Architecture as Apparatus and Social Process

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Keywords: culture, uncertainty, speculation

What is the place of architecture within the collective social imaginary? This question has been raised in different ways over time from within and outside the profession, but it gains special urgency as we deal with urbanization on a planetary scale and a dramatic expansion of the built environment. The continued relevance of designing to expand built environments at different scales is being questioned both outside and within the profession, with critiques situating the impact of building in a vastly expanded social and political field.

Teaching architecture today also includes modeling connections between policy, social identity, cultural relevance, and political conflict, responding to an increasingly uncertain environment in new and creative ways. These responses are symptoms of the expansion of architecture as a field of practice and an intellectual discipline as well as its changing nature as an apparatus of particular social and political significance. Here we follow the line of thinking opened by political philosopher Michel Foucault, who defined apparatus as follows: "by the term apparatus I mean a kind of a formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency." (Agamben 2009)

The urgency confronting us, across geographical and cultural contexts, might be grounded in the extractive nature of contemporary architecture practice, its embrace of spatial products that serve as funnels for surplus capital and in the variety of toxic spatial conditions it engenders. In turn, spatial conditions organize everyday life and enable the articulation of culture as a diacritic or marker of differences in values, ethics and beliefs. In our teaching practice, we responded to these provocations with a year-long hybrid studio-seminar co-thought by an architect and an anthropologist with numerous collaborators, drawn from the worlds of grassroots organization and cultural practice.

Our focus was on tapping into the ways in which groups and individuals were co-creating and building new cultures of solidarity in Central Queens (NYC) during a time of emergency. Introducing students to transdisciplinary methods of participant observation, engaged listening and archival research, we encouraged them to explore what it means to think anthropologically about culture and act architecturally in creating and enabling the conditions around which new and creative cultural practices might emerge amongst groups.

Our students explored the cultures that emerging urban collectives were creating around food pantries and community gardens, around precarious labor, and playground politics, around street vending and immigrant empowerment, to name just a few space-based ideas that fed into their projects. The students authored their own briefs in solidarity with actors and networks on the ground whose needs they understood through an engaged research practice. Their work was not confined to the programming of spaces in response to needs but expanded to identify the cracks in the regulatory frameworks upon which to speculate on future architectural paradigms.

METHOD

Since the publication of the collection Writing Culture in the 1980s, reflection on method has been a fundamental concern within the discipline of anthropology. (Clifford and Marcus eds., 1986). More recently, these reflections have expanded into cultivating active experiments in collaboration with other disciplines and professions giving rise to new fields such as Science and Technology Studies and Historical Anthropology, within which the limits of anthropology's traditional objects of study – that is, human beings and the sources of cultural difference - have been challenged. The collaboration between social sciences and architecture is also not new per se. Neither is the collaboration of architectural schools working in solidarity with communities. Since the 1960's architects in search of new paradigms for an engaged practice have ventured beyond the academy and traditional expectations of professional services to bring segments of the population that had been left out of design and planning into the decision-making processes. However, we believe that our approach in this course did offer something new as we will elaborate throughout this essay. Indeed the value of a collaboration is to extend value itself or to foster new values and we use this space to explore the ways in which we ourselves learned from this collaboration. Our points of focus for this brief reflection will be:

PROJECT

Theater of the People | Teatro del Pueblo
A look into Queens Street Vending Culture

How might we imagine a Theater for the People?
Everyday, street vendors perform a range of sensory, technical and expressive interactions in the act of place-making. Within this practice of everyday life, they produce an inherently social space that's embodied, processual, rhetorical, and political.

What happens when a theater, a space of leisure that gives pleasure from fiction, become a backdrop for the script of the street vendor?
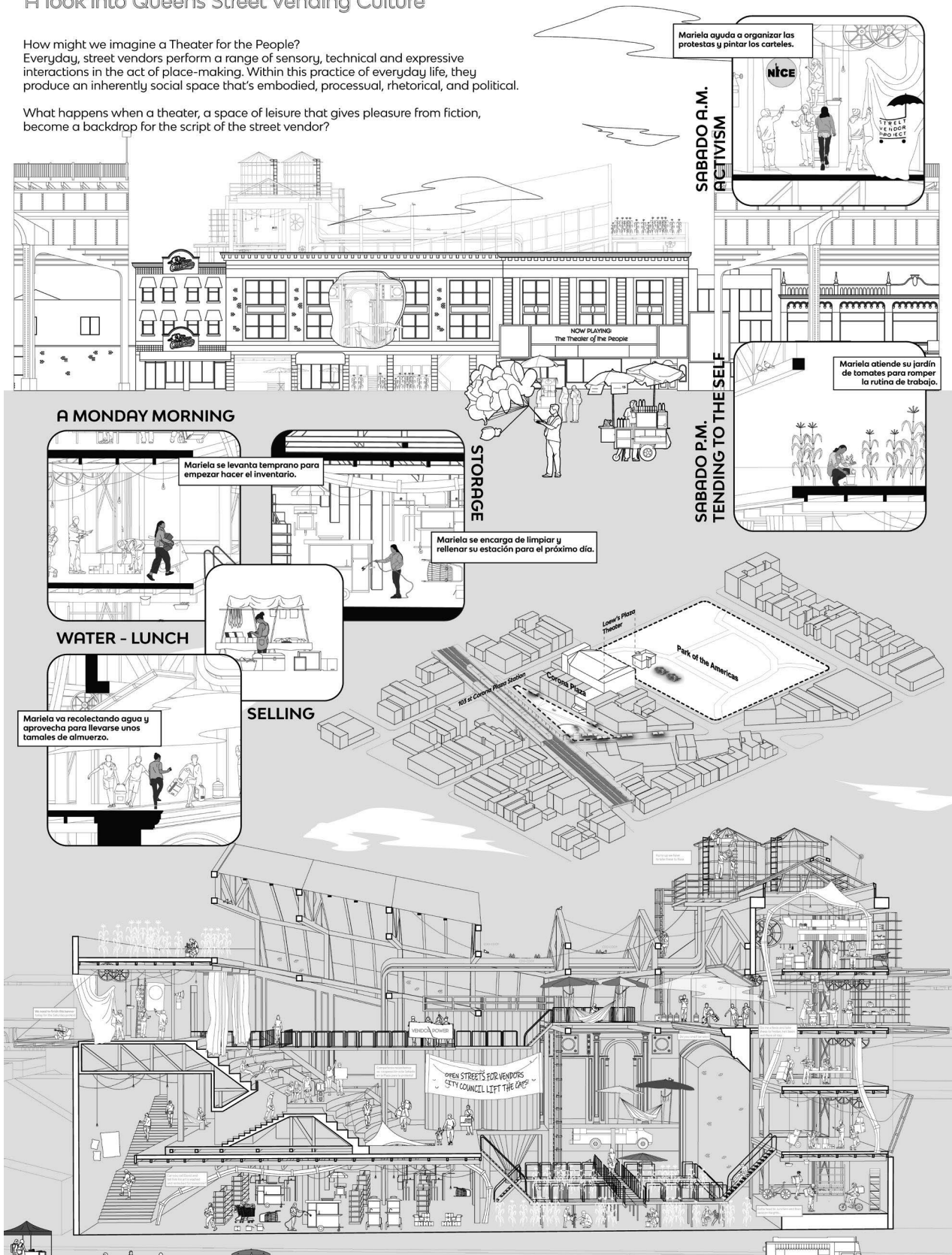

Figure 1. Theater of the People. Pedro Cruz Cruz

1. Perceptions of anthropological method and with it understandings of culture that are static and rooted but nevertheless instrumentally useful for design speculations.

2. The temporal disjuncture between anthropological and architectural practice – while one studies existing conditions, the other intervenes in those conditions, thus creating a sequential juxtaposition between the act of research and the act of design.

3. Redesigning the epistemic frame of architecture as an apparatus, responding to the specific urgencies of the critical demand for care and nourishment of emergent and precarious collective cultures.

THE TOOLKIT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

In his book, Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture, Tim Ingold (2013) contrasts two approaches to learning which he labels, in his own words, "rather crudely" as the "differences between anthropology and ethnography." As Ingold puts it: "[a]nthropology is studying with and learning from; it is carried forward in a process of life, and effects transformations within that process. Ethnography is a study of and learning about, its enduring products are recollective accounts which serve a documentary purpose." Our studio-seminar began with a broad exploration of the difference between the documentary and transformative through a reading of Rebecca Solnit's book A Field Guide to Getting Lost. (2010) The seminar's role was not only to introduce students to people-centered field research but to simultaneously train them to treat research as an open-ended design process rather than a documentary one.

We began our work remotely in the Fall of 2020 amidst a great deal of uncertainty around the pandemic's effects and in the wake of the tumultuous political events of the previous summer. Unable to connect with our students in the architectural studio, we turned the streets of Queens into our classroom. We walked the length of Roosevelt Avenue through the neighborhoods of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona underneath the #7 train and began an awkward process of socializing with one another and then with strangers. Understanding the rhythms of an immigrant enclave, appreciating the labor and the material residues of lives in transition allowed students to engage more directly with the place. We also congregated in the Flushing Meadows Park amid the monumental ruins of past World's Fairs and visited the Queens Museum, where the voluminous, art receiving docks were transformed into a much-needed food pantry. A few students volunteered at the food pantry and visited local organizations making banners and participating in different types of collective undertakings.

While ethnographic research and community outreach has become a somewhat accepted part of the toolkit that architects and urban planners use- our cautious approach to community through a period of remote learning and an empathetic yearning for sociability brought a range of responses that questioned the pedagogy of design and the rituals of public life. To change the epistemic frame within which architecture is practiced, we pushed the students towards making different kinds of investments in research, from identifying their objects of observation to coming up with objects of inquiry that would then inform their architectural design process as they learned to author their own briefs. In so doing we encouraged students to apply the imagination of design to the process of research and thus to treat research as a practice that goes beyond data gathering and fact checking required before proceeding with the work of architecture itself. The question then becomes, how can we place research and architecture (or design) on the same plane of disciplined pedagogical activity? More importantly, what do we gain by doing so?

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE AND INTERVENTION:

The above question further requires that we revise our understandings of the subjects and objects of both research and design, that we decolonize our approaches to both what constitutes knowledge and intervention. Drawing inspiration from our respective work with activists and marginalized communities in the cities of New York and Mumbai, we used the opportunity of the hybrid research unit format to explore how our students could learn from the practices they observed on the streets of Queens and through their conversations with immigrant communities with whom they wished to work.

In terms of methodology, our hope was that direct and directed interactions not only with the site as an abstract, geometric entity but also with the residents and occupants whose activities transformed these abstract sites into lived place would enable students to expand their view of how learning takes place and who might count as a teacher. This pedagogical strategy draws mainly from an approach developed by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who argues that research, "normally seen as a high-end, technical activity, available by training and class background to specialists," should also be seen as "capacity with democratic potential." The argument for seeing research as special kind of human "right," "requires us to recognize that research is a specialized name for a generalized capacity..." Appadurai writes. "All human beings are, in this sense, researchers, since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons," he continues. (Appadurai 2006)

Over the course of a year, many of our students found the resources to connect with local community organizations and individuals. Many (but not all) made frequent site visits, even though their 'sites' of intervention remained open ended for most of the first semester. We encouraged and noted a great deal of knowledge and resource sharing amongst the students who could and could not do fieldwork, limited by language barriers, access, pandemic and personal life conditions. Most importantly, spending some part of the first semester 'getting
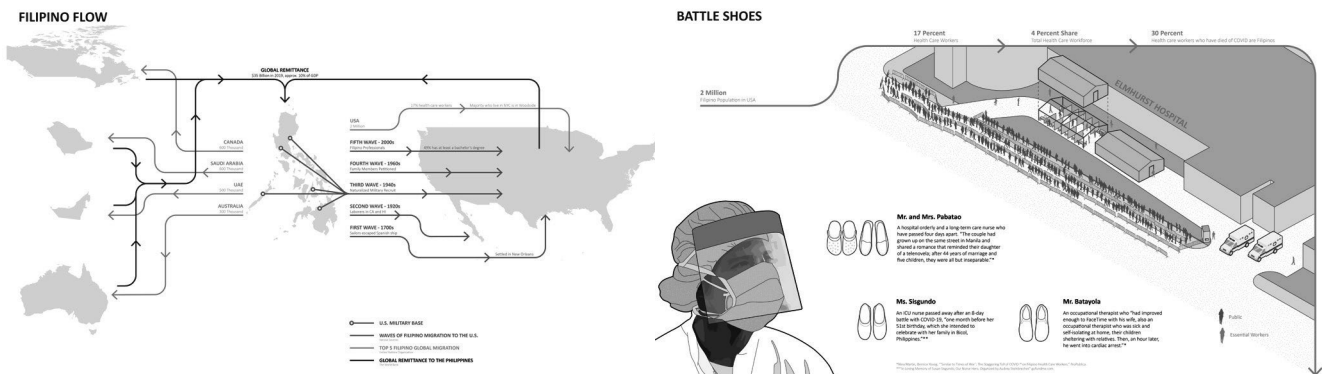
Figure 2. Filipino Flows and Battle Shoes. Dax Masiglat.

lost' in the field while engaging in drawing, photography, and filming encouraged a close observation of the site at different scales – from the personal to the local to the collective. Having the time created a more nuanced understanding of the spatial practices that lie at the heart of what we perceive as urban culture. Reading texts like Setha Low's Spatializing Culture (2013) in the seminar pointed their attention to those practices.

In the Spring of 2021 we began a collaboration with the Queens Memory Project (QMP), an oral history archive that is part of the Queens Public Library. QMP provided us with the tools and techniques to conduct interviews with a range of interlocutors. Each of these practices – observing, drawing, interviewing and introspection were composed into auto-ethnographies– contributed to an understanding of both the spatial and the social underpinnings of collective life. With this slowly developing picture of the neighborhoods of Central Queens with specific actors within them, we hoped our students would cultivate an understanding of the always emergent quality of the cultural as opposed to a static picture of an existing condition that can be changed through design interventions. Our approach to the concept of culture was to treat it as an active, fluid and constantly evolving zone of sharing and commoning, underpinning collective life building based upon our reading of Raymond Williams' interpretation of the concept of culture in his Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1976).

ARCHITECTURE AS APPARATUS:

Early on in our studio work we had established a partnership with the Queens Museum. Through the Fall of 2020, various members of the staff had joined us for zoom reviews and informal conversations. As with many other museums they were reassessing their role as a cultural institution and initiated a project where they invited artists and community groups to collaborate in a "Year of Uncertainty". As our spring semester drew to a close we discussed the possibility of exhibiting the student work within the museum. The yearlong rethinking of institutional and disciplinary boundaries thus resulted in an exhibit at the museum titled "Building Culture: Architecture as Apparatus and Social Process". We invited the individuals and groups with whom the

students had worked and learned to join us in the museum-, not simply as viewers but also as participants in a conversation around the work and what it revealed.

In what follows, we offer snapshots of some of the student work produced by the unit noting the limitations of language and conventions of representation that necessary prevent us from conveying the diversity, unevenness, conflict and joys of the research and pedagogical processes. Following Raymond Williams' initial provocation in Keywords (Williams 1976) where culture is defined as process sharing etymological roots with the process of cultivation – the students generated a body of work that examined the collective, contradictory undertaking in which actions become a way of cultivating life. The exhibit was thus a catalog of architectures that emerged from specific cultural cues provided by the immigrants who dominate economic, political, and social life in Central Queens. The student projects were exhibited in thematic clusters, grouped according to the interests that served as the prompts for them.

Critical Care| Cultivate

In the summer of 2020, the hospital at Elmhurst was declared as "the epicenter of the Covid crisis". Simultaneously food pantries and mutual aid groups sprung into action – seemingly spontaneously – distributing the necessities from vacant lots, gymnasiums, churches, and sidewalk refrigerators. Recent feminist scholarship has foregrounded the concept of care as a critical practice in trying to survive the onslaught of crises from the ecological to the daily insecurities people are faced with. Can the concept of critical care become instrumental in architecture? What types of space, programs and constituencies can cultivate this concept of care?

Dax Masiglat's Culture of Care ponders the role of Filipino Healthcare workers in light of epidemic in Little Manila, Queens. The traditional "main street" of the Filipino neighborhood "Little Manila" in Woodside is within walking distance of the Elmhurst hospital. Her research uncovered a history of migration as well as a ruminated on the forms that culture is coded through

ritual, ceremony, food and architecture. She collaborated with Filipino community artists to design a mobile hut-like structure to memorialize the Filipino nurses who were disproportionately impacted by Covid. The mobile memorial references the Bayanihan custom in the Philippines where people collectively move bamboo homes of fellow community members during events of flooding.

Corona Grows is Victor Gorlach's proposal to unite a neighborhood around a roof top cultivation and waste/ biogas system. For his site Gorlach selected a car garage located in an area in Corona so varied and complex to be simultaneously unique and representative of the whole of Queens. Instead of erasing this scrappiness, the project celebrates the possibilities inherent in a heterogeneous fabric by creatively linking disparate zones to sow an autonomous food network. Unexpected relationships between programs become the purpose, resulting in an architecture of interactions that potentially generate long-term, healthy futures rather than short-term returns.

Migrant Economies | Hybridize:

The borough of Queens in New York City is celebrated for its ethnic diversity. In Non-Stop Metropolis, Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro illustrate the linguistic multiplicity that is centered in Queens, where over 800 languages are spoken in a mere 109 square miles. This richness of language and attendant cultures can be seen from the outside as a marvelous asset (and it is!). However, the working lives of people in search of security are often contradictory, contentious, and messy. What if we embraced this contradiction? What if we identified the powerful overlap where the spaces of work and leisure were not separated but rather hybridized?

In La Parada Diedre Nolan identified a powerful site where leisure intersected with labor- a children's playground block enclosed by a chain link fence that is also a thriving pick-up place for informal day laborers. Currently, the fence enforces a division between inside and outside, between the protected and safe world of a NYC parks enforced play zone and the precarious work of the day laborer. Questioning that opposition, Deidre proposed a project that speculated on a program for a physical re-design of the fence into a series of structures that facilitated both construction training and play.

Similarly, working with another sector of an informal migrant economy, during the pandemic, Pedro Cruz conducted a yearlong study of the bureaucratic mechanics that control the practices

Figure 3. La Prada. Diedra Nolan.

of street vendors. He wanted to make the labors of this vibrant work-force visible and to create an archive where their personal stories of could be formally situated. He identified a site- an old non-functioning theater in Corona Plaza and proposed to adapt it into the Theater of the People. Cruz capitalized on the adjacency of the theater to Corona Plaza – an existing street vendor occupied space- and expanded from the outside to the inside locating the vending garage at ground level and then constructing a series of auxiliary spaces for socialization and rest. This transformation of the theater to include a daycare, roof garden as well as a chapel built upon the culture of social connection and mutual aid networks- so important to the survival of migrant workers as his research and his archived interviews reveal.

Shared Housing | Embody

What does it mean if our existing buildings and cities are no longer in synch with the culture that is continuously changing? This disjuncture between the existing built environment and society is most evident in the housing stock that Queens affords its inhabitants. In considering the options for housing newcomers and working-class residents of Queens the unit searched for new typologies and communal contracts that would embody the realities on the ground and aspirations of the demographic that calls Queens their home.

Patchwork Building by Henry Aguilar-Morales investigated the systemic failure of affordable housing and the proliferation of underground basement dwellings as the only form of housing in central queens that is currently available to even median income residents. In his proposal for a new model of housing he wished to embrace the polyphonic aesthetics of Roosevelt Avenue while tapping into an immigrant base that has expertise in the construction industry.

The projected form of the housing remained open ended and is modelled upon some of the half-built or self-built work of architects in Mexico and Chile (Iacobelli 2012). The model constructed for the exhibition became a tool of participatory action.

Krystal Kaler's speculative project Repair and Unite took 4 city blocks of single family detached homes and overlaid an adaptive strategy to transform it into a superblock by limiting vehicular traffic flows. The desirable typology of the garden apartments in Jackson Heights (Karatzas 1998) became a physical model for a strategic expansion of the individual houses into a low-rise superblock with interior courts, pedestrian access, and common facilities. In Kaler's proposal there was also a strong critique of the real estate escalation and privatization that have rendered the existing garden apartments beyond the reach of mid and low-income residents. The community land trust became a logistic model to support the new model housing and to provide long term neighborhood stability.

The modern university has evolved along a divide separating analytic and propositional forms of learning and representation – or between thinking and making. Anthropologists and other qualitative social scientists were always aware of their own precarious claims to objectivity given that their methods involved active engagement with individuals and groups upon which they based their claims of knowledge. In the practice of architecture, despite or perhaps because of the awareness of the ways in which architecture enables conviviality, architects have preferred to pose problems in terms of basic standards and in ways that are conducive to abstract and universal solutions. For each discipline this stance has resulted in forms of silencing the messiness of social life in favor of a consistent theorization of the social or in favor of an elegant program that enables the re-shaping of social life without seeming to be intrusive. Our experiment here was to re-examine and challenge the limits imposed by our respective disciplines' engagements with the world and ability to influence change by entering a dialogue that focused on making new propositions. Moving into a future marked by profound existential uncertainty, we follow many critical thinkers in asking how the order of things might be different.

Figure 4. Patchwork Building at the Queens Museum Model by Henry Aguilar Morales.

Wagering on how the university of the future may center around practice rather than abstraction, we attempted to find ways to bring the complexity and diversity of theoretical propositions into the realm of practice.

What we learned during this process, which was certainly uneven and rocky given the conditions under which we had embarked on this journey, was the magnitude of the impact of this year-long process of engagement upon some of the individuals whose voices were heard and archived by the students. As products of a year-long design studio, the projects are perhaps relatively modest and, in some cases even shy about the narratives and speculations they are revealing.

Yet, we might say, the 'architecture' of these projects is not revealed by the structures they imagine but is to be found in the 'networks' that these projects participated in and in the traces of those networks as potentials for the transformative futures. What we perceive as architecture, in other words, is only revealed by tracing the deeply collaborative nature of the process – from the trust built between members of the cohort to the generosity of our partners – the community groups and individuals who gave their time and expertise to 'teach' our students, the Queens Memory Projects for their oral history interviewing workshops and the Queens Museum for serving as a host to show our students' work – all this part of and lives within the proposed structures. The architecture itself is not these structures, which remain prompts and invitations to a conversation, but it is embedded within the process. Rather like the open-ended and inconclusive genre of anthropological monographs, the student work is work in progress, whose value may pass into the more definitive design work that they will undertake as members of the profession.

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PROJECT