urban assemblages

urban assemblages

Kelly Homan
Master of Landscape Architecture Thesis
Auburn University Spring 2012

To Matt

URBAN

urban assemblages

Abstract

Urban Assemblages explores a landscape strategy for the adaptive reuse of abandoned homes throughout the West End neighborhoods of Birmingham Alabama with the goal of making these properties once again valuable to local communities. *Urban Assemblages* seeks to empower these communities to become involved in this transformation process. The thesis explores creative deconstruction techniques, repurposing of existing materials, and establishing worker training programs focusing on the trades of deconstruction and material salvaging. It further proposes fostering an ongoing relationship between local art organizations and local communities as a strategy to re-establish neighborhood enthusiasm for the potential of abandoned sites. *Urban assemblages* is explored through the theoretical framework of assemblages. Assemblages are utilized as a method of framing a set of complex conditions to more thoroughly understand them.

Research Question: **How can landscape assemblages be used to empower local communities within the urban field of West End Birmingham?**

Rationale

Over the past seventy five years, cities across the United States have been experiencing a change in population. A lengthy industrial decline, low employment opportunities, the current housing market crisis, and an economic recession have resulted in a loss of population throughout many cities. Notably the majority of this loss is occurring within central areas of the city while an increase in population is occurring in outer suburban neighborhoods. What is left behind as people have moved from the city are abandoned homes and vacant lands scattered throughout central city neighborhoods. It is estimated in some of the hardest hit cities that upwards of 15% of the properties sit abandoned. Entire blocks in many locations reveal row upon row of dilapidated and decaying structures. To the people who have stayed, these properties represent a daily reminder of a neighborhood in decline, decreasing property values, increasing crime rates, and a multitude of safety concerns for communities. To the city these properties represent a huge burden to already struggling neighborhoods as well as an unprecedented decrease in tax revenues. Both the city and the local communities have a motivation to see these properties become valuable once again.

Birmingham Alabama is no exception to the shrinking city phenomena. The population of Birmingham has declined by 30% over the last sixty years. Within older, lower income neighborhoods this percentage reaches as high as 50%. (Evans 2005) These communities which are already vulnerable from the nation's ongoing recession find they are slowly being dragged further into decline as abandoned properties continue to multiply. *Urban Assemblages* proposes a community based revitalization project to begin to help the city and the community reverse this ongoing negative trend.


BRI
AVI

Birmingham Alabama

fig 1-7


SLOSS


ALABAMA

A Shifting

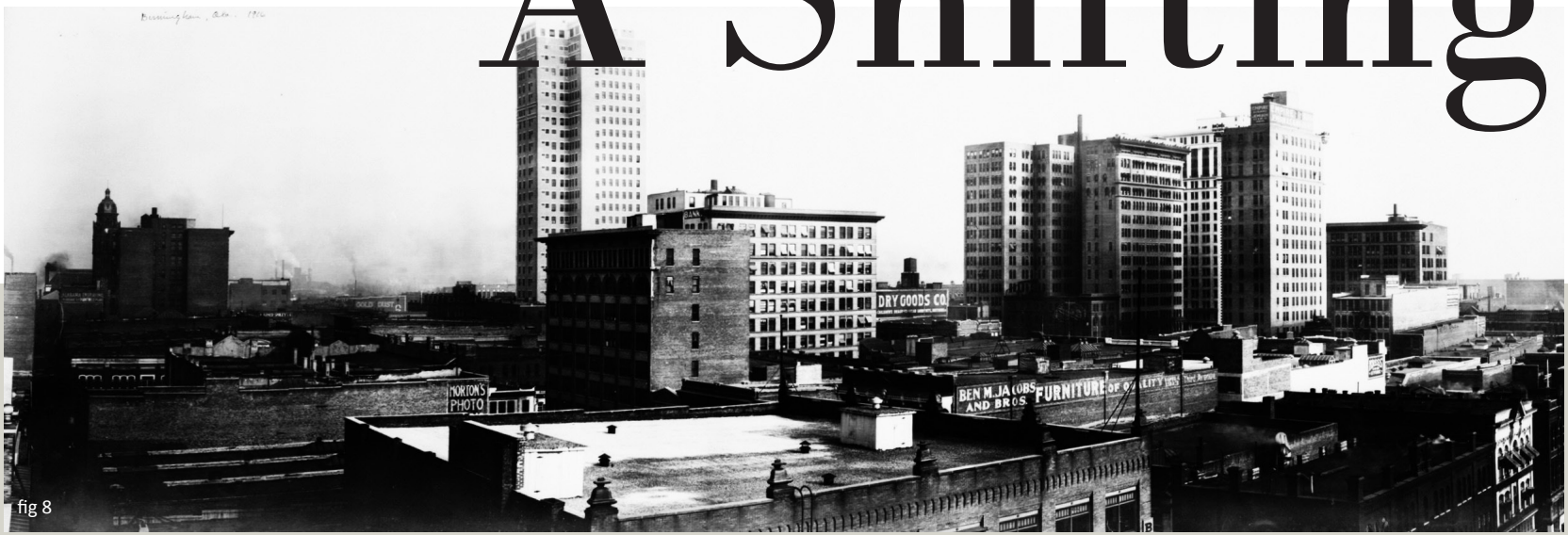


fig 8

Founded in 1871 Birmingham Alabama materialized from the unifying of three small, adjacent farming towns. Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian mountain range, Birmingham reaches out over 152 square miles through a deep valley system fringed by long steep ridges running north-east to south-west. Slicing through the ridges and directly bisecting the main valley runs the railroad corridors which paved the way for Birmingham's role as a steel and iron production powerhouse of the Southeast. (Atkins 1999) Due to the abundant deposits of iron ore, coal, limestone, and dolminite from 1881-1920 Birmingham was one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Early Birmingham entrepreneurs discovered a wealth of these raw materials in compacted arrangements allowing for low production extraction costs. Because of this characteristic, the largest central valley, Jones Valley, would quickly swell with people from all over the country flocking to the promise of prosperity. Birmingham became known for its famous quantities of steel and iron production, along with its rich forest lands and meandering creek systems responsible for draining the valley and along which much of the industrial factories were located. (Atkins 1999)

At the peak of the industrial boom, Birmingham held a population of 341,000. Beginning notably in the 1960s the city began spreading beyond the central valley, over the largest ridges and into smaller adjacent valleys. What would be soon be termed "suburbia" methodically started sprouting up everywhere. As the steel and iron industry slowly declined and Birmingham chugged towards a post-industrial city, people steadily moved away. As the factories closed new generations of young adults headed to the suburbs or adjacent cities to find work. Parents fearing increasing crime problems in inner city neighborhoods

City


fig 9

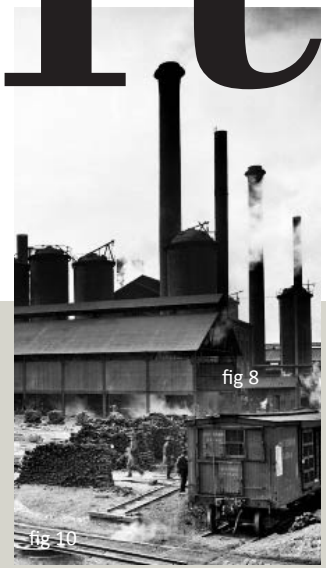


fig 10

fig 11


fig 12

sought refuge in the seeming safety of the suburbs or in smaller more rural cities. Over 40 years starting in the early 1960s, Birmingham's central neighborhoods would lose 20% of their population. Between 2000 and 2011, the latter half of which included the worst American economic recession since the great depression, this would increase another 12% for a total loss of close to 100,000 people or 1/3 of the population over 50 years. (Evans 2005) Such a population shift left a trail of abandoned structures and vacant lands in its wake.


fig 13

the ridges and the

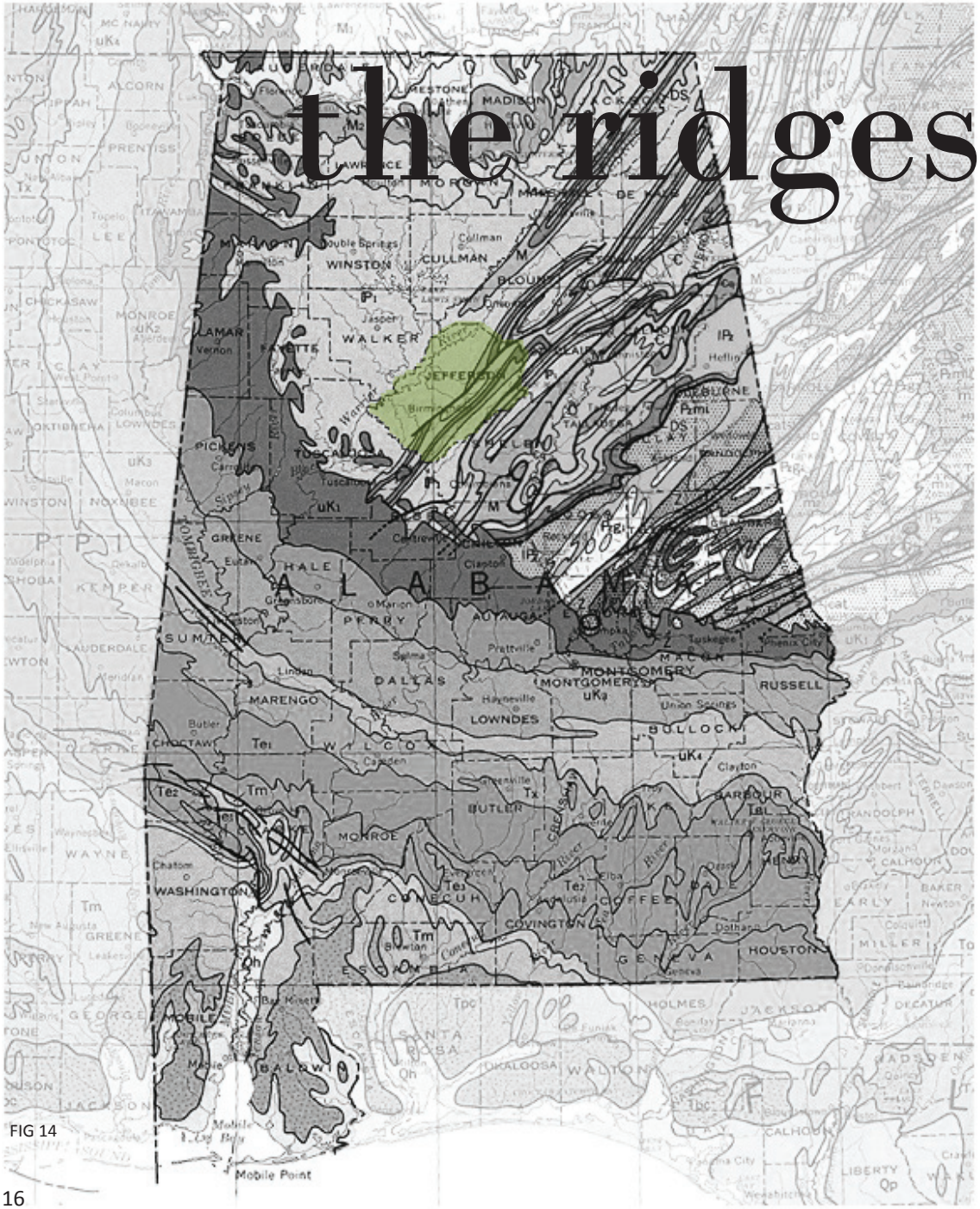
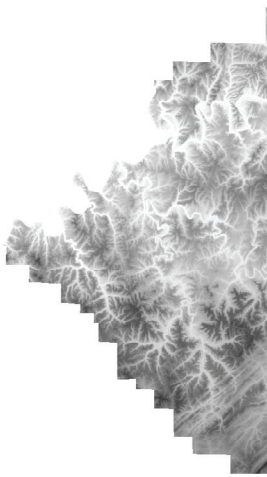
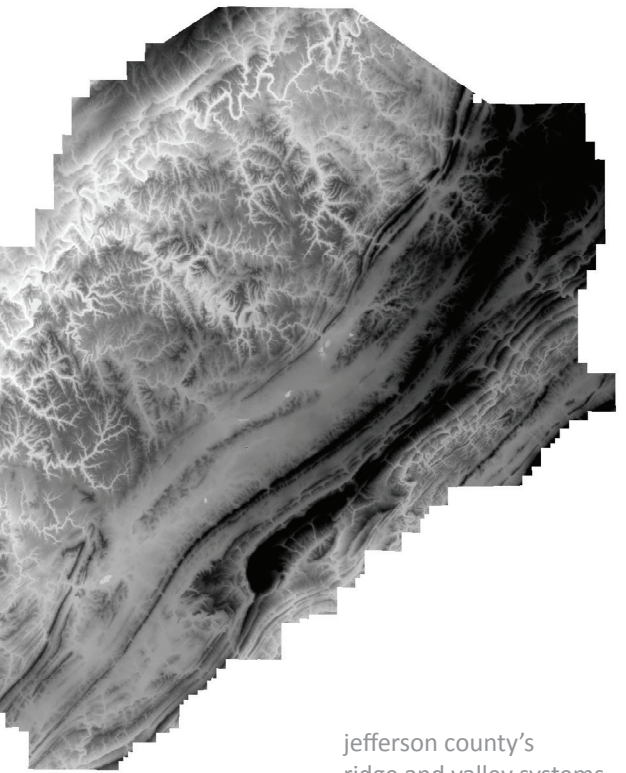


FIG 14

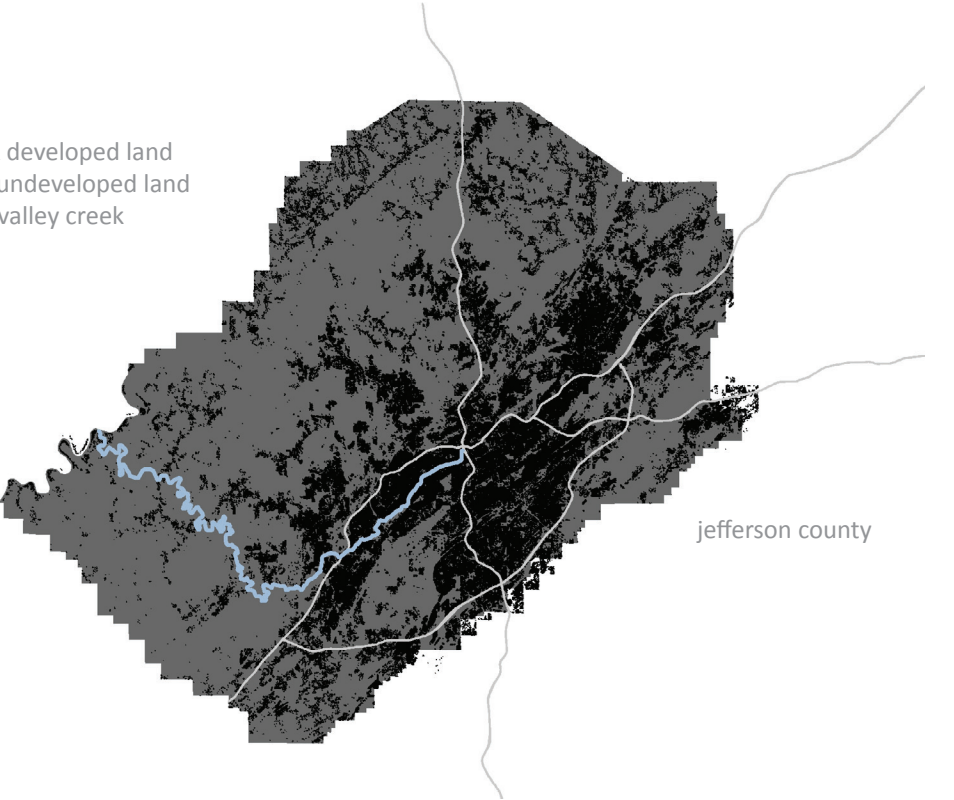


e valleys

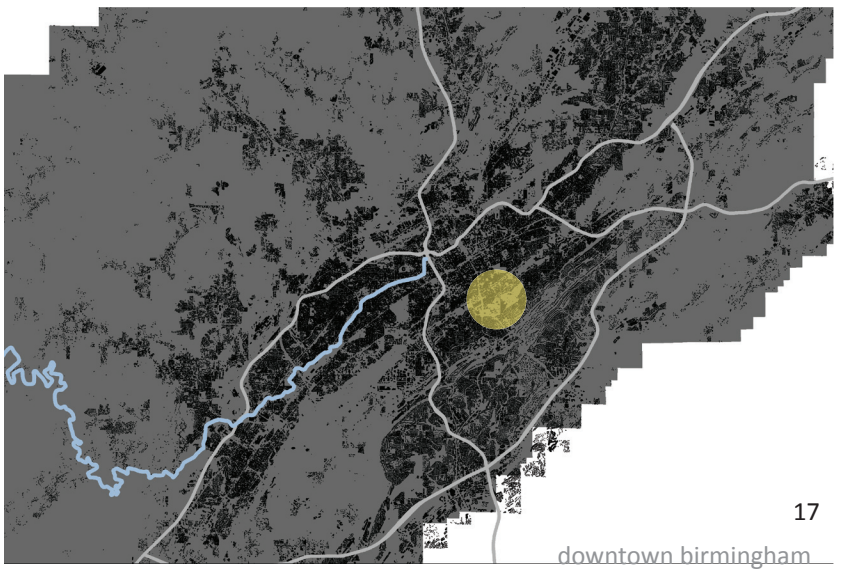


jefferson county's
ridge and valley systems

black developed land
gray undeveloped land
blue valley creek



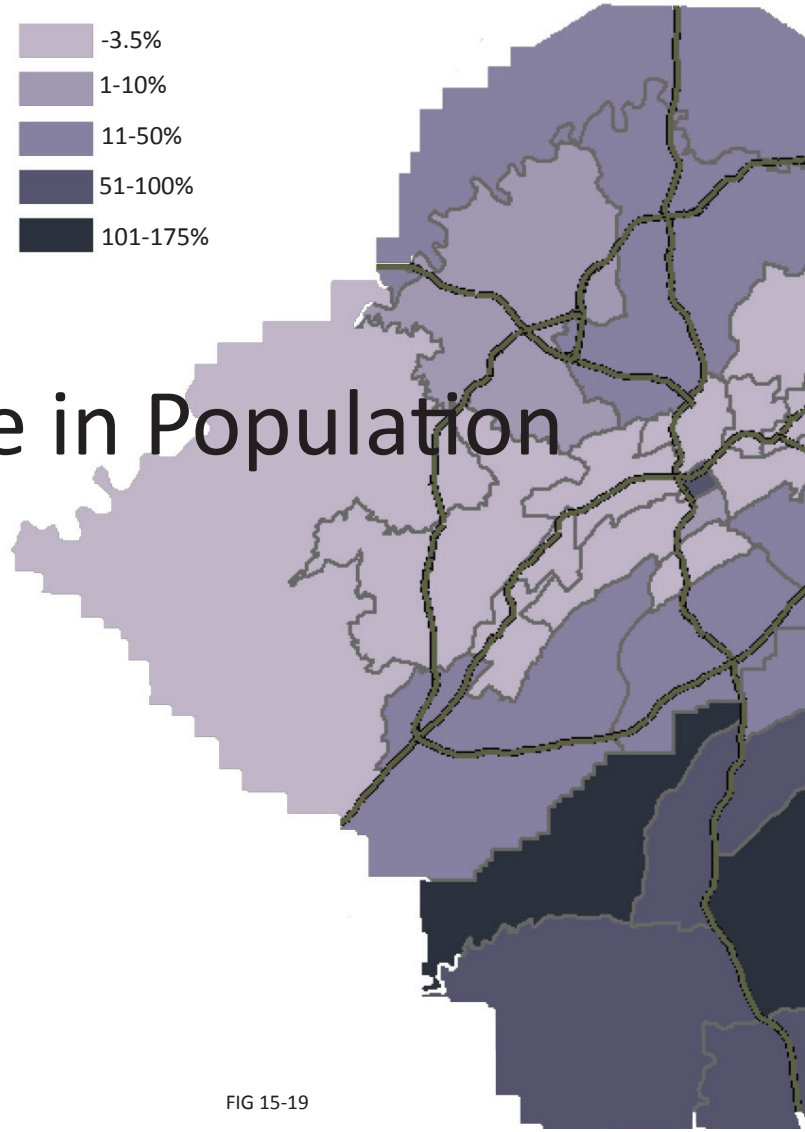
jefferson county



downtown birmingham

The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham in 2008 produced a set of population and employment projections for the years 2005 through 2035. The analysis included both Jefferson county and Shelby county and reveals a continuation of the shifting city trend over the next 23 years. (RPCGB 2008) The overall population of the city will grow in the shape of a donut. The donut whole, central Birmingham , will continue to hollow out as people shift towards the city fringes. The data also indicates the areas decreasing in population will also decrease in employment opportunities. The West End is projected to have the largest employment decreases in the city losing 1,000 jobs by 2035. (RPCGB 2008)

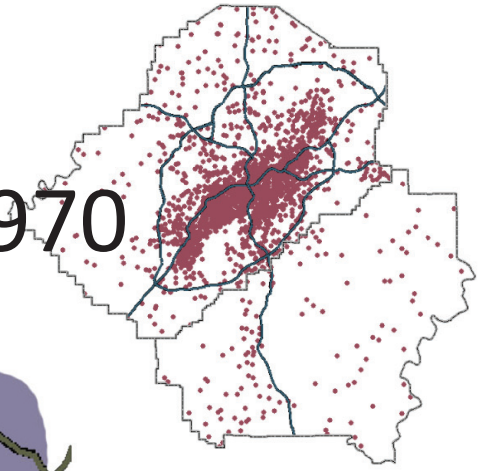
"The Donut Effect"



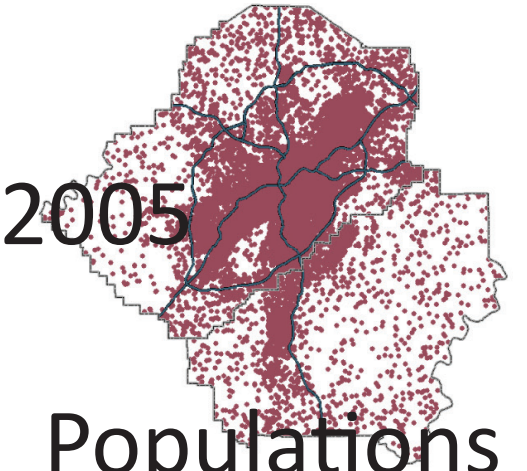
Change in Population

FIG 15-19

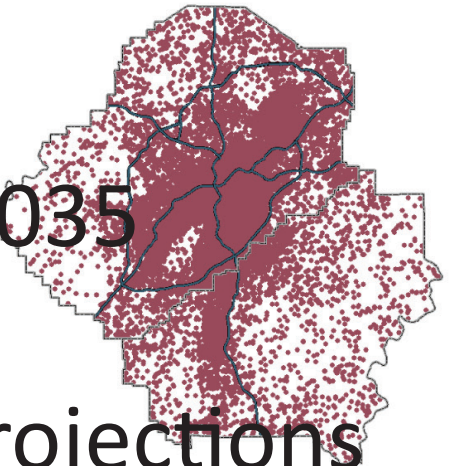
1970



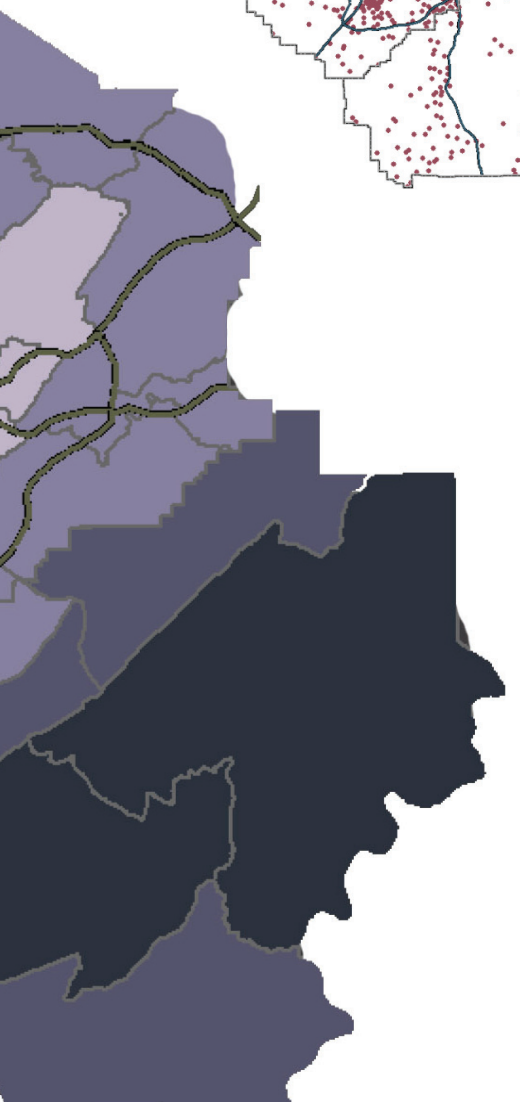
2005

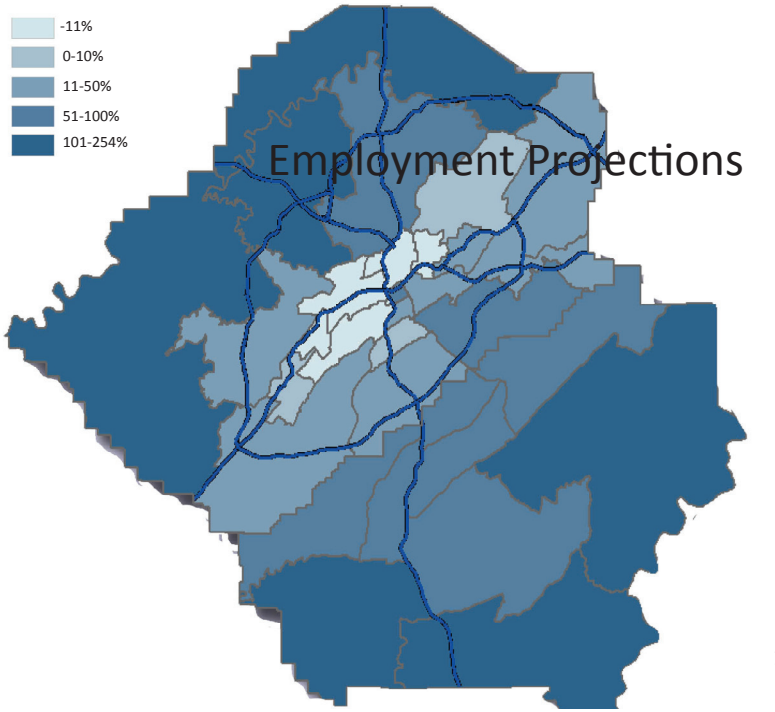


2035



Populations Projections

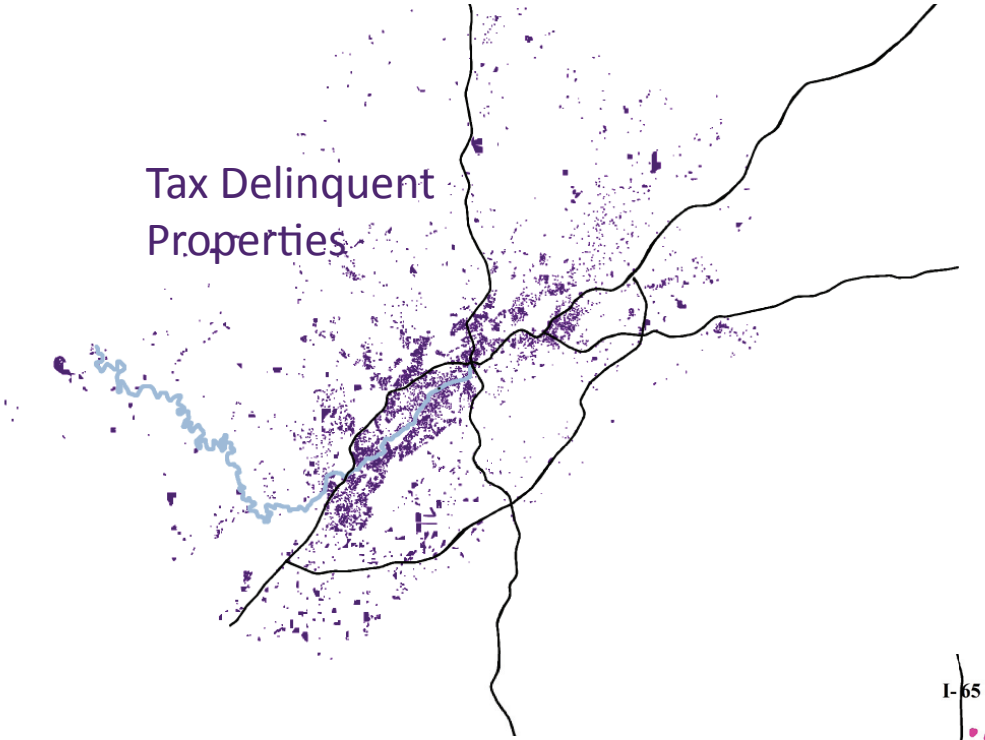




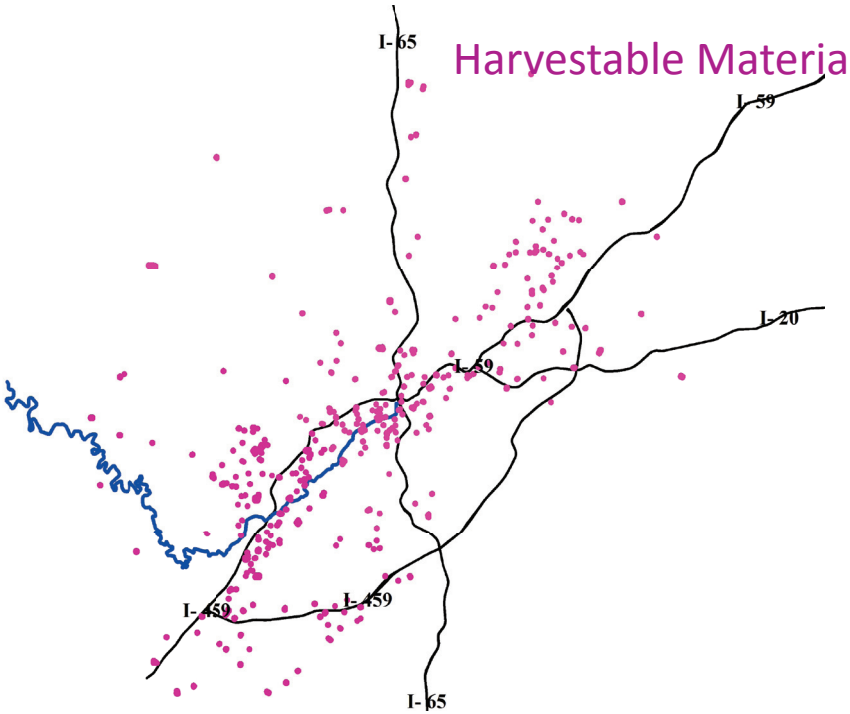
Employment Projections

The purple represents over 18 thousand tax delinquent properties throughout Jefferson County.

Tax Delinquent Properties

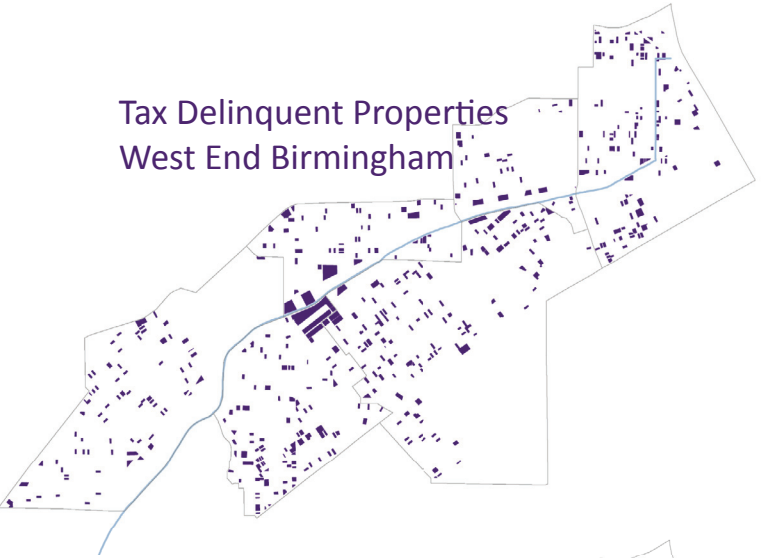


Harvestable Materials

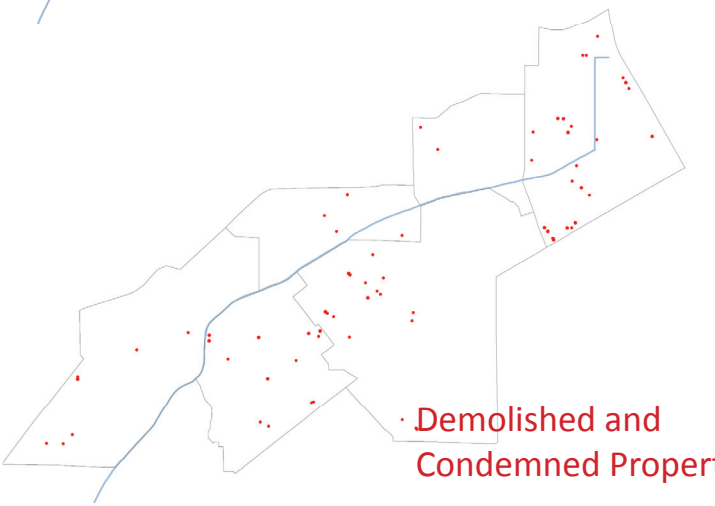


The neighborhoods of Oakwood Place, Smithfield, Arlington West, Central Park, and Rising West Princeton currently contain close to 700 tax delinquent properties not including the year 2011. Many of these properties have been tax delinquent for over 6 years. There is a correlation between tax delinquency and abandoned properties and currently the city uses tax delinquent status to track abandoned properties. Valley creek cuts through the center of the West End flowing west out of Jefferson County connecting with the Black Warrior River system.

The city currently demolishes 40-50 properties a month. These maps represent a multitude of properties that could potentially provide valuable materials and land to local communities.



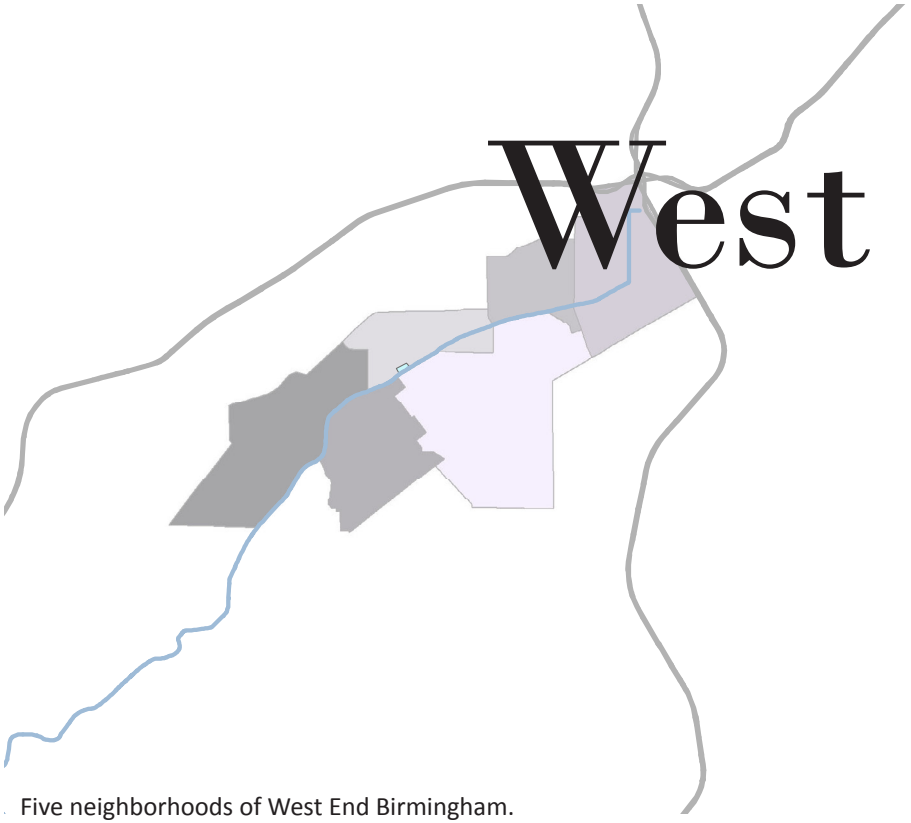
Tax Delinquent Properties
West End Birmingham



Demolished and
Condemned Properties

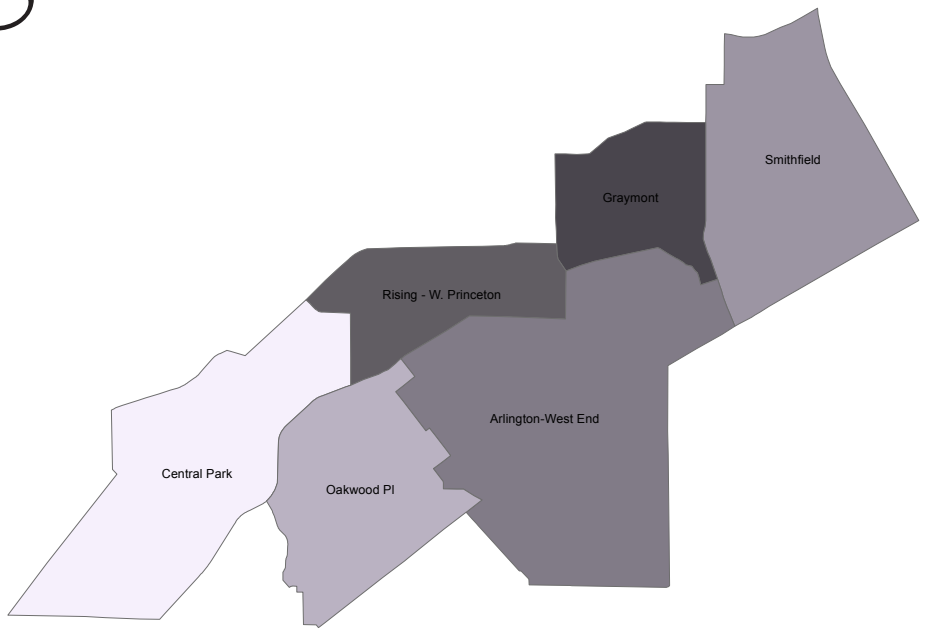
West End High Value Harvestable Materials

West End Birmi



Five neighborhoods of West End Birmingham.

ngham



As populations continue to shift, abandoned homes and vacant lands will continue to multiply. Jefferson county has close to 18,000 tax delinquent properties. Close to 30% of these properties have been tax delinquent for 10 or more years with 50% delinquent for 5 years or more. In 2004 it was estimated that close to 70% of these properties are possibly abandoned. (Evans 2004) The neighborhoods included in these maps are Arlington West, Central Park, Graymont, Oakwood Place, Rising West Princeton and Smithfield. The West End was chosen as a research area due to its particular vulnerability to all of the problems associated with a shifting city, along with the sheer number of abandoned homes and vacant lands within these neighborhoods. West End Birmingham began to see rapid decline in the late 1980s. (Pelfry 2011) What was once seen as a bustling commercial destination for local Birmingham residences has become in many areas a boarded up ghost town with aging infrastructure, poorly performing schools systems, and high crime rates. Block after block are speckled with empty, aging and structurally warped single family residences, many of which have been deserted and decaying for years. When standing in downtown Birmingham looking towards the sky line and surrounded by revitalization projects such as Railroad Park and the Barons future baseball stadium, the West End visible in the distance lingers as a reminder of neighborhoods also in desperate need of revitalization.







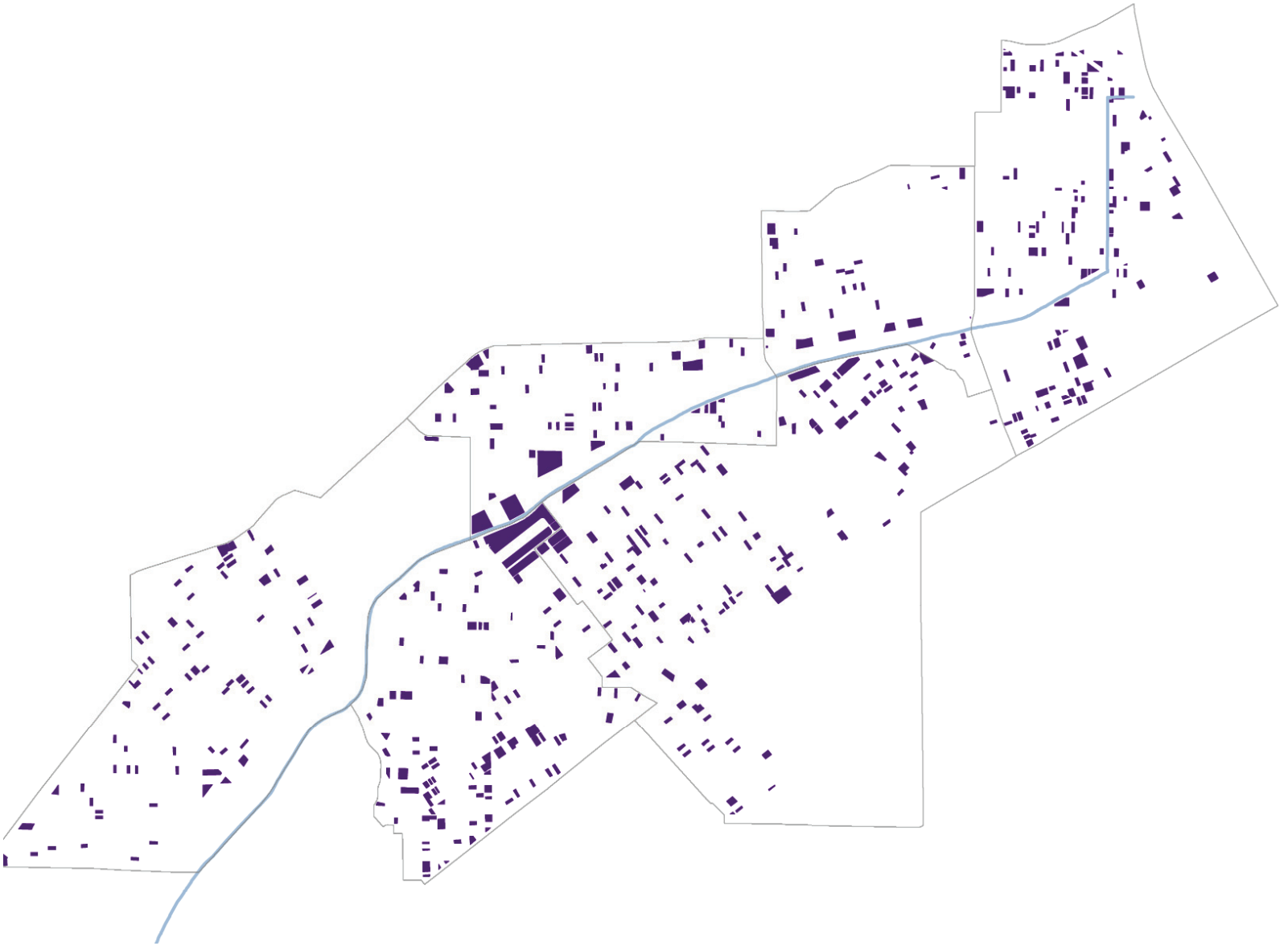









abandoned properties throughout west end birmingham



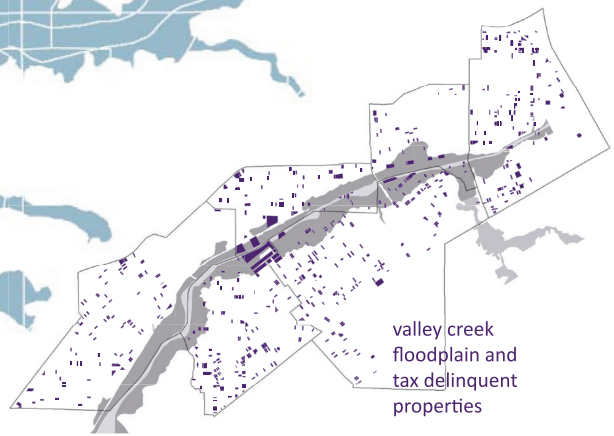
tax delienquent properties west end birmingham

Research Site

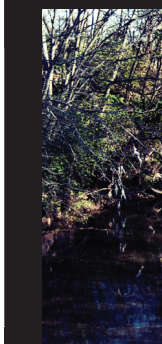
Valley C

The first exploration for a research site focused on the many abandoned properties along the first three miles of Valley Creek with in an interest in harvestable materials as well as restoring the upper portions of the creek. The ecologies of Valley Creek were studied as well as tax delinquent properties mapped in order to find relationships between the properties and the surrounding city structure including future city projects in the West End.

This initial exploration of Valley Creek and the properties along the creek led to several discoveries. Categorizing and valuing the properties in terms of how each could be used for the community was a thesis in itself and in terms of scale, to large of a project to focus on an initial pilot project for community engagement. With respect to the creek, it was determined that the water pollution in the creek cannot be remediated without major changes within the watershed as a whole. The speed at which storm water enters the creek due to impervious surfaces,

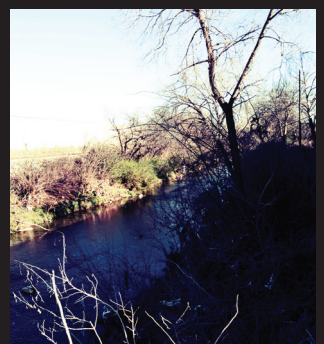


valley creek floodplain and tax delinquent properties

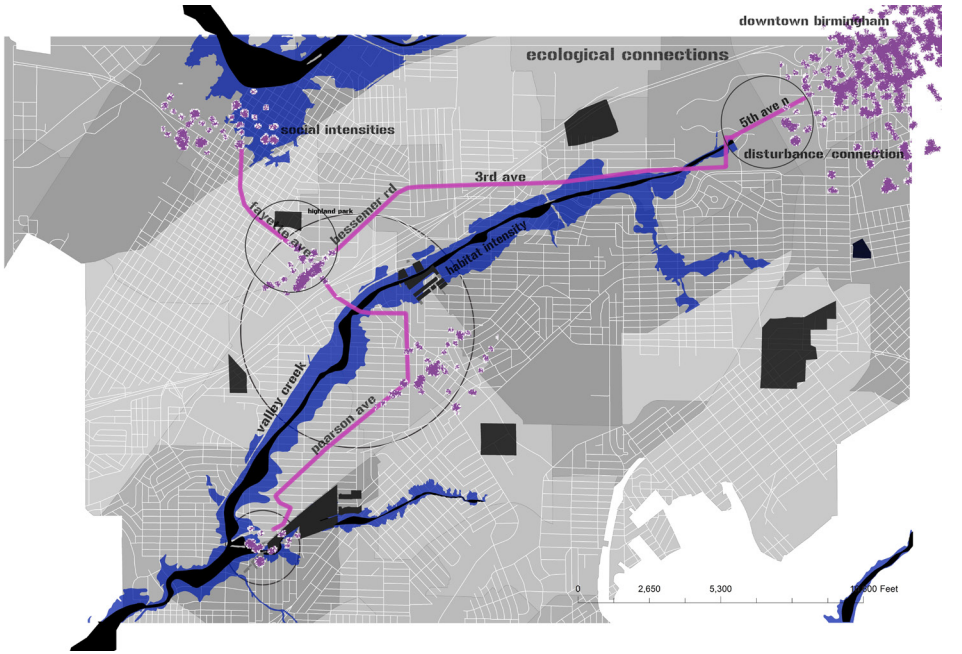


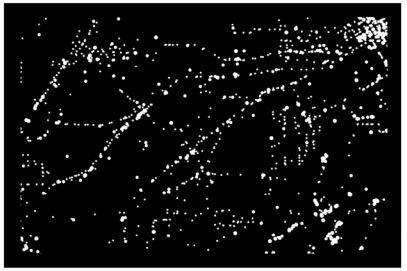
Creek

poor development practices, and a leaky sewer system throughout Jefferson County will continue to lock the creek into its current state. Without addressing these three issues along with the larger watershed, restoring the creek would be very difficult and costly. The Freshwater Land Trust of Birmingham recognizes these issues and has begun purchasing land adjacent to the creek with hopes if future creek restoration projects.

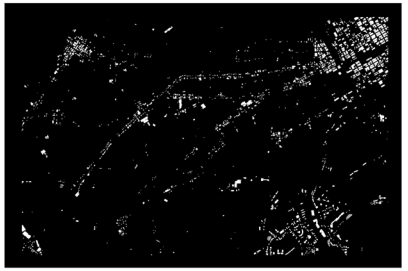


The second exploration for a research site involved mapping intensities. GIS layers were extracted and crossed to reveal relationships Information such as social hubs, bus routes, potential ecological corridors, and tax delinquent properties were overlayed and points of interaction were selected for further investigation. While this method established sites that could potentially be earmarked for adaptive reuse, none of the sites were of a substantial size and afforded enough reusable materials for the scale needed for a pilot project (many of the abandoned properties are less than 1/10 of an acre sites)





SOCIAL SPACES

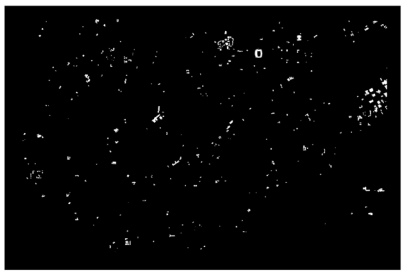


COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

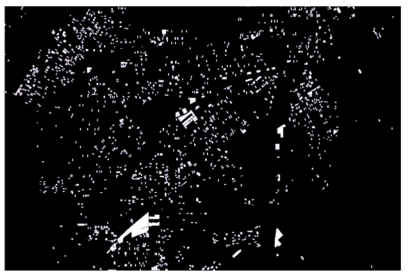
POTENTIAL WILDLIFE HABITAT

ROAD SYSTEM

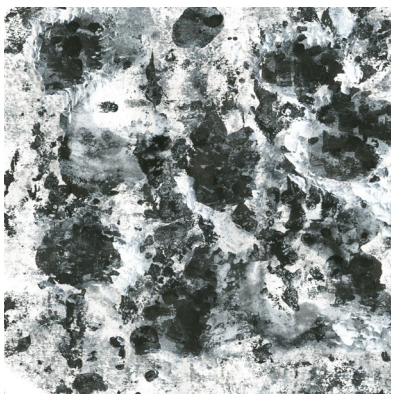
PUBLIC BUILDINGS

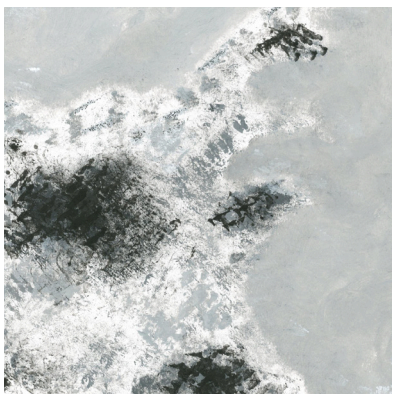


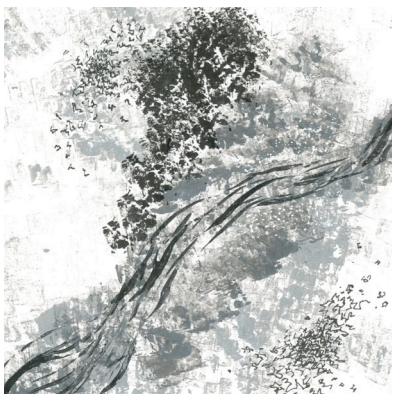
POTENTIAL MATERIAL HARVEST

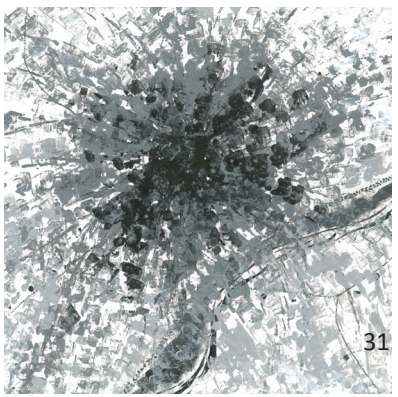


abstract ink drawings of intensities







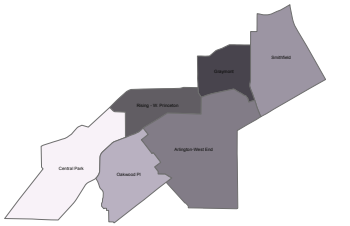



Reso

The third research site exploration established criteria. Those criteria are as follows:
1. located within West End Birmingham
2. larger than 2 acres
3. valuable harvestable materials (such as brick)
4. adjacent to valley creek
5. close proximity to future city projects or established social hubs
7. abandoned residential buildings

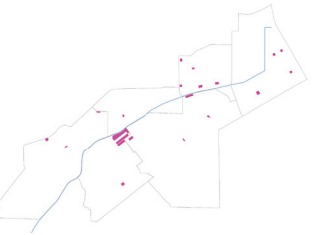
earch Site

Site Criteria



located in the west end

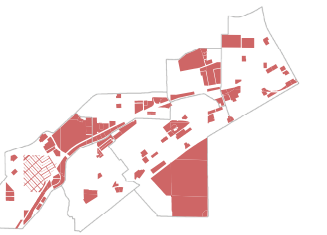
abandoned structure



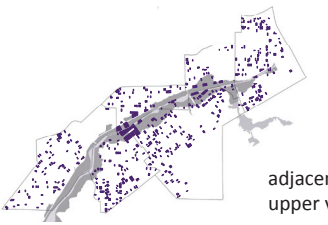
structure worth>100k

adjacent or visible to social hubs

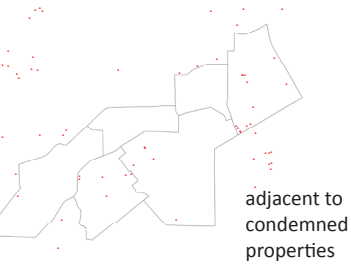
residential property



size >2 acres

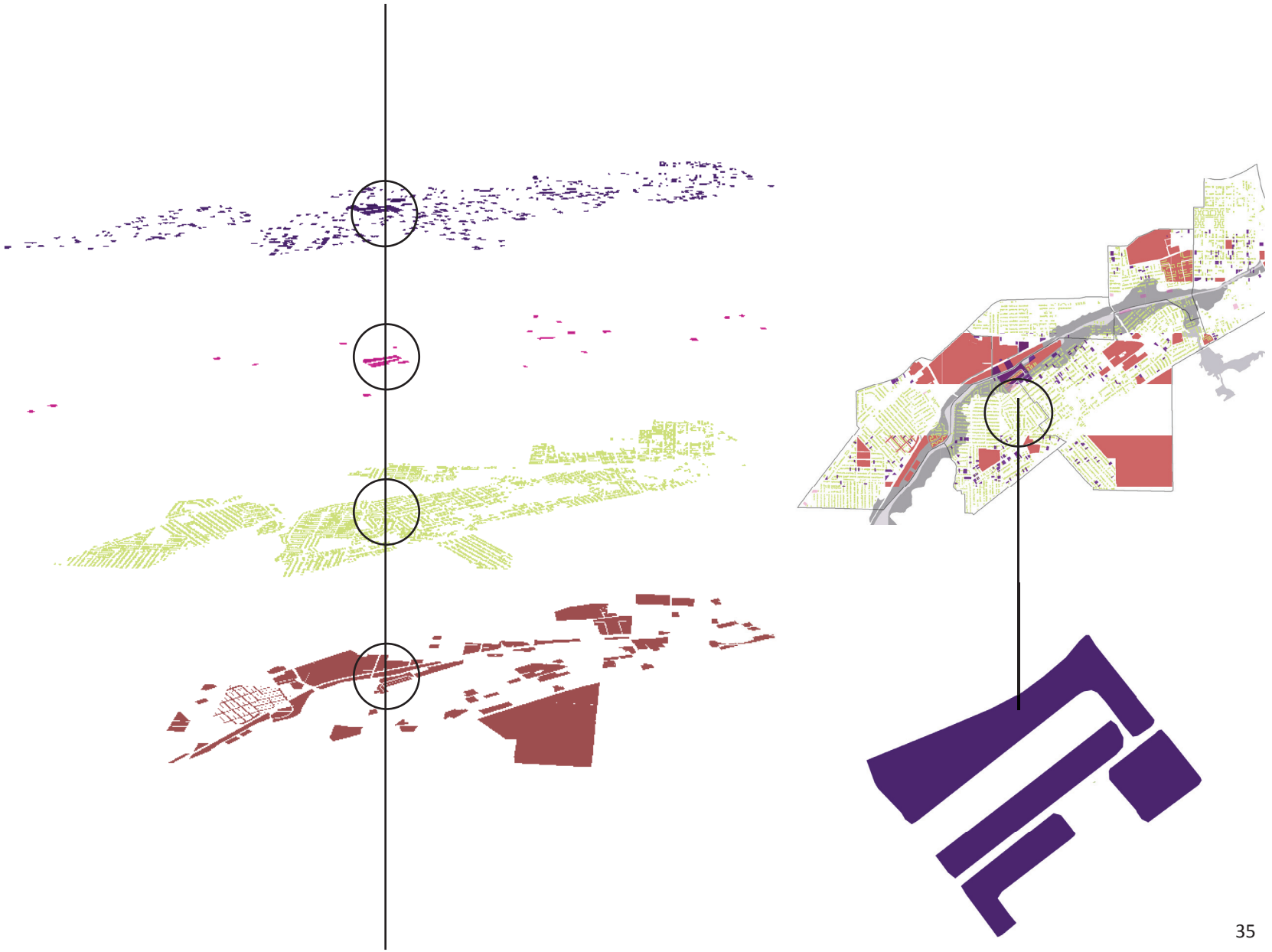


adjacent to upper valley creek

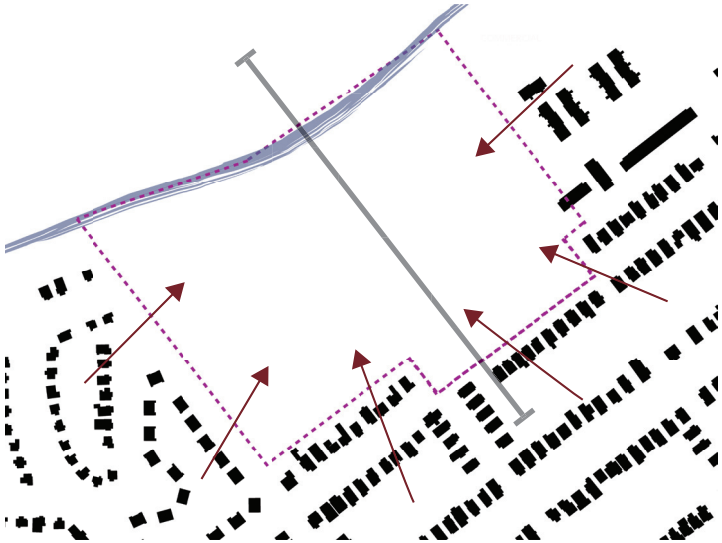


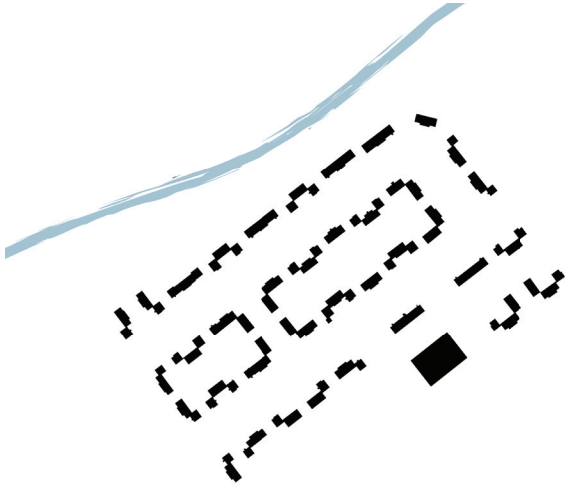
adjacent to condemned properties

Research Area Criteria



The research site is located roughly three miles west of the start of valley creek in the neighborhood of Oakwood Place and consists of thirty-seven abandoned duplexes. Eighty percent of the site is in the flood plain, and according to community members the duplexes have been empty for at least five years.





footprints of existing abandoned duplexes

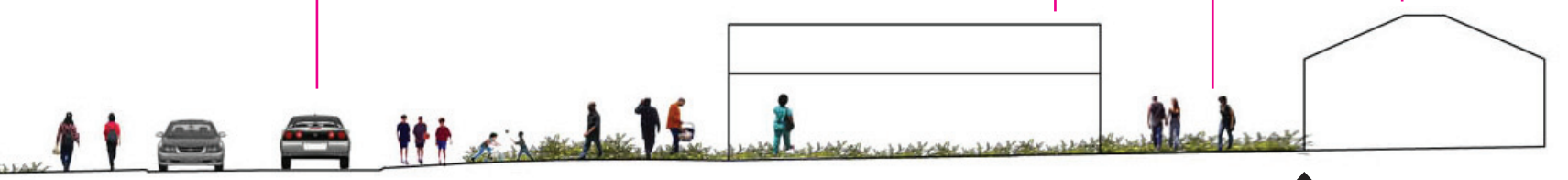
valley creek

household median income 25K

95% African American

single family residence

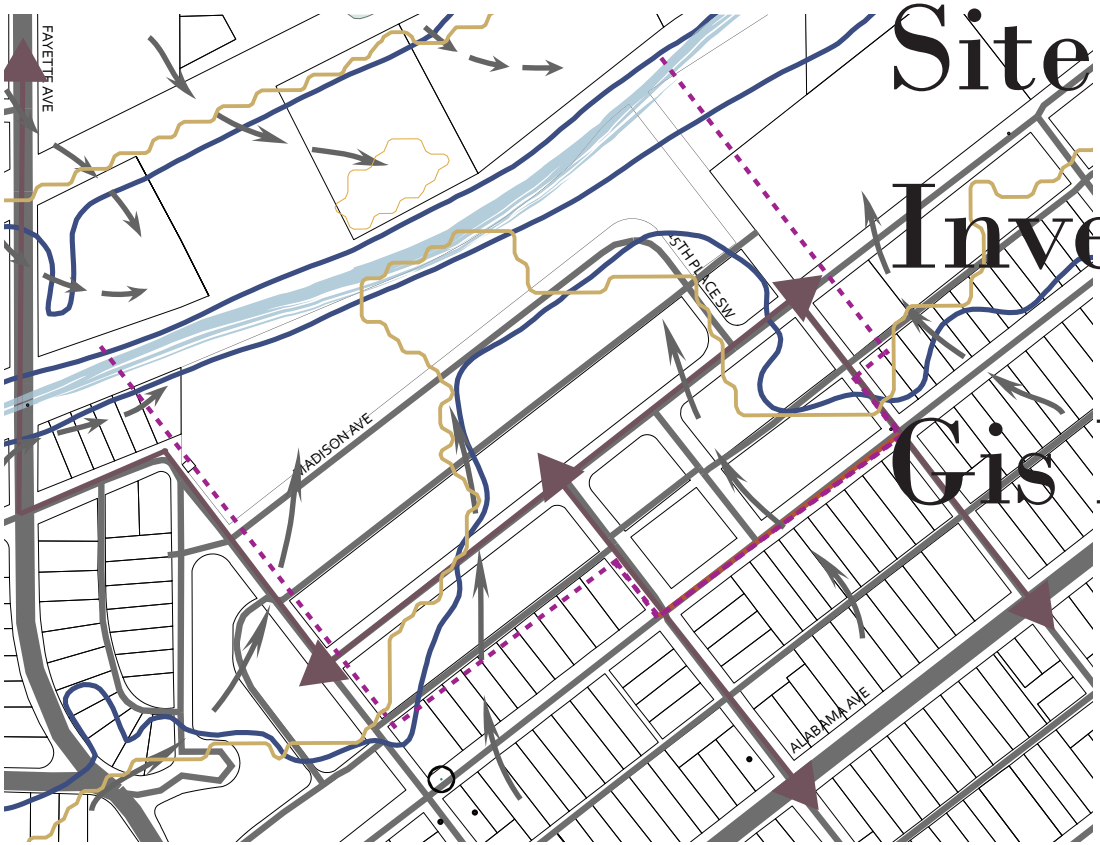
service industry occupations



Site Analysis

Inventory

Gis Mapping



ROADS
ACCESS
5' CONTOURS
FLOOD PLANE
VALLEY CREEK
PARCELS
SITE
WATER FLOW

Riparian Edge

Early Successional Plants

Abandoned Structures

Commercial Buildings

Single Family Residences

akwood Pl


ABS
SE

Assemblages “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to create new ways of functioning”

(Deleuze and Guattari 1984:311)

Assemblages are defined as collections of components relating to and acting on one another. This term can be found in several disciplines including philosophy, ecology, art, and archeology. Assemblages are dynamic and complex. Components fit together linked by process, occurring within a particular habitat and performing together in a particular way. Through design landscape architects "develop, transform, and create assemblages. They do this by gathering, composing, redistributing, emphasizing, and enhancing existing material, expressive, and processual components" (Barnett 2010:2) Some examples of possible assemblage components might include people, plants, and wildlife.

In ecology, assemblages are defined as various species living together and ecologist are interested in how these species depend on one another. The ecologist usually depicts this information through food chain diagrams beginning with the larger dominante species and moving down the food chain. These assemblages are not random collections of things, but a collection of things that come together in a chosen place for a reason. This concept is shown clearly within archeology. Things unearthed in a dig from a point in time constitute an assemblage of things, all expressing a unique character of everyday life in a certain culture (Stivale 2005)

The French artists Jean Dubuffet first introduced the term assemblage to describe his method of producing collage artworks. He refers to his artwork as an assemblage to emphasize the process of creating the artwork is the actual artwork. Assemblages describe the act of "turning found objects into three-dimensional structures" (AssemblageArtists.com) A key concept to art assemblages is the idea of "found" or combining existing material parts into some sort of whole artwork.

In the philosophical work *A Thousand Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define assemblages as "complex constellations of objects bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to create new ways of functioning". Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages include expressive components such as expressions, feelings, qualities, words, and events. Deleuze and Guattari use a scene to describe this point. The scene is of a child looking through a window and watching a horse collapse in exhaustion from pulling a heavy cart. The horse lies dying in the middle of a street. The components of this assemblage, the horse + child +cart, etc. are in a clear relationship, but Deleuze and Guattari also describe "active and passive affects" as part of the assemblage. Included are feelings such as pulling or proudness, the blinds from the window blocking some of the child's view, the horse biting

the bit etc. (Stivale 2005:78, Deleuze and Guattari 1984:257) What the horse is doing and not just the horse itself is part of the assemblage. “How something occurs is as important as what occurs” (Barnett 2010:3)

Assemblages have emergent properties. Emergence theory explains the workings of complex systems found within the natural world. These natural systems emerge, interact, become disturbed, change, and reorganize. Within these systems, the individual parts of the system collectively affect the larger system as a whole, yet do not necessarily contain the characteristics of the larger systems. In this way the parts are said to have emergent behaviors. (Encyclopedia of Evolution) These systems are open systems in that they are resilient and adapt to disturbance emerging with a greater level of complexity. Assemblages are emergent, complex systems constantly in a state of flux. Currently there are many landscape architects, academics, ecologist, and writers suggesting there is value in understanding the landscape as a complex living system.

In her essay Shifting Sites Kristina Hill explains where this shift in thinking towards a greater degree of complexity originated and through her explanation she redefines landscape architectures traditional view of site. She is proposing this traditional view of site is bounded and disconnected and she describes a transition in this frame to a site as a “node of interactions” She further explains that ecology and landscape architecture have a vested interest in cross disciplinary involvement in the world of design. (Hill 2005) Her notion of place (site) is comprised of systems and flows with no boundaries and people are part of these systems. Any actual boundaries of any given place are purely cultural and not physical.

The urban field in another interesting metaphor for complexity proposed by James Corner of Field Operations. In his essay Terra Fluxues, Corner describes the landscape as an “apparent incoherent or complex condition that one might initially mistake as random or chaotic can, in fact, be shown to be highly structured entities that comprise a particular set of geometrical and spatial orders”. He goes on to suggest the landscape is a space of horizontal actions he labels the urban field. This field “attempts to create an environment that is not so much object that is designed, as it is an ecology of various systems and elements that set into motion a diverse network of interactions.” (Corner 21-33)

In a different approach Ginger Strand’s essay “At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape and the Land” defines how people

assemblag

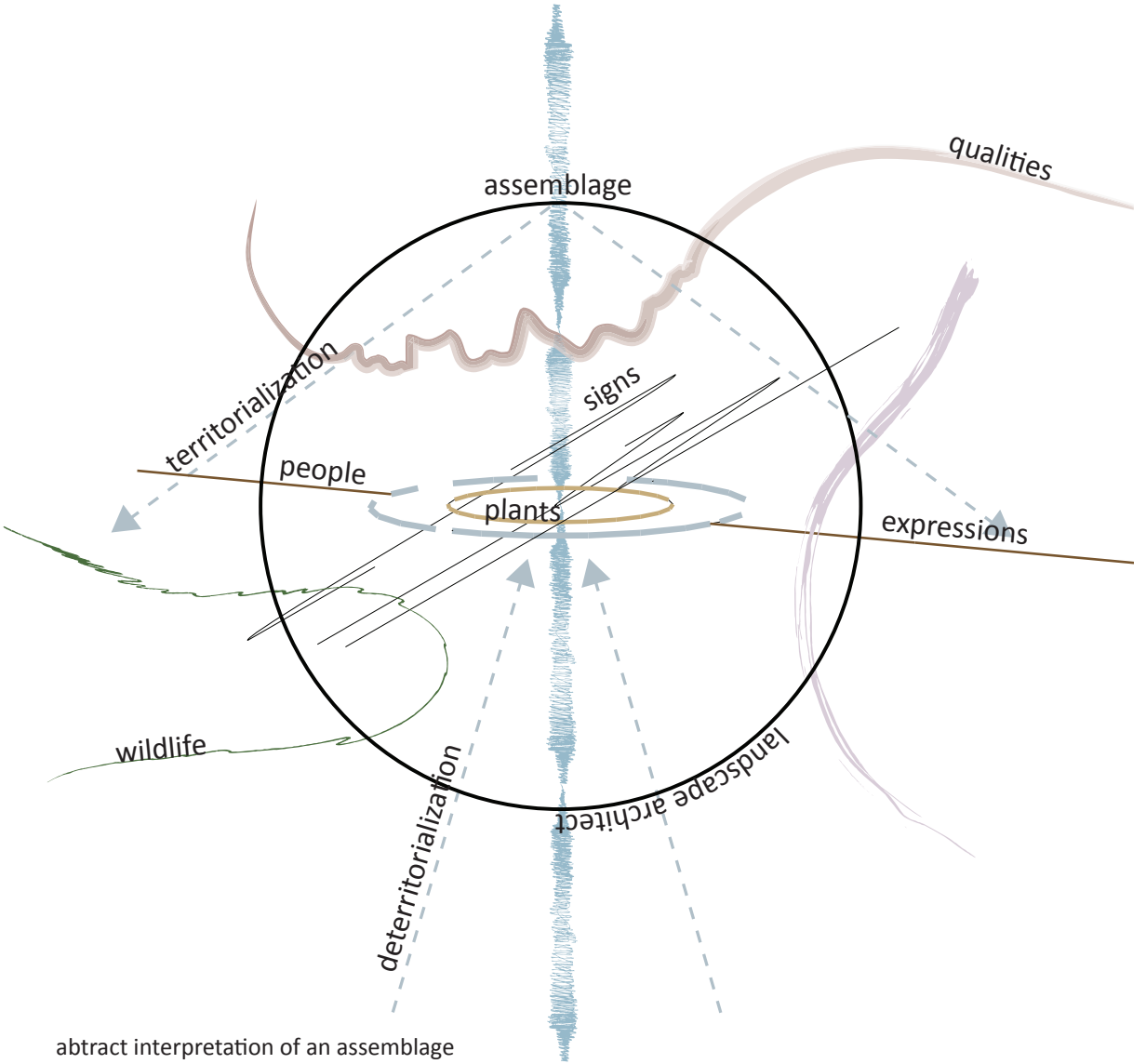
currently view the landscape. She suggests the landscape is viewed like a photograph of the landscape might be viewed, a static framed pathway into the imagination very pictorial and worth fantasizing about. The “pretty” in the picture is intriguing. The landscape then becomes a place people search for the aesthetic and the picturesque. Strand credits Frederick Law Olmstead as embedding this view of the landscape into American minds and notes this way of framing the landscape “does not show us how the landscape might lend us beyond the limits, helping to create a better world.” She goes on to suggest seeing the landscape as an “environment”, might be a start to reframe the perception of landscape. “ When nature is landscape, we look at it. When nature is environment, we live in it.” (Strand 2008:84)

Seeing the landscape as an assemblage proposes a frame that builds on the above ideas of complexity. For example assemblages have the ability to expand Strands above quote to say “ When nature is a landscape, we look at it. When nature is environment, we live it in”……when nature is an assemblage, we understand it. Understanding people are part of the assemblage breaks from Strands suggestion that the landscape is something we look at or even that we live in. The idea of assemblage suggests that people are the landscape; People are a part of the system.

Much time was spent experimenting with mapping assemblages and how to graphically show ideas of process and connections. The following diagrams from early in the thesis exploration display different attempts at both understanding the concept of assemblages and graphically representing assemblages.

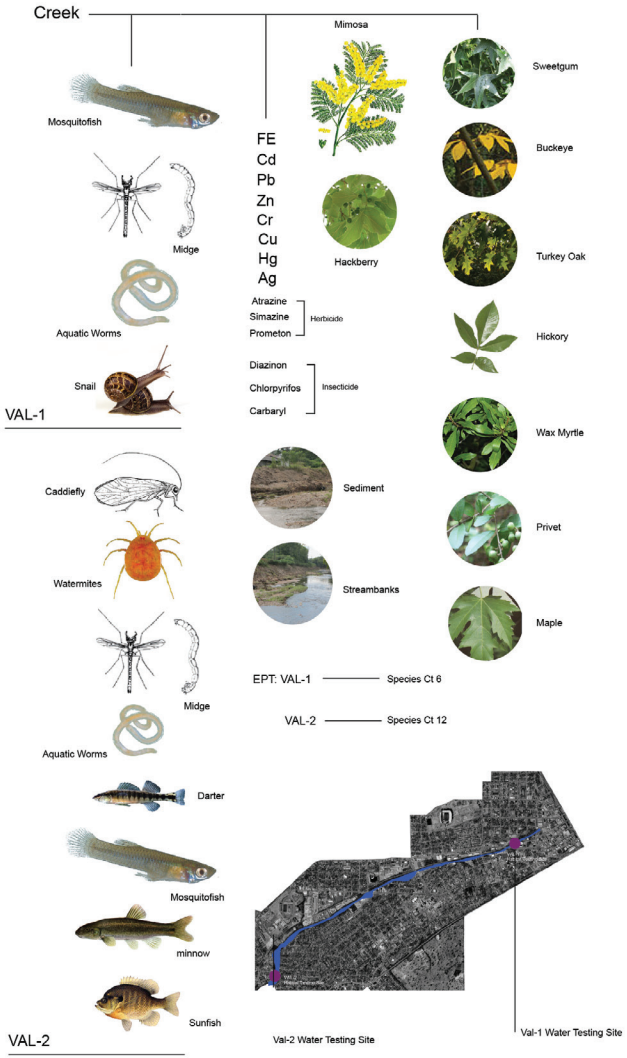
FIG 20

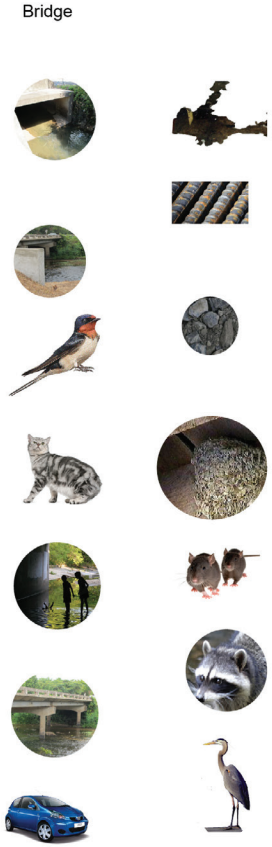
ge

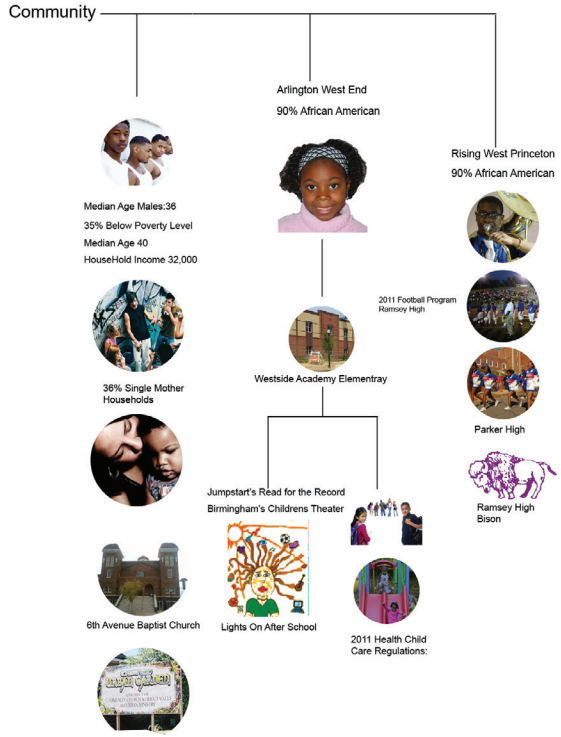


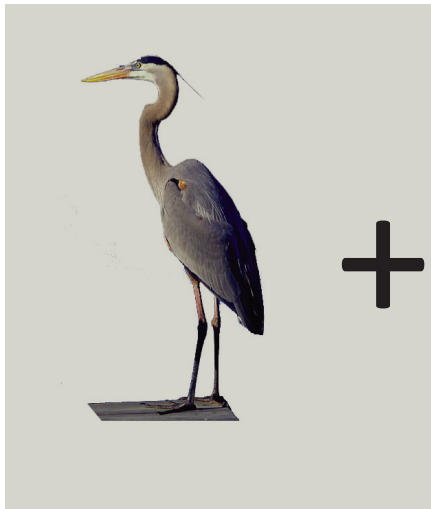
abtract interpretation of an assemblage

Creek + Bridge + Com



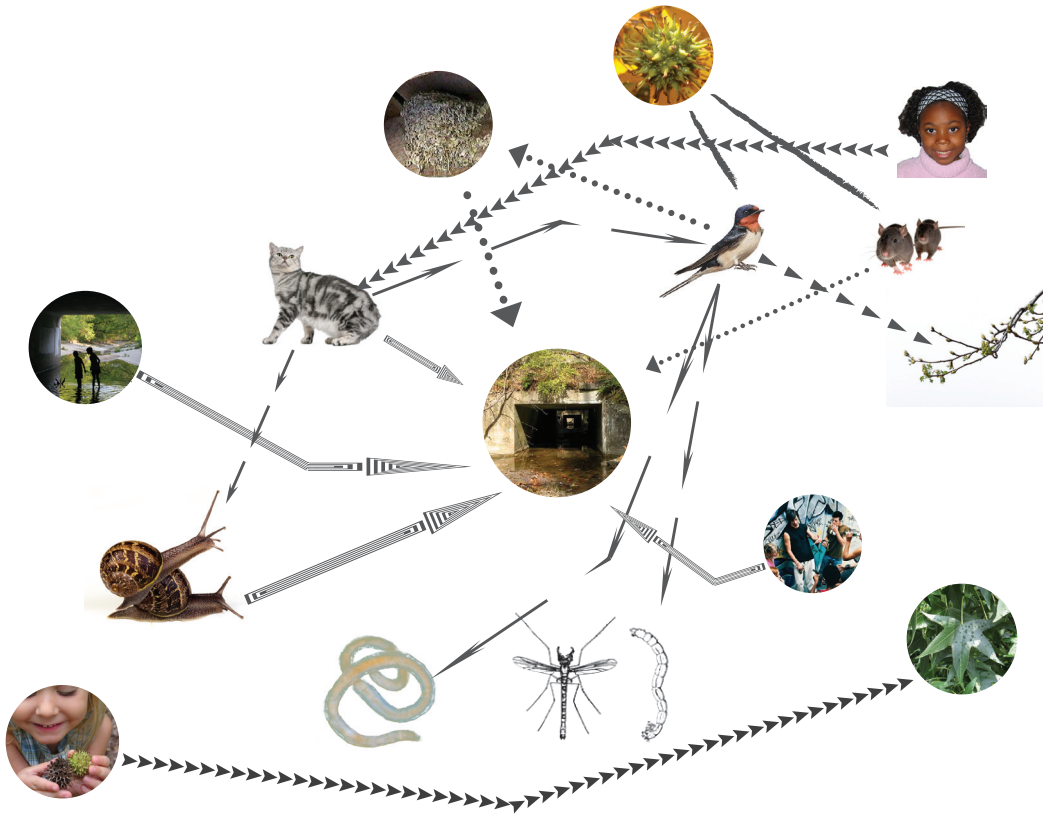




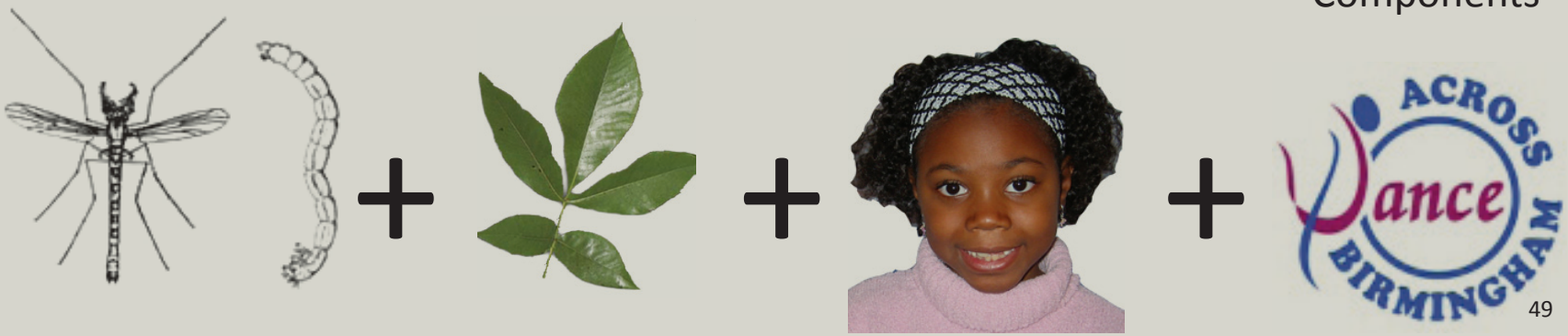


mmunity

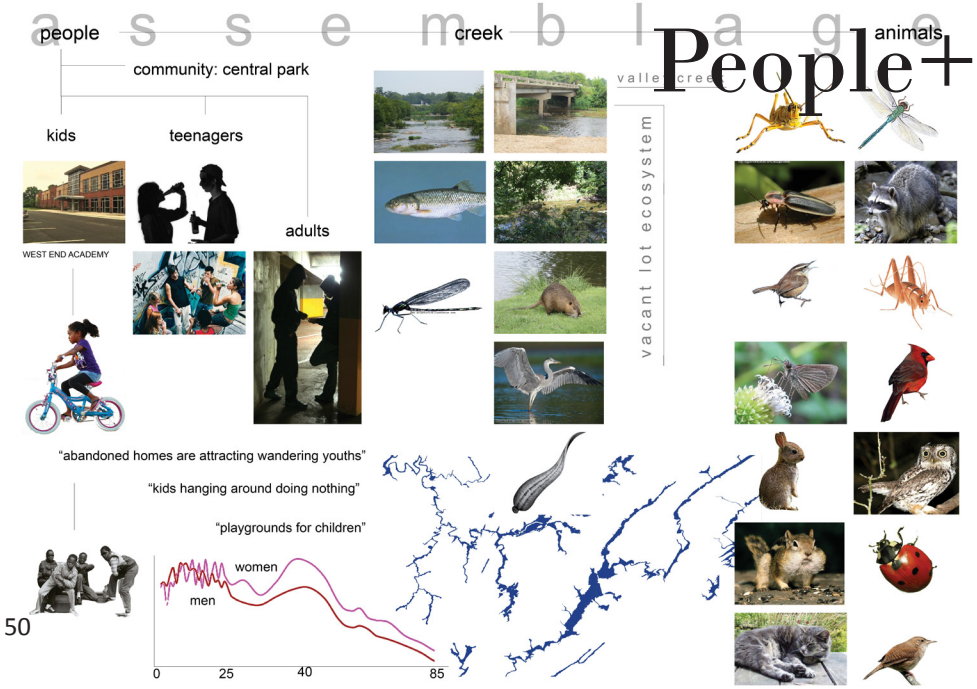
Preys On
Pollinates
Eats
Hides In
Plays With
Lives In
Spreads
Picks
Smells
Catches
Builds With



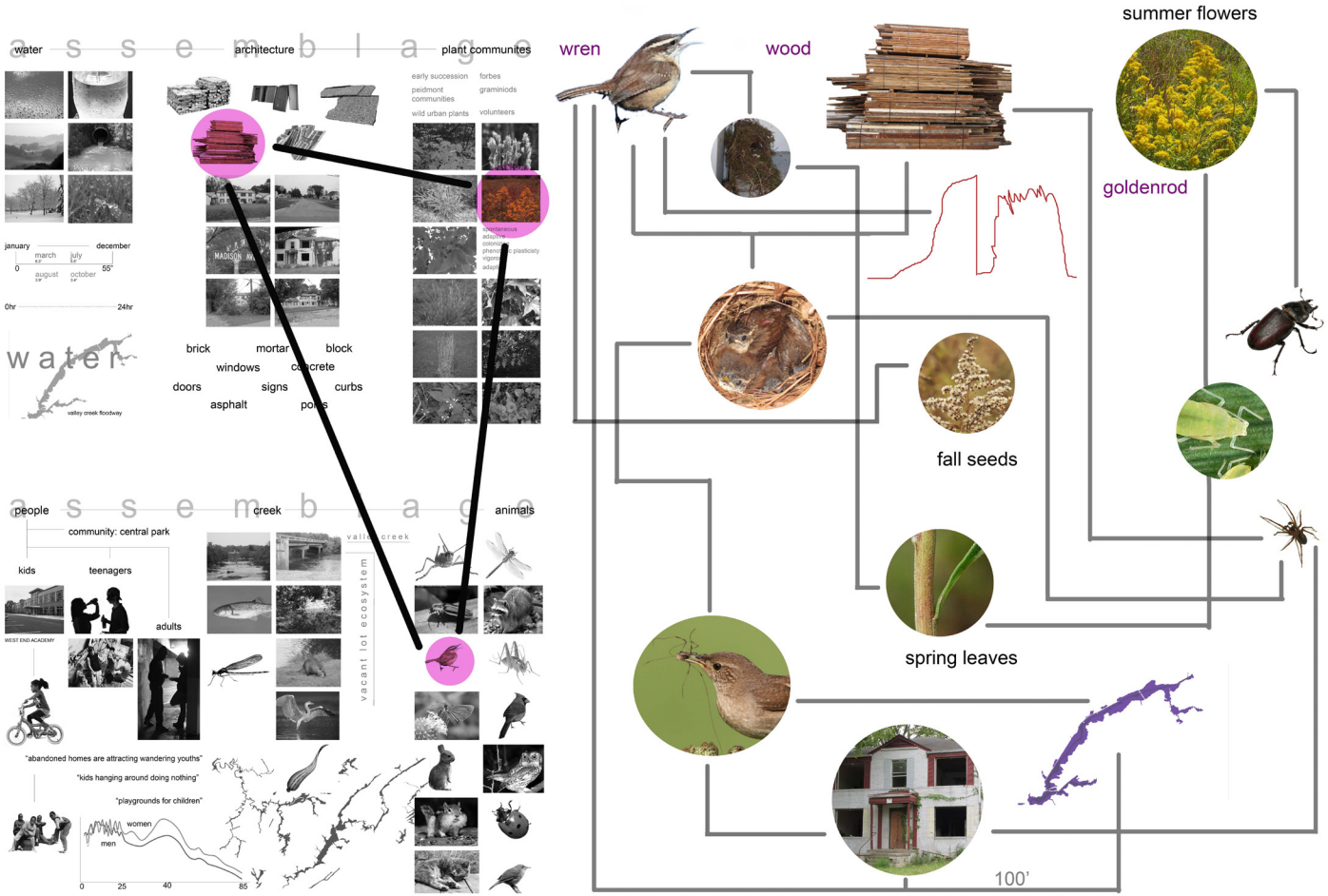
Components



Water+Structure+Plant Communities



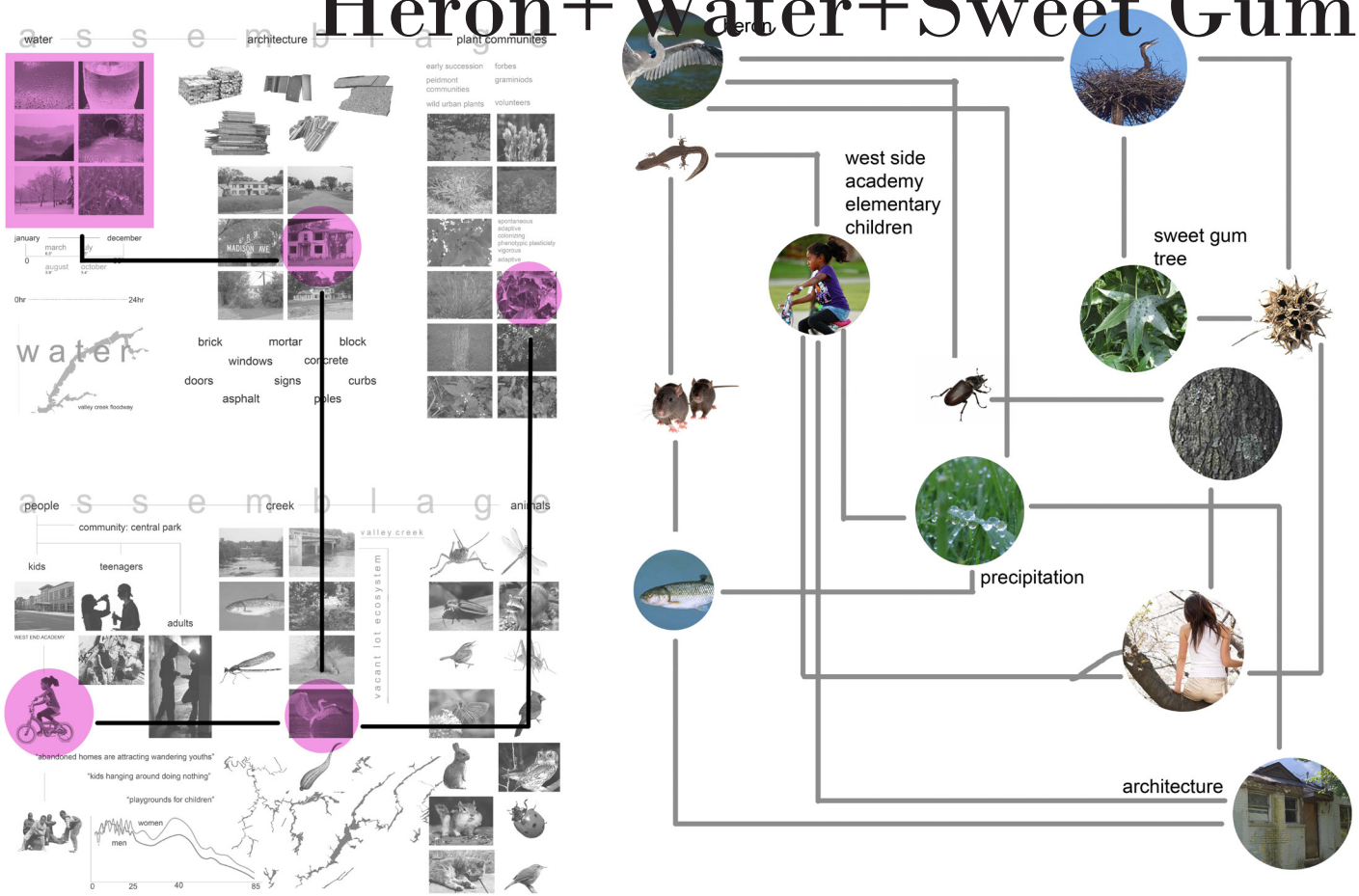
People+Creek+Wildlife



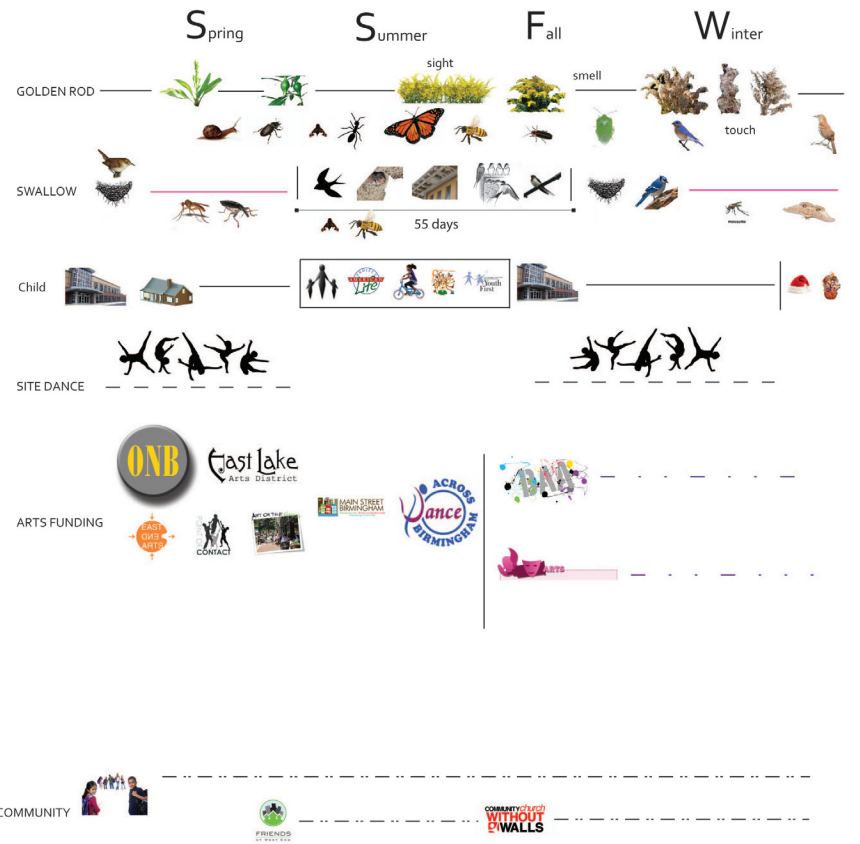
The diagram displays an assemblage of wrens+wood (framing in the abandoned structures) + goldenrod. The diagram attempts to show links between these components. Wrens nest in structures, goldenrod attracts insects providing food for the wrens. Decaying wood attracts beetles and spiders for the wrens, wrens spread the seeds of the goldenrod and goldenrod provides materials for wren's nesting habits

Wren+Wood+Goldenrod

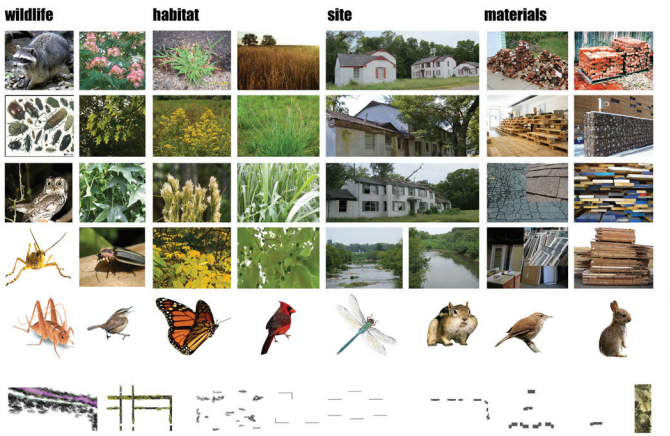
Heron+Water+Sweet Gum Tree

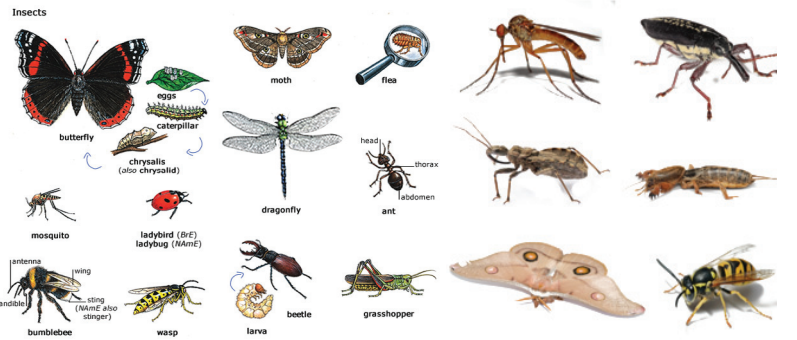


The diagram displays an assemblage of blue herons, water, sweetgum trees, and children, all of which are existing components on the site. Links show the heron nesting in the sweetgum trees, the water (valley creek and the flood plain) providing food habitat for the heron, children climbing trees, and the abandoned duplexes providing habitat for rats and lizards, food for the heron.



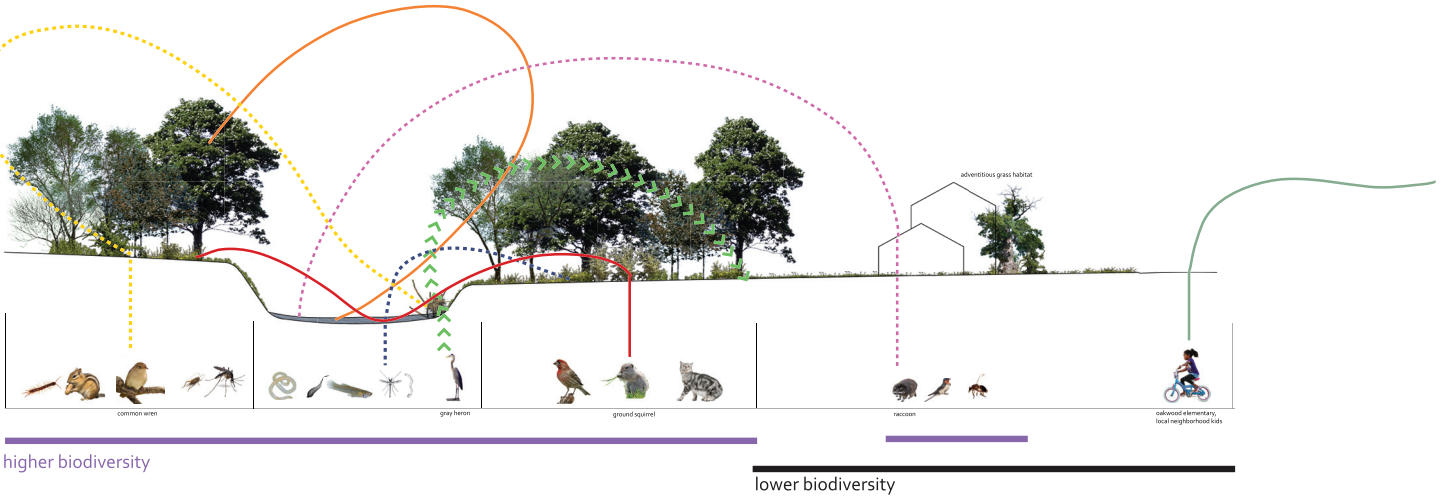
Left diagrams depicts an assemblage of goldenrod, swallows, children, the arts, fund raising events, and local community organizations through different seasons over one year.





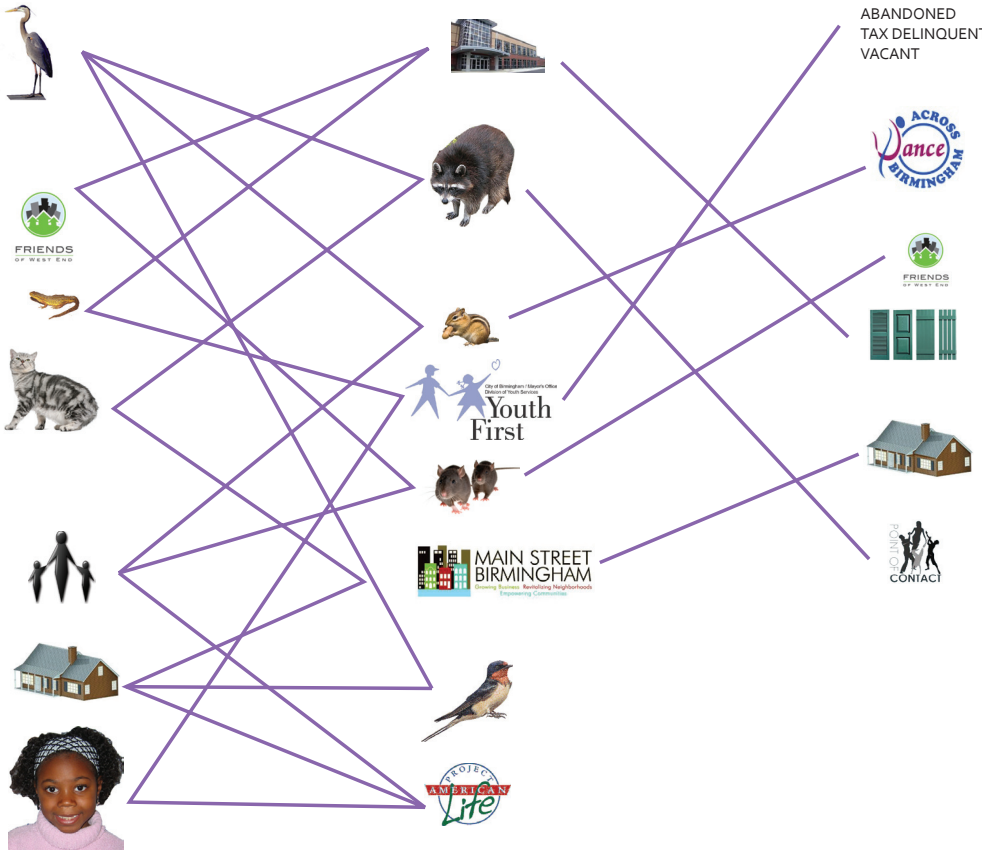
assemblage mapping began with a site inventory of potential components

assemblages shift constantly. Connected components move throughout any site in a constant fluctuation.



movement mapping:summer

site section valley creek



Plants

St

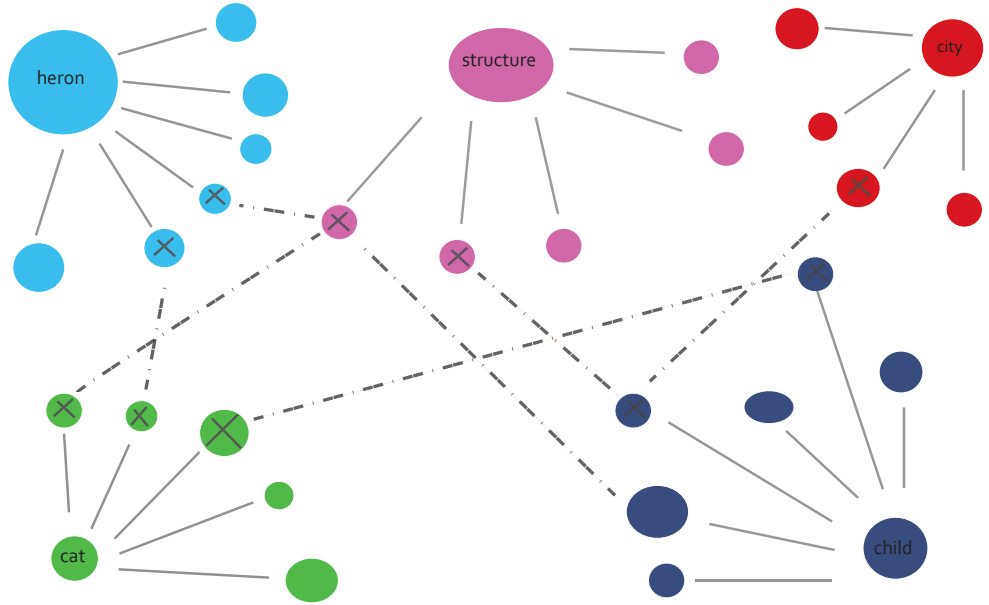
Art

Organiza

tructure

ts

ations



Wildlife


Poper


ations

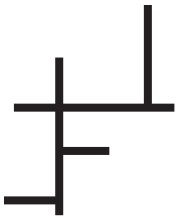
Operations

Operations are used both as a design technique and an exploratory tool to 1. Investigate ideas of creative deconstruction 2. Explore the theoretical framework by creating assemblages of people, wildlife, plants and building remnants 3. orchestrate an engaging public green space for local communities. The operations use existing assemblage components, redistribute them, and enable a new condition. Each operation is a type of deletion or erasure and removes portions or entire buildings. Many of the exterior walls, as well as sections of the buildings interiors remain and are reconfigured in ways that enable such components as play spaces for children, nesting locations for wildlife, and debris catchment piles for flooding and rain water.

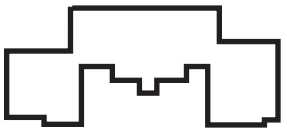
Along with the three aforementioned goals, two additional ideas are researched as methods for reconnecting the community with the abaondoned site. The first idea is the use of art as a tool to motivate community vitality. The newly formulated structures provide platforms for the arts. The larger goal being to connect Birmingham's already established and thriving art culture to the existing problem of abandoned properties. The two types of art suggested for the *Urban Assemblages* project are site specific dance and community theater. The second idea establishes worker training programs providing instruction in the trade skills of deconstruction, construction, and material salvaging.

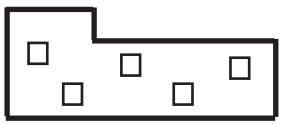
Each operation was initially explored by itself as a single design move across the entire site. Amplifying the operation allowed for a thorough exploration to establish where each operation should occur within existing site conditions. For example which operation would perform in an edge condition verses a north facing condition vs. a flooding condition. The four operations are Orientation, Adjacency, Displacement, and Dispersal.

Orientation

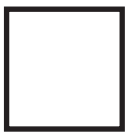


Adjacency

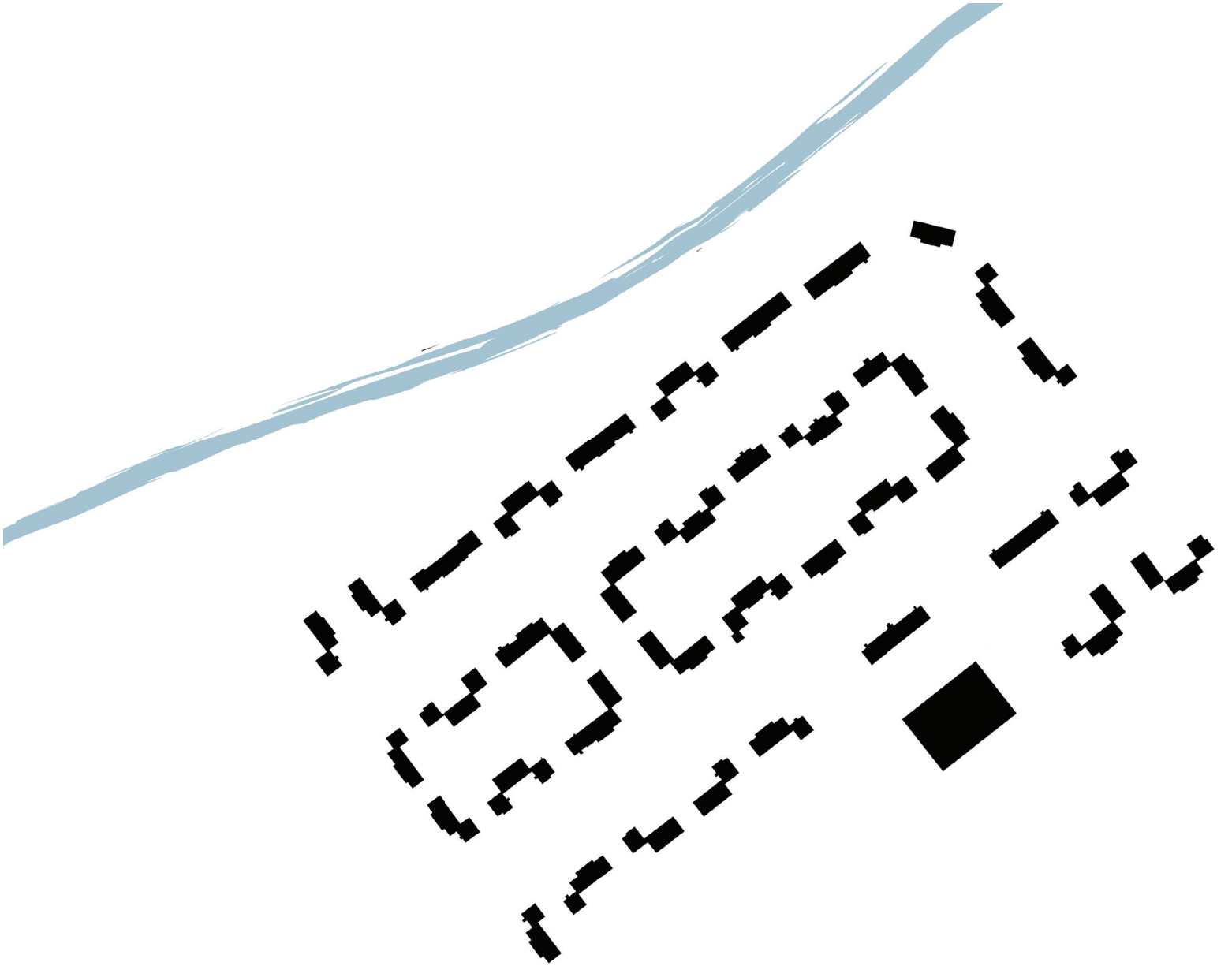




Displacement

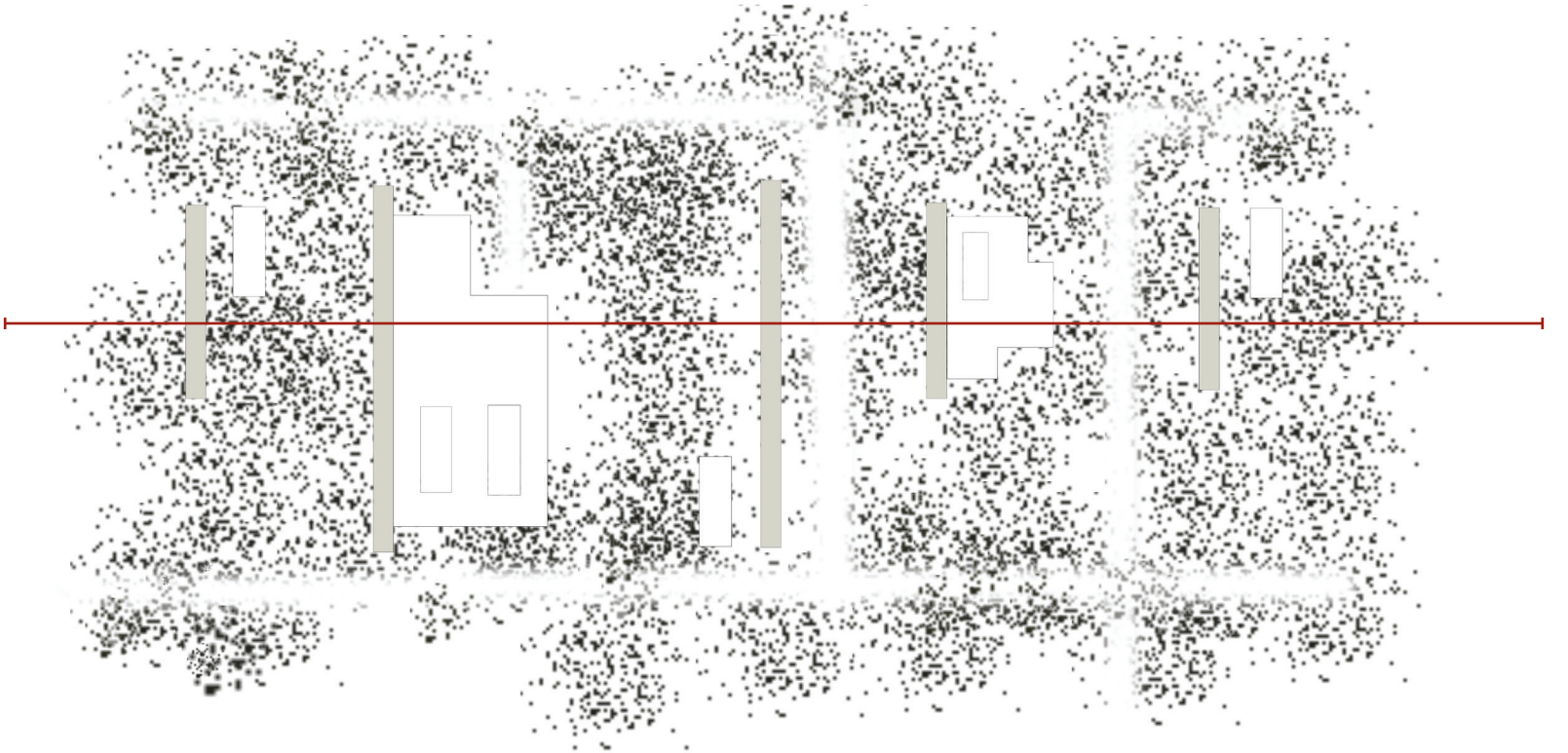


Dispersal

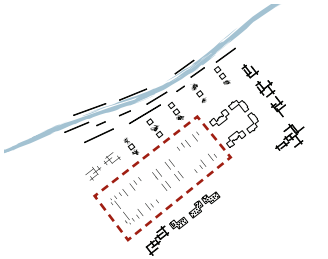


existing buildings

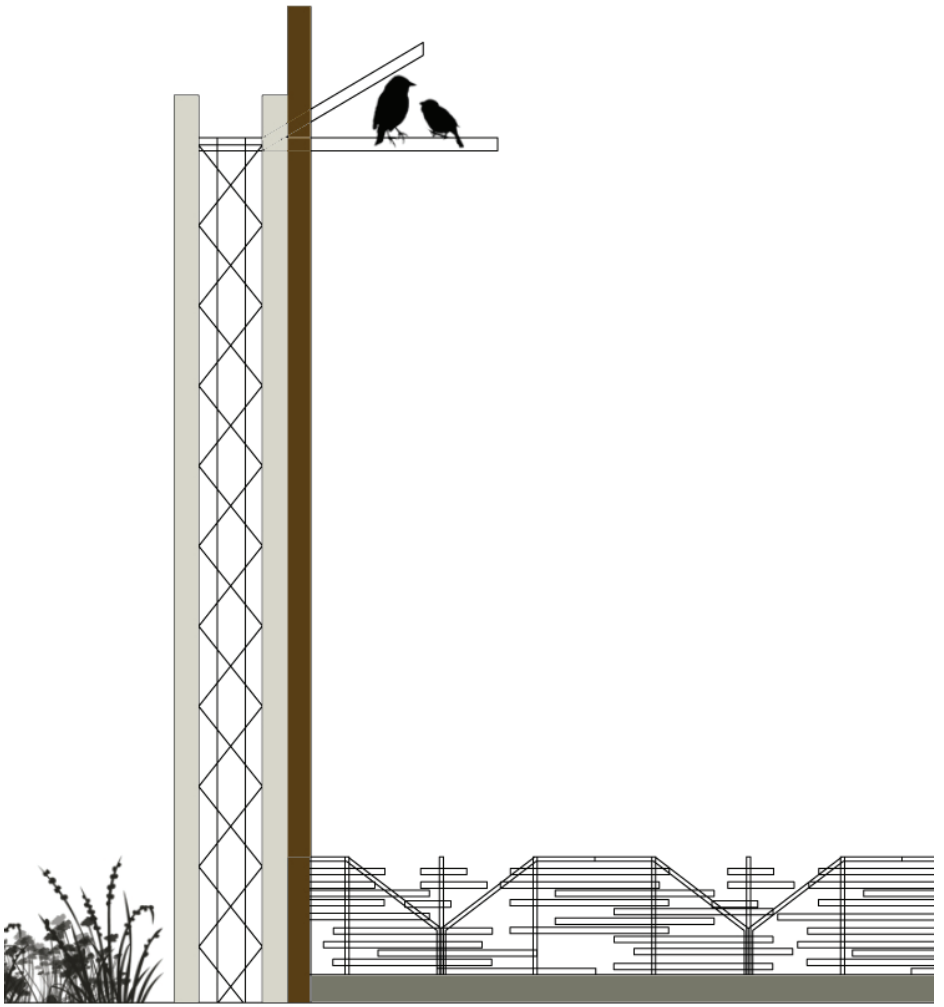
proposed operations

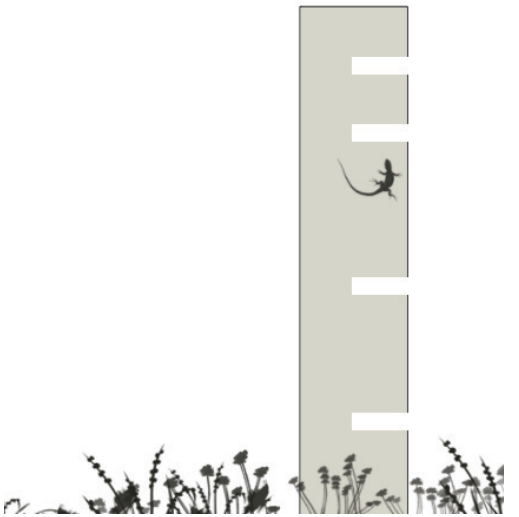


Orientation

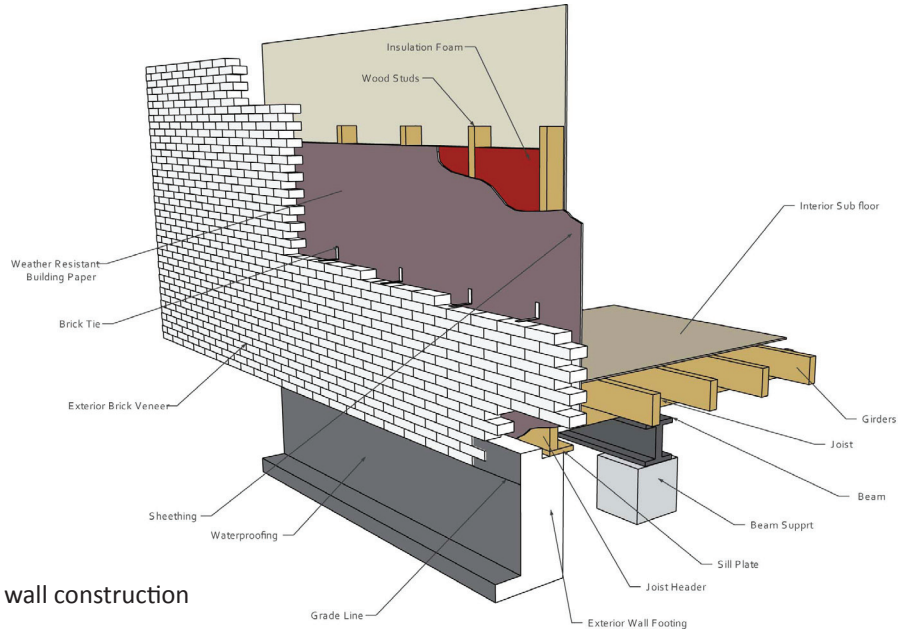


The operation of orientation explores assemblages of sun, people, wildlife, and plants. The duplexes chosen for the operation of orientation are located in the areas of maximum sun exposure. All walls with the exception of the north-south oriented walls are deleted. The north-south walls remain along with certain sections of the interior ceiling framing. Landings are constructed with existing materials along the east sides of the walls, which include sitting areas and re-purposed metal railings. The reconstruction of the walls provides nesting areas for birds and wall niches within the interior and exterior of the walls for small wild life habit. Mixes of wildflowers and grasses are seeded around each structure which in turn responds to the sun/shade patterns thrown by the walls.

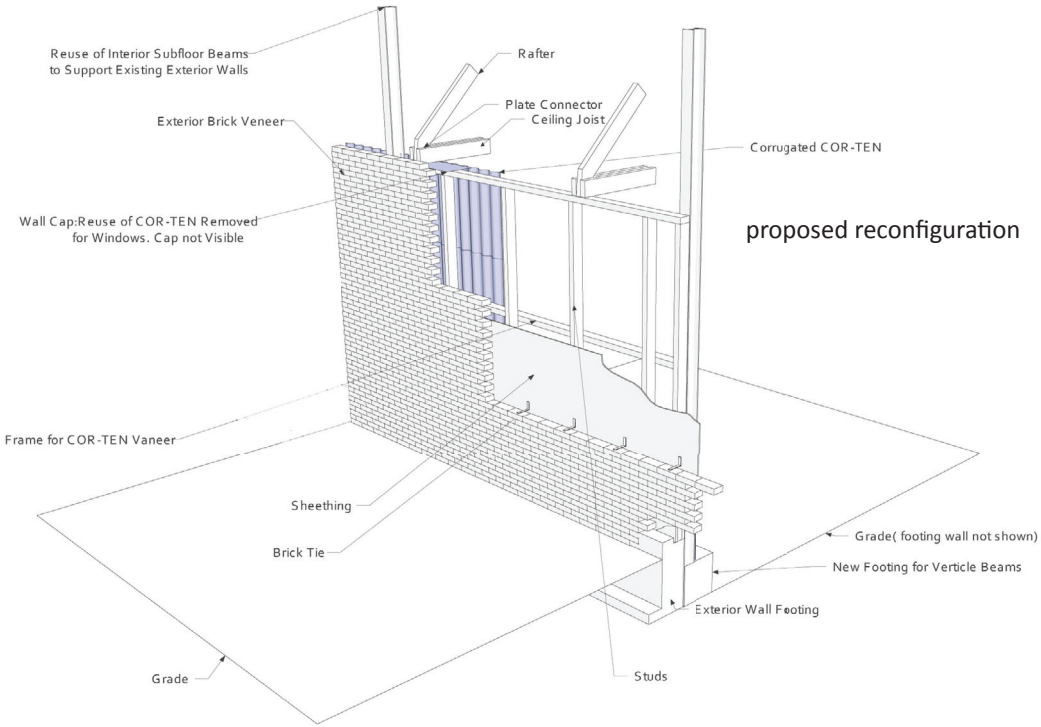




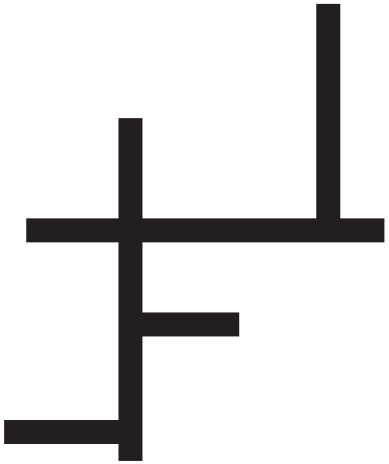
The orientation walls associate with multiple parts of the assemblage. This assemblage might include West End high school children chatting after school in the summer months watching the house wrens and thrashers bouncing from structure to structure while collecting seeds and fruit from golden rods and goose berries, lizards bathing on the sunny side wall ledges, and long horned beetles and bees sipping nectar from lemon balm just coming into bloom. All of these components, and many others, fluctuate in, around, and through the orientation walls.



existing wall construction

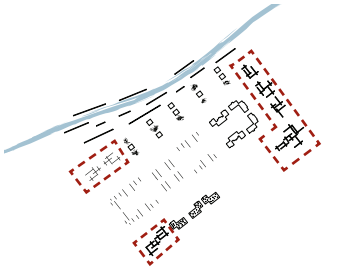


proposed reconfiguration



section adjacency walls

Adjacency



The operation of adjacency explores the idea of introducing the arts into the assemblage. Site specific dance is a form of art which is meant to engage people with the landscape and the adjacency walls provide a platform for this to occur. The adjacency walls also provide seating and play structures for local communities These are low walls located on the edges of the site. Metaphorically they represent assemblage links in that all of the adjacency walls deconstructed from one duplex are physically connected just as all components in any assemblage are connected.

section adjacency walls

The adjacency walls would also be constructed in ways that invite small wildlife into and through the walls, while providing perches and landings for larger wildlife and birds. Site specific dance is said to “enhance” or “dramatize” the landscape and many of the companies that choreograph site specific dance performances include the community in the performances. The adjacency walls provide tight geometries to respond to the “rules” many dance performances establish that guide and form the dance.

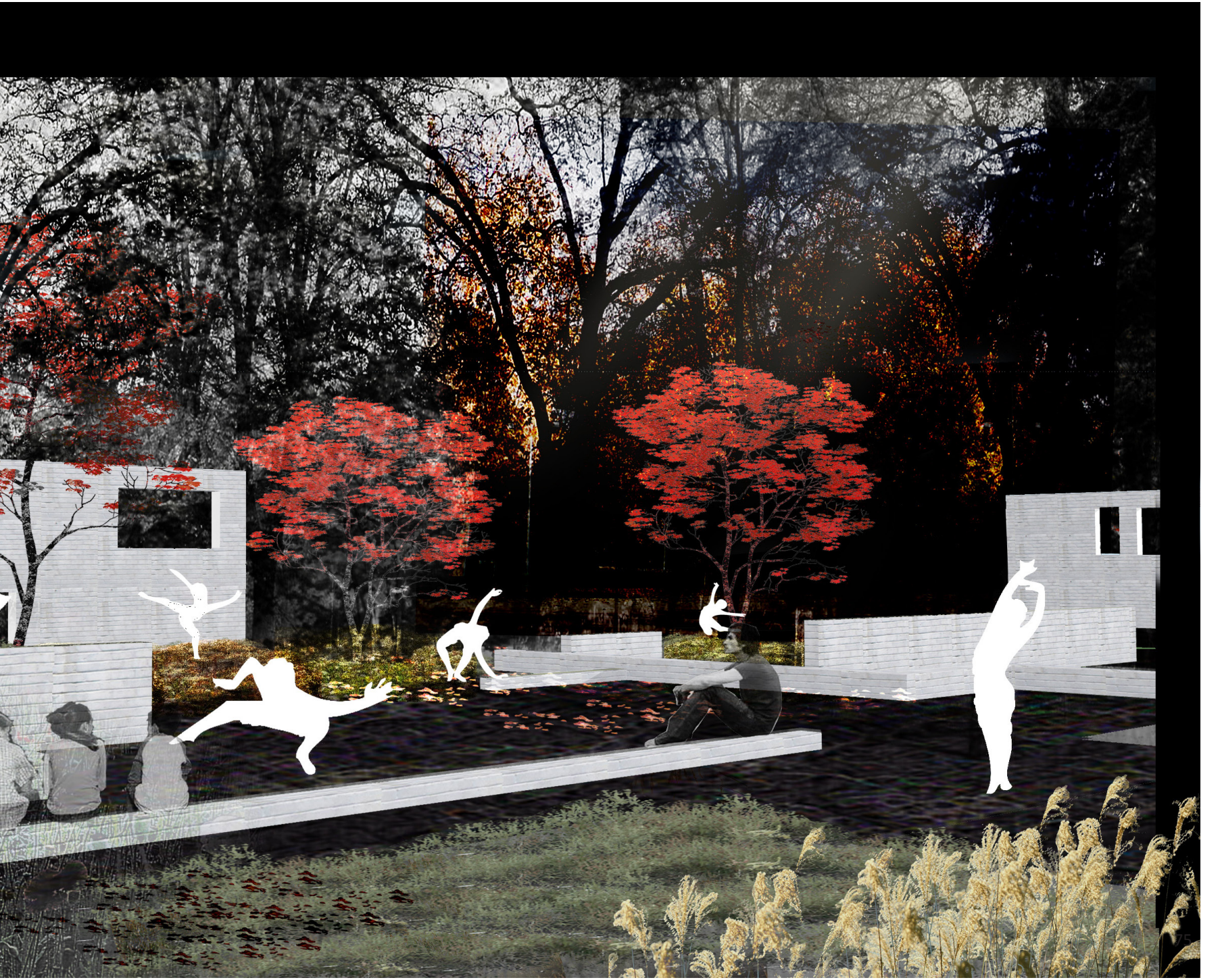


FIG 21

FIG 22

FIG 23

Site Specific Dance

FIG 24

FIG 25

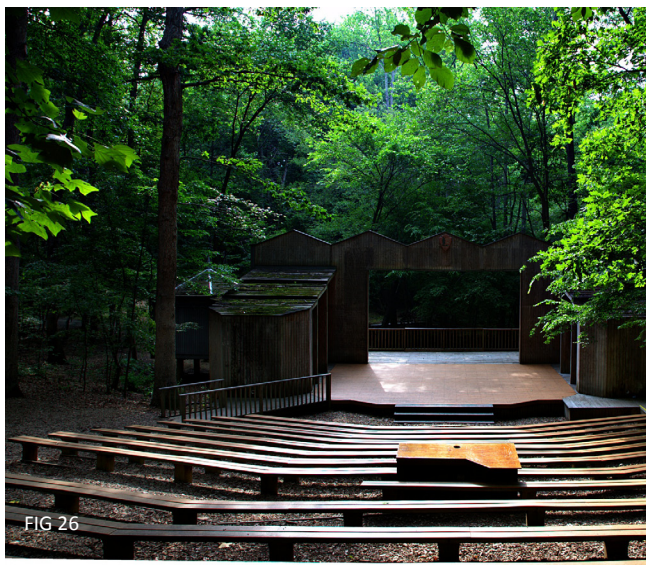
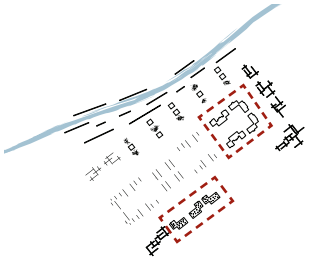


FIG 26

FIG 27

Displacement



The operation of displacement erases the building interiors, while maintaining the shells of the buildings at various heights. With four of the displacement buildings all exterior walls remain to the height of the first floor with the exception of the walls facing the center; these walls are removed. Framing from the interior is reused to create large stages for community theater based groups interested in community outreach projects. Large metal scaffolding structures double as support for the walls along with support for set props.

FIG 28

Two additional buildings remove all walls down to the exterior wall footings, which outline the building's footprint. With this operation the base structure block columns that act as supports for the buildings will also remain and be reveneered with salvaged brick.

Dispersal

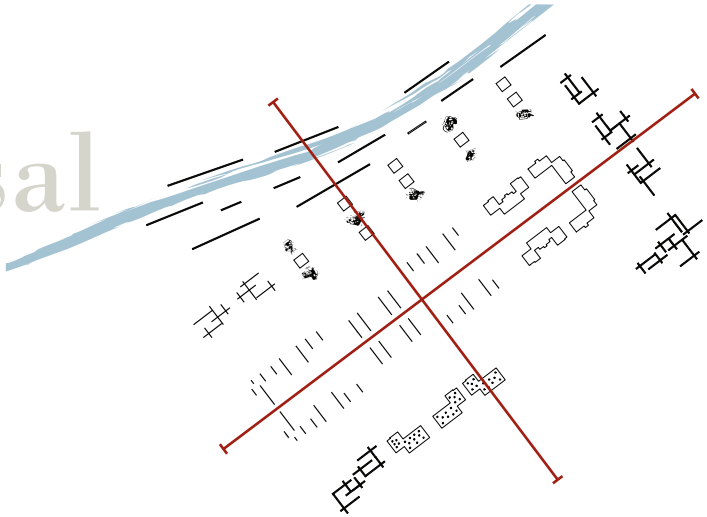
The operation of dispersal deconstructs the buildings completely salvaging materials for reuse throughout the site. Portions of the materials are reconfigured in piles and pallets on the north edge closest to Valley Creek. If the site floods or there are large rains, sediment becomes trapped within and around the piles and pallets. This is turn provides small animal habitat as food for urban herons that frequent the riparian zones and feed in the early morning hours when people are scarce. The constructed piles and pallets also serve has seating platforms and play structures. This area is shaded year round by groves of native sweet gum trees.

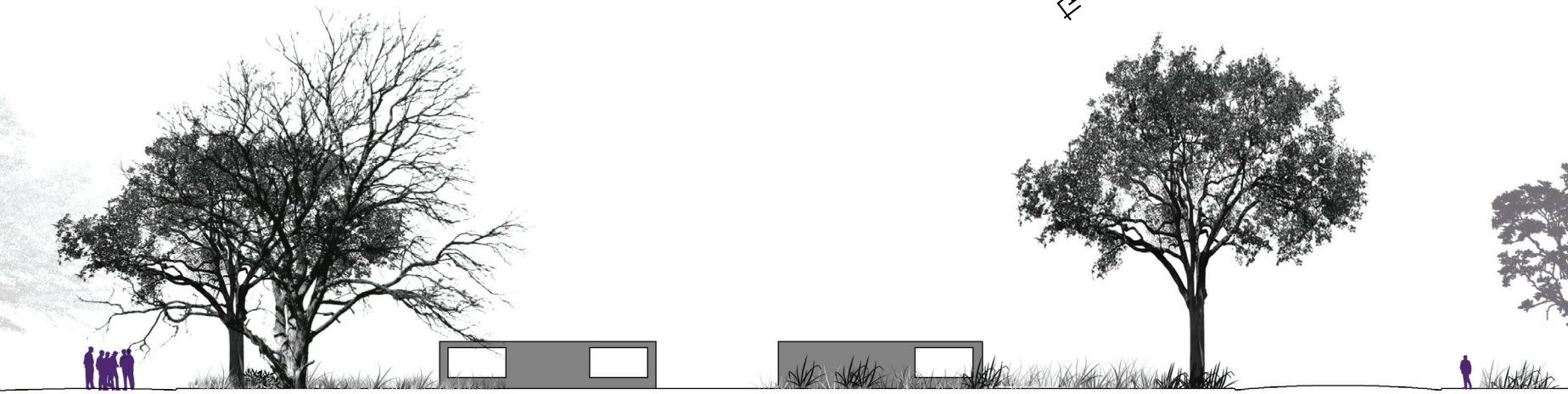
herons feeding in early morning

displacment operation+valley creek section

Creative deconstruction can allow for adaptive reuse of materials, the bulk being brick, block, and wood framing. Other materials for possible use particularly for the operation of dispersal could include shutters, doors, railings, roofing shingles, and concrete landings used for the building entrances. This type of deconstruction allows for visible remnants of the buildings to exist. These remnants provide a visual link to the past.

blacement+Dispersal





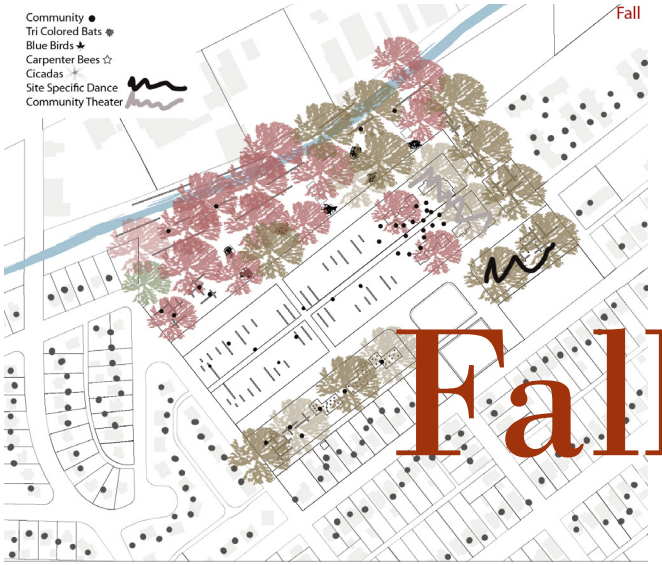
Discoveries from the operation explorations include:

1. Design interventions to any site are a form of disturbance. For example an abandoned building is an assemblage, and the deconstruction and reformulation of materials causes a disturbance within the assemblage. Animals living in the building, water pooling around the building, children playing or hiding in the buildings, all reorganize as the operation changes the platform on which the assemblage comes back together. When the assemblage reformulates, it's a new assemblage with new components. Design interventions could enable the new assemblage to be more diverse in components.

Spring

Summer

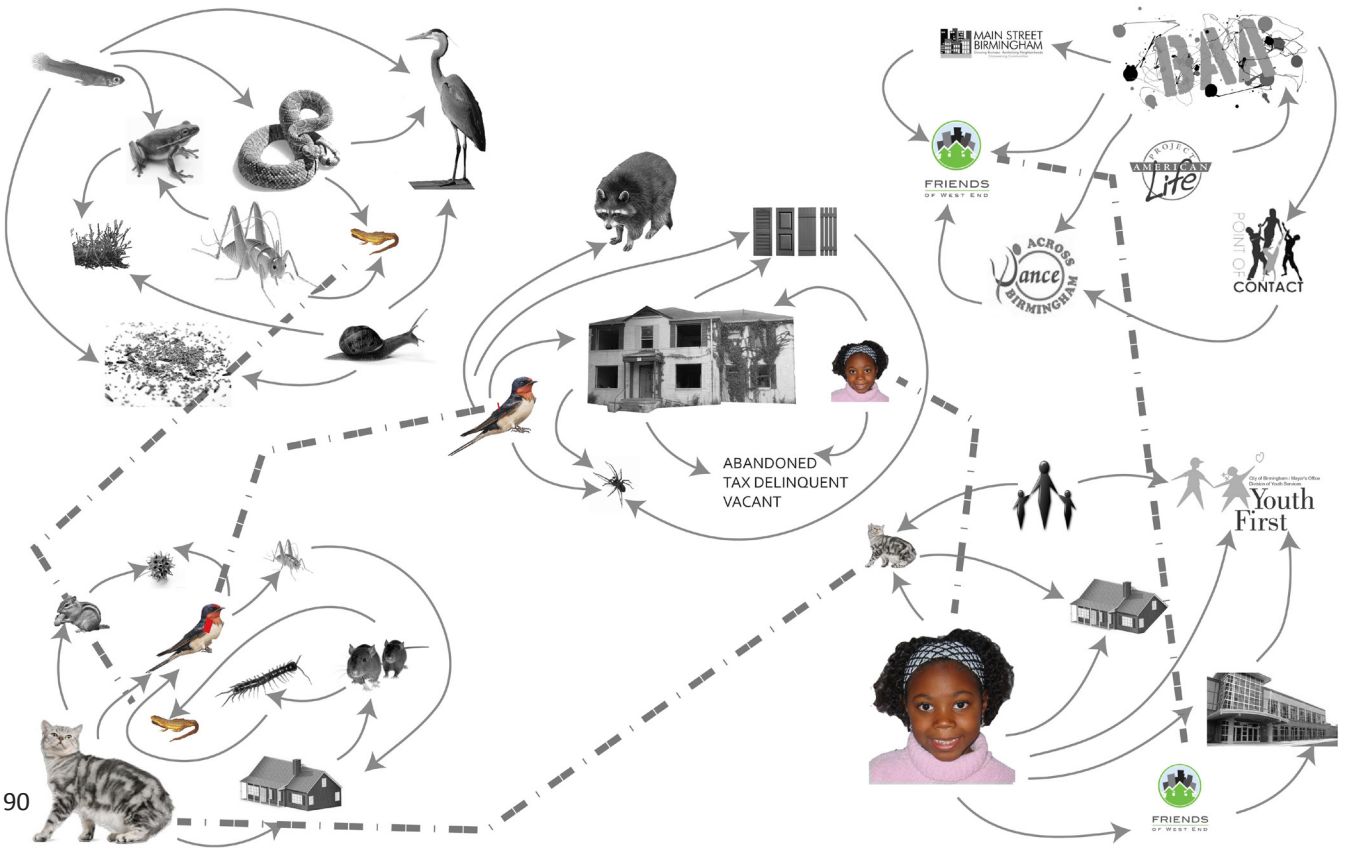
Discoveries



Fall

Winter

2. No component in the assemblage has more or less value than another. Each operation permits component interactions with the goal of maximizing those interactions. The orientation and dispersal operations display these concepts well. The adjacency and displacement operations primarily focus on the programmatic elements of the site and less on the ecologies of the site. A more thorough exploration is needed to address how these two operations could respond to additional assemblage components.



components are a equal parts of multiple assemblages

3. While exploring the operations, the community's ability to become involved in the proejct was evaluated. Will these communities care about this site? Is there an organizing neighborhood structure within the communities? Is the erasing and reconstructing of walls feasible? What materials can realistically be reused? Because of the site's high visibility community members call the city yearly asking that the abandoned duplexes be removed, and they have been calling for many years. Currently the building are not on the city's condemned list, and there is no plan to remove them in the near future. The West End communities are working communities with a higher than average unemployment rates (citydata.com) The neighborhoods in the West End also have organizational structure, neighborhood associations, and neighborhood council members all which may have interest in helping these communities organize around the reuse of abandoned sites. With respect to the materials and wall construction, it was discovered that many of the valuable materials with in the buildings have already been removed. Items such as counter tops, copper wiring and pipes, hardware etc. are no longer in the buildings. So the bulk of the materials that could provide value both for reconstruction, and in potential resale are mostly brick, wood, concrete block, steel I beams, and shingle roofing. It was also determined through the operation exploration that the site probably contains more materials than would be needed for construction. These materials could be stored, sold, or donated to local non-profit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity which currently needs roofing materials. Some materials could also be donated to tornado damage rebuilding in cities such as Pratt City and Cordova.

shutters

brick

doors

framing

block

4. Words are powerful components of the assemblage. How the assemblage is "described, framed, allocated meaning…… can affect future states of the assemblage" (Barnett 2008:3) The larger collection of abandoned properties throughout the West End are intimately tied to such phrases as urban blight, urban decay, neighborhood destabilization, neighborhood decline, etc. These phrases frequent multiple news media when describing Birmingham's West End neighborhoods. *Urban Assemblages* along with future adaptive reuse projects has the ability to begin to change the discursive elements of the assemblage thats is the West End. Words like productive, valuable, and performative can enter the discourse as communities slowly shift perspective. The examination of the operation explorations revealed the site as much more than abandoned buildings however, particularly with respect to existing ecological systems. For example viewing the site from the perspective of plants and wildlife, the current discourse would be completely different. In this respect the sites are not abandoned. Abandoned sites represent potentially very rich ecologies, particularly when there are hundreds even thousands of these types of sites in close proximity. As people have disappeared, plants and wildlife have come back in. As the discourse shifts, so will eventually the existing assemblage components connected to the discourse. It is then important that this new discourse describe these sites in a way that values ecological components of the assemblage.

"Birmingham at a cross roads…..Can we come together?"

FIG 29

Case Studies

GUID

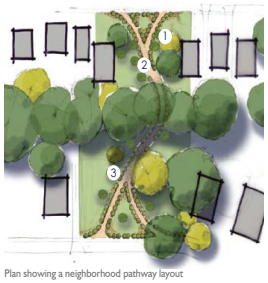
Reimagining Cleveland

FIG 30-35

Reimagining Cleveland is an initiative that began in 2008 with the goal of transforming vacant land throughout struggling neighborhoods in central Cleveland. (Ideas-to-Actions 2008) The project started small, with the idea of modest vacant lots becoming community gardens, phytoremediation projects, pocket parks, and small urban farms. The pilot project sought to turn fifteen acres of vacant land into usable, productive space. Funding for the implementations came from a combination of city funds, non-profit organizations, and grants. Due to the success of the pilot project, in two short years Cleveland has not only changed the perception of vacant land to local communities, evidence found in the growing participation from neighborhood associations but also attracted larger funding resources.

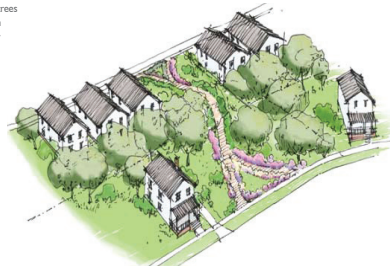
In 2010 the leaders of the initiative put in to motion what they are calling Reimagining Cleveland 2.0 which is currently in a research phase of a much larger scale projects that could transform more than just single lots, but the city as a whole. *"Re-imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland 2.0 is a study to identify large-scale catalytic projects in the following categories that could create lasting change in Cleveland: agriculture, alternative energy, contamination remediation, land assembly, neighborhood stabilization, sustainable pattern of development, and storm water retention"* (reimaginingcleveland.org) In December of 2011, the project received its largest grant yet of one million from the federal government.

"From Vacant to Vibrant" -reimagining Cleveland



1 flowering trees
2 gravel path
3 hedge row

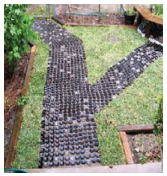
Plan showing a neighborhood pathway layout



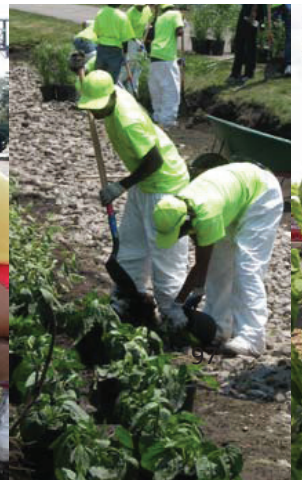
View showing a neighborhood pathway layout

Children enjoying riding through the Brooklyn Centre neighborhood pathway

Volunteers working on the construction of a pathway through the Brooklyn Centre Orchard



Bottles used as construction material for a pathway



Louisiana Green Corps:

Case Study: deconstruction/construction training programs for local communities

Louisiana Green Corp was started in 2008 with the goal of training low income, at risk youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in the field of green construction and deconstruction. The program has graduated 250 students to date. Participants begin in the classroom learning green construction technologies, followed by in the field training throughout local communities in building renovation, deconstruction, historic preservation, home weathering, and material salvaging. The goal of the program is to "provide green job training to unemployed, underemployed, court involved, or otherwise disadvantaged New Orleans youth" The program awards technical certifications along with job placement assistance. The program is funded through the Department of Labor's National Emergency Grants and organized through five local organizations, including local businesses and non-profits.

Job Corp is a national organization with 124 programs nationwide and an 87% success rates for graduates finding employment or going on to a four year college. The closest Job Corps programs to Birmingham are located in Gadson and Montgomery.

FIG 36-39

Pathways out of Poverty

Green For All: Information Source for Worker Development Programs

Pathways out of poverty is an organization that was created in 2009 by the Obama administration and is funded by the American Recovery and reinvestment Act. Pathways out of poverty provides training programs focusing on individuals living below the poverty level and provides a range of skills related to green industries and green technologies. One of the priorities of pathways out of poverty is assisting organizers in creating meaningful, lasting partnerships within a community to establish worker programs that qualify for federal grant money. In 2009, Green for All (parent organization of Pathways out of Poverty) convened at a two days conference to brain storm ideas on helping workforce practitioners establish worker development programs.

Pathways out of Poverty is both a source of case studies for existing worker development programs across the United States as well as information on the types of partnerships that work for such programs The ideal model for a worker development program would include 1.community based organizations, labor groups, colleges, local business service providers, and/or nonprofit organizations 2. central intake agencies (agencies that conduct community outreach to low income communities to “screen in” eligible individuals,3. GED preparation agencies 4.career ladders (various points of paths and opportunity with the training) 5.performance measures. 6 diversified funding mechanisms.
(greenforall.org)

FIG 40-41

GREEN FOR ALL

07

REFLEC

REFLEC

Landscape assemblages of people, wildlife, and remnant architecture can be used to empower local communities within West End Birmingham. Through creative deconstruction what is currently seen as devalued unproductive property, can be transformed into valuable community public space. Programmatic elements such as art performances, worker programs, and ongoing partnerships between city organizations, non-profits, and motivated community leaders can be used to help communities envision new purposes for the thousands of abandoned properties in their neighborhoods.

The following is a list of questions and responses that were brought up in reviews, in thesis studio, and in advisory committee meetings that discuss the strengths and limitations of the thesis.

1. **Would** *Urban Assemblages* **require funding from the city?** Most of the case studies researched that involved pilot projects reusing abandoned or vacant sites did require initial city funding and organization. Along with the city additional funding came from partnerships with local nonprofit organizations, private donors, and state and/or federal grants. In many instances, a local university was involved providing ideas and analysis. Certain types of adaptive reuse projects fall under green building initiatives that could possible qualify for grant money through the Obama administration's Sustainable Community Initiative or HUD Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds. Birmingham is currently working through round 1 of NSP funding. NSP funding focuses more on home rehabilitation for the purpose of low income housing, however "landscaping" is included and could possibly be allocated money. A good resource for up to date federal grant information is the Ferguson Group blog www.thefergusongroup.com.

2. **What occurs on the site when there are no arts performances?** Incorporating arts programs as a programmatic element to the site is meant to engage communities with the landscape, the arts, and the abandoned structures in a way that is not currently imagined. This is envisioned to occur at various times

throughout the year, but is not attended to be the only use of the site. The site is first and foremost a public green space for local communities, specifically communities living directly adjacent to the site.

3. **How it is decided which components in the assemblage the landscape architect works with?** This question was raised frequently in reviews and advisory meetings. Assemblages are infinite and everything is a part of an assemblage. But it is impossible for a landscape architect to design with every component, or to even research and know every component. Early in the thesis process when trying to understand what assemblages are how and they function, a site inventory of existing assemblage components was complied. Components were then linked together via diagrams based on how they might interact. For the purpose of understanding assemblages, no specific valuing systems was applied to these components aside from a subconscious one used when choosing which site components to use for research purposes. Assemblages by definition do not value one component over the other; all components are equal. Critique of the thesis however suggested a valuing system would be needed in order for the landscape architect to begin to decide which components to work with. An example of a valuing system would be to privilege native wildlife over invasive or to only value components society devalues such as rats or homeless people.

4. **Were the assemblage mapping explorations valuable to the thesis?** The thesis exploration began with very little understanding of what assemblages are and how they might be used as a framework for a project. So as the project was explored, so was an understanding of assemblages explored and in this respect the mapping exercises helped greatly. The diagraming clearly shows different components and connections. The golden rod+swallow+arts+child diagram begins to try and show elements of time. Where the diagrams are limited is expressing process. More investigations are needed, possibly using other types of medium, to better express components in a process with each other. Another interesting exploration may include trying to graphically express the unknown elements in the assemblage. This might begin to consider the unpredictable nature of assemblages and a need to acknowledge this characteristic in design.

5. **To what extent is Valley Creek part of the thesis?** The thesis began with an interest in Valley Creek and the abandoned materials located within the flood plain along the first three miles of the creek. The more

Valley Creek was explored the more the thesis shifted away from restoring the upper portions of the creek. The problem lie in that there is nothing actually wrong with the creek, but many things wrong within the surrounding watershed. Therefor the entire watershed would have needed to be studied. The two main things affecting the water quality of the creek are storm water and leaky sewer drains throughout Jefferson county. Instead of proposing expensive retrofitting techniques, *Urban Assemblages* proposes that the creek is still an asset to communities without restoration. Currently the environmental organization Fresh Water Land Trust is buying up property directly adjacent to the creek for possible future creek restoration projects.

6. **If the pilot project is successful, what would the next adaptive reuse site be?** Currently the city of Birmingham uses tax delinquency to track abandoned buildings and vacant properties. However there are many degrees of tax delinquency that range from recently tax delinquent to tax delinquent for many years. Recent tax delinquency would more than likely be properties in good condition with possible occupancy. Properties tax delinquent for several years or more could represent properties that have been abandoned . But whether or not a specific property is in disrepair and to what extent is currently not available through GIS mapping. To further investigate which properties would be most appropriate for adaptive reuse a more thorough analysis of each property is needed and new GIS information created. This would need to involve a neighborhood scale site by site inventory which would allow the city to begin to understand which properties or groupings of properties might best serve the communities and in different ways.

7. **How is the project connecting to the larger assemblage that is Birmingham?** *Urban Assemblages* explores connecting socially between the local neighborhoods and the greater city. This is done through programmatic elements such as arts projects, worker training programs, working with local nonprofit organizations, and city involvement in the project. However more research is needed into the many ecological connections to the greater Birmingham area and the relationship those connections have through time. An interesting characteristic of an assemblage is its ability to adapt and change with the environment. In this way, the assemblage is unpredictable. Further explorations would entail scenario investigations as to how the assemblages might shift, change, and reorganize over many years. Because of this unknown quality, further discussion is also needed as to the role the landscape architect has in the formation of the assemblage. The landscape architect is part of the assemblage, but to what

extent? Is he or she an ungoing interactive component? Understanding the landscape architect as an orchestrator of possible conditions would need to be further investigated.

8. **How does Urban Assemblages encourage building community?** *Urban Assemblages* is first and foremost about trying to help build communities. Birmingham's West End has been steadily declining over the last twenty five years and the accumulating numbers of abandoned homes and vacant lands are significantly adding to a variety of problems within neighborhoods. Even with a demolish rate of 40 to 50 properties a month the city is barely making a dent. These properties need to be reimagined in a way that communities want to become involved. Without their involvement, the problem only gets worse. So the question becomes how to compose the assemblage in a way that helps communities envision what these properties can be, while creating sustainable and ecologically healthy spaces. *Urban Assemblages* begins the conversation on how to help communities take back abandoned properties.

Acknow

wledgments

Many thanks to the following people:

Matt, Mom, and Dad for support and encouragement in my many pursuits of knowledge

Professor Rod Barnett for his patience and ability to teach me new ways of thinking

Professors David Hill, Charlene Lebleu, Michael Robinson, Jocelyn Zanzot, and Jacqueline Margetts,
for valuable guidance and critique throughout my time at Auburn University

Dr. Jack Feminella, Matt Churnock and Philip Amthor for assistance with research

Margie Woodbury, Taylor French, Long Zhou, Sissy Deng, Adrian Sharp, and Yimiao Li for going through thesis with me

References

FIG 1-7 iweatherman “untitled” Photo. *Flikr.com.* July 10 2009 < http://www.flickr.com/photos/iweatherman/4905541414/>

FIG 8 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *nbirmingham.net*< http://< http://nbirmingham.net/historyphoto1.php>

FIG 9 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *nbirmingham.net*< http://< http://nbirmingham.net/historyphoto1.php>

FIG 10 grandman “untitled” Photo *RedMountainPost.com* August 29 2010 < http://www.theredmountainpost.com/birminghams-history-photographs-of-the-old-ensley-works-6463/>

FIG 11 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *Al.com* cira 1924< http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2008/01/bjcc_to_use_replica_of_familia.html>

FIG 12 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *nbirmingham.net*< http://< http://nbirmingham.net/historyphoto1.php>

FIG 13 unknown “untitled” Photo. WoodrowHall.com cira 1914 < http://woodrowhall.com/category/uncategorized/page/2/>

FIG 14 Adapted From digiitaltopomaps.com < http://www.digital-topo-maps.com/county-map/alabama.shtml>

FIG 15-19 Adapted From RPCGB.com < http://www.rpcgb.org/gis/data/>

FIG 20 Adapted From Bransonlakearea.com < http://www.explorebranson.com/gallery/index.php/attractions/butterfly/Butterfly-Palace-Boy-and-Butterflies>

FIG 21 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *umich.edu* < http://sitemaker.umich.edu/jkfogel/ann_arbor_dance_works >

FIG 22 unknown “untitled” Photo. *dancemagazine.com.* < http://www.dancemagazine.com/blogs/siobhan/3871>

FIG 23 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *umich.edu* < http://sitemaker.umich.edu/jkfogel/home >

FIG 24 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *umich.edu* < http://sitemaker.umich.edu/jkfogel/red_trail_photo_gallery >

FIG 25 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *wikipedia.org* < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wolf_Trap_(national_park)_theatre_in_the_woods.jpg >

FIG 26 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *columbiatribune.com* <http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/specialsections/ourtown/parks_and_trails/ >

FIG 27 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *milleroutdoortheater.com* < http://milleroutdoortheatre.com/events/30/ >

FIG 28 unknown “untitiled” Photo. *seatletimes.com* < http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/thearts/2009412100_outdoortheater05.html >

FIG 29 Fletcher,Naaman “Irondale-Stair” *flicker.com < http://www.flickr.com/photos/naamanfletcher/>*

FIG 30-35 unknown “varies” *reimaginingcleveland.org < http://reimaginingcleveland.org/ >*

FIG 36-39 unknown “varies” *lagreencorp.org < http://www.lagreencorps.org/ >*

FIG 40-41 unknown “varies” *greenforall.org < http://www.greenforall.org/what-we-do/building-a-movement/community-of-practice/green-pathways-out-of-poverty-workforce-development-initiatives >*

*all photographs and maps not listed are credited to Kelly Homan. GIS information courtesy of The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham

Bibliographies

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1987). A Thousand Plateaus. London, University of Minnesota Press.

Waldheim, C., Ed. (2006). The Landscape Urbanism Reader. New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

Corner, J. (2006). Terra Fluxus. The Landscape Urbanism Reader. C. Waldheim. New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

Wise, J. Macgregor 'Assemblage' in Charles J. Stivale (Ed.), 2005, Deleuze: Key Concepts.McGill-Queens Univeristy Press

Lister, Nina-Marie. Ecological Design or Designer Ecology? in Julia Czerniak and George Hargreaves (Eds) 2007 Large Parks New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

Hill, Kristina Shifting Sites in Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn (Eds) 2005 Site Matters . New York, Routledge

Evans, Mary (2005) The Prevention, Management, and Re-Use of Jefferson County's Tax Delinquent Property Harvard University, John F Kennedy School of Government

Barnett, Rod (2010) *A Ten Point Guide to Assemblages* www.rodbarnett.co.nz

Strand, Ginger "At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape and the Land" in Markonish, Denise and Thompson, Joseph (Eds) 2008 Badlands MIT Press

Parr,Adrian (2005), The Deleuze Dictionary. Revised Ed. Edinburgh University Press

Atkins, Leah (1999) The Valley and the Hills University of Alabama Press

Pelfry, David (2011). Birmingham Black and White City Paper

Tinker (2011). About Assemblage. AssemblageArtists.com . April 23 2012. http://www.assemblageartists.com/

Mitchell, Melanie and Newman, Mark: (2002) "Complex Systems Theory and Evolution" Encyclopedia of Evolution New York: Oxford University Press

unknown author (2011) CityData.com <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/West-End-Birmingham-AL.html>

Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization (2008) Regional Planning Commision of Greater Birmingham Population, Housing, and Employement Projections <http://www.rpcgb.org/gis/data/>