

'Settling the Nomad'
Exploring Transience in a Permanent Typology



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*Water
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Pasture*

Graduation Report

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Foreword

This report arises from an architectural investigation into mobility, ritual, and dwelling in the context of Somaliland's accelerating urbanisation. It is informed by both scholarly research and personal proximity to semi-nomadic and recently settled communities. Rather than positioning architecture as a solution, the work approaches it as a cultural and spatial intervention, seeking to honour nomadic knowledge systems while critically engaging with the social and material transformations imposed by sedentary urban life. The project is motivated by a concern for how architecture facilitates identity, labour, and agency, particularly for women, during moments of ecological and social transition.



Problem Statement:

According to the World Bank, Somaliland is experiencing an accelerating rate of urbanisation, the capital city Hargeisa's population has quadrupled since 2005, now reaching an estimated 1.2 million. This is particularly noteworthy for a region which has some of the highest rates of pastoralists in the world. Semi or fully nomadic pastoralists make up around 60% of the total population and in turn livestock trade accounts for 23% of the GDP (The World Bank, 2025). This fragile ecosystem has been infringed by climate change, making rainfall inconsistent and droughts more frequent, diminishing herd sizes and pushing nomads to a more sedentary lifestyle. Somali nomads practice transhumance, moving cyclically between geographical or climactic regions as the seasons change, By carrying their portable homes on the backs of their camels as they travel, home is synonymous with journey and thus in order to understand the form the journey must be investigated.

By extrapolating the extent of journey and what it entails both physically and metaphysically we can apply it to the end intervention. The rituals that surround the forming of tools, deciding the path, and creating family units will provide us with a unique set of design drivers or conditions. The resulting will be an embodiment of this journey, a final form that presents the contradictions of the nomadic Somali identity in a fast changing environment.

The fluidity between spatial and social relationships are masterfully articulated through the nomad's Aqal. A circular hut made from the branches and roots of native tree species, which was seasonally recreated and created through the prisms of 'memory, practical wisdom, collective use, and decision-making.' The architect, exclusively the women of the family, had their fingers on the pulse of society crafting interactions and mapping out the relationship between capital and labour. In a society that limited the woman's access to the xeer (the social contract or governing principles of the nomadic community), she utilises architecture as a language of emancipation and autonomy. However in the increased urbanisation of the Somali region, this fragile social dynamic is at risk, as the urban environment changes the social landscape changes with it.

Explicitly the problem statement is the extent to which the 'non-tangible' elements that are important to the nomad can be applied to creating 'tangible' architecture. The project explores this by looking at the building culture, the use of varying scales and song.

Relevance

This topic was relevant to explore through Explore Lab due to the large data gap. Though 'conflict' is a topic much associated with Somalia and by extension Somaliland, there have been few voyages into understanding on how the built environment has served to architecturally mediate different types of conflicts.

Additionally my relation to this topic is a major factor. I have proximity to both semi-nomadic and recently settled individuals through familial connections. Allowing me not only to access the relevant data required for this investigation but also have an insight into the cultural nuance that informs this context. The open brief of Explore Lab also allows me to differentiate between architecture as a solution or an intervention. My project aims to be an intervention, giving individuals an alternative choice, thus recognising the reductive nature of imposing solutions on unfamiliar contexts.

Objective and Motivation

The journey of the nomad doesn't just end with the settlement into a town or city. There seems to be a linear progression of dwelling typologies as the individual's economic and social standing evolve. First in an effort to hastily claim land rights families settle in metal shacks, before eventually, as they accrue more capital, a stone house. This marks a huge shift not just materially but socially. The ephemeral architectural typology of pastoralist nomads required constant maintenance and repair; creation and recreation. It was a living architecture that the women tended to collectively, offering opportunities for community cohesion, however, in the realm of permanent dwelling, fixed notation and continual land occupation, the woman no longer holds a monopoly over this vital task.

The metal shack draws in heat and stale air, however despite its unpleasantness, it does not denounce architecture's symbiotic relationship with familial and communal ties, yet it does not maximise it. It raises the question: **what aspects of architecture allow the form to act as a tool for social inclusivity?** The main difference between the nomadic lifestyle and the families' first introduction to fixed settlements is the lack of ritual: whether that be the practice of crafting tools, gathering material and creating the final form; every aspect of nomadic architecture is ritualised, a choreography acted out to the sound of poetry.

As we have explained that architecture is the site of the connection of all planes of human society and interaction, the material realm offers a view into the relationship the individual, in the case of the Aqal being both the designer and dweller, has with the land. The indigenous nomads originally used native tree species such as the Maraa, Galool and Sogsog, to create every element from grass mats that provide cover and insulation to the twine that holds the form together. However, climate change has forced nomads to utilise non-natural materials such as corrugated metal and plastic tarp, as the grass and trees become sparse. In this case materiality is the marker of ecological insecurity, another driver that spurs the nomad to urbanise. **How can ritual be used to provide this vital connection to land and material?** Can the methodology of the natural wood and fibres be just as powerful with synthetic plastics and metals?

Additional Research Questions

What extent does ancestral movement and journey represent in static dwellings?

What are the spatial and material possibilities when investigated through the lens of time and movement in the context of transient landscapes?

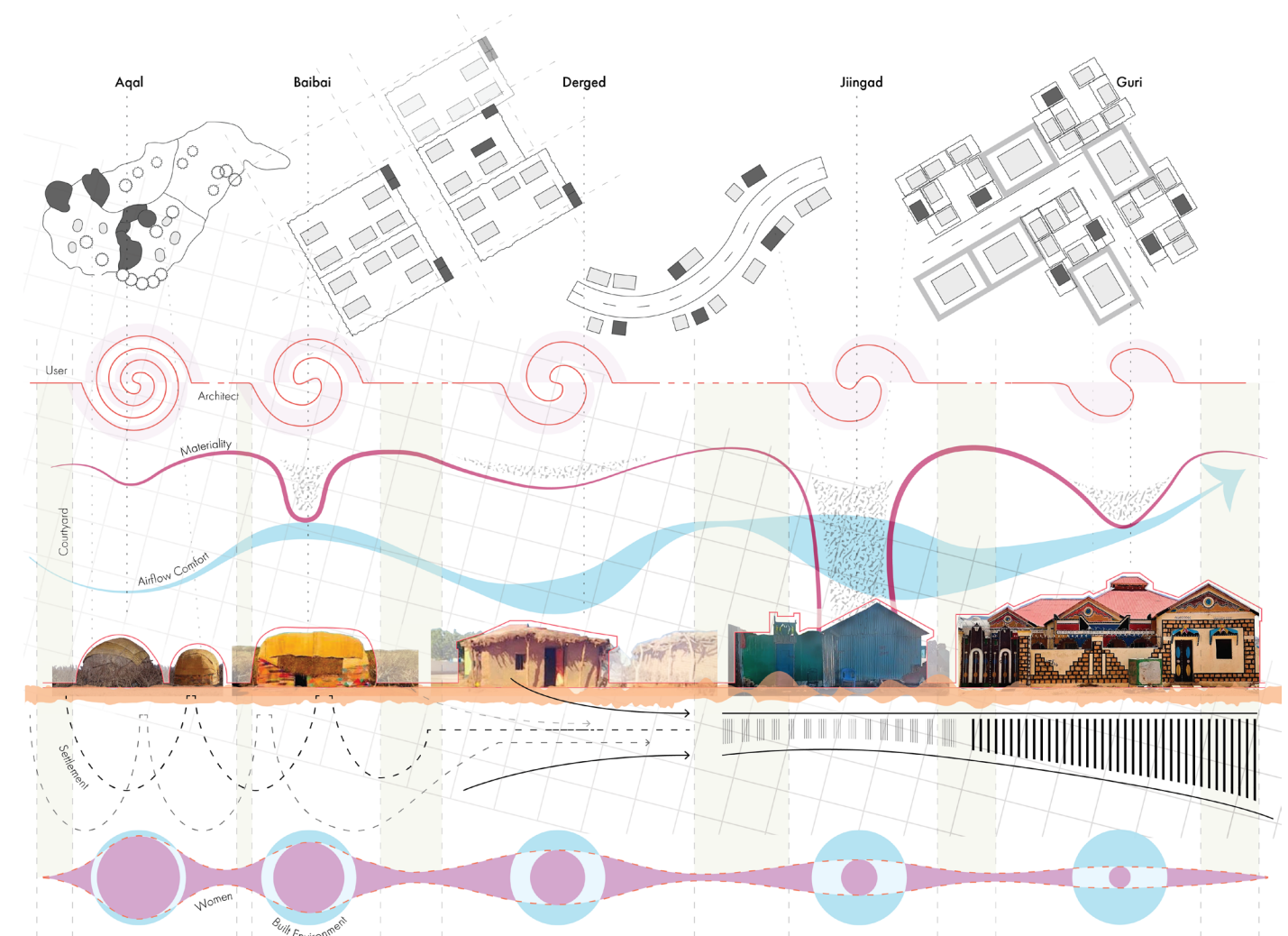
Architecture as the language for expressing the intersection between the social and spatial?

To what extent can ephemerality be maintained and represented in static dwelling?

Scope

The project will be located in the Maroodi Jeh region of Somaliland, particularly in the Naaso Hablood neighbourhood of the capital Hargeisa. Although the nature of the design is that it is repeatable and modular, this specific location was chosen because it represents the modern dilemma of the pastoralist nomad, it is the last patch of undeveloped land on the edge of a rapidly expanding city and represents a bridge between the dense urbanised cityscape and the barren mountain region it sits next to.

The inhabitant of the metal shack still identifies with the nomadic identity, their journey is not over. How can this intermediary socio-economic status be dignified with the materials and methodology that honour this cultural heritage and material landscape? Creating a typology that is breathable and kept alive by the cyclical ritual that its dwellers are so accustomed to. By outlining an adapted construction method and vernacular materiality, it allows the architecture to once again act as a site of community cohesion and female empowerment.



The Evolution of Housing Typologies in Somaliland

Methods

Gordon Clarke details in his exploration of ‘Mobility and permanence in the nomadic architectural traditions of Africa and Northern Siberia’, ten levels of information to be uncovered in fieldwork. They include ‘knowledge to be gleaned of the historical development of the design pattern’, ‘the local memory of design transmission between communities’, as well as the construction details of the physical building’ (Clarke, 2025). These aspects of knowledge are already hard to come by in a historically oral society, made even more difficult due to my inability to travel to Somaliland, therefore the conditions of knowledge transfer must be emulated through other means.

Informally, given my connection to the subject matter informal interviews and conversations with family members accustomed to semi-nomadic living provide the necessary cultural sensitivity and understanding of nuances that the design must contain. This is particularly necessary in my effort to utilise the practice of poetry as a tool of knowledge dissemination. Giving music to the choreographed dance of building. In a landscape marked by sonic symbols of possession, Somali poetry mapped spaces of belonging and imagination.

Practically, at the initial research phase of the project it meant forming a process of exploring existing databases for records of notation or architectural dissemination. By using sources from the Hargeisa Cultural Centre, design drivers were extrapolated to provide the framework for intervention.

In the intermediary design phase the project took the turn of looking into the significance of notation, looking at the works of John Cage and Daniel Liebskind particularly in his ‘Micromegas’, which look at the spatiality derived from architectural elements in their most rudimentary form. Since my aim at this point was to capture the passage of time, interaction, intensity among a myriad of other elements captured in the architectural form, I looked at the way architecture could be used as a coded language to tell the story of movement.

Liebskind has written ‘An architectural drawing is as much a prospective unfolding of future possibilities as it is a recovery of a particular history.’ And in my case, this experimentation symbolised the act of unfolding and folding, playing around with the elements until they successfully translated song.

Practically, this would form a process of exploring existing databases for records of notation or architectural dissemination, identifying interviewees, conducting a series of interviews either purely auditory or conducting notation exercises. The task would then be to extrapolate the design drivers to provide the framework for intervention.

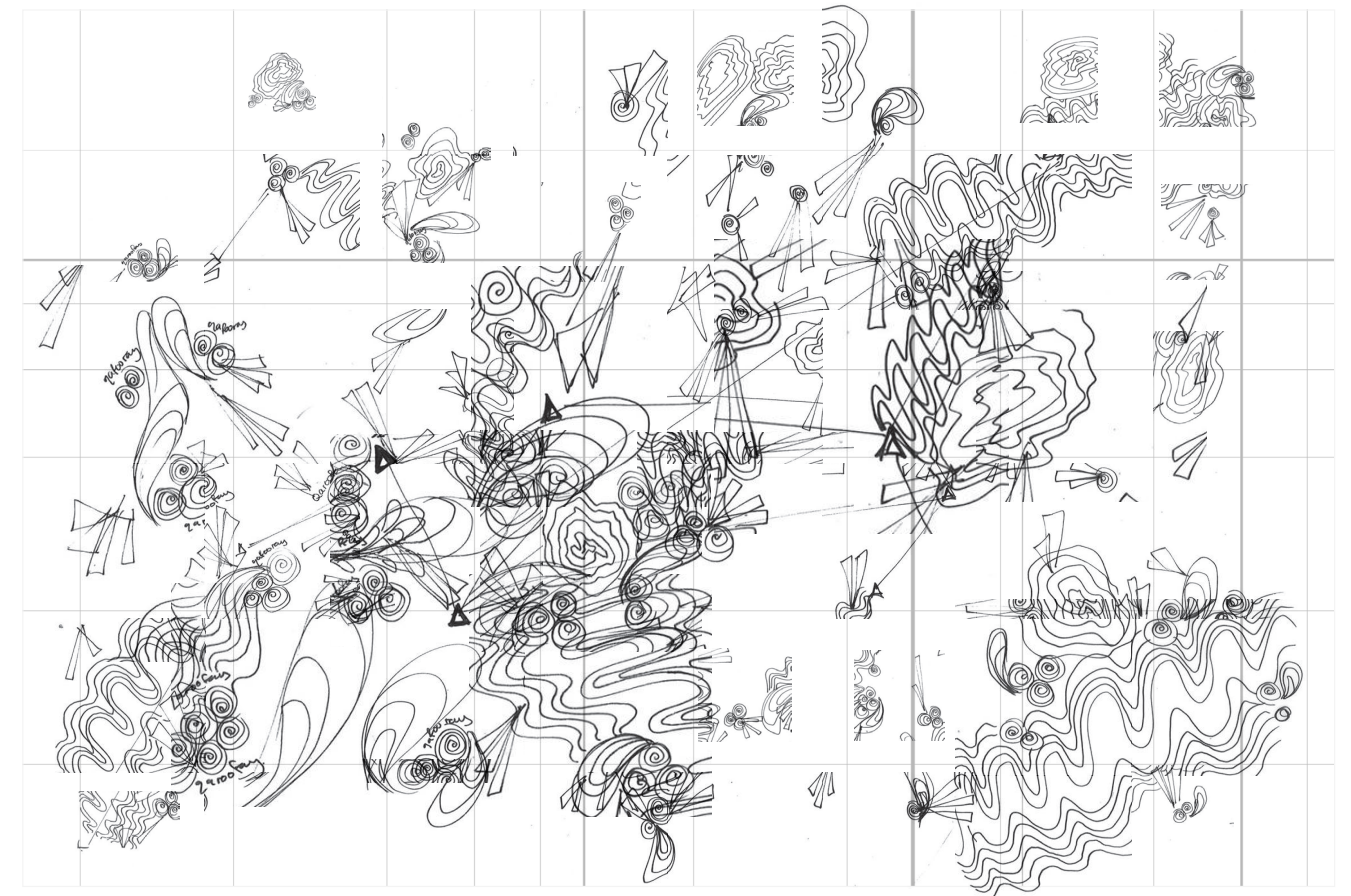
Theoretical Framework

Robin Evans (1984) studies the ways in which architecture always exceeds its representations, “Architecture begins and ends in pictures, but I would urge resistance to the idea that pictures give us all we need. . . . The question is, how much more is ever brought within the scope of the architect’s vision of a project than what can be drawn?”. However ephemeral architecture calls into question this assumed intrinsic relationship between notation and architecture. Somali nomads used no form of physical notation to inform the spatiality of their dwellings nor physical markers as wayfinding tools. It was all either stored in collective social memory, through the practice of storytelling or naming or informed by astrology, each community having a ‘weather-lore’ expert to determine favourable conditions for travel. This sets the precedent for the development of a unique and adept method of notation to represent the journey of urbanisation as manifested through spatiality.

The Aqal is the icon but as Robin Evans points out meaning is often assumed to ‘exist behind, beneath or within the subject.’ By investigating the ritual of creating the icon, meaning is understood to exist in the process, it is not static and can only be understood when the critic retraces the steps themselves taking part in a mirror image of the ritual. Thus this points to a non-static method of research, interviews conducted with ritualists to retrace and unfurl. The preliminary theory that informed this investigation was Edward Said’s Travelling Theory. We must explore the implications of the chosen methodology of interviewing and even translating from one language, Somali, to another, English. In all of these acts the theory is ‘to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a time and place,’ calling into question the fidelity and textual meaning of the original theory. Just as the nomad’s tent is collapsed and erected, each time its slight intentional or unintentional alteration is a fingerprint, evidence of its translation. By utilising memory as a source to develop a standardised form of architecture, we attempt to apply textual meaning to formerly intangible concepts.

However architecture is not just the site of the intersection of representation and imagination but also capital and labour. The Aqal is an architectural form that originated in Somalia’s precapitalist era, where there existed neither a landlord class nor a state establishment, as established in Abdi Ismail Samatar’s (1989) book, ‘the State and Rural Transformation in northern Somalia 1884-1986.’ He theorises that the ‘surplus extraction’ that was required in the colonial and post-colonial capitalist economies was unprecedented to the pastoral communities’ precarious ecosystems’ as they saw the single sector economy split into three: pastoral, peasant and town, resulting in a neglected and undercut position of society that suffers to this day, forcing many pastoralists to urbanise and adapt to the more profitably emerging commercial sectors.

Therefore, the Aqal finds itself out of depth in the more permanent settlements in towns and cities, it no longer has the task of being a site of labour and containing wealth stores in the form of cattle. Similarly the homestead is no longer defined by journey in the literal sense that the nomadic one is. This sedentary lifestyle combined with a more rigid and standardly educated society, sees the roles of the family unit change. The mother has her identity stripped, she is no longer a home maker in the literal sense and the architecture now has a standardised form of notation, devised by men in architectural offices. The metal shack is the site of this change but how can we intervene and return to it this aspect of ritual and journey. Transformation but not in a contained and recognisable form.



The Journey Understood through Sound

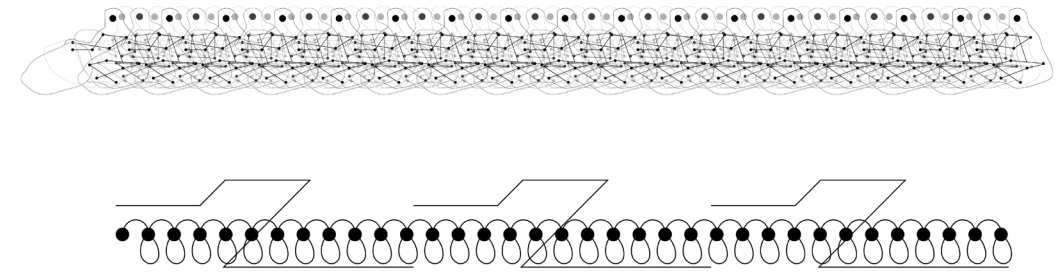
Research and Design Results

This next phase of design saw the investigation of sites of collaboration; what indicated them and what set up the conditions for spaces to come about.

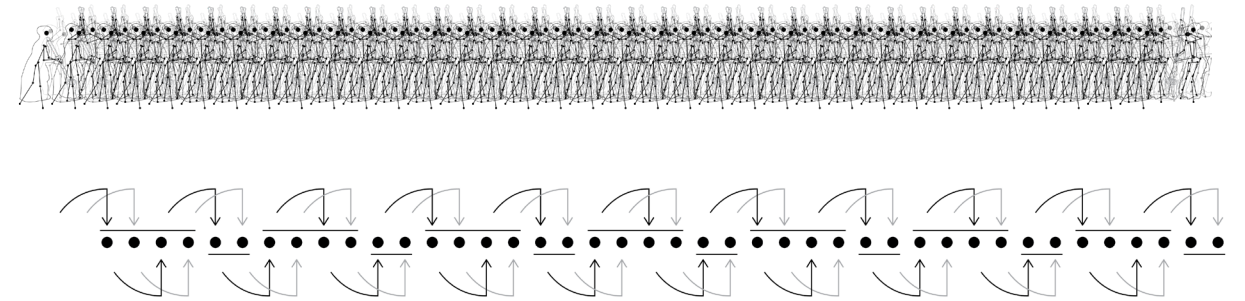
In the traditional hut collaboration is manifested by the ritual into the built elements, therefore in order to eventually bring out these architectural elements, as mentioned previously, I looked at the companion of ritual: song. The work song assumes many roles, at some points it's a companion, easing the labourer's load, at others it's a distraction singing of better days and prosperous futures; it can also be a warning; either to the cattle of wild beasts of the horizon or to young girls of the dangers of marriage. I initially explored the correlation between song and journey, the extends of sound create a spatial threshold for movement, the camel herder finishes his song before ushering his herd into their pen for the night. Then, I chose 5 work songs: The Labourer's song, the pestle and mortar song, the milk churning song, the weaving song and the camel-watering song. I knew that each of these songs had very specific spatial thresholds and thus they helped inform the masterplan and give spatiality to the vast and impersonal site. The project calls into question the issue of notation, its validity in architectural design and the consequences of a building culture that does without a tangible one. The songs were an opportunity to ascribe a form of notation to this building culture. This exercise was intuition led and self referential. This is important as it represents the elements of traditional nomadic design that I want to guide the design of the project. By taking the human measurements that are used to design every part of the Aqal, it ensures that the architectural elements are in the same way intrinsically tied to the dweller. This resulted into an abstract representation of the architectural possibilities that can be drawn directly from the intangible.

Songs guide the body and create movement through space. I selected several work songs and created a form of notation to represent it. This was intuition led and self-referential. This is important as it represents the elements of traditional nomadic design that I want to guide the design of the project. By taking the human measurements that are used to design every part of the Aqal, it ensures that the architectural elements are in the same way intrinsically tied to the dweller. This resulted into an abstract representation of the architectural possibilities that can be drawn directly from the intangible. I created a system of notation based on the beat, rhythm tone, and exchange. Through this system the songs became a series of rises, falls, breaks and moments of repetition, representing both movement and song. The initial experimental phase saw me attempt to loosely ascribe architectural elements to the lines, dots and dashes of the 'songlines', this iterative process allowed me to come to creating a series of 'rules' to guide the design that lead to my final designs.

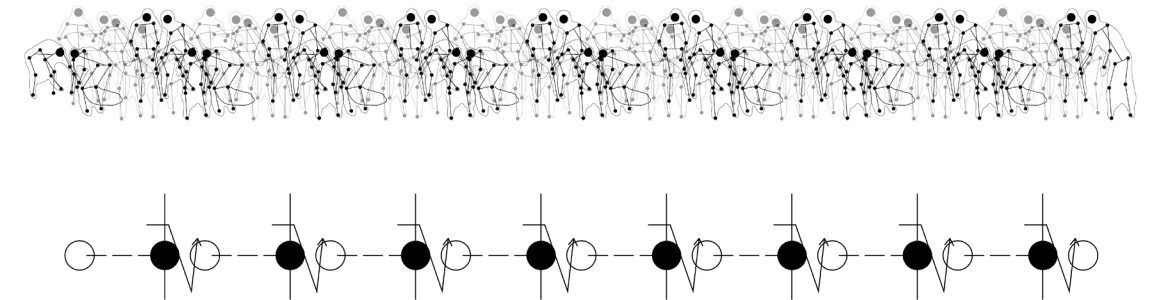
the milk churning song



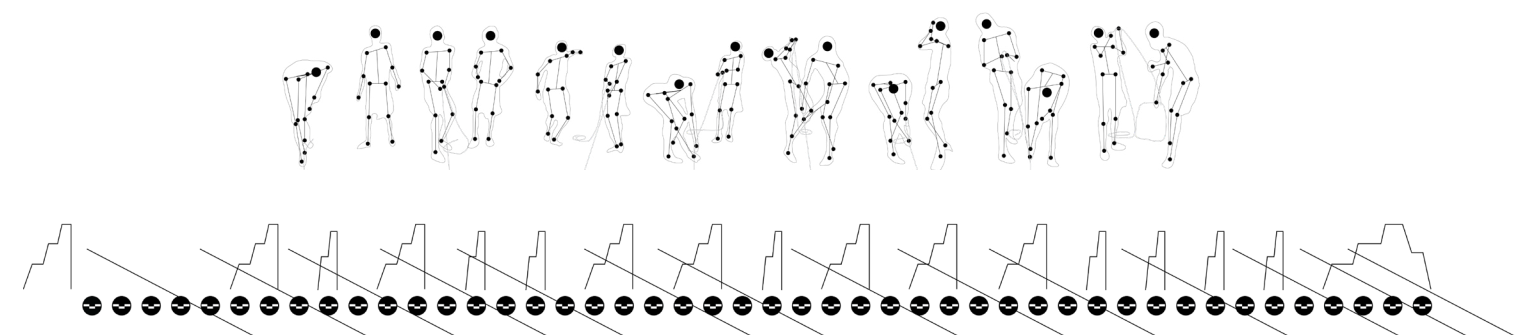
the pestle and mortar song



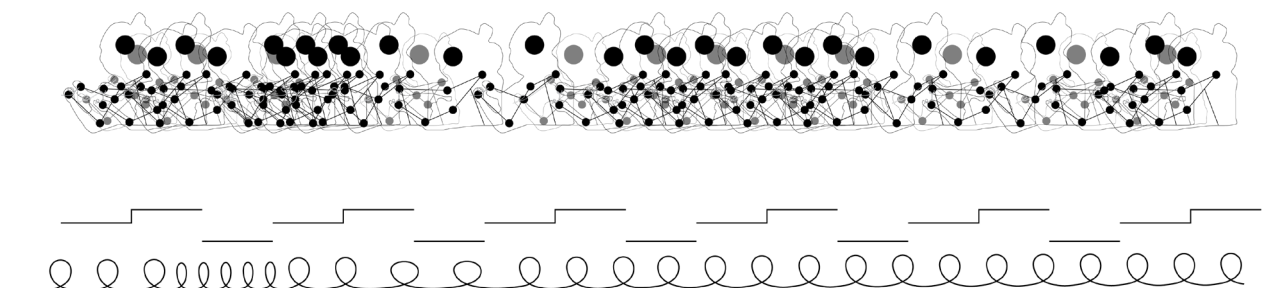
the labourers' song



the camel watering song



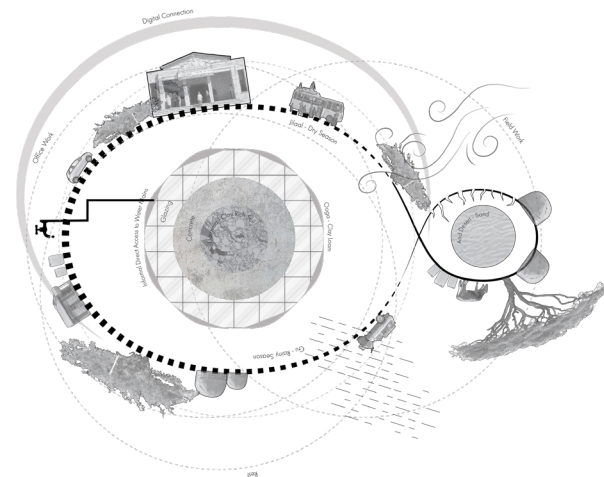
the weaving song



Water is life. In the context of Somaliland and Hargeisa specifically, this is especially critical. Large regions of the city periphery are not connected to the main water system, specifically the project site. Although projects are now underway to connect the site area to a water treatment facility in the Geed Deebale botanical gardens outside of the city boundaries, even regions that are connected to the mains experience water insecurity and are plagued by dry spells; a family might have running water for four days of the week. To supplement this, it was important to affirm how water is intrinsic to the identity of three actors chosen: a city dweller, a pastoral nomad, and a member of the herd. By creating diagrams inspired by portals to create their identity, it showed how different each of their relationships to water were. Although they were all equally dependable on it, the city dweller had more access to it being also able to rely on private suppliers. This exploration and research helped inform the site location: in a floodplain next to a river bed. Although at the building scale the slopes are not obvious they characterise the geology of the site and thus informs the movement throughout it.



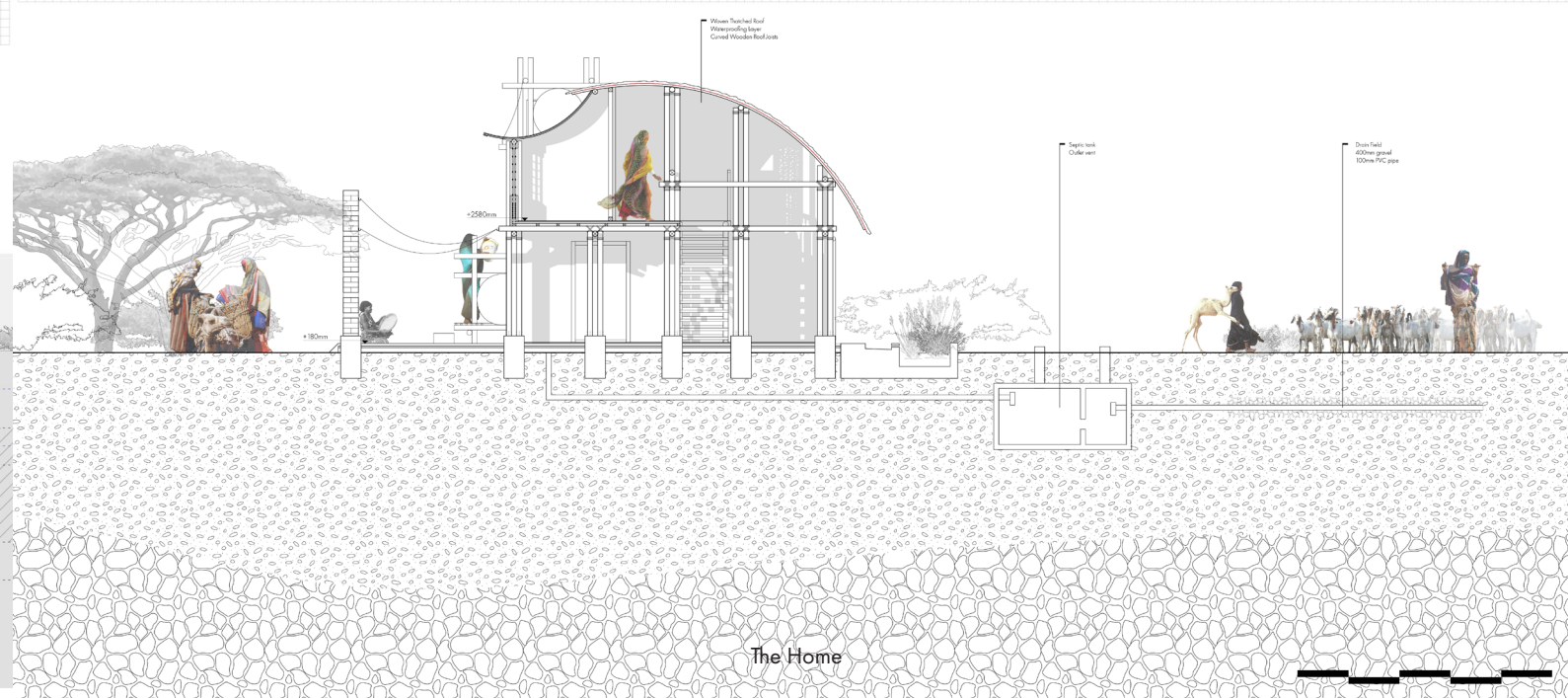
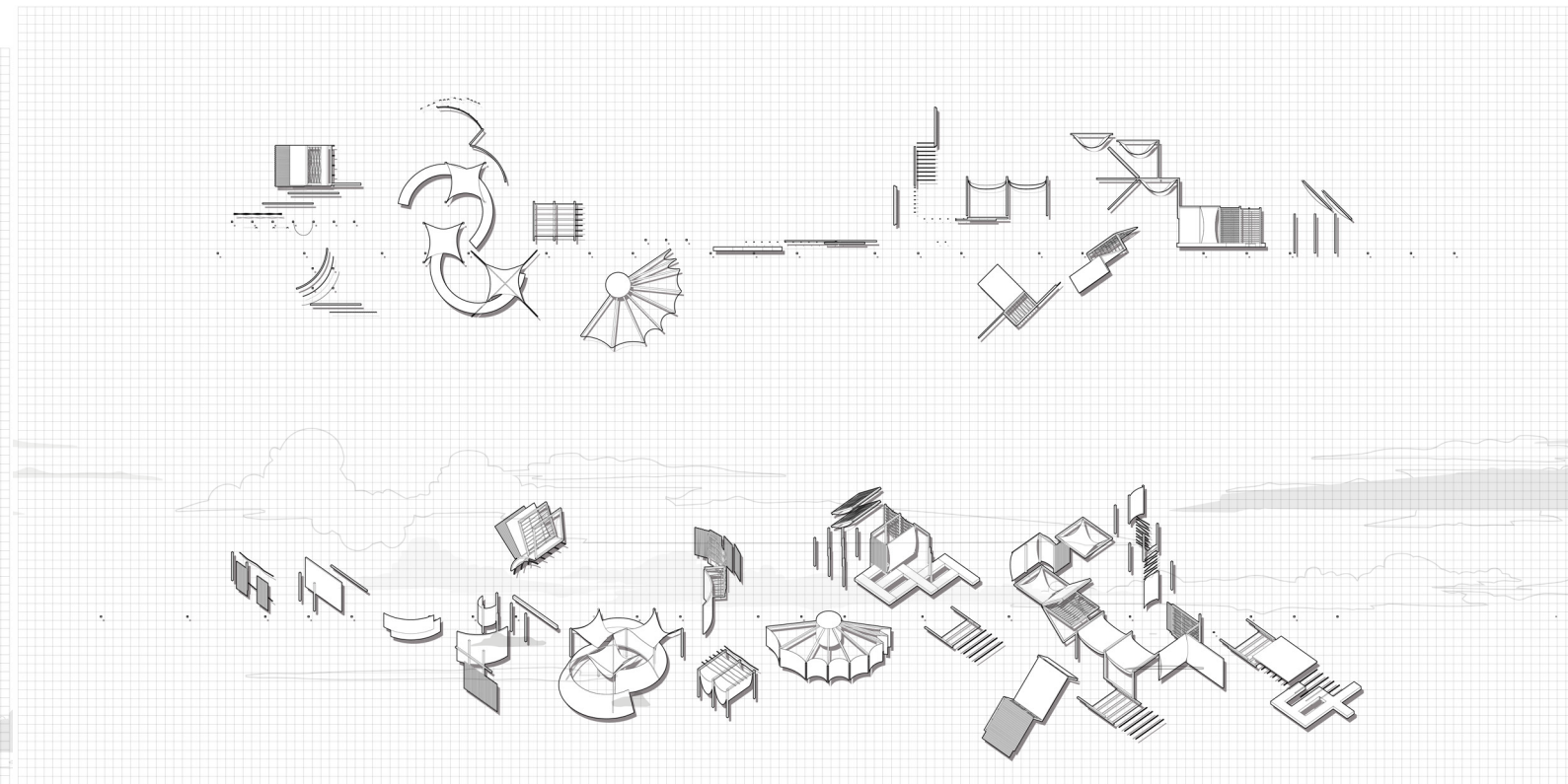
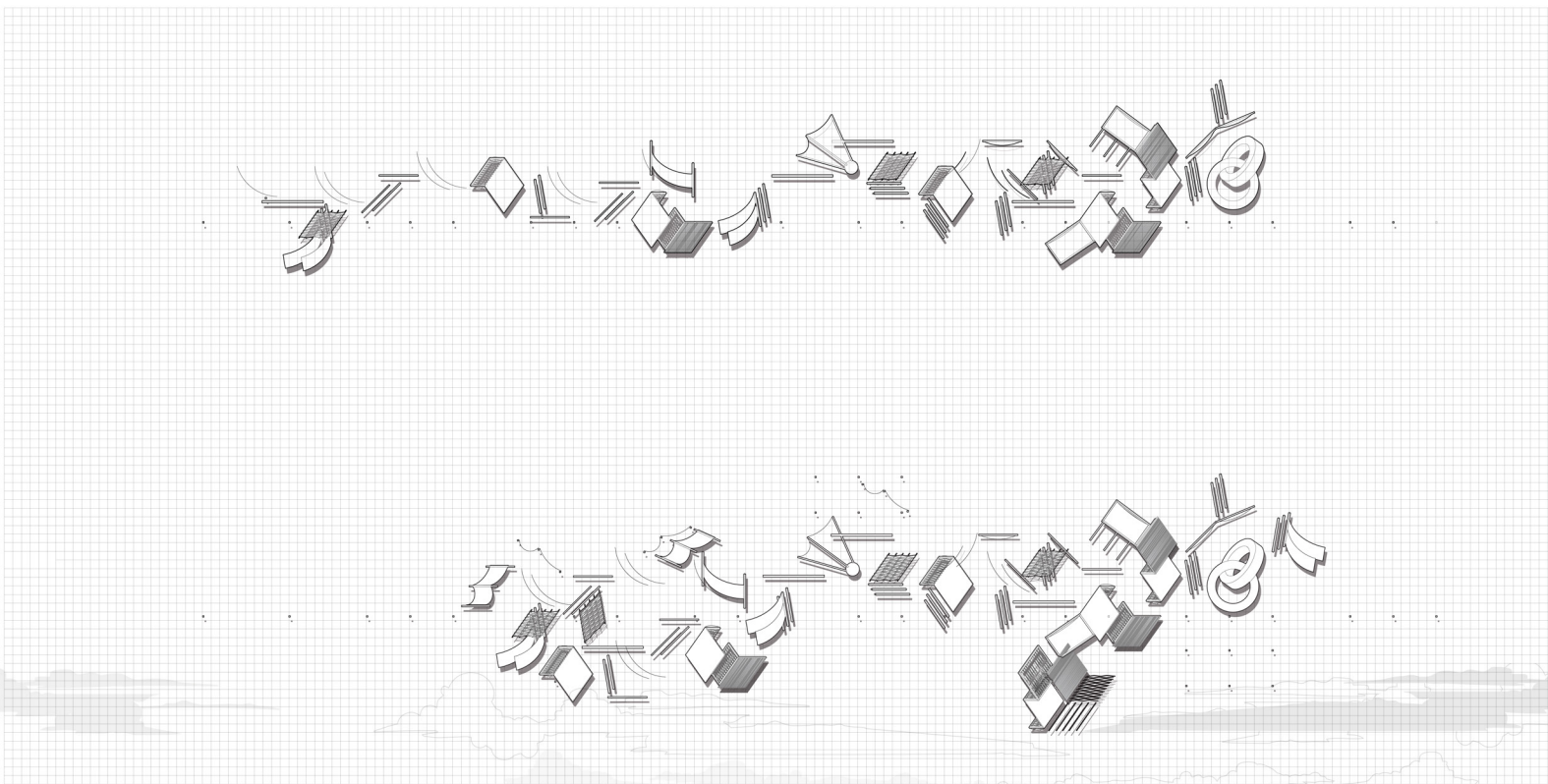
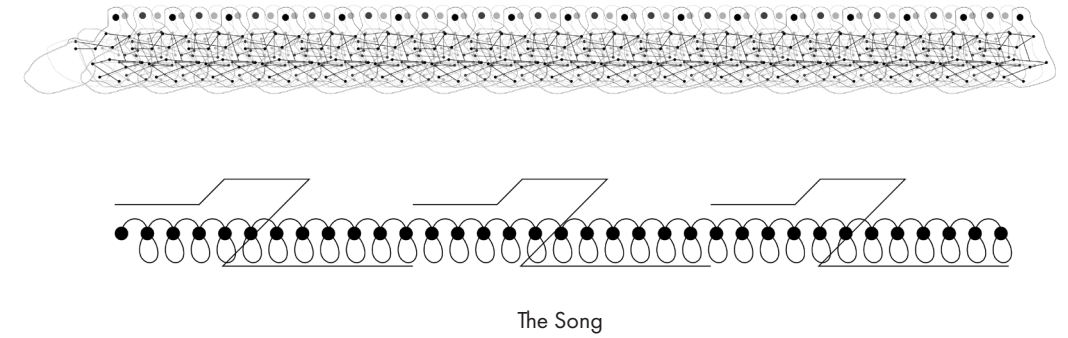
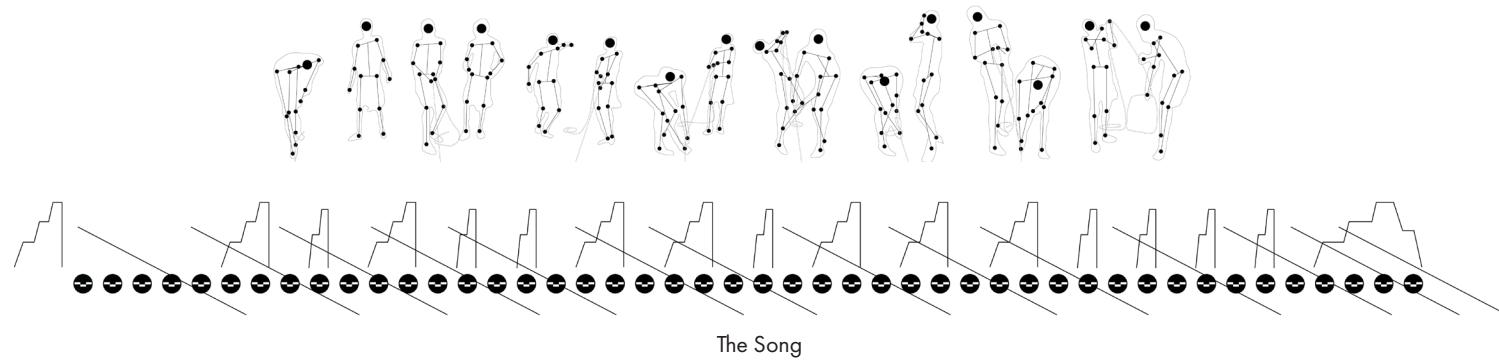
The Nomad



The City Dweller

Once the site was chosen, the landscape was traced to further realise the function of the project: reimagining the watering hole or the communal act of retrieving water from the well. The site has a combination of sandstone and gravel, which both traps and absorbs rainwater. However rainwater slopes down dragging along the loose top sand creating temporary grooves in the landscape before momentarily gathering in the riverbank before being absorbed. Since it only rains a few weeks of the year, this problem gave the project the aim of retaining rainwater for reuse by the community. Given how inland the site is the issue of water salinity levels were not a problem as filtered sand river pumps would be utilised to draw up clean groundwater through boreholes. Given the appropriate depth of alluvium in the site, this would allow for enough water to be pumped to power 4 to 5 families daily water usage per pump.

The form of the two structural interventions: the well and the home, were informed by the exploration of notation in translating sing to architecture; the construction was informed by the vernacular. The spine of the project was to create something recognisable and repeatable thus the loadbearing structure of both interventions is made from eucalyptus poles which are abundant in Hargeisa as they are used for scaffolding on the plethora of building projects across the city. They have spans of up to 3 metres and can reach heights of 15 metres. A key important factor in choosing the materials was whether the knowledge of their use existed. This draws back to the building culture of the Aqal. For the wall infills wattle and daub as well as earthen brick was selected. This takes inspiration from the woven components of the Aqal, creating different types of materiality to eventually be applied to the different layers of privacy and public, resulting in a dynamic environment. For the groundwork of the well, fired earthen bricks will be used to give texture to areas that become dangerously slippery when wet during the brief rainy season. This provides a source of thermal mass and is preferred to the regularly used concrete, which cracks due to the intense heat. The bricks also add to and diversify the building culture, putting the power of building back into the users hands. However of all the structures the well is the most complicated this is because it is intended to be a piece of infrastructure, built by professionals. This explains the difference between the two interventions, one requires dug foundations and a more than 6 metre deep borehole, whereas the housings foundations sit above the groundline, only a septic tank permeating it. The septic tank does not negate the temporality of the project, in this context they can be covered and uncovered as per inhabitant. For both of the interventions their form and structure tells many stories, one is of the visitor climbing up stairs to fill their jerrycan with water before descending to sit in the shade and talk with their community and exiting out of the shade into the unknown; the other is that of the raindrop, which first hits the slope of tarp, gathers in its dip before spilling out into a catchment basin, here it is either drunk by a thirsty visitor or absorbed into the ground where it is absorbed by the alluvial soil beneath before being drawn up through the well.



Conclusion

The project asked a lot of questions and they have all been confronted if not answered in some way. The primary question of the project, formed in the initial phase was: **To what extent can ephemerality be maintained and represented in static dwelling?**

Answering this questions requires the reframing of what architecture is, if we understand that architecture is not just the plans and sections produced at the final stage but rather every crossroad that was approached at the design process then architecture even in its most permamnet form is infact a vessel for movement and the ephemeral.

Implications and Recommendations

The final design showcases something rudimentary and elemental yet also adaptable and exciting, it is a stage for social interaction both in its manufacturing as well as in its usage. Its wider implications on the architectural profession is that in showcasing the design possibilities not only when the scale is brought down to the individual level but also when the non-tangible is considered a design driver just as much as climate is. It sees architecture being treated as a continual craft. This can be seen in the dips of the tarps that make up the well's rooflines, they create moments. In the sun they offer shading and in the rain they become a gathering place for the rain and spill out onto the basins in the topography, replenishing the soil water content that is utilised by the well itself.

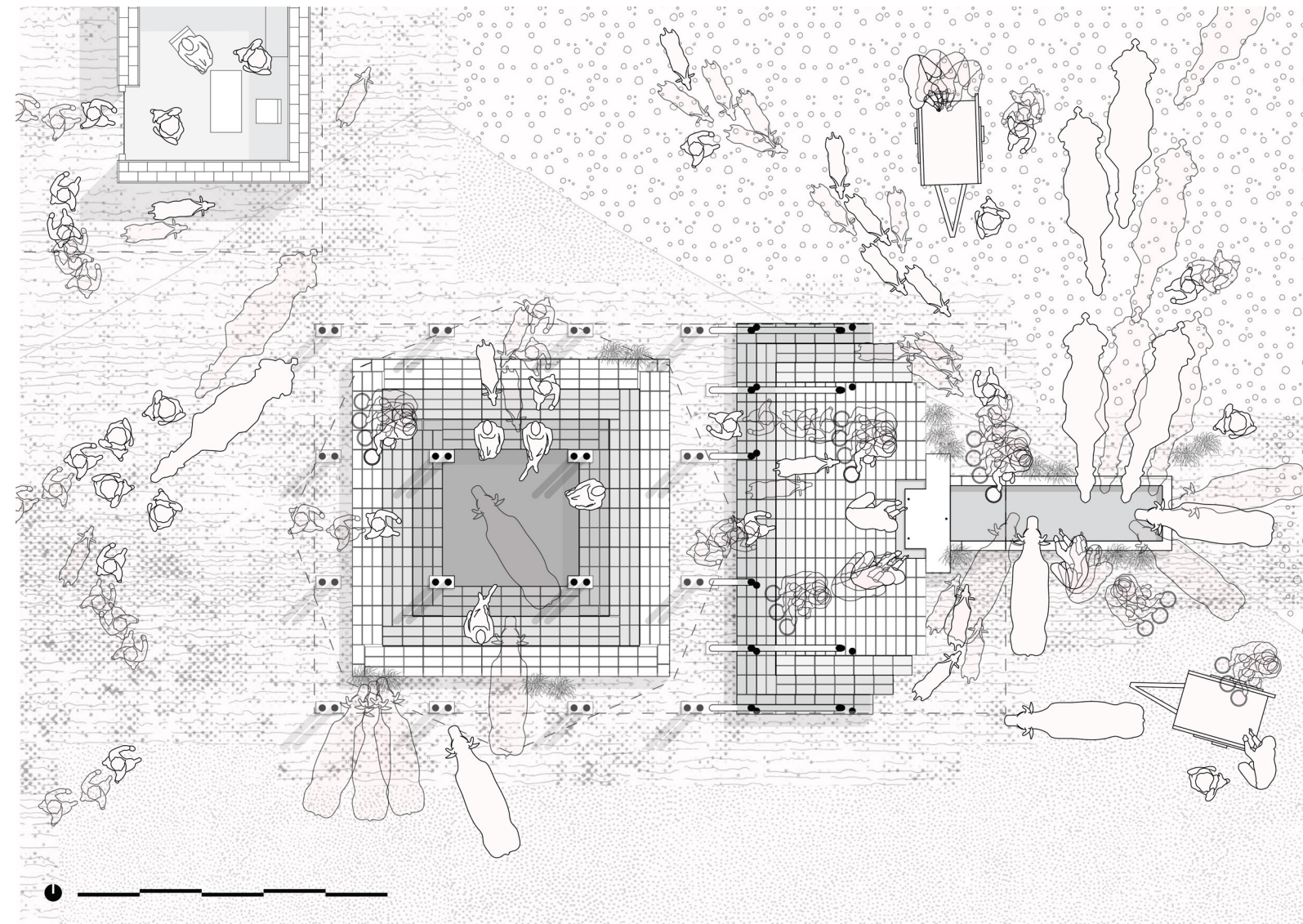
This project also highlights the importance of the initial research phase of any architectural problem and maintains the importance of understanding the vernacular culture. Architecture sees at every level a small violence being enacted, whether that is the removing of native vegetation or biodiversity for a concrete foundation, or tearing down a local staple to make way for something new. Although this project is not as temporary as the nomads hut (it is not transportable on a camel's back), it has a minimal footprint and uses lightweight materials. The final design is in fact not even final it is only one example of the possibilities of this process. Where I listened to the songs and interpreted swoops as gathering points in tarpaulin another person could have interpreted them as the opening and closing of doors and had a completely different outcome. The project represents the possibilities of embracing intuition and drawing out a method from it.

Reflection

On a personal note, this project was a moment of introspection. It pushed me to look between the lines and do a lot of relearning. It saw me questioning the conventional methods of notation that I fell into time and time again and having to make compromises on what I was capable of showing.

The process of translating the songs into architectural language was the most complex part for me. I found myself repeatedly tracing and retracing my steps apprehensive of emerging into the design phase.

I was also apprehensive of losing sight of my initial aim of creating something recognisable whether that be in method and form. However, I found that through exploring sound and methods of representation, although it gave me the opportunity to honour the very 'journey' that I explored in A1. It was the opportunity to reinterpret the journey rather than mereanalyse it or describe it. Once a distinct method was deduced, I found myself creating these recognisable forms and expanding my definition of recognisability and vernacular.



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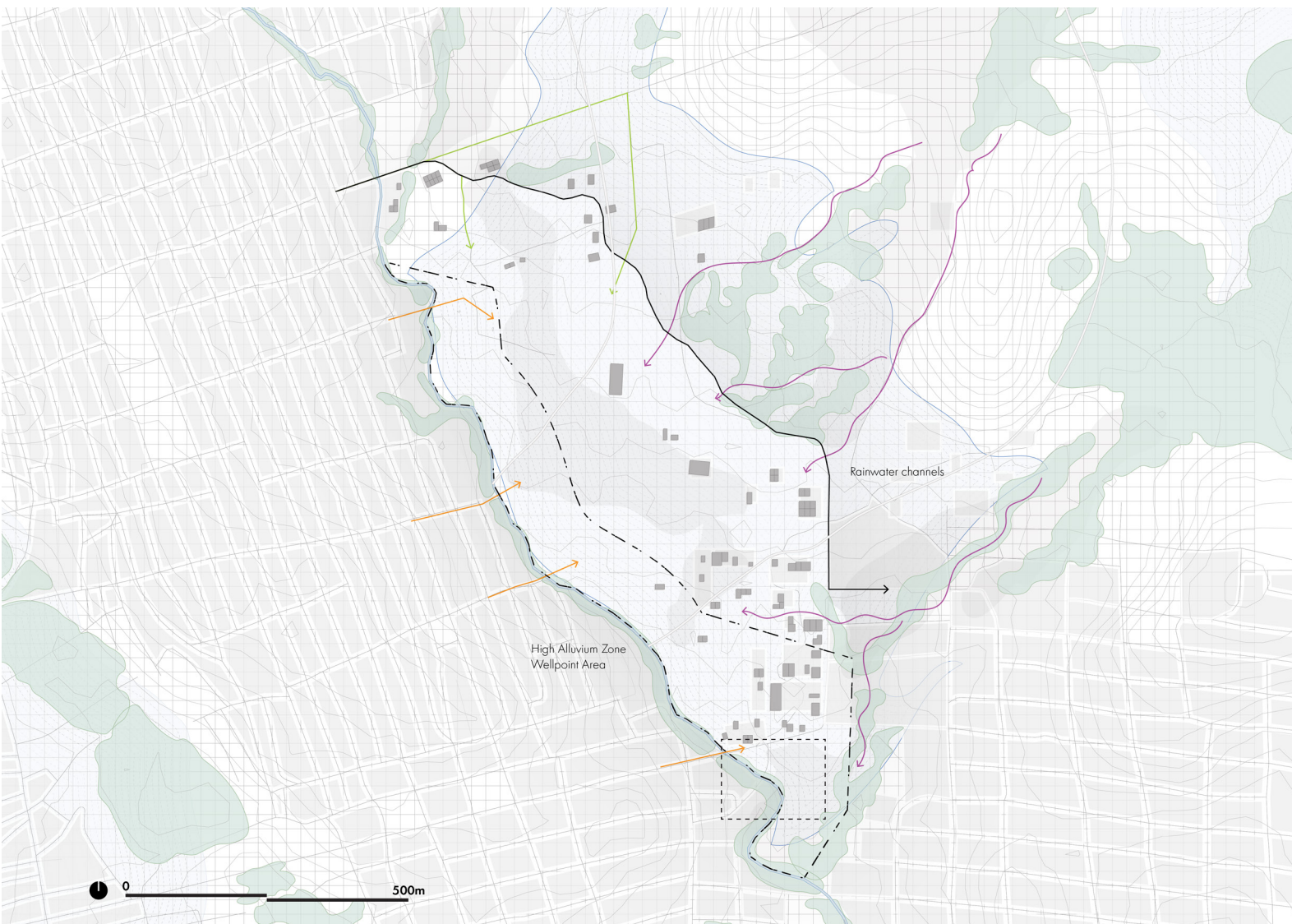
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Figures

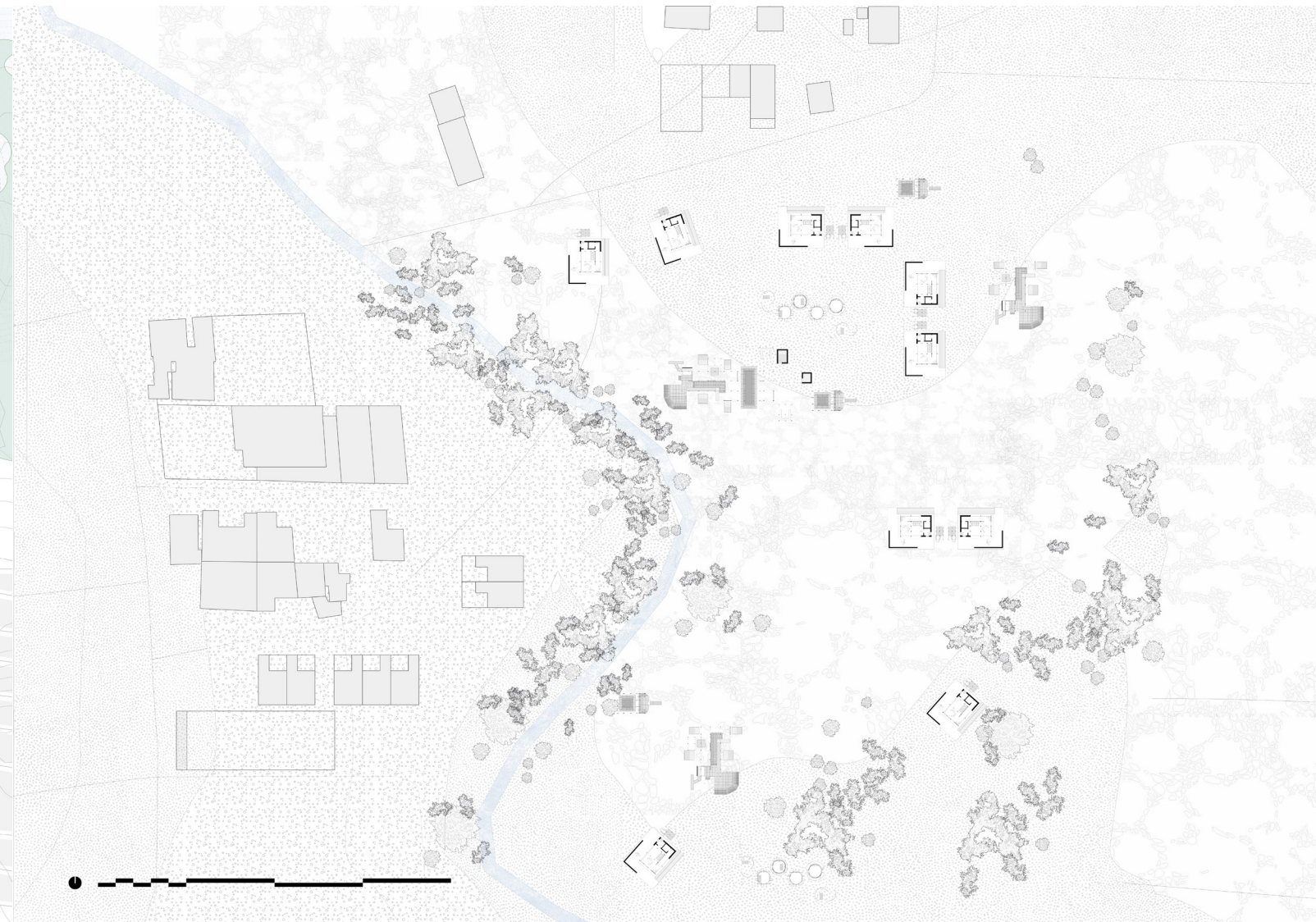
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Acknowledgement

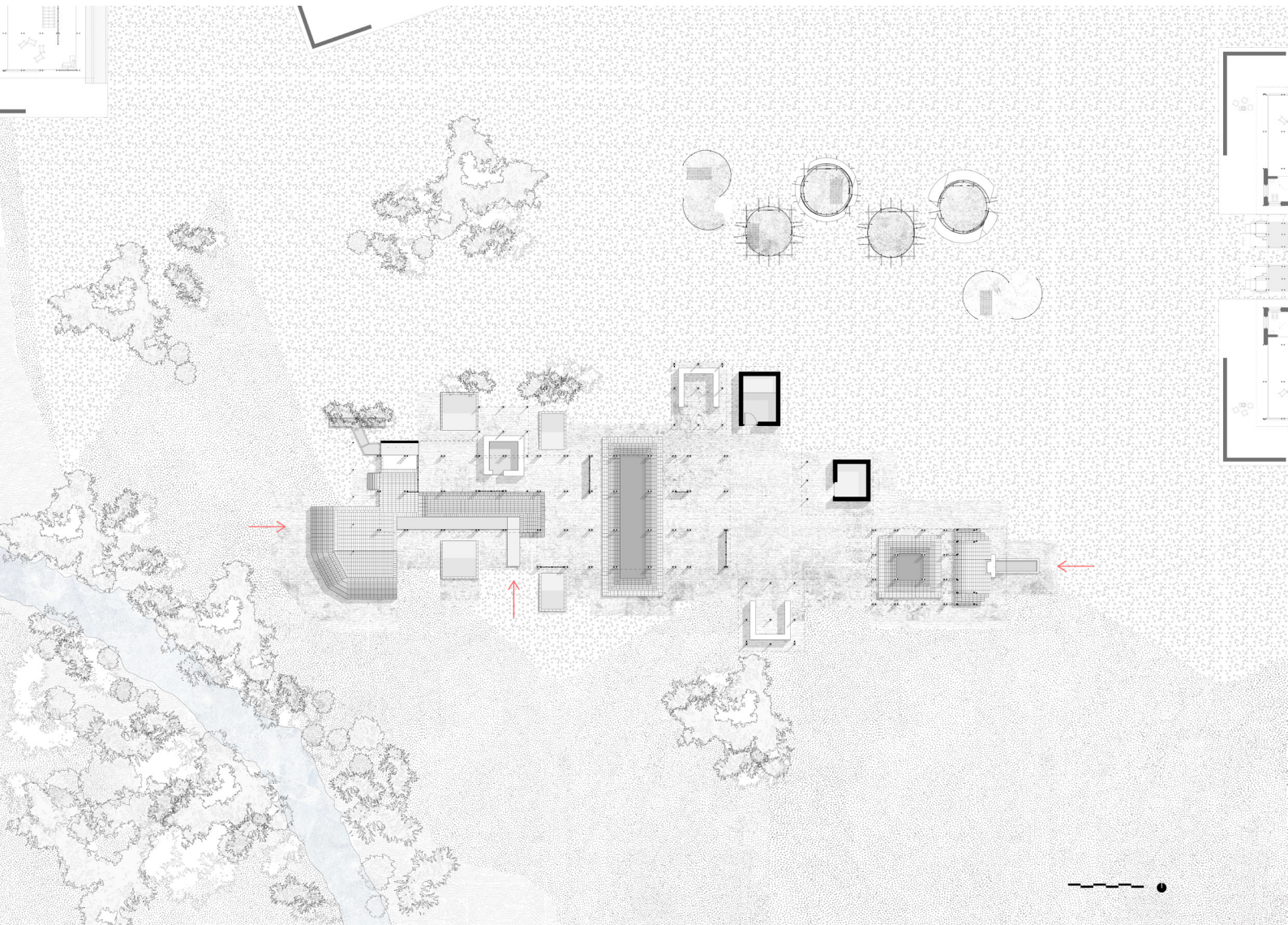
I would like to express my gratitude to the my community whose support shaped this project from its inception to its output. Mahad Sanid.



Site Map



Fragment Plan

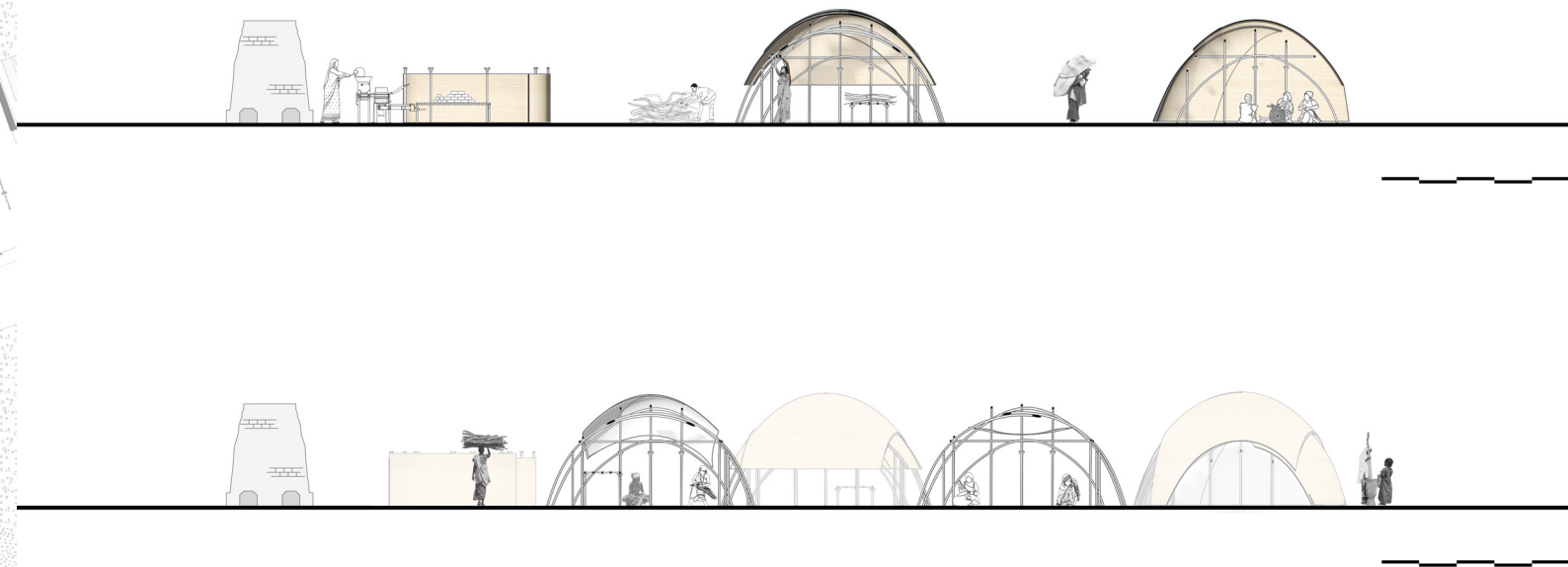


Production Huts

1:5 Details



Housing Unit Ground Floor Plan



Production Huts