

# Designing for Gen Z

## A New Collective Space Within the Historical Context of Lazzaretto in Milan

Master's Thesis

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the adaptive reuse of an elementary school in the Lazzaretto district of Milan, proposing its transformation into a Generation Z oriented community center. Located within a historically layered urban fabric marked by underutilized public space and fragmented social interaction, the project addresses the evolving spatial needs of a generation characterized by hybridity and flexibility.

Through a methodology involving user research and spatial mapping, the thesis identifies six core needs shaping contemporary communal environments: community, flexibility, physical and digital integration, sustainability, health and well-being, and authenticity. These principles inform the architectural strategy, which reinterprets the existing structure rather than replacing it, preserving its identity while introducing adaptable spatial systems. The proposal operates through a tiered access model. The ground floor serves as a fully public space containing exhibition areas, conference halls, and multipurpose spaces. The first floor accommodates semi-public workshops, creative studios, and wellness spaces, while the upper level hosts reserved co-working and study environments. Architectural interventions, such as flexible interior configurations, allow the building to be personalized by the users over time.

Rather than positioning adaptive reuse as mere preservation, the project frames it as an active process of negotiation between past and present. The resulting design establishes a contemporary communal infrastructure that fosters belonging, collaboration, and cultural continuity within Lazzaretto's urban context.

## Sinossi

Questa tesi indaga il riuso adattivo di una scuola elementare nel quartiere Lazzaretto di Milano, proponendone la trasformazione in un centro comunitario orientato alla Generazione Z. Situato all'interno di un tessuto urbano storicamente stratificato, caratterizzato da spazi pubblici sottoutilizzati e da una frammentazione delle interazioni sociali, il progetto affronta le esigenze spaziali in evoluzione di una generazione definita da ibridità e flessibilità.

Attraverso una metodologia che combina ricerca sugli utenti e mappatura spaziale, la tesi individua sei bisogni fondamentali che modellano gli ambienti collettivi contemporanei: comunità, flessibilità, integrazione fisico-digitale, sostenibilità, salute e benessere, e autenticità. Tali principi orientano la strategia architettonica, che reinterpreta la struttura esistente anziché sostituirla, preservandone l'identità e introducendo al contempo sistemi spaziali adattabili.

La proposta si articola attraverso un modello di accesso stratificato. Il piano terra è concepito come spazio pienamente pubblico, comprendente aree espositive, sale conferenze e spazi polifunzionali. Il primo piano ospita laboratori semi-pubblici, studi creativi e spazi dedicati al benessere, mentre l'ultimo livello accoglie ambienti riservati al co-working e allo studio. Interventi architettonici, come configurazioni interne flessibili, consentono all'edificio di essere personalizzato dagli utenti nel tempo.

Piuttosto che considerare il riuso adattivo come mera conservazione, il progetto lo interpreta come un processo attivo di negoziazione tra passato e presente. Il risultato è un'infrastruttura comunitaria contemporanea che promuove appartenenza, collaborazione e continuità culturale nel contesto urbano del Lazzaretto.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has been a period marked by exponential developments in terms of the political and economic environment. The global events that have defined the early twenty first century has brought along undeniable transformations in how space is inhabited, shared, and utilized. The accelerated technological development, ecological urgency has changed how architecture should function in today's world. The social disruptions caused by the COVID19- pandemic have altered the traditional separation between domestic, professional, educational and social environments. A life that integrates digital conditions into our physical world has become unavoidable, therefore the necessity for flexibility and hybridity has become indisputable. The inherited architectural typologies struggle to accommodate contemporary modes of living, particularly in dense European cities, where spatial resources are limited and historical layers are deeply embedded. In the 21st century, architecture is challenged not only to produce new forms, but to rethink the frameworks through which civic space is managed and inhabited.

There has been a rising concern about the state of the world being left to the younger generations. Since the COVID 19 pandemic, the way that the world functions has changed. Generation Z has come of age during the uncertainty of the 21st century. As the first generation to grow up entirely in the digital era, Gen Z is in a unique position. Being born and raised in a time completely immersed in technology gives the generation an upper hand in understanding the world and the way it will take shape in the future, however they also face the challenge of navigating a present shaped by unprecedented conditions. The rapid advancement of technology is inevitably and inarguably changing the landscape of the workforce. While Gen Z is equipped to navigate these changes, their individual struggles are often overlooked. As the generation poised to shape the future, they remain underrepresented, both in the workplace and in how spaces are designed to support their needs.

One of the most visible spatial manifestations of this shift is the renewed relevance of third places: informal, accessible environments that exist outside the binary of home and workplace, yet are essential for everyday social cohesion, belonging, and mental balance. Prior to COVID 19, a house was a place to sleep, an office was a place to work, a cafe was a place to socialize. During the pandemic, these lines were blurred. The bedroom became the gym, the living room became the office, the kitchen became the cafe, as people were confined to one household and their laptops. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for connection, the post-pandemic city has revealed the limitations of exclusively virtual interaction and reaffirmed the importance of physical space for collaboration, creativity, and care. Many contemporary urban environments offer few non-commercial, inclusive spaces that support these needs. Shared public grounds are increasingly shaped by consumption, tourism, or nightlife, leaving limited room for everyday civic engagement, particularly for younger generations. In the European context, where cities are characterized by high density, limited land availability, and deeply layered urban fabrics, the pressure on shared spaces is particularly pronounced. This growing lack of communal spaces highlights an architectural challenge that is both spatial and social.

Within this broader urban condition, the Lazzaretto district in Milan offers a particularly meaningful context through which to explore these issues. Historically conceived as an infrastructure of care, isolation, and collective protection, the Lazzaretto was designed to respond to moments of crisis through architecture, embedding public health and social responsibility directly into the urban fabric. Over time, the area has undergone successive transformations, shifting from a space of emergency care to a dense, everyday neighbourhood integrated into the city. Today, Lazzaretto is characterized by demographic diversity and cultural vibrancy, yet it also experiences fragmented public space, limited greenery, and an urban environment in which social life is heavily concentrated around commercial nightlife activities, leaving few accessible spaces for every day, non-commercial civic use. This combination of care, historical memory, and contemporary urban pressures makes Lazzaretto the perfect candidate for experiment to understand how architecture can support collective well-being in everyday urban life.

This thesis responds to these conditions through a Generation Z-oriented third place developed via the adaptive reuse of an elementary school in the Lazzaretto district. Reuse is understood as a project of continuity that preserves identity of the space while reconfiguring an inherited historical structure into a contemporary communal environment, aligned with Generation Z's values and accessible to the wider neighbourhood. The proposal reimagines the school and its courtyard as a "collective living room": a sequence of adaptable, multi-use spaces capable of supporting study, co-working, cultural production, wellness activities, and informal social life across different times of day. Modular spatial systems enable continuous transformation, while wellness-oriented environments embed care into everyday use. Digital tools support creative expression and engagement with local memory, reinforcing the hybrid nature of contemporary spatial experience. Access to these spaces is organized through a layered system that ranges from fully public to more dedicated and member-based environments, allowing different degrees of use while maintaining inclusivity. Governance is treated as an integral component of the architectural concept through this tiered access and management model, which balances openness with long-term operational sustainability and is supported by partnerships with local associations and mixed revenue streams.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that designing for Generation Z can act as a catalyst for rethinking the contemporary civic realm more broadly. By combining adaptive reuse, participatory design, and a feasible governance model, the project proposes a non-commercial, inclusive third place capable of strengthening everyday belonging, supporting mental well-being, and encouraging intergenerational and intercultural exchange. In doing so, Lazzaretto becomes a prototype for renewed public space; one that responds to present realities while remaining anchored in collective memory.

# 1.DEMOGRAPHICS & ARCHITECTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY

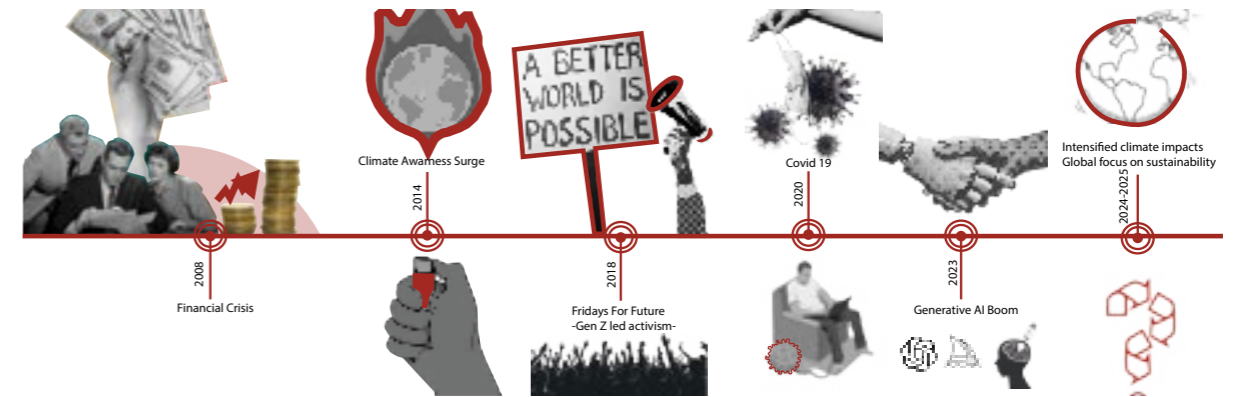
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## 1.1. Generation Z: Values, Identity, and Social Awareness

As the first generation to grow up entirely within the digital age, Generation Z is defined by its deep familiarity with technology and online environments. Roughly born between -1997-2012, members of this generation have never experienced a world without smartphones, social media, or instant access to information. As Coklar & Tatlı (2021) state, “They are individuals who do not know a world without the internet and digital technologies, and were born directly into digital technologies.” This unique condition distinguishes Gen Z from previous generations, not only in terms of communication and learning styles but also in how they perceive and engage with space. Constant connectivity and digital fluency have shaped their expectations for environments differently in respect to older generations.

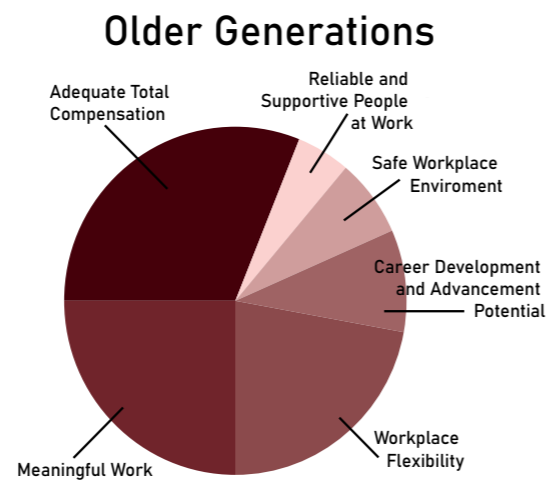
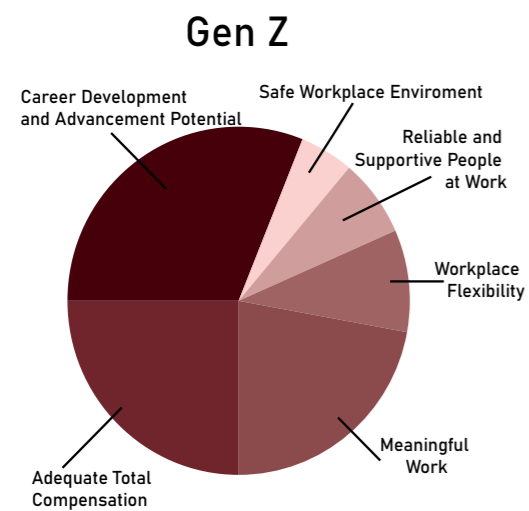


Generation Z is predicted to become one of the most influential demographic groups globally, projected to represent over %30 of the workforce by 2030 (Brown et al., 2024). Having come of age during landmark global events, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the climate emergency, the COVID19- pandemic, and the explosion of digital technology, Gen Z sits at the threshold of one of the most significant technological transformations in human history. These experiences have shaped not only their worldview but also their expectations from society and the spaces they inhabit. As a result, Gen Z is actively redefining traditional systems, bringing forward new demands that challenge long-standing norms in their environments.

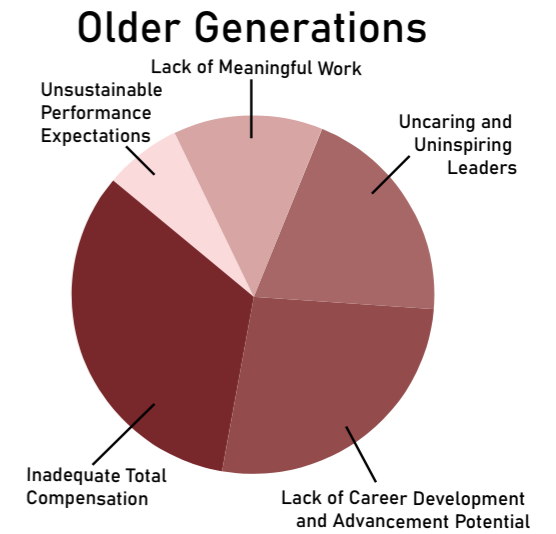
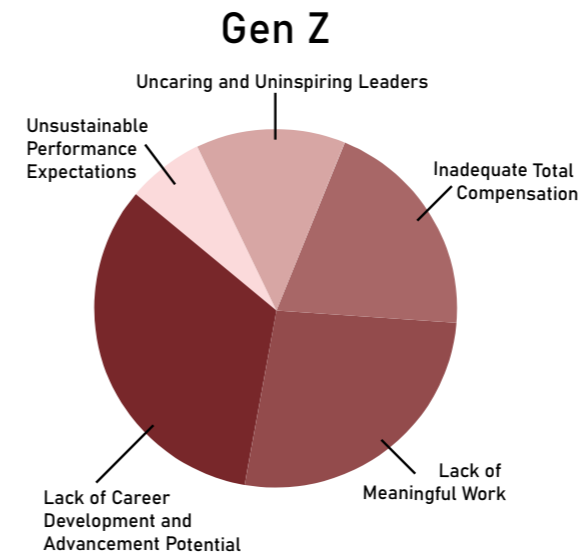


Unlike previous generations, Gen Z prioritizes values that go beyond financial gain. “Of all age groups, Gen Zers are the only respondents who do not cite inadequate compensation as the top reason for leaving their current jobs” (De Smet et al., 2023). Their concerns lie in other matters such as mental well-being, inclusivity, sustainability, and flexibility. This shift is rooted in their lived reality: growing up connected to the world through digital platforms has given them the opportunity to have a front-row seat to systemic inequalities and global events. Especially seen in the workforce, the new generation is bringing different expectations to the workplace, with corporations being forced to make structural changes to accommodate the needs of the young. These changes have been observed by research studies taken from different places of work.

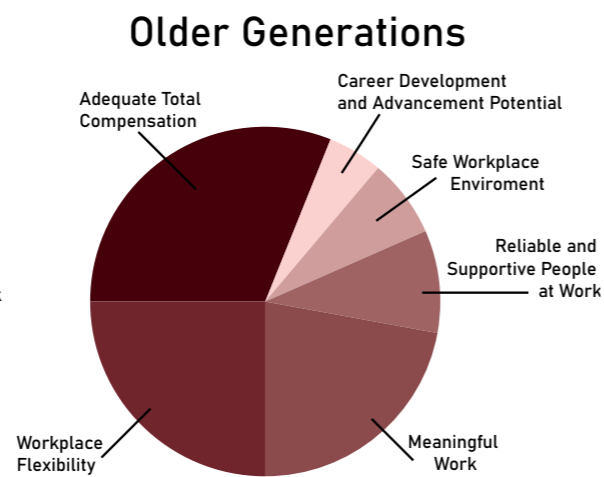
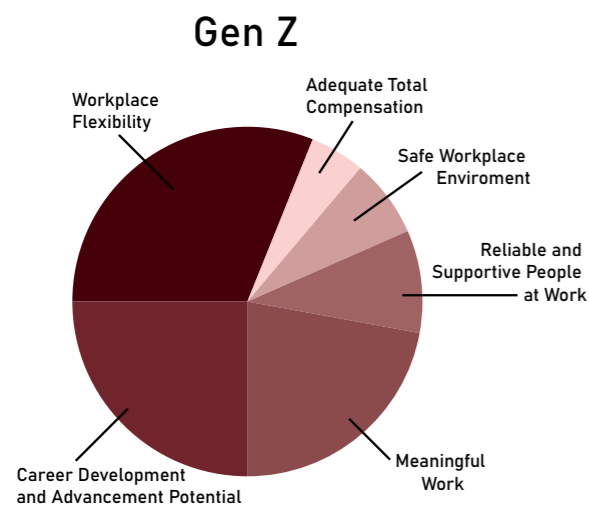
One priority for Gen Z is inclusivity. Having grown up in the social media era, with increased exposure and globalized spaces, the young people of this generation are ‘woke’ to global injustices in institutions such as workplaces or educational spaces. A defining trait of this generation is their resilience and willingness to speak out against injustices, therefore more and more of these institutions are actively restructuring policies to allow for more inclusive hires. According to a World Economic Forum report from %40 ,2023 of Gen Zers would discuss sexism in the workplace, as opposed to a cumulative %24 of older generations. Furthermore, the report also stated that a large number of Gen Zers would consider career changes if their employers were not engaged in social issues (Kreacic, 2023). This paints a picture of a generation unafraid to challenge authority for equality in the spaces that would become theirs.



Graph 1: Main reasons job transition



Graph 3: Main reasons for leaving a position



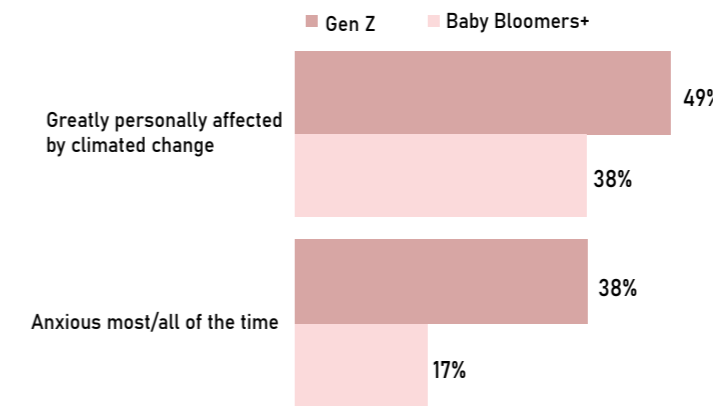
Graph 2: Main reasons employees remain in their current roles

In addition to an increased engagement in social issues, growing up in the social media era means that this generation consumes news more than any other form of content. According to new studies, (Clark-Memler, 2025) this has left a growing proportion of young people feeling “overwhelmed, disempowered, and adrift” due to a global lack of adequate mental health support services. The availability of these services is an increasing requirement by Gen Z in the workplace. Wellbeing, sense of purpose, and stable work/life balance have become more of a priority to Gen Zers in comparison to older generations. Long-term established institutions are learning how to integrate improved systems for mental health wellbeing for all generations, in a world where mental health stigma still exists. Generation Z is redefining the cultural and social fabric of contemporary life, bringing new expectations to the way we interact with systems, institutions, and the spaces we inhabit. Deeply shaped by digital immersion and heightened global awareness, this generation values inclusivity, mental well-being, flexibility, and purpose over traditional markers of success. Their willingness to challenge authority and advocate for systemic change signals a generational turning point, whether in the workplace, education, or the built environment. Understanding these evolving values is essential for shaping the future of the built environment, as Gen Z is not only redefining how spaces are used but also what they must represent. As the generation poised to inherit and transform contemporary society, their expectations are setting the foundation for the next era of spatial and cultural design.

## 1.2 A Generation in Transition

Generation Z, having been born after 1997, has come of age during a period marked by disruption, uncertainty, and accelerated changes, the early 21st century. From the moment members of Gen Z has started to gain consciousness, they have been exposed to global problems such as the intensifying climate crisis to the COVID19- pandemic. This generation has experienced formative events that have significantly influenced their values, priorities, and expectations for the future. (Koulopoulos et al., 2014) This claim doesn't undermine the global events that older generations has faced, rather, it gives a reason for why Gen Z was the generation to be the most affected by them. Gen Z has grown up with full awareness of planetary-scale risks and social fragility, often feeling the direct emotional burden of these realities. Having access to technology and the internet, Gen Z has had the opportunity to reach the world and analyse these events from a global perspective during their formative years (Coklar et al., 2021). According to a 2025 UNICEF report, over %59 of Gen Z youth reported feeling anxious, uncertain, or overwhelmed about the future due to global crises. These experiences have not only shaped their psychological well-being, but have also fueled a shift in how they approach work, social life, and, perhaps most critically, space. As institutions adapt to accommodate these generational shifts, the built environment must also respond to the new demands for sustainability, flexibility, and wellness that now define what it means to design for the future (Clark-Memler, 2025).

A growing concern for Gen Zers is the current climate crisis, as the generation that will inherit the consequences of inaction by older generations. As a result, Gen Z has grown increasingly vocal about the need for systemic change. A study in Australia directed towards Gen Z university students reflects global patterns, revealing that climate change is among the top concerns, with %81 claiming to experience 'serious climate anxiety' (Bogueva, 2024). In another survey in the US, %64 of Gen Z respondents stated that this climate anxiety will impact their future plans to some extent. This heightened awareness of ecological collapse has contributed to a broader set of lifestyle expectations that go beyond personal behaviour and into institutional and spatial accountability. For Gen Z, sustainability is not a trend but a baseline requirement. Many young people actively seek out employers and companies that demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainability and reducing their environmental impact. In architectural terms, this can translate into green infrastructure, low-carbon materials, and adaptive reuse over demolition. Generation Z values transparency and genuine long-term ecological commitment (Hickman et al., 2021).



Graph 4: Concern related to the climate crisis

A growing concern for Gen Zers is the current climate crisis, as the generation that will inherit the consequences of inaction by older generations. As a result, Gen Z has grown increasingly vocal about the need for systemic change. A study in Australia directed towards Gen Z university students reflects global patterns, revealing that climate change is among the top concerns, with %81 claiming to experience 'serious climate anxiety' (Bogueva, 2024). In another survey in the US, %64 of Gen Z respondents stated that this climate anxiety will impact their future plans to some extent. This heightened awareness of ecological collapse has contributed to a broader set of lifestyle expectations that go beyond personal behaviour and into institutional and spatial accountability. For Gen Z, sustainability is not a trend but a baseline requirement. Many young people actively seek out employers and companies that demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainability and reducing their environmental impact. In architectural terms, this can translate into green infrastructure, low-carbon materials, and adaptive reuse over demolition. Generation Z values transparency and genuine long-term ecological commitment (Hickman et al., 2021).

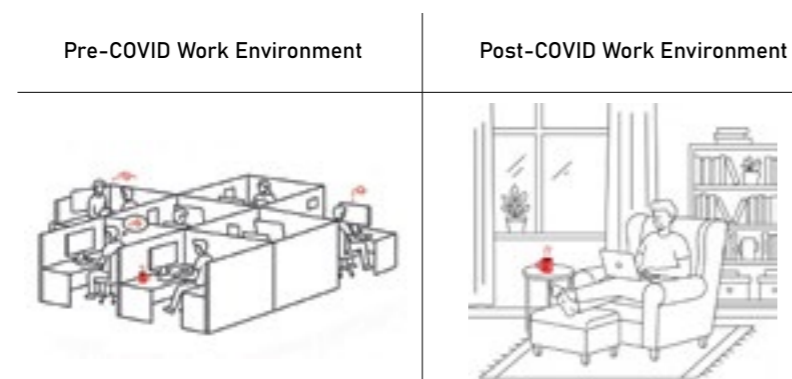
A turning point for the whole world, and consequently Gen Zers, was the COVID 19 pandemic. What had already been happening accelerated dramatically; the shift in the way the world functions. While many of the shifts toward digital platforms and remote access were already in motion, the global crisis accelerated these changes. The introduction of the 'work from home' concept is still applied universally today, which has made flexibility a top priority for the younger generation who were either entering higher education or the workforce during this transition. A Deloitte survey found that %75 of Gen Zers would prefer a flexible job over a high paying job, and that they would leave a rigid environment for a more flexible arrangement (Deloitte, 2021)

These studies highlight that in order to attract younger generations; companies must adapt to more flexible ways of working and living. Unlike previous generations, who often adapted to static, hierarchical systems and compartmentalized spaces, Gen Z gravitates toward open, adaptable settings that support both individual focus and collective collaboration. These preferences have major implications for architectural and urban design. The future of spatial design must prioritize modularity and convertible interiors. As Gen Z continues to challenge and reshape the norms of daily life, architecture must respond with spaces that are not only physically adaptable but also psychologically and culturally aligned with this generation who was raised on immediacy, mobility, and constant change (Gillis et al., 2025).

Generation Z demands more than just a superficial change; it calls for a fundamental redefinition of space. Gen Z's lived reality, shaped by instability, constant digital engagements, and a heightened awareness of social and environmental issues leads them to a desire to see a change in the workplace and outside. The traditional boundaries between home, work, and leisure have dissolved, giving rise to a new spatial paradigm that must be flexible, emotionally supportive, technologically integrated and socially conscious. Gen Z's values, mental well-being, sustainability, autonomy, and inclusivity, are not only peripheral demands but central design drivers.

### 1.3 Third Places, Informality, and Non-Commercial Urban Space

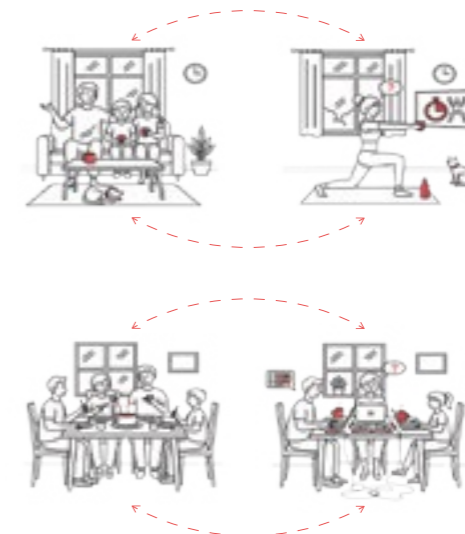
When COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, the dynamics at home and at work changed. The pandemic forced everyone to utilize their space in different ways they've never thought was possible, spend more time with people they live with, and spend less time with people they see every day. COVID-19 changed the dynamic of the workplace indefinitely, creating new possibilities like work from home, as well as bringing attention to issues that people have been dealing with for many years. Due to these changes, the desire for 'third places' increased exponentially since the rise of the pandemic.



Drawing 3: Comparison of the work environment

Third places are informal public gathering places that are neither home (first place) nor the workplace (second place) but are essential for community life and social cohesion. As defined by Ray Oldenburg "Third places are informal public gathering places that foster social interaction, community connection, and a sense of belonging. They are neutral ground where people can come and go as they please, enjoy the company of others, and engage in spontaneous conversation" (Oldenburg, 1989). Third places give the population the choice to go out, people do not go to third places out of necessity, creating a certain level of comfort in their existence.

As the cities continue growing rapidly, the boundaries between the public and the private life become increasingly unclear. Housing becomes more compact and unaffordable, cities become more crowded, growing the need for accessible, informal places. Generation Z seeks environments that support hybrid modes of living spaces that are not strictly private or commercial but offer the freedom to work, socialize, or simply exist without pressure or obligation. Gen Z values the opportunity to work remotely and may seek a balance between urban amenities and a tranquil, sustainable environment (Saylor, 2024). Offering an alternative spatial model that aligns with Gen Z's desire for flexibility, emotional security, and social connections, third places fulfil this role.



Drawing 4: Multiusage of a space at home

According to Oldenburg, third places typically have these 8 characteristics:

Neutral ground – No one is the host; people can come and go freely.

Leveler – Everyone is equal regardless of status or background.

Conversation is the main activity – Dialogue is central.

Accessibility and accommodation – Easy to enter and welcoming.

The regulars – A group of frequent visitors help shape the atmosphere.

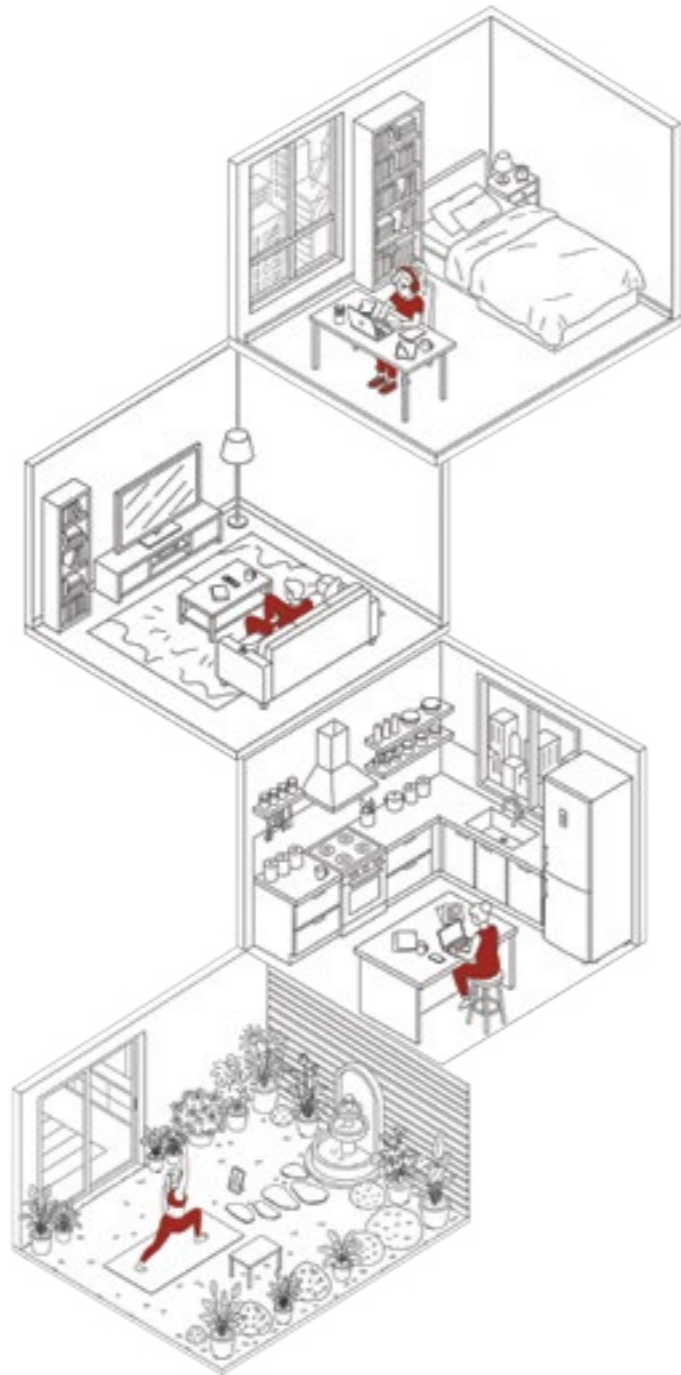
Low profile – Simple, modest, and unpretentious.

Playful mood – Light-hearted, relaxed, and fun.

A home away from home – Comforting, familiar, and safe.

These spaces can include cafes, libraries, parks, community centres, and any other place where spontaneous interactions occur naturally.

Oldenburg argues that societies function best when they have access to third places, settings outside of the home or the workplace. Third places induce a natural connection between people from different paths of life, encouraging them to interact informally, building trust, empathy, and a sense of community. Third places are also where people can de-stress, engage in conversation and feel a sense of belonging which are all great contributors to mental health and emotional well-being. Third places also offer balance to the structure of modern daily life, as people's lives became increasingly divided between home and work, third places provided a necessary social escape valve, spaces for spontaneity, playfulness, and unstructured socialization. In addition to these arguments, Oldenburg also believed that third places prevent 'urban alienation; the experience of being emotionally and socially disconnected from the surrounding community within the fast-paced urban life. Oldenburg argues that in dense, impersonal cities, third places serve as anchors of familiarity, helping people feel grounded, recognized, and less isolated (Oldenburg, 1989).



*Drawing 5: Post Covid layers of a house*

## 2. GEN Z CORE NEEDS

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## 2.1 How to Design For Gen Z

“We need to look at Gen Z not just as a generation, but as a new set of behaviours and attitudes about how the world will work and how we will need to respond in order to stay current, competitive and relevant.” (Koulopoulos et al., 2014).

Generation Z is not just the most recent generation going into the workforce; they leave a cultural and social mark in how space, work, identity, and well-being are perceived. Gen Z has grown up during a time of rapid technological innovation, global uncertainty, and evolving social values. As digital natives, their expectations towards society, design, functionality, and interaction are significantly different from older generations (Coklar et al., 2021). This generation’s lived experiences have shaped a collective mindset that values issues that were previously taboo subjects; inclusivity, sustainability, authenticity, and emotional well-being (UNICEF, 2021). These shifts demand a new kind of spatial thinking; one that goes beyond aesthetics and function to approach the space on an emotional, technological, and psychological level.

Before Generation Z emerged as a dominant demographic force, they were anticipated to change the cultural dynamics. In *The Gen Z Effect*, Koulopoulos and Keldsen (2014) predicted that this generation would challenge and dissolve traditional boundaries by embracing unexpected levels of connectivity and collaboration. This could be between generations, consumer and creator, physical and digital, or personal and global. Rather than conforming to already existing societal structures, Gen Z demands that institutions evolve to meet their values and pave the way for future generations. These include transparency, diversity, and constant technological relevance. Gen Z actively reshapes the spaces and environments they inhabit to reflect their need for identity, autonomy, and shared experience; they are not only passive users of space. Their stance in society is very influential; their preferences and demands are not just passing needs, but they are values that are reshaping and restructuring societal functions and institutions as we know them (Koulopoulos et al., 2014).

Since Gen Z’s values are the building blocks of what’s to come, ultimately, designing for Gen Z means designing for the future. The amount of importance that Gen Z puts on social issues today is on the way to becoming the standard. Their desire for autonomy, individuality, transparency, and flexibility is not a depiction of sensitiveness or laziness as it might seem, but they are reflections of a broader cultural evolution, one that puts forward emotional well-being, sustainability, and the meaningful use of space. Designing with Gen Z in mind doesn’t necessarily mean adapting to a temporary demographic shift; it means recognising the emergence of a new model in spatial thinking. As their values become baseline expectations for society; architects and institutions must reimagine how environments can foster them. Design judgements can be made through the investigation of core needs of Gen Z, where these needs are rooted, and how these needs are communicated. Gen Z’s spatial expectations offer a roadmap for designing environments that are not only relevant for today, but resilient for the future (Koulopoulos et al., 2014).



Drawing 6: Core Values

### 2.1.1 Flexibility



As the first generation to grow up digitally, Generation Z has significant expectations when it comes to places where they work, learn, and socialize. With values related to mental well-being, inclusivity, flexibility, and digitality, Gen Z has a different perspective of understanding of the space than previous generations. This generation actively identifies spaces that respond to their unique needs, rhythms, and identities. This expectation promotes the rising need for adaptable, user-centered, and flexible space in every sector.

Born and raised in a digital era, which provides constant access to everything and a variety of choices, this generation prioritizes work-life balance as well as autonomy and flexibility for the public and work environments. According to the Deloitte 2024 Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey, this generation places high importance on hybrid working arrangements such as remote or on-site and flexible hours, stating these preferences are crucial rather than optional to maintain their well-being (Deloitte, 2024). These demands are further explained in Elisabeth Arno's 2024 thesis "Redefining the Office: Workplace Design for Gen Z" which includes semi-structured interviews with young professionals in the creative industries, to give a better understanding of certain preferences related to the physical aspects of the spaces. Throughout the interviews, participants showed a distinct preference for spaces that are not rigidly planned or uniform and that are designed in terms of mobility, adaptability and flexibility. As one of the interviewees said, "You don't feel that the space belongs to you, that you can do whatever you want. You still have your own place. You still stick to that, and your freedom is ending where your chair is able to move." (Arno, 2024). This statement highlights how this generation wishes for an environment that emphasizes adaptability, mobility, and flexibility.

The expectation for adaptable and flexible settings is not limited only to the workplace. A study conducted by Resume.io illustrates that one in three Gen Z workers would favour a four-day work week alongside various amenities like nap rooms and pet-friendly spaces, demonstrating their desire for comfort and personal well-being as necessary components of their spatial environment (Watson, 2025). According to the research done by HAN Spaces, it highlights certain design features such as adjustable lighting, movable configurations, and open spaces, indicating Gen Z's need for personalized environments that can adapt to personal preferences. They prioritize spaces that allow them to express their individuality, for example, co-working areas with assigned spaces for collaboration, socializing, and relaxation (HAN Spaces, 2024).



Figure 1: Modular office pod



Figure 2: Experiential workplace elements



Figure 3: Flexible office elements

Under the theme “Living with Intention and Flexibility” mentioned in the magazine Identity.ae, draws on insights from a variety of designers and studios such as Studio Baab, and TwentyOne06 demonstrates how Generation Z values environments that accommodate their emotional or functional expectations. This generation not only values spatial experience in the work environment but also in residential. Gen Z does not see “home” as a particular and fixed setting but a combined area which includes workspace, leisure, and social. Home would be compact but adaptable in design, modular furniture, hybrid communal/private spaces, and flexible as they relate to the mental wellness and value of identity expression in everyday life. This new understanding of the domestic space aligns with the rising popularity of co-living, particularly in high-density urban environments. As stated by the Identity.ae article, “with skyrocketing urban density and shifting lifestyle patterns, co-living and modular living are gaining ground.” This illustrates that these types of shared residences respond to contemporary values of flexibility, adaptability, affordability, and sense of community in the context of Gen Z’s culture (Rai, 2025).

A study managed by Susanti and Natalia in the IOP Conference Series further contributes to the issue of Gen Z’s overall demands for public space in a survey that was held in Indonesia. The study identifies four critical characteristics that shape the ideal public space for them: flexibility, uniqueness, privacy, and contemplation. Respondents showed that shopping malls were the most popular places among Gen Z, visited by 34%, followed by city parks, visited by 28%, indicating a balance between stimulating and reflective places. In this context, flexibility means they can interact with different activities in the same space. Uniqueness refers to a public space able to present an uncommon, provoking, magnificent image. Privacy means that they are allowed to spend time with their loved ones or alone without feeling exposed. Lastly, contemplative means the public space helps them question, get creative, and feel inspired. These characteristics illustrate that this generation gives high importance to spaces that merge function, emotion, and personal expression (Susanti et al., 2018).

Generation Z’s spatial demands lean towards a flexible, personalized, adaptable, well-being-oriented design. Regardless of whether these spaces are workplaces, homes, or any public settings, Gen Z requires environments that can adapt to their current needs by promoting their freedom, allowing connectivity while emphasizing privacy and inclusivity.



Figure a

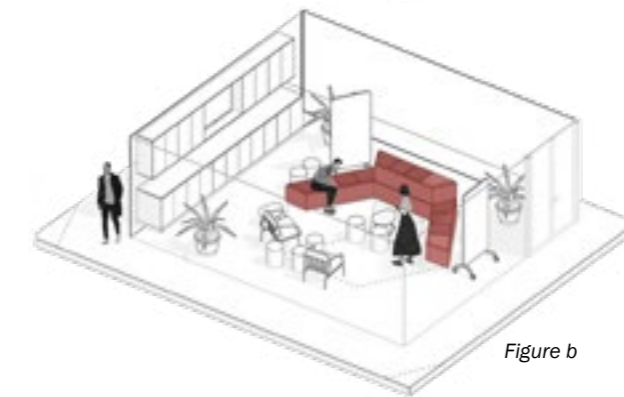


Figure b

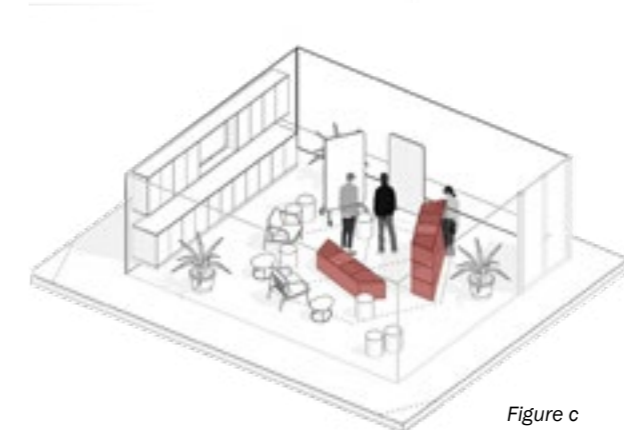


Figure c

Figure 4: Flexible office furniture  
(a) Linear configuration; (b) Stacked (compact) configuration; (c) Parallel dual-line configuration.

## 2.1.2 Digital and Phygital Integration



The word ‘phygital’ refers to the blending of both physical and digital experiences, which also defines the life that has been led by Gen Z. Generation Z, or the ‘digital natives’ have never experienced a life without the internet. (Coklar et al., 2021). Being born and raised in a period where technology was improving exponentially, Gen Z as an entire generation was intertwined with technology at all stages of their lives. This constant exposure to technology and the internet has shaped how they communicate and consume information, as well as how they perceive and interact with the world around them. For Gen Z, the boundaries between the physical and the digital space are fluid; to them, one doesn’t exist without the other. Due to their complete immersion in the digital world, they naturally expect environments, whether educational, professional, or recreational, to reflect this hybrid logic.

Gen Z’s everyday lives, education, entertainment, communication, and even relationships are deeply intertwined with technology. Contrary to previous generations who adapted to digital tools, Gen Z’s baseline for any experience is shaped by immediacy, mobility, and seamlessness between physical and digital realms. This relationship thoroughly impacts how Gen Z interacts with space. They gravitate towards environments that tend to be much more flexible, non-hierarchical, and receptive. A study done by Althuraya et al. (2021) found that more than 75% of Gen Z tend to be more immersed in interactive platforms rather than traditional settings, suggesting a broader perspective that offers two-way engagement. (Alruthaya et al., 2021).

Even though Gen Z is the generation that doesn’t know a world before technology and social media, their complete immersion has made them aware of the consequences that come with their full integration. This constant digital engagement has sharpened their perspective of how online actions can translate into real-world outcomes. Most use their social media not just as a platform for entertainment, but almost as a curated digital portfolio, as an extension of their identity, values, and aspirations. Gen Z utilizes social media to create a persona for themselves, to connect, to learn, and to network.

Actively following the evolution of social media and technology, Gen Z has adapted to the global language. They have witnessed how missteps can lead to long-term reputational harm, causing ruin either in their personal lives or careers, ultimately leading to real harm. This has made the generation much more cautious, strategic, and emotionally intelligent, especially when navigating online spaces and media. They are fully aware that a poorly thought-out post can compromise job prospects or social stature. As a result, many members of this generation are increasingly vocal about the mental health implications of digital spaces, advocating for boundaries and authenticity.



Figure 5: Digital displays in workplace



Figure 6: Phygital meeting rooms



Figure 7: Smart kiosks

Gen Z are the curators of the new generation of social media. While being online isn't always harmful for the generation, Gen Z remains conscious of how older generations perceive them, as screen addicted, distracted, or overly reliant on technology. While these critiques are not unreasonable and true to some extent, the complete immersion of social media and technology doesn't necessarily indicate a loss in desire for genuine, offline interaction. According to Larkin et al. (2018), nearly three out of four Gen Z-ers prefer face-to-face communication, and over 51% want in-person meetings with managers rather than emails or online meetings. These preferences depict a generation that seeks balance between their online presence and real-world engagement. Conclusively, Gen Z wants to be recognized for their work ethic and their offline capabilities, not just as the generation who lives in the digital world (Larkin et al., 2018).

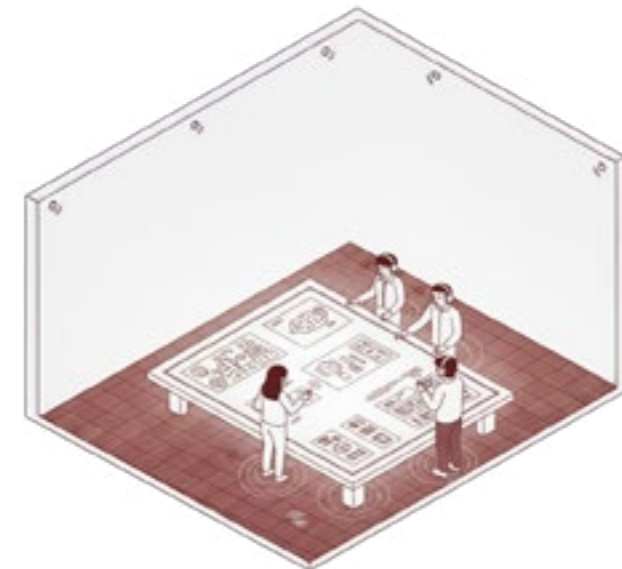
According to a study published by DELL Technologies in 2024, when it comes to choosing employment, 91% of Gen Z says their choice to work at a company depends on its' level of technological sophistication. In the same study, it is mentioned that 80% of Gen Z aspire to work with cutting edge technology. Gen Z finds it unreasonable for workspaces and companies to not keep up with new technology (DELL Technologies, 2024). This expectation not only considers the corporate world, but it extends into all spaces they occupy by nature, the very design of physical space. In architecture, this translates as the integration of digital technologies into the built environment, giving rise to phygital spaces, as well as the use of technology during the design and construction processes.

This phygital integration in architecture can be exemplified through the use of interactive, AR-enhanced (Augmented Reality) environments, smart building systems, and responsive design solutions. The innovative technologies can also be utilized during the construction process in order to produce a more sustainable and environmentally conscious outcome. These innovations enhance user experience by enabling spaces to adapt to real time needs and offer energy efficiency. For Gen Z, these features are the standard expectations. By their nature, they predict environments that are connected and flexible. In the 21st century, phygital design has become not just a stylistic choice but an architectural language that aligns with Gen Z and the future generations who are being raised in a digital world. (Yan et al., 2024)

As technology evolves, and social media becomes a preview portfolio of any member of society or institution, it becomes increasingly more difficult to avoid. It needs to be accepted that the way of the world is shifting and evolving, and the world needs to evolve in parallel. Designing for what and who the future is, utilizing technology most efficiently becomes not a luxury, but a necessity.



Drawing 7: Phygital work environment



Drawing 8: Exhibition with digital displays

### 2.1.3 Authenticity and Identity



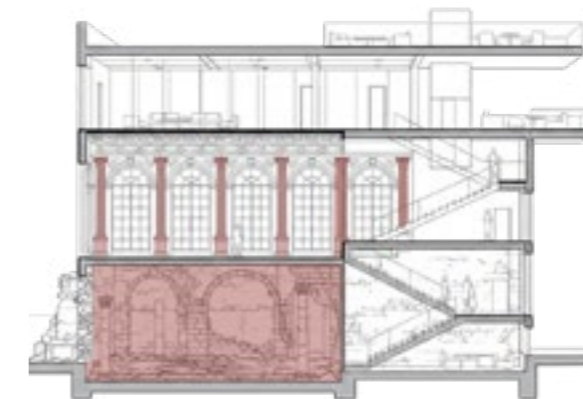
The concept of authenticity and the social media era existing simultaneously may seem paradoxical. Social media has been seen as a mask put on by the user to convey an ideal or filtered lifestyle to other users for likes and shares. However, the consumption of social media platforms has recently been going through a change, as the main users of the platform evolve to include people from younger generations. According to StyleSeat, Gen Z-ers are more likely than other generations to condone the use of beauty filters on social media platforms, indicating a general awareness within the generation of the inauthenticity of the use of filters (StyleSeat, 2023). A call for transparency in social media platforms is being heard by Gen Z for all users, from individual accounts to brand accounts. As a generation that has grown up in a world of filtered and embellished content, Gen Z has mastered the skill of being able to identify inauthentic content on social media (Govinpath, 2025). More and more people from the younger generation believe in being authentic in their everyday life, from the personas they present on social media, to the brands and products they choose to engage with.

For Generation Z, the brands they choose to purchase from are used to communicate their identity. Transparency has become an expectation, with branding and advertising directed towards younger audiences which prioritize reflecting unique values, digital habits and cultural aspects. This is mirrored in their expectations for the built environment. Studies show that members of Gen Z prefer spaces that ‘feel something’, meaning purposeful spaces that reflect identity and culture in their design rather than polished perfectionism (Kaspro, 2015). As discovered by architects, Gen Z clients prefer a sense of individuality and purpose in their spaces, to be shaped by their values and lifestyles rather than global trends and movements (Rai, 2025). For example, boutique architecture has seen a rise in popularity among the younger generation (Clarito, 2024). Boutique architecture specializes in creating unique and personalized designs for its clients, and client collaboration is expected in the design process. Furthermore, almost all Gen Z respondents to a survey stated that they were very interested in visiting heritage and cultural sites as a way to interact with meaningful architectural and urban spaces that connect to a cultural context (Roller et al., 2025).

In an increasingly globalized society, cultural identity has become a core element of Gen Z’s self-expression, both online and physically. Gen Z frequently uses social media platforms not only for entertainment but also as tools to share and educate others for cultural storytelling and preservation (Kessler, 2024). This engagement extends beyond the digital

to the physical as well. Members of Generation Z desire spaces to allow for cultural expression, within a wide overview of architectural spaces, such as food markets, cultural centers, or community hubs. The availability of spaces in the urban landscape that allow for cultural expressions of all kinds is a building block for identity formation for all generations, and is especially meaningful for Generation Z, as the most diverse generation yet. The prioritization of these two aspects, authenticity and identity, extends beyond aesthetics. Generation Z is increasingly attentive to how architecture communicates the story behind the design, preferring spaces that are not only visually pleasing but culturally and ethically formed. This is being reflected in the rise in popularity for vernacular architecture; more young people are drawn to spaces that embody traditional values rather than globalized trends (Mohamad, 2025). It is possible that this rise in popularity could be seen as a critical response to decades of homogenized architecture that fails to connect to cultural contexts. Instead, the younger generations prefer the built environment to express a sense of belonging, social responsibility, and personal relevance.

Design strategies and concepts such as adaptive reuse, cultural preservation, and participatory design have regained traction in recent years as the priorities for design shift. These strategies offer more than just functionality in their uses, but they also represent intentional efforts to create purposeful spaces that resonate with the cultural and social values of the contexts. Gen Z sees architecture as an instrument for both storytelling and social impact, therefore these design strategies are examples of helpful tools that could be used to achieve the authentic and personal spaces they desire. As indicated by Marilia Matoso, Gen Z’s pursuit of authenticity in life, and in turn in architecture, alongside the rapid development of technology, will continue to advance the built environment on a



Drawing 9: Building with traces from the past



## 2.1.4 Sustainability

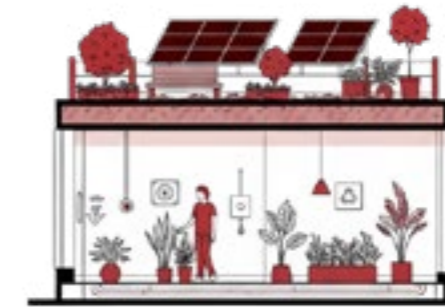
Growing up in a digitalized world heavily influenced by evolving technological advancements, Generation Z is fully aware that they are living the consequences of environmental problems of decades caused by unsustainable decisions of the previous generations. Witnessing an era marked by climate change, depletion, and ecological crises puts Gen Z in a position where they strongly experience the outcomes of this environmental neglect. All this exposure to global problems not only made this generation more conscious and engaged with them, but it also created certain priorities. Their awareness of these issues influences how actively they are engaging with them, making sustainability one of their core principles in daily life. Based on a survey by Angelini Industries, 53% of Gen Z call themselves environmentalists, and almost half of them boycotted certain products that they considered environmentally damaging, which is higher than the overall population (Falatuano, 2024). Today, this increased sensibility towards sustainability and overall global problems, merged with a digital and technology-oriented consciousness, declares Gen Z as a major force in today's efforts for sustainability in shaping the built environment.

Generation Z displays a distinct preference regarding a sustainable environment in both residential and workplace settings, highlighting their sensitivity to sustainable design. As stated by Michael Boyd Agency, Gen Z homebuyers value energy-efficient appliances, renewable energy, and eco-friendly materials (reclaimed wood, bamboo, and low-VOC paints) while emphasizing green spaces and walkable neighbourhoods that create a sustainable lifestyle. They are specifically attracted to properties that have "Energy Star" certification, which lowers utility expenses and power consumption. Additionally, Gen Z's demand for control over their energy use is responded to by smart home technologies like programmable thermostats and automated lighting systems in order to track their energy consumption. These preferences demonstrate Gen Z's wishes for domestic spaces that foster environmental well-being.

King Business Interiors, young employees are favouring work environments that reflect their eco-conscious ideals. These ideals dictate that this sustainable approach to workplace design is not only crucial for the planet but also for those who work in the places (King Business Interiors). Unisource also highlights that Generation Z wants office spaces to meet green building requirements while promoting inclusion and flexibility. They are drawn to spaces with natural elements that contain natural features and offer people a sense of community. Besides energy-efficient systems and recycled materials, Gen Z considers a sustainable workplace as a company's dedication to worker well-being (Jacobs, 2025).

Gen Z entering the architecture and design sectors are strongly redefining the built environment with new ideals. With a strong emphasis on sustainability, Gen Z has led to a more environmentally aware design principles with a blend of technological innovation when it comes to design and architecture. According to JCV & Associates, their familiarity with new technologies creates a base for a more enhanced efficiency and safety in the construction process, meanwhile applying certain strategies to follow the overall work. As an example, in the Philippines, it has been analysed that Gen Z designers are focusing on biodegradable building elements, shifting the norms of the sector towards an environmentally responsible approach (Clarito, 2024). ArchDaily reports that Gen Z architects are changing the industry ideals and integrating ecological concepts into the practice by encouraging businesses to hire specialists in biomimetic design (Matoso, 2022).

Gen Z is changing the foundations of the design and architecture fields, not only contributing to them. This generation is leading the way in design methods that are not just ecologically conscious but also socially and technologically progressive due to their unique ideals and digital knowledge. Their strategy places a high priority on creating environments that enhance well-being while simultaneously minimizing the environmental effects through the use of sustainable materials, energy-efficient devices, and new design principles.



Drawing 10: Green roof



Drawing 11: Biophilic design elements

### 2.1.5 Community Based Design



In a McKinsey study authored by Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel, Generation Z is referred to as ‘communaholic’, describing a generation that is in a way addicted to constant communication. Having grown up in a world where global connectivity is readily available at their fingertips, the term is particularly applicable. There is no separation between the physical and digital realms, to them they are one. Studies show that Gen Z do not distinguish between friends they meet online and friends they meet in person, and that their online communities are highly valued as they allow for people of different backgrounds and circumstances to connect and share their interests (Francis et al., 2018). A general sentiment shared by most members of Gen Z is the yearning for shared moments, real life interactions, and a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. Nonetheless, it highlights Generation Z’s unique ability to relate to and adapt across a range of causes and interests, both in the physical and digital worlds.

An interesting intersection of the blend between digital communities and physical communities was commented on in a study from November 2024. The study examines how characteristics of Ray Oldenburg’s theory of third places can be found within online spaces used by Gen Z, particularly video games. The study likened the virtual spaces of online video games with the characteristics of being a neutral, accessible, and comforting ground, for all kinds of players (Huang-Isherwood et al., 2024). Further studies explore how other online spaces can also function in this context, as third places, such as forums like Reddit and Discord, which foster spontaneous dialogues between users (Hiniker et al., 2018). Also highlighted in this study is the fact that physical third places are rapidly disappearing, especially considering COVID 19 quarantine measures. Roughly between early 2020 to late 2021, most social interactions were confined to virtual interactions as the world went under lockdown. As an alternative solution to public gatherings, online spaces emerged as the main platform for community engagement, enabling people to maintain social connectivity despite physical separation, providing an addition to the meaning of third places.



Drawing 12: People exchanging ideas

As the world emerged from the pandemic lockdown in early 2022, members of Generation Z, now entering higher education or the workforce, started to reclaim physical environments as spaces for social interactions. The need for spaces outside of home and work renewed the need for third places. Traditional third places such as libraries and coffee shops became key sites for Generation Z. The importance of having a physical manifestation of their desire for community-based interactions is evident among Gen Z, as a complement to virtual platforms, for Generation Z to be able to exist in both realms.

Another spatial application of the communal environments that Generation Z seek are co-housing, co-living, and coworking situations. As previously mentioned, studies have found, Gen Z individuals tend to place greater value in experiences over material possessions, so conventional models of housing and work are being reimagined. (citation) Cohousing, co-living, and coworking are terms referring to collaborative modes of housing, living, and working, respectively. In housing situations, it refers to shared living experiences, in which individuals rent private or shared rooms within larger complexes that include shared amenities such as kitchens, gardens, or recreational areas. These environments tend to foster strong community bonds within the tenants, with shared responsibilities being a major component. Coworking spaces, on the other hand, follow the same general concept of shared environments, however focused on work or study. These spaces allow individuals to rent desks, offices, or meeting rooms on a flexible basis. These areas encourage collaboration and flexibility and tend to be a space for individuals to network and meet people from different backgrounds.

This rise in popularity of these models is partly due to Generation Z’s ‘communaholic’ mindset, but also due to some general factors. Economic and demographic drivers play a role, such as rising housing costs, changing lifestyles, and the implementation of remote/hybrid work. These design frameworks also tend to align with Gen Z’s environmental values. Within communal living and work spaces, resources are typically shared amongst the users, waste is usually reduced, and there is greater resource efficiency. These spaces also usually incorporate green technologies and practices. Furthermore, due to the communal aspect, these spaces are particularly appealing to younger generations as they can provide social, and in turn psychological, benefits that can help address feelings of loneliness and depression by encouraging openness between community members (AboutHousing).

Unlike older generations that adhered to more rigid social roles, individuals within Generation Z approach their roles within society with a sense of dynamism, choosing not to conform to traditional expectations (Ferrigni, 2021). In the McKinsey study, Generation Z was also referred to as ‘True Gen’, “... [Gen Z behaviours] are all anchored in one element: this generation’s search for truth” (Francis et al., 2018). The values of collaboration and shared experiences reflect a generational shift towards community-driven lifestyles that blend the physical and digital realms.

### 2.1.6 Health, Wellness, and Mental Balance

Growing up surrounded by exposure to global crises such as climate change, social unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Generation Z has experienced exceptional emotional challenges and has expressed increasing concerns about mental health problems. According to a UNICEF global study, 59% of young people, aged 15-24, report feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or uncertain about the future, with mental health often cited as a top personal priority. For Gen Z, mental health is not just a talking point; it is a lived reality. This generation is known for its openness to discussing mental health, its demand for safe and supportive environments, and its refusal to separate wellness from everyday life, ultimately seeking a healthier and more productive way of living. Wellness for Gen Z includes mental balance and the freedom to exist in environments that promote emotional comfort (UNICEF, 2021).



Figure 8: UNICEF on Gen Z mental health in global challenges

As digital natives, Gen Z was born into a world that was already shaped by the internet, social media, and smartphones. They are the first generation to have their formative experiences formed through screens (Coklar et al., 2021). While this experience grants them fluency in navigating digital spaces, and exposure to a world outside of what surrounds them in the physical world, it also subjects them to constant connectivity and information overload. The use of social media can lead to performative pressures and social comparison, which in turn can cause rising levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Lee et al., 2023). However, Gen Z is not unaware of these facts. According to Impact 360 Institute (2023), Gen Z strongly values face-to-face relationships. 54% of Gen Z strongly agree that in-person relationships are more valuable than digital ones, and another 30% agree to some level (Impact 360 Institute, 2023).

Gen Z approaches 'well-being' from a different perspective, expanding the definition of it to include emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Mental health is no longer a private concern but is openly talked about and has become a public discussion. This generation looks for therapy, mindfulness practices, and emotional regulation strategies as a part of daily life (Lech, 2024).

Creative and active actions like moving, taking a walk, going to nature, listening to music make Gen Z feel better.

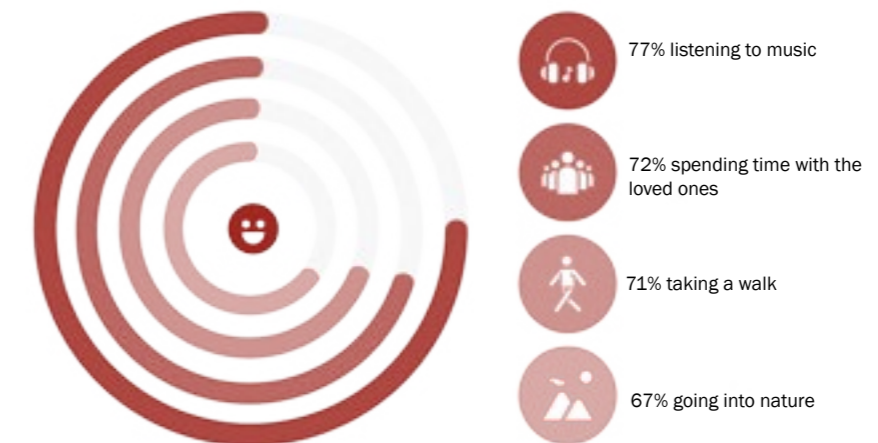


Figure 9: UNICEF on Gen Z coping mechanisms and health

Gen Z has come to expect mental health resources, flexibility, and empathetic leadership in educational and professional environments. They call for inclusive, safe, and non-judgemental spaces. In contrast to older generations that often put material security or advancement in their careers before their mental health, Gen Z perceives mental stability and emotional well-being to be fundamental for long-term success and happiness. According to an article published on SHRM Business in 2025, 61% of Gen Z workers would consider leaving a job for significantly better mental health support, and 92% want safe, open dialogue on mental wellness in the workplace. As a generation, Gen Z is vocal, driven by values they hold close to their chest, and unafraid to leave workspaces that don't meet expectations, specifically in terms of mental health (Gebreamlak, 2025).

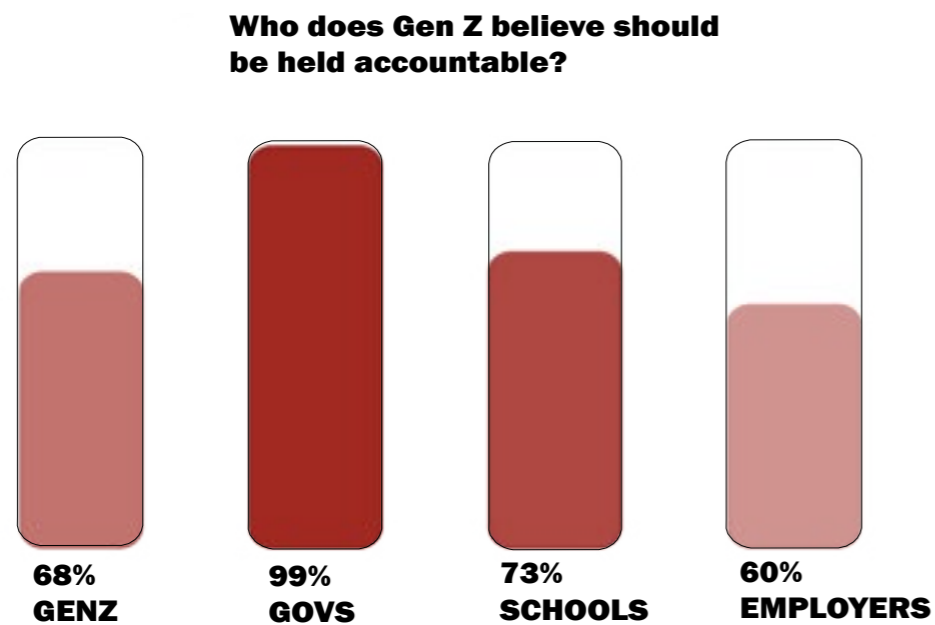


Figure 10: UNICEF on Gen Z views of mental health accountability

In this context, the built environment becomes more than just a backdrop to daily life, but a critical element of mental well-being. Architecture must evolve to meet the expectations of safe, well-rounded, emotionally supportive spaces. As we move forward in the 21st century, design no longer solely relies on aesthetics or function; it is also about emotional resonance and adaptability. One of the most widely recognised examples of architecture's impact on emotional well-being is the series of Maggie's Centres located throughout the United Kingdom, which are a network of cancer support centres designed to offer psychological, emotional, and practical support outside of the sterile, clinical setting of hospitals for people affected by cancer, patients, families, and caregivers. Designed by various renowned architects such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, and Norman Foster, each centre prioritizes natural light, open plan layouts, visibility of greenery, and domestic environment, which contrasts with the institutional feel of typical healthcare centres.

According to Van der Linden et al. (2016), visitors of Maggie's Centres have reported a reduced feeling of anxiety, great comfort, and increased emotional stability (Van der Linden et al., 2017). This directly reflects Gen Z's desire for supportive, non-judgemental, and comforting spaces and how they can be beneficial. These are spaces where people can go to just 'be', without any added pressure, in a supportive environment, which lowers anxiety related to the loaded weight of health concerns in families. They reflect a new model of care where the built environment acts as silent support, creating a sense of serenity as a background actor (Annemans et al., 2012).

The amount of value put on mental health support by Gen Z presents both challenges and opportunities for architectural design. This generation seeks not only functional and well-designed spaces, but also environments that will support them and provide them with the flexibility and adaptability they require. Architecture has the power to reduce anxiety, provide serenity, and emotional ease. Gen Z's determined requirement for mental health support is forcing all industries and institutions to reevaluate their methods and ways, ultimately shaping the future, showing a glimpse of the new world.

## 2.2 Design Strategies

By studying the patterns and behaviours of Generation Z, six core principles have been established as fundamental to their long-term priorities: flexibility and personalization, authenticity and identity, digital and physical integration, health, wellness, and mental balance, sustainability, and community-based design. Understanding these principles is a crucial step forward to navigating how to design for Gen Z. These ideals are not isolated values but are the reflection of the hopes, habits, and cultural expressions of Generation Z in today's society, and in turn, the expectations they have for the built environment. Architecture today must anticipate and respond to the projected needs, values, and challenges of future generations, ensuring that the built environment remains socially relevant. In order to design with Generation Z in mind as the target audience, these abstract principles must be articulated into concrete, material design strategies. As the aim is to create spaces that are adaptive, collaborative, sustainable, and authentic, it is important to develop a design language which follows the core needs of the generation.

To move from abstract to spatial forms, each of the above-mentioned ideals must be materialized through architectural strategies. These strategies can provide a framework for the application of a Generation Z focused project. To support flexibility and personalization, spatial layouts can accommodate different uses, group sizes, and individual preferences. As mentioned previously, surveys have illustrated that younger people prefer non uniform spaces and instead prefer spaces that favour mobility and adaptability (Arno, 2024). Physically, this can be translated into movable and modular furniture that can be adjusted to different configurations depending on the user's needs. Furthermore, open space layouts rather than closed off and restricted views, can augment the feeling of flexibility. Offering users the ability to personalize their experience can be done with the integration of adjustable appliances, giving Generation Z a sense of control and purpose within their spaces. Involving Gen Z in the design processes of their spaces allows for collaboration between different members of the community. As discussed previously, participation fosters a deeper sense of belonging and connection, which support Gen Z's 'communaholic' qualities (Francis et al., 2018). Places that embody these principles such as co-living, co-housing, and co-working spaces are ideal examples of community-based design. These areas tend to host spaces for shared dialogue, collaboration, and gatherings such as shared kitchens, workshop areas, and conference halls. A spatial layout that encourages both spontaneous interaction and intentional programming nurtures the kind of social connectivity that Gen Z values.

As outlined earlier, Gen Z lives in a world both immersed in technology and environmental concerns. In the built environment, the use of technology can be utilized to combat both. Technology can be integrated to a large degree in the built environment to support Generation Z's desire for advanced technological support in spaces they inhabit, as well as during the construction process, and the aftermath, to be the most environmentally conscious as possible. The presence of infrastructure to support fast connectivity, smart lighting, and digital engagement aligns with Gen Z's inherent fluidity between both the digital and physical worlds. Phygital design strategies can also contribute to long-term environmental goals and offer meaningful tools that serve a sustainable future. These tools can include the use of smart technologies, solar panels, and recycled elements in the built environment, satisfying the desire for technological and ecological awareness within Gen Z.

Gen Z's approach to well-being is holistic; mental, emotional, social, and spatial factors are seen as interconnected. As shown in studies like UNICEF (2021) and SHRM (2025), Gen Z prioritizes mental health support, emotional safety, and environments that promote psychological comfort. At the same time, authenticity plays a key role in how Gen Z relates to space. They gravitate toward environments that feel honest, personal, and reflective of their identity. Design strategies that use natural materials, biophilic elements, personalized atmospheres, and transparent narratives can provide both emotional grounding and symbolic clarity. Additionally, strategies such as adaptive reuse, cultural preservation, and collaborative, client-driven processes have gained traction, enabling spaces to embody identity, belonging, and ethical engagement, which are priority requirements for Generation Z that directly correlate to a sense of wellness and mental health balance.

Consorzio Agrario  
Milan, Italy



Figure 11: Site plan



Figure 12: Building view

A further understanding of how these principles can be practically applied as design strategies can be examined through the study of architectural examples. Recent architectural projects embody more than one design strategy to achieve the above-mentioned design principles. For example, the adaptive reuse of the Consorzio Agrario into the Aparto Ripamonti student housing complex, located in Milan, Italy and designed by Park Associati, offers a compelling example of how architecture can address Generation Z's evolving values. The project maintains a sense of authenticity in its' historical identity by preserving the original industrial shell, which reflect Gen Z's desire for spaces that reflect cultural memory. The project also includes communal courtyards, shared amenity spaces, and flexible housing typologies, allowing Gen Z both autonomy and community, supporting mental well-being through spatial diversity and social connections. Its LEED Gold certification further aligns with the generation's prioritization of sustainability, demonstrating how adaptive reuse can be a strategic approach to environmental responsibility. Aparto Ripamonti also embodies the concept of phygital space by creating a space that is both materially grounded and technologically equipped to meet Gen Z's requirements for technological standards. Conclusively, Aparto Ripamonti exemplifies the kind of design that anticipates and reflects the core needs of Generation Z.



Figure 13: Ground floor plan

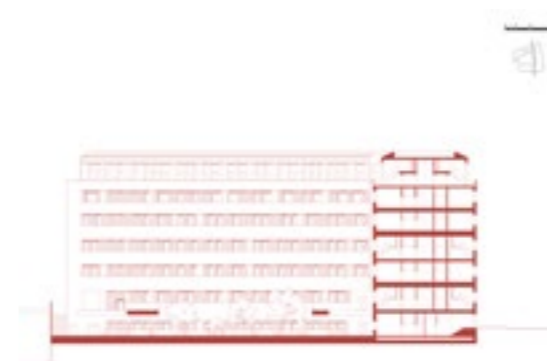


Figure 14: Building section



Figure 16: Building view



Figure 15: Gym



Figure 17: Leisure room

RISD Student Success Center  
Rhode Island, USA



Figure 18: Building top view



Figure 19: Gallery



Figure 20: Auditorium

The RISD Student Success Center by WORK-ac in Rhode Island, USA embodies key spatial values that resonate deeply with Generation Z, particularly adaptability, inclusivity, and authenticity. Designed within a historic brick building, the project reflects a Gen Z sensitivity toward cultural continuity, while its insertion of a perforated metal pavilion introduces a layer of contemporary expression, blending heritage with modern identity. The flexible layout, featuring movable curtains, multifunctional gathering areas, and open circulation paths, aligns with Gen Z's preference for spaces that support fluid use and spontaneous interaction. Transparent design choices, like revealing the inner workings of the mailroom, reflect this generation's desire for honesty and visibility. Most notably, the incorporation of inclusive spaces, speaks to Gen Z's prioritization of diversity and safe-affirming environments. Through these strategies, the project becomes more than a student center, it is a responsive social platform that reflects the values and lived realities of a generation seeking spaces that are flexible, inclusive, and rooted in both narrative and purpose.



Figure 21: Entrance



Figure 22: Ground floor plan



Figure 23: Axonometry



Figure 25: Building Section



Figure 24: Building view



Figure 26: Mailroom

PJKita Community Center  
 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia



Figure 27: Building view



Figure 28: Building view

The PJKita Community Centre, designed by DTLM Design Group, located in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, is a great example of adaptive reuse and embodies the key spatial values of Generation Z: flexibility, personalization, authenticity, digital integration, sustainability, and well-being. The modular T-Canopy system is a flexible framework for food markets, athletic courts, workshops, and gathering spaces, which provides young users adaptable space for their continuously evolving needs, nonstop: pop-up retail, skate zones, or socializing areas. Keeping Generation Z's phygital mentality in mind, this project also provides technology supported public zones that can accommodate digital demands, emphasizing the need to continue to be relevant in this hybrid digital-physical lifestyle. The design does not impose a civic identity but embraces local culture in participatory mural-painting with young people and draws from Malaysia's tropical ecology in organic canopy structure to give a sense of identity and place. Sustainability is built into the project with reused materials, passive ventilation, and open-air that reduces energy use while enhancing the user's experience and their connection to nature. Overall, PJKita is a community-driven site of social, cultural, and economic exchange, and not only offers a public programming suite that encourages public participation and engagement, but also integrates active and passive areas, greenspace, and natural materials to promote mental and physical well-being. As a result, a socially responsive and emotionally sensitive site is created and serves a new generation who shaped the space.

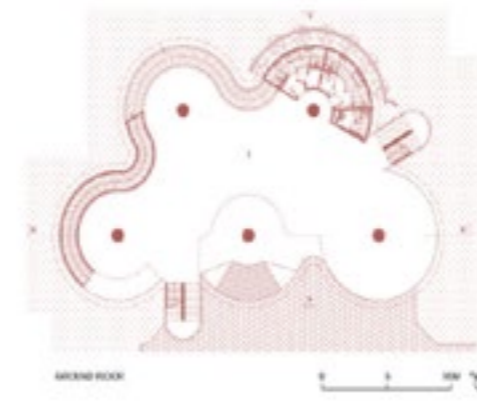


Figure 29: Ground floor plan

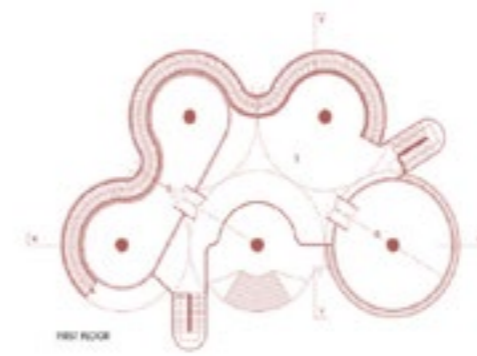


Figure 30: First floor plan



Figure 32: Building view

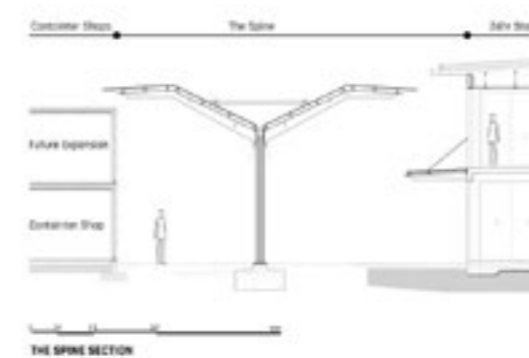


Figure 31: Detail section

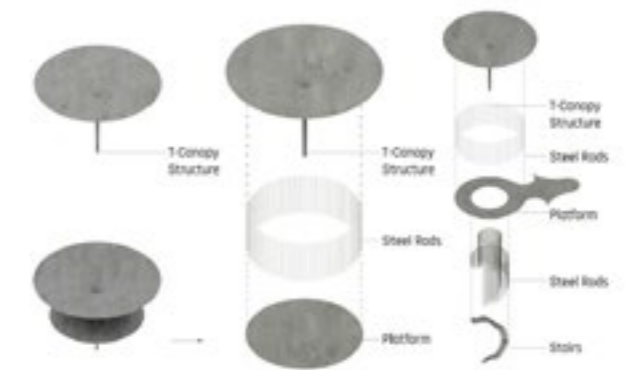


Figure 33: Material breakdown

As the built environment adapts to the evolving values of a new generation, it becomes clear that designing for Generation Z is not just about accommodating trends, but about recognizing a fundamental shift in cultural priorities. The six core needs; flexibility, authenticity, digital integration, wellness, sustainability, and community; are not abstract ideals, but applicable criteria that are shaping the way spaces are conceived, designed, and experienced. Architectural projects designed with Generation Z in mind offer valuable insight into how the industry must evolve to meet the needs of a new generation. By critically examining these projects through the lens of Gen Z values and priorities, this thesis aims to establish a set of benchmarks for designing spaces that are both relevant and forward-thinking. The research not only identifies key strategies but also explores how they can be effectively implemented in practice to create environments that truly resonate with Gen Z users. These examples illustrate how architecture can act as a platform for identity, participation, and well-being, and how spatial design becomes a powerful tool in shaping a future that resonates with Generation Z. Ultimately, designing for this generation means designing a more inclusive, responsive, and adaptive built environment.

### 3. UNPACKING LAZZARETTO

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3.4 Project Potentials and Opportunities.....	100



Drawing 13: Timeline collage

### 3.1 Historical and Morphological Overview

The term Lazzaretto refers to “a hospital for the plague-sick; also a site for the observation of people and goods suspected of infection with the plague” (Boerio, 1867).

The Lazzaretto is a type of hospital that was created to care for patients with the plague and oversee the quarantine of those who may have infected or contaminated goods that may have been carried by individuals with the plague. As the threat of epidemic diseases was increasing throughout Europe during the late medieval period, it was at this time that lazaretti began to emerge. Although Venice has long been considered the first place to have invented a Lazzaretto, there is evidence that demonstrates that the city of Ragusa temporarily created the first Lazzaretto in 1377 and made the regulations for quarantine strict by 1397. The name Lazzaretto is derived from the first hospital for the plague that was established on the island of Santa Maria di Nazareth in Venice. Historically, early Lazarettos were located on sites previously used for the care of individuals with leprosy, primarily due to practical reasons rather than for any actual connection between the plague and leprosy. The connection of public health and commerce was highlighted by the strategic placement of the Lazaretto Vecchio and later the Lazaretto Nuovo in Venice to monitor and manage infections brought through maritime and terrestrial trade. By the late 15th century, there were lazarettos established throughout the various Italian city-states, such as Padua, Brescia, Verona, Florence, Milan, Naples, and Genoa, before spreading to other parts of Europe, such as France, Spain, and the Low Countries. Lazaretti provided not only a place to receive medical care but also fulfilled the charitable and social needs of society and incorporated religious beliefs into taking care of the poor. In this light, lazaretti illustrate the response of architectural development towards the concern for the threat posed by the plague on the urban fabric. They also represent the changing approach to health, commerce, and urban planning in the early modern period in Europe (Crawshaw, 2012).



Figure 34: First Lazzaretto, Ragusa



Figure 35: Lazzaretto Vecchio, Venice



Figure 36: Lazzaretto Nuovo, Venice

The Lazzaretto di Milano is one of the oldest and most important examples of Early Renaissance public health architecture, developed in response to numerous outbreaks of the plague as a means to establish an objective approach to urban design and medical treatment that would improve on previous practices for handling illnesses. The building's history demonstrates the continued evolution in mankind's understanding of the importance of hygiene, quarantine, and the ability of the built environment to improve public health over time; it began as a conceptual idea in the 1450s and continued through to its destruction in the late 1800s. Throughout this time period, the Lazzaretto illustrates architectural developments in relation to evolving medical knowledge, changing social attitudes regarding the place of architecture in terms of health care, and continual urban changes that occurred over four hundred years (Beltrami, 1899; Denti et al., 1997).

The Lazzaretto was initially planned to house, care for, and separate the sick from the healthy during times of plague in Italy during the 14th and 15th centuries. Early designs proposed the use of a central courtyard surrounded by a large hospital and multiple out-buildings (chapel, morgue, etc) and were to be built on an open emergent property located directly in front of canals with access to burial grounds. Although many of the components proposed for this early design reflected the practice and philosophical theories of the early Renaissance regarding the importance of separating the sick from the healthy, the complexity of the early proposals was too sophisticated for the resources and technology available at that time, and the plans were discontinued. Following the second plague in 1468, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza made a new proposal for the land to be used for the Lazzaretto, which developed into the facility to which people turned for help during the plague and many other sicknesses throughout the following centuries (Beltrami, 1899).

Ospedale Maggiore, which was established as a general medical care service for Milan in 1456, was then the main hospital serving Milan, ruled by Francesco Sforza. The hospital treated a large number of patients with a variety of ailments but was inadequate to care for those suffering from highly contagious diseases, such as plague, and the infection of that disease in the city of Milan required the development of an isolated quarantine site located outside the city's borders to prevent further spread of the disease (Albini et al., 2011).

When the epidemic erupted, there was an urgent requirement for a lasting quarantine facility. Therefore, in 1488, Duke Ludovico il Moro directed that work begin on constructing the Lazzaretto. Lazzaro Palazzi was appointed as the site architect to oversee the Lazzaretto's construction. The facility was designed as a rectangular-shaped building measuring approximately 378 by 370 meters, with continuous arcaded walkways encircling a large central courtyard area. The Lazzaretto's funds were provided from the substantial donation made by Galeotto Bevilacqua to Ospedale Maggiore in 1486. The financial intervention and administrative oversight from the Ospedale Maggiore support the concept that the Lazzaretto was envisioned not as an individual institution but rather as an additional component of Milan's central hospital system for epidemic isolation and control purposes.

Progress in the construction phase remained consistent between the late 1480s and the 1490s, with the majority of the structure having been realized by the end of the 15th century. The transition from Palazzi to another architect, Bartolomeo Cozzi, occurred between 1507-1508. At that point, the emphasis changed to finishing the porticos and also completing the general layout of the building itself. Amongst its many design features, Lazzaretto included an advanced isolation scheme intended to classify patients into infected, suspected, and convalescent groups. In addition, as part of the Lazzaretto design, a large house was constructed to accommodate the doctors, barbers, and officers, which clearly demonstrated the increasing sophistication in combating disease through architectural containment and medical control (Cavenago, 2017; Beltrami, 1899).

The plague outbreak from 1576 to 1577 brought attention to the Lazzaretto as a major center for the treatment and isolation of those who had contracted the virus. It was Cardinal Carlo Borromeo who ordered that there be a central altar within the Lazzaretto so that patients could attend Mass while confined to their cells. The stressed importance of providing spiritual assistance to facilitate complete health was made clear by this act. Between 1585 and 1592, architect Pellegrino Tibaldi extended the facility through the design and construction of the octagonal chapel of San Carlo al Lazzaretto, which provided definitive and symbolic connections between the concept of healthcare as a place of healing and the importance of faith as a support in the process of recovery. During the Great Plague of 1629 and 1630, the Lazzaretto served once again as Milan's primary facility for treating those suffering from the disease (Fiorio, 2006).

The Lazzaretto's methodical design of the hundreds of identical patient cells was archi-

rational planning with proper ventilation through arcaded porticoes. However, the very size and density of this design made apparent both its positive and negative aspects, in particular, the challenge of adequately responding to the public health problems associated with infectious disease. Crowded conditions within the Lazzaretto often caused it to become a place where disease spread more rapidly than it would under circumstances where patients received appropriate containment.

The Lazzaretto ceased to function as a health facility by the end of the 18th century, as evolving health care priorities and urban design theory led to a much reduced role for this type of institution. In the 1770s, the Lazzaretto was included in the larger urban design projects happening in Milan, and by the time it was taken over by Napoleonic officials for administrative purposes in 1797, the structure had undergone extensive renovations, including the addition of multiple new entrances and the conversion of existing facilities for alternative uses. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Lazzaretto had become a place where various military, civic, and recreational activities took place, thus removing some of the fear associated with the original purpose of the facility (Denti et al., 1997).

At the same time, the Ospedale Maggiore became the primary hospital in Milan and maintained this distinction until almost the end of the 18th century. In the following 19th century, the Ospedale's original complex was gradually redeveloped and transformed into the Università degli Studi di Milano, the Statale, in 1924. While the Ospedale's functions clearly transitioned from health care to higher education, part of the original architectural features have been retained (Università degli Studi di Milano, 2023).

With the increasing urbanization of Milan during the years leading up to 1840, the Lazzaretto area was more closely integrated into the city's overall urban structure. The construction of arcaded porticos into shops happened during the transition from an isolated area to a part of everyday culture (Denti et al., 1997). The establishment of the viaduct in 1861 further accelerated this trend by allowing people to travel to and from the area in different ways.

Throughout the late 19th century, the development plan outlined by Piano Beruto (1884-1889) led to the demolition of almost all of the Lazzaretto buildings. In 1881, the Banco di Credito Italiano acquired the Lazzaretto site, and most of the remaining unused structures had been razed by 1890. What replaced them were multi-story residential blocks typical of those in the Porta Venezia area. This redevelopment changed the overall form of the area from an introverted health-based complex to a modern, regular urban street system, emphasizing density and traffic flow (Denti et al., 1997).

Certain parts of the former Lazzaretto Complex were set aside for public use. Between 1885 and 1890, architect Angelo Savoldi designed the Elementary School Complex, now known as Scuola Primaria Statale Carlo Borromeo, according to the Piano Beruto layout. The building, which was completed circa 1888, replaced portions of the Lazzaretto Walls, maintained continuity in terms of health, education, and public welfare (Mina, 1892; Ar-



1472



1542



1630



1697



1704



1737



1737



1797



1797



1807



1877



1877



1880



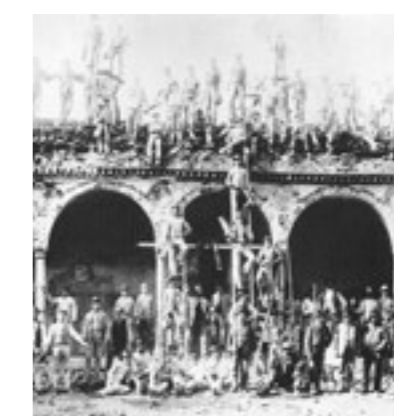
1880



End of 19th century



1882



1882-1884



1884

Figure 37: Timeline

Today, there are still remnants from the Lazzaretto Complex, including the San Carlo al Lazzaretto that was restored by Luca Beltrami in 1884 and an existing arcade on Via San Gregorio, which is currently the home of the Greek Orthodox Church of San Nicola. These two structures are representative of the way public health was treated at the time, adding to the sense of Milan's health services and infrastructure during this period (Milano sui tacchi, 2025).

The Lazzaretto district has been defined by its layers of urbanism that combine both past and present within a dynamic socio-economic environment. As this part of Municipio 3 is located next to Milan's busy pedestrian shopping area, Corso Buenos Aires, and the outer gate of the old city, Porta Venezia, it has experienced other significant transformations related to Milan's shifting patterns of culture, diversity, and urban development. Because of these various transformations, as well as those in other areas of the city, the Lazzaretto neighborhood has undergone the same long-term transformation from corridor to community and its changing identities over time (Denti et al., 1997; Arsuffi, 2017; Montagnoli, 2024).



Drawing 14: Axonometry of Lazzaretto

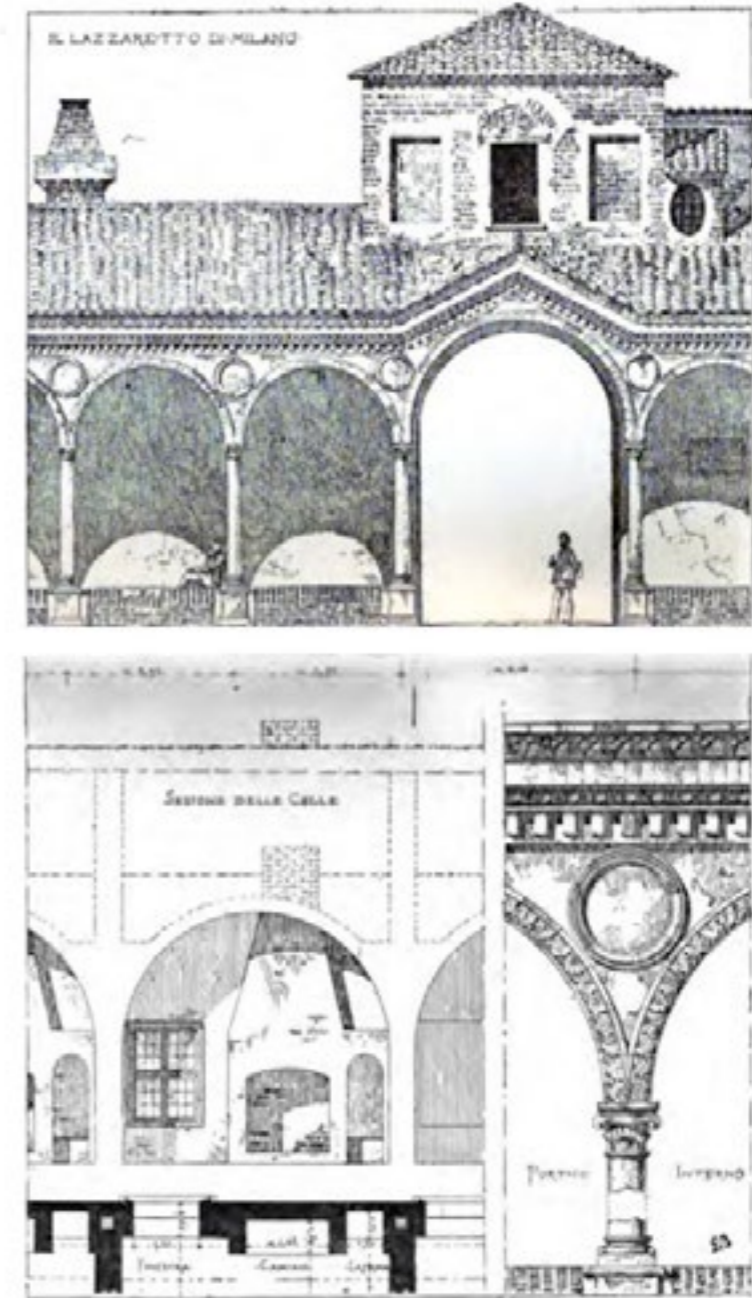


Figure 38: Detail section of Lazzaretto

### 3.2 Socio-Spatial Characteristics Today



Drawing 15: Map of Milan highlighting Municipio 3

The Lazzaretto district occupies a strategic position between the historic Porta Venezia gate and the commercial axis of Corso Buenos Aires, located in Milan's Municipio 3. Even though it is small in scale, Lazzaretto reflects broader socio-spatial patterns observable across the municipality, characterized by demographic diversity, high urban density, and a mix of residential and commercial uses. Lazzaretto offers a relevant perspective through which to analyze the municipality's evolving population structure, age distribution, and cultural composition, as it is one of the most vibrant and dynamic areas in Municipio 3. Examining and analyzing the demographics of Municipio 3 provides a foundation for understanding the spatial and social dynamics that shape the municipality and, consequently, the Lazzaretto area.



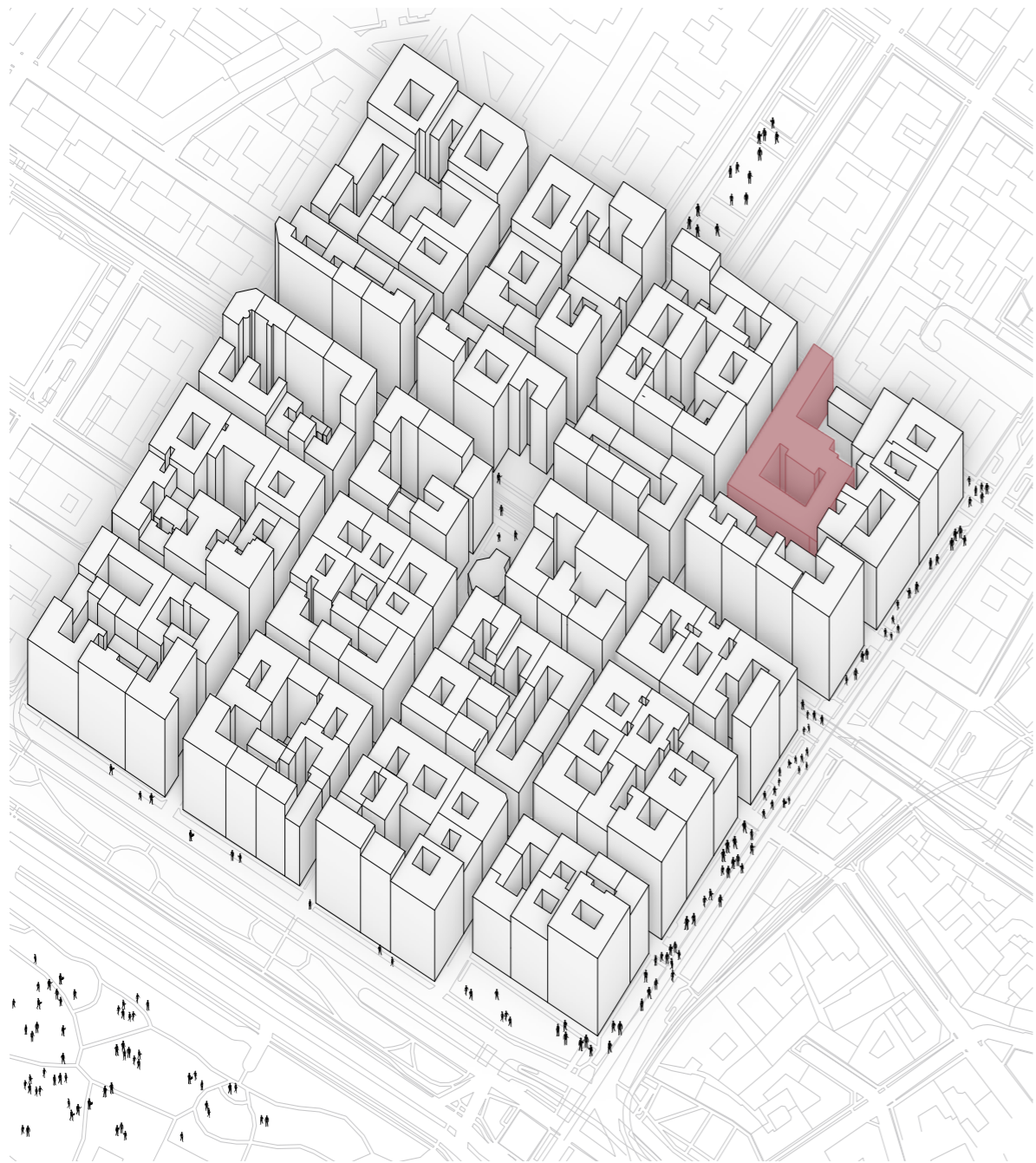
Drawing 16: Functional Analysis of Lazzaretto and surroundings



Drawing 17: Road network analysis of Lazzaretto and surroundings



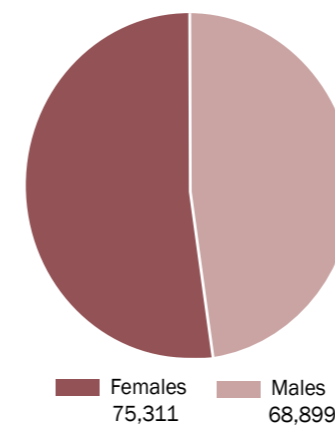
Drawing 18: Greenery analysis of Lazzaretto and surroundings



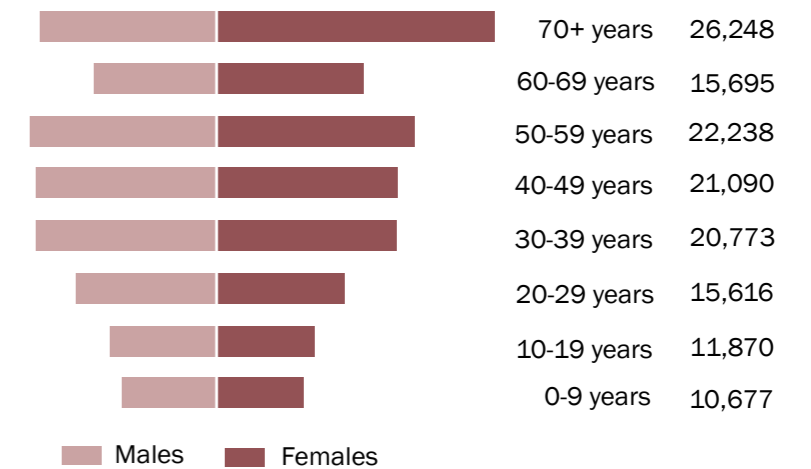
Drawing 19: Busy pedestrian zones

Municipio 3, which includes Lazzaretto, has a western border with Municipio 1 (Centro Storico), a northwestern border with Municipio 2, and a southern border with Municipio 4. It has a surface area of 14.23 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 142,726 residents (2022), which equals a population density of 10,786 residents/km<sup>2</sup>. Municipio 3 includes key neighborhoods such as Lazzaretto, Citta Studi, Porta Venezia, Buenos Aires, Casoretto, and Ortica. It hosts many students and residents from different parts of the country and the world.

The age distribution of Municipio 3 in 2024 shows the significant demographic resources and social complexity of this district. Although residents aged 70 and older are the largest cohort, about 26,000 people, there is a sizable population of young adults aged 20 to 39. Over 36,000 people combined are in this range, a major contributor to this population are the major universities and student housing in areas such as the Lazzaretto, or Città Studi. In addition to generational differences, Municipio 3 is also characterized by the heterogeneity of its population. Current citizenship data shows that about 15% of the residents have non-Italian citizenship. This group includes EU citizen residents and a sizable group of non-EU citizen residents. This group of international origins creates multicultural constellations in the urban neighborhood, which is explicitly visible in the neighborhoods of Porta Venezia and Lazzaretto, with many international restaurants and retailers, as well as communal spaces for socializing. This can be observed through the signage throughout the neighborhood written in multiple different languages.



Graph 5: Gender distribution of Municipio 3, 2024



Graph 6: Age distribution of Municipio 3, 2024

This graph depicts the age distribution of Italian and foreign residents in Municipio 3 and allows us to see the age dynamics that underpin the cultural diversity of the area. According to the data, foreign residents were predominantly found among the 20–39 and 40–59 age groups, pointing to the presence of a solid group of migrants in the young adult and working-age demographic. This demographic tends to be associated with higher mobility linked to education and employment opportunities and reinforces the role of Municipio 3 as a gateway to cultures in Milan. The age ranges 60–74 and 75+ are made up almost entirely of Italian citizens, suggesting that the long-time resident population tends to be native born. In contrast, growth within the younger age group is largely driven by recent foreign arrivals. This age difference, alongside the rich multicultural makeup of the growing adult population is indicative of a fabric in motion, with a layered sociocultural complexity.

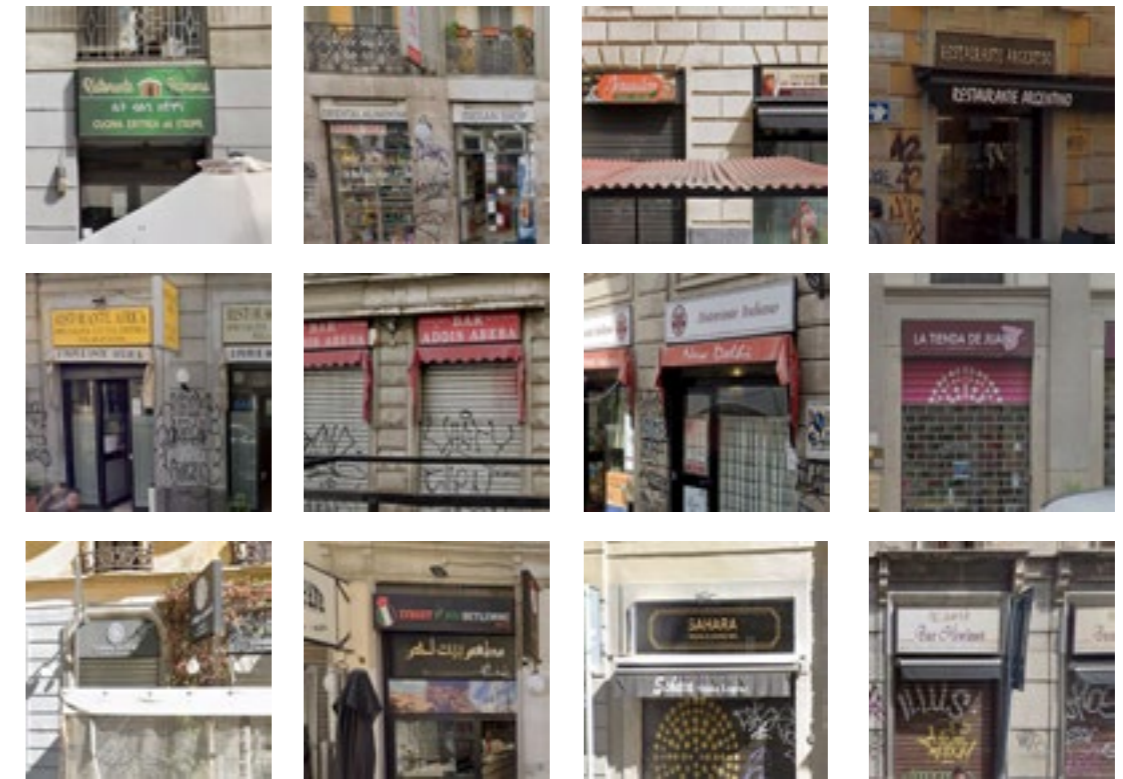
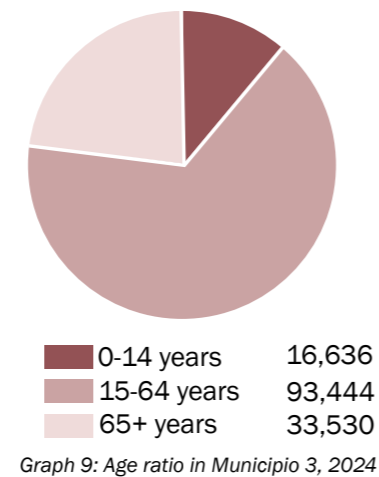
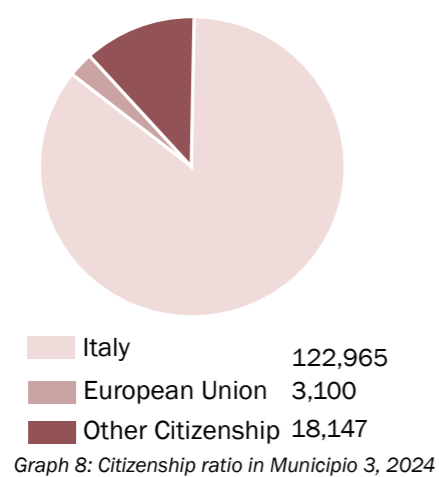
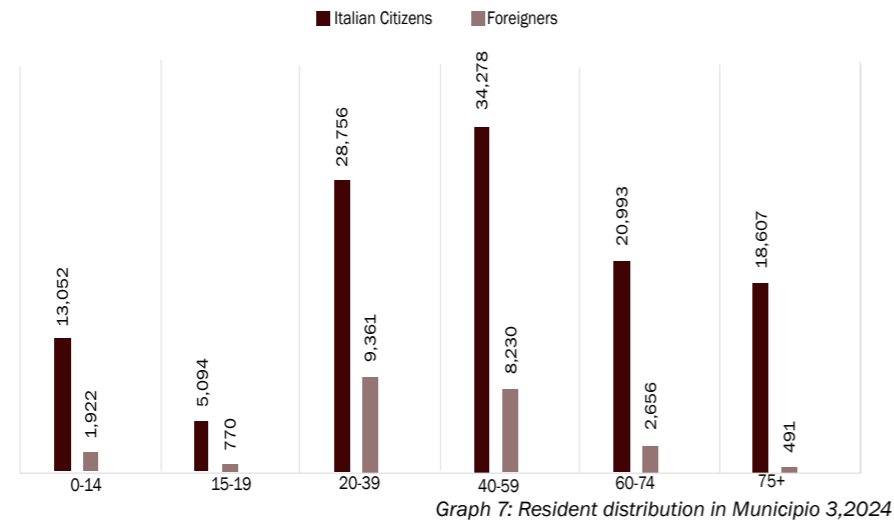


Figure 39: Multicultural store fronts

This has practical and direct implications for urban space and service provision: how to design space that attends to the needs of a rooted elderly population, who may have lived their whole lives here, alongside younger international populations, who may have the same degree of attachment to the neighborhood. These differences in age and culture highlight the need for a space that accommodates and facilitates intergenerational and intercultural exchange through inclusion and adaptability. In neighborhoods like Lazaretto, in which the population is marked by variety in age and culture, architectural design and urban cohabitation can be shaped to reflect the area’s demographic diversity.

When taken together, generational diversity and cultural plurality in Municipio 3 are a signal to acknowledge, design, and consider the built environment in light of the diversity of lifestyles, cultural traditions, and forms of social interaction. Multigenerational and multicultural design is built on the recognition of age-varying needs and cultural diversity, embracing strategies that include adaptable interiors, accessible services, and spaces for informal meetings. Together, these strategies represent an essential tool for cultivating coexistence, representation, and a sense of belonging.

The socio-spatial identity of the Lazzaretto area, along with the demographic and cultural factors, is also being greatly influenced by the local and metropolitan associations that define social life and the ways residents and visitors form ties of belonging in Municipio 3. One of these is the Fondazione Il Lazzaretto, which is particularly relevant because of its direct association with the historical legacy of the site. The Fondazione Il Lazzaretto sponsors and organizes cultural initiatives and public and educational events relating to memory, heritage, and collective consciousness, thereby enhancing the symbolic and cultural identity of the Lazzaretto as well as allowing residents and visitors to participate in collective narratives relating to the area's history (Fondazione Il Lazzaretto; Artribune, 2024). This cultural activation has been a significant contributor to the development of a community that has both an awareness of the area's history and an attachment to it. Municipio 3 has an active and diverse ecosystem influenced by multiple civic associations working to create meaningful experiences for the different groups that exist within the municipality. The impact of these associations creates a productive environment for collaboration among individuals over time; this has helped to shape the city and its identity. At a cultural level, Serate Musicali enriches the cultural fabric of the municipality by bringing together a wide range of individuals and enhancing the cultural life of the area (Serate Musicali). Meanwhile, ANTEAS works as an association that provides services to support the aging population by promoting projects and initiatives that bring young people into close contact with older people, encouraging the exchange of experiences and the development of authentic relationships (ANTEAS). All of these organizations combine to create a dense social ecosystem shaped by civic engagement and contributing to the ongoing production of social groups, the development of shared identities, and daily urban life within Municipio 3.

At a broader scale, since its establishment, Fondazione Cariplo has invested time and money into the creation of projects that focus on social inclusion, youth activism, migration, community wellbeing, and education, all of which have been addressed through the foundation's funding programs (Fondazione Cariplo). Despite its headquarters being located in Municipio 4, CIG Arcigay Milano organizes city-wide cultural events in collaboration with the Comune di Milano, including Milano Pride activities in the Lazzaretto and Porta Venezia districts, which attract big crowds and influence public space utilization and the local demographic landscape (CIG Arcigay Milano; Comune di Milano). These associations have created local community initiatives throughout many neighborhoods in Milan, Lazzaretto being one example, allowing them to maintain social support networks that are adaptable to changing demographics and emerging social challenges.



Figure 40: Associations

Milan still faces a broader urban challenge: the diminishing presence of shared public grounds that can meaningfully engage Generation Z. As a generation that seeks spaces blending social interaction, creativity, and self-expression, Gen Z finds few environments beyond commercial or digital that foster a sense of belonging within the city. The traditional piazzas, streets, and squares that historically served as social anchors for younger generations have lost much of their communal role, and today's main meeting points, including bars, cafés, and restaurants, are often transactional and economically exclusive (D'Aprile 2025). Despite the abundance of coworking spaces, most are priced well above the national average, excluding many students and early professionals. This underscores a growing absence of free, community-based environments that enable social and cultural collaboration across generations (Paolucci, 2025). In the post-pandemic context, creating accessible third places is essential to rebuild social bonds and to allow younger populations to reclaim spaces for creativity, belonging, and civic participation, ensuring that cities like Milan evolve inclusively while preserving their social liveliness.

### 3.3 Building Selection and Analysis

The chosen site is an operative elementary school situated in the historic district of Lazzaretto in Milan, a neighborhood that is part of the understanding of the city's history of urban settlement. Scuola M. di Savoia - Cardinal Borromeo was opened as a primary school on September 1st, 2008, as part of the school grouping Istituto Comprensivo Statale Luigi Galvani. The strategic location makes the school site an ideal, vibrant urban location that maintains an ongoing relationship of the past with the present. This particular way the present and the past interact within space allows for a genuine opportunity for architectural engagement that further develops a sense of belonging, community, and historical awareness within the urban landscape.

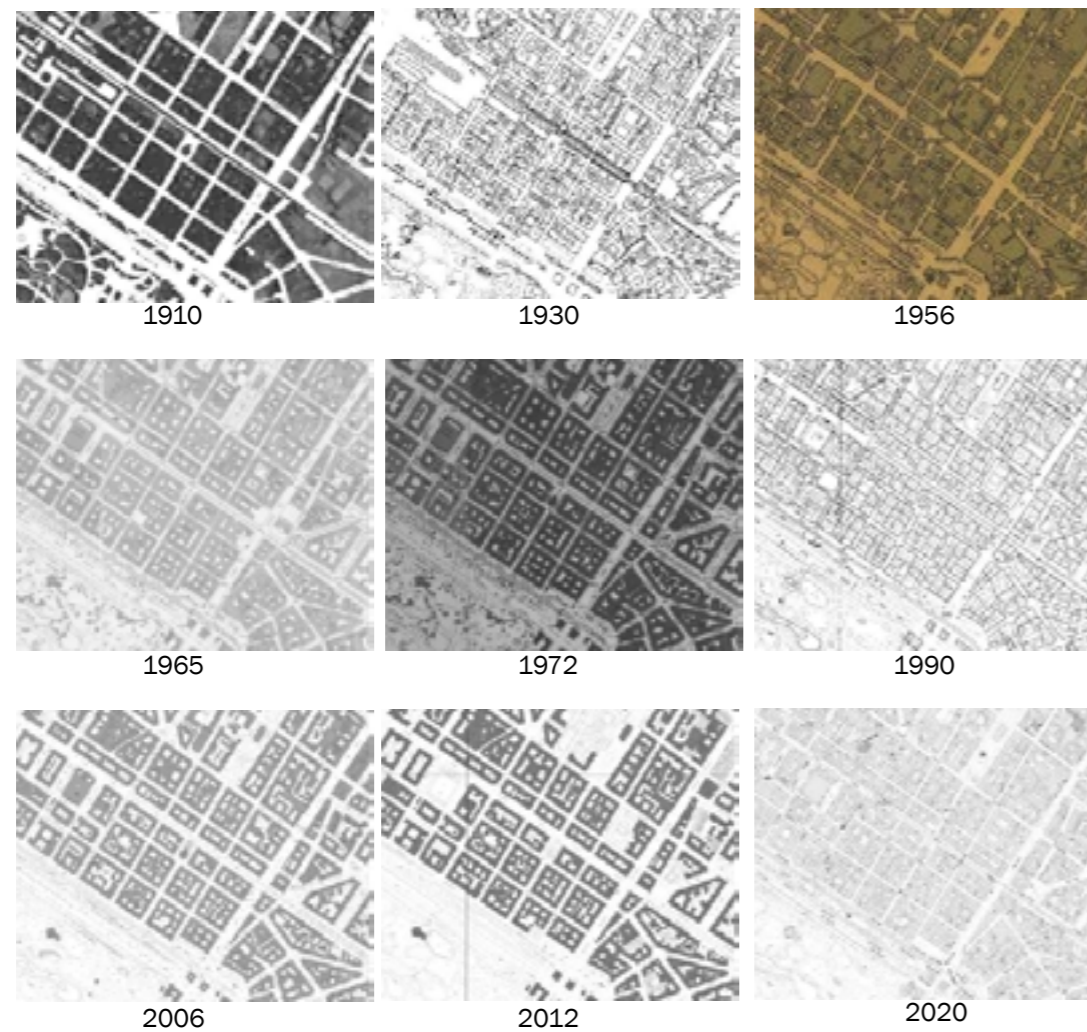


Figure 41: Building evolution

Designed by the architect Savoldi, the Lazzaretto Schools at the intersection of Via Alessandro Tadino and Via Felice Casati served about 1,500 students in 26 classrooms staggered over three levels (Mina, 1892). This rational and efficient configuration reflected the pedagogical and hygienic concerns of Milan in the late nineteenth century, whereby order, clarity, and control were thought of as necessary aspects of schools. Classrooms were arranged alongside long, linear corridors for the sake of student movement and supervision, and large windows ensured that classrooms were well-lit and ventilated, in line with the health standards of the time (Mina, 1892). Although the plan was efficient, it reflected pattern and rigidity, a kind of architectural form concerned with institutional discipline more than spatial flexibility.



Figure 42: Ground floor plan, 1892



Figure 43: First floor plan, 1892

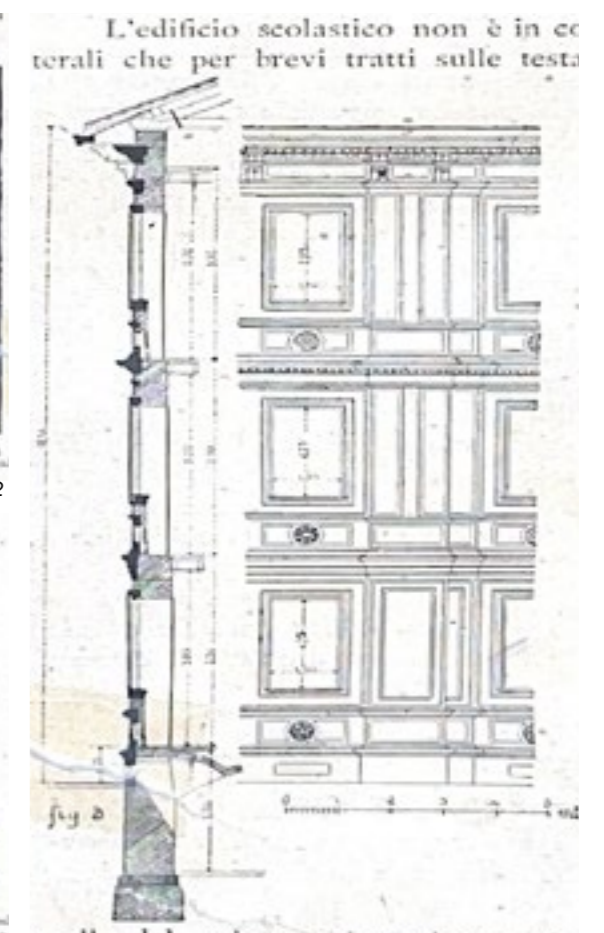


Figure 44: Section, 1892

The building's uncomplicated appearance was, in materiality, equal to this clarity of purpose: brick masonry with limewashed walls and polished dados paired with simple decorative terracotta and ceppo stone details. The modest amount of ornament emphasized the civic goal of education while keeping the project contractor costs down (Mina 1892). Even spaces designed to be used in a more utilitarian way, such as the gymnasium, were simply conceived as necessary function areas and not grand spaces for celebratory social gatherings, reiterating this practicality that was operational during the age.

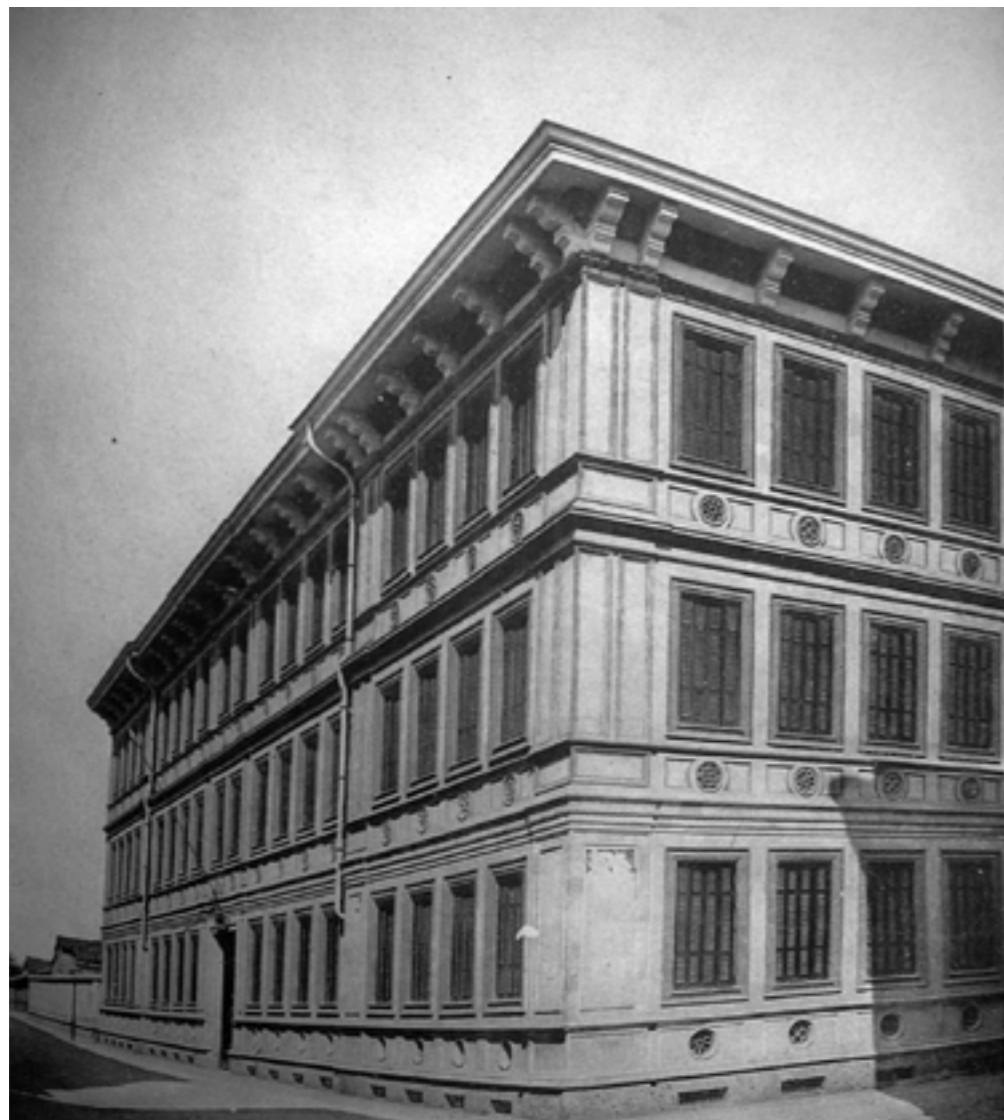


Figure 45: Building facade, 1892

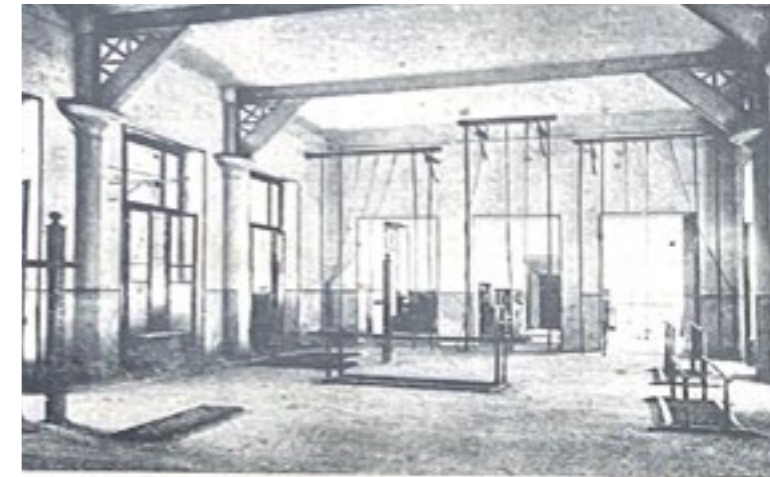
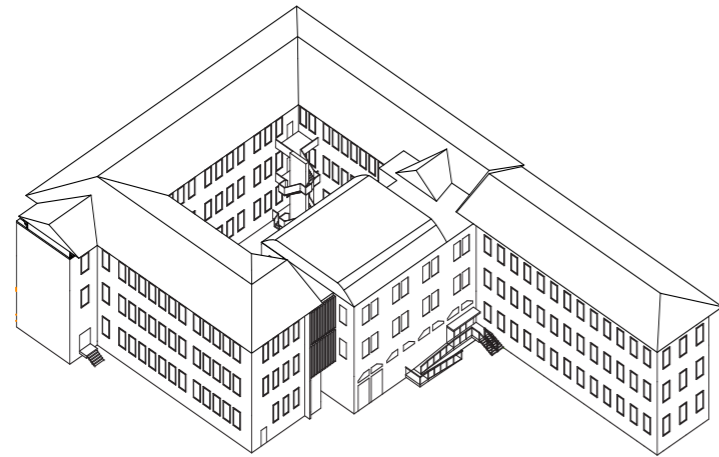


Figure 46: Gymnasium, 1892

This educational entity was subsequently modified over time and adapted to the city's new social system. It became a public institution again on September 1st of 2008 as Scuola M. di Savoia - Cardinal Borromeo as part of the group of educational systems called Istituto Comprensivo Statale Luigi Galvani. Its location is notable as it is anchored within a lively and similar urban fabric that allows for the daily intertwining of historical memory with contemporary life.



Drawing 20: Building interven-



Drawing 21: Building axonometry



Drawing 22: Building section

Next to the school is the only remaining section of the Lazzaretto wall, which now houses the Orthodox Church of San Nicola. Its location solidifies the school as a symbolic connection to collective memories for Milan, providing an architectural link between the past and present.



Figure 47: Orthodox Church of San Nicola, today

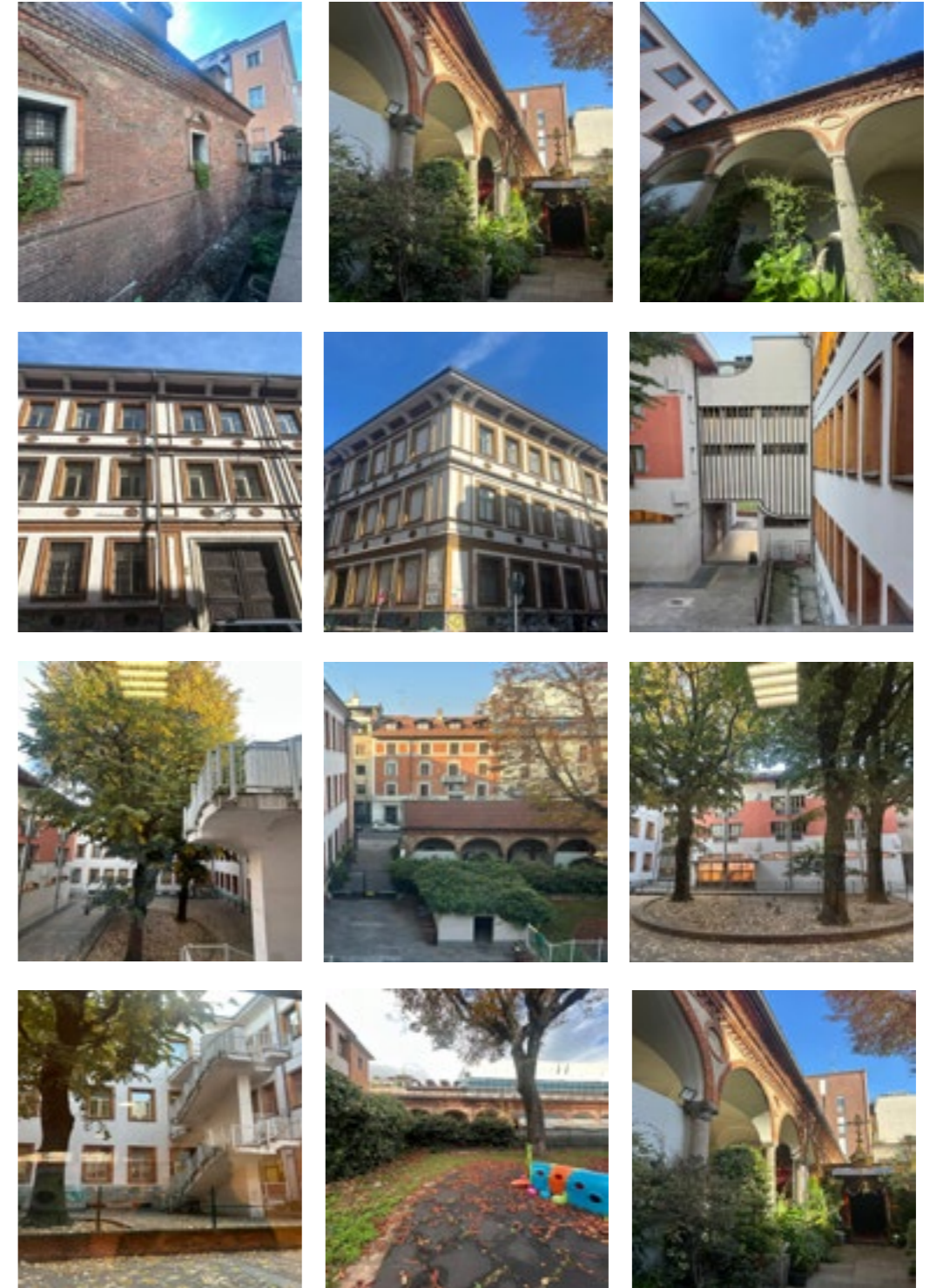


Figure 48: Outdoor views

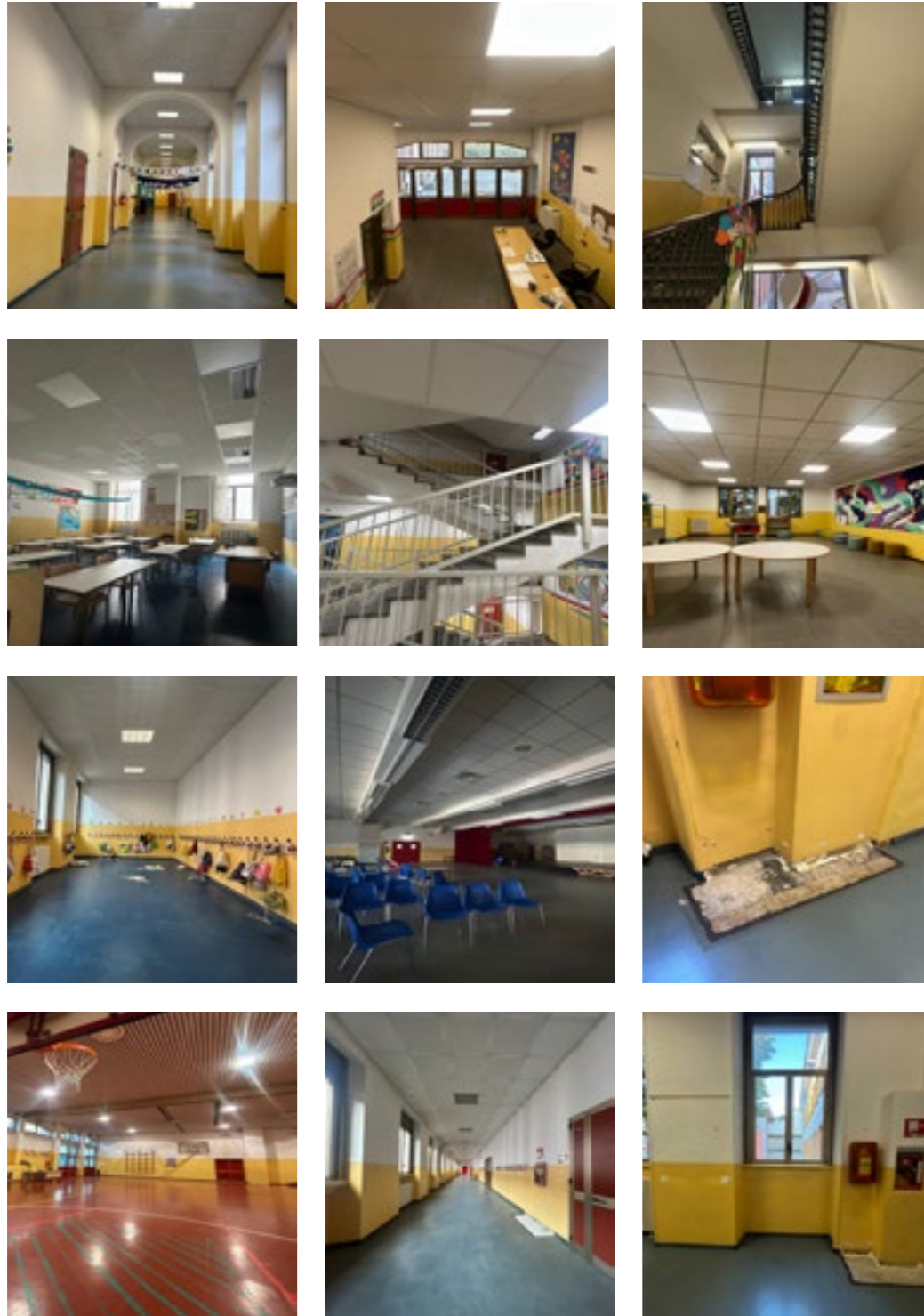


Figure 49: Interior views

In addition to being historically resonant, the surrounding area of the school is a site of social dynamism and cultural diversity. The busy streets nearby, especially Via Lecco and Via Lazzaretto, are expressive places for Gen Z and LGBTQ+ communities and have public life that is characterized by inclusivity, creativity, and belonging. The interweaving of past and present creates a layered sense of place, in which one of the rational, ordered logic of nineteenth-century schooling meets the open, fluid social processes of contemporary urban culture.

The Scuola M. di Savoia – Cardinal Borromeo exists as an integral part of Milan’s educational and architectural legacy while remaining an active part of its urban fabric. It represents a dialogue between history and change, offering a valuable setting to explore inclusive and community-focused architecture in Milan today.

### 3.4 Project Potentials and Opportunities

Milan's Lazzaretto neighborhood faces urban challenges that deeply affect its livability and social cohesion. While rich in historical layers, the area today struggles with disjointed public spaces, excessive nightlife activity, and a lack of meaningful civic infrastructure. Although the area is known for its nightlife, it has been reported that the residents sometimes find it disruptive. In order to minimize this while maintaining the liveliness of the area, there were laws applied to balance public enjoyment (Vazzana, 2025). For Generation Z, who prioritize inclusivity, identity expression, sustainability, and mental well-being, Lazzaretto remains largely unresponsive to their values and everyday rhythms. The absence of safe, accessible, and creatively engaging third places is a missed opportunity in a district with strong potential for architectural and cultural transformation.

Today, the Lazzaretto suffers from urban decay: overflowing bins, broken sidewalks, abandoned construction sites, and limited greenery (D'Amico, 2014). These conditions discourage meaningful public life and create a generational disconnect. Young residents and students living nearby lack safe, flexible gathering places to collaborate, unwind, and self-express. Past urban interventions have been criticized by residents of the area, condemned for feeling 'superficial' and 'nightlife oriented,' and tending to serve touristic and commercial interests over local needs (Dardari, 2023). From the point of view of the community, these circumstances lead to a sense of exclusion when public space is either disregarded or focused on consumption. Residents' trust in the built environment may be restored by a project that places a high priority on accessibility, maintenance, and daily use. This would encourage a sense of shared responsibility and long-term local management.

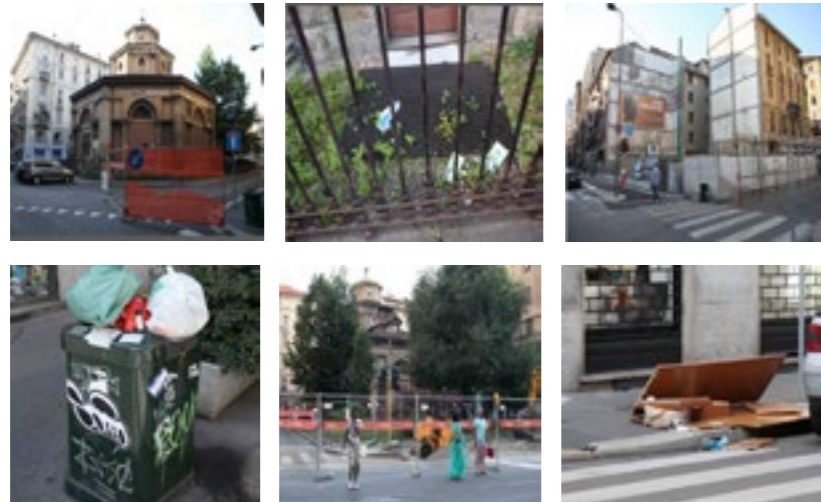


Figure 50: Decay in outdoor spaces

The lack of shared, non-commercial civic spaces restricts options for communication, intergenerational care, and communal presence, which has an influence on the larger community. Although Generation Z's requirements have become more noticeable, providing them can have wider advantages by reintroducing areas that promote regular connection, social trust, and neighborhood-level involvement.

This fragmentation and lack of social cohesion present a vital architectural opportunity for the area: the need to introduce a Gen Z-oriented third space that embraces hybridity and blends culture, co-creation, and well-being. Generation Z values spaces that are adaptable, collaborative, socially aware, and digitally integrated. The architectural reuse of historical sites could anchor a new typology of the public realm, one that holds memory and yields functional areas. This initiative can serve as a social bridge rather than a generational separation by addressing these ideals. Students, young professionals, long-term residents, and local associations can all benefit from spaces that foster creativity, teamwork, and mental health at the same time. This allows for shared use while acknowledging varying schedules and demands.

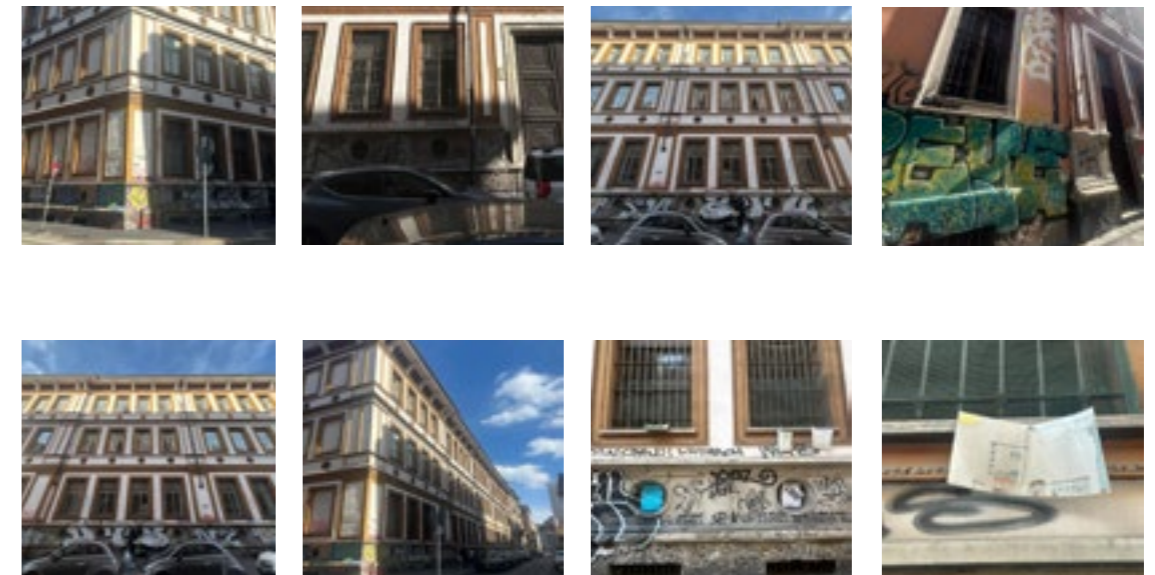
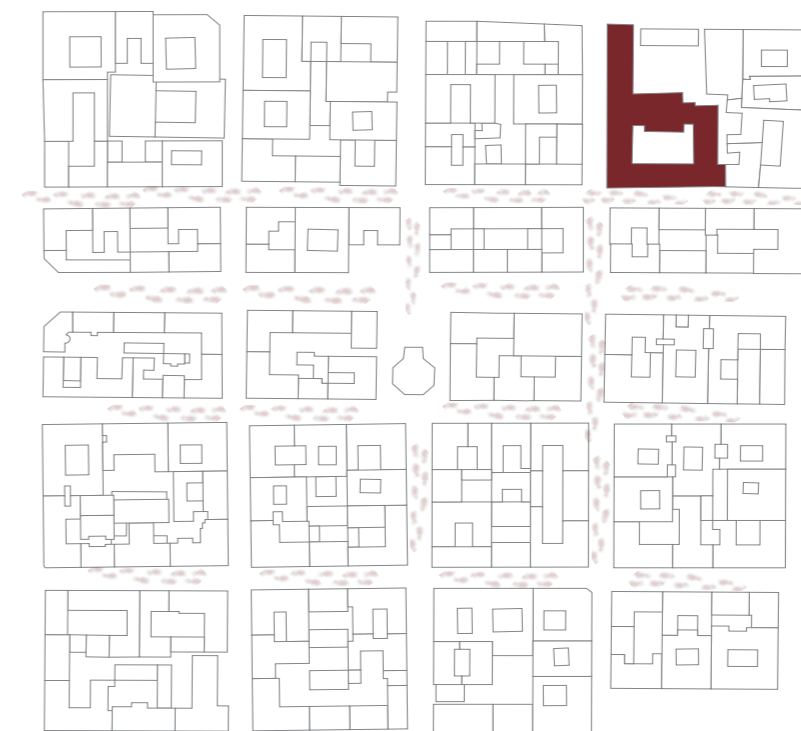


Figure 51: Decay on the building facade

In this vision, Lazzaretto becomes a prototype for adaptive reuse, where design doesn't erase the past but layers new uses and meanings over it. A third place here could embody countless useful functions promoting co-working, unwinding, and socializing. As gentrification threatens the area's social diversity (Tozzi, 2024), investing in spaces that serve youth, inclusivity, and public memory becomes not just a design gesture but a political act. Generation Z associates Lazzaretto primarily with nightlife; therefore, it is important to encourage daytime activities as well. This creates the opportunity for us to establish a Generation Z space that meets their needs and day-to-day activities. Encouraging a daytime presence creates a more balanced way of experiencing a city, decreases reliance on nighttime social activity as a primary form of social activity, and has the potential to alleviate tensions between residents and visitors. By providing both formal and informal spaces for learning, sharing ideas, and connecting with one another, we can create a lived, shared community rather than one dominated by entertainment. This also means that by providing an opportunity for an intervention that centers Generation Z, the benefits will extend beyond generating social cohesion within the area to facilitate support networks between local businesses and reactivate public life through both inclusive and exclusionary means of engaging with the community, creating a sustainable future and diverse cultural heritage for Lazzaretto.



*Drawing 23: Towards a new third place*

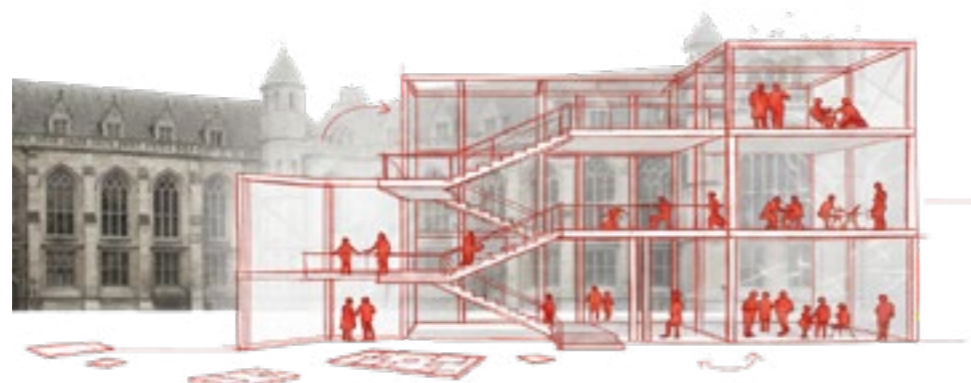
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## 4. CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

## 4.1 Adaptive Reuse as a Responsive Design Tools

Generation Z is known to be the most conscious generation when it comes to environmental awareness, commitment to authenticity, as well as cultural preservation. These key demographic characteristics of this generation distinguish them from the previous generations. Born and raised during the ecological crisis, yet deeply connected with digital culture and cultural heritage, their ideals are strongly aligned with the values of adaptive reuse, which prioritizes environment, sustainability, and preservation of identity. Their beliefs in these approaches show a generational change towards an architectural perception that focuses on cultural identity, sustainability, and environmental responsibility (Lanz et al, 2022).

Adaptive reuse has gained significant importance in recent decades as a responsive design strategy, offering both pragmatic and symbolic solutions in architecture (Kahvecioğlu & Selcuk 2023). Throughout history, buildings have been repurposed due to the high cost of construction or to present new architectural identities. The formal emergence of adaptive reuse was born from the reactions to the idea of tabula rasa, clean sweep, in the mid-twentieth century. Clean sweep was a present ideology during the Modern Movement in the mid-twentieth century, which emphasized demolition and new construction while ignoring the historical, material, and social values of existing buildings. Coincidentally, the 1970s experienced an increase in environmental awareness, rising energy costs, and expansion of conservation, which played a role in the emergence of adaptive reuse (Lanz et al, 2022).



Drawing 24: Adaptive reuse diagram

Today, adaptive reuse could be defined as a tool of intervention that focuses on transformation over demolition. While the idea of adaptive reuse as a field of theory dates back to the 1970s, the last decade has witnessed a new rise of interest in the field related to sustainability, memory, and history, as well as the flexibility of today's architecture. This approach has become more evident in the field, seen throughout a wide architectural scope, from high-profile designs to basic community-involved projects. Dr. Sally Stone from the Manchester School of Architecture stated that the main concept of 'reuse' reflects a cultural perspective suitable for the modern day. She also adds, "'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' is a slogan or statement that epitomizes the twenty-first-century post-industrial society's need for everything to be useful, to have a purpose and be interesting, and to be authentic or real." (Stone, 2019).

Adaptive reuse consists of several aspects that demonstrate its multifaceted nature. The concept preserves cultural integrity and authenticity while transmitting intangible values like knowledge, skills, and techniques. These techniques not only preserve physical legacy but also protect civic pride, identity, and collective memory, ensuring that heritage will remain actively engaged in contemporary society. It enhances cultural life by preserving these values while fostering education, creativity, and dialogue between historic and contemporary expression (Gravagnuolo et al, 2017).

Adaptive reuse has important economic advantages, as it is a feasible alternative to demolition. It is a more resource-efficient process, representing a reduction of capital cost through decreased construction costs, waste disposal costs, and cost of materials, while extending the usable life of the building. Heritage can be converted into a productive resource, with both tangible and intangible value to the community, and can be an asset for employment and income, as well as an avenue for cultural tourism that stimulates the local economy. In addition, repurposing the buildings increases real estate values, attracts public and private investment, and fosters creative industries that cluster around cultural spaces and promote innovation. Adaptive reuse also embodies the key principles of circular economy principles, which are: Reuse (keeping buildings and materials in use), Reduce (less construction waste and landfill), Repair and Refurbish (maintenance and upgrades), Repurpose (new building uses), and Recycle/Recover (recovering materials and energy). It also encourages different and socially innovative business and governance models, framing heritage not just as a cultural good but also as an engine for sustainable economic development. It enables the decoupling of growth from material consumption while continuously enabling economic, plus social and cultural, value creation (Gravagnuolo et al, 2017).

From a social point of view, adaptive reuse strengthens communities by creating inclusivity, cohesion, and civic collectivity. It is not only the reimagining of buildings but also the renewing of the connection between people and place and redefining a sense of place and belonging. Providing the opportunity to reinvent buildings into social spaces allows for civic engagement to flourish and for new relationships to develop between residents, users, and stakeholders. Civic engagement can take many forms, including community engagement in the planning phase, creating shared educational and cultural experiences, or using repurposed space for organizing local events and functions. With these approaches, citizens are also enabled to develop as active participants in their environment and to strengthen conditions of trust amongst community members, leading to a long-lasting practice of stewardship for heritage (Gravagnuolo et al, 2017).

Simultaneously, adaptive reuse has also opened up the possibilities of access, safety, and inclusivity, while also establishing new forms of engagement with community heritage. This includes former or deserted areas becoming part of the urban environment, encouraging cross-cultural interactions, and having social value derived from the outcomes of cultural participation and community members (Lundgren, 2023). A wider engagement with community heritage buildings may establish a collective identity, and in Italian rural villages, for example, abandoned heritage buildings transformed into Airbnb accommodations have revitalized community life by reconnecting residents with their cultural heritage and encouraging active participation in local projects (Presti, 2024). In other cases, adaptive reuse fosters a re-engagement of communities with their heritage, as seen in the Farm Cultural Park in Favara, Sicily, where derelict buildings are transformed into cultural and social spaces, creating civic engagement, volunteerism, shared food experiences, and community-based learning opportunities from events, exhibitions, and workshops. This is an example of how adaptive reuse can give stakeholders direct ownership of interventions, which builds up community engagement, connectedness, and sustainability of both social value and cultural heritage. In this way, heritage becomes more than a physical remnant as it is re-imagined as a living heritage that provides a contribution to resilience, cohesion, and well-being.



Figure 52: Casa Panitteri, Sicily for Airbnb adaptive reuse



Figure 53: Casa Maer, Lavenone for Airbnb adaptive reuse



Figure 54: Farm Cultural Park, Favara, Sicily

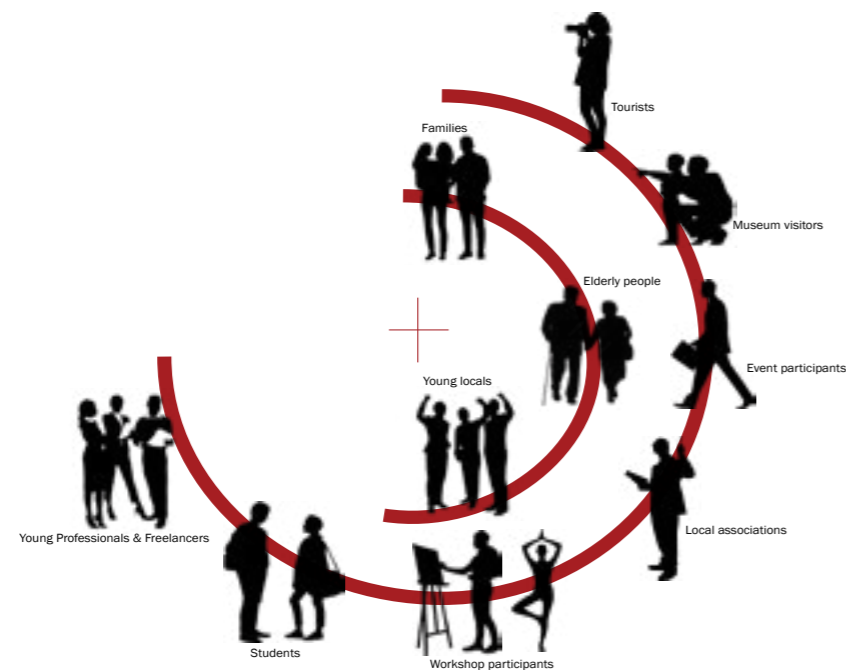
Adaptive reuse has also been shown to be a viable approach to improving the environmental performance of heritage buildings. A case study in Türkiye recently showed that modifying the use of buildings was substantially more energy efficient in terms of embodied energy than demolition and new material manufacture, while improving operational energy efficiency at the same time (Alasmar et al, 2023). By renovating with improvements such as insulation, more energy-efficient window systems, and upgrading HVAC and lighting systems, it is possible to substantially reduce energy demand while maintaining the cultural heritage values and architectural qualities of the heritage building itself. This study reflects and further emphasizes the concordance of adaptive reuse as an example of heritage conservation with sustainability objectives as a viable climate change mitigation strategy that extends the lifespan of buildings while conserving cultural identity. By retaining built fabric and avoiding demolition, adaptive reuse also helps lower the total environmental footprint associated with material production, waste generation, and energy consumption compared with conventional new construction (Foster, 2020).

The site is culturally and historically rich and presents a viable adaptive reuse project that considers social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. The transformation into a public space created by and for Gen Z would enable social connectivity, inclusivity, and community participation, while also connecting the next generation to the heritage of the site. Culturally, the design, prevalent with heritage themes, acknowledges and conserves the past, allowing the past to speak to the present. Economically, the reuse of the space would activate the site to simulate more local activity, small projects, and events that serve the community and the localized neighborhood. Environmentally, the adaptive reuse proposal emphasizes creating sustainable interventions, embracing the reuse of existing buildings while reducing waste resources. This approach positions sustainability not as an added layer, but as an outcome of reusing and adapting the site's existing architectural fabric. As a result of the application of adaptive reuse, the project aims to re-imagine the Lazzaretto as a dynamic, relevant, and sustainable public space that is uniquely authentic to contemporary youth culture, but still allows the Lazzaretto identity to resonate and evoke its historical past.

## 4.2 Program Definition and Spatial Strategy

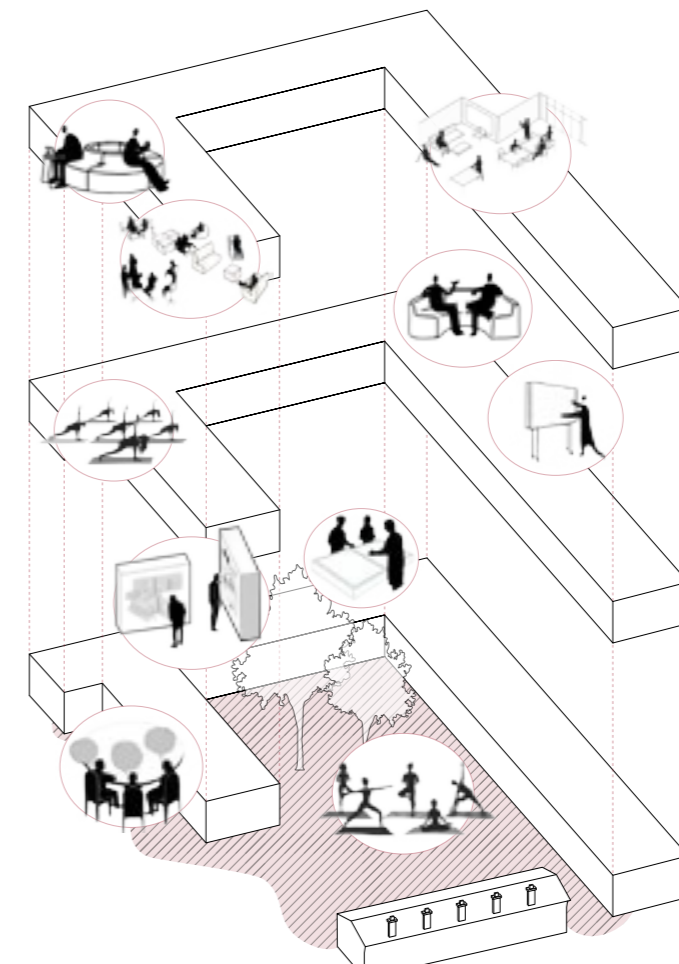
The design development of a building in Milan's Lazzaretto area must start with its contradictions: a historically important neighborhood that has been fragmented by imperfect redevelopment, the disruption of nightlife, and the lack of public spaces for public use. While there are many historical layers to the Lazzaretto neighborhood, it suffers from an absence of public spaces dedicated to community life. Other neighborhoods like Porta Venezia offer vibrant social and cultural exchanges, but Lazzaretto's courtyards and streets are primarily for nightlife and are underutilized as public space. Lazzaretto's courtyards and streets are often dominated by nightlife or left underutilized, offering little room for younger generations to gather or collaborate. The absence of inclusive public space and engaging heritage creates both a gap and an opportunity.

This calls for a Gen Z community center: one that creates a third place that can meet both the preservation of collective memory and the co-generation of a contemporary identity; a place for not only gathering but also co-creating wellness and belonging. Based on Gen Z's cultural priorities, the program aims to create a space that fulfills the generation's six priorities: community, flexible space, physical and digital intersection, sustainability, health and wellness, authenticity, and identity. The program intends to transform the elementary school into a third place based on memory and action or participation through the architectural practice of adaptive reuse to not only acknowledge the historic significance of the site but also permit and inspire new stories to unfold.



Drawing 25: Target users

At its heart, the program positions the Lazzaretto site as a collective living room, an anchor for community life rooted in Gen Z's demand for openness, inclusivity, and cultural relevance. The design strategy reimagines the school and courtyard as a sequence of adaptable, multi-use spaces that could respond to the demands of everyday life. Central to this concept are modular event halls that can be reused as market spaces for local sellers, and co-working spaces reflecting the generation's expectation for fluid and transformable environments. Alongside these ideas, a flexible gallery strip can provide space for local performers and exhibitions, fostering participation. These amenities will not function separately but as part of an integrated spatial ecosystem designed to encourage civic engagement, spontaneous collaboration, and the emergence of new forms of collective identity. By reclaiming and activating the site in this way, the proposal offers a durable, community-driven alternative to the commercial fragmentation of urban life that celebrates the social connectedness of its young residents.



Drawing 26: Program

Flexibility is a core spatial principle, guiding both the architectural language and program choices of the project. Interiors include non-rigid, open-ended spaces that continuously evolve in response to changing needs, times of day, and modes of use. Modular furniture and movable partitions enable swift reconfiguration, allowing a single room to shift from a quiet study lounge into a collaborative workshop or a vibrant social gathering. Rather than fixed-use rooms, the design introduces rentable spaces that can be temporarily reserved for meetings, tutoring sessions, club gatherings, or informal co-working, allowing residents and users to co-shape the building's function. The outdoor courtyard is conceived as a flexible, programmable space that can accommodate a wide range of activities, from morning yoga sessions to evening film screenings. This layered and user-responsive spatial system reflects Gen Z's rejection of fixed environments, embracing adaptability, spontaneity, and a sense of shared ownership.

Physical and Digital Integration plays a vital role in shaping the Lazzaretto project as a hybridized third place. The design merges analog and digital layers to create a space where technology enhances, rather than replaces, physical experience. Media rooms and digital art installations are integrated throughout the building, enabling creative production and expression while supporting new forms of storytelling and cultural engagement. Tools like the above mentioned ones connect users to the layered memory of the neighborhood, fostering a connection with the history of the area. This combination of physical and digital realms reflects Gen Z's native fluency in hybridity, where spatial experience and online presence are not separate but deeply interconnected. The project redefines what it means to be present in space physically, technologically, and collectively by including possibilities for cultural and digital involvement.

Sustainability is a defining principle of the project, shaping everyday experiences. Rooted in Gen Z's ecological consciousness, the design treats environmental responsibility not as an add-on but as an embedded framework for living. Historic structures are preserved and reimaged through adaptive reuse, extending their lifecycle while reducing material waste. The green pockets act as a living infrastructure, creating a space for both ecological processes and collective care. The green infrastructure not only enhances environmental awareness but also fosters social cohesion, transforming everyday urban life into opportunities for interaction and well-being. Beyond ecological performance, sustainability is also social, through long-term adaptability and the cultivation of habits that empower communities to sustain themselves as much as their environment.

Health and wellness are integrated into the design as an important layer of the program, fostering and encouraging healthy lifestyles within the neighborhood. The design program introduces quiet zones, wellness nooks, soft lighting, and biophilic design to promote moments of rest and reflection throughout the space. Meditation areas, fitness studios, and outdoor lounges offer restorative settings that support both mental and physical well-being, urgent needs for a generation increasingly impacted by urban stress and social pressure. A flexible space within the program will occasionally be allocated to medical experts for doing blood tests and draws, facilitating on-site preventative treatment through local collaboration. The inclusion of rented storage spaces encourages ease, supporting longer, more flexible stays, and creating a safe space for the users. Rather than treating wellness as an accessory, the program integrates it holistically into the architectural language, embedding care into the space. In doing so, the project cultivates spaces that prioritize wellness, balance, and care for both individual and community needs.

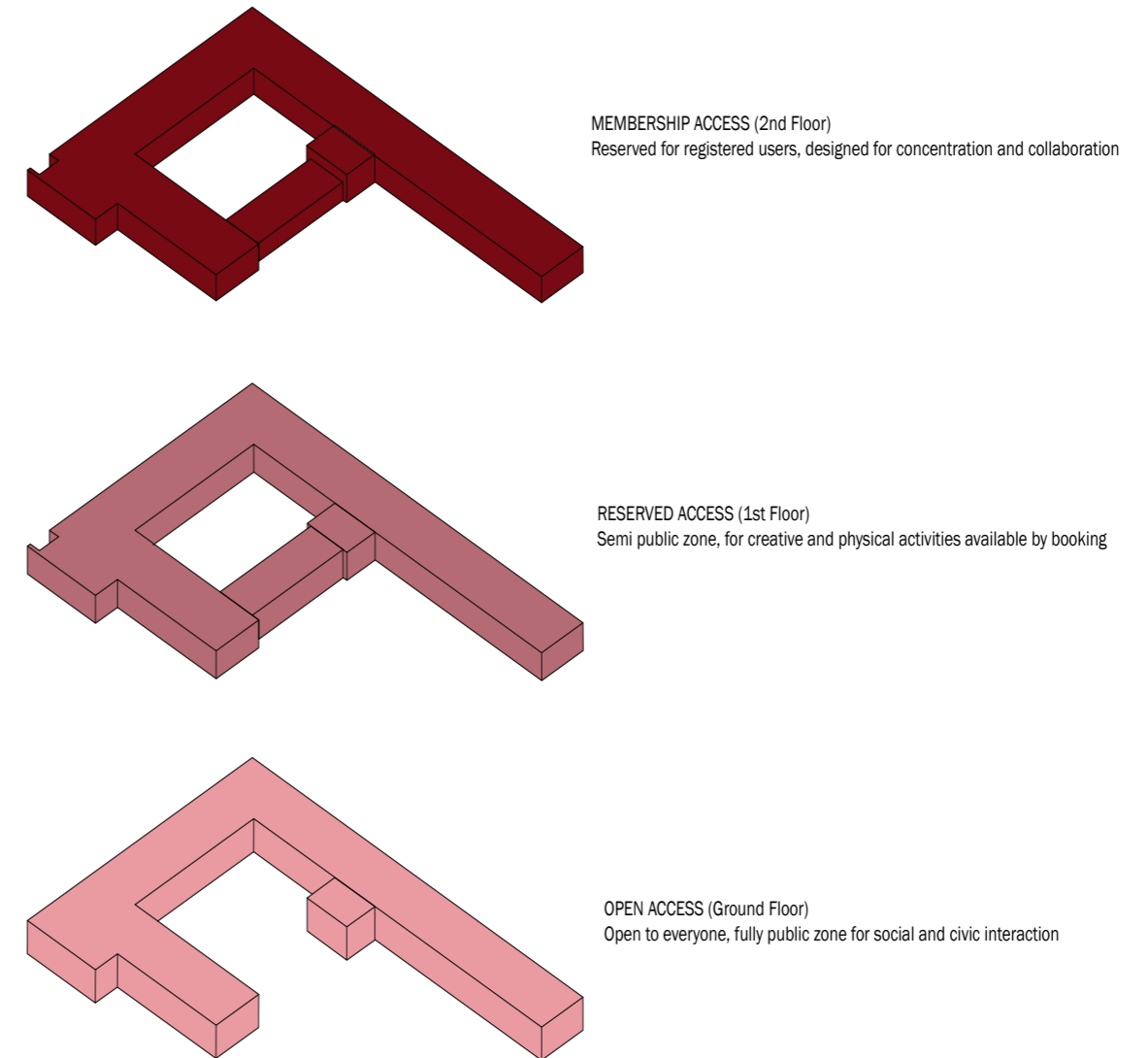
Authenticity and identity emerge as central drivers of the project, reflecting Gen Z's insistence on spaces that feel genuine and allow for self-expression. Rather than erasing the traces of history, the untouched surfaces of the old building are preserved, exposing the patterns formed through time as a living layer of the design. These material remnants define the identity of the project as a transformed and lived-in building. An exhibition space anchors this principle, providing a curated yet evolving platform for youth-led programming, rotating displays, and collaborative cultural initiatives. Alongside it, designated areas for spontaneous self-expression encourage creativity, whether through temporary installations or performances, granting users the freedom to leave their mark on the space. By combining repurposed as well as untouched layers, the project resists uniformity and instead celebrates authenticity as a dialogue between history, community, and individual identity.

### 4.3 Program Management

Due to the project's proximity to the city center, its location within a historically layered urban fabric, and the adaptive reuse of an existing elementary school, the proposal positions itself as a civic transformation. In order to ensure public legitimacy and feasibility, the building is conceived as municipally owned and managed, reinforcing its role as shared social infrastructure accessible to a wide range of users. At the same time, the operational and financial sustainability of the project relies on partnerships with local associations, cultural organizations, and educational initiatives already active in the surrounding area. These actors contribute private funding and programming in exchange for dedicated spaces within the building, becoming permanent stakeholders rather than temporary users.

The hybrid nature of the project requires a management structure capable of mediating different users and degrees of access. Rather than functioning as purely organizational, the management structure is conceived as an extension of the spatial strategy, translating openness, flexibility, and community into daily use that can be separated based on user. Through the regulation of access, programming, and shared resources, the management model ensures that the building remains inclusive while maintaining long-term functionality and economic sustainability.

Access within the building is structured through a tiered model that directly corresponds to both spatial organization and user access. The ground floor functions as an open and permeable platform with the neighborhood, remaining freely accessible to all users and accommodating civic, social, and informal activities. The first floor introduces a semi-public layer, operating on a rental or class-based system in which spaces are booked for specific programs, workshops, or educational activities, allowing controlled access while remaining flexible and publicly oriented. The second floor is reserved exclusively for members, accessible through a monthly subscription that grants regular use of focused workspaces and shared resources. This vertical gradient of access translates the membership model into architectural form, balancing openness at street level with progressively more controlled and dedicated environments above.



*Drawing 27: Tiered access*

This tiered access model also establishes a self-reinforcing economic structure that supports the long term operation of the building. Revenue generated through rentals, classes, and membership subscriptions directly contributes to the maintenance, management, and operation of the entire building and particularly allows the open ground floor functions to remain inclusive and free of charge. By combining revenue from this membership model with funding from local associations and organizations as stakeholders, the building establishes a financially sustainable model.

To ground this management and funding approach in existing practices, two precedent case studies are studied, which successfully mediate between civic responsibility and diversified funding. The Deelfabriek community center in Belgium and The Social Hub in Rome provide two frameworks for understanding how management can function as a spatial and social tool within hybrid community-oriented environments.

The Deelfabriek community center operates through a cooperative management model, where spatial openness is supported by shared responsibility rather than strict control. The project combines publicly accessible areas with spaces managed by resident organizations, which are also stakeholders in the funding of the center. Management functions less as a centralized authority and more as a facilitator, coordinating shared use and maintenance across multiple user groups (Wilson, 2024). On the other hand, the Social Hub in Rome informs the membership structure chosen to be implemented. The management model is more structured and sustained through memberships, bookings, and time based use, with certain spaces remaining open to the public, with others only accessible to members which pay for the access (The Social Hub Rome). A combination of these two models allows for the building to manage the access of the spaces along different levels, while being able to generate revenue to maintain financial sustainability, without compromising the social aspect and preserving its identity as a civic center.



Figure 55: The Social Hub, Rome



Figure 56: Deelfabriek, Kortrijk

## 4.4 User Scenarios

The envisioned community center is primarily oriented toward Generation Z, encompassing students, young professionals, creatives, and activists whose values of inclusivity, digital fluency, and sustainability shape the future of urban life (Francis et al, 2018). Yet, it also remains permeable to secondary users, local residents, migrant communities, and older generations, who together enrich the social fabric of Lazzaretto. This layered demographic acknowledges the neighborhood's cultural diversity while positioning the youth as the curators.

Though small in scale, Lazzaretto mirrors larger patterns of urban transformation, shaped by high population density, generational contrast, and multicultural exchange. As mentioned previously in Chapter 3.2, Municipio 3 exhibits a diverse population, characterized by a range of age groups and cultural backgrounds. A large cohort of young adults (20–39) linked to universities and creative industries exists alongside a substantial elderly population (70+). The area is culturally diverse, with nearly 15% of residents being foreign-born, contributing to a vibrant, multicultural character. This diversity is additionally represented in the active involvement of civic associations that cater to various demographic segments, ranging from youth and students to older citizens, hence fostering chances for intergenerational and multicultural interaction. This mix of long-term Italian residents and younger, international arrivals creates a layered social fabric, positioning Lazzaretto as both a point of arrival and a place of permanence.

For architecture, this implies a need for spatial strategies that allow the younger generation to embrace the intercultural coexistence reflected in Lazzaretto's demographics, designing for self-realization and social inclusion. To translate this inclusivity into design, the program is developed through user scenarios that activate different rhythms of the center. Since the design is meant to be a flexible space that caters to the 6 core principles of Generation Z, as described previously, it is important to observe how the facilities that are being created could be used in different ways and scenarios. Including multifunctionality in the spaces and the amenities allows for different uses by different groups of people, embracing and encouraging individuality as well as community building. This user scenario based design approach directly informs membership tiers and access levels, aligning different spaces with the needs and routines of different users.

During the day, the center acts as a creative gathering space for students and young adults, allowing them to utilize the amenities either to work from home or focus on other projects. Students and freelancers occupy flexible co-working areas that shift between quiet study pods and collaborative tables. Workshops of several kinds hosted and attended by the users invite participation from both locals and newcomers, embedding learning into everyday life. The eligible users can also organize and give physical activity classes, such as yoga or pilates, in the readily available multifunctional studios that are provided, to promote health and wellness as an integral part of a busy working schedule. To strengthen ties with the local community, dedicated spaces within the building host various associations and organizations, fostering closer engagement with the young population in a shared, interactive environment.

Towards the evening, the atmosphere pivots toward collective cultural activity. Adaptable halls become spaces for exhibition halls and self expression, where the local creatives of Gen Z can showcase their work. The courtyard transforms into spaces for film screenings, debates, or digital exhibitions, fostering critical dialogue and global connectivity. As the sun sets, the community center transforms into an open floor for various activities, from quiet lounges where users can relax to collective areas where ideas are exchanged. The building's function is created by the users and is turned into an all day activity that welcomes anyone who is seeking community.



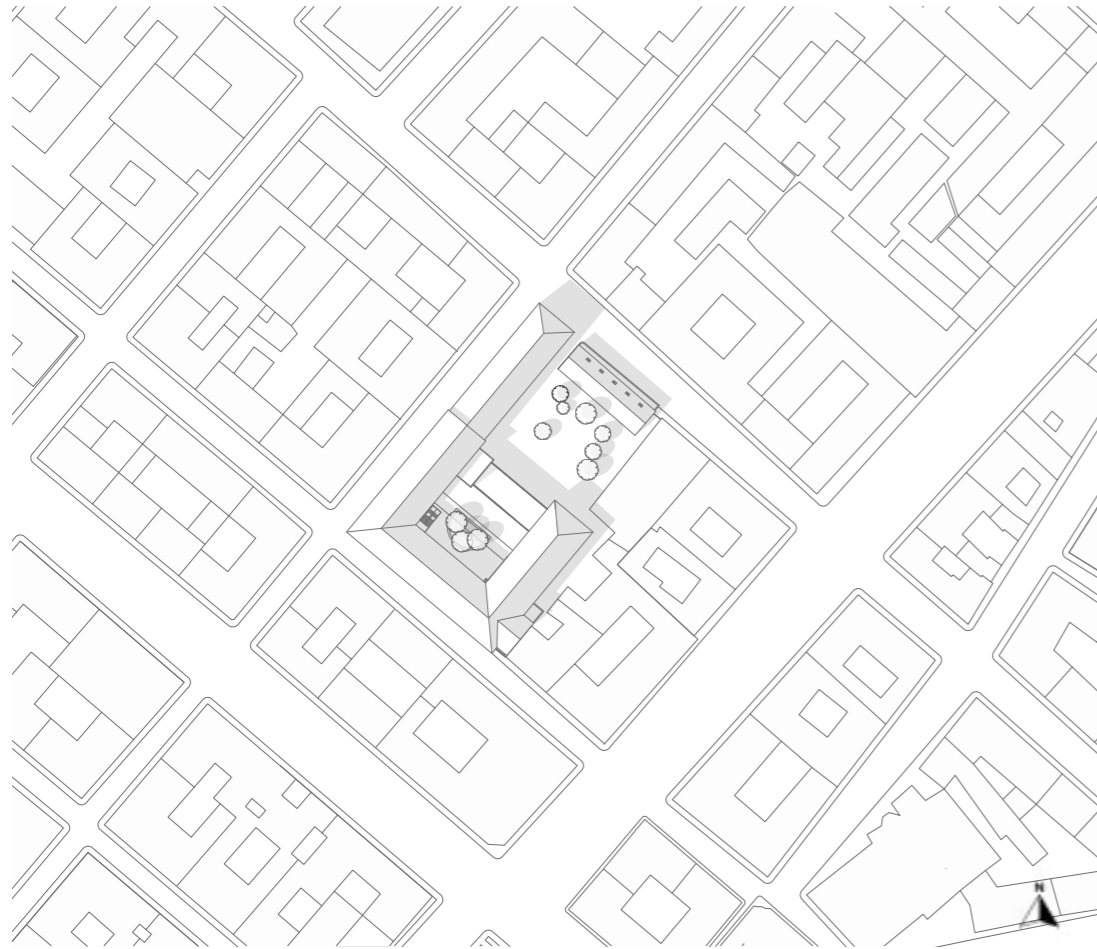
Drawing 28: User Scenarios

On weekends, while the co-working spaces continue functioning as spaces for individual or collaborative work, market stalls within the adaptable halls support circular economies by promoting upcycled and local artisanal products. Generation Z can use these spaces in order to showcase and sell their artworks and other goods. Health and wellness activities, from yoga to guided meditations in the courtyard, reframe the site as a place of balance. Events led by different community members can bring together the core target group of Generation Z as well as the older residents of the area, reinforcing community cohesion while celebrating diversity. The meeting rooms turn into club gatherings, hallways turn into exhibition areas, and workshop spaces become gathering spaces. Due to the flexible and the multifunctional nature of the building, every room and every furniture is up to interpretation. Beyond the daily and weekly rhythms, the center adapts to larger cycles of cultural life. This allows for the site to become embedded into the cultural and social fabric of Lazzaretto all year round. Heritage festivals or art biennales can be hosted, blending memory with reinvention. Temporary installations in courtyards or digital archives curated by youth ensure that the site remains both locally grounded and globally connected.

Each of these scenarios is rooted in the six core values of Gen Z-oriented design: community through intergenerational gathering; flexibility through spatial transformations; physical and digital interaction via hybrid events; sustainability embedded in gardens and circular economies; health and wellness supported by green infrastructures and physical activities; and authenticity and identity realized through youth-led cultural production. Together, demographics and scenarios frame the center not as a fixed typology but as a living system; adaptable, participatory, and deeply responsive to its users.

## 5. DESIGN PROPOSAL

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Site Plan

Drawing 29: Site plan

Designing in such a densely historical area as the Lazzaretto of Milan required paying close attention to the history embedded in the site. The project came from the need to not only address the history of the former elementary school, but also the generation that the project aims to address. Generation Z needs spaces that are open, flexible, and socially engaging. In this regard, the design process addressed how the building could transition from being an introverted institutional building to an extroverted social space.

Specific attention was paid to the openings of the building and its relationship to the urban block. In a densely residential area, the school was a closed system. By addressing entrances, transparency, and visibility, the project repositions the building as an open establishment in the neighbourhood.

The project addresses a historically complex, largely untouched, and poorly renovated space and turns it into a space that is relevant to its users. Instead of removing the history of the space, the project engages with it and gives it a new role. The aim is to create a space that feels natural to inhabit today; one that reflects both the character of the area and the expectations of a new generation.

## Masterplan



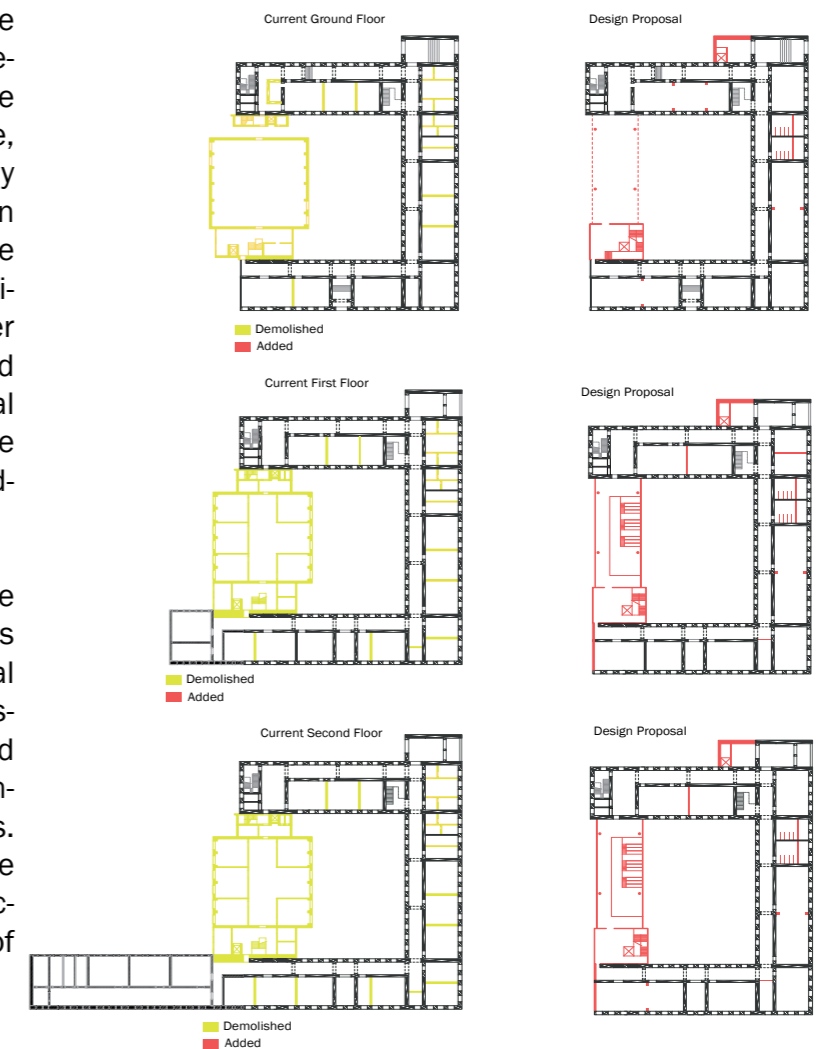
Drawing 30: Masterplan

## Restoring the Structural Logic

Over the years, many of the internal walls that were depicted in the 1892 plans have been torn down. In their place, lighter and less structurally sound partitions have been introduced in order to divide the interior space into additional classrooms. These later modifications have weakened the clarity the original spatial order and undermined the structural rhythm of the building.

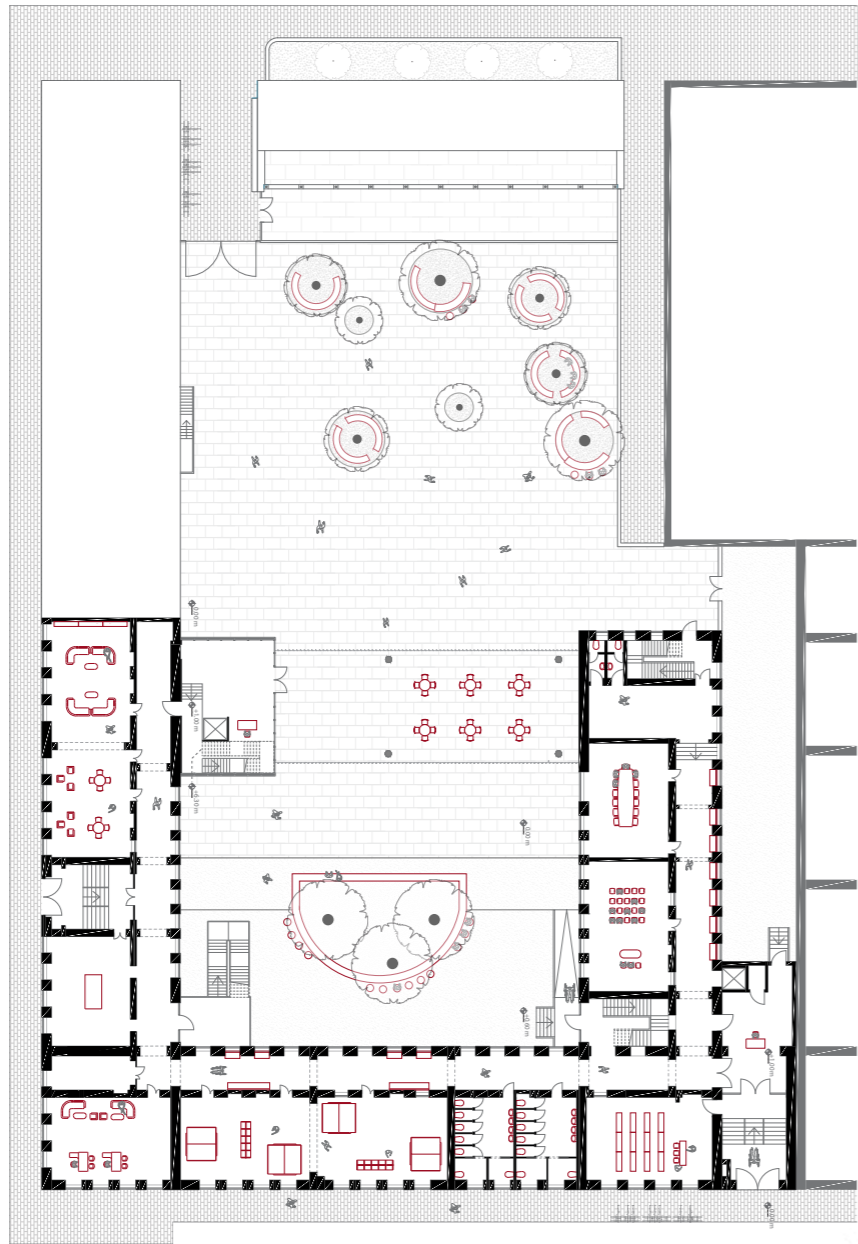
The project removes these non-structural interventions and reinstates the original wall positions. In certain cases, rather than restoring solid partitions, archways are inserted to connect two rooms. This way, the spaces can be expanded while still respecting the structural integrity of the original plan.

The goal is not to renovate the building but to enhance and reinforce the original system without undermining its structural integrity. The spatial order is clarified, and the structural system is respected rather than changed.

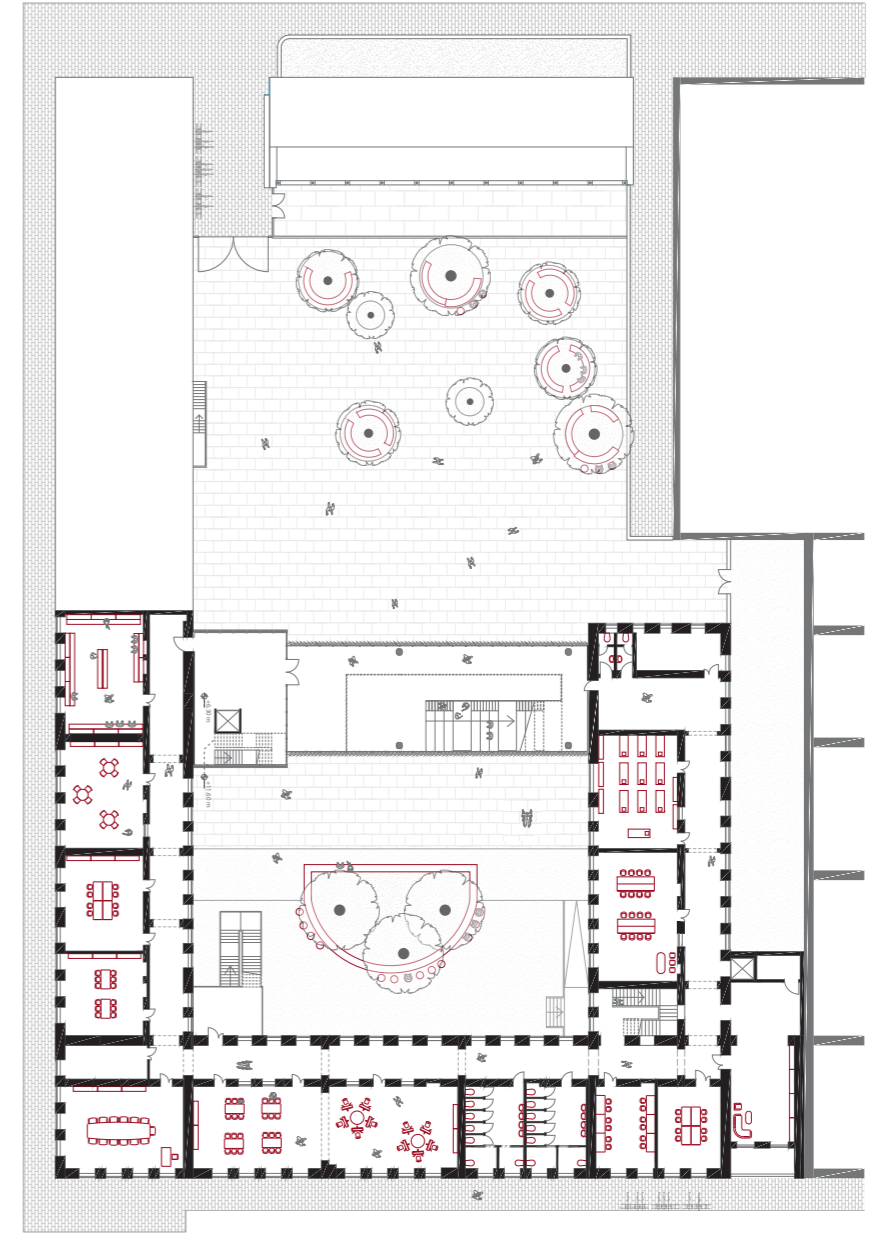


Drawing 31: Building intervention proposal

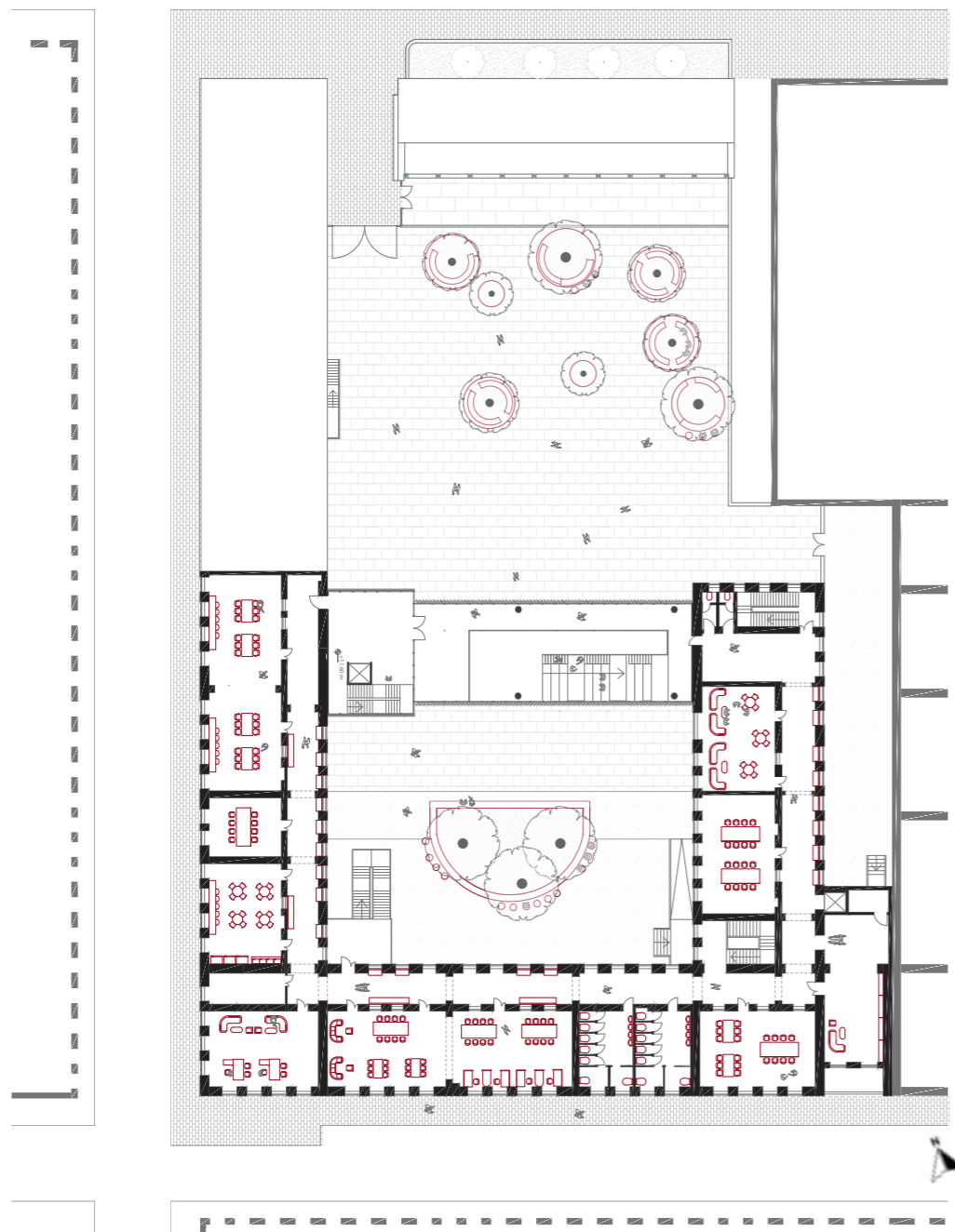
Plans



Drawing 32: Ground floor plan



Drawing 33: First floor plan



Drawing 34: Second floor plan

### *Reinterpreting the Plans*

The intervention began with a close reading of the original plans from 1892. While the original points of entry of the school were still there in the physical space, they were no longer functioning as the main points of entry into the building. Over the years, new paths of circulation had shifted the emphasis away from the original axes. The intervention reinstates the original points of entry as the main points of entry into the building.

Additionally, a new point of entry is also introduced in the modern addition of the project. The new point of entry corresponds with the new identity of the building and is in harmony with the original points of entry. The coexistence of the old and new points of entry enables the building to function both as a preserved building and as a renewed communal space.

### *Removing the Post-1975 Addition and Introducing the Bridge*

A later addition, built some time after 1975, occupied the central part of the school complex. This addition disrupted the clarity of the original composition and limited the spatial relationship between the two courtyards. Its removal became a key architectural intervention in re-establishing the identity of the project.

In the place of the addition, a new body is introduced. By its proportions and geometry, it reflects the original central body of the school, but is expressed in a contemporary language. Rather than replacing what was there before, the project re-interprets its presence. The new body serves as a bridge, connecting the two sides of the building on the first and second floors. On the ground floor, it is entirely open. This openness enables the interior courtyard to be directly connected to the naturally formed courtyard between the school and the adjacent Orthodox church. A separated and enclosed condition is made continuous as a single outdoor space. The project enhances the permeability of space and provides a generous and larger open area in the dense Lazzaretto.

The bridge is both a connector and a separator. It connects the levels while freeing up the ground plane. The bridge brings back centrality without recreating mass, allowing the building to be cohesive yet open.

### *Spatial Continuity and Identity*

Through these interventions, the building transforms from a fragmented and changed institutional structure to a unified communal space. The historic entrances are revitalized, the original structural order is respected, the later additions are removed, and new elements are inserted with clarity

The distinction between the interior and exterior space is made continuous rather than divided. The courtyards are no longer leftover spaces but are instead intentional extensions of the building itself. The new bridge brings about a sense of contemporary identity while still being linked to the memory of the original shape.

The total transformation is not intended to erase the past but to instead reinforce what was already there, erase what threatened it, and add new components that enable the building to serve as a relevant space for contemporary use.

### *Redefining the courtyards*

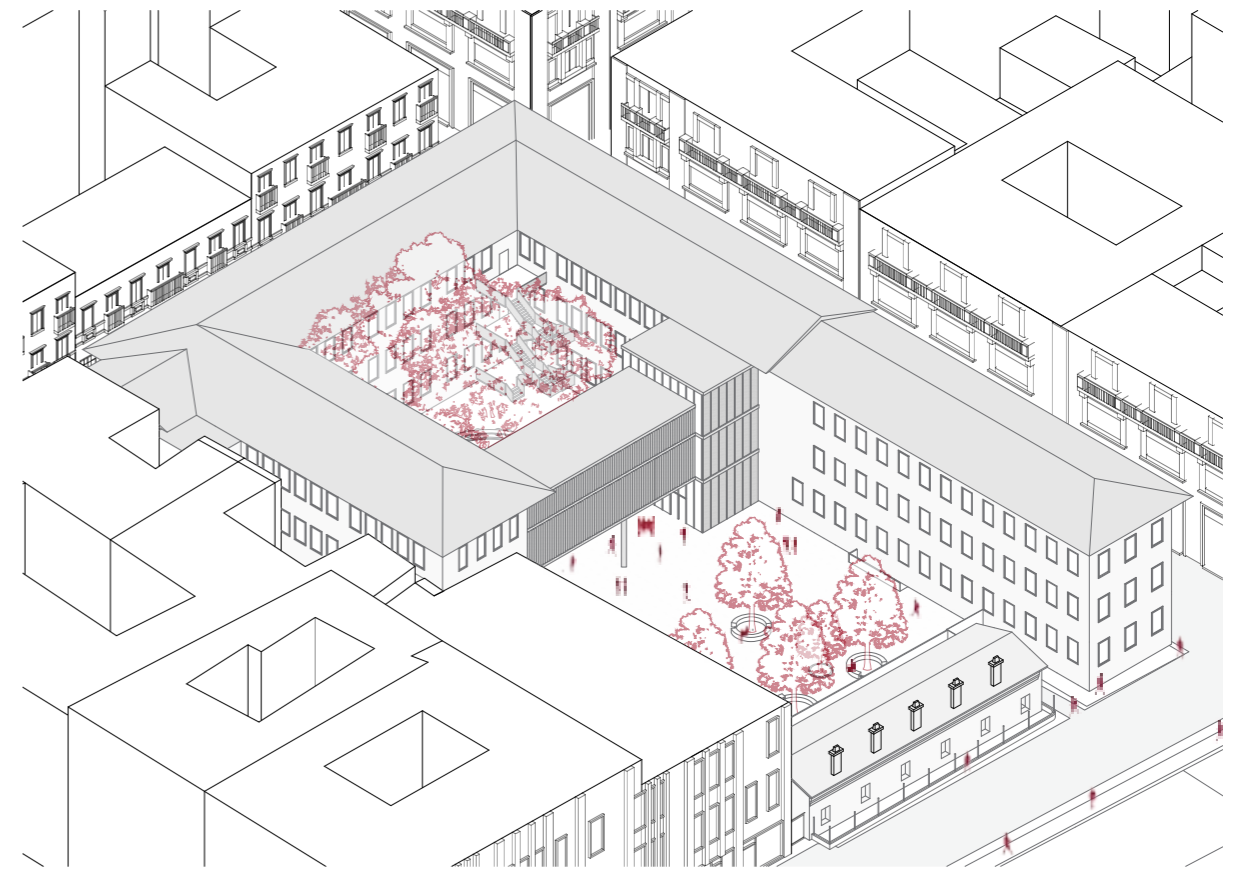
The interior courtyard, which was previously enclosed and underutilized, is now transformed into an active communal space. The existing trees and general spatial organization are preserved to maintain consistency with the current condition. The purpose of the courtyard is completely redefined.

The courtyard, which was previously a closed and passive space, is now utilized as a space for sitting, eating, studying, reading, and socializing. The seating area is provided under the trees, which will allow for flexible usage of the space. By connecting this courtyard with the adjacent open space created through the removal of the central addition, the outdoor area becomes more expansive and breathable.

A small step from the interior courtyard, which led to the entrance of the existing building, is eliminated. Instead, a gentle slope connects the ground levels of the two courtyards more smoothly. This detail enhances accessibility and the spatial flow between the two courtyards.

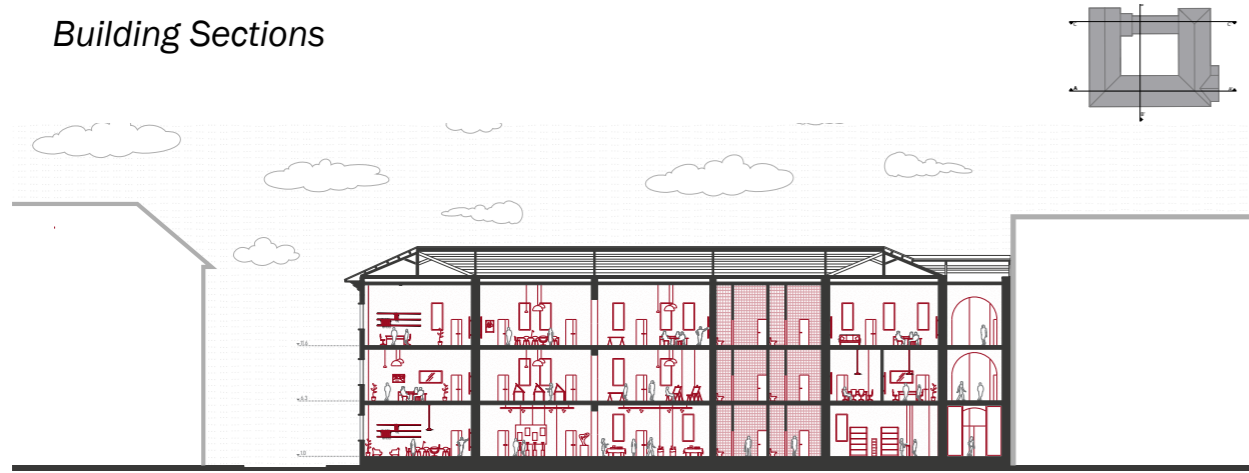
The exterior courtyard adopts the same approach. The existing trees are preserved, and new planting is added. The seating elements are located under the trees, forming shaded areas for gathering. This way, the exterior courtyard is turned into a minimalistic and welcoming transition space that leads to the modern entrance of the building. The result

### *Axonometry*



*Drawing 35: Building axonometry*

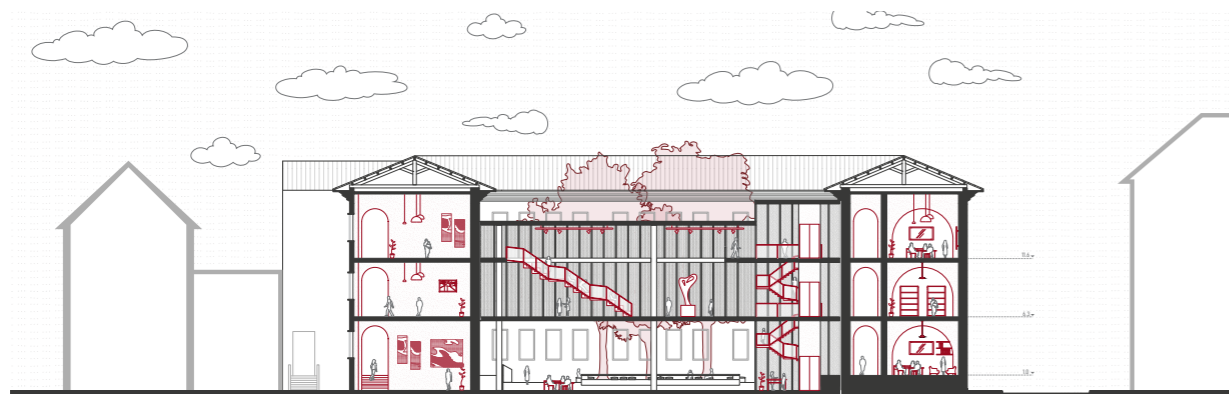
## Building Sections



Drawing 36: Section A-A'



Drawing 37: Section B-B'



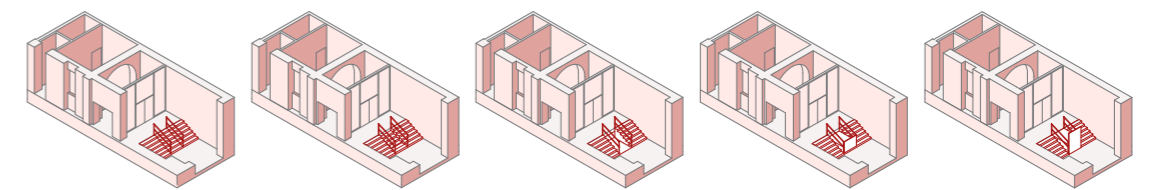
Drawing 38: Section C-C'

## Accessibility and Vertical Circulation

The removal of the central addition altered the structural configuration of the building. The removal of this mass meant that elevators could no longer be placed in the original structure. One of the elevators is therefore added into the new bridge structure, providing vertical access without compromising the historic building fabric.

A second elevator is provided through an extension of the new main entrance. This extension provides for storage needs as well as vertical circulation, addressing accessibility needs while underlining the significance of the new entrance axis. In addition, a new staircase model is installed into the two main historic entrances. The staircase folds into the floor to create a flat surface, to then rise to the ground floor level for accessibility purposes.

The decorative staircase that existed in the school is left intact, retaining its architectural significance. The existing fire escape is relocated within the same region and upgraded to current safety standards while retaining its original logic.



Drawing 39: Accessibility staircase

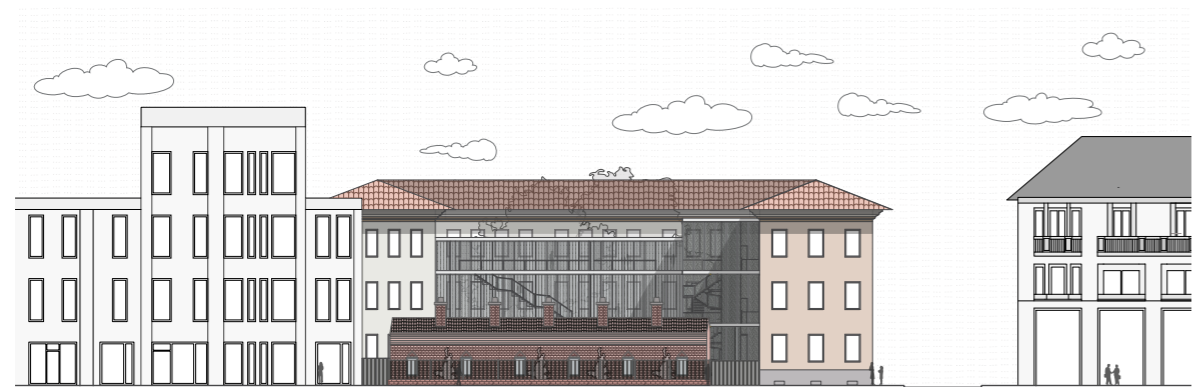
## Building Elevations



Drawing 40: South-West Elevation

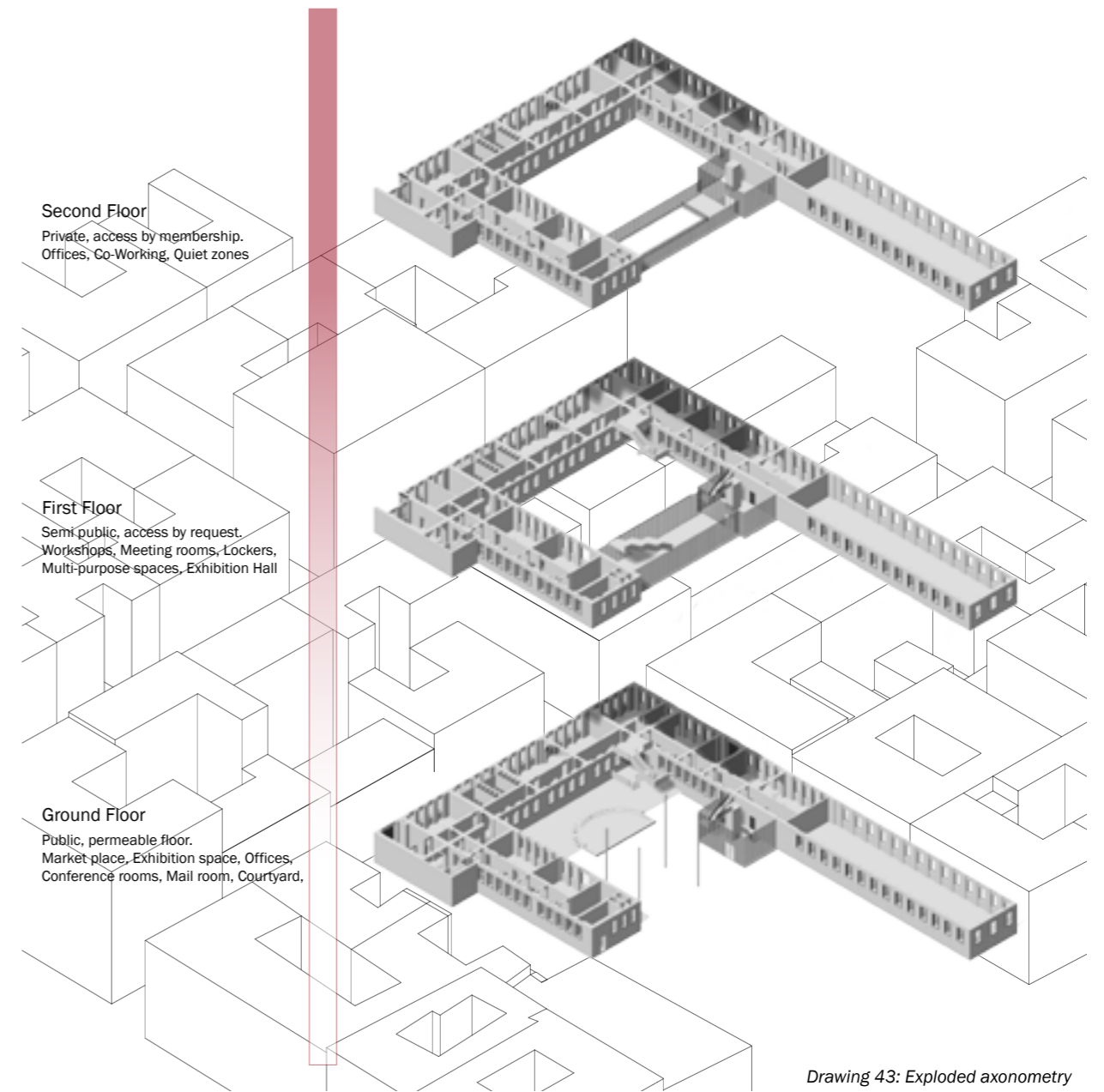


Drawing 41: North-West Elevation



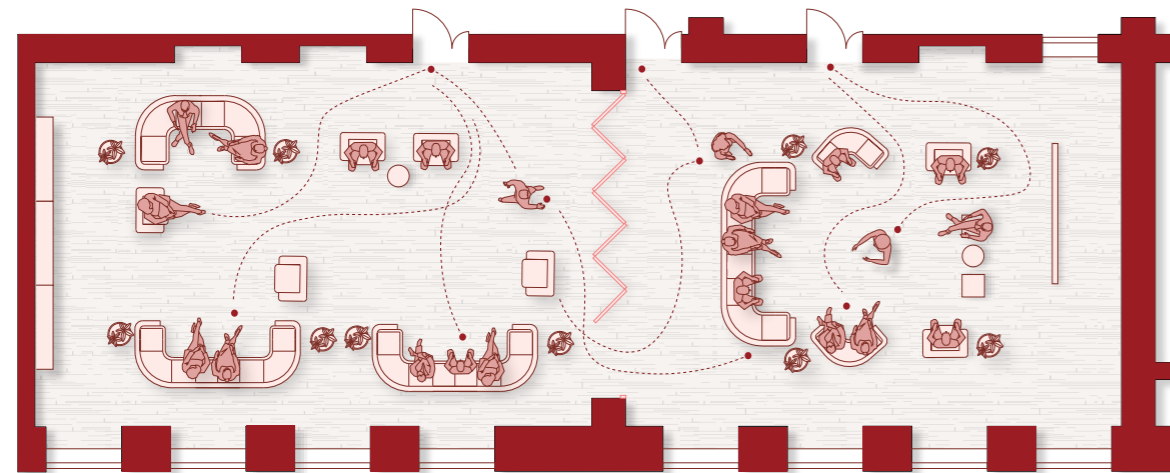
Drawing 42: North-East Elevation

## Program

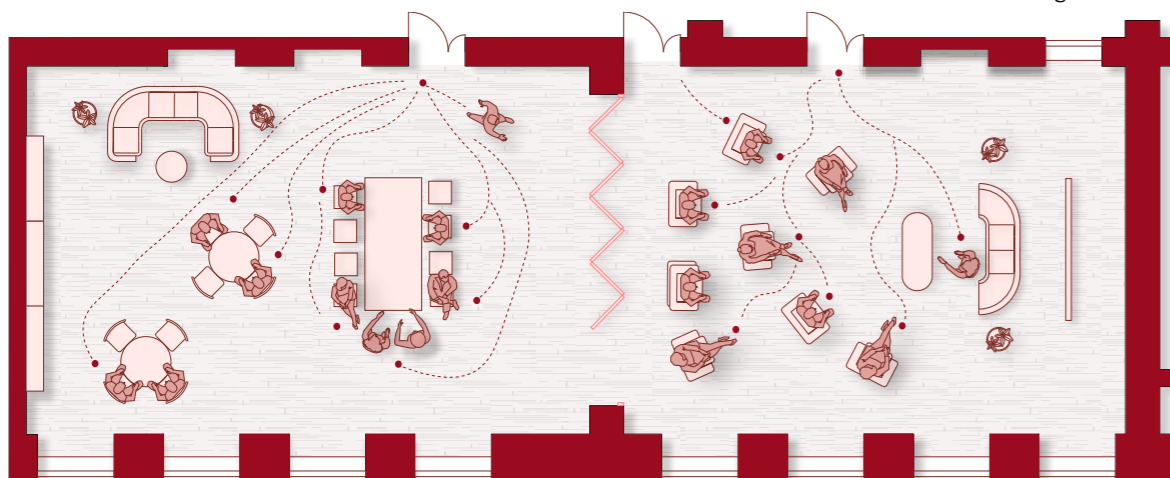


Drawing 43: Exploded axonometry

Close-up Plans & Sections  
Ground Floor

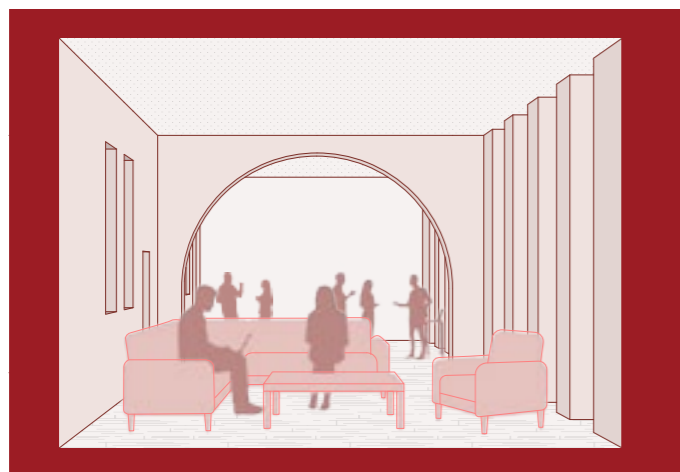


Configuration a

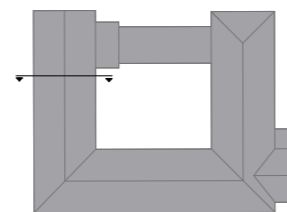


Configuration b

Drawing 44: Close-up plan  
Configuration (a), Configuration (b)



Drawing 45: Close-up section 1

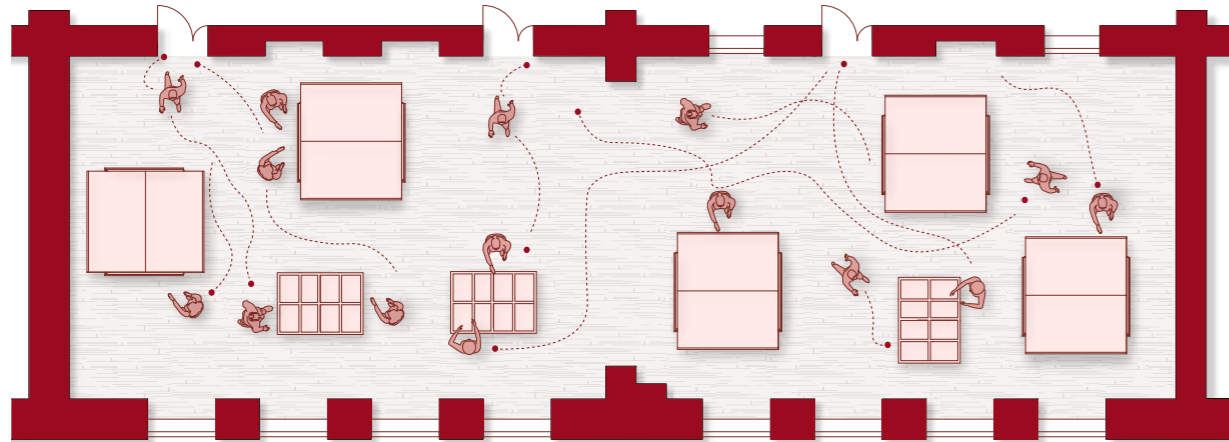


Multi-use Options

The space operates as an open discussion forum, where one half accommodates a circular conversation while the adjacent area remains flexible seating. Visitors may sit, stand, or casually listen, allowing temporary and spontaneous participation. This configuration supports short-term talks, community meetings, and public events.

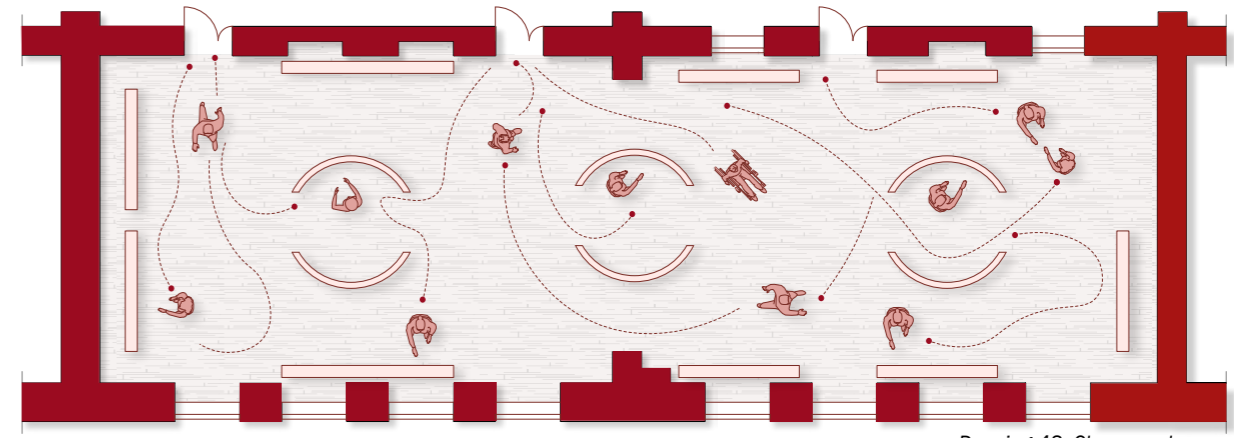
The room can be temporarily occupied by an association for extended use, functioning as both a working office and an event space. One zone supports collaborative work and meetings, while the other accommodates presentations or internal gatherings. The layout allows the association to operate continuously while remaining adaptable for public engagement.

Close-up Plans & Sections  
Ground Floor



Drawing 46: Close-up plan

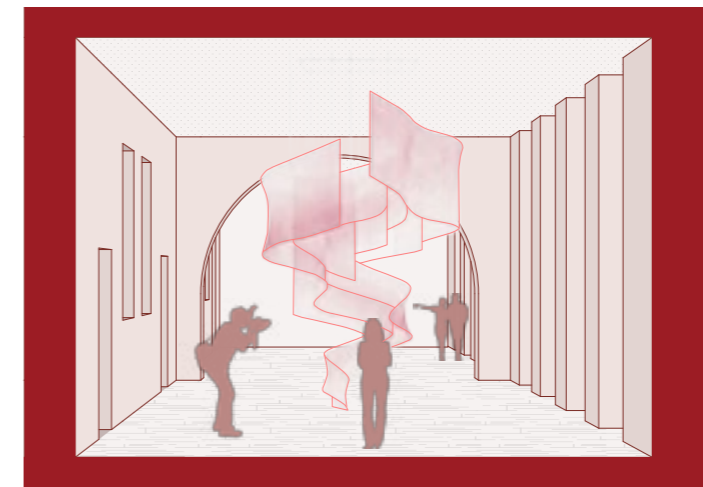
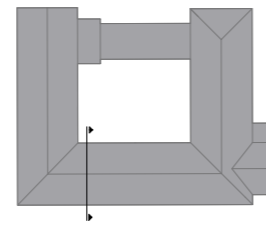
Close-up Plans & Sections  
Ground Floor



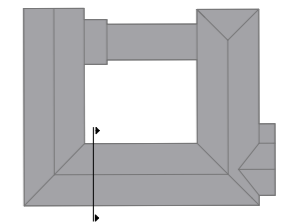
Drawing 48: Close-up plan



Drawing 47: Close-up section 2



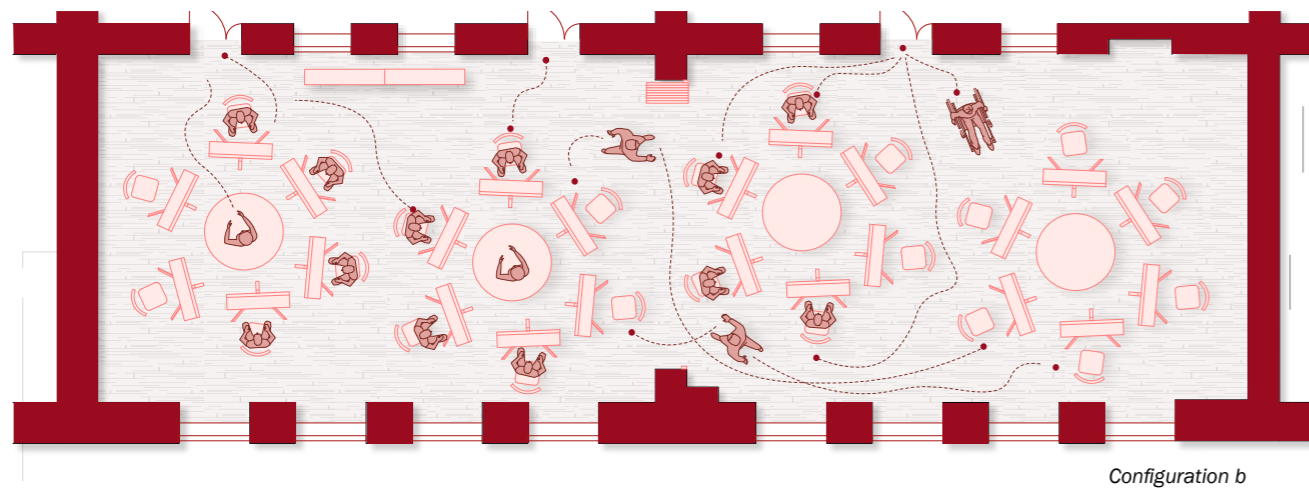
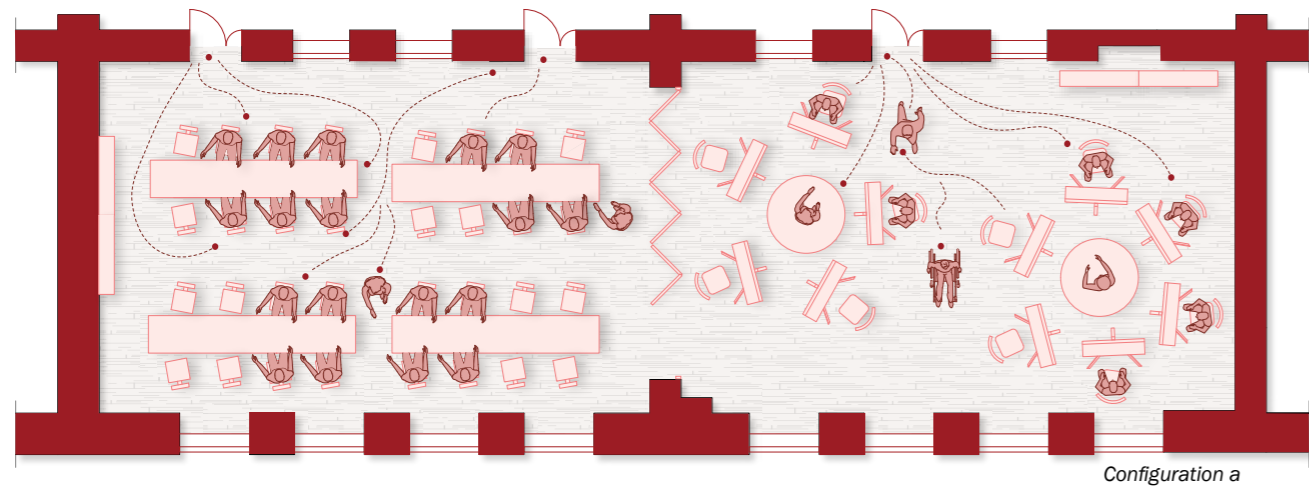
Drawing 49: Close-up section 3



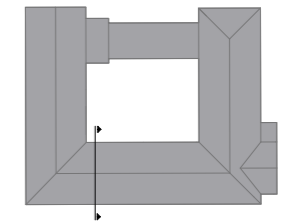
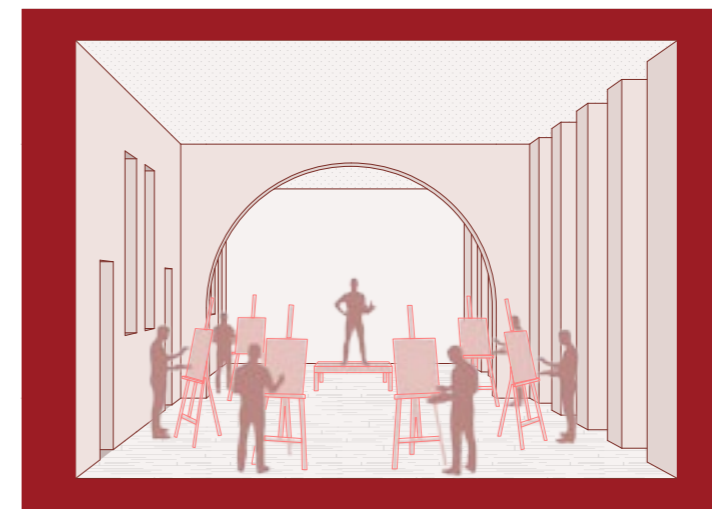
The open floor plan of the space allows for it to be transformed into a large multi-purpose room. In one case, this room can be utilized as a market space, supporting locals that sell their artisanal products.

The flexible nature of the room provides space for cultural or artistic exhibitions. This room allows temporary exhibitions that can be displayed and packed up with ease, leaving the room to shapeshift into another use.

Close-up Plans & Sections  
First Floor

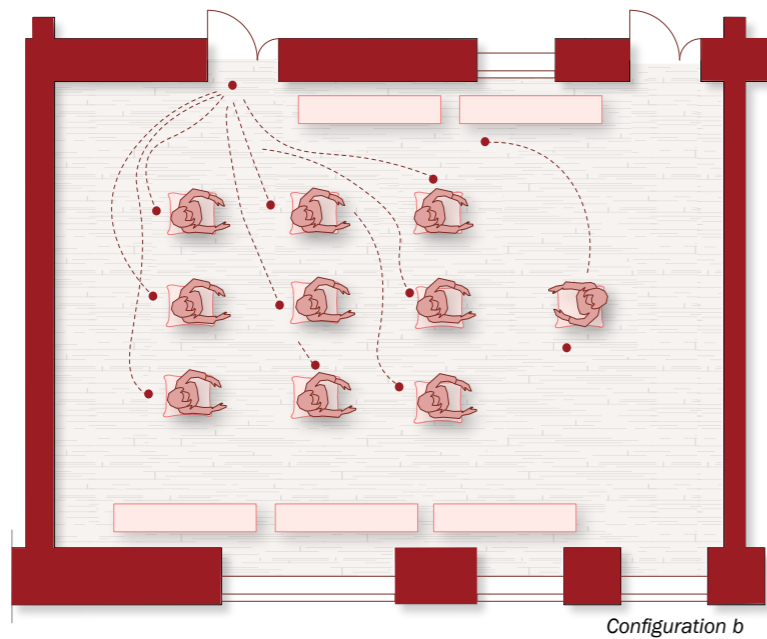
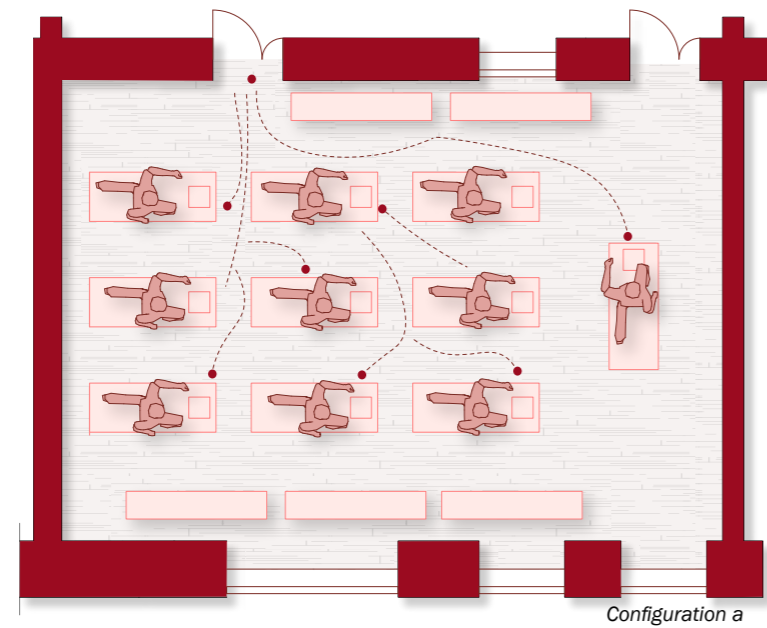


Drawing 50: Close-up plan  
Configuration (a), Configuration (b)

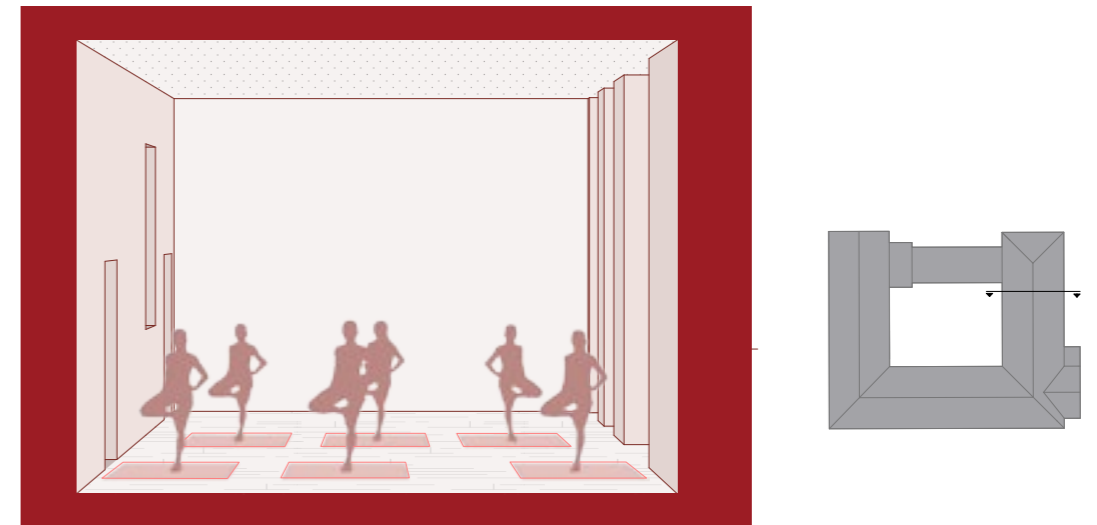


This space hosts workshops that teach various creative activities. Some examples are pottery making, painting. This room, although it's perfectly suitable for workshops with a large group of people, if necessary, allows the room to be divided into two through a temporary partition wall. This allows for the dimension of the room to be flexible as well.

Close-up Plans & Sections  
First Floor

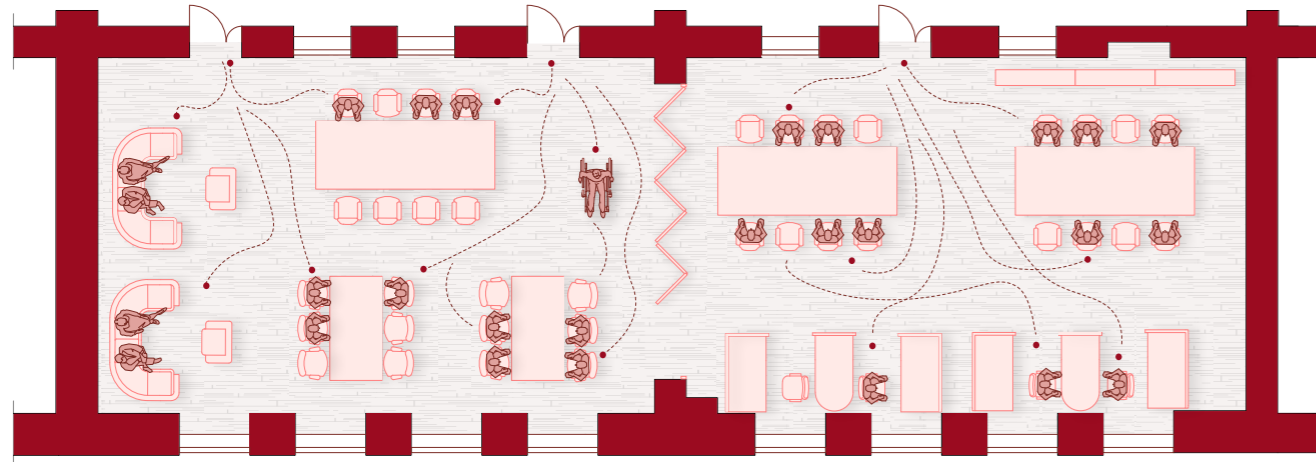


Drawing 52: Close-up plan



This room is mostly dedicated to physical activities. Various physical activities that do not require much equipment can be carried out in this space with ease. It creates a very practical workout space for common visitors of the community centre.

Close-up Plans & Sections  
Second Floor



Drawing 54: Close-up plan



Drawing 55: Close-up section 6

This area is specifically designed for co-working. Members can access this room with or without reserving a space, use it for working individually or with colleagues. This space can be used by both students or young adults who are working remotely. It consists of rearrangeable tables and chairs, suitable for any situation.

Sun Path Analysis  
Solar Strategy and Brise-Soleil System  
Summer



Winter



Drawing 56: Sun path Analysis

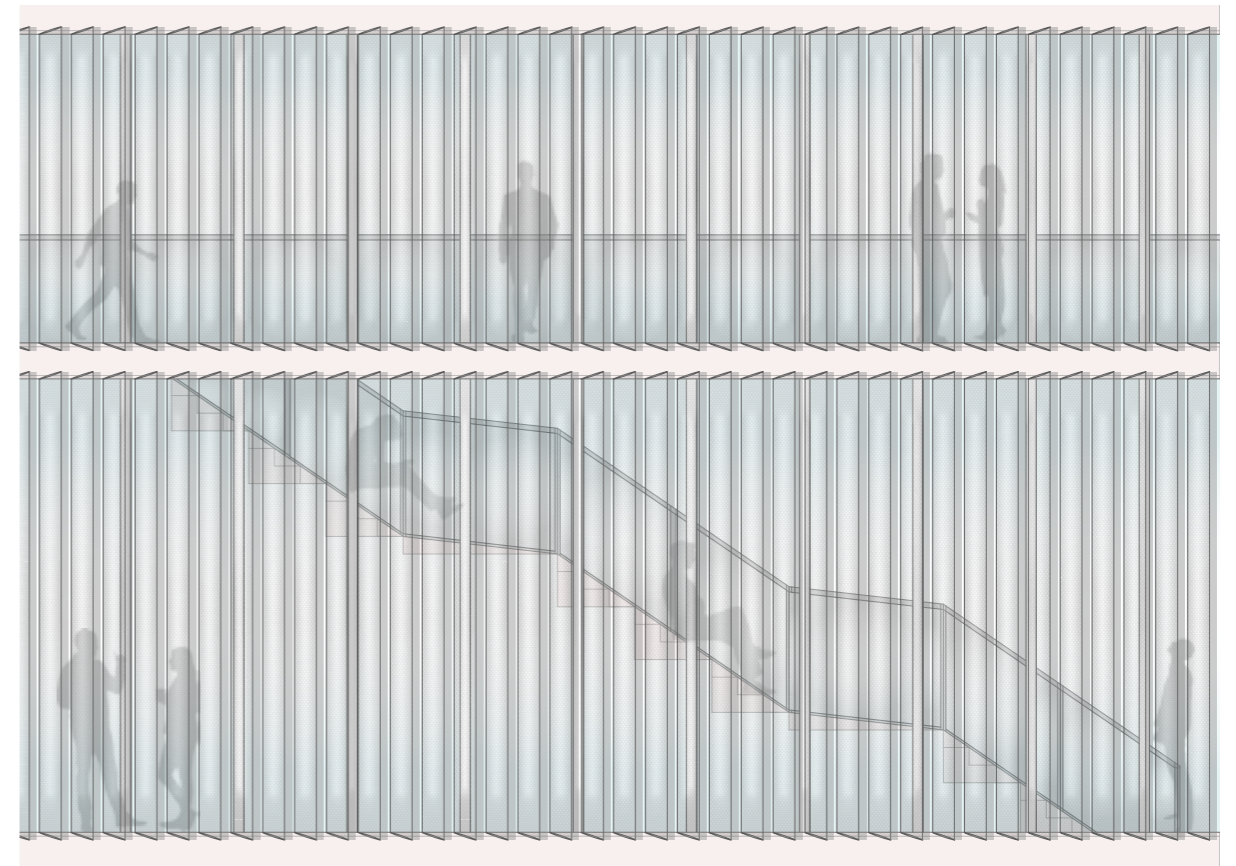
The bridge and tower extensions are designed mainly as glass volumes. Although the transparency of the extensions accentuates their contemporary character and lightness, it also requires careful regulation of solar exposure. The sun path analysis influenced the location and performance of the shading system, which reacts to the changes in sunlight conditions directly.

A brise-soleil system composed of perforated metal panels is added to the façades of the bridge and the external sides of the tower extension. On the bridge, each window is covered with a shading device. These elements take on a compressed oval shape, slightly stretched horizontally, and are linked to turning rods from their center, which are fixed to the extended floor slabs. The system is mechanical, enabling the panels to move according to the position of the sun. The brise-soleil can be fully closed or opened up to an angle of about 45 degrees, which enables the regulation of daylight access throughout the day.

The perforated metal sheets allow filtered light to enter the interior while reducing direct solar gain. This strategy prevents overheating in the glass volumes and ensures that the interior space does not become too warm, while still providing a light-filled environment. The same strategy is adopted for the tower extension, where shading is applied to the exterior-facing façades. The interior-facing façade of the tower, where the entrance is located, is left unobstructed to maintain clarity and transparency at the entrance point.

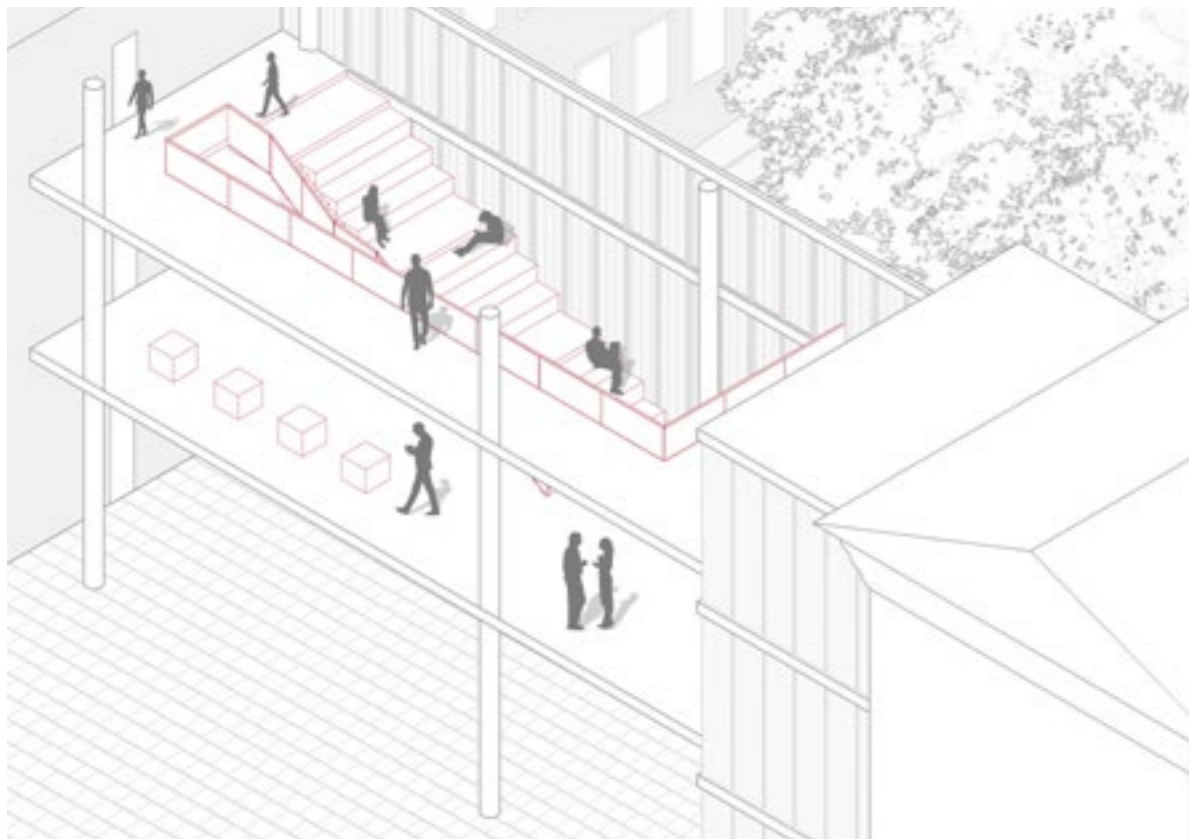
The perforated metal screen also ensures that the lightness of the glass architecture is maintained. Instead of hiding the façade, the screen provides a semi-transparent layer that maintains the desired contemporary appearance. Behind this filtered screen, vertical circulation and seating steps in the bridge are visible from the exterior. The activity of people and the displayed exhibition inside the building become part of the façade composition, enabling the building to express activity while maintaining environmental control.

The brise-soleil system therefore functions not only as a climatic response, but also as an architectural layer that mediates between interior and exterior, solidity and transparency, protection and openness.

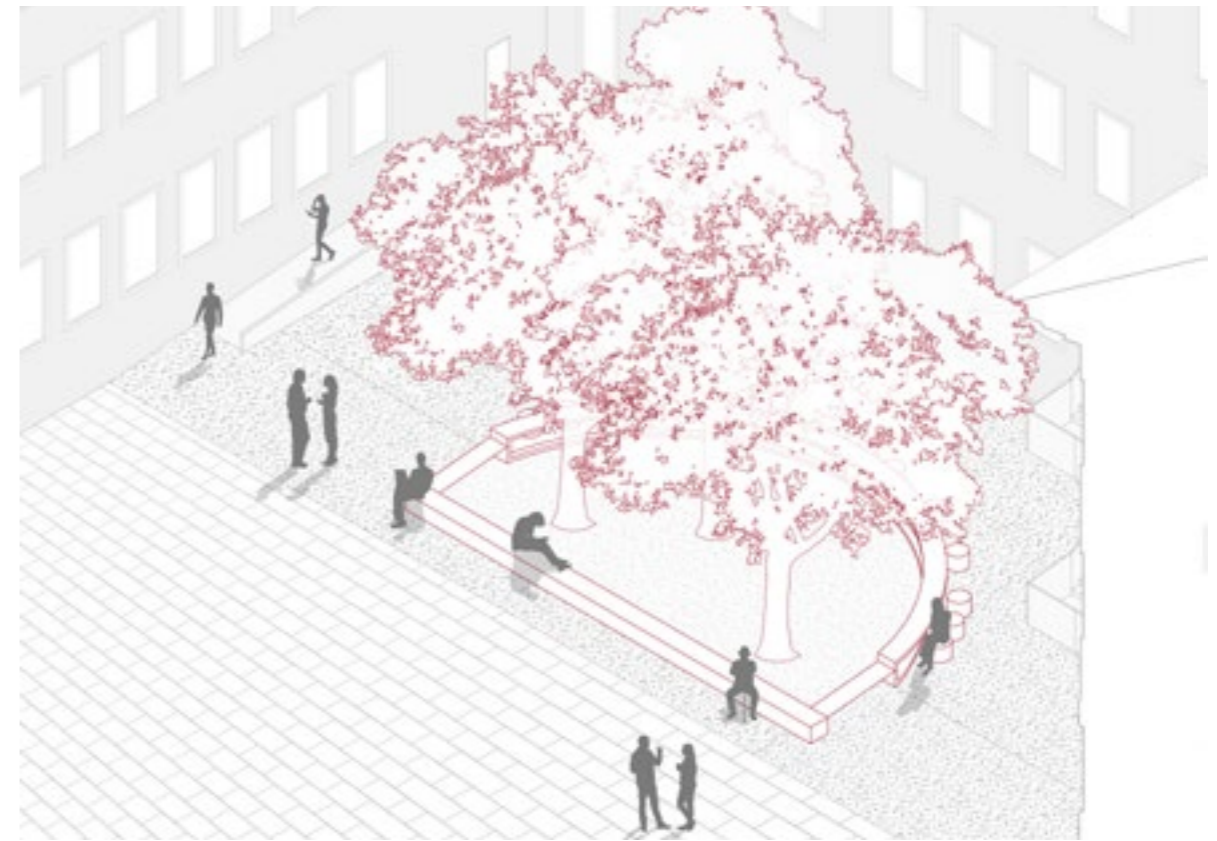


*Drawing 57: Close-up elevation*

Close-Up Views



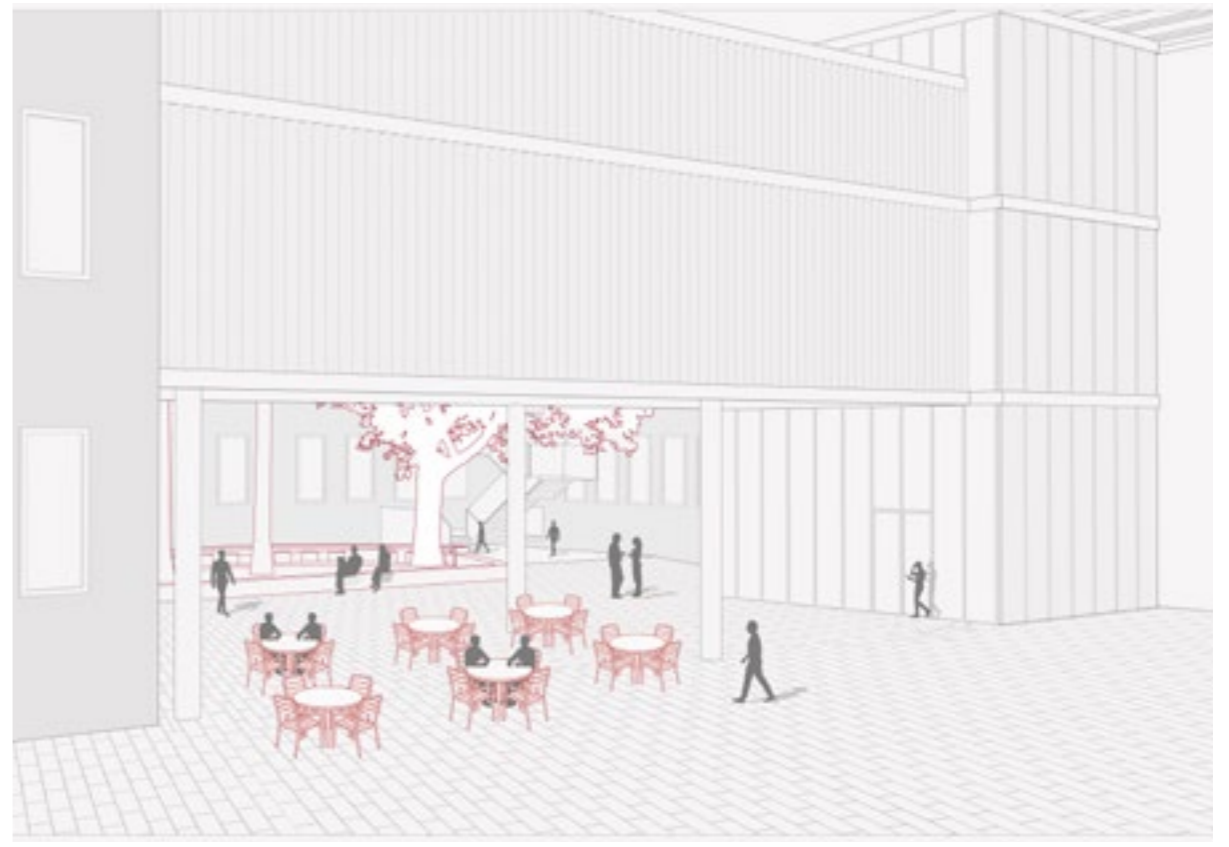
Drawing 58: Partial axonometry, bridge



Drawing 59: Partial axonometry, courtyard



Drawing 60: Partial axonometry, outdoors



Drawing 61: Perspective view, outdoors

Collages



Drawing 62: Market hall



Drawing 63: Co-working



*Drawing 64: Corridor*



*Drawing 65: Bridge*

*Renders*



*Drawing 66: Courtyard*



*Drawing 67: Courtyard Render*



*Drawing 68: Outdoor Render*



*Drawing 69: Bridge Render*

CONCLUSION

The thesis was shaped around a central question: how can historic architecture respond to the evolving spatial, social, and cultural needs of a new generation? Situated within the layered urban fabric of Milan's Lazzaretto, the project explored whether adaptive reuse can function as a transformative architectural strategy to bridge memory with future use, and not only as an act of preservation. The research investigated the relationship between heritage and contemporary collective life to redevelop an elementary school in the Lazzaretto district in Milan into a Gen-Z oriented community space.

Lazzaretto represents a context shaped by historical stratification, urban evolution, and changing social dynamics. Applying an architectural intervention in this district brings along hundreds of years of history. The elementary school building embodies a typology tied to a specific moment in time. Rather than treating this structure as a fixed artifact, the project approached it as an adaptable framework, a canvas that could accommodate new forms of occupation. In doing so, the thesis interprets adaptive reuse not only as nostalgic preservation, but as a negotiation between continuity and evolution.

The research shows that Gen Z's spatial expectations differ significantly from previous generations and the traditional spatial models. This generation requires environments that are flexible, hybrid and inclusive. Digital and physical spaces coexist, work and leisure overlap, and individuality thrives in collective belonging. The design proposal responds to these characteristics by reintroducing the elementary school as a layered community infrastructure, structured through degrees of accessibility and interaction.

The project proposes a tiered access model through a fully public ground floor, a semi-public collaborative first floor, and a more reserved work-oriented second floor. The ground level invites openness and permeability, welcoming all sorts of interaction and education, reinforcing the building's civic presence within the neighbourhood. The first floor supports experimentation, workshops, and creative production. The second floor, on the other hand, hosts spaces for co-working, studying and exchange of ideas. The vertical spatial organization makes space for anybody who requires a space to meet people, learn, work, and wind down.

Most importantly, the project reframes the architect's role and proposes an ideal for how architecture can be perceived. In this proposal, the design process shifted from composition toward mediation. Instead of imposing on the users a predefined program, the proposal hands the opportunity to the potential users through its flexibility, aligning architectural intervention with lived realities. This participatory aspect reinforces the argument that future collective spaces must be co-produced, reflecting the values and needs of those who will inhabit them. Architecture, in this sense, becomes the physical interpretation of society and culture, a cultivator of interaction rather than a static object.

The theory behind this thesis connects the project to bigger conversations happening in architecture. The city is understood as a continuum of memory, where typologies evolve rather than disappear. The structural integrity, material presence and urban alignment of the elementary school is maintained; however, the internal logic is reinterpreted. This approach reinforces the permanence of urban form while adjusting to social change.

Beyond the immediate context of Lazzaretto, the thesis suggests wider implications. Across European cities, numerous institutional buildings face the risk of deterioration due to demographic shifts and changing modes of work. Demolition often appears as a convenient solution, yet it erases embodied history and consumes significant material resources. This project argues instead for adaptive reuse as an ethical and sustainable strategy. By reactivating the historical identities of structures, cities can cultivate new forms of community while preserving urban continuity.

Furthermore, the emphasis on intergenerational exchange highlights a critical urban need. This proposal advocates for shared civic infrastructures where different generations intersect. While designed with Gen Z in focus, the building remains accessible, encouraging dialogue across age, background, and occupation.

Ultimately, the thesis demonstrates that collective space is always redefined through cultural, technological, and social evolution. The concept of adaptive reuse offers a way to pay homage to architectural memory while keeping these structures functional and up to date, enabling future adaptability, reinforcing the idea that historic fabric can support contemporary life without losing its identity.

This project intends to support the conversation of negotiation. Architecture's task is to translate shifting values into spatial form while respecting the urban fabric and continuity of the city. In Lazzaretto of Milan, the project proposes a model in which heritage becomes a platform for flexibility, participation, and collective growth, allowing for future generations to take part in and shape the spaces which they inhabit. It creates an environment that people can choose to visit to satisfy any need; to work, to study, to learn, to relax, or simply to meet people and converse. Through this lens, architecture becomes a dialogue between a city's inherited past and the needs of its future inhabitants.

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