Nantasket Avenue Study

Prepared for the Town of Hull Planning Board
July 18, 1990

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Boston, Massachusetts

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We also thank the citizens of Hull, the Planning Office of the Metropolitan District Commission.

We would also like to thank the efforts of the members of the Hull Planning Board: Neil Pennywitt, Chair; Roland MacLean, Vice Chairman; Judeth Van Hamm, Clerk; Joanne Adduci, Peter Bond, Mary Ann Cloherty, and Andrew Staub. Romin Koebel, Town Planner.

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PREFACE

At the request of the Town of Hull Planning Board, the research and planning for the following urban design study was initiated early in 1990. The proposed study site focuses on both sides of Nantasket Avenue between just northward of Park Avenue to the intersection of Bay Street and Hull Shore Drive. The heart of the issue was a general recognition that the unquestioned natural beauty of Nantasket Beach was shadowed by the poor physical and visual quality of the built environment of the street and parking lots flanking the beach.

In interviews with users of the area, beach-goers (both local and regional), adjacent property owners, merchants, residents, and in early conversations with the Metropolitan District Commission (the largest landholders in the study zone), there was near universal agreement that the area would benefit from study for fundamental change.

Foremost in the reality of any proposal for this site is the role of the Metropolitan District Commission in shaping the area's past and future. Since 1899 the Commission has preserved the beach as a park for the enjoyment of millions. This study seeks to enhance that asset by examining the configuration of parking and buildings that now present a weak background for the beauty of the beach. It is hoped that the Commission and others will see this opportunity and be open to new ideas and uses for land in the area to serve both local and regional users.

Even when there exists a consensus for change, there will be varied views of what, where and when it should happen. In response, there has been broad and well-balanced input from numerous sources leading to the observations and conclusions of this report. When the ideas presented are successfully implemented and the benefits proven, the approach can be used as a formula from which development of adjacent parcels could proceed.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Patterns of Place and the New England Waterfront

In seeking an understanding of particular qualities and geography that make Hull unique, we observe several larger urban design qualities which distinguish and connect it to the larger New England context.

Continuity of Scale

There is an observable horizontality to the existing buildings and landscape in the area with all structures two stories or less (excepting the clocktower). This scale complements the horizon of the sea and could, if expanded, provide the human scale supportive of pedestrian activity sought in the area.

Continuity of Fabric

Though no style of architecture prevails in the study area, there are several consistent themes which, if consistently repeated, could provide a continuity of fabric. The bracketed roofs of the M.D.C. building and the rhythm of the bandshell pavilion columniation are both ideas which could be developed in newer structures as basic elements. Also important is the presence of several stucco buildings which begin to form a pattern of material and color.

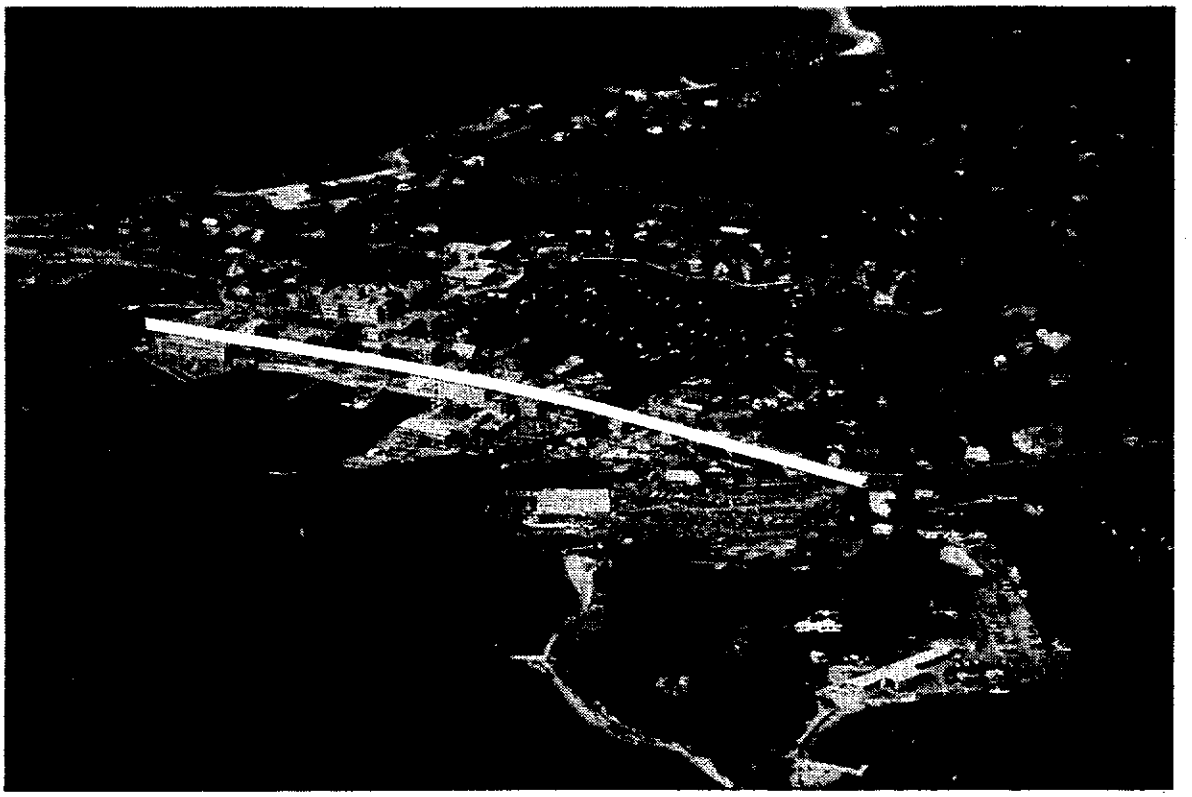
Continuity of the Street/Nantasket Avenue

The street is the most basic element in the public realm. The edges of Nantasket Avenue are not sufficiently defined to support a sense of place in Hull. This is not a call for absolute density or to make the street canyon-like, but rather to suggest that for sidewalks to support pedestrian activity, they must engage elements (typically buildings).

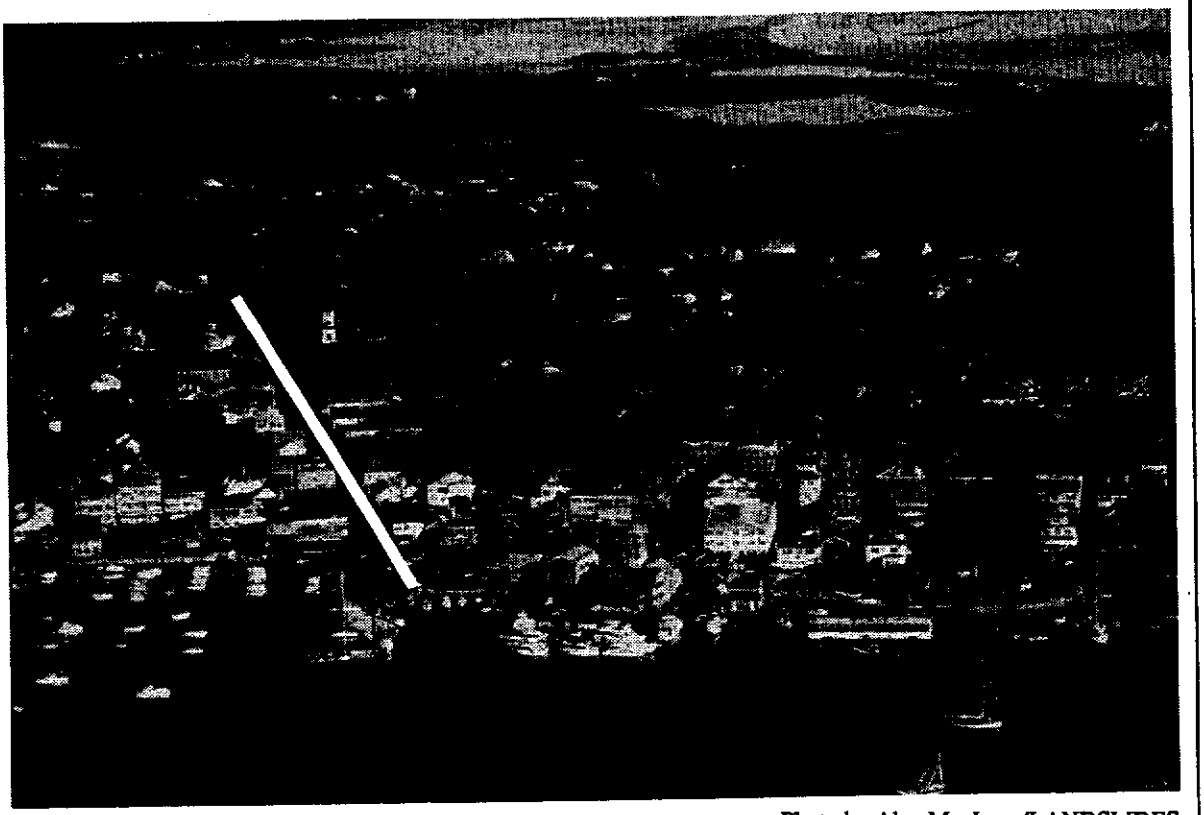
Preference for Two-Sided Streets

The success or failure of harbor-front streets---success and failure measured both by the amount of human activity and the sense of successful space---is determined by whether these streets achieve a two-sided feeling. In seacoast situations, from cities to villages, inevitably the main street is either perpendicular to the harbor (e.g. Nantucket, Edgartown) or parallel to the harbor (Woods Hole, Provincetown, Stonington, CT). In all these cases, whether parallel or perpendicular, the main street is a double-sided street, with active commercial activity following a pattern of mercantile life almost everywhere in the world: commerce thrives more often--and maybe only--on a two-sided, well balanced street.

Provincetown, Massachusetts

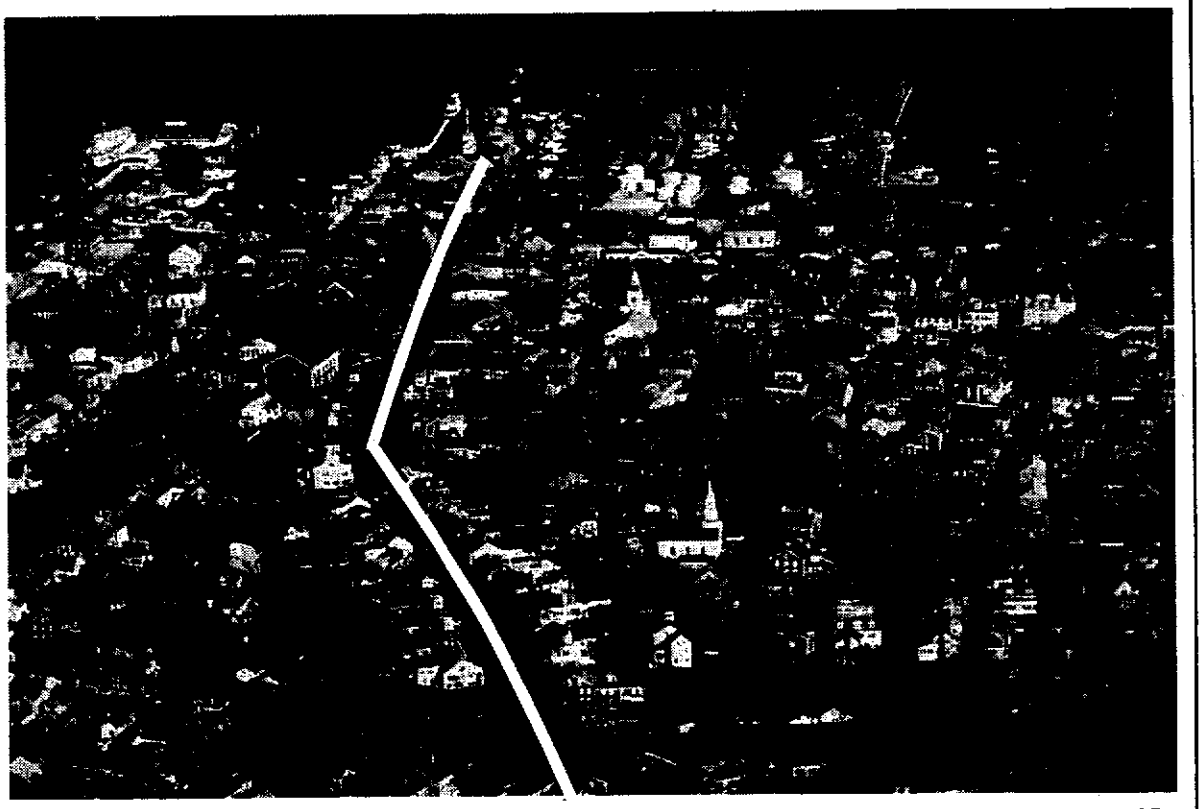


Woods Hole, Massachusetts



Edgartown, Massachusetts

Photo by Alex MacLean/LANDSLIDES

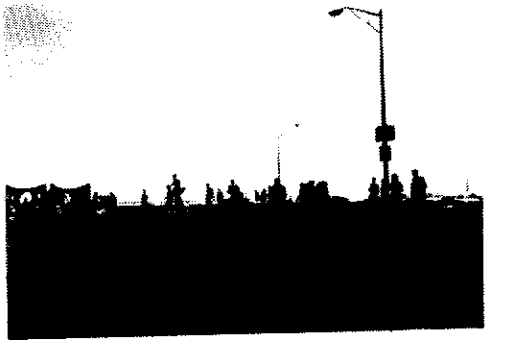


Nantucket, Massachusetts

Photo by Alex MacLean/LANDSLIDES

3.0 PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

3.1 Recreational Open Space



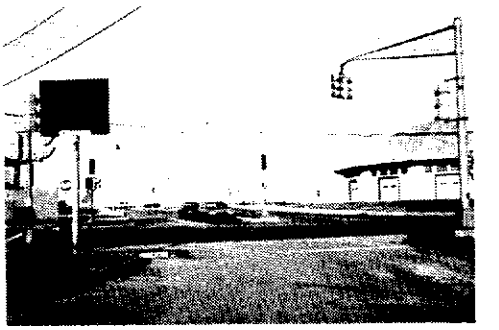
Clearly, the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue is under utilized as parking lots. The highest priority of this study is to propose ways in which defined public open space, institutional, amusement or recreational uses, and, to a lesser degree, new retail space, can coexist on both sides of Nantasket Avenue while maintaining a strong visual and physical connection between the ocean and the street. Every effort should be made to encourage a collaboration between the Town of Hull and the M.D.C. to achieve the highest and best use for the area. The new edge to Nantasket Avenue should avoid building a continuous physical or visual barrier to the ocean while providing enough edge to protect the street from the severity of the wind.

New open space between the beach and Nantasket Avenue is clearly desirable but is better served by some degree of physical definition provided by shelters, paths, material differences of landscaped and hard surface areas; and use definitions between active play, passive areas and transitional zones. Open space without these definitions becomes uninviting and the variety of users of the waterfront encourage a multiplicity of active and passive areas.

3.2 Nantasket Avenue

At present, Nantasket Avenue (within the study zone) exists as a single-sided street parallel to the beach with buildings forming an edge of varying strength on the inland side of the road. The ocean side is dominated by M.D.C. parking areas which serve the beach during peak times. For the majority of the year these lots see very light use. The visual domination of the parking areas and to a degree the lack of built or natural windscreens make Nantasket Avenue a harsh and underutilized pedestrian zone. The difficulty experienced by existing restaurant, retail and amusement businesses is typical of single-sided streets in New England and elsewhere. The lack of a built edge on the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue leaves the street exposed to the ocean which, while visually desirable, is physically destructive to the pedestrian environment of the street.

3.3 Nantasket Pier



The development and revitalization of Nantasket Pier is a major opportunity for the Town of Hull and should be seen as the first priority for the revitalization of this area of Hull. The Pier's cross-axial relation to the midpoint of Nantasket Avenue in this study forces a recognition of the potential interaction of development in the two areas. How users of the pier will arrive at, and become engaged by, Nantasket Avenue and the ocean is also a goal of this investigation. Successful development of the pier will push the ideas of this study into reality and become the seed for additional revitalization of the district.

4.0 SECONDARY GOALS, OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is strongly felt that the urban design consultant should not be confused with the role of an architect in designing specific buildings. Thus the observations offered here are meant to define a range of issues and solutions to meet the primary goals of the study set forth earlier and to encourage both the citizens of Hull and the Metropolitan District Commission to see the enormous potential benefits for all users of this raw but deserving area.

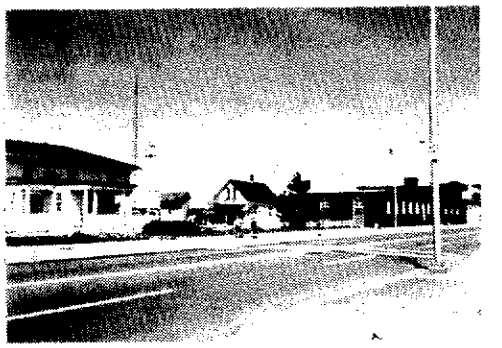
4.1 Scale of Building

The scale and pattern of building on the inland side of Nantasket Avenue provides a decent model for development of the ocean side. Aside from the tower portion of the clock tower building, no building exceeds two stories with the average height being around 1 1/2 stories. Stylistically and materially a broad range of building types exists but none provides enough unity to hold the area together. While the diversity of material and style can be an asset, there has been a bit too much free reign in this area of Hull. This is not to say that a specific style is presently dominant in the area but rather to say what is to be discouraged would be the addition of wholly new or alien building types and materials. This is an opportunity for a designer to choose from and work within the existing context without rigid limitation to a specific style.

4.2 Sea Wall Promenade

The experience of the walk along the sea wall is enjoyed by thousands year-round and particularly when tides or colder weather make the beach itself too narrow or severe to enjoy. Measures can be taken to do more than maintain this asset, it should be enhanced by offering moments of protection from the sea through built and landscaped screens while keeping vistas and connection to the water open. The pergola proposed for the renovated M.D.C. bathhouse could be extended along other portions of the walk to provide intermittent shelters which would be predominantly open yet provide some relief from wind and occasionally sun. The pergola could also become a strong image as seen from the beach without building monumental structures. Places for seating should also be developed to provide people with an alternative to sitting on their cars during high tide.

4.3 Re-use of Existing Buildings



The maintenance and storage operations of the Metropolitan District Commission currently occupy several buildings between George Washington Boulevard and Nantasket Avenue. One of these buildings originally housed a laundry facility where swimsuits could be rented by beachgoers. The significance of this is in the fact that these buildings historically worked as part of a two-sided street that served the beach. It would again be desirable for these buildings to work in tandem with the renovated bathhouse by promoting pedestrian activity on the street. The present administrative buildings of the M.D.C. are a positive use and strong encouragement should be made to restore their physical condition and appearance. Additional beach parking could be provided between George Washington Boulevard and the garage buildings to replace parking lost by improvement of the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue. A varied list of uses has been suggested for these buildings including public or commercial gallery space, retail space, a youth hostel, and youth and adult recreation facilities.

4.4 Parking

The unquestionably poor visual quality of the expansive parking areas along the ocean is one of the primary targets of this study--though the loss of their parking capacity would be detrimental to neighboring residential areas for the peak beach use days of summer. It is a major understanding of this study that parking spaces directly on the beach lost to new recreational open space or building should be replaced on a 1:1 basis in areas close enough for beach-goers to walk to the beach. We would encourage that short term metered spaces be added to both sides of Nantasket Avenue to slow traffic down and serve adjacent businesses directly. Beach parking capacity could be increased by optimizing the configuration of the currently inefficient layout of the M.D.C. parking area #6 and by new parking areas on the storage yard of the M.D.C. along George Washington Blvd. By maintaining and re-configuring some oceanfront parking, increasing on-street parking, and creating new lots within walking distance of the beach, this proposal seeks to relocate rather than remove parking capacity.

4.5 Tivoli Bandshell

The success of the Tivoli Bandshell Pavilion operated by the M.D.C. is evidence of how a structure on the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue can create a vitality for both sides of the street. During the summer, the Pavilion is heavily used as a gathering place and a shelter from the sun. On colder fall and spring days people gather on the leeward side of the Pavilion to enjoy being near the ocean and yet be protected from the force of sea breezes. There exists a physical dialogue between the Pavilion and the buildings across Nantasket Avenue that makes this several hundred feet of street more vital and hospitable than the single sided condition elsewhere. The success of the Pavilion is a strong signal that buildings can exist on the ocean side of the street, enhancing the character of the waterfront and street without isolating the two.

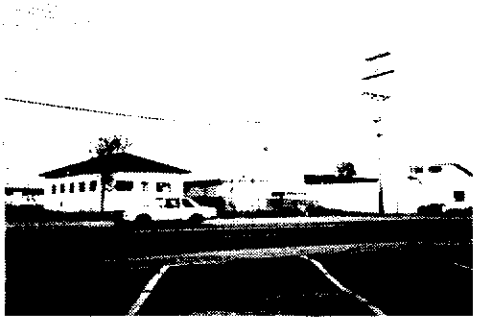
4.6 Fronts and Backs

It is desirable for new buildings on the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue to "front" on the avenue but care must be taken to assure that the ocean sides of these buildings are also designed as "fronts" to the beach. Entrances should be on the street side but the architectural character of the ocean sides must be equally considered.

4.7 Role and Figure of the Carousel

By its position, the carousel building has taken on a major physical role in the area and also a major symbolic one in addressing the history of the Town of Hull as a center of amusement and recreation. Physically it occupies a site at the cross-axis of Wharf and Nantasket Avenues where a high volume of foot traffic from Nantasket Pier is expected. Visually, the 12-sided form of the building lacks a strong edge to support Wharf Avenue or anchor the intersection. Kiosk structures or pavilion structures built at the corners would help to define the space around the carousel and act as destinations for pedestrians on the path along George Washington Boulevard and from the Pier.

4.8 Path Along George Washington Boulevard



The implied pedestrian path along George Washington Boulevard from the M.D.C. parking lots suffers from several problems including: its adjacency to a relatively high speed artery; a broken ground plane with excessive transitions from path to curb cut driveways; and the poor visual quality of the rear facades of buildings fronting on Nantasket Avenue. To make this a viable path a sense of separation between the path and the road is necessary. Families walking on this edge should feel secure about children not wandering on the edge of a busy road. An edge of trees could help separate the path from the street as could low screens though walls or tall fences would not be encouraged. A reduction in the number of ground plane transitions is critical and a continuous paving material or pattern could also distinguish the route. The kiosks positioned around the Carousel could tie into a physical arcade defining the path and connect the pedestrian route to the Pier and Nantasket Avenue. Ideally foot-traffic on this path could be greatly reduced by a more direct route from the lots to Nantasket Avenue when redevelopment of the Dream Machine block occurs in the future.

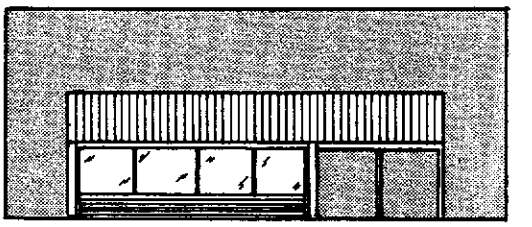
4.9 Coastal Designation and Alternative Building Types

It is recognized that the portion of land on the ocean side of Nantasket Avenue under consideration has been designated a coastal high hazard area subject to hurricane wave wash. Though this does present structural design challenges for building in the area that are well outside the scope of this study, local building officials have confirmed that commercial structures are a viable possibility. As is often the case, the debate about the suitability of the site for building has spawned a number of legitimate options ranging from seeking variance from restrictions to the more novel (and seasonally flexible) ideas of pushcart commercial development. Town Planner Romin Koebel has begun a thoughtful study of how the two-sided street goal of this study could still be supported by framed structures housing a vital pushcart business in the area. These ideas and solutions are exactly the type of positive expansion of the this study which must be ongoing to insure the healthy revitalization of the study area.

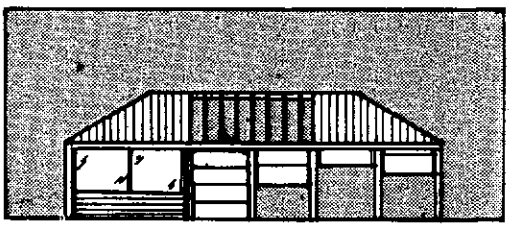
4.10 Types of Structures

The strengthening of Nantasket Avenue by the two-sided street concept allows several options for types of structures which could provide the needed definition to the street edge.

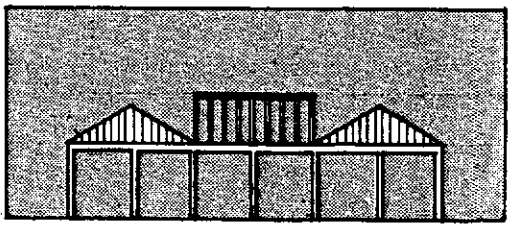
A. Conventional buildings - The severity of the physical environment of Nantasket Avenue discourages pedestrian activity on the street in all but the summer weeks. The option of conventional buildings could address this problem in two ways: the buildings uses will draw people to the street while the building's physical presence will shelter the street making the sidewalk a more hospitable environment.



B. Convertible or partial buildings - This approach is more seasonally oriented and would allow buildings to shelter uses as variable as gathering places with picnic tables, etc. or vendor areas. Walls could be transparent or movable such as the side market aisles at Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace. In this way buildings could change their physical character to adapt to both hours and seasons of use.



C. Frame structures or pavilions - A third option exists for frame structures which could still accomplish parts of the two-sided street goal. These open air pavilions could still provide a visual edge and balance to the street while providing shade and maintaining a high degree of visual openness to the ocean (a major priority of any proposal).



5.0 GUIDELINES

These guidelines provide specific definition where necessary to help structure the goals and ideas presented in this study.

5.1 SETBACKS

Nantasket Avenue (Bay side)--All new construction should be parallel to Nantasket Avenue. Two setback distances are acceptable and both use existing buildings as a datum or reference. For buildings south of Wharf Avenue the setback line is established by the row of arcade structures. For buildings north of Wharf Avenue, building faces should align with the eastern face of the Metropolitan Police station.

Nantasket Avenue (Ocean Side)--A new street edge datum will be established by the proposed renovation of the M.D.C. bathhouse which should become the reference line for the setback of structures fronting on Nantasket Avenue. If no such datum has been established, the maximum allowable setback should be established as fifteen (15') feet from the street edge.

5.2 BUILDING HEIGHTS

The minimum allowable height of structures shall be:
One story: (Grade to eave height) Eight (8') feet

The maximum allowable height of structures shall be:
One and one-half story: (Grade to eave height) Twelve (12') feet)

Eave to Ridge height: Maximum allowable: Ten (10') feet

Maximum structure height: Twenty (20') feet - Exception: Turrets, towers, cupolas or other special features may exceed this height limit provided the plan area of such feature does not exceed twenty (20) percent of the overall roof. Maximum height of such features: forty (40') above grade.

5.3 MASSING

Sloped roofs: Minimum pitch of 4:12 is encouraged.

Arcades, Pergolas and other structures which provide shelter while preserving views are encouraged.

5.4 DENSITY

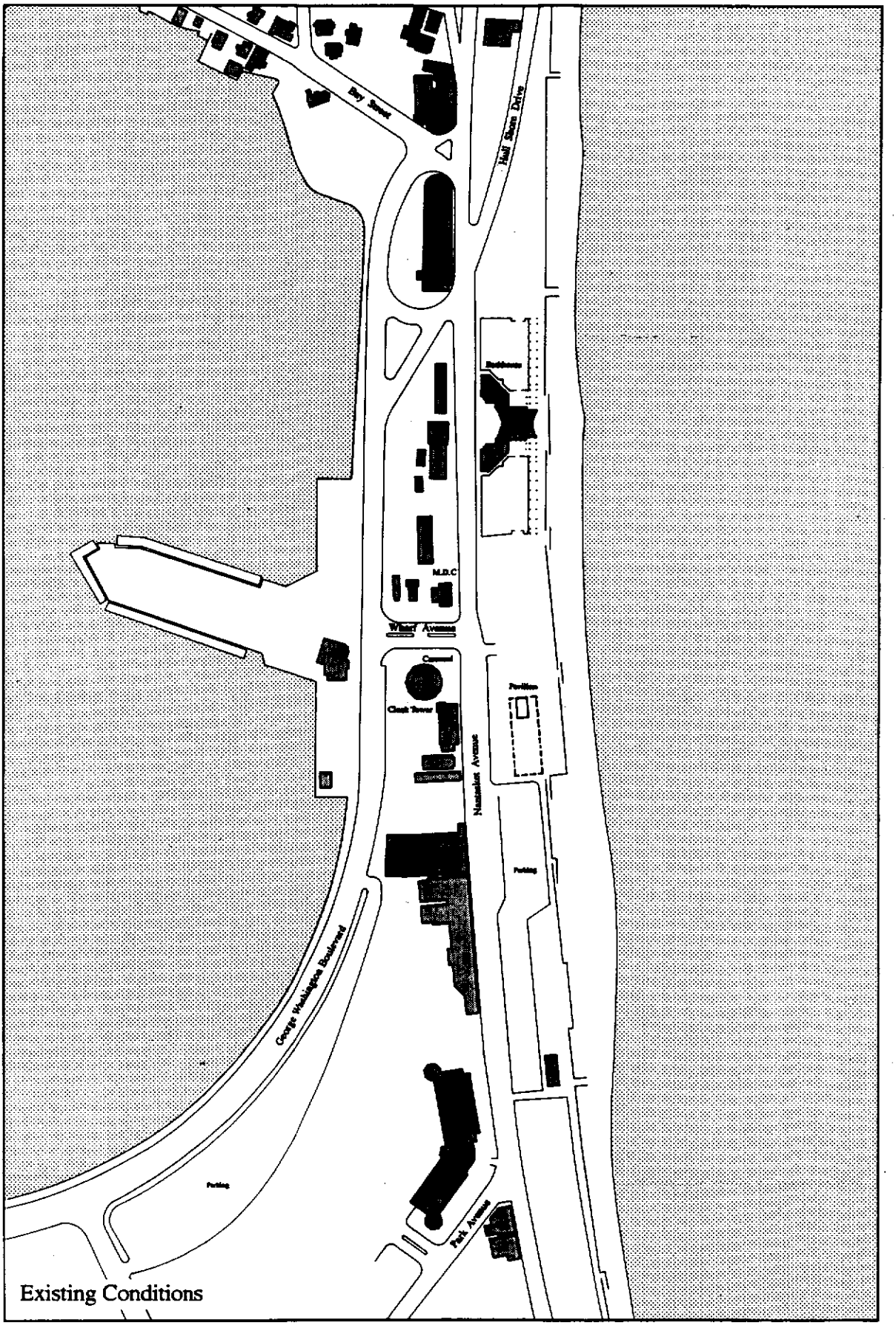
Ocean Side of Nantasket Avenue

For any two hundred (200') feet of frontage:

- -No more than 120 linear feet shall be covered by roof
- -No more than 60 linear feet of continuously built wall nor more than 80 linear feet of total built edge

No single built portion of any structure shall exceed 2400 square feet.

For typical structures planned on Nantasket Avenue there shall be a building zone established 40' deep beginning 15' from the street edge.



Existing Conditions

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URBAN DESIGN STUDY
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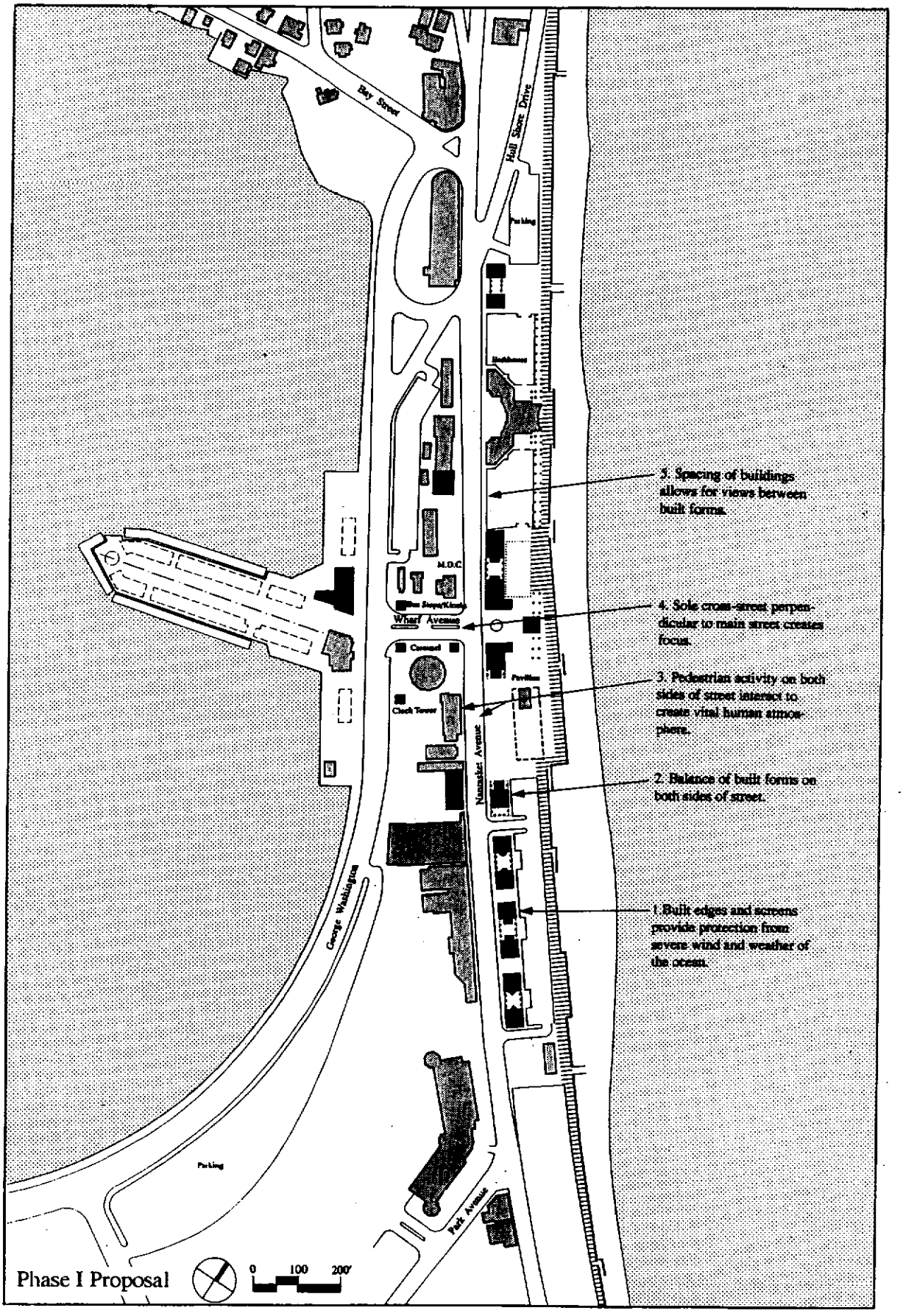

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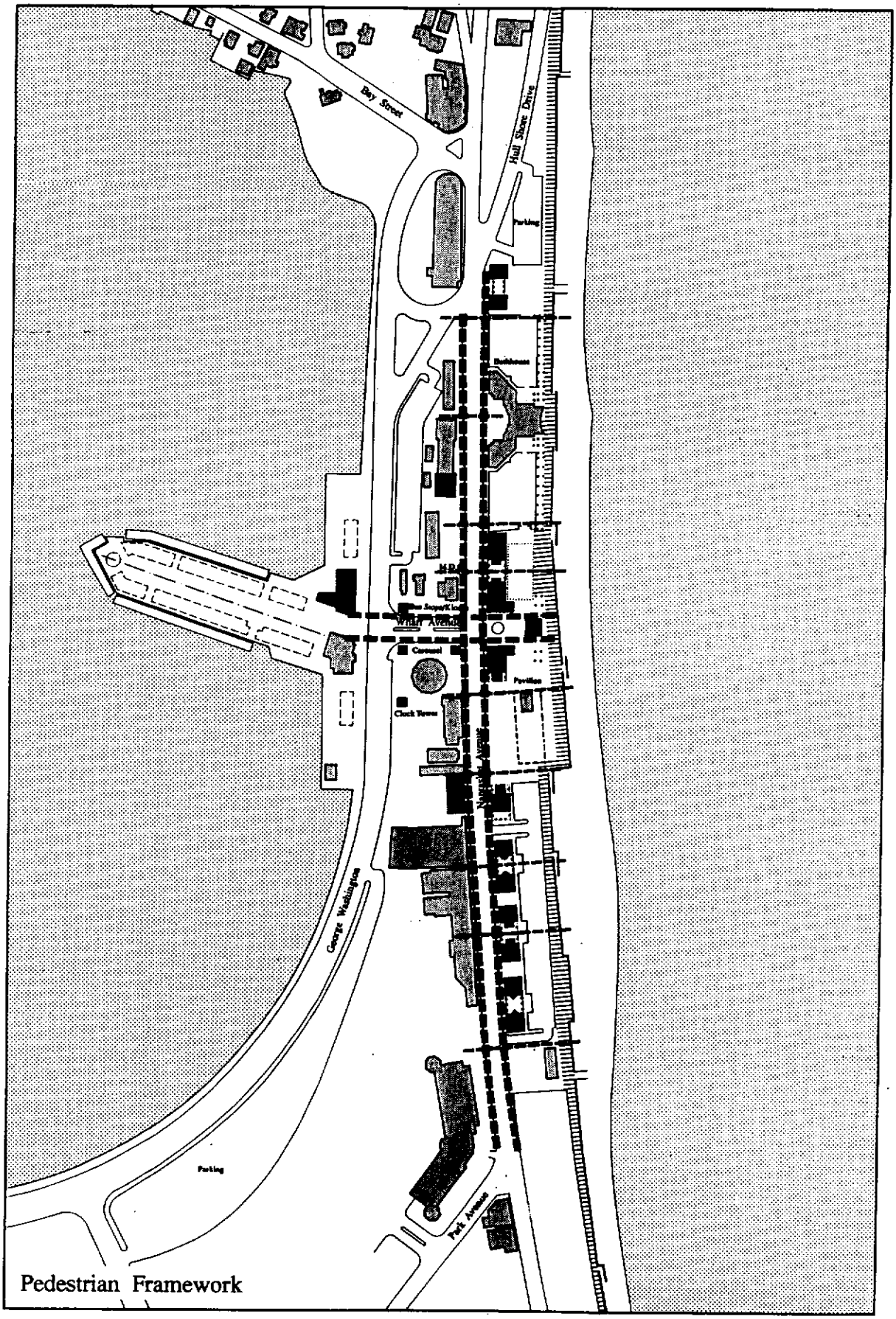

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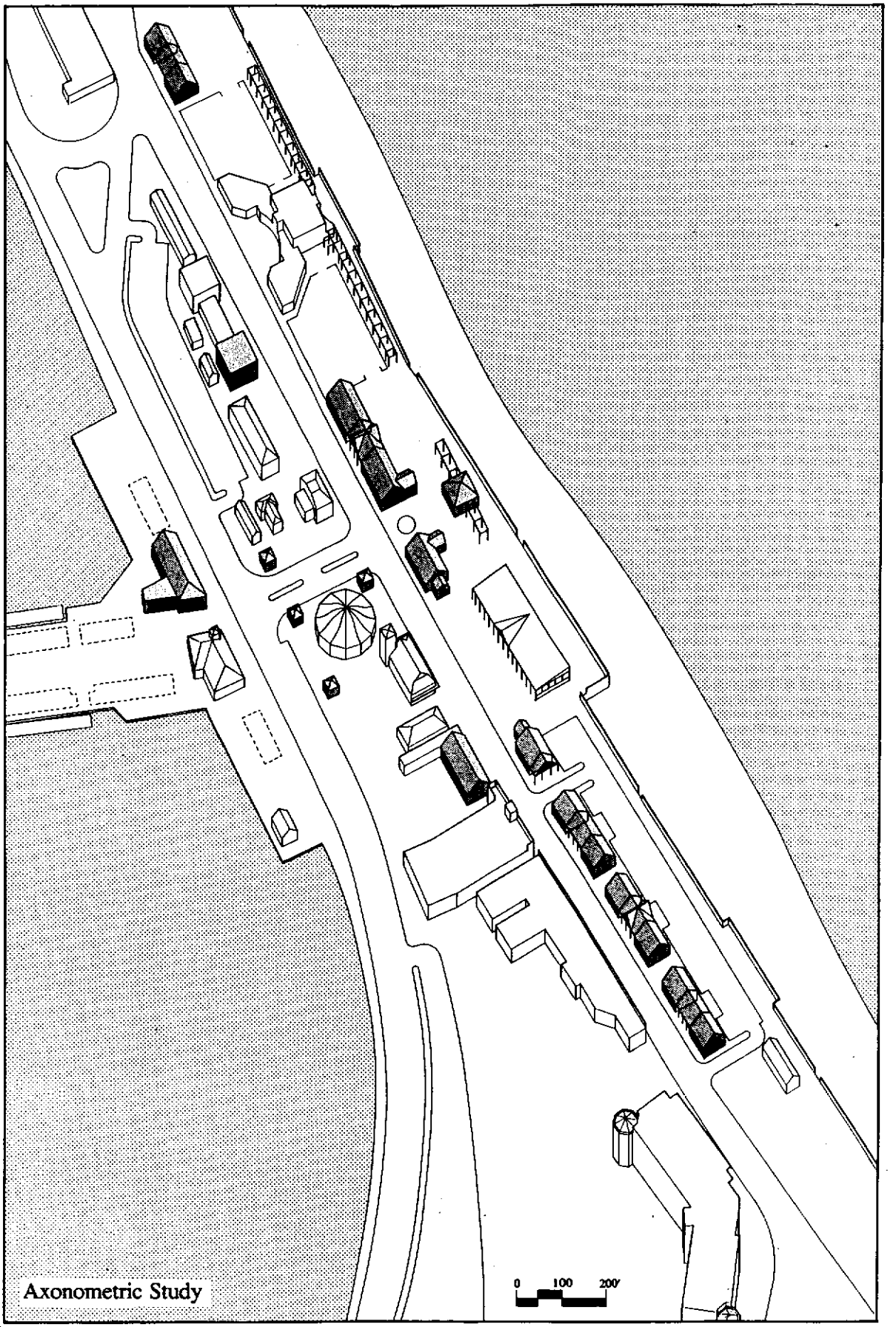

Axonometric Study

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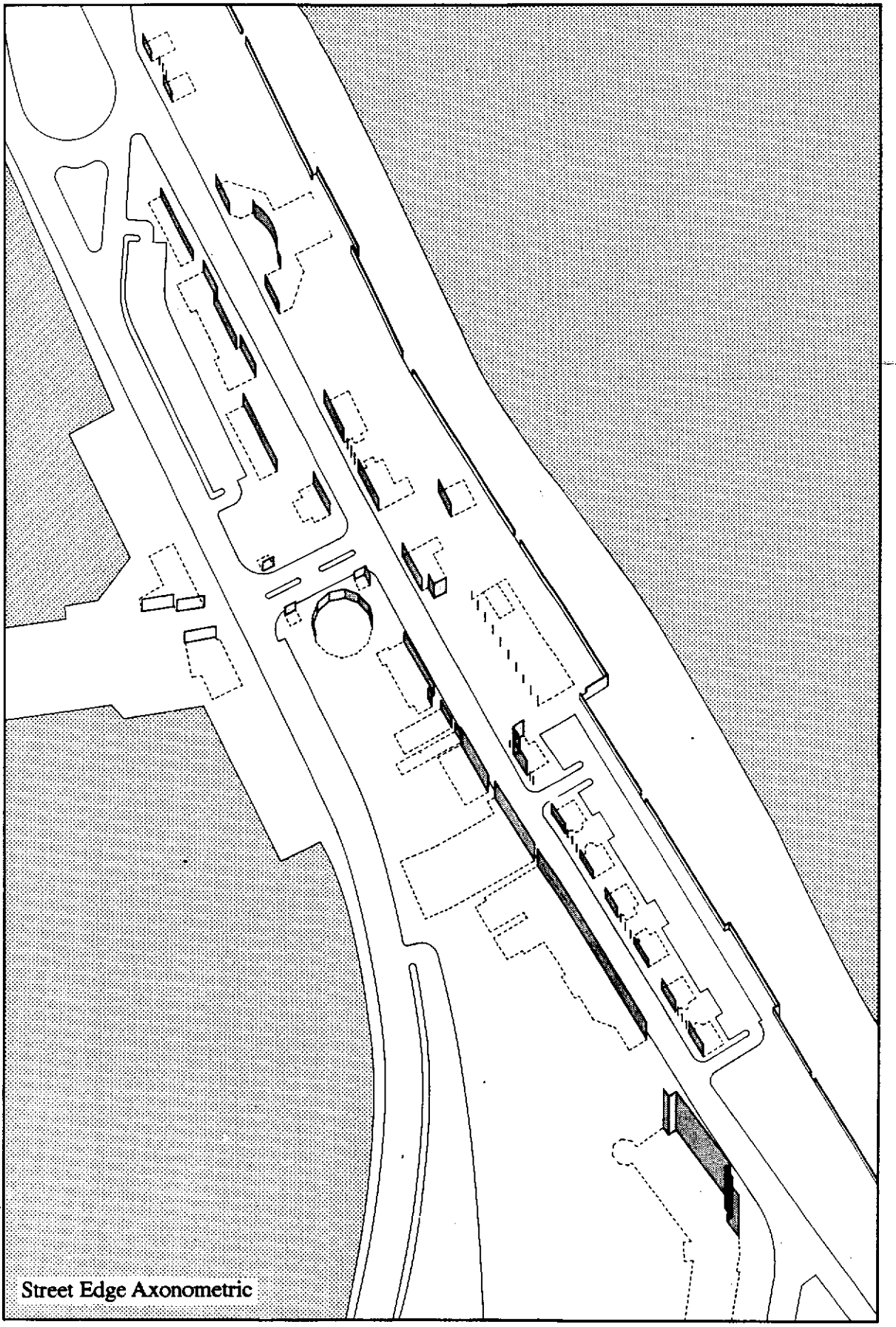

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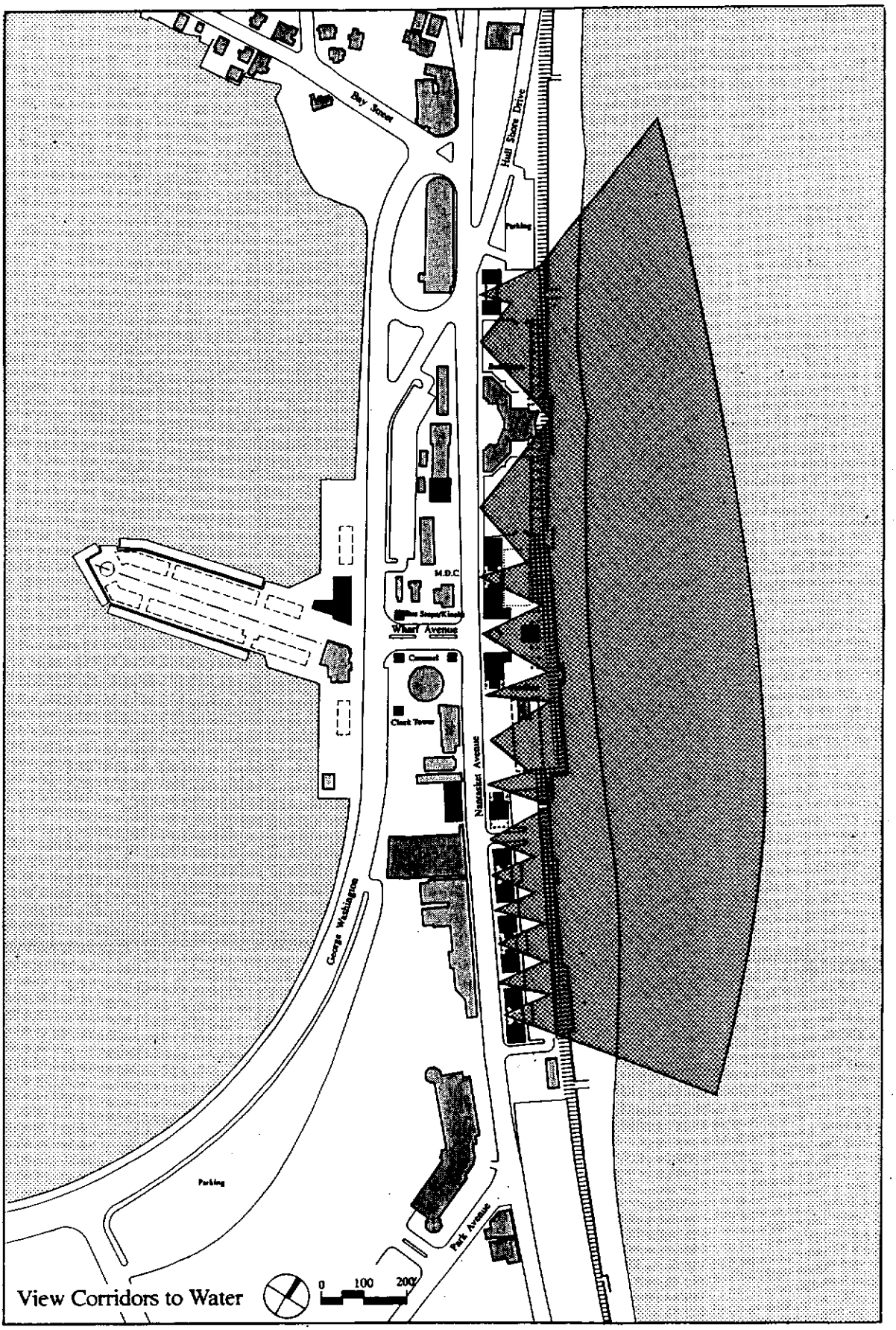

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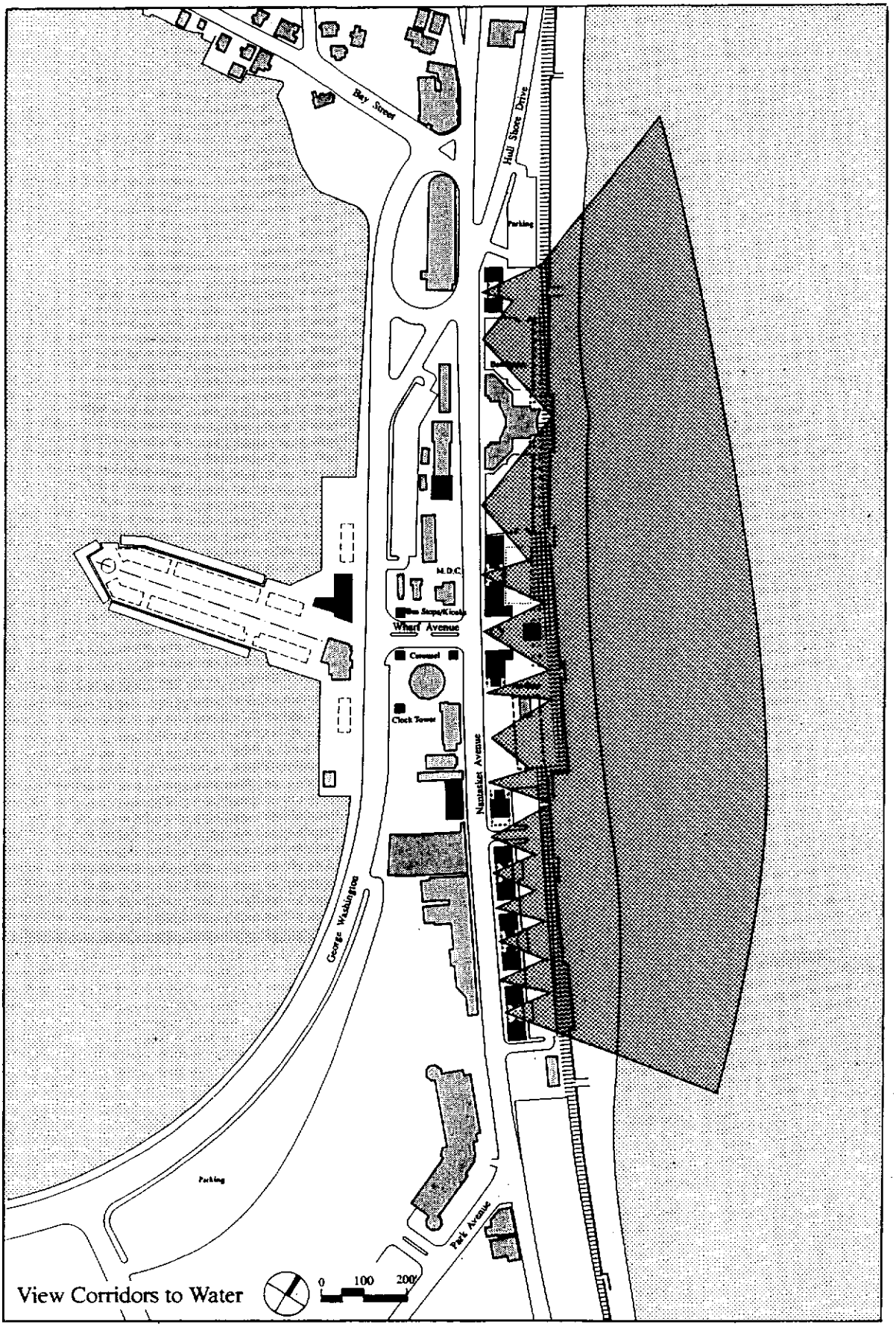

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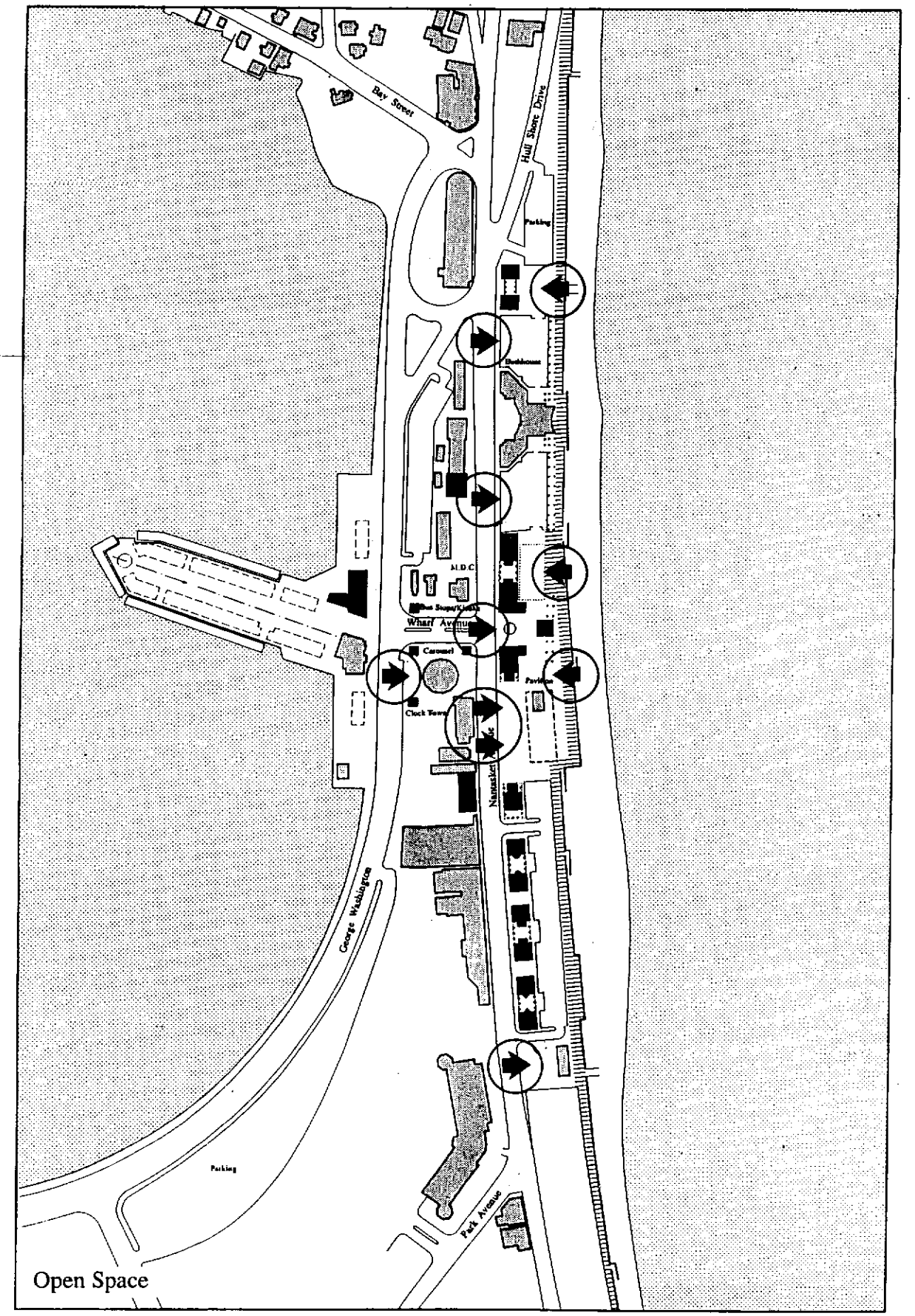

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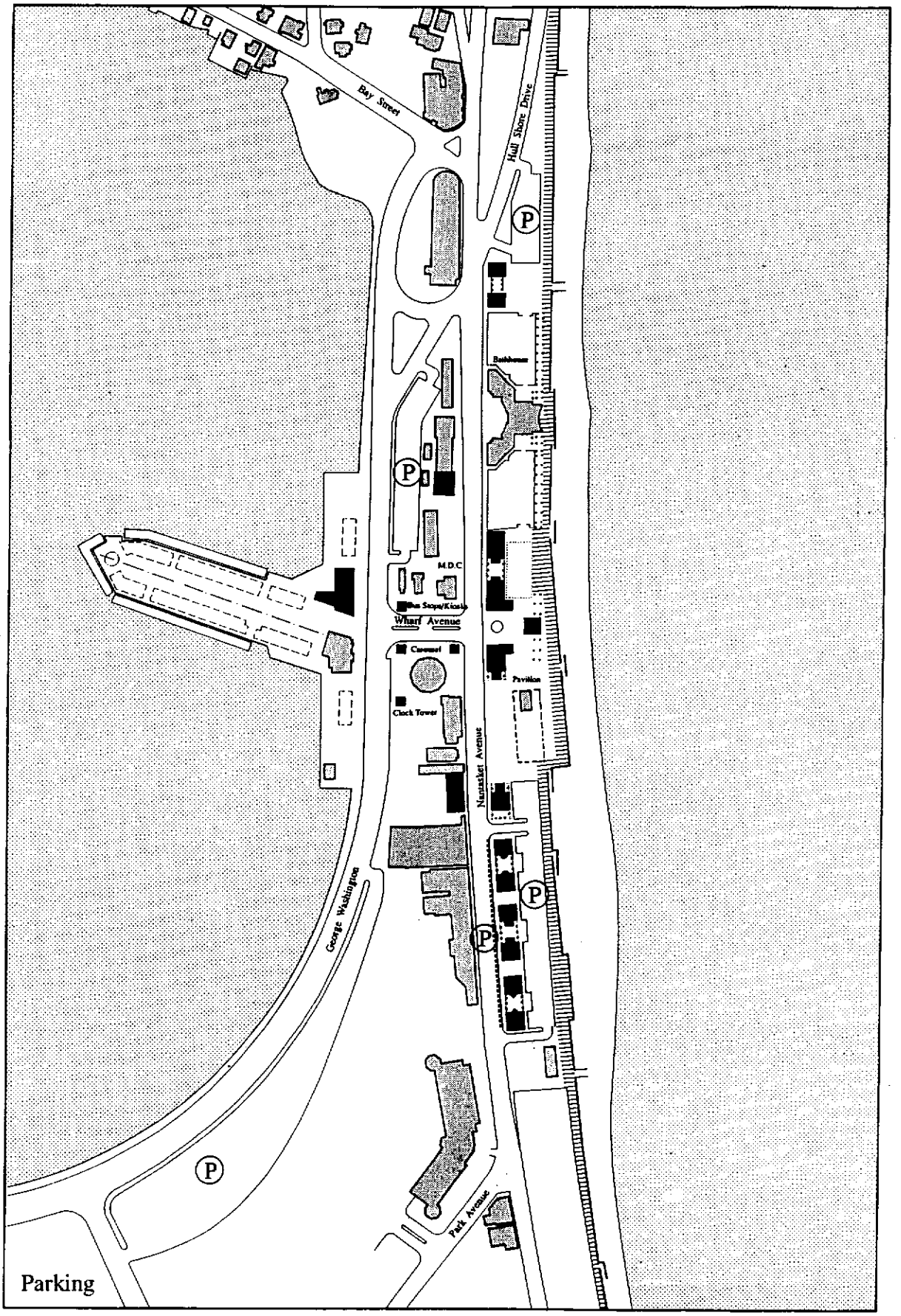

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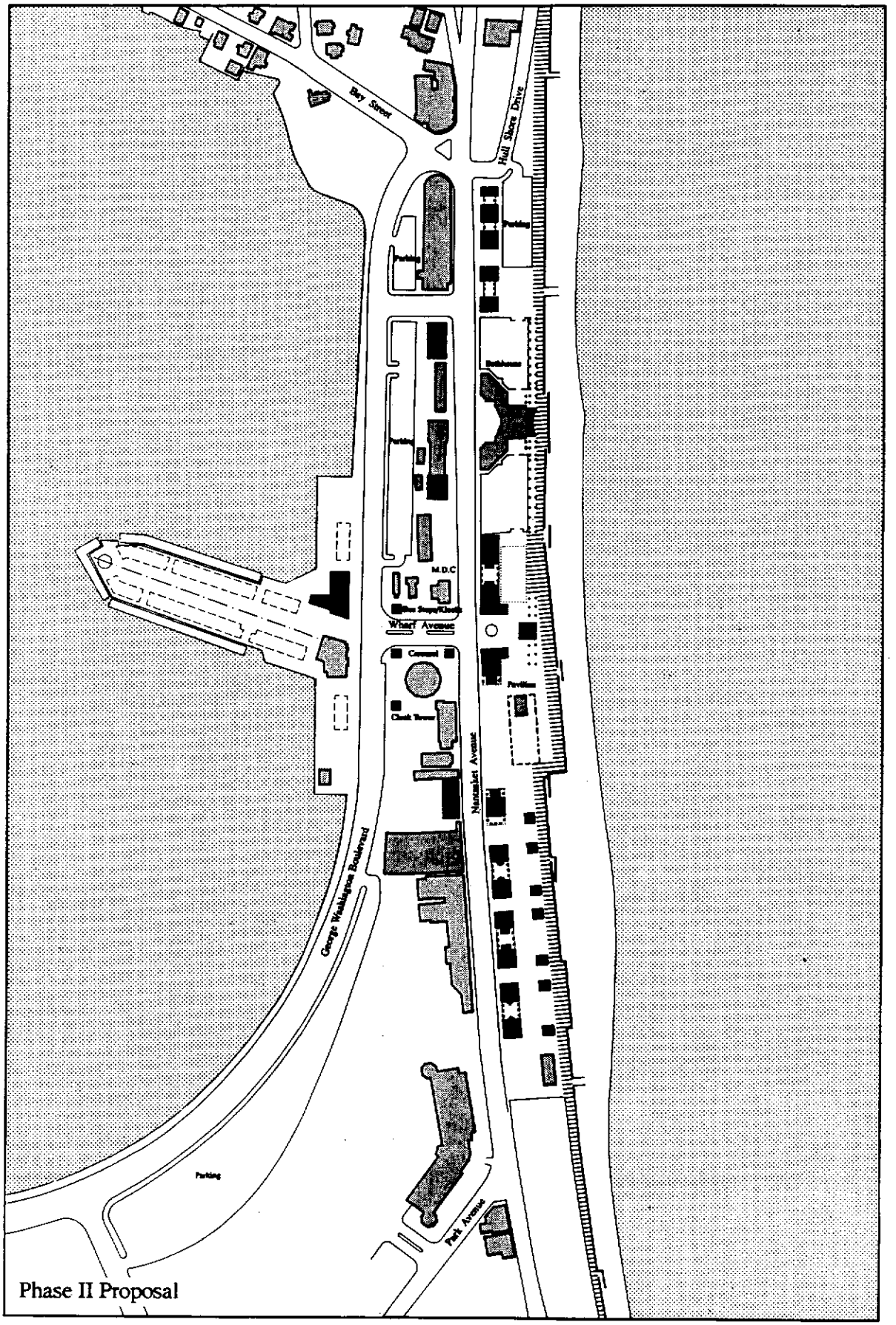

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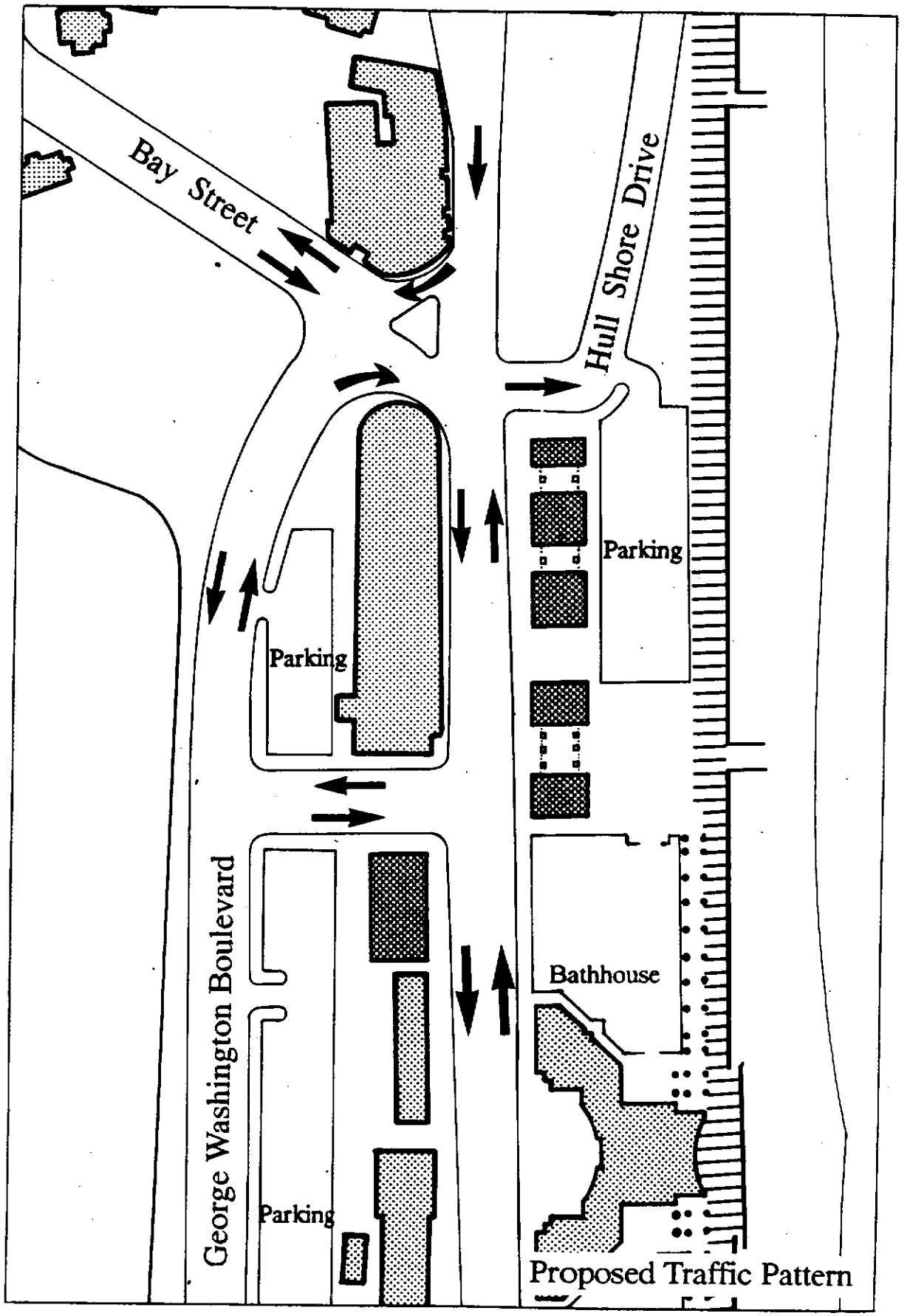

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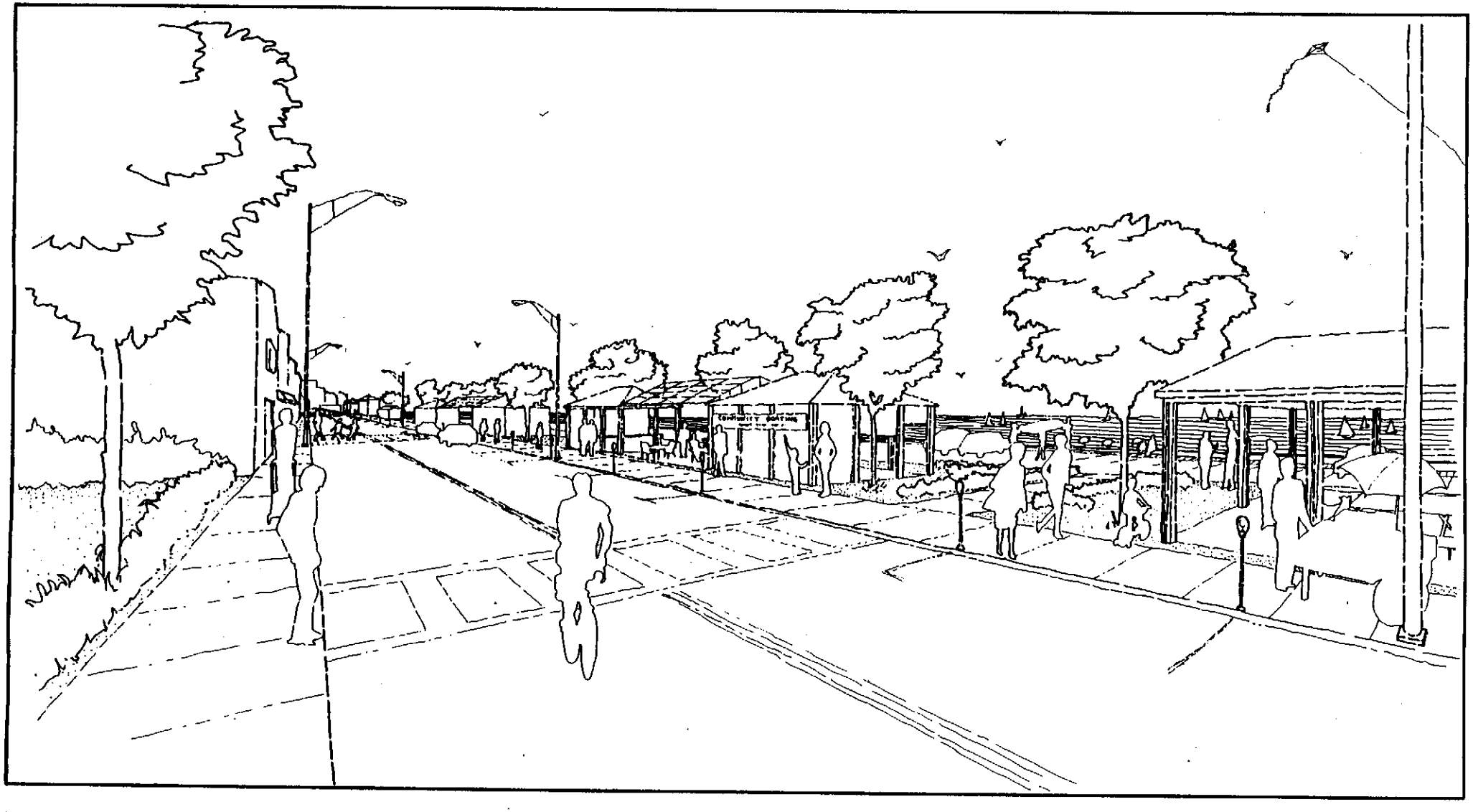

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