PROGRAM SUMMARY

The former Sears building is reimagined as a mixed-use civic framework combining dining, retail, recreation, performance, maker and culinary programs with generous unprogrammed spaces for gathering, appropriation and change over time. Rather than prescribing a single mode of occupation, the project uses the building's expansive floor plates and structural grid to support a range of public uses within a shared interior.

The program extends beyond the building to the neighborhood scale, where new housing and a public park transform the former retail complex into a denser, walkable civic district.

PROJECT STATEMENT

Once a commercial and social anchor of North Knoxville, the former Sears building is reimagined as the center of a new civic district. The project responds to a neighborhood once connected by streetcars and local gathering spaces, but later fragmented by interstate construction and automobile-oriented development. Rather than erase this history, the proposal reuses its physical residue to support a different model of community life. At the site scale, expanses of surface parking are replaced by housing and public landscape, shifting the former retail complex from an automobile destination toward a walkable neighborhood center.

The existing concrete frame and deep floor plates, originally designed for an inward-looking, artificially conditioned department store, become the primary architectural resource. Selective roof monitors, clerestory cuts, interior voids and new circulation bring daylight, air and visual connection deep into the building, transforming how its formerly sealed interior is occupied.

Environmental performance follows the same logic: retain first, reduce demand through architectural intervention, then efficiently condition what remains. Geothermal systems, rainwater collection, solar energy, thermal zoning and mixed-mode ventilation work with the reused structure, while mass-timber modular housing extends the low-carbon strategy across the site.

Together, the park, housing and adapted Sears building transform an obsolete retail complex into an open-ended civic framework, preserving its familiar presence while allowing North Knoxville to occupy, reinterpret and grow into it over time.

PROJECT LOCATION

Knoxville, TN

BUILDING AREA

141,447 SF

COST PER SQUARE FOOT

$158.32 PER SF (EST.)

CONSTRUCTION COST

$22,393,018.00 (EST.)

DATE OF COMPLETION

N/A

Designed for:

AIA Framework For Design Excellence







SP-02.02

A DIVIDED COMMUNITY

In approaching the adaptive reuse of the Sears Building, one must understand the history of the site and the role it has played within the community over time. Prior to the construction of Sears, the lot served the North Knoxville School and a local baseball fields, which served as a hub for the community to gather.

With the introduction of Sears in 1948 after two years of construction, the site shifted into a retail destination, but it remained deeply embedded in community life. The building was more than a place to shop—it was an experience. People came not only for goods, but for services and social interaction: getting pants hemmed, visiting the candy counter, spending time on the playground. Sensory memories, like the smell of candy upon entering, still shape how people remember the space today. It became part of a larger culture of shopping in Knoxville, one that evolved significantly with the construction of the interstate system.

The addition of new highways divided neighborhoods and redirected movement, retail patterns shifted east and west, eventually pulling activity away from this site toward places like West Town Mall. The Sears building closed its doors, and relocated their operations.

Following Sears' departure, the building entered a period of utilitarian use under Knox County, housing storage, veteran services, and sheriff's offices. While these uses maintained occupancy, they did not fully engage the public or contribute to the civic life of the site. Now, as the county begins to phase out, the question becomes: what should this building be next?



Redlining



Thriving Downtown with Market Hall



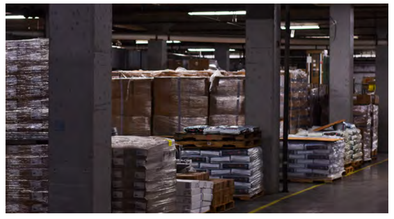
Streetcar Neighborhoods



Candy Counter at Sears



Current Use of the Sear Building

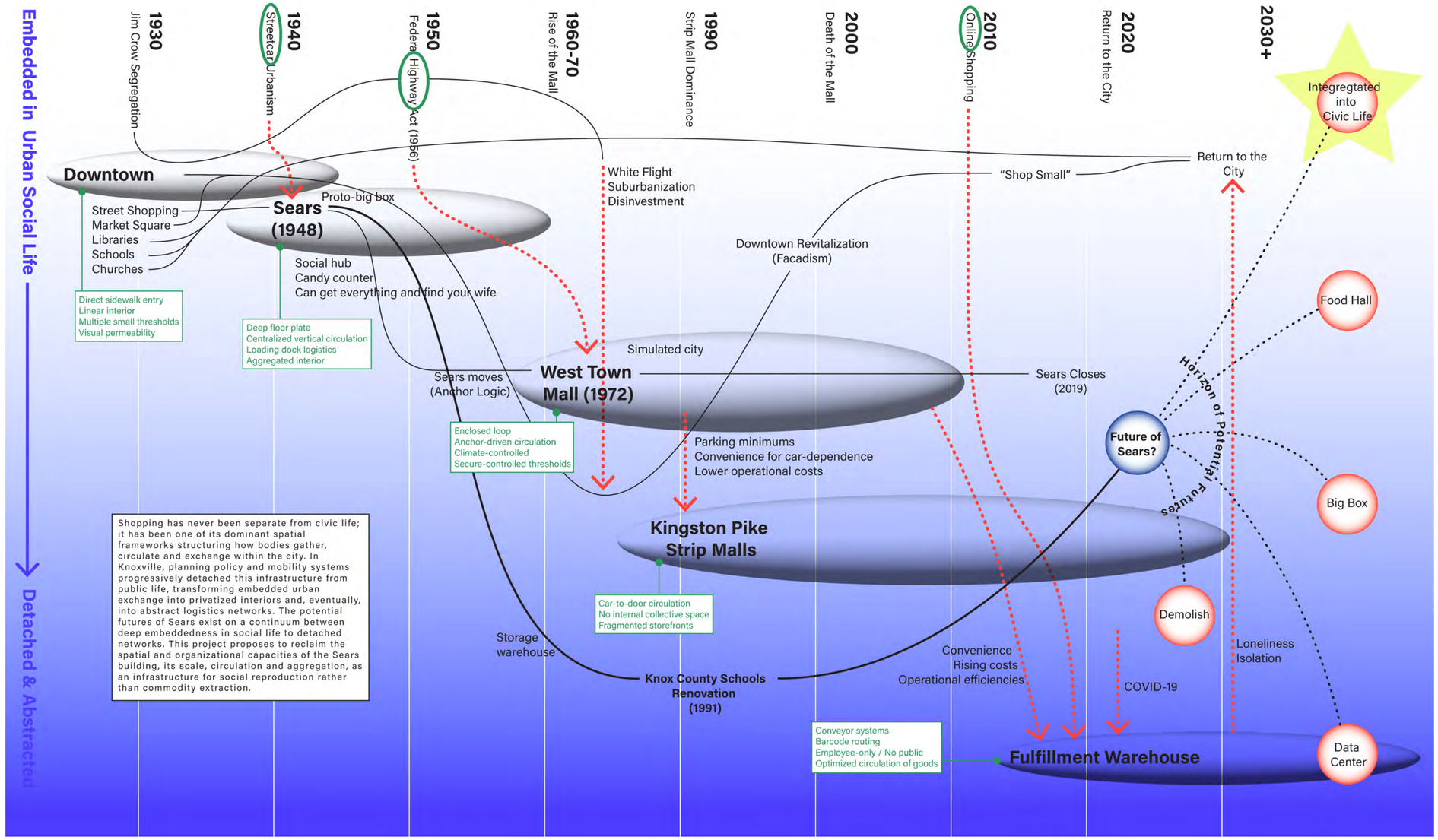


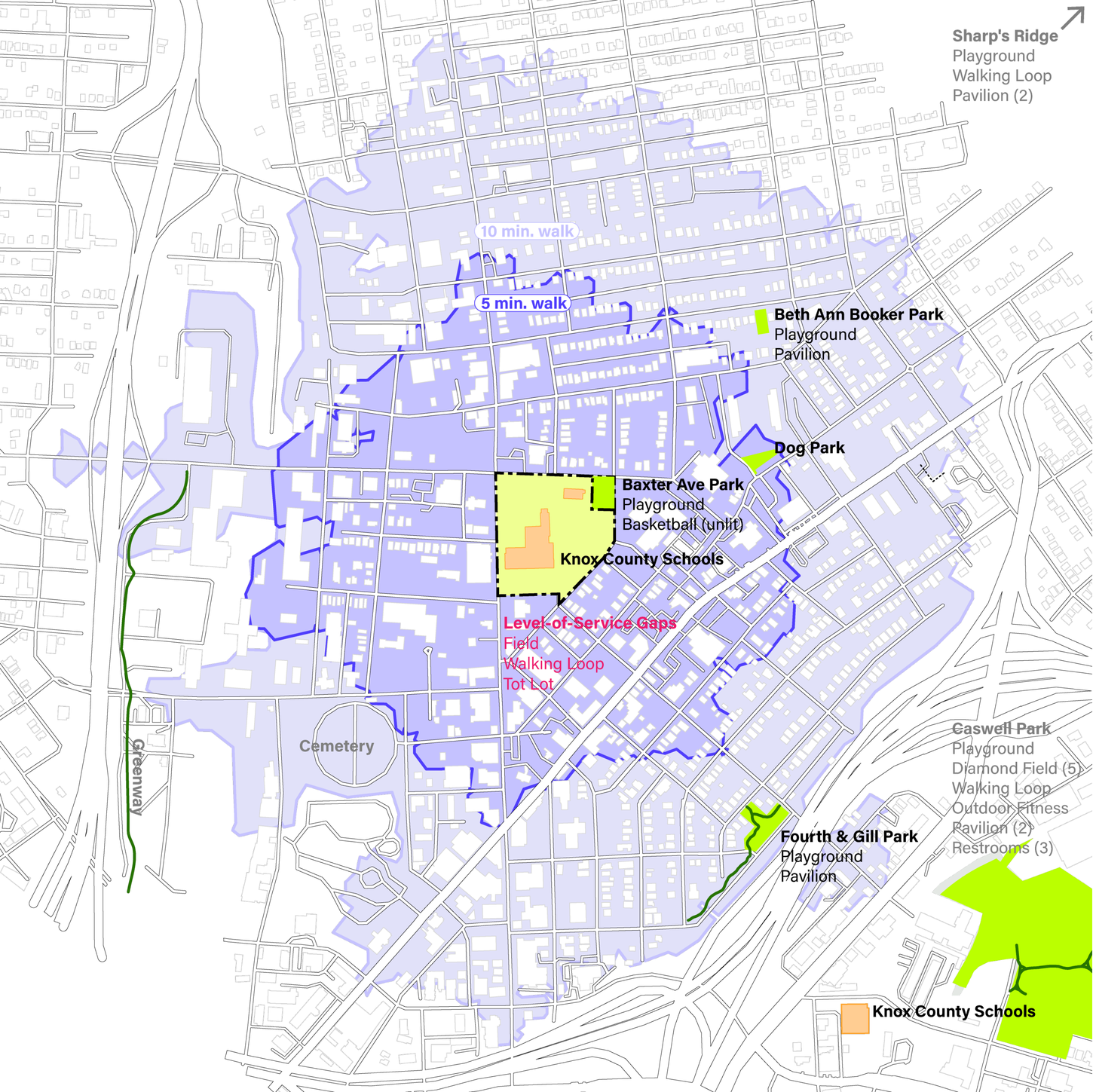
SP-02.03

WHERE HAS SHOPPING GONE?

Shopping has never been separate from civic life; it has been one of its dominant spatial frameworks structuring how bodies gather, circulate and exchange within the city. In Knoxville, planning policy and mobility systems progressively detached this infrastructure from public life, transforming embedded urban exchange into privatized interiors and, eventually, into abstract logistics networks.

The potential futures of Sears exist on a continuum between deep embeddedness in social life to detached networks. This project proposes to reclaim the spatial and organizational capacities of the Sears building, its scale, circulation and aggregation, as an infrastructure for social reproduction rather than commodity extraction.



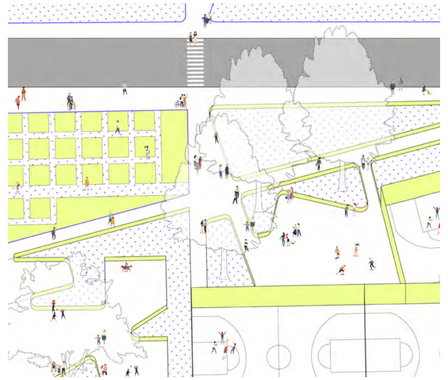


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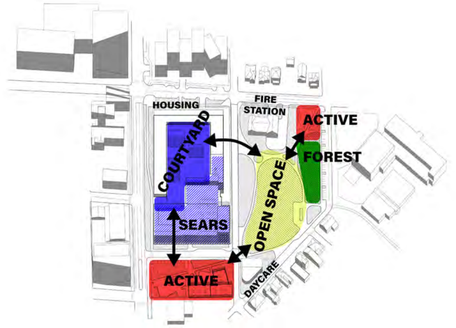
THE NEED FOR A PARK

The logic of the park comes from a lack of meaningful park access in this area. Existing options are limited to very small parks that do not serve the broader needs of the community. Historically, there was access to larger green spaces, but the introduction of the interstate created a physical and social separation that limited that access.

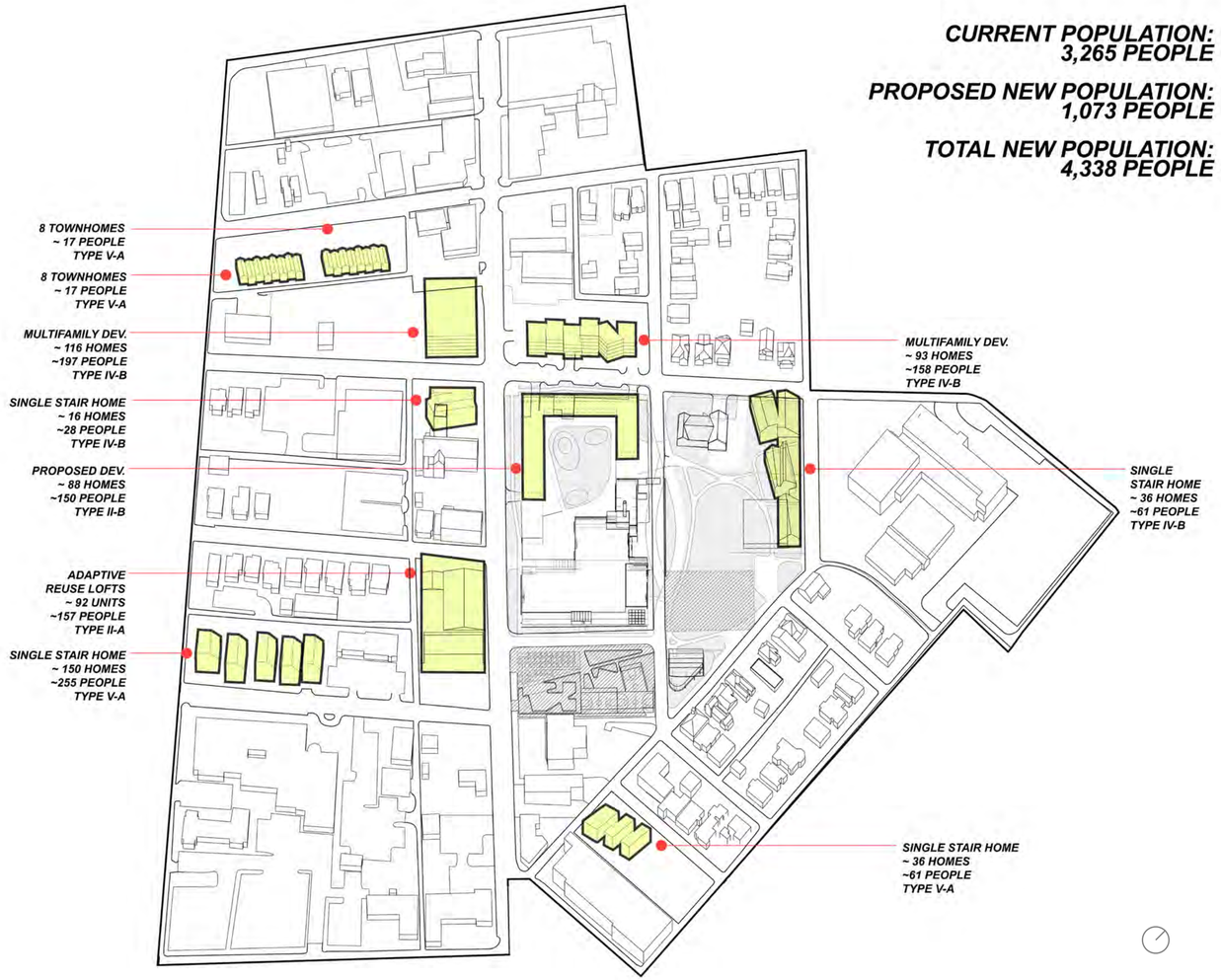
A publicly owned parcel of this size is not common, so this is a great opportunity for a large public park. The city has also identified this area as one where additional park space is needed. By introducing a park here, the project begins to repair that disconnect, providing accessible green space and reestablishing a connection between the site and everyday civic life.



Enlarged Axon of the proposed park.



Park Program relationships.



SP-02.05

HOUSING AMERICA

The housing strategy extends the redevelopment beyond Sears to create a denser residential core around the new public park. Multiple housing developments are dispersed throughout the surrounding site, adding nearly 1,100 new residents while gradually transitioning in scale toward the existing neighborhoods. By concentrating new housing around the civic core, the proposal supports the park and Sears as active community destinations while introducing new residents into an area that has historically lacked a strong residential presence.

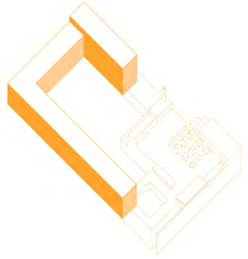
The housing directly surrounding the Sears site is organized around shared courtyards and open spaces, creating a transition between the larger civic programs of Sears and the surrounding neighborhood. The buildings use mass-timber modular units to create a flexible system of solid and void, with recessed areas and courtyards providing shared outdoor space. On the Sears site, housing is positioned adjacent to a central courtyard with below-grade parking, creating a shared landscape that connects residents to the activity of the building while providing a more intimate residential environment. Together, the housing developments establish a new residential framework around Sears, allowing the project to function not simply as a destination, but as part of an everyday neighborhood.



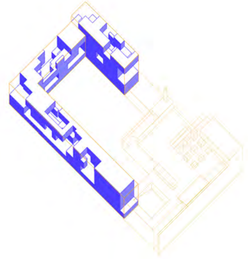




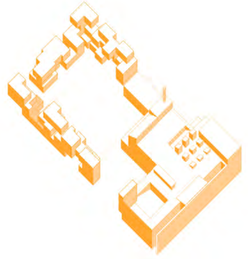
Proposed site context and future development model.



Massing geometry from existing Sear's geometry.



Deductive void strategy.

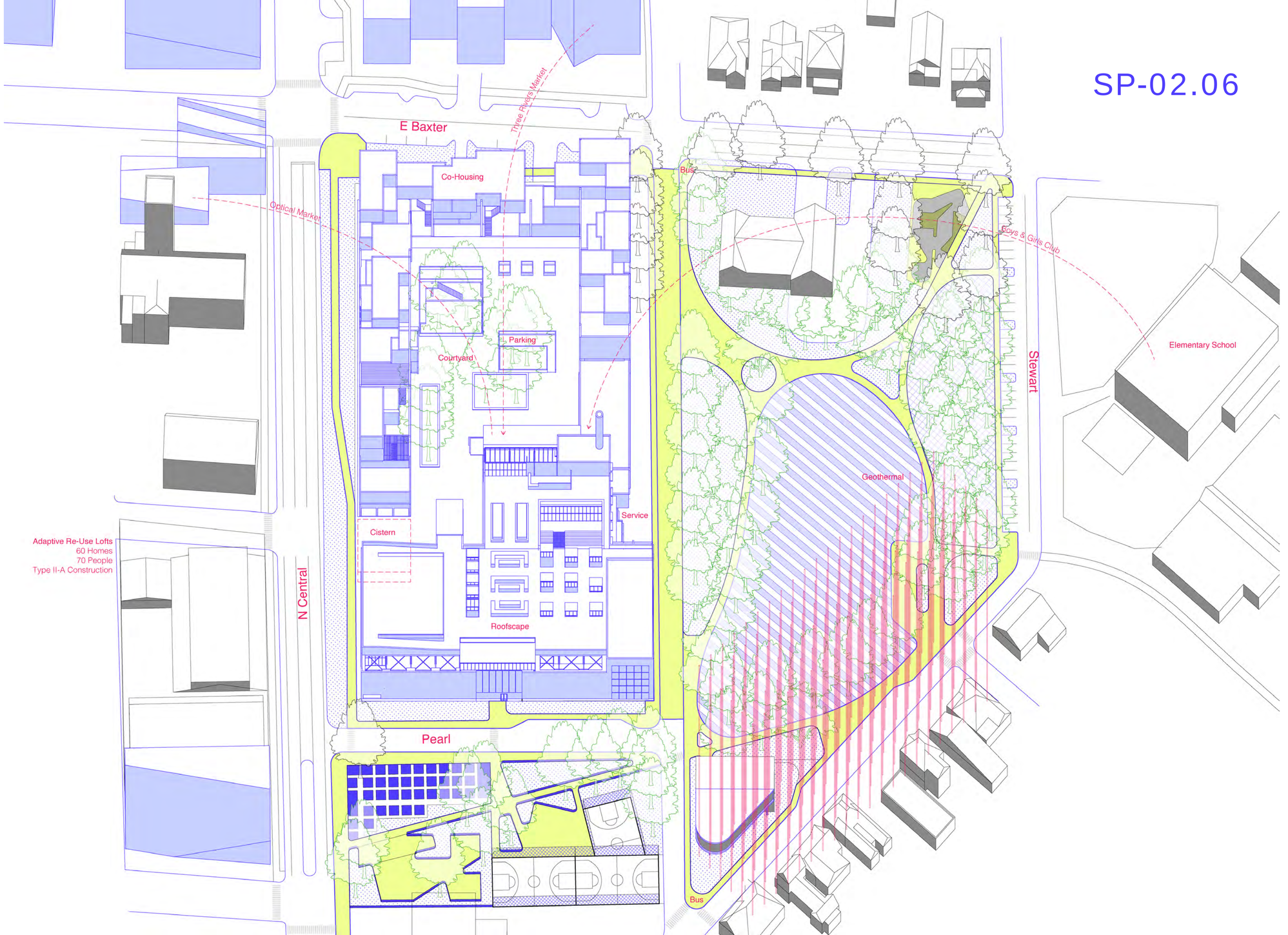


Modular housing configuration.



Modular housing unit floor plans.

SP-02.06


E Baxter
Three Rivers Market
Co-Housing
Optical Market
Parking
Courtyard
Cistern
Service
Roofscape
Pearl
N Central
Adaptive Re-Use Lofts
60 Homes
70 People
Type II-A Construction
Bus
Boys & Girls Club
Stewart
Elementary School
Geothermal
Bus



Original interior staircase of Sear's building.



Proposed reuse of the existing staircase within new Sear's building context.

NEW CONSTRUCTION	
INITIAL COSTS:	**$46,685,525**
NMTC [39%]:	($6,366,687)
HTC [20%]:	($0)
TOTAL COST:	**$40,318,938**

REUSE OF EXISTING	
INITIAL COSTS:	**$ 35,816,625**
NMTC [39%]:	($6,260,282)
HTC [20%]:	($7,163,325)
TOTAL COST:	**$22,393,018**

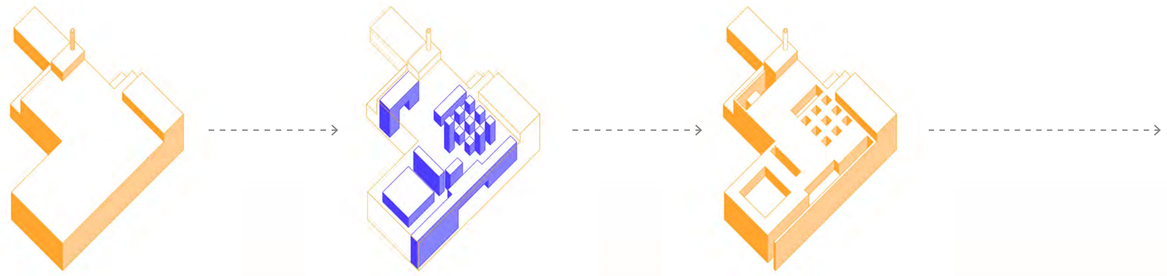
PRESERVATION

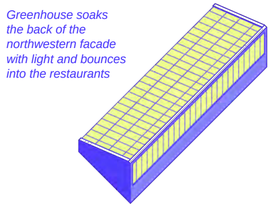
The project approach prioritizes preserving the facade and character of the existing Sears Building. As a result, the majority of interventions are focused on subtractive interior cuts and additive roof monitors, allowing the historic exterior to remain largely intact. Preserving the exterior maintains the building's recognizable presence within the neighborhood and maintains the physical connection to its history and former role as a Sears department store. The existing facade becomes a foundation for introducing new uses and activity while maintaining the character and identity of the original building. Preserving the existing facade also positions the project to pursue historic preservation tax credits.

If constructed as an entirely new building, the project is estimated to cost approximately $40 million. By reusing the majority of the existing structure, the project can take advantage of both Historic Tax Credits and New Markets Tax Credits, reducing the estimated project cost to approximately $22 million.

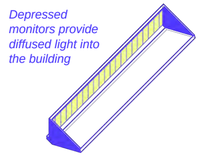
SURGICAL CUTS

A series of surgical cuts are made into the roof and floor plates to open the structure to light and air, while preserving the building's hermetic presence. The result is an unassuming exterior hiding a complex geode within. The cuts are capped with a roofscape that channel the sun to provide unique light qualities throughout the building. From the street, these monitors emerge from the opaque facade, hinting to its contents.

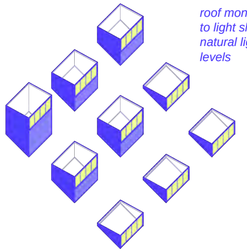




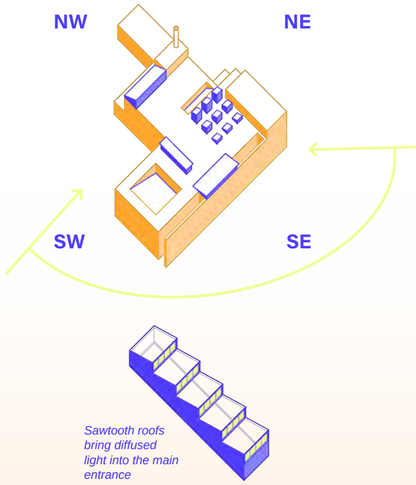
Greenhouse soaks the back of the northwestern facade with light and bounces into the restaurants

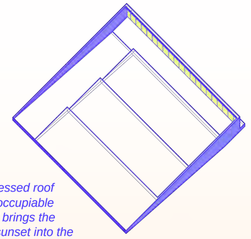


Depressed monitors provide diffused light into the building



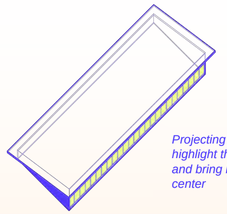
roof monitors connect to light shafts that bring natural light to the lower levels



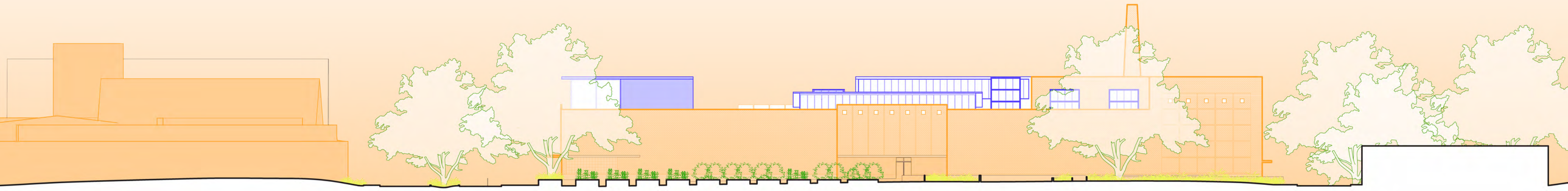


The depressed roof features occupiable trays and brings the evening sunset into the hearth of the building

Sawtooth roofs bring diffused light into the main entrance

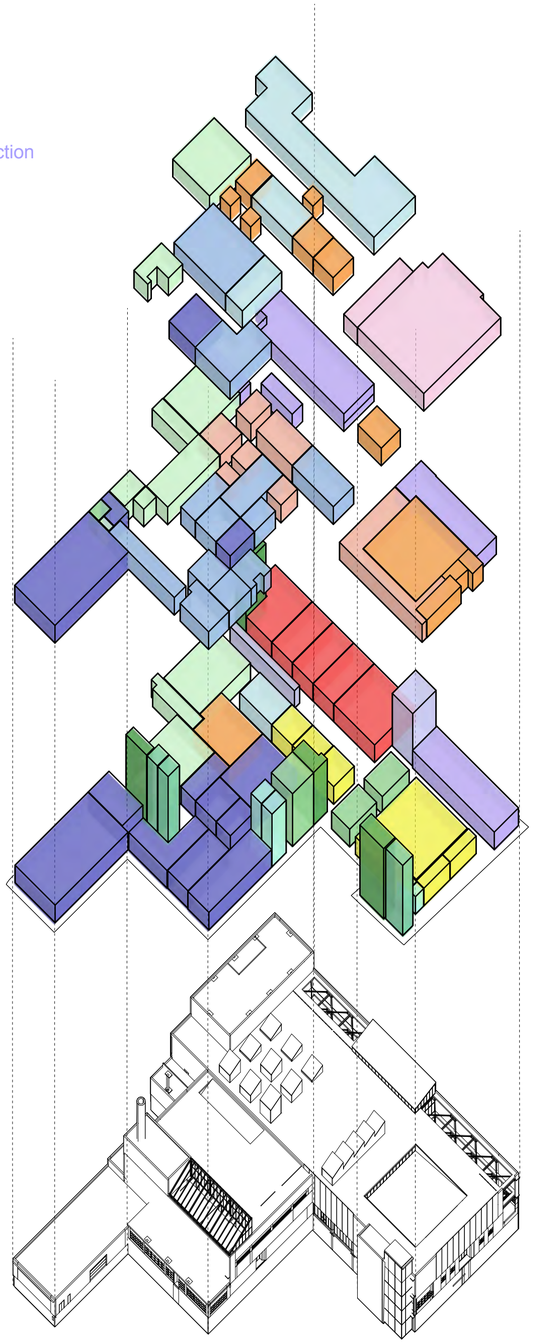


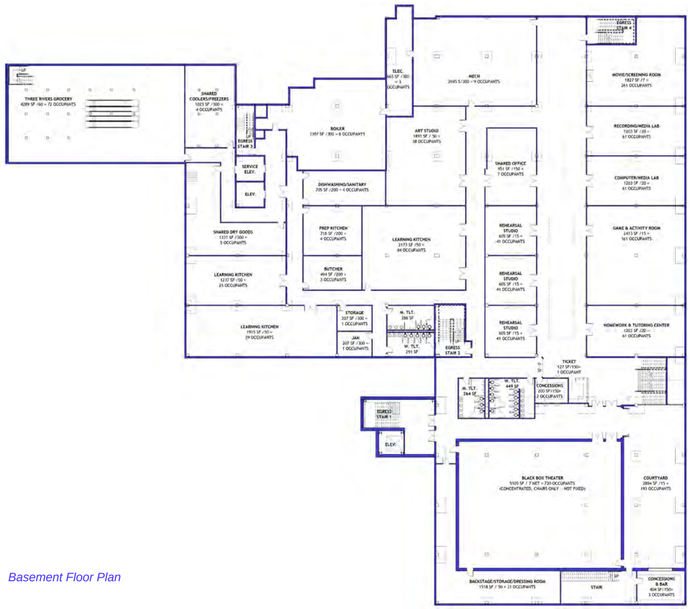
Projecting roof monitors highlight the existing stair and bring light into the center



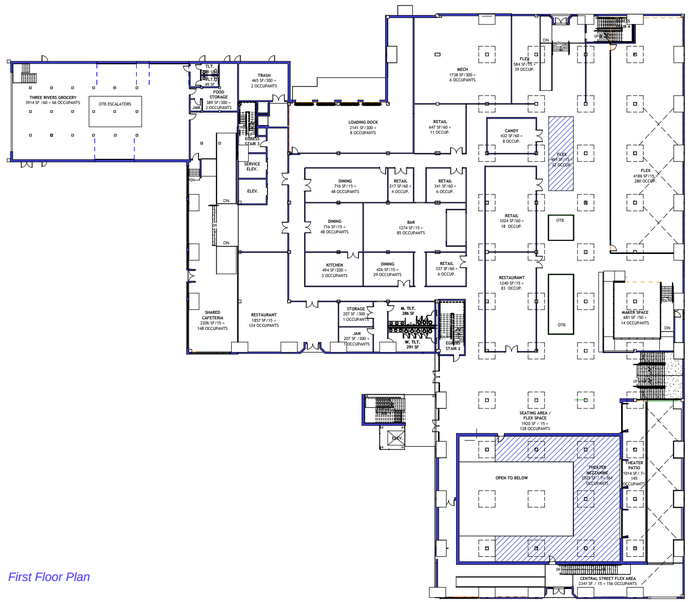
SP-02.09

- Maker Space
- Retail
- Culinary, Grocery & Production
- Dining
- Office & Non-Profit & Civic
- Recreation & Use
- Performance & Arts
- Communication Stair
- Flex Space
- Storage
- Building Core
- Bathrooms
- Elevators
- Egress Stairs





Basement Floor Plan



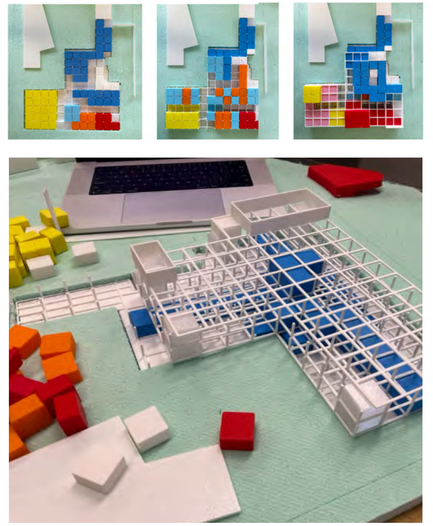
First Floor Plan

Generic Specificity & Loose Fit

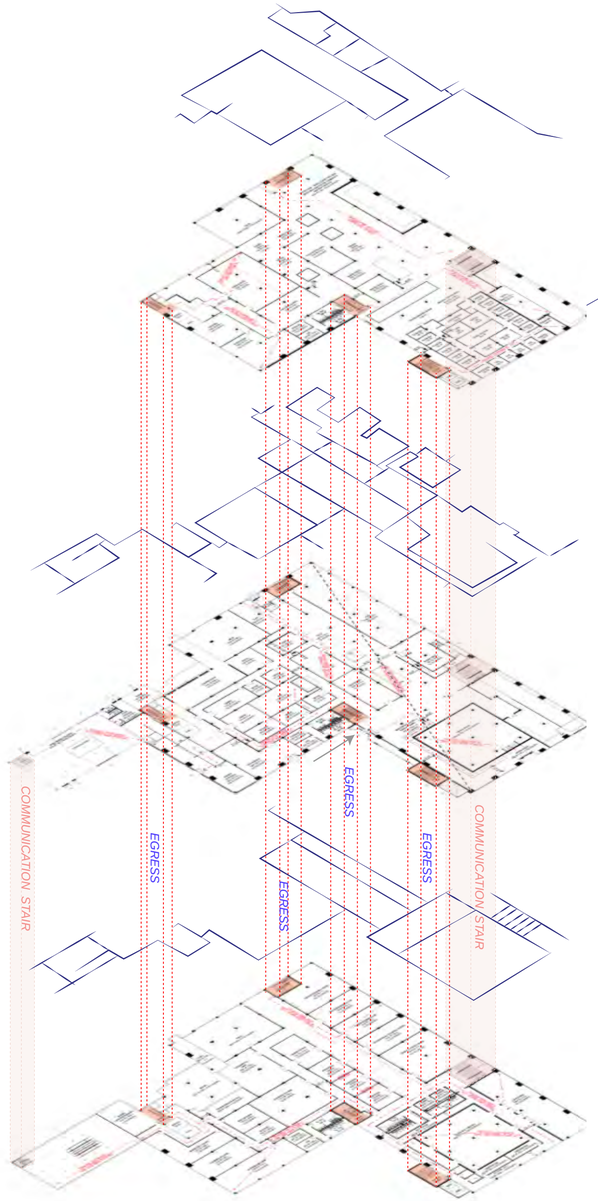
The programming process started by making a physical model of the existing column grid and using 3D printed program blocks to test how different uses could fit within the structure. This allowed us to quickly study adjacencies, stacking, and spatial relationships, while staying grounded in the constraints of the existing building. The model helped determine where spaces could be more open or more condensed, and how different functions could begin to overlap or connect both in plan and in section.

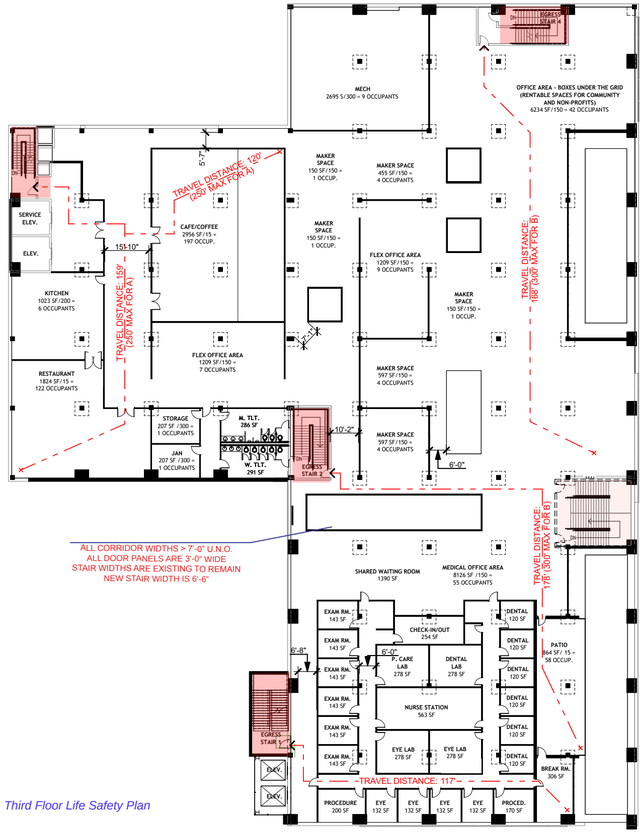
The building contains a variety of uses intended to serve the surrounding community. While some areas are designated for specific programs, many are designed to be shared or used by other groups when not occupied by their primary program. The layout encourages partnerships across uses.

This loose-fit approach allows spaces to support different users and activities over time. Open courtyards, wide hallways, and an occupiable roof extend this flexibility, providing additional spaces that can be shared across programs and remain open to the public.

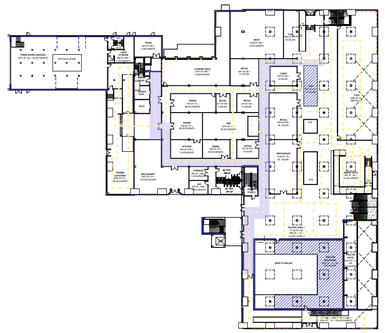


Initial Massing and Program Study with 3D Prints and CNC Base

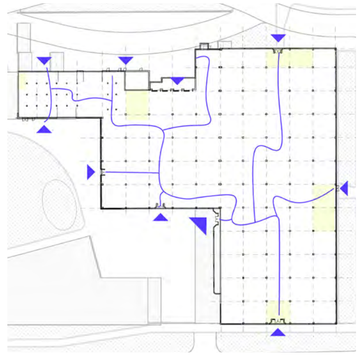




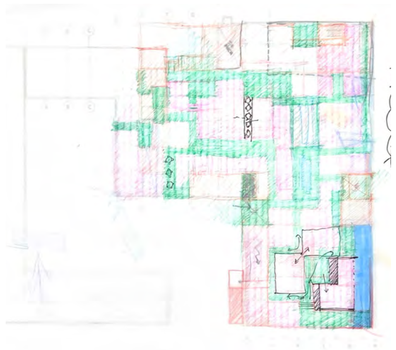
Third Floor Life Safety Plan



Service Corridor Highlighted Purple, Meandering Path Dashed Yellow



Circulation Strategy - Wander-Like Movement with Direct Entries



Floor Plan Strategy - Free Plan

SP-02.10

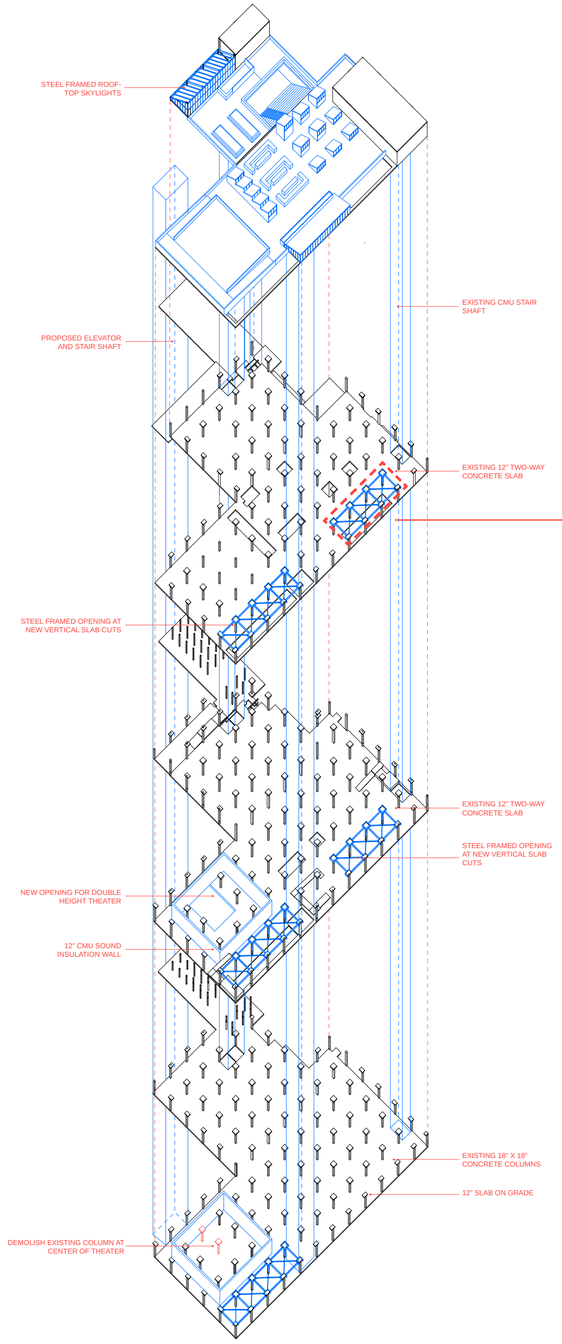
Circulation

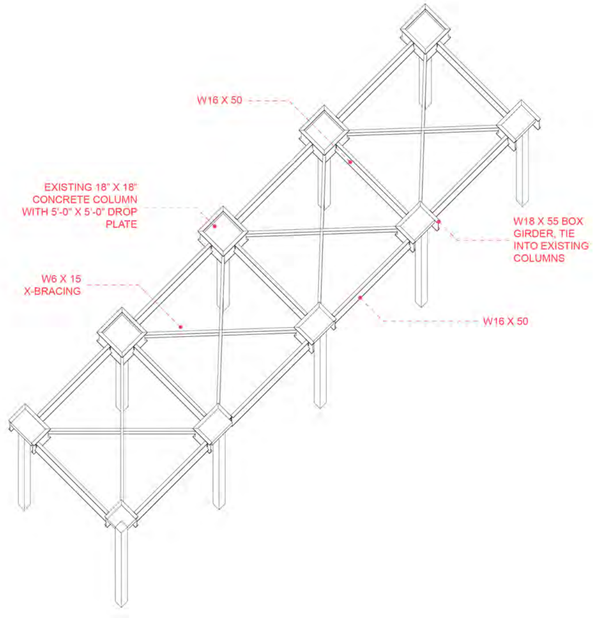
The circulation strategy is not organized around a strict hierarchy, but instead encourages wandering and exploration, influenced by the meandering we see with people in parks and in shopping. Rather than directing people through a single primary path, the system gives users multiple ways to move through the building.

The interior is organized through a series of loops instead of long, linear hallways. These loops allow continuous movement between programs and avoid dead ends. With the variety of programs and occupancy types, the free plan was maintained by treating the whole building as assembly. By following the most stringent occupancy type by code, we eliminated the need for fire separation that would divide a floor plan centered around programs and people collaborating and freely exploring.

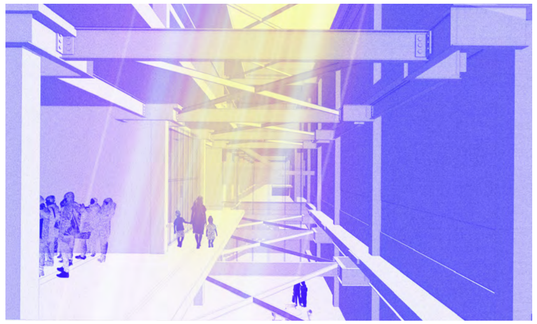
While there is no rigid hierarchy, certain paths naturally become more active. Circulation gravitates toward areas with access to light wells and corridors where program spills into the hallway. Display, making, and seating draw people in and create informal centers of activity.

Corridors are treated as active zones rather than leftover space, allowing circulation to become part of the experience and support interaction. Courtyards act as breakout zones that extend activity and provide moments of pause, but they are not part of the egress system.





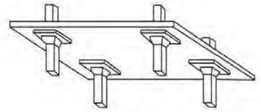




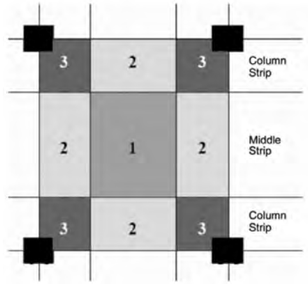
SP-02.11

Structural Intervention

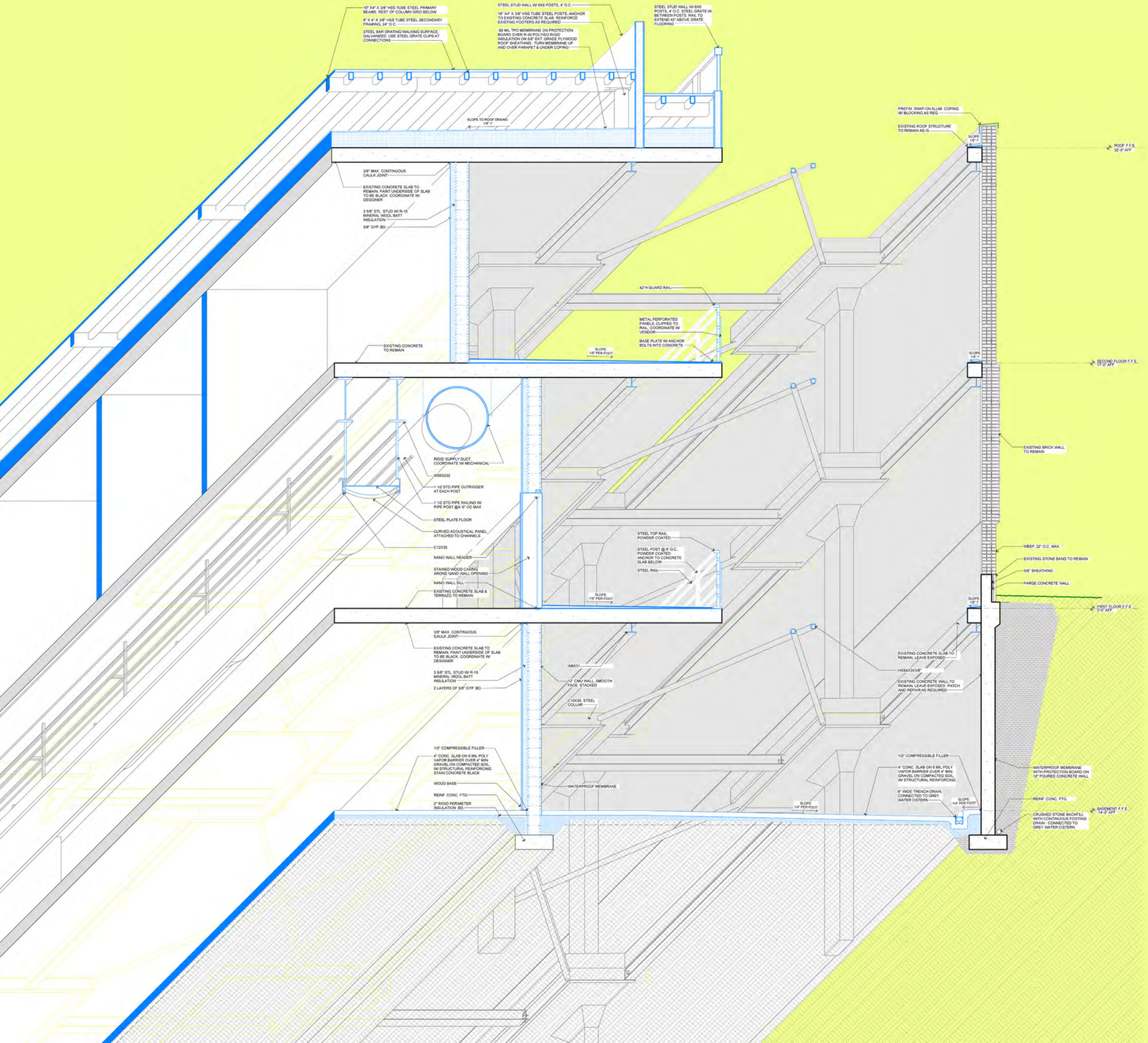
The existing Sears building is composed of a two-way concrete flat slab supported by concrete columns and CMU exterior walls, and shallow foundations performing at their maximum capacity. Because the structure cannot accommodate additional vertical load, our design strategy has shifted towards subtraction and redistribution.
Roof and slab cuts introduce new voids for light, air, and circulation, but these removals disrupt the original load paths. To compensate, a series of structural steel interventions are inserted to capture and redirect loads around the openings. These steel interventions are only required in areas where the slab cuts exceed cutting less than 6.25' from the column centerline. These steel elements act as a secondary structural network, bridging across cuts and transferring forces back into the existing column and wall grid without overloading the foundations. The result is a careful negotiation between removal and reinforcement, highlighting the inter-workings of the old Sear's structure, with the new while still enabling spatial transformation.



Two way flat slab with concrete capitals and drop panels. From MIDAL, 2022.



Allowable slab penetration areas. From The American Concrete Institute, 2006.



SP-02.12

Tectonics & Assembly

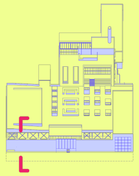
Wall Section

The wall section reflects an approach to sustainability rooted in adaptive reuse. Instead of demolishing and re-building, the project works through retaining and upgrading the existing Sears structure.

The section combines increased insulation, storm water collection, and reduced embodied carbon through structural retention. The environmental strategies and mechanical systems are also intended to work together rather than operate separately from the architecture. Daylighting from the roof above helps reduce lighting demand, thermal mass helps stabilize interior temperatures, and open circulation zones act as buffers between conditioned and unconditioned space. Mechanical systems are integrated within the structure in order to maintain the open and flexible nature of the floor plates rather than breaking the building into isolated zones.

Roof monitors bring controlled daylight deep into the building while also creating opportunities for passive airflow and ventilation throughout portions of the project. Elevated rooftop conditions, perforated grate systems, and open circulation zones help blur the boundary between interior and exterior environmental conditions while reinforcing the project's focus on wandering, gathering, and movement through space.

Overall, the section reflects the larger goals of the project including adaptive reuse, free-plan flexibility, ecological systems integration, and community use. Structure, environmental systems, circulation, and program are intended to work together as one interconnected system rather than as isolated parts layered onto one another.



SP-02.13

Integrated Environmental Strategy

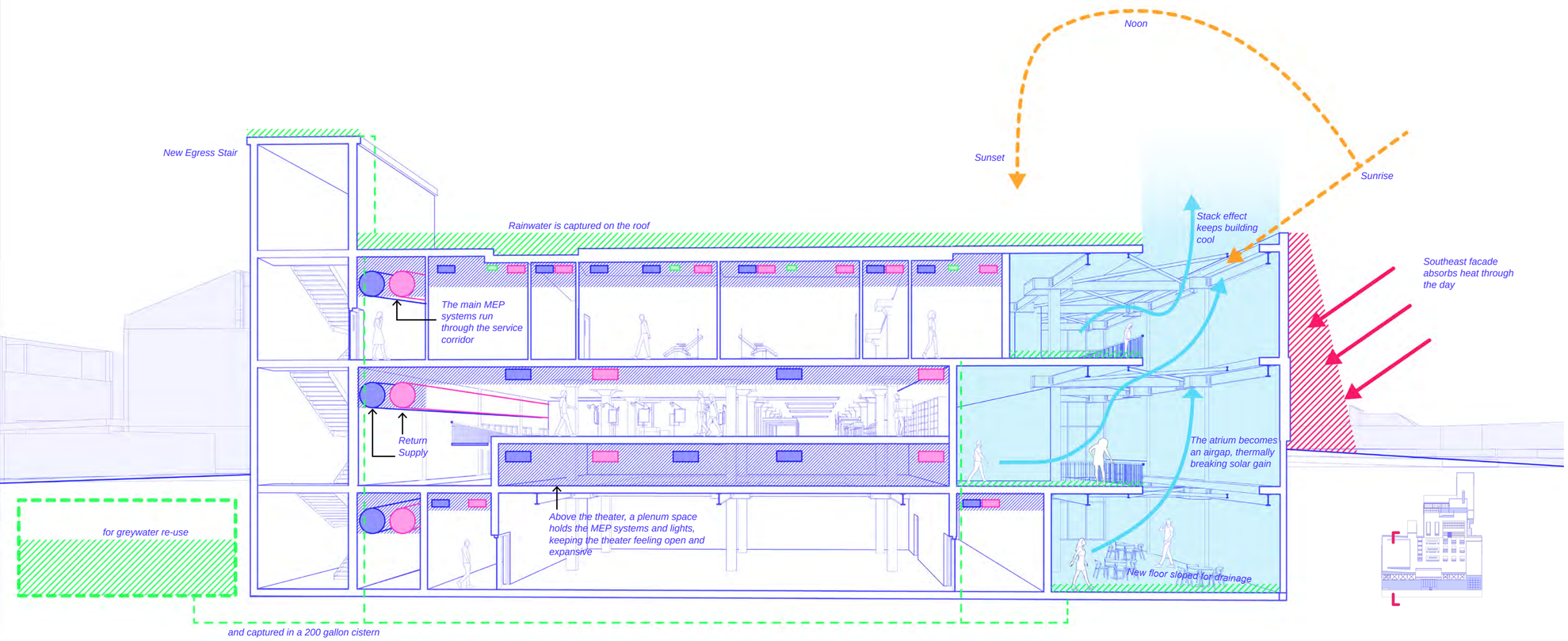
The building integrates passive climatic response with high-efficiency mechanical systems to reduce energy demand while maintaining a stable interior environment. Daylighting, solar control, and stack-driven air movement are embedded within the building's massing and section, allowing operable apertures and vertical voids to support mixed-mode ventilation during mild seasons.

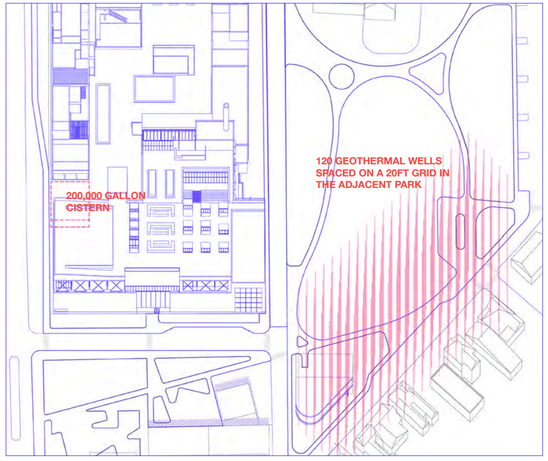
Mechanical conditioning is provided by a centralized water-source heat pump system powered by 120 geothermal wells arranged on a 20-foot grid beneath the adjacent park. Heating and cooling water is distributed from the existing basement boiler room to local heat exchangers, allowing conditioning to respond directly to occupancy and programmatic needs.

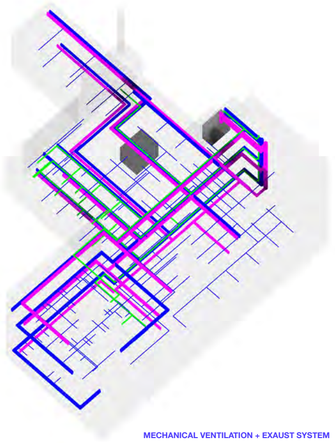
Ventilation operates independently through a rooftop Dedicated Outdoor Air System (DOAS), supplying filtered, conditioned fresh air to occupied spaces. Decoupling ventilation from thermal conditioning improves system efficiency while maintaining indoor air quality and building pressurization.

Vertical service shafts connect rooftop equipment to each floor, where horizontal ductwork and piping distribute environmental services. Much of this infrastructure remains exposed, making environmental systems a legible component of the building's spatial organization.

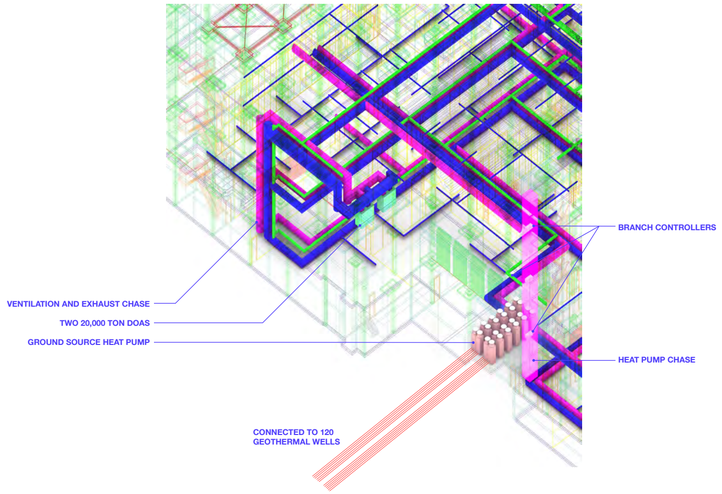
Together, passive airflow, geothermal heat exchange, and dedicated ventilation form a hybrid environmental strategy in which building section, infrastructure, and energy performance operate as a single architectural system.



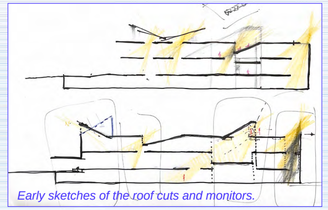




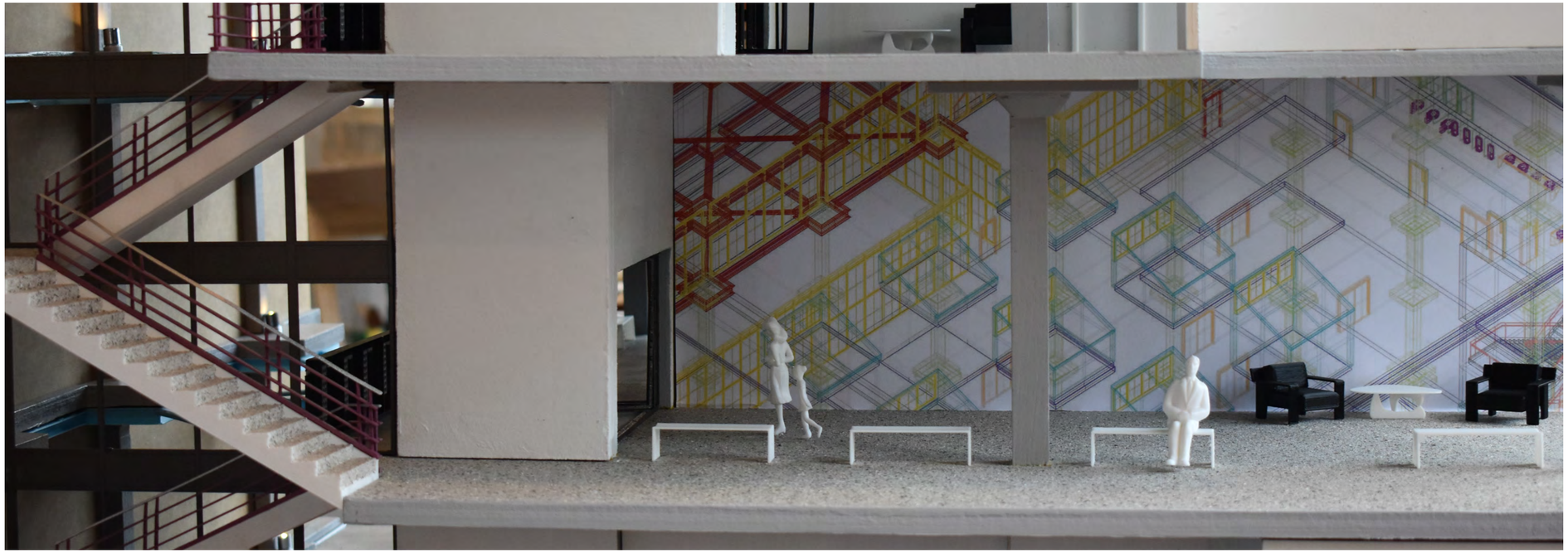
MECHANICAL VENTILATION + EXAUST SYSTEM



SP-02.14



Early sketches of the roof cuts and monitors.



SP-02.15

Dissemination

Through construction of a large-scale physical model, the team explored means and methods while gaining a better understanding of how the building's systems come together as an integrated whole. The model was designed to communicate the proposal as an experience rather than simply as an object. Various materials and colors, multiple views into the building, and the interaction of natural and artificial light allow viewers to see relationships between floors, circulation, program, structure, and new interior interventions.

The model was presented to the Knoxville community at the East Tennessee Community Design Center's Community Collaborative First Friday exhibit. Its scale and level of detail allowed visitors to visualize spaces that are difficult to communicate through drawings alone, including the interior courtyard, double-height black box theater, and preserved terrazzo stair.









