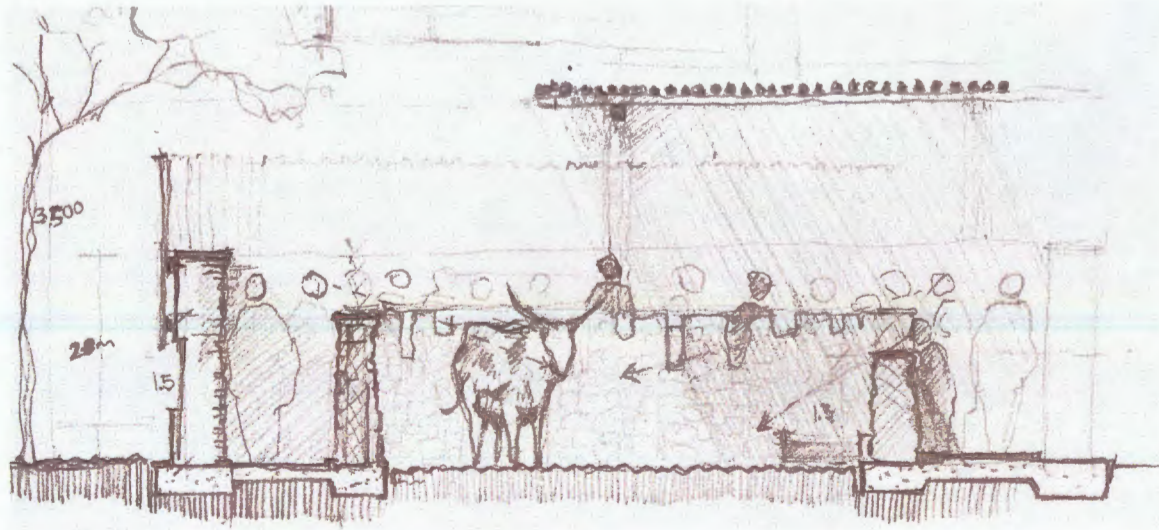


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# Spatialising African Indigenous Customs in Langa.

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MLFRAM001

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Architecture [Professional] in the faculty of Engineering and Built Environments, at the University of Cape Town.

November 2010

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# 1

## Introduction

- 1.1 Background
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Figure 1: African Customs in an urban environment



Figure 2: African Customs practiced in an Langa

### 1.1 Background

African Traditional Customs form an important part in the lives of millions of people on the African continent. They are the thread that stitches together the multifaceted blanket of African cultural variety.

### 1.2 Issue

The problem is that of designing an African city that is representative of the cultural fabric and diversity in its spatial structuring and order. Although a city like Cape Town is considered an 'African city' it fails to spatially accommodate African customs that are the core ingredients of being African. Historically African lifestyle values found resistance in expression and loss of meaning within an urban context. The city in its conception and planning does not adequately address the need for African customs that find expression in the more rural context.

Now that South Africa is emancipated from the bonds of apartheid, a new era of redefining African Identity has come. The question of African identity cannot be ignored because it is fundamental to solving many societal problems that develop from a loss of character personally and collectively.

Many black South Africans living in Cape Town do not consider the city as their 'home'. The majority are of Xhosa lineage and do not feel that their lives are not well rooted in the urban environment. Many still consider the Eastern Cape 'ekhaya' (home), because that is where generations of amaXhosa set their roots. Even though some amaXhosa were raised as second and third generation inhabitants in Cape Town, the stronghold of their traditional roots is evident in their attitude towards their ancestral home. It is marked by the annual pilgrimage to the Eastern Cape by thousands of people who return home to fulfil traditional rituals and customs.

For those growing up in Cape Town without a strong family ties or cultural roots with the Eastern Cape, their sense of identity is often lacking because the pillar of traditional ritual is absent in their lives. Personally I believe that a person's self-worth is directly related to their spiritual constitution, and that African traditional customs are not only important but they need to find expression in the environments that people live in daily.

### 1.3 Design Question

How can African Traditional Customs be accommodated in the urban setting by physically finding expression and relevance practically and spatially.

### 1.4 The Site

This project is located in Langa township because of the history of African people who have lived in the urban setting while upholding their traditional practices.

# 2

## Locality and Context Analysis

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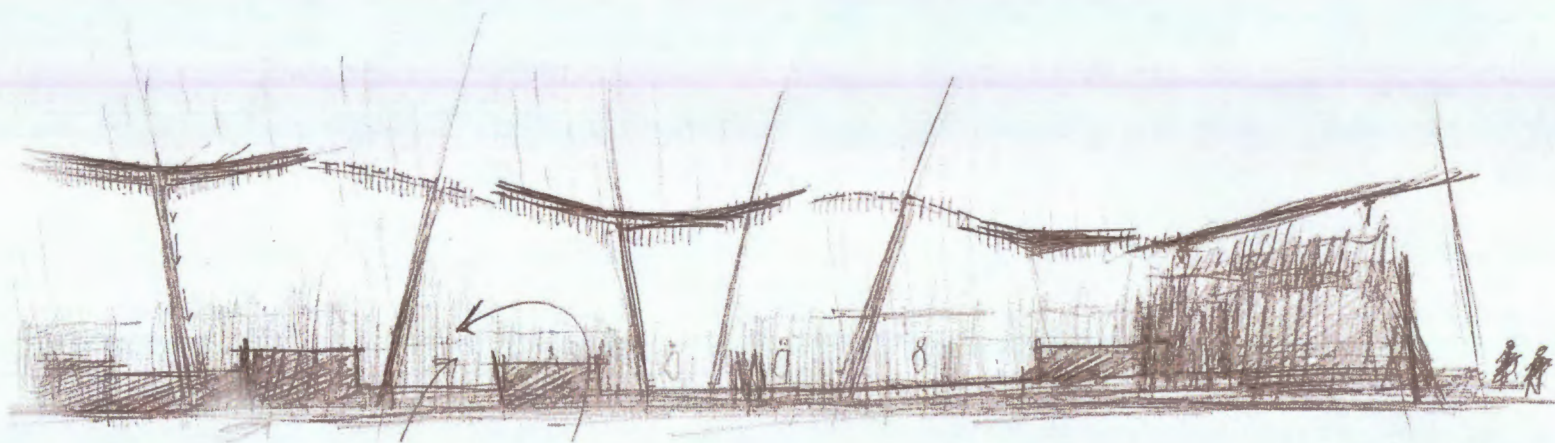




Figure 3 : Arial viewof Langa township

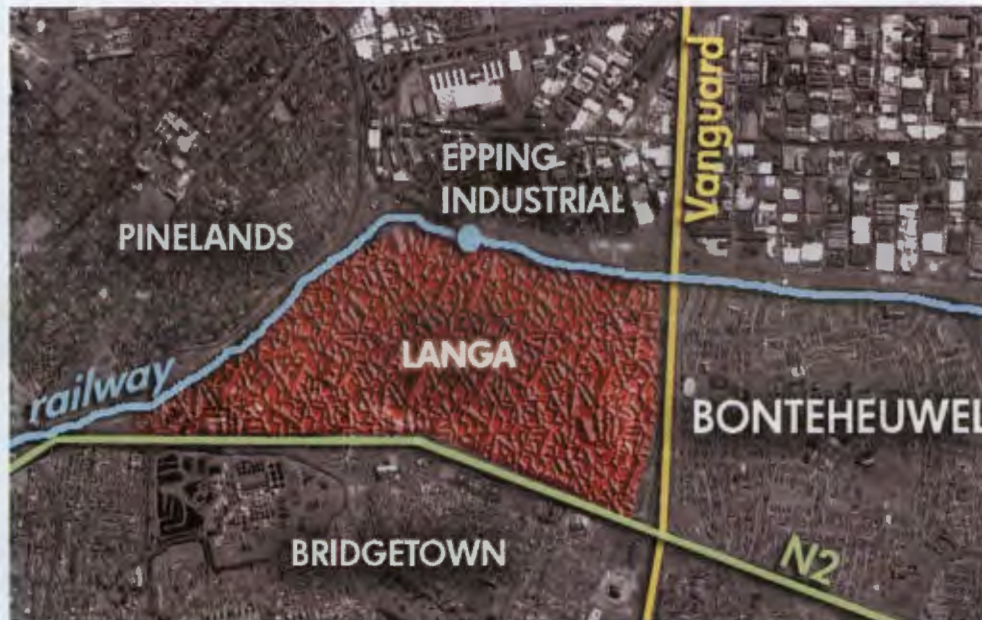


Figure 4 : Local access to Langa

## 2.1 Cape Town Locality

Langa Township is positioned in the central district of the Cape Town municipality. It sits on the flat plains bounded by Settlers Way Road, Vanguard Drive and the Railway line.



Figure 5: Location of Langa township in the Cape region

## 2.2 Langa Township Planning



Figure 5: Aerial map of Langa township in the 1930s.



Figure 7 : Aerial map of Langa township in 1950's



Figure 8: The sequence of development of Langa.

## 2.3 Site Context analysis

### 2.3.1 Physical Infrastructure context

The residential stock in Langa tells a story of a history of struggle and oppression. The first of the buildings were designed for people relocating from Ndabeni in the late 1920's, these included row houses and barracks on the now western side of Langa.



Figure 9: Hostels



Figure 10: Old flats and Barracks



Figure 11 : New Higher dense family units



Figure 12 : Informal Shacks



Figure 13 : Row Houses



Figure 14 : Informal structures used for market spaces

### 2.3.1 Physical Infrastructure context

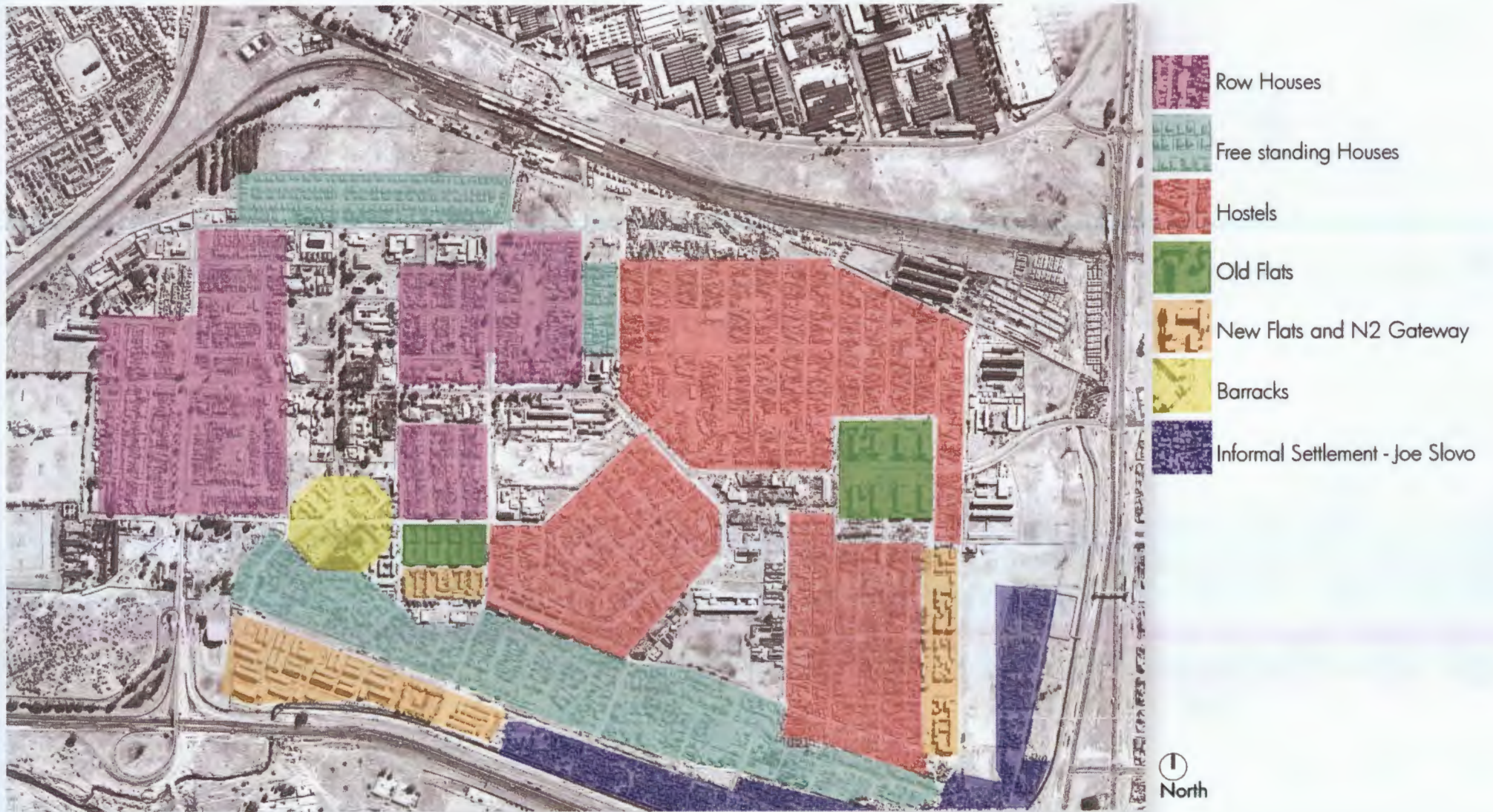


Figure 15 : Langa Map showing different types of dwelling typologies.



Figure 16 : Meat market next to the old flats.



Figure 17: Entrepreneurship as major income generator



Figure 18: Food prepared for the 'spaza' shop.



Figure 19: Using salvaged timber to make fire.

- Train Station
- Taxi Rank
- Shopping centre
- Small businesses in shipping containers
- Meat markets
- Vehicular repairs



### 2.3.2 Socio-Economic context

Langa township is relatively a low-income area with a wide range of income options. Most of the working class citizens are formally employed in the surrounding industrial areas and commercial hubs in greater Cape Town. Self-employment is a favorable option for the rest of the population. Informal business on the streets include 'spaza' shops, hair salons, car repairs, furniture repairs and shoe repairs, and the meat market. The informal settlement and backyard shacks host a variety of enterprises that enable the residents to make a living.



Figure 20: Hair-care business



Figure 21: Meat stall along the street



Figure 22: Meat market stalls.



Figure 23: Spaza shop

Figure : Langa Map highlighting some economic active areas.



Figure 24: Independent African Church in a shack

### 2.3.3 Religious context

The people of Langa follow some form of religion. The Christian churches in the area have a long history and have played an important role in shaping the community. Many Christians in this location also follow traditional African customs that are performed by AmaXhosa. This perceived conflict in ideology has allowed African Independent Churches to flourish. Unlike the orthodox Christian churches, many of them have small congregations and hold their meetings in homes, school classrooms and backyards.



Figure 28: Orthodox church buildings and services in school Halls.



Figure 25: Worship



Figure 26: Prayer



Figure 27: Dancing



Figure 29: Some of Langa church buildings.

## 2.4 Access to Site

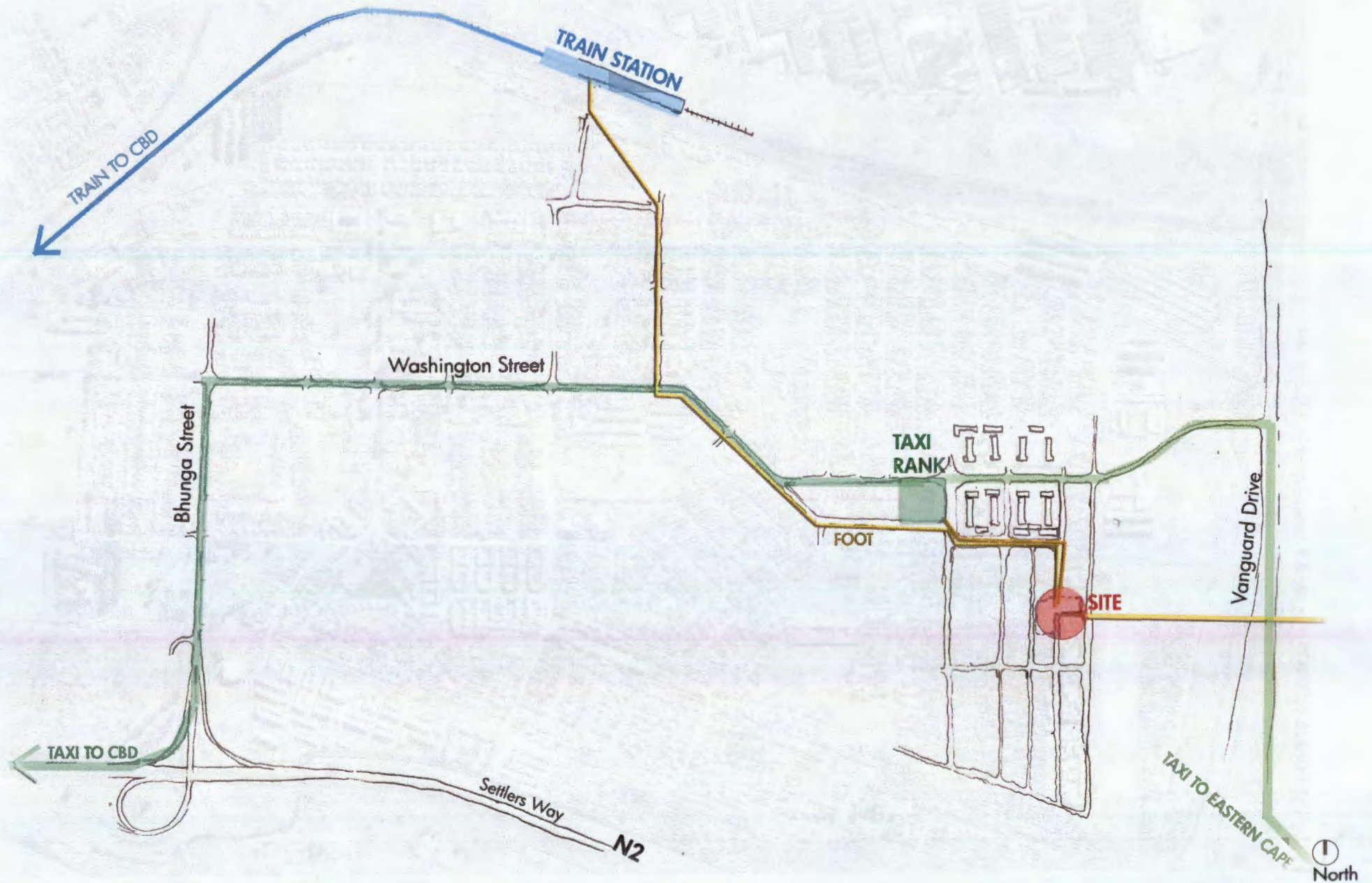


Figure 30 : Langa Map highlighting some economic active areas.

## 2.5 Existing Context



Figure 31: Langa Context showing route of access

## 2.6 Site views

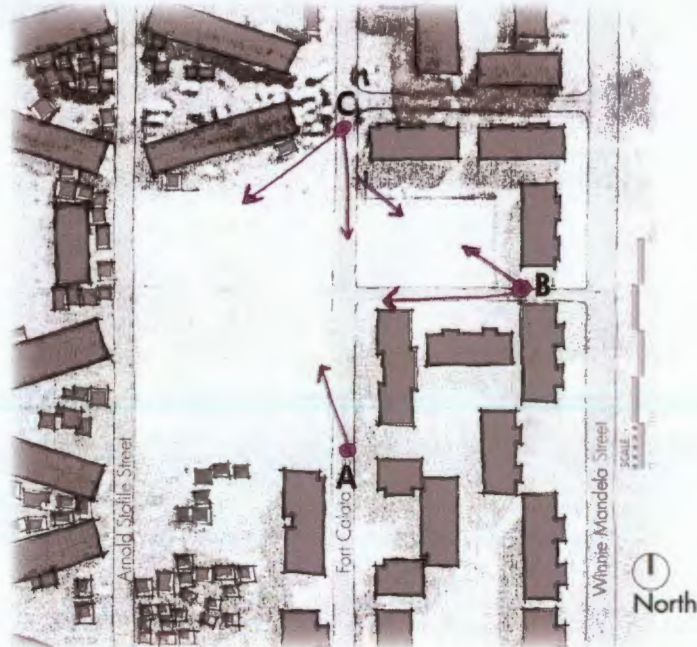


Figure 32: Langa Map showing view points of site view.



Figure 33: A - View of the site and context, looking north down Fort Calata street.



Figure 34: B - Panoramic view of the site, looking onto the public square.



Figure 35: C - Panoramic view of the site, looking south down Fort Calata street.



Figure 36: C - Panoramic view of the site and context, looking south down Fort Calata street.

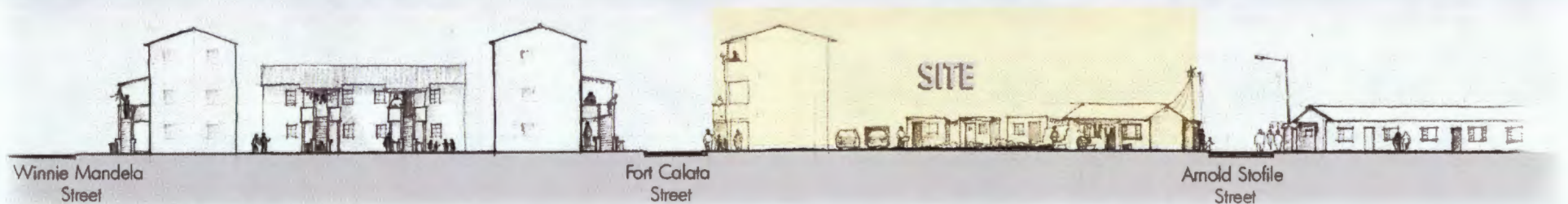


Figure 37: Sectional Elevation through the site

## 2.7 Micro-climatic conditions

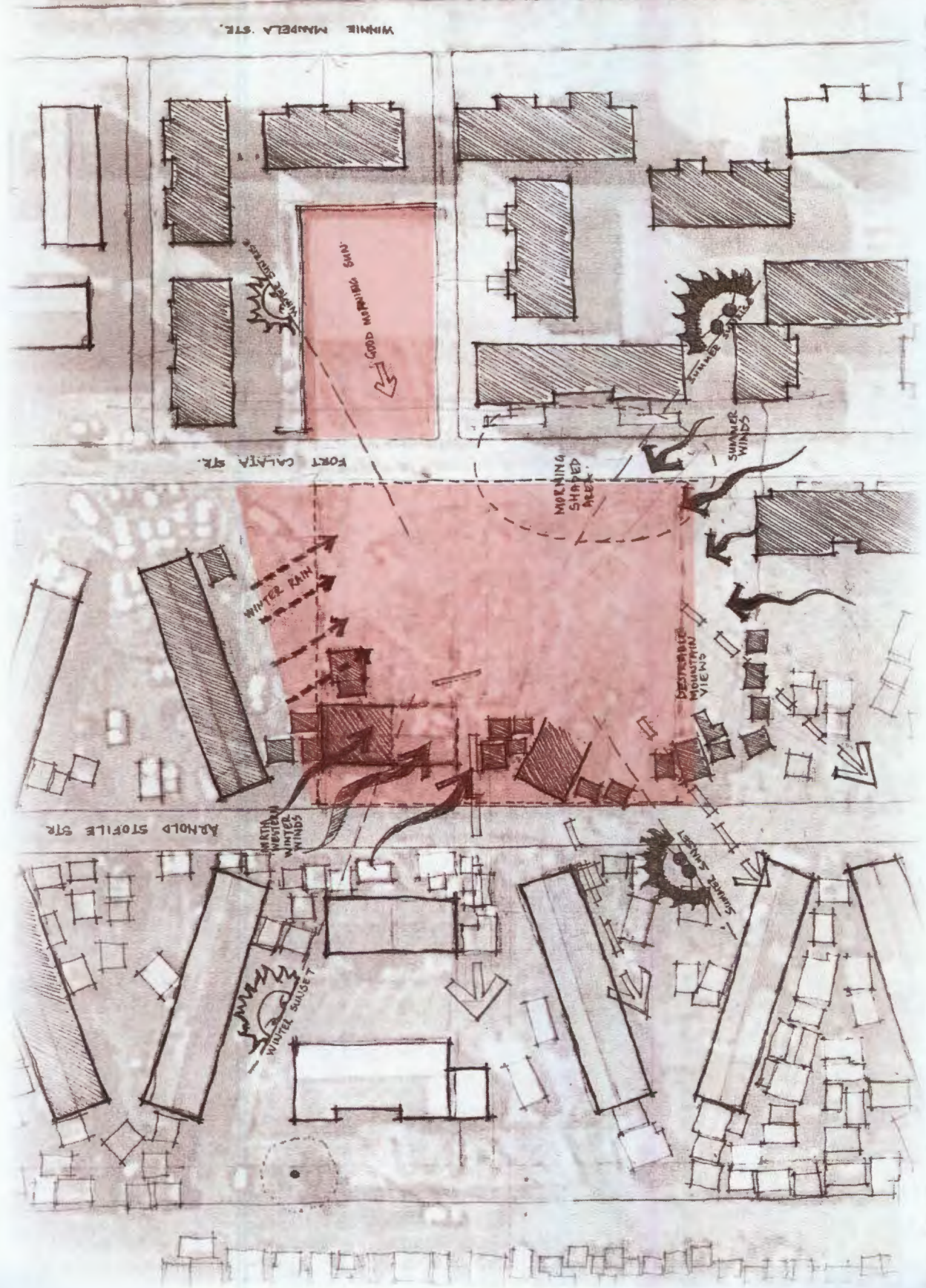


Figure 38: Climatic conditions on site

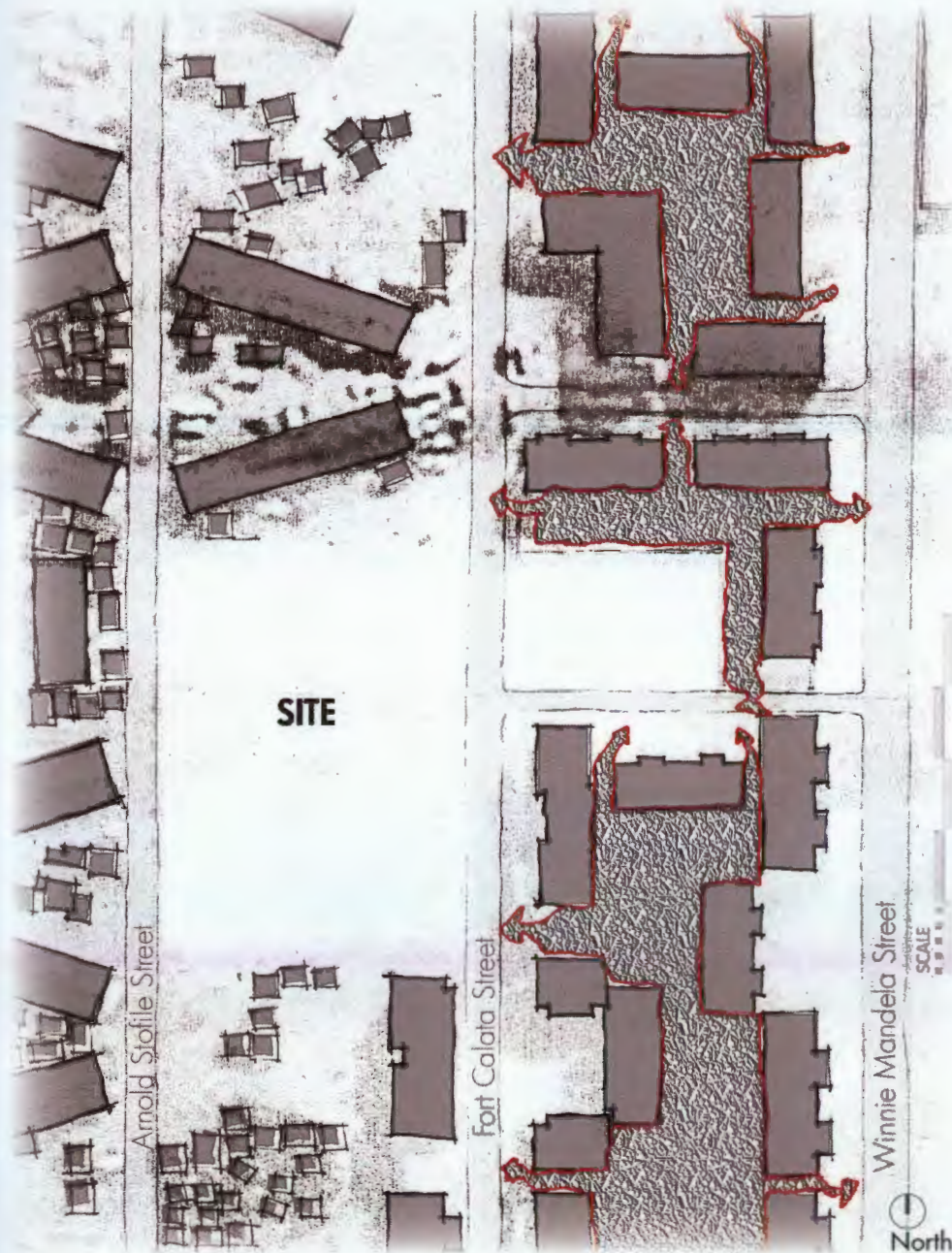


Figure 39: Context plan showing site with courtyard spaces.

## 2.8 Coutyard Spaces

### 2.8.1 Grund Cover

Most of Langa is covered with sandy soil that is exposed to wind and rain, that easily erodes the top layer. Although the area was once a forrest, the clearing of vegetation has caused the it to become desert like.

There is a need for adequate ground surface treatment and design. Due to the fact that a lot of washing of clothes takes place daily, water channels begin to form as the water finds its way to the street (figure ).



Figure 41: Soil erosion due to inadequate ground surface cover



Figure 40: Internal courtyard



Figure 42: Loose sandy soil

### 2.8.2 Internal Courtyards

The courtyard spaces that the residential developments create are not inviting spaces because of the lack of place making design. The alien space remains unclaimed and not defended.

The courtyard spaces leak out to the street and the integrity of the space is compromised as it is defiled and not cherished. These courtyards end up becoming dumping grounds because the residents take no ownership of the place.



Figure 43: Unkept courtyard spaces.

# 3

## African Customs & Traditions

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3.2 African traditional practices	18
3.2.1 Ritual ceremonies	18
3.2.2 African celebrations	20
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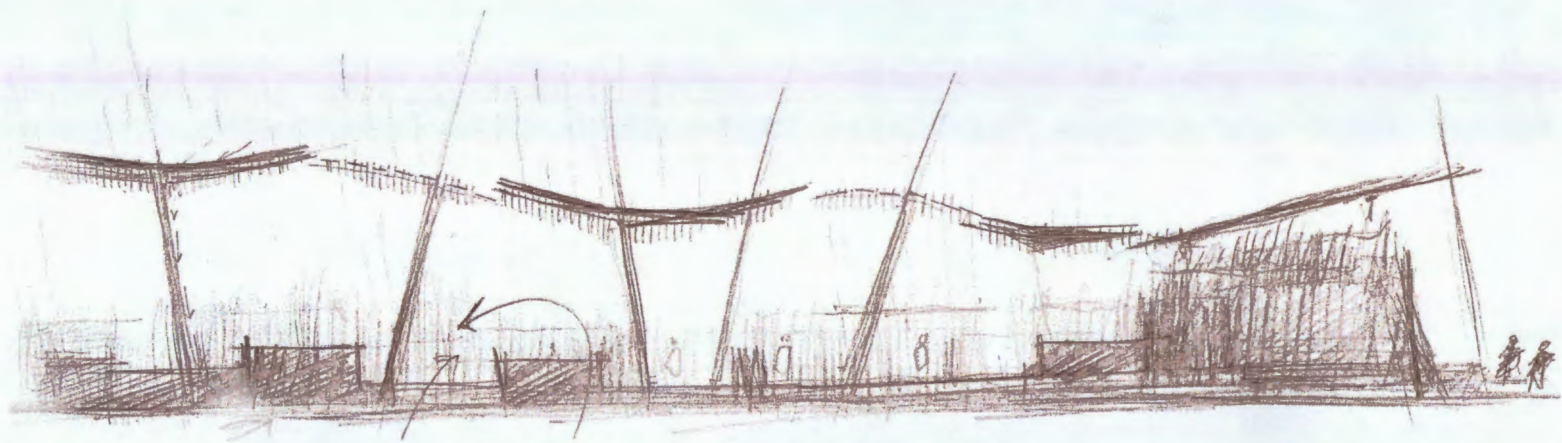




Figure 44: Games

### 3.1 Indigenous Games

#### Childhood ritual of play games

In a South African Township context the games that children play form an integral part of the African identity as they carry with them indigenous knowledge and values that were once central to community life. Langa Township is an example of an urban environment that still carries traces of indigenous knowledge in the form of the games that children play. When walking through the tarred streets, I found marks of evidence that suggest the presence of traditional African games that are often associated with rural settings. In the streets the children temporarily claim a part of the street to accommodate the activity of play. White chalk and lime stone marks distinguish the space for Diketo (Five stones), and Hopscotch (figure 21) on the road surfaces that children choose to play. The marking are only traces of the daily ritual that children have formed as part of their lives in the township. The traditional games of this kind were once played in rural have now been adapted in the urban environment with little hints to their original meanings. In a sense, traditional games communicate localized ethnic and socio-cultural identity of earlier times (Hirth, 1991). Contrary to popular belief that children do not play anymore, the street of Langa are alive with games that children play. In essence, children still play and also create or adapt many games to satisfy a variety of physical, psychological, social and cultural needs. They are instrumental in perpetuating this facet of indigenous culture in which their lived realities find expression (Burnett & Hollander, 2002). Indigenous Games provides a window for the expression and showcasing of African value and talent. Although there is cultural diversity in Africa, African people do share some general values and history. An example would be the history of rural livestock tending and the games that boys would play while in the veld.

“The revival of indigenous games in South Africa is essential for the call of African Renaissance...Like other sport and recreation codes, indigenous games impact on a number of socio-economic issues such as African identity, cultural diversity, education and training accessibility of resources, international relations economic growth and so forth.” (Tsetetsi, 2007)

Indigenous games are still practices on many street surfaces in townships and are a legitimate educational tool that was used traditionally

## 3.2 African Customs and Traditions

### 3.1 African traditional practices

The African way of life is an important part in the lives of millions of people on the African continent. The principles that govern this way of life are rooted in universal principles of creation. The African philosophy is a way of thinking and living.

It is important to understand the African concept of circle of life and what is considered important stages or phases of a person's life. In most African cultures there are four distinct life states that play an integral part in the life of a person and their community.

In African culture there are at least four major rites of passage: rituals of birth, puberty or initiation, marriage, and death. At each phase of the life-cycle, the family performs certain rituals to announce to the ancestors in the spiritual realm of the physical progress in life.

From time immemorial, these phases of life have always had a significant expression in the lives of Africans. The celebrations are traditionally accompanied by rituals directed at the ancestral spirit. Although today many of the different customs and rituals have fallen victim to modernism, some groups like Amakhosa are still active practitioners of most of these rituals.

#### Birth

The rituals associated with birth vary with culture. In the Xhosa tradition rituals of birth include the slaughtering of an animal and the burial of the umbilical cord (inkaba). A place of birth among amaXhosa means the place where one's inkaba is buried because it is at that place where the spiritual connection with the ancestors is made. The ritual is followed by a community celebration that announces and introduces the child to the community.

The umbilical cord is buried under a pile of timber logs called 'igoqo'. This pile is a symbolic sacred space that represents a female version of the kraal. Igoqo is a sacred place for women just as the kraal is sacred to men.

#### Initiation

Rituals initiation into adulthood is performed by most of the African cultures. Its basic structure in the Xhosa tradition is that of seclusion, initiation, and coming out. The process is a spiritual rite that binds one to the ancestral clan as an adult. Sacrificial slaughtering and beer brewing are customary in the initiation rite of passage, as well as the community celebration that follows the ritual.



Figure 45: Initiation Ritual



Figure 46: Marriage

### Marriage

Marriage is an important stage in one's life and it the mark of adulthood and respect. It is the base for starting a family and having children. It is regarded with the utmost respect because it was created to extend relationships to the wider community through bringing two clans together. This means that marriage is not just a union on a materialistic level but extends to the spiritual world of the ancestors.

Children are a gift from the spiritual world, therefore marriage should be blessed. (Mndende, 1999)

The rituals and ceremony that accompany marriage are performed to find approval from the ancestors of both families and bind the two clans in all future dealings, and they will share all future joys, sorrows and burdens that come with the marriage of the bride and groom.

The ritual ceremony for the ancestors takes place in the in the grooms clan's kraal.

The bride and groom are married when the two biles from the sacrificial animals, one from each home, are mixed and poured in the kraal at the emthonyameni (sacred place towards the back of the kraal), after some sacred words by the elderly are spoke. (Mndende, 1999)



Figure 47: Death

### Death

Death is not the end of life but a transition into the world of the ancestors; hence this is perhaps the most important of the rites of passage for African people.

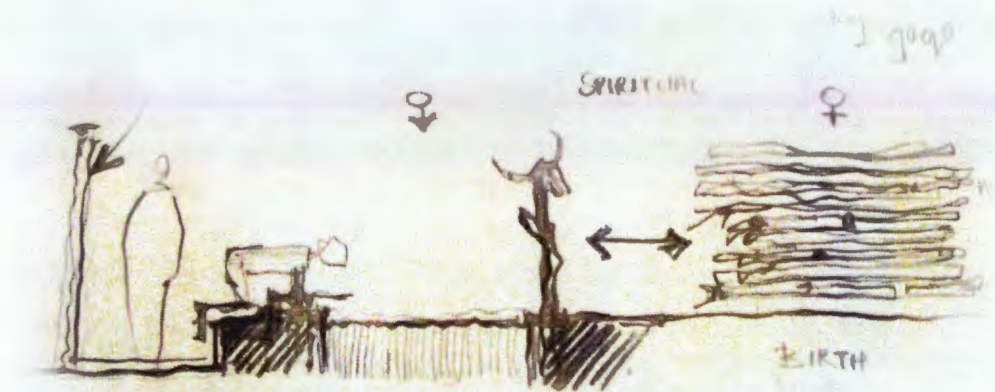




Figure 48: Food preparation



Figure 49: Cooking

### 3.1.2 Ritual ceremonies African Rituals

Langa has a unique mix of urban and rural African culture that includes a diverse range of traditions and cultures. It is this balance that gives it 'sense of place' and its distinctive character. Since its establishment in 1927, Langa has attracted a varied scope of persons who were not exclusively of Xhosa roots. The township has been home to white administrative families, coloured families, and black families from Sotho, Zulu, Pedi and Venda backgrounds. In recent decades the township has enjoyed an increase in the different nationalities that have settled there. Even though it has majority of Xhosa speaking people, Langa is an example of a heterogeneous community. As far as the early 1930's the township culture continues to a distillation of all the influences from the diverse contributors.

The people who took residence in this township were mainly from traditional rural environment. As a natural phenomenon, their move into an urban environment meant a change in lifestyle and adjustment into the role of an urbanite. Modernisation was also a great factor in the diffusion of strong rural traditions and cultural customs. No one group could claim to have kept its traditions pure from the cultural blend that existed.

With this in mind, there are, however, still core cultural practices that form a base for many African cultures that continue to be part of people's daily lives. Some of the cultural practices that have a strong presence in Langa include:

- Initiation ceremonies of boys into adulthood.
- Ancestral appeasement ceremonies (for thanksgiving) through animal slaughtering for the ancestors and traditional beer .
- Open fire cooking of meat
- Funeral and burial rites
- Traditional healing by Isangoma.
- Initiation ceremonies of Isangoma.



Figure 50: African Independent Church



Figure 51: African Independent Church



Figure 52: Animal slaughtering

### 3.3 African Independent Churches

Although Langa has a strong cultural essence, it has always been open to other influences of culture. One of the most prevalent influences on people of Langa is a very strong affinity to Christianity. In terms of religions culture, it is the dominant one in Langa. The role of the church in Langa cannot be neglected nor its influence in the cultural discourse regarding this particular township.

It can be argued whether the introduction and spread of Christianity among the African population was a noble religious act or it was used as a colonial tool to gain influence over. For centuries the black people struggled to find ground with the Christian faith while remaining true to their cultural practices and rituals. The adoption of Christian culture has surely caused a rift in African identity, because they had to pay by letting go of their own rich traditions for one that had a modern appeal. I feel that split exist even among people of Langa with some being strictly traditional and completely closed off from the Christian ideology, while others are on the opposite scale, having completely denounced their traditional roots. In the past the discrimination and tension that developed between the two extremes led to violent altercation, with terms like 'red people' and 'towns people' used to describe and distinguish the traditional (illiterate and heathen) population from the Christian (educated and holy) population. This issue is one of the key factors that contribute to an identity crisis among black people even today. It is also a major cause of social dismantling and family breakdown in the African communities. My reason for saying this is because the religious views within families are now as diverse as the increasing Christian sects and a family that is divided in cultural belief often shares little in common.

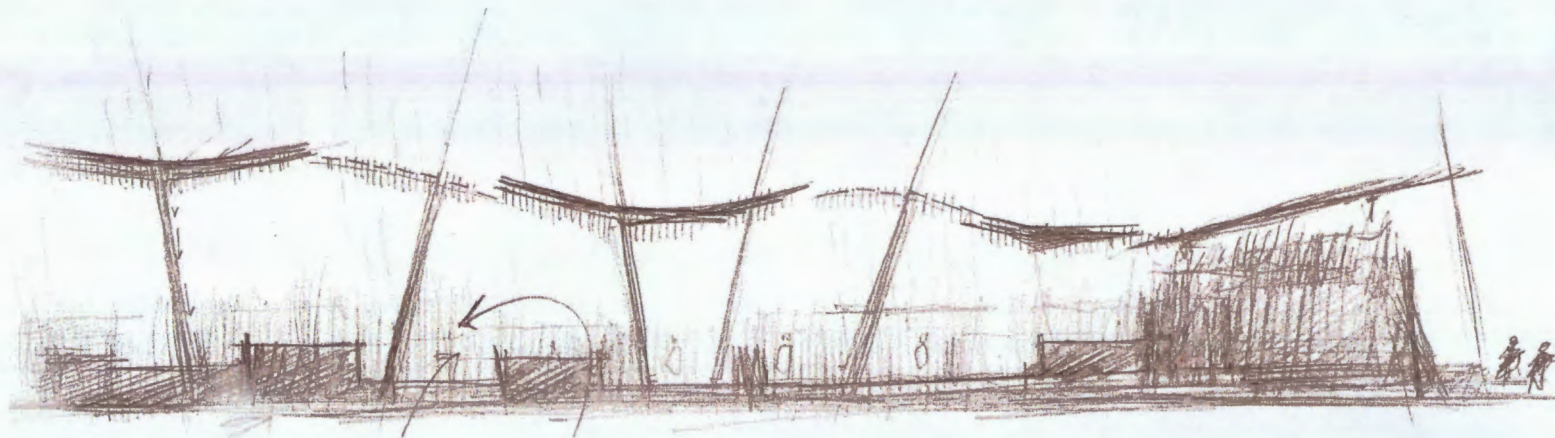
A major part of African Christians do not feel at home when they are forced to denounce their forefathers' beliefs that form the core of their spiritual and cultural roots. This phenomenon has led to the increase in the African Independent Churches in South Africa. These churches follow the Christian doctrine but do not let go of their traditional and cultural roots. Langa is an example of a large number of churches of this nature, where people have yet found a balance in an evolving culture to suit their practical needs.

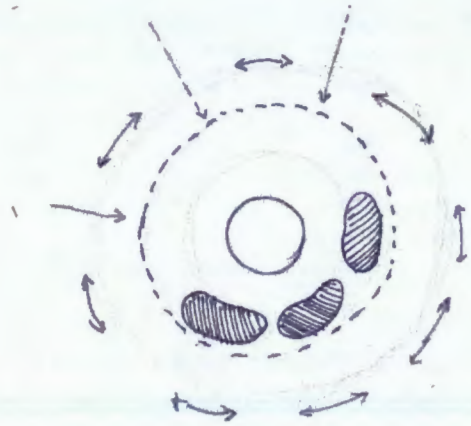
When Langa was built, the churches that were built and could function as public entities were only those that were recognized by the state, and other forms of worship in the public realm such as African outdoor worship were outlawed. The urban condition simply does not make provision for African inspired worship and spiritual practices, whether in a public space or in a private dwelling.

# 4

## Design Investigation

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#### 4.1 Design Principles

The Traditional African concept of activity based space making was used to define a design philosophy for the project.

The main ideas drawn from the traditional African ritual is that of a cellular activity relationships structure. The type of relationship that the different activities share is determined by factors such as levels of privacy and publicness, gender relations, visual connections, and the degree of importance of the activity.

This thesis aims to explore the nature of these activity cells and the relationship they have. It will focus on the cells of activity and the threshold spaces that are born out of the nature of relationships the cells share.

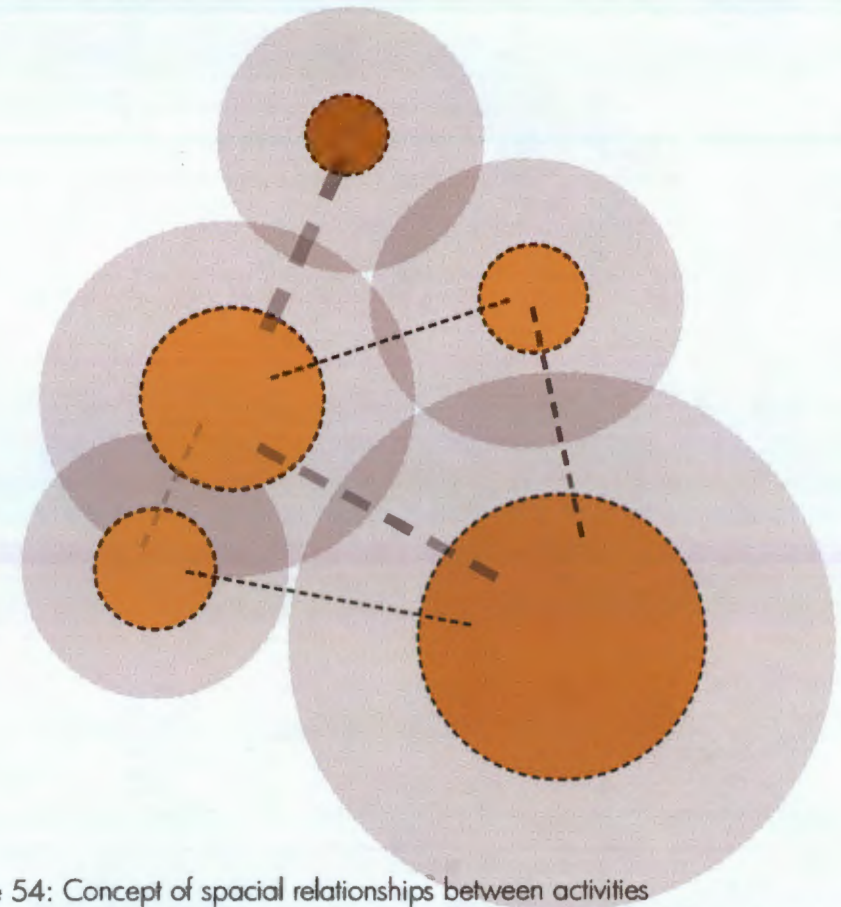
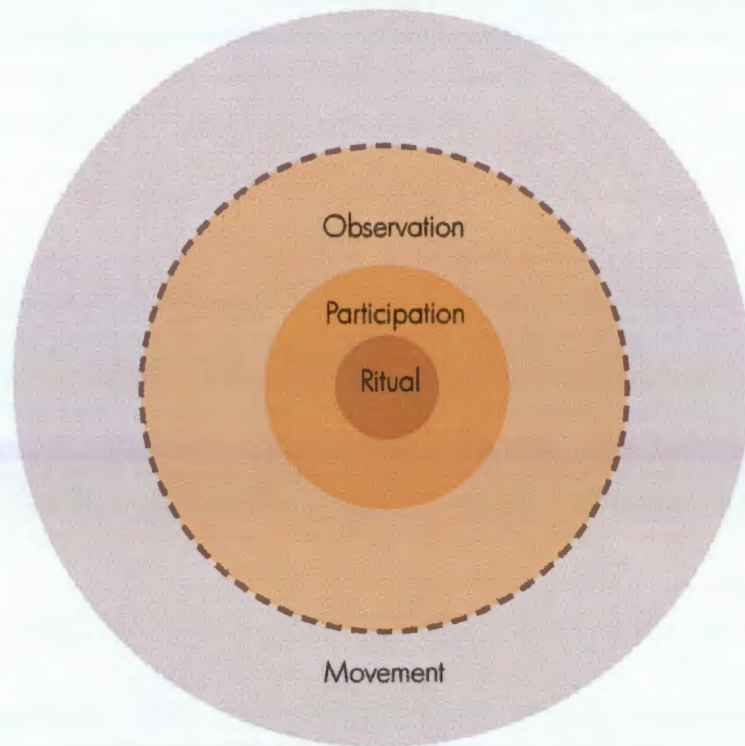


Figure 53: Ritual space ordering in African societies

Figure 54: Concept of spatial relationships between activities

## 4.2 Program and Accommodation schedule

The program for this project is based on spatialising African traditions. The main focus is on providing a series of spaces where the community in Langa can easily perform the ritual ceremonies that are traditionally celebrated in rural areas .

The facility would provide for community normal functions that require gathering spaces, such as wedding, funerals, family gathering celebrations. It would also provide spaces for ritual practices.

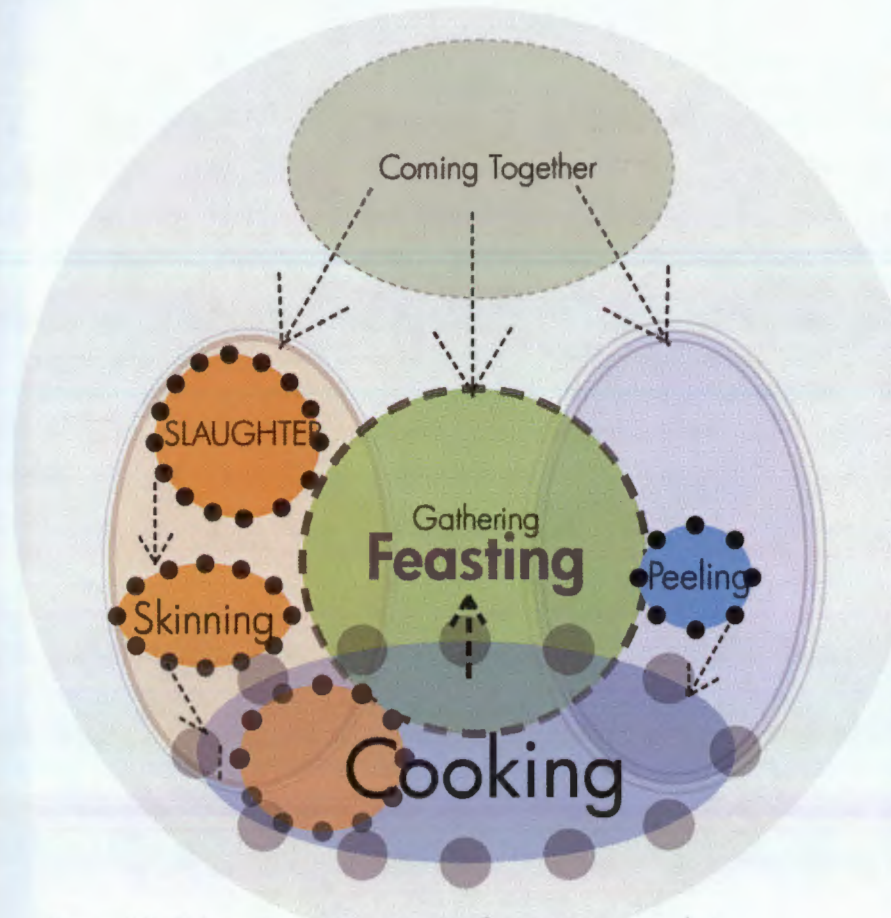


Figure 55: Schematic representation of activity spaces during a typical gathering for an African feast.

### SEMI PUBLIC CEREMONIAL SPACES

**Multi purpose enclosed space** for functions to accommodate 150 people

- overflow space
- storage
- ablutions

**Courtyard**

- break away courts
- seating area
- food serving
- ablutions

**Slaughtering space**

- work area
- wash area
- storage space

**Food preparation**

- work tables
- wash area
- storage
- seating
- cooking

### PRIVATE RITUAL SPACES

**Slaughtering space**

- work area
- wash area
- storage space
- temporary animal keeping

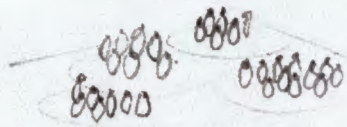
**Ritual participation**

- observation areas

**Traditional Healing space**

- consulting room
- seclusion rooms
- ceremonial space
- waiting and sitting area
- ablutions

#### 4.4 Design Ideas



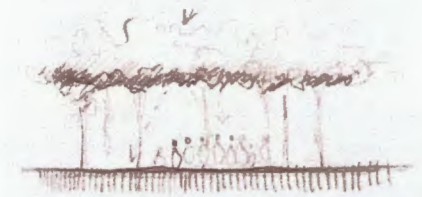
Group gathering for different activities, at times of celebrations and rituals.



Home rituals that incorporate veneration and communication with ancestors. These require a sacred space that is primarily on the ground.



Gathering under the protection of trees



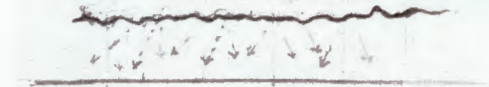
Rituals in the forest under the tree canopies



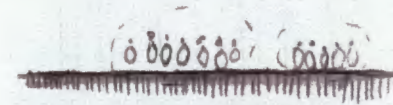
Idea on ritual slaughtering .



Ideas on site definition and creating an edge :



The quality of light penetrating through



The idea of the ground activity under a canopy. The canopy defines a space and gives it more significance.



Cells for activity under the canopy of trees :

Figure 56: Activity Space ideas

#### 4.4 Ritual Space Explorations

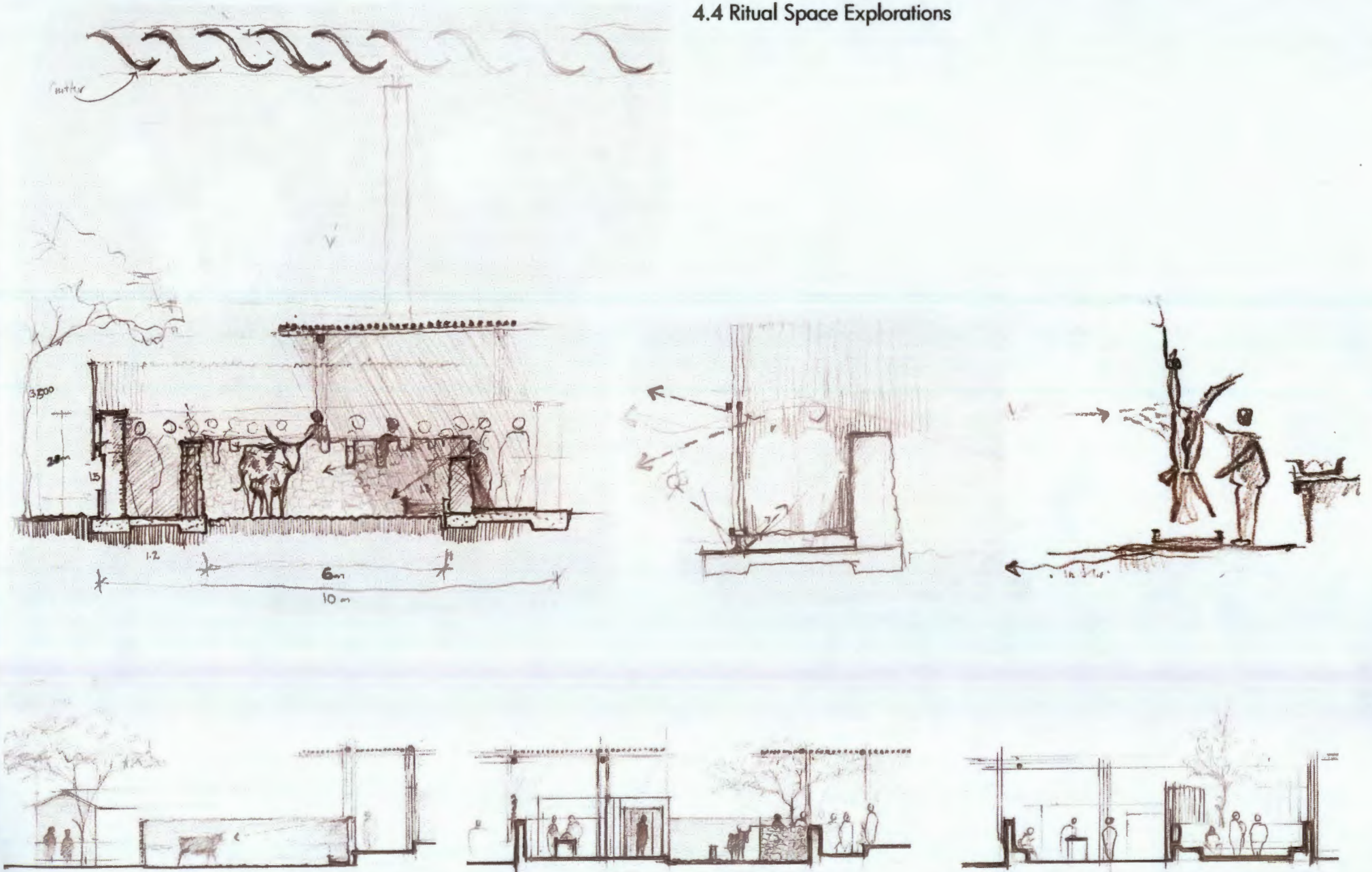


Figure 57: Exploring spatial requirements for a ritual slaughter ceremony and spatial relationships

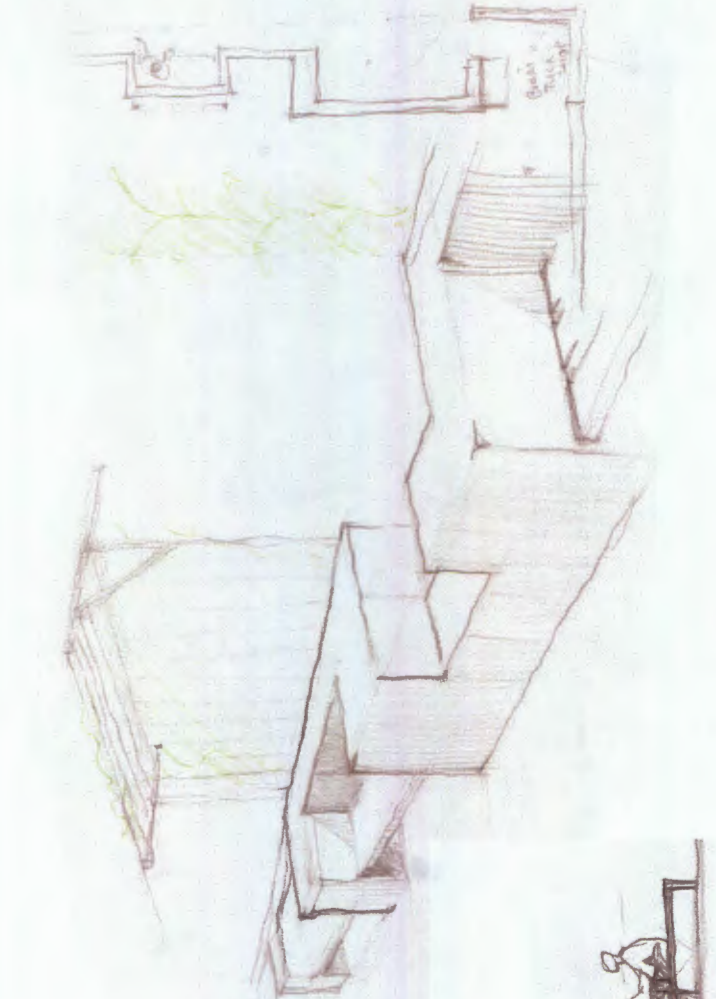
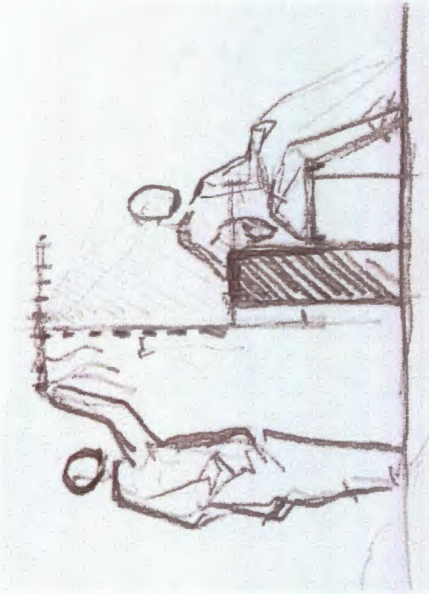
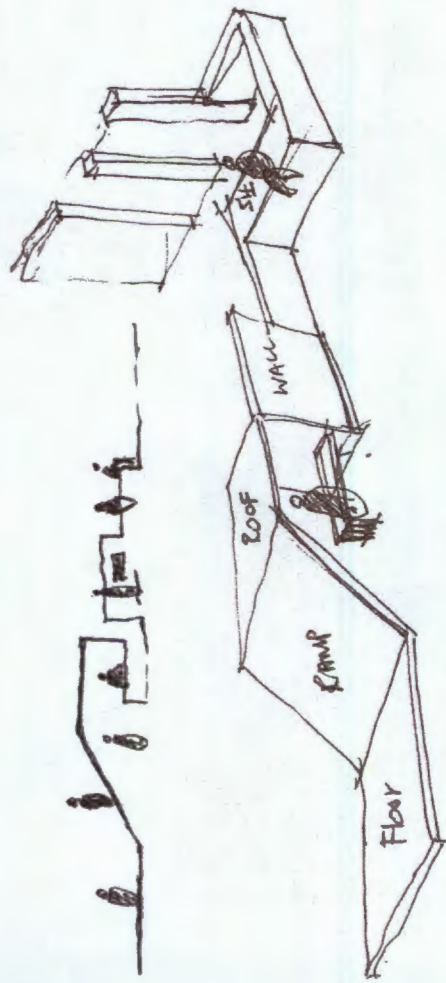


Figure 58: Exploring ideas of a multifunctional wall system

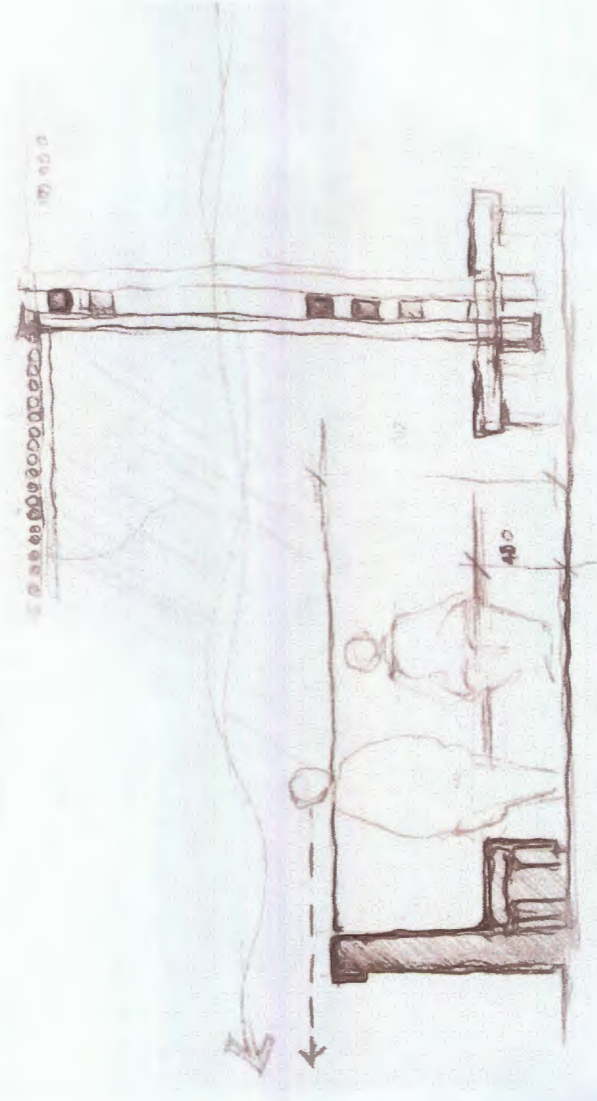
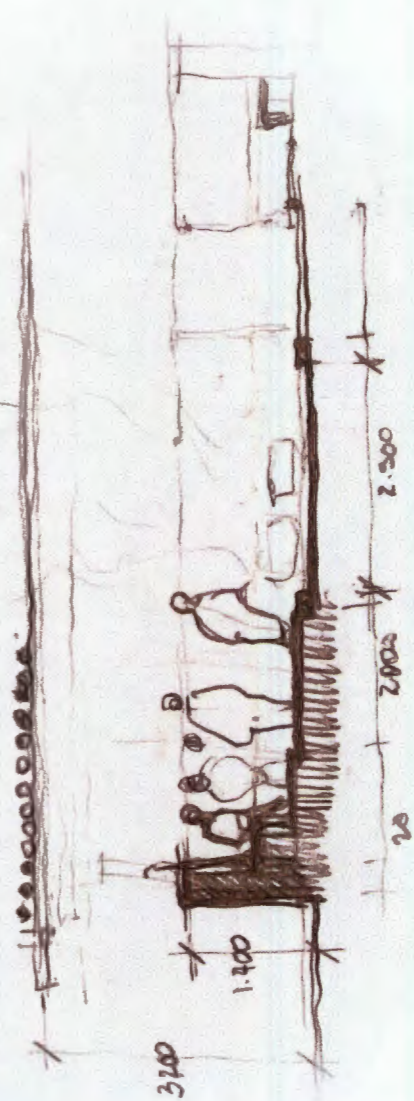


Figure 59: Exploration of outside cooking and food preparation dimensions

## 4.5 Site Definition and layout



Figure 60: Site Definition

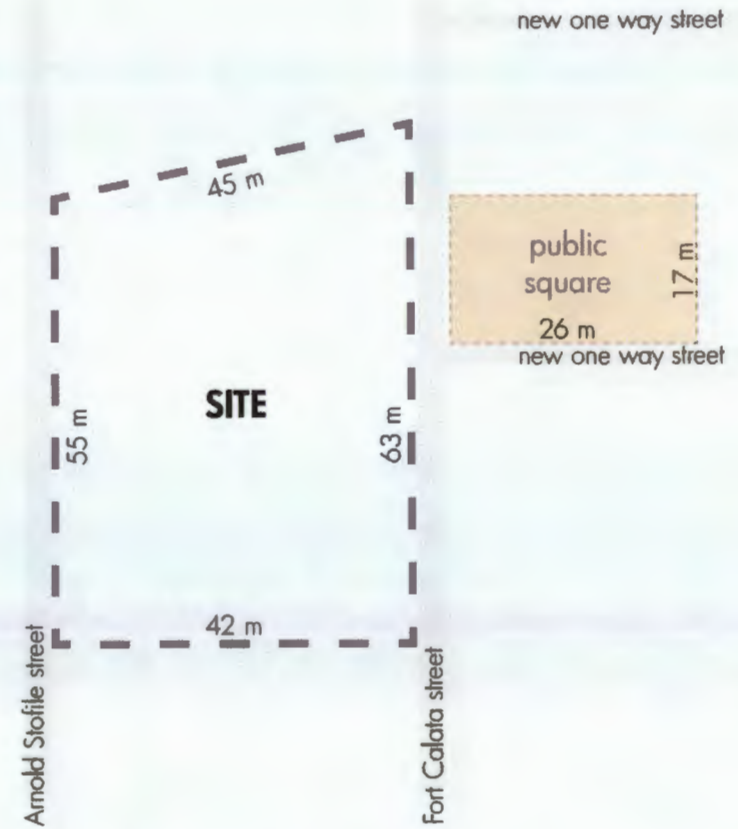


Figure 61: Site limits and dimensions

## 4.5 Site Definition and layout

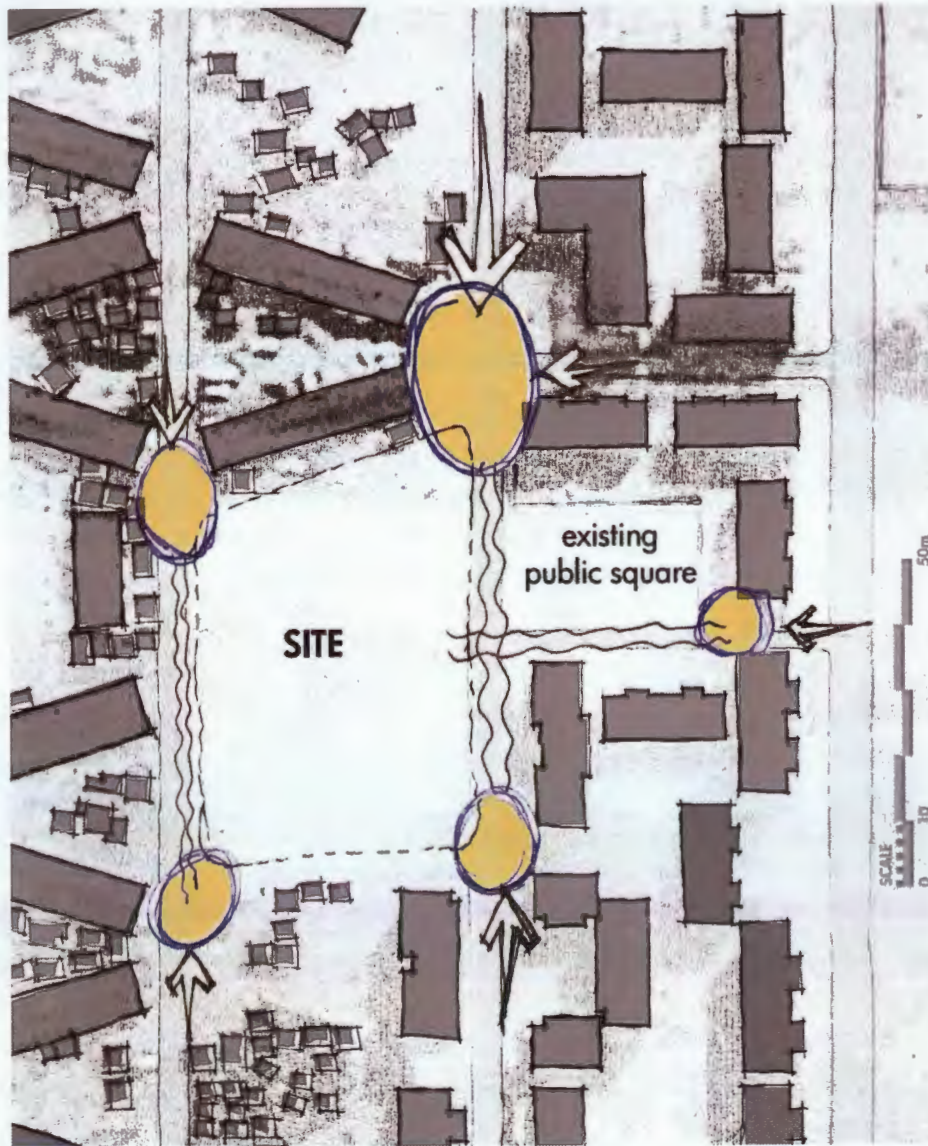


Figure 62: Entry points onto site along movement routes

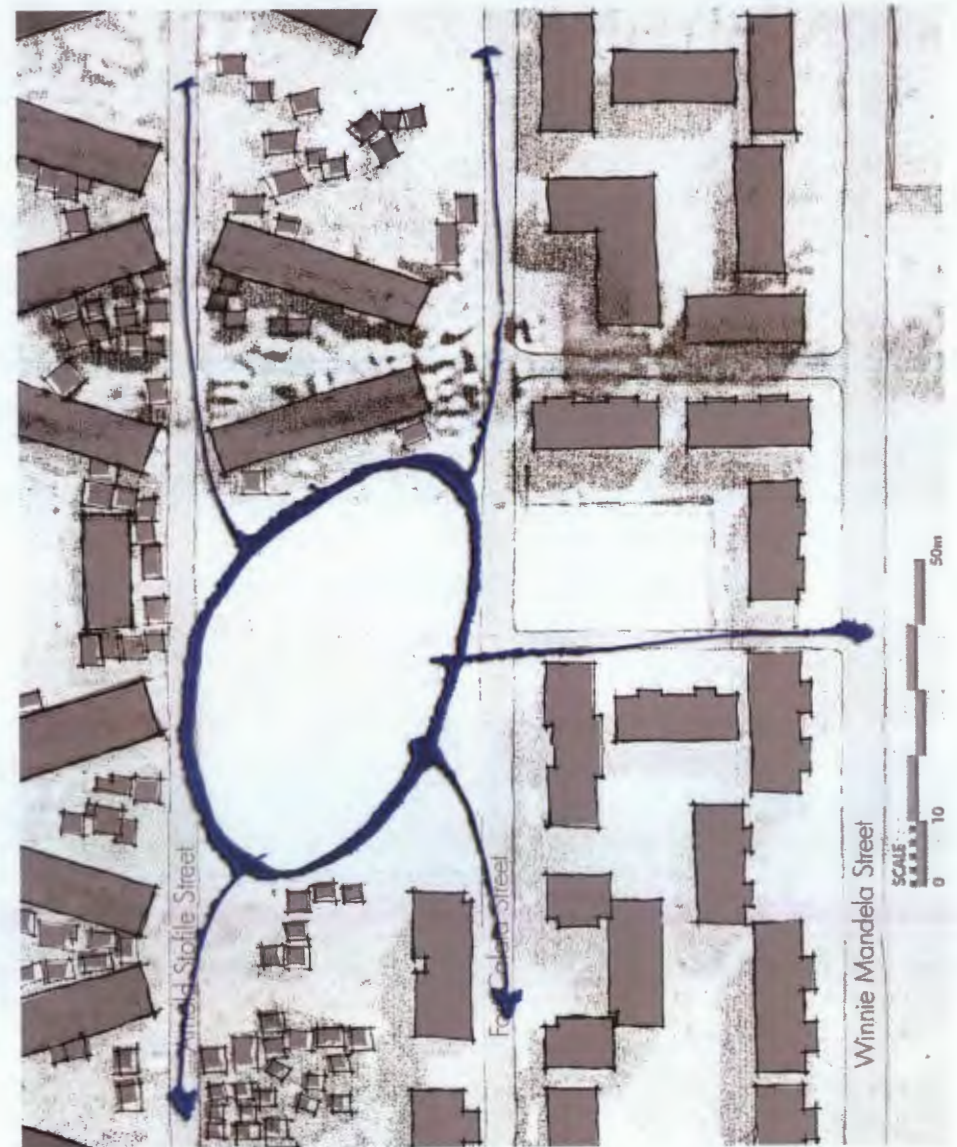


Figure 63: Pedestrian movement away from site

4.6 Concept Development  
4.6.1 Concept 1

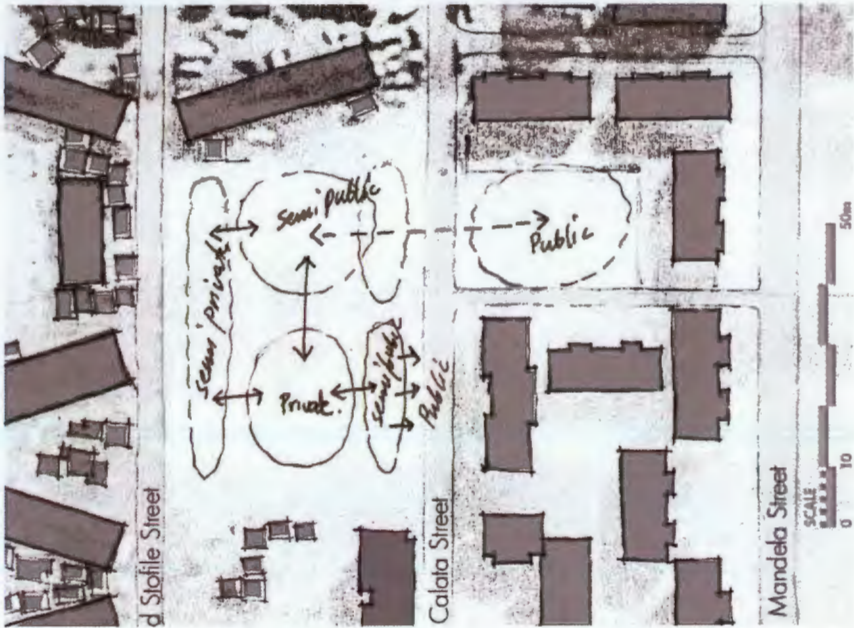


Figure 64: Initial ideas on spatial ordering

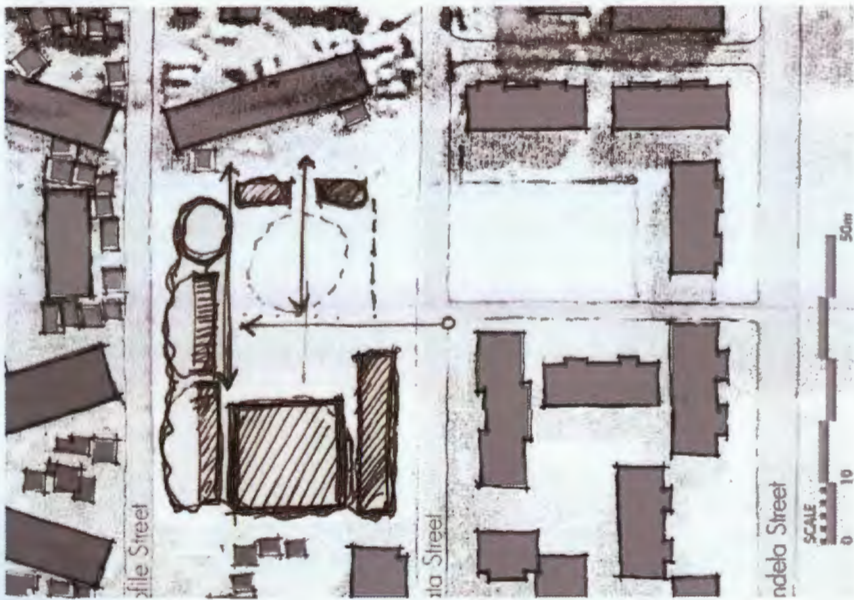


Figure 65: Initial ideas of a courtyard building



Figure 66: Initial exploratory sketches of a possible spatial order

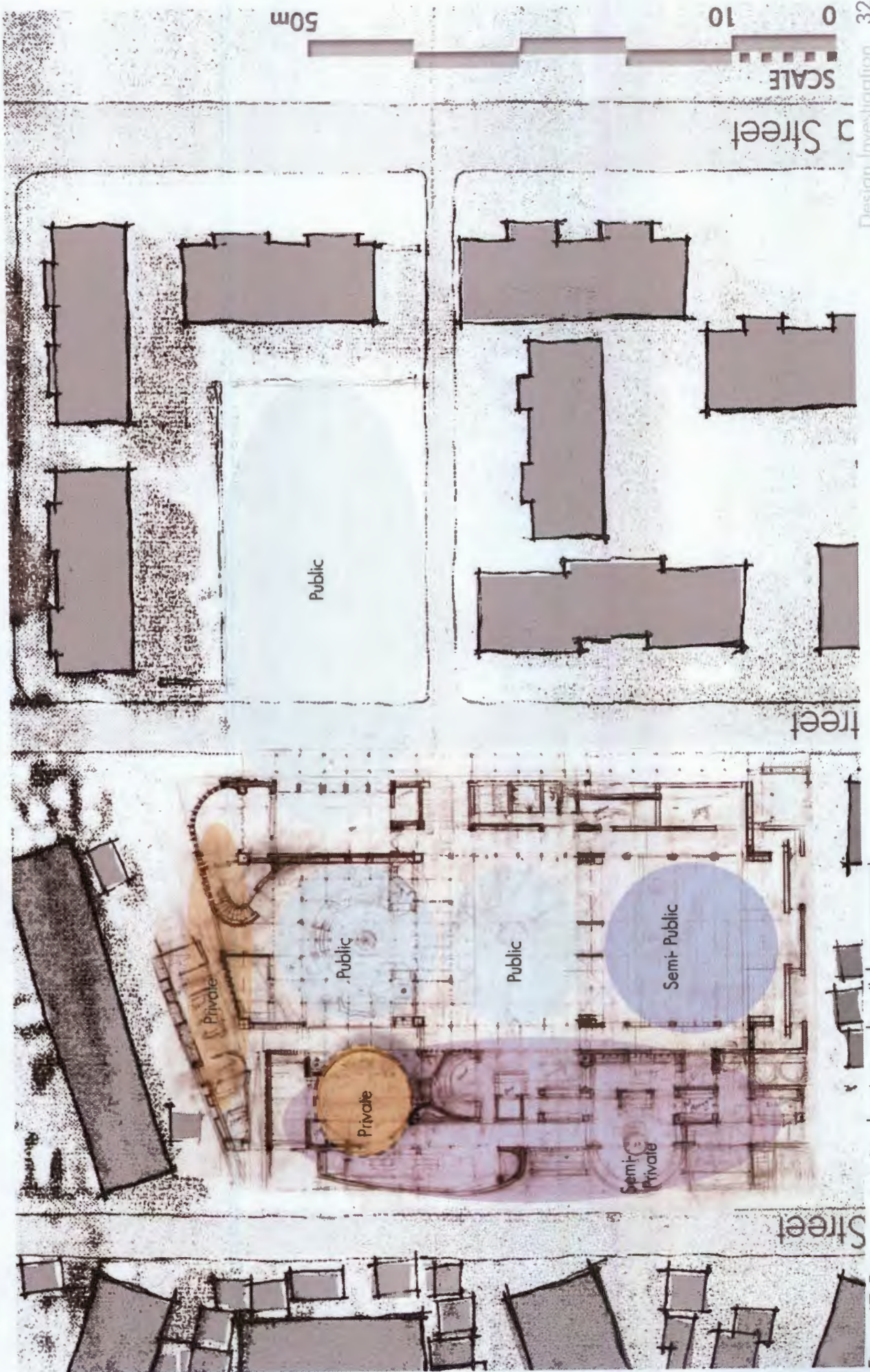


Figure 67: First attempt at site planning and spatial arrangement

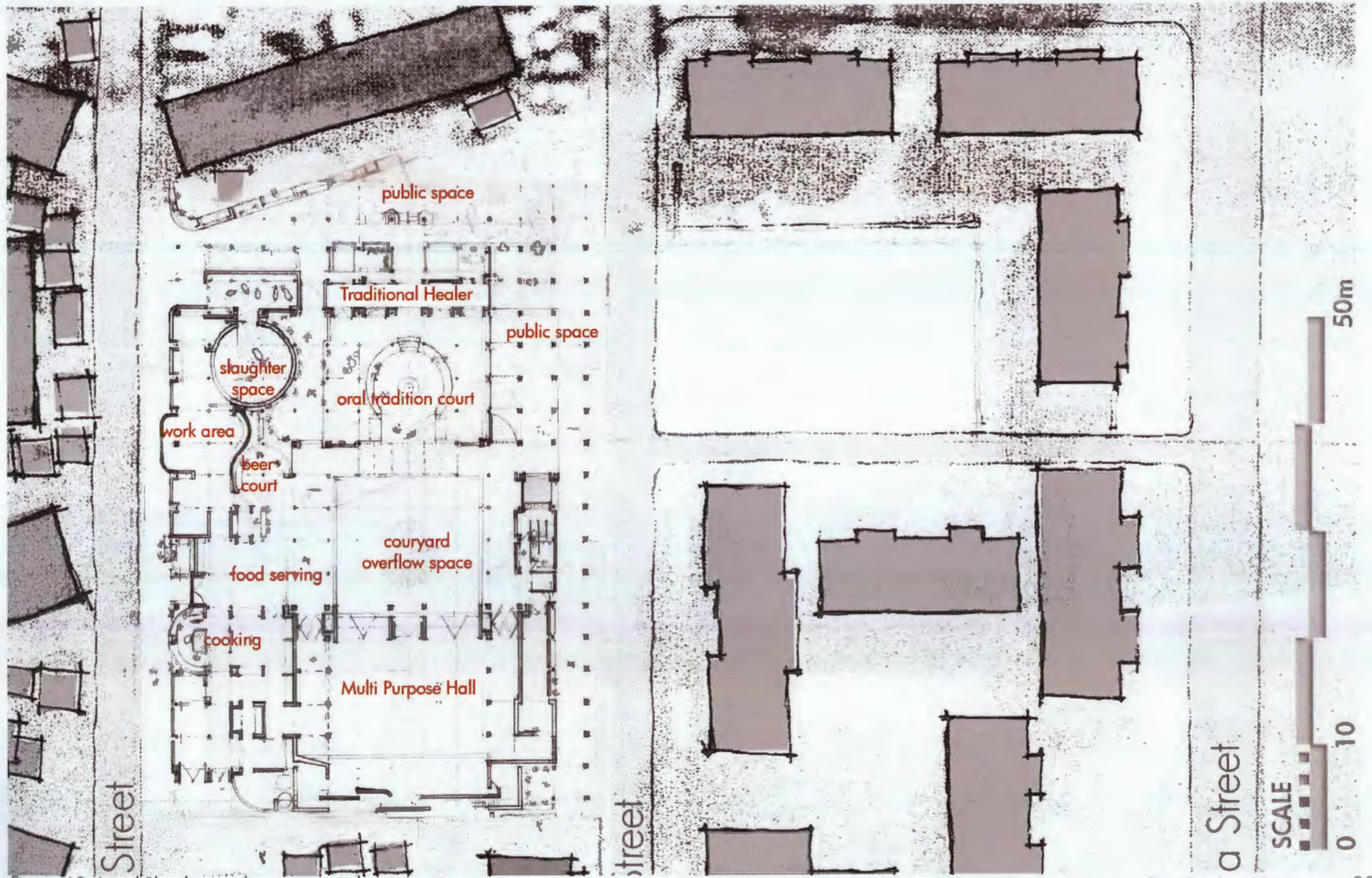


Figure 68: Initial Plan layout showing spatial organisation

#### 4.6.2 Concept 2

The decision to redesign was made because of the following reasons:

1. The design did not adequately address the relationship between the public and private functions. The ritual slaughter area is not positioned well enough to hold more intimate and private ritual ceremonies because it is next to the oral traditions court which is very public. The Traditional healers cells also need to be in a less public area.
2. The existing public square needs to be more defined and given more treatment.
3. The spatial relationship ordering needs to be more fluid and not rigid.

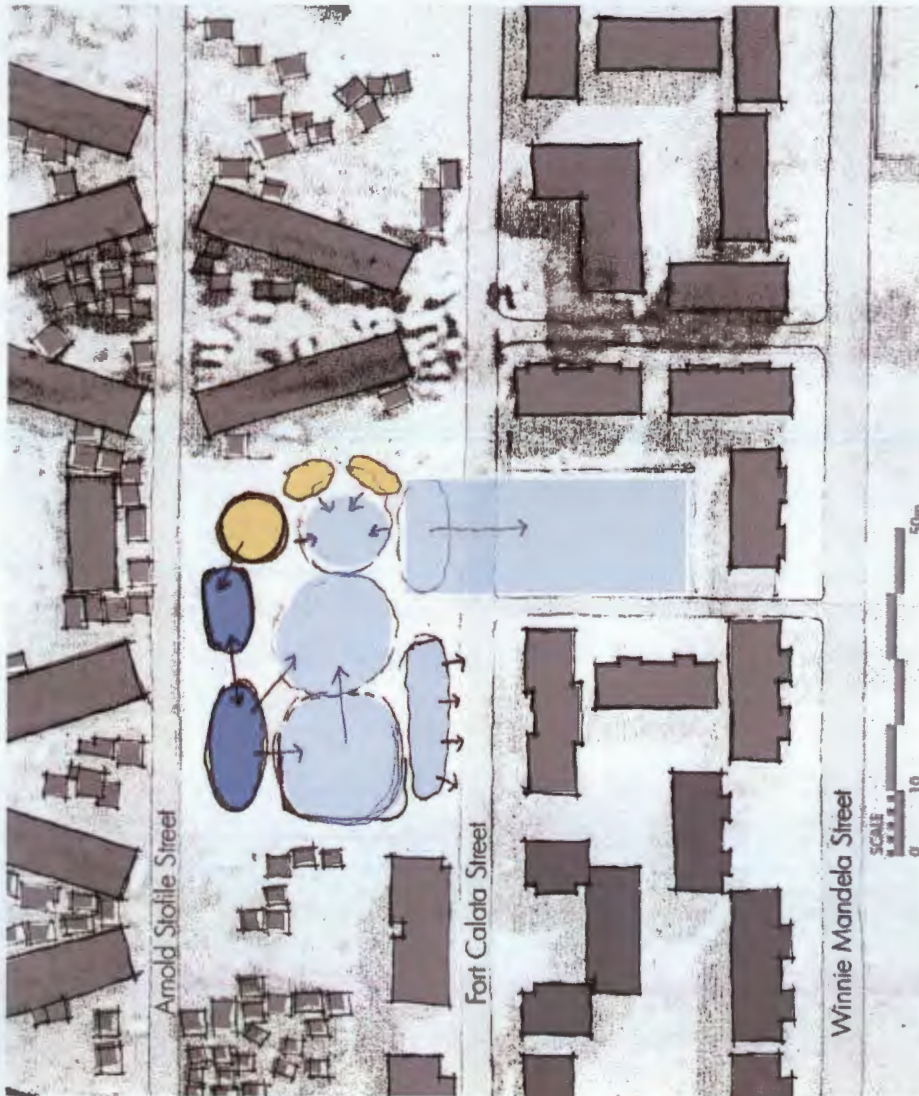


Figure 69: Concept 1 Spatial relationships on site

- Private ritual spaces
- Semi-public and public areas
- Semi-private work spaces

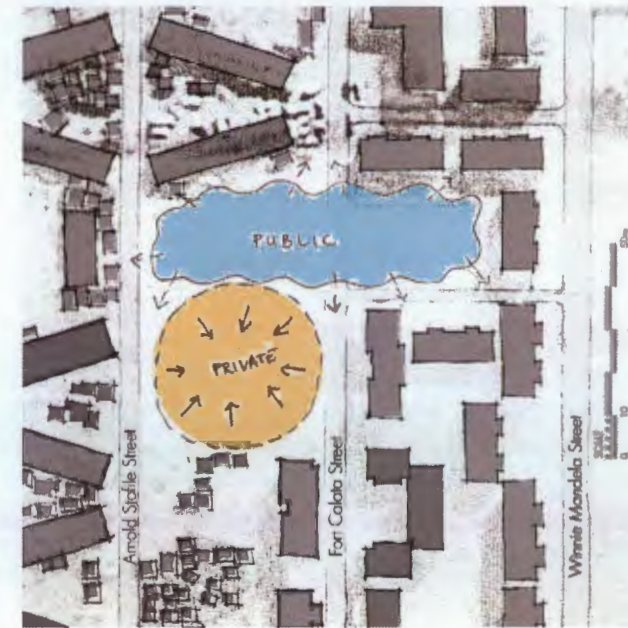


Figure 70: The second spatial concept aims to have a more distinct private and public areas, while giving the ritual ceremony space more prominence.

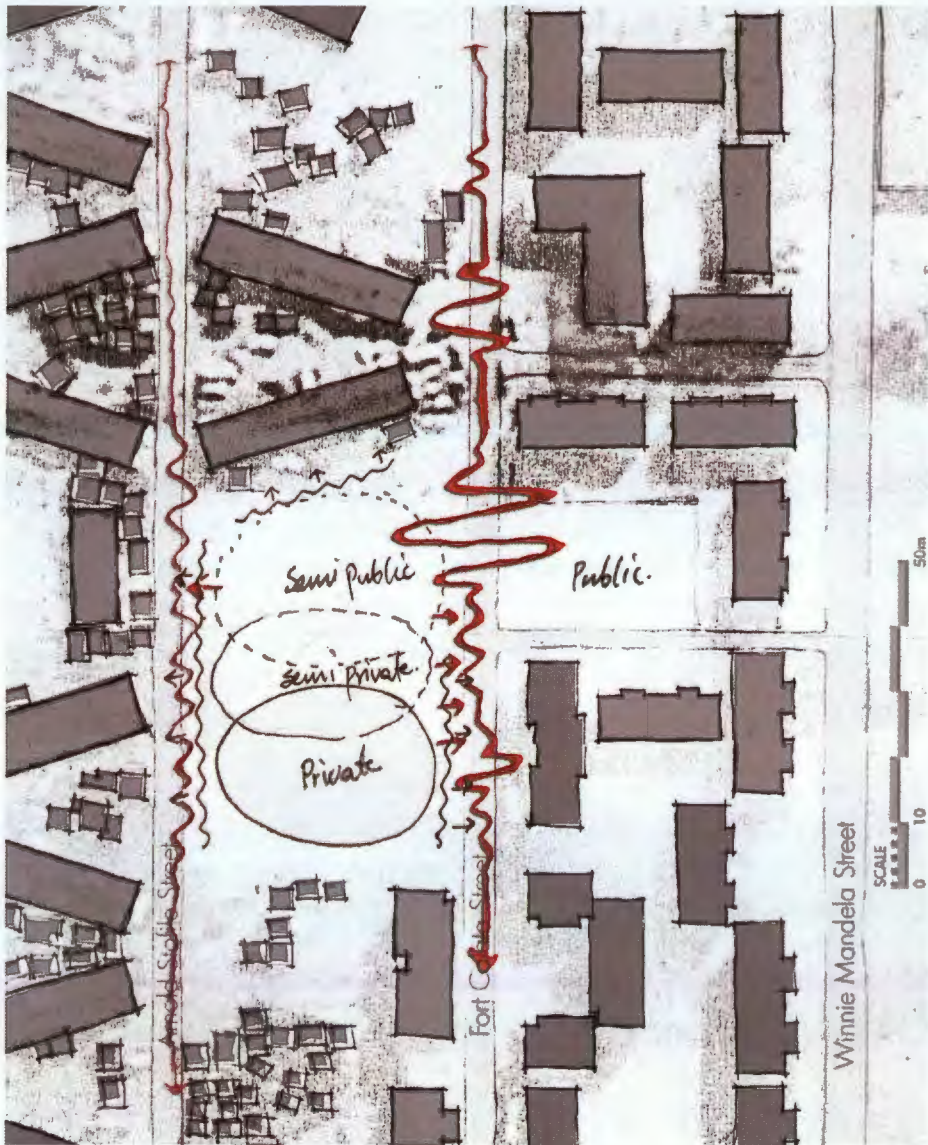


Figure 71: The degree of privacy on site

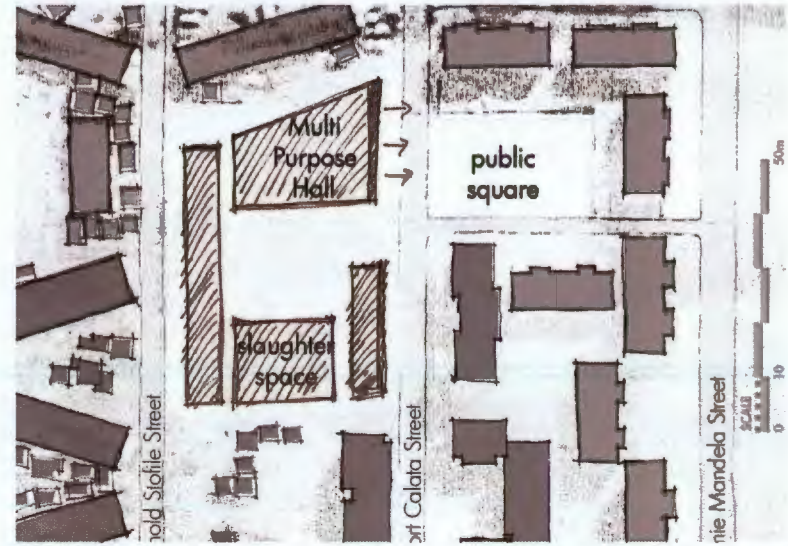


Figure 72 : The Multi-purpose hall is now positioned on the north side of the site so as to give definition to the public square. The ritual slaughter space is now positioned on the south where more privacy can be achieved. The courtyard space positioned centrally acts as a default gathering space that connects to other spaces.



Figure 73: Conceptual relationships of spaces and threshold spaces

## 4.7 Interim Design

### 4.7.1 Concept Model and functional spaces

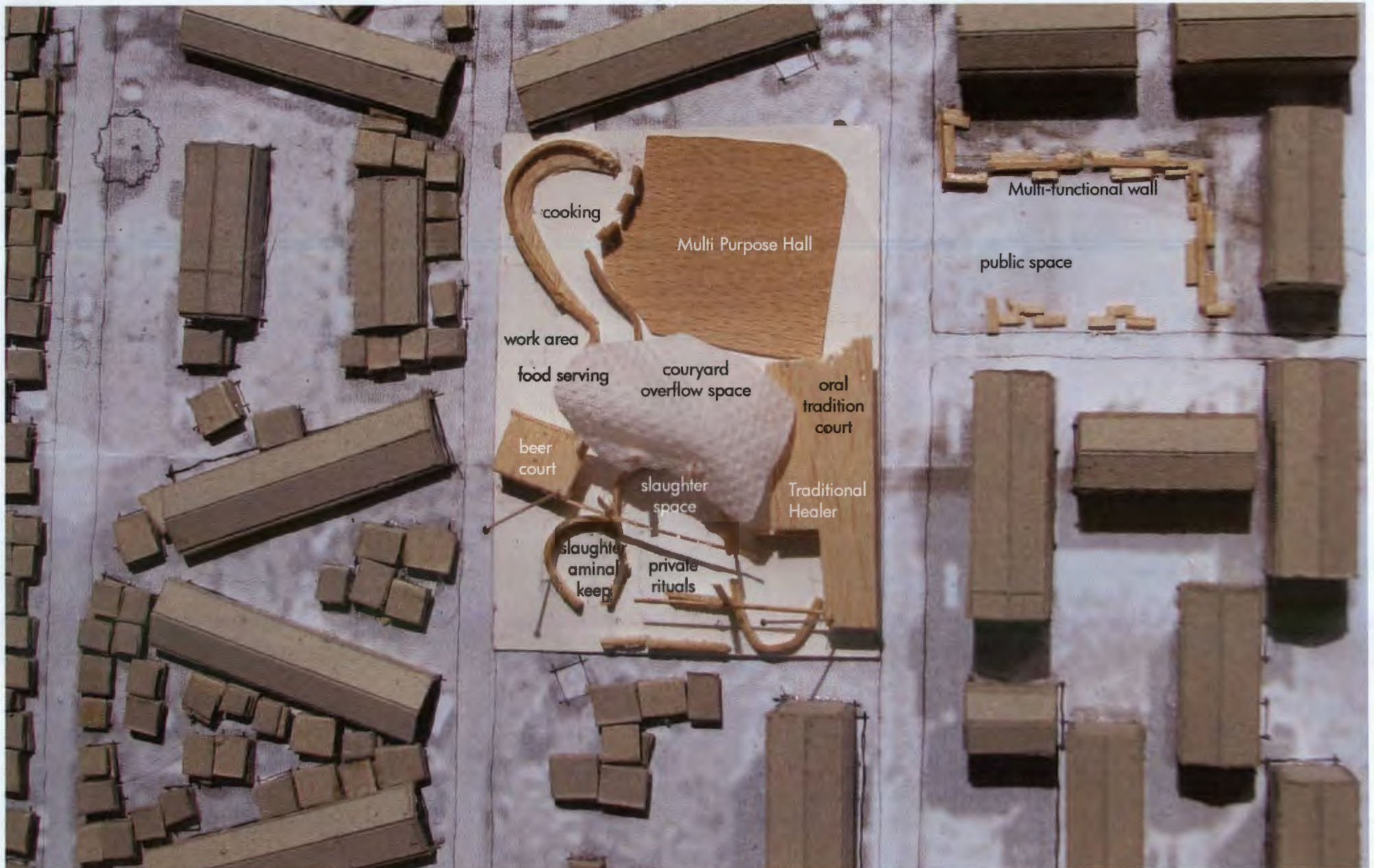


Figure 74: Concept Model showing activity spaces

Concept Model 1  
light structure canopy



Figure 75: view from north



Figure 77: view from north west



Figure 76: Concept model with light structured roof canopy



Figure 78: view from the west



Figure 79: Irregular roof canopy looking into the public square

## Concept Model 2 Irregular roof canopy



Figure 81: South West view



Figure 82: North west view



Figure 80: west view

#### 4.7.2 Site Plan

Functional spaces

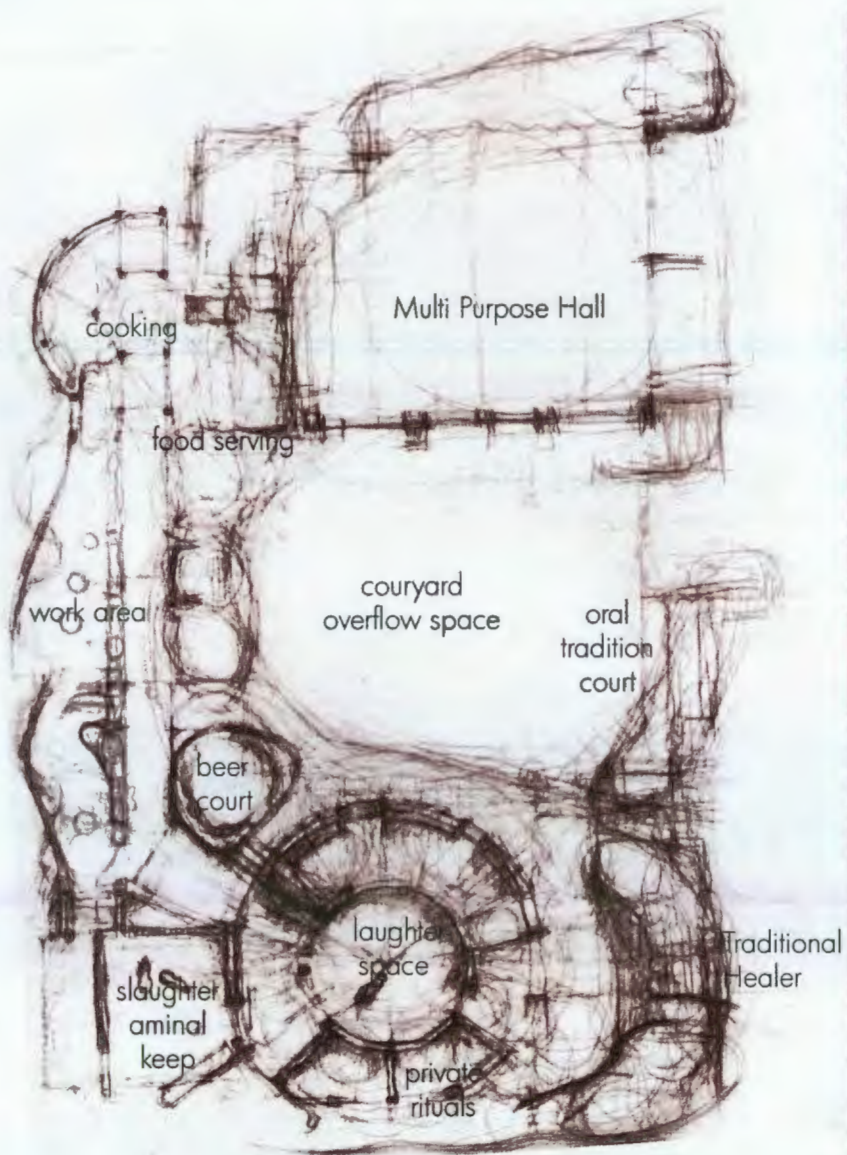


Figure 83: Concept Sketch showing activity spaces

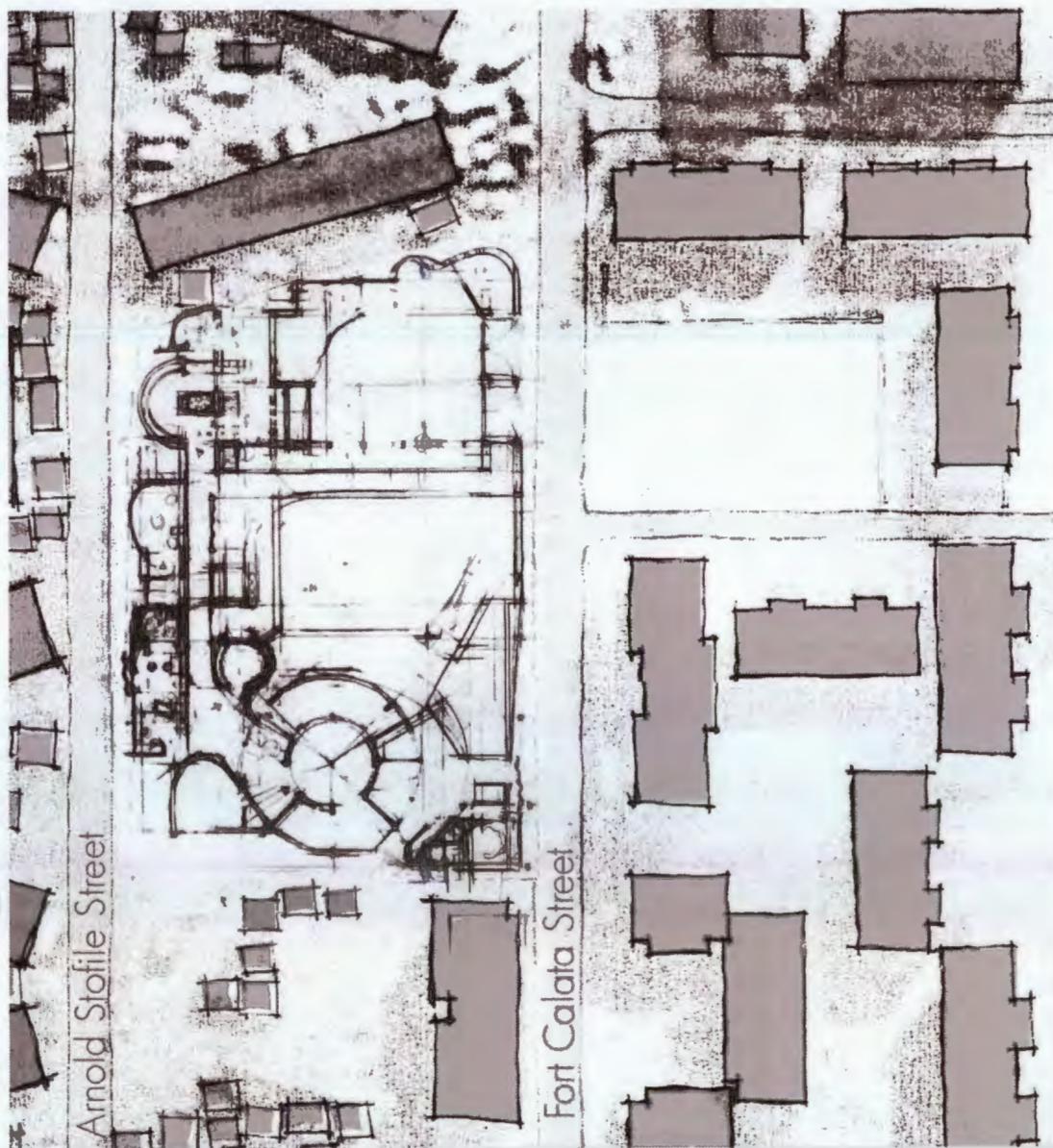


Figure 84: Site Plan

#### 4.7.3 Internal Views of Activity areas

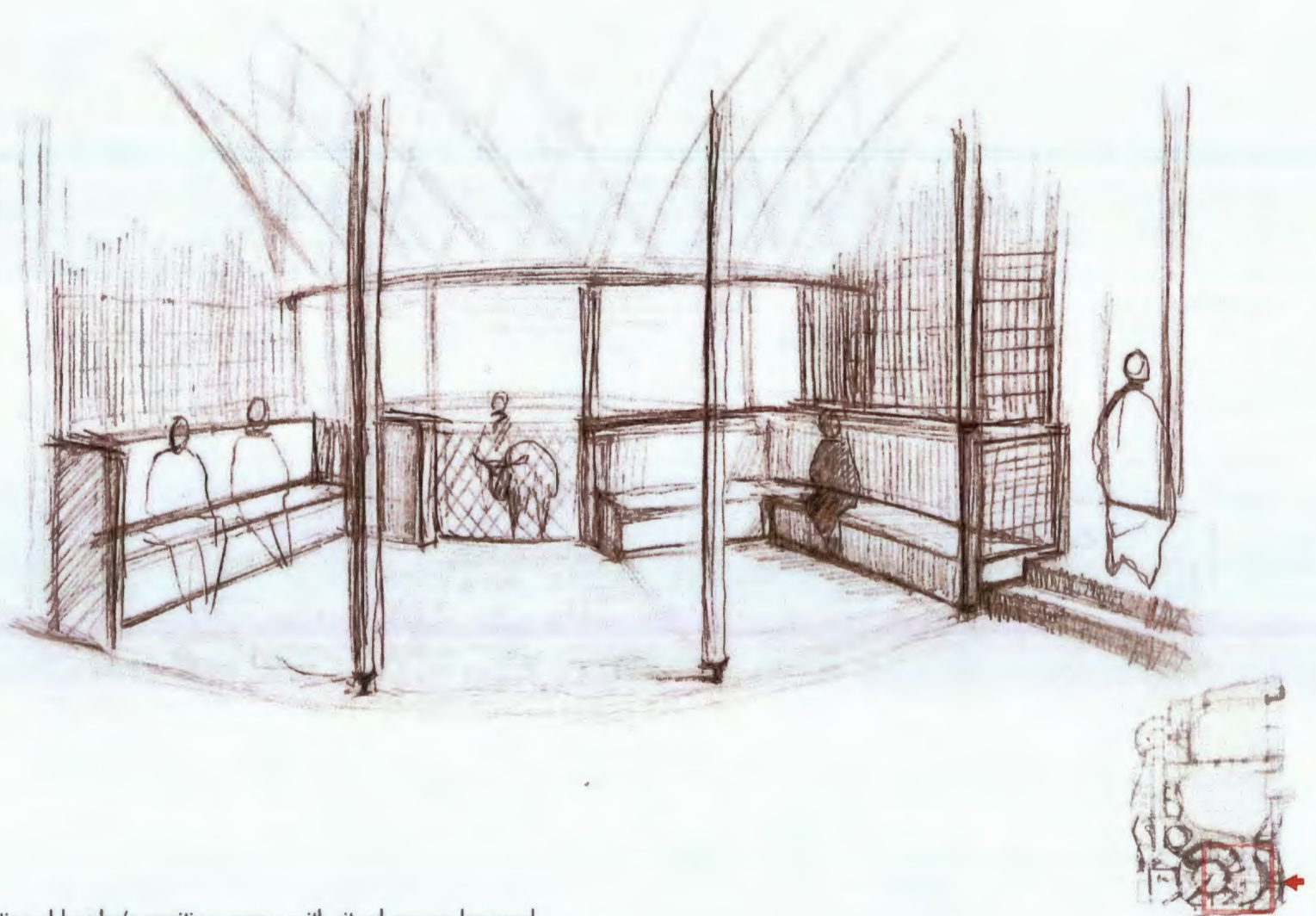


Figure 85: Internal Perspective of traditional healer's waiting area, with ritual space beyond

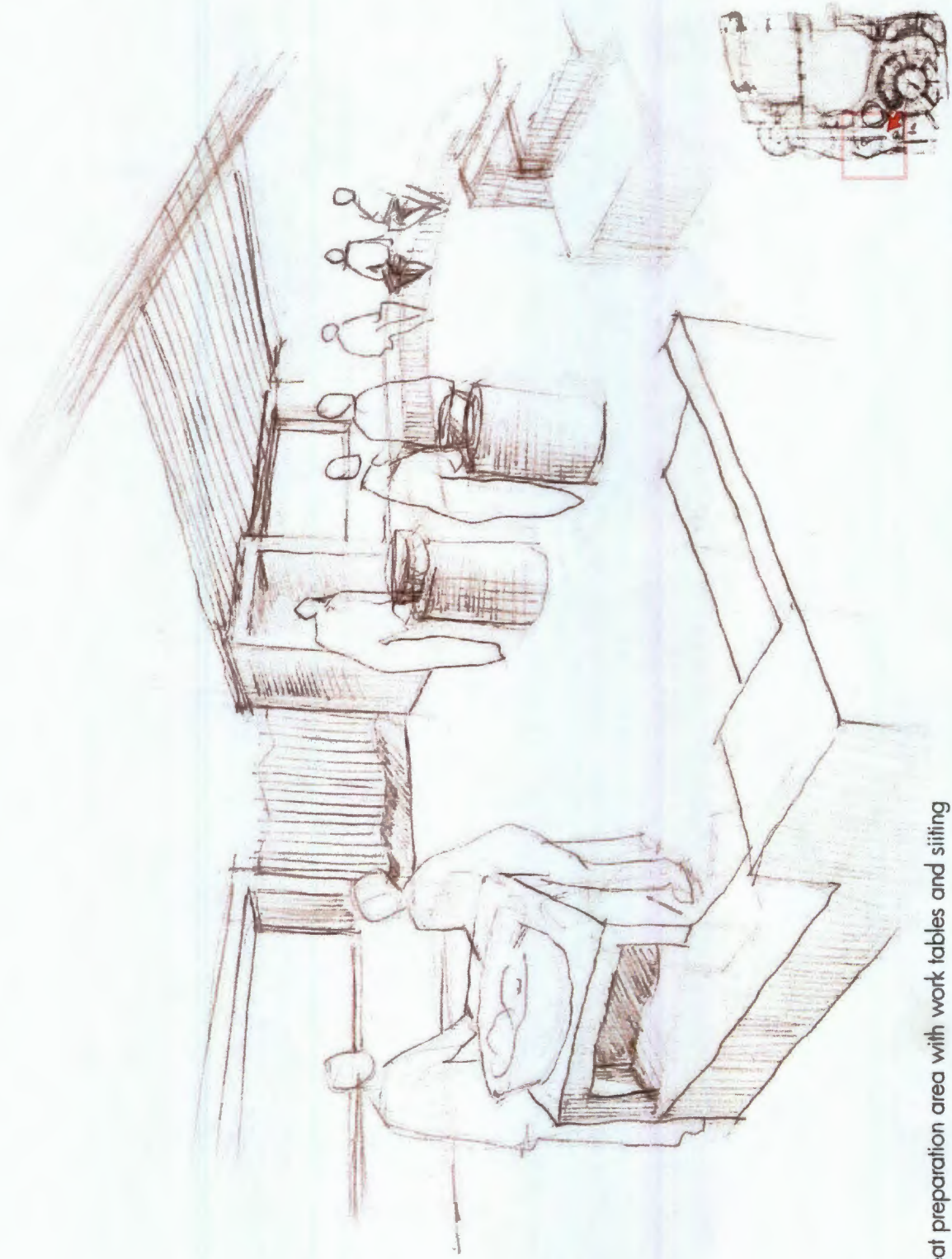


Figure 86: Internal Perspective of meat preparation area with work tables and sitting

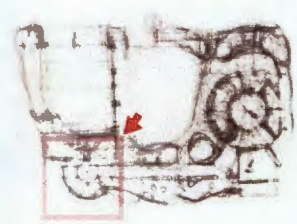
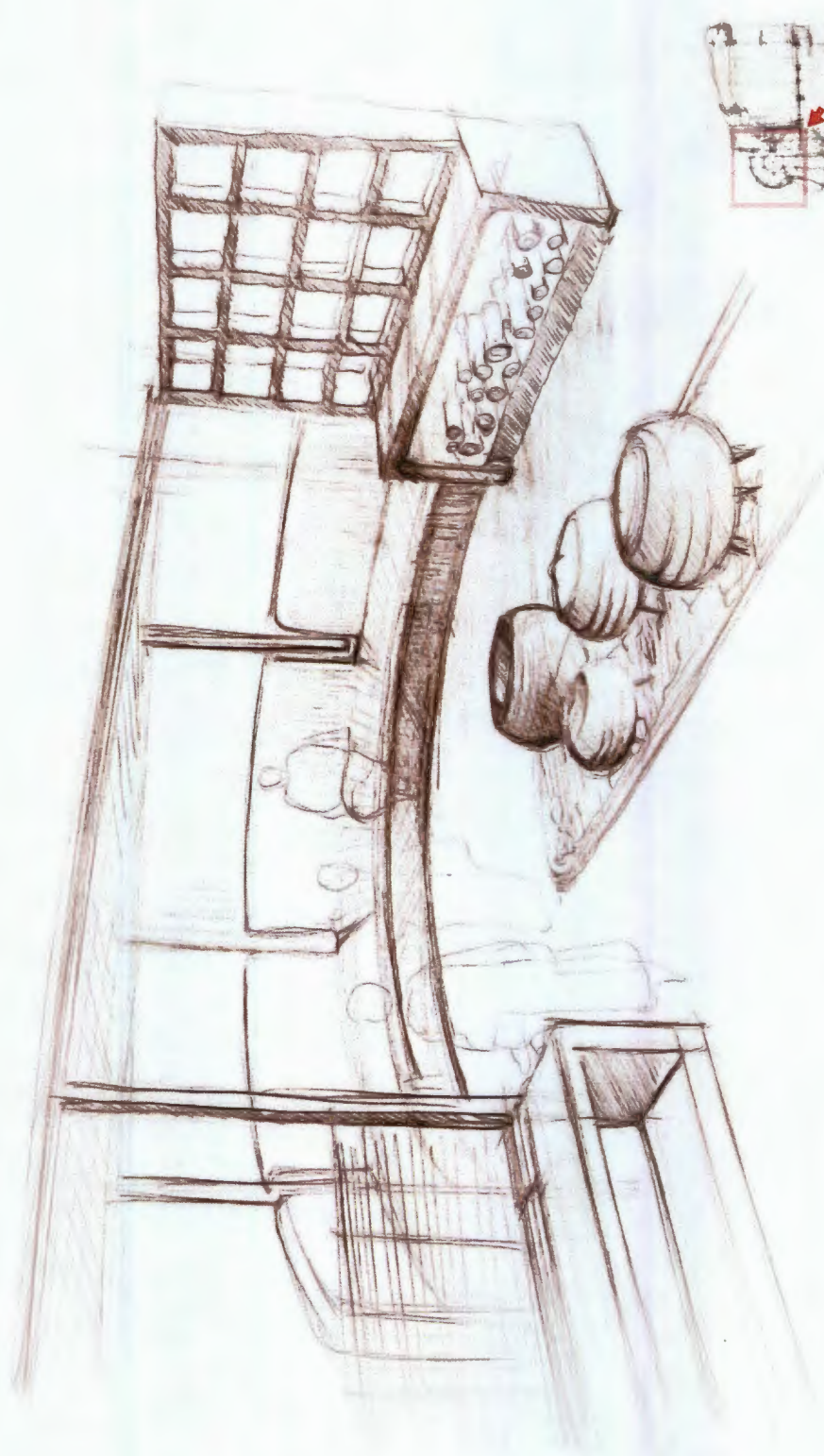


Figure 87: Perspective of out door cooking area with work tables and sitting

#### 4.7.4 Street Views

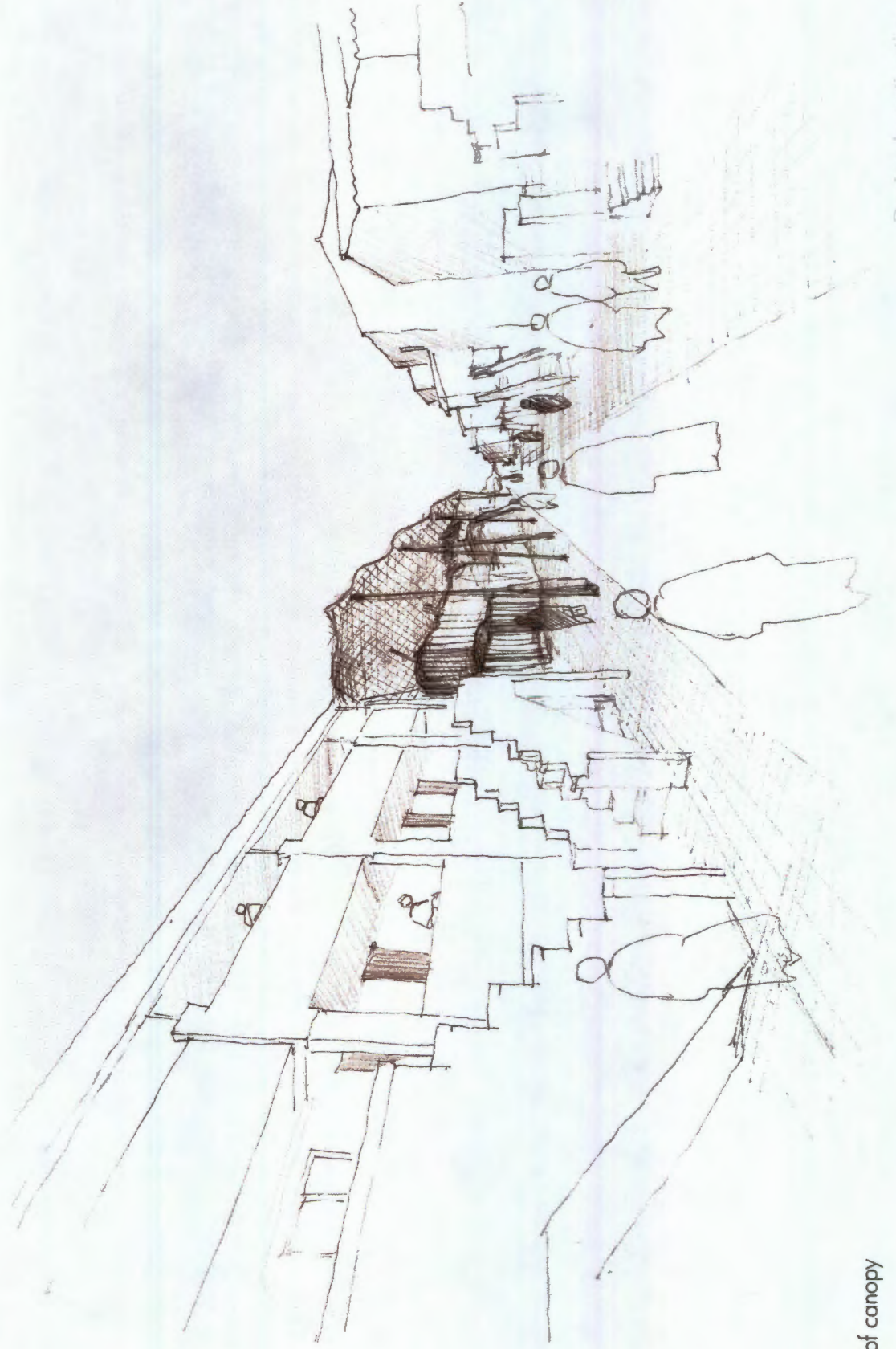


Figure 88: Irregular roof canopy

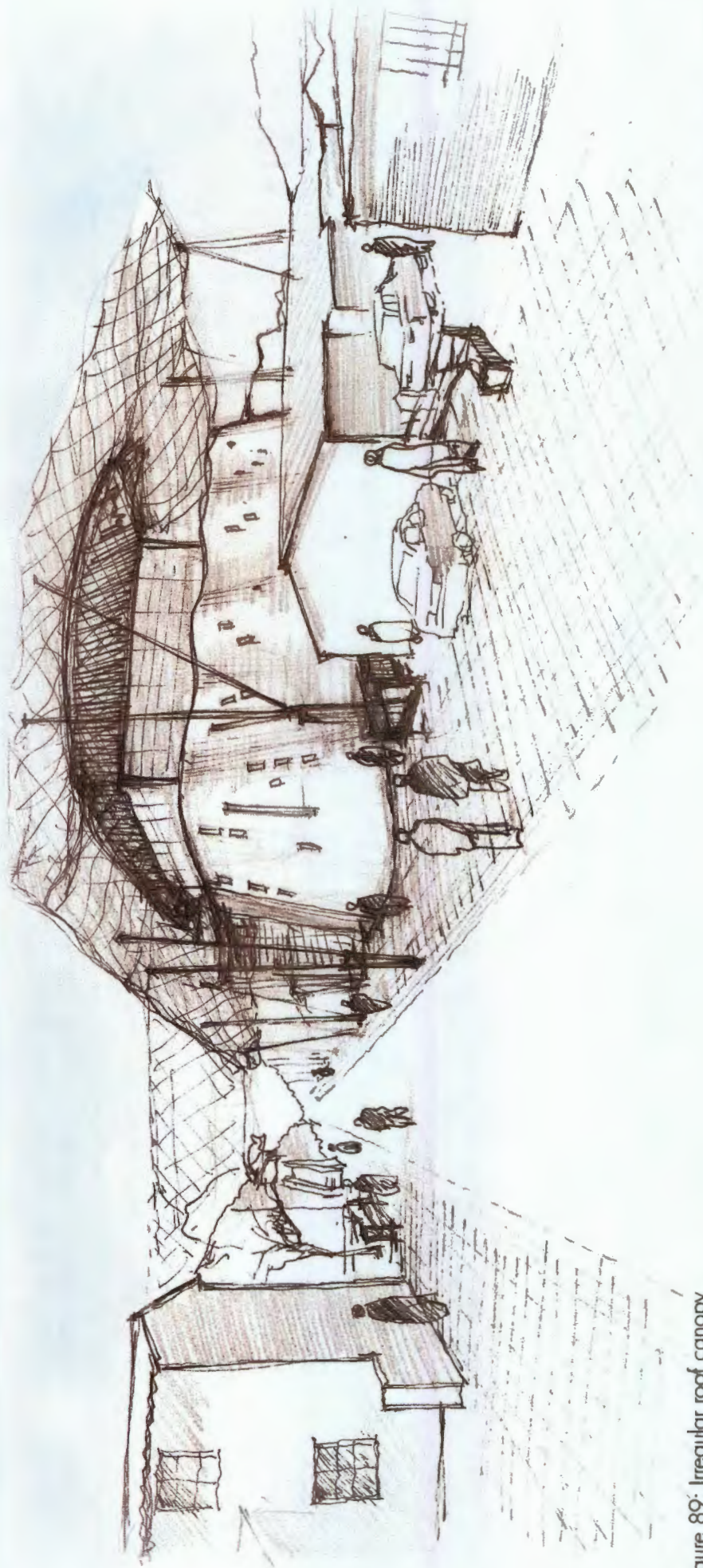


Figure 89: Irregular roof canopy

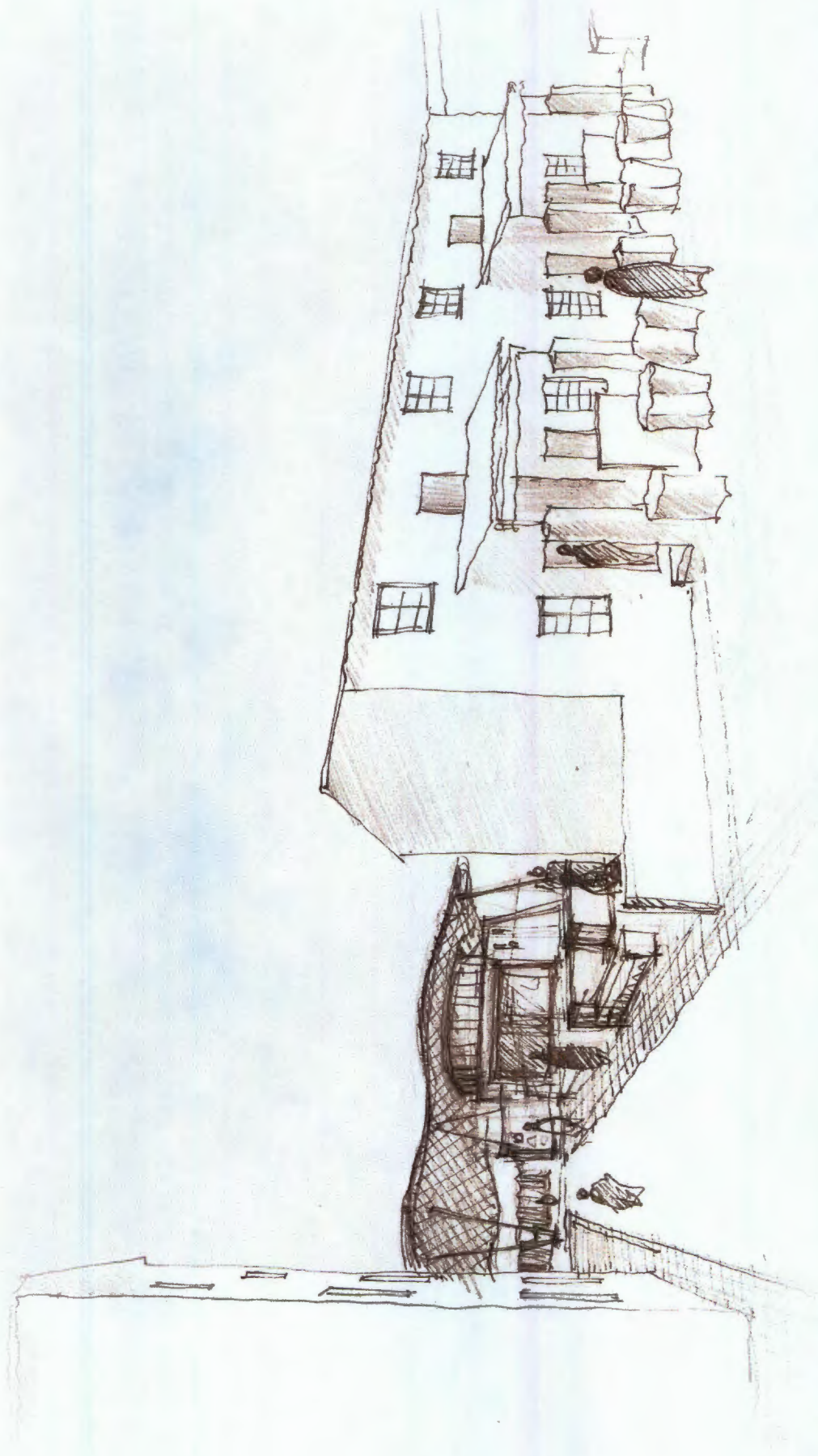
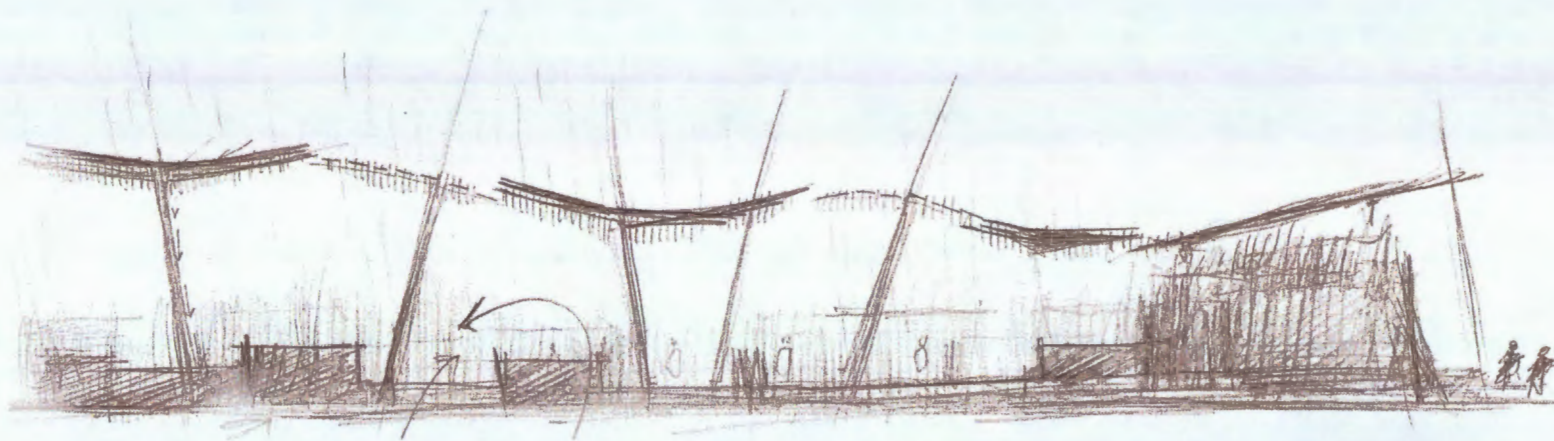


Figure 90: Irregular roof canopy

# 5

## Technical Investigation

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## 5.1 Principles of Making

The technical approach to the design is to resolve the complex roof construction by using traditional ideas of making. Looking into African ways of construction and using modern technology to realise the construction of the animated roof canopy.

The main principle to follow is to have a roof canopy that reflects the nature of the spatial activities that would take place beneath.

The use of a suitable material to achieve the goal of involving community participation in the making of such a structure.



Figure 91: Traditional Hut construction



Figure 92

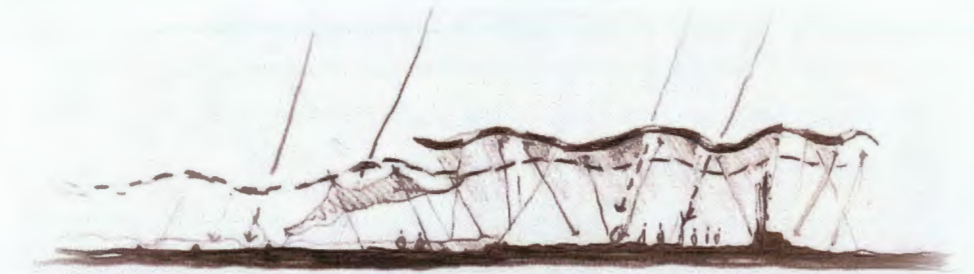


Figure 94

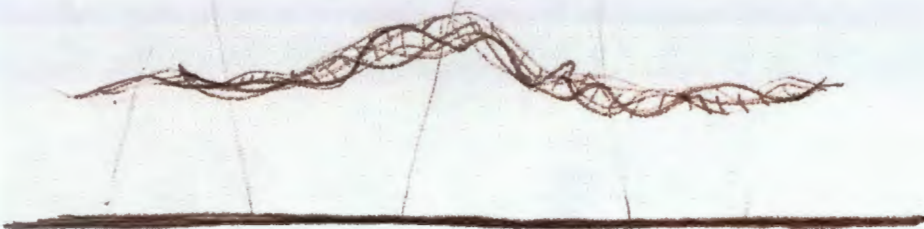


Figure 93

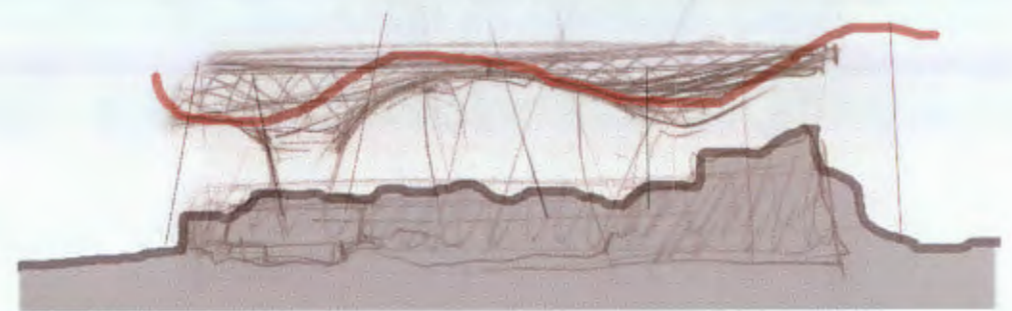


Figure 95



Figure 96

## 5.2 Materiality

Firstly the roof canopy needs to create a natural sense of being under trees. The material choice for the structure is simply timber. This an obvious choice because of the aesthetic qualities it provides, the lightness of the material, the ease of working with timber in making and construction.

For the exercise of designing a timber gridshell structure, the ancient craft of basketry weaving is studied. The structural integrity of the hand woven reed baskets is evidence that the use of a light weight material in the construction of the proposed roof structure can be achieved.

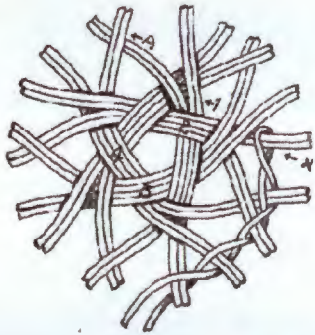


Figure 97



Figure 98



Figure 99

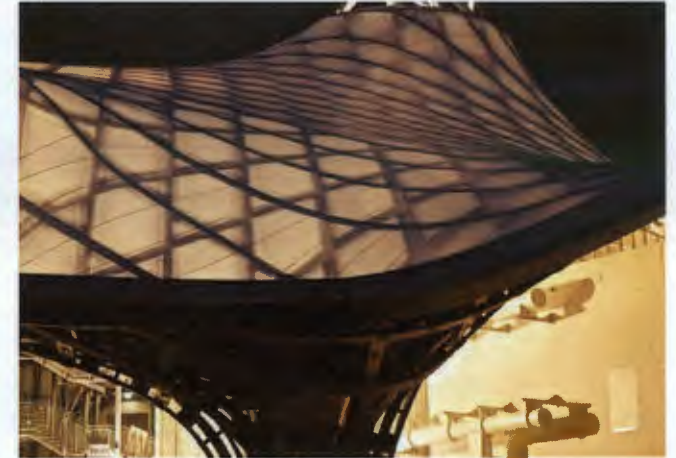


Figure 100

### 5.3 Structural Layout

The roof canopy simply supported by tilted columns along structural zones. The zones are laid out in a grid to allow for a large central shell with smaller domes on the sides.

The columns can be positioned at different points along the structural zones, making sure that the required support is maintained while achieving an informal layout of the columns.

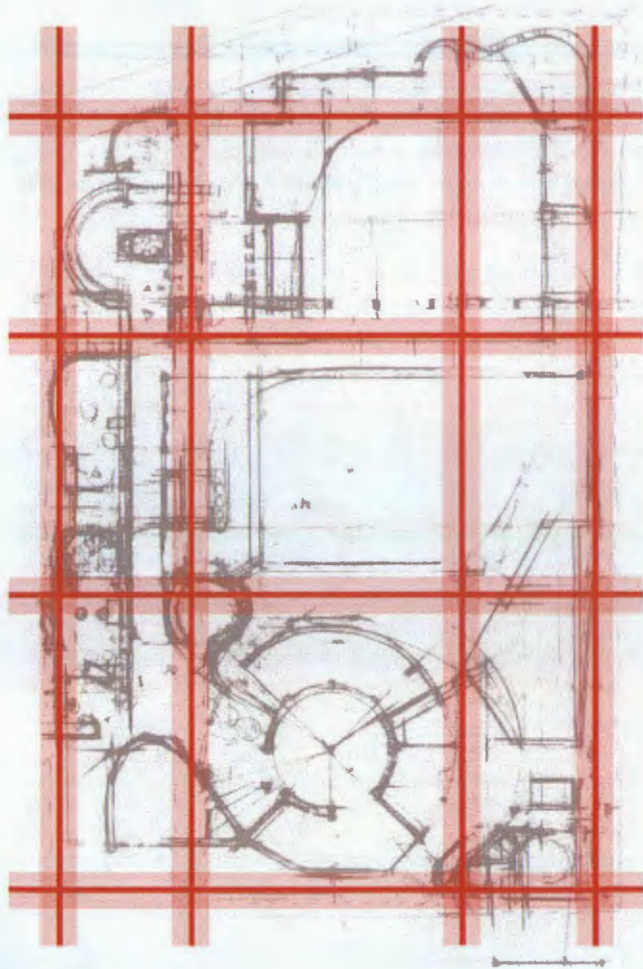
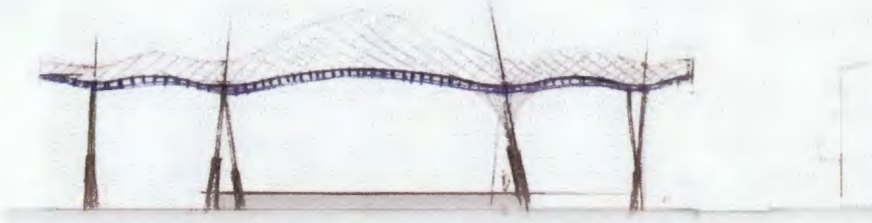


Figure 101

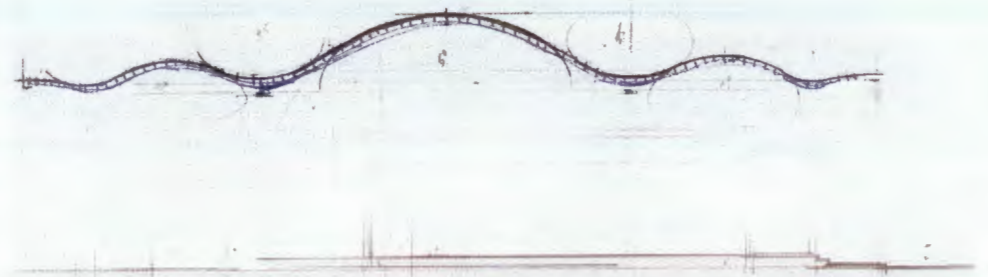


Figure 102

## 5.4 Roof Canopy Construction

### Roof Cover

The canopy is essentially a timber construction with layers of coverings at different areas along the roof.

The courtyard space is covered with a opaque membrane that allows sufficient light to illuminate the area while keeping the rain out.

The multi purpose hall needs to be covered with sheet iron properly shaped to the geometry of the roof structure.

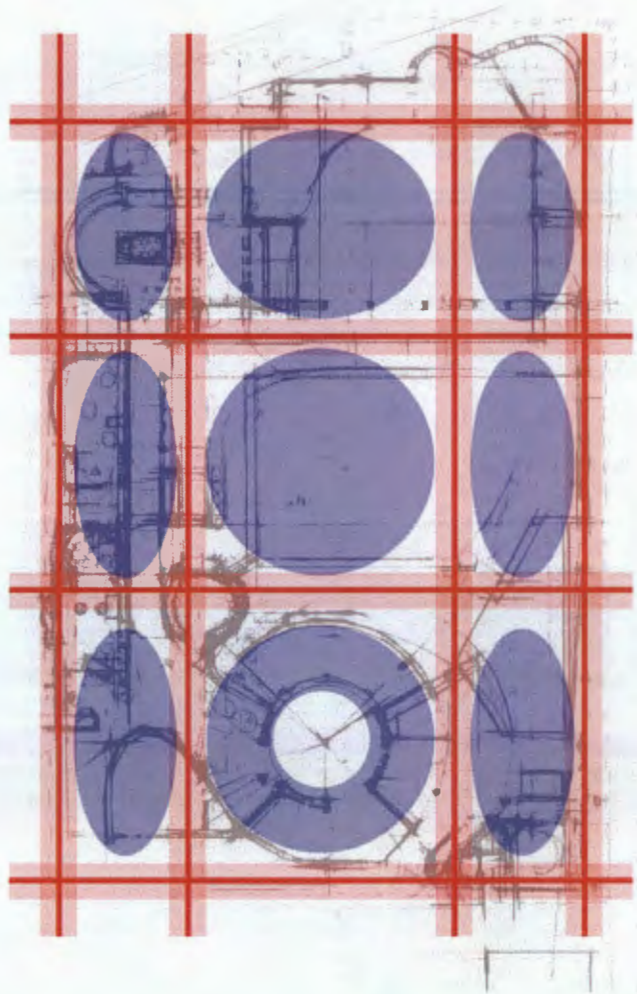


Figure 103

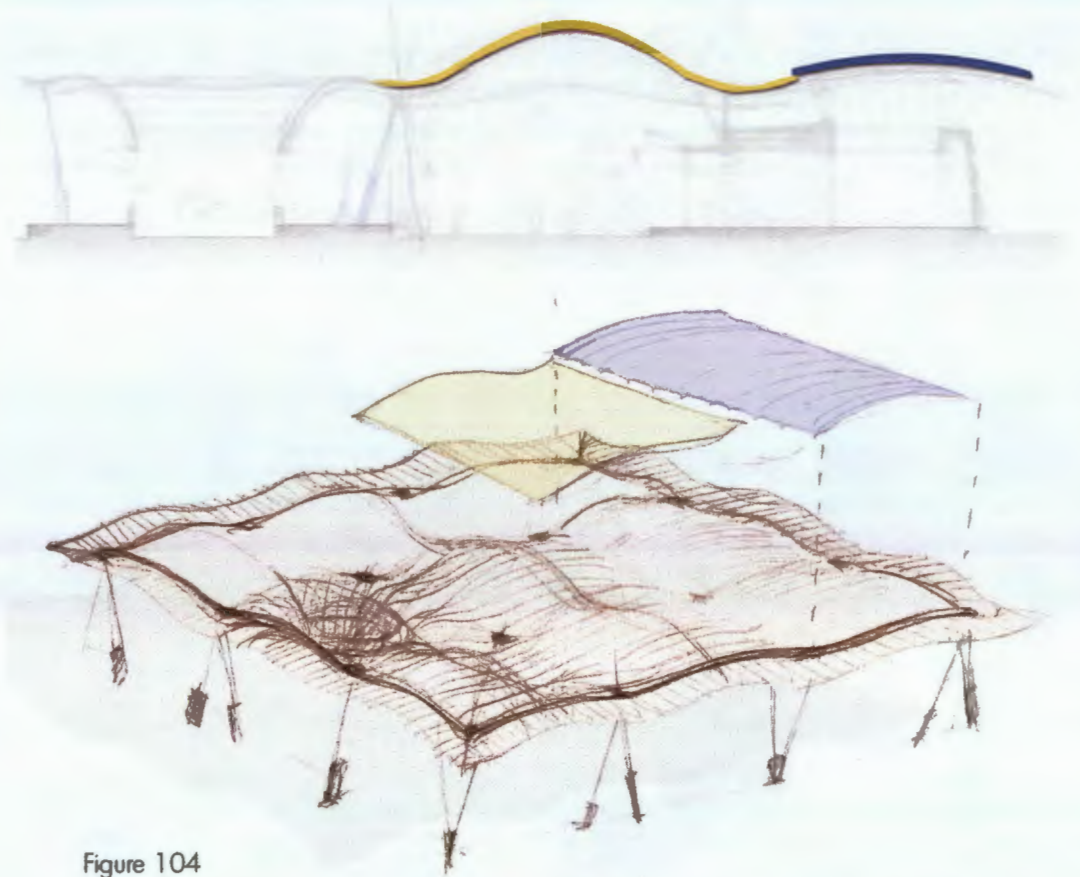


Figure 104



Figure 105

### Timber structure

The gridshell structure used is designed to allow for the system to bend in more than one direction. This is achieved by using a flexible joint structure that is braced by steel cables. The cables are used to achieve rigidity and alteration of the shape of the structure.

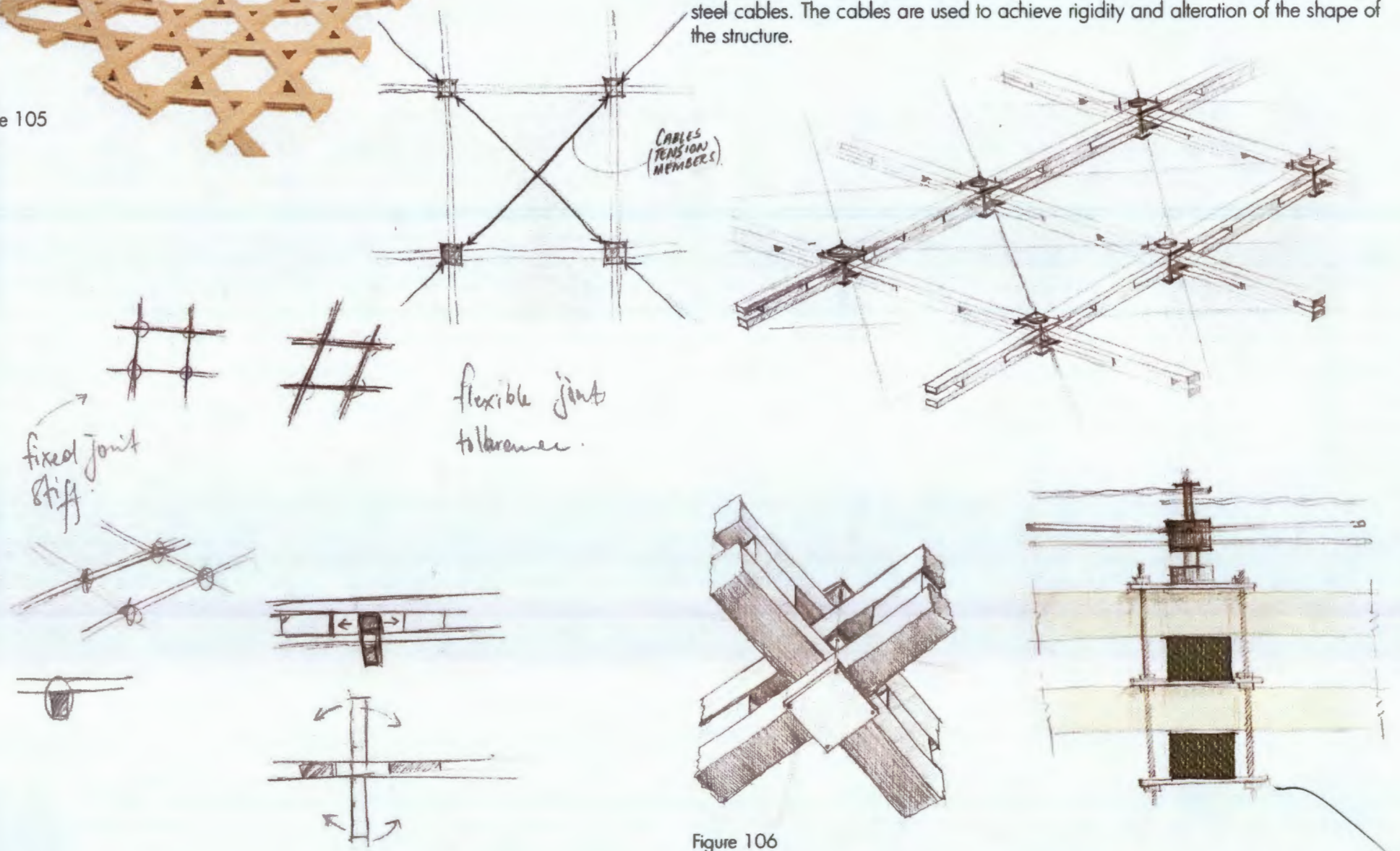


Figure 106