

THE CIVIC CLOISTER

A New Threshold as a Civic Reclamation of the Oxford Public Library

Oxford Westgate Library, Oxford, OX1 1PE

How can the threshold of a public library be reimagined as a civic cloister that fosters making, exchange, and community engagement in a commercially dominated context?

The purpose of this project was to address the spatial and semantic marginalisation of the Oxford Westgate Library. Currently, the library's identity as a vital civic institution has been severely weakened as it is hidden away within the Westgate Shopping Centre and overshadowed by commercial space.

Site observations revealed that the library goes unnoticed, burried beneath the heavy footfall and consumer focus of the retail space. This misses a vital opportunity to capture that public crowd and channel it into community engagement; the very thing people most fundamentally require from a public library today.

In response, The Civic Cloister proposes relocating the library's primary entrance directly onto Queen Street. The proposal introduces a semi-permeable colonnade inspired by the prominence of arches within the Oxford context, seamlessly merging the street fabric with the first-floor library site. The new entrance hosts spaces for creative making, public events, and everyday pause to actively encourage community engagement. This architectural intervention reclaims the threshold, shifting it from a commercial pass-through into a welcoming civic space centred entirely on citizenship, connection, and community rather than consumption.



Flat Diorama

Claire Walters

1:20 Physical Model



Adverse Condition

A Site Eroded by Commerce

Historically, the Oxford Public Library served as a vital urban sanctuary and a scholarly alternative to the local tavern. Today, that tavern has been replaced by the Westgate Mall.

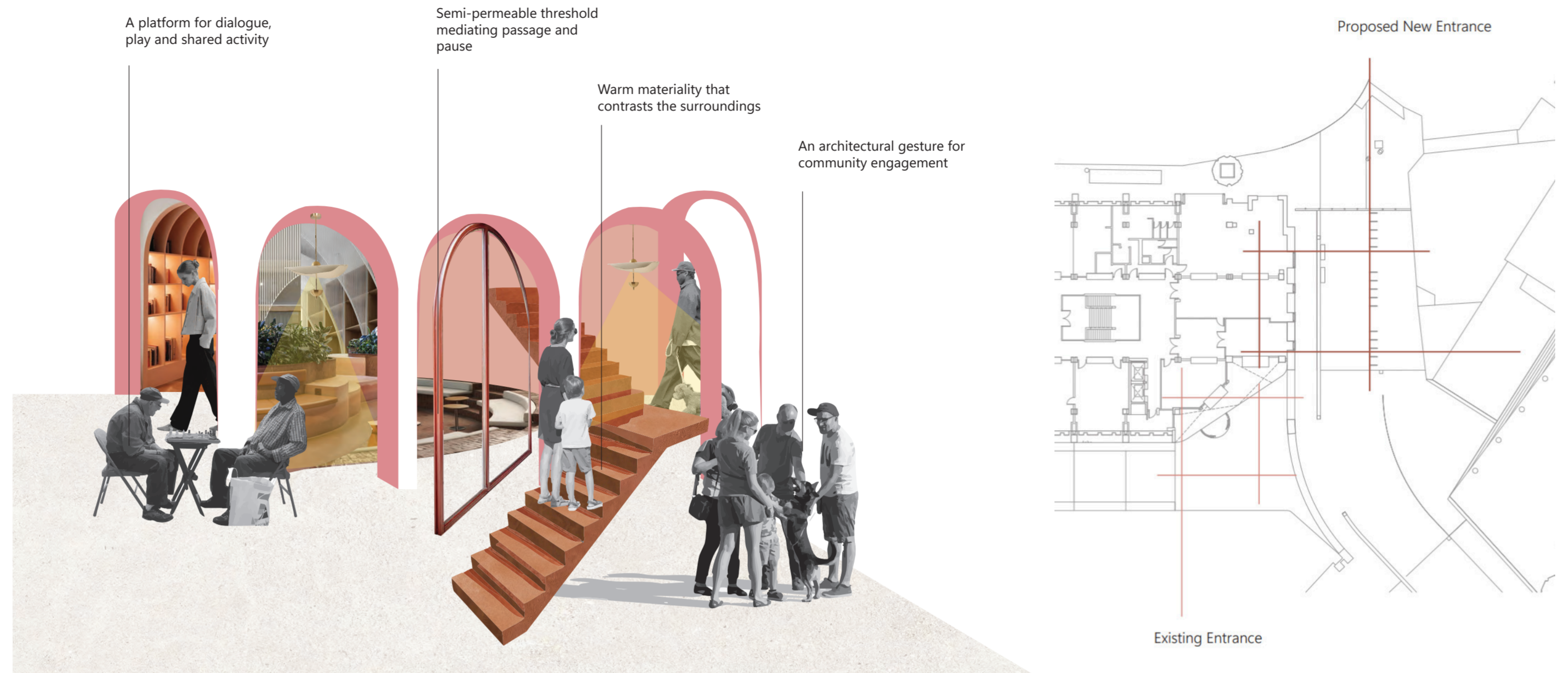
The library's civic identity has been compromised by the absorption of the institution into the shopping centre and the library was renamed "Westgate Library". The retail development effectively acts as a spatial puppeteer—dictating the library's thresholds, signage, circulation, and even its opening hours. Rather than acting as the democratic heart of the city, the library has been reduced to a passive "non-place" that people only encounter incidentally while shopping.

Westgate - The Puppeteer of Oxford:

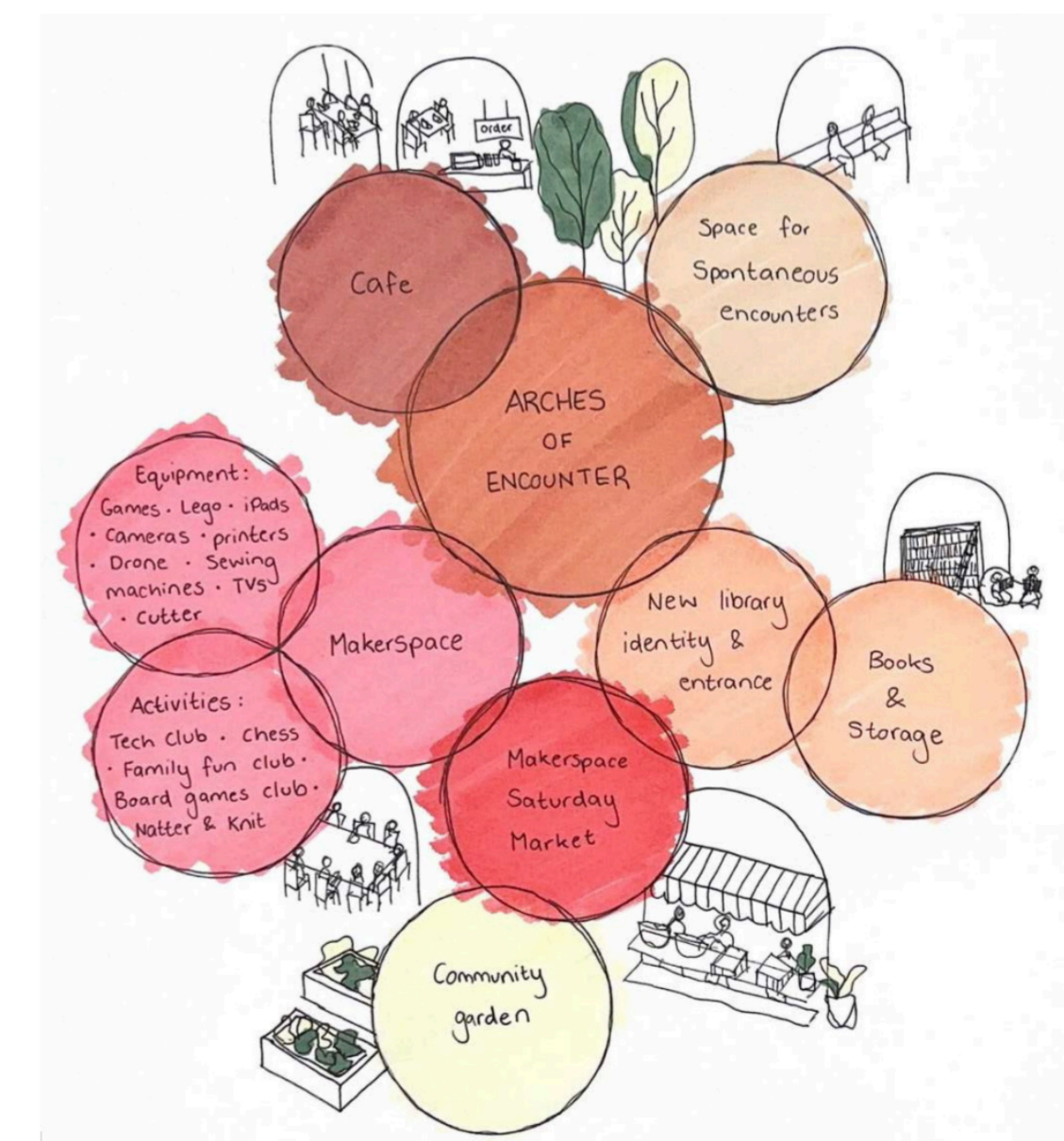


Claire Walters

Collage



DESIGN INTENTION

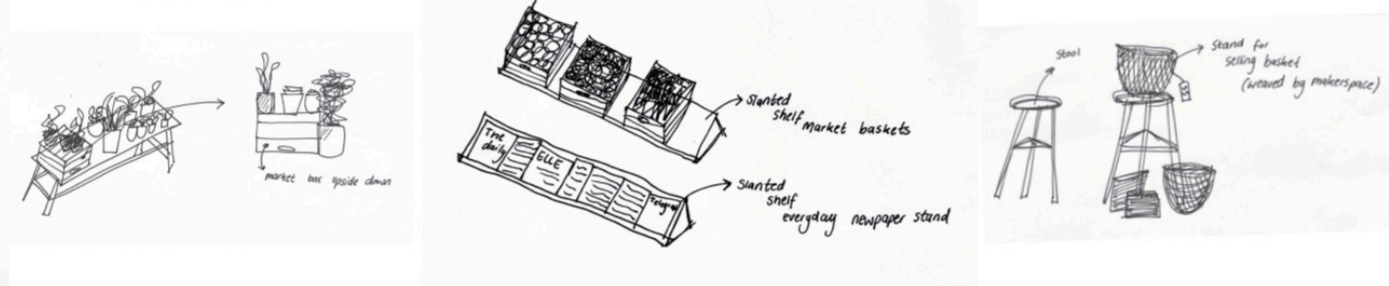


Human-Scale Gesture

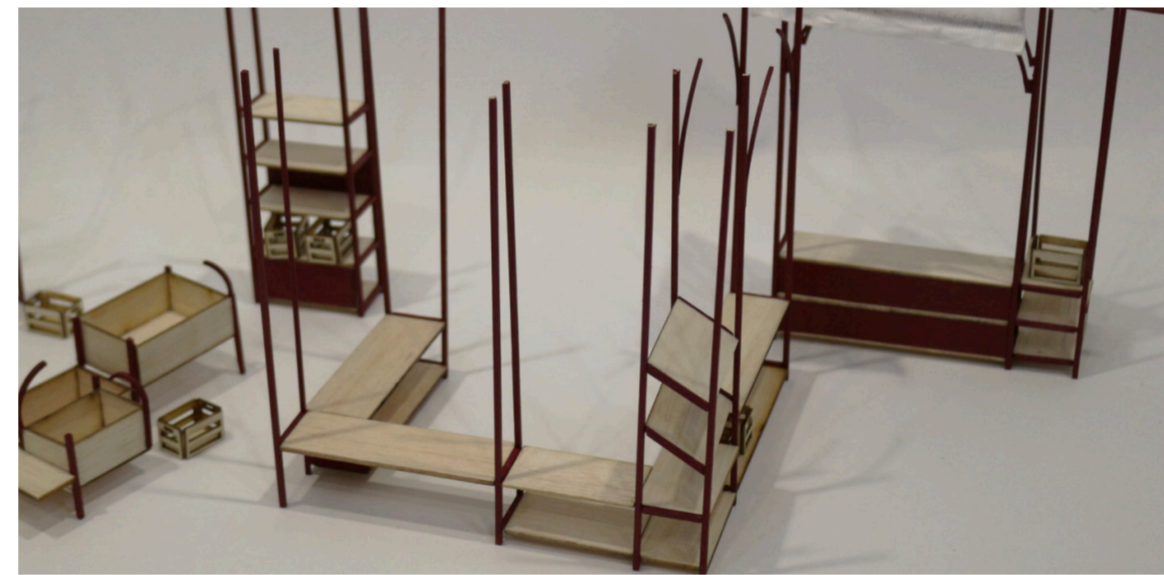
A lightweight, movable aluminium shelving-scheme designed for flexibility. The modular system functions as “furniture”, it can be easily configured to host diverse library activities whether it be makerspace storage, the weekend market, a coffee stall or book shelving.



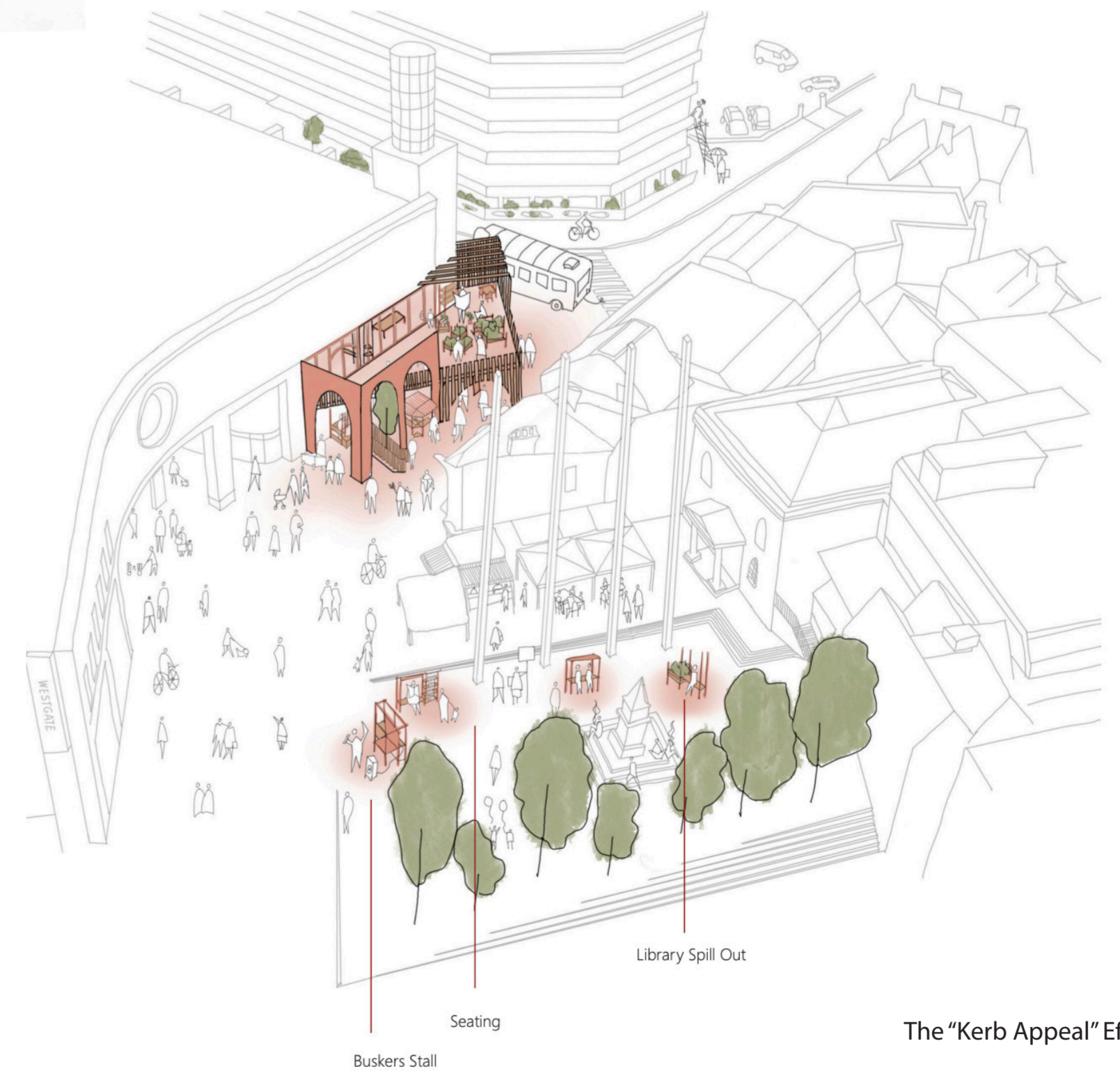
Different Conditions



Architectural Gesture



1:20 Model Pieces

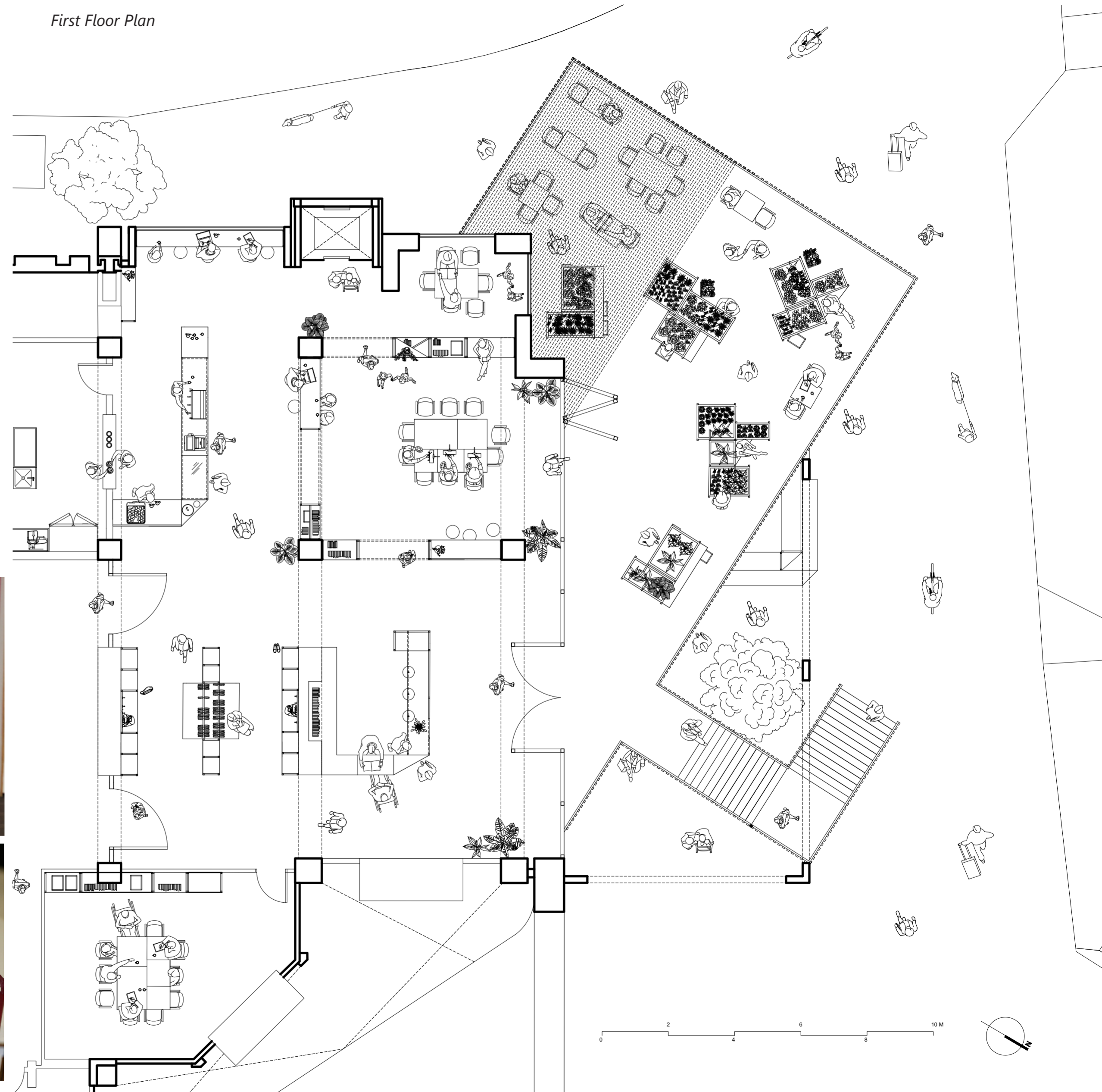


SPATIAL STRATEGY

A community hub where clubs and societies create handmade products and grow fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the week, which are then sold in a Saturday market on the ground floor to support local connection, creativity, and sustainability. This generates income to help struggling community members.



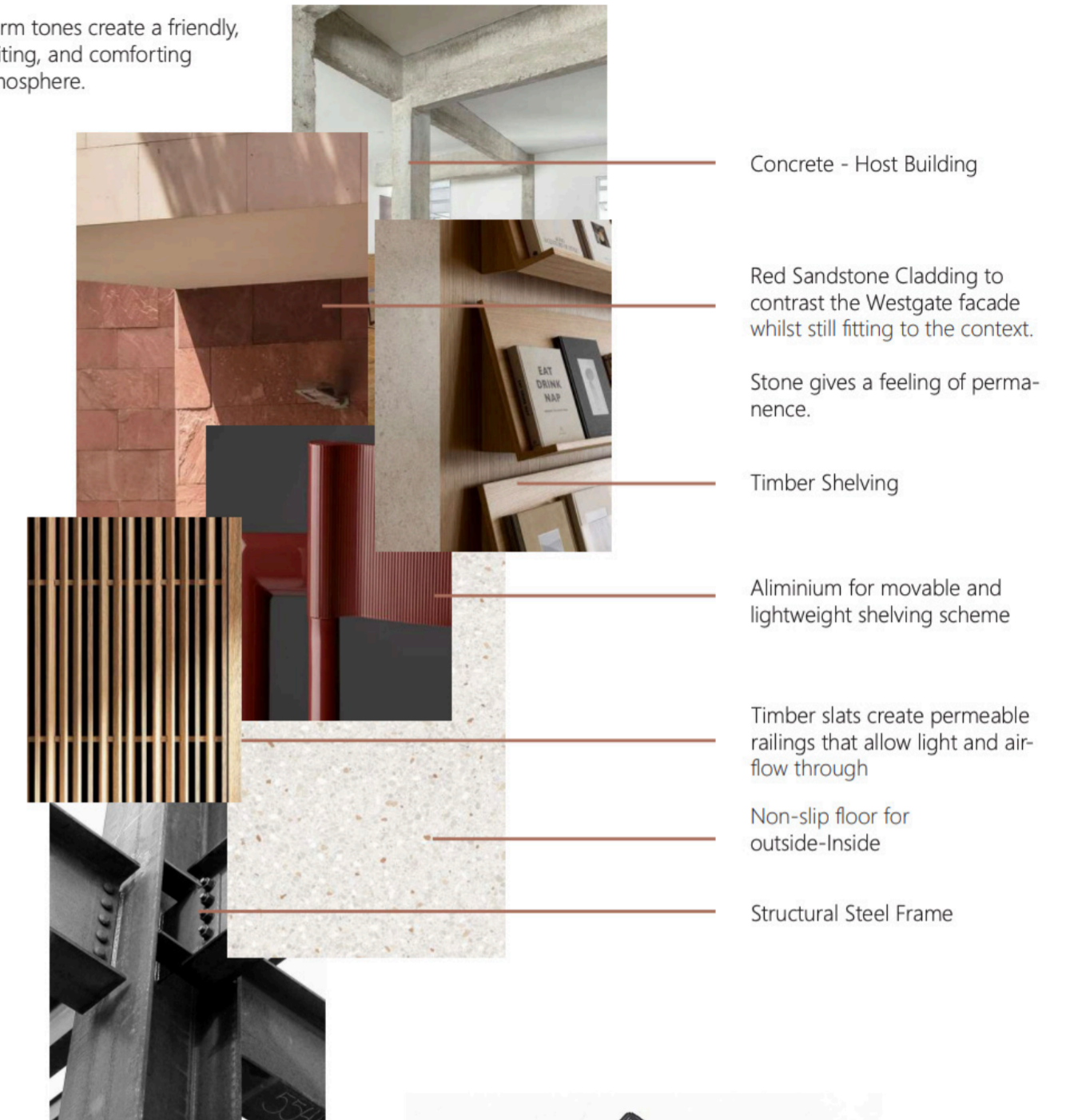
First Floor Plan





Material Strategy

Warm tones create a friendly, inviting, and comforting atmosphere.



Ground Floor Zoning



Floor 1 Zoning

