

Company Town: Housing for Houston

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The Company Town was a phenomenon of the early twentieth century in which a single corporation would build housing, commercial, and community facilities for its employees, providing for all aspects of its employee's daily lives. Financed by industrial tycoons, these Company Towns often became mechanisms to police worker behavior and lifestyles, creating isolated communities hostile to labor organization and marked by class paternalism and monopoly economics. Ultimately, the Company Town model declined due to a combination of factors, not only its exploitative tendencies but also including the rising prosperity of workers, an increase in government-funded public facilities such as schools and libraries, and the affordability of private transportation [1]. These changes made the Company Town's proximity between housing and factory no longer necessary, resulting not only in the dispersal of these workers but also in the loss of the concentrated power of their collective presence. Despite its failure as a model for urban settlement, the Company Town occasionally became a space of radical change for labor rights. The shared experience of

workers uniting over common hardships produced significant victories for labor activists and worker unions, spurred on by organized action such as the Pullman Strike and railroad boycott in 1894 in Chicago [2]. Through the lens of the Company Town, the studio asked if this model of housing could offer clues to developing new forms of solidarity and support for one of the most precarious conditions of labor today: the seasonal Amazon fulfillment worker. By developing worker-owned housing adjacent to the Amazon HOU1 Warehouse in Houston's outer loop, students proposed an alternative version of the Company Town, cooperatively owned and governed by co-workers rather than a corporate employer.

The conceptual starting point for the studio began on July 15th 2019, Amazon's Prime Day, in which thousands of fulfillment center employees engaged in a global strike. Workers protested not the pay or the hours but "the rate:" a metric of efficiency that drives employees to keep pace with robots transporting goods from stocking to packaging. Despite automation's

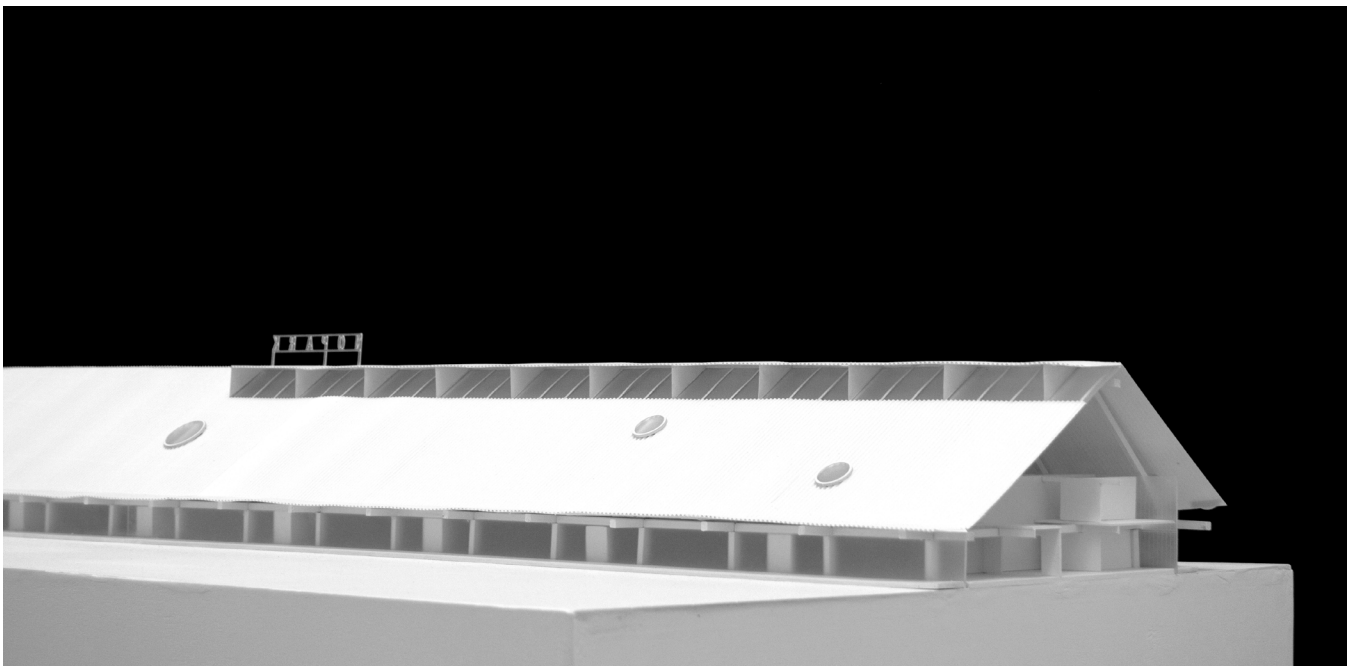


Figure 1. *Long Term Motel*, Model Photo. Student Project by Anna Fritz, Shree Kale, and Edward Liew.

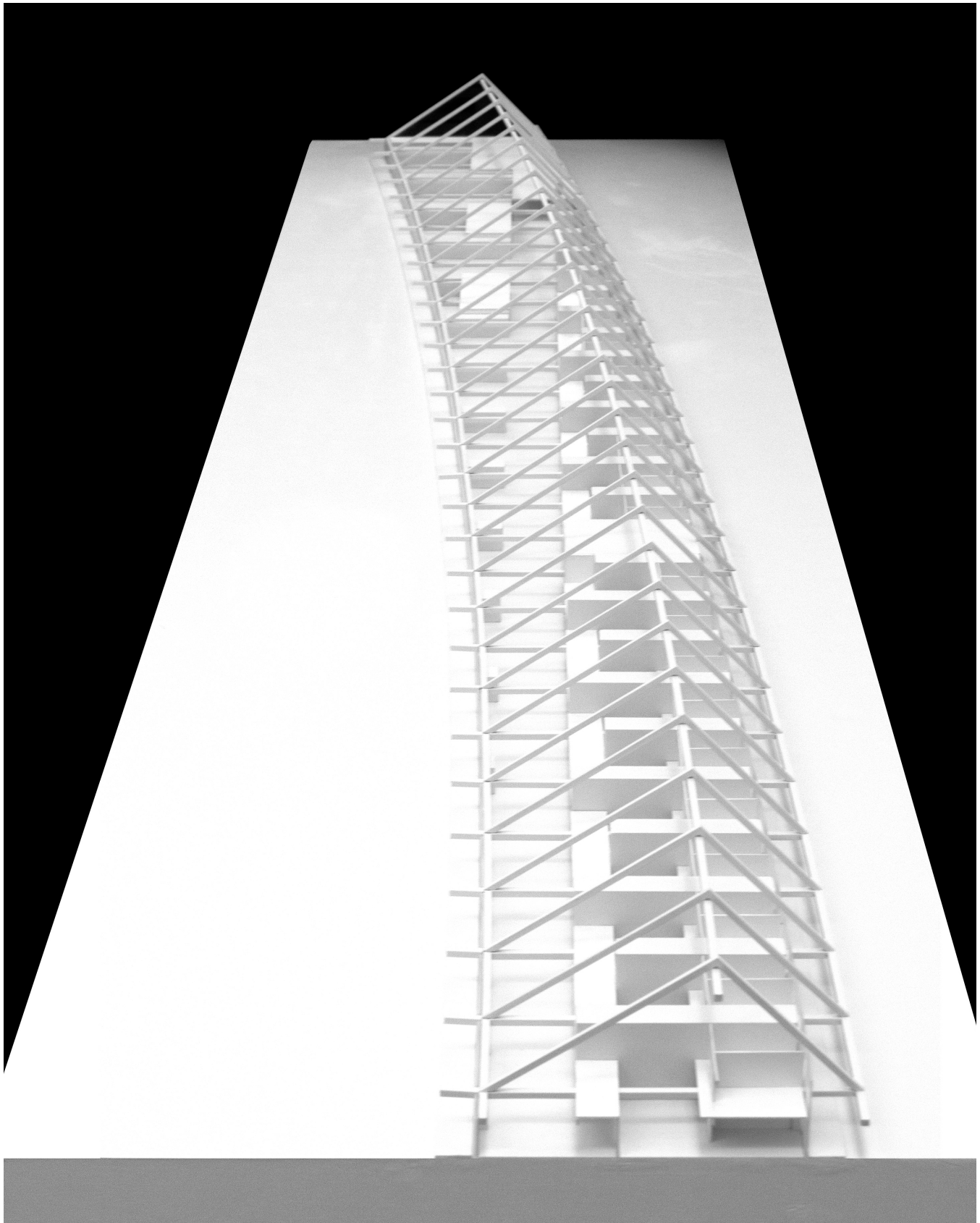


Figure 2. *Long Term Motel*, Model Photo. Student Project by Anna Fritz, Shree Kale, and Edward Liew.

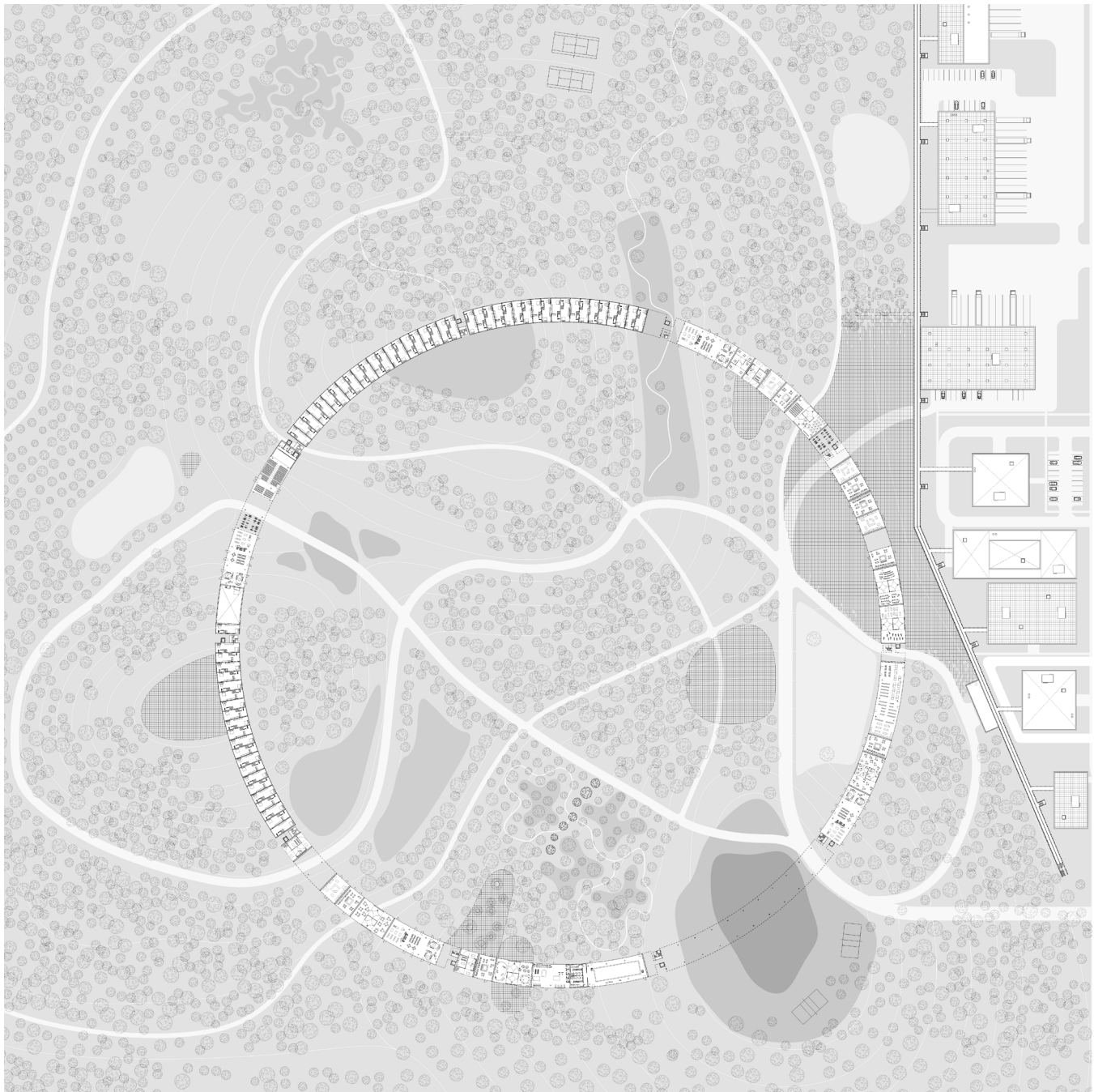


Figure 3. *The Freeport*, Site Plan. Student Project by Emma Foster, Taylor Yi, and Kelly Yu.

promise of a future without work [3], fulfillment operations still require an enormous exchange of labor: accelerated by a digitally-managed landscape of products, bodies, and information. Moreover, companies like Amazon employ thousands of employees while providing little or no safety net, offering only short-term contracts for work that often necessitates long commutes to fulfillment centers located at the edges of cities [4]. The combination of physical and psychological exhaustion due to “the rate” and the financial precarity of seasonal

employment had caused the Amazon workers to reach a critical tipping point.

Through these dual frames of today’s Amazon strike and the historical Company Town, the studio addressed the relationship between housing and contemporary forms of seasonal work that characterize emerging fulfillment, distribution, and e-commerce economies. Design proposals developed new spatio-temporal platforms for collective life and transient labor for the seasonal worker, proposing housing models that could



Figure 4. *Long Term Motel*, Interior Render. Student Project by Anna Fritz, Shree Kale, and Edward Liew.

support the daily rhythms of what Benjamin H. Bratton terms “the logistical modernity of the endlessly itinerant object” [5]. Projects responded to the eCommerce typologies of Houston’s outer loop, creating extra-large housing proposals that served as a conceptual double to the fulfillment center. While the peripheral spaces of the metropolis are increasingly populated by these generic buildings, the city itself remains indifferent to the continuous flows of objects, data, and labor driven by these vast economies [6]. By operating at the scale of these extra-large warehouses, the studio imagined how to retool Houston’s ex-urban spaces into a monumental frame for collective life and labor. Following are the research findings of the studio including brief descriptions of three student projects that exemplify the work from the studio.

One project, *Long Term Motel*, deployed the tectonic systems of the ready-made shed to produce a typology that incorporated seasonal worker housing with union headquarters. Through the internal variation produced from the overlay of the building’s long sweep with a series of infrastructural walls, the project produces a rich set of housing unit types, addressing the variety of spatial and temporal needs for Amazon’s itinerant workers. The innovations of the project were twofold: creating a housing typology that allowed for temporary or nomadic forms of life, and the implementation of a domestic infrastructural wall which separated and supported each unit. Another project, *The Freeport*, examined the status of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) within the context of Houston, the spatialization of capital’s privileges to operate outside of the world’s labor, environmental, and taxation laws. By appropriating the extra-legal and extra-state model of the SEZ, the



Figure 5. *The Freeport*, Exterior Render. Student Project by Emma Foster, Taylor Yi, and Kelly Yu.

project proposes a free enclave that benefits, rather than exploits, its labor force. *The Freeport* is imagined as a zone in Houston’s peripheries in which the usual rules of citizenship are suspended, allowing seasonal employees to safely live and work regardless of their legal status. And finally, the project *Retirement at the End of Capital*, examined a speculative future in which a Universal Basic Income and a fully-automated labor force had reduced the age of retirement to effectively eighteen. By decoupling wages from work, this retirement community proposed an architectural framework of domestic and civic space centered around an emerging homo ludens, redefining how we value both play and care as essential components of reproductive work. Through the deployment of an infrastructural grid that united programs of leisure with labor, the project deployed the architectural frame in order to address the variety of spatial, temporal, and psychological needs for Amazon’s itinerant workers.

In conclusion, through the program of cooperative housing, the studio transformed the seasonal worker’s condition of invisibility and precarity into a new form of political will and social presence, repurposing the Company Town as a possible frame for collective forms of life, labor, and mutual support. Through this lens, the studio sought to leverage the positive aspects of the Company Town—its potential for political solidarity, shared identity, collective presence, and community support—to put forward a new live-work model.

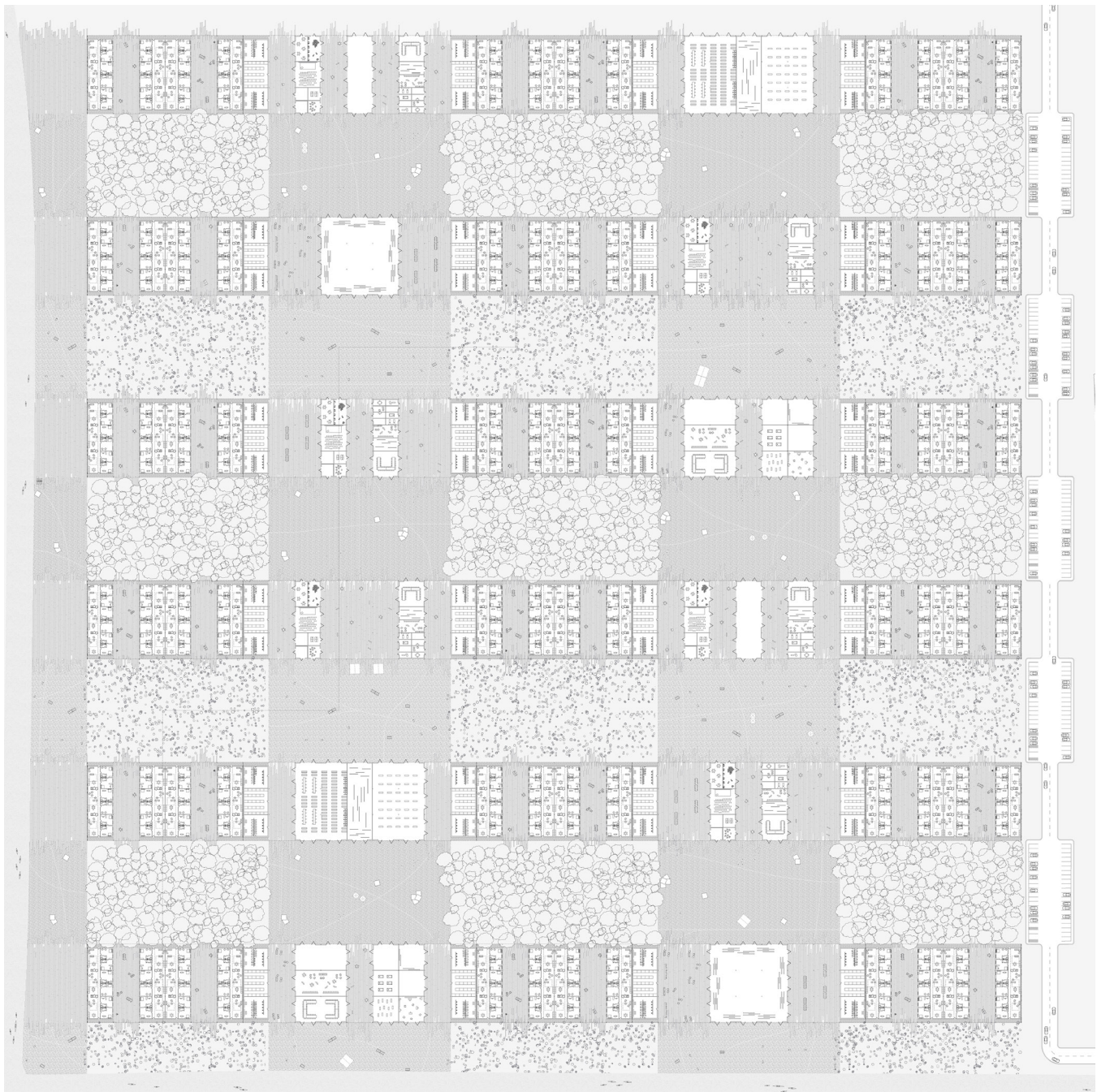


Figure 6. *Retirement at the End of Capital*, Site Plan. Student Project by Amanda Spitzer.

ENDNOTES

1. J. D. Porteous, "The Nature of the Company Town," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, No. 51 (Nov., 1970): 127-142.
2. Hardy Green, "Utopia," *The Company Town* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
3. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016) 107-127.
4. Heike Geissler, *Seasonal Associate*, trans. Katy Derbyshire (Cambridge: Semiotext(e)/Native Agents, 2018).
5. Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016) 4.
6. Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 63-105.