



Henrietta Street



Vernacular styles develop in specific times and specific places in response to specific conditions that a people are faced with. In the case of Charleston, that vernacular style is the Charleston single house. Developed in the 18th century to mitigate the unpleasantness of hot, humid Charleston summers, the single house is the dominant urban housing form in Charleston. Even cities as historic as Charleston will grow and add to their architectural histories, and those additions need not simply be replicas of a past style for sake of blending in. As the world advanced and technologies improved the quality of life, some technologies become obsolete, including technology that is architectural form. The Charleston single house in the modern world no longer operates as it was designed. Designed to shade the windows and allow breezes to cool the inside, the piazzas of the single house are now just a pleasant luxury no longer appreciated for their once-innovative design. The space they occupy is valuable real estate and in some cases is being closed off to provide air conditioned square footage for residents. For a site in the heart of downtown Charleston in the shadow of one of the city's tallest buildings--a piece of Modernist architecture deriving influences from the city in which it lives--the historic vernacular style is not the answer. For the development of this 2.77-acre site, historic vernacular forms are cited as influences with abstraction of the forms and re-thinking of the ideas behind them being the driving influence. Reinstating the long, narrow subdivision of the Charleston block would fail to exploit what is a tremendous opportunity to build a new, open development inside a standard city block. Rather than closing the block with the urban street wall of single house facades and driveways in a continuous rhythm, that rhythm can be altered and allow for a more dense urban community at the scale of Charleston right in the heart of an historic neighborhood. Through creative design and planning, 44 residential units are achieved versus only 30 that would be achieved through traditional subdivision of the block and densities prescribed by zoning. In addition to increased density of people, a public green space at the heart of the development gives life to the interior of a block not experienced in Charleston and should be a treasured space for the new residents.



Charleston, South Carolina.

**Do Not Duplicate:**

how the walls between preservation, modern architecture, intelligent urbanism, and sustainable design can be eroded to create high design in a historic urban context.

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arch 497  
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Image: Juxtaposition of modern infrastructure components on historic fabric, part of a 2005 exhibition at the Clemson Architecture Center in Charleston.

**-foreword-**

Mayor Joe Riley said that historic preservation was the most important architectural movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have yet to come to terms with that statement but must say that my views on the matter have evolved substantially since I was first able to question the purpose and the practice of the preservationists I encountered. This quote from the renowned architect and professor W.G. Clark puts quite succinctly his thoughts, which I feel mirror my own.

“Frankly, I think there are constitutional issues. I worry about someone telling a property owner what his gate should look like – I don’t care whether it’s tasteful or not. I don’t think this kind of review is part of our country’s sensibility, and so I’m forever at odds with it.”<sup>1</sup> – WG Clark

As design students, we are rarely if ever handed a project statement with requirements for the demolition or preservation of an existing historic building. Often times vernacular styles become research lost in a notebook and fail to reach the level of knowledge or become acknowledged in our design projects.

This project is about what can happen when design embraces vernacular (or doesn’t) and what it means to build in a place that is controlled the preservation movement. The university from which I received my undergraduate degree in Architecture embraces what Charleston has done for itself, the state and the world and sought to construct a new building for its branch program.

This was said about the results of the competition—the winning W.G. Clark proposal in particular—which I think is true and encouraging for architects, urban designers, preservationists, city officials and residents alike:

“Increasingly the **WALLS** between preservation, **MODERN ARCHITECTURE**, intelligent **urbanism**, and **sustainable design** are coming down.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maybank, Jane. “Progressive Preservation.” *Metropolis*, Sept 1997: 30-35.

<sup>2</sup> Broke, Alan G. “Clemson Architecture Goes Off Campus: A New Branch Program in Charleston.” *Competitions*, Summer 2005: 54-57.

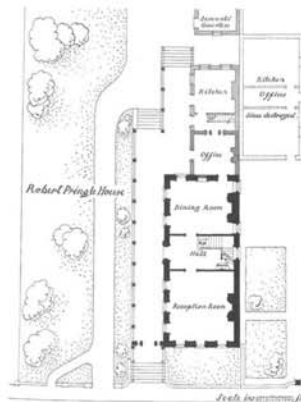
“The old Charleston was built in the image of a golden past. Early Colonists patterned the settlement on memories of Old World splendor, and forged it with local materials: cypress hewn from feverish swamps, bricks and tile made from rust-red clay.”<sup>1</sup>

**The vernacular of Charleston is not symbolized by a singular style or a particular building type but a collection of styles** (Adamesque, Greek Revival, Federal, Italianate, stately Antebellum) **and ingenious adaptation and interpretation of familiar forms to fit a new situation.**

However, the “most inventive contribution was the use of classic European elements to create a structure suited to life in a sun-beaten Colonial port—the single house, most with two or three stories, made from brick, stucco, and wood.”<sup>1</sup> The single house became “the urban house form most closely associated with the historic fabric of Charleston. The essential characteristics of the single house, according to its most meticulous student, Gene Waddell, are ‘two or more stories of the same plan with a central stair hall between two rooms on each floor and an entrance opening directly into the hall.’ Waddell continues: ‘A Charleston Single House is a separate, multi-story dwelling one room wide and three across including a central entrance and stair hall. It also typically, but not necessarily, has its narrow end to the street, a piazza along one of its longer sides, and back wall chimneys.’

Ken Severens offers the most commonly cited rationalization for the single house: ‘the single house was a creative response to the increasing scarcity of space in the city and was designed to mitigate the unpleasantness of hot, humid summers. With its narrow side directly on the street, the rectangular house with two rooms in each story grew tall to raise the main entertaining room to the level of the prevailing breeze which passed through the side piazza. As a free-standing house communicating more with a side garden than with the street the single house offered a masterful but still vernacular solution to the residential problems of achieving comfort, privacy and propriety.’<sup>3</sup>

“...in Charleston persons vie with one another, not who shall have the finest, but who the coolest house.”<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Poston, Jonathan H. 1997. *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture*. University of South Carolina Press, November.

<sup>4</sup> Severens, Kenneth. 1982. *Southern Architecture: 350 Years of Distinctive American Buildings*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

A clue to the invaluable beauty that was created by such a natural blend of styles and unique building forms is the fact that 31 years into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Charleston established America’s first municipal preservation ordinance, establishing the Old and Historic Charleston District to protect ‘the qualities which preserve property values and attract tourists and residents alike.’

In 1947, the Historic Charleston Foundation was established. These days the foundation has “a revolving fund to buy and resell historic properties with covenants to protect as many buildings as possible while maintaining the city as a place to live and work—not a museum.” This is the approach that I believe will be most successful in garnering support for preservation as well as enhancing the quality of new construction on the peninsula. Architects that embrace the varying historic styles of Charleston as the threads in a cohesive urban fabric are more apt to succeed in properly replicating, simply acknowledging, or only abstractly alluding to any specific style. The unique architectural forms of Charleston need also be embraced—especially the single house as it dominates much of the beautiful streetscape that gives the town its charm.

The following projects will all reference Charleston’s vernacular styles and forms through various means and to varying degrees. Not all are examples of urban planning, urban design, architectural design, or historic preservation gone right. In fact, projects that show the shortcomings of historic preservation requirements, poor urban design and shoddy architectural work are included to show that even a movement as large and important as preservation requires mistakes to be learned from.

Projects of residential, civic, and institutional functions are included to show that good design grounded in the principles of preservation, modern architecture, intelligent urbanism, and sustainable design is possible at all scales and should be the goal of all architects operating in a setting with such strong ties to its past and such a bright future.



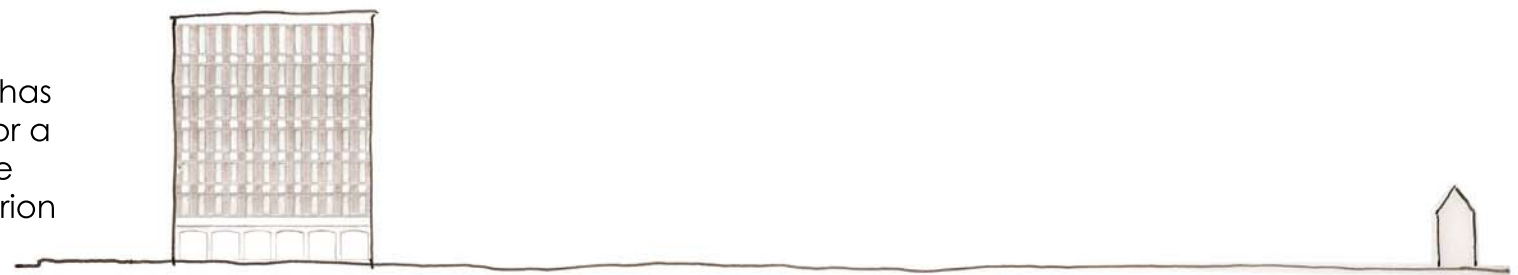
By the close of the eighteenth century the single house had triumphed as the preferred form for Charleston’s urban housing. “As the city grew, more modest versions of the single-house were built by small business owners, immigrants, and the working poor. In such neighborhoods, one saw the narrow end of buildings and intermittent tropical gardens – lush deep emerald, alternating up and down either side of the public way – a uniquely Charlestonian street rhythm.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tung, Anthony M. “Will Charleston get it right? An ambitious, holistic plan to revitalize the South Carolina city may set a new standard in urban redevelopment.” *World Monuments Icon*, Spring 2005: 26-31.



existing site at 334 Meeting St, Charleston, South Carolina

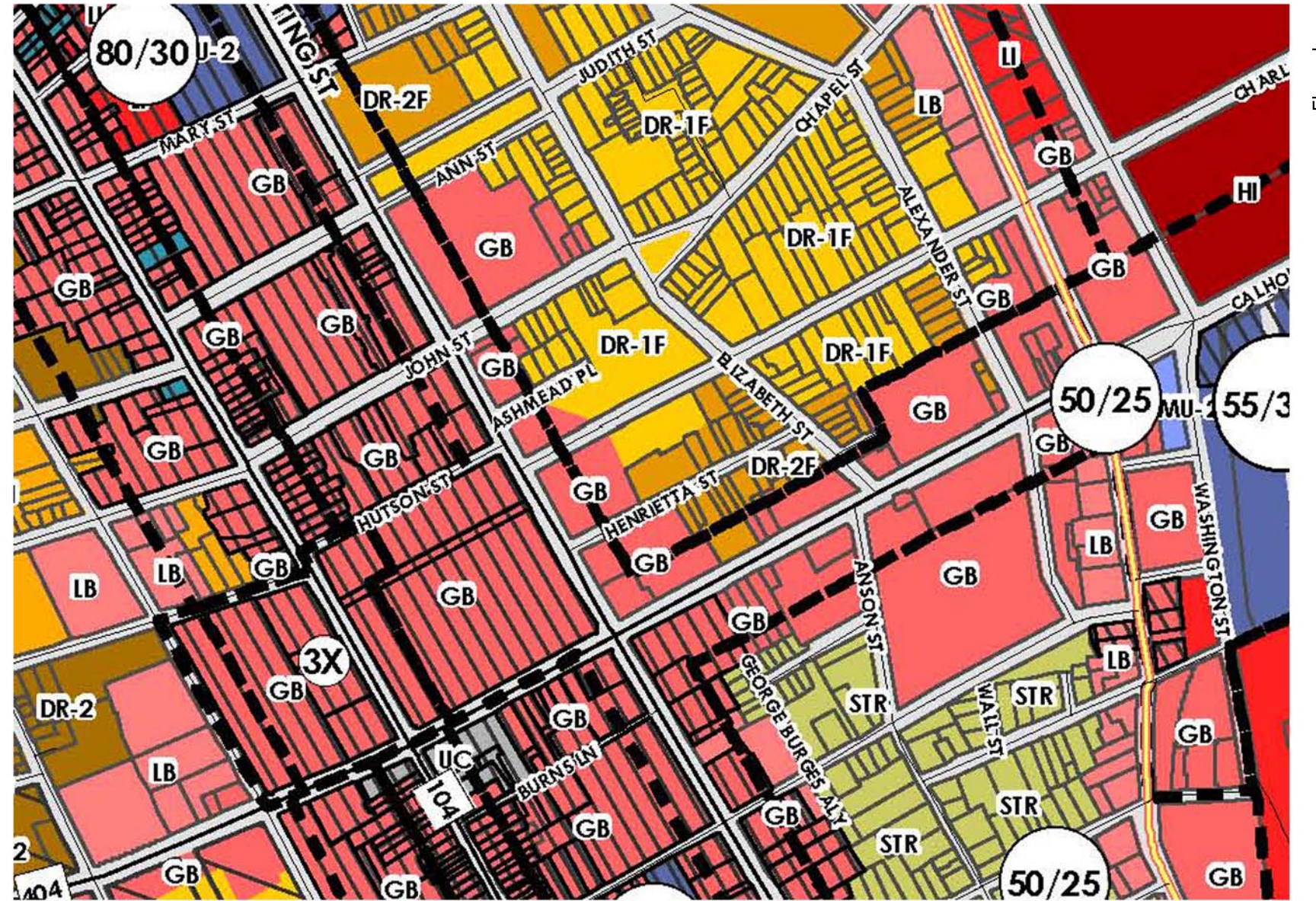
The L Mendel Rivers building was constructed in 1964. As an office building owned and operated by the federal government, it was occupied for 35 years until Hurricane Floyd damaged it in 1999 and the government decided to close it due to asbestos contamination. Charleston has a very rich preservation heritage but not much has been said about this building even though it has sat dormant for a decade. Many criticize it for its size, but in its context, it is just the right size to give positive form to an urban space the size of Marion Square. Its vacancy is the problem.





FEMA Flood Zone Map

site detail



City of Charleston Zoning Map

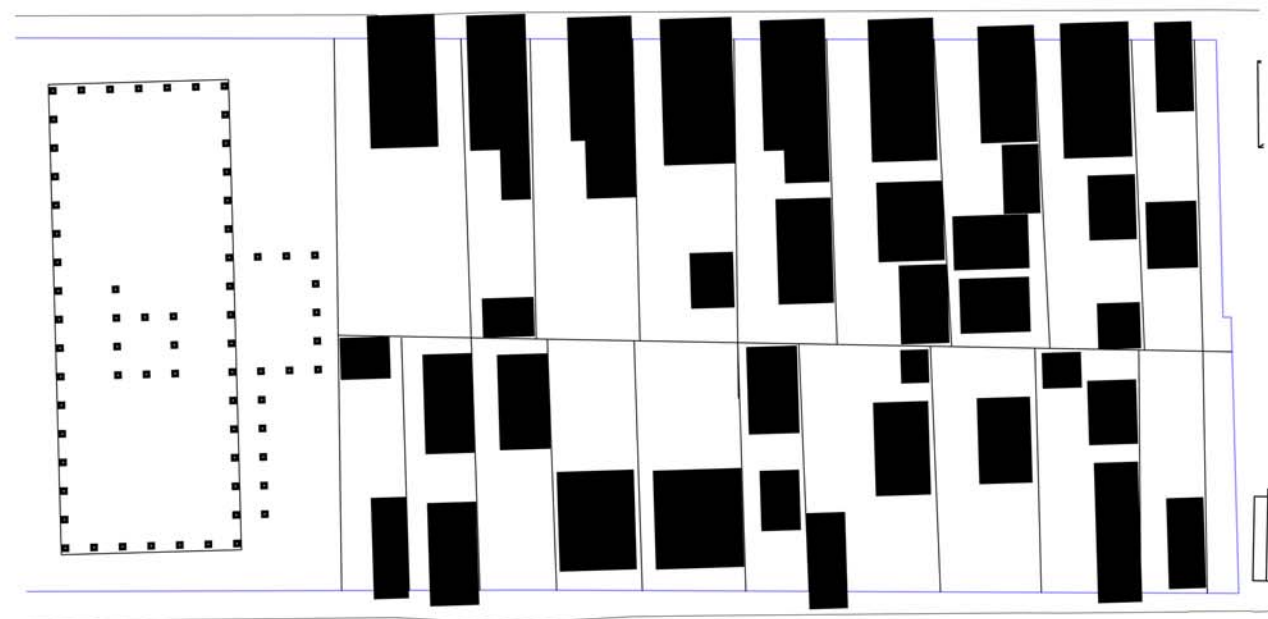
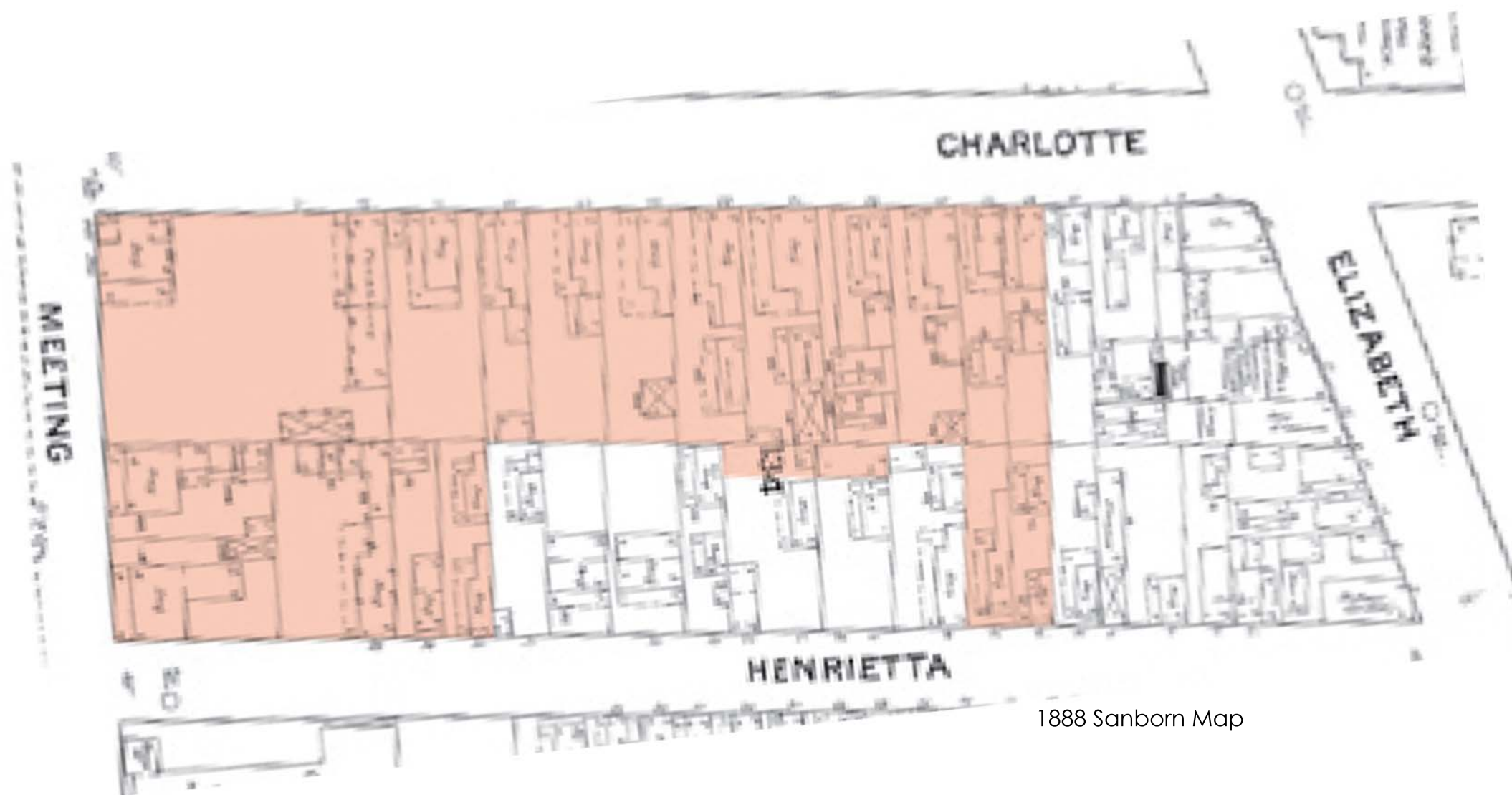


figure-ground of 1888 Sanborn Map with existing building shown



1888 Sanborn Map

the rhythm of the Charleston residential street is a product of the site dimensions laid out as the city grew and of the architecture that formed within those bounds. the street wall is consistent in rhythm and scale while the interior of the blocks, the back yards and gardens vary in their size and shape in the many irregular blocks but invariably have different uses and different built structures from home to home.



street corner at Meeting & Charlotte St (north)



Elizabeth St & Charlotte St (south)



180d panoramic across Meeting from Wragg Square



Elizabeth St & Henrietta St (south)

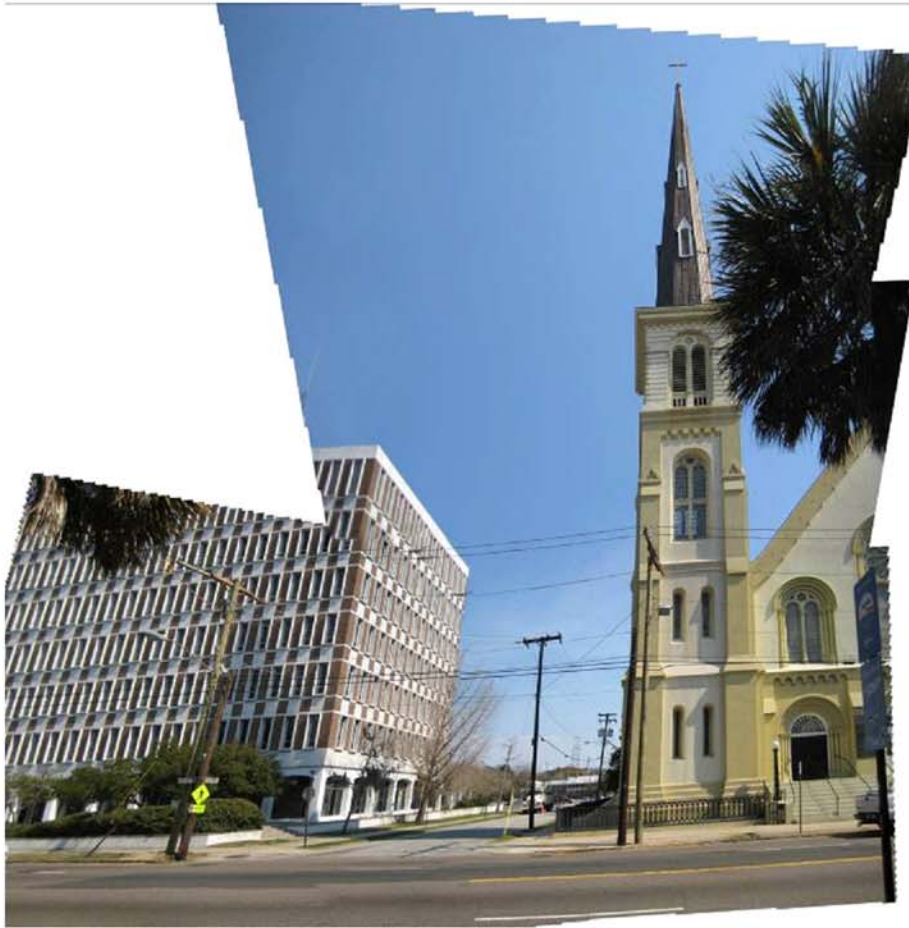


Chapel St fountain

Wraggborough is a neighborhood bounded by the main roads of downtown Charleston: Calhoun St, Meeting St, and East Bay St. there is a diverse range in the scale and luxury of homes in the neighborhood, as well as in age. this variance makes for an interesting 21st century neighborhood, occupied by yuppies, students, and long-time residents.



360d panoramic from Henrietta Street



Charleston, South Carolina is known as The Holy City due to the prominence of churches, especially the prominence of church steeples on the low-rise city skyline. the 334 Meeting Street site is neighbored by four churches, shown here; (top left to bottom right) Second Presbyterian Church, New Tabernacle Fourth Baptist, Citadel Square Baptist Church, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.





ground level plan & sub-terranean parking



roof plan



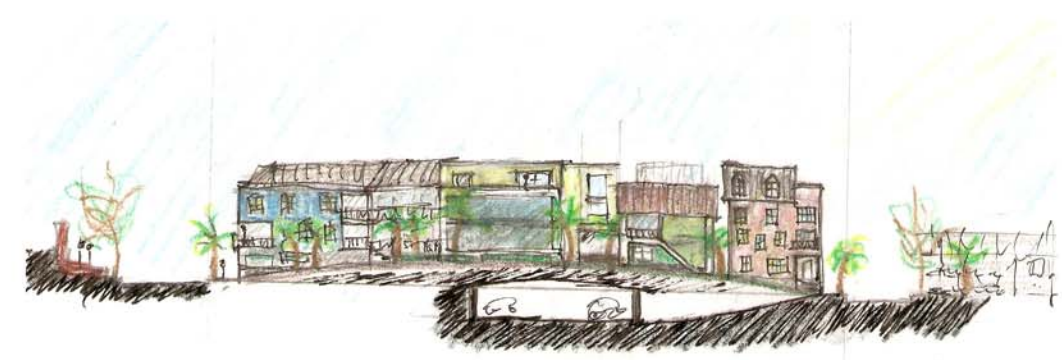


longitudnal site section

the elevation of the interior of the site creates a more intimate space by providing a more defined feeling of separation from the street while also providing for some private parking below-grade.



concept sketch



design sketch - transverse section



the scale of Charleston is part of what makes it charming. the rhythm of the streets and the intimate scale of the neighborhoods are an aspect of the town that I wanted to capture in the design of this development even with increased density. the spacing of the buildings with pedestrian access between and narrow walks that open to larger gardens are amenities that should be built on in a project of this size.

perspective of pedestrian access to interior of block



perspective of shared interior green space

the interior of Charleston blocks are dominated by walls and fences separating private gardens and back yards. in order to create a more dense development on a standard narrow Charleston lot, a common green space is a necessity. the space provides a large space to compensate for not having private yards and also provides a more intimate, private entry to a number of the residential units that are not entered from either Charlotte St or Henrietta St.



perspective of interior shared green space from NE corner

the color palette of Charleston is a diverse one. from pastel pinks to the deep Charleston Green, architecture in the city wouldn't be the same without the variety of colors. introducing abstract forms in a historic neighborhood defined by the detailed architecture with classical inspirations, use of color can be used to express the deliniation of forms or to make them more abstract.