

## Ordinary Form, Radical Ideology: An Exhibition that Decolonizes the Historical Narratives of America's Expansion

JARED MACKEN

Oklahoma State University

**Keywords:** Historically Black Towns, Architectural Form, Ideology, Architectural Urbanism, Main Street.

The exhibition “The Legend of the Town Center: Ordinary Form, Radical Ideology” examines and critiques the historical narratives and architectural forms that made colonizing what was once designated “Indian Territory” possible. This act of colonization—the taking of Tribal land, the erasure of Tribal culture, and replacing it with new pioneer narratives—was accomplished in part by way of designing and constructing towns that were used, in conjunction with land runs, to impose new power and ideologies on this territory. The exhibition uses case studies, large-scale detailed plans, and speculative models as tools for analyzing and critiquing the histories of towns in Oklahoma, specifically the main streets that were at the center of the communities that made these towns possible. What results is just a beginning, a starting point for retelling this particular phase of America’s expansion through the lens of architectural knowledge and methodologies.

At the turn of the 20th century, a hole existed at the center of the United State’s land acquisitions—a large portion of land known as Indian Territory. This land belonged to Sovereign Nations who were forcibly moved to the center of the United States from other parts of the country. While this land legally belonged to Native American tribes, the United States Government was systematically deconstructing land treaties and taking land in a desperate attempt to fill their territorial void.

By the middle to late 1800’s the U.S. Government initiated a new strategy for colonizing this land, and an explosion of urban development occurred throughout this territory. The government’s process for taking back this land was a systematic colonization scheme facilitated by the construction of towns—colonization machines that acted as large-scale land speculation. This system utilized a type of phased-in development operation that first involved making the land a commodity, then created desire for this land resource, and finally offered incentives for White European settlers to occupy this land. In contrast, culturally accepted historical narratives, in particular those found in present-day Oklahoma, does not reflect this intention and favors narratives that mythologize “settlers” and “pioneers”

the fictional tropes of manifest destiny. This narrative leaves out the true intentions of these towns and as a result suppresses the narratives of under-represented communities who were also urbanistically transformative at this time.

This exhibition explores these alternative historical narratives and examines their architectural form in conjunction with their community’s ideologies. One such history that is uncovered in the project is the phenomenon of over 50 “All-Black Towns” that formed in this territory before it became the state of Oklahoma, and before it was governed by segregation laws. The exhibition retells the architectural story of Boley, a town founded in 1903 by freed Black men and women of the Muskogee Creek Nation who created a utopian city in the middle of the prairie that has created lasting impacts in our contemporary political and cultural climate. Boley’s radical ideology of freedom for Black citizens can be tied directly to the urban form of its town, predating mainstream architectural projects that occur 15-20 years later in Europe. As a result, an understanding of the form and ideology of “All-Black Towns,” Boley in particular, rewrites not only America’s history of Westward Expansion, but also architectural history as it pertains to its discourse on the city.

The exhibition focuses on the architectural form of main streets, each constructed by different entities seeking to build towns during America’s 19th century expansion into present-day Oklahoma. While many studies exist on the American main street, none looks at this particular instantiation: main streets in Oklahoma during its transition from “Indian Territory” into statehood at the moment the American Frontier dissolved into the contiguous United States. These particular main streets were both literal and metaphorical centers for their communities. While these main streets utilized the same ordinary architectural parts—such as aligned flat store fronts, parapet walls that extended above roof lines, awnings, and entrance niches—they could be configured into different shapes that in turn represented very different collective, even radical, ideologies. These collective ideas, coupled with the architectural form that defined the main street as a public and social space, were mutually reinforcing and unifying the town’s citizens. At their time of construction, there were limited modern resources that could bolster the success of these towns, and as a result, main

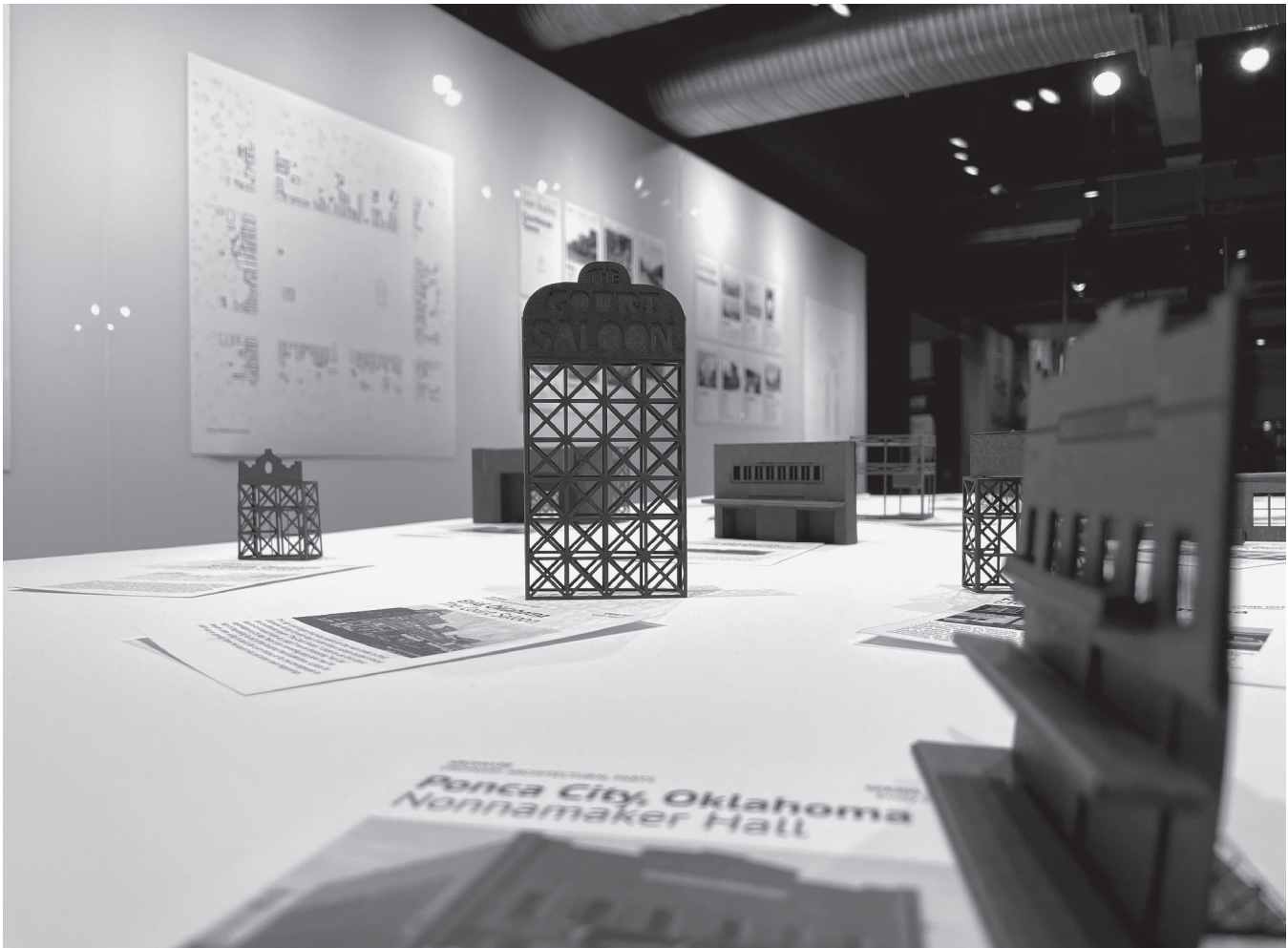


Figure 1. View of exhibition showing a table of models that explores the individual ordinary architectural parts that construct main streets that represent radical ideologies.

streets became very important ways to emphasize the power structures integral to making the town appear to be prosperous when many times they were barely existing.

The exhibition identifies four main street typologies that demonstrate how ordinary architectural forms were shaped into different main streets that reinforced the ideologies of the communities they represented:

**Courthouse Towns:** towns inserted into Indian Territory that use the courthouse square as a way of organizing main street businesses around a courthouse that was used to impose new power on the surrounding territory;

**Mining Towns:** main street store fronts align with each other but are capped at the end of the street by main mining company structures which monumentalizes the mining company over the citizens of the town;

**Tribal Towns:** towns that were heavily influenced and shaped by their proximity to the capitals of sovereign Native American nations;

**All-Black Towns:** towns that were formed by former freedmen and freedwomen and that used the typical form of the main street to reinforce their community's ideology of freedom.

The exhibition is organized by panels that highlight the different cultural, political, and social entities that influenced the creation of these main street typologies. This includes town case studies filtered through the lens of architecture discourse, accompanied by detailed plan drawings that allows visitors to "visit" these towns. The plans distill the truth of these different towns into a single new speculative drawing guided by the varying ideologies of each community. This research is a work in progress, but it initiates an architectural methodology that examines both the forms but also the ideologies of these entities. Each panel uses case studies as tools for retelling these histories, and the speculative detailed plans to synthesize all the case study information into a speculative historical depiction of the truth behind these towns.

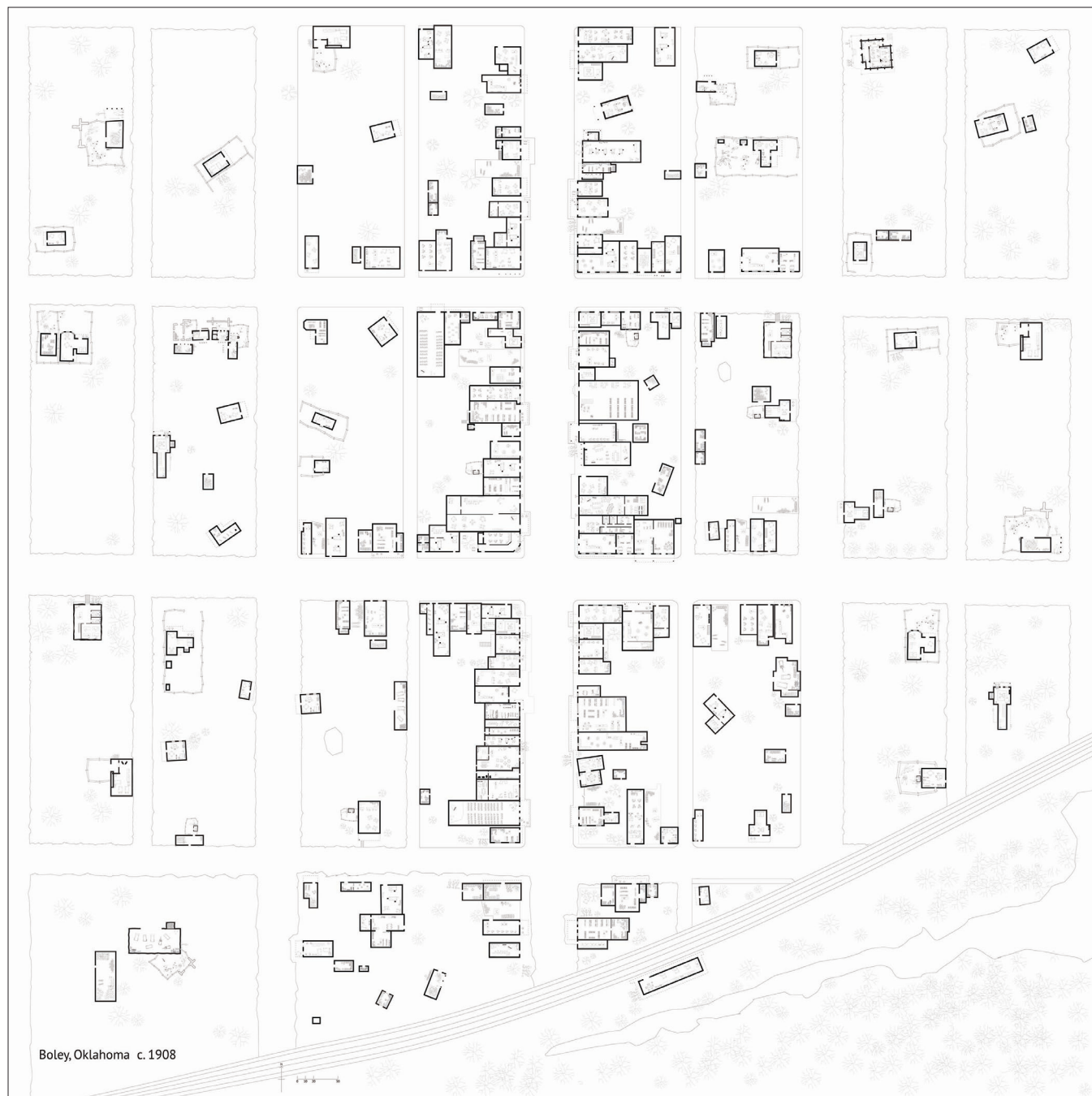


Figure 2. Detailed plan of Boley, Ok. The detailed plan becomes a speculative act that uses the conventional planimetric mode of representation. Sanborn maps, articles, and other scholarship were used to reconstruct what the town looked like in 1908, the same year Booker T. Washington visited the town and described it as a bustling metropolis.



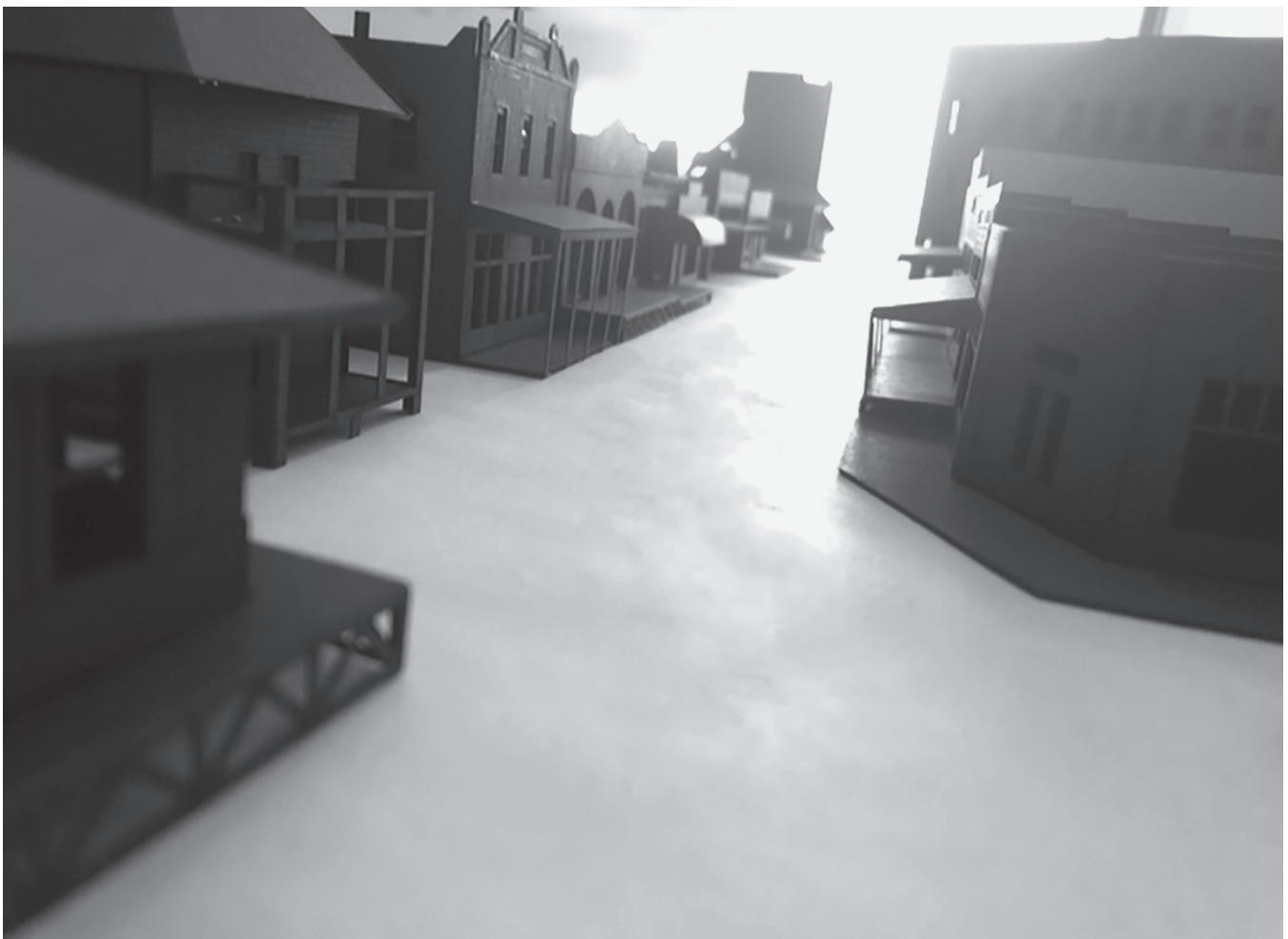
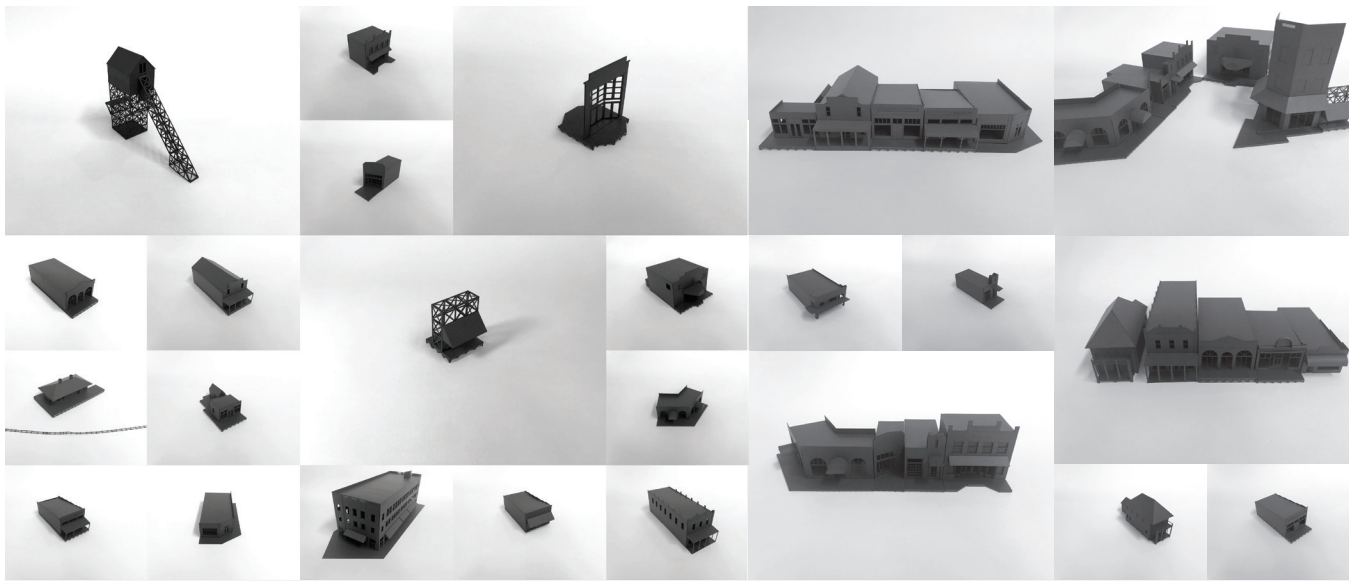


Figure 3 (above). The ordinary parts from extraordinary main streets in Oklahoma. Figure 4 (below). The speculative reconstructed main street of Boley, Ok, which uses these ordinary parts to reimagine cultural and social spaces in the Historically Black Town.

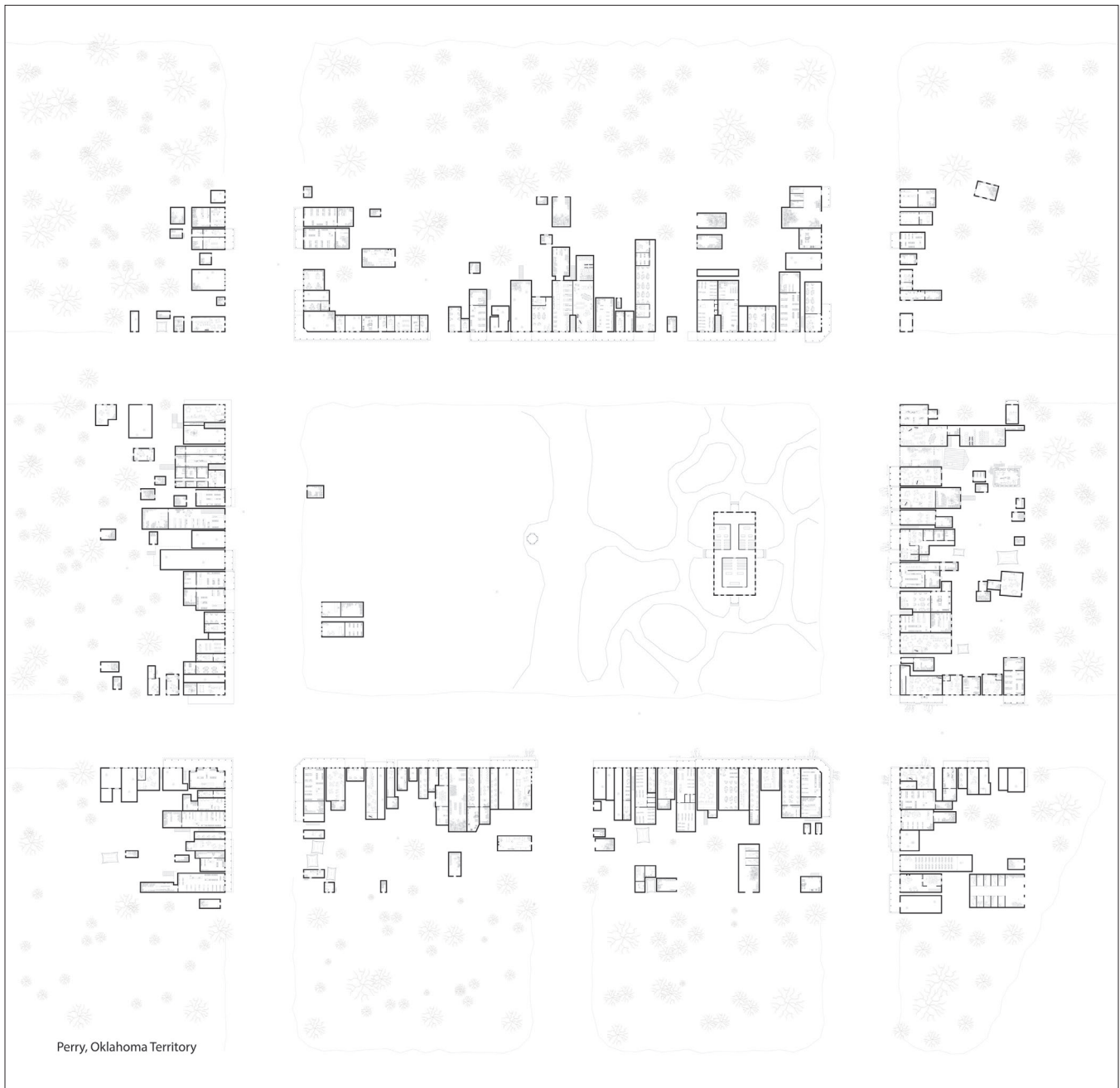


Figure 5. The detailed plan of Perry, Ok, showcasing the typology of the courthouse town. Courthouse towns in Cherokee Outlet were mandated to have at their center a courthouse with main street buildings facing this power structure.

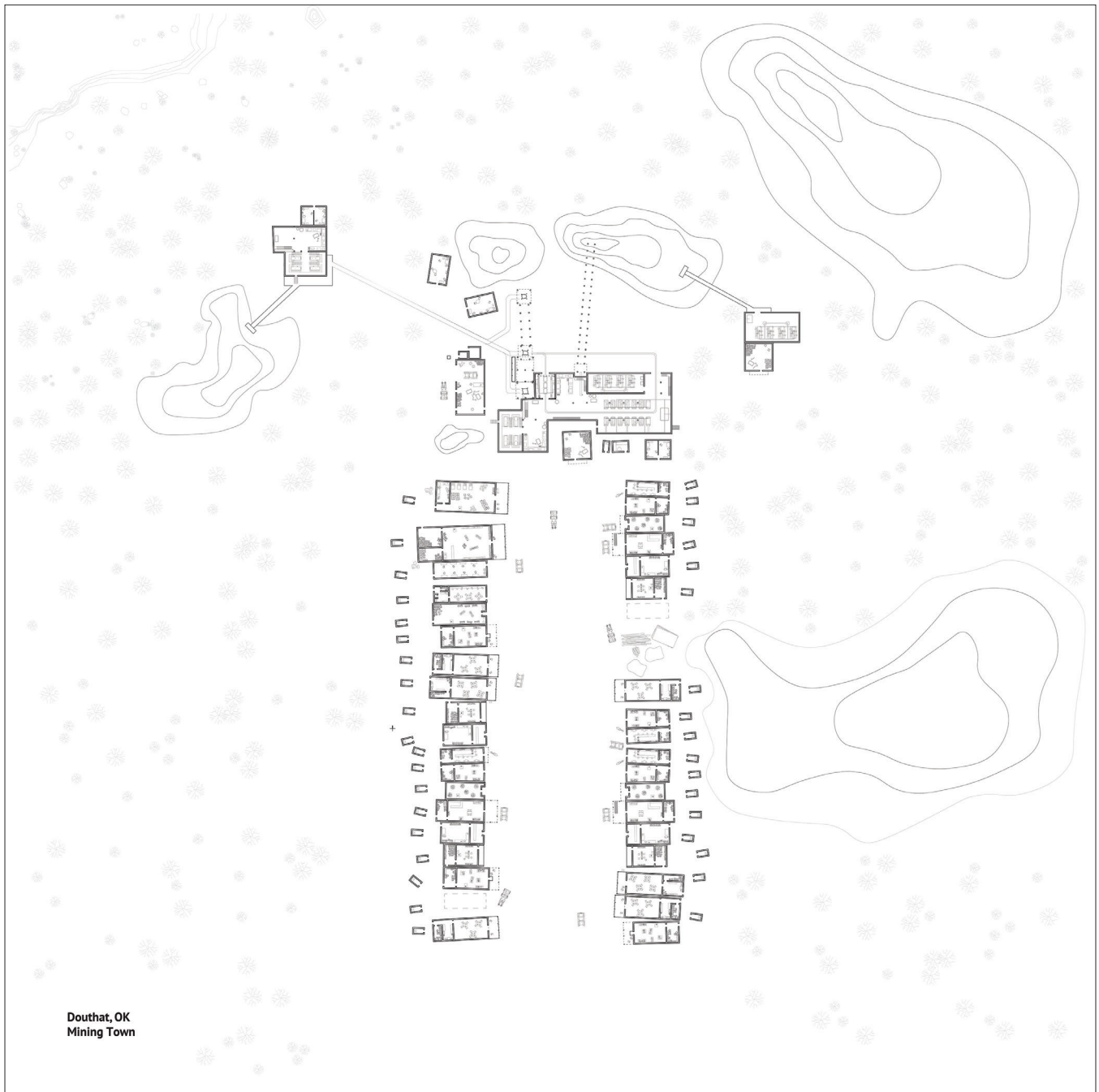


Figure 6. The detailed plan of the Mining Town of Douthat. The town's main street aligned to emphasize the mining structures that were constructed purposefully at the end of the street. The individual citizens and their collectivity is no longer emphasized, neither is a courthouse, but instead the mining company itself.



Figure 7. The detailed plan of Pawhuska shows how the Osage Nation's presence allowed the town to thrive, while their own structures on the outskirts of town had a different land-use mandated by the Osage Constitution.



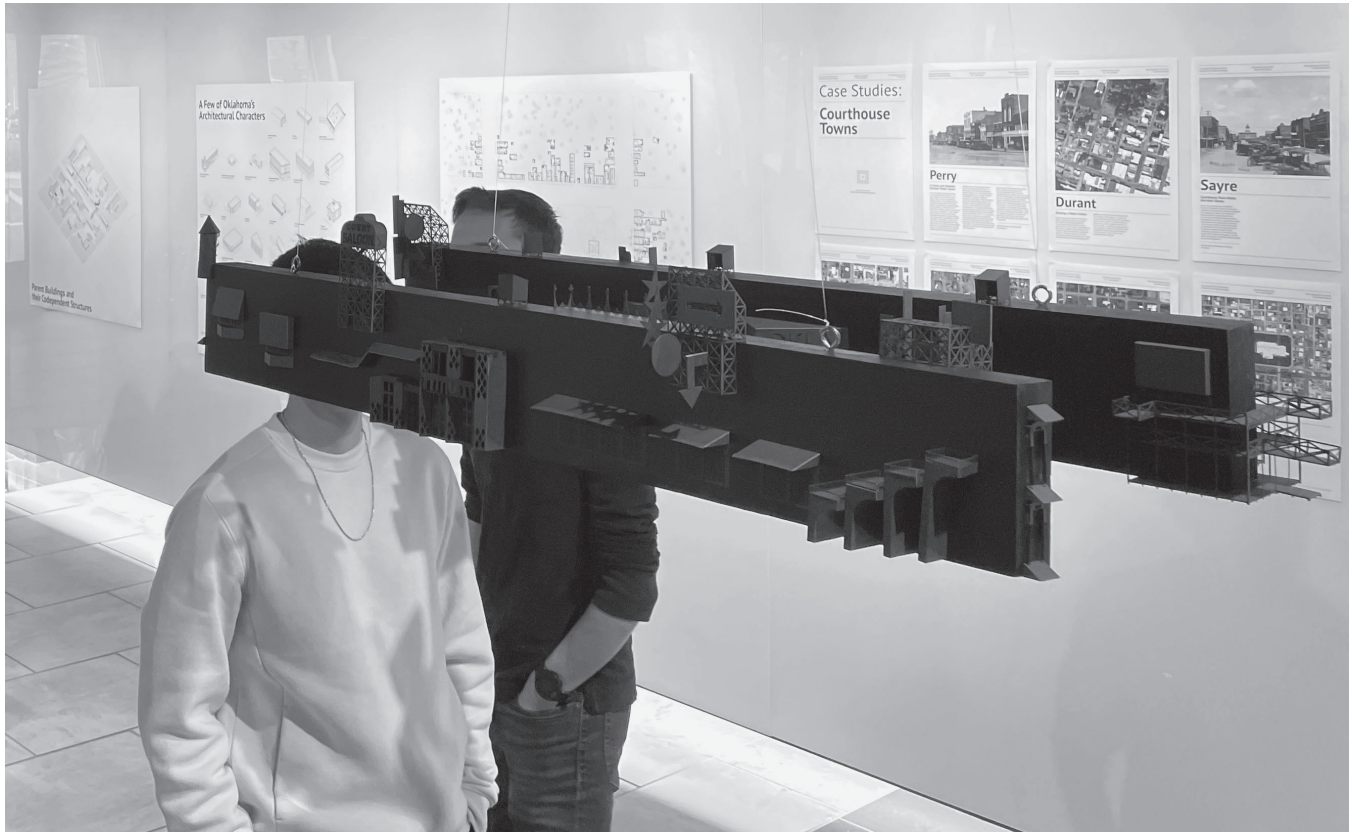


Figure 8.(above). Exhibition view showing a suspended model comprised of individual ordinary parts cohering into a new monument. This model was used to explore new ways these parts could connect to each other in order to create new architectural form.

Figure 9 (below). The introductory panels to the exhibition, which consisted of visual and written essays that introduced the subject, case studies that explored how the different typologies of main streets were centered around different power structures, and speculative drawings and models that further explored these ideas.