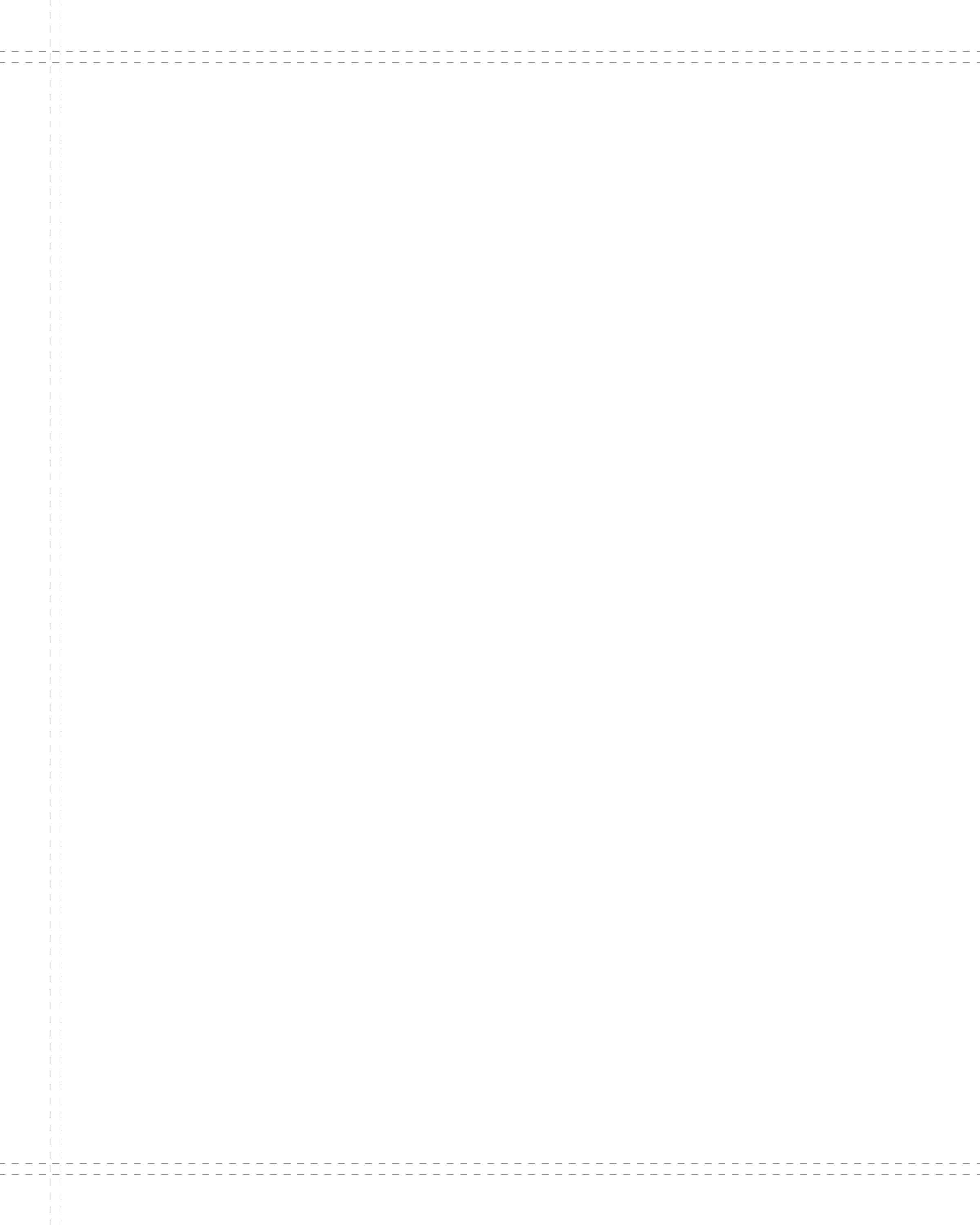


beneath the tracks

reclaiming spaces occupied by transit infrastructure

beatriz vezzaro britto | kompas fellowship | 2024-2025







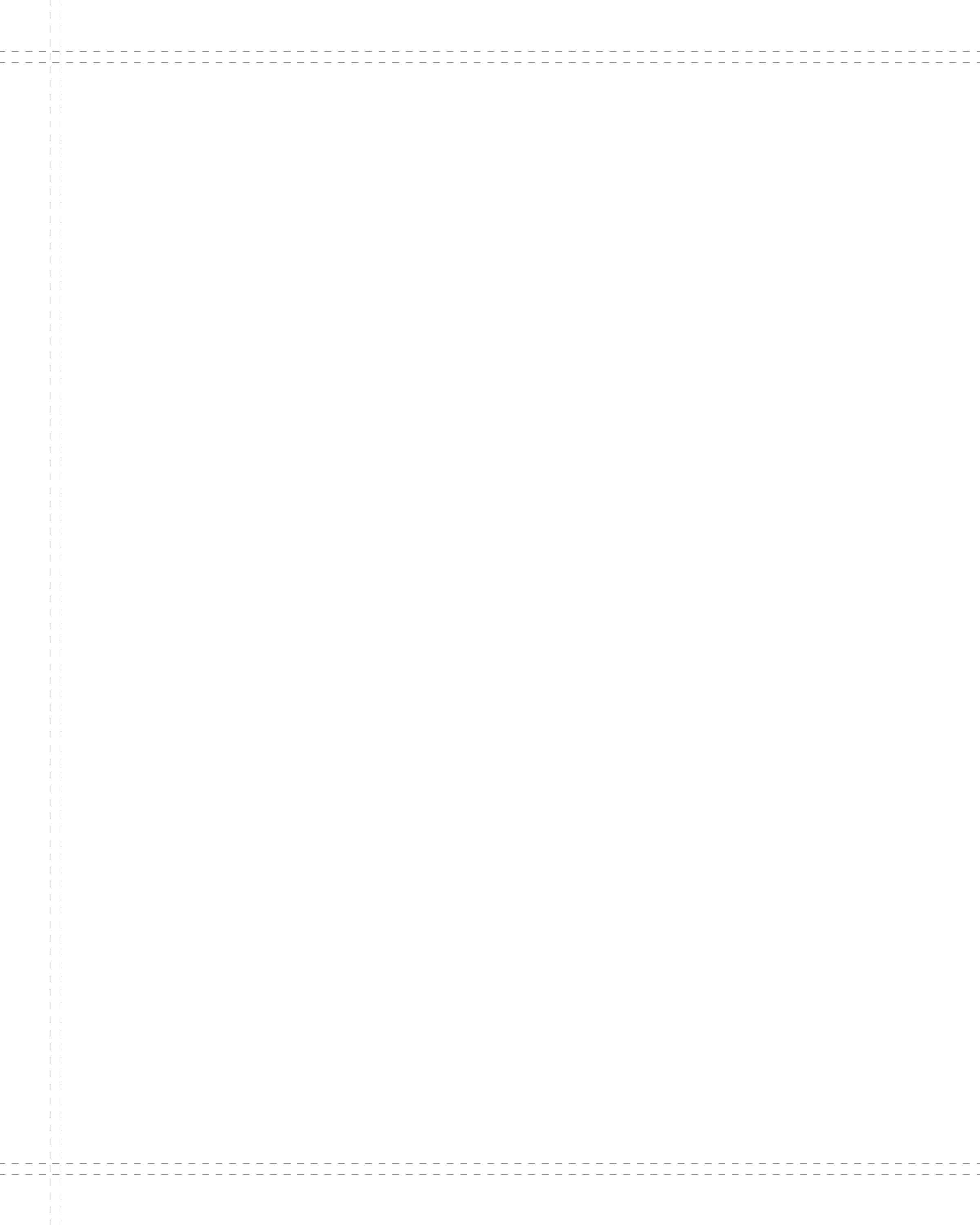


table of contents

chapter 1 | introduction.....1

chapter 2 | the impact of highways.....5

chapter 3 | elevated trains in chicago.....13

chapter 4 | legacy vs reality.....19

chapter 5 | precedent work.....29

chapter 6 | choosing a site.....37

chapter 7 | site analysis.....43

chapter 8 | proposal.....51

chapter 9 | takeaways.....75

introduction

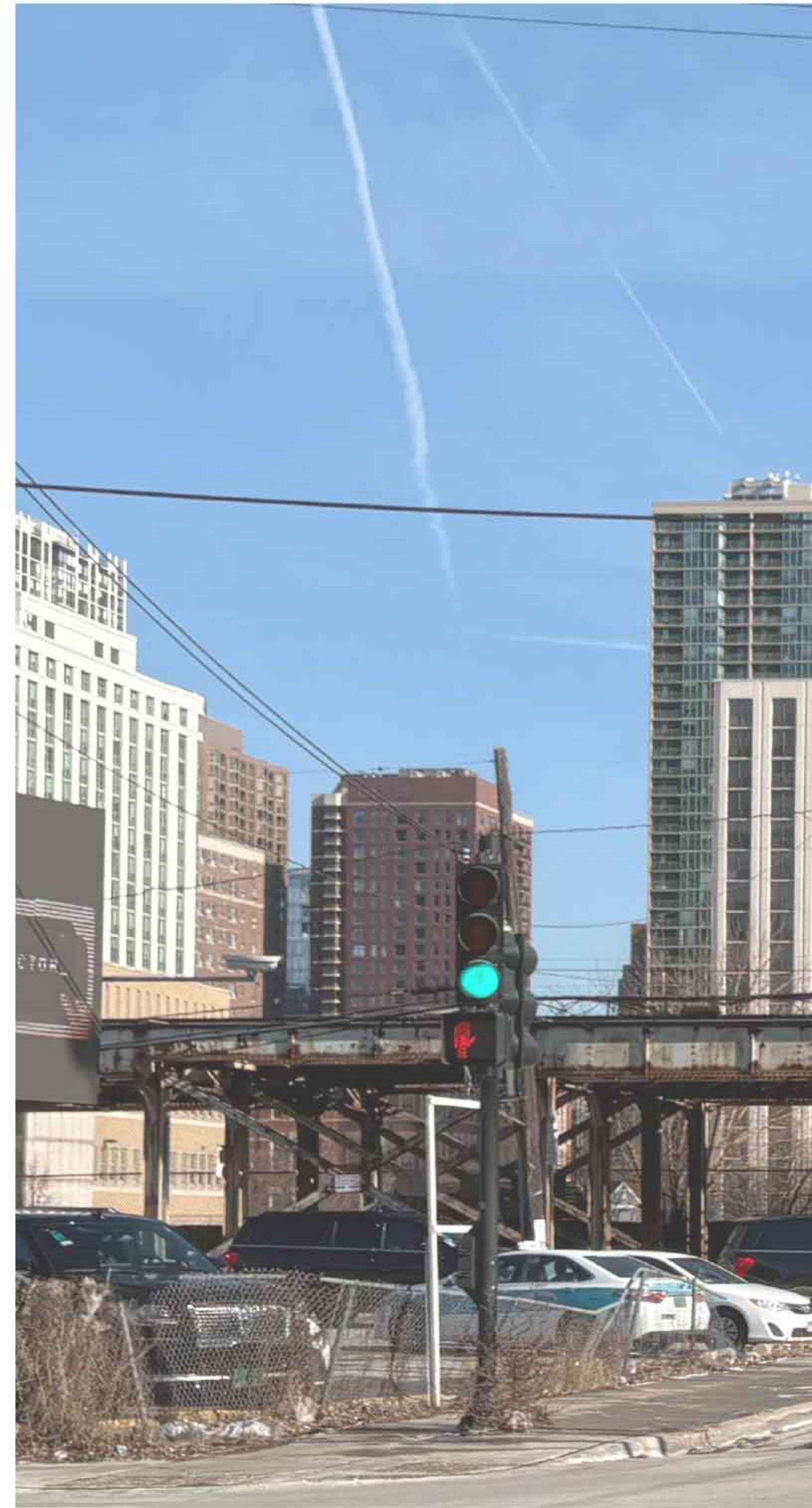
Transportation plays a crucial role in shaping any architectural project. A deep understanding of the area, including its people and infrastructure is essential to creating a design that responds to the needs of its residents. From Rogers Park to Downtown to the East Side, the character of Chicago shifts dramatically. Neighborhoods change, skylines vary, and the urban fabric transforms – yet one element remains constant: the enduring presence of trains and public transit systems that stretch from the far north to the far south.

The built environment is a mirror of a city's values and evolving story. In the United States, much of that story has been shaped by the dominance of car-centric infrastructure. Highways, in particular, have carved through neighborhoods, splintered communities, and steered the flow of urban life.

Yet, Chicago stands as a powerful outlier - a city whose deep-rooted connection to public transit offers a striking contrast.

"From highways to high-rises, schools to subways, bridges to baseball parks, architecture reflects our values and our visions, and, in turn, it shapes just about everything we do. It is not a frill. It is essential to the quality of life."

- Blair Kamin





View looking East of Chicago's Brown Line L crossing Division Street.

The 'L', short for 'elevated train', is more than just a means of transportation - it's a spine that threads through the city, shaping how Chicago moves and grows. But while the trains rumble above, the spaces beneath them are often left forgotten: vacant lots and underused corridors that await purpose.

This project, aims to reclaim and transform these neglected spaces beneath Chicago's elevated rail into vibrant, community-focused public spaces. By concentrating on Sedgwick Station as a pilot site, the goal is to establish a blueprint for how other underused transit-adjacent parcels across the city can be reimaged.

Rather than leaving these underpasses as parking or storage zones, these stretches have the opportunity to become a human-centered space. Grounded by transit-oriented planning, the project envisions turning overlooked infrastructure into a connective thread – linking riders to homes, workplaces, and possibly one another.

Fig. 1. This photo from the Sun-Times archives shows a view to the northwest from Webster Avenue and Damen Street along the right-of-way in 1959

the impact of highways



In the decades following World War II, the United States undertook an unprecedented expansion of its interstate network under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. By offering nearly complete federal funding, the Act incentivized states to cut high-speed roads directly through urban cores, displacing long standing neighborhoods¹. Because of this, car ownership surged, from about 25.7 million vehicles in 1945 to over 61 million by 1960, which made the automobile the dominant mode of transportation¹.

Highway planners frequently targeted lower-income and minority neighborhoods for their routes, viewing these areas as the most convenient corridors for new roadways². This strategy uprooted families and small businesses, eroding social networks and reinforcing patterns of segregation. Researchers have characterized these infrastructure decisions as a form of architectural exclusion, where design choices - such as elevated roadways or limited pedestrian crossings - served to control who could move freely through certain parts of the city².

Across Midwestern cities like Detroit, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, newly built freeways bifurcated Black communities, accelerating white flight to the suburbs and leaving behind fragmented urban enclaves¹. National analyses estimate that by the early 1970s, over a million people nationwide - predominantly from marginalized communities - had been displaced by interstate construction³.

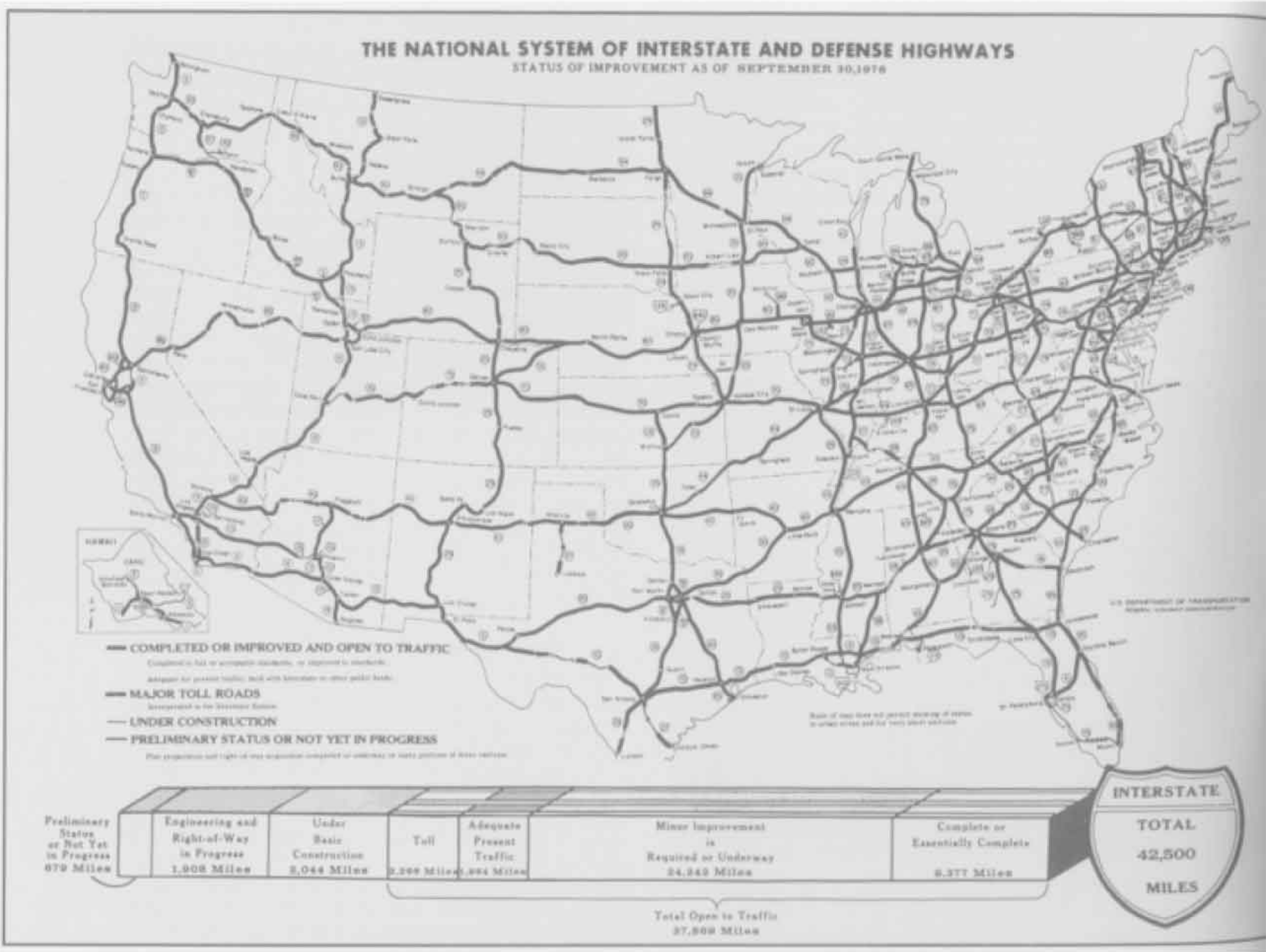


Fig. 2. This map shows the status of interstate highways as of September 30, 1976.

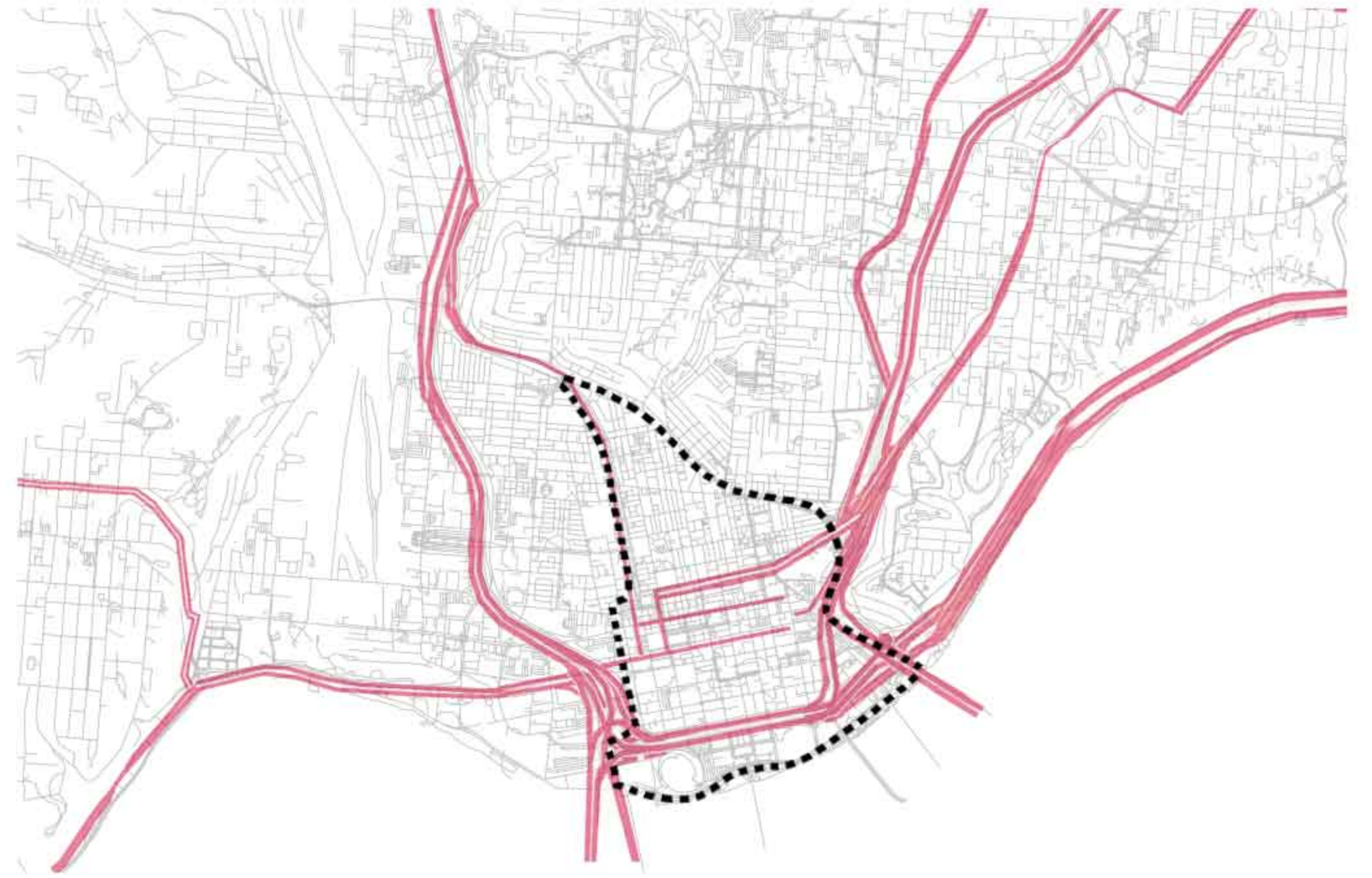
“Not TV or illegal drugs but the automobile has been the chief destroyer of American communities.” - Jane Jacobs, Dark Age Ahead

1. Lee, Timothy. "Before-and-after Maps Show How Freeways Transformed America's Cities." Vox, 16 June 2016.
2. Schindler, Sarah. "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment." The Yale Law Journal, April 2015.
3. Ermagun, Alireza, and Nebiyou Tilahun. "Equity of Transit Accessibility Across Chicago." ScienceDirect, Elsevier, Sept. 2020.

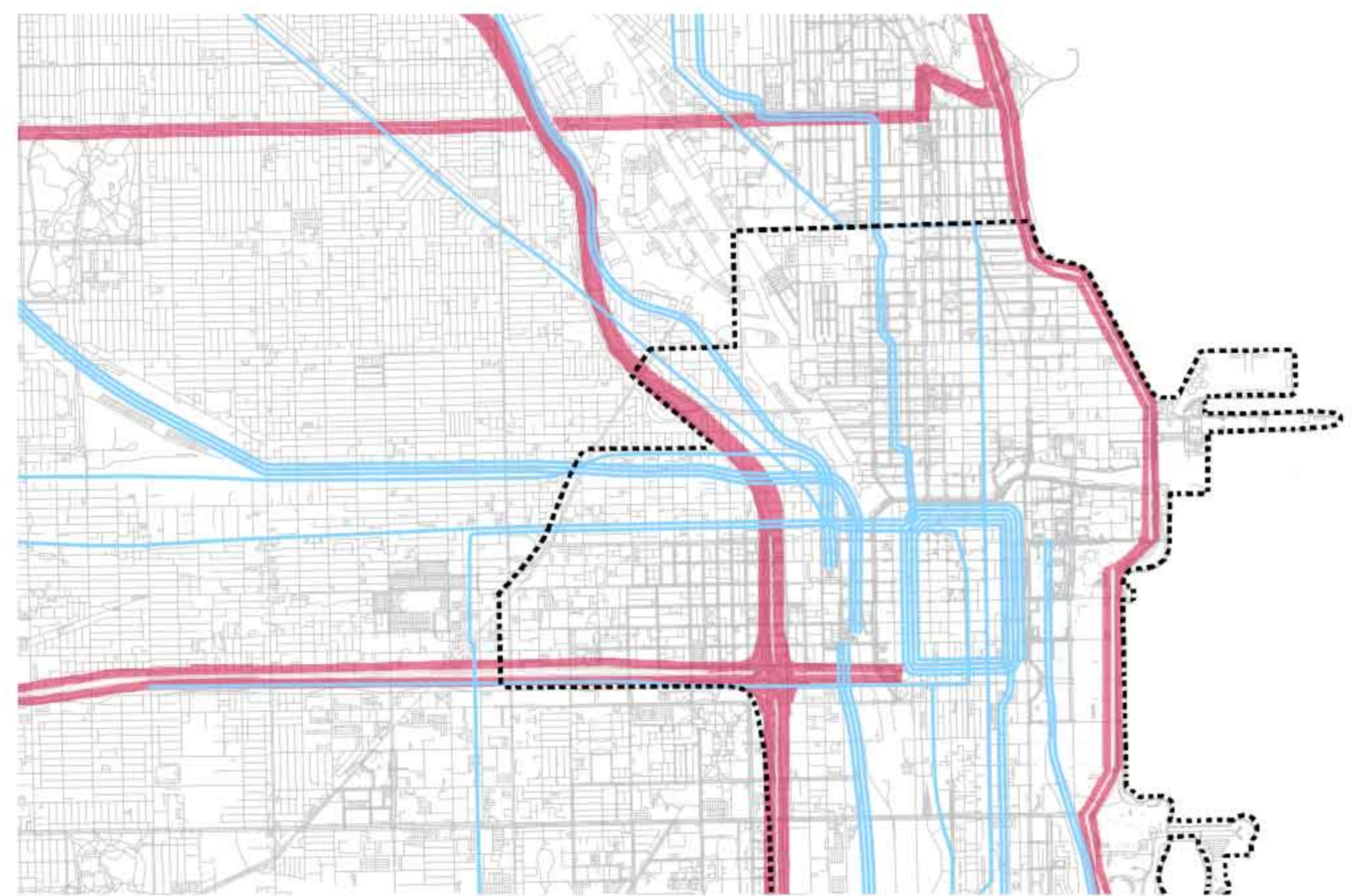


Madison St. IN & S
EAST ↓ WEST

Monroe
Street ↗



cincinnati, ohio



chicago, illinois



detroit, michigan

The maps of Cincinnati and Detroit show how highways dominate their urban layouts, slicing through neighborhoods and defining city boundaries. Chicago's map, by contrast, highlights the pre-existing elevated rail network.

Built before the interstates, these tracks clearly guided the development of downtown – what we now call the "Loop" – and continue to shape its form today.

midwest highways dictated cities to have car centric systems, but the legacy of public transit in chicago makes the city stand out

- highways
- train lines
- ■ ■ downtown

Fig. 4. Northwest expressway opening in Chicago, 1959

Chicago's transportation network is deliberately organized to keep people and vehicles moving smoothly within a dense urban fabric.

Originally, much of the city's street level was raised in the mid-19th century to improve drainage and sanitation, creating a precedent for vertical separation⁵.

At street level - now elevated above original ground - the historic grid handles local traffic and delivers access to shops and residences².

Above that, the 'L' carries rapid transit on steel viaducts, anchoring major corridors and defining the Loop's perimeter⁵.

Below grade, Lower Wacker Drive channels traffic away from surface streets, while the Pedway offers an enclosed walkway for pedestrians during harsh winters.

This multi-layered system that almost separates modes by function vertically, reflects Chicago's commitment to transit efficiency and urban resilience.

elevated trains

street level

lower wacker dr

pedway

2. Schindler, Sarah. "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment." The Yale Law Journal, April 2015.

5. Kamin, Blair. Why Architecture Matters: Lessons from Chicago. The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Fig. 5 - Fig. 16.





Fig. 17. View of the L on Lake St in 1893.



elevated trains in chicago



Fig. 18. Chicago Train Yard, 1941.

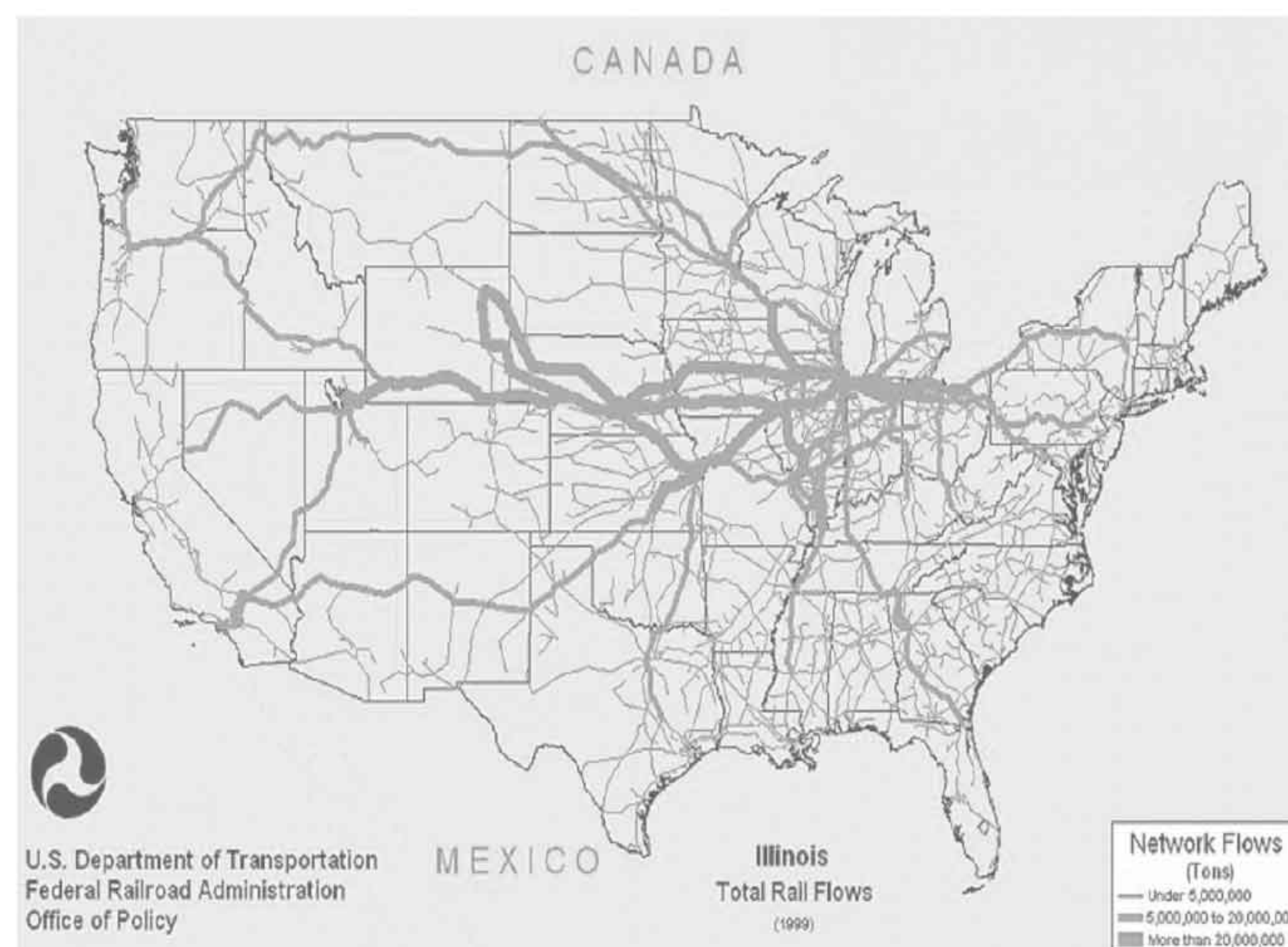


Fig. 19. US Department of Transportation, Total Rail Flow of Illinois, 1999.

Chicago's rise as America's main rail connection began in the mid-19th century, when its strategic location at the center of East-West and North-South corridors made it a natural gathering point for emerging rail lines.

By 1856, less than two decades after its first chartered railroad, the city had already earned the name of "greatest railroad center in the world," with dozens of companies moving goods and passengers through its yards⁶.

This early dominance set the stage for Chicago to become the busiest rail hub on the continent - a status it would sustain for well over a century.

At its height, more than forty distinct railroads served Chicago, and all seven Class I freight carriers in North America operated lines into the city - a network unseen anywhere else⁷.

The city's infrastructure evolved rapidly to handle this volume. Grand terminals, such as Union Station, opened in 1925, offered monumental gateways for long-distance passenger travel, while sprawling classification yards sorted and dispatched freight cars around the clock.

By mid-20th century, Chicago accounted for nearly half of Illinois's 490.4 million tons of annual rail freight⁷.

Chicago's rail supremacy fueled its economic and physical growth. Many neighborhoods grew around busy depots, and the city extended out to meet new lines. The symbiotic relationship between railroads and urban development made Chicago an exemplar of the "railroad city" - where steel tracks, terminals, and yards were as integral to the urban fabric as streets and public squares.

6. Telegraph System Inc. "Chicago, Chicago, What a Railroad Town." Telegraph, 2025.

7. Lynch, Christopher, and Patrick McBriarty. "Episode 24 - The Railroads." Windy City Historians, October 1, 2021.

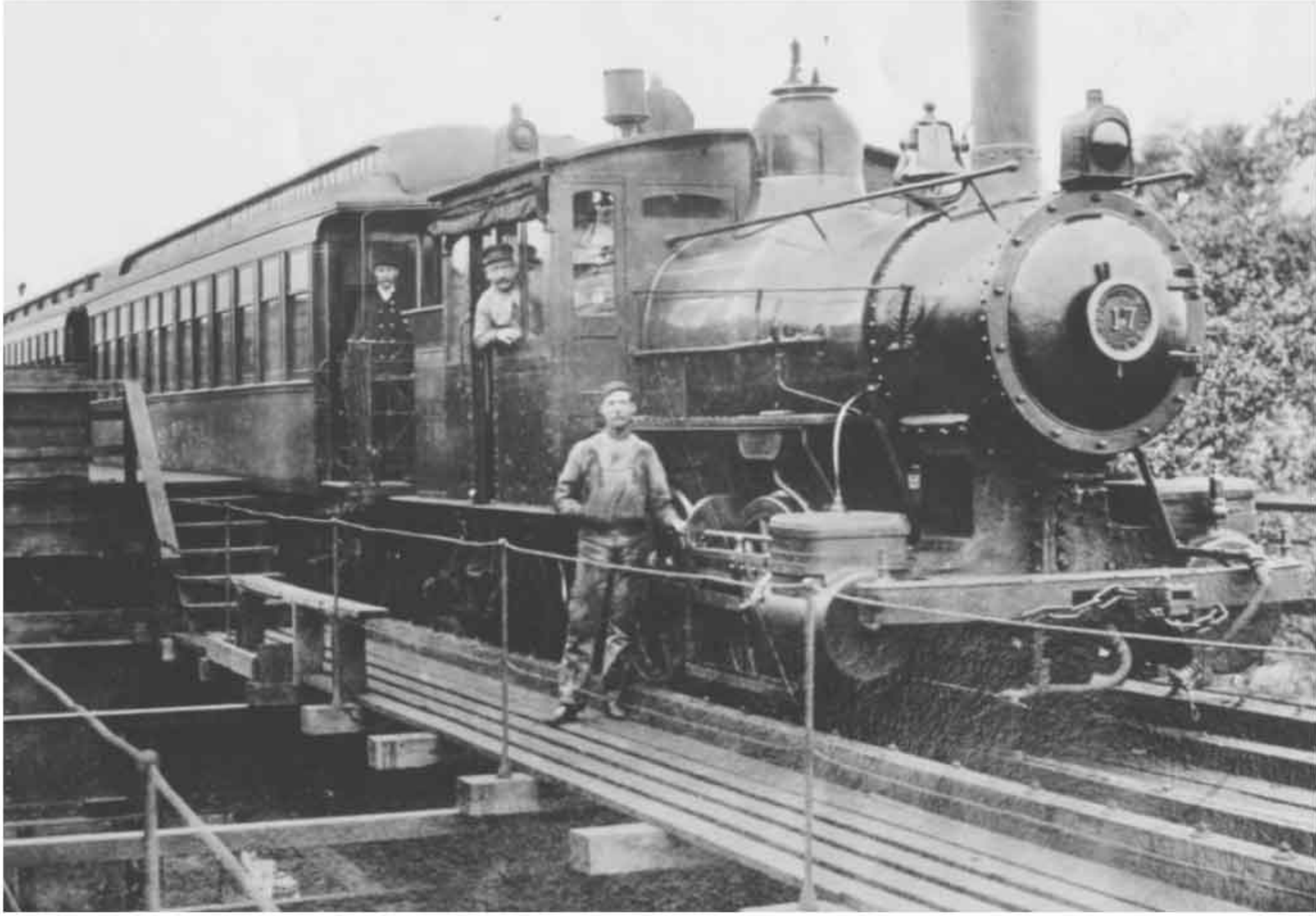


Fig. 20. The Lake Street Elevated Railroad circa 1894.



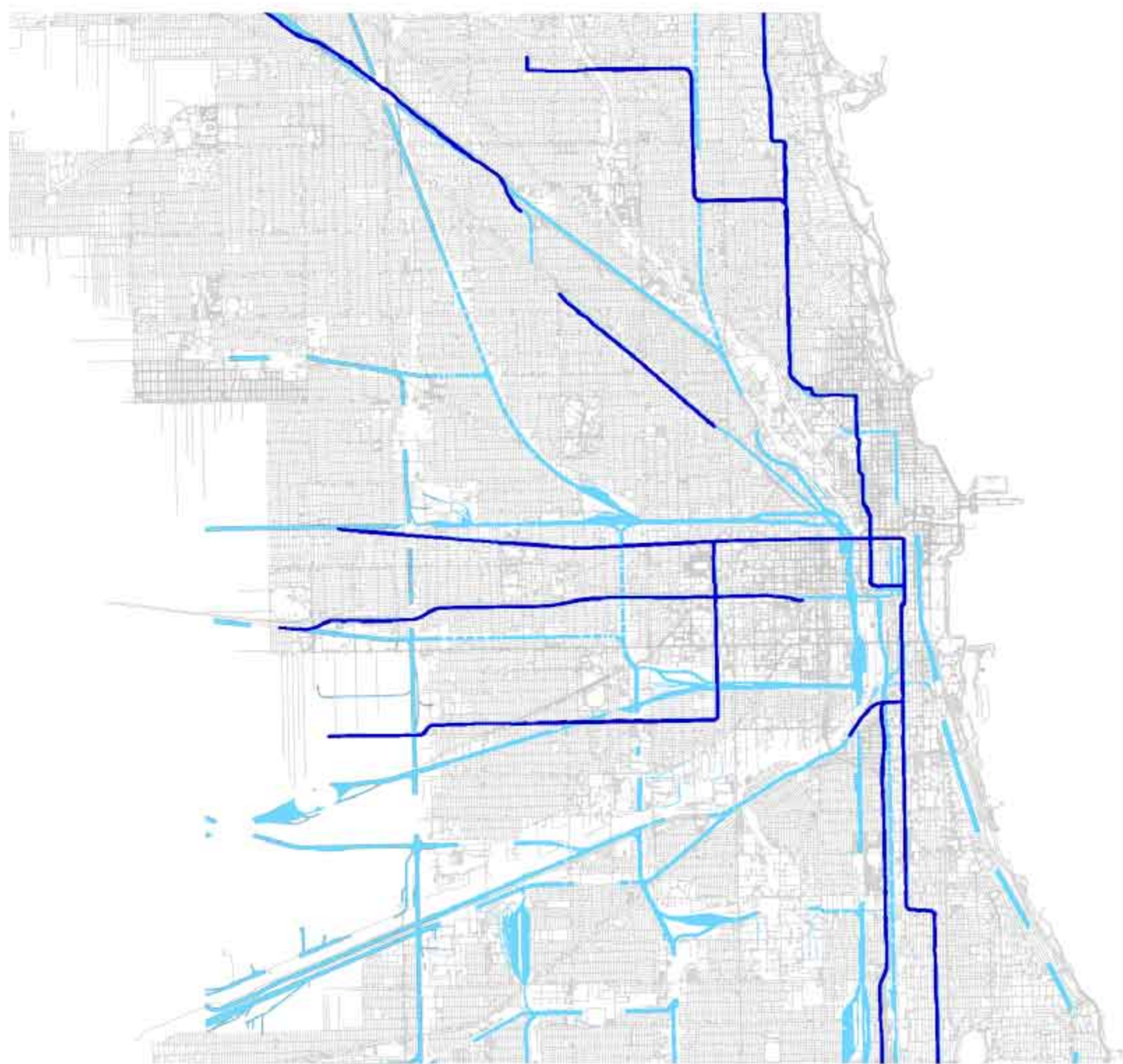
Fig. 21. This image shows the Wells and Lake train junction.

Chicago pioneered urban mass transit rail in America with cable cars starting in 1882, that was then followed by the 'L' service in 1892, making it one of the nation's oldest rail systems⁸.

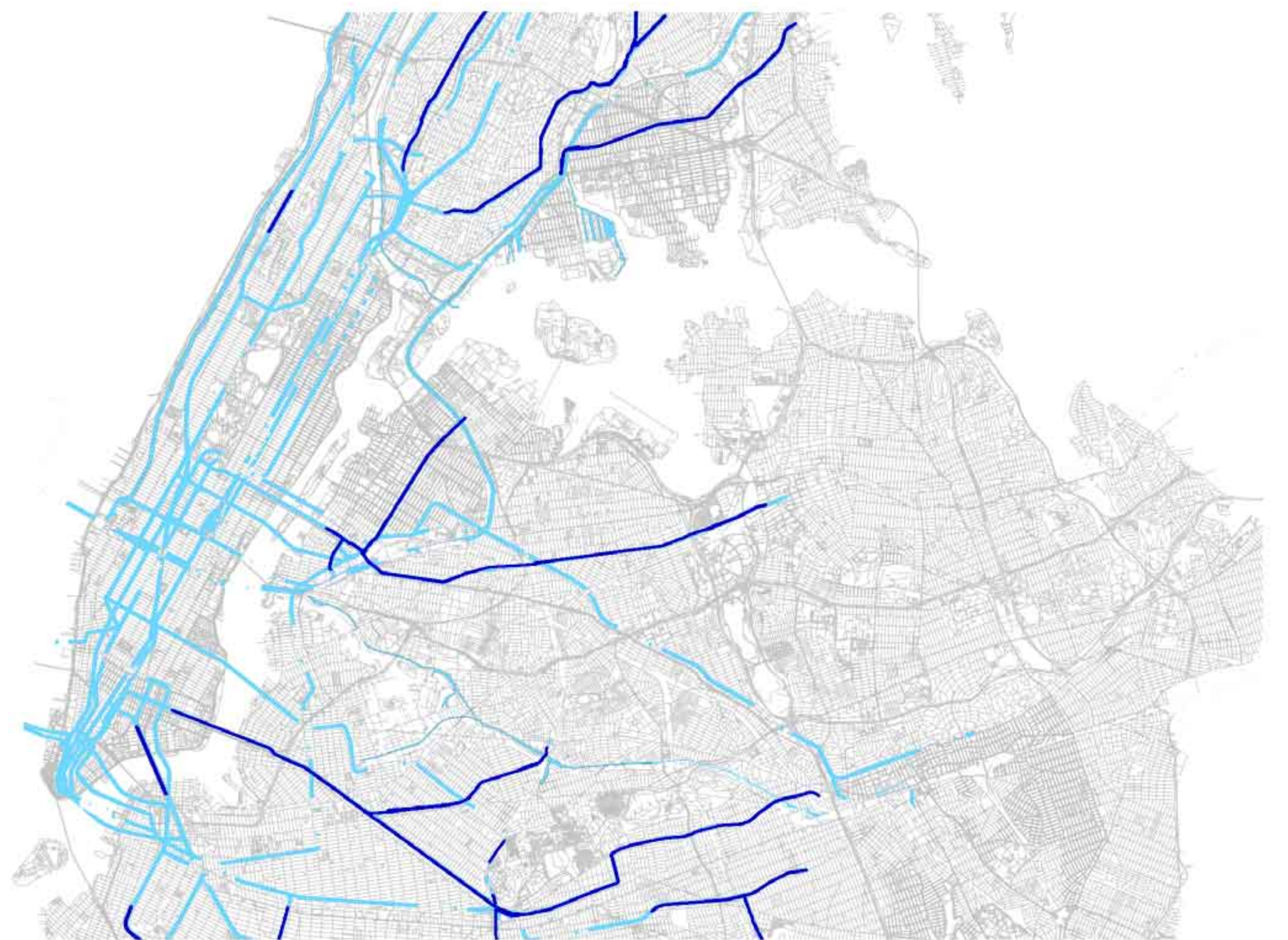
Over the century, the system that is now operated by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), expanded both above and below ground by acquiring private streetcars and elevated trains, helping shape the city's growth more than any other network in the United States.

In the following decades, Chicago's growth was planned around its elevated structures, allowing lines to thread through developing neighborhoods and also concentrate development around stations.

8. "The Chicago L." Chicago Architecture Center, August 8, 2024.



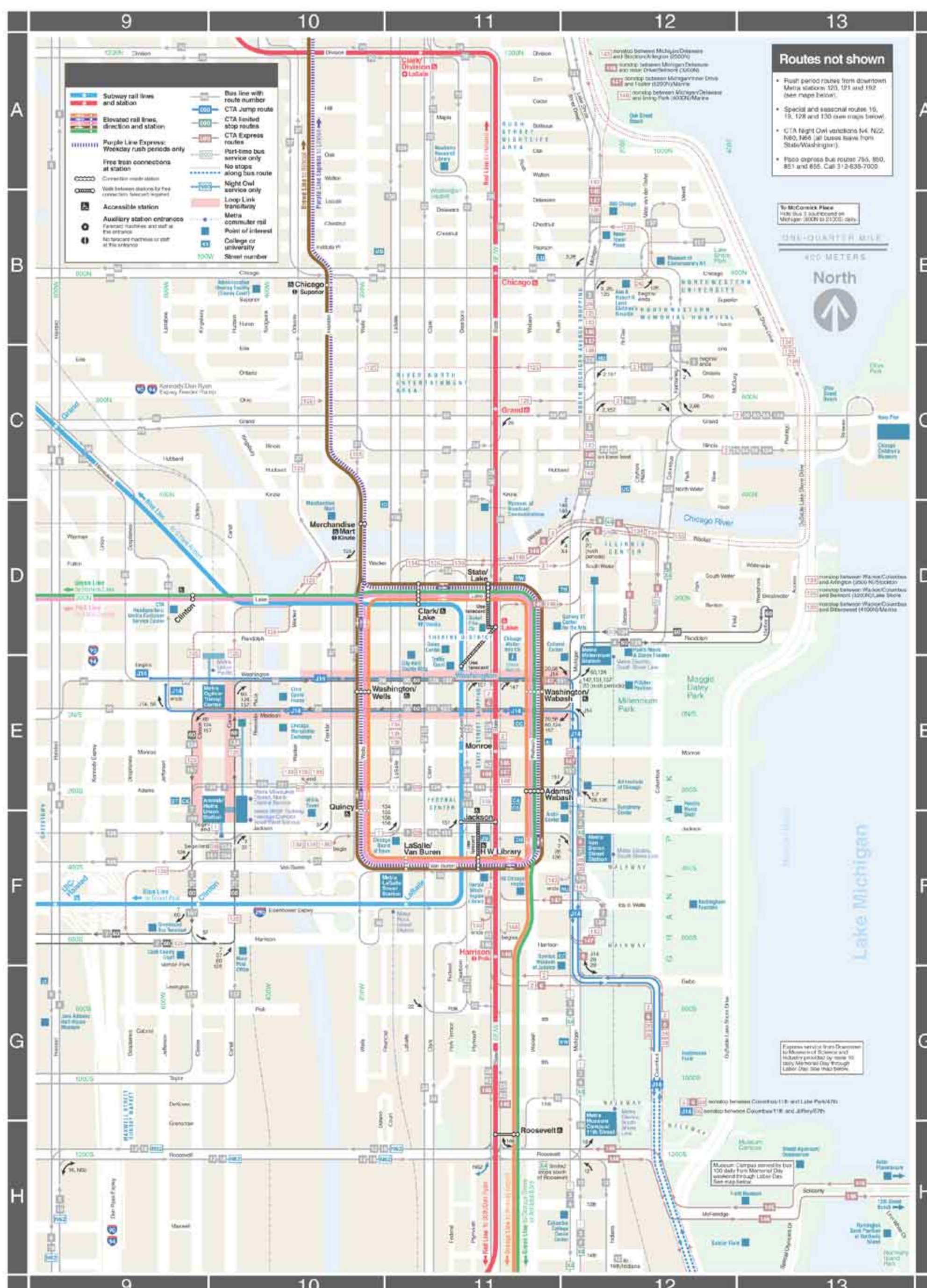
chicago, illinois



new york, new york

train lines
elevated trains

Fig. 22. Current map of the CTA in the downtown of Chicago, or the "Loop".



As this map shows, and as it has since the late 19th century, Chicago's elevated lines drop off riders into the central business district area that came to be known as the "Loop" - named for the continuous circuit of elevated tracks that wrap around multiple blocks.

This became one of Chicago's most iconic and defining features. Today, no other U.S. city's train system stands out the way Chicago's elevated tracks do.

Even in New York, with its system being the closest to what we see in Chicago, while visually similar in some areas, it goes around Manhattan's edges instead of threading through its core.

Chicago stands alone in the nation for having its transit shape not only the daily rhythms of locals but also the city's downtown in name and form.

legacy vs reality



Artwork at the Chicago Athletic Club, 2025.

The 'L' is more than just steel and wheels providing easier access to transportation for thousands of Chicagoans every day - it's the city's defining image. From professional photographs and postcards to social media snapshots, the 'L' embodies Chicago's spirit. Its interlocking structure frames the Loop, guiding both the eye and the city's growth in a way no other American transit network can match.

As you stroll around the city such as in areas along Wabash Street, you'll experience this vision firsthand. Everywhere you look, what might seem like a utilitarian structure is seen and celebrated as public art.

The "Chicagohenge" is an example of this tribute to Chicago's history. On the spring and fall equinoxes, the sun's rays align perfectly with the east-west streets at sunrise and sunset. The crowds gather on Michigan Avenue and in Millennium Park to admire and photograph the spectacular sight of a train gliding past the glowing sun, that creates a beautiful image of the train passing by as the sunset perfectly aligns with buildings in the background.



Fig. 23. Chicago 'L' Train Painting by Char Swift.

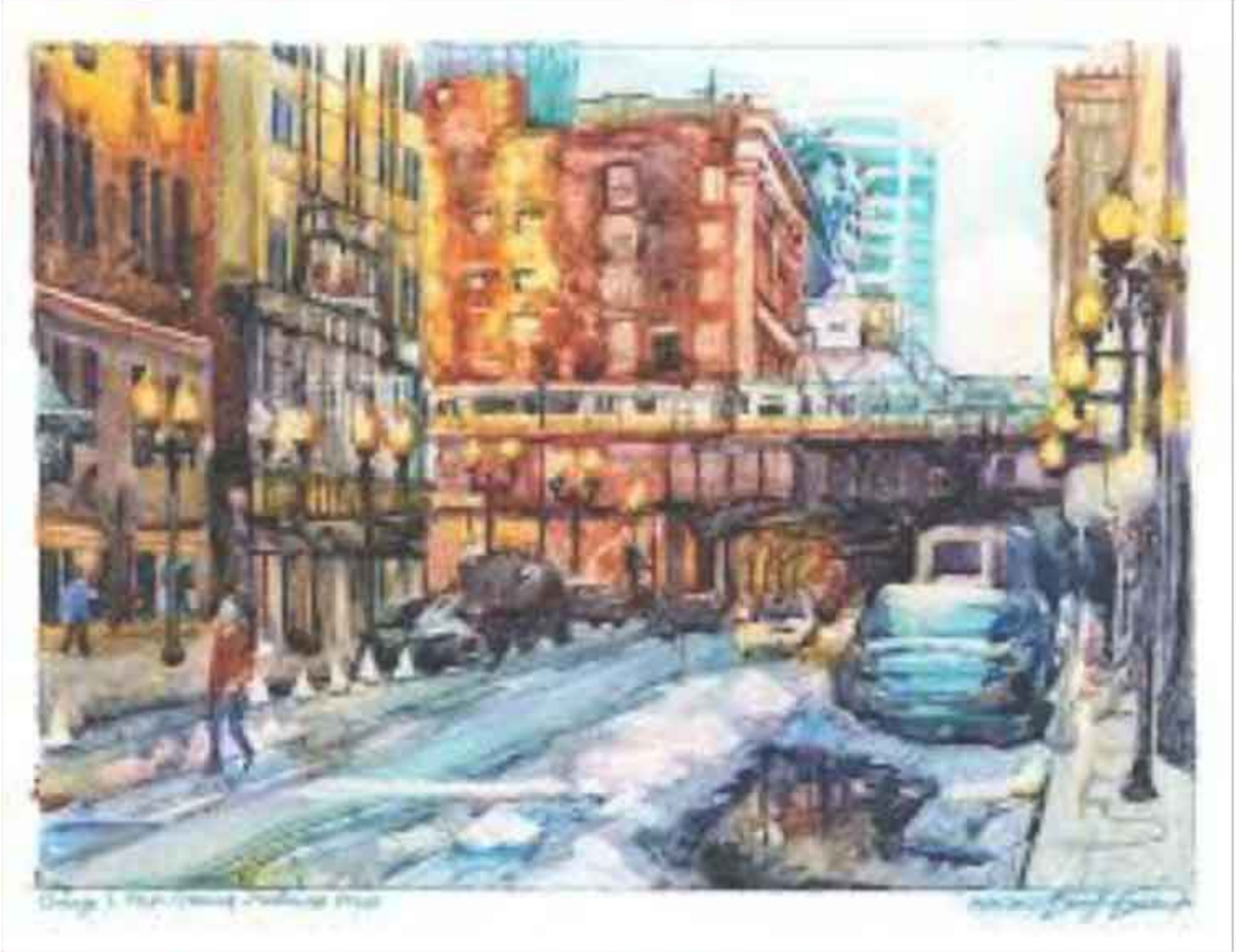


Fig. 24. Watercolor painted in 2023 by Karolina Szablewska.



Fig. 25. Picture of the "Chicagohenge".

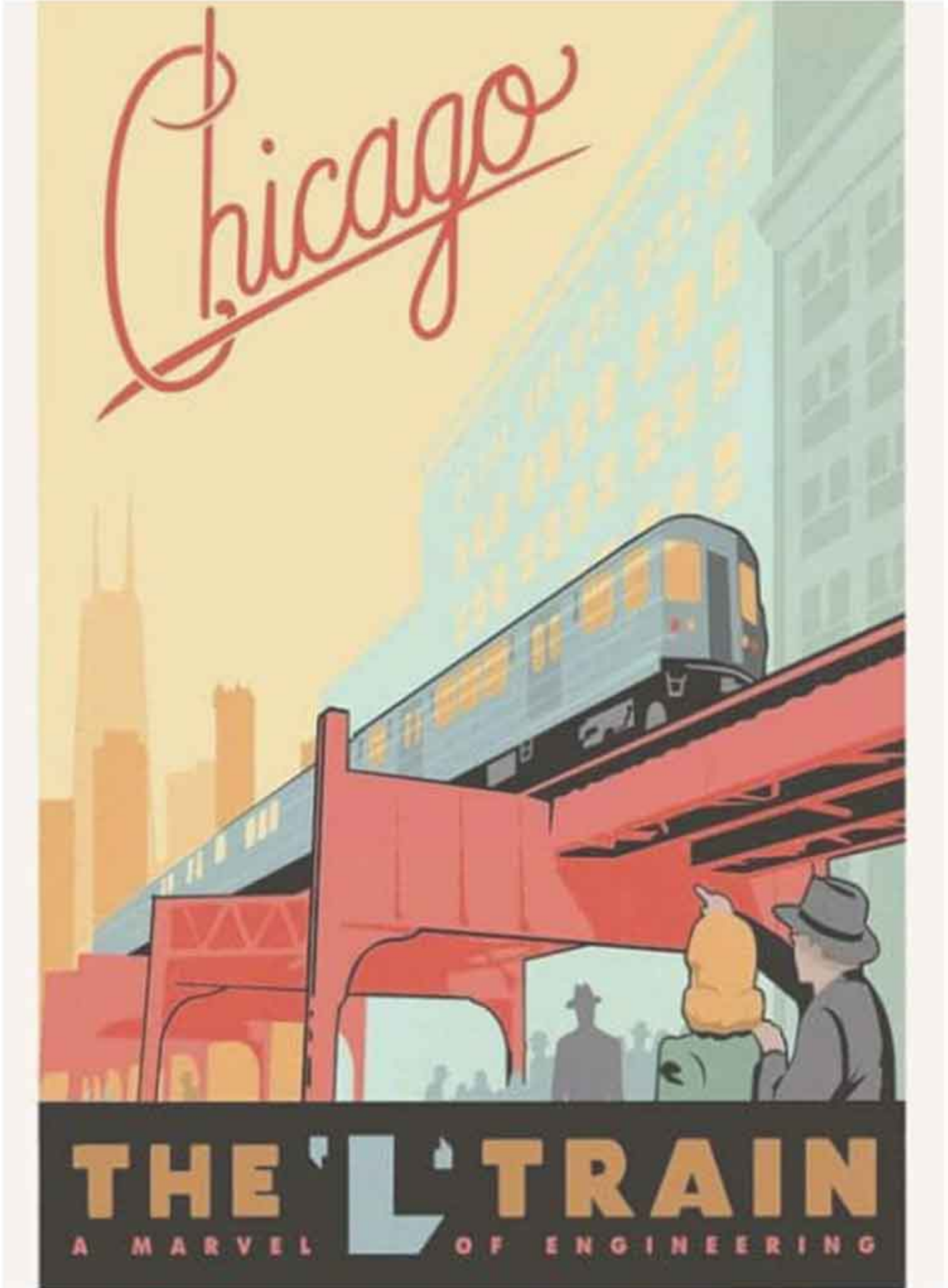


Fig. 26. L Train Travel Poster by Anderson Design Group.

the physical and emotional heart of chicago



Belmont Station that serves the Red, Brown, and Purple lines, 2025.

Yet beneath that celebrated image lies a gap between legacy and reality, and the lived experience of those who navigate these spaces tells this different story.

While the 'L' evokes pride in its long history, the infrastructure too often falls short of the image that has been created around it. Although the train is seen as a historic symbol of the city, for its daily users, it often feels too outdated to support the number of people who rely on it every day: the noise of the train vibrates and echoes through neighborhoods, the structures cast long shadows over the streets, and the peeling paint signals a lack of investment in the care of these spaces, showcasing the disconnect between its celebrated image and the reality of its urban footprint.

Despite the noise, crowding, and occasional breakdowns, the L remains woven into daily life - because for all its flaws, it still beats the unpredictability of traffic below.

However, these persistent issues are signs that the infrastructure planned in the 1890s, no longer serves the public as well as it could. There is far more that can be achieved with this great public system.

We already have a willing ridership and strong public interest in using the train as a primary mode of transportation. So what is missing - and how can it be achieved?

**"Public space should never be thought of as a leftover. It is the heart of the city - it belongs to everyone."
- Tatiana Bilbao**



Entrance to the Adams/Wabash elevated station, 2025.



Fig. 27. O'Hare Blue Line train enters the Montrose platform.



Non-accessible elevated train platform in the winter, 2025.



Red line train approaching the Adams/Wabash station.

a rumbling steel overhang that plunges sidewalks into shadow



An interesting part of elevated train tracks actually lies beneath the platform. Spaces people routinely use and see everyday: beneath the tracks.

The land surrounding many stations reflects this reality of lost opportunity. According to the City of Chicago's inventory, one-third of underdeveloped lots lie within a half-mile of 'L' stops⁹ - yet most serve as parking or remain fenced off.

These neglected corridors undermine accessibility, walkability, and safety for daily riders because of their vibration-cracked sidewalks and dimly lit underpasses.

The consequences of these conditions are that people rely less on public transportation and turn to other forms of transit, like cars - an option that is not accessible to many residents and that fuel the expansion of highways, further dividing communities.

This is deeply contradictory to what spaces around essential transportation hubs should represent. Access to public transit should be the heart of a neighborhood, not neglected or left as empty space. These are the areas with the most foot traffic and are the most essential and convenient for those who depend on public transportation in their daily routines.

⁹ City of Chicago. "View City-Owned Lots." Chi Block Builder, October 12, 2024.



Fig. 28. - Fig. 39. Google Maps images of areas surrounding elevated train infrastructure in Chicago. Retrieved in August 2024.



how can spaces near public transit be maximized to full potential?

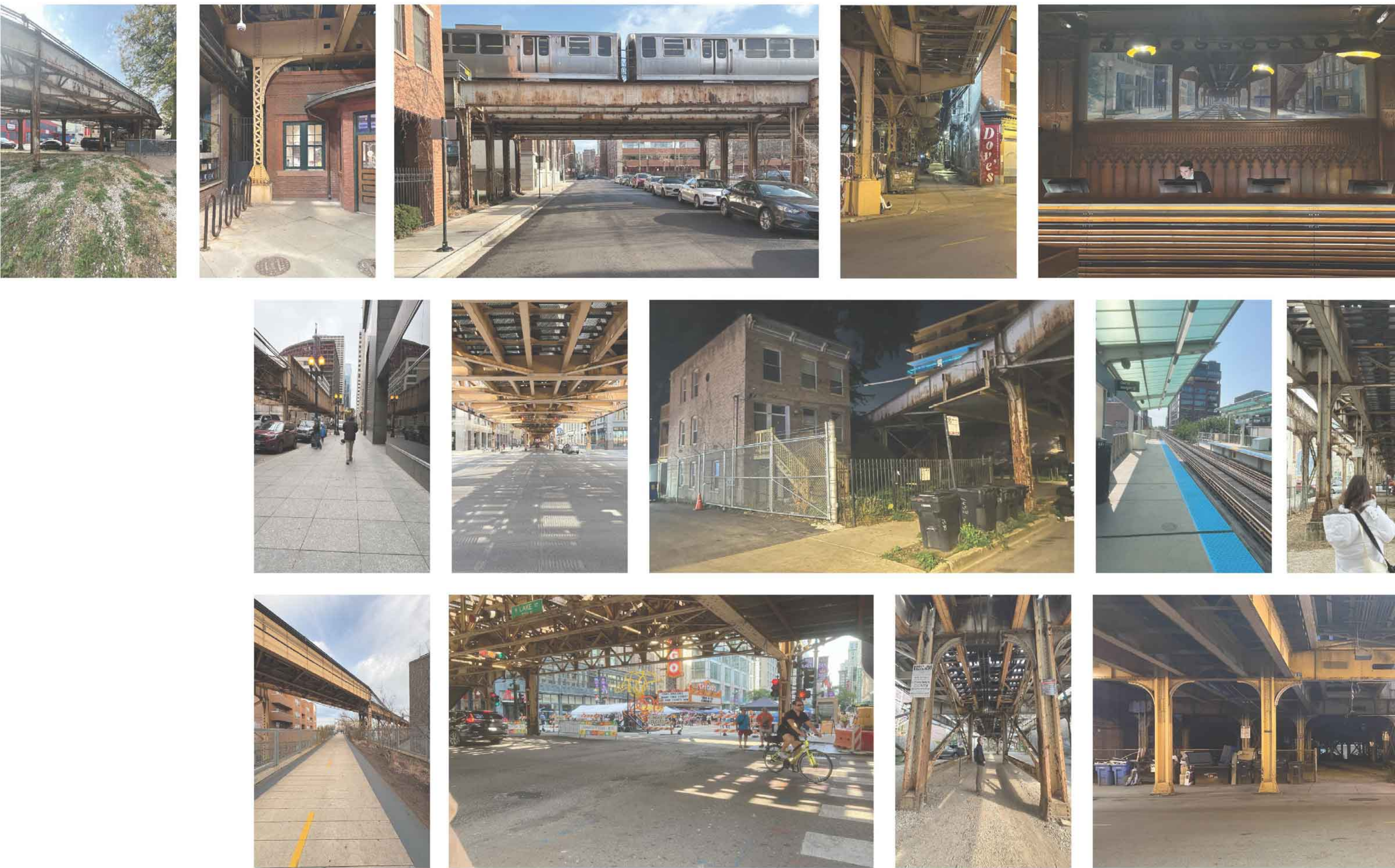
how can this environment prioritize the people who interact with it?

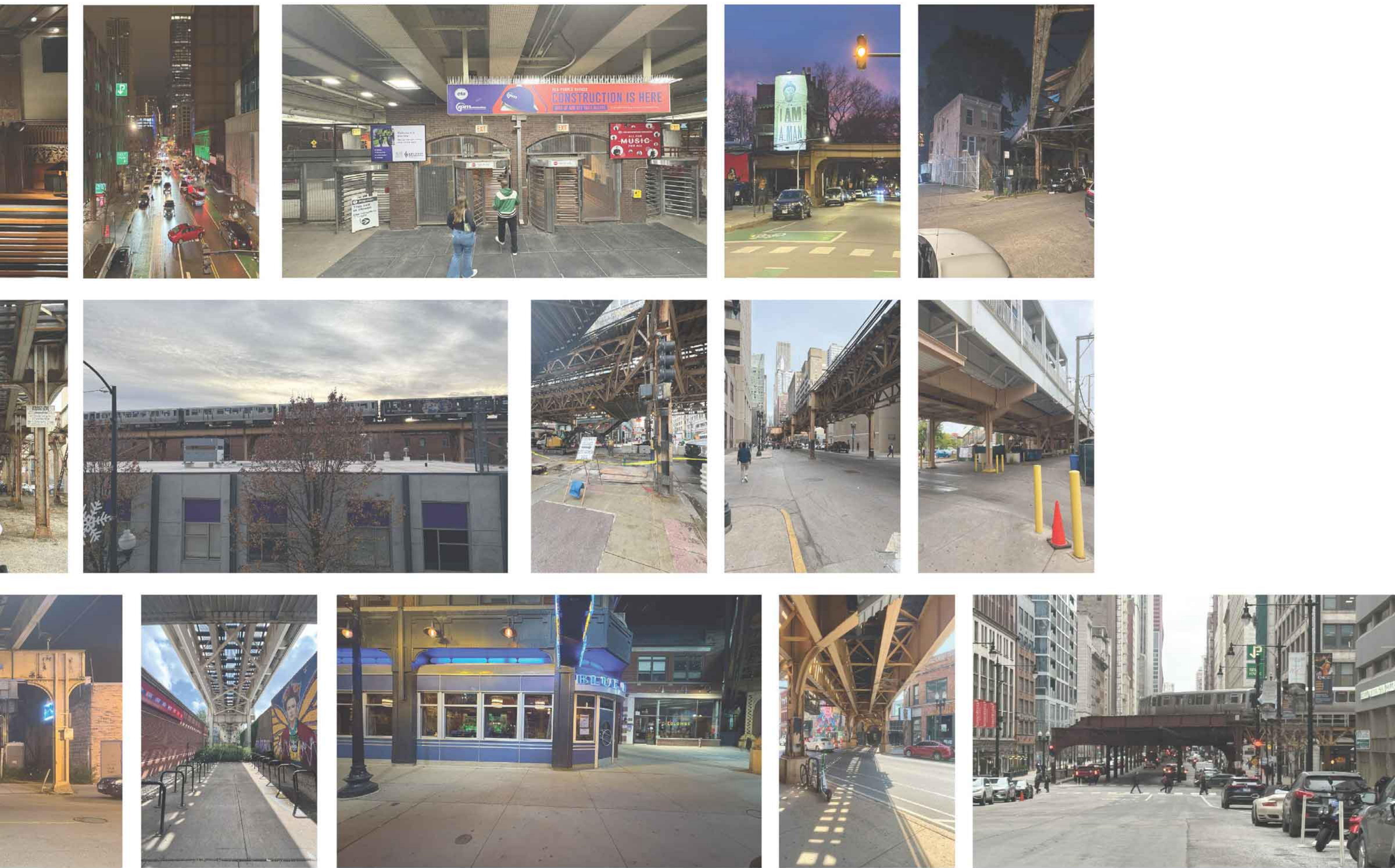
how can the urban fabric be improved and revitalized?

how can Chicago's transportation infrastructure be reimagined to further serve its communities?



In order to address these questions, I decided that it was necessary to focus on a specific site in Chicago - one that presents a meaningful opportunity to explore connection and propose a design solution that responds to the issues at hand.





The following chapters are a culmination of my year living in the city, shaped by experiences of learning, exploration, and the ongoing discovery of new ways to reimagine these overlooked spaces.

precedent work

Designing under and around elevated train infrastructure presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities.

In reimagining the underutilized space beneath Sedgwick Station, this project looks to precedents that transform transportation-adjacent sites into places of connection, utility, and life.

Each of the following case studies provide insight into how public infrastructure can support vibrant, multifunctional environments. Together, they offer a toolkit of ideas that prove that these infrastructures can be more than functional: they can be communal, adaptable, and even joyful.

These examples have been chosen not just for their aesthetics, but for how they respond to constraints, reveal potential within the overlooked, and prioritize the people who use them.

aldo van eyck | amsterdam, netherlands

Aldo Van Eyck, an architect best known for his playground designs in vacant lots across Amsterdam, has become an important design inspiration. His work exemplifies **human-scaled design** that transforms overlooked or underused spaces into **vibrant community assets**.

By **activating underused urban pockets**, Van Eyck created places that encourage interaction, imagination, and social connection. His emphasis on “in-between” spaces shows how thoughtful interventions can foster community interaction, while remaining adaptable, context-sensitive, and accessible for diverse users.

Fig. 52. One of Van Eyck's minimalist playgroynnds that blend with its context.





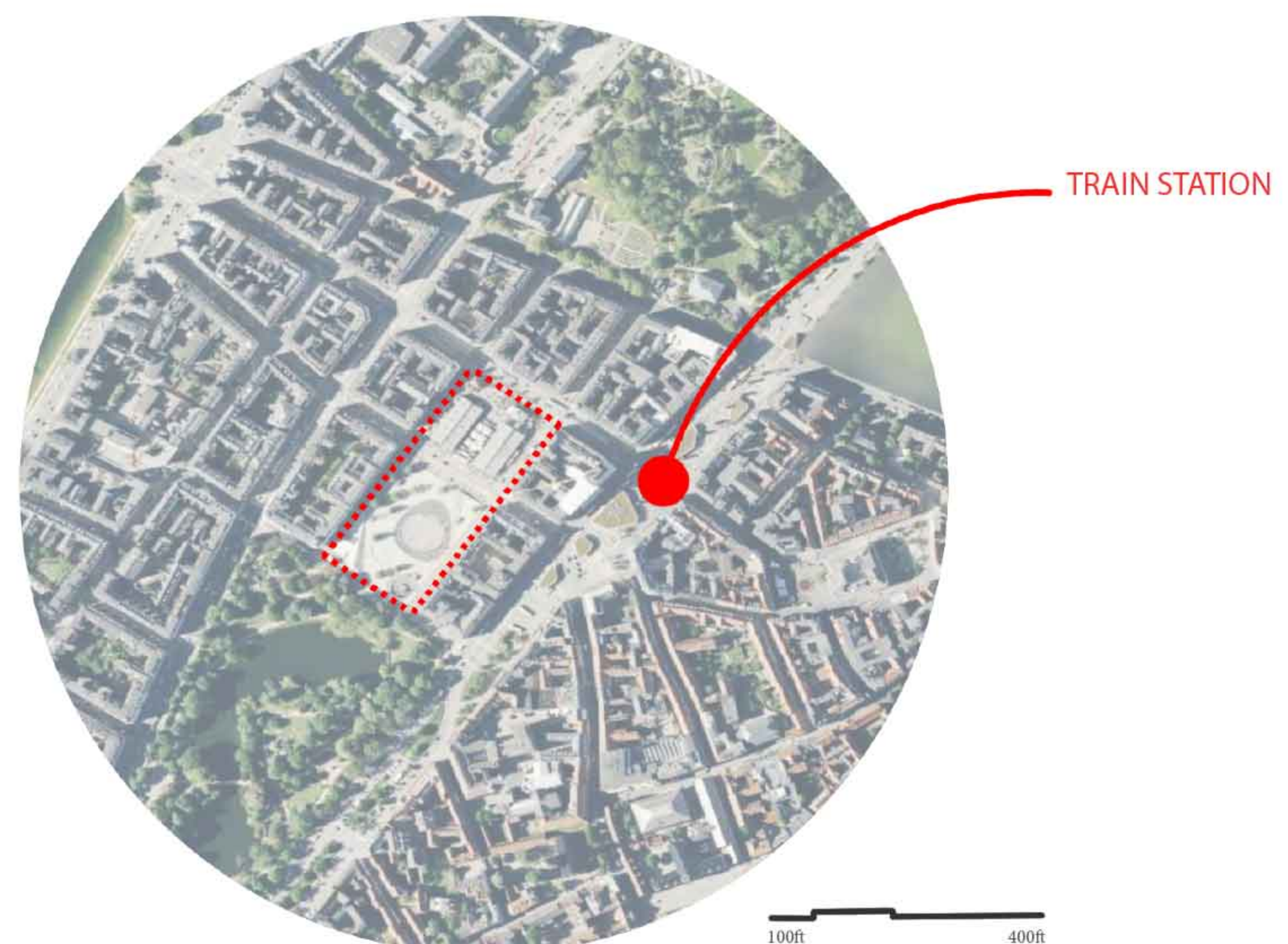
Fig. 53. The interior of the market establishes a space for each of its vendors.

torvehallerneKBH | copenhagen, denmark

In the heart of Copenhagen, Torvehallerne functions as a hub that serves the community, integrating food markets with **transit-oriented public space**.

Located near metro lines and bike routes, it encourages the use of public transportation by making essential amenities **easily accessible without a car**. The market's **flexible design** allows for both everyday use and special events, creating a space where people can gather, shop, and connect within a walkable framework.

It showcases how dense urban centers can combine food access and social interaction without compromising mobility - merging the functional with the communal.



farm on ogden | chicago, illinois

Farm on Ogden in Chicago brings urban agriculture directly into the **transit-accessible core** of a neighborhood, just steps away from the CTA Pink Line.

The project combines **fresh food production**, job training, and health programming, turning **underutilized space** into a hub for wellness. It shows how community resilience can be built by pairing access to transportation with access to nutrition, creating a local ecosystem of care and opportunity.

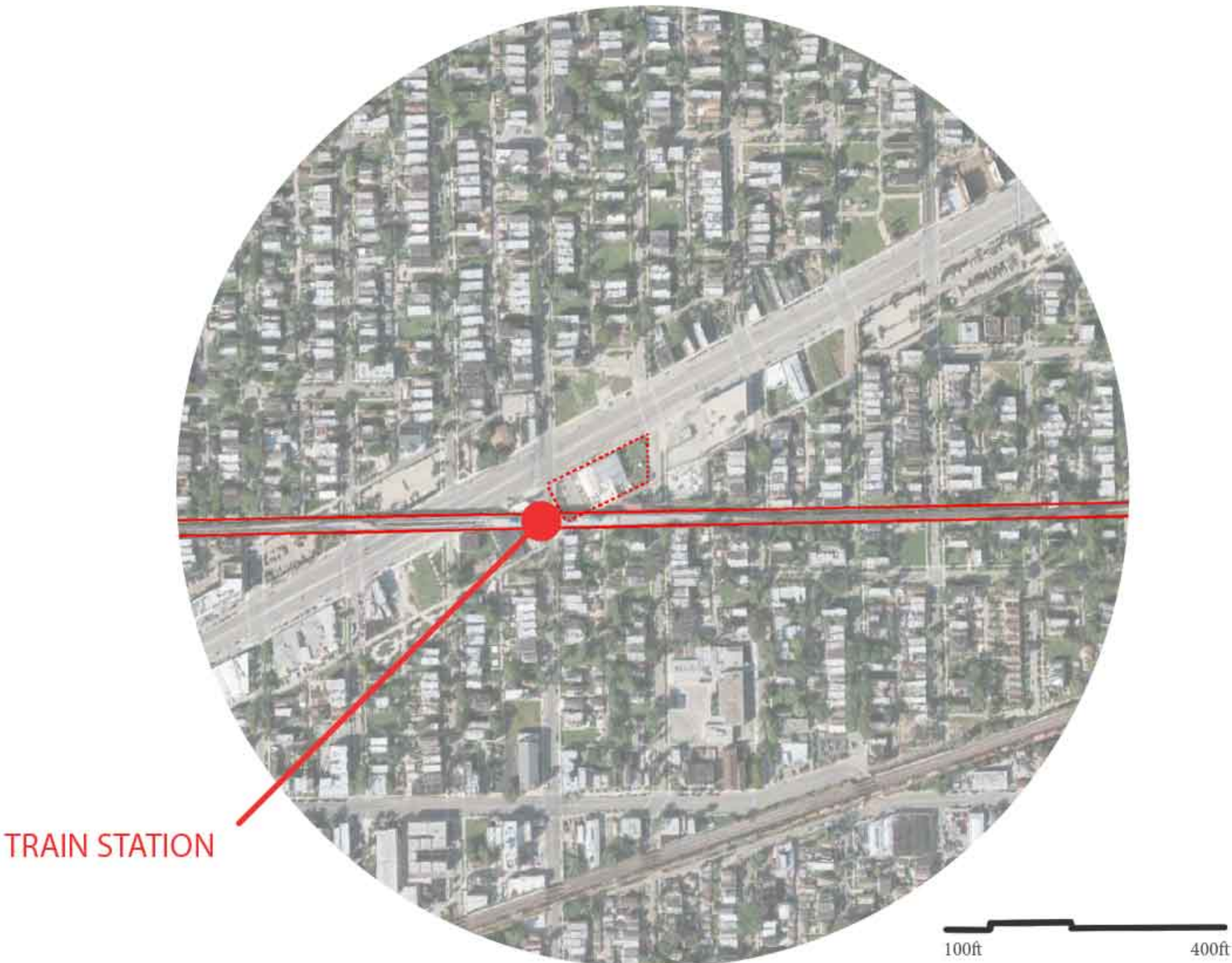


Fig. 54. This image shows both the market and green house areas of the project.





Fig. 55. An image of the train leaving as vendors hold their tents back.

talad rom hub | mae klong, thailand

This market is an example of how food **hubs and transportation can intersect**. Set directly along an active railway line, the market comes alive with its rhythm: when a train approaches, vendors quickly adapt their stalls, pulling back goods to make way, then resuming business once the train passes.

This system demonstrates an extraordinary flexibility of space, **maximizing land use** without sacrificing its function. It also creates a **human-scale environment** where daily life, commerce, and infrastructure operate in harmony.



high line | new york, new york

The High Line in New York offers inspiration through its thoughtful **integration of green design** into the urban environment.

By transforming a disused elevated railway into a lush linear park, the project **reuses industrial infrastructure** to create a vibrant public space filled with pathways, native plants, and seating areas, something that is not commonly found in the streets of the city. It also enhances **urban connectivity**, allowing pedestrians to move fluidly through the city while enjoying moments of pause, reflection, and community.

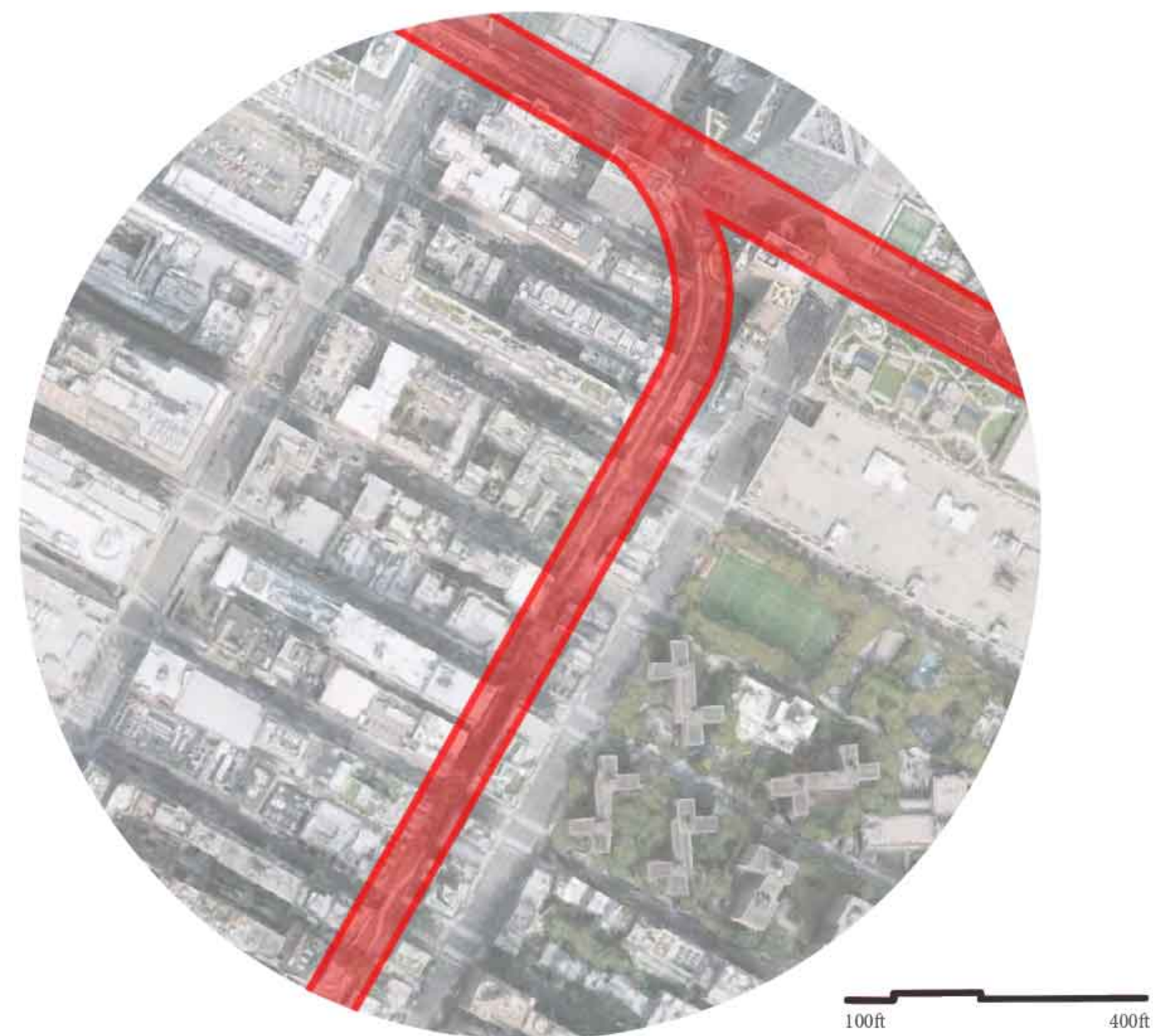


Fig. 56. The picture showcases the green pathway created on the elevated railway.

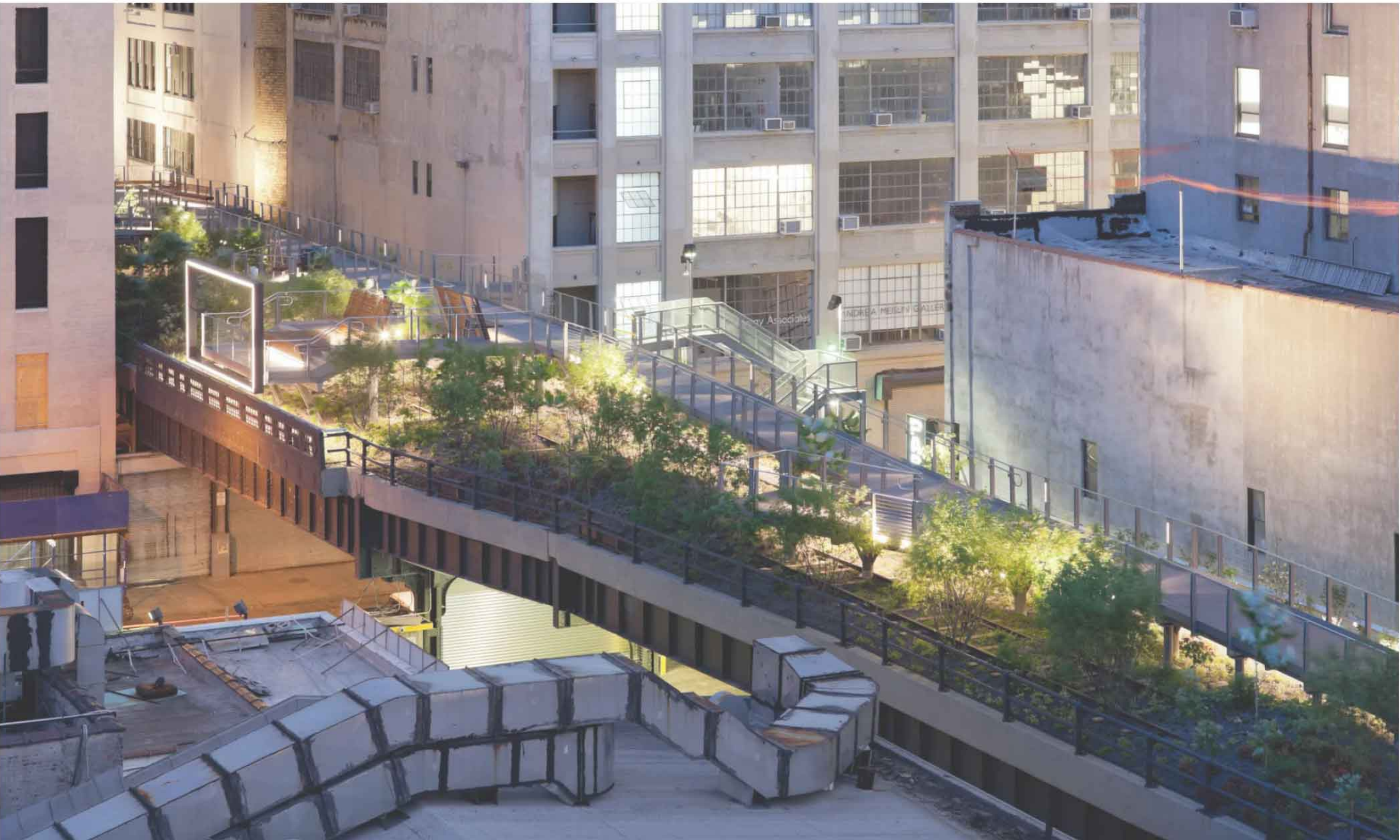


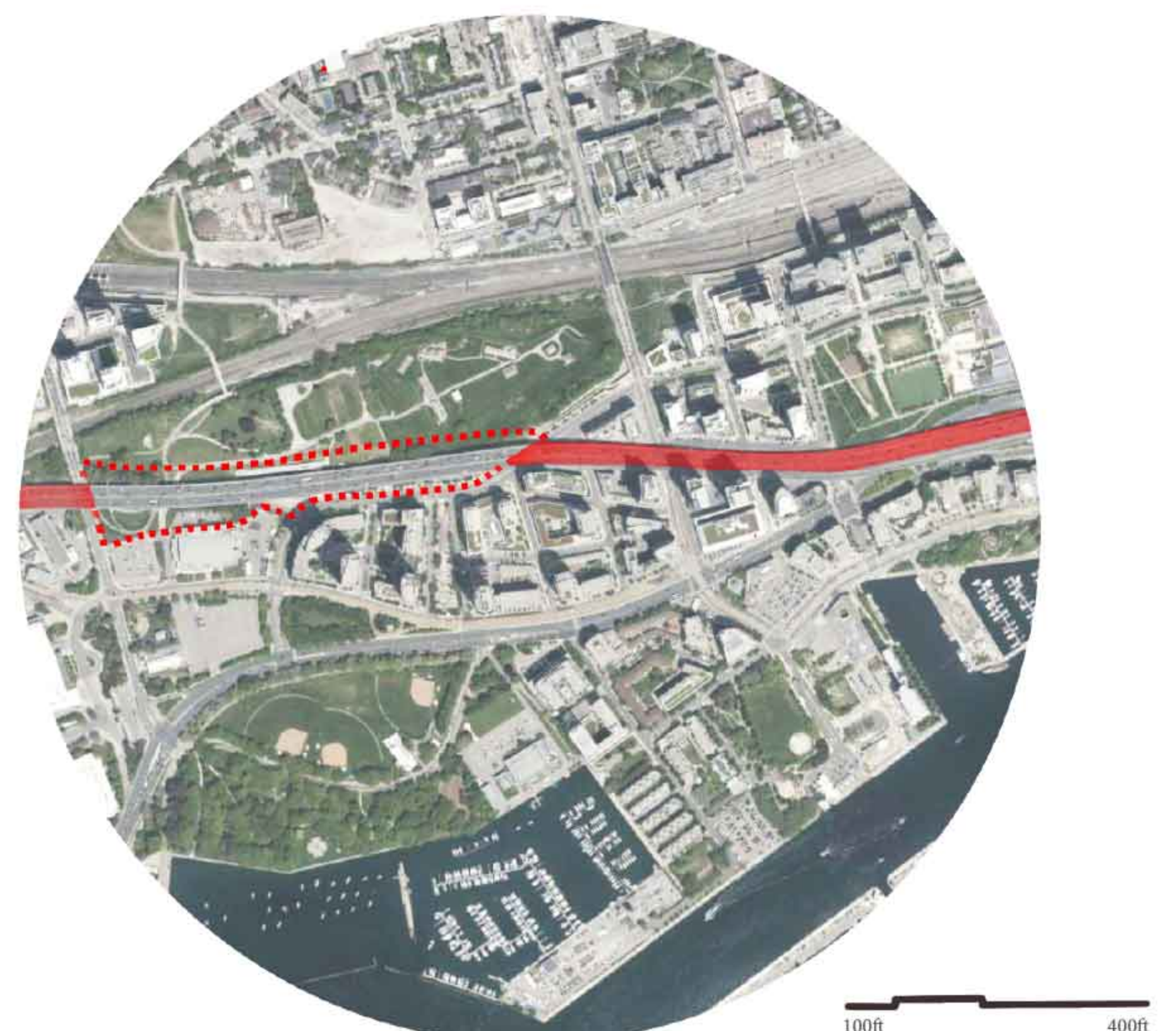


Fig. 57. An image of the structure of the highway and its activated ground-level corridor.

the bentway | toronto, canada

This project reclaims the previously neglected space beneath the Gardiner Expressway, transforming its infrastructure into an asset. By introducing multi-use public programming year-round, like skating in winter and performances in summer, the project **activates an overlooked corridor** and **reconnects fragmented neighborhoods**.

Its design also demonstrates how space beneath elevated infrastructure can be reimagined to serve communities through **flexible and engaging public use**.



choosing a site

brown line | sedgwick station
old town | zip 60610

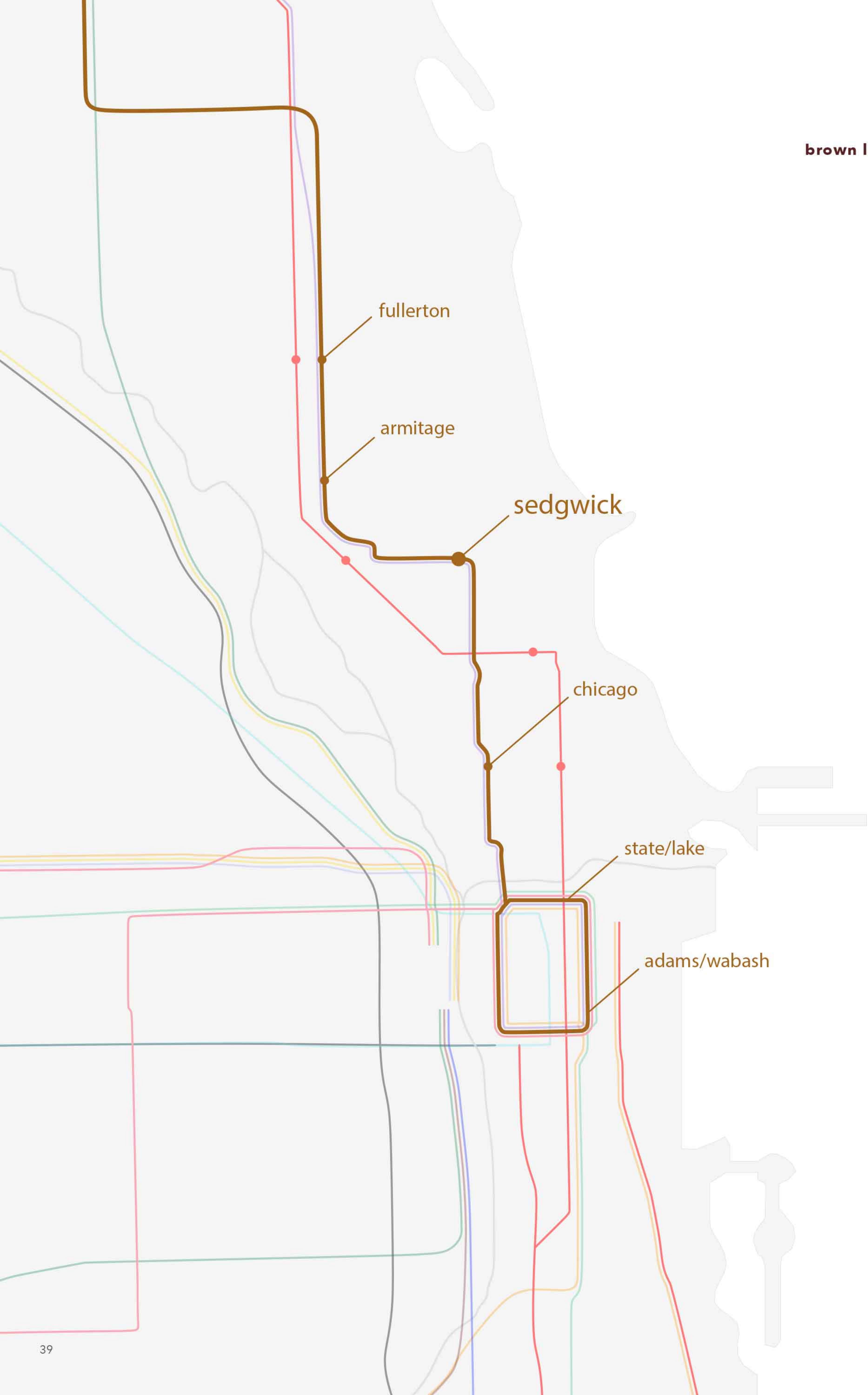




Fig. 40. An image of Wells Street, located a few blocks from Sedgwick Station.



Fig. 41. This image illustrates the typical urban fabric of the streets in Old Town.

Sedgwick Station, located in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood, presents a compelling case for an intervention.

It is the only station serving this part of the city, with red line stations being over a mile away on each side, making it a vital transit hub for the residents in the area. Despite its importance, the area surrounding the station remains underutilized.

Located in the heart of Old Town, the Brown line's Sedgwick station is located in a vibrant neighborhood known for its historic character, with a mix of preserved 19th-century buildings, cultural institutions, and a vibrant arts scene.



Fig. 42. The Old Town skyline.



TOW ZONE

site analysis

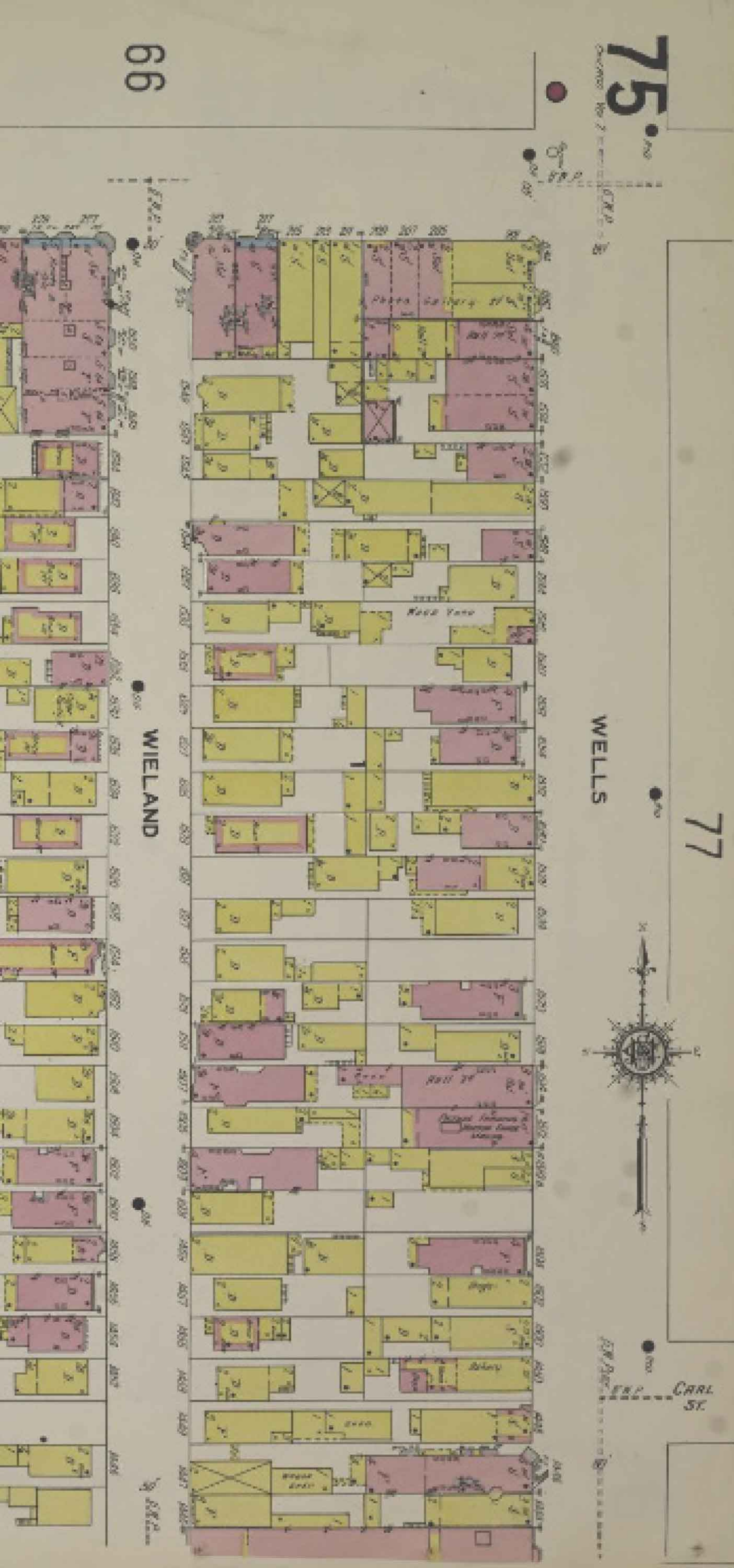


Fig. 50. Sanborn Map Company. Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, 1927. Library of Congress.

This 1927 Sanborn map offers a glimpse into how long this area of Chicago has been established. Even nearly a century ago, the neighborhood around Sedgwick Station was already developed with a dense urban fabric: rows of residential buildings, small-scale commercial structures, and a well-defined street grid.

The rhythms of daily life, the mix of uses, and the patterns of movement have roots that extend far back, shaping how the space functions in the present.

The map highlights Sedgwick Station in dark gray, situated within a primarily residential area. Surrounding it are dense blocks of housing that reflect the neighborhood’s character.

In contrast, major corridors such as North Avenue and Wells Street introduce a different urban texture, offering a mix of commercial spaces with several bus routes that connect the neighborhood to the broader city.

This unique intersection of residential and commercial vibrancy makes the area around Sedgwick Station very active. North Avenue and Wells Street function as key spines of movement and activity, drawing both locals and visitors. These streets are lined with restaurants, cafés, and commerce that define Old Town’s cultural identity.

The constant movement of residents, commuters, and even tourists contributes to the area’s dynamic street life, reinforcing the importance of responsive public space design.

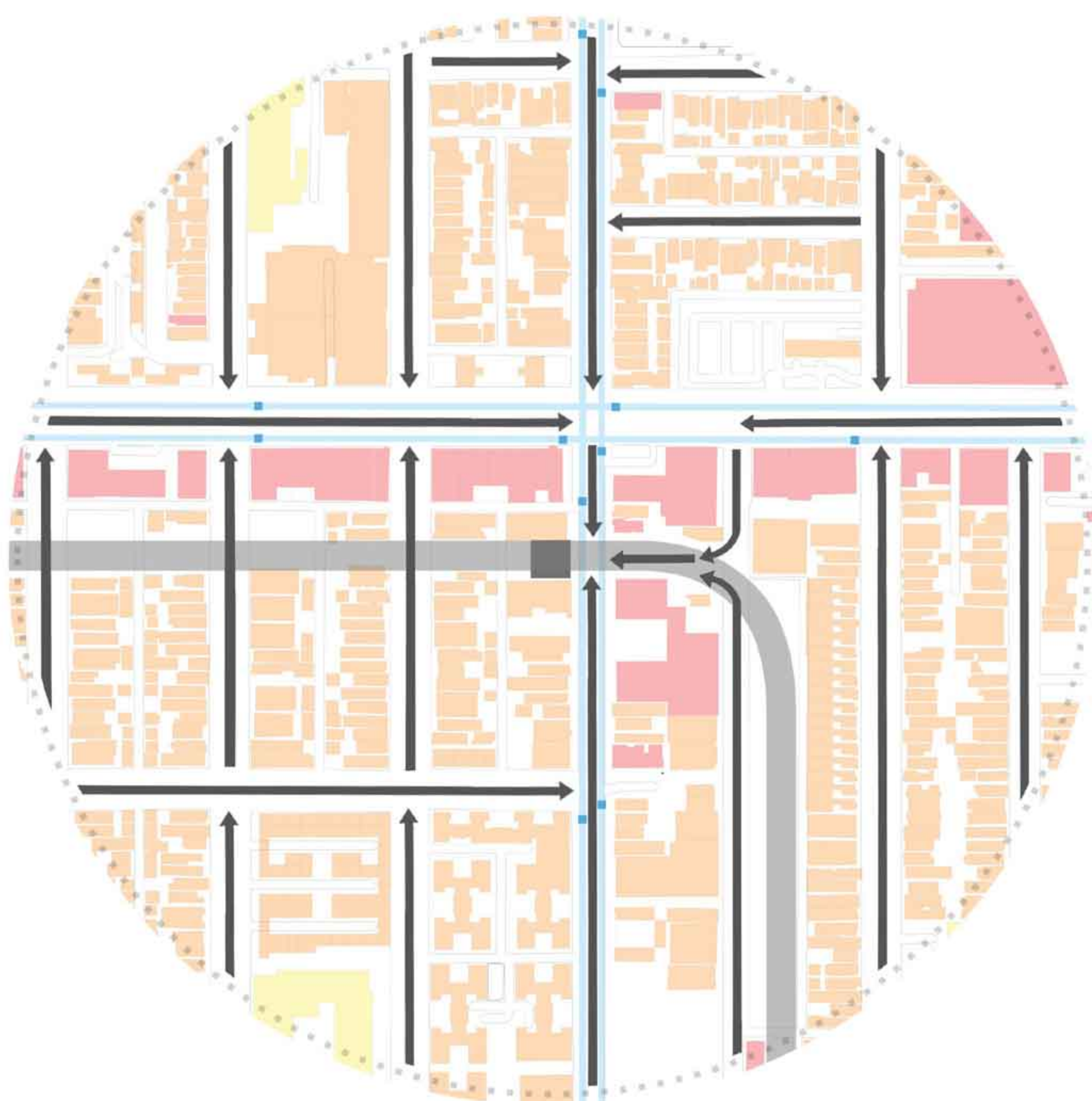


Fig. 51. Design of the sidewalk vs a desire path that clearly is more convenient.



Spatial organization is more than just arranging rooms and pathways - it is about shaping human experience within the built environment. In a project aimed at activating space, the primary goal becomes creating an inviting environment that engages users and encourages exploration.

The concept of the "desired path" offers a compelling framework. Though seemingly simple - observing how people naturally move and leave traces - it serves as a powerful tool for understanding spatial behavior and designing with user experience at the forefront.



Over the course of several months, the site was observed at various times of the day and week. Patterns in movement, points of entry and exit, and the ways individuals navigated obstacles were documented to gain insight into how the space was used.

These observations informed the creation of a circulation map, visualizing movement patterns and desired paths. This led to the development of spatial diagrams, that ensure that the design aligns with the natural flow of human activity.



Here you can see what these paths actually look like - these are the views people face every day on their way to and from work.

These views encountered daily by commuters helped define the site's boundary - one that responds to the layered routines and experiences of the area.

The design is divided into two key functions. One part emphasizes convenience, supporting a major pedestrian route to the station. The other responds to the surrounding community - reflecting a familiar condition in Chicago where train tracks run directly behind rows of residential buildings.

Taking into account the site's demographics, spatial constraints, and proximity to the train, several spatial strategies began to emerge, such as:

viewing platform at the corner of the site offers a striking perspective of the train as it rounds the curve - an intentional nod to the city's rail legacy.

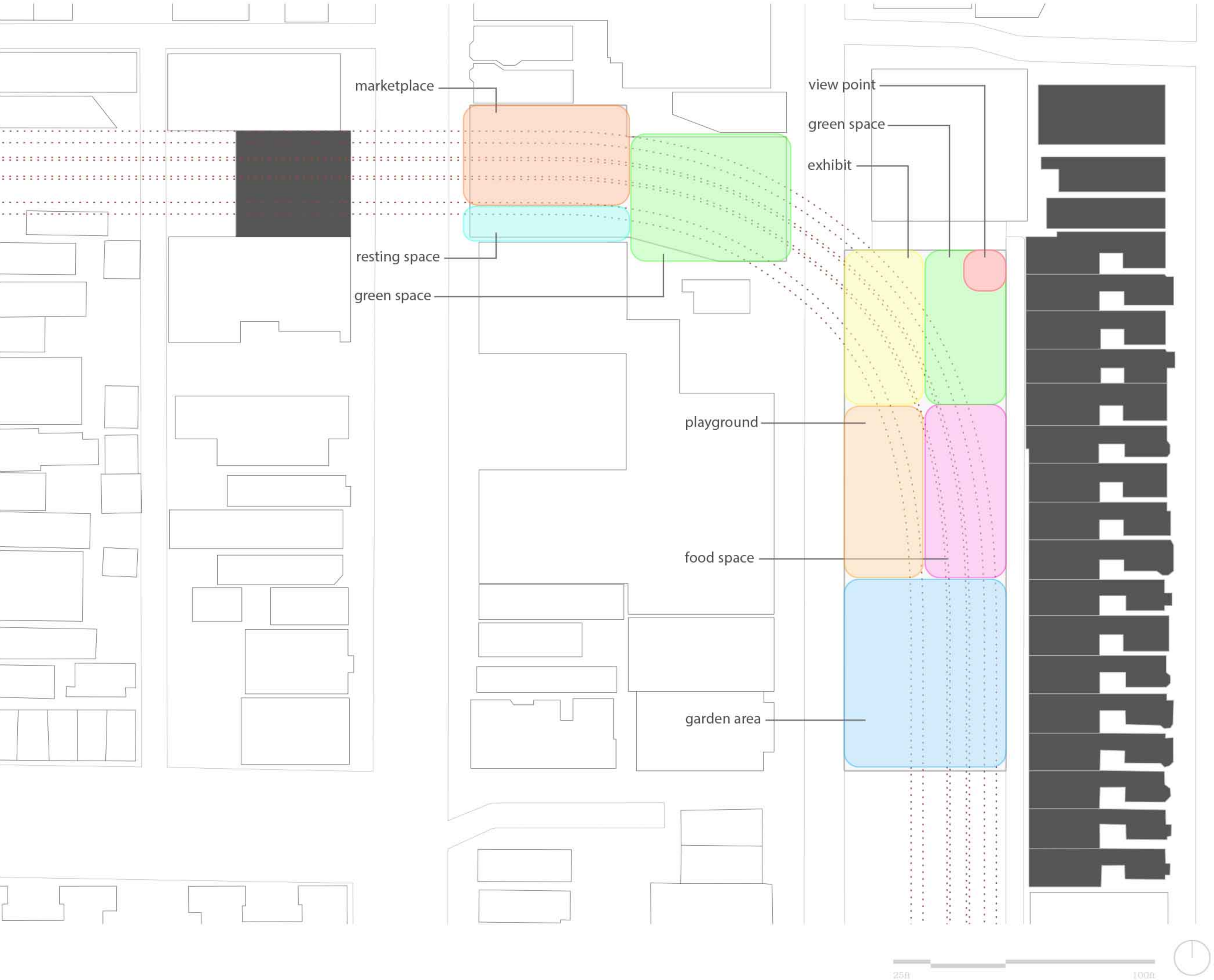
green space takes advantage of the only portion of the site open to above.

potential exhibit space invites visitors and connects to Old Town's cultural identity.

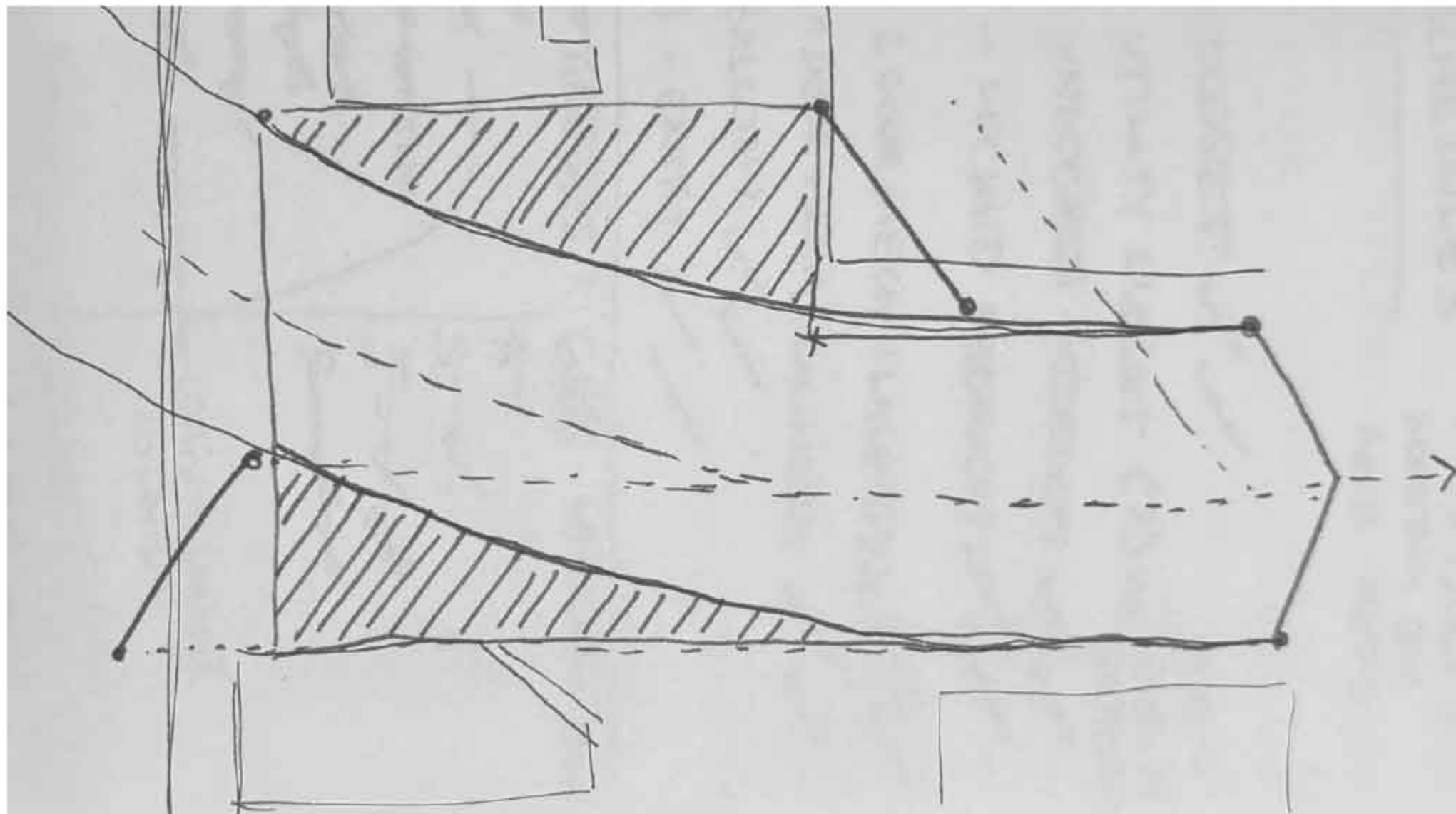
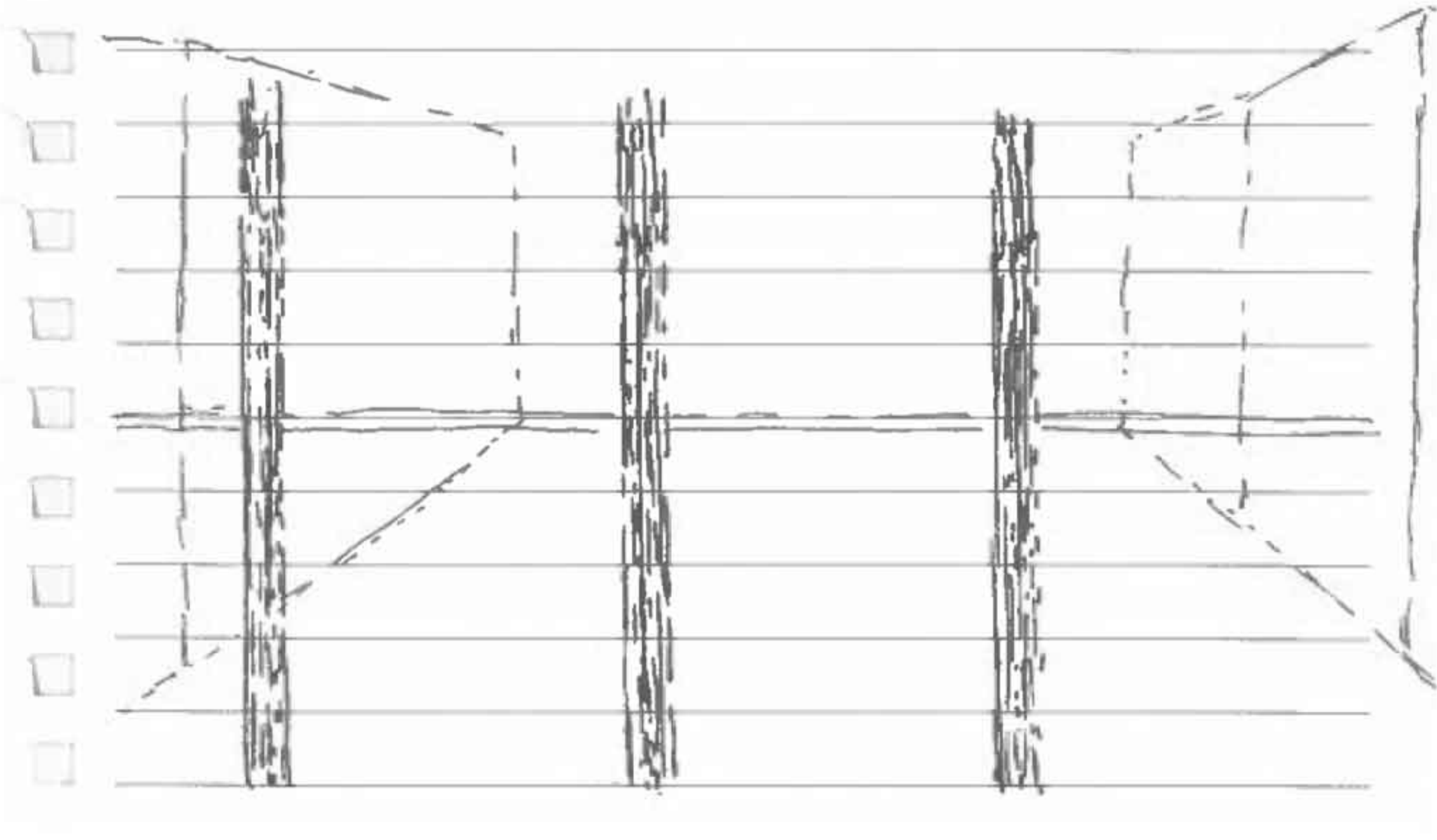
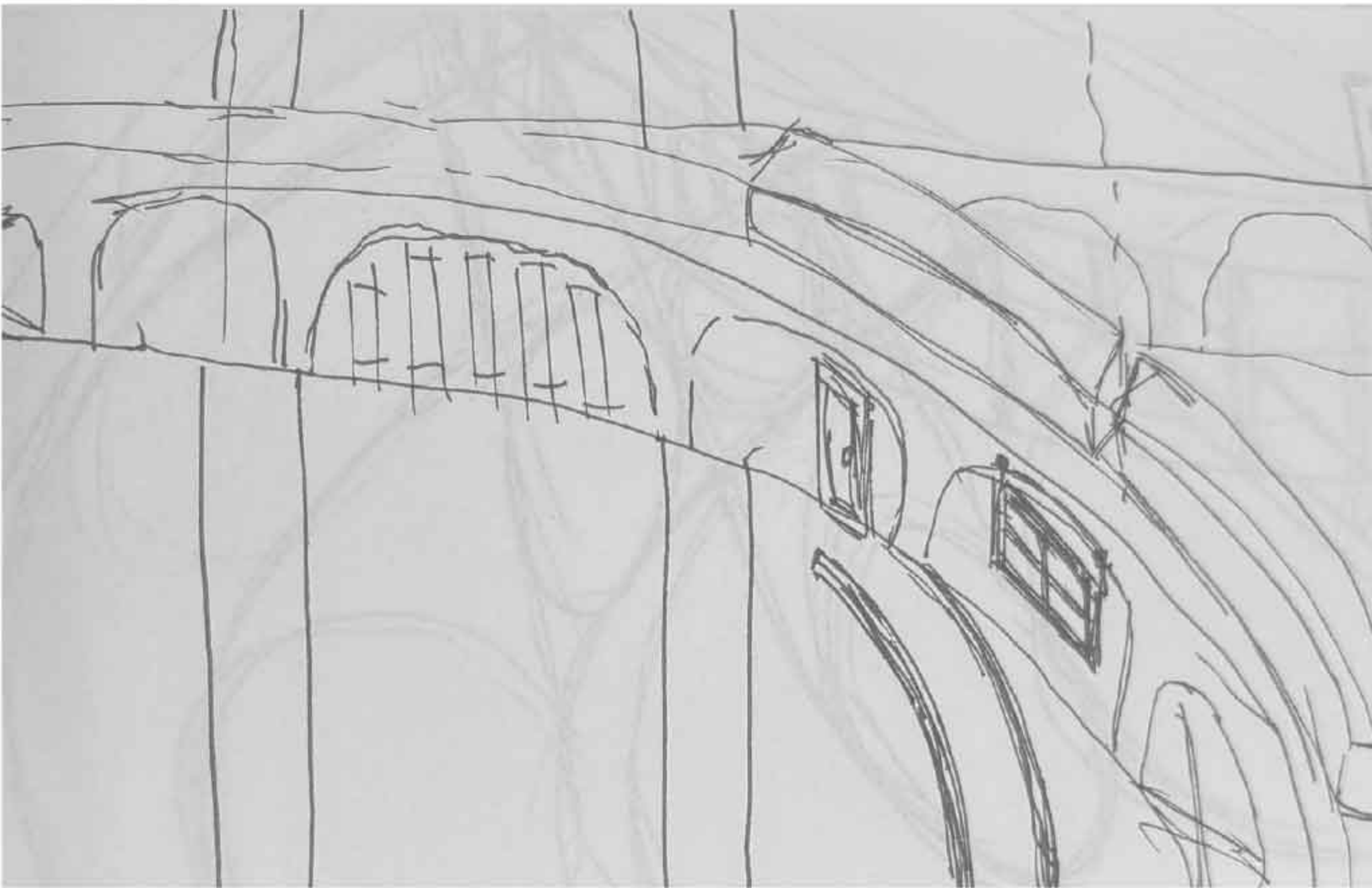
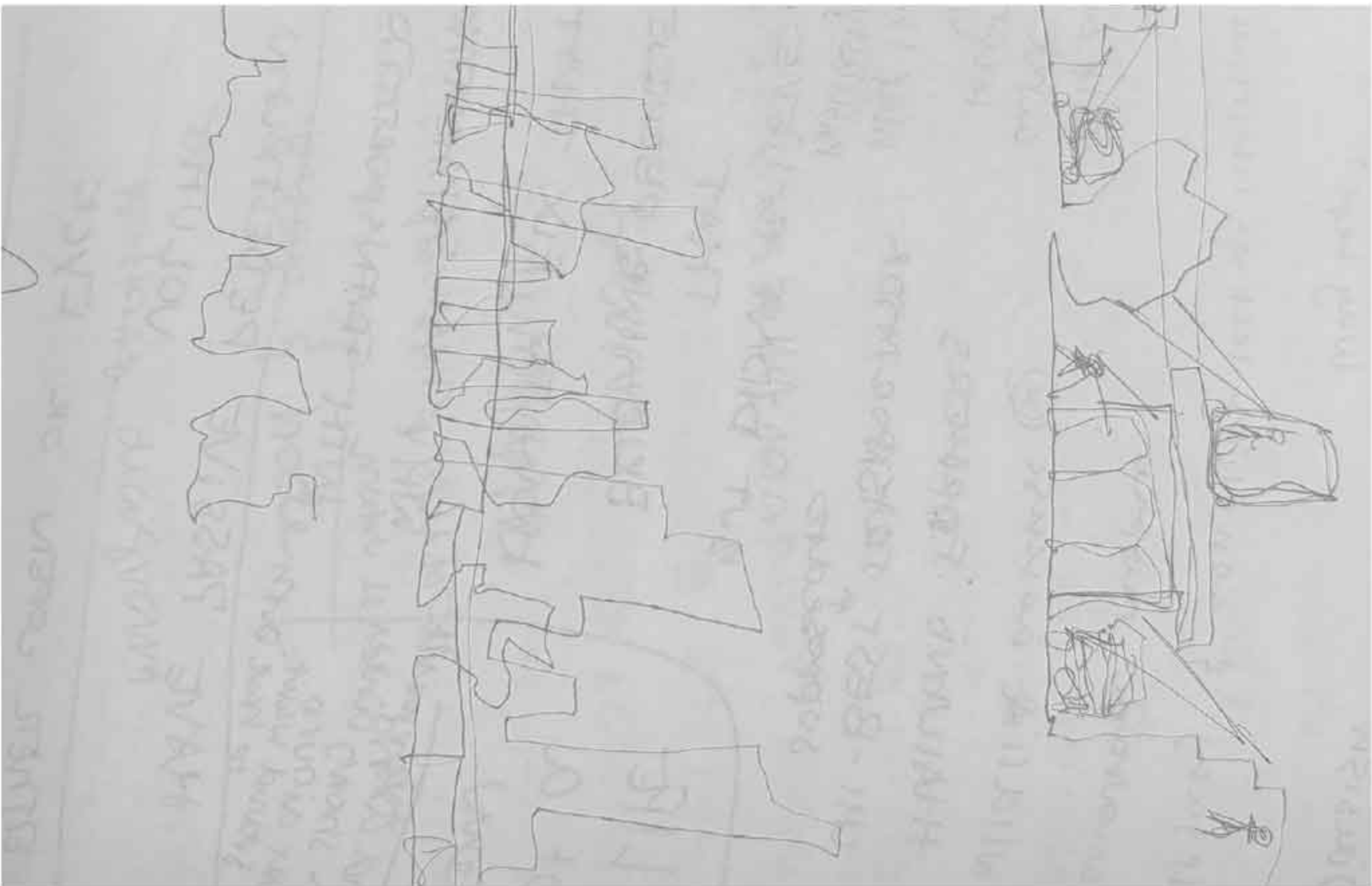
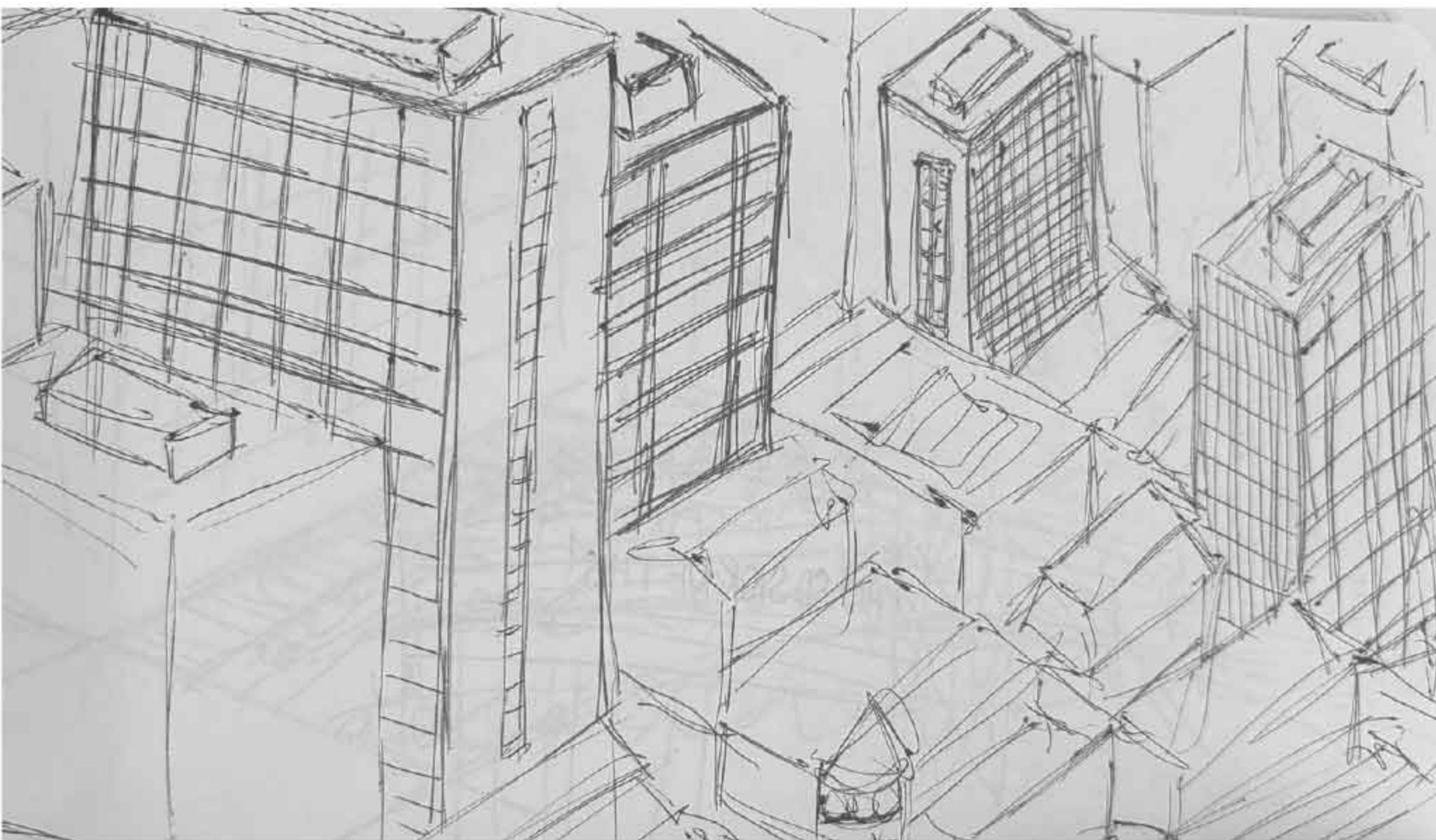
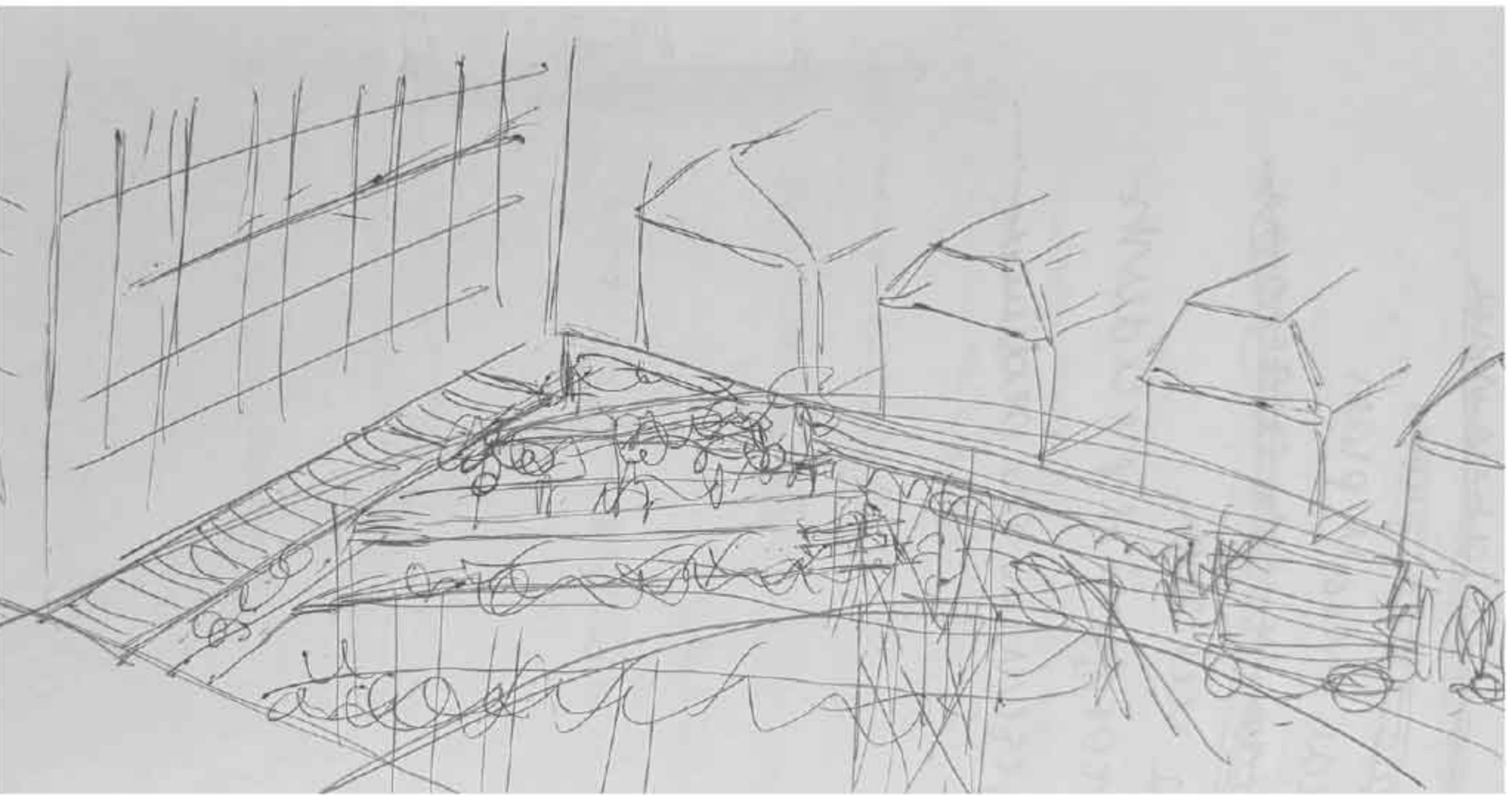
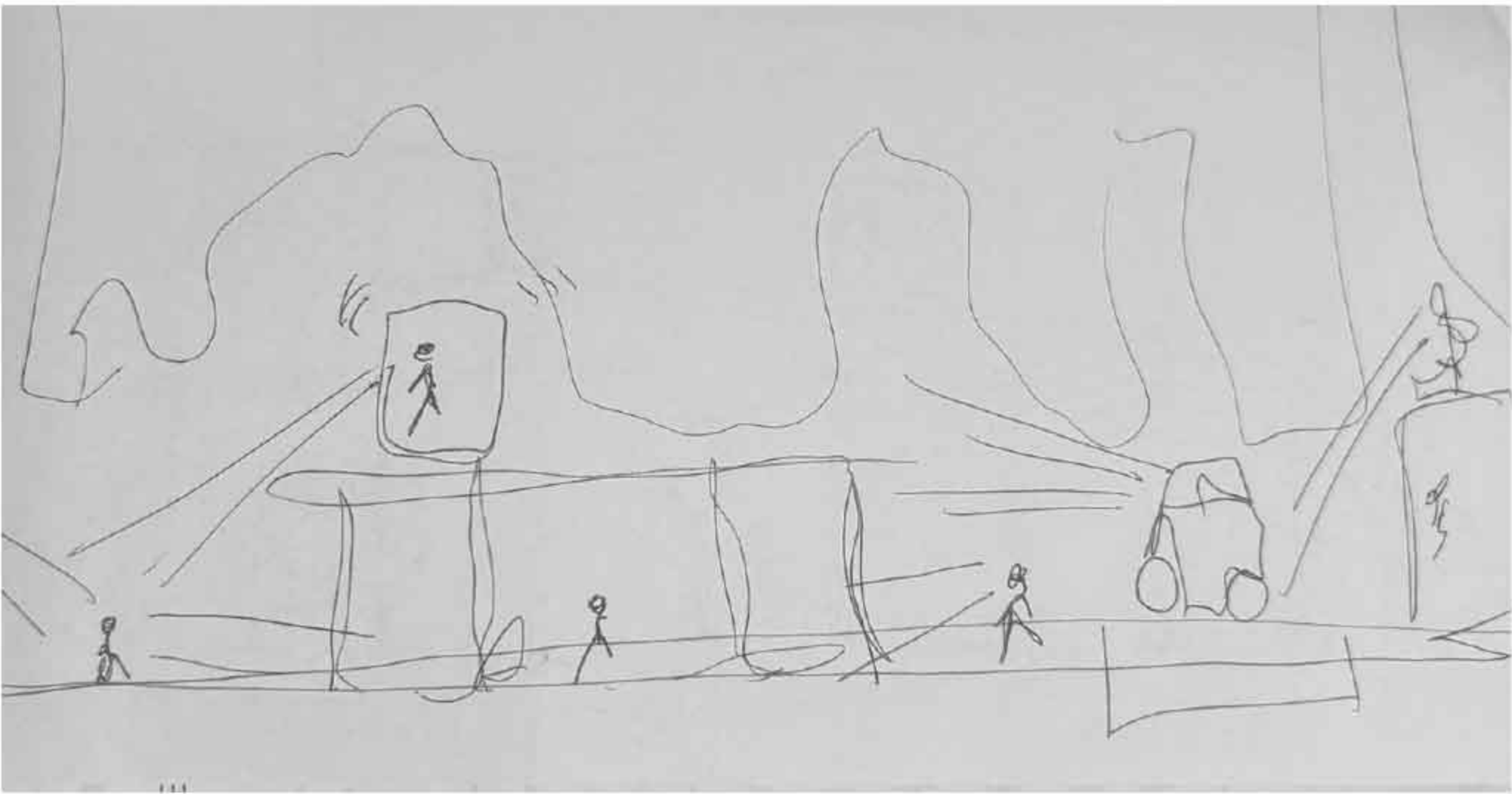
play area serves the neighborhood's family-oriented demographic.

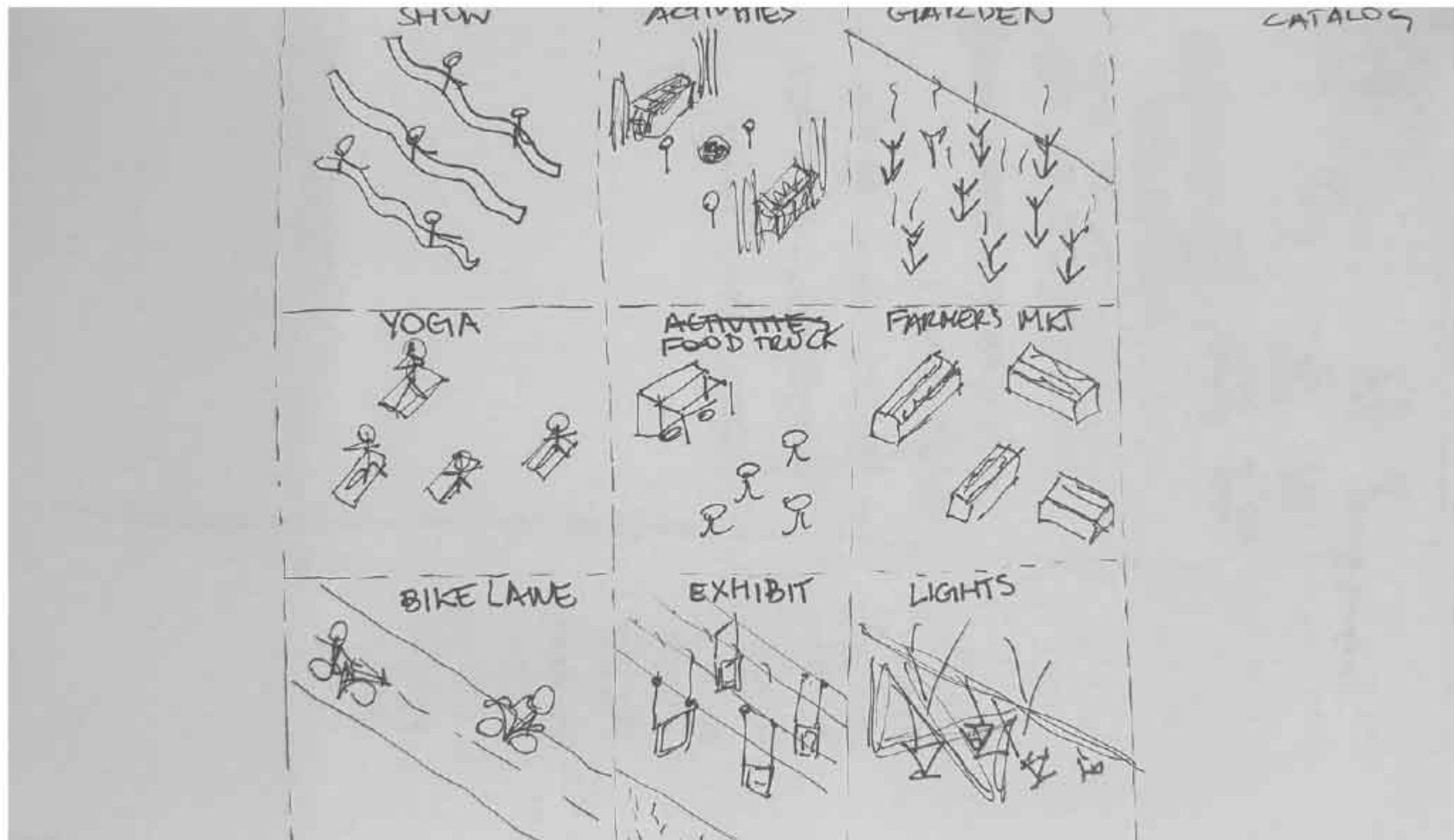
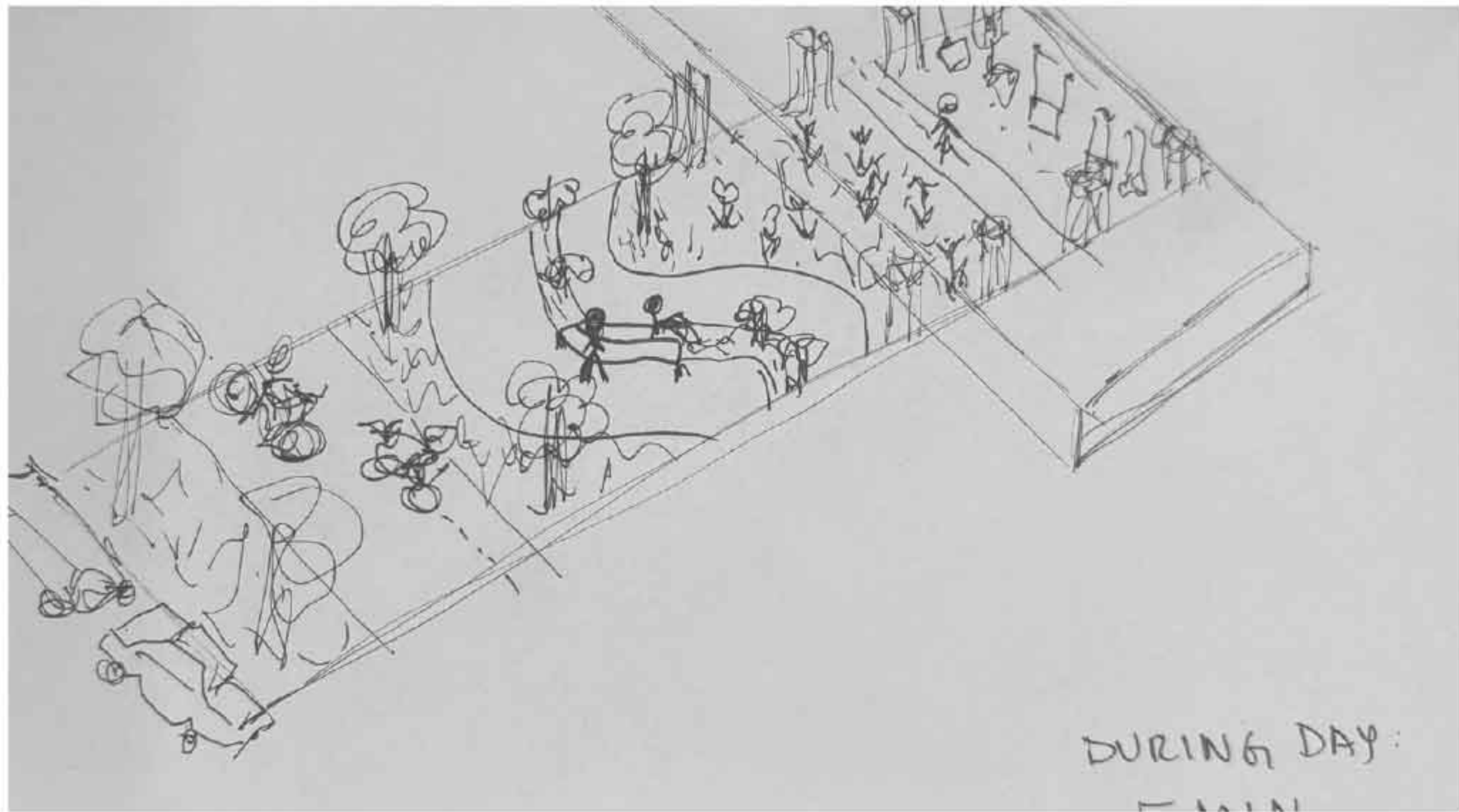
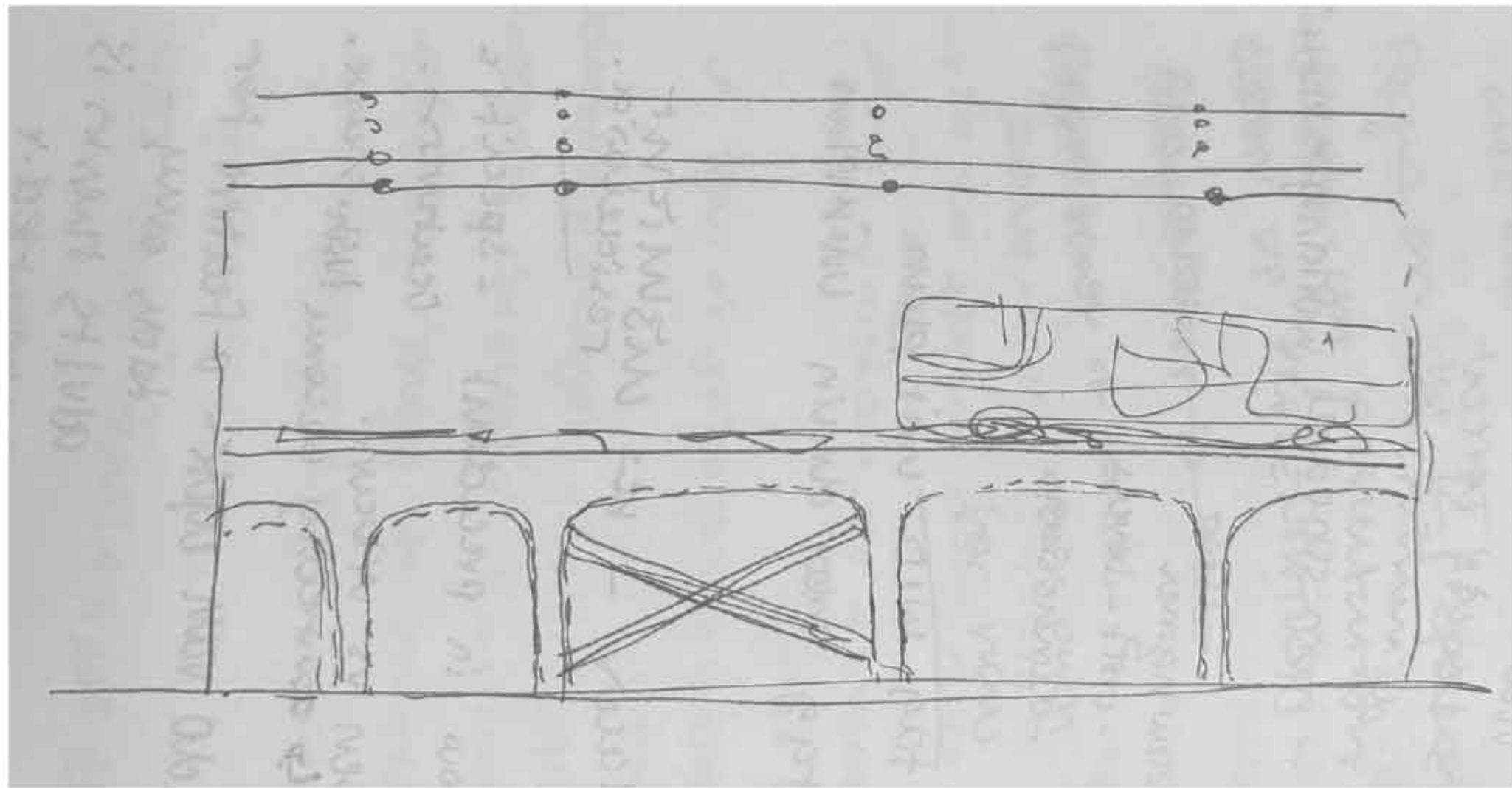
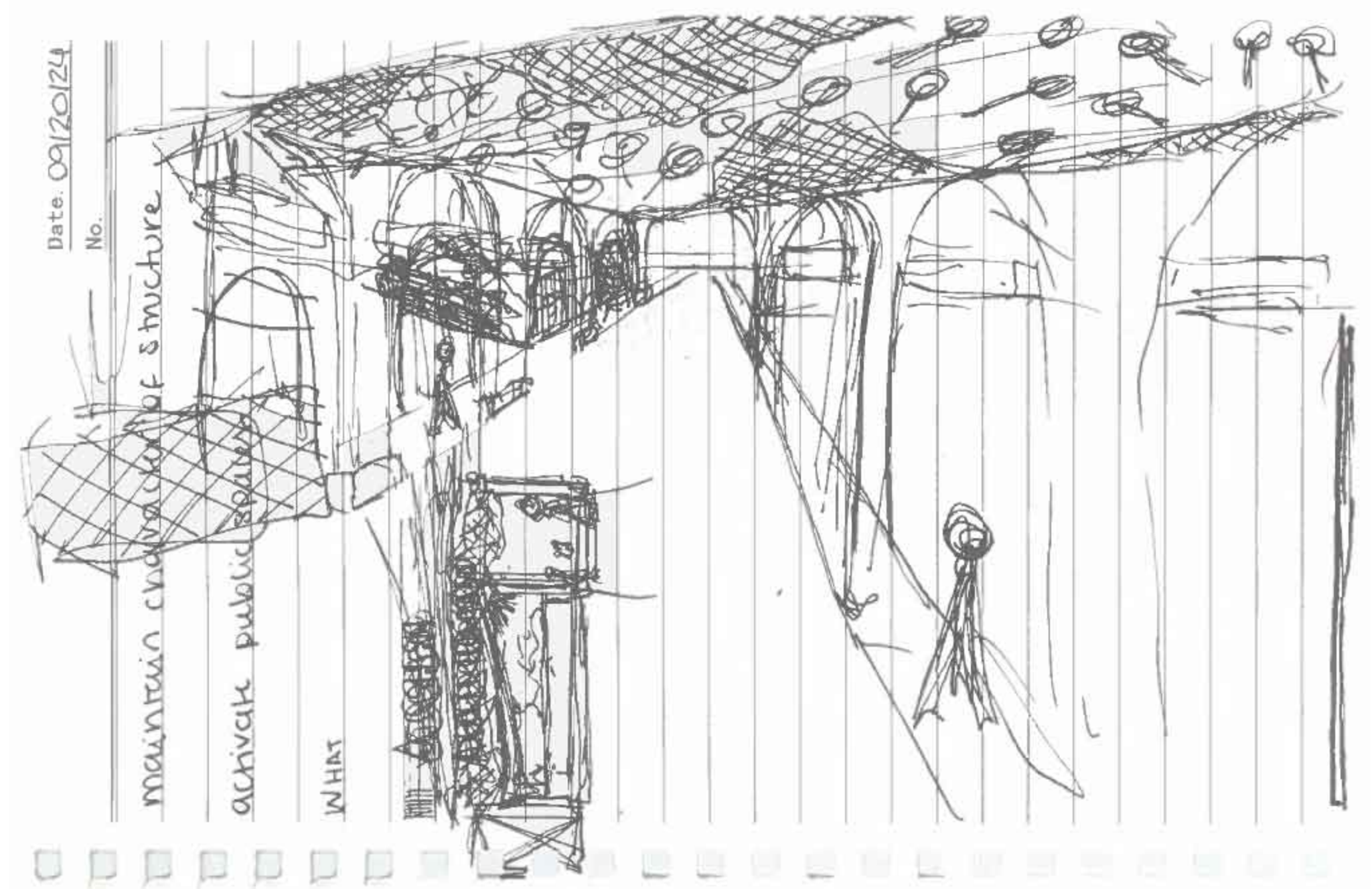
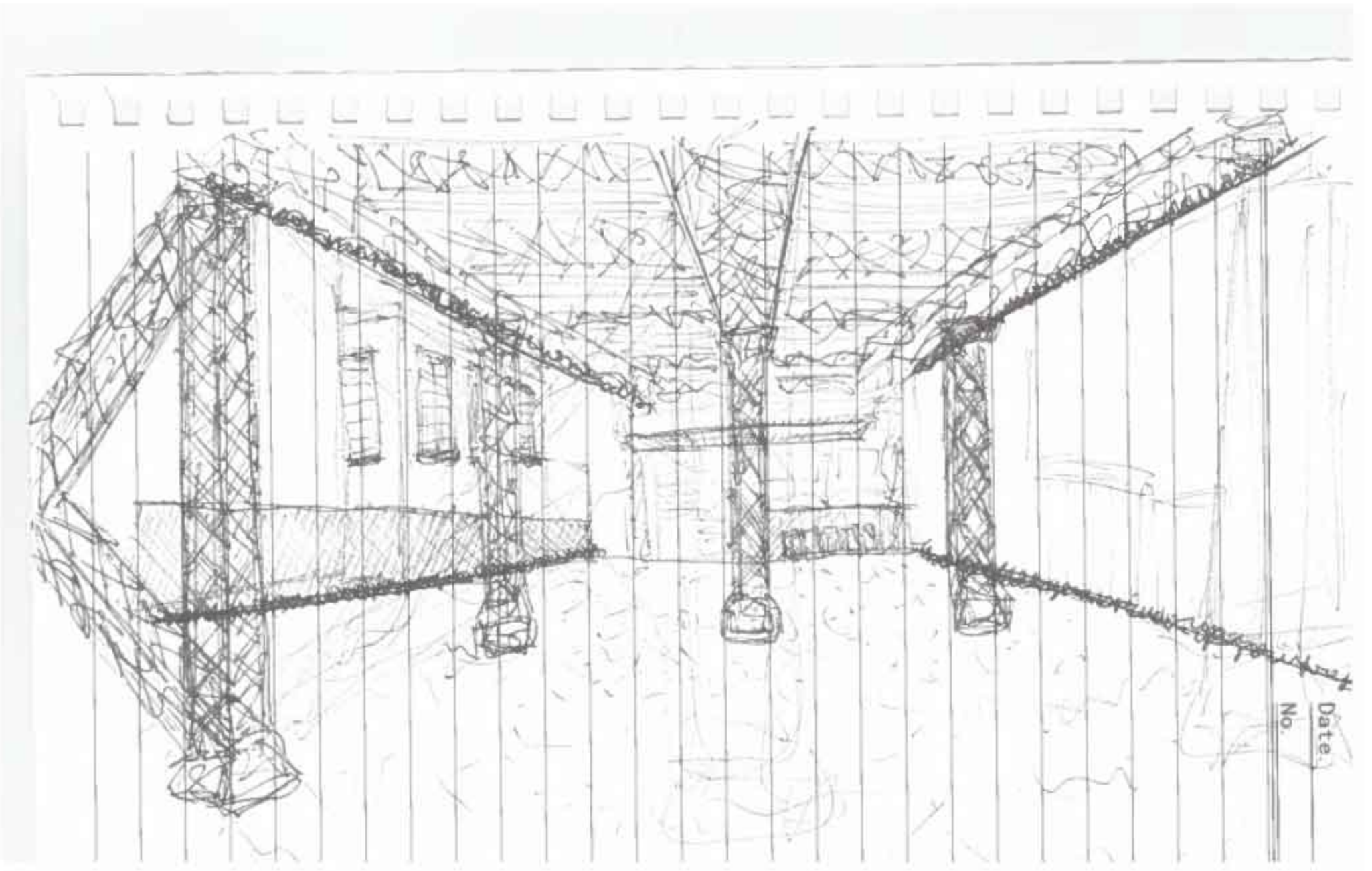
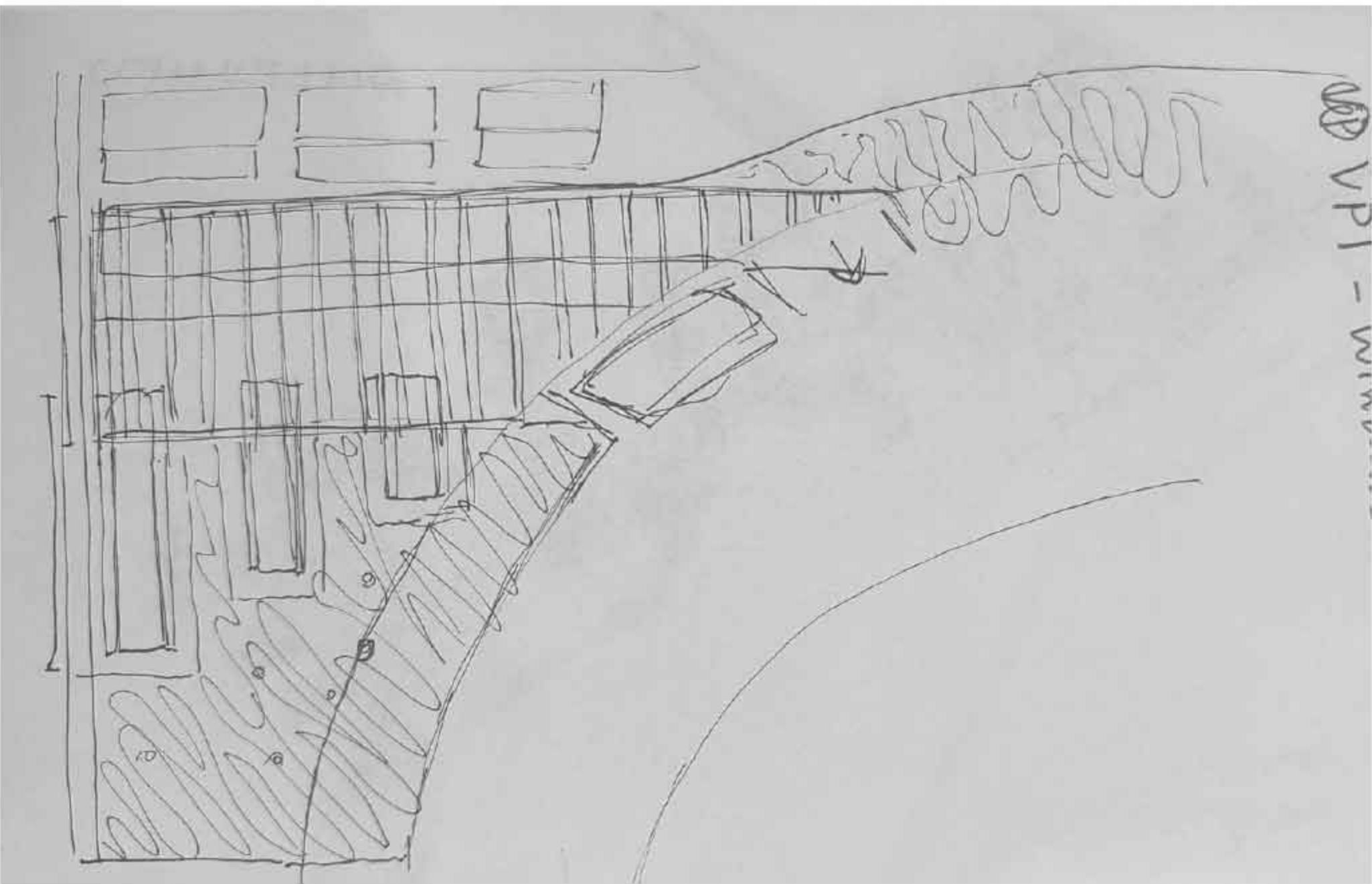
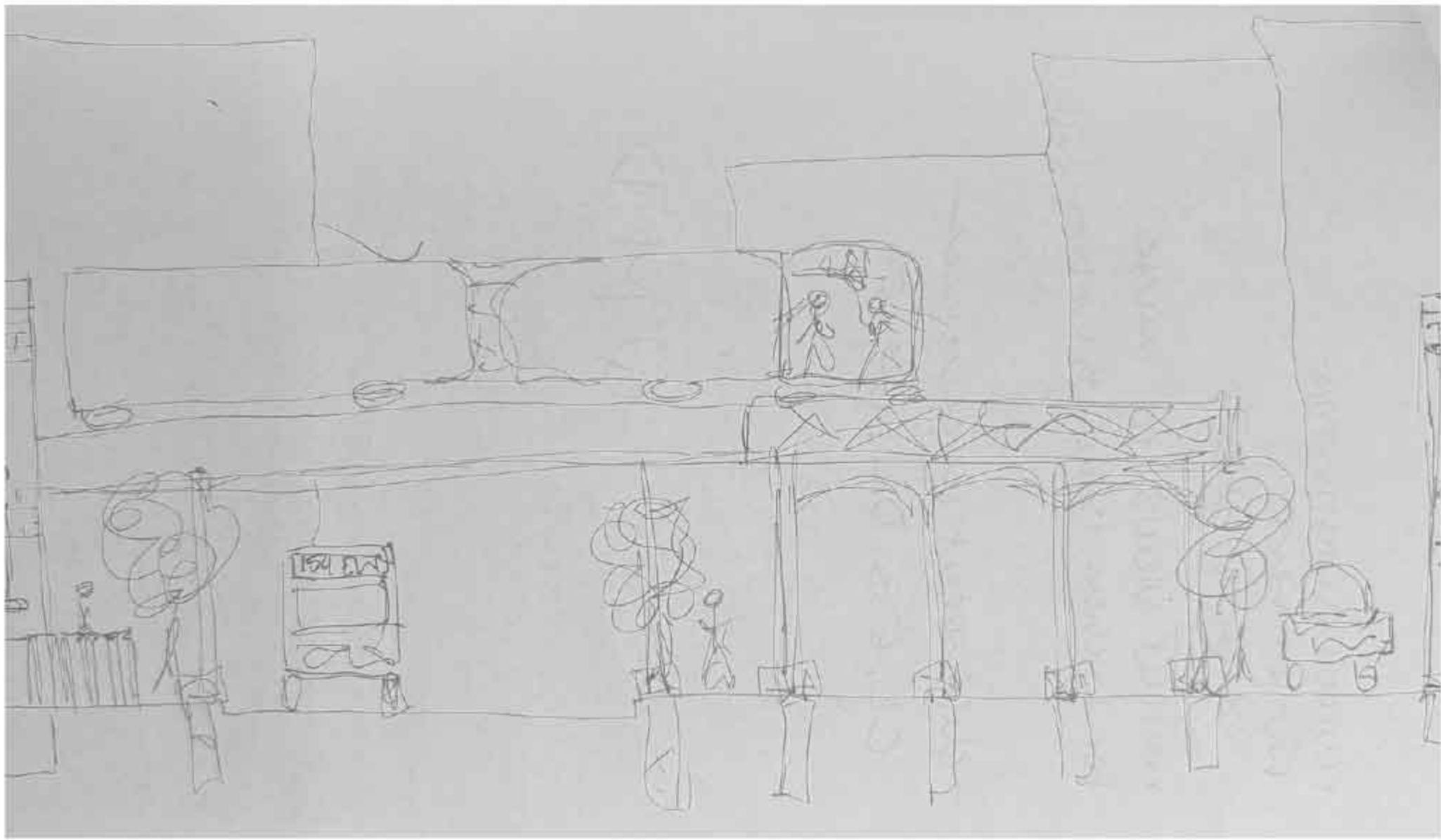
food space and garden area introduce access to fresh produce and opportunities for local vendors.

These elements collectively support a marketplace positioned near the train exit, making it an easy and logical stop for commuters. Finally, a resting area and a connective space between both sides of the site accommodate traffic patterns, welcoming the morning rush and evening flow.



proposal







After a careful analysis of context and public need, this chapter presents the spatial response that has emerged through this research. This proposal occupies the space beneath and alongside the elevated tracks at Sedgwick Station - not as an afterthought, but as a confrontation of urban fragmentation.

Rather than smoothing over the tensions revealed in earlier chapters - between movement and stillness, visibility and neglect, infrastructure and intimacy - this design leans into them. It seeks to convert the inherited constraints of the site into a generative framework for civic life.

This chapter does not aim to deliver a finished solution, but rather a proposal that remains open - adaptable and collaborative. It offers a framework for occupation that privileges flexibility over permanence and public use over programmatic prescription.

The interventions detailed here are modest in gesture but intentional in its effect, aiming to re-script a space long defined by transit alone into one shared by presence, pause, and possibility.

What follows are the drawings, models, and spatial strategies that give shape to this vision - grounded in the previous lessons but oriented toward action.

Just steps from Sedgwick Station, this sign honors activist Marion Nzinga Stamps, a key figure in Cabrini-Green who fought for public housing residents and community-led change.



View from Sedgwick Station looking East.



Looking West towards Sedgwick Station.



Looking East towards N Orleans St.



stairs

This portion of the intervention begins with a newly introduced stair connection, offering an alternative route for eastbound commuters to take without crossing the street. The stairs guide users directly into a semi-enclosed area beneath the tracks - a space envisioned as a flexible zone for small vendors, casual seating, and pedestrian flow. By creating a protected yet open environment, this area invites both lingering and movement, balancing everyday utility with opportunities for informal gathering and local commerce.





Entrance of Sedgwick Station.



Loop-bound side of train platform.

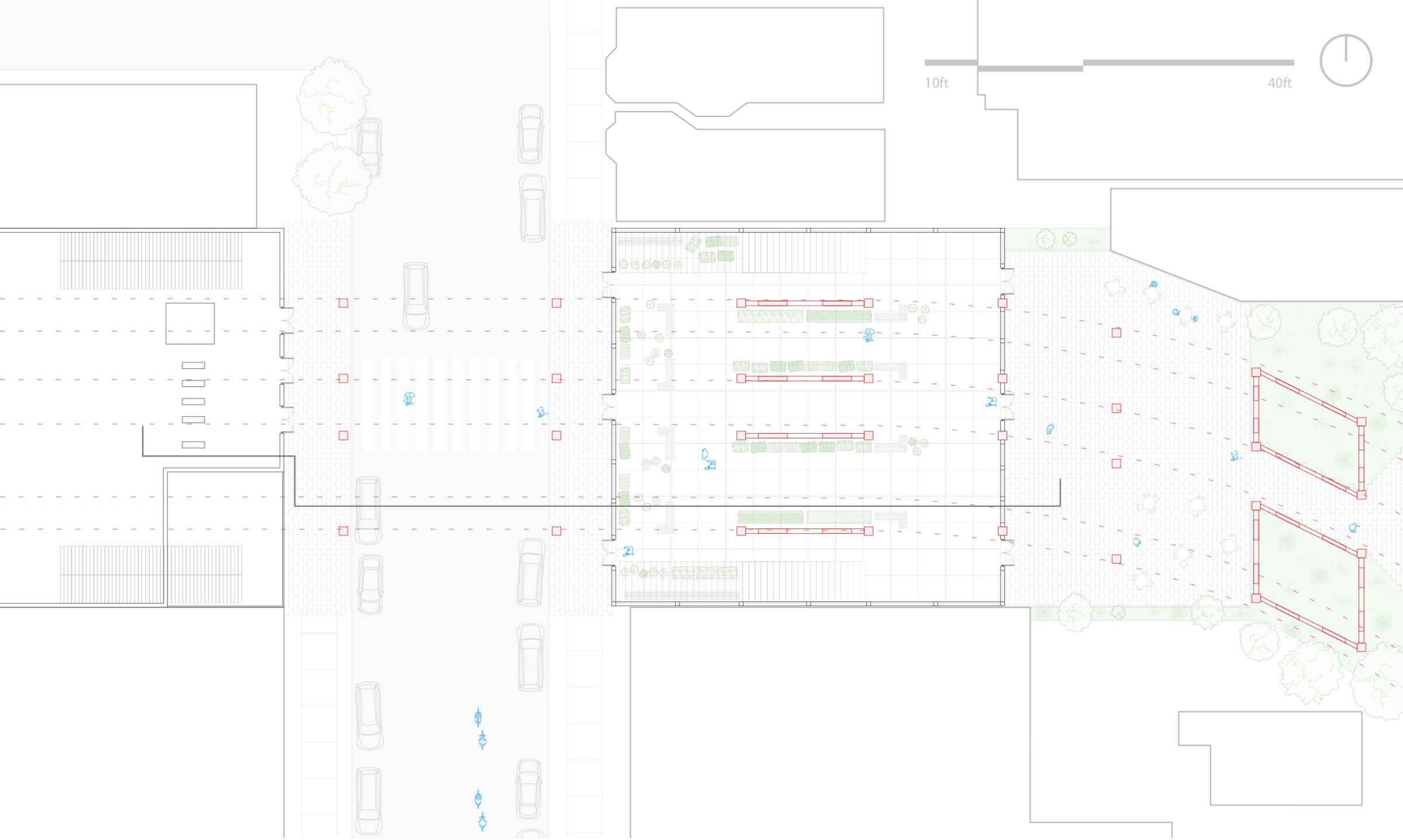
vendor space

Located directly adjacent to the station exit, this semi-enclosed space becomes a natural threshold between transit and the public. Its proximity to constant foot traffic makes it an ideal location for vendors, capturing the energy of daily commuters and passersby. The spatial enclosure created by the structure above offers shelter from the elements while maintaining visual openness to the street and surrounding pathways.

Positioning vendors here not only responds to logistical convenience but also reclaims the underutilized space as a site of exchange - economic and social. The design supports temporary and rotating use, allowing community members to activate the space throughout the day and across seasons. Seating areas woven into the layout encourage pause and interaction, making this more than a transactional zone - it becomes a sample of neighborhood life, fueled by the rhythm of the station.

Views adjacent to train station, facing north.





viewpoint garden

This view highlights a proposed elevated green space that blends stepped seating with planted surfaces, offering both movement and moments of pause. This accessible intervention is more than a place to rest, it is a curated overlook positioned to frame a unique urban scene: the train as it slows into the curve.

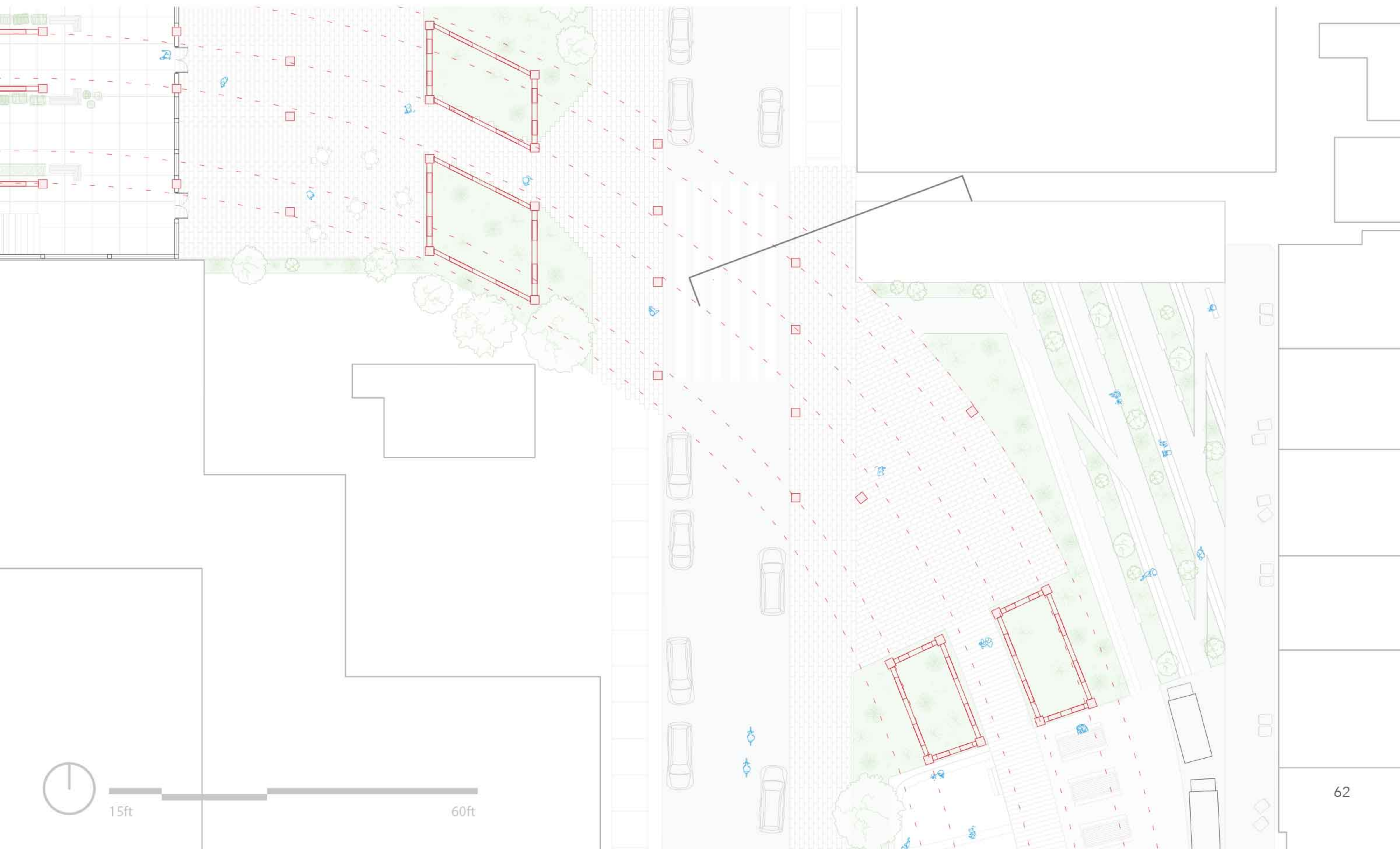
Because of this curved quality, this is the only location along the site where the overhead structure pulls away, creating a rare pocket of open sky and better visibility. The curve becomes an opportunity for experience: from here, visitors can witness the train in motion from an angle not commonly seen, turning an ordinary view into something cinematic.

This moment captures the essence of this project: turning overlooked infrastructure into a stage for the city to reveal itself. It reflects the belief that public space can celebrate the everyday while building a stronger sense of community. Here the train, so often treated as background, is reframed as a civic monument, much like the Hancock Tower on the skyline. This space transforms the train from something passed through to something looked up to.

Images of pocket of open space created by curved tracks.



"Our cities are a collection of fragments - what matters is how we stitch them together." - Tatiana Bilbao



Images of open space from the same point of view.





garden p.o.v.

This moment shifts from the space itself to the person experiencing it. Framed by the curve in the tracks and the open sky above, a visitor pauses - not just to sit, but to look up and capture the train in motion. The passing train, often unnoticed in daily routines, becomes something worthy of documentation and admiration.

The layered steps, gentle elevation, and open view align to create a scene where people don't just pass through, they participate, encouraging people to see their city differently.

In this frame, the train is no longer just transit.

Images of open space from the same point of view.





train p.o.v.

The perspective at right flips the view, now looking from the train itself. As the car begins to follow the curve of the tracks, passengers can see an extended view of the space below: the greenhouse structure with its intentionally placed windows opens up towards the train, aligning perfectly with the line of sight from the moving cars, designed to meet that gaze.

This detail turns an otherwise fleeting moment into an invitation. It signals to passengers that something is happening here.

In a city where so many spaces beneath the 'L' are overlooked or avoided, this moment reclaims visibility as a design tool. It gives presence to what was previously unnoticeable.

And just as the train becomes an icon when viewed from below, here the roles reverse: the site below is now on display, framed by the train windows.



Views of an average path from station to train.



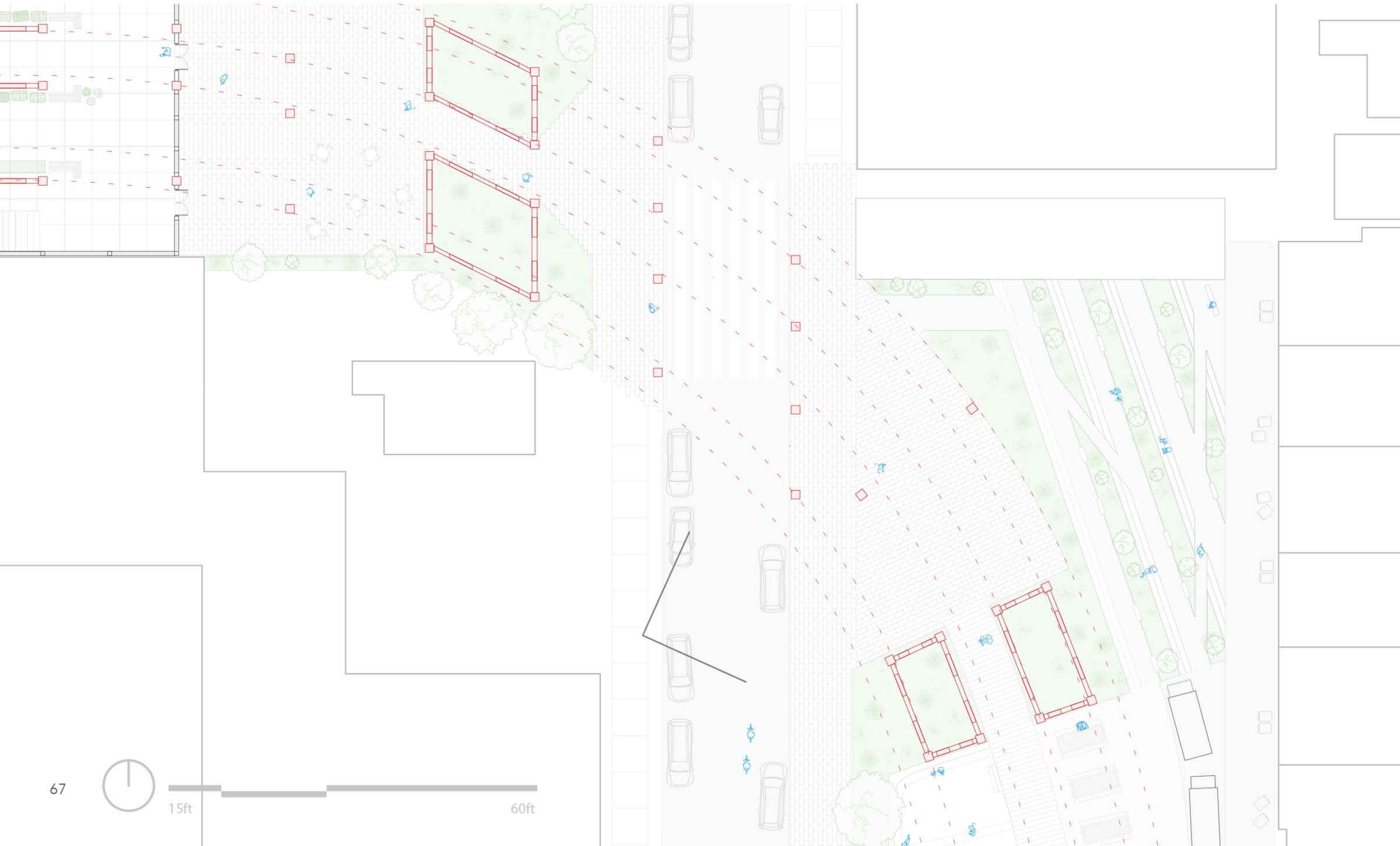


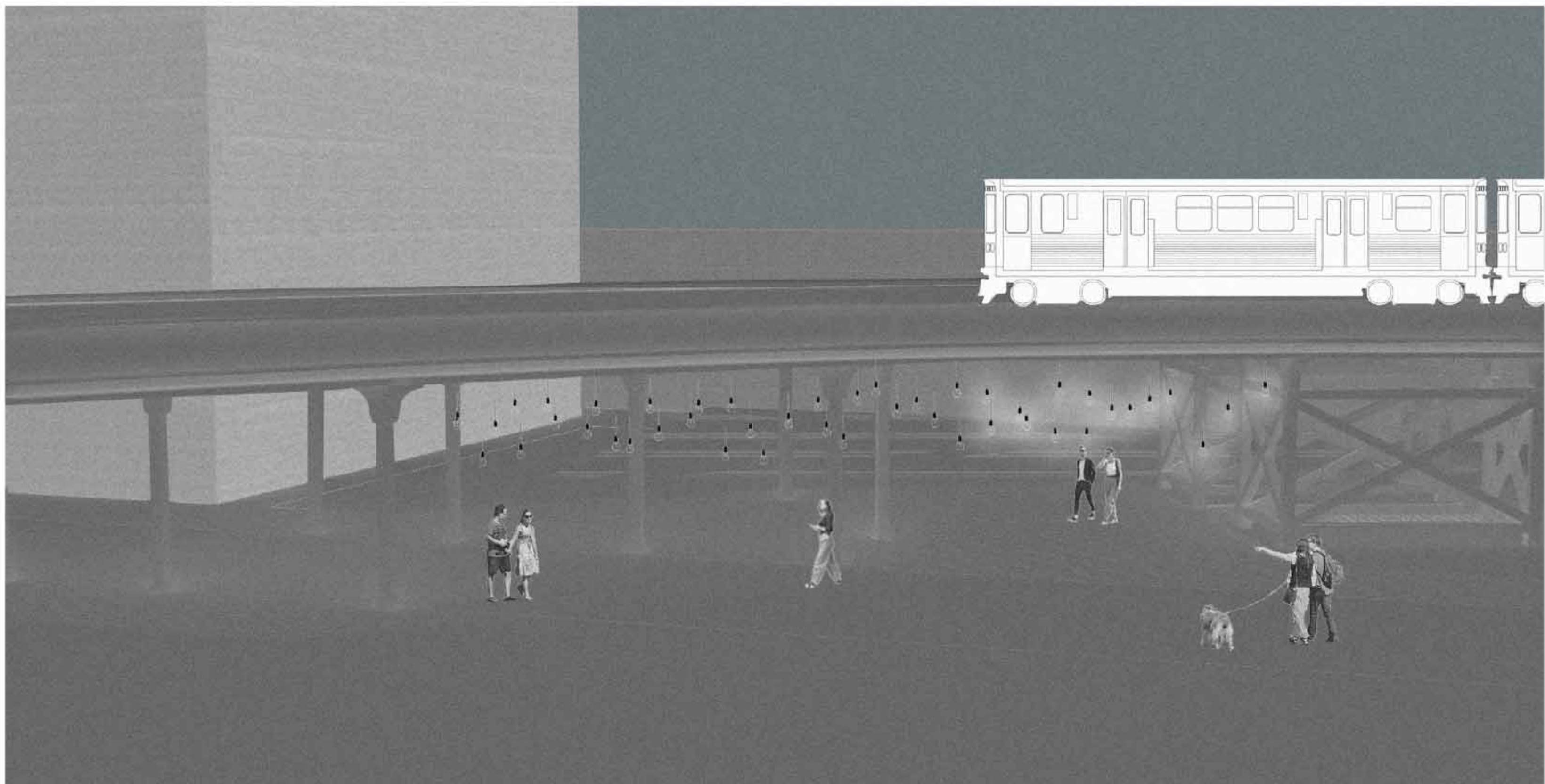
Images of curved section of train tracks.

energy and motion

At the center of the curve and as the train passes overhead, a sequence of lights embedded beneath the tracks flickers on, each one powered by the energy emitted by the train itself. The result is an illumination that traces the motion of the train in real time, lighting up the space below in sync with its path above.

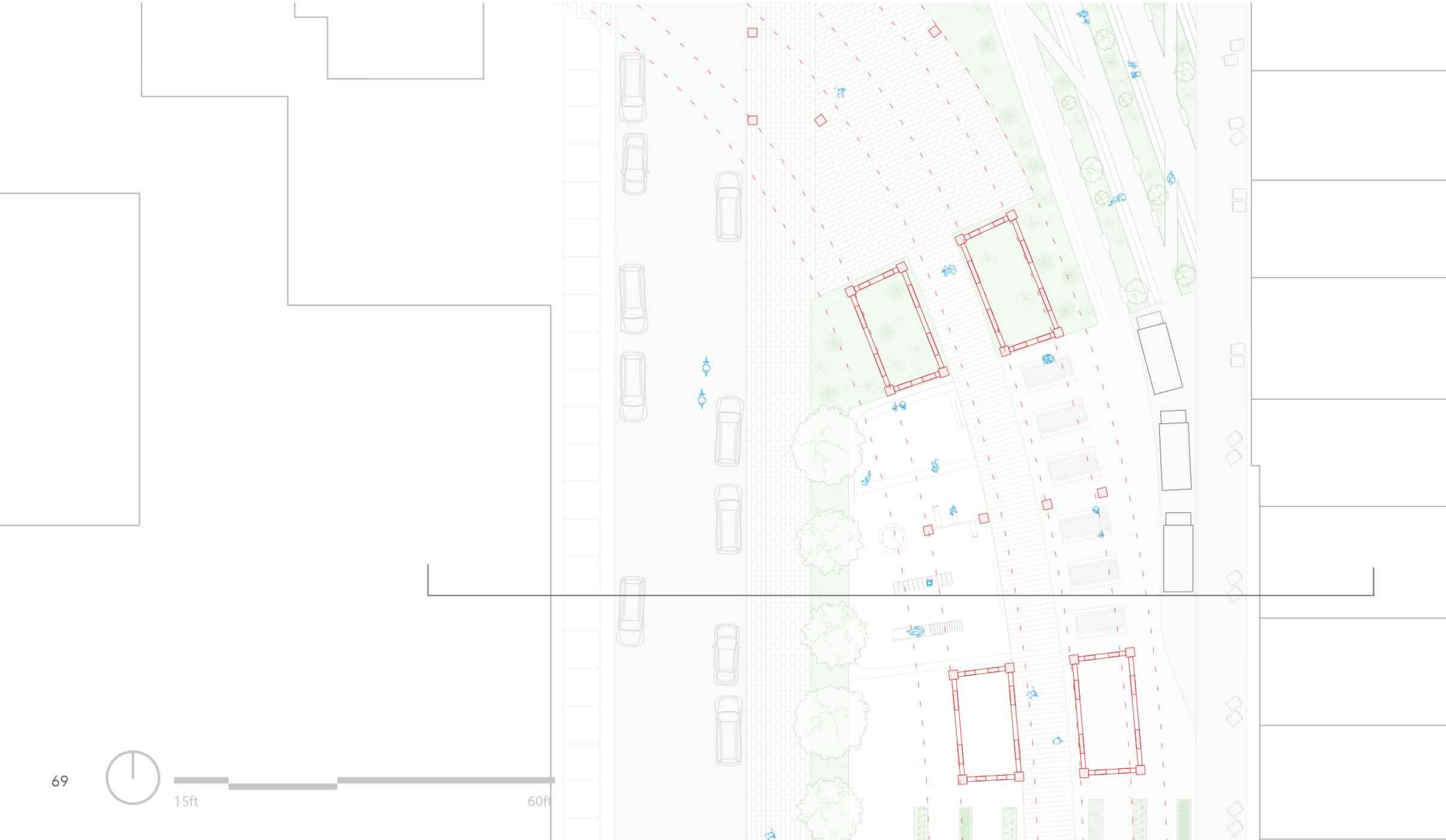
This acknowledges the presence of the train without overpowering it, using light to create a fleeting yet memorable interaction. It reinforces the idea that this site is no longer passive or forgotten, but actively engaged with the city around it.





connecting spaces

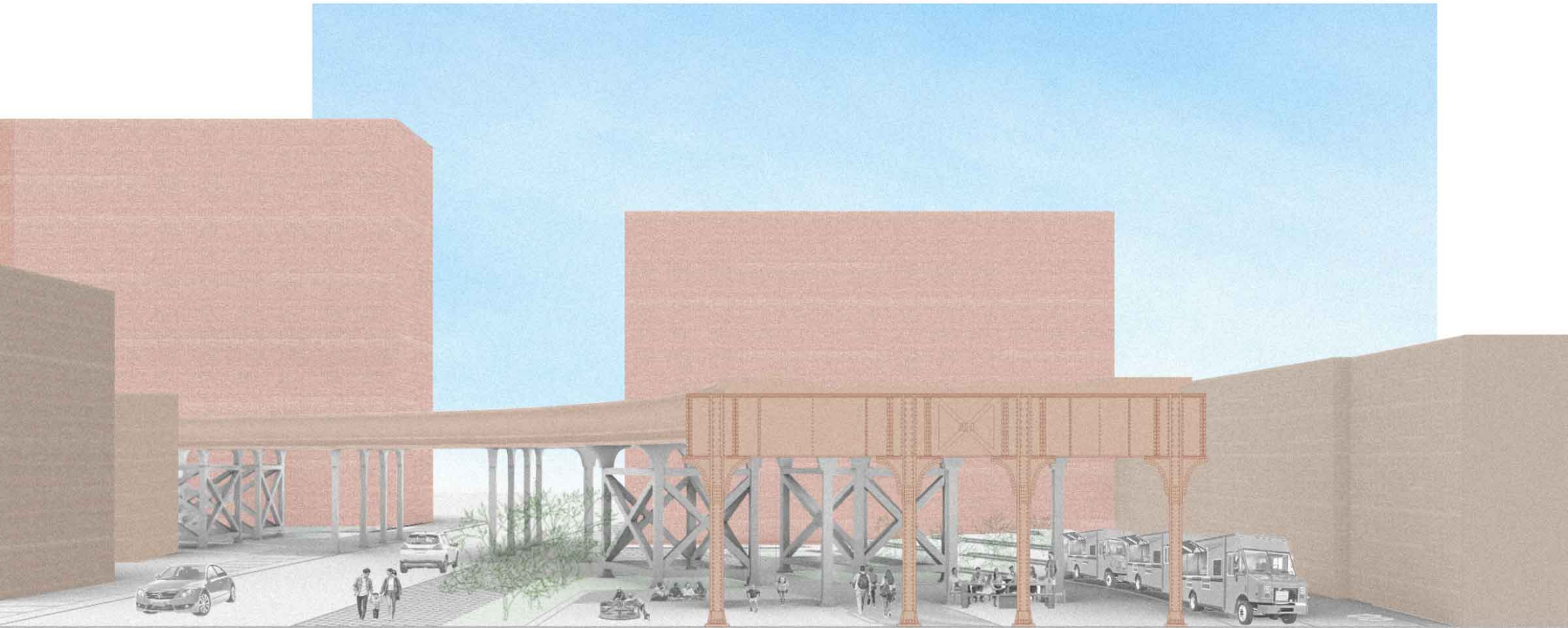
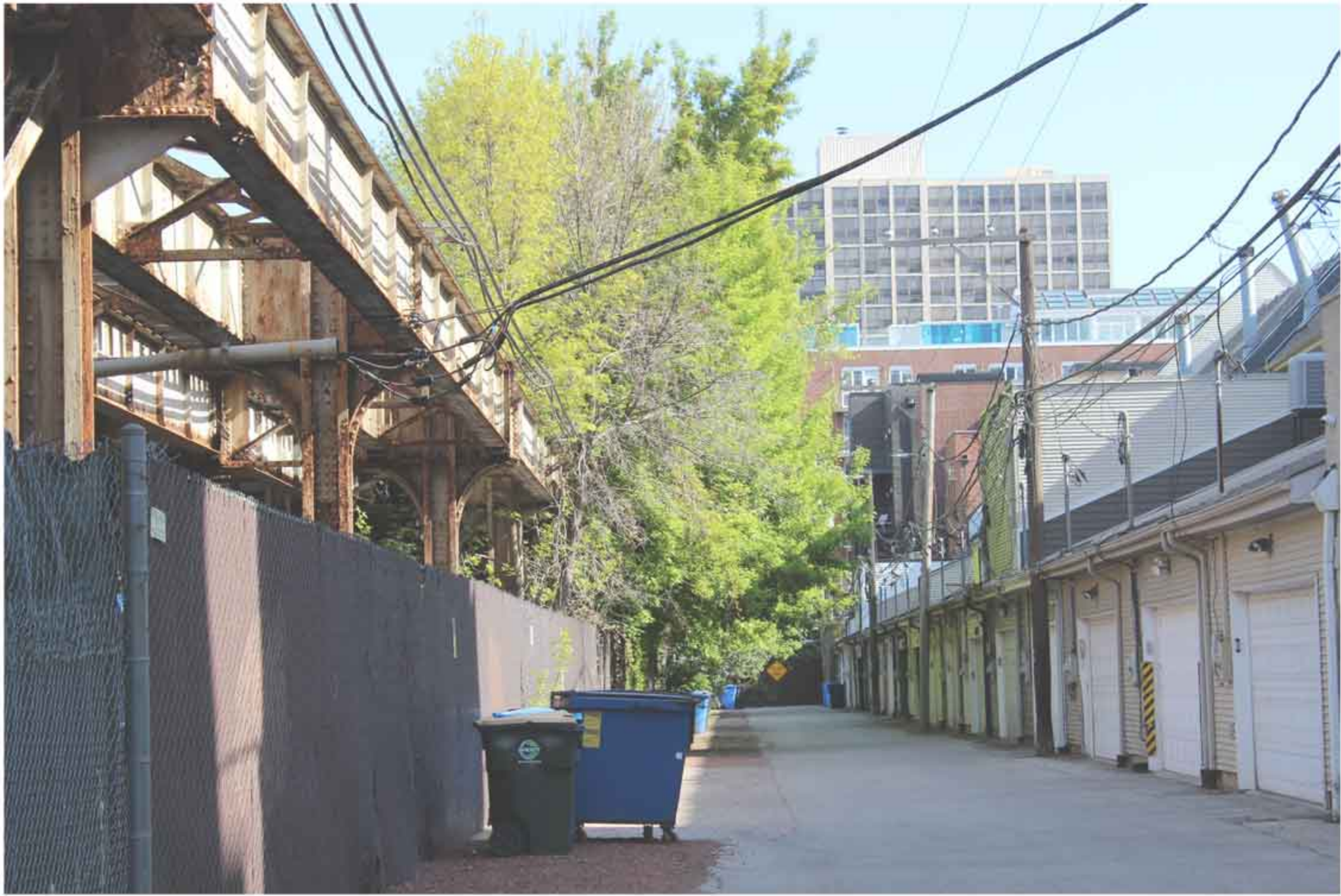
Views looking north of street sidewalk, beneath tracks, and alley.

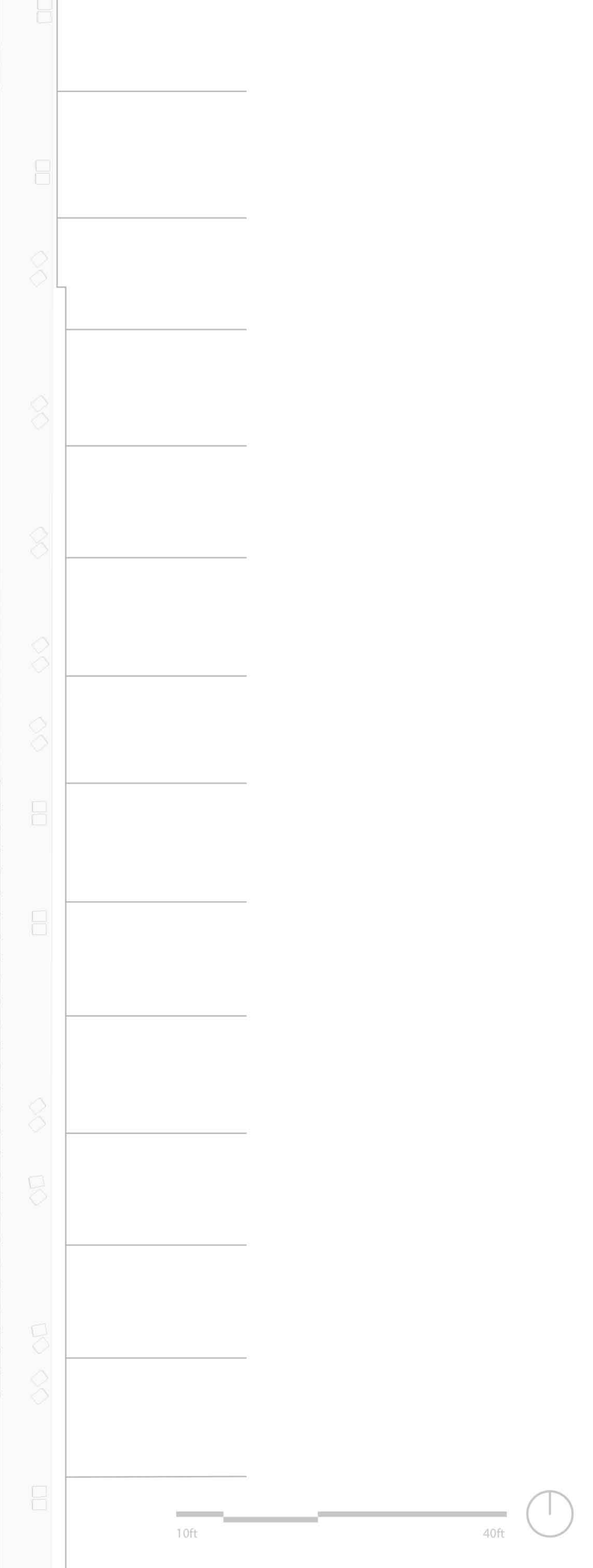
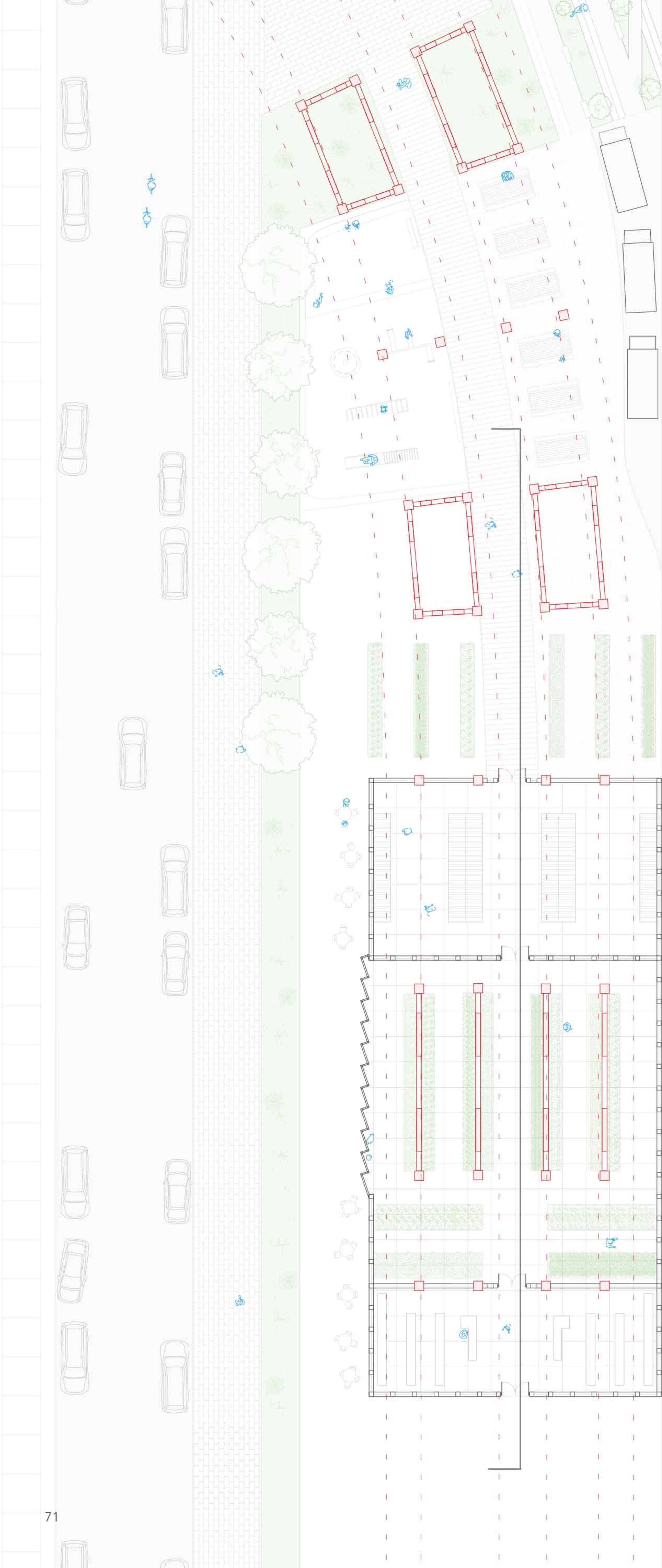


What is currently a fenced-off alley used for storage and construction materials is reimagined as a lively pocket of public space, made possible through strategic connections to the existing back alleys.

By opening this edge, the design invites vendors and mobile programming to inhabit the site. This move not only brings services and amenities to the community, but also creates a shared zone of interaction. Families can grab a bite to eat while kids play, neighbors can meet in a space that once felt off-limits or invisible.

It serves as example that activation doesn't have to be permanent to be powerful - activities can be seasonal, vendors can rotate, and the space can adapt to community needs over time. It's this spirit of responsiveness and reclamation that turns neglected spaces into valuable public ground.







greenhouse

The image below focuses on the greenhouse, while it is visible from the train and oriented to catch the attention of passing riders, its purpose goes beyond aesthetics. This structure introduces the idea of productiveness - where food can be grown and shared.

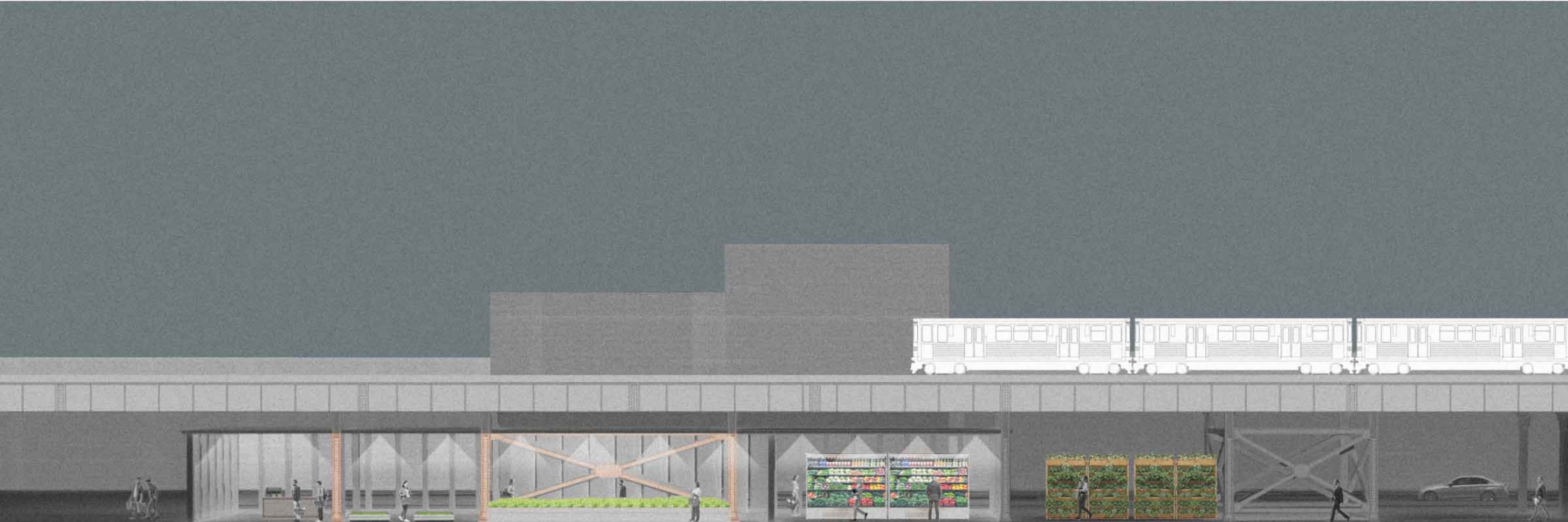
Its transparent envelope allows people to see inside, fostering a sense of openness. It becomes a place not only to grow food, but to support local growers and reconnect urban life with cultivation.

This intervention offers an alternative to vacancy and disuse, proposing instead a space rooted in access and shared purpose.

The existing images already show plants thriving along the edges of the tracks - organic proof of this concept's viability.

The structure is imagined as part of a system that could be adapted and replicated throughout Chicago in the many similar conditions that exist beneath the 'L'.

Whether used for food production or alternative programming, this type of intervention proposes a scalable model for reactivating spaces.





What begins as a neglected corridor under the tracks becomes a connected sequence of public spaces that respond to the 'everydays' of the city.

Beginning at the station, a continuous route follows the curve of the tracks, connecting each of the spaces and movement of people into one sequence.

By following the train, the project reveals everything else that was possible beneath it.



takeaways



Designing for a space like the areas near Sedgwick Station - a residual zone beneath the 'L' tracks - requires balancing transformation with restraint. The goal was never to overwrite the area's identity, but to work with its existing conditions to uncover new forms of use, connection, and perception. While elevated train infrastructure is often seen as a barrier, this project reframes it as an opportunity to support public life in a way that reflects the neighborhood it lies in.

The design avoids a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it proposes a flexible framework that encourages different people to use the space in different ways, depending on time, season, or personal need. A commuter might pause for a moment of shade or shelter, while a weekend market might spring up where there was once only parking. Children may find places to play, a local vendor might find a new place of work. Each experience - no matter how brief - adds to the site's evolving identity.

Rather than relying on spectacle or strict programming, the project supports open-ended encounters. It values the casual and temporary. In doing so, it resists the idea that strong design must always be visually dominant. Sometimes, the most meaningful change comes from providing space for people to shape their own experience.

What emerges is a new logic for transit-adjacent spaces. One where the 'L' proves to be the backbone of the city, where the city's rhythms are celebrated and amplified. This model points to a city where the paths under every elevated line become threads of civic life, stitching together its fragments into a shared commons.

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