THE STRANGER IN THE ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT ON THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the project   Two Strangers Meet in a Parking Lot" and associated research studios as a case study of decolonized architecture pedagogy. The project conceptualizes the stranger as an alternative architectural user, creating a dialectical conversation with the users and architectural visions from architectural history. This dialogue encourages new pedagogical research methodologies related to the topic of city design. The case study uses these methodologies to recuperate lost cultural histories of Tennessee Town, an overlooked neighborhood in Topeka, Kansas, with an important connection to the Harlem Renaissance.

According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, strangers transgress and challenge cultural boundaries by creating conversations at the edges of these borders, yet strangers counterintuitively utilize the environments in the city that are initially foreign to them to produce alternative cultural knowledge. This interaction between stranger and entities in the city provides a model for how disciplines can communicate across their own boundaries. The strangers' conversation, when transferred to the architectural studio setting, becomes what Mark Linder calls "transdisciplinary" discourse, which occurs at the borders of adjacent disciplines. The resulting knowledge intentionally highlights overlooked and misinterpreted cultural moments in the city while creating an alternative to traditional interdisciplinary modes of working, which the philosopher Homi Bhabha says is essential if disciplinary fields are to progress with the global city.

The "Two Strangers" case study consists of built structures that were designed, first, to transform people into strangers and, then, to instigate conversations between them. As a result, strangers become acquaintances and exchange new knowledge. The architectural studio course explored this idea further by taking students outside of the classroom where they engaged with the community through conversations with city archivists, community leaders, city council persons, urban planners, and museum directors.

Keywords: Architecture, City, Culture, Stranger, Transdisciplinary, Urbanism

1. INTRODUCTION TO STRANGERS

Let's imagine for a moment the last time we each encountered a stranger in the city. Maybe you were in your hometown, but perhaps it was while you were visiting a city; were you walking down the street or sidewalk, or cutting across an empty parking lot, when someone you didn't know and didn't recognize was approaching? And maybe this approaching person was, at first glance, different from you in some way. How did you feel in that moment when you realized you weren't alone but in the presence of a complete stranger? In that moment you were both strangers, and perhaps mutually cautious, maybe even fearful, in this unpredictable and awkward circumstance. I think we can also imagine what would have happened if you both paused in that moment of passing and created a conversation. Interaction between strangers is a common occurrence in the city. This happens every day, and it is part of what makes a city a rich cultural experience. This thought experiment highlights a trait common to all entities that contribute to the collectivity of the city: that at one point in time we are all strangers, and there are times when we have all been just a little bit afraid of strangers (Figure 1).
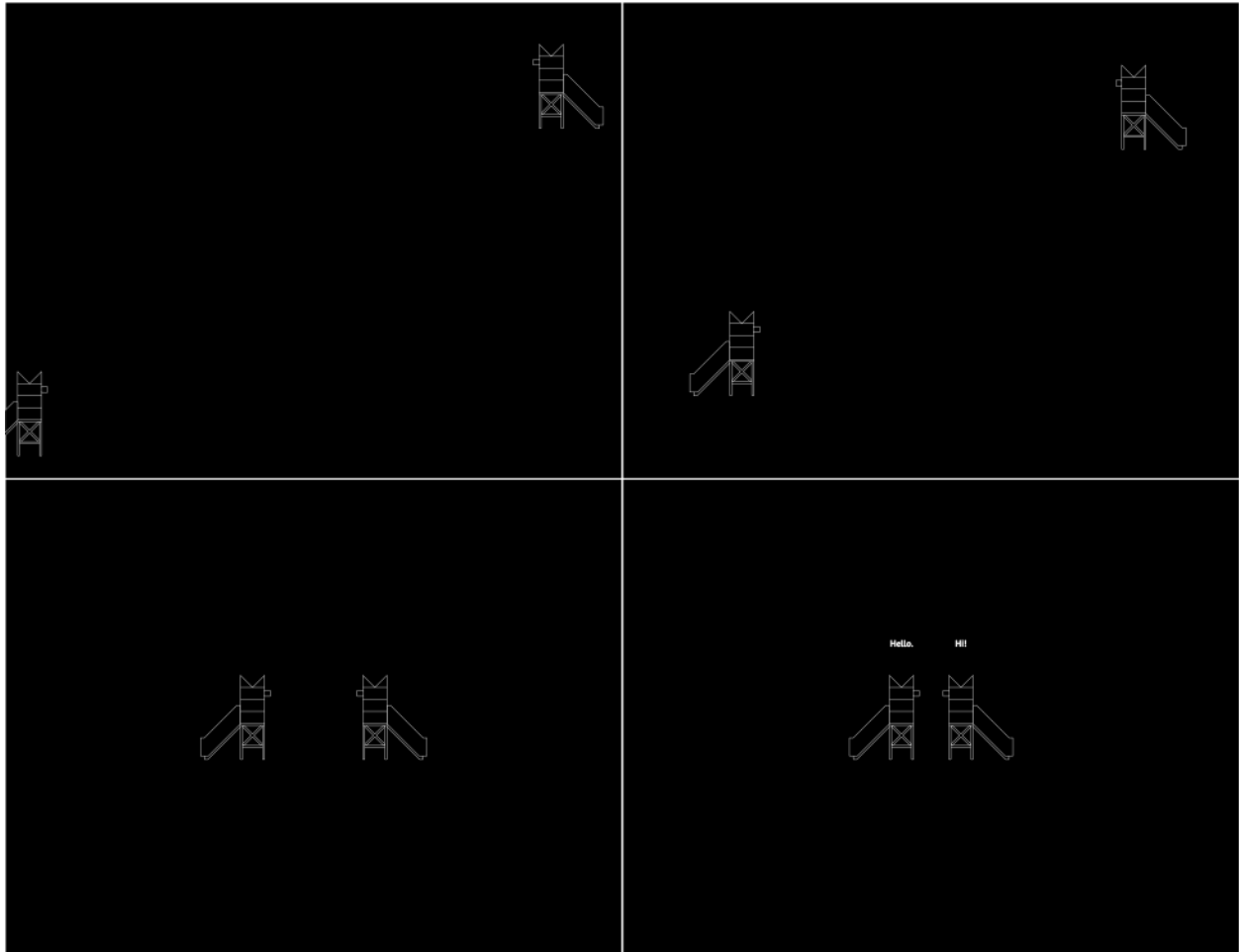

Figure 1: Two strangers meet. (Jared Macken)

2. ARCHITECTURAL USER AS STRANGER

Despite the anxiety surrounding the idea of strangers in the city, these kinds of interactions are a crucial component of our collective environments. Yet, interactions of this sort have been challenged both in contemporary politics and even in design projects. While architects and designers who shape our cities can easily imagine how design affects these interactions, cities have been designed for narrowly defined constituencies. But what would happen if an architectural project on the city sought out these strange interactions and even produced them intentionally through form? What if the city was designed for the stranger? Or, for instance, what would happen if the qualities and characteristics of well-known users from twentieth-century architectural projects were inverted or critiqued by identifying their opposite, and could the stranger be this antithesis? An exploration of these questions provides a critical lens through which architectural projects of the twentieth century may be examined.

Architects are all familiar with the term "user," how it drives architectural projects on the city, and how the concept of user helps realize a project's ambitions and ideologies by utilizing specific architectural forms that cater to that user. Consider the list of usual suspects that comes from past projects:[1] the worker, the family guy, le flâneur, the nomad, the participant, *der Bürger* or citizen, the bachelor, and the consumer to name a few (Macken et al. 2013). One characteristic that all these projects have in common is their use of hyperspecific character traits to justify city-scaled projects that embody monocultural lifestyles. Those users have a narrow set of characteristics and a linear script for how they use the cities that are designed specifically for them. Each of the projects tied to those users was driven by a manic ambition to seize control of an ever-changing metropolis. The postwar project on the city was a test bed for these kinds of users. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter argue in *Collage City* that each of those projects strips citizens of their cultural and social qualities to create the protean universal denizen of the mega/city-scaled utopias each character represents. Rowe lumped them all together with the pejorative term "noble savage," and while their intentions were well-meaning—to create airy, healthy, safe-space-infused cityscapes for narrowly defined citizens that limited the number of strange interactions—an alternative can still be imagined (Rowe and Koetter 1983). The stranger, for instance, challenges the monocultural nature of those projects, since a stranger does not describe a single specific type of person, but any citizen who brings their own qualities and characteristics to a new city. Strangers engage with all the rich cultural material found in the locations they insert themselves into, combining those qualities with their own to create new cultural artifacts, hybridizing aspects of themselves with their contexts. An architectural project can expand on this aspect of a stranger's interactions with the city by splicing the qualities of the stranger with the context of the site to create a city that fosters different kinds of interactions between citizens (Simmel 1971). Designing for this kind of user expands the design toolbox of architectural forms and affects, has the potential to tap into lost histories of the city, and in turn reimagines the way an architectural research project can function in relation to other disciplines.

3. STRANGERS' CONVERSATION

Kwame Anthony Appiah confirms this idea of strangers in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, where he describes them as adept users of the global city, armed with the act of conversation, dialogue, and a curiosity about other ways of life. Appiah's use of the term "conversation" is enhanced with agency when he describes it as a "metaphor for engagement" that enables a stranger to not merely assimilate into their new contexts but create a response to them and ultimately provide pathways for creating new cultural communities and artifacts. Speaking of this dialogue, Appiah states that "conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own" (2006, 85). Strangers, as the users of the universal city, use engaged conversation to draw out the materials they need to invent something new. They do not completely change their new contexts to meet their needs, nor do they completely abandon their own qualities. Instead, they synthesize them together, thereby contributing to the very places that enhance their malleable identities. Given their adaptability to any context, strangers not only critique past architectural users by breaking the mold of the hyperspecified citizen of the city; they have the potential to carry a little cultural DNA of each one simultaneously. Strangers are the citizens of the universal city, and as such, the city can be designed to provide access to these moments of engaged conversation, thereby resulting in the rich cultural outputs these interactions generate.

4. PROJECT AS STRANGER

In the spring of 2016, the conceptualization of the stranger as an alternative architectural user was tested through the grant-funded project "Two Strangers Meet in a Parking Lot." This project explored how architectural form at a small scale, versus the master planning or megascale, can embrace interactions between strangers in the city.[2] The form of the structures functioned in two ways: first, their elevational figures resembled two giant strangers facing each other in conversation; and second, they allowed the citizens of the city who interacted with them to become strangers, and then acquaintances, by engaging with one another through intentional conversation (Figure 2).
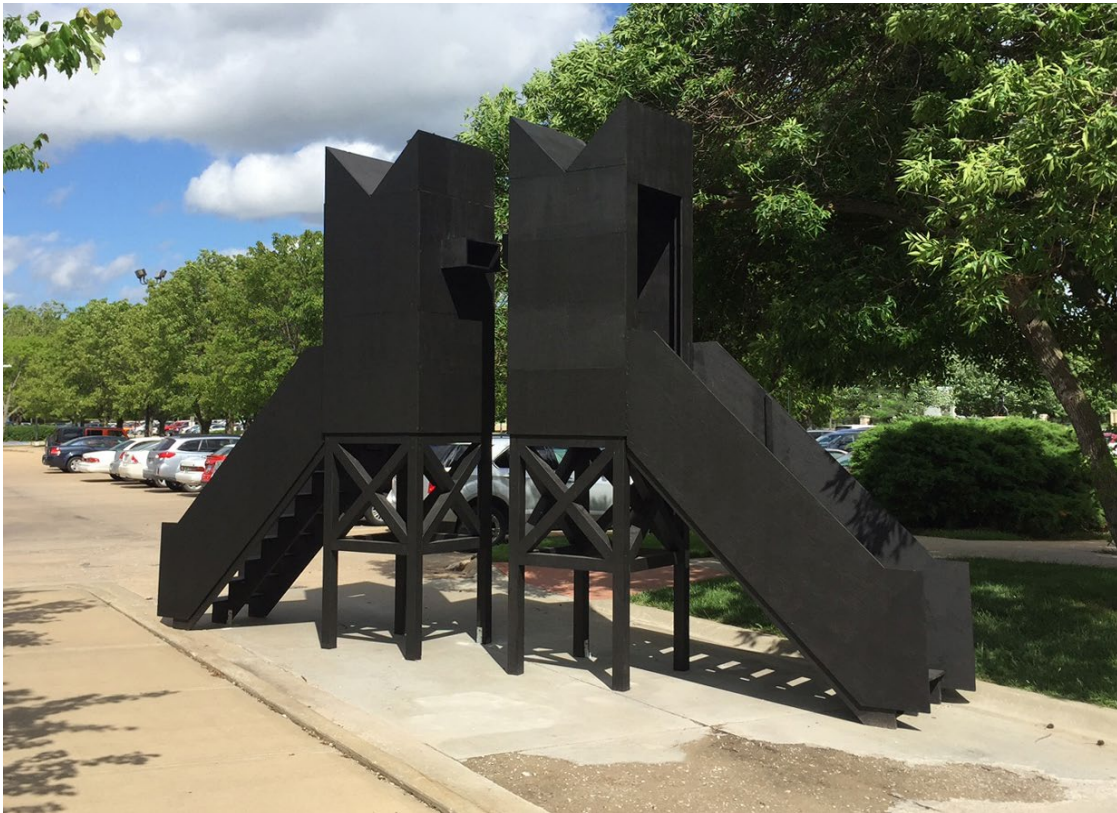
Figure 2: Two strangers block the entrance of a parking lot in Topeka, Kansas.
(Jared Macken, 2016)

facing elevation   side elevations   stair elevation   side sections

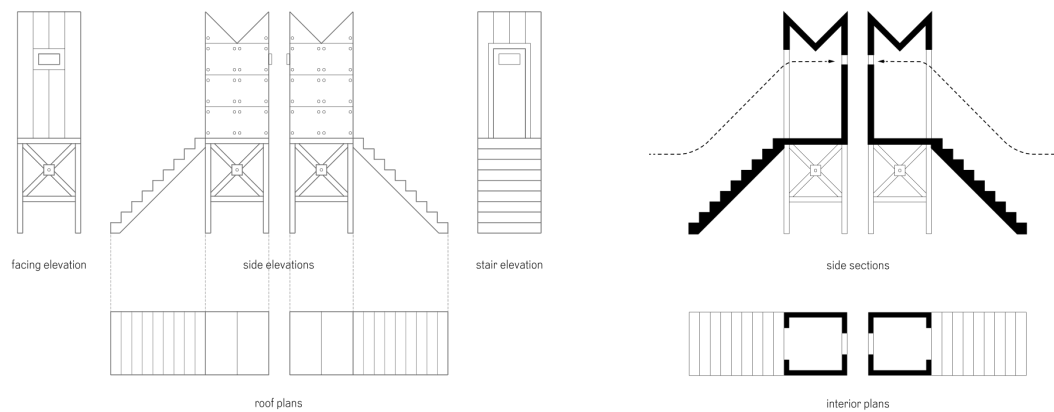roof plans   interior plans

Figure 3: Creating a conversation and dialogue through architectural form
(Jared Macken, 2016)

The two identical structures stood 18 feet tall, consisted of a tail-like staircase that led to a small 4 x 4-foot room, which was topped with earlike roof structures and a protruding window box. Their elevational figures related to each other and loosely resembled anthropomorphic forms, allowing them to exude a critical aura and automatically confront other objects in their immediate surroundings. Their window boxes protruded toward each other, making them appear to be in conversation. Banal elements in the city—like parking lot asphalt, light posts, storefronts, even lean-tos—were highlighted when in the presence of the strangers and appeared to be witnessing these two foreign structures in dialogue (Figure 3). Human inhabitants of the city were ultimately intrigued, if at first anxious, wondering what the structures were. Passersby started to interact with them by climbing the stairs, entering the small room, peeking through the small window box, and coming face-to-face with other human strangers. The window boxes induced conversation and dialogue, functioning like the opening of a giant mask through which each inhabitant was simultaneously connected to another person face-to-face but also given a little protection from the awkward situation. Strangers became acquaintances through conversation and dialogue, and the architectural forms of the structures, that is, stairs, doorway, room, window box, made this interaction possible (Figure 4).
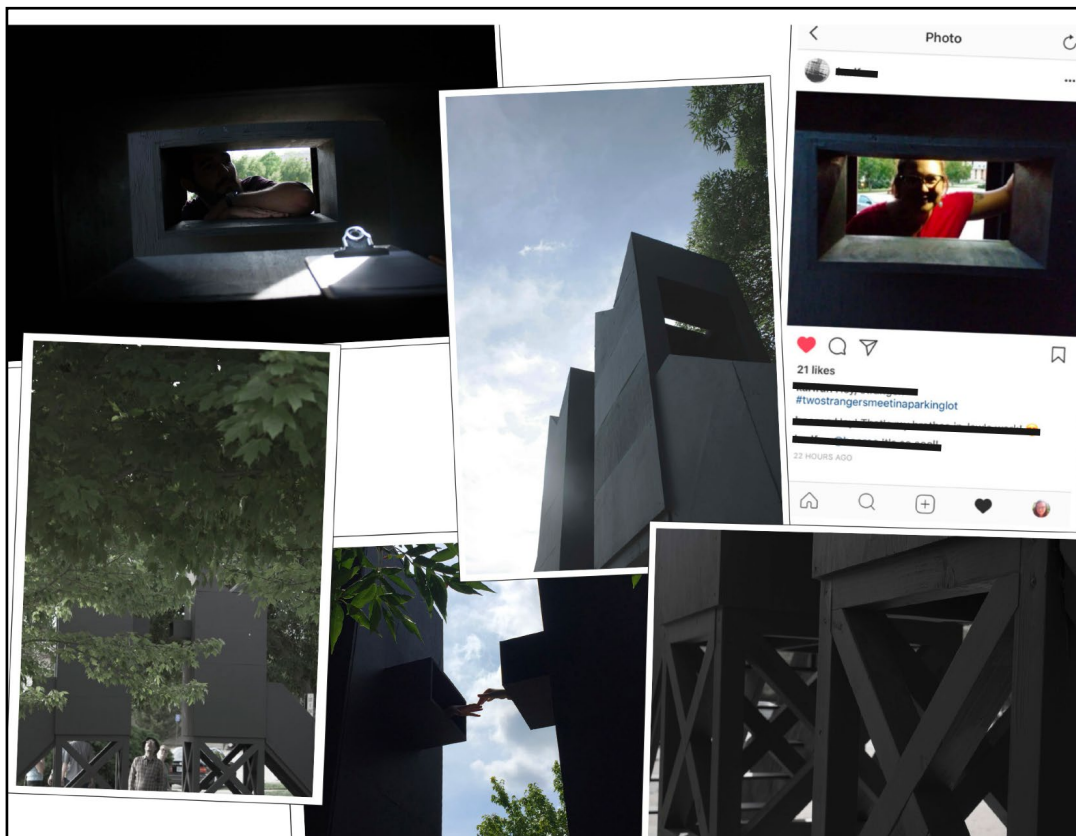

Figure 4: Strangers become acquaintances. (Jared Macken, 2016)

5. DISCIPLINE AS STRANGER

This notion of conversation between strangers becoming a cultural catalyst can also be applied to how disciplines communicate with one another. In his essay "TRANSdisciplinarity," Mark Linder (2005) argues for a new type of interaction between disciplines, presenting an alternative to what is traditionally labeled *inter*disciplinarity. The relationship between disciplines is similar to the relationship between strangers and the city; while it is important that each discipline maintain its unique characteristics and own discursive output, it is also important that each find ways of creating dialogues with other disciplines so as to contribute to a global intellectual community.[3] However, Linder argues that transdisciplinarity's "aim would not be to assimilate other discourses into architecture or to find common principles or to establish architecture's dependence on or affinities with related discourses, but to scrutinize particular instances of the translation or transference of concepts, vocabularies, and techniques, and thereby come to terms with the specific discourses that constitute architecture's distinct, yet mutable, identity as a discipline" (2005, 15). Similar to the way Appiah describes a stranger's interaction that allows them to combine their qualities with their new context, transdisciplinary interaction allows for each discipline to retain its unique characteristics while absorbing new knowledge through an overlap of discursive ideas. The result is not the elimination of disciplines within a new multiheaded hydra—what Linder argues can occur with interdisciplinarity—but a new outcome that keeps respective disciplines intact while allowing them to adapt into a global intellectual community. If Appiah provides the stranger with their qualities as a universal user of the city, then Linder brings the idea of conversation to a disciplinary context, showing how architecture can not only utilize the stranger as a user in projects but how it can conduct research in dialogue with other fields to inform said projects.

6. PEDAGOGY AS STRANGER

These two ideas of the stranger within an architectural project, both the utilization of it as a user and as a method of doing disciplinary research, were applied to the classroom. In 2016, students at the University of Kansas adopted the stranger as the user but also assumed the role of strangers themselves when they instigated their own disciplinary conversations with archivists, historians, city planners, neighborhood citizens, city council people, and even those in other artistic disciplines. The resulting design studios were called "The Stranger in the City," and conversations they stimulated led to investigations of the culturally rich histories in the overlooked and underutilized neighborhood of Tennessee Town in Topeka, Kansas. They also helped develop design strategies that highlighted and resurrected site-specific cultural and social qualities that had been lost in the contemporary city.

The site for the students' projects was situated in the historic Tennessee Town neighborhood of Topeka, Kansas, occupying a whole city block at the geographic center of the city. The north half of the site is a small park dedicated to the visual artist and native Topekan Aaron Douglas. The south half contained a vacant grocery store and a parking lot. The students' research began with a conversation with the local archivist/historian Donna Rae Pearson, a resident of the neighborhood. Ms. Pearson introduced the students to the city archives she manages at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, just a few blocks north of the site, and she provided them with her own first-person accounts of life in the

neighborhood. Access to historical documents and anecdotal information in the archive allowed the students to assume the role of architectural archaeologists and anthropologists. They quickly uncovered a rich history from 1880s Tennessee Town and discovered an inspiring narrative of the strangers who built the neighborhood's community.

In the 1880s, the neighborhood was an important destination for "Exodusters," a term used at the time to describe African Americans who fled the south for safer communities in the north (Figure 5). These new citizens of Tennessee Town encountered the city of Topeka as strangers, bringing their own cultural qualities and then meshing them with their new context. As a result, a new community thrived, one that included churches, businesses, social clubs, reading rooms, and schools. From these new cultural institutions a neighborhood collective was constructed, and out of this environment emerged prominent twentieth-century figures. Most important to our research in the studio was the visual artist Aaron Douglas, who in 1925 moved to New York City and became an integral member of the Harlem Renaissance.

Figure 5: Poster from Benjamin "Pap" Singleton's Scrapbook that advertised safe passage to Kansas from the south in the 1880s
(Image courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society)

Douglas, much like the Exoduster community that built Tennessee Town, was a stranger when he arrived in Harlem, but he quickly found work collaborations with the many artistic and intellectual colleagues living in the city at that time. The graphic two-dimensional design principles Douglas developed provided a visual language for the intellectual ideas he

fostered with many intellectual figureheads of the movement, including Langston Hughes and the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine editors among many others. His artwork adorned books, magazines, and the walls of the New York Public Library. But he was also a pioneer in the discipline of art and design. The formal qualities of his artwork were in conversation with other avant-garde artists, utilizing fundamental shapes that expanded into complex figures, each assigned individual hues that, when composed together, embodied the cultural aspects of Harlem and the African American experience. The professor and scholar David Driskell, in an interview with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, explains that "instead of looking at European modernism, Douglas went forth to study very carefully the great empires of Africa, of Songhai and Mali, and he started to incorporate that into his drawings and into his paintings." He goes on to explain that "[Douglas] was doing something that was two-fold . . . He was looking at Biblical history, but he was also looking at the social plight that African Americans were [in] under the rule of the pharaoh, so to speak" (Driskell 2015). Like Appiah's description of strangers combining their own characteristics with those of their new context to synthesize a new cultural artifact, Douglas did the same. His collaborations were stranger-like, but so was his artwork, which intertwined the characteristics of his cultural and social background with Western myths, creating a hybrid cultural artifact that disseminated the ideas from his artist/intellectual collective of the Harlem Renaissance (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction* (New York Public Library mural, 1934)

This way of combining the histories and cultural qualities of converging strangers resonated with the students. These ideas worked their way into their own projects but also helped them develop new design methodologies. For instance, they imitated Douglas's working method, thereby creating for themselves a new design technique that allowed them to consciously highlight, not supplant, existing characteristics of Tennessee Town. This was

most explicitly demonstrated through the way they combined the histories of their site with those they researched from architectural history. For instance, the students learned that the legalization of African American literary societies and reading rooms in the state of Kansas became an important catalyst to the development of the community. This simple urban program—a building that provided a space for a reading room—was crucial to the development of the intellectual community in Tennessee Town, and it resonated with the students so much that they adopted it as a part of their own architectural program narrative. They also learned from interviews with neighborhood citizens and the Topeka councilwoman Karen Hiller that current residents no longer had a space for a reading room. At some moment over the years, the structure that housed the reading room had fallen into disrepair. However, they had been using the grocery store as a similar kind of social condenser, a place they could walk to from their homes and connect with one another through conversation. Similar to the original reading room, the grocery store had been shuttered by the store's corporate offices just before our studio began researching the site. The students were then inspired to design a reading room and grocery store as a new type of community center, one that was more resilient to changes over time by building into its form a temporal adaptability and spaces for more diverse programmatic uses. After meeting and communicating with an urban planner in Topeka, the students catered their design strategies to the community, populating the city block with programs that the neighborhood had lost over the years, including the reading room, grocery store, and even local businesses and meeting spaces. They made their design comply with the existing urban codes, and then they also invented new provisions through their conversations with the city planner (Figure 7).
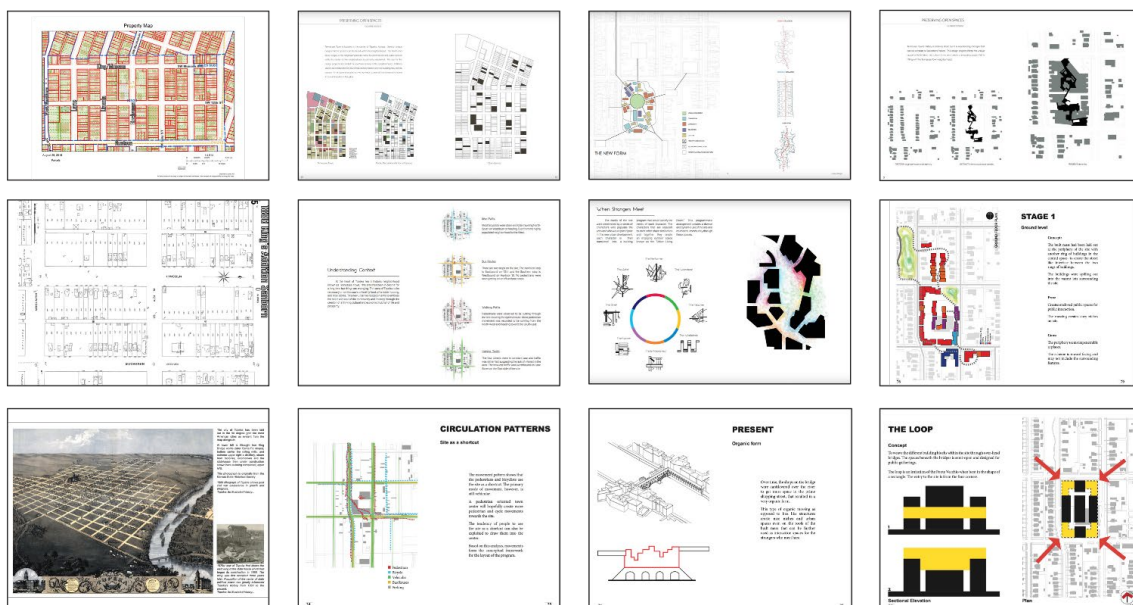

Figure 7: Assorted pages from student research booklets showing the synthesis of the research into design strategies (Student project by Jacob Albrecht and Sierra Dubis, 2016)

7. STUDENT PROJECTS AS STRANGER

With that central programmatic idea in mind, the students' projects explored different ways architectural form, from both the site's context and the history of the city, could be used to resurrect lost programs from Tennessee Town. For instance, the project "Preserving Open Spaces" combined Tennessee Town's planimetric aggregation of building stock with the plan of Split, Croatia, specifically the sector of the city that infilled the abandoned palace of Diocletian, a fortified Roman complex built in the fourth century AD. This resulted in a project that rebuilt the typical street fronts of Topeka, namely, the front porches of bungalows and shotgun houses, but allowed them to extend deep into the block, where massing became atypically repeated and then interconnected using the hybridized plan. The collision of these histories accommodated the spatial diversity needed to create small storefront businesses, large gallery-like community meeting rooms, a grocery store, even residential areas that included artists' studios. All of this was intertwined with plaza-like open spaces. The project simultaneously restores the street fronts that were demolished in the 1960s, retains the "big box" form of the vacant grocery store as a community meeting space, while unifying the new diversity of programs that permeates the block with open plaza-like spaces. New cultural programs were given homes through the project's diverse yet unified forms, including a residency program where artists and researchers living in the studios could access Ms. Pearson's archives down the street (Figure 8).

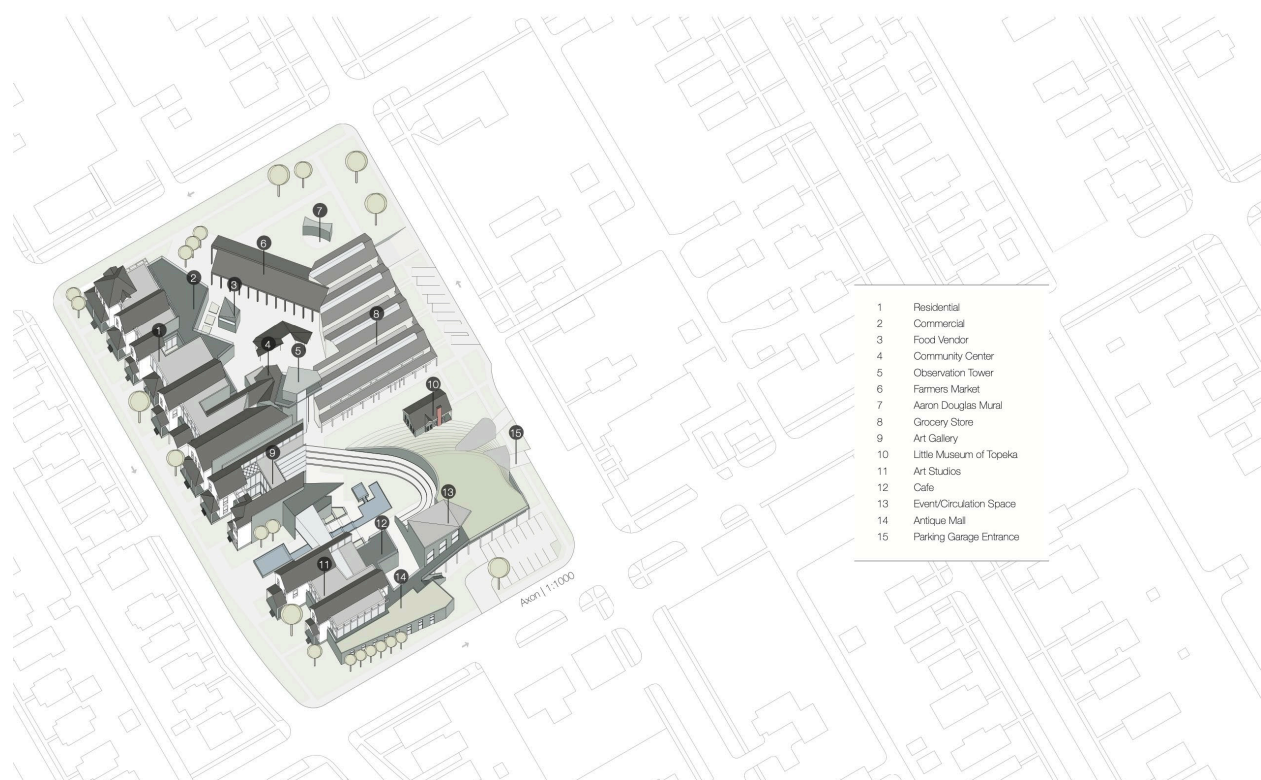| 1 | Residential |
2	Commercial
3	Food Vendor
4	Community Center
5	Observation Tower
6	Farmers Market
7	Aaron Douglas Mural
8	Grocery Store
9	Art Gallery
10	Little Museum of Topeka
11	Art Studios
12	Cafe
13	Event/Circulation Space
14	Antique Mall
15	Parking Garage Entrance

Axon | 1:1000

Figure 8: Axon site plan of "Preserving Open Spaces" (Student project by Jacob Albrecht and Sierra Dubois, 2016)

Another project transplants the lost cultural programs of Tennessee Town into the form of classical marketplace bridges, like the Ponte Vecchio built in 1345 (Figure 9). The pathways, storefronts, plazas, and apartments of the Florentine bridge were duplicated and then pulled across the site, not bridging a body of water but the voided block itself, creating many new connections across it. The newly created plazas and pedestrian streets became outdoor meeting spaces, with food markets, local businesses, and interior community rooms that aggregate at the scale of the neighborhood (Figure 10).
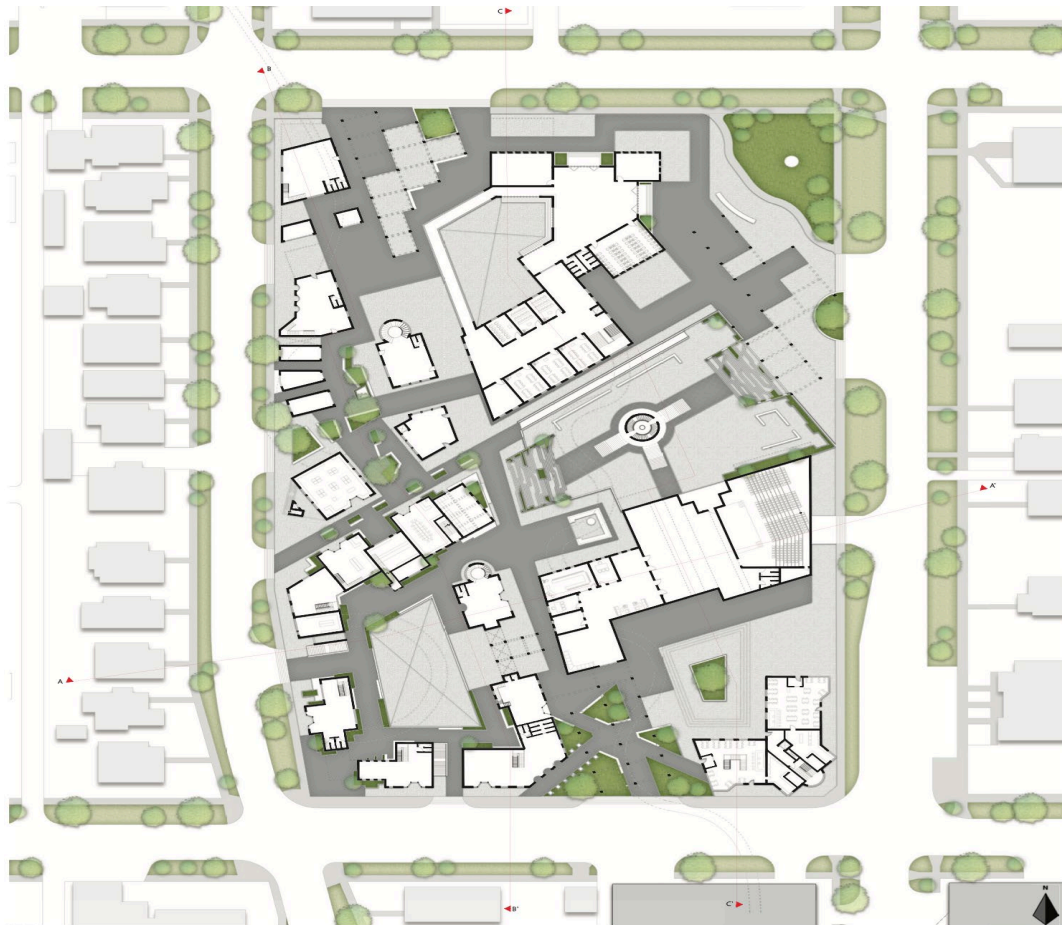
Figure 9: Plan of "Tennessee Corridor" showing how the Ponte Vecchio was used to arrange lost city programs across the site (Student project by Haripriya Madireddi and Bhaswati Mukherjee, Fall 2016)
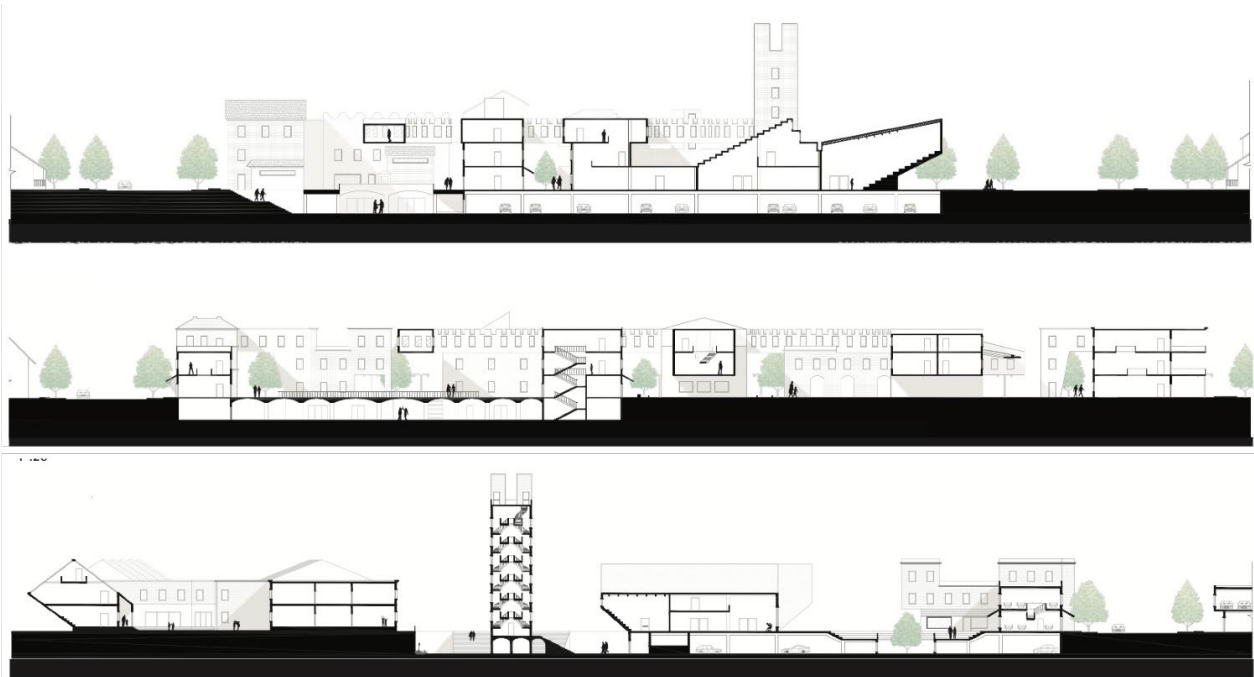
Figure 10: Drawings showing how "Tennessee Corridor" invents new ways that the resurrecting programmatic histories of the neighborhood interact in section (Student project by Haripriya Madireddi and Bhaswati Mukherjee, Fall 2016)

Projects from the class also found different ways to explore how the existing park could better engage with the citizens living in the neighborhood around the site. The project "Collective Living Room" extended the mural that defines the existing Aaron Douglas Park along new walls that define outdoor meeting areas (Figure 11). The murals are displayed through different mediums, utilizing not only paint and mosaic tiles but also digital projections and temporal banners. The walls that receive these cultural images house cafes, readings rooms, and adaptable meeting spaces for the community, including rooms for continuing education programs. Activities in the outdoor living room spaces are intended to extend to evening hours, similar to the way a domestic living room functions, giving the site relevance throughout the day (Figure 12).
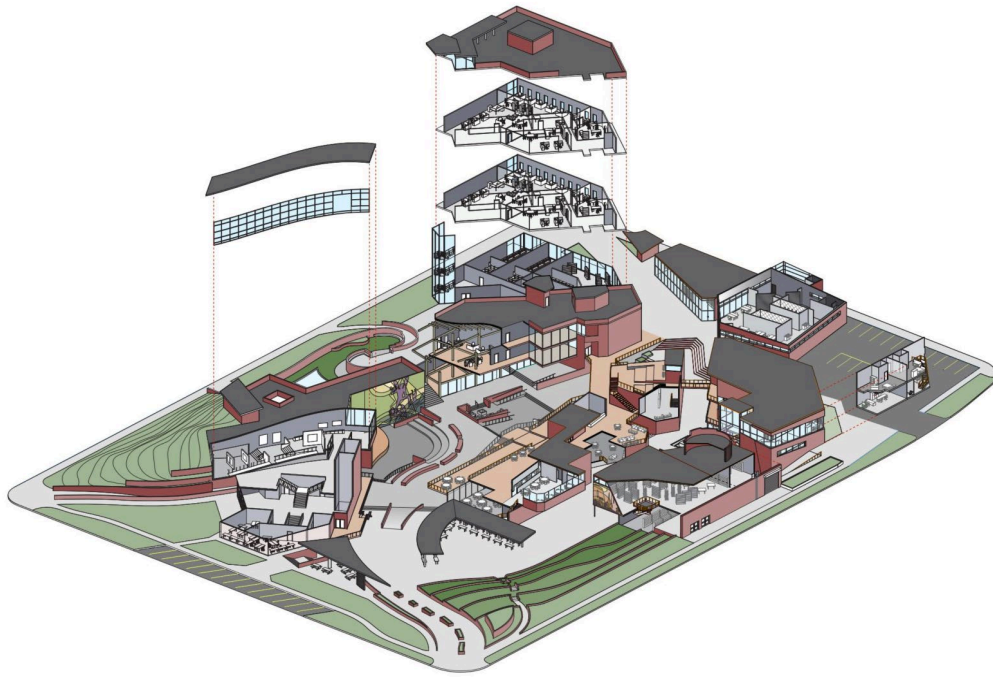
Figure 11: The "Urban Living Room" project extends the Aaron Douglas murals into new meandering pedestrian streets with large meeting spaces and programs interspersed. (Student project by Kyle Walsh and Simon Davies, Fall 2016)

Figure 12: Events extend into the night as the community uses the "Urban Living Room" as a communal cultural space. (Student project by Kyle Walsh and Simon Davies, Fall 2016)

Another project also extends the existing park but with a smaller footprint on the site. Simply named "The Aaron Douglas Art Centre," the project duplicates a small portion of the park vertically by stacking "super porches" into four levels; the lowest sinks below grade to form an outdoor amphitheater. The porches become indoor/outdoor galleries that feature the community activities as a kind of living billboard or mural that is visible from across the park's open space. Each porch plays host to a variety of activities, including art exhibits, concerts, and receptions. They serve interior spaces that are as adaptable and programmatically diverse as the porches, which can be used for children's story times, bingo nights, artist residencies, and even spaces for archives that could be used by both the community and researchers from outside the neighborhood. Like Douglas's artwork, the center combines histories, allowing important aspects of the community's history to be resurrected (Figure 13).
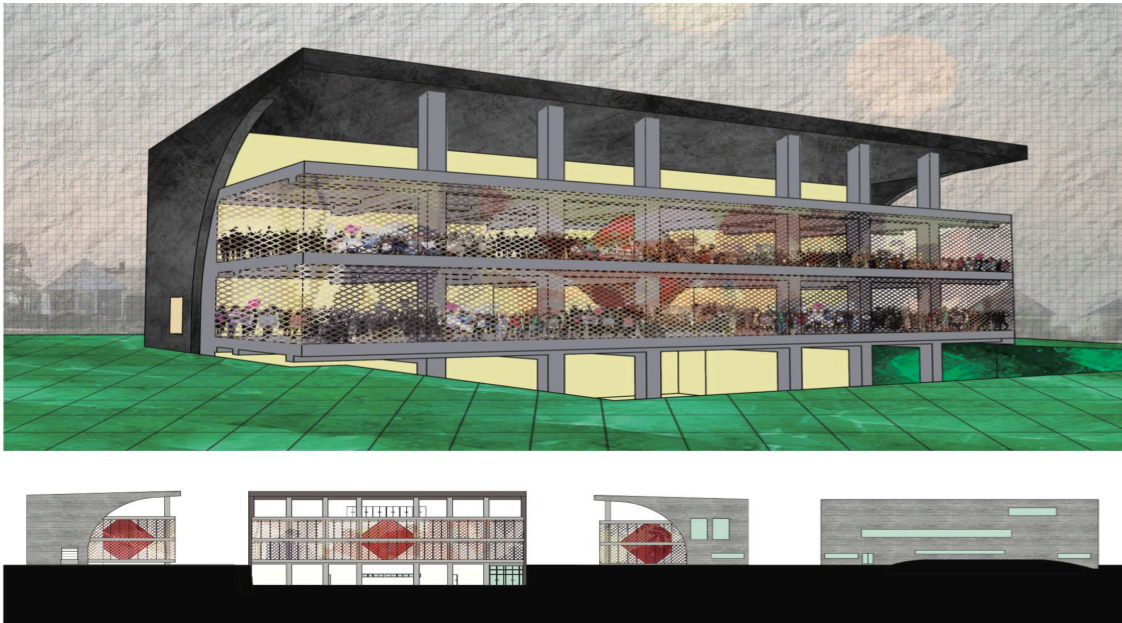

Figure 13: The form of the "Aaron Douglas Art Centre" project extends the park by stacking it into giant front porches. (Student project by Jacob Hansen, Spring 2017)

8. STRANGE CONCLUSION

While utilizing the theories discovered through Appiah's definition of the cosmopolitan citizen of the city, Linder's advocacy for a specifically disciplinary form of conversation, and Douglas's methodology for combining different cultural ideas and histories, the students were able to retell the cultural narratives of Tennessee Town through architectural projects.

Like a city, the classroom was a crossroads of strangers, with students coming from different countries, cultures, social backgrounds, and beliefs, and architecture acting as a unifying common interest. Adopting the stranger as a user helped the students develop a critical mindset for their projects, which explored how architecture could connect to larger cultural ideas related to designing an inclusive city. Becoming research strangers within Topeka allowed the students to create projects that would elevate narratives and histories that had been overlooked, specifically the development of the midwestern city in relation to the African American experience. As a result, knowledge of architectural history was expanded to include the rich characteristics of Tennessee Town, providing an important entry in the lexicon of architectural discourse on the city.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[1] These users come from projects like constructivism, Ebenezer Howard's garden city, Superstudio, Archizoom, Situationist International, Archigram, Le Corbusier's master plans and megastructures, Ludwig Hilberseimer's architectural urbanism, and Rem Koolhaas's skyscraper to name a few. This list was first compiled as an argument for the stranger as antithetical architectural user in the book *The Western Town: A Theory of Aggregation* (Macken et al. 2013), which explores the relationship architecture has with pop-cultural depictions of the built environment, including its fictional legends in Wild West movies.

[2] The majority of twentieth-century architectural projects on the city focused on large-scale architectural gestures, which contributes to the use of a singular type of user.

[3] On the one hand, a discipline contains its own knowledge base of expertise and uniquely communicates through its own disciplinary modes of representation. Yet, if a discipline closes itself off to the outside world, which contains many different disciplines and therefore various intellectual points of view, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant in a world that is rich because of its interconnectedness.