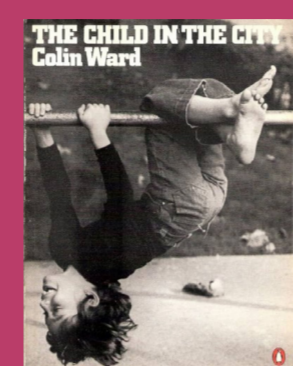


# The Halfway Library

## Design Manifesto

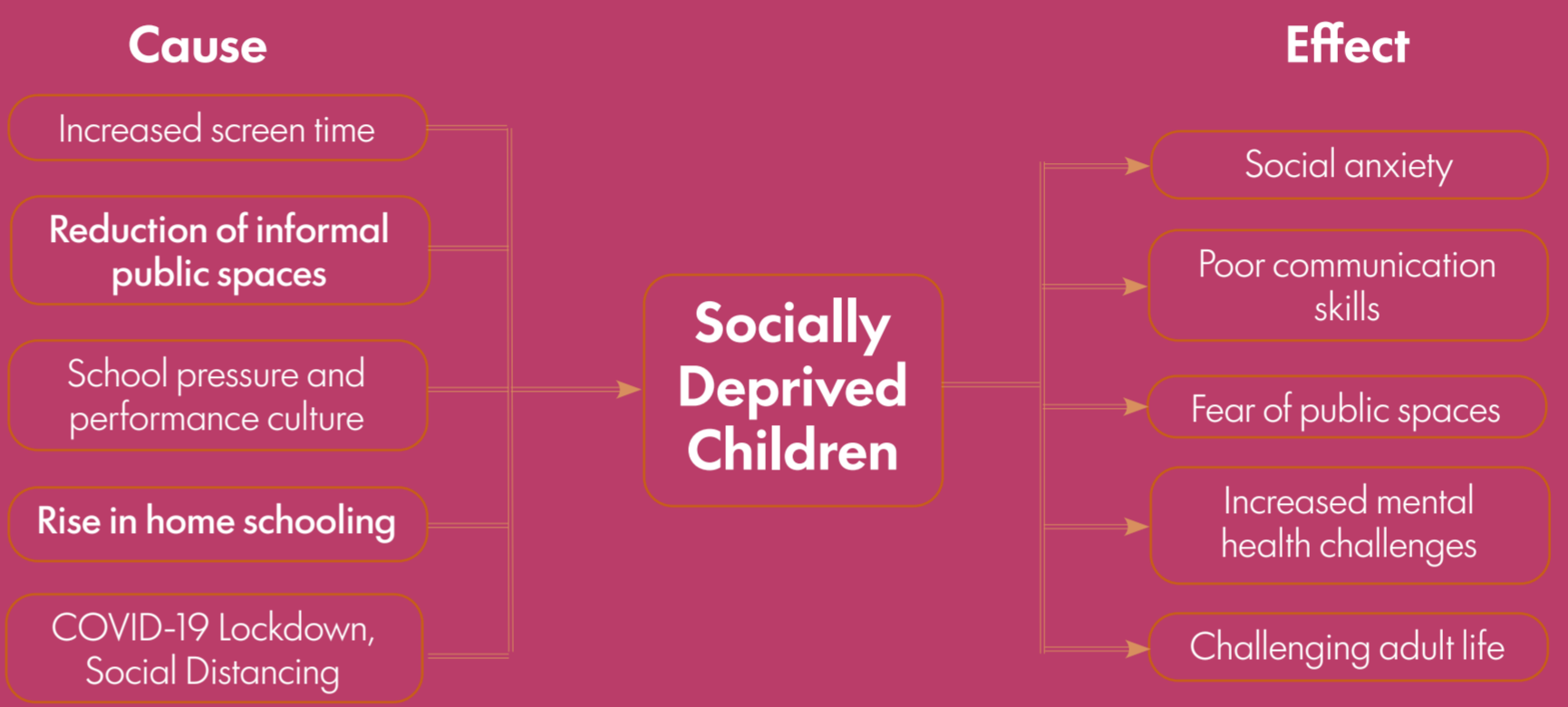
The Halfway Library proposes a third place that bridges home and school, supporting both learning and social development. The project addresses the growing social deprivation among children in Oxford by creating an environment where reading becomes a shared social activity rather than an isolated task. Through a balance of domestic and public spatial qualities, the design offers a range of affordances that support retreat, interaction and play, responding directly to the diverse emotional and behavioural needs of children. During the day, the library accommodates home-schooled children through structured programmes that encourage confidence, social engagement and gradual reintegration into school environments. Beyond school hours, it transforms into an open and inclusive civic space where children can gather, form friendships and develop a sense of belonging. Situated within a historically significant riverside site, the project reclaims underused public space for younger generations, demonstrating how interior architecture can foster accessibility, inclusion and meaningful community connections through socially responsive design.



The Child in the City - Colin Ward

## Socially Deprived Children

*"The modern city child is deprived"*, not through a lack of care but through a lack of meaningful social interaction (Ward, 1990, p.103). Childhood development relies on everyday encounters which cannot be learned in isolation. When these interactions are reduced or removed, children struggle to develop confidence, emotional resilience and social awareness. The growing number of children struggling with anxiety and withdrawal reflects not individual failure but a broader social condition. Social interaction is therefore not a secondary aspect of childhood, but a fundamental condition for healthy development. Addressing social deprivation is therefore central to any architecture that claims to support children or society as a whole.



Urban Playground - Tim Gill

## Lack of Public Spaces for Children

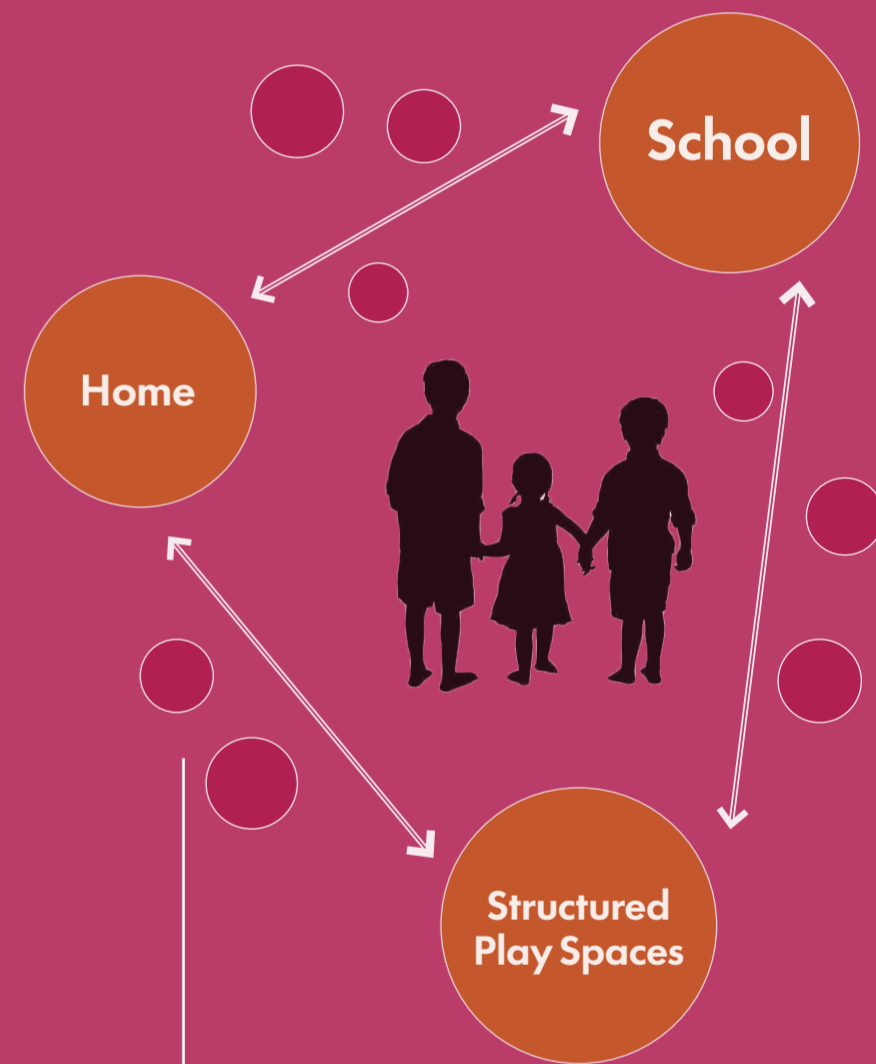
The modern child is increasingly socially deprived by cities designed around adult priorities rather than children's needs. In Oxford, public space serves students, tourists and commuters well, yet offers few places where children can gather, linger and develop independence. As children's daily lives become restricted to journeys between home and school, opportunities for spontaneous social interaction diminish (Bornat, 2025). The result is not only reduced freedom to act and belong but measurable impacts on communication and social competence among children with limited social interaction. A city that invests in every user except its youngest risks deepening social deprivation.



Nearly **half** of children experienced a **decline in social and emotional skills** during COVID-19 (Cattan et al., 2023)

Face-to-face socialising among teenagers has **fallen by over 45%** since the early 2000s (Effective School Solutions, 2024)

**1 in 5** young people report feeling like an **outsider at school** (OECD, 2019)



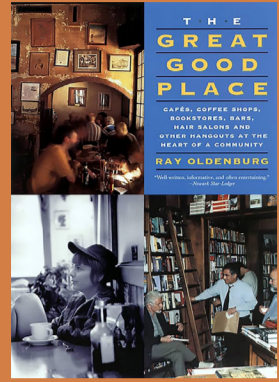
The Halfway Pavilion creates informal "in-between" spaces where children can gather freely, read, play and socialise without pressure or surveillance. These spaces support independence, curiosity and everyday social learning.



The Halfway Pavilion

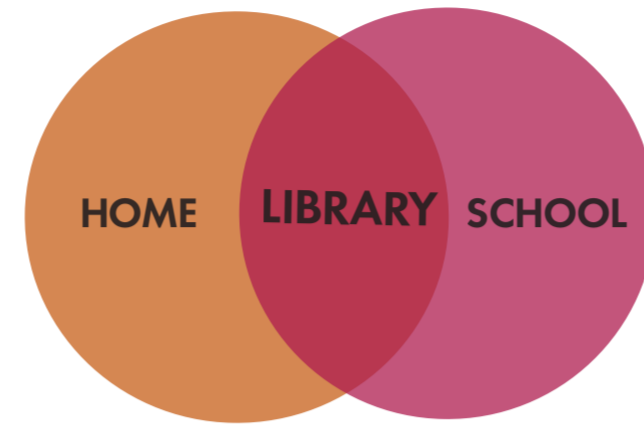
# Library as a Third Place

## A Place for Social Interaction



The Great Good Place  
- Ray Oldenburg

Ray Oldenburg defines the third place as “the core settings of informal public life” existing beyond home and work (Oldenburg, 1989, p.16). While the home remains “the first regular and predictable environment of the growing child” and school reduces the individual to a productive role, the third place provides neutral ground for voluntary and informal gathering (Oldenburg, 1989, p.16). In such spaces, social equality is fostered and conversation becomes the primary activity through which personality and individuality are expressed (Oldenburg, 1989). Libraries have historically embodied this condition, blending domestic comfort with educational structure, operating between home and school as spaces that support social interaction through reading and encounter. The Halfway Library reclaims this role in Oxford, positioning itself as a third place that restores social connection and supports socially deprived children through everyday encounters and collective learning.



## Restoring “Life Between Buildings”

Historically, Fisher Row functioned as a lively social corridor where fishermen, boatmen and local workers gathered along the river, embodying Jan Gehl’s notion of “life between buildings” through everyday encounters and shared activity. Today, despite its rich landscape setting, the site is largely experienced as a transitional route between the railway station and city centre, a place passed through rather than occupied. The proposal restores this social role by transforming the site into a child-centred civic space where reading, gathering and everyday interaction allow children to reclaim a meaningful presence within the city.

### The Past



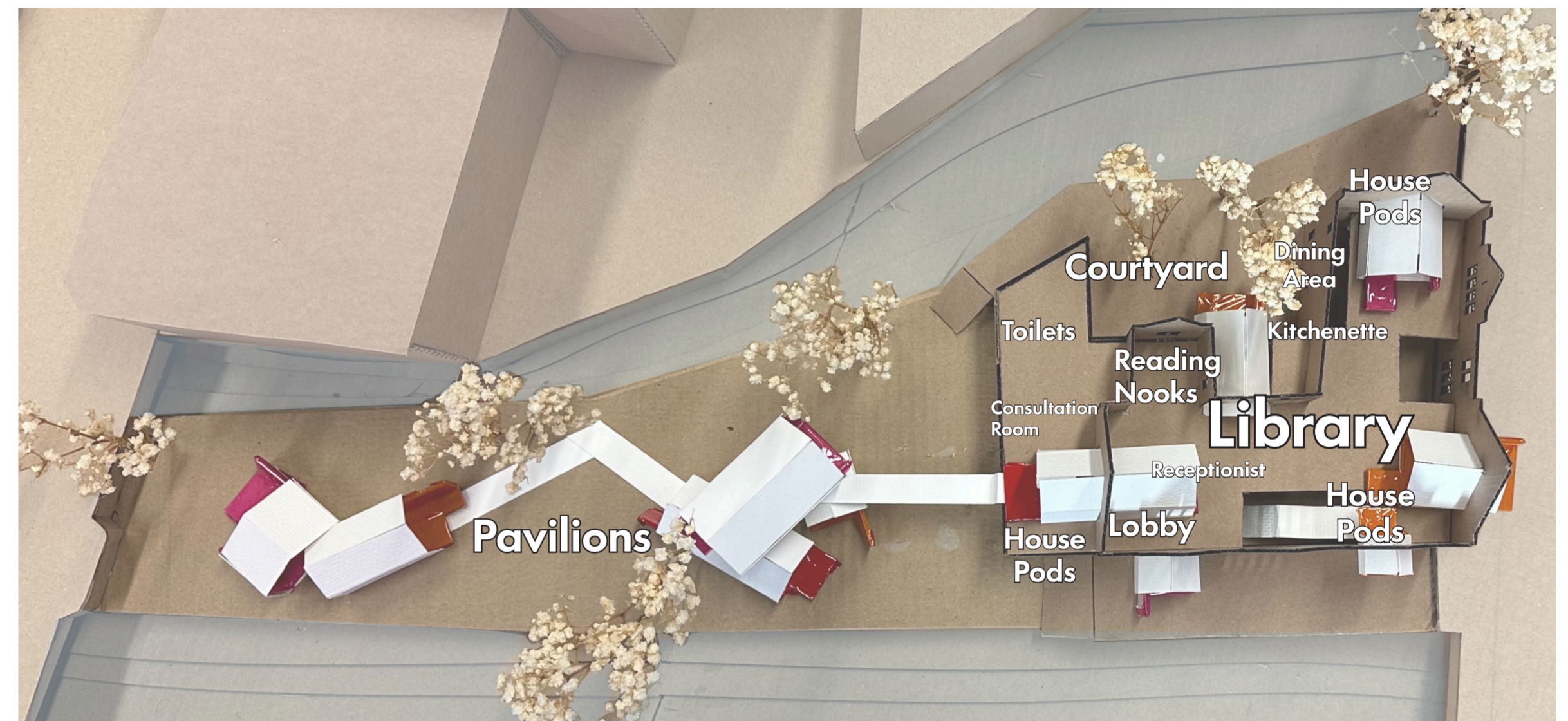
### Locating the Site



### The Present



### The Future



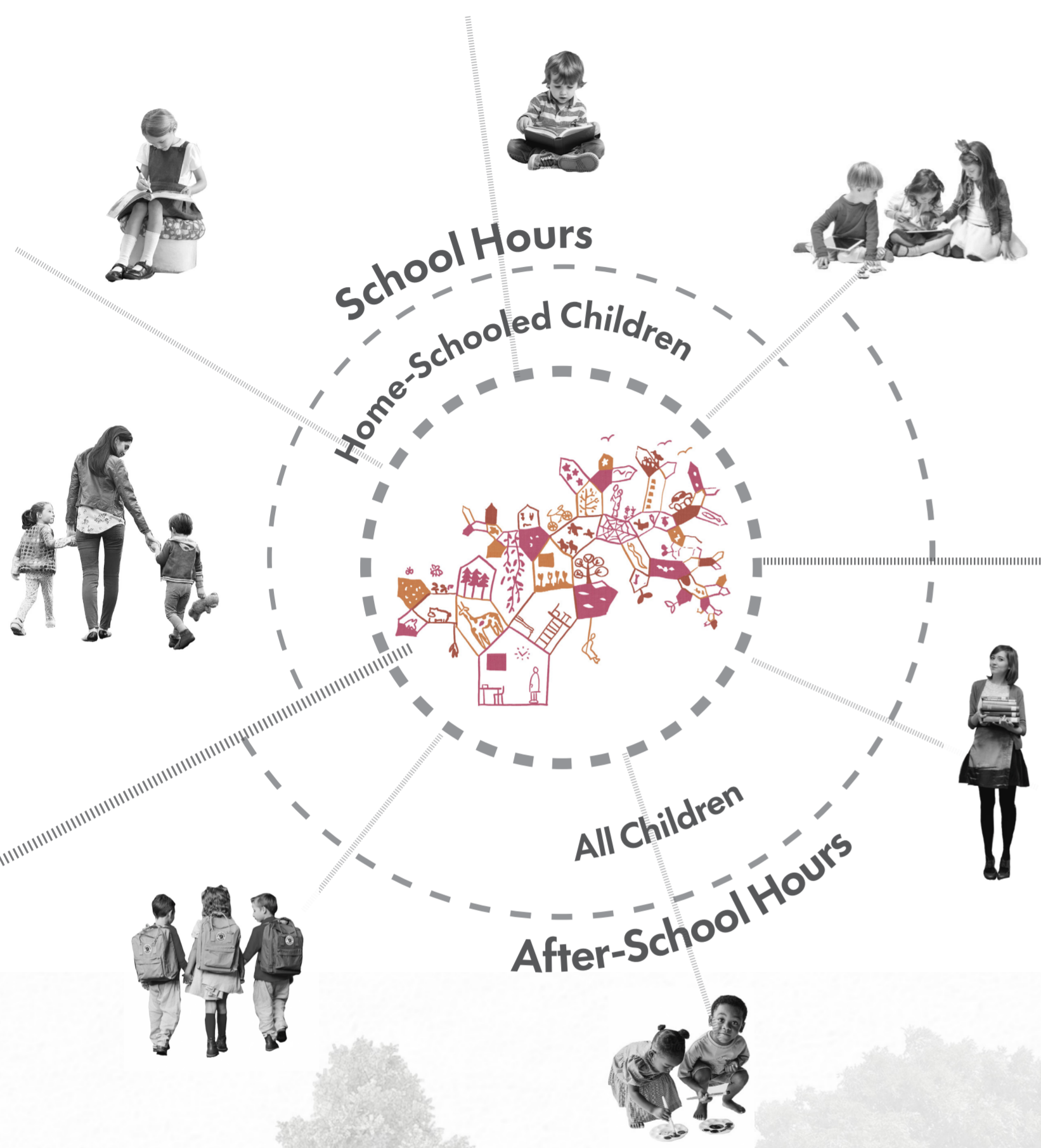
## Creating Affordances

User profiling identified the emotional, behavioural and spatial needs of both home-schooled and mainstream school children, revealing the importance of retreat, play, observation and social interaction within learning environments. In response, the design creates a spectrum of affordances ranging from quiet reading pods and domestic nooks to communal spaces and playful furniture. These varied settings allow children to choose how they engage with the library, supporting different levels of confidence, stimulation and participation. Rather than prescribing a single way of learning, the design encourages independence through choice, comfort and gradual social engagement.



# Social Strategy Programme

Accommodating Different Levels of Social Interaction



## Heterotopia for Home-schooled Children

Home-schooled children represent a growing subgroup within the socially deprived modern child. Although home education is legally permitted in England, it is increasingly chosen in response to unmet needs within schools, particularly bullying, anxiety and mental health difficulties (Long & Danechi, 2023). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, numbers have risen sharply, with disrupted routines and prolonged isolation making re-entry into school environments difficult for many children (Children's Commissioner, 2023). While home education may offer immediate relief, research consistently emphasises the irreplaceable role of school in socialisation and emotional development (Larsen et al., 2022). Drawing on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a space of otherness that exists alongside but outside dominant systems, the Halfway Library proposes a parallel environment during school hours: neither home nor school, but a structured social space where home-schooled children can practise interaction, rebuild confidence and gradually re-engage with collective learning.

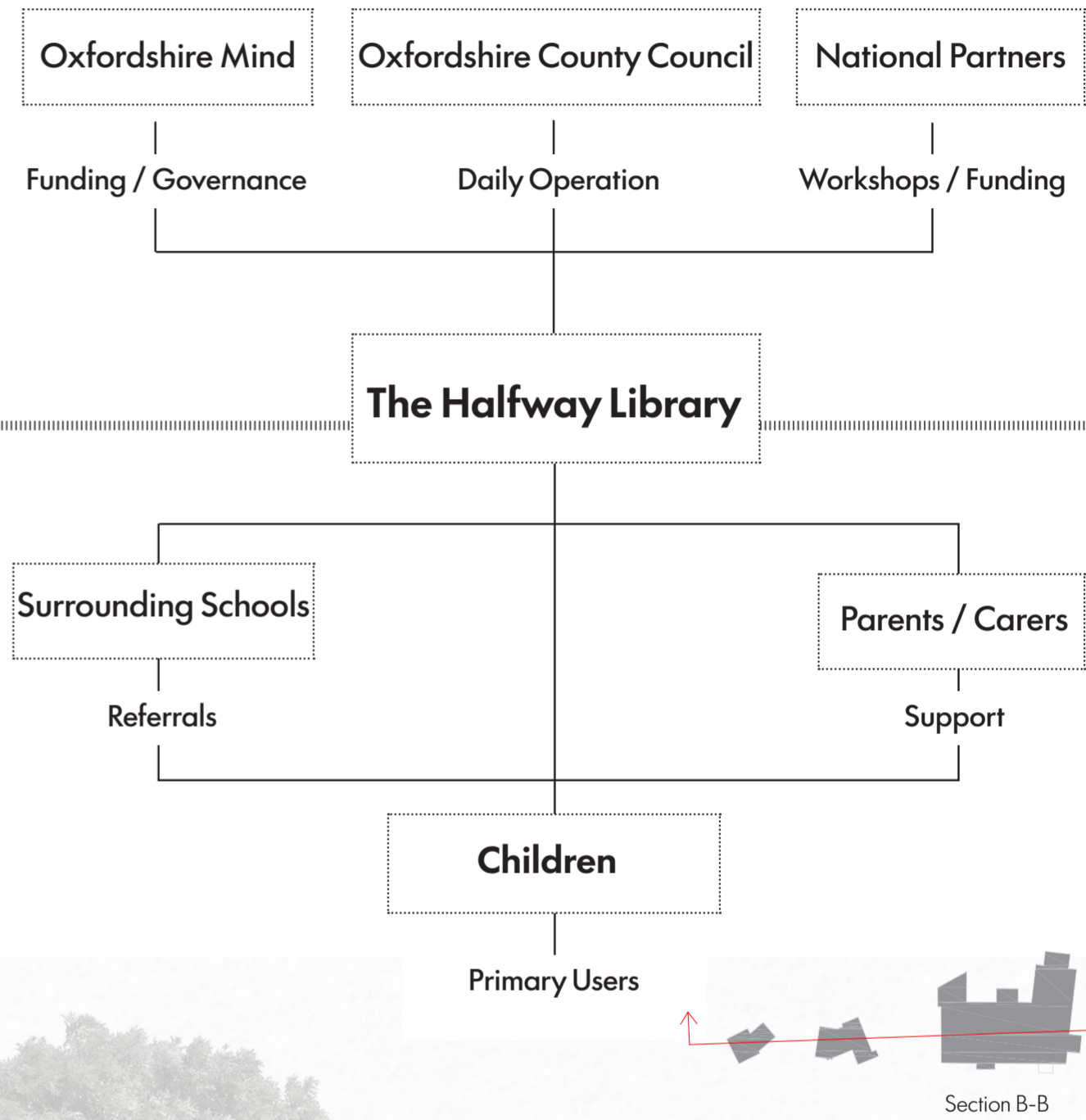
## Third Space for Children After-School

After school hours, the Halfway Library opens fully to all children from nearby schools, becoming a shared place to read, learn, play and socialise. In a city where children's access to free, welcoming civic spaces is limited, the library offers an alternative to home isolation and over-structured institutional environments. Alongside informal reading and play, the library hosts daily clubs, ranging from storytelling, book groups, and creative writing to science, making and homework support, which use books as social catalysts rather than solitary tools. These shared activities create low-pressure opportunities for conversation, collaboration and friendship. Crucially, this openness also supports home-schooled children by gently reintroducing them to public social learning. Sharing space, routines and interests with peers helps rebuild confidence, familiarity and a sense of belonging beyond the home.

## The Social Infrastructure

Connecting Organisations, Communities and Children

The Halfway Library operates as a piece of social infrastructure, bringing together local authorities, schools, families, charities and community organisations in a shared investment in children's wellbeing. Through collaborative programmes, learning opportunities and everyday social encounters, it creates a supportive environment where children are free to read, play, explore and build meaningful relationships. By connecting education, community and care, the library contributes to a more inclusive and socially resilient future for Oxford's youngest citizens.



# Inserting Domesticity

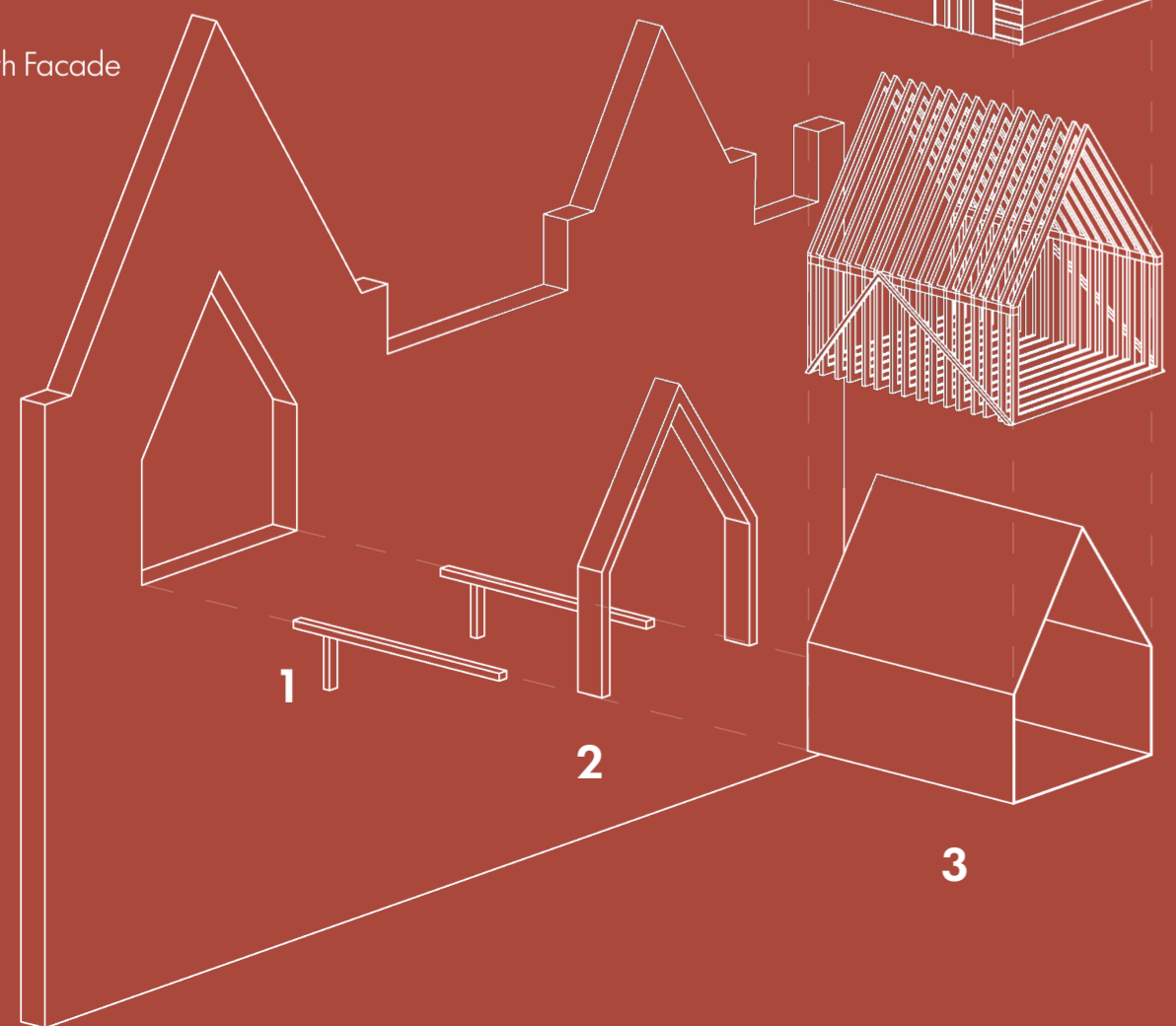
## Design Strategy and Key Interventions

The project inserts a series of domestic-scaled interventions into the existing public building to soften its institutional character. House pods, reading nooks, inhabitable furniture and garden pavilions create a gradient of social interaction, ranging from quiet retreat to collective activity. Together, these interventions support different emotional needs, allowing children to choose between observation, participation and privacy. Rather than designing a single open library, the proposal creates a landscape of smaller social environments that encourage comfort, independence and informal interaction.

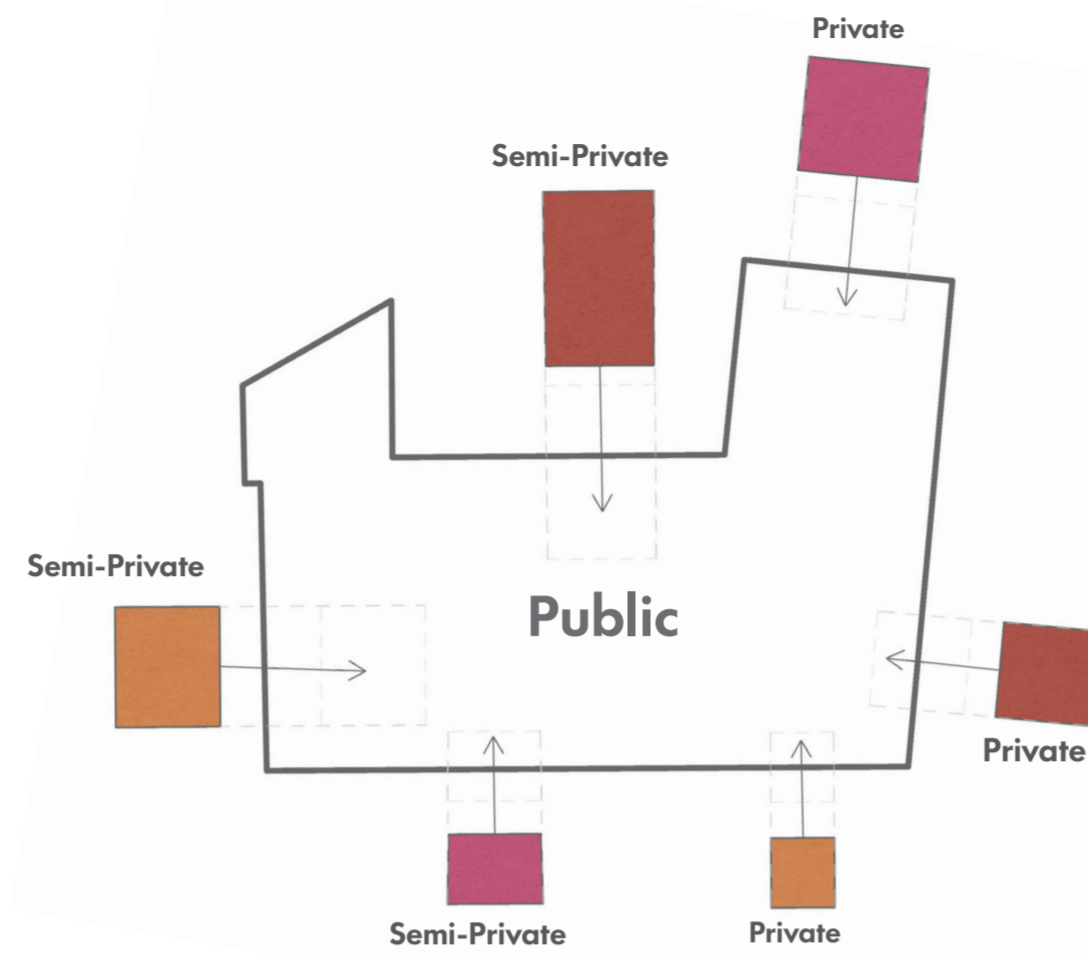


1. Anchoring Cantilever Beam Fixed to the Existing Floor
2. House-shaped Steel Portal Frame
3. Birch Ply Lining 15mm Interior Cladding
4. Steel Frame Structure - Light Gauge Steel Fram 100mm with 100mm Mineral Wool Insulation in between Studs
5. Insulation Layers: 25mm Service Void Batten  
1mm Vapour Control Layer  
12mm External Sheathing Board  
1mm Breather Membrane  
38mm Ventilated Cavity Timber Battens
6. Exterior White Corrugated Aluminium Cladding

North Facade



Hannah Luyen



Inhabitable Furniture Spine

Reading Nooks

Pavillions

House-Pods

6

5

4



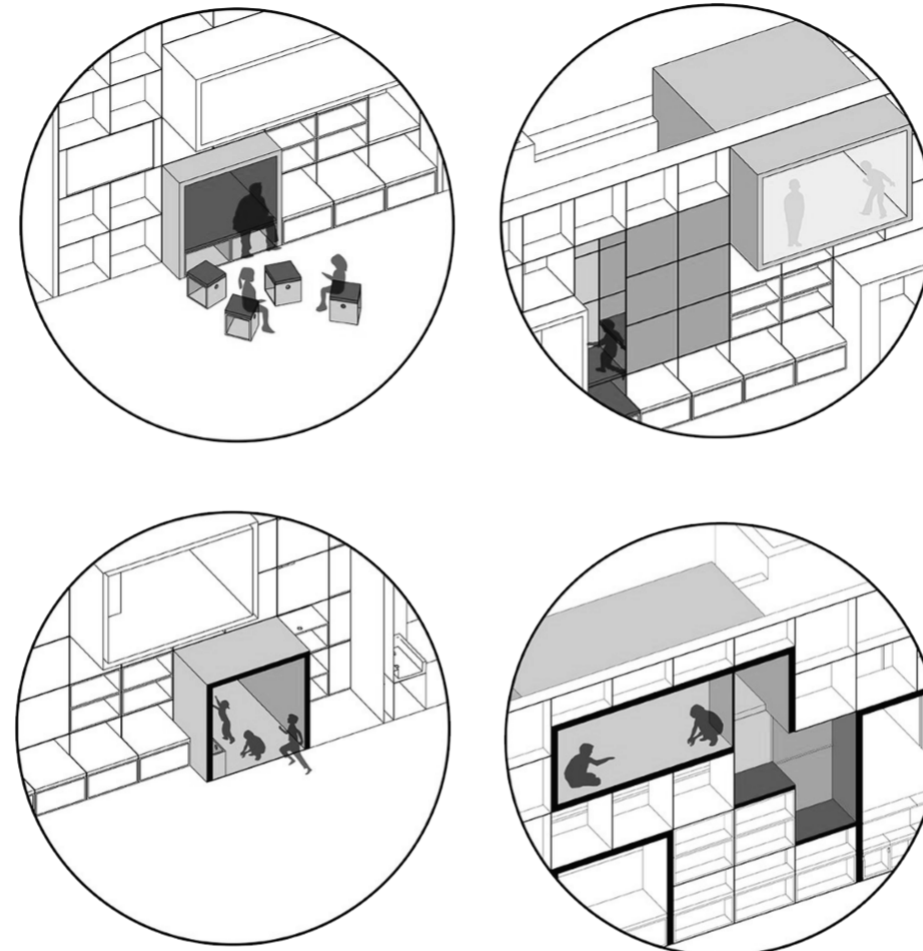
# Beyond The School Curriculum

## Book Catalogue Curated From Children's Interests

The Halfway Library reimagines the traditional book catalogue by organising knowledge through curiosity-led themes rather than academic subjects. Instead of separating books into rigid categories such as maths or science, collections are grouped into accessible themes like "How Things Work", "People & Feelings", and "Nature & World", allowing children to engage with learning in a more intuitive and self-directed way. This approach supports informal education, where knowledge is discovered through interest rather than obligation, particularly benefiting children who may feel disengaged from conventional schooling. By blending fiction with non-fiction, the catalogue encourages emotional connection, imagination, and critical thinking simultaneously. This reflects educational theories that emphasise play, exploration, and child-led learning as key to cognitive and social development (Piaget, 1952; Nicholson, 1971).



### Furniture Configuration Opportunities



Hannah Luyen

### Inhabitable Furniture Spine

The inhabitable furniture spine transforms the traditional library bookshelf into an interactive, multifunctional social landscape. Rather than functioning solely as storage, the spine integrates reading platforms, climbing elements, seating niches and storytelling spaces to encourage movement, curiosity and informal learning. Running through the centre of the building, it acts as both circulation and social infrastructure, connecting different programmes and levels of interaction throughout the building. The movable sections of the spine allow spaces to adapt for workshops, performances and group activities, supporting the library's role as a flexible community environment rather than a silent institutional space.

