

SISYPHUS GETS TO THE TOP
Breaking the Cycle of the DC Prison



SEPEHR F. ARABI



SISYPHUS GETS TO THE TOP
Breaking the Cycle of the DC Prison

Sepehr Forooghmand Arabi

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

Master of Architecture
In
Architecture

Andrew P. Linn, Chair
Paul J. Kelsch
Elizabeth M.F. Keslacy

July 15, 2025
Alexandria, Virginia

Keywords: Architecture, Carceral Architecture, Correctional Institutions, DC Jail,
Hill East, Institutional Design, Prison Reform, Reentry, Washington DC

© 2025 Sepehr F. Arabi



SISYPHUS GETS TO THE TOP

Breaking the Cycle of the DC Prison

Sepehr Forooghmand Arabi

ABSTRACT

“Sisyphus Gets to the Top” explores the psychological effects of confinement and the adverse impacts of prison architecture on human behavior. In a country with one of the highest incarceration rates, the United States suffers from a cycle of recidivism. Facilities that suppress self-growth and rehabilitation contribute to a never-ending feedback loop that leaves little room for a second chance.

This thesis calls for reform of our penal system by shifting the focus toward education, skill-building, and reintegration for those who want to break out of this cycle. Our national capital has lacked a long-term correctional facility for over two decades. Inmates are handed over to the Bureau of Prisons and sent to remote, harsh federal institutions.

“Sisyphus Gets to the Top” proposes a new prison system in the form of an educational and learning center for Washington, D.C. Located next to the newly announced \$500 million jail (intended for short-term stays), within the Hill East and the RFK Stadium redevelopment plans. This facility will house 256 individuals enrolled in vocational and educational programs.

The project explores the opportunity to architecturally integrate a highly introverted space into a highly extroverted urban context, as it is situated in an emerging tourist destination. It features workshops, retail stores operated by inmates, classrooms, art studios, and other support-driven learning environments that enable a path to a better future. By redistributing funding and rethinking policies, it's time we brought our people back, closer to their homes and their maximum potential.

SISYPHUS GETS TO THE TOP

Breaking the Cycle of the DC Prison

Sepehr Forooghmand Arabi

“Sisyphus Gets to the Top” explores the harmful impacts of prison architecture on human behavior. The United States locks up a lot of people. Many are rearrested after release. This system prevents self-growth and rehabilitation, contributing to a feedback loop that leaves little room for a second chance.

This thesis calls for reform of our prison system by shifting the focus toward education, skill-building, and the return to society for those who want to break out of this cycle. Washington, D.C., has not had a long-term prison for over twenty years. Local prisoners are sent to remote, harsh federal prisons.

“Sisyphus Gets to the Top” proposes a new prison system in the form of an education and learning center for Washington, D.C., within the Hill East area. This project will house 256 prisoners who are enrolled in vocational and educational programs.

The project explores how to fit a high-security space into a highly public neighborhood. It features workshops, retail stores run by prisoners, classrooms, art studios, and other learning environments. This approach brings people closer to their families and the local community, which would reduce rearrest and make a better future for prisoners.

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENT	x
OPENING STATEMENT	1
GROUNDS	4
Panopticon	5
Typology	6
Prison Reform, Prison Refunction	11
JURISDICTION	14
Background	15
Reports	16
DISCOVERY	22
Master Plan	23
Campus	28
PROCESS	32
Transitioning	33
Precedents	34
Site	38
PROPOSITION	44
VERDICT	80
REFERENCES	82
ADDENDUM	84

Abbreviations

BOP	Bureau of Prisons
CDF	Central Detention Facility
CTF	Correctional Treatment Facility
DC	District of Columbia
DOC	Department of Corrections
FAR	Floor Area Ratio
MCC	Metropolitan Correctional Center
RFK	Robert F. Kennedy (Stadium)
WAAC	Wasahington-Alexandria Architecture Center

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This has been the best and most exciting academic adventure I have gone on so far, and it is one I could only finish with the help of many.

Firstly, I should like to thank my thesis committee. Andy, thank you for guiding me through uncertainty. Paul, thank you for showing me what I was looking for. Elizabeth, thank you for helping me keep perspective. And I should like to thank the rest of the WAAC faculty, whose inspiration and encouragement have been so incredibly invaluable.

I should like to thank my friends at the WAAC. To the usual gang of three in our thesis studio, thank you for keeping me sane. To the rest of my friends at the WAAC, thank you for being great companions in this adventure.

I should like to thank my friends and family for their kindness and support.

I should like to thank my partner for her endless patience throughout this journey.

And lastly, I should like to thank my mother, without whom none of this would have been possible.

OPENING STATEMENT

The title of this thesis is an homage to the Greek mythical character, Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down each time, again and again, forever. In the context of our current penal and justice system, this myth is a metaphor for a feedback loop responsible for historically high incarceration rates and persistently low recidivism in our nation. This never-ending cycle has directly or indirectly encouraged further criminal behavior and stagnation among its members. Once an individual enters this system, the chances of taking back control and redirecting their path decrease.

Although more scientific research is necessary, part of this cycle is influenced by the architectural form of its institutions. Traditionally, correctional facilities are hostile by design, responding to measures that ignore personal growth, mental health, or even basic human needs. However, emerging prison models in progressive societies are promising precedents that show real-life improvements in rehabilitation outcomes and daily lives. Such new models could be tailored to blend in seamlessly with our specific social and urban context.

The pages that follow are the results of an ambitious proposal to break this cycle through a pilot project in Washington, D.C. One that would initiate a new penal system, both in design and in operation, appealing to both an individual's needs and to the city's. Thus helping our Sisyphus get to the top.

What, if some day or night a demon were to say to you: This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more, and there will be nothing new in it?

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882.

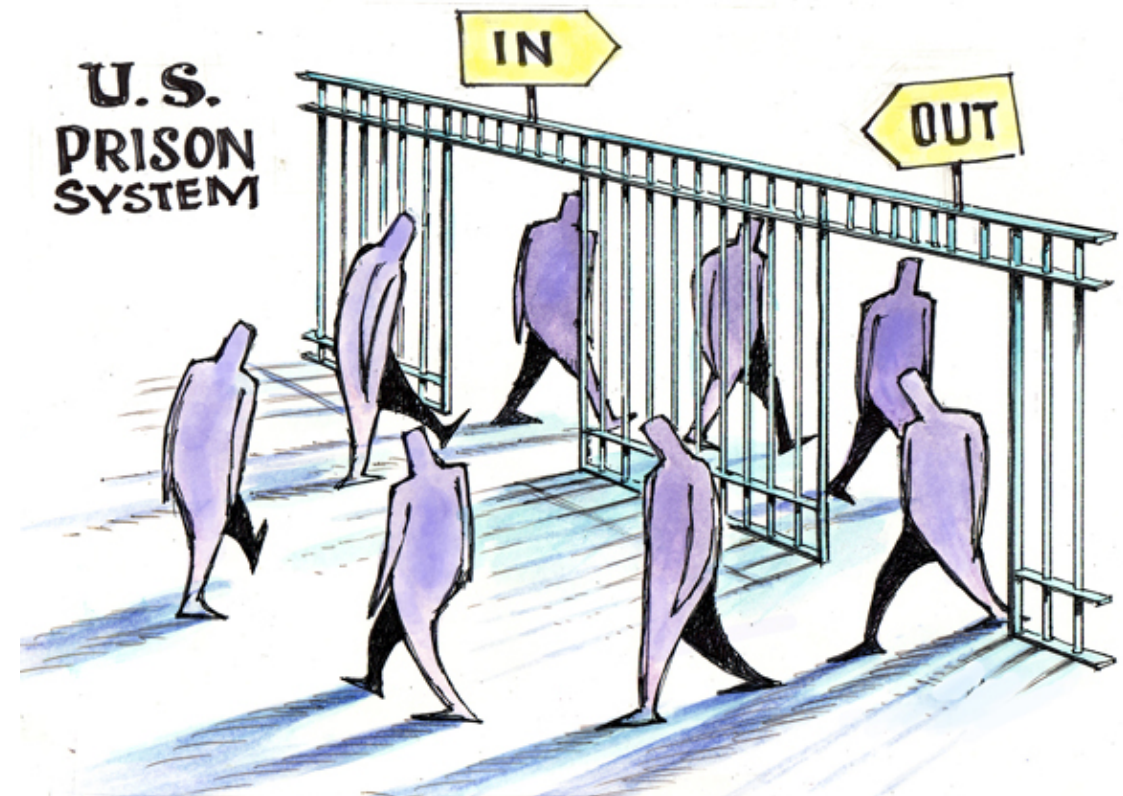


Fig. 1. An artist's depiction of the U.S. Prison System. Dave Granlund. 2012.

Panopticon

Although Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon was never widely implemented in prison models, the concept of Panopticon persists in other various forms. In 1785 Bentham, an English philosopher, proposed the Panopticon for correction houses, hospitals, schools, and poor houses (Bentham 5). The Panopticon featured individual cells arranged in a circular layout, all facing inward toward a central watchtower. This configuration allowed for absolute authority through both isolation and constant surveillance (Johnston 52).

At the time, the concept was viewed as a progressive solution to the inefficiencies of the institutions of his time.

However, the few prisons that were built with the original Panopticon structure in mind ultimately proved unsuccessful. Beyond its structure, the Panopticon became an inspiration for architects and systems of social control. The core elements it introduced (authority, surveillance, and isolation) would go on to influence future incarceration models and serve as a conceptual foundation for post-Panopticon models.

Next few pages will focus on the typology of prison systems throughout history.

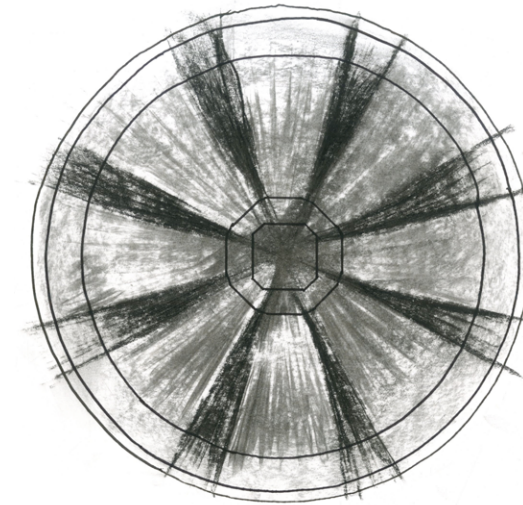


Fig. 2. Charcoal sketch of a panopticon (by author).

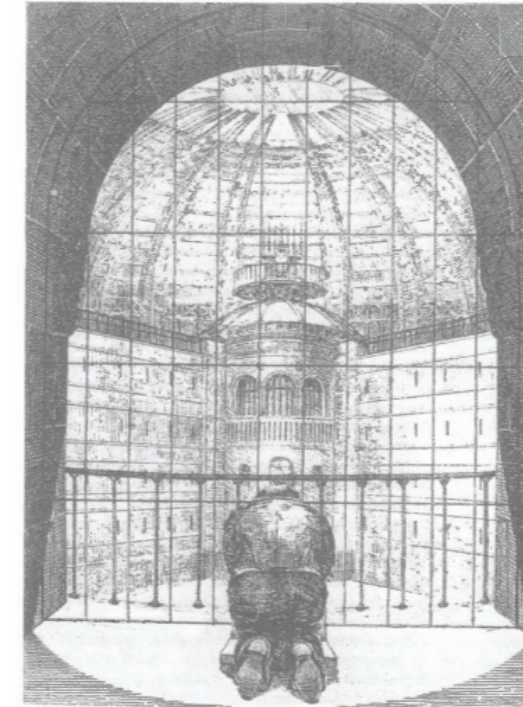


Fig. 3. A prisoner, in his cell, kneeling at prayer before the central inspection tower. N. Harou-Romain, *Plan for a Penitentiary*, 1840.

GROUNDS

Typology

As mentioned, authority, surveillance, and isolation are intangible elements that shape the experience of incarceration. Along with other qualities such as distrust and arbitrary restrictions, these elements have been present, more or less, in nearly every prison model throughout history. While the influence of other factors cannot be overlooked, it is undeniable that the layout of a prison helps determine which of these intangible elements become most dominant.

Each prison type throughout history reveals a specific relationship between its tangible spatial organization and the intangible forces at play. The evolution of prison models is not just a timeline of architectural changes, but a record of shifting emphases (where each new shape expresses a different configuration of authority, surveillance, isolation, etc.) New types of prisons have often emerged in response to changes in the intended purpose of incarceration, which itself evolves in response to broader societal norms, economic demands, or philosophical and political movements. A selection of these types is shown on the following pages.

Fig. 4. Charcoal sketches of different types of prison layouts (by author).

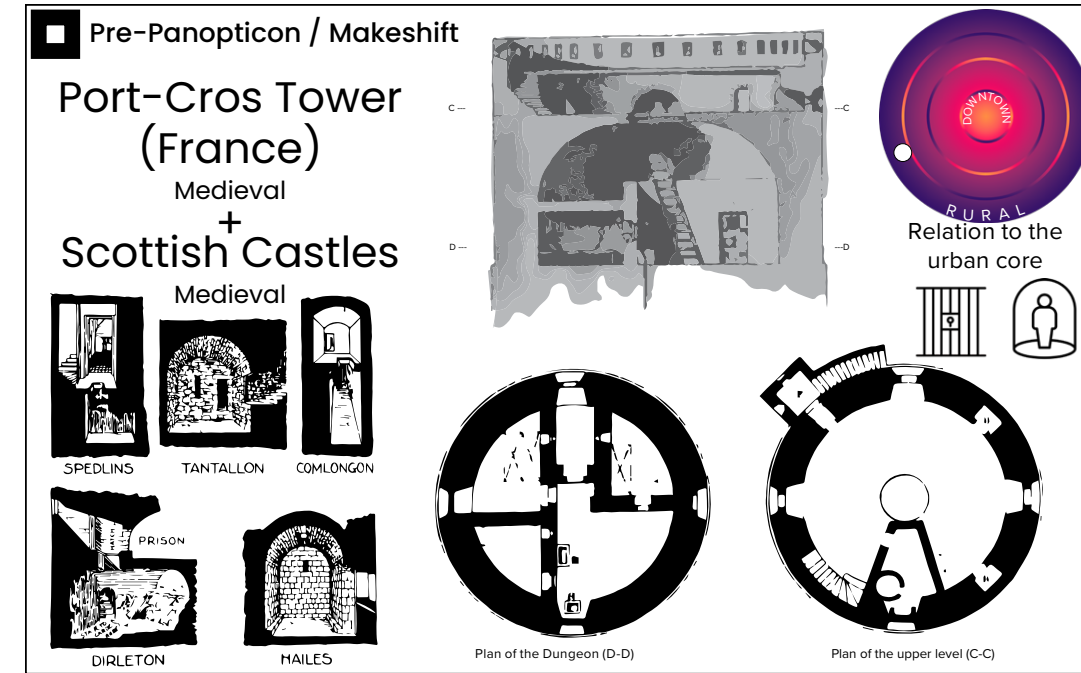
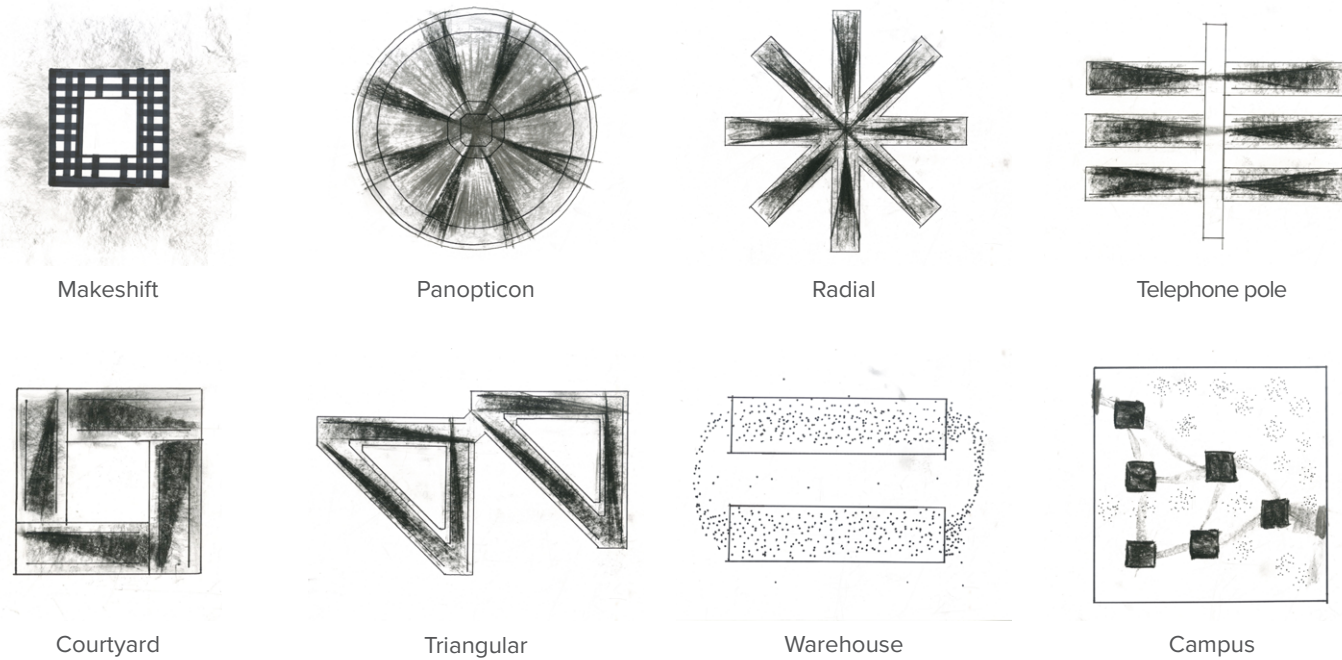
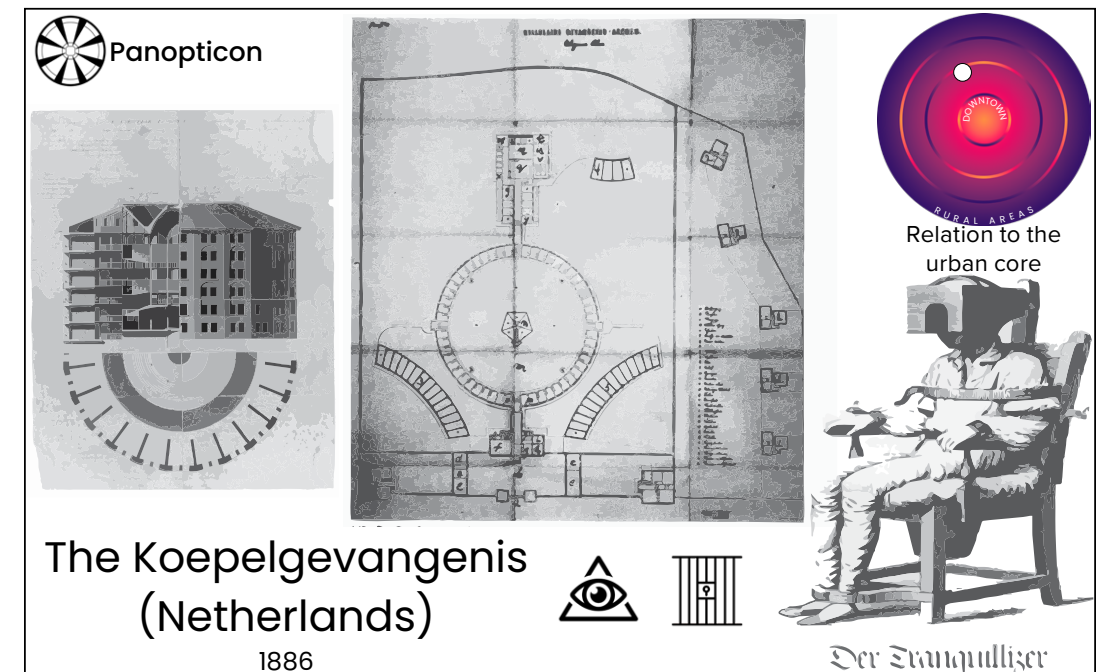


Fig. 5. Early forms of imprisonment were often an afterthought, serving mainly as temporary holding spaces before executions (Johnston 11). The main elements are isolation and restrictions.

Illustrations: Johnston, 2006.

Fig. 6. The Panopticon was among the earliest prison reform models optimized for long-term incarceration, with a focus on surveillance. Three Panopticons were built in the Netherlands, one of which was later reopened to house former Nazi war criminals ("Koepel Panopticon Prison"). The main elements are surveillance and restrictions.

Illustrations: Martínez-Millana & Alcaraz, 2021.



Relation to the urban core

Der Tranquillizer

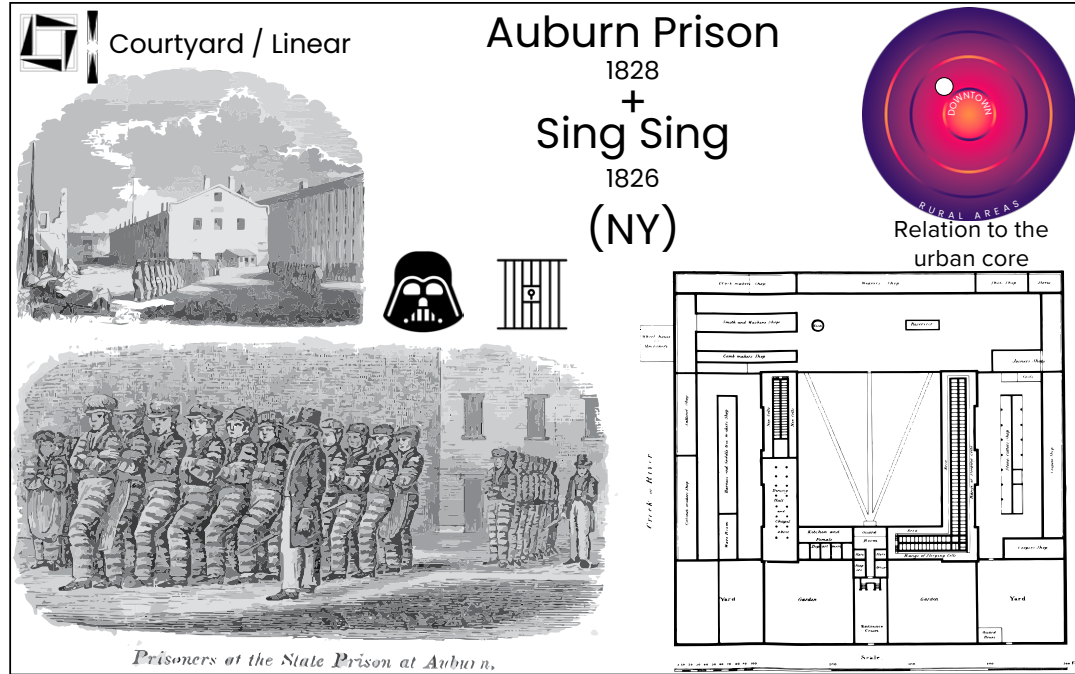


Fig. 7. The Auburn System, one of the two main prison models of its time, focused on enforcing silence and forced labor (Johnston 75). The main elements are authority and restrictions.

Illustrations: Johnston, 2006.

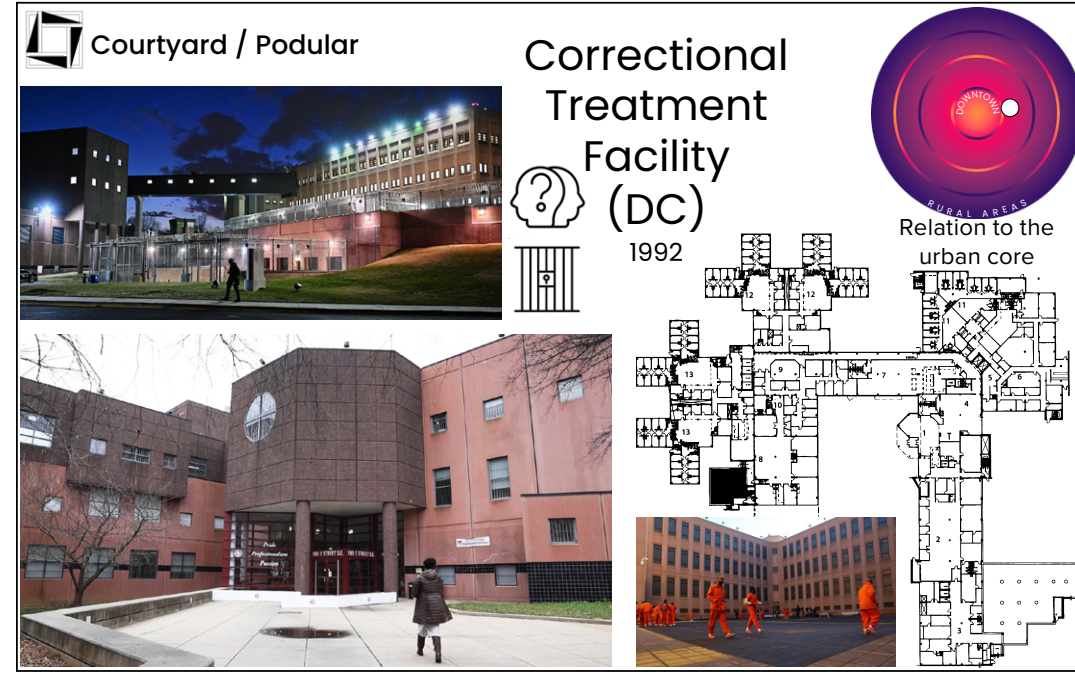


Fig. 9. Silver & Ziskind Architects designed a podular addition to the D.C. Jail CDF, with housing units arranged as a village of separate volumes connected by internal “streets,” maintaining distinct areas for sleeping, eating, and recreation (“Recreation Centers/Prison Facilities Supplement”). The main elements are suppression of identity and restrictions.

Illustration: *Progressive Architecture Magazine*, 1994.
Photos: D.C. DOC.

Fig. 8. The other major prison system was the Pennsylvania System. Inspired by the Panopticon, John Haviland designed the Eastern State Penitentiary to enforce repentance through solitary confinement (Johnston 70-73) Conditions were so harsh that Charles Dickens described them as immense torture and agony (“Dickens on Solitary Confinement”). The main elements are isolation and surveillance.

Illustrations: Eastern State Penitentiary Library.
Photo: Author, 2025.

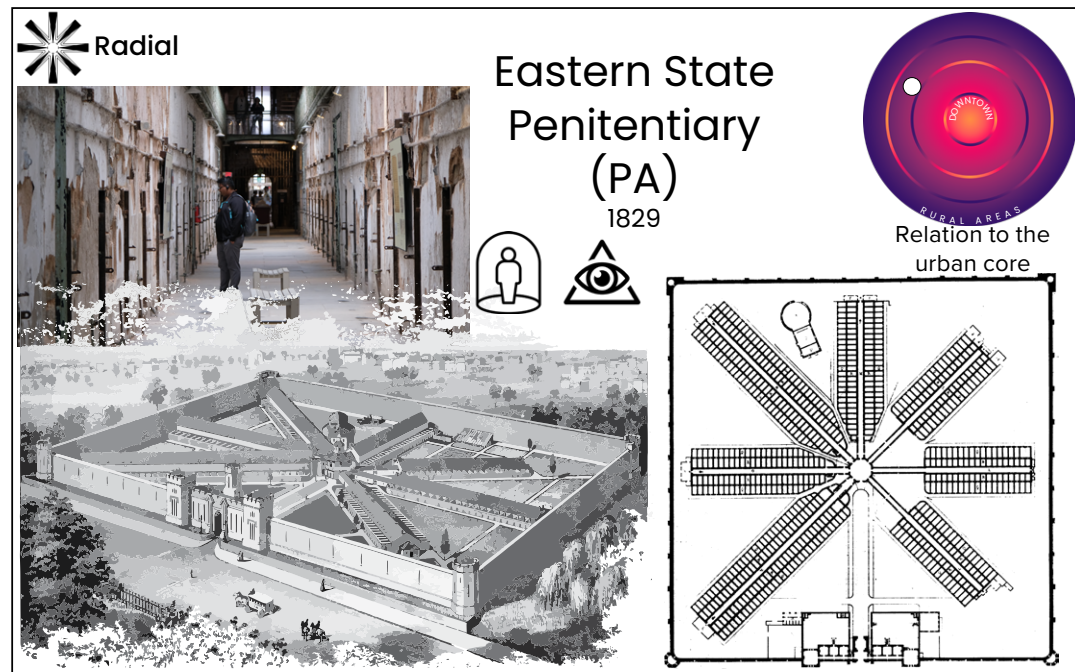


Fig. 10. Another type of prison designed as an afterthought is the warehouse layout, used mostly for immigration detention centers. Built quickly to house as many individuals as possible, these facilities often overlook basic needs (McCreesh). The main elements are absolute authority and suppression of identity.

Illustrations: *New York Times*.
Photos: Doug Mills, 2025.



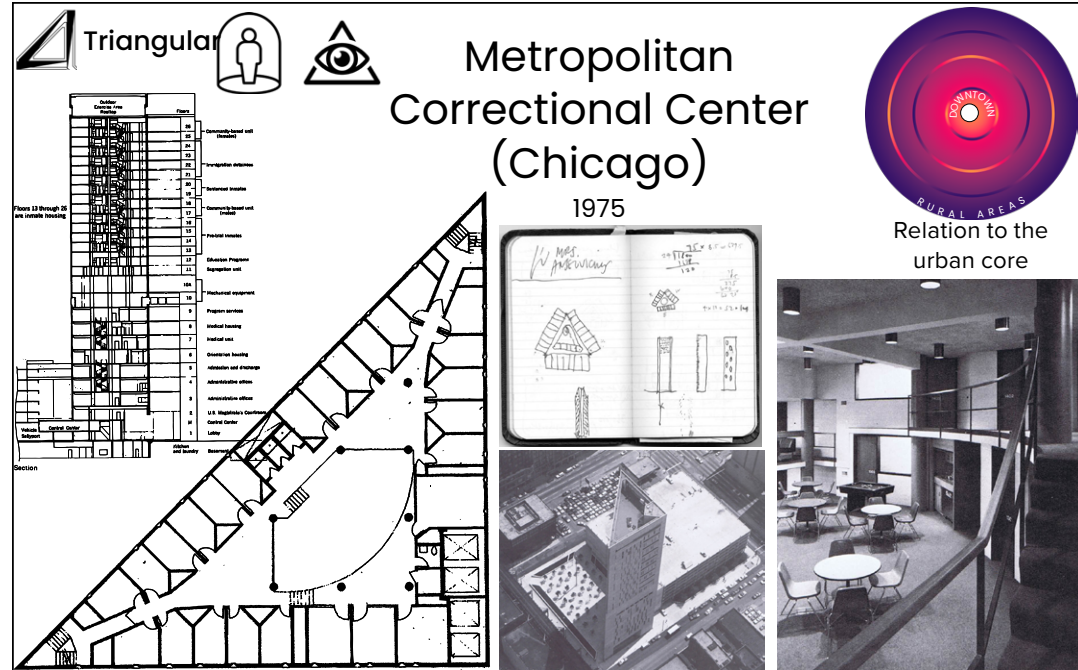


Fig. 11. The MCC Chicago, designed by Harry Weese in 1975, uses a triangular layout to reduce its visual mass and fit into the downtown context. Housing is organized in modular units with cells arranged around the perimeter, enclosing a central common area where one guard can oversee their entire unit. The separation into modules allows conditions to be managed more effectively. Slit windows create a lively facade pattern while maintaining security (Urrutia-Moldes 49). The main elements are isolation and surveillance.

Illustrations and photos: *HIC Architectura*, 2023.

Prison Reform, Prison Refunction

Following the evolution of prison architecture reveals that each distinct form of prison is a direct consequence of a new function. A reminder of Louis Sullivan's famous principle "Form ever follows function". In his 1901 book *Kindergarten Chats*, Sullivan describes this phrase as the law and a universal truth (154, 191):

Where function does not change, form does not change.

Louis Sullivan, 1896.

Prison typology too, reflects this principle clearly. A prison designed with labor in mind takes the form of a prison suited for labor (like Auburn). And a prison built around isolation as its main function takes the form of a prison that works around isolation (like Eastern State). Each model, then, can be seen as successful at what it was originally set to achieve (aside from the negative impacts and consequences that followed). This universal law suggests that a new reformed and humane form of prison architecture will emerge through the pursuit of a new function.

Fig. 12. Halden Prison in Norway, completed in 2010, uses a campus layout that reflects progressive approaches to incarceration. Located well outside the city and unconnected to its surroundings, the facility organizes housing, workshops, and recreational areas in a low-rise, village-like setting. Following the philosophy that confinement is punishment enough, the design avoids hostile architecture. (Urrutia-Moldes 172-188) The main element is restriction.

Illustrations and photos: Erik Møller Arkitekter, 2010.



Fig. 13. Tangible layouts and intangible elements showing combined prison typologies (by author).

Authority									Alligator Alcatraz	
Surveillance		Koepelgevangenissen		Eastern State			MCC Chicago			
Distrust					Herbert					
Restrictions			Auburn			Blundeston	FCI Phoenix			
Isolation	Port-Cross									Halden
Oppression									DC CTF	

Fig. 14. Comparative matrix positioning prisons, madrasas, and monasteries by their functions (by author).

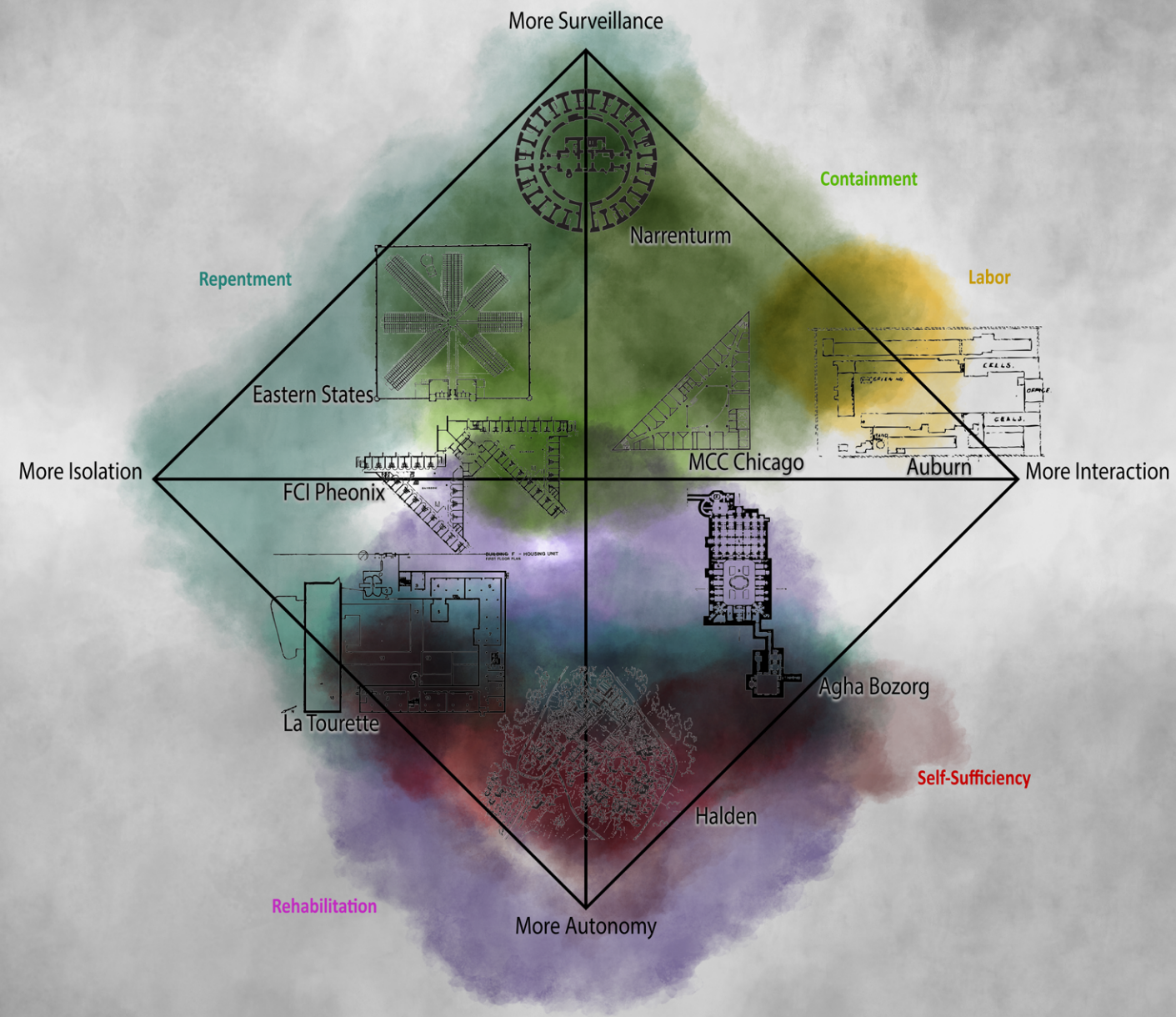
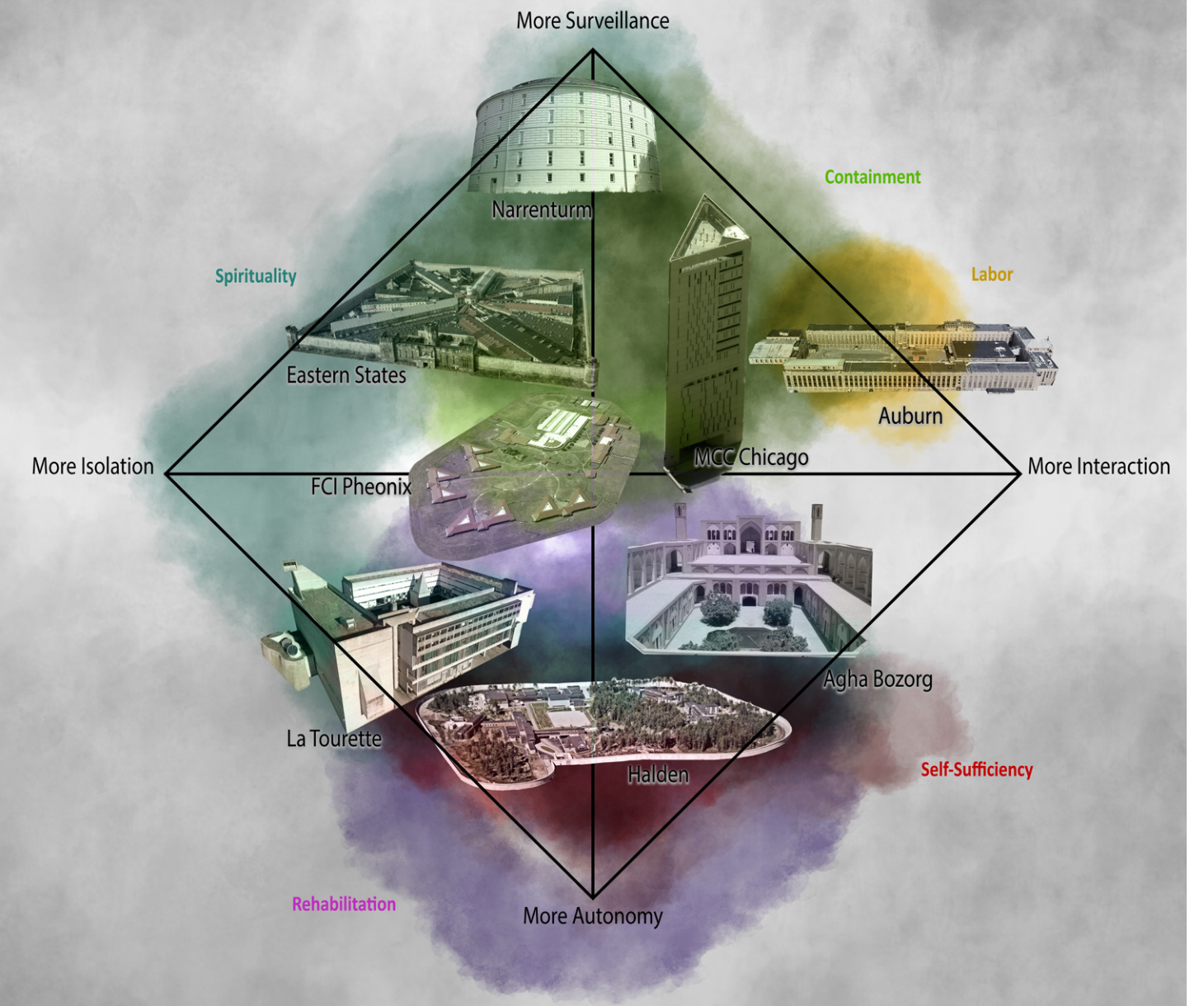


Fig. 15. Comparative matrix positioning prisons, madrasas, and monasteries by their functions (by author).



Background

Despite crime rates in the United States showing a downward trend over the past few decades, incarceration rates have not declined and, in some jurisdictions, have even skyrocketed (Sawyer and Wagner). According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics study, more than three-quarters of prisoners released in 2005 across 30 states were arrested for a new crime within five years. The same study found that the younger the inmate, the higher the likelihood of re-offending; within five years of release (Alper et al. 4, 9).

Washington, D.C. has had a long and troubled incarceration history. The current main D.C. Jail -CDF- was opened in 1976 following an uprising in the old jail over inhumane conditions. In 1997, under the Revitalization Act, D.C. closed its Lorton Prison and transferred adult felons to the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, while short-term offenders remained in D.C.-run jails. Overcrowding at the D.C. Jail and the relocation of D.C. Code offenders to far-off federal prison eventually drew public and media attention (Gathright, "D.C. Jail Uprising 50th Anniversary"). As of 2025, D.C. inmates still face long distances from their families and/or suffer in a 50-year-old building. Many, including Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, have called for a new jail facility and for returning D.C. BOP inmates closer to home.

From a broader point of view, a main key that could hint at a new function for a reformed prison model is continuing education. An evaluation found that inmates who participate in correctional education programs are 43% less likely to return to prison (Davis et al. 57). Another important finding comes from a meta-analysis showing that prison visitation leads to an approximately 26% reduction in recidivism (Mitchell et al. 76). This makes D.C. the perfect case for a new prison model that prioritizes education and brings individuals closer to their families.



Fig. 16. Inmates shout to reporters during the 1972 uprising at the D.C. Jail, when 12 hostages, including the Corrections Director, were taken. Washington Area Spark; D.C. Public Library, Star Collection; *Washington Post*.

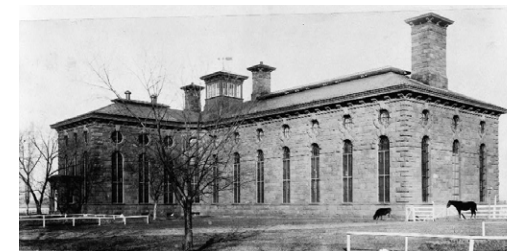


Fig. 17. Old D.C. Jail, 1872–1976. National Photo Company, Library of Congress.

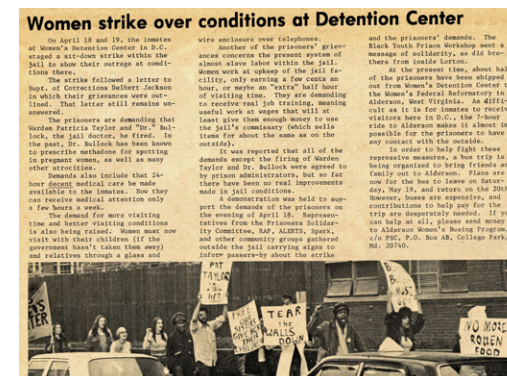


Fig. 18. Demonstrations during a strike at the Washington, D.C. Women's Detention Center. Insurgent Press, *Washington Area Spark*, 1973.

JURISDICTION

Reports



Fig. 19. Washington, D.C.'s prison and jail incarceration rates, 1978–2022. No prison population data are available after 2001 due to the transfer of inmates to the Federal Bureau of Prisons. *Prison Policy Initiative, 2024.*

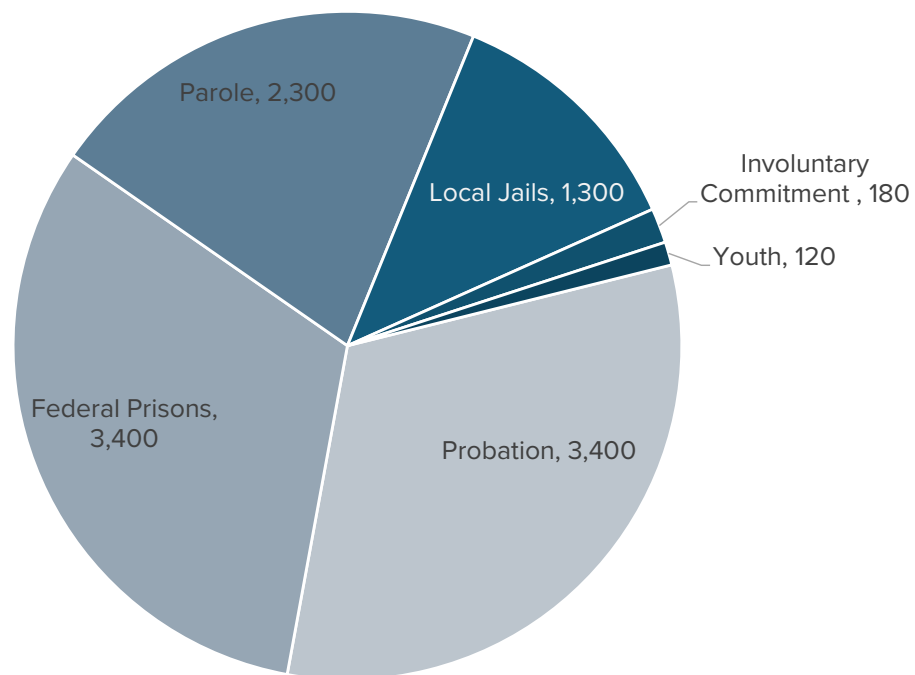


Fig. 20. People in the District of Columbia's criminal legal system, with 10,500 residents behind bars or under community supervision. Totals may not sum due to rounding. *Prison Policy Initiative, 2023.*

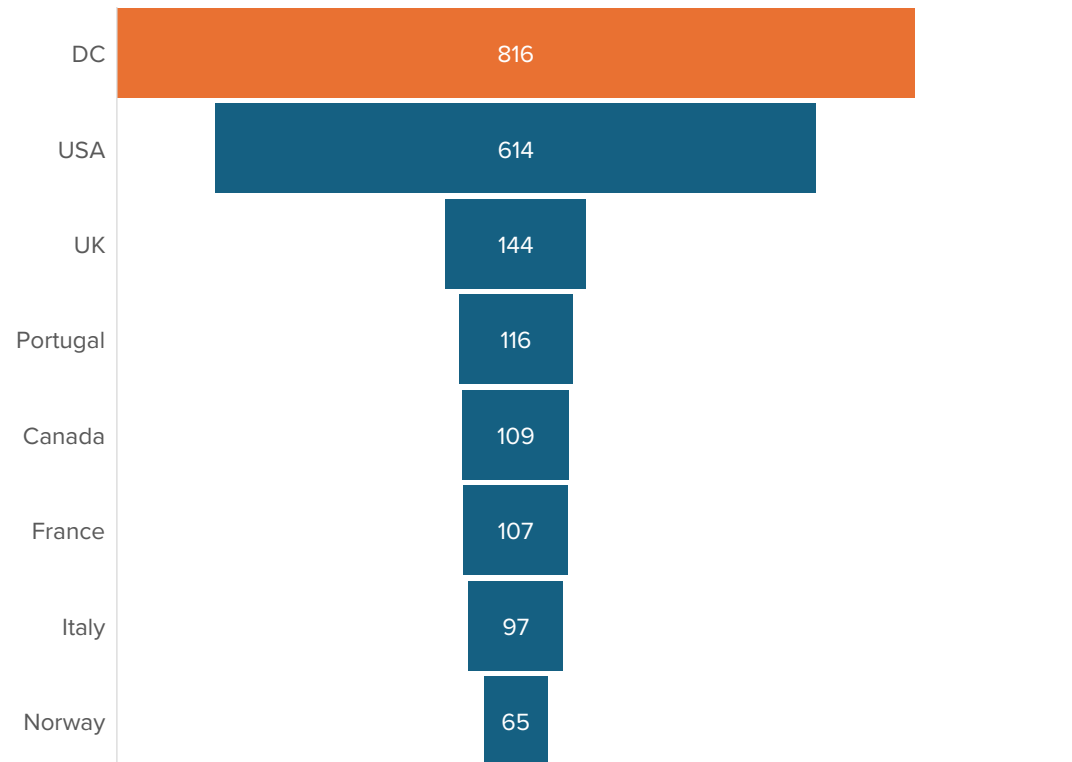


Fig. 21. 2024 incarceration rates per 100,000 population. Today, D.C.'s incarceration rates stand out internationally. *Prison Policy Initiative, 2024.*

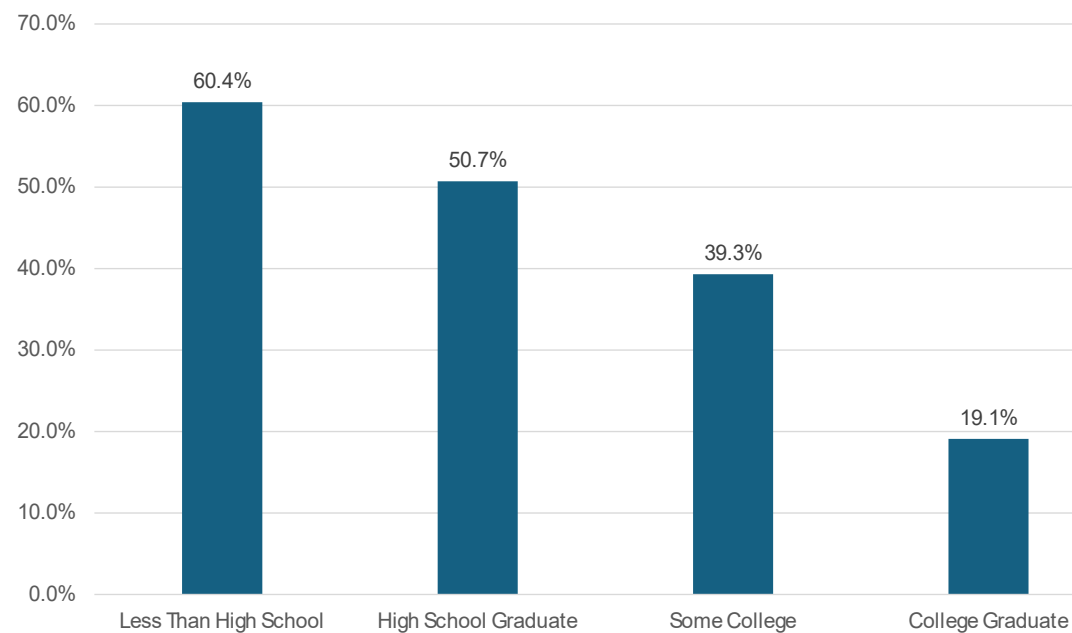


Fig. 22. Rearrest rates of federal offenders by educational level. *U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2022.*

Fig. 25. D.C. Map comparing residents 25+ with a bachelor's degree or higher to median household income. 2023. By author. Data: Open Data DC.

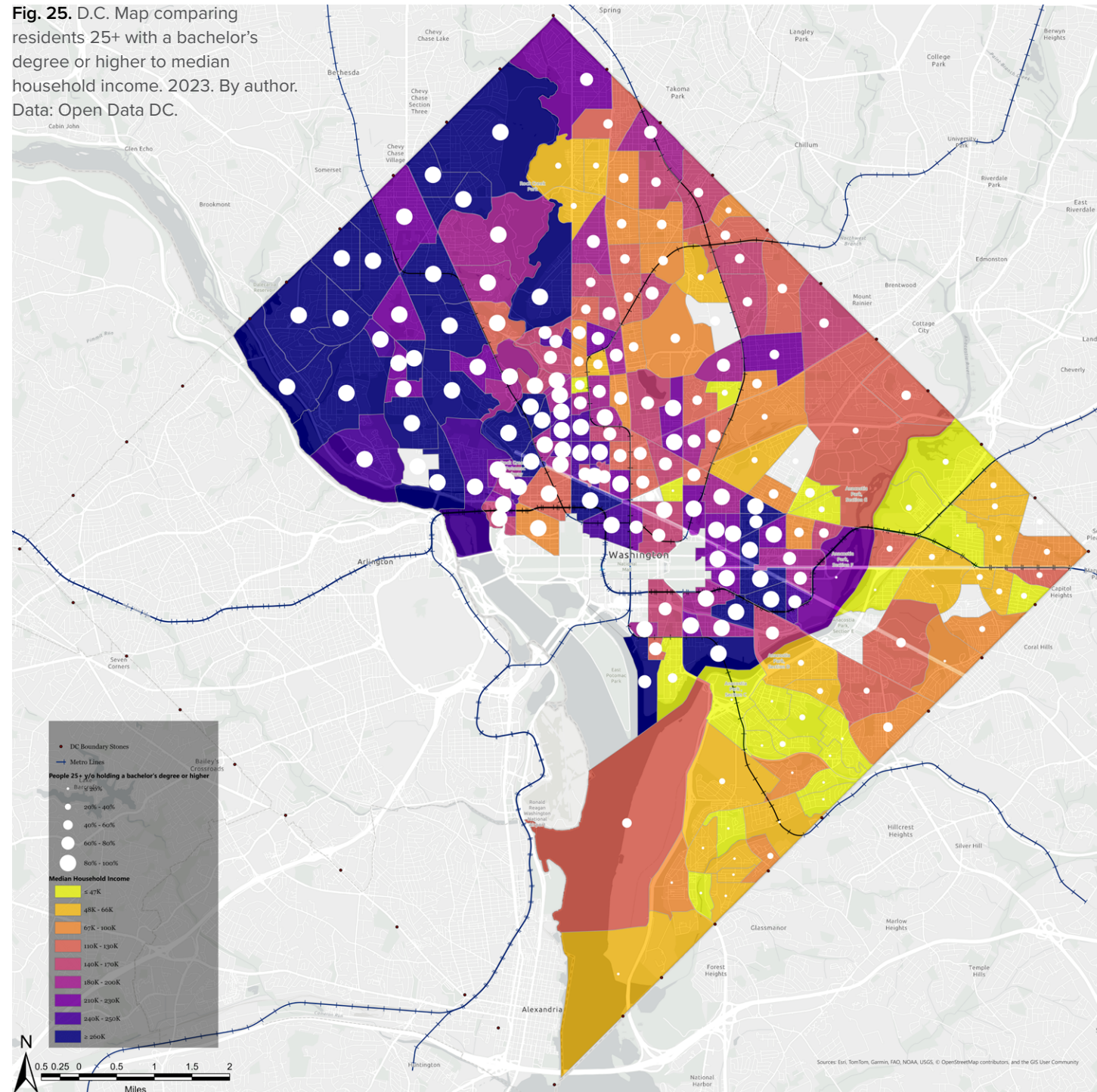
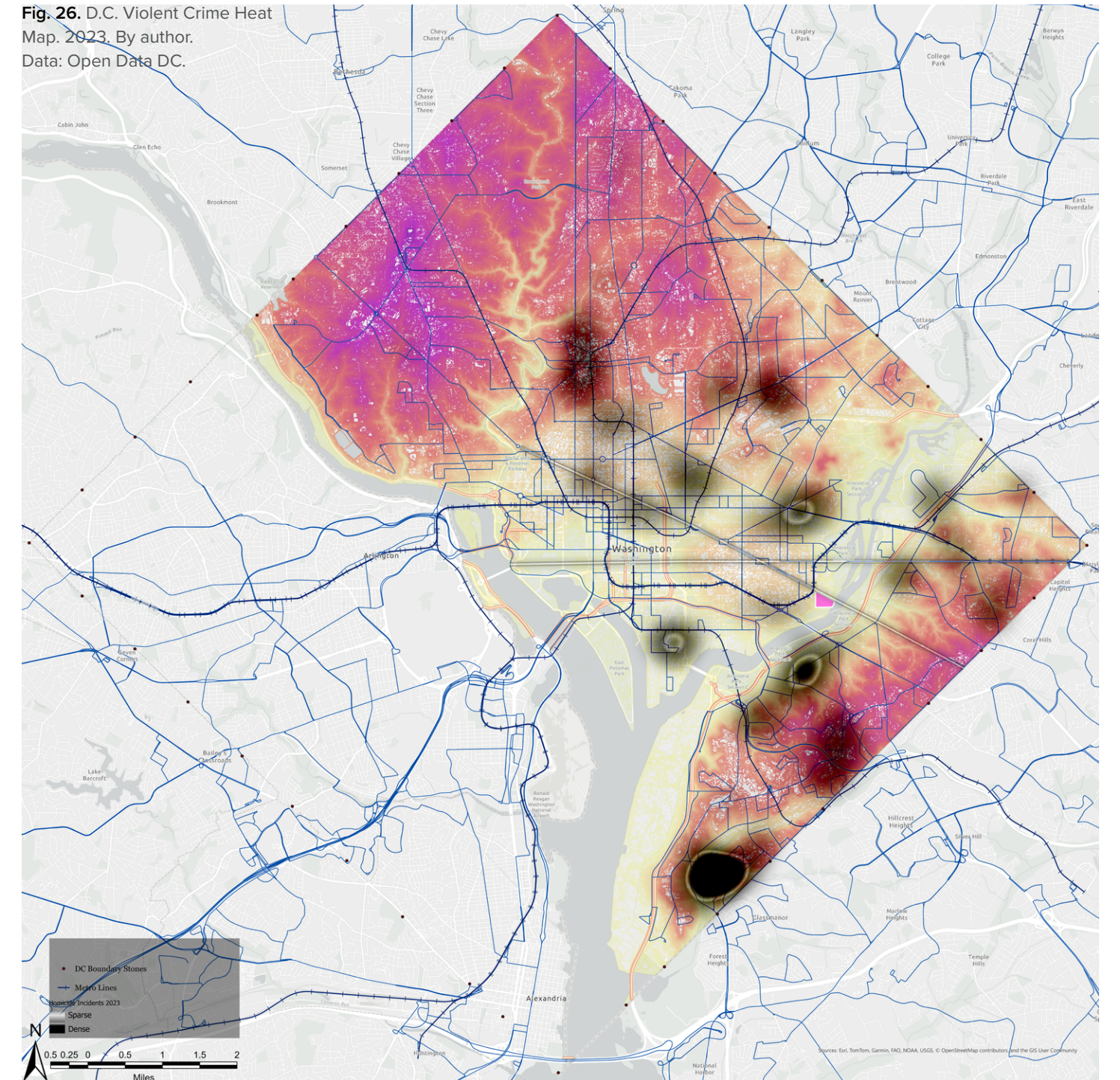


Fig. 26. D.C. Violent Crime Heat Map. 2023. By author. Data: Open Data DC.



Master Plan

DISCOVERY

Washington, D.C. aims to revitalize the RFK Stadium campus. This defunct multipurpose sports arena sits in an area with significant potential for development. City leaders have proposed bringing the stadium back to host the Washington Commanders, alongside numerous community-focused recreation and cultural amenities, positioning this area as “a new gateway to the city.” Although the plans are not yet finalized, the goal is to reconnect the District to the Anacostia waterfront (“The Future - Events DC”).

In this vision, new neighborhoods would emerge around the stadium and the waterfront. One of these neighborhoods is Hill East, home to the D.C. Department of Corrections’ facilities. Hill East is planned to become a public space that links the existing neighborhood to the waterfront while meeting District-wide and neighborhood needs for health care, recreation, civic space, and housing. The Hill East Master Plan, calls for redeveloping 50 acres into a vibrant, mixed-use urban waterfront community with a distinct new identity (“Hill East District Redevelopment”).

As part of this transition, the D.C. DOC plans to build a new jail. This \$463 million project would replace the aging CDF building with a "modern, secure, and resilient" facility to meet critical rehabilitation needs for individual. The facility is intended only for short stays, housing mostly unconvicted individuals awaiting trial. The new design, proposed by CORE Architecture, aims to make the design "functionally anonymous", hiding the building in plain public sight (“New DC Jail”). My thesis proposes a learning center as part of an extended campus for the D.C. Department of Corrections, designed to house convicted individuals currently held in federal prisons. Individuals accepted into the educational and vocational programs would be housed at the facility.

Fig. 27. D.C. map showing major development plans around my proposed site (by author).

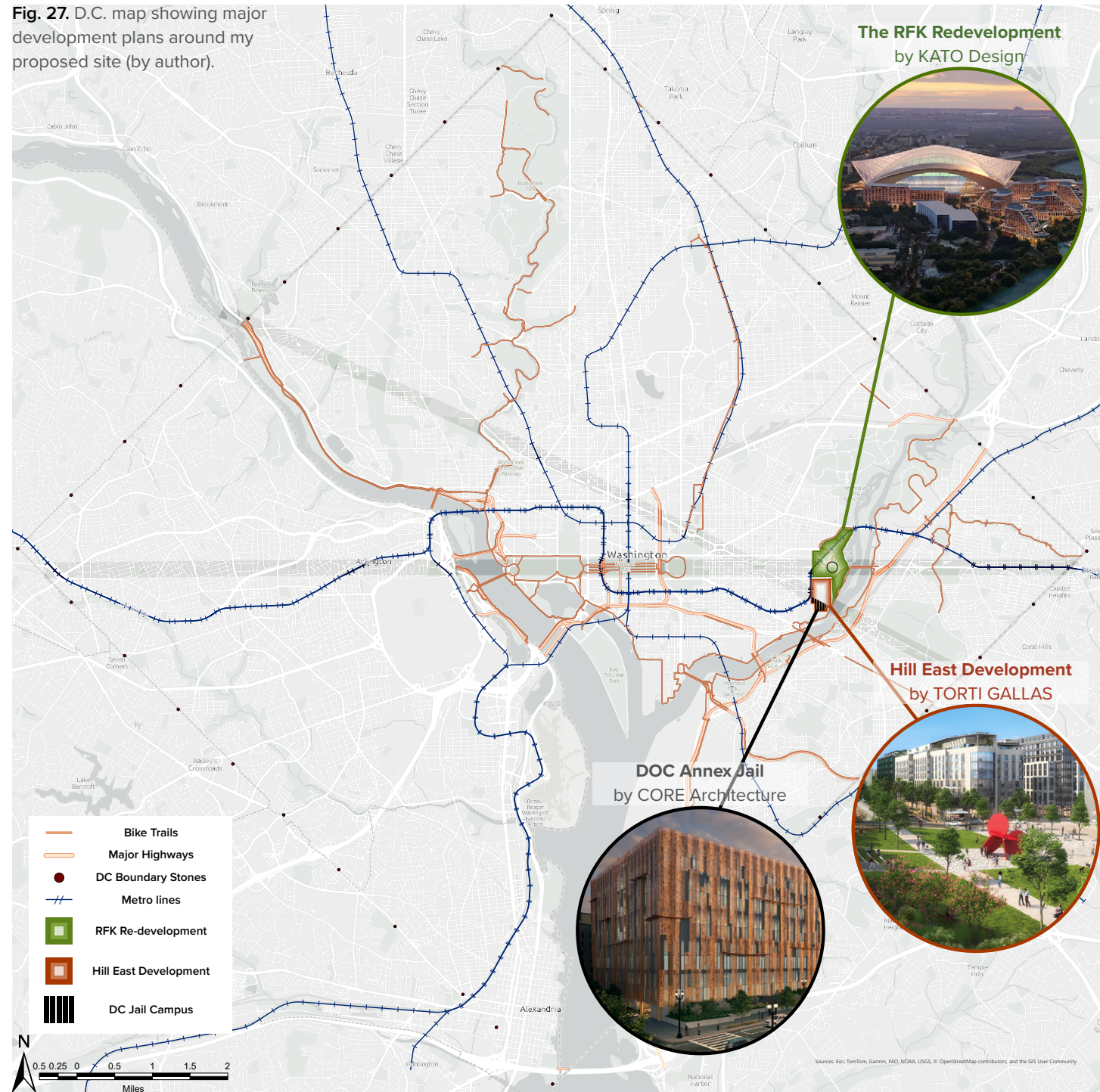


Fig. 28. Aerial view of Hill East Waterfront. Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects. 2003.

Fig. 29. Rendering of Hill East Waterfront. Michael McCann. Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects. 2003.





Fig. 30. Rendering of the new DC jail's Annex Project. CORE Architecture and Design. 2024.

Fig. 31. Snapshot of the a development project in Hill East Master Plan, Parcels C, E & H. Home Team Community Partners. 2021.

Project Concept

- *Building a neighborhood* by providing a diversity of uses, including residences, retail, and office all needed in Ward 7.
- Nation's first urban/mixed-use **Home Depot** – a 100,000 SF store and 20,000 SF garden center.
- Commercial office space – 80,000 SF dedicated to the **Special Olympics** as well as 20,000 SF of office space for local/Ward 7 small businesses.
- Creating 15,000 SF of inviting retail urban storefront along Independence Avenue.

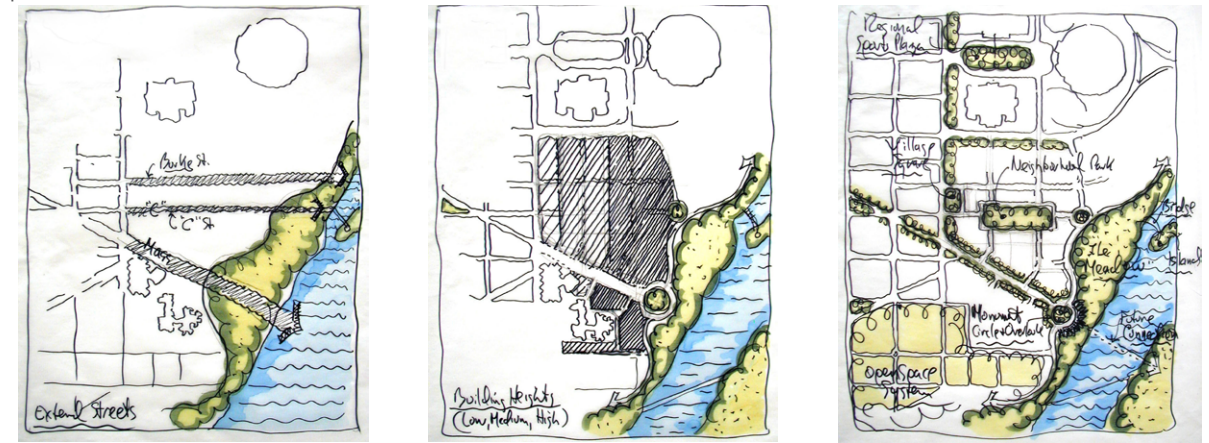


"A PLACE FOR ALL PEOPLE"

Our plan for **HILL EAST** will provide residents and guests with **COMFORTABLE** and **SAFE PLACES** to **LIVE** and **REST, SOCIALIZE** with neighbors, and **ENGAGE IN HEALTHY LIFESTYLES**.

Fig. 32. Snapshot of a development project in Hill East Master Plan, Parcels C, E & H. Torti Gallas. 2021.

Fig. 33. Snapshot of the Master Plan for Reservation 13, Hill East Waterfront. Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects. 2003.



Extend Streets

Extend the existing pattern of local streets to and through the site to create simple, well-organized city blocks, appropriately-scaled development, and views to the waterfront.

Building Heights

Maintain a human-scale of building heights that relate to the existing residential buildings on 19th Street and increase in size as the site slopes down towards the waterfront.

Open Space System

Connect the Hill East neighborhood and the city at large to the waterfront via tree-lined streets, recreational trails and increased access to waterfront parklands.

Campus

The ideal site for a new prison model centered on education and returning D.C. residents from federal prisons would be adjacent to the D.C. Jail's new annex project. Its location within a major new development plan, which is also positioned as a tourist destination, creates a great opportunity to explore the concept of bringing a correctional facility closer to the community. The proposal would include retail spaces operated by students of the learning center or by individuals in this new prison model who (through parole or other arrangements) are trusted with direct contact with the public. This extended greater campus of the D.C. DOC would include the new annex project, the existing CTF, and the old CDF retrofitted as administrative offices. My thesis proposal would be part of this campus, with space reserved for a shared family visitation park accessible to all residents of the campus.

Fig. 34. Sketch map showing Hill East to determine the site of the thesis project (by author).

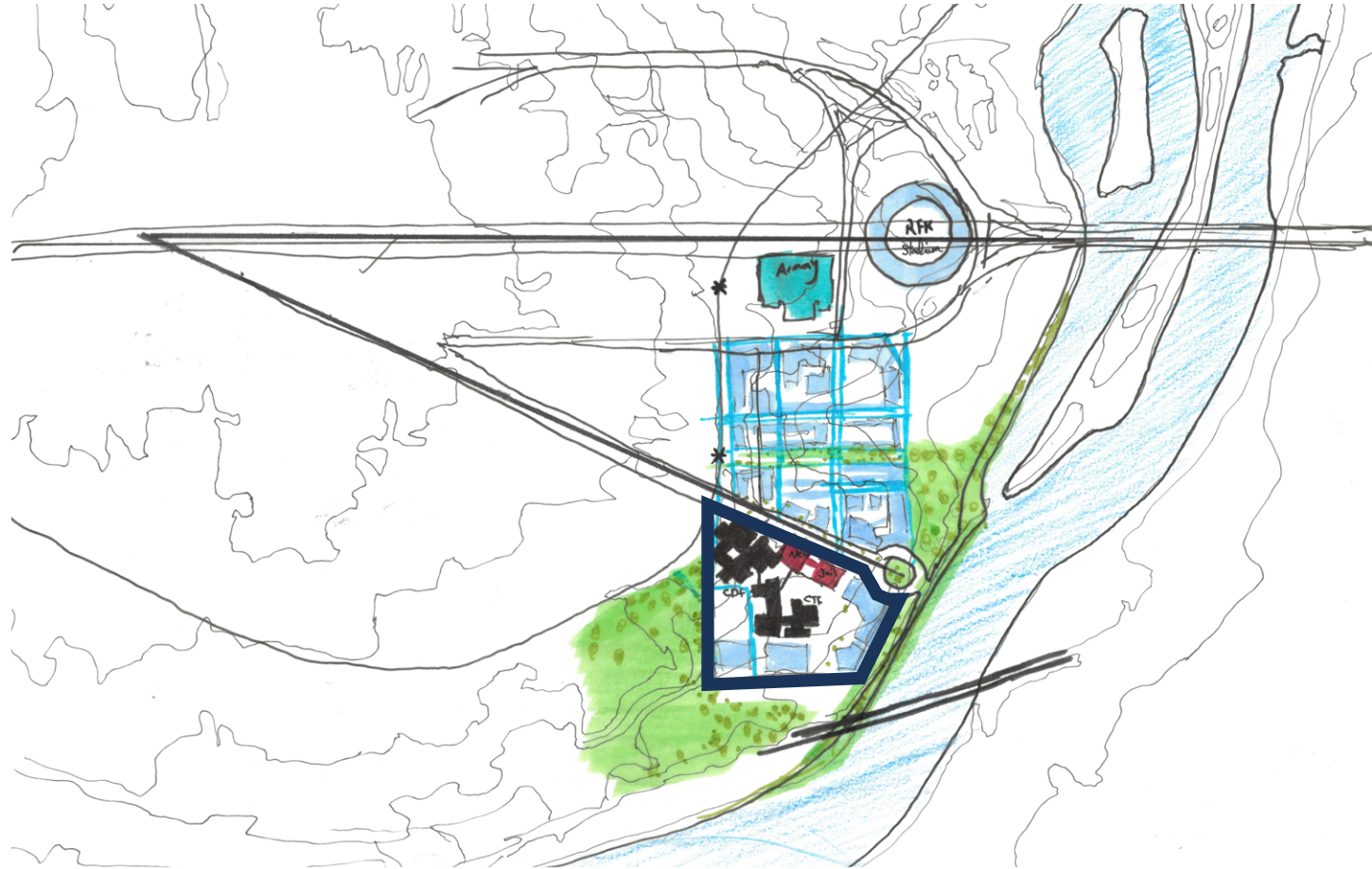


Fig. 35. Diagram of the Hill East Master Plan highlighting important building facades (by author).



Fig. 36. Diagram of the Hill East Master Plan showing current structures, future phases, and the planned new jail (by author).

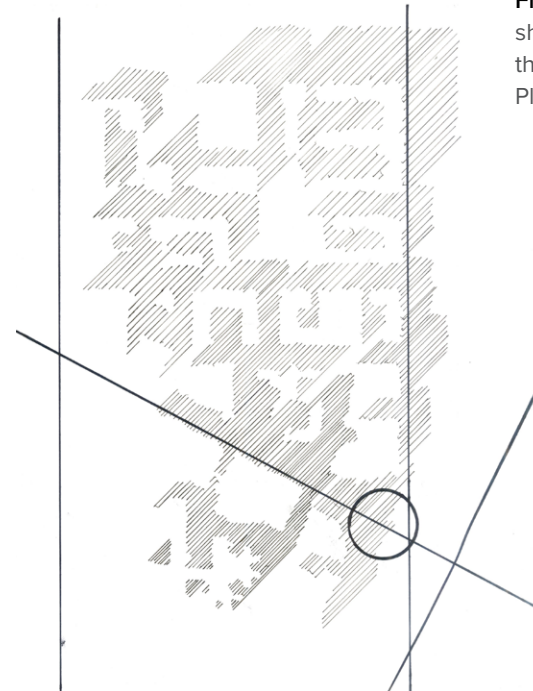


Fig. 37. Diagram shadow study of the Hill East Master Plan (by author).



Fig. 38. Diagram of the Hill East Master Plan with stippling indicating speculated pedestrian density (by author).

Fig. 39. D.C. Map of the existing conditions of Hill East (by author).

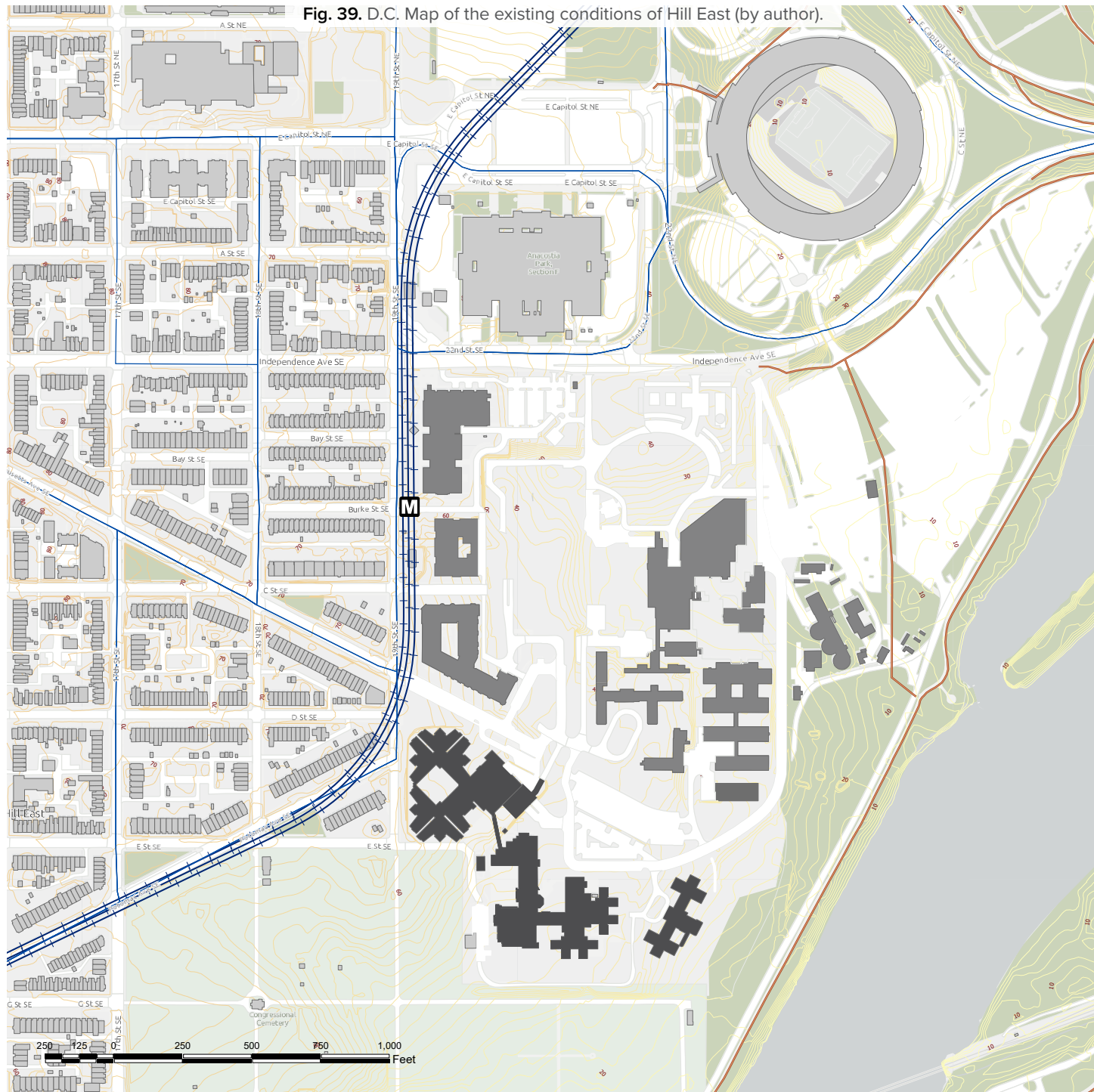
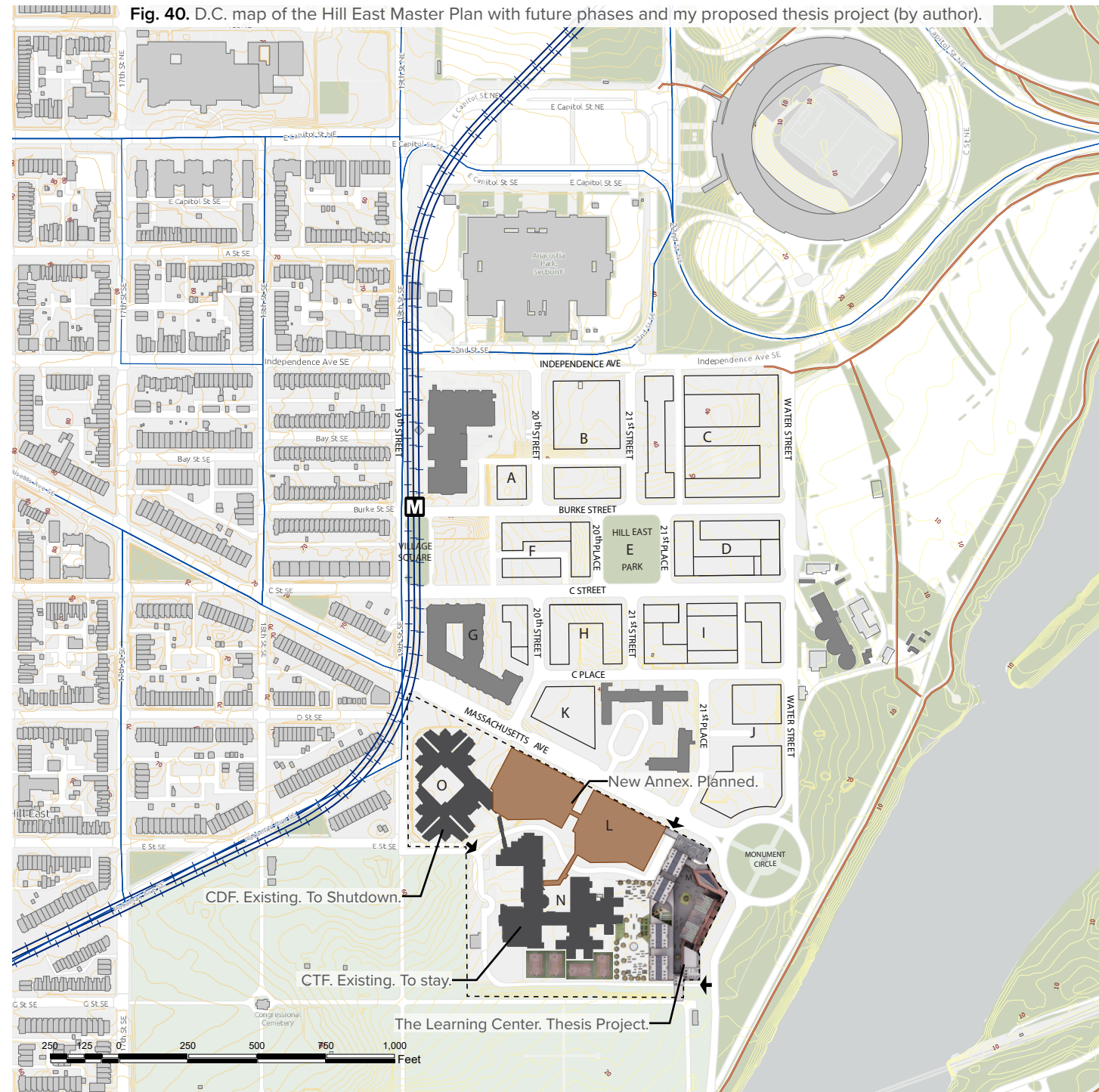


Fig. 40. D.C. map of the Hill East Master Plan with future phases and my proposed thesis project (by author).

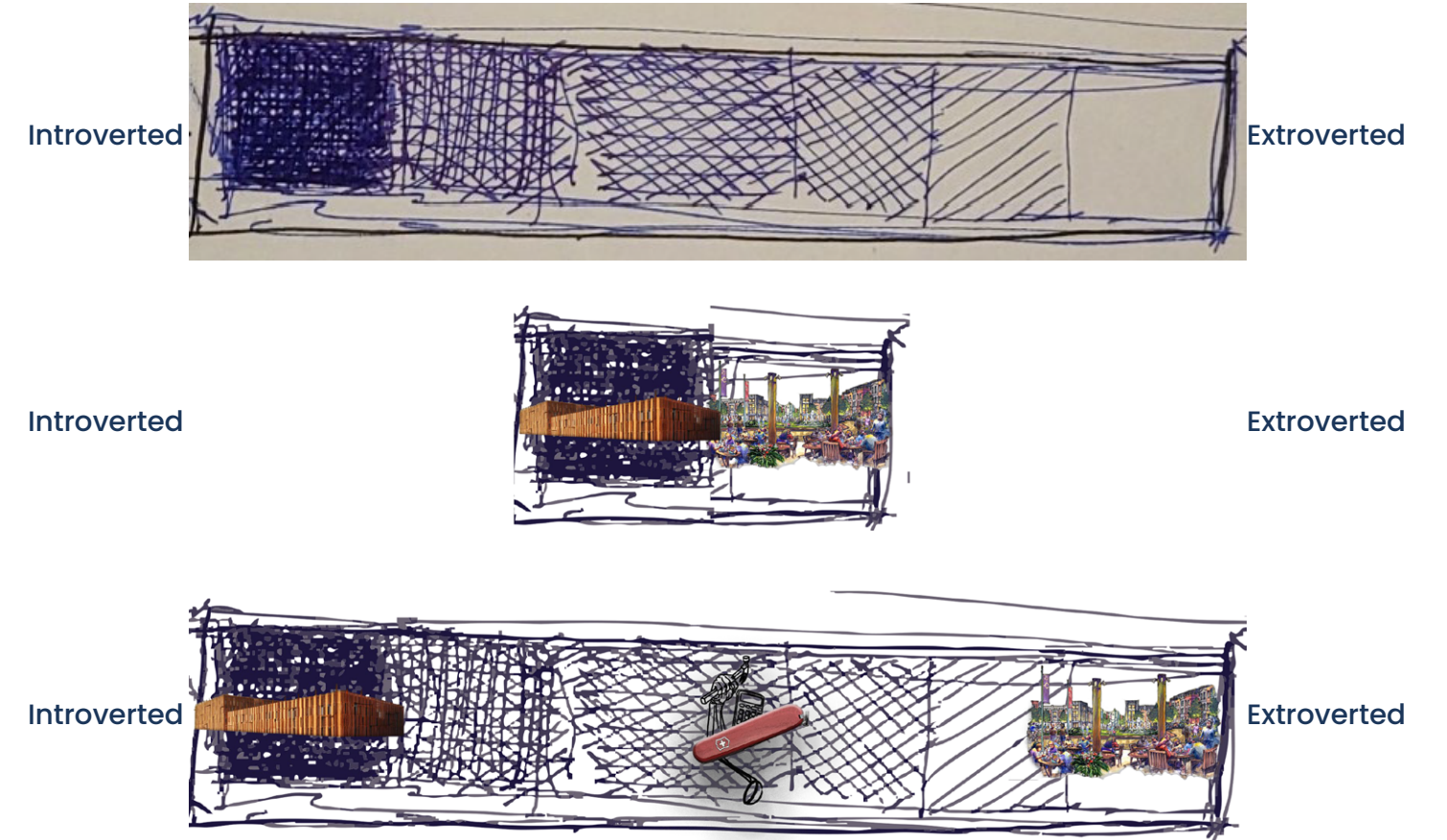


Transitioning

Prison models, largely for security reasons, have traditionally been fortified with a clear boundary separating them from their context. The challenge now is to -architecturally- make a highly introverted space transition into a highly extroverted urban setting and blur the threshold between these two ends of the spectrum. Historical Persian-Islamic seminaries (called Madrasas) present a precedent for such an approach. Often located next to or within a mosque or bazaar complex, these structures blend with their environment without drawing a clear boundary while still maintaining their introverted characteristics.

PROCESS

Fig. 41. Sketches and collages showing the spectrum of introvert-extrovert and how the project would bridge the gaps (by author).



Precedents

Several precedents can help shape this project's design approach. Some mosque–madrasa complexes, such as Agha Bozorg, address this challenge by sectionally dividing functions. Eastern State Penitentiary offers a historical lesson in ensuring that views and other interactions with the outside world are not entirely blocked. Le Corbusier's La Tourette demonstrates how private areas can maintain clear views outward, while communal spaces are designed to encourage inward-looking interaction and socialization. In Chicago's MCC, the relationship between guard and inmate is brought closer by assigning each guard to a pod with a set number of residents, fostering more direct interaction. Halden Prison in Norway simulates aspects of daily life through a campus layout, where individuals experience commuting just like in the outside world.

Fig. 42. Sketches and analyses on Madrasas (by author).

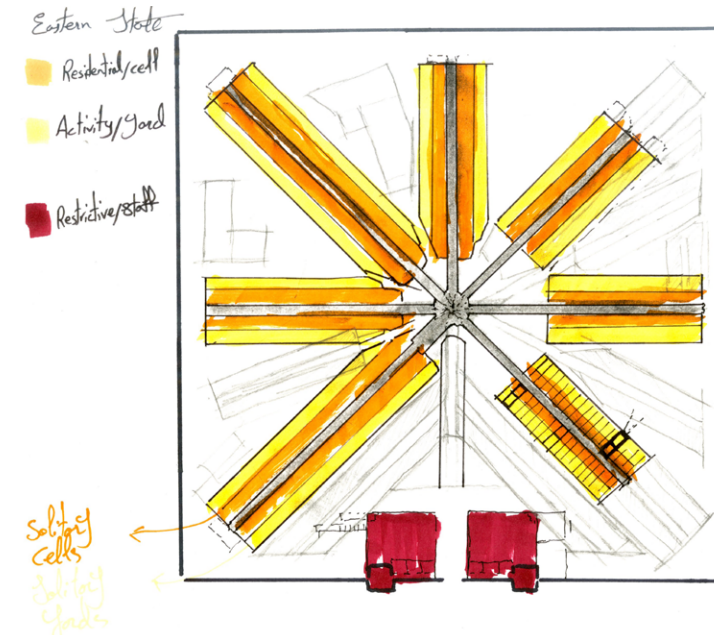
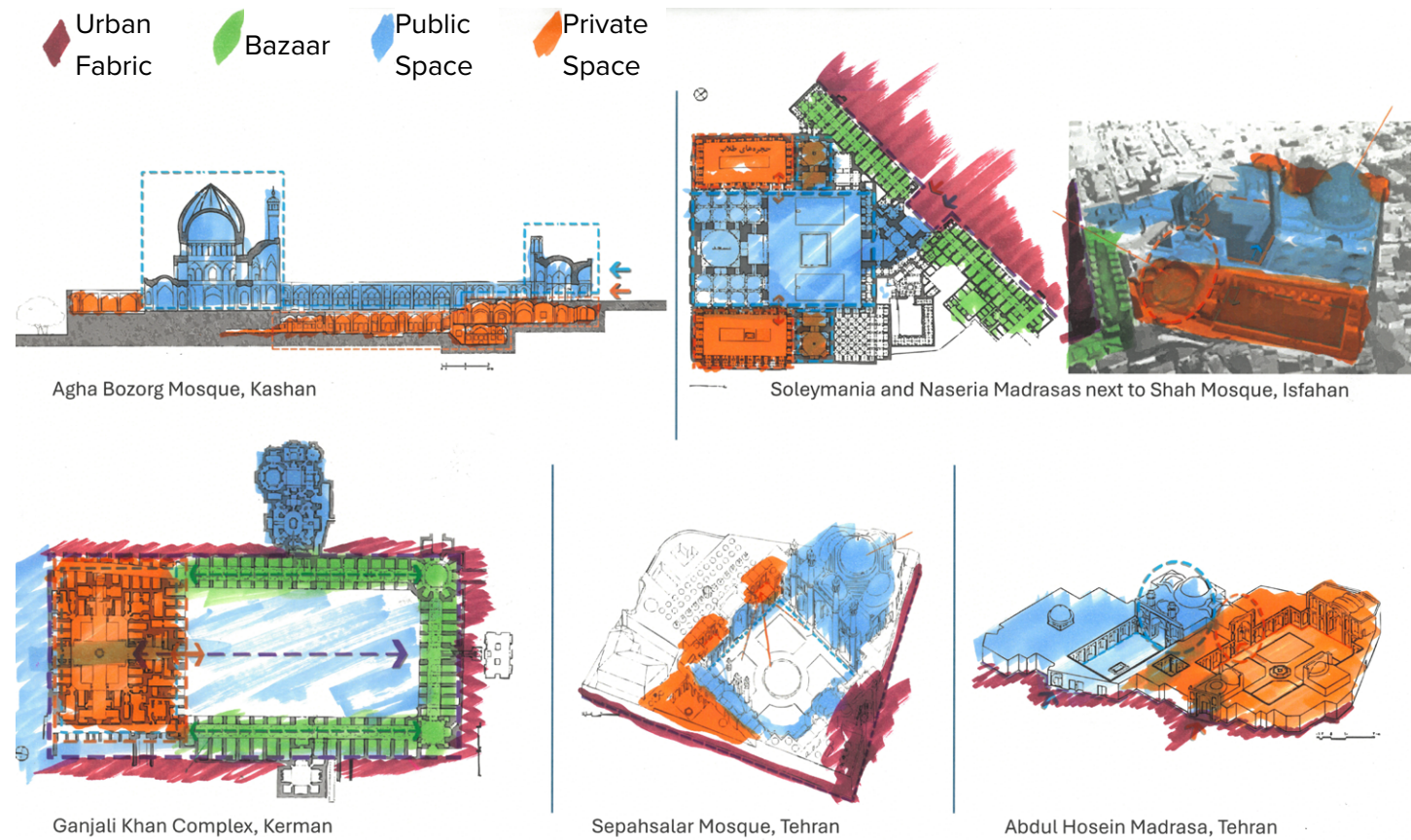
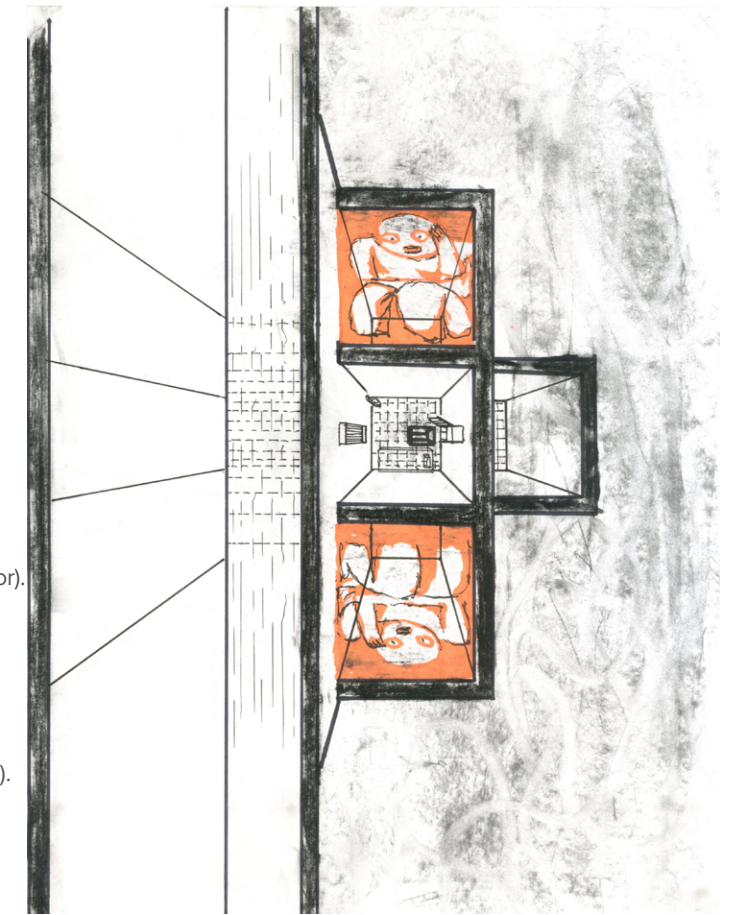
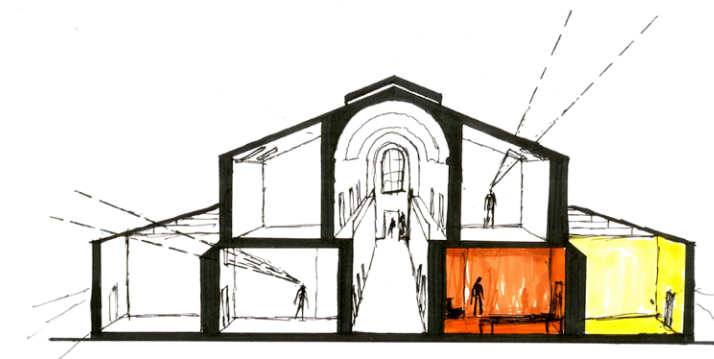


Fig. 43. Sketch of the Eastern State Penitentiary's layout (by author).

Fig. 44. Plan-perspective of the Eastern State's isolating design (by author).

Fig. 45. Section-perspective of the Eastern State Penitentiary (by author).



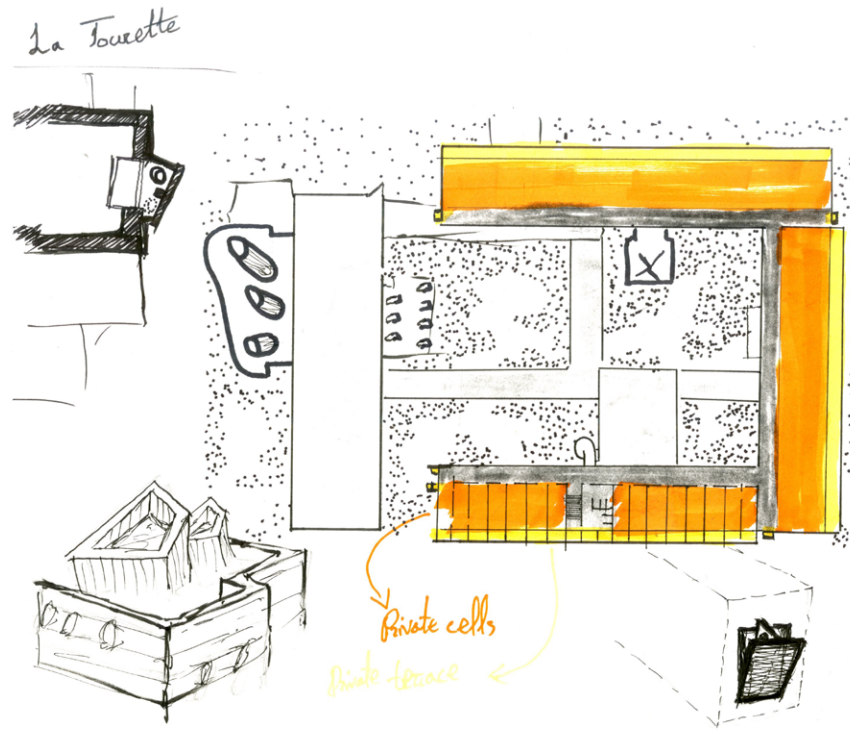


Fig. 46. Analytical sketch of La Tourette. Each cell has a clear view outside with a private terrace, separated from neighboring terraces so interaction is only with the view. Some social spaces have windows facing concrete walls, allowing daylight in while blocking outward views (by author).

Fig. 47. Analytical sketch of MCC Chicago (by author).

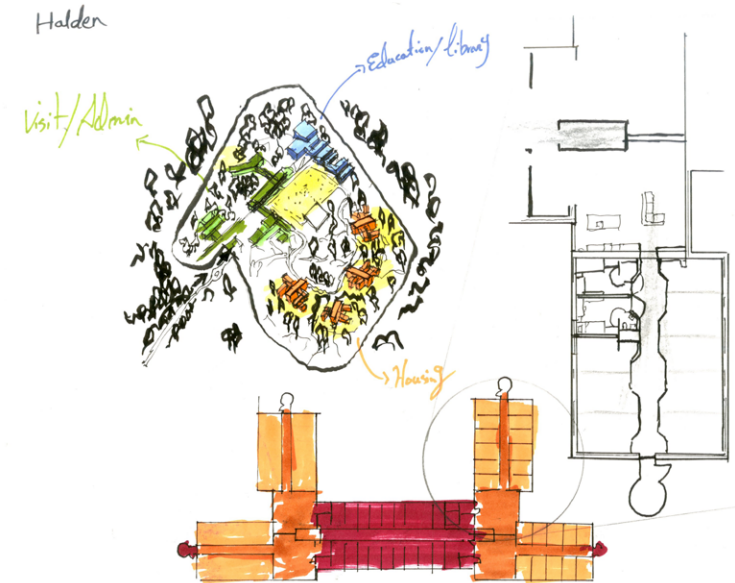
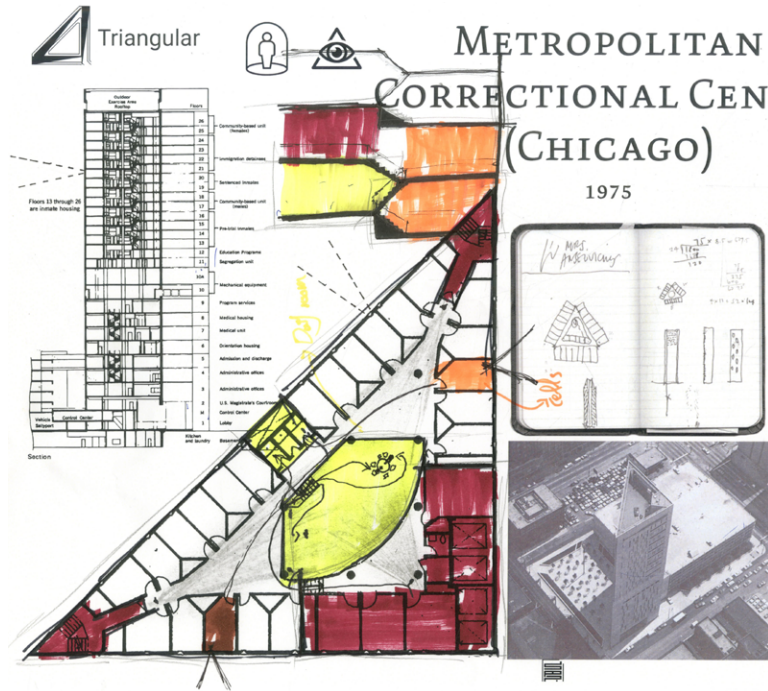


Fig. 49. Sketches showing different cell arrangements inspired by Halden and Storstrom (by author).

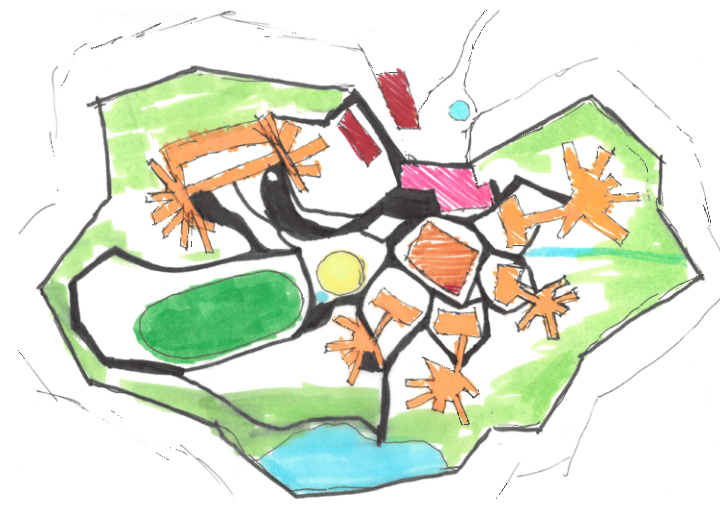


Fig. 48. Analytical sketch of Halden Prison showing its campus layout and its dormitory-style cells (by author).

Fig. 50. Analytical sketch of Storstrom Prison campus layout in Denmark opened in 2017. This project was designed to resemble a small village with interconnected buildings. The cells are gathered in units comprising four to seven cells, placed around a social hub (by author).

Site

The 2.37 acre site for the project is surrounded by the proposed DC Jail annex, the Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF), and the Congressional Cemetery. It lies southwest of Monument Circle, which will act as the end node of the planned Massachusetts Avenue extension to the Anacostia Riverfront. The site slopes naturally toward the waterfront, a condition that creates a great opportunity for my design strategy.

In the planar approach, the concept is organized as a thick poche wrapping around a central courtyard. The design incorporates gaps between building blocks to preserve clear sight-lines, ensuring visual and spatial connection between the public riverfront and the private learning center. These gaps align with view corridors to the waterfront and the public areas. The levels are offset, which makes the gaps act as ha-ha walls, maintaining the view without creating physical connections.

In the sectional approach, the concept steps with the slope from the lower waterfront side to the higher DOC campus side. The lower level, at Water Street grade, forms the public-facing retail spaces. The upper level, aligned with the DOC campus grade, contains the courtyard. This stepped profile uses the natural change in elevation to define thresholds between public and private spaces which reduces the need for extra walls or barriers.

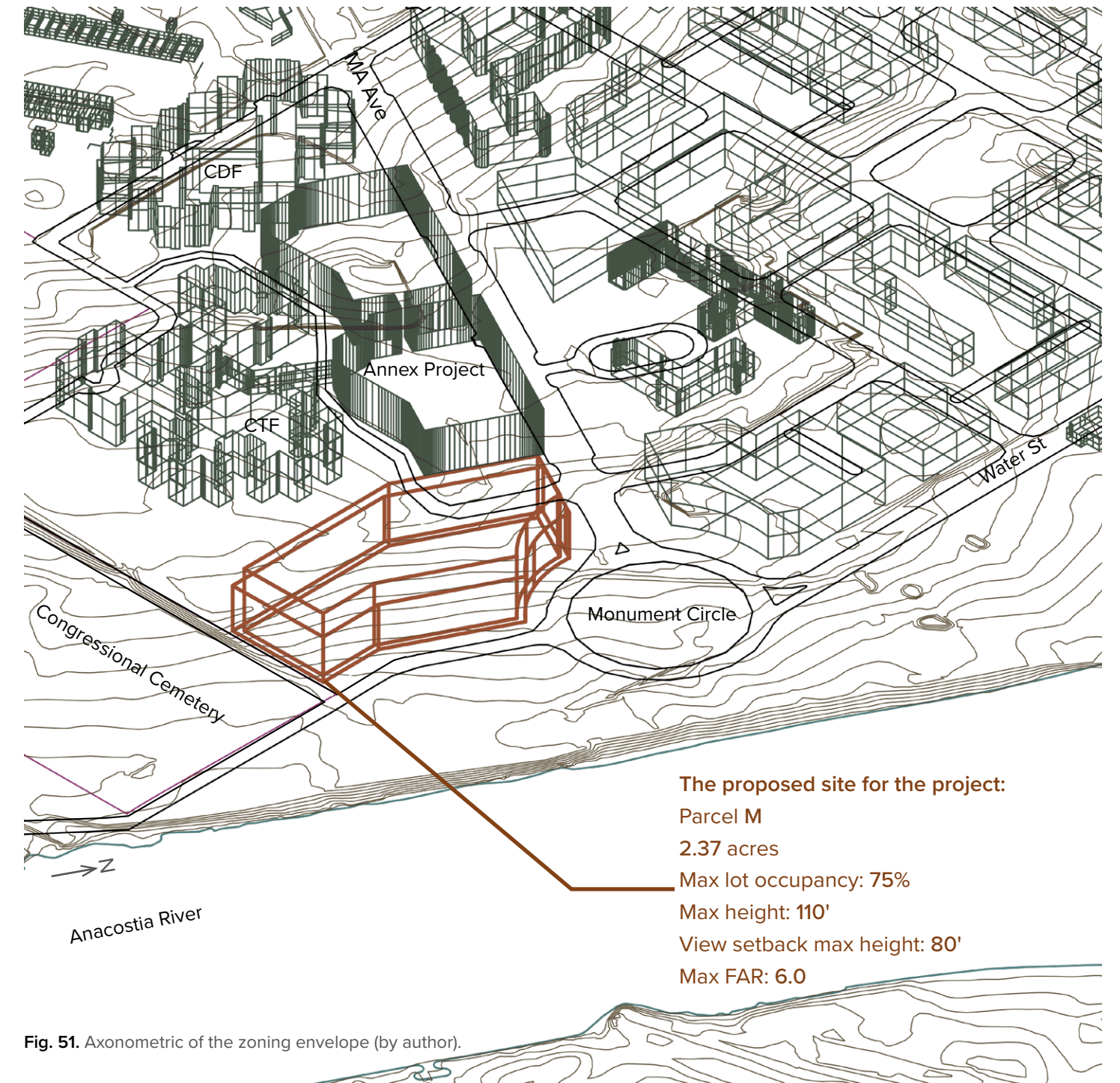


Fig. 51. Axonometric of the zoning envelope (by author).



Fig. 52. Conceptual sketch exploring gaps and natural circulation as the main organizers (by author).

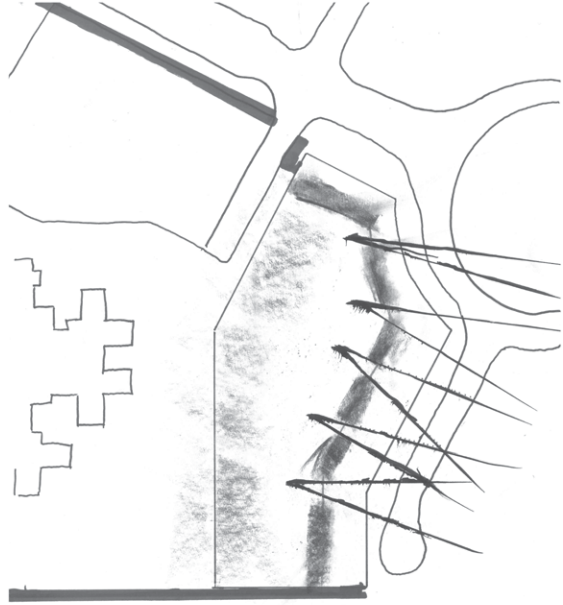


Fig. 54. Conceptual sketch of the poche, the courtyard and the views through the gaps (by author).

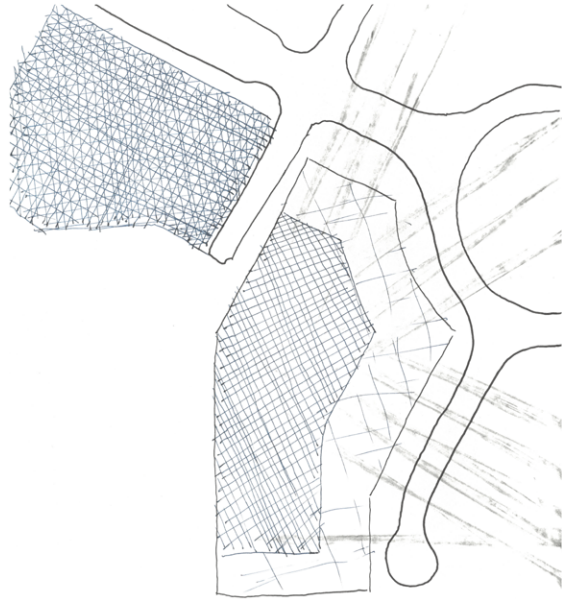


Fig. 53. Early conceptual sketch showing the poche and the different secured spaces (by author).

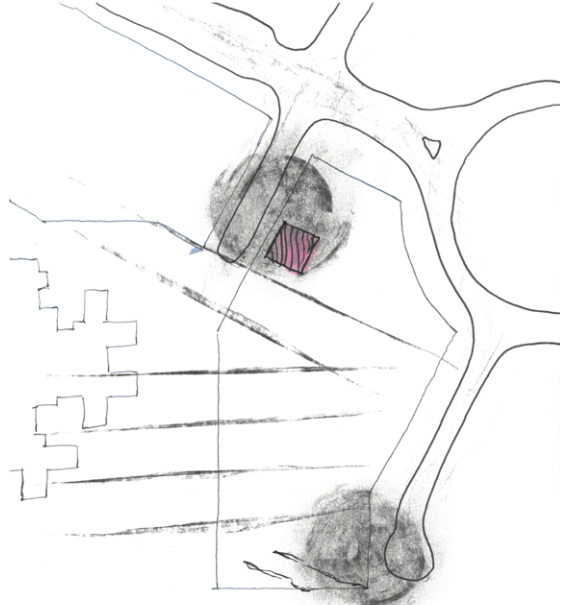


Fig. 55. Conceptual sketch exploring possible entrances and access points (by author).

Fig. 56. Conceptual sketch exploring the stepped design and the layout of different programs (by author).

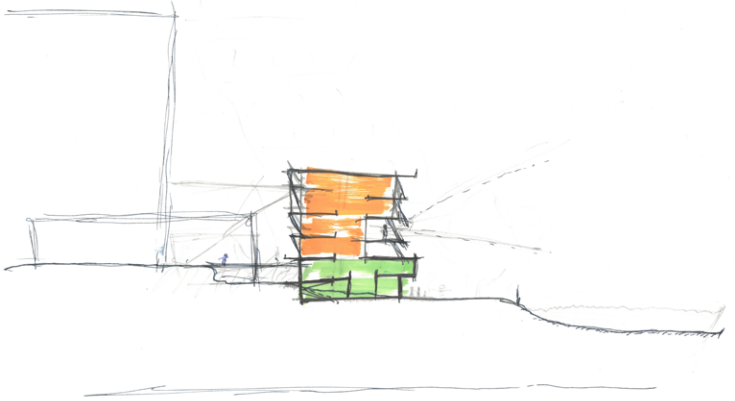


Fig. 57. Conceptual sketch exploring the circulation and the visual interaction between the public and the residents (by author).

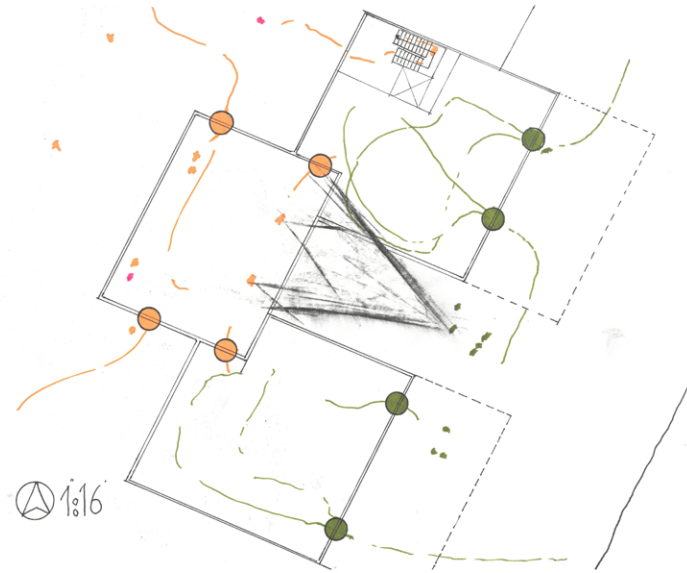


Fig. 58. Conceptual sketch exploring the stepped design and the layout of different programs around a courtyard (by author).



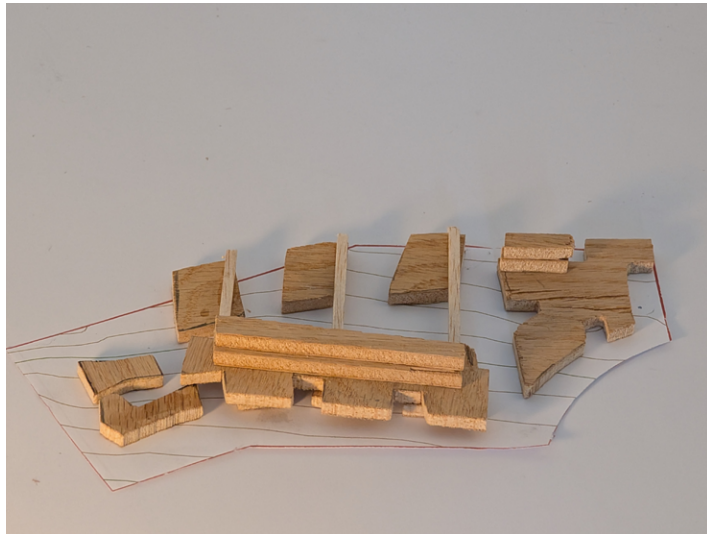


Fig. 60. Sketch model of the front block's stepped design (by author).

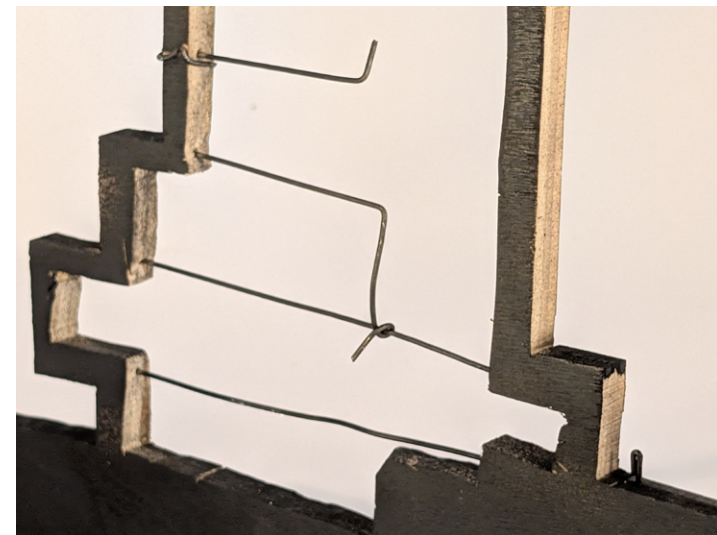


Fig. 59. Sketch model of the blocks and the steps (by author).

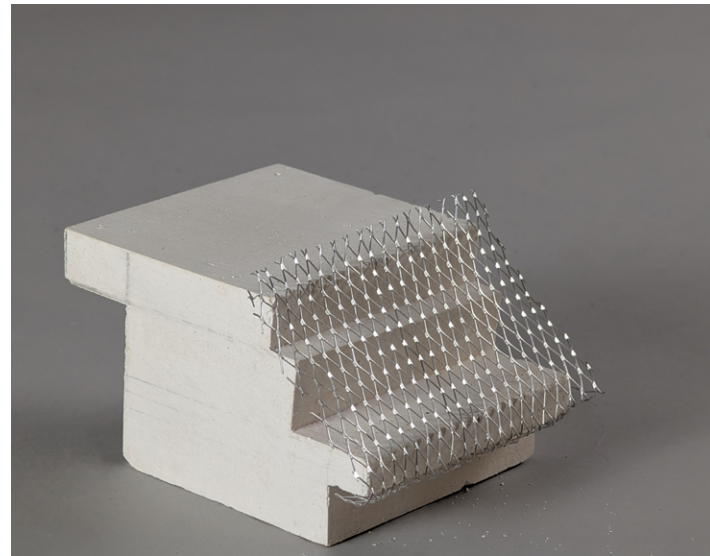


Fig. 61. Sketch model of the stepped sectional approach (by author).

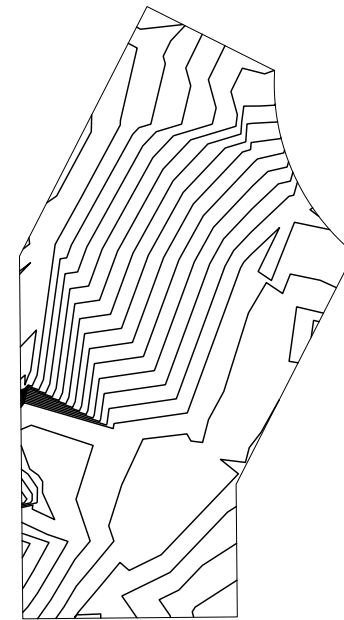


Fig. 62. Diagram of the site's topography (by author).

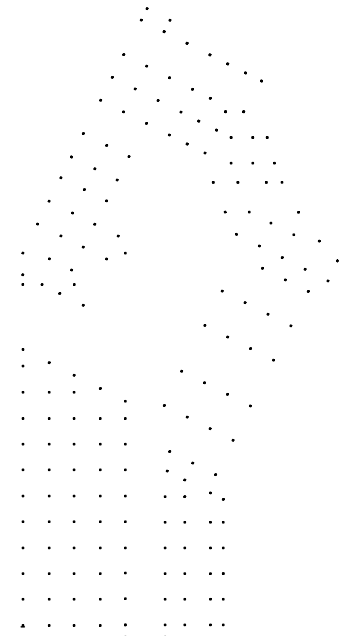


Fig. 64. Diagram of the project's structural columns, following the original grid (by author).

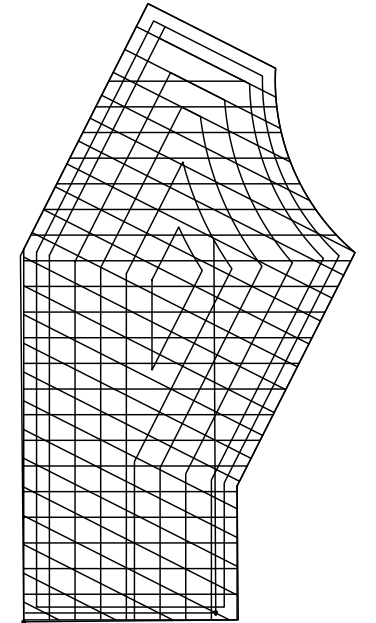


Fig. 63. Diagram of the grid that shaped the poche and the structure (by author).

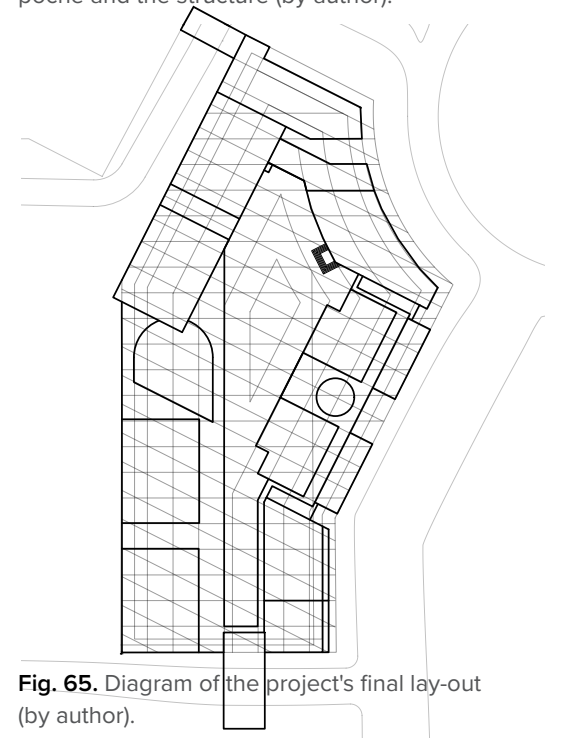


Fig. 65. Diagram of the project's final lay-out (by author).

Fig. 66. View of The Learning Center proposal from the Monument Circle looking toward the proposed Annex (by author).

PROPOSITION

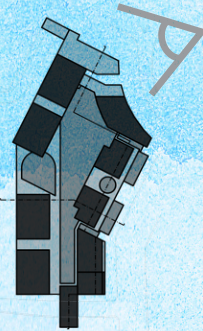


Fig. 67. Aerial view of The Learning Center proposal looking toward RFK Stadium (by author).



At street level, the building houses about 32,000 square feet of public-facing retail space, including a 5,300-square-foot art gallery and a 6,600-square-foot restaurant. The service entrance for these businesses is the souther entrance which allows for deliveries and operations without interfering with public circulation. This frontage along Water Street is the project’s main connection to the broader urban environment.

Fig. 68. View of the restaurant rooftop from the Annex (by author).

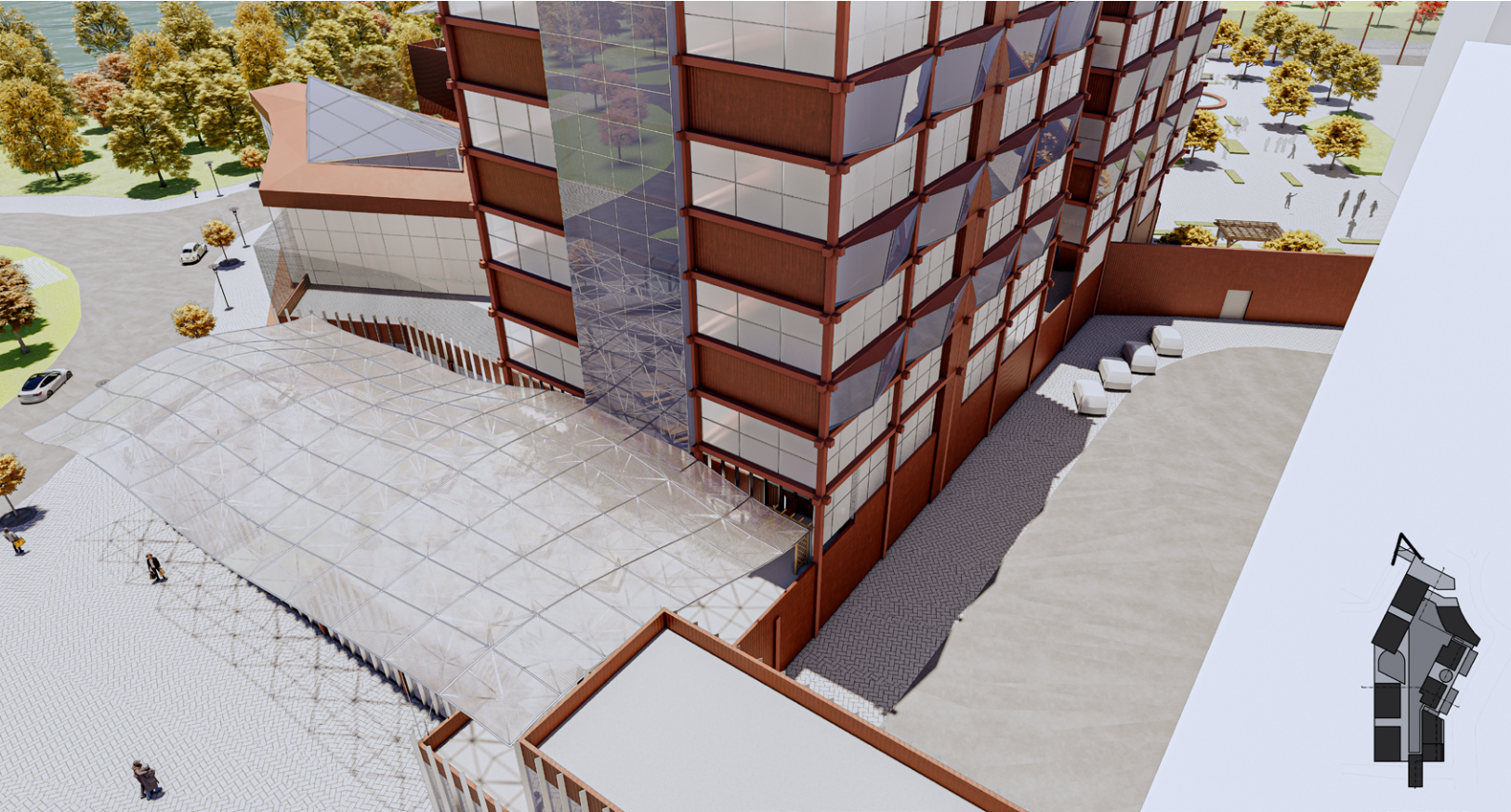


Fig. 69. View from Water St looking south, showing Level 1, the public front (by author).

Residents admitted into the facility are divided into three authorization tiers. The first tier includes individuals on parole or otherwise trusted to interact directly with the public. These residents can work in the retail spaces and engage directly with the public. The second tier consists of individuals trusted to operate heavy machinery in the workshops and have an indirect connection to the public. The third tier is made up of residents who attend classrooms.

Access throughout the facility is regulated by four types of entry points, all of which are supervised. Free access points are supervised but open to anyone. Keyed access points require a fob or key-card in addition to supervision, limiting movement to residents or staff with the necessary clearance. Controlled access points require ID checks and search procedures. Restricted access points are for staff use only, and in cases when residents -with prior authorization- must enter, they are fully monitored at all times. Restricted access point include full screening measures and metal detectors.



LEVEL 1

Fig. 70. Key organizational plan (by author).

Level 1

1. Cores
2. Campus Security
3. Restaurant Diner
4. Restaurant Kitchen
5. Bakery
6. Art Gallery
7. Retail Spaces
8. Gift Shop
9. Security Offices
10. Visitor/Commuter Entrance
11. Service/Transfer Entrance

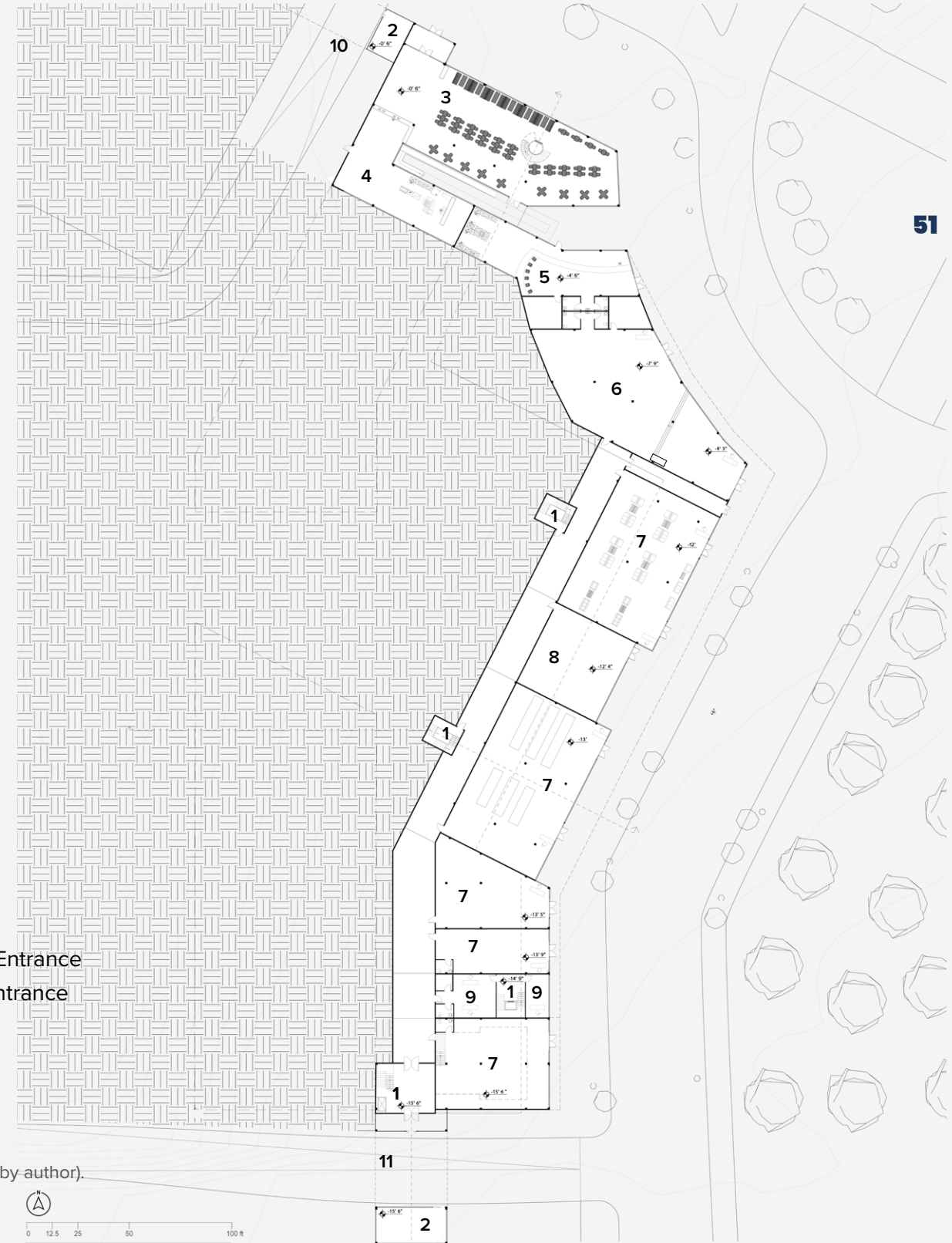


Fig. 71. Floor plan drawing (by author).

Section A-A

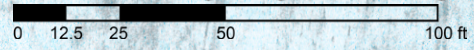
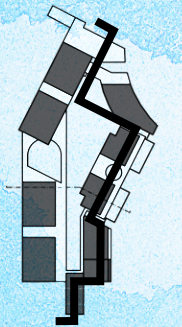


Fig. 72. Section drawing (by author).

The project is organized across multiple levels, each engaging a different part of its context. The lower street-facing level connects to the public through retail, art, and dining spaces. The level above holds the workshops and active learning spaces, totaling over 35,000 square feet. The highest levels open to the waterfront and contain 12,000 square feet of classrooms. Dormitories sit on the west side of the plaza with views to both the city and the river. Gardens are set at the threshold between the students' plaza and the visitation park, shared with the broader campus. Circulation is arranged to avoid blind spots while still allowing for small hangout spots.

Fig. 73. Aerial view of the front block showing the chain-link fencing system (by author).

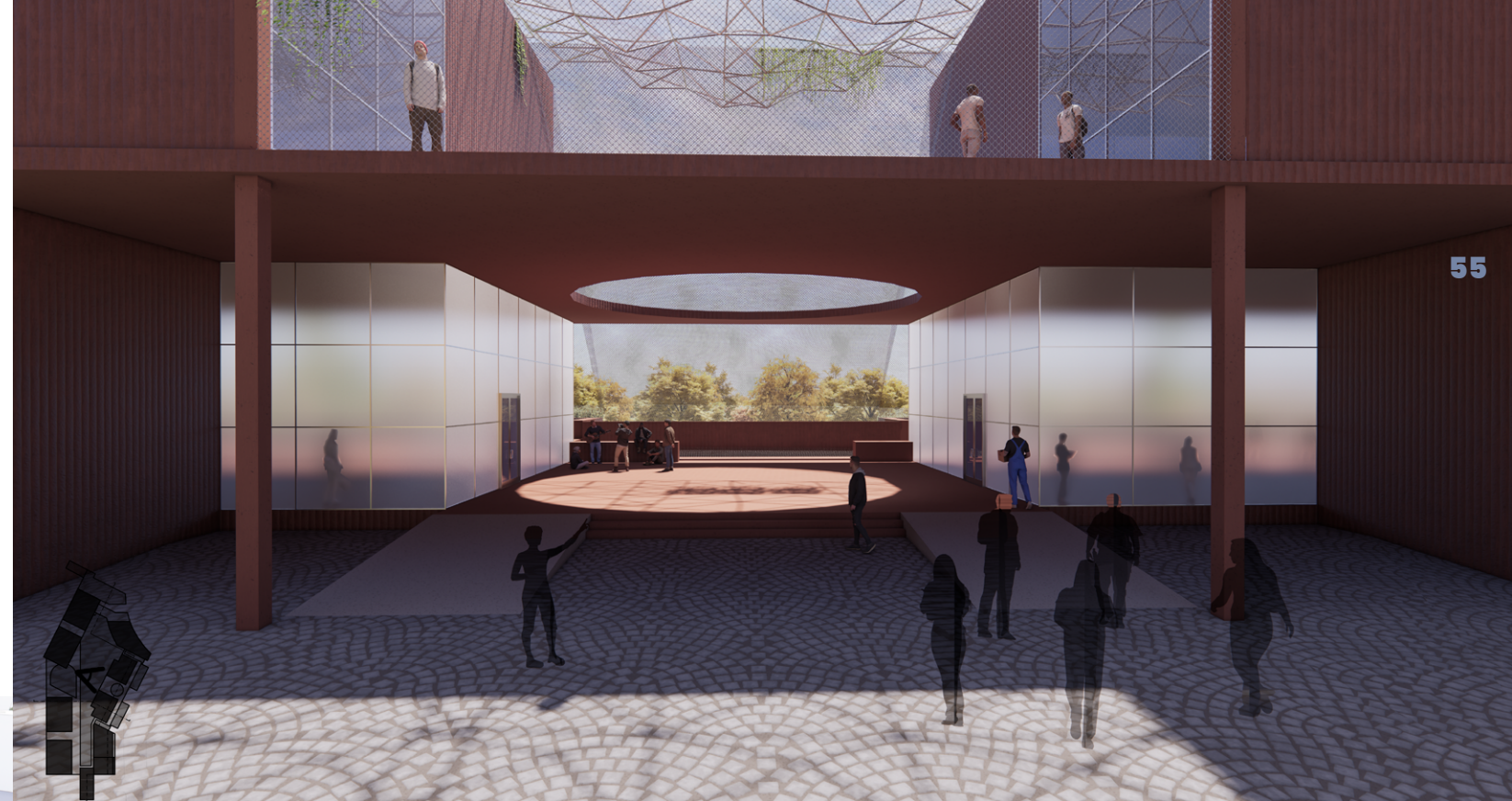
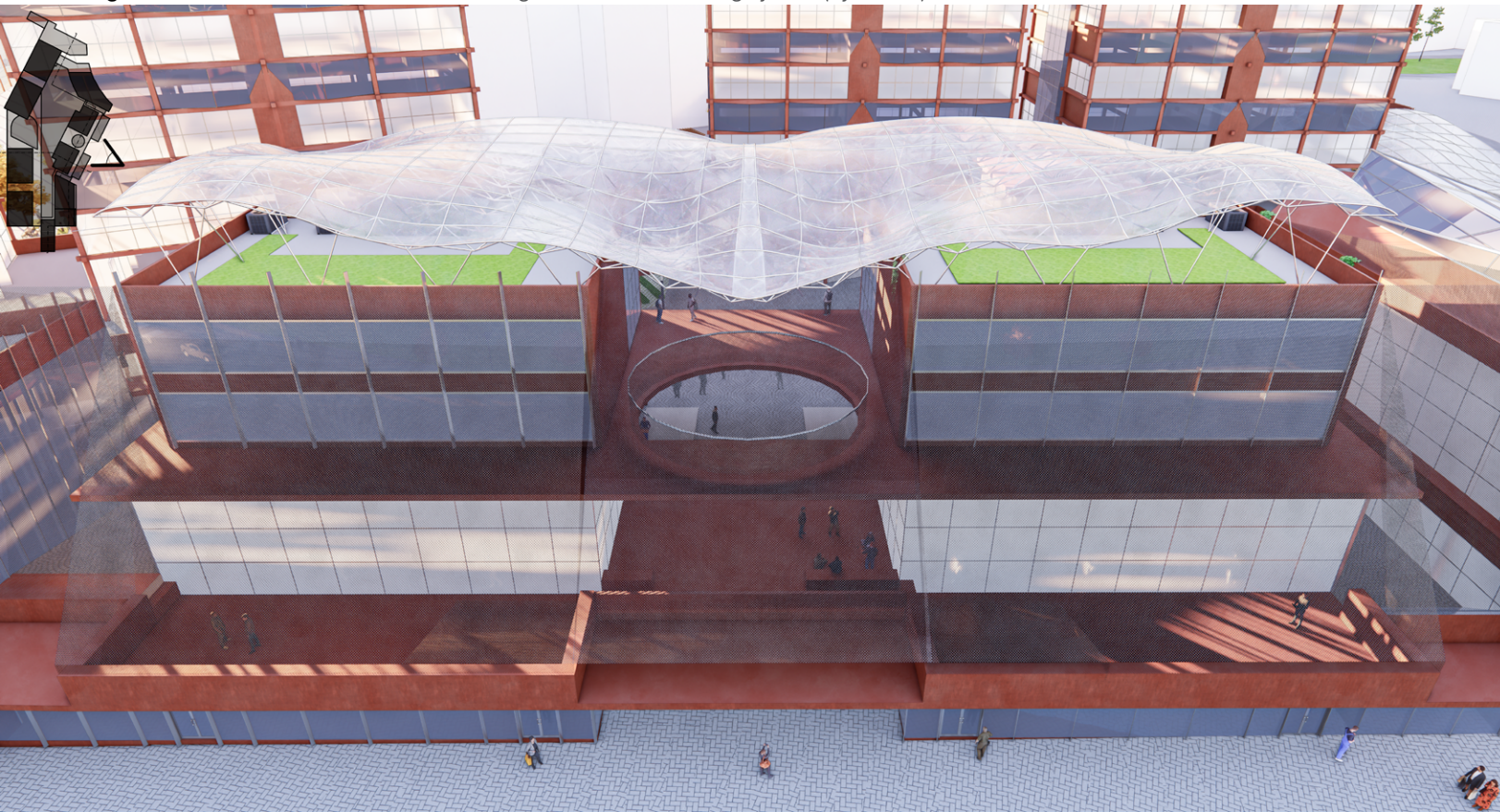


Fig. 74. View from the plaza toward the riverfront (by author).

Following the overall concept of transitioning, the facade uses three primary levels of transparency. The most transparent areas are glazed curtain walls for classrooms, staff offices, and public-facing spaces. Semi-transparent and translucent facades (like Kalwall panels) bring daylight into the workshops but limit direct views in or out. The opaque parts are pigmented concrete cast in bamboo formwork, giving texture and articulation to the solid surfaces. At the terraces closest to the public, a chain-link mesh is installed which allows ivy or vine growth, softening the visual boundary and bringing the private training center as close to the public as possible without creating security concerns.



LEVEL 2

Fig. 75. Key organizational plan (by author).

Level 2

1. Cores
2. Cores to Dorms
3. Campus Security
4. Restaurant & Bakery (level 1)
5. Library
6. Textile Shop
7. Pottery Shop
8. Security & Staff Offices
9. Retail (level 1)
10. General Skills Studio
11. Metal Shop
12. Handcraft Shop
13. Wood Shop
14. Recoding & Music Studio
15. Art Studio
16. Culinary Studio
17. Students' Plaza
18. Gardens
19. Visitation Park
20. Visitor/Commuter Entrance
21. Service/Transfer Entrance



Fig. 76. Floor plan drawing (by author).

Fig. 77. View of the plaza looking north (by author).



A walking deck runs around the project at the 3rd level, connecting the blocks and creating a continuous loop of circulation for residents and staff. This provides a clear and secure path between blocks which supports natural surveillance and casual supervision across. Two spaceframe canopies are part of the upper level. One over the classrooms roofs, reserved for staff breaks, and another above the restaurant rooftop. Between the two classroom blocks, a section of the deck also falls under the canopy, creating a sheltered hangout spot for students.

Fig. 78. Worm's eye view from the visitation park toward the gardens and plaza (by author).

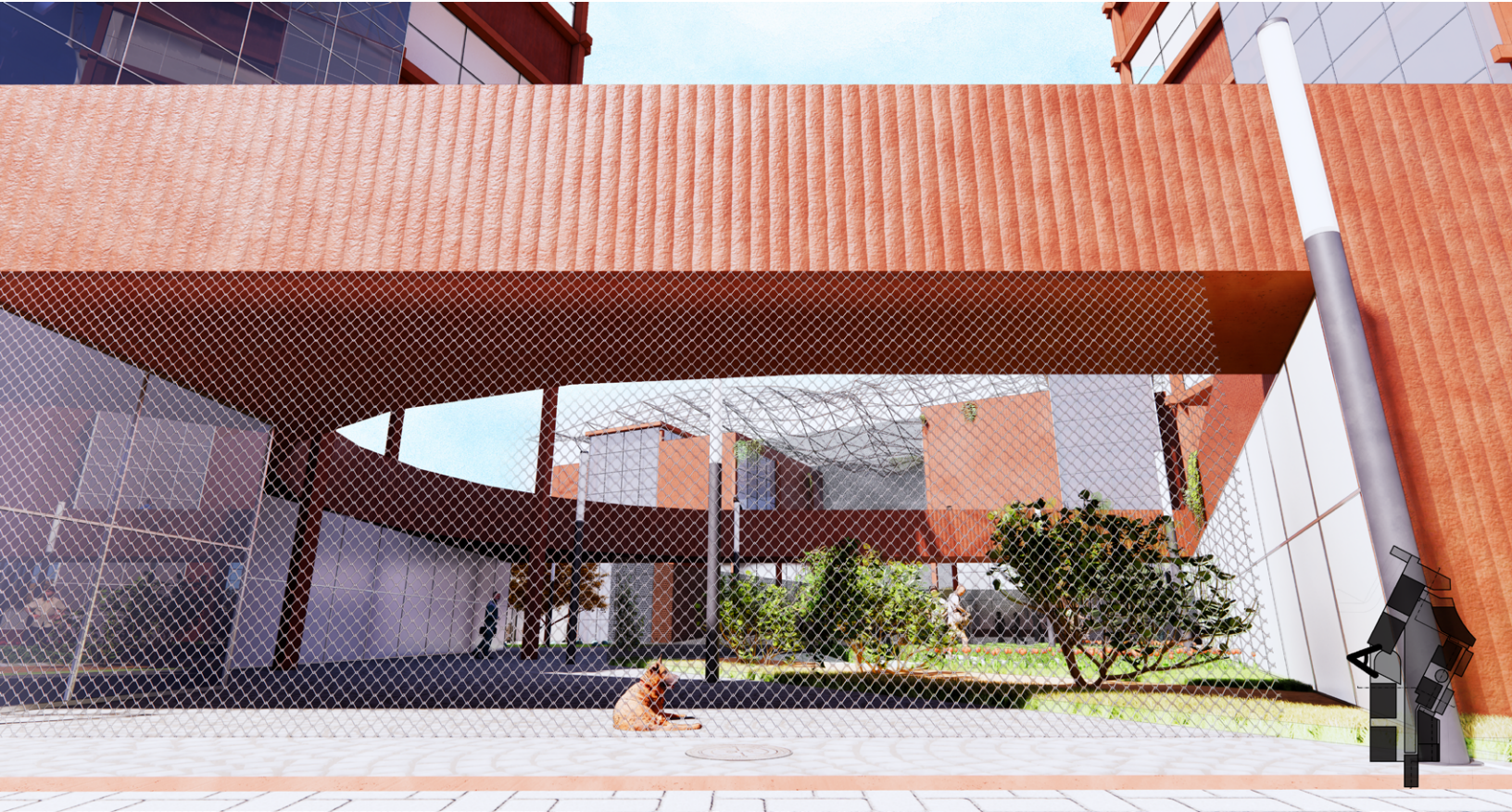


Fig. 79. View from the CTF jail toward the river (by author).

The social halls are located directly below the dormitory blocks. These enclosed spaces contain each block's amenities, including a fitness center, dining hall, and laundry facilities. Wall panels along their perimeter can swing open to make open-plan pilote spaces during events or gatherings.



Fig. 80. Key organizational plan (by author).

Level 3

1. Cores
2. Cores to Dorms
3. Campus Security
4. Security & Staff Offices
5. Classrooms (two floors)
6. Library Mezzanine
7. Dormitory Social Halls
8. Students' Plaza
9. Gardens
10. Visitation Park
11. Visitor/Commuter Entrance
12. Service/Transfer Entrance



Fig. 81. Floor plan drawing (by author).

Fig. 82. View of the walking deck looking south (by author).





SITE PLAN

Fig. 83. Key site plan (by author).

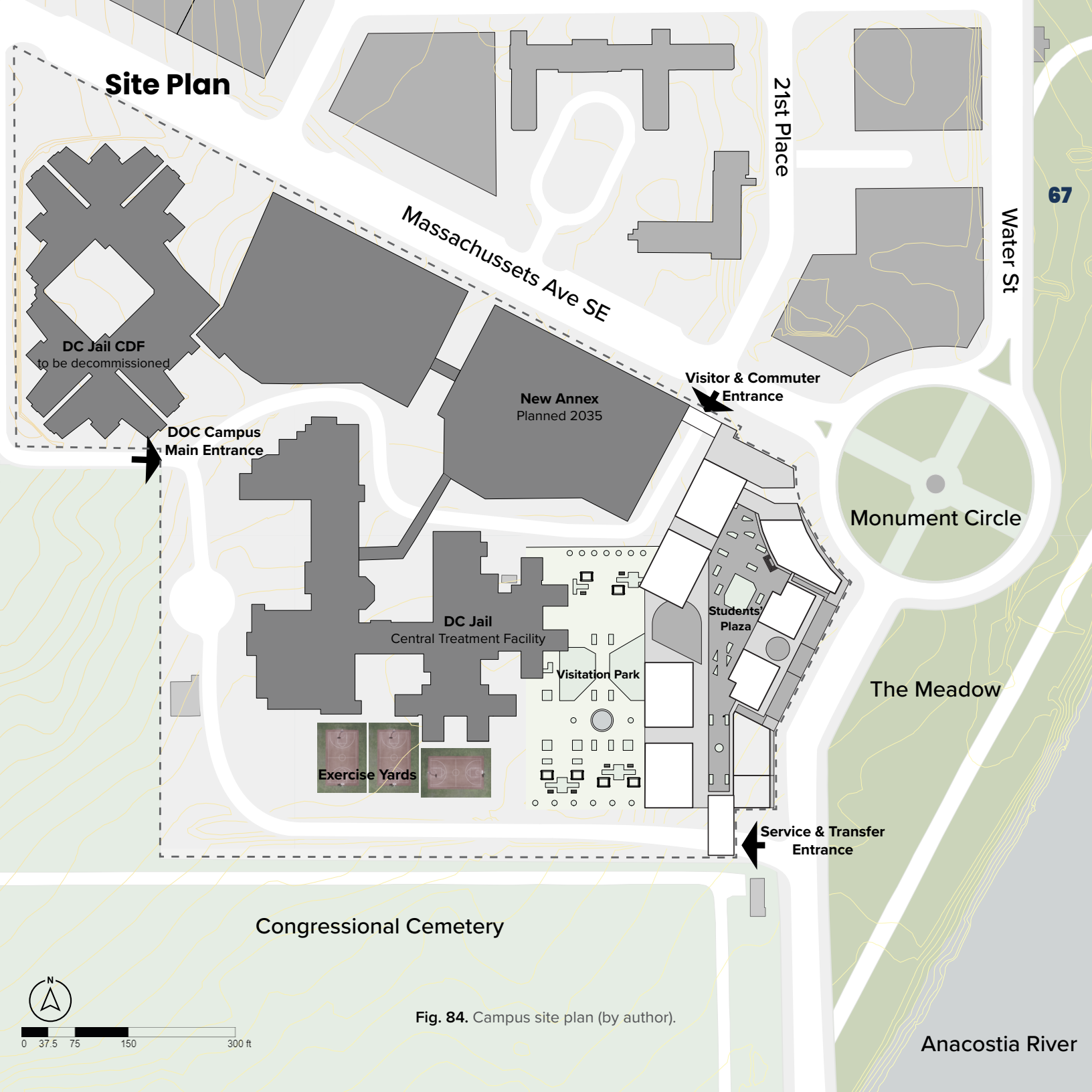
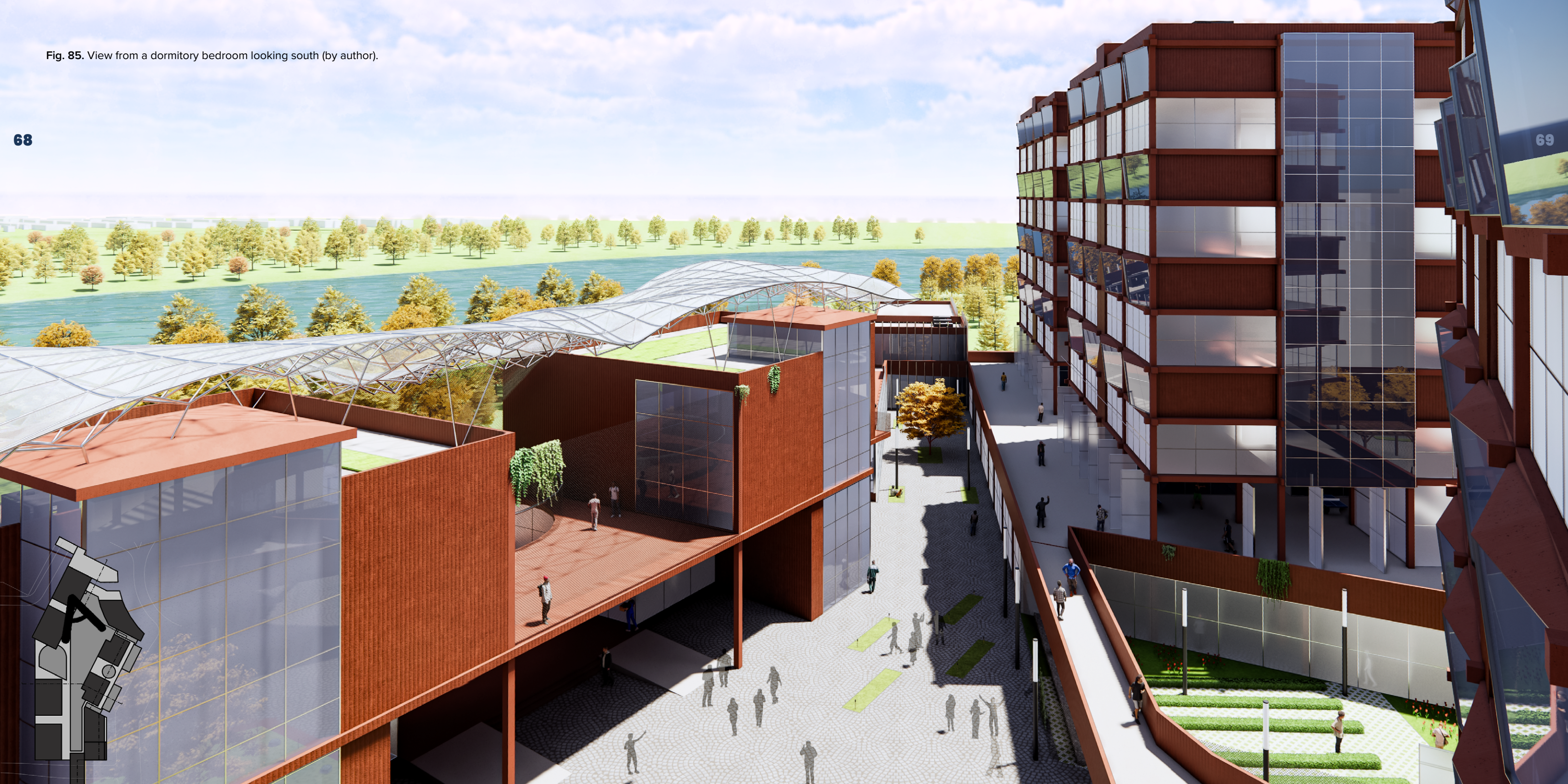


Fig. 84. Campus site plan (by author).

Fig. 85. View from a dormitory bedroom looking south (by author).



Section B-B

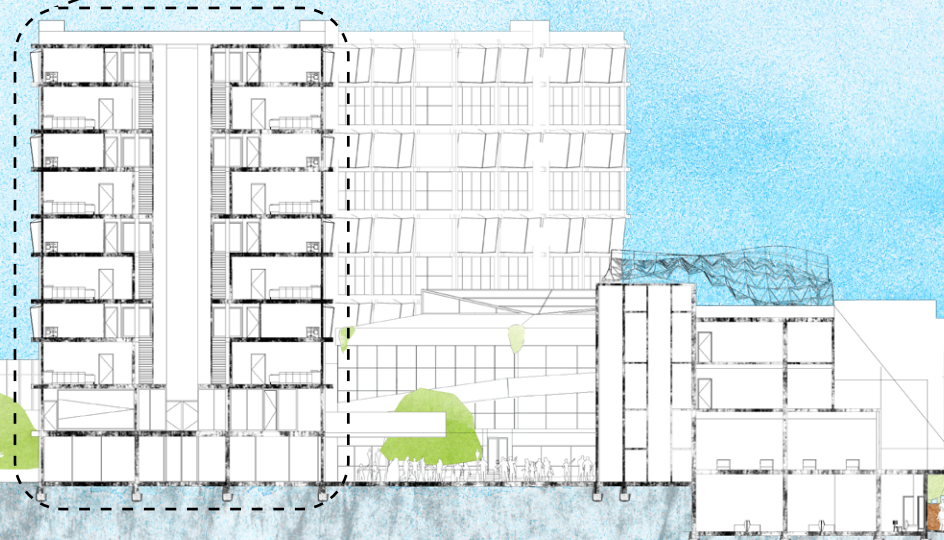


Fig. 86. Section drawing (by author).

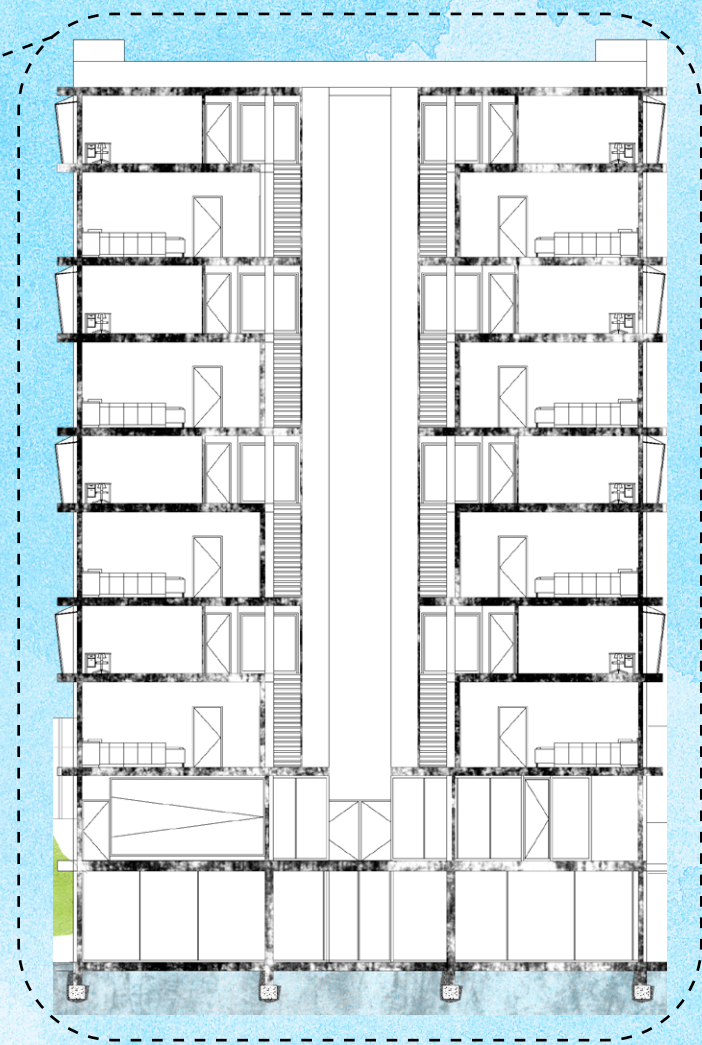
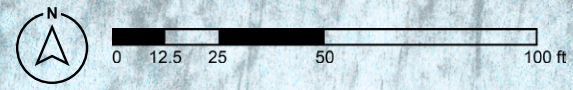


Fig. 87. Section callout for the dorms (by author).

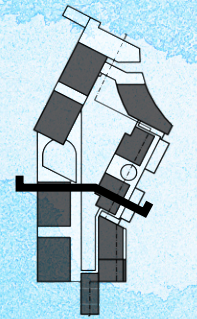
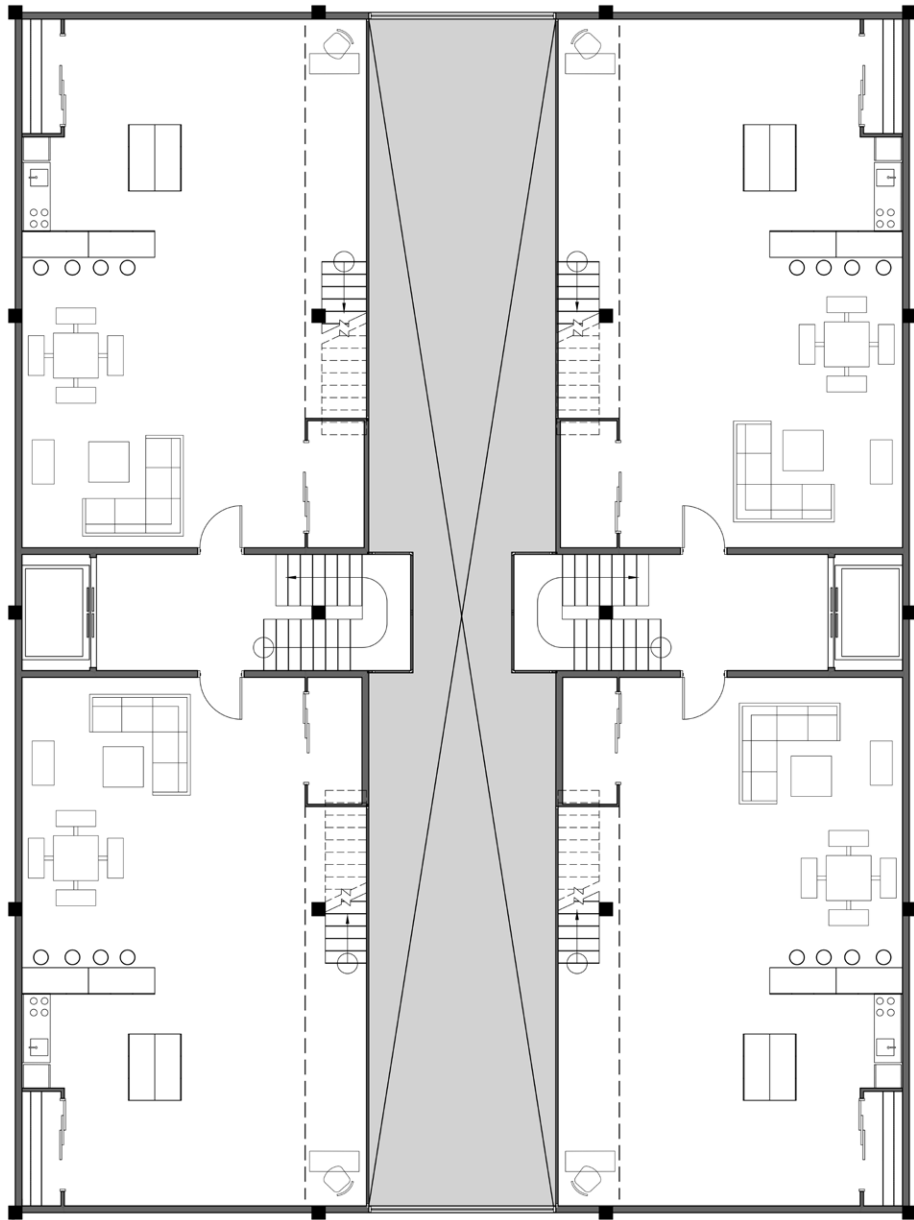


Fig. 88. Areal view of the training center looking south (by author).



Fig. 89. Dormitory's lower level plan (by author).



**DORMITORY
COMMON SPACES**

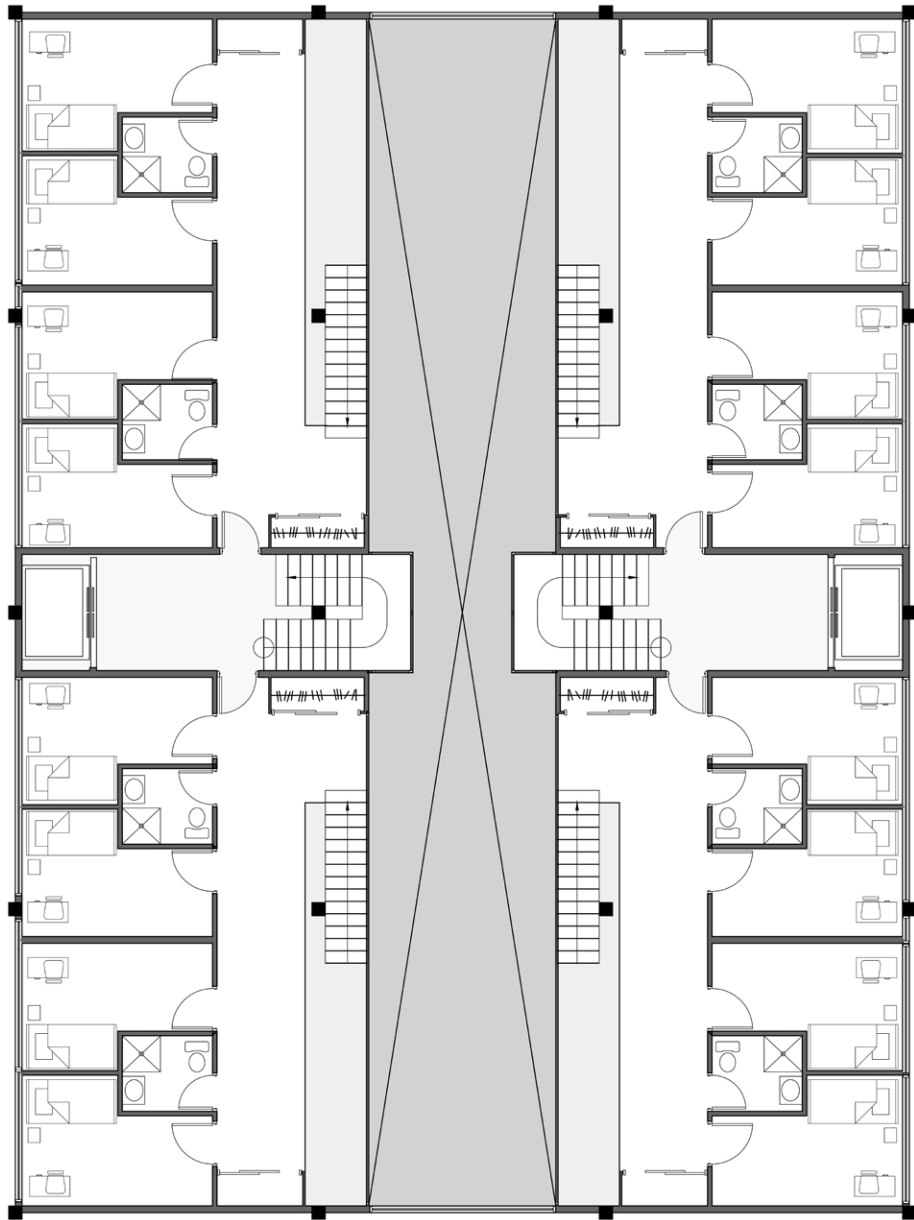
0 3.75 7.5 15 30 ft

Each of the four dormitory blocks is organized around a central atrium that runs vertically to the roof. Each unit is set up like a duplex apartment, with the lower level containing shared living rooms, kitchens, and a space for support staff, and the upper level holding the private quarters. Each block has four single bedrooms, with bathrooms shared between two rooms. The atrium brings light through the center and also creates a sense of natural surveillance between different units and across levels.

Fig. 90. Point-of-view of a support staff in a dorm's common area (by author).



Fig. 91. Dormitory's upper level plan (by author).



0 3.75 7.5 15 30 ft

**DORMITORY
PRIVATE ROOMS**



Fig. 92. View of one of the bedrooms facing the riverfront (by author).

The bedrooms have full-height glazing to the outside, giving each resident a clear view toward the city or the river. This visual connection reinforces a sense of openness and orientation. In contrast, the shared spaces use translucent panels for the facade. These let daylight in while filtering views, keeping attention inward toward the group and the activities taking place inside.

East Elevation

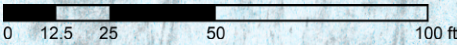
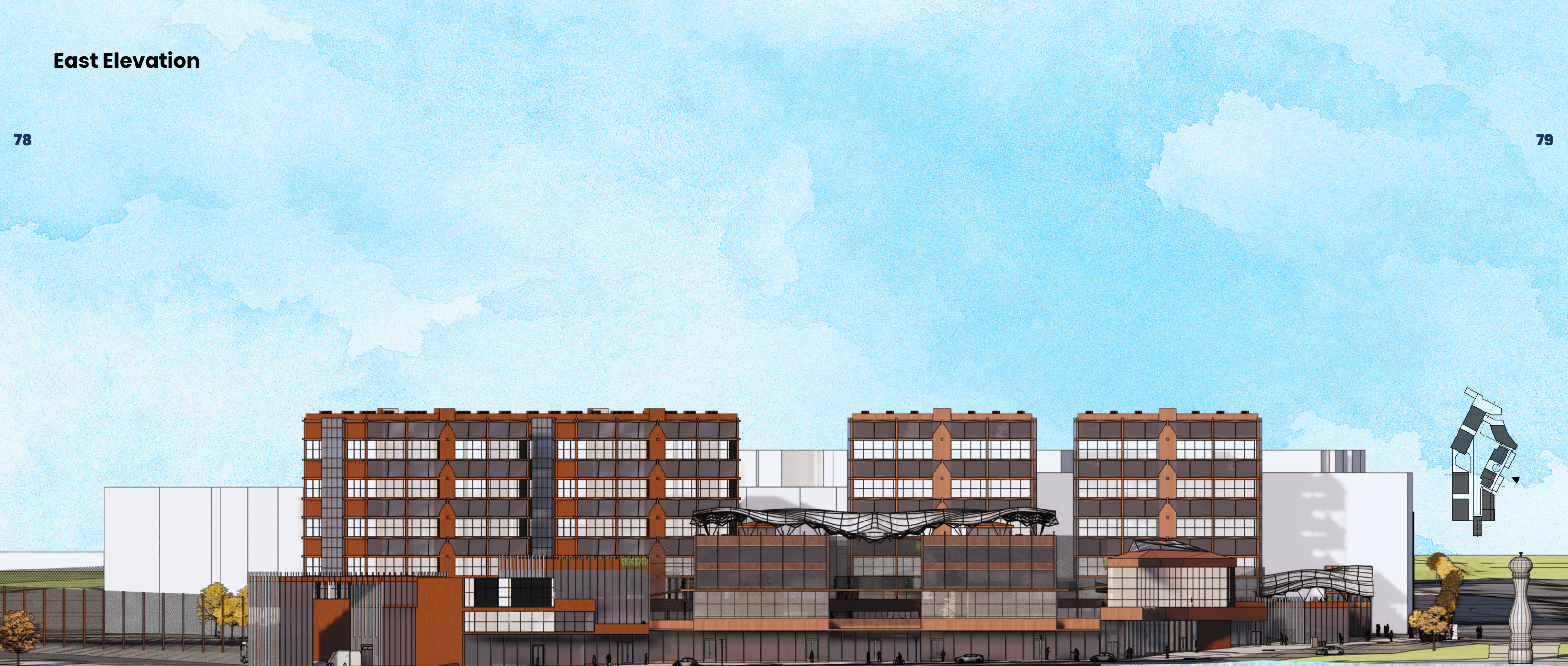


Fig. 93. Elevation drawing (by author).

VERDICT

This thesis has been an effort to propose a new way to reshape the future of those who may have gone down the wrong path. The project is designed to house 256 resident-students, though without real-life implementation, the outcomes of this new model cannot yet be measured.

Architecturally speaking, by bringing D.C. residents back home and placing education programs at the center of incarceration, this project creates an environment that is integrating rather than isolating, blending functionally and visually with its surroundings.

Socially speaking, this proposal seeks broader reforms in how we view people involved in the penal system. While media coverage and certain political voices have started to address the issue, this vision cannot come to life without the commitment of our lawmakers. Nonetheless, I hope this proposition sheds some light on the struggles faced by many whose lives are too often overlooked. For that, I believe -as Albert Camus put it- "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). That said, I rest my case with a direct quote from an American philosopher:

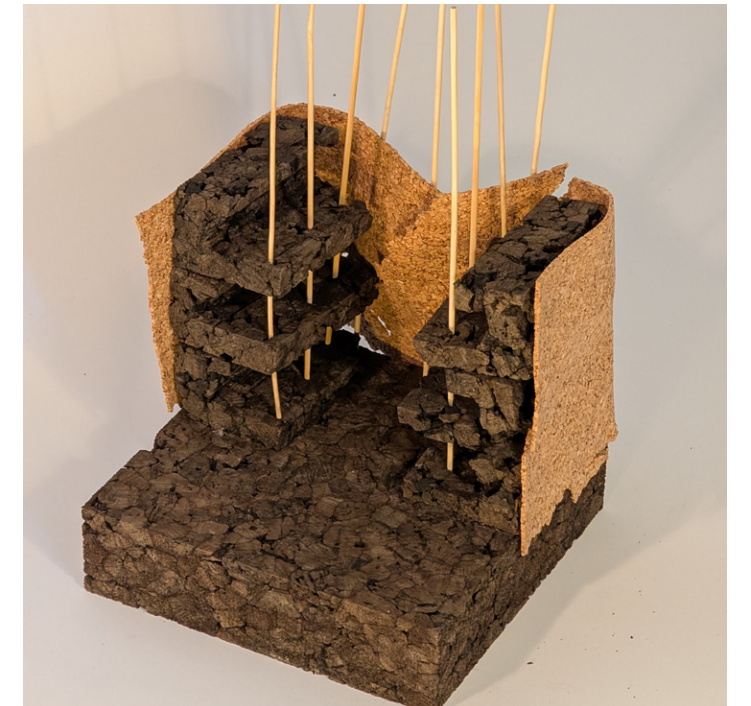
Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they were made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good?

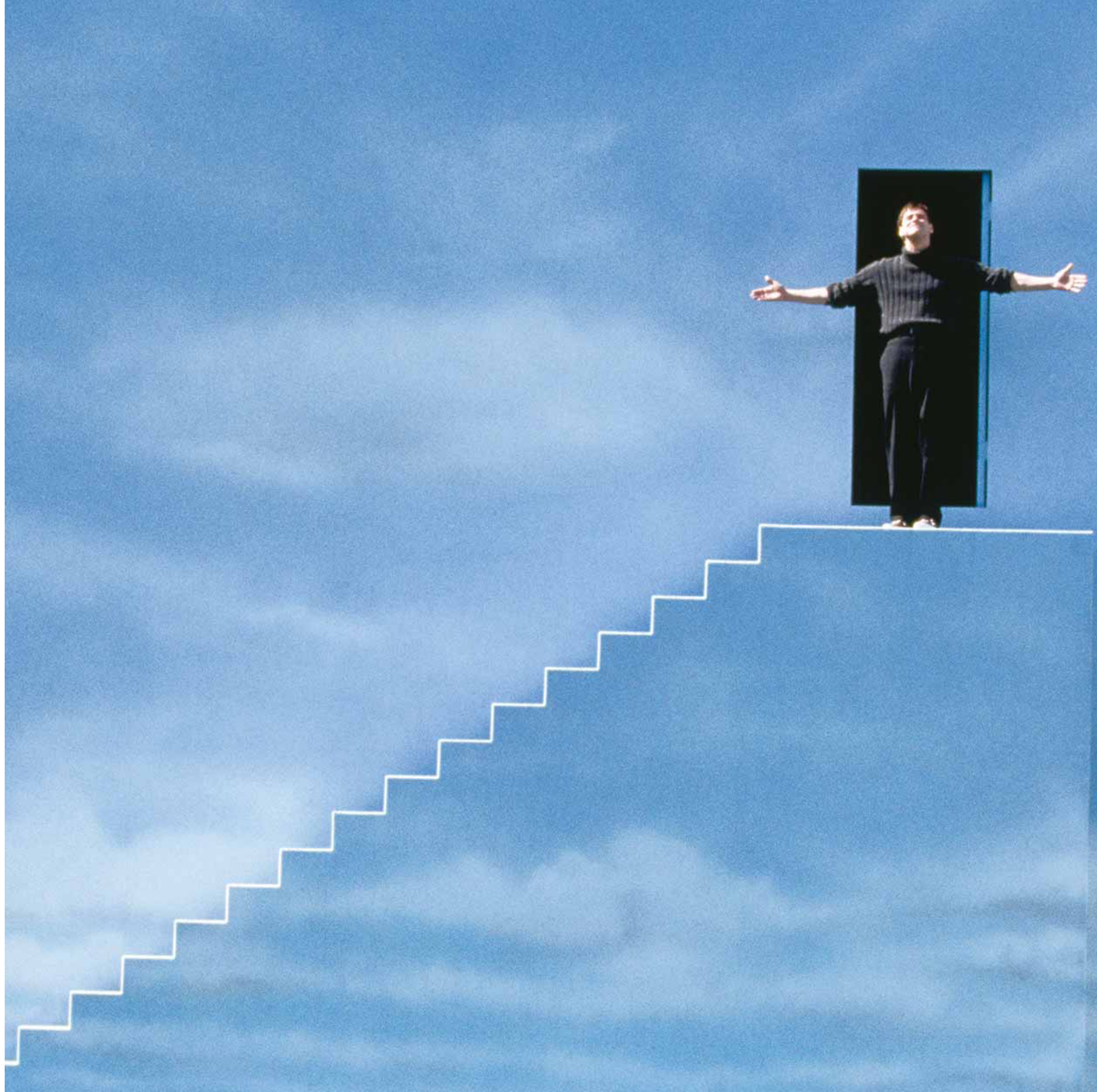
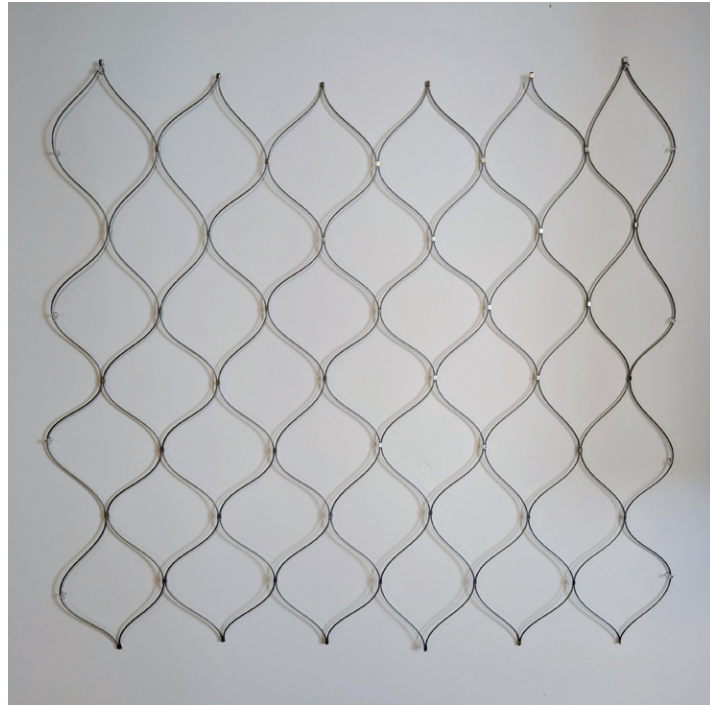
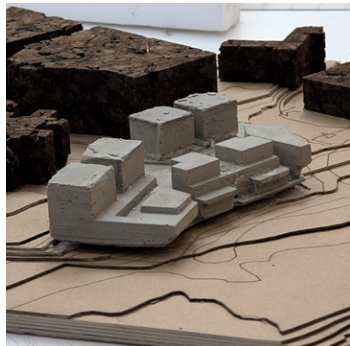
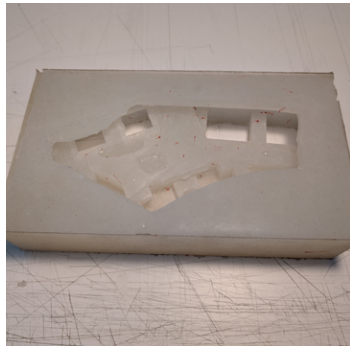
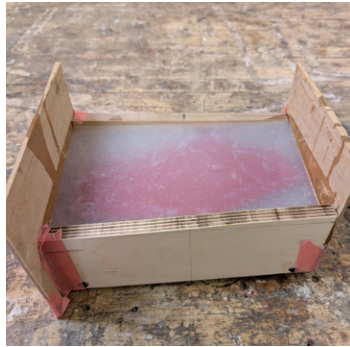
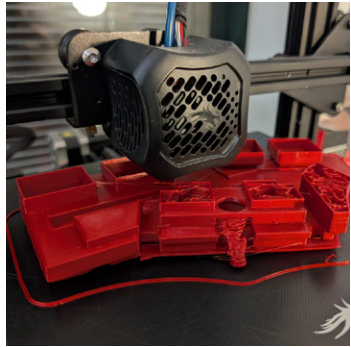
Henry David Thoreau, 1859.

REFERENCES

- Alper, Mariel, et al. *Special Report 2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005-2014)*. U.S. Department of Justice, May 2018.
- Bentham, Jeremy, and Timothy L S Sprigge. *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*. London, Athlone Press, 1988.
- Calma, Emilia, and Yesim Yesim. “Map of the Week: Where Are D.C. Code Offenders Housed Today?.” *D.C. Policy Center*, 10 Mar. 2023, www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/where-dc-offenders-housed/.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Éditions Gallimard, Oct. 1942.
- Davis, Lois M, et al. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. United States Of America, 2013.
- Dickens, Charles. *Philadelphia and Its Solitary Prison: From American Notes*. Philadelphia Pa., Benjamin F. Emery Co. Printers, 1916.
- Gathright, Jenny. “Attorney Recalls D.C. Jail Uprising on 50th Anniversary.” *DCist*, WAMU 88.5 - American University Radio, 11 Oct. 2022, dcist.com/story/22/10/11/dc-jail-uprising-50th-anniversary/.
- “Hill East District Redevelopment.” *Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development*, 2025, dmped.dc.gov/page/hill-east-district-redevelopment.
- Initiative, Prison Policy. “District of Columbia Profile.” *Prison Policy*, www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/DC.html.
- Johnston, Norman. *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- “Koepel Panopticon Prison.” *OMA*, www.oma.com/projects/koepel-panopticon-prison.
- McCreesh, Shawn. “On Pivotal Day for His Bill, Trump Leaves Washington for “Alligator Alcatraz.”” *The New York Times*, 1 July 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/07/01/us/elections/trump-bill-alligator-alcatraz.html.
- Mitchell, Meghan M., et al. “The Effect of Prison Visitation on Reentry Success: A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 47, no. 47, Dec. 2016, pp. 74–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2016.07.006>.
- “New DC Jail” *D.C. Department of General Services*, 2025, dgs.dc.gov/page/new-dc-jail-construction-new-corrections-facility.
- Norton, Eleanor Holmes. Statement of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton. *Norton Introduces Bill Requiring BOP to Place D.C. Residents Serving Sentences for D.C. Code Felonies within 250 Miles of D.C.*, 24 Apr. 2025, norton.house.gov/media/press-releases/norton-introduces-bill-requiring-bop-place-dc-residents-serving-sentences-dc-0.
- Recreation Centers/Prison Facilities Supplement to P/A, Progressive Architecture*. Progressive Architecture, Oct. 1994.
- Sawyer, Wendy, and Peter Wagner. “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2025.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 11 Mar. 2025, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html.
- Sullivan, Louis H, and Isabella Athey. *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*. New York, Dover Publications Inc, 2015.
- “The Future - Events DC.” *Events DC*, eventsdc.com/venue/fields-rfk-campus/future.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. 1859. Gloucestershire, U.K., Dodo Press, 2008.
- Urrutia-Moldes, Alberto. *Health and Well-Being in Prison Design*. Routledge, 6 May 2022.
- VISION FOR RFK. *VISION for RFK*, KATO Design, 2025, www.rfknewstadium.com/home.

ADDENDUM







© 2025 Sepehr F. Arabi

