THE BRIDGE

Bringing government back to the people.

ArtCenter College of Design Graduate Environmental Design (Spatial Track) Thesis Project

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SETION I - INTRODUCTION

American culture and society has changed greatly since the country's founding, but the spaces designated to carry out our democratic systems have not kept pace. We need to update these spaces and make them relevant to the people who use them in ways that are convenient and useful. The United States government attempts to find balance with powers of three. This includes the three branches - executive, legislative, and judicial - which are all put into place within the three main government levels - local, state, and federal. Throughout the research process, I have explored how government works across the branches and is distinct amongst the levels. In order to explore how to best bring this style of government back to the people for which it is intended, I have decided to focus this project on specifically within the more local level. By focusing on how local government interacts with the people, I hope to bring what has become seemingly distant and unattainable for the average citizen back to the people for which it was designed.

This project is quite personal to me and has been inspired by my own work with local government processes and interactions with representatives as a volunteer advocate. I work part time as an Event Planner for the Culver City Downtown Business Association, and constantly communicate with local business owners, community members, and City Hall staff to coordinate successful public events. One of the moments in my work that inspired my interest in this project was navigating the bureaucracy of the system. To get a standard event permit, my supervisor and I need to physically carry a piece of paper around City Hall for the signatures of the different public departments. We are treated like strangers, in a difficult and unfriendly fashion, even though we have contacts throughout the City and our events are well known within the community. I feel that there has to be a better way to get this sort of work done, and aspire to spatialize a systems design change within this project.

I am also a passionate volunteer with the San Fernando Valley chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. Part of this work is organizing meetings of varying scale, and it is sometimes a struggle to find appropriate venues. We need space for large all-member meetings and more intimate locations for small break-out groups, often with the need to show photos and videos. We bounce back and forth between a local temple, a local church, and a community room in the Van Nuys State Building for our large meetings, and typically use a casual counter-service restaurant for smaller team meetings. It would be so wonderful to have a home for our organization, where we both have access to our representatives as issues arise that we wish to speak with them about and a place in our part of Los Angeles that works for what our organization needs.

With these experiences, I am uniquely qualified and prepared to both study and speak for the way governments works for the people for whom it is meant to represent. This has been done by choosing three main areas - sociological analyses, the concept of belonging, and the field of urban studies and city planning - on which to focus the research, determining the project location based on demographic research, and finally designing with all of this background information in mind.

Therefore, the Bridge becomes an immersive campus environment focused on fostering government engagement in University Park. This space is run in partnership with the City of Los Angeles and is programmed with members of Generation Z in mind. The goal is to empower citizens to become active participants in their democracy through creating opportunities for personal interactions, breaking the traditional boundaries that separate lawmakers from their constituents, and educational programming.

SECTION II - RESEARCH

Sociological Analyses The Concept of Belonging Urban Studies and City Planning Case Studies I have identified three main categories to organize the bulk of my research into - a disciplinary lens, a concept, and a professional practice - and throughout the process have determined where and how they overlap to find the root of this project. However, before any of this can become relevant, I must identify and clarify the scope of the project. Determining this scope becomes the first challenge, as government practices vary across scale and power from place to place across the United States. Therefore, I must determine a specific sliding scale within which to focus, and I have decided to study the scope of government from the most local, neighborhood groups up through the city or county level. Focusing on local government allows for the study of how individuals feel and interact with their government on a human scale, making it more promising for a spatial design project such as this.

The disciplinary lens of sociological analyses allows for the opportunity to find research on how the field of sociology thinks about how to successfully design spaces to foster best interactions among people. This research has been focused on interactions in the context of citizen engagement with government processes. Three leading thinkers on this subject are Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, Eric Klinenberg, and Richard Sennett, whose works and teaching have become central to this branch of the research process.

In "Imagined Communities" by Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, he examines the creation and global spread of what he considers the imagined communities of nationality. This work fills a void Anderson sees in the field by explaining that, "while many studies have been written on nationalist political movements, the sense of nationality - the personal and cultural feeling of belonging to the nation - has not received proportionate attention." The processes that created these communities include territorialization of religious faiths, the decline of antique kingship, interactions between capitalism and print, the development of vernacular languages-of-state, and the changing concepts of time. These processes have developed along with human kind over the past centuries and have created what we know today as the individualities between the communities of different nationalities, including those in the United States.

In Eric Klinenberg's "Palaces for the People," he describes a way forward for Americans to come together and find common purpose in a time of deep divisions. As

¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.*

opinion and policy continues to become more polarized, it is important to acknowledge the similarities we all share, and this piece offers a blueprint for bridging our seemingly unbridgeable divides. Klinenberg proposes that social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life. He believes that the future of democratic societies rests not simply on shared values but on shared spaces: the libraries, childcare centers, churches, and parks where crucial connections are formed. Interweaving his own research with examples from around the globe, Klinenberg shows how "social infrastructure" is helping to solve some of our most pressing societal challenges.

As a sociologist and author, Richard Sennett has examined social life in cities, changes in labour, and social theory. Sennett poses that "living with people who differ - racially, ethically, religiously, or economically - is the most urgent challenge facing civil society today. We tend socially to avoid engaging with people unlike ourselves, and modern politics encourages the politics of the tribe rather than of the city." This sentiment, though seemingly shocking at first, accurately describes the root of the common conflicts seen in blended communities. People are naturally inclined to live and interact with those of a like nature or history, and breaking those barriers is essential to the future success of such communities. But this requires that deep personal connections be made. Sennett contends that "cooperation is a craft, and the foundations skillful cooperation lie in learning to listen well and discuss rather than debate." This entails finding spaces, both physical and digital, for people to practice this art form and using such places appropriately allows us to determine why cooperation has become weak, and how we can strengthen it.

Sennett's work has also traced the relationship between how cities are built and how people live in them. He shows how the "'closed city' - segregated, regimented, and controlled - has spread from the global North the the exploding urban agglomerations of the global South." Our cities have become more impersonal and cold for those who live in them, making it a wholly unpleasant experience to simply exist in these environments. Sennet argues instead for what he terms the "'open city,' where citizens actively hash out their differences and planners experiment with urban forms that make it easier for residents to cope" with their everyday lives. I have taken this lesson truly to heart while working on this project in order to create an "open city" environment within which democracy can be discussed.

² Sennett, Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation.

³ Sennett, Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City.

But the history of democracy is an important piece of the puzzle to include, and thankfully Sennett has also lent his expertise to the study of this area. He argues that democracy's foundations were, in fact, deeply rooted in the civic spaces of the Greek cities in which they first appeared. The two main spaces for this early form of democratic ruler were the pnyx, an amphitheater in which citizens listened to debates and took collective decisions; and the agora, the town square in which people were casually exposed to differences in an unmediated, natural format. Having both of these opportunities was critical to the success of the city-states of this era, and the combination of both formal and informal means of communication have become an integral part of this project as a result. The greatest lesson that can be taken from Sennet is: "To achieve sustained attention, to commit people to one another even when the going gets rough or becomes boring, to unpack the meaning of arguments, all require a disciplinary space for the eye and the voice."

From the study of these three sociological thinkers - Anderson, Klinenberg, and Sennett - I have learned how the built environment can deeply affect the psyche of the people living within close proximity to one another. And, though divisions may run deep, it is important to remember what we all have in common in order to live together in peace and self-government.

While living together, people come to a sense of belonging, and the concept of belonging is deeply rooted in the definition of community - a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. Community has a long and intensive history, and "few words have become so polysemous as 'community." This history begins in medieval times when it became the basis of the earliest forms of democratic sovereignty. It can be traced throughout time among many cultures and peoples and, in the 1930s, the field of sociology began to develop its own definition for the term - any group united by interpersonal relationships where all members know and recognize others in an equal belonging that implies personal and collective rights. Specifically in the United States, the word has embodied "the tension between the illustrated political values of the young state" and "is now one of those words that arouse an emotional and positive consensus." But community and belonging still varies from person to

⁴ Sennett, "Concentrating minds: how the Greeks designed spaces for public debate."

⁵ de Ugarte, "A very brief history of the meaning of 'community."

person, from group to group, and it is important when creating spaces for government interaction to be sensitive to this diversity.

Social cooperation, as studied by Tom Finkelpearl, requires different people to take on different roles, allowing for a sense of purpose and belonging within a group. He suggests "social cooperation as a meaningful way to think about this work and provides a framework for understanding its emergence and acceptance." He examines the activist, participator, and aesthetic experiences being created in contemporary art through this cooperative system. There is an elusive criteria for evaluating cooperative art, and Finkelpearl discusses the experiences of working on public projects such as museums and libraries. He also examines opportunities for social change, the lines between education and art, spirituality, and collaborative opportunities made available by new media. This new media is the way of engaging younger generations and offers additional chances to create works that will stand the test of time.

Eric Liu is another author writing on the subject of the human need for belonging in society. In "Become America," Liu has collected civic sermons he delivered at gatherings around the nation. This work poses the question, "What does it mean to be an engaged American in today's divided political landscape, and how do we restore hope in our country?" Liu takes on such thorny questions present today and provides inspiration and solace in a time of anger, fear, and dismay over the state of the Union. The main argument here is that we should all be active citizens in order to make a mark on our own society with a positive message for the future. This question of how to belong to a society is always present, and creating that true sense of community requires collaboration, empathy, and safe spaces to express ideas and collaborate with those of differing opinions.

This brings us to civic spaces, and how they are integrated into the community within the principles of the field of urban studies and city planning. Like democracy, urban planning has a long history, beginning in ancient Rome where, "the government has recognized urban planning as the perfect measure to eradicate the problems occurring in various cities." Though the cities of the time were quite a bit smaller than the sprawling urban centers of the twenty-first century, the same goal of making life better for the people living there applies.

⁶ Finkelpearl, What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation.

⁷ Liu, Become America.

⁸ Admin, "Reasons why Urban Planning is important for cities."

Not only does the forethought within this field have the opportunity to impact the people living there, but it allows for communities to effectively communicate and work with one another. It is "a framework that helps leaders transform vision into implementation, using space as a key resource for development and engaging stakeholders along the way." This collaboration is an important example to set for the individuals, and encourages citizens to actively participate in their cities and home towns.

Civic spaces themselves "are the 'front porches' of our public institutions...where we can interact with each other and with government." They become extensions of the community, the place where people feel government is being carried out. This gives these spaces great power, and can feel intimidating to the average citizen looking to find a piece of themselves in their own representation.

^{9 &}quot;Top ten Reasons why cities need Urban Planning."

^{10 &}quot;What is a Great Civic Space?"

Case Studies

This project has been driven by the question: does this kind of space already exist and, if not, how can existing similar places be improved upon? Some of the most influential case studies that I came across are the Los Angeles Civic Center Master Plan, GovPorch in North Carolina, and the Pavement-to-Plaza program in Vancouver, each specifically designed for the community it is intended to serve.

The Los Angeles Civic Center Master Plan is a multi-year effort to add 1.2 million square feet of office space to the area around City Hall, as well as housing and retail space. The City of Los Angeles controls a number of fragmented properties and facilities in the broader Civic Center area, some house critical municipal functions while others are underutilized. The master plan evolves this area from a group of single-use public facilities district into a 24/7 mixed-use community. Civic Square is the focal point for development, creating a defining central gathering point for civic employees, residents, and visitors.

GovPorch in Charlotte, North Carolina opened in 2017 and aimed to create a welcoming "front porch" for the government buildings in the area. As a design by the Center for Active Design (CdAD), this project was subject to much research and meticulous notes. One of CfAD's most significant discoveries within this project is "that activation provides key elements to public space that even the most well-designed un-activated space cannot."

Therefore, programming is key to the success of such spaces in order to engage the public. This is related to the conclusion made that three factors are key to success when designing public spaces:

- 1. Visibility activation can help renovated be seen by its intended public.
- Approachability a redesigned space can be intimidating and community members
 may wonder if it's a place for them, so tailoring the design to the local population is
 important.
- 3. Flexibility allows for spaces to be adaptable and to serve multiple functions as the users and intentionality behind the space is likely to change over time.

These conclusions have assisted the development of my new, proposed project in Los Angeles as it offers valuable insights into how to effectively design for public, civic spaces.

In Vancouver, Canada, the Pavement-to-Plaza project experiments how to assess how changes to public realm design influences people's emotions and happiness. To

¹¹ Sadin, "If You Build It, They Might Not Come: Animating City Spaces."

conduct this study, leaders brought 100 people on tours of various public spaces in the city and measured their feelings and physiology. These spaces were employed by the City of Vancouver in a program that employed a formalized tactical urbanism approach to turn slivers of underused road space into public plazas. The approach was to make changes that were light, quicker, and cheaper but also that make a tangible and important impact. It was determined that, "basic elements like paint, plants and moveable seating built trust, feelings of welcomeness and safety," 12 showing that it does not take much to make a big impact on the general public.

Out of this focused literature and case study review, I have developed five principles with which to focus the design process:

- 1. In public spaces, design is important but needs activation and programming to successfully engage with the citizenry.
- 2. People have a desire to establish a personal connection with a government that has become impersonal.
- 3. The future of democratic societies rests not only on shared values but on shared spaces.
- 4. The future of shared spaces includes both physical and digital spaces.
- 5. The next generation of leaders is eager to become involved, but there is no clear path forward for them or a space dedicated to fostering their growth.

¹² Reardon, "Can we design more trusting public spaces?"

SECTION III - NEIGHBORHOOD AND DEMOGRAPHICS

I envision this project as a case study in and of itself, an example to set for future implementation in communities across the United States. For this reason, finding the right community in which to test the concept is essential. Because I am based in Los Angeles, it makes sense to focus my research locally within the city. Los Angeles contains 272 unique neighborhoods, and the way they are grouped together in different ways aligns with the theories behind this project of how to communicate with different levels of government to the population it represents and affects.

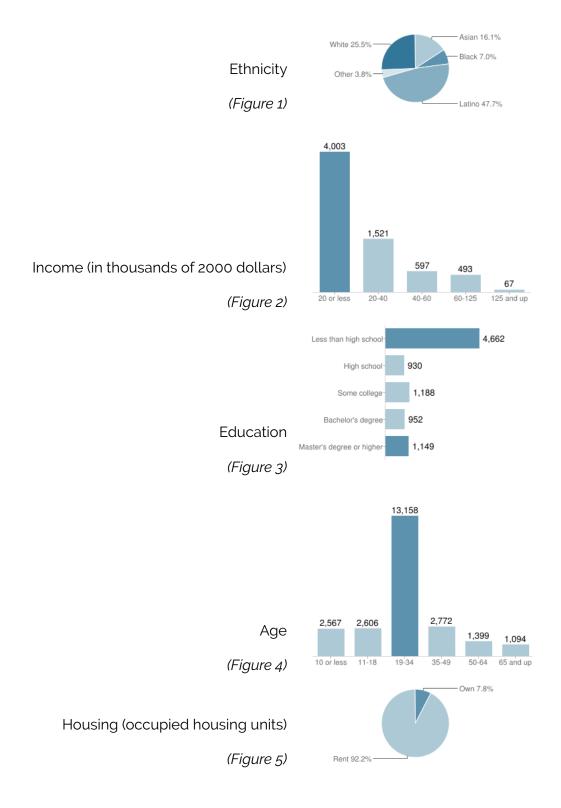
The next big question becomes, who specifically is this space for? I have decided to target members of Generation Z, as they are stepping into the spotlight to fight for the social and political issues of today they find to be of greatest importance. Generation Z encompasses those born between 1995 and 2012, meaning they are now reaching their teenage years and young adulthood. This generation reminds some of the young people of the 1960s and 1970s and, in fact, "not since Vietnam have college students been so vocal, and so proactive about ensuring their voices are heard." With issues like gun violence and climate change on their minds, Generation Z sees the dark issues of today as real and pressing, and believe they are the ones to solve them. This desire and passion for social and political involvement makes Generation Z the ideal target demographic for a space such as this aimed at fostering and encouraging government engagement in local communities.

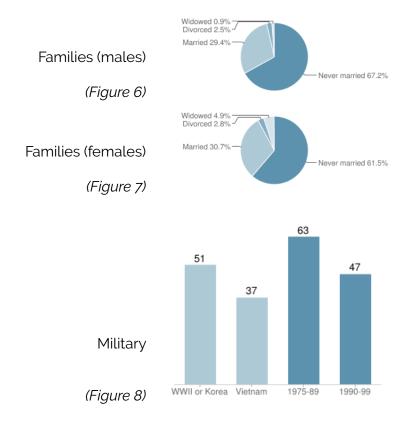
With Los Angeles and Generation Z as the initial framework for determining a location, I then began looking at which of the neighborhoods within the city have among the highest percentage of young people living and working there. This brings us to the neighborhood of University Park in the South Los Angeles region. This neighborhood also boasts diversity in ethnicity, ancestry, and age that makes it a good micro-sample of the diversity in Los Angeles as a whole (see Figures 1 -8 and statistics on the following pages).¹⁴

^{13 &}quot;How Gen Z Will Affect Community Activism."

¹⁴ Mapping L.A., "Neighborhoods."

Statistics on the Population of University Park, Los Angeles





Overall Population:

- 1. 23,596 population in 2000, according to the U.S. Census.
- 2. 25,181 population in 2008, based on L.A. Department of City Planning estimates.
- 20,217 people per square mile, among the highest densities for the city of Los
 Angeles and among the highest densities for the county.

Ancestry and Immigration:

- 1. Mexican (29.3%) and Salvadoran (4.3%) are the most common ancestries.
- 2. 10,016 (42.4%) of residents are foreign born, about average for the City of Los Angeles but high for the country. Mexico (38.6%) and El Salvador (14.5%) are the most common foreign places of birth.

Within the University Park community, I have found a site for this project that both fulfills the requirements for the design (expanded upon in the Section IV of this paper) and is accessible to the community. The site for the project is:

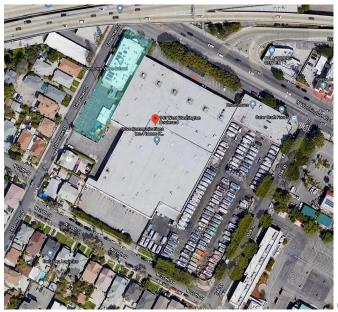
940 West Washington Boulevard Los Angeles, CA 90015



(Figure 9 - courtesy of Google Maps)

The address is on a major street in the area and close to the I-10 freeway, situating the project in a visible and accessible spot. The opposite side of the block faces homes in the neighborhood, really emphasizing the theory that this new place is for the people who work here, and making it both within walking distance and in a location that feels like the center of the residential section accomplishes the goal of making government accessible within the residents' everyday lives.

Even within the single block of the project site, the diversity and character of the neighborhood is represented and seen. Figures 10 through 13 below detail the existing makeup of the proposed site:



(Figure 10 - courtesy of Google Maps)

The Downtown Value School - a public, charter elementary and middle school.



(Figure 11 - courtesy of Google Maps)

Film set catering company.



(Figure 12 - courtesy of Google Maps)

Food truck parking lot.



(Figure 13 - courtesy of Google Maps)

Single-family homes.

I propose to keep these important community areas untouched, with the exception of the "Food truck parking lot" detailed in Figure 12, which I propose to share with patron parking, and even open up to special event programming in partnership with the proprietors of the food trucks stored in this lot.

SECTION IV - PROGRAMMING AND DESIGN DECISIONS

Taking all the research detailed in the previous sections into consideration, the final design dismantles the hierarchy seen in existing government structures and aims to create maximum transparency. Therefore, the Bridge becomes an immersive campus environment focused on fostering government engagement in University Park. This space is run in partnership with the City of Los Angeles and is programmed with members of Generation Z in mind. The goal is to empower citizens to become active participants in their democracy through creating opportunities for personal interactions, breaking the traditional boundaries that separate lawmakers from their constituents, and educational programming.

The site plan is inspired by a combination of a theme park and a college campus. From the theme park, I borrow the concept of a wheel and spoke layout to emphasize what I have determined is the central program of this large project; as well as the friendly and unimposing attitude of such an entertainment center. Looking at college campuses allowed for examples of how varying programs are connected by outdoor spaces, and how to create an environment to inspire a desire for higher learning. Within this campus environment, six distinct programming areas can be found:

- 1. The Crosswalk
- 2. Welcome Center
- 3. The Hill & The Quad
- 4. Marketplace
- 5. Where It Happens
- 6. Exploratorium

Each of these areas has its own, unique flavor to emphasize the programming within while prescribing to the same main set of design principles to tie it all together.

The Crosswalk is the main entrance that brings you from the world of everyday into this space that will fully immerse you in the task of learning and engaging with our representative democracy. It is all about privileging the pedestrian, welcoming visitors with the sweeping open arms of a bridge in forced perspective.

Once inside the Welcome Center, a staff member will make that first personal connection that brings the experience with government back down to the more human level. This is a space to appreciate and spend a few moments in before passing through to the rest of the experience. I have taken lessons from other forms of hospitality, while still attempting to create a unique experience for patrons of The Bridge in University Park.

The Hill & The Quad make up an outdoor gathering space for community groups or casual friends to discuss on the topics of today. The names of all the spaces are made with tremendous thought, but these require specific explanation. "The Hill" is known as the nickname for Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., which feels like a faraway place for intricate and foreign processes that are supposed to represent the country occur, but often feel disconnected from those citizens. This is a place for residents of University Park to reclaim their own representation, find a voice and feel inspired to share it with their representatives in person. "The Quad" is often a place for young college students to gather and work outdoors when the weather permits, and this name encourages that same demographic to gather in a different kind of community of people they may not otherwise have an opportunity to interact with.

The Marketplace is the heart of The Bridge, situated at the center of the site and open on all sides for both physical and metaphorical access to all who wander around it. This is the modern-day interpretation of the Agora of ancient Greece or the Roman Forum, where an exchange of goods becomes an exchange of ideas. Modular and movable furniture and spatial dividers are used to create the perfect space for community meetings, coffee with a friend, and can even be removed all together to create a large open space for rallies or debates between candidates running for public office. Community food trucks rotate to offer sustenance to those spending long periods of time here, and a permanent coffee bar brings a sense of consistency and familiarity to those who come back again and again.

Offices for the representatives whose constituents live in University Park is Where It Happens. Here, Space is provided for all levels of representation for this community, from the most local neighborhood council members to the California Senators who represent the state at the federal level. Although representatives cannot always be on site, it is imperative for a project based around the idea that people should have more a voice in our American democratic system, that all these elected officials have a home base in University Park. These are divided among three building which surround the Marketplace on all sides, not intimidating and lofty as traditional government buildings are, but on the same level as the people who will come in to speak with their representatives.

Finally, the Exploratorium is located at the far end of this campus. Although you can get here by walking through the entire site, it also has its own entrance nearby both for convenience and for safety, as this space is created with elementary and middle school students in mind. The two buildings house exhibits to excite this age range of school

children around how they can make an impact through democratic engagement in their community. The permanent exhibit will demonstrate the legislative process for how a law gets passed in California at the state level and in Los Angeles at the city level. The temporary exhibit allows space for a yearly rotation on a topic for the time. In 2020, the proposed temporary exhibit focuses on the census process: what the information gathered is used for, how to participate, and why this year it has been so contentious.

All of these spaces come together using outdoor space, embracing and celebrating the weather of Los Angeles as a whole and lifting spirits as only fresh air and sunlight can.

SECTION V - CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the process, this project has been hard to define and sum up in just a few words because it is a new concept for how government and citizens meet and work together. The main goal is for the public to feel empowered to exercise their rights and interact with one another and their government and representatives. After deep thought and much internal turmoil, I believe that The Bridge accomplishes just that. It is a physical and thoughtful dismantling of the hierarchy American democracy has built up over the years, making the process visible to all and answering the questions in plain terms so that the people of University Park can confidently make informed decisions and engage their representatives in thoughtful conversation.

A give and take is always happening, an exchange of ideas and encouragement to become involved in whichever way makes the most sense for each individual in the community. I hope that this study can be applied to communities across the country, breaking down the walls and bringing people back to the government that is supposed to represent them in the first place.

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