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The Archaeosphere of City Hall Park

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Abstract Modern metropolises are fundamentally reliant on complex subterranean infrastructure networks, yet these vital systems remain physically and psychologically severed from the civic realm by the rigid, constructed threshold of the ground plane. This article examines the concept of the "Archaeosphere"—the hybridized, human-made geological layer containing the accumulated strata of urban history and active infrastructure. Using New York's City Hall Park as a primary case study, this paper investigates the historical suppression of subterranean layers to create a sanitized political surface. By transitioning from horizontal mapping to vertical excavation, the project employs a methodology of threshold thickening, delamination, and topographic manipulation to construct a new civic agora. This intervention reconnects dormant historical strata and active public transit networks with the surface, transforming a nominal monument of power into a highly porous, democratic public domain.

Keywords: City Hall Park, Civic Hub, Infrastructuralism, Subterranean Urbanism, Underground Threshold, Urban Topography.

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1. The Archaeosphere

To understand the trajectory of the built environment, one must first question the physical traces left behind by human civilization. Does contemporary urbanism leave a legible, enduring mark, or do the layers of our metropolitan lives pass into eternity without a memory? Archaeology approaches this inquiry by studying the strata of the earth concealed beneath the ground, stretching back into deep geological time. To effectively frame the latent potential of the modern city, it is necessary to borrow and expand upon the archaeological notion of the Archaeosphere.

The Archaeosphere encompasses all traces of human activity located below the surface, operating simultaneously as a repository of historical memory and a conduit for the active urban environment. Modern metropolises are highly reliant on these underground infrastructures and networks, which are frequently hidden and sometimes entirely forgotten. This vital subterranean realm is cleanly severed by the threshold of the ground—a barrier that disproportionately focuses the attention of the city on the inhabitable upper levels while leaving the underground to utilitarian decay. At the macro-urban scale, the United States is replete with leftover, abandoned spaces that house the dormant traces of forgotten development. The abandoned transit tunnels of Cincinnati (Figure 2), the obsolete subway infrastructure of Rochester (Figure 3), and the myriad of forgotten subterranean spaces across New York City (Figures 4, 5) all serve as evidence of this phenomenon.

Even in the most dense, highly congested downtown areas, the manufactured threshold of the ground actively separates the citizen from a profound subterranean life, revealing that our widely accepted notion of the "ground"

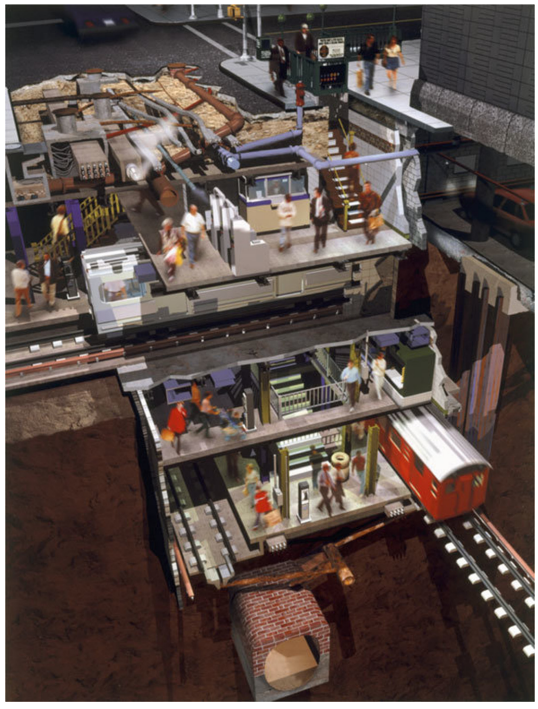
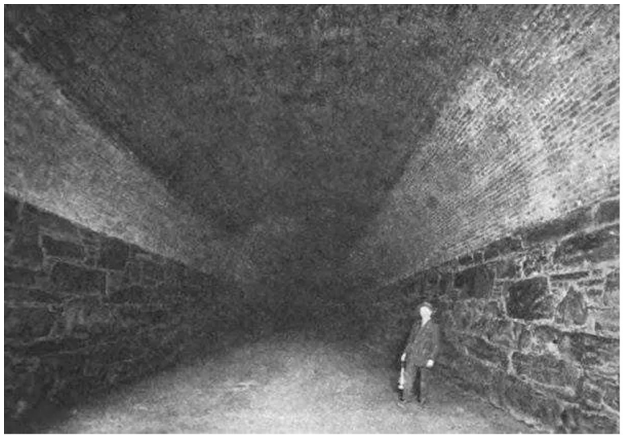


Figure 1. Underground New York by Don Foley for National Geographic (donfoley.com)





Figure 2. Abandoned Transit Tunnels, Cincinnati. Photograph by Chez Chesak, 2018 (left).
Figure 3. Abandoned Subway Station, Rochester. Historical Image (right).



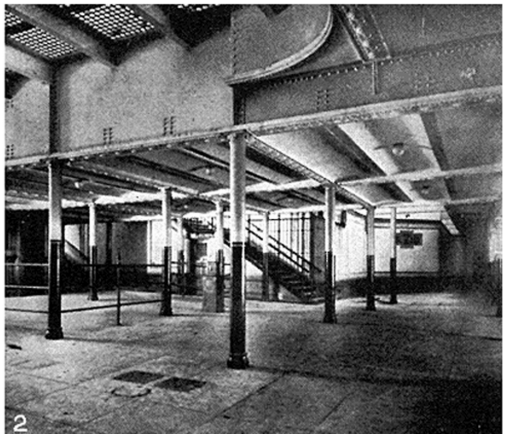


Figure 4. Atlantic Avenue Tunnel. Photograph taken during an FBI investigation in 1916 (left).
Figure 5. 18th St. Station, New York. Photograph by Joseph Brennan, 2001 (right).

is largely an ideological construct (Figure 6). The archaeosphere in these sites holds a spatial and historical density that far exceeds what is permitted to exist on the modern surface.

2. City Hall Park

City Hall Park in Lower Manhattan perfectly exemplifies this urban detachment, serving as the primary site for this

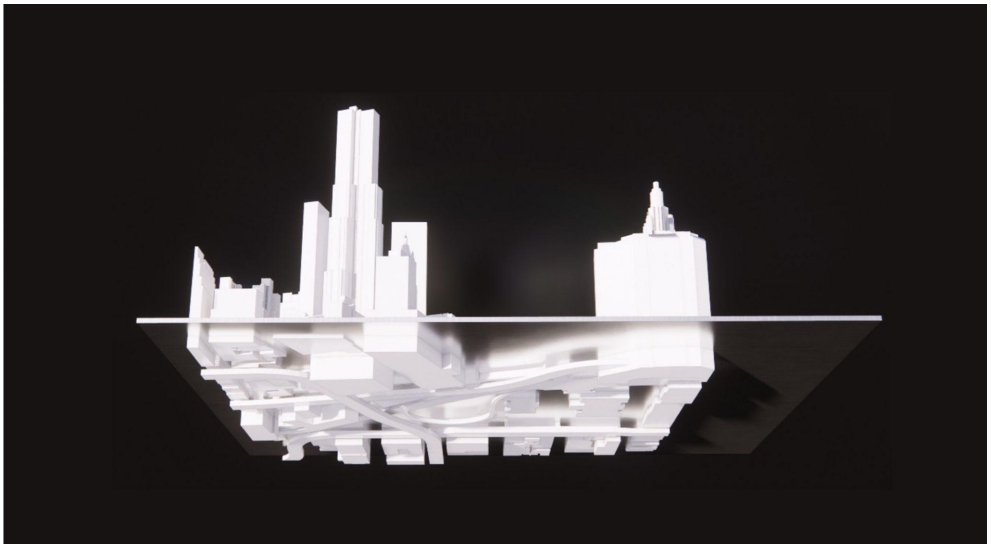


Figure 6. Threshold Barrier Model. A representation of the ground threshold acting as a barrier between the surface world and the subterranean infrastructure below New York.



Figure 7. Aerial view of City Hall Park, 1952. Photograph by Angelo Rizzuto.

design investigation (Figure 7). Approaching the park from the Financial District at the southern tip of Manhattan, visitors are greeted by a stone medallion with an optimistic mandate: "It must not be forgotten that the park is still the refuge of the people, the cradle of liberty."

While it is inspiring to see such an optimistic statement regarding the power of space and the potential of the public realm, the actual physical state of the park fails to live up to these ideals. Although it is presented as a "refuge" for the people, the park's greenery is heavily restricted and fully fenced. As a "cradle of liberty," the site manifests the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the way modern political discourse is framed. The nominal architecture of City Hall, representing municipal power, is deployed flatly upon the ground plane and walled off from the citizens. This condition expresses, on a strictly physical level, the protected and impenetrable hierarchies of power.

This sanitized condition has not always been the reality of the site. If one looks back in time to the prehistoric state of the land, one finds a natural, undulating Manhattan inhabited by the Lenape people and characterized by diverse flora and fauna (Figure 8,9). While it is easy to assume this primordial state is irreversibly lost, the remnants of the past are merely buried. Following the Lenape, the initial Dutch settlements were paved over and lost to the naked eye. The first cow pens from when the site operated as common land, and the remains of the almshouse that was eventually built over by the Tweed Courthouse, did not disappear. These historical artifacts are lying dormant within the geological layers of the ground, intrinsically embedded in the archaeosphere of City Hall Park. The hills and valleys visible on historical maps have been forcibly leveled into a thin, compliant surface.

To accurately describe the archaeosphere of City Hall Park, one must recognize its highly stratified nature (Figure 10). On the top surface, it plays an important civic role: it functions as a vital green pause within the dense urban texture of the Financial District. Surrounded by skyscrapers from different eras, it acts as a primary vestibule, receiving pedestrian flows descending from the Brooklyn Bridge and meeting the currents of people moving north. It is a highly manicured environment where every tree is cataloged and carefully maintained.



Figure 8. "Welikia" Map of Manhattan, 1609 (left).
Figure 9. Satellite View of Manhattan, 2025 (right).



Figure 10. City Hall Park Urban Condition Scheme.

However, immediately below this thin crust lies a highly active, congested artery of the city. Beneath the archaeological treasures operate four major subway lines, alongside the active Brooklyn Bridge station and the historic, currently unused City Hall Loop station. Currently, City Hall Park and the Tweed Courthouse sit atop a fragile, fenced surface that entirely conceals this active infrastructure, and the centuries-old history lying beneath our feet.

The practice of layering the ground with new artificial strata is not new; it is an inherently natural process for New York City. The island's shoreline is significantly broader today because it covers centuries of construction debris; Freshkills Park emerged as a monumental hill situated over a landfill; and Governors Island was expanded via a manufactured surface built over its original base. Consequently, mapping the current state of City Hall Park requires analyzing the site as a vertical palimpsest. Becoming aware of these vertical layers is the critical first step in giving the site its polyphonic voice.

4. Drifting through Archaeosphere

Figure 11. Drifting Through the Archaeosphere. Left: Elizabeth Reynolds, Underground Urbanism (2020). Right: Collaged adaptation referring to James Corner's concept of "drifting."

To engage this palimpsest, this intervention shifts the theoretical lens of urban mapping. In The Agency of Mapping, James Corner discusses the concept of "drifting" through a space to reinterpret the city. However, rather than drifting horizontally across the city's surface, this project proposes a vertical drift through the archaeosphere (Figure 11). This verticality encompasses multiple historical eras, forgotten pasts, and infrastructure, re-envisioning how the public interacts with the present. Building on Corner's concepts, this design framework provides an opportunity to look at the urban palimpsest differently by drifting downward through the geological and infrastructural strata.

To execute this vertical drift, the intervention employs a specific set of architectural operations: Threshold Thickening, Delamination, Constructing a New Topography, and Adding Strategic Openings (Figure 12).

5. Ground Operations

Threshold Thickening: The initial gesture reimagines the threshold from an impermeable, thin surface that detaches the underground from the city, into a distinctive space of reciprocity (Figure 13). This new realm acknowledges both

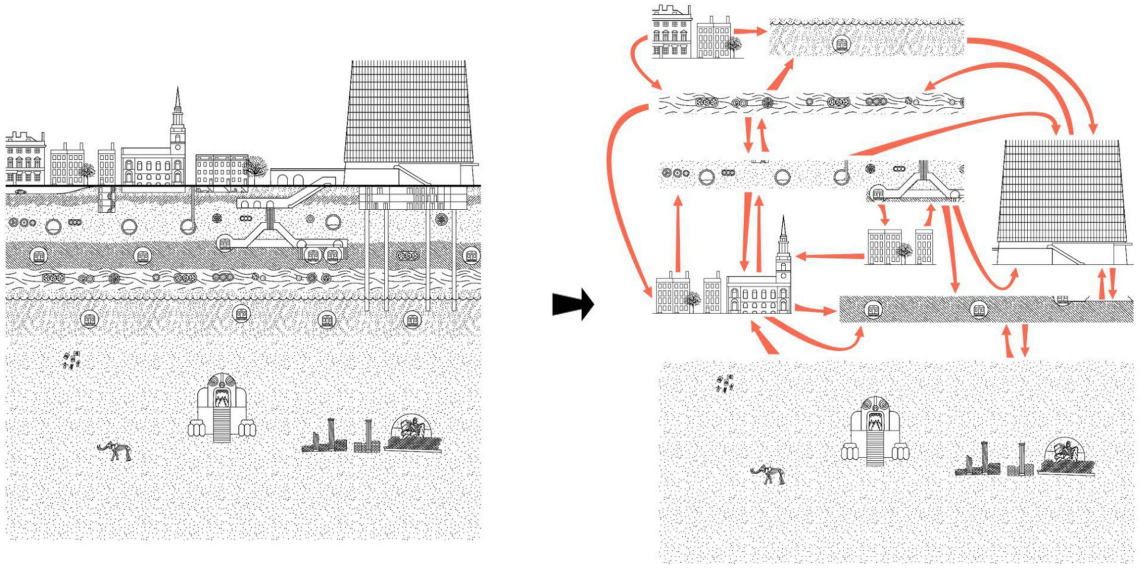


Figure 11. Drifting Through the Archaeosphere. Left: Elizabeth Reynolds, Underground Urbanism (2020). Right: Collaged adaptation referring to James Corner's concept of "drifting."



Figure 12. Architectural Operations: Threshold Thickening, Delamination, Constructing New Topography, and Adding Strategic Openings.

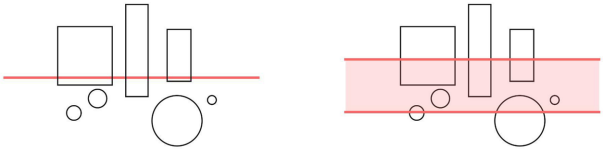


Figure 13. Threshold Thickening Scheme.

states simultaneously. By thickening the threshold, formerly separated subjects are forced to clash within a single spatial volume. Pristine municipal architecture intersects with forgotten maintenance pipes; contemporary skyscrapers are juxtaposed against the buried artifacts of the past.

Delamination: The archaeosphere is composed of interdependent layers, all of which play a role in the life of the urban environment. While architectural monumentality is traditionally driven by addition this project is equally driven by the subtractive process of delaminating extraction. By delaminating the layers of the ground, the dormant physical history is exposed, allowing distinct geological strata to reveal different temporal eras. As a physical volume in space, this excavation works as a sunken amphitheater (Figure 14); it brings people together, orienting them towards each other while granting access to subterranean depths previously unviewed.

Constructing the Civic Hill: Constructing the Civic Hill:

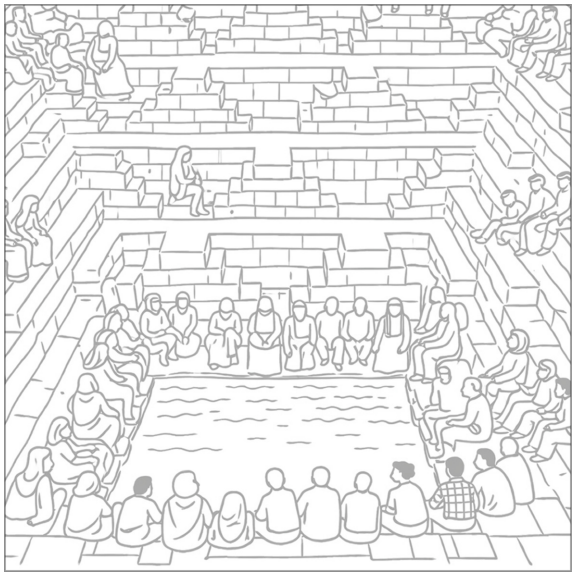


Figure 14. Delamination Example. Illustrating how delamination could lead to the shape of a sunken amphitheater.



Figure 15. Constructing a Civic Hill. Topographic manipulation to establish new vantage points.



Figure 16. Strategic Openings. Derived from the subtractive architectural art practice of Gordon Matta-Clark.

Historically, settlers covered the past with earth to establish a new reality. In this intervention, the displacement of earth is utilized to reimagine the political condition. Instead of relying on a peak, steeple, or tower to signify established power, a constructed hill provides the public with the high

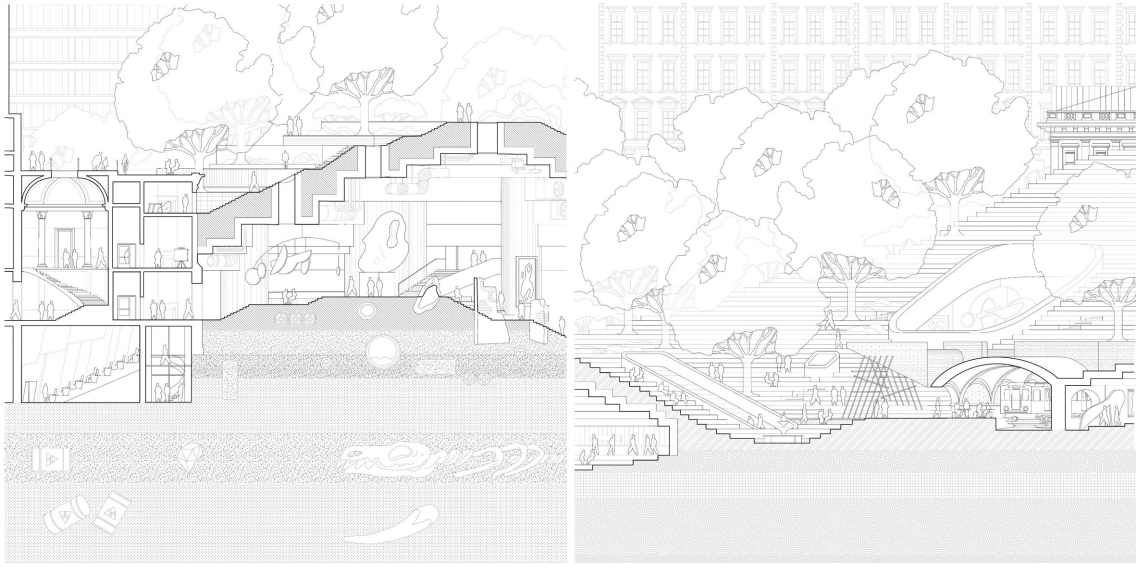


Figure 17. Sections. Section through City Hall and Section through the City Hall Station.



Figure 18. Proposed Plan of City Hall Park (left).
Figure 19. Cut-away Plan of the Threshold Space Below City Hall Park (right).

ground as a literal point of view (Figure 15). The terraced slope creates a new political stage, elevating the public's presence into direct view. Because City Hall Park is a highly politically charged site, this topographic manipulation serves as a critical spatial arena for public assembly and civic agency.

Strategic Openings: Strategic Openings: The introduction of profound structural openings alludes to the subtractive act of cutting through existing structures, drawing a direct lineage to the works of Gordon Matta-Clark (Figure 16). In this context, these precisely carved apertures allow both natural light and physical bodies to travel through the thickened threshold space, illuminating the deep layers of the site.

6. The New Agora

By deploying this specific set of tools, the palimpsest of the site receives a new life, simultaneously breathing new vitality into all its forgotten layers. The final design proposal preserves all existing trees, saving the site's crucial function as a park in the heart of the city while fundamentally altering the ground beneath them.

The park operates simultaneously as a stage for people to gather in the amphitheater pits, and as an opportunity to climb to previously inaccessible heights on the newly created hill. Most crucially, this delamination opens up the historically abandoned City Hall subway station. Rather than remaining a dormant, forgotten relic, the station is

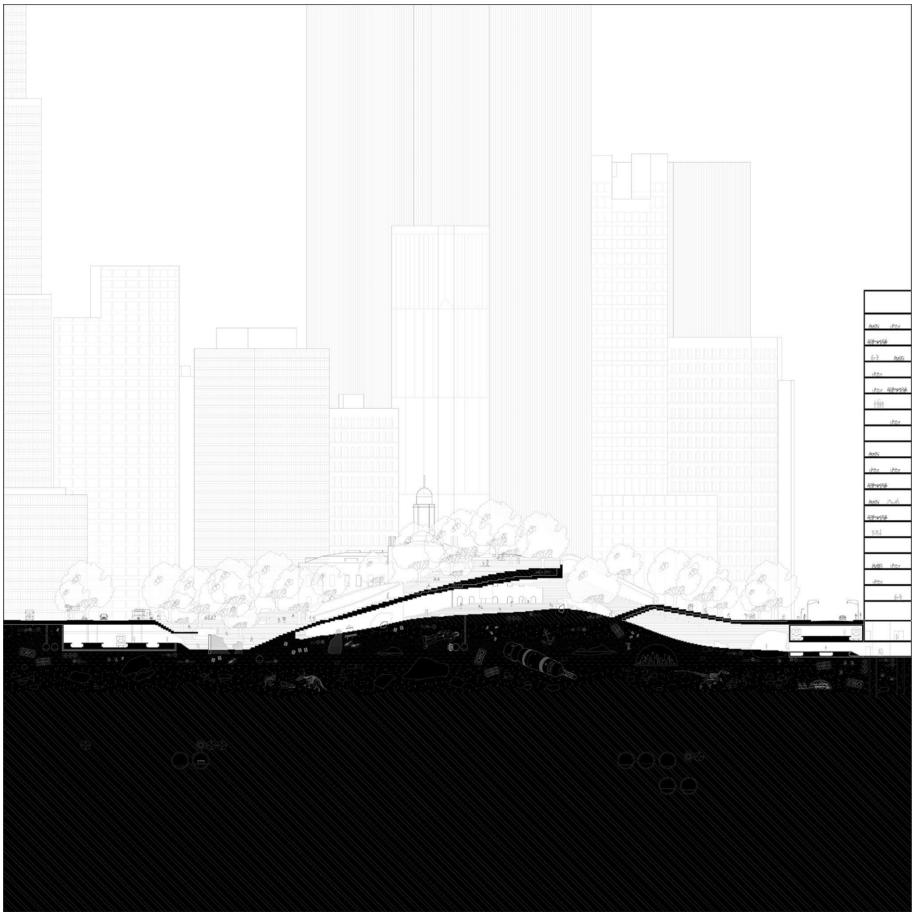


Figure 20. Section Through City Hall Park.



Figure 21. Proposed City Hall Park. Detail with the excavated City Hall Station (left).
Figure 22. Interior of the Threshold Space (right).

reactivated as a highly visible, dynamic actor within the urban space. The cascade slope of the hill flows down into this space, functioning permanently as a civic stage for the metropolis.

As a unified whole, the newly thickened threshold physically and visually connects to the active subway stations adjacent to the site, bringing public transportation out of the utilitarian underground backroom and into the

civic foreground. Furthermore, this intervention strategically links the abandoned tunnel levels with the underground floors and basements of adjacent skyscrapers,. This creates an expansive, continuous subterranean network, opening up an entirely new, interconnected horizon for the public realm.

7. Conclusion

Through these interventions, the threshold space fulfills its original promise as a true cradle of liberty—a City Hall for the citizens. It is a space where the utilitarian systems that maintain the city clash with the architecture of power and the delaminated, buried past. In this activated palimpsest, a new spatial condition emerges, allowing citizens to interact with and truly live within their city.

The City Hall building is thereby absorbed into the public domain, and the buried history of the archaeosphere transforms from an invisible artifact into an active device for the production of the future. By intertwining topography with historical memory, public transportation, and the broader urban context, the forgotten past is reused and brought back into daily life. This is what a City Hall—conceived as a hall for the city—can truly be.

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