

ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX



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In order for an architect to create, he or she must first understand what architecture is. Architecture is not building. Rather, building is the framework on which architecture exists. According to Ruskin, “Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure.”¹ I began with this definition in my research to understand what my definition of architecture is. Ruskin classifies architecture as an art, and he describes it as a positive visual stimulus to man. In addition, he defines architecture as merely adorning edifices. The limit of architecture to edifices and visual stimulation is an underestimation of the power and possibilities of the art. Architecture is more than adornments, and it applies to more than four walls and a roof. It stimulates all of the senses and exists within, on, around, and beyond an edifice.

Ruskin continues his explanation of what is and is not architecture. The machine is the enemy of architecture because it is through the craft of making architecture that the worker experiences spiritual deliverance. When a machine is used to construct an edifice, the human worker is no longer able to express himself. Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace could never be architecture because it was machine-made iron and glass. St. Pancras train station in London was heresy because of its juxtaposition between its gothic hotel and train shed. Engineered buildings can soar and tower over humans with mathematical precision evoking the feeling of the sublime, but for Ruskin, “All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections that have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy.”² It is in the imperfections that the individual labor becomes apparent. The craftwork becomes a physical record of the human, and a city of architecture becomes the physical record of society over time.

What Ruskin fails to consider in his diatribe against the machine is that it is just another tool in the hand of the craftsman. The art of machine-made buildings does not come from the repetition and precision of the machine but in how the designer composes and uses the fabricated pieces. In addition to denying the validity of iron and concrete as architectural materials, Ruskin ignores the constantly changing architectural material of vegetation. Trees, bushes, grasses, and flowers are all valid architectural materials and require a craftsman’s touch to guide and mold them. Architecture is about how materials are composed and the meaning behind the expression of the materials and design rather than the materials themselves.

What does qualify as architecture is categorized by Ruskin into five heads of architecture:

- Devotional – Including all buildings raised for God’s service and honour
- Memorial – Including both monuments and tombs
- Civil – Including every edifice raised by nations or societies, for purposes of common business or pleasure
- Military – Including all private and public architecture of defense
- Domestic – Including every rank and kind of dwelling-place³

One conspicuous omission is the Commercial head of architecture. A substantial amount of the built landscape is composed of commercial buildings. It is a bleak conclusion that commercial buildings can not be architecture when-

1. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Toronto: Dover, 1989), 7.

2. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1897), 8.

3. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Toronto: Dover, 1989), 9.

ever they are so pervasive. I believe that all building types can become architecture.

Having studied Ruskin, I have developed my own definitions of building and architecture. Building is only concerned with satisfying the basic needs of the private client and the standard functions of an edifice, and it is limited to the scale of the individual parcel. Architecture concerns itself with the elements of design which are above and beyond the concerns of a building, and it contributes to the public realm. In architecture, there is no separation between the building and the landscape because they are both equally important and necessary to complete the composition. Architecture serves a greater purpose than just ensuring the adequate functioning of a building. It is an opportunity to physically express commonly held ideals of a local community through sensory stimulation in a commonly held place. It is harmony between the outside and the inside, the public and the private.

THE BIG BOX STORE IS A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO THE PLACELESS NATURE OF SUBURBIA. I BELIEVE THAT THE SUBURBS CAN BEGIN TO CREATE INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES BY CULTIVATING AN ARCHITECTURE FOR THE BIG BOX STORE THAT FOCUSES ON PLACE BY LEARNING LESSONS IN SCALE FROM FORMAL GARDENS.

Big box stores deplete the suburbs of individual, physical identities because they are only concerned with the basic needs of their stores and reduce their outward contributions to signs with their logos printed on them.



They are the epitome of mere buildings. What results from these entities is a landscape of generic boxes and signs divided by oceans of asphalt and detention ponds.

While the big box interiors often lack beauty and the stores give questionable contributions to the local economy, they are well designed for their purpose of thrift and efficiency for the consumer and can sometimes evoke feelings of the sublime. The greatest opportunity for elevating the big box to the level of architecture is to develop the site, including the parking lot, the facade, and the water collection structures. These are what contribute to the site's long term development impact, future marketability, water quality, community interaction, and pedestrian safety (see figure 1). When the site is well designed, it can establish a meaningful identity.

Rem Koolhaas writes about the Generic City in his book *S, M, L, XL*. He states that "identity is derived from physical substance, from the historical, the context, from the real, we somehow cannot imagine that anything contemporary—made by us—contributes to it."⁴ That is the problem. Value is given to what is old, what has survived, what has been made unique by its longevity and scarring. If that is the case, then new buildings need to continue the tradition of creating something inherently valuable that can grow with a community. History can not be made. It has to evolve. Architecture, not building, is what a community cultivates, and it is the source of physical identity. Koolhaas describes the Generic City as a place without history because any time something falls out of repair or outlives its use it is either abandoned or razed to create something equally valueless. Because nothing is sacred and everything is replaceable, there is no foundation upon which to build a history and identity. "The idea of layering, intensification, completion are alien to [the Generic City]: it has no layers."⁵ Through the creation, preservation, and adaptation of architecture, the physical identity of a community is developed and enhanced.

In spite of the physical lack of connected spaces, suburbia is not devoid of social community. Margaret Crawford writes in *Everyday Urbanism* that human interaction occurs where it is needed whether it is planned or not.⁶ These places sprout in the leftover spaces of carports and gas stations similar to grass growing in the cracks of asphalt. The human interaction is vibrant but the quality of the spaces are lacking. They are transient spaces which have little

4. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 1248.

5. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 1263.

6. Margaret Crawford, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999).

longevity over the lifetime of a community. The built environment can be a testament to the values and history of a local community. One community is indistinguishable from another community, and therefore, the built environment lacks value. Each local community has a set of distinct places, buildings, and establishments such as Target, CVS, Applebee's, etc. When another community contains the same list of establishments, the physical manifestations of the communities are the same, generic. Identity appears when the similar establishments take on the characteristics of their respective localities. Big box retail is not going away and must, therefore, be reassessed. It needs to become a contributor to the collective culture of a local community.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown write about two kinds of architecture in their book *Learning from Las Vegas* which includes the decorated shed and the duck.⁷ The decorated shed is described as functional, boring architecture which becomes a backdrop for the surface which is alive with ornamental symbols evoking various emotions from the viewer. It is the most versatile form of architecture due to its separation of meaning from its form unlike the duck model. The big box store can rise to the level of architecture by using the idea of the decorated shed because it needs to function as a big box but also needs to express the personality of its surroundings.



The Decorated Shed



The Duck

MASTER'S PROJECT

Big box stores have been engineered for maximum efficiency and profitability. Each retail chain has developed a precise science of how to layout their respective stores within the ubiquitous 100,000+ square foot box. Therefore, the interior of the big box is not in need of a redesign. It is the exterior which contributes to the long-term impact on a neighborhood, the site's future marketability, storm water runoff, lack of human interaction, and lack of pedestrian safety.

By studying 16th and 17th century, French and Italian formal gardens, lessons in scale may be learned. The enormity of the big box store façade, parking lot, and storm water structures presents a difficult challenge for the architect when attempting to design to the human scale. Formal, Renaissance gardens break down vast amounts of space by creating an ordered framework that connects key pieces of the garden and organizes the rest. At the Gardens of Versailles, allees cut up the landscape into various gardens while visually connecting significant statues and buildings to one another. The gardens become a poche which support the more important pieces of the composition.⁸

The Sandy Springs Home Depot and Costco are islands set within in a sea of asphalt which is surrounded by multi-lane roads (see figures 17-20). Neither of the big box stores has any sort of connection to each other or the local community beyond the site other than a vehicular entrance. The site has a dramatic change in elevation dropping

7. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

8. Doug Allen, "Studies in Landscape Architecture" (Series of lectures presented during Studies in Landscape Architecture class, Atlanta, GA, January - April, 2010).

thirty-eight feet at the north end of the site and forty-four feet at the south end of the site. As a result, all of the storm water runoff from the acres of asphalt collects in a retention pond at the south end of the site.

The collection and channeling of the storm water runoff becomes an opportunity to create an order to the site. Using Villa Lante as a precedent, I extend an axis from the north end of the site that passes in front of Home Depot and through Costco ending in the retention pond at the south end of the site (see figure 7). Before reaching the retention pond, the water filters through a living machine and then cascades down a grotto-like set of blocks and planes (see figure 6). Because there is a significant need for residential in this locality, the area around the pond becomes a public park which is an enticing amenity for residential developers and future home owners and tenants. Similar to Villa Lante, there is a distinct difference between the opposing ends of the site. At Villa Lante, the garden begins with a rustic grotto that represents the primitive beginnings of man, and a water channel connects the grotto to formal parterres at the base of the garden which represent the progress man has made. Questioning this, I begin my site with parterres which are owned by Home Depot and are used as displays for the garden center. The drains for the storm water runoff connect the formal parterres to the more free form grotto at the south end of the site (see figures 3, 8, 9).

In order to increase the future marketability of the site and create a friendlier pedestrian environment, I am introducing many of the urban planning lessons learned from the Gardens of Versailles. I add four connecting streets onto the site and condense the parking lot into two mirrored parking decks which serve their respective stores. I supplement the parking in the decks with on street parking along all of the new interior streets. Because I have taken away the unobstructed view of Costco from Peachtree Dunwoody Road, I place the mirrored parking decks along an axis from Peachtree Dunwoody Road to the front, corner entrance of Costco. As at Parc Sceaux, I have created a dramatic entrance to Costco by framing their large sign with a "pleached allée" created by growing vines up the sides of the mirrored parking decks (see figures 5 and 6).



Home Depot engages its surroundings by moving the garden center from the north side of the building to across the street. The entrance to the main store is mirrored on the other side by the garden center entrance, and the street is framed by trees which are intensified by mirrored glass (see figure 4). The garden center is organized in formal rows which are divided by a central axis that connects back to the entrance of the main building. The overflow stock of trees and bushes which arrive in the spring is located in front of the mirrored ramps which connect the sidewalk up to the formal parterres at the north end of the site (see figures 2 and 11). Home Depot's façade is created out of four foot by four foot panels of wood slats which are inspired by the trellises of formal gardens (see figure 12).

Because Costco is essentially a warehouse, its exterior façade has been smoothed over with stucco to form a pristine, white box with a visual slit through it where the water channel cuts. The slit is composed of floor to ceiling glass and skylights. The Costco tire center and the gas station have been separated from the main building and occupy the front of the store's site. The south wall is a green wall which rounds the southeast corner encroaching on the purity of the white box (see figure 15). The ground material for the gas station is grasscrete which further emphasizes the encroachment of Nature onto the site.

The entire site is connected by a dirt path defined by tree canopy which creates the perimeter. It is a twenty-four foot sidewalk that is divided into twelve feet of pavement and twelve feet of dirt. The two materials denote two, distinct paths for different purposes. The dirt path is for those who are out for exercise, whereas the pavement is for those who are on the site for shopping or working. The tree canopy path was inspired by the aviaries of the Boboli gardens (see figure 14).

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of architecture for big box was to beautify and enrich the suburban environment while addressing existing concerns with the building type. The stores that inhabit the big boxes are temporary, so the architecture needed to be for the elements of the site that would last. By focusing on the design of the exterior of the big box, an urban framework has been established to aid in long-term development plans for the site. By turning the site into a large set of gardens, impermeable surfaces have been reduced, and the storm water collection system has been both upgraded and made into an amenity which will enhance the value of the neighborhood. Public and private gathering spaces have been added which encourage, and the site now accommodates both automobiles and pedestrians in a safe environment. With this project, Home Depot and Costco are not only successful in terms of retail, but they are also successful in contributing to a unique character for the city of Sandy Springs.

Allen, Doug. "Origins of Cities." Lecture presented during History of Urban Form class, Atlanta, GA, September 14, 2008.

Doug Allen defines the built environment in terms of the constitutional order which applies to the public realm (streets, boundaries, public spaces, and monuments) and the representational order which applies to the private realm.

Allen, Doug. "Studies in Landscape Architecture." Series of lectures presented during Studies in Landscape Architecture class, Atlanta, GA, January - April, 2010.

Doug Allen details the history of landscape architecture beginning with the earliest known existence of a garden. He focuses on the genealogy of specific garden types which have clear influence on the modern, American landscape including the Italian Renaissance garden and the French formal garden.

Chase, John, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski. *Everyday Urbanism*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999.

Everyday Urbanism includes a series of essays describing the unintentional and temporary developments that grow in spaces unplanned for them. With or without design, life and activity occurs.

Christensen, Julia. *Big Box Reuse*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008.

Julia Christensen documents ten big box reuse projects. She has documented projects in order bring attention to the growing problem of empty big box stores. The suburban environment is littered with these boxes, empty or inhabited, and it is time to consider what one does with them once they have served their original purpose. The conclusion is that new big box stores need to be designed with its lifespan in mind.

Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York: North Point Press, 2001.

Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck define two types of growth: traditional neighborhood and suburban sprawl. As opposed to the organic growth of traditional neighborhood, suburban sprawl is an idealized, artificial system conceived of by architects, engineers, and planners. It is "rational, consistent, and comprehensive," but it is ultimately unsustainable. The foundation of urban life is in the neighborhood where communities and lives are built. The book attempts to demonstrate the value and vigor of living spaces which are aided by mixed uses, alternative transit, and human-scale design.

Dunham-Jones, Ellen, and June Williamson. *Retrofitting Suburbia*. New York: Wiley, 2008.

The book is an exploration of various suburban typologies which are currently being reassessed in light of an increasing inventory of out-of-date properties, dead malls, and changing values. There are a series of case studies of existing retrofits highlighting their successes and failures in an effort to illuminate good practices when designing for the future of suburbia.

Hayden, Dolores, and Jim Wark. *A Field Guide to Sprawl*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006.

The guide defines and documents various elements of sprawl including big box stores. They are giant, windowless, concrete infill structures designed to facilitate consumption, and they are usually located near or on highways. The parking lots are designed for maximum which occurs once a year around Christmas. They are viewed parasites and are often called category killers.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Modern Library, 1993.

Jane Jacobs criticizes hyper-rationalist planners who segregate life's activities and attempt to untangle complex webs of interaction. She argues that community is created and thrives on layers of intertwined and seemingly chaotic connections and activities.

Kieran, Stephen, and James Timberlake. *Refabricating Architecture: How Manufacturing Methodologies Are Poised to Transform Building Construction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2003.

Kieran and Timberlake have a sympathy for Le Corbusier and his book *Towards a New Architecture*. Similar to Le Corbusier, they emphasize the need for architecture to look to its cousin engineering as a process model. Ships, automobiles, and planes have progressed with demands and advancements in technology in materials whereas architecture has become more and more wasteful and degraded by clinging to outmoded forms of process. Commodity and art have been separated where they once worked together, "Commodity was once equated with the traditions of craft present in architecture that became craft." (3) The machine and computer are latest tools of the craftsman. They argue that architecture's latest frontier is fabrication. Machines are no longer only form mass production because they are now capable of mass customization. Architects need to focus on how to utilize this technology and design for fabrication and assemblage.

Koolhaas, Rem, and Bruce Mau. *S, M, L, XL*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997.

The Generic City is defined by its name. It has no identity or distinction and therefore has no history or future. Koolhaas claims that identity is derived from physical substance, history, and the contemporary is not a valid contributor to identity. Because there is exponential growth in the human population, it is impossible for the existing identities of cities to maintain their substances. The existing cities either become caricatures of themselves or become more and more like a generic city. The generic city is easy in that there is no maintenance, and everything is equally bland. If more space is needed, it just expands. Most importantly, Koolhaas explains that planning makes no difference.

Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. London: J. Rodker, 1931.

Le Corbusier's seminal work looks towards a new future for architecture defined by the machine. Not only are buildings to be created by using machines, they are machines and should be designed in a similar fashion to ships, automobiles, and planes.

Mitchell, Stacy. *Big Box Swindle: The Fight to Reclaim America from Retail Giants*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

Mitchell describes the history of the battle between retail giants and American citizens. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, companies like A&P, Kroger, and Woolworth encountered strong public opposition from a variety of sources including progressives, unions, wholesalers, and local business owners. Opponents of the large chains argued that they hurt democracy by “undermining local economic independence and community self-determination.” A fight for legislation against big retailers ensued only to be found unconstitutional under the 14th amendment. Once again, opposition to retail giants has started to form. Mitchell’s ultimate goal is to revive a decentralized economy which is more conducive to democracy than global corporate giants.

Mitchell, Stacy. *The Hometown Advantage*. Washington D.C.: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2000.

Stacy Mitchell outlines ways to combat large retail chain stores. Towns need to get statistics of the true impact to local economies affected by chain stores and in response enact land use policies deterring such stores. She also advocates towns combining resources to develop regional approaches to combating chain stores. All these objectives are aimed to help the small businesses in communities, and she encourages these small businesses to form alliances and cooperatives in order to defend their businesses.

Parr, Adrian. *Hijacking Sustainability*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009.

Parr encourages a new sustainability culture, one that brings art and science together while questioning the current state of economics. Therefore, she criticizes the hijacking of sustainability by the state and corporations who spin ecological awareness to reinforce their current operational structures.

Ruskin, John. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Toronto: Dover, 1989.

Ruskin defines architecture as “the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure.” He makes the distinction between building and architecture. Building is an important component of architecture, but it is not architecture by itself. Architecture is something unnecessary to the structure or function of a building because it is something above and beyond these things. Architecture exemplifies the spirit of the building and the workman, as well as the moral condition of the society of the workman. The seven lamps are the ways in which architecture produces meaning, and they include sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory, and obedience. Architecture arranges itself into five categories: devotional, memorial, civil, military, and domestic. Business or commercial building types do not make it on to the list implying that they can not be architectural forms.

Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1897.

John Ruskin illuminates his position on the craftsman, religion, and architecture, “All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections that have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy.” (8)

Booth, Geoffrey. *Transforming Suburban Business Districts*. Washington D. C.: Urban Land Institute, 2001.

One of the chapters in the book is Place Making to Enhance Real Estate Returns. It details a series of elements critical in place making while documenting successful and failed examples. Some of the elements include composition of physical forms, distinctive open spaces, pedestrian scale and connectivity, access, mixed land uses, landscape environment, connectivity to adjoining neighborhoods, and partnership.

Venturi, Robert, and Denise Scott Brown. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001.

Contrary to the title’s implications, the book is not about Las Vegas but rather the symbolism of architectural form. It is a case study of Las Vegas which highlights the “Strip” which is architecture of communication over space. The architecture of the buildings is boring. The signs are purposefully clichéd, but the symbols are recognizable. Venturi and Scott Brown divide all architecture into two types: the decorated shed and the duck. The decorated shed is functionally boring architecture with a surface of expressive symbols. The duck is architecture that has been reduced its importance in relation to the sign so much that the building becomes the sign. Of the two types, the decorated shed proves to be the richest and most versatile.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Typically occupies more than 50,000 square feet with typical ranges between 90,000 - 120,000 square feet
- Profits derived from high sales volumes rather than price mark-ups
- Large, windowless, rectangular, single-story buildings
- Standardized facades
- Reliance on auto-borne shoppers
- Acres of parking
- No-frills site development that eschews any community or pedestrian amenities
- Seem to be everywhere and unique to no place, whether in a rural town or an urban neighborhood
- Varying market niches: discount stores, category killers, warehouse clubs
- Profound planning impacts on the character of a community

BENEFITS



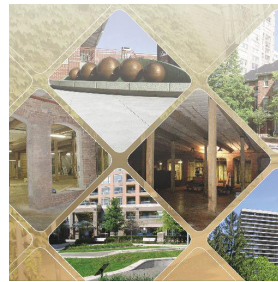
Offer low prices



Great convenience for an increasingly time-deprived society



Consistency of products and services across localities



Sales tax revenues increase local economies in turn financing local services

CONCERNS



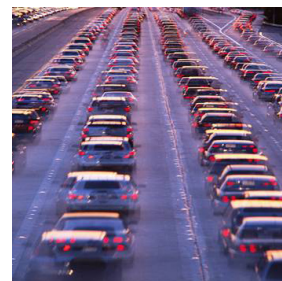
Longterm development impacts



Future marketability - will the store be a longterm eyesore when/if it closes



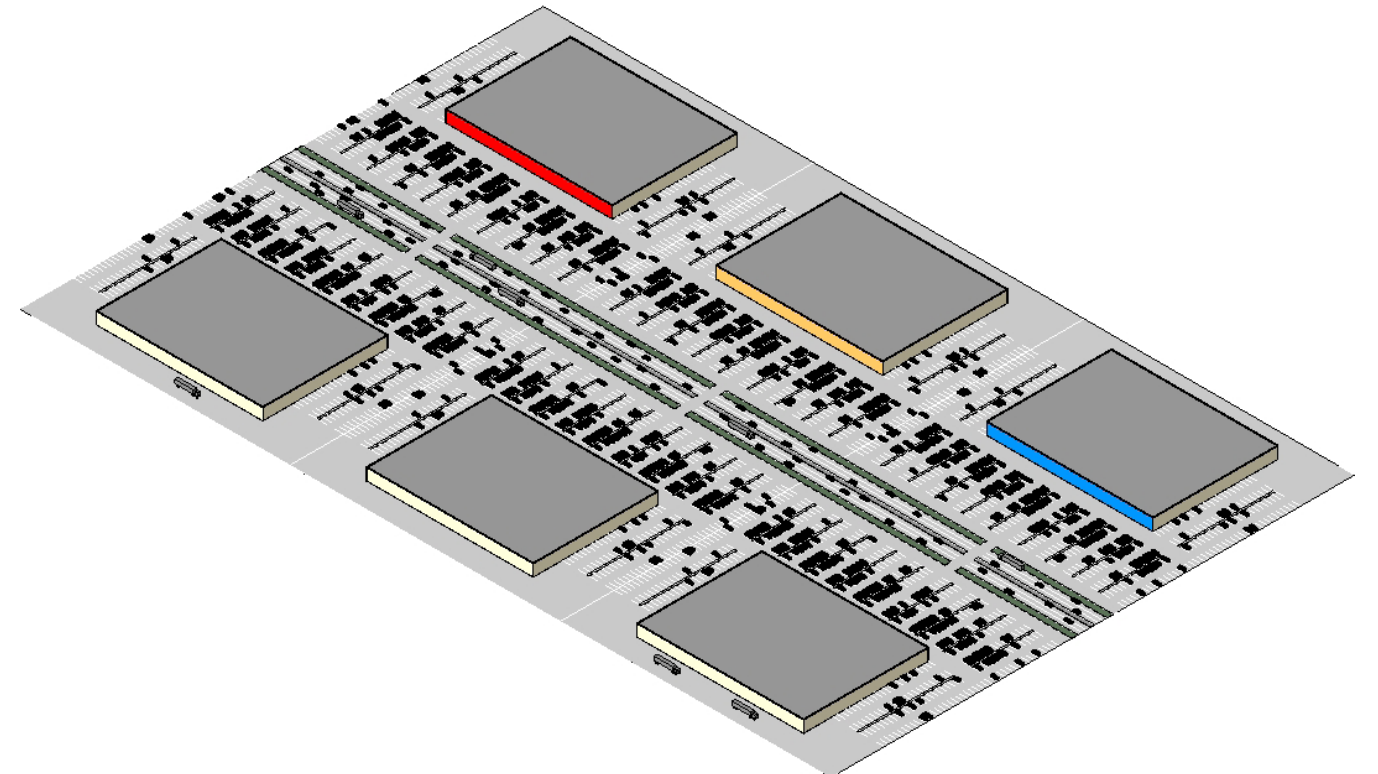
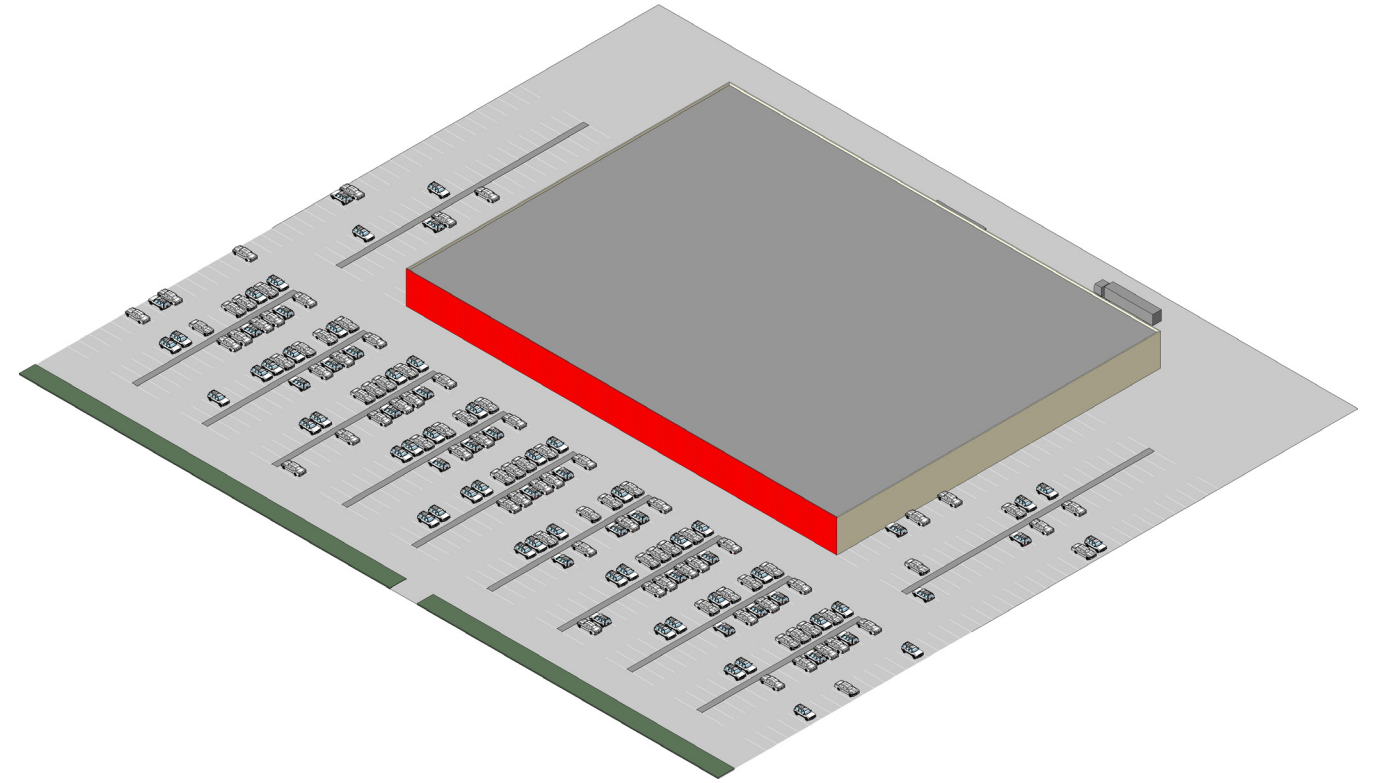
Runoff from acres of impermeable surfaces

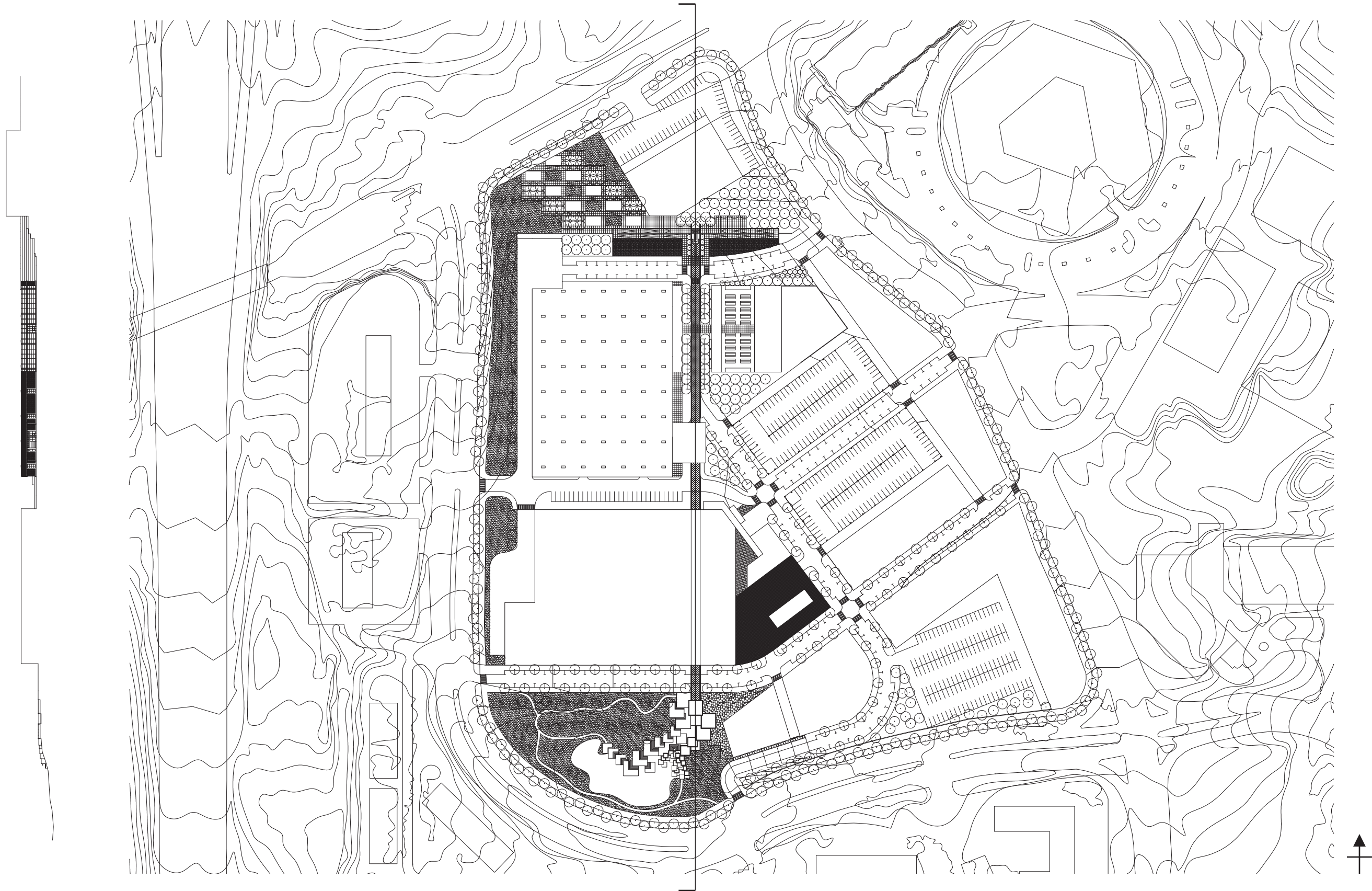


People are less likely to interact with each other



Safety - auto-oriented sites can be dangerous for pedestrians



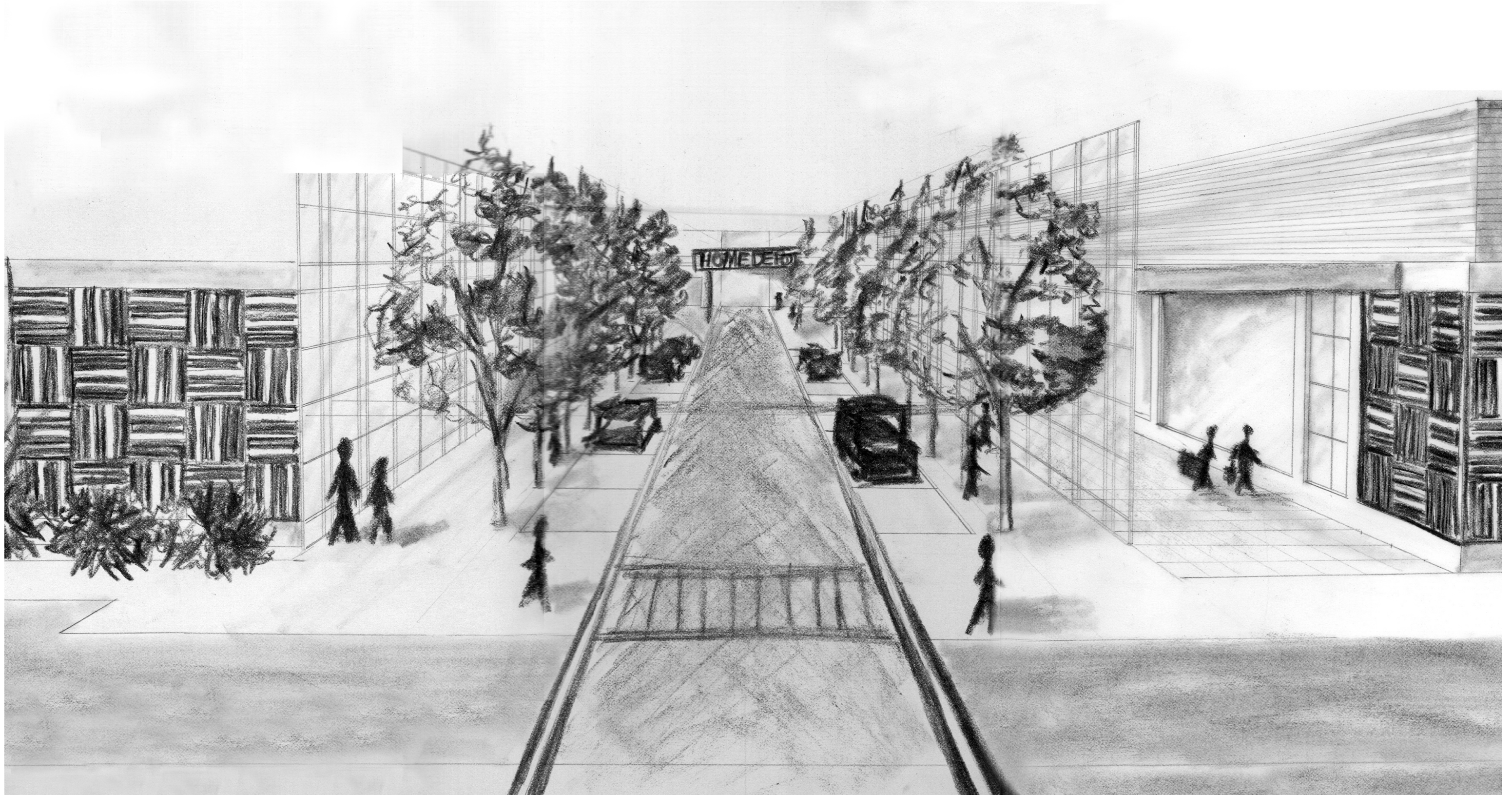




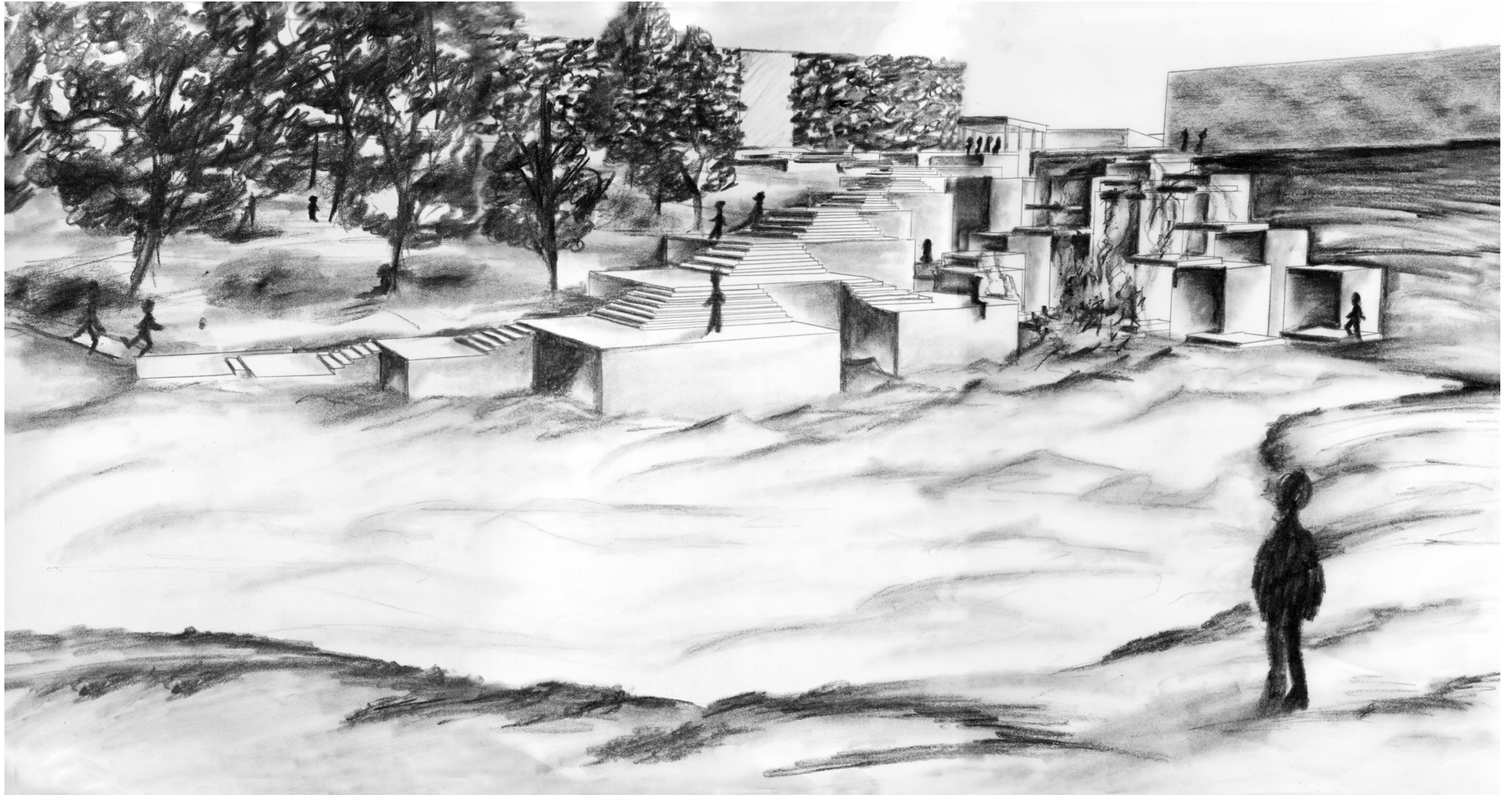
ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 4

PERSPECTIVE: Home Depot

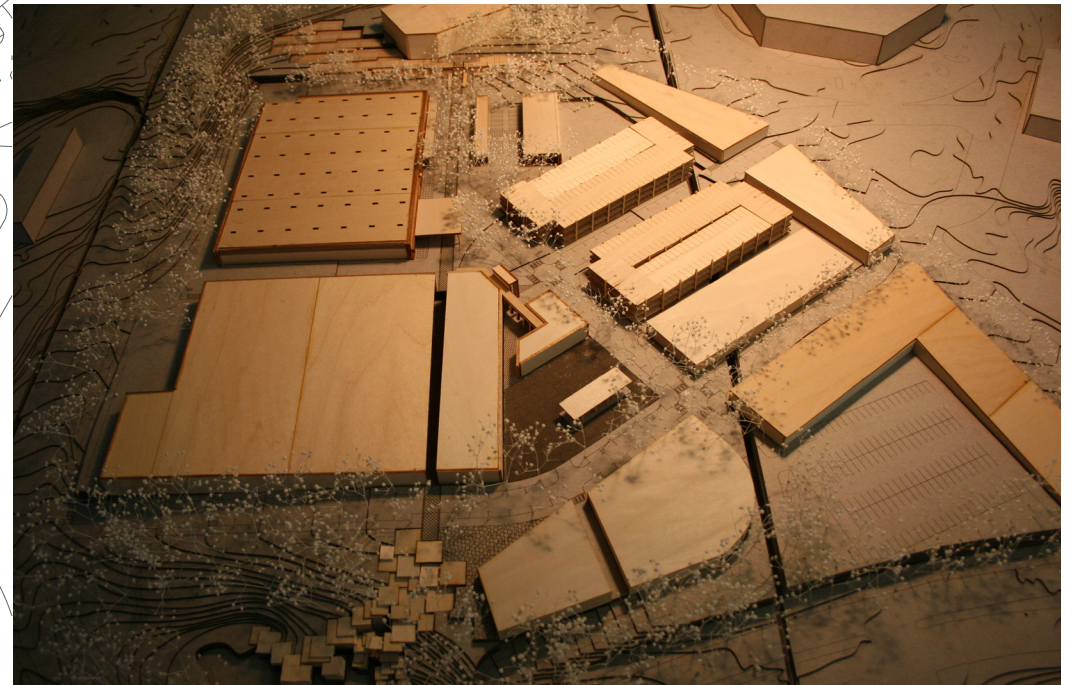
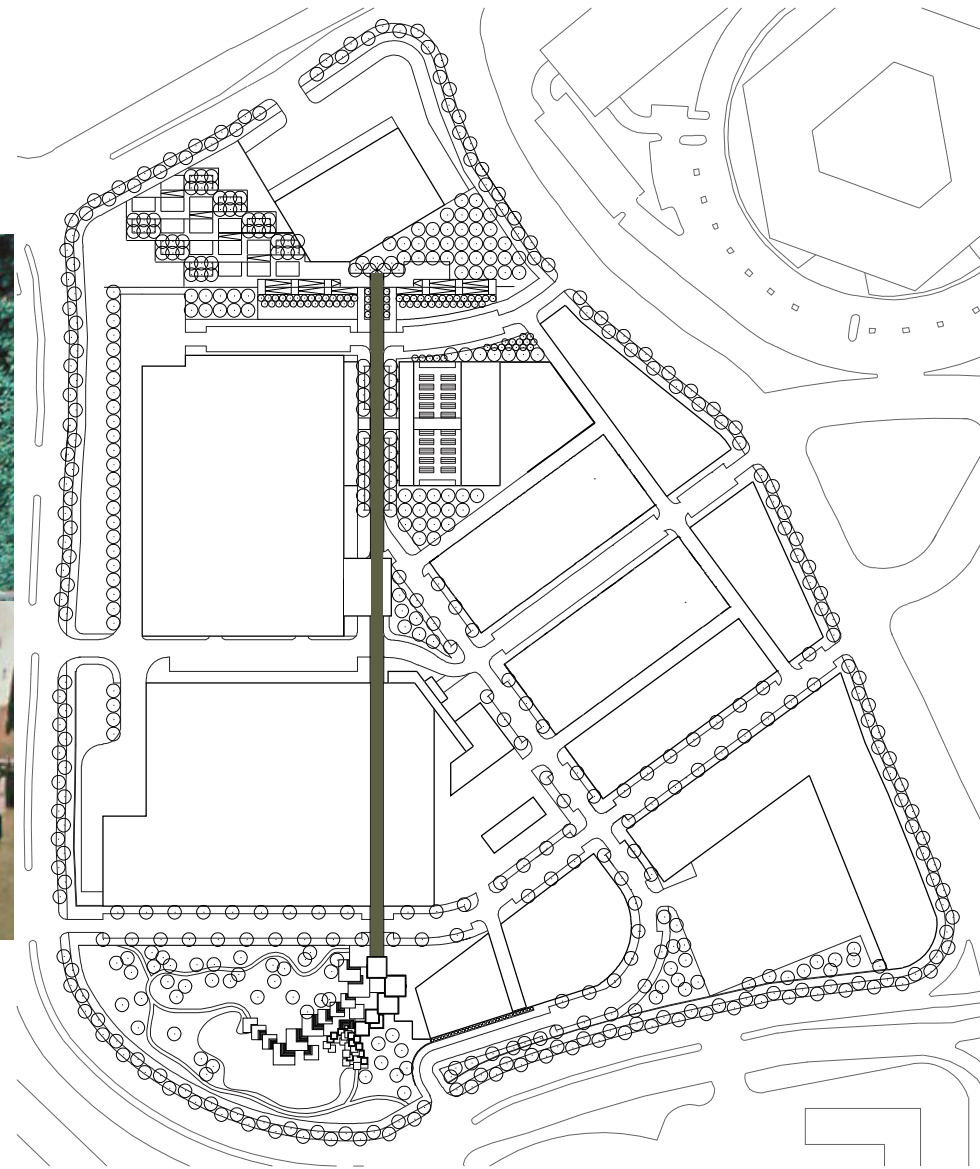








Precedent Photos Courtesy of Doug Allen



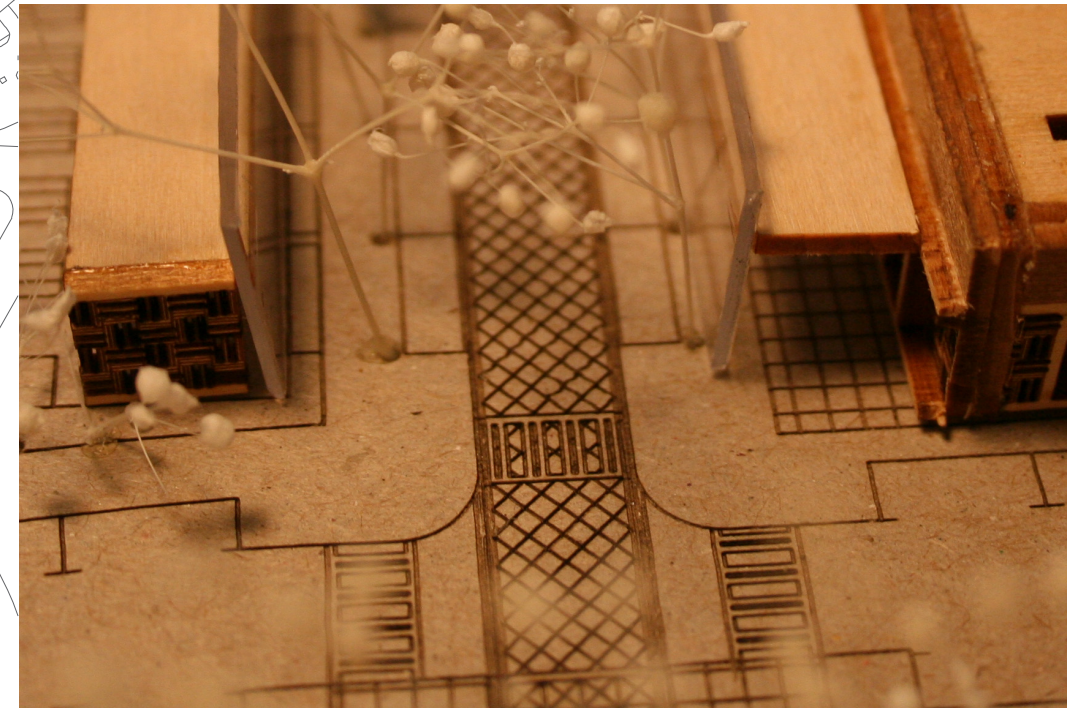
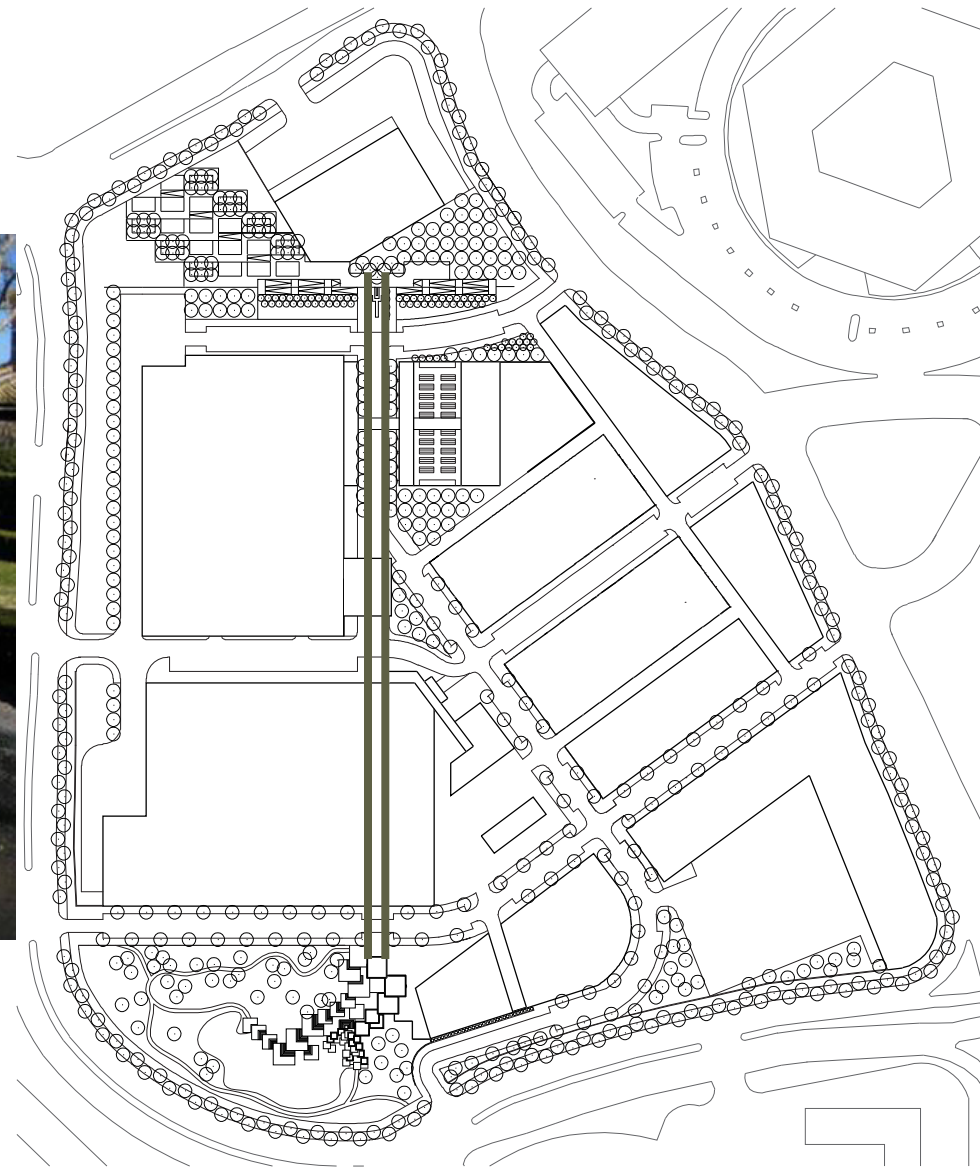
ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 8

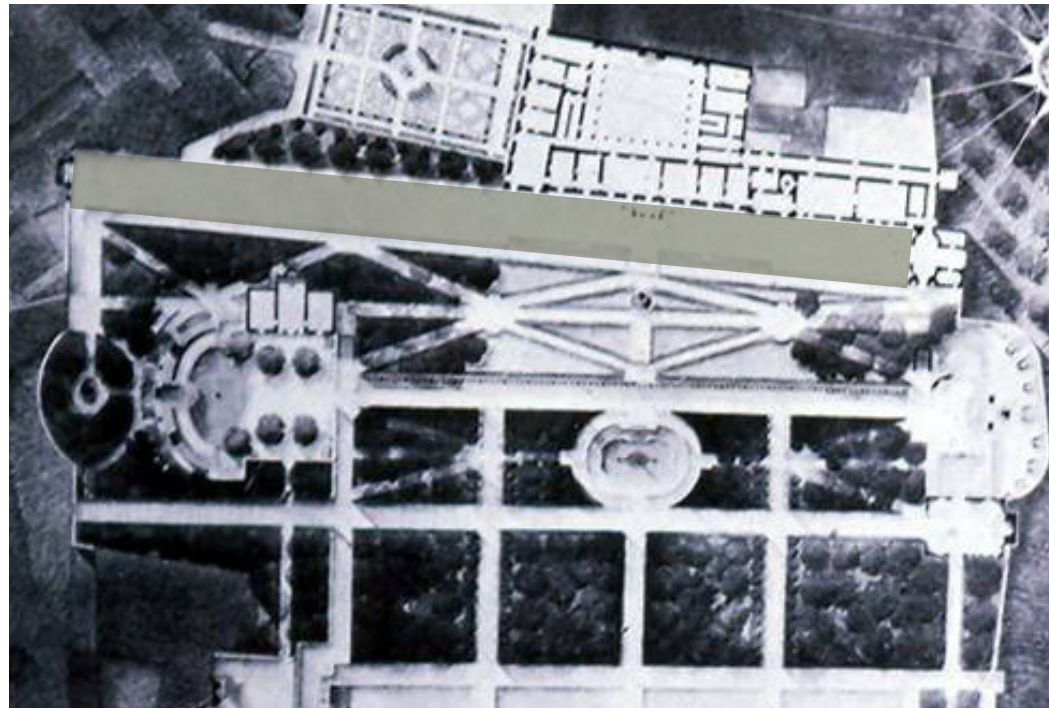
PRECEDENT: Villa Lante - Water Channel



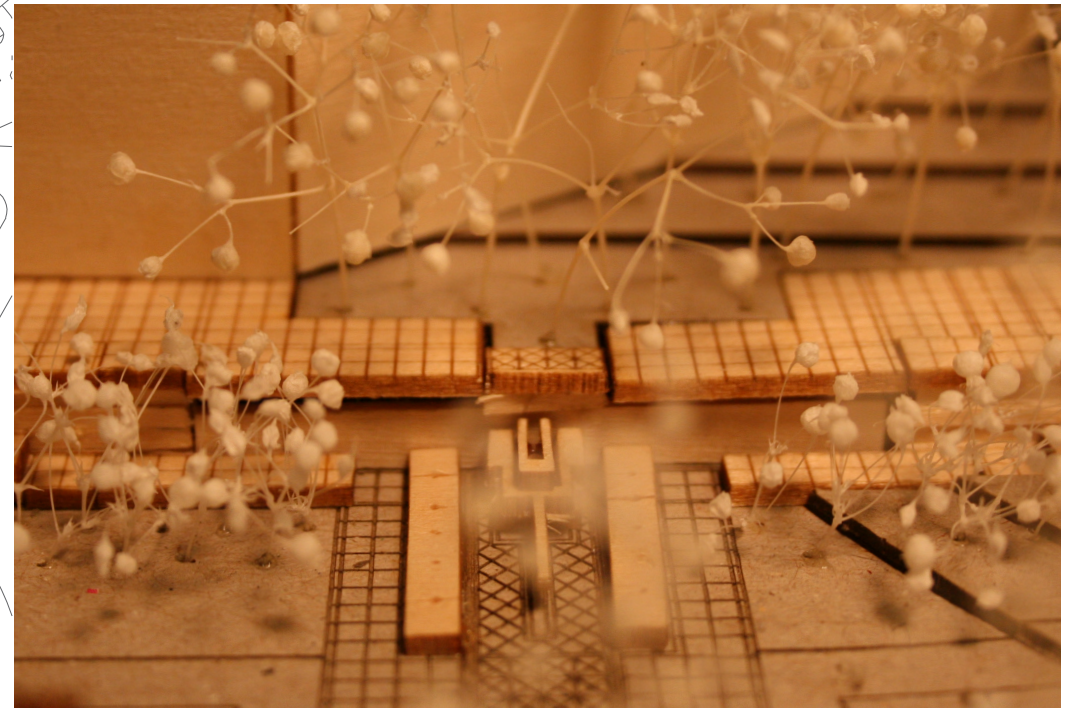
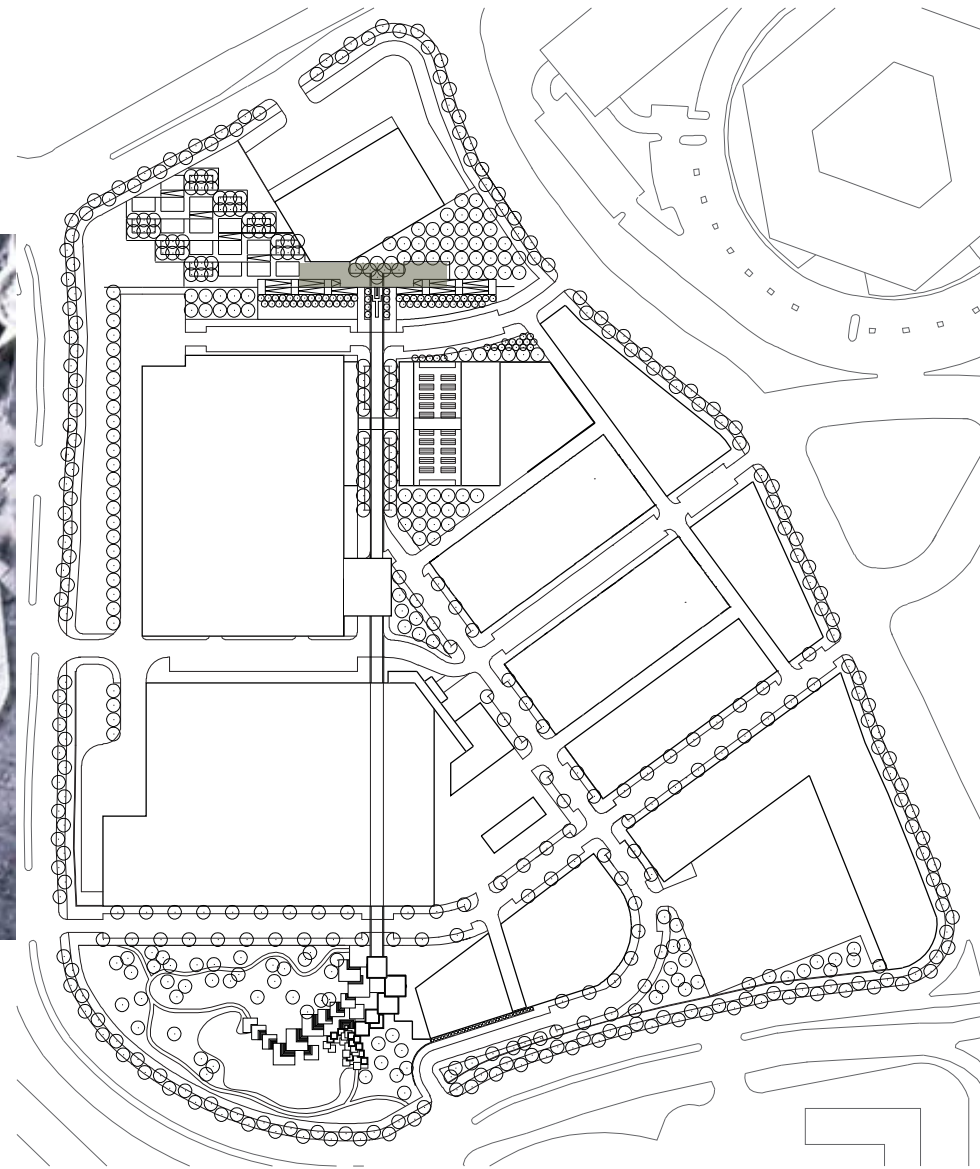
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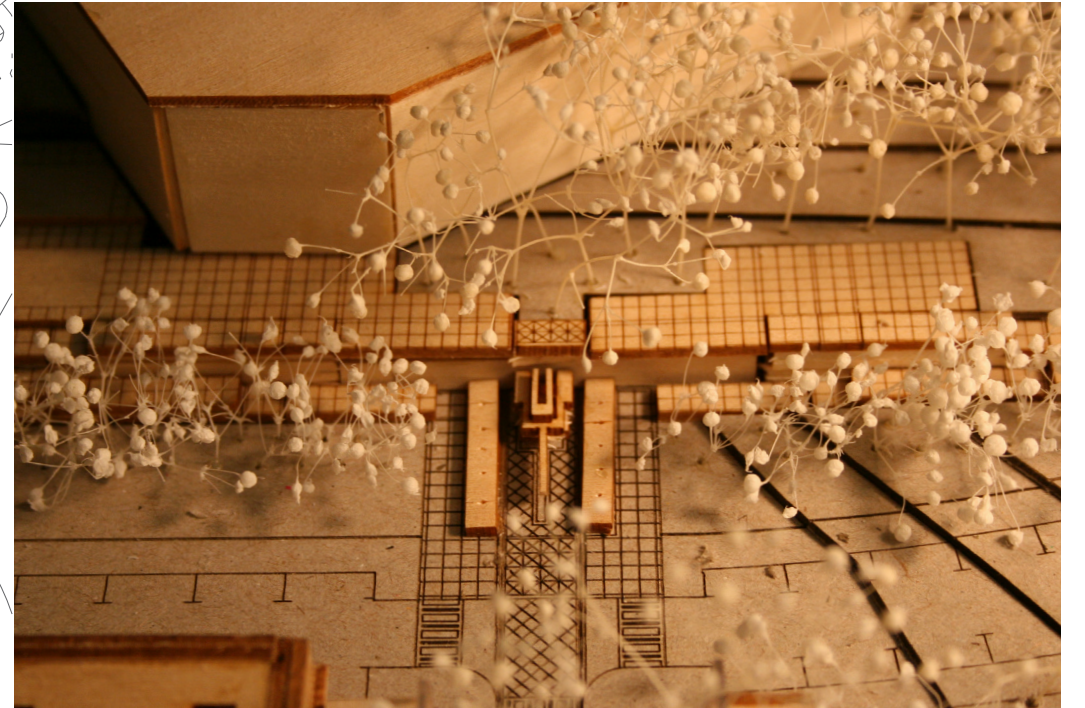


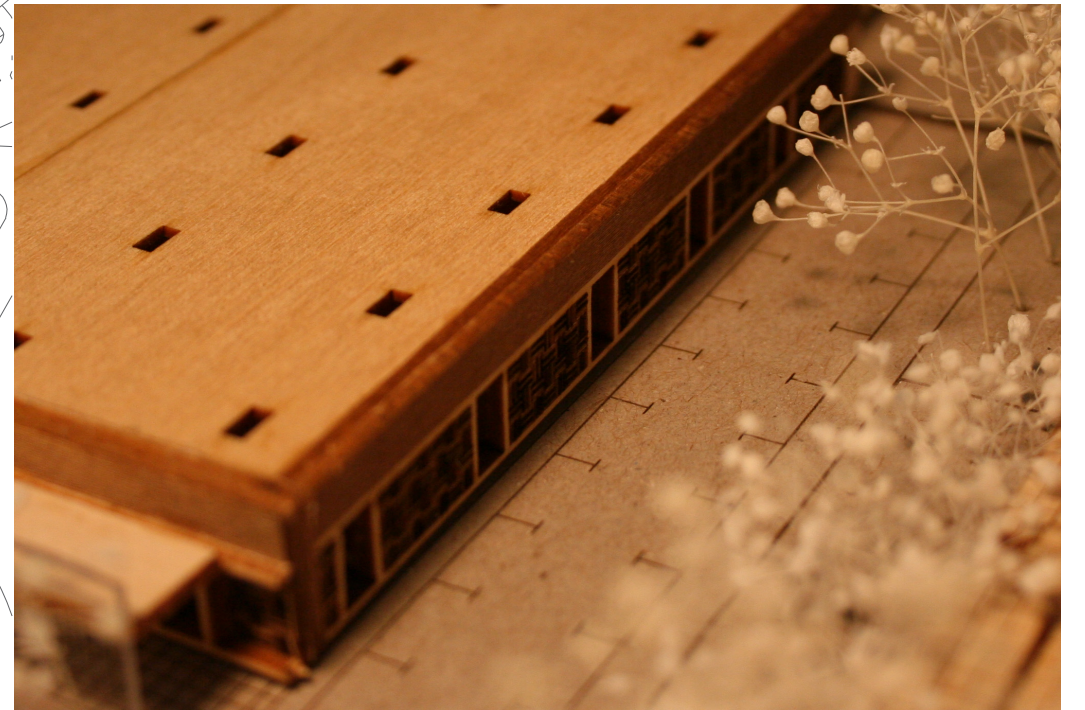
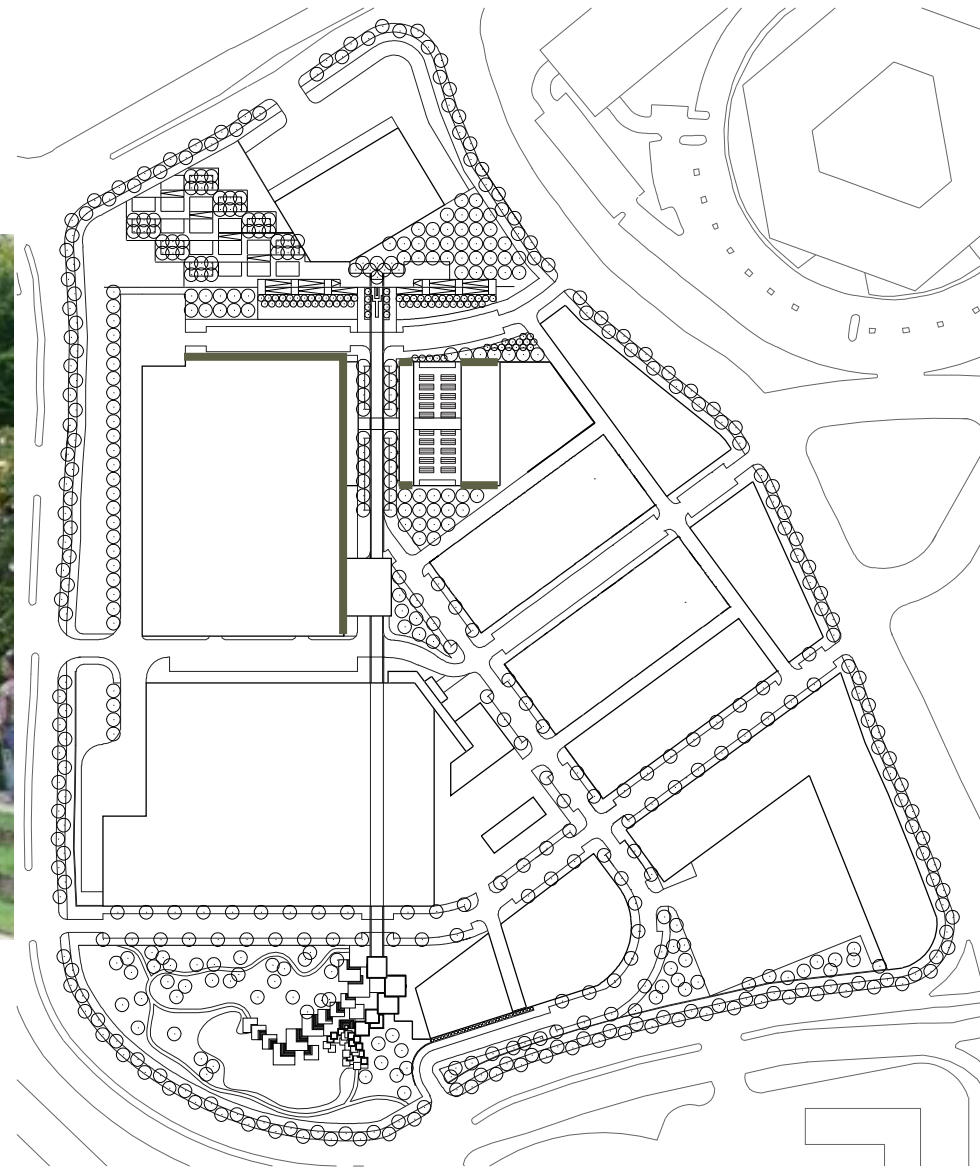
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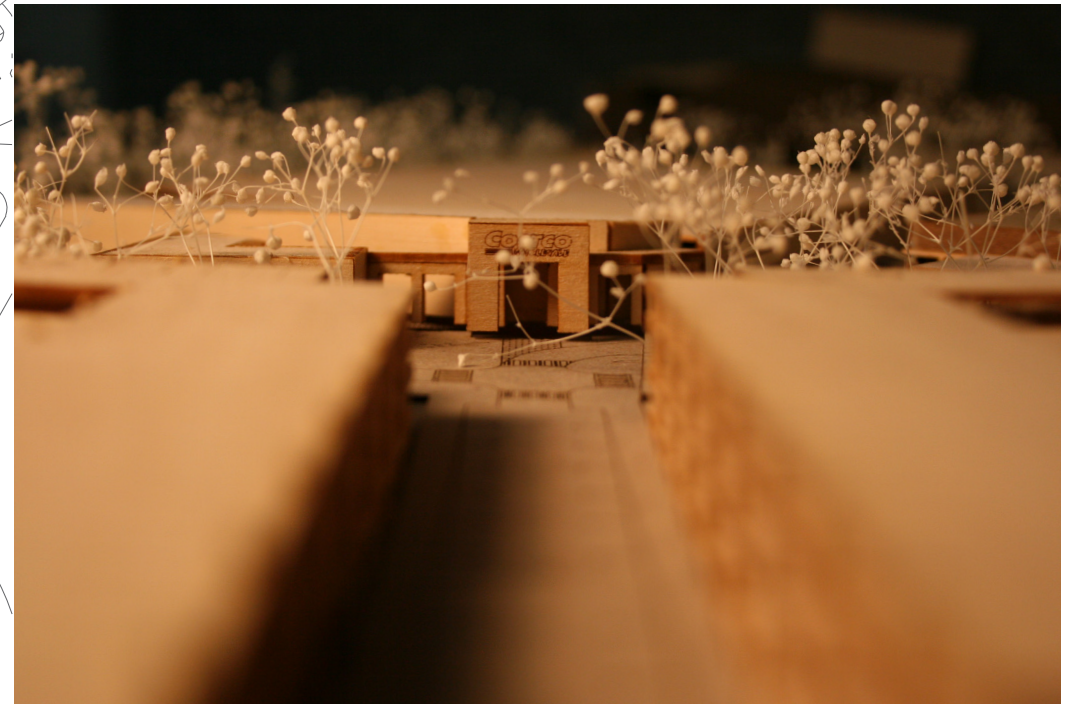
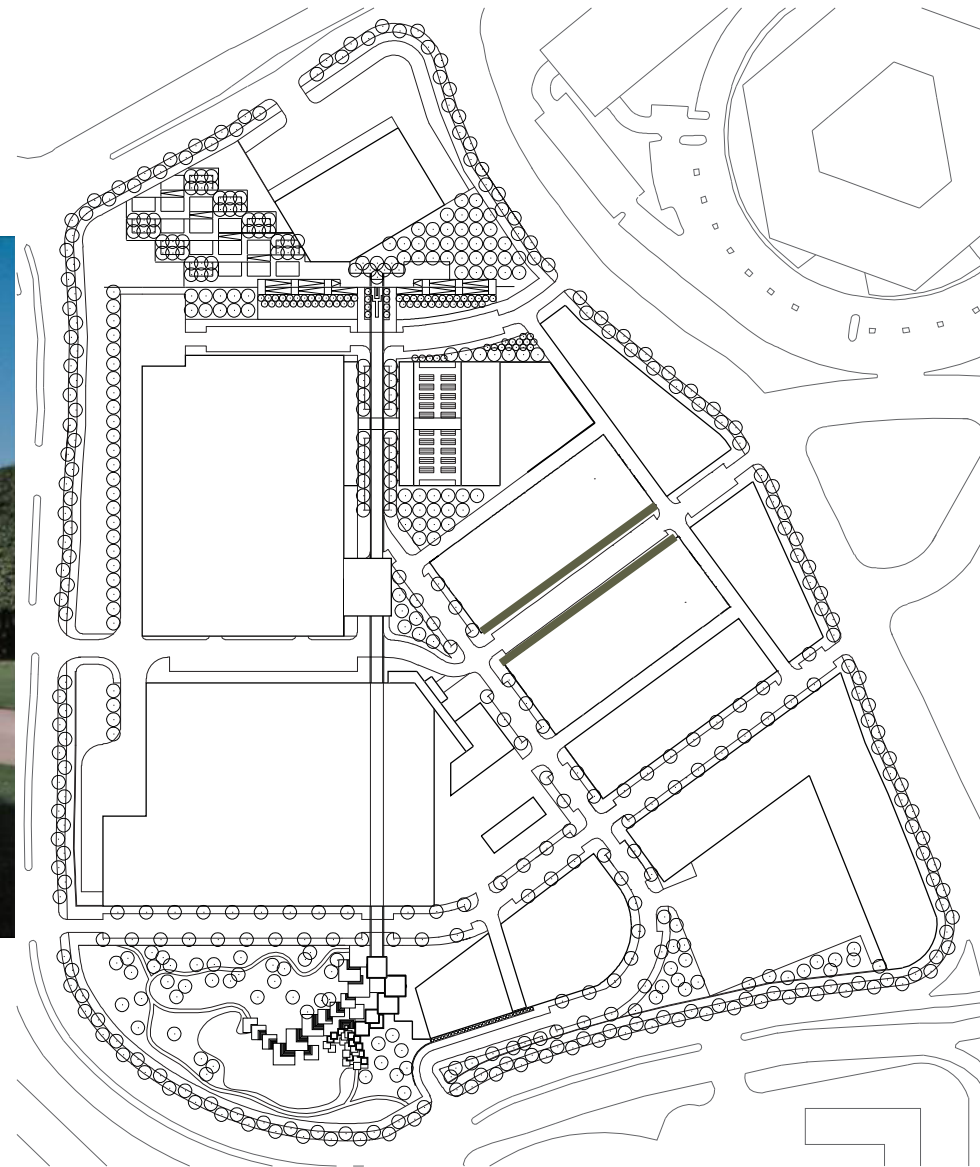
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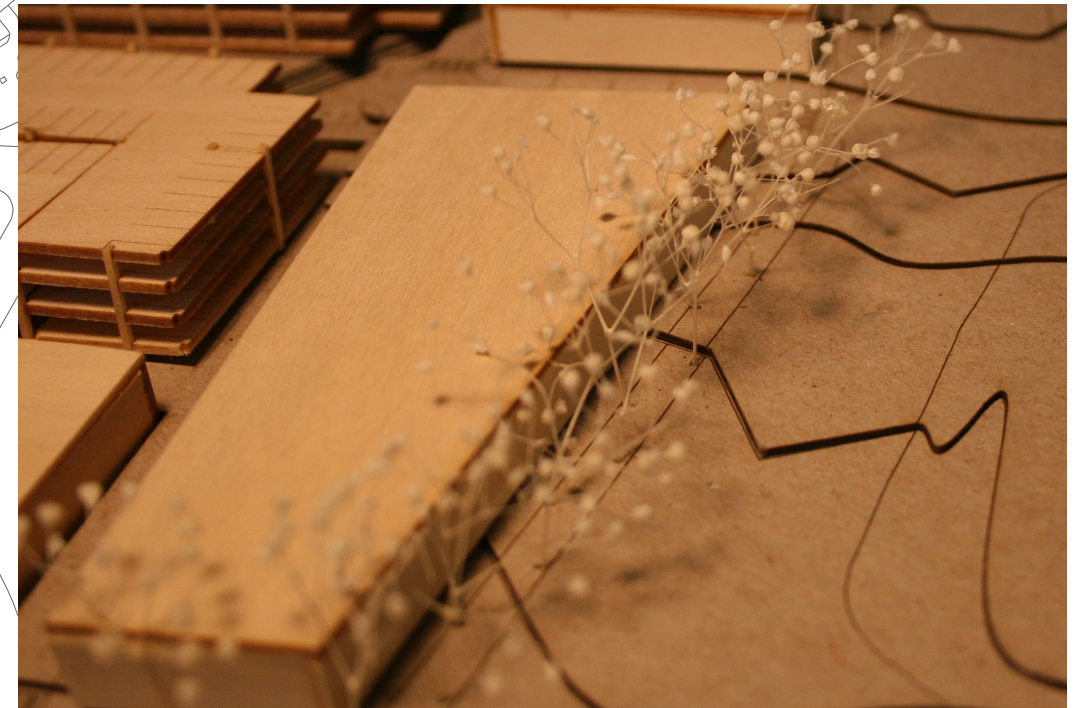
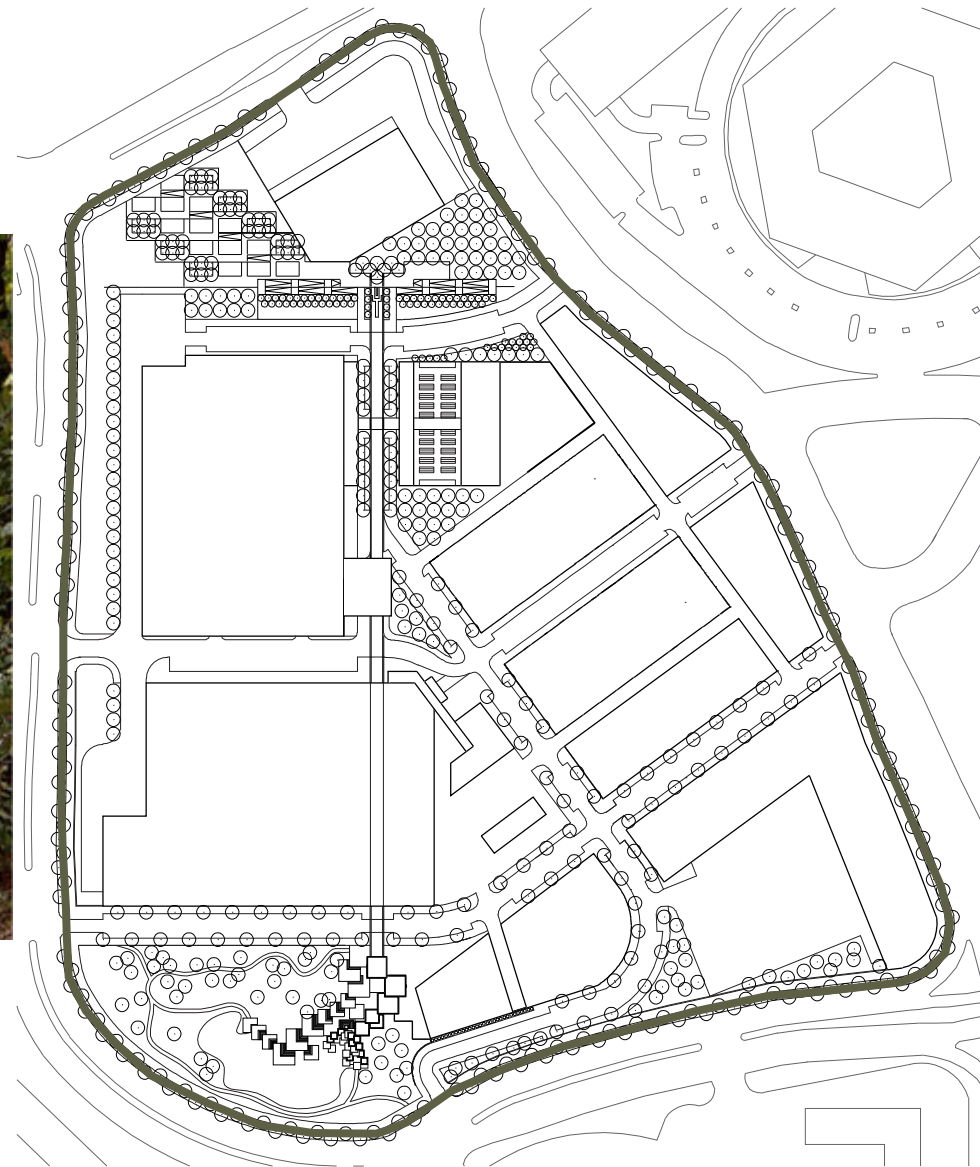
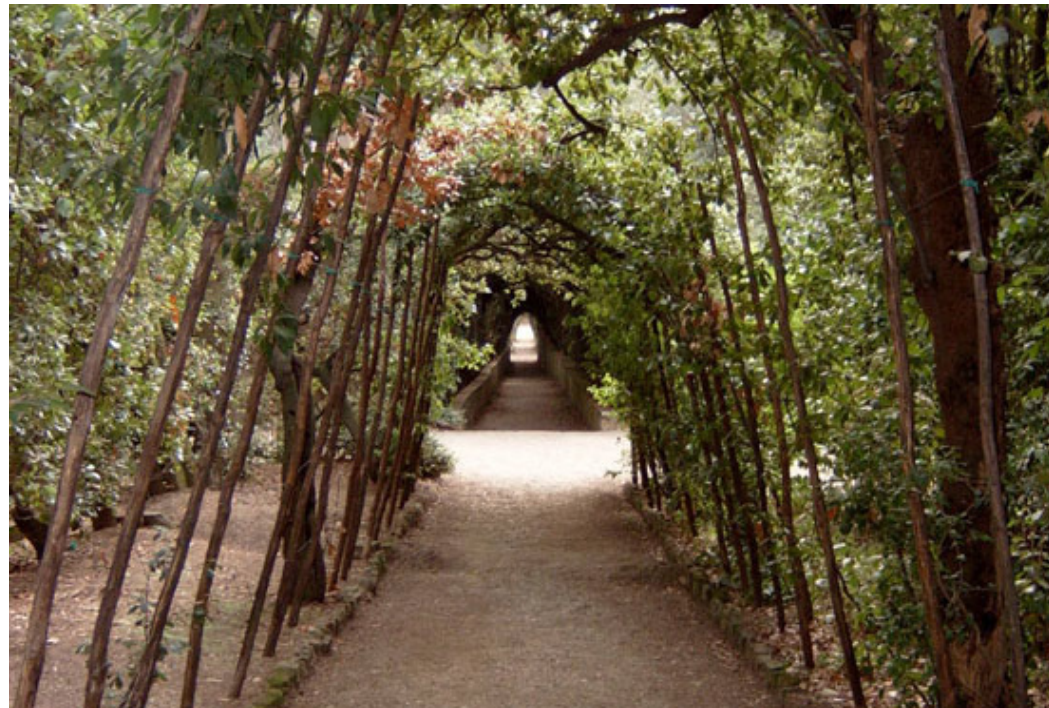






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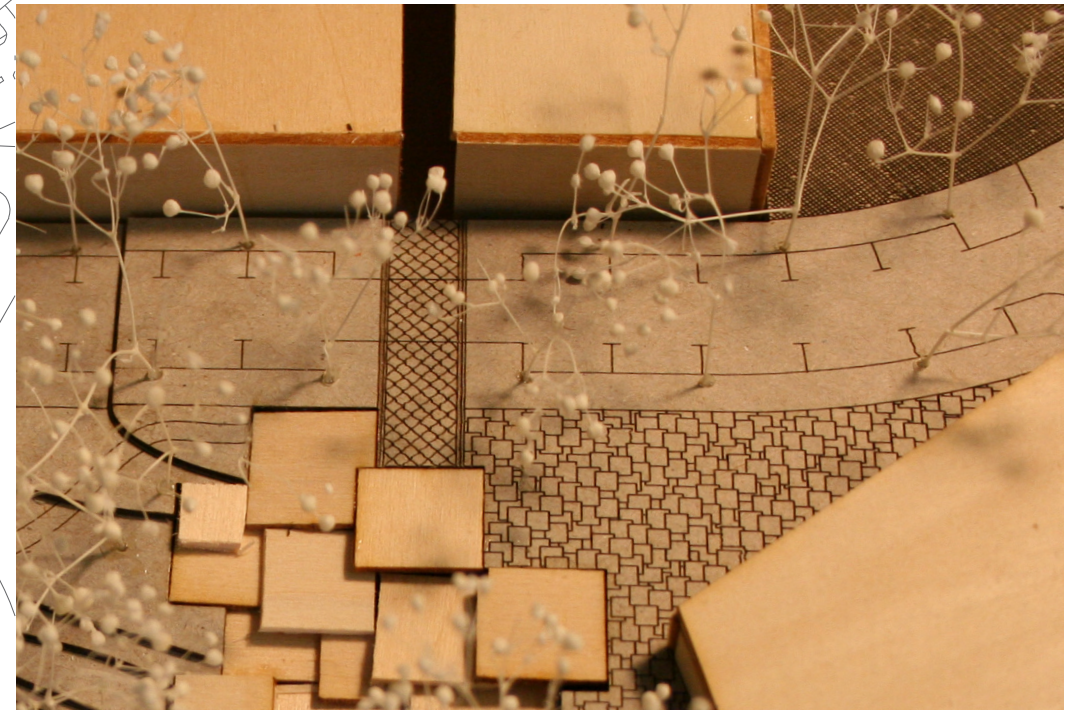
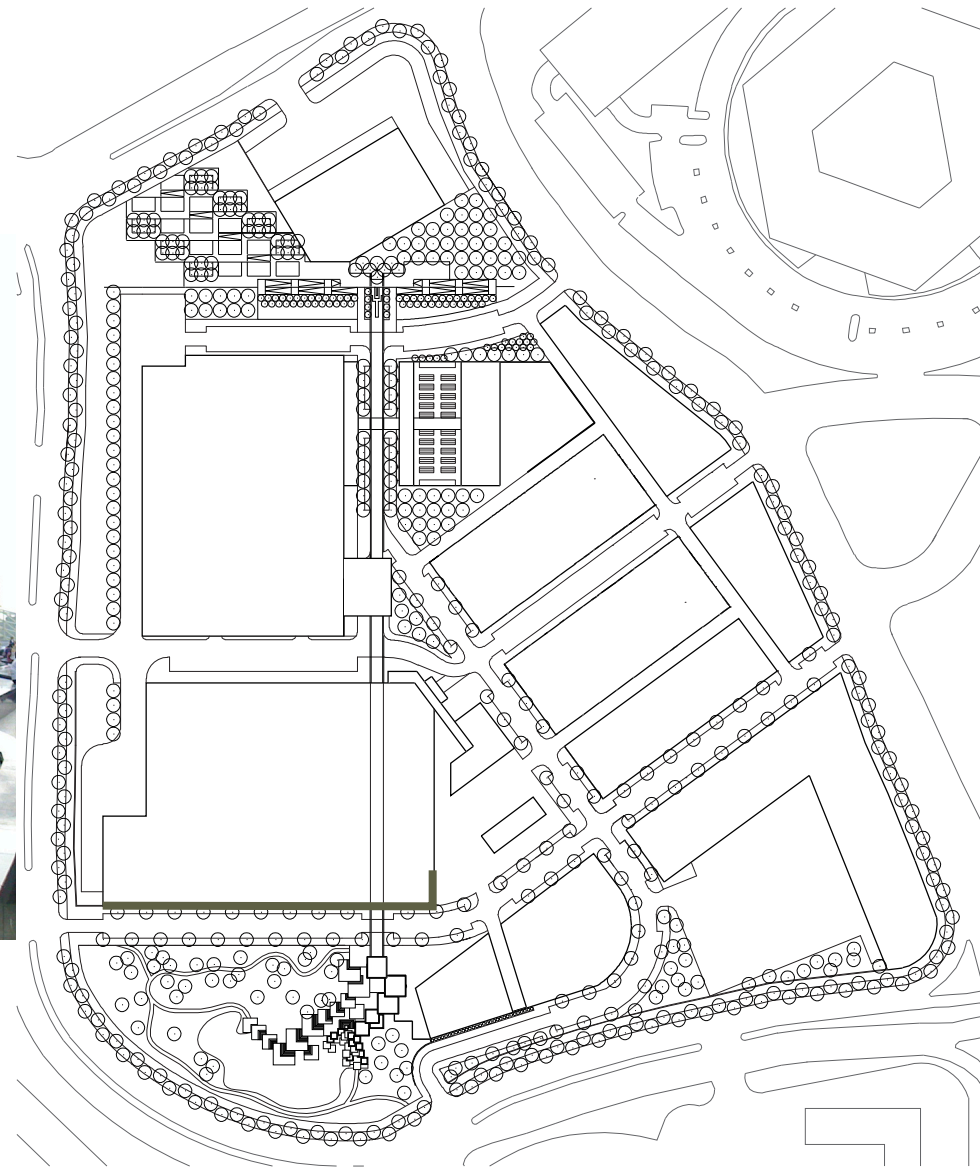


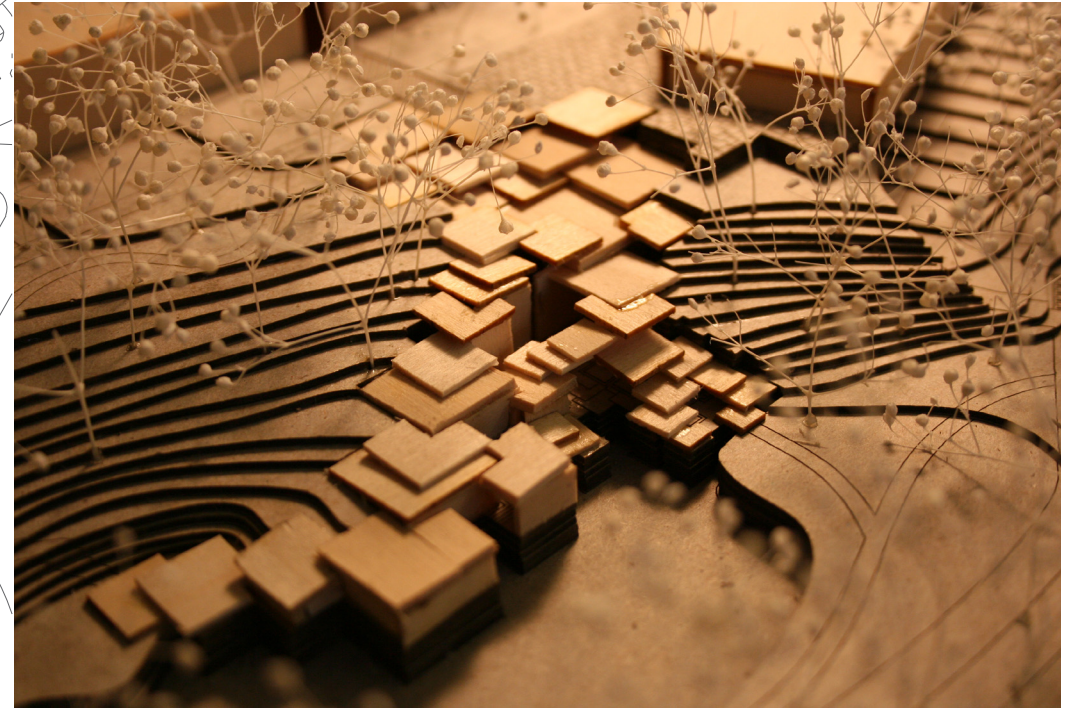


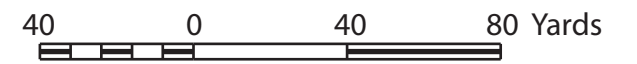
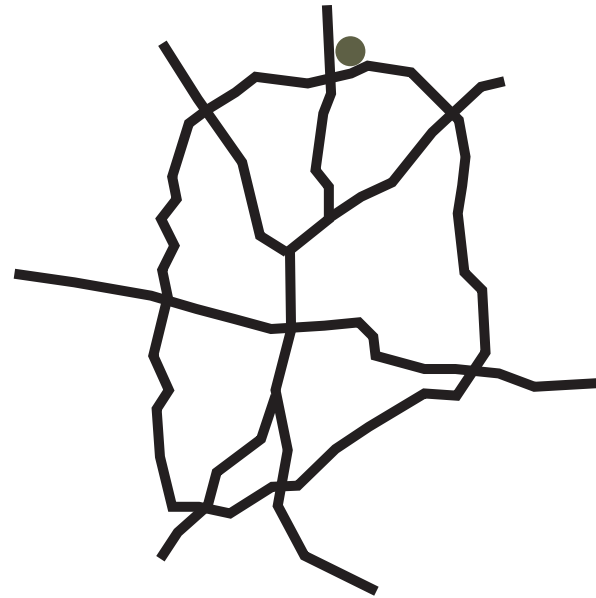
ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 15

PRECEDENT: The "Living Wall" at Westfield - Green Wall







ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 18

EXISTING SITE

Dunwoody Self Storage on the corner of Mt Vernon Highway and Peachtree Dunwoody Road



Costco gas station in parking lot

Costco and Home Depot facing Peachtree Dunwoody Road



Sweet Tomatoes restaurant on the southeast corner of parking lot

ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 19

EXISTING SITE

Southwest corner of site: retention pond at base of slope



Northwest side of site: severe topography change from road to service entrance

South side of site: slopes down to Crestline Parkway



Northeast side of site: topography change of one story from self storage to Home Depot parking

ARCHITECTURE FOR BIG BOX

Figure 20

EXISTING SITE

Secondary entrance to site on Peachtree Dunwoody Road



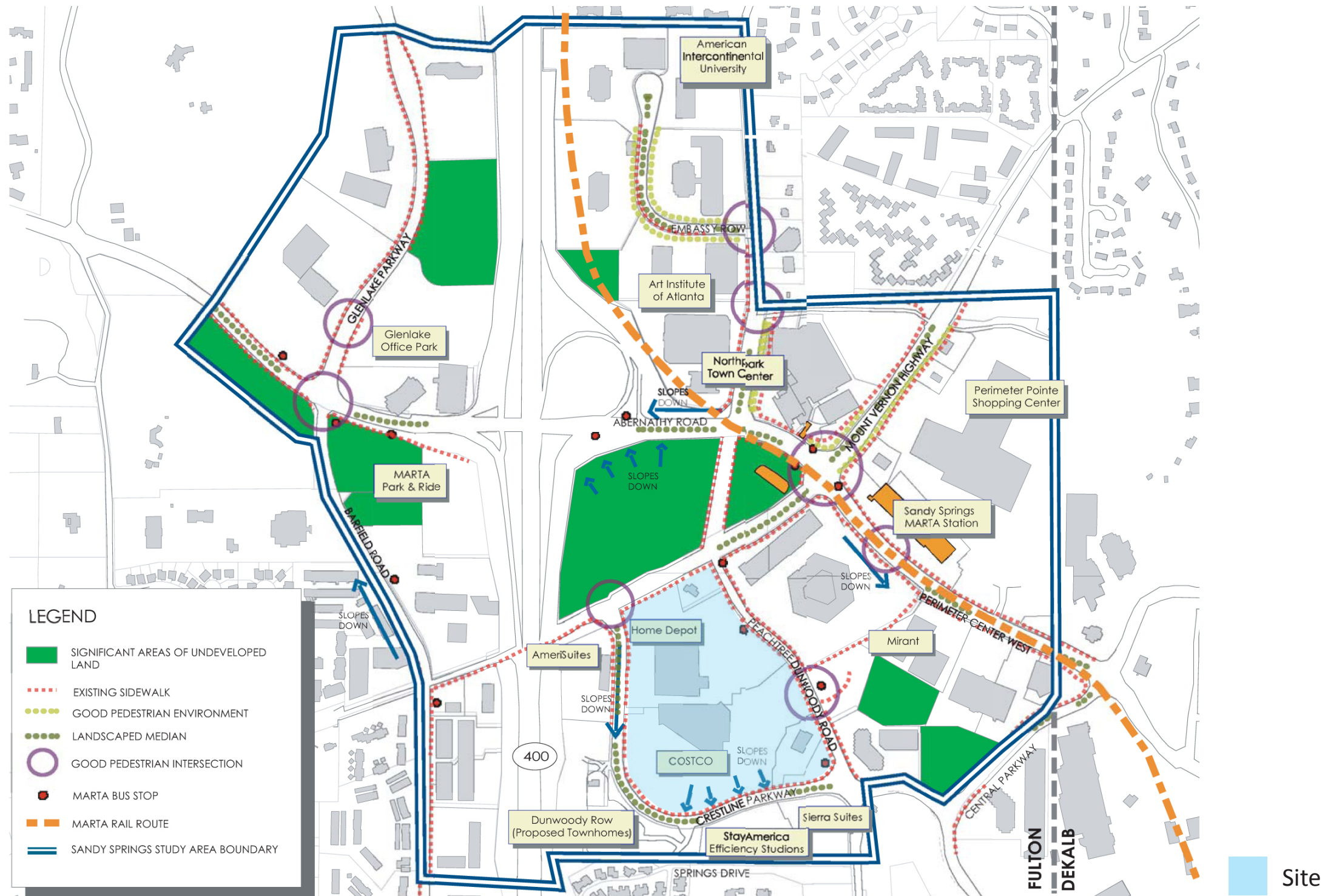
Entrance from Crestline Parkway

Primary entrance to site on Peachtree Dunwoody Road



Service entrance from Crestline Parkway





Map from Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centers Initiative

