
Access to the City

Public housing and common ground

Master Thesis

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1.

The large scale settlement offers affordable living on an unmet scale. Its essential qualities for residents and urban context cleave to the date of its emerging.

The “East River Village”

Prior to their construction, the site of today’s Jacob Riis, Lillian Wald and Bernard Baruch Houses was a mixed slum with heavy industry on both sides of the East River. Most of the housings were so called old-laws which dated prior to 1901. Hygiene standards and overpopulation as well as the drive of the ruthlessly ambitious and influential city planner and politician Robert Moses

were root causes for the implemented modernist restructuring of the area.

Because this area, which is framed by Avenue D, Williamsburg Bridge, FDR Drive and a Con Edison power plant has not made a summarizing name for itself today, in the following of this document it will be referred to as “East River Village”.

»Robert Moses was the catalyst and buffer between theory and practice. He gave the “tower in the park” final economic and political credibility, and also its incredible design mediocrity.«¹

Richard Plunz (1990)



Low East Side, Jacob Riis & Lillian Wald Houses under construction, 1948

Data Source: NY State Archives

[1] Plunz, Richard (1990): A History of Housing in New York City. Dwelling type and social change in the american metropolis, pp. 268



Jacob Riis House

I: 11.73-acre / Jan. 1949 / 1,187 DU / 2,903 residents

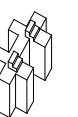
II: 5.94-acre / Jan. 1949 / 577 DU / 1,402 residents

High-rise Riis House



13-14 floors

Low-rise Riis House

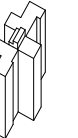


6 floors

Lillian Wald Houses

16.46-acre / Okt. 1949 / 1,857 DU / 4,536 residents

10-14 floors



Baruch Houses

27.46-acre / June 1959 / 2,193 DU / 5,367 residents

13/ 7 floors



Analysis of the urban structure

Connectivity

The East River Village is situated in an area of missing fast track infrastructure. At some points the nearest metro station can be up to 1.5 km away. Most public transportation is done by buses, which are less reliable and slower but grant coverage of the area.

So far there is no direct ferry to the Brooklyn. It takes one up to 45 minutes just to get to the Brooklyn shore and look back at East River Village.

Local amenities

NYCHA housings in the East River Village don't host commercial infrastructure. All amenities for the daily requirements of residents can be found in the nearby East Village, especially along the

Avenues. However there are social and communal amenities within the campus. Kindergartens, a senior center, educational facilities, a center for economic advancement, community centers, a church and Pre-Ks.

Three neighbors

Looking upon East River Village from above, three to four different typologies and three distinguishable concepts of the open space become apparent. From north to south it consists of Jacob Riis Houses I, Jacob Riis Houses II, Lillian Wald Houses, Bernard Baruch Houses.



Lower East Side, map of NYCHA developments

Data Source: NYC OpenData, URL: <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Housing-Development/Map-of-NYCHA-Developments/i9rv-hdr5>



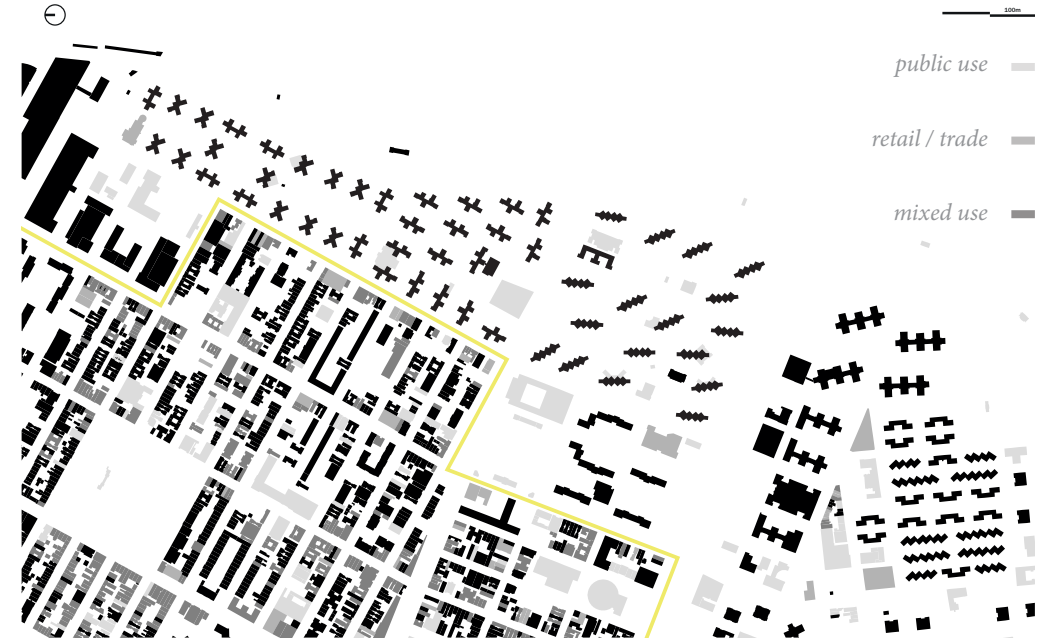
East River Village and the urban context, 2015



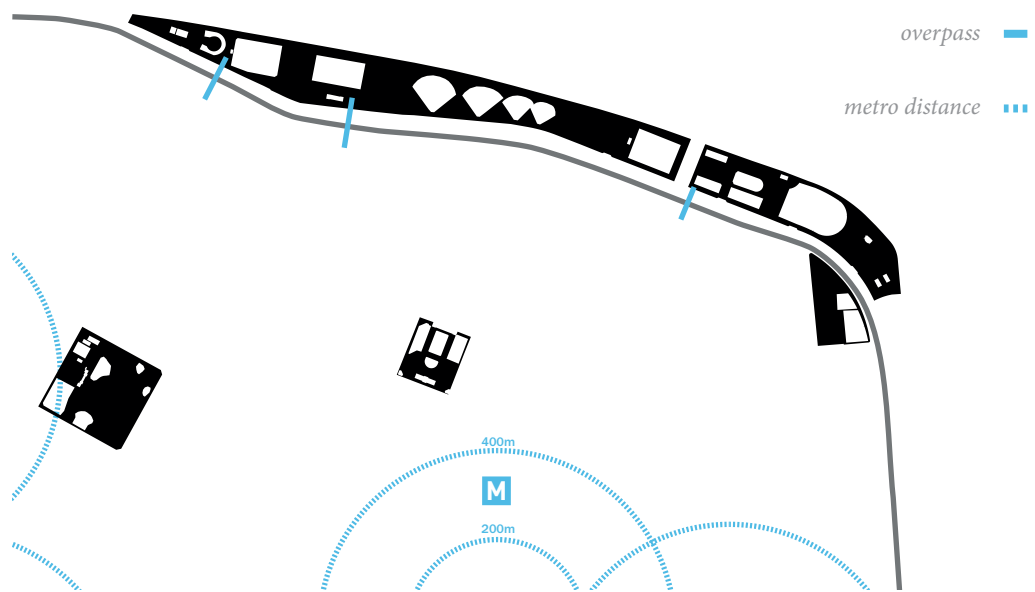
East River Village and the urban context, 2015



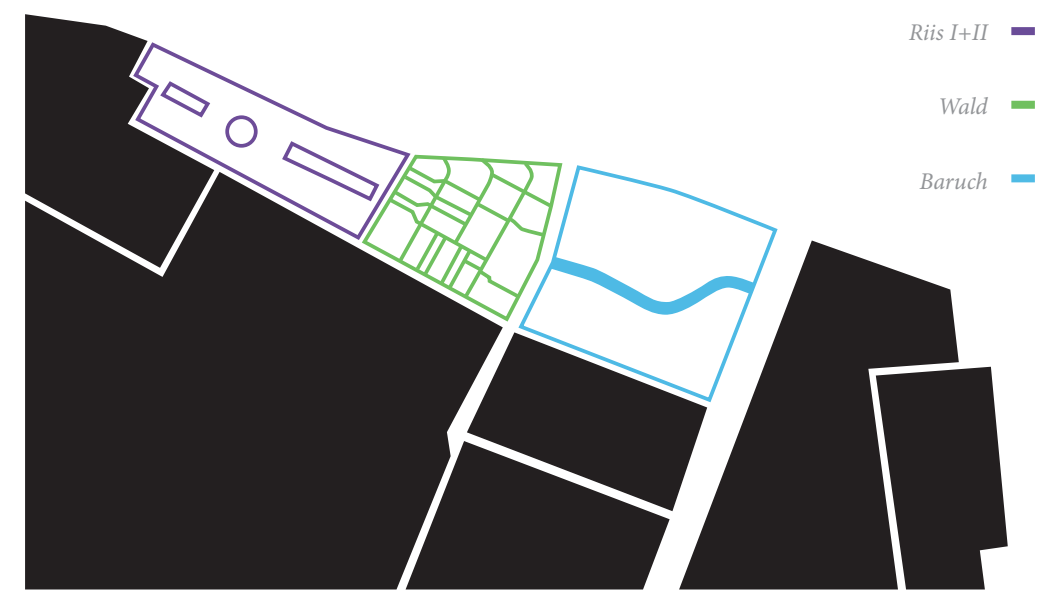
The FDR Drive between park and neighborhood, 2015



Lower East Side, Local amenities



Lower East Side, Connectivity



Lower East Side, Three neighbors

A prototypical unit in East River Village

This example of a two-bedroom apartment on the Lillian Wald campus displays some of the criteria which were applied when the complex was planned. Some of which translated into the sources of problems, many units face today.

The lengthy shape of the floor plan is consequence of the restricted unit size on upper floors – 2 to 3 bedrooms - that was standardized and the centrally placed corridor. Both added to the requirement for additional circulation space within the unit.

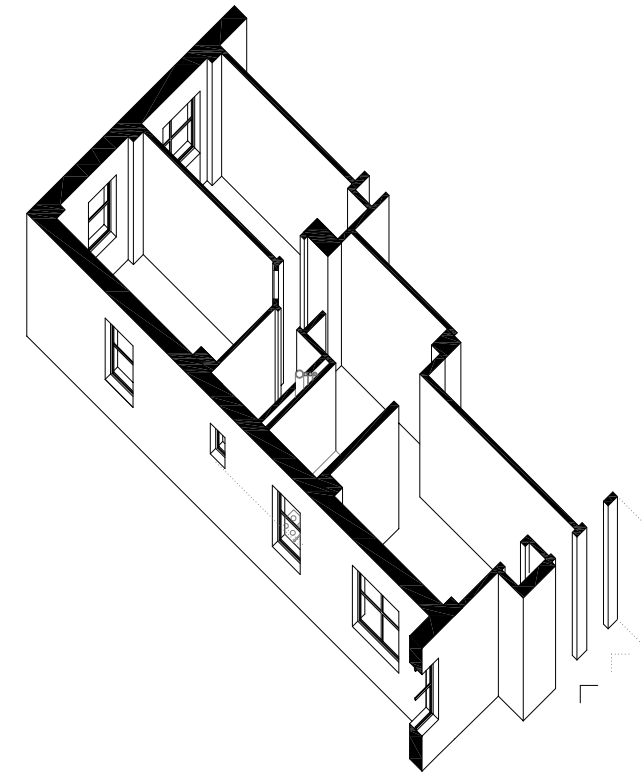
One master bedroom with orientation in two

directions and at least one window in every other room allows for sufficient lighting in most rooms and cross-ventilation.

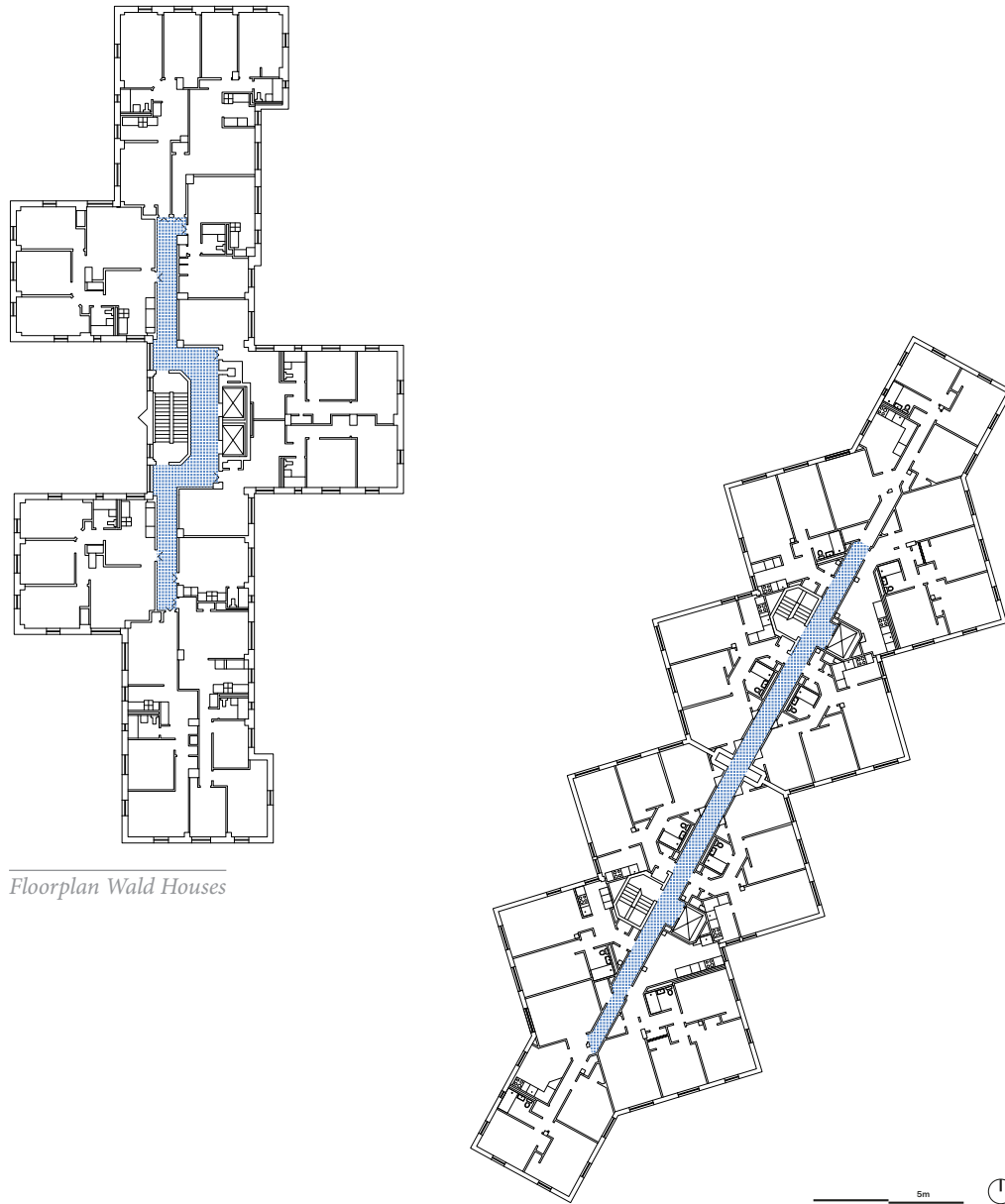
Kitchen and living room are separated by a non-bearing wall. Overall the bearing system of the facades and inner pillars as the static elements enable for a relatively flexible redefining of inner organization. However the placement of sanitation tubing makes some spatial organization awkward. Tubing runs along shafts that are not connected to the bearing elements of the structure and reach into the otherwise freely arrange-able space of the floor plan. Additionally the placement of wet

rooms on the facade produces problems of mold with the change of the seasons, as manual ventilation often fails.

Although the arrangement of partition walls makes sense for a family of three or four in the 1960s, NYCHA's policy forbids self implemented change inside the apartments so that the inner logic has been fixed for the past 65 years.



Lillian Wald House, axonometric drawing of a unit



Floorplan Wald Houses

Floorplan Baruch Houses

The double loaded corridor

All four housing types of the East River Village use the same organizational strategy, which is omnipresent in New York's elevator accessed apartment housings: the double loaded corridor. A typology that allows for maximum rentable space and minimal shared space, in many cases not allowing for natural lighting of the hallway.

In a compact building form it often affects the apartments in terms of no diverse orientation to its surrounding and no possibility of cross-ventilation. Here is where the seemingly arbitrary shape of the Baruch House gains some significance. Although it uses the double loaded corridor and

bars out natural light, the apartments always show at least two different directions of orientation and can be cross-ventilated. However the shared space remains without any qualities of a neighborhood typology.



Greenwich Village, WESTBETH ARTIST HOUSING, double loaded corridor, 2015

Evaluation of thesis 1



Jacob Riis Houses, 2015

Residents communicated to us a feeling of powerlessness towards the local government. Representation of the needs for the low to extremely-low income groups seems to fail while the urban landscape remains cut off from the neighboring context of the grid aligned Alphabet City. It creates a vicious circle that produces the current state of overwhelming poverty and disregard for urban potential.

Emblematic for the status of the public and semi-public space is that many residents define “home” as just the apartment. The words “projects” or “NYCHA campus” or “Lillian Wald 09” do not convey significant identity. Neither the campus nor the building provide enough qualities which can provide a feeling of being home. Instead infrastructure, circulation space and unmaintained open space make it uneasy during the day and a burden at night to walk your way home or to go out.

Administration and maintenance services of NYCHA are to the largest part perceived as rigid and produce distrust among the residents. Bureaucratic obstacles are often times too high for self-implemented improvements. However, without government intervention, NYCHA remains

incapable of acting due to nearly \$17 billion in unmet capital needs.¹

Weather economically or racially, in any of the five boroughs, NYCHA campuses develop a segregating character too often.

However, the mere typology of the brick wall, high rise, multi-family apartment housing alone does not create a stigma today. Many so called “projects” which were glorified in Hip Hop culture as homes to violence, crime, drug trade and abuse, today find themselves to be precious urban resources and attractive to a diverse clientele.

The quality of the housing unit has suffered in technical terms. Most have never been refurbished and go towards being 70 years old. However, in terms of inner logic and contemporary credibility the modernist typologies show plenty of potential and adaptability.

Responsibility lies with NYCHA to enable the adjusting and optimizing of the asset. So far the Authority has failed to present a clear vision to its residents and the city.

»Where are the local politicians to defend us?«

Resident at community meeting

[1] City of New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio (2015): NextGeneration NYCHA. URL: <http://www.on.nyc.gov/nextgeneration>, p. 6

2.

Stability, local identity and the ability for self-representation in urban large scale settlements depend on it's neighborhood organization and it's self-perception in the city context.

Workshop

In February 2015 we were given the opportunity to co-design and partake in a workshop with pupils of the East River Village, who were in the process of earning the high-school degree. Over the course of two hours we collaborated with them and their coach Kathleen Brennan to find out what their living experience on the NYCHA campus is like and what perspectives they imagined for the neighborhood and themselves.

Word Flip

The Word Flip exercise asked students to write down a representative term that described the challenges on the NYCHA campus and their personal solution on the back of the same paper. Holding the messages up for photos, they became the bulletin boards of their personal agenda. Safety, cleanliness and the sense of community were the deficits they outlined.

Tools

Together with the Columbia students we developed three different tools of formal engagement with the students. This exercise took place two weeks before the workshop and with revisions from our professor Kaja Kühl. The studio decided to further develop four suggestions, three of which were applied in the workshop and another one informally with residents of the area.



East River Village, workshop "Word-Flip"



East River Village, workshop "Future Collage"

Collages

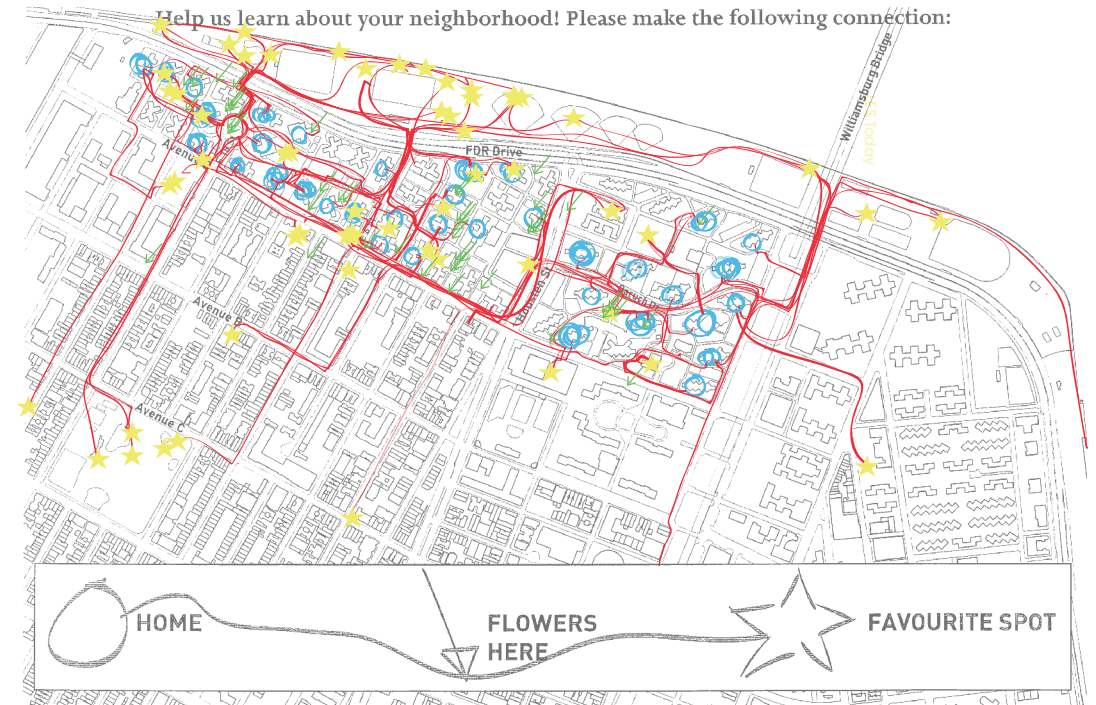
In the collages we asked the students to freely express how they feel about the neighborhood community, the architecture and the city of New York, they call home. The responses – in cut-outs, drawings, writing and crafting - were highly diverse and covered a spectrum from euphoria and pride to disliking and fear.



East River Village, workshop "Future Collage"



East River Village, workshop "Mapping"



East River Village, workshop-tool "Beauty Lottery"



East River Village, workshop "Mapping"

Mapping

In another exercise - the Mapping for local knowledge - we asked the students to use four different colors to rate the quality of a spot or area in the neighborhood. Then we asked them to add more detailed information, that reflected on the qualities of the mark.



East River Village, workshop "Beauty Lottery"

Beauty Lottery

We gathered around 50 different personal pathways and marks which talked about personal memories, transportation, appearances of architecture, quality places inside and outside the NYCHA campus. Here we got the most savage but for our design process precious thoughts and facts.

Evaluation of resident engagement

We found that the issues that were put forth to us can be linked accurately to their historic and administrative sources.

Powerlessness and a role as the recipient of the Authorities (NYCHA) agenda deposes the residents of a feeling of involvement. Most qualities that were pointed out to us referred either to the apartment as being a safe place or the attractions of Alphabet City and East River Park.

The potential qualities of the park like setting, that surrounds the houses were not recognized as such. In fact visions for a future East River Village were overwhelmed by the urgent wishes for cleanliness, safety of the public realm and local amenities.

There is an interdependence of unfulfilled requirements of open space and unrecognized potential.

They can be tackled in a creative process, that would commence improvements on both ends. Because the East River Village is conceptually not aligned to any of its neighboring quarters, the process must devote itself to the area as a specific challenge.

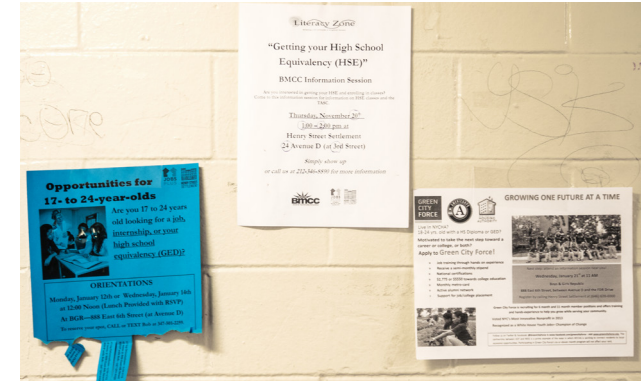
In our approach to qualify the spaces that surround the housing towers, tenants become the driving force. The local knowledge qualifies them as directors of the process.

We believe that building a bench or simply putting it in its spot can change your perspective of an

entire street. In that manner we think that change should advance sensitively on a small structural scale and primarily in the perception of the space as we believe that it bears overlooked qualities.



Baruch Houses, abandoned bathhouse, 2015



Wald House, notices in hallway, 2015



Wald Houses, The Tenants Garden, 2015



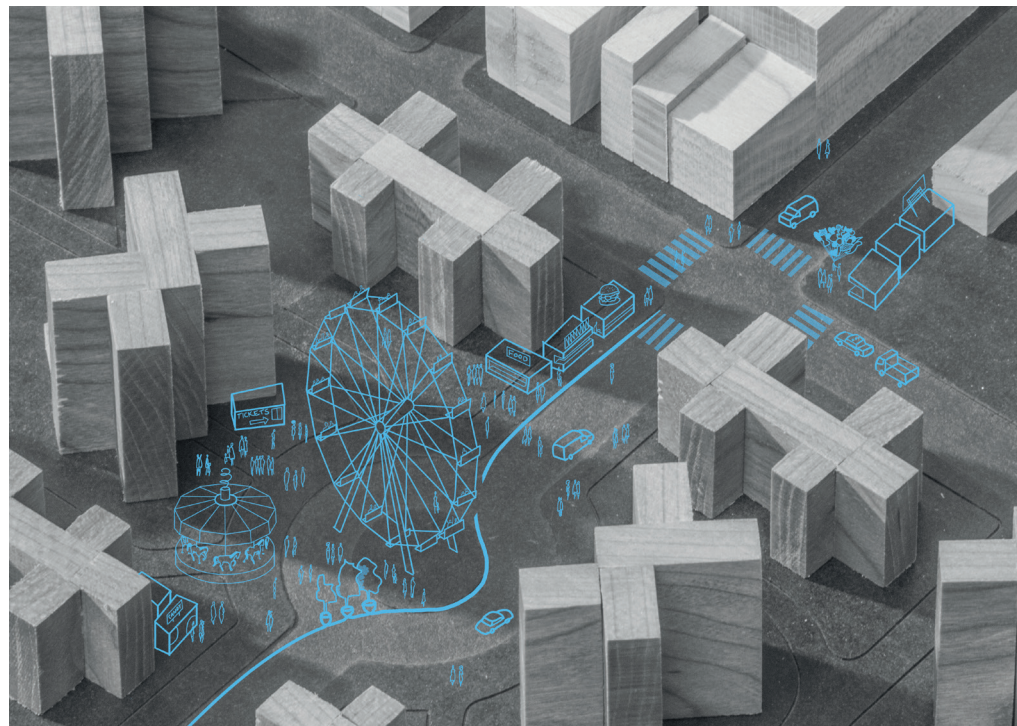
Wald Houses, ephemeral paths, 2015



Ephemerality

The division of the Jacob Riis Houses I and II bears the traffic design of a gestural roundabout. By using potted trees, traffic space can be reduced in size and ephemerally the road provides a central plaza - suitable for events. Markets, concerts and gatherings could be locally organized, respective to resources and local demand. The radiant roundabout, which is placed on an axis with Tompkins Square Park, would root these northern housings temporarily into the urban context of the East Village.

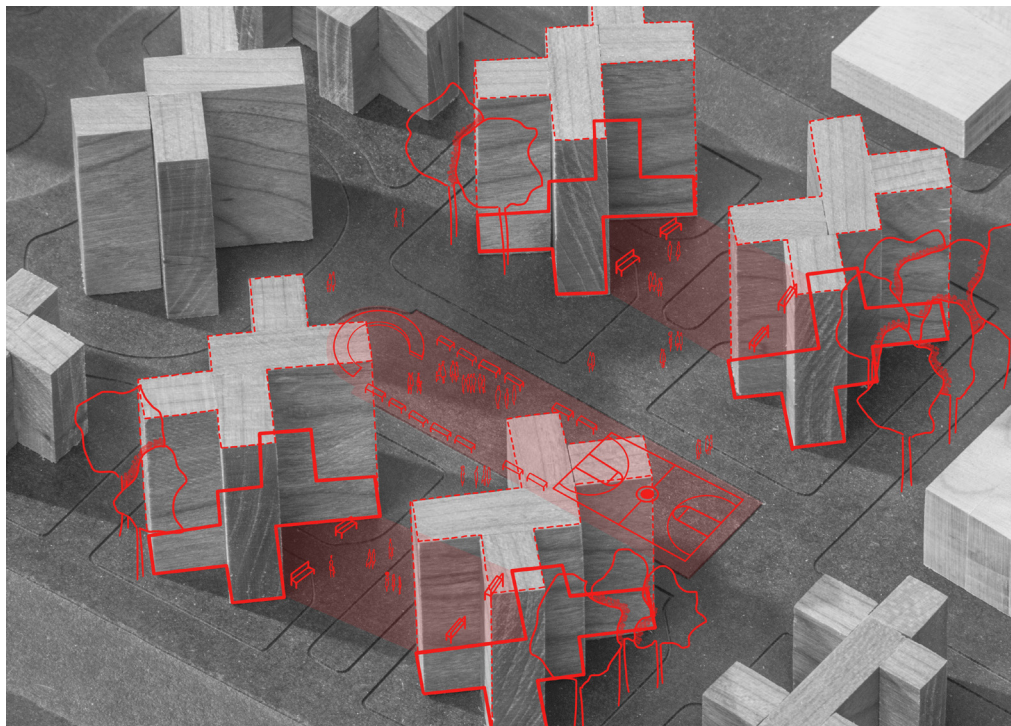
Events of local significance entitles the NYCHA residents to a local identity that is woven into a larger context. It is an opportunity to materialize and represent the neighborhood.

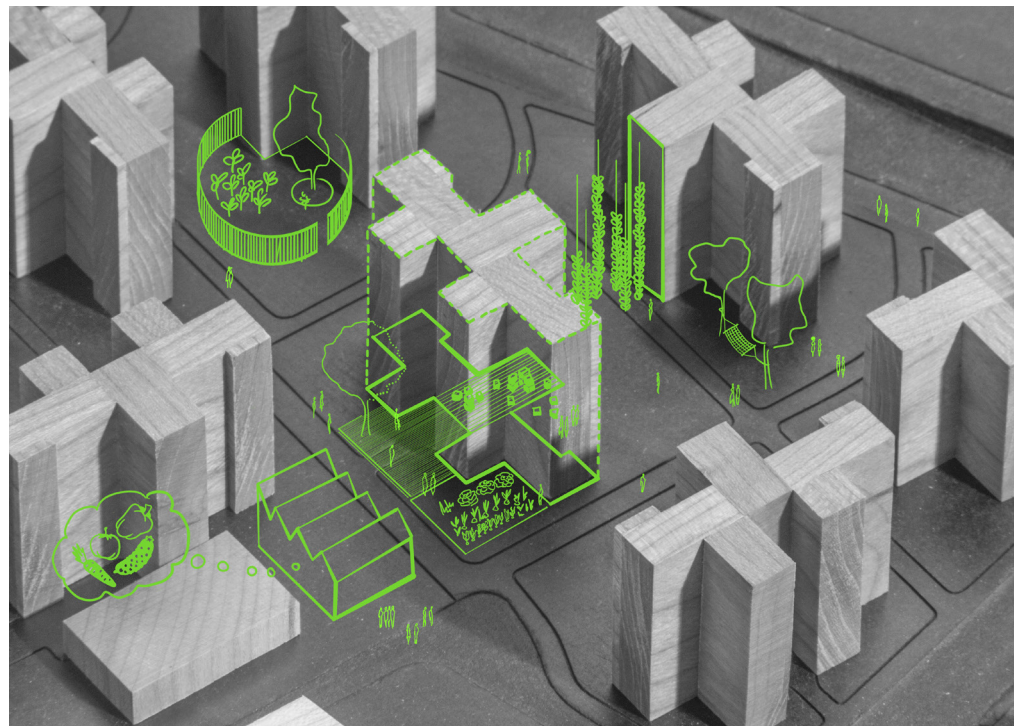


Street Furniture

Benches provide an excellent urban resource. Benches are for sitting, lying down, eating and drinking, pausing, smoking, remembering, thinking, contemplating, waiting, kissing, talking, resting. Workshops bring people together. Workshops are for learning, getting to know your neighbor, discovering talents and improving your skills, making friends, finding common sense. DIY is good for you. DIY is claiming the public realm, taking responsibility, defining your home, executing power, doing your thing, changing your

personal perception of space. We believe that measures that involve a “do it yourself” approach are indicators of the examination of space. It is therefore suitable to be an instrument of learning about the specificities of the space. Whether it will be perceived positively or negatively, it forces a thought that can grow into a reflection about public space and start a process of personal identification with it.





Garden

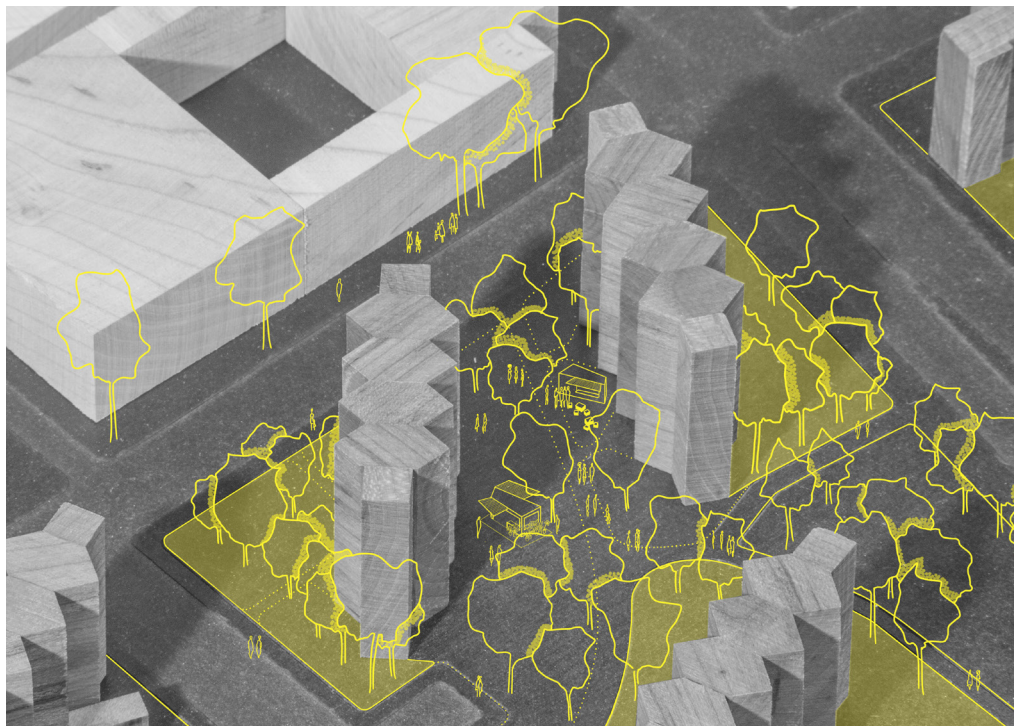
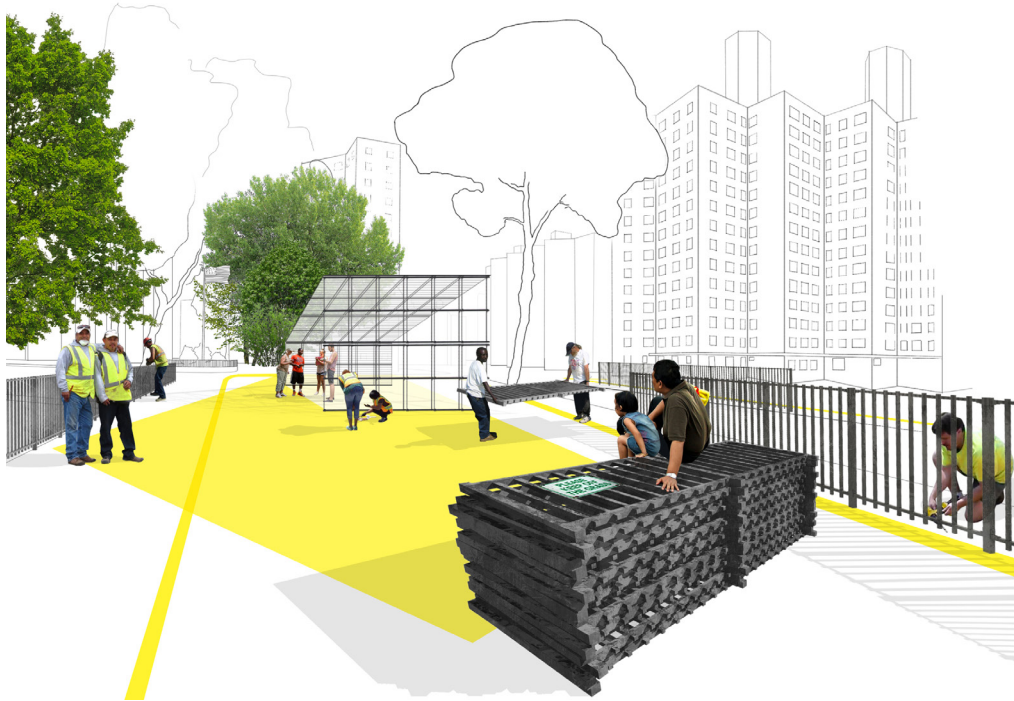
During the course of a field examination we learned that there are many more traces of space appropriation around the Lillian Wald Houses, than in the other regarded typologies. Most of them in the form of garden plots. We found the enabler for this tendency to be the winding shape of the architecture and its placement. It makes the paths dismember into the smallest compartments. An environment that creates many niches for small gardens.

As residents act through gardening the perception of the vast space surrounding the singular structures is free to metabolize towards a more personalized, interchangeable and less given status.

We want to assess to this idea and propose the de-

finition of open space to become subject to neighborhood organization in the form of gardening groups and projects. Neighborhood negotiation and renegotiation with the seasons.

The residents become partners in designing the public realm, building scaffolds from dismantled fences, greenhouses for commercial agriculture and continuing with the appropriation of unused, unprogrammed open space.



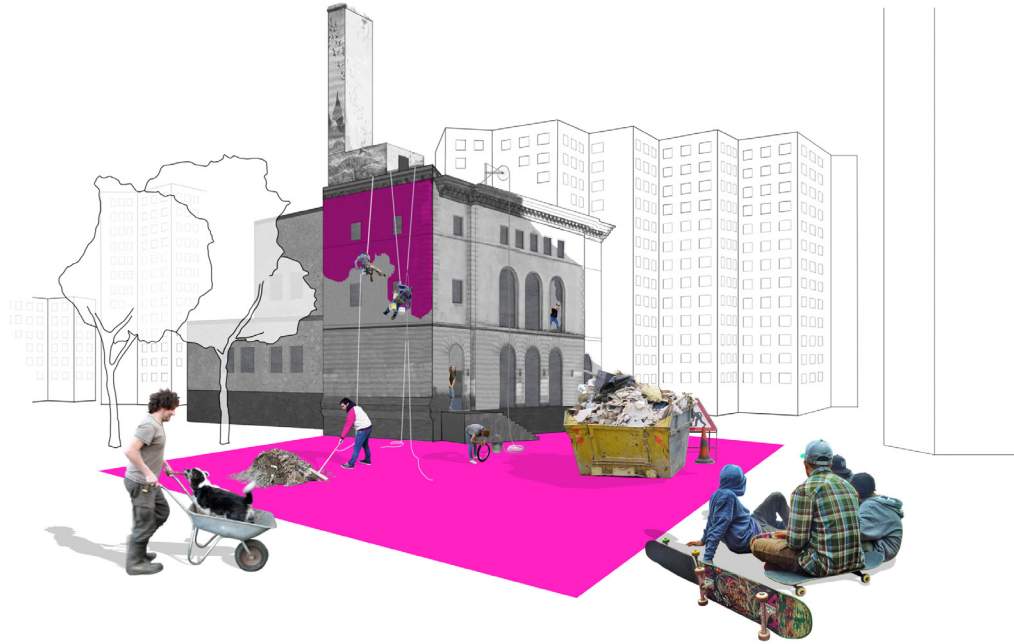
Fences

The array of fences in East River Village implements the criteria of separating and guiding. They are the edges on the board that define different intensities of maintenance and accessibility.

Traces in the February snow showed us how pathways are used informally, regardless of the designated passages. We propose that the criteria for fencing are revisited. They can be instrumentalized to define the public realm. On Avenue D

they can invite the public by creating opening gestures instead of bottlenecks.

In total there are 16223 meters of fence within the entire complex. In our proposal, 5512 meters serve the public in new ways, like being upcycled and welded into greenhouses. Others merely change position in their role as definers of program and assist in the new understanding of public and private spaces.



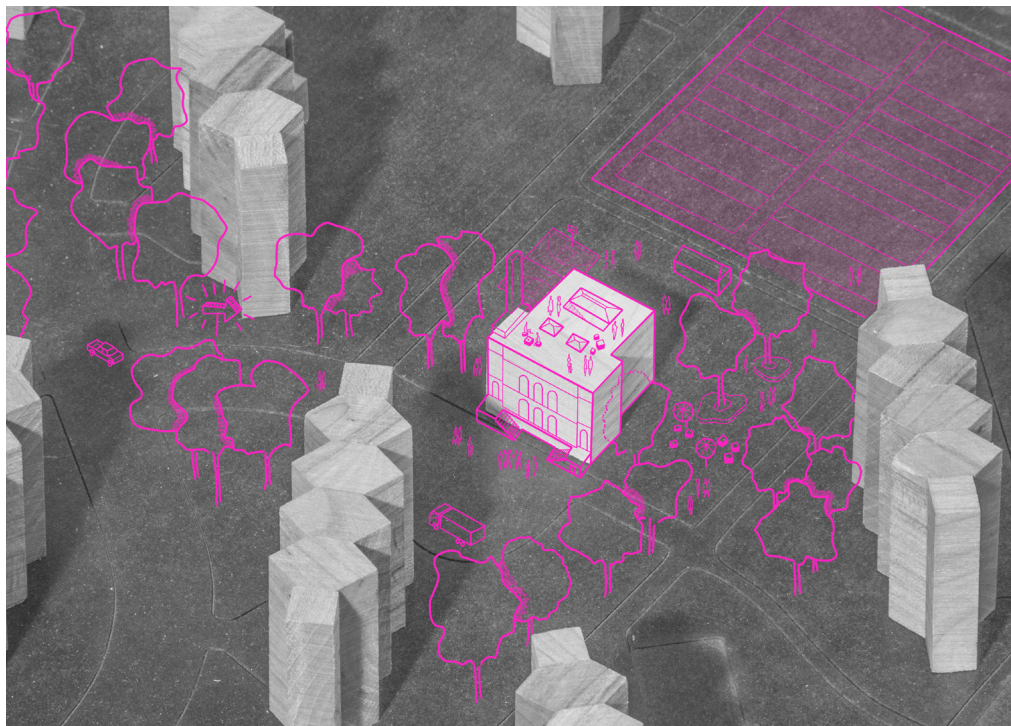
Reactivation

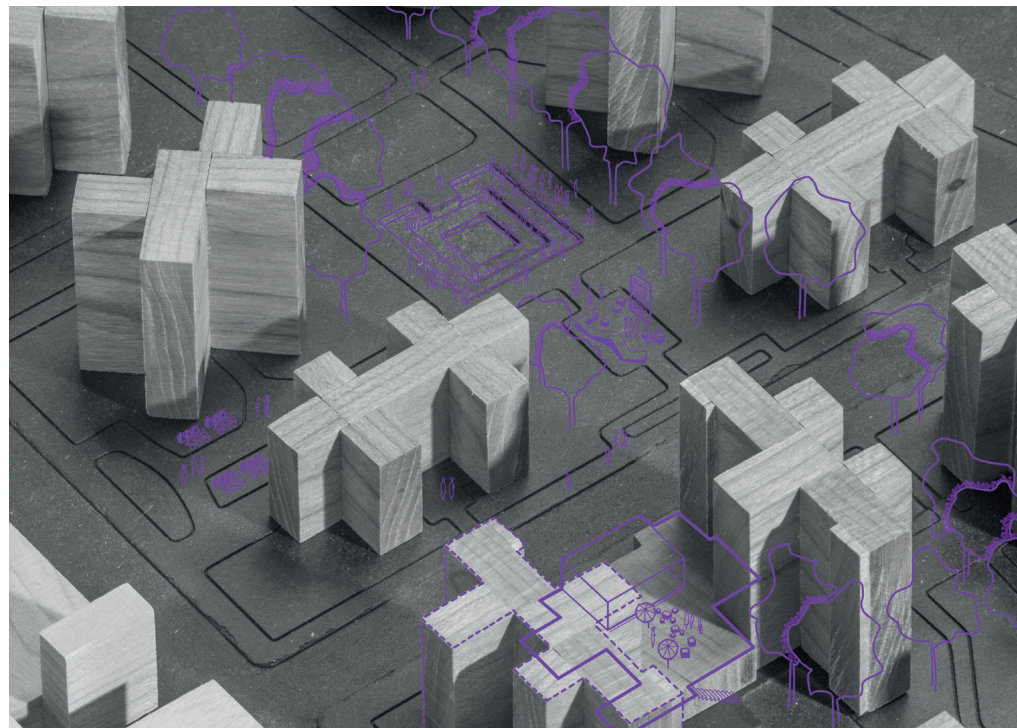
Today the ruinous and former Jewish bathing house, which went out of business after it became an inter-generational hot spot for family recreation, drug trade and a pleasure house stands representative for the contradictory ambitions of landscape without program and topography.

The abandoned bathing house also represents a different set of architectural values within the Bernard Baruch complex. Through a policy of acquiescence it becomes the next project of the squatting culture of Alphabet City.

Charged with different types of daytime activities the bathing house is an acupunctural pinprick of diversity in the homogeneous tissue of housing towers and vast open space.

Its own history of estrangement from its original purpose can find continuation and put a stop to its deterioration. Through the old bathing house, the Baruch complex incorporates a historic relic that can be a source of identity for the area.





Community Spaces

Announcing the long-term strategic plan “Next-Generation NYCHA”, the Housing Authority proclaims ambitions to better target the needs of the community through revisiting the social amenities and enable more community involvement. Our analysis in New York as well as in Neu-Hohenschönhausen let us to believe that the amount of social amenities is actually quite high and rather underutilized. The missing factor is a common presence in its proposition to the residents.

We suggest a new communication system under a common layout. It has to embody the shared vision of a resilient neighborhood. Where today mostly notices on lamp posts, in hallways or bus stations promote community services, we ask NYCHA to invest in a public bulletin that combines the display of different choices with an internet hot-spot.

Evaluation and interpretation of thesis 2

The character and development of the neighborhoods in the Lower East Side of New York is traditionally associated with a history of self organization, protest and demographic concentration of ethnicities. Post-gentrified Alphabet City has shown that the real estate market as well can become core factor for development here.

When combating the deterioration of a public housing neighborhood that is faced with little economic perspectives, a new understanding for its value must emerge. Local knowledge of the factors that render the complexity of a neighborhood have to be identified and articulated. The qualities

that unfold from a unique typology, in a city that defines itself to a high degree by its diversity, have to be made accessible for its dwellers.

Neighborhood organization is required to activate the qualities that cannot be found elsewhere in the Lower East Side, so that they can to become a self-sustained part of the urban context.

We are convinced, that local research associated with interventions that seek processual improvement on a neighborhood scale are suitable to re-qualify the “tower in the park” in East River Village.

3.

The converse about architecture and open space in East River Village must reflect on the local specificities.

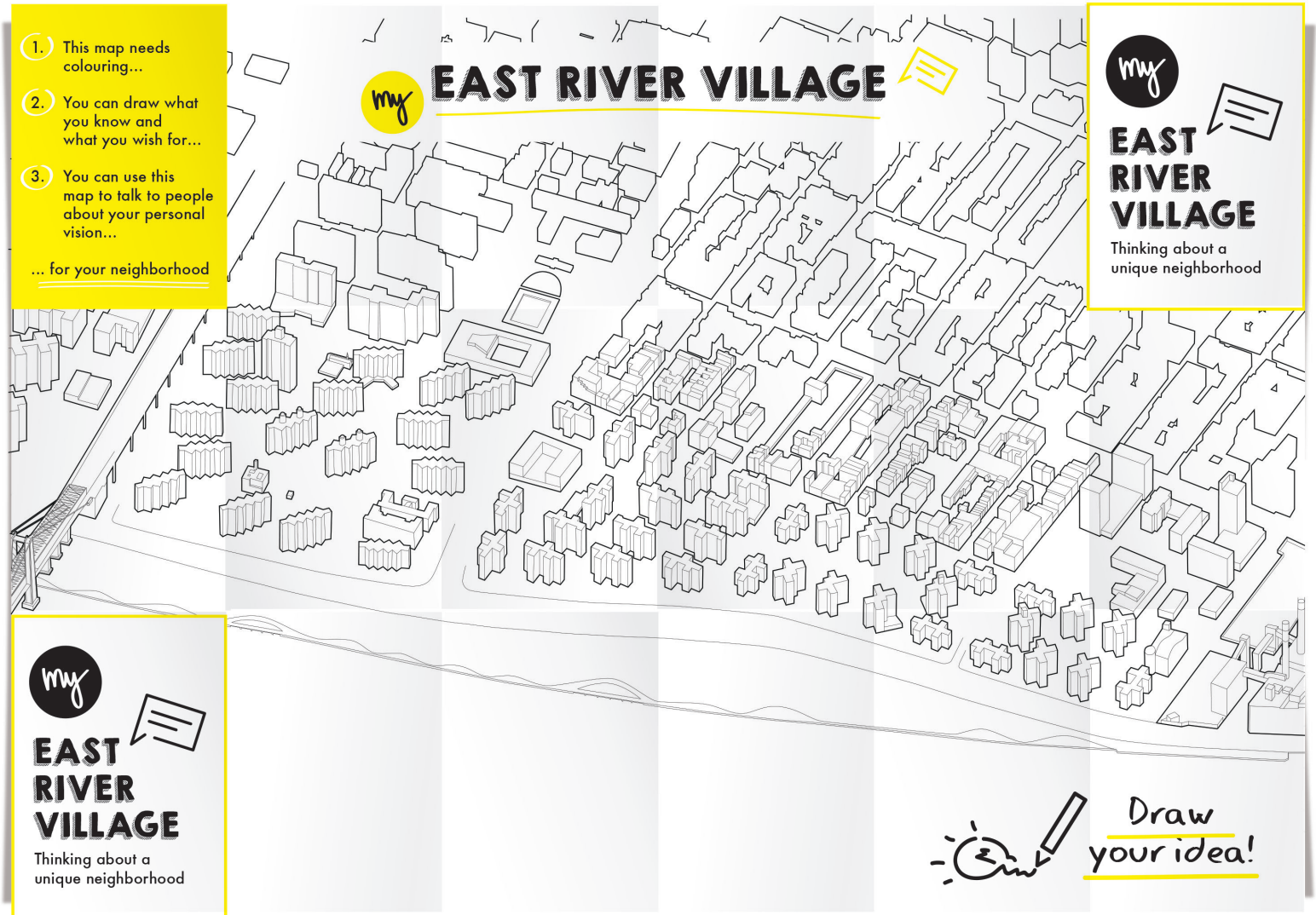
Approach

The NYCHA campus, which we call “East River Village”, has to date not made this name for itself. It is an area that fails to stir any particular interest in the Lower East Side. It provides the city with three pedestrian crossovers to East River Park, but they are mostly circumvented. Three different types of spacial arrangement mark the urban composition of East River Village. They each bear specific qualities for the use and perception of the open space. It is in the open space where residents choose their individually preferred path that leads them home. This path tends to be the fastest and most direct. It can lead through spaces of clear definition and spaces that lack most definition. The reasons for choosing any path can be manifold, however the experience is predominantly being perceived as a burden. We ask the question weather the performed maintenance on all the space should not rather try to achieve clear publicness for some of the space. One accepted quality that can be observed is planning that has manifested a usage in a spot.

Another quality are places of appropriation, where residents took it upon themselves to write the suitable program for a specific locality. Both manage to define a space by either being public and orderly or dynamic and savage. Unfortunately most of the open space has not become subject to any kind of effort and did not transform into a definition, satisfactory to its dwellers. The majority of open space presents itself with an array of local specificity that cannot be captured in a prototypical approach. In order to implement a concept that can attend to the entire area and meet its specific requirements, the local knowledge of the inhabiting population must be solicited. It is key that a prospect can creatively grow in the minds of the inhabiting population. In 2017 – as a measure of flood protection – a damn will be build, which is going to cover East River Drive. East River Park will receive more programming and up to nine additional pedestrian crossovers will be build, connecting the Lower East Side with its waterfront. With new connecti-

vity, East River Village will face challenges. Higher frequencies in communing dwellers, higher prices of local amenities, a convergence to the context of Manhattan. In order for the neighborhood to become an active stakeholder and take part in the shaping of its future development, a new sense of community has to emerge.

My East River Village leaflet



1. This map needs colouring...

2. You can draw what you know and what you wish for...

3. You can use this map to talk to people about your personal vision...
... for your neighborhood

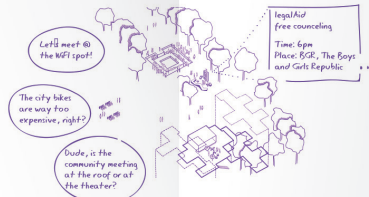
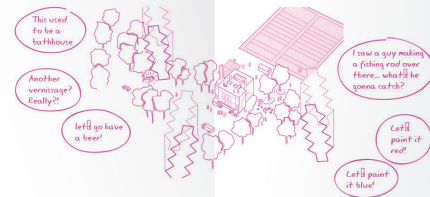
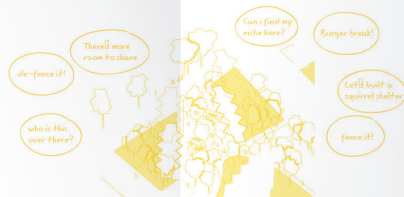
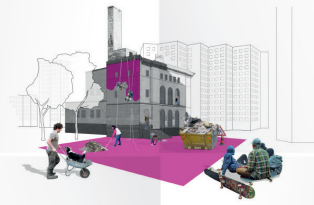
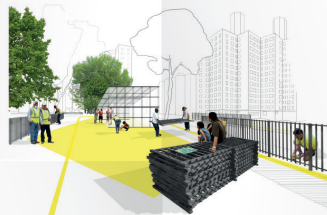
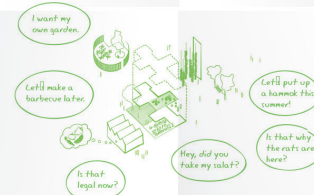
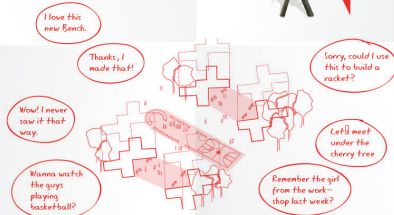
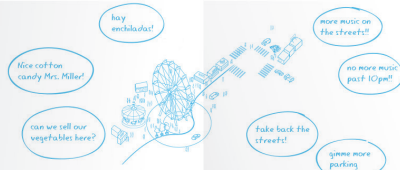
my
EAST RIVER VILLAGE
Thinking about a unique neighborhood

my
EAST RIVER VILLAGE
Thinking about a unique neighborhood

my
EAST RIVER VILLAGE
Thinking about a unique neighborhood

Draw your idea!

These visions are in your hands now!
How does your vision for a future neighborhood look like?



Can you locate these places on the map?

Leaflet

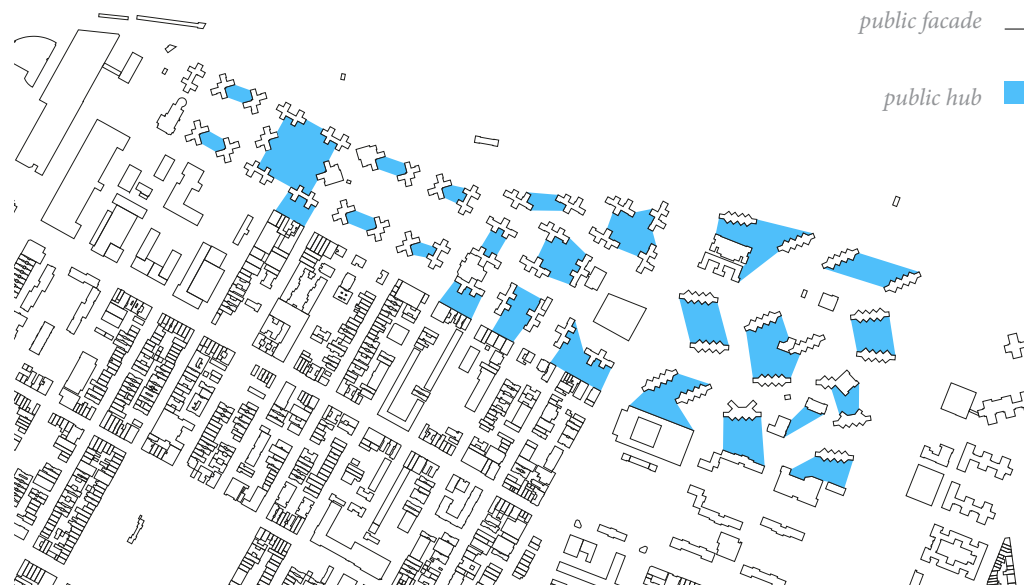
- Offer for individual creative elaboration of the open space
- a tool to enable and enhance communication on the subject of open space design
- a focus on intellectual education
- no promise on implementation



Open space concepts

Publicness

- a continuous definition of public spaces in East River Village
- public space connects to Alphabet City and is generated around each house entrance
- each singular architecture finds spatial partners with whom it creates a public hub



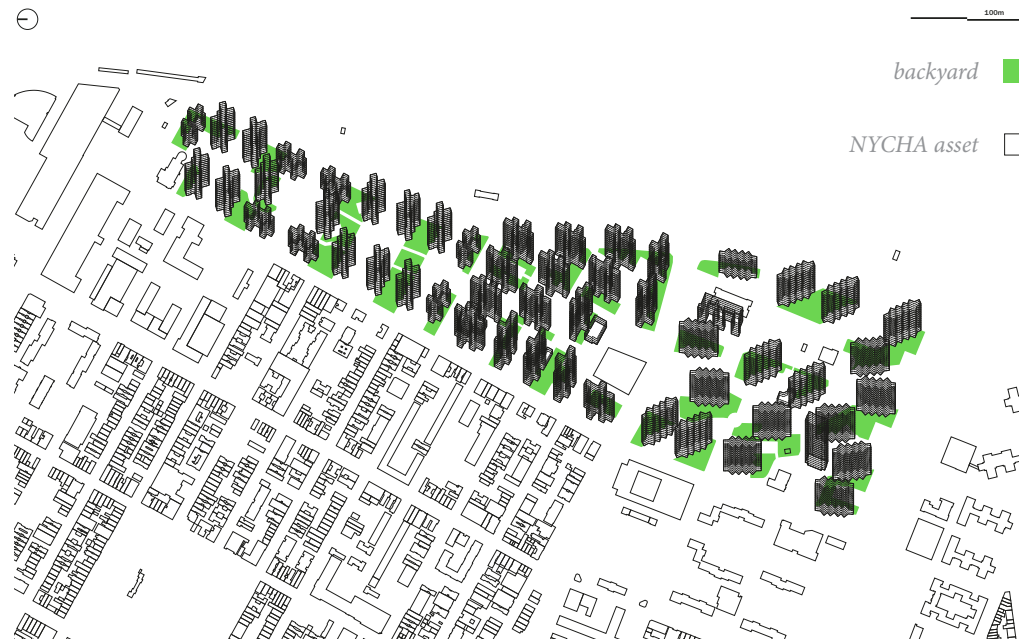
Fences

- rezoning the open space by dismantling and re-arranging fences
- 5512 meter of obsolete fences find new purpose as construction material



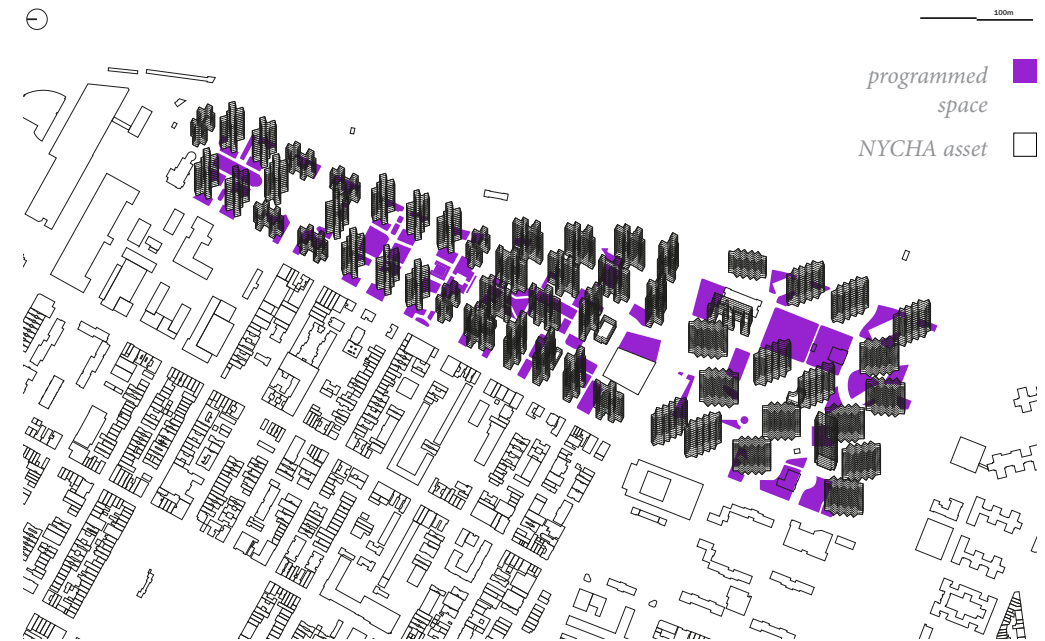
Backyards

- each building obtains a dynamic backyard
- maintenance is assigned to the residents
- the backyards are subtracted from the public realm and re-introduced as spaces of appropriation

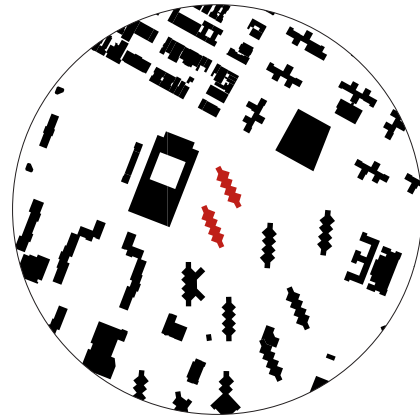


Programmed Spaces

- the present programs (sport, playground, promenade...) become the singular focus of maintenance for NYCHA



Baruch Pilot



We developed an addition of three stories for Baruch Houses 16 and 17, located on the north-western end of the Baruch campus.

The architecture is designed to fit the locally identified requirements of space and program of the address. It is specific and not applicable for all Baruch houses as it aims to be a driving factor of the debate over NYCHA's approach of negotiation and development of its asset without monetary sovereignty.

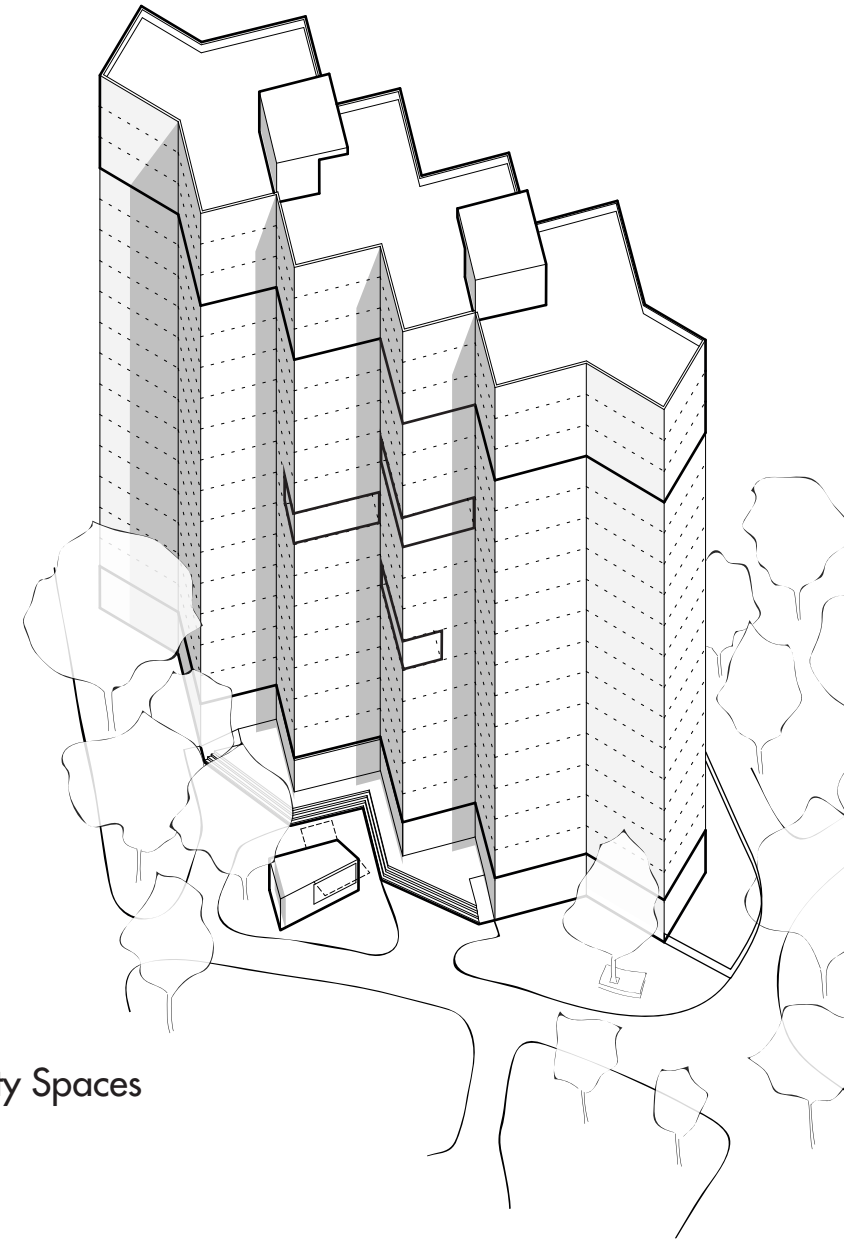
In the proposed case, NYCHA leases the regarded parcels for a symbolic amount to a cooperative, which brings a new capacity to act and commits itself to contractual obligations. In a cross-financing model it is able to capitalize off the ground floor by transforming it into office spaces. The previous tenants are relieved of the threat of flooding and relocated to the added, upper floors. The ground floors renovation includes a refurbishment

of the NYCHA facility for community service and connects it through an opening gesture to the public realm. Here the cooperative can further capitalize off two kiosks. A model that has shown to be dynamic and supports local amenity service. Revenues of the cooperative, cap the rents of the new structure where new residents mix with NYCHA tenants.

Following up on the contract - after construction of the new housings is complete - the cooperative transforms singular housing units of a central position, into communal spaces. The cooperative then must provide housing on the upper floor for the affected. An intervention that sheds light on the double-loaded corridor.

The friction that the negotiation approach generates, its outcome and radiance, make the case of communal effort for an individual prospect.

- + Housing
- + Residents
- + Public Space
- + Program
- + Building Access
- + Community Spaces

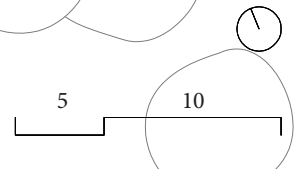
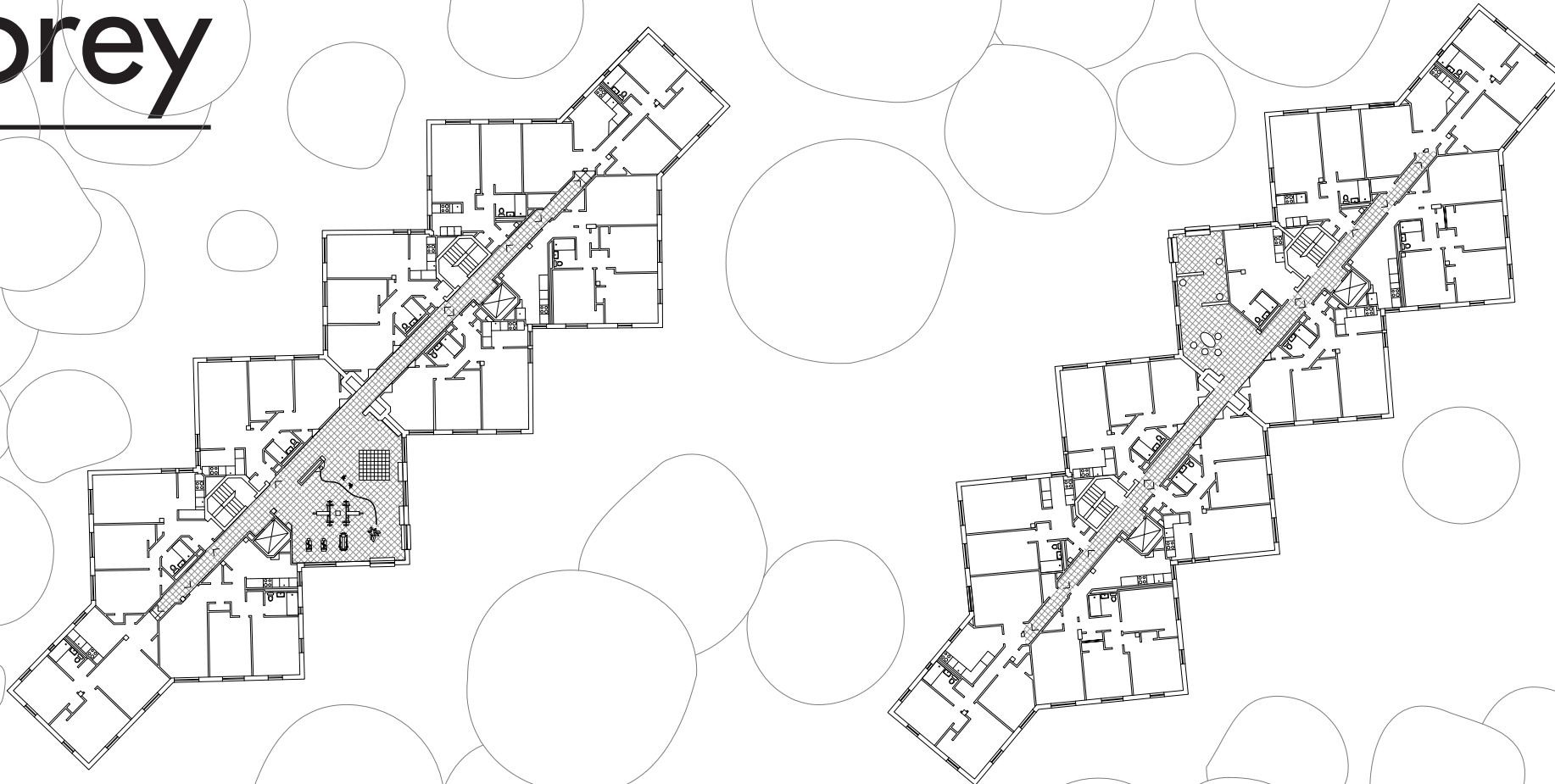


F1

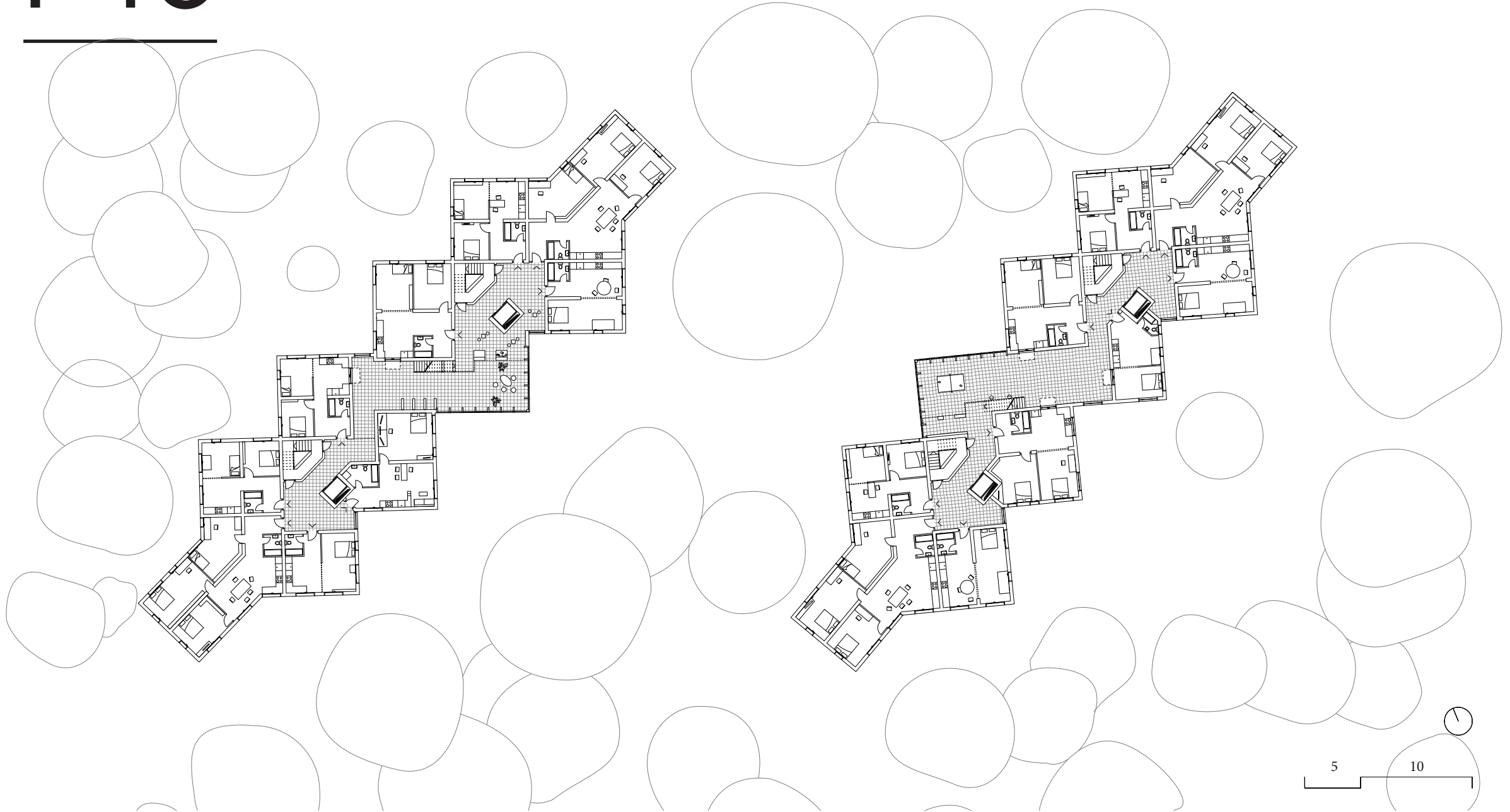


Normative

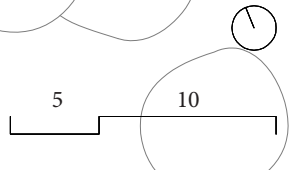
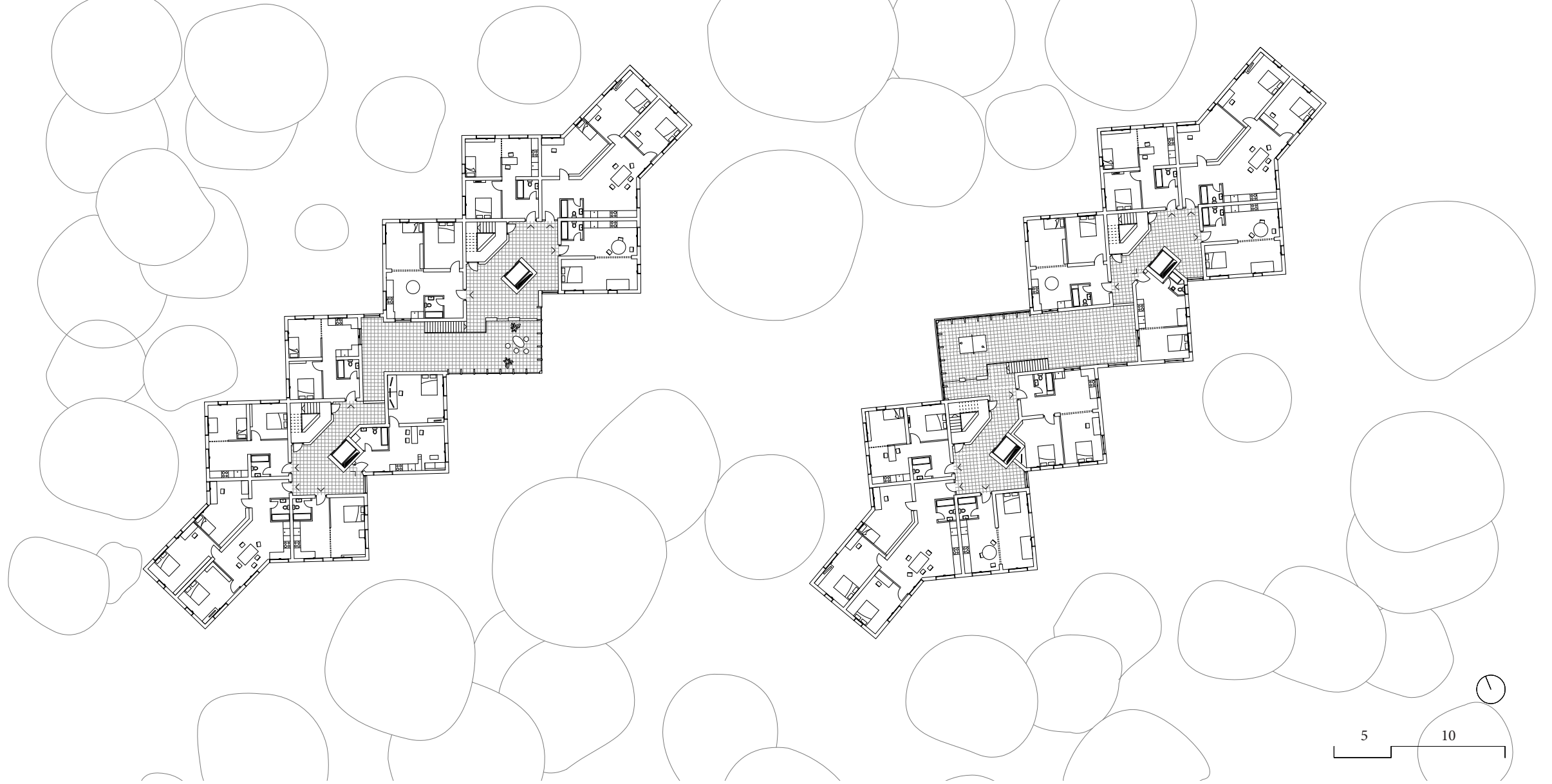
Storey



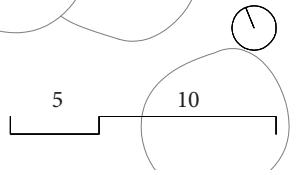
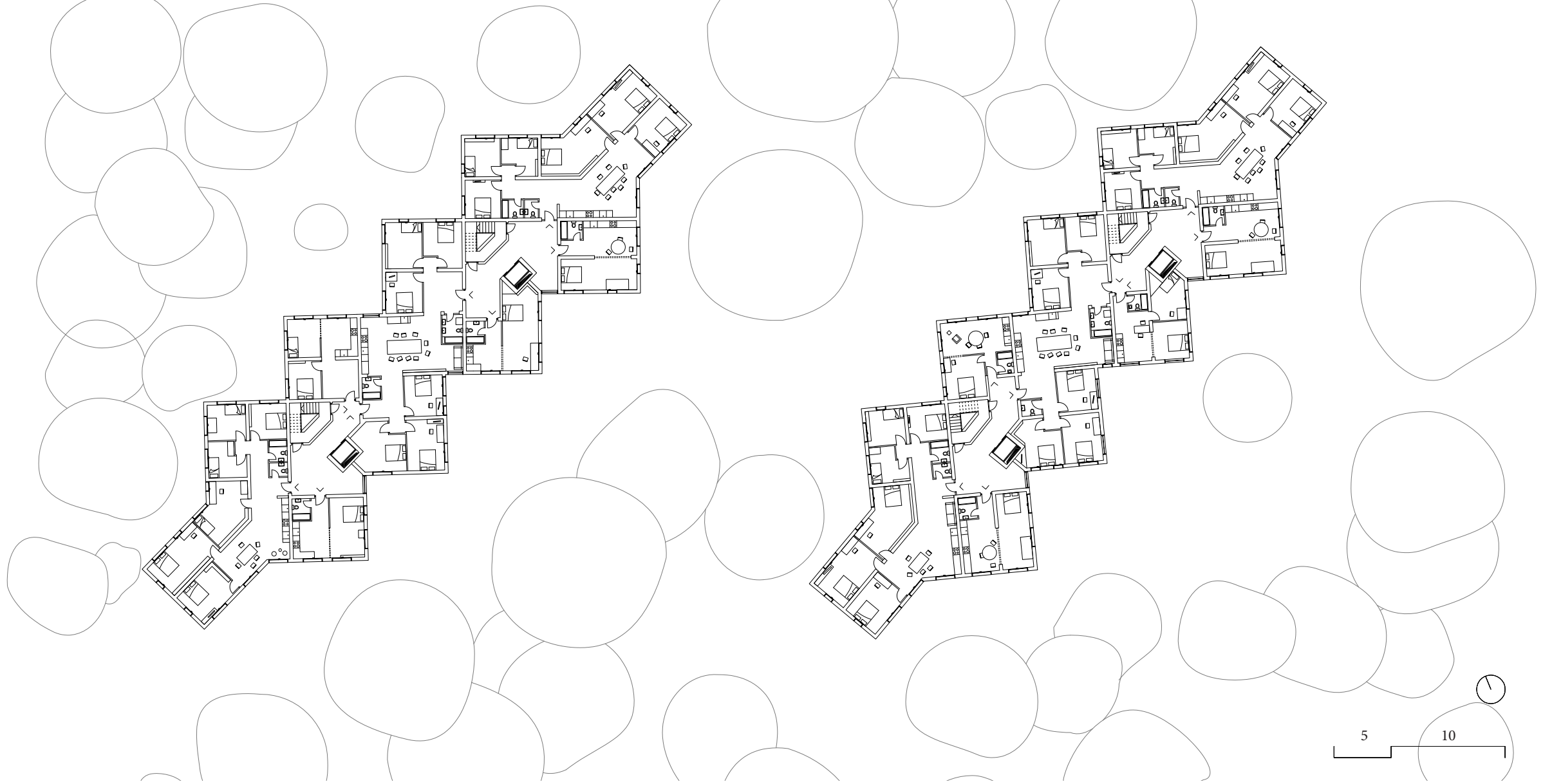
F 15



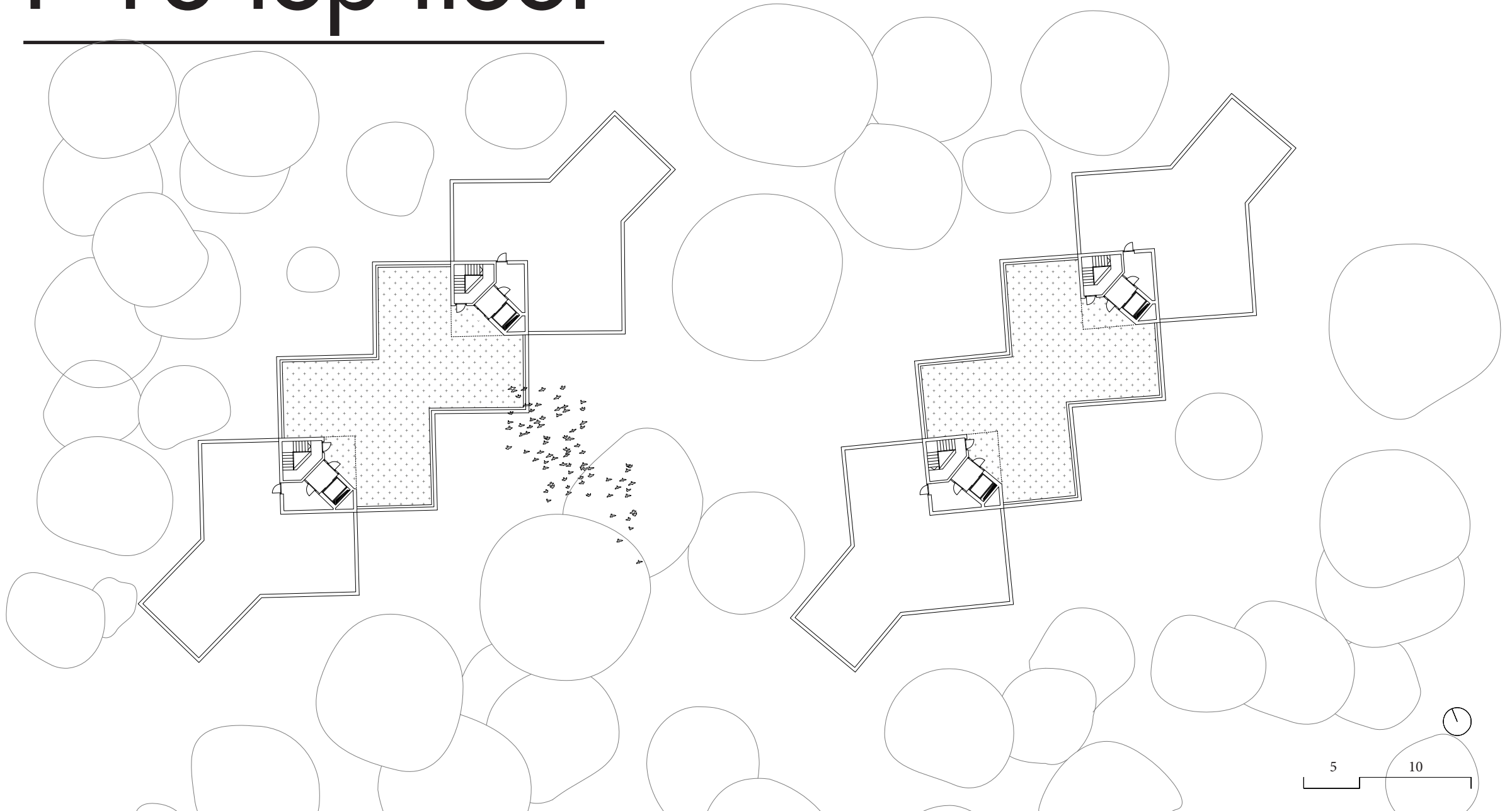
F 16

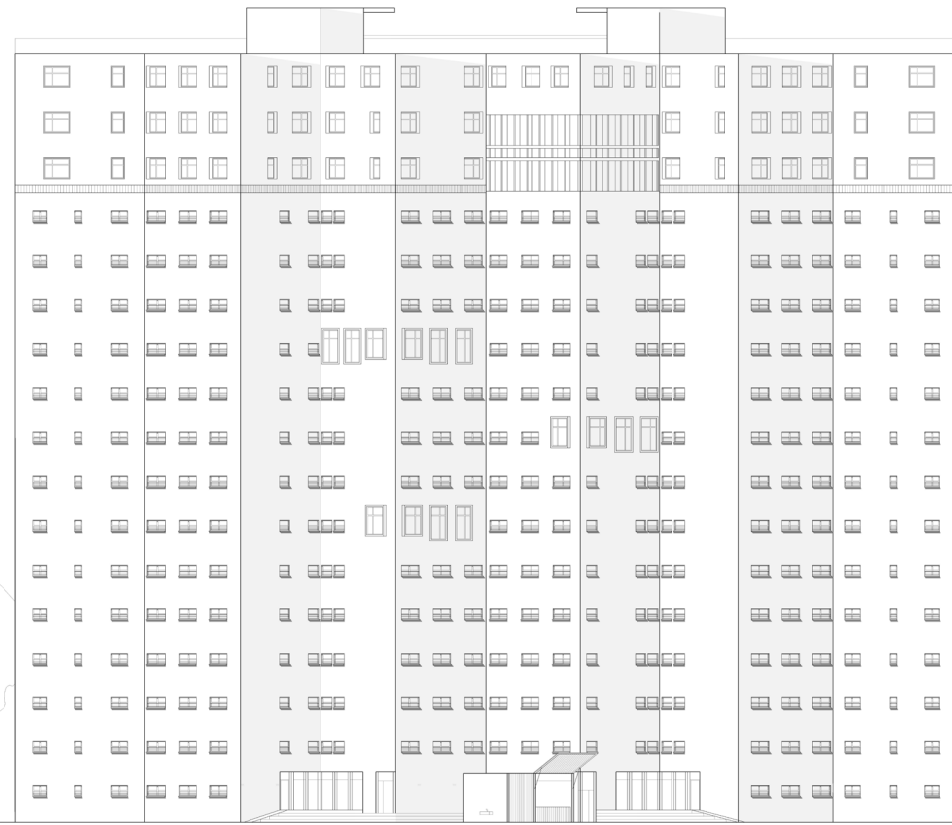


F 17



F 18 top floor



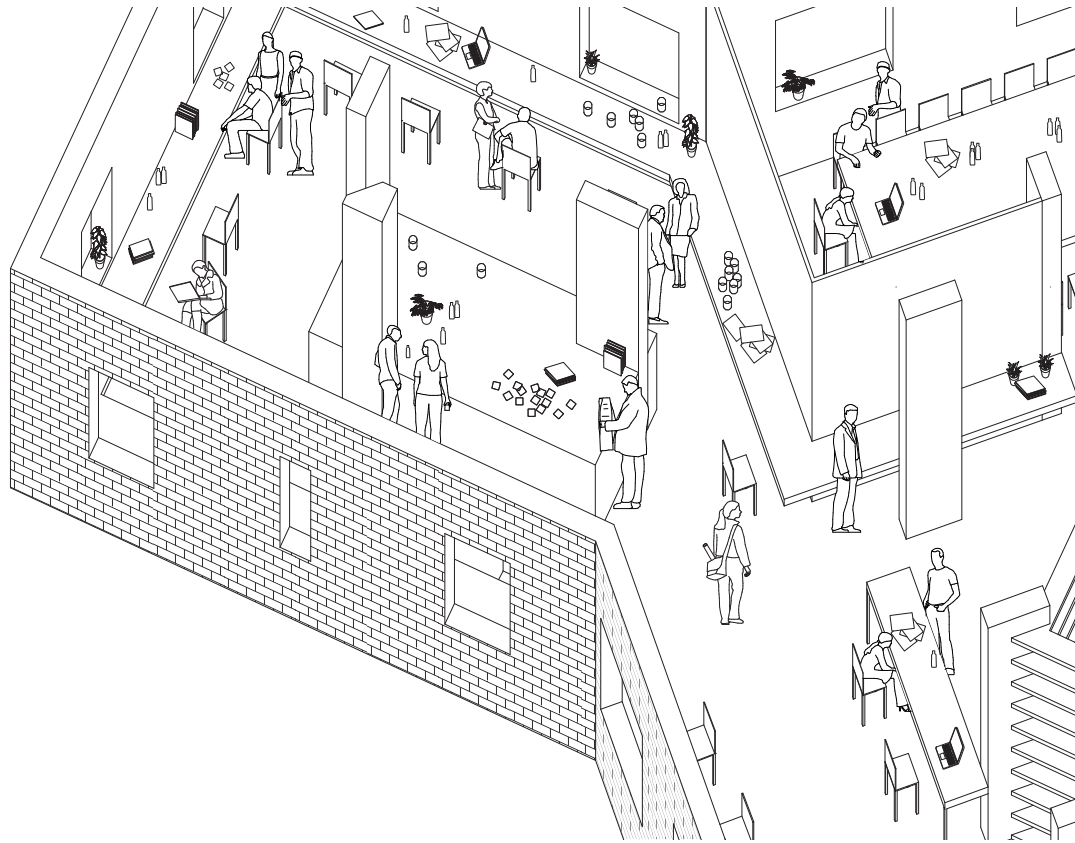


Elevation Pilot Baruch House

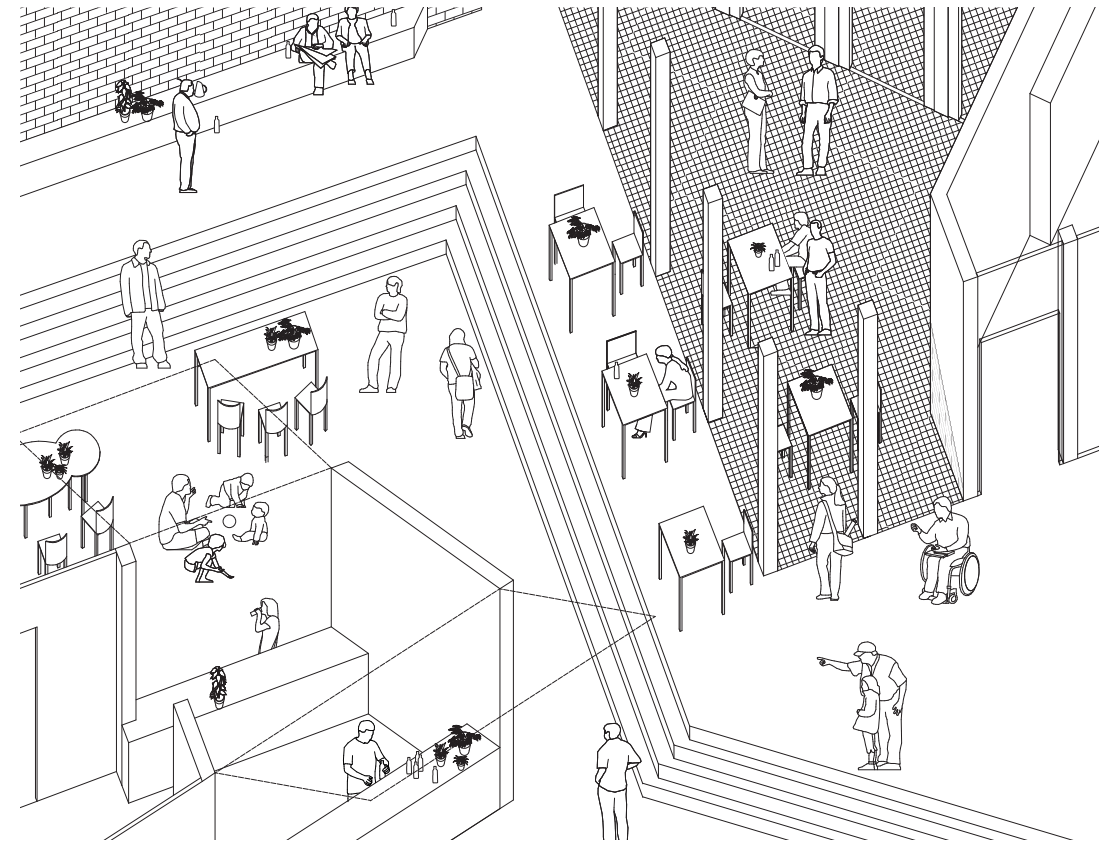


Section Pilot Baruch House

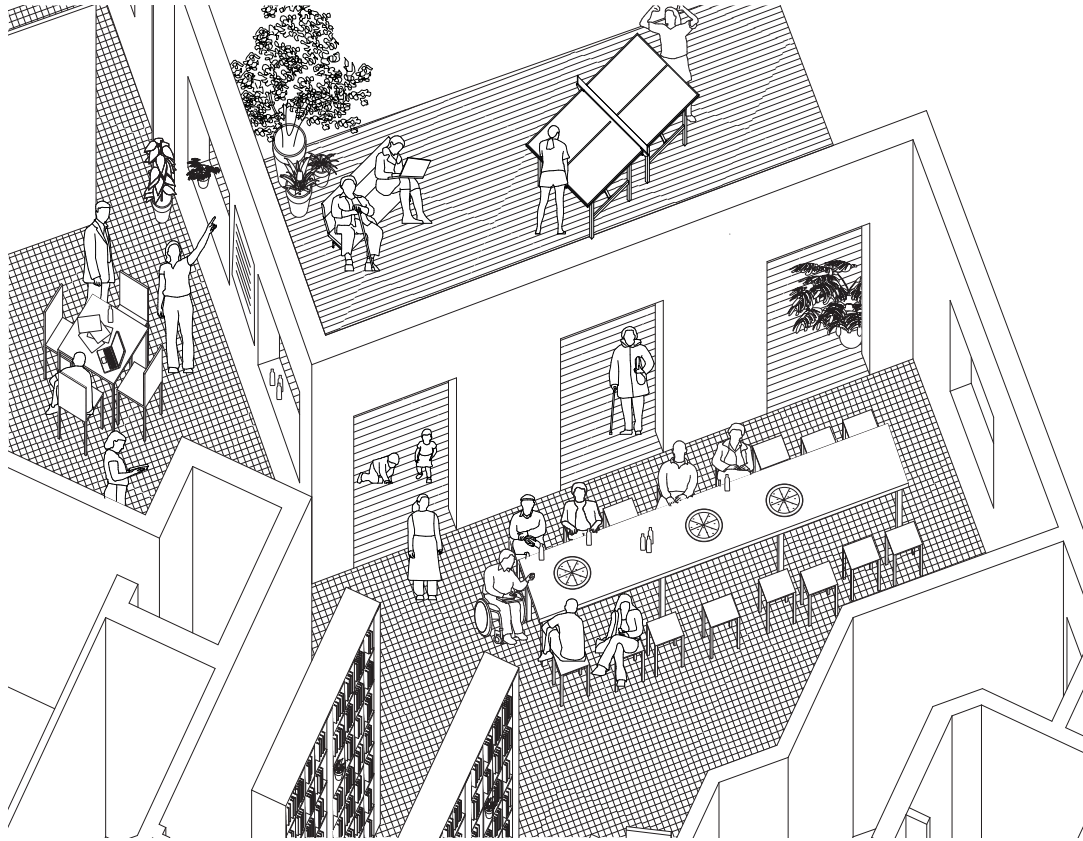
Zooms



Office space on the ground floor



linkage of public space and community service



Community service on the ground floor

Community Service

- Housing Cooperative renovates the ground floor
- cross-financing by capitalizing the ground floor for affordable housing on the top floors
- renovation of NYCHA's social amenity space by the Cooperative
- relocation of the residents from flood-threatened ground floor to the new housings

Community Space

- new community spaces of every other storey in the old structure
- natural lighting of the double loaded corridor
- relocation of the residents from transformed housing unit to the top floors



Transformation of housing unit to community space

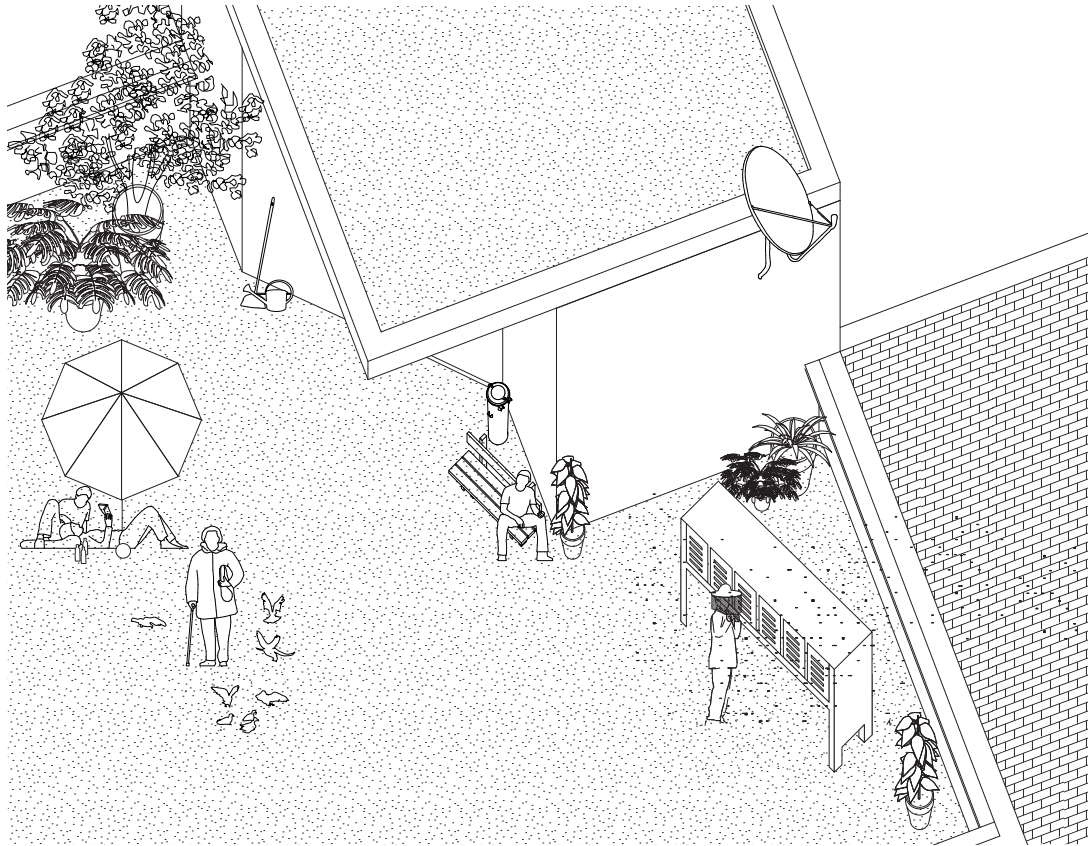
Community Space

- new shared living space
- mixed typologies of housing units (studio, medium and large apartments)
- mixture of NYCHA and cooperative residents



Two storey community space on floor 15 and 16

Zoom



Open air community space on the roof

Open Air Community Space

- upgrading of elevators and staircases
- new access to the roof
- programming through residents

