



anOther home

Reimagining San Francisco's Victorian Houses

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Terms and Conditions

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Thesis Contention

Familiarity and character in architecture are fundamental in reinforcing cultural identity within the built environment. However, a collective sense of belonging is not universal as the built environment is mediated through visual representations that privilege cultural hegemony and neglect cultural otherness. This thesis investigates vernacular architecture's role in placemaking and how it can preserve and promote different subcultures.

San Francisco is known for its iconic, colorful Victorian-style houses. While these structures are beloved symbols of the city today, their social history is relatively unknown. These houses once served as the backdrop of many of San Francisco's most defining cultural phenomena and were home to many of the city's ethnic and non-conformist subcultures such as Japantown, the Black Panther Party, Manilatown, and hundreds of communes during the 1960s. For many San Franciscans, the familiarity of these houses' unique architectural features creates a shared sense of place not commonly found in other cities in the United States.

Currently, the cultural legacy of these houses exists in a precarious position. In the past few years, the gentrification of these homes has linked them to an increased sense of displacement that follows a long legacy of discriminatory policy-making towards minority occupants.

Additionally, the city's current preservation policies do little to preserve more than the image of these homes, as preservation for most means to experience buildings solely through their preserved exteriors, while the interiors remain accessible to the fortunate few. This condition reinforces the idea that belonging in the built environment is increasingly defined by class and race.

This thesis critiques existing preservation policies and proposes a new method of preservation that reveals, acknowledges, and celebrates the historically latent identities of San Francisco's subcultures. Using the social values of the communes during San Francisco's 1960s counterculture movement, this project constructs a new form of urban identity and public space-making that is reflective of the progressive cultural values of the past. While adhering to Neighborhood Character guidelines, the design alters three generic Victorian houses with community-centric programs and new public access to reflect the ideology of San Francisco subcultures. This proposed method of preservation prioritizes material conditions, cultural values, and lifestyles of specific groups rather than a fallacy of a building's permanence. Overall, the thesis is a reinterpretation of how subcultures of the past appropriated these homes and put forth a more holistic notion of preservation that transcends the conservative aesthetically driven policies in place today.

1.

A City of Victorian Houses

The city of San Francisco is known for its iconic, colorful Victorian-style houses. While these homes are beloved symbols of the city today, their social history is relatively unknown. These houses served as the backdrop of many of San Francisco's most significant cultural phenomena and were home to many ethnic and non-conformist subcultures, such as Japantown, the Black Panther Party, Manilatown, and hundreds of communes during the 1960s. For many San Franciscans, the familiarity with the unique architectural features of Victorian houses creates a shared sense of place not commonly found in other cities in the United States. However, the cultural legacy of these houses still exists in a precarious position.



1776
Mission San Francisco is founded and begins colonizing native people.

1848 - 1849
The Gold Rush brings an influx of American settlers westward in hopes of striking it rich.

1906
The Great Earthquake and fire destroyed nearly 80% of the city.

1967
Summer of Love transforms Victorian houses into homes for communes such as the diggers, kaliflower, and grateful dead who challenge conventional ways of living.

1970s
The city launches an Urban Renewal plan labeling many ethnic enclaves in the city as blighted. During this time many Victorian homes were destroyed and people were displaced for new development.

8000 BC
The Ohlone people are the original founders of the San Francisco bay, lived in homes constructed from willow.

1870
Cubic Air Ordinance required 500 cubic feet per person lodging, was created to discourage Chinese immigrants who often packed into rooms, sleeping in multi-tiered bunk beds.

1882
San Francisco passes Chinese exclusion act due to escalating labor conflicts and xenophobia, banning the naturalization of Chinese immigrants.

1942
Executive Order 9066 forces Japanese Americans into internment camps during WWII. At the same time an influx of African American families begin occupying the now empty Japantown during the Great Migration

1960s
A chapter of the Black Panther Party occupied a Victorian house in San Francisco

1976
Steve Jobs and many tech innovators in the bay area create startups from their homes and launch the start of the dot.com boom.

FRIGIDAIRE
The General Motors Value in the Refrigeration Industry

Timeline of significant cultural phenomena that occurred in San Francisco houses.

Gentrification of the neighborhoods in which these homes are situated has associated them with an increased sense of displacement that follows a long legacy of discriminatory policy-making towards minority occupants. Subject to racially motivated redlining in the 1950s and Urban Renewal in the 1970s, citywide policies were enacted to discriminate against low-income families, immigrants, and residents of color whose communities lived within these types of houses. Urban renewal policies ordered the destruction of all Victorian houses within San Francisco's Western Addition as a part of the city's slum clearance program, exploiting displaced minority residents into newly developed multistory buildings. While grassroots preservation organizations were able to stop the destruction of most of these houses, they did little to bring back the communities that had already been displaced and cultural activities once hosted in these structures.



San Francisco, Cole Street, 1980



San Francisco, Western Addition, 1979

Preservation is typically seen as a response to preventing displacement. In San Francisco, preservation policies fail to prevent and even exaggerate the disappearance of the city's subcultures. Architectural preservation policies are complicit in upholding a monolithically white and wealthy collective identity rather than embracing and celebrating the lively cultural hubs that once existed. In addition, the language of many housing preservation advocates to "preserve neighborhood character" is codified in dog-whistle politics that reflect the historically racialized exclusion of single-family zoning.

Preservation for most San Franciscans is limited to experiencing buildings solely through their preserved exteriors, while the interiors are only accessible to the fortunate few. This condition reinforces the idea that belonging in the built environment is increasingly defined by income and race, and that preservation policies serve to uphold it.



San Francisco, Fillmore Street, 1977



San Francisco, Western Addition, 1977

2.

The Latent Identities of San Francisco

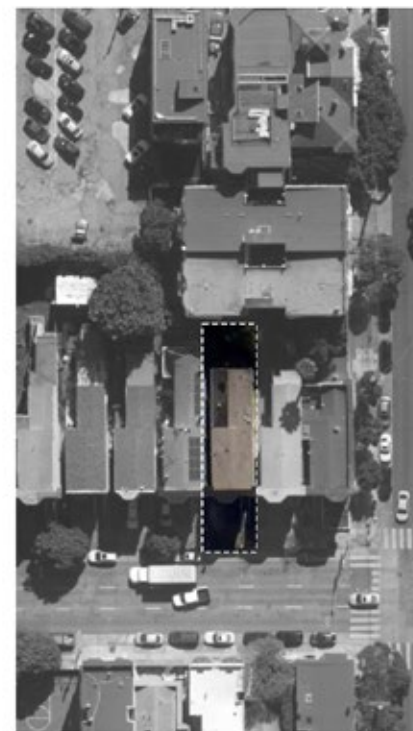
This thesis critiques existing preservation policies and proposes a new method of preservation that reveals, acknowledges, and celebrates the historically latent identities of San Francisco's subcultures. Using the social values of three specific communes during San Francisco's 1960s counterculture movement, this project constructs a new form of urban identity and public space-making, that is reflective of past progressive cultural values that left a longstanding influence on the culture of the city today. This project selects three different Victorian houses located in Haight-Ashbury, to reimagine the cultural legacy of these historical groups in the built environment today. This proposed method of preservation prioritizes material conditions, cultural values, and lifestyles of specific groups rather than a fallacy of a building's permanence. The design proposal reinterprets how communes of the past appropriated these homes to put forth a more holistic notion of preservation that transcends the conservative aesthetically driven policies in place today.

Italianate Style Victorian



The Diggers
Founded 1966

The Diggers' central tenet was to be "authentic," seeking to create a society free from the dictates of money and capitalism.



House 1
Italianate Style
1527 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA

Queen Anne Style Victorian



Kaliflower Commune
Founded 1967

Their principles included common treasury, group marriage, free art, gay liberation, and selfless service.



House 2
Queen Anne Style
1527 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA

Eastlake Style Victorian

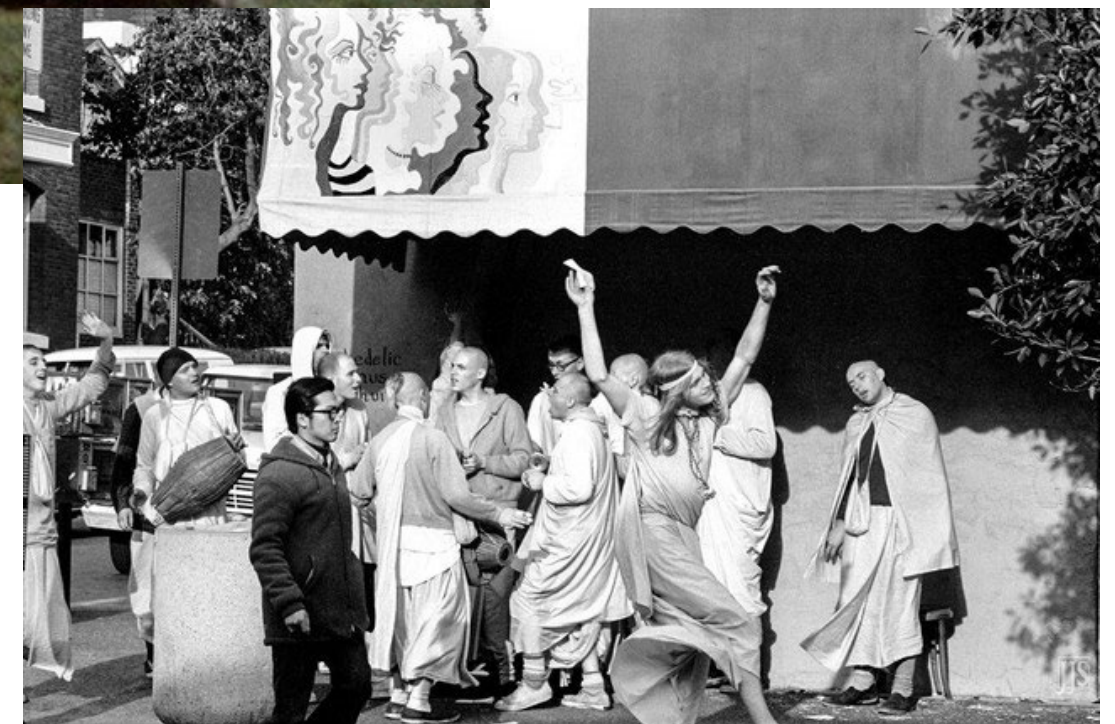


Acid Tests
hosted 1965 - 1966

The use and experimentation of acid promised psychological, social, and other kinds of liberation.



House 3
Eastlake Style
1527 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA



To provide historical context, during the 1967 Summer of Love hundreds of communes began to occupy the vacated Victorian houses of San Francisco's Western Addition. The three historic groups selected for investigation –the Diggers, the Kaliflower Commune, and the Acid Tests– were based on the significance that each group's legacy had on the city's culture today.

The Diggers

Subculture One

The San Francisco Diggers were one of the legendary groups in the Haight-Ashbury during the years 1966 to 1968. The Diggers were a commune at the forefront of San Francisco's counter-culture movement. They believed in a Free Society, operating a free store out of their house and handing out free food every day. The Digger ethic was so significant it permeated the counterculture—every commune invariably had a Free Box in the hallway. The Diggers provided housing services in the form of Digger crash pads for the influx of young people arriving in San Francisco. These were usually apartments rented by Diggers or Digger supporters who offered their couches and floor space for anyone who needed a place to stay. They were also known for combining street theater and art happenings to promote their social agenda to reject normative capitalist society. Digger events provide strategies for subverting normative social structures while providing spaces for the exploration of alternate identities and community structures. Their stage was the streets and parks of Haight-Ashbury, and later the whole city of San Francisco. The Diggers also initiated California's back to the land movement that advocated for people to get back in touch with nature and grow farms to live off the land.



Kaliflower Commune

Subculture Two

The Kaliflower Commune occupied a victorian house on Scott Street from 1971 to 1974. They were a free psychedelic drag theater group known for elaborate parties and theatrical drag performances. There was a spirit of communalism and cooperation. Many members saw their commune as their family. It was common for commune members to limit relationships with non-communalist friends. Attachment to a single sexual partner was frowned upon. Most communards were polyamorous, sleeping in a group bed and regularly rotating sexual partners in what was loosely considered group marriage. Polyamory was just one of the many ways the Kaliflower members experimented with sexual liberation as many of the members identified as gender and sexually fluid. Members relinquished all savings to the group, quit outside jobs, and worked inside the commune instead. Commune tasks included gardening, cleaning, cooking, and running the Free Print Shop delivering the newsletter or food to other communes.



Acid Tests

Subculture Three

Until it was banned by the California in October, 1966, parties like this were places where people could openly take LSD and dance to the new music of the times. The Acid tests were a series of house parties held by Ken Kesey in San Francisco that served acid spiked punch to guests to experiment with its effects. They discovered and advocated for the spiritual benefits of its use. The Acid tests had initially been an attempt with lights and music to recreate the spiritual transcendence brought on by drugs. However more than that it was a happening that changed the world. They passed LSD through the youth and the celebrities of the day and thus helped create a whole new era: the era of psychedelics, hippies, and rebellion. Many of the attendants became innovative artists and musicians, such as the Grateful Dead, who accredit much of their creativity to the drug use.



3.

Neighborhood Character Guidelines

While each of these communes once occupied and altered the interiors of these Victorian houses to reflect their unique ways of living, this thesis proposal seeks to radically alter both the interior and exterior conditions. Adhering to Neighborhood Character guidelines, the design proposal alters three Victorian house styles with new public access and community-centric programs that extend the progressive ideologies of San Francisco subcultures. San Francisco's Neighborhood Character Guidelines define expectations regarding a house's image to protect overall neighborhood character so that a coherent visual identity is maintained. However, the guidelines themselves are purely aesthetic. Limiting themselves to superficial requirements of scale, patterns, proportion, and architectural features of surrounding buildings. Of significance for this thesis, the vagueness of these guidelines allows for the reimagination of existing houses to propose an alternative form of preservation that extends beyond aesthetics.

Neighborhood Character

DESIGN PRINCIPLE: Design buildings to be responsive to the overall neighborhood context, in order to preserve the existing visual character.

Most residents live in areas that are distinct neighborhoods. Many neighborhoods have defining characteristics such as street trees, buildings with common scales and architectural elements, and residential and commercial uses that make the neighborhood identifiable and an enriching place to be. The neighborhood is generally considered as that area around a home that can easily be traversed by foot. Neighborhoods may also be defined by natural or man-made elements such as parks, streets and hilltops.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

Though each building will have its own unique features, proposed projects must be responsive to the overall neighborhood context. A sudden change in the building pattern can be visually disruptive. Development must build on the common rhythms and elements of architectural expression found in a neighborhood. In evaluating a project's compatibility with neighborhood character, the buildings on the same block face are analyzed. However, depending on the issues relevant to a particular project, it may be appropriate to consider a larger context.

Neighborhood patterns that are important to the character of the neighborhood include:

- **The block pattern:** Most buildings are one piece of a larger block where buildings define the main streets, leaving the center of the block open for rear yards and open space. Some blocks are bisected by mid-block alleys where service functions that detract from the public pedestrian environment, such as garage entries, trash collection, and utilities, are located.
- **The lot pattern:** Residential blocks are typically made up of narrow and deep lots (25' x 100'), creating uniform building pattern, with a pedestrian scale.



Architectural Features



Proportions



Patterns



Scale

4.

Reimagining San Francisco's Victorian Houses



Community Garden
The Diggers



Sex Positive Community Center
Kaliflower Commune



Experimental Art Gallery
Acid Tests

House One

Subculture: The Diggers

The design of the first house proposes a community garden that is reflective of the Digger's free food initiatives and "Back to the Land Movement". Using an adaptive reuse strategy, the elements of the house are stripped down to reveal a new open-air framed space that preserves the architectural features and ornament of its pre-existing character. Some of the interior walls are left as remnants that become new spatial dividers for the gardens within. The project also proposes seat steps that are oriented toward the street reclaiming the space as a new stage for "street theater activism" similar the Diggers who would use theater and urban spaces to address social issues.







Level One
Community Garden

34.



Ground Level
Maintenance Space

35.



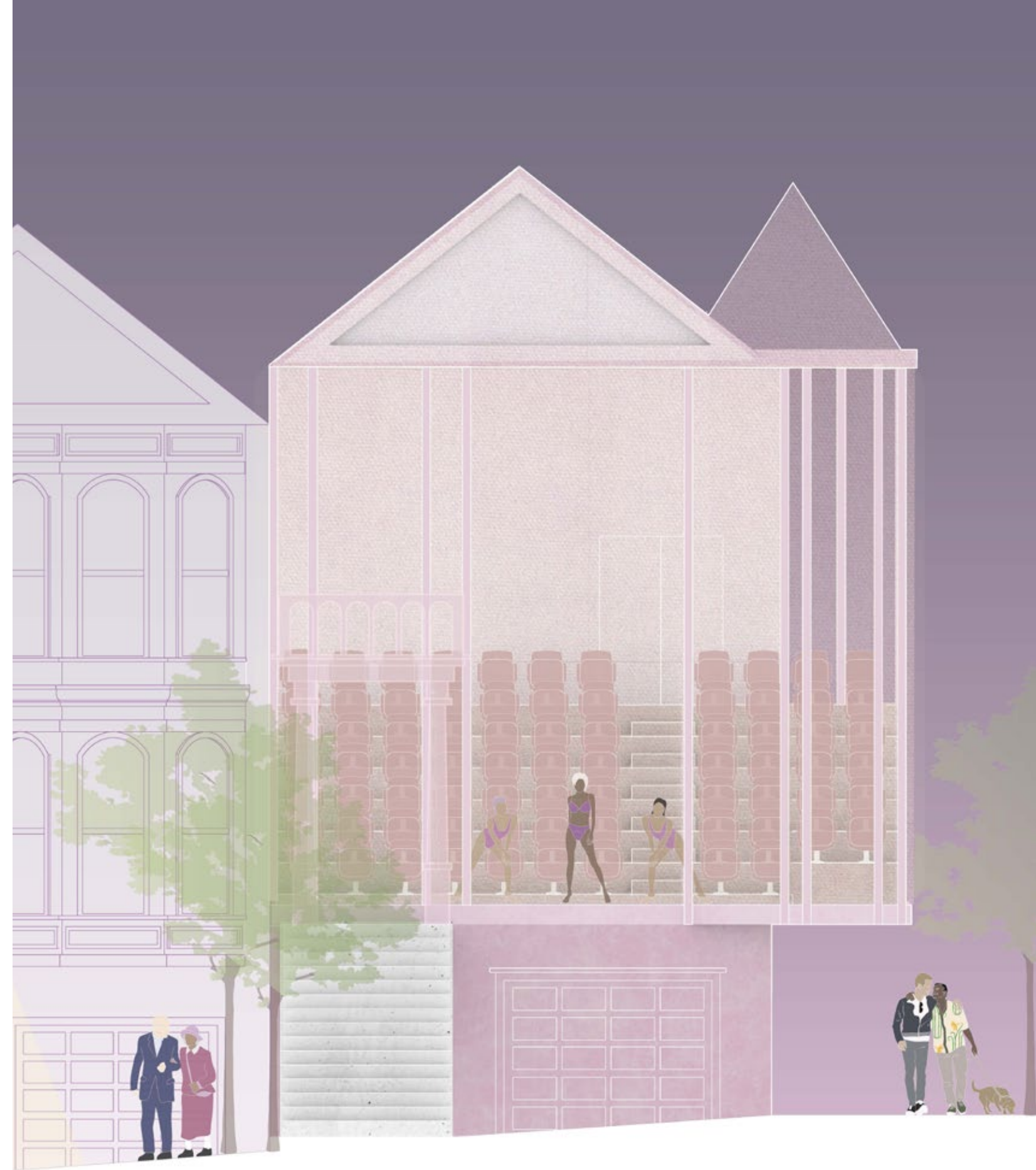
*Scale Model
1/2" to 1'
Dimensions Approximately
4' x 1' x 2'*



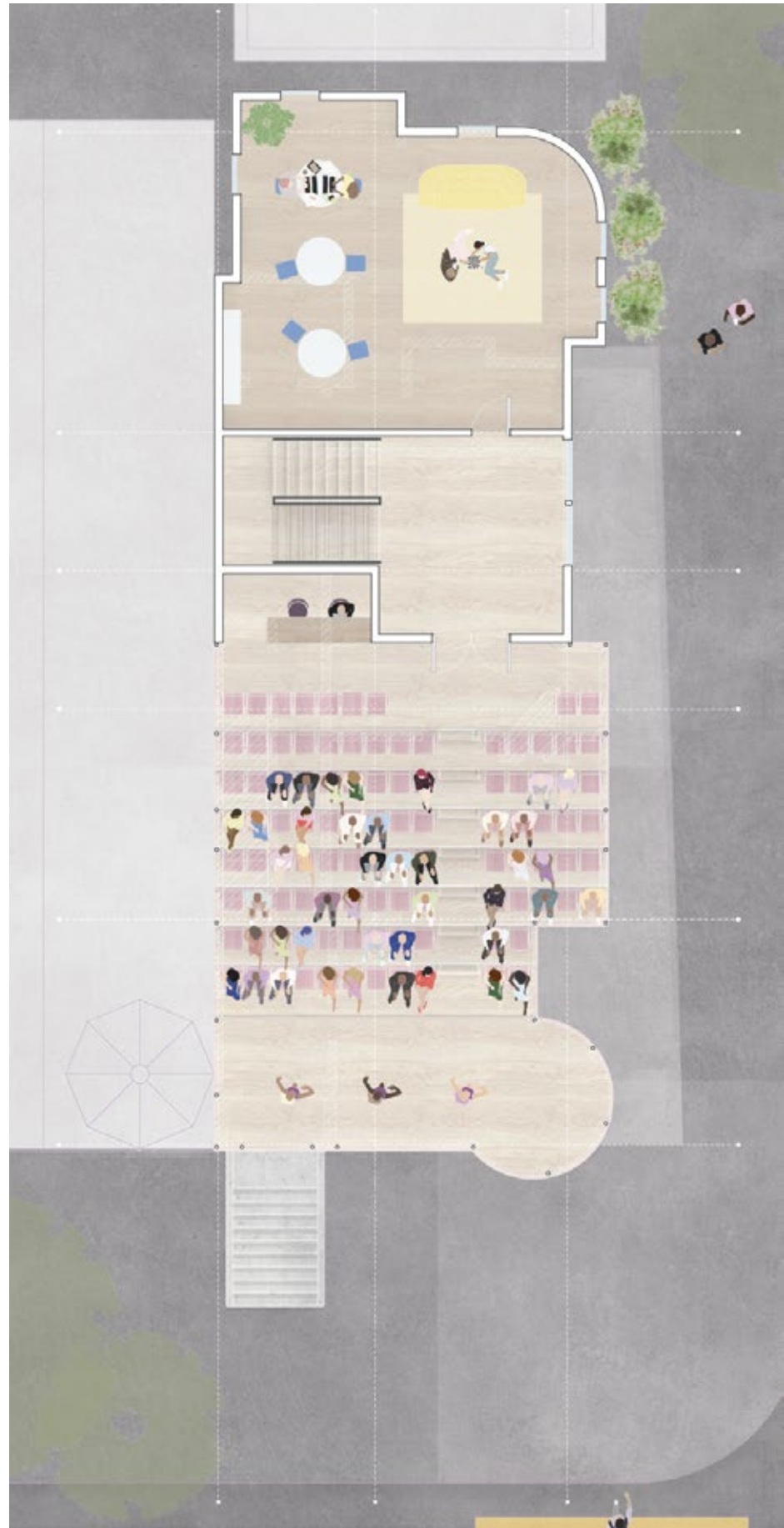
House Two

Subculture: Kaliflower Commune

The design of the second house introduces a sex-positive community center with a large semi-public theater. The theater space can be used for drag shows or other large community events, while the rooms in the back provide additional private meeting spaces. The spatial organization of the house follows a front-of-house back-of-house design commonly found in theaters. The front-of-house and facade uses a mesh material condition to maintain familiar architectural features while enabling a new sense of transparency and access to the public. This is reflective of the exposure the Kaliflower commune advocated for in the expression of self.







Level One
Theater +
Community Spaces

42.

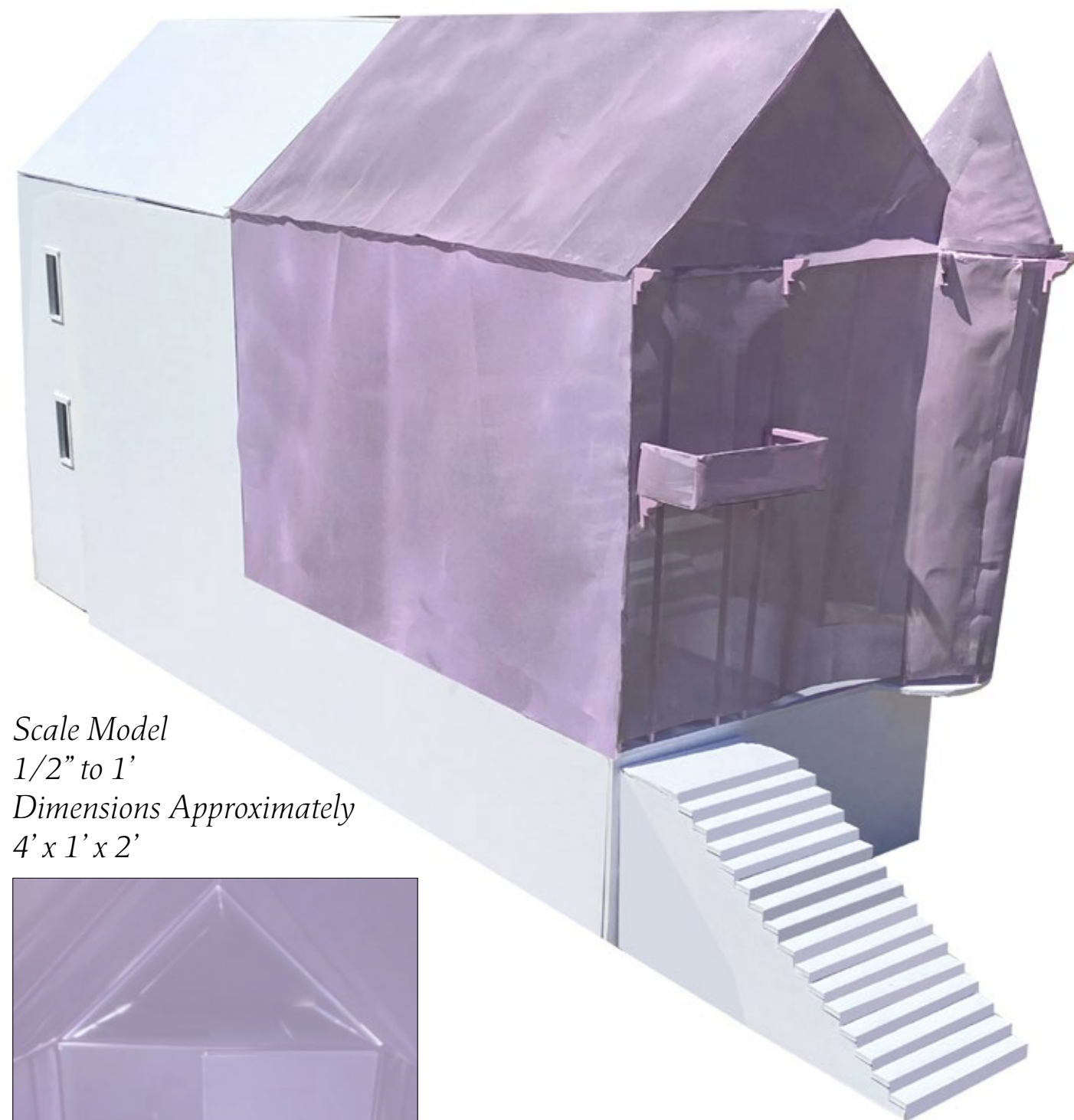


Ground Level
Administration +
Dressing Room

43.



14.



Scale Model
1/2" to 1'
Dimensions Approximately
4' x 1' x 2'



45.

House Three

Subculture: Acid Tests

The final house design proposes a dispensary and experimental art gallery. The house's exterior is cast to preserve the familiarity of its architectural features while simultaneously devoiding them of all original utility, leaving visitors to consider its new meaning. The design invites occupants in to experience a trip using new circulation strategies and atmospheric material qualities to simulate the drug-induced passage to a higher state of consciousness. The floor plans are shifted and reflect an altered state of mind that challenges the house's traditional order. Also using the method of carving to define programmatic spaces out of the building's mass and create spaces that have unique sensuous experiences.







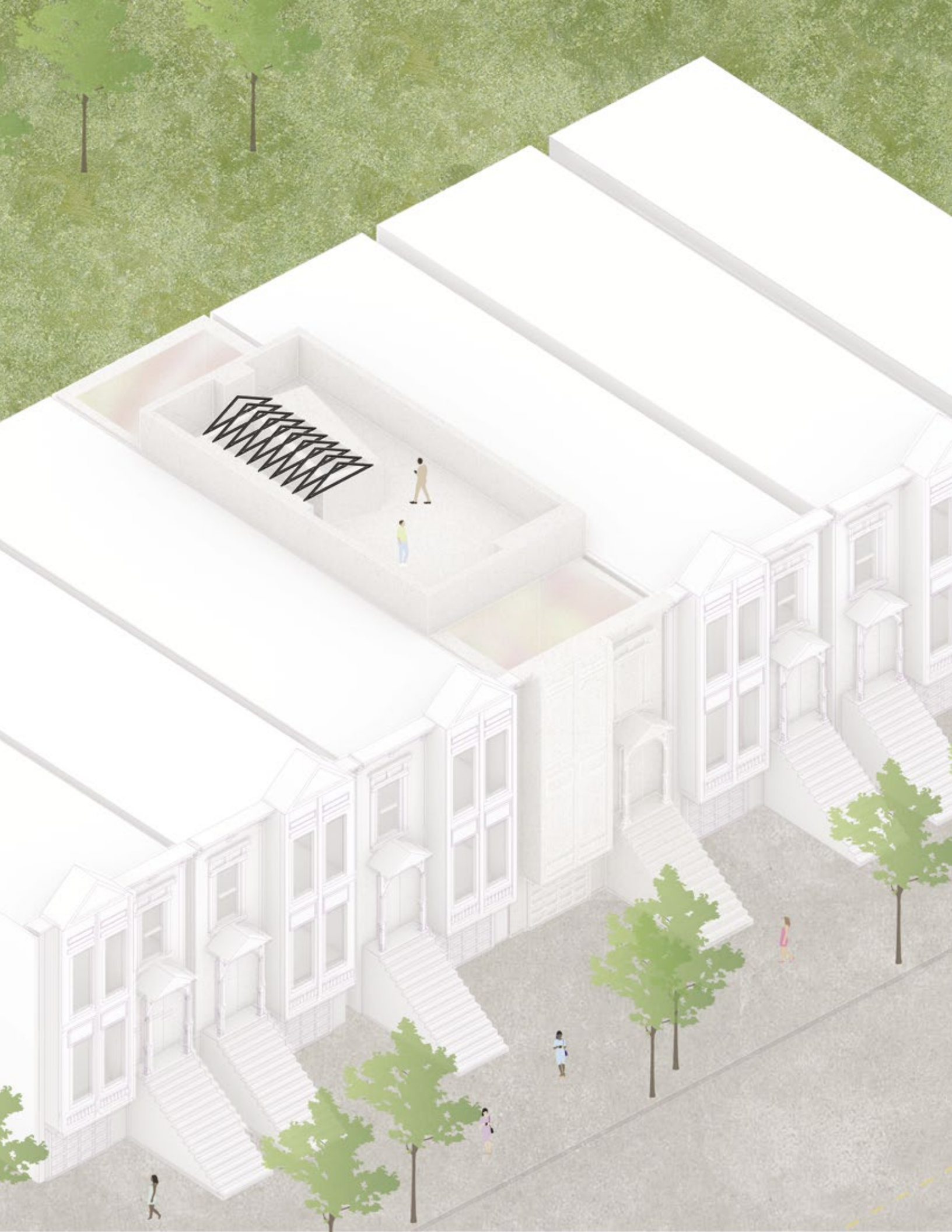
*Level One
Experimental Art
Gallery*

50.

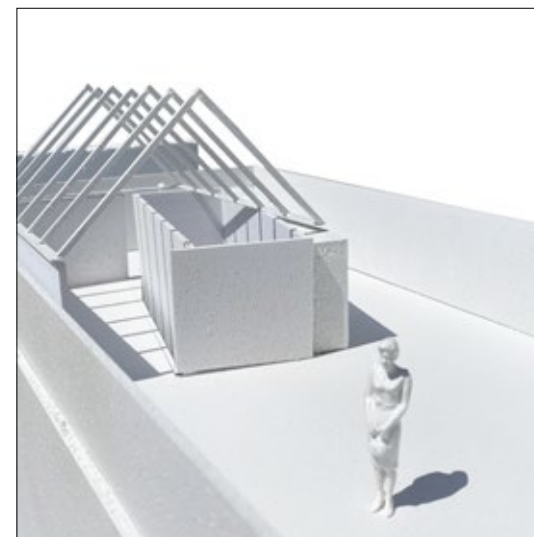


*Ground Level
Dispensary Lounge*

51.



*Scale Model
1/2" to 1'
Dimensions Approximately
4' x 1' x 2'*



5.

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