A SPATIAL THEORY OF PUBLIC SPACE
CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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INTRODUCTION OF CONCEPTS AND TERMS:

THEORY: Among the various aspects of public space, one of the foremost is that of architectural space.

All architectural space falls on a single continuum of accessibility determined by physical and social boundaries.

Thus, space can be understood and represented in terms of loosely bounded layers that are mediated by thresholds.

These layers and thresholds distinguish and regulate the degree to which a space can be considered private or public.
BOUNDARIES

National scale boundaries regulating access to the NYPL:
Physical geography, U.S. borders (Legal and Physical), Transportation
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Local scale boundaries regulating access to the NYPL:
Physical geography, Transportation, Monetary (Toll)
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INNUMERABLE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES:

In many ways, the boundaries and thresholds exist ad infinitum before anyone even gets within the vicinity of the New York Public Library.

In order to reach the NY Public Library, people must:

- CLIMB STAIRS…
- OWN SHOES…
- READ MAPS…
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And most of these thresholds require some type of financial transaction to guarantee access…
WITH THESE IDEAS IN MIND, MY INTENTION NOW IS TO:

1) Look closely at the boundaries and thresholds around the New York Public Library to understand the layering of public space.

2) Communicate how architects, in general, tend to think about public space at the scale of a building or urban block.

3) Suggest that when public space is understood *spatially*, it can be measured on a single public-private continuum.
RESEARCH METHODS:

1) Architectural field survey of the New York Public Library.

2) Behavior mapping using counting and observation of activity.
THEORY DEVELOPMENT:

By combining architectural analysis with behavior mapping, it is possible to define the layers of space around the library as well as the boundaries and thresholds regulating the space.
NYPL AS VIEWED FROM 40TH STREET AND FIFTH AVENUE
ISOMETRIC VIEW OF NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
LAYER 0: PUBLIC SIDEWALK
LAYER 1: ENTERING THE LIBRARY PRECINCT
LAYER 3: THE ENTRY STAIRS
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THRESHOLDS BETWEEN LAYERS OF PUBLIC SPACE
The design of the New York Public Library by John Carrere and Thomas Hastings was “guided by the idea that the architectural progression of the spaces should follow a logical, hierarchical sequence from the most easily accessible and public spaces, to the most removed, scholarly retreats…Today most visitors begin a tour of the Library by proceeding through a series of ever more enclosed spaces: from the exterior steps, past the lions, through the sheltering portico, and into the gracious space of Astor Hall.”

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SOME DESIGN SUGGESTIONS FROM THIS RESEARCH:

1) Create spatial boundaries to differentiate areas of use.

2) Use thresholds to create smooth transitions between layers of space.

3) Provide architectural features that allow opportunities to rest, change pace, or take a seat in spaces designed for public use.