

The Urgency of Presence:
Designing Healing Community Spaces After Displacement

by

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ABSTRACT

Named for its proximity to the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard, “Mass. and Cass” is an informal neighborhood in Boston that is often described in the news with disaster-tinged language like “epicenter” and “tent city”. After this neighborhood was declared a “public health crisis”, the City of Boston made major investments into constructing and bolstering permanent supportive housing and other much-needed services. But when we sat with its unhoused, drug-using, and outreach communities on the ground, they described parallel investments in militarized public spaces, an exclusionary neighborhood planning process, and stigmatizing media stories that overemphasize the neighborhood’s crime and violence. Most narratives about “Mass. and Cass” ignore these structural oppressions, exemplifying how current “solutions” to homelessness are less concerned with the well-being of unhoused people and more with their disappearance from public space. In response, our art collective See You In The Future has been working with community members of “Mass. and Cass” and poor people’s movements to research how histories of crisis and displacement connect with current anti-homeless policies, and to collectively imagine what healing community spaces might feel like. Centering the wisdom and lived experiences of residents and staff—and informed by liberatory and loving philosophies like harm reduction, disability justice, and abolition—we offer four spatial design values: belonging, care, hope, and growth. As our project is ongoing, this document shares our work thus far: our methods rooted in seeing and solidarity; research on the creative labor of maintaining community spaces despite policy interventions; practical notes on designing workshops and a mural; and finally reflections on presence and solidarity as outside artists and designers. Because we are focusing on community stories, which are in some sense infinite, I present our work as a series of essays to emphasize the indeterminate, character-led, and emotional nature of our methods and findings. My hope is this reads like a walk, where our feet stay planted on the ground and the humanity of community members never leaves our sight.

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Spaces After Displacement

Melissa Q. Teng
See You In The Future Collective

August 2023

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A Note on Content

All names of residents, visitors, and folks seeking services in “Mass. and Cass” have been changed for anonymity. Names of government staff and See You In The Future Collective members have been maintained or omitted.

I have created all images included, unless otherwise credited.

We are often advised in our conversations to show the reality of life in “Mass. and Cass”, both the beauty and the brutality. As such, this document contains descriptions of state violence and forced displacement, as well as references to chaotic drug use, domestic violence, and bodily violence. Please take care.

Introduction to the Urgency of Presence

The florals threaded through his dark backpack caught my eye. I followed the delicate needlework along its rough material. Rosy peonies and lotus blossoms curled around a tiger mid-roar, framed by a poem: *L'Aveugle, par amour* [The Blind, by love]. Ward was a young Black man, probably no older than twenty, sitting at our workshop table alone and doodling a heart in flames. “Great style,” I said, sitting across the table from him. He stopped coloring and said thanks slowly, scanning my face for ulterior motives and, it seemed, preparing to leave. I introduced myself and said I was an artist and student, not working for the government or hospital. He picked up his marker again and we started chatting. He showed me tattoos that he had designed or poked, some less proudly than others, and recounted times he used to jack cars for fun. I didn’t know much about carjacking (a small alarm went off in my head; I had no idea if Ward was a dangerous person beyond our encounters, but he showed nothing but curiosity and respect to me so I could not judge him), but I shared about tattoos I dreamed of getting and their significance for my heritage. Although Ward had an apartment about an hour away by train—where he sometimes couldn’t help but play *Grand Theft Auto* all night—he liked to visit this neighborhood to “gamble” with another addiction he couldn’t quite kick. “But did you think you’d be here coloring today?” I joked and he smiled. *No, I did not.*

This neighborhood is often described in the news using disaster terms like “epicenter,” “open air drug market,” “tent city,” and “public health crisis”. Named for its proximity to the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard, “Mass. and Cass” became a major campaign topic in the city of Boston’s 2021 mayoral elections, framed as the region’s most visible convergence of crises in homelessness, opioid addiction, and mental illness. Members of the community—tent residents, shelter guests, visitors and “gamblers,” and service providers^{1,2}—described such an obvious uptick in drive-by photography before the elections³ that if anybody spots a nonconsensual camera still today, they’ll call out, “Filming! Filming!” and people will throw bottles in knee-jerk defense. Capitalizing on the neighborhood’s visibility, the vast majority of stories about “Mass. and Cass” are produced *by* outsiders and *for* outsiders. Authors drop in, extract images and people’s experiences out of context, and shape them into stories for profit. The trouble with claiming the “Mass. and Cass” neighborhood as a crisis is that this single story evokes an urgent and moral demand for intervention⁴ and fuels a public spectatorship hungry to see *how will this disaster be fixed?*

¹ Personal communications with group of service providers, October 12, 2021.

² George Halfkenny, phone call with author, December 14, 2021.

³ To see the uptick in journalism, see Note A: 2020 Coverage by *The Boston Globe*.

⁴ Roitman, Janet L. *Anti-Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Housing and poverty scholars have established that “fixes” to truly eradicate homelessness require structural-level decisions and policy changes.⁵ The root cause of homelessness in the U.S. is that housing is not affordable or available for enough people today.^{6,7} The city of Boston has always been home to unhoused or unsettled people who do not meet the demands of capitalism.⁸ But today’s alarming proportion of unhoused people in every U.S. state and territory is the result of policy choices that have dismantled housing, labor, and social protections. A single parent with one child in the Boston area needs to earn over \$47 an hour to meet their family’s basic needs, but the state mandates a minimum wage of only \$15 an hour.^{9,10} In Massachusetts, about one in five people in the workforce earn less than the minimum wage.¹¹ Alongside many other low-income renters like students, elders, disabled folks, and single caregivers, workers are competing for a small and insufficient number of affordable housing units.¹² Massachusetts would need to make over 175,000 more units available to ensure that all families considered “extremely low-income” have at least a chance at housing.¹³ This amount may seem daunting, but there were over 250,000 vacant housing units across the state in 2020.¹⁴ Across the country, there are 28 vacant houses for every unhoused person.¹⁵ That is, homelessness is ultimately a policy choice and, on clear days, its eradication is within reach. Unfortunately political will and public education are still clouded by centuries-old stigmas about unhoused people and their other social identities, including disability, poverty, immigration, drug use, gender expression, racism, and settler colonialism.

⁵ Wes Enzinna and Violet Luca. *Homelessness, Empty Houses, and Eric Adams*. Podcast. Harpers Magazine, 2023. <https://soundcloud.com/harpersmagazine/homelessness-empty-houses-and-eric-adams>.

⁶ Colburn, Gregg, and Clayton Page Aldern. *Homelessness Is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain U.S. Patterns*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022.

⁷ “Housing Affordability and Homelessness,” *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, Jan. 2020, <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/housing>.

⁸ Vale, Lawrence J. *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

⁹ Glasmeier, Amy. “Living Wage Calculation for Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA.” Living Wage Calculator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Accessed August 10, 2023. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/14460>.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts. “Massachusetts Law about Minimum Wage.” Mass.gov, May 25, 2023. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-law-about-minimum-wage>.

¹¹ 19.4% of the workforce earns less than \$15/hour. This includes 40.3% of all Latinx workers, 31.7% of Black workers, 15.5% of AAPI workers, and 15.3% of white workers. (Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. “2023 Massachusetts Fact Sheet,” May 2023.

https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Massachusetts-Fact-Sheet-Template_resources.pdf.)

¹² “Massachusetts Housing Needs: State Data Overview.” National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023. <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/massachusetts>.

¹³ “Massachusetts Housing Needs: State Data Overview.” National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023. <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/massachusetts>.

¹⁴ Kolomatsky, Michael. “Vacant Homes Everywhere.” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2022, sec. Real Estate. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/realestate/vacancy-rate-by-state.html>.

¹⁵ United Way the National Capital Area. “Vacant Homes vs. Homelessness In the U.S.” United Way NCA, March 28, 2023. <https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/vacant-homes-vs-homelessness-by-city/>.

One prevalent false narrative is that homelessness is caused by an individual’s own bad choices and unwillingness to change or work. But over a quarter of unhoused people in Boston are employed.¹⁶ This past spring, a couple Jennifer and Dan described to me how they had lost their apartment to a fire and walked for eight days from Lynn, MA, to seek medical treatment for Dan in Boston. When a hospital worker said that Jennifer couldn’t stay with him overnight, Dan signed out and the two of them pitched a tent in the nearby “Mass. and Cass” neighborhood. When I paid them each our standard interview rate of \$50, we were stunned that they were still eight dollars short for a night in the nearest motel.¹⁷ Another prevalent narrative in the news is that homelessness is caused by drug addiction or mental illness. To test these characteristics often ascribed to unhoused people, housing scholar Gregg Colburn and data journalist Clayton Aldern mapped their relative rates across the country and found no correlation; many people with a drug addiction or mental disability do not end up unhoused.¹⁸ But for those who do, who find themselves trying to manage their health within the shelter system or in the public eye of the streets, accessing non-judgmental healthcare is scarce and precarious.

Many nationally recognized innovations in street-based medicine and harm reduction services were started in Boston^{19,20} and were sited near the Boston Medical Center to help patients access them more easily. These services form the vital infrastructure that supports the surrounding neighborhood, which has become known as “Mass. and Cass”. The desire and labor of these service providers to meet clients where they are have made this neighborhood one of the region’s only public health refuges, where unhoused or drug-using people can receive life-affirming, relational, and destigmatized care.²¹ Many housed residents and government officials do not see this neighborhood’s history or people beyond their stigmas. As a result, when homelessness is declared a “public health crisis,” the “fixes” have often included sweeping away the places where unhoused people are most visible.

¹⁶ “Working Homeless On Path To Self-Sufficiency.” WBZ NewsRadio1030, May 22, 2015.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/working-homeless-on-path-to-self-sufficiency/>.

¹⁷ Jennifer and Dan, conversation with author, April 9, 2023.

¹⁸ Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern. *Homelessness Is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain U.S. Patterns*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022.

¹⁹ Szalavitz, Maia. *Undoing Drugs: How Harm Reduction Is Changing the Future of Drugs and Addiction*. Hachette Go, 2021.

²⁰ O’Connell, James J., Sarah C. Oppenheimer, Christine M. Judge, Robert L. Taube, Bonnie B. Blanchfield, Stacy E. Swain, and Howard K. Koh. “The Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program: A Public Health Framework.” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 8 (August 2010): 1400–1408. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.173609>.

²¹ Kidder, Tracy. *Rough Sleepers: Dr. Jim O’Connell’s Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People*. Random House, 2023.

As a result of their crisis declaration, the City of Boston is currently making major investments into constructing and bolstering much-needed permanent supportive housing and other homeless services.²² But from our conversations with residents and staff at “Mass. and Cass,” these structural investments have run parallel to other investments in militarizing and enclosing public spaces on the ground, an exclusionary neighborhood planning process led by property and business owners, and stigmatizing media narratives that overemphasize the neighborhood’s crime statistics and violence. Most stories about “Mass. and Cass” focus on the City’s promising structural investments while ignoring people’s oppressive experiences on the ground, exemplifying how current “fixes” are less concerned with the well-being and healing of unhoused people and more with their disappearance from public space.

* * *

When I asked Ward what he might change about “Mass. and Cass,” he thought for a moment and said, “I wouldn’t change a thing.” He explained: “Some people, especially young people, ... need to come here to learn lessons.” Things like, “don’t take things offered if you can’t deal with the consequences... And there are always consequences.”²³ Ward had a joyless relationship with his childhood family, and he was far from the only person with, as he put it, “connection issues” in this neighborhood. I asked Ward if he had friends here, and he made a motion like laughing without sound. People here were acquaintances only, which was part of why he liked coming here. Friends and family will “end at some point,” but acquaintances go on forever. To him, “Mass. and Cass” was irreplaceable; it was a place to learn lessons on his own terms, where he felt like he mattered (in whatever state he was in), and where he was able to fall, start from scratch, and feel supported by his community of acquaintances.²⁴ It was a place where he could show love to others and, gradually, learn to love himself.²⁵

Long-time organizer Shira Hassan describes the value of having what she calls “harm reduction spaces” to survivors:

“I have worked so hard to reclaim my body from the experience of childhood sexual violence. ... Harm reduction helped me process the experiences ... because rather than kicking me out of places

²² Bedford, Tori. “Wu Announces \$16.5 Million in Federal Funds to Tackle Homelessness in Boston.” *GBH*, May 4, 2023, sec. Local News.

<https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2023/05/04/wu-announces-16-5-million-in-federal-funds-to-tackle-homelessness-in-boston>.

²³ Ward, conversation with author, April 2, 2023.

²⁴ Miguel, conversation with author, May 29, 2023.

²⁵ Shira Bassan writes: “I have always pushed back on ... *You can’t love anyone until you love yourself*, which seeks to deny survivors the right to love. Instead, harm reduction values tell us we are worth loving and protecting exactly as we are, and, moreover, we learn to love ourselves through how we show love and protection to other people” (Hassan, Shira, “I Believe(d?) in Violence,” in *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022, Kindle).

when I was high, it encouraged me to be there. ... Harm reduction spaces and community showed me I was worth investing in and gave me space to practice boundaries through peer-to-peer communication with other survivors, other drug users, other people in the sex trade.”²⁶

When Shira left home as a young teenager, she found her people in the park; she found a bus pass, snacks, and eventually work at a youth leadership development program called The Door; and she found safety from predators and police with a bouncer who let her sleep in a nightclub corner some nights.²⁷ For people without a stable shelter to return to, these “third spaces” and organizations play the critical and anchoring role of home, helping to reduce the harms inflicted on unhoused people and holding space for communities to form bonds and care for one another.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg calls this network of places an area’s “social infrastructure”. Healthy social infrastructures build community and grow relationships by nature of people’s inevitable “[engaging] in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy” in these shared places.²⁸

The health of a neighborhood’s social infrastructure is inextricably linked to its physical and psychological environment. In the last four years, public health resources and public spaces welcoming of unhoused people have become increasingly limited in “Mass. and Cass” as Boston’s policies and practices have shifted towards policing and displacement. Several community members have described how people’s willingness to help, trust, and care for one another have eroded in recent years.²⁹

Today the neighborhood of “Mass. and Cass” is quarantined to one street: Atkinson Street. Residents are forced to pack their tents tightly together, inflaming small tensions among neighbors and forcing survivors close to their abusers. At least four different security groups work in the area, hired by the nearby Boston Medical Center, the Newmarket Business Association, the City of Boston, and Massachusetts state. Every morning, a team of residents hired by the Newmarket Business Association cleans the street, making people break down their tents and wait elsewhere while they work.³⁰ Adding to this daily uprooting, memories of mass eviction events (or “homeless sweeps”) linger among residents and service providers. People have shared what it feels like to be in this environment (“we feel like caged animals”; they “[treat] me like shit”) and

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, “Harm Reduction: A Survivor-Led Strategy.”

²⁸ Klinenberg, Eric. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. Reprint edition. Crown, 2018, 13.

²⁹ George’s conversation with Tory, November 29, 2022.

³⁰ The business association stepped in with private street cleaning team after Boston’s Public Works Department slowed trash collection in the area.

under-the-skin thoughts (“I don’t know how to feel here sometimes”; “I hate myself”).^{31,32} Each physical rupture in the neighborhood has worn down its social infrastructure and, by extension, worsened the health of community bonds and escalated violence.

Though it is not formally recognized, I describe “Mass. and Cass” as a neighborhood to highlight the ways in which the place and people mutually constitute each other. In sitting with people from its many communities, our team hoped to better understand how—in writer Carlo Rotella’s words—“neighborhoods live in us as much as we live in them.”³³

* * *

In 2021, a few friends and I formed an art collective called See You In The Future. An encampment “sweep” had just happened, and crisis-claims dominated the “Mass. and Cass” narrative. Our members have been residents, friends, and designers at “Mass. and Cass” for years in various capacities, and we hoped to use our skills in art, design, and storytelling to highlight the communities and how they cared for each other in the neighborhood. From our previous work with prisons, George Halfkenny and I were interested in amplifying the creative voices of folks on the ground. Sabrina Dorsainvil and Stephen Walter were instrumental in the conception and development of a local day space, the Engagement Center (EC), which was moving from a large outdoor tent to a newly constructed building. As former City of Boston employees, they were interested in bringing back the EC’s ethos of community-centered design after the COVID-19 pandemic had paused all experimental supports.

The phrase “see you in the future” highlights our belief in care as making the future. When we care for someone, we pour into their continued survival.³⁴ With our newest member Evvy Diego, we are moved by our own experiences with recovery, housing insecurity, mental illness, incarceration, as well as in witnessing spatialized injustices in this neighborhood, both in the distribution of resources and public space, as well as in the processes by which decisions are made.³⁵

³¹ Conversation with Diane, July 2, 2023.

³² Conversation with Michael, June 11, 2023.

³³ Carlo Rotella, *The World is Always Coming To An End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*, University of Chicago, 2019.

³⁴ I first heard this framing of care from architecture professor Anooradha Siddiqi, during her guest lecture in Garnette Cadogan’s class, *Attending to the Body: Kinship and Care in Urbanism and Architecture* in Fall 2020.

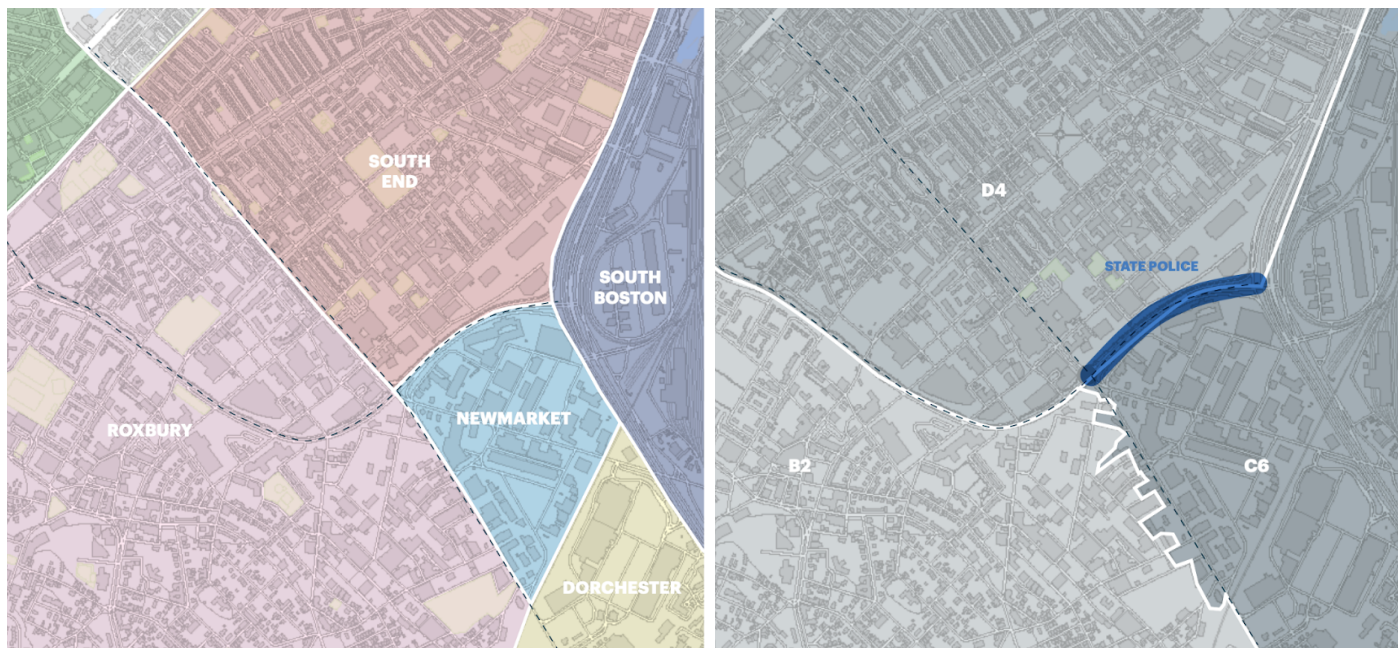
³⁵ I use the Spatial Justice Network’s definition, which sees spatial justice as the combination of distributive justice and procedural justice (Spatial Justice Network. “Spatial Justice Definitions.” Accessed June 22, 2023. <https://spatial-justice.org/definitions/>).

A Sense of Where You Are

“Mass. and Cass” Maps

1. Neighborhoods & Jurisdictions
2. Informal & Formal Borders
3. Planning Stakeholders
4. Local Amenities

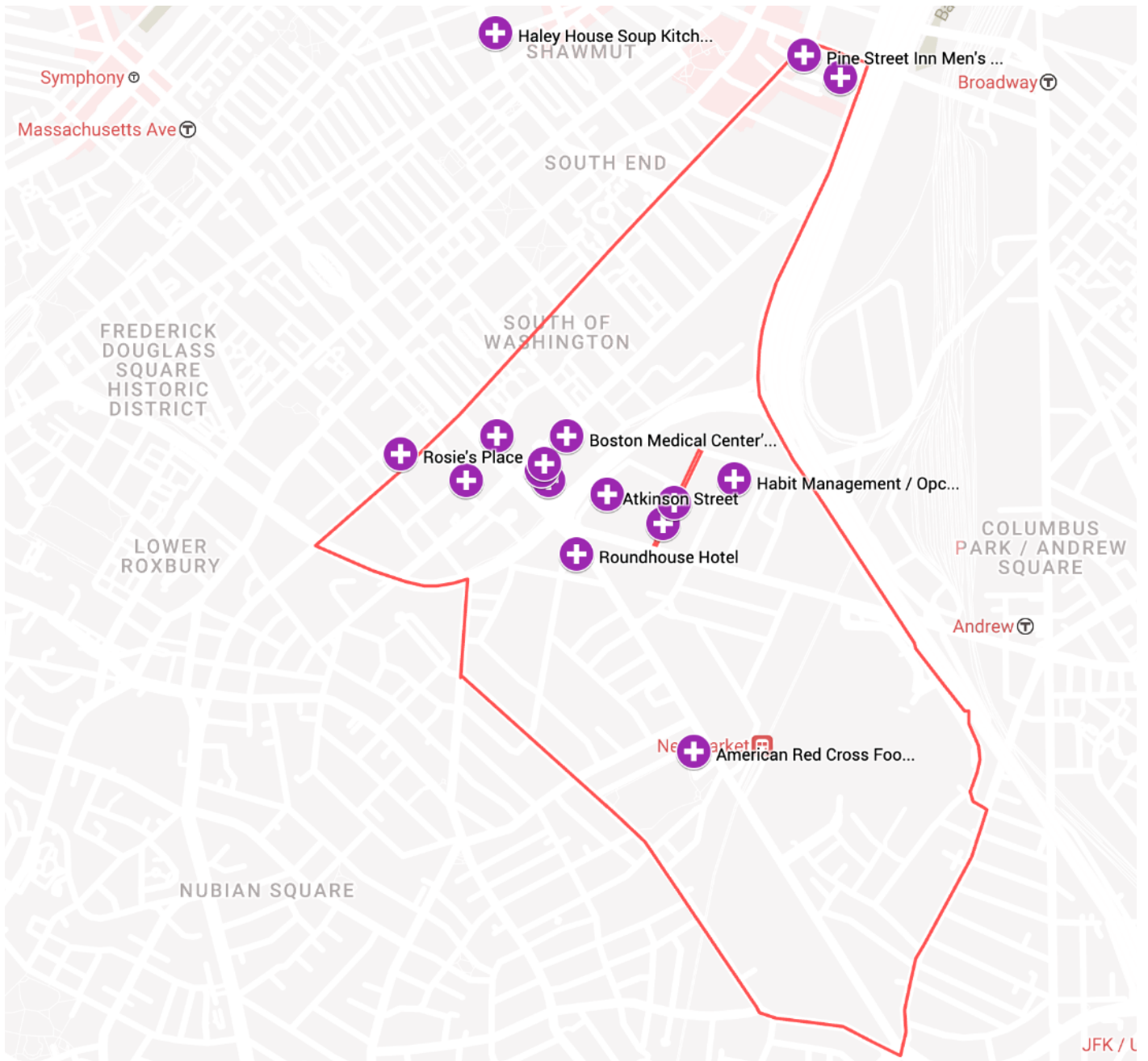
1. Neighborhoods & Jurisdictions



Aerial maps of “Mass. and Cass” with overlays showing formal neighborhood limits (left) and police jurisdictions (right). / Visualizations were created by the MASS Design Group for a masterplan that explored gaps in recovery and homeless services in 2017.

“Mass. and Cass” is a place among formalized neighborhoods. Massachusetts state police, rather than City of Boston police, has jurisdiction on the “Mass Ave Corridor” (highlighted in dark blue, right), because this stretch of Melnea Cass Blvd. is part of the Interstate highway system. This creates a harmful dynamic where unhoused people were herded from one jurisdiction to another by different police groups, as if to say: “They are your problem.”

2. Informal & Formal Borders



Map of “Mass. and Cass” showing recovery and homeless services (purple), Atkinson Street (red, center) and ‘Stay Away’ borders (outlined in red).

Around 2019, the ‘Stay Away’ borders were drawn by the City of Boston’s Office of Recovery Services around the neighborhood’s human services, which is why the shape extends up and out to the Pine Street Inn Shelter. These borders were originally intended to keep away folks who would come in and film guests seeking services in the area.³⁶

³⁶ Personal communications with former Office of Recovery Services worker, July 2022.

After the January 2022 encampment sweep and subsequent arrests for human, sex, and drug traffickers, these borders were adopted by law enforcement for “stay-away orders,” a legal tactic to deter defendants from returning to an area by threatening incarceration.³⁷ However there was no accountability on whether police were arresting large-scale drug traffickers or small-scale drug dealers who need a way to make money to survive. Anecdotally, several of the community members our team hoped to interview were arrested during this time period (someone told us it felt like “for every person who gets housing, three people go to jail”).³⁸

In just a few years, the size of “Mass. and Cass” has diminished at an alarming scale. After the January 2022 sweeps, the unhoused and drug-using communities of “Mass. and Cass” were contained to Atkinson Street. Many residents have told us that the tight space and the regular forced movements (and forced dismantling of their tents) have contributed to escalated tensions and increased prevalence of violence. (See the essay, “the History of Enclosure and Displacement” for more context.)

³⁷ Valencia, Milton J. “For Those at Mass. and Cass, a New Order to Stay Away.” *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 2022. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/07/metro/those-mass-cass-new-order-stay-away>.





³⁸ Personal communications with frequent “Mass. and Cass” visitor, September 2022.

3. Neighborhood Plan Stakeholders



Map ([link](#)) showing the 29 Community Advisory Group members of the Boston Planning & Development Agency’s “PLAN: Newmarket,” their investment properties, and the unrepresented recovery and homeless services located in the area.

Legend

-  Recovery or Homeless Service
-  PLAN Newmarket's Community Advisory Group (AG) members
-  PLAN Newmarket's AG members' investment properties
-  'Stay away' borders (large perimeter) and Atkinson Street (center)

The Boston Planning & Development Agency does not engage with unhoused or drug-using residents, visitors, or staff in the neighborhood. The neighborhood's development is informed by business and property owners. Of the 29 Community Advisory Group members, 2 work in and are familiar with recovery; 7 are real estate developers, architects, urban designers; 5 are special interest/neighborhood groups; and 15 are local businesses. One organization is represented twice: the Newmarket Business Association.³⁹ (See the interlude, "Planning for Displacement" for more context.)

³⁹ Boston Planning & Development Agency. "PLAN: Newmarket, The 21st Century Economy Initiative." Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.bostonplans.org/planning/planning-initiatives/plan-newmarket>.

4. Local amenities dedicated to industry, health, and “corrections”



Satellite map ([link](#)) of the Mass. Ave. and Melnea Cass Blvd. intersection and surrounding areas, with the Engagement Center and nearby 112 Southhampton Men's Shelter highlighted in blue, and Atkinson Street highlighted in red. Near Atkinson Street is Newmarket Square, where many food and industrial warehouses are sited.

Today the neighborhood of “Mass. and Cass” is quarantined to one street: Atkinson Street. Residents are forced to pack their tents tightly together, inflaming small tensions among neighbors and forcing survivors close to their abusers.

Interlude One

Planning for Displacement

When our Collective started this project in 2021, I was excited to learn that the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) was in the midst of developing a neighborhood plan for Newmarket, the industrial area encompassing “Mass. and Cass”. This process was started in 2019 and uninspiringly named PLAN: Newmarket.

I signed up for updates on PLAN: Newmarket’s website and started receiving emails about every *other* development project in Dorchester, Roxbury, South Boston, and the South End. When I wrote to the BPDA, an employee transferred me to their communications team, who responded: “We don’t actually have a Newmarket-specific list, but if you are interested in only getting updates about PLAN: Newmarket, I can make a note on your profile to that effect.”⁴⁰ I wondered how much the BPDA cared about Newmarket if the neighborhood had not merited an email list after four years.

Newmarket’s erasure by the City of Boston seems in line with its history. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the City relocated meatpacking and food processing companies to an “economic outpost” near the Boston Medical Center, hoping to attract more “public-facing” industries like tourism, restaurants, and office rentals in downtown’s Faneuil Hall Market and Haymarket. On the Newmarket Business Association’s website, the history reads like a western: “Business owners had little or no influence on City government or on issues affecting the Newmarket area”; “infrastructure improvements were minimal, traffic controls were minimal and the area looked more like the wild west than an urban food distribution center.” Then a group of business and property owners “banded together” and “the Newmarket Business Association was born.”⁴¹

Today the business association is the most powerful political voice in the neighborhood’s development. Every one of PLAN: Newmarket’s Community Advisory Group members is also a member of this association. The association is the only organization represented twice in the 29 member Advisory Group. All but one of the Advisory Group members represent real estate development, business and property owners, and homeowner association interests. One member, Victory Programs, serves unhoused people across the region.

⁴⁰ Personal email communications with BPDA, March 23, 2023.

⁴¹ Newmarket Business Association. “The History of Newmarket Business Association.” Accessed July 23, 2023. <https://newmarketboston.org/history/>.

Almost none of the neighborhood’s hundreds of unhoused residents and visitors have heard of this Community Advisory Group.

The plan aims to rezone the neighborhood. The land where the tent encampments and services of “Mass. and Cass” are located is intended for a “Traditional/Heavy Industrial” zoning code, which prioritizes food and product manufacturing and “truck-dependent warehousing”.^{42,43} After a presentation with sleek building and street improvement diagrams at one of the Newmarket plan Advisory Group’s monthly virtual meetings, I asked about this zoning code’s implications for public health organizations. The lead planner responded (emphasis added):

“Initially, the plan process sought to prevent displacement of social service providers—including providers for people who are facing housing instability and addiction and recovery challenges—and as the process evolved over the last three years, the use recommendations became that those uses should be welcomed to stay as long as they want, but that displacement prevention was no longer a goal. And, in fact, the policy goal would be to enhance the geographic distribution of those uses over time, so that there’s less of a concentration in Newmarket, relative to the rest of the city and region ... But in terms of existing providers, to your question, Melissa, they would be allowed to stay, even though this plan doesn’t seek to attract new ones. So, Kevin, I see your hand up—”

He was interrupted by his colleague, who apologized and added:

“One thing I think I neglected to mention was some of the engagement that we’ve done ... did include some of our service providers and healthcare providers working in Newmarket today. ... So that feedback did inform our public realm recommendations, as far as street designs go. But it’s true that we have not shown these suggested, you know, height zones... I think it’s difficult to draw those lines, which is why we do want impact from all of you on where those lines fall.”

She looked tired. Perhaps more vigilant attendees, like the Newmarket Business Association’s Executive Director who kept apologizing and interrupting the planners, would have kept pushing, but I have never known good intentions, fatigue, and looming deadlines to bode well for dialogue.

How could I tell the planners that my concern was not where the zoning map lines were drawn, but the land use designation itself? Did they really believe that health and human service providers felt included in their planning process? The Bureau Director of Recovery Services, who is always working on the streets (hard to

⁴² Boston Planning & Development Agency. “Public Realm.” Presented at the PLAN: Newmarket Advisory Group Meeting, April 5, 2023. <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/4d9f4e57-3bbb-41cb-8f29-b671b1d2b993>.

⁴³ The neighborhood is legally zoned for heavy industrial use, rather than residential use, creating a dynamic where residents can live in their encampments for free while the City is not obligated to make the land liveable and can evict or “sweep” the residents away at any point.

miss), has been contacted by the BPDA once over four years to share advice on “ADA access”.⁴⁴ Disability access is not only tangential to her expertise in addiction recovery and harm reduction, but the ask for help likely came from housed residents’ claims that tents were blocking sidewalks for wheelchair users, a false narrative that disability justice activists call “access washing.”⁴⁵

Despite the BPDA talking with members of the Mayor’s Office about the vital roles played by the neighborhood’s homeless, recovery, and medical services, the planners decided against including these “human uses” as a primary land use.⁴⁶ They did not explain why and seemed resistant to slowing their process down.⁴⁷ Their directive to displace these human services had likely come from above, in a strategy to displace the encampment residents they served.

It is not clear what happened three years ago when “displacement prevention was no longer a goal,” but a petition went online two years ago by the South End-Roxbury Community Partnership. It called on every state and municipal government leader to “Decentralize and Repair Mass and Cass - Methadone Mile,”⁴⁸ with 249 companies signing on. Six months after this petition, planners were explicit in their anti-homeless stance at a monthly Advisory Group meeting:

“This plan addresses issues that will come up five-to-fifty years out so, in that time, we should not seek to bring new [human] services into this area ... those people seeking services will be distributed.”⁴⁹

In October 2022, I joined the BPDA’s PLAN: Newmarket team for a walking tour, one of their public engagement efforts (I was the only non-BPDA person who showed up). As we walked, their team pointed out spatial oddities with wonder (we paused at a street marking the transition from industrial to residential

⁴⁴ Larkin, Devin. (Bureau Director, Recovery Services, Boston Public Health Commission), in discussion with the author. August 3, 2022.

⁴⁵ Aimi Hamraie calls this passive aggressive advocacy “access washing.” In a presentation hosted by the *Disability Justice & Planning Initiative* at the MIT Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning, Hamraie shared a photo of a tent encampment on a sidewalk and emphasized, “City governments implementing anti-homeless measures under the guise of making streets more accessible to people with disabilities with no consideration that those most harmed by this—homeless community members—are often disabled people themselves” (*Critical Access Studies*. DUSP Disability Justice and Planning Speaker Series. YouTube, 2022. Citing Stacey Milbern. “Notes on ‘Access Washing.’” *Disability Justice Network of Ontario* (blog), February 20, 2019. <https://www.djno.ca/post/notes-on-access-washing>).

⁴⁶ City of Boston staff, chat message with author, April 5, 2023.

⁴⁷ The planners have slowed their process for the Newmarket Business Associations’ Executive Director to review their plans more thoroughly. She is often quoted by journalists on her pro-displacement and anti-homeless stance on “Mass. and Cass” and her presence looms large over neighborhood development conversations.

⁴⁸ South End - Roxbury Community Partnership. “Decentralize and Repair Mass and Cass - Methadone Mile.” Change.org, December 4, 2021. <https://www.change.org/p/decentralize-and-repair-mass-and-cass-methadone-mile>.

⁴⁹ Boston Planning & Development Agency. “PLAN: Newmarket Advisory Group Meeting,” May 4, 2022. <https://www.bostonplans.org/news-calendar/calendar/2022/05/04/plan-newmarket-advisory-group-meeting>.

zoning; they described historical palimpsests and downzoning implications). We had a good time (we passed a “Southside Dyeing Company” and someone joked, “better than Northside!”).

The tour avoided the north-eastern area where the encampment and services of “Mass. and Cass” were concentrated and instead walked west. We ended up at a food processing company called City Fresh, whose charismatic director shared their company’s story—how they had outgrown their space, how they bought out their investor and sold 30% of the company to their workers during the pandemic, and how the highways around Newmarket helped them deliver food to communities of color around Boston. “Companies like yours are exactly the kind we hope to support,” a planner said, and I was glad.

Planning is a discipline concerned with the future. The BPDA aims to design a public realm “shared by everyone in the city,”⁵⁰ but it was difficult to reconcile their kind hopes with their quiet exclusion of the neighborhood’s actual residents: from the Community Advisory Group, from meetings and updates that required computer and email access, and from the seemingly unnegotiable decision to displace their services.

The BPDA recently published a draft of its final plan titled “Newmarket: 21st Century Economic Initiative”. In its 45 pages, “Mass. and Cass” is never mentioned by name, only referenced once as a “significant challenge related to Boston’s disproportionate share of care for people experiencing drug addiction and housing instability.”⁵¹

The City’s service displacement tactic echoes other strategies used in the 1960s and ‘70s to clear the neighborhoods of poor people of color in the name of “urban renewal”. When legal urban renewal plans were met with entrenched community resistance, planners and policymakers proceeded through other less direct means. One policy was “benign neglect,” which stopped creating new services and repairing damaged housing in neighborhoods deemed “sick” (which were often poor communities of color), hoping these places would die on their own. Another was “planned shrinkage,” a more aggressive policy that went into these “sick” neighborhoods and pulled services like libraries, fire services, and public transportation out.⁵² That is, in sanctioning the displacement of their vital services, the BPDA and City have written the residents of “Mass. and Cass” out of the future.

⁵⁰ Boston Planning & Development Agency. “Public Realm.” Presented at the PLAN: Newmarket Advisory Group Meeting, April 5, 2023. <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/4d9f4e57-3bbb-41cb-8f29-b671b1d2b993>, 8.

⁵¹ Boston Planning & Development Agency. “PLAN: Newmarket: The 21st Century Economic Initiative,” DRAFT Document,” July 11, 2023. <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/b55601aa-54cf-457e-8976-420ecb80ac7d>.

⁵² Wallace, Deborah, and Rodrick Wallace. “Benign Neglect and Planned Shrinkage.” *Verso* (blog), March 25, 2017. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3145-benign-neglect-and-planned-shrinkage>.

Essay One

A Politics of Seeing

In the summer of 2019, my teammate George and I met at the Andrew train station to visit a place that mattered to him. We walked down Massachusetts Avenue past the Target in the South Bay shopping center, the worn Victoria Diner and corner liquor store, some brick government buildings, a U-Haul rental lot, and meat processing businesses with names like “Lord Jeff” and “Mutual Beef”. The wide pavement of Mass. Ave diverged and met another wide street named Southampton. Bits of crumpled paper wrappers, orange needle caps, and plastic soda bottles had fallen into the crevice between the street and sidewalks, which were stained a medley of colorful liquids. Across the street from the Boston Fire Department Headquarters on Southampton, we turned onto Atkinson Street.

In the late afternoon sun, perhaps two hundred people gathered on Atkinson like an outdoor festival. Their bare skin, dotted with sweat, track marks, and age spots, baked in the reflection of hot asphalt and metal fences lining the street. The food processing warehouse on the right offered a sliver of shade. People sat together on the sidewalk or leaned against walls. I started noticing that people were helping each other inject thin syringes into arms, calves, or necks. Some were slumped over where they sat, silently rocking themselves or talking to someone who, perhaps, they wished were in front of them.

We turned into a narrow brick corridor lined by worn but colorful banners and came to a small courtyard. Two blue and white Port-A-Potties, slightly obscured behind white planters, stood to our right. In front of us, a dark haired man with large tattoos stood over another man, trimming his bearding with professional shears. The barber nodded to George, who reciprocated. In the center of the courtyard was a large white tent, the kind you might see at an outdoor graduation. A giant blue banner hung out front, reading “Everyone is welcome here” and underneath: “The Engagement Center”. Inside the shaded tent, around thirty people lounged at tables dozing, sipping from coffee cups, browsing on computers, or chatting. Some people looked at us with reserved curiosity. A few recognized George and reached out to fistbump him or clap him on the back, calling him G. George met their warmth, moving with confidence and grace.

After the tour, my jaw started to relax and I realized that I had not known what to do with my eyes and limbs the whole time. “Stupid question,” I muttered to George, “In the future, is it good if I make eye contact?”

“Yes,” he grinned with understanding. “And introduce yourself.”

* * *

In 2015, the *Boston Globe* published a photo story called “Life and Loss in Methadone Mile,” sharing breathtakingly tragic details about a group of unhoused people using drugs to survive in the industrial hinterlands of Boston. The violent photography of homelessness and the damning name, “Methadone Mile” spread. Boston’s Office of Recovery Services tried to rebrand the area with a more neutral-sounding name derived from geography, “Mass. and Cass,”⁵³ but its associations had already been drawn to other sites of racialized and colonial fears: the “projects,” “ghetto,” “blight,” “skid row,” “dirty,” “sketchy,” “infested”.

Stories like this evoke a psychological response familiar to military propagandists;⁵⁴ readers become passive spectators only able to share public pity or outrage, demand someone (often the government) do *something*, or slip back into the old and privileged impulse to turn away from others’ suffering.⁵⁵ Newspapers profit from these narrative tours into marginalized groups like street-based communities, whose infinite experiences are flattened by a few photos that capture them on their worst days. These images feed public fears of unhoused people committing unhinged or petty crimes out of their encampment, the epicenter of criminality. It is only after public deaths like 24-year-old Jordan Neely’s protested but undefended murder by a chokehold in May 2023 that newspapers print stories about change, failed systems, and the unseen and ungrievable lives of unhoused people.^{56,57}

Public attention on the area waxed and waned until a media surge in 2019, when an altercation between several unhoused men and a corrections officer from the South Bay Jail broke out on Atkinson Street one early August morning. The Mayor sanctioned a police action called “Operation Clean Sweep,” which was meant to clean the street of “predators” or people who came to “Mass. and Cass” to prey on vulnerable drug-using people. In a “man hunt” for their primary assailant, a young Black man, the Boston Police patrolled the “Mass. and Cass” area for several days and arrested over 30 unhoused people as part of the

⁵³ Vivant, Elsa. “Naming the Sites of the Opioid Crisis in Boston: A Political Issue.” *EchoGéo*, no. 53 (October 19, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.21369>.

⁵⁴ In his authoritative manual, *Psychological Warfare* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Peace, 1948, 1954), U.S. Army Colonel and science fiction author Paul M. A. Linebarger described propaganda as “communication designed to affect the minds, emotions, and action of a given group for a specific purpose.” Training the camera on suffering, in particular, is a form of “atrocious propaganda,” which “heats up the imagination of troops,” inciting public outcry, desire for revenge, and last-ditch desperation.

⁵⁵ Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Translated by Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli. New York : Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2012, 11.

⁵⁶ Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Reprint edition. London New York: Verso, 2016.

⁵⁷ Iscoe, Adam. “The System That Failed Jordan Neely.” *New Yorker*, May 10, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/05/22/the-system-that-failed-jordan-neely>.

“sweep”,⁵⁸ Several local news outlets capitalized on white fears and cast the story in racialized terms that emphasized the “savage attack” on the officer,⁵⁹ describing the unhoused Black men as “a pack of animals”⁶⁰ who needed to be contained.⁶¹ It was later found that almost all of the arrests were made for unrelated minor or outstanding charges, not trafficking, but the story about the dangerous “Mass. and Cass” population had been stirred into the public imagination.

In the months that followed, police officers kept community members from lingering around “Mass. and Cass,” questioning or forcing them to “move along”. People were cut off from their safety net organizations like the Engagement Center, their regular medical and drug maintenance treatments, and their community supports which were especially crucial for women, queer folks, and young people. Some people moved to other cities but, for others with nowhere to go, they scattered into the surrounding neighborhoods of Dorchester, Roxbury, South Boston, and the South End. Residents there began seeing and reporting traces of domestic activities (food wrappers, condoms, blankets, biowaste, needles) on the streets. More unhoused people were arrested.⁶² Eventually people were allowed to return to the industrial interstitial spaces in Newmarket and started rebuilding the social infrastructures of “Mass. and Cass.”

Then the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and congregate shelters reduced their capacities to allow for safer distancing. With emptier residential streets, the communities around “Mass. and Cass” took more space in surrounding neighborhoods. After unwillingly hosting their unhoused neighbors a second time, folks from the South End and Roxbury neighborhoods banded together with folks from the Newmarket Business Association to create the South End-Roxbury Community Partnership. Their slogan, “Make the community comfortable for all” capitalizes on anti-homeless fears, doing similar silencing work to “All Lives Matter”. They began lobbying government officials to support decentralizing services under the banner of “equitably [sharing] the burden of this crisis,” as well as pasting stickers around the Boston area that read “MASS AND CASS IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS”—language that started to spread.⁶³ Throughout the pandemic, the

⁵⁸ Ben-Menachem, Jonathan. “Pulling Back the Curtain on Boston’s ‘Operation Clean Sweep.’” *The Appeal*, August 15, 2019. <https://theappeal.org/boston-police-clean-sweep-arrests/>.

⁵⁹ CBS Boston, “Corrections Officer Attacked In Boston,” YouTube, August 1, 2019, video, 2:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz24UcmIQbs&ab_channel=CBSBoston.

⁶⁰ WCVB Staff. “Vicious Attack on Corrections Officer on Methadone Mile Caught on Camera.” *WCVB5*, August 1, 2019, sec. News. <https://www.wcvb.com/article/corrections-officer-attacked-in-boston-on-way-to-work/28578675>.

⁶¹ Rose, Nikolas. “Governing Risky Individuals: The Role of Psychiatry in New Regimes of Control.” *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 5, no. 2 (November 1998): 177–95.

⁶² Deanna Pan, “‘It’s the worst it’s ever been’: After police crackdown, unease grows in the South End,” *The Boston Globe*, September 17, 2019, Pan, Deanna. “‘It’s the Worst It’s Ever Been’: After Police Crackdown, Unease Grows in the South End.” *The Boston Globe*, September 17, 2019. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/09/17/worst-ever-been-after-police-crackdown-unease-grows-south-end/uhamNLioWgkV2vX6mK61HI/story.html>.

⁶³ South End-Roxbury Community Partnership. “Andrea J. Campbell Letter to Mayor Walsh,” September 21, 2020. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=115962780255882&set=pb.100064530983431.-2207520000>.

organization held virtual gatherings and posted news on social media that emphasized the unhygienic, violent, and miserable nature of “Mass. and Cass” and its unhoused residents.

Public health providers and street outreach teams were traumatized after Operation Clean Sweep, having witnessed the police detaining their clients, throwing away vital belongings like wheelchairs, and blocking their clients’ access to healthcare. The sweep created a rift between public health and public safety professionals that has yet to be reconciled and has mutated into an uneasy power struggle today. One public health worker affirmed, “We don’t need the police to do most of our job. *We do* need the police to keep the community safe [and] ... respond to things like the level of sexual assault that’s happening down here [but] ... the way to do that is not to arrest sex workers.” The Police Department’s street outreach team had once partnered closely with the Public Health Commission’s outreach team, but after several changes in leadership, the police had shifted their strategy towards more incarceration and control of the street population. “There are officers who *do* know how to do this work,” the worker insisted. “They’re just sort of ... waiting in the wings to be able to do it again.”⁶⁴

In October 2021, the *Boston Globe* ran another photo exposition titled “12 hours at Mass. and Cass,” this time focusing on the various encampments that people had built⁶⁵ to shelter-in-place during the long COVID-19 pandemic, when hospital beds were full and shelters had reduced capacity.⁶⁶ “The encampment of addiction and misery at the edge of the city’s South End is a travesty that only grows worse,” the story begins. The authors implore readers to “not look away” but then, once again, train our eyes on photo after photo of palpable struggle, poverty, and desperate coping. One reader responded: “If the point ... was to make us even more sad and sickened about what’s happening there.....missions [sic] accomplished.”

The trouble with this story is that it does not challenge the fundamental disparity that defines the dominant viewing practice, which sees unhoused people as fundamentally outside of public life and public space. The notion of “public participation” at the founding of the U.S. was tied to voting, which was itself tied to property ownership and a physical address. To many planners and housed residents, public space is synonymous with open spaces for recreational and entertainment uses, not domestic living or dwelling.⁶⁷ Adapting Black feminist scholar Tina M. Camp’s critique of visibility, unhoused lives are rendered in ways

⁶⁴ Personal communications with public health worker, Summer 2022.

⁶⁵ Encampments were defined by the City of Boston as temporary structures like tents on the sidewalk, in cars, in highway tunnels, or under bridges. (City of Boston, “Boston Homeless Encampment Liaison Protocol as of October 28, 2021.” https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2021/10/Homeless%20Encampment%20Liaison%20Protocol%20as%20of%2010.28.21.docx_.pdf)

⁶⁶ McDonald, Danny, and Craig F. Walker. “12 Hours at Mass. and Cass.” *The Boston Globe*, October 13, 2021. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/10/09/metro/12-hours-mass-cass/>.

⁶⁷ For a full exploration on the politics and domestic possibilities of public space, see Alvarez, Paige Xiomara. “The Houseful(l)Ness of Public Space.” Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/140358>.

that allow them to be “viewed at arm’s length through a lens of pity, sympathy, or concern. [This story] is a temporary point of connection, visited and left behind in the face of an inevitable return to the comfort and comforting perspective of self and ‘home’.”⁶⁸

How might representations “[defy] the gravity of violence, social and premature death, structural impoverishment, organized abandonment, and engineered precarity”?⁶⁹ Campt suggests stories and art that evoke a “Black gaze,” which requires their audience to be present, to *see oneself through* the complex positionality that is blackness, and to *work* through the labor of discomfort, feeling, positioning, as well as to work through the implications on and for oneself. Art does this by making passive consumption of brutality uneasy, even impossible, in order for its audience to be able to appreciate moments of Black love, beauty, and reverie.⁷⁰

* * *

The former Attorney General visited “Mass. and Cass” in October 2021 and was transfixed by the “mass of humanity lining the streets,” not “able to get the images out of her mind” for months.⁷¹ The shock of the scene affirmed her conviction that “all options need to be on the table,” including a proposal by the county’s Sheriff to shelter up to 100 people inside the South Bay Jail at the end of Atkinson Street. “Would I prefer to have health care agencies pick up the mantle and do this? Absolutely,” the Sheriff had said in defense of his plan, which faced understandable pushback. “Since that is not happening ... we [public safety] will do it. We will pick up the ball and run down the field.”⁷²

Two weeks later, on October 19, 2021, the Mayor declared homelessness a public health crisis,⁷³ consolidating dominant narratives about “Mass. and Cass” that had accumulated over years: the dangerous presence of predators (citing reports of homicides and sexual assaults), the unhygienic nature of living (citing disease and rodent proliferations), and the obstruction of public space for others (citing blocked sidewalks for wheelchair users and roads for trucks). The story’s selective framing justified the removal of encampments and around

⁶⁸ Tina M. Campt. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. The MIT Press, 2021, 11, EPUB e-book.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷¹ Leung, Shirley. “All Options Need to Be on the Table,’ Says AG Maura Healey, Including Sheriff Tompkins’s Controversial Proposal for a ‘Mass. and Cass’ Treatment Center.” *The Boston Globe*, October 4, 2021.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/10/04/business/all-options-need-be-table-says-ag-maura-healey-including-sheriff-tompkins-controversial-proposal-mass-cass-treatment-center/>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Office of the Mayor Kim Janey. “An Executive Order Establishing a Coordinated Response to Public Health and Encampments in the City of Boston.” City of Boston, October 19, 2021.

<https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2021/10/public-health-eo-10-19-21.pdf>.

300 people⁷⁴ on the basis of public health and safety, a narrative tactic used by governments around the country.⁷⁵ There were no acknowledgments that investments into community health and safety infrastructures could have made encampments safer, cleaner, and more spacious.

What followed the crisis declaration was a predictable and traumatic reliving of Operation Clean Sweep. Despite rhetoric about “leading with a public health lens” and using police as a last resort, people’s belongings were seized or destroyed and communities were forcibly removed without a secure housing alternative.

Before the October 2021 sweep, a *Boston Globe* reporter had warned about “Mass. and Cass”: “One thing we can’t do is to engage in something Boston is all too good at: the politics of no.”⁷⁶

It’s counterintuitive to do nothing or slow down in a crisis. But when the goal is healing, not just crisis response, the need to move carefully becomes more clear. When therapists work with patients to make large changes, they work in incredibly small ways because bodies cannot psychologically handle immense amounts of change at once.⁷⁷ This self-determined and often cyclical change process is at the core of harm reduction, a trauma-centered community practice and later a public health strategy, that intervenes in harmful behaviors. It grew as an alternative to traditional drug treatment models, which tries to “break [or] rebuild the addict”.⁷⁸ The harm reduction philosophy believes that people do not make any changes before they are ready; change does not have a clear timeline; and, when practiced as a liberatory philosophy, “making a change” is not ranked above “not making a change” because the act of survivors making their own choices, even if we disagree with them, is a step towards taking their power back.⁷⁹

Though crisis breeds a compulsion to act, doing nothing must always be an option when working with survivors and traumatized communities and, sometimes, it is the best intervention to reduce potential harm.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ McDonald, Danny. “‘There Is an Urgency’: Janey Unveils Mass. and Cass Plan as City Declares Addiction and Homelessness a Public Health Crisis.” *The Boston Globe*, October 19, 2021.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/10/19/metro/janey-unveils-mass-cass-plan-city-declares-addiction-homelessness-public-health-crisis>.

⁷⁵ Dozier, Deshonay. “Contested Development: Homeless Property, Police Reform, and Resistance in Skid Row, LA.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43, no. 1 (January 2019): 179–94.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12724>.

⁷⁶ Leung, Shirley. “‘All Options Need to Be on the Table,’ Says AG Maura Healey, Including Sheriff Tompkins’s Controversial Proposal for a ‘Mass. and Cass’ Treatment Center.” *The Boston Globe*, October 4, 2021.

⁷⁷ Johnson, Debs. (Social Worker), in discussion with the author. May 18, 2023.

⁷⁸ Hassan, “Moving Away from Public Health Harm Reduction.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hassan, Shira and Mariame Kaba, “Harm Reduction is our shared root: Interview with Mariame Kaba.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*.

Of course, interactions always offer something. In doing nothing to intervene in “Mass. and Cass,” unhoused people may take (or continue taking) space to process,⁸¹ be in pain, build relationships with their peers, and figure out what they need on their own terms. Doing nothing also gives the would-be intervener space to reflect on our own actions and reactions, making space to plan a course of action that would do no harm.

* * *

After my walking tour of “Mass. and Cass” and the Engagement Center, George and I caught up over the phone about the kinds of storytelling spaces we wanted to facilitate in the neighborhood. We wanted to be intentional about how we showed up in traumatized community spaces, especially me as a securely housed student without many shared experiences or circumstances as encampment residents. George offered a hypothetical to illustrate a subtle but crucial way outsiders could show respect. “How do we make some space ... where every interaction with you doesn’t make me feel like a bad person?” If our social interaction were part of a TV show, would our storyline reinforce or overwrite known stereotypes and stigmas? “For my choices,” George said, playing the role of an encampment resident. “I don’t have be reminded that I’m homeless, or a drunkie, or any of that stuff ... I already know I got that going on. So, in this episode, you’re going to be the upright citizen and I’m going to be the bad guy. We’re playing our part.”⁸²

Responding to homelessness requires a way of seeing that aspires to “fundamentally change the way we react to each other, the way we respond to difference or harm.”⁸³ In *The Invitation*, writer Barry Lopez shares how he learned to see through another’s eyes: “The lesson to be learned here was not just for me to pay closer attention ... [but] to step away from the familiar compulsion to understand.”⁸⁴ This type of seeing asks the viewer to slow down, resist solutionism, and work to *feel* our implication in the precarity of unhoused lives today. Rarely do planners articulate solidarity in public engagement efforts, but how else can this profession see beyond “us and them” stigmas, move through uncomfortable inequalities in power,⁸⁵ and work towards a healing practice of spatial design?

⁸¹ Hassan, “Moving Away from Public Health Harm Reduction.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*.

⁸² George Halfkenny, phone call with author, April 27, 2022.

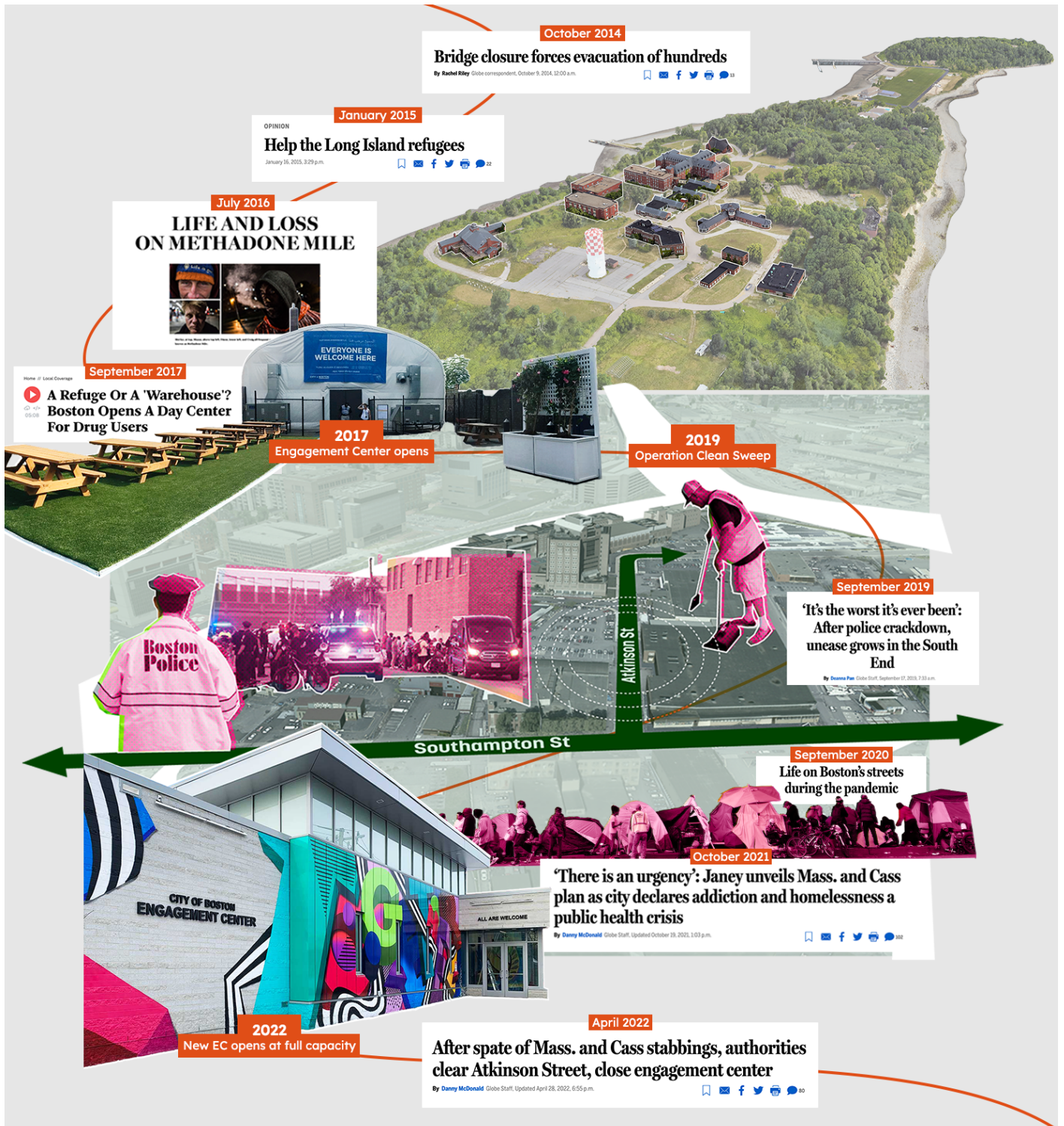
⁸³ Ben-Moshe, Liat. “‘The Institution yet to come’: Analyzing Incarceration through a Disability Lens.” In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Fifth Edition., 119–32. Routledge, 2017.

⁸⁴ Lopez, Barry. “The Invitation.” In *The Contemporary American Essay*, edited by Phillip Lopate, 229–30. New York: Anchor, 2021.

⁸⁵ Shokooh Valle, Firuzeh. “‘How Will You Give Back?’: On Becoming a Compañera as a Feminist Methodology from the Cracks.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 50, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 835–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416211021631>.

Ruptures in the News

A Timeline of Media Headlines Since Long Island



Major media headlines about “Mass. and Cass” since the closure of Long Island in 2014. / Image by author, with graphic and research support from Ben Zunkeler, Yirong Yao, Rinika Prince, Kongyun He, and Christopher Latouche from Sasaki.

Essay Two

A History of Enclosure and Displacement

Most stories about “Mass. and Cass” begin in 2014,⁸⁶ when over one thousand people living and working on Long Island were abruptly evacuated. The island in Boston Harbor held a 35-acre campus maintained by the Boston Public Health Commission. It hosted one of the City’s largest homeless shelters, many nonprofit-led residential and short-term recovery programs, a fire department station, and a 2-acre organic farm where residents harvested enough produce to supply all of the island’s residences and shelters as well as restaurants and farmers markets in Boston.⁸⁷ People could walk the island’s perimeter in about an hour, and the island had several historical buildings and structures that people could explore. Among recovery communities, the island had a reputation of being actually effective; residents could focus on healing without having to deal with old triggers or stigmas in the city. The Director of Boston’s Office of Recovery Services, Jen Tracey recalled seeing Boston’s distant skyline from the Richards building’s third floor. “It just overwhelmed me, the beauty of the island,” she said. “You can’t escape it when you’re there. You’re just surrounded.”⁸⁸

But like many publicly funded resource for addiction recovery and homelessness, Long Island was no paradise. Many of the facilities were between 80 and 150 years old, and there were always overloaded staff and those who mistreated or talked down to residents. Some of the recovery programs were based on traditional treatment models that tried to “break [or] rebuild the addict”.⁸⁹ An activist named Savina Martin remembered when she and a few others in the ‘80s heard complaints about Long Island’s sleeping conditions (always about the pillows and mattresses) and food quality (“I’m so sick of eating hard macaroni!”), so they snuck onto the island, tried the macaroni, and started a riot in the cafeteria.⁹⁰

For Jen Tracey, the most unwelcoming part of the island was the drive over the bridge. As a young woman, Jen would pack a bag of quarters for her partner to call her and his mom from the island and bring it to him on Sunday’s visiting days. Everyone knew the bridge was falling apart. Security allowed one vehicle to cross

⁸⁶ Michelle Wu’s campaign page about “Mass. and Cass” starts with the 2014 Long Island Bridge (The Wu Committee, “A citywide plan to address homelessness, substance use, and mental health,” *Michelle For Boston*, <https://www.michelleforboston.com/plans/housing-justice/homelessness-sud>).

⁸⁷ Crimaldi, Laura. “Fresh Start: Organic Farm Jobs ‘a Blessing’ for Hub Homeless.” *Boston Herald*, August 12, 2007. <https://www.bostonherald.com/2007/08/12/fresh-start-organic-farm-jobs-a-blessing-for-hub-homeless/>.

⁸⁸ Tracey, Jen. (Director of Office of Recovery Services, City of Boston), in discussion with the author. July 11, 2022.

⁸⁹ Hassan, “Moving Away from Public Health Harm Reduction.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*.

⁹⁰ Martin, Savina and Paul J. (Community Organizers, MA Poor People’s Campaign & National Union for the Homeless), in discussion with the author, March 21, 2023.

the bridge at a time so the first time Jen approached the island, she was alone. That feeling stuck with her and she vowed to design a warm welcome for everyone entering the recovery campus.⁹¹

Around 4:30 PM on Wednesday, October 8, 2014, Jen received a phone call in her office from one of the detox providers on the island. The campus police were banging on their door, saying that they needed to evacuate the island immediately. At the time, Jen was the state regulatory authority on these treatment programs and had not received any news from the City of Boston or Health Commission about this. She dialed her City counterparts: “Is this real? What is the directive?” Two hours earlier, Boston’s Mayor, Public Works Commissioner, and a City engineer had decided that the structural safety of the Long Island bridge had to be addressed and they requested a full island evacuation by 8 PM.⁹²

Jen thought of her programs’ detox patients in the medical facilities and kept pressing. “Does everyone need to be evacuated at this second?” The Mayor’s team agreed that the evacuation could take place over the next few days and, relieved, Jen called her providers back to share the City’s directive. “It’s too late,” they replied. The police were still going into each building telling people to leave, and residents were scheduling pick ups or being loaded onto buses in whatever condition they were in.⁹³ In a pattern that would foreshadow future evictions of unhoused, drug-using, and service-providing groups, Jen described the on-the-ground displacement effort as “happening so quickly that it didn’t allow for what should have happened, which is a plan to move people gradually.”⁹⁴

Jen started calling her network of treatment programs across the state to find replacement recovery beds for the island’s patients, while other staff were coordinating the evacuation from the ground. Devin Larkin, the Health Commission’s Bureau Director of Recovery Services, recalled trying to help 200-300 people board the buses, some of whom were in the midst of painful withdrawal and others shivering because they left their jackets or medication. One of Devin’s co-workers grabbed whatever medications she could, and the two of them drove to 35 Northampton, a City-owned building in an industrial part of Boston near the Boston Medical Center, where they would receive the buses.

Much like people coming together after an environmental disaster, Devin’s team got to work setting up camp. They put up cots, made a station for serving warm food and snacks, and settled as many people as they could. “A lot of people were really, really scared. They were convinced that it was Ebola and that we weren’t

⁹¹ Tracey, July 11, 2022.

⁹² Cullen, Kevin. “The Human Issue in Long Island Evacuation.” *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 2014.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/10/13/the-human-issue-long-island-evacuation/5Qg1inhv51trKy61WbiQII/story.html>.

⁹³ Tracey, July 11, 2022.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

telling them the truth,” Devin recalled. It was late night when she finally stepped away, walked to the nearby Office of Recovery Services’ building, and sent an email to the president of a major recovery service organization providing the full continuum of care. “We’re going to start placing people at 5 AM,” she wrote. “So I need all hands on deck.” By 6 AM at 35 Northampton, her staff had coffee ready, set up a breakfast table, and started the long process of triaging patients and placing them in services around the state. Some people hesitated to leave because they had left precious belongings in their rooms on Long Island. Devin would respond, “Go to treatment, and I’ll get it!” With the bridge now closed, she took a boat to the island and looked through the abandoned residences for people’s items. She remembered picking up photos of children and a guitar that once belonged to a family member.

None of the island’s other nonprofit service providers had the same access to infrastructure to triage and shelter their patients, and many programs would take months to stabilize and go back online.⁹⁵ Some providers were forced to drop their patients off at train stations, where people walked off if they had nowhere else to go. Between lost patient connections, treatment charts, and medications, a homeless activist Paul J. put it this way: “An unknowable number of people died because of the City.”⁹⁶

Service providers had all received a notice from the City of Boston months prior about the bridge’s state of disrepair, with a suggestion to make plans in case of an emergency.⁹⁷ The notice read like a standard disclaimer, so few organizations created robust contingency plans. Those who did were not able to implement their plans in the frantic three-hour evacuation window.⁹⁸ But in any case, safely evacuating and replacing treatment programs and shelter for almost one thousand people would have required unprecedented levels of coordination between not only the state, municipalities, and community service providers, but also with neighborhoods.

Boston’s Mayor planned to relocate some of Long Island’s programs to Roxbury and the large homeless shelter to the South End. Both neighborhoods pushed back with predictable discomfort living so close to unhoused and drug-using people.⁹⁹ (It would take years to find new locations for all of Long Island’s programs and build back up that lost treatment capacity.) In an attempt at a solution, the City turned to the industrial area around 35 Northampton and identified another City-owned parcel on Southampton Street.

⁹⁵ Larkin, August 3, 2022.

⁹⁶ J., Paul. (Community Organizer, MA Poor People’s Campaign & National Union for the Homeless), in discussion with the author. November 16, 2022.

⁹⁷ Larkin, August 3, 2022.

⁹⁸ Cullen, Kevin. “The Human Issue in Long Island Evacuation.” *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 2014.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/10/13/the-human-issue-long-island-evacuation/5Qg1inhv51trKy61WbiQII/story.html>.

⁹⁹ Becker, Deborah, and Lynn Jolicoeur. “Boston Identifies Southampton Street Site To House Displaced Homeless.” *WBUR*, December 15, 2014. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2014/12/15/southampton-street-boston-homeless-shelter>.

There, a Boston transportation building was adapted and renovated into the 112 Southamptton Men's Shelter, built for roughly 500 people or half of those displaced from Long Island.¹⁰⁰ Plans to reopen the island's recovery campus have been repeatedly stalled and, as one of the largest and few pieces of land designated for public health use,^{101,102} this loss has crippled the entire region's capacity to take care of its unhoused and sick residents.

* * *



Satellite map ([link](#)) with "Mass. and Cass" (with Atkinson Street), Long Island, and Deer Island highlighted. In addition to the experience of forced movement from Long Island to "Mass. and Cass", the move also constituted a loss of available land for people seeking recovery, homeless, and related medical services.

¹⁰⁰ In the transition, data are missing about unaccounted people who fell out of the continuum of care systems and lost access to vital medication and care providers.

¹⁰¹ Tracey, July 11, 2022.

¹⁰² Another location under consideration for a replacement recovery campus is the state-owned property on the 13-acre Lemuel Shattuck Hospital Campus in Jamaica Plain, Boston. The land use deed requires its use for public health purposes. (Leech, Doug. "Shattuck Campus Redevelopment RFI." Ascension Recovery Services, May 17, 2019. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/shattuck-rfi-ascension/download.>)

The Long Island mass eviction is not the first or last event of this kind. Another interpretation of “Mass. and Cass” sees this place and people as the product of continual forced displacement of groups unwanted by dominant society, rupturing their community spaces and practices—their social infrastructure—and being forced to rebuild their lives and relationship with land with those who survive.

This story of continual forced displacement begins over three hundred years ago with the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony, before the industrial neighborhood was land at all. “Mass. and Cass” was still a body of water named South Bay by recently arrived colonists. Over time the bay was filled in,¹⁰³ and the colonists chose to site distasteful business like the leather tannery and burial grounds on these new wetlands, far from Boston’s urban core. Tensions between the expansionist colonists and the Indigenous tribes who fought back were culminating into a genocidal war, and colonists in the region had grown uncomfortable and untrusting living close to Indigenous peoples, even those who had converted to Christianity.¹⁰⁴ During the unusually cold winter of 1676, over one thousand Indigenous peoples from the region’s different tribes were forced out of their homes and onto barges, which transported them to two islands in the Boston Harbor: Long Island and Deer Island.¹⁰⁵ On Deer Island that winter, more than 500 Indigenous peoples died from starvation, frostbite, and European diseases like smallpox, and their survivors made graves in the island.^{106,107}

In the mid-19th century, thousands of people migrated from Europe fleeing famine, and the City of Boston built a hospital and almshouse on the harbor islands to quarantine and treat their arrivals. Around the same time, fear of disease drove planning and public health officials to invest in sewage infrastructure and the physical removal of “environmental miasmas,” which included garbage, unfilled wetlands, and “undesirable and sick” people.¹⁰⁸ The Deer Island facilities were expanded to house a variety of populations deemed “sick” by the government, including foreign arrivals judged “insane” or “likely to become a public charge,”¹⁰⁹ as well as local residents who were “preferred out of sight,” including “the terminally ill,”¹¹⁰ unwed mothers,¹¹¹

¹⁰³ Acitelli, Tom. “The Old City and the Sea: Boston’s 5 Most Significant Reclamation Projects.” *Curbed Boston*, May 16, 2017. <https://boston.curbed.com/2017/5/16/15640430/boston-infill-projects-reclamation>.

¹⁰⁴ Regan, Keith. “Harbor Project Opposed: Indian Group Says Deer Island Sacred.” *The Boston Globe*, February 22, 1993.

¹⁰⁵ Spitz, Julia. “Nipmucs Add History to Memorial to Deer Island Internment.” *Metro West Daily News*, October 24, 2010. <https://www.metrowestdailynews.com/story/news/2010/10/24/nipmucs-add-history-to-memorial/41306638007/>.

¹⁰⁶ “Facts about History. History: Deer Island.” MA State Library: Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, Fall 1996.

¹⁰⁷ Jarzombek, Mark. “The ‘Indianized’ Landscape of Massachusetts.” *Places Journal*, February 9, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.22269/210209>.

¹⁰⁸ Corburn, Jason. “Reconnecting with Our Roots: American Urban Planning and Public Health in the Twenty-First Century.” *Urban Affairs Review* 42, no. 5 (May 2007): 688–713. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087406296390>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 690.

¹¹⁰ Arnold, David. “‘The Island’s Gone inside out’: Deer Island - Used, Abused in Past - Undergoes Massive Transformation.” *The Boston Globe*, July 24, 1991.

¹¹¹ “Guide to the Long Island Hospital Records,” July 2017. 7020.004. City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division. https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/imce-uploads/2017-07/guide_to_the_long_island_hospital_records.pdf.

“orphans, paupers, drunks, and criminals”.¹¹² In line with the charity mentality of the 19th century, which separated the “working” poor from the “professional beggar,”¹¹³ the government offered different facilities for “patients” (e.g. almshouses, hospitals) and “inmates” (e.g. training schools, Houses of Reformation).¹¹⁴

By the 1930s, the City had built a 35-acre prison campus named the Suffolk County House of Correction on Deer Island, and a 35-acre shelter and public health campus on Long Island. The Long Island campus would become the region’s main treatment and recovery facility for substance use until the bridge closed in 2014. On the mainland, myths developed about the islands (including a rumored “Lunatic Hospital”¹¹⁵)—the co-location of health and correctional facilities blurred the boundaries between poor, sick, unhoused, and criminalized people from a distance.

To reduce polluting miasmas, much of South Bay was filled in starting the 1850s. Overlooking these shrunken shores, the City of Boston purchased a land parcel for a smallpox hospital, likely to ensure patients would remain far from the urban core. At the time, health professionals in Boston believed unhoused and “destitute” people posed a smallpox risk, dispensing “virus squads” (often with police officers) to forcibly vaccinate men in boarding houses.¹¹⁶ A short walk away from the smallpox hospital, Boston opened the country’s first municipal hospital in 1864, which offered free shelter and medical care for poor patients.¹¹⁷ (Boston City Hospital, later renamed Boston Medical Center, has maintained its reputation; in the mid-1970s, Beverly Smith of the Combahee River Collective described it as “the resource of last resort. ... Not that all of their patients were people of color, but pretty much all of them were poor.”¹¹⁸)

As the smallpox and “poor people’s” hospitals developed, gas and shipping companies bought up much of the nearby and newly infilled land. The neighborhood’s major roads were named: Massachusetts Avenue connected the area’s gas companies to other parts of Boston, while Southamptton Street ran towards the shipping companies near the bay. Side streets divided the land by Southamptton into narrow and long blocks, including Atkinson Street which separated the City’s smallpox hospital from a lumber yard.¹¹⁹

¹¹² Lupo, Alan. “Deer Island Left to Its Ghosts.” *The Boston Globe*, January 1, 1992.

¹¹³ Howard, Ella. *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 13.

¹¹⁴ Arnold, David, *The Boston Globe*, 65.

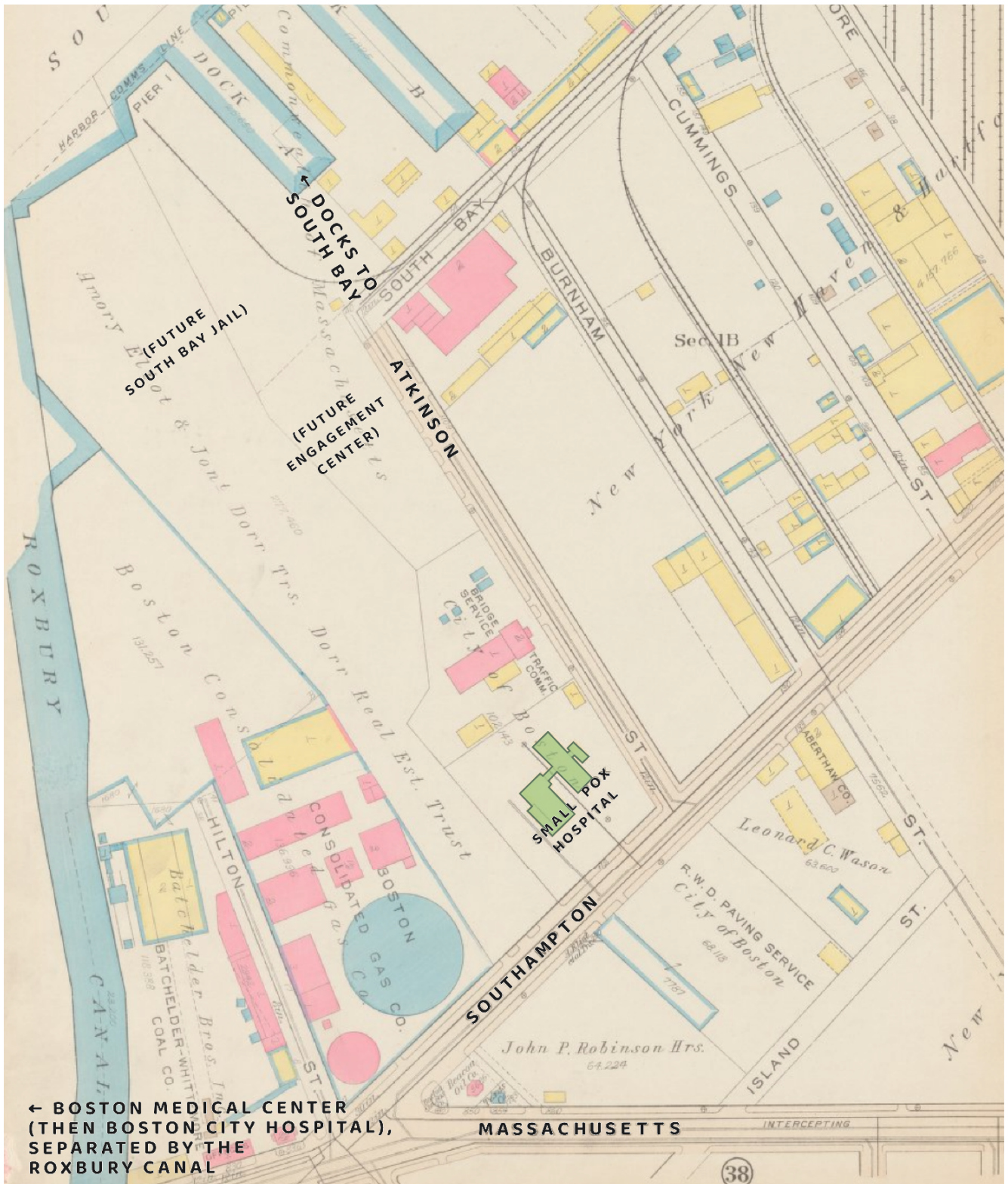
¹¹⁵ Nevins, Joe. “Boston Harbor: Fort Strong, Long Island.” Unpublished, n.d.

¹¹⁶ Archivist. “Smallpox in Boston a Hundred Years Ago.” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 84, no. 4 (April 2001): 301. <https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.84.4.301>.

¹¹⁷ *The Boston Directory*. Collection of the Boston Athenæum: George Adams, 1864. <http://archive.org/details/bd-1864>.

¹¹⁸ Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. “Beverly Smith.” In *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017.

¹¹⁹ G.W. Bromley & Co. “Atlas of the City of Boston : Roxbury.” Map. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co, 1931. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center. <https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:tt44pw24v>.



A segment of the 1931 Atlas of the city of Boston: Roxbury (Plate 39, Part of Ward 8), surveyed and drawn by G.W. Bromley & Co. Highlights show the major streets (Southampton, Massachusetts, and Atkinson), the small pox hospital (in green) that would become a transportation department building and later the 112 Southampton Men's Shelter, and the future locations of the Engagement Center and South Bay Jail. The Boston Medical Center is located beyond the map's borders, separated from industry by the Roxbury Canal. / Map in the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collections, Boston Public Library.

Boston City Hospital was further out, separated from the corporations by a canal and sewage line that piped industrial and bodily wastes into the Boston Harbor. I imagine their patients would hear the daily clangs of machinery and keep their windows closed. In 1924, the City passed a zoning law that encoded the area's industrial use into place, allowing the businesses to grow while ensuring a safer separation from residential use.¹²⁰ More land was bought up by gas, coal, lumber, and leather companies, and the smallpox hospital—a marooned health outpost—was eventually repurposed into a transportation building on the corner of Southamptton and Atkinson Streets.

Around the same time period, the federal government created mortgage security maps that rated every residential neighborhood surrounding this industrial zone “hazardous”. In a practice known as redlining, houses in Black, poor, and immigrant neighborhoods like Roxbury and the South End were considered “sick” and targeted by the 1949 Housing Act, which authorized the razing and “renewal” of these neighborhoods. The 1949 Act also required that poorer families, including those displaced by this policy, be given priority for public housing, which the government originally described as a temporary stop for the “working” and “deserving poor”. However with neglected maintenance¹²¹ and unsafe building design,¹²² many public housing units were made into racially segregated and prison-like¹²³ sites of poverty and crime. They became known as “the projects”¹²⁴ which, like “skid rows,” became a marker of identity that conflated race, poverty, crime, and sickness,¹²⁵ overwriting the stories of people who made their lives there.

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, the deeply intertwined HIV/AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics tore through poor, Black, Brown, and queer communities in Boston, especially hitting Roxbury and the South End. “It was the first wave of ‘Mass. and Cass’,” recalled Dr. Savina Martin, a long-time activist who grew up in public housing near the Boston Medical Center.¹²⁶ Community efforts to stem infections and provide anti-carceral treatment (e.g. non-condemning, non-shaming, reinforcing self-determination and body autonomy¹²⁷) led to innovative harm reduction practices such as needle exchanges and the widespread dispensation of Narcan to reverse overdoses.¹²⁸ Many recovery services around “Mass. and Cass” today were started during this era: the

¹²⁰ The City Planning Board. “Zoning Law of the City of Boston (Chapter 488 of the Acts of 1924).” City of Boston Printing Department, June 5, 1924. Internet Archive. <https://ia600500.us.archive.org/32/items/zoninglawofcityo00bost/zoninglawofcityo00bost.pdf>.

¹²¹ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York Oxford: Oxford university press, 1987, 227-8.

¹²² Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 59.

¹²³ Vale, Lawrence J. “Empathological Places: Residents’ Ambivalence toward Remaining in Public Housing.” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 16, no. 3 (March 1997): 159–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X9701600301>.

¹²⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 219.

¹²⁵ Howard, *Homeless*, 10-11.

¹²⁶ Conversation with Savina Martin, March 21, 2023.

¹²⁷ Hassan, “Moving Away from Public Health Harm Reduction.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*.

¹²⁸ Szalavitz, Maia. *Undoing Drugs: How Harm Reduction Is Changing the Future of Drugs and Addiction*. Hachette Go, 2021.

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, the Pine Street Inn and Woods-Mullen Street shelters, and the Project Trust drop-in center for harm reduction testing and supplies. Led by underground efforts, the City piloted its first syringe service program in 1987 and, following its success, expanded to 10 pilots across the state.¹²⁹ However demand for safe injection sites and substance use treatment overwhelmed available city facilities, and communities did what they could to take care of each other and protest for more life-affirming resources.¹³⁰

Some people started selling and using drugs in the vacant lots of present-day “Mass. and Cass”. (In 1988, the City rebranded the area as the “Newmarket Industrial District” in a revitalization effort.¹³¹) “There *really* was nothing there then,” remembers George Halfkenny, who grew up near “Mass. and Cass” and would drop by the area’s meat suppliers with his mom on weekends. “Maybe they had a methadone clinic over there, but people were mainly exchanging some pills. ... It just wasn’t a place for people.”¹³²

As foreshadowed by the co-development of health and correctional facilities on the Boston Harbor islands, when the state passed an emergency law to relocate the Deer Island prison complex in 1986, they chose a land parcel near the Boston Medical Center, on Atkinson Street.¹³³ The Environmental Protection Agency had sued Massachusetts to clean the Boston Harbor, where accumulated wastes had been polluting waterways across the East Coast.¹³⁴ With a federal judge overseeing the cleaning process, the state fast-tracked the construction of a sewage treatment facility on Deer Island. There, the 35-acre Suffolk County House of Correction had been neglected for decades with “defective toilets and locks,”¹³⁵ limited trained officers, and increasing violence.¹³⁶ Despite protests by community members, who did not want a jail near the “poor people’s hospital” where people were seeking treatment and shelter,¹³⁷ federal and state pressures pushed the massive migration forward. In the winter of 1991, almost one thousand people were moved from the harbor island to the new Suffolk County House of Correction (South Bay Jail) in present-day Atkinson Street. The county Sheriff promised a “more enlightened approach to the incarceration ... of those whom society still wants out of sight, out of mind.”¹³⁸

¹²⁹ Office of Recovery Services. “Draft of South End Health and Human Services Timeline,” n.d. Accessed March 15, 2023.

¹³⁰ Savina Martin, phone call with author, March 21, 2023.

¹³¹ Lloyd, Marilyn Swartz. “Why Manufacturing?” *EDIC/Today*, Summer 1987.

¹³² George Halfkenny, conversation with author, November 26, 2022.

¹³³ An Act Improving Jails, Houses of Correction, and Correctional Institutions in the Commonwealth, Pub. L. No. Acts of 1986, § 2, Chapter 658 1208 (1986). <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/bitstream/handle/2452/8095/1986acts0658.pdf>.

¹³⁴ Tye, Larry. “Deer Island Groundbreaking First Step in 11-Year Project.” *The Boston Globe*, August 11, 1988.

¹³⁵ Cowen, Peter. “Boston Sues State over Deer Island.” *The Boston Globe*, January 22, 1980.

¹³⁶ Island, Steve Marantz, “Object of ‘correction’ shifts at Deer. “Object of ‘Correction’ Shifts at Deer Island.” *The Boston Globe*, December 31, 1991.

¹³⁷ Savina Martin, March 21, 2023.

¹³⁸ Lupo. “Deer Island Left to Its Ghosts.” *The Boston Globe*, 39.

When people are released from the South Bay Jail with nowhere else to go, some will be taken five minutes down Atkinson Street and dropped off the 112 Southampton Men’s Shelter. Lining Atkinson Street today are tents and tarp-covered structures. Many people living in this industrial neighborhood now called “Mass. and Cass” have made this short walk from jail to shelter to hospital and back. It’s so convenient that it seems designed.

The closure of Long Island is one of many forced mass evictions of poor, sick, unhoused, feared, or criminalized people. The lack of care in people translates into a lack of care in infrastructure; many of these mass ruptures are caused or exacerbated by neglected infrastructure (unstable bridges, polluted waters, untrained officers, lack of harm reduction spaces), as well as uncoordinated and uncommunicated crisis plans. Each rupture kills people and upends existing social infrastructure, community practices, and life-sustaining relationships. With this history of “Mass. and Cass” in mind, as a product of broken infrastructure and trust, I turn to the present health of the neighborhood’s social infrastructure, with its inextricable link to the physical and psychological environments.

* * *

We heard on Friday, April 28, 2023, that the City would begin tent removals on Monday, May 1. The Mayor had “[chosen] not to remove tents during the winter months, out of concern for the well-being of unsheltered individuals,” a spokesperson shared on the news.¹³⁹ It felt arbitrary; the encampments at “Mass. and Cass” had been left alone and de facto sanctioned for almost a year. At first I wondered what happened for the City to kick its ‘Encampment Protocol’ back to life but, as I had been learning, lack of clear communication was the norm when it came to evicting unhoused people.

Our team already had an arts workshop at the Engagement Center scheduled for Sunday, April 30, so we scrapped our plans and spent the workshop talking with guests and staff about the tent removal notice and what their plans were. Almost no one had seen or heard of the notice, except for a few street outreach workers. One long-time worker shook his head in disappointment, a jarring departure from his usual quippy demeanor. He said he’d grown up in foster care, around “this kind of stuff” his whole life.¹⁴⁰ The Engagement Center’s Assistant Director is a veteran social worker who has seen every sweep / eviction in the neighborhood since Long Island’s closure in 2014. He handed us his paper copy of the notice before leaving to do his job.

¹³⁹ Cotter, Sean. “Boston Plans to Resume Tent Enforcement on Mass. and Cass.” *The Boston Globe*, April 26, 2023. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/04/26/metro/boston-plans-resume-tent-enforcement-mass-cass/>.

¹⁴⁰ Personal communications with outreach worker, May 8, 2023.

The page was dated *April 2023*, and it read:

“Dear Friends,

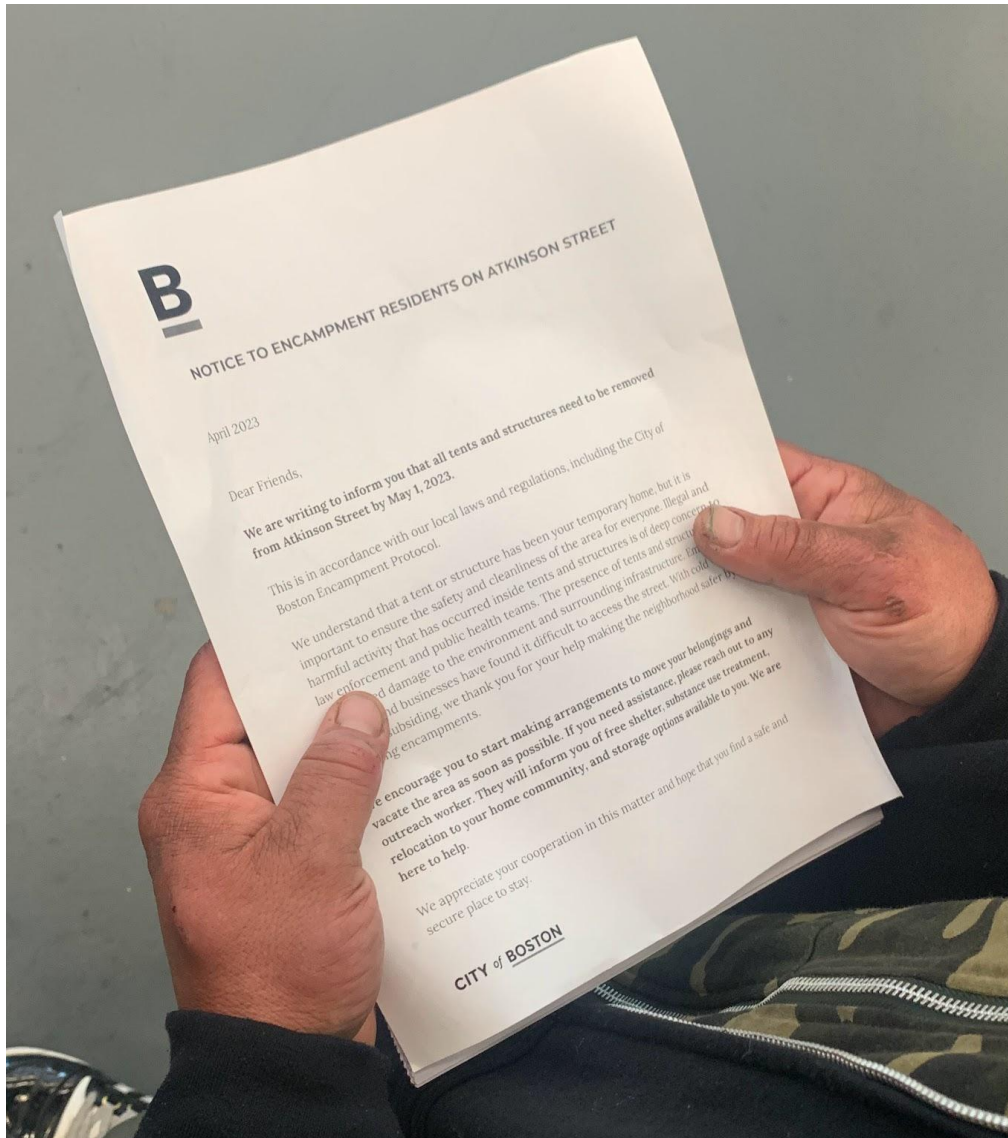
We are writing to inform you that all tents and structures need to be removed from Atkinson Street by May 1, 2023.

This is in accordance with our local laws and regulations, including the City of Boston Encampment Protocol.

We understand that a tent or structure has been your temporary home, but it is important to ensure the safety and cleanliness of the area for everyone. Illegal and harmful activity that has occurred inside tents and structures is of deep concern to law enforcement and public health teams. The presence of tents and structures has also caused damage to the environment and surrounding infrastructure. Emergency vehicles and businesses have found it difficult to access the street. With cold weather subsiding, we thank you for your help making the neighborhood safer by removing encampments.

We encourage you to start making arrangements to move your belongings and vacate the area as soon as possible. If you need assistance, please reach out to any outreach worker. They will inform you of free shelter, substance use treatment, relocation to your home community, and storage options available to you. We are here to help.

We appreciate your cooperation in this matter and hope that you find a safe and secure place to stay.”



The City's eviction notice being read by a guest for the first time on April 30, 2023.

That the City's letter begins "dear friends" felt particularly offensive. "What is friendship if not a willingness to act in an interested way on a friend's behalf?" asks anthropologist Lisa Stevenson. "What does it mean to be both a friend and an enforcer of the law, a friend and the executor of bureaucratic reason? ... [As many, notably Weber (1968:1200), have theorized] a bureaucracy is indifferent to persons and the personal."¹⁴¹ That the letter ends with a "hope that [residents] find a safe and secure place to stay" felt like the City abdicating their responsibility to care if residents did not accept their limited given options.

The night before the May 1 tent removals, we were relieved to hear from a City contact that the plan was pushed back a week and outreach workers would use the week to inform tent residents of the plan and help

¹⁴¹ Stevenson, Lisa. *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*. University of California Press, 2014, 76.

them find other housing options. The next day, we saw the news: someone had given the wrong directives and the removals had gone ahead on the ground.¹⁴²

* * *

When the new Mayor started, her first move was to clear the encampments that had developed in the “Mass. and Cass” area during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their team disassembled and destroyed nearly 200 tents and housing structures,¹⁴³ referring 154 community members to supportive housing and leaving many others on the streets with no dwelling in the cold January weather.¹⁴⁴ Some were stuck on bureaucratic housing waitlists, while others were picked off the streets by police for minor outstanding warrants and told to *stay away* from the area.¹⁴⁵ At a press conference on January 13, 2022, the Mayor and her newly appointed “Mass. and Cass czar” celebrated their process of first surveying each resident’s needs before removing their tents, declaring their response different from previous “sweeps”.¹⁴⁶ The City saw each tent resident as the sum of their surveyed needs—a form of “anonymous care” that serves with indifference to who precisely is being cared for,¹⁴⁷ where residents are watched but not seen.¹⁴⁸

The evictions and forced movements were leaving their mark. “All the movements they make everybody do is what creates a lot of hostility,” an older woman named Tory told George. “If you just leave people alone, the way it was, ... everyone was with each other. When you start telling people, ‘pack your shit and go,’ they get aggravated. Patience is wearing thin. ... Nobody wants to help anybody watch their stuff, because they’re so used to taking care of their stuff.”¹⁴⁹

In the area, we often met people with apartment keys given them by the City. We asked why they came back if they have housing. *Bored*, several folks told us. Others like Ward were here to “gamble” with their drug of choice. In a circle conversation, one man who spoke in a slow poetic voice shared, “When I started cleaning [my tent] ... which nobody was doing, it motivated a lot of people. ... That’s one of the reasons that I came

¹⁴² Cotter, Sean. “‘We’re Just Going to Come Back’: Tents Removed at Mass. and Cass as Wu Administration Sweeps Area.” *The Boston Globe*, May 1, 2023. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/05/01/metro/tent-removals-near-mass-and-cass-to-resume/>.

¹⁴³ Cotter. “Boston Plans to Resume Tent Enforcement on Mass. and Cass.” *The Boston Globe*.

¹⁴⁴ *MASS and CASS Update - 1-13-22*, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEZ0FHP1MEg>.

¹⁴⁵ Valencia. “For Those at Mass. and Cass, a New Order to Stay Away.” *The Boston Globe*.

¹⁴⁶ Bedford, Tori. “‘Nothing Is Different’: After the City Clears Tents, Some Still Don’t Have Housing.” *GBH*, January 12, 2022, sec. Local News.

<https://www.wgbh.org/news/local/2022-01-12/nothing-is-different-people-struggle-to-find-housing-after-city-clears-tents-at-mass-and-cass>.

¹⁴⁷ Stevenson, Lisa. *Life Beside Itself*, 133.

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. 1st edition. Medford, MA: Polity, 2019, 49.

¹⁴⁹ George’s conversation with Tory, November 29, 2022.

over here today from my apartment. ... I've never felt like what I did mattered to anybody until I got down here, really."¹⁵⁰

It is not lost on unhoused people that their presence is not wanted around Newmarket. Tory described her solution to George: "I understand you can't have people camped out right in front of a business. But I would say [the City can] find a deserted ground or a construction site that they don't need no more, and let people ... just be there. You'll be creating a little homeless community. ... We'd be going there to take care of them, instead of having to find people everywhere because you keep getting moved."¹⁵¹

The trouble is, with Long Island closed, shelters mistreating people, and neighbors lobbying to keep unhoused and drug-using folks away, there are few other places where people can go. Founder of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), Pete White has adopted more precise language around the displacement of unhoused residents. For White, *displacement* entails uprooting and moving people elsewhere, like from public housing to downtown, but *banishment* is when there are no places for folks to go, besides jail or death.^{152,153}

¹⁵⁰ Group circle conversation with a "Mass. and Cass" visitor, August 4, 2023.

¹⁵¹ Tory, November 29, 2022.

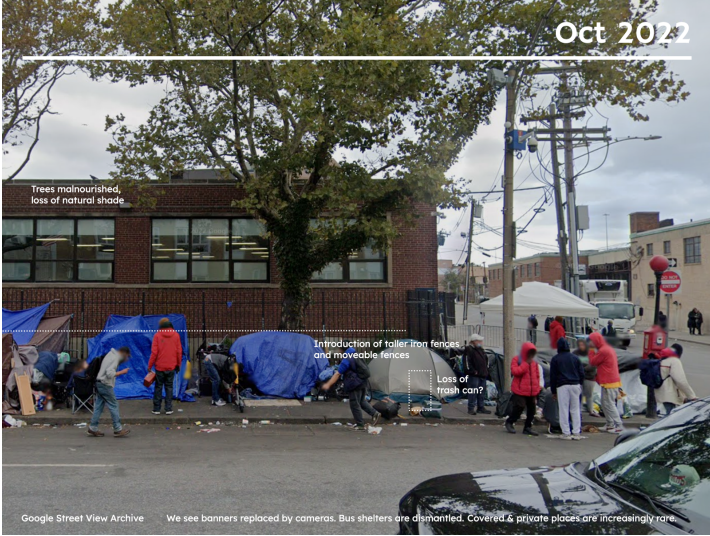
¹⁵² White, Pete. Black Banishment and Real Community at Skid Row. Interview by Kenton Card on behalf of Institute on Inequality and Democracy at UCLA Luskin, March 3, 2016.

<https://challengeinequality.luskin.ucla.edu/2016/03/02/luskin-school-students-interview-urban-color-lines-activists/>.

¹⁵³ Roy, Ananya, Terra Graziani, and Pamela Stephens. "Unhousing the Poor: Interlocking Regimes of Racialized Policing." In *Examining Justice Reform and the Social Contract in the United States: Implications for Justice Policy and Practice*. Justice Lab at Columbia University: The Square One Project, 2020. <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/56m97nbn4265rn7l44k7l2jwql9zdc5>.

Interlude Two

The Labor of Presence



The landscape near the intersection of Atkinson Street and Southampton Street in October 2014 (left) and October 2022 (right). Over time, we see bus stations are dismantled (first the bench, then the entire station), decorative neighborhood banners are replaced by security cameras, and green spaces are neglected. With stronger fences and powerful surveillance technologies, the public realm is increasingly designed for control. / Photos from Google Street View, with edits and additional blur on faces.

Just like a neighborhood's physical environment, the vitality of a neighborhood's social infrastructure depends on its maintenance and adaptation. Libraries, parks, and community centers require labor and investments to persistently support their social and civic uses.¹⁵⁴ Through passive neglect and active disinvestment, spaces that support well-being, social life, and civic agency for unhoused and drug-using communities—like the Engagement Center and Long Island—have been worn down. In the face of these structural decisions, workers at “Mass. and Cass” have done their best to care for street-based communities in line with harm reduction values.

“We’re part of the community that we’re trying to [serve],” a public health worker told us. “[But] there’s a shortage of behavioral health professionals who are willing to work on the street.” She explained the consequences, drawing a connection between presence, violence, and solidarity:

“When people see you standing ... outside in the worst of this, they trust your leadership more. We really do have the love and faith of the community here, so when we need them to do something, we’re often able to persuade them without our public safety partners ... 95% of the time. That relationship always needs to get nurtured if we’re going to keep staff safe on the street. ... You can’t do that unless you’re present.”¹⁵⁵

My teammate Stephen Walter shared an unpublished video interview he shot in 2019 that exemplified the labor and expertise of staff. It was gently raining. A street outreach worker on Atkinson Street was talking about her own experiences with recovery and what brought her to this work. Suddenly she called out to a man and the camera panned to him. He was swinging a thick wooden stick with several knives stuck to the end: a budget scythe. I was immediately on edge, though I was only watching footage. The outreach worker spoke to him kindly and slowly talked the situation down. “Here, take this cigarette. ... Come on, baby, no jail today.” After a few tense minutes, the man lowered the scythe and apologized to her and Stephen behind the camera. She smiled and asked the man if he would like any snacks or water at the Engagement Center.

Care-takers have the emotionally challenging work of not only affirming someone’s inherent worth, but also knowing how to de-escalate their personal crises without punishment, when stresses and traumas cause potentially violent situations to arise. Like social workers and teachers, people who take care of traumatized communities understand that the ways we carry ourselves and the tools we have shape what type of interactions become possible. The outreach worker who talked the man down recognized that they were not living in the same reality at that moment, but she knew enough about what might have brought him to that point to empathize, and she knew enough about trauma-centered methods to help them both see eye-to-eye.

¹⁵⁴ Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 26.

¹⁵⁵ Personal communications with public health worker, Summer 2022.

Learned through work or out of survival,¹⁵⁶ de-escalation training calms the responder’s gut reactions to escalate or run and then looks for the person’s motivations and root causes of pain. De-escalation often comes more naturally for long-time workers at “Mass. and Cass” because they know everyone on the streets by name. An outreach worker shared how he had built trust with people, seeing them at their worst and still showing up for them over years. Because people respect him, he knew he could break up a fight.¹⁵⁷

In a 2022 interview with the *Boston Globe*, a “Mass. and Cass” resident named Sohayb attributed the area’s escalating violence to a loss of respect on the streets.¹⁵⁸ As someone who has known “Mass. and Cass” his whole life, my teammate George Halfkenny described the violence as part of a longer progression in the street culture, tied with fluctuating investment in communities:

“[Years ago,] it sort of resembled how jail was. ... It seemed like: ‘We’re all in this shitty boat together. How can we stand together to get better?’ I feel like there were lots more conversations like that. That seems to be lost now. ... I hear people getting shot—that wasn’t a possibility before. ... Now it seems harder to take care of each other. ...

Part of it is all the new people, ... whether it’s turnover from people going to treatment or getting incarcerated, [or from] people who work there, Boston being a college town. The intern that’s going really hard for you and representing is an intern, but you don’t know that. ... This is the progression. And with that came a loss of empathy to your fellow people. Because you do that long enough, it’s easy to give up on yourself, let alone give up on your peers.”¹⁵⁹

Liberatory geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore famously framed presence as the foundation of abolition and the opposite of absence.¹⁶⁰ Presence is form of care labor “founded on mutual recognition; ... work that requires rethinking and unlearning, ... where knowledge is a process of being, knowing, and acting with others, not something to be collected.¹⁶¹ But when places like “Mass. and Cass” see structural disinvestment and such stigmatizing false narratives, care-takers who continuously pour into others can feel drained and gaslit, causing their burnout.

¹⁵⁶ George Halfkenny, phone call with author, April 27, 2022

¹⁵⁷ Personal communications with street outreach worker, June 1, 2022.

¹⁵⁸ The *Globe* article reporting carried extraneous gory details about the stabbings or criminal details about the unhoused individuals he interviewed. (McDonald, Danny. “After Spate of Mass. and Cass Stabbings, Authorities Clear Atkinson Street, Close Engagement Center.” *The Boston Globe*, April 28, 2022.

[https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/04/28/metro/after-spate-mass-cass-stabbings-authorities-clear-atkinson-street-close-engagem-ent-center/.](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/04/28/metro/after-spate-mass-cass-stabbings-authorities-clear-atkinson-street-close-engagem-ent-center/))

¹⁵⁹ George Halfkenny, phone call with author, December 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. “Making Abolition Geography in California’s Central Valley.” *The Funambulist*, December 20, 2018. <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/21-space-activism/interview-making-abolition-geography-california-central-valley-ruth-wilso-n-gilmore>.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, Diana. *Presente!: The Politics of Presence*. Dissident Acts. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.

Essay Three

The Energy of Belonging

The palpable swell of orchestral strings, horns, and winds filled the 80-foot tent, holding vibrant and cozy space on an otherwise chilly October morning in Boston. Beethoven, Faure, Verdi, and Vaughan Williams were guests that day, along with around 80 unhoused community members, who had arrived in varying moods and states of sobriety. Some guests had started a bit rowdy, but they were no less respectful or in good spirits once they had settled into their seats and the orchestra hit their swing.

After the performance, two musicians shared about their experiences living with mental illness and took questions from the audience. One guest pointed to an instrument and asked, “What is *that*?” *It’s a bassoon*, the musicians answered, and I imagine the crowd laughed. To wrap up the event, the then-Program Director of the space, Mario Chaparro thanked and reminded everyone: “The Me2/Orchestra shows *up* to play music here because they believe in you—just like I do—and we love you.”¹⁶²

The Me2/Orchestra held a residency at this tent and performed several times between Fall 2018 and Spring 2019. To bridge the gap with their audience, they decided to run a conducting workshop with guests. The week before, Me2’s co-founders came by to meet with any interested participants and offer conducting lessons. The manager welcomed them enthusiastically but said no one had signed up (“This is not really a ‘sign up’ crowd,” one recounted later, laughing), so the co-founders mustered up their courage to ask the guests directly. One man got excited about the workshop and they had fun sharing conducting videos with him and his friends. But when they returned with the Me2/ Orchestra the following week, he wasn’t there.¹⁶³ After a slow start, five other guests eventually tried conducting for a few minutes each.

One older gentleman was encouraged by his friend. He protested, *I can’t even stand on the podium!* In response, someone placed a chair onto the podium and two others led him by the hand to sit down. He listened carefully to the Music Director’s technical but affirming instructions on how to start the piece, Johannes Brahms’ *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, and then began conducting. As he waved his arms to the melody and began to relax, he closed his eyes and let the music wash over him. Perhaps in that moment, it became everything.

¹⁶² Whiddon, Caroline. “Boston’s Engagement Center: ‘We Believe in You.’” *Me2 Music* (blog), February 9, 2019. <https://me2music.org/bostons-engagement-center-we-believe-in-you/>.

¹⁶³ Whiddon, Caroline. “Searching for Conductors at Boston’s Engagement Center.” *Me2 Music* (blog), October 14, 2018. <https://me2music.org/searching-for-conductors-at-bostons-engagement-center/>.



Musicians clapping for a guest conductor during the Me2/Orchestra’s conductor workshop in this tent. / Photo from the [Me2/ Facebook page](#), October 20, 2018. The original photo caption reads: “We shared music, conversation, laughs, and smiles. When was the last time you smiled at someone who lives on the street?”

“Even when a conductor’s movements were slight and hesitant,” one musician later reflected, “the orchestra fully responded to the spirit of those gestures, and we could see the conductor’s eyes light up with the power and simple human connection of the moment.”¹⁶⁴

To be living so fully that you forget, just for a second, about your next high or sources of pain—seeing constant mistreatment, missing your child, and trying to find righteousness and purpose. “We got a lot of those stories [here],” my teammate Stephen Walter described. “The more time you have, where you can feel any sense of joy ... or cope without the substance, ... it’s a huge source of hope for a lot of people.”¹⁶⁵ These brief moments can be anchors for people to remember that they are capable of having a different and forgetful relationship with addiction.

* * *

Drivers from all around the Boston area take Melnea Cass Blvd. to access two major interstate highways, making “Mass. and Cass” one of the city’s busiest and most dangerous intersections for pedestrians. In 2017,

¹⁶⁴ Whiddon, Caroline. “A Very Different Conducting Workshop.” *Me2 Music* (blog), October 25, 2018. <https://me2music.org/a-very-different-conducting-workshop/>.

¹⁶⁵ Walter, Stephen. (Engagement Center Designer & Collective Member), in discussion with the author. April 26, 2022.

Boston's bicycle police witnessed three people falling into traffic while high and, with no grounds or desire to make arrests, they requested a day space for guests while shelters were closed. They approached Jen Tracey from the City's newly created Office of Recovery Services, Devin Larkin from the Boston Public Health Commission, and Sabrina Dorsainvil, Stephen Walter, and Susan Nguyen who were then part of the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics (MONUM). With a \$1 million investment and about two months to stand the pilot up, the team turned to the large tent behind the 112 Southamptton Shelter and began imagining what would become the Engagement Center (EC).

The EC's first design was laid out according to regulatory health codes and met basic physical needs with chairs, tables, water, and bathrooms. When they first saw the space, Sabrina and Stephen noticed the tables and chairs didn't match, strewn across the cavernous tent like weeds. "I was like, this isn't gonna work, y'all. ... I think that reaction was shared amongst a lot of people," Sabrina recalled. "What we [as designers] were hoping to bring is to say: we may not have windows, but how can we bring outside in? We may not have perfect flooring, but how can we bring color in? How can we just think about the space differently?"¹⁶⁶

Though the original request prioritized safety from outside traffic, the MONUM and public health teams brought an additional reparative and critical understanding of safety, asking: How might this space tend to not only people's physical safety but also their emotional, social, and even metaphysical safety? As Sabrina put it, "we started asking questions about ... spaces that help people feel like they belong to a place, ... [that] allow people to feel welcomed, connected to the resources and people they want to feel connected to, and creative—[which] for us was about agency and being able to shapeshift and manipulate a space?"¹⁶⁷ In shifting their baseline from "safety" to "belonging," the EC design team set a service culture that not only recognized how the space can help guests but also honored how guests can help the space. In the midst of a neighborhood with militarized public spaces, the EC was designed to feel truly common.

¹⁶⁶ Dorsainvil, Sabrina. (Engagement Center Designer & Collective Member), in conversation with the author and other Collective members. February 11, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.



Outdoor photos of the Engagement Center tent before and after the pilot renovations in 2017. Multilingual welcome signs, plants, portable bathrooms, astroturf for “green space,” seating areas, a walkway, and trash cans were brought in to make the space more welcoming for guests. / Photo from a slidedeck by Sabrina Dorsainvil and Stephen Walter, shared on April 20, 2022.

With a mix of incredulousness, frustration, and triumph, the team described the spatial design process as a “proving ground” for what a government-initiated space for community could be. As City staff with lived or felt experiences of marginalization, the team began with an understanding that residents from all different backgrounds struggle to trust government services and the state as an entity. “We wanted to make sure that folks hear [about the EC from] word of mouth, that they get told to come here from someone they trust, ...

like, ‘The vibe is different. We think we can take a risk here.’ ... Because [other spaces] haven’t always been in service of meeting them where they are,” Sabrina said. “We were like, we’re going to actually get that color in there. We’re going to fight for plants, [and] they’re going to be real plants!”

At first, their team was warned that guests might “hide needles in [the plants] and get stabbed” but they took the risk, bought some pieces out of pocket, and snuck the plants in.¹⁶⁸ “And literally week one, [guests] were like, ‘Y’all planted these wrong, I’m gonna take care of it,’” Sabrina laughed. “While eventually, there were rodent issues and we had to forego some plants, it was really telling to know that ... we could lower the fear.”¹⁶⁹ But before the plants were replaced, staff from other shelters and programs around “Mass. and Cass” came by and felt what these plants did—something lush, healing, perhaps even wild—and they added plants to their workspaces too. Sabrina and Stephen shared other stories about renegade Wi-Fi hotspots, astroturfs, and a community library, cultural initiatives that initially touched a nerve but eventually took root and shifted what felt possible.

Bogotá’s artist-Mayor Antanas Mockus describes these ephemeral experiments as “cultural acupuncture”: provocatively placed and timed artworks that awaken, release, or re-enchant something in a public’s collective imagination, shining a light on behaviors or relationships that could transform.¹⁷⁰ In other words, cultural acupuncture changes the energy. For Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, energy is the medium of performance art, and artists can use creative tools like proximity, endurance, frequency, and context framing to move pent up or released energy towards collective causes.¹⁷¹ Like any creative discipline, people can practice these tools and cultivate a nuanced eye for reading the energy in a space. For example, what connections or catharsis might have been created if, instead of the Me2/Orchestra holding a Q&A after the conducting workshop, they arranged the seats into a circle and asked their guest conductors to share with each other how they felt and what more they wanted to try? The room’s energy had undoubtedly changed for everyone there, enveloped by the orchestra’s beauty and witnessing guests step onto the podium to direct the space, even if only temporarily.

The EC design team was persistent in trying to create these transformative moments and engage guests as creative agents in the space, but they also understood that agency comes after earning people’s trust and making space for healing empowerment. To show guests that they could take a risk and lower their walls, the design team needed to take risks as well and lower the EC’s barriers. Many day spaces and shelters across the

¹⁶⁸ Walter, Stephen, April 26, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Dorsainvil, Sabrina, February 11, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Sommer, Doris. *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 49-50.

¹⁷¹ Bruguera, Tania, and Kathy Nobles. “Useful Art.” *Frieze Magazine*, January - February 2012. <https://taniabruquera.com/wp-content/uploads/2011 - frieze - eng.pdf>.

country have high security, stiff expectations of abstinence or treatment for guests who use drugs, little tolerance for breaking rules, and not enough staff to care for guests who may need extra support. As a result, a significant proportion of people at “Mass. and Cass” avoid or have been banned from these other spaces because they carry weapons for protection, use drugs to avoid withdrawal, or don’t like choosing between shelter and leaving their pet or different gendered partner. The EC’s first barrier to lower was welcoming guests in as they were and allow them to simply be. The team recognized that people were not necessarily asking for help or ready for services. Only if and when they were ready, the EC staff would offer paths to transitional housing, recovery and medical services, employment, and other vital resources.¹⁷²

The EC team tried asking guests for ideas and feedback in a variety of ways, which resulted in better sightlines throughout the space, an industrial-strength coffee maker, on-site storage and phone chargers, and a dedicated space for staff to decompress.¹⁷³ As more people got used to the space, more ideas came in: activities, field trips, books, more books, a pool table, more staff, more therapy for staff, a better hiring process. “I don’t think a survey might have gotten some of this,” Sabrina reflected. “It really is a testament to spending time trying to understand where people are.”¹⁷⁴ Over time, the EC’s staff felt empowered to prototype ideas as well. A few guests knew how to cut hair, so the Program Director Mario bought a barber chair and set up an area for them. Others were looking to dress up before work or special occasions, so they asked the staff for a curling iron. “That creativity ... was staff in real-time saying, ‘Sounds like we need this thing. We can make space for it and try it out.’ ... I think that energy [gave] the guests and staff the flexibility and desire to grow [the space].”

A year into the Engagement Center pilot, the team commissioned an ethnography to better understand who was using the EC and how the space might better meet people’s needs.¹⁷⁵ Researchers Felice Ling and Cecilia Ackerman spent a month getting to know guests and staff, seeing how groups created rituals and took up space, and paying folks to share their wisdom through more formal interviews. They found that guests had many different reasons for being there: some just needed a pitstop or bathroom, while others took care of the building and its communities like a home. But it was the way that people felt respected, cared for, and supported, no matter how they chose to move through the EC, that made this space a refuge where people could build themselves back up, away from the outside stigmatized and brutal world that constantly mistreated them.

¹⁷² Walter, Stephen, and Sabrina Dorsainvil. “Innovation as Care.” April 2022.

¹⁷³ Walter, Stephen and Sabrina Dorsainvil. (Engagement Center Designers & Collective Members), in discussion with the author. February 4, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Dorsainvil, Sabrina, February 11, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Ling, Felice, and Cecilia Ackerman. “The Boston Engagement Center.” Research Report. Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics, City of Boston, May 4, 2018.

<https://drive.google.com/file/u/1/d/1hkNZ0k6VAfBLwssFJoWpr31tX7CeleV7/view?usp=sharing>.

Asking for help can be seen as a sign of weakness if that help is or felt as diminishing. Abolitionists have redefined help as allyship, asking what is truly helpful from a prisoner’s perspective?¹⁷⁶ Recently I met a young man named Jason staying at the 112 Southampton Shelter. He was a comedian and loved making connections between people, a trait that alienated him at the shelter but resonated with me immensely. We started talking about how help was given around “Mass. and Cass” and how people outside the neighborhood didn’t believe in residents’ opinions and realities. “That’s what makes it hard for us to be like, ‘*I need you,*’” he said, then clarified: “When I say, ‘*I need help,*’ [people] can respond in many different ways, like, ‘you need help with, what, fixing?’ or ‘you need help with drugs or stuff like that?’ When I say, ‘*I need you,*’ I actually just need your face-to-face communication. ... When I talk to you and you give me the same kind of emotion back, it’s like we’re on the same page.”¹⁷⁷

In centering ‘belonging’ rather than ‘safety,’ the EC designers and staff designed a healing community space for guests to feel seen, at home, cared for, and hope, even if just temporarily. In line with harm reduction principles,¹⁷⁸ the EC team primarily focused on improving individual and community well-being and quality of life. This not only allowed for transformative moments like Me2/’s workshop and the creative empowerment of staff, but it was the team’s way of believing in and respecting guests’ inherent wisdom and autonomy to search for their own creative solutions or ask for help.¹⁷⁹ As Jason observes, asking for help around “Mass. and Cass” must be rooted in shared presence and mutual respect.

* * *

¹⁷⁶ Knopp, Fay Honey, Barbara Boward, Mark O. Morris, Mary Jo Brach, Scott Christianson, Mary Ann Largen, Julie Lewin, Janet Lugo, and Wendy Newton. *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists*. Syracuse, New York: Prison Research Education Action Project, 1976. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/instead_of_prisons/.

¹⁷⁷ Jason, conversation with author, August 6, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ For harm reduction principles, please see Note B.

¹⁷⁹ This recognition of inherent wisdom is true for all survivor-centered and survivor-created work. When practiced this way as a liberatory philosophy, harm reduction borrows and walks alongside movements in disability justice, healing justice, reproductive justice, transformative justice, and others (Hassan, “Moving Away from Public Health Harm Reduction.” In *Saving Our Own Lives*).



Outside the new Engagement Center, with an “ALL ARE WELCOME” sign and mural by artist Mz.Icar. The South Bay Jail sits in the background. / Christian Phillips Photography for saam architecture, 2021.

After four years of data gathering, experiments, and trust-building, the City invested in the design and construction of a brick-and-mortar building for the Engagement Center on Atkinson Street. The sun-lit space opened in December 2021 with a maximum capacity of 150 people. There is a patio in the back, and the room’s perimeter is lined with sofa-shaped plastic chairs. Four bathrooms line the back wall, hidden by a divide that doubles as a bulletin board for community announcements. A long reception and food distribution counter greets you when you walk in. “You are loved,” the former Program Director Mario Chaparro’s daily saying, is painted as a colorful mural framing the large open space. “All are welcome,” the message originally printed on a large banner, is carved from metal and affixed to the building’s exterior. The new EC was a major milestone and investment in harm reduction for the region.



Inside the new Engagement Center, with a mural reading “YOU ARE LOVED” by artist Alex Cook. / saam architecture, 2021.

Two months prior, the incumbent Mayor had declared “Mass. and Cass” a public health crisis, and the incoming Mayor had campaigned heavily on “fixing” the neighborhood. In January 2022, the Mayor sanctioned a sweep of the neighborhood’s encampments. Among community members, it was well-known that violence and tensions got worse after the tents were removed.¹⁸⁰

Four months later, several stabbings around the neighborhood made headlines and the new Mayor acted swiftly to close and “reset” the Engagement Center.¹⁸¹ None of the standings were fatal, and several long-time EC staff have told us that they could have de-escalated the situation more had there been more staff around. But like other public health spaces and shelters, the EC lost critical staffing capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic and was still recovering.

¹⁸⁰ Xavier, conversation with author, November 11, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Becker, Deborah. “Boston Engagement Center Temporarily Closed after Series of Stabbings.” *WBUR*, April 28, 2022. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/04/28/mass-and-cass-engagement-center-resources-five-day-shutdown>.

“We were a pawn in a game [the City] played with the police to get them to do their jobs. They're a new administration and they don't want advice, ... but they hurt people by doing that,” one public health worker explained, elaborating:

“[The stabbing inside the EC] was a *very* minor event. There was a staff who handled it. ... We agreed to a five-day closure. [The Engagement Center is a licensed medical clinic and] a five-day closure doesn't disrupt medication in the same way. We had about 80 people on daily observed therapy at the clinic and most of them were taking PrEP [for HIV prevention], ... and if you don't take your PrEP for seven days, you need a whole new lab panel to get back on your medication.”¹⁸²

As with other closure and displacement policies regarding “Mass. and Cass,” the details were not communicated with workers on the ground, forcing them to make on-the-fly medical decisions that inevitably harmed their patients and broke the trust and routines they had spent months or years building with them. In an interview for the *Boston Globe*, a “Mass. and Cass” resident named David affirmed that closing the EC even temporarily created barriers to accessing basic resources,¹⁸³ like bathrooms, water, communication technologies, storage, and space for gathering.

After the agreed-upon five day closure, the police did not allow the EC to re-open, arguing that the City needed more time to plan their neighborhood “cleanup”. At the time, their plan was doing street cleanings three times a week, which forced encampment dwellers to break down their tents and temporarily leave Atkinson Street, and routine drug searches and arrests by undercover police, who were in the area every day from 8:30-10:30 AM.¹⁸⁴

The City and police hoped to move the EC's programming into other parts of the Boston area, following pressures to “decentralize Mass. and Cass” from the South End-Roxbury Community Partnership and Newmarket Business Association. But the public health worker reframed the problem around needs: “At the end of the day, the major hospital is here, the shelters are here, and the jail is here. You can't just not have services here too. You're always gonna have need around a safety net hospital.” The Engagement Center guests say that their physical needs are met, but they wish for more room to be in community, be engaged in activities, or just be. People with keys to housing often come back to feel less lonely and bored.

¹⁸² Personal communications with public health worker, 2022.

¹⁸³ McDonald, Danny. “After Spate of Mass. and Cass Stabbings, Authorities Clear Atkinson Street, Close Engagement Center.” *The Boston Globe*, April 28, 2022.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/04/28/metro/after-spate-mass-cass-stabbings-authorities-clear-atkinson-street-close-engagem-ent-center/>

¹⁸⁴ Personal communications with “Mass. and Cass” residents and staff, June 2022.

The closure ended up lasting one month and was a catastrophic medical event for the EC’s staff and clients. “All of those people stopped taking their medications, which include medications for HIV, to prevent HIV, even some ... on psych meds and getting injectables,” the health worker told us. “The staff had worked so hard to get these people on their medication, ... because we had an HIV epidemic. ... Now we have to rebuild it all back up. ... We’re still getting there, ... but there was no need for that.”

* * *

When it reopened, the EC had added metal detectors, ID checks, and security guards—completely contrary to its original harm reduction ethos, now focused on safety (but for whom?), not belonging. The EC had also reduced its capacity, letting 35 people in at a time. But people weren’t going in anyway, turned off by the increased police presence.¹⁸⁵ Today Atkinson Street is bookended with police cruisers, whose officers rarely engage with the encampment residents. The street is lined with permanent and temporary metal fences that create small alleys where people can pitch their tents. Colorful tent structures, informal lean-tos, and umbrellas form neighborhood blocks along both sides of the street, with tarps serving as rain covers and quick shade.

“We feel like caged animals down here,” Diane told me during one of our Sunday workshops at the Engagement Center, which we started in late January 2023. “They want us on *this* side of the street,” she reenacted the daily sweep. “Or we can be here, but *only* on the sidewalk.”¹⁸⁶

Diane had never missed a day of rent. Her family moved from Massachusetts to Florida when she was young to live in a cozy house that they had built by hand. Doing well in school came naturally to her and she had a soft spot for sea animals, especially living near the ocean where she swore she always saw new creatures. She got pregnant before her high school graduation, but then her child was taken away from her two weeks after his birth. To help cope with her profound sense of loss as a young mother, she started using drugs. There weren’t many consequences until much later, when she moved back to Massachusetts and started living with an abusive ex in a trailer park, splitting a \$750 rent. When the park got sold, her ex pressured her to take the buy-out cash. She was given \$3250 and two months to find a new place, but she was unable to afford anything in Boston’s rental market. She was houseless for a year and a half, using drugs on the streets before someone invited her to “Mass. and Cass”.

Diane had been staying in her friend’s tent. “You know the saying, ‘a dead body stinks after three days?’” I shook my head and she explained that staying in her friend’s tent was like that: after three days, people start to get tired of someone in their house. She tries to be a good guest, but it’s a tight space. “Obviously I want

¹⁸⁵ Personal communications with Engagement Center staff, June 1, 2022.

¹⁸⁶ Diane, in discussion with the author. July 2, 2023.

housing,” she rolled her eyes. “Everyone should have electricity and running water.” But she didn’t know all of her options for getting housing and was preparing to try living at a shelter with her friend, Laura. I asked what was stopping her from going to the shelter now. “I don’t want to go alone,” she said simply.

Having lived at “Mass. and Cass” for a month now, Diane felt a much stronger sense of community and knew enough people she could go to for help. Then she got quiet. “A girl here got stabbed three times. ... I don’t know how to feel here sometimes,” she said. She seemed confused and distant when she described that the stabbing was starting to feel like an “everyday thing” to her, just part of the daily landscape.

“When people act as if a neighborhood matters, that helps to shape the concrete ways in which the neighborhood really does matter,” described sociologist Robert Sampson, in conversation with writer Carlo Rotella.^{187,188} Though many stories about “Mass. and Cass” now focus on the violence in the streets, few trace how public pressures and crisis narratives have led to “safety”-driven policies (again, for whom?) and unplanned opaque processes. Few stories acknowledge how the resulting militarization and enclosure of physical spaces have worn down the neighborhood’s social infrastructure and culture of care. These structural forces must be accounted for in understanding why violence has escalated over time, beyond individual’s motivations. As Diane told me, “Addiction is a disease. The majority of us didn’t ask for it. ... We chose to come here, but they don’t have to treat us like this.”¹⁸⁹

Under the current Mayor, neighborhood associations, planners, policymakers, and other professionals are determined to decentralize the recovery and homeless services at “Mass. and Cass,” in a direct effort to displace existing communities.¹⁹⁰ Not only does the urge to decentralize echo histories of displacing the poor and sick out of sight and mind, but it forgets that “Mass. and Cass” was a proving ground for harm reduction spaces like the Engagement Center. It continues to be a place of shared grief and resistance among residents, public health workers, and other activists who are pushing for anti-carceral healing practices that are rooted in belonging, love, solidarity, and presence.

¹⁸⁷ Rotella, Carlo. “Neighborhood Has Always Mattered.” *The Boston Globe*, May 26, 2014.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/05/25/neighborhood-has-always-mattered/WGsMwEivxomPzf6OaoCbDP/story.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Sampson, Robert J. “The Neighborhood Context of Well-Being.” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 46, no. 3x (2003): S53–64. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2003.0073>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Boston Planning & Development Agency. “Public Realm.” Presented at the PLAN: Newmarket Advisory Group Meeting, April 5, 2023. <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/4d9f4e57-3bbb-41cb-8f29-b671b1d2b993>.

Four Design Values for Healing Community Spaces

In May 2023, See You In The Future was commissioned by the Boston Public Health Commission to paint a series of murals for the outdoor courtyard of the 112 Southampton Men’s Shelter, the largest shelter in New England, located at the entrance of Atkinson Street. We saw this as an opportunity to design a physical space in “Mass. and Cass” with encampment residents, visitors, and staff, one that could benefit themselves and future shelter guests.

We started with the question: *What does a healing space mean to you?* We wanted to understand healing on people’s own terms, not bringing any prescribed notions of healing. Four design values have emerged during our conversations and art workshops: belonging, care, hope, and growth.

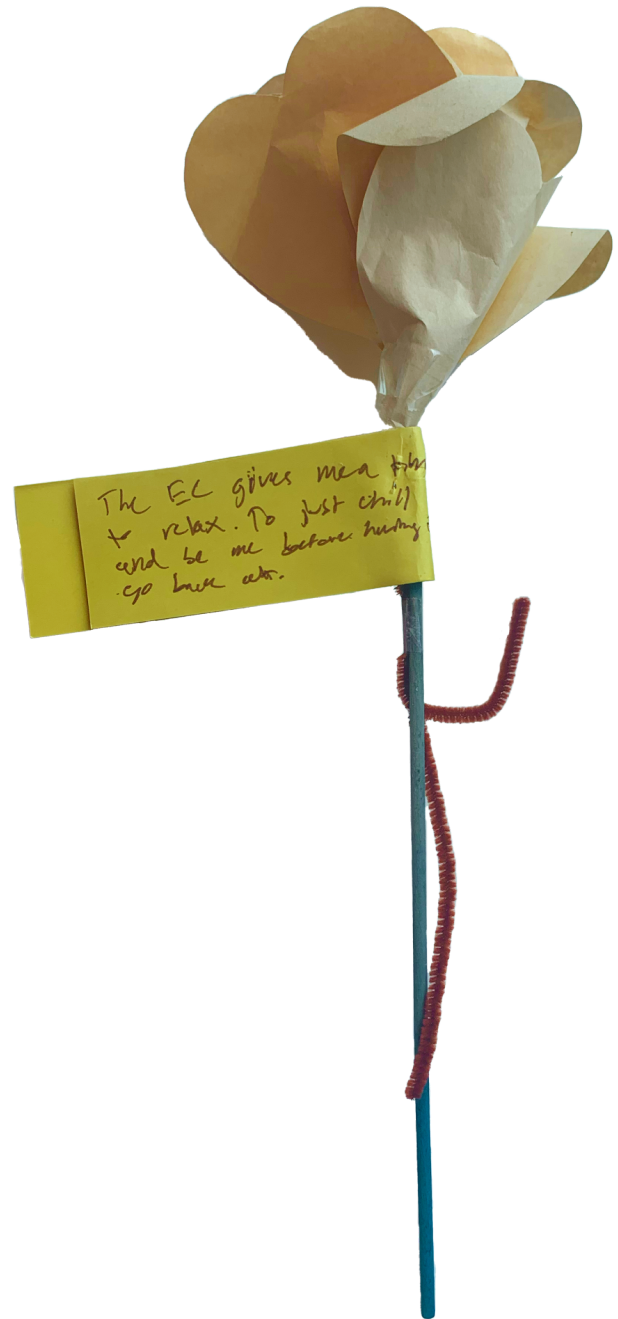
We want to feel *belonging* to something greater in this neighborhood.

“I feel safer on this block [Atkinson], because everybody's there. Everybody's there.”

“Let people from the neighborhood, *who know its history*, stop and interact with the mural.”

“The EC [Engagement Center] gives me a place to relax. To just chill and be me before having to go back out.”

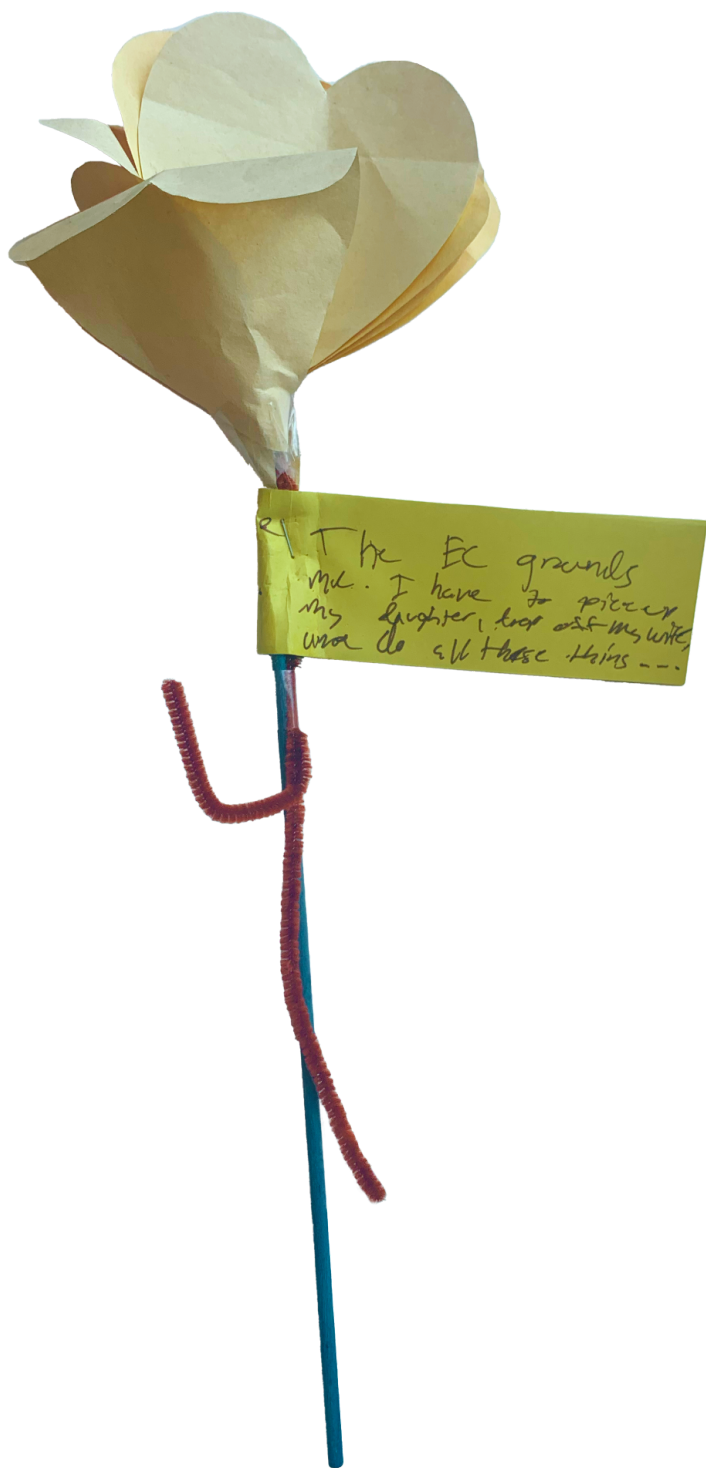
“I think about that show, *Cheers*. You want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came.' ... So why [do] I keep going to the same spot? This shitty ass spot? ... Because somebody out there is gonna say hi to me, and all I see is your¹⁹¹ back.”



Flower from an Engagement Center workshop, March 2023.

¹⁹¹ This is referring to the speaker's abusive partner at home.

We want to feel *belonging* to something greater in the city.



"Help my with housing."

"Belonging is having housing."

"I've been waiting for housing for 3 months."

"The EC [Engagement Center] grounds me. I have to pick up my daughter, and drop off my wife, and do all these things ..."

"I feel trapped in the shelter. I want to feel freedom in the city."

"My things get stolen at the shelter."

"It's hard to get sleep here. You have to sleep with one eye open, one eye close."

"The people that live outside, like me and other people in the world, we have the kingdom to roam, but we don't have no home to roam to."

Flowers from an Engagement Center workshop, March 2023.

We show *care* by



learning to trust.

Open hands, open mind.

“Do not disrupt, let them talk.”

“No matter how hard it gets in life, it's never that bad where you can't start making changes in your own life, little-by-little. But never give up. It's never too late.”

supporting others' growth.

“Sharing when you have little, giving when you have excess.”

“I plant seeds. ... If I give you everything you need or make it available for you, then the choice is yours and I've done my part.”

remembering family.

“Never forget those who have died.”
“The immigrant experience is different.”

We feel *hope* when we feel unconditional love and salvation.



“There may be bad days but there’s always better days ☺”

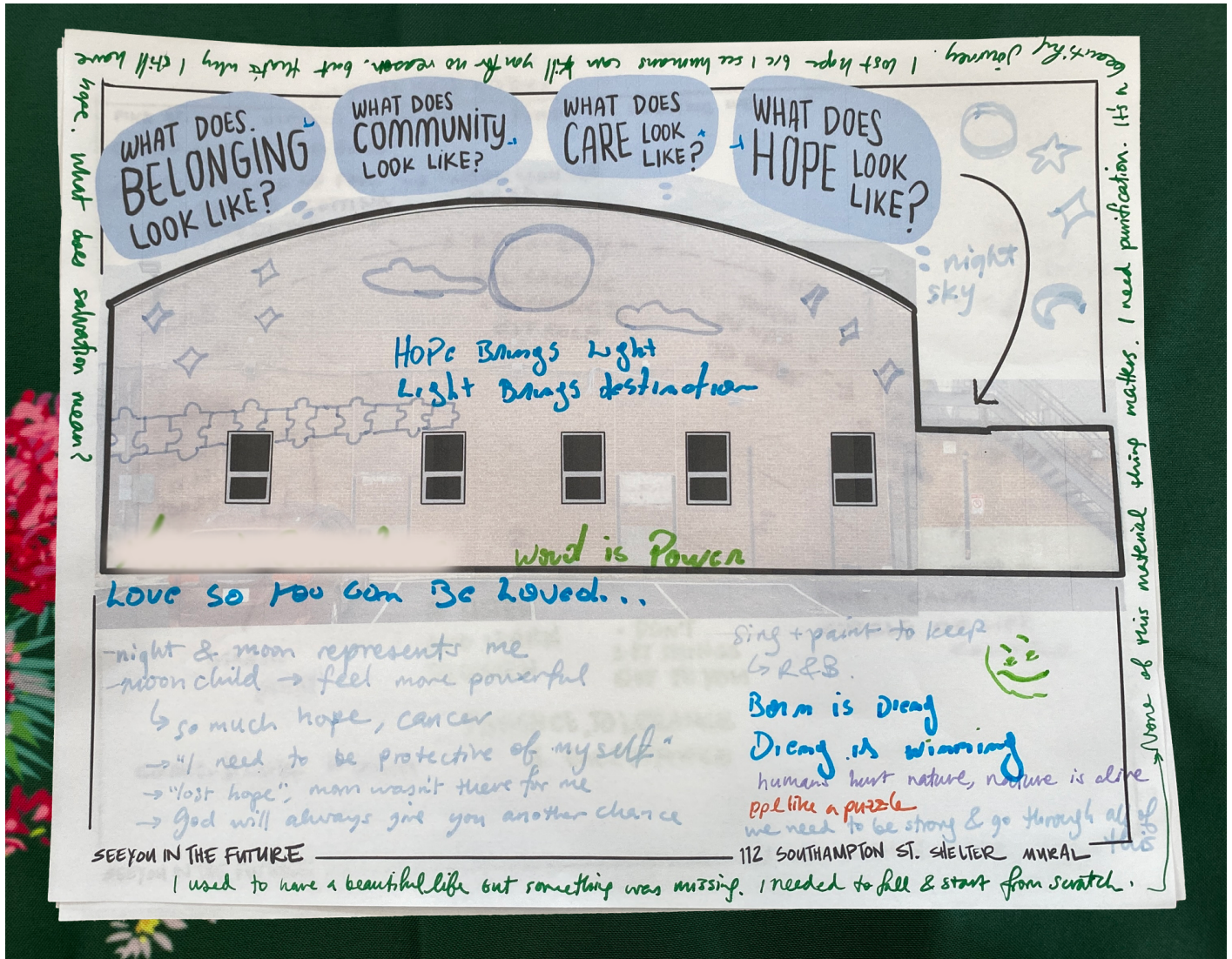
“Follow the footsteps set for you and you will find salvation at the end.”

I lost hope because my mom wasn’t there for me, but “God will always give you another chance.”

(To wife) “I am with you. I have not left you. My passion started with you. I love you.”

Flowers from an Engagement Center workshop, March 2023.

We feel *hope* when we see our place in nature.



Mural notes from an Engagement Center workshop. / Worksheet design: Sabrina Dorsainvil, May 2023.

"The night and moon represent me. I am a moonchild. I feel more powerful at night."

"Humans hurt nature, nature is alive."

"It's a beautiful journey."



Mural notes from an Engagement Center workshop. / Worksheet design: Sabrina Dorsainvil, June 2023.

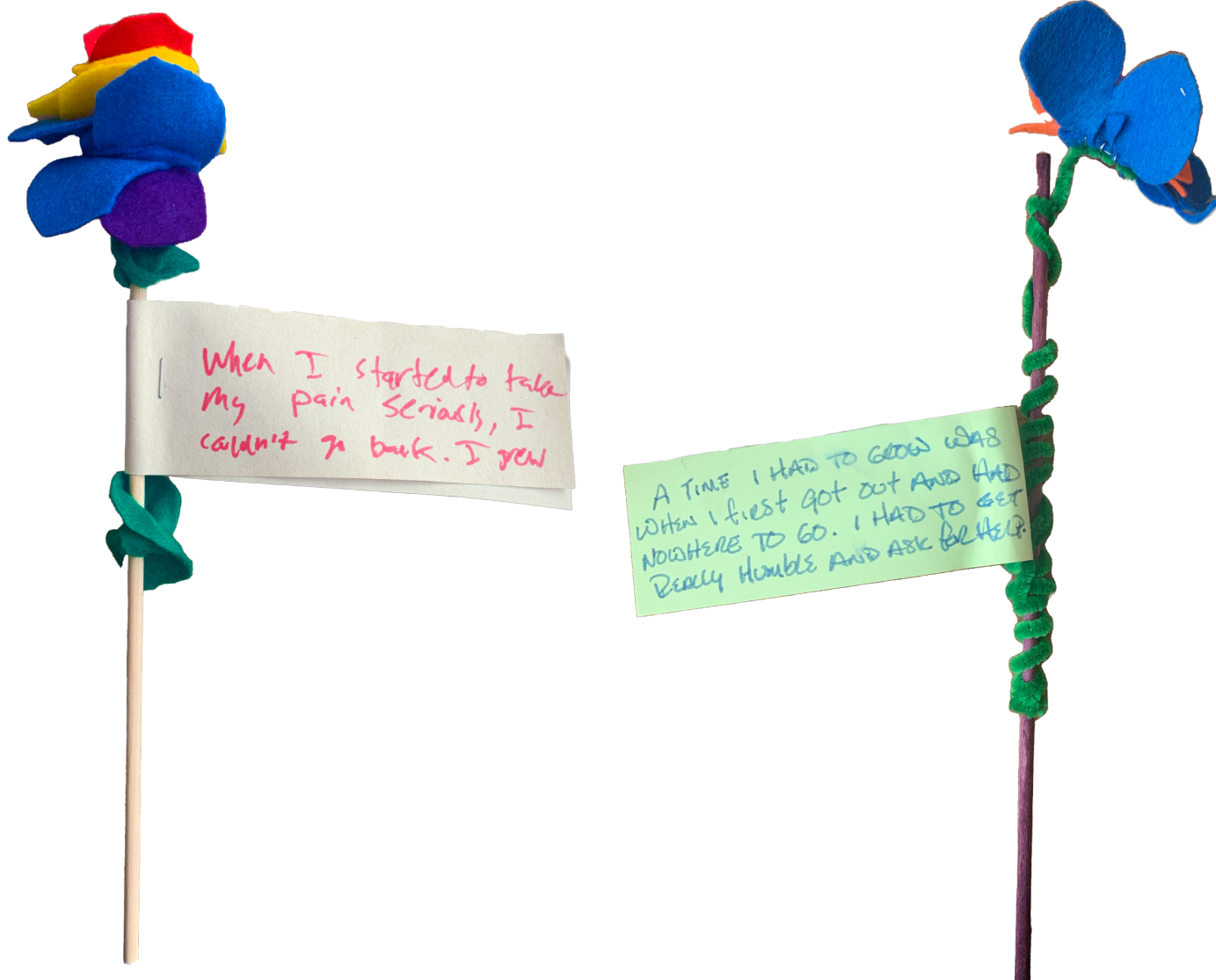
"I want to see life! Flowers, trees, animals, clouds."

Blue skies, butterflies, and birds say: "At last I am free. Yes, I am free."

Beach vibes and water.

Seahorses say power, love, humility, obedience. Fishes say love & humility.

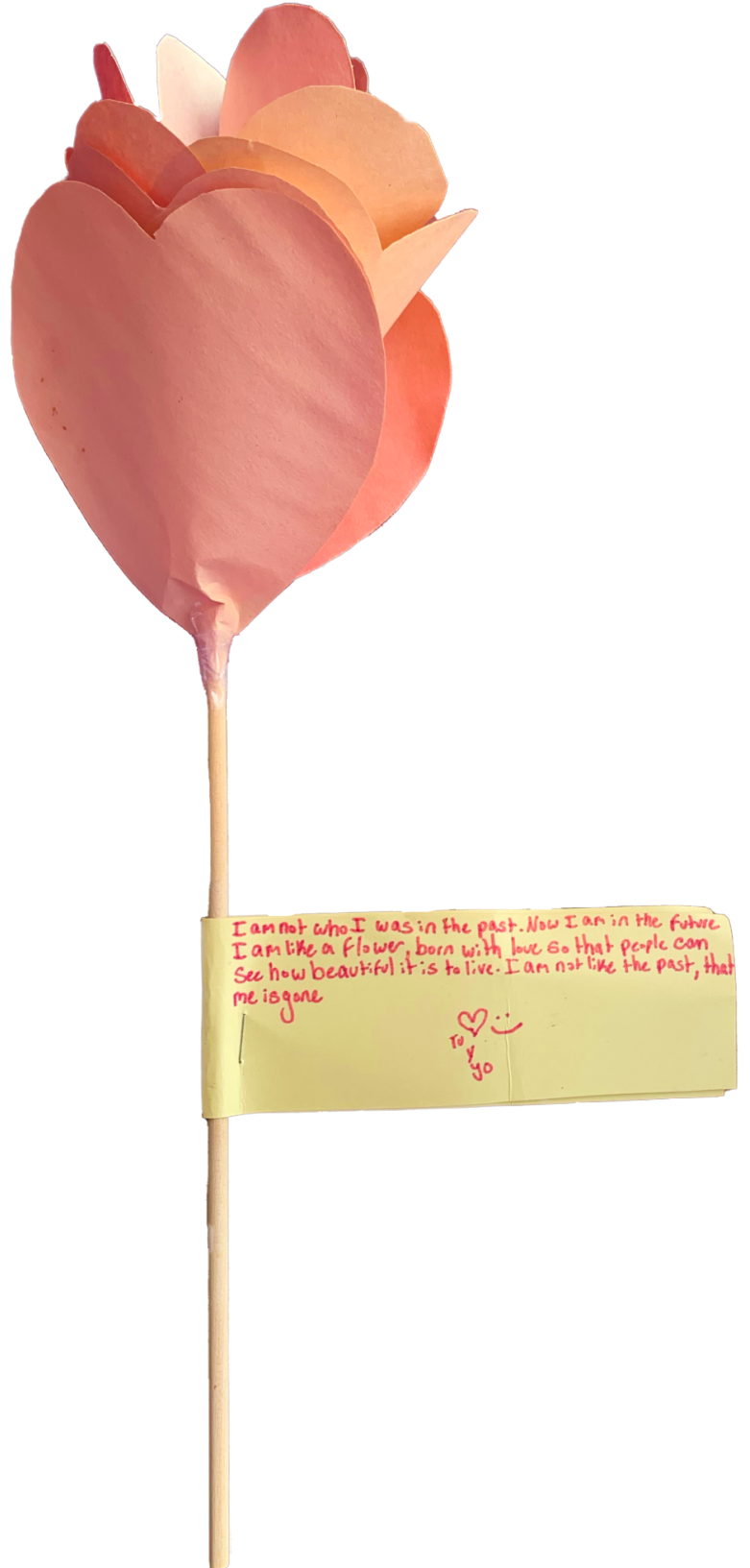
We grow ourselves by seeing our own potential.



“When I started to take my pain seriously, I couldn’t go back. I grew.”

“A time I had to grow was when I first got out and had nowhere to go.
I had to get really humble and ask for help.”

Flowers from an Engagement Center workshop, March 2023.



"I am not who I was in the past. Now I am in the future. I am like a flower, born with love so that people can see how beautiful it is to live. I am not like the past, that me is gone.

♡ ☺ Tu y yo"

"I am tired of being the same. ... To reach freedom, I must be changed."

"Growth is life."

"I wish to fly."

Process

Art as Harm Reduction

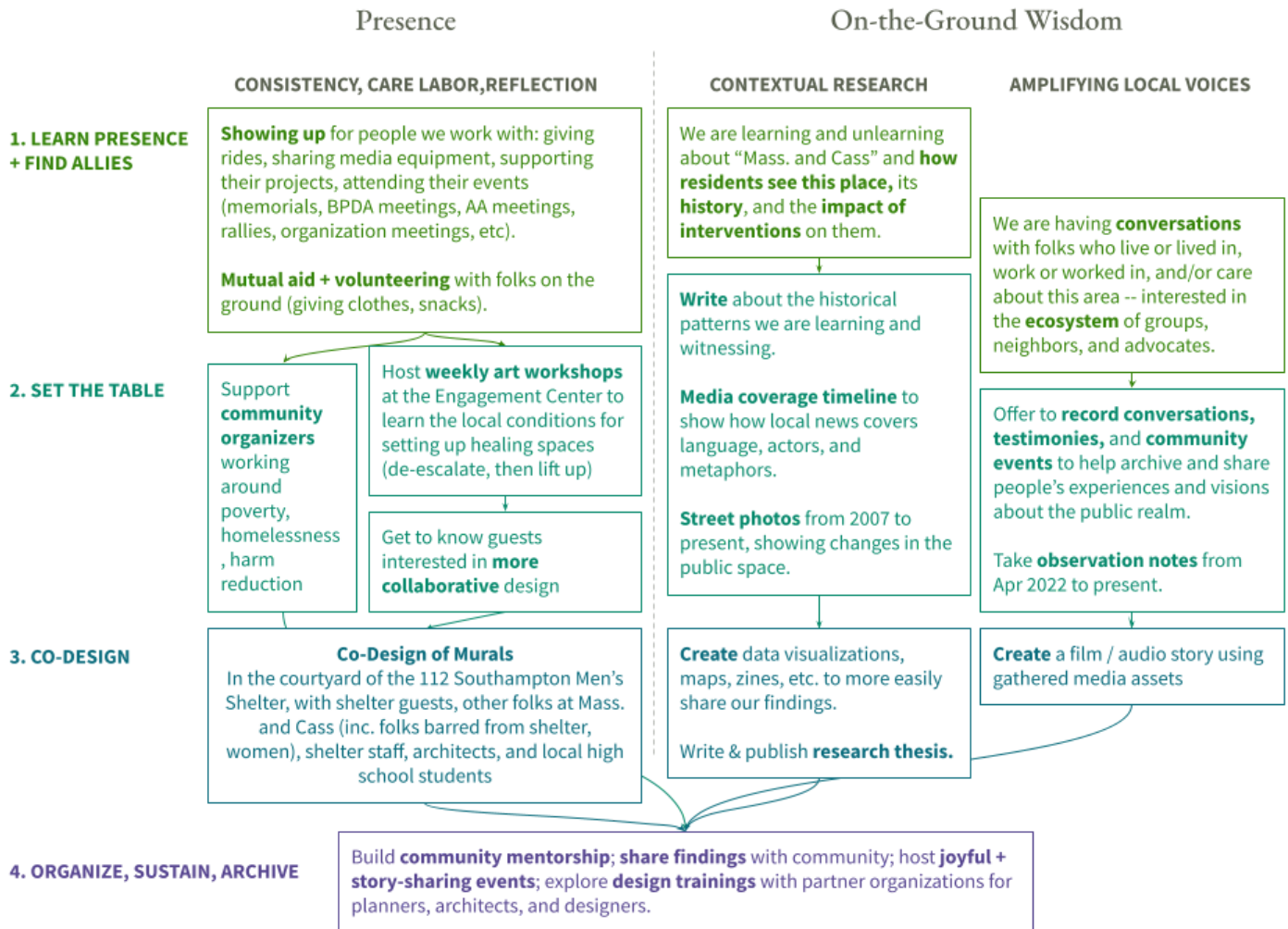


Diagram of our design methods, which try to be present to communities and lift up the wisdom on-the-ground. We are inspired by community organizing work, harm reduction principles, reflexive planning practices, expressive therapy work, and solidarity networks.

Learning Presence

After almost two years, our Collective has only recently moved towards collaboratively designing spaces with community members, despite co-design being our goal from the beginning. Why has it taken us so long to get here? Yes, we were figuring things out as we went and navigating a pandemic. Most of all we were learning how to be present in the neighborhood and move at the speed of trust.¹⁹² No one invited us to “Mass. and Cass”. It has taken time and conversations to determine what project outcomes would feel gratifying and useful to community members. We’ve had to learn and practice how to show up in solidarity without paternalistic notions of “helping”. Though we have existing personal and professional relationships here, we wanted to honor the mistrust that communities felt of people like us: housed individuals affiliated with powerful, complicit, and unaccountable institutions like professional planning, MIT, and the City of Boston. What needed to change for our work here to cause no harm? How could we resist the statistical bent to see individuals as interchangeable and anonymous community members?

In striving to build non-judgmental, trauma-centered, and mutually gratifying relationships with folks at “Mass. and Cass”, we had to work through our internalized fears and judgments about community members. I started to see how my discomfort in smelling dirty clothes or urine on another person perpetuated harmful ideals of purity and self-righteousness, entangled in histories of European colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, and animal cruelty.¹⁹³ Left unexamined, these discomforts would shape my body language, subconscious decisions, and the energy I brought with me.

From a distance, we spent months researching the neighborhood’s context, language, and histories, as well as interviewing each other about our past experiences here. When had partnerships or collaborative design not felt mutual before? What had caused us to burn out before? Only after we felt confident that our presence would not be burdensome or harmful did we start meeting folks at “Mass. and Cass.” From there, we began the slow and persistent process of earning their trust, running weekly arts workshops, owning our mistakes, and learning how to show gratitude (such as paying for people’s time and labor in their preferred ways). Without this groundsetting work, we could not have created a psychologically safe and healing space for folks to *want* to engage, share their experiences and wisdom, and imagine new possibilities with us.

¹⁹² brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Reprint edition. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017.

¹⁹³ Shotwell, Alexis. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. 1st edition. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Setting the Table

After the Engagement Center reopened at reduced capacity and with more security, our Collective hoped to help reactivate the space. Returning to the EC's original ethos of harm reduction and belonging, we decided to host low-barrier art and storytelling workshops. From February to June 2023, we held weekly arts workshops inside the EC, going almost every Sunday at the same time. From our previous work in this neighborhood and in prisons, as well as in with trauma-centered work, we learned the importance of showing up consistently to build trust. EC staff had shared how their previous workshop efforts, including painting and music, fell apart because “[the workshop facilitator] left after a few weeks.”¹⁹⁴

Folks living outside or in shelters often did not have access to a stable physical address, calendar, or phone (phones are often stolen), and often had other medical, housing-related, or court-related appointments and programs to plan around. Being able to tell workshop participants, “See you here same time next week,” and give others who missed our workshop a set time and place, “We’ll be back next Sunday same time,” was often relieving and took at least some of the stress in planning off their minds.

Guests shared how “there’s no community in the EC anymore” and that the new EC was great for getting their physical needs met—with food, naps, bathrooms, and medicine—but they missed an emotional wellness component.¹⁹⁵ We also saw that staff were burning out, stretched thin with understaffing and high turnover.

In response, our workshop goals became to 1. Fill a programmatic gap in the EC, 2. Offer expressive therapy-inspired activities for people to share what was on their minds, and 3. Support community-building. In line with harm reduction values, we always tried to offer a menu of options for guests to participate on their own terms:

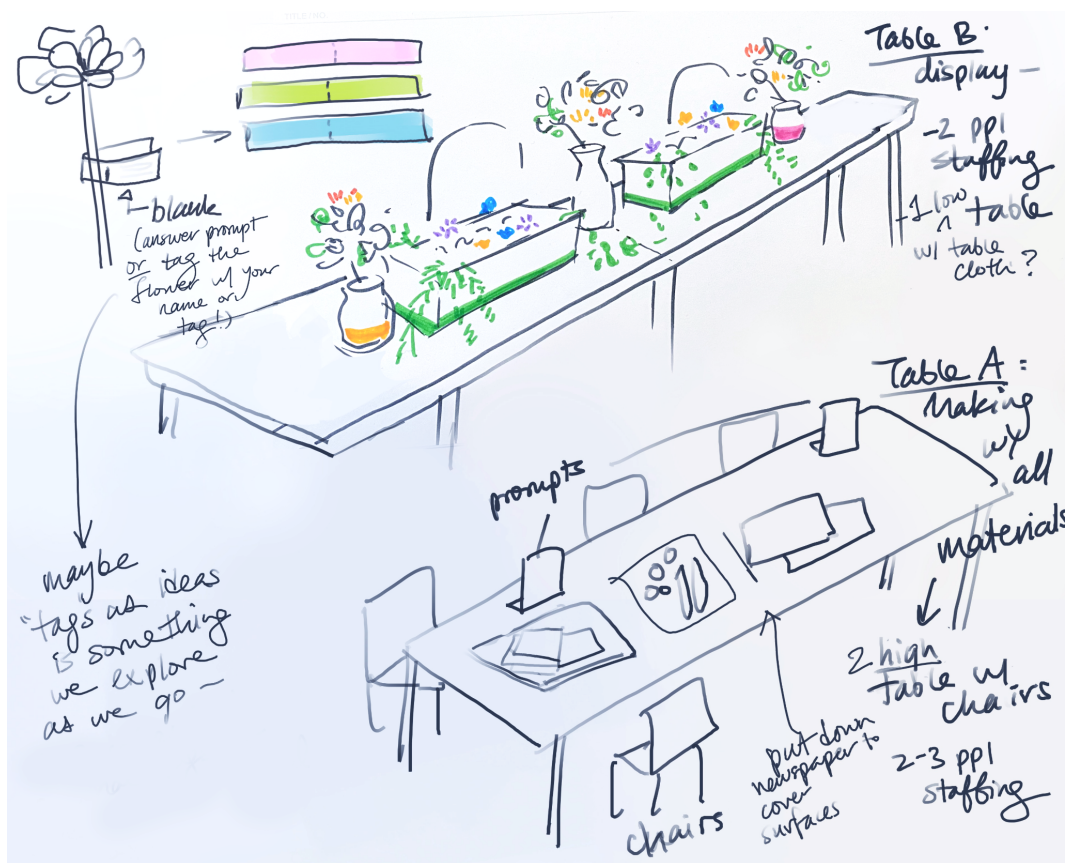
1. We offered a low-barrier expressive activity (e.g. coloring books, origami, collaging), for guests who just want to hang out and chat with us or silent with us in silence.
2. We offered a more-involved creative activity involving telling a personal story, if guests would like to engage and stay for a while. Whatever the storytelling activity, we tried to design it in a way that gave community members control over their own outward-facing story. Each workshop was a way to share and listen to stories through art. While our emphasis was only on process over output, we hoped the workshops’ outputs could be used as colorful decoration inside the EC and bring joy to staff and other guests.

¹⁹⁴ Personal communications with EC staff, February 13, 2023.

¹⁹⁵ Personal communications with EC guests, February 19, 2023.

3. We offered a multilingual space for folks to just talk and be heard if they'd like, without any pressure to do another activity or make anything. Some days, it was harder to hold this space because we were short-staffed.
4. We offered a separate and optional space to record an audio or video story, with an honorarium, if they'd like.

Inspired by Sabrina and Stephen's previous design work at the old EC, we saw our workshop table as its own spatial intervention within "Mass. and Cass". We set it up to emphasize beauty and hope through colors, fresh flowers (we always gave these to guests or staff after), and snacks. We later designed a tablecloth that collaged artworks created by previous workshop guests. This gesture was meant to be a passive indication to guests that we respected their voices and wanted to honor them in our table. We had a few regulars who came to our workshops almost every week and they were eventually so familiar that they helped us to make space and set up our table.



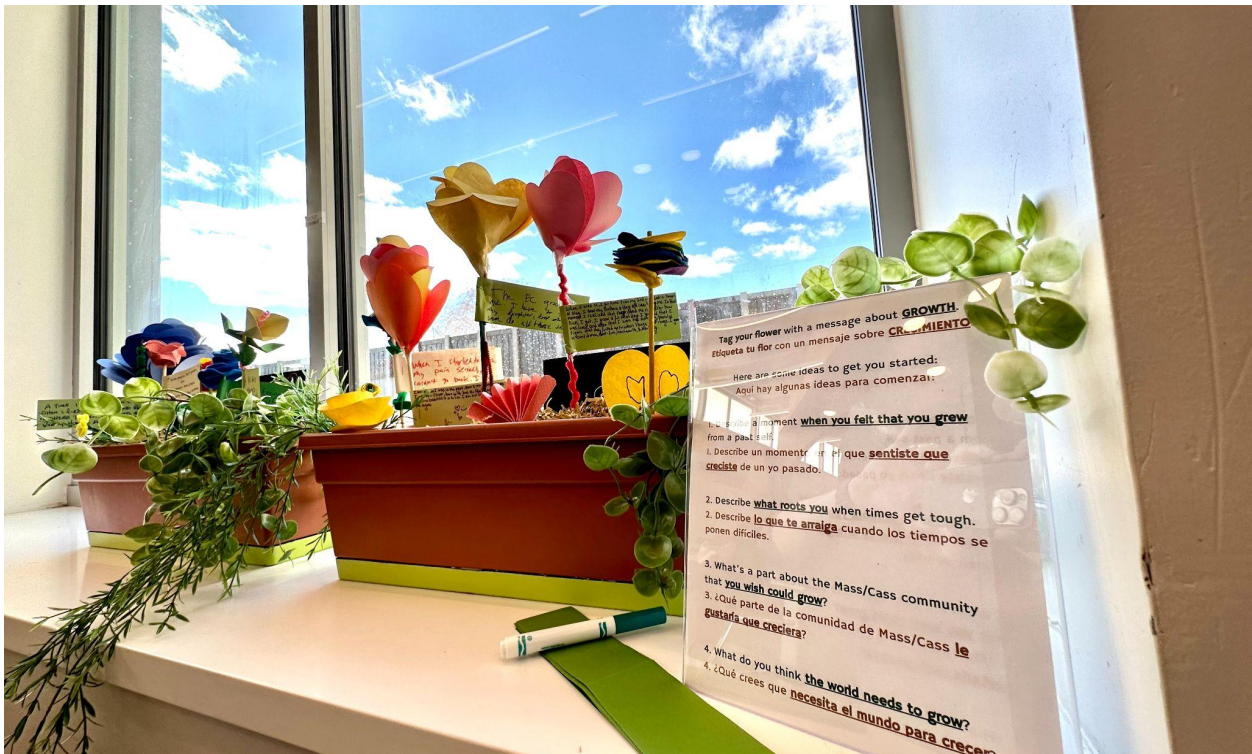
Sketch of our workshop table set-up. Considerations included height for wheelchairs, tablecloth design, flowers, snacks (sugar-free, both savory and sweet), how activities were arranged, and bilingual signs (“talk with us, we’re here to listen” and “make art with us”). Each week, we tried to have enough team members present so some of us could sit with folks at the table, some people could walk around to the EC’s other tables and bring materials to people directly, and some people could talk with folks outside the EC to ask if they wanted to come in and join us. / Drawings by Sabrina Dorsainvil and author, March 2023.



Close up of our workshop table set-up with the new tablecloth. / Photo by Sabrina Dorsainvil, May 2023.



An earlier flower-making workshop about growth with a few regular guests. / Photo by Stephen Walter, March 2023.



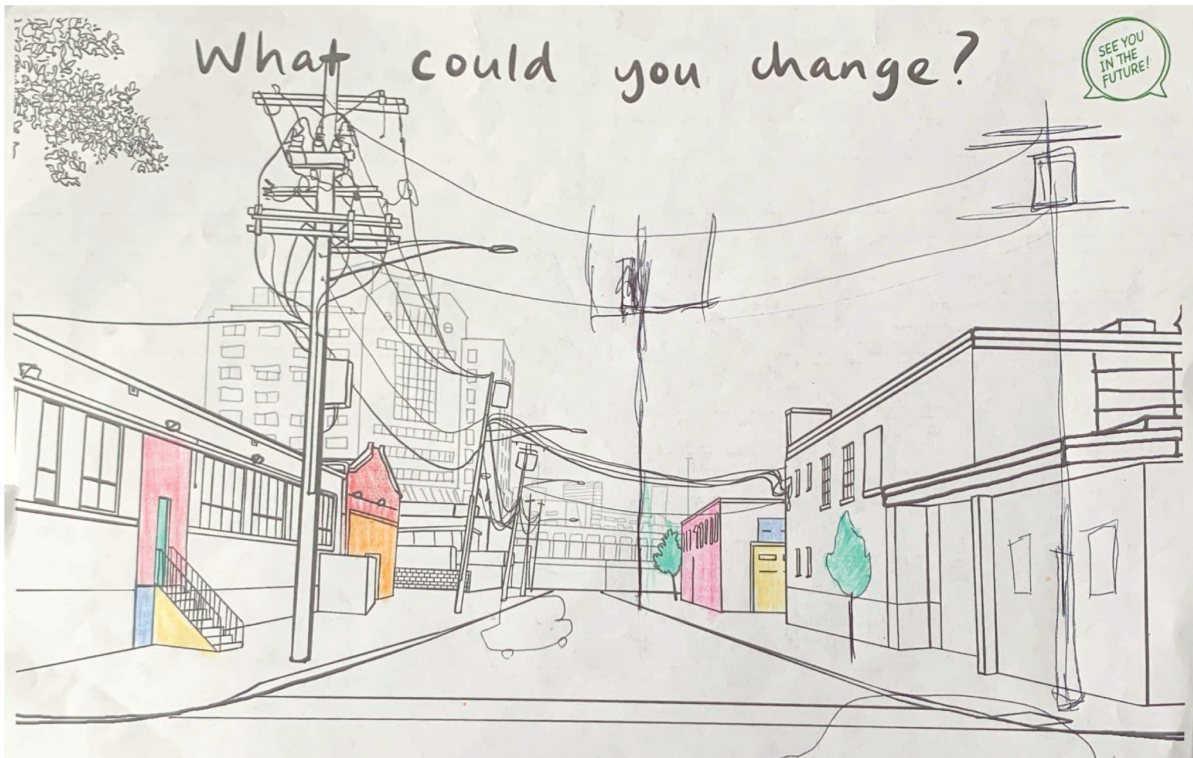
The planted flowers shared stories and added color to the EC. When a staff came into work on Monday, she texted, “I saw some art at the EC today and it made me so happy!” We left extra flower-making materials and prompts for guests during the week. / Photo by Sabrina Dorsainvil, April 2023.



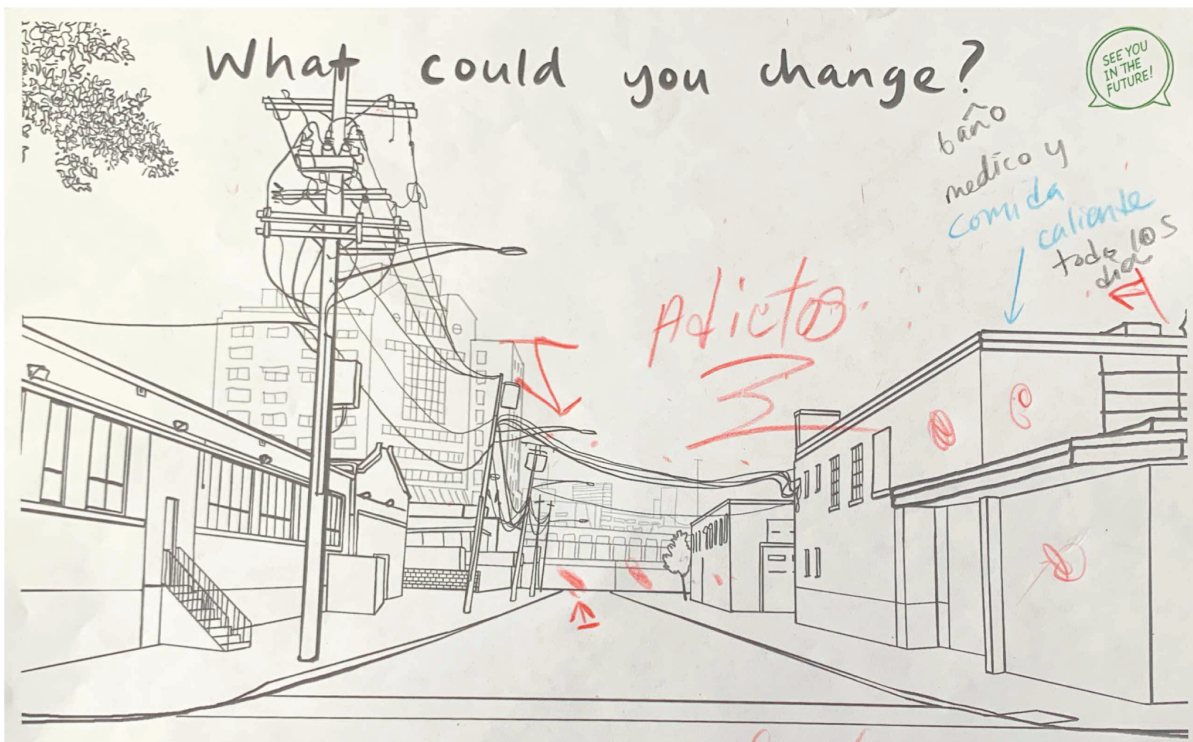
The design of the 112 Southamption Shelter front entrance and a teammate (right) holding a bouquet of flowers, June 2023.



George Halfkenny interviewing a guest outside of the Engagement Center about their story. / Photo by Stephen Walter, June 2023.



Our first workshop activity was a coloring page of Atkinson Street. We asked guests to draw or write what they wanted to change. We learned that we had better conversations with guests when activities felt more collaborative, tactile, and mutually beneficial. This coloring sheet felt like a glorified survey to some. / Guest coloring page, February 2023.



A coloring sheet by another regular guest, who suggested transforming the food warehouses on the right into a 24/7 recovery center with hot food, bathrooms, and doctors. / Guest coloring page, February 2023.

Cultural De-Escalation

Led by our Collective member Sabrina Dorsainvil, we were asked by the Boston Public Health Commission to create a series of murals on the 112 Southamptton Street's Men's Shelter's wall, fence, and ground.

In our work, we have heard numerous stories about people's negative experiences in and perceptions of the shelter, from some staff calling guests homophobic names and being more keen to kick people out than help,¹⁹⁶ to guests' worldly possessions being stolen, bed bugs, and cold food.¹⁹⁷ We were not interested in "art washing" away from the mistreatment and injustices people experience in the shelter and on the streets. Following Tina M. Campt's call for a "Black gaze," which is art that demands the labor of presence to Blackness,¹⁹⁸ we wanted to create an image that saw both the beauty in community alongside the brutality people faced.

In our Sunday workshops, we started asking the question: *What does a healing space mean to you?* Following harm reduction values, we wanted to understand healing on people's own terms, not bringing any prescribed notions of healing. Four design values emerged during our conversations and art workshops: belonging, care, hope, and growth. We then asked folks to help us understand what these themes meant to them (see previous interlude for several responses).

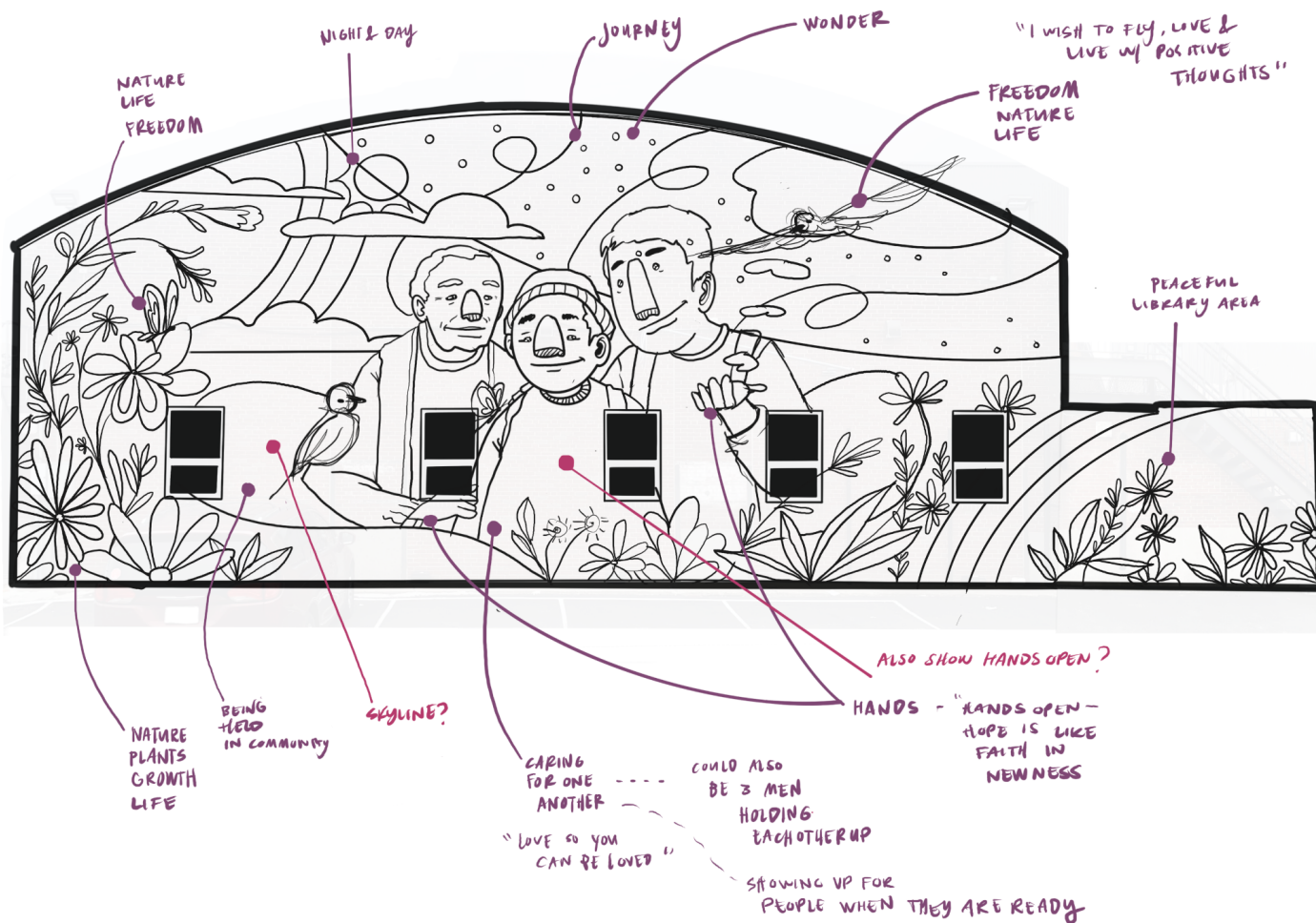
To move towards visualizing these themes as a mural, we asked people a variety of questions that tried to connect these abstract ideas to their experiences:

- What spaces / places offer you [belonging / care / hope / growth]?
- How do you show [belonging / care / hope / growth]?
- What memories do you have of [belonging / care / hope / growth]?
- What does [belonging / care / hope / growth] look, feel, or sound like to you?
- What is [belonging / care / hope / growth]?

¹⁹⁶ Personal communications with guests, April through August, 2023.

¹⁹⁷ Personal communications with guests, May and August, 2023.

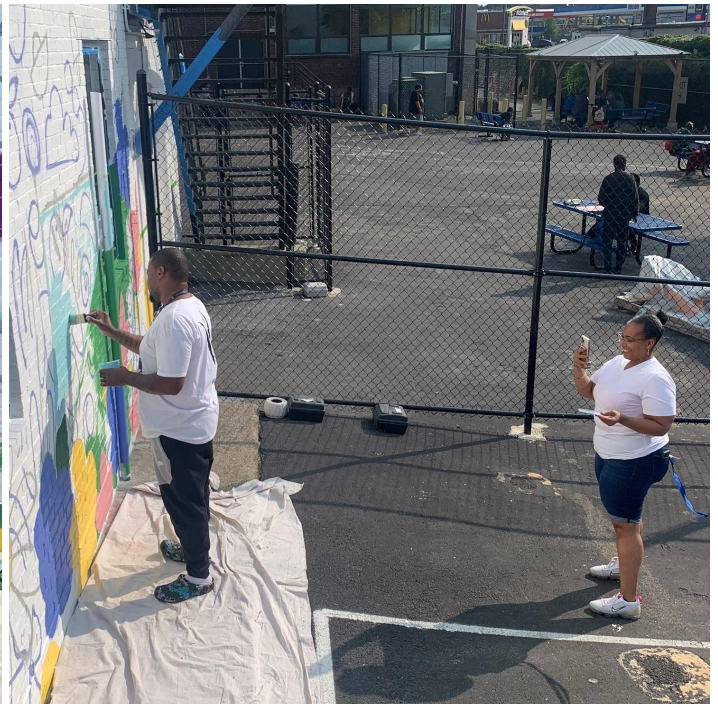
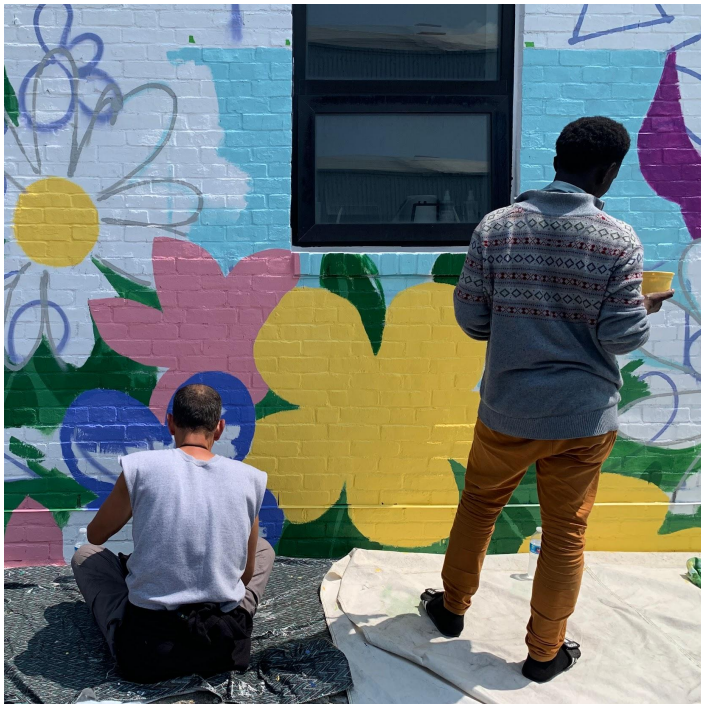
¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 25.



Early mural sketch pointing to notes from workshop conversations. / Illustration Credit: Sabrina Dorsainvil, July 2023.



The final mural design based on conversations. / Image by Sabrina Dorsainvil, August 2023.



Photos from painting days, where guests (top left, bottom left), staff (top right), and folks who lived/frequented the encampments on Atkinson Street (bottom right) joined us, August 2023.

As in our workshops, we tried to have enough team members present so some people could be painting while others could be talking with guests, looking for potentially interested painters in the shelter courtyard or on Atkinson Street, or talking with staff to welcome them to participate. We found that many of our first

painters had previous experience painting for art or for work (on various buildings). More guests became interested after seeing others painting.

Structural disinvestments and labor burnout continue to be fed and exacerbated by the story of crisis around “Mass. and Cass” today. Following the original EC design team’s ethos, we wondered if public art could help shift the neighborhood conversation away from public safety and towards belonging? Could the process of art-making and design bring the collective temperature around “Mass. and Cass” down, serving as a tool for cultural de-escalation? Just as de-escalation responds to personal crises with calm and empathy, cultural de-escalation would learn to see the root causes of personal crises, calming our reactions and not conflating personal crises with larger public health or public safety crises of public safety. By recognizing a traumatized community’s story, cultural de-escalation helps to level set and create a shared reality from which to move forward.

Walls, fences, and cameras surround the 112 Southampton courtyard. To enter the shelter, people coming from the encampments on Atkinson Street must go through security. We knew that merely painting images on these border surfaces would not be enough to lessen feelings of over-security and bounded reality, even if the images were collaborative in nature. As part of our process, we hosted two circles with shelter guests, a reparative group process rooted in indigenous practices and popularized by restorative justice practitioners. Our circle keeper, George Halfkenny participated as well.

“There’s no grass. You can’t feed the birds. It brings me back to a time, ... like a prison yard. One way in, one way out,” one man described the shelter’s courtyard.¹⁹⁹ Several guests nodded and shared their own comparisons between the shelter and jail. When it was his turn to speak, one man reminded the others, “[But] this ain’t jail. There’s no reason to act like you’re in jail.”

He was met with a few surprised looks. This man had put into words a sense of agency and hope, feelings that underly a potential shift from guest to community member. “To bridge means loosening our borders ... Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without,” writes Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. “To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded.”²⁰⁰ For “Mass. and Cass” residents carrying hurt internally and facing spatial banishment externally, we saw light in this brief moment of mutual recognition and the seeds of community healing.

¹⁹⁹ Group circle conversation with 112 Southampton Shelter guest, August 4, 2023.

²⁰⁰ Anzaldúa, Gloria. “(Un)Natural Bridges, (Un)Safe Spaces.” In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th edition., 1–5. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015, 3.



A town hall-style conversation about the mural, hosted by the 112 Southampton Shelter team. Guests sat in rows facing the front (the mural), raising their hands to speak one at a time. August 2023.



A circle with shelter guests led by a circle keeper (George Halfkenny) and scribe (author). Snacks were placed in the center. Guests shared that they had few options like this to talk with each other, face-to-face and hear each individual's opinions and ideas. This circle focused on their experiences at the shelter, healing spaces, and what they felt about the walls and fences. Though we hoped their thoughts would inform our mural work, we also saw the circle as their space to share, connect, and reflect. / Photo by Sabrina Dorsainvil, August 2023.

Conclusion

Every major U.S. city has a tent encampment,²⁰¹ and every city has similar narratives about violence, crime, addiction, disease, and mental illness. These stigmas and fears are often used to justify policies that enclose and banish unhoused communities from public space over time, distracting from the economic factors at the root of homelessness at this scale: an increasingly unaffordable housing market and alarming wealth inequality.

Rather than focus on long-term responses like the much-needed construction of permanent supportive housing, our work sits in the present. We asked: how can we see encampment communities and unhoused residents more honestly? And, when we allow what we see to change us, how can we (the professional planning and architecture fields, universities, the government) show up in solidarity with unhoused communities and their allies? How can we design with love?²⁰² How can we account for and begin to repair the harms inflicted on the communities of “Mass. and Cass”—from the accumulated traumas of forced mass displacement efforts like Long Island and all previous “homeless sweeps”, to the closure of community spaces like the Engagement Center and subsequent disruption of medical and social systems?

When they have been forced to shrink and disappear from public life, how do people imagine a healing space that feels truly public?

I had two hopes in presenting our project as a series of essays, rather than a summary of our project design. Because we focus on community stories, which are in some sense infinite, we wanted to emphasize the indeterminate, ambiguous, and emotional nature of our methods and findings. Through scenes, characters, and pacing, I tried to write as we work: encouraging multiple voices to speak, sitting with the negative space of what is not said, and trying to

²⁰¹ National Coalition for the Homeless. “Position Statement on Sanctioned Encampments.” *National Coalition for the Homeless* (blog), September 14, 2021. <https://nationalhomeless.org/sanctioned-encampment-policy/>.

²⁰² See Swenson, Katie. *Design with Love: At Home in America*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2020.

be present to the complexities of others' experiences and my positionality. My first hope was that this reads like a walk, where our feet stay planted on the ground and the humanity of community members never leaves our sight.

As designers, we cannot consciously reckon with healing spaces for unhoused communities without implicating ourselves in the ongoing stigmatization and criminalization of homelessness and poverty across the U.S., a tension that makes encampment sites like “Mass. and Cass” both a refuge and a prison. The patience of essays allowed me to sit with the often traumatic experiences of our collaborators and participants. The essay was an ethical decision to bring you closer to these stories entrusted in us, resisting the psychological distance created by intellectualizing.²⁰³ With “Mass. and Cass” in the news again recently, my second hope is that you follow along and see with new eyes.

²⁰³ Fullilove, Mindy Thompson. *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, And What We Can Do About It*. Second edition. Random House, 2004.

Acknowledgments

This thesis exists because of generousities. To the residents, guests, visitors, and public health workers at “Mass. and Cass” who took time to invite us in, share your experiences and ideas, and entrust us with your stories, thank you. Thank you especially to Jen Tracey at the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Services, Devin Larkin at the Recovery Services Bureau of the Boston Public Health Commission, and Claudia Lopez at the Boston Healthcare for the Homeless Program for modeling how to lead with care, justice, and grace.

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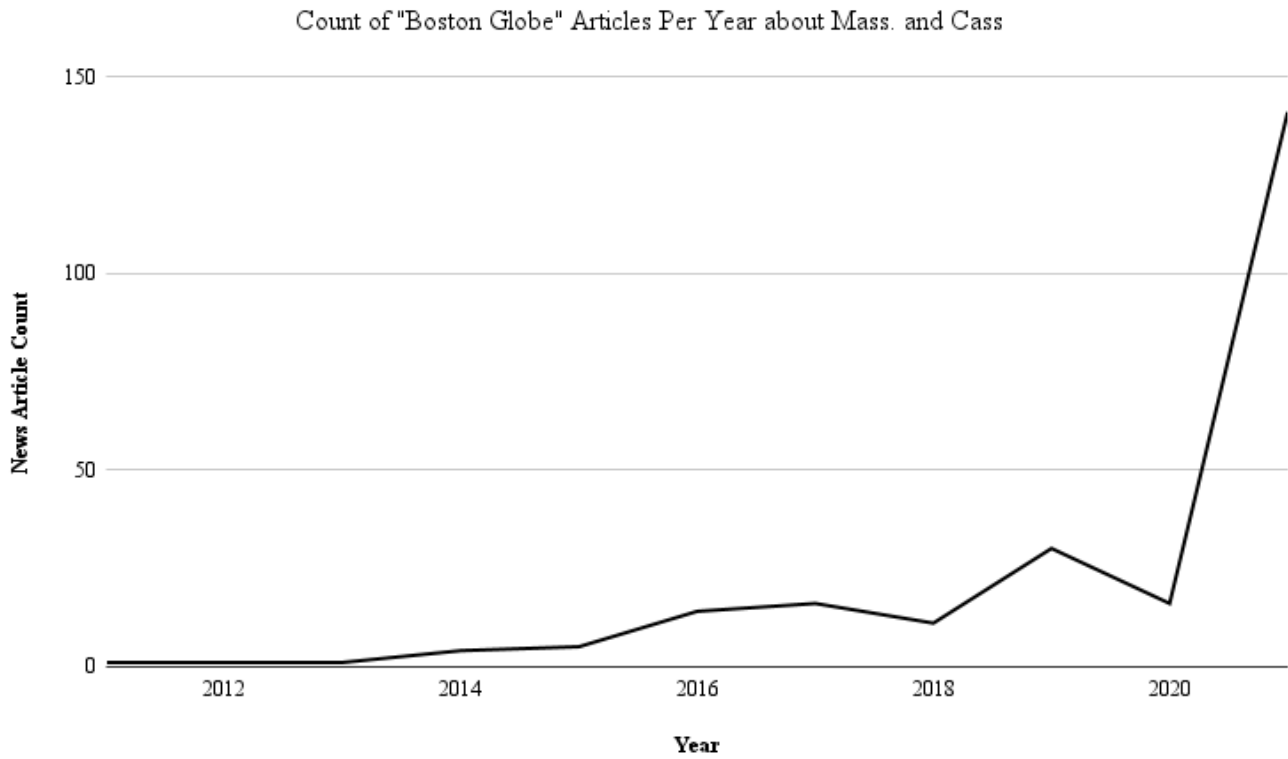
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See You In The Future Collective at the Boston Society for Architecture. / Photo by Maia Erslev, April 21, 2023.

A. Coverage by *The Boston Globe*



The number of *Boston Globe* articles about the Mass. and Cass area shot up in 2020, in line with the mayoral election campaigns. / Data from 2012 to November 17, 2021, collected by author.

B. Harm Reduction Principles

Though they did not have this language then, the Engagement Center team designed a harm reduction space. As a social movement founded on meeting people where they are, there are no universal harm reduction definitions or implementation formulas.

However, the National Harm Reduction Coalition²⁰⁴ offers the following principles that have supported organizations and practices since the movement's start in the 1960s:

1. Accepts, for better or worse, that licit and illicit drug use is part of our world and chooses to work to minimize its harmful effects rather than simply ignore or condemn them.
2. Understands drug use as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses a continuum of behaviors from severe use to total abstinence, and acknowledges that some ways of using drugs are clearly safer than others.
3. Establishes quality of individual and community life and well-being—not necessarily cessation of all drug use—as the criteria for successful interventions and policies.
4. Calls for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live in order to assist them in reducing attendant harm.
5. Ensures that people who use drugs and those with a history of drug use routinely have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them.
6. Affirms people who use drugs (PWUD) themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use and seeks to empower PWUD to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use.
7. Recognizes that the realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-based discrimination, and other social inequalities affect both people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm.
8. Does not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger that can be associated with illicit drug use.

²⁰⁴ National Harm Reduction Coalition. "Principles of Harm Reduction," December 20, 2020. <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>.

C. Project Visual Identity



Various flower memorials created by JR, placed on his street corner. He combined traditional art materials like acrylic paint and spraypaint with found or donated objects. / Public installation by JR. Flowers, beer cans, jars, spraypainted jugs, partially spraypainted hose, painted gas canister, part of a tire, pulp fiber four-cup carrier, June 2022.

In May 2022, I met a Brazilian artist named JR on the intersection of Boylston Street and Mass. Ave in the Back Bay, where he has long been in residence. I often biked by him on my way to and from school in Cambridge, so I made a habit of stopping to say hello and chatting if he had time. Over the following year, I got to know and admire him as an artist who creates prolifically, combining found and donated objects, paint, and sculptural elements. Across the street from him, the City was constructing a new skyscraper, and the only time I ever saw JR upset was when he started yelling about how much investment he saw going into that building every day while he had spent months waiting for housing.



Digital painting of a flower memorial that JR created in May 2022.

While I liked several of his sculptures, I found his flower memorials extremely poetic and powerful. I asked him if I could paint one of his sculptures to use in our project, and we agreed to a \$200 commission fee.²⁰⁵ As most people’s first impression of our project, we hoped our visual identity might feel both familiar yet promising to folks we encountered, especially the residents and staff at “Mass. and Cass”. Our visuals add another layer to our project, which hopefully affirm: “We see you.”

²⁰⁵ I struggled to find a fair amount. Ultimately I paid \$200 because this is what I would charge another artist for using my work’s likeness in their project.



See You In The Future’s business card design, which folds like a card and incorporates JR’s flowers, outside (top) and inside (right).

D. Project Timeline

October 2021 - Ongoing: Learning and building partnerships and relationships

As we have continued our research and sharing with values-aligned folks, we have met mentors, supporters, and partners. We are building and solidifying relationships with different organizations with stakes in the “Mass. and Cass” area, each rooted in lived personal or work experiences.

January 2023: New team member

We added a team member, Evvy Diego, who is bilingual in Spanish and brings a compassion and sensitivity to this work from her own lived experiences and vision.

February - July 2023: Storytelling and arts workshops at the Engagement Center

Since 2021, our Collective has had almost a hundred conversations and have, to the best we can, maintained a consistent presence in the neighborhood. We’ve held 20 arts workshops at a table inside the Engagement Center. We go (almost) every Sunday at the same time and always offer guests options so they can participate on their own terms.

May - September 2023: Mural at 112 Southamptton Street Men’s Shelter

Led by our teammate, Sabrina Dorsainvil, we were commissioned by the Boston Public Health Commission to create a series of murals for the 112 Southamptton Street’s Men’s Shelter’s new courtyard.

July - October 2023: Conversation circles + Research analysis

Since October 2022, we have been recording conversations with individuals, with a consent form, \$50 honorarium, and series of questions, which have slightly evolved over time as the project’s vision has clarified. We have recorded around 20 conversations in semi-structured interview format.

We have been reviewing these one-on-one conversations individually, but we are talking with local organizations about a potential collaboration to code the conversations as well as edit them for sharing on a website in the fall.

One goal we had was to host a series of peer-led circles for community conversations around “Mass. and Cass”. This took time to prepare because we needed to build relationships and trust to facilitate a group conversation, and we did not anticipate the community bonds to be so worn. We have been working to better understand why this is the case. Now having laid the groundwork, we are planning to hold a few conversations circles starting August.

September 2023 - Mural celebration

From our conversations and reassessing our team’s changed capacity, we are now planning to hold a public event in September (recovery month), planned with at least one of the EC staff members and at least two guests. (We are gathering ideas and feedback through our Sunday workshops.) We imagine this celebration will be a time for folks to hear community members’ stories, share company over food and music, as well as to sit with the completed mural and, we hope, see themselves and their experiences reflected.

With a staff member, we will host an open mic for folks who want to share poetry or about their experiences. We will also create a way for audience members to share their responses or thoughts. We are working with a local chef to create some of people’s favorite foods that they’ve shared. We are working out a community security system that does not rely on police.

Our primary goals are to celebrate community members, strengthen relationships, and invite in friendly outside neighbors who want to learn how they can better support the “Mass. and Cass” communities. Our planning team is still deciding if it feels appropriate to invite in policymakers and planners to witness the event and space, ideally to see and feel how this community imagines healing and care. But we may decide to keep it private for mainly community members.

October 2023 - June 2024 - Sharing back and organizing

We hope the celebration will inspire community members, staff, and their directors to want to invest in more community events (ideally community-organized) as well as more storytelling efforts. From the fall to spring, especially passing through the colder months, we hope to support community members in building and hosting their own events, workshops, or other initiatives, as desired by the broader community. We support where we can or we bring in folks in our own networks. We hope this long runway to create their own

initiatives will help to build capacity across multiple seasons, to ensure sustainable community ownership of this work, and to continually renew, remix, or reimagine what “Mass. and Cass” can be.

At the same time, we’ll be working with partners on the qualitative research component of our work, coding our conversations, and designing and building a website to listen to and explore the edited conversations and major themes. We hope this will speak to policymakers, journalists, and others interested in Mass. and Cass but removed from its daily and long-term realities.

We are also planning to work with partnerships to create trainings, presentations, zines, or a book to share back what we have learned about “Mass. and Cass”; its history; its practices of care, creativity, and survival; and its potential future rooted in abolitionist and community-defined healing.

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A memorial for Atkinson Street / Edited on May 7, 2023, from a photo taken November 20, 2022.