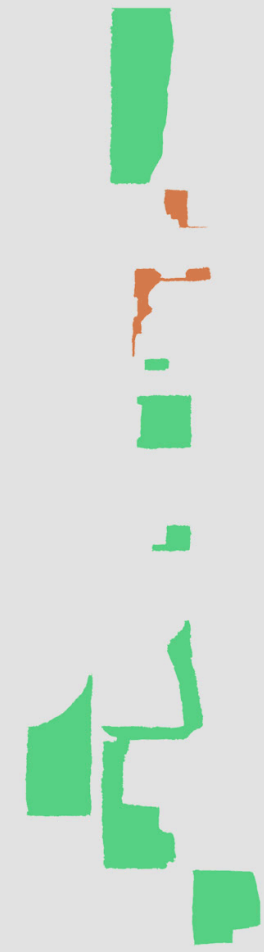Alexandria was first settled by Europeans in 1695 by the British Colony of Virginia. It became a prominent port city, especially in the transportation of tobacco, cotton, wine, sugar, and slaves. In 1791, the part of Alexandria now known as Old Town, was incorporated into the portion of land that would make up the District of Columbia.

From 1828 to 1836, the slave trade in Alexandria was one of the most prominent in the country. The main plaza in Alexandria, Market Square, was the home of the second largest slave market in the country prior to the Civil War. This square is famous for being the oldest functioning marketplace in the country. In 1846, Alexandria was given back to Virginia.

Because of competition with Georgetown's port and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, Alexandria's economy started to stagnate during the 19th century. Its importance as a port town was further lessened once the rail system became developed. These conditions enabled a lot of modern industry to overlook this colonial town, thus preserving its historic fabric.[1]

2. Images adapted from: Historical Materials from Alexandria Archaeology Museum. Alexandria, Virginia. 5 December 2007.

Because Old Town Alexandria is such an historic town, it seemed appropriate to study the existing urban fabric. The primary commercial areas are along King Street, which creates a strong central axis cutting through the town. King Street enters Old Town Alexandria at The Masonic Temple, the highest point of the town, and then descends slowly until it terminates at the Potomac River. The town's layout is a classic gridiron plan. Thus, King Street assumes an even stronger central role, one because of its commercial importance, and two because of its central location, cutting across the town at its center.

Currently, there is a park promenade along the waterfront. The goal of the town is to complete the promenade with a strong public fabric defining the Alexandria waterfront.

⬭ density

⬤ open space

🔵 commercial

🔵 residential

🔵 industrial

🟠 plazas

🟢 parks

An exploration of the fabric of Old Town Alexandria

All images on this page are by the author.

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King Street elevation and section profile
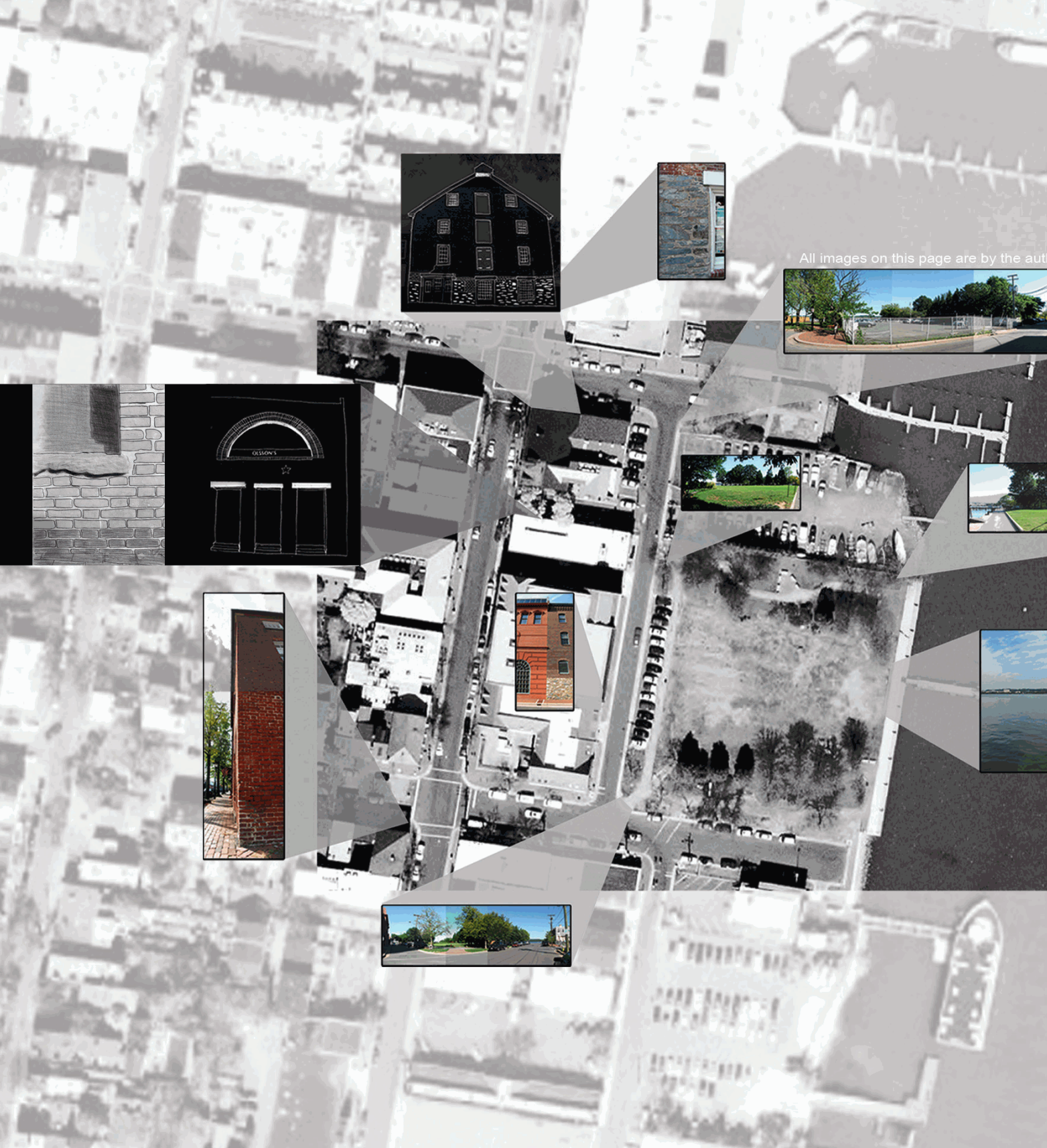
images of the site

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The site is at the end of King Street, adjacent to The Strand. It is now comprised of a parking lot owned by a local boating club, and a park. On the other side of The Strand is a four story office building. The town dramatically ends at The Strand, leaving no transition from town to river.

After studying the elements of the site, it seemed important to respond to the river, because the river has such a strong presence along the edge of the site. I also wanted to preserve some of the existing park.
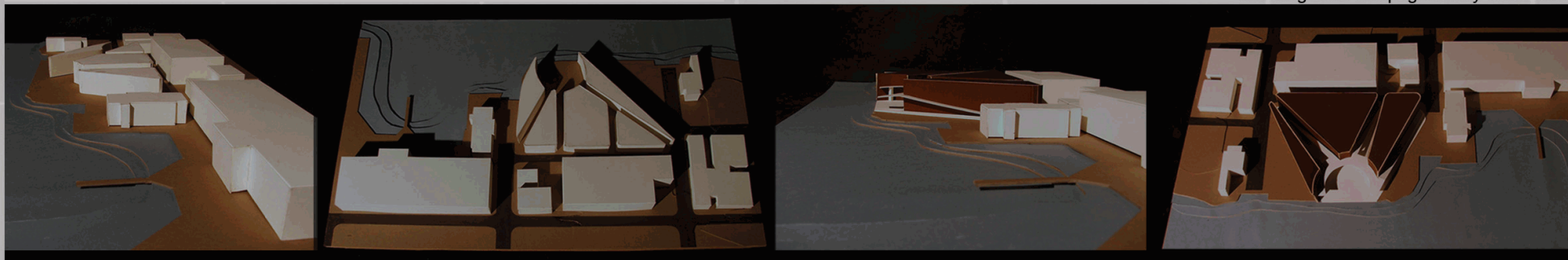
The materials used in building are fairly consistent in this part of Alexandria. Brick is frequently used, with stone lintels and sills. Also, the ground level of buildings is often a rusticated stone wall.

All images on this page are by the author.
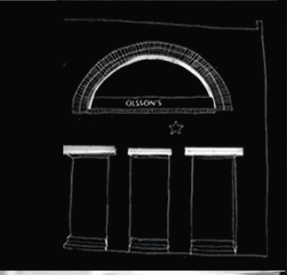
One of my early design exercises was to recreate the site through a scale model. I wanted to cut up the space, which was currently a park and parking lot.

My initial concerns were to respond to the density of the town, primarily the immediate four story building neighboring my site. My intention was to create density that would lessen as it approached the water. This change in density would create a threshold or entrance to a more open condition. A public space would be carved out of the structures, creating a strong "village green" at the edge of the water.

After manipulating these forms, it seemed necessary to incorporate an element of transition from urban fabric to open public space. Also, the difference in scale of the Potomac River to that of Alexandria became striking. I realized that a building on this site must respond to the change in scale from narrow streets and row houses to a mile wide river. This was the first time the current and tidal element of the river became important, and it seemed crucial to respond to the movement of the river.

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