

Building Community: The Ark on Noah Street

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The project began as a response to a competitive call for community engagement based art projects benefitting the historic “Tenth” district of [City]. The winning project, led by a local artist and a community-based non-profit group, incorporated the efforts of an architecture professor and students as design and construction partners. From this collaboration, and the overwhelming support of the community, an Ark was built on Noah Street as a pavilion-scaled home for exhibiting of local culture, art and history at an annual celebration aimed at raising awareness of and strengthening relationships within the neighborhood by showcasing their family histories/narratives. This included original text, paintings, drawings, photographs, and other family ephemera.

The artist, oversaw the design, assembly, and community engagement for the entirety of the process. The architecture professor articulated the physical structure and involved his students in the process of design communication and on-site construction. As part of a senior design studio centered around tactile learning and building quickly at multiple scales, the project proved a perfect fit offering students valuable experience in making while giving them the opportunity to engage the community and understand the cultural importance of the project and its affect on a district in need.

Far exceeding the time-constrained efforts of students, there was substantial outpouring of effort from the neighbors, both in the preparation of materials and construction. An important element of the project was the collaborative build process, which enlisted many people at varying degrees of involvement. The Ark brought people together by creating a festival template that gets people out, and engaged in the evolution of a tradition that connect neighbors and evolves on their terms. The Ark heightened recognition of community history by becoming an annual repository of these stories and histories that both neighbors and the greater community can expand on, respond to, and otherwise engage.

After a two week build process, the Ark Festival commenced with a neighborhood parade and celebration of the art, process and involved citizens through the exhibit opening, featuring live music, food and entertainment from members of the community, and the nearby zoo. The visible pride and camaraderie at the Ark Festival was unmistakable and unforgettable.

The Ark on Noah Street shifts perceptions by activating a vacant parking lot and temporarily exploring the possibilities of that space. It also preserves the history of the Tenth District and promotes local culture by creating an ever evolving archive of family stories, recognizing the history of the area.

Short term, the Ark on Noah Street will encourage neighborhood participation both in the construction and in documentation of families stories through audio recordings, photography and art panels created by the residents themselves. It will be an opportunity for neighbors to know each other. The long term impact would be to create a reproducible ritual and annual tradition that evolves with the community. The neighborhood trajectory will trend upwards with policies that integrate the Ark project into any additional development in the district.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: The Ark on Noah Street A collaborative project, engaging designers and residents in a historic neighborhood



Project Narrative. The project began as a response to a competitive call for community engagement based art projects benefitting the historic “Tenth” district of Dallas, Texas. The winning project, led by a local artist and a community based non-profit group, incorporated the efforts of an architecture professor and his students as design and construction partners. From this collaboration, and the overwhelming support of the community, an Ark was built on Noah Street as a pavilion-scaled home for exhibiting local culture, art and history at an annual celebration aimed at raising awareness of and strengthening relationships within the neighborhood.

The Ark was designed for and built in the vacant parking lot behind the Greater El Bethel Baptist Church at the corner of Noah and North Cliff Street. Constructed by surrounding a 20 ft shipping container with a wooden frame structure clad with salvaged doors, screens and windows from the area, the Ark serves as an exhibit space for distributed wood panels on which participating neighbors composed their families’ narratives through imagery and writing. During the time of year when the exhibit is not open, the shipping container serves as a containment space for the exterior materials of the modular, disassembled ark. Many of the materials used were gathered from the neighborhood, including remnants from abandoned homes, doors donated by the church - while some were purchased from near-by scrap yards or recycled from previous builds.

Pedagogical Goals. Christopher Blay, the project leading artist oversaw the design, assembly, and community engagement for the entirety of the process. Assistant Professor Joshua M. Nason of UT-Arlington’s School of Architecture articulated the physical structure and engaged his students in some of the process of design communication and on-site construction. As part of a senior design studio centered around tactile learning and building at multiple scales in short order, the project proved a perfect fit, offering students valuable experience in making while giving them the opportunity to engage the community and hopefully understand the cultural importance of the project and its affect on a community in need of support.

Community Involvement. Even exceeding the time-constrained efforts of the students, there was a substantial outpouring of support and effort from the neighbors, both in the preparation of materials and construction. An important element of the project was the involved and collaborative build process, which enlisted many people at varying degrees of involvement. Volunteers and neighbors often shared cookouts after a long working days. In the interim period before the construction of the Ark, 2’ X 2’ panels were distributed to residents on which they composed family histories/narratives. This included hand written text, original paintings and drawings, photographs, and other family ephemera.

Some of the elements of community engagement reflected in the proposal include the following: (1) A need for bringing people together. Some of what we learned through the discovery phase was that people don’t come out and interact with their neighbors. The Ark project creates a festival template that gets people out, and engaged in the evolution of a tradition that connect neighbors and evolves on their terms. (2) Recognition of community history. There are a lot of stories about the historic tenth that are not widely known or shared (like the house that Bonnie and Clyde lived in, or the historic connection the Greater El Bethel has with the multiple musicians that are house hold names in the African American community). The Ark project becomes an annual repository of these stories and histories that both neighbors and the greater community can expand on, respond to, and otherwise engage.

The Ark Festival. After completing the two week build process, the Ark Festival commenced with a neighborhood parade when contributing narrators walked from a local daycare center through the community to the ark with their completed family panels, ready for installation. The day was marked with a celebration of the art, process and involved citizens through the exhibit opening, live music, food and entertainment from members of the community, including the involvement of the nearby Dallas Zoo and some of its featured residents. After the opening, the Ark on Noah Street was available for a period of 40 days and nights when the ark was open by appointment. During that period the ark received many visits and served as a gathering space for the neighbors. Tours were conducted for students of area universities and schools as well as for people in the community and their guests. The visible pride and camaraderie centered around the Ark was unmistakable and remains unforgettable. The ark was recently re-packed and is planned to reopen in about a year.

Themes and Impact. The Ark on Noah Street shifts perceptions by activating a vacant parking lot and temporarily exploring the possibilities of that space. It also preserves the history of the 10th Street neighborhood and promotes the culture by creating an ever evolving archive of family stories and recognizing the history of the adjacent church and lots.

Short term, the Ark on Noah Street will encourage neighborhood participation both in the construction and in documentation of families stories through audio recordings, photography and art panels created by the residents themselves. It will be an opportunity for neighbors to know each other. The long term impact would be to create a reproducible ritual and annual tradition that evolves with the community. The neighborhood trajectory will trend upwards with policies that integrate the Ark project into any additional development in the area.

