Memory and Continuance

Rotch Travelling Scholarship

Final Competition Brief 2023

INTRODUCTION

> *Part of the answer lies in the work of architects in their struggle with obsolescence, finding creative ways to acknowledge and even reconcile that fundamental contradiction between constancy and change.*
> —Daniel Abramson, Obsolescence (2016, 7)

Memory and Continuance

This year's competition will ask participants to explore how design creates a dialogue between the history of a place and the new imaginaries that shape its future. Place is a shared territory that persists in collective memory and identity, and yet it is also a contested territory where the sense of a shared history is polemicized or rewritten. In responding to present challenges and envisioning future possibilities, proposals will need to examine the processes of preserving, erasing and even replacing artifacts and ideas in the process of making place.

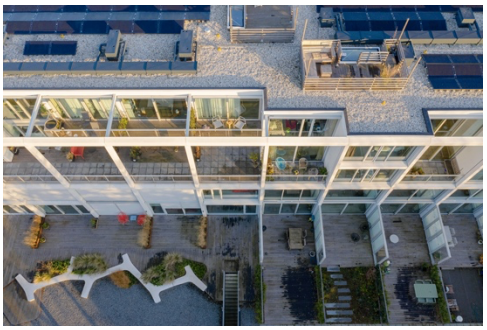
EMBODIED

Architecture embodies energy. The production of buildings sets in motion global flows of material from extraction, processing, manufacturing, shipping, assembly and, eventually, demolition. But buildings are not finished at construction, their evolution continuously transform places, economies, and ecologies. As long-lived cultural artifacts, buildings are vessels for collective memories, repositories of materials, and banks for the flows of disinvestment and reinvestment of global capital. The current global crisis of climate change demands that architects reconsider all forms of energy embodied in existing buildings, understanding their past to extend and transform their future. Historic preservation has many allies, but not all old buildings are loved and protected. Yet in those unprotected buildings may lie the opportunity and freedom to explore how to harvest embodied energy and channel new energy into sites. Architects can challenge a culture of devaluation, waste and obsolescence through new imaginaries that transform how a community sees its own past in order to reshape its future.

REINHABITATION

Mitigating the role of construction in the climate crisis while expanding housing for a rapidly growing, increasingly urban, and largely displaced global population, demands that architects reconsider existing buildings as reservoirs of memories, resources, and energy that can be renewed. Unlike the act of memorializing, the act of reuse can mean simultaneously erasing and rewriting embodied histories in order to propel functionally obsolete and culturally devalued buildings into the future, extending their useful life to support new forms of inhabitation.

Housing shortage and affordability is an urgent crisis in Boston and many other cities in the global capitalist economy. The resulting displacement of communities of people by the influx of speculative capital from absent investors is changing place identity by disconnecting people from the buildings and landscapes that act as vessels of their collective memory. At critical moments, radical models of architecture practice resisted the inequities of speculation by embracing affordability as an engine of architectural innovation and community engaged design. Models of affordable housing have a long history of reinhabiting buildings that markets have categorized as economically and functionally obsolete, despite their long material life left. Ironically, the success of what these forms of collective resistance in devalued spaces have at times elicited their revaluation by capitalist flows that come back to drive gentrification and displacement of adjacent communities.



Figures above:
Top: *Mark Koehler, SUPER LOFTS Open Building cooperative concept for co-design and adaptability. Blok Y Cooperative, Utrecht.*
Center: *Lacol, La Borda collective housing in the former industrial site Can Batlló, Barcelona.*
Bottom: *Lacaton & Vassal, Rendering of Proposed Transformation of Existing Social Housing Building using a spatial recladding. Mail de Fontenay, La Courneuve.*

Non-profit cooperative models challenge those patterns, and despite challenges continue to emerge and evolve as engines of architectural innovation, especially in Europe (Baraona Pohl 2017), and even in cities like Boston (French 2D n.d.). In the United States, the lack of a sufficiently robust social safety net puts real pressure on housing as an investment; thus alternative models like cooperatives have faced difficulty over the years, as residents see the real need to extract appreciated value (Schindler 2021). The racial inequities of home ownership also demand new housing models that can provide a path to building generational wealth for historically marginalized populations that were left out of the housing booms.

The City of Boston has recently announced investments in programs for homeownership for income-restricted units on city-owned parcels, including paths for wealth-building in a more diverse range of income levels. But the gains in affordability from income-restricted housing and supply-side approaches that saturate the city with micro-units are limited, especially for local families and young entrepreneurs in lower income neighborhoods. In this context, there is room for innovation in housing models that can protect marginalized communities from displacement, support local entrepreneurship as a path to wealth, while catering to a diversity of household sizes and types that build community and place.

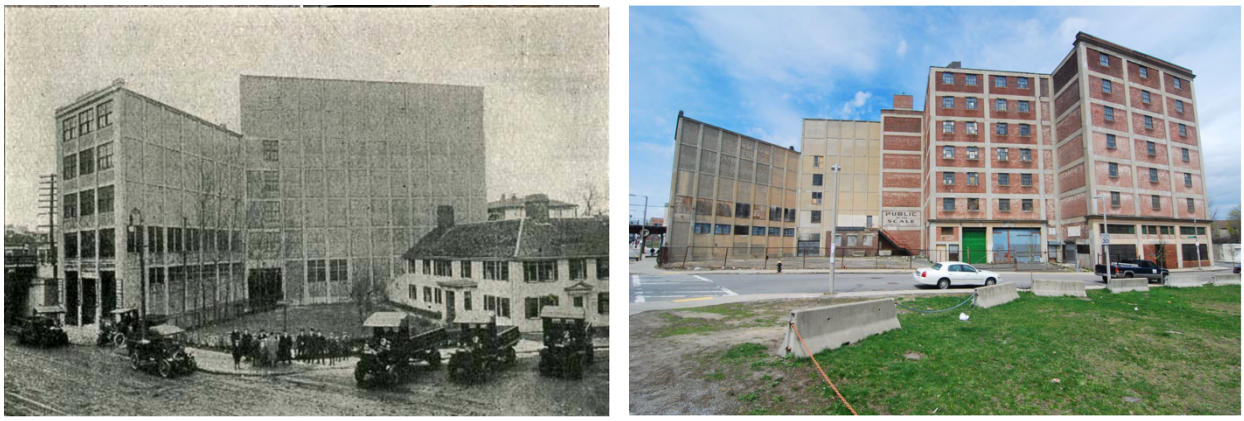
This final competition brief asks participants to radically rethink **spatial**, **social** and **economic models** of collective housing that combine dwelling, working, and recreating, to allow young families, local entrepreneurs and established communities to stay and thrive in the city. New **spatial** models will reimagine the structural framework of a massive formerly industrial building, carefully considering strategic interventions that subtract, reuse, and add new layers of space and material to produce an adaptable model of collective housing that is compactly urban yet generous in their access to green space to be restorative and climate resilient. As a **social** models proposals should illustrate how they create a diverse, environmentally and economically sustainable live/work and multi-generational community. As **economic** models, proposals must innovate programmatic approaches to redevelopment that support social and economic entrepreneurship for different degrees of collective work, living, and ownership that are adaptable to residents changing lives.

SITE

ANTICIPATION

The site of Leon Electric in Dorchester, a 7-story vacant warehouse built in 1915, is a remnant of a time when Uphams Corner was shifting away from residential use towards becoming an industrial hub. This historic center of activity in Boston now looks to recapture its past significance, recalling an era of prosperity as a commercial district and an arts and culture destination. The plans for the Uphams Corner Station Area on the Fairmont Indigo Line describes the station adjacent to the Leon electric site as a gateway—an opportunity for transit-oriented development within minutes of South Station in downtown Boston. The station area plan celebrates the city-owned Strand theater as a cultural and historic asset of the station area. In contrast, it highlighted the need to "address negative impact of Leon Building-short and long term." Politicians and journalists describe the Leon Electric site as "blight… a behemoth… and of Boston's nastiest eyesores."

Historic photographs of the site show that the part of the building adjacent to the commuter rail station is the oldest construction of the industrial complex. This part of the Dorchester Fireproof Storage Building has a robust concrete frame with concrete infill walls that are not load-bearing, with tall structural bays at the ground floor, and regular fenestration on its narrow side facing the main street. A taller volume is set back from the main street. Later additions replaced the Humphry House with a taller concrete frame with brick infill and some fenestration. As an industrial storage use, the building has a high structural capacity but low ceilings. The site has been the target for redevelopment for at least two Mayors of Boston in the last 10 years, without success. The community waits in anticipation of something *promising*, something *"new."* With so much capacity and energy embodied in this robust structure, and no signs of change in the near future, the building sits in anticipation of new imaginaries that can revisit the past and reshape its future.



Figures above: Leon Electric in 1915 (Left, Source: Dorchester Athenaeum) and 2015 (Right, Source: Boston Globe)

TRANSFORMATION

Seven years ago, in anticipation of a Boston Olympics, the Boston Globe published a piece claiming "If the Leon Electric building still looms over the Uphams Corner T Station in 2024, it will represent a failure of Mayor Walsh's housing policy—and the city's Olympic potential" (Editorial Board 2015). This closely followed the planning study for the Upham Corner Station Area (The Cecil Group, Inc 2014) which identified this Leon Electric site as prime for transit oriented redevelopment. The Arts & Cultural District Plan later described it as a strategic parcel, held back by land banking, that could be a catalyst for reinvestment (MAPC 2018). Much of the press about this site suggests demolition, but the robust structure of Leon Electric in Uphams Corner has sustained years of neglect with few signs of structural damage and invites more thoughtful interventions that reconsider its embodied potential.

This final competition asks participants to develop proposals for the largest part of the Leon Electric building that transform its dark interior space and heavy massing to better shape spaces within and around it. Finalists will consider strategies for transforming the 7-story, 15,000 SF floorplate building volume and mass through strategic ***subtraction, reuse, and reskinning*** to produce more humane spaces for a radically transformative co-live/co-work program. The narrow portion of the older building touching Dudley Street and adjacent to the commuter rail station has a natural affinity with the program of transit. For the purposes of this final competition brief, the older and narrower part of the structure is assumed to have been repurposed already as part of the transit station, with community spaces, retail, and offices. In that version of reality, this was the critical catalyst for the impending transforming of the taller and later additions to the Leon Electric Building, which will be the focus of this competition (see diagram). This larger volume is set back from Humphrey's Street, leaving the corner with Dudley Street undefined. This part of the building creates more pressure on its rich community context—its bigness and its blankness imposed on neighboring small residential buildings—its setback from the street creating potential to release pressure and mitigate for its inflicted harm. Proposals must reconsider and redesign the full site, consider its role as a gateway into Uphams Corner along Dudley Street and create better relationships to the neighborhood context.

Parameters

Proposals must preserve or reuse the structure to the extent allowed by the optimized spatial and urban strategy, clearly justifying any demolition in the narrative and diagrams by explaining how it extends the life of the building. The brick masonry can be repurposed or removed. The narrative must account for or suggest the end of life of all materials. No front or side setbacks are required on Dudley and Humphreys Streets, nor the station, but the proposal must engage the public realm through community programming within view and access of the street and/or adjacent commuter rail station. The height of additions can be up to ten stories near the station, per published transit-oriented development guidelines, but the subtraction strategy must consider how the form responds to the current and future residential context to provide equitable access to sunlight, air, open space, and urban canopy.

Figure above: Aerial photograph of Uphams Corner area, showing project site, an irregular parcel including the open space at the intersection of Dudley Street and Humphreys Street on the south, the eastern portion of the existing Leon Electric Building on Humphreys Place and the empty parcel adjacent to the commuter rail station of the Fairmont line on the northern side. This site is part of the arts and cultural district, connecting Humphreys Street Studios and the Strand Theater at the center of Uphams Corner.

PROGRAM

Proposals must include the following:

- Live/work units, and/or separate live and work units (maximizing number of units that can be supported by the optimal urban massing and open space strategy), considering:
    - Density strategy that produces a diversity of housing types and sizes, with customization and conversion opportunities to allow at least 30 percent of units becoming 3- and 4-bedroom units.
    - Formal strategy to provide each unit with access to daylight, natural ventilation, and open space views
- Collective or shared space(s) for entrepreneurs, with access to shared interior space for public access
    - Co-working and meeting spaces (min. 3000 SF)
    - Production or fabrication facilities (min. 5000 SF)
    - Market / retail / event space (min. 3000 SF)
- Communal facilities for residents as defined by economic and/or social model (min. 10% of building floor area)
- Childcare and elder care space(s) – min. 2000 SF
- Open space: diversity of green spaces in an area equivalent to 50% of site footprint (including outdoor + indoor, hardscape + softscape, ground level + upper levels) including:
    - Access to semi-private green space for each unit or group of units (open or protected exterior space, or interior unconditioned space, or other spatial inventions, min. 100 SF per unit
    - Shared communal outdoor space(s) for residents, with community garden and other communal facilities
    - Public open space with access from the street (minimum 10% of site area)

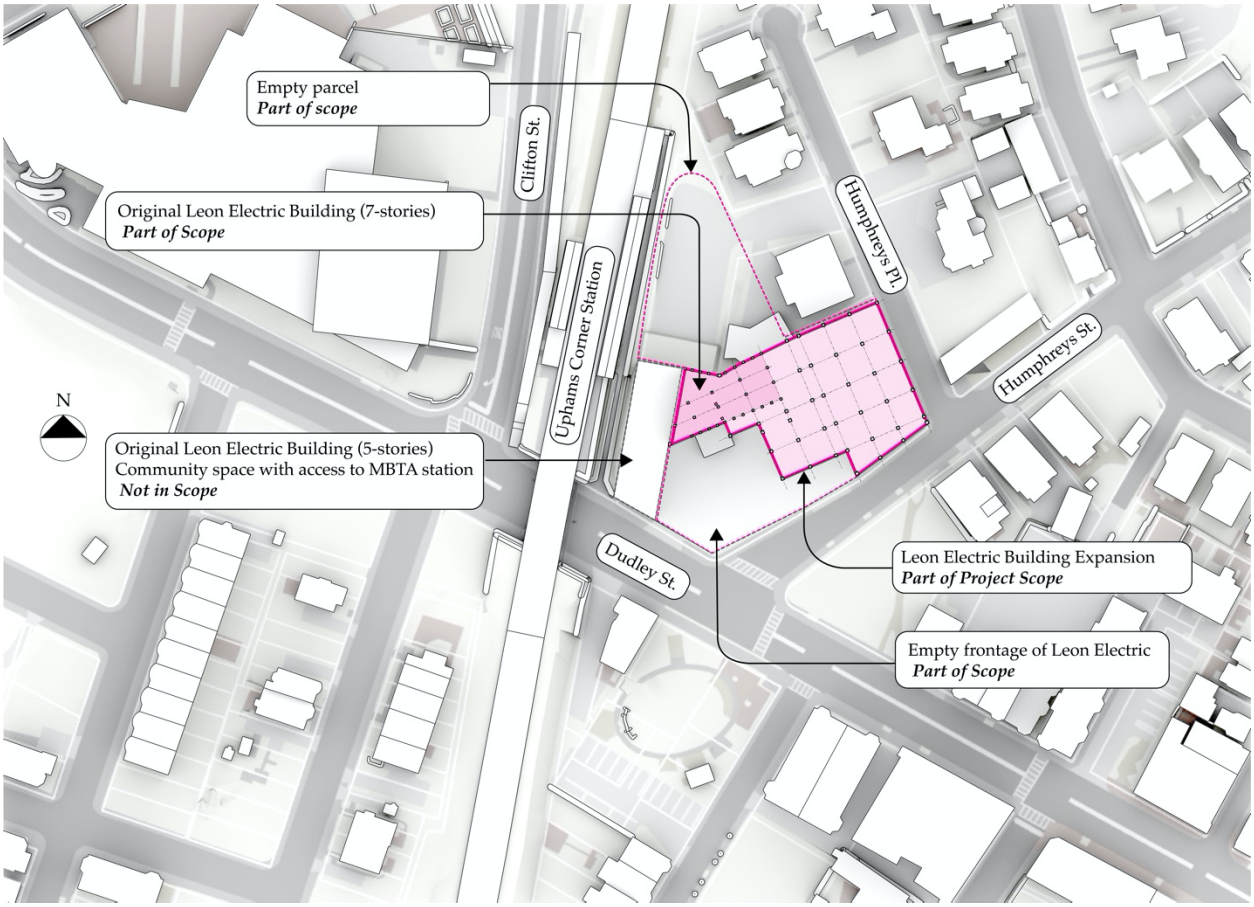


Figure above: Site diagram and scope of competition, showing buildable empty areas and existing building with structural pattern. Please note: A 3d model with the site boundary, massing and primary structure of the existing building has been provided with the competition materials.

REQUIREMENTS

DOCUMENTATION

The submission is limited to no more than ten 16 x 9 format slides in PDF. Your drawings or other media should be clearly labeled, and a descriptive text provided. The following represents the minimum documentation required:

- Narrative: conceptual framework and a basic description of the proposed design not to exceed 200 words.
- Site Plan with ground floor and adjacent context
- Site axonometric with open space strategy, indicating categories of open space
- Two site sections or section perspective views
- Typical (key) upper floor plan(s) clearly differentiating original structure and new material layers
- Renderings of proposal (at least one exterior, optional interior)
- Suggested diagrams: Urban massing of subtractions and additions, structural diagram, material reuse diagram

The Rotch Committee reserves the right to use submission materials for publication. Solutions to the competition become property of the Rotch Travelling Scholarship and can only be used with its express written consent.

Submission

ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION: All proposals will be submitted and reviewed electronically, as a single, multi-page PDF document. Files may be emailed if smaller than 15 MB, otherwise transferred using a file sharing service. Be sure to include your full name on each slide and to optimize your file for digital viewing.
SEND TO: polshan@architects.org
DUE BY: 12:00 PM (EST) on 27 March 2023

Presentation

Submissions will be judged on 31 March 2023 via Zoom meeting. Finalists should arrive in the virtual waiting room at least 5 minutes prior to your presentation. You will have 8 minutes to present your work, followed by 12 minutes for questions from the jury and general discussion.

Statement of Sole Authorship

Sign and digitally submit the statement of sole authorship on the last page of this brief along with your digitally submitted materials.

Evaluation criteria

Submissions will be evaluated by the jury according to the following criteria:

- Strength of conceptual premise, clearly articulated in written narrative and graphic form.
- Extent to which ***subtraction, reuse, and reskinning*** strategies optimized the use of existing materials ***t***o produce more humane urban and interior spaces, and to extend the life of the building
- Degree to which collective work/live models have been radically reconceptualized to address social and economic challenges of affordable housing, as described in the brief.
- Inventiveness of strategies for maximizing housing density *and* high-quality open space
- Ability of a cohesive massing and open space strategy to negotiate different scales and adjacencies in the urban context

References

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The Cecil Group, Inc. 2014. "Upham's Corner Station Area Plan." City of Boston. https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/5bda3162-0391-4f1e-beb7-c8e4b42c0780.

STATEMENT OF SOLE AUTHORSHIP

I hereby assure the Rotch Committee that I am the sole author of my submission for the 2023 Rotch Competition. I have not received criticism, suggestions, or help of any sort other than through the use of books and other published literature.

signed:

print name: date: