

Visualizing Health Equity: Toward Spatial Justice in the Jade District

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Visualizing Health Equity contributes visions for an equitable future, where everyone in the Portland, Oregon Jade District has the opportunity to lead a healthier life. With Jade District community environmental justice frameworks as a starting point, the studio explored connections between the built environment and racial and socio-economic health inequities, examining the full role that architecture and urban design can play in reducing those inequities. The studio affirms that architecture is never neutral, but rather always communicates cultural values. This paper will analyze simultaneous attempts to produce more equitable architectures and a more just studio pedagogy.

The studio combined undergraduate and graduate architecture students and one interior architecture student. We began with three one-week individual exercises investigating environmental and spatial justice concepts. Students then worked in groups of one to three on designs for our site, which sits along

a busy corridor and is currently occupied by an auto body shop. Studio prompts emphasized relational visualization skills and empathic design approaches outside of normative architectural practice. Presenting final projects through short videos helped students to focus on the narrative aspects of their proposals and encouraged a synthetic presentation of research and design. The experimental studio produced thoughtful results while also exposing limits of imagination and empathy.

Students synthesized lessons from local environmental justice group the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), as well as the University of Oregon Institute for Health in the Built Environment, and spatial justice theorists such as Interboro Partners. They were asked to design for resident priorities and the community group's intersectional approach to climate, health, and housing. They developed design proposals centered on affordable housing and community spaces, on a site in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Oregon. One



Figure 1. The Greenhouse is a multi-use, affordable housing development that integrates community and health through programmatic, material, and aesthetic interventions specific to Jade District cultures and addressing local health inequities. Alexandria Clark, Nick Dworshak, and Delaney Hetrick.



Figure 2. Process collage showing productive agriculture and intergenerational housing. Alexandria Clark, Nick Dworshak, and Delaney Hetrick.



Figure 3. The design integrates the adjacent side street and transforms it into a street market offering healthy food and recreation, while increasing site surface permeability. Alexandria Clark, Nick Dworshak, and Delaney Hetrick.



Figure 4. Community Through Cooking puts culturally specific communal kitchens at the center of its affordable housing scheme, building on the Jade's vibrant Asian restaurant scene and contributing to healthy eating and social cohesion. Lorine Moellentine and McKenzie Vanko.

project, “Community Through Cooking,” put culturally specific communal kitchens at the center of its affordable housing scheme -- building on the Jade’s vibrant Asian restaurant scene and contributing to healthy eating and social cohesion -- while submerging a main thoroughfare to mitigate the health inequities of the high-crash corridor.

This course originally centered on a partnership with APANO, in-person site visits, and community engagement sessions. As Covid hit, our would-be community partner cancelled our formal collaboration in order to focus on supporting its constituents during the pandemic, at the same time imploring us not to contact neighborhood residents too traumatized by current events to engage with architecture students and possible futures. Overnight, we reconceived the studio as an online offering reliant almost exclusively on secondary sources, together exploring ways to develop place-based, culturally aware interventions based on the tools available. The community group remained our inspiration, but was no longer our client.

This studio asserts that equitable design must center the experiences of those most impacted by dual climate and health crises, a conviction increasingly shared by architectural scholars. As Meredith TenHoor and Emely Balaguera argue, “We believe that designers would be well-served by centering and ethically engaging the deep expertise about climate change already held by grassroots organizations that make up the

Environmental Justice movement.” To support this approach, students met virtually with APANO’s community advocate, studied a report produced by the group in collaboration with local residents and the EPA, and conducted independent and collective research around local environmental justice issues.

As the EPA report shows, “Jade District residents experience stark economic and health disparities compared to the rest of Portland,” following decades of disinvestment. Students developed empathic narratives around Jade District assets and issues and then designed toward specific community health goals, including decreased asthma rates and reduced pedestrian injuries and deaths. We supplemented local knowledge with health equity research from the fields of architecture, public health, and urban planning.

Students were given wide latitude on program and drawing outputs, and were asked to focus on three questions. How might your project...

1. Best promote greater healthy equity for Jade District residents?
2. Best respond to the Asian American environmental justice group’s intersectional approach to climate, health, and housing, and to community priorities?
3. Address a range of scales, from the individual to the global?



Figure 5. Communal kitchens were designed to foster social cohesion (a health equity metric), multi-generational interaction, cultural understanding, and joy . Lorine Moellentine and McKenzie Vanko.



Figure 6. Submerging a main thoroughfare mitigates the health inequities caused by the high-crash corridor. Lorine Moellentine and McKenzie Vanko.



Figure 7. The scheme builds on the district’s reputation for excellent food, increases healthy food access, and contributes to economic development. Lorine Moellentine and McKenzie Vanko.



Figure 8. Students used demographic research to develop prototypical client households, presenting relevant health concerns to address through design. Vayle Khalaf, Alexandra Dobkin, Delaney Hetrick.

A retroactive analysis reveals pedagogical lessons from what became an accidental experiment in internal community engagement. Turning engagement practices inward, we invited students to develop their own frameworks for collaboration and conflict resolution and facilitated exchanges between students with a range of lived experience with housing insecurity and immigration. One student shared a collage conveying how a hometown neighborhood designed for first-generation immigrants felt hostile to him as a second-generation Asian American. Another designed a public space intervention informed by her experiences with homelessness. We facilitated conversations activated by these personal, vulnerable contributions around spatial justice. During the term, students faced abrupt moves, job loss, and, days before the final, as protests broke out, tear gas wafting into some of their apartments. Focusing on student wellbeing as a measure of studio success, rather than traditional metrics of production, resulted in happier students and arguably higher quality work, offering lessons to take forward into “normal” studios to come.

ENDNOTES

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- Ibid.
- Brian Phillips and Deb Katz. “Designing for Impact: Tools for Reducing Disparities in Health,” *Architectural Design* 88, no. 4 (2018): 56–61. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2321>.
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Figure 9. Empathic narrative: the personal impacts of low pedestrian safety. Lorine Moellentine.

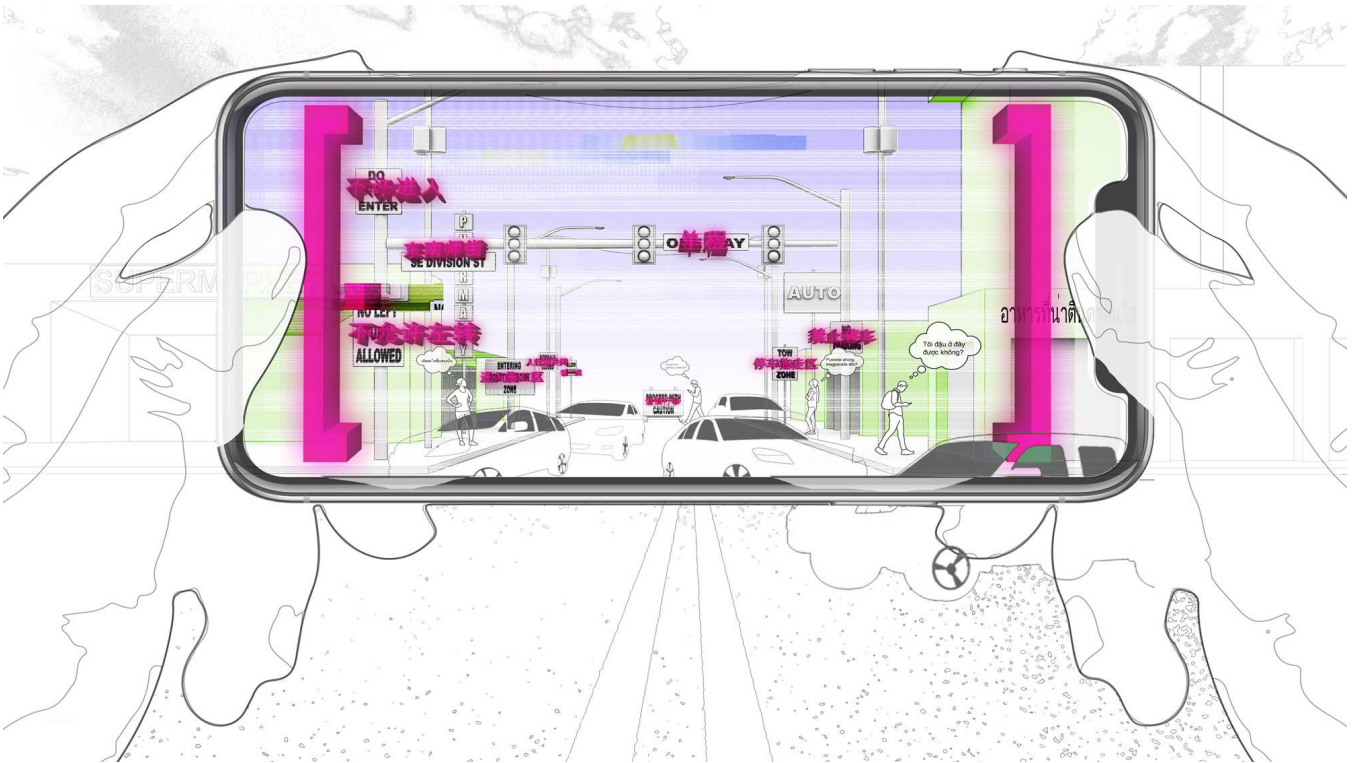


Figure 10. Empathic narrative: navigating the Jade District as an ESL speaker. Danielle Valdez.