CONTESTED TERRITORIES: EVALUATING THE LIMITS AND LIBERTIES OF DESIGN (AND DESIGNERS) IN PUBLIC SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Recent accounts in Boston highlight tensions among individuals experiencing homelessness, individuals seeking treatment for substance use disorder, service providers, advocates, residents, and business owners in geographies colloquially referred to as "Mass and Cass." The dynamic frictions of lived experience unfold in public spaces entangled in a field of social, political, economic, and spatial conditions. The Boston Architectural College, mission-driven to "provide excellence in design education emerging from practice and accessible to diverse communities," sits less than a mile from these geographies. A curriculum in applied learning, where practicing and learning occurs *concurrently*, distinguishes the BAC's educational approach from co-op or externship models. Its educational agenda recognizes the vital dialogue between academia and practice and locates teaching and learning directly within these conduits.

This research-driven project focuses on the spatial, sociocultural geographies of Mass and Cass and examines the pedagogies of community participation and engagement in design education. The project addresses the nature of interdisciplinary teaching and learning in design settings through examining modes of critical thinking, listening, reflection, and translation as integral to civic spatial practices. Using the tools of spatial designers and conceptual frameworks from other disciplines, students attempt to understand the agents, actors, and forces at play in the conditions of Mass and Cass. Through critical inquiry into the sociocultural contexts that characterize the spatial narratives of Mass and Cass, students (and city agencies as collaborators) seek to identify moments when design or designers have, may have, or could have intervened in these contested territories.

Keywords: Civic Design, Community Engagement, Homelessness, Interdisciplinarity, Pedagogy, Public Space

1. INTRODUCTION

On August 2, 2019, the city of Boston mobilized multiple city departments in the policing and expulsion of individuals experiencing homelessness at the boundaries of Boston's South End and Roxbury neighborhoods. In a coordinated effort by police and public works departments, people were displaced, personal belongings were seized and destroyed, and multiple arrests were made. Citing an incident of violent crime against a Suffolk County corrections officer, the city legitimized the self-named Operation Clean Sweep as part of "an

effort to address ongoing community concerns in the general area of Massachusetts Avenue and Southampton Street in Roxbury" (Dwyer 2019).

In the vacuum of opaque policy agendas or motivations, a flurry of news reports and social media posts constructed a complicated series of narratives to fill the gap. Headlines signaled the mounting problems of "Methadone Mile," the "troubled district" surrounding the Boston Medical Center, and reductively conflated the issues of homelessness, substance use disorder, and public space into a tangle of ideas, affects, and anecdotes. These narratives have lingered, migrated, and exploded. The accounts of tension among individuals experiencing homelessness, those seeking treatment for substance use disorder, service providers, advocates, neighborhood residents, and business owners have adversely positioned, accurately or not, the concerns of public health, public safety, and community "quality of life" concerns.

In "Mass and Cass," these frictions unfold in public spaces. In these messy collisions of contested territories, what is the role of the designer? What is the responsibility of design? This paper examines the pedagogies and methodologies associated with community engagement and civic responsibility in design education. Using a recent and ongoing design research project, "Contested Territories," in the Boston Architectural College's Gateway Initiative as a case study, the paper addresses the complexities of interdisciplinarity in design research and praxis. As an exploration, Contested Territories explores the possibilities for civic spatial practices to become more than transactional by committing to iterative processes of collaboration, critical thinking, listening, reflection, and translation.

1.1 Mass and Cass, Not "Methadone Mile"

Boston is a small city of neighborhoods. Out-of-towners might be familiar with the romantically idealized associations with neighborhoods like Charlestown, Beacon Hill, the South End, and the Back Bay. Conversely, other geographies in the city have acquired disparaging and derogatory monikers. The intersections of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard, in an area loosely centered around Boston's oldest public city hospital (Boston Medical Center), are coarsely referred to as "Methadone Mile" or "Recovery Road" on account of the perceived concentration of programs and providers offering services to those seeking treatment for substance use disorder or those experiencing chronic or conditional homelessness. This paper admonishes each of these toponyms and will refer to these geographies as "Mass and Cass."

In less than a half-mile radius circling the intersections of two major vehicular thoroughfares, three politically demarcated neighborhoods collide without any clear indication of their borders or boundaries. To the west of Mass. Ave.: Roxbury; to the east: the South End; to the immediate south: a collage of industrial infrastructures known as Newmarket (Figure 1). Demographically, socially, and economically, the contrasts between these neighborhoods are distinct (Boston Public Health Commission 2017). However, the jurisdictional outlines of each neighborhood are fuzzy. The edges of each abut or belong simultaneously to state, city, or neighborhood political designations.

Additionally, there is a recognizable shift in urban scale and fabric; Victorian-era brownstones transition into institutional medical facilities into low-density food distribution warehouses, car washes, and storage facilities. The legibility of places and their peripheries is cloudy. This ambiguity confuses claims to ownership, stewardship, and care among the multiple populations who live, work, play, and exist within these territories.
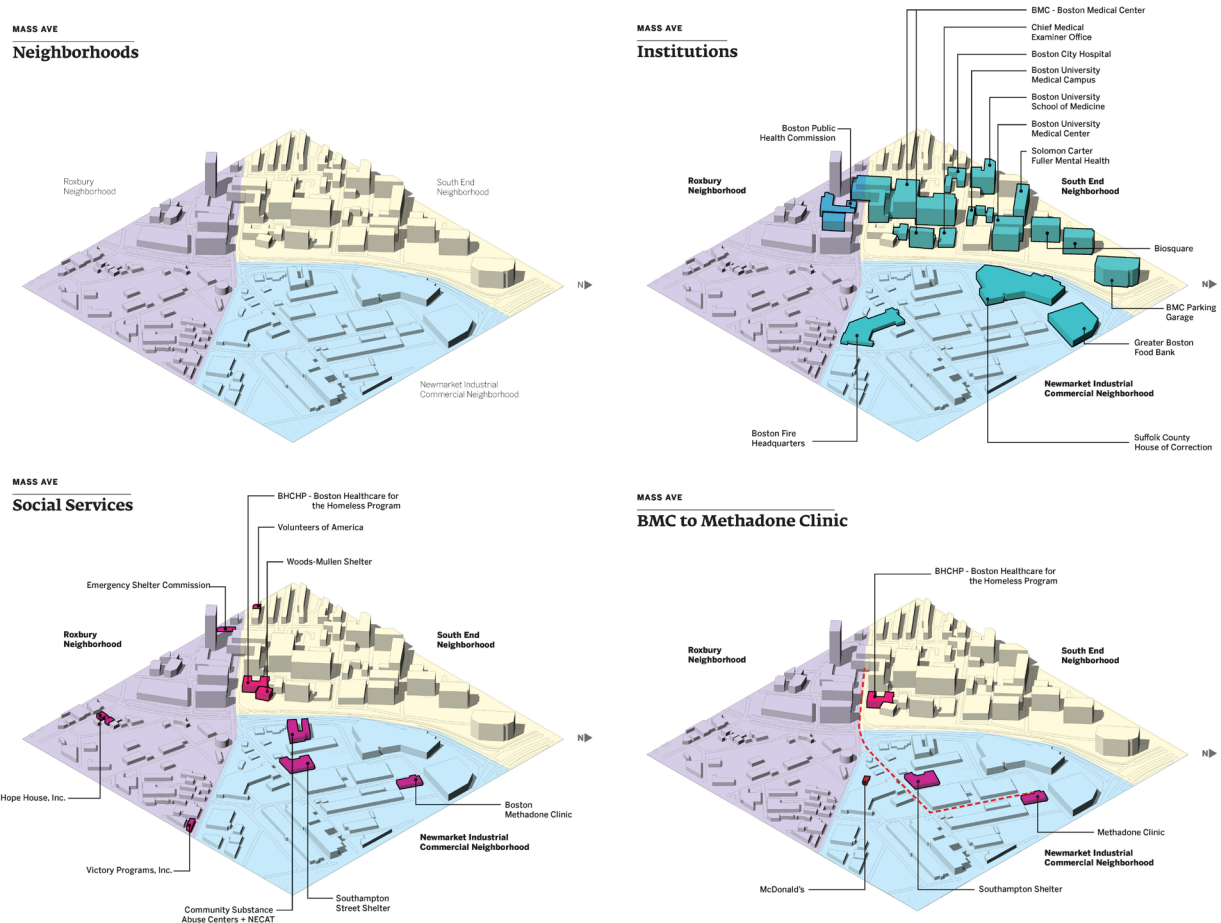
Figure 1: The geographies of Mass and Cass (Image by the MASS/CASS research group that consisted of students, educators, and practitioners from the BAC, Mass Design Group, and RISD. The project was supported by the Ada Louise Huxtable Fellowship, 2018.)

1.2 Design School in the City: The BAC and the Gateway Initiative

Less than a mile from Mass and Cass, the Boston Architectural College (BAC) offers the only accredited degree programs in architecture, interior architecture, landscape architecture, and design studies that operate through concurrent education. Unlike other programs that incorporate alternating internships or co-ops, the BAC's 130-year practice-based tradition synchronizes classroom and work-based learning, educating students in a way that encourages the attainment of knowledge and skills amid multiple settings. This approach positions BAC students to be better equipped with both professional and critical thinking

skills to participate in the profession of architecture as a civic discipline. The synthesis of applied and academic learning fosters a robust dialogue between the community of learners at BAC and the community of professional designers at large.

Aligned with the development of design skills and tools acquired in studio and technology courses, a sequence of Practice Department initiatives serves as an outlet for students to test, develop, and reflect upon skills in real-time, double-loop learning feedback systems. In the design disciplines of the college, the Practice curriculum is intentionally interdisciplinary, recognizing that active and participatory engagement with the world requires multiple disciplinary frameworks. Ideally, the experience in Practice encourages the growth of a reflective practitioner.

The Gateway Initiative is a transitional program in the Practice Department that bridges foundation studies and full immersion in concurrent learning. It presents students with the opportunity to apply newly acquired skills through projects with community partners. Gateway projects live outside of the classroom, and the design considerations are challenging. Through direct engagement with community members as both clients and partners, students are encouraged to reflect on the responsibilities and the rewards embedded in the design process. Successful Gateway projects satisfy the needs outlined by a particular client, but also often exceed these expectations—presenting complex information through new lenses, uncovering further opportunities for design, and advocating for the role of designers in the resolution of messy problems.

2. CONTESTED TERRITORIES

The Gateway project "Contested Territories" emerged from within these academic and urban contexts and evolved from relationships that had been developing over several years. Over two semesters, working with a constellation of collaborators, students were encouraged to consider a range of difficult questions. What is the nature of public space? Who does public space in the city belong to? How does design participate in or alleviate the experiences of retraumatization in public space? What is the utility of design? What is the role of the civically engaged designer in the messy intersections of contested territory? These questions aren't formulating problems to be *solved*, but rather posit entry points for the identification of and construction of new priorities and perspectives to help guide and situate our collective work.

2.1 Fall 2019: Inquiry

Contested Territories 1, in the fall of 2019, situated these questions as the generator for research. Absent any particular client or partner, students carefully examined and contextualized a series of events in Boston, from the closure of the Long Island Shelter to Operation Clean Sweep. Using the tools of spatial designers and allied disciplines (mapping, drawing, ethnographic research), students worked to uncover, clarify, and re-present the agents, actors, and forces at play in the geographies of Mass and Cass.

Narratives about places provide essential clues about how particular public discourses shape the character of "problems" and, consequently, set the frameworks for policy and planning decisions. Through the collection and analysis of newspapers, social media posts, and informal conversations, students developed an awareness of the multiple narratives circulating around Mass and Cass. Simultaneously, students explored texts from outside of the typical architecture or theory canons. Often student-identified or recommended based

on a student's particular train of thought, readings offered students new ways of situating their ideas. Judith Butler's writing on precarity and the nature of what constitutes a life, Michel Foucault's expositions of power and personhood, and Craig Willse's analysis of the forces embedded in the construction of "homelessness" challenged preconceived ways of understanding how to define and articulate a problem.

Students recognized the implications for architecture's representational tools. As noted by Sophie Hicks, a graduate student in architecture, "how we represent our work impacts how we assign value, how we make decisions, and how we communicate these processes to larger audiences." Sophie constructed a "narrative timeline" of social media posts to understand how contested ideas about populations and places migrate, spread, and become codified as matters of fact (Figure 2).
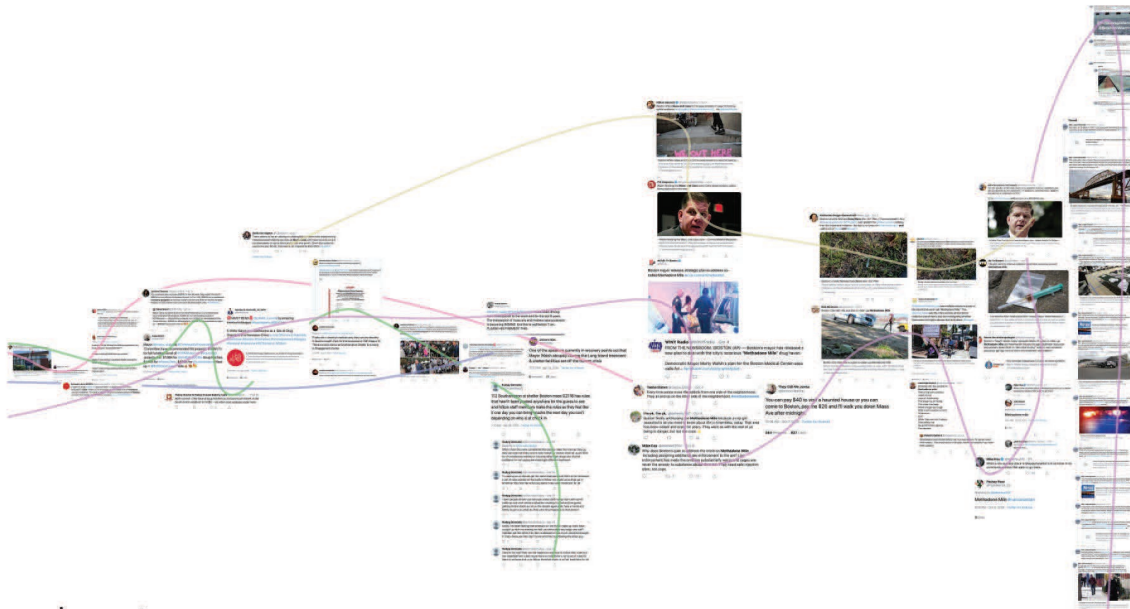

Figure 2: Contested timelines.

Using social media, this timeline offers insight into how events are documented, described, and circulated. Twitter as "territory" allows research because of its open availability and its search options. The timeline displays different users around Boston who tweeted highly publicized words or phrases such as "homeless," "shelter," "long island," or "Operation Clean Sweep"; the use of mentions (@) in the tweets highlights those who appeared responsible for specific events. The frequency of tweets varied greatly between 2014 and 2019, with the most significant spike happening around Operation Clean Sweep. (Image by Sophie Hicks, BAC, Fall 2019)

Graduate student Jason Peoples extracted pervasive words, phrases, and ideas found in local reporting and attempted to clarify (or better yet, visualize the complicated associations at play) how these narratives might illustrate the contested interests that form alliances or exclude certain populations from entering into the dialogues of specific interest groups (Figure 3).
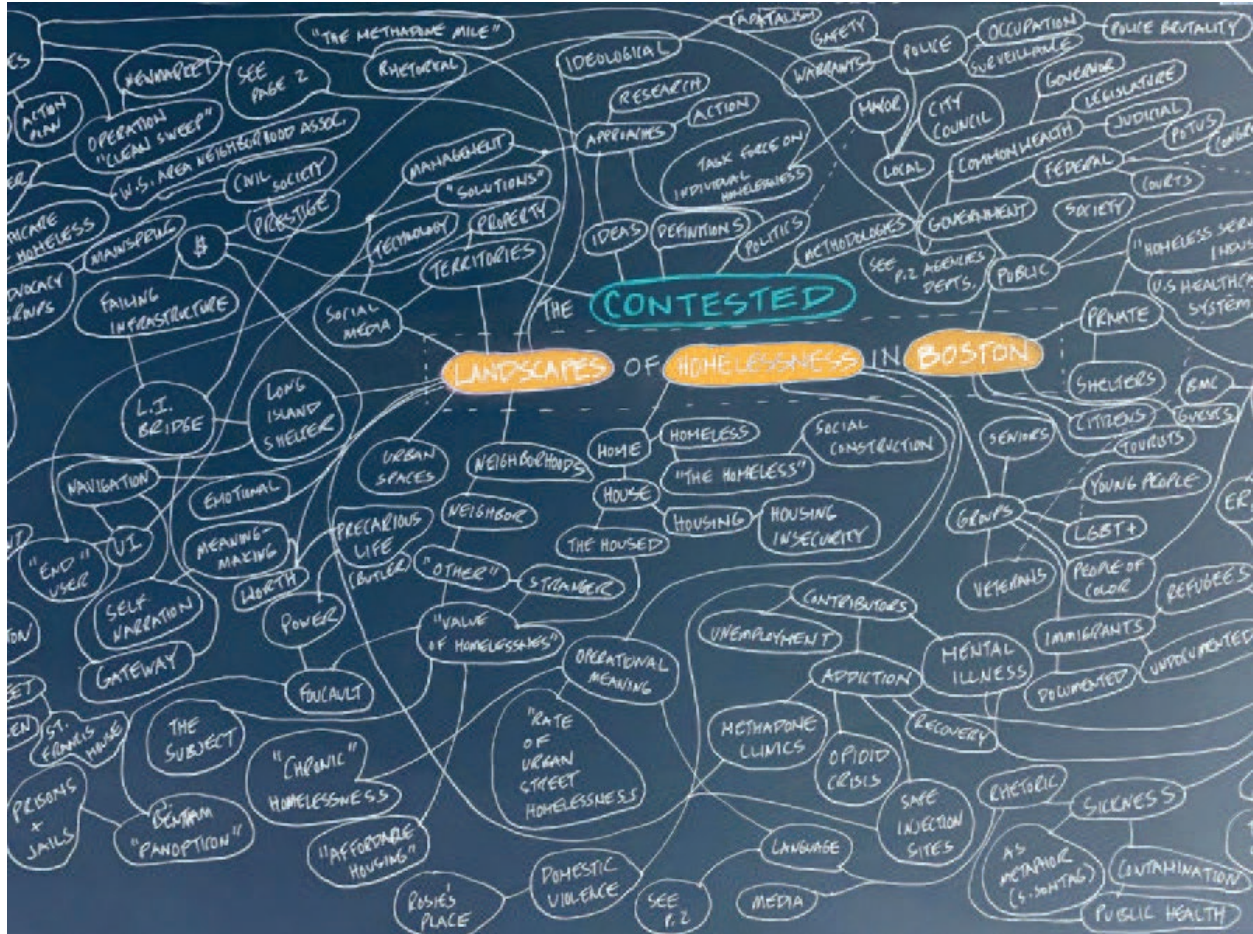
Figure 3: Contested interests.

According to student Jason Peoples, "To reveal systems, places, and forces that shape the narratives of 'Mass and Cass,' webs of influence were created. Beginning with a 'contested' scenario, we were able to map relationships between organizations and recognize the large multitude of different principles, affects, and capabilities that impact the current environment." (Image by Jason Peoples, BAC, Fall 2019.)

As noted by the undergraduate landscape architecture student Scott LeBoeuf, the conventional tools of the drawing, the diagram, or the map "allowed for the findings to be understood at a broader scale, but in peculiar ways." An awareness of the multiple ways of situating and defining a problem allowed students to ask more critical questions not only of their work, but also of the motivations that catalyze many of the city's planning decisions being actualized in Mass and Cass (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Contested boundaries.

Scott LeBoeuf writes, "Territory is an area which connects power to land. Occupation, militaristic measures, or social and political processes determine territorial boundaries. The enforcement of power on territories often defines its owner. Often a territory is defined by outside political and social forces rather than its occupants. The maps provide a geographic understanding between Mass and Cass and the city of Boston. The maps contest boundaries of space. They reveal how the impact of events in one location is not restricted to its formal borders, and its consequences can extend beyond the legally drawn lines of territories." (Image by Scott LeBoeuf, BAC, Fall 2019)

These critical inquiries spurred conversations about the roles and responsibilities of the architect in the public realm. Reflecting on the semester's journey, LeBoeuf argues,

> As designers, we are responsible for the inherent relationships and interactions with the built environment. The decisions designers make place them in positions of advocacy that promote the interests of people or an organization. To better understand how this responsibility can contribute to further problems or potential solutions, designers should be aware of society's injustices within the social, economic, and political context. We also have to be better advocates for recognizing how design thinking can bring positive change. The

process of design is an iterative one that is most effective when it's interdisci-
plinary, incorporates multiple points of view, references professional exper-
tise, and understands the desires of its end users. It is through this process
that designers can show injustice, understand its context, and be better advo-
cates towards constructive change and creating environments that are inclu-
sive and socially conscious.

The work of Contested Territories 2, in the spring of 2020, evolved from these expanded no-
tions of architecture's roles and responsibilities. With grounding in the conceptual frame-
works established in the first semester, the cohort of collaborators grew to include the City
of Boston's Office of Recovery Services, the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, and
the Boston Society for Architecture.

2.2 Spring 2020: Situated Engagements

In the late fall, the mayor's office released a planning document, "Melnea Cass/Mass Ave
2.0," as a measure intended to address an increasingly audible public discourse around
Operation Clean Sweep and the murky territories of competing interests in the Mass and
Cass area (Walsh 2019). The plan reflects residents' frustrations about the responsibilities
of municipal actors. The plan attempts to balance multiple civic agendas, yet effectively
positions public health strategies at odds with public safety and quality of life concerns. It
suggests a familiar pattern of "event-response" that perpetuates a way of operating through
request fulfillment or unilateral problems often being solved without the time for reflection
necessary to clearly articulate the complexities of the problems.

The Office of Recovery Services (ORS) was one of ten city departments tasked with
operationalizing the Mass Cass 2.0 plan and, along with the Mayor's Office of New Urban
Mechanics (MONUM), became partners in the continuation of the fall Gateway project
(Figure 5). Students were tasked with aiding ORS and MONUM in the creation of a resource
guide for providers and individuals seeking services in the ecosystems of social services in
and around Mass and Cass. Students cataloged and analyzed service providers across the
city to assess their capacities to match client needs with resources and to identify
relationships, trends, and omissions. The conceptual and contextual frameworks from the
fall semester helped students recognize the complex social and cultural overlays that affect
those seeking resources for harm reduction, treatment for substance use disorder, and
navigation through the quagmire of housing insecurity. Again, students used their critical
thinking and representational tools to reframe and rearticulate geo-social-spatial narratives
to offer alternative routes to redefining, reframing, and resolving the "problems" of Mass
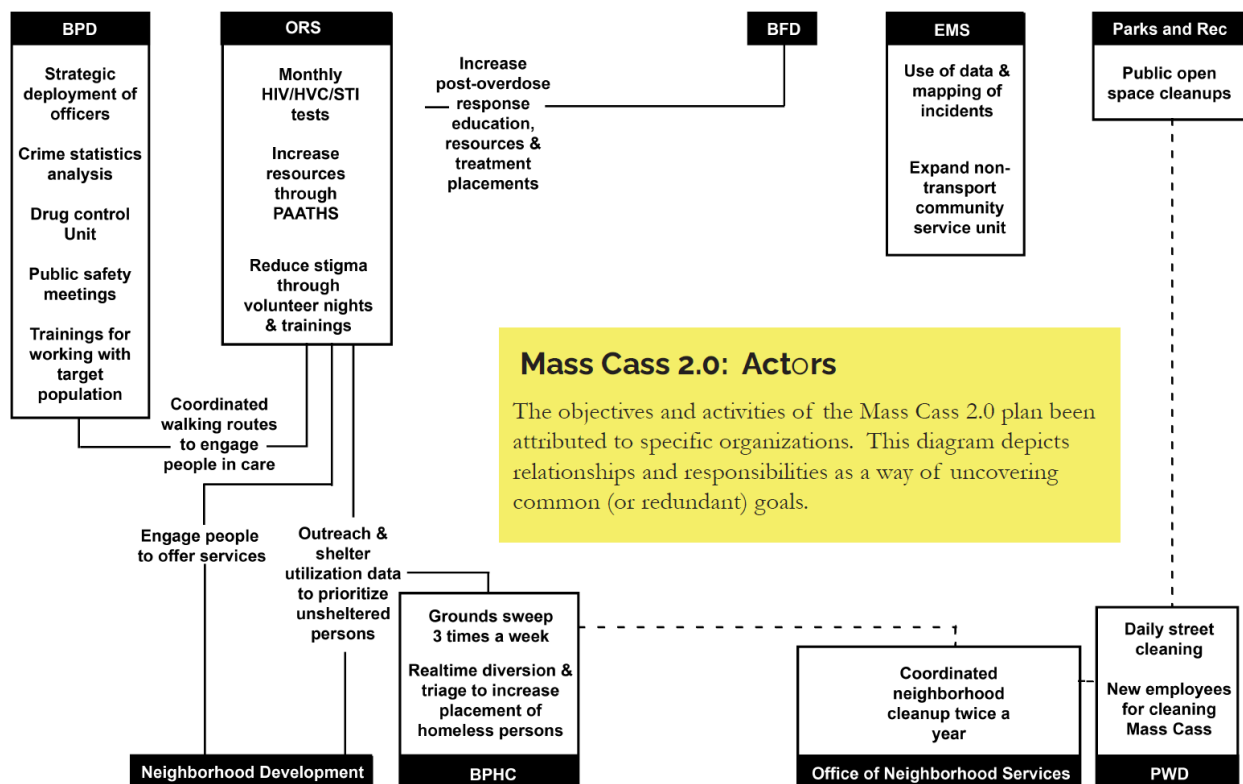Cass 2.0.

Figure 5: Alignment of Mass Cass 2.0 organizations and actions.

According to our partners from the Office of Recovery Services and the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, the analysis provided by the students has allowed for a valuable visualization of the otherwise opaque roles, responsibilities, and relationships among the city departments tasked with coordinating Mass Cass 2.0. (Diagram by Yasmine Badawi, BAC, Spring 2020.)

The undergraduate architecture student Yasmine Badawi writes in the research project document the team delivered to ORS and MONUM:

> We hope that through these investigations, we can help improve experiences and reduce barriers to stabilization and recovery. This book does not propose an *answer* or framework for how to address these complexities; rather, this book aims to bring fresh critical insight to Boston's Mass Cass 2.0 plan. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis that no matter what services are available to individuals seeking help, *the opportunity to choose* must exist to recognize a person's need to be in control of their life and actions. Agency is key.

The semester's document, and its affiliated resource guide, is still in process. It is migrating laterally from academia into the world of advocacy, supported by the Boston Society for Architecture. Through this process, students have developed a growing clarity and confidence in their voices and have generated new connections and new directions for the work that keep them invested (Figure 6).
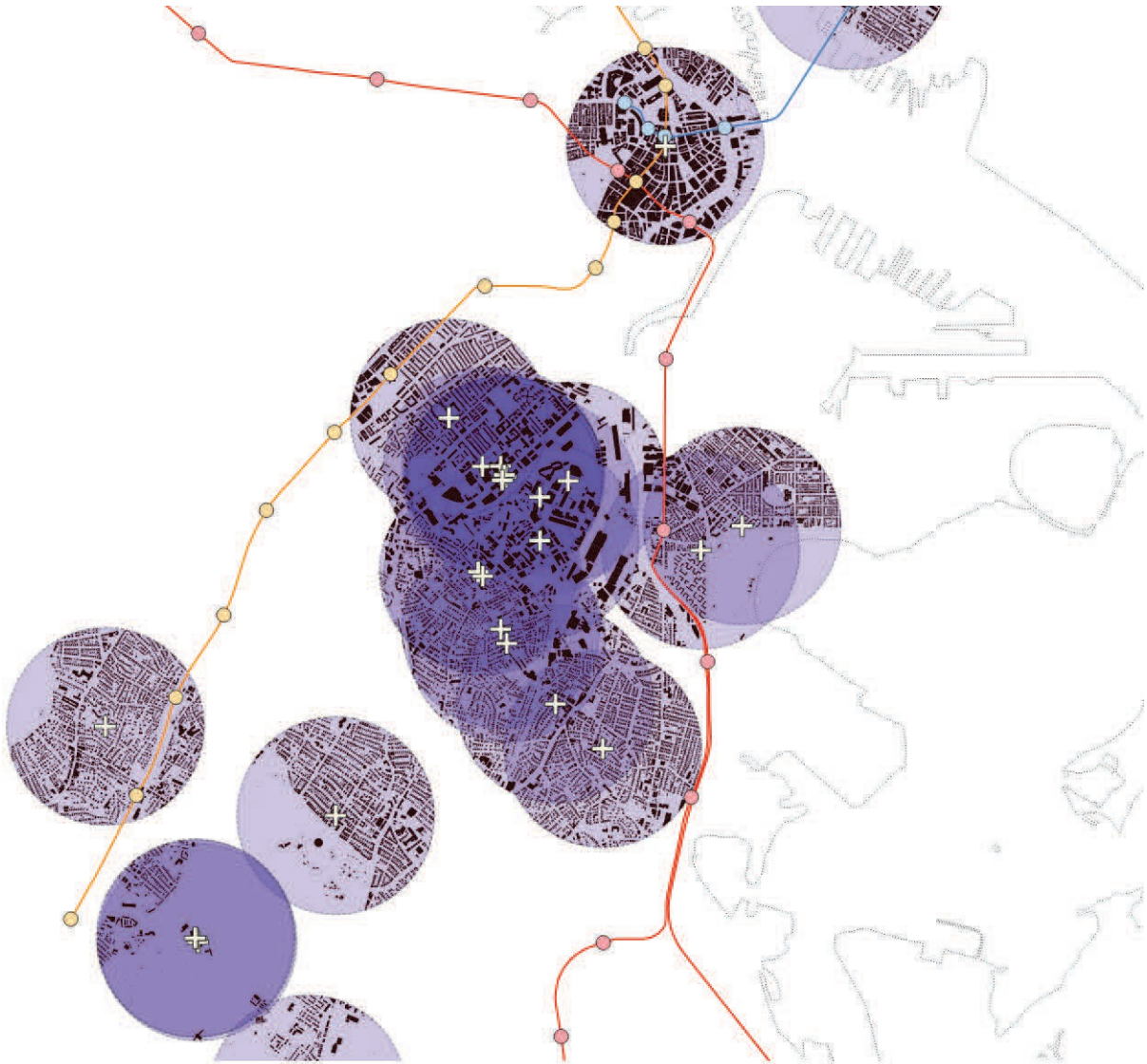
Figure 6: Mapping access and transportation to support services in Boston. Students utilized the familiar tools of GIS, Adobe, and CAD to translate spreadsheets of data about service providers and their affiliated services. Coupling this information with other city infrastructures, notably transit, layers information in a way that might help those seeking services make more informed decisions about their support service engagement. The project of mapping also offers alternative readings to the perceived "burden" of service provision often expressed by residents of surrounding neighborhoods. (Map by Ben Peterson and Kyle Warren, Fallow, March 2020.)

3. PEDAGOGIES OF APPLIED LEARNING, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND CRITICAL SPATIAL PRACTICES

As the work continues to evolve from semester to semester, we are actively documenting and developing methodologies that account for dynamic social systems and shifting collaborative networks. Reflecting on the project of Contested Territories to date helps identify recurrent and emergent modes of working. A definitive pedagogical approach has not yet crystallized (and may never, to leave open the possibilities for deconstruction and experimentation), but we have attempted to prioritize methods of teaching and learning that

- center student experiences by contextualizing learning at various scales from the personal to the political;
- explore and experiment with interdisciplinarity; and
- include communication, translation, and collaboration as critical competencies for architects and designers.

Considering how these models of learning migrate from the academy into practice and the profession may suggest ways to redefine the roles and responsibilities of the architect and to recast the value of architecture. Altogether, the work has called into question a variety of ideas worthy of reevaluation: pedagogy, discipline, notions of engagement and community, and, ultimately, the agency of design and designers in the messy intersections of these "contested territories."

3.1 Students as Publics

Community-based or civically engaged design practices often refer to an ambiguous public "outside" of the classroom as if the "beneficiaries" and "benefactors" of design processes exist in separate realms. As teachers and co-participants, we underscored that each of us (intentionally or unintentionally) encounter, belong to, or collide with any number of multiple publics. The classroom should not protect, nor sever, an individual's relationship to communities beyond its walls. Recognition of a shared publicness opens a space where designers may challenge themselves to welcome and invite dialogue beyond their comfort zone.

The population of the Boston Architectural College represents a multitude of ages, identities, and pathways to design education and the design professions. According to its mission, the BAC offers a design education "accessible to diverse communities." Through the mechanism of open enrollment (there are no admissions requirements), the college attempts to remove the barriers to entry that have effectively maintained the white, male composition of the profession. BAC students are largely first-generation college students, international students, or are members of underrepresented populations in design education. Demographically, 44 percent of the college's current student body identify as female, and 44 percent identify as people of color. In comparison, according to statistics from 2019, 90 percent of those who have successfully attained NCARB's licensure certification identify as white (NCARB 2019).

Licensing and accrediting bodies aside, Gateway projects and their affiliated Practice curriculum, while tethered to the satisfaction of degree requirements, are not bound by accreditation criteria. Moreover, participation in Gateway is voluntary and frequently self-selected. Without the obligation of demonstrating how the course satisfies standardized

"student performance criteria," the semesters' syllabi offer nimble structures for emergent processes. Over the two semesters, student needs and questions determined specific lines of inquiry for research. A loosely bound set of frameworks has also allowed for the accommodation of new collaborators and their shifting project desires, directives, and deliverables.

3.2 Traveling in Other Territories: Interdisciplinarity

In the closing panel discussion of March's Schools of Thought conference, Sharon Sutton, FAIA, noted that "removing some of the disciplinary boundaries that we've constructed around ourselves would be a way of not just becoming more research-based, but having a broader palette for how to (re)solve problems. We have much too narrowly defined ourselves" (Sutton 2020). Sutton's comments support several arguments for an interdisciplinary approach to design pedagogy at the intersections of civic engagement and spatial practices.

Investigations in design technologies, materials, and practices have generated new approaches to representing, fabricating, and constructing the *products* of architecture. However, the processes that contextualize and condition architecture's adventures in the public realm—ideas about "the client," community engagement, and social responsibility—have not received a similarly prolific or critical reframing. Those considerations benefit from outside disciplines such as the humanities and encourage literacy in other extradisciplinary discourses.

Additionally, the complexity of current issues, such as homelessness and climate change, to name a couple, requires sophisticated multidisciplinary approaches. Socially and politically minded designers do not have the luxury to remain specialists if it means they are ill prepared to engage meaningfully with shifting political climates. Interdisciplinary engagements encourage the learning of new languages and celebrate the difficult conversations that might arise with new fluencies. Contextualizing architecture and architectural education through other lenses allows for a rethinking of discipline that recognizes its limits and liberties simultaneously.

3.3 Communication and Collaboration

So much architecture training is rooted in *dialogues* that hover around the work: between student and instructor, student and student, the academy and practice. The work of Contested Territories asks how these dialogues might be made accessible to wider audiences, particularly where spatial design intersects with policymaking. In the translation and visualization of otherwise opaque planning agendas, design's communication tools might be considered vehicles for community or civic engagement. The work of the Center for Urban Pedagogy and Interboro Partners offers references for how these tools are deployed in professional practice. Broadening access to the records of decision-making reveals the curiosities, frictions, and desires that frequently emerge in a project's development, but often remain veiled behind "official" documents.

If architects can expand access to the messiness of process and decision-making, they may provide entry points for critical engagement about the places we share. If architects can encourage dialogue with consultants and experts from outside of the design and construction disciplines, we might more genuinely situate architecture's role as an actor within com-

plex ecological, political, and social systems. We might be better communicators and collaborators. We might make more allies who recognize the value of architecture as a public good.

4. CONCLUSION

The tools of spatial designers combined with conceptual frameworks from other disciplines help locate, understand, and contextualize the forces at play in the city as a precursor to problem solving. Through critical inquiry into the sociocultural contexts that characterize the spatial narratives of Mass and Cass, students (and city agencies as knowledge holders and collaborators) sought to identify moments when design or designers act, through intervention or nonintervention, among these contested territories. This experiment in teaching and learning is emergent and should not be read as offering any definitive resolutions for best practice. These insights have generated, and ideally will continue to generate, more questions than answers.

We advocate for approaches to design and teaching that equip students with the tools necessary to engage processes and events with a critical eye, as an alternative to responding to problems or agendas that are "client-driven." In our experience, the latter become encoded in language and ideas that obscure motivations and make other bodies, and other livelihoods, problematic, that is, things to be "solved." Rather than working uncritically and accepting the role of designers as problem solvers, students have sought to interrogate the construction of the problems themselves, acknowledging both the limits and liberties of design's engagement in these complex scenarios.

The experiences of Contested Territories suggest opportunities to rethink and reconfigure the fundamental relationships that Gateway projects (and professional relationships) accept as conventional. Committing space and time to begin the work without a "client" (or patron or partner) might encourage a reconsideration of design's service-oriented utility in the contexts of civic engagement or critical spatial practices. If designers are to participate in resolving wicked problems, they might value time to reflect, to reframe, and to reiterate the nuances of the "problem" instead of hastily working toward a solution. The offering of design might become valued as one of instigation rather than reaction. Designers, as members of (and not apart from) a multitude of communities and publics, might not have to wait for someone else to ask for the work to be done.

The spring of 2020 has been characterized by unprecedented, intense, and rapid changes to the routines of daily life. The public health crisis of COVID-19 uprooted the ability for students and teachers to convene in proximity. Many of the BAC students left Boston to return home, often across continents and time zones. Transitioning online challenged us to consider new ways of doing community-based or civically engaged design, but it also allowed for a different kind of relationship between teaching and learning. Telecommunication tools offered shared platforms for communication. Conversations between students, partners, collaborators, and experts happened from afar, each broadcast from home bases. Opportunities for shared dialog became more immediate, more accessible, and less stymied in the vertical pipelines of communication through student-teacher-expert. If a student wanted to reach out to a partner, an author, a stakeholder, she could . . . and did.

Moreover, as cities across the country wrestle with the murders of Black and Brown bodies at the hands of police, the notion of precarity is no longer admissible as a purely academic or abstract idea. Structures of white supremacy, racism, and oppression have been

systemically operationalized and weaponized, frequently in public spaces that serve as the backdrop for violent and fatal encounters with police. Recently, in one of Boston's public spaces, a community of medical professionals and frontline healthcare workers knelt in protest and solidarity with communities of color (Griffin and Adams 2020). Recognizing that these protests are happening in Mass and Cass, we might revisit the "coordinated policing" of Operation Clean Sweep that catalyzed this work, not as the consequence of a public's safety at odds with a public's health, but as a striking example of the inflammation of their conceptual and spatial intersections.

As design education moves into design practice, the currencies of critical thinking, deep contextualization, and collaboration should endure as critical components of a designer's toolkit. These tools may be deployed in potent ways as designers engage directly with the vulnerabilities, injustices, and inequities that precede and persist beyond the inflection points of crisis. Acknowledging the persistence of conflict in specific places and among multiple publics might encourage broader contexts for inquiry: the educational, professional, and institutional frameworks that structure design's engagement with the world are themselves contested territories.

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