

Pandemic and Gentrification: An Interdisciplinary Pedagogy to Engage the Messiness of Urban Spatial Justice

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In the environment of heightened neighborhood change, sparked by the pandemic and underlying social injustice, interdisciplinary approaches towards urban challenges are in dire need. Built environment professionals and Social Work practitioners have a unique opportunity to address these challenges through collaboration. This article highlights how educators in these fields can leverage existing best practices in collaboration and apply it to curricular design solutions focused on spatial justice.

INTRODUCTION

Social work, with its grounding in competencies such as human rights, social justice and engaging in diversity and difference, can aid built environments professionals in our reach for spatial justice. In this article, we evaluate the process and outcomes of a collaborative, project based, interdisciplinary course co-taught by faculty from the School of Social Work and the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington. As authors and co-designers of this course, with professional and academic backgrounds in social work, architecture, landscape architecture and community-centered practice, it is our hope to continue building off our understanding of the strengths of tackling the world's complex problems through the lens of collaboration. Together, with specific skill sets, we can do better.

Students of the built environments need encouragement and opportunities to expand beyond a narrow framing of the field or else run the risk of insular, siloed practices¹. The seminar builds upon the collaborative efforts of many before us. In this article, we highlight why this approach is an important addition to an existing hectic course load for students in built environments disciplines. Then, we place this course within the broader context of similar contemporary curriculum. Lastly, we highlight what will be important to consider if you find yourself developing a course with similar goals of bringing a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to addressing spatial justice challenges, such as a pandemic, systemic racism and gentrification.

This course sought to explore potential benefits to the field of built environments when we create space, budget, and opportunity for social workers on design and planning project teams. Theories of identity, intergroup dialogue, othering, and cultural humility are all the territory of expertise for faculty of social work. They can provide a foundation for design students in these theories and practice application, while exposure to social work students connects them to the future experts of the field. This is an effort to reflect upon and reinforce traditional areas of expertise, rather than over generalizing either. We advocate for designers to rely on collaboration with others to address areas of weakness or gaps in critical theory, rather than using diluted approaches appropriated from other fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

All professions, including architecture, grow and change in response to the increasing complexity of the world around them. Architecture has a need for specialization to develop a depth of knowledge critical for successful practice, but an overly myopic approach limits an architect's agency and effectiveness at responding to real world, big picture complexities. In the *Architectural Design* volume titled "The Changing Forms and Values of Architectural Practice", the authors and editors raise concern that the architectural profession is trending towards an overly siloed approach². Rolf Hughes, architectural theorist and academic, points towards a path forward where the success of architecture professionals will hinge upon their ability to manage complexity. Hughes reinforces the need for complete solutions that integrate a depth of knowledge across disciplines. He warns against reductionist or fragmented approaches and advocates working collaboratively in "complex, integrated and synthetic ways"³. We can avoid fragmentation caused by specialization through critical collaboration across fields where we retain the complexity and richness of individual expertise.

In her article, "The Co-Constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism" designer, organizer and educator Lauren Williams describes the ways in which racism and colonial systems of power are embedded in design practice and education. She states that these issues must be addressed head on rather than ignored, that we must not pretend our work is apolitical.

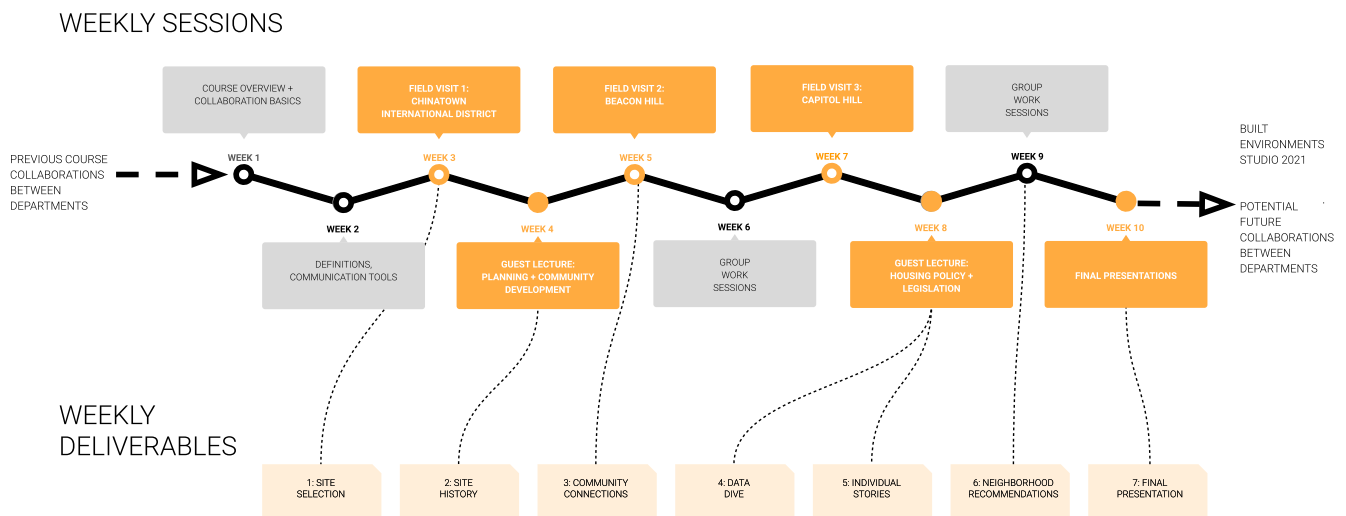


Figure 1. Course scheduling overview showcasing integration of group collaboration, guided field visits, and guest lectures.

Though the origins of neoliberalism, design, and racism are situated at disparate moments in time, these systems support, reproduce, and reify one another in the United States today...Rarely does design proactively seek to unsettle racism from its own operations or the larger set of power hierarchies, which it upholds.

—Lauren Williams “The Co-Constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism”⁴

Effectively addressing the complex issues of our time (eg., racism, pandemic, gentrification, systemic oppression) and their intersections with the built environment calls on interdisciplinary teams to work together to tackle issues⁵. These intersectional issues are all the territory of spatial justice. Urban theorist and geographer Edward Soja defines spatial justice as “an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice. As a starting point, this involves the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them”. In this, Soja posits, places have aspects of justice and injustice built into them and as designers of the public realm, practitioners must contend with this historical and contextual reality⁶. Social work can aid built environments professionals in a shared goal of attaining spatial justice⁷.

Social work theory and expertise also supports developing soft skills that are important for built environment practitioners. These foundational skills are essential for effective project management on teams having interdependent processes⁸. Students are taught to develop cultural humility defined by the following attributes, openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive engagement, self-reflection and critique. The benefits included mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, and lifelong learning⁹. In *Topophilia: A Study of*

Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan underscores the linkage between self reflection on identity and efficacy at solving macro challenges¹⁰. In *Design: the Invention of Desire*, designer and author Jessica Hefland critiques design education in its limited investigations into questions of self and identity. She argues students need support in developing not only studio based investigations into form, iterative process, speculation, and hard skills foundational to the discipline, but also into moral and ethical development and self reflection. Academic institutions are where these patterns and approaches are formalized¹¹ and the foundational courses typically set these patterns early in a students’ conceptualization of their chosen profession¹². Social work educators can help students develop critical skills in self reflection on their social identities and models of power and privilege. An outward facing design pedagogy is critical to the built environments education, but needs to be supplemented with guided processes for self reflection and the development of an understanding of identity in relation to systems of spatial (in)justice.

A fundamental approach used in the course to address spatial (in)justice is through a series of reframings based on research. These included remappings, redefinitions, and updating community narratives for added nuance and complexity. This builds upon the work of Dolores Hayden, Yi-Fu Tuan, Erin Toolis and others. In “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach”, Yi-Fu Tuan notes the extent and depth of power that narrative holds over our communities. He writes, “if we are under obligation to build well, we are also under the obligation to speak well, for the two are part of the same uniquely human, world-making process.” According to Tuan, as a consequence, narrative and placemaking are interwoven¹³. Story based strategy tools have been developed by contemporary activists that apply the constructivist theories of Tuan.

The story based strategy allows students to learn how to update community narratives while also considering the true power of language¹⁴.

These linkages between narrative, power, and placemaking are reinforced in “Theorizing Critical Placemaking as a Tool for Reclaiming Public Space” by Erin E. Toolis. In the article, Toolis notes the relationship between personal identity and place is co-constitutive and that the design and planning processes of the public realm present opportunities to invite and lift up polyphonic and inclusive community narratives. Toolis builds upon the theories of cultural-historical activity and master narrative engagement to underscore the ways polyphonic narratives can create more inclusive places to better reflect the full range of community. Further, Toolis argues that public design and planning can be processes of community empowerment through conscientious engagement in social justice action¹⁵. Recalibration of community narrative is also a graphic and mapping exercise as noted by urban historian and architect Dolores Hayden in *Power of Place*. Hayden posits remappings are a tool for updating and democratizing social histories to more accurately reflect the interplay of social and spatial forces¹⁶.

Scholarship suggests that attempts to carry over social work and justice theory and practice into the realm of built environments education might not provide the robustness or expertise needed for effective results. The Decolonizing Design Group has worked extensively to identify why there has been such minimal fundamental change in the fields of design, despite a long history of posturing around broad social and political movements. The authors argue the design community - both practitioners and academics - have a history of co-opting terminology and popular movements without making changes to their practices or teaching. They have called for deep pedagogical shifts in order to decolonize design practice. Further, they identify a lack of change in this area as a systemic failure of academic institutions, not of individual practitioners. Historically there have been minor ‘token’ changes to curriculum and pedagogy rather than “substantive redesigning of the dominant cultures of design practice”¹⁷. Efforts to deconstruct systems of oppression within design academia must avoid superficial actions that co-opt vocabulary or tokenize theories and practices of those engaged in social work professions¹⁸. Thin applications of social work theories, devoid of the associated self reflection and depth of knowledge, “fails to reference wider theories of the social and misses opportunities to illuminate the context into which the designer is intervening”¹⁹.

Interdisciplinary collaboration between the social work and built environment fields is neither novel nor new. At the University of Washington, this course builds upon the work of social work faculty Dr. Susan Kemp and architecture faculty Dr. Sharon Sutton, who identified the advantages of interdisciplinary design charrettes. They noted that these community

engagement methods could close the gap divorcing academia from the world outside and “deepen the group’s collective knowledge and capacity to take action”²⁰. Coursework building upon this model is increasingly important with the complexity of challenges design professionals are tasked to solve. Recent scholarship and efforts funded by the Mellon Foundation also demonstrate a useful framing of the benefits for designing courses integrating readings and project based assignments drawn from the fields of design and social justice²¹.

COURSE ORGANIZATION, DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

The Gentrification and Pandemic: Community Inclusion and Equity In The Changing Public Realm seminar brought together university students from social work and the built environments in a collaborative investigation of neighborhood change. The core goals were twofold: (1) examine the impact of history, policy and practices driving neighborhood changes in the city of Seattle through the lens’ of gentrification and pandemic, and (2) bring interdisciplinary groups of students together to seek collaborative approaches for community driven place-keeping and placemaking rooted in spatial justice.

ROLES AND IDENTITIES OF FACULTY

The identities and perspectives of the collaborating faculty are important aspects of effective course design. Interdisciplinary collaboration among instructors models behavior for students in effective (or ineffective) patterns²². In addition to interdisciplinary faculty with unique skill sets, the teaching team was cross-racial, Latinx and White. This demonstrated to students conversations and engagement around identity and how those identities impact our experiences and practice. In her article, “Everyone Has to Learn Everything or Emotional Labor Rewind”, author Nana Adusei-Poku underscores in our current social change context, too often the deep emotional work of understanding and dismantling privilege and power is left to faculty and students of color. If we continue this trend in our educational system, it carries forward into the working realm where professionals are given little tools to address white supremacist culture, perpetuating a cycle of systemic racism, sexism, xenophobia and queer-phobia, isolating and dividing our world²³.

DESIGNING FOR TEAMS

Students were assigned to interdisciplinary groups by the course instructors. Groups were then allowed to select a community site for their project work over the quarter. Weekly assignments were designed specifically to engage in building skill sets critical to spatial justice. External community experts were invited in to share present day issues and solutions specific to neighborhoods. This allowed for new networks to be built across disciplines. Community walks and consultations led by local organizations also highlighted ways to forefront community leadership before design solutions were considered.

Sometimes understanding of place are based solely on quantitative measures and metrics. As an alternative, the course had students begin by investigating the site through qualitative means. This centered history and storytelling in the context of place. Starting with a framing of the qualitative and neighborhood community history allows us to recognize what metrics are missing before we begin to map or chart. Individual stories pull students away from the zoomed out view of data and mapping back to the human - which is really where answers to problems lie. Student recommendations were framed as 'preliminary paths of investigation', underscoring the heart of humility to acknowledge their research and engagement was not at a depth or breadth to support full recommendations, but merely paths of inquiry.

Critical to the design of this course was also a clear understanding of the benefits to collaboration in teaching students not to get trapped in the singularity of theoretical perspectives from our disciplines. In her study on collaboration, social worker and academic Laura Bronstein wrote an extensive review of literature on interdisciplinary teamwork. She upholds Charles Bruner's definition of interdisciplinary collaboration as "an effective interpersonal process that facilitates the achievement of goals that cannot be reached when individual professionals act on their own"²⁴. Acting in isolation as a designer, we will continue to lack the growth necessary for shifting our design praxis to effectively address issues of spatial injustice. Designing courses to bring together the specific strengths of both social work and the built environments will support cross-pollination of ideas, strategies and work product²⁵.

Bronstein also notes five core components for those engaged in this type of interdisciplinary work; (1) interdependence, (2) newly created professional activities, (3) flexibility, (4) collective ownership of goals, and (5) reflection on process, which were built into the curriculum for this course. She also highlights that strong collaboration shows up when "reliance on others for certain tasks and resources allows collaborators to spend their time doing what each knows and does best." Using this as framing, we designed the course to address each core component.

Interdependence: A belief individual members have more to gain collectively through listening and working alongside one another versus independently. Teams developed a project management plan, documenting their work each week, with each student in the group rotating "lead" in editing shared deliverables. A user friendly and accessible multimedia platform was used to avoid isolating single students in the task of documentation.

Newly created professional activities: Student teams were tasked with documenting multifaceted and multimedia site histories based on the story based strategy framework that builds upon the constructivist theories of the power of words in placemaking²⁶. Further, multimedia approaches integrating

photos, timelines, thick sections²⁷, thick maps, and mixing the use of graphic communication with narrative forms were used to reframe and remap community narratives²⁸. A core strategy for students to learn the complexities present in neighborhood change was in the role of definitions, and our power as academics to engage deeply in meaning and terminology. This effort to recapture nuance in the way we speak and write was reflected in the student group definitions of gentrification and pandemic, which shifted over the term. Additionally, the student groups added definitions for terminology they identified as critical for understanding the forces of neighborhood change in their sites of study.

Flexibility: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown of most neighborhood businesses and non-profit organizations, students relied on technology to access neighborhood sites and community groups.

Collective Ownership: The core project of the course asked teams to begin by selecting a neighborhood site at a scale they could engage with directly. A prerequisite for site selection required at least one team member having an existing and deep connection with the community and place. Additionally, interdisciplinary teams were divided evenly between social work and built environment students to create a sense of collective ownership over decisions for the project without isolating students by discipline.

Reflection of Process: All group members were tasked with identifying their relationship (or lack of relationship) to their study site. Weekly reflections were written to encourage personal reflection throughout the project.

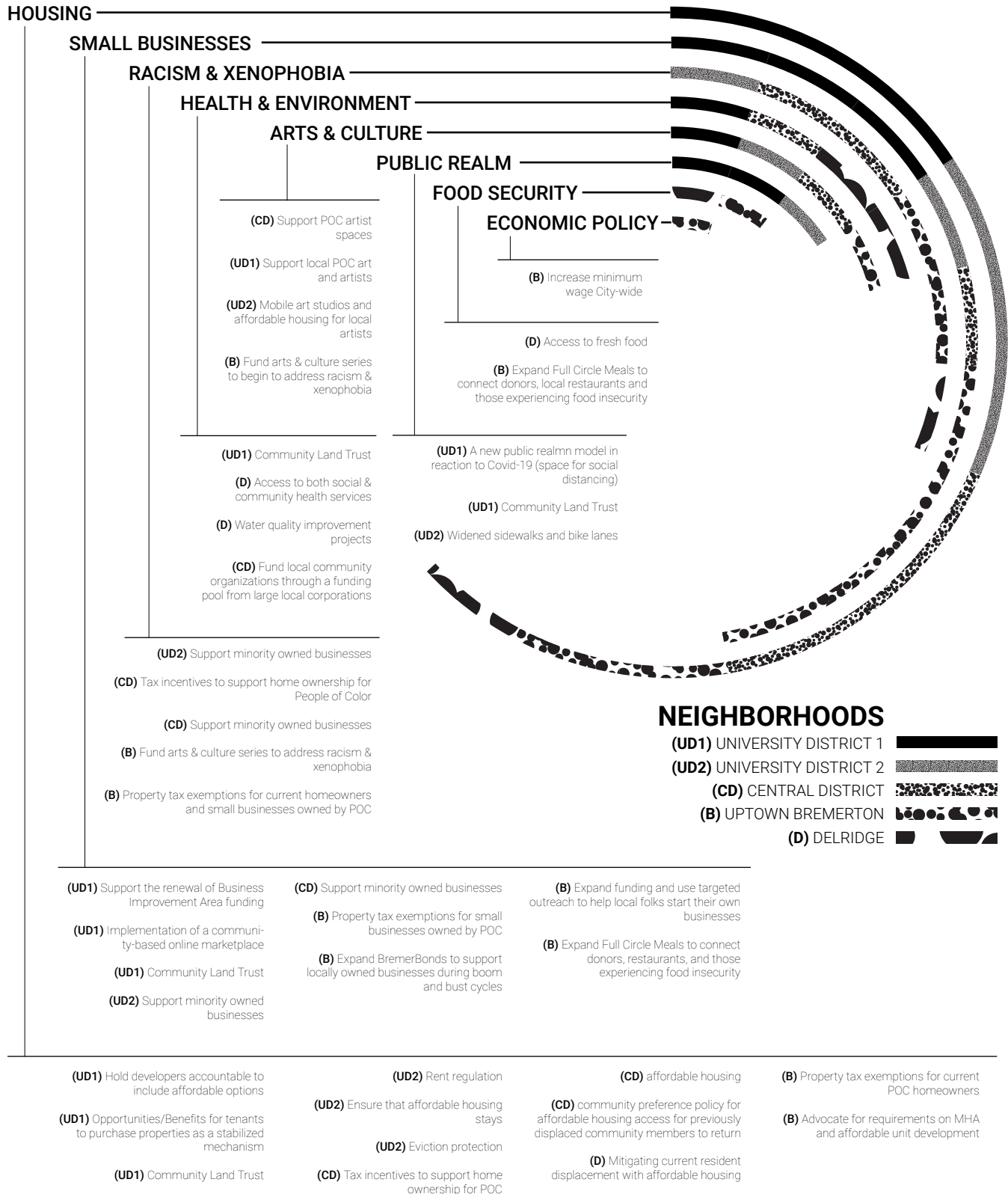
FINDINGS OF STUDENT PROJECTS ON PANDEMIC AND GENTRIFICATION

The problems caused by gentrification and pandemic in our communities intersect as drivers of neighborhood change. The student groups conducted investigations at five sites throughout Seattle and King County in an iterative process that encouraged the generation of an evolving understanding of gentrification and pandemic.

One of the most enlightening outcomes was that every group identified gentrification and pandemic as a complex set of forces, having both positive responses and negative impacts. To be clear, pandemics are the cause of suffering and life lost, and even one is too many. The qualifier 'positive' or 'pros' relates to the community response to pandemic. The majority of students joined the course with definitions of gentrification which did not include any beneficial attributes. This shifted over the course as they continued to redefine and examine the term.

All teams found that the negative outcomes of both gentrification and pandemic more heavily impacted Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and people with

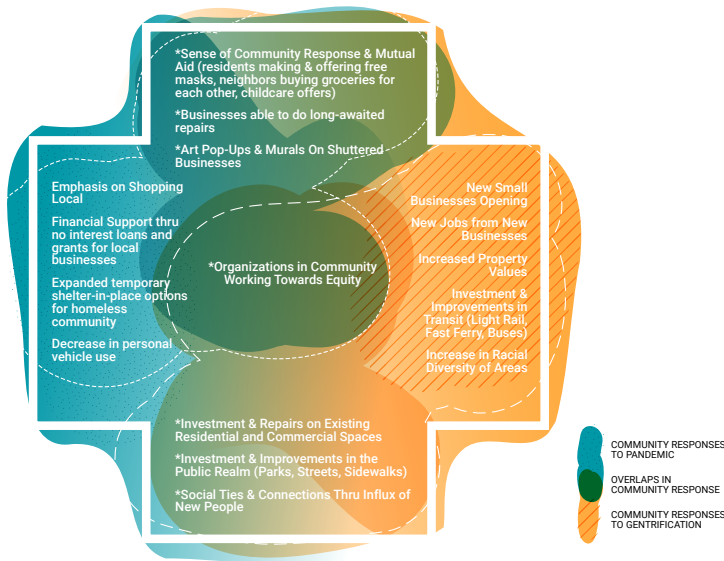
RECOMMENDATION CATEGORIES



SOURCE: Projects for UW URBDP & SWK Course

Figure 2. Student group preliminary recommendations for further investigation organized by topic to highlight areas of overlap and distinction.

POSITIVE COMMUNITY RESPONSES



NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY

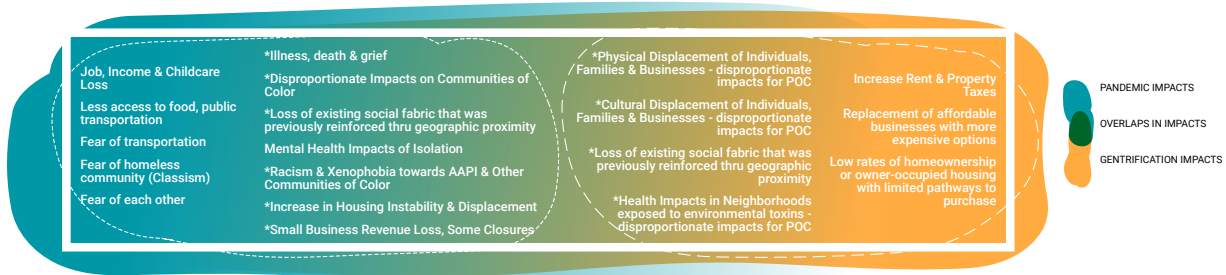


Figure 3. Student group exploratin of pandemic and gentrification impacts. “Pros” in relation to pandemic identifies postitive community responses to an entirely negative set of events. The majority of students joined the course with definitions of gentrification which did not include beneficial attributes of gentrification. This shifted over the course as they continued to redefine and examine the term.

RE-DEFINING DEFINITIONS

TERMS ASSIGNED FOR RE-DEFINITION	Gentrification	Pandemic
	<p>STUDENT SELECTED TERMS DEFINED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redlining Displacement Green Space Food Justice Inclusionary Zoning Legacy Business Third Place Reflexivity Single-Family Zoning Densification Payment Protection Program Neighborhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Urban Infill Tract Homelessness Business Improvement Area Community Ownership Street Art Residential Segregation Racism Xenophobia Connection Flipping Repurpose

Figure 4. Student groups were tasked with redefining the terms gentrification and pandemic over the course of the quarter. Additionally, groups selected terms that they added definitions to their work, these terms are listed here as indicating the breadth of investigations.

low incomes than their whiter and more affluent neighbors. A core finding of all course projects was both processes exacerbated issues of racism and xenophobia already existing in these communities.

One of the team project outcomes was to develop preliminary recommendations for their sites. Student preliminary recommendations had multiple areas of overlap in engagement, policy, planning, and design approaches to address the negative impacts of gentrification and pandemic (fig 2). In addition, there were distinct recommendations that uniquely addressed challenges or concerns of specific neighborhoods. Finding both commonalities and differences amongst all project sites demonstrates the importance of the inquisitive practices used in the course. As practitioners we should identify the universality while also looking for nuance and uniqueness of applicability in solutions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Despite the course title, and despite the title of this article, the centering of pandemic and gentrification is in fact not central, but peripheral. It sets the stage for students to engage around complex and urgent issues whose impacts (and solutions) cross disciplinary boundaries. Complex interdisciplinary problems necessitate accelerated collaboration across disciplines in order to translate solutions to society as a whole²⁹. Many contemporary issues would serve this course framework - be it urban flooding, homelessness, wildfires, so long as it allows foothold into the realms of both disciplines of social work and the built environments. Questions of spatial justice, like gentrification and pandemic, are entry points for students to study and apply much more foundational skill sets to serve them in any challenging design task.

As practitioners or academics, we cannot stay current on all aspects of design, community engagement, and social activism best practices, which often come at the expense of communities of color. We follow the example of so many educators before us in advocating for bringing together students of social work and built environments fields to increase collaborative, sustainable commitments to lifelong learning and anti-racist action. Instead of trying to 'learn everything' our field would benefit from opening our interdisciplinary teams and project budgets to include experts in social justice work. Building interdisciplinary collaboration allows for multiple layers of tailored expertise to fulfill complex community needs in the rapidly changing urban environment. Pairing social work and design can be a catalyst for building strong community relationships before design solutions are put into place. Social work can help designers throttle and navigate away from cultural appropriation and into focused community-centered, community-driven project solutions. Learning from one another, we are able to push past the white supremacist notion of individualism and "doing it all yourself"³⁰, to embrace the strength of bringing on multiple levels of expertise in different areas to fulfill community needs.

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