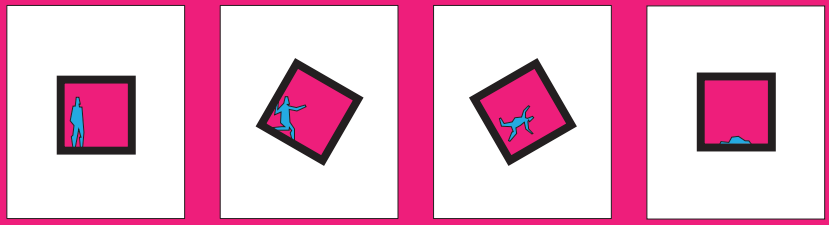

Comic Communities: interstitial interventions into fringe conditions

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ACKNOWLEGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents who have supported me my entire life.
Wladek Fuchs, who understood my breakthroughs, as well as my frustrations.
And to all my classmates who made this five year journey with me to the end.

COMIC COMMUNITIES:

Interstitial interventions into fringe conditions

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"One of the key characteristics of the comic book medium is that it is not brought to life by just one voice."

-Jim Lee

ABSTRACT

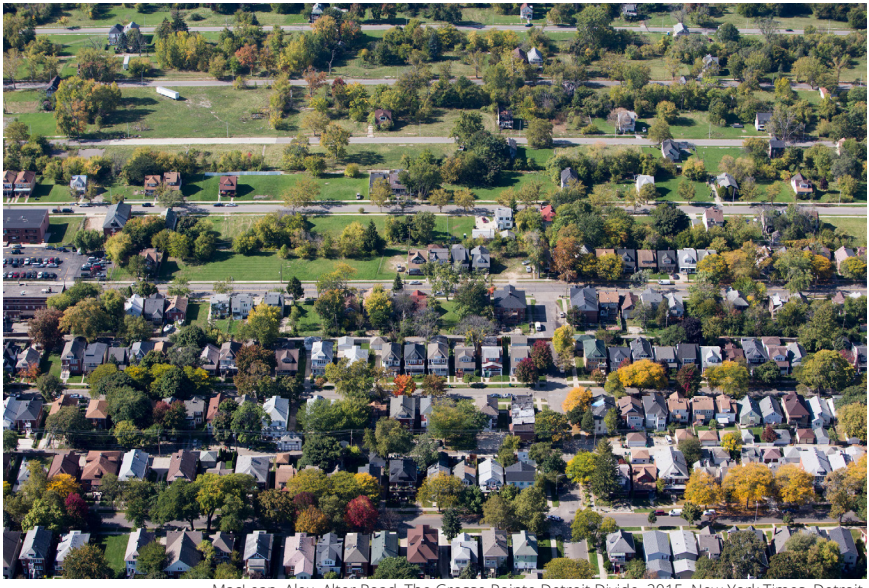
The aim of this architectural thesis is to identify characteristics found on the fringe of cities and how a designed intervention can challenge the disparity found on the margin. This study was conducted at the edge of Detroit and Grosse Pointe along their shared border, Alter road.

In the first part, research was taken along the edge of the two municipalities to examine the inequality present on both sides of Alter. As the thesis progressed, the site was in flux with many changes happening, while studies into how to represent the concept of the Interstitial began. Finally, the proposed design took into question how to bring citizens to the border instead of repelling, utilizing theory and practice from non-traditional sources.

This study questions what is needed to draw attention to such a small space that is found at the peripheral of all cities and communities. The hope is that what is proposed encourages a dialogue between Grosse Pointe and Detroit to begin addressing issues that have been complacent for many years prior.

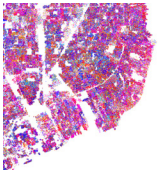
Alter road is a clear division between two cities, and it's not just marked by a sign signifying the passage from one city to another, but rather a distinct visual change occurs simultaneously. The stark change from a city of blight and poverty to one of affluence and density is shocking to many. In his 1985 book, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, Author Kenneth T. Jackson describes Alter road as "The most conspicuous city-suburban contrast in the United States". Alter roads 2.2 miles becomes a symbolic wall between the two cities and there seem to be no effort to come together and unite over the border.

First, Grosse Pointe and Detroit have been legal neighbors for over 150 years, with Detroit's founding in 1703 and Grosse Pointe becoming a city in the 1850's. Though there haven't been any threats on each other, there have been plans put into motion to help define the division of the two. With Grosse Pointe being a haven for White flight, and Detroit the opposite, many G.P (Grosse Pointe) citizens became afraid of outsiders coming into their community. Through a series of figure grounds and research, the separation is quite apparent, with further research showing G.P. actively hindering traffic from coming into the city limits. Road ways are purposefully unaligned to make it harder for cars to pass into the community. Other acts include setting up blockade on certain cross streets along Alter road to impede more car traffic into the town, with Kercheval road being the most recent barricade to be set up, and quickly removed. This event is the catalyst for this thesis.



MacLean, Alex. Alter Road, The Grosse Pointe Detroit Divide. 2015. New York Times, Detroit.

Age

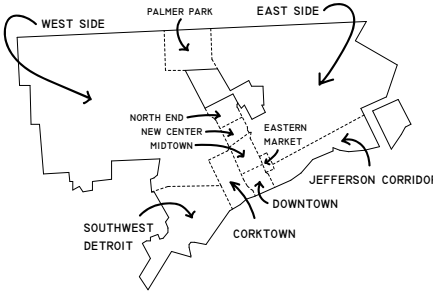


Size

Income

Race

DETROIT
GROSSE POINTE PARK

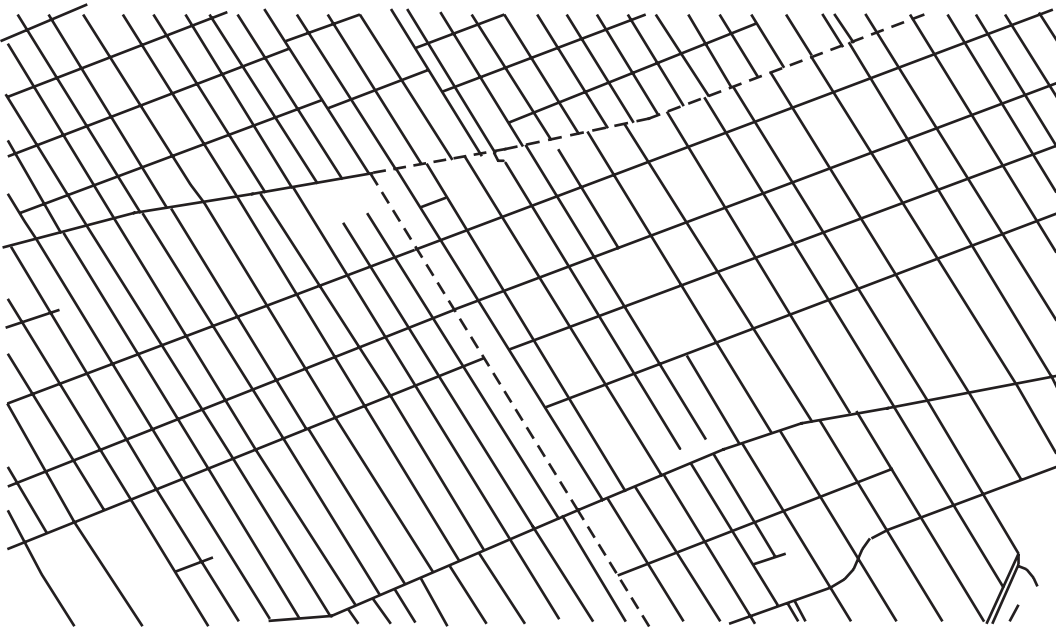

WEST SIDE
PALMER PARK
EAST SIDE
NORTH END
NEW CENTER
MIDTOWN
EASTERN
MARKET
JEFFERSON CORRIDOI
DOWNTOWN
SOUTHWEST
DETROIT
CORKTOWN

"TRUTH" "LIE"

Kercheval road is one of the last major thoroughfares of Grosse Pointe and Detroit, and during the summer of 2014, the city of Grosse Pointe closed off the road, built three farmers market sheds while all on Detroit property with no written permission. Many complained that this was a racist act, trying to keep Detroiter's out of G.P., while Grosse Pointers argue that it helped their business district drastically. This issue was dividing the cities on what was acceptable at their border.

Second, examining the border began to relate to the concept of the Interstitial, a small space found between two other spaces. Most commonly seen in office buildings, as the space between floors'. This site (Alter) draws on those notions, but on a much larger scale, warping the typical typology. Alter road is now viewed as an interstitial. Through a series of short studies ("Truth" & "Lie") on the border condition, introducing a "small space", explores the idea of major engagement. By introducing these small spaces, the participant forms their own ideas and thoughts to complete the image, and in doing so either create a true or false reality, highlighting that the participation is important in what is created.

There is importance in the border-line; it is a means of definition. Within the lines, that is where the engagement is known to happen, culture is born within the border. One reason that there is no definition found on the Detroit side of Alter is the lack of definitive borders within the city. Since people only refer to it as the east side, there can be no real community engagement with such sprawl, identification losses meaning. One of the perks of the Grosse Pointe's are their small sizes and borders to help define utilities, as well as identity. The thesis is an alternative to the conventional definition of a border.



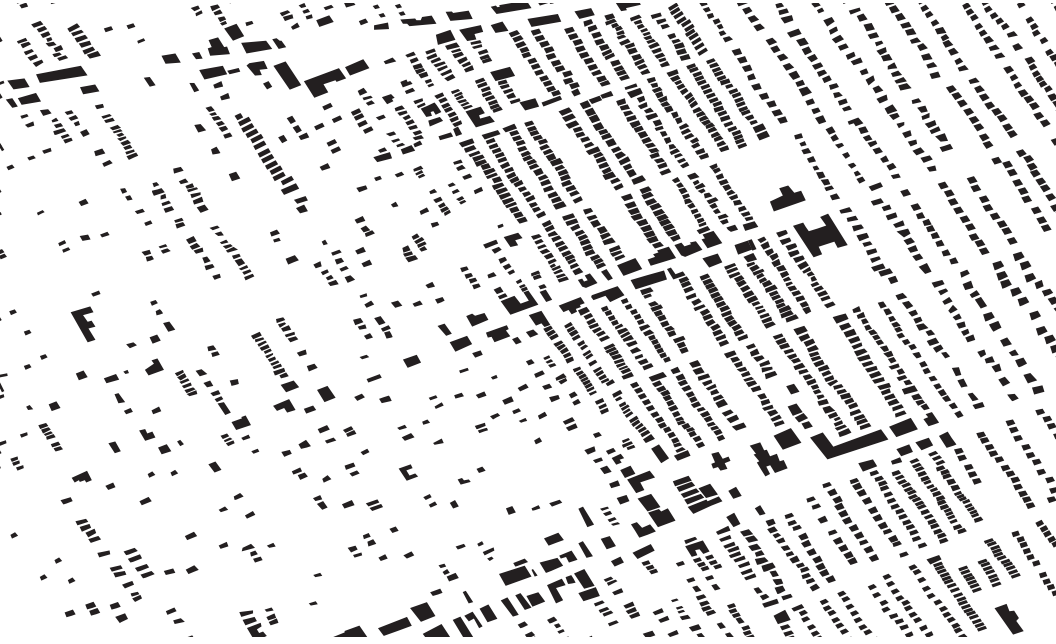
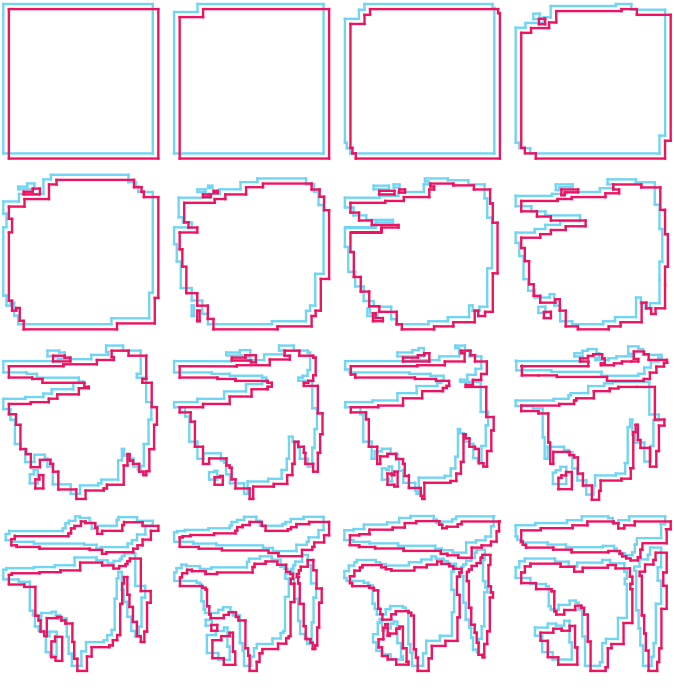
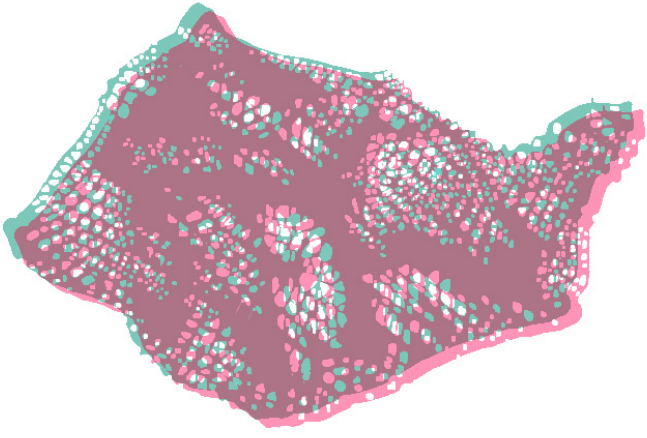
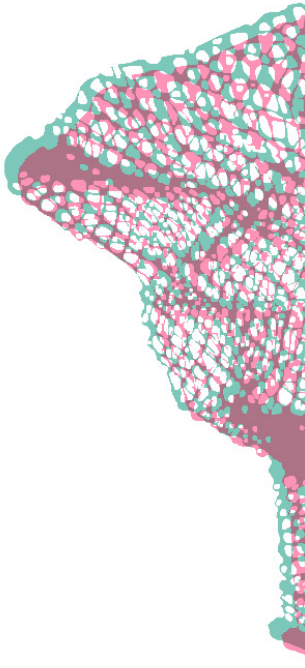


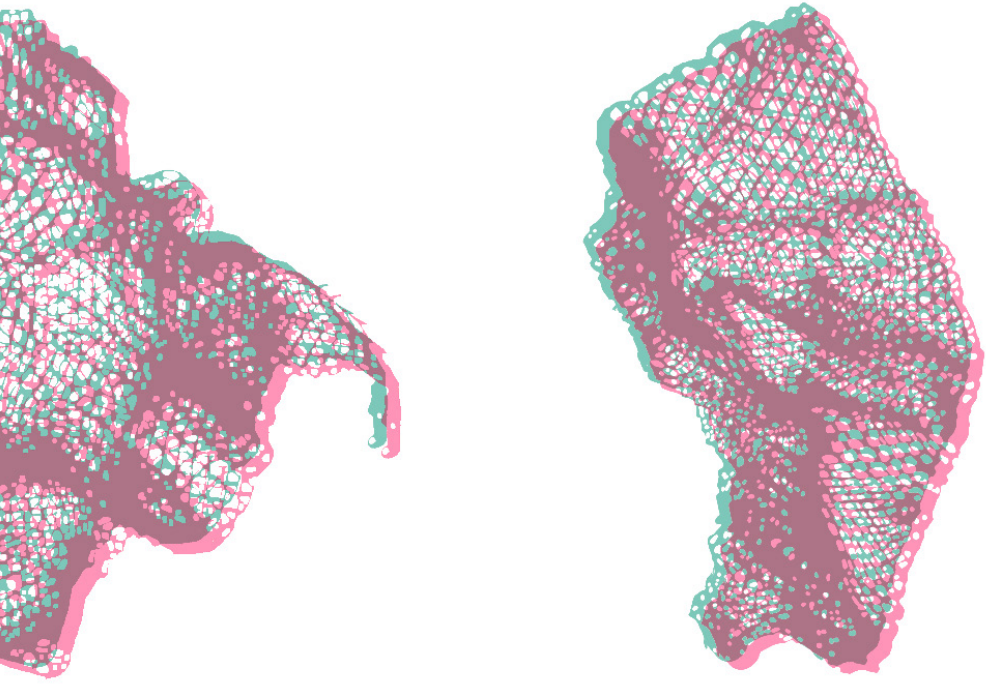
FIGURE GROUND

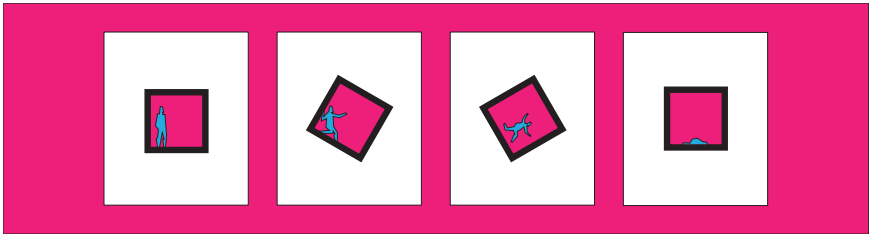
Furthermore, select theorist's concepts are introduced to suggest new typologies that can be implemented. Gilles Deleuze's model of smooth and striated space, along with the War Machine and The State[4] influence early designs of interventions that could pop up on (Alter). A study called "Rigid Structure::Fluid Movement" acts as a teaching tool. A grid acts as a striated space, the State controlled system, utilizing a Cartesian grid to enforce conventional thought. Then, an outside force, the War Machine manipulates the existing structure, creating new "lines of flight"[1] that one can access, creating a new smooth space within the existing striated space. The graphic illustrates this through three images, all coming from the same model. The grid is folded and refolded on itself, and then examined[10]. With new folds on the grid, the structure becomes something virgin, allowing for unconventional means of "dialogue". Other minds inspired early designs as well, including Lebbeus Woods, Frank Gehry, and Slavoj Zizek. Zizek has a lecture "the Architectural Parallax", which talks about interstitial spaces and two examples on how to view such a space. The first is the Frank Gehry residence. This home is designed around two principles, the skin and the structure. The structure, the home Gehry bought, is what he wanted to modify. The skin are the new elements, steel and glass. These elements began to wrap and push its' aesthetic limits. With this pushing and pulling, Gehry created a new space between the old structure and the new skin, an interstitial space. New conversations could be had about what is/defines a space. The second example Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*[9]. Zizek asks what would have happened to our antagonist if he had a place to dwell so his psyche might heal. Norman Bates, is torn between two worlds ,the flat horizontality of motel, and the tall Gothic structure his mother occupies. Zizek states Bates might have been able to overcome his psychosis with a space that inhabits both these worlds, an in-between space. An Interstitial space[13].

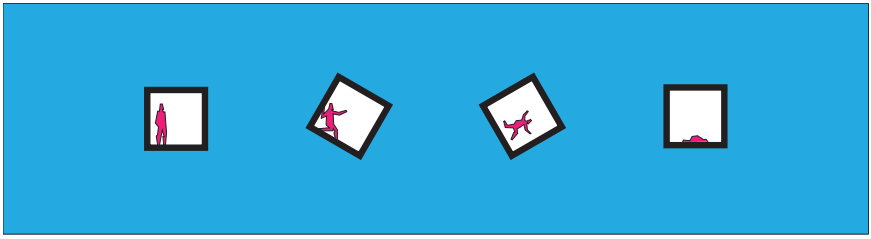












In addition to these great minds and designers, there is one form of media that influenced the designs of this thesis the most, the media of Comic's. Comic's form an interesting relationship within its own construction that could be directly applied to the site of Alter road. Comics are formed by panels which create a window into a moment of time, and adjacent to the panel, is another one, with another moment directly following the previous one, creating a timeline of a story. Between the panels though is a small space, referred to in the industry as the gutter. This gutter is the means by which the reader engages the comic, being forced to take action and reconcile the two panels to create a consistent narrative. In Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, he gives the example of an axe murderer raising his weapon to his victim, and the next panel only shows a city with a scream. He accuses the reader of committing the murder, by reading panel to panel, the reader engages the story and completes the scene[7]. In the graphic on the left, there are two stories, one with comic panels, and the other without. The latter is showing simply four individual graphic with no real connect. The former however, when the comic structure is introduced, allows the viewer to engage and move the story forward (be it a very brief story).

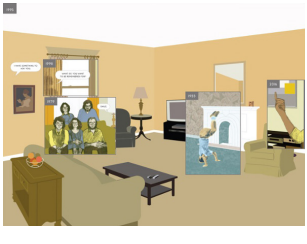
With the nature of the comic, the design had to begin to reflect both the construction of a comic, while handling the content in a different, but still connecting the two. Many authors and artist's works examined different ways in which one could think of a comic and how to read it entirely. In doing this, the interstitial began to become an integral part of the story instead of just support piece.

Richard McGuire's revolutionary comic *Here*, published in 1989 second volume of RAW, and later published into a full graphic novel in 2014, creates a story that takes place all in one room. The narrative structure is set up with the pages acting as the panel and the act of turning the page as the interstitial (the gutter). While the room is static, the content with in it is always changing, with overlapping panels showing different time periods, and different stories that are all diverse, but similar simultaneously[8].

Jimenez Lai's book *Citizens of No Place* acts as a portal for the layman to begin to understand what an architect actually talks about in the profession. The book is set up as a comic to help the audience begin to recognize complex thoughts through graphic representation. The structure of the novel is the main component to this particular thesis[3].

Scott Mccloud's *Reinventing Comics* helps the reader question what makes a comic a comic. He tackles certain issue's within the field of making comic's but urges reader's to not be satisfied with where the industry is at currently. He and others have tried to argue that the comic is not just "vaudeville", but a place where real connections can be made. He argues that comics have been around much longer than other forms of media, but is now only being recognized at a public level as a form of art[6].

These precedents speak closely to the study done earlier about interjecting a "small space" into site images. The Comic construction was investigated further, but before it could be implemented, other developments emerged to narrow down a core idea into a physical manifestation[2].



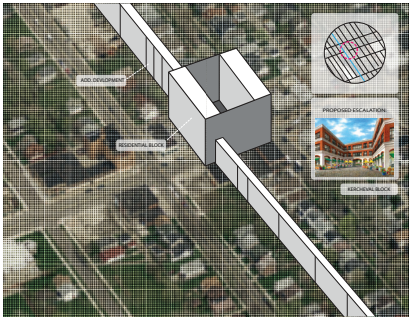
With regards to executing a design onto Alter road, many iterations came to fruition. The first major proposal was to effectively manifest the border into a habitable line, by creating a wall. This acts as a commentary to how Alter road is perceived, by creating the structure that many believe it to be already. The wall though would be programmable with functions for both sides, but when reflected upon, the wall concept doesn't solve the problem of Alter, merely addresses it superficially[12].

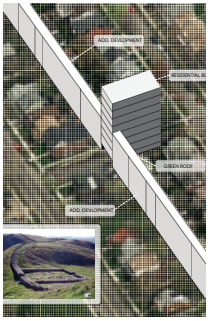
Second, the scale of the strategies shrunk immensely, to the form of urban furniture with smart technologies. Specific sites were chosen along Alter road as points of interest, to be utilized as conduits for dialogue. The "furniture" would react to citizens and provide seating to allow for discussion about social/political/economic problems and in turn, activate the border as a space of major engagement. An example would be a smart wall that doesn't show a reflection, but instead shows the reflection from another site, giving the impression that there is more than yourself along the edge[11].

The last design took the wall model and refined it to a more explicit function, the tower. The tower's would be placed along Alter road as "look-out points" for citizens to climb and look down on both communities, giving a whole new perspective on how to approach this situation. These towers again would be placed on specific sites to illustrate certain issues that plagued each location. The Jefferson site recently had some controversial matters happening, with G.P. buying the property (it being on Detroit property), and demolishing the building even though it was registered as a historic building, meaning they legally couldn't tear it down. The building itself use to be one of Detroit's first gay bars, and the notion that the tower would somehow respond to this function seemed like an

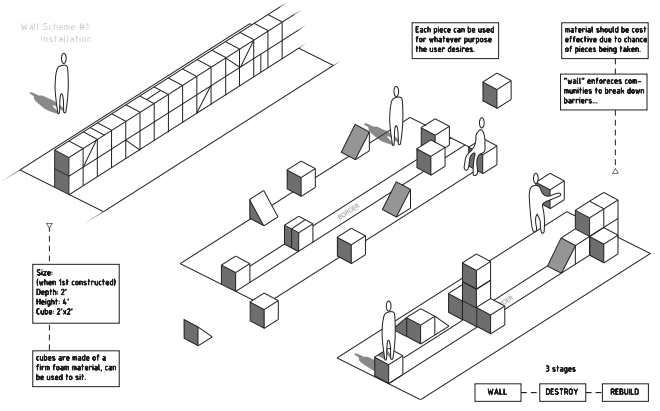
important aspect to the design. By remembering the past, the site might make it's own future, instead of repeating it.

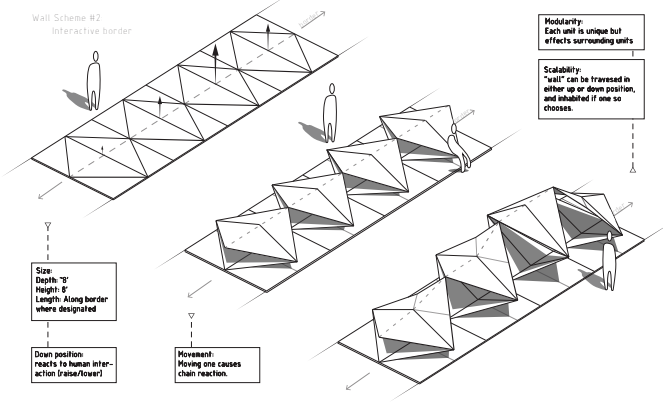
On the subject of strategies, a comic was made to help develop a new way of looking at Alter road. The comic follows two man as they argue over the issues happening on Alter, when suddenly a newcomer arrives. The new comer has created a new machine in which upon entering, allows for ones' perspective to change and see an issue in an entirely different manner. Using the comic as a vehicle, the machine could never be built in reality, but within this fantasy, anything is possible. In the end, the two people enter and are brought to new conclusions about how they and other might see the circumstances presented. The comic acted as a storytelling device that might allude to a wider audience due to its conotations to the medium already. With this is mind, the final design plays with this idea as Alter begins to be analyzed as a story, instead of a street.

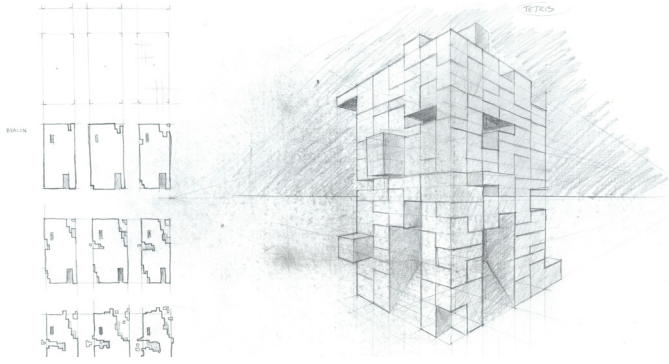


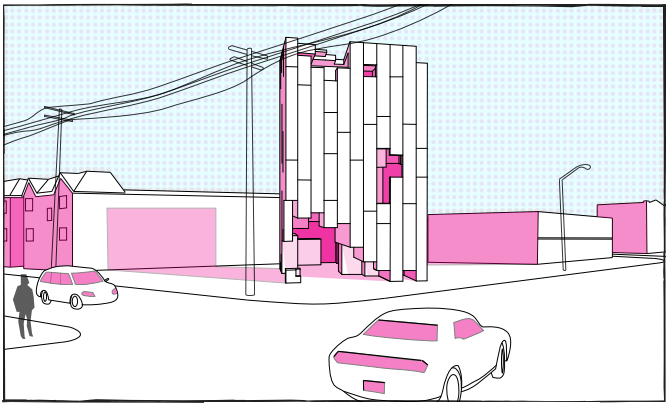


The Wall concept

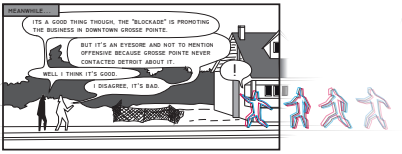

Wall Scheme #1
Installation
Each piece can be used for whatever purpose the user desires.
material should be cost effective due to chance of pieces being taken.
"wall" enforeces communities to break down barriers...
Size:
(when 1st constructed)
Depth: 2'
Height: 4'
Cube: 2'x2'
cubes are made of a firm foam material, can be used to sit.
3 stages
WALL
DESTROY
REBUILD

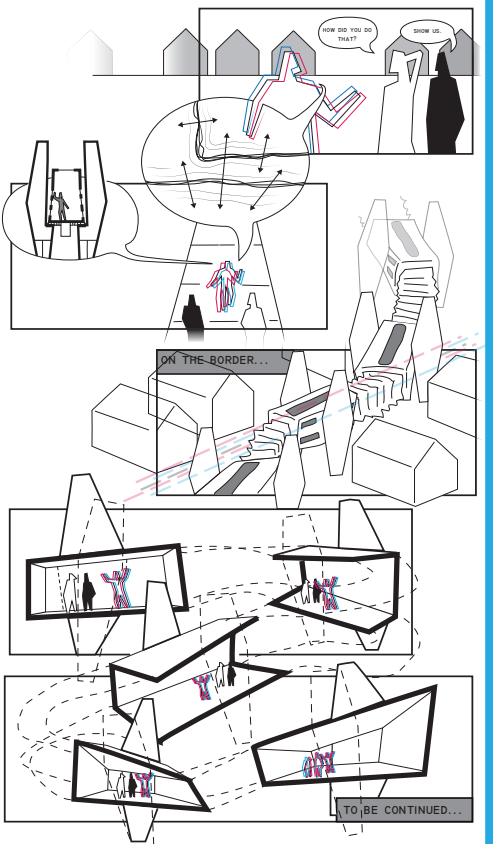

Wall Scheme #2
Interactive border
Modularity:
Each unit is unique but effects surrounding units
Scalability:
"wall" can be traversed in either up or down position, and inhabited if one so chooses.
Size:
Depth: "8'
Height: 8'
Length: Along border where designated
Down position:
reacts to human interaction (raise/lower)
Movement:
Moving one causes chain reaction.


TETRIS



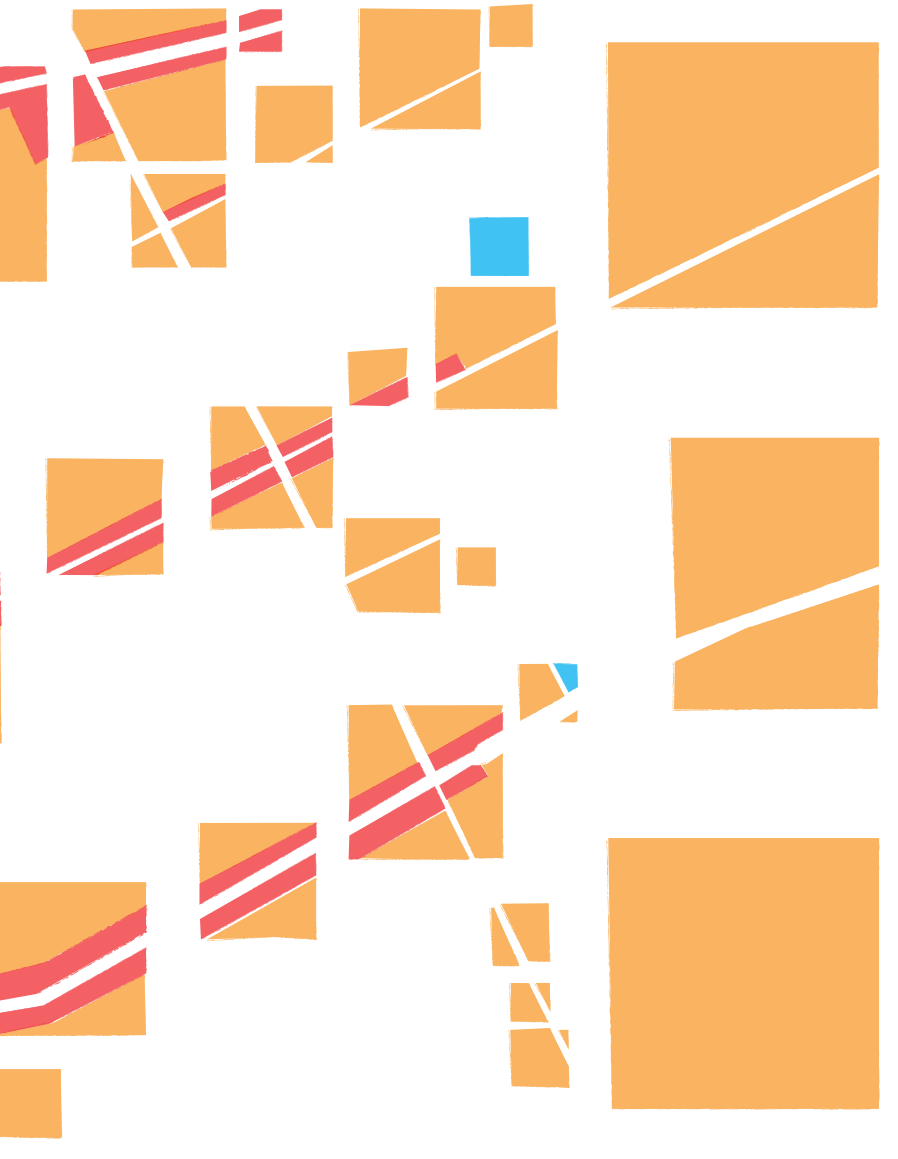
[RE]ISSUE #1: THE INBETWEEN MACHINE

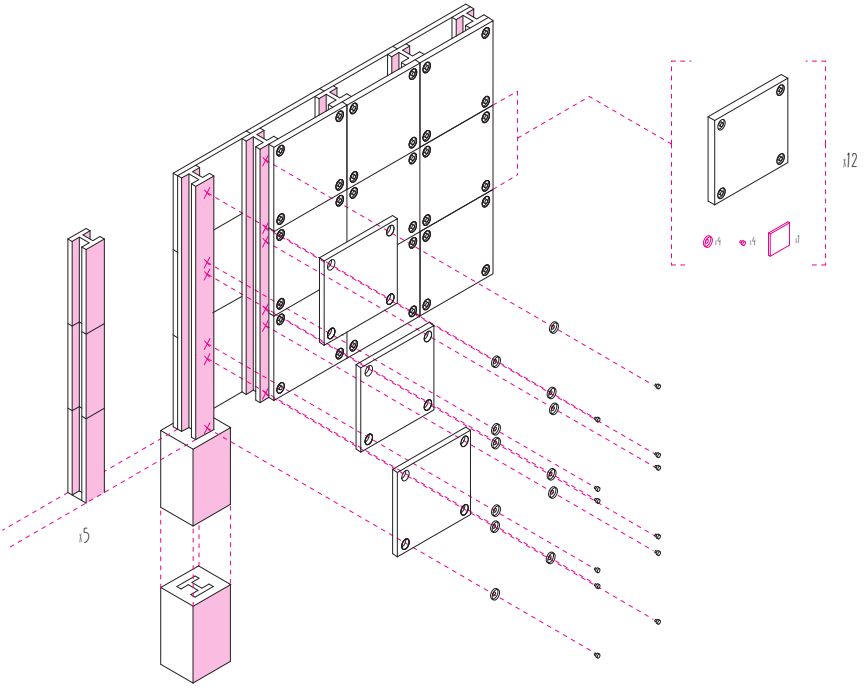




Subsequently, the site was reevaluated with comic's playing a bigger role in the research. Alter and the surrounding area was made into a comic, and through this study, Alter was seen, not as a single entity, but instead, as a multiplicity. The panels of the comic broke up the road and it could now be viewed as multiple sites instead of one, meaning that each site had its own surroundings to address while still maintaining the whole. Moving forward, the design began to incorporate numerous impressions, from previous ideas and theories, as well as new methods, which will be touched on later. Alter road became more than one issue, and instead an assortment of subjects that needed to be addressed independently, while maintaining a common identity[7].

The final design came about with a reading of David Mazzucchelli's book *Asterios Polyp*, a comic about a "paper" architect and his relation to his work, his wife and how he copes with both. Within the pages, many concepts are addressed through the medium, with an attention to simultaneity. Sections of the comic have multiple stories going on at the same time, but we are focused to certain stories, be it through color,size or an assortment of graphic representations. One of the characters even says, "The most salient feature...in contemporary life is simultaneity". As he says this, panels begin to overlap showing how each person sees the moment, with it being the same moment, but different for each character[5]. This alludes to Richard McGuire's *Here* [8], applying simultaneous storytelling into the narrative. Alter road needed to be read like a comic, so the design reflected this view, with the introduction of two panels on 11 sites, to create a three-dimensional comic.

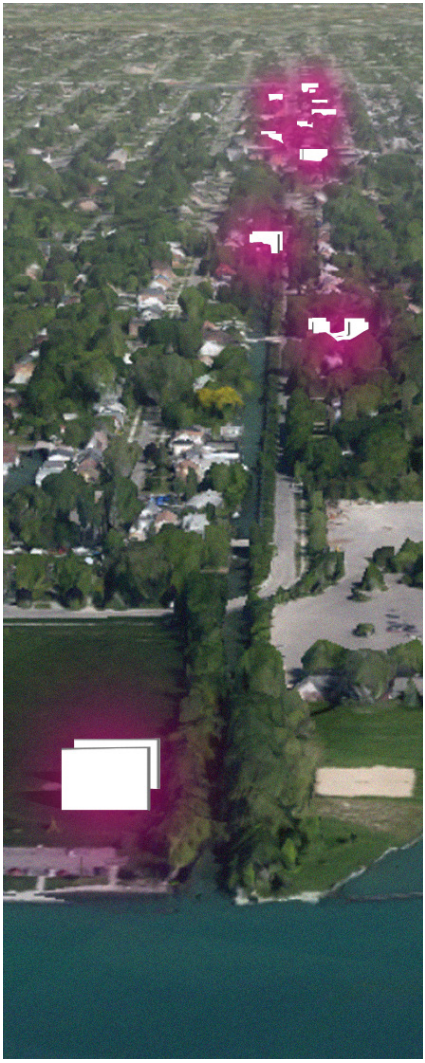



12
4
4
1
5

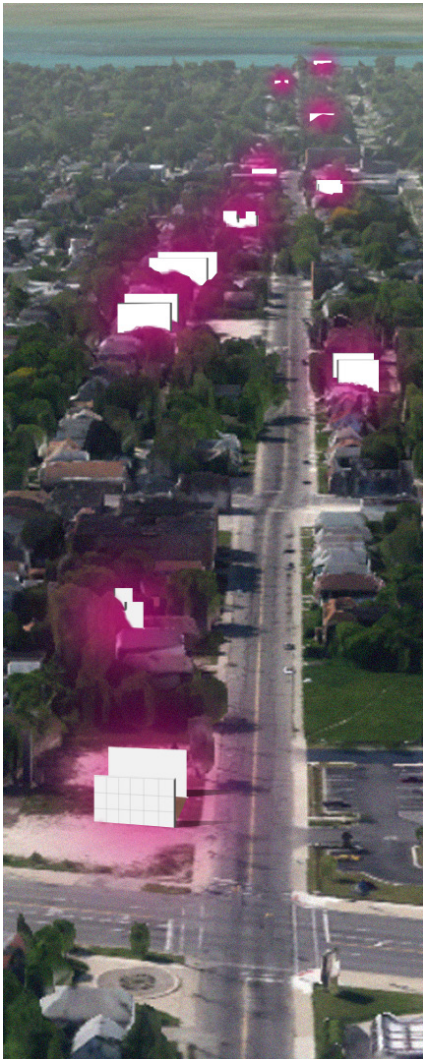
Furthermore, the 11 sites were chosen based on criteria that affected Alter road directly. The range from Mack Avenue, the corner of which Grosse Pointe and Detroit diverge, all the way to the riverfront. It was important that all the sites be situated near Alter road. This was due to the fact that Alter road is the perceived border between the two cities. The real border runs between Alter road and its adjacent street, Wayburn to the east with few instances where the border shifts more to the east. By placing the panels on the eleven sites along the edge, it confines the conversation to the interstitial space. If the panels were to be placed further away from the border, it would become harder to read what was beginning to happen on the edge. As introduced to early, the sites each respond to an exact condition at their sites, while uses the systematic construction of a panel construction to create a "unified" experience.

The panels act in two ways along the border. First, one can view them as the gaps that happen along Alter, where the content is everything not defined by the panels, and the major engagement happens in between them. This idea forces the participant to view his surroundings as the content, and begin a conversation about how the two communities make amends. Secondly, it can be viewed in the opposite way as well. The gutter becomes the spaces found between the 11 sites, and we focus in on each site in particular, making connections as one visits each site while walking along the interstitial. The experience of traversing these panels is meant to enlighten the participants into not accepting of what is happening, and produce a proactive environment. The starkness of the panels, because they stick out so much to their context, begin questioning why they are placed along Alter.

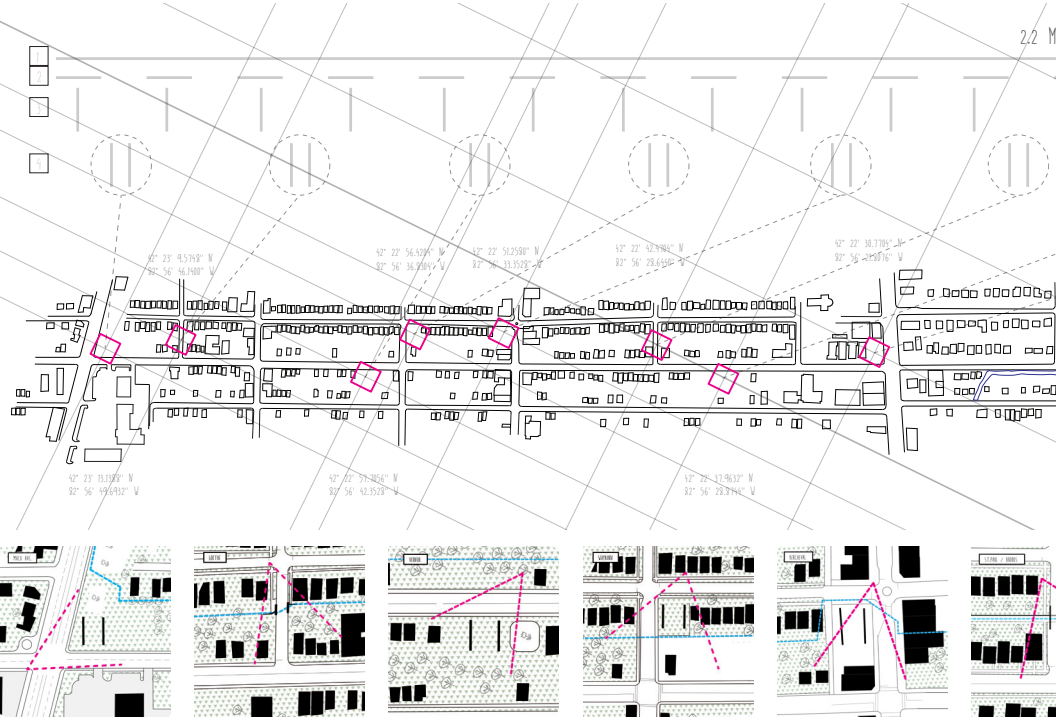
With regards to the materiality of the panels, they too respond to the condition found at each site, but only on the interior of the two panels, creating a cross dialogue. For example, the Mack avenue panels have two defined circumstances that are implemented into the design. The first being a digital display that runs parallel with Mack that shows a feed of the river. This is done to indicate that at the water, the border disappears, it is just a construct of the mind that we impose. The intention is that Mack avenue is a start for the "comic site", but it can be read in any order, from middle out, or the end to the beginning, there is no defined story to be told on Alter. Also, with site conditions, there is an existing urban farm that is part of the site, and the panels would absorb this function, even going so far as to bring the greenery up onto the panels walls, embracing the site completely within the "frame". Another example is the Goethe site, which is just a few hundred feet away from the Mack avenue site. The panels act in a different way at this site, by acting instead as perpendicular conduits for traffic. The idea is the panels separate the brick wall that is situated on the site, and open it back up to pedestrian traffic. This approach is a means to show how the gutter's can make the biggest difference, in only so much space. This design is again is an effort to disintegrate the disparity, and perhaps show people issues happening currently in their own backyard. The design is not a push to get rid of the border, but instead address it in a meaningful way. The gradation of such a margin would only worsen the problem by assuming these two communities can all of a sudden co-exist without a discussion. The panels are meant as a start to how Grosse Pointe and Detroit treat the problem. With recent developments and news sources, it appears the Grosse Pointe isn't doing it's best to make an effort to remedy the situation[1].



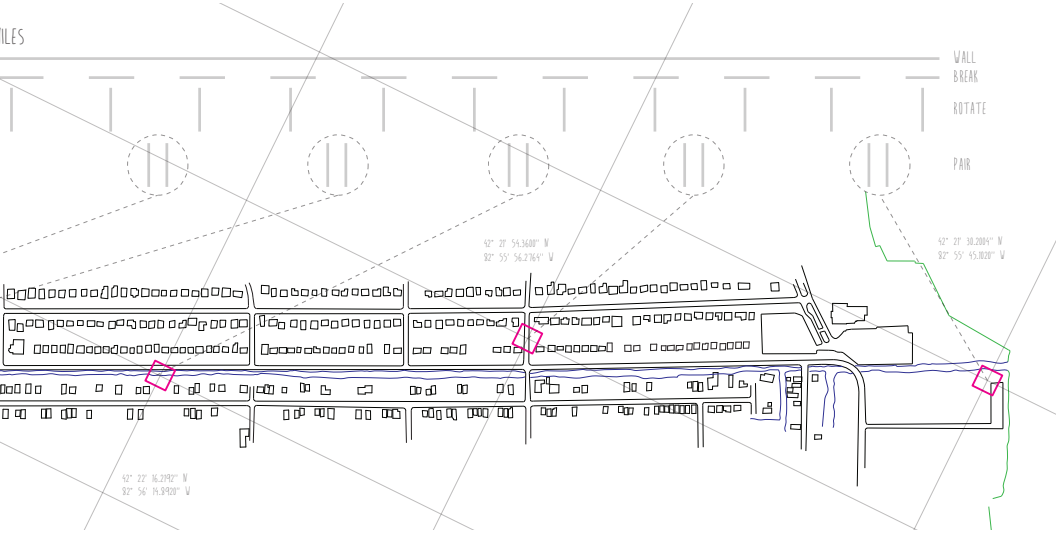
River to Mack aerial.

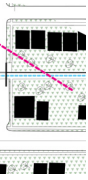


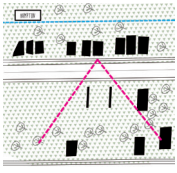
Mack to river aerial

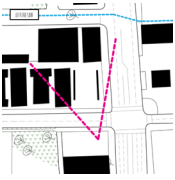


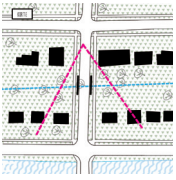
Site plan(s)

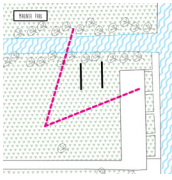

TILES
WALL
BREAK
ROTATE
PAIR
42° 21' 59.3600" N
92° 55' 56.2764" W
42° 21' 30.2004" N
92° 55' 45.1020" W
42° 22' 16.2192" N
92° 56' 14.9920" W







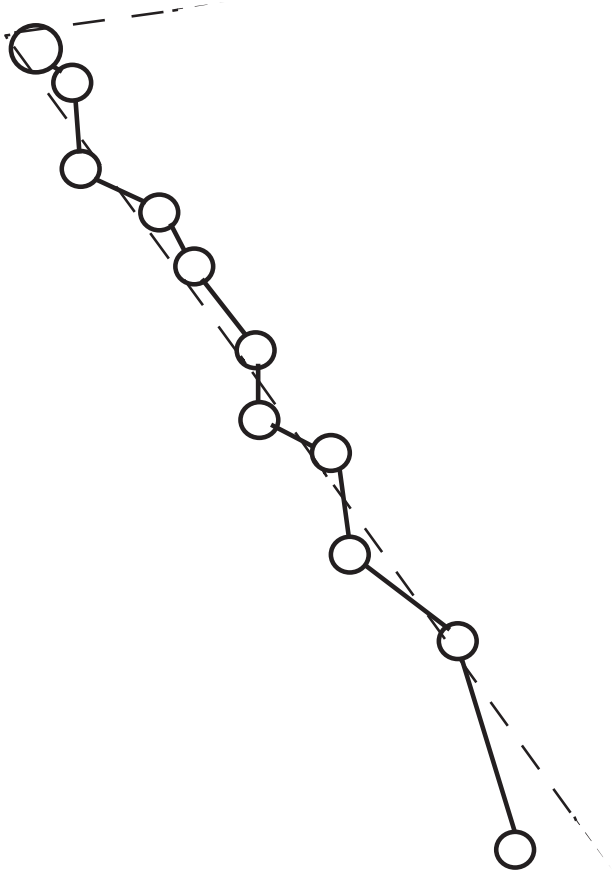




In addition, by placing all the interventions along Alter road, it creates a stitching effect, that brings both sides together, instead of washing it away or disregarding it entirely. To read to project, one must come to the interstitial and put forth effort to analyze what is being placed versus what can be proposed. The idea behind placing the panels is not a definite answer, but a temporary solution. People gather as sites of interest, and with such drastic shift in architectural language along the edge, there must be a reason.

With people now viewing Alter as more than just a divider, but instead as an incubator for proactive solutions, analysis can begin to decode what should happen next. The aim of the design is not some grand gesture that can be seen from miles away, but instead is a more subverse and subtle approach, forcing the viewer to slow down, and make their own connections. The parti n the right shows these connections, but the point is the participant makes their own as well. The image could look completley different to another person entirly.

The following pages will illustrate each site and how it effects its surroundings while maintaining a consistent architectural language throughout the interventions. Site plans and context are given to help understand the reasoning behind certain desicions, along with perspective's in the vein of a comic language. This is done to amplify the desicion to make Alter into a three-dimensional comic, while also creating a language that nearly everyone can understand that isn't too convaluted or complex. The Comic is a means to an end of universal understanding, which in turn allows for the engagment of the communities, all within this small interstitial space known as Alter road.

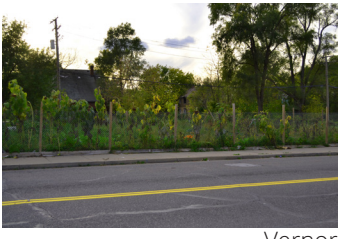


Mack

Wayburn

Goethe

Kercheval



Vernor

St.paul/Brooks

Hampton

Korte

Jefferson

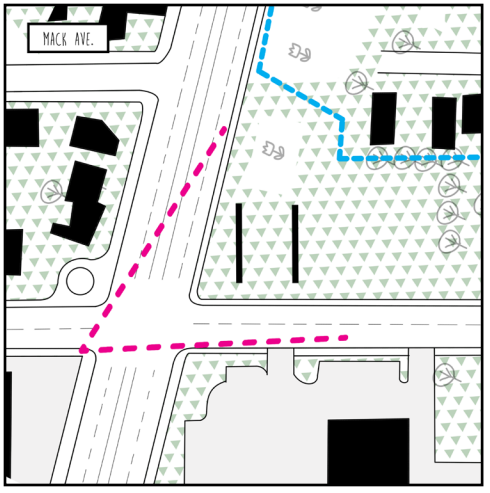
Mariner park

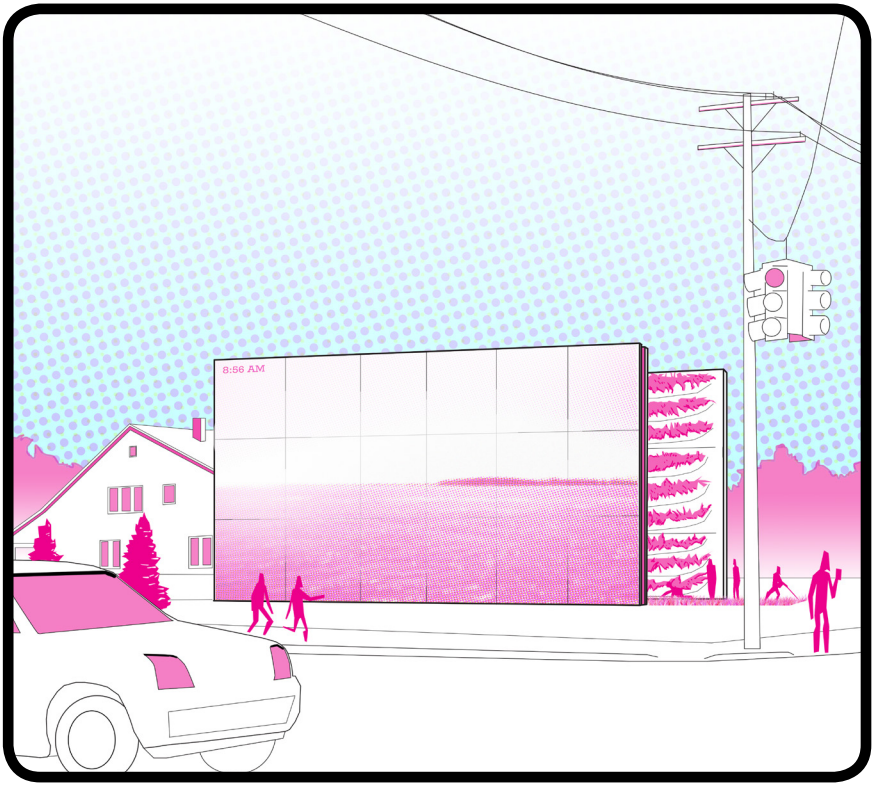
Ashland

Mack Avenue.

Mack Ave. has two distinct features that come from the site. The first being specific to the lcoation, being right next to a urban garden. The garden can be extended and the content of the panels form a green wall to grow on. Second is the digital facade that projects a constant feed of the river, to remind the community that the border of alter is just a construct of the mind. This display becomes the beginning of the narrative of Alter road, to show that even though we see if as a wall, once you get to the river, the border disappears, and you may reflect on the journey.

Site plan

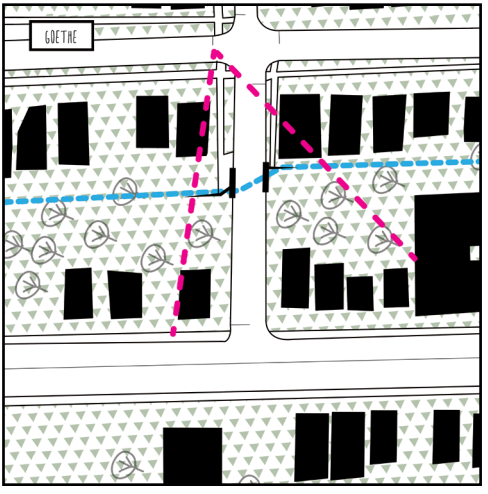


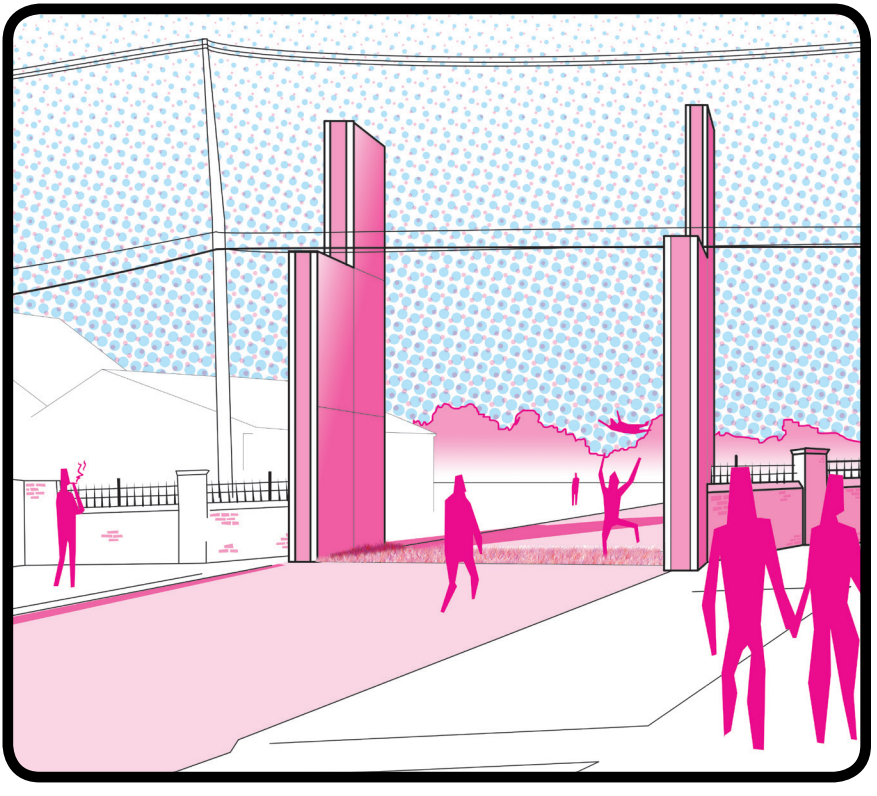

8:56 AM

Goethe

Goethe is one of the first streets to be a blockade for Detroit so people could not enter G.P. through any means of transit. This brick walled fence is very imposing and creates a hostile environment for pedestrian and automobile traffic. This site tries to address this by removing the wall entirely. The panels act as “erasers” and create a new bridging of the wall and allowing foot traffic to cross the border once again. The material will be like that of a new canvas, issuing in a new era of creativity and ingenuity. With a blank slate, the site looks at it’s history in a completley new way.

Site plan

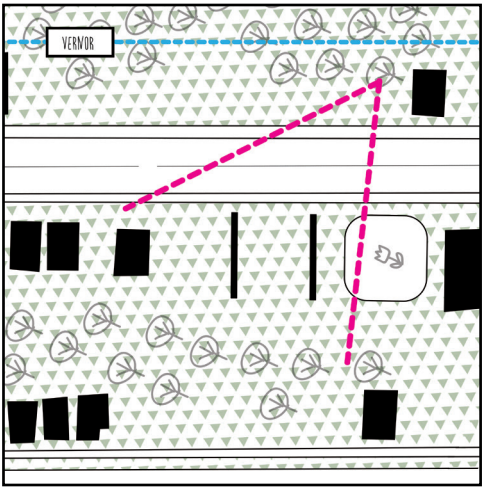


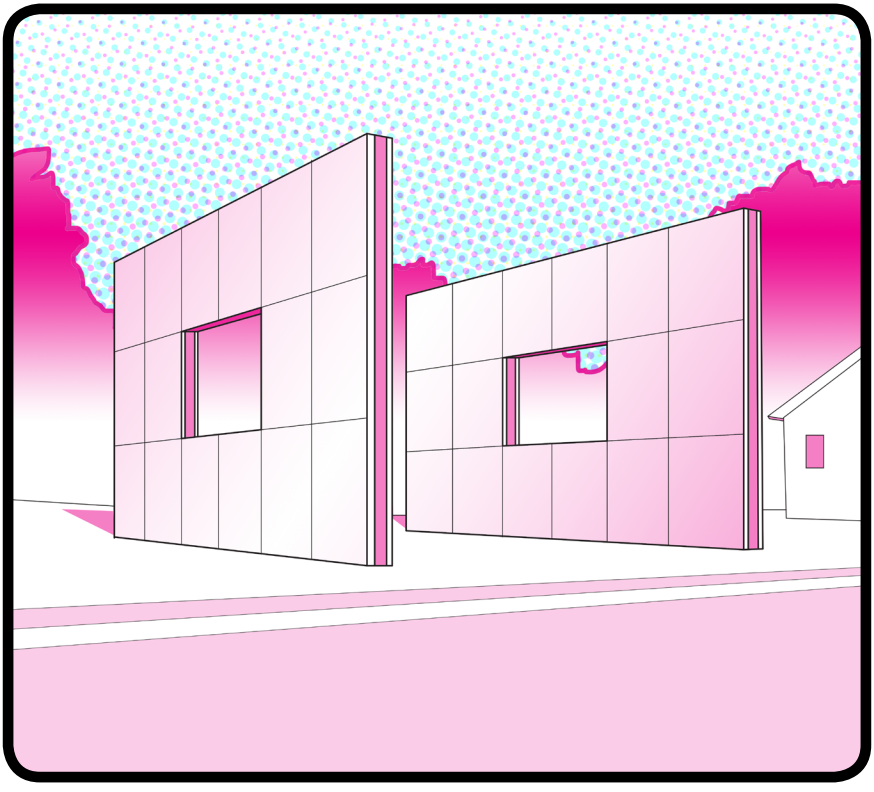


Vernor highway

Vernor is similar to the Mack ave. site, with an urban garden, but the design tries to be something different and react to it's surroundings better. Since it's proximity to the wayburn is so close, these two sites try to create a dialogue with each other. Incorporating greenery with a friendly playscape, this site hopefully will pull people out of GP and draw them across the border. by doing this, it starts a new relationship for G.P. citizens to see their community fro a new perspective. This drawing people out of their comfort zone seems fitting for people to understand how others might see or approach this situation.

Site plan

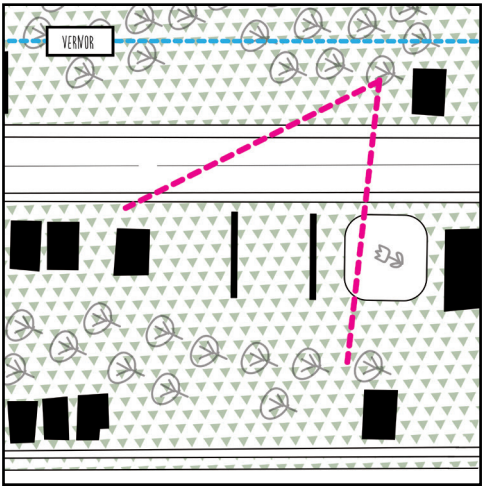


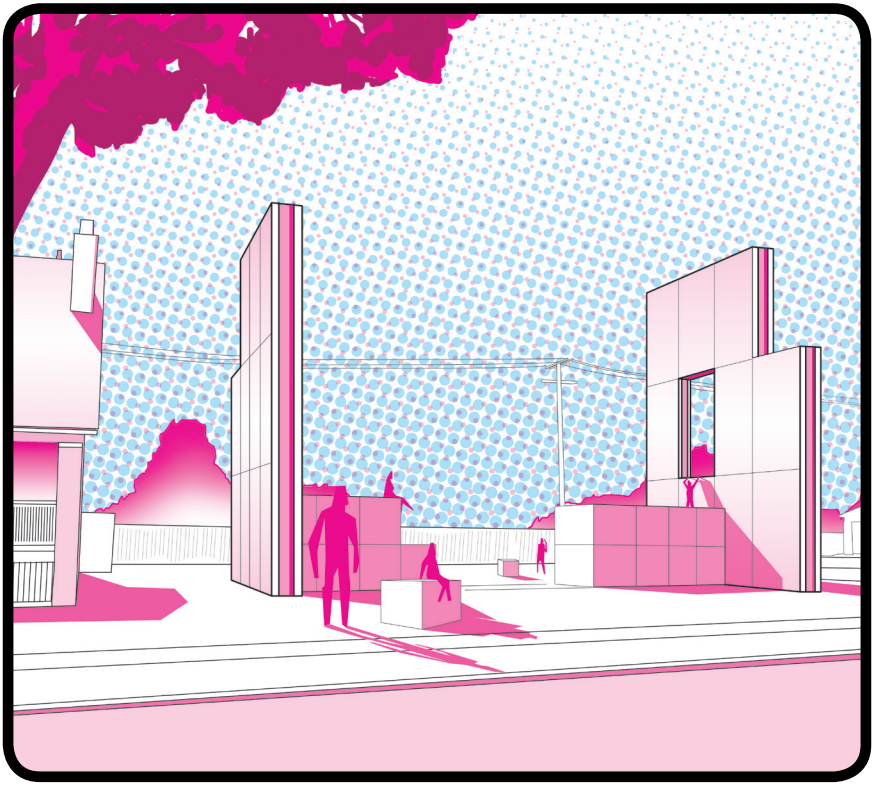


Wayburn

In conjunction with the Vernor site, the wayburn panels try to have a specific function that will have people coming from blocks away to interact with the site. Having some form of information/education seems important, especially with this issue, so the site utilizes a stage and "outdoor library" where people can take a book, bring a book and allowing for discussions. Drawing inspiration from a previous development, the movable line, blocks too are implemented to create a "wall" between the panels, for citizens to interact with a create new shapes or objects, showcasing that they themselves can tear down the barriers and create something new.

Site plan

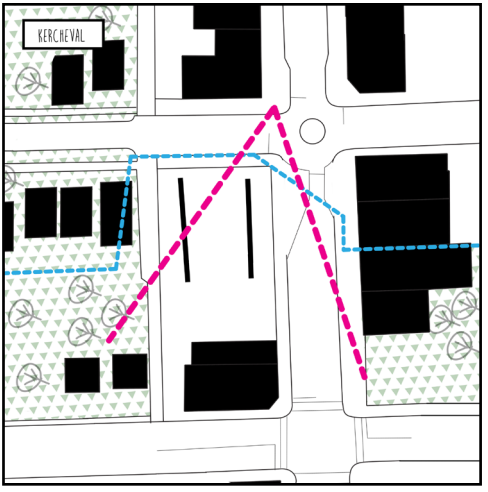


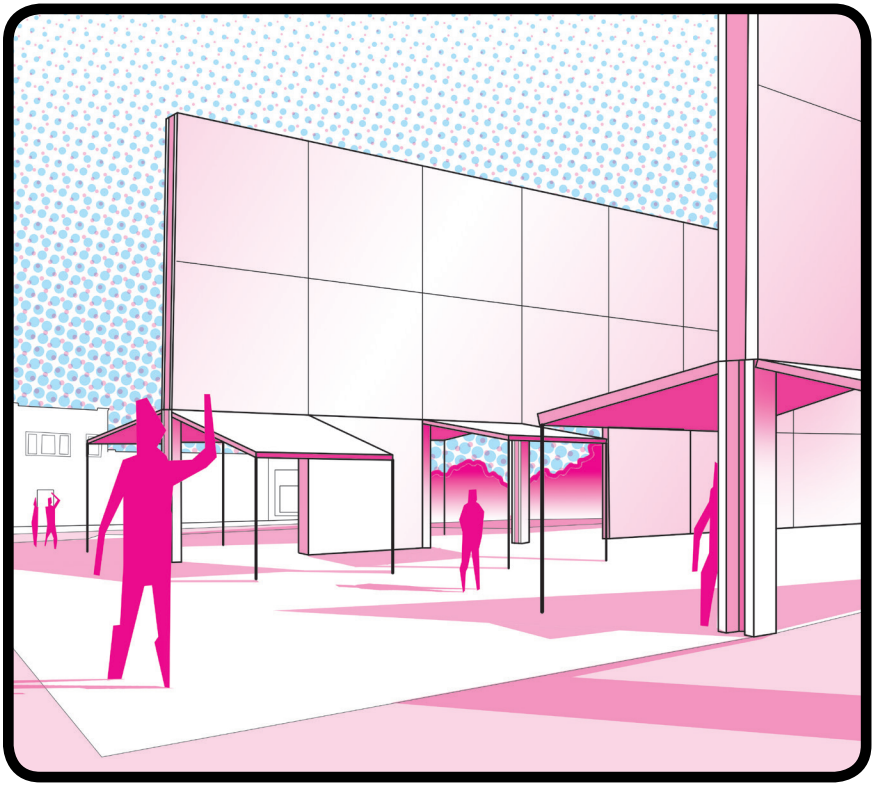


Kercheval

Kercheval is one of the more controversial sites at the moment, due to the blockade/new roundabout and farmers market. Because many people do enjoy the farmers market, that function will stay but be incorporated into the panel design. The panels open up when the function is need, and create a completly new space inbetween and around the panels, blurring the notion of the gutter/interstitial space. This environment hopefully brings a proactive approach to Alter road in the future.

Site plan

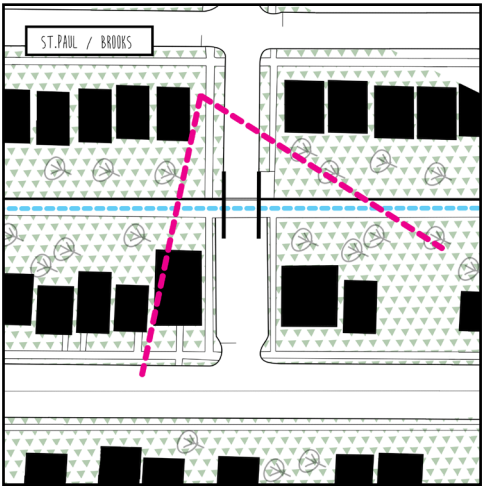


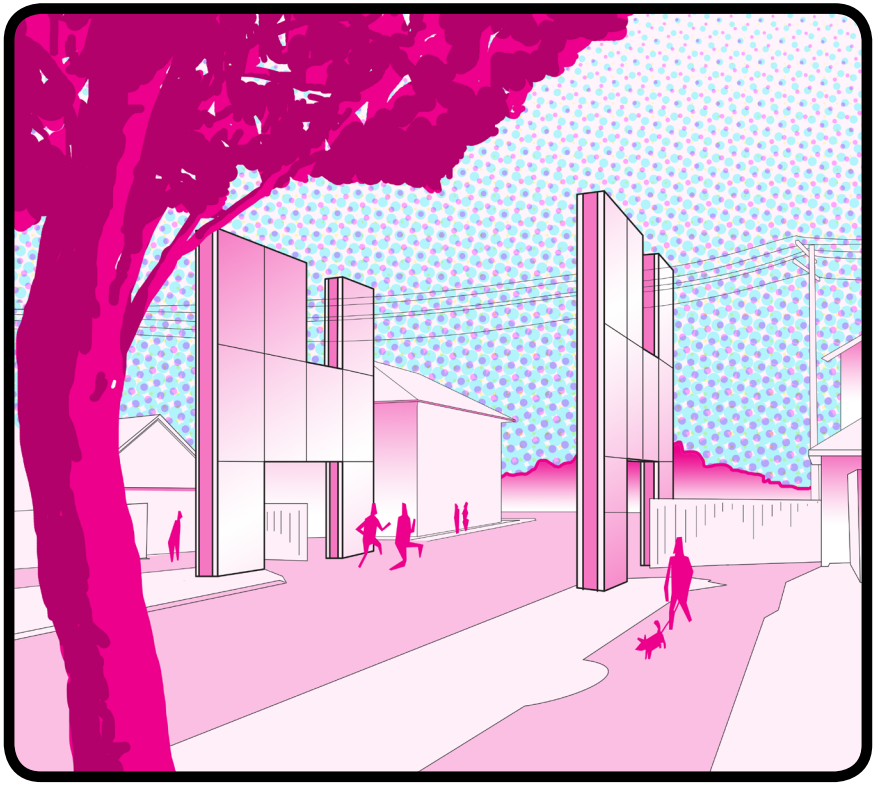


St.Paul/Brooks

St.paul/Brooks is similar to Goethe, a street that stops traffic from going through. The concept is to have pedestrians able to "go over" the fence, while keeping it there as a reminder to the citizens that this is how G.P. treated Detroit for a long time. Maybe if people realize that, they can cross the border again, they could petition to have it removed. The material of the site will copy the style of the fence itself. The is one of the first sites that also reacts to the surrounds through the architecture. The panels must be arranged to accomodate conditions like existing driveways and powerlines, as well as changing streetscapes. Goethe and a few other sites follow this pattern as well, while still remaining consistent in their language.

Site plan

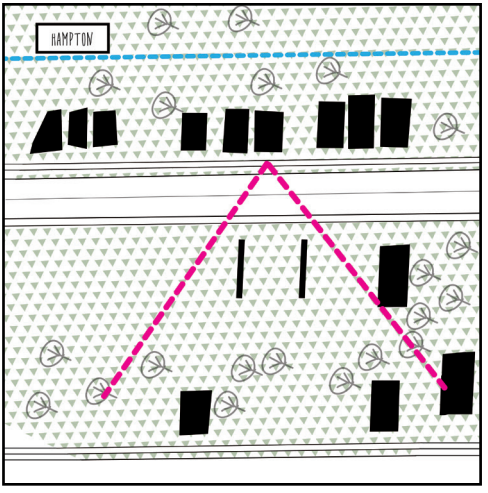


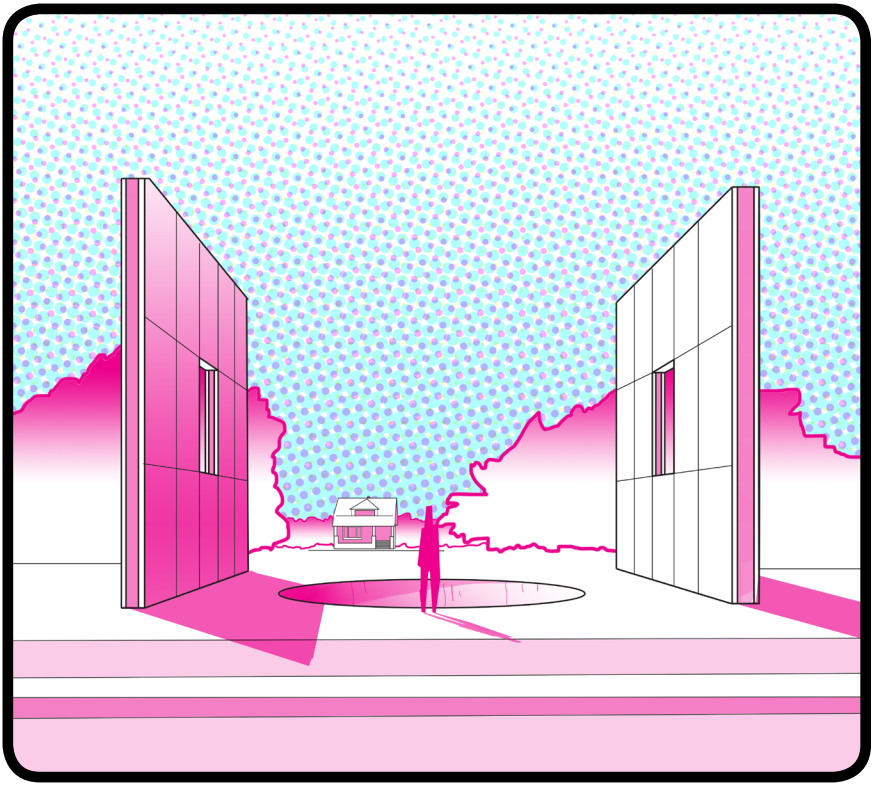


Hampton

Hampton is a peculiar site due to is vast size. So much land but no particular function to address. The idea is to include some form of emptiness to reflect the site. A hole in between the panels to showcase how one side is viewed from the other, a commentary of perception. The emptiness is accessible to the public, allowing for one to be in the vast emptiness, while other look in. This dialogue starts to address the disparity found on either side of Alter.

Site plan

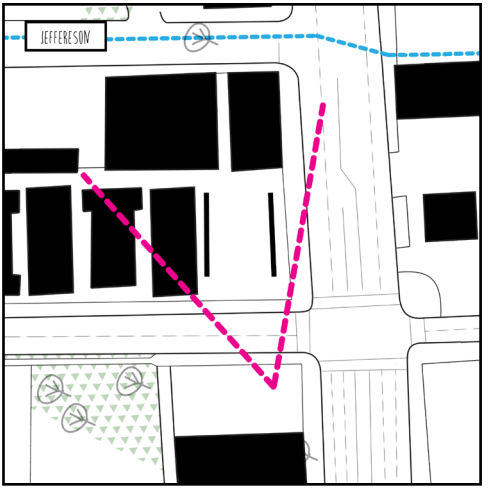


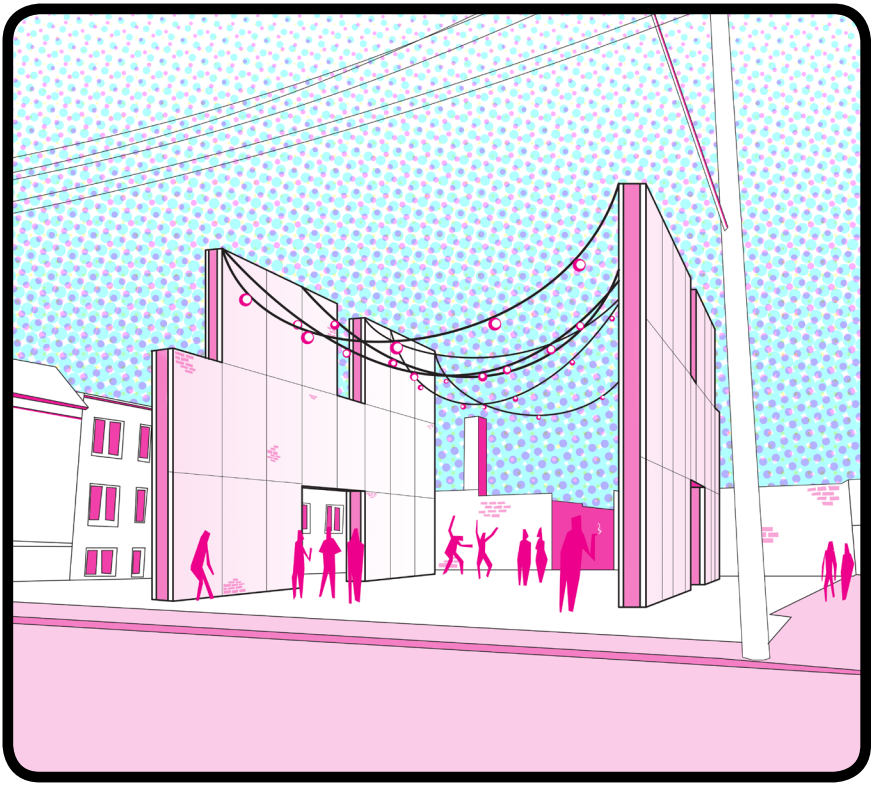


Jefferson

Jefferson is the other touchy site. In investigations, it was learned that Grosse Pointe purchased this land and wanted to demolish it and make room for a park, even though the building (which was one of Detroit's first gay bar's) was listed as historic, meaning you couldn't take it down. The site wishes to bring back the old function, in the form of a biergarten to encourage the community to come together and have a drink. One of the larger panel systems, the vast size accomadates large numbers of people to get together and celebrate or discuss. Hanging lights are reminiscent of the typical biergarten and evoke a happier mood amongst citizens.

Site plan

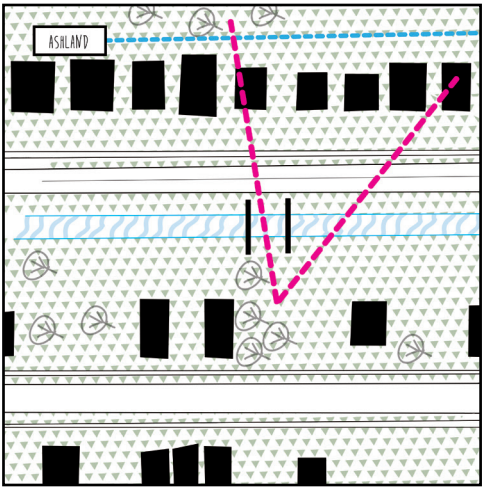


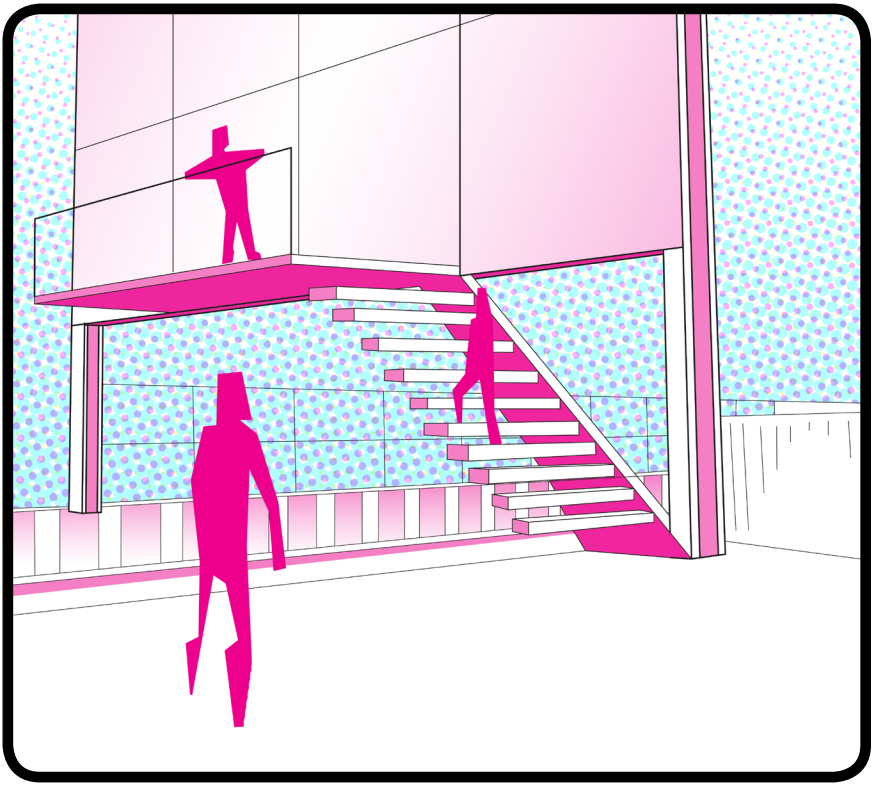


Ashland

The Ashland site bridges the Fox creek to again showcase that idea of crossing a border. Bringing a pier-like feel to the site seemed appropriate due to the fox creek area being described as the Venice of Detroit. Boats are allowed to pass under the panels, since the system is raised up unlike the other sites.

Site plan

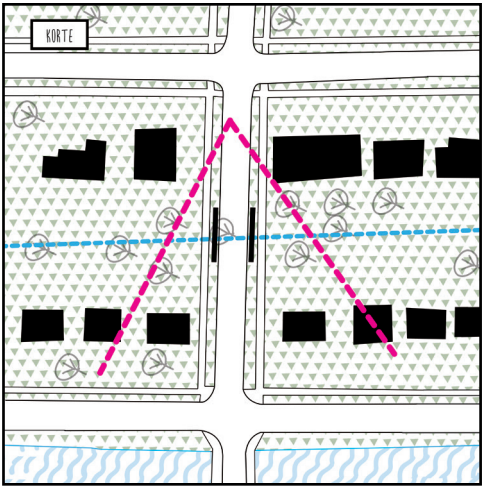


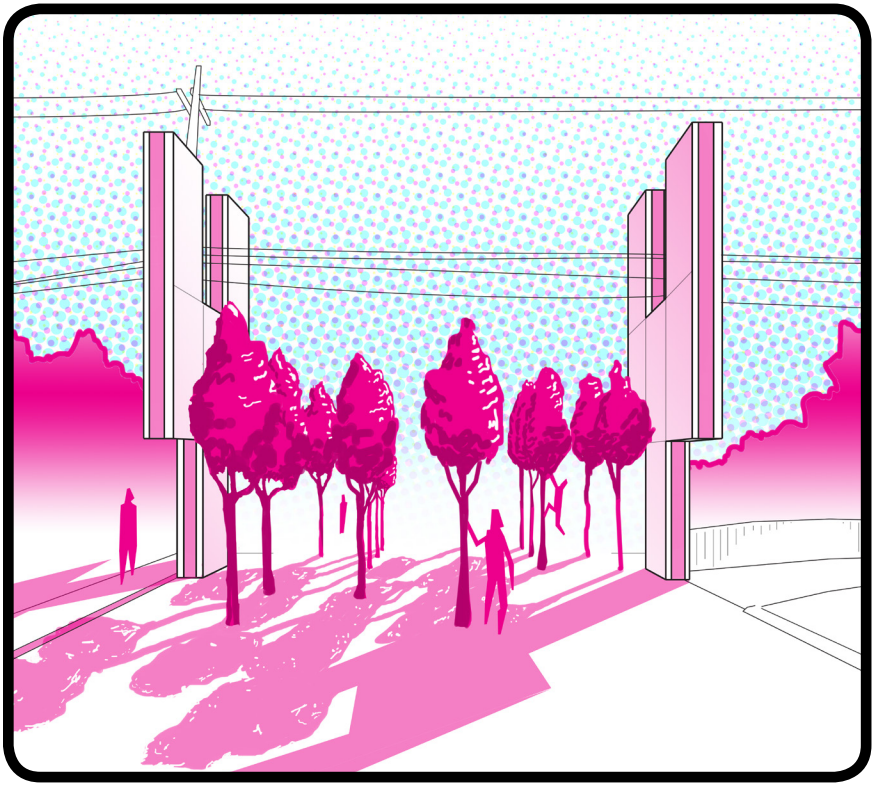


Korte

The last of the blockade sits, Korte is one of the few that is blocked but still passable. The site contains a strip of land with trees, with a small path on the side for pedestrain traffic. The concept here was to expand the strip of trees to a “mini-forest” and create a permeable layer between the panels. This allows for exploration as well as people to remain within the panels and reside in the interstitial. Through automobile traffic is not allowed, the viusal nature of this site still rings true to the idea of a conduit , bringing people to Alter road.

Site plan

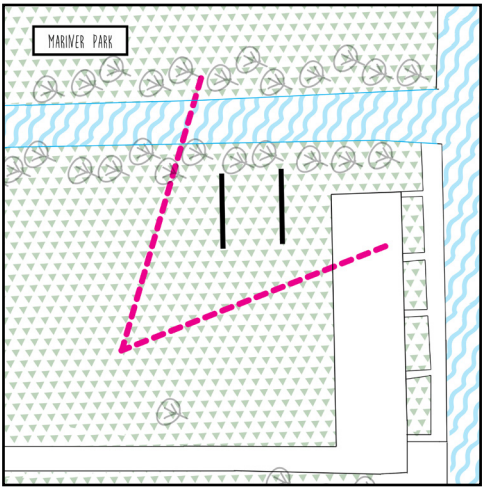


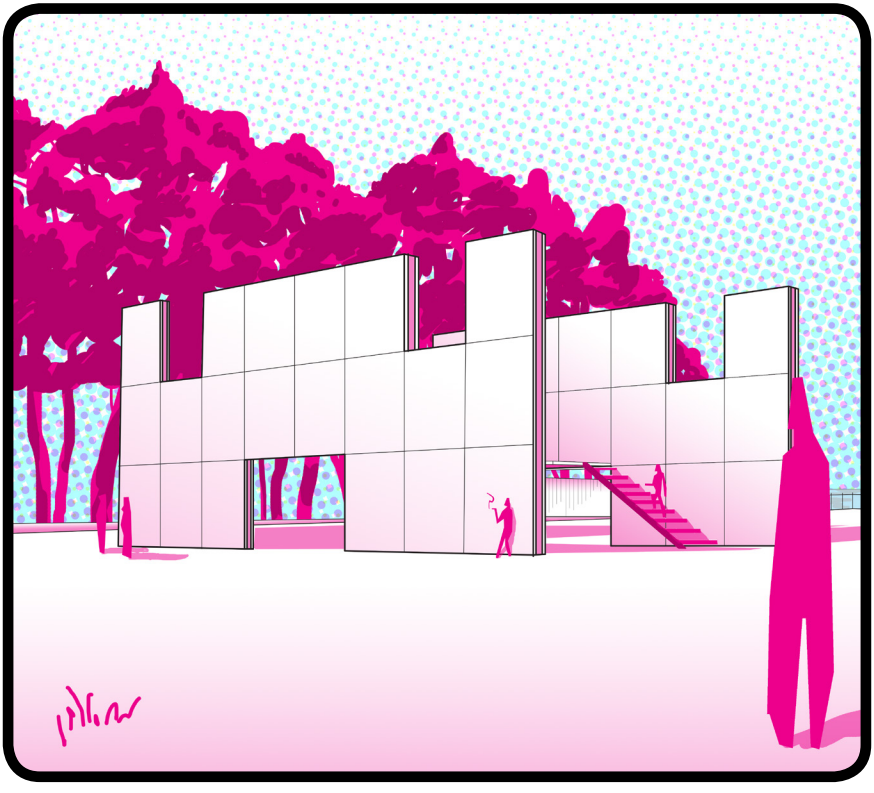


Mariner Park

The final site, located at Mariner park on the Detroit river is an interesting site. Meant to utilize the tower idea, so one can scale the panels and look out and see the old wall slowly coming down. A feature that is added to the design came from a site visit, when upon arrival, what appeared to be a fire pit out in a field. The idea of a bonfire seemed appropriate to act as a beacon for the world, so as one comes across this site form the river, they are aware that the border is there, but to remember that it is slowly being torn down by both parties.

Site plan





Conclusion:

In conclusion, this thesis attempted to address an issue that was being marginalized on the border of two cities. By introducing a panel system that acts as a comic, the interstitial could begin to be read as a conduit for discussion. As future generations are born on both sides of this line, both communities need to be proactive in informing the other and acting together, instead of segregating each other even more, so the integration of these panels creates a new outlet for dialogue and transparency.

NOTES:

[1] "Duggan: 'Tired of Lying' from Grosse Pointe Park as Shed Still Blocks Kercheval." Duggan: 'Tired of Lying' from Grosse Pointe Park as Shed Still B. My Fox Detroit, 12 Dec. 20147. Web. 5 Feb. 2015.

[2] Jodidio, Philip. Architecture Now! 7 = Architektur Heute = L'architecture D'aujourd'hui. Köln: Taschen, 2010. Print.

[3] Lai, Jimenez. Citizens of No Place: An Architectural Graphic Novel. N.p.: Princton Architectural, n.d. Print.

[4] Lambert, Léopold. The Funambulist Pamphlet: Deleuze. Vol. 3. N.p.: Punctum, n.d. Print.

[5] Mazzucchelli, David. Asterios Polyp. New York: Pantheon, 2009. Print.

[6] McCloud, Scott. Reinventing Comics:. New York: Perennial, 2000. Print.

[7] McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics:. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1994. Print.

[8] McGuire, Richard. Here. N.p.: Pantheon, n.d. Print.

[9] Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Janet Leigh, Vera Miles & John Gavin. Universal Studios, 1960. DVD.

[10] Rajchman, John. Constructions. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1998. Print.

[11] Shepard, Mark. Sentient City: Ubiquitous Computing, Architecture, and the Future of Urban Space. New York City: Architectural League of New York, 2011. Print.

[12] Woods, Lebbeus. War and Architecture = Rat I Arhitektura. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural, 1993. Print.

[13] Zizek, Slavoj. “Slavoj □i□ek. “Architectural Parallax; Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Puggle.” Slavoj Zizek. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.