untitled, ambiguity and architecture

by

Dennis Steven Kosovac

Bachelor of Humanities and Arts
Carnegie Mellon University, 2016

Submitted to the
Department of Architecture
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Architecture

at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to expand Robert Venturi's concept of ambiguity in architecture to include meanings that, extending beyond the formal and semiotic, are rooted in narrative. It takes as a precedent the work of Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, two artists whose book Evidence explores both formal and narrative ambiguity in photography. This expanded definition of ambiguity evokes the mercurial and conflicting thoughts, feelings, facts, and memories that are at the core of architectural experience yet remain conspicuously absent from contemporary discourse.

untitled consists of four books that collectively and equally constitute the thesis. Each book can be intepereted independently or in dialogue with its companions.

Braddock, Pennsylvania is a steel town downriver from Pittsburgh, in Allegheny County. The town's dualities are manifest in the narrative tensions between past and present, mind and body, growth and decay. It is home to the first Carnegie Free Library in the US as well as to the Edgar Thomson Steel Works - one of America's earliest, and still-operating, steel mills. Braddock Avenue runs the length of the town and serves as a mile-long Main Street that encompasses the breadth of the town's vernacular American architectural history. The thesis takes as its site the empty lots along Braddock Ave. that now make up nearly half of the streetscape.

Without speculating on the uncertain future of the town's industry, the project engages the divergent narratives of the town by imagining a renewal of Braddock Avenue. A formal strategy of mirroring the existing urban fabric is deployed in an act analogous to the production of photographic images. Where possible, existing buildings are mirrored onto adjacent empty lots; in this act each building is isolated, duplicated, and transformed. The buildings' bounds are reproduced inversely while their materiality and tectonic languages are replaced by new mass timber structural systems and surfaces. Together with these mirrored forms, the sharply differing color of light reflected on these new materials evokes divergent memories and feelings associated with the work of photographers like Diane Arbus and Stephen Shore, who capture the melancholy, peculiarities and optimism of American urban abjection.

The dialectic between the town and the mill is represented by a new community center inserted at the heart of Braddock Avenue, radically skewed on an open site adjacent to the Carnegie Library. This singular anomaly is a distorted mirror of the building forms found in the Edgar Thomson Steel Mill, representing the capacity of mirroring to make architecture participate in an expanding field. The new building's typology, materiality, tectonics, and programs collectively evoke divergent readings that are at once historic and speculative, sacred and profane.

Thesis Advisor: Andrew Scott
Title: Interim Department Head

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abstract sets forth the disciplinary premise of the thesis.

image documents the project a through a sequence of drawings, diagrams, renderings, and photographs. Interspersed with these documents are found and appropriated references that expand the understanding of the project. Equal weight is given to each image, minimizing visual hierarchy so that sequencing becomes the primary narrative tool.

reflection documents oft-omitted elements of the thesis: fleeting and fragmented thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions behind the project.

remains includes the parts and pieces integral to the process of the thesis but without a place in the other three books.

Braddock, Pennsylvania is a steel town downriver from Pittsburgh, in Allegheny County. The town's dualities are manifest in the narrative tensions between past and present, mind and body, growth and decay. It is home to the first Carnegie Free Library in the US as well as to the Edgar Thomson Steel Works - one of America's earliest, and still-operating, steel mills. Braddock Avenue runs the length of the town and serves as a mile-long Main Street that encompasses the breadth of the town's vernacular American architectural history. The thesis takes as its site the empty lots along Braddock Ave. that now make up nearly half of the streetscape.

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The remaining pages of *abstract* contain a series of precedents, each numbered and cited at the end of this book.

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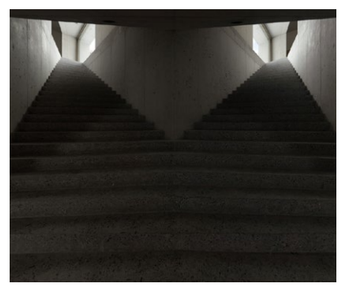

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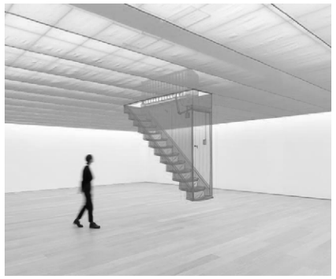

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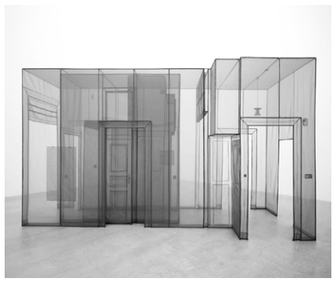

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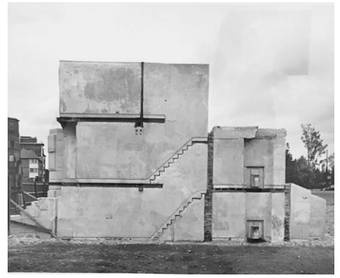


image credits

01 Minoru Yamasaki, World Trade Center

02 John Hejduk, Torres Hejduk

03 Harry Cobb, Fountain Place

04 Edwin Lutyens, Munstead Wood

05 Lacaton & Vassal, FRAC Dunkerque

06 John Hejduk, House for Two Brothers

07 Shaker Dwelling House

08 Shaker Dwelling House

09 Shaker Dwelling House

image credits

10 Valerio Olgiati, National Park Centre

11 Valerio Olgiati, National Park Centre

12 Valerio Olgiati, National Park Centre

13 Do-ho Suh, Staircase-III

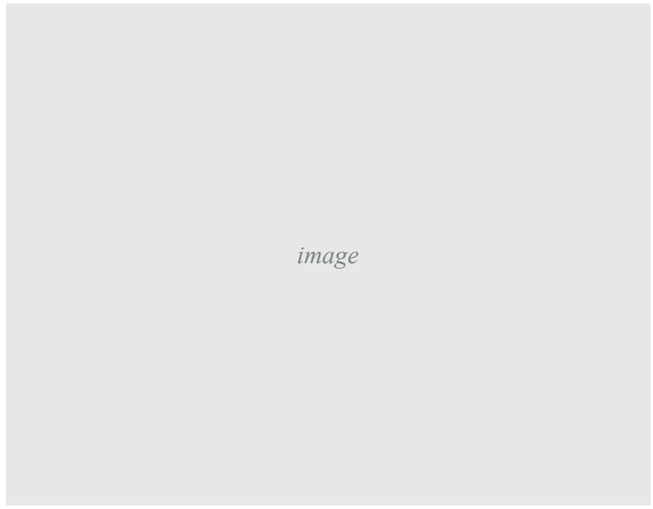
14 Do-ho Suh, 3 Corridors

15 Do-ho Suh, Hub-2, Breakfast Corner, 260-7

16 Rachel Whiteread, GHOST, GHOST I

17 Rachel Whiteread, Detached I

18 Rachel Whiteread, Ghost House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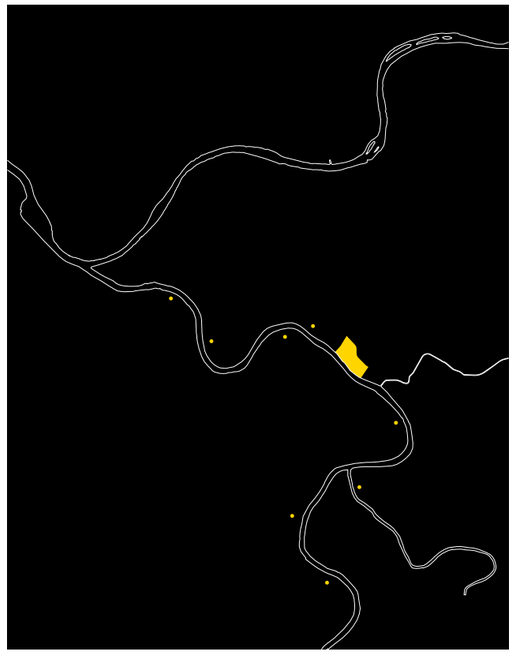

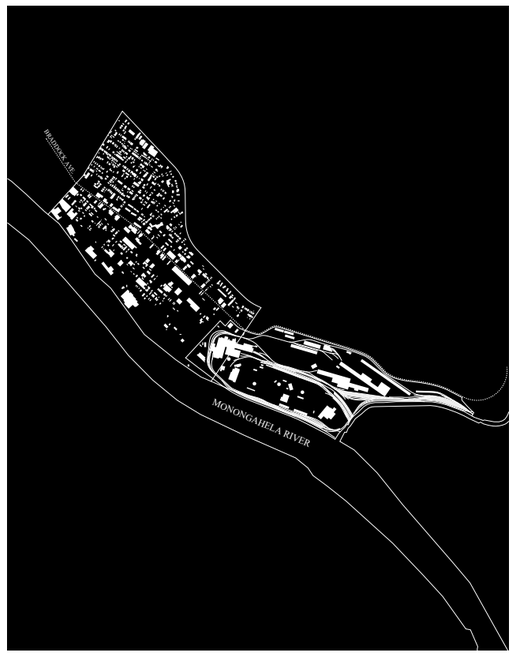
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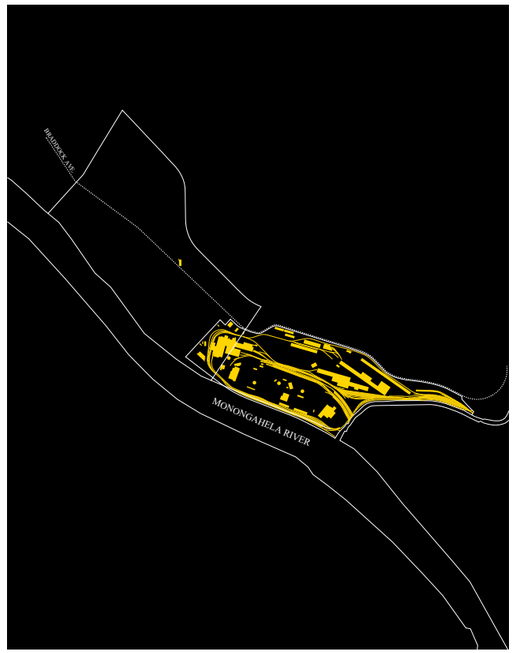
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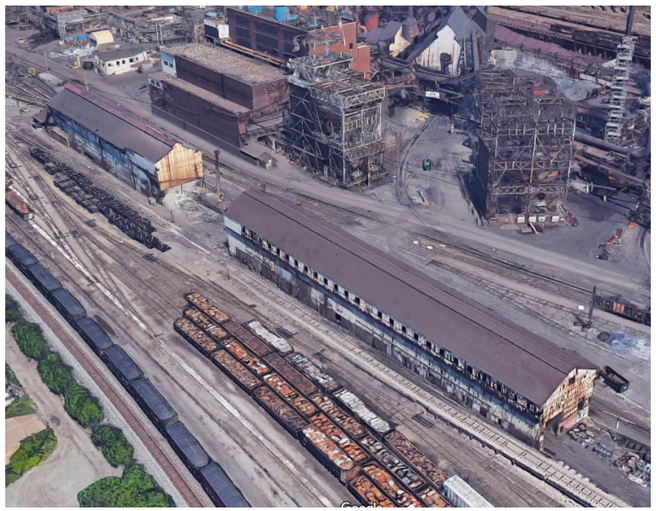

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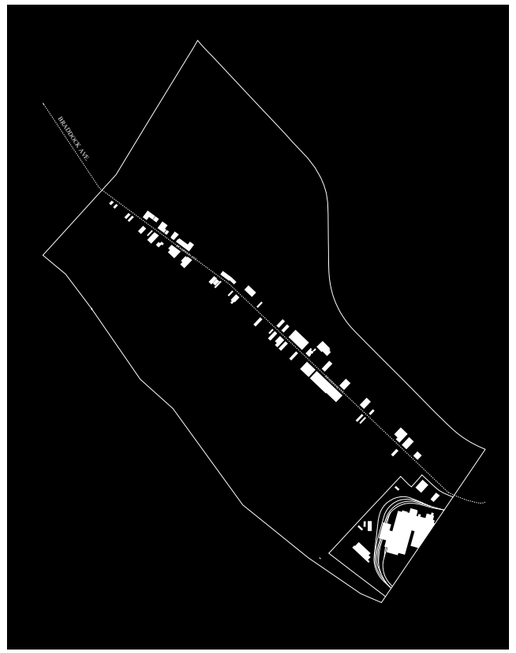
BROADWAY AVE

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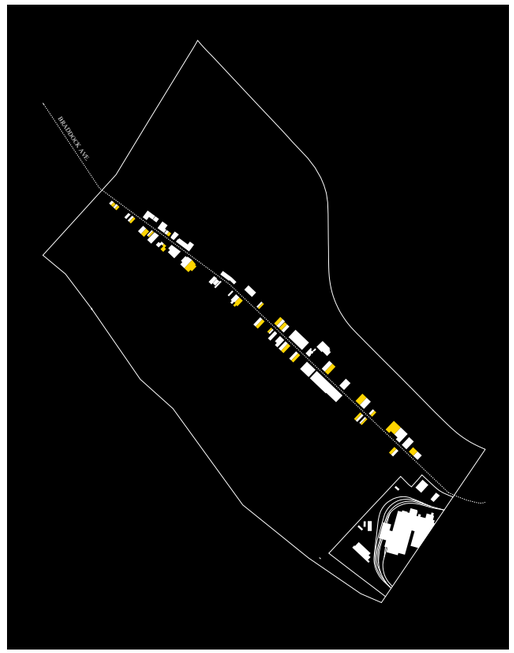
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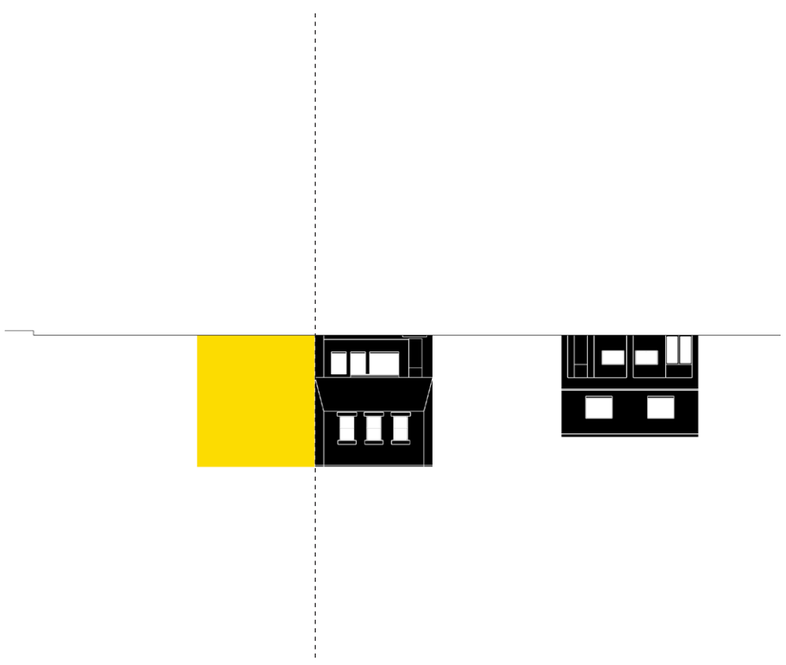

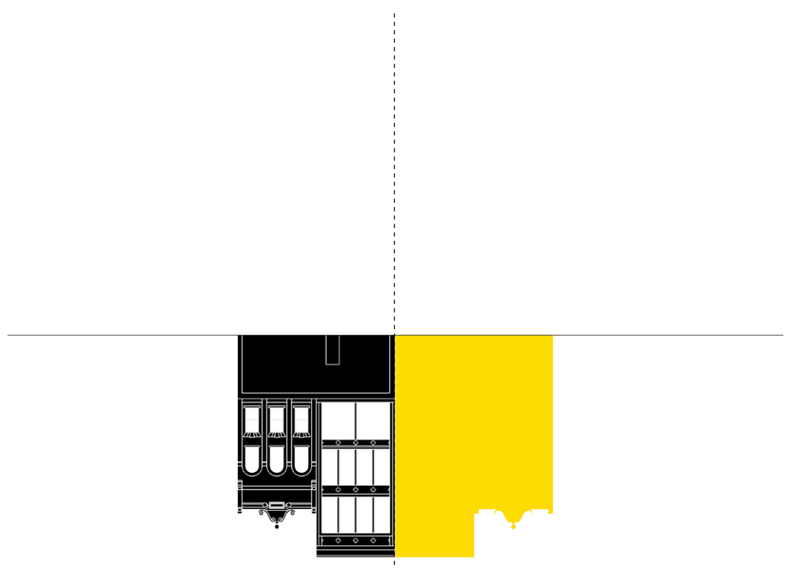

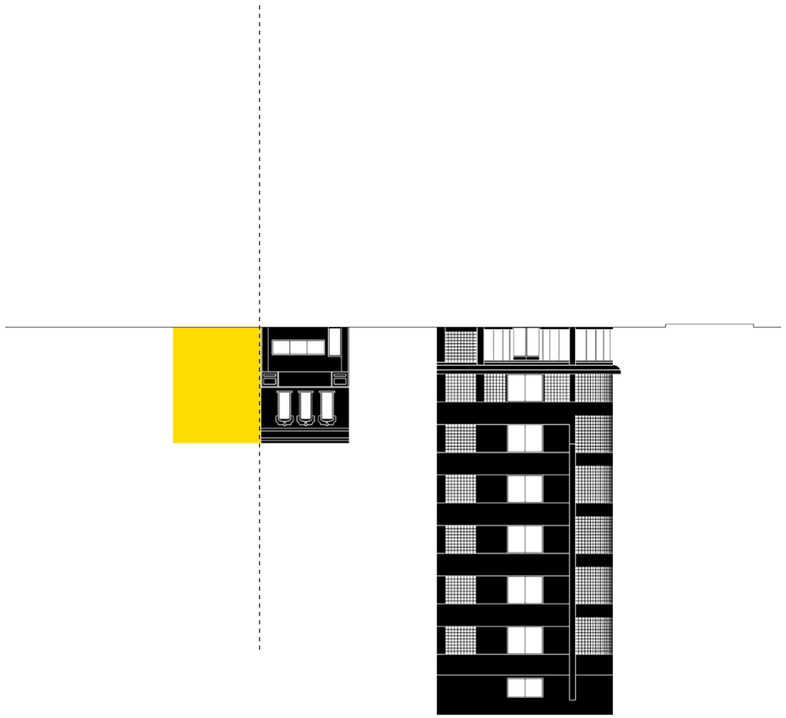

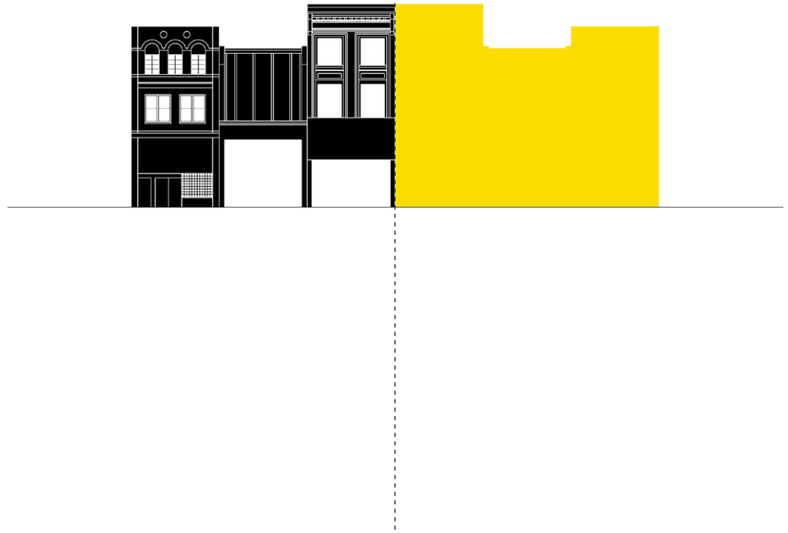

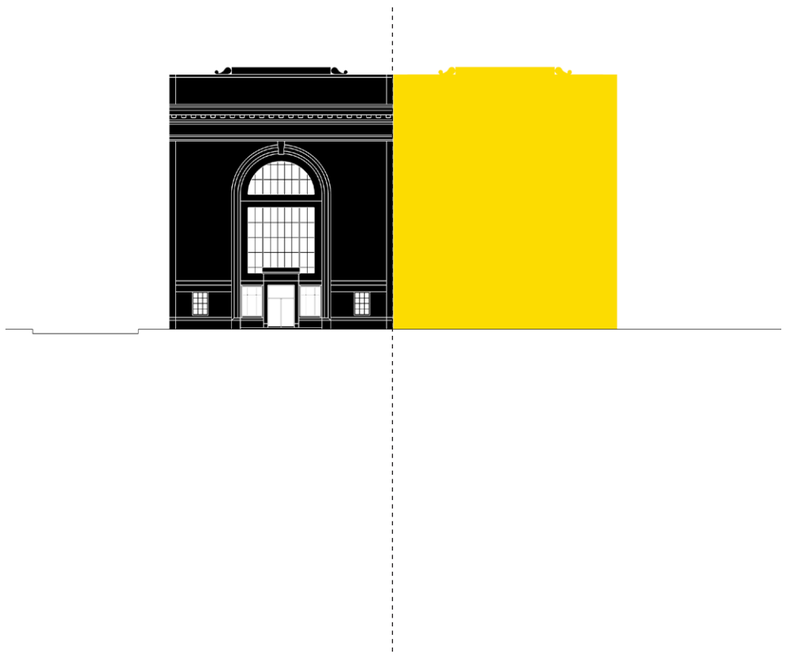

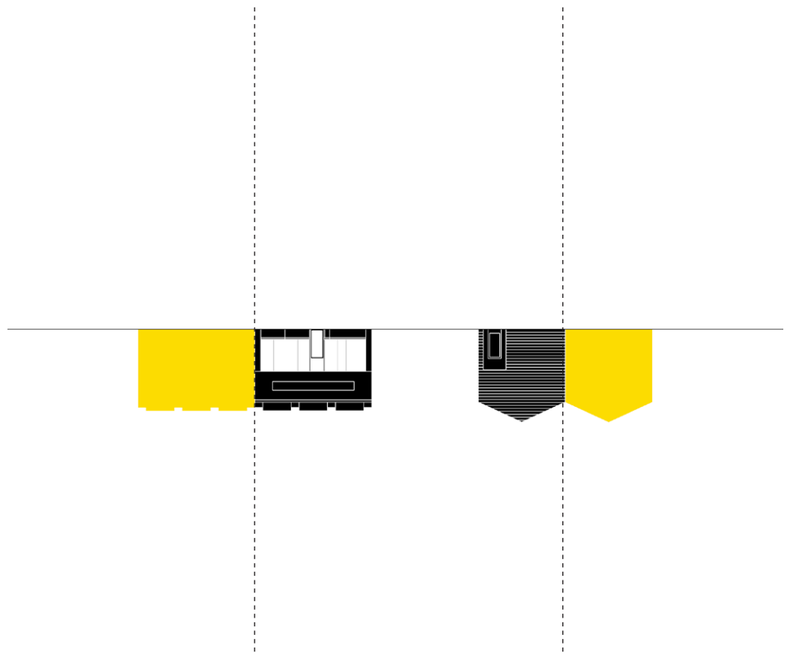

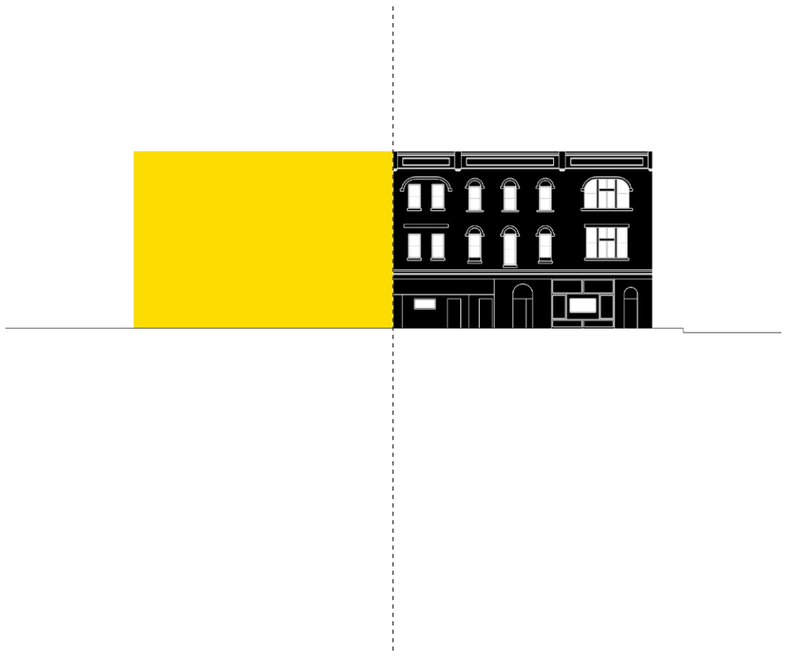

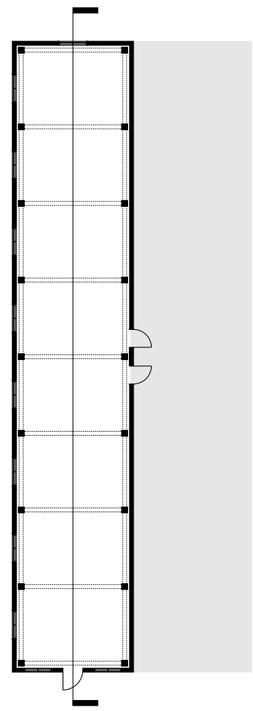

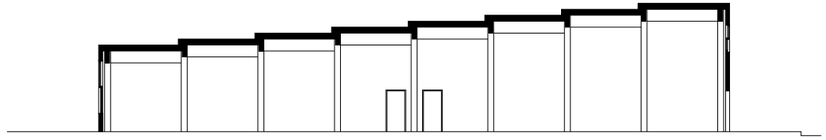

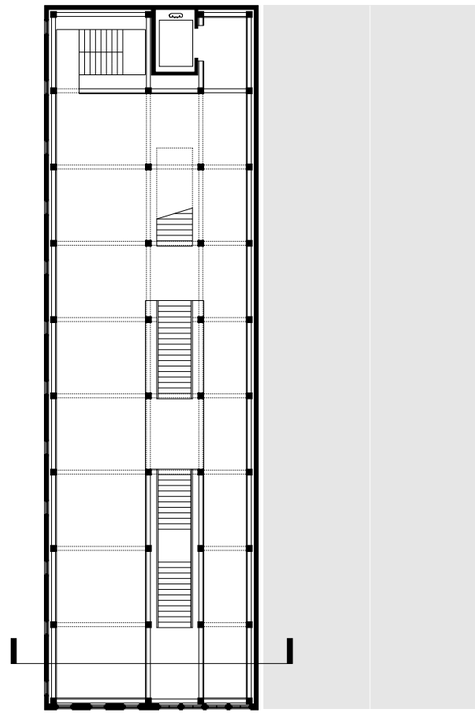

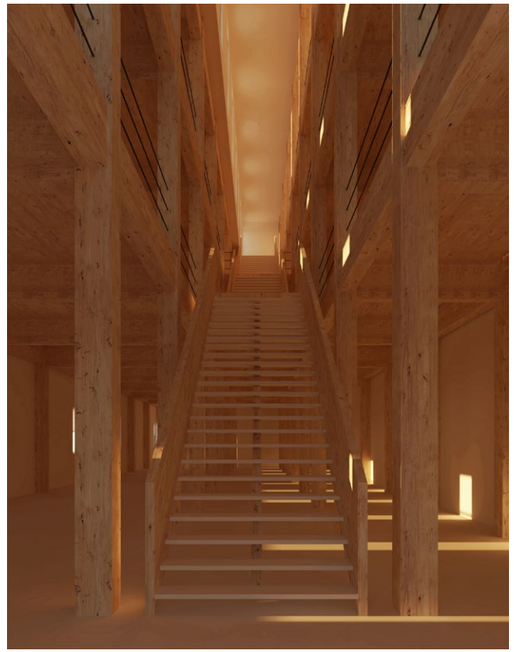

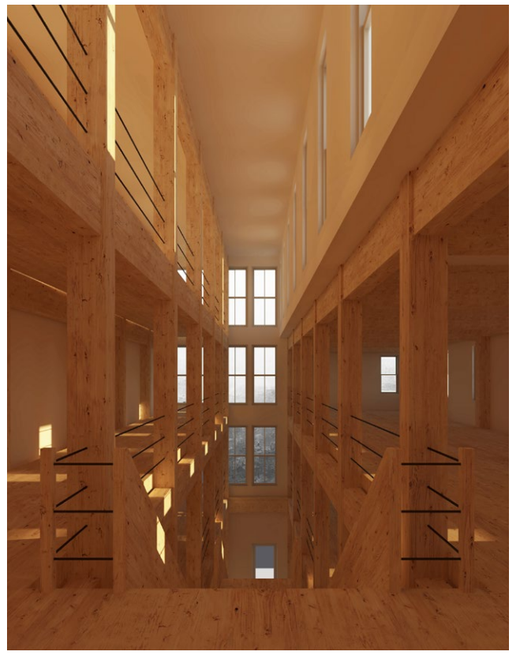

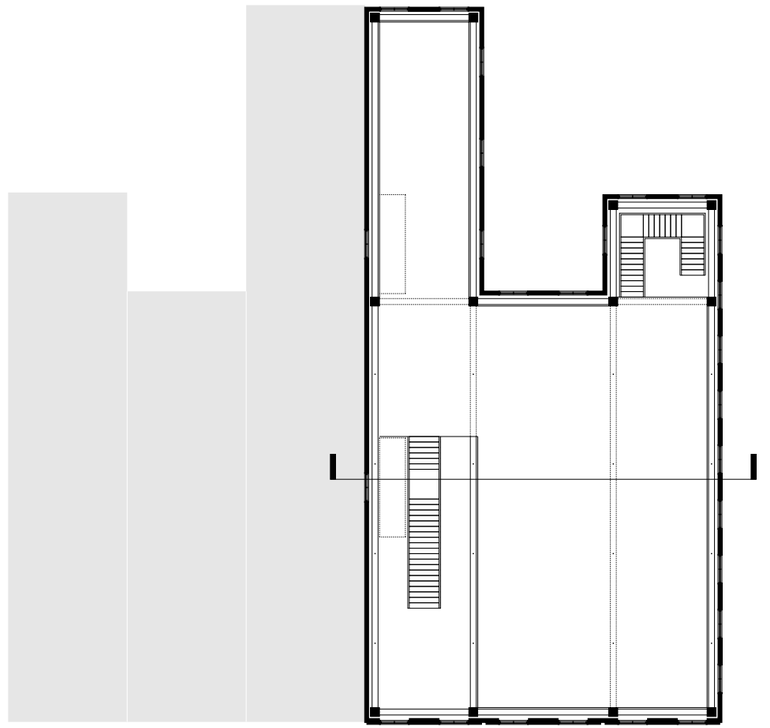

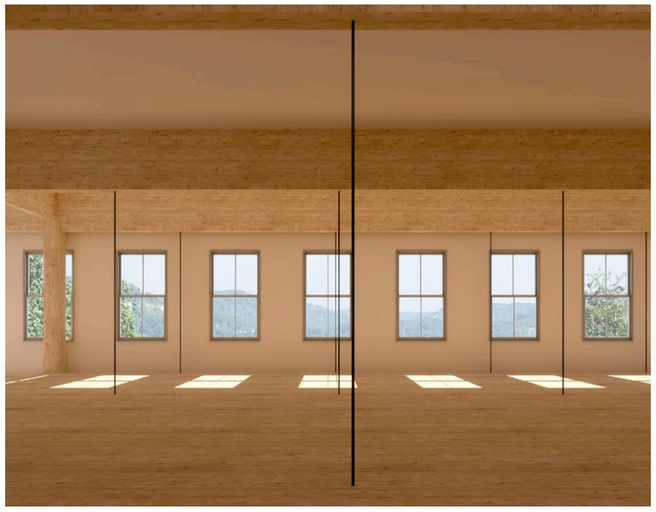

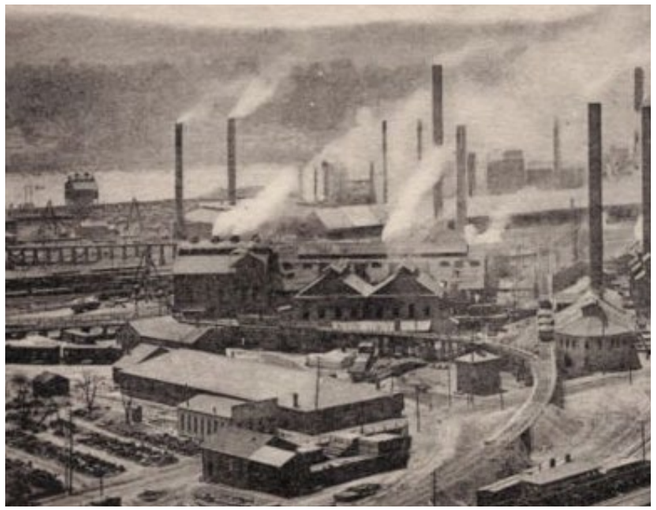

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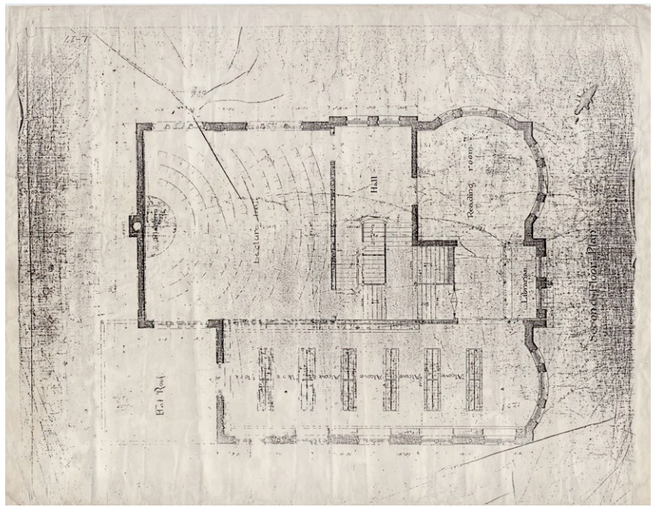

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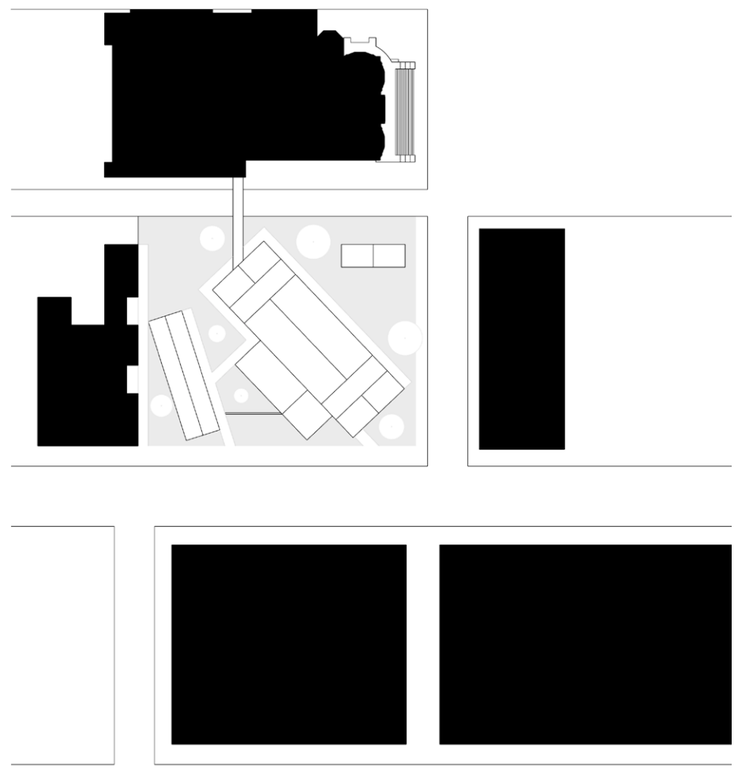
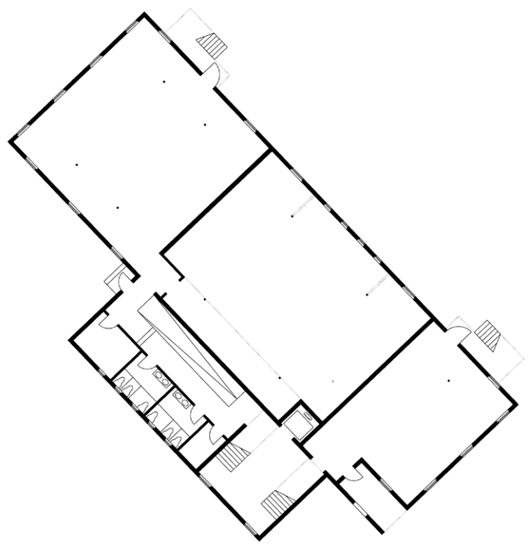
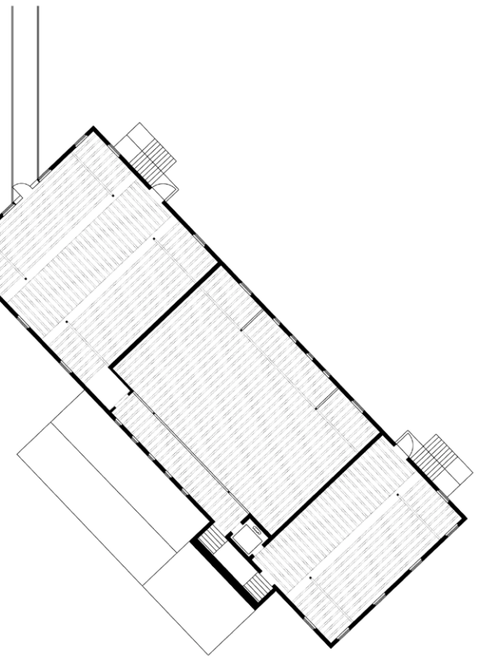
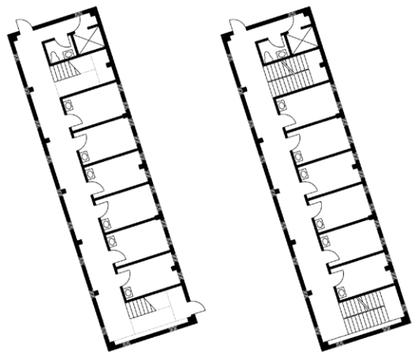
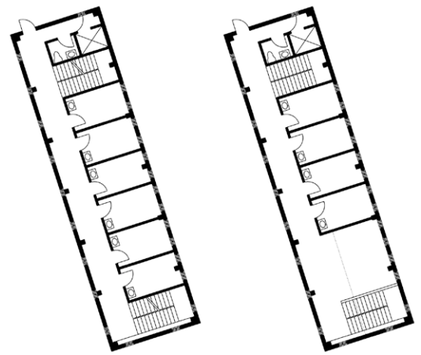
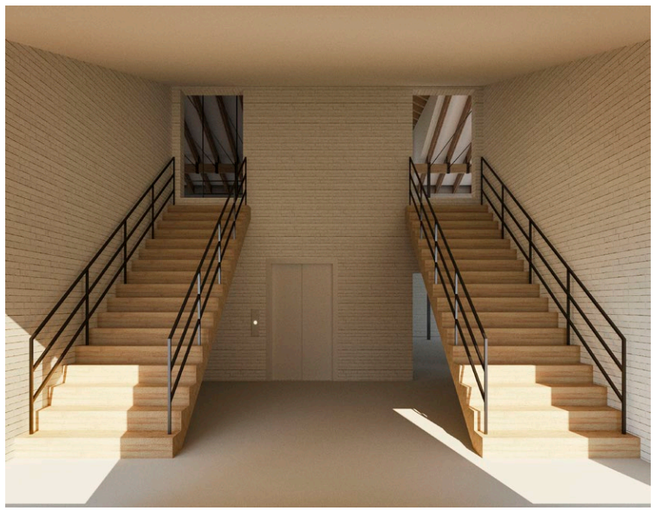












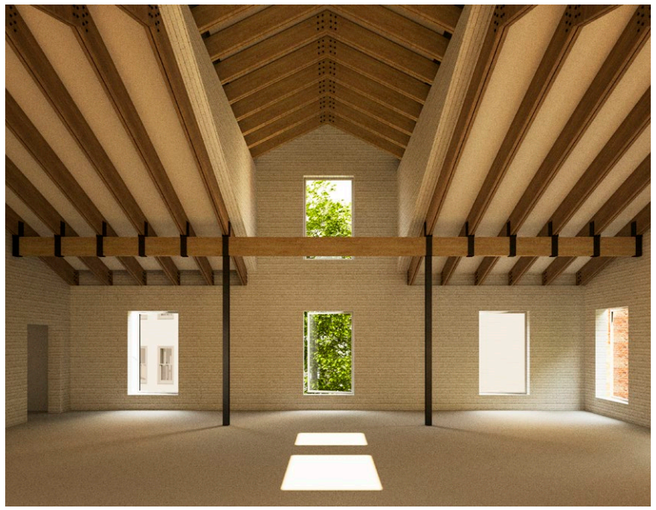


image credits

01 Braddock sign

02 old view of mill across river

03 Latoya Ruby Frazier, Notions of Family

04 Main St., Braddock, Vintage Postcard

05 Braddock Post Office, Vintage Postcard

06 Historic photo of Braddock, PA

07 Original plan of the Braddock Carnegie Library

08 Historic photo of the Braddock Carnegie Library

09 Adult Reading Room, Carnegie Library of Homestead

10 Gymnasium, Braddock Carnegie Library

reflection

My parents took me to visit my grandmother at her home in McKeesport, Pennsylvania when I was a boy. She lived in a small house near the top of the hill in the steel town, a few miles downriver from Braddock. When my father was a boy he worked summer in the mill at the bottom of the hill. McKeesport has become a ruin, but Braddock persists.

The thesis became two theses:

1. The “thesis” as design project defined by site, context, program, design, plans, sections, renderings, diagrams, etc. Over the course of the semester this thesis was overtaken by the second:

2. The meta-thesis: an inquiry into what a thesis is, should, or could be.

Architecture is experience. Experience necessitates an intentioned slowing, attention turned inward. Yet, the academy asks: *what is the tweet?* The tweet is: the tweet is dead. *Death of the singular, of the architect as such.*

I have both personally and anecdotally encountered this question repeatedly: *why does your thesis matter* now*?* Our current moment has become one of both transition and disjuncture. Assuming the validity of this question, what does it mean to begin a thesis in one reality, and to finish it in another? How do we design for an uncertain future?

"A reflection…an opposite that is the same, an other that is also clearly yourself."

Daniel Mendelsohn

"I'll be your mirror
reflect what you are, in case you don't know"

The Velvet Underground

Metaphor is intrinsic to human experience; we make sense of the world through metaphor. In the thesis the mirror acts as both formal logic and as metaphor.

The mirror is deployed as a metaphor of absence, loss, growth, and transformation. Architecture does not start with nothing. We see the world, we create anew - what do we keep, what remains?

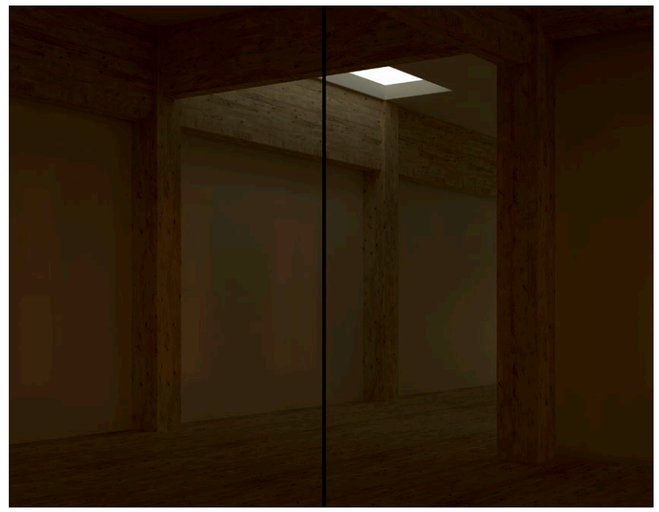
So too is the mirror analogous to the (re)production of images. Photographers and artists like Andy Warhol identify, isolate, and duplicate the "real," and in so doing both transform and reflect the world back to itself. *untitled* seeks to do the same with architecture.

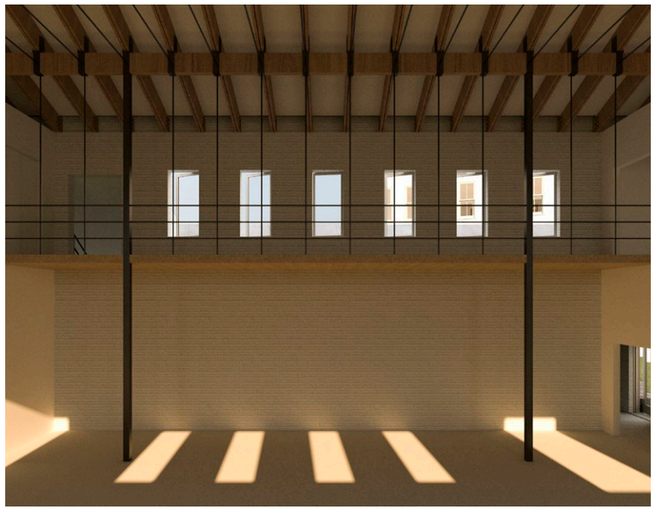
I spent the initial weeks of the thesis thinking and writing about the relationship between light, architecture, and photography. I came to understand that light alone would prove an insufficient means to guide the design project in a meaningful way. Light was too literal and too subjective to deploy as a formal or graphic device.

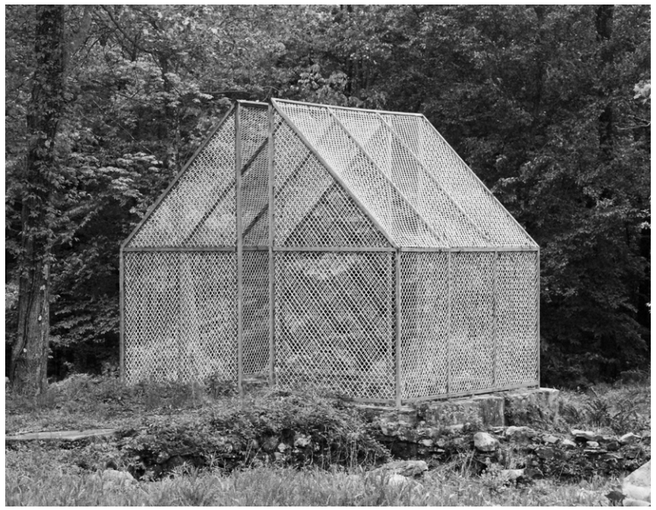
Yet ight arises repeatedly as an unstated design interest. Light serves as a tie between art and architecture. It is both the medium of photography and a defining quality of spatial experience. It is visual and bodily, something that we can see and literally feel with our bodies. Light prompts physical sensations, emotions, and a sense of time and place (narrative). In the project it creates a sense of emptiness but it also emphasizes the textures and colors of the buildings. In so doing the project attempts a visual realism that ties the work back to its photographic precedents.

I want to be both artist and architect. I do not want to slip between the two but rather I want to be both at all times. I want to design as an artist and make art as a architect.

remains







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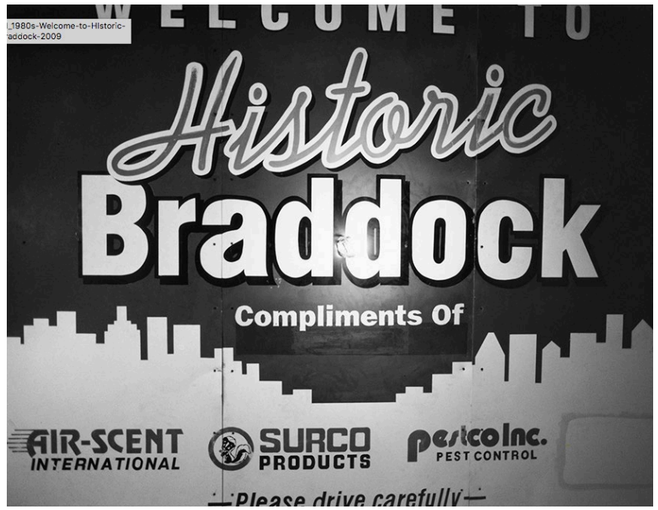
Compliments of
Paramount Theatre
Braddock, Pa.

04

TIMES

05


1980s-Welcome-to-Historic-Braddock-2009
WELCOME TO
Historic
Braddock
Compliments Of
AIR-SCENT INTERNATIONAL
SURCO PRODUCTS
pestco inc. PEST CONTROL
Please drive carefully

06

image credits

01 Philip Johnson, Ghost House

02 David Hammons, Day’s End

03 Braddock National Bank, Braddock, PA

04 Vintage pamphlet from the Paramount Theater

05 The Times Theater, Braddock, PA

06 Latoya Ruby Frazier, Notions of Family

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