



BETWEEN BUILDINGS

An exploration of conceptualism
within the alleyways of downtown
Birmingham, Alabama's
historic Theater District.

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acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible (or coherent) without the unwavering support, patience and wisdom of thesis professor Dr. Rod Barnett. I would also like to thank my thesis advisors, professors David Hill and Kelly Hohman for their insight and guidance along this journey. I could not have gotten to this level of ability and creativity without being a part of such a strong masters program. The faculty and students of Auburn University's Master of Landscape Architecture program has challenged, educated and inspired me for the past six semesters. For this I am grateful and appreciative.

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introduction

Known as the Magic City due to its fast growth of population and industry during the industrial revolution, Birmingham, Alabama was a crucial city for the economic success of the Southeastern United States. However after the 1960s with the decline in industry and rise of suburbia, Birmingham residents moved from the city's downtown core to the outskirts of the metro area to establish pocketed neighborhoods along the rim of the city's center. Because of this, Birmingham's city center is faced with many abandoned structures, a lack of pedestrian activity, economic decline and a high crime rate. Its shifting population has left the downtown disjointed, lacking in cohesion and grasping for a sense of community. This shift is a condition which transcends Birmingham, AL and can be found within many post-industrial cities in the Western Hemisphere. This body of research examines the potentials of design to act as a catalyst for change and re-animation of the downtown core through the research framework of conceptualist landscape architecture.

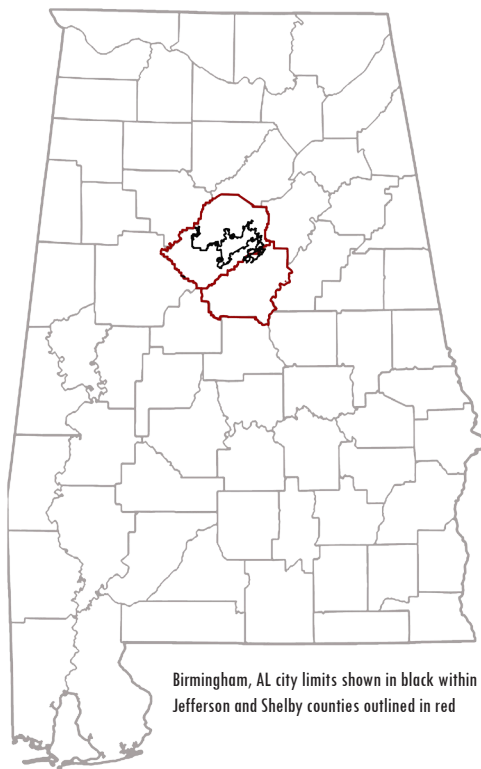
Conceptualism, founded in practice by Martha Schwartz, is a design framework which provokes the reconsideration of received ideas through the use of form, color and contrast. At its core comes the requirement of concept, or a governing idea that defines every detail of the design. This overarching concept becomes the driver of design yet must also allow for the many complexities of site such as cultural, social, historic and ecological systems, to be woven into it and never excluded. The research project described here explores the use of conceptualism as a design framework for the redevelopment of the Theater District in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Its aim is to change the perception of public space. The Theater District is a historically and culturally charged area of downtown. With its once functioning 72 theaters, it has left in its midst a series of hidden backstage access points and service ways which combine to create an alleyway system. The alleyways serve as a connective infrastructure which could streamline the pedestrian experience, increase walkability and improve access to current businesses. An anomalous condition within the strong urban fabric, the alleyways provide an opportunity for a conceptualist design to deliver visual, physical, phenomenological and financial change, woven through the extent of the Theater District. This design research aims to create a wide-reaching connective tissue, the perception of large scale transformation, and a district-wide identity which could culminate in a renewed sense of community and public involvement throughout the city as a whole.

research question

How can conceptualism enable the re-presentation of an alleyway network as a different type of public space in the Theater District of Birmingham, Alabama?

1

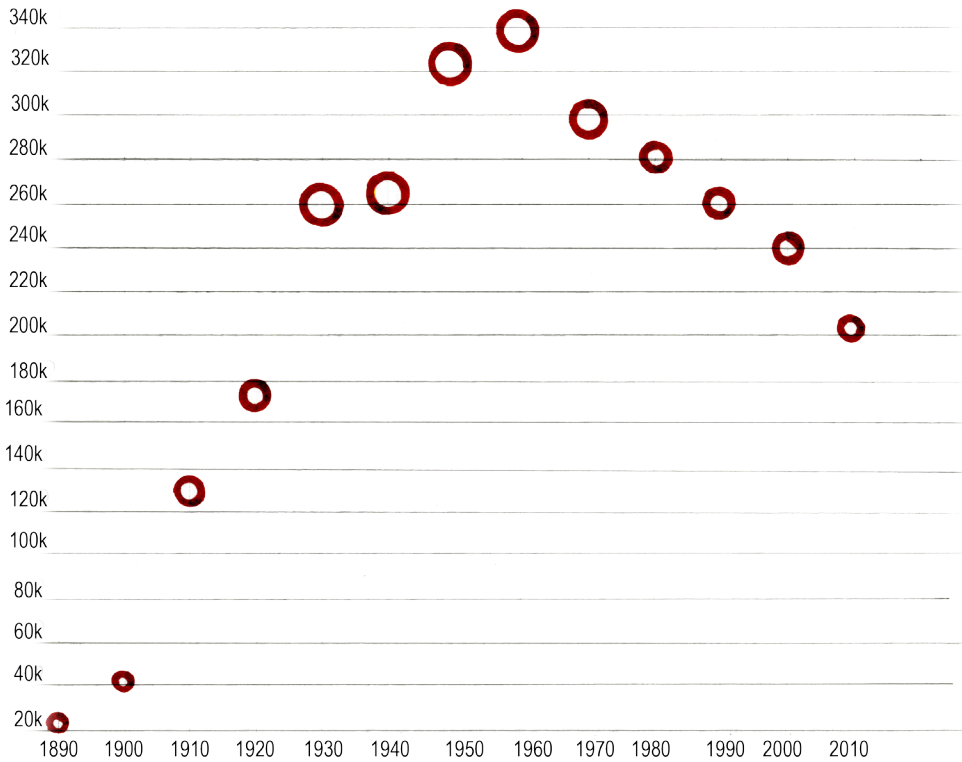
birmingham, al: a history



Birmingham, AL city limits shown in black within
Jefferson and Shelby counties outlined in red

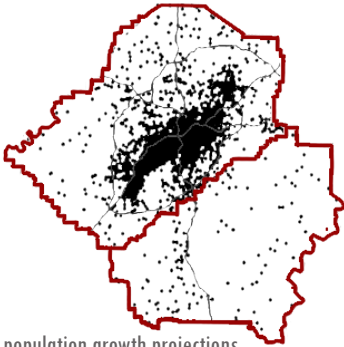
Known as the Magic City because of its fast growth of population and industry during the industrial revolution, Birmingham, AL was a crucial city for the economic success of the Southeastern United States. It was known for the production of iron due to the unique geological concentration of iron ore, coal and limestone in the same location (Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham [RPCGB], 2013). The success and growth of the city meant that it was a desirable place to live, employment was assured, and retail establishments and entertainment

Population Growth and Decline

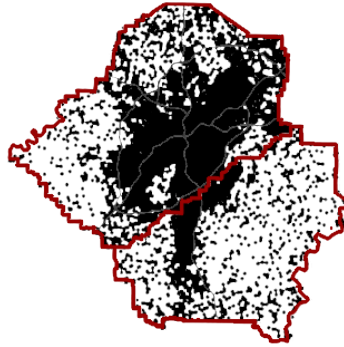


venues lined the streets of downtown which were a buzz of activity day and night. However, after the 1960s with the fall in industry and rise of suburbia, Birmingham residents moved from the city's downtown core to the outskirts of the city to establish pocketed neighborhoods along the rim of the city's center (RPCGB, 2013). As a result, Birmingham's downtown is faced with many abandoned structures, a lack of pedestrian activity, and a high crime rate. The ensuing donut effect has left Birmingham as a whole disjointed and lacking in cohesion with designers and planners facing the question of how to invoke community in a shifting, or already shifted, population.

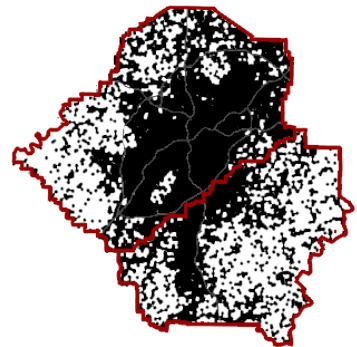
1970



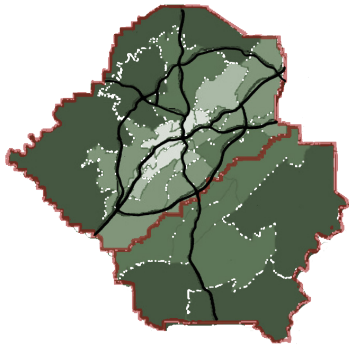
2005



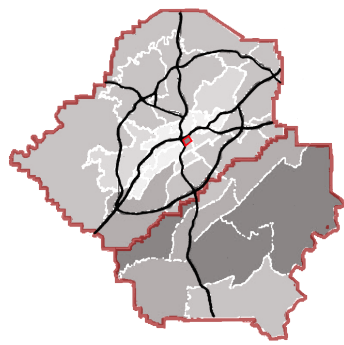
2035



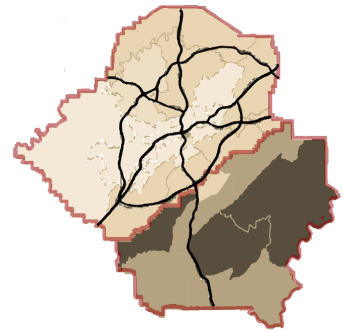
population growth projections
figures 1-6



employment change 2005-2035

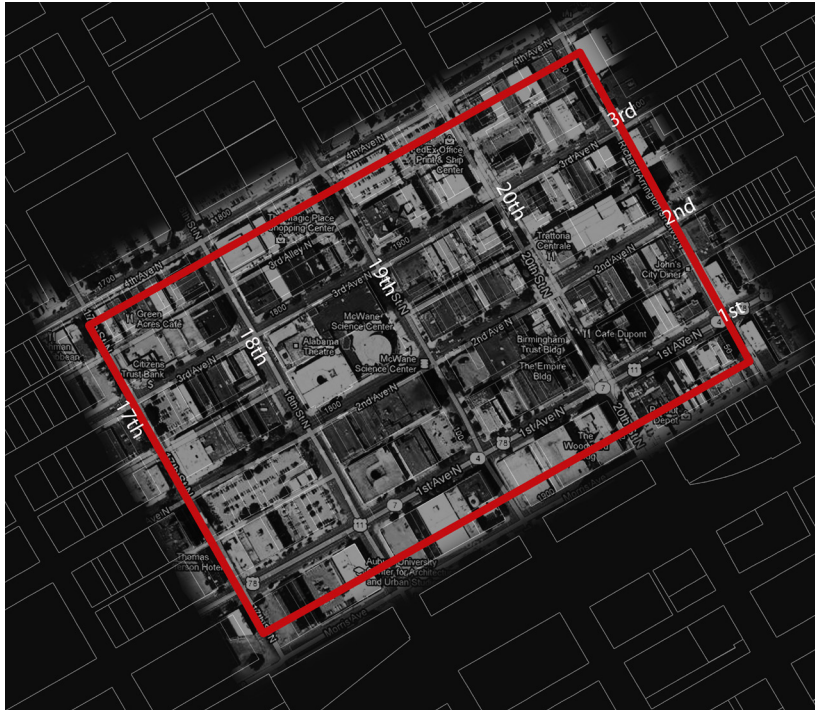


housing unit change 2005-2035



population change 2005-2035

These images depict the results of a study done by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham. They show the predicted *movement* of the population by the year 2035, as well as the *change* in density predicted in businesses, housing units and population by the year 2035 (RPCGB, 2013). Here, it is evident that as the population spreading, investment in businesses and homes is predicted to increase dramatically in the areas outside of the downtown core.



This research examines the historic Theater District; an eight block expanse that lies between 1st and 4th Streets North, and is bracketed on either side by 18th and Richard Arrington Boulevard, as shown above. Within this district from 1900-1960, 72 theaters were in operation, entertaining Birmingham's large population that stood in lines so long they wrapped around the blocks, both day and night (Hollis, 2006). The Theater District was a destination for a multitude of venues which were mainly theatrical, retail, and gastronomical. One could start their day shopping at



figure 7 Historic photos of the Theater District

retail giants such as Belk-Hudson, Parisian, or the Pizitz, then turn the corner to take in a late afternoon vaudeville show at the Alabama Theater (Hollis, 2006). Leaving the theater one could then walk to the adjacent block to end the evening within the luxury of the Ritz-Carlton hotel. Today as businesses begin to return, restaurants start



figure 8

to open their doors, and theaters begin to be restored within the district, they are doing so in a sporadic manner (Tomberline, 2012). These investments in the downtown are lacking in cohesion for the pedestrian, and don't foster a sense of community due to their disconnection from one another. In order for downtown to become a center of activity for the Birmingham community, its perception of abandonment, danger, and discontinuity must be changed.

2

framework: conceptualism

“ [Public spaces need to] provide an immediate emotional, physical and visual impact on the people who use them in order to change perception of place, as a result transforming the place itself. In order to make it something people are drawn to you need to imprint it in people’s imaginations. It has to have an identity in and of itself that has cultural and artistic value. ”

—Martha Schwartz, [Recycling Spaces: Curating Urban Evolution](#)

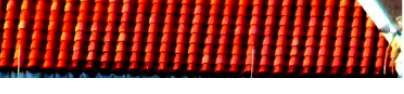
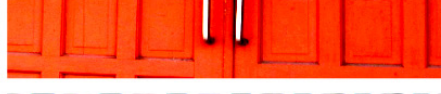
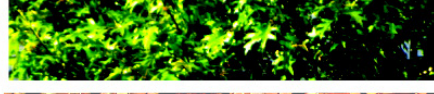
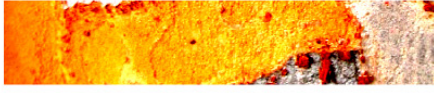
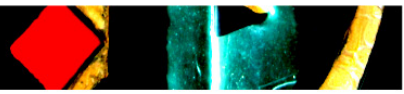


CONCEPT

At the heart of this quote from Martha Schwartz lies the goal of this project. The following investigations seek to explore the use of conceptualism in order to produce a design which performs as a catalyst for change in Birmingham. By utilizing the alleyways as public space and drawing attention to them through the creation of a landscape which offers artistic value and cultural significance to the people of Birmingham, a new destination can be created in order to jump start revitalization of the area. Perception of place is an essential focus in order to enable change in the Theater District and a conceptualist design could presence the landscape, allowing it to bring a renewed sense of identity to the district and act as the activator for transformation.

CONFUSION OAK ASH
A CURTAIN CAT NEON
TOPOGRAPHY LOW POINT
C VAUDEVILLE VACAN

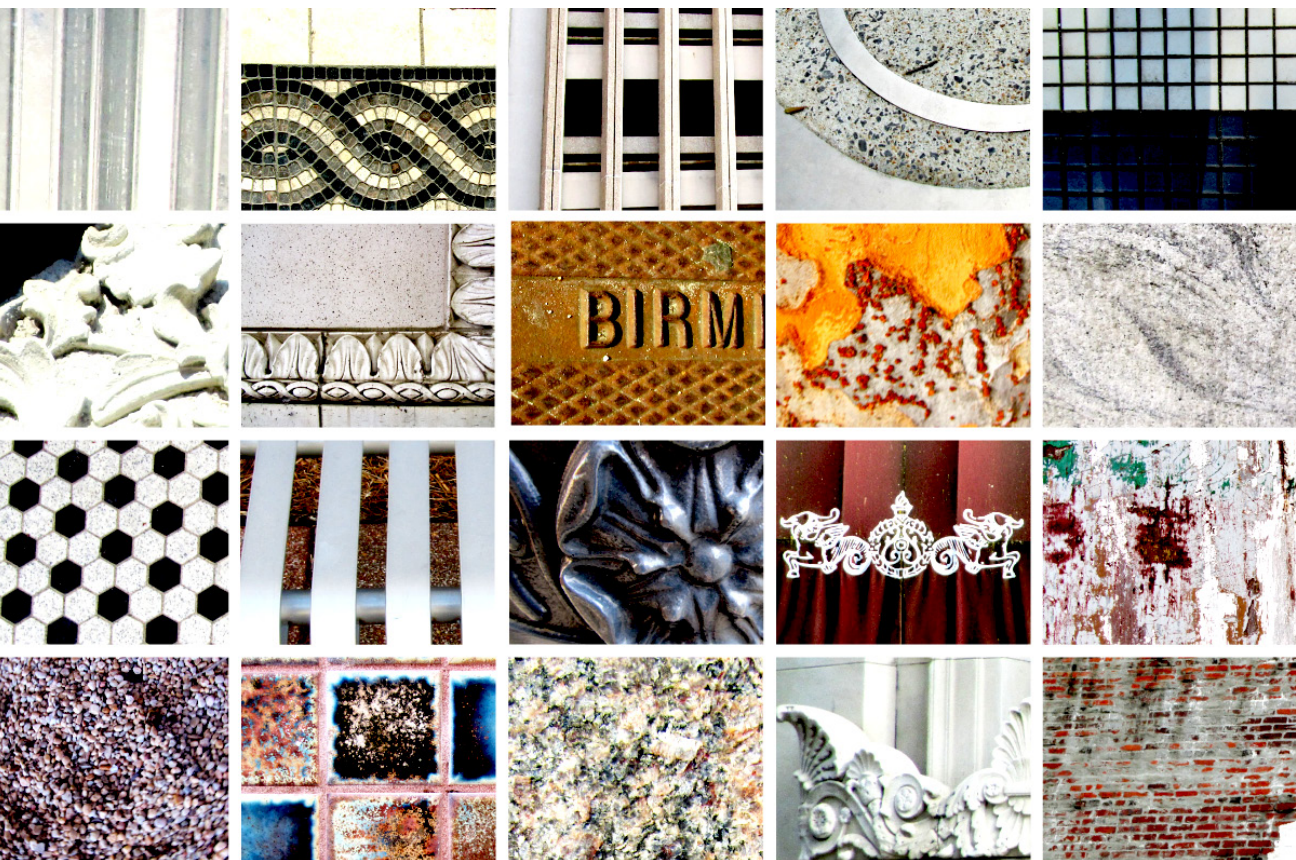
LIMESTONE BIRD SPECIES COYOTE WORM CONCRETE THEATER ECONOMY RESTAURANTS ANGER CONFUSION OAK
WALNUT COPPER FILM DRAMA MYSTIQUE SQUIRREL VIBRANCE STEEL RED DOG ABANDONED BERMUDA CURTAIN CAT M
SIGNS HIGHRISE ECOLOGY SILVER HYDROLOGY POODLE VALLEY CULTURAL GOLD RAT GRASS TOPOGRAPHY LOW
SOCIAL HIGH POINT BIRCH FINCH SWALLOW CARDINAL GREEN PLAY DRAMA HISTORY URBAN FABRIC VAUDEVILLE VA



Conceptualism is a term developed by Tim Richardson in his book Avant Gardeners (2009) and defined by the following components:

- Predicated on an idea: Designing through a concept or governing idea that defines its every detail, from start to finish. All conditions are subordinate to the idea.
- There is a functional or social rationale which must coexist with the underlying concept [it is not a stand-alone art object, these are spaces to be used by people and that will change and develop through time]
- It is interactive [physically, emotionally, phenomenologically]
- Characterized by the use of color, artificial materials and commentary on a site's history and culture.
- Calls attention to itself visually. Contrasts with its surroundings and often has repetitions in design form.
- Revelatory: Often a readable narrative is revealed in the landscape or imposed within it.

The above criteria are used in my development of design solutions for a catalytic intervention within the Theater District of downtown Birmingham.



Landscape architects will always be faced with the wonderful challenge of understanding site. The conditions of place embodied in a portion of terrain presented to a designer are vast and complex. There are endless details and multiplicities to be discovered, deciphered and understood at the beginning of a project. What are the ecological, social, cultural needs, economic struggles, safety concerns, history of the site, geologic and hydrologic conditions; what are the existing materials, their textures their colors, their functionality? What does this landscape hold in its past and therefore what is its most appropriate future? This endless list of layered conditions is constantly in flux. Conceptualism as a research framework offers a method to capture and distill this information into a pertinent and focused design. The ability to choose one concept which arises from a site's conditions, but also allows the incorporation of other systems and conditions, is a seemingly powerful tool. The focus of one concept enables one to design through a focused and informed mentality which is also open to creative freedom. Therefore this body of work examines and challenges the abilities and shortcomings of utilizing conceptualism as a framework through various design scenarios.

3

the conceptualists

Martha Schwartz

**Dublin Docklands
Grand Canal Square**

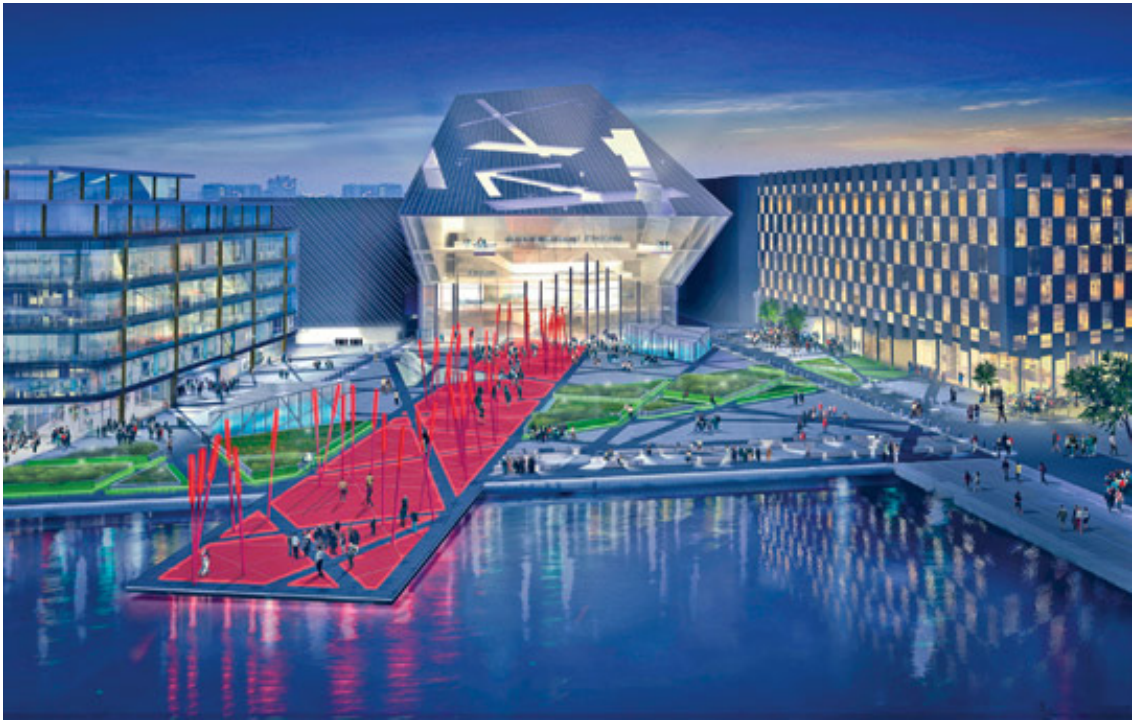
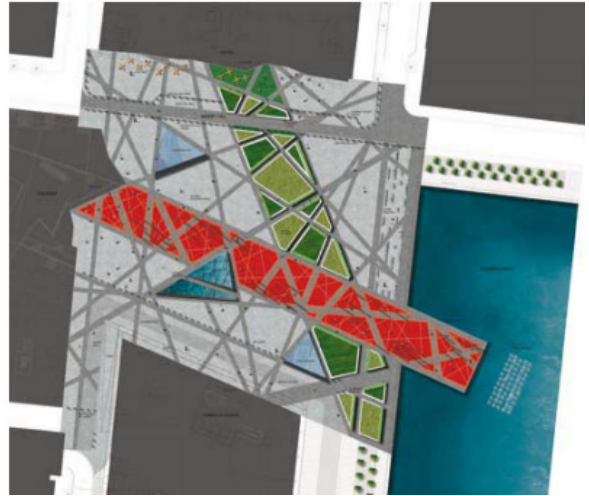
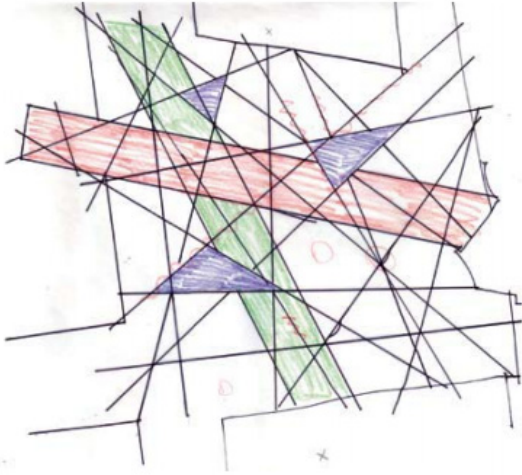


figure 9 Dublin Docklands design rendering

An example of the implementation of conceptualism in design can be found in Martha Schwartz Partners' (MSP) Dublin Docklands. The designer of this project, Martha Schwartz, is the pioneer of conceptualism in landscape architecture, according to Tim Richardson (2009). Located in a square surrounded by multi-use buildings and a prominent theater, the Dublin Docklands commission charged MSP with the task of enlivening a very grey city through the use of bold color in a multi-purpose public space (Coulthard, 2008). For this project MSP utilized the figure of the red carpet as their over-arching design concept (MSP, n.d.). From this came the creation of a long, rectangular red plane which extends from the theater's front doors out into the water of the docklands. The red carpet contrasts with a green field which is



figures 10-11 Process drawing and site plan

reminiscent of the dockland's history as a marsh (MSP, n.d.). The striking red plane is enhanced through the use of large, red vertical poles which are scattered along the groundplane in the form of pick-up sticks in order to evoke the chaos and energy of the red carpet during an event. These poles are equipped with motion activated lighting. At sundown the site takes on a new life which is inviting and intriguing, allowing the space to be utilized 24 hours a day (MSP, n.d.).

The multitude of criss-crossed lines which traverse the site is a result of observed and predicted pedestrian pathways which are made tangible through change in material in the groundplane as well as open spaces between the green planters and other raised features. The square therefore functions as an open public space which can be utilized for a multitude of events, both programmed and unprogrammed, active and



figures 11-12

passive. The space is often used for outdoor concerts or performances but also simply as a place for informal gatherings of friends and as a thoroughfare for workers and shoppers in the area (Coulthard, 2008). No matter how one experiences the square, MSP's bold design seeks to ensure an engaging experience with the space.

This square has been utilized by many locals and visitors since its opening in 2008. The radical nature of the design in contrast with Dublin's traditional urban fabric has created a positive stir in the perception of the area. While Dublin has recently been faced with a shrinking population, the Docklands area is growing (Coulthard, 2008). The square has become a destination, and the design has jump-started new possibilities for the local area with more businesses establishing themselves nearby.

Claude Cormier
Pink Balls, Montreal



figure 13

Claude Cormier is often credited as the leader of the second generation of conceptualist landscape architects following Martha Schwartz. One of his recent works was an installation in Montreal titled Pink Balls. In this project Cormier and Associates evoked delight, positive energy, happiness and joy through the use of 170,000 plastic pink balls suspended over a 1.2 kilometer expanse along Sainte-Catherine Street East, thus marking the temporary transformation of the area into a pedestrian mall for the summer (Cormier, 2012). The aim of the Pink Balls installation was to draw people into a shopping district which was facing economic downturn. The design is not only visibly striking but also changes in density and light along the length of the street. The balls are three different sizes, painted five different shades of pink, and are lit from within for 24 hour interest (Cormier, 2012). Each section of the overhead expanse is arranged in different patterns in order to cater to the mood and physical needs of the buildings from which it is suspended.

The overall concept for this project is the emotion of happiness (Cormier, 2012). The simplicity of the pink balls, bold in color and contrasting with its surroundings creates a tangible message for the viewer. The installation irrefutably enlivens the city fabric and provokes positive emotion in its viewers. The power of this



figures 14-15

installation is seen both in its physical presence, and in the media outreach it has achieved. The installation, although temporary (from June 2011 through September 2011), created an instant landmark for Montreal. This is clearly evidenced by the number of positive news stories, videos, and photos infiltrating social media and online outlets. A retail area facing downturn was instantly transformed not only into a pedestrian mall but into an icon, a destination for the city (Verzone, 2012). The street has been imprinted in the minds of local and visiting patrons transforming its aura through the memory of this landscape installation.

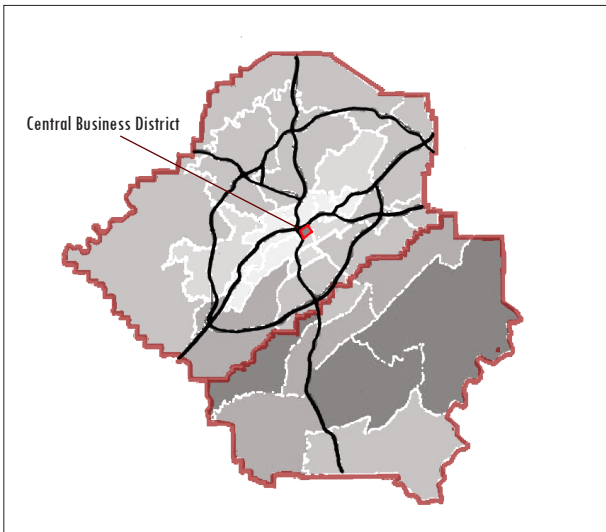
Identifying the gap

Martha Schwartz's Dublin Docklands, like many others, is confined to a small site and doesn't extend beyond the bounds of the square. Conceptualism as a design tactic is not currently utilized within large-scale design, yet its catalytic power has been proven in smaller areas such as the Docklands. However, when faced with the abandonment of entire city centers, and populations shifting from the downtowns of large cities, the need for catalytic change is larger than small site-based design and should be tested within a larger-scale network.

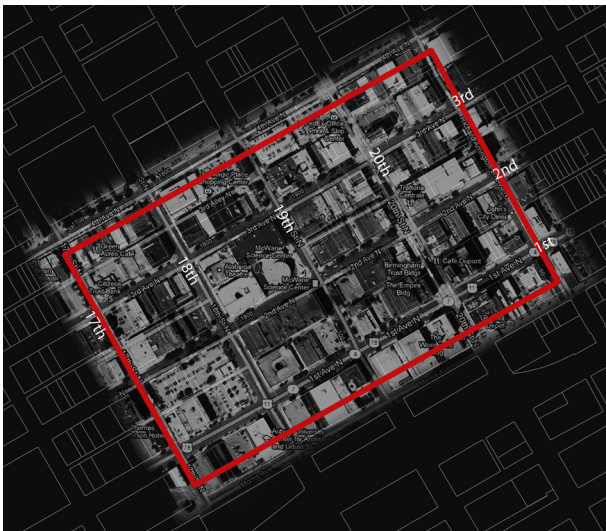
The Pink Balls installation begins to extend design to a wider reaching area. Cormier however, does this in a very temporary manner, as do many conceptualist designers. Due in part to the synthetic materiality and artful nature of the designs they are often misinterpreted as stand-alone art pieces, or temporary exhibits rather than recognized as essential landscapes incorporated into larger systems and networks. Therefore this research will explore the potential of a conceptualist design to expand the extent of Birmingham's Theater District in order to create a wide-reaching cohesion, the perception of permanent large scale transformation, and a district-wide identity which could culminate in business investments and public involvement throughout the area as a whole.

4

site: alleyway network



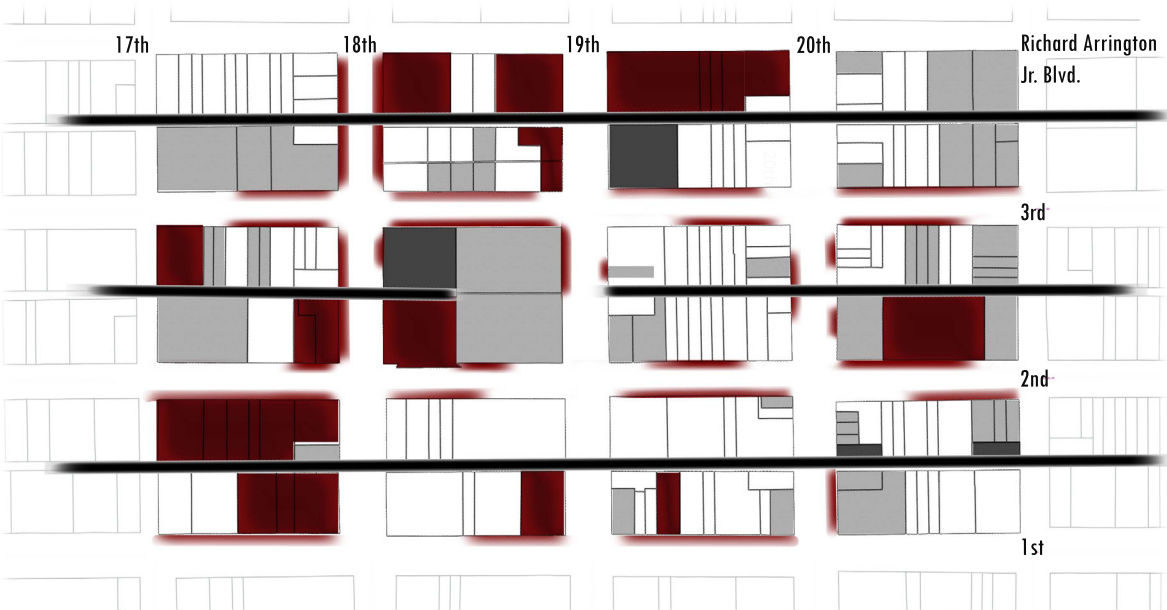
Located in the central business district of the downtown core, indicated here in red, the Theater District's 72 theaters have left in their wake a series of hidden backstage access points and service ways which combine to create an alleyway system unique to the history of Birmingham. Considering the rich urban fabric of the Theater District, the alleyways function as under utilized corridors which provide immense potential to be activated as public space.



Connecting to one another throughout the eight blocks of the District shown here, these corridors extend in some cases for miles linking into adjacent districts and neighborhoods. The consistently tall scale of the buildings creates narrow, largely shaded passageways making them mysteriously intriguing, liminal spaces which allow you to escape from the normative and open public setting of the sidewalk and enter

Destinations and Parking

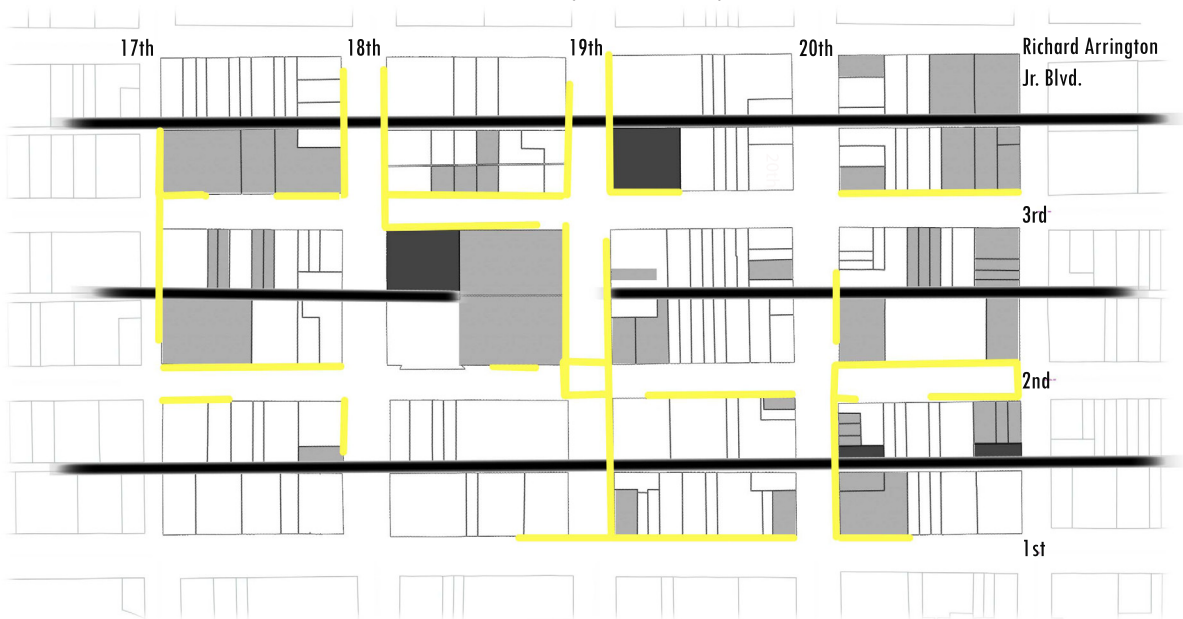
■ parking lots and on-street ■ 8am-5pm destinations ■ afternoon to night destinations ■ alleyways



into an intimate, enclosed landscape. The alleyway system, denoted above in black, traverses the aforementioned, sporadically located downtown destination points, serving as connective infrastructure which can act as a pedestrian thoroughfare, increase walkability and improve access to these current businesses. The buildings are inhabited by a range of establishments including predominantly offices, local retail shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues such as the McWane Science Center and the Alabama Theater. Thus the alleys exist within a community whose majority play out daily ritualistic patterns. The 8-5 work schedule, and even the mundane action of parking in the same lot and walking to the same destination are two examples of common behavior seen here. However the alleys exist as the exception to these patterns. They are the threshold between the interior and the outdoors, between one office building and the next. They are neither one or the other, but embody a transition, whether that be an escape from the daily work schedule or simply infrastructure which delivers you from one point to another.

Sidewalk traffic

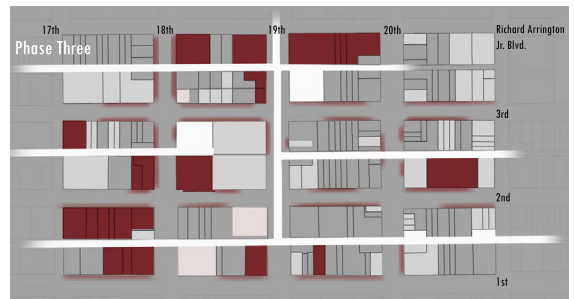
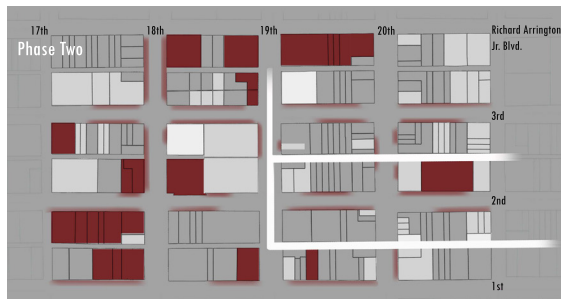
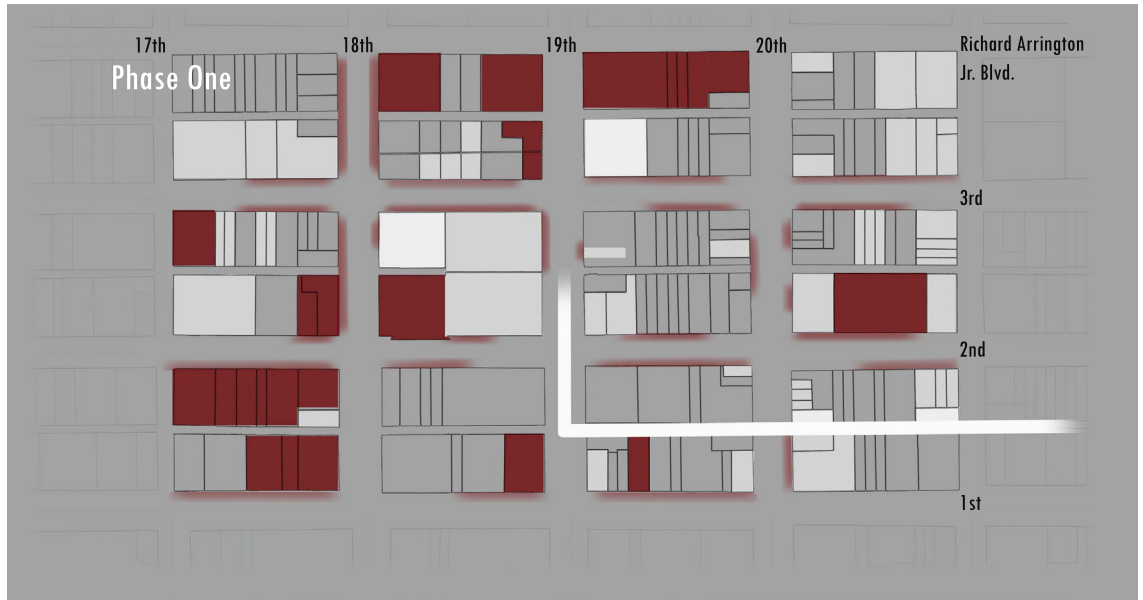
 pedestrian flow from parking to building destinations



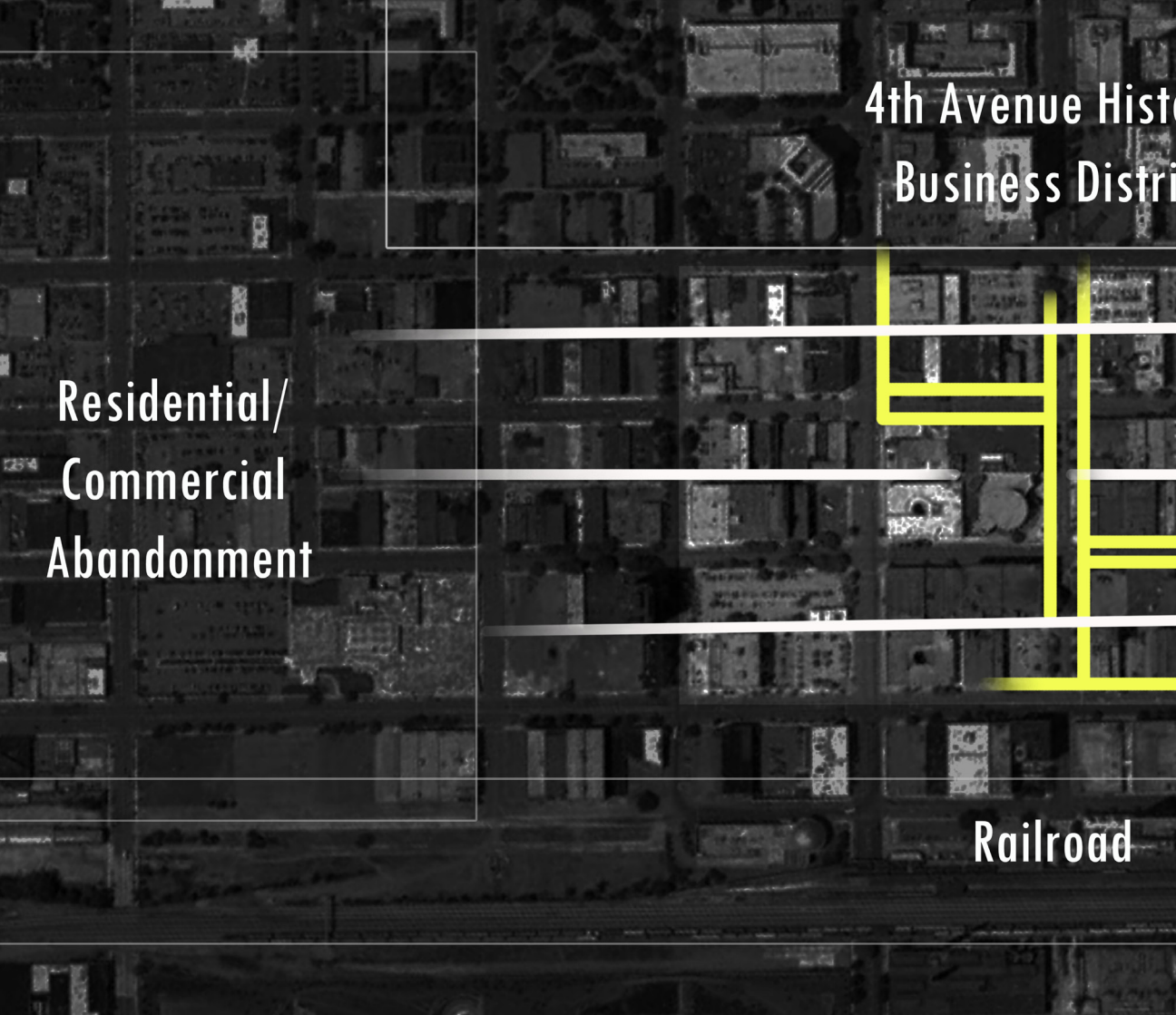
As anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner discovered, the act of ritual is comprised of three stages: the first being a separation from a known group or community, then liminality, which is a stage of transition, and finally communitas, which is the re-incorporation into a new community or stage of life (Gennep, 1960). The state of liminality is presented here through the experience of the in-between that the alleys have to offer. Not only the physical, infrastructural in-between but also the phenomenological experience this offers one inhabiting the space. The alleys offer a hidden, protective form which welcomes and creates an environment of enigmatic behavior between a previous way of considering the daily routine, personal identity, or community, and a new way.

The above map is an analysis of sidewalk usage and pedestrian intensities. Because the alleys run along an east/west axis, the interception of the sidewalk system is necessary in order for the alleys to act as a cohesive network which also has a north/south presence. This added connectivity allows for people to be brought into the Theater District from all surrounding adjacencies and vice versa. While the sidewalk offers traditional infrastructure for the safe flow of people,

Phasing of Development



albeit strolling next to vehicular chaos, intersecting this ritualistic, normative path pulls pedestrians into a new realm, offering not only a new perspective on the urban, but also a reconsideration of public space for downtown Birmingham. Three stages of development have been determined for the building of the alleyway network as a whole. Each phase was determined based on the current existence of destination points and areas where future investment is



4th Avenue Historic
Business District

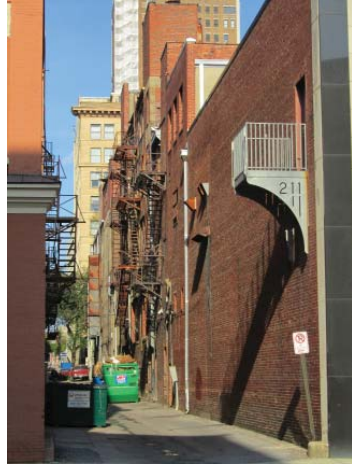
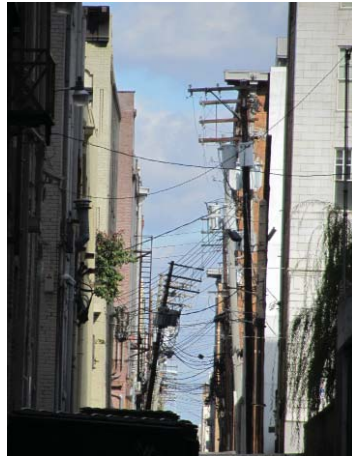
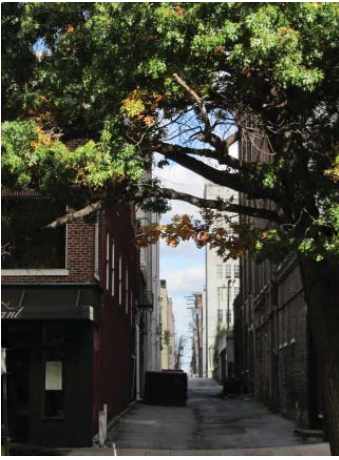
Residential/
Commercial
Abandonment

Railroad

The network viewed as a whole, denoting surrounding districts and communities crucial for connectivity.

oric
ct

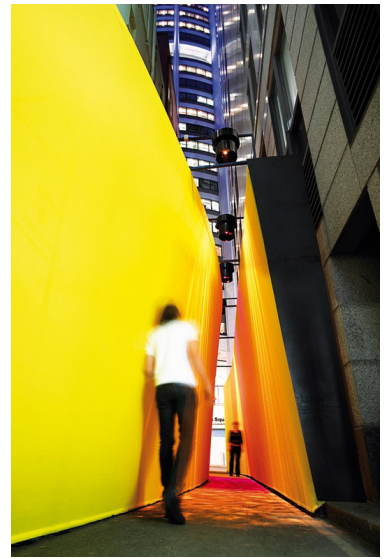
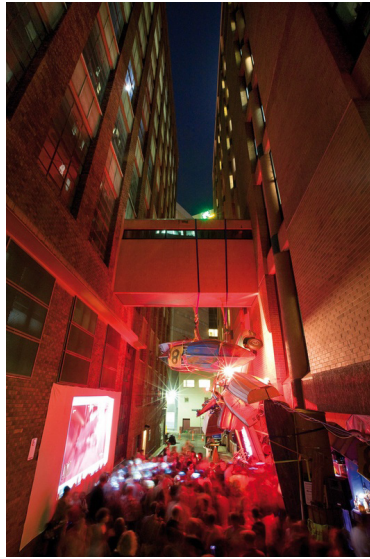
Loft District



These main alleyways identified in the network each offer a unique experience and story. The historic facades provide a palimpsest of past inhabitants and building functions. The groundplane which is now mainly layered and broken asphalt, covers up existing cobblestone in two of the alleys, while the material of the facades varies from brick to painted cinder blocks, to layers of concrete. Many of these layers are chipped and peeling off revealing the identity of the past facades. Fire escapes, diverse window and door frames, as well as power lines and makeshift gutter systems adorn and enhance the alleyways offering the pedestrian a rich and diverse experience within the enclosure of these spaces.

Sydney Laneways

Sydney, Australia



figures 16-18 Sydney Laneway design competition proposals

Many cities throughout the United States and the world have begun to recognize the potential that alleys hold for the development of their cities. In the Sydney Laneway initiative, currently taking place in Sydney, Australia, alleyways are being considered as a nexus for art, community and the public to come together in order to enrich local businesses and social interaction (City of Sydney, 2011). This is a grass roots, community based initiative which began in order to prohibit the use of graffiti and increase safety in the downtown area. Sydney has seen positive results with an increase in downtown activity and business investment (City of Sydney, 2011).

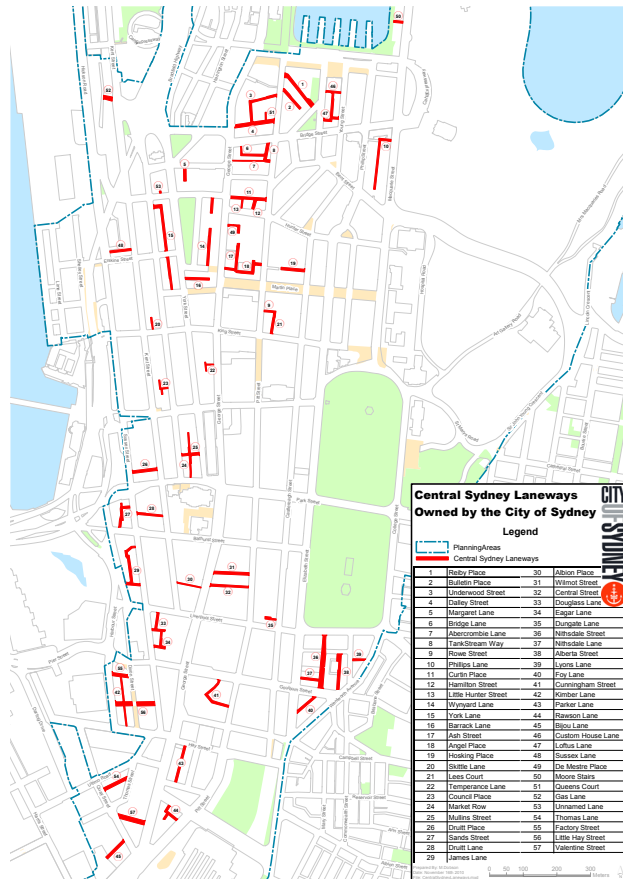


figure 19 Map of Sydney Laneways

While similar to the potentials of the alleys in Sydney, Birmingham's alleyways bring with them a unique set of conditions and inter-connectivity. Although Sydney's transformed alleyways are strategically positioned near points of interest, they are not designed to connect to one another or work as a cohesive network as can be seen in the above map.

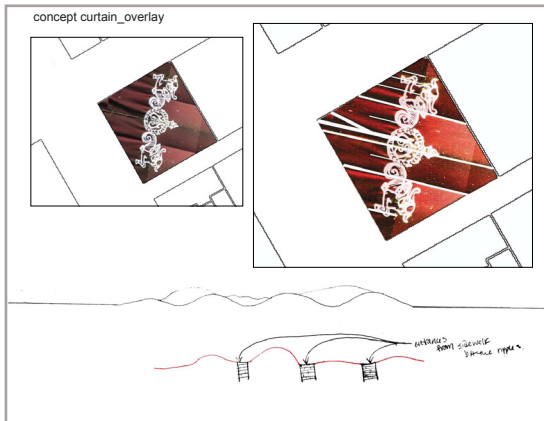
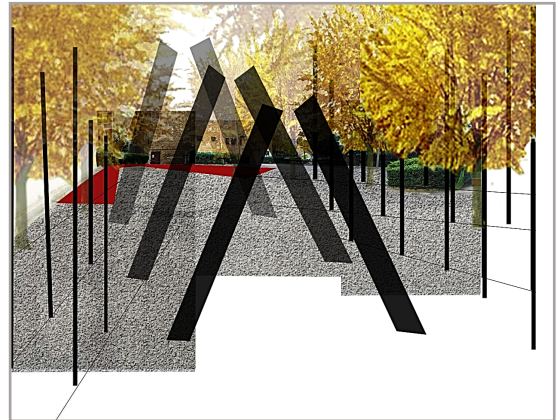
5

concept_curtain

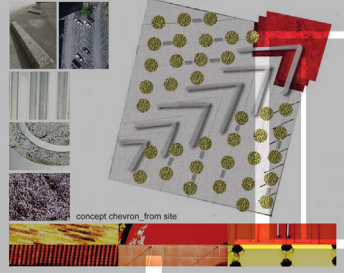
How do you know when you have arrived at the right concept?

“You know it, you just know it, and you know when it’s not right, and you know when you have to keep working on it, it’s extremely intuitive in my heart and I’m always trying to make room for my intuition [when designing]...you keep working until you have...that one idea that can incorporate many complexities.”

—Claude Cormier on conceptualism, Terragrams interview



The investigation in search for one main concept of which to explore throughout this project came about through an intuitive, iterative process of rapid design investigations which looked at a range of concept potentials and design possibilities. Many concepts were considered and explored, as seen above, then eliminated or expanded upon until the appropriate concept, or in the words of Cormier, the “one idea that can incorporate many complexities” was reached (Verzone, 2012).



CONCEPT

Underville Music Dance Theatre

Mystique Disguise Drama

cinematography

opens and closes
film reel
camera lens projector

performance

Director

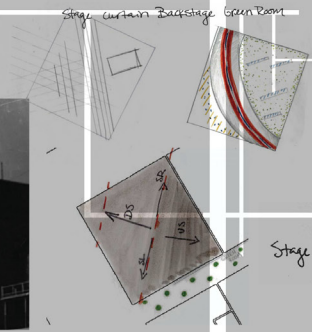


Sit applaud
Walk down the aisle

audience + performers = Public

Viewer - performer

Audience - Stage



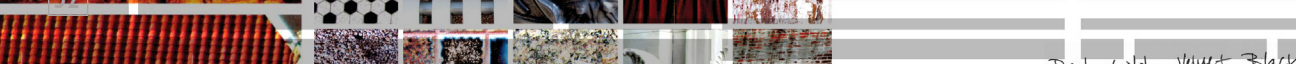
Down Stage
Stage Left
Up Stage

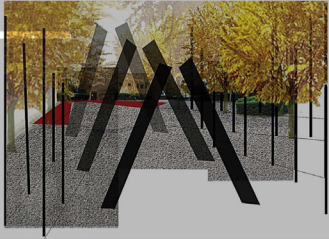
Curtain exists no matter the performance.

Curtain is icon

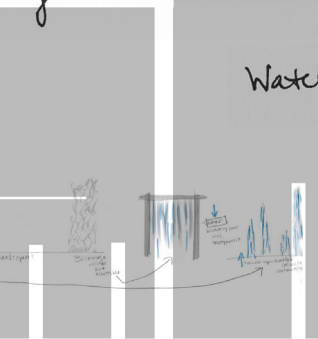


CURTAIN





Stage curtain Backstage Green Room



Water fluctuates reflection rehearsal



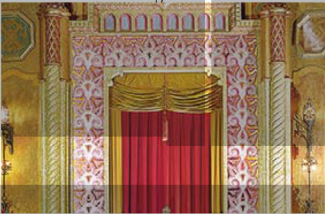
Stage Right

It closes to re-present the stage - the landscape.

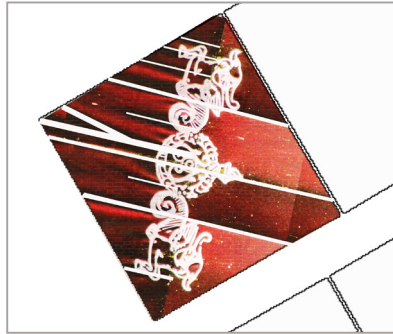
medium of the

ONCEAL REVEAL HIDES SHOWS

stique

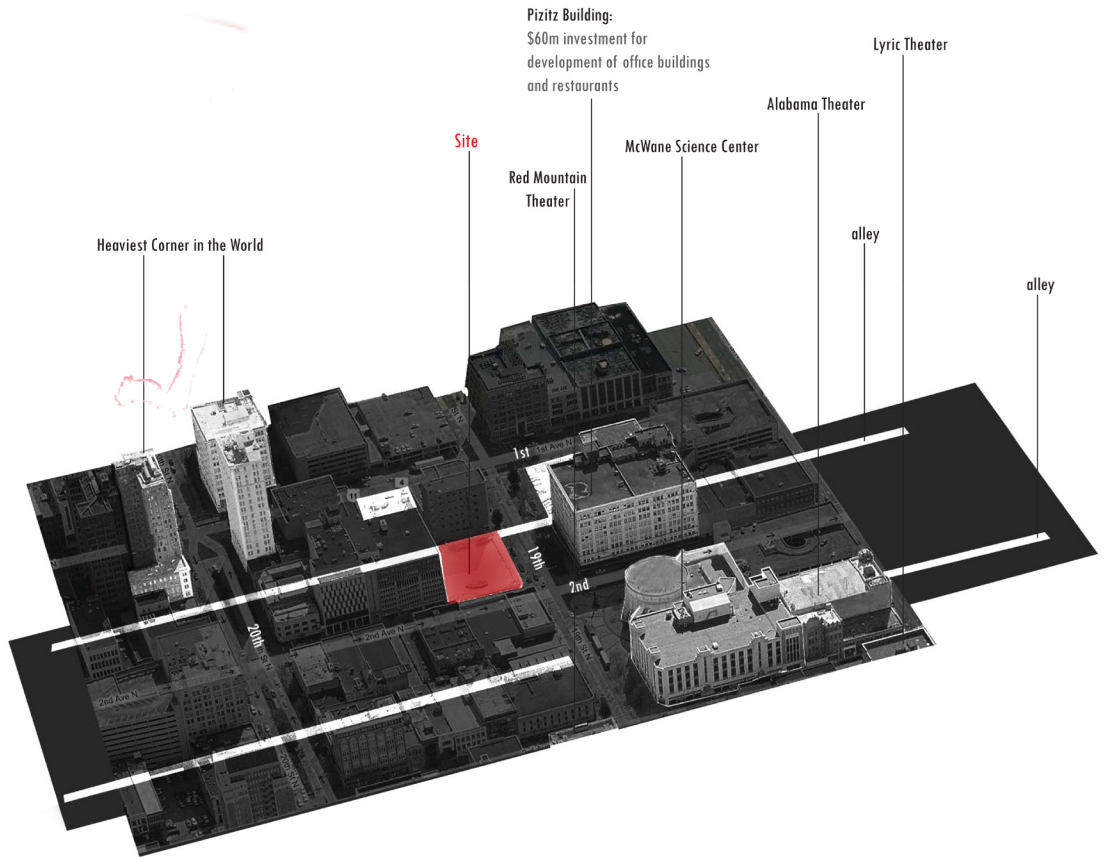


The investigation towards the discovery of a concept began with an analysis of site, its historical condition as well as its existing condition. This was done through an examination of historic photos, maps and recorded research and stories from the area, as well as a study of materials, textures and colors which exist throughout the District today. Analysis was also done by walking the District, speaking to the locals of the area and considering the businesses and organizations which make the District what it is today. These thoughts and information were recorded through sketches and note taking in a sketchbook and distilled into a multitude of possible design investigations.



One design exploration was the overlay of a picture of a curtain taken outside of the Alabama Theater onto the groundplane of a potential design site within the District, shown here in plan view

Through these considerations the above concept of the red curtain found on the stage of a theater offered many possibilities and arose as intuitively the best option to explore first, both creatively and practically. A curtain opens and closes, reveals and conceals; it is dynamic and bold in color, a threshold between audience and performer; it is a theatrical icon which embodies the objective of a re-presentation of place. The curtain in its many forms exemplifies a significant part of the history of downtown Birmingham and can offer a palpable identity for the District, made tangible through the landscape.

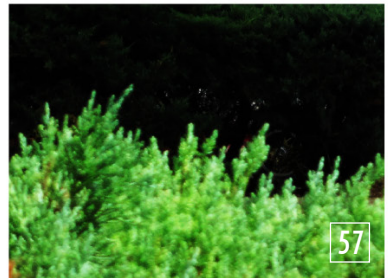
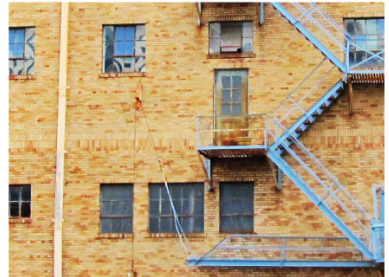
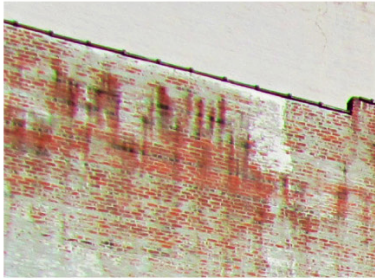


The concept of the curtain was first explored on the site of an abandoned parking lot, shown here in red, situated on the corner of 2nd Street North and 19th streets. The site was chosen due to its connection to the alleyways as well as its close proximity to the McWane Science Center, an already established destination point in the city. The lot also faces the historic Pizitz building across 19th street, which is a building that has been given a \$60 million investment for its renovation and reuse as a mixed use office building in the near future.

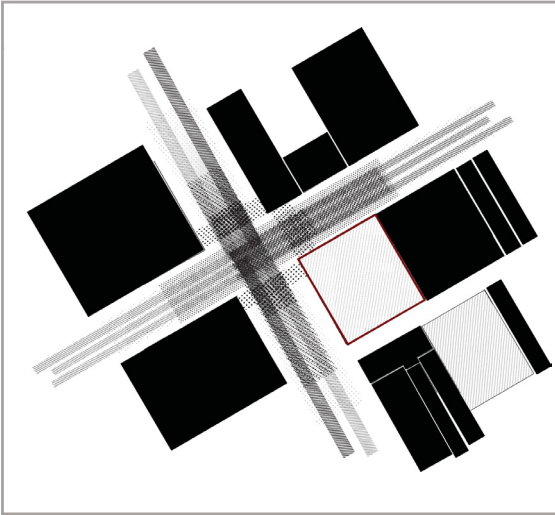


Panorama of current site conditions

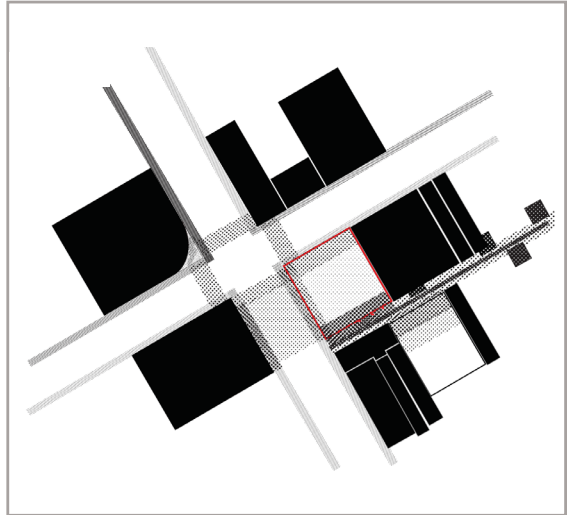
Study of existing materials, colors and textures on-site



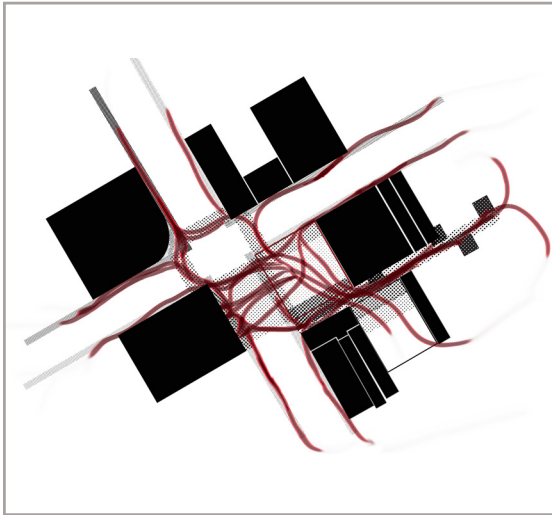
Mapping Analysis



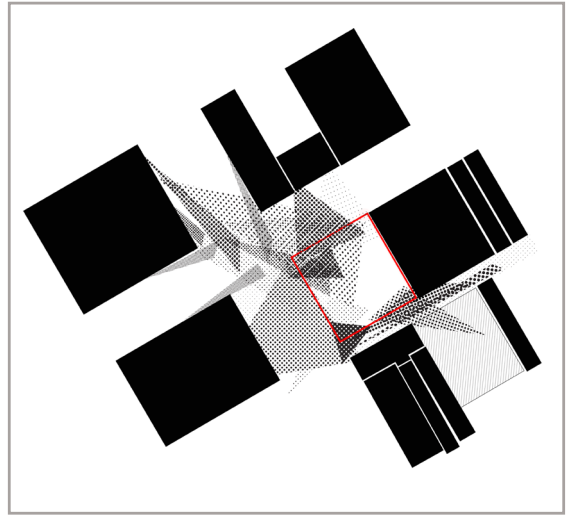
Vehicular intensities



Pedestrian infrastructure



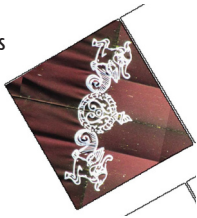
Pedestrian movement



Viewshafts

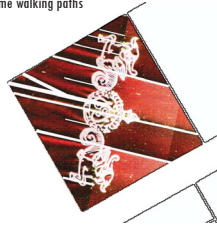
Concept_ Curtain

Historic presence
Conceals_Reveals
Dynamism



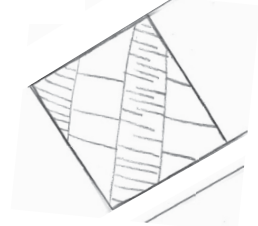
Conceal_Reveal in groundplane valleys become walking paths

1



Two acts _concealing and revealing repetitiously

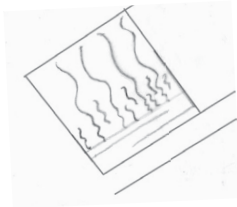
2



3D Curtain_Horizontal Human Scale

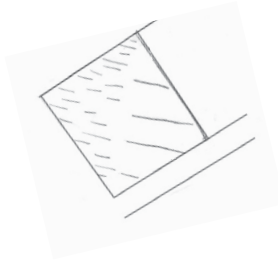
curtain acts as maze ranging from enclosed to open

3



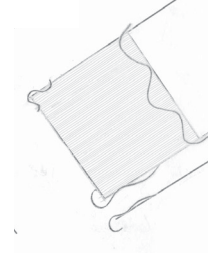
change in direction of pedestrian flow from sidewalks to site to alley_
creates McWane to Alley visual connection.

4



Undulating curtain mimics curtain on stage and wood planked flooring_
creates entrance and exits _large structure -bold color animates

5



The above images are a set of schematic design investigations exploring multiple ways the concept of a curtain could be explored and interpreted in the first design site. The purpose of this exploration was to gain a deeper understanding not only of design predicated by the concept of a curtain but also the implementation of the guidelines of conceptualism itself. Therefore this series of designs were examined for their implications on the ground such as their influence on

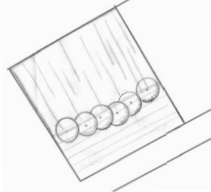
Theatrical Progression

Stage_Curtain_Backstage

Open_Threshold_Conceal

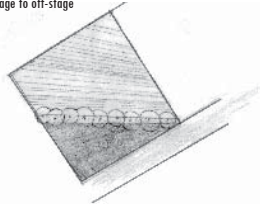
groundplane is multi-directional, tree allee heightens threshold effect

6



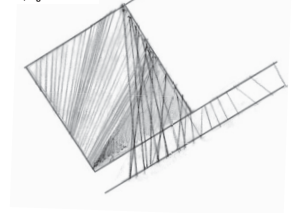
groundplane change from wood to dark asphalt_change in sound and color, from onstage to off-stage

7



Fly system_added height_connection of buildings and into alley_from open to enclosed, light to dark and narrow

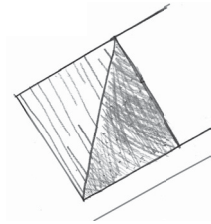
8



Widened Alley_Projected pathways

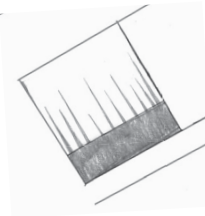
paths heighten view_from stage to audience_multi-function as seats

9



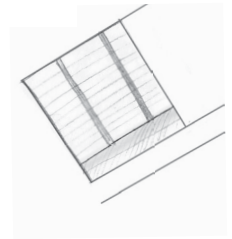
inverted pathways_climb up into site_from ease to challenge or challenge to ease of movement

10



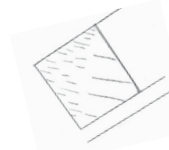
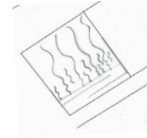
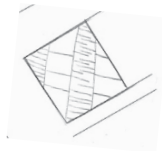
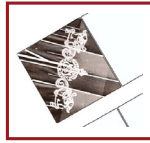
barrier mound from alley to site_barrier or interactive movement

11



pedestrian movement, ability to cater to multiple uses such as programmed events and unprogrammed occurrences such as the creation of open, informal gathering spaces. It also looked at the connections created in relation to the sidewalk, buildings and alleyways. Each of these designs were then cross examined for their ability to follow the criteria of conceptualism developed by Richardson (2009), see page 21. This examination allowed the elimination of designs which did not fulfill the criteria and thus the goals of the project.

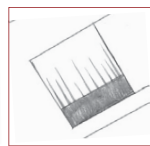
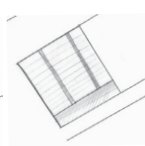
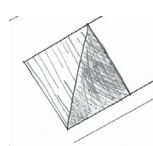
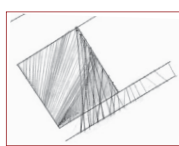
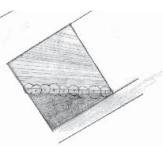
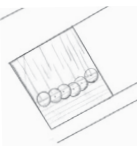
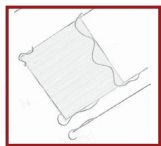
Conceptualism Criteria



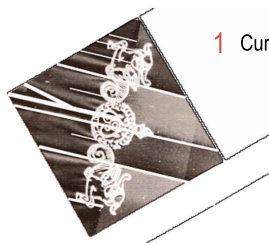
1	Predicated on idea of the curtain	●	●	●	●
2	Use of artificial materials [non-plant based]	●	●	●	●
3	Bold use of color	●	●	●	●
4	Revelatory: Does it have a readable narrative?	●	●	●	●
5	Does it contrast with surroundings?	●	●	●	●
6	Is it interactive [physical, emotional, phenomenological]	●	●	●	●
7	Does it call attention to itself visually?	●	●	●	●
8	Can it be repeated?	●	●	●	●




 Most successful to least successful

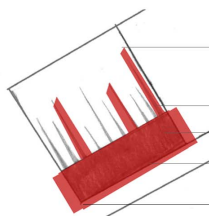


Four designs taken forward and combined to create two final designs to be explored



1 Curtain as extruded groundplane

Edits and Adjustments



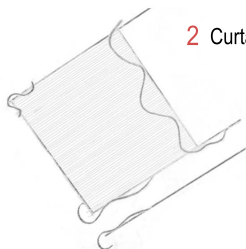
projected path: change in level, entering into open space, new territory beyond the threshold of ripples, adds to dynamic experience

direction of ripples: cater more to existing pedestrian flow

widened alleyway

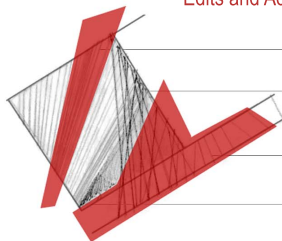
change in level: blocks views and opens views as you progress through site

change in material: from light to dark, change in atmosphere, scene, stage



2 Curtain in vertical plane

Edits and Adjustments



slightly undulating groundplane: open effect but still dynamic and intriguing

progression through theater: Fly System: added height, connects to buildings, gives visual presence, creates new space: change of scene

progression moves through alleyway: moves from dense to light, conceals and reveals through time

overhead cover signifies backstage: black is the color of this area in theaters, quiet, enclosed area, more restrictive and concealed

Summary of Methodology of Investigation:

- 1 Site Selection carried out by proximity to District destinations and alleyway network
- 2 Site documentation and analysis of existing conditions (observation, photography, mapping)
- 3 Series of schematic designs exploring the concept of curtain in interaction with site conditions
- 4 Schematic designs evaluated against conceptualism criteria
- 5 Two schemes which most successfully fulfill the criteria are selected for further development

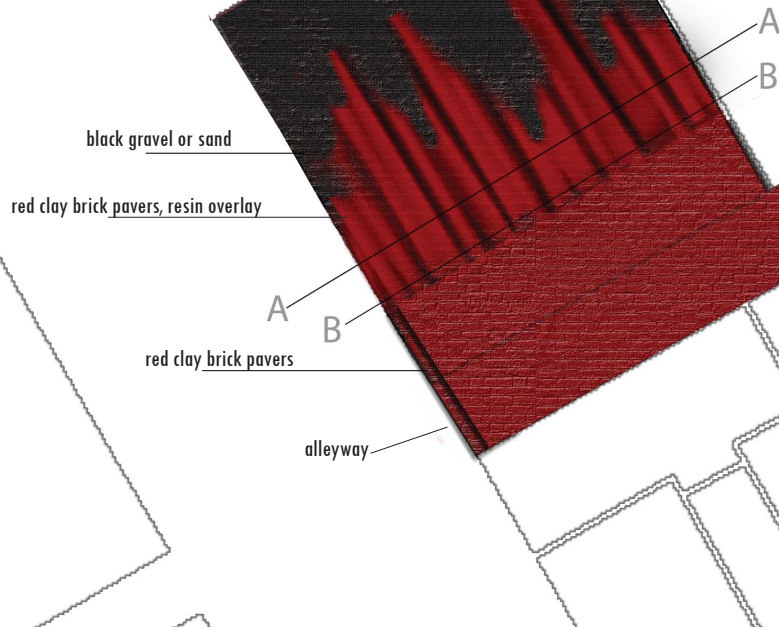
6

design one

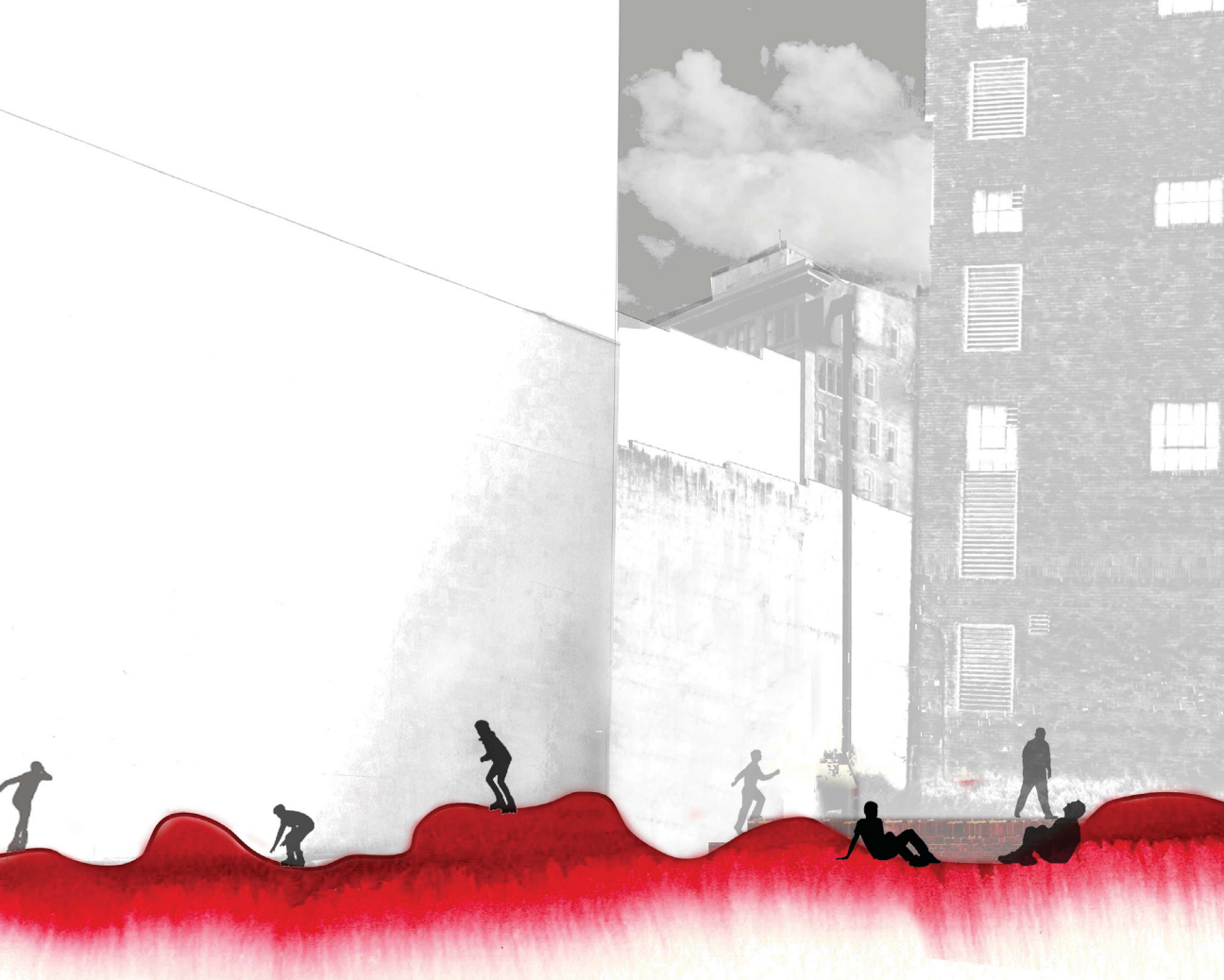
curtain as
extruded groundplane

Plan_extruded groundplane

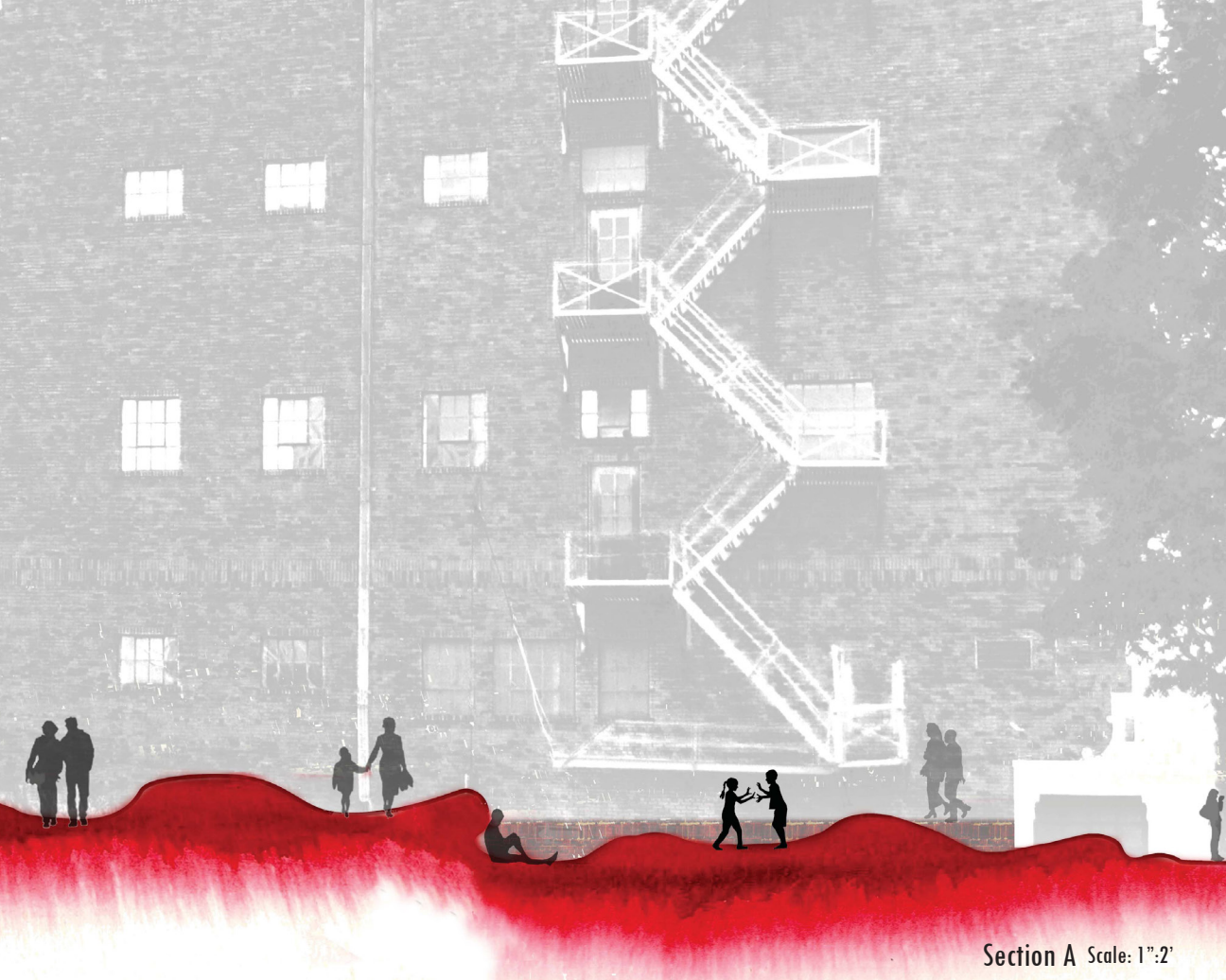
N↑



This design explores the form of a curtain through protrusions and undulations in the groundplane. The surface of a theatrical curtain is dynamic and fluctuates in curvature from small folds to larger curves as you move across its surface. Here the groundplane undulates in varying depths to project paths from the alleyway out into this adjoining site which offers a visual connection to 2nd and 19th streets, as well as a physical connection to the McWane Science Center. The curtain as it exists on a stage has a dramatic presence, and when viewed in plan it acts as a linear threshold dividing the audience from the stage and concealing the backstage functions of performance. This function of the curtain as

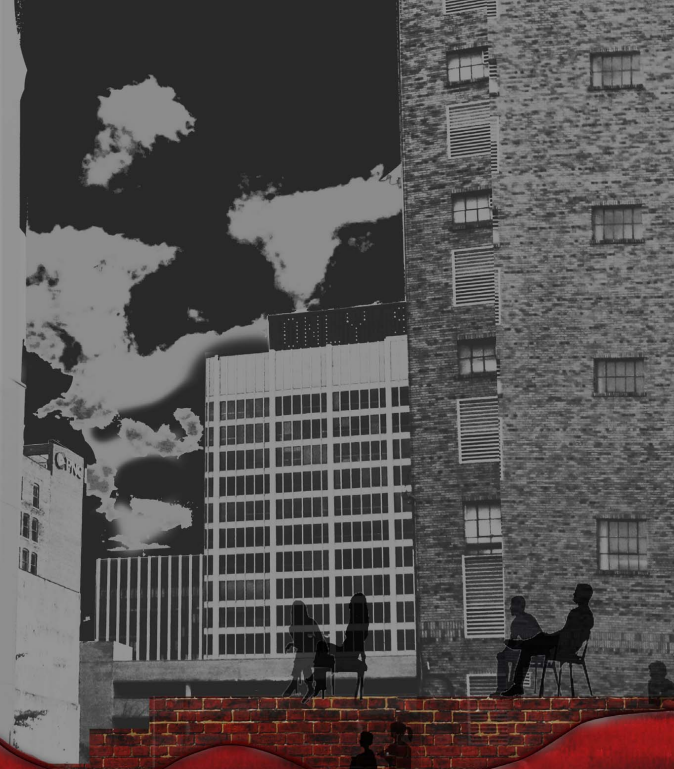


barrier is made tangible in the groundplane through its precarious surface which is difficult to negotiate, made noticeable through its varying depths. As one progresses through this site from the sidewalk, to what was once the parking lot,



Section A Scale: 1":2'

and then through to the alleyway, there is a progression from level ground, to undulating surface, to a raised stage. Exploring the site through this pathway or vice versa makes this contrast noticeable and enhances the tangibility of



this division of space. The elevated stage designed at the entrance to the alleyway forces one to enter the alley by going up a small set of steps which acts to denote a change in space. One must go up stairs and then back down in order to progress through the rest of the alley, or vice versa to enter or exit the sidewalk. The material chosen here is a clay brick paver which has been additionally pigmented with red, and has a red resin coating. This allows the ground to emulate the form and color of a curtain. The level ground of the site however is to be black gravel or sand which allows for a softer, contrast of experience, as if one has entered into a new dimension of the theater after crossing the threshold of the curtain.



The large undulations and varying groundplanes create an open public space which can be utilized by many different groups for different purposes. As seen in sections A and B, this design is an unprogrammed space open to multi-functional public use for both day and night. The flat stage allows for seating, as seen above, and the undulations create unique cavities and planes for walking, playing and lounging among other possibilities. One example of a potential programmed event in the space could include outdoor films sponsored by the McWane Center IMAX or the Alabama Theater, as seen above. The space is re-presented to the public by drawing attention to itself through its bold use of color and unique form but also remains an accessible and connected part of the local community through the activities which it enables.

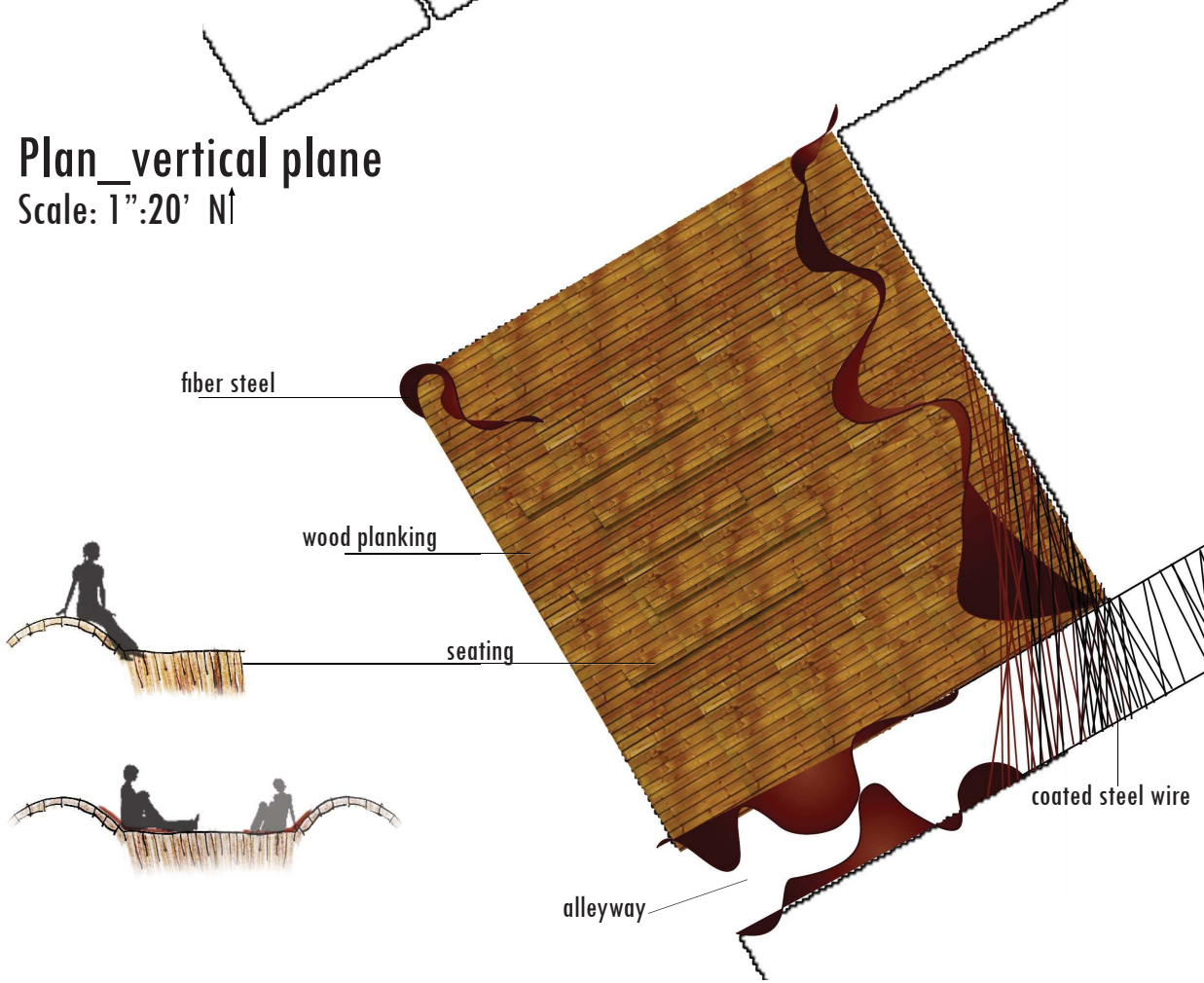
7

design two

**curtain as
vertical condition**

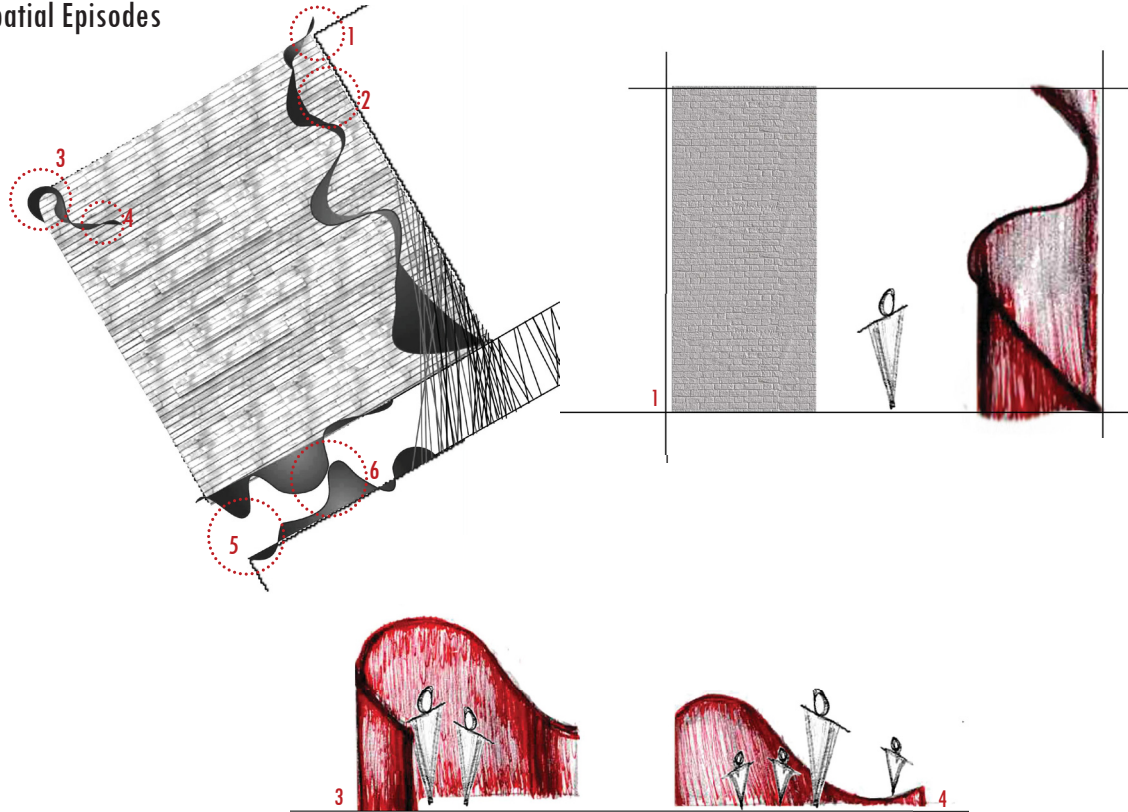
Plan_vertical plane

Scale: 1":20' N↑

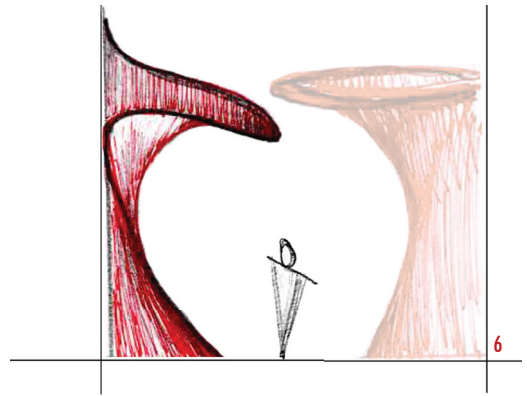
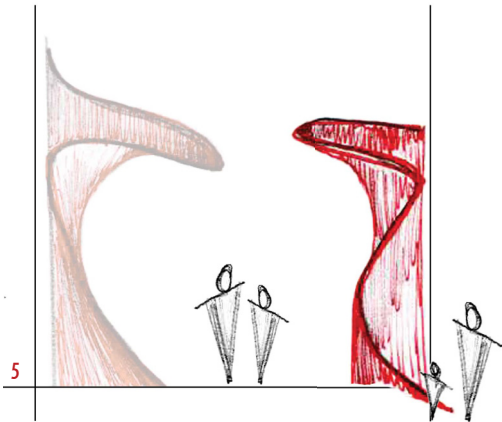
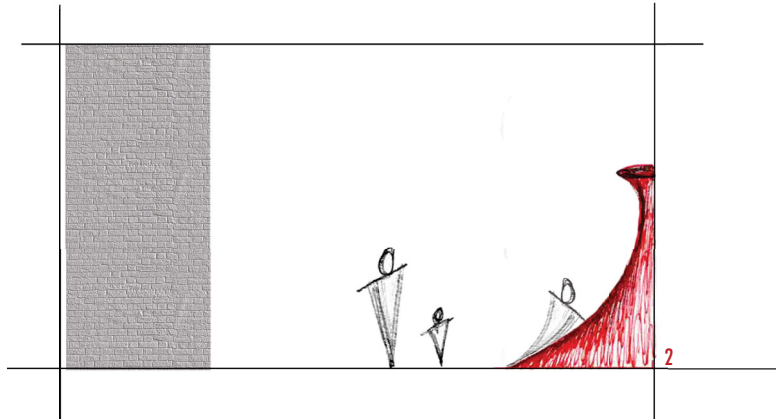


Acting as a second wall to the buildings, a curtain like red fiber steel structure moves and flows through the lot and alleyway intersecting standard pedestrian movement and forcing the body to go left, or right, up and down. As a pedestrian walks through this area, the curtain moves from 18 to 10 feet, next from 8 to 12 feet, then down to 2 feet, and continuing back up to 20 feet. It is not always solid but rises and falls allowing movement under and over its surface.

Spatial Episodes

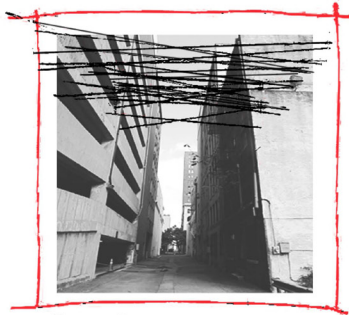


The ground consists of wood planking which runs over a flat plane, and is stained and waxed so that it is a replication of the stage and curtain relationship. The planking arises from the ground in the western portion of the site to create a bench like seating area that blends with the surroundings. The fiber steel vertical structure examines not only the form of a curtain but also the ability to emulate the functions and forms of plants. Because

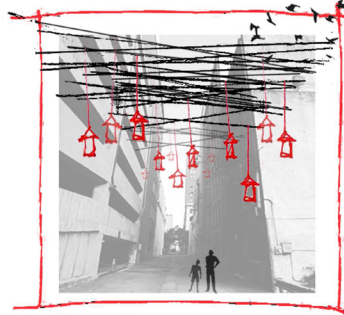


conceptualist designs so often focus on the use of artificial materials, this structure explores how synthetic material can achieve the aspects such as a canopy layer, and enclosure that a tree or other plant material could offer.

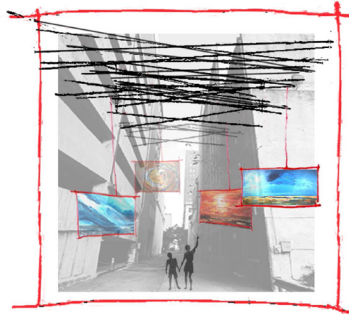
Alleyway Dynamism



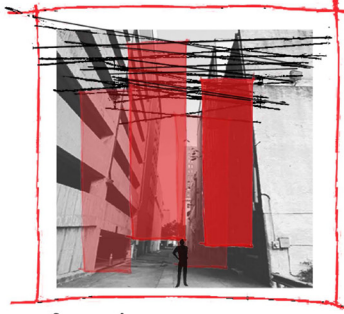
Scene 1



Scene 2



Scene 3



Scene 4

Sponsored set change:

BIRMINGHAM
MUSEUM OF ART

BAYER
PHARMACEUTICALS

Alabama
State
Council
on the
Arts

McWane Center
ADVANCEMENT IN DESIGN

ALABAMA
POWER
Always on™

UAB

In the alleyway an overhead structure of black cables represents a theater's fly system, and backstage aesthetic of the theater. Visually and literally connecting the buildings to one another and to the alley, this overhead canopy varies from dense to more dappled and sporadic positioning. These cables vary in dark and light as they move throughout the alley becoming denser at points of interest and more spread out between destination points. This alignment functions as an indicator which moves people throughout the alley. The cabled structure also caters to multi-purpose usage. From local art to bird feeders to fabric dividers, various objects can be suspended from the cables in order to change the functions

Folding Space

Embodiment+Physicality: aerial view

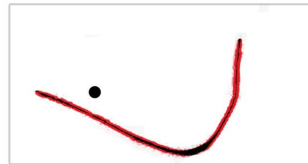


Tension



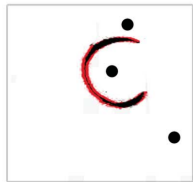
Division

Enclosure

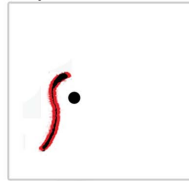


Expectation

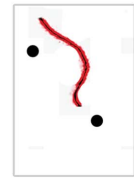
Invitation



Play



Flow



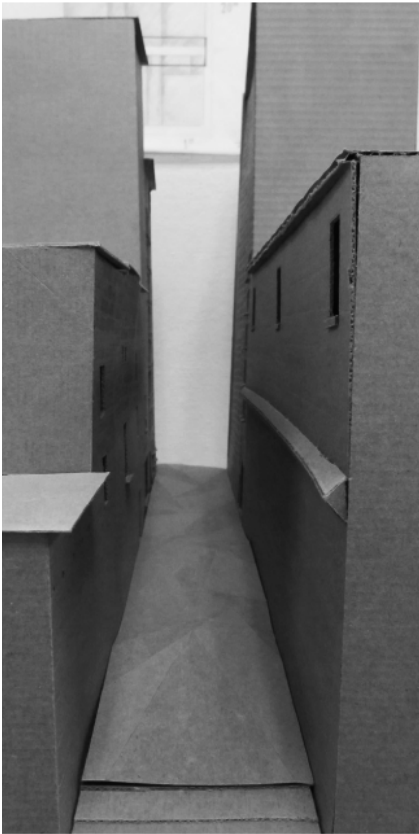
Anticipation

and form of the alleyway. Each of these events could be sponsored by the featured local organizations. The cables allow for the alleyway to become a transformative set with continuously changing scenery for the enjoyment of a returning public.

Both designs one and design two explored the concept of the curtain in various ways which follow the criteria of conceptualism as a design framework. They both suggest that the manipulation of the groundplane and the vertical plane can result in a new structuring of space which creates a revelatory landscape for the pedestrian. These designs have also shown that an interpretation of the curtain within the landscape can create moments of enclosure, flow, division, and invitation (among others) while also remaining a multi-use public space. However these designs have stuck strictly to the literal form of the curtain and have yet to explore the phenomenological, sensorial properties of this entity. A further exploration into these potentials and what an abstracted and further interpreted understanding of the curtain can produce for public space is necessary in the next design investigation.

8

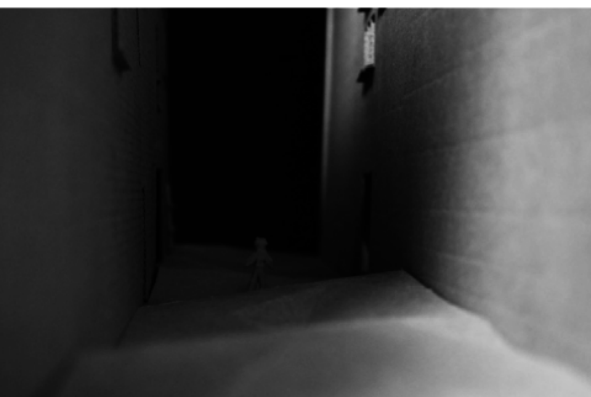
design three: landscape as sensory experience



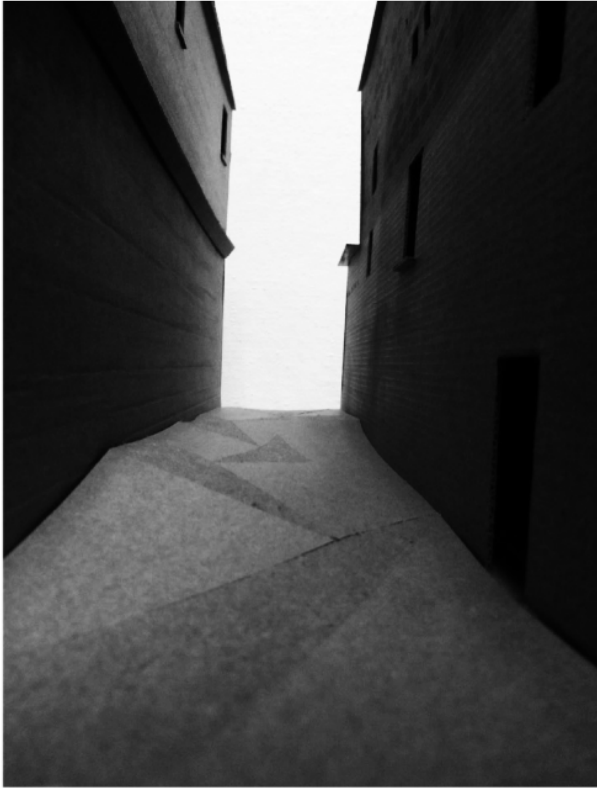
While conceptualism is largely grounded in the visual aesthetic of design, the perception of an individual is not simply made on the basis of vision alone. How the body perceives the world around them as they move through space is a culmination of the five senses (Pallasmaa , 2000). Therefore the exploration of a third design was done through modeling. Using only cardboard and balsa wood, my design investigation moved into the third dimension and a 1"=4' scale model of a portion of the alley way was constructed. Here the undulating surface of the curtain has been



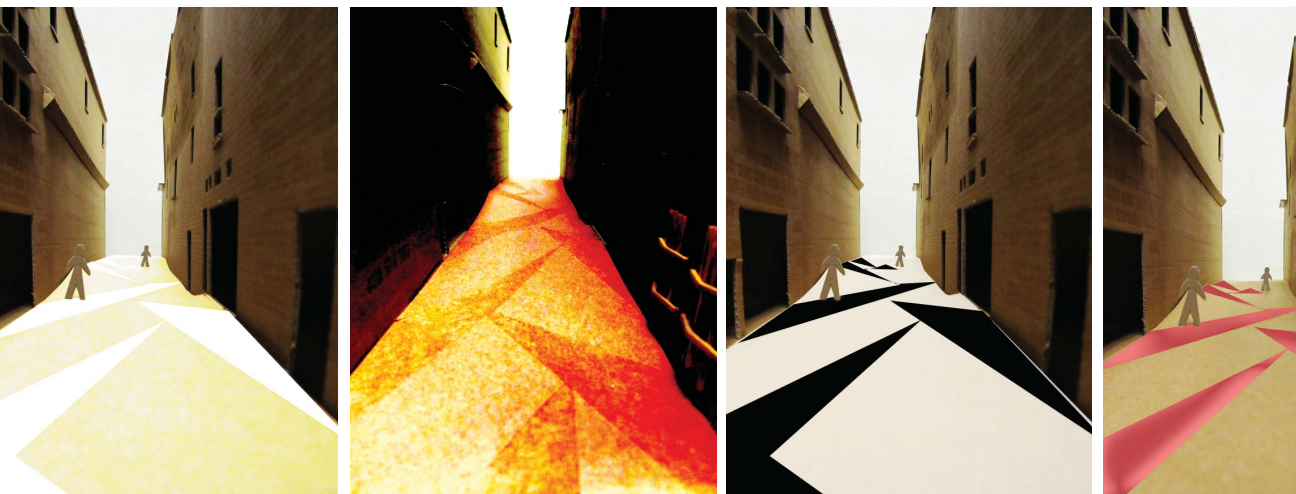
reimagined as large gently shifting planes which ramp up to the door and window sills, gently moving the pedestrian up and down as they move through the alley. Through a multitude of iterations it became clear that the alleyway's buildings and historic conditions emanate hapticity in their own right, and therefore a design intervention should not cover or distract from this condition but enhance it through a groundplane which contrasts in simplicity. The buildings in this portion of the alley features old brick, varying in size and condition, as well as painted cinder block facades with



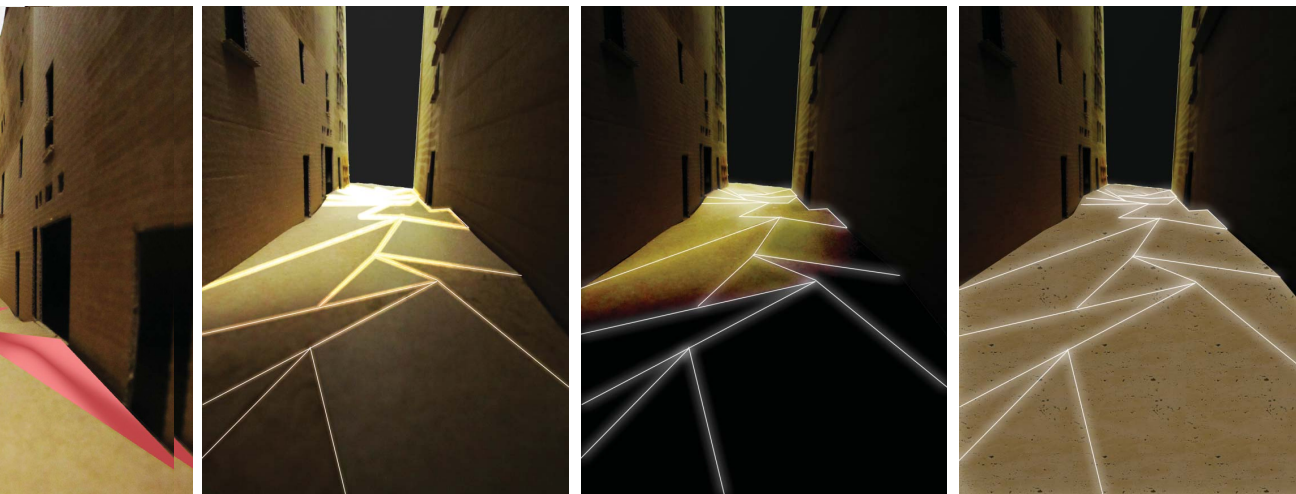
boarded windows and iron barred doors. They are rough to the touch, shading the alley and buffering the sounds of the busy surrounding streets. The groundplane consists of glass resin pavers which are triangular in form and softly undulate up and down, the tallest height being no greater than 4 feet. As one follows the path of the ramp they are raised to new heights giving one a new perspective of the alley, and also forcing you to analyze the facades at a closer level as the planes direct you right up to their surface. The raised planes conceal parts of the alleyways to add intrigue, and reveal new spaces as you traverse the landscape, much as the curtain reveals and conceals the stage. The pavers are



lit from below and vary in opaqueness in order for the ground to appear dappled and varied like the surface of a curtain. The artificiality of the material denotes a textural change in space from the existing rough concrete and asphalt surfaces of the streets and sidewalks onto the smooth groundplane of the alley. The synthetic nature of the groundplane clearly states that it is constructed, which shows one experiencing the insertion that there has been a significant investment in their city, and that it is an investment of permanence. The subtlety of the groundplane undulations and simplicity of the angularity also allows it to be repeated throughout the larger network of the alleys with minimal adjustments.

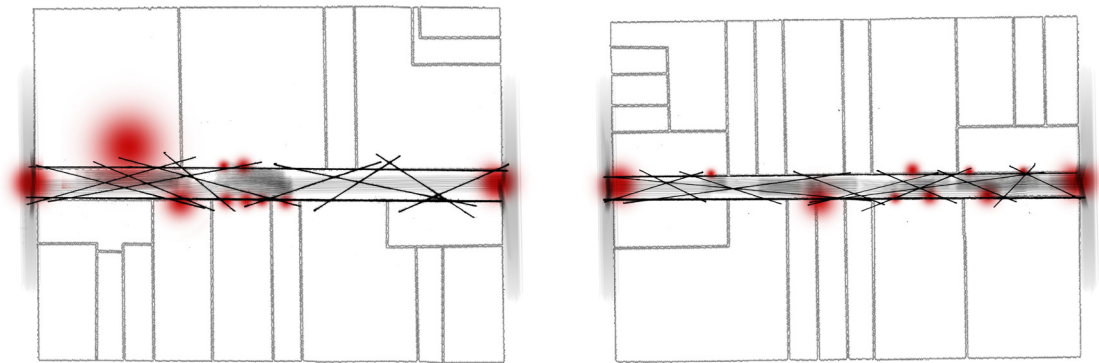


The resin pavers chosen in this design achieve the aforementioned goals of having a surface which varies in opacity yet remains consistent in color. However the resin paver has potential negatives such as concerns of the safety of the slick elevated surface when it rains, as well as the feasibility of such a large paver being lit from below in order to achieve the desired effect. Therefore a material study was conducted through photo manipulation of the model's groundplane. The criteria for this new material developed as different potentials were explored and varying outcomes were realized. The final image on the far right was chosen as the final paving system. It consists of large limestone pavers which are honed, not polished, to give added texture and uplift on the edges.

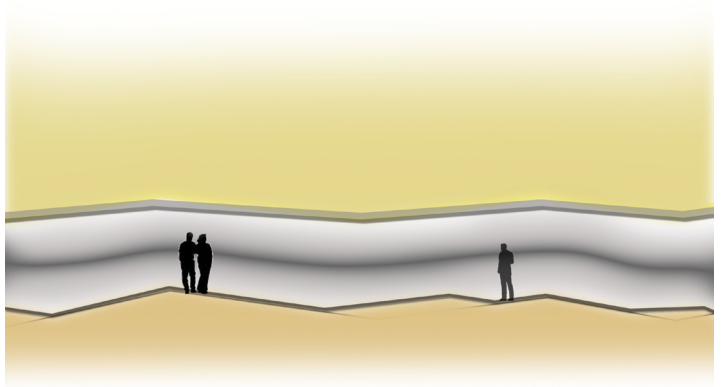
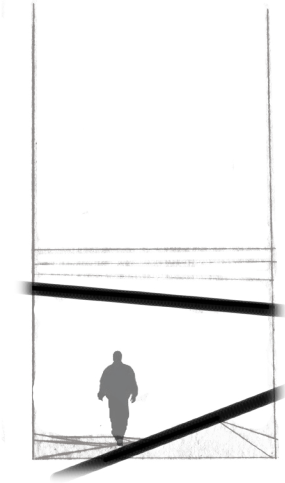


The criteria the limestone pavers meet are as follows:

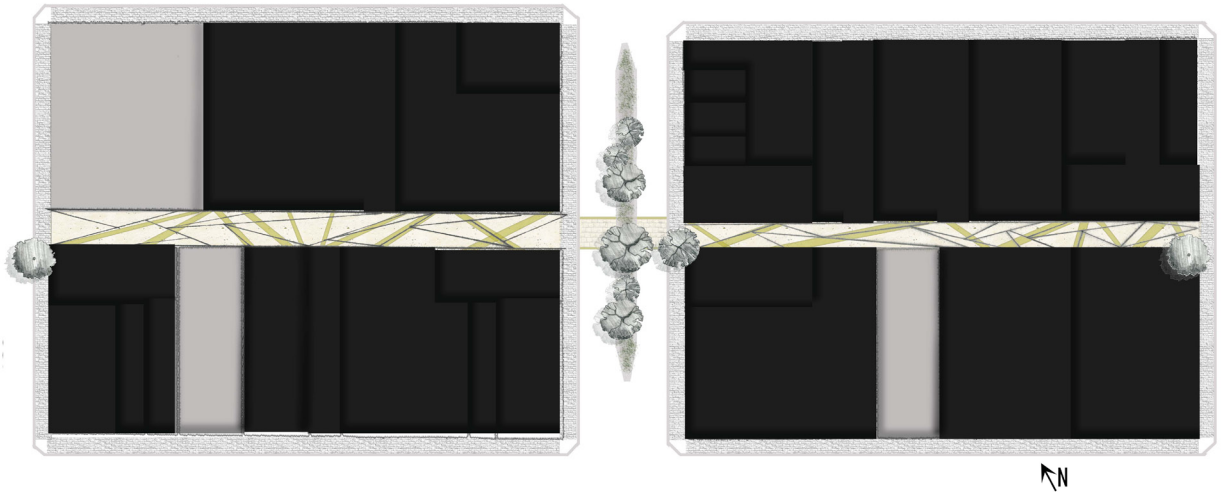
- Groundplane must contrast in color and texture to the walls.
- It must look sleek, new and uniform
- It must have the ability to reflect light, and allow shadows to be easily readable
- Dynamic throughout the day as sun and shade changes, even after dark (up lighting achieves this)
- Must have a soft, dense feel, which is approachable (honed, not polished)
- Planes must be sharp and noticeable in change (edged lighting)
- Speaks to the history of the area but presented in a new light (Birmingham's early rise in industry is largely due to the presence of limestone in the city's geologic formation)
- Residential/familiar connotation achieved through the use of limestone which is commonly found in and outside of homes, here presented in a very urban setting in order to enhance feeling of safety and familiarity



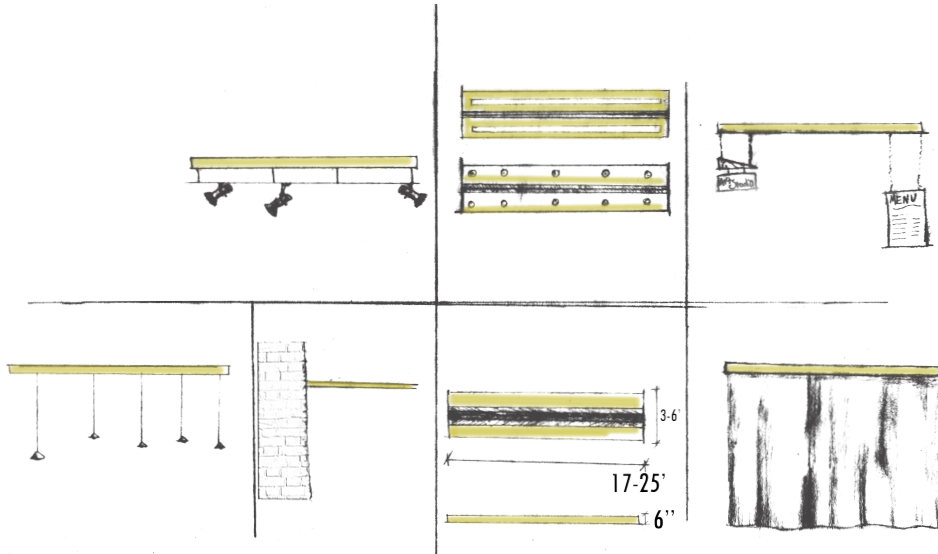
The placement of the pavers was then determined by the points of entrance and exits to the alleyway as well as the positioning of the window and door frames. These points are denoted in plan view over a two block span of the first phase of the alleyway system. The planes are raised to meet the edge of the door sills which in many places are raised up to 2 feet from the ground making them less accessible and unwelcoming in their current condition.



A canopy layer was added that mimics the shifting planes of the ground. The canopy serves the function of lighting but also sculpts the space so that one feels the embodiment of enclosure and opening which a curtain facilitates.



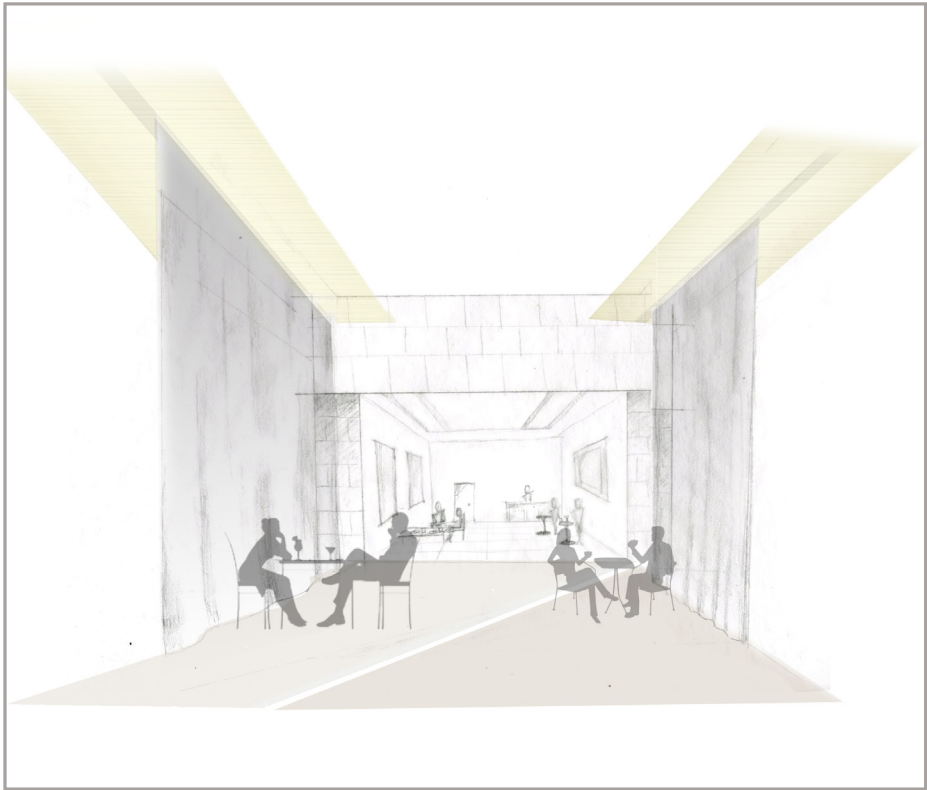
The above site plan shows the placement of the planes in relation to the canopy layer which is manifested as a permeable series of gold steel plates which connect to the buildings adjacent to the alleyway. The gold steel plates were chosen for their dramatic presence and durability as well as their ability to draw on the



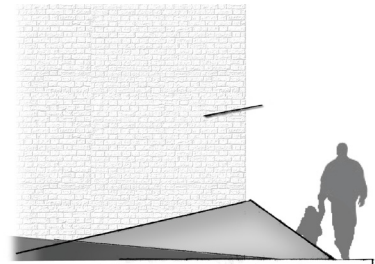
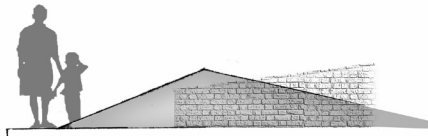
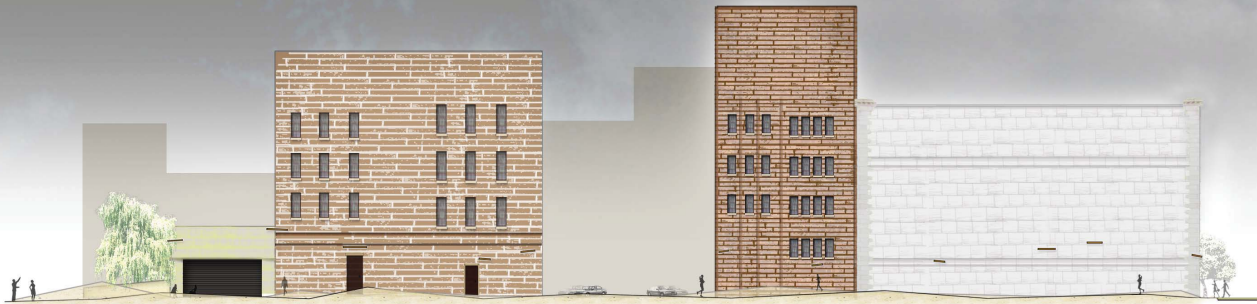
infrastructure of the theater. They are reflective and draw attention from afar so that patrons of the sidewalks as well as inhabitants of the upper levels of the buildings overlooking the alleys will be drawn to them visually. Not only do the planes feature lighting capabilities but they also have a tract system embedded for the hanging of various items. The adaptability the curtain enables for the stage is made tangible through this feature. Signage, added lights, or even curtains can be hung



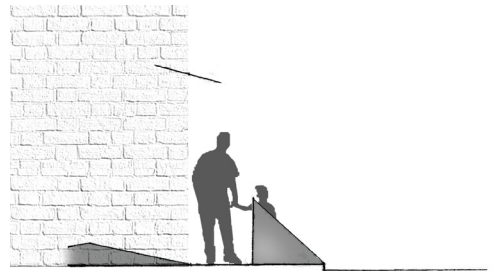
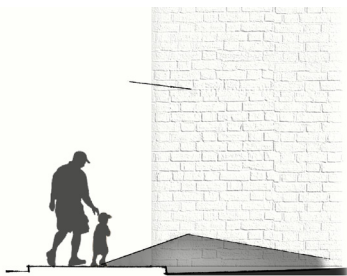
from these tracts in order to change the space on a daily or even hourly basis. The above images depict different ways the space could be used by different groups or simply as a thoroughfare or gathering space amongst the created enclosures. However the alley should not only be considered within this linear void but also in its relationship with the



buildings it traverses and connects into. Shown here is an example of how a building with a wide roller door can be transformed into a restaurant which connects to the alley through outdoor seating. The curtains hung on the tracts act as extensions of the enclosure of the building while allowing for a unique outdoor experience.



The above elevation features the facades of the southern side of the two block expanse of the Phase One alleyway. By cutting the alley in half I was able to analyze exactly how and where the limestone planes should be located in regard to the existing conditions. I was also able to explore how this multitude of angular planes could be used as a thoroughfare and how each of the sidewalk/alley thresholds could be designed. These intersections proved to be good opportunities to

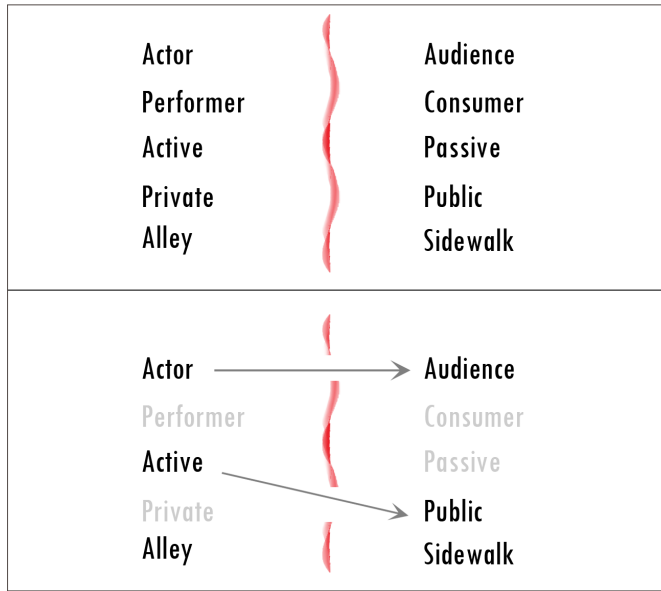


bring further presence to the alleys. By allowing the design to extend into the sidewalks, pedestrians are either forced to enter the alley or to completely avoid it. This intrusion of the normative sidewalk path acts as an attention grabber, jarring the passive walker into a state of decision making and therefore imprinting the existence of the alleys into their minds.

9

design four: relation to the whole

Rethinking public space



The relationship of alley to the sidewalk is much like that of the actor to the audience. The sidewalk has a more public, passive and predictable experience, while the intimacy of the alley is private, much like the relationship between an actor and an audience with the curtain as the threshold between these two environments. When the curtain opens this relationship becomes intertwined, the public is now a part of the life of an actor, they are now a part of the stage. On stage there is uncertainty and guise and transgression, it is a place of action and allowance. Therefore in the activation of this alleyway network it was important to capture this condition and look at how the alleys could be re-presented as this different type of active, performative public space.

In order to do this I first looked at the normative street components that would typically be found in the passive, public condition of the sidewalk. The three entities I chose to focus on were the street tree, the street lamp and the sidewalk bench. I then created a series of designs which reinterpreted these three typologies through the lens of the curtain in order to investigate new outcomes of representation for implementation in the alleyways.



street tree

canopy • shade • aesthetics



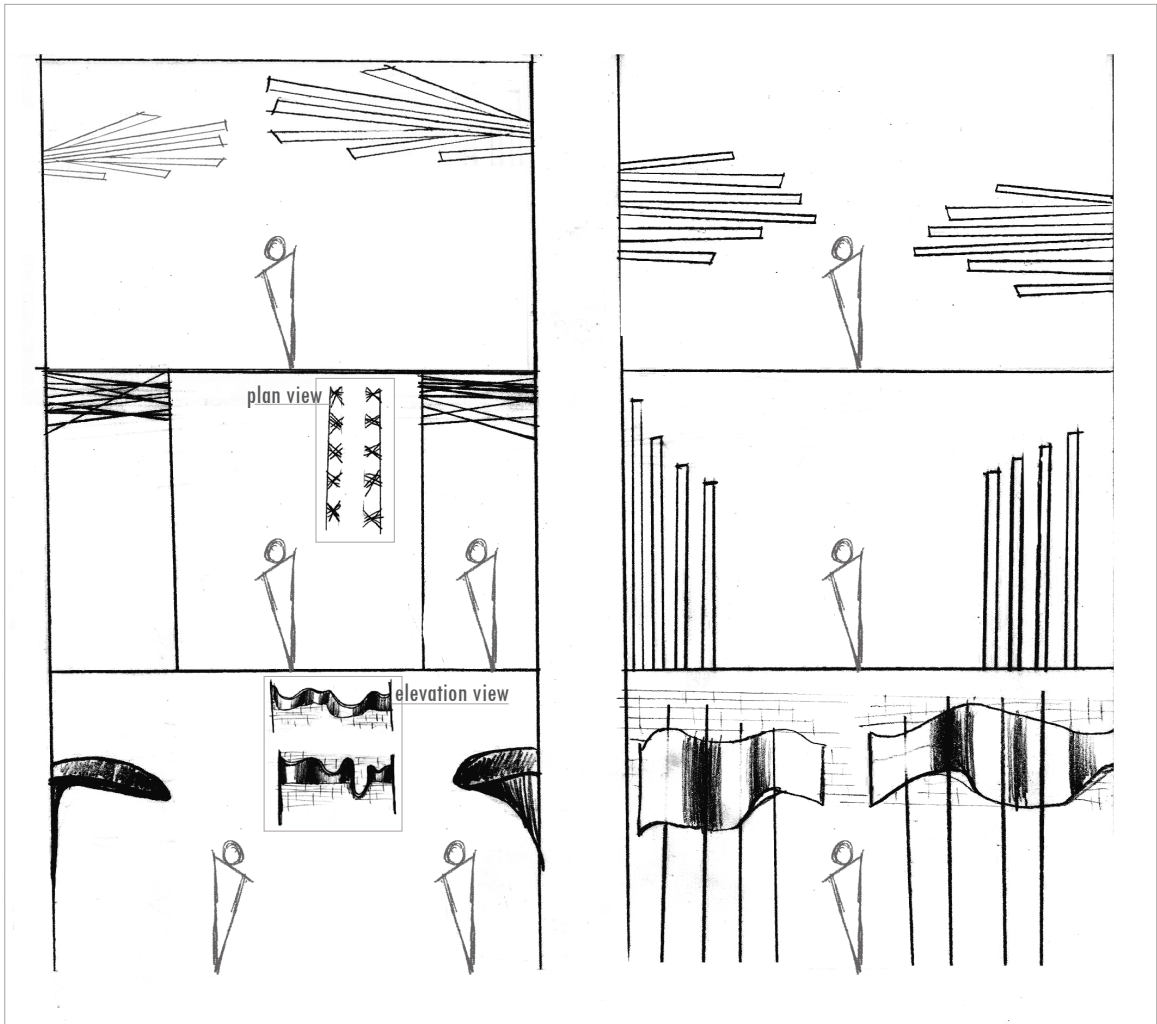
street lamp

light • permanence • aesthetics

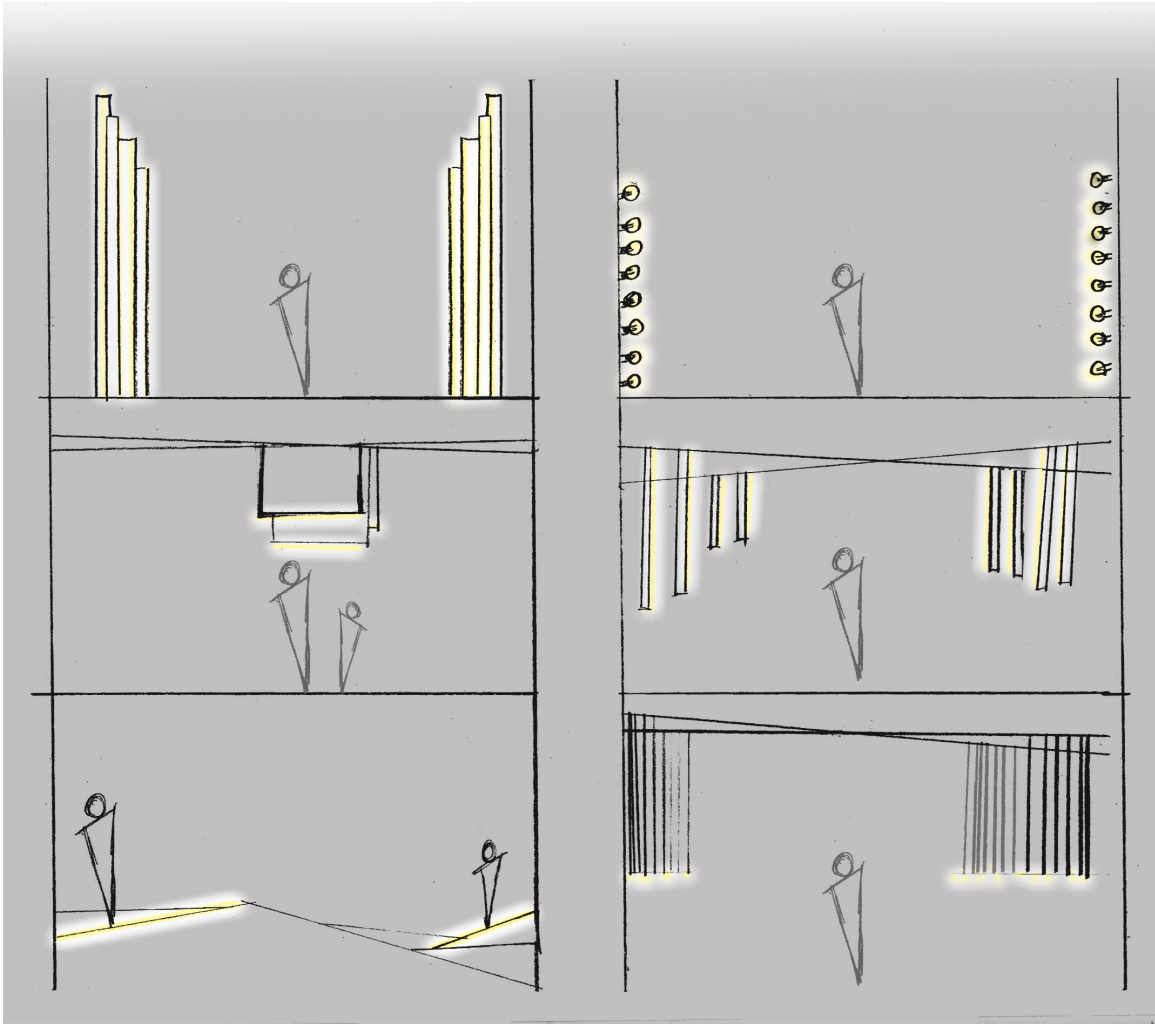


sidewalk bench...

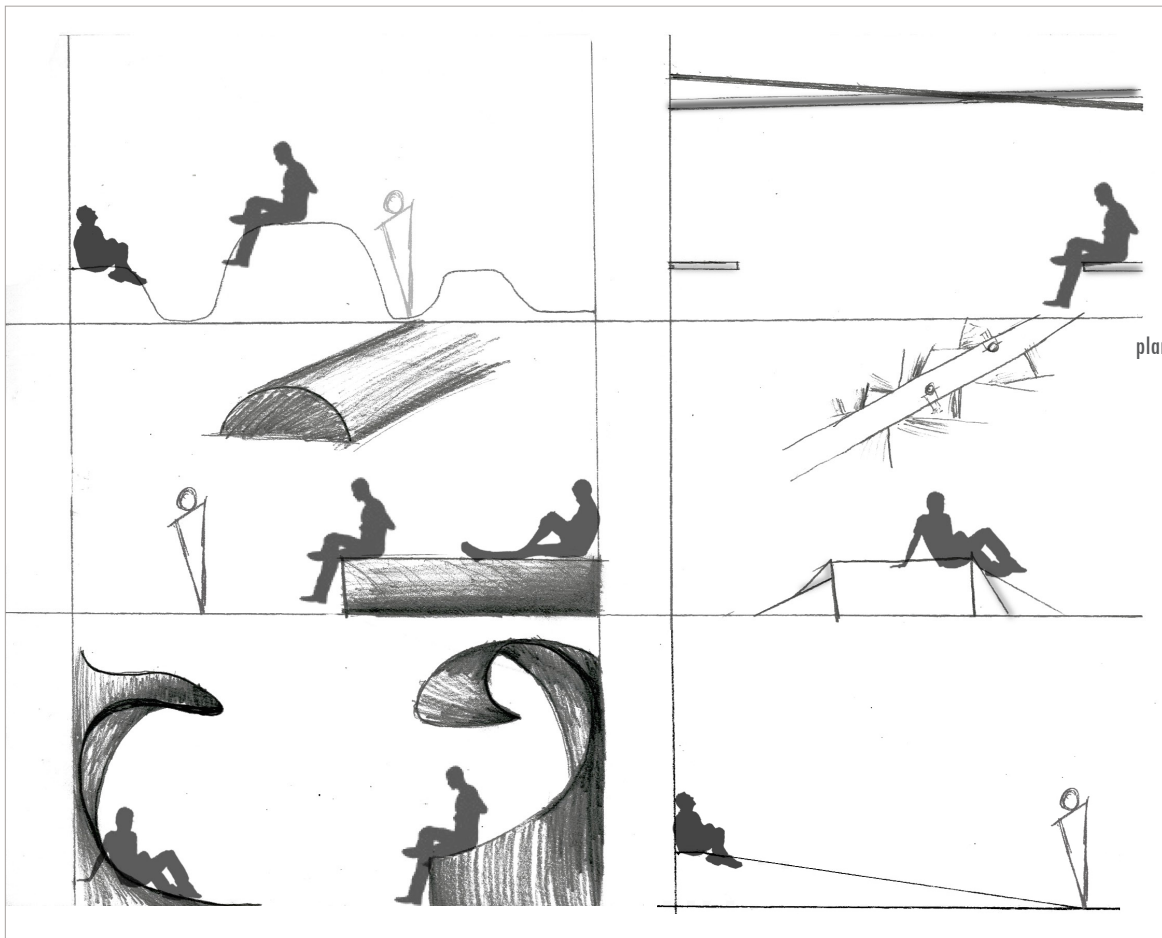
resting • observing • inviting



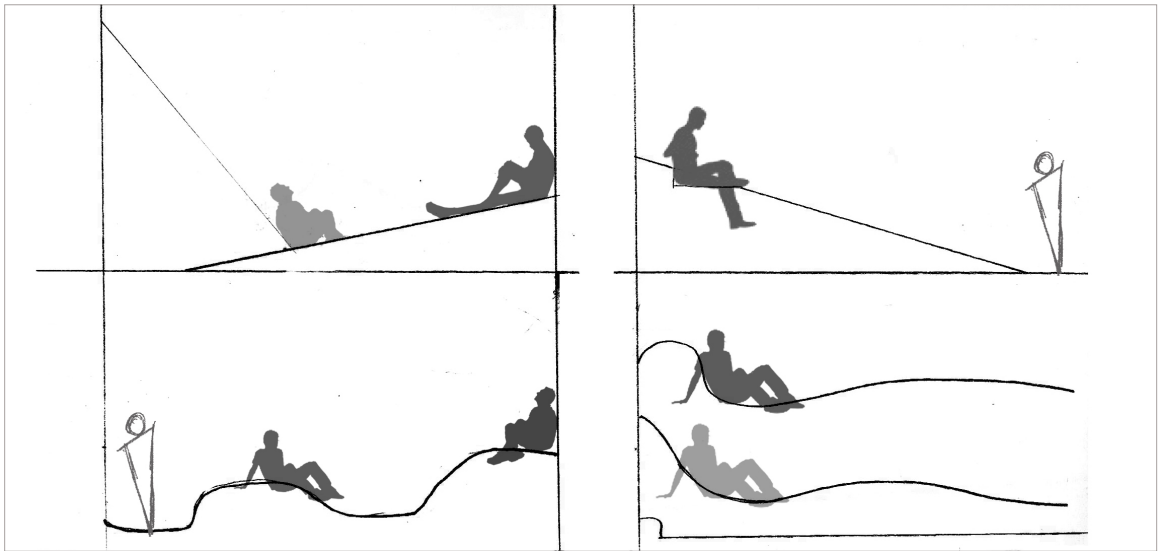
STREET TREE



STREET LAMP

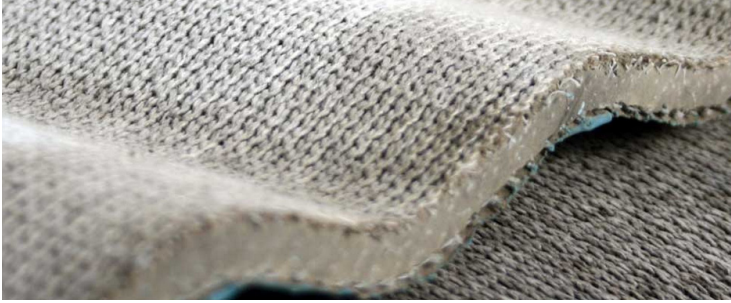


SIDEWALK BENCH

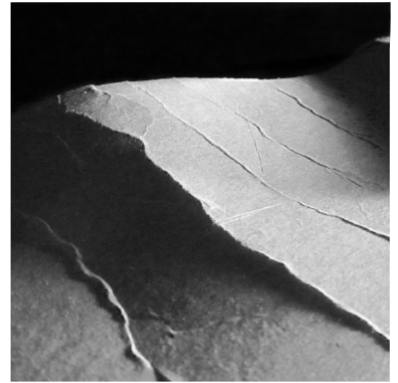
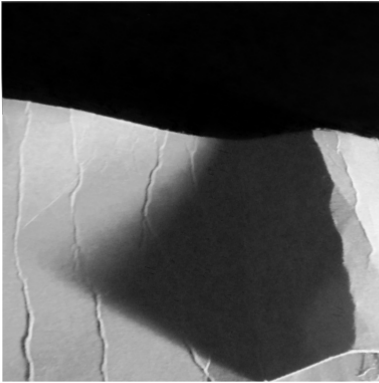
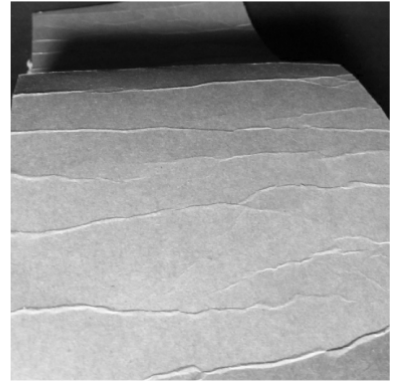
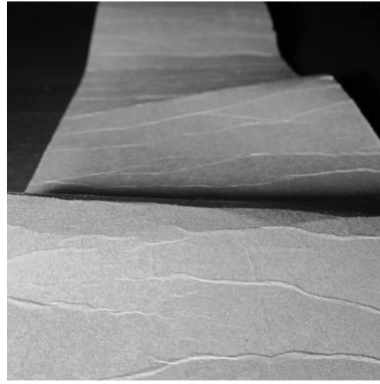
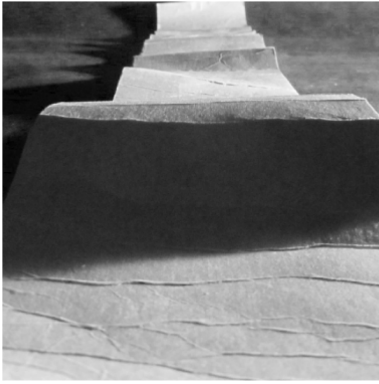


This exercise emphasized the importance of an overhead canopy and lighting feature, as well as the potentials of an undulating groundplane to cater to the needs of an active public. It also showed that a smoothly sloping, curved groundplane can offer more possibilities for seating and ease of access than sharply angular formations. Therefore the fourth design iteration will extend and expand upon the two main entities of the groundplane and overhead canopy presented in design three.

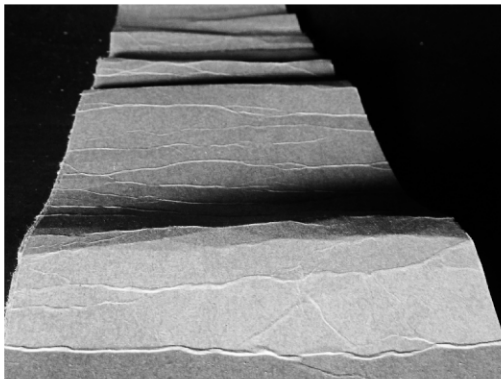
material change: concrete fabric



The decision was made to change the material of the groundplane to something which could accommodate the needs of a curved formation. This material also allows for more possibilities of arrangement and is strong and durable enough to handle both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The woven and sculptural nature of this fabricated concrete emulates the texture and fluid form of a curtain as well. The concrete is long-lasting, meant for the outdoors, waterproof, and can be dyed with pigment (Milliken, 2011). In this case, the proposed color of the concrete plane is a striking bright red tone in order to capture the essence of a curtain and the attention of passersby.

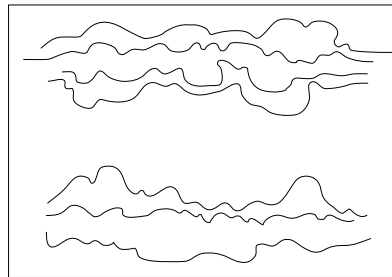
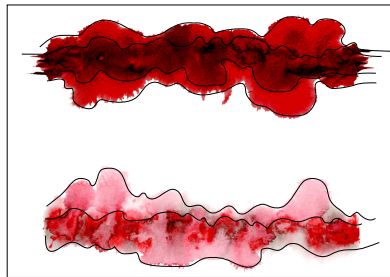
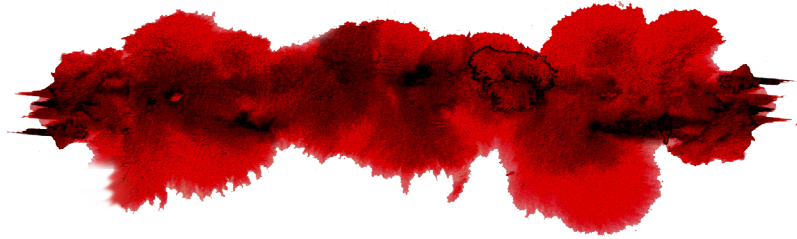


The rounded form of the groundplane offers an added level of tangibility of the curtain and embodies the effects of revealing and concealing in a more revelatory way. The above photographs are a compilation of a lighting study which analyzed the effects of light cast from various angles on this curved surface. This study showed the need for the ground to undulate along as well as across the alley to achieve the necessary dynamism that the surface of a curtain emanates.



The lighting cast from the left and right sides proved most effective for emphasizing and dramatizing the curves of the ground. This angle of light highlighted the undulations in a way which created a continuous transition between light and dark, hiding what lies beyond and also offering dappled exposure of spaces along the corridor. This lighting effect allows for the enigmatic phenomena to be heightened in the alleyway, allowing for the transgressive actions and mindsets to flourish. Not only does one enter into the threshold of the alley, in the in-between of destinations and occupancy but they must also transition between shadows and glares of this reality.

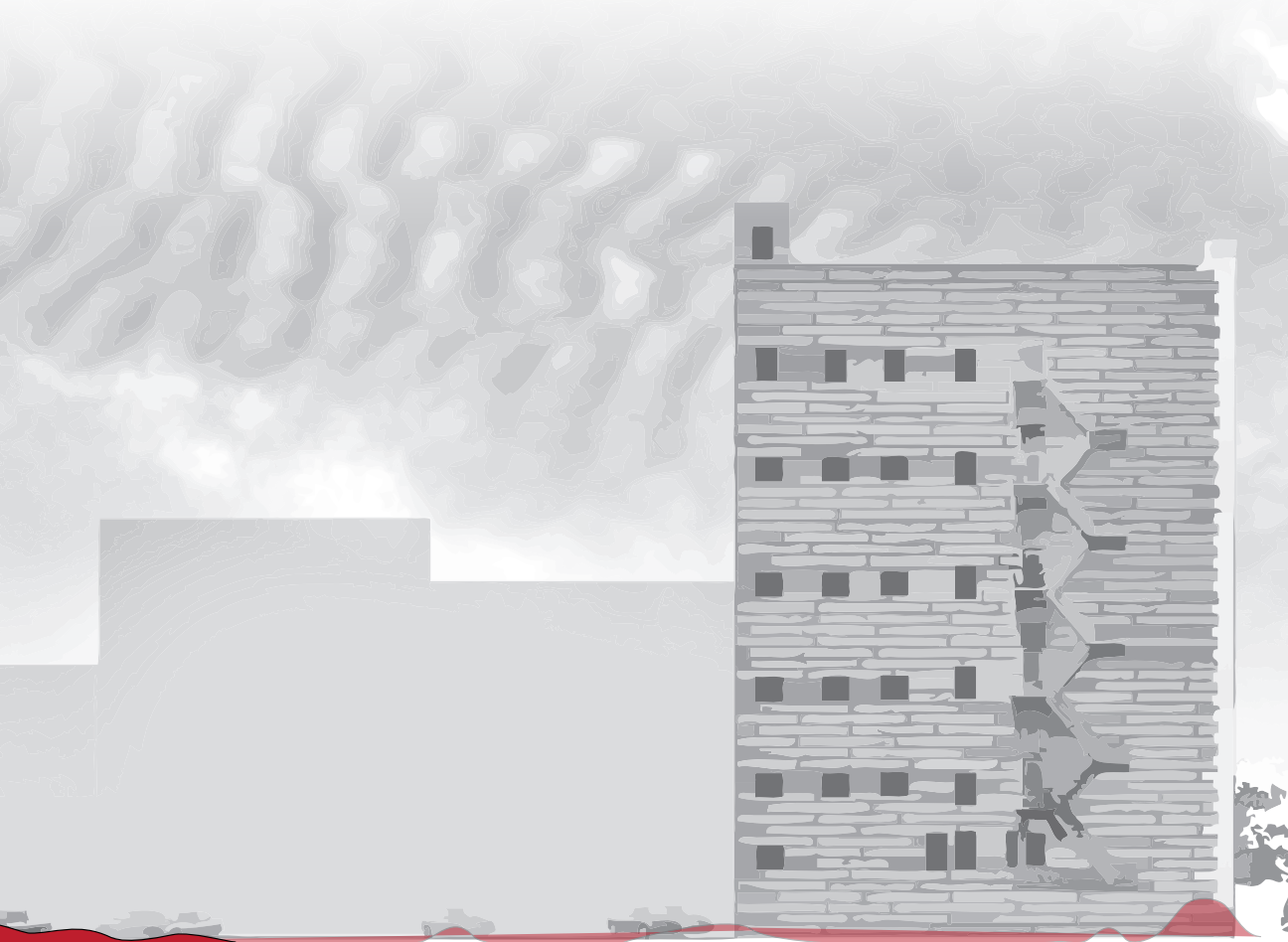
Topographic fluidity



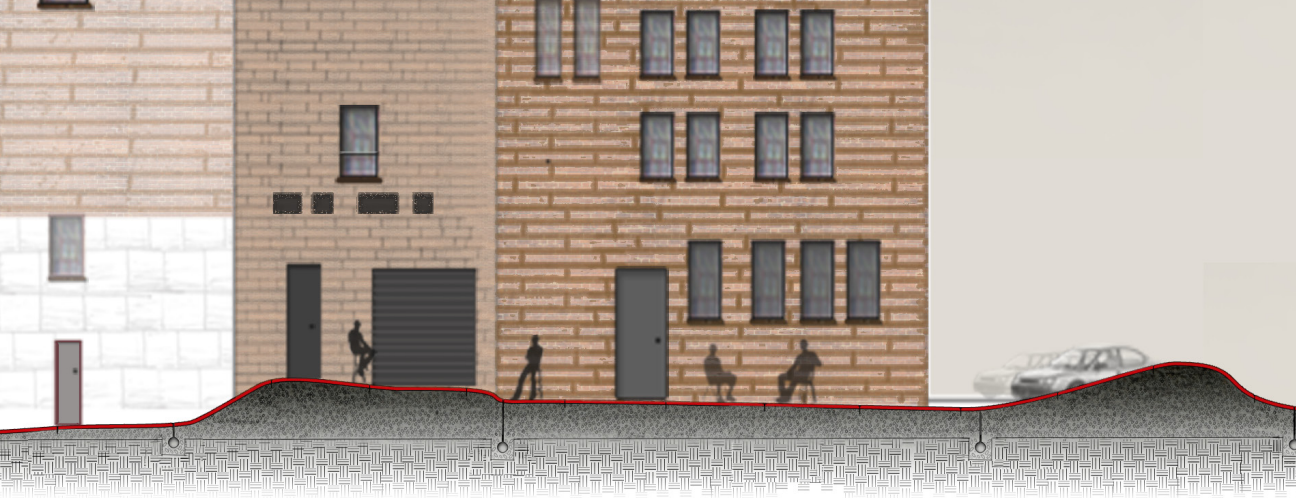
In determining the location of the undulations throughout the alley, I wanted a dynamic, fluid and organic environment to be achieved. Therefore a series of watercolor pourings were done, and then traced in order to create rippling topography lines.



Intuitively, these lines were then molded to fluctuate in an accessible and functional manner paying close attention to necessities such as door and window heights as well as parking lot and sidewalk thresholds.



Here it was decided that when wall facades did not feature windows or doors or other accessibility constraints, the undulations would become seating and therefore were designed within the parameters of seat backs and bench heights.



The constructibility of this sinuous surface was also considered. The concrete fabric is a layer which is overlaid and secured onto a sub-base of compacted aggregate, formed to the undulation (Milliken, 2011). Because currently the surface of the alley is layered asphalt, this asphalt would be removed in this alleyway and then re-used to form a portion of the aggregate base. However while the alleyways are mainly for pedestrian use only there are portions of the network which must allow for vehicular access due to parking lot adjacencies and emergency vehicular use. In these areas only, the original asphalt is to remain in place and the new sloping ground plane evades these areas (as shown on page 115).

In order for this design to connect to the alleyway system as a whole a set of guidelines were created in order for this design to be consistently implemented in the connecting alleyways, while also catering to local differences and conditions. The main alley in phase one of this network, which has been thoroughly examined throughout this design process, contains many of the same conditions found in the other alleys. These conditions include abandoned buildings, inhabited buildings, connected parking lots, fire escapes, facades which must cater to seating, sidewalk intersections and so on. Therefore the guidelines were discovered through the phase one alleyway design investigation.

Guidelines



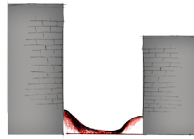
parking lot/alley threshold
4 inches to resemble speed bump like
conditions, a barrier but still accessible



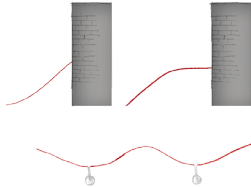
sidewalk/alley intersection
maximum height 5 ft, maximum extrusion
into sidewalk



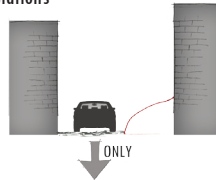
door sill- goes to sill height, undulation
ramps to sill



where facades don't feature windows, doors, fire
escapes or other protruding entities undulations should
form seating, requiring them to reach 2-3 feet in height



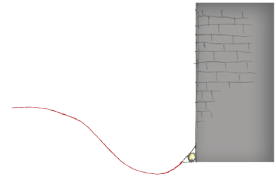
angle of the undulation where it meets wall facade
should be obtuse, meaning no less than 90 degrees
for proper drainage and drainage must exist at all low
points in undulations



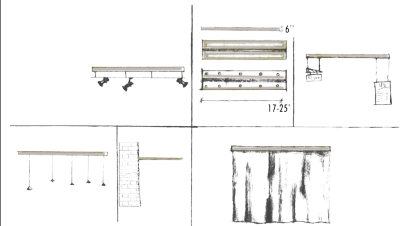
vehicular requirements- 8 foot width clearance.
Original paving will remain where regular car traffic
will exist. Alley traffic will be one way.



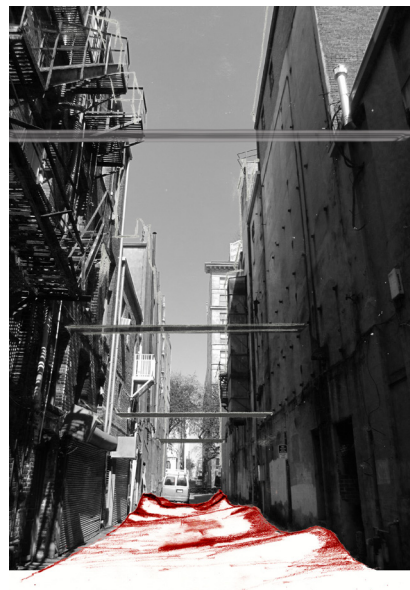
undulation heights should not match from one
side of the alley to the other in section.



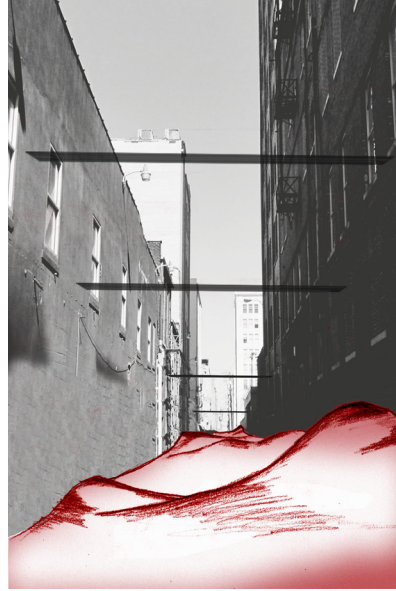
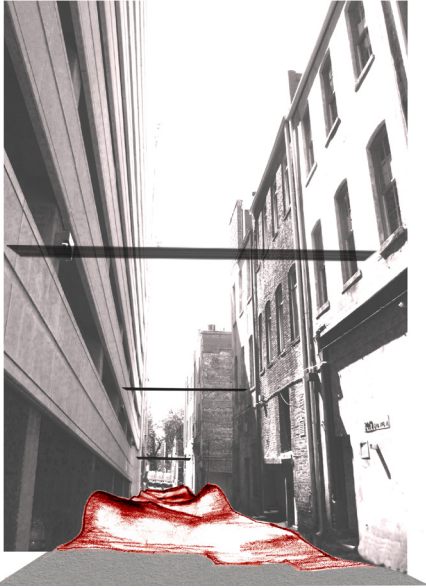
lighting-Ground is up-lit at edge of building
facade and angled so that undulations are
highlighted from the side



Canopy layer-fly light and track system- stainless
steel non-reflective plates with lighting and hanging
capabilities embedded.



These images depict perspectives of the guidelines implemented throughout the six main alleyways of the District.



Phase One alleyway site plan



Based on building types and ownership, as well as local organizations I have determined some of the potential patrons and occurrences in the alleyway, as well as future potential usage of the buildings:

Arts practitioners_performers_dance,music,artisans,painters,actors

Civil Rights Institute_community programs and events

Salvation Army community outreach, evening events

An escape from the normative daily schedule, a place of refuge from the office

Mixed use with office space: Local food_restaurants, Low income residential, lofts



Because the alleys were once used as service corridors, and for African Americans, as well as a backstage to the theaters, they have always been a place where people and activities were to be hidden. The homeless, the unjustly treated, or those seeking unridiculed self-expression could find refuge here. These are the people and conditions which are largely ignored by the passive public, and not allowed in the open, political settings of the sidewalk and the streets.



Through the reconsideration of the alleys as active public space, Birmingham would gain a landscape which could truly be utilized by all people as a new venue for expression, performance, community and action.

reflections

In response to my research question, “How can conceptualism enable the re-presentation of an alleyway network as a different type of public space in the Theater District of Birmingham, Alabama?”; I believe my work suggests that it is possible to design the alleyways in such a way, through the concept of the curtain, that will provoke intrigue, provide a unity of identity amongst the District, and enable a multitude of activities to occur in what is currently under-utilized and forgotten space. The concept of the curtain being a subject which emerged from the cultural and historic fabric of the District is an aspect which was instrumental in the success of this exploration. The curtain allowed conceptualism as a framework to be a guide that remained relevant to this landscape throughout the various iterations into which it manifested. While I challenged and edited the criteria of conceptualism as the project progressed, it is personally evident that by strictly following conceptualism’s guidelines I was able to create a series of designs which were artful, culturally charged, and bold in form that in turn would grab the attention and imaginations of its viewers, thus creating a new destination for Birmingham.

(continued)

Common Questions which have arisen throughout the project:

Is it necessary for the concept to be understood by individuals experiencing the built design in order for conceptualism to be considered successful?

Yes it is necessary. While design three intentionally pushed away from the literal idea of the curtain (which was represented in designs one and two) in order to gather a greater understanding of designing through a concept, design three lost some of its power as a result. To me the design was abstracted to a point of intangibility of the curtain and therefore the design lost its relevance to the design framework. The design was no longer a reflection of an entity which was so strongly tied to the District. That being said, although I believe conceptualism fails when the concept is no longer tangible, it does not mean that the built design necessarily fails as well. For example, if a design is created in a space which draws a lot of people to it and becomes a destination for the city, but a concept is not understood to all of its viewers then the design must be considered successful because people are still utilizing the space that weren't previously.

What are the downfalls of conceptualism as a design methodology?

The concept of a curtain was very fruitful creatively and developmentally. It narrowed my focus of the project and allowed the iterative and rapid prototyping process to flow without abandon into bold and daring places I never would have found myself otherwise. However this is also one of the downfalls of conceptualism. Once a concept is found, that one concept can be interpreted in so many (too many) ways that all work for the same goal. The question then becomes how to decide which ideas to take forward and how to stop more ideas from popping up and distracting from the project. This is a challenge I know will always exist in landscape architecture as long as creativity abounds in the design world. I tried to address this through the creation of criteria at various points in the design process in order to justify the elimination of ideas. This was a technique that I felt helped bring clarity and focus to the project.

Another downfall of conceptualism is its tendency to be exclusive of other concepts and conditions related to the site. While I tried to stress the need for the one main concept to incorporate many other complexities, I have now realized that this is almost impossible once a concept is decided upon. For example, the alleyways lie in very close proximity to the Civil Rights Trail. If my concept had been the civil rights, or a person such as Martin Luther King Jr. who was famously jailed in Birmingham, my project would be a completely different project than it is today. So how do you decide what is the most important concept for a site? I truly believe that the answer to this comes from a designer's intuition, as Cormier referenced (see page 52). The use of intuition is a challenging and powerful tool for designers. It is also important to understand that as the methodology of conceptualism might require intuitive thinking, that this is an informed intuition. As long as the the needs for the design site and conditions of the landscape are known, deciding on a concept can be done in a sensitive, albeit intuitive manner.

What happens when it rains?

My next step in this project would be to refine the currently conceptual state of the design. While I began to look at the constructibility and detailing, a more refined investigation is necessary for the physical implementation of this design. Although it should be noted that each component of the design was investigated for its feasibility before proposed. Drainage at the low points of every undulation would need to be installed as well as a further investigation into the proposed lighting features. Other considerations such as ADA requirements for ramps and slopes would also be necessary to fine tune the design. However these were not explored here in order to reach a deeper level of understanding of the main goal of the project, which was to explore the possibilities of conceptualism as a framework.

image list

Figures 1-6: Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (2013). *Data and Maps*. Retrieved from <http://www.rpcgb.org/gis/>.

Figures 7 and 8: Hollis, T. (2006) *Birmingham Rewound*. Retrieved from http://www.birminghamrewound.com/features/bhamtheaters_part2.html

Figures 9-12: Coulthard, T. *Dramatic Dialogue*. In *Landscape Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.groundinc.com/firm/news/grand_canal.pdf.

Figures 13-15: Claude Cormier and Associes. (2012). *Pink Balls*. Retrieved from <http://www.claudecormier.com/project/pink-balls/2012>

Figures 16-18: City of Sydney. (2011). City centre laneway revitalisation . Retrieved from <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/development/cityimprovements/roadsandstreetscapes/CBDLanewayUpgrade/Default.asp>.

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