

An Infrastructure for Restorative Justice: Studio Progress Report

DARRICK BOROWSKI

School of Visual Arts

RIK EKSTROM

School of Visual Arts

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In this paper, we lay out learnings from the first two years of our ongoing, student-led design/research study to develop a bottom-up, community-based approach to ending mass incarceration via design interventions in our built environment.

The initial phase of research was focused on developing an operating framework—a guiding document for designers. This led to two overarching conclusions. The first is an approach to, and scope for, programming, which we summarize as being captured by five “touchpoints”—Advocacy, Prevention, Intervention, Mitigation, and Re-entry. The second is the spatialization of these programs which, we propose, need to be woven into the urban/neighborhood fabric at various scales and positions in the public realm.

The second year’s studio built on the work of the first, by linking up with city agencies and organizations working on criminal justice reform to apply our framework to real projects, sites, and communities. The studio partnered with NYC’s Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) and Department of Design & Construction (DDC) as well as the Center for Court Innovation (CCI) to explore opportunities for practical interventions. The resulting projects ranged in scope and scale from mobile, street-based installations to new Community Justice Centers in Far Rockaway and Queensbridge, and proposals for a redesigned Bronx Housing Court, including a “Problem Solving Court.”

Our goal is to provide architects and designers with an actionable framework for promoting spatial justice, identified by Soja as “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them.”¹ By sharing our process we hope to provoke our colleagues in academia to join us in encouraging a new generation of designers to exercise their agency and criticality and use their craft to advance social change.

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

In the fall of 2019 New York’s City Council approved plans to close Rikers Island, one of the world’s largest and most notorious jails. The decision was a result of a long-fought, still ongoing battle to push the city toward reckoning with an unjust, and demonstrably racist, mass incarceration system. The city settled on a plan to replace the remote island complex with four “borough-based” jails. The new jails, the city said, will adopt newest best practices, as seen in more progressive northern European models, and be “safer, smaller and more humane.”² Our department was invited by the NYC Dept of Design and Construction to contribute to the research that will inform these new institutions. But our research in the Spring of 2020 led us down a different path, and the year that followed reinforced our developing hypothesis that “better prisons” are not enough.

That summer saw Black Lives Matter protests erupt in cities around the world. Quarantined citizens were moved to march by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Jacob Blake, and more, at the hands of police. As educators, training future designers of the built environment, it became even more imperative, that we investigate how we might leverage our cities—our streets, sidewalks, buildings, and public places—to end mass incarceration, while promoting equity and beginning the process of healing in communities disproportionately affected by the carceral system. We frame this initiative as an urgent infrastructure project, *An Infrastructure for Restorative Justice*.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

The research began with a look into our current carceral system, including its roots in slavery and Jim Crow laws, and the explosion of “mass” incarceration in the 1970’s, largely fueled by the “war on drugs” and “tough-on-crime” policing.³ These policies further devastated communities of color already struggling due to disinvestment and racist planning (redlining), leading to further economic inequality, housing inaccessibility, inadequate public services, and subsequently, increased crime. NYC Dept of Corrections records, obtained by journalists in 2013, make plain just how localized this effect is. The headline “5 Neighborhoods Supply Over A Third Of NYC’s Prisoners”⁴ reinforced for us that the work to create a more just system begins not in the jails, but



Figure 1. Touchpoints in the Infrastructure for Restorative Justice.

in neighborhoods, starting with the five identified—Brownsville, South Bronx, East New York, Harlem, and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

In our search for an entry point to a solution, we spoke with colleagues and activists and were quickly pointed toward the Restorative Justice movement, a community-based approach that seeks to repair the harm caused by wrongdoing and promote healing in both parties (victim and offender). To challenge the way the criminal justice system currently functions, this alternative (with its roots in the justice practices of indigenous peoples) shifts the focus from *retribution* towards *rehabilitation* and *reconciliation*.

Spaces to facilitate this approach to justice have been built. In New York, The Center for Court Innovation has been creating a network of Community Courts/Justice Centers in neighborhoods around the city since its first in Midtown in 1993. And on the west coast in 2019, Restore Oakland, designed by Deanna Van Buren of Designing Justice + Designing Spaces, opened to the public, creating a hub for restorative justice in the Bay Area.

Taking a cue from this approach, our students began to articulate a “framework” starting with a vision and a set of goals. We then set out to explore how the built environment might support these goals, by funneling investment not into continuing mass

incarceration, but into an infrastructure of spatial justice aimed at ending the self-propagating racist system.

The framework establishes five “Touchpoints”—Advocacy, Prevention, Intervention, Mitigation, and Re-Entry—which identify and categorize the ways in which society fails a large portion of our population, establishing and maintaining a revolving door to our carceral system. It then explores how the built environment can be leveraged to address these systemic roots. Students, working in five groups (one per touchpoint) developed the definition and programming opportunities related to each touchpoint. They can be summarized as:

Advocacy—Humanizing the incarcerated and communities disproportionately affected by the current carceral system (often low-income people of color). Proposed interventions include community forums, art exchanges, and community-generated journalism/storytelling.

Prevention—Addressing poverty and trauma, two leading precursors to crime and subsequent incarceration, in the neighborhoods where a disproportionate number of our city’s incarcerated peoples come from. Proposals include mobile solutions for educational programs, mental/emotional wellness, career services, and community-built cooperative housing.

Intervention—Repairing wounds in communities caused by wrong-doing using alternatives to the current criminal justice system (while keeping those accused out of jail). These projects facilitate the traditional activities of Restorative Justice like peacemaking circles and alternative courts.

Mitigation—Engaging with policy-makers and “lessening the severity” for people caught up in the existing system. This includes space for advocates doing bail and parole work, as well as interventions within jails and prisons, such as spaces for education, therapy, and re-envisioned visiting experiences.

Re-Entry—Assisting those recently released from prison and working to reduce recidivism by helping them develop the tools they need to rejoin society. Projects include housing solutions, job training, space for rebuilding social bonds, and enrichment programs via craft and the arts.



Figure 2. Hubs, Nodes, and Satellites.

A NETWORK APPROACH

New York City’s proposed “Borough-Based Jail” approach may in the end succeed in addressing some of the well-documented institutional failures at Rikers, but decentralizing the jail system won’t address the root causes leading to incarceration. Stemming the rate of incarceration requires addressing community needs. Solutions should be situated in the community, informed by the community, and supportive of the community. To date, these needs have been largely under-resourced and the effects have been treated as symptoms. To effect our alternative strategy, the Touchpoints were developed to be implemented via a network approach that locates these reparative structures within communities at three topological locations and scales:

Satellites are easily deployed, often mobile or temporary interventions, distributed throughout the neighborhood and providing the most direct connection to people in public spaces. **Nodes** represent a new kind of local institution, at the scale of neighborhood libraries or schools. Nodes are familiar, trusted,

integrated into the daily life of the community. And finally Hubs, which are collocated with existing borough institutions, such as courthouses and jails, in order to promote alternatives to the traditional system, while influencing positive change within the adjacent traditional institutions.



Figure 3. Prevention Touchpoint—Mobile Library. Daniella Lun, Xinze Li, Botao Wang, Yuanjun Chen.

With the touchpoints, and a strategy for their spatialization established, student teams explored implementation via conceptual prototypes. *Advocacy* projects include a gallery space to highlight neighborhood creative expression, a neighborhood Forum to promote community workshops and political activism, and sidewalk kiosks, at the scale of bus stops or phone booths, to collect stories and promote neighborhood journalism. *Prevention* projects include a Community Development Corporation storefront, mobile libraries and tutoring classrooms, and pop-up therapy pods. The *Intervention* team focused on the components of community justice and peace-making by designing a Restorative Justice Welcome & Information Center, Community Justice Court, and spaces for peacemaking circles. *Mitigation* projects look at ways of lessening the negative impacts of the current carceral system by reimagining parole preparation and hearing spaces, mental health access, and connections to family and community through physical and virtual visiting accommodations. The *ReEntry* team focused on a single building in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, which provided returning citizens a safe, supportive environment to live, find work and find wellness through art and music.

EXPLORING THE FRAMEWORK VIA PROJECTS

In the second cycle of research, students built on the work of the first cohort, exploring the potential of our framework to solve design challenges at each of the three network typologies (Satellites, Nodes, & Hubs) using the five touchpoints.

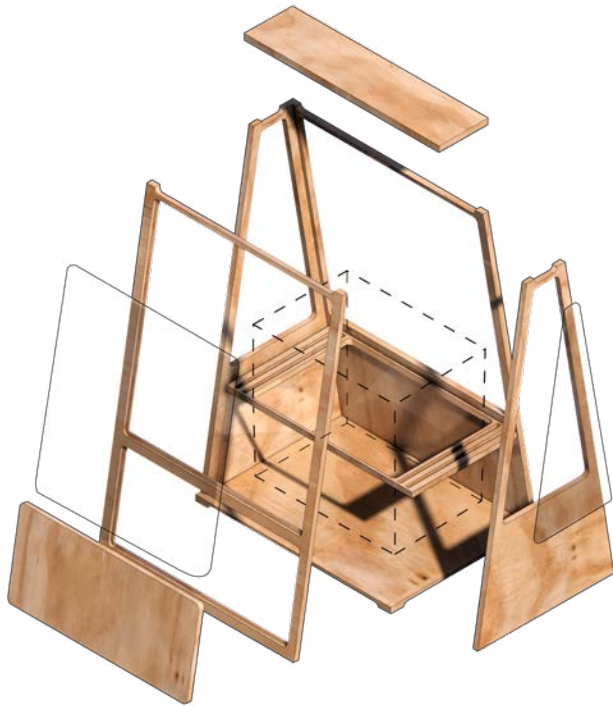


Figure 4. DIY Modular Greenhouse Kit. William HuanYu Kuang.

Satellites were explored through a project we called *Community Toolkit*, a set of DIY interventions. We worked with the Center for Court Innovation to develop proposals for neighborhood Nodes in the form of *Community Justice Centers* in two neighborhoods in Queens. And the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice challenged us to rethink one of their existing “Hubs”—The Bronx Housing Court.

SATELLITES: COMMUNITY TOOLKIT

The *Community Toolkit* was conceived of as a collection of small, deployable urban interventions, each aimed at tackling a spatial justice issue and shared via an online platform. Each toolkit project was considered as an open source DIY “product” intended to be built by community members. To make the project realizable, the brief called for an economy of materials and labor—materials should be available at a local hardware store or building materials supplier and the fabrication and assembly should not require more than a basic construction know-how.

Projects again were developed in groups, with each group tackling one of the five touchpoints. Ideas for projects were generated by research into issues raised by their touchpoints and via conversations with city agencies and partner organizations.

Within *Advocacy*, the students responded to a challenge by the Mayor’s office (MOCJ) looking to boost awareness and participation in the Participatory Budgeting Process on NYC Housing Authorities campuses. Participatory Budgeting is a city initiative by which residents of a district are given the opportunity to propose and vote to fund local grassroots projects to be paid for out



Figure 5. Subway Stories Interactive Art Installation. Jayden Perez.

of a city council person’s discretionary funding. The team developed a kit of parts for a *Community Forum*, an easy to assemble/disassemble (and reconfigure) outdoor structure for brainstorming, promoting, debating, and voting on local projects.

The *Prevention* Group proposed *Sprout*, a modular greenhouse kit. This small-scale easy-to-fabricate low-tech, high-productivity greenhouse is designed to be aggregated together, and includes a “veggie exchange” module, encouraging community members to grow and share fresh food together.

The *Intervention* team developed solutions for both in and out of the courts, including *Consultation (& Childcare) Booths for Courts*, providing much needed space for the justice-involved to meet with court-appointed counsel and prep for hearings and the *Community Service & Upcycle Studio*, a container-based community service hub and workshop that promotes upcycling, small-scale repair, mentorship and job training.

The *Mitigation* team developed spaces for education, skills development, and mental health support within prisons, each addressing the alienation and dehumanizing aspects of the carceral system. Students also found opportunities for cross-touchpoint cooperation, including prison-based hydroponic gardening, in cooperation with the previously mentioned *Sprout* project.

The *ReEntry* team built on research conducted around the specific challenges facing people released from prisons, or returning citizens. The team developed programming for self-discovery,

team building, and creative expression for individuals seeking to reintegrate into society.

Over the course of development, some projects began to evolve into slightly more complex solutions, including a hybrid of DIY construction and an open-source tech platform supporting it. The technology side, we suggest, might be tackled by a pro-bono team of developers and serve multiple communities, while the physical manifestation would be deployed and built by local community members.

Examples of these types of projects include Book-emon Go a neighborhood network of “little free library” boxes, which broadcast a mesh wifi network (powered by the local library) and promotes reading in middle-school-aged kids via a location-based AR game (think book club meets Pokemon Go meets geo-caching). Another tech-enabled project, Subway Stories, turns a subway/bus commute into a pop-up interactive installation celebrating the diversity of New York City neighborhoods.

Funding for these projects might be pursued through various routes, including participatory budgeting proposals (with calls for proposals put out annually by city council) or established community advocacy programs like the Mayor’s Action Plan (MAP).

NODES: COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTERS

In order to explore the potential of the framework to inform restorative justice “Nodes,” we worked with The Center for Court Innovation (CCI) to help program and design two new potential locations for their Community Justice Centers in New York City.

A Community Justice Center is a neighborhood-based, multi-jurisdictional community court aimed at solving problems locally, diverting clients from the traditional justice system. There are currently a handful of these centers in New York City, with more being planned.

CCI asked us to consider one such future location in Far Rockaway, Queens. After a study of the neighborhood, the student team selected a low-rise commercial building on Mott Ave, a main thoroughfare, ensuring it was a visible presence in the community. The center was programmed through the lens of the five touchpoints. The ground floor was dedicated to public spaces like basketball courts and event space, as well as storefronts to serve as small business incubators. The upper level of the two-story building was programmed with community resources like daycare, classrooms, art studios, and conflict resolution and peacemaking. Additionally, the roof was considered as a community gathering space, including a garden and space for events.

Another team proposed a Community Justice Center to serve Queensbridge Houses, a public housing campus in the Long Island City neighborhood of Queens. An old four-story, 90,000 sqft former factory was selected as the site and a survey of local services informed programming. In order to break-down

traditional pre-conceived notions of the justice process, the team took a novel approach of integrating the justice center with a public library. Library and community court functions are organized around an inner atrium and oriented to the Queensbridge Houses. The idea was to link access to information and learning to perceptions of justice.

A key takeaway from both projects was the principle of co-locating the formal programming of restorative justice work, like conflict resolution and peacemaking, with more general community-building programming that brings local residents together in daily activities and celebration, not just in times of crisis.

HUBS: BRONX HOUSING COURT

Our “Hub” project came out of conversations with the Mayor’s Office for Criminal Justice which was looking for design solutions for one of New York’s court system’s most problematic assets, the Bronx Housing Court. The process began with research into the court’s challenges. The team poured through numerous surveys, studies, and reports commissioned by the bar association and courts administrators. There was also ample journalistic coverage of the court’s problems. This literature review resulted in the identification of major pain points and led to the development of the design brief, which identified two approaches to be led by two separate teams. One which works with the court’s (traditional) program, and one that proposes a new progressive court typology—the Problem Solving Court.

The first approach led to a rethinking of the “experience design” of the court, looking at the current “user journey” and nine key moments or opportunities for creating a more just experience for court users (gleaned from the literature review). These included, starting from the front door—security, wayfinding, help centers, and community resources and public spaces. Once upstairs, the team proposed family areas, clients/attorney meeting spaces, guidance re art and decor, and even a reconsideration of the courtroom itself.

The project netted some unexpected discussions and findings, the primary being a radical reconsideration of programming and public/private space. While most courts are impenetrable edifices, this redesign opened the court up to the community with a glass streetfront facade and inside a housing resource lab to help tenants understand their rights and avoid eviction (and perhaps even avoid a hearing).

And whereas in the current building layout, circulation might be 20% of the floor area, this proposal flips that ratio. Recognizing the importance of the time in the building leading up to a hearing, the team suggests prioritizing circulation spaces and programming them with all the supports users need to prepare for their hearings and increase their chance for positive outcomes.



Figure 6. Bronx Housing Court Redesign, Section. Eunice Kim, Camille Lyn-Morillo, Mini Ziheng Zhao, William HuanYu Kuang.

Finally the team considered the effects of the colonial legacy of civic architecture, art and decor, and we challenged ourselves to make these spaces feel more welcoming, more diverse, more inclusive. Courtrooms themselves are stripped of their hierarchy and iconography—designed for negotiation and compromise. The experience throughout is designed to feel more like home, incorporating natural elements, and reflecting the cultures of the community it serves - the Bronx. The result, we argue, will be a space that communicates *justice is accessible to all here*.

Upstairs, another team considered how to reimagine the upper four floors as what's known as a "Problem Solving Court." For more than thirty years Problem Solving Courts have been explored as an alternative to the established judicial process in the United States—going beyond sentencing to directly addressing underlying societal issues. To date, most of these judicial alternatives, have been used to deal with drug-related offenses. Our team proposed developing a Problem Solving Court (PSC) devoted to housing issues, applying resolution practices, support, and remedies from the more successful PSC precedents to solve housing conflicts in the South Bronx.

Working from the same research foundation as the Bronx Housing Court "experience design" team, the PSC team considered the community's relationship to the institution and were

alarmed at the findings. Eighty-five percent of tenants surveyed, for instance, reported that no one had told them that they had the right to object to legal fees. Eighty-three percent said that they did not have access to legal representation when appearing at housing court hearings. And 56% reported that they did not understand their legal options if a landlord did not make repairs per an agreement. A vast majority (86%) of the cases brought to Housing Court are initiated by landlords.⁵ But despite the overwhelming advantage to landlords represented by the traditional justice system, the PSC team concluded that landlords and property owners were important stakeholders in a more holistic process, along with families and advocacy groups.

Visitors to the PSC would arrive on the 7th Floor and step out into an open plan programmed for public gathering spaces, orientation and family areas. A permeable central service bar incorporates core functions and meeting spaces, separating "primary" circulation from "secondary," movement, pooling, and gathering zones. Like the redesigned Housing Court spaces below, the PSC programming places a high priority on enabling communication and mitigation, before parties see a judge. There are no court rooms, corridors, or security queues.

The four primary program areas—from most public to most private as you ascend—include the "Arrival" experience

(orientation, information), programmed public space (child and family care, hospitality), “Problem Solving” (consultation and hearing spaces), and “Specialized Services” (housing support, evaluation, therapy). The first three levels are connected by an open, grand stair that provides views north across the Grand Concourse, neighborhood housing complexes and Mullaly Park.

A key conclusion from this study was that the courthouse as a building typology, which traditionally is insular, opaque, and authoritative, could evolve to become the inverse, incorporating landscape and “satellite” interventions in and around the neighborhood in order to connect people back to an institution that should be perceived in the same way as a major public amenity, like a hospital or museum.

CONCLUSION

As we prepare for another cycle of this research, the team is considering how to build on the foundation set by the first two years of work while flushing out the gaps identified along the way.

Feedback on the framework has been overwhelmingly positive—the general conclusion being that we have pulled together and formalized a number of ideas that have been circulating in more progressive circles within the justice community, and contextualized it for designers.

In student project work, we’ve seen how our framework can be a generative tool for understanding and uncovering opportunities for spatial justice interventions in the built environment. We plan to continue to interrogate the five touchpoints and explore how they might inform projects at various scales. Going forward, we’re looking to share this framework to see what it might yield in the hands of other designers, both in academia and in professional/public practice.

But embarking on this effort from the studio, our offices (even city hall) can only get us so far. In order to design a truly bottom-up infrastructure, the work needs to be done in partnership with community stakeholders. This will mean establishing a codesign process by which we can collaborate and tackle issues that the community identifies, leveraging solutions that emerge from those collaborations. We had every intention of doing this with our previous projects, but the pandemic prohibited it, and in the end, we decided that we had much to learn internally before asking community members to devote their time, particularly in light of the risks imposed by the health crisis.

We recognize that community co-design requires a level of trust that precedes meaningful engagement. We look forward to continuing to work with our existing partners in developing these relationships and further growing our network in order to connect and work with actual stakeholders in the communities we hope to serve.

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