

**MOTION AND EMOTION:  
URBAN DWELLING IN NEW ORLEANS**

by Benjamin S. Keeney

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

Approved by...

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Mark Schneider, PhD, Chairman

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Steve Thompson

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Bill Galloway

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

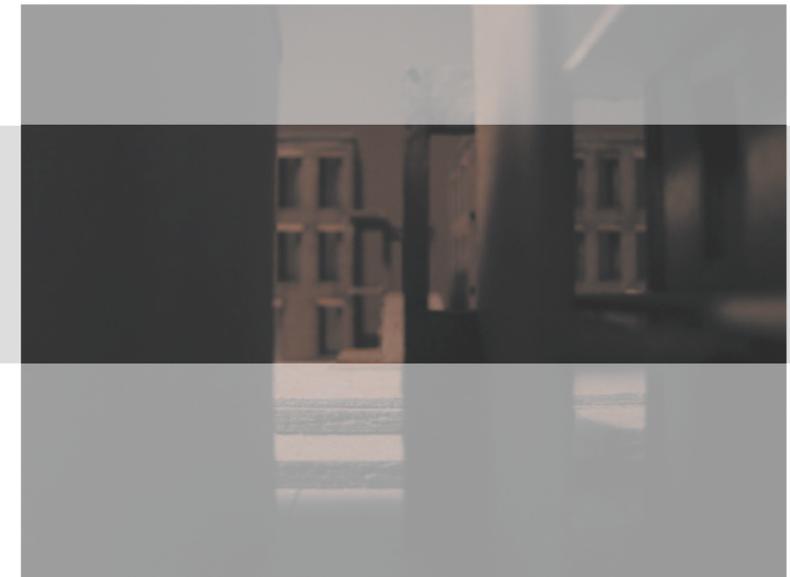
This thesis is dedicated to Jeffery Allen Mayfield, Sherman Harman, and William Keeney. The life and work of a mentor is something that never fades.

I would like to thank my thesis committee members, Mark Schneider, Steve Thompson, and Bill Galloway for their patient guidance and steady support.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to all those impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

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# MOTION AND EMOTION

## URBAN DWELLING IN NEW ORLEANS

by Benjamin Keeney

### ABSTRACT

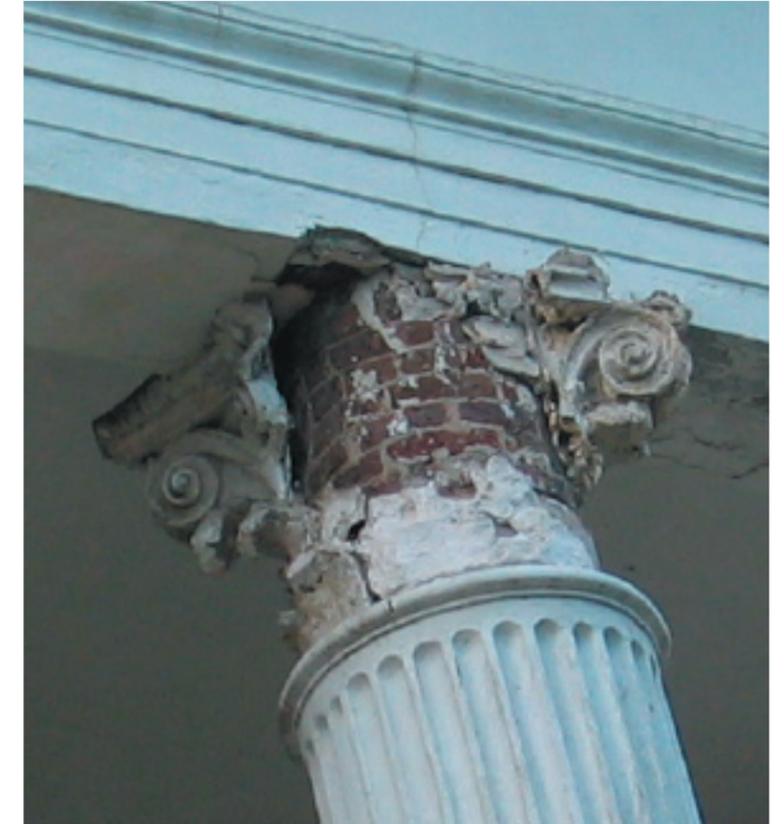
This thesis brings forth the regional architecture of New Orleans, Louisiana, and applies it directly towards the reconstruction and reconstitution of the Lafitte Housing Project closed as a result of Hurricane Katrina in late August 2005. The half-mile long Lafitte Housing Project rests just outside the French Quarter in the Sixth Ward.

This thesis proposes reopening the canal along Jefferson Davis Parkway and extending it into the French Quarter to the southern edge of Louis Armstrong Park. As many of the former apartments were damaged by flooding from Hurricane Katrina, some units will be demolished to make way for site changes.

A problematic condition of the former public housing complex was the way that it stood within the site as a massive homogenous entity, far out of scale to the surrounding urban fabric. The solution to rebuilding the site is not to construct another massive housing community. Rather, this proposal would include restoring many of the existing units, providing a historic anchor to the new neighborhood, and allowing them to remain along with new construction.

Earth removed from the canal will stay on the site and be used to construct a half-mile long mound, running most of the length of the projects. This mounded area will feature spaces for recreational activities, Marti Gras celebrations, relaxation, and it will allow bridged access to the second floors of the new buildings. More important than what the mound does, is what it is: a metaphor for rising up from the mud and water and towards an elevated way of living, for inhabitants of the new and old structures.

The vehicle for the form and structure of the new dwelling units is the historic Foursquare house. A house that symbolizes aristocracy and well-being, these new units are a refinement of the two bedroom apartments in the existing public housing complex. In this proposal, both will coexist throughout the site.



## NEW ORLEANS AND THE FRENCH QUARTER



French Quarter  
Rainy Day, July 2006



Frenchman Street  
Mid Afternoon, July 2006

The French Quarter is the most recognizable neighborhood in New Orleans. Featuring Jackson Square, the French Market, and the infamous Bourbon Street, it draws massive crowds into the city from all around the world.

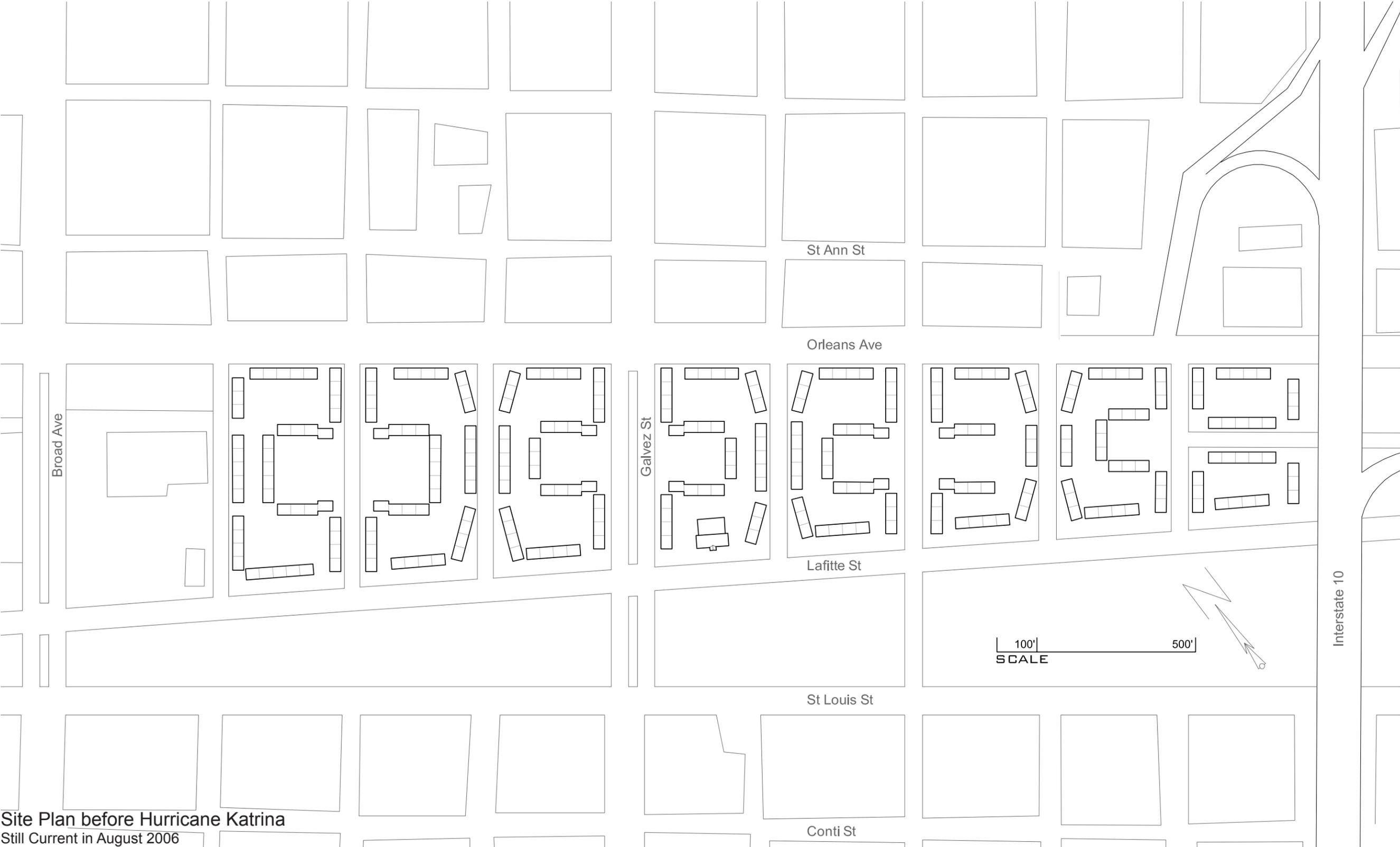
The site of this proposal, the Lafitte Housing Projects, is a half-mile stretch located on Orleans Avenue, in the Sixth Ward. It borders the Louis Armstrong Park, just next to the French Quarter, yet is separated from the park and the core of the city by Interstate 10.

The housing project is part of an area once known as Congo Square, one of the few places in the South where enslaved Africans were allowed to gather to dance, create music, and share news (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2005.)

After the birth and death of the Congo Square, the area seated the original Storyville, a place designated by the city government as a zone of legalized prostitution. The Storyville era, beginning in 1897, was ended by the federal government in 1917. Many of the historic buildings and single cot motels were burned to the ground during a massive raze. (Wikipedia, 2005.)

In 1941, an 896-unit housing development, the Lafitte Housing Project, was constructed to provide low-income housing for African American tenants while a nearby development was built to accommodate Caucasians. (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2005.) The completion of Interstate 10 further segregated the area from the French Quarter during the late 1960's. The busy roadway continues to form a border between the site for this thesis and the core of the city.

THE LAFITTE HOUSING PROJECTS IN THE SIXTH WARD



Site Plan before Hurricane Katrina  
Still Current in August 2006

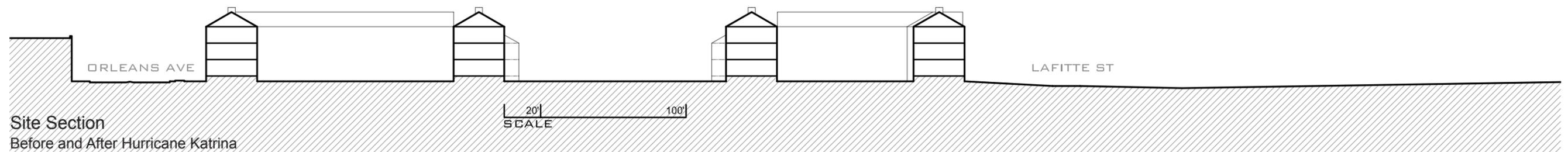
# THE LAFITTE HOUSING PROJECTS



Side View of Single Unit  
Postedited Photograph, July 2006



Existing Window  
Postedited Photograph, July 2006



Site Section  
Before and After Hurricane Katrina

## THE LAFITTE HOUSING PROJECTS, AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA



Site, Empty Courtyards  
July 2006



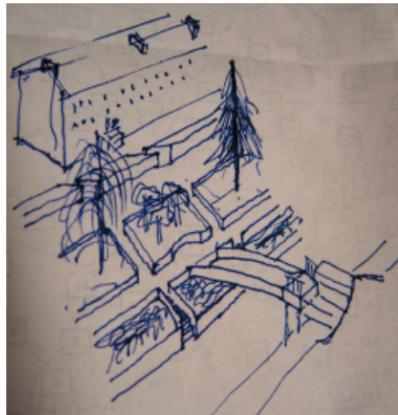
Pathways through Existing Site  
July 2006

Heavy steel plates currently cover all of the accessible openings, blocking potential inhabitants from entry. Former residents can only legally enter the units with HUD supervision. HUD has recently released confirmation that four of New Orleans public housing projects are scheduled for complete demolition to make way for mixed-use and mixed-income developments. Many former residents quickly responded with lawsuits and marches, claiming that it is discrimination to demolish their former homes. (Roberts. "New Orleans housing unwelcoming to some.")

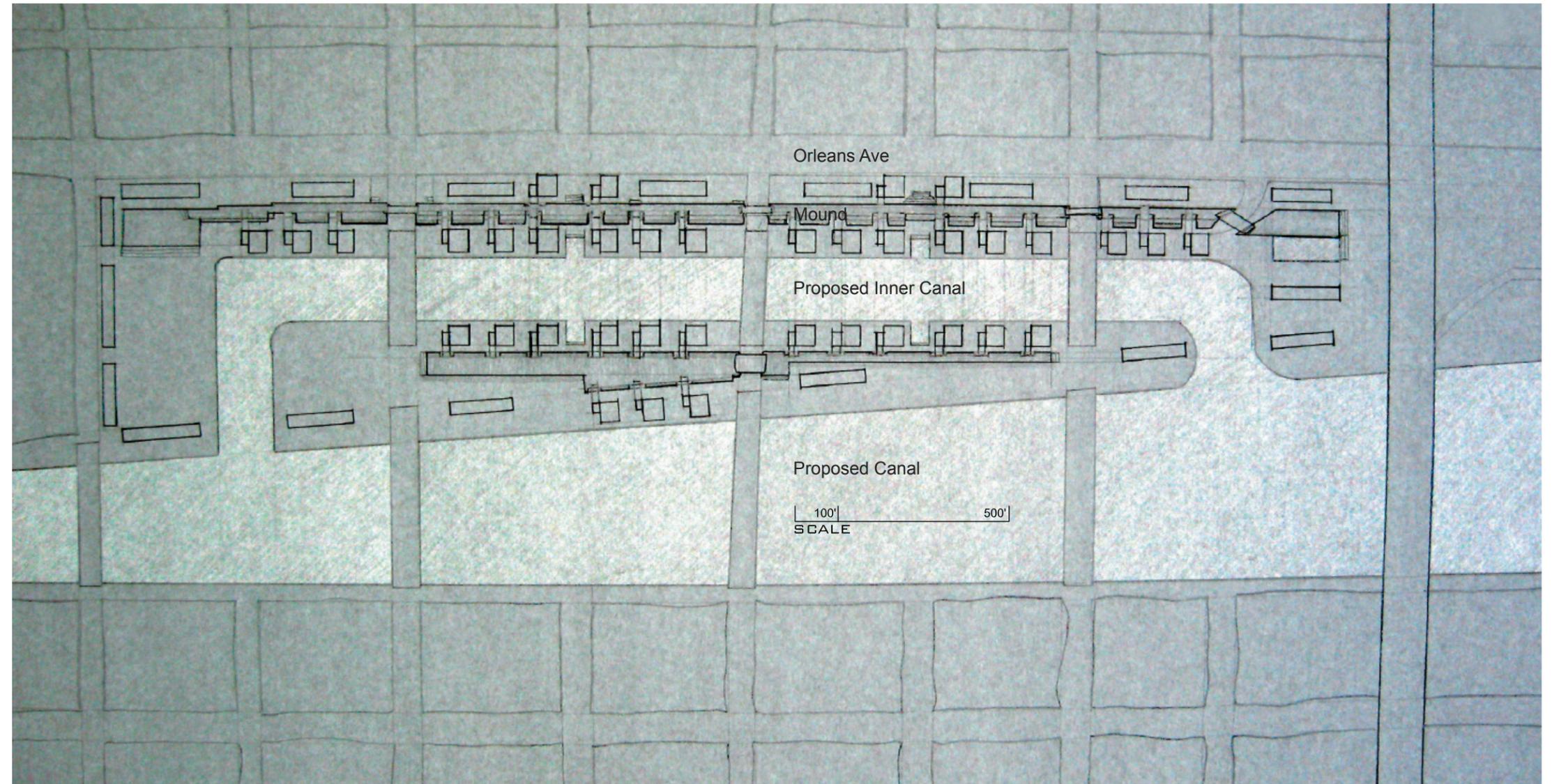


Site, From Orleans Ave  
July 2006

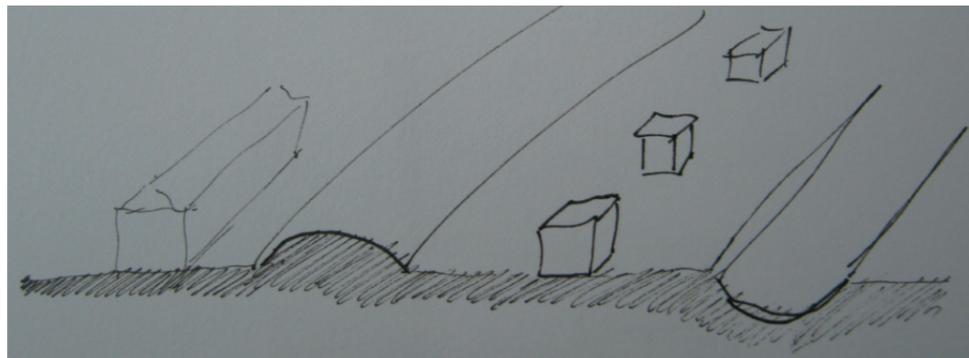
## SITE PROPOSAL



Axon Showing Mound  
Path Intersections



Overall Site Plan  
And Surrounding Areas



A diagrammatic illustration of the site treatment illustrates a removal from the filled canal and a replacement of this earth on the other side of the dwelling units. From the mud, arises a mound that elevates the inhabitants to the dwelling units above the streets.

This proposal relies upon not only adding new units, but also keeping many of the old public housing apartments on the site. After fumigation against mold, these residences can be restored to remain on the site as public housing. Thus, the introduction of the new apartments serves as an added layer in history to, and not merely over, the preexisting conditions.

## EDGES OF WATER



Piazza and Sidewalk  
Venice, IT



Hard Edge, Buildings Emerge from Water  
Along the Grand Canal, Venice, IT

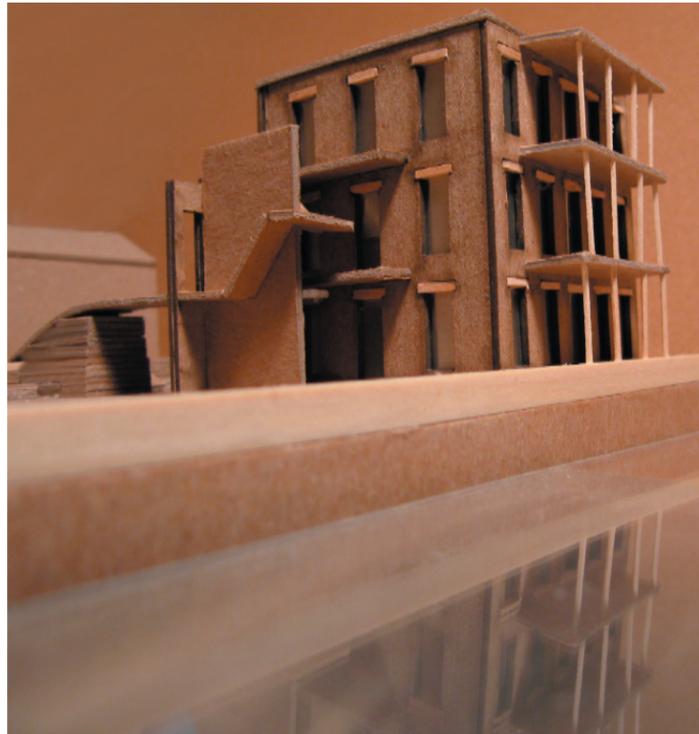


Walkway along Each Side  
Canal in Georgetown, DC



Soft Edge, Buildings set Further Back  
North of French Quarter, New Orleans, LA

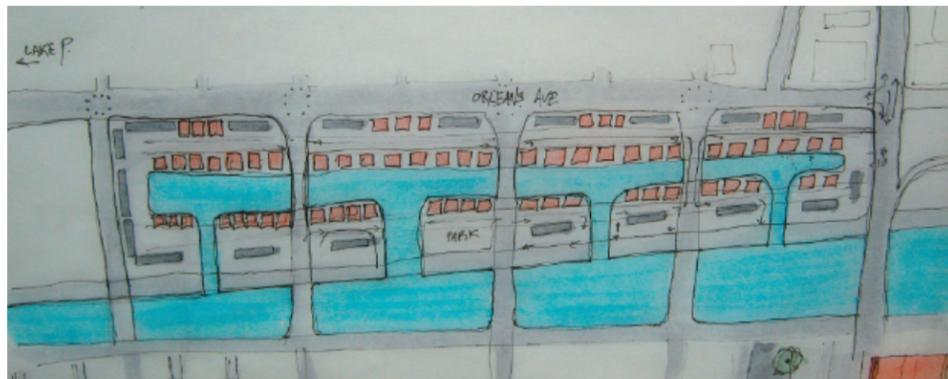
## WATER IN NEW ORLEANS



Looking Up from Canal  
Study Model

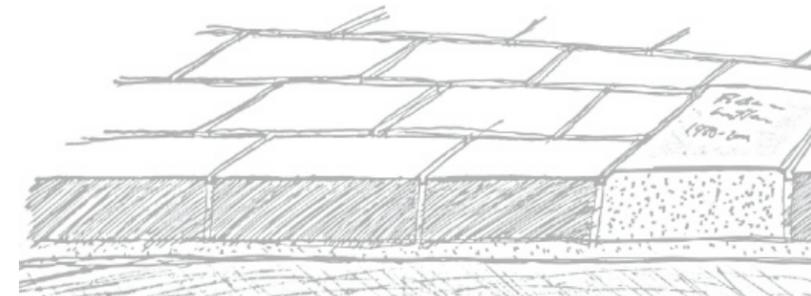


2-Point Perspective  
Early Sketch



Early Site Plan  
Before Reduction of Number of Units

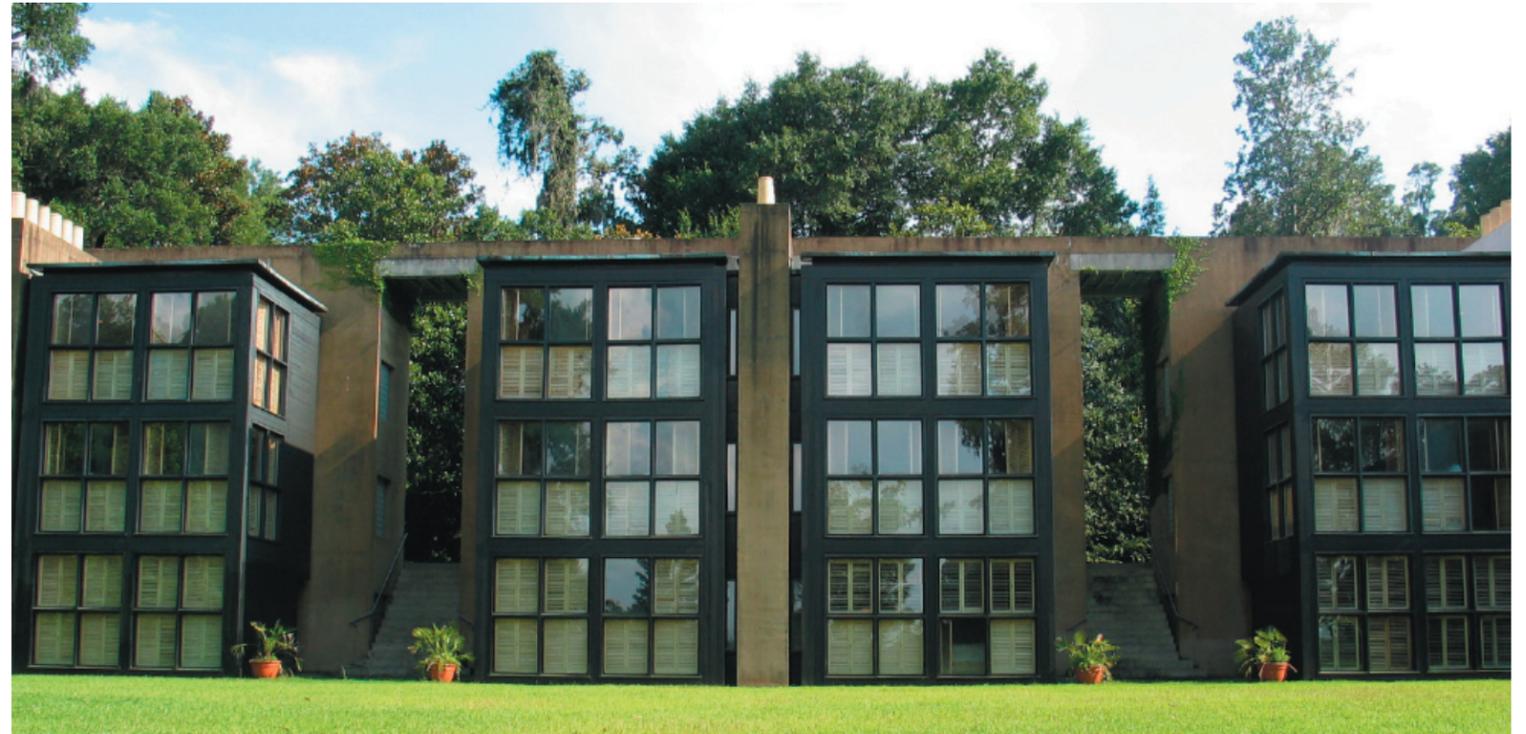
The presence of water in New Orleans is something that does not have to be destructive. The controlled introduction of water into the urban environment allows a place for reflection and meditation. In this thesis, water is used to create a street for pedestrians and watercraft, thus defining a new series of city blocks within the surrounding fabric.



## EARTH AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT



Looking From Mound  
Early Study Model



Inn at Middleton Place, by W.G. Clark  
Charleston, SC  
Summer 2005



Looking Up Mound  
Study Model

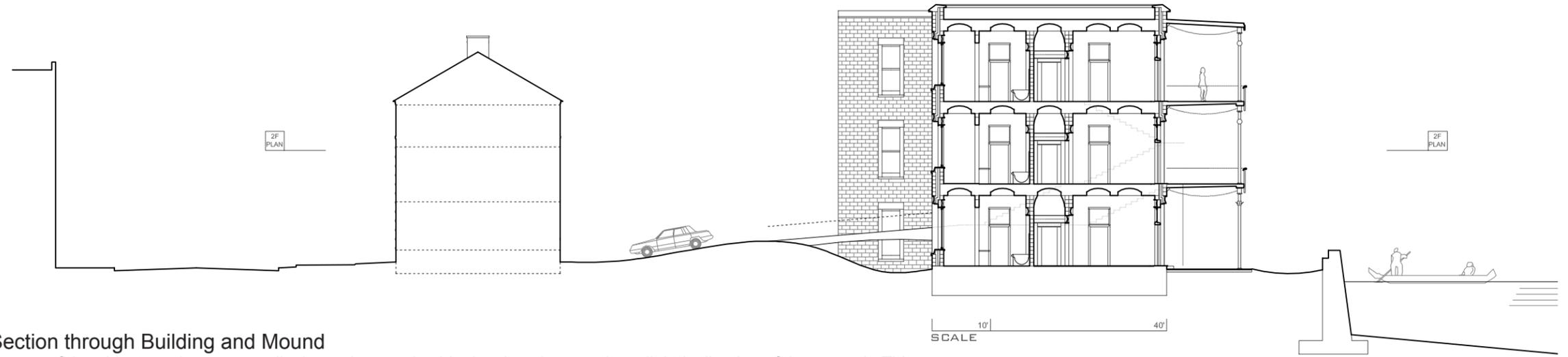
Earth from the swamps is elevated to form a landscaped mound between the rows of buildings. Pathways intertwine around the mound as a small one-way street divides it from the buildings bordering the canal. The mound will contain a multitude of leisurely and recreational spaces, yet provide access for inhabitants to enter the dwelling levels via bridges that connect to porch-sized landings on the second floors.

The one-way street allows passage to and from parking areas and first floor commercial occupancies. Many buildings will have small businesses housed on the first floor, while others will feature storage spaces, laundry rooms, and supporting facilities.



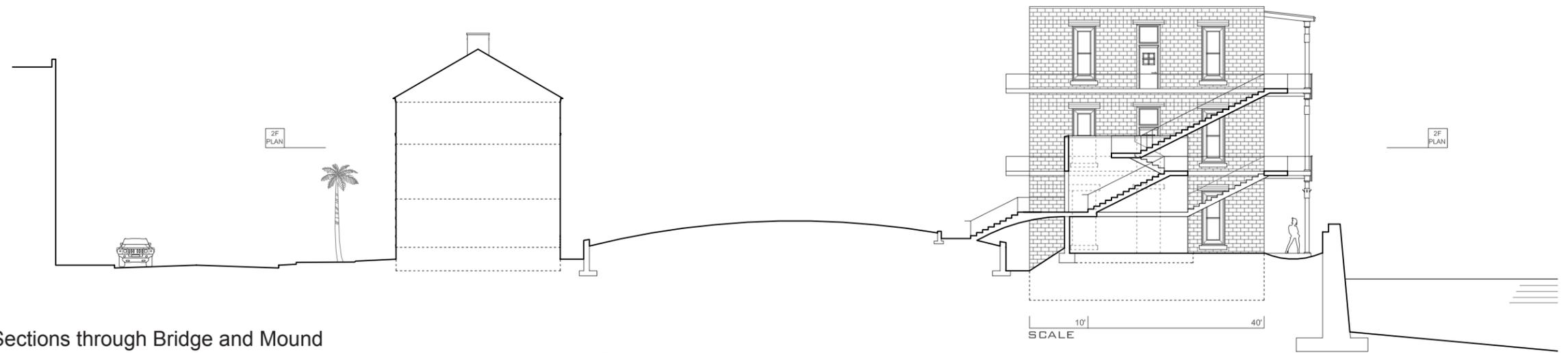
Mound Section  
Facing Interior Streets

## DESIGN OF THE MOUND



### Section through Building and Mound

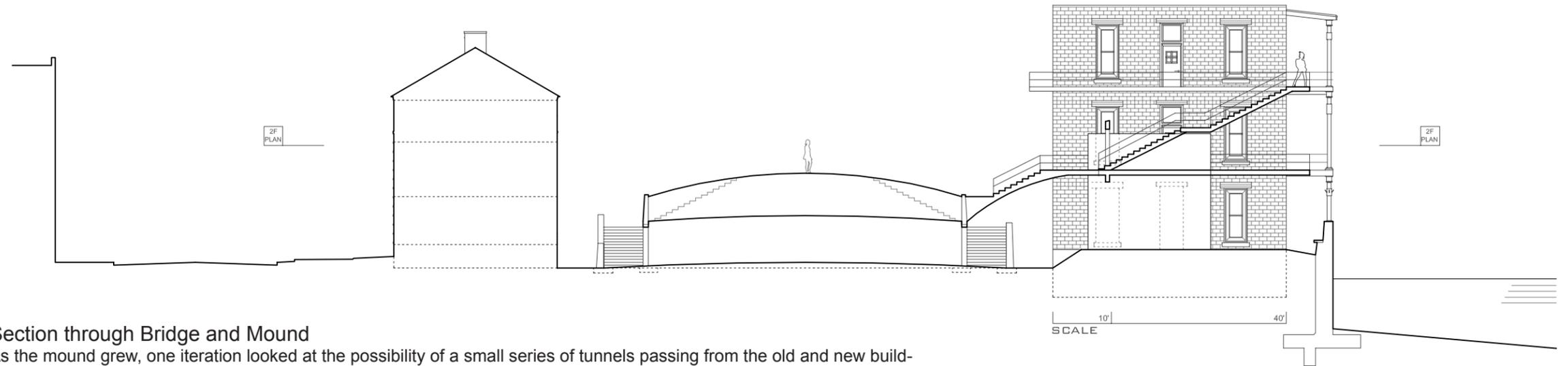
As one of the oldest sections perpendicular to the canals, this drawing shows only a slight inclination of the ground. This idea featured parking spaces, pedestrian access, and other activities all coexisting in the central space as it and the new buildings entered the site in a waving line.



### Sections through Bridge and Mound

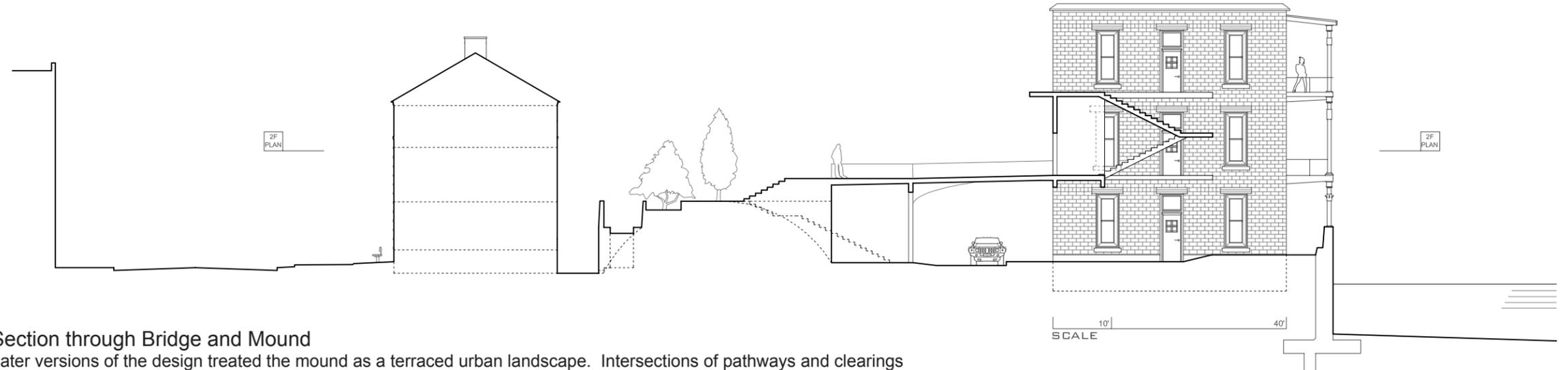
This version shows the section with a much smaller Mound than later designs. The commercial and public use buildings on the bottom floor would have suffered from parking located far away from the building, yet the mound presented itself as a continuous presence with minimal interruptions.

## DESIGN OF THE MOUND



### Section through Bridge and Mound

As the mound grew, one iteration looked at the possibility of a small series of tunnels passing from the old and new buildings. This idea did not address the mound as something in the nature of ascension, and further refinement was halted.

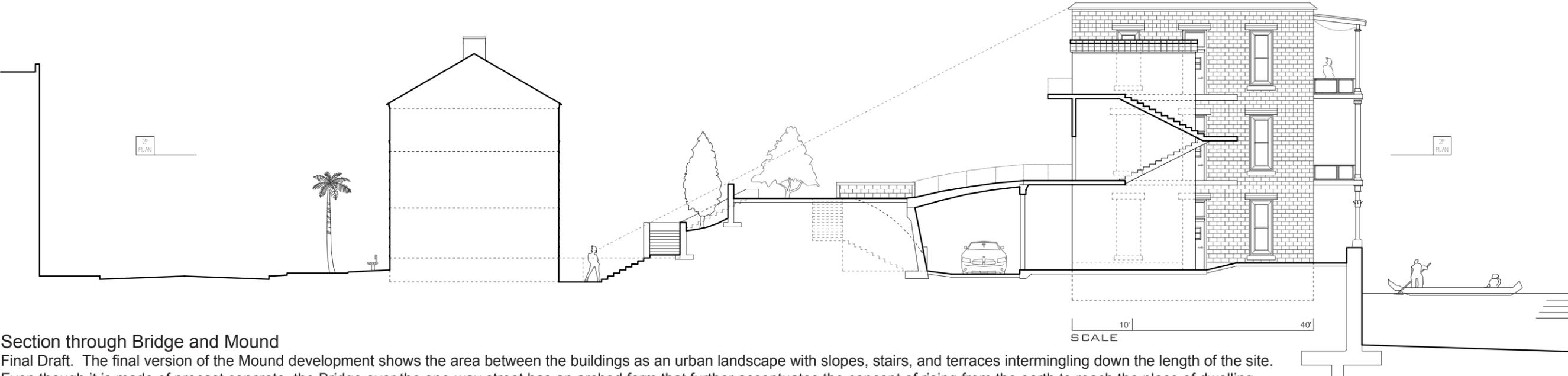


### Section through Bridge and Mound

Later versions of the design treated the mound as a terraced urban landscape. Intersections of pathways and clearings cater to a wide array of activities, while other spaces feature shaded resting spots or densely planted ground cover.

These images show the development of the mound in relation to the development of the section of the units themselves. Over the course of this thesis, the relationship of the edge of the water and the units has been a top priority. The final Porches span over an 8' sidewalk that follows the canal through the site. In the later versions, the columns that support the canal actually stem from the wall that defines the edge of the canal. The introduction of a one-way street in the later concepts moved the center of the mound away from the center of the space between the buildings, and thus further celebrated the spanning of the bridges.

FINAL DESIGN OF MOUND



Section through Bridge and Mound

Final Draft. The final version of the Mound development shows the area between the buildings as an urban landscape with slopes, stairs, and terraces intermingling down the length of the site. Even though it is made of precast concrete, the Bridge over the one-way street has an arched form that further accentuates the concept of rising from the earth to reach the place of dwelling.