

# Take A Stand: A Foundation for Today's Citizen-Designer

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**These past few years have challenged and altered every one of us. To recollect the innumerable racial and social injustices, the rise of devastating natural disasters from climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic with the ensuing economic recession is to recognize how much we—as a collective society—have endured and continue to endure in the struggles and hardships issued upon us each day. Nearly every city has taken the brunt of upheavals or revolutions, with episodes continually exploding in local townships and municipalities across the country and around the world. Whether one lives in a booming metropolis or a small town, it is evident that communities that implement creative and empathetic interventions—in response to these events and transformations—can catalyze profound effects to the built environment and the human experience.**

**Students in an urban design studio at Cornell University were asked to take a stand – a stand on their work and position of manifesting ideas from concept development to design intervention, from position to proposition. The studio asked students to answer what is the value of design and what is the role of the designer? Alongside conversations on climate change, social equity and design empathy, how does conjuring the unknown, speculating upon possibilities, and imagining constructed futures all occur without a voice? How can one hold onto their values and position, while engaging others through the intricate, and sometimes elusive, design process?**

**During the semester, students considered these questions and demonstrated their knowledge through a design process that enabled flexible, and more importantly, self-directed, self-confident positions that allowed for independent visions and a declaration of intents, or more fundamentally, a series of calls to action. As active participants and citizens in this world, students were encouraged to advocate for positive change; to reinforce what is seen as good and what is necessary to be preserved; to rally against what threatens one's rights and beliefs; and as a pedagogical objective to the studio, to communicate those values through design.**

## TO SITUATE . THE FIRST CALL TO ACTION

“These young people are saying we all have a right to know what is in the air we breathe, in the water we drink, and the food we eat. It is our responsibility to leave this planet cleaner and greener. That must be our legacy.” – Civil Rights Activist and Former Georgia House of Representative John Lewis (September 2019).

When we think about where we came from, and the people that have come to influence the ways in which our interests, our proclivities, and even our principles have transpired and matured over time, it is hard not to consider how the entanglements of past events, prominent individuals, and illuminating spaces have come to shape who we are today as architects and designers. What could be a debate of nature versus nurture or nature and nurture amalgamated into one individual – whether through the pre-wiring of genetic inheritance and biological factors inherited from families or through the combined exposures of external stimuli and life experiences – individuals are social byproducts of a cultural supply chain, outputted from local spheres and into a collective global domain.

### Situating Home.

**Home.** *n.* A place where one lives or where one was born and grew up, especially as a member of a family or household; a place where someone or something flourishes or from which someone or something originates. *adj.* Relating to what is made, done, or intended for use in the place where one lives; relating to one's own country and its domestic affairs. *v.* To return by instinct to one's territory after having left it.

Home is a place where family and close friends reside; home is a place where people can receive institutional knowledge, professional care, or supervised observation; home is a place where one's team sport is played on a home field or court; home is a place where spiritual beliefs and faiths are preserved and practiced. Home conjures a sense of security, control and privacy, as well as identity, belonging and acceptance.



Figure 01. “When we push the boundaries of our technological capabilities in order to bring out a more rewarding user experience, we are able to recalibrate the true purpose of why we do what we do as architects. It is more than just designing a space to meet a project brief and program demands, but rather about creating an experience and enhanced sense of connection with the spaces around us. The beauty of constructing something into fruition that once was only able to be imagined in our minds is another pleasure, we are able to admire within our field.” – Seth Kunoff, BSLA ’21.

In an urban design studio at Cornell University, students were asked to return to their roots and explore their hometowns as sites for design intervention. Within the bounds of their native localities, students situated their home’s historical issues and contemporary affairs of recent, to prompt a hypothesis on how public sites can sustainably manifest over time. And in the sharing of collective experiences, and even emotions, the connotations underlying ideas of home, provided students the first step in empathizing with others – whether indigenous, (im)migrant, refugee, commuter, etc. – each possessing a similar goal or vision.

### Situating Oneself.

“A public declaration or proclamation, written or spoken; especially a printed declaration, explanation, or justification of policy issued by a head of state, government, or political party or candidate, or any other individual or body of

individuals of public relevance, as a school or movement in the Arts.... A book or other work by a private individual supporting a cause, propounding a theory or argument, or promoting a certain lifestyle.... A call to action through the power of rhetoric in times of intense political and economic uncertainty.” – Architect and Historian Anthony Vidler (November 2011).

**Take a stand. Take several stands. But remember to always be accountable and to be grounded.**

As the first call to action, the studio asked students *to take a stand* – a stand on their work and their position of manifesting ideas from concept development to design proposal; from position to proposition. Students defined the value of design and the role of the designer. What connects community values to conceptual and design propositions? How can a designer materialize values through a spatial, graphic and material languages?

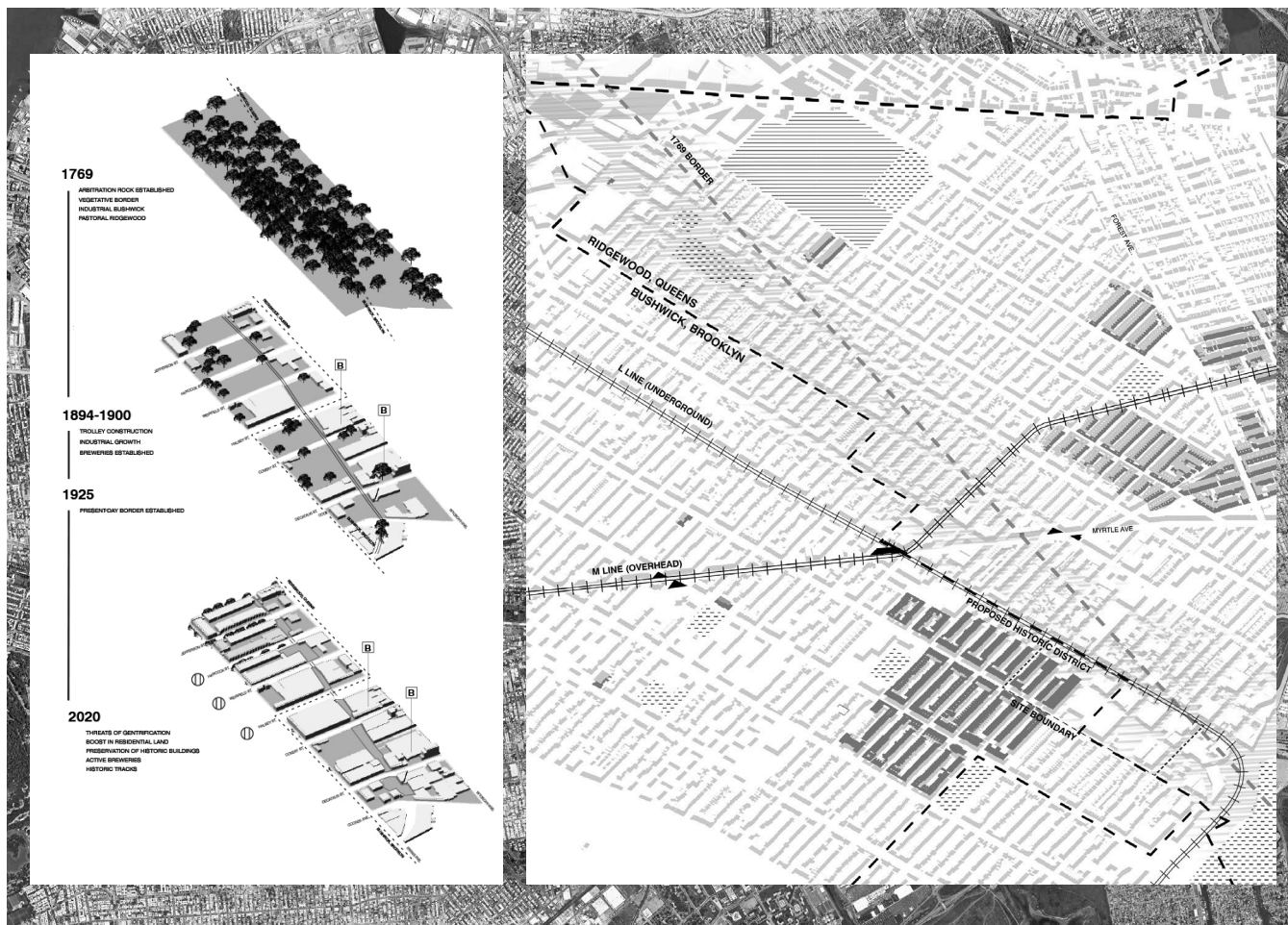


Figure 02. “As the effects of the pandemic, economic recession, the protests for racial justice and a highly polarized electorate continue to leave the public with increasing anxiety, it is evermore urgent for architects to investigate how we change the urban environment for the public good? Sometimes we feel obliged to justify a traditional legacy into a perfect figure, rather than let the context determine how we treat a site. Due to this lack of conversation on social meaning and community perceptions, visitors to the site will not feel connected to the real history and fail to identify themselves as environmentalist-citizens.... As architects, we have the profound ability to steer human behavior in the constructed realm. Through design, we channel movement, spur emotion, form relationships, conceal or reveal spaces, prescribe or un-prescribe programs; such impacts permeate beyond site boundaries alone. With this in mind, we must remind ourselves to manipulate responsibly. We have enormous power.” – Barbara Kornak, BSLA ’21.

**Positioning.** Students were asked to propose a new or modified vision for an urban site located in their hometowns, while investigating architectural and urban design strategies that reconstruct or de-construct the existing spatial structures and dynamic flows. Considerations included: What are the systems and exchanges, matter and events, narratives and regimes that are implicit for manifesting a design strategy? How do they impact one’s vision and experience of public space – a common space for all people?

**Conceptualizing.** Students were then asked to interpret and synthesize their site readings (site observations and site analysis) in convergence with an explicit design intervention programmed to understand the people’s needs. Interventions were influenced by unique design approaches, where methods for spatial and

material explorations and design experimentation involved an extensive range from the analytical and projective, precise and speculative, practical and imaginative. In consequence, students had to deploy a site strategy that accounted for urban landscapes and their ecological infrastructure, material economies, and social agency.

Alongside the semester’s conversations on climate change, social inequity, and design empathy, additional considerations students reflected upon included: How does conjuring the unknown, speculating about possibilities, and imagining designed futures all occur without a voice? How can one hold onto their values and design propositions, while engaging others through the design and construction process? How does one communicate the value of public space and equitable design to others?

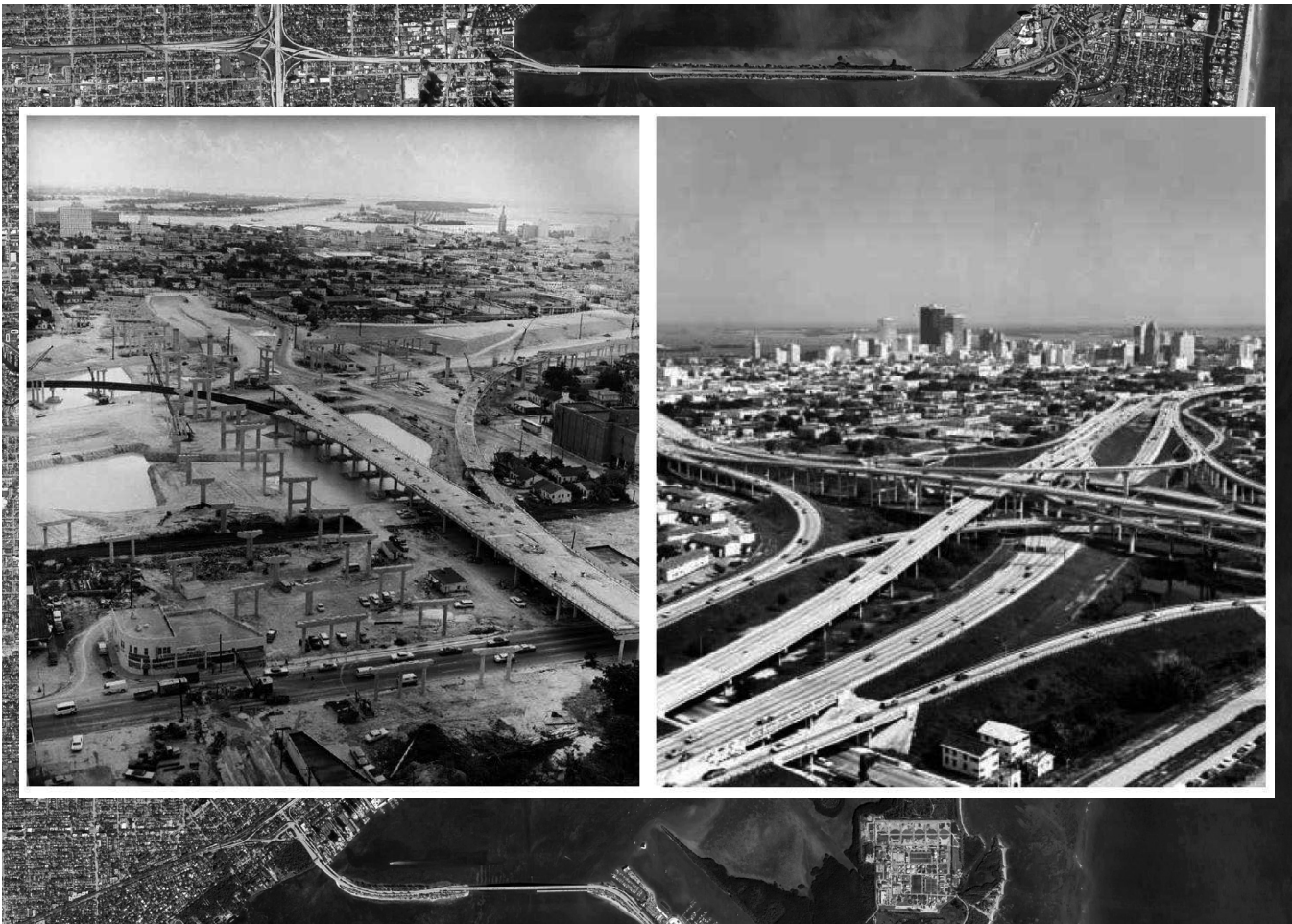


Figure 03. “Designers aren’t shaping a new city, but rather manufacturing an *ideal* urban condition. These moves will culminate in a dense, insensitive appropriation of space by structures ill-suited for changing conditions. Sea level threatens to submerge the entire coastline and displace thousands of residents, while ageing infrastructure perpetuates a narrative of inequity and fragments the city. Local communities are disaffected as the needs of the people and their immense cultural resources are disregarded. Local communities are disaffected as the needs of the people and their immense cultural resources are disregarded in favor of a vision of a city that is exclusively for the wealthy. The consequences of this outdated, exceptionalist view of Miami’s growth threatens to undermine life in the city as we know it, further sequestering residents from their public spaces and disenfranchising them from a safe and habitable future. This is a place in need of interpretation and narration, a place wounded by the insensitive decisions of the past and left to heal with no treatment and where the landscape can be a driver social change. This is why we design.” – Michael Chang, BSLA ’21.

The series of discussions eventually evolved into a preliminary manifesto <sup>1</sup>; students declared their values and perspectives on contemporary public spaces and the role of today’s designer. Statements were shared and, in some cases, *defended*.

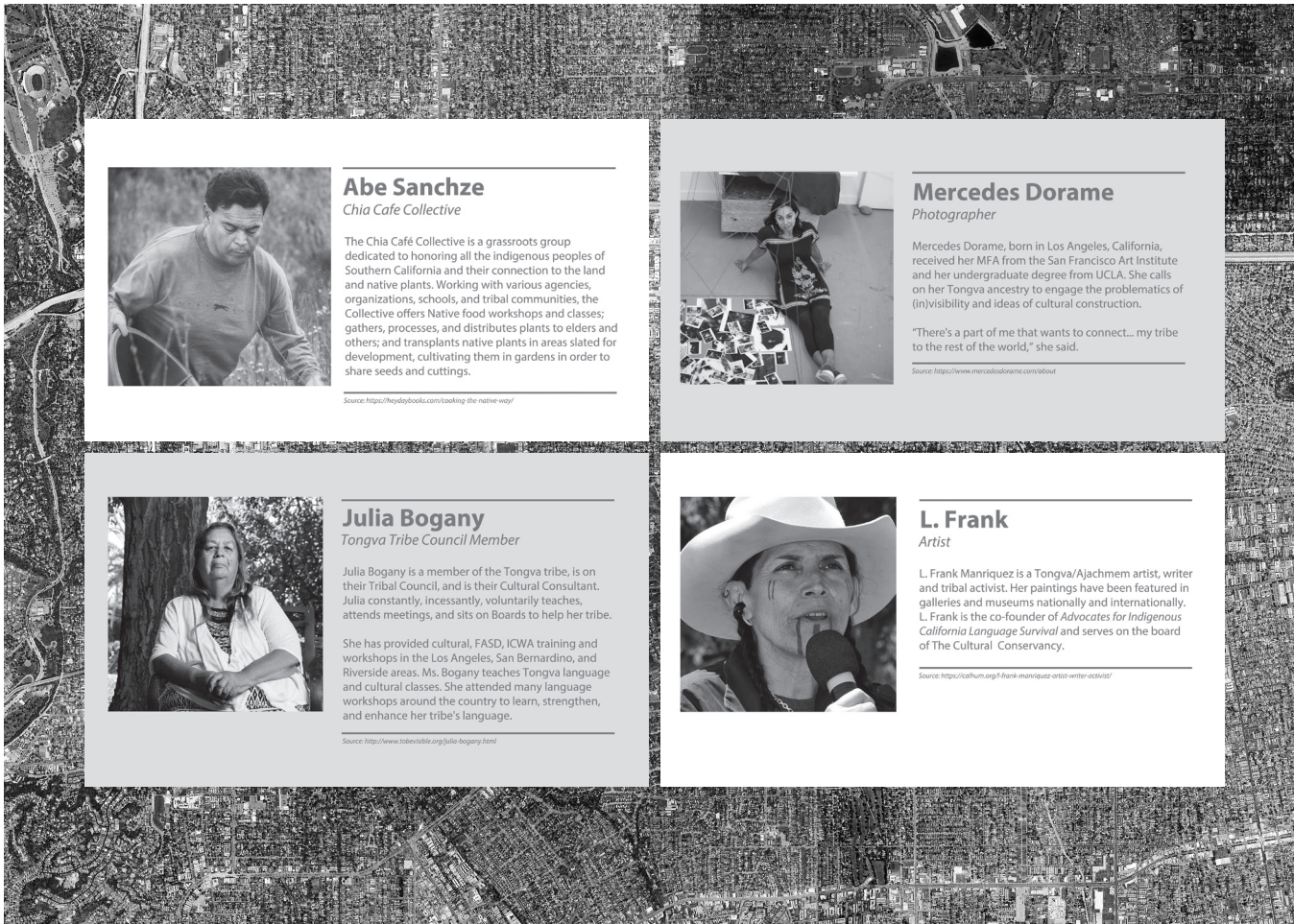
Resourcing course readings and intermittent group discussions during the semester, situated students’ design interests and established theoretical and historical correlations with those of other architects, landscape architects, designers, ecologists, scientists, philosophers, artists, etc. In company with these manifestos, students curated a visual essay that provoked a critique on contemporary public spaces and urban design. These *living* documents were edited and refined over the course of the

semester, and they provided a means to frame a clearer vision of the future for their respective hometowns.

#### TO PROMPT . THE SECOND CALL TO ACTION

**Prompt.** *n.* An act of assisting or encouraging; a word or phrase spoken as a reminder; a message or symbol that is waiting for input. *adj.* Acting without delay, immediate. *v.* Of an event or fact, cause or bring about an action or feeling; cause (someone) to take a course of action.

**I will make my hometown better by [prompt]. My design should be a place to [fill in the blank] <sup>2</sup>.**



**Abe Sanchze**  
*Chia Café Collective*

The Chia Café Collective is a grassroots group dedicated to honoring all the indigenous peoples of Southern California and their connection to the land and native plants. Working with various agencies, organizations, schools, and tribal communities, the Collective offers Native food workshops and classes; gathers, processes, and distributes plants to elders and others; and transplants native plants in areas slated for development, cultivating them in gardens in order to share seeds and cuttings.

Source: <https://heydoybooks.com/cooking-the-native-way/>



**Mercedes Dorame**  
*Photographer*

Mercedes Dorame, born in Los Angeles, California, received her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and her undergraduate degree from UCLA. She calls on her Tongva ancestry to engage the problematics of (in)visibility and ideas of cultural construction.

"There's a part of me that wants to connect... my tribe to the rest of the world," she said.

Source: <https://www.mercedesdorame.com/about>



**Julia Bogany**  
*Tongva Tribe Council Member*

Julia Bogany is a member of the Tongva tribe, is on their Tribal Council, and is their Cultural Consultant. Julia constantly, incessantly, voluntarily teaches, attends meetings, and sits on Boards to help her tribe.

She has provided cultural, FASD, ICWA training and workshops in the Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside areas. Ms. Bogany teaches Tongva language and cultural classes. She attended many language workshops around the country to learn, strengthen, and enhance her tribe's language.

Source: <http://www.tobevisible.org/julia-bogany.html>



**L. Frank**  
*Artist*

L. Frank Manriquez is a Tongva/Ajachmem artist, writer and tribal activist. Her paintings have been featured in galleries and museums nationally and internationally. L. Frank is the co-founder of *Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival* and serves on the board of *The Cultural Conservancy*.

Source: <https://calhum.org/l-frank-manriquez-artist-writer-activist/>

Figure 04. “While architecture has historically been used to silence the voices of underrepresented minorities, perhaps this new era of social awareness can allow architecture to be a way of honoring and recognizing the contributions of different cultures.” – Annette Guan, BSLA ’21.

Today more than ever, the role of the citizen and their relationship with the urban context is demonstrating new modes for practice based on the re-appropriation of public spaces. We can learn from example and reflect upon the past decade: the 2020-21 Black Lives Matter Movement – instigated by the George Floyd protests – witnessed thousands of demonstrations in nearly 2,500 large cities and small towns; the 2017 Women’s March advocating women’s rights on Washington DC’s National Mall (among other cities in the country and world); the 2017 March for Science, held on Earth Day, and once again along Washington DC’s National Mall, to celebrate science and to recognize a call for non-partisan, evidence-based policies; and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protesting against economic inequality that occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City’s Financial District.

**Recognizing.** Let the people find a place in the design. Ask yourself, how does a designer have influence and impact in these public spaces? How do design decisions regarding spatial and formal configuration, scale and materiality support an urban realm?

Challenge your preconceptions of public spaces by (re)framing complementary urban programs and (re)imagining gradients of public to private use, from the collective to the individual?

As their second call to action, students were asked to assess their site readings and solicit feedback from multiple community members. This allowed students to challenge their own preconceptions and definitions of public spaces. By deconstructing favorable and unfavorable preconditions, reimagining gradients from public to private, from the collective to individual, students reframed ideas of social experiences into materialized public spheres. These interviews were integrated into their manifestos, and design interventions became focused as site-specific and time-specific strategies for *real* public spaces.

During the next phase of the studio, students were asked to develop a series of conceptual scenarios, each clearly different from the other in terms of spatial and material exploration; however, grounded in the knowledge gained by their experiences

with their community members. Scenarios were based on different site readings and site mappings; various urban insights and lessons from case studies and interviews; and precedents of previous urban tactics. The multiple scenarios extracted scalar considerations, such as programmatic and material applications, from specific experiential encounters between different publics. Each conceptual scenario provided physical connections to existing infrastructures within the hometown sites, such as strengthening public utilities, reformed policies, and sustainability guidelines.

From these diverse scenarios, a single scenario was selected for further exploration. Students used this phase of concept ideation and design exploration to open new possibilities and to consider widely divergent approaches and responses.

### TO INTERVENE . THE THIRD CALL TO ACTION

Whether one has lived in a booming metropolis or a small town, it was evident that cities that implement flexible, creative, and light design interventions can catalyze profound changes to the urban context and human experience. The studio forwarded an approach of tactical urbanism, an alternative method that achieved urban regeneration at the scale of a structure, a street, and/or a city block. Similar to acupuncture, where thin needles are inserted at critical points on the human body to relieve or treat an ailment for the well-being of the entire organism, a tactical design intervention intended to promote positive change for an entire neighborhood. The most important objective to this strategy was to create positive, direct, and lasting impact for not just the hometown sites but for the individual students in the studio as well.

As a third call to action, students were asked to use their refined design scenarios to propose final projects that constructed public spaces on a whole other level. Each student had varying dimensions of sites and programmatic interventions, from vacant plots and parcels to recreational greenways and infrastructural corridors.

The final task asked students to imagine a strategic urban intervention in their hometown – to test and prototype beyond the traditional programs of an urban park, a public plaza, a streetscape, a sidewalk, an urban void – and to experiment with, as much as promote, new social interactions, material exchanges, community activities, and urban scenarios. It was important to establish a clear understanding and a strong link to their hometown and its citizens through the act of prototyping. The constructed artifacts generated from the act of prototyping allowed students to garner a feedback loop to their design process – to respond, spatialize, and evaluate for a public realm.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The semester-long project asked students to respond to current urban conditions that are unique to their hometowns, and to find ways to (re)construct future urban realms. Beginning with the prompt to design for a public – a public for whom one can identify in person and with detail – students began to understand their hometowns' basic needs, activities, and aspirations, otherwise for today as well as for the future.

Through lecture presentations, weekly readings, open discussions, and healthy debates, the studio provided students with an environment where learning was inclusive to the differences and diversity of opinions and perspectives. A variety of design inquiries, methods of explorations, and final project proposals were encouraged and independently guided by the student's individual interests and skills with the feedback of the instructor, teaching assistant, and review critics. From a collaborative nature of developing the course syllabus to the final documentation of studio work, a plasticity to ideas and an encouragement of design motivations were accommodated, as well as the manifold ways of processing information, working methods, and styles.

Students foregrounded the collective and experiential aspect of their design interventions – identifying and understanding the immersive, existential components that leaned away from form-making alone. Designing for a public, for whom one can identify in detail – their habits, annoying and otherwise, their aspirations, close at hand or remote, allowed students to find their place in design – both as a practice, but also as its citizens. The students were open and flexible to all things, acknowledging the love as much as the hate of their hometowns, making the familiar surreal and becoming inspired by re-presenting spaces anew.

The course learning objectives were shared at the onset of the semester and were regularly reminded throughout the term.

- To take a stand, a point of view; to ask questions; and to reason persuasively through words, imagery, and drawings.
- To situate your work in a larger intellectual context by consciously and critically engaging with theoretical, historical, as well as contemporary issues and influences.
- To demonstrate conceptual clarity in each and every stage of the design process.
- To interpret site histories and urban systems from the biological to ecological, the social to economic.
- To explore methods and tools for fieldwork and site readings in order to find unexpected relationships and design possibilities between select design criteria and performance metrics.
- To explore and deploy graphic techniques that are commensurate with conceptual ideas.

- To underscore the importance of personal experiences alongside community expectations.
- To work effectively with one another and to contribute to class discourse, including critical discussions on the concept of public space, design empathy, social equity, etc.
- Of great importance, only make things you love.

## CONCLUSION

It is imperative that as designers, we develop methodologies that contribute to the dissecting and dismantling of certain assumptions and complexities in our design processes; and to find ways to implement more accessible, adaptive, efficient, innovative, resilient, and sustainable solutions for today and tomorrow's communities. We must broadcast various modes of dissemination from site analysis, site observation, and site intervention to piece together a place's effect on people and their experiences.

"I got to use my voice" said Tynay Wright, a former student at Kent Island High School located in Queen's Anne County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In a recent *New York Times* article, former superintendent Dr. Andrea Kane supported students in organizing a series of Black Lives Matter events with a local organization called Students Talking About Race (STAR) after the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. It was a rare opportunity – to be given a voice – for Black students in a majority-white community. When young adults, especially those who are minorities of color – are given the time and space to stand-up and share their opinions and attitudes, even during the most divisive of times, it is incredibly vital for instructors, advisors, and mentors to show their support and to build a robust foundation to support their ideas.

Architectural education is built upon a culture of projective thinking and critical feedback; these concepts require mutual respect from engaged parties, including students and professors (as much as professors and administrators, administrators and policymakers, policymakers and citizens, etc.). We are all party to a network of communities, boroughs, and townships that makes it necessary to heed to each other's voices, even when we are not fully in agreement or of unified opinion.

Today's architecture students have already transformed contemporary dialogues in design education, finding paths to amplify marginalized voices, especially those of women, Blacks, Latinx, Asians, and LGBTQ+ individuals into current and future course curricula and in the changing demographic of faculty and administrative bodies at universities and colleges. Actively building the body of knowledge beyond traditional canons exposes the profession as one beyond the servicing of elite clientele and white dominant counterparts, who currently *occupy* 66.6 percent of the profession, followed by sixteen percent of American

Indian and Alaska Natives, Asians, Blacks or African American Hispanics of Latino, Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders, etc.<sup>3</sup>

There is a cost to not using one's voice and staying silent. Silence fosters ignorance and an erasure of history's systemic injustices and demonstrations of violence. In the same *New York Times* article, Tory Brown, a Black Queen's Anne County native resident said, "For anybody to say there's no racism in Queen Anne's County, when I've been here and have experienced and seen it, just goes to show what we're dealing with." He continues, "People had been suffering for years; we just never had anyone to speak up."

At the heart of humanity, as well as design democracy, the studio encouraged students to actively engage in the equitable design of public spaces – squarely within their own hometowns and in the eyes of its people, while most importantly learning how to take a stand and hold one's own ground. When the human condition became generative to the design process, the experimentation and prototyping of programmatic necessities; the support and promotion of new social interactions, material and immaterial exchanges, community activities, and urban scenarios – each of these provided a valuable means for design thinking and design making, realizing the possibilities of design's impact for cities and a genuine design empathy for its citizens.

At the heart of democracy, students were charged with engaging urban landscapes squarely in view of *We the People*. We – as architects and designers – are a collection of individuals who advocate for change, reinforce what is seen as good and needs to be preserved, and rally against what threatens our rights and beliefs. The studio intended to be a forum for a necessary change and preservation for the individual student, and a rallying call to improve the quality of life for citizens, communities and future built spaces.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Definition of manifesto: "A public declaration or proclamation, written or spoken.... A book or other work by a private individual supporting a cause, propounding a theory or argument, or promoting a certain lifestyle." – Oxford English Dictionary. "... [A] call-to-action through the power of rhetoric in times of intense political and economic uncertainty" – Anthony Vidler, *Architect and Theorist, What Happened to the Architectural Manifesto?* Symposium at Columbia University, November 2011.
2. Proposed examples of the [fill in the blank]: commemorate, educate, garden, memorialize, play, protest, sit, surveil, etc.
3. American Institute of Architects. Membership Demographics Report 2019.