

[Un]Common Ground: Co-Creating the Vision for the City's Ground Floor

CHRISTOPHER A. ROACH
California College of the Arts

JULIA GRINKRUG
California College of the Arts

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What do we share in common among each other and what are the [un]common experiences and identities that must be considered and preserved? Can a common ground be established in pursuit of uncommon needs that mark the divergent missions of various interest groups? Is there even a possibility for the “commons” in our radicalized, alienated, co-opted, gentrified, and post-truth world? These are some of the questions that occupied a group of academic practitioners from Urban Works Agency at California College of the Arts through a series of courses and research projects that revolved around the enigmatic topic of the commons.

In this paper, we will unpack the most recent investigations and discoveries that emerged from three consecutive urban design studios focusing on the ground floor of the city as the datum upon which the urban commons can emerge or be reclaimed. At the conception of this three-year project, we were searching for overarching principles or codes for commoning, learning from worldwide precedents, where public space was generated as a common good. As the research evolved in close dialogue with community partners, it became more and more clear that the notion of “common good” as a homogeneous abstraction was a fiction, just like the notion of a generic “public”. Instead, the commons should be seen as an emergent amalgamation of agonistic desires, practices and capacities that is meaningful only as long as it maintains its heterogeneity.

PREMISE: THE COMMON GROUND FLOOR THE POST-2020 CITY

This studio, and the research project that it was a part of, sprang from an interest in examining the ground floor of the city as a self-sufficient urban entity and an object of research in its own right. Following on the heels of a series of urban design studios that focused on housing, density, air rights, and generally what planners consider *vertical* development, we became increasingly interested in the collective impact of the current forms of fragmented property, ownership and development on the

aggregate footprint of the city. This analytical turn toward the *horizontal*, married with our own empirical observations of the ways in which both contemporary approaches to planning and development, as well as economic, social, and technological changes were affecting the city and the ways people use it. The intersection of these interests became the genesis of an idea for a new line of research focused on the ground floor itself. This research was also catalyzed by witnessing the perplexing decline of once-thriving neighborhood commercial corridors and the plague of empty storefronts being propagated in new developments, which happened in the midst of an urban renaissance, and one of the longest economic expansions in the history of the US.

Besides the conceptual premise stated above, we also had a keen interest in new models for cooperative economics and community organizing that produced hybridizing typologies as a source of innovation. We saw great opportunity in the ground floor's potential to become a new catalyst for neighborhood activation; for example serving as distributed community centers in an increasingly work-from-home society that aspires for having a diverse set of amenities within a 15-minute walk from home. The studio was rife with opportunities that aligned with existing research initiatives in our own practices, and we were also energized by the chance to connect students with community representatives, industry professionals & policymakers to develop creative solutions that may affect real change on such a pressing issue in our cities today.

APOCALYPSE NOW!

The first of the three studios investigated the *Retail Apocalypse* as both an opportunity to rethink current models of commercial environments and their relationship to the public sphere, as well as an alibi to question contemporary preconceptions in urban planning and real estate that have shaped the footprint of the modern city. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, bricks-and-mortar retail faced an existential crisis precipitated by the explosive growth of Amazon and other direct-to-consumer retail, calling into question retail's global presence in the urban fabric as it undergoes a drastic transformation away from a place simply for the purchase of commodities. Simultaneously,



Figure 1. *Bridging Blocks*, [Un]Common Ground Studio. Project by Suvin Choi and Alden Gendreau.

as shopping has become disembodied from the city, the city itself became increasingly mediated by mobile technology and its surfaces became appropriated by augmented reality, creating new opportunities and new roles for commerce within the urban fabric. This first round of the studio initiated a *project for the city* series by applying and adapting various hybridized models of commercial civic space to a selection of large development sites in San Francisco.

COMMON GROUND

The design research initiated in the *Apocalypse Now* studio in the Spring of 2020 didn't end with the final review, but transitioned into a continuous collaboration with our community partners. This transition was inspired by the year of pandemic, which proved to be a reality check for our supposedly progressive society. It revealed deep and entrenched inequalities, bringing them to the frontlines of public attention during the summer of social unrest that followed the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by the hands of police. The calls for reparations and social justice urged the need for reckoning with structural racism that underlie our capitalist democracy. In response to this historical and political moment, we were compelled to re-address the studio topic through equity and justice framework.

Viewed through this framework, the issue of the *ground floor* ceased being merely an architectural subject, but appeared as a confluence of complex and ever changing socio-economic, political and cultural factors - a manifestation of a broader systemic and societal condition. Unpacking some of the fundamental notions of property and ownership, resource distribution, forms of governance, care and stewardship, the second version of the studio in the Spring of 2021 centered on the importance of civic agency and community organization of land as the generative engines of structural change.

[UN]COMMON GROUND

The third and final advanced urban studio, conducted in the Spring of 2022, dove even deeper into the social underpinnings of the city's ground floor and centered on the role of "social infrastructure" (Klinenberg, 2018)¹ as an indispensable factor fostering a more just, inclusive, and co-authored city. It followed the premise that *social infrastructure*, produced on the city's ground floor, is an *[un]common good*, driven by a divergent yet collective civic agency. This approach compelled us to rethink the fundamental notions of motive, property and method, in understanding the physical configurations of the city's ground floor.

Through a series of immersive, investigative and creative explorations, the studio developed tools for reciprocal dialogue between architectural discourse and other spheres of cultural debate. Bringing questions of class, race, privilege and identity to the foreground of architectural inquiry, the studio aimed to identify the glitches/breaches/hacks/surreal experiences of the citizens that the market neglects, to reveal the *[un]common realities* of the post-2020 city. The goal of the studio was to demystify the design process, opening up to a possibility of an inclusive city-making that seeks common ground in restoring the broken social contract between the city and its residents.

METHODOLOGY: COMMONING AND GROUNDING

ISSUES: Our intent was to develop an issue-based line of inquiry that would guide students through research and analysis of a particular subject matter, developing a certain level of expertise and leading up to development of a spatial thesis and speculative design approaches towards concrete project sites. An interactive dialogue with actual stakeholders of these project sites allowed students to critically assess and evaluate their own propositions.



Figure 2. SPUR Workshop, Apocalypse Now! Studio. Photo by C. Roach

SITES: The key sites that were explored in depth were Excelsior and Japantown neighborhoods in San Francisco, as well as Lower Bottoms and Hoover Foster neighborhoods in West Oakland. These sites were selected to include locations slated for significant investment and large-scale redevelopment. At the same time, all these locations endured decades (if not centuries) of discrimination and divestment by the local and regional government, which inflicted generational traumas on their inhabitants. If carried out according to the mainstream neoliberal logic, the upcoming mega-developments would further deepen the already rampant gentrification. The charge of the studio was to co-create radical counter-proposals that would harness the upcoming investment channeling it into reparative actions for the community benefits in an open dialogue with community partners.

GROUND AND GROUNDING

Our focus on the ground floor was driven by an interest in seeing urbanism not as merely a collection of buildings, but as a field of relationships among systems, spatial conditions, programs, and inhabitants. Cutting a conceptual horizontal slice through the city and peering into the ground floor allows us to investigate these relationships at a scale beyond architecture and its boundaries, and to engage with the city as a more holistic and collective design project. For us grounding the studio was more than its theoretical premise. It was also rooted in the studio process itself. From the outset, shaping the studio around a community-led process was a core value

for us. As the studio unfolded, it became evident that this approach was key for grounding the studio in real-life issues by introducing students to actual people, who are battling these issues *on the ground* through their lived experience. However, when we began the process we could not anticipate the full depth of actual learning that we experienced in this process.

In order to create a collaborative process with our community partners, the studio embedded itself in existing community processes. Instead of working in an academic vacuum, the studio participated in ongoing planning discussions and community meetings, such as Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) agreement and other participatory processes initiated by the local governments and community groups. Through a series of inter-institutional and inter-sectoral connections, the studio generated vibrant conversations, facilitating intellectual cross-pollination between the public agencies, industry and Community Based Organizations (CBOs). In addition, the studio benefitted from insightful presentations and engaged participation of representatives from San Francisco and Oakland planning departments, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), as well as progressive initiatives such as East Bay Permanent Real Estate Collaborative (EB PREC), Designing Justice+Designing Spaces (DJ+DS), Sidewalk Labs and Creative City Making in Minneapolis.

These external partners became critical participants in the studio, providing feedback and giving the students a crash course in retail, planning, development, politics, public space, property, and justice. However, beyond the richness of these external contributions, the key component of studio engagement centered on the deep reciprocal partnerships with the local CBOs.

COMMONS AND COMMONING

The idea of urban commons was key to the conceptual premise of the studio, addressing the intricate interplay of property and commons as the cornerstone of contemporary urban politics. Through this lens, the studio viewed the city as a process rather than a product. It interrogated the relationship between the commons and the market as well as the tensions intrinsic to *commoning*. The process and the state of commoning can be seen as an agonistic practice whereby the *community organization of land* asserts an alternative to the organization of land by the market or the state. While the theory of the commons is still emergent, communities and collectives around the world are already enacting them defining unique forms of co-ownership and co-governance. Prof. Sheila Forster describes these experiments as Co-Cities (2016)² joining other contemporary scholars of the commons such as Stavros Stavrides (2016)³, Stephan Gruber (2018)⁴ and others.

We questioned the singularity of top-down systems, such as the market or the state, in the production and functioning of

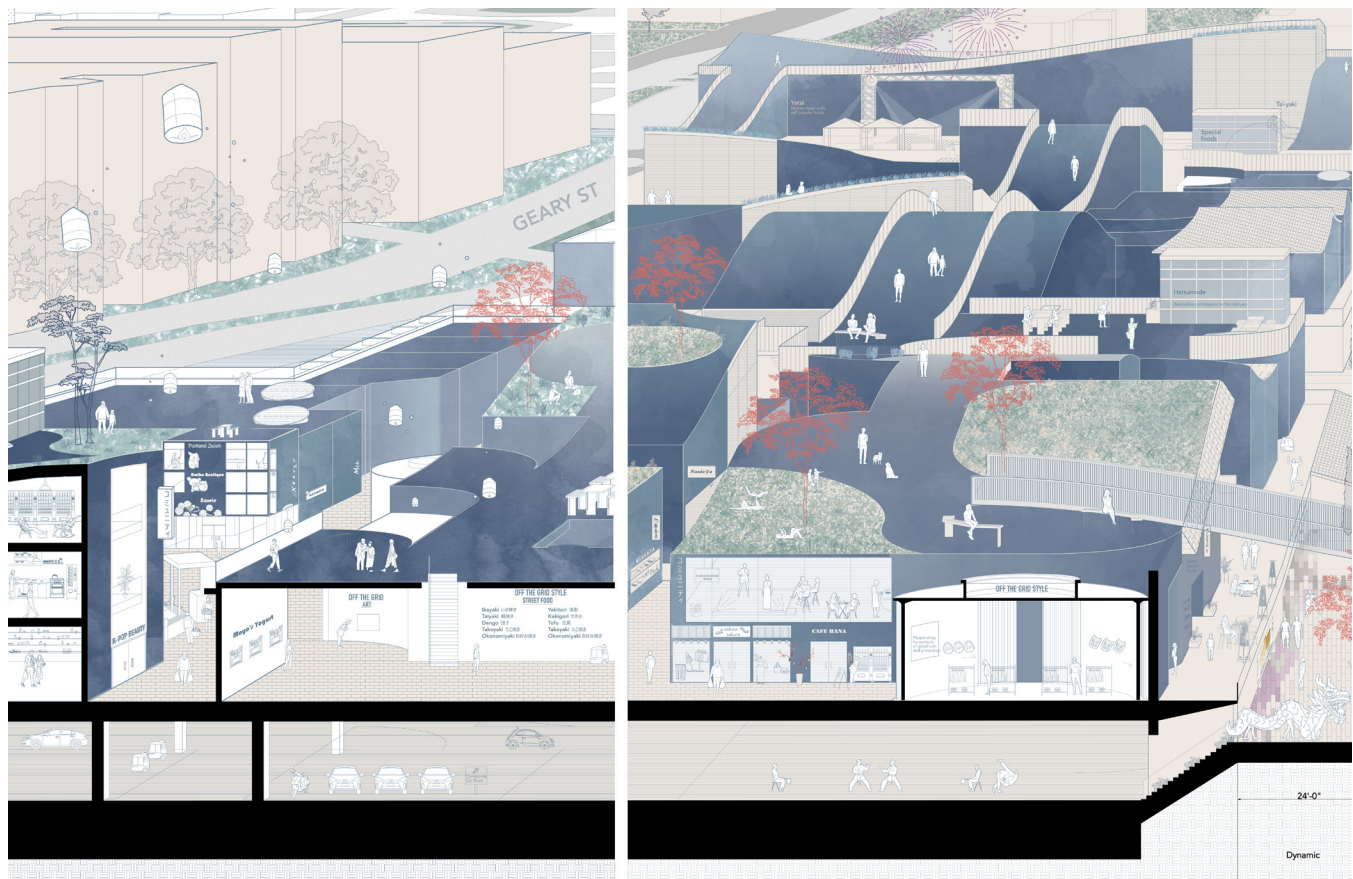


Figure 3. *Commons Village*, Common Ground Studio. Project by Maria Antonieta Ramirez Perez & Valeriya Velyka.

“social infrastructure” by revealing bottom-up networks and catalysts that contribute to its physical, financial, and organizational frameworks. Focusing on the “who” in the urban drama, the studio explored the internal dynamics and relative efficacies of various stakeholders in relation to systemic conditions of the physical, environmental and socio-political components of the city.

Beyond addressing the commons as a theoretical construct, we were intentional in instilling the spirit of *commoning* in the pedagogical practices of the studio itself, learning how to reach the common ground among ourselves before projecting it into the world. Inspired by our community partners, we invested time and energy in building an inclusive and respectful community within our own classroom, practicing the skills of negotiation, argumentation and consensus-building through interactive discussions and teamwork. This communal dynamic shifted the focus of the studio from an individualistic approach of a *mastermind* to a cooperative spirit of co-creation and co-governance, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It helped us not only to imagine the idea of the commons intellectually, but also to enact and embody it through our own experience in the context of architecture school, which brought up a whole series of questions related to the academic norms, hierarchies and procedures.

LANGUAGE AND REPRESENTATION

Lastly, this studio adopted a critical stance toward representation, considering the inherent biases, limitations, and forms of agency of various representational types, graphic conventions, and methodologies. This discerning approach informed the selection of a few highly specific and intentional drawing types which were instrumentalized as analytical tools and yielded a set of formulas that became the raw material for a synthetic and recombinatory process through which new design models were produced. In addition, we also explored experimental representation techniques, drawing from other disciplines and genres, such as collage, graphic novels, and newspaper, which expanded our ability to tell the story behind the project.

The *[Un]common Ground* studio (Spring, 2022) hosted an interdisciplinary symposium, *Uncommoning the Architectural Language*, which brought in the evocative premises of Afro-Futurism and Afro-Surrealism in addressing the uncanny desire to foster allyship despite sharply different backgrounds and positionalities of the engaged parties. This visionary discussion instigated a radical approach to pedagogy leading up to experimenting with visual storytelling techniques, worldbuilding and radical imagination, expanding and contesting the repertoire



Figure 4. Online Co-design Workshop, Common Ground Studio. Screenshot.

of architectural production. As one of our MArch students, Shreya Shankar shared in a reflection:

“The [Un]Commoning Architectural Language symposium was a collective clearing of the eyes. It was activated by an interdisciplinary pantheon of artists, architects, and educators Nyame Brown, Ife Salema Vanable, Bz Zhang, and Lonny Brooks, and facilitated by masters of ceremonies and CCA professors Uzoma Idah and Michael Washington. The panelists offered foundational teachings in world-building by sharing their own explorations bridging art and architecture towards healing and liberation. Through each participant’s oeuvre, we were invited to re-member the wonder and possibility available in the work of built environment alchemy.”

—Shreya Shankar, *10 Codes from the [UN]Commons*⁵

PROCESS: GRAPPLING WITH THE UNCOMMON

Starting as a traditional studio project, where the community partners played the role of a mere client and of a research subject, this three-year-long project grew to be wholly co-created and community-led, in which the curriculum was developed around the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and “coliberation”⁶, where the community partners perform as experts and institutional equals. Our core community partners were Excelsior Action Group (EAG) in Outer Mission district of San Francisco, Japantown Task Force (JTF) in Fillmore district, SF, and West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (WOEIP), which later led to partnership with West Oakland Cultural Action Network (WOCAN) and the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collective (SPARC).

MOVING AT A SPEED OF TRUST

Throughout the three consecutive semester-long engagements, what started as a project-bound appeal, has evolved into a sustained creative partnership, in which both faculty and the CBO leaders are invested in each other’s purpose and take ownership in the development of content and tools. The foundational step, which began long before the studio started, was finding the common ground between the studio instructional team and the CBO leadership by drafting a thorough Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Extending far beyond the bureaucratic procedure, the process of drafting this document became a trust building device, in which the academic and community partners co-developed a series of frameworks for collaborative exchange that centered the rooted expertise of the residents and their lived experience as the primary source of knowledge.

Our genuine interest in the work and the mission of the CBOs was demonstrated through our participation in community meetings and our engagement in frank in-depth dialogues with the CBO leadership. This bi-lateral exchange has not only

invited the CBO leaders behind the scenes of the academic process, but also set the table and gave validity for non-hierarchical knowledge sharing exceeding a transactional encounter. Once the trust was established, our community partners were excited to share their experience and had a lot to offer.

With an incredible hospitality and sense of mentorship, our partners took us on experiential walking tours in the neighborhood, animated by first hand accounts and oral histories of the residents and activists, gave informative presentations, offered group meetings and one on one conversations with the students, and later in the semester participated in interactive workshops with a wider community group. The overall learning experience was unparalleled in its depth and vibrancy, evolving into a reciprocal loop of projection and reflection. This is how Ms. Margaret Gordon, the co-director of West Oakland Indicators Project, described her interest in our partnership:

“One of the things that we want you to learn, to unlearn, is how to be engaged with the community and our process. I thought: “How do we give you something that you have never experienced, and how to take that experience to another level, another phase of the process; to be engaged from the White House to the outhouse and everything in between, to have that experience?” We knew that we had to treat you like a can opener, crank you up a little bit by little bit at a time to keep your balance. I think that this really gave you the ability to start rooting yourself in, and growing and sprouting to see the bigger picture; I have a vision for the bigger picture to have to educate.”

—Ms. Margaret Gordon. *Interview*⁷

One of the central pieces of students’ engagement in community life was a development of a participatory game co-created by the students, to engage residents in a dialogue about their emotional responses to their environment. Launched during a Black Heritage Month celebration in the Hoover Elementary school, the game is now being considered as a potential community engagement tool for the General Plan Update initiative in the City’s Planning Department, and is being further developed in collaboration with the interested students, faculty and the partnering CBOs.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY:

As we engaged in deep dialogues with our community partners, we started realizing the barriers that needed to be overcome in order to establish trustful relationships in the shadow of daunting legacies of academic supremacy and the extractive scientific methods. Maribel A. Ramirez, our partner from Excelsior Action Group explained this barrier as a deference that marginalized communities have towards authorities:

“I think when you are imagining, when you’re in the realm of ideas, it’s hard to translate it to the community in need, who could benefit from that. There’s already this deference [to authority], or this fear of what we perceive as *authorities* or *experts*. It reveals the schisms that we need to figure out how to bridge, to have more of an equal collaboration, honoring those historical traumas and voices that have not always been valued the way they should be.”

—Maribel A. Ramirez. *Interview*⁸

Reckoning with these realizations we were eager to learn alternative practices of consensus-building and co-governance, which our partners were so generous to share with us. These learnings and un-learnings, were poignant reminders of how much our own educational system is still entrenched in the hierarchical, exploitative and transactional mindset of industrial capitalism.

Inspired by the writings in critical pedagogy by authors such as Paolo Friere⁹, bell hooks and others, we aimed to widen “the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared” - embracing difference while recognizing and negotiating “biases of any kind”¹⁰. To allow this, we as faculty took the back seat, performing as conveners and enablers rather than ultimate experts. By fostering direct interaction between the students and the community members, we aimed to decenter the authority of the educators. This relational and unmediated engagement created an increased sense of accountability and self reflection among the students. They were urged to identify and assert their own agency, value systems, as well as their aspired role as professionals in a society. Ms. Margaret Gordon described it as a two-way learning process:

“That’s another look at education that the civil society does not practice. How do you dismiss what power is? Education is a service for both sides. There’s a service to the community also to empower them, to give them power to perform as equals; understand their position of power, being positioned at the table. Because at the end of the day, we [community organizers] are setting the table for them to have the voice; them to have the strategy; them to understand how to do research and to collect data and to translate it based on THEIR life experiences; and to have a place to agree to disagree, to struggle for unity, for one struggle.”

—Ms. Margaret Gordon. *Interview*⁷

The direct engagement with our partners brought a higher level of awareness and urgency into the studio process. Instead of competition for a smart and good looking hypothetical project for the sake of self recognition, the students and us (the faculty) were attuned to unpacking the complex web of urban actors and their interrelationship in resolving real issues on

the ground. We started seeing ourselves as one of the strings in this interwoven web of forces. Ultimately, this created an immersive and heuristic educational framework for the stu-



Figure 5. “Sandbox Feel-Around” Participatory Game, [Un]common Ground studio. Photo by Uzoma Idah.

dents, fostering the idea of emergent learning, as defined by adrienne maree brown: learning that “emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all senses of the body and the mind”¹¹. In their exit interviews, the students shared accounts of a transformative experience on a personal level, such as this quote from a MArch student, Geada Alagha, Spring 2021:

“To me this course didn’t only offer a unique experience of working on certain projects outside of the traditional architecture studio scope, but also personally changed my sense of responsibility moving forward in architecture courses and career. It made me a lot more aware that every project that we work on, even the hypothetical projects for our classes, are still projects for the people in this area and this automatically comes with the responsibility to meet the needs of the people. And it’s a difficult process! I am a social person and I like to talk to people and I still found it really difficult. This class sure got us out of our comfort zone but also gave us just the tools to reach out and ask the right questions. I am excited to keep working on this path of collaborating with people and learning from them and restoring and improving neighborhoods that just deserve better.”

—Geada Alagha. *Interview*¹²

One of the major takeaways of this participatory process was the understanding that in order to achieve a structural change there is an urgent need in what Ms. Margaret Gordon called - "intersectional cooperation". Based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, "all oppressions are interlinked and cannot be solved alone."¹³ This was a great lesson to learn from a life-long fighter for environmental justice, such as Ms. Margaret Gordon, who (in her own words) has seen it all "from the White House to the outhouse and everything in between"⁷. Today, similarly to many other veterans of the movement as well as its emergent leaders, Gordon's goal is centered on education. Our studio partners shared hope that a fundamental shift in the mainstream mindset is possible by educating a future generation of scholars and practitioners to be able to see beyond the boundaries of the current status quo and to be open to radically new, emergent possibilities. Here is how George Turner, the founder of PHATT Chance, a center for re-integration services, described his vision of a higher education:

"The education system is not set up and designed to graduate people of color, and continue to be people of color. It is set up to graduate people that largely emulate white males because at the time they were the majority of people in power. Do you know how many people can't even dream? They have been exposed to so much trauma they can't dream. They say, "Dream it, believe it, and you can achieve it." Well, what about the people who can't dream? I believe that, instead of teaching people to become system dependent, let's try becoming system independent! This way you could take some pride in yourself from a garden if you're selling vegetables, or if you're repairing shoes. I believe it's very important that you stay focused on your roots, the successes in your culture, not everything about your history is something that's negative."

—George Turner. *Interview*¹⁴

CONTINUING PARTNERSHIP

As we move on with our lives, we don't leave behind the deep human relationships that emerged from the embodied experience of these studio projects. Studio instructors and students alike have built long lasting friendships and continue to participate, contribute and facilitate community work and co-creation practices. Some of the examples of this continuing collaboration is the involvement in helping develop a digital self-guided Black Liberation Walking Tour in the Hoover Foster neighborhood, featuring local oral histories; participating in mural co-visioning events and working hand in hand with the local mural artists; co-producing a neighborhood newspaper in collaboration with San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative, promoting popular education in urban planning; and recently engaging in a year-long training program for placed-based

teams of community members and researchers in California to develop Community-Academic Partnerships to Advance Equity-Focused Climate Action (CAPECA)¹⁵. We see this collaboration as an inspiring model for reciprocal accountability practice that harnesses academic skill sets as well as its privileges into a reparative action to pay back for the harms inflicted on marginalized communities of care, who bear the burden of our society's disbalanced and extractive existence.

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