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Maywood A-Bridged: a thesis about engagement

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Leslie Joanne Worthey entitled "Maywood A-Bridged: a thesis about engagement." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture, with a major in Architecture.

Brian Ambroziak, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mark Schimmenti, Koichi Yamamoto, Avigail Sachs

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Maywood A-Bridged:
A thesis about engagement

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Architecture Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Leslie Joanne Worthey
August 2010

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my committee: Brian Ambroziak, Avigail Sachs, and Koichi Yamamoto.

Thank you to my family.

Abstract

This is a thesis based on the idea that things in our environment, through neglect or ignorance, become invisible, despite an essence of virtue. The idea stems from the literary work of Fyoder Dostoevsky, particularly his depictions of fallen women. In stories such as “Notes from the Underground,” Liza, the prostitute, is his most virtuous character. My exploration of this idea culminates in the design of an advocacy center for the community of Maywood, California and the Los Angeles River, including a gathering center in which residents of the community and environmentalists may come together on equal social footing.

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1. Overview

“Everyone is alone and yet nobody can do without other people”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The World of Perception, p. 87

I agree with the premise of the corpus of Dostoevsky’s work: the key to redemption is full engagement with our environment, despite the vulnerability that engagement engenders. Excursions outside of our own zones of safety are often difficult, painful, and potentially dangerous, thereby explaining the human tendency to remain isolated. Yet, the risk associated with engaging the world is far less than that of remaining isolated. Isolation leads to misrepresentation, the misalignment of perception, which allows for the tolerance of exploitation and in extreme cases, atrocity. Engagement, on the other hand, engenders creativity. I define engagement as the commitment to interact, despite difficulty.

In order to fully explore architecture’s potential to facilitate engagement, I have chosen a site that epitomizes neglect. The Los Angeles River is an exploited natural resource that has ceased to exist as a river. Although originally fundamental to growth and vitality of Los Angeles, the natural river has been compromised, its water contained, manipulated, and made dirty and invisible in the interest of confining flood danger.

Residents of the City of Maywood, adjacent to the river are also exploited. The residents work primarily in industry outside of the city, bringing revenue to the larger Los Angeles metropolis rather than into their own community. Because of the legal status of many residents, they work for substandard wages with



Figure 1: Engagement

no representation, doing jobs that support the urban vitality while remaining themselves invisible.

Maywood is an isolated community. Substantially surrounded on three sides by an industrial landscape, it protrudes from the residential fabric of urban Los Angeles. On its south border railroad tracks physically separate the community of Maywood from the adjacent community of Bell. The main access from Maywood to downtown Los Angeles, and the freeway system from which the whole of the urban landscape is accessible, is over the Atlantic Blvd. Bridge. As such, the bridge represents an opportunity for engagement between Maywood and the rest of Los Angeles.

At present, the relationship between the community of Maywood and the river is tenuous. Although the community is nearly adjacent to the river, Vernon to the north extends a thin industrial finger southward that pushes Maywood back from the banks of the river. Although residents regularly bridge the river to access the broader urban metropolis, the physical landscape discourages engaging with it.

More than fifty percent of the residents of Maywood are foreign born. As first generation immigrants, they have already committed to engagement with the broader world. For them, I propose a place of engagement within the community

at which they may receive respect and recognition. Engaging the river may serve as a vehicle to rehabilitate the river and provide sanctuary to these people. The program features an adult learning center. Through learning, residents will be better equipped to contribute to ongoing cultural discourse.

The Los Angeles River presents a dangerous landscape. Physical engagement requires transformation of the river. I propose deepening the river adjacent to Maywood in order to create a permanent body of water and eroding the concrete slope into a series of steps to allow safe interaction with its surface and waters. Converting this formidable landscape into an inhabitable sanctuary will facilitate engagement of the river by the community, as well as providing drainage to the metropolis.

The goal of this project is twofold: I intend to reveal the river to the community of Maywood and I intend to reveal the community to the rest of Los Angeles.

2. Precedents

Brodsky and Utkin: Villa Nautilus

“A cell of a Hermit [is] the main Bulwark of Resistance at all times. Going away to Deserts, Woods, Mountains, crossing oceans alone on small boats, they stand against a senseless vanity that swallow[s] up tremendous masses of people all over the world. This Man is a Hermit[,] too. Seeing the uselessness of [escape] he built his cell [in] a midst of a big street in a big city. His house reflects the [duality] of his character – a will for resistance, an aspiration to open struggle and intimate desire to hide. Dwelling No. 1 has no walls and roof – just so-me furniture standing on the street level and surrounded by a narrow [slot]. Here he lives paying no attention to weather, noise and sights of thousands of people. At the same time it’s a roof of the dwelling No. 2 – a concrete tower in the mass of the earth. On the bottom of it – in absolutely closed and silent space – [is] the same room as on the top. Day by day the little ship sails forward against the current staying in the same place (Nesbitt, plate 27).”

The Villa Nautilus represents isolation in the city and movement by standing still. It provides a stark contrast between complete physical isolation and the possibility of isolation within a mass of people. The hermit above ground has access to a rich visual panorama, sounds and smells, but remains isolated because of the impossibility of interacting with his surroundings. He remains isolated in a broad urban landscape.

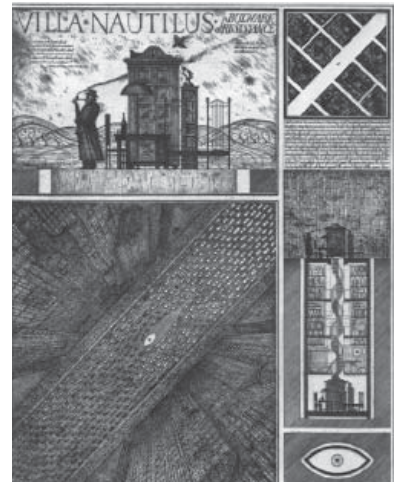


Figure 2:
Villa Nautilus

Steven Holl: Gymnasium Bridge

“Steven Holl’s Gymnasium Bridge was one of six proposals commissioned by the Wave Hill Center for a bridge between New York’s impoverished South Bronx neighborhoods and the parkland of Randall’s Island. The project, for four intersecting and overlapping bridges containing usable space as well as acting as passageways, was intended to foster economic development: in Holl’s scheme, community members would earn incomes by working on organized recreational activities housed in the bridges—rowing, ice skating, basketball, boxing, and so on—and these activities would in turn attract visitors and custom to the area. Thus the Gymnasium Bridge would not only serve a physical purpose but act as “a vehicle from which destitute persons can reenter society (Domino, p.188).”

The predominance of the site plan reflects Holl’s belief that “architecture and site should have an experiential connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link (Domino, p.188).” The darkness of the site contrasts with the luminosity of the structure, casting the bridge as a beacon of hope in the community. Anchors not only provide grounding support, but also engage the water below.



Figure 3: Anchors



Figure 4: Bridge

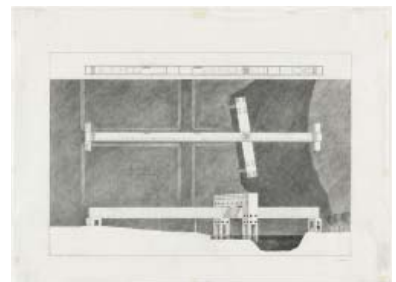


Figure 5: Connection

The literary work of Fyodor Dostoevsky

I first became intrigued by the work of Dostoevsky because of his depictions of women. In many of his stories, the prostitute features as the sole ray of hopefulness and virtue, despite her invisible position in society. She is often exploited, yet remains honest and authentic in her relationship to her life and her environment. I believe that this core of virtue exists in many things that society habitually neglects.

Further examination of Dostoevsky's work reveals that he not only illustrates the problem of social neglect, but also provides the approach to a solution. A review of the corpus of his work shows a progression that ultimately argues for the necessity of engagement with our urban environments.

In his early works, Dostoevsky implies an unchanging bureaucratic urban fabric upon which his stories unfold. Each protagonist is in some way detached from the urban environment. The stories reveal ways in which contact distorts the relationship between the individual and the city. Characters encounter reality through frames, delusional misapprehension, and point encounters; the self as a construct only tenuously touches reality.

In Poor Folk, Dostoevsky reveals characters in their own carefully constructed literary frames. Not only do the characters know one another through adjacent window frames, each letter in the exchange represents a framed view of reality.

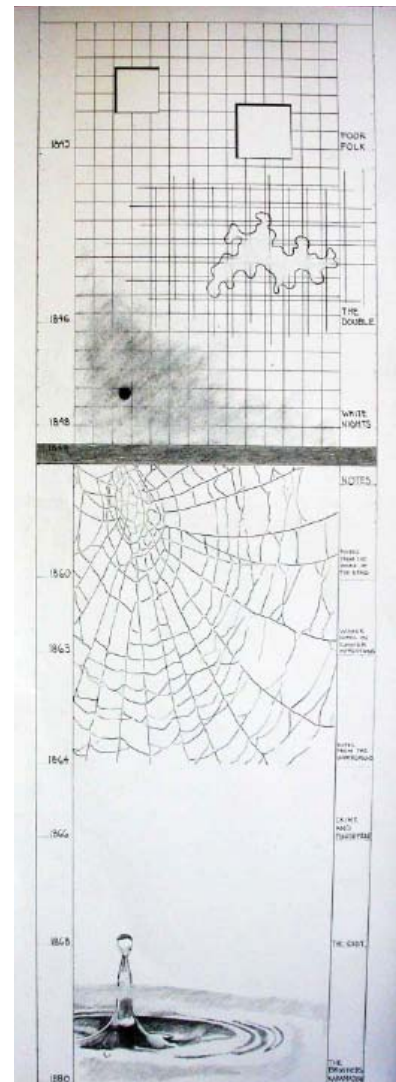


Figure 6: Timeline of the literary work of Dostoevsky

Characters construct their own individuality as frames within the broader, implied urban context.

The Double is the story of someone living in, but misunderstanding, his urban context. Golyadkin steps outside of his prescribed roll, thereby fracturing his personality. His double appears to take his place within the system, while Golyadkin progressively loses his grip on reality and sanity.

White Nights is the story of the narrator's brief encounter with the world outside of his books. (The narrator is alone in the world with his thoughts – a dreamer who spends his time with books.) Briefly jolted into reality by Nastenka, only to be disappointed and retreat back into the world of literature. He ends the story happy to have experienced the momentary convergence of fantasy and reality.

In his early work, like in Plato's allegory of the cave, Dostoevsky detaches urban reality from the world of thought.

Until in 1849 literary performance and reality crashed into each other nearly costing Dostoevsky his life. Dostoevsky was arrested for subversive literary activity, tried and sentenced to execution by firing squad. The execution was called off moments before the order to fire, having been staged on orders from the tsar. Reprieved, Dostoevsky instead served four years in a penal camp in Siberia.

*“I walked for hours and hours,
and, as usual, had for some time
been completely oblivious of my
surrounding, when I suddenly found
myself near the toll gate. I felt cheerful
at once, and stepping beyond the bar,
walked along the road between fields
of corn and meadows of lush grass,
unconscious of any fatigue, and feeling
with every breath I drew that a heavy
weight was being lifted from my heart.
All the travelers I met looked so genially
at me that it seemed that in another
moment they would most assuredly
bow to me . . . so strong was the impact
of nature upon me, a semi-invalid
townsman who had all but been stifled
within the walls of the city.”*

Dostoevsky, White Nights, p150.

Following his imprisonment, Dostoevsky rails against the prospect of the cessation of personal development. In these stories characters are in some way trapped.

In the story Notes from the House of the Dead the bounds of the established norms deteriorate. Hierarchy disappears. Self assertion trumps reason. The house is dead because the lack of freedom implies the lack of personal development. In order to remain alive, one must continue to develop personally. Thus, Dostoevsky stresses the importance of process rather than outcome.

Yet, Dostoevsky views technological progress as a threat to personal development. He reveals the danger in Winter Notes on Summer Impression, in which the Crystal Palace becomes the culmination of technology. According to Dostoevsky, this type of advancement leads to gross materialism and a desperate struggle to maintain the status quo. In other words, if technology is truth, the process of seeking it may stop. In such a system freedom depends on wealth. Only the wealthy have the freedom to assert their individuality.

The underground man in Notes from the Underground consciously questions the individual as the product of natural laws and enlightened self interest. He is “sick, nasty, spiteful” acutely self aware and self absorbed. Imprisoned in the underground of his mind as efficiently as the imprisonment by the state. His

encounters with reality are all painful. Only through Liza can he glimpse an honest interaction with the world.

Dostoevsky's later works, the most well known, further develop his idea of the importance of honestly engaging with reality to the fullest extent.

In Crime and Punishment Raskolnikov reveals the extent to which isolated reasoning can lead to deviant behavior. In The Idiot Mushkin's detached morality is ultimately just as destructive as Raskolnikov's cold reason. Despite Prince Mushkin's morality, he fails to integrate into the world. His detachment causes the death and downfall of those he loves.

In his last novel, The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky divides personal thought into three realms: rational, emotional, and ethical. Each of these must ultimately take responsibility for the death of the father and none can move forward without recognizing the consequences of each type of engagement with the world. I believe that this is the work in which Dostoevsky's ideas culminate most strongly in the argument for complete engagement with our environment.

3. Site

Los Angeles River

The Los Angeles River was once a natural amenity. Its waters determined the site of downtown Los Angeles. Yet, it was unpredictable and flooding caused severe damage to the developing city (see Figure 9). “Catastrophic floods in 1914, 1934, and 1938 led to the creation of a comprehensive regional flood control program ... (the river) was straightened, deepened, and widened and its new channel was lined with concrete to provide floodwaters the quickest route to the sea” (Gumprecht, p.3). Now, the river is largely cut off from the urban fabric by fences and barriers. It is now a neglected concrete ditch that remains dry most of the year, and yet remains dangerous due to flash flooding and crime.

Despite all the work done to control the river, it remains in need of attention. The pink areas in Figure 9 show areas subject to current inundation by flood waters due to ongoing development and increased runoff (Gumprecht). I propose a shift in the approach to controlling the river - away from the focus on creating a functional, yet hidden drainage ditch. I believe that by considering the experiential potential of the river some of the most park poor communities in the Los Angeles region may become invested in the river.

Currently, the river provides an essential service to the city, but is not fully engaged with it. To much of Los Angeles, the river remains invisible.

“I encountered the river for the first time while crossing the freeway ... If I noticed the river or even realized what it was, I don't recall ... I worked less than a mile from the river's mouth in Long Beach, but the river made no impression on me.”

Blake Gumprecht, p.4

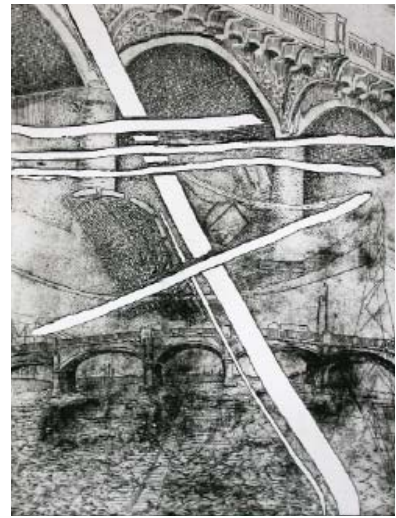


Figure 7: A tenuous river connection



Figure 8: River connection obscured

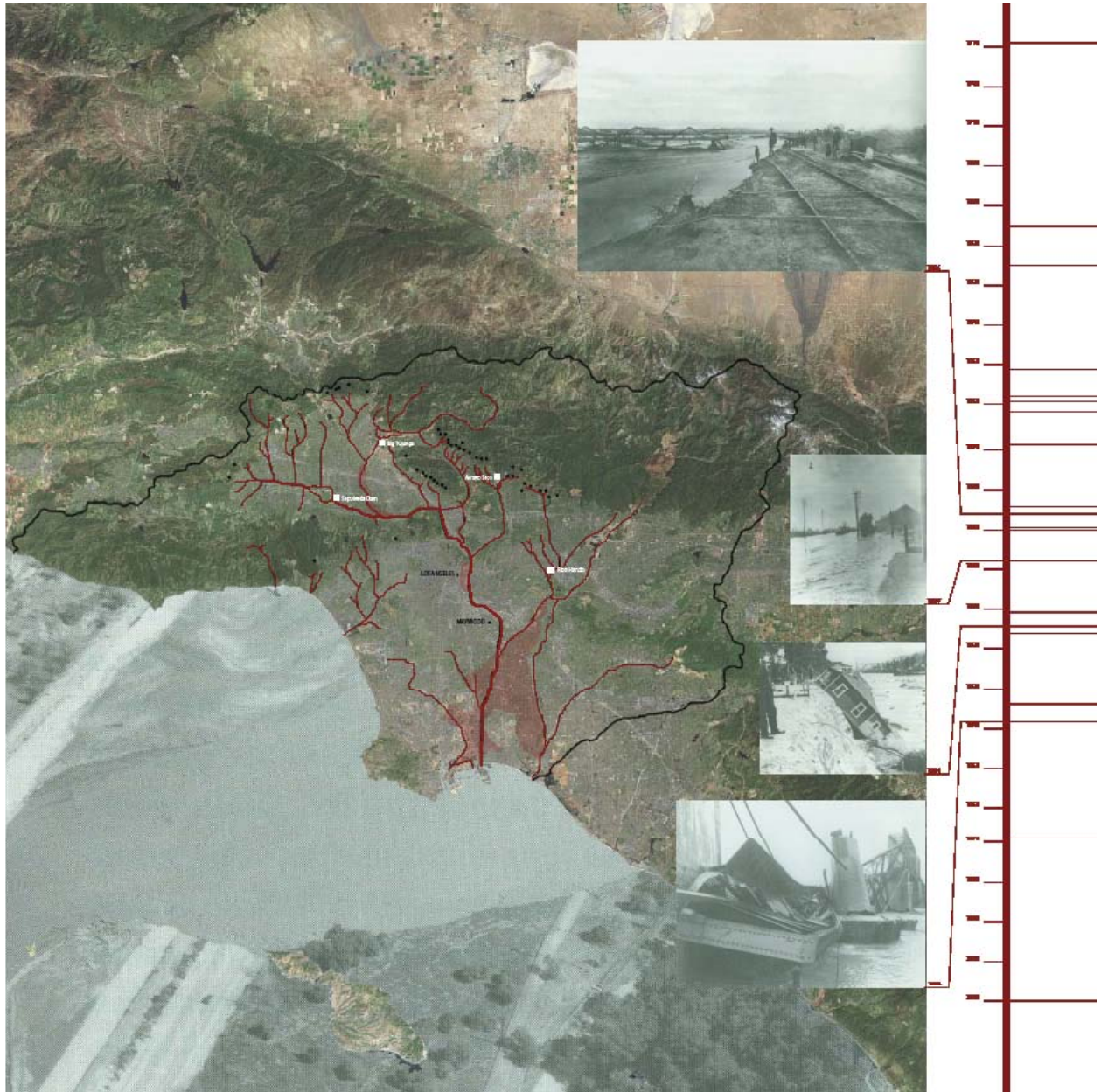


Figure 9: Flooding potential of the Los Angeles River

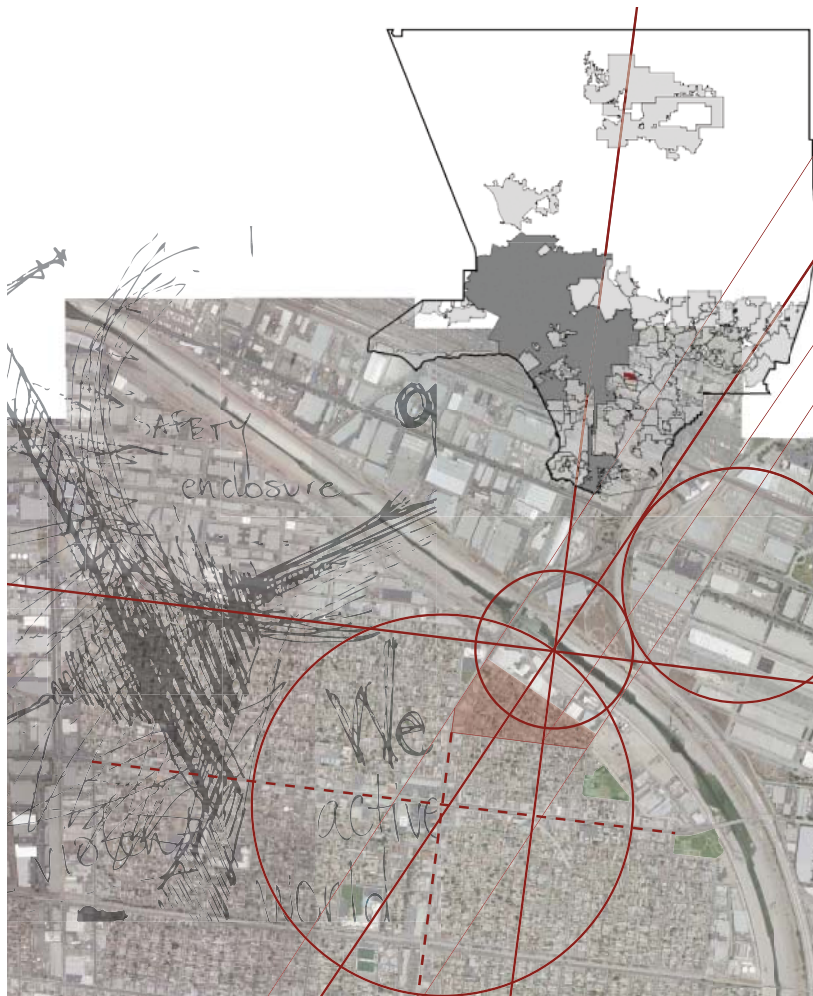


Figure 10: Maywood's position in Los Angeles

*MAYWOOD,
Incorporated September 2, 1924*

*(Form of Government) Council
Area-Square Miles 1.14
Elevation 172 feet
Population 28,083 (2000 Census)
Adults 17,641
Children 10,392
Hispanic 96.3% 27,051
White 2.6% 739
Asian 0.35% 85
American Indian 0.2% 51
African American 0.2% 43
Library (County) Volumes 17,410
Churches 11
Schools
Public Elementary 3
Parochial Elementary 3
Average Temp. - Summer 84 Deg.
Average Temp. - Winter 65 Deg.
Annual Rainfall 14.71"
Paved Streets 28 Miles
Parks 2
Latitude N 33 59Min. 15 Sec.
Longitude W 118 11Min. 13 Sec.
City Flower Snapdragon
Township San Antonio
Registered Voters 3,105
Assessed Valuation \$355,314,912
Median Household Income \$37,573
Traffic Count - Daily 57,200 Vehicles*

Figure 11: Maywood facts

Maywood, California

Maywood is a place imbued with vitality that is largely ignored or unappreciated by the rest of Los Angeles.

It is a densely populated community, occupying a land area of 1.18 square miles with a population, as of the 2000 census, of 28,083 people and a foreign born population of 15,490 people (55.2% of which 22.8% are naturalized citizens). It is one of the smallest incorporated cities in Los Angeles, as indicated in red in figure 10. The population tends to be younger than state and national averages (8.4 years younger than the California median age). Unlike in the general population, men outnumber women by about two percent. 96.3 percent of the population is Latino. The average household size is nearly double in Maywood, as compared to the rest of California (4.33 compared with 2.87).

Maywood is a financially poor community. While the median household income in California is \$47,493, the median household income in Maywood is \$30,480. While this is a significant difference, the difference is more extreme when comparing per capita income: \$8,926 in Maywood compared to an average of \$22,711 for California. Clearly, individuals in Maywood are pooling resources by living in larger family groups. Above data is according to the 2000 Census report.



Figure 12: Industrial Heritage



Figure 13: Locating Maywood

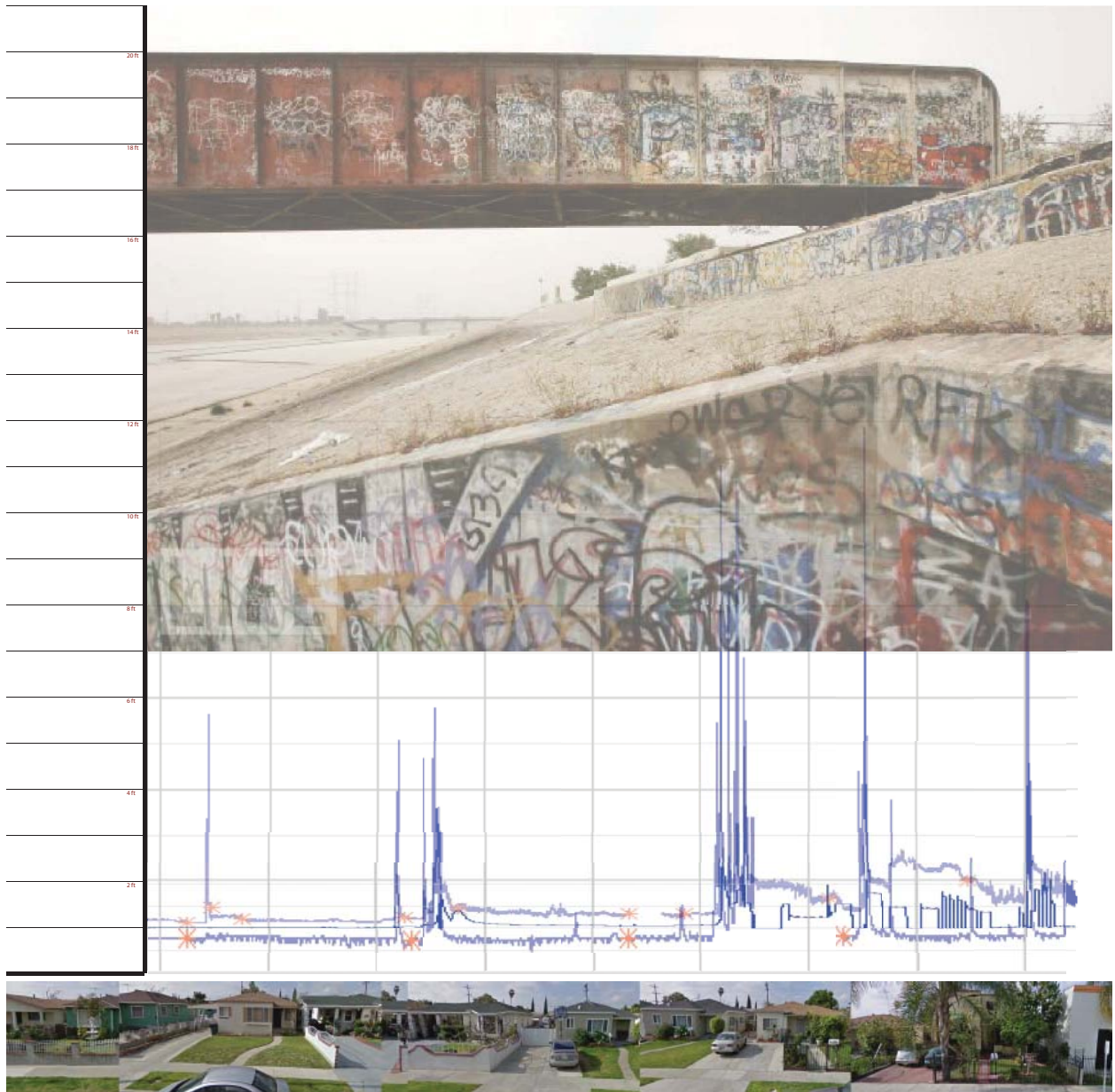


Figure 14: A place of contradictions

A Place of Contradictions

Friends of the Los Angeles River

Maywood has received attention as a “sanctuary for illegal immigrants” (Life Magazine online, May 2006). As such, its appearance in the media is predominantly negative. I find this in stark contrast to the well kept houses, clean streets and new schools. Figure 14 shows a typical residential street in Maywood. The perception of Maywood to the outside city is quite different from the reality of Maywood.

The river also presents a contradiction. While dry most of the year, it never the less protects residents from the real danger of flooding. The graph in Figure 14 shows the water level in three reservoirs near the head of the river: the Sepulveda Dam, Big Tujunga and Arroyo Seco (seen in white in Figure 13) between the months of November 2009 and January 2010 (Department of Water Resources).

The Friends of the Los Angeles River is a major environmental group dedicated to revitalizing the Los Angeles River (as seen in its mission statement to the right). Yet, its master plans and maps for the restoration process end just north of the city of Maywood. They do not, to date, include the southern portion of the River’s course. I propose that the headquarters of the Friends of the Los Angeles River be moved to the area of Vernon that divides Maywood from the River. Bringing environmentalists into this currently neglected area would simultaneously reveal the reality of Maywood and begin to expose this portion of the River.

(FoLAR) Friends of the Los Angeles River is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization founded in 1986, whose mission is to protect and restore the natural and historic heritage of the Los Angeles River and its riparian habitat through inclusive planning, education and wise stewardship. Once home to steelhead and grizzlies, the Los Angeles River meandered through wetlands, marshes, willow, alder and sycamore, providing desperately needed water for the region. Now running over 50 miles long - from the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley to the ocean in Long Beach - the Los Angeles River flows through 14 cities and countless neighborhoods. When the Army Corps of Engineers initiated a flood control project in the late 1930's, they began the process of paving 80% of the River, creating the world's largest storm drain. Over the ensuing decades, the River that had been the sole water supply for the City of Los Angeles before the Los Angeles Aqueduct was completed in 1913 almost disappeared from public consciousness. With the cement came a perceptual shift: the River no longer existed. Instead, it was a "flood control channel," a no-man's land, surrounded by fences and signs.

The Atlantic Blvd. Bridge

The Atlantic Blvd. Bridge provides access from the community of Maywood to the rest of the city. It is the main route over which the people of Maywood pass daily to go to work, providing services to greater metropolis.

Several Los Angeles bridges were built “as part of a vast bridge building initiative between 1909 and 1938” (Spanning History). The new bridges replaced “nineteenth-century metal truss bridges which were susceptible to severe damage or complete annihilation by seasonal river floods” (Spanning History). This set of bridges was inspired by the City Beautiful Movement popular at the time. The Atlantic Blvd. Bridge, built in 1931, is the southern most of these historic Los Angeles bridges (David Kimbrough, www.bridgehunter.com).

It was designed with closed spandrel concrete arches. Its total length is 463.9 feet and the deck width is 60 feet. The length of its largest span is also 60 feet. The bridge remains open to traffic, accommodating an average of 56,151 cars daily (as of 2005).

Yet, this bridge is not included in the Los Angeles Conservatory publication: Spanning History. It seems beyond the realm of concern for river advocates who tend to focus their concentration further north, closer to downtown Los Angeles. The bridge, like the River itself and the community of Maywood is invisible.



Figure 15: Atlantic Blvd. Bridge,
photo 1



Figure 16: Atlantic Blvd. Bridge,
photo 2



Figure 17: Atlantic Blvd. Bridge,
photo 3



Figure 18: Figure / ground of existing condition

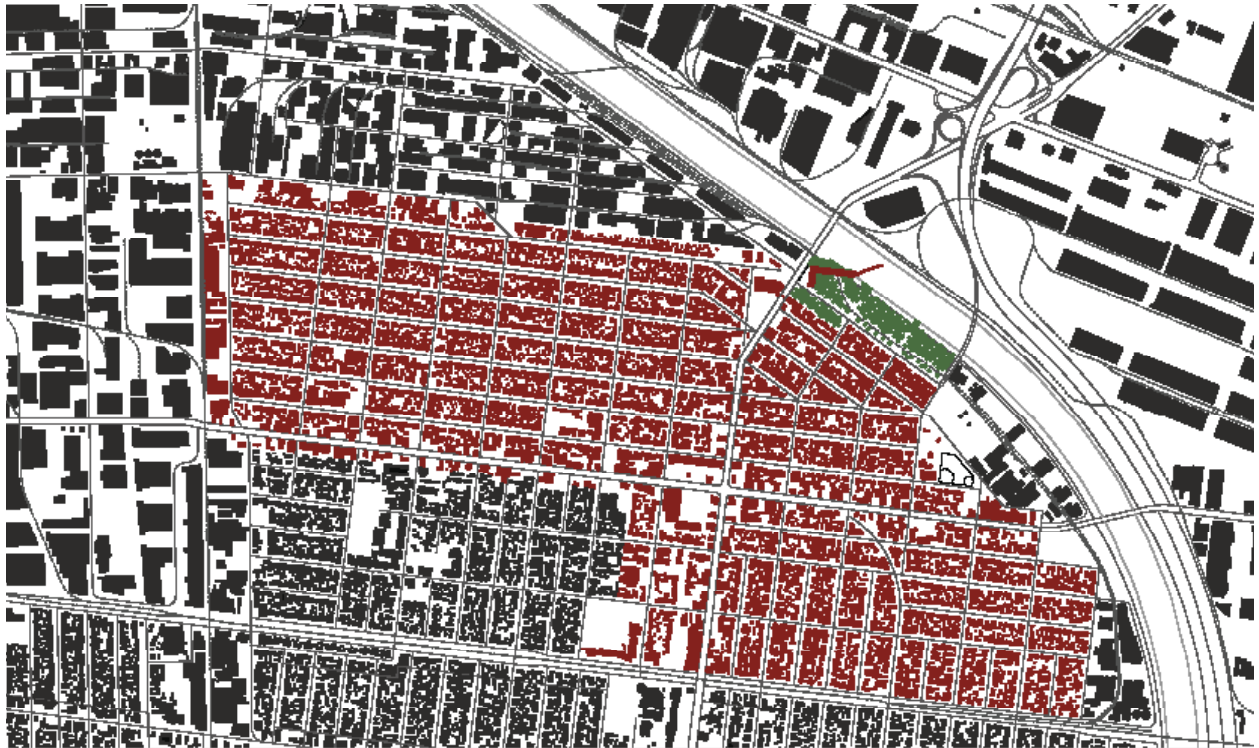


Figure 19: Figure / ground of proposal

4. Program

The program consists of five main elements: a community advocacy center, a river advocacy center, the learning bridge, the archive, which culminates in the tower, and the cafe, which serves as meeting center. Additionally, I propose a large California Sycamore orchard on the site, replacing the existing brown field.

Advocacy center: Community

Family Service Program:

Reception

Administration

Private offices

Library/conference room/ files

Fair Housing Program

Reception

Administration

Private offices

Library/conference room/ files



Figure 20: The orchard

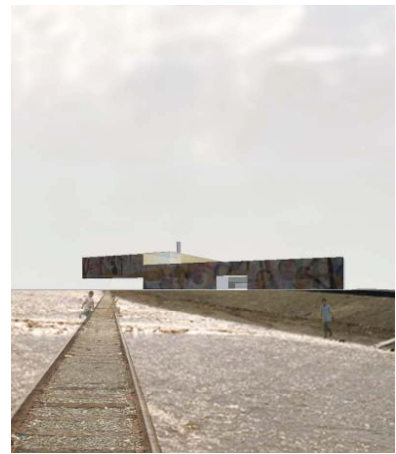


Figure 21: Community advocacy

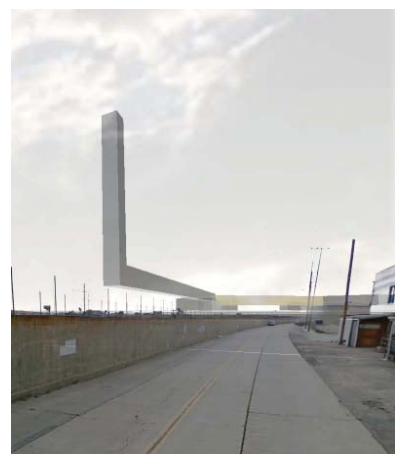


Figure 22: The tower

Advocacy center: River

Offices:

5 permanent staff: (offices 1250 sq. ft., 250sq. ft. each)

Executive Director

President

Program Director

Program Director

Website Design

Conference room (to accommodate Board of Directors 8 members)

Archive

Archivist office

Workspace

Duplication center

Individual reading rooms

Stacks

Learning Bridge

Lecture Rooms

Classrooms (for 30: 760 sq ft)

Computer lab (15 stations: 675 sq ft)

Combined lab and lecture room

Language labs with attached taping room and storage

Café: Meeting Center

Dining area (15 sq ft per seat)

Serving facility

Dish washing

Receiving

Refrigerated Storage

Other storage

Main cooking

Garbage storage

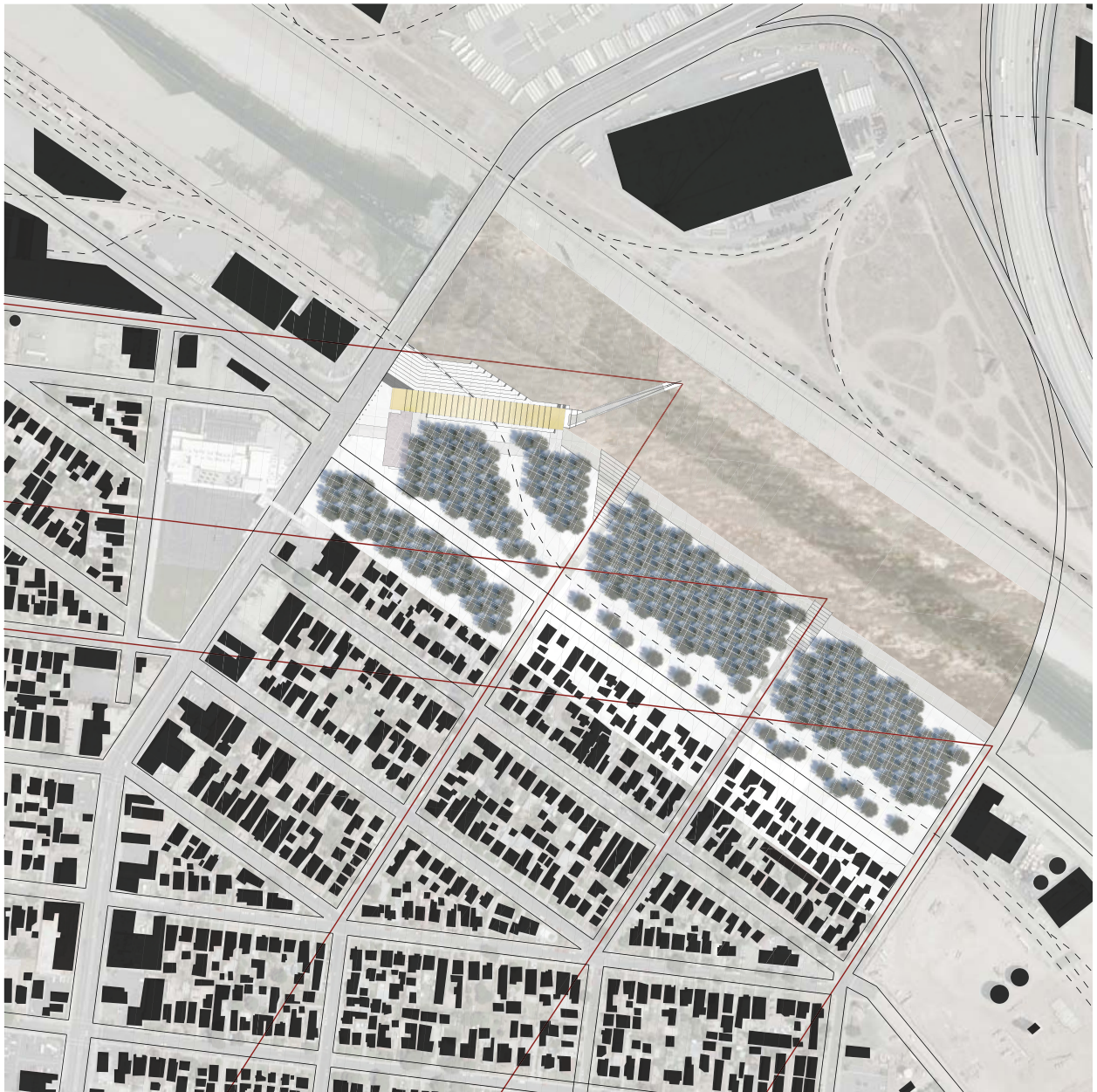


Figure 23: Site plan

5. Design

I selected this site because of the shift in the regular city grid, which reorients itself toward the river. I use that shift to develop a further connection between Maywood and the river. I propose altering the site in a number of ways. First, I have added an off-ramp to the 710 Freeway, bounding the area of the channel that I propose to deepen, thereby providing a permanent body of water adjacent to Maywood. I provide access to this water by eroding the channel's concrete edge, providing instead, a series of steps (Figure 25). The remaining concrete walls and surfaces provide a canvas to showcase the living history of the place through graffiti art. This allows residents to change and mold the appearance of the place overtime.

I have replaced the sparse industry existent on the site with a vast orchard composed of rows of California Sycamore trees. They are a riparian species native to the area and tolerant of poor soil conditions. Additionally, the streets are regularized such that the blocks adjacent to the orchard are consistent with the block size in the rest of the city. This allows space for additional residential program and allows the orchard to penetrate into the residential fabric.

The rows of the orchard and the built structure align with the established grid of the city, thereby bringing the city grid to the river. This shift in the grid also creates an exterior entry that funnels visitors toward the water (Figure 24). To further define this entry I have pulled the materiality of the river up onto

the street edge. A row of concrete pillars descend toward the water, hinting at both the presence of the river and the materiality of the channel. The largest of these pillars is embedded with LED lighting that monitors the activities of the reservoirs upstream. Changes in the lights indicate varying water levels and provide a constant, visual gauge of river activity to residents as they drive to and from work over the bridge (Figure 24).

Beyond the entry court, visitors enter the community advocacy bar and the gathering place. The building that houses the legal centers is clad in corrugated metal. This material reflects back on the industrial heritage of the site, while simultaneously showcasing the material in a new way to residents, such that its strengths are revealed. From the gathering place, visitors have views of the water, the orchard, and the railroad track that I have left on site (Figure 25). The track provides another layer of memory to the site and may run adjacent to a future bike path that runs the full length of the river.

Structural support for the archive comes from a single tower and suspension cables. The tower sinks into the river water at the convergence of the two grids. The lightness of the support is both contrasting and complimentary to the heaviness of the historic Atlantic Blvd. Bridge (Figure 27). By hovering over the river, the development extends itself to the rest of Los Angeles. Visible from the 710 Freeway, the tower acts as a beacon and advertisement for the river and the community of Maywood.

Corrugated iron is unappreciated as a material and often misconceived as temporary, despite its strength:

“To the majority corrugated iron remains invisible ... It is a portrait of a wonderfully versatile and characterful material; one that for nearly two hundred years has been at the forefront of architectural and engineering innovations, which have in turn created shelter for millions, in diverse locations, at short notice and with a minimum of fanfare.”

Adam Mornement and Simon Holloway, p7



Figure 24: Community entry with water tower



Figure 25: Gathering place



Figure 26: Steps to river



Figure 27: Suspended archway with tower

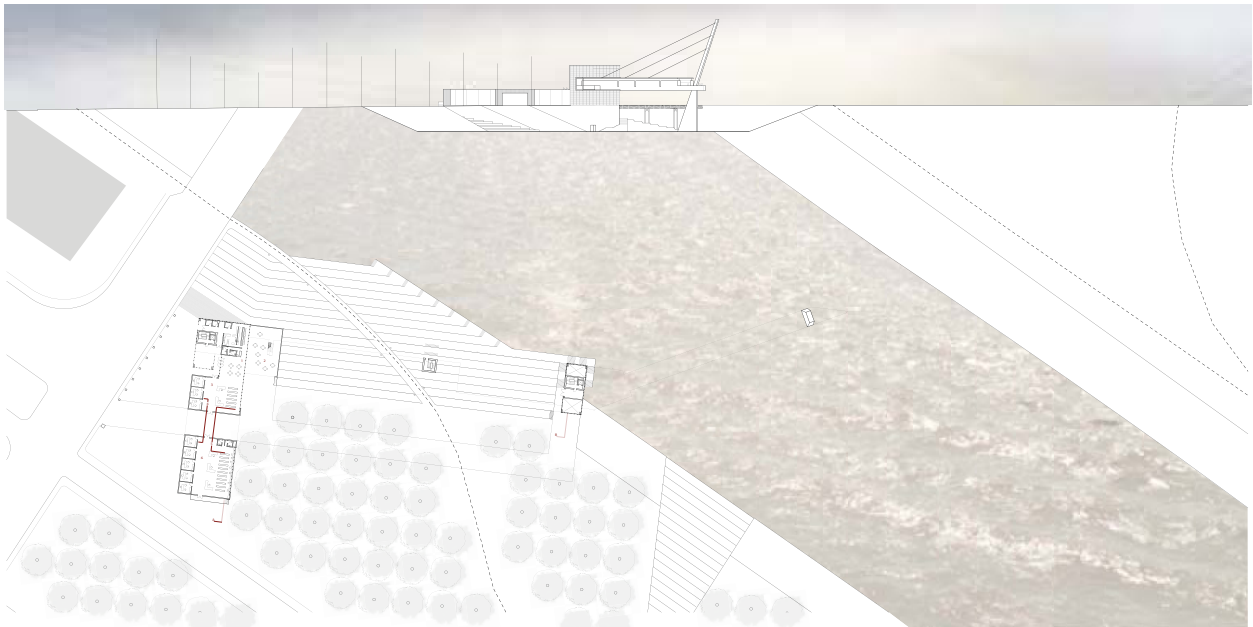


Figure 28: Ground level plan

The ground level offers engagement through advocacy: Legal offices ensure fair living conditions for the residents of Maywood. The ground level includes:

1. The kitchen and dining areas, that provide a place for gathering without the social hierarchy pervasive on the other side of the bridge.
2. Outdoor gathering place with view toward both the river and the orchard that acts as a fulcrum for the form of the building, and its program.
3. Offices for the Fair Housing Program currently active in Maywood, but without a local presence.
4. Individual lawyer and consultation offices that form the backbone of open work space.
5. The files, which are given a place of prominence, facing the orchard, as a symbol of the importance of every individual's situation.
6. Offices for Family Services, also active in Maywood, but currently without a local presence.

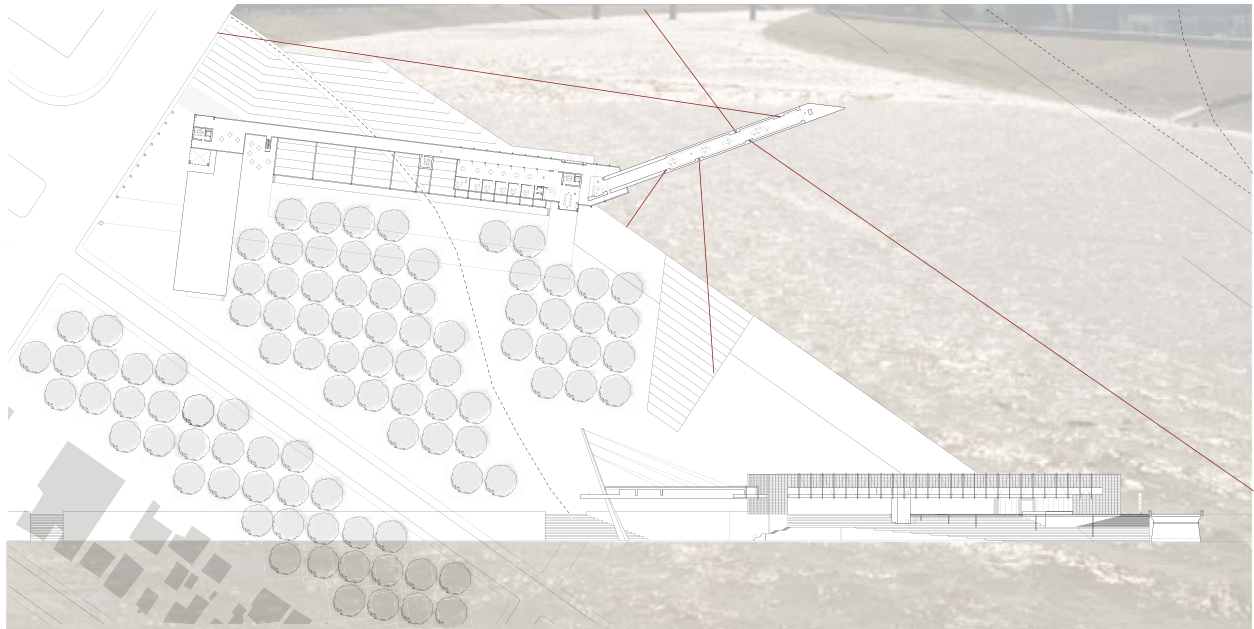


Figure 29: Mid-level plan

The mid-level offers engagement through focus. The enclosure of the archive and its constructed views focus a visitors attention. The mid-level includes:

1. The outdoor walkway between the two bars of program which provides direct access to the archive for community visitors.
2. Offices for the permanent staff of FoLAR (Friends of the Los Angeles River).
3. Open work space for volunteers and students. This space is adjacent to an operable wall such that the headquarters may be interior or exterior.
4. The conference room, open to above, which forms the link between FoLAR and the classrooms above.
5. The archivist.
6. The archive. The history of the river is embedded in shelves carved from the walls.
7. Viewing platform.

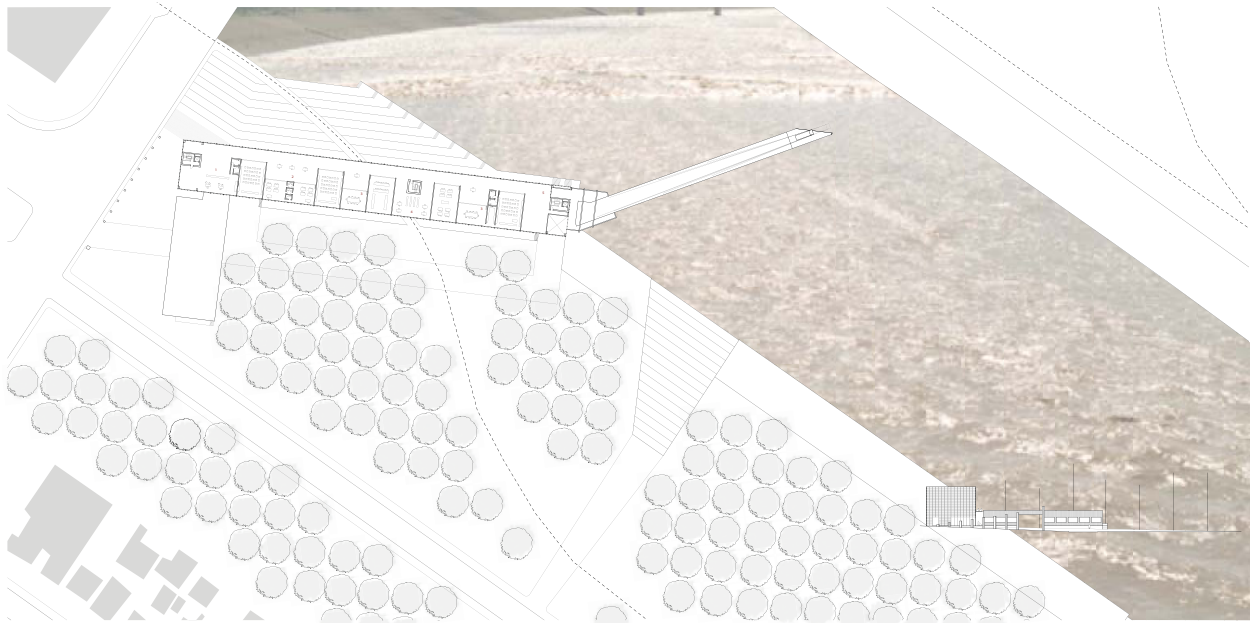


Figure 30: Bridge level plan

The bridge level offers engagement through discourse: The classroom bar provides educational opportunities to the residents of Maywood, facilitating their increased egalitarian participation in the Los Angeles metropolis. This upper level includes areas for:

1. Administration.
2. Language labs with individual recording areas.
3. Seminar classrooms for smaller group discussions.
4. Reference area.
5. View to walkway below and out to tower.

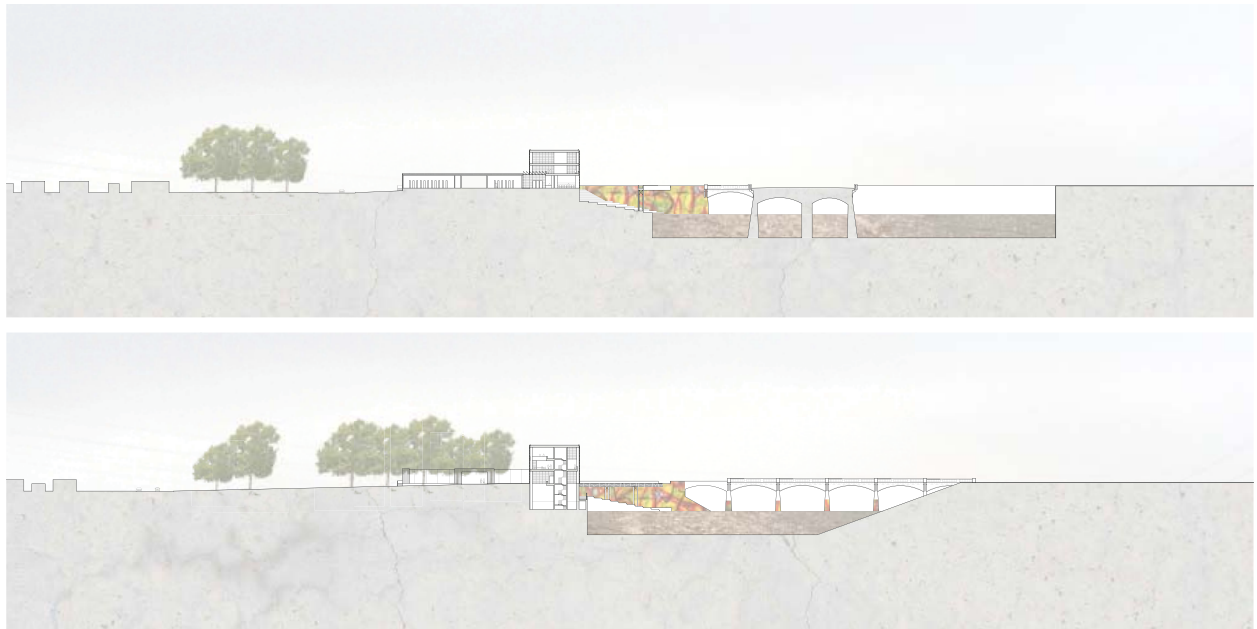


Figure 31: Sectional plans

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Vita

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