

Unpacking the Archive: Community Engagement and the Research Studio

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The city is often a place of collective memory, but as the recent conflicts over monuments and memorials have taught us, some memories are prematurely erased while others live on past their shelf life. Although history and memory can sometimes leave their mark upon the city, it is more often incumbent upon later generations to construct physical markers of important, though ephemeral, events. More recently cities have invested in informative and interactive installations, and architects have created more abstract, experiential structures that convey history in a more emotive mode.

As part of this discourse, our teaching project titled “Unpacking the Archive” aimed to recuperate the lost histories of those who shaped the city immediately after the Civil Rights era when white flight to the suburbs and an era of austerity permanently altered cities. In the context of two courses, a seminar and a research studio, we examined the struggles and actions of the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement in Cincinnati, Ohio that originated in the early 1970s and continues today. The People’s Movement is a coalition of activists, institutions, and residents who waged a series of campaigns to fight for housing access, schools, parks, and services against hypergentrification and a municipal bureaucracy actively working to eliminate the poor from a picturesque historic neighborhood. A true poor people’s campaign, the Peoples’ Movement unified poor Appalachian and Black residents at a time of heightened racial tensions.

Building upon the legacy of the research studio, the studio follows the humanistic turn in Urban Studies. “Unpacking the Archive” diverges from the pedagogical model inaugurated by Venturi Scott Brown’s work in Las Vegas or developed by Rem Koolhaas’ Harvard Project on the City. Instead, we leverage access to the People’s Movement’s informal, dispersed archive and the urgency of conducting oral histories with its aging leadership to do team-based micro-historical research into five campaigns that culminated in a library of visual materials, a written narrative, and mappings. Students

then designed an exhibition that situated those campaigns within larger national trajectories such as desegregation and housing policy, and secondly built empathy through formal, spatial, and graphic design decisions. Revisiting the concept of “memorial,” students were asked to design in a mode that was both informative and celebratory, reinscribing the actions of the city’s marginalized actors into the foreground.

THE ORIGINS OF THE OVER-THE-RHINE PEOPLE’S MOVEMENT

In the wake of post-war suburbanization, broad disinvestment in cities, and destructive modernist planning principles, reformist and even radical approaches to re-thinking architecture’s engagement with the city emerged. In 1968, civil rights activist Whitney M. Young Jr. spoke at the 100th Convention of the American Institute of Architects decrying “a white noose around the city” and identified a “thunderous silence” and “complete irrelevance” of the architectural profession in responding to the city’s multiple crises.¹ Similarly, European polemics from the ‘68 era critiqued architecture’s avoidance of social issues, such as Giancarlo de Carlo of Team X, who cited the “bourgeois professionalisation” and “specialisation” of the architect as the foundation of the profession’s inability to adequately address “architecture’s public.”² Similar debates in the planning profession led to such reforms as advocacy and equity planning, applied with varying degrees of success to build community capacities to influence development and political circles.

Socially conscious movements emerged not only in architecture and planning circles, but also within community groups themselves. The Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, the focus of this paper, grew out of similar anti-war, anti-poverty, civil rights, and women’s liberation efforts. Located just north of Cincinnati, Ohio’s central business district, the neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine is an exemplary case study in preservation-by-neglect in the post-war period, and, subsequently, in large-scale displacement and gentrification today. In Over-the-Rhine, the People’s Movement grew out of a grassroots community concern with the provision of shelter for the neighborhood’s unhoused. Suspicious of most institutional and professionalized approaches to constructing the city, the People’s Movement also emerged out of desperation to fill the gaps in inadequate



Figure 1. People's Movement protest signs and informally organized archival materials.

social service provisions in areas such as mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness.

Urban renewal and highway projects from the adjacent West End neighborhood in the late 1950's and early 1960's displaced more than 25,000 African-Americans, many of whose ancestors first came to Cincinnati during the Great Migration. Many of them took root in Over-the-Rhine, and joined with the predominantly White Appalachian communities in the neighborhood, who had been displaced since the 1940's from the regionally adjacent coal mining towns of West Virginia and Kentucky. The People's Movement's efforts initially focused on affordable housing, and quickly grew to include issues of educational equality, desegregation, affordability, and other "right to the city" issues of urban access. Finding common ground in poverty, a unique coalition of urban Appalachians and African Americans politically united in the People's Movement.

FROM THE IVORY TOWER TO THE STREET: MODELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As the People's Movement tactics tended toward protest and mutual aid, its leaders intentionally tried to avoid participating in existing institutional frameworks and local political camps. In the late 1960s, community development and architecture circles leveled similar critiques of institutionality and professionalization, proposing two nonprofit structures in response that share the same acronym—community development corporations and community design centers (CDC's). Community development corporations as a structure grew out of Bobby Kennedy's critiques of Johnson's War on Poverty strategies. As a model, community development corporations and more broadly, community based development organizations (CBDO's), attempted to broaden the impact of their work to provide decent affordable housing through the partnership of public and private sector dollars. Broadly, the result of such an institutional structure creates an organizational tension between attracting private sector dollars, and preventing displacement caused by that same development. Within the framework of the People's

Movement, the CDC that emerged, today called Over-the-Rhine Community Housing, has consistently augmented affordable housing efforts in the context of broad private-sector-led development of more than \$1.4 billion dollars in recent years.³

Community design centers first emerged in the 1960's in the academic context of architecture schools. While initially infused with great momentum and optimism, by the 1980's many community design centers scaled back their scope of services and alliances as austerity politics during the era of Reaganomics caused many to close, resulting in fewer than twenty nationwide by 1987.⁴ That number expanded by the mid-1990's under the Clinton administration, as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created the Office of University Partnerships to foster relationships between communities and local universities. Many community design centers emerged during this period, including the Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine (MUCCE), which opened in 2001.

The MUCCE has served as Miami University's primary venue of community engagement since its inception, drawing together architecture majors with students from education, social work, art, journalism, and other disciplines to live, study and work with community partners in Over-the-Rhine. "Community engagement" is an umbrella term in higher education that encompasses a variety of pedagogical practices, differing levels of community involvement, and a plethora of desired outcomes for the school, the students, and community organizations. The MUCCE has served the Over-the-Rhine community in collaboration with the People's Movement organizations in a variety of modes: design-build architectural services, placement of student teachers and workers in neighborhood schools and social service organizations, and the production of "agit-prop"-style writing and exhibition in participation with current struggles.

Pedagogically, our project seeks a role for research in the design studio in the context of a community engaged pedagogy. Much



Figure 2. Examples of ephemera found in the People’s Movement archive

of the contemporary work of community design centers housed in universities focuses on either meeting the needs of community members through frameworks such as design-build studios, or through advocacy planning. Engaged research is less common, though becoming a more formidable avenue for meeting community needs. In the Obama-administration sponsored “Rebuild by Design,” in New York City, for example, community design centers augmented their design work with technical research in service of meeting community needs. Other research practices like Forensic Architecture or Columbia’s Center for Spatial Research also attempt to bridge gaps between research in the academy and various forms of community-engaged praxis. In our work, we attempt to bridge similar gaps—offering the expertise of the researcher, with long-standing engagement and pedagogical aims of the community design center.

THE STATE OF THE ARCHIVE AND ITS POSSIBLE FUTURES

After decades of community organizing and engaging in dozens of campaigns or “struggles,” the People’s Movement had amassed a large collection of documents, records, and artifacts. More than 150 boxes of informal archival materials precariously sit in an unconditioned warehouse building in the heart of the neighborhood. Public meeting fliers, protest banners, community zines, and planning documents are loosely organized by campaign. Media in the form of photography and documentary films also capture the lived experiences of many of the campaigns and residents.

Together, People’s Movement activists and faculty affiliated with the Miami University Center for Community Engagement began a series of conversations around how the materials might be preserved—conversations that remain ongoing. The community remains wary of simply handing them over to local archival institutions, where they might languish for years before processing and will be subject to institutional rules and gatekeepers. To hand over their materials invokes fears that they

will lose access to their materials and, more importantly, that they may lose control over the narrative of their own history.

Instead, the People’s Movement seeks to navigate the terrain between formal archival practices and more localized control through the construction of a community-based archive, which would keep the materials in the hands of the People’s Movement in perpetuity. It would also allow them to more regularly use their materials to engage new audiences. People’s Movement leaders are particularly concerned with the link between their historical struggles and contemporary fights, as well as introducing the next generation of activists to their work.

THE ARCHIVE AND THE SEMINAR: CONNECTING THE PAST WITH THE FUTURE THROUGH THICK MEDIA

Through a grant awarded through the Miami University’s Humanities Center, our “Unpacking the Archive” project constituted a three-course sequence examining the People’s Movement history and related archival materials as part of a Humanities Lab. The grant encourages experimentation with methodology and pedagogy around a chosen topic, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration. Initial conversations with the community, an archivist, and architecture faculty framed the project. The community, hesitant of transferring their archival materials to a formal archive, saw the potential benefits of exploring the materials with students and faculty before deciding on the future direction of a community archive.

The first course of the Humanities Lab sequence was the seminar, “The American City Since 1940: Race, Class, Gender, Culture, Space.” In this course, students are exposed to a range of theoretical perspectives and case studies on the city, and also develop an engaged project throughout the semester. For the Humanities Lab, students connected historical People’s Movement struggles with contemporary issues confronting neighborhood development. Relying on resident interviews, archival materials, and data from the County Auditor and other official records, students developed a narrative that brought



Figure 3. Student animation examining the taxonomy of lighting conditions in Over-the-Rhine, “The American City Since 1940,” Fall 2020.

together “fact” and “atmosphere,” the quantitative and the qualitative, through animated digital media through which a story of the neighborhood emerged.

To do this work, we acknowledged two guiding frameworks. First, we recognized the inherent shortcomings in any singular discipline’s ability to investigate and engage the city. Henri Lefebvre describes disciplinary “residues” tied to research methods that evade a more complete understanding of the city and its multiple phenomena.⁵ Student enrollment largely consisted of architecture students, but because of the course topic, several students from urban planning, geography, finance, and business also partook in the course. The multiple disciplinary perspective enriched classroom conversations, leading to an understanding that the city was a complex overlapping of formal, historical, economic, and social forces.

Second, we aligned ourselves with the framework of “thick” investigation and practice, as defined by Dana Cuff, Todd Presner and others. Thickness as a method and epistemology accepts as its starting point that, “Not everything is legible or recognizable by everyone; not everything will be legible or recognizable all the time; not everyone will care; and some things will be lost forever.”⁶ Thickness, in contrast to depth, allows multiple meanings to arise, as opposed to seeking one definitive narrative. It foregrounds the contestation of narrative, and acknowledges the overlap of power structures in constructing a narrative amid multiple audiences in complex milieux like cities.

Using this framework to orient our work with the People’s Movement archive, we focused our approach to not only understand historic campaigns, but how historic issues shape experience in the city today. Thus, multiple “thick media” student projects examined the qualitative, experiential, and affective components of the neighborhood. For example, a student group examined how qualities of lighting index past narratives of securitization in early stages of gentrification through the installation of glaring security lights, likening the neighborhood to a “prison yard” in comparison to sophisticated lighting qualities in streetscape projects constructed in more advanced stages of gentrification. Such investments also highlight the disparity of how tax dollars are used to criminalize one population and bolster real estate prices for another.

Another group examined how varieties of signage found in the neighborhood revealed competing narratives about its identity. Neighborhood signage developed prior to gentrification, for example, is no longer sanctioned within the historic signage guidelines now ubiquitous in the community. This, in effect, erases evidence of Black-owned businesses present prior to gentrification, ultimately reinforcing a top-down narrative of blight supplanted through investment. Similarly, People’s Movement murals compete with developer signage and more abstracted murals deemed more palatable to new gentrifying residents.

Other student groups examined specific campaigns of the People’s Movement in relation to the changing shape of the

neighborhood. For example, two student groups traced changes occurring within a few blocks over several decades. Examining a People's Movement campaign from the early 1980's to preserve affordable housing, the group reinforced the necessity of such a struggle by documenting increasing real estate prices and visual markers of gentrification through data and historical research. In these "thick media" drawings, People's Movement archival materials are visually layered with other sources documenting neighborhood change, suggesting how the historic event resonates with similar issues today.

DESIGNING THE ARCHIVE: PUBLIC HISTORY AND THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH STUDIO

The second component of the Humanities Lab project comprised a research studio entitled "Unpacking the Archive: Collective Memory and the City." The phenomenon of the architectural research studio has a decades-long history, originating most famously with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's 1968 Yale studio in Las Vegas.⁷ More recently, in the early aughts, Rem Koolhaas led a series of research studios at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His Project on the City repeated and expanded VSB's model in which students examine a complex place or typology through multiple lenses and using diverse methods. In these examples, students brought their architectural skills of visual analysis through drawing, diagrams, and photography, to such diverse topics as the Las Vegas Strip, the shopping mall, and China's Pearl River Delta. The research studio model expanded in the 1990s and 2000s with the emergence of the Dutch "datascape" approach, which introduced new methods of visual representation and analysis of complex quantitative data to the architectural toolkit.

"Unpacking the Archive: Collective Memory and the City" introduced a method to the research studio—in this case, to an upper-level undergraduate studio—that has been previously limited to students pursuing Masters of Science or doctoral degrees, namely archival research. The students, working in groups, worked with the People's Movement archive to, first, articulate the micro-history of some of their most consequent campaigns, and second, consider how best to present and memorialize those campaigns in the design of an exhibition. In so doing, we pursued the following question: Could the research, visualization, problem-solving, and collaborative work skills taught in the architectural curriculum be successfully applied to historical research? Would students' engagement in historical research lead them to produce more sensitive or compelling installations? How might the graphic design of the historical narratives integrate more interestingly with the formal characteristics of the installation? How might architecture students, who most commonly work with form, expand their thinking to integrate text, sound, and image in their designs?

Working closely with People's Movement activist Bonnie Neumeier, we developed an attitude toward the archive that diverged from the usual objectivity and neutrality typically

claimed by historians. Situating this work squarely within our decades-long relationship with the People's Movement, we explicitly acknowledged that we would be telling the story from the "people's" perspective. The gaps between preserved document and the imprecision of human memory remained to be negotiated.

Formulating the first half of the studio as a kind of research atelier, we divided students into five groups, each of which chose a People's Movement campaign to address. The types of materials available for each campaign varied widely. Some groups were given substantial amounts of archival material, while others relied on newspaper accounts and oral history interviews with People's Movement activists. Some materials were heavily textual in nature, including such documents as city planning reports, legal documents, and meeting minutes, while others drew upon rich visual material like posters, flyers, protest signs, and dramatic photographs.

Given the relatively short duration of the studio, which took place in an accelerated summer semester of just six weeks, and the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated entirely remote interactions, a great deal of preliminary work and organization was necessary. We, the instructors, scanned relevant documents and created packages of materials for the student groups to work with. We designed a workflow and a set of collaborative Google documents that prompted students to collect certain forms of information. These included a timeline, a running list of protagonists and their biographies, a list of images and their sources, and a research notes document. Each group member was assigned to be 'Keeper' of one of the shared documents.

We also designed a series of exercises intended to introduce students to the studio's research methods and to introduce the format of the history exhibition and installation. For example, to introduce the problematics of oral histories, we asked students to interview one another and write up their "findings." Students were required to visit (whether virtually or in person) a history museum, and to analyze the types of materials found there and the methods of presenting the historical narrative. Students presented on such diverse institutions as the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History, the British National Museum of Computing, and the University of Oklahoma's exhibition, "Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture."

After working their way through historical materials and conducting oral history interviews, groups developed exhibition design proposals that addressed the full spectrum of images, texts, and physical objects that comprised their installations. Groups developed a variety of approaches to the project. One group designed an exhibition about the Peaslee Elementary campaign (1982-84) in which People's Movement activists fought a

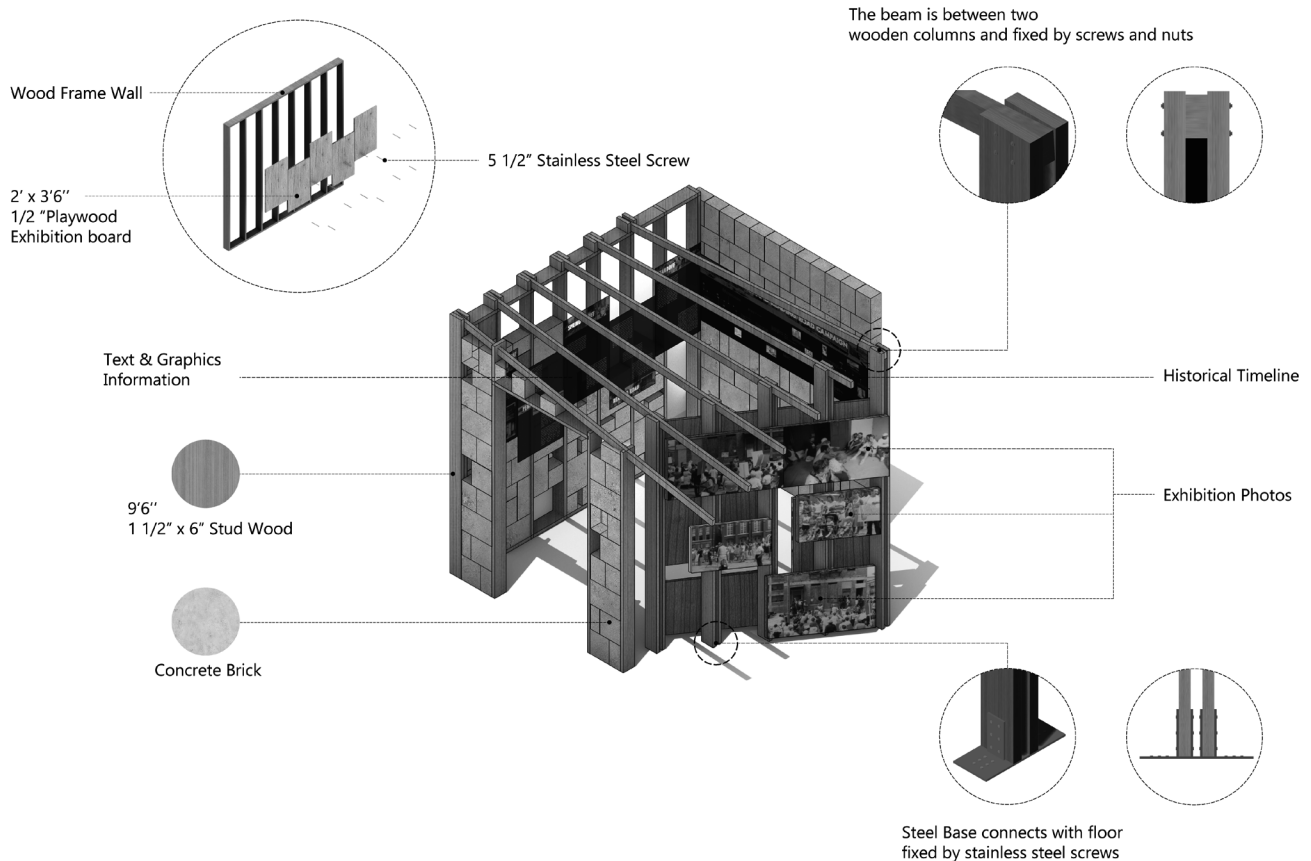
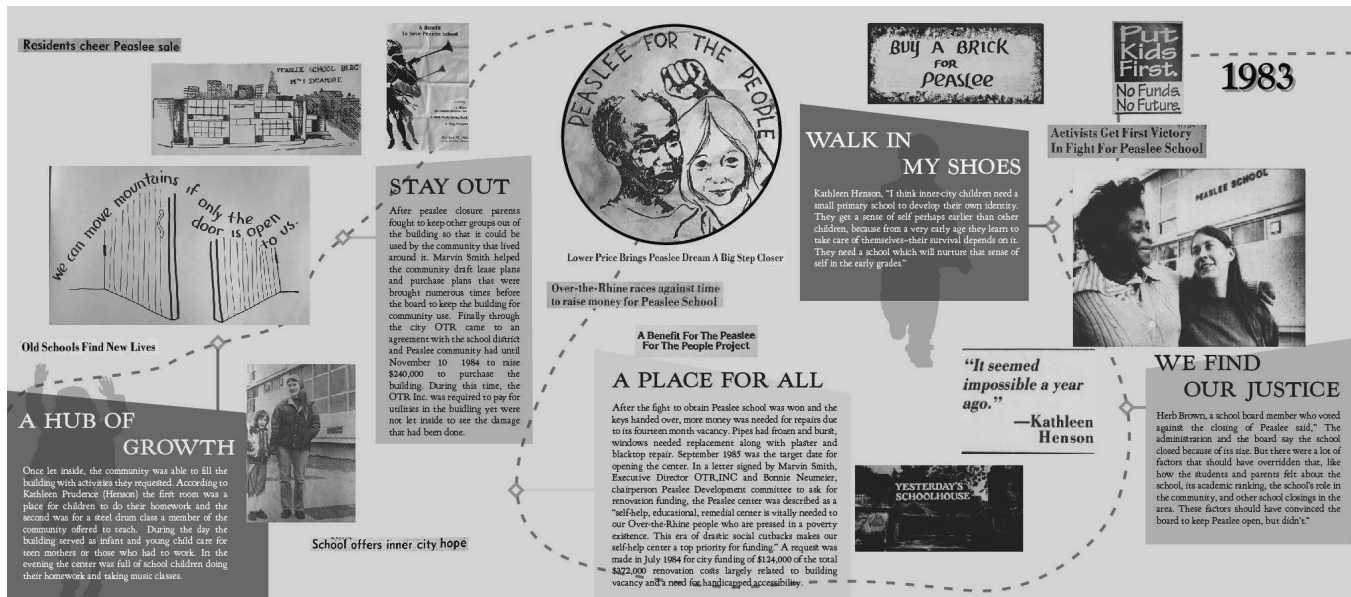


Figure 4. Top: Graphic narrative timeline of Peaslee campaign; Bottom: Spring Street/Reading Road campaign installation design, "Collective Memory in the City," Summer 2021.

two-stage battle. First, they fought the Cincinnati School Board to prevent the closing of their neighborhood high-performing, racially integrated elementary school, resulting in its students being diverted to one of the worst performing schools in the system. When they lost that fight, they regrouped to secure the Peaslee building as a community center that would host a daycare, after-school programs, recreation and enrichment classes, and other community-oriented services. The complexity of the Peaslee campaign narrative necessitated a graphic approach in which a visual timeline studded with photos, flyers, and protest signs took center stage. To hone the campaign's historical account, the group supplemented archival material with interviews, tenaciously searching for, and ultimately locating, one of the Peaslee mothers at the center of the fight.

Another group developed a scheme that integrated graphic and formal strategies to experientially reinforce their campaign's history. Their project recounted the People's Movement's Spring Street/Reading Road campaign that took place in 1988. During this campaign, a People's Movement organization, the Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, protested the planned demolition of multi-family apartment buildings in the adjacent Pendleton neighborhood. These were abandoned buildings owned by the city that had sat boarded up for years, while the city's homeless population skyrocketed. Though the city had promised earlier to rehabilitate them as subsidized housing, by the late 1980s an area business wanted the land for parking, to which the city agreed. Coinciding with the national "Take off the Boards" campaign planned by the Washington DC-based Community for Creative Non-violence, People's Movement activists occupied the Spring Street building until Cincinnati Mayor Charlie Luken agreed to turn over the property to the community. They attempted a second occupation of a building on Reading Road, only to be expelled and the building immediately demolished.

The Spring Street/Reading Road group conceptually engage the dramatic moments of the campaign, when activists literally pried boards off the windows, as well as the slower yet more significant act of renovating the buildings and offering them to low-income families. Utilizing a framework of typical wood studs to support the campaign's graphic narrative, the group proposed a simulated brick infill of lightweight foam blocks that could be taken down and reassembled by visitors. Ultimately, each of the groups strove to create spatial and formal experiences that reinforced some aspect of their campaign.

Between the "thick media" work of the seminar and the combination of archival research and public history exhibition design of the studio, our Humanities Lab project demonstrates the feasibility and value of combining community engagement with historical, even archival, research. Even community groups with a cadre of engaged, long-standing members and substantial collections of documents and ephemera can lose track of the details. This kind of community-engaged project not only

recovers an important history that may otherwise fade into obscurity, but it also provides those groups with an opportunity to bring old and new members together to connect past achievements with future goals and battles that remain to be fought.

BETWEEN THE RESEARCH STUDIO AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

As this work moves forward, the third course in the Humanities Lab will result in a forthcoming exhibition of the People's Movement at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, which will bring the group's history and ongoing mission to broader audiences. To design this exhibition, we are collaborating with a neighborhood artist collective that includes People's Movement artists called "Storefronts," referring both to the typical site of their installations and to the civic life of the street to which they contribute. The exhibition will combine artistic representations of the community alongside historical material and information.

The process of the Humanities Lab has helped coalesce a group of People's Movement leaders interested in carrying this work forward. By sifting through materials, reconnecting with distant People's Movement campaign participants, and co-constructing a narrative of their own history the group's leaders are interested in two paths. The first seeks to build solidarity with young Cincinnati activists through engagement and exploration of the archival materials. Activists, neighborhood residents, and artists who are unfamiliar with People's Movement struggles will be asked to sift through and interpret the materials through a series of exhibitions and conversations. This not only exposes further members of the community to the material, it also allows them to inscribe their own stories and interpretations into the broader narrative. The second path is determining a more permanent location for their archival materials. Further conversations on the direction of a permanent archive will take place between community members, relevant university faculty, and various institutions. Conversations around the possibility of permanently inscribing the history of the People's Movement into the neighborhood as an act of commemoration and counter-narrative will also lead to further investigation and engagement.

Pedagogically, this three-course sequence asks architecture students to augment their skills related to historical research and representation. They must determine what data is available, how to organize it, how to construct narratives, and how to account for narratives that may still be missing. It also asks students to reflect on how to represent those stories in novel and engaging ways. Beyond the scope of the book or article, it asks what role the designer might play in considering memory through designed space beyond the exhibition or museum. It also asks architecture students and students from the humanities where their skills diverge and where they reinforce each other.

More broadly, this work seeks to understand what role research might bring to community-engaged practice. The People's Movement is a living movement, and they seek for their own archival materials to not only be preserved, but to engage and inform contemporary struggles. Their living archive also raises interesting questions for researchers about how to add materials over time, and who makes those decisions.

Overall, our project demonstrates the potential value of public humanities scholarship for an architecture student. While architects in practice often consider the public realm, engage in public processes, and may even participate in community design efforts, they are largely unrehearsed in effectively researching history in any formal way. Ongoing contestation over public space, commemorative landscapes, and representation of identity is particularly important for the architect to consider, especially when working with marginalized communities.

Architecture students often refer to history and theory when undertaking studio projects. However, they are less familiar with structured empirical methods in the humanities, or how they translate that work to be accessible to a broader public. In part, this project seeks to situate the architect in line with the aims and responsibilities of a public intellectual. Training in humanities scholarship further strengthens their abilities to work in critical proximity to communities, and to structure narratives that ultimately shape space and culture.

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