THE ACT OF REFUGE

Facilitating spatial practices of mobile urban dwellers in the inner city of Pretoria

DECLARATION

In accordance with Regulation 4(c) of the General Regulations (G.57) for dissertations and theses, I declare that this dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree Master of Architecture (Professional) at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

I further state that no part of my dissertation has already been, or is currently being, submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification.

I further declare that this dissertation is substantially my own work. Where reference is made to the works of others, the extent to which that work has been used is indicated and fully acknowledged in the text and list of references.

Wian Jordaan
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Submitted in fulfillment of part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture (Professional), Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment, and Information Technology (EBIT).

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THANK YOU

TO COENET,
for your unwaivering love, endless patience and always believing in me
- for being my place of refuge -

TO MY PARENTS,
for your support and encouragement

TO HANO AND CAMERON,
for a friendship built by maquettes

TO ARTHUR AND SILINDZILE,
for inspiring me

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PROGRAMME	Cooked food market Communal kitchens Tertiary education facilities Library and study centre
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SITE LOCATION	Madiba Street Queen Street Lil1an Ngoyi Street Church Street
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ABSTRACT

In the inner city of Pretoria, the mobile urban dweller is confined to the sidewalk - a space of transition that promotes anonymity, indifference and transience. The mobile urban dweller has a desire for a place of refuge - a place to dwell, a place to call their own, a place to escape the disorder of the street. The intention of this dissertation is to explore how a place of urban refuge can be created by facilitating temporary acts of refuge for the mobile urban dweller. The contemporary built environment in the city have fallen victim to a function-, form- and aesthetic - driven approach to space-making. This approach neglects people's everyday lived experiences, and creates a disjunction between how space is conceived and how it is used. An alternative approach to space-making were developed to explore how architecture can facilitate everyday spatial practices, in order to mediate between the lived and conceived spatial dimensions.

KEYWORDS

Refuge, urban, arcade, courtyard, place, dwelling, spatial triad, spatial perception
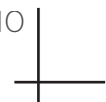
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Fig. 1: Experience on the sidewalk (Author 2021)

Douglas is traveling to work in the city, wedged between the shoulders of strangers in a tightly packed taxi. Their faces, voices, smells, sounds and moods are somewhat familiar, but not much else. Upon arrival, the crowd disperses into the city's never-ending corridors. Douglas joins the synchronized rhythm of the street, dodging obstacles and strangers. One by one they escape into small openings of fortified walls.

In a room that was once an office, then a church and now a classroom, Zandile struggles to place herself. She can barely hear the muffled sounds of the street as she observes from above.
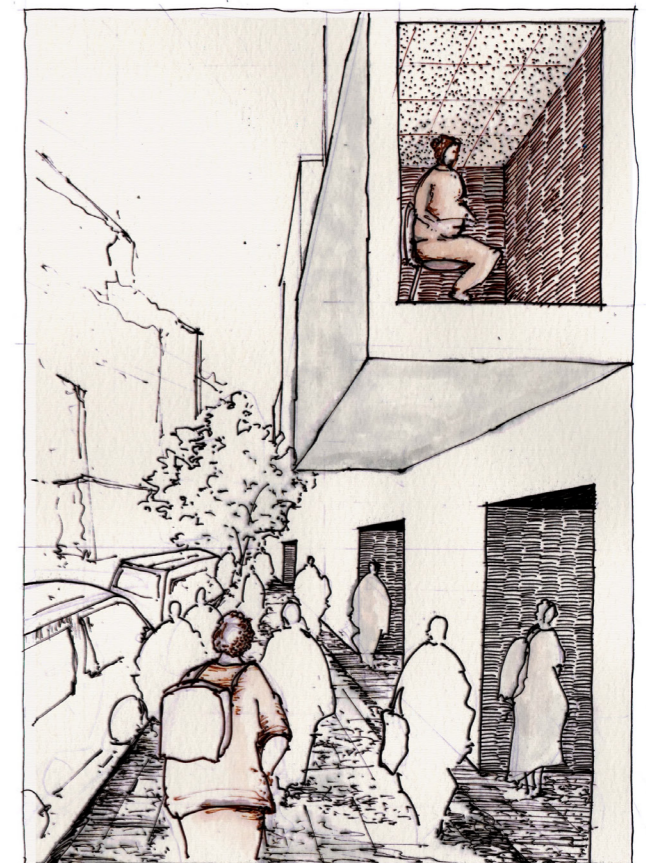

Fig. 2: Detatchment from the steet (Author 2021)

01
CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

A story of the mobile urban dweller

The clock calls everyone back into the realm of the street. It is time for lunch, time to escape and time to socialise. For Abdou it is time for prayer. The mosque, like the city, is in a constant state of flux - contracting and releasing. The familiar crowd quickly gathers, but dissipates equally as fast.

From the Mosque, Abdou takes a detour to buy a fresh magwinya (vetkoek) from Grace's stall. The movement of strangers pushes him closer into her nook. "Business is bad today" she says, prompting him to buy a few extra. Wandering the streets for lunch, Zandile bumps into a lady selling sandwiches. Her face seems oddly familiar, she might have bought from her before.

Douglas and his friends are approaching their favourite spot, where Naaila has been preparing food for them all morning. In the shade of a broken gazebo on the side of the road, they feast. In that moment, the world beyond fades away.

Fig. 3: Taxi operators' encroachment and appropriation of the sidewalk(Author 2021)

Fig. 4 Entrance to the Queen street mosque(Author 2021)

Fig. 5: Informal street food traders claiming ownership of public space (Author 2021)

Fig. 6: Informal street food traders creating an informal place of refuge (Author 2021)

This is a story of Pretoria's daily 'migrants' and their current relationship with the inner city, the proposed site and one another. It describes their experience of anonymity, transience, detachment from place and their desire for refuge - a place of dwelling, intimacy and belonging.

1.1
GENERAL ISSUE

The process through which contemporary urban architecture is produced is driven by function, form and aesthetics, resulting in architecture that operate as self-contained isolated objects (Perez-Gomes 2002: 29; Van Rensburg & Da Costa 2008a: 34). This approach to space-making neglects the social landscape of everyday spatial practices and people's lived experiences (Merrifield 1993: 524; Sennett 2018: 78-83).
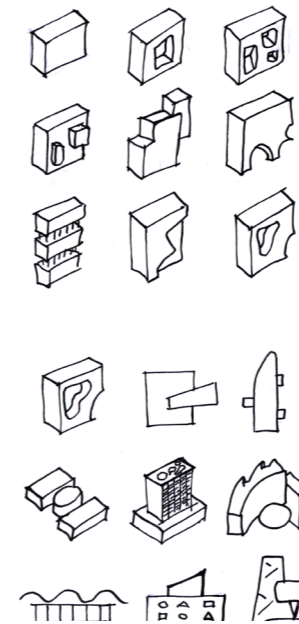
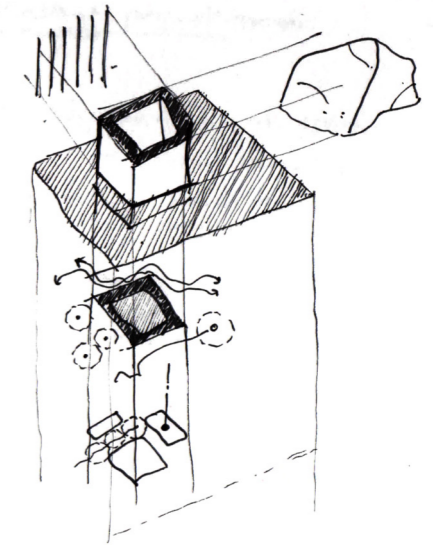Fig. 8: Form driven architecture (Author 2021)

Fig. 9: Architecture conceived in isolation (Author 2021)

Sennett (2018: 63-89) argues that the contemporary urban condition can be characterized by the disjunction between the formal built environment and the way people dwell in the city, everyday spatial practices and people's attachment to place. In the inner city of Pretoria, the formal built environment has been conceived as static objects, that attempt to order, rationalise and control the complex dynamics of urban life according to architects' visions (Bremner 2010: 22-31; Pallasmaa 2005:29), rather than engaging with the existing lived complexities and dynamic social behaviour of the street (Van Rensburg & Da Costa 2008b: 45).

If urbanism were to be interpreted as a way of life, the urbanity of the street, a place of connection, diversity and openness, is being undermined by the built fabric's anti-urban tendency towards separation, control and privatisation (Vaetisi 2013:3; Wirth 1938:1).

Fig. 7: Form driven space (top) vs activity driven space (bottom) (Author 2021)

1.2
URBAN ISSUE

The legacy of past urban planning and development practices such as Apartheid spatial planning policies, modernist urban visions, urban sprawl and lack of inner-city housing (Bremner 2010: 10-15; Mbembe & Nuthall 2004: 357) has created a condition where the majority of workers, students and shoppers live outside the bounds of the inner city of Pretoria (Simpson, McKay, Patel, Sithole, Berg, Chipp, 2012: 37-58). The experience of the daily commuter in the city can be described as mobile, transient and fluid. It is necessary to differentiate between the needs of the mobile urban dweller, a temporary inhabitant of urban space, and a permanent resident.

The mobile urban dweller moves through the inner city of Pretoria as a stranger, with few memories and short histories with the places they pass through (Bremner 2010:150). The experience of the destination is now dominated by the experience of the route (Bremner 2010: 104). The route promotes movement rather than dwelling and anonymity instead of social interaction. Philosopher Karsten Harries (in Nesbitt 1996: 394-392) argues that the act of dwelling is essential for man to understand his purpose and his place in the world. In the context of mobility, the term dwelling can be defined as the temporary act of staying, to pause, linger, rest and engage with the place you inhabit.

Fixed boundaries and clear distinctions between public and private realms in the inner city of Pretoria confine the mobile dweller to the street (Van Rensburg & Da Costa 2008b:37). Even though informal spatial practices on the streets surrounding the site provide some opportunity for social interaction and temporary dwelling, the transitional nature of the sidewalk and mobile urban dweller's alienation from the built fabric, have created an indifference to place and others. Anonymity, social disconnection and strangeness are common in any city (Sennett 2018:70; Wirth 1938:1). However, in the context of the Pretoria, these qualities are exacerbated by the mobile urban dweller's detachment and indifference to place.
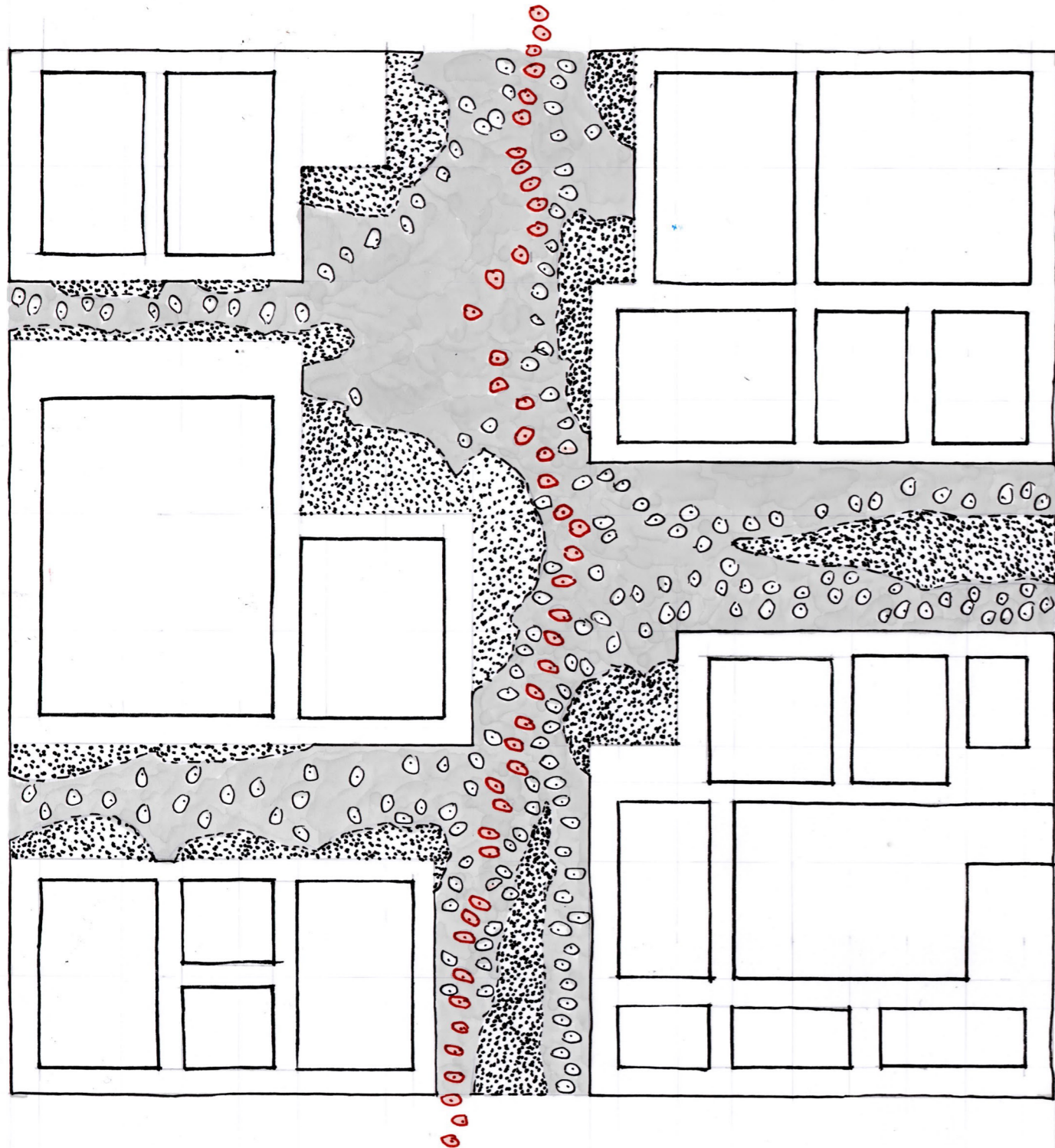

Fig. 10: Spatial realm of the mobile urban dweller (Author 2021)

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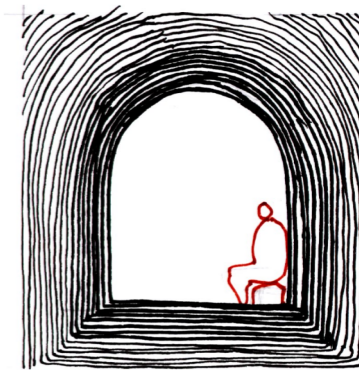YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

1.3
THE DESIRE FOR REFUGE

Douglas, a government worker, steps outside the comfort of the office to re-join the fast-paced rhythm of the street. The sidewalk is narrow and filled with unfamiliar faces. The continuous motion push and pull him forward. There's barely a chance to pause and breath. Thankfully his refuge is not far away. Under the shade of a broken gazebo and behind protection of fabric walls he sits and dines with friends. A place that they claim as their own, even if its only temporarily. A place to rest, laugh and share stories.

Zandile, a college student, moves through the city as a stranger. At first the anonymity is oddly comforting. No one knows her or expects anything from her. She fears the exposure of the street, to be seen, confronted or be out of place. Alone in an empty classroom she finds peace and comfort. It is not long before she realised that the act of turning inward and isolating herself from the uncertainty of otherness, has detached her from the city.
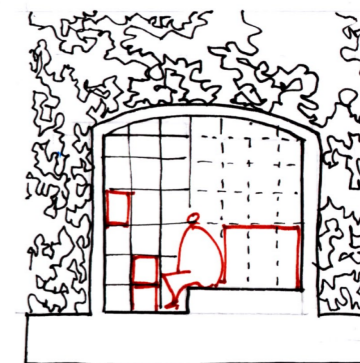
SPATIAL INTIMACY

FAMILIARITY

CONTROL

DWELLING

Fig. 11: The desire for refuge (Author 2021)
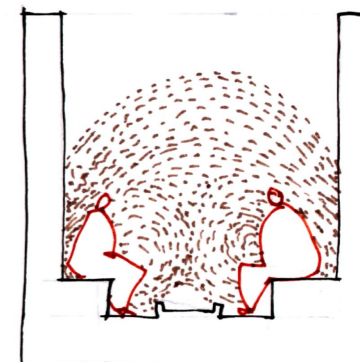
Fig. 12: Characteristics of refuge (Author 2021)

1.4
THE NEED FOR EXPOSURE

The mobile urban dweller has a desire for refuge in the inner city. A place to dwell, a place to call their own and to escape the anonymity of the street. A desire to create attachments to place by restoring the intimate relationship between space and the body, and between oneself and others (Harries in Nesbitt 1996:394-392).

Sennett (1992: 12-15) argues that the neutrality of the modern city has made us fear difference. We are reluctant to expose ourselves to things beyond our control. When we are confronted with difference, we react with indifference (Sennett 1992:125). However, it is through exposure that we find ourselves. By seeing and engaging with differences on the street and with other people, we determine who we are in relation to the world around us (Sennett 1992:12-15). A place of refuge is typically defined as a sanctuary, a place that isolates and protects you from the dangers of the outside world. In the context of the inner city, a place of refuge has a responsibility beyond protection. It must confront the desire to turn inward with the need for exposure.

INTERACTION
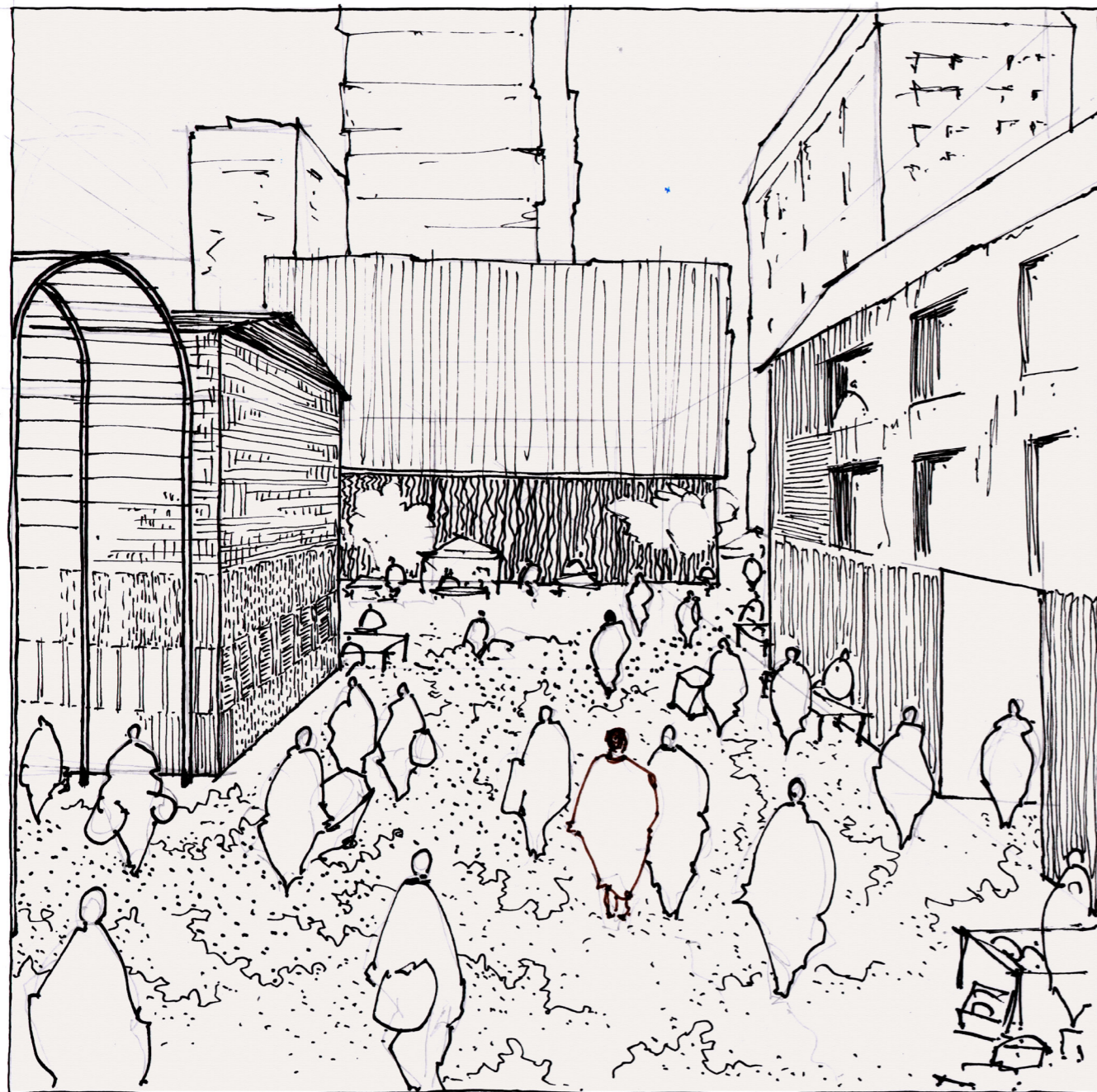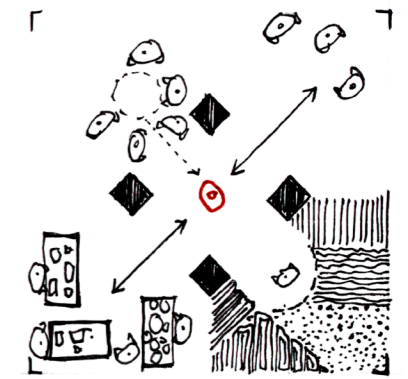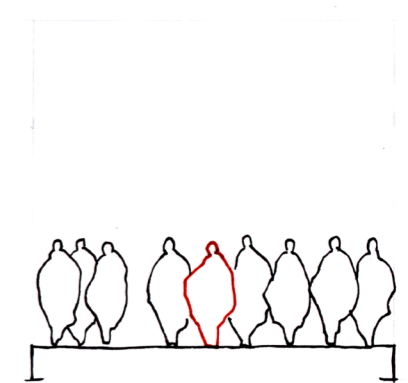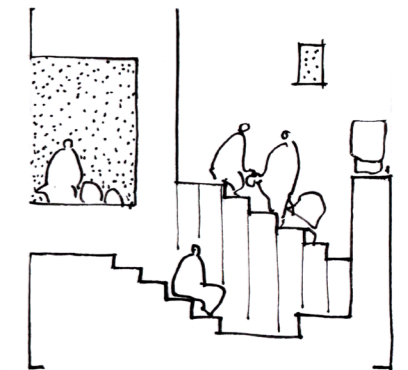
ANONYMITY

AMBIGUITY

DIFFERENCE

Fig. 13: The mobile urban dweller's desire for exposure (Author 2021)

Fig. 14: Characteristics of exposure (Author 2021)

1.5
ARCHITECTURAL ISSUE

This project will explore how architecture can create a place of temporary refuge for the mobile urban dweller in the context of the inner city of Pretoria. In a complex context where there are many different types of users, the architecture must be able to accommodate a plurality of contradictory interpretations of refuge and exposure.

Existing typologies of refuge in the inner city of Pretoria were identified and divided into three categories: refuge as isolation, refuge as a place for the public to dwell, and refuge that create an alternative reality to escape in. The majority of these places do not respond to the mobile urban dweller or accommodate different types of refuge for different users. In the context of the site, which links to the surrounding arcade network, this project will explore how a space of transition can also be a place of refuge.

PARK

SOCIAL HOUSING

MOSQUE

PUBLIC SQUARE

ARCADE

ROOFTOP GARDEN

INFORMAL STREET FOOD
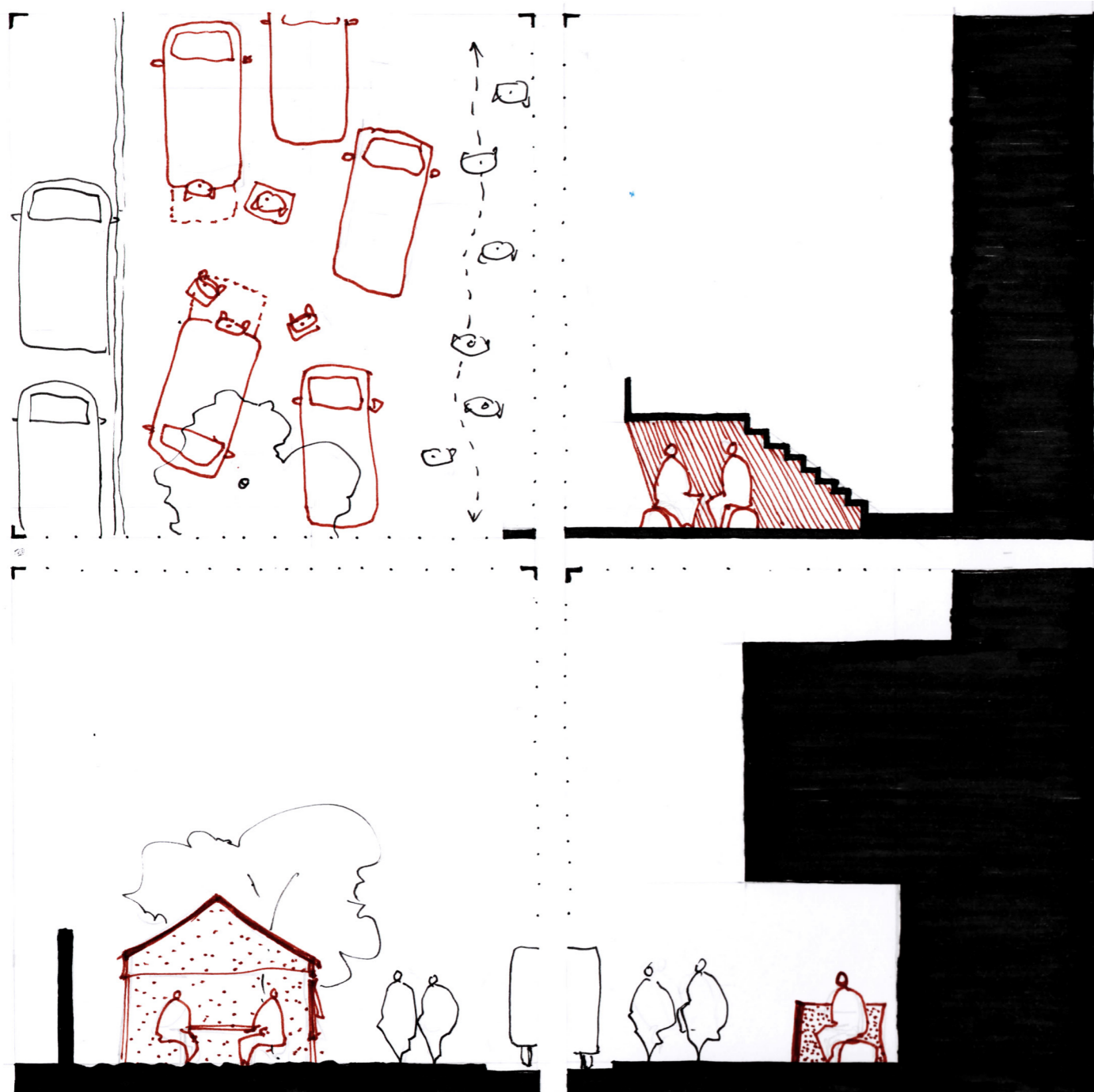
012 CENTRAL

SHOPRITE

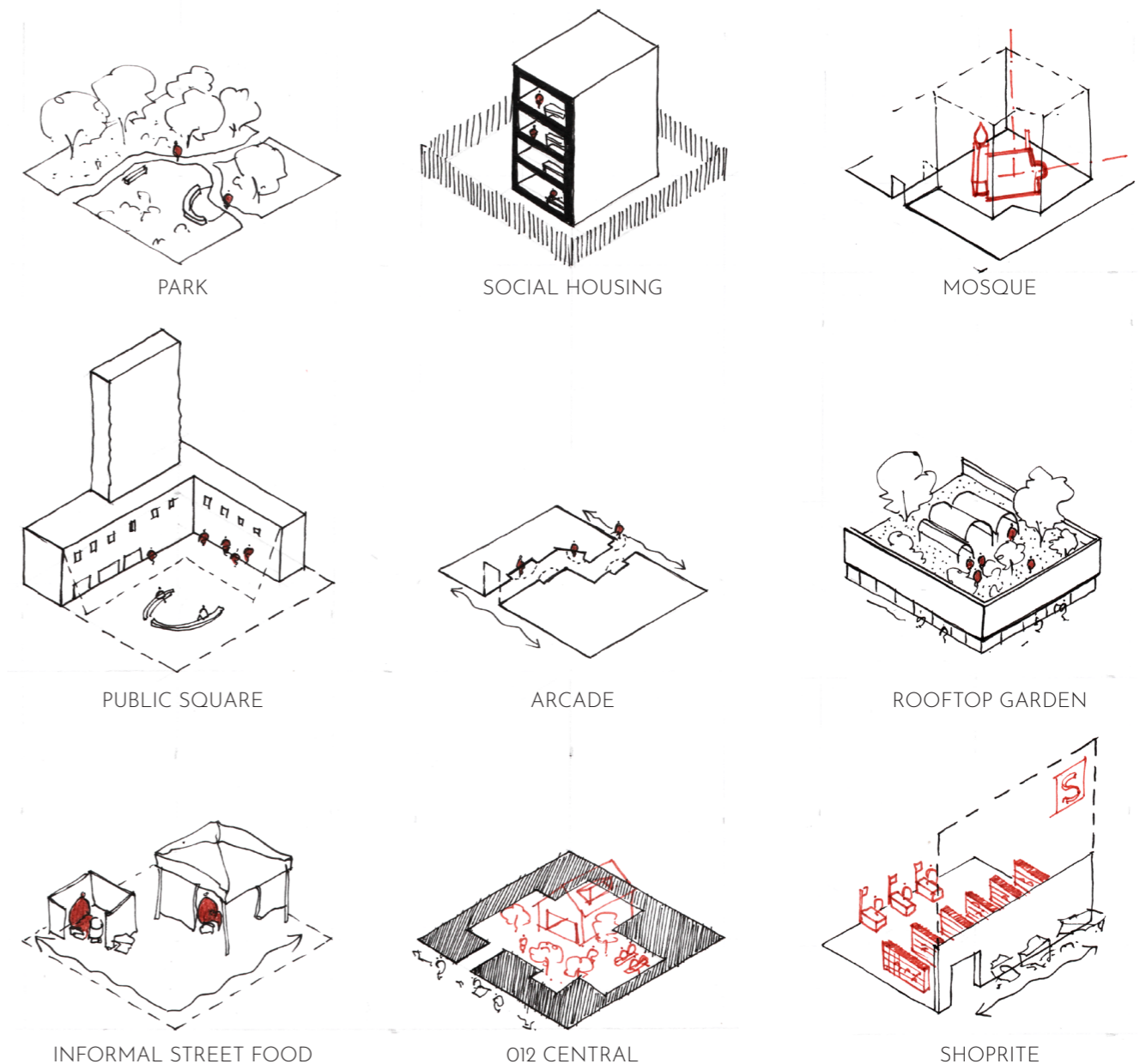*Fig. 15: Acts of refuge in the public realm of the city(Author 2021)*

Fig. 16: Existing typologies of refuge in the inner city of Pretoria (Author 2021)

1.6
RESEARCH QUESTION

How can architecture facilitate temporary acts of refuge for the mobile urban dweller in the inner city of Pretoria?

1.7
METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach, based on a relativist ontology and an interpretivist paradigm (Scotland 2012), were used to investigate the existing spatial practices and subjective experiences of mobile urban dwellers in and around the selected site. The physical and ethnographical characteristics of the study area were investigated by conducting a field study (Du Toit 2010). Salkind (2010) argues that field studies allow researchers to examine and interpret the existing phenomena, behaviour and dynamics of a site. Unobtrusive observation of people, activities and the context formed the primary method of data collection. The intention of the field study was to gain insight into how the existing built environment, in the inner city of Pretoria, affect the experience and behaviour of city dwellers. The observations were guided by intuition rather than a predetermined criteria, which gave the researcher the freedom to discover problems and opportunities unique to the site and context. The theme of urban refuge were not the initial focus of the dissertation. The decision to focus on refuge were informed by the spatial practices of mobile urban dwellers, an initial reading of the selected site and the researchers subjective experience in the city during visits.

The theoretical framework, context analysis and design explorations were guided by the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre (1991). Based on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, a new approach were developed to explore how the lived and conceived spatial dimensions in the inner city can be reconciled through the spatial practices of everyday acts of refuge. Guided by intuition, this approach made use of typological investigations for context analysis, spatial explorations and design informants.

1.8
DELIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

In this dissertation, priority was given to the needs of the specific mobile urban dwellers identified on site, above the needs of other potential users of the building. Four different personas were created to represent a diverse range of users' needs that the design ought to respond to. These personas were informed by the users observed on site, but remain subjective and can not be universally applied.

The design was heavily influenced by the particular context (physical, urban, users, etc.) of the site. For future projects in the inner city, the approach that was developed is more valuable than the particularities of the design solution.