

# Slowly but Surely: Chronicle of Springfield's First Community Fridge

SARA KHORSHIDIFARD

Drury University

**Keywords:** Mutual Aid, Commoning, Community Fridge, Co-Creation, Community Connections

Not all tools or normative practices at the hands of architects and designers may align with the call for architectural commoning. Yet, design thinking and skill contributions to building more sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities are conceivable on all levels and scales. One such approach aligns with what is theoretically known as the “mutual aid.” Activist and law professor Dean Spade in his 2022 book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* defines the concept as the survival work done in conjunction with social movements. Mutual aid is a framework for demanding transformative change, for radically redistributing care and wellbeing, and to ultimately “heal ourselves and the world.”<sup>1</sup> Through a mutual aid outlook, even though with small design acts, architectural contributions to regenerative and redistributive commons-based economies are foreseeable, by putting design to work and the heart where the needs are.

Mutual aid in action is the story behind the journey of Springfield's first Community Fridge. It all began with an electronic message circulated during a peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2021, sharing voices of two city residents who had raised the need for neighborhood fridges due to rising food costs and local food insecurities. The Community Fridge movement has started globally as a grassroots effort to combat food insecurity and food waste. When installed in accessible locations, they are proven to act as vital and identifiable resources for community members to pick up free fresh food and for patrons to donate excess food. Springfield's Community Fridge project born with the spark from residents Chelsy Cole and Mal Bailey grew in partnership with local Citizen Architect Kate Stockton and myself. The initiative has since gained momentum in the months and year following, and attained resourceful new partnerships such as Drury AIAS Freedom by Design, the West Central Neighborhood Alliance and Urban Roots Farm business as hosts, Better Block SGF through its WeCreate 2022 design competition focus, and the Discovery Center of

**Springfield to be offering fresh produce donations from its aeroponics vertical gardens.**

The first neighborhood hosting the first fridge today has high need for food resources where neighbors will definitely benefit from the project. According to City data, 16.9% of county households are food insecure, an issue highly prevalent in West Central that is amongst poorest neighborhoods. Most recent data indicated 80% of residents as renters, 41.8% individuals and 30.8% families below poverty rates, with 14% unemployment rates and a median income as low as \$19,731. Thanks to the collective efforts, unscripted impetus of the mutual aid groups and individuals involved, and funding through donations and grants, the fridge will be on its way in the built stage set for competition by the end of 2022.

[Three responses to mutual aid] Some will ignore proliferating mutual aid efforts. Some will try to fold them into a narrative about volunteerism, labeling mutual aid efforts “heroic” and portraying them as complementary to government efforts and existing systems rather than as oppositional to those systems. And some police and spy agencies will surveil and criminalize mutual aid efforts.<sup>2</sup>

— Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*

## MUTUAL AID AND DESIGN RELATIONSHIP

Calls for commoning ask for rethinking intersections of design ownership and co-creative collective authorship. Not all tools and normative practices at the hands of architects and designers align with the call. Design contributions to gradual building of more sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities can be conceivable on all scales through purpose-driven inclusive approaches. Architecture manifests deep-rooted tensions with authorship projecting dilemmas between artistic-creative and community-societal demands. With commoning, before and after lives of a built likewise find agency. Problematizing authorship, Otero-Pailos scrutinizes architecture as process happening, not just at the time of the design, but decades, even hundreds of years after construction. Architectures

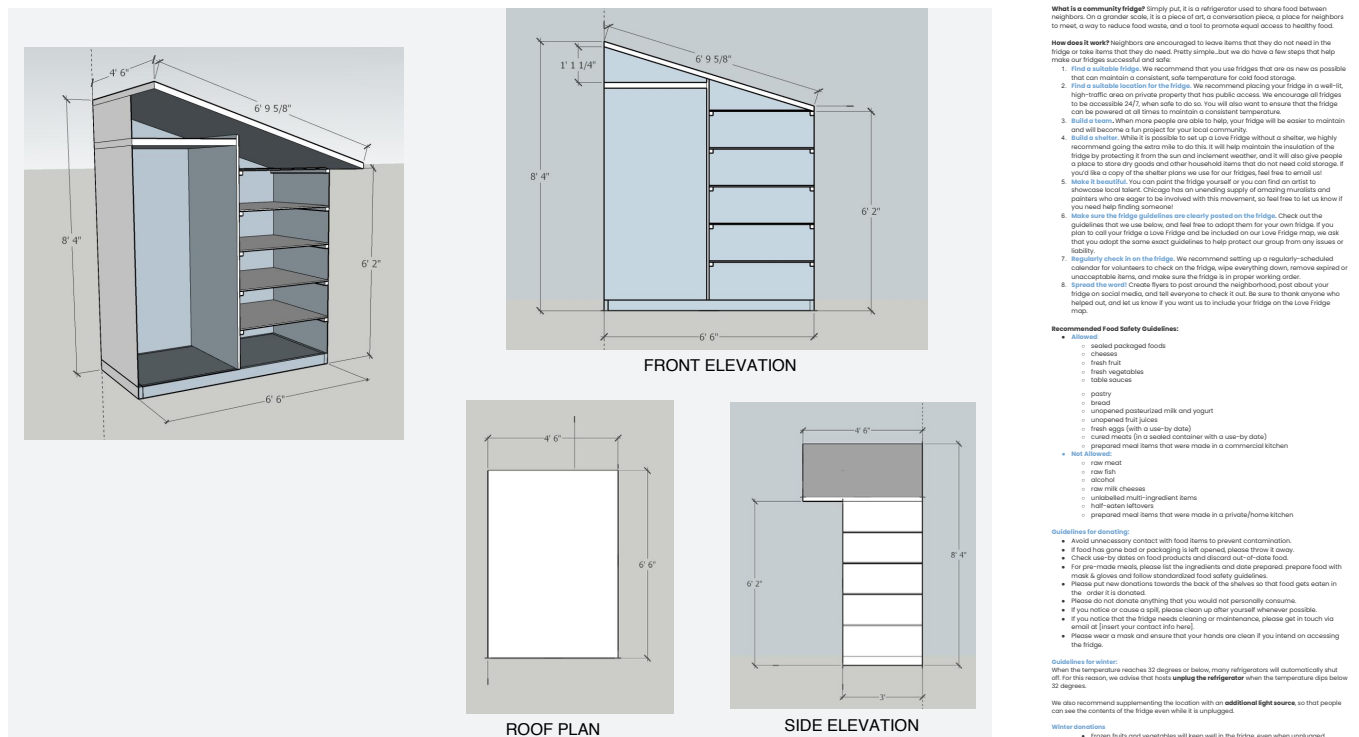


Figure 1. Landscape of Commoning: Open Source.

In initial phases, the group reached out to Chicago Love Fridge. They graciously shared helpful start-up information on how to start a community fridge, sharing ideas as open source for improving upon. Between the text and drawing, shared materials cover most questions new starters may face. Courtesy of Chicago Love Fridge.

not starting with acts of original designers, for instance, an ordinary vernacular building, shape through communal processes emerging from collective actions of many over time and at different moments. Architecture is shaping from within a built, cutting and slicing into and opening it up, grounding on habitability, influence on human activities, interaction with natural world, shaping experiences, ... all changing relationships between what is built and architecture.<sup>3</sup>

Commoning puts design ownership and authorship at stake. To reconceive how design and community may collectively align, the idea of “mutual aid” is a contributory. Defined as survival work done in conjunction with social movements, mutual aid agendas ambitiously invite transformative changes for radical redistribution of care and wellbeing, to ultimately heal ourselves and the world. Distinct from charity, for meeting needs, mutual aid underscores cooperation rather than differentiation, not putting haves on top and not haves on bottom, offering everyone their needs relying on free/available resources. To build innovative and effective social resolutions, instead of acting situational, mutual aid curiously acts on causes of systemic issues. Through mutual outlooks and commoning, even with smallest design-acts, contributions to regenerative and redistributive

commons-based flows and economies are foreseeable, putting design to work and hearts where needs are.

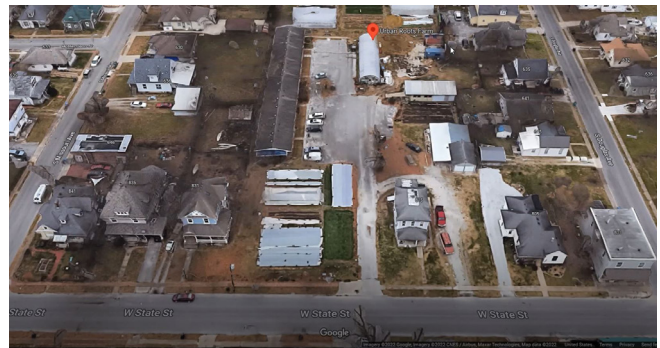
## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The Springfield Community Fridge initiative was formed spontaneously through discussions between the authors, starting in April 2021 with an electronic blurb circulated during COVID-19 peaks. Citizens had raised the need for neighborhood fridges due to rising local food insecurities. Community fridges globally are helping combat food insecurity and food waste; installed in accessible locations, they become vital identifiable resources for picking up fresh food free of charge and for patrons donating and finding good uses for excess food. Born with that email spark, the idea was hatched and expanded through thoughts shared amongst the citizens, citizen architect, and public scholar. In the months followed, the emerging collaborative gained momentum, charting numerous advocates and funding sources, also locally promoted as design competition theme. Primary partnerships included: local AIAS student chapter (adopting the fridge as Freedom by Design project), and West Central Neighborhood Alliance and Urban Roots Farm community garden business (as the first fridge hosts). Other entities encompassed: local Better



Figure 2. Site and Context.

Currently at built stage, the fridge is to be placed on WCN's Urban Roots Farm as the hosting site property. With the host neighborhood's high needs for food resources, neighbors will benefit from the project. According to City data, 16.9% of Greene County households are food insecure. The issue is highly prevalent in West Central, which is amongst the poorest city neighborhood. Most recent census and demographic data indicate that 80% of neighborhood residents are renters, 41.8% individuals and 30.8% families are below poverty rates, median income is low at \$19,731, and the neighborhood has 14% unemployment rates. Diagram Courtesy: Kate Stockton.



Block (adopting the fridge as theme for 2022 WeCreate design competition), and Discovery Center of Springfield (pledging fresh produce donations from its indoor aeroponics vertical gardens). With the efforts of the collective and funding through donations and grants, the fridge is on its way.

In formulating a collective co-creative approach for the fridge design, the collaborative group tinkered, tapping into identifiable synergies existing locally within the community. As initial step, the project became the theme for the local Better Block's 2022 WeCreate design competition, chaired by the author. The promotion continued with other synergetic adoptions, e.g. as the local AIAS chapter's first Freedom by Design community

project topic. With these adoptions, the project at seed garnered funding resources including national FBD grant and local donations. Despite reservations on the concept of design competition as a conducive tool in creating settings pertinent to altruistic commoning, it was used, nevertheless, as an educational and awareness tool. Additionally, the decision drew on the benefits of the fast nature of a competition in honing interests for accelerating the co-creation process. Three proposals were submitted. In a public-event presentation in March 2022 hosted on the fridge host site, winner designs were recognized with design and public choice awards by a diverse jury encompassing local community/non-profit leaders, community-oriented design professionals, and non-architecture academics.



## NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

## WEST CENTRAL

[www.itsalldowntown.com/businesses/west-central-neighborhood-alliance](http://www.itsalldowntown.com/businesses/west-central-neighborhood-alliance)  
[www.facebook.com/WestCentralSGF](https://www.facebook.com/WestCentralSGF)

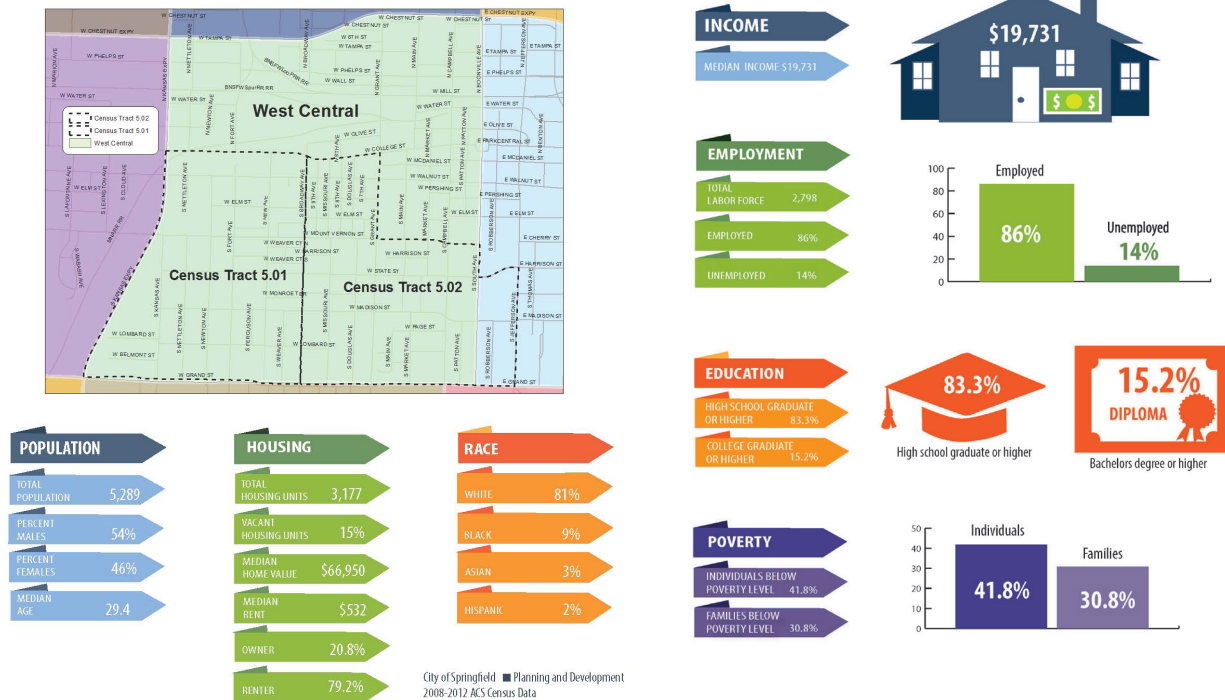


Figure 3 West Central Neighborhood Demographics.

Courtesy of City of Springfield.

## PRAGMATICS IN COMMONING

In preparation for the build, the coalition visited city spokespersons and zoning ordinances. Practical questions surfaced concerning siting, demanding encroachment evasion in city right of ways. Otherwise placing on city property would have demanded official documents putting the project as part of city records and the fridge group/site host securing insurance policies covering the city for claim provability up to \$3M. On hosting site designated as Community Garden (CO 36470), the fridge is regarded as Accessory Structure (CO 36450). Not as original trajectory but now considered by the group, accessory structures cannot be on front yards established by two adjacent structures. Deviating from original front-yard placement intends for public visibility, side yard as next siting option is acceptable only not within three feet of property line. Limiting visibility and accessibility, pushing inside the property may not be preferable. A third possible option would be moving further inside adjacent to current farm stand, which if left without proper signage, may add use mix-ups for the fridge and farm stand risking mistaken identity.

The farm stand operating on-site demands ensuring people do not confuse the two. A community fridge on wheels, not fixated in place, could be a forth, yet, heavy-fee-bearing option, aligning with the city rules for mobile food trucks and push carts. Although this path can give the fridge flexibility to be anywhere, on front, side, or else, fees to be paid to the city frequently and constant permit renewal asks would make matters unsustainable. Not on city right of way with no front yard setback, side lot placement may be the next logical option still close to public street interface. Critical explorations remain in the works about the program operating entities, utility considerations, and systems for stocking, cleaning, maintenance, and longer-term sustainability including possible ongoing funding avenues.



## WE CREATE 2022

### COMMUNITY FRIDGE

fostering healthy food access across the community

Ensuring that all citizens have adequate and equitable access, purchasing power and physical availability, to reliable and nutritious well-balanced food supply is necessary.

This competition seeks proposals for the design of Springfield's first innovative community fridge. The accessible, user-friendly, self-sustainable, and secure micro foodways hub will be supported by a continuous stream of staff and volunteers who help operate, replenish, and clean the fridge.

Final designs will be evaluated according to the criteria of Research, Innovation, Functionality, and Aesthetics. Along with the central refrigeration theme, competition entrants should take the designs beyond simple utilitarian fridges and address a variety of issues including energy and electricity, food waste, trash and recyclables, universal design, social stigma of poverty, cultural meaningfulness of food, etc.



## DESIGN COMPETITION

**Registration**

FREE and open to the public

Website: [betterblocksgf.com/we-create-2022](http://betterblocksgf.com/we-create-2022)

Deadline: January 28, 2022



**Competition Format**

Design teams shall meet frequently, virtually or in person, during the month of February. Collaboration with community members are strongly recommended.

By providing a plan, a section and other supporting drawings and materials, design teams are asked to present their design for the first Community Fridge in Springfield. The final presentation event will take place on March 5, 2022.



**BETTER BLOCK SGF**



**Urban Roots Farm**





**DRURY UNIVERSITY**



questions? email: [betterblocksgf@gmail.com](mailto:betterblocksgf@gmail.com)

Figure 4. WeCreate 2022 Design Competition Flyer.  
Courtesy of Better Block SGF Archives.

WE CREATE 2022  
COMMUNITY FRIDGE

### ARCHITECTURAL STYLE PREFERENCE

SPRINGFIELD COMMUNITY FRIDGE


























### WISH POEM

*I wish my neighborhood to be a place with more parks.*

*I wish my neighborhood to be a place with more parks.*

*I wish my neighborhood to be a place with more parks.*

*I wish my neighborhood to be a place with more parks.*

*I wish my neighborhood to be a place with more parks.*

*I wish the community fridge in my neighborhood to have a larger variety of greens and produce.*

*I wish the community fridge to be well taken care of.*

*I wish the community fridge to be well taken care of.*

*I wish the community fridge to be well taken care of.*

*I wish the community fridge to be well taken care of.*

Figure 5. Shared Process.

Community involvements facilitated for competition entrants involved a survey sent to and an engagement session with residents in one of the host neighborhood association meetings.



Figure 6. A Team Proposal

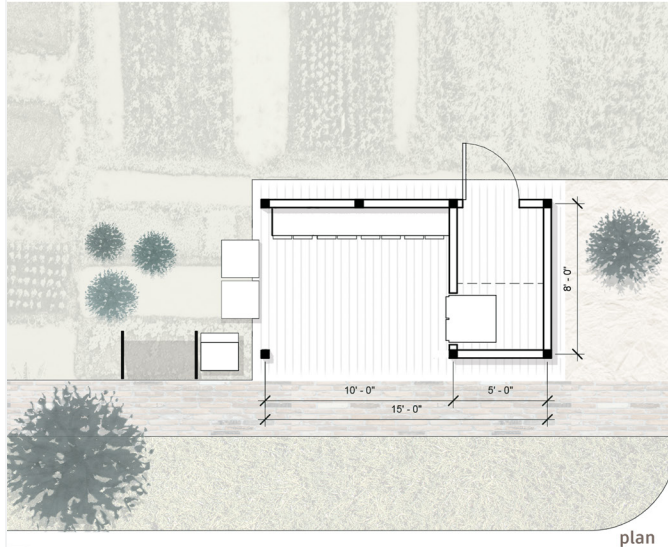
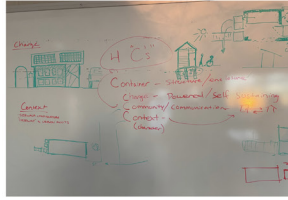
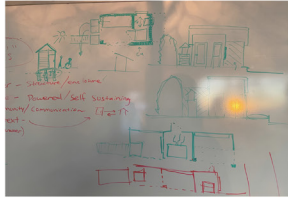
Courtesy of Competition Entrants in Alphabetical Order: Charlotte May, Connor Stokes, Jenine May, Quoc Huynh, and Stephanie Monroe





# community fridge

## WeCreate2022



The Community Fridge in the West Central Neighborhood will cultivate a sense of community through mutual aid. A plot of land on the Urban Roots Farm property, which is part of the West Central Neighborhood, will house the structure. The space is on the south edge of the farm, along the sidewalk to encourage foot traffic. The plot measure 24.5x10.5' and has a level elevation.

The design includes a 15x8' covered wooden structure with space for a fridge, pantry cabinets, trash & compost bins, and a storeroom behind the fridge. The structure's frame is made of wood, with a metal roof. The roof is angled toward the south to accommodate for a solar panel. On the south wall there is a mural representative of the project. Along the east wall there is a space for community news and information. This could be for events, safety and gardening tips, restaurant features, or whatever the neighborhood deems important to share with fridge visitors. A native paw paw tree will be planted on the east side to provide some shade with stone steps underneath that lead up to the community board. Behind the structure, on the north side, it is recommended that moss be planted to act as a natural foot path to the storeroom door. On the west side of the structure will be trash and compost bins for visitors to use and the Free Little Library that currently stands there will remain.

While the community fridge encourages people to walk there, street parking is available on Mount Vernon or visitors can use the Urban Roots parking lot. A storeroom will be part of the structure to allow for maintenance to the fridge and storage for fridge volunteers. All electrical equipment relating to the fridge and the solar panel will be kept in the storeroom as well.

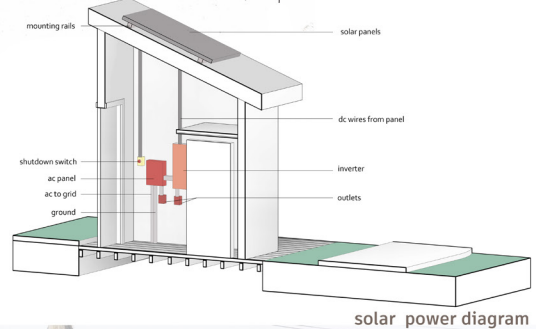
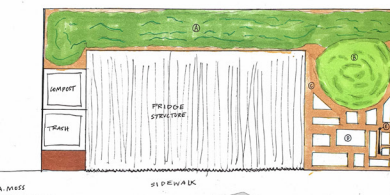


Figure 8. C Team Proposal

Courtesy of Competition Entrants in Alphabetic Order: James Pottberg, Madeleine Zahn, Nathalie Lindsey, Shaza Umran, and Teddy Dentinger

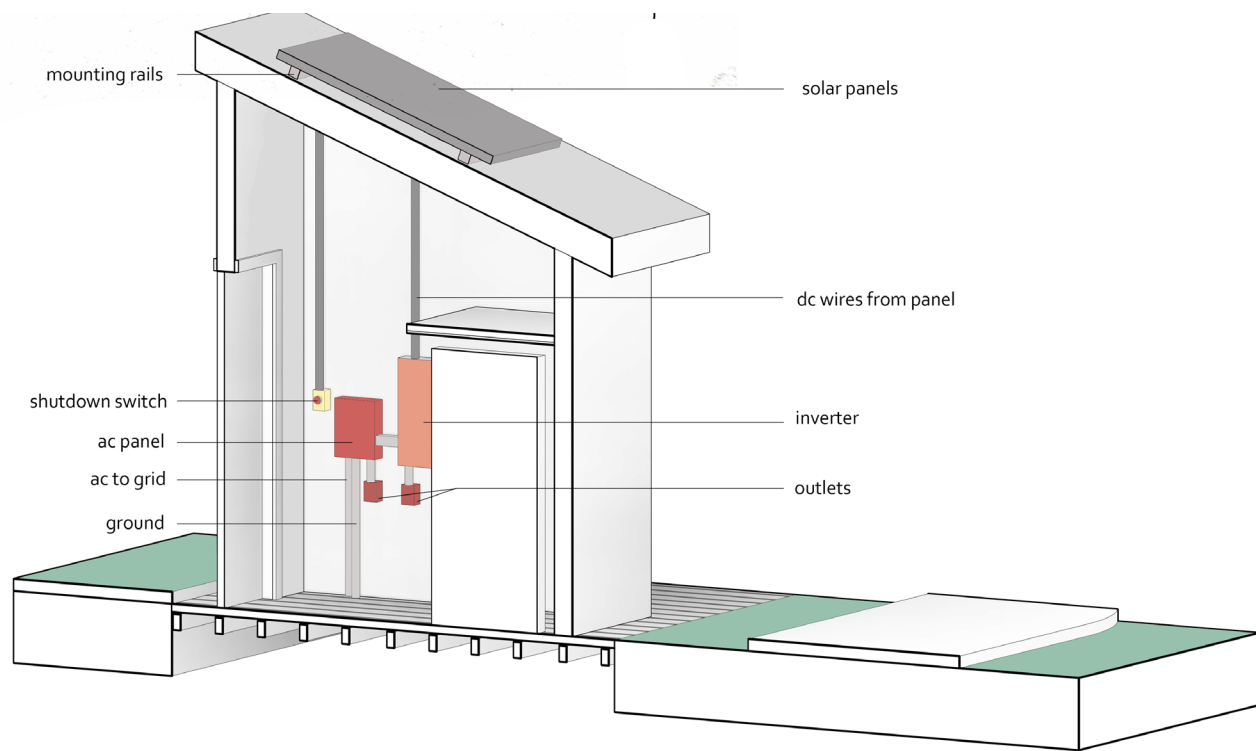


Figure 9. Winner Team Proposal. Details. Visibility. Thresholds.  
Courtesy of Team C Competition Entrants

### SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF COMMONING

Commoning as social practice is dynamic, aiming at integrative systems for managing shared resources, embedding acts of mutual support, conflict resolution, negotiation, communication and experimentation.<sup>4</sup> Opening the 2022 AIA Women Leadership Summit, Salbi emphasized the role of women's impacts globally through connections and demands for deeper human connections to the earth, described as a living being with a heartbeat.<sup>5</sup> Design as commoning was theorized on provocations of "drawing together," partly situating in feminist material-semiotics of care as a lens to bend contemporary discourses.<sup>6</sup> Humility, shared ownership, social responsibility, and reciprocal/collective care attitudes describe eruditions from design commoning at micro-tangible fridge scale for macro architecture-in-whole thinking. Transformative change has been made known to have been much needed in the field for taming capital accumulation, promoting egalitarian economies, environmental stewardship, and mutualizing shared resource use benefits.

Obstacles to change as main issues at stake fall less on lacks of will or motivation, instead, caused by uncertainties regarding disciplinary identities unbendingly tied to obsolete conventions, unspoken taboos, or designer identities exclusively revolving around entitlements and ownership, all to be openly questioned in a commoning manifesto. What were asked before worth being asked again. Are we teaching enough commoning in design schools? Is the profession acting in solidarity with reciprocal care in line with paradigm shifts for commoning? Is it sufficiently and abundantly honoring those engaged in commoning to points of burnout? Are commoning and design alignments even possible with current foundations of disciplinary limits? As prerequisites to change, what are costs of contesting the limits? Does the commoning need as well a common language, or can it? Ending here with more questions than answers.

---

## ENDNOTES

1. Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books, 2020.
2. Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books, 2020. 33.
3. Adjaye, David, Nikolaus Hirsch, and Jorge Otero-Pailos. "On Architecture and Authorship." *Places Journal* (2011).
4. Bollier, David. "Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm." In *The New Systems Reader*, pp. 348-361. Routledge, 2020.
5. Zainab Salbi is a global humanitarian, author, founder of Women for Women International and co-founder of Daughters for Earth.
6. Vass, Lőrinc, Roy Cloutier, and Nicole Sylvia. "Design as Commoning: Drawing Together with Care." In *Design Commons*, pp. 259-276. Springer, Cham, 2022. "Drawing-together those who have nothing in common involves representing the manifold entities assembled in, and affected by, design. And drawing, together, common-enough worlds entangles these heterogeneous agencies in new constellations beyond received roles and hierarchies, recasting design as a collective production. Both examples begin a renegotiation of the ways in which the designer's place in webs of life and matter matter, and how we might act care-fully with(in) them (259)."