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Healing Neighbourhoods through Urban Acupuncture

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Healing Neighbourhoods through **URBAN ACUPUNCTURE**

by

Jonathan P. Pascaris
BArchSc *Ryerson University* 2007

A design Thesis|Project

presented to Ryerson University

in the partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012

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Healing Neighbourhoods through Urban Acupuncture

Master's Thesis, 2012
Jonathan Pascaris
Master of Architecture
Ryerson University

Well-being is a holistic concept of human health, and it is inextricably linked to environment. Built landscapes that do not service real human needs can be extremely detrimental to the growth of community. In the context of Toronto, this is no more apparent than in suburban neighbourhoods where changing demographics have left a population with diverse and urgent needs, but in which homogenous and auto-centric built environments inhibit the informal socialization that contribute to both individual and urban vitality. This thesis purports that architecture has a particularly important role in the future of such neighbourhoods because of its capacity to intensify program and create opportunities for people to coningle. Drawing upon the metaphor of therapeutic acupuncture, this thesis will explore the ways in which punctual interventions can activate places. Objectives of connectivity, hybridity and porosity will be explored as the means by which this activation can occur. Ultimately, this thesis aims to assert the importance of architecture in facilitating more holistic understandings of urban health.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to George Kapelos, my girlfriend Jaclyn, and my family for helping me through the personal struggles that have accompanied the completion of my thesis. I am forever indebted to you all.

Dedication

To my mother. I wish I could have done better, but I'm trying not to agonize.

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1. Introduction

CONTEXT

One of the greatest challenges facing North American cities in the 21st century is determining how to repair the automobile suburbs which proliferated in the decades after the Second World War. Typified by a built form which privileges the movement of vehicular traffic over the “in-between,” pedestrian-centred spaces of the city, the suburbs have disconnected communities of inhabitants from the types of public spaces important to both individual and societal well-being. Characterized by dispersal, segregation and fragmentation, the suburbs cause a great deal of strain on both the sustainability of the city, and its inhabitants.

The specific concern of this thesis is that suburban built form has demonstrated an inability to foster a strong sense of community. The ramifications are troubling for theorists across a wide range of disciplines, since a primary role of the city over the course of history has been that of a meeting place (Gehl, 2010). The privileging of vehicular traffic throughout much of the 20th century begat an urban environment where the individual’s getting from “point A” to “point B” was accommodated at the expense of their personal journey. As the 21st century progresses, many communities are now trapped in a dispersed and fragmented urban landscape which greatly inhibits the connectedness, walkability, and sense of place which work synergistically towards community and individual well-being.

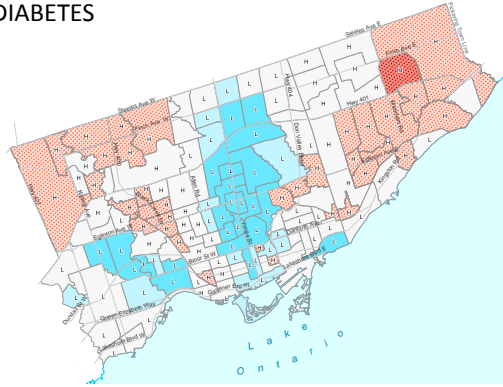
Over the past 40 years, many of Toronto’s low-income and newly-arrived immigrant populations have settled in the suburbs (Hulchaniski, 2007). This is a shift from the turn-of-the-20th-century model of immigration, in which the newly-arrived would settle in dense communities in the downtown core where they might share space and resources. Compounding the many obstacles faced by new immigrants, this suburban shift has created a new set of impedances to the social integration and community cohesiveness that are essential to individual well-being.

Toronto’s “inner suburbs” are especially emblematic of these conditions, being home to diverse communities of new immigrants. Typically consisting of the mono-functional, auto-centric plans that defined much of urban development in the 1950’s and 60’s, like all Toronto’s suburbs, they were designed to privilege the privacy and individualism valorized in much of North American society. As history has shown, however, such overt individual privileging in the built form of the city is at the

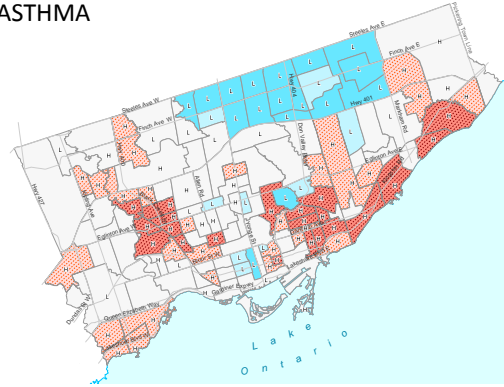
expense of an implicit or explicit sense of community. Lacking the types of public spaces where strong community networks are forged, supported, and nurtured, suburban and inner-suburban neighborhoods often require residents to build support systems outside of their local community. While this did not necessarily pose a problem to the once prototypical, automobile owning, nuclear families of the post-war era, it does for many of these neighbourhoods' contemporary inhabitants.

The built fabric of the "inner suburbs" at one time operated primarily as a base from which the working population set off in cars to other neighbourhoods to conduct most of their day (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1979). As demographics have shifted within the neighbourhoods, however, and residents and their needs have become more diverse, the mono-functional nature of the neighbourhoods has proven to be problematic. Today, the populations within these neighbourhoods are more commonly comprised of the women in the labour force, families of children with special needs, elderly with limited mobility, large proportions of newly-arrived immigrants, high numbers of unemployed, and households without automobiles. These groups have much more urgent need for services and opportunities for social gathering that are close to home. Thus, what has resulted from such outmoded built environments are neighbourhoods with consistently below average health outcomes when compared to the larger city (See Fig. 1.1).

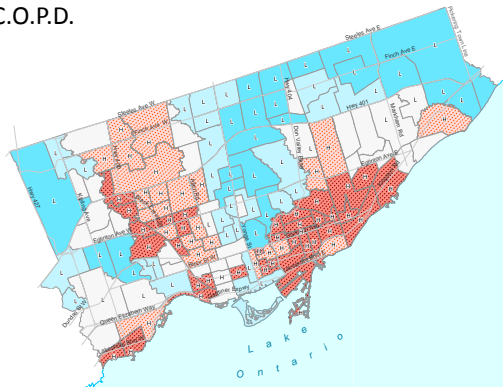
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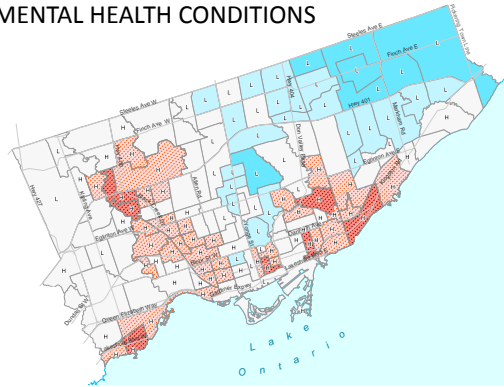
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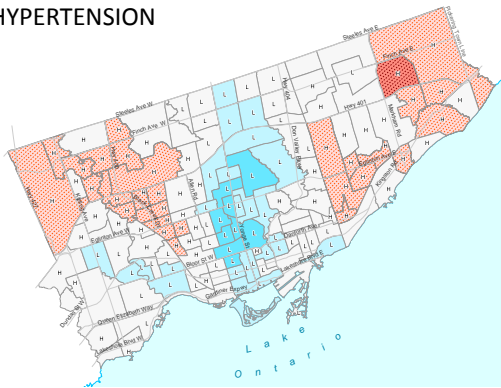
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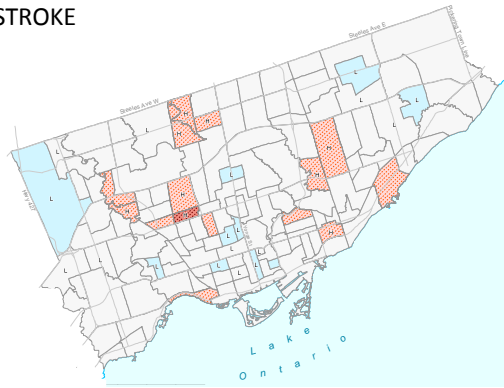
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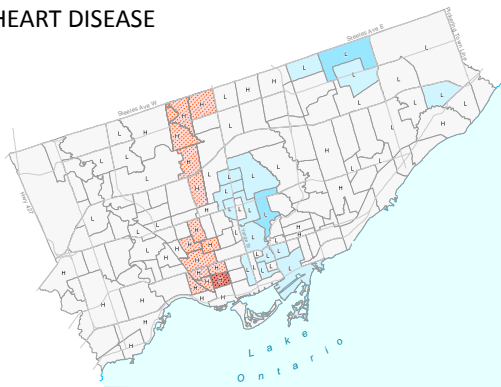
HYPERTENSION



STROKE



HEART DISEASE



HOUSEHOLD INCOME

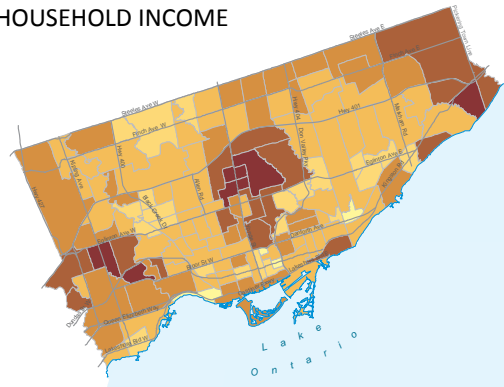


Fig. 1.1 - Maps highlighting Toronto's health geography in relationship to family income (bottom right). Red indicates high-rates of disease, and blue low rates of disease.

PROBLEM

This thesis project began as an exploration into the relationship between contemporary Canadian urbanity and well-being. Looking at the current health status of Toronto's population, it quickly became apparent that Toronto, despite being one of the wealthiest and most socially inclusive cities in the world, largely fails to support an equality of health across its diverse population. Health and illness in Toronto, like in most cities throughout the world, follows a social gradient: the lower the economic position, the worse the health (Mikkonen 2010, p. 7).

While this is certainly not a new development in cities, the nature of the problem within Toronto has evolved with the shifting dwelling patterns described above. Conceptualizing the problem as simply a result of socio-economic discrepancies, however, greatly oversimplifies the problem. Recent decades have witnessed a re-emergence in the study of broader influences on well-being in urban environments. Consistent with this broadened understanding of the determinants of health, there has also been an increased interest in the “place effects” on health. (Macintyre, 2002)

Diseases such as heart disease and diabetes have been tied time and time again to individual behaviour, like diet choice and exercise. Complicating the matter, however, in the “inner suburbs” are the effects of stress, which result from the social exclusion, food insecurity, lack of quality employment opportunities

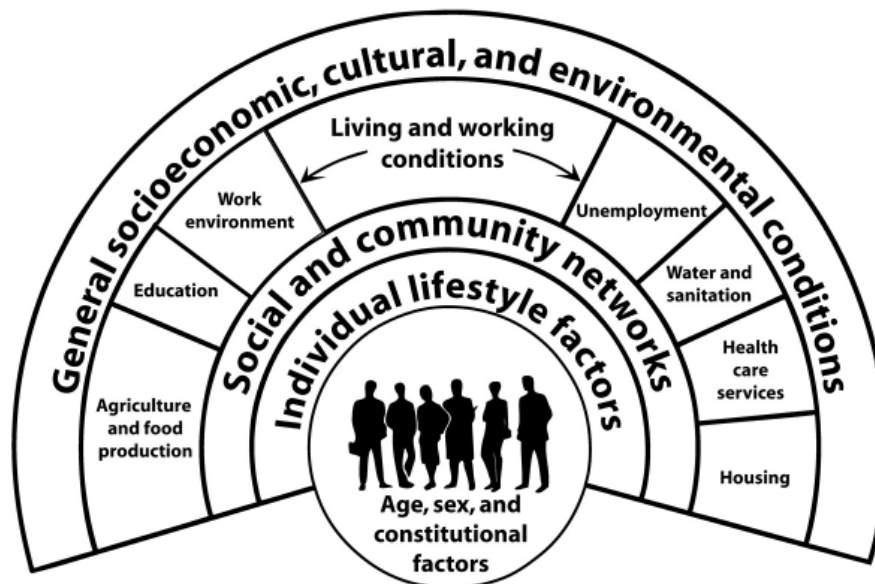


Fig. 1.2 - Diagram illustrating how various health-influencing factors are embedded within broader aspects of society.

and numerous other factors that accompany urban environments that have failed to adapt to changing demographics and evolving socio-economic realities. It is these factors that social epidemiologists refer to as the “social determinants of health.”

What the social determinants of health reveal is that the factors that influence health outcomes extend well beyond individual lifestyle behaviours (Fig. 1.2). Unfortunately, as has been well documented by sociologists, past decades have witnessed a number of patterns which have contributed to an increasing isolation of certain communities from the networks which are just as, if not more, important to human well-being. Of great concern to architects and urban designers, is a decline in the types of public spaces where these networks are forged, supported, and nurtured. While advances in communication technologies have facilitated an evolved form of socialization – one which stretches around the globe – it is unlikely that such technologies will ever be able to replace the types of connections made through collective experiences in physical space. Accordingly, neighbourhoods which fail to provide opportunities for contact amongst the local community can leave people feeling disconnected and without support, compounding the stress and other social determinants of health which also limit opportunities for the neighbourhoods’ regeneration.

In Toronto, these disparities have not gone completely unacknowledged. In 2005, the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force was formed, at the initiative of the United Way of Greater Toronto and the City of Toronto, with the intention identifying city neighbourhoods in the most urgent need of support, and then developing strategies for revitalizing those neighbourhoods. This work, while important in the address of the need for adequate social infrastructure, offers a glimpse into the structural dilemma inherent in evaluating health within the city. The recommendations of the agencies and their broader discourses view socio-economic conditions as the primary cause of health inequality. Health, thus, becomes a problem fixed through public investment into restored vitality within the neighbourhood.

While it has been proven that poverty is a precursor to health, there is less research available to show the degree to which the support of healthy physical and social lifestyles and environments can reduce the negative impacts of poverty. Furthermore, health infrastructure is not a commodity of fluctuating value; it is an important element of a neighbourhood regardless of its socio-economic make up. Money will be invested into the 13 neighbourhoods identified as Toronto’s priority neighbourhoods in the future. It is of primary concern that it is used wisely so that revitalization is given the best chance to succeed in a holistic sense, having a sustainable impact on all metrics of community well-being.

One neighbourhood typical of the types of neighbourhoods in Toronto that suffer from problems of built form is the Westminster-Branson Neighbourhood at the North of the city. It is slated as the next neighbourhood to receive a “community hub,” a United Way initiative in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Health, which aims to provide basic community services like primary health care, newcomer assistance, and employment assistance. Westminster-Branson is emblematic of the type of “inner suburbs” identified by the United Way, the province of Ontario, and the City of Toronto for its lack of community infrastructure. Composed of residential sprawl, apartment blocks, and a small provision, or auto-centric public amenities, the neighbourhood may be characterized as blatantly mono-functional (See Fig. 1.3). There are more shortcomings in the neighbourhood, however, than the types and quality of services available in the neighbourhood. One way of describing the shortcomings of this neighbourhood would be to say that it has been designed to the scale and speed of the car.

Viewing the neighbourhood from the street, one begins to get a better sense of the auto-centric nature of the neighbourhood. Parking lots and billboards dominate the front lots of many properties, physically and visually, and in some instances cars are permitted to encroach on the pedestrian realm (see Fig. 1.4-1.6). Though some attempts have been made to pedestrianize the street, such as in the provision of public benches or public art, many of these attempts are dwarfed by the scale of the neighbourhood (see Fig. 1.8-1.10). Numerous paths beaten through the grassy fields adjacent to main streets are just one way the neglect of pedestrian needs is visibly demonstrated in the lived environment. (see Fig. 1.11)

The need for solutions such as community hubs originates from trend that continues to grow in Toronto, whereby a widening income polarization has resulted in concentrations of poverty in Toronto’s suburbs. Forty years ago Toronto’s poverty was concentrated downtown. While this posed its own set of impedances to individual well-being, research has shown that a whole new set of problems have emerged from a shift of this poverty away from the core of the city. Composed of a much greater diversity of people, with a much greater diversity of needs, the demographics within many of Toronto’s suburbs are poorly served by a built fabric originally designed for a post-war vision of the prototypical family.

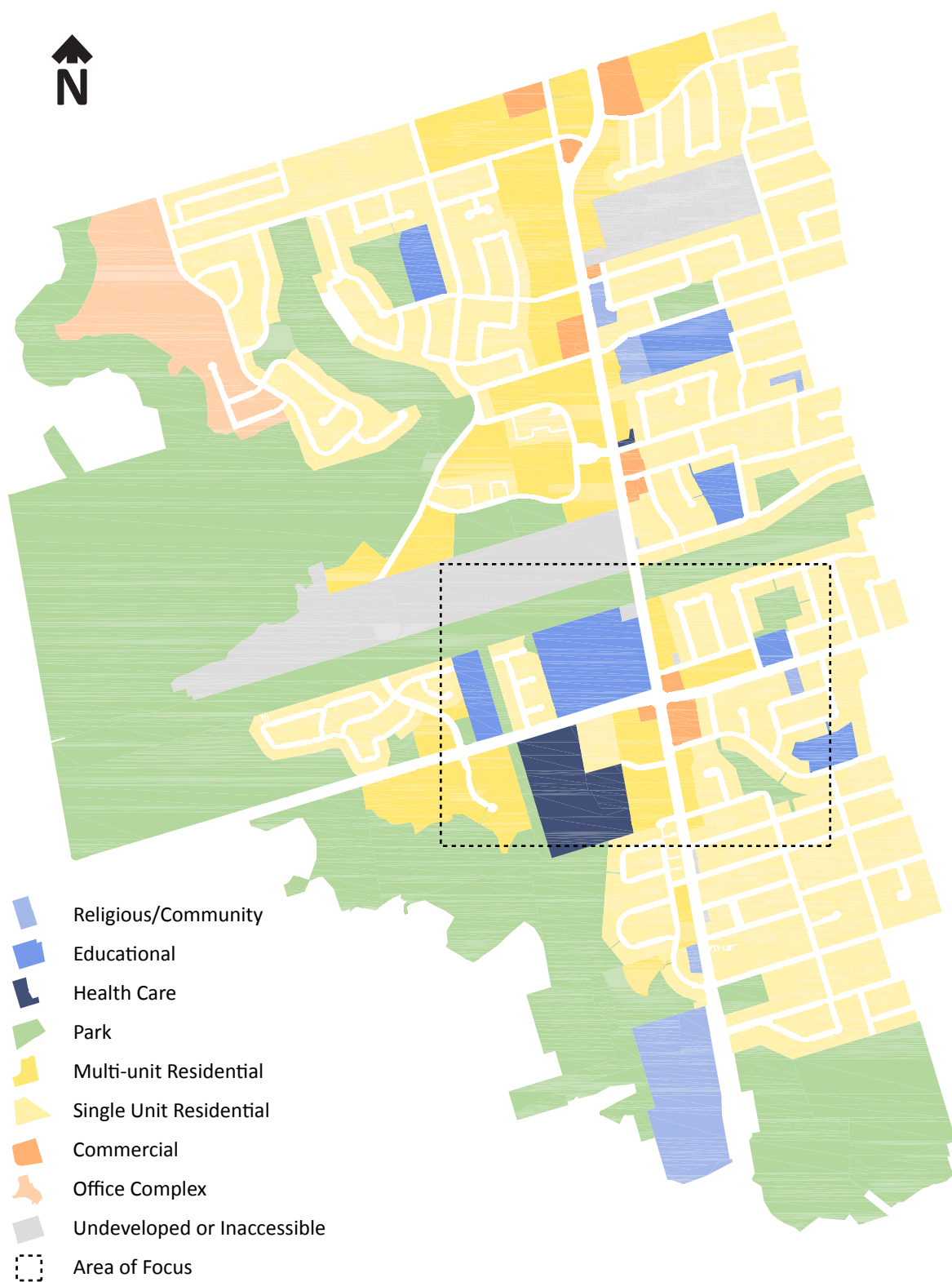


Figure 1.3 - Land-use map highlighting the area targetted for a design intervention



Fig. 1.4 - Image of parking lots dominating thresholds



Fig. 1.5 - Image of cars encroaching on the pedestrian realm



Fig. 1.6 - Image of billboards dominating the visual thresholds to buildings



Fig. 1.7 - Image of buildings designed to the speed and scale of the car



Fig. 1.8 - Image of an attempt to introduce human scale to the neighbourhood



Fig. 1.9 - Another Image of an attempt to introduce human scale to the neighbourhood



Fig. 1.10 - Pedestrian benches are placed awkwardly beneath a billboard



Fig. 1.11 - Desire Lines are left unaccommodated

THESIS

Many times, solutions to the urgent problems of suburban disconnectedness have been sought through updated approaches to master planning, which actually run counter to the integration and dynamism of the healthy life lived in cities. Just as public health has an inconsistent record of engaging the social realm, so too does the architectural profession. This thesis, instead, is an exploration of how the dynamism and integration characteristic of healthy urban life can inform architectural solutions in the suburbs, advocating the primacy of process over form in human environments.

The goal underlying the following pages is the re-imagining of how architecture might approach the revitalization of a social life that authentic individual and social wellness can emerge out of, regardless of socio-economic determinants. The design research, explored on the site of Westminster-Branson, investigates themes of hybridity, porosity and connectivity, which may increase opportunities for residents to come together within an informal community framework. Central to all these efforts is a critique of the segregation and rigidity which dictated much Modern master planning, and an advocacy for, in the words of landscape architect James Corner, a “looser, emergent urbanism more akin to the real complexity of cities” (Corner, 2006). The key concept of “urban acupuncture” derives its pertinence to this thesis in accordance with such thinking.

The design research that follows begins with the articulation of the concept of “urban acupuncture,” which reframes the role of the architect within the discourse of the healthy urban community. This is followed by a discussion of contemporary urban theories that attempt to define place and space, espouse a greater emphasis on “process over product,” and explore the challenges and opportunities of activating potential within fragmented urban fabrics. The writings of Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, and Nan Ellin, among other theorists, are taken into consideration. Hybridity and threshold articulation emerge as important considerations, as does an attitude towards architecture which defines the role of the architect as a mediator of public space rather than a form giver. The research will be completed through design responses to the below-average health and auto-centric fabric of the Westminster-Branson neighbourhood at the northern edge of Toronto. The broad objective of the thesis is to reassert the role of architecture in the relationship between well-being and urban vitality.

2. Key Concepts

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

The fundamental question that emerges when analyzing the current state of the unhealthy neighbourhoods within our cities is “how can we begin to regenerate the social life from which both individual and urban vitality emerges?” For the purpose of this thesis, the question must be reframed in terms of what role architecture can play in improving the social conditions within neighbourhoods like Toronto’s “inner suburbs.” There is no simple answer to this question. The means of revitalization is one that has challenged designers and planners throughout the history of modern cities. The architecture profession has a particularly troublesome past in its interventions in the larger scale ordering of cities. Of specific implication are the paradigms established by the Modern visionary architects of the 20th century. Having acquired an elevated status as the visionaries of a new framework for urban life, the avant-garde architects of the first half of the 20th century were given a historically unique license to influence the large scale reconstruction of the urban sphere. (Bergdoll, 2010) As history has shown, however, the plans drawn out by the likes of Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier were often far too comprehensive and utopian to ever be fully implemented. (Ellin, 2006, p.118) The partially realized built form that often resulted can be seen as a major contributor to the urban fragmentation that will be discussed in the next section. Much has been learned, however, from the failures of past generations of urbanists. For one, the approach of master planning employed by the Modernists has become highly criticized as an approach to urban regeneration.

For many, the notion that a single individual or group can produce forms that anticipate the future needs of the city runs counter to the way in which most vital neighbourhoods are formed (Morten, 1994). Cities cannot be designed as buildings because the success of a neighbourhood is the result of much more dynamic influences than the spatial forms of urbanism in and of themselves. Accordingly, attempts at urban design that begin from a pretense of permanence, or the notion that spatial order can control history and process, are destined to fail in meeting their objectives (Ellin, 2006; Corner, 2006). With this lesson in mind, cities are now being viewed more often in ecological terms – as the products of process rather than form (Corner, 2006, p.29). Just as processes such as erosion, sedimentation, and climate change shape the character of a natural landscape, so too do processes of capital accumulation, government regulation, globalization, and environmental protection shape the character of urban landscapes.

The dilemma this explanation poses to architectural practice is that it often leaves architects as relatively powerless in their influence over the shaping of the urban environment. In contrast to the far-reaching authority given to architects at the beginning of the 20th century, architectural practice today has seen its authority relegated to only the most static elements of the built environment (i.e. form and aesthetics). While this is not, in itself, a bad thing for cities, many of the “unhealthy” patterns, characterized by the neighbourhood explored in this study, are a product of urban development driven primarily by speculation. So the question again must be posed: what role can the architect play in improving social condition in the contemporary city?

This thesis articulates that it is through the punctual interventions that assist in the activation of places of potential.

URBAN ACUPUNCTURE

Connected to the understanding of urban environments as the products of dynamic processes is the often used metaphor of the city as a living organism. As Jane Jacobs proposed in *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*, “vital cities have an innate ability to understand, communicate, contrive and invent what is required to combat their difficulties” (Jacobs, 1961). Implicit within this statement is the idea that vital cities often operate as self-organizing systems, whereby the multiple agents that inhabit the city manage to produce neighbourhoods without the need of a central authority. This description paints a portrait of a city that is a fully alert and engaged entity that responds and reacts to wounds inflicted upon them.

It is from this understanding that an approach of “urban acupuncture” derives its significance. To provide some frame of reference, master planning approaches like those discussed above have often been described as a form of surgery performed on the city (Ellin, 2006, p.9). In circumstances where entire neighbourhoods are demolished (sanitized or anaesthetized) and repaired anew, the metaphor is particularly apt. If we presume, however, that, even in less vital neighbourhoods within a functional city, there is an alert and engaged community life to be found, then a response akin to the activation therapy of acupuncture would be much more appropriate than the heavy handedness of tabula rasa redevelopment. Nan Ellin, the urban theorist, employs the ‘urban accupuncture’ metaphor to support her theory for an Integral Urbanism. “By opening up the blockages along ‘urban meridians,’” just as acupuncture and other forms of bioenergetic healing open up blockages along the energy meridians of our bodies, [Integral Urbanism] can liberate the life force of a city and its dynamic communities (Ellin, 2006, p.10).

The methodology implied by the ‘urban acupuncture’ approach, as defined by Nan Ellin and other like-minded urbanists, holds true to the metaphor. Characterized by punctual interventions, rather than heavy handed tabula rasa approaches, ‘urban acupuncture’ aims to contribute to the activation of places under the pretense that neighbourhood regeneration can unfold naturally if the appropriate catalyst is introduced. The key difference in the approaches is that ‘urban acupuncture’ acknowledges that strong neighbourhoods cannot be created instantaneously by designers, but rather requires time and at most, the assistance of designers (Dovey, 2001, P.96).

One example often cited as illustrative of the nature and potential of such an approach is the scheme

undertaken in Barcelona prior to the 1992 Olympic Summer Games. Faced with the challenge of regenerating a number of dilapidating neighbourhoods, the architect and acting counsellor of urban design, Oriol Bohigas, initiated a redevelopment which emphasized “projects, not planning” (Ellin, P. 124). Of particular note was the creation of a network of discrete and context-specific public spaces, or “living rooms,” located within each quarter of the city. These public spaces, each designed by a different design team, and each with a piece of art created by an internationally famous artist, gave a unique identity to each quarter and offered a mediation between the scales of the neighbourhood and the larger city.

An approach of urban acupuncture does not have to be initiated by top down structures. In fact, it is often much more effectively applied through modest, community level efforts. One particular intervention that has shown to be highly effective is the introduction of food trucks to previously underperforming public parks. In the particular case of Evanston, Illinois’ Grey Park – a park that had become greatly underutilized as a result of a turf-war between mentally ill patients and parents – food trucks provided the perfect catalyst for a new and re-invigorated social life within the park (MacIver, 2011). Another example of a community finding unique informal socialization opportunities can be found in the case of a Seattle neighbourhood where community members set up a small movie theatre within a garage laneway (Wolfe, 2011). If the objective of urban design is to assist in the creation of environments conducive to community socialization, there is much to be learned from the informal urbanism that is being initiated in communities like these.

Such examples of informal urbanism do not happen in a vacuum, however, and they often need the correct set of physical and social circumstances to provide motivation and inspiration. In the case of the taking back of Grey Park, the impetus to do so would not have existed if there wasn’t a great park to be had. Similarly, the inspiration to set up an informal theatre could not have happened just anywhere. The compactness and defined edges of a laneway are highly supportive of the intimacy and controlled environment required to make an activity such as movie watching enjoyable. It is in such scenarios, that a new role for the architect can be found, one whereby they are the mediators between neighbourhood spaces and the residents that inhabit them.

INTENSIFYING PROGRAM

The objective of revitalization is most often to generate diversity. Diversity is a seductive objective because it is often a self-reinforcing process. People like to go where there is a great diversity of life, and diversity thrives on an active public life. The reason diversity rarely develops in suburban neighbourhoods is because there are simply not enough people to support it, an impedence to vitality inherent in the suburban model. Small speciality shops and services, of the kind found in most big cities, rely upon a very large number of people within a relatively compact segment of the city, all with vastly differing skills, tastes, and needs, in order to thrive (Jacobs, 1961). In the absence of such a population, only large scale supermarkets and malls with high accessibility via the automobile can survive. As mentioned in the previous section, the spatial order of a city can only do so much to generate an active public life. Punctual interventions, however, stand a much better chance of generating the type of socialization needed within suburban neighbourhoods because they build upon established resources and life within the neighbourhood. Less concerned with the overall restructuring of a neighbourhood, architectural interventions can presume to do no more than enhance and build upon the life that already runs through a site or neighbourhood. In such instances, the objective of diversity is replaced with the objective of intensifying program.

The objective of the intensification of program, often achieved through the means of hybridization, is to create greater opportunities for people to congregate. The idea draws from a concept termed “triangulation,” by Urban sociologist William H. Whyte. Triangulation, for Whyte, occurs when certain uses that seem like unlikely partners are put together to create a synergy that exceeds the vitality of the separate parts (Ellin, 2006, P20). The community hubs described in the introduction can be seen as example of triangulation. By placing a number of services under the same roof, new opportunities for social interaction are generated. Another common, but less obvious, example would be coffee shops located in bookstores. There is much more to an approach of urban acupuncture than simply grouping mutually beneficial programs within a single site. It is through an architecture thought of urbanistically, that triangulation and an intensification of program can be best exploited.

THRESHOLDS

Of primary concern for architects, when attempting to make the most of an intensified program, is the proper design of thresholds that define the interstices between the multiple uses on a hybridized site. Creating visual connections is one obvious way of doing this and it is already commonly exploited in highly transparent building facades, where people from the street are drawn to look into a building and the activity within the building is enhanced by enabling a view of the life on the street. The same sort of interaction can occur by engaging the other senses. By allowing the scent of a coffee shop or the words of a speaker to bleed into the other spaces of a building, an experience akin to the dynamic life of a busy street can be better achieved. Thresholds can enhance hybridity in less obvious ways, as well. One other way they do this is through carefully articulating the access to a building. A freedom of access, enhanced by a highly porous threshold, can allow the circulation from a street to flow into a building, blurring the definition between public and private space. This is not always desirable, however, and so the architect's task is to fashion thresholds that find the right balance between a complete freedom or denial of access. Hybridization can also be enhanced by exploring temporary access and uses. Most buildings within cities have peak hours during which they are most used, and hours during which they go relatively unused. An architecture that creates opportunities for usage throughout the day endows the greatest degree of vitality upon a site. In neighbourhoods, such as the Westminster-Branson neighbourhood explored by this thesis, parking lots provide a key opportunity for such an approach. When not in use for conventional purposes, parking lots can be exploited by a number of other public activities, such as markets and recreational uses. An architecture which allows for an ease of temporal modification greatly enhances the intensity of a program.

Though there are many ways to articulate a threshold, the objective is always fundamentally the same: to optimize the relationship between multiple uses. It is here that architecture finds its key role in bringing an active social life to neighbourhoods. Thresholds are rarely optimized by being either completely open or transparent, or completely closed and opaque. Rather thresholds that are translucent and porous are often more suited to accommodate a diversity of life within a building. Employing his or her expertise in materiality and circulation, the architect is best equipped for accommodating a great diversity of uses upon a single site.

3. Research

ARCHITECTURE AND OUR CURRENT TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE

Architecture's main purpose is to act as a mediator between aspects of our biological origin and our present technological culture, and good architecture includes archaic as well as new elements (Palasmaa, 2001, p.213).

In framing the role that architecture can play in relationship to health and well-being, the above quote by the Finnish architect Juhanni Palasmaa, provides a helpful starting point. One of the primary ways in which architectural practice separates itself from less critical building practices, is that it attempts to be more aware about the ways in which built form and space is registered by the human body. As Martin Heidegger first proposed, human dwelling consists of both an engagement with the world and a contemplation of it (Heidegger, 1927). Regardless of how frustratingly difficult it can be to unravel the complexities of such a reality, architects attempt to operate in response to these complimentary modes of dwelling by addressing both the symbolic and experiential qualities of form and space. Palasmaa's quote reminds us that humans are conditioned by both deeply embedded biological origins, as well as the current technological context in which we find ourselves. When we find ourselves out of comfort, or worse, in a state of physical distress, as the first chapter explored, it is because one or both of these conditions are not being respected by the environment in which we dwell. As Palasmaa suggests, "the environment repulsed by our bodies and our psyche does not require verbal and pseudo-scientific evidence of its negativeness" (Pallasmaa, 2001, p.205). Using Pallasmaa's claim as a starting point, the secondary research will explore the ways in which the architect can act as a mediator of human activity. The investigation will first examine contemporary discourses surrounding the meanings of "place" and "space," and will look at the ways in which the human senses interact with space to influence social interactions (mediating experience). The importance of social empowerment (mediating practice) in the built environment can then be fully explored.

DISCOURSES ON SPACE AND PLACE

Henri Lefebvre and the Productions of Space

“Authentic knowledge of space must address the question of its production.” – Henri Lefebvre

Henri Lefebvre offers an apt starting point for not only conceptualizing place, but also for considering the powers at work in place production. Lefebvre posited a theory that suggests that space is both a product and a determinant of social practices; it is at once a means of production and a commodity (Zieleniec, 2007). He was, of course, discussing social practices and space in the broadest of terms. By social practices, he was referring to everything from global economic practices to those of habitation, which are probably the most essential of social practices. By space, he was referring to all scales, from cities to neighbourhoods to individual buildings.

Lefebvre's interest in the production of space was not simply one of understanding how spaces come to be, however, but also one concerned with the importance of lived experience. His theory of space thus extends to include a triad of necessary elements: spatial practices, spaces of representation, and representations of space. This triad is often interpreted as practised space, conceived space and lived, imagined or perceived space. Practiced space refers to the ways in which space is empirically used in the reproduction of society (Franklin, 2006). Conceived space refers to the seemingly objective knowledge of space, which can be conceptualized, and is understood to be under the control and manipulation of architects and planners. Perceived or lived space is the space of imagination and meaning, which is overlaid upon physical space, and is the product of every individual's perception and experience of space. Lefebvre's ultimate argument about current practices of space production is that a major consequence of capitalist modes of production (which include space production) is a diminished consistency between the three dimensions of space, in particular, due to a diminished consideration of representational or perceived space. Though Lefebvre was often critical of the limited focus of phenomenology, the practice is probably the most easily equated with his notion of lived space. The role of architects and planners as the producers conceived place informs the perspective of this thesis, which advocates that they act as the arbiters of practiced and lived space.

Practiced Space

Conceiving of the broad scale of social practices that shape urban space in a globalized world has been one of the more rich areas of exploration in today's society. Characterized by global economic, information, communication and transportation networks, it is difficult to define where influence on a particular space begins and ends. Lefebvre attempted to conceptualize this multi-scalar influence in his "diagram of nested scales". Developed through an examination of Japanese spatial order, the diagram supports his formulation of urban spaces as something produced by the "encounter, assembly, and simultaneity" of everything that is produced by nature or society. Thus in all urban spaces, "global", "private," and "transitional" influences are present (Lefebvre, 1991).

A more recent tendency amongst space theorists is to describe urban space as a tension between "flows and places" (Castells, 2004). Largely, consumed with the influence of advances in information technology, Castells characterizes the tension between flows and places as one in which the experience of urbanity is at once consumed with far reaching global networks, and at the same is tied to characteristics of a physical locality. What begins to emerge from an analysis of the contemporary city is that it is in a state of constant tension and reproduction; a tension between the global and the local, the individual and the collective, and networks versus locality (Castells, 2004). If this is so, the problem of space design becomes one of mediating between these tensions. Castells suggests that much of the social inequality (including the health inequality that this thesis was originally concerned with) is a result of the larger scale taking priority over the smaller.

Perceived Space and Phenomenology

The danger with a number of the existing planning approaches to promote healthy cities, such as the ecosystem approach or ecological urbanism, is that they have the potential to exacerbate an existing imbalance between the global and the local, whereby global or larger scale forces are accommodated at the expense of local needs. In a way, they represent the very same "diminished role of lived space" condemned by Lefebvre, and the "tension between flows and place" elucidated by Castells. It should thus be the responsibility of architects, more than ever, to engage in the practice of place definition. Place has a long history of conceptualization. It began to gain currency in the 1970's through the propagation of Heideggerian phenomenology, and was later substantiated within architectural practice by Kenneth Frampton's writing on "critical regionalism" and Norberg Shulz's writing on the notion of

“genius loci” (Dovey, 1999). Though theories have varied in a number of other areas, place is commonly conceived of as an experiential phenomenon, defined in opposition to space. The concept of place is often aligned with terms such as identity, community, character, and home; concepts which play an important part in our well-being, but that are extremely difficult to define in tangible terms. The result has often been that the direct manipulation of place has been viewed as an attempt at cultural domination (Dovey, 1999). This is apparent in the several obscene post-modern attempts to fabricate “senses of place” or “authenticity” by creating townscape characterized by overt languages of local roots. This is certainly something to be wary of when engaging notions of place, and for this reason this thesis adopts the less problematic understanding of place as something captured by sensual experience.

Landscape Urbanism and the Convergence of Practiced and Perceived Space

Landscape urbanism is a design practice that engages the scales of landscape, architecture and urban design. Just as the ecosystem attempts to be “human based,” landscape urbanism can be thought of as not only encompassing ecology and nature, but also history and culture. Linda Pollak (2006) understands the practice as an attempt to move beyond a historically embedded oppositional system of thought. She points out how the “figure ground approach” is still a widely held convention for analyzing urban spatial relationships. The figure ground approach falls sharply in line with a line of thought that also sees architecture and landscape, object and space, culture and nature, and work and site in an oppositional relationship that acknowledges the first term as constructed, and the second as a natural, unproblematic background.

The tendency is to view the second, or what I call environmental term, as an abstract container: separate from objects, events and relations that occur within it. These second terms often become fused together in some kind of landscape-space-nature-site blur, in contrast to the supposedly clear outlines of architecture (Pollak, 2006). The goal of landscape urbanism is to engage this “abstract container” in a way that brings it to the foreground. The term “landscape urbanism,” thus, comes from a notion that the horizontal surface in between vertical definitions of space needs to be better explored; the ground itself becomes a material for design.

While this thesis is careful not to indulge too much in a conception of the ground as the material from which to engage health, the theories of landscape urbanism and its particular engagement with the ‘in between’ spaces of urbanity seem to directly engage the transitional scale between the global and the

local, flows and place, and practiced and perceived space. Just as place has been poorly conceptualized, so too has the “abstract container,” and landscape urbanism begins to respond to this lack of definition.

Concurrent with a wide reaching shift of society towards a post-modernism that re-evaluated the many shortcomings of Modern practices, was the rise of the discipline of urban design. Urban design was and still is heavily concerned with the concept of place and its influence on environments. Only recently, however, were place and urban design found to be relevant to the health sector, as more comprehensive attempts dissect the causes of geographical variations in health have been made. Engaging environments at an experiential level seems more and more appropriate as we reach a better understanding of the diverse range of social determinants of health. Landscape urbanism represents one of the more current approaches to urban design, as it engages both the highly connected world in which we live, as well as the always-present need for architecture to address locality.

SPACE, SENSE, AND LOCAL WELL-BEING

The Hidden Dimension

Edward T. Hall, the American anthropologist and cross cultural researcher, was one of the first to accumulate research towards the influence that space has on not only human health, but our relationships with each other. In his book, *The Hidden Dimension* (1990), Hall explores what he terms “Proxemics:” a study of how people behave and react in different types of culturally defined personal space. He begins by exploring the natural responses of living things to their surroundings. Some such responses include the instinct of an animal to flee or attack, given the proximity of another animal; the inclination of some species to stay in contact, while others prefer non-contact; and the biological effects of overcrowding. The portrait painted by these explorations is that living things do not operate within a passive context, but are constantly affecting, and being affected by, external stimuli, often at a subconscious level. To explore man’s relationship to space, Hall deconstructs man’s perception of space through a characterization of the senses. This deconstruction reveals the dominance of sight and sound in the conscious perception of space, the culturally divisive nature of smell, the intimate and grounding nature of taste and touch, and the subtle communicative nature of thermal interaction. Hall also describes man’s perception of space as dynamic - as a product of what can be done within the space, and affected by what others are doing in the space. Hall (1990) explores this dynamism by looking at the effects of different organizations of space, and also at the characteristics of interpersonal interaction at differing distances. His explorations reveal how different spatial organizations lead to varying public interaction distances, which allow for varying degrees of sensorial acuity.

Underlying much of Hall’s discussion on perception is an understanding of cultural relativism. Mentioned time and time again is the fact that different cultures perceive the world differently, and thus, define their spaces accordingly. Arabic people, as an example, make much greater use of olfaction in perceiving space, than do members of a heavily sanitized American culture. The implication tied to such observations is that if individuals from different cultures perceive spaces differently then they also must be affected by space differently? Hall (1990) notes how the Japanese tend to organize rooms by placing objects in the middle of the room, whereas Western cultures place the objects at the perimeter of the room. This difference in space organization is said to be a result of the Japanese tendency to place more importance on kinaesthetic experience. Objects in the middle of the room are not seen as cluttering, but as forcing a more conscious perception of space. He sees this sensorial relativity as influencing

urban design as well. Crowded public spaces, for example, are much more prolific in Southern Europe. where close proximity and casual encounter are much more welcome than in America, where privacy and structured organization are desired. Ultimately, it was the design of urban settings, without regard to “proxemics,” that concerned Hall. With global trending towards more crowded and diverse urban populations, Hall (1990) sees a need for designing for culturally specific “proxemics” - as necessary for avoiding the marginalization of urban immigrants. More broadly, he sees it as necessary for improving the urban experience for one and all. The implications for the social health of an urban community and the mental and physical health of US residents would be palpable.

Senses and the City

Jan Gehl is one architect and urban designer particularly attuned to the ways in which the nature of human senses dictate our interactions within a space. Highly critical of the way modern cities have favoured the scale and speed of cars, Gehl’s work explores the biologically evolved nature of our senses as a means of educating design towards more pedestrian friendly, and socially engaging urban spaces. Drawing from Hall’s writing, Gehl (2010) writes about the “social field of vision,” which examines the way the capabilities and limitations of each sense influence our interactions with space and other people at different distances. At 300-500 metres, he elaborates that the human eye is capable of distinguishing between general forms (e.g. between humans and animals). At 100 metres, the human eye can see movement and body language in broad outline. At 50-70 metres more distinct body features, such as hair colour, begin to be legible. At 35 metres communication can begin to be conducted with a loud voice. At a range of 22-25 metres, facial expression and dominant emotions can be read and short messages exchanged. Finally, at a point of 7 metres, genuine conversation can begin and at points even closer the more intimate senses of touch, taste, and thermal exchange begin to influence interaction. Just as Hall suggests, these sensory capabilities are highly influential in our interactions within space. Spaces that are more confined play on our more intimate senses. Spaces that are open and vast free us of the sometimes abrasive qualities of interaction, but can also fail to encourage social interactions that can also be supportive and invigorating.

Building upon the “social field of vision,” Gehl (2010) elucidates that cities that are designed for the speed of cars (60+ km/h) ultimately lead to environments where these human senses become alienated. In one example, he compares a pedestrian bench located in an auto-centric neighbourhood with one located in a pedestrianized neighbourhood. The bench in the auto-centric neighbourhood lacks

attention to pedestrian comfort, and is often painted with information that is grotesquely magnified to the pedestrian. Gehl believes that this sort of effect can also be seen on the edges of the street in the undifferentiated and opaque facades of many modern buildings.

Edges, or the spaces where the city meets the building are incredibly important to Gehl. “Edges make a vital contribution to spatial experience and to the awareness of individual space as place. Just as the walls of home support activities and communicate a sense of well-being, the city’s edges offer a feeling of organization, comfort and security” (Gehl, 2010). Here he reveals his belief in the role that the “in between” spaces of the city can play in human well-being. He suggests we are intuitively aware of places with weak edges, such as urban squares with heavily trafficked roads on all four sides.

For Gehl, edges can play a number of important roles. They can act as “exchange zones,” providing opportunities for life within the building to interact with life in the city. They can also act as “staying zones” that offer prime opportunities for sitting or standing. It is at the edges, he suggests, where much of the urban experience happens because it is directly in our line of vision, quite unlike upper floors of buildings. He also notices that people have a natural tendency to keep to walls. Gehl’s observations about the city in relation to the speed of travel, and the sensorial faculties of humans extend well beyond observations about the edges and dimensions of urban spaces. In his discussion much is revealed about the ways in which spatial form can influence social activity. “First we shape the city, then it shapes us,” he proclaims. In shaping the city in favour of the car, we deny one of the city’s most important functions as a meeting place. As Gehl (2010) suggests, a multitude of valuable social and recreational opportunities naturally emerge when you reinforce life on foot. Photos included in preceding pages testify that the neighbourhood explored in this thesis has been geared towards the car at the expense of greater social and recreational interaction.

THE NEED FOR “THIRD PLACES”

“[D]aily life, in order to be relaxed and fulfilling, must find its balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second gainful or productive, and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it.” (Oldenburg, 1989, P.14)

There are a number of reasons to criticize the automobile suburbs that proliferated in the decades after the Second World War. The shortcoming that is most fundamental to their stultification, however, is their inability to foster a strong sense of community. As Jane Jacobs illustrated in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, contact between the characters that make up a neighbourhood is the “small change from which a city’s public wealth may grow” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 72). In order for this contact to flourish, however, there have to be appropriate places for it to occur. Winston Churchill is often famously quoted for saying that humans first shape their environment, and then the environment shapes and controls them (Oldenburg, 1999, p.295). With the privileging of automobile traffic that dictated much suburban planning, came a neglect of the conditions that lead to a healthy public life. In some instances, it has led to neighbourhoods completely devoid of even the most basic forms of informal public gathering. While the building of social capital can occur in a multitude of public spaces in cities, there are specific types of public spaces that play a much more fundamental role in supporting the well-being of individuals. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg, author of *The Great Good Place* (1999), refers to these public spaces as “third places,” and as the open quotation suggests, he places them amongst the home and the workplace in terms of their importance to the everyday lives of urban inhabitants. For Oldenburg, it is these “third places” that play a highly undervalued role in supporting both individual and community well-being.

The types of places that Oldenburg refers to are well known to most people. Amongst his exemplars are the “English Pub,” the “French Café,” the “American Tavern,” and the “Main Street”. Typology is less important to Oldenburg, however, than are the characteristics and qualities common to each of these typologies. For one, each of these typologies offers a “neutral ground” for socialization that doesn’t exist in our homes or places of work (Oldenburg, p.22). Sociologists often suggest that an individual’s well being is partly contingent upon having relationships and friendships that are less intimate than are the relationships between family members and partners. These types of “lighter” relationships require a certain distance between the individual’s involved in order to flourish. As the sociologist Richard Sennett suggests, “people can only be sociable when they have some protection from each other”(Sennett, 1979, p.311). “Third places,” as many of us know them, offer the atmosphere conducive of this type of

protection. There is nothing of personal intimacy that is revealed in third places, so people are allowed to socialize relatively free of inhibitions or the guards worn in most situations in our life.

It is for similar reasons, that Oldenburg (1989) suggests that “third places” also play an important role as a leveller. Humans are inherently a social beings, and thus, derive their greatest joys (and frustrations) from their interactions with other people. As he elucidates, however, much of daily life in contemporary society casts us into roles that tend to submerge personality and the inherent joys of being together with others (Oldenburg, 1989, p.24). The third place is one of the few places where this is not allowed to occur. The socially accepted rules that govern activity in most “third places” are such that any “worldly claims” or social status must be checked at the door, along with any personal problems or moodiness (Oldenburg, 1989, p.24). Those who use and contribute to the character of “third places” have a stake in making the place as inclusive and congenial as possible because it expands the possibility for socialization. Anyone whose behaviour runs counter to these objectives is quickly put in their place and in service of the greater good of socialization. As such, there is no hierarchy in the “third place.” There are no bosses and employees, or hosts and guests. The role of each person is the same – to support the congeniality and levity offered by the place.

Also characteristic of “third places” is that the main activity is recreational conversation (Oldenburg, 1989, p.26). Recreation comes in many forms, but the diverse, lively, and engaging conversation that happens in “third places” offers many important personal benefits that contribute to a sustained well-being. For one, recreational conversation offers perspective. As Oldenburg (1989) suggests, “mental health depends upon the degree of harmony between the organism and its environment and, for most of us, this translates into harmonious relations with other people” (p.48). In other words, the more isolated one becomes from society, the more distorted that person’s world view can become. In today’s society, where specialization brutalizes relationships (p.48), and new forms of communications media offer superficial forms of social engagement, this type of distortion likely happens even more frequently. In “third places,” however, where genuine conversation and diverse opinions are valued, individuals can evaluate their perspective of the world and the degree to which it harmonizes with others’ perspectives. This is not to say that third places homogenize society, rather that they create the opportunity for individuals to become grounded through relating themselves to others. One of the major transitions undergone by Western culture and philosophy in recent decades is in the belief that nothing exists or is defined in isolation, but rather in relation. This is as true of places as it is of persons (Ellin, 1999, p.83). Places and people achieve their identity in relation to other places and people.

“Third places” and the type of conversation they support are certainly not solely responsible for such types of personal orientation. It is just as often that they play the important role of providing novelty and levity to people’s lives. It has already been stated that most people derive their greatest joys through interactions with other people. In addition to this, some of the greatest diversions from the banality of everyday life are those that invite participation that is both social and active (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 47). For this reason, “third places” can serve an important role in lifting spirits. Part of the reason this is possible is that nobody is forced to stay at a “third place”. Unlike the home or the place of work, when the mood begins to sour in a “third place,” one is free to leave or ration the amount of time spent there. By allowing a freedom of use, “third places” ensure that they are primarily inhabited by people in good spirits. Such an atmosphere can be contagious, and provide a uniquely joyous experience rarely had in places of work or at home.

While each of these characteristics may be found in the many other places that make up a city, it is rare that they all congeal in the way that they do in the “third places” that Ray Oldenburg describes, and that each of us can relate to. As such, “third places” can play a crucial role in contributing to the perception we have of our communities, and the perception we have of our own lives. For this reason, “third places” really offer much beyond the personal benefits just described. If, as Jane Jacobs suggests, social contact is the small change from which a city’s public wealth may grow, then the places that support and encourage that type of contact can be important catalysts for urban vitality. One broader statement that Oldenburg makes in favour of “third places” is that they represent “fundamental institutions of mediation between the individual and the larger society” (Oldenburg, 1989, p.xxviii).

As we know, our individual well-being is contingent upon our relationship with the larger society in which we live. Though social networking media and other new communication technologies offer new platforms to support mediation, this thesis is partially predicated on the belief that they will never be able to replace the quality of mediation, proposed by sociologists like Ray Oldenburg, that occurs in physical places. Completely accessible public places, free of hierarchy or surveillance and where face-to-face socialization is the prime purpose, are where strong bonds are made with neighbours and community members alike. When such bonds are made, a greater security and investment within the community emerges, and individuals work more actively towards improving the community for themselves and those around them. Such places have also been shown to reduce the burden on poverty. As Oldenburg (1989) suggests, “for those on tight budgets and who live in some degree of austerity, such public places can compensate for the lack of things owned privately” (p.11).

For those who live in the spatially compact quarters of urban downtowns, this type of public resourcefulness is well-known, as people use cafés for work purposes, street corners for vending, shared yards for gardening, and participate in many other practices which compensate for the lack of privately owned space. In many respects, the suburban environment, now so devoid of the types of public spaces described in this chapter, proliferated from a belief that such mediation between the individual and the larger society was not necessary. Placing great faith in technology to compensate more efficiently for all of the needs previously provided by a strong and close-by public life, large populations of people have substituted the ideal community with the ideal home. As Delores Hayden, the architect and urban historian suggests, “[such people] proceed as though a house can substitute for a community if only it is spacious enough, entertaining enough, comfortable enough, splendid enough” (Hayden, 1984). For many people, these requisites might suffice. As long as houses are spacious enough, and automobiles allow for the contact with friends we need, suburban life can and does support a sufficient life for many people. For those who don’t have these means, however, like those residing in the Westminster-Branson neighbourhood explored in this thesis, nearby informal social gathering spaces are a necessity for well-being.

As this chapter has explained, there are many things that a home cannot provide, and significant among those things is the type of easy friendships and congenial social interactions to be found in third places. The question that remains to be answered is how urban design and architecture, specifically, might tap into the character of such places – character totally contingent upon the people who use the places – in the hopes of creating new “third places,” where they currently do not exist. One of the things to be explored is the nature of user modification. As Oldenberg (1989) pessimistically suggests, “what is revolutionary about our new environment is not its freeway mazes or its hulking rectangular skyscrapers with their smoked glass skins, but its unprecedented resistance to user modification” (p.286).

4. Design Research

In beginning to form a design response that holds true to the research conducted on the ways in which strong communities are forged, the first step was to identify a location within the neighbourhood where an intervention might have the greatest impact. Looking back into the composition of the neighbourhood (See Fig. 4.1-4.2), it quickly became apparent that the neighbourhood already had logically organized most of its community resources. Located at the heart of the neighbourhood, primarily along Finch Avenue, are the neighbourhood's library, recreation centre, high school, hospital, and primary shopping centres. All in relatively close proximity to one another, the organization was such that a "heart" of the neighbourhood was already established (See Fig.). Like much else in the neighbourhood, however, the resources were designed specifically to be accessed by the car. With large parking lots dominating the access to the buildings, the potential for the resources to be the pinpoints of a strong main street network is not capitalized on.

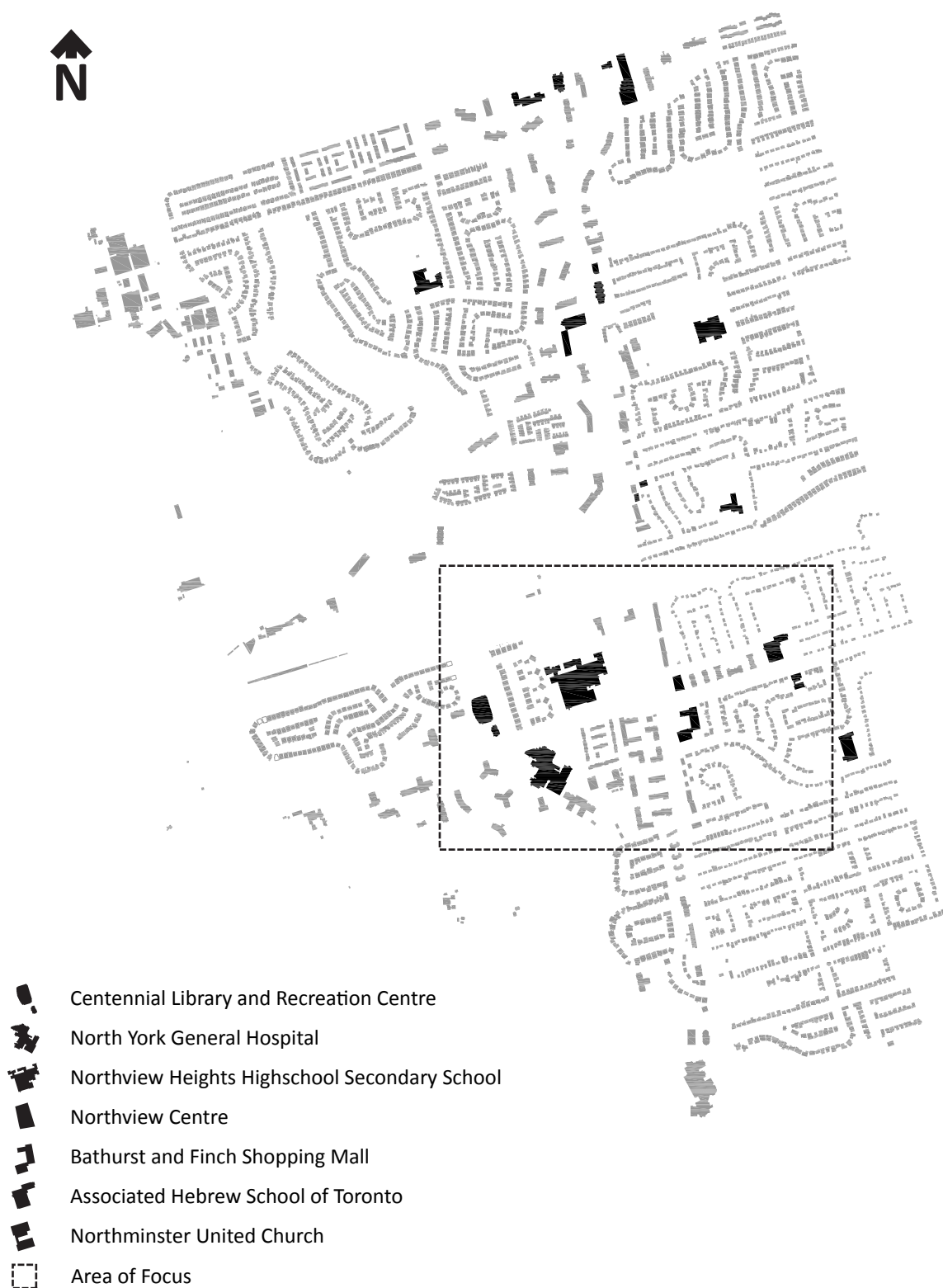


Figure 4.1 - Figure-ground map highlighting the area targetted for a design intervention

LATENT POTENTIAL

Seeking a way to begin to re-frame the street as a “pedestrian first” pathway, I began to identify “moments of potential” along the street where I believed there was an opportunity for the existing built form to better engage the pathway (see Fig 4.3). In most cases, such moments were characterized by a built form that oriented itself strongly to the street, but did not add experiential richness to the path, nor provide “eyes on the street.” Other moments of potential are identified where smaller attempts have been made by the community to beautify the path. Garden planters and art sculptures reflected a desire within the community to enhance the pedestrian realm, and so part of the scheme envisions a formalization of such moments. Finally, the parking lots were identified as another type of potential. Though presently a deterrent to walking in the neighbourhood, parking lots are far too predominant within the neighbourhood to write off as lost space. Furthermore, parking lots, when not in use, provide a vast surface upon which a number of activities can occur. In the City of Toronto, there are already hundreds of lots which are used for farmers’ markets, street hockey games, church services and other similarly community-oriented uses. Therefore, the latent potential untapped within parking lots could be viewed in terms of its unconsidered temporally contingent value.



Fig. 4.2 - Site plan highlighting key community resources

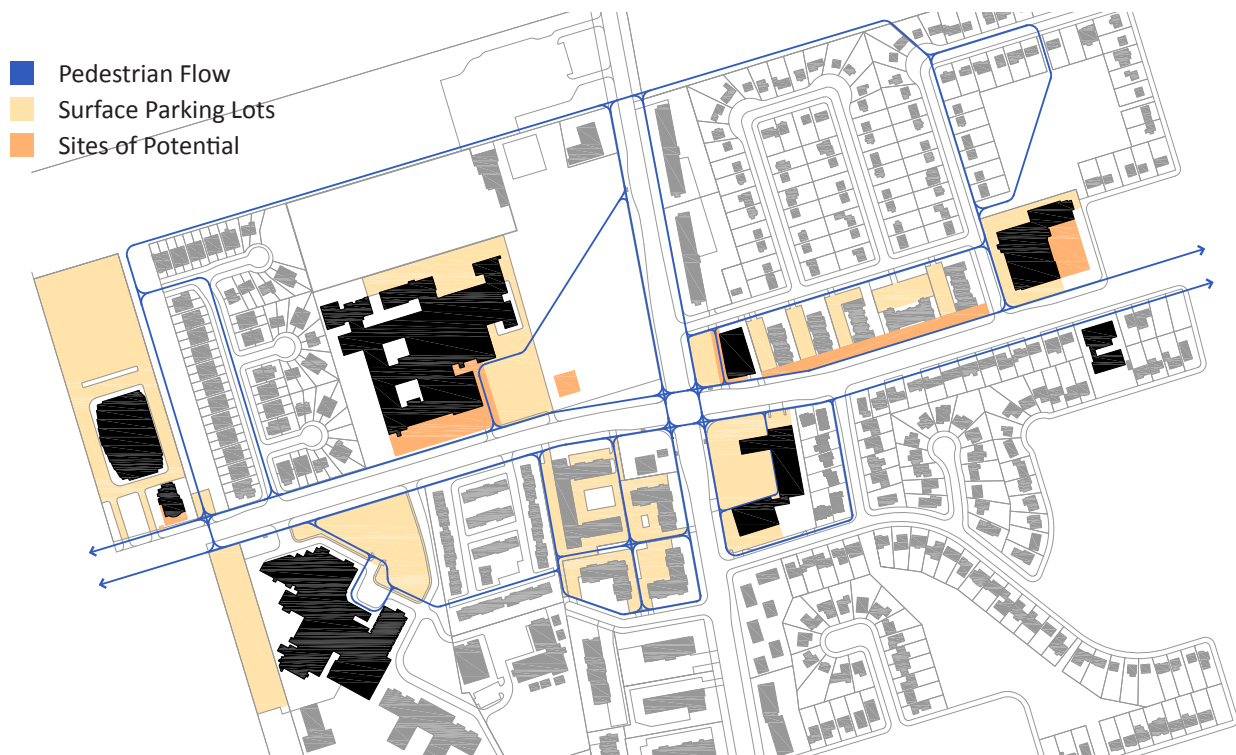


Fig. 4.3 - Site plan indicating pedestrian flow and sites of potential

A NEW INFRASTRUCTURE

With key moments identified along the Finch pathway, attention was turned to both the pathway itself and how it might be re-articulated to better accommodate pedestrian (and bicycle) traffic. While early design studies explored a highly integrated infrastructure, which inflected itself at the moments of potential just discussed (see Fig. 4.4), this was ultimately deemed to be too monolithic, inflexible, and cost-intensive to be a viable response. Aiming for a more sensitive response, one of the first decisions was to simply widen the surface of the path. Constructed of the same pre-cast concrete slabs which make up the majority of sidewalks in the city, the pathway currently privileges the means of construction over the user. By widening the path, however, pedestrians would feel less alienated by both the auto-centric scale of the neighbourhood and the narrow walking surface. The widening also created the opportunity for a separation of functions. The path could now be envisioned as accommodating of pedestrian and bicycle traffic, as well as providing a platform for information display (See Fig.4.5). A fourth function, that of a rain-water bio-swale, was also envisioned for the path but not developed. Materially, the new pathway was envisioned as an in-situ concrete surface, divided up by expansion joints that widened and contracted as the public property allowed and differentiated using different coloured admixtures (See Fig. 4.6).

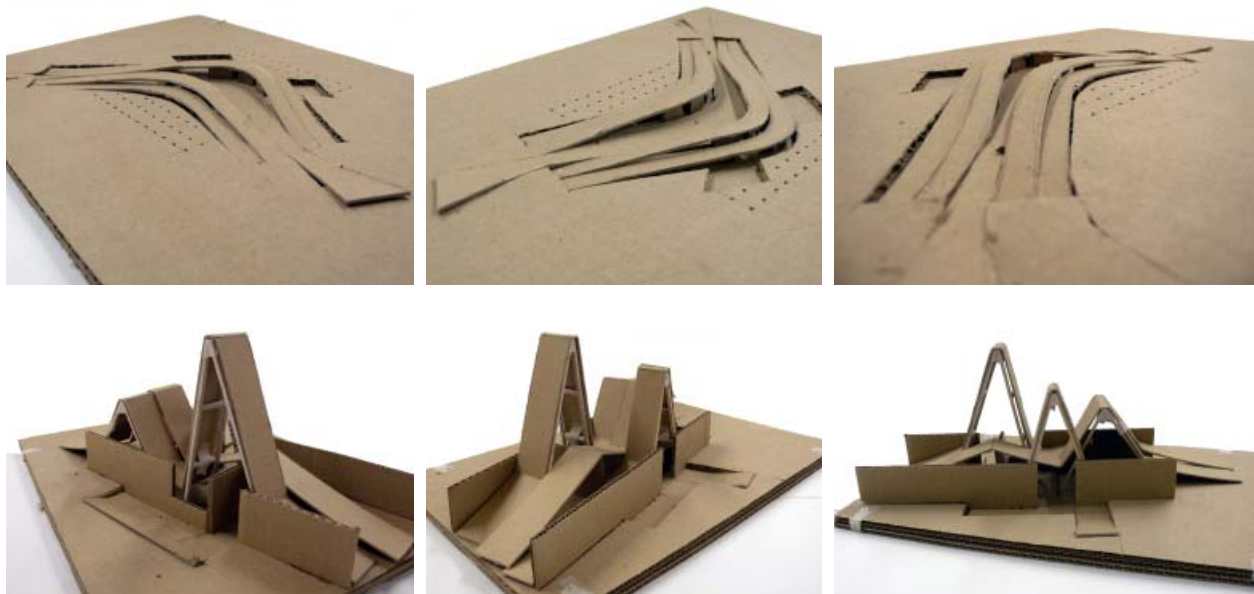
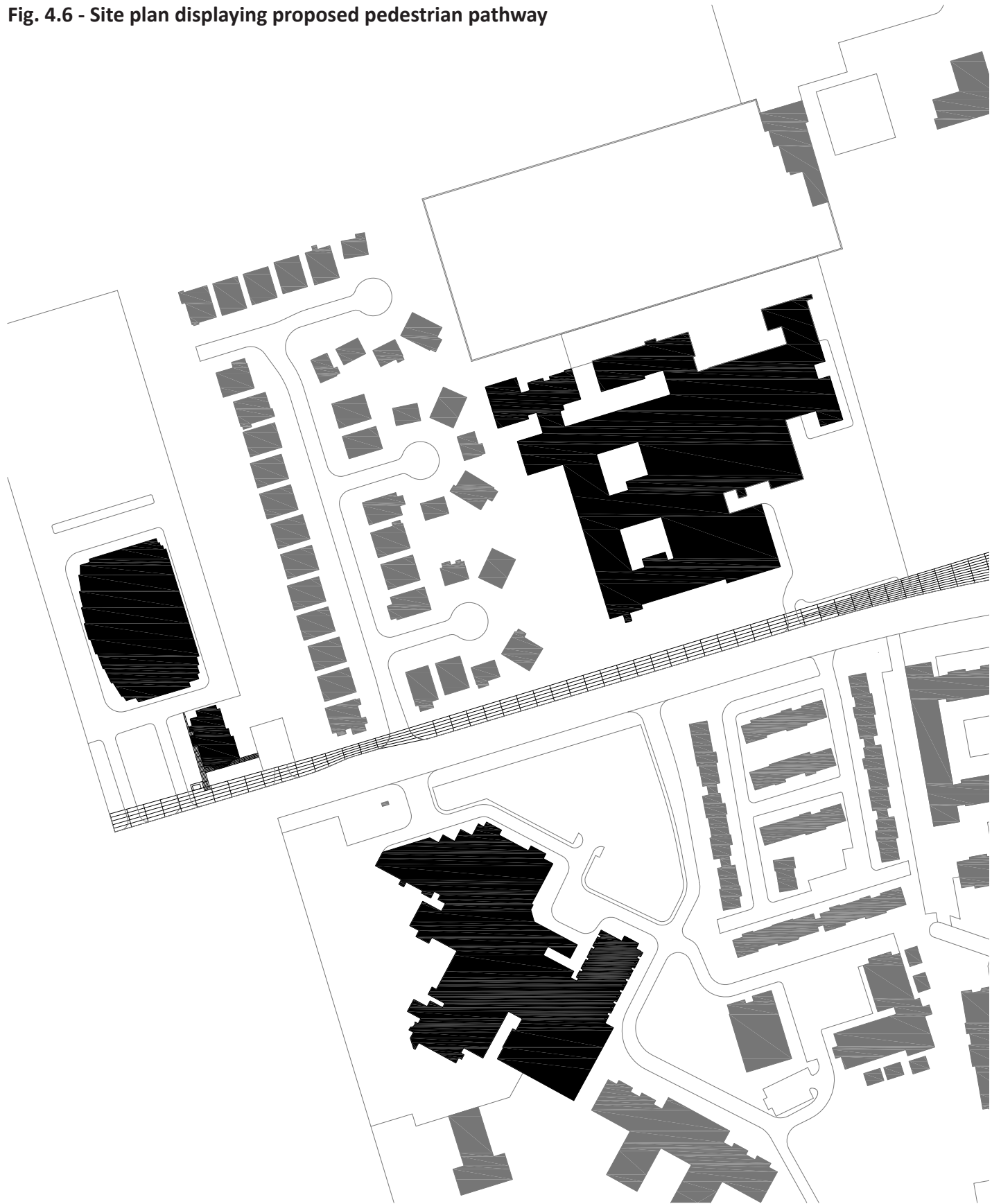


Fig. 4.4 - Form studies for a new pedestrian infrastructure



Fig. 4.5 - Diagram illustrating proposed pedestrian infrastructure

Fig. 4.6 - Site plan displaying proposed pedestrian pathway





HYBRIDIZING THE BUILT FORM

With a preliminary idea of how the Finch pathway might be enhanced, I began to explore how it may be engaged by the built form on the street. One site, which had been a focus of much design research early on in this thesis, was the strip mall on the Northeast corner of Bathurst and Finch. Originally, envisioned as the locus of the new community hub in the neighbourhood, a design was undertaken for a building that enhanced the programmatic hybridity of the hub by creating opportunities for informal gathering and recreation (See Fig. 4.8-4.11). Expanding upon the existing strip mall, a second level was projected across the parking lot in a manner that created a central, enclosed public space. Within the building, the standard program of the hub was enhanced by a complimentary program of a café, community garden, and rooftop basketball court. Architecturally, the form derived from a desire to allow the circulation to flow from the street and through the building as if they were an extension of each other.

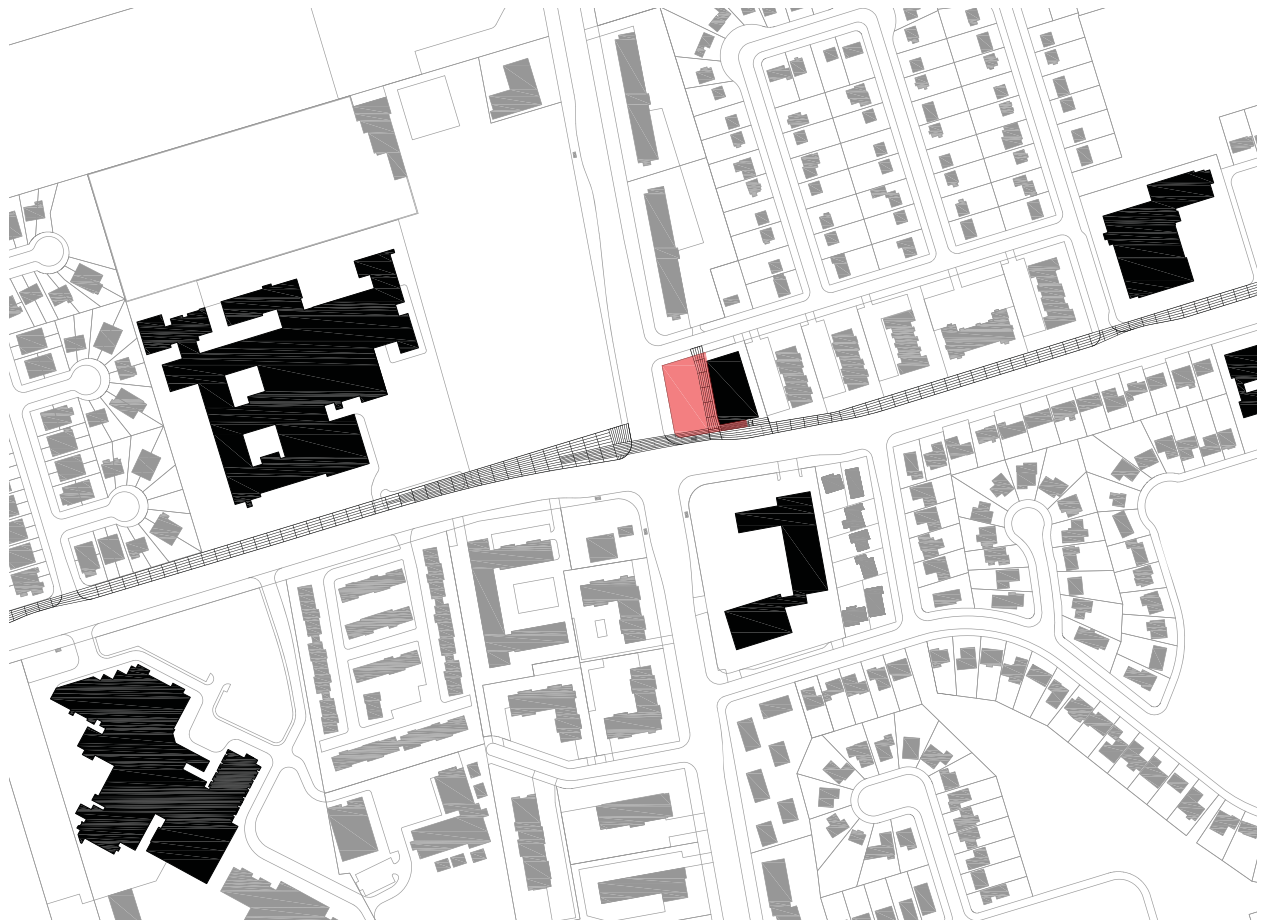


Fig. 4.7 - Site plan indicating the location of the strip mall intervention

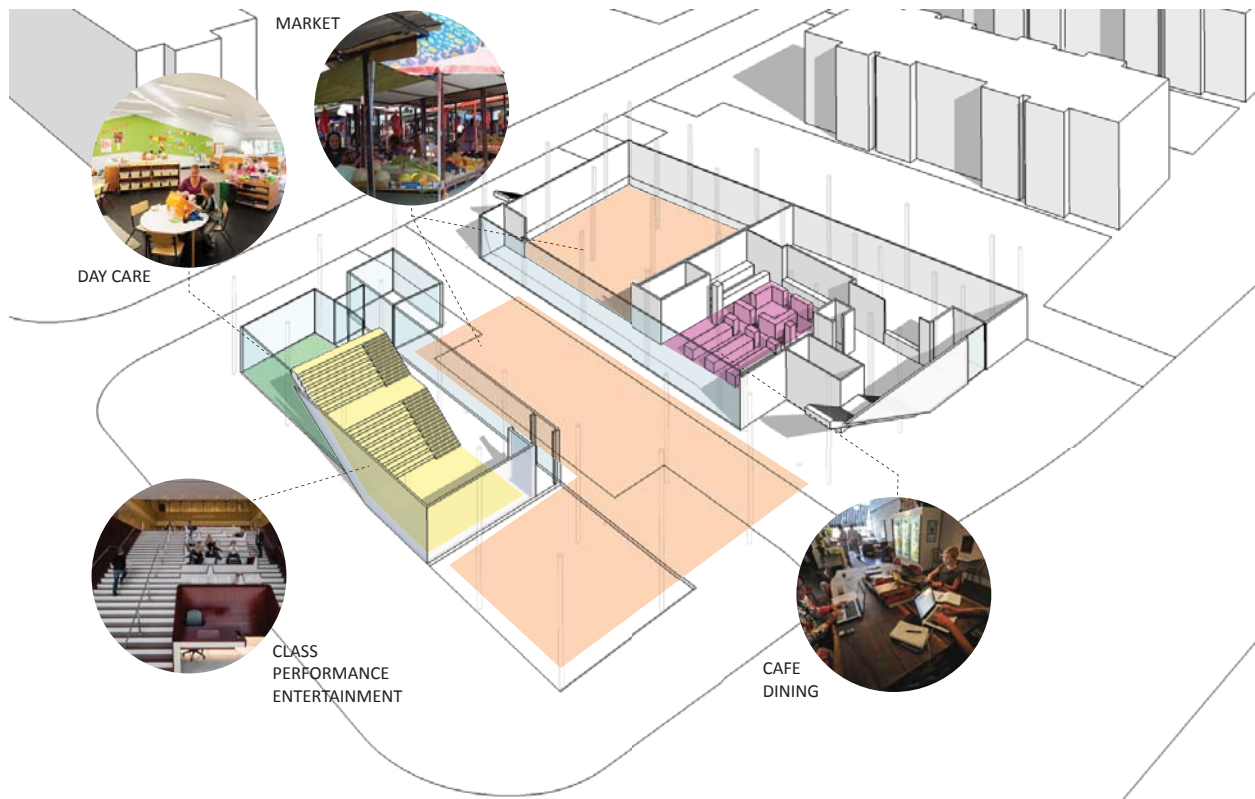


Fig. 4.8 - Preliminary design of the ground floor of the new community hub

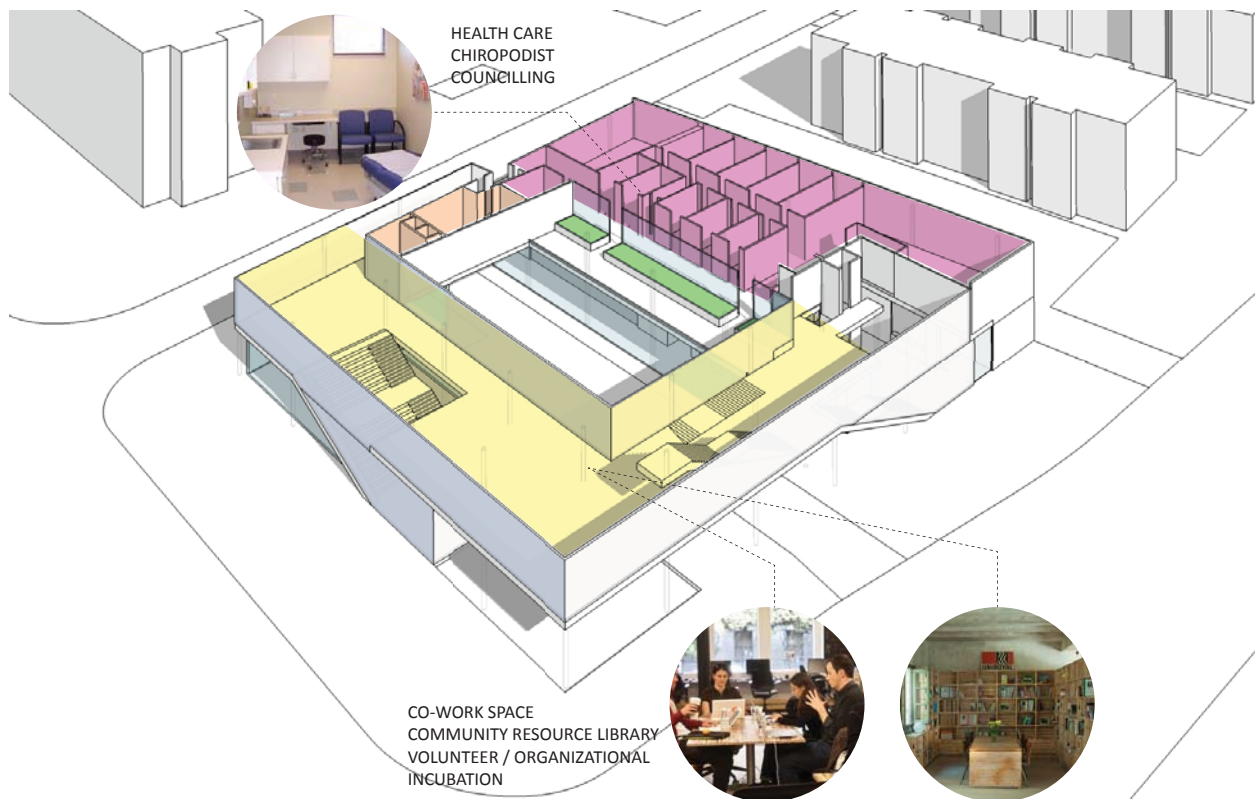


Fig. 4.9 - Preliminary design of the second floor of the new community hub

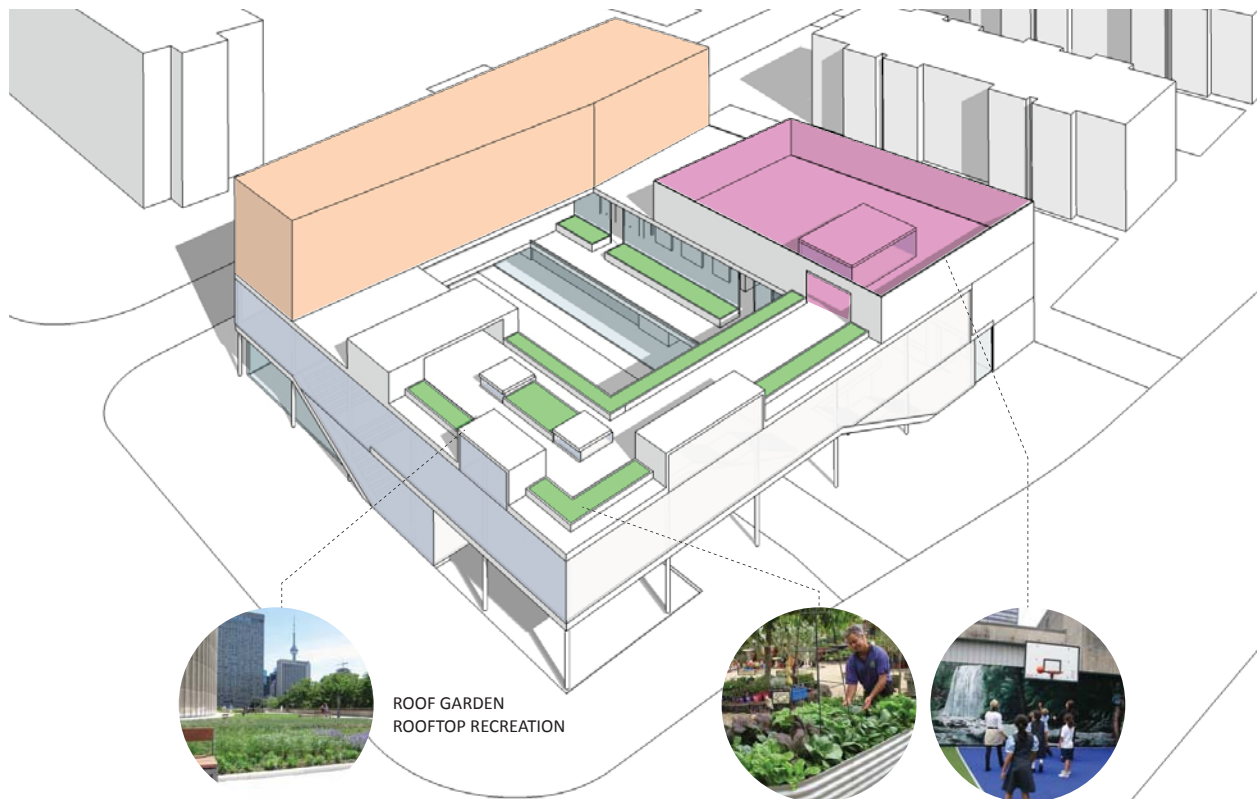


Fig. 4.10 - Preliminary design of the roof of the new community hub

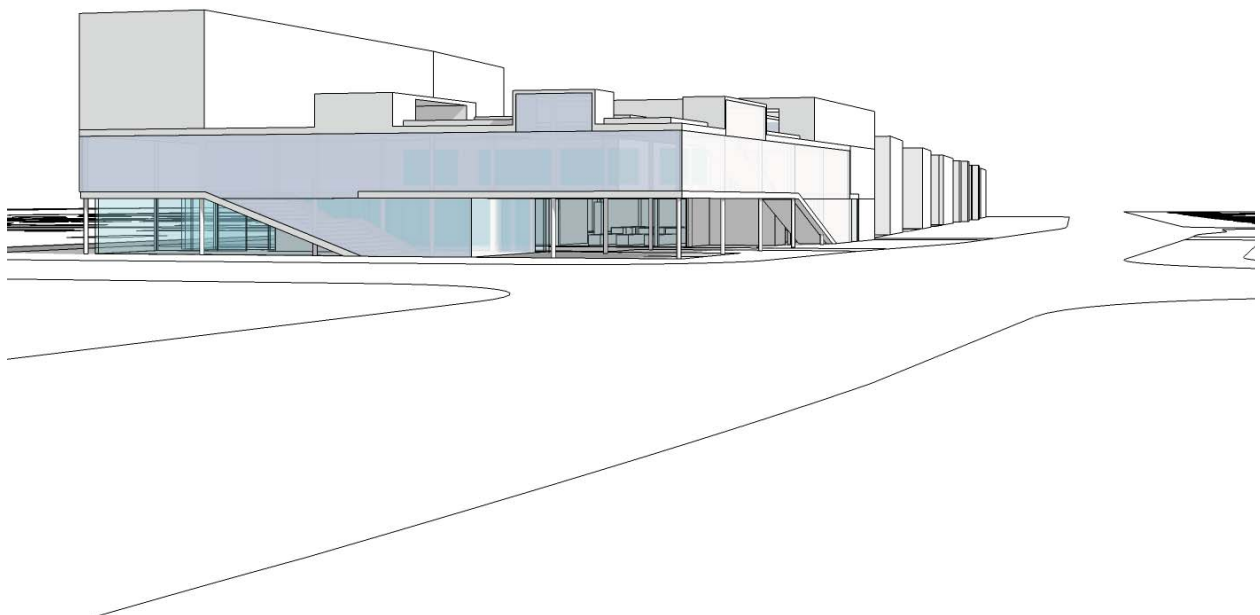


Fig. 4.11 - Street view of the preliminary community hub design

Within the paradigm of urban acupuncture, however, a new proposal seemed appropriate, whereby only a modest intervention was developed in order to “open up” the existing strip mall (See. Fig. 4.12). Within this scheme, only the units directly adjacent the pathway were overtaken, and a multi-functional stair was introduced to offer a locus for informal presentations and gathering, while also ushering a flow from the street up to the community space at the second level of the building. Also introduced was a market structure parallel to the shops of the strip mall. The intention of this punctual intervention was to create an intensified market experience at certain times of the week. On weekends, the market structure would offer a framework for farmers and local chefs to set up stalls to sell produce and cooked goods - the result being an enlivened pedestrian “alley way” built upon the existing parking lot.

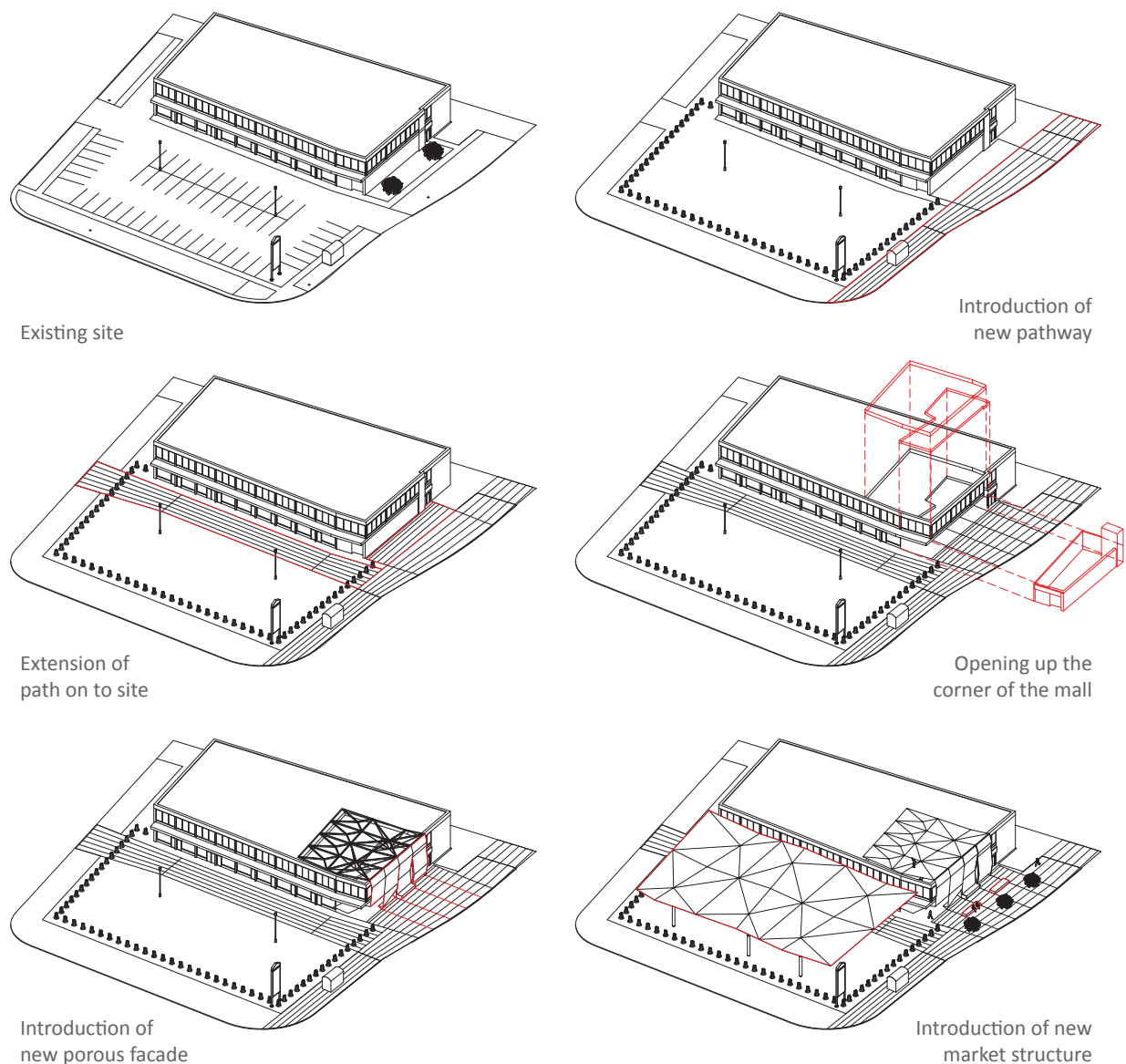


Fig. 4.12 - Strip mall site development



Fig. 4.13 - A view of the south-west corner of the existing strip mall



Fig. 4.14 - A view of the south-west corner of the strip mall with the new stairwell and market structure



Fig. 4.15 - A view of the south facade of the existing stripmall



Fig. 4.16 - A view of the south facade made “porous”

The final site explored along the “Finch Path” is the Northview library, located a block west of Bathurst Street. With a large, south facing reading room, the library is one of the few moments along the path where the interior use of the building engages with the street. Using this as a starting point, a café structure was envisioned, which would act as a meeting point along the path and as an interface between the path and the library. Addressing the highly contingent nature of the project, the café was designed as a highly portable structure serviced by a snack bar-style counter located adjacent to the parking lot. Whether a spot for summer picnics, a coffee break, or outdoor reading, the role of the café is to bring life from the library outside, and life on the pathway to the doorstep of the library.



Fig. 4.17 - Site plan indicating the location of the library intervention



Fig. 4.18 - Isometric Drawings of the Northview Library and the proposed cafe intervention



Fig. 4.19 - A view of the south facade of the existing Northview Library



Fig. 4.20 - A view of the new cafe structure oriented towards the main reading space of the library



Fig. 4.21 - A view from the interior of the library looking out to the new cafe

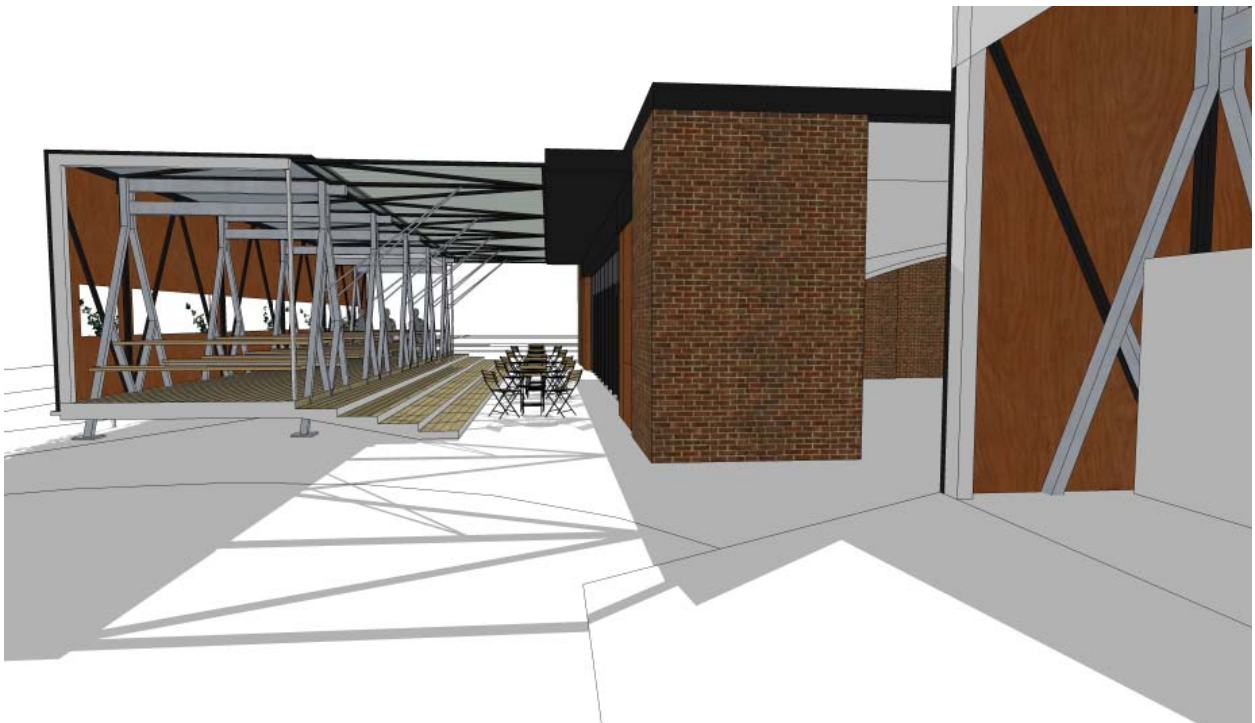


Fig.4.22 - A view showing the relationship between the existing library and the punctual intervention

5. Conclusion

This thesis began by discussing the challenge North American cities face in attempting to bring new vitality to the automobile suburbs that proliferated from their centres after the Second World War. The broad statement this thesis makes is that this lofty goal cannot be achieved by built form alone, regardless of how innovative. The success of a neighbourhood is contingent on a great variety of interconnected factors that go well beyond the spatial ordering of cities. This understanding of neighbourhood necessitates the critique of top-down master planning that inspired this project.

Tabula rasa redevelopment schemes originate from the pretense that built form can control history and process. The reality is quite the opposite. Cities are the result of a dynamic interplay of processes that require time and nurturing to be productive. Comprehensive planning approaches often circumvent these processes, eventually resulting in neighbourhoods that lack the community life upon which future vitality rests. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that designers have no role to play in addressing the social fragmentation that results from auto-centric built fabrics.

Strong neighbourhoods can grow incrementally with the assistance of architects. As the research in chapter three displayed, architects have a unique ability to recognize the influence that space has on our social interactions. They also have the ability to recognize the potential of places to play a greater role in the public life of a neighbourhood. Since residential neighbourhoods are rarely devoid of an impetus for change and improvement, when sites with potential are cleared of impedances, this impetus can take hold and incite processes of regeneration from within. Such an approach is akin to the activation therapy of acupuncture, hence the title of this thesis.

In attempting to apply the concept of urban acupuncture to the specifics of a site, the design research focused on the specifically architectural themes of intensified program and threshold articulation. While such themes behold great potential for enriching the suburban experience and increasing opportunities for informal socialization, limitations must be recognized. Suburban neighbourhoods, by their very nature, rely upon strong connections to urban cores for their survival. Where this connection does not occur a sustainable public life is not likely to be found. In other words, while urban acupuncture recognizes the highly contingent nature of urban sites, it is still subject to it.

In light of this, it might be stated that perhaps the most important lesson to from this research is that architecture is something that exploits and enhances a city rather than creates it. This is a humbling lesson for a student of architecture, but one, which can inform a critical and ethical professional practice.

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