

Present Absence: The Interior as Register of Memory in the Context of Urban Renewal

by
SHIH HSUAN LO

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Chairperson: David Foley
Advisor: Edwin Zawadzki

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming to interior design from a very different undergraduate background, I am deeply proud to complete and present this book. This thesis represents not only the completion of my graduate studies, but also my own perspective on how design can respond to places undergoing change. Through this work, I hope to suggest a thoughtful approach to preserving memory in space—one that allows what has been lost, altered, or left behind to continue shaping the present.

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Edwin Zawadzki, for his guidance and thoughtful critiques throughout this process. His support encouraged me to approach the project not only as a design proposal, but also as an investigation into how interiors can carry memory forward. Thank you, Edwin, for always approaching my work with optimism, patience, and understanding.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Stefan Di Leo. Stefan has been more than a professor to me; he has been a mentor in my professional growth and a trusted friend beyond the classroom. During one of the most difficult periods of my time in the program, it was Stefan who offered his support and helped me continue moving forward. His kindness and encouragement have meant more to me than I can fully express.

I am also grateful to our Associate Chair, Tania Branquinho, for her support and encouragement throughout my time at Pratt. Her guidance and care helped me navigate the program with greater confidence, and I sincerely appreciate the assistance she offered along the way.

None of this work would have been possible without the unconditional support of my family, especially my parents and my brother, Albert. They gave me the confidence and the opportunity to pursue a master’s degree at Pratt Institute, and their belief in me has supported every step of this journey. I am grateful to them from the deepest part of my heart.

This book is dedicated to everyone who supported me through this process, and to the places and memories that continue to shape the way I understand interior space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01. Thesis Design Problem	01 - 15
02. Research Sources Bibliography	17 - 21
03. Precedent Analysis	23 - 31
04. Case Studies	33 - 41
05. Programming & User Groups	43 - 45
06. Site Description & Analysis	47 - 55
07. Final Thesis Design Scheme	57 - 67

01.

THESIS DESIGN PROBLEM

THESIS STATEMENT

ABSTRACT



fig 1.1. an aerial view photo of Shezi Island, *From Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*, by P. L. Chi, 2013, Chi Po-lin Foundation [1.4.2].

Exploring adaptive reuse and material transformation at the interior scale, interior design can sustain emotional attachment, preserve cultural memory, and help reconstitute social identity within spaces marked by absence.

Cities around the world are shaped by cycles of renewal, erasure, and reinvention—processes that can leave community memory vulnerable as buildings age, decay, or disappear. This thesis investigates how design can operate within this cycle: by exploring ways to preserve the cultural and emotional imprints embedded in architecture even when physical structures are unstable or impermanent? It further examines how spatial interventions can honor a community’s lived history while creating new spaces for gathering, and belonging.

This study originates from the urban tensions experienced in Taiwan—specifically the friction between developmental pressures and community identity—but addresses a phenomenon that is globally pervasive. In major metropolises like New York, the relentless push for urban renewal often necessitates the erasure of collective memory, resulting in the loss of vital community hubs and cultural spaces. This research posits that while redevelopment is an economic and structural necessity, the "spirit" of a site can be preserved through a strategy of architectural reinterpretation. By utilizing concrete casting to fossilize existing artifacts and strategically expanding or inserting new programs within the historical fabric, the design seeks to transform the interior into a "register of memory" that honors the past while serving the future.

Major cities like New York are facing rapid redevelopment that erases everyday environments as gentrification accelerates. This lived experience shapes the core of the research: the belief that memory is not a static record but an atmosphere shaped by material traces, absence, and the social life they support.

Although this thesis draws from precedents such as New York City's 9/11 Memorial Plaza, which is the best example of using absence as a part of its design, the project is not about a single site. Rather, the plaza serves as a lens through which broader questions about memory preservation, and community advocacy are examined. Its success lies in its unique way of translating damaged symbol of New York, that strongly expresses loss of the people of the nation, into a memorial that invites both city residents and visitors to commemorate what once stood there.

As Jane Jacobs reminds us, “Cities need a mingling of old buildings to cultivate primary diversity... They need old buildings to incubate new primary diversity.” ¹

This thesis uses New York City's West Park Presbyterian Church as its research site. The church carries historical significance while the exsisting build is in desperate need of demolition/renovation. Therefore, the design does not pursue strict conservation or literal preservation. Instead, it seeks to retain the essence of the original architecture: its spatial rhythm, materiality and its proportions. The proposal reinterprets these qualities through clean, contemporary details, that also acknowledge of it's original materials or exsisting objects.

Within this framework, the project maintains three objectives:

- (a) stabilize and build upon the existing building in ways that acknowledge its age and imperfections;
- (b) embrace absence, voids, and light as spatial strategies that reveal memory rather than conceal loss;
- (c) reintegrate community-oriented programs that respond to contemporary needs and restore active social use.

While many endangered structures face severe deterioration and require intervention for safety, these conditions also create opportunities. Instead of fully restoring the past or erasing it, reconstruction can preserve material traces, accept incompleteness, and reimagine the building as a vessel for collective memory. Through this approach, the project aims to demonstrate how interior architecture can sustain cultural significance while adapting to evolving community life.

1. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 187.

THESIS RESEARCH STATEMENT

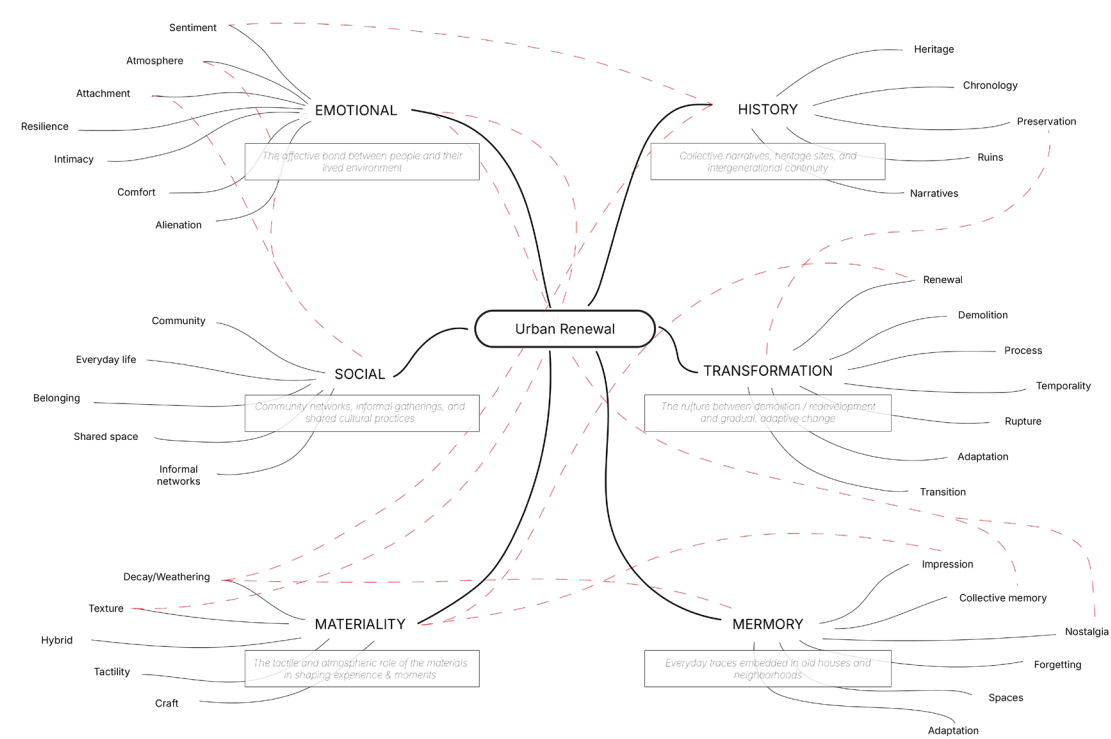


fig 1.2. layer and threads by author

Gaston Bachelard’s writes “space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. Especially in the case of the house, space holds compressed time, memories, and dreams that continue to shape presence.”²

This reinforces that when physical forms are altered or erased, the imaginative and affective dimensions of space endure, this creates opportunity for designers to reinterpret absence and sustain memory.

2. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)

How can different material perserve memory, embrace absense and build upon/within the exsisting?

Three central questions guide this study:

- (a) How can interior design and adaptive reuse mediate between inevitable urban change and the preservation of meaningful spaces?
- (b) How can absence be intentionally designed as a form of remembrance?
- (c) Given that urban renewal operates at a large, policy-driven scale, what role can interior design, inherently human scale, interrogate a fundamentally urban scale issue?

Precedents were analyzed to frame these questions resulting in four primary approaches: Closure and Continuity, Absense as Remembrance, Reversal of Objects and Materials, Reforming From Historical Objects, through which absence can be reinterpreted and memory preserved.

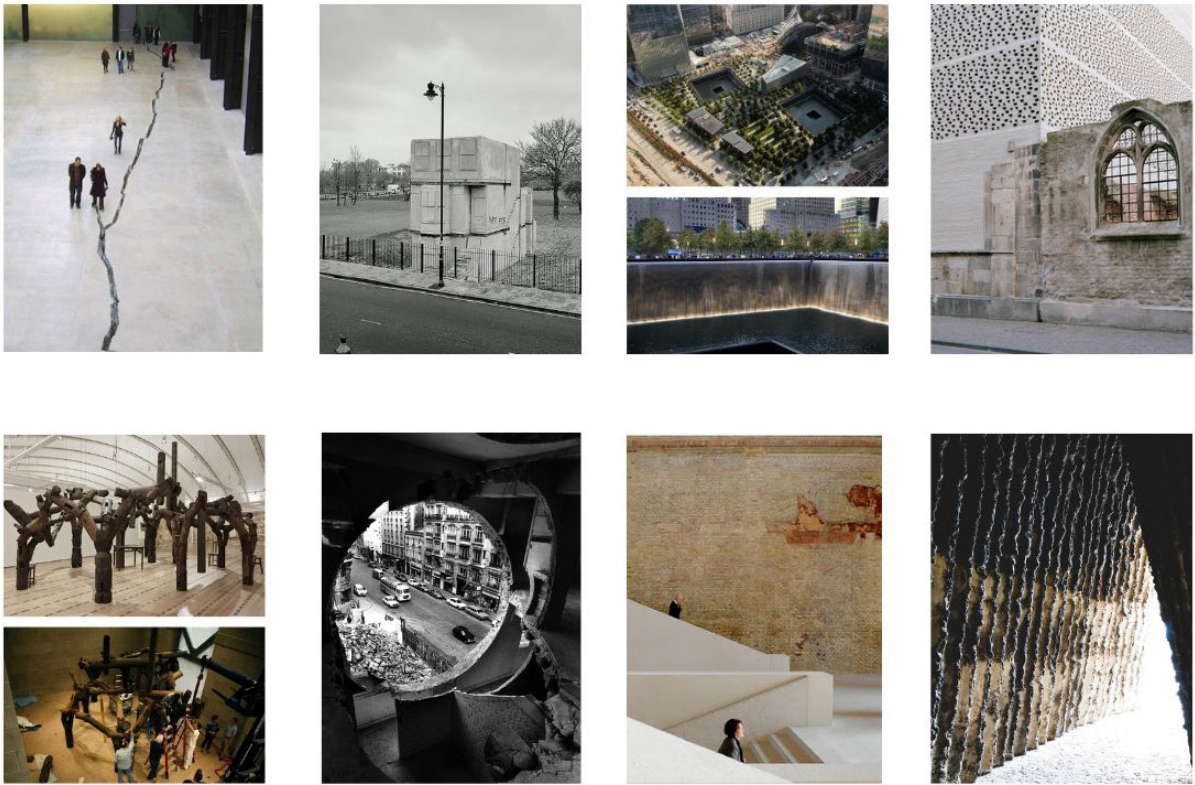


fig. 1.3. Precedent images exploring rupture, absence, fragments, material reversal, and continuity. Images include Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth; Rachel Whiteread's House; Michael Arad and Peter Walker's Reflecting Absence / 9/11 Memorial Plaza; Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum and Bruder Klaus Field Chapel; Ai Weiwei's Fragments; Gordon Matta-Clark's Conical Intersect; and David Chipperfield Architects with Julian Harrap's Neues Museum.

Theoretical Framework:

This thesis is structured through a three-part theoretical framework: the social, the phenomenological, and the material. Together, these lenses establish a way of understanding adaptive reuse not only as a technical or preservation practice, but as a spatial method for sustaining memory, identity, and continuity within conditions of urban change.

The first lens addresses the social life of the city. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs argues that cities depend on the complexity of everyday interactions, informal networks, and accumulated urban layers.³ For Jacobs, older buildings are not valuable only because of their age or architectural style; they support diversity, affordability, and civic life in ways that new development often cannot. Her argument that “cities need old buildings”⁴ establishes an important socio-political foundation for this thesis: existing buildings can function as anchors of urban vitality, carrying social relationships and community memory that may be lost through large-scale redevelopment.

Jacobs’s concept of “organized complexity” is especially important here. Rather than understanding the city as a fixed object, she describes it as a living system made through overlapping routines, encounters, and uses. This framework allows the thesis to ask how architecture can preserve not only physical structures, but also the social conditions that make a place meaningful. It also raises a larger question: when urban renewal removes older buildings or replaces them with more standardized forms of development, what kinds of civic memory and social possibility are erased?

The second lens shifts from the scale of the city to the scale of interior experience. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* provides a phenomenological framework for understanding interiors as spaces of memory, imagination, and emotional attachment. His idea of “topoanalysis,”⁵ or the psychological study of the places of intimate life, suggests that space is not experienced only through function or form, but through memory, atmosphere, and personal association. Within this framework, the interior becomes a register of lived experience: surfaces, corners, thresholds, and material traces can hold emotional significance beyond their physical presence.

Bachelard’s writing helps position absence not as emptiness, but as something that can still be felt through spatial experience. A void, fragment, or trace can become a carrier of memory when it invites the occupant to sense what once existed or what has been lost. This lens allows the thesis to ask how interior design can make memory spatially perceptible. How can architecture create conditions where the past is not simply represented, but felt? How can absence become an active emotional and atmospheric presence within a space?

3 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 428–33.
4 Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 187.
5 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 8.

The third lens focuses on material continuity and temporal orientation. David Leatherbarrow’s *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* offers a way to understand architecture as a response to the conditions of a site rather than an isolated formal object.⁶ For Leatherbarrow, a site is not a blank slate. It is shaped by topography, weathering, use, history, and accumulated material presence. Architecture therefore gains meaning through its orientation toward these existing conditions.

This material framework is important because it moves preservation away from simple imitation or restoration. Instead of reproducing the past, architecture can establish continuity by making relationships between old and new legible. Materials can register time, reveal transformation, and show how a building has been affected by use, damage, repair, and change. In this sense, material contrast, layering, and intervention can become methods for acknowledging history while allowing new life to emerge.

Together, Jacobs, Bachelard, and Leatherbarrow form the theoretical tripod of this thesis. Jacobs establishes the social urgency of preserving urban memory and civic complexity. Bachelard provides the phenomenological basis for understanding interiors as containers of intimate memory and atmosphere. Leatherbarrow offers a material and spatial approach to working with existing conditions over time. Through these three frameworks, the thesis asks how adaptive reuse can mediate between inevitable urban transformation and the preservation of social, emotional, and material memory.

This framework leads into the investigation of precedents that explore memory through different spatial strategies: preserving social continuity, making absence perceptible, working with fragments, and allowing old and new conditions to coexist. Rather than treating precedent studies as isolated examples, the following chapter examines how each project contributes to this larger theoretical structure: the social life of place, the emotional experience of interior memory, and the material registration of time.

6 David Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 67–118.

Closure & Continuity

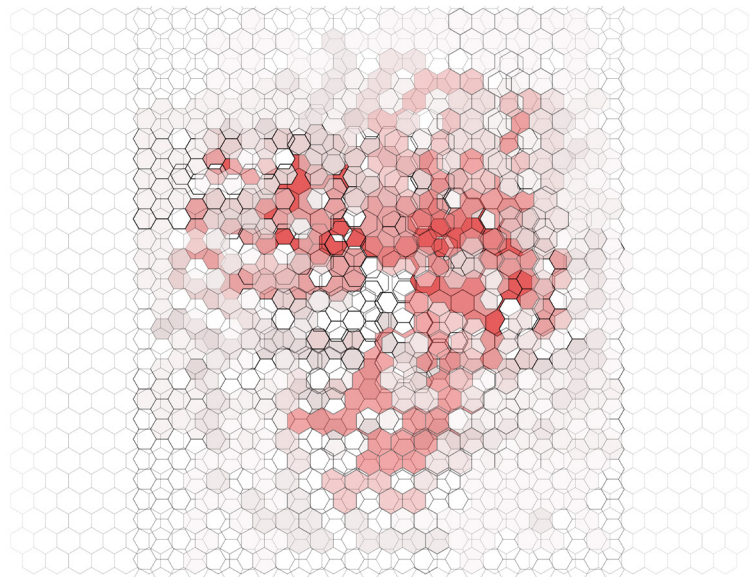


fig 1.4. diagram by author

The following precedents show how spaces can acknowledge an ending while still carrying forward what remains unresolved. Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth takes the form of a long fissure cut into the floor of a gallery, turning the surface people normally move across into a visible break that cannot be seamlessly closed. For this thesis, Shibboleth suggests that rupture itself can become a spatial device, allowing damage or division to remain visible rather than being repaired into neutrality.

The 9/11 Memorial Plaza¹ in New York marks loss through two large recessed voids set within the original footprints of the Twin Towers, establishing a clear boundary around what is irretrievable while sustaining a public space for repeated return. Its key lesson for this project is that absence can be given a precise spatial boundary, allowing memory to be encountered through scale, edge, and repeated movement.

Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Field Chapel² offers a more enclosed version of this pairing: a dark interior shaped through a subtractive construction process produces a sense of closure through containment, yet maintains continuity through an atmosphere that visitors experience over time. For this thesis, the chapel shows how enclosure can hold absence emotionally, transforming loss into an intimate and atmospheric interior condition.

Read together, these precedents suggest that rupture, void, and enclosure can hold both finality and persistence.

1 National September 11 Memorial & Museum, "About the Memorial,"
2 "Bruder Klaus Field Chapel / Peter Zumthor," ArchDaily, January 27, 2011.

Absence as Remembrance

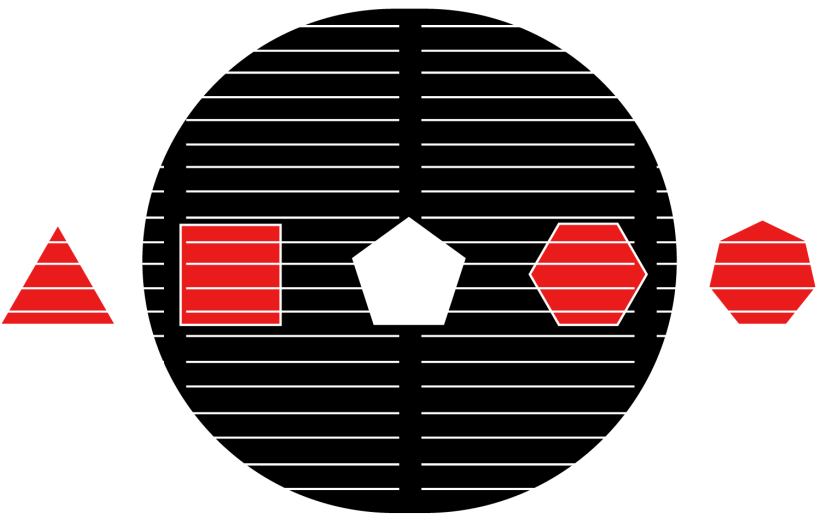


fig 1.5. diagram by author

Across these works, remembrance is not created by adding representational images or objects, but by shaping what is missing into something perceivable. At the 9/11 Memorial Plaza, the absent towers are translated into spaces that draw the body toward an emptiness that cannot be filled, making loss felt through scale, edge, and sound. For this thesis, the memorial shows that absence can be designed as an active spatial presence rather than a symbolic image.

In Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, absence becomes an interior condition: the charred cavity left by a removed timber formwork turns subtraction into a quiet, sacred atmosphere. Its key lesson is that material removal can become a form of memory-making, where what disappears continues to shape the emotional experience of the space.

Gordon Matta-Clark's Conical Intersect approaches remembrance through cutting and exposure; by carving a void through existing buildings, the work reveals hidden layers and histories that would otherwise remain sealed. For this project, Matta-Clark's work suggests that subtraction can uncover memory, turning demolition or cutting into a method of revealing what is already embedded in a structure.

Together, these precedents frame absence as an active means of remembering.

Reforming From Historical Fragments

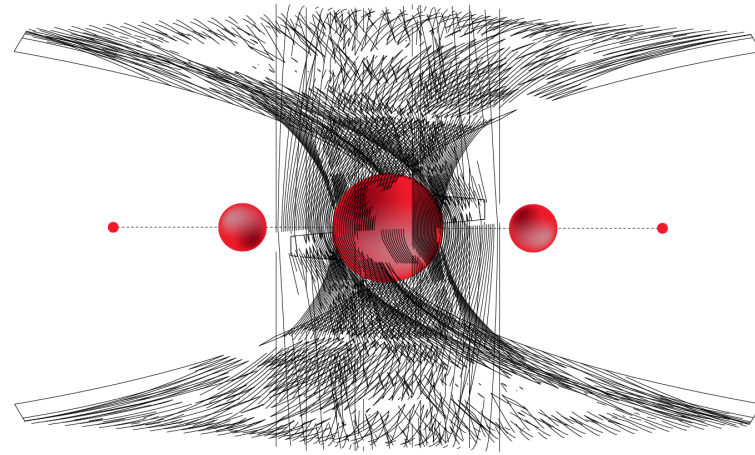


fig 1.6. diagram by author

Ai Weiwei's *Fragments* and related works compose salvaged timbers and displaced materials into new assemblages, using remnants to reactivate histories rather than preserve them as untouched artifacts. For this thesis, Ai's work suggests that fragments do not need to be restored to their original state; they can be recomposed into new spatial relationships that carry memory forward.

David Chipperfield's renovation of the Neues Museum in Berlin retains war-damaged surfaces and incomplete architectural traces, allowing the building's breaks to remain visible as part of its renewed identity. The key takeaway for this project is that repair does not have to erase damage; instead, new interventions can coexist with historical scars and make time legible.

Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne similarly incorporates existing ruins into a new structure, keeping the older fabric perceptible within a restrained contemporary envelope. For this thesis, Kolumba shows how a new architectural layer can protect and frame fragments without overpowering them, allowing the past to remain present within a new program.

Reversal of Objects & Material

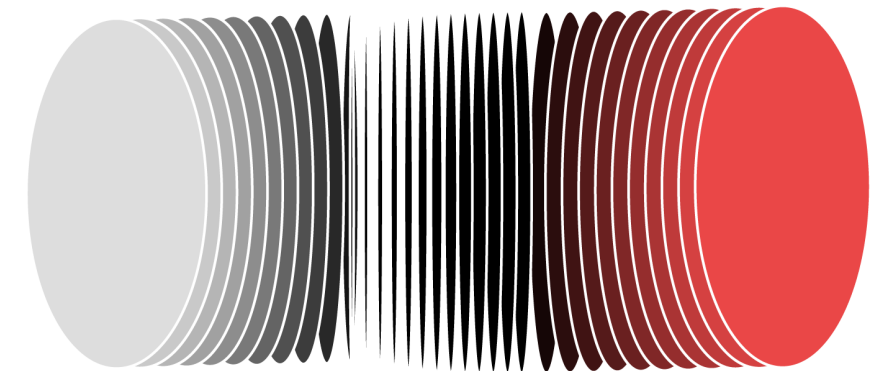


fig 1.7. diagram by author

Lastly, several precedents work through reversal, making what is normally invisible into the primary form. Rachel Whiteread's *House* is created by casting the interior of a domestic building, so the resulting object is the solidified negative space of rooms rather than the familiar exterior of the house. For this thesis, House demonstrates that the interior void can become the main artifact, turning lived absence into a physical and material presence.

The 9/11 Memorial Plaza performs a comparable inversion at the scale of the city by giving the missing towers a legible spatial form through two descending voids. Its takeaway for this project is that a lost structure does not need to be reconstructed in order to remain spatially powerful; its absence can become the organizing form.

In Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, reversal occurs through process: a timber framework is built and then burned away, leaving a concrete shell defined by the imprint of what disappeared. For this thesis, this process suggests that material traces can preserve the memory of a vanished form, allowing disappearance itself to become constructive.

In each case, inversion becomes a way to materialize memory through void, trace, and residue—so absence is not represented, but directly experienced as space.

MAKING AS RESEARCH

Precedent research reveals how material and spatial absence can hold memory, and how design can employ transformation rather than replication to preserve the essence of what has been lost. This aligns with Peter Zumthor’s reflection that materials in architecture are carriers of meaning: they can speak to us, touch our memory, and operate in different ways.⁷ This idea provides a conceptual bridge to the making component of the thesis.

Building on the conceptual strategies derived from the precedents, the study turns to material investigation as a way to test how memory can be articulated through casting, inversion, and material transformation. These processes examine how manipulated forms—such as solidified voids, reversed imprints, and altered residues—can generate distinct physical and psychological qualities. Rather than treating absence as empty or passive, the making process asks how absence can become perceptible, how traces can be preserved through transformation, and how design can reform meaning from what remains.

If materials possess the capacity to hold and evoke memory, then casting, inversion, and transformation become tools for revealing what is absent or forgotten. The making studies explore how different materials and objects can reveal distinct physical and psychological qualities. Resin, for instance, can encapsulate and suspend objects, effectively freezing a moment in time, while plaster records impressions and surfaces as literal memory traces. Together, these materials demonstrate how transformation can preserve traces of the past while generating a new presence that endures.

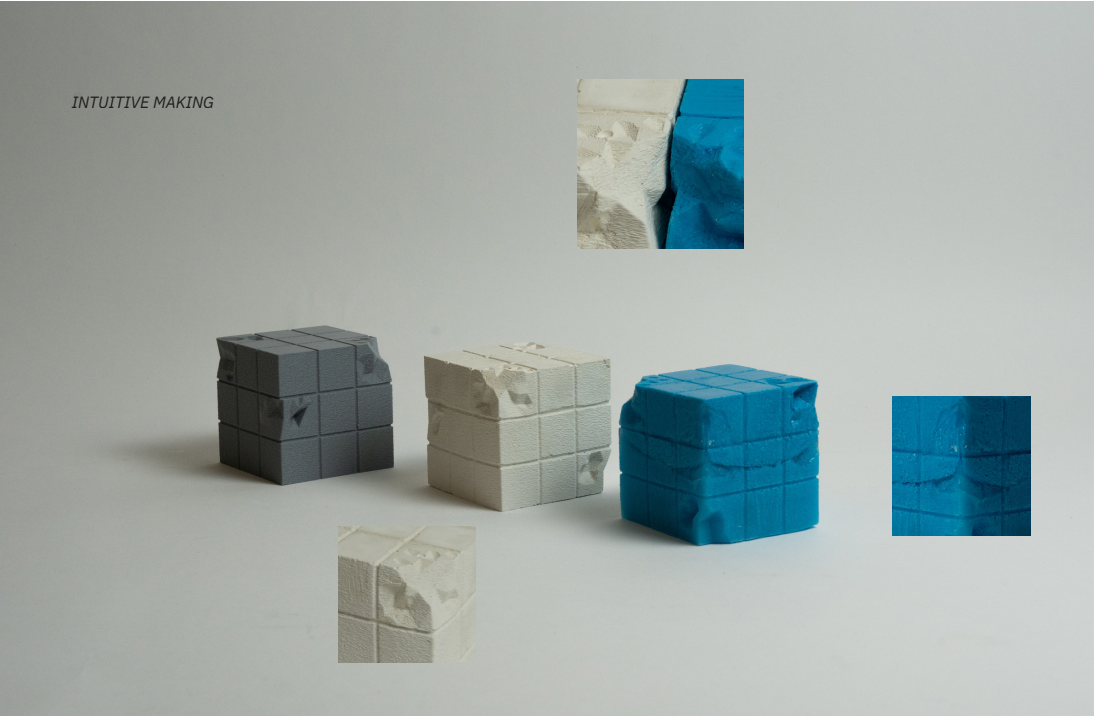


fig 1.8. model by author, materials include PLA (3D Printing), plaster and resin.

Taken together, these ideas establish a framework in which absence, fragmentation, and material transformation carries of the past. Whether through voids that mark what has been lost or fragments that reform new narratives from existing traces, these studies demonstrate how design can sustain continuity without replication. As Peter Zumthor reminds us, “architecture is exposed to life. If its body is sensitive enough, it can assume a quality that bears witness to past life.” This insight underscores the central premise of the thesis: spaces and materials carry the capacity to remember, and through careful transformation, design can activate these memories to shape new forms of presence.

In this sense, the work ahead does not seek to restore what once was, but to reveal how traces, voids, and reassembled fragments can carry meaning across time.

7 Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998)



fig 1.9. model by author inspired by Shibboleth

The idea of closure and continuity in *Shibboleth* lies in the way the crack was later sealed. Physically, the exhibition ended and the rupture was “closed,” but a visible scar remains on the floor. This shows that while societies may attempt to cover over histories of racism and exclusion, the traces never fully disappear — continuity exists in memory, scars, and the way the past shapes the present.



fig 1.10. model by author inspired by House

What is no longer physically present can still exert a powerful presence, shaping collective identity demonstrating that loss itself can function as a potent form of remembrance.



fig 1.11. model by author inspired by Fragments

Reforming from historical fragments involves taking material, spatial, or cultural remnants of the past and reassembling them into new configurations. Rather than erasing history, this approach foregrounds its trace, allowing fragmented elements to inform contemporary identity and meaning. It is a mode of continuity through transformation—reworking what persists from the past rather than beginning anew.



fig 1.12. model by author inspired by 9/11 memorial plaza

Absence as remembrance refers to the idea that what is missing can itself hold memory. By marking voids, scars, or traces, design allows absence to function as a reminder of what once existed. In this way, emptiness acquires presence, transforming loss into a space for collective reflection.

02.

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03.

PRECEDENT ANALYSIS

Chapter 3 brings together the research findings from a set of precedents that demonstrate how absence can be made spatially legible and meaningful through distinct but related design operations. Across the case studies, four recurring results emerge: spaces can hold closure and continuity at once through rupture, void, and enclosure; remembrance can be activated not by representation but by shaping what is missing into an encounterable condition; historical fragments can function as generative foundations for new meaning rather than defects to conceal; and material reversal can invert figure and ground so that void, imprint, and residue become the primary carriers of presence. The precedents examined—including *Shibboleth*, the 9/11 Memorial Plaza, Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, *Conical Intersect*, Ai Weiwei's *Fragments*, the Neues Museum renovation, the Kolumba Museum, and Whiteread's *House* and more—collectively show that subtraction, exposure, recomposition, and inversion are not merely techniques, but research-backed strategies through which memory is registered and sustained in space.

PRECEDENT RESEARCH

SHIBBOLETH

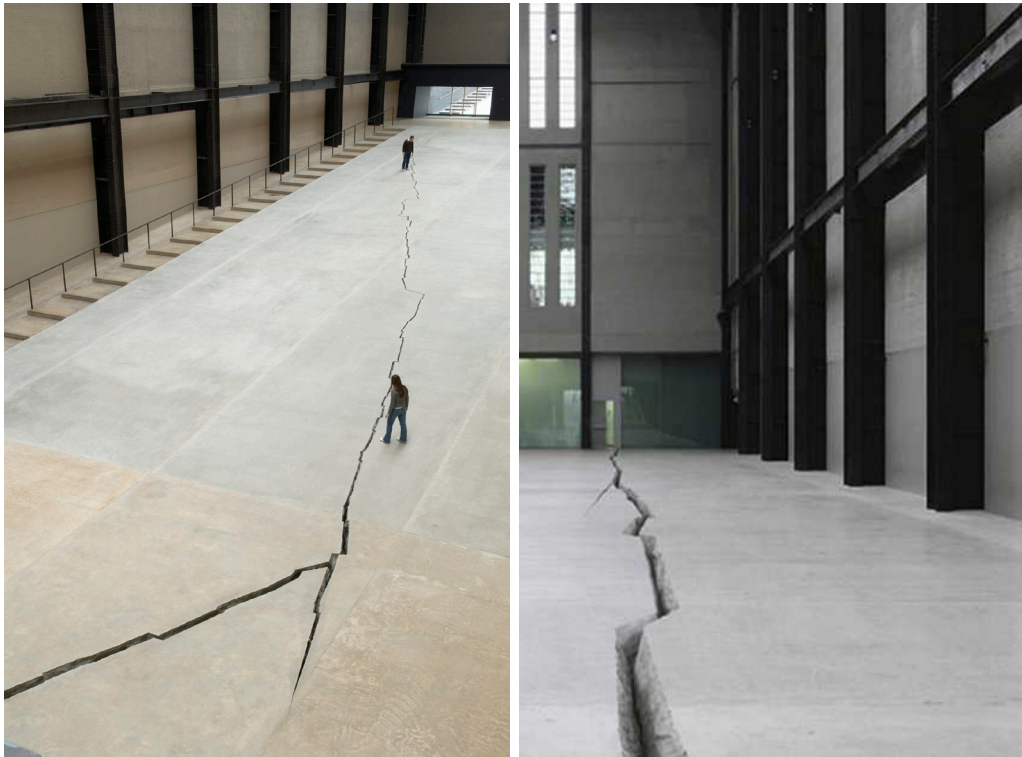


fig. 3.1. Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, installation view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2007–2008.
Source: Tate, "Doris Salcedo: *Shibboleth*."

"Urban landscapes can become storehouses for the shared memories of those who have experienced them. The power of ordinary urban landscapes is not simply visual; their persistence in time makes them invaluable to the articulation of shared public history."

Dolores Hayden – The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History

Introduction

Shibboleth (2007) is a seminal site-specific installation by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, created for the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London.¹ The work consisted of a massive, meandering crack that stretched the entire length of the hall's concrete floor. The fissure began as a hairline fracture and widened to reveal a depth of several feet, exposing wire mesh and the raw foundations of the museum. The title refers to a biblical story from the Book of Judges, where the pronunciation of the word "shibboleth" was used to distinguish friends from enemies, serving as a lethal test of belonging and exclusion.

¹ Tate Modern, "Doris Salcedo: *Shibboleth*," Tate.org.uk, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-shibboleth-t12565>.

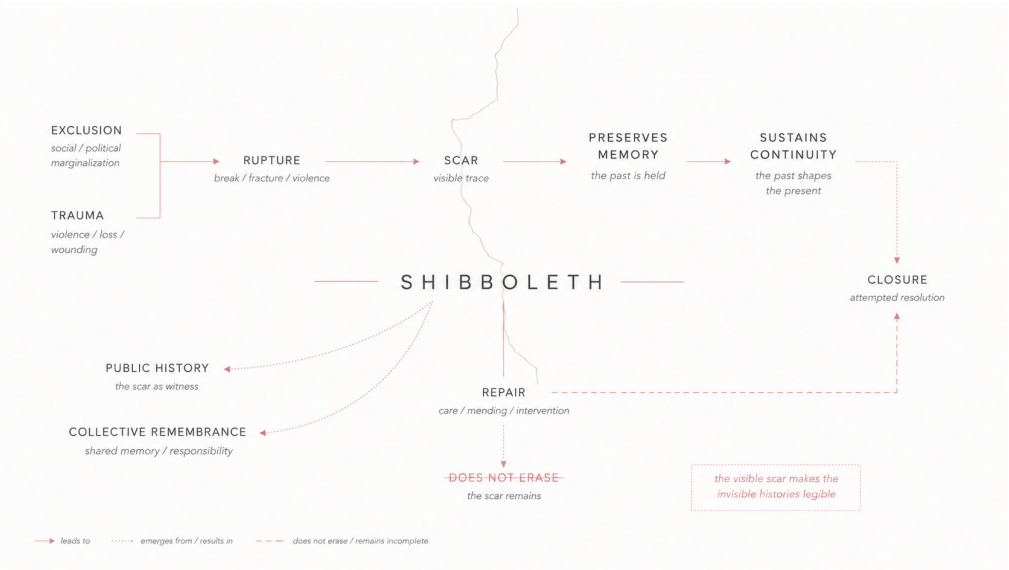


fig. 3.2. diagram by author

Analysis: Closure, Continuity, and the Scar

The conceptual power of Shibboleth did not end when the exhibition closed; rather, it evolved through its own erasure. Salcedo's decision to have the crack filled with concrete after the show's conclusion created a permanent "scar" that runs through the Turbine Hall. This physical sealing engages directly with the tension between closure and continuity. While the rupture was ostensibly "fixed" to restore the floor's utility, the repair remains visibly distinct from the original architecture.

This scar serves as a potent metaphor for how societies deal with trauma, racism, and exclusion. The act of filling the crack represents the institutional or societal attempt to smooth over difficult histories—to claim that a chapter is closed or a wound is healed. However, the persistence of the scar defies this desire for a clean slate. It suggests that while the immediate rupture of violence or discrimination may be patched over, the structural damage leaves an indelible mark. Continuity is found not in the open wound, but in the permanent trace of the injury, reminding us that the past is never truly erased; it is merely paved over, continuing to shape the texture of the present.

PRECEDENT RESEARCH

HOUSE



fig 3.3. Rachel Whiteread, House, concrete cast of the interior of 193 Grove Road, East London, 1993. Source: Artangel, "House." Photographs by John Davies and Sue Ormerod, courtesy of Artangel.

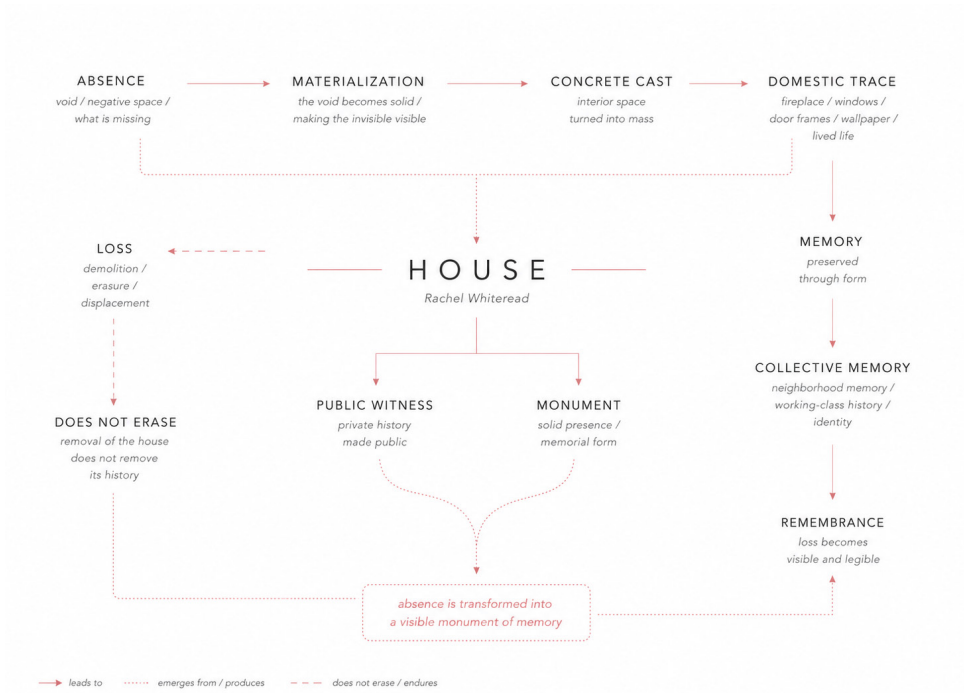


fig 3.4. diagram by author

Introduction

House (1993) was a monumental, temporary public sculpture by British artist Rachel Whiteread. Located in East London, the work was created by spraying liquid concrete into the interior of a condemned Victorian terraced house—specifically, 193 Grove Road—and then stripping away the exterior brick walls and roof. The result was a ghostly, inverted replica of the home's interior space: a solid concrete cast of the air that once filled the rooms. It captured the negative space of domestic life, preserving the indentations of fireplaces, windows, and door frames, before being controversially demolished by the local council in early 1994.²

2 Artangel, "House 1993," Artangel.org.uk, accessed September, 2025, <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/house/>

Analysis: The Materialization of Absence

Whiteread's House serves as a profound architectural embodiment of the idea that "absence doesn't erase — it transforms." By solidifying the void, Whiteread literally gave weight and mass to what was previously invisible. The sculpture transformed the empty air of a demolished home into a heavy, brutalist monument, proving that the removal of a physical structure does not equate to the removal of its history.

The work operated as a "space for memory and reflection" by fossilizing the intimate traces of daily life—the soot marks of a fireplace, the impression of a light switch, the texture of wallpaper. These details forced the private, forgotten history of a working-class neighborhood into the public eye, asserting that "what is gone still exerts presence." In an area undergoing rapid gentrification and erasure, House stood as a stubborn, silent witness. It shaped collective identity by refusing to let the displacement of the community vanish without a trace, ultimately demonstrating that the "loss itself"—monumentalized in concrete—is the most potent form of remembrance.

PRECEDENT RESEARCH

FRAGMENTS



fig 3.6. Ai Weiwei, *Fragments*, 2005, ironwood architectural remnants from dismantled Qing dynasty temples. Source: Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, "Perspectives: Ai Weiwei." Courtesy of the Sigg Collection.

Introduction

Fragments (2005) is a monumental installation by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. The work is constructed entirely from salvage: heavy ironwood (tieli) pillars and beams recovered from dismantled Qing Dynasty temples (1644–1911) that were destroyed during China's rapid urban modernization. These ancient architectural remnants are reassembled using traditional Chinese joinery techniques, without nails or glue. From the ground, the installation appears as a chaotic, irrational forest of wood; however, when viewed from above, the seemingly random arrangement of beams aligns perfectly to form the outline of the map of China³

3 Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. "Ai Weiwei: *Fragments*." Si.edu. Accessed September 2025. <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/ai-weiwei-fragments/>

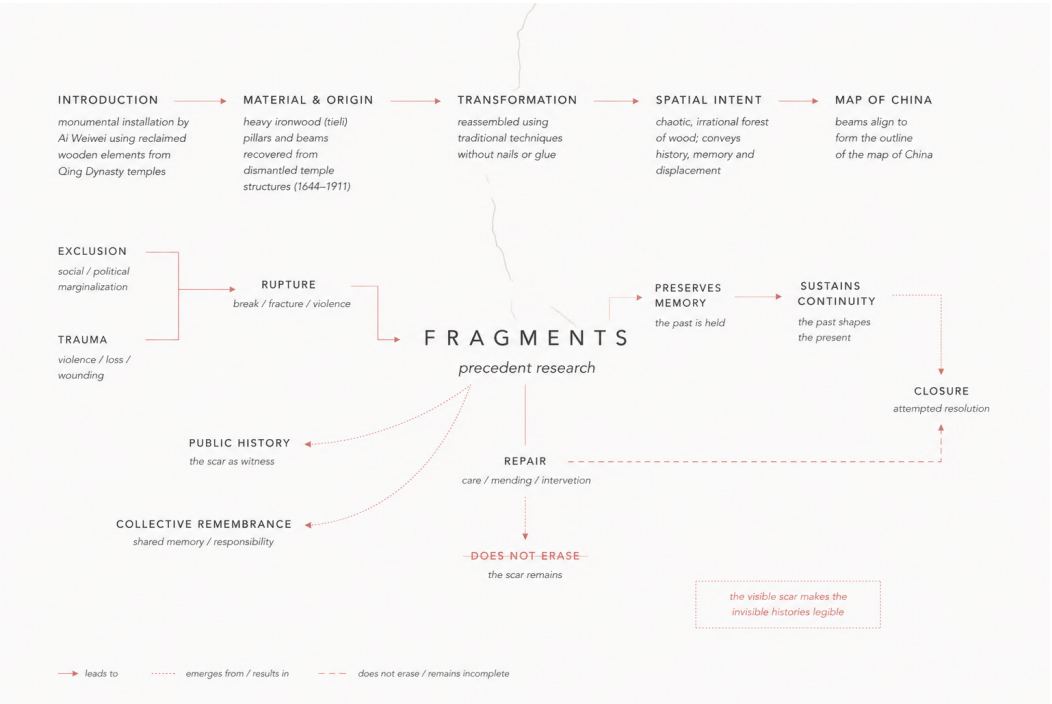


fig 3.7. diagram by author

Analysis: Continuity Through Transformation

Fragments is a literal and conceptual exercise in "reforming from historical fragments." Ai Weiwei does not attempt to replicate the original temples; instead, he takes the "pieces of the past"—both the physical wood and the cultural memory embedded within it—and reconfigures them into a new spatial reality.

In line with the context that "continuity exists... by reworking what remains," the installation preserves the integrity of the historical materials and the ancient craftsmanship (the joinery) while radically altering their context. The work suggests that contemporary identity (symbolized by the map of China) is inextricably built from the debris of its own history. Instead of "erasing history" to make way for the new, Ai Weiwei forces the viewer to navigate through the physical weight of the past. The work demonstrates that the future is not a clean slate, but a complex structure held together by the "fragmented elements" of what came before.

PRECEDENT RESEARCH

9/11 Memorial Plaza



fig 3.8. Michael Arad and Peter Walker, Reflecting Absence, National September 11 Memorial Plaza, New York, opened 2011. Source: National September 11 Memorial & Museum, "About the Memorial." Photograph by Jin S. Lee.

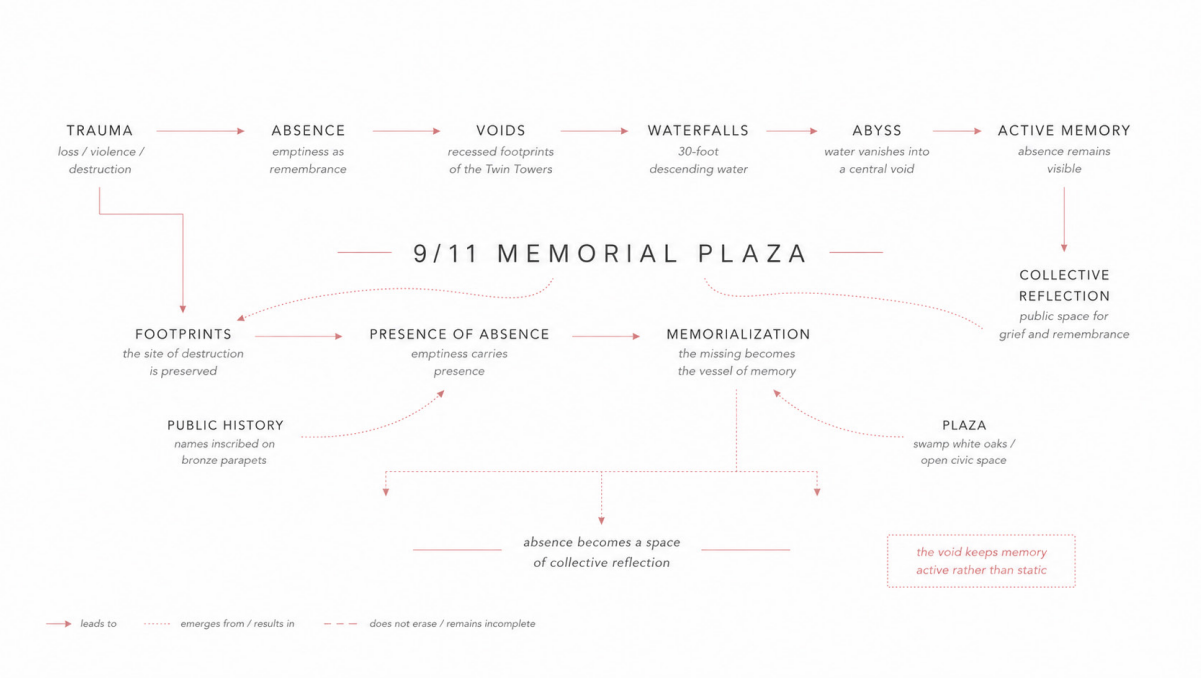


fig 3.9. diagram by author

Introduction

The National September 11 Memorial (opened 2011), titled Reflecting Absence, was designed by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker. Located at the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan, the memorial centers on two massive recessed pools set within the original footprints of the Twin Towers. Each pool features 30-foot waterfalls—the largest man-made waterfalls in North America—cascading into a central void. The pools are surrounded by a plaza of swamp white oak trees and bronze parapets inscribed with the names of the 2,983 victims of the 2001 and 1993 attacks.^{4 5}

4 9/11 Memorial & Museum. "About the Memorial." 911memorial.org. Accessed September 2025. <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial>.

5 Chotiner, Isaac. "What the 9/11 Museum Remembers and What It Forgets." The New Yorker. September 10, 2021. Accessed September 2025. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/what-the-911-museum-remembers-and-what-it-forgets>.

Analysis: The Presence of Absence

The 9/11 Memorial functions as a definitive architectural expression of "absence as remembrance," validating the idea that emptiness can carry as much weight as solid form. By refusing to build over the "footprints of the Twin Towers," the design uses the "voids" of the pools to physically mark the scale of the destruction. The water that vanishes into the central abyss ensures that this absence remains active and visible, rather than static.

Through this approach, the memorial demonstrates how "design and art allow absence to become a powerful reminder." The voids are not merely empty space; they are charged with the memory of the towers that once stood there. This emptiness "carries presence," forcing the visitor to confront the magnitude of the loss directly. By turning the site of trauma into a sanctuary of open space and water, the memorial succeeds in "turning loss into a space of collective reflection," where the missing structures act as the primary vessel for the city's grief and memory.

04.

CASE STUDIES

Chapter 4 shifts from precedent-based research to applied spatial lessons through three focused case studies that directly inform the design direction of this thesis. Whereas the previous chapter established how absence can be materialized through rupture, void, fragment, and reversal, this chapter examines how those findings can operate within fully functioning architectural and interior systems—spaces that must host programs, audiences, ritual, and long-term use. The selected case studies offer three complementary models: LUMA Theater demonstrates how a neutral, adaptable “black box” can act as a contained memory chamber where flexibility makes absence feel like potential; Tadao Ando’s Church on the Water illustrates how a carefully choreographed sequence and a framed relationship to landscape can produce a heightened emotional threshold between interior and exterior; and David Chipperfield’s Neues Museum provides an ethical and material framework for continuity, showing how damaged fragments can remain visible while new insertions support renewed life without imitation. Read together, these case studies translate the thesis themes into practical design strategies—transformability, framing, procession, and honest integration of old and new—that will be carried forward into the project’s spatial proposals.

CASE STUDIES

LUMA Theater,
Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts



Total Building Area: ~
107,000 sq ft (entire center)

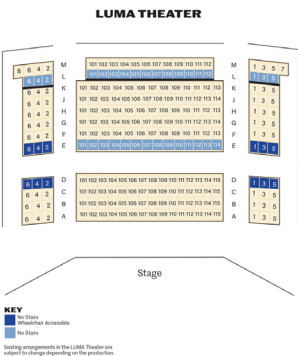
LUMA Theater ~
3,500–4,000 sq ft

Type:
Performing arts center /
Black box theater

Location:
Bard College, Annandale-
on-Hudson, New York



fig 4.1. Photos and seating diagram of the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts and LUMA Theater.
Source: Fisher Center at Bard, “The Building,” Bard College.



Introduction

The LUMA Theater represents a contemporary interpretation of the black box typology, demonstrating how a neutral, transformable space can exist within a large cultural complex. It resonates strongly with the Memory Theater thesis concept: the “box-in-box” acoustic system creates a contained interior memory space, while the stainless-steel exterior acts as a physical and temporal shell. The flexible spatial system (movable seating and stage configurations) aligns with the idea of absence as potential.

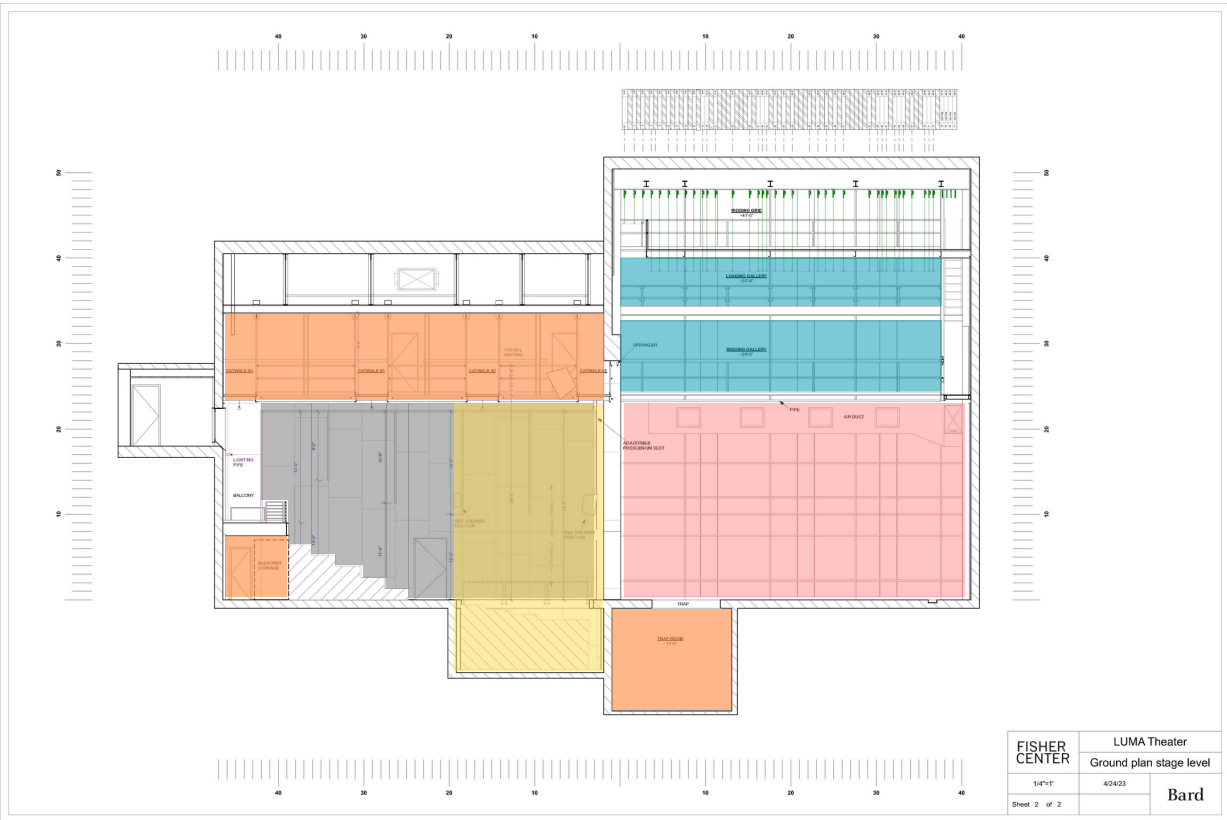


fig 4.2. diagram by author

Program and Spatial Elements of
LUMA Theater

Its retractable seating, movable platforms, and controlled lighting conditions create a spatial environment that blurs the line between stage and audience. This flexibility enables emotional and narrative reinterpretation—an idea that resonates strongly with the concept of memory as layered, shifting, and subjective.



fig 38. diagram by author

CASE STUDIES

Church on the Water



fig 4.3. Photos of Tadao Ando's Church on the Water, Tomamu, Hokkaido, Japan, 1988.
Source: ArchEyes Team, "The Church on the Water by Tadao Ando: Nature and the Sacred." Photographs by Yoshio Shiratori and Hirofumi Inaba.

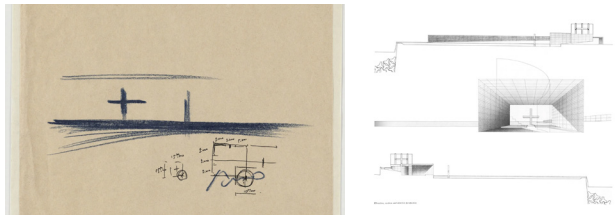


fig 4.4. sketches of Church on the Water
Source: ArchEyes Team, "The Church on the Water by Tadao Ando: Nature and the Sacred."

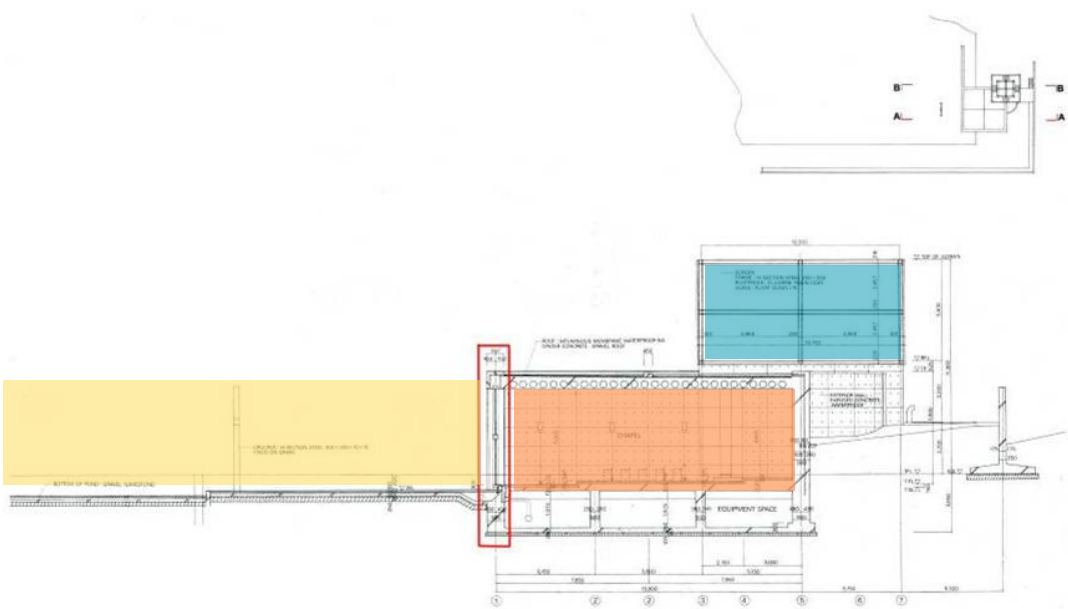
Introduction

Designed by Tadao Ando in Hokkaido, Japan, the Church on the Water is a minimalist chapel that integrates architecture, nature, and spirituality. It demonstrates how controlled geometry and light can evoke contemplation, turning the boundary between built space and landscape into an emotional experience.

Total Building Area: $\approx$
5,597 sqft

Type:
Religious / Spiritual
architecture + Water
garden

Location:
Tomamu, Hokkaido, Japan

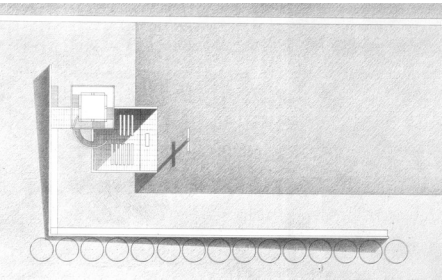


Sezione longitudinale A-A

fig 4.5. diagram by author

Program and Spatial Elements of Church on the Water

Ando's composition frames a reflective pool and cross beyond a glass wall, merging the sacred interior with the natural exterior. The visitor's movement—from dark corridor to illuminated space—becomes a ritual of transition, emphasizing stillness, material simplicity, and emotional depth. Together they form a strong "framed moment".



Vertical Circulation	Processional descent and ascent connecting entrance → chapel → water terrace	Enclosed concrete path that gradually opens to daylight and framed exterior views.
Entrance Courtyard	Transitional gathering / threshold space before entering chapel	Open to sky but enclosed by walls; first contact with light and water.
Main Chapel Hall	Worship/ Ceremony / gathering space	Double-height concrete volume; full glazing visually connects to water and landscape.
Cross + Water Garden + Terrace Over Water	Spiritual focal / meditation zone	Continuous plane of stone and water; fully open to sky and reflection.
Waiting Room	Pre-service / preparation area	Dim, inward-focused; minimal daylight for quiet reflection.

fig 4.6. diagram by author

CASE STUDIES

Neues Museum



fig 4.7. Photos of the Neues Museum, Berlin, restored by David Chipperfield Architects in collaboration with Julian Harrap, completed 2009.
Source: David Chipperfield Architects, "Neues Museum."

Introduction

Neues Museum became a landmark model because it treats preservation not as reconstruction, but as continuity through honesty — keeping the building's trauma visible while giving it a new life.

It demonstrates that ruins can be architecturally activated rather than repaired away, preserving both physical remnants and intangible memory, and showing the world that historical identity can be carried forward through thoughtful integration rather than replication.

Total Building Area: $\approx$
86,111 sqft

Type:
Museum / Archaeology- &
history-museum.

Location:
Berlin, Germany

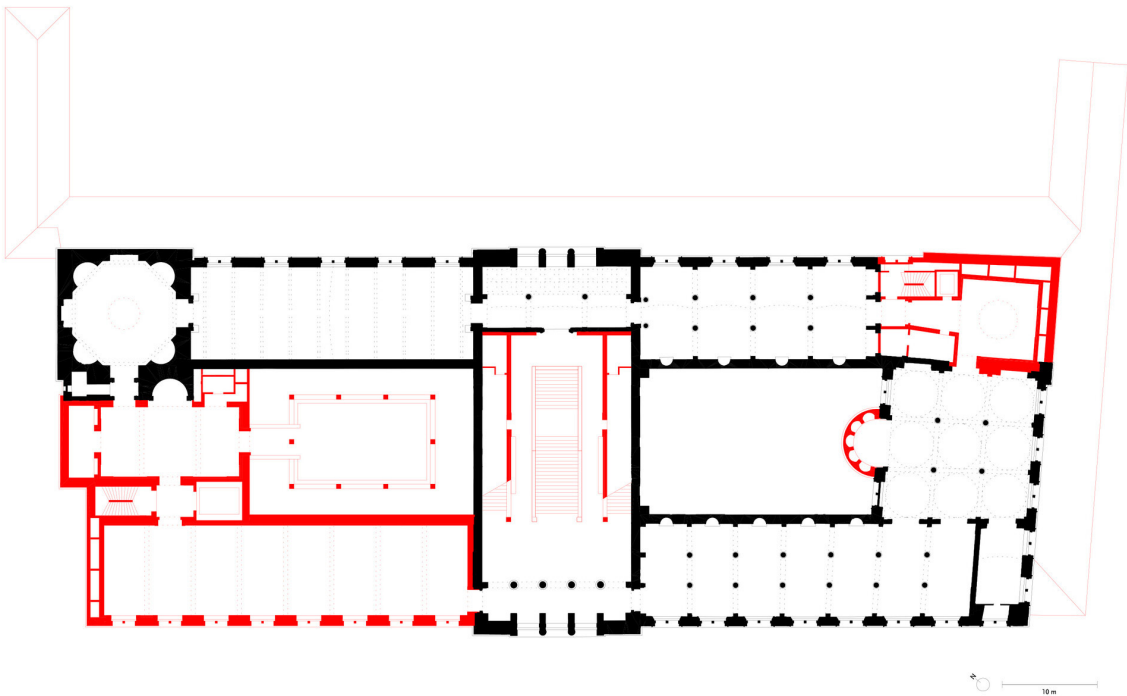


fig 4.8. plan of Neues Museum, red is highlighting new construction
Source: David Chipperfield Architects, "Neues Museum."



fig 4.9. Photos of the Neues Museum, Berlin, restored by David Chipperfield Architects in collaboration with Julian Harrap, completed 2009.
Source: David Chipperfield Architects, "Neues Museum."

Historical Preservation

David Chipperfield's restoration preserves large portions of the war-damaged building exactly as they were found — scarred brick walls, missing fragments, exposed structural wounds — and weaves them together with new, calm, minimal insertions.

Instead of reconstructing the lost elements, the design stabilizes the ruins, fills gaps only where structurally necessary, and uses new materials (concrete, glass, and brick) in a clearly distinguishable yet harmonious language, allowing old and new to coexist without imitation.

Framed Moment

Drawing inspiration from Tadao Ando's Church on the Water, this model explores how a cultural symbol can carry spatial and emotional weight. Through framing, the model directs the occupant toward a specific perspective, turning a visual moment into a curated interior experience. The act of framing not only controls what is seen, but also intensifies the atmosphere and emotional reading of the space.

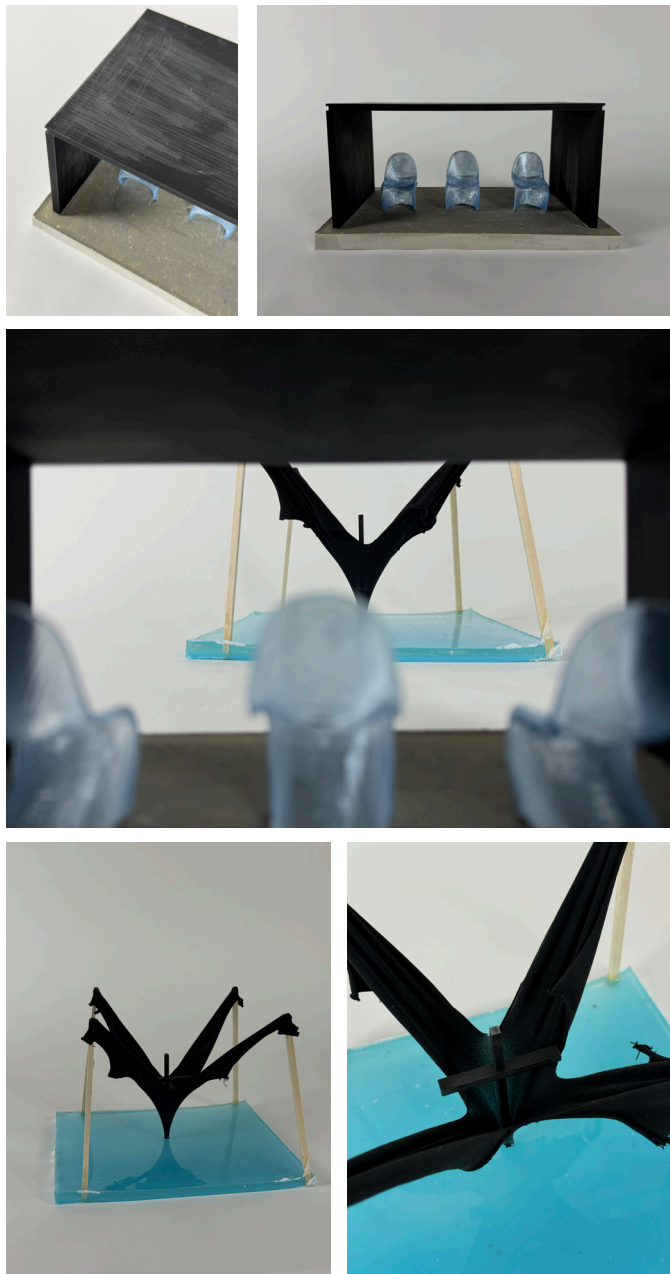


fig 4.10. model made by author inspired by Church on the Water

Building Upon Ruin

Inspired by David Chipperfield's Neues Museum, this model examines the relationship between existing ruins and new architectural insertions. Clean, minimal materials are placed upon weathered surfaces, allowing the contrast between old and new to remain visible. Rather than blending the two together, the model uses material difference to clarify time, memory, and transformation within the space.

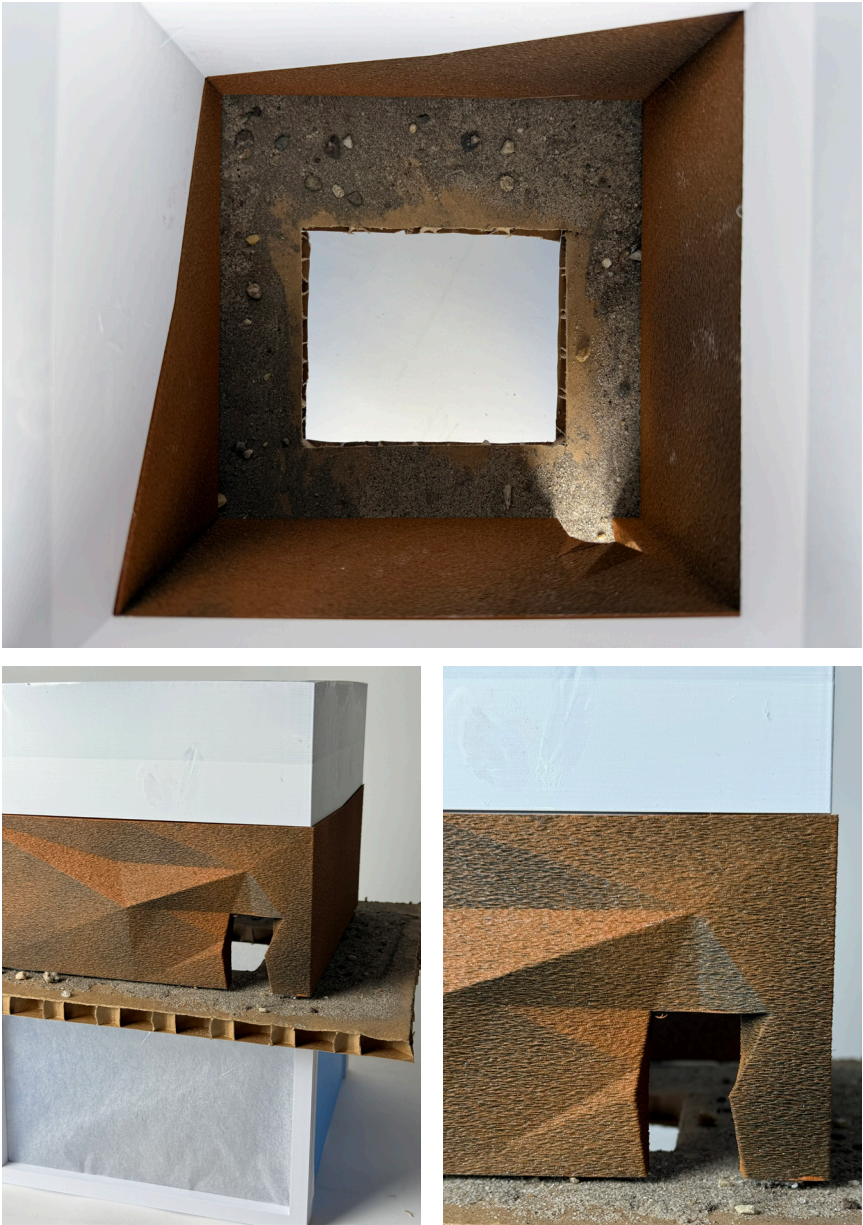


fig 4.11. model made by author inspired by the Neues Museum

05.

PROGRAMMING & USER GROUPS

This chapter introduces the proposed program for reactivating West Park Presbyterian Church as a cultural and community-focused space. Through theater, rehearsal, workshop, gathering, and rooftop café programs, the project transforms the inactive church into a flexible public interior. Rather than assigning one fixed function, the program creates a sequence of spaces where performance, memory, and everyday occupation can overlap, allowing the building's past to remain present within a new spatial life.

PROGRAMMING & USER GROUPS

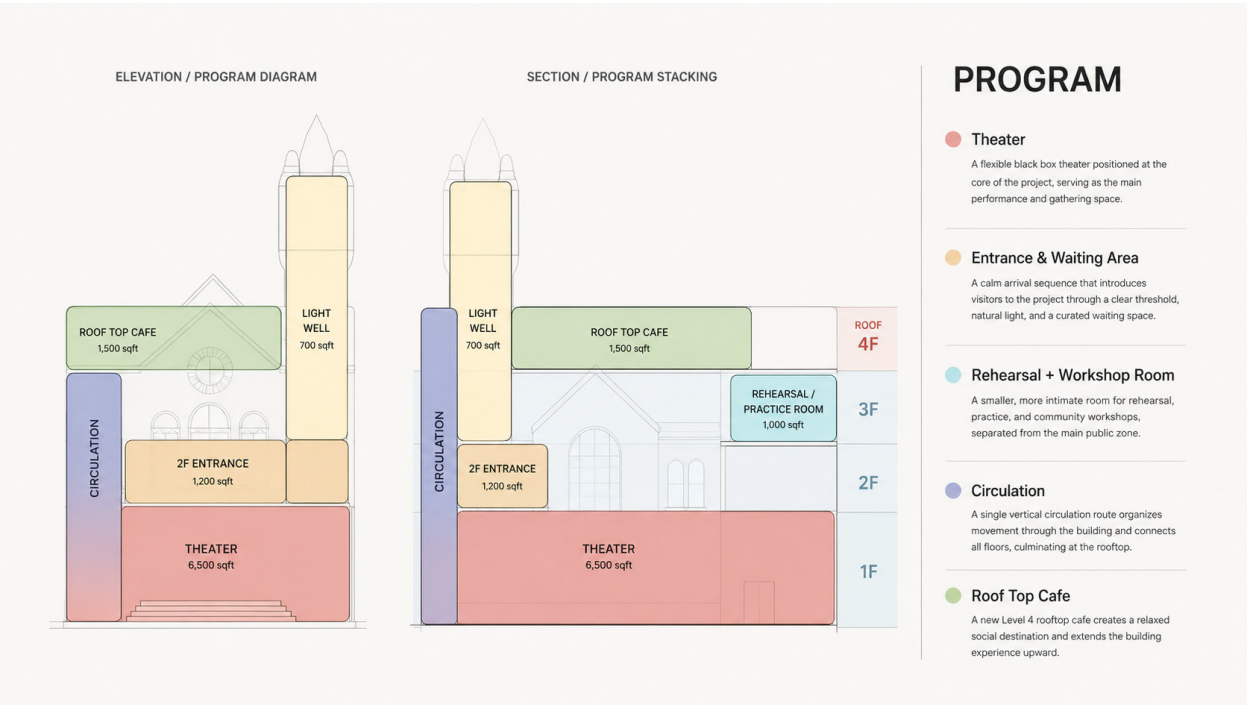


fig 48. adjacency diagram made by author

Programs

The reintroduced theater reinterprets performance as an act of remembrance. Rather than functioning only as a place for presentation, the theater becomes a spatial framework where memory can be activated, shared, and re-experienced. Each programmatic element is imagined as a vessel for memory, inviting visitors to move through layers of absence and presence, old and new, silence and gathering.

At the center of the project, the Performance Hall serves as a flexible black box theater. Its openness allows different narratives, events, and collective experiences to form and dissolve through light, sound, movement, and occupation. This flexibility reflects the changing nature of memory itself, allowing the space to support performances, public programs, and moments of reflection.

The Rehearsal and Workshop Room supports smaller-scale, community-based practices. It provides an accessible and affordable space for local groups, performers, and residents to rehearse, gather, and exchange ideas. While the main theater holds larger collective events, this room creates a more intimate setting for everyday cultural production and community participation.

The Entrance and Waiting Area is conceived as an open threshold into the project. Rather than acting only as a transitional space, it becomes a moment of orientation, pause, and anticipation. From this area, visitors are able to overlook the theater, creating a visual connection between arrival and performance. This openness allows the act of entering to become part of the overall spatial experience.

Throughout the project, historical elements from the existing church are reused and reinterpreted as materials for the new design. Existing objects such as pews, door frames, and architectural fragments are brought back into the building, not as static artifacts, but as active parts of the new spatial language. By blending these found elements into the new intervention, the project allows the memory of the church to remain visible while giving it a renewed function.

The rooftop café introduces a quieter and more relaxed program within the building. Positioned above the main performance spaces, it offers occupants a place to pause, rest, and enjoy a calm moment within the busy city. As the final point of the circulation sequence, the café extends the experience of the building upward, transforming the roof into a social and contemplative space.

Together, these programs translate loss into continuity. Through performance, gathering, reuse, and material transformation, the project proposes a new cultural space where the memory of the existing church is not erased, but carried forward within an evolving urban context.

User Groups

The proposed programs are designed to support both the surrounding community and visitors drawn to the cultural life of the building. Rather than serving a single audience, the project reintroduces West Park Presbyterian Church as a shared public interior where different forms of occupation can overlap.

Local Residents

Neighborhood residents can use the building as an everyday cultural and social space, attending performances, gathering in the café, or participating in community events.

Performers and Artists

Actors, musicians, dancers, and independent artists are provided with flexible performance and rehearsal spaces that support both formal presentation and informal creative practice.

Community Groups and Workshop Participants

Local organizations, students, and small groups can use the rehearsal and workshop room for meetings, learning, collaboration, and community-based cultural programs.

Visitors and Audiences

General visitors and theater audiences experience the building through performance, circulation, reused historical objects, and public spaces that reveal the memory of the existing church.

Together, these user groups allow the church to become active again not only as a performance venue, but as a neighborhood resource where memory is sustained through continued public use.

06.

SITE DESCRIPTION & ANALYSIS

West Park Presbyterian Church is located at the corner of West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Completed in 1890, the church is recognized for its Romanesque Revival character, with a heavy red sandstone façade, arched openings, layered masonry, and a strong corner presence within the neighborhood. As both a religious structure and a long-standing community landmark, the building carries architectural, cultural, and social significance.

Today, the site exists in a state of uncertainty. While the church remains physically present, its interior has become largely inactive, and its future is shaped by ongoing debates between preservation, demolition, redevelopment, and public advocacy. This condition makes West Park Presbyterian Church an important site for investigating absence, memory, and adaptive reuse. Rather than treating the building only as a historical object, this thesis understands it as a vessel of collective memory — a place where architectural fragments, cultural traces, and community attachment can be reinterpreted through new spatial programs.

WEST PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

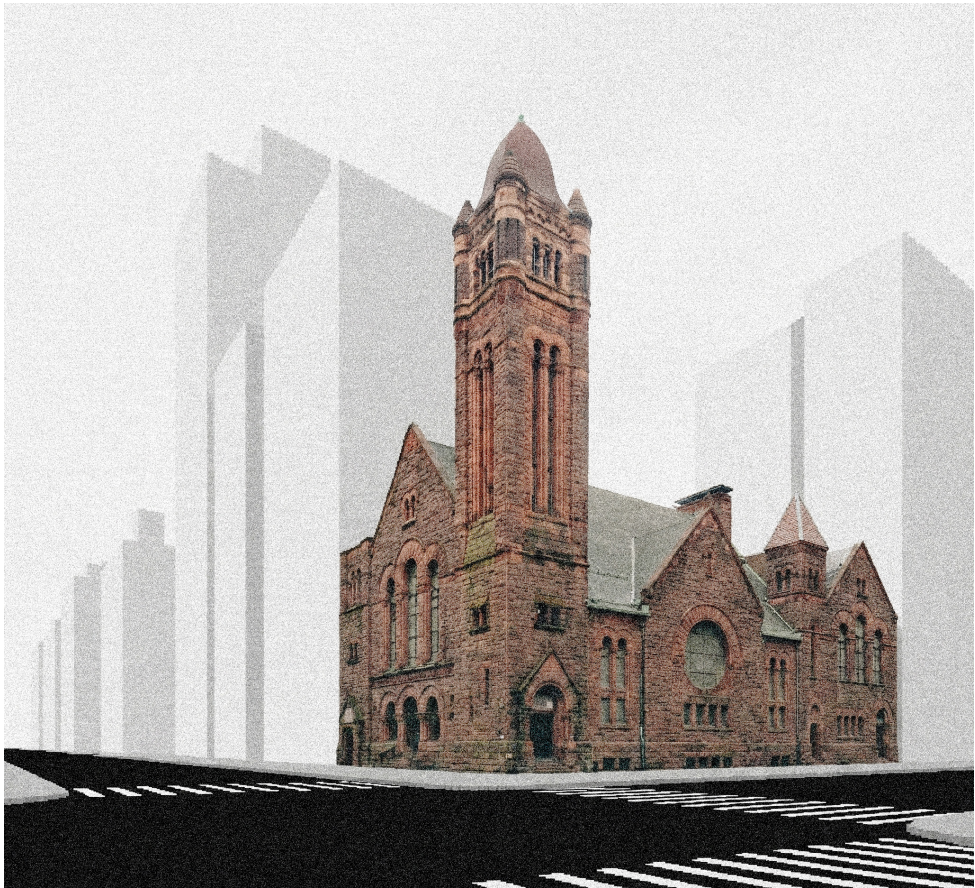


fig 6.1. collage made by author

A Building in Limbo

Located at the corner of West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the church sits in the heart of the Upper West Side—a neighborhood shaped by strong community activism and cultural diversity. Its presence anchors a network of local artists, residents, and preservation advocates.

Today, the church stands in a state of uncertainty—vacant, deteriorating, and awaiting a decision between preservation and demolition. Its future remains suspended, embodying both physical decay and social tension.



fig 6.2. demographics diagram made by author

New York Mid Town Manhattan

The area surrounding West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, situated within Manhattan Community District 7 (Upper West Side), is defined by a dense, affluent, and highly educated population of approximately 224,000 residents. The demographic profile is predominantly White (64%) and exceptionally well-credentialed, with over 80% of adults holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Economically, the district serves as a stronghold for established professionals and families, boasting a median household income of roughly \$144,000—nearly double the citywide average—and a median age of 43, indicating a mature community with significant stability and purchasing power compared to younger, more transient neighborhoods.¹

¹ New York City Department of City Planning, "Manhattan Community District 7 Profile," Community District Profiles, accessed September 2025, <https://community-profiles.planning.nyc.gov/manhattan/7>.

SITE DESCRIPTION & ANALYSIS

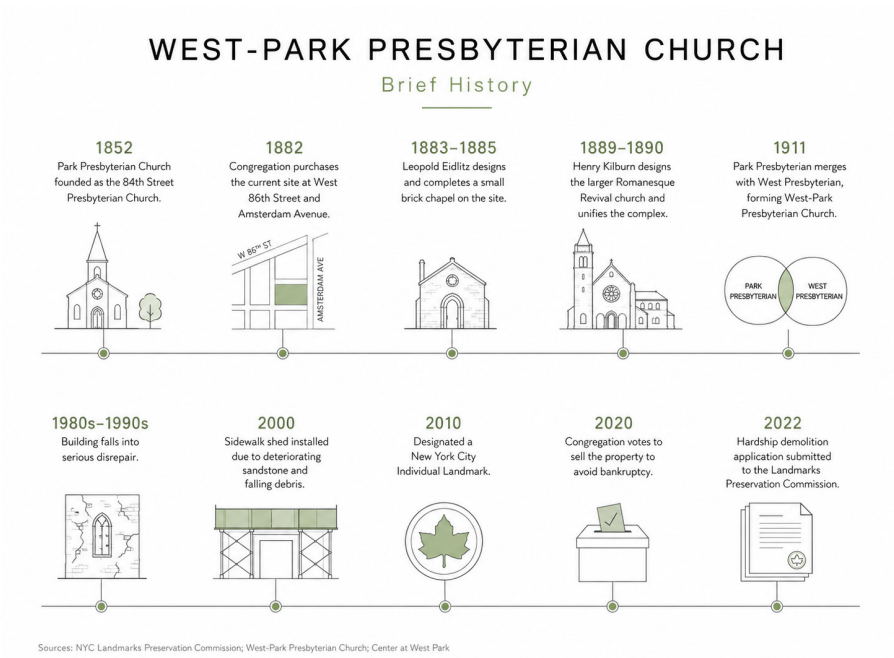


fig 6.3. diagram made by author showing the brief history of the West Park Church

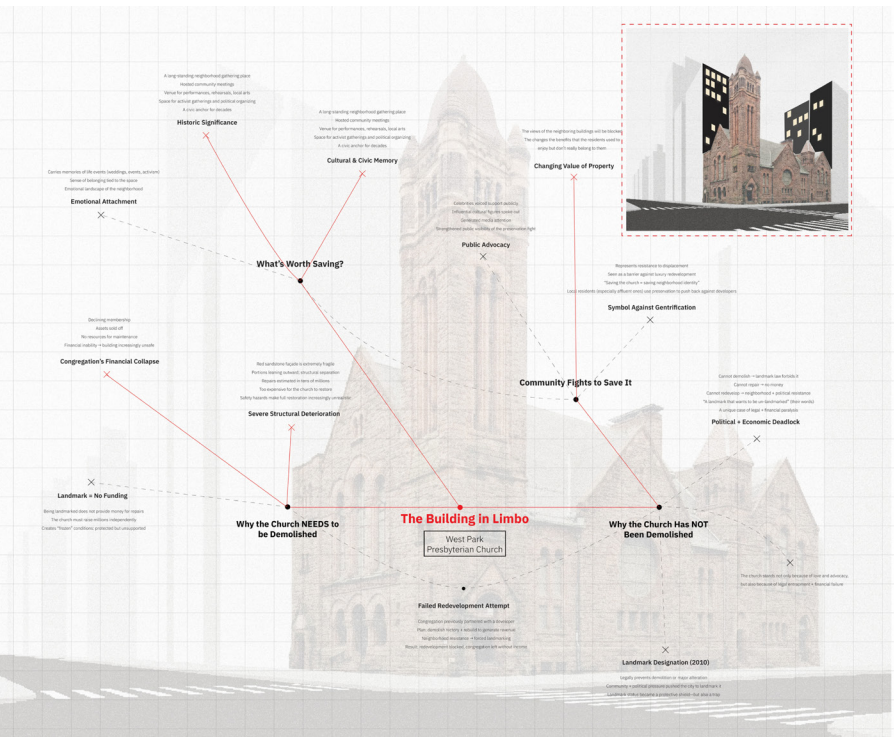


fig 6.4. diagram made by author explaining the conflict between the owner of the church and the community

Located at the corner of West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the church sits in the heart of the Upper West Side—a neighborhood

EXISTING CONDITION

THE INTERIORS

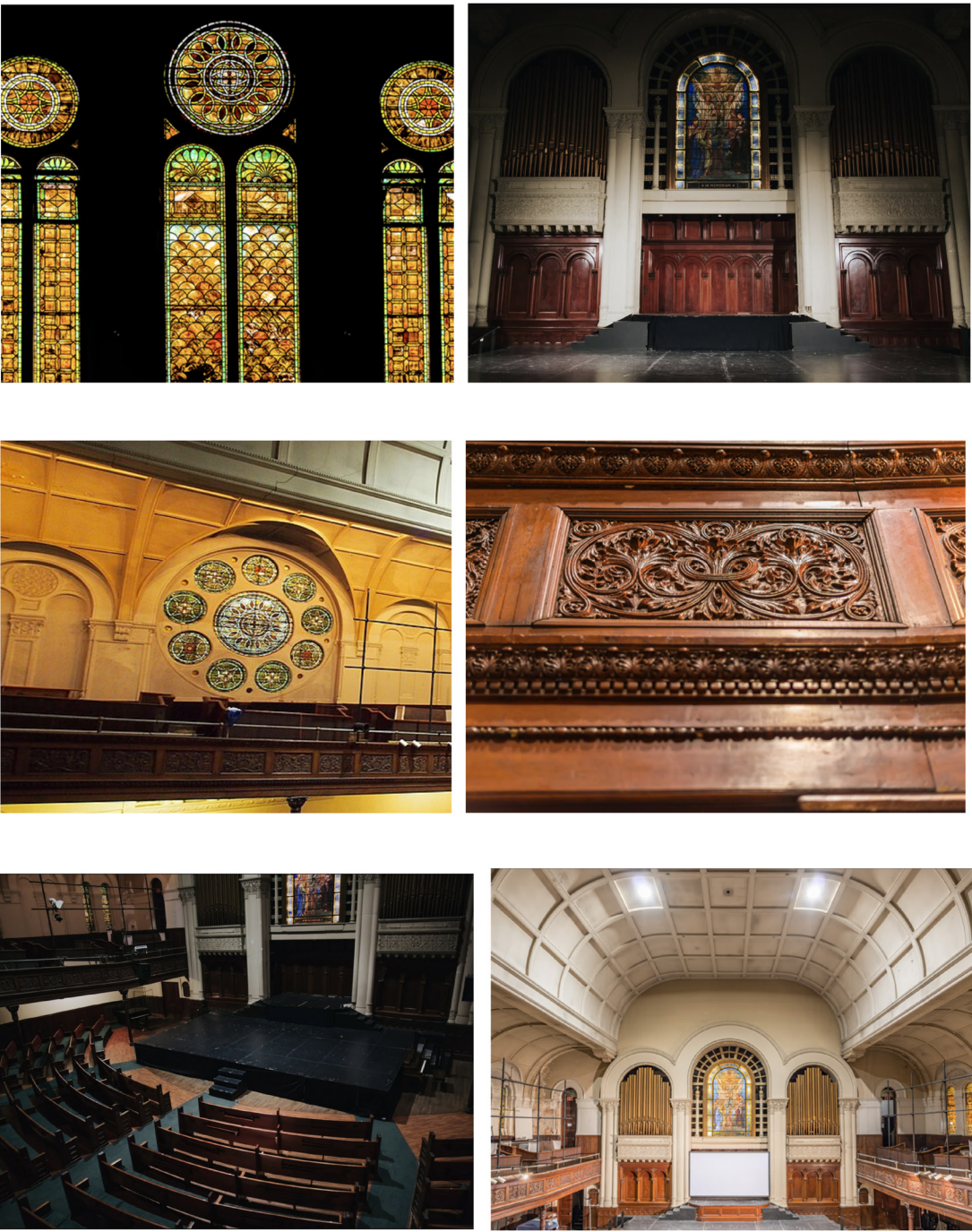


fig 6.5. Interior photographs of West Park Presbyterian Church, showing the sanctuary, stained-glass windows, pipe organ, carved wooden balcony, stage, and existing pew seating.
Source: The Center at West Park, "Sanctuary Space", Untapped New York, "Tour The Center at West Park Inside West Park Presbyterian Church."
Photographs courtesy of Kamelot Productions and The Center at West Park; additional image from the Municipal Art Society of New York.

SITE DESCRIPTION & ANALYSIS

ORTHOGRAPHIC DRAWINGS

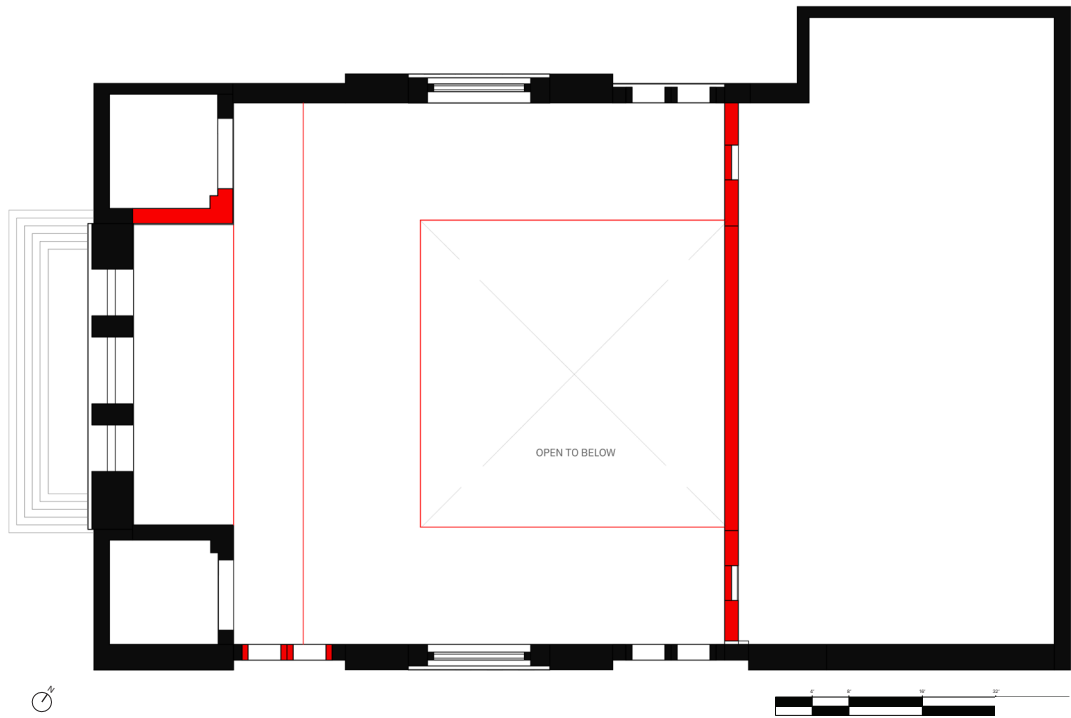


fig 6.6. site plan - 1F by author, red poche marks parts to be removed for the new design

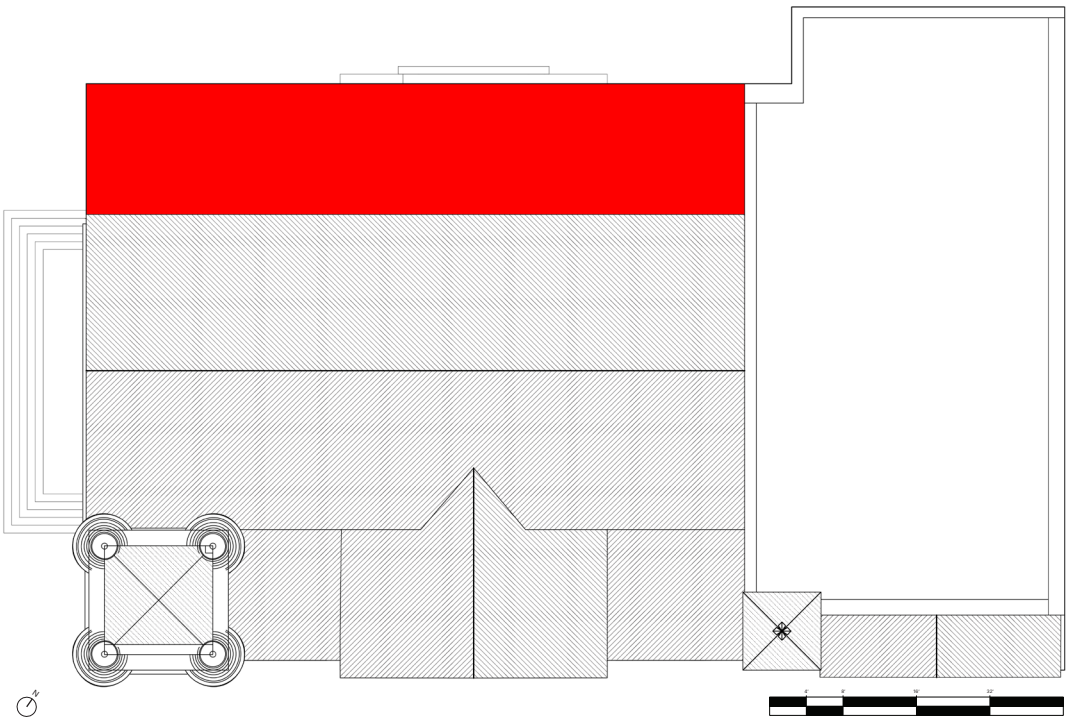


fig 6.8. site plan - Rooftop by author, red poche marks parts to be removed for the new design

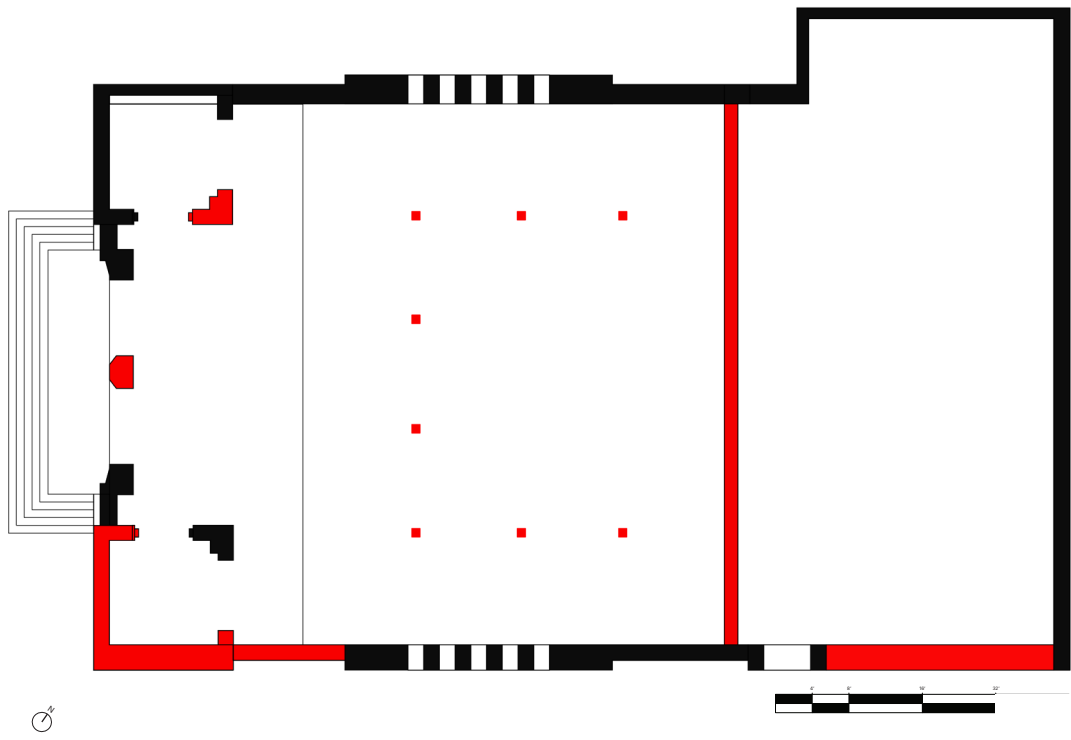


fig 6.7. site plan - 2F by author, red poche marks parts to be removed for the new design

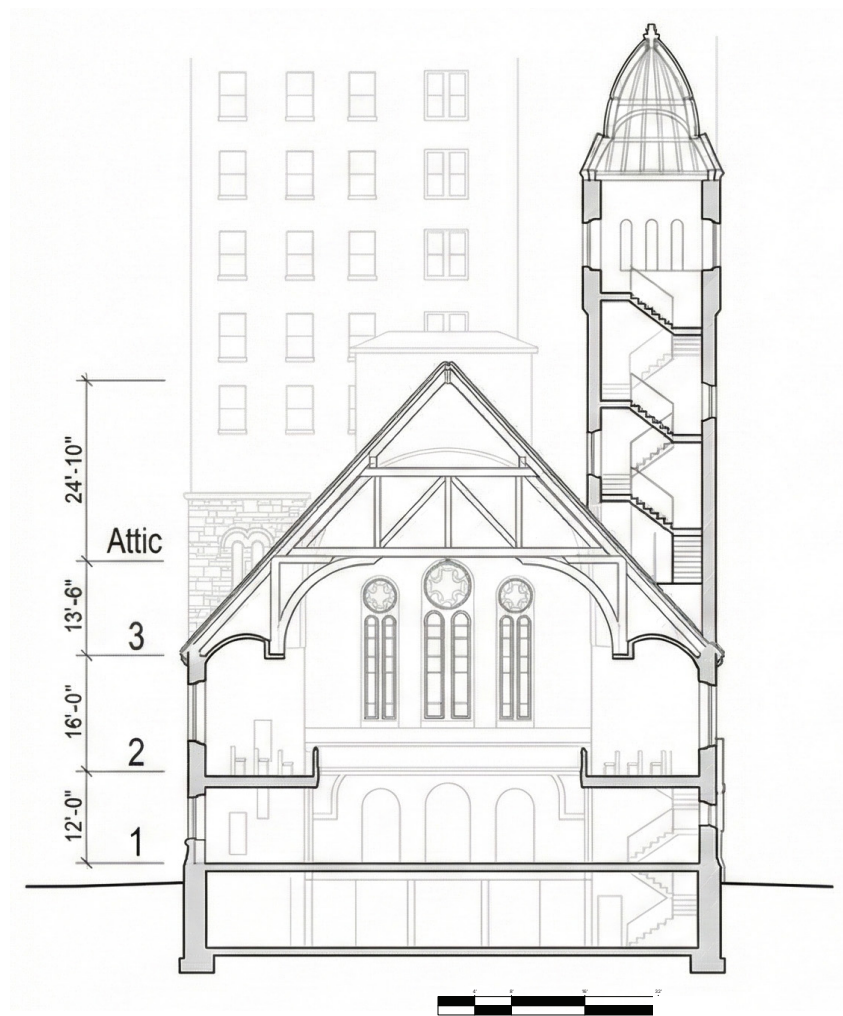


fig 6.9. west section by author

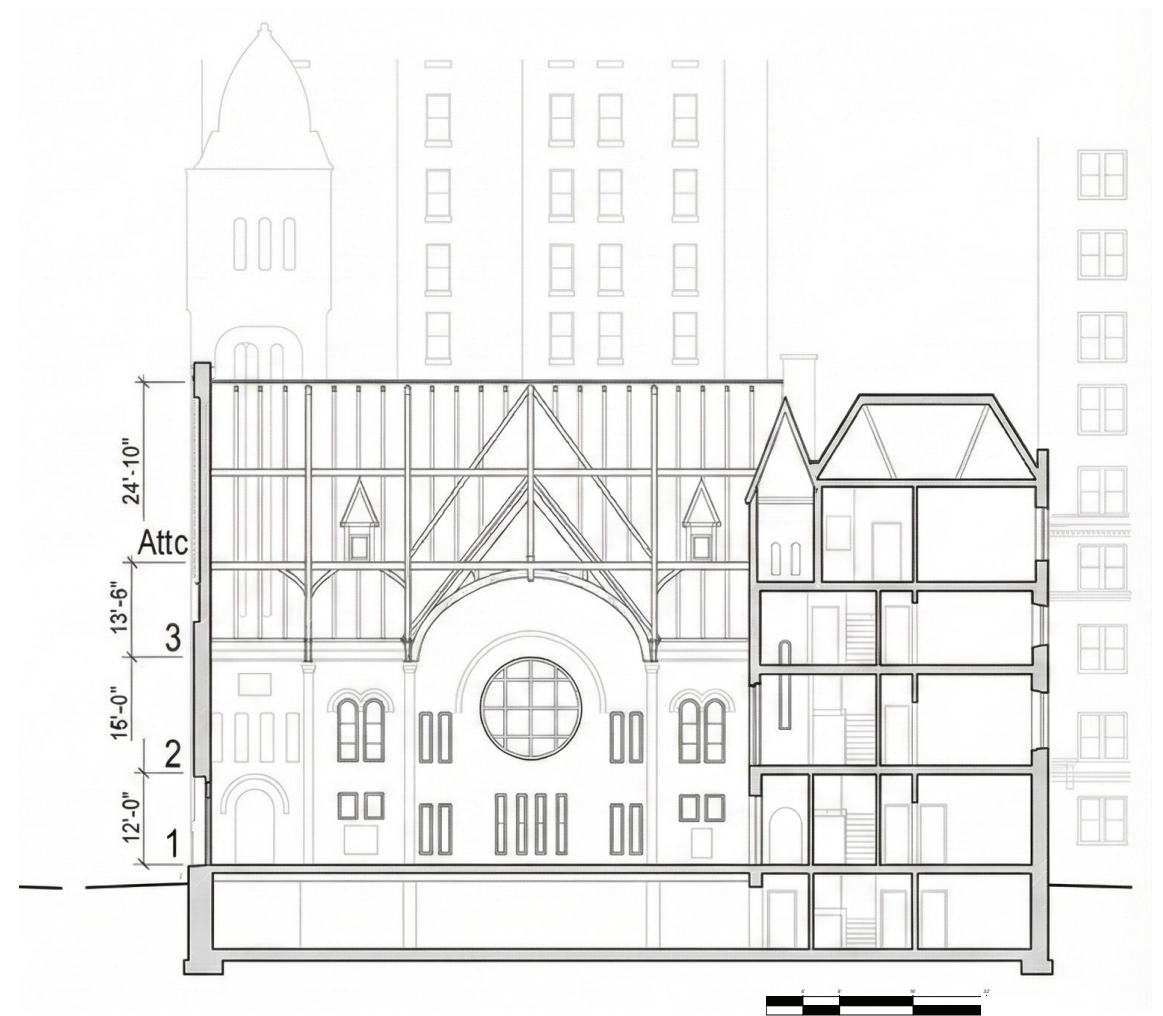


fig 6.10. south section by author

07.

FINAL THESIS DESIGN SCHEME

Chapter 7 introduces the final design proposal for reactivating West Park Presbyterian Church through adaptive reuse, material transformation, and programmatic insertion. Informed by the thesis's three-part theoretical framework—the social, the phenomenological, and the material—the proposal translates earlier research on absence, memory, fragments, and continuity into a spatial intervention. Socially, the church is reactivated as a cultural and community-focused public interior; phenomenologically, its spaces are designed to preserve memory through atmosphere, threshold, light, and familiar traces; materially, existing elements are retained, transformed, and integrated into the new design. Through the introduction of theater, rehearsal, gathering, and rooftop café programs, the building's past is not erased or replicated, but carried forward within a renewed spatial life.

DESIGN STRATEGY

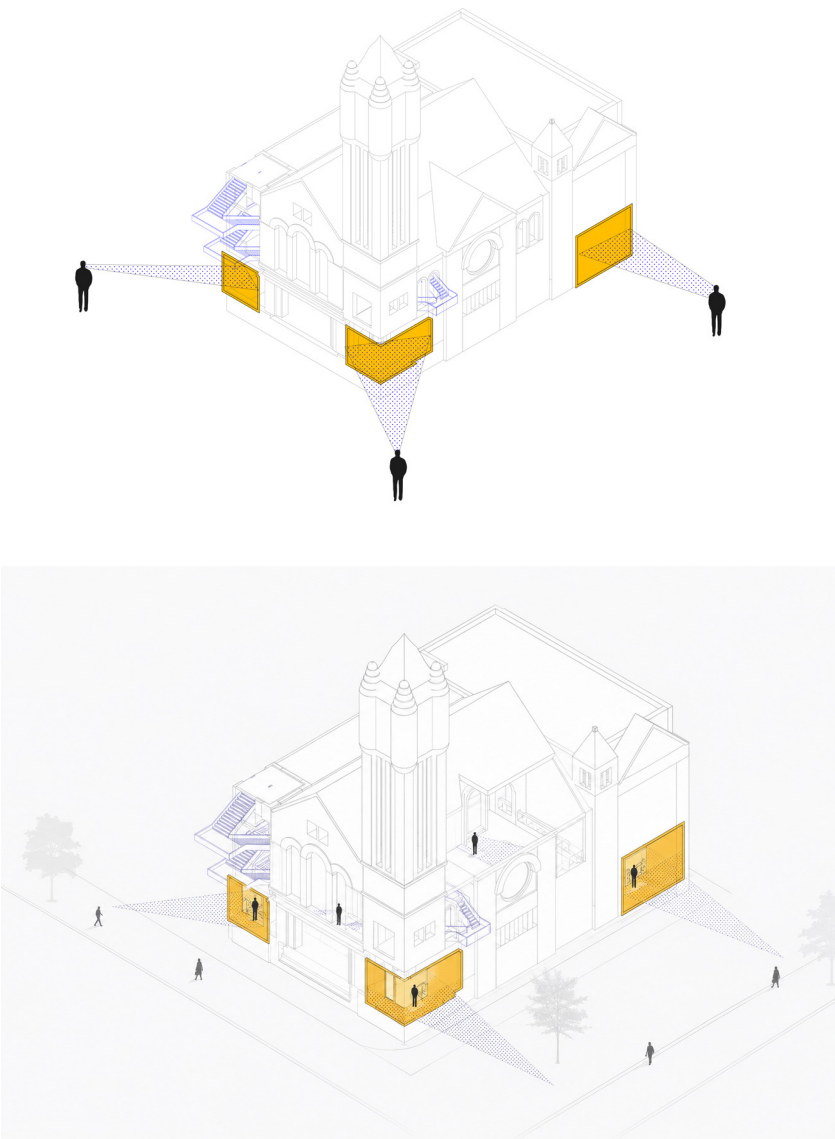


fig 7.1. program diagram made by author showing how opening up the facade encourages public gaze into the interior.

"The safety of the city is kept by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves." ¹ The Concept is that a street must have "eyes" belonging to its "natural proprietors." For this to happen, there must be a continuous flow of people throughout the day and night.

¹ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Vintage Books, 1992

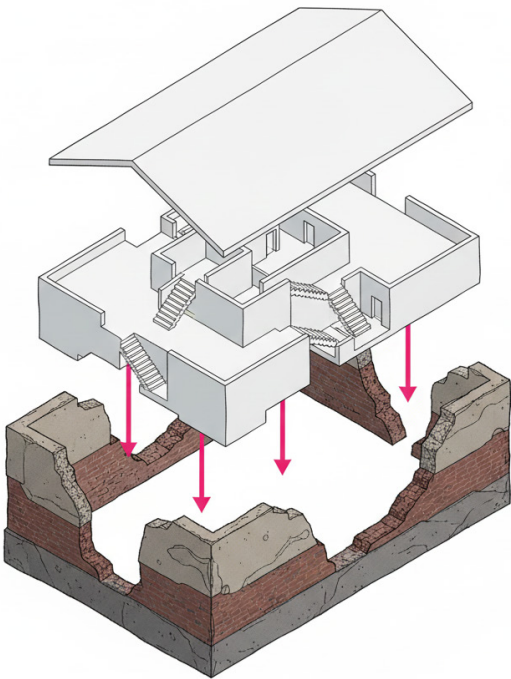


fig 7.2. diagram made by author demonstrating the idea of building upon ruins.

Building Upon Ruins

Focuses on the structural and volumetric completion of a ruin through a complementary infill rather than mimetic reconstruction. This approach utilizes large-scale, contemporary components—such as pre-cast concrete—to act as pure, geometric fillers that precisely inhabit the voids left by missing structures. By recreating the original architectural volumes and spatial sequences without replicating historical ornamentation, the design restores the building's legibility while maintaining a clear distinction between the old and the new. A key application of this strategy is the reinterpretation of missing elements, where lost features are replaced by minimalist abstractions that respect the original scale and massing. These new interventions function as a "silhouette" of what was lost, ensuring a sense of continuity without imitation by reflecting the memory of the past through a modern, stripped-back architectural vocabulary.

DESIGN STRATEGY

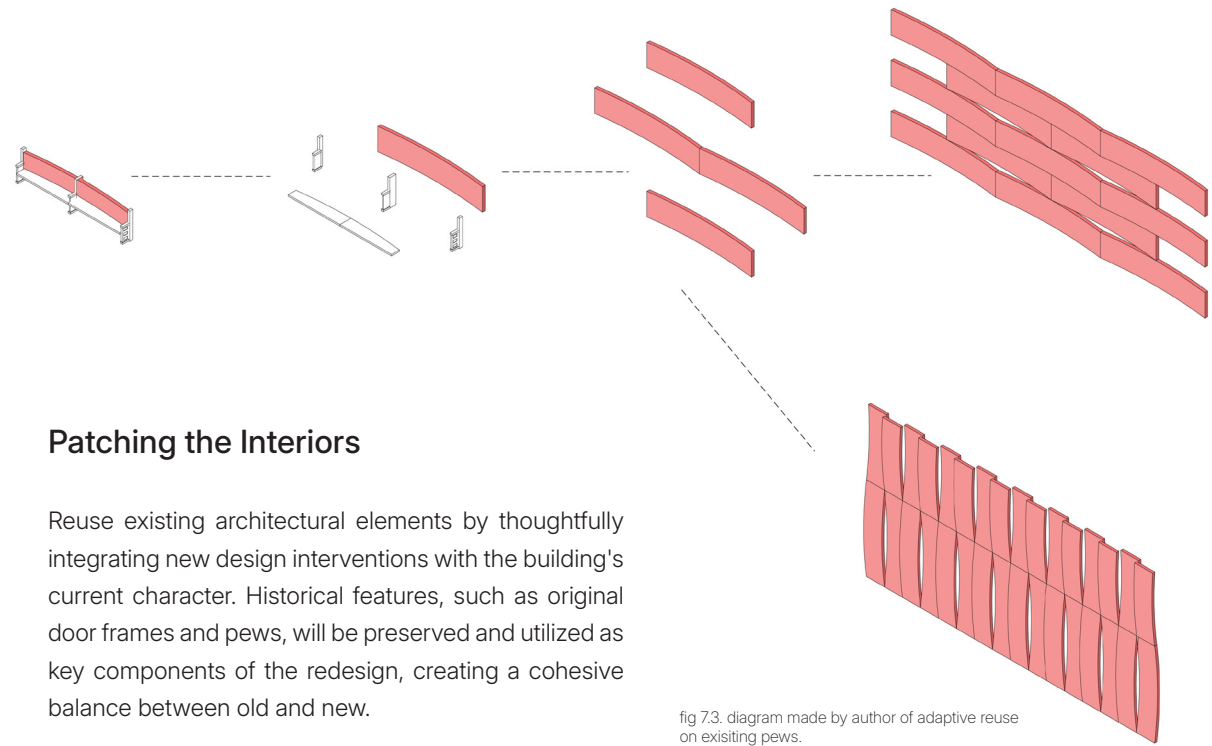
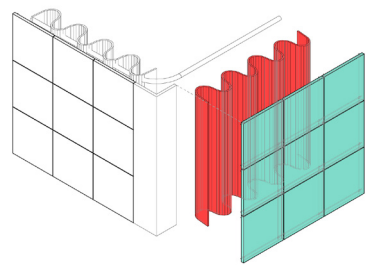


fig 7.3. diagram made by author of adaptive reuse on existing pews.

Patching the Interiors

Reuse existing architectural elements by thoughtfully integrating new design interventions with the building's current character. Historical features, such as original door frames and pews, will be preserved and utilized as key components of the redesign, creating a cohesive balance between old and new.



Patching the Facade

Portions of the exterior facade are selectively removed to suport the new design and encourage interaction bewtween the community and the building's occupants, who arethemselves members of that community. The redesigned facade is patched with a combination of glass panels and curtains, allowing flexible levels of visual accessibility while softening the boundary between interior and exterior. In doing so, the design opens the building outward and gives the space back to the community.

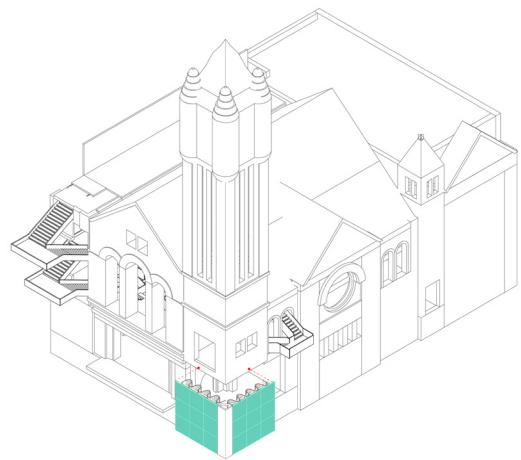


fig 7.4. diagram made by author of patching the facade.

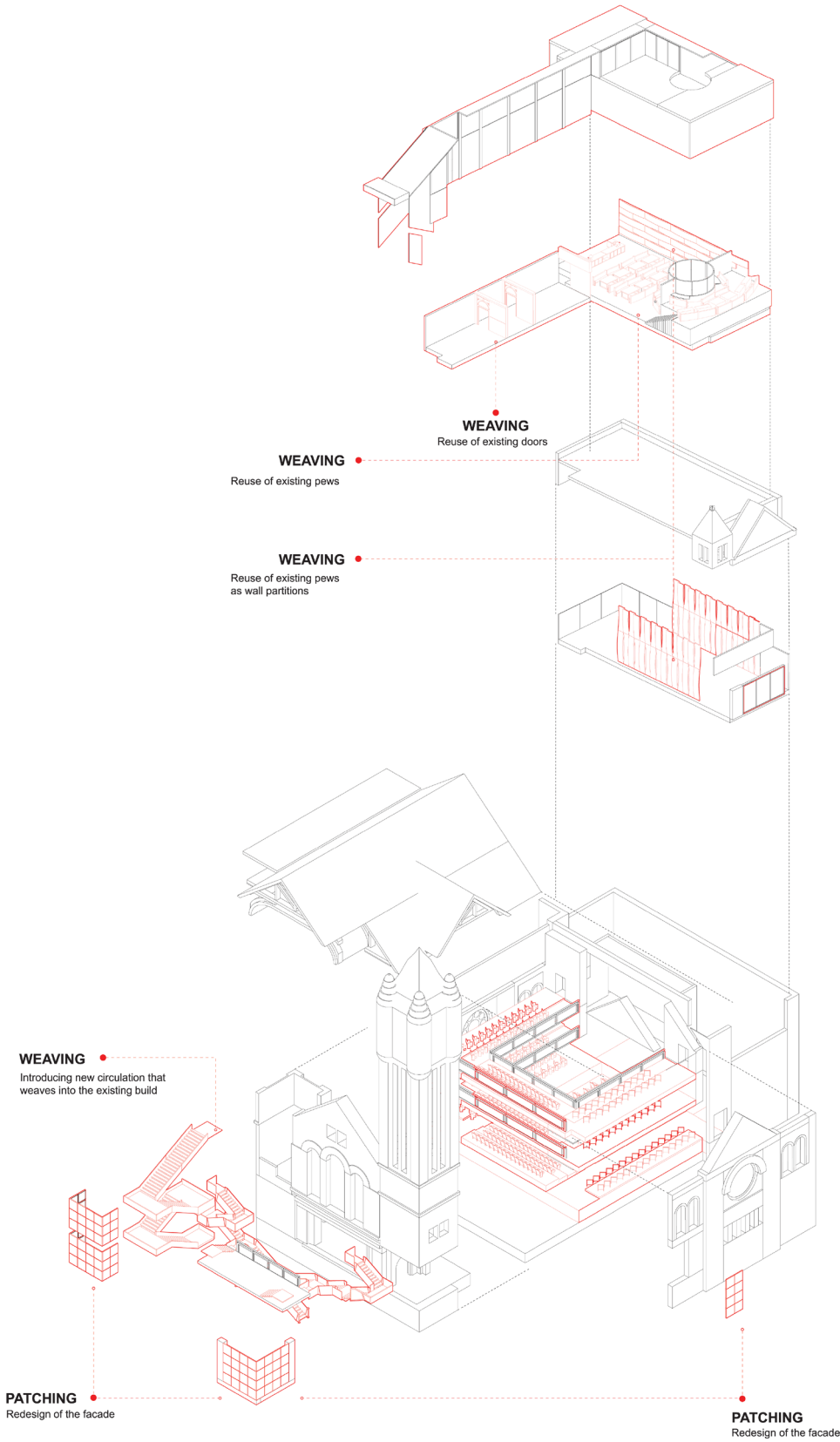


fig 7.5. exploded diagram by author showing where patching and weaving are applied in the new design.

DESIGN STRATEGY

Weaving Through Circulation

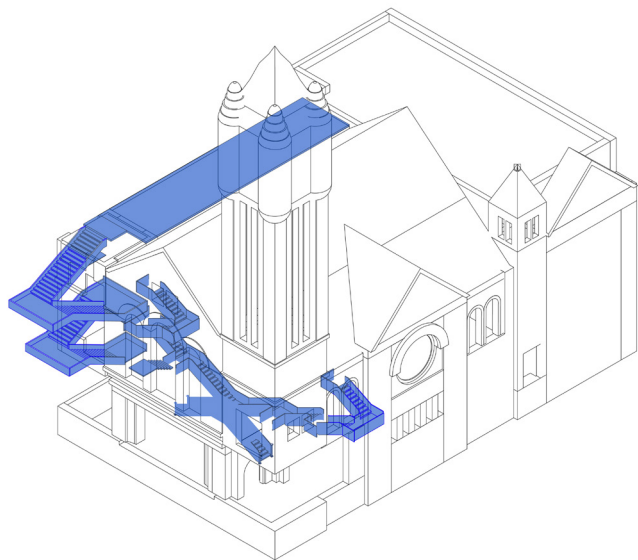


fig 7.6. diagram made by author showing how the new circulation weaves through the existing building.

These diagram makrs out the circulation introduced into the exsiting structure and connect with the new inserted floors.

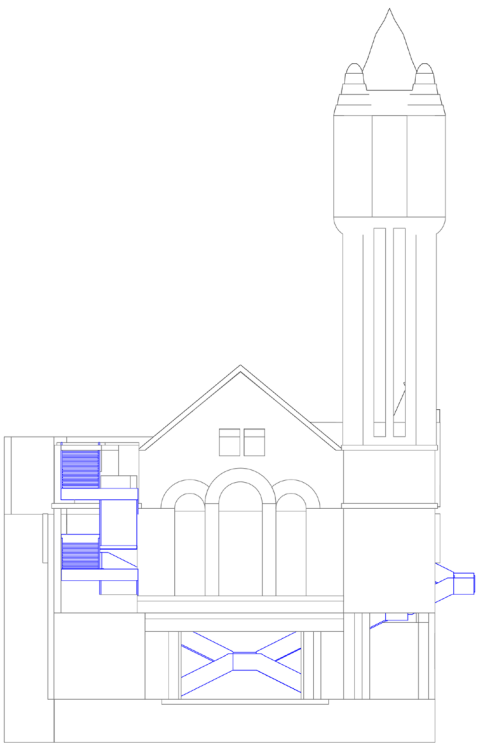


fig 7.7. west elevation by author, blue demonstrates how the circulation is visible from the exterior

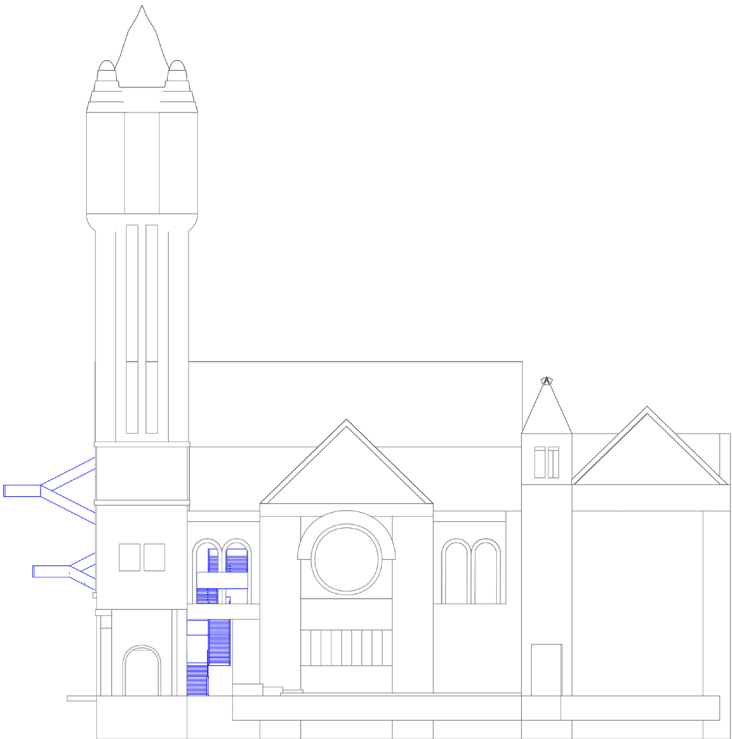


fig 7.8. south elevation by author, blue demonstrates how the circulation is visible from the exterior

DESIGN SECTION & PLANS

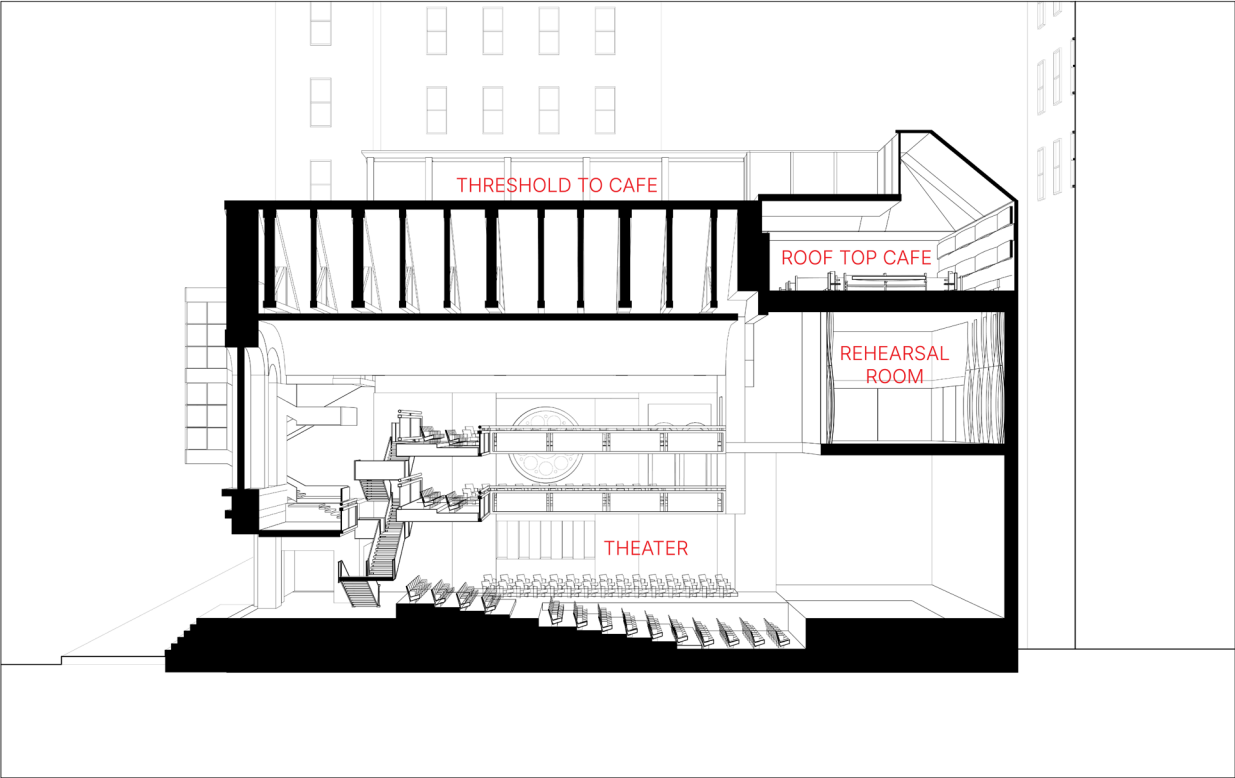


fig 7.9. perspective section by author showing different programs reintroduced into the church.

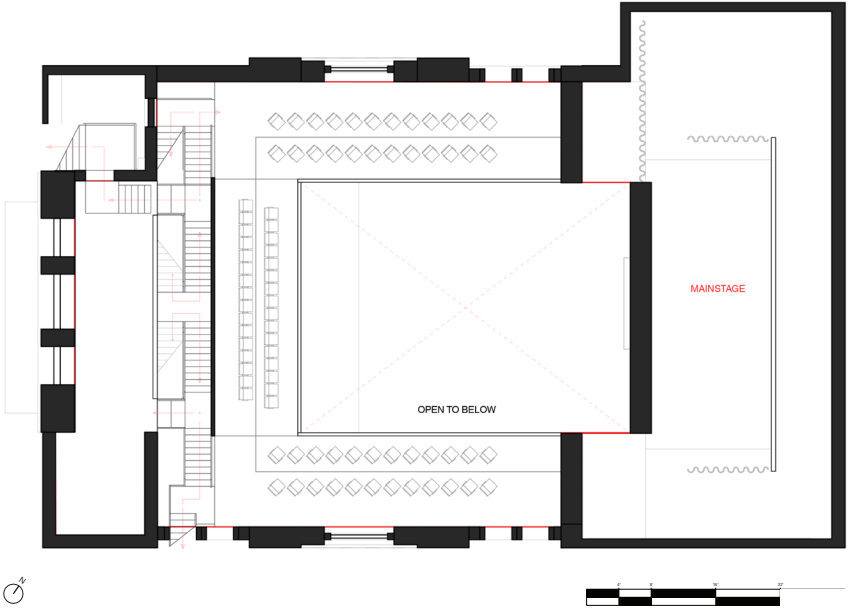


fig 7.10. floor plan - 2f by author

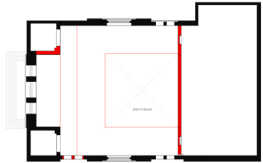


fig 7.11. site plan - 2f, red shows removed parts

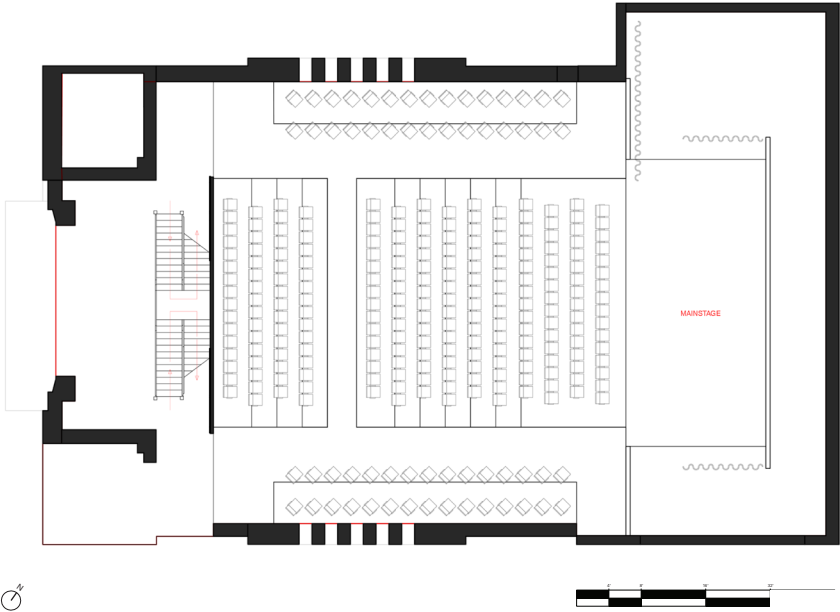


fig 7.12. floor plan - 1f by author

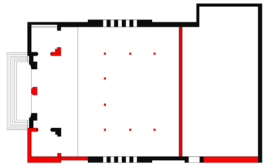


fig 7.13. site plan - 1f, red shows removed parts

DESIGN SECTION & PLANS

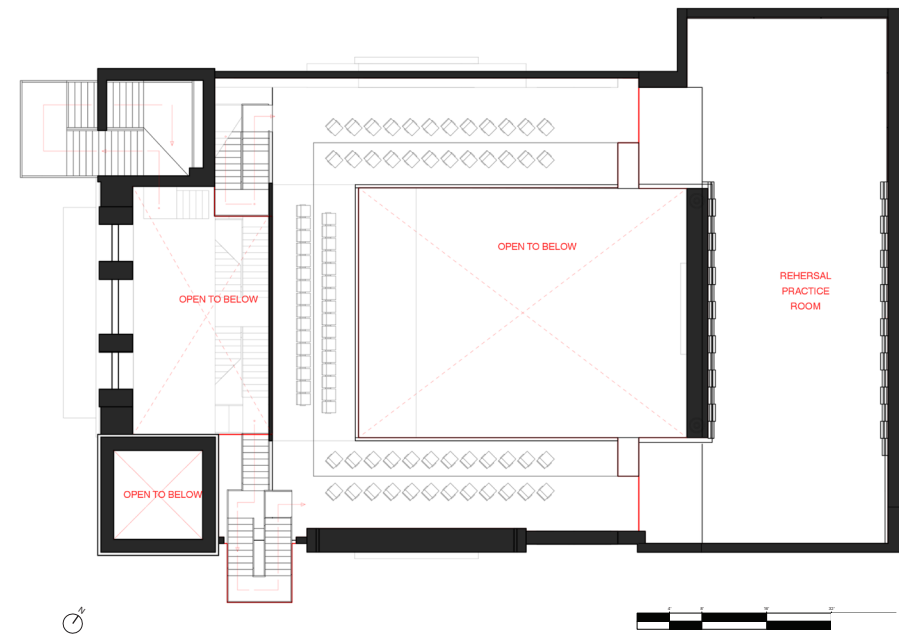


fig 7.14. floor plan - 3f by author

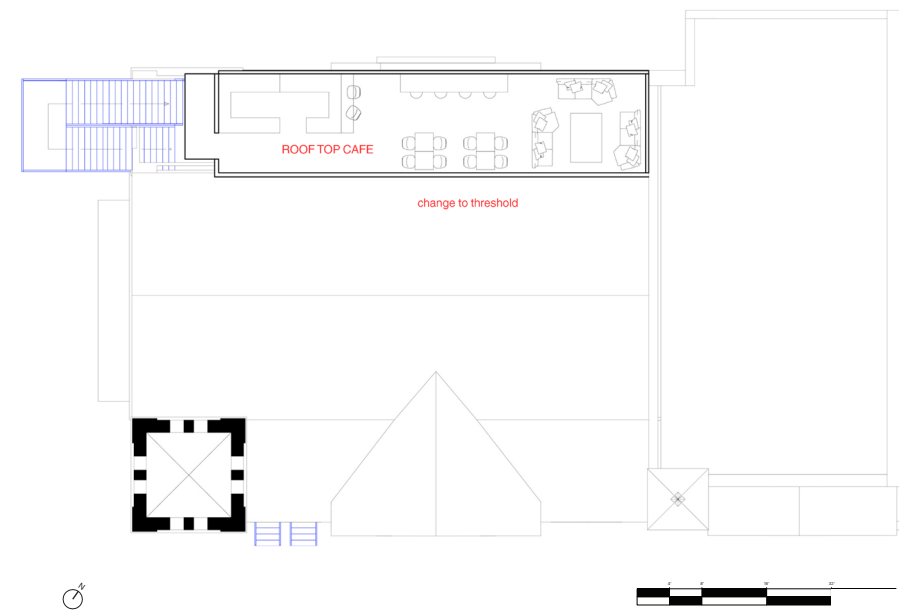


fig 7.15. floor plan - roof top by author

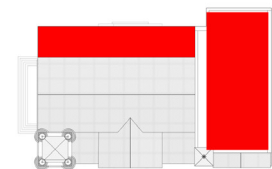


fig 7.15. site plan - roof, red shows removed parts

THEATER



fig 7.16. render by author, showing theater in use with audience.



fig 7.17. render by author, showing seating in theater.



fig 7.18. render by author, showing theater covered with curtains during plays.



fig 7.19. render by author, showing theater with excess to natural light.

The theater stands at the core of the intervention, inheriting the structural presence and spatial memory of West Park Presbyterian Church. By opening the façade, the design creates visual access from the public realm while allowing natural light to enter the performance space when no events are taking place. The red curtains act as both a functional and atmospheric layer: they echo the tones of the existing red sandstone and brick, while providing flexibility to control visibility, light, and enclosure. Through this balance of openness and concealment, the theater becomes a space that can shift between public transparency and performative intimacy.

TRANSITIONAL SPACES



fig 7.20. render by author, staircase to roof top cafe.



fig 7.21. render by author, staircase connecting different levels of the theater and waiting area.



fig 7.22. render by author, staircase connecting different levels of the theater covered with curtains during plays.



fig 7.23. render by author, threshold connecting roof top cafe and staircase. Door frame in the image is an existing door frame of the church reused in the new design.

All newly introduced programs are connected by a single staircase that weaves through the church, moving between the existing structure and the new intervention. The stair becomes a spatial seam, combining preserved materials with newly added elements to create a dialogue between old and new. Facing outward, visitors encounter the street through the glass façade, which patches and redefines the exterior opening. As the path continues upward, it leads into a threshold where the existing church door frame is reintroduced, guiding movement toward the rooftop café while carrying traces of the building's former identity.



fig 7.24. photo by author, existing door frame located on first floor.

ROOF TOP CAFE



fig 7.25. render by author, interiors of the roof top cafe.



fig 7.26. render by author, interiors of the roof top cafe inactive.

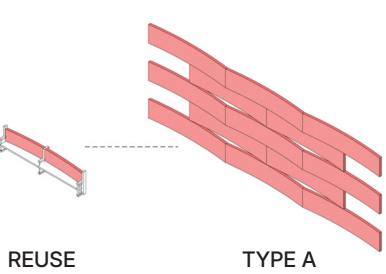


fig 7.27. diagram by author, adaptive reuse strategy of the pews.



fig 7.28. photo by author, existing pews in west park church.

The rooftop café reuses pews from the existing church in two ways: as furniture and as wall partitions. As seating, the pews allow visitors to physically engage with familiar objects from the building's past, turning everyday use into an act of remembrance. As partitions, the backs of the pews are detached and reassembled into screens that define the café while blending into the new design language. Through this transformation, the original objects are not preserved as static artifacts, but reintroduced as active elements that carry memory into the new program.

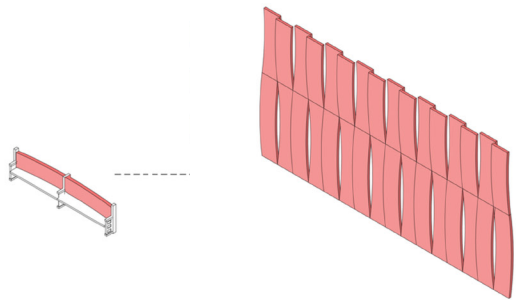
REHEARSAL ROOM



fig 7.29. render by author, rehearsal room in use.



fig 7.30. render by author, the back of the pews are reused as the wall partition of the rehearsal room.



REUSE

TYPE B

fig 7.31. diagram by author, adaptive reuse strategy of the pews.

In the rehearsal room, the existing pews are reused as partitions, continuing the material strategy introduced in the rooftop café. Here, however, the wood boards are arranged horizontally, creating small pockets and layered surfaces that help improve the acoustic condition of the room. Facing outward, the rehearsal space opens toward the street view of New York, allowing the city to become part of the practice environment. Through this arrangement, the room combines material memory, acoustic function, and urban presence within a flexible space for performance and preparation.



fig. 7.32. Exterior visualization of the redesigned West Park Presbyterian Church from the street, showing the patched glass façade, visible circulation, retained stained-glass features, and renewed public connection. Image by author, AI-assisted visualization based on the author's design drawings and model, 2026.

CONCLUSION

Rather than proposing a fixed design solution that can be applied universally to every site worthy of preservation, this thesis presents a process of inquiry: one that considers how memory may be identified, retained, and transformed during renovation and adaptive reuse. Through the documentation and classification of precedents, the research examines how architects, designers, and artists have worked with absence, fragments, voids, traces, and material transformation to preserve the emotional and cultural significance of a place.

The final design proposal for West Park Presbyterian Church translates these lessons into an interior intervention. The reintroduced theater, circulation sequence, rehearsal space, and rooftop café do not attempt to reconstruct the church as it once was. Instead, they work with its existing structure, materials, and familiar objects to create a new cultural life in which the memory of the church remains perceptible. Existing pews, door frames, masonry, and spatial traces are not treated as static artifacts, but are transformed into active components of the new design.

In this sense, the thesis is intended as a playbook for how interior design can act as a mediator within the context of urban renewal. It proposes that preservation does not always require a complete return to the past; it can also occur through careful transformation, where what remains is allowed to shape what comes next. By working at the intimate scale of interiors, design can sustain emotional attachment, carry cultural memory forward, and create new forms of continuity within spaces facing change.