

Restoring our

KADAVUMBHAGAM SYNAGOGUE,
MATTANCHERRY

INSPIRELI AWARDS

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Introduction

The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue in Mattancherry, Kochi, is one of the oldest surviving Jewish prayer halls in Kerala, reflecting the layered cultural and architectural heritage of the Malabar Jewish community. Currently abandoned and in a state of decay, the structure holds immense historic and spatial value. The proposed adaptive reuse aims to transform this heritage monument into a cultural café and art experience center, reviving its social life while respecting its historic essence.

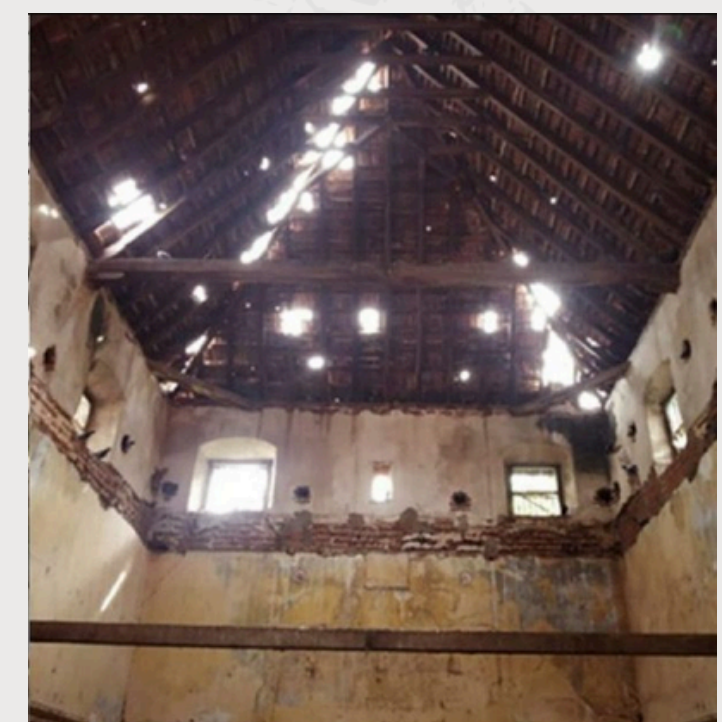
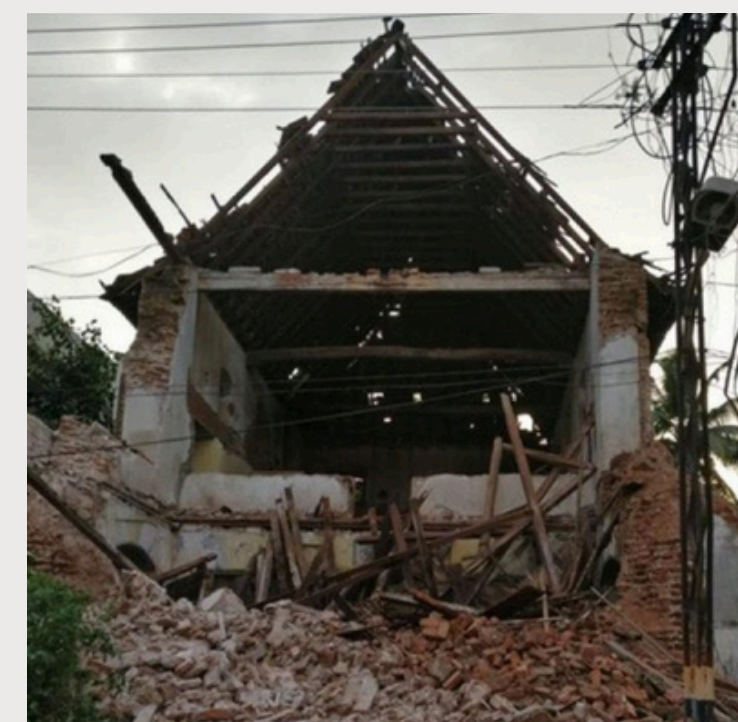
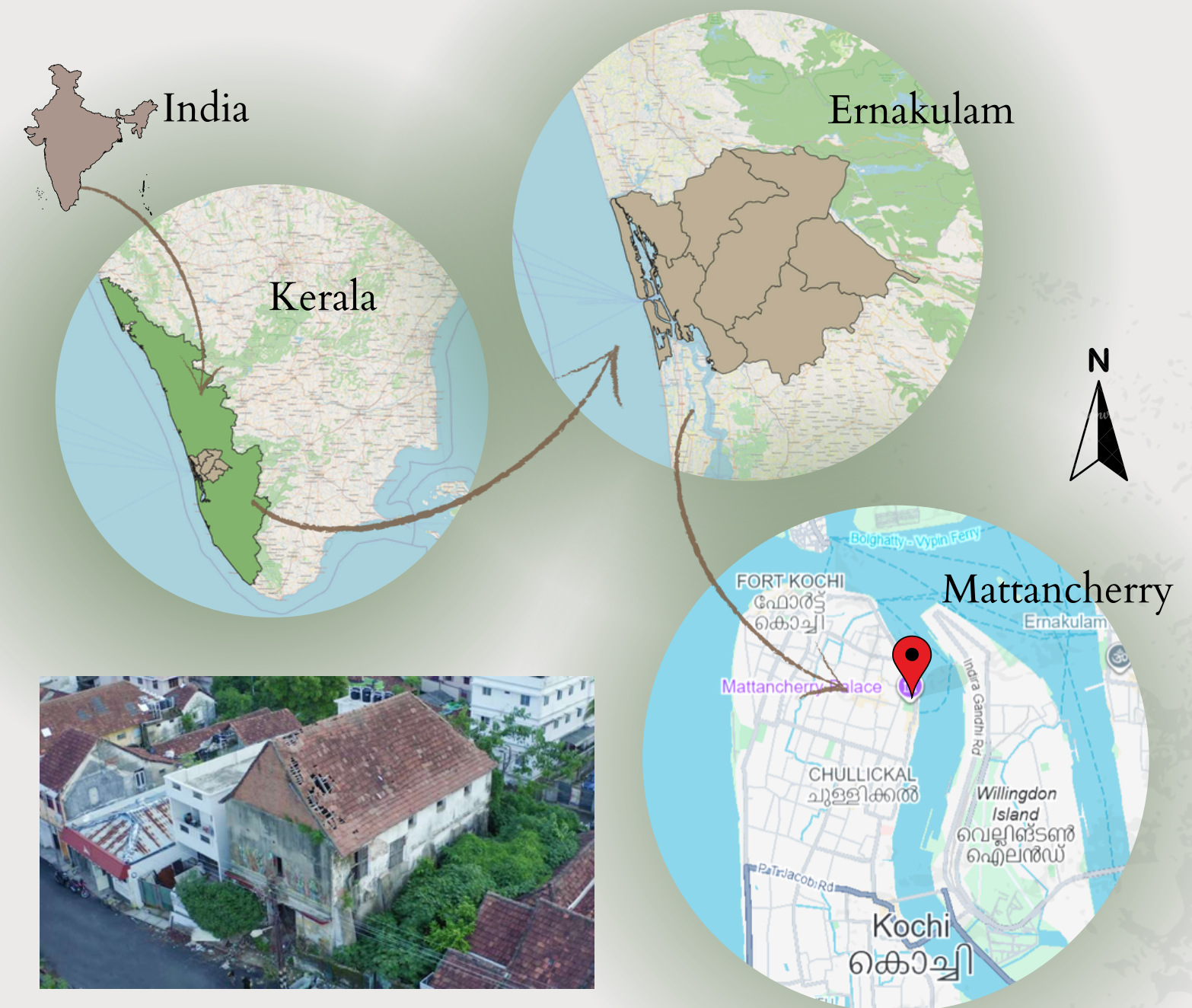
District : Ernakulam

Area : 220 sqm

Location : 9°57'11"N 76°15'38"E

- **Macro Context:** Kochi lies on the southwest coast of India and forms part of the humid tropical climatic zone.
- **Meso Context:** Mattancherry is the historic Jewish quarter, home to spice markets, heritage buildings, and art galleries.
- **Micro Context:** The synagogue is situated along a narrow inner lane branching from the bustling Jew Town Road, surrounded by traditional tiled-roof houses, antique shops, and warehouses.

Connectivity: The area is easily accessible by road from Fort Kochi (3 km), with ferry and public transport links connecting to mainland Ernakulam. Pedestrian movement dominates the lane, making it ideal for cultural and café functions.

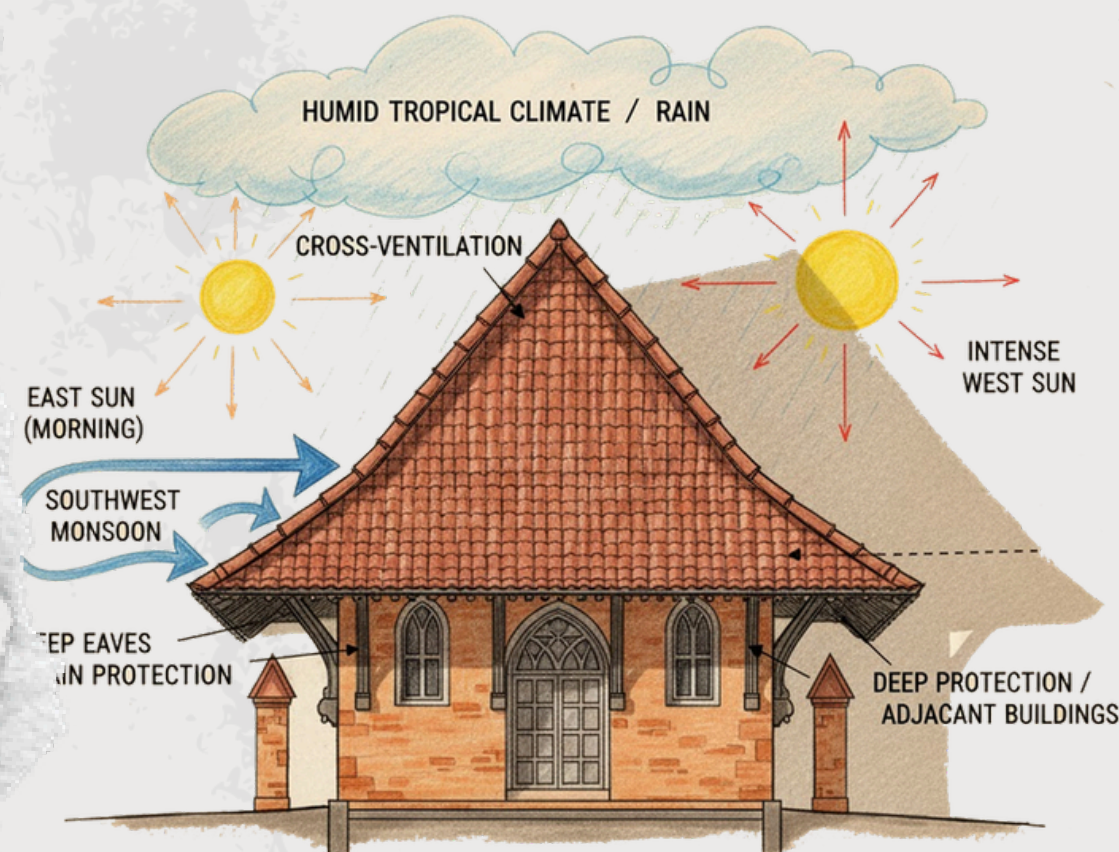


SITE JUSTIFICATION & ANALYSIS

During my site visit to Mattancherry, I observed that the Jew Town precinct, although rich in history and cultural vibrancy, lacks adequate resting spaces or cafés for the many tourists, and heritage visitors exploring the area. The streets are lined with antique shops and galleries, yet there are very few places that allow people to pause, reflect, and engage with the local atmosphere.

The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue (also known as the Black Jew Synagogue), currently lying unused, presents an ideal opportunity for adaptive reuse. Rather than allowing this historic structure to remain abandoned, my proposal aims to revive it as a cultural café that celebrates its architectural legacy while meeting a contemporary public need.

CLIMATIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS



Neighbourhood Context

The surrounding neighbourhood is a dense mixed-use urban fabric, combining residential, commercial, and cultural uses.

- The area's character is defined by narrow streets, courtyard houses, and colonial-era facades.
- Land use is predominantly tourism-oriented, with cafes, art galleries, and homestays occupying restored heritage buildings.
- The synagogue's location amidst this evolving cultural landscape strengthens its potential to become a node for heritage-led regeneration.

Physical Features & Circulation

Site Area: Approximately 200-250 sqm (estimated based on print).

Access: Single pedestrian entry from the front lane; secondary access through the rear courtyard.

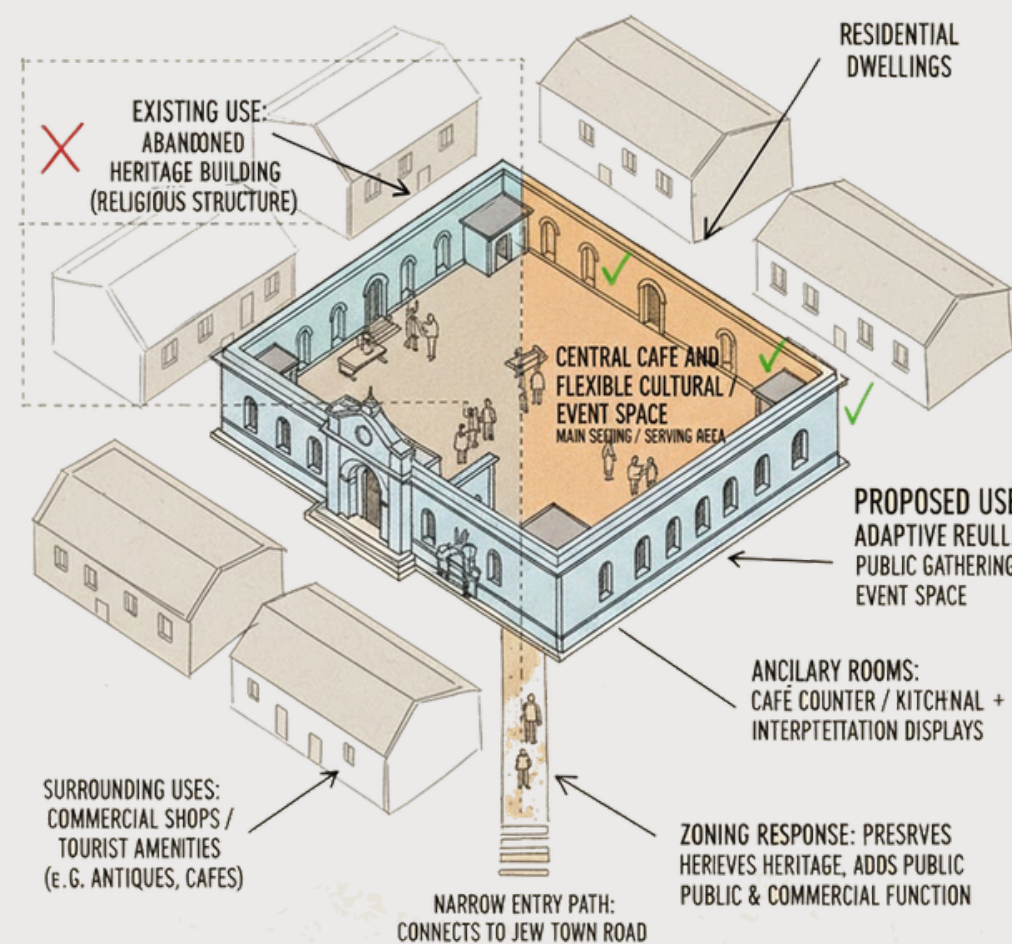
Topography: Flat terrain, with built-up edges and limited open space around the structure.

Vegetation: Scattered trees and small patches of green along boundary.

Orientation:

Pedestrian: Primary mode along narrow streets.

Vehicle: Restricted to smaller vehicles at the main junctions.



LAND USE AND ZONING: ADAPTIVE REUSE CONCEPT



Timeline



1956

Pre-1950s: Functioned as a vibrant center for worship and community gathering.



1977

Abandoned after the Jewish exodus to Israel; structure fell into neglect.



2011

Recent decades: Dilapidated but retains unique timber ceilings, bimah, and pointed arches.

Present condition: Structurally stable but weathered, requiring conservation and adaptive intervention.



2017



2019

The adaptive reuse proposal seeks to preserve the architectural soul of the synagogue while giving it a renewed social relevance.



"THE INHABITED RUIN"

The new structure does not touch the old; it respects the scars
of history while providing modern comfort.

CONCEPT & DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

CONCEPT DERIVATION

The concept emerges from the idea of "Reviving a Forgotten Space." During our visit, we noticed that Jew Town receives hundreds of tourists daily, yet lacks a comfortable place for rest or reflection. The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, once a sacred community space, now stands silent and neglected. The concept therefore focuses on restoring social life within this heritage shell by transforming it into a cultural café that encourages pause, interaction, and appreciation of history.

The design approach seeks to:

- Preserve the sanctity of the original prayer hall volume.
- Insert new functions lightly, using reversible and minimal interventions.
- Blend memory with modernity, allowing visitors to experience both heritage and hospitality.

Concept Statement:

- "A place where people can rest, reflect, and reconnect with the layered history of Mattancherry – breathing new life into an abandoned sacred structure."

DESIGN STRATEGY AND PRINCIPLES

The adaptive reuse strategy follows a balance between preservation and intervention.

- **Preserve:** Retain external façade, existing load-bearing walls, timber beams, and characteristic arched openings.
- **Intervene:** Add light-weight steel structures for mezzanine café seating and modern amenities.
- **Reprogram:** Use the central hall for dining, side wings for display and service, and rear space as kitchen/storage.
- **Reinterpret:** Introduce soft lighting, wooden furniture, and earthy finishes that complement the historic texture.
- **Reconnect:** Create an open entry forecourt encouraging pedestrian flow from Jew Town street into the café.

The design maintains visual transparency and ensures that any new addition can be removed in the future without harming the original building.

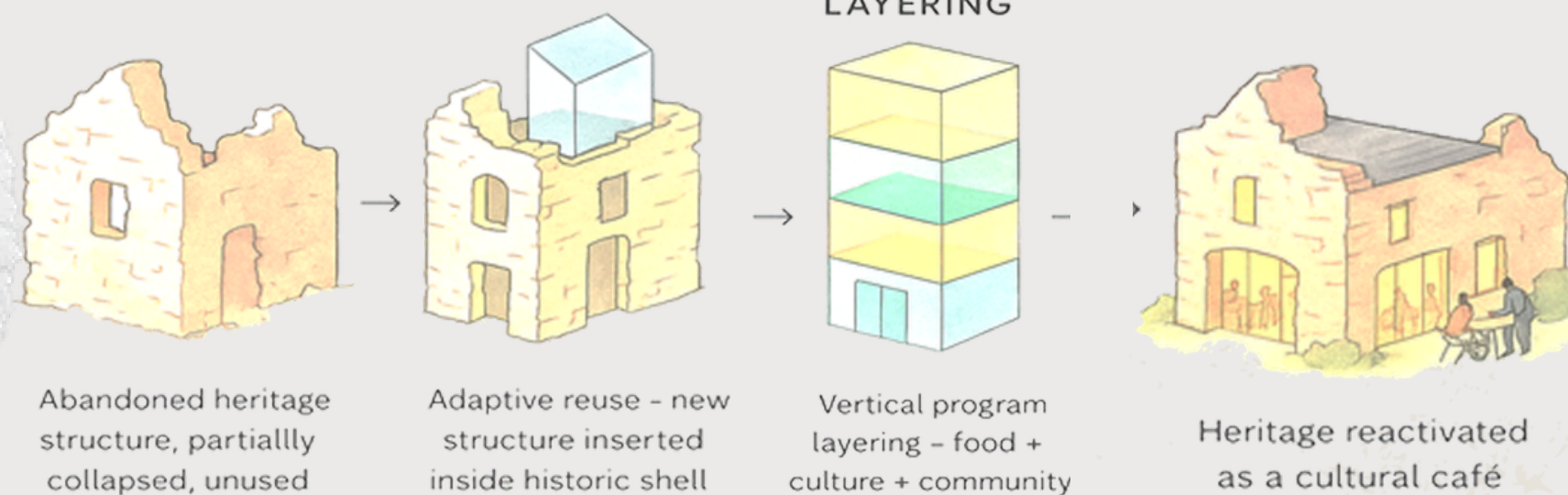
ISSUES & PROBLEM

- The Kadavumbhagam Synagogue is abandoned and structurally damaged, with collapsed roof portions and decaying walls.
- The site is culturally significant but neglected, with no active use or conservation effort in place.
- Despite heavy tourist movement, the stretch lacks any café, public seating, or community space, resulting in a dead urban edge.
- The structure remains economically and socially underutilized, causing loss of heritage value and public memory.
- The absence of activation increases the risk of further deterioration, vandalism, and irreversible loss of identity

HOW IT IS ADDRESSED

- The abandoned synagogue is revived through adaptive reuse, preventing further decay.
- A café and cultural space activates the silent stretch and fills the gap of missing public functions.
- The proposal retains the historic shell while inserting a new usable structure, preserving identity and memory.
- The space now supports community interaction, tourism, and local economy, turning a neglected heritage site into a living public asset.

EXISTING RUIN INSERT STRATEGY PROGRAM LAYERING ACTIVATED SPACE



REIMAGINING - CAFE SHALOM



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



FRONT ELEVATION



SIDE VIEW 1



SIDE VIEW 2

MATERIAL BOARD

