Free To All: Outdoor Spaces for the Boston Public Library

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INTRODUCTION

Free to All is a series of semi-permanent outdoor shade canopies, cooling misters, and seating strategies developed for nine satellite branches of the Boston Public Library. In the summer of 2022, Boston Public Library received a grant to improve access and visibility to library resources in nine underserved communities. The project served as an opportunity to bring the library's services and spaces beyond traditional boundaries to connect with the public in new ways. Community engagement served as a fundamental bedrock of the development of the work, from initial interviews and informal gatherings, to design and construction with a local youth organization, to post-occupancy surveys and operational memos. More than an end product, *Free to All* is an embodiment of a design process, one deeply engaged with members of the public throughout all aspects of the project's development.

INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Beginning with community workshops conducted in partnership with Design4Equity, a local social justice organization, the vision, identity, and distinct needs of each branch and community were highlighted. Providing food and music, we created an informal and fun atmosphere where community members could engage (Fig. 5). They were asked to participate in writing and drawing exercises that brought their ideas to paper and helped inform both general and site-specific strategies. This effort was supported by detailed site surveys, librarian interviews, and existing equipment inventories which built on the unique conditions of each site and previous engagement work.

FLEXIBLE + ACCESSIBLE DESIGN

Based on this feedback, a modular kit of parts was designed with components that could be deployed on each site as needed. The system introduced a series of simple and open-ended pieces of furniture that could be assembled and aggregated by the public to serve a variety of functions, from outdoor performance stages to informal gathering spaces (Fig. 4). Here, the end-user becomes an integral part of the design, creating new organizations and environments previously unanticipated. The five furniture types were designed with ease of fabrication in mind using only four cuts. A colorful weather-resistant lumber made from recycled milk crates was chosen for the material. In addition to the furniture, canopies were developed to provide shade, light, and cooling mist. The canopies reimagined the use and function of ready-made components including Unistrut (Fig. 6), as well as salvaged dimensioned lumber (Fig. 3,7), aimed at affordability, replicability, and responsiveness to community and context. Critical to these simple and accessible material and tectonic systems was an emphasis on design literacy, empowering our construction partners and the general public with the knowledge to easily build, replicate, and potentially expand on the design. An operation manual was developed to outline all of the components of each system, demonstrating step-by-step how one could put together, modify, or take apart the designs.

FABRICATION + ASSEMBLY

Fabrication and assembly was conducted in partnership with YouthBuild Boston, a local non-profit organization aimed at assisting underserved youth with social, vocational, and academic skills to thrive in the design and construction industry through practical experience. Throughout design, fabrication, and assembly we worked with the organization to support hands-on training and design education. Our partnership was intentional about offering new leadership and training opportunities, empowering the youth through a tangible contribution to the built environment, and constructing identity through the reimagining of spaces and places within their neighborhoods (Fig. 1,2). Together, we developed jigs, guides, templates, and built one-to-one prototypes which allowed students to get a feel for unfamiliar materials and construction techniques. We also workshopped these designs together in software programs such as Rhino and AutoCAD on site, allowing us to test, modify, and develop our designs in real-time (Fig. 9).

FEEDBACK + CARE

With a tight schedule and limited budget, we developed a threephase solution that continually examined the projects at two scales: individual sites and a collective entity. Each branch was considered independently to respond to distinct needs and conditions, while simultaneously framing them in a series to ensure the design was responsive to lessons learned, and to maintain legibility across branches. The phasing provided an iterative feedback loop to learn from the development of the designs, provide space to discuss and reflect with the community, and uncover ways to refine construction methods with the students. We completed our work with a post-occupancy survey and operational memo which included drawings, design inventory, and detailed instructions for assembly, disassembly, repair, and replacement (Fig. 8). Despite the limited budget, investment in these elements was central to ensure the continued success of the project through its long-term stewardship and care.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Free to All serves as a community-driven model for future public design and construction processes, creating playful, flexible spaces using simple off-the-shelf resources, low-tech construction methods, a modular design approach, and a robust community engagement process in not just the planning and design, but the construction and assembly process as well. In this series of projects, our aim has been to rethink the notion of community engagement to extend throughout the entirety of a design process, and to better understand how we as architects can serve as conduits of the community in public works projects. Integrating iterative feedback loops, providing time and space for design education and knowledge-building in the construction and assembly process, and offering opportunities to modify or repair designs are just a few examples offered in this work. Free to All embodies a belief in making good design accessible to all members of civic life, not just in its final product, but as a philosophy of participatory design that interfaces with the public at each stage in the development and delivery of a project.

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Figure 1. Assembly and construction of a Unistrut canopy with members of YouthBuild Boston. Image by Matthew Akira Okazaki.



Figure 2. Assembly and construction of a wood canopy with members of YouthBuild Boston. Image by Matthew Akira Okazaki.



Figure 3. Final installation at Egleston Square Branch Library. Image by Randy Crandon.



Figure 4. Diagram of design concept demonstrating flexible furniture and modular canopy system. Image by Chana Haouzi and Matthew Akira Okazaki (Architecture for Public Benefit).



Figure 5. Community engagement sessions held at the branch libraries. Images by Chana Haouzi, Dionne Jones, and Matthew Akira Okazaki.



Figure 6. Final installation at Codman Square Branch Library. Image by Randy Crandon.



Figure 7. Final installation at Egleston Square Branch Library. Image by Randy Crandon.



Figure 8. Excerpt from operation manual outlining canopy parts and assembly. Image by Chana Haouzi and Matthew Akira Okazaki (Architecture for Public Benefit).



Figure 9. YouthBuild Boston student inspecting the digital model on site. Image by Matthew Akira Okazaki.



Figure 10. Looking up through one of the canopies. Image by Randy Crandon.