

Acknowledgements

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Thank you all.⁵

1 Sonia Nuñez-Vas Jorge, Fernando Eduardo Colina

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5 There are far too many people I didn't fit in here, so many "thank you"s I haven't detailed. I could write an acknowledgements section the length of two theses for you all. From the deepest depths of my heart, I appreciate you.

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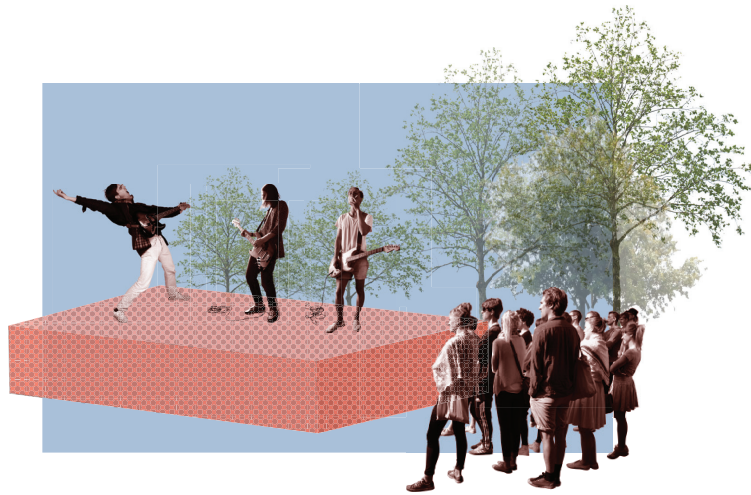
Introduction

Housing today— especially affordable housing— is in quite a state. There continues to be a cost of living crisis, and in the context of one of the highest income countries in the world, this is nothing short of an embarrassing tragedy. Public housing is scarce and often inadequate, housing stock is aging and in need of repair or replacement, new builds are often prohibitively priced, and the rental market is bloated. In the past, legislation towards affordable housing has made strides, imperfectly at best and tragically at worst.

Today, housing as a human right is still a contentious ideal, as gentrification prices out residents from their homes, NIMBYism maintains the status quo, and more and more people find themselves unable to afford the cost of living. The importance of housing cannot be overstated, as reliable, affordable, and long term housing has been proven to improve physical and emotional wellbeing, job attainment, public safety, health outcomes, and more¹. The concept of “Housing as a verb”, detailed by John Turner in the early 1970s², explains how the act of housing is a long term endeavor that policymakers, designers, planners, neighbors, residents, and more are consistently in the process of. Part of this process is the constant shaping of meaning that allows for a transition from housing to Home. Advocating for necessary housing stock is a step in the right direction towards improving quality of life, to which secure tenancy is a major element.

Even so, providing a shelter is only one element of a holistic solution to housing. A holistic approach works over time with multiple stakeholders to ensure that basic needs are met so that people can flourish. Part of this flourishing is the insurance of stability, which allows residents to dream. Gaston Bachelard explains the house as the protection of the dreamer³, giving us a chance to find possibilities to believe in. These frameworks situate my work, where the physical buildings of apartments and houses are but one part of the continued effort to house people, to help ensure the opportunity to dream. I suggest then that the role of the designer is to imagine possibilities, and to inspire these dreams among others.

The creativity of a wide ranging group of people with multiple needs and wants cannot be replicated perfectly with the ideas of a single designer. With the framework of the “expert community” in mind, the role I take in this project is to propose a possible world that can be created through cooperation and time, incrementally and with the intent and participation of those who will be using and benefiting from their own creations. These possibilities take the form of speculative collages in my work, which communicate trust in the expertise of the community to create and carve out the places they desire through need, whim, or the option to make something better and more usable. Placemaking matters because it is the mechanism at the hyperlocal scale through which needs can begin to be realized by the very people experiencing them. These collages only begin to imagine the possibilities of a community, but are a start at increasing the connection, collaboration, and social change that placemaking can bring.



Introduction endnotes

1 Maqbool, Viveiros, and Ault, The Impacts of Affordable Housing on Health: A Research Summary. April 20

- This publication details the real impacts of having security in one's living situation. It is critical to recognize not only the more obvious implications of affordable housing, but also the institutionalized issues that housing is all tied up in.

2 Turner, 1972, in Freedom to Build, dweller control of the housing process, edited by Turner and Fichter.

- John Turner's concept of the actionable nature of housing has broad applicability and implications across policy spaces, design and architecture, and even just the way that we think about housing in our lives.

3 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, page 6.

- Bachelard goes on in this passage to describe other phenomenological conceptualizations of the house, its a really wonderful read.

Section One, Site



Alewife herring. Image courtesy of Chesapeake Bay Program, photo by Will Parson

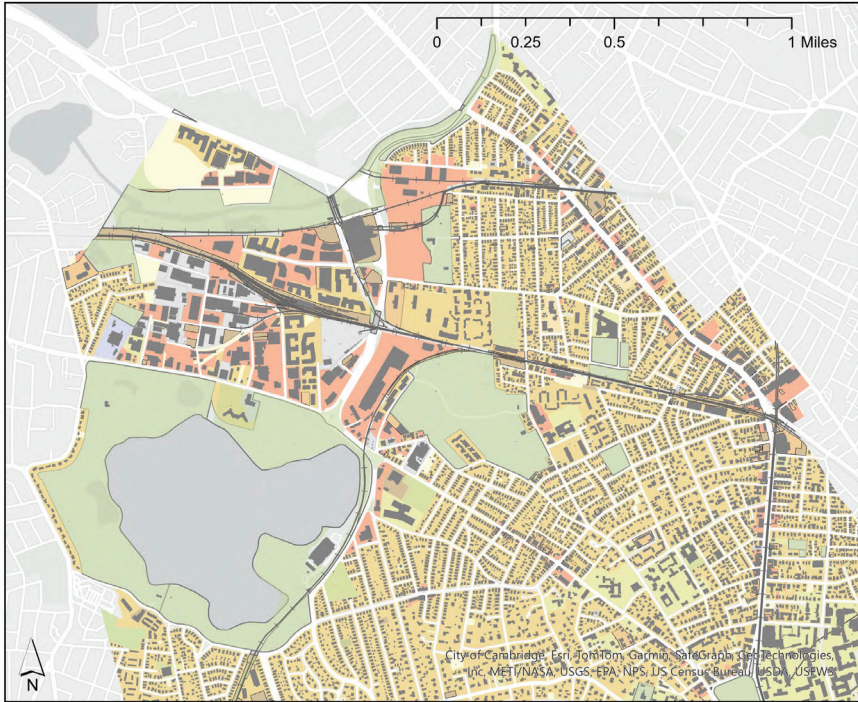
The Seed














I grew up around Cambridge. This city was where my friends lived, extra curricular activities happened, it was the city I swapped sides of when my family moved from Medford to Boston. Passing through the Fresh Pond area was a common occurrence. There were walks around the pond, grocery stores, birthday parties at the bowling alley, restaurants, multiple train rides to and from Alewife station, and so much more. Always, the three massive brick towers stood out at me. I asked questions and learned that they were affordable housing blocks. I grew up more and continued wondering about these and other affordable housing options, this line of questioning leading me to research topics in high school and later college. Passing through it still piqued my interest, most recently with the increased development in the area. Lanes and Games, a longstanding bowling spot, became a new luxury apartment complex. Leaving Alewife station one day in the summer of 2023, I saw a new building being erected right across the street. Passing this build site, I quickly assumed that the building was more luxury housing, given the modus operandi of projects in the area, and that the materials being used were top-shelf high-performance Swiss building materials. I took a photo and went on my way, shaking my head at the thought of new luxury housing on the very footprint of such icons of affordability in the neighborhood.



Image by author, 2023

The Alewife area is a rich site, full of residential plots, commercial areas, public transit, roads of all types, new and old buildings alike, and green spaces. Like other neighborhoods in Cambridge, the urban fabric here is layered and complex. Low income areas, houseless populations, dilapidated buildings, and crumbling sidewalks and streets are just a hop skip and a jump from luxury condos, expensive cafes, modern homes, and more markers of a mixed income city full of disparate experiences.



- | | |
|--|--|
|  Building footprints |  Health |
|  Railroad lines |  Industrial |
|  Bridges |  Mixed Use |
| General land use |  Open Space |
|  Cemetery |  Residential |
|  Charitable/Religious |  Transportation |
|  Commercial |  Utility |

Fresh Pond Apartments and Rindge towers are prime examples in Cambridge of the modernist housing blocks of the 50s and 60s that were imagined to be the cure to a lack of affordable housing at the time. While the five-hundred-and-four apartments were preserved as a mix of affordable¹ and Section 8² designated housing using City of Cambridge funding³, this barely makes a dent in the actual need for affordable housing options in this neighborhood and across the city.

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Councillors okay millions to keep affordability of Alewife units; 504 homes have been at risk

By [Ursula Murray-Bozeman](#) and [Marc Levy](#)

Monday, March 2, 2020

Towering achievement

Three towers holding a combined 777 units of affordable housing were built on Rindge Avenue between 1968 and 1970, but how they have been kept affordable over a half-century has evolved and diverged, along with area median income in a community with an increasingly large gap between classes.



Research: Ursula Murray-Bozeman Graphic: Marc Levy

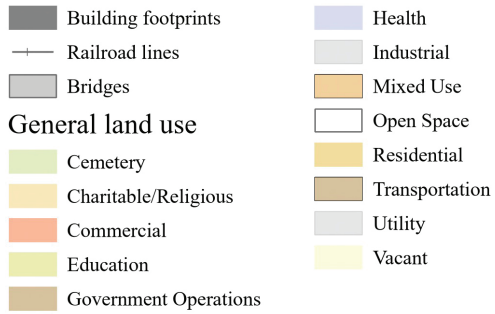
This is where that new apartment block I saw being built comes back. I had assumed this was more luxury housing, but I was wrong – it was new affordable housing. Just a Start, a community development corporation out of Cambridge which aims to “promote equity by creating access to stable housing and building pathways to economic opportunity” manage the Fresh Pond Apartments, as well as the newly built Rindge Commons project⁴. Once the second phase of Rindge Commons is completed, this project will provide another one-hundred-and-one new affordable apartments⁵.



Part one of the Rindge Commons development – Rindge Commons North, completed summer of 2024. Image from Dellbrooks JKS Developers.

In a conversation with Gerry Zipser – Director of Housing at Just A Start (JAS) – I learned about the requests during the resident feedback phase from residents of the towers to maintain access to enough parking, as well ensure that traffic did not increase too much. Having adequate lighting at night was also important to residents, who also requested that the first level of the new building not be occupied by businesses that would increase traffic to the area.

Traffic remains a big question. In Cambridge, a city that prides itself on its progressive bike infrastructure and other green initiatives, this neighborhood situation feels set apart. Returning to the map shown above, one can clearly see the emphasis of this site is on commercial (red) areas, when the fabric of the majority of the surrounding city is primarily residential (yellow).



Experiencing the area alongside the apartments reveals how distinct these buildings are from other parts of the neighborhood. Adjacent to the towers is a mixture of single family and multi-family homes that generally fit a similar style. The brick massing not only stands out across the skyline but on the ground in terms of program and organization of the neighborhood. The buildings are within their own plot, surrounded by parking and small strips of green. All together, the footprint, aesthetic, and more set the affordable housing apart from the typical market options, leading to separation and alienation of residents from the neighborhood spatially and aesthetically. Further adding to the separation of the affordable housing from the neighborhood is the ability to access resources.



This diagram illustrates the commercial (red) versus mainly residential (yellow) areas, showing their closeness, while also highlighting the intersecting train tracks which cut through the area. The called out angle shows the view of the apartments from the parking lot of the shopping area. While so close, this distance cannot be safely crossed.

The Fresh Pond Mall area contains restaurants, grocery stores, and retail options like furniture stores and other outlets. Getting here from Rindge towers should be simple— the apartments are only a stone's throw away from the shopping center. In reality however, a stark chasm of railroad tracks cuts between them, making access impossible without crossing a busy bridge that, while having a crosswalk, is relatively hostile to pedestrians. Loud traffic, lack of shade, and crumbling sidewalks make the trek across the bridge uncomfortable.

In this project, I use the framework of housing as a verb, established by John Turner's 1972 work by the same title. Using this concept, the action of "housing" people is not a single event in time but rather something that practitioners and other stakeholders participate in together, which takes time and deliberate action.

In this site, housing residents is one step that Just a Start and other providers have taken. Yet, other elements of the area will require attention and change to create systems of home for the community. This is where placemaking and participation become part of the picture. The role of the designer is to advocate for change through creative solutions.



Images by author, 2024



History of the site

The Cambridge we see today was shaped millions of years ago during the last ice age. The movement of glaciers across land masses carved out the hills and valleys that make up the landscape of the city as we know it.

Strawberry Hill, Avon Hill, and Observatory Hill, along with the great marsh which would become the Alewife area were each shaped during this time.

Indigenous peoples – namely the Massachusetts Tribe– lived here, shaping and altering the landscape and using the tools of the natural environment. The name Alewife now refers to the wetland brook reservation area – a tributary of the nearby Mystic River – as well as the major bus and train station in the area, but originated from a smallish, silver river herring which was plentiful in the area, swimming along the brook and river. The fish served as an important fertilizer and food for the indigenous community in this region, utilizing a practice of planting the fish in alongside the seeds of their corn crops, a technique later taught to the colonists.



Map developed by Jenny Davis and Lisa Brooks for *The Common Pot: the Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (University of Minnesota Press 2008) by Lisa Brooks.

Later in the 1800 through the 1900s, the swampy area created so many millions of years prior provided rich clay pits for the brick industry that soon thrived in North Cambridge. The New England Brick Company (NEBCo) operated in the area until 1956, producing bricks that were used locally to build the city and can still be seen stamped with the NEBCo label today. These remnants of the land in crumbling sidewalks, homes, Harvard University buildings, worker housing, and old mills of the era are another way that the natural history of this place created the landscape we now know to be quintessential Cambridge.



Bricks drying out in North Cambridge Brickyard, 1930s. Image from History Cambridge.

Soon the clay pits were exhausted of their supply, and the industry slowed, with the last of NEBCo's facilities closing in 1956. Many of the former pits were either filled in and built upon or turned into parks like Danehy park.



Brick with NEBCo stamp. Bricks like this one can still be seen across the Cambridge and Boston area.

017101 JOHNSON GATE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, MASS.



© 1998 GETTY PHOTOGRAPHIC CO.

Johnson Gate at Harvard University, one of the many brick landmarks of the college. Image from Library of Congress.

One such pit which initially served NEBCo until it was exhausted of its supply in the mid 19th century was Jerry's Pit, known now as Jerry's Pond. The pit was decommissioned and filled in with water in the 1870s, serving seasonally as a place to harvest ice for nearby ice houses. After being filled in, Jerry's Pit also provided a swimming hole for the local community. The area was used recreationally until the "pond" was gated off in 1961 following drownings and chemical runoff issues, with the opening of McCrehan pool in the adjacent lot.



Historical image of Jerry's Pond as a swimming hole, 1940s. Image from the Cambridge Historical Commission.

The rich natural history of this site is ever present in the current environment and iterations of North Cambridge, although in diminishing ways as this area changes and morphs. The role of the designer is to know what came before us so we can design for the future.



Built in 1848, this house was the superintendent of the brickyard's home while the area was dominated by the brick industry. Today, the house still stands, with the continued legacy of brick echoed in the facade of the Rindge Towers, built upon the retired claypits which were key to the early economy of the area. Image from Google Maps.

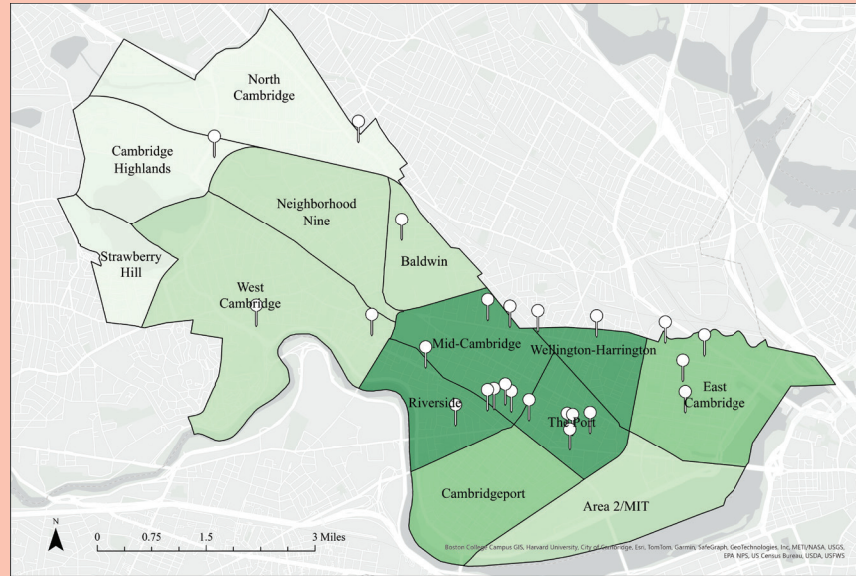
Section one endnotes

- 1 Affordable means that the rent of these units is calculated to not exceed 30% of the tenants income. This is typically understood as the resident not being “cost burdened”.
- 2 Residents are able to use Section 8 housing vouchers on these units. This greatly expands the possibilities of tenants to afford their housing.
- 3 Cambridge Announces Preservation of 504 Affordable Units at Fresh Pond Apartments. City of Cambridge, 2021. This move allowed for the rent to be stabilized in these units, perpetuating housing security for residents here,
- 4 <https://justastart.org/> Just A Start was able to finance the construction of these developments though grants and lots of fundraising. It is a really critical area for increased housing, and concentrating social services here as well is important. Refer to section appendix for detail on social services in Cambridge.
- 5 Rindge Commons North - CDD - City of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cambridge Community Development Department.

Section one appendix

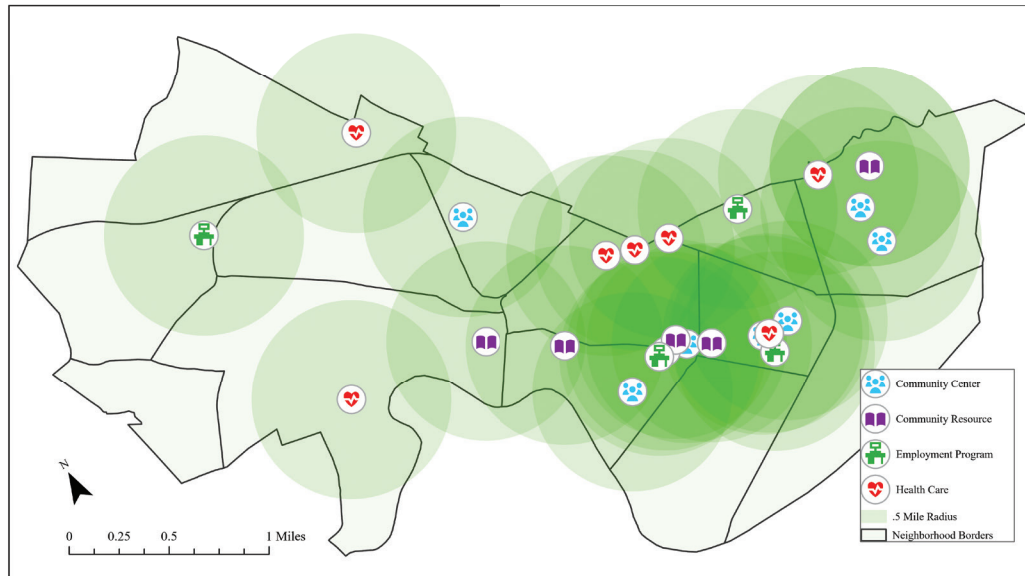
This cartographic analysis examines the distribution of critical community assets in Cambridge, MA. Looking at locations of healthcare facilities, employment agencies, community resources, and community centers, the analysis aims to identify which neighborhoods are less served by these resources in their current conditions. Through this analysis, neighborhood differences can be understood more clearly, as certain neighborhoods maintain the majority of public resources of the city.

“Critical community assets” in this analysis include community resources as identified by the city’s Community Development Department (CDD). These majority non-profit organizations include assets with decent public recognition and use. In this analysis, locations focussing on arts and culture have been removed from the data for clarity.



This map depicts the result of a spatial join between these community assets and the 13 neighborhoods of Cambridge. This model uses a .5 mile search radius, showing which neighborhoods intersect with this radius. The neighborhoods with more instances of intersecting the .5 mile radius around these assets are shown in the darker shades, while those with fewer instances are shown lighter.

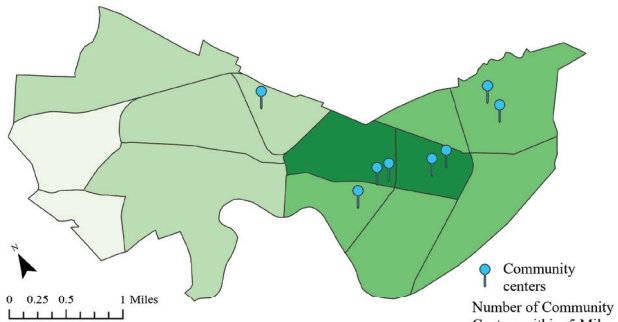
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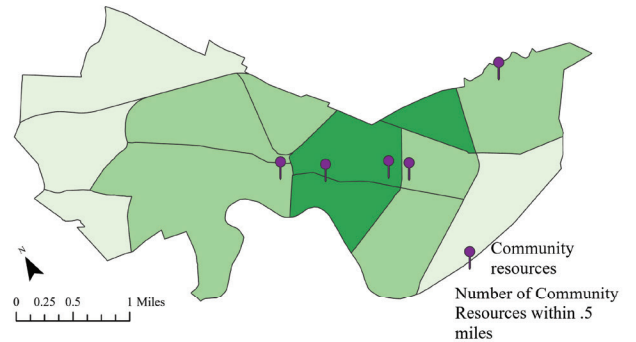
Cambridge consists of 13 neighborhoods. Of these 13, Mid-Cambridge, which contains Harvard University, Harvard Square, and some residential areas has the highest amount of community resources within .5 miles of the neighborhood. North Cambridge, the site of this thesis, is much less well served, with only three of these resources within .5 miles of the neighborhood boundaries.

This table shows the instances of each neighborhood intersecting this .5 mile radius.

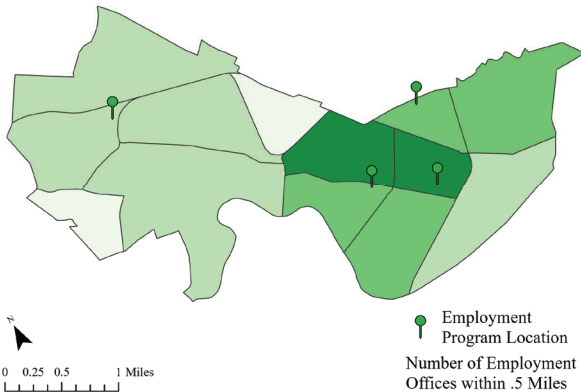
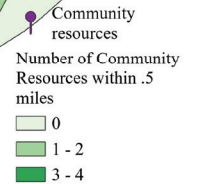
Neighborhood Name	Number of Community Assets within .5 miles
Mid-Cambridge	17
The Port	16
Wellington-Harrington	16
Riverside	14
Cambridgeport	10
East Cambridge	10
Baldwin	7
Area 2/ MIT	6
Neighborhood Nine	5
West Cambridge	5
North Cambridge	3
Cambridge Highlands	1
Strawberry Hill	0



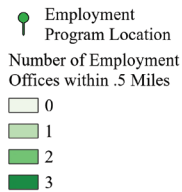
Community Centers



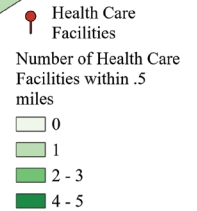
Community Resources



Employment Programs

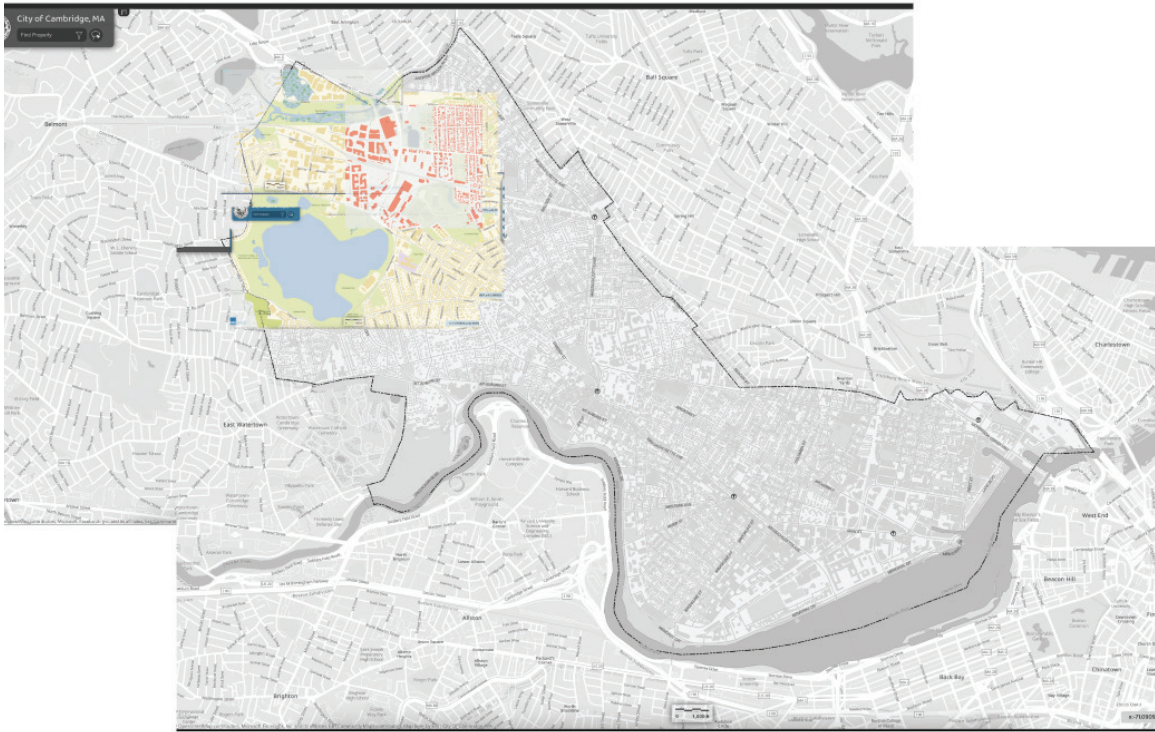


Healthcare Facilities



All maps by author, using data from Cambridge GIS, and from the city of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD)

Section Two, Housing



Composite map collage using City of Cambridge GIS data. Compiled by author.

Creating Place

“Housing” as a word carries baggage. The term “housing” can be at once defined as

- a.) specific schemes of providing shelter
 - b.) a bane of homeowners associations
 - c.) a commodity
- or
- d.) an action.

In this thesis, I define housing following the terminology of theorists like John Turner, who refine these multiple meanings and connotations of the concept of housing.

Turner's 1972 piece "Housing as a Verb" explains the action of housing: it is something we are participating in deliberately. Working to house people thus also brings with it a slew of new actions – making a shelter permanent, making that structure safe, making that place home. Those who work to house may also work to create value there with services and amenities, elements which create a better place for people to live. These aspects of housing as a continuous and ever changing activity are not always the purview of solely the architect, designer, or planner. These are the actions of placemaking.

Place in the geographic sense is a separate term from space.

a.) Place is more loose of a definition, typically understood by geographers as a space which has been imbued with meaning¹.

b.) Space is the physical location we create through relationships to other spaces. Space is something we inhabit, move within, conceptualize, and constantly reshape and reconfigure

However, once we start to create memories in a space –put things and people there that matter– these spaces become more than a park or a room or a store but become places of belonging. This is the creation of place value. It is critical that people have these places to feel like they belong and matter, but creating meaning cannot be forced or put upon people.

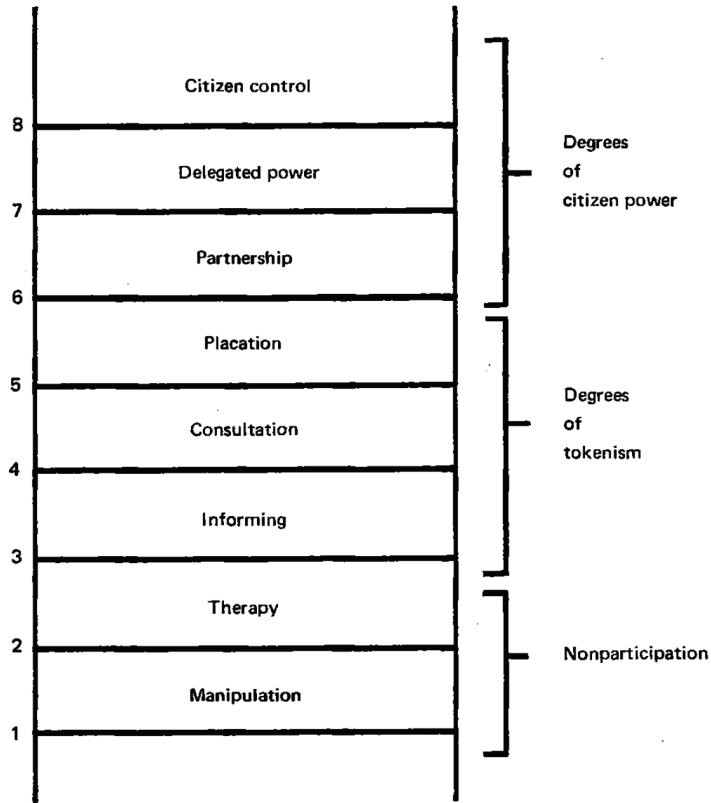


Examples of placemaking in Cambridge today: Upper image: chess tables in Harvard Square, these were refurbished but kept when the campus center was renovated (Flickr image, Harvard ABP Chess Tables, by MadBall, August 5, 2012.). Bottom image: street activation in Inman Square– what started as a temporary project has become a mainstay of summer dining in the area (Photo from Neighborways website. <https://www.neighborways.com/cambridge-public-patios>).

Placemaking is something that cannot be done in a vacuum as it is based on a collective creation of meaning. Placemaking is inherently communal. As such, it is something that happens not through the typical mechanism of project based planning and design. The concept of the expert community is critical here to understanding the tools that advocates of placemaking have at their fingertips. Designers in this sense cannot come to these sorts of projects with too many ideas in mind already– the community leads the action. These people have first hand experience with the space, and will have important background and insight. They will also be the “advocates, stewards, and owners”² of these places for the future.

Helping to activate the creativity of a community takes empathy, solidarity, and a focus on the process instead of the outcome. In *New Creative Community, the Art of Cultural Development*, Arlene Goldbard says that “To be most effective, projects must be open-ended... freedom to experiment and even fail is essential to the process”³. This is an important lesson not to prioritize solely the positive outcomes, but to shift focus to the element of surprise that the process can bring, caring not just for the long term vision of a cohesive end goal but being open to the potential for change and growth along the path to get there.

The creation of meaning is a personal thing, it takes time. Participatory models take into account more of the actual needs and wants of a community than a top-down approach, but the reality of participatory design is that it takes lots of time. Time to work with community members to ensure designers are listening and bringing attention to needs. Critical also is to recognize whose voices and needs are being heard. If only those with the time and energy to make it to meetings and events are recognized, this may not be representative of the actual possibilities to use a space. The concept of “participatory design” can also be manipulated in ways which allow organizations to tout their community focus while doing nothing to actually affect people. Offering participants the illusion of choice while really prescribing the solution so called experts think will cure a community is not real participation.



Original diagram of the ladder of citizen participation, developed in 1969 by Shelly Arnstein and published in the Journal of the American Planning association. This is still a critical framework for understanding community projects today. To reach the top rungs of the ladder, power must be in the hands of the citizens. <https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/>

Participatory design on this site has been a topic that the designers of the new Rindge Commons apartments, Icon architecture, were in tune to. To give credit where it is due, the design of Rindge Commons North and the soon to come second building (which contains the majority of the housing that this project will provision) seem to be in line with the needs of residents of the area. In conversations with residents of the nearby Rindge Towers apartments it was understood that enough parking was an important element of the complex, as well as safety of the area's residents, especially at night. Residents also wanted to reduce extra traffic to the area from mixed-use development like retail space below the apartments and offices⁴. Instead, the designers opted for a childcare facility on the ground floor of the building. Just A Starts offices are also contained here with some other programming from the organization including a career center and youth development program. The design team also took into consideration the need for parking, and claim to only be reducing parking spaces by 25 spots⁵. This project is a good example of housing development actively taking into consideration the perspectives of those in the community that they are affecting– this needs to be the absolute bare minimum.

I situate this project in the second tier of participation following Arnstein's framework: that of "degrees of tokenism," where the community had been informed of a change to their neighborhood, and were consulted on the project, given the opportunity to make comments even in the instance that they would not be heeded. Luckily, changes were made to the building such as the daycare replacing retail space. Even so, so much more can be done with this site to expand the opportunities of those in affordable housing, empowering them and bringing to life a more actively engaged population.

When I first began to think about this project, the parking around these buildings seemed like not only an ineffective use of space, but a potentially environmentally harmful one, and became one of the first critiques of the site I identified. Hearing however the request to maintain parking made me reconsider this. Examining the issue more helped me to realize some of my own bias.



Early site plan. Google maps image with overlays, by author.

While I considered parking and driving to be less of a “need,” assuming that nearby public transit would cover transportation needs, and that other land use options would benefit residents more, I had failed to consider the reality. Many residents work jobs which require more reliable transportation, or which are not on the public transportation lines. Driving jobs like livery service, delivery driving, and more are also important streams of income for residents, and missing out on parking could mean a change in lifestyle and livelihood with detrimental consequences. This is only one example of how the designer brings into a project their own lifestyle, values, and ideas, and how without questioning and confronting our own position in the project, we can lose sight of who really stands to benefit from a project. I was wrong, and learning from this and other instances of making mistakes, I gleaned another part of what designers must do. The role of the designer is to be humble.



Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that

...if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

(The Poetics of Space, Page 6)

The ability of shelter is to create the possibility of something more than survival. To create a place where a resident, now secure, no longer worries all day and night about security, and can instead imagine a world apart. Housing is a basic human need, but often the action of housing leaves out the very real issue of a shelter which does not protect, or a so-called housing solution that doesn't adequately solve a problem. If we don't listen to those who stand to benefit from our housing intervention, we risk worsening the issue. Providing a solution which still feels tenuous and insecure has negative impacts on health and wellbeing.

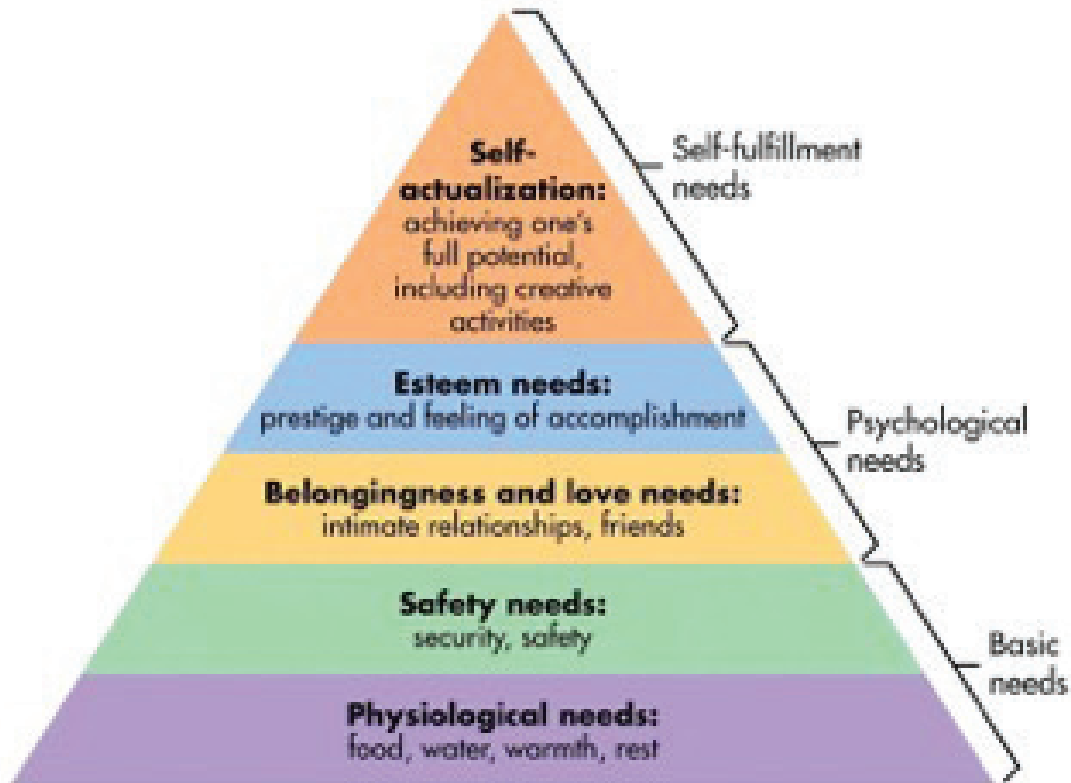
“

...if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

~ Gaston Bachelard

”

Returning to a question of what is needed calls to mind the classic framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. The physiological needs, those of which we depend upon for our survival, are the foundation upon which we can start working towards other needs, with the final goal of self actualization predicated on reaching these needs of safety and belonging. Our most basic needs include food, water, shelter, air, rest, and comfort. These are all typical elements of any long term housing being built to code in the United States today. As such, reaching fulfillment of this level should be simple. Even so, access to these resources can be stripped of people, and some even question whether access to each of these needs is a right or a privilege.



Once the basic needs are met Maslow purports that we can start working towards belonging. Once we feel we belong, that we can settle in that knowledge of having reached fulfillment of this level of need, we can exploit our creative potential.

What would our landscapes look like if we each felt the comfort and security in our residence that allowed us to start to modify, add to, and participate in the creation of our surroundings? How would our homes change if we could fully embody and engage with these places to this extent? We refrain from creating places out of fear of losing the space we have tenuous access to. However, when a community is empowered through true participation the benefits can be felt not only through the visible elements of placemaking happening, but in civic engagement, and also in the more conceptual markers of success such as feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment, collaboration and increased social activity among stakeholders⁶.



Who + what is the community

Community is probably one of the most overused and tired words in housing literature today. The concept of who the community is often goes undefined, leaving theory up in the air or in the hypothetical minds of academia, in many cases far from practice. Community is all those stakeholders involved in a project– all those people who are touched even barely by the interventions. In this thesis the community is the residents of Rindge Commons and their neighbors in Rindge Towers. It is also those who work in the area, those who own businesses here, who take their kids for bike rides or walk their dogs or take the trains and buses and more.

Casting a wide net around the “community” is critical as it is all of these lifestyles, all of these experiences, which shape this place into what it is, and have the potential to morph it into what it could be. The experience of the community members as they move through these places form desire paths– physical or theoretical– that give clues and ideas as to what this place is lacking, what it can provide to create a more comfortable and enjoyable experience.

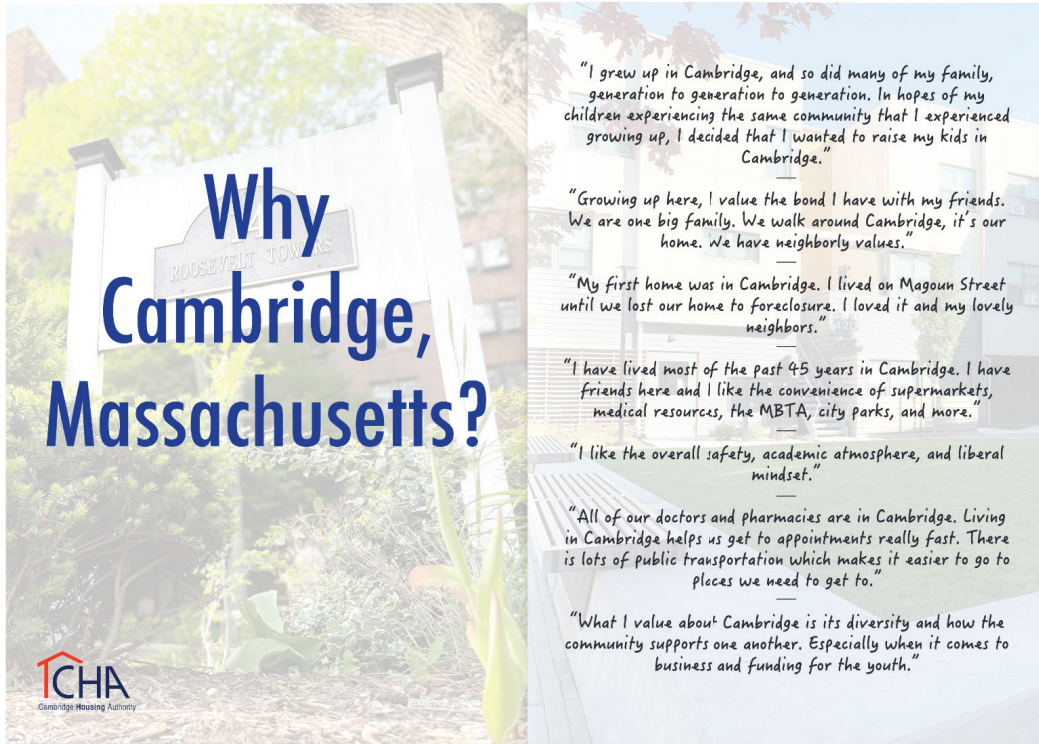
These pathways are everything from the Friends of Jerry's Pond organizing group putting signs on the fence to "make me a park!", to stories of teenagers growing up in Rindge Towers crossing the train tracks to get to parks, shopping areas, and more comfortable spaces⁷. The noisy bridges, narrow sidewalks, lack of seating, pavement and fences and discomfort are hostile architecture of the city, of an urban fabric that wants to keep people out. By creating the environment for people to affect their own surroundings, placemaking works to create that sense of comfort that much of the area is missing.



Image by Greg Harris, 2022.

In 2021, the Cambridge Housing Authority published a report titled “Stories of the Can’t Wait List,” compiling the emotional stories of real people on their waitlist for housing. This report features heartbreaking realities of those who are still waiting for their turn – families, elderly, disabled, and homeless people. Many have been on the waitlist for years, through fluctuating employment, changes in family, and changes to the area around them.

These accounts tell us a lot, but especially they say that people want to live in Cambridge. That they care for this place and for what tools it offers them. This existing fondness for and dedication to the city is an important tool



One of many pages in the Stories of the Can't Wait List publication by the Cambridge Housing Authority, published 2021.

Housing Precedents

History of housing:

In this section, “housing” refers to the noun. Living quarters for people. Particularly, I will focus on examples of public housing and other models outside of the standard private home model. Public housing has gone through many iterations worldwide. Generally, I will categorize three broad time periods of social housing from the 1930s to the present. These periods are defined as the pre-World War I era of the Welfare State (1930-1945), the post- World War II moment of design-as-solution and urban renewal (1945-1970), and the current state of housing provisioning delineated by mixed use and income developments and the extreme demand for affordability we find in this increasingly urbanizing time.

Prewar: Onkel Toms Hutte, Karl Marx Hof

Beginning our history of housing starts in the 1930s with the Great Depression. Across various countries, low wages and substandard living for the working class became a real issue attracting government attention. In order to stimulate economic growth in the way that waning industry was not able to, governments put funding towards improving housing for the working class, subsidizing these buildings and bringing standards and “good design” to a varied audience, rather than only being available to the upper echelon. With increasing standards, tenement removal was another important element of pre-World War II housing.

In this period where government was playing a central role in the provisioning of housing, decent living quarters with light, air, and standards characterized more humanistic living. Many developments of the time also featured amenities like communal spaces, following the idea of environmental determinists: beautiful spaces would make beautiful people⁸. The precedents I chose to exemplify this era are Onkel Tom’s Hutte, and Karl Marx Hof.

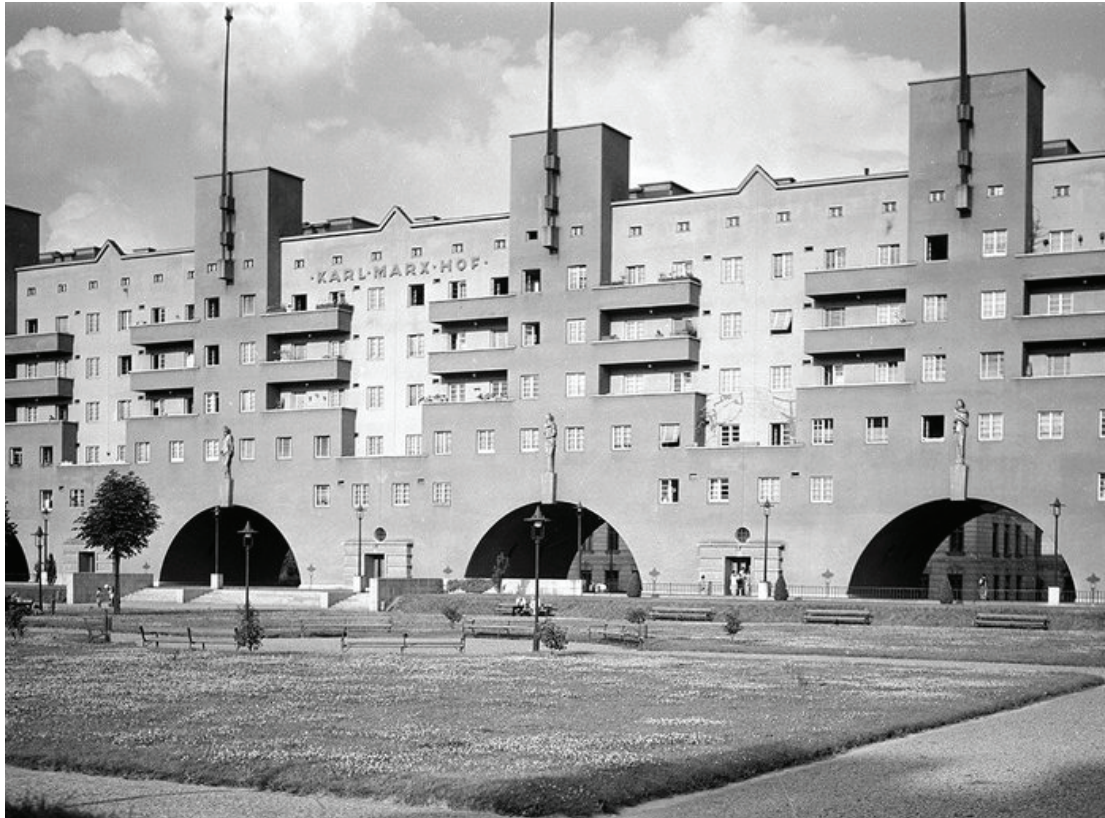


Onkle Tom's Hutte is a modernist housing development in Berlin, Germany designed by architects Bruno Taut, Hugo Haring, and Otto Rudolf Salvisberg. The development was constructed 1926 - 1931 and consisted of different schemes by the architects. Mostly multi-family apartment buildings and attached family homes, this complex stood in stark contrast to the typical detached single-family homes in the area: pitched versus flat roofs⁹, colorful facades (sometimes nicknamed the "Parrot Estates") versus flat white¹⁰. An emphasis on nature throughout the complex, as well as a sense of individuality and personality within the confines of budget and form set this development apart. In the facades of Taut's section of the estate, bold color choices and brick accents bring a comfortable and quaint feeling to the block, rather than it being a monolithic stretch of white plaster. Each of the units had a yard. The multifamily apartment style living featured access to the outdoors as well in a backyard park, designing around the trees in the wooded suburban part of the city. This housing development was brought to life with financing from the GEHAG, a public housing cooperative in Berlin (now under Deutsche-Wohnen-Gruppe), of which Taut was the chief architect. The individuality, early modernist style, and emphasis on human centered design are critical points of this design in regards to its importance as a housing model and as a model for community development by design. The complex also included restaurants, hairdressers, and is centered around the Onkel Tom's Hutte U-Bahn station. Central amenities, clean airy housing for the working class, and a modernist utilitarian design characterize this development and era.



Onkel Tom's Hütte, Berlin, Germany. Image from Institut für Landschaftsarchitektur

Also designed and built during this time was the Austrian Karl Marx Hof, which featured similar centralized amenities to Onkel Tom's Hutte¹¹. This massive public housing project was an effort by the socialist government of the time to pick up the pieces of a post war Austria, providing housing for workers which would be affordable and contain practically all amenities required for the more than 1,250 units it held. Started 1927 and completed in 1930, the context of the socialist "Red Vienna" background is evident in the way that this housing model aimed to rectify past ills of worker housing, a fierce departure from the rundown tenements they often inhabited. Kindergartens, laundromats, clinics, post offices, and more served the residents of the complex. Much of the site was not built up and kept as play areas and parks. These, along with other centralized resources, became de facto gathering areas and the parks are still frequented today. Centralized resources and green space worked in the past and continue to work today to provide a sense of place to those using the grounds.



Royal Institute of British Architects collections, image by Ralph Deakin

Post-war: Unite d'Habitation, Pruitt-Igoe, Rindge Towers

Next, the post-WWII moment of suburbanization and white flight led to the subsequent disinvestment in urban areas and the blighting of housing there. Slum clearance and urban renewal were the name of the game, inspiring modernism to feature strongly as the solution to the issue of public housing. In reaction to the expanded housing program in the United States, efficiency – housing as many people as affordably and in as little urban footprint as possible – became the role of the architect. In the United States, this role became provisioning housing through involvement in government, with programs like the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) being created in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson¹².

In the post - WWII period housing schemes maintained the concept of safe and healthy living conditions for low income workers, with a renewed sense of the good deed that design can do in helping to rectify the issue of an overwhelming need for housing. Social housing of the time emphasized simple modernist design, prefabricated elements for cheap and speedy construction, and urban density. Precedents which are exemplary of this era are the Unite d'Habitation, Pruitt-Igoe, and Rindge Towers/Fresh pond Apartments.



The Unite d'Habitation by Le Corbusier remains ubiquitous in the housing architecture sphere as a primary example of the modernist era and its fascination with prefabrication and accessible design for the public. The Unite was used as a model for housing blocks in various locations, with versions built first in Marseilles in 1947, and later in Nantes, Berlin, Briey, and Firminy. The building was composed of residential quarters as well as a shopping street, kindergarten care facilities, a restaurant, and other communal amenities – a city in a building. The highly rationalized and spacious living quarters of the Unite along with the lush setting within a park were elements of the original design which contributed to the sense of place and home that residents felt, and are a reason why the Marseilles Unite is still lauded as an important and beautiful model for mass housing. Even so, subsequent iterations of housing which took elements of the modernist design were lacking in these green spaces and functionality, with budget constraints limiting width of hallways or altering access to amenities. Important to note with this and other examples listed is the way that nearly all elements of life in these programs are dictated by a designer, meaning that when elements are cut out due to constraints, the existing basis of community hasn't been created, and without the bells and whistles these developments fall flat. In short, the potential of the community is not being harnessed here, so these projects have a greater tendency to fail as they mean less to people.



Image by Gili Merin

The Pruitt Igoe apartments were a large scale social housing project built in 1954 in St. Louis Missouri. Thirty-three housing blocks stood for just 20 years before being demolished, citing high crime rates and violence among residents. The buildings hosted 11 stories, featuring elevators and amenities like public fields, slough lacking in certain planned social services like retail, grocery, and churches due to budget restrictions. At its peak, these apartments housed nearly 10,000 occupants. The racism that mieres social housing still today was certainly present in the instance of Pruitt-Igoe, where many of the residents were black people from the overcrowded city. Disinvestment, regional issues of poverty and deindustrialization, over policing of the area, and lack of services like trash pickup led to high vacancy rates and public distaste for the project. The narrative of Pruitt-Igoe became one of the failure of government welfare programs, the inability of modern architecture to serve the needs of the population, and the continued marginalization of poor and black people in this country, conflating these populations with crime and drug use. Critical to the story of Pruitt-Igoe however is the tight-knit community which it fostered before disinvestment tainted its legacy. Many of the first tenants to move in cited satisfaction and excitement with their living arrangements, sanitation, and elevators. By 1976 all of the buildings had been imploded and cleared, a nasty reminder of urban slum clearance they were originally designed to redress. Initial tenants felt a connection to this place but with divestment and reduced services to support them issues grew to a boiling point.



Left: image of the Pruitt Igoe projects as built. Courtesy of the United States Geological Survey. Right: image of the first implosion. This image was circulated and became known as the “death of modernism”. Courtesy of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research.

In a similar style to the modernist housing projects of Pruitt-Igoe are the three monolithic Rindge Towers in Cambridge, MA. These were built in the typical style of the public housing projects that popped up across the country in the 70s. The form of these buildings tends to be dictated by funding limitations, as they are aiming to house many people quickly. The reactions to these buildings is pretty typical of the time: density was critiqued, as well as the massive 22 story height, which made them the tallest buildings in North Cambridge. Much of the critique around these structures also came from racist prejudice and fears around crime, and increased police presence furthered the issue. While the towers were meant to stimulate the Alewife area, disinvestment in this part of the city continued to be an issue in the 70s and 80s. In recent years, a change to the federal subsidization provided more owner investment to the towers, improving the physical condition of the buildings and allotting more to resources for tenants, including community spaces, afterschool programs, and more which in turn improved community well-being. As previously mentioned in this thesis, the towers feel physically separated from the fabric of the rest of the neighborhood, meaning that interventions like these programs are critical to involving the tenants with their own community, but much more can be done.



Image from Cambridge Historical Commission. By Peter Southwick, 1979.

Present day: Freedom West, Tamaki Regeneration programme, Urbane Alewife

Finally, the current period beginning in the 1970s saw housing projects like those developed in the previous era as fundamentally flawed and the solution of “modernism” as a failure. Rather, housing was viewed as more of a commodity and asset to people, with revitalization programs aiming to improve overall quality of the area and thus purchase value of the property. Today, developers still utilize subsidies to reduce costs of building by footing the bill with government dollars. In many areas, minimum affordable units are enforced in new apartments to attempt to ensure affordable options, yet the extent to which these policies are actually effective is small as often setting aside 20% of apartments as “affordable” is not adequate to address needs¹³. Still, many more experimental housing developments and models are being implemented, which allows for a more expansive idea of what housing can look like.

Community land trusts, federal subsidies, community development corporations and other non-profit organizations are all ways that housing can be made more accessible to the growing population requiring affordable options. While in many cases income restricted access is one of the critical ways to maintain priority for those who are deeply in need of affordability, the rise in mixed income developments allows for developers to take advantage of government funding for building projects while still being able to receive rental payments from those who make above a certain income. Some examples exhibiting the variety of models in the current system of housing affordability include Freedom West homes, and the Tamaki regeneration programme, as well as Urbane apartments.



The Freedom West Cooperative was created in the 1960s as a response to the detrimental effects of Urban Renewal in San Francisco's Fillmore district. The displacement of over 20,000 primarily African American residents catalyzed the community to create the coop which is now working to redesign the community to better serve the needs of the future. Maintaining current residents is the main priority, made possible through permanently affordable rental structures, prioritizing resident ownership, and promoting multigenerational wealth accumulation. The cooperative model ensures that residents' voices are heard, maintaining the community while offering new amenities like a performing arts center and a STEM Innovation Center to promote high paying STEM jobs to residents. Placemaking and aging in place is a priority for the project, which will dedicate 115 of the 515 affordable housing units to senior housing. Economic longevity of the project is also a main priority, as the coop will share 15% of the net profit from the market rate housing with the master developers, allowing coop members to have a stake in the beneficial redevelopment plan. This concept of co-ownership attempts to ameliorate some of the issues around lack of access of marginalized communities to accumulating generational wealth. By stressing the importance of intergenerational living, longevity and security in peoples housing situations, and the ability to own and gain wealth from their homes, Freedom West is providing a valuable resource and model for other affordable housing projects. The sense of community this project aims to maintain is also critical.



The Freedom West 2.0 Mission

- **Save** 1,000 low- moderate-income residents from displacement
- **Preserve** by rebuilding 392 affordable housing co-op units
- **Add** 133 new affordable-housing units to the San Francisco Fillmore District/Western Addition
- **Build** a STEM Innovation Center to help Fillmore district residents access high-paying STEM jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities
- **Build** a Performing Arts Center to spark the *Fillmore Renaissance*
- **Generate** \$2 billion in one-time community economic impact from the project's construction* and ensure at least 30% women and minority contractor participation

Images from Freedom West website <https://freedomwest.com/>

With a focus on “supporting local cultural identity and sense of belonging”, the Tamaki Regeneration program is working to transform the housing stock in Auckland, New Zealand. This program would expand housing from 2,500 public housing units to 10,500 public and private housing units (3,500 private, 3,500 affordable, 3,500 state owned), with the principle that those who want to stay in this place will have the opportunity to do so. This revitalization with protection of tenants is a critical element in housing and neighborhood development to avoid displacement. In terms of placemaking, the very ability to stay in a place and create ties is the basis upon which people begin the process of imbuing meaning into their surroundings.

Focusing specifically on the Maori and Pasifika communities in the area, The Tamaki program tries to center the voices of the residents and locals. The project also works to increase home ownership in the area as well as creating entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, as well as a program through which homebuyers share ownership with the Tamaki Regeneration Company (TRC), paying off the portion TRC owns over up to 20 years. A critique of this “participatory” method finds that this project represents primarily the interests of the state and developers, as it centers the economic revitalization through increasing consumption and the presence of higher economic classes, deciding who can participate and to what extent.



TAKE THAT FIRST STEP TOWARDS BUYING A HOME FOR YOU AND YOUR WHĀNAU.

Tāmaki Regeneration is helping whānau reach their dream of home ownership through our shared home ownership programme, OWN IT. Shared Home Ownership is a game-changing way to own your own home sooner.

We will own a portion of your home alongside you, and overtime (up to 20 years) you will buy us out until the home is 100% yours! This means you will pay a smaller deposit (as little as 5%), and will have lower mortgage repayments too, making things more affordable.

Our team will journey closely with you throughout the process. We will put together a plan to help get you closer to your dream, answer your questions and support you every step of the way!



Images from Tamaki Regeneration Program website tamakiregeneration.co.nz

I have already mentioned the case study of Rindge Commons in terms of place value and “why here”. In cases like the aforementioned precedents, people care for the area, and displacement of lower-income residents when the area is invested in remains an issue. As a foil to Rindge Commons, Urbane at Alewife is a luxury style apartment complex which promises a lively neighborhood, upscale amenities, and prime location, mere steps away from the Rindge Commons / Fresh Pond Apartments site.

This luxury apartment development is also located in the North Cambridge neighborhood, steps away from the Rindge Towers (.2 miles), yet could not be more different in the design aesthetic and audience. The complex boasts amenities like a pool, pet friendly spaces, common areas, a smart fitness center and more. Work from home areas are highlighted on the website, as well as the “tight knit community” of the surrounding area, access to a nearby Whole Foods, soft-close Italian cabinets, and touting LEED certification. This complex leads with its strong amenities, clearly reaching out to a certain demographic with their appeals to a range of activities for the upper echelon. Online forums however speak to lacking management, issues with waste removal and building maintenance, and little use of public spaces. The attempt here to cater to a specific young, affluent audience ignores the real world that exists around this apartment, instead opting for a built up luxury experience with all inclusive amenities available just to those able to afford it.



Image from Urbane at Alewife website <https://urbaneatalewife.com/gallery/#gallery-13-9>

What housing providers now must reckon with is the dire need for housing to be at affordable, often non-market rates, with protections for residents to maintain a rent that they can afford in the long term, while also providing the amenities and important elements of healthy and decent places to live. This entails improvements to the area, which in many cases may affect the value of the area, and as housing is a commodity in our current system this is reflected in the price of homes. When the community becomes more expensive and people can no longer afford to live, work, and belong there gentrification is an issue. The importance of placemaking must not be overshadowed by fears of gentrification however, as models like Tamaki Regeneration Program and the Freedom West Housing Cooperative can provide meaningful options where residents are valued, and longevity of their tenure and contribution to the community is protected.

My study area of the Alewife neighborhood is ripe with opportunity. The potential for increased civic participation, community health, and more is right there to take advantage of. The community is ready. The role of the designer is to be a communicator, a facilitator, to advocate for change through creative solutions, and design for the future. In the next sections, the role of the designer in community projects is explored further, as my interventions on the site are introduced and explained.

Section two endnotes

- 1 John Agnew, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Henri Lefebvre among others are critical in the conversation of place and space in the philosophy of the field of geography.
- 2 Project for Public Spaces, “Eleven Principles of Placemaking,” in *How to Turn a Place Around*, page 43
- 3 Goldberg, “Theory from Practice,” in *New Creative Community*, page 148
- 4 In person conversation with Gerry Zipster, November 1, 2024
- 5 Levy, 2019, Just-A-Start proposes its Rindge Commons, adding 100 affordable units to existing 800, in *Cambridge Day* online publication.
- 6 Goldberg, “Theory from Practice,” in *New Creative Community*, page 154
- 7 Via *Cambridge Day* website, a young man who grew up in North Cambridge recounts using the purple line tracks as a shortcut to get to nearby friends’ apartments (<https://www.cambridgeday.com/2024/09/23/growing-up-gen-z-in-north-cambridge-a-young-persons-perspective/>). This is not a novel issue, as a 1994 study found people using the railroad right-of-way (ROW) as a throughway to get to destinations quicker or easier, notably citing many elderly and disabled people using this shortcut as well as children and young people.
- 8 Harrison, 2024 <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/environmental-determinism>
- 9 The so-called “Zehlendorf roof war” of the Weimar era symbolized the ideological differences embodied in the designs of public housing. The more conservative design was the “traditional” pitched roofs of other homes in Germany, which the flat roofs of Onkel Tom’s Cabin stood in strong contrast to. Design has always been a contentious thing, and popular opinion like in this issue polarizes and moralizes choices. The argument over flat versus pitched roofs was an early example of some of the nationalist traditionalist ideals that took hold in Germany in the decade to come. (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-heated-highly-political-roof-war-that-captivated-berlin-before-world-war-ii> , <https://www.berlin.de/en/districts/zehlendorf/916977-6654163-zehlendorf.en.html>)
- 10 Onkel-Toms-Hütte Estate, from *World Heritage Estates Berlin*
- 11 Karl-Marx Hof was designed by Karl Ehn, an apprentice to Otto Wagner, a Dada contemporary of Bruno Taut (Blau, 1999).
- 12 US Department of Housing and Urban Development, *History of HUD*
- 13 In Massachusetts, the Affordable Housing Law allows for zoning restrictions to be bypassed to allow for 10% affordable housing. Chapter 40B allows for even more lessened restrictions if at least 20-25% of units are income restricted (<https://www.chapa.org/sites/default/files/FAQ%20for%2040B-2018.pdf>).

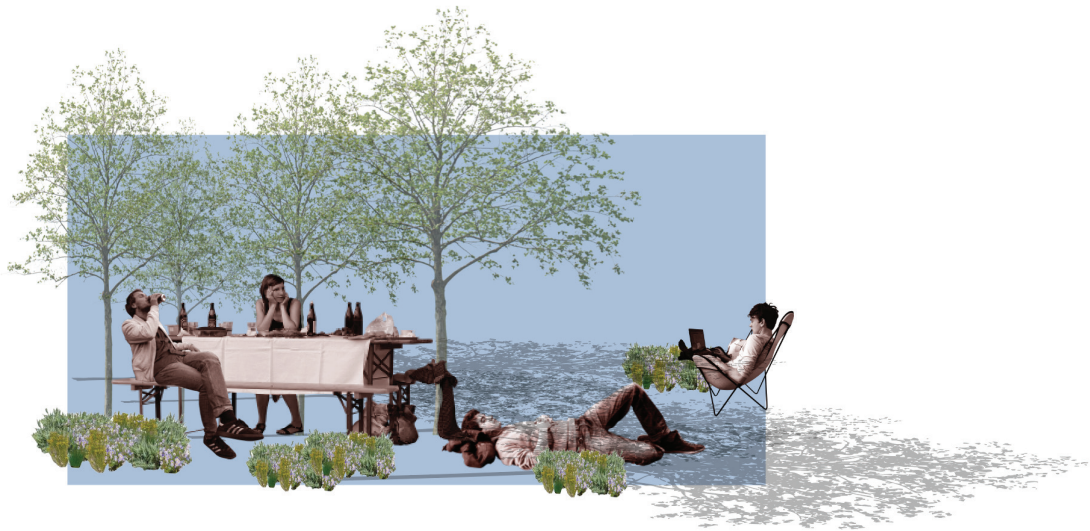
Section Three, Placemaking in practice



Great blue Herons which have nested in trees around Jerry's Pond for many years. Photo by Kathy Johnson for Wicked Local, 2019.

Placemaking and creative community

First, a summary of some critical throughlines of this thesis. I have discussed how and why this project came to be as my interest was sparked by growing up near the Alewife area, a history which planted the seed for this project in my mind many years ago. The rich natural history and industrial past of this location gives further context to the current state of the site. Looking at placemaking in the context of housing, especially affordable housing, gives important insight into what can be done, as well as what has been done in past precedents and how effective these interventions have been.



“Who is the community” has been answered, with the wide-flung response being all the stakeholders. The community includes the residents of the apartments on the site, as well as those who work there. The neighbors down the street and the people who walk their dogs here. The kids who ride their bikes down these roads, the commuters who use the buses and trains, and so many more. The community is made up of people who use this site daily, infrequently, who live there, who own businesses there. These are the people who deeply know the area. Once again, I frame the community as the expert. What are the “desire paths” they are carving out? Where do people want to exist where they are not simply able to? I have identified a few areas, namely activating the street levels for travel aside from cars creating more potential for seeing and communing with your neighbors, bringing people to the area surrounding Jerry’s Pond as another node for gathering and social activity, and bolstering methods of connecting the environmental, social, and consumer amenities of the area.

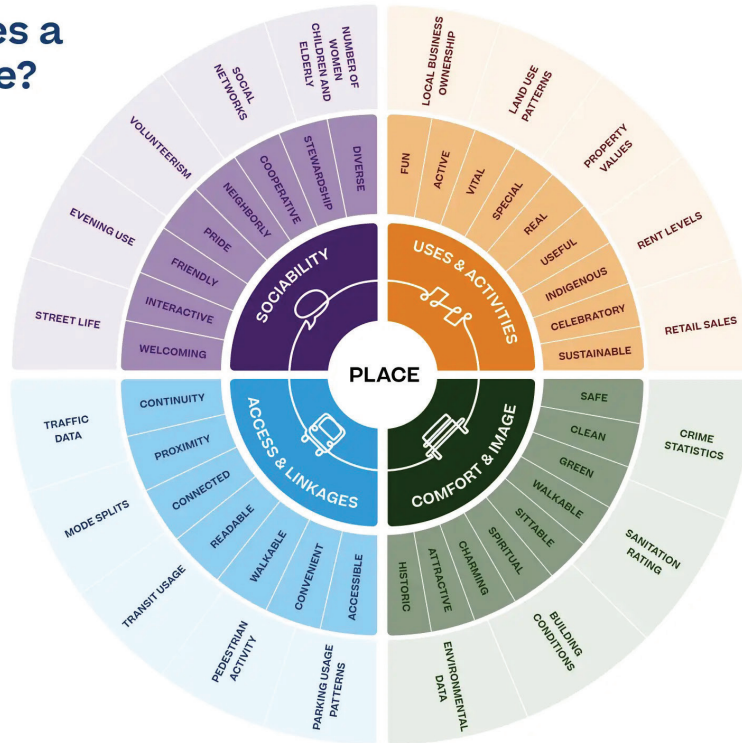
A few drawbacks of the approach I have taken are outlined here. I have detailed the benefits and issues that participation in design may bring, speaking to a participatory ethos of the speculative designs proposed. However, in my project real participation from the community is necessarily limited. The project does not use surveys, nor do I enlist the public in a maquette session. Rather, my intervention is an imagined one, one which utilizes my observations and research on the area to inform decisions and choices. I have imagined a world in which these interventions have come to life, but the process through which they develop is also critical to me. These projects I propose are envisioned as incremental developments in the area, which leave space for growth and change. They are led by the community and are possible through a dissipation of power and responsibility among the group of diverse stakeholders. This is the world in which I situate my project.

Elements of what make a place

Borrowing from the Project for Public Spaces' manual for placemaking *How to Turn a Place Around*, I examined the site with this framework in mind: a successful place has these four characteristics – comfort and image, access and linkages, sociability, and various uses and activities. These are organized in a wheel with the main attributes at the center, intangible elements following, and ways to measure success in this section around the perimeter.

What Makes a Great Place?

Project for Public Spaces



Graphic from *How to Turn a Place Around* by Project for Public Spaces, 2018

Currently, the site is missing major elements of each of these characteristics. What my project aims to do is develop the intangible elements of the site to make the area more fun, connected, welcoming, accessible, safe, sittable, comfortable, and more. These intangible elements – perceived safety, shade and other comfort needs, the real lack of comfortable seating options – are what will make the greatest change to the people really using the area. The role of the designer here is to pick up on these intangibles, finding ways to develop solutions. The role of the designer is as a community resource– a tool the community can use to realize their vision.

Section Four, Intervention



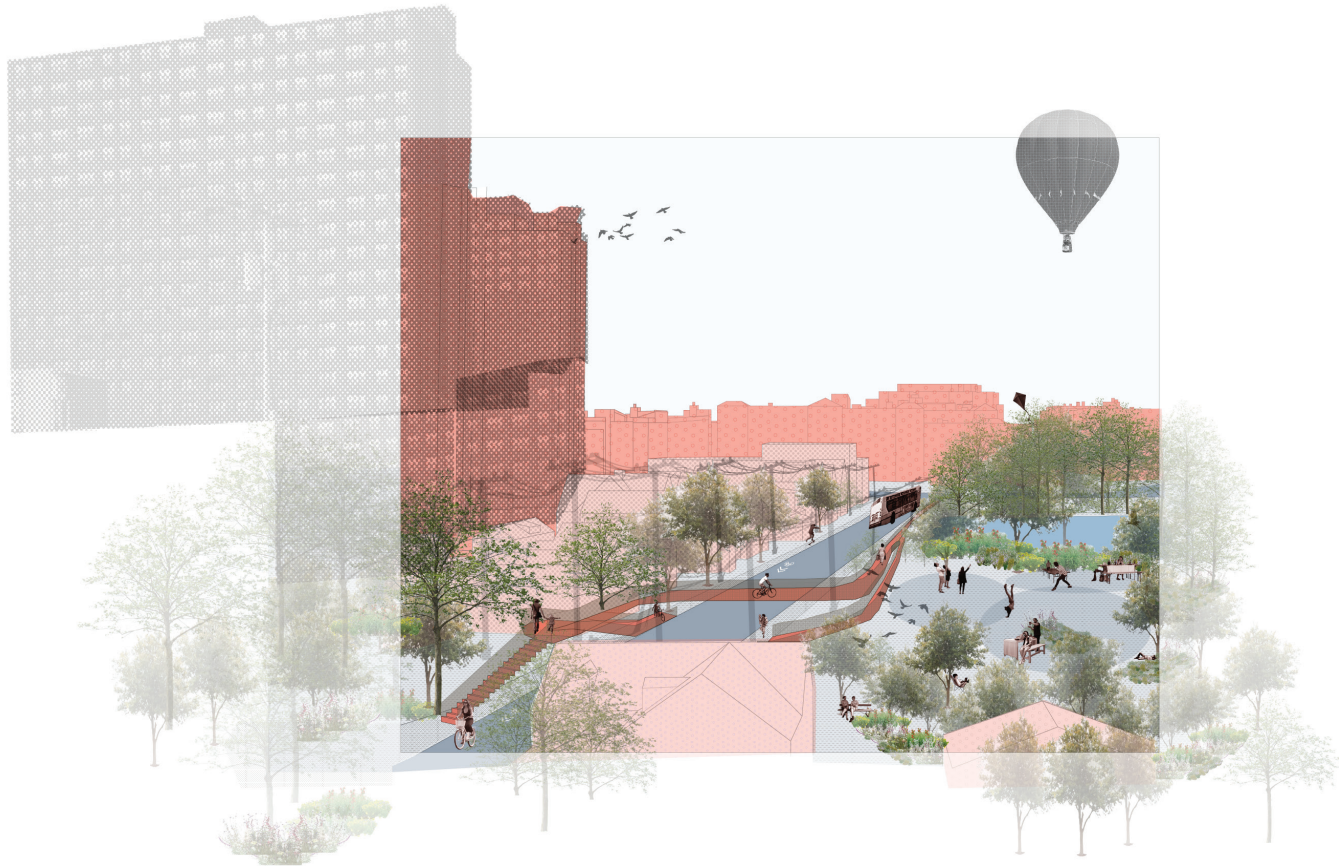
In this section, the insight I have gained through my research on the topics of housing, placemaking, and my own development philosophy coalesce in the interventions I stage on my site. These take the form of speculative collages which graphically depict the ways I have been thinking about the site and the impact that empowering the community might have on it. I am not setting these conceptual images in any particular time. These exist sometime in the future, having developed over time by the users.

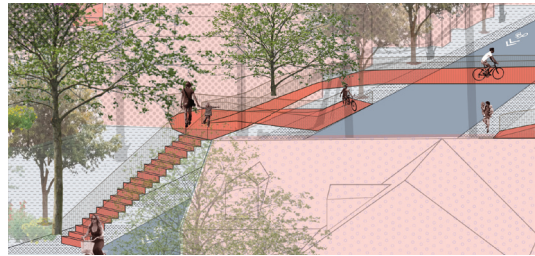
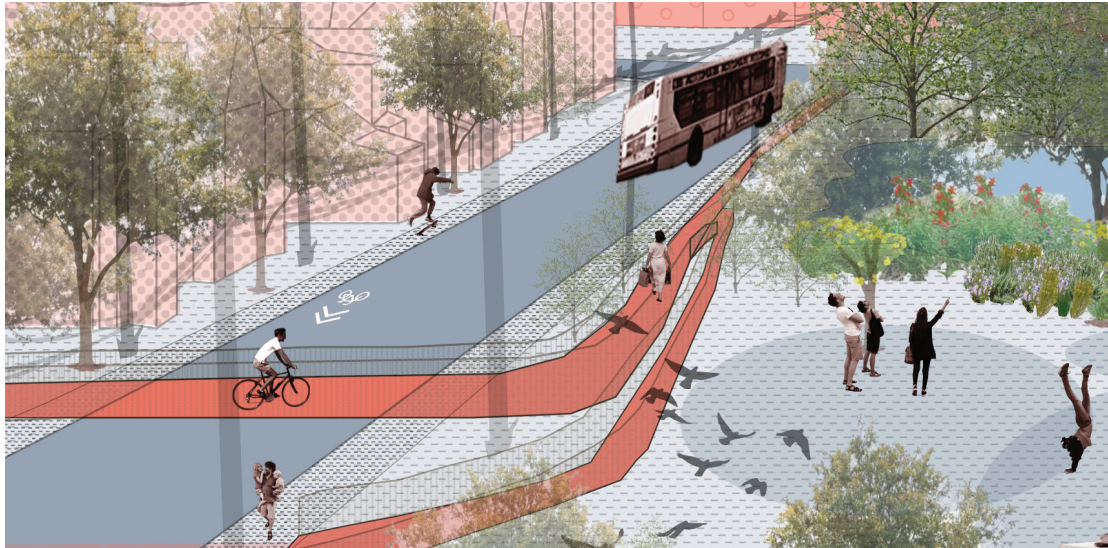
Collage 01

In this first collage, I was working through ideas of connection and community, using the existing neighborhood as a base layer. This road – Rindge Avenue – cuts between the housing on the left and Jerry’s Pond to the right, with very few areas for pedestrians to comfortably cross. Activating pedestrian access to the street with a footpath, I wanted to include more possibilities for rest and shade, seating, and communal gathering. These are shorter term projects which could help fuel the community to work together for larger change like the elevated crossing. In the collage, the fence around Jerry’s Pond is gone. People play on the field, sitting beneath trees and appreciating the space which had once been largely closed off. Increased canopy helps with the growing heat island issue that Cambridge is confronted with.



Google Maps





Rindge Ave Reimagined

Varied seating arrangements allow for people to use these areas for a variety of activities, from lounging and spending time to quick breaks on a commute. Canopy coverage creates more shade for people to enjoy. Open space can be reconfigured and comfortable pathways bring a sense of human scale to the streetscape. In the winter months, these areas provide safer areas for children to gather and play.



Collage 02

In this second collage, I experimented with ideas of integrating connected pathways through the site to make pedestrian access more safe and comfortable. Imagining that physical connectivity might inspire interpersonal connections, this image shows various nodes throughout the site, connected via activity and uses rather than just proximity– which in the case of this site is proven to not be enough. Making the convenient pathway a pedestrian crossing rather than an unsafe trek over train tracks (abstracted in the top left of the image), this collage imagines that residents feel safe, proud, and take ownership of their neighborhood. This collage also contains, like some others, a heron. This bird is known to live in vegetation around Jerry’s Pond, and is an important figure for those who enjoy birdwatching and appreciating the beauty of nature in the area. Layering an image of historic Jerry’s Pond in the bottom left is a nod to the past use of the area, while boardwalks and picnic tables are a modern way to enjoy the old clay pit.



Image of the Fresh Pond Apartments/ Rindge Towers from the shopping center parking lot, a short distance that can only be crossed over train tracks or via a long vehicle-pedestrian bridge. Google Maps.





Connected and active

The historical image of Jerry's pond (bottom left) provides a sense of continuity as the pond is reimagined in a safer way in the modern context. The composite pathway that extends from the water is an image from the pathway around Fresh Pond, a nearby waterbody and well-traveled greenspace south of Alewife. Cambridge has ample examples of well-designed and well used areas, a methodology that could be applied to this area.

The pedestrian pathway is overlaid on the current Alewife Brook Parkway bridge, the only way to cross the Commuter rail tracks which cut through the area. Rather than narrow sidewalks alongside a busy road, this imagines a car-free option. This could be an at-grade crossing behind the Towers, eliminating the need for a tall, costly bridge to be constructed.



Collage 03

This collage shows another angle of Rindge Ave, looking down the road from the intersection at the end of the street. In this collage, the street corner by Jerry's Pond has metamorphosed into a communal outdoor area, where people utilize the space in a variety of ways, playing, walking through, taking a rest stop, eating, and more. This collage also features Rindge Ave being closed for a block party. Cambridge offers block party play kits for residents to host their own community events. Residents can also apply for funds of up to \$300 for their programming¹. In this image, residents have used this funding to pay for a local restaurant to cater a food cart. Placemaking and community building is important for the local economy, which thrives off of connection and word of mouth advertising.



Intersection of Rindge Avenue and Alewife Brook Parkway. Google Maps.





Supportive and growing

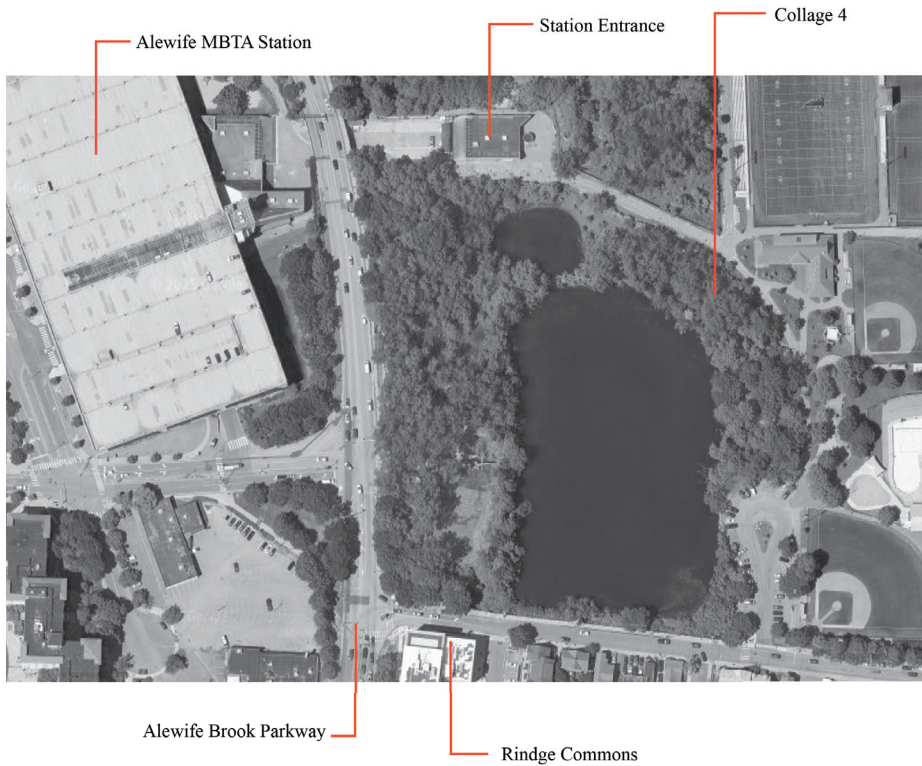
Users walk, run, bike, and skate on this newly expanded street corner with the removal of fences around Jerry's Pond. Space to play is expanded, and greater activity fosters community like a pick up game of soccer.

Closed streets for block parties foster community and offer opportunity for further dialogue between residents. These spaces are the locus for communication and organizing among people who live there.



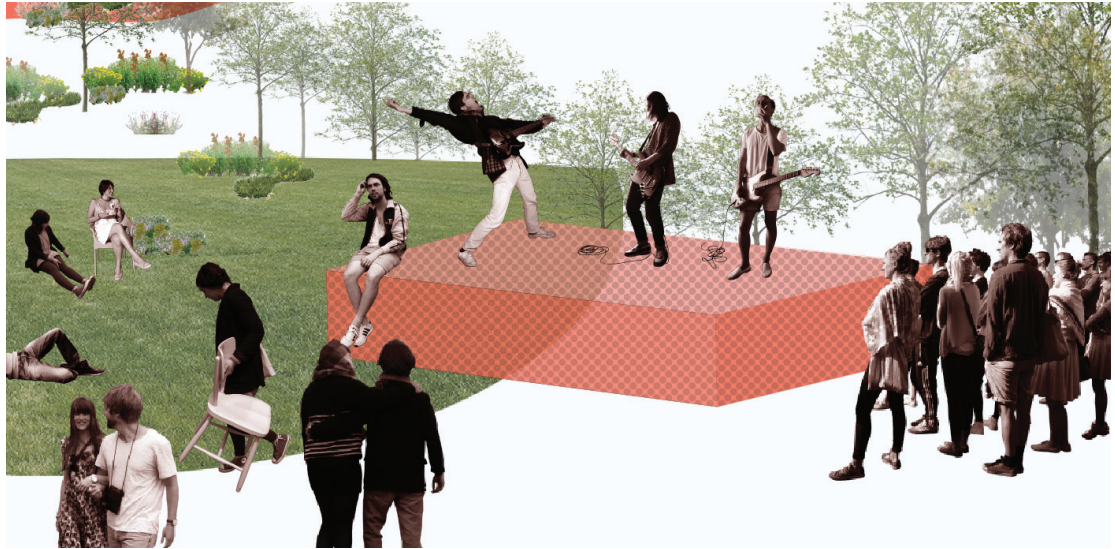
Collage 04

Alewife station, in the left of this aerial image, is one of the major transfer and train to bus connections in Cambridge, serving the surrounding towns as well. Across the busy Alewife Brook Parkway is a satellite station entrance. In this fourth collage, I am picturing changes to the area by the T station entrance. Brickwork in the pathway here is maintained, a nod to the brick manufacturing history of the area. The vegetation around Jerry's Pond has grown this way over time through being untouched and largely let to grow wild. Local groups dedicated to invasive plant management could find ample work in these areas, as well as local school groups learning about landscape stewardship. A lawn nearby Russel Field would create a comfortable area pushed back from the street to hold community concerts and other performance events. A small stage which could be set up for these concerts is tucked into this area, not far from the path. When not being used for performances, this could be used as another seating area. Movable seating is also employed in this vision as a way to give up the reins and show trust in the community. This small action helps to increase independence and empowerment of the users as they are given options to affect their own environment.



Google Earth, annotations by author.





Community oriented and fun

Independence and autonomy are bolstered through trust in the community. By giving opportunities for people to affect their own surroundings I am acting in line with one of my principles of the role of the designer: that the designers role is to give up the reigns and recognize our position in our actions, decentering ourselves from the narrative. Designers are communicators, facilitators, the creative spark, translator. Designers work as accomplices, imagining a future which works towards answering the problems of the present.



Collage 05

This final collage shows more pathways between community members and their urban landscape. The collage abstracts the pathway around Jerry's pond, adding activity along this passage. The bus station could function as a community message board, advertising events, jobs, and other opportunities. Rindge Commons hosts a YouthBuild group², which provides young people with general education and targeted career training in retail entrepreneurship or construction. Seeing this program as an opportunity for deeper connection, the garden beds are imagined to be built by YouthBuild construction students. Maintenance of the gardens will be a community effort, with local organizations providing volunteer bases. The students working on retail entrepreneurship could be tasked with working to develop business plans to address some other issues around the site, such as increasing possibility for playful activity, or addressing intergenerational gaps.



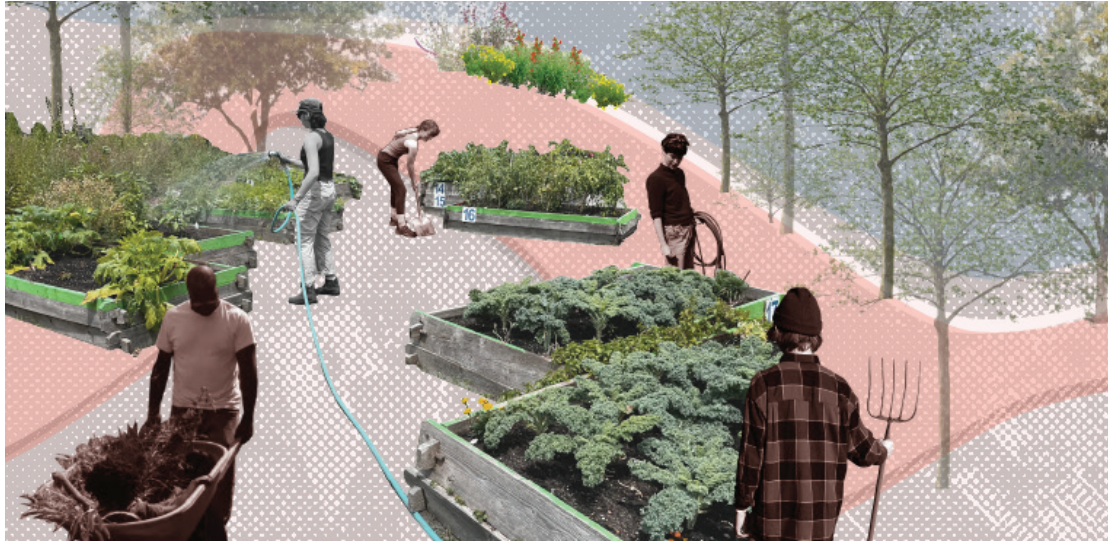
Photo by Robin Lubbock for WBUR.





Program integration

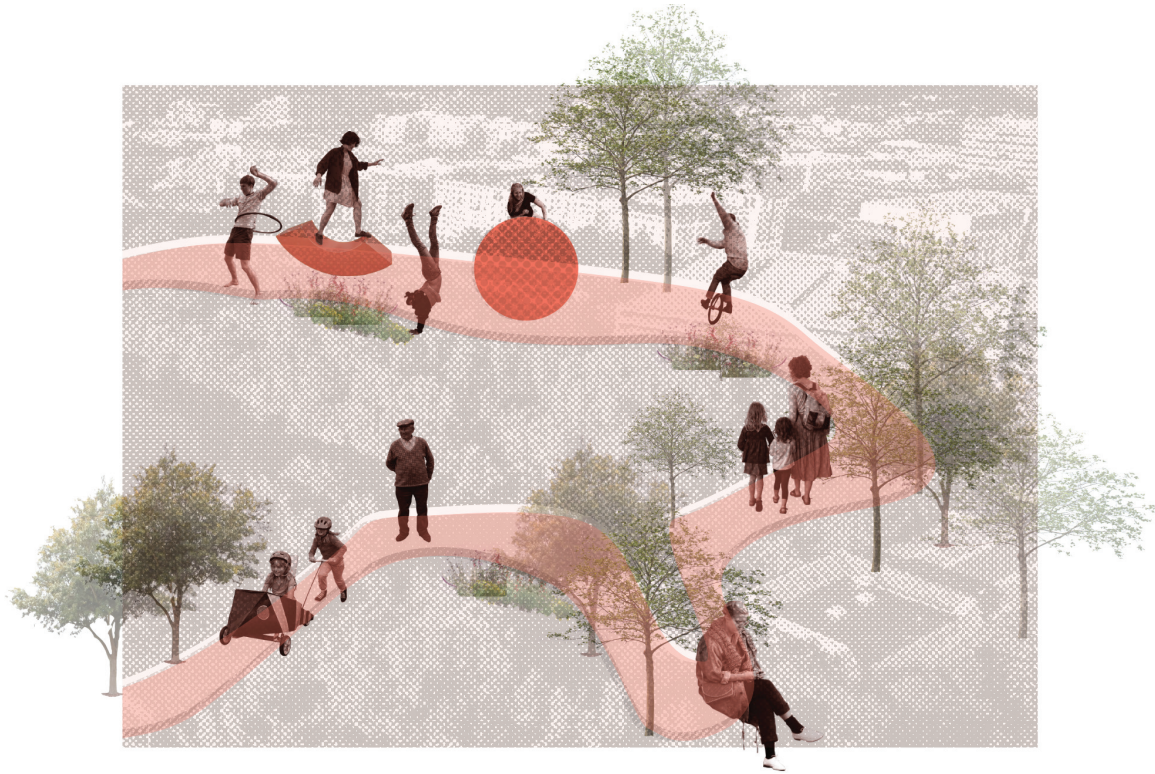
The garden beds here could be a project for the construction students of the YouthBuild program. The bus stop offers possibilities to advertise the efforts of the entrepreneurship students, as well as other community events. Play is also emphasised here with space for mobility and a variety of structures.



Section four endnotes

- 1 City of Cambridge, <https://www.cambridgema.gov/iwantto/applyforablockpartypermit>
- 2 <https://justastart.org/youth-programs/>

Section Five, The role of the designer



The role of the designer

Throughout this process of working on this thesis, I have been asking a parallel question of what my role as a designer is in this project, in a community, in the world. In working on this project I have gained many lessons, the role I play – and the complexity of this role – being a big part of what I have learned.

I have distilled the role of designers in community engagement projects in a few lines:

THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER IS TO...

- ... advocate for change through creative solutions
- ... know what came before us so we can design for the future
- ... be humble
- ... act as a community resource – an asset, facilitator, translator, and accomplice so that the vision of the community can be realized.

The role I take in this project is to propose a possible world that can be created through cooperation and time, incrementally and with the intent and participation of those who will be using and benefiting from their own creations.

Advocating for change through creative solutions is a critical way that designers act in the world. Large scale change is often shaped by the co-optation of more radical movements as trends by the mainstream audience, such as in the case of the concept of “sustainability” in recent years. What began as a more fringe movement is now a buzzword for massive corporations. It is important that placemaking is legitimized without being watered down. Returning to the ladder of participation, we can see that this is possible through more distributed power to the citizens, empowering them and giving them the opportunity to choose and fight for the change in their community that they want to lead, rather than just being relegated to a passive obstacle fielding developer’s obligatory surveys¹.



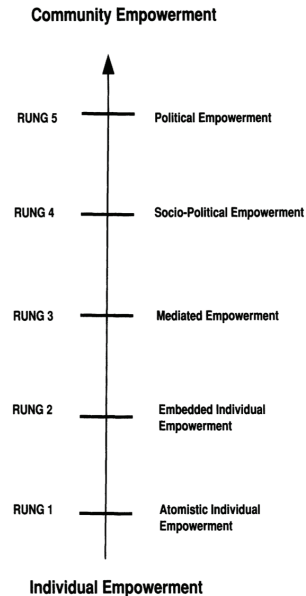
Conclusion

To conclude, this project asked the questions: what can placemaking do to benefit the community in an affordable housing context? Concurrently through this thesis I questioned what part the designer has in this process, and how, if so, does this role change if the process is a participatory one? I have found that placemaking can be an important and effective tool to empower communities. Literature on placemaking and participation offer answers to critiques of tokenism and top-down approaches, emphasising horizontality and community led processes which value the tools and lessons the community gains rather than just the end goal. The interventions I propose provide jumping-off points of inspiration for what can be done, but are necessarily speculative and vague, maintaining the possibility for the community to use this place in planned and unplanned ways. My task as a designer is to leave room for interpretation, designing for a future of peace and potential, serving the community with compassion.

Importantly, community art advocate Arlene Goldbard and others working in these spaces emphasize that this work is never truly completed, yet this is part of the joyful process. Open ended projects are what promote the experimentation and fearlessness of the creative process. It is important to me then that while my thesis exists in the academic sphere the work that it advocates for it is a part of my genuine and long-lasting practice. I am submitting some of my designs to be in a seasonal zine run by local business Cambridge Naturals. If accepted, I hope these designs will find an audience open to and excited about working towards a more livable future in the affordable housing context.

Section five endnotes

1 The Ladder of Empowerment by Elizabeth Rocha in 1997 tracks empowerment from the individual to the community. Through the placemaking efforts I have proposed, I hope for individual empowerment to be strengthened for residents and other community members. Through increasing individual efficacy, recognizing that the world around us is not set in stone, community empowerment becomes more possible. The status quo is a changeable thing, no matter how much inertia there is. By working to establish interpersonal trust, individual understanding, and empowerment at different levels, design and placemaking influences opportunities for deeper community engagement. This is the long term work of this project, aiming to prioritize community through the process of creating place value.



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