

Premise

Everything is evolving, nothing is stable - nothing can stay the same. However, the rate at which things evolve, shift or change relative to the circumstances encountered and dependent upon the artefact in time... One thing is certain though - in time everything as it is today will eventually be lost.

So then, how does one say 'I was here'?

This project is about lifespans, and the importance of the footprints they leave behind - The lifespan of a person, the lifespan of a building, the lifespan of the ground on which the building stands and of the natural world that surrounds it.

In this sense, the immediate idea that springs to mind is a time capsule or archive - the idea that we protect the most important relics of our present so that future generations may learn, understand and relate to their ancestry - however, what if we could archive a piece of nature, preserve it and utilize it in the future?

The project is set on a dynamically shifting coastline in Maryport in Cumbria, where the insertion of a new tidal barrage will impact upon the rate of erosion in an important place of special scientific interest. This onslaught of erosion - alongside the threat of rising sea levels - will mean that in as little as 200 years, this place and the rare natural vegetation it is home to will be lost, forever.

The building then acts as a marker, a point of reference, of not simply a lost place, but of a time, an ecology, and the life of a man who has devoted his existence to ensuring that future generations can discover, understand and utilize what he has left for them - a scientific archive of a lost world.

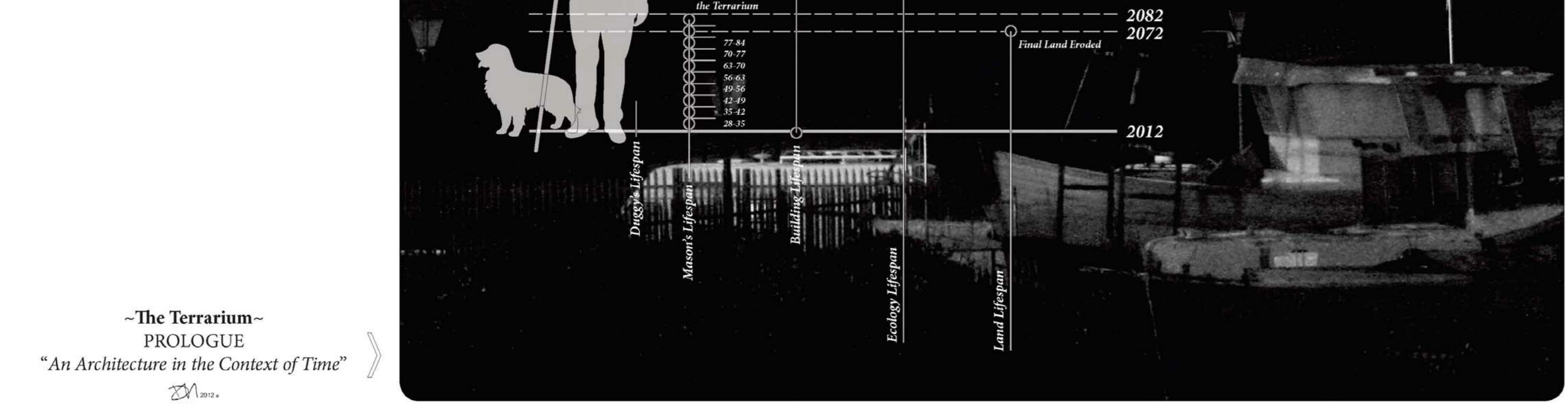
Through the architecture there is an opportunity not just to preserve, but allow one to read the story of several points of existence which once coincided, 500 - 1000 years in the future, then, our successors can discover the detailed overgrown ruins of this place. An ecology which has evolved from the original plant species on the land can be discovered, interwoven through the exteriority of the building - created and encouraged to grow and self-sustain by the inhabitant. Within this ruin there will be layers of the inhabitant's personal archive of plant remains, seeds, books, measuring equipment, soil samples, journals, etc. in a protected environment which was once his home - a fixed point in time of the surrounding land now washed away. In this way, two points of reference within the natural world are established. The inhabitant's way of life is also preserved and ingrained upon the internal spaces of the structure, however the corroded and battered exterior of the tower tells of the extreme weather conditions which it has survived, and the erosion it has suffered over centuries. Perhaps even sediment has begun to form around the base - the beginnings of a new island.

The following is a story board following the extended lifetime of the terrarium, which has been adapted from my final design thesis for the Master of Architecture programme at Liverpool John Moores University. The project was developed with a strong sense of narrative to both explain the rationale of the project and to provide a basis for the poetic intent of the design.

Prologue

The light ocean spray sparkled playfully as it showered the boy. The sound of each wave crashing against the cliff face far below brought with it an excited anticipation of this colourful cascade. As the fine mist crossed his face, the young Mason giggled with glee, tasting the salty brine on his lips...

(Continued in the attached story)



-The Terrarium- PROLOGUE "An Architecture in the Context of Time"

It started with the ocean. The sound of the waves beating rhythmically sleep down against the Maryport cliffs again. Mason threw back the covers and wandered through the dark corridors that led towards the shop front. Rubbing his eyes and dragging his fingers tiredly through his rough stubble, Mason was guided only by the steady cymbal crashes of the breaking water, guided through the overgrown forest of plants to the store entrance.

The shop bell rang as Mason stepped out into the cool night and beheld the new shoreline that was just approaching the shop front. The sea no longer lapped at Maryport beach. Instead, icy water now flooded the neighbouring shop entrances and stretched down Serenhouse Street, swallowing first floor windows and rooftops as it deepened and darkened. The foreboding shadow of the Mound loomed in the distance, emerging from the deep to claim his place as one of the few remaining parts of Maryport above water.

The cold liquid washing over Mason's toes compelled him to wade out into the alien marine landscape, in turn engulfing his thighs, waist and shoulders, until he was swimming above the amber ghosts of streetlights. The smell of sea salt air reminded him of long gone afternoons playing in the surf with Mother Mason, her skinny jeans rolled up to her knees.

As he drew closer to the Mound, Mason peered beneath the black surface of the water at the gloomy graveyard of Maryport below, still and lifeless save for a few potted garden plants drifting past on the current, ebbing towards their inevitable destruction.

Mason clawed chunks of earth from the Mound as he scrambled out of the water and up the muddy slope towards its pinnacle. Breathless and dirty, he turned to survey what remained of his home town. It hadn't taken long for Mother Mason's beloved flower shop to be engulfed by the relentless water. Mason used a few of the taller buildings that still jutted out of the surging swell as landmarks, and attempted to estimate how far the coastline had travelled from its original position.

He fell to his knees, exhausted, dumbfounded. His town and surrounding ecosystem obliterated within a matter of minutes. Mother Mason's tireless conservation had amounted to nothing. Her precious collection, amassed over years, now hung dead in the water that used to be called Maryport.

Mason woke with a start, sat up and threw the cold, sweat soaked sheets off the bed. He waited for his heart to stop pounding and wondered how many times he'd had the dream now. It had been so long, he couldn't remember the last time he'd dreamt of anything else. His trembling hands reached for his cigarettes and fumbled to work the lighter.

"There's something in it" he whispered into the dark, "I know there is."

He had no idea what, but something was heading for Maryport. Mason was sure of it. Something insidious and corrosive. Something that would change everything.



-The Terrarium- Chapter ONE "The Dissolving Shoreline of Maryport"



Mason whistled, beckoning Duggo to his side. The dark-haired cocker spaniel nuzzled his head from the side he'd begun to excavate and bounded along the coastline towards his master. Originally purchased as a companion for the ailing Mother Mason, Duggo had passed hands to Mason when his Mother's increasingly erratic and obsessive behaviour had become unmanageable.

Mason patted Duggo's head and looked out to sea, the familiar sound of the waves meeting the sea defences.

Mason recalled the final days that his mother had spent in the family home. The shop front had become an impassable jungle of overgrown foliage, long ago forsaken by customers. Mother Mason's tireless conservation, however, showed no signs of abating. Mason had slowly begun to realise his Mother's hobby had developed into something more sinister and compulsive. He knew drastic action was required the night she went missing after dark, only to be found leaning over the precipice of the Maryport cliffs, straining to reach a rare plant specimen that lay just out of reach.

Mason turned and started back towards the town. As he walked he picked out the care home where Mother Mason had resided and lived out the last remaining years of her life. With her gone, it was nothing but another Maryport landmark that had sunk beneath the waves of his dark dream.

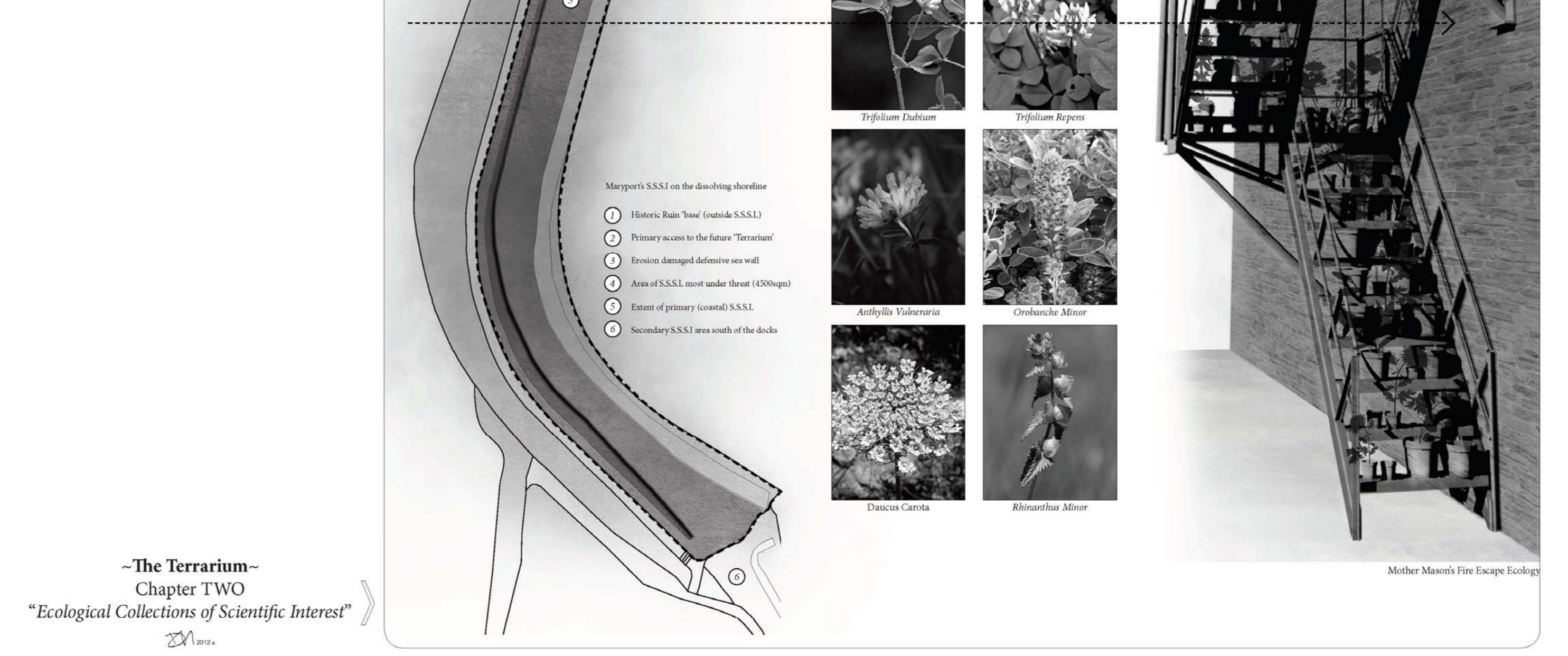
In his hand, Mason carried a bucket housing his own collection of local plant life samples. The difference between himself and his mother, Mason thought, was that he could stop whenever he wanted. Or at least, he hoped so.

Duggo clanked excitedly at the flower shop entrance as Mason fumbled for the keys and shouldered the stiff door open. He had cleared the shop floor and archived most of Mother Mason's clutter away, but the shop was still only doing intermittent business. It was enough to keep him going for the time being, but not forever.

Mason shuffled through to the back of the shop and heaved a large sash window open. He ducked through onto the steps of the old iron fire escape that lay outside. The stairway now housed much of Mason's expanded plant collection. It snaked up the houses exterior like a huge, leafy vine.

Mason gingerly manoeuvred to one of the few remaining clear spaces on the stairway and carefully deposited his latest finds. He knelt out over the edge and tilted his neck to contemplate the upwardly sprawling mass in its entirety. From the window, Duggo sniffed at the plants he could reach and met his Master's gaze with a sadness in his eyes.

"You're right Duggo" Mason sighed, "we're running out of space. Duggo's tail wagged in agreement."



-The Terrarium- Chapter TWO "Ecological Collections of Scientific Interest"

"You want it where?" The foreman raised his eyebrows with genuine surprise and concern.

"Just like the plans say" Mason reassured, "up there." They stood in a car park near Maryport docks from which Mason pointed to the summit of a small mound. A top which mound sat an old sandstone ruin looking out onto the ocean.

The foreman scratched his head with a pencil and sucked on his bottom lip. It wasn't every day someone asked you to build a 'vertical landscape' on top of an old pile of stones. A nice change of pace from two-up, two-down, but still!

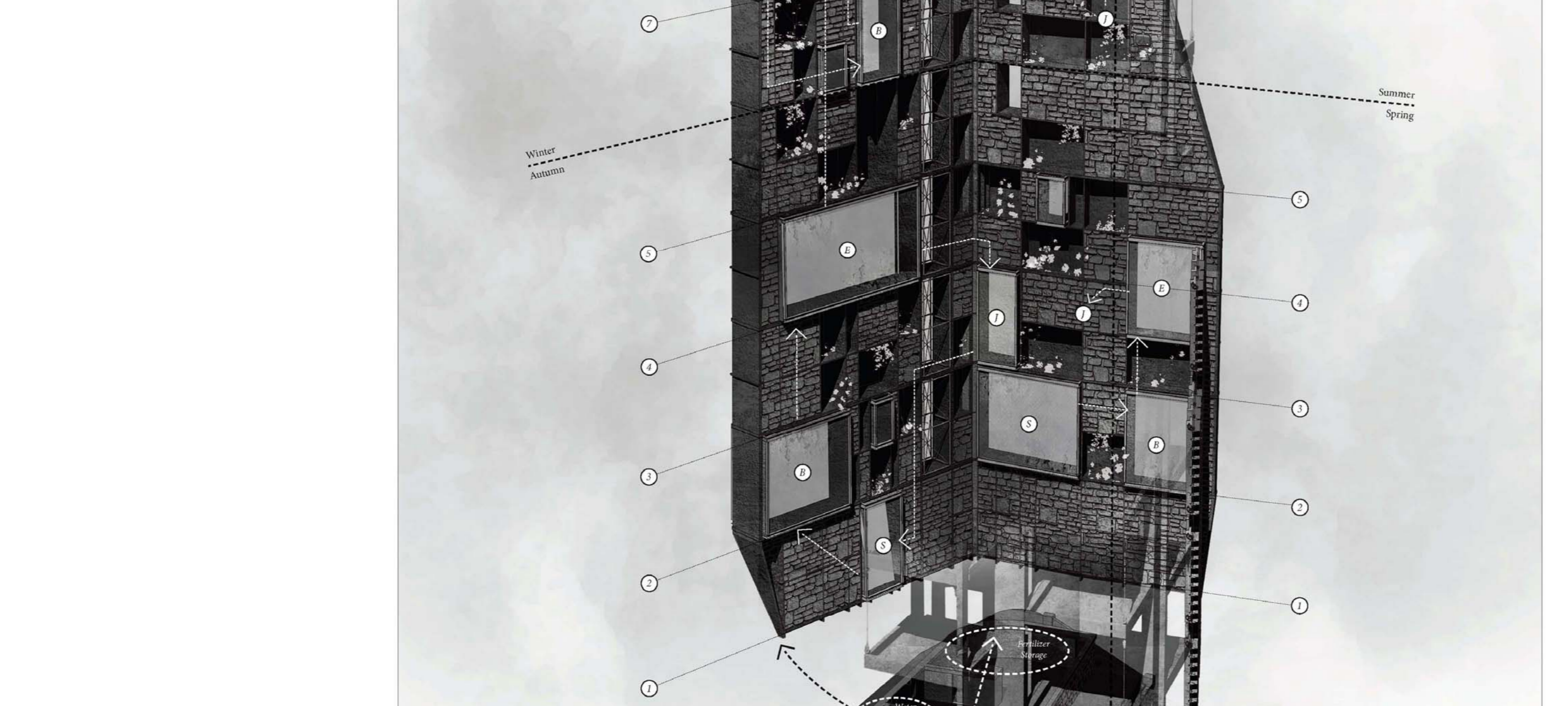
"Okay mate, you're paying for it."

Mason had anticipated such antagonism, but it was true, he was paying for it. The old house and adjoining shop had been sold. Mason hadn't gotten the price he was after, but the sale combined with his personal savings and a sizeable inheritance from his distant Aunt - her will named 'next of kin', all of which remained Mason - ensured there was enough to commission the construction of the tower.

As the workers began to organise themselves nearby, Mason looked down at Duggo who was panting mindlessly at his feet. Their lives were about to change more radically than either of them could ever have imagined.

There was little left for Mason in Maryport these days. At the tail end of his twenties, most of Mason's friends had either moved away permanently or just fallen out of touch. Most were starting families of their own and were well established in their chosen careers. Meanwhile, the flower shop continued to flourish and Mason found himself alone and depressed more and more often. He knew things had hit rock bottom when he finally turned to alcohol.

With years of AA meetings, sleepless nights and soul searching behind him, Mason had finally reached the point where he felt sane and focused again. He considered the task ahead of him and realised for the first time in a long while that he was excited about something. He had no idea how he was going to do it, but he was determined to save every plant and insect he could from the fate they had suffered in his cataclysmic nightmare. He would build his ecological ark.



-The Terrarium- Chapter THREE "A Framework for Lifespans"

Mason entered the first level of the tower and glanced over the first few plates he had already filled with his existing plant collection from Mother Mason's florist shop. He arrived at his living quarters where Duggo bounded towards him, barking excitedly.

Above them, the remaining levels of the tower were still being constructed. Until they were ready, the workers had built Mason a rudimentary wooden hut containing a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. For the time being, the hut would provide shelter during the winter months which Mason had planned out meticulously along with the other seasons.

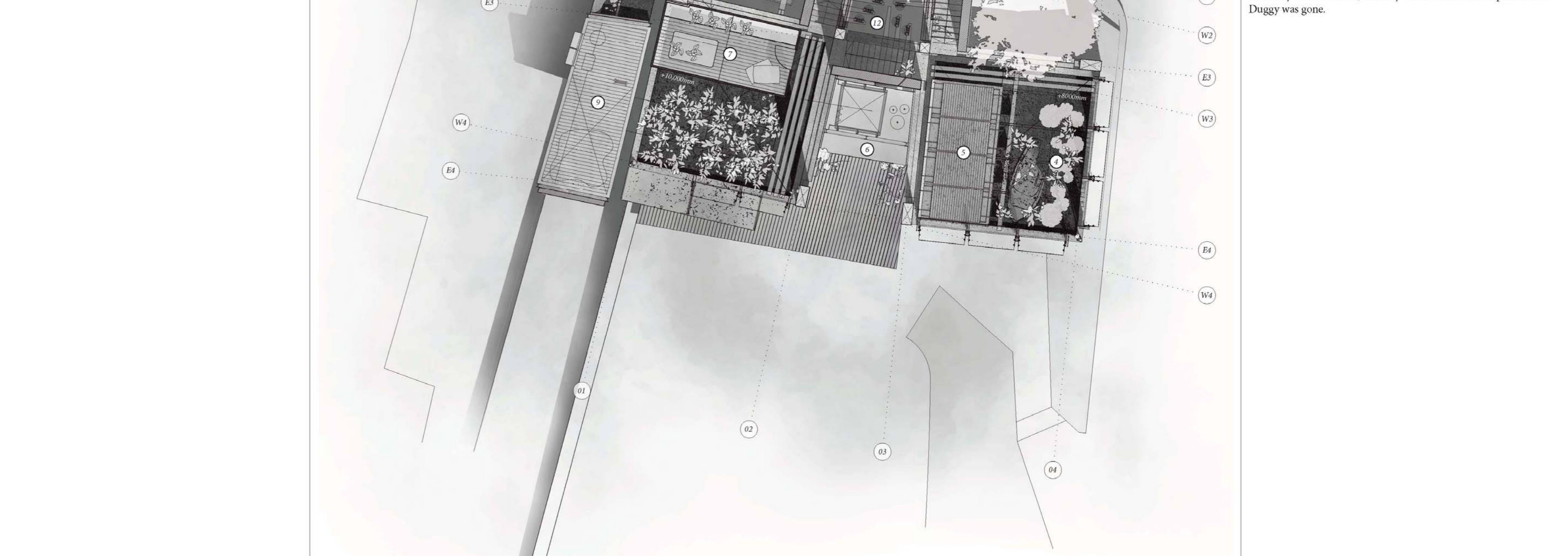
Winter meant habitation and maintenance. No new plants would be growing, but he could make short rounds of his collection to prevent any frost damage. Spring would bring with it the collection of newly building samples and the rotation in his journal of all the natural changes occurring around him. Summer was for banking on the open terrarium platforms, soaking up the sun alongside his plants and bathing in the nearby sea. And finally, Autumn would arrive, the natural time for harvest of his food stores and stocking up for the winter once more.

Mason entered the hut, undressed and slipped into his old dressing gown. Opening his journal, Mason began to plot the overall scheme of his ark's ecology. Before adding more plants and insects, he was determined to organise and maximize the potential of his existing collection.

He could see the overall plan for his terrarium in his mind's eye. Level after level of plant life would interconnect to provide homes to a wide range of insects and create the perfect, sustainable habitat. While maintaining this, he would experiment with different methods of farming and cultivation to enhance the tower's productivity.

All the while, Mason would safely stow away any samples of particular importance in a specially constructed 'Core'. This would house only the most precious and valuable specimens that warranted preserving for future generations.

Mason sat over his journal long into the night, just as he would the following evening, and the evening after that. Once the first level of the terrarium was organised he would take Duggo out into the hills and continue to search for new specimens. It felt good to have a plan, for once in his life.



-The Terrarium- Chapter FOUR "Dwelling & Daily Rituals of Mason"

Mason trudged through the fields just outside Maryport while Duggo padded by his side. The dog's youthful spark had been replaced by frequent rests. This familiar journey was one of the few the poor animal could manage anymore.

Mason had previously shared these fields with his classmates and Science teacher during his days at Netherhall Secondary School. The Science outings were always his favourite. He and his teacher, Mr. McAndrews - Mac to his star pupil - got along well. While his friends lagged behind to smoke cigarettes, Mason was at Mac's side, collecting every seed of botanical knowledge that was on offer. If Mason had known his father, he would have wanted him to be like Mac. The relationship was short-lived, however, ending along with Mason's high school career.

As they reached the first Maryport town houses, Mason lent down to clip on Duggo's lead, though he doubted Duggo had the energy run off. They continued, a bucket of specimens in one hand, Duggo's lead in the other, through the streets littered with discarded wrappers and lined with overflowing council bins.

It had never bothered him before, but since beginning his sparse tower existence, Mason's patience for the wantonly wasteful society around him had waned. Before living in the terrarium, Mason had known as little about recycling and living a green existence as anyone else, but it had taken hardly any time to learn. And if he could learn, anyone could...

Mason visualised the tasks that lay stretched out into the remainder of the day. His mornings were dedicated to rambling and collecting specimens, but the afternoons were set aside for the maintenance tasks necessary to sustain his solitary existence. And the terrarium required more attention with each year that passed.

The crops needed watering, the bee hive he had installed was full of honey and the tower's plant filled levels were in dire need of pruning. All these tasks needed seeing to, along with the emptying of his rainwater containers and the always pleasant (always pungent) task of putting his waste to good use. He would also have to go out and fish for his supper.

In the evening, with Duggo snoring at his feet, Mason would open his journal to note the day's findings and how they would fit into the overall scheme of the terrarium. A challenge, considering the first level was almost full. Mason's days were busier than they had ever been, but they would seem a lot emptier when Duggo was gone.



-The Terrarium- Chapter FIVE "The Infiltration of Nature"

