ITINERANCY AND SHELTER IN THE 21ST CENTURY: EXPLORING DIGNIFIED LIVING SOLUTIONS FOR UNSHELTERED COMMUNITIES

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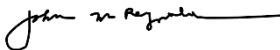the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

by

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ABSTRACT

ITINERANCY AND SHELTER IN THE 21ST CENTURY: EXPLORING DIGNIFIED LIVING SOLUTIONS FOR UNSHELTERED COMMUNITIES

Macy Dana Whitaker

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the numbers of homeless individuals has been on the rise since 2017, increasing 2% between 2019 and 2020 alone ("State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition). With statistics like these, the existing solutions in the form of homeless shelters or other affordable housing options cannot accommodate the numbers of people that need support. Shelters and other social service sites can quickly become overcrowded, and there are other factors at play that may deter some people from seeking out shelter services. Currently, solutions for housing the homeless are largely stationary and don't take into consideration the movement patterns of the population they serve. Relegated to more simple forms of portable shelters, the most popular options for those living on the streets are camping tents, pitched in any location with enough space, whether it is public or private.

Today, we see people successfully living and thriving in forms of itinerancy besides homelessness. These conditions range from nomadic communities across the globe to social media influencers traveling in remodeled cargo vans. Bringing to light a variety of situations that call into question what many people associate with the term "itinerancy" will start to challenge and destigmatize the way we think about the condition of homelessness. In my design thesis, I will study the support systems, cultures, and methods of building and movement of multiple migratory communities, to begin to understand the tactics that have allowed some of these mobile lifestyles to endure and provide comfort for the people who live them. To explore these topics, I will map out urban and rural conditions to understand how access to amenities and social services vary by the location in which people live. In addition to mapping, I will provide visual and spatial comparisons of shelters used by other groups of mobile people, as well as inventories of personal possessions to better understand living conditions and needs. These methods will aid in exploring the possibilities of integrating successful aspects of traditional and modern itinerant living into America's homelessness epidemic to design a community based alternative living environment for people experiencing homelessness in Akron, Ohio.

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[1] Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis committee, John Reynolds, John Blake, and Elizabeth Keslacy, as well as my studio professors, Jeff Kruth and Todd Yoby, for all of their support throughout the entire thesis process. Their feedback and guidance were vital to the success of this project.

I also want to thank my family. They were always there to act as my sounding board and offer new perspectives on my ideas and designs. Throughout all of the stress and uncertainty that this project entailed, they responded with nothing but positivity and encouragement. I would never have been able to do any of this without their love and support.

[2] Key Words

Community based architecture, flexible design, homelessness, itinerant, transient, unhoused, shelter, socially constructed architecture

[3] Introduction

       The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines four categories of homelessness as the following:

> "(1) Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes a subset for an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter, or a place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution;
>
> (2) Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;
>
> (3) Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; or
>
> (4) Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member." (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

       Today's homeless populations deal with a number of different issues, only one of which being the absence of a permanent residence. Loss of a primary source of income, substance abuse and addiction, lack of affordable housing, mental health issues, and disabilities are only a few of the potential reasons that someone may end up in need of a temporary housing solution. In 2021, the number of unhoused people in the United States was around 567,700, and the people that make up these numbers consist of both individuals and families, as well as veterans, people with mental health diagnoses, and many more ("Homelessness – Factor in the Numbers).

       People of all races, genders, faiths, and sexualities experience homelessness, but there are certain demographics that statistically experience it at higher rates. According to research gathered by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, men are more likely to be homeless than women. In 2020, statistics showed that "out of every 10,000 males, 22 are homeless. For women and girls, that number is 13" ("State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition). Race is another factor to compare when studying the demographics of people who are homeless. In the overall population of the United States, white people have the highest number of homeless individuals. However, as a racial subgroup, white people have lower percentages of homelessness than many racial minorities, as seen in figures 3.1 and 3.2. The percentages seen in the subgroups of minority individuals provides evidence that they are impacted to a greater degree than the white population ("State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition). The data detailed in this report does not have information regarding the impact that COVID-19 has had on the current numbers and living situations of unhoused people across the United States, but it is suspected to be significant. The

data that we do have, however, does still show 2020 as the fourth consecutive year of increased growth in our homeless populations ("State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition).
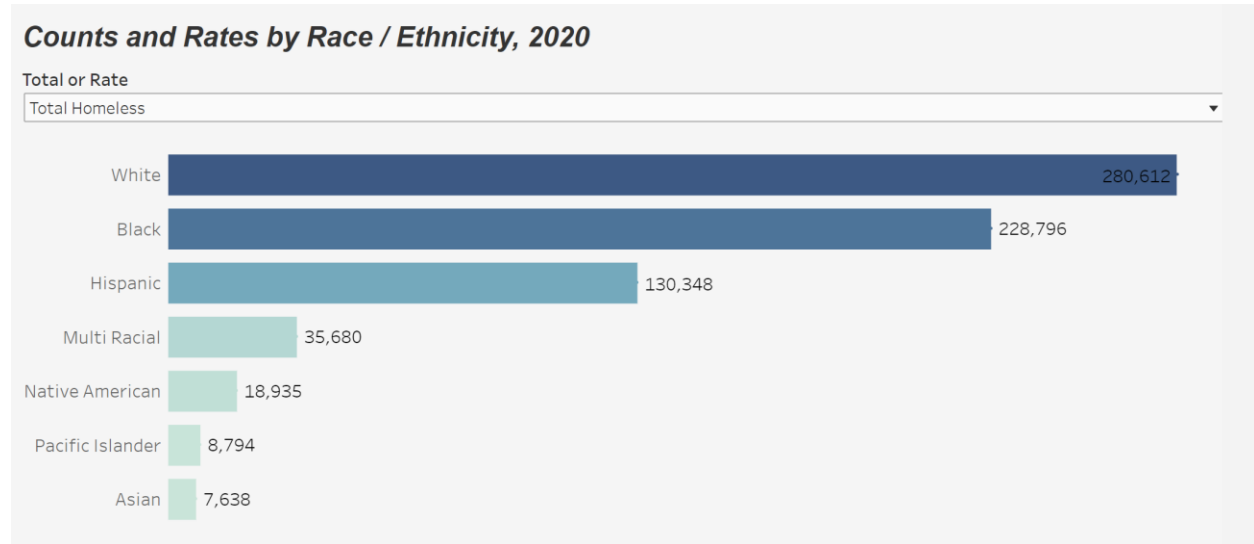
Counts and Rates by Race / Ethnicity, 2020

Total or Rate

Total Homeless

Race / Ethnicity	Total Homeless
White	280,612
Black	228,796
Hispanic	130,348
Multi Racial	35,680
Native American	18,935
Pacific Islander	8,794
Asian	7,638

Figure 3.1 Rates of Homelessness as a Whole

Counts and Rates by Race / Ethnicity, 2020

Total or Rate

Rate Per 10,000

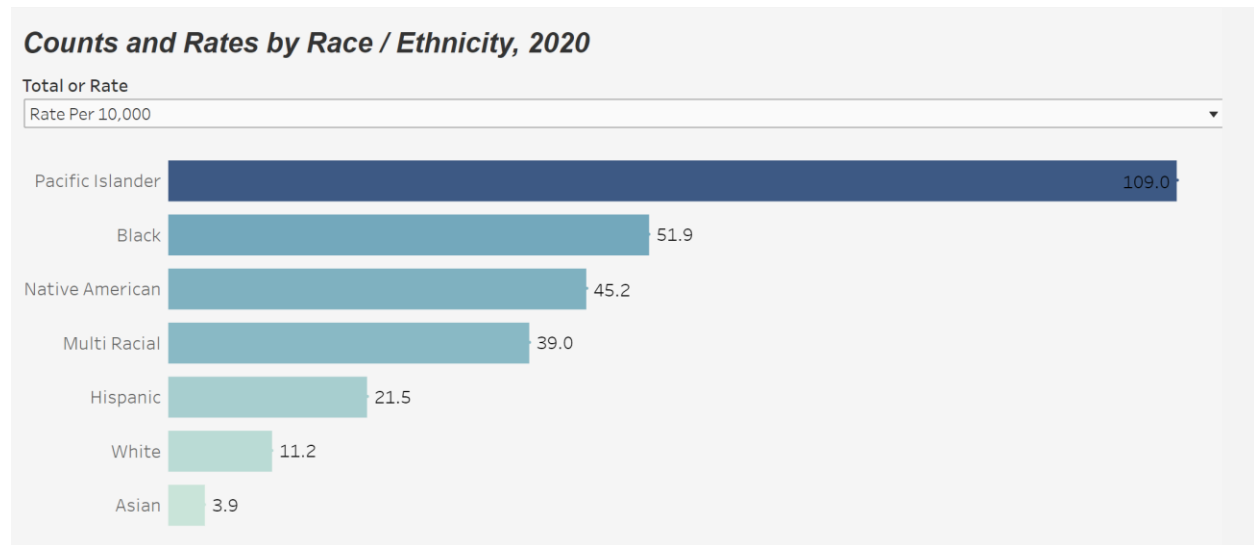| Race / Ethnicity	Rate Per 10,000
Pacific Islander	109.0
Black	51.9
Native American	45.2
Multi Racial	39.0
Hispanic	21.5
White	11.2
Asian	3.9

Figure 3.2 Rates of Homelessness per 10,000 Individuals

With trends going the way they are, potential solutions need to be explored to begin to address some of the problems faced by unhoused individuals. Even before a global pandemic changed the way people across the country lived, close quarters and lack of sanitation options in communal shelters meant that illnesses and the spread of infection were not uncommon among those experiencing homelessness. Decreased accessibility to doctors or professionals when dealing with addiction, mental health crises, or physical ailments also pose risks to vulnerable populations. Food insecurity, physical discomfort, unemployment, and violence are other common worries of this community.

As if sleeping rough and not having a stable place to rest at the end of the day was not hard enough, many cities have installed what they like to call defensive architecture. Proponents

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of these elements will argue that they help maintain cleanliness in public spaces and are used for the safety of people and property. While that may be true at some level, another consequence of these features, intended or not, is that they make it difficult for those who must sleep outside to find somewhere to stay the night. Advocates for homeless populations call this hostile architecture. Public plazas may have "unique" seating with curves or slopes that make it hard to sit for long periods of time. Benches will often be seen with armrests running through the middle of them to prevent people from laying across them, and metal spikes are seen on sidewalks or windowsills to keep people off of them. The cities that we live, work, and play in present a paradox; how does one use a "public" space when that space seems to be designed with subtle details to keep the public out? To what extent do these features negatively affect the day to day lives of those who rely on the public infrastructure as a means for rest?

There are many organizations and agencies that aim to provide support for people who need help finding temporary housing, but there are usually people that slip through the cracks. For example, not everyone qualifies for housing vouchers and homeless shelters can quickly reach their capacities. Shelters and transitional housing complexes also tend to have barriers to entry that some individuals cannot meet, such as sobriety, curfews, or passing background checks. Personal comfort also plays a role in where unhoused people choose to take shelter. Some people simply prefer to sleep in tents on their own, and others have concerns about the safety of themselves and their possessions in shared living spaces.

With all of this information in mind, I developed four main goals to answer the question:

How can an understanding of different itinerant lifestyles be used to develop alternative living environments for people experiencing homelessness?

The first goal was to meet basic human needs. Unsheltered living comes with many difficulties in accessing daily necessities, so my project needed to provide things like restrooms, clean water, space for food distribution, and personal hygiene stations at the very least. Secondly, I wanted to provide an additional choice in living conditions. As I mentioned before, what is currently available is not always the best option for everyone. I am not claiming that my proposal is the perfect solution or only solution, but I am acknowledging that there is potential for other options to fit different people's lifestyles and preferences in a better way. The third goal was to welcome flexibility through design and offer users autonomy over the place they inhabit in the broader context of the city. Finally, I wanted this project to foster a community. People who don't live in shelters still tend to congregate with people in similar situations to themselves, where they can find safety in numbers. Providing a designated safe space within the city for these communities to form in allows them to develop beyond just the need for survival.

[4] Precedents

Because of the need for more desirable sheltering options for people experiencing homelessness, architects have been working to develop more permanent built structures to provide temporary housing solutions to those who need it. With varying approaches to shape, size, or configuration, these shelters are able to offer different kinds of amenities and resources to those that occupy them. Government funding, community support, and volunteer efforts also can make an impact on the success a housing project achieves. When timelines are tight, some solutions are simply proposed as quick and easy ways to keep inhabitants from sleeping on the streets, while others utilize technology and modular parts to quickly manufacture units that provide shelter, privacy, and comfort for a short period of time. With more time and money, architectural firms are able to design bigger, more communal style living structures that are able to accommodate more residents and support resources for them to utilize.

[4.1] Shelter With Dignity

Figure 4.1.1 Rendering of potential implementation of Shelter with Dignity

Proposed by design and research firm Framlab, Shelter With Dignity pods are clusters of sleeping shelters that stack and interlock vertically by connecting to scaffolding on plain building faces. Occupants would access their individual spaces through staircases and walkways built between the scaffolding and the buildings. The pods protect inhabitants from the elements with an aluminum exterior and have a warm interior made from recycled polycarbonate that is 3D printed into the shape for the intended unit type ("SWD").

Though these pods have been proposed for use in New York City specifically, one of the benefits of a system like this is the ability for it to be implemented in just about any urban context, given there is enough room between two buildings for the structural pieces of the design to fit. It is a smart option for using vertical space that would otherwise be empty, and it means that surface level lots, which can be expensive in large cities, would not have to be purchased for the building of a shelter or affordable housing units. Using technology such as 3D printing to construct the hexagonal pods makes modules easier to replicate, alter, or mass produce, and recycled materials are a more sustainable way to build. Most of the time, recycled materials can be cheaper to use as well, however, the cost that would be associated with installing smart glass on the facades may outweigh that benefit. Other potential issues with this design arise from the lack of multi-person units for families, and unsupervised shared spaces, such as shower rooms, which may not be as clean or safe as shelters that have more private or regulated options. Utilities and how they would be provided to these pods would be a difficult process as well, as they would likely have to come from the building that hosted them, which would increase the cost of those bills for the owners.

[4.2] Hilda L. Solis Care First Village

Figure 4.2.1 Rendering of shipping container buildings that make up the Hilda L. Solis Care First Village

The site of today's Hilda L. Solis Care First Village was originally intended as the location for a new jail, but in 2019, the number of both sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness was nearing 60,000 in Los Angeles County (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority). Conversations began to shift towards using the land to supply housing and resources for some of the population. When covid-19 made its way to the United States, the timeline for the project was accelerated with the hopes of quickly accommodating vulnerable residents. The main material in the construction of the living quarters was shipping containers,

and the rest of the design consisted of modular components that could be made and assembled offsite, then transported to the site and put in place. Because of the urgency of the circumstances and relative ease of assembly, the village was completed in around six months. The shipping boxes were insulated and fitted for windows to create comfortable private rooms, equipped with private bathrooms and ventilation systems. Shared spaces in the complex include the dining area, kitchen, and laundry rooms.

In this project, the modularity of parts and use of unused shipping containers were vital to its speed of construction and success as a place of shelter for Los Angeles County's homeless population. In this case, the quick timeline was driven by the infection rates of the coronavirus and the high risk of illness and infection for unhoused people. The same strategies of using ready-made and easily assembled parts could be used in other cities or parts of the world to address itinerant populations there. The units themselves are excellent at giving inhabitants a space to relax privately and practice personal hygiene, as well as a place to call their own, even if it is for a limited time. Unfortunately, the HLSCFV reached full capacity of its 232 units quickly and still only sheltered a fraction of the people it could be available to. Housing options and ideas like this one are a good start but need to be implemented at a faster rate and over a larger area of influence. Of course, there are barriers to large-scale interventions. Something that must be remembered when assessing the feasibility of other projects similar to the Care First Village, is that the global pandemic was a huge factor in the amount of money it received for construction. The project cost around $57 million, "of which $51 million is federal Cares Act Coronavirus relief funding and $6 million from Chair Solis' First District Interim Housing Pool funds" (*Hilda L. Solis Care First Village Receives…*). In other situations, funds may vary and make it more difficult to achieve the same types of accommodations or serve a city of a similar size.

[4.3] Flat Pack Pods

Figure 4.3.1 Multiple flat pack pods deployed in and emergency shelter

      Reed Watts Architects have designed a small wooden module that can be set up within open rooms like gymnasiums being used in instances of emergency sheltering. Most of the time, the accommodations in situations like these are mattresses laid out on the floor with no division of space or privacy, but the pods that Reed Watts came up with act as both bed frames, partitions, and storage spaces for the people they serve. The units themselves are built from CNC cut panels that can be assembled without typical joining materials like glue, screws, or nails. The individual boards have edges that allow them to fit together like puzzle pieces. The pattern is freely available online to anyone with the supplies and abilities to make the units, and there is even a variation that has two units sharing a wall so that both space and materials can be saved in their construction. This relatively low-tech and low effort solution can be put together by regular people and provides a feeling of security for users that they may not experience otherwise in a communal shelter.

Figure 4.3.2 Close up of construction of the pods

Following their design, the modular pods were implemented and trialed in the winter of 2018-2019 as part of an evaluation of their potential as housing solutions. They were set up in three different emergency shelters in London, and their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the emotional and psychological effects they had on residents were documented and shared in a report. Independent evaluator Leila Baker and her team found that some of the biggest benefits that users experienced in the pods were storage opportunities, privacy, and feelings of safety. Each unit consists of a lifted bed frame, mattress, and shelving or clothes hanging space, which was reported to give some people a sense of comfort, personalization, and ownership, even within the close quarters. The physical barriers between people allowed for more vulnerable occupants to dress and sleep more peacefully than they would in an open space (Baker, et al., 3). Though there were positive responses to the modules, they did not come without downsides. For all the good reviews on the spaces the units created for residents, there were several people that reported the opposite effects. For example, "pods were described negatively as reminiscent of prison, and also positively as being like little houses," (Baker, et al., 7) or they "enabled people to slowly come out of their shell and overcome anxiety by giving them somewhere to retreat to, or exacerbated their anxiety by enabling them to become more isolated" (Baker, et al., 7).

One of the largest issues that volunteers had with construction was the weight and awkwardness of handling that they dealt with when putting pieces together. Their rigid shapes made it difficult for them to sit and function correctly if set up on uneven flooring, and without

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multiple coats of varnish for protection, the lifespans of the pods will likely be reduced, though it is too early to tell by how much (Baker, et al., 6). One other important piece of information to note is that some of the unused buildings where the pods would be implemented may need permits allowing temporary structures to be built within them. For the safety of the occupants in case of fire or other emergencies, these things need to be considered.

This project and study have provided both a potential solution to some of the inconveniences involved with communal emergency housing and an updated and informed plan for a wider range of implementation. Though some of the points outlined are dependent upon context or the type of solution used to address a problem, I believe their key ideas regarding resources, place, and space can be reframed and applied anywhere that intervention may be necessary. In my thesis, these topics were important to consider to help make sure that any design resulting from my research is appropriate, affordable, and humanistic.

[5] Process

The very first steps in my project were to use methodologies that I had identified in earlier classes to gather research and create graphics that would be useful to the development of my thesis. Personal testimony, mapping, and comparative drawings were all key in my understanding of the condition of homelessness.

I started by reading articles, listening to podcasts, and watching interviews with people who had experienced or were currently experiencing homelessness to learn what it was like from their perspectives. From this information, I started an inventory of items of importance to unhoused people to show how their priorities varied depending on what kind of living situation they were in. These lists translated into graphics that allowed me to visually represent the possessions and begin to think about the types of spaces that would be required to store or transport them.

Another piece of research that I did to understand differences in accessibility involved looking at different living situations and how people were able to meet their basic needs. Taking floor plans that represented various forms of itinerancy such as living in camping tents or cars, travel blogging from a renovated cargo van, or couch surfing at a relative's place, I laid out which amenities and services were available in each option. It showed the way that certain conditions had benefits over others, and where the deficiencies were in some of the lower tech shelters.

Figure 5.1 Resource and floor plan study

Mapping also played a role in this project's development. The infrastructural framework in which my thesis would operate was important to consider, and after doing some mapping experiments between urban conditions versus more suburban or rural conditions, relating location to access to amenities like medical centers or shelters, it was easy to see that the busier, more populated areas were better equipped to support the intervention I was trying to make. I

executed this mapping exercise in several states, analyzing an urban and suburban city in each of them. The results were clear. These maps showed that being homeless in an urban center has some benefits that being unhoused in a less busy city lacks. For this reason, it made the most sense that I focus on new living solutions in urban conditions. Realistically, whatever kind of system I was able to impose for those that are homeless to use, wouldn't be able to meet every single external need, so focusing on locations where some were already available was an advantage.

Using the information and research outlined above as a foundation, I began my explorations into designing living solutions that could be viewed as more durable and dignified than existing sheltering options for people who are unhoused.

[5.1] First Exploration

It is important to note that the original thesis question I sought to answer was not the same one I presented earlier in this paper. The way that I approached answering that first question led me down a different design path. Ultimately, the graphics I produced and research that I had conducted were still applicable to the development of the final thesis project, however, they influenced the design in a different way.

My initial question for this thesis was "How can the study of nomadic cultures impact the approach to today's homelessness epidemic?" Because of this, I began by focusing on nomadic communities and how they used architecture, structures, and materials to be able to deconstruct, transport, and reconstruct their homes in new places as they moved as a group. Unhoused people often must do a similar thing, taking down and setting up their tents or makeshift shelters in new places based on factors like safety, or local government restrictions. Though the situations are different in terms of stability, support, or acceptability within each culture, the basics of their architecture in regard to movement are similar.

My first concept consisted of a network of individual, mobile sleeping pods operating within a citywide infrastructure. The goal was to create something that could be taken apart, moved, and set up by a single person. It was similar to that of a tent, which is what many unhoused people use to begin with, so it would likely not require any drastic change in their shelter set up in this respect. The main differences would be the module's durability and better quality of protection from the elements. The size of these pods could vary to house one person or multiple, and it could be altered to accommodate different physical abilities that would be a factor in the transporting or occupying of the shelter. Since the unit was intended to be quickly taken apart and moved, modular pieces that could be manufactured efficiently out of lightweight, durable materials would make up the structure I developed. Their modularity would also mean that it would be easier to replace panels in case of defect or damage. Speed of manufacturing can also be an important factor in the rate that governments or companies can produce modules and get them in use.

The infrastructure relied on the use of underutilized spaces such as empty lots or oversized parking decks to set up as bare bones campsites where people could bring their sleeping pod and use basic utilities like shower stalls or camp sinks. These utilities would be provided and paid for by either local homeless support organizations or by the property owners in return for tax breaks. The goal with this avenue of design was to create a module that could replace tents and function more effectively in a lifestyle that didn't require any sort of permanence. With multiple locations throughout the city, the idea was that people could travel a short distance with their belongings to access several amenities in one spot.

As the exploration progressed, I found that this solution created more problems than it fixed. How would everything be maintained? How would it interact with existing conditions of the city such as vehicle or pedestrian traffic? Overall, it was introducing more uncertainty and stress into a situation that was already precarious and full of complexity and nuance. Analyzed in the "Precedents" section of this paper, the Shelter with Dignity pods in particular influenced some of the work that went into my first exploration into better mobile housing options. I wanted to use the infrastructure that was already available within the city to support the transportable sleeping modules that I intended to design. However, many of the concerns mentioned for this case study were still prevalent in the solution I was proposing, and the inability to mitigate some of these factors in a safe and logical way contributed to the change in direction with my final thesis project.

[5.2] Second Exploration

When I moved on from the initial design idea, I reframed the intent and stopped trying to create a single vessel that could support all the different life paths and needs in a neat, tidy package. Instead, I turned my focus to designing a single site that was capable of letting all these needs and paths play out, regardless of the form or vessel that took place in. While I originally wanted to allow people to use the unpredictable nature of their situation to their benefit, I came to the conclusion that in this case, it might be more successful to implement some sense of stability or permanence into the condition. The chaos and uncertainty of homelessness allows people to do few things aside from simply surviving. By introducing an element of security and support, people have the opportunity to look beyond what their immediate needs are, to see what could be next for them. My thesis question became:

How can an understanding of different itinerant lifestyles be used to develop alternative living environments for people experiencing homelessness?

To answer my new question, I identified and studied various forms of itinerancy in today's world. The term itinerant is one that does not only apply to people experiencing homelessness. Groups that can also be considered itinerant include people like long haul truckers, travel vloggers, and modern nomadic communities, among others. They all live itinerant lifestyles and are able to thrive without dealing with the kind of stigma people experiencing homelessness do. I looked into how these groups operated in modern society and the different ways they used their environments to meet their needs on a daily basis. This

research led me to believe that a community-based approach to my thesis might be a better approach.

A large part of the societal distaste and negative stigma that surrounds homelessness comes from a view of aesthetics. Many housed people believe that individuals experiencing homelessness are dirty and the camps that they form will become messy, unsightly blights in their otherwise well-kept communities. This is further proven in many cities where local laws do not allow for tents to be pitched within city limits because they do not align with the "aesthetics" of the city. These laws, disguised as being concerned with aesthetics, just serve to act as another piece of anti-homeless legislation, making it more difficult for unhoused individuals to exist undisturbed in society. If homelessness is an issue that is not going away anytime soon, and optics play this much of a role in public perception of homeless camps and people who live in them, governments and developers should be working to design spaces for these people to occupy in an orderly and deliberate manner.

Of course, the idea of creating a community for people experiencing homelessness is not an entirely new concept. It is not uncommon for unsheltered people to create communities on their own, often referred to as "tent cities." These informal communities develop around city infrastructure and other forgotten and abandoned places within the larger city context. The group setting provides the benefit of safety in numbers for their occupants, but they are rarely sanctioned by the local governments, resulting in their eventual dispersal by authorities. Some homeless coalitions or support groups have paired up with the cities they serve to start legalized homeless "neighborhoods" by providing simple tiny homes for people experiencing homelessness. One example is the 3290 Temporary Housing Village at Civic Center Drive in Los Angeles. There are 40 units with room for storage and a bed as well as electricity and air conditioning (County of Los Angeles Homeless Initiative). Tiny home villages work for some people, but for others who may be more comfortable in informal conditions, residing within the confines of four walls can begin to affect their mental health. These communities are not perfect, but they do begin to provide an extra layer of support and security for people who need it. Because of this, it was important to me to provide a community within a larger city context that allowed for more flexibility in how people occupied it.

To accomplish this flexibility, I would offer a variety of spaces on one site. There would be covered parking stalls for people who were living out of their vehicles, open space for people to set up tents, and other areas that offered water, electricity, or cover. One of the things that I thought was important to have as a part of this concept was a designated building that would provide additional support to the site. The building would serve as a safe indoor space for people living on the site to use for daily activities like showering or eating, or for programs such as substance abuse counseling or GED classes. Starting with these thoughts in mind, I was able to use these characteristics and build on them as the project progressed.

[6] Site Selection

[6.1] Akron, Ohio

      To choose a site, I looked to a city close to my hometown where I had personally been able to see the effects of housing insecurity and homelessness—Akron, Ohio. Located in Summit County, Akron was founded in 1825 and became the fastest growing city in America between 1910 and 1920. The population boom was driven by the tire making industry when businesses like Goodyear, Firestone Rubber Company, and BF Goodrich made their homes in Akron, which earned the city the nickname of "Rubber Capital of the World." Other things Akron is known for include Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens, the Bridgestone Invitational, and Derby Downs, the site of the All-American Soap Box Derby.

      Despite the success of industry and infrastructure in the 1900s, in 2021, Akron's population had a total of 23% of its 189, 347 residents living below the poverty line. This meant that some of these people were at risk of losing their homes and property. Because of inconsistent movement patterns and mistrust of government officials, it is difficult to get accurate counts of people experiencing homelessness in an area, however, the data we are able to access estimates that Summit County currently has around 441 unhoused individuals (Huntsman). The majority of these individuals reside in the cities of Akron and Barberton, Ohio. Every year, Akron puts money towards social programs like shelters, day centers, and housing vouchers, but these programs are unable to help everyone that needs them.

      I started to analyze the city and began with research, mapping, and observations of Downtown Akron. It is split into four major zones, including medical campuses, residential neighborhoods, the University of Akron's campus, and a stretch of land that combines commercial and industrial type businesses. Because of the variety of uses in a relatively small area, the typology of Akron's buildings range from brick warehouses to modern concrete and glass buildings, like the art museum.
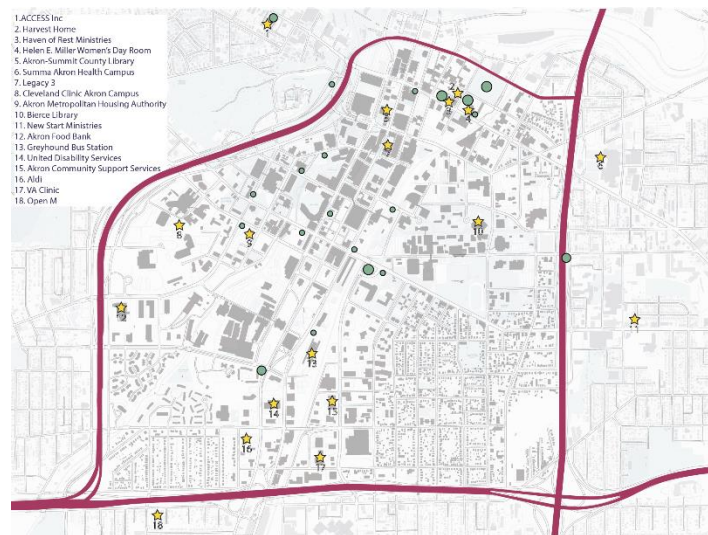
Figure 6.1.1 Map of Akron showing proximity of people and homeless support resources

Another mapping exercise that I did looked at relating the locations of support services to the locations where unsheltered people were gathering during the day. Through observations I made during multiple visits to downtown Akron, I was able to put together the map seen above in figure 6.1.1. The green dots indicate where individuals were gathered, and the larger the dot, the higher the number of people in the area. The stars and the numbers assigned to them correspond to the services offered by the city. I found that for the most part, the majority of unhoused individuals stayed up north, near Akron's homeless shelter, Haven of Rest, during the day to make sure they could claim a spot to sleep when it reopened for the evening. The southern end of the city had plenty of support programs as well, but fewer people were seen in this area during the day.

[6.2] Choosing a Specific Site

The support systems at the southern end of Akron are just as qualified and diverse as the ones at the northern end of Akron, but it seemed like the lack of shelter options to the south contributed to the lack of people in the area. The location of some of these resources meant that people residing at Haven of Rest would have to travel three miles to the south end of town to access the programs, and three miles back to the shelter over the course of the day. Because of this, I decided that it made the most sense for me to provide a living community in the south.

Between surveying Google maps and personally driving around Akron, I was able to find a suitable site for the design of the village and support building for unsheltered people. The lot, owned by the city, was already empty and available for construction. Away from busy commercial businesses, the sidewalks and roads that border the site, Miami Street, East Voris Street, and Sweitzer Ave, are not traveled very frequently. This meant that the residents of the site could have somewhere to return to at the end of the day where they felt a sense of privacy from the rest of the city. Even cars coming over the bridge at East Thornton Street and driving past the south end of the lot on Route 77 had an obstructed view of the site. The semi-private nature of the site was important so that anyone living there felt that the space that they occupied was safe and conducive to their healing or journey, whether that involved finding the necessary support to obtain permanent housing or not. Nearby resources, such as the Akron Veterans Affairs clinic, a domestic violence counseling office, bus stations, and disability support services make the location an even more attractive site. The main factor that I had to take into consideration when designing the project was the location of the train tracks. Although it is used infrequently, the proximity does mean that it when a train does come by, it can be a visual and auditory annoyance.

[7] Design

Figure 7.1 Rendered view of the site and building

The design for this project consisted of two different pieces that work in harmony with each other – the resource center and the surrounding site, or village. The village is intended as a place for people experiencing homelessness to come and inhabit the grounds organically, with whatever kind of shelter they have with them. That could be a tent, a car, or even just a sleeping bag. The covered parking on the east side of the village is for use by people whose primary shelter is their vehicle. To keep the same design language across the project, the carport covering itself mimics the roof shape of the building next to it. Density of the site is up to the residents. If a group of people is more comfortable sleeping in close proximity to each other, there is enough room to set up several shelters in one area. There is also plenty of space for individual members of the community to spread out if they would rather be alone, but still benefit from the security and resources the village offers.

The project incorporates vegetation for multiple reasons. The first is to make the village more inviting and pleasant to live in. The second is to provide another level of privacy to people residing there. Without this boundary, the site may feel too open and vulnerable to individuals who are used to having to tuck themselves away into hidden crevices of the city. Using fencing around the site was another option to combat that discomfort, however, it would be less attractive visually, and could also send an unintentional message that the village was unwelcoming or something for the city of Akron to be ashamed of and hide.
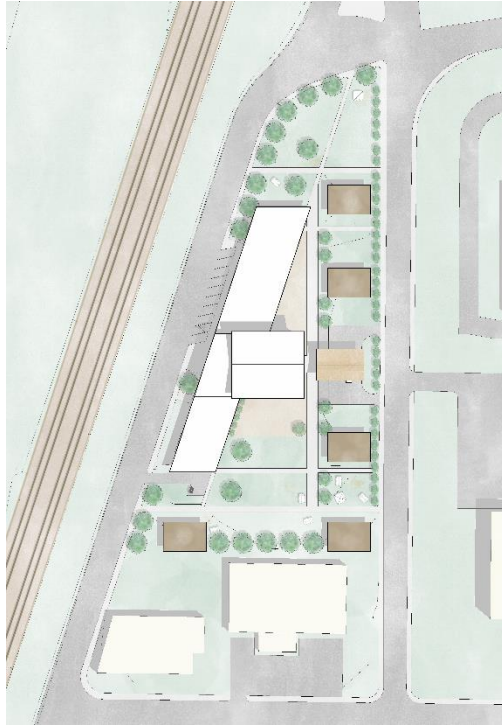
Figure 7.2 Site plan

Throughout the village, there are pavilions that act as anchoring points that provide overhead cover, as well as electrical outlets and water bottle fillers. The structures are sunk into the topography on one side to allow for carts or wagons to easily roll from the path to the pavilion. The other three sides and the floor are raised above ground level for drainage purposes and a dry place to sleep, even in Ohio weather. It is encouraged for the residents to customize these spaces or use materials available to them, like tarps or sheets, to section off areas for their own comfort. The pavilions can hold multiple people and offer an additional layer of choice as to how the village evolves through its habitation.

Figure 7.3 Pavilion design

The building concept and shape were influenced by the desire to create a visual and physical barrier between the train tracks and the village. The shape follows the lines of the site and is intersected by a volume in the middle that invites people in from the surrounding yard. It was important that this part of the building did not completely cut one side of the village off from the other, so that there was a collective sense of community across the whole site, instead of creating two neighboring camps. The west facing elevation is fairly simple but acts as the main point of entry for employees, delivery personnel, and volunteers. Inside, the program consists of administration offices, classrooms for scheduled events like resume workshops or financial literacy courses, and a computer lab as well for remote work and job hunting. The restrooms are accessible from inside of the building as well as outside of it so that they can be used 24 hours a day, even after the center has locked up for the night. In severe weather conditions, the building and its basement level serve as emergency sheltering for occupants of the village. Laundry machines are available, as well as storage for food or clothing donations. The volunteer run kitchen sits next to the flex space, which can be used as a dining area or for hosting events like barber services or healthcare checks and vaccinations.

The second floor balcony has a meeting room as well as small breakout rooms and a sitting area that overlooks the double height community room. This warm, inviting space would be in use daily for more generic activities such as watching tv, eating, or reading. Oftentimes, day centers for people experiencing homelessness are fairly basic, which contributes to a more negative perception of the space and its function. By introducing greenery and opening a corner of the room with glass to allow light to stream in, a much more enjoyable and upbeat environment is created. This bright atmosphere can be expanded upon on nice days, as there is the opportunity to connect the inside of the building to the site and village by opening the doors to the patio and creating a fluid transition between spaces.

Figure 7.4 Interior rendering of the community room

Safety is obviously a factor to consider when designing a project like this. Ideally, everyone who was experiencing homelessness could be comfortable living in this village and coexist with each other, but we know that that is not always the case. Security measures such as cameras, nighttime lighting, and regular check ins and meetings between village residents, administrators, and city officials would all go towards the development of a safe environment for everyone around. The central path through the site also acts as a means of egress for emergency vehicles, should they be called to provide help. While no one would be turned away from accessing the resources provided in the building during the day, individuals who posed a danger to themselves or others might be encouraged to seek other options within the city for sheltering and consistent help. Realistically, human behavior cannot be controlled or changed with architecture alone, however, I do believe it can facilitate some of the necessary qualities that go into existing within a shared space.

The combined effect of the building and landscape is a space in which unsheltered individuals can gather and find community and understanding. A place within a larger context that is designated for a group of people who are often overlooked by society sends a message that there are organizations who want to support people in their journeys, no matter how unconventional they may be. Living conditions that people can take pride in encourage a sense of ownership over a space, and ideally, that means there will be respect and care for the upkeep of the environment they inhabit. A place to call one's own is important for most people, and even more so for those who may feel they've lost an element of autonomy over their own lives and spaces. Providing an area that is not only clean and safe, but also open to personalization and growth allows people to infuse a space with a dynamic quality that it may lack on its own.

[8] Conclusion

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory about personal motivation and growth, visually represented by a pyramid. A person cannot begin to consider higher needs towards the top of the pyramid without first attending to the needs at the lower levels, such as food, water, and shelter (Mcleod). My project begins to provide the resources for people experiencing homelessness to meet the needs at the bottom of the pyramid, which can then be used as a foundation to work towards a different living situation if so desired. Realistically, not everyone will use this space and its programs to its fullest extent, but the framework still exists to give them the most basic respect they deserve as human beings.

Obviously in order to fully and completely address the complexities of homelessness and what it means for individuals and society, many different sectors and perspectives need to come together to make real, long-lasting improvements. Architecture is just one aspect of this nuanced situation, but it provides a place to start—with a design that provides support and allows unhoused individuals to carry out their daily lives with understanding and dignity.

[9] Works Cited

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[10] List of Figures

Itinerancy and Shelter in the 21st Century:
Exploring Dignified Living Solutions for Unhoused Communities

Question: How can an understanding of different itinerant lifestyles be used to develop alternate living environments for people experiencing homelessness?

Goals:

- Meet Everyday Needs
- Provide an Alternative Living Option
- Foster Community
- Allow for Flexibility and Autonomy

Abstract

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the numbers of homeless individuals has been on the rise since 2017, increasing 2% between 2019 and 2020 alone. With statistics like these, the existing solutions in the form of homeless shelters or other affordable housing options cannot accommodate the numbers of people that need support. Shelters and other social service sites can quickly become overcrowded, and there are other factors at play that may deter some people from seeking out shelter services. Currently, solutions for housing the homeless are largely stationary and don't take into consideration the movement patterns of the populations they serve.

Today, we see people successfully living and thriving in forms of itinerancy besides homelessness. These conditions range from nomadic communities across the globe to social media influencers traveling in renovated cargo vans. Bringing to light a variety of situations that call into question what many people associate with the term "itinerancy" will start to challenge and destigmatize the way we think about the condition of homelessness. In my design thesis, I will study the support systems, cultures, and methods of building and movement of multiple migratory communities, to begin to understand the tactics that have allowed some of these mobile lifestyles to endure and provide comfort for the people who live there. Through a variety of methods, I will begin exploring the possibilities of integrating successful aspects of traditional and nontraditional itinerant living into America's homelessness systems to design a community based alternate living environment for people experiencing homelessness in Akron, Ohio.

History

Akron, Ohio was founded in 1825 and earned the nickname Rubber Capital of the World because it was the home of tire making companies such as Goodyear and Firestone. As of 2021, the population was around 189,000 people. Of this 189,000 people, 20% live below the poverty line, and homelessness has become an issue for many. Because of unpredictable movement patterns, it is hard to find exact counts of the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in an area. However, it is estimated that Summit county has nearly 500 people who are unhoused, which is up about 100 people from last year. Most of these people can be found in Akron. Currently, the city puts $2,000,000/year towards support systems and housing for people, including housing vouchers and emergency sheltering. However, these solutions do not always work for everyone in this situation, nor do all of them meet the requirements to receive help from this funding.

Design Process

Initial Explorations

The Pods
Design Intent
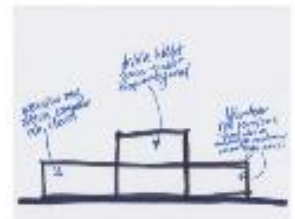

Form Exploration

Sites
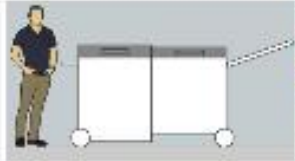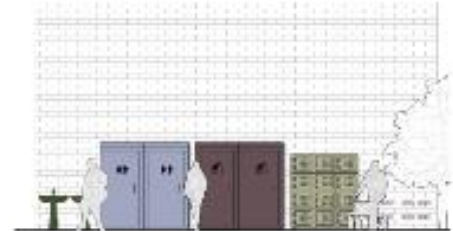
The Village

Site Factors

Form Development/Site Massing
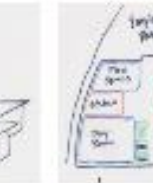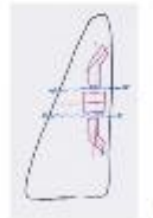
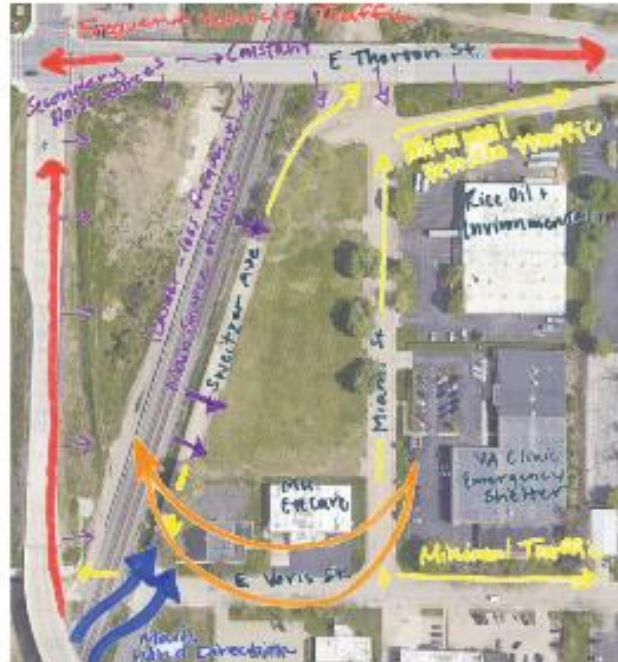# Site Analysis/Documentation

Figure/Ground
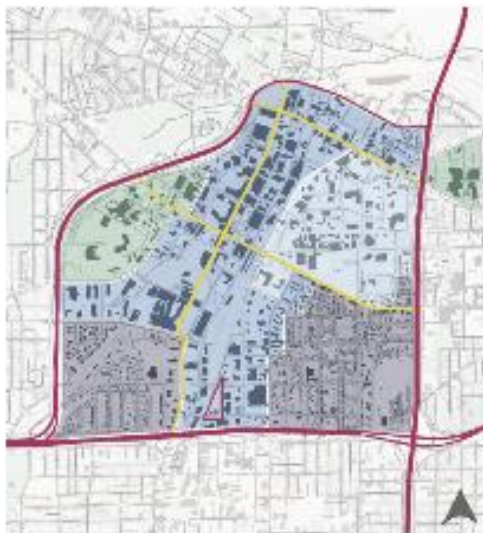
Land Use

People and Resources
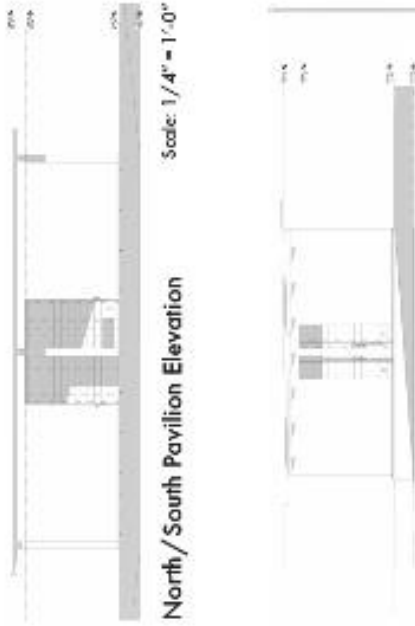
Existing Site
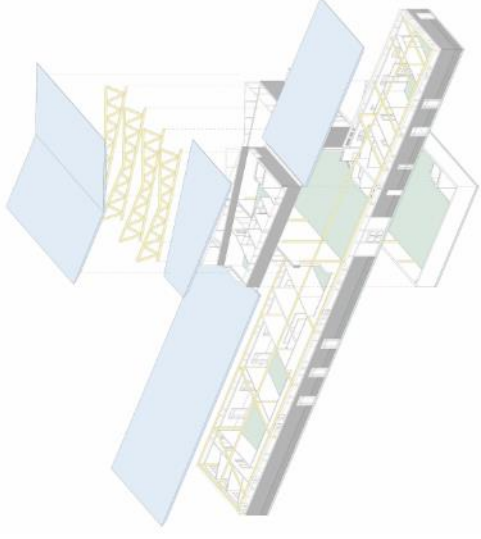

Akron Typology

Design

North/South Pavilion Elevation
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"
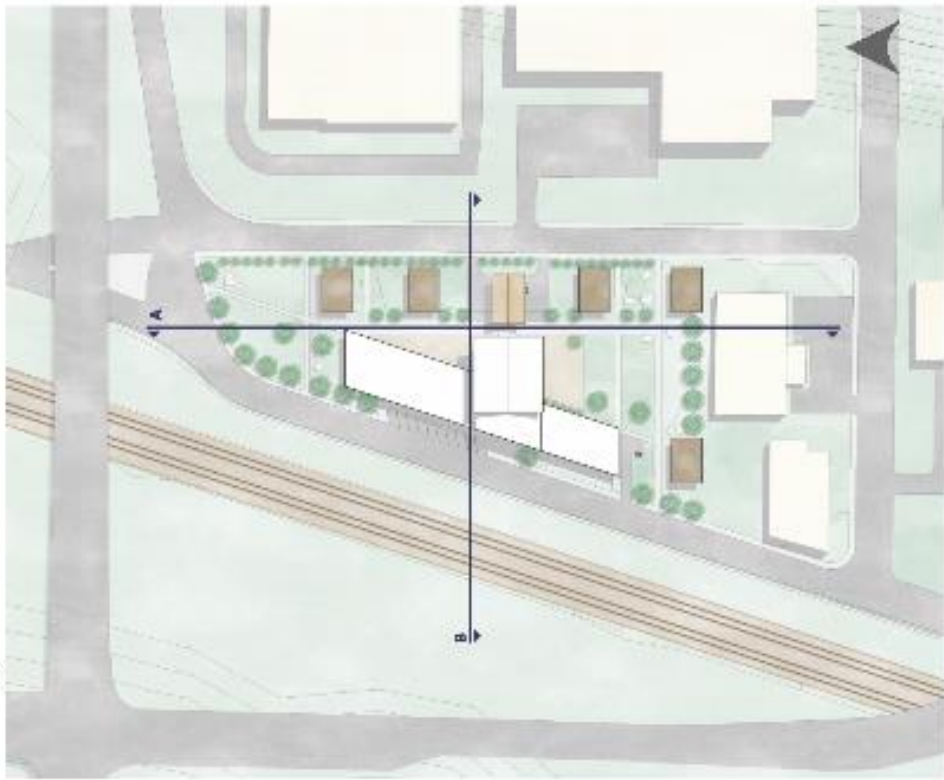
East/West Pavilion Elevation
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

Pavilion Plan
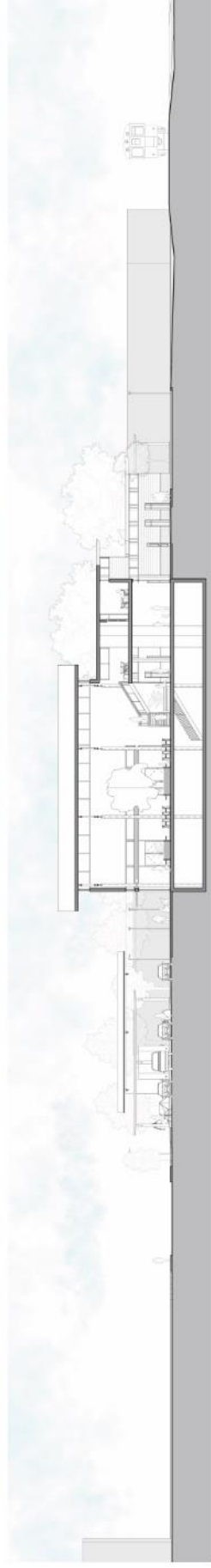Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

Site Plan
Scale: 1" = 40'-0"

Site Section A
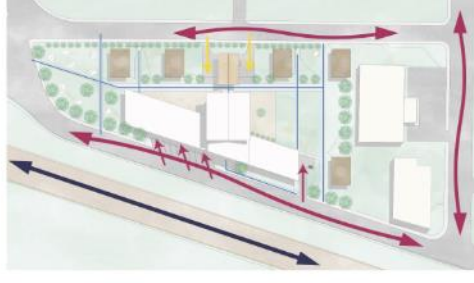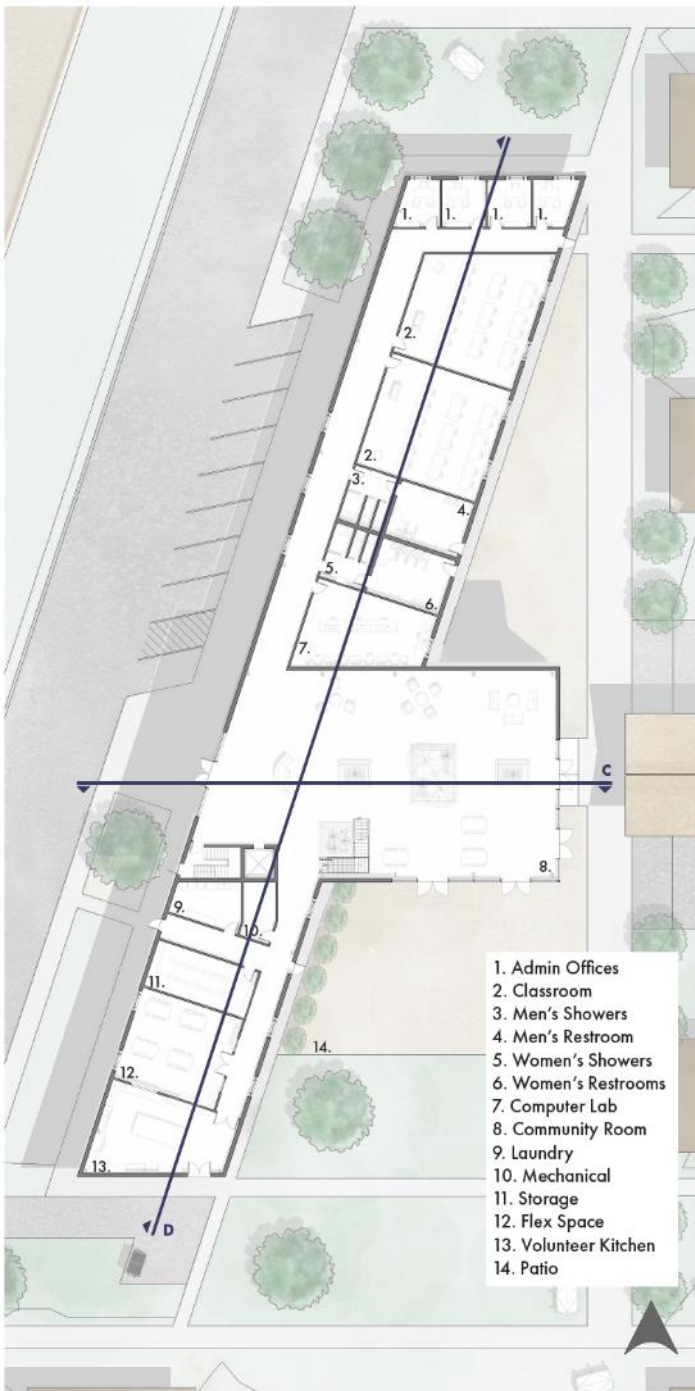Scale: 3/32" = 1'-0"

Exploded Axon

New Site Circulation
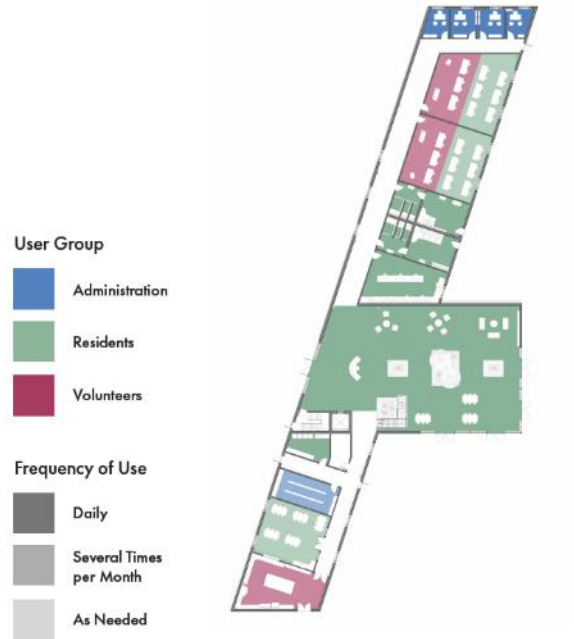
Train
Pedestrian
Vehicle - Community
Vehicle - Occupants

Site Section B

First Floor   Scale: 3/32" = 1'-0"

1. Admin Offices
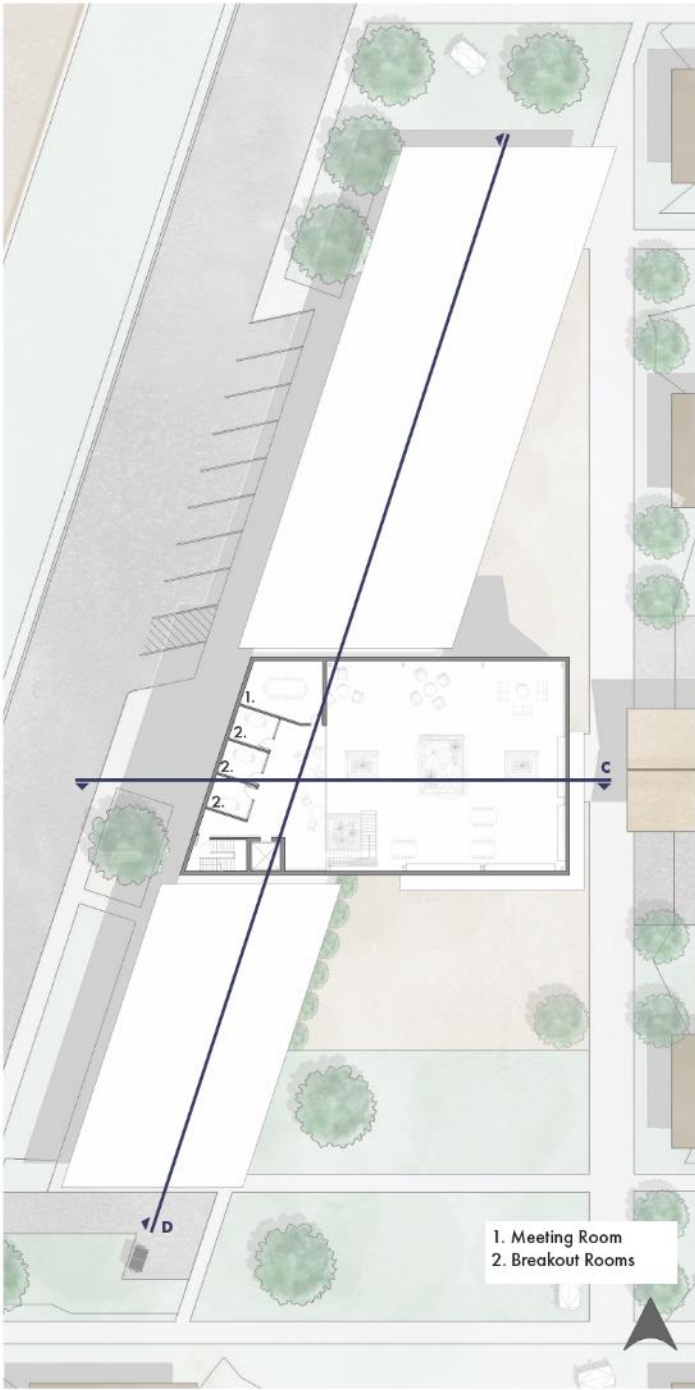2. Classroom
3. Men's Showers
4. Men's Restroom
5. Women's Showers
6. Women's Restrooms
7. Computer Lab
8. Community Room
9. Laundry
10. Mechanical
11. Storage
12. Flex Space
13. Volunteer Kitchen
14. Patio

User Group

- Administration
- Residents
- Volunteers

Frequency of Use

- Daily
- Several Times per Month
- As Needed

User Frequency Diagram

West Elevation   Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Second Floor

1. Meeting Room
2. Breakout Rooms

Scale: 3/32" = 1'-0"

User Group

- Administration
- Residents
- Volunteers

Frequency of Use

- Daily
- Several Times per Month
- As Needed

User Frequency Diagram

East Elevation

Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

North Elevation

Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

South Elevation

Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Section C

Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Section D

Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"