

Design for Distressed Public Housing:

How landscape architects can use outdoor public spaces to create a more supportive living environment.

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April 2022



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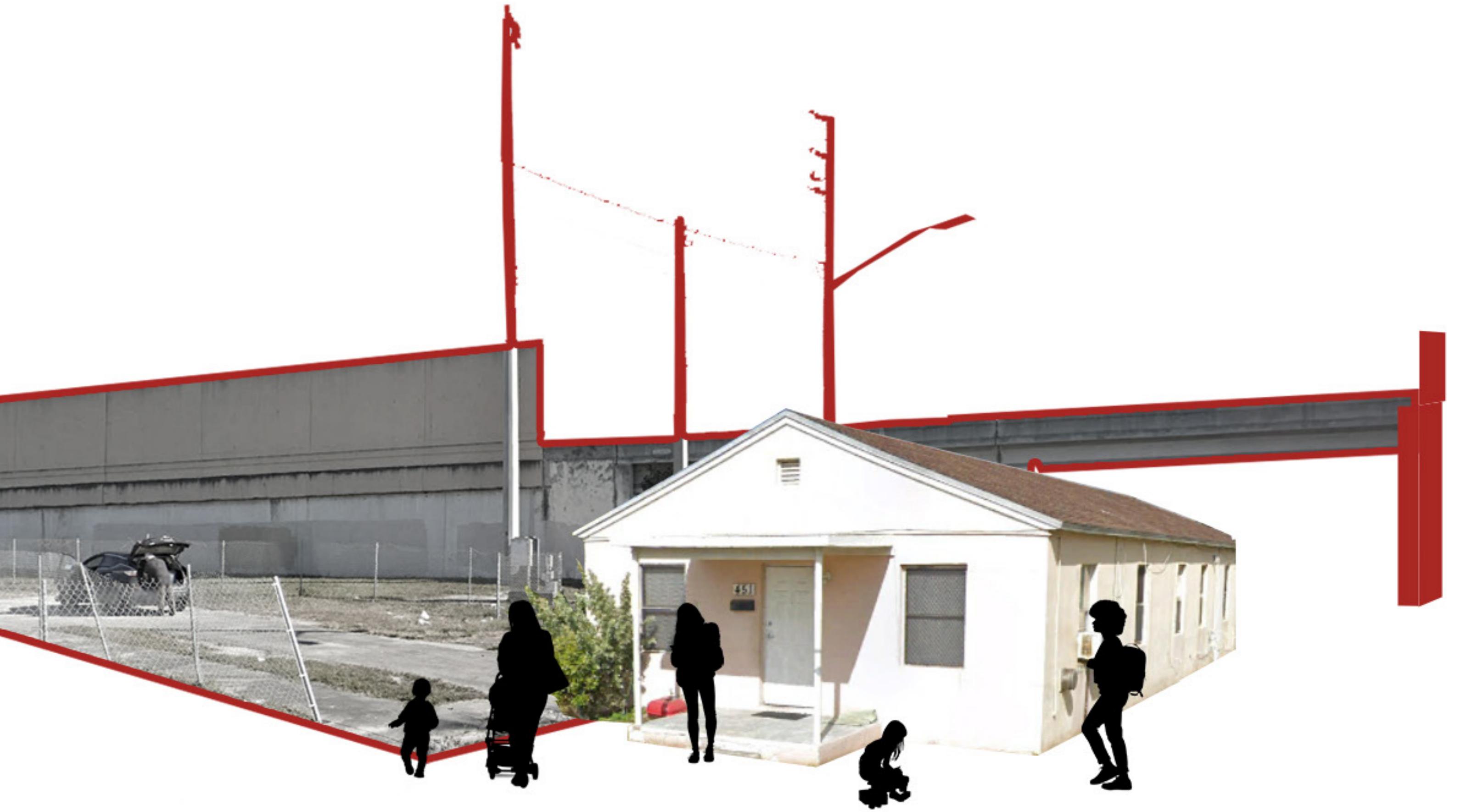
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Severely Distressed Public Housing

Public housing was first introduced in the United States at the federal level in 1937 with legislation that provided public financing of low-cost housing that is both publicly owned and managed.^{15, 24} There are currently two million people in the united states that rely on public housing.²⁷ The intention of public housing is to provide safe rental housing for low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities²². However, decades of government disinvestment, discriminatory planning practices, and hazardous living conditions has created dangerous and non-supportive living environments known as severely distressed public housing. Distressed public housing developments are virtually uninhabitable and are the result of physical and social issues such as, physical deterioration caused by extreme old age of buildings, crime and insecurity, residential distress, and high concentrations of poverty.
^{2,3,22}



"Public housing is concentrated in racially segregated, under-resourced neighborhoods, due in part to a long history of racial bias in siting decisions and other discriminatory public policies"²²

Literature Review

Drivers

Decades of Disinvestment

Insufficient Funding & Weak Oversight From Federal, State, & Local Governments ^{2,4,6}

Discriminatory Planning

Disproportionately locating housing in areas of **Extreme Poverty, Racial Segregation, & Low Public Investment** ^{1,3,6}

Hazardous Conditions

Physical **Deterioration, Managerial Neglect, Inadequate Maintenance Oversight, & Overcrowding** ^{1,2,3}

Oppressive Design

Practices & Facilities Within The Built Environment

Concentrated Poverty ^{5,6}

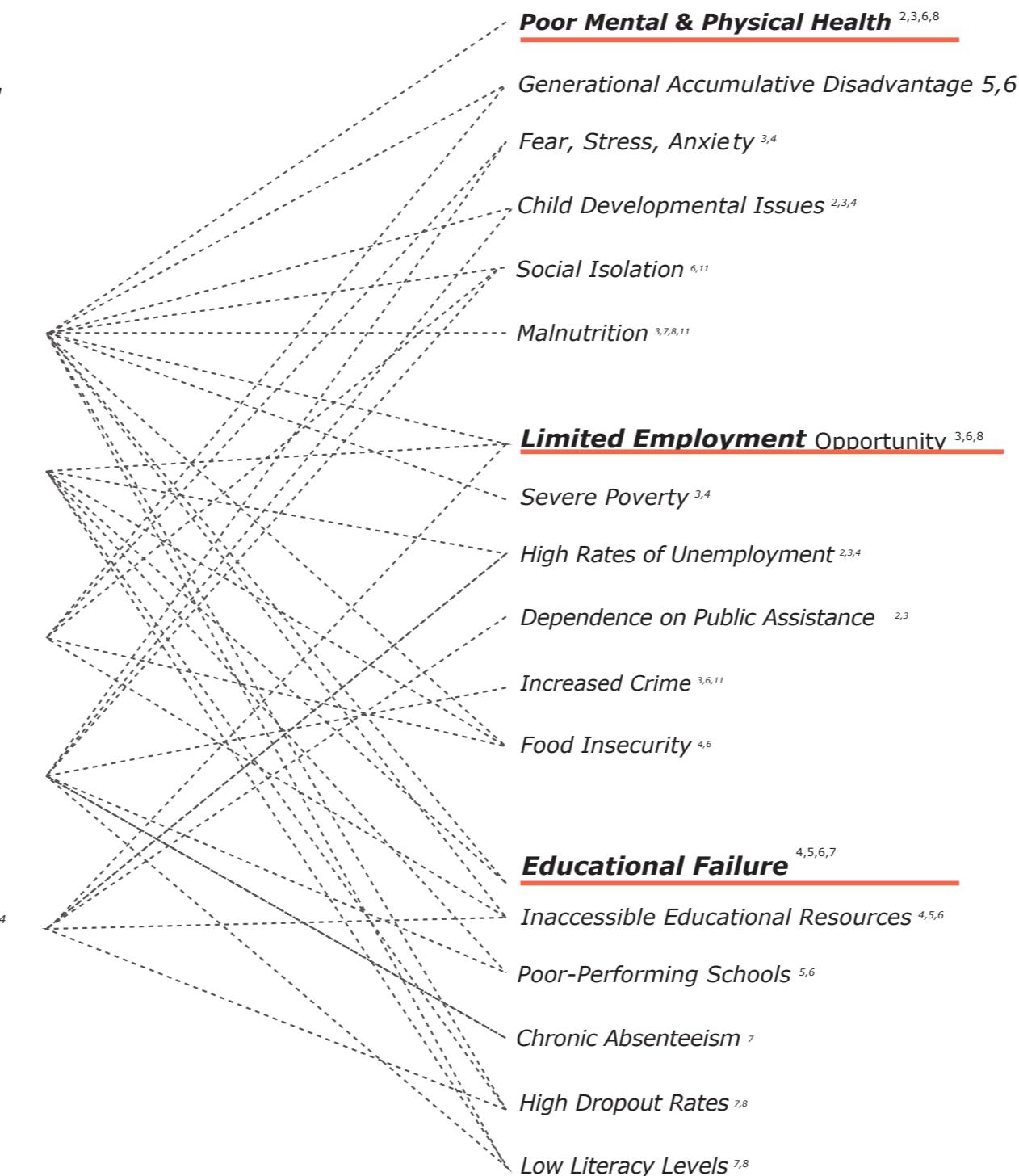
Isolation From Communities & Amenities ^{2,3,4}

Inaccessible Parks & Public Green Space ^{2,3,4}

Unsafe Public Spaces ^{2,3,6}

Lack of Transportation Access ^{3,4}

Impacts



Consequence

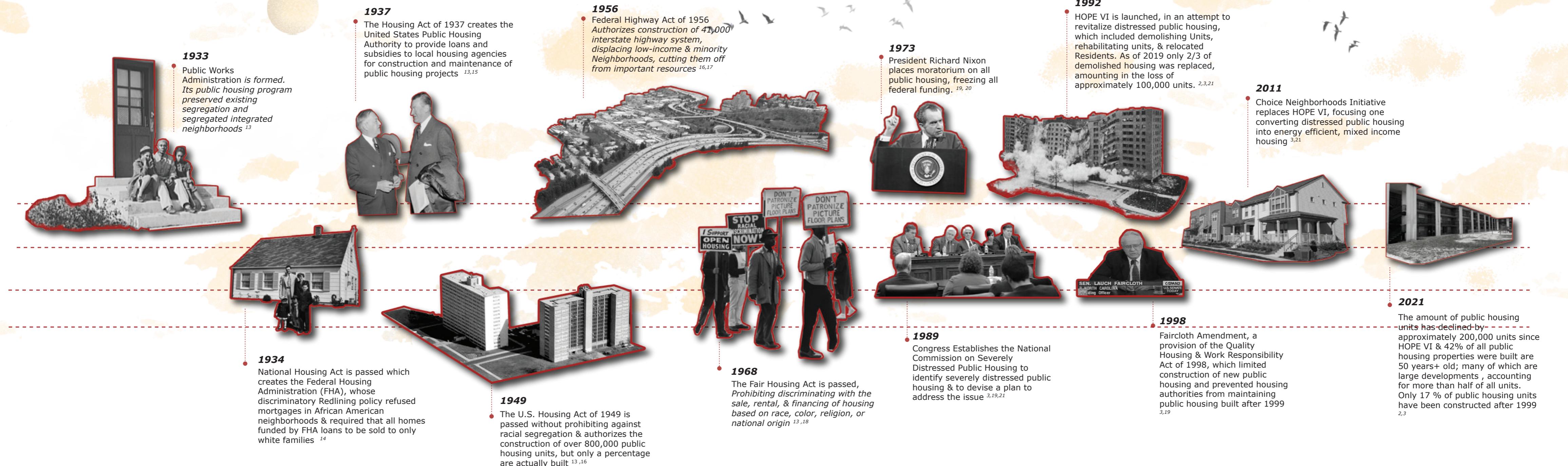
Distressed Public Housing

The **causes of severely distressed public housing** stem from three major drivers: decades of disinvestment from federal, state, and local governments ^{2,4,6}, discriminatory planning practices by disproportionately locating public housing in areas of extreme poverty, racial segregation, and low public investment ^{1,3,6}, and hazardous living conditions which include physical deterioration, managerial neglect, inadequate maintenance oversight, and serious over crowding. ^{1,2,3}

The **practices and facilities within the built environment** which have contributed to these impacts include high concentrations of poverty ^{5,6}, isolation from community and amenities ^{2,3,4}, inaccessible parks and public green spaces ^{2,3,6}, and lack of transportation access. ^{3,4}

The **resulting destructive impacts** include mental and physical health issues ^{5,6}, limited employment opportunities ^{3,6,8}, and limited educational success ^{4,5,6,7}, high crime rates ^{4,5}, and unsafe living environments. ^{3,5,6} Living in profoundly poor and distressed neighborhoods can significantly damage resident's health, foster school failure and delinquency, create concentrations of crime, and undermine the long term life chances of children and youth. ^{2,3}

Public Housing Timeline



The historical events that shaped **the current state of severely distressed public housing** include a long history of discriminatory planning practices and policies including the preservation of historically segregated neighborhoods¹³, Redlining¹⁴, lack of anti-discrimination housing policies^{13,16}, President Richard Nixon's moratorium on federal funding for public housing^{19,20}, and the Faircloth amendment.^{3,19} The first federal program initiated to help address severely distressed public housing was the HOPE VI act of 1992 which attempted to revitalize distressed housing by demolishing units, rehabilitating units, and relocating residents, only 2/3 of units have been replaced amounting in the loss of over 200,000 public housing units.^{2,3,21}

Landscapes as Supportive Environments

Landscapes and easily accessible outdoor spaces have been scientifically proven to positively impact mental and physical health, create economic and educational opportunities, and help create a greater overall sense of community.^{38,39,40,41}

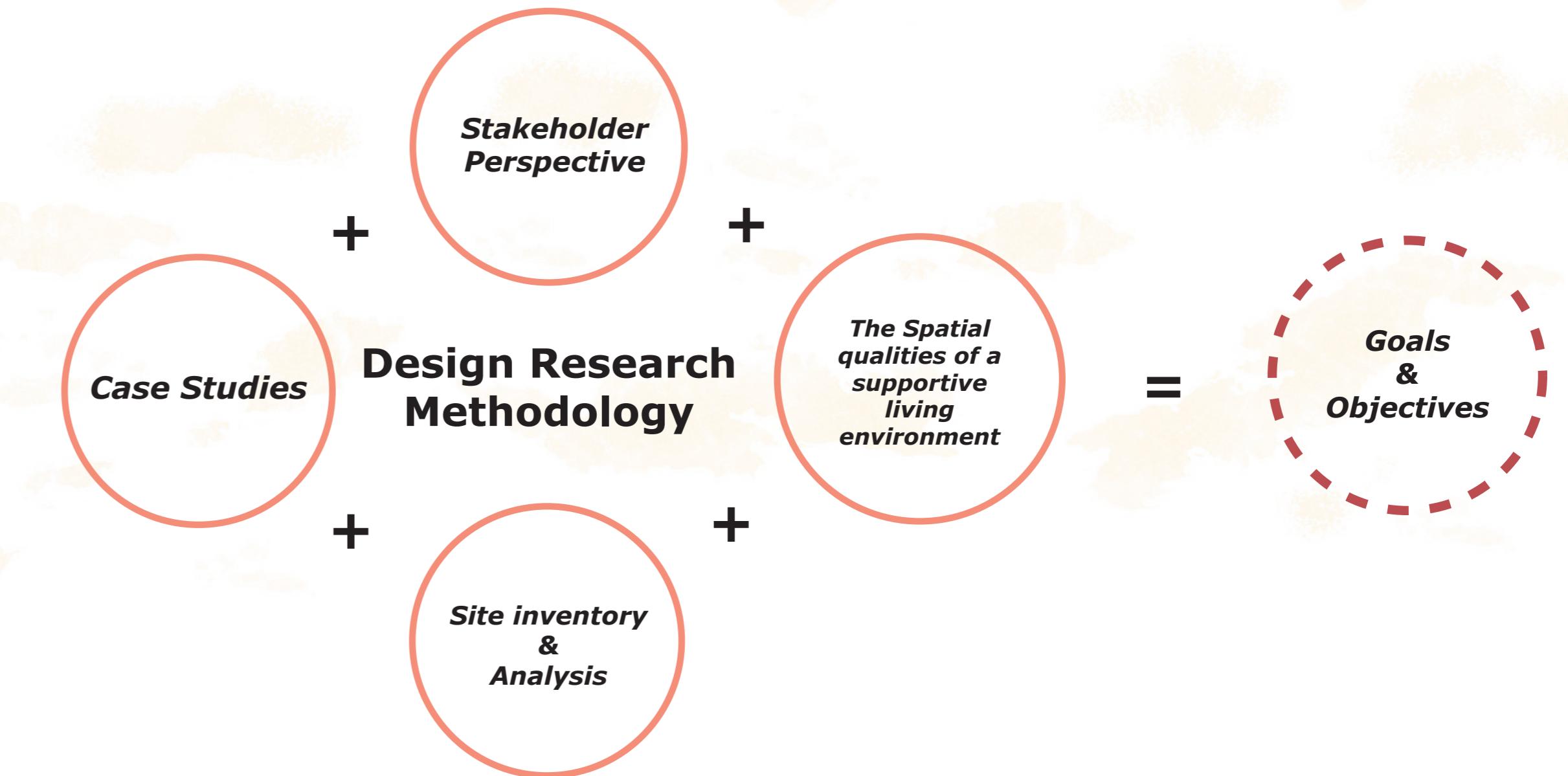


Project statement & Methodology

How can landscape architects design outdoor public spaces to create a more supportive living environment for severely distressed public housing residents ?

"Housing environments—especially if broadly considered—are connective spaces that link residents to broader sets of opportunities or, if poorly designed, act to restrict them." ²⁸

Project statement: One of the most effective solutions for dealing with severely distressed public housing is to transfer residents to newer mixed-income housing which have been shown to help mitigate social and health problems cause by distressed public housing. Unfortunately, the timely process of building new housing and transferring residents and lack of governmental oversight requiring 1 to 1 unit replacement, has been a leading factor in the loss of over 200,000 public housing units during a time where the country is facing a major affordable housing crisis ^{2,3,54}. The Current national numbers of households being wait-listed for housing assistance is 737,000 with wait times that range from 5 to 167 months ⁵⁵. **Design for Severely Distressed Public Housing explores ways in which landscape architects can design outdoor public spaces to help create a more supportive living environment that will provide relief for residents until more suitable housing options are available.**



Case Studies

Pocket Neighborhoods

Pocket neighborhoods is a community design method that clusters groups of neighboring houses or apartments gathered around shared open spaces. Pocket neighborhoods use design principals that aim to help create a greater sense of ownership and community for residents. These design principals include providing shared and active common spaces with clear and unobstructed views, layering of materials to create personal spaces, providing common buildings and gardens, and creating a place for unique and restorative planting.⁵³



Shared & Active
Common Space



Eyes on Commons



Layers of
Personal Space



Common Buildings
& Gardens



A Place for Planting

Greenwood Avenue Cottages Shoreline, Washington



Fifth Street Commons Langley, Washington

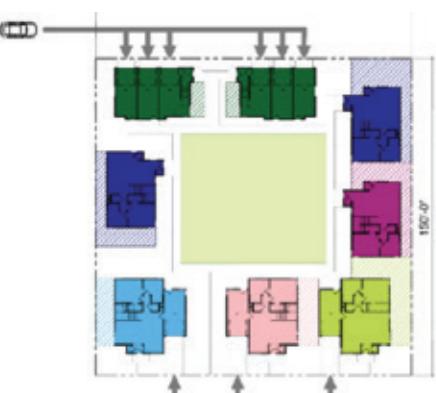
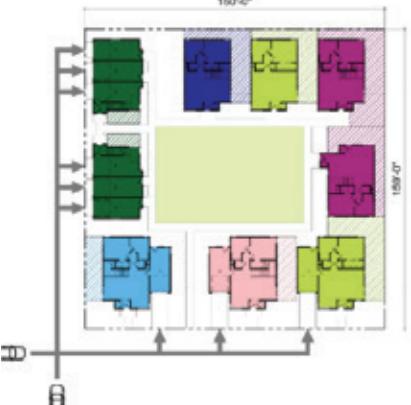
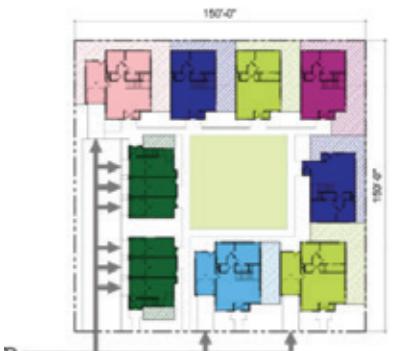


Case Studies

Block - 150

KTGY Architecture

KTGY R+D Studio uses Block - 150 to explore how clustered single-family design can bolster a greater sense of community and ownership. The design provides versatile floor plans that include tucked-aside parking spaces, and shared outdoor community spaces that help to contribute to a more dynamic, walkable, and social neighborhood. Each home is oriented toward the courtyard with direct access to their private yard, promoting neighborhood interaction. The shared courtyard design varies to accommodate a range of activities and age groups, from a treehouse play area for kids to a multigenerational community garden or entertainment space.⁵⁴



California Branch House

Vonn Weisenberger

California Branch-style Housing explores a framework for affordable, flexible, and sustainable multi-family housing that fits seamlessly into the low-rise neighborhoods of Los Angeles. The design provides shared common spaces and restorative planting to help create a calm and supportive living environment that helps create a greater sense of community.⁵⁵



Case Studies

The Rose - Minneapolis, MN

"Deep green affordable housing", The rose is a four story, 90-unit mixed-income apartment complex located in one of the lowest-income and ethnically diverse neighborhoods just south of downtown Minneapolis. 30,31,32



The Rose community teaching garden hosts hands-on workshops for all ages centered on health, culture, community & land stewardship.



53% of the site is dedicated to landscape & open public spaces to help **build a greater sense of community** 30,31,32



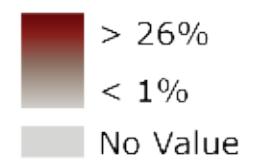
33% of the sites green space is designed with rain gardens that captures stormwater that provides 90% of the irrigation for the community garden 43



Site Selection Rationale

The site selection process involved a series of mappings that compiled data showing the locations of severely distressed public housing in Florida and Miami-Dade County. The criteria for the maps included public housing buildings that were 50 plus years old, within a half-mile radius of a major interstate or highway and located in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

Percent of population whose income is below the poverty line⁵¹



Public Housing Built Before 1974⁴⁸

Public Housing Built After 1974⁴⁸

Major Highway or Interstate⁴⁸

42% of all public housing developments in Florida are 50+ years old^{48 52}



63% of all public housing developments in Florida are located in areas of concentrated poverty^{48 52 53}

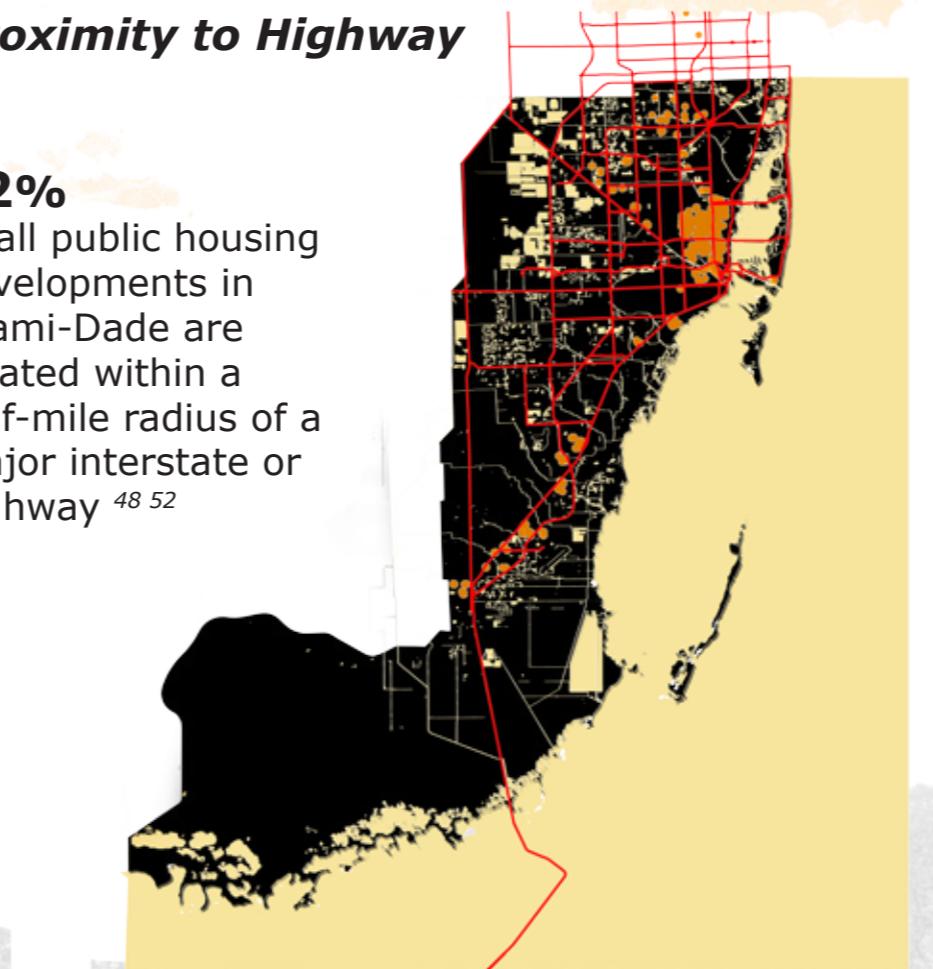


40% of all public housing developments in Florida are located within a half-mile radius of a major interstate or highway^{48 52}



Proximity to Highway

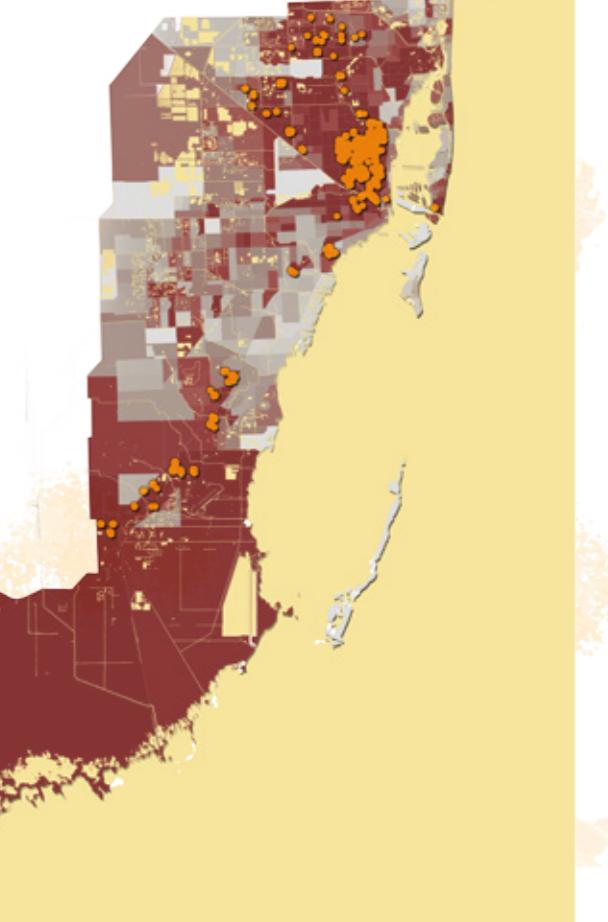
42% of all public housing developments in Miami-Dade are located within a half-mile radius of a major interstate or highway^{48 52}



Public Housing Buildings⁴⁸
Major Highway or Interstate⁴⁸

Areas of Concentrated Poverty

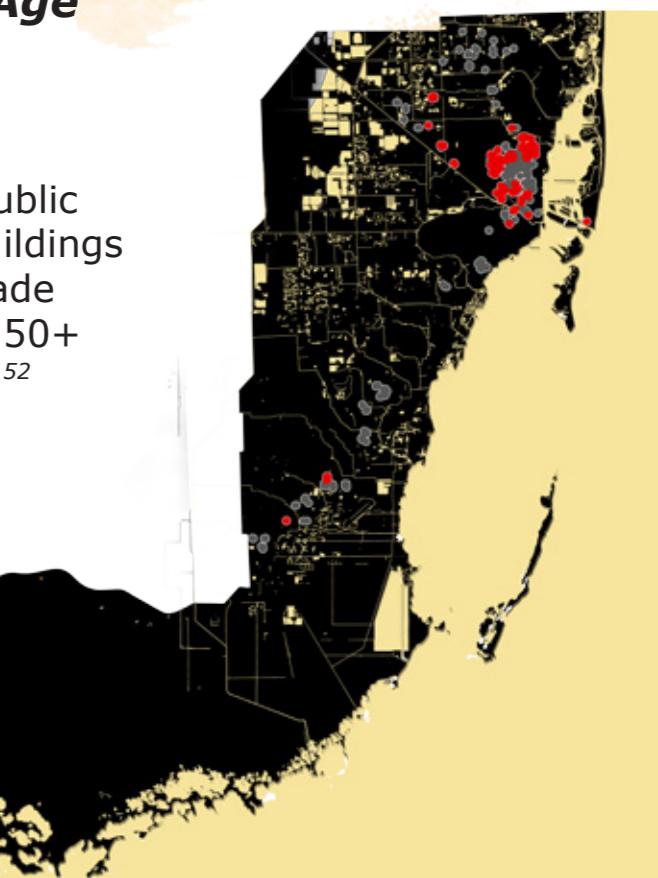
80% of public housing developments in Miami-Dade are located in areas of concentrated poverty^{48 52 53}



Percent of population whose income is below the poverty line⁵¹

Building Age

42% of public housing buildings in Miami-Dade County are 50+ years old^{48 52}



Public Housing Built Before 1974⁴⁸
Public Housing Built After 1974⁴⁸

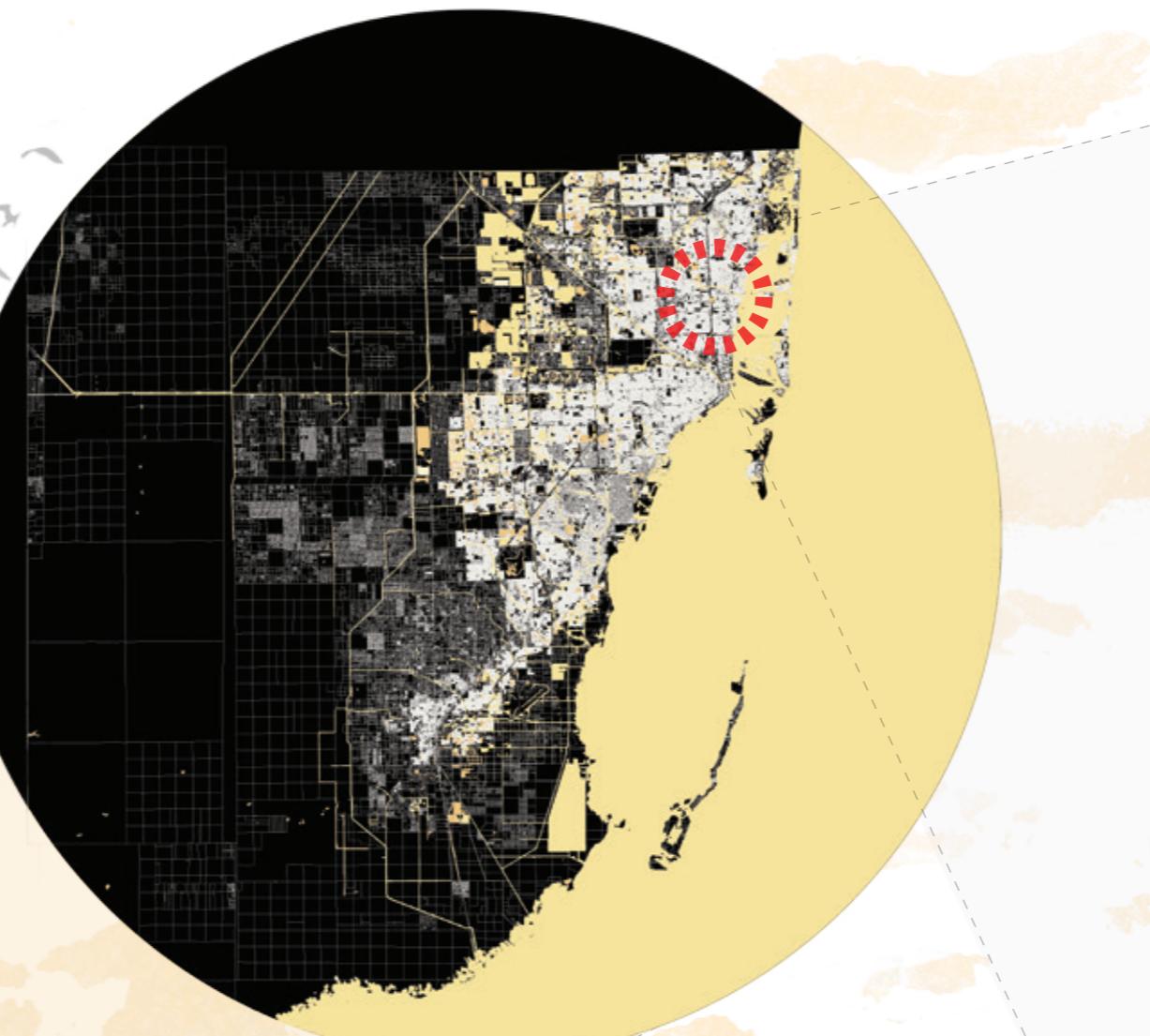
Site Location

- Public Housing Built Before 1974⁴⁸
- Public Housing Built After 1974⁴⁸
- Interstate⁴⁸
- U.S. Highway⁴⁸

Victory Homes is a public housing complex in Miami-Dade County was originally built in 1949 as a part of the defense housing project to provide temporary housing for WWII military veterans and families. The 23.27 Acres site consists of 148 single family units and is bisected by I-95, was built 73 years ago, and is in a neighborhood of concentrated poverty where the median household income is about \$16,000.

^{48,21,52}

Miami-Dade County



Victory Homes
520 NW 75 Street Miami, FL

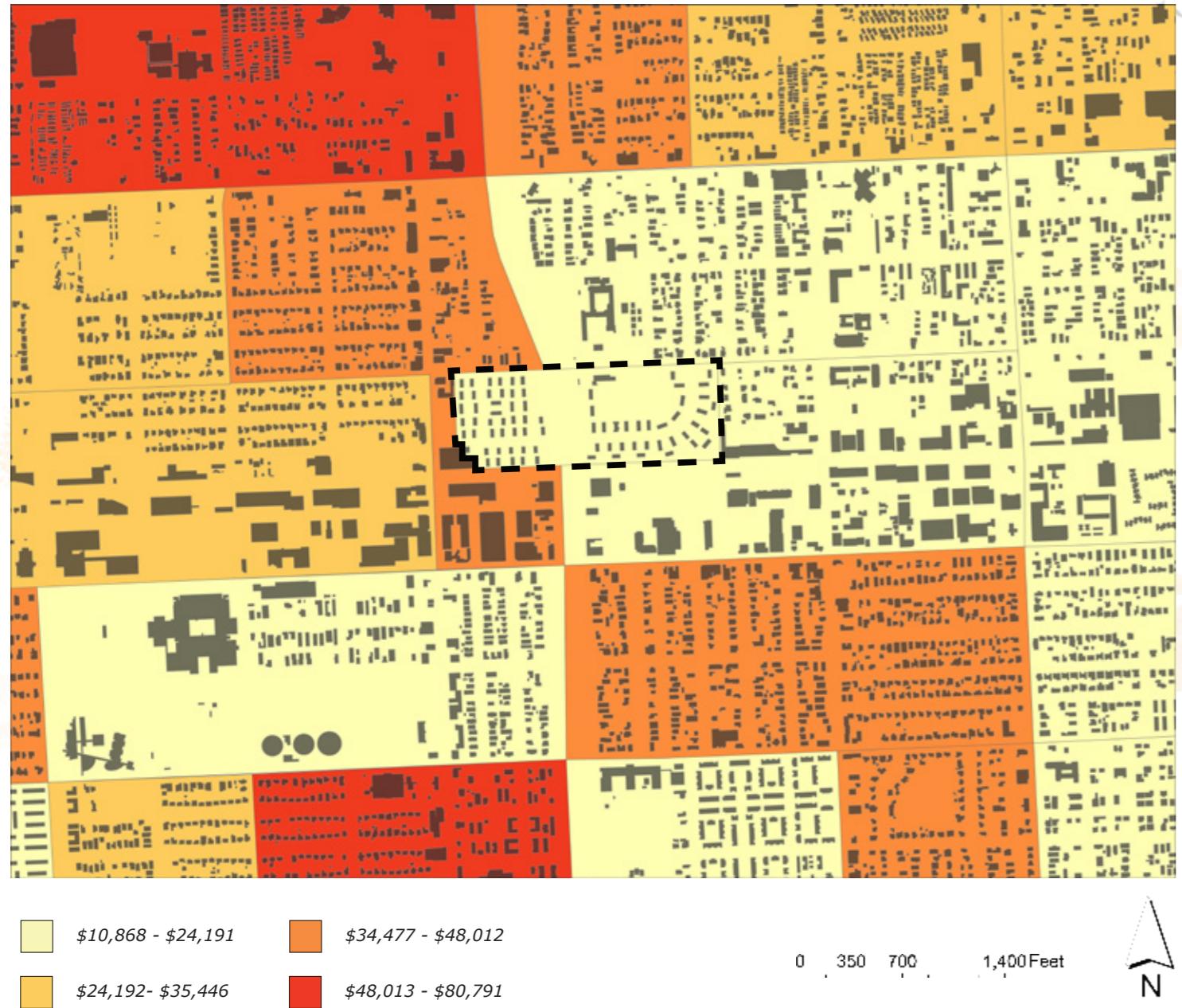


Site Context



Analysis

Median Household Income ⁴⁹



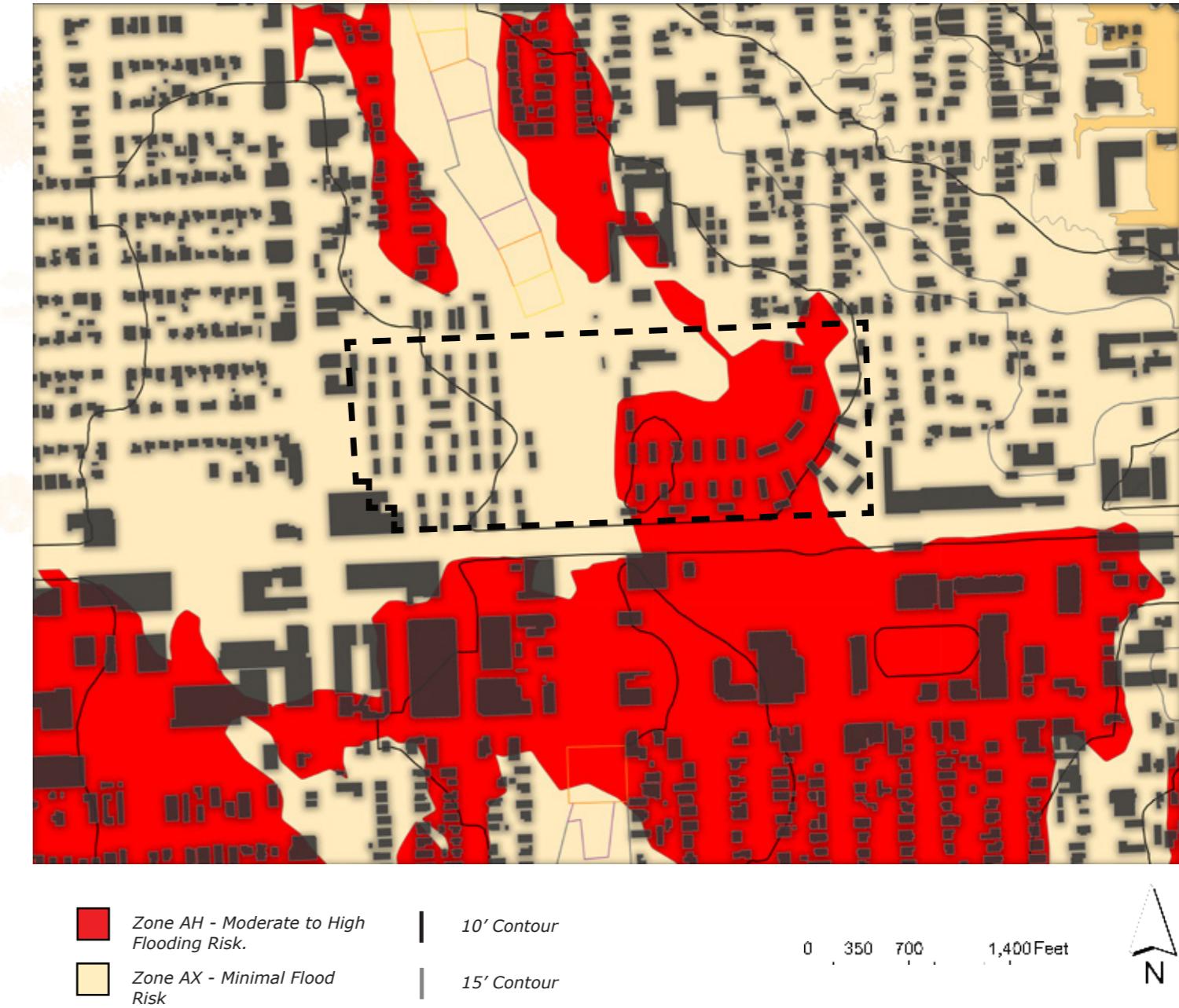
Victory homes is in a neighborhood of **concentrated poverty**. The median household income of the neighborhood is around \$16,000. Neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty lack access health, employment, and educational resources.^{3,5,6,8}

Land Use ⁵⁰



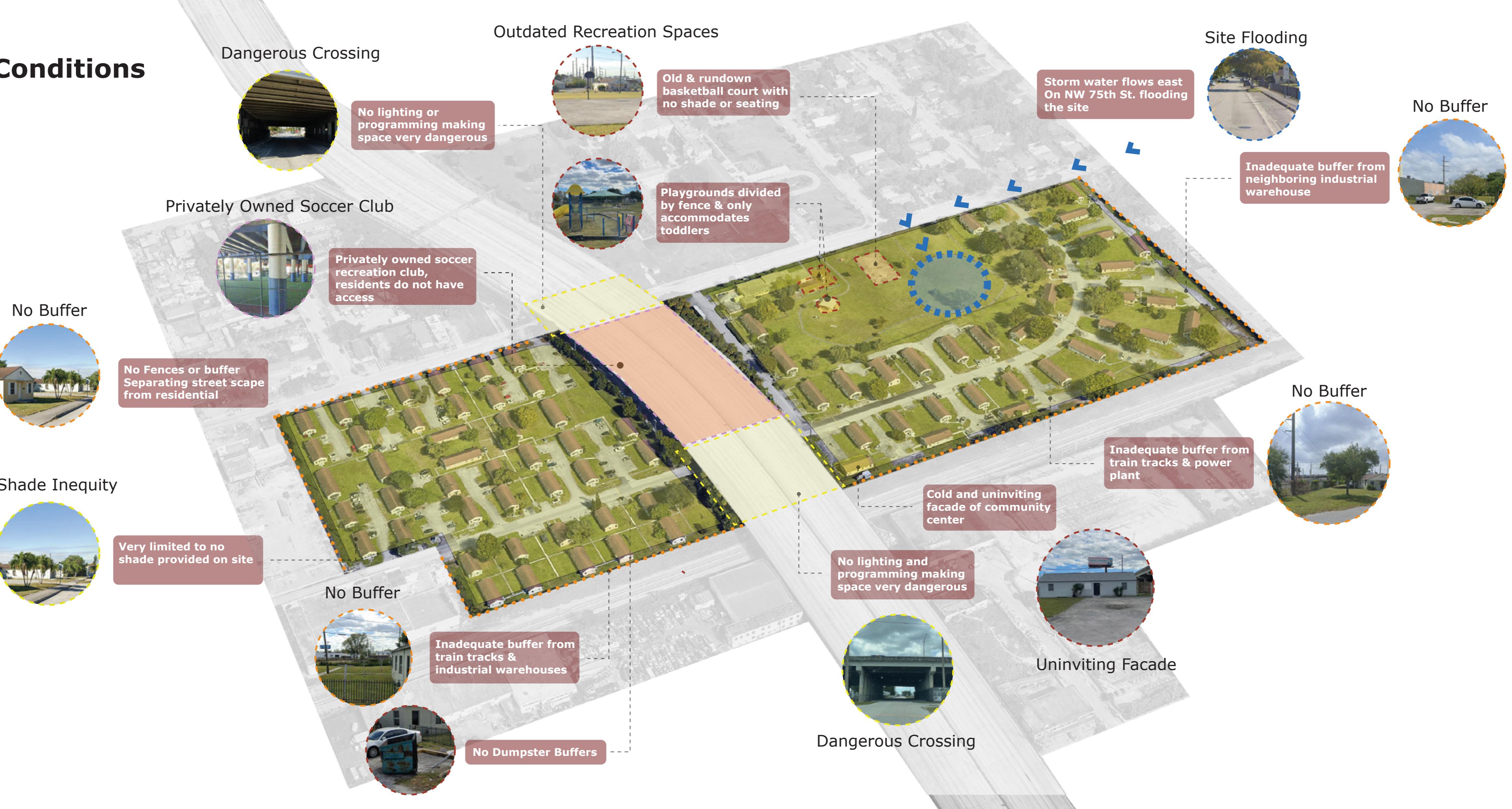
The neighborhood is primarily residential with some commercial parcels to the west of the site location running along NW 7th Avenue. The SE and SW corners of the site are next to **industrial parcels**, and the entire southern border of the site abuts an **active rail track**.

FEMA Flood Map ⁵⁴

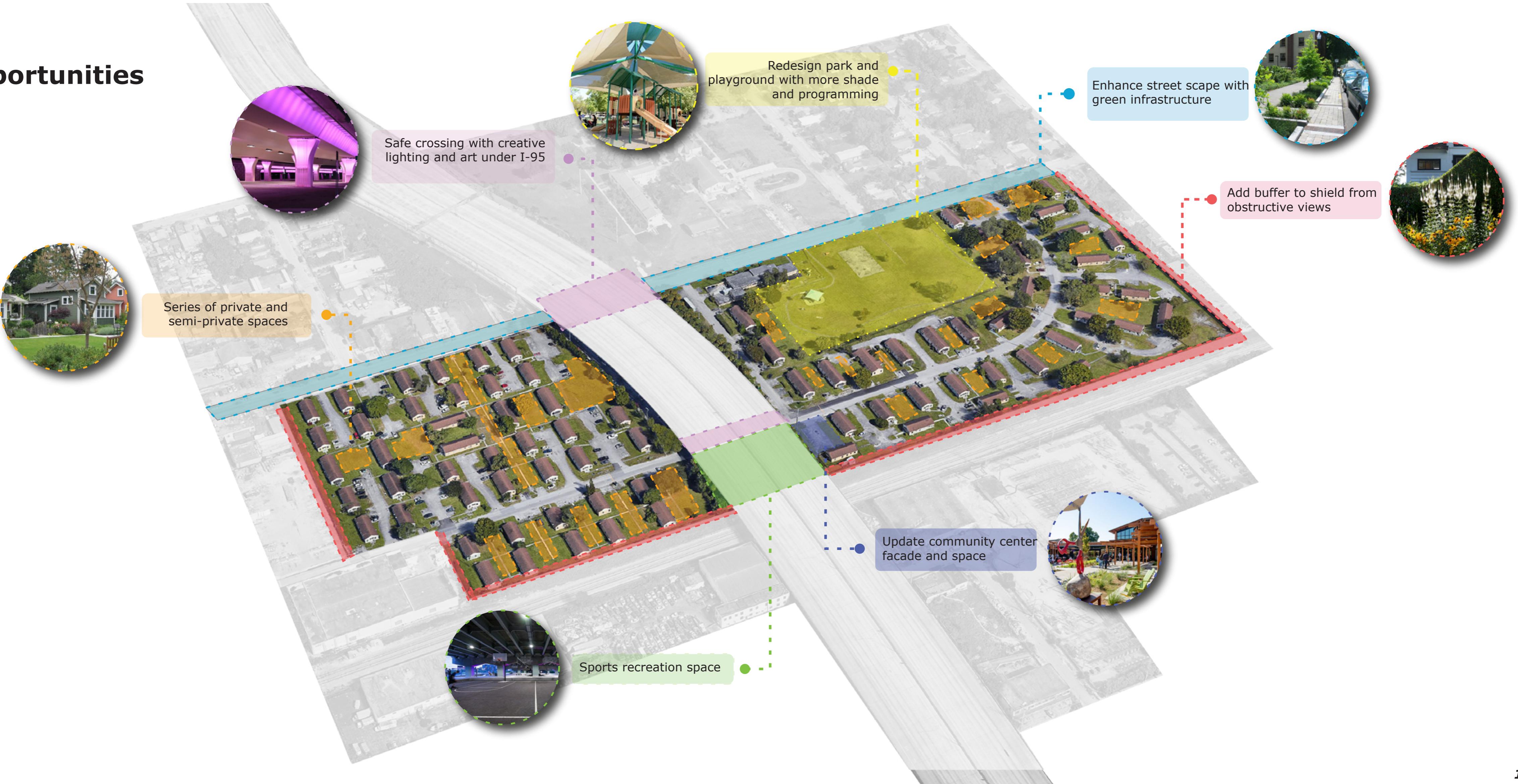


The northeast portion of the site is in Zone AH, which is the moderate to high flooding risk. This area of the site experiences **frequent flooding** from stormwater runoff traveling from the east of the site.

Existing Conditions



Site Opportunities



Stakeholder Perspective

Issues⁵²

- Very limited lighting on-site which creates unsafe spaces.
- Park and street get flooded during rain events
- No adequate buffer from train tracks & neighboring industry
- Lack of shade
- Outdated and disconnected playgrounds
- No personal outdoor spaces

Needs⁵²

- More recreational spaces & programming for children, teens, and adults
- Upgraded playground
- Resident garden spaces
- Community grilling spaces
- Private outdoor spaces for residents
- Shade and seating
- Creative lighting

How the space is Used⁵²

- Surrounding neighborhood uses park
- Local churches use park for events
- residents spend allot of time outdoors taking advantage of the limited programming provided



Maxine Mason:
President of The Victory Homes Resident Council

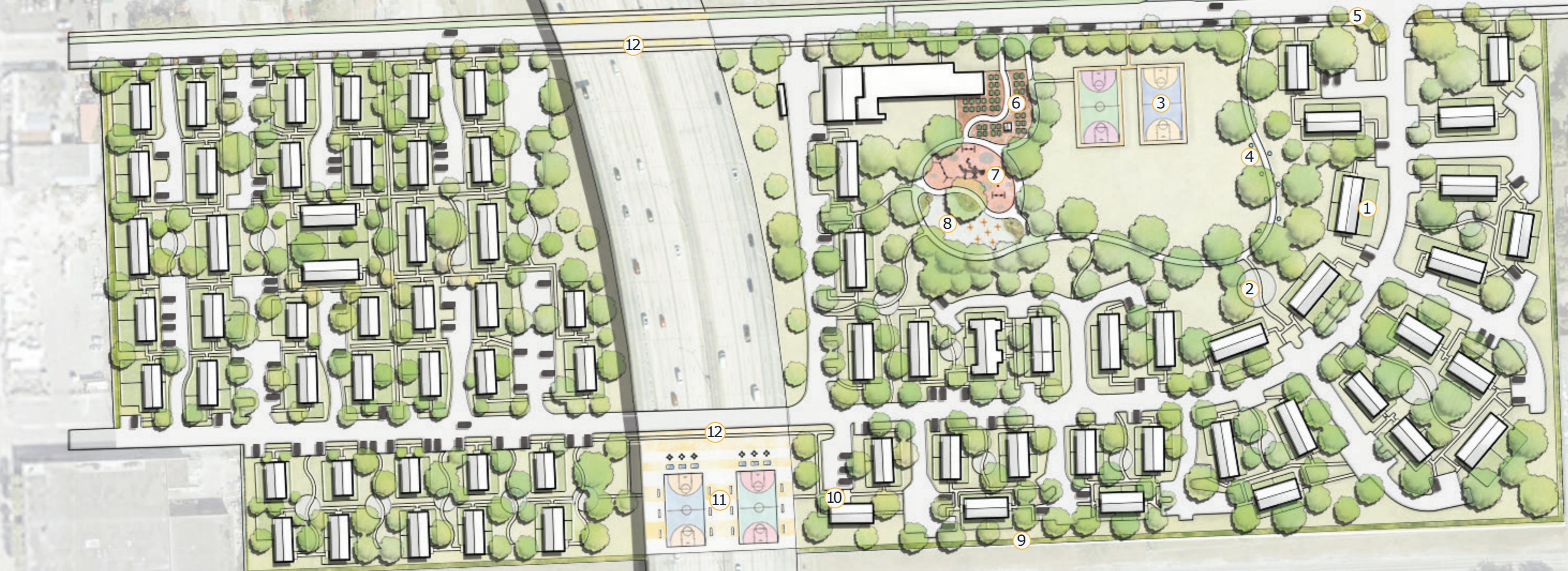


Victory Homes has a very active **resident council** that discusses and works towards resolving the day-to-day and long term issues faced by residents. Maxine Mason, the President of the Victory Homes Resident Council shared some insights as to how the residents utilize the site, the issues facing the residents, and resident needs.

Supportive living Environments For Distressed Public Housing Residents



Site Plan



Victory Homes Site Improvements

- ① Household yard space
- ② Resident shared courtyard
- ③ Updated basketball courts
- ④ Exercise circuit
- ⑤ Streetscape swale
- ⑥ Community garden
- ⑦ Updated playground
- ⑧ Victory Homes Plaza
- ⑨ Plant buffer
- ⑩ Updated entrance
- ⑪ Sports recreation center
- ⑫ Safe crossing

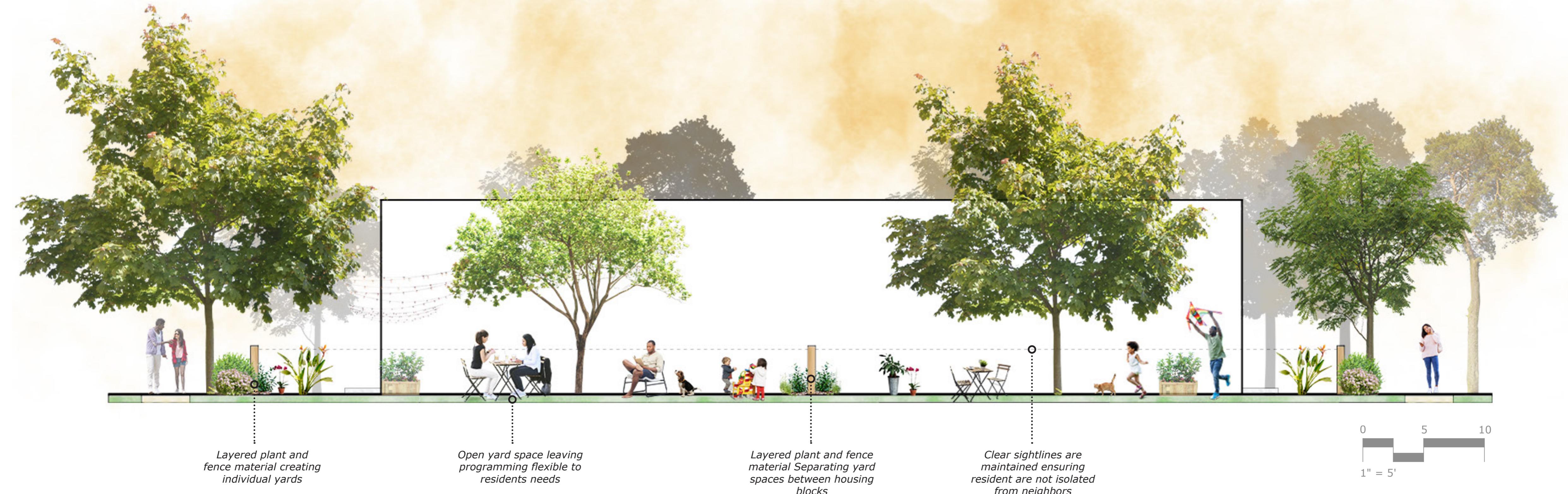


025 100 200 ft



Sense of Ownership







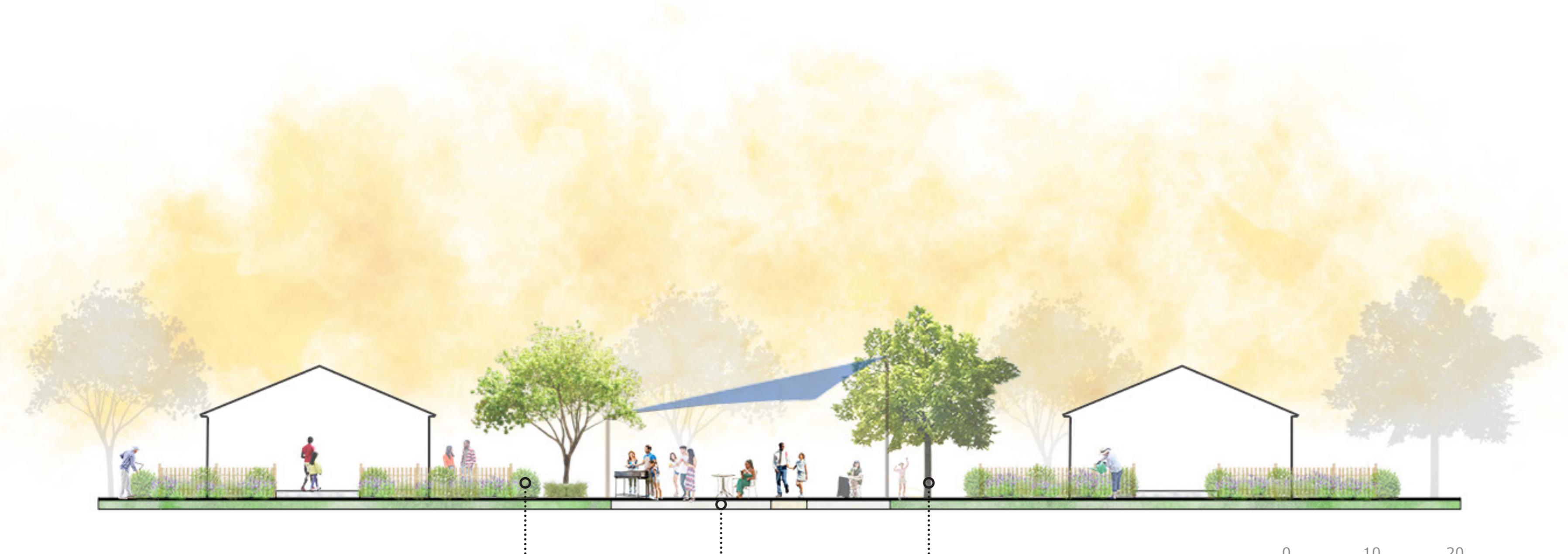
Personal yard spaces that provide residents with autonomy over outdoor spaces surrounding their houses are added to help create a **greater sense of ownership**. Layered fencing using plant and fence materials maintain clear sightlines creating individual yard spaces without isolating residents from their neighbors. This design helps to create private spaces for residents while still maintaining a greater sense of community.

Open yard space leaving
programming flexible to
residents

Layered plant and
fence material creating
individual yards



Community Empowerment

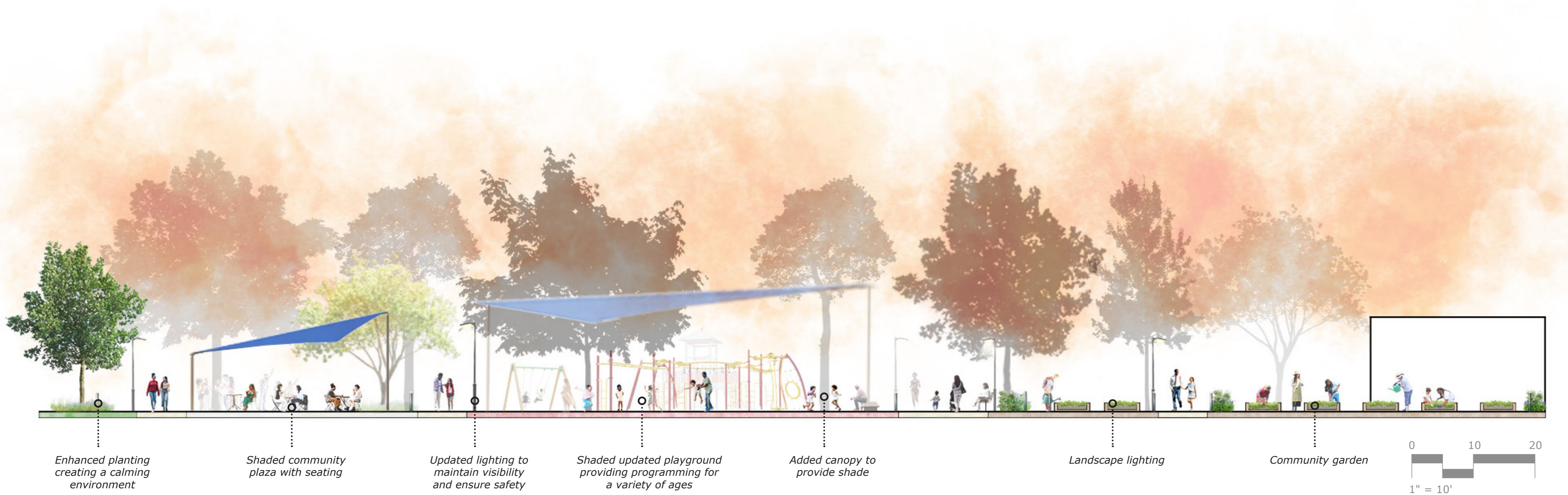




In order to help create a **greater sense of community**, shared courtyards are provided. The courtyards provide residents with shaded spaces to interact with neighbors. The courtyards are furnished with movable furniture, barbecues, and flexible open space. The design intention was careful not to over program shared spaces to allow flexibility of use that meets the residents needs.



Equitable Opportunity

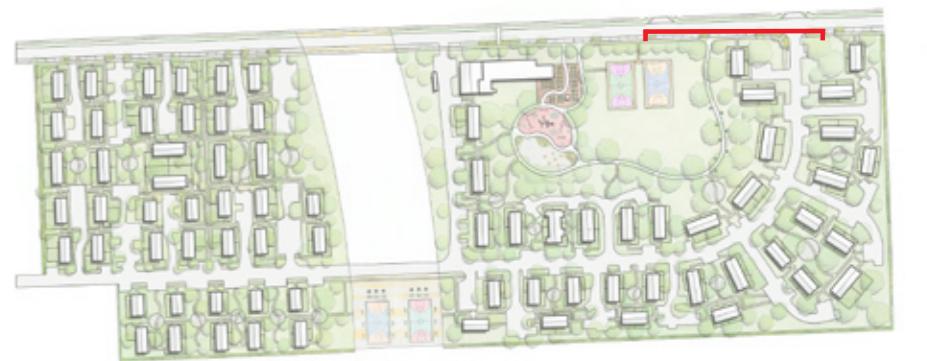
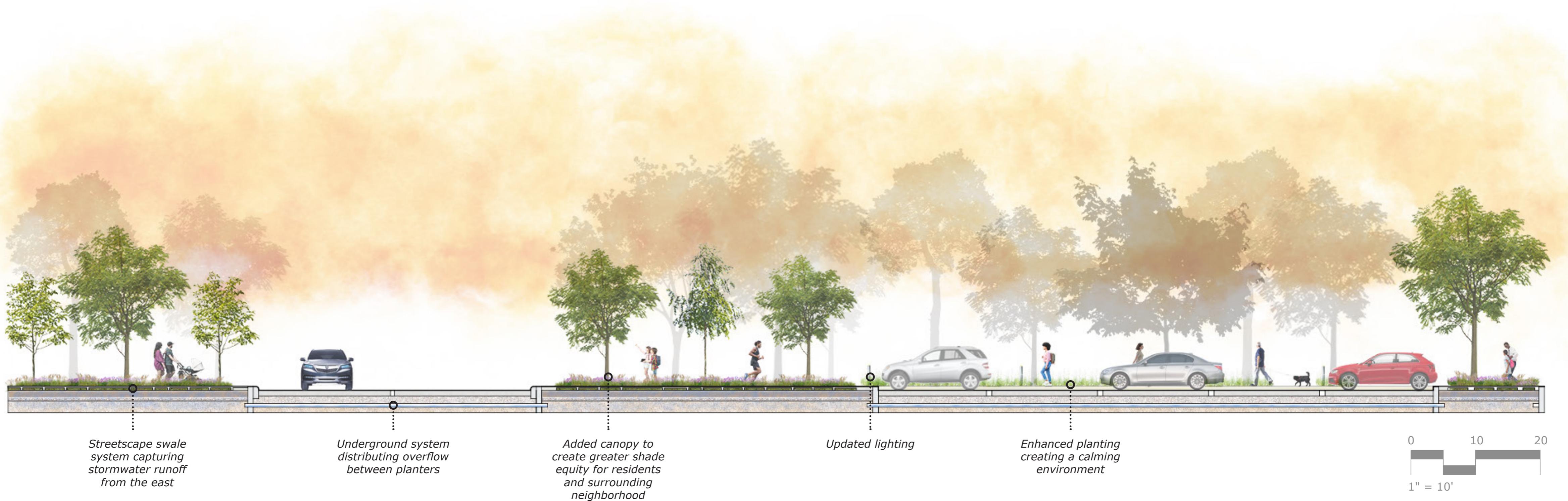




Updating community shared spaces that provide more programming, shade equity, lighting, and restorative plantings helps to create more **equitable opportunities** for residents. The Victory Homes Plaza creates a shaded outdoor meeting space for community meeting events and leisure. The updated playground space adds more programming for a variety of ages as well as seating for parents, creating an active and inclusive space. The community garden provides resident garden plots and a shared garden shed for storage. The community garden also provides a setting for workshops on gardening and nutrition. A sports recreation center with basketball and tennis courts, and gaming tables is proposed at the southern section of the site to provide more programming and activate the neglected and unsafe space underneath I-95.



Safe & Accessible





Streetscape improvements are proposed along NW 75th street which runs along the entire north portion of the site. These improvement's help to mitigate poor street lighting, flooding issues, and lack of planting, which helps to create a safer and more accessible site. Street and landscape lights are added along the streetscape, sidewalk, and planting beds to help maintain an active and safe space. A streetscape swale system is added to deal with flooding caused by stormwater runoff and create a more aesthetically pleasing corridor. The areas crossing underneath I-95 are activated with artful lighting and murals painted on the interstate columns, creating a safe crossing.

Conclusion

The ***design proposal*** looks at immediate landscape interventions to help provide relief for an underserved community living in a unsupportive environment. This project explores the reach of landscape architects and how the practice can better serve marginalized communities.



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