### RICE UNIVERSITY

# **CULTURAL INFLATIONS**

by

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Master of Architecture

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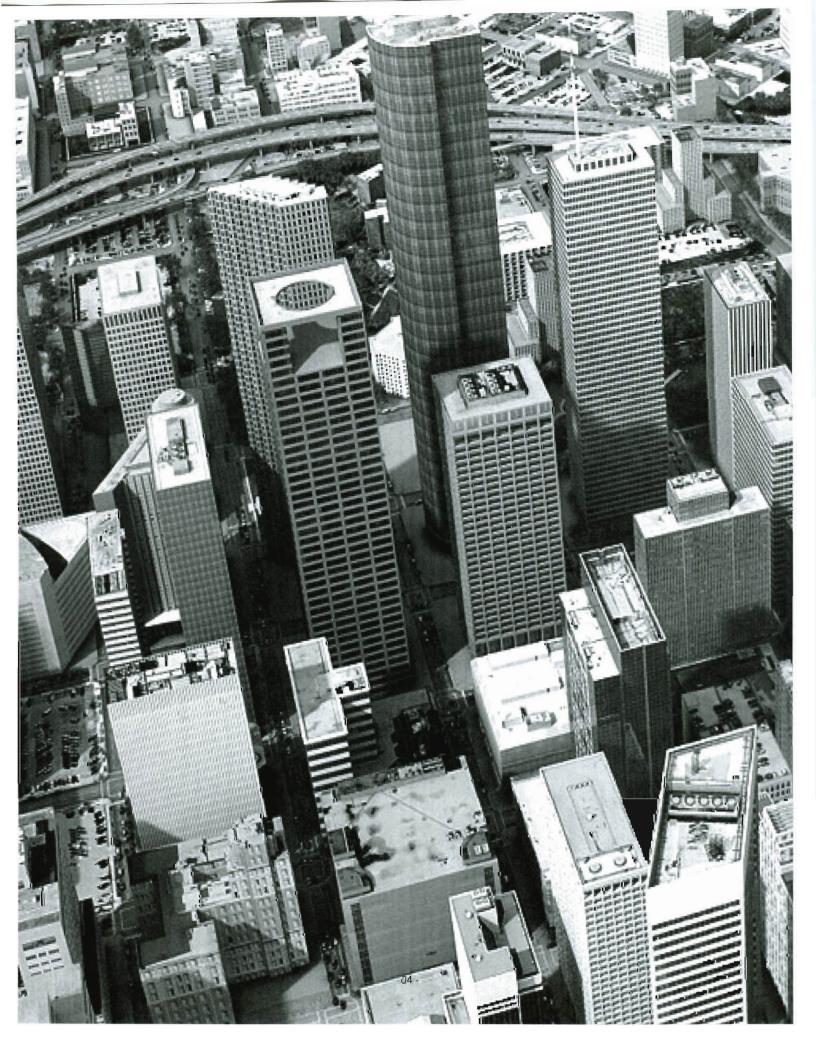
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HOUSTON, TEXAS MAY 2011

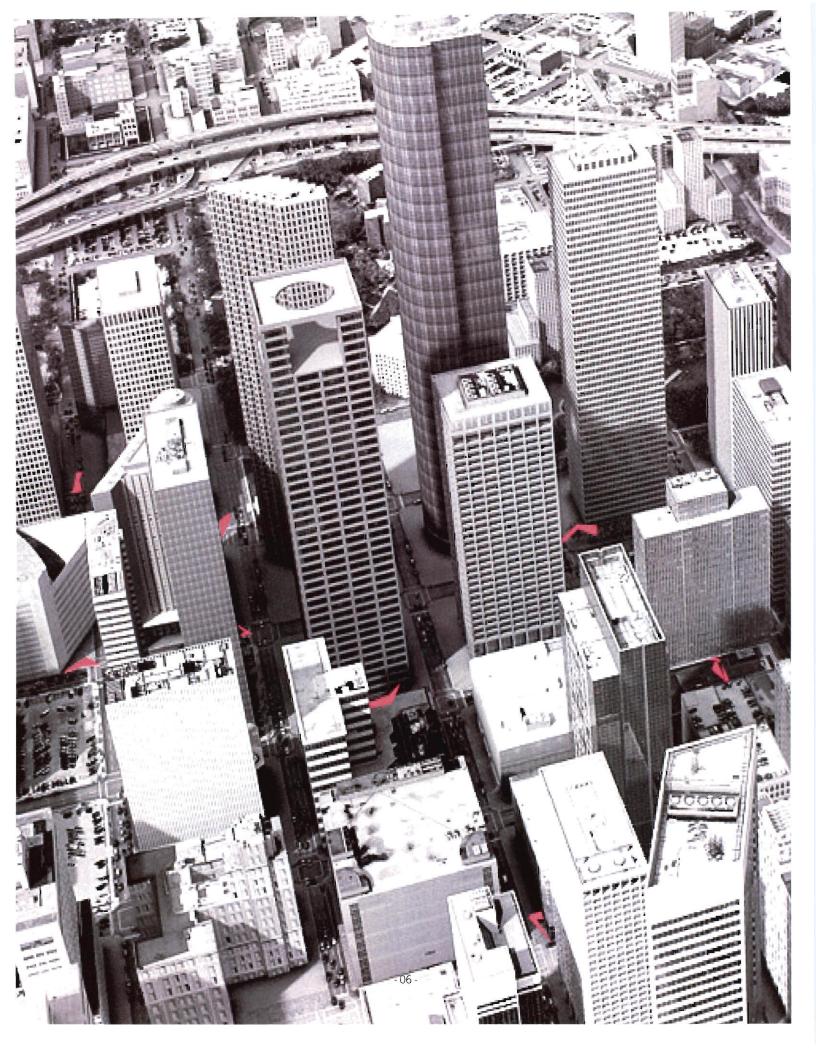


### **Abstract**

If the 19th century urban center was a city of manufacturing, and the early 20th century city was one of corporate capitalism, today's downtown can best be characterized as a site of culture and consumption, from the Guggenheim Bilbao to Times Square in Manhattan.

Downtown Houston is at a disadvantage in this contemporary context, for it lacks any density of cultural institutions. Sites of entertainment and culture are instead spread throughout the greater Houston metropolitan area. This dispersal creates islands of culture, but leaves downtown Houston without a cohesive cultural identity. By tweaking municipal policy and exploiting untapped sites, this thesis seeks to inflate cultural space in downtown Houston (and by cultural space, I mean everything from the symphony to contemporary art to Karaoke).

Inflations promote a new way to transform the city. Rather than make big change through big cultural projects, Inflations are small iterative structures where transformations occur through a set of connections: infrastructural and visual. Already in place in downtown Houston is a seven mile system of tunnels and skywalks that has led to an evacuation of the street and a fragmented downtown public. By slowly infusing forms into this downtown infrastructure a new culture map is made. Through an accumulation of Inflations these small structures become sites of consistent visible exchange: point moments of cultural activity placed in a once banal infrastructural system.

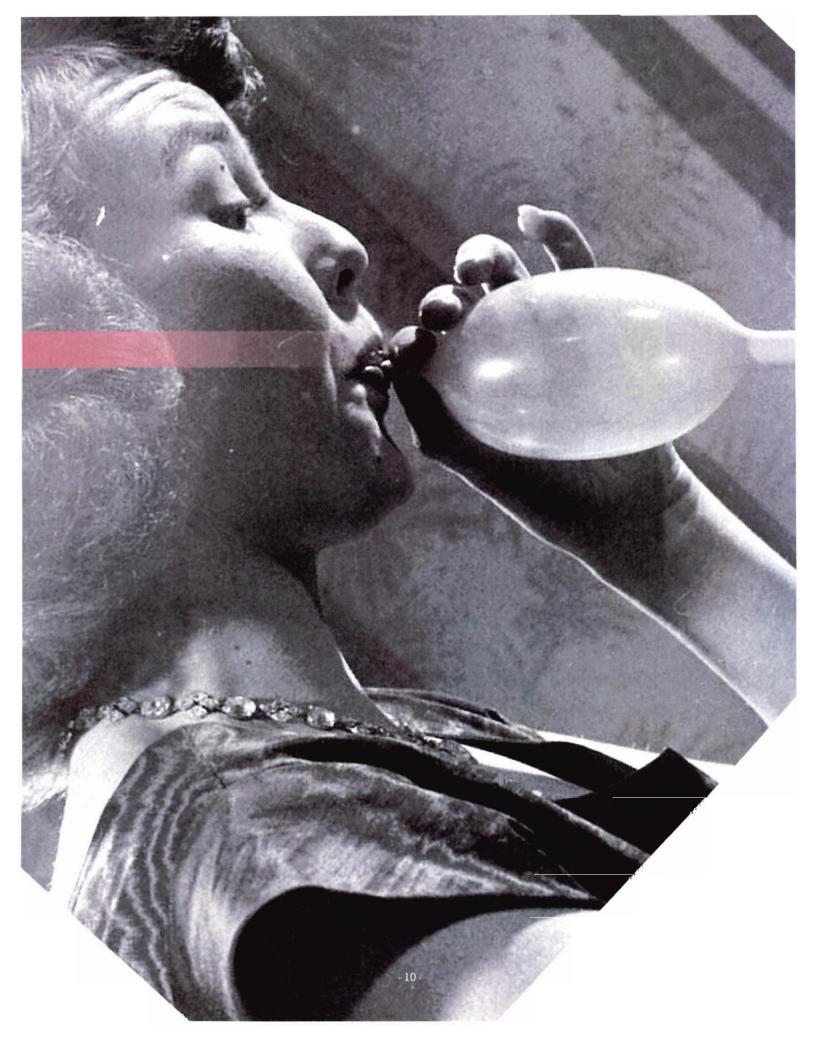




# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First I would like to thank my wonderful thesis advisor and Dean of the Rice School of Architecture Sarah Whiting for her insightfulness and patience through this whole process. Her precise wit and criticisms taught me more than how to simply to acknowledge the city and its public as an architect, but what this project contributes to the world. Architects can be the arbiter of their own social projects - this thesis in response offers an architectural alternative to the city. Many thanks to Albert Pope for supplying countless moments of wisdom over the course of my few years at the RSA and teaching me that architecture is really not about solving problems but creating them. To Lars Lerup, whose intelligence and whimsy continues to inspire and challenge the younger generation to preserve that architecture is everything.

Thanks to all those that provided scores of inspiration along the way and directly to the hard work of Amy Westermeyer, Kate Morgan, Ian Searcy, Sara Hieb, Duncan White, Karla Wallace, Kelly Barlow, Aaron Bush, and Sam Tannenbaum. Finally, the biggest thanks goes to Brian Rex, who has long supported my crazy endeavors and continues to provide passionate perceptions into the world of architecture, thank you.



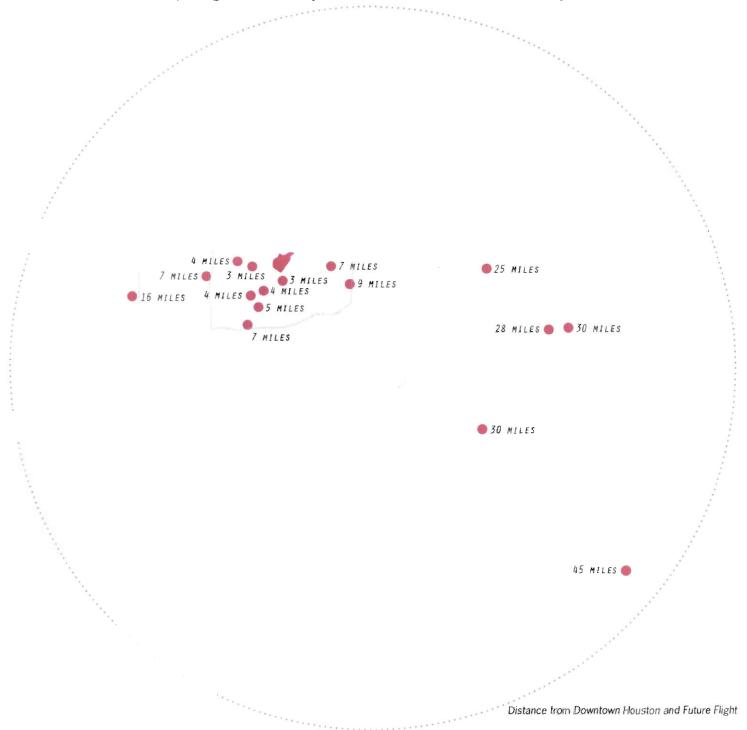
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Just as other cities have been branded for certain Institutions or Capital experiences, Houston is known for many things: the Johnson Space Center, Oil, the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Astrodome, its interstates, and Chinatown just to name a few. Below is the reach of Houston's sprawling metropolis. Tucked into this large expanse is a series of cultural islands



This dispersal creates a cultural void in downtown Houston. These institutions are located up to 30 miles away from the city center. This has resulted in a sparse tourist industry. Rather than build or expand these programs internally, programs are added externally. Extensions of these institutions are injected into downtown. By adding new programs to these varied institutions and placing them in the city center, both the institutions and the city benefit.

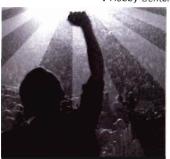


7 Alley Theater



10 Zoological Gardens

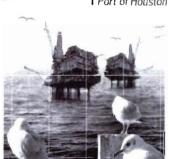
4 Hobby Center





8 Wortham Theater







2 Chinatown





1 Port of Houston



12 NASA

16 Atkinson Island Wildlife Refuge

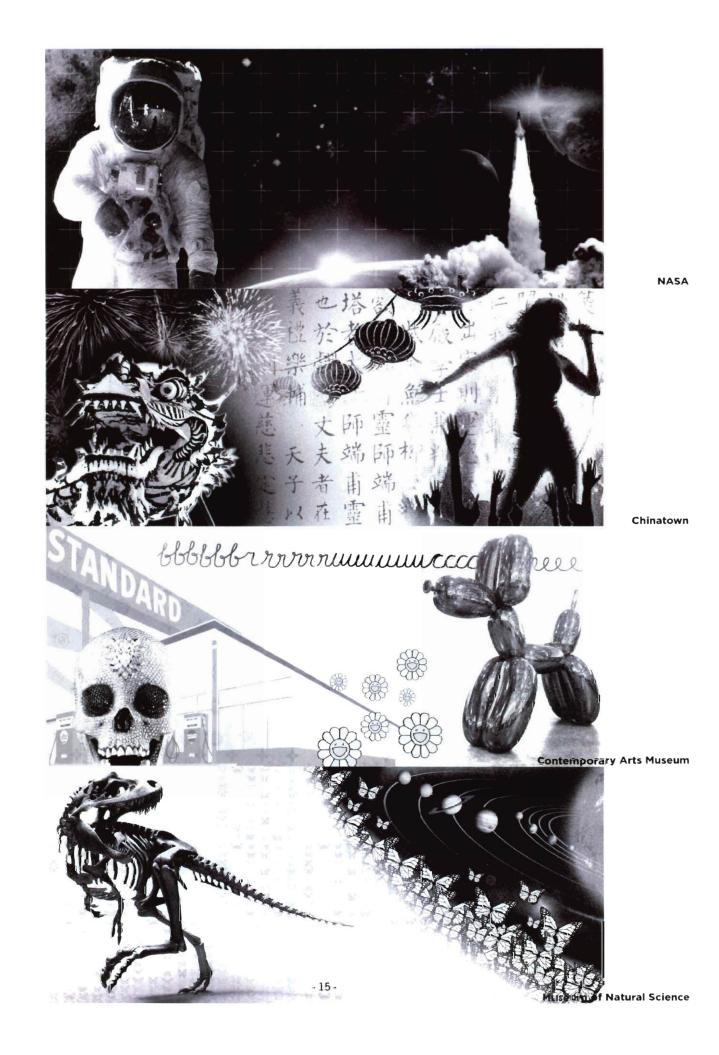


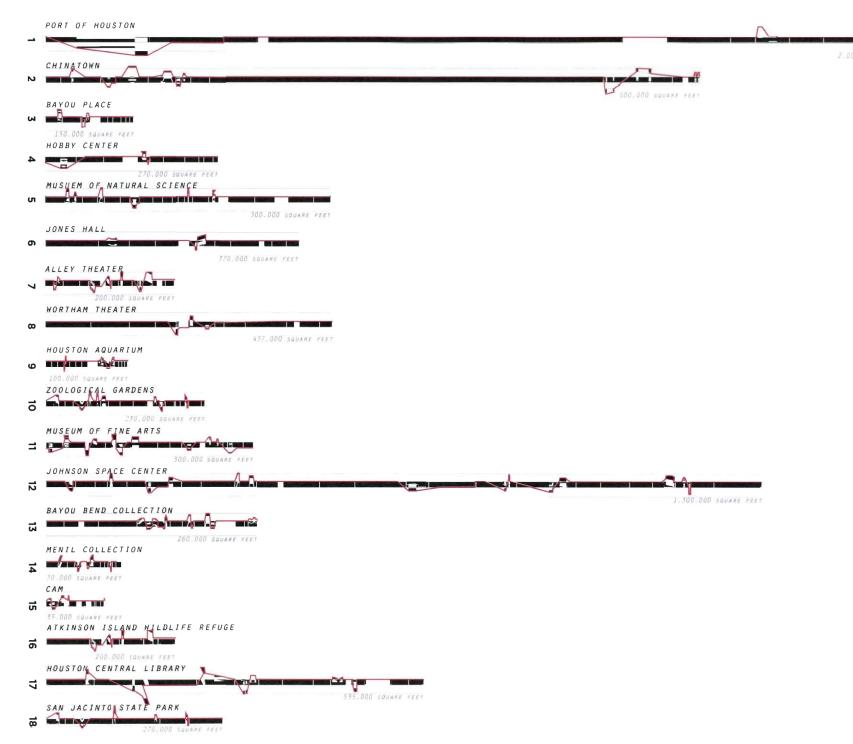
15 Contemporary Arts Museum

5 Museum of Natural Science



Houston's Culture Map





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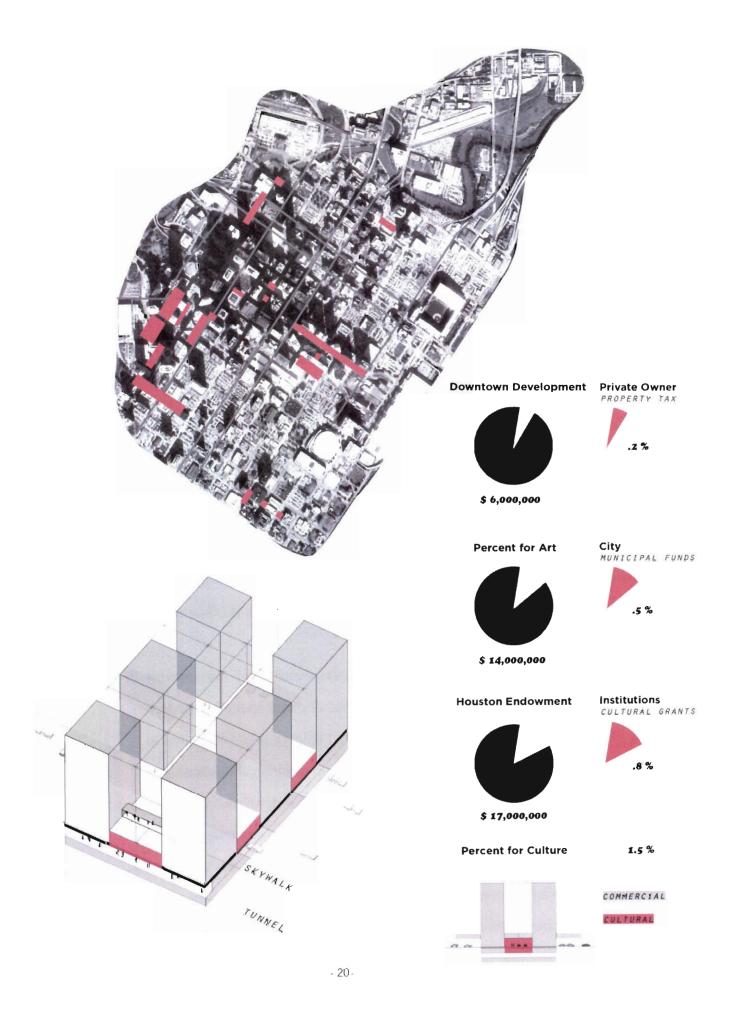
- 8. Parking Garage
- 9. Surface Parking

# **Downtown Fragments**

Traditionally, Houston's cultural buildings and its downtown infrastructure are entirely disconnected— the former acts as a large node and the latter as a network. One is an object in the fabric and the other is embedded in the fabric. The issue implicit in a strategy for downtown cultural resuscitation is to not build big - these behemoth structures sit in a field of parking and will only fill this grandiose space for a few hours at a time. In response this project shifts the tradition of building large cultural megastructures in downtown into a system of integrated ministructures.

The Map to the left divides Downtown into three zones - two that contain large cultural and sport monuments while the other is defined by its infamous corporate landscape. Embedded within this third zone is a system of discrete tunnels and skywalks. This system is set up as infrastructure for Houston's corporate population - it is for those people who arrive to work at 8 AM and leave at 5 PM sharp. They are mere trajectories anchored by over 3 million square feet of surface parking, 50 public accessible parking garages, and 44 million square feet of office space.

The Corporate zone of this map is culturally underserved. The 7 mile network of tunnels and skywalks connects this large expanse of office space but services only its workers. The density of this area pushes the large megastructures to the outskirts of downtown and as a result makes no cultural connections to its immediate networked context. By strategizing a plan for downtown that creates a broader cultural infrastructure, a consistent transformation can take place in this once banal city center. Transformations have less impact when the structure is giant and sits in a field of parking. This project is a part of a paradigm shift - where architects can build small and slowly add to the city to literally change the face of downtown.

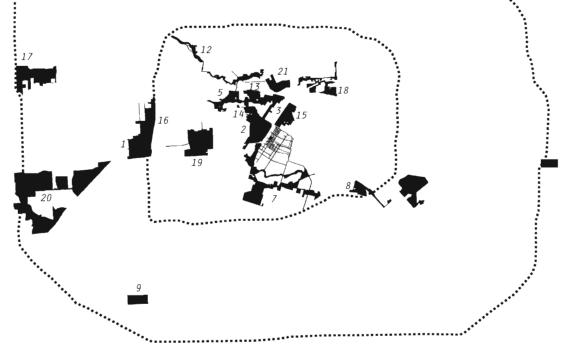


# Percent for Culture

To insert cultural program into the tunnel and skywalk system slowly over time, a rigorous plan for development is necessary. A new urban policy called Percent for Culture makes this new datum visible and accessible to the Public. Houston's Cultural Affairs Office supports the growth of various cultural vendors throughout Houston. This policy pairs this aid with property tax incentives for private owners in downtown Houston. Growth is both internal and external, creating small satellite event spaces embedded into a once privatized infrastructure.

The role of the architect in society is changing. Manfredo Tafuri declared that "Architecture has been absorbed by the Metropolis," and yes this is true, but this thesis questions how an architect can progressively position him or herself within this context. How can we change the city, visually and operationally. Instead of waiting for projects, architects are initiating and developing strategies for building. By analyzing institutional and government bodies present in Houston, Percent for Culture takes municipal aid that is set up to support our local cultural vendors and pairs it with incentives for private land owners. Dissimilar to the Percent for Art programs, this policy has size, scale, and program are incorporated in the plan. In 1999, the City of Houston established an ordinance mandating that 1.75% of qualified Capital Improvement Project monies will be allocated for civic art. These art projects tuck themselves into the city fabric. Similarly, Percent for Culture projects are inserted into the once fully privatized tunnel and skywalk system, but the funding part of the policy takes all thee players into consideration - the Private Owners, City Council, and the Institutional Parties. By taking a small percentage out of these yearly funds a consistent 1.5 Percent can slowly change the culture map of Downtown Houston. Year by year these projects will infiltrate Houston's primarily corporate downtown.

A second part of this Percent for Culture Policy includes Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZs). TIRZs are unique zones created by City Council to attract new investment to an area. TIRZs help finance the cost of development and support the additions to unlikely areas that would otherwise not attract cultural programming. Below there is a map of the existing 22 investment zones, each one of these investment zones is created as an isolated sector of the city. Similar to the presence of Houston's dispersed cultural islands these 22 patches are spread throughout without necessary connections to one another. In the inner loop the patches begin to overlap because of density, but the density disappears in the inner inner loop, otherwise known as downtown. A new map of point TIRZ zoning is shown to the left in pink - these pink areas are located where there is a density of tunnels and skywalks. These spot zones operate as one, but are present in multiples. This variegated zoning creates difference based on local site conditions rather than providing a typical homogenous planning scheme.



- 1. St. George Place
- 2. Midtown
- 3. Market Square
- 4. Village Enclaves
- 5. Memorial Heights

- **6**. Eastside
- 7. O.S.T. / Almeda
- 8. Gulfgate
- 9. South Post Oak
- 10. Lake Houston

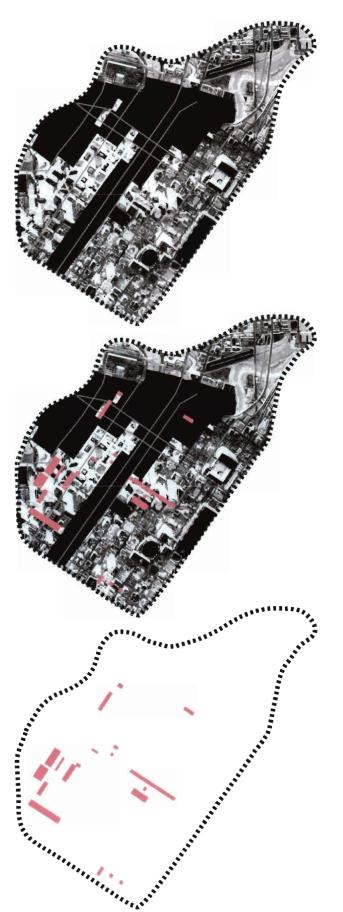
- 11. Greenspoint
- 12. City Park
- 13. Old Sixth Ward
- 14. Fourth Ward
- 15. East Downtown

- 16. Uptown
- 17. Memorial City

21. Hardy / Near Northside

22. Leland Woods

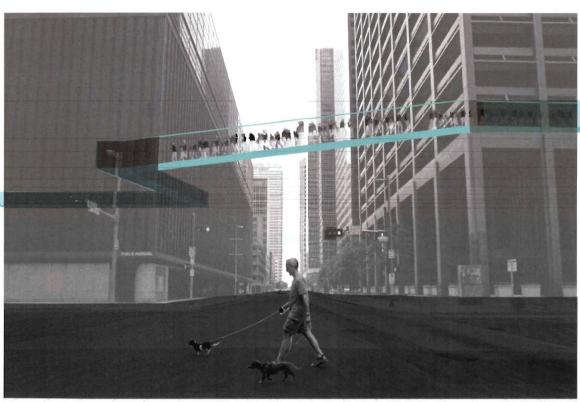
- 18. Fifth Ward
- **19**. Upper Kirby
- 20. Southwest Houston

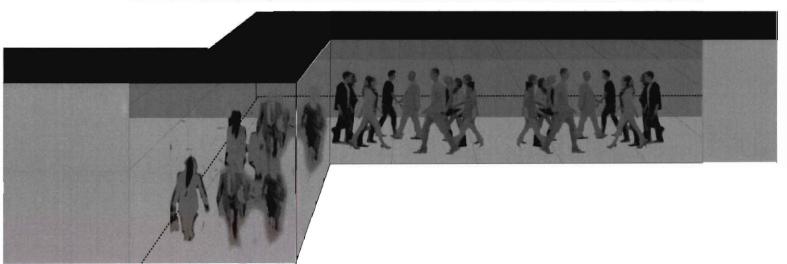


Existing Market Square Zone #3

Additional Culture TIRZ

New Spot Culture Zone



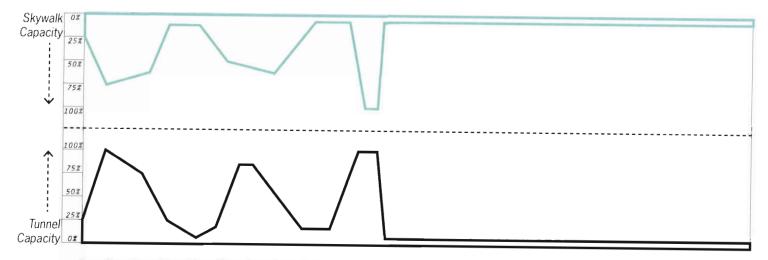


### Networks

Implicit in the infrastructure of downtown Houston is its network. This network has several horizontal grounds: its tunnels, streets, and skywalks all act as independent systems facilitating the office workers of downtown Houston's corporate landscape.

These layered circulation spaces comprise downtown Houston's public life. However, their interiority, while desired by Houstonians who hide from the heat, has led to a condition of fragmentation. Houston at times could pass for a ghost town - on the street. But below and above there are two isolated strata that together connect 77 buildings in 7 miles - yet this giant system is only open for three quarters of the day. In short, downtown Houston's dwindling corporate population, sparse tourist population, and occasional non-corporate downtown resident are all further reduced by being separated out into different strands along this network.

The system was not planned; it just grew. The first to connect buildings downtown was Ross Sterling, an oilman and governor in the early 1930's. Inspired by Rockefeller Center in New York, his vision was soon copied. But as it began as a private development, it remains the same. Each segment is controlled by the individual owner who determines the hours and programs to fill the system.



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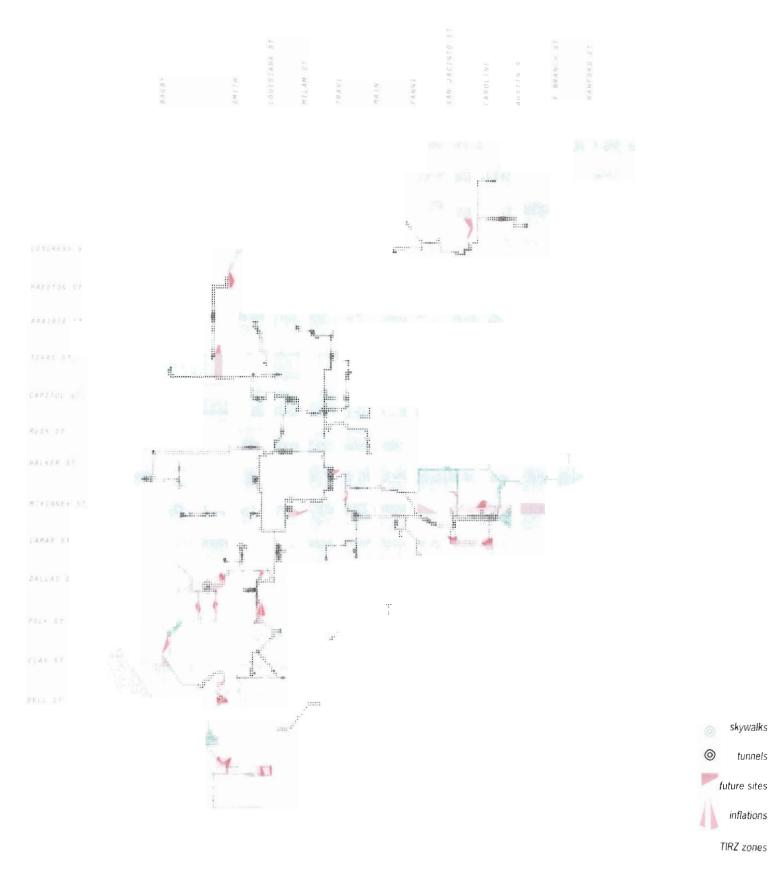


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These bridges and tunnels, while technically public, lack a cohesive identity, existing instead as isolated strata only open from 8 to 6. Alienated from the street, deriving what little sense of identity they may claim merely from the buildings most closely adjacent to them. Moreover, the presence of Houston's corporate culture means that these 'public' spaces are deserted at night and on the weekends. Workers arrive and park in garages swarm the tunnels and then evacuate at the end of the work day, swarming the air-chilled comfort of the tunnels and skywalks yet again. They have no relevance outside the workday.

The tunnels are programmatically diverse, however they only service the office workers that exploit them. The tunnels are lined with coffee bars, restaurants, boutique shops, florists, shoe-repair shops, jewelers, beauty salons, barbers, dry cleaners, dental clinics, optometrists, pharmacies, dental clinics, copy and printing services, banks and post offices all of which are clearly amenities to the Houston corporate character. The tunnels and skywalks also connect to over 30 parking garages and one line of the system connects directly to the Theater District. However, because these spaces close at 6 PM, there is no use for this system on performance nights.

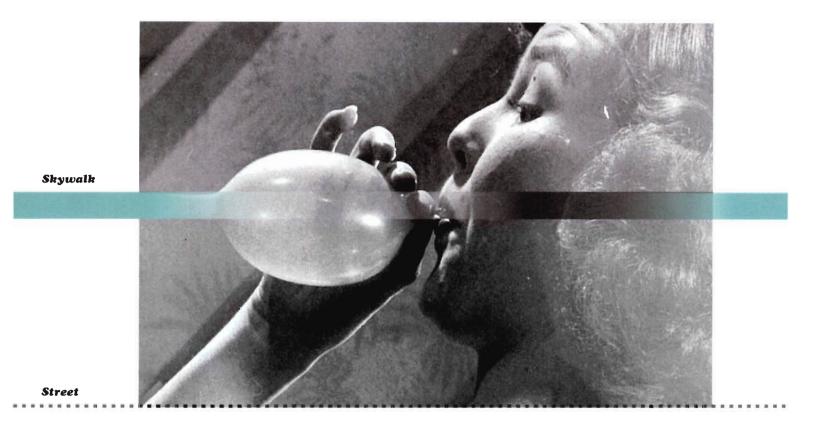
By creating an interface between underground, at ground, and above ground levels downtown Houston's layered circulation arteries transform from their current fragmented condition to one of cultural integration. The injection of satellite cultural space into existing programmatic voids produces a full 24 hour programmatic section for downtown Houston. Extension programs ranging from the Johnson Space Center Space Foods Restaurant to a new Kabuki Theater, to a Butterfly Greenhouse, to practice spaces for the Houston Symphony, or to an new Media Arts Space for the Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) will fill these voids.



Site Plan



14 Inflations



### Tunnel

Cultural Inflations are a series of urban interiors that are inserted into the system of downtown tunnels and skywalks. Just like puffing air into a balloon, these spaces are consequently filled with Cultural program. Programs are determined by site and the assembled public private partnership necessary for the Culture Policy to succeed. Each patron of this policy partners with a cultural institution to locate, strategize and build an Inflation. Inflations are a kind of serial architecture, as they exist in multiples. The idea is always similar, insert culture where culture is void, but the institutions involved in this downtown culture curation require specificity and brandability.

closed ground

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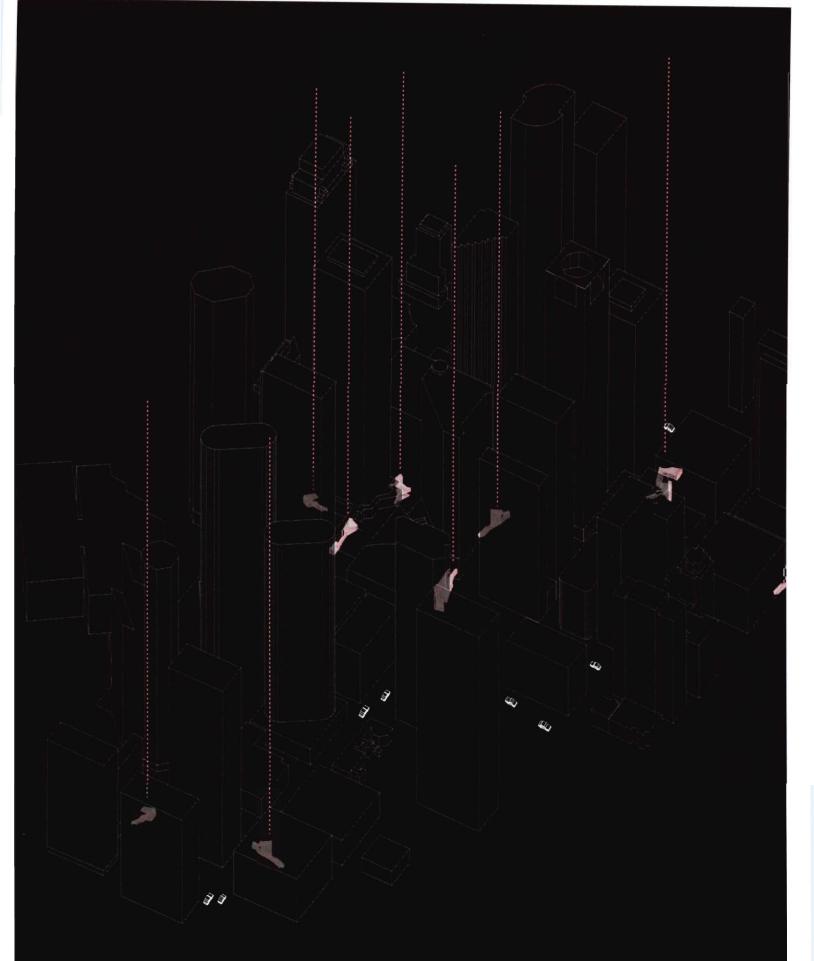
Inflation architecture must be recognizable as a family, but experientially unique - a kind of multi-type figure with a highly adaptable interior. Just as Houston is obsessed with its interiority so is Inflation architecture. This figure is able to expand and connect - it must do this in order to respond to a myriad of site conditions and programmatic variables.

empty ground

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closed ground

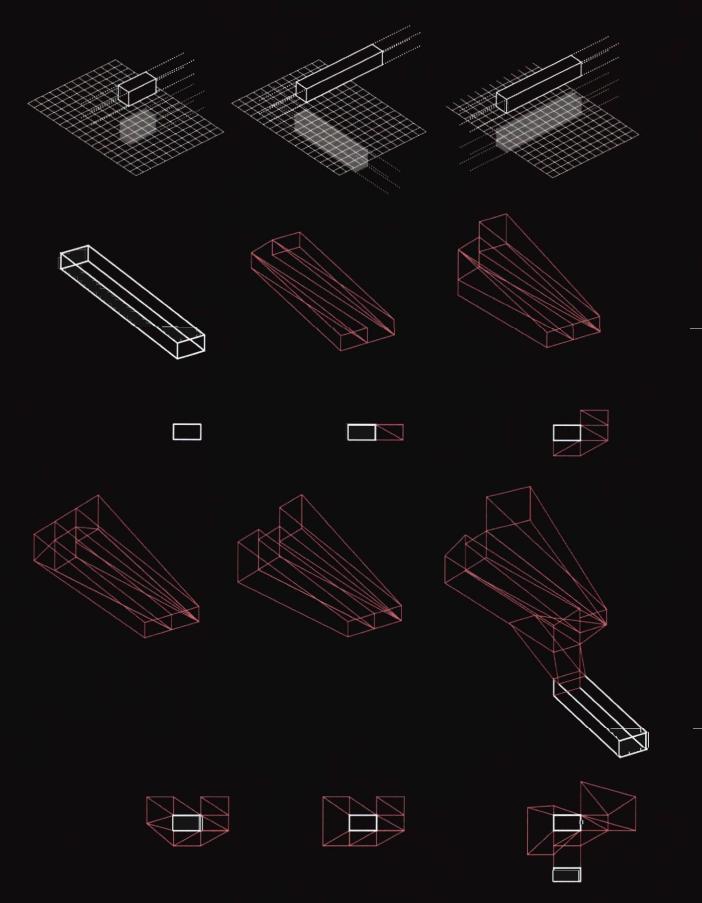
Inflations grow out of the endless tunnel and skywalk hallways, they connect to buildings and to parking garages. The space itself is small, in one single Inflation there is never more than 2000 square feet. Program types can range from theaters to exhibition spaces, to greenhouses and are slipped in between downtown's stacked layers of grounds - skywalks to streets to tunnels. By inserting an inflation connections are made and streets gain access to the systems that hover above and lie below them. A new vertical cross section is generated by "inflating" a once flat and privatized system. This project is figural, spatial, and most importantly, public.



# **Families of Form**

Inflations are multiples; their figures need to adapt. In developing a mutable architecture the legibility of these small structures translates across a large field. The site here is a long and narrow 7 mile infrastructural system tucked into downtown's corporate landscape.

Rather than design a monument to culture, where permanence and symbolism are key, Inflations use form in the operative sense. The figure takes on an oblique character. Because this particular 7 mile site is primarily based on flows, the form has to break that flow and inflate. Rather than focus on a surface that is continuous, the form breaks away from the vectorial form of the tunnel or skywalk and makes an oblique shift. This shift signals a moment in transfer from hallway to an expansive spatial interior. Smoothness is out and obliqueness is in. By modeling 6 Inflations all with different variables in site and program, a family of forms is developed through similar formal operations by being tailored to a range of potential sites. It is the variables in site and program that cause differentiation. There is no ideal type, each inflation while advancing relational form on the exterior, interiors are designed to be highly specified and programmatically unique. Together these structures generate a new culture datum for downtown Houston.



# 5 2

# **Inflation Architecture**

There are countless variables involved in this project. One question is if the tunnels and skywalks happen to intersect, how then do they interact or ignore one another? Systems could be running parallel or perpendicular to one another or they could simply cross at a point without the viewer or visitor even realizing their presence. By taking advantage of these situations as well as the constant near proximity to a parking garage, Inflations are smart and responsive. The first figural operation is to expand out beyond the limits of the dynamical flows present in each site (1). Similar to the movement of a rubber band these flows are distorted and literally pulled apart or 'inflated', becoming spatial rather than vectorial (4). Filled into the voids generated are cultural programs that have an incorporated relationship to the buildings and site that they immediately connect. Each form follows suit, but again the conditions always vary, each Inflation is relative to one another. These structures exist simultaneously in the city, although they are each unique, they produce an integrated cultural field for downtown Houston.









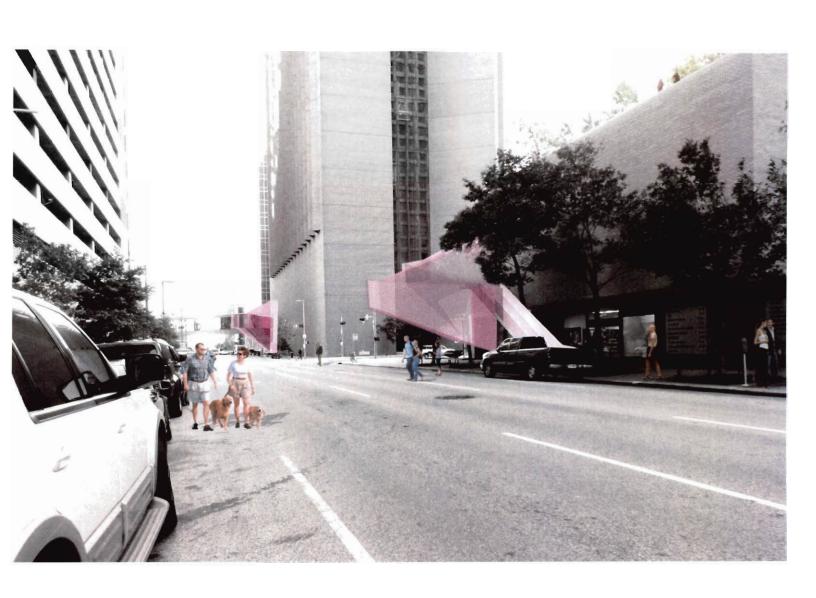


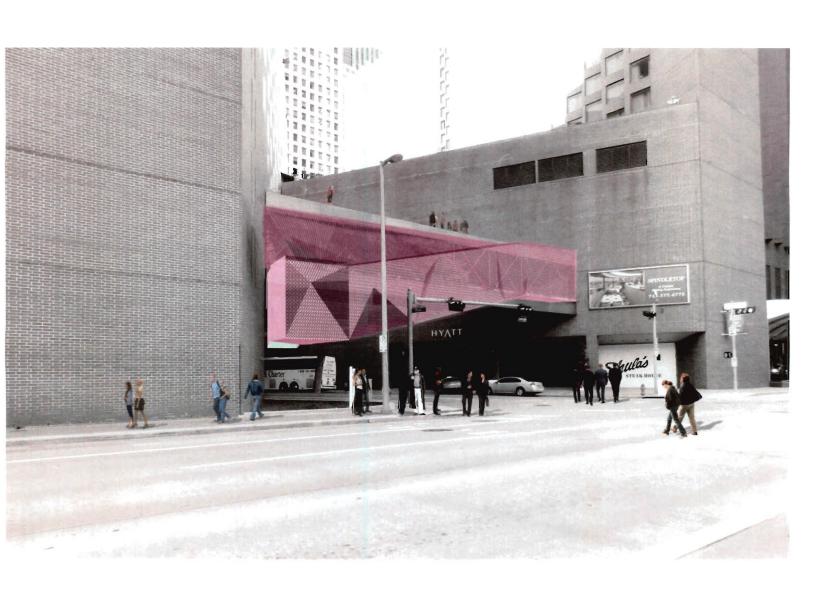




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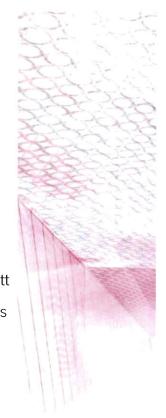
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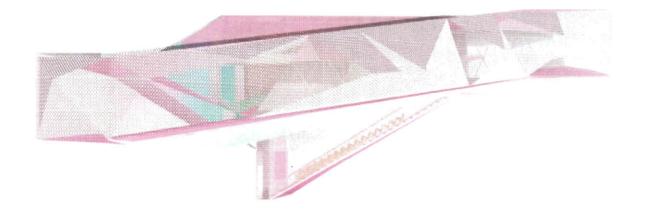




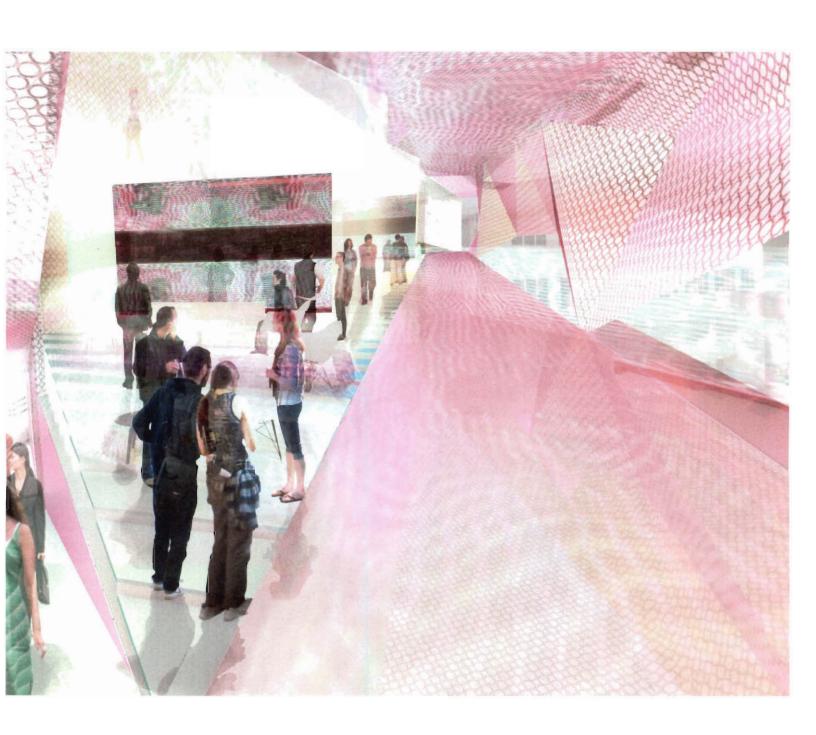
## **New Media Arts Inflation**

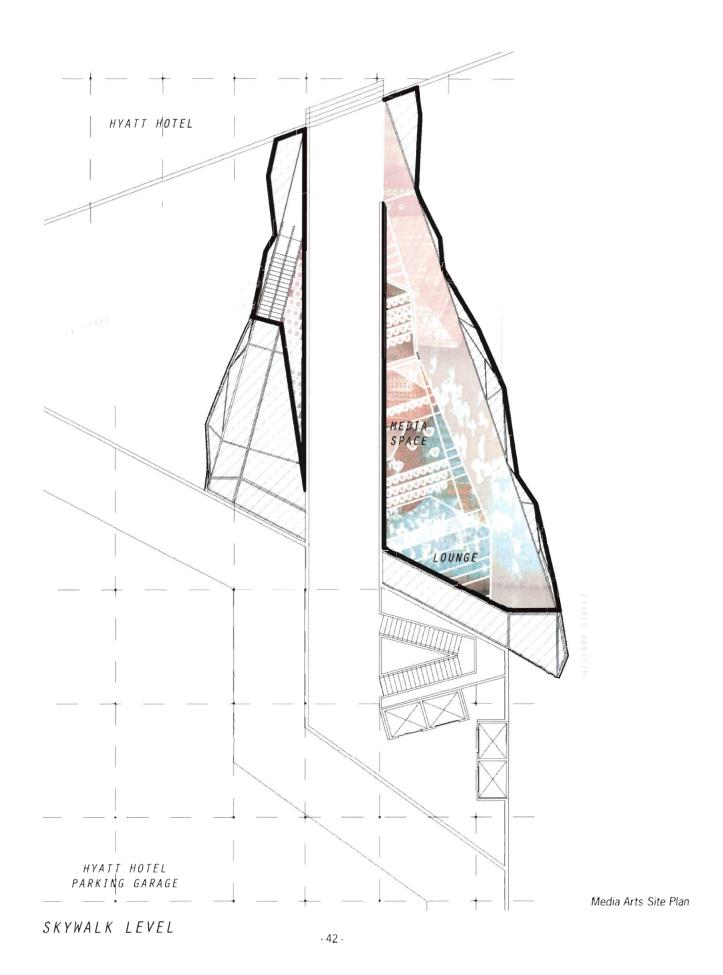
The Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston expands 4 miles from its home in Houston's Museum District into the Culture Zone at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Houston. The CAM is a non-collecting institution that rotates installations and exhibits throughout the year. Although the CAM now exists in a 35,000 square foot facility, the institution lacks sufficient room for multiple media exhibits, they are without a theater, and a proper book store. The New Media Arts Inflation plugs these programs back into the downtown network and breeds a new Contemporary Arts Museum space. This is the first project in many that would extend the existence of the Houston Museum District into downtown. The Inflation makes a direct connection from the street to the Hyatt and to the Parking Garage attached to the Hyatt, providing easy public access to the bookstore, media arts theater, and new media arts exhibition spaces.

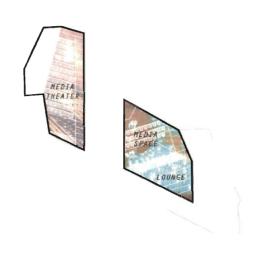


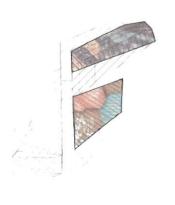


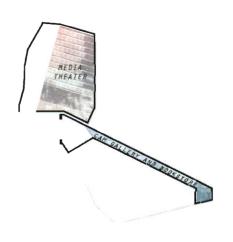












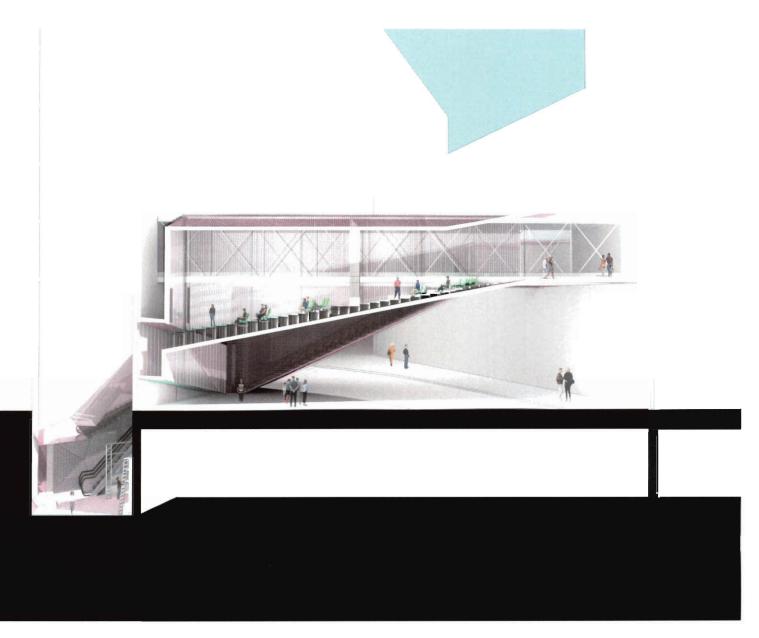




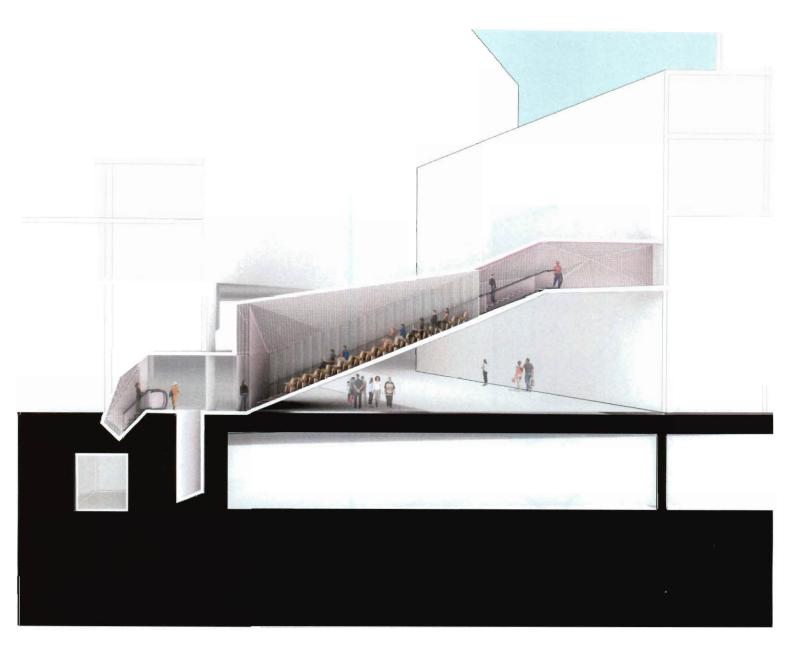


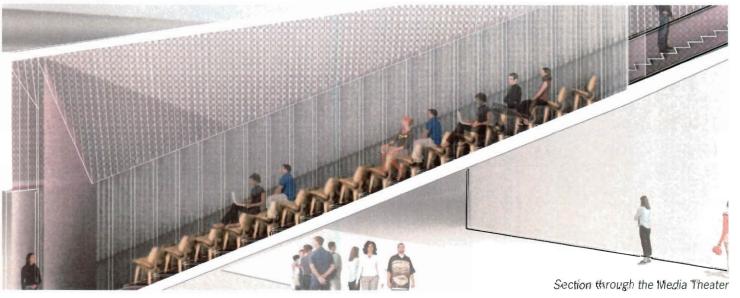


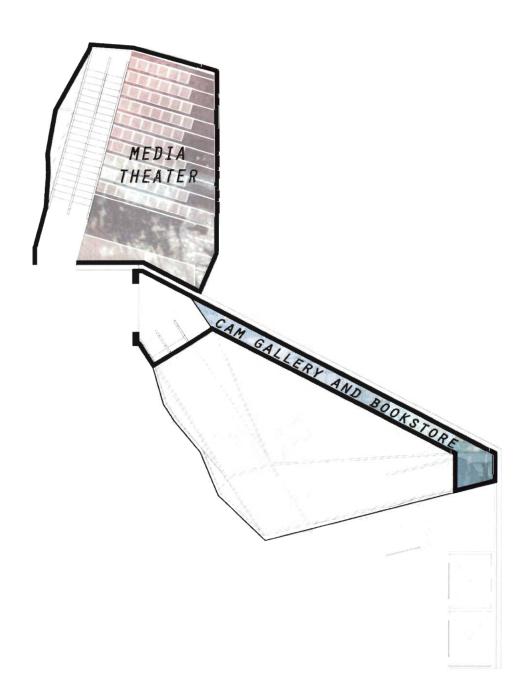






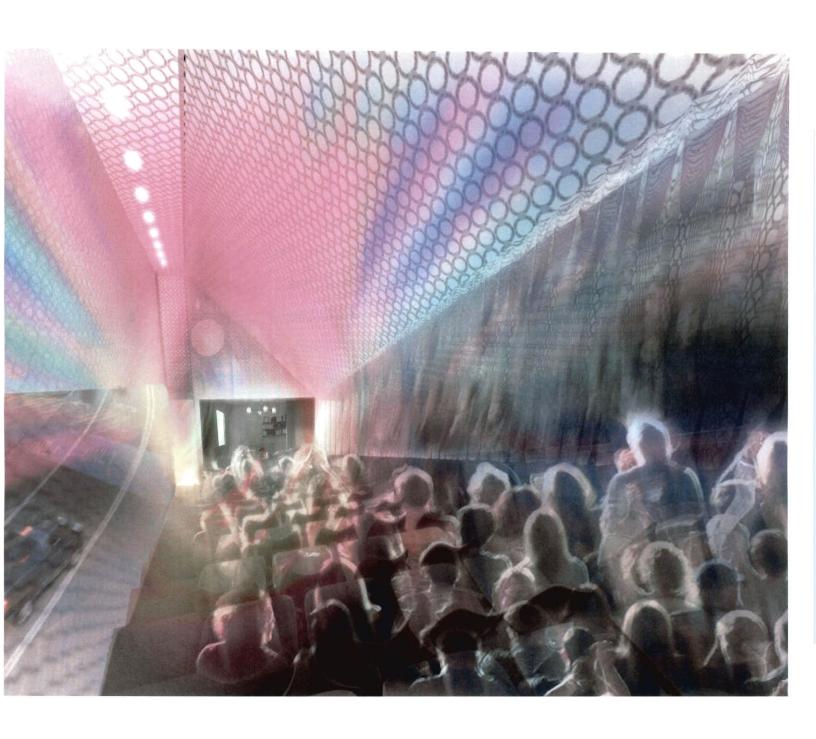






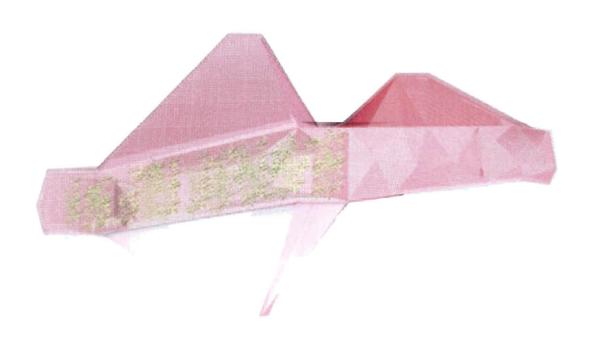


Media Theater Plan



## **Asian Inflation**

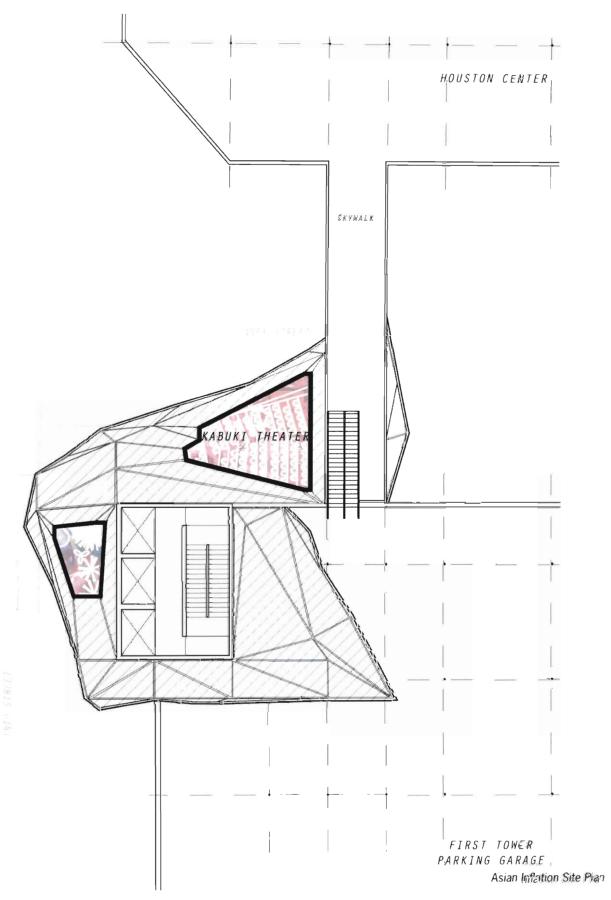
Downtown was once home to Chinatown, located in the east part of downtown, it moved 20 miles from the city center to find more inexpensive land and by the 1990's all of the businesses had moved. Today this site is home to Houston Center and the Downtown Club. The only existing presence of this old culture is tucked away in the offices of Houston Center, the Japanese Consulate. By taking advantage of the history of the site and its proximity to the Consulate, the new Asian Inflation brings a bit of the old Chinatown back into east downtown. Featuring a Karaoke Bar, Kabuki Theater, Japanese Garden and Farmers Market, as well as an Asian Arts Exhibition Space, this Inflation attaches to the 24 hour Downtown Club Garage, allowing nightlife to penetrate an area that is rapidly growing once again. There are three new sets of loft apartment buildings that neighbor this site, if there was never nightlife here before, there is now.

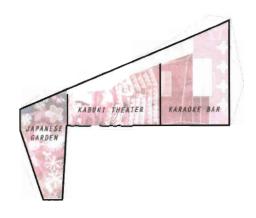


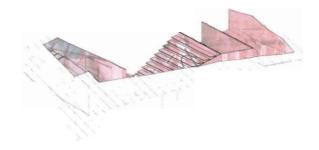
Elevation View

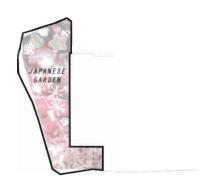


Japanese Garden and Market



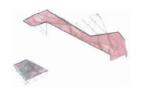








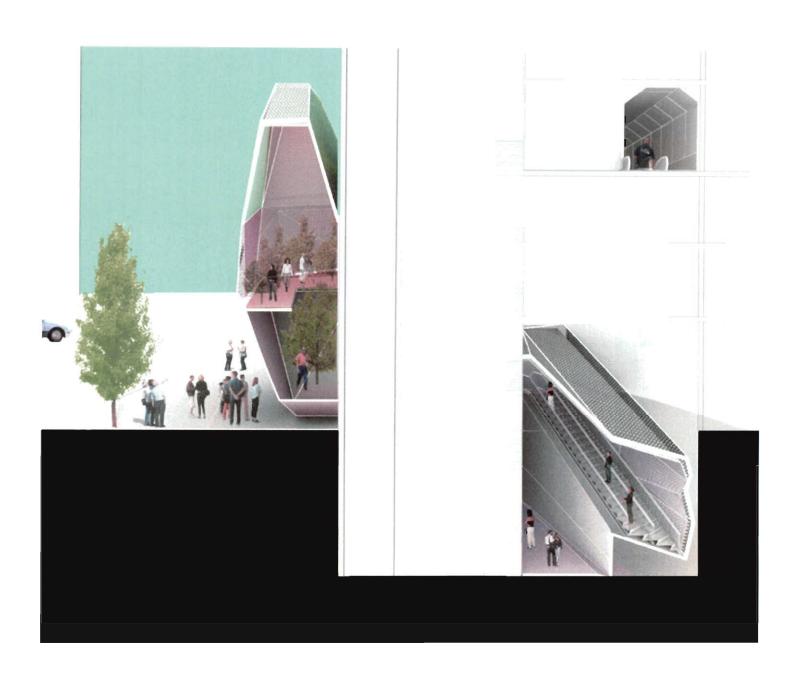


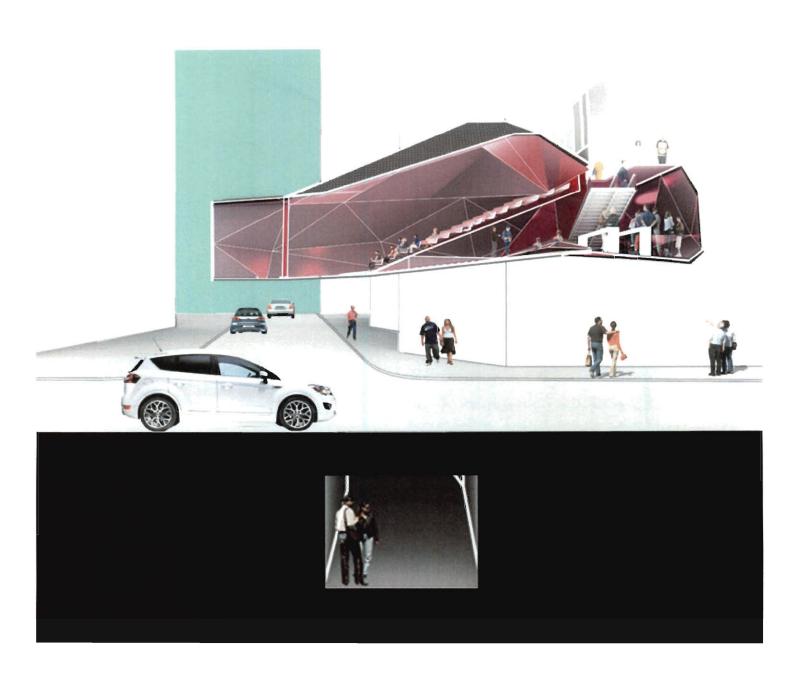


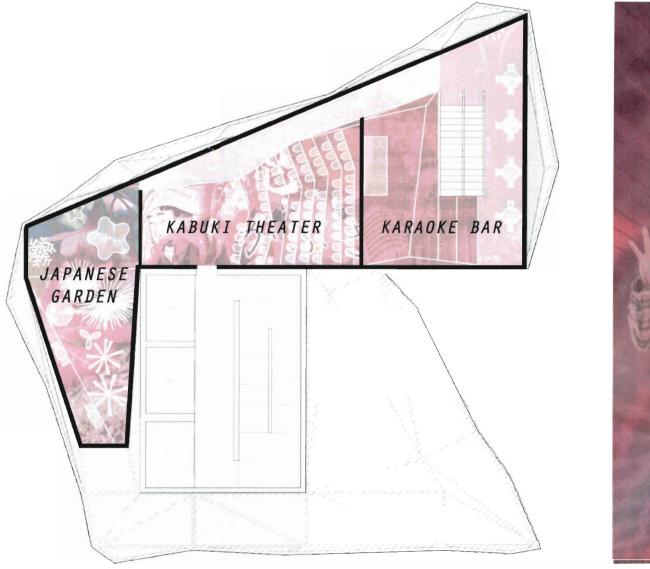




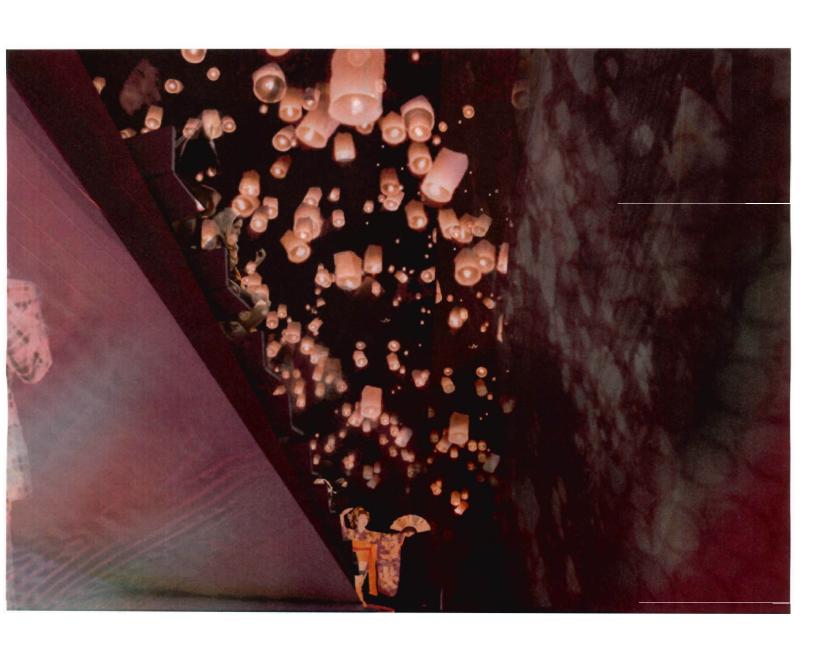
Vertically Cut Sections

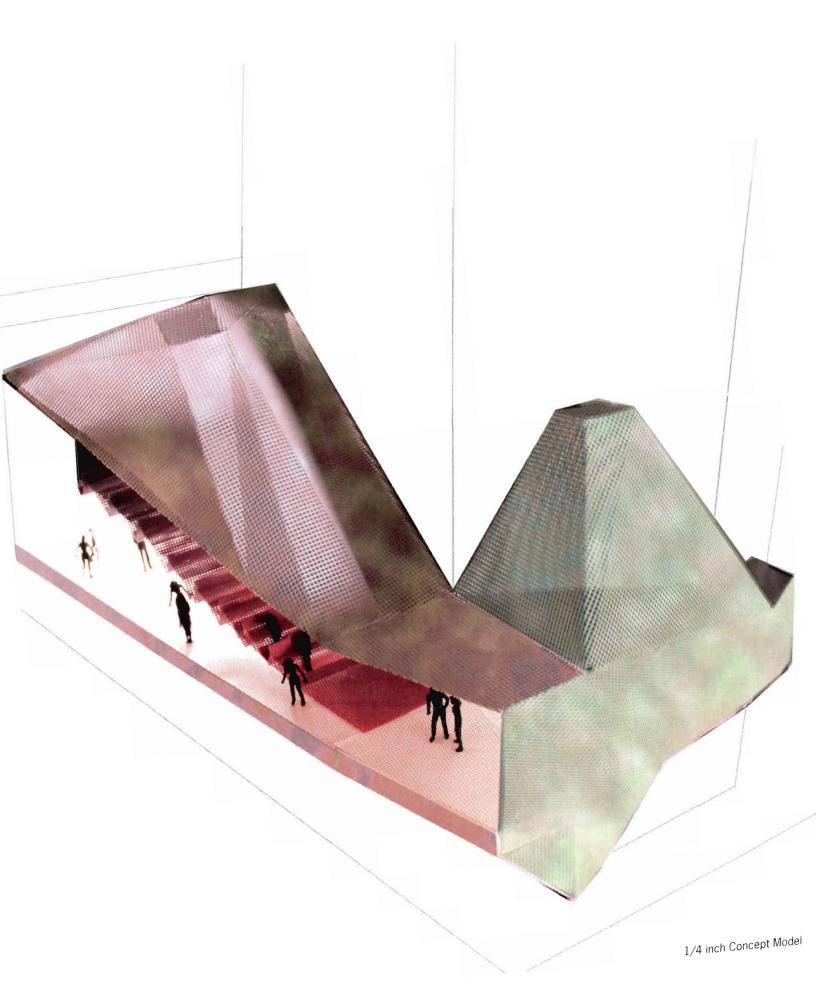


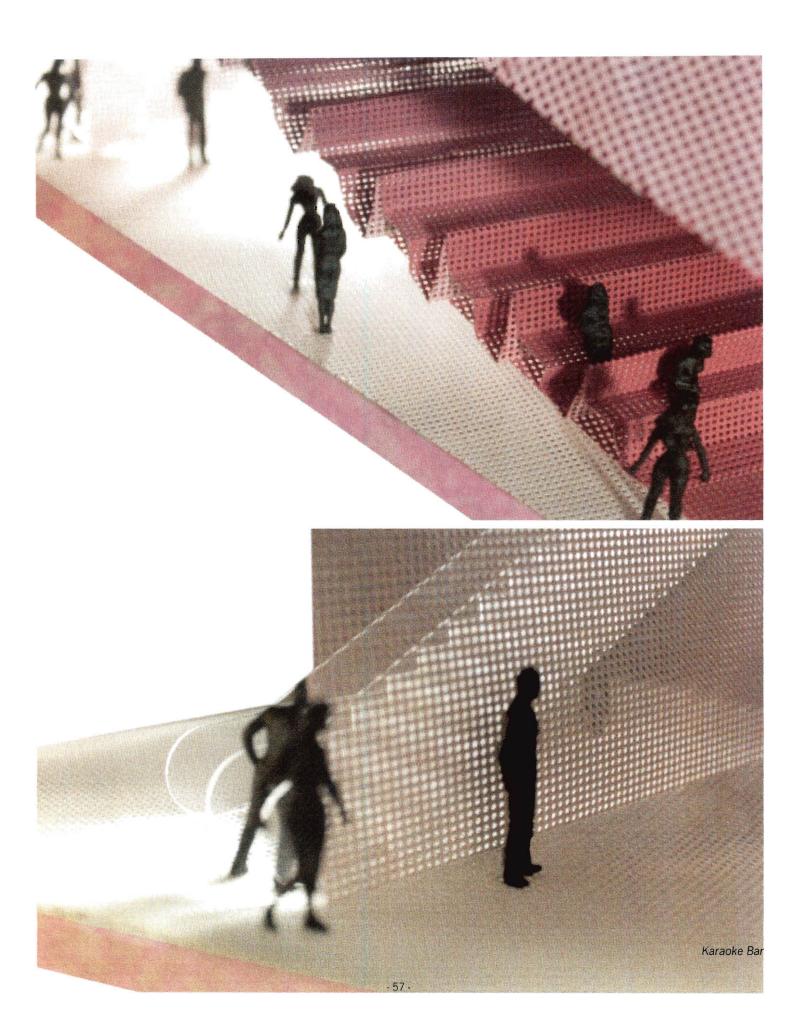


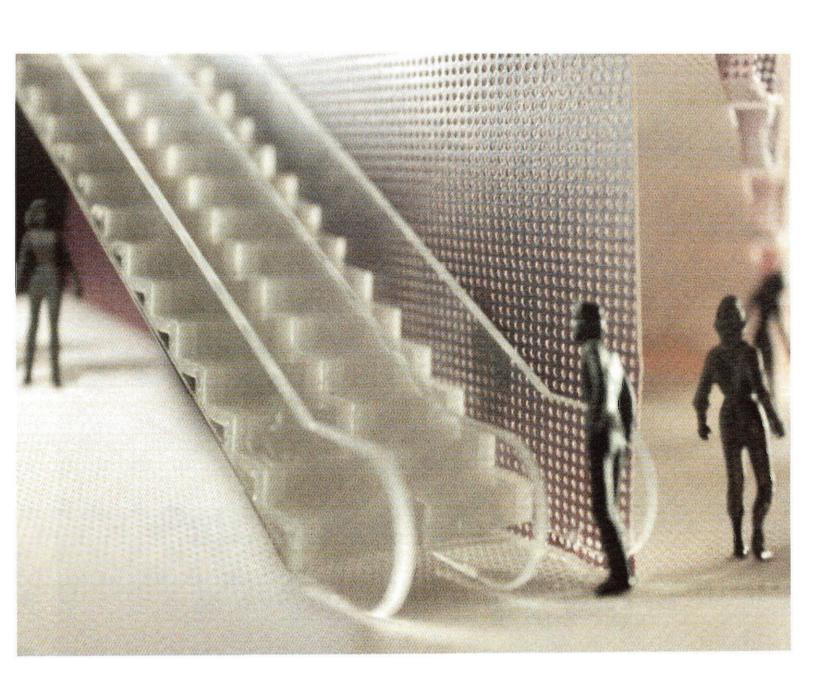


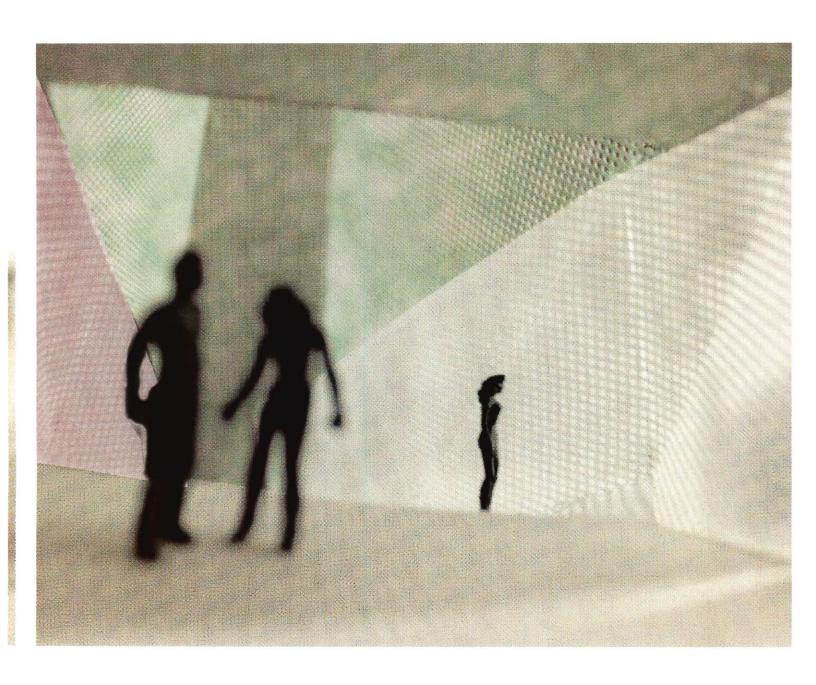












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