REBUILDING COMMUNITY:
DESIGNING A COMMUNITY CENTER FOR THE ENRICHMENT AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OF A DIVERSE YOUTH

A Thesis

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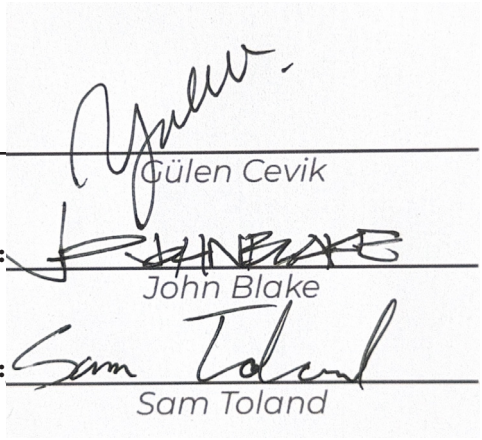
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“Rebuilding Community: Designing an Accessible Community Center”

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ABSTRACT

Today more than ever people are often isolated socially and physically, resulting in a stark lack of community among people. This lack of desire for community interaction calls for the development of a new model for community centers with a clear focus on the creation and facilitation of comfortable community-engagement spaces that provide a sense of familiarity and belonging, resulting in a building that people desire to be in for the sake of existing as part of a larger community. This model must embrace concepts of universal design and create spaces that are beautiful, comfortable, and experiential.

Specific aspects of what make the space unique and successful will be discovered and understood through the analysis of existing literature related to architecture, sociology, psychology, and the human experience. Exploring related literature with the goal of understanding unique and diverse experiences of space and being will push the design to be more holistic, inclusive, and universally accessible. Through the use of works like Jos Boys’ *Doing Disability Differently* and Juhani Pallasmaa’s *The Sixth Sense,* this thesis aims to understand how a community center can be designed to engage human experience and interaction in an inclusive, sensory-conscious manner.

This study explores the physical and metaphysical relationship between the building and its site, examining how the built environment can create opportunities for community interaction and engagement. It also delves into the elements of space, and their connection to human emotion and understanding, continuing to work towards the creation of a wholly accessible community center. Additionally, this thesis investigates the role of universal design and accessibility, and aims to understand how to make spaces and experiences accessible to all, regardless of ability. Overall, this study aims to explore and understand how inclusive and sensory-conscious design can facilitate a sense of belonging among a diverse community. This sensory-conscious design will also come in the form of understanding how the interior design of a space directly impacts the human experience. Through the careful manipulation of furnishings, finishes, wall graphics, lighting, materials, and space organization, the community center will become a host to a wide variety of unique individual and group spaces that ensure there will always be a comfortable place for anyone who visits the building.

By rethinking the traditional community center model, this research aspires to create vibrant, people-centric spaces that celebrate diversity, promote social cohesion, and enrich the human experience through shared, public spaces.

INTRODUCTION

There is an existing problem with public spaces that involves the lack of accessible, comfortable, and desirable features within and around the space. Over the course of the last several years, people's social lives have become more and more remote, and the desire for human interaction in a public sphere has begun to slowly fade out. Because of this lack of interest to simply exist within a public space, many public gathering spaces are only accessed when there is a specific event going on that draws people in. When these events occur and people leave their homes to go to public places, there is an odd sense of discomfort with the space that feels liminal and labyrinthine. The uncomfortable nature of maze-like community centers results in undesirable, inaccessible conditions that deter people from coming to the space simply as a means of community, comfort, and support. If the goal of community centers is to foster relationships and engagement from the local community, then it must become a comfortable, accessible, and inclusive space that hosts a wide variety of social functions.

The uncomfortable nature of maze-like community centers results in undesirable, inaccessible conditions that deter people from coming to the space simply as a means of community, comfort, and support. If the goal of community centers is to foster relationships and engagement from the local community, then it must become a comfortable, accessible, and inclusive space that hosts a wide variety of social functions. This study explores the physical and metaphysical relationship between the building and its site, examining how the built environment can create opportunities for community interaction and engagement. It also delves into the elements of space, and their connection to human emotion and understanding, continuing to work towards the creation of a wholly accessible community center. Additionally, this thesis investigates the role of universal design and accessibility, and aims to understand how to make spaces and experiences accessible to all, regardless of ability.
The goal of this research endeavor is to explore and understand how inclusive and sensory-conscious design can facilitate a sense of belonging among a diverse community. This sensory-conscious design will also come in the form of understanding how the interior design of a space directly impacts the human experience. Through the careful manipulation of furnishings, finishes, wall graphics, lighting, materials, and space organization, the community center will become a host to a wide variety of unique individual and group spaces that ensure there will always be a comfortable place for anyone who visits the building.

By rethinking the traditional community center model, this research aspires to create vibrant, people-centric spaces that celebrate diversity, promote social cohesion, and enrich the human experience through architecture, creating spaces that can be universally accessible and experiential.



Figure 1: Thesis Concept Art

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As discussed earlier, this research is important in determining important strategies and practices that will result in the successful implementation of a community center that is open and accessible to everyone within a community. A re-assessment of what makes a community center inviting and engaging is long overdue, especially post-Covid. Since the lockdown in 2020, the vast majority of people

have become less socially engaged, and spend most, if not all, of their time at either home or work. Through understanding a community's wants and needs, it may be possible to re-introduce the concept of community centers by providing a space where people can interact with one another, and help each other through donations, community events, etc. If the space is meant to serve a wide variety of people (different backgrounds, abilities, ages, etc.) it must be made universally accessible to everyone in the community. While physical accessibility is certainly important, monetary and social accessibility must also be considered. The community center must be designed to remove barriers, not only in terms of mobility, but also in affordability and inclusivity. Events, classes, and donation hubs must be made relatively accessible to everyone in the community in order for the project to be successful.

While the project may never truly be built or incorporated into a community, the outcomes of this study can serve as a resource for future endeavors. By identifying the best practices for inclusive and accessible design within a community project, this research contributes to a stronger understanding of how architecture can be used to foster community engagement and connection. The research outcomes can help community architects and designers in developing spaces that prioritize equity, inclusivity, and functionality.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand how to approach the creation of an accessible community center, this research will use a variety of methods to learn and understand the diverse needs of the community. By fully understanding the potential users, this research will ensure inclusivity and program functionality. A mixed-methods approach will be employed, incorporating interviews and archival research. Gathering first-hand experiences from parents, seniors, community members, and individuals with disabilities will provide insights into what program needs to be readily accessible, and common challenges faced by those in the community. Archival research will be done to see what has already been attempted in the community, and what has/hasn't been successful. By integrating these methods, the research aims to develop a comprehensive framework for designing a community center that is welcoming, practical, and truly accessible to all. This method of data collection will not be able to encompass the opinions and experiences of everyone in the community, but by interviewing community members and those involved in driving change for the community, this research will capture a diverse range of perspectives that highlight key accessibility and program needs and priorities.

THEORETICAL LENSES / LITERATURE

This research will be analyzed through a few theoretical lenses that relate to the creation of space(s) and the impact of space(s) on people. A well-designed building should be strongly connected to its site, both physically and metaphysically, influencing the way that people experience the space and events within the building. Specific space elements and architectural strategies have a large influence on human emotion and understanding, making it incredibly important for the space to be designed in a way that caters to community needs. By first understanding the community's wants and needs, then working to create a community center with those needs in mind, community engagement and human interaction can be facilitated and encouraged through architecture. The space will only be successful, though, through the implementation of inclusive, sensory-conscious, and universal design. Specific space planning, material choices, layout and organization, and several other factors will go into understanding what makes public spaces and their experiences wholly accessible.

The literature that will be used throughout this research will have a few different purposes. The research will begin by analyzing works like Martin Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" and Juhani Pallasmaa's "The

Sixth Sense: The Meaning of Atmosphere and Mood", this research will first attempt to grasp an understanding on the importance of architecture on human emotion and experience. In his work, Heidegger provides his own insight on what it means to be a human within the built and natural environment. Throughout his writing he speaks on the active process of existing and experiencing space as a continuous, repetitive set of actions that occur indefinitely as we exist in the world around us. This process of building, dwelling, and thinking serves as the basis of the human experience and how we perceive the world around us. Understanding the true importance of comfort, understanding, and experience within the built environment will provide stronger reasoning for incorporating accessibility seamlessly into architecture. Pallasmaa, in his work, discusses the passive human experience of the built environment. This work specifically analyzes how humans inactively perceive, interpret, and understand the world around them before they even fully realize where they are. He refers to this quick and primal form of perception as the sixth sense, and goes on to explain how we, as humans, make generalizations in our mind about spaces solely based on this sixth sense. Determining the best practices for using architecture to foster a sense of community will help to lay a solid foundation for understanding the more intricate parts of this research.

When it comes to understanding universal design and accessibility, specific works like Stefanija Stameska's "Embracing Inclusivity and Redefining Accessibility in Architecture" and Jos Boys' "Starting from Disability" will provide an understanding of what changes and practices need to be implemented in order to make a space's environment and experiences fully accessible to everyone within a community. Stameska, in her writing, demonstrates the importance of accessible design that's seamlessly integrated into the built environment. She comments on important aspects of public architecture, such as the ability to easily wayfind, physical accessibility,and several other important factors. She rounds off her writing by explaining that accessible features need to be incorporated in architectural design at the beginning of the design process in order to avoid costly retrofits and accessibility issues in the future. Jos Boys is a trained architect who educates on, and advocates for, rights to accessibility in all aspects of life. In this particular work, she provides insight and analysis on what dis/ability entails and how that impacts architecture. She attempts to reframe disability as an act of designing for everyday life, rather than going out of the way to specifically design for accessibility. These works will create a strong background for establishing universal design principles that apply to the building and its experiences.

On top of universal and accessible design, this research needs to establish an understanding of how and why people would want to engage in what's known as a "third place." Ray Oldenburg, in his work, "The Great Good Place" discusses the importance of the 'third place'. Many people (especially post-lockdown) are isolated between their home and their workplace, and usually don't spend much (if any) time outside those two places. 'Third places' are informal gathering spaces like coffee shops and bookstores, and encourage social interaction and community through shared public spaces. He argues that the existence of these 'third places' exist as a neutral ground between home and work, and are vital to a healthy society. The community center proposed by this research aims to act as a 'third place' that encourages people to get out of their homes and interact with others in the community, in an effort to revitalize and encourage social engagement. Each of these works will contribute to the research by establishing a solid basis for each of the project's main objectives.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Each of the case studies that will be analyzed for this research project will be used either as a case in the positive or a case in the negative.

Each of these projects have strengths and weaknesses, but they will each be analyzed in terms of their experience of space, accessibility, and universal design strategies. The first case study to be analyzed is the Robson Square, located in Vancouver.

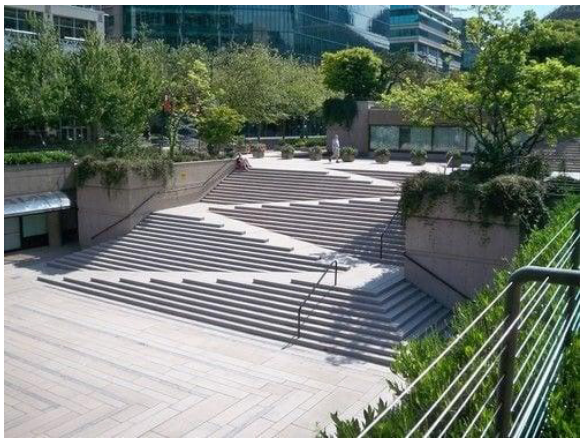


Figure 2: Robson Square Staircase

This public park showcases a unique (for the time) stair that combines a ramp and a staircase. While this may not be the best solution for an accessible public park, due to the time and precision required to actually use the ramp, this showcases one of the earliest attempts to bridge the gap between all physical abilities. The next project is the Hunter's Point Library located in Queens NY.



Figure 3: Hunter's Point Library - Steven Holl

While the project has a great deal of spaces for community engagement and passive 'third-place' opportunity, the project is wholly inaccessible. There are several stories and mezzanine levels that are accessible solely via a staircase, meaning that those with physical disabilities can only access about 80% of the publicly accessible floor space. This project is an accessible nightmare, and showcases a near 'worst-case-scenario' in terms of accessibility and universal design. The next case study to be analyzed is the Tangeman University Center located on the University of Cincinnati's campus.



Figure 4: Tangeman Center's Staircase

The building has two main entrances on different levels, and this helps to make the building a bit more accessible, but if one desires to move from level to level without using the architectural stair, they must head down a long tunnel to reach the public-access elevators. While the design acts strongly as a 'third-place' for campus students, the building is difficult to navigate for those with physical disabilities. The final case study to

be analyzed in this project is WOHA Architect's Enabling Village. This project is an adaptive reuse of an existing vocational institution that was transformed into a thriving, accessible community center. The building facilitates a multitude of learning, community engagement, and retail functions that are all completely accessible. Through the building's use of specific materials and lighting, there exists many comfortable spaces for social interaction all throughout the building. Acting strongly as a 'third-place' and as an accessible building, this community center is a close precedent for what this research aims to do. Overall, these case studies aim to provide physical context for what this project aims to accomplish and what it aims to avoid.



Figure 5: Enabling Village Staircase - WOHA

POTENTIAL SITE

In order for this research to be successful, the research will be carried out in a mid-size city with existing attempts at building and engaging the community. The best opportunity for this project to thrive is in Hamilton, Ohio. The site, along Main and High Street, will be a central location that lies in the main commute route for most people living in and around Hamilton. This makes the space as accessible as possible from a transit perspective, and places it in the perfect location as a 'third-place', since it's on the main commute route. The potential site location is currently home to an underutilized parking lot and some neglected buildings, acting as a strong location for adaptive reuse or new building opportunities.

There currently exists a gap and a need for an effective community center in the city. Community supported projects are common in the area though, and the tightly-knit Hamilton community would be a great fit for the community center that will be a product of this research. As for current community-centered spaces in the city, Spooky Nook is an athletic complex that exists on the North side of Main Street, along the waterfront. The Booker T Washington community center is also in the area, but acts primarily as a YMCA, featuring indoor pools and recreational spaces. While these spaces are both currently acting as great 'third-places', there is still a gap for initiatives like donation centers, GED programs, trade classes, and event spaces that a community center would do a good job of fulfilling. As for potential Interviews and Archival Research, the architecture firm CDA, Community Design Alliance, has a great team that would be critical to the interview. They have a strong hand in the city already, and would be a great resource for understanding what the community already has, what they have tried, what has succeeded, and what has failed. All of this additional information will significantly benefit this research, and will lead to a successful project. All of these reasons help to support Hamilton, Ohio as the strongest candidate for this project's site.

ANALYSIS CONCLUSION

This research project, through the analysis of different literatures, case studies, and research approaches, aims to create an accessible community center located in Hamilton, Ohio. This research project also aims to show that community centers are not doomed to be inaccessible, uncomfortable, undesirable spaces. While many existing community centers fail to attract people in the community, and have their own share of accessibility failures, this research will make it clear that

this is not endemic to the building's program. While the mix of large and small spaces, unique circulation, and separation of uses certainly poses a challenge to architects, there is a way to design public gathering spaces that are successful, and that members of the community will genuinely want to spend their time within. Through the encouragement of community growth and cultivation I hope to inspire people to design, experience, and desire community spaces that offer universally accessible experiences and foster human connection. By rethinking the traditional community center model, this research aspires to create vibrant, people-centric spaces that celebrate diversity, promote social cohesion, and enrich the human experience through architecture, creating spaces that can be universally accessible and experiential.

ANNOTATED SOURCE LIST

Boys, Jos. "Starting from Disability." In Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Architecture, Dis/ability and Designing for Everyday Life. London: Routledge, 2014. [pp.9–60]

Jos Boys is a trained architect who educates on, and advocates for, rights to accessibility in all aspects of life. In this particular work, she provides insight and analysis on what dis/ability entails and how that impacts architecture. She attempts to reframe disability as an act of designing for everyday life, rather than going out of the way to specifically design for accessibility. I believe this work is important to my research, as I'll be able to provide perspective on the basis that accessible design should simply be the standard for design. Using the perspectives provided by Boys will strengthen my writing.

Frampton, Kenneth, Larry Beasley, and Janet Nairn. "History of Robson Square." Robson Plaza. Accessed November 14, 2024. https://robsonplaza.ca/history/.

The talented architects/designers Kenneth Frampton, Larry Beasley, and Jaret Narim, as well as others, worked on the Robson Square project as well as this piece of literature. This writing breaks down the core ideals behind the project, and showcases the design considerations that led to the project that exists today. I believe this project, and its history, will be important to include in my writing, as it shows that natural, accessible design for all is nothing new, and should simply be the standard for architectural design.

Heidegger, Martin. "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." In *Poetry, Language, Thought. Poetically Man Dwells*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1975. [pp.143-159].

In this piece Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, provides his own insight on what it means to be a human within the built and natural environment. Throughout his writing he speaks on the active process of existing and experiencing space as a continuous, repetitive set of actions that occur indefinitely as we exist in the world around us. This process of building, dwelling, and thinking serves as the basis of the human experience and how we perceive the world around us. This retrospective look into why we experience things the way that we do, and the active processes of experience surrounding the built environment will contribute to my research. Understanding the true importance of comfort, understanding, and experience within the built environment will provide stronger reasoning for incorporating accessibility seamlessly into architecture.

Oldenburg, Ray. "The Great Good Place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a Community." Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group LLC, 2023.

Ray Oldenburg, in his work, "The Great Good Place" discusses the importance of the 'third place'. Many people (especially post-lockdown) are isolated between their home and their workplace, and usually don't spend much

(if any) time outside those two places. 'Third places' are informal gathering spaces like coffee shops and bookstores, and encourage social interaction and community through shared public spaces. He argues that the existence of these 'third places' exist as a neutral ground between home and work, and are vital to a healthy society. The community center proposed by this research aims to act as a 'third place' that encourages people to get out of their homes and interact with others in the community, in an effort to revitalize and encourage social engagement.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. "The Sixth Sense: The Meaning of Atmosphere and Mood." *Architectural Design* 86, no.6 (November 2016): 126-133.

Juhani Pallasmaa, a Finnish architect and professor, in his work "The Sixth Sense: The Meaning of Atmosphere and Mood" discusses the passive human experience of the built environment. This work specifically analyzes how humans inactively perceive, interpret, and understand the world around them before they even fully realize where they are. He refers to this quick and primal form of perception as the sixth sense, and goes on to explain how we, as humans, make generalizations in our mind about spaces solely based on this sixth sense. This work will contribute to my own research, as it provides a basis for understanding how humans perceive the world around them in such a quick and primal fashion. If a space's accessible features are pushed to the far wall in the back of the building, people in the space who require said features will impulsively feel uncomfortable in that space.

Pintos, Paula. "Hunters Point Library / Steven Holl Architects." ArchDaily, September 25, 2019. https://www.archdaily.com/925389/hunters-point-library-steven-holl-architect s.

Including this project in my thesis research serves as a showcase for an accessibility nightmare. As a public space, a library this large should facilitate some forms of group/community interaction. While the space is a library and should certainly provide spaces for independent reading, I believe that there should have been more emphasis on any kind of community engagement, yet the space lacks any form of collaboration space. Aside from personal opinions on the operations of public spaces, the Hunter's Point Library also failed to follow basic ADA guidelines. The architect, Steven Holl, is known for breaking some competition rules in the pursuit of great architecture, but this freedom should never come in the form of physically limiting people from interacting with certain areas of the building due to their own physical ability. His big 'architectural moment' is the grand stair that hosts a portion of the library's books, but there is no way for someone in a wheelchair to ever access this point of the library. There are also higher floors and mezzanine levels solely accessible by stairs within the library, further restricting people to the spaces they can be in due to their physical ability.

Stameska, Stefanija. "Embracing Inclusivity and Redefining Accessibility in Architecture." Hatch. Accessed November 14, 2024. https://www.hatch.com/About-Us/Publications/Blogs/2024/04/Embracing-inclusivity-and-redefining-accessibility-in-architecture.

Stefanija Stameska is an architectural designer and accessibility specialist who works with Hatch Architecture. In her work, she demonstrates the importance of accessible design that's seamlessly integrated into the built environment. She comments on important aspects of public architecture, such as the ability to easily wayfind, physical accessibility, and several other important factors. She rounds off her writing by explaining that accessible features need to be incorporated in architectural design at the beginning of the design process in order to avoid costly retrofits and accessibility issues in the future. This work is important to my research because it provides insight into how important it is to design spaces

for all, and the true importance of accessible features in architecture.

"Tangeman University Center." Campus Life, May 13, 2025. https://www.uc.edu/campus-life/tuc.ht ml.

This project is an example of a community center with highlightable strengths and weaknesses. To start with the strengths, the space does a great job of fostering community and incentivising human interaction. With its wide variety of hosted functions, such as dining space, open seating, study areas, offices, meeting halls, and other specific areas, the building invites a large range of users, all coming to the space for various reasons. The space fosters community through hosted events and open seating areas, providing a space for students to be with one another throughout their busy days. The building's central location on the University of Cincinnati campus also contributes to its popularity as a comfortable and familiar place to be. While the building does a great job of fostering community, it does have some pretty significant weaknesses in terms of its accessibility. One of the building's 'architectural moments' is its grand staircase. Similarly to the last project, those who need to use the elevator must go down a 50'+ corridor in order to reach the elevator, which puts them in an uncomfortable space that limits their engagement and experience of the building overall. Those who can use the stair also express discomfort due to how thin some of the stairway is on higher floors, resulting in a mess of uncomfortable vertical circulation.

WOHA Architects. "Enabling Village." WOHA, April 2, 2024. https://woha.net/project/enabling-village/.

The Enabling Village is an adaptive reuse project that turned an existing vocational institution into a thriving community center. The building facilitates a multitude of learning,community engagement, and retail functions that are all completely accessible. Through the building's use of specific materials and lighting, there exists many comfortable spaces for social interaction all throughout the building. The building's creation of ponds and gardens also creates several lovely public park spaces through its landscape. When it comes to accessibility, WOHA took a similar approach to a grand stair as the Robson Square, where the stairs, seating, and ramp all coexist in one, grand architectural moment. Due to this building's variety of program spaces and accessibility features, it will serve as a strong precedent through which the community center will be analyzed.

Addendum

"Rebuilding Community: Designing A Community Center for the Enrichment and Social Engagement of A Diverse Youth"

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Miami University

REVISED ABSTRACT

It's a recurring trend that the fate of many community centers is to become an operable, yet irrelevant space that people simply ignore, or to become simply abandoned. Many community center buildings have lost traction as true 'centers for community engagement' and have been repurposed as gymnasiums, weight rooms, and community pools. While this still drives some community engagement and belonging, it doesn't quite fit the needs of every community. The main problems currently plaguing community centers nationwide include insufficient funding, difficulty measuring impact, recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers, lack of effective community outreach, and irrelevant or unsustainable program. In order for community centers to be successful, they must not only be physically accessible, but locationally accessible. Community centers must aim to fill the gap that exists in communities, whether that be a lack of access to good education and GED programs, or a lack of access to fresh produce and affordable food. Another reason for this research is the current lack of community among people. In recent years (especially post-Covid) people have become more isolated, and community has become less mandatory for people and places in day-to-day life. Things like food, friends, family, ideas, and everything in between can be accessed remotely through the use of technology, and people have begun to lose the importance of true human connection and interaction.

Understanding the principles of the human experience provides a solid foundation to begin exploring the importance of human connection and engagement, and what it means to be a part of a community. Through literature review it is possible to learn how architecture impacts the human experience, and how to use architecture to facilitate engagement and specific behaviors. Through interviews and archival research it becomes possible to learn how specific communities differ in their practices and needs. By first understanding what a community wants/needs, there can be further development of a community center based on those needs.

This research is relevant to all communities that currently lack a space where people can come together for the benefit of one another. The lack of community engagement and interaction in recent years has led to the abandonment and irrelevance of community centers across the country, and a new set of principles and practices is required in order to reshape the community center into something more usable. By redefining the framework of what makes a community center, cities can be better prepared to provide spaces for community engagement and interaction that will last far longer than the community centers we see today that fall to the wayside after initial excitement dies down.

INTRODUCTION / THESIS REWORK

Over the course of the last semester, this thesis project evolved and changed into something aiming to tackle the world-wide issue of loneliness and isolation through the creation of community-centered third places. Working towards finding solutions to these problems revealed that, while feasible, this thesis project had become far too large in its scope, and I needed to tone it back down to something more tangible. Finding a specific solution for a specific demographic was going to be the best way to make the thesis more plausible, and to tackle issues of isolation, accessibility, and belonging, all in one architectural intervention. After doing research into specific demographics, I landed on designing a Teen Center that acts as a third-place, allowing students to engage and interact with one another outside of their traditional home and school environments. Providing teenage students with their own community space invites a sense of belonging and encourages a strong sense of community among peers, without the potential stresses of school or home environments. This project would act to 'sow the seeds' of community development, and while this thesis doesn't cover the long-term effects of the space, this project hopes to develop teens into community-driven young adults that are willing to work for one another and bring life back into their communities. While the original scope of this thesis project was far too large, this project still holds those same ambitions, encapsulated in a kind of first-step approach. The thesis will still use a similar theoretical framework to the original thesis' research paper, but aims to specifically operate those goals within a community center for teenagers.

What follows this introduction will be a collection of the new research goals, learnings, and design criteria that I will be applying to the thesis project. All of the original information and analysis from the thesis paper are still included in this project, and what follows will be supplemental information that has come as a result of new research over the last semester.

MAJOR THESIS GOALS

This thesis project will culminate in the creation of a place with the major goal of Rebuilding Community. Through the analysis of current community center trends and an overview of research methods, a particular typology of place will be determined, and the implementation of architectural intervention, such as universal design and holistic design strategies, will aim to further the goal of Rebuilding Community. This thesis directly addresses three major issues: The state of the current community center, the lack of physical interaction and third-place, and accessibility / universal design. Through the analysis of each of these major issues, a solution, in the form of a new center for teens, will be created.

THE STATE OF THE PRESENT-DAY COMMUNITY CENTER

Community Centers have long existed with the purpose of acting as a 'physical space for the purpose of community engagement.' Through shared event spaces, community meeting areas, and community recreation centers, these spaces were successful, for a time, at fostering social engagement and providing a place for community members to meet and engage with one another. In recent years, it has become evident that community centers no longer succeed at fostering the social engagement that they were designed for. Many community centers have fallen to abandonment, commercialization, or privatization, and many that have remained fail to engage the community and provide spaces and services that directly help with the issue of social isolation. This problem also persists with successful community centers of today. Most successful community centers are made up of extremely specified program spaces with little to no interaction with one another, such as pools, basketball courts, and event halls all become simple destinations for individuals, with each area having its own dedicated space secluded from other community members.

LACK OF PHYSICAL INTERACTION AND THIRD-PLACE ACCESSIBILITY

This problem is something that exists and impacts people of every age group. Trends and shifts in social behavior in recent years have led people to live very isolated lifestyles. American Urban Sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, in his work *The Great Good Place* discusses the importance of third-places and their role in personal and social development and engagement. People's first-place is their home, where they spend time with family, and a second-place is where people spend a majority of their waking hours, something like school, or a workplace. Oldenburg discusses and argues the importance of third-places, and their crucial role in engaging people with one another, but the trends of social isolation and shift in social behavior in recent years has led to many people living without the presence of a third-place. This lack of a dedicated third-place is something that disproportionately affects teenagers and 65 and older communities. This thesis research will specifically focus on finding a solution for teenagers. Many communities have, or are currently implementing, youth centers, after school care, public parks, and other program catered to young children. There are also many third-places for adults, such as bars and cafes. It is a standard belief that many teenagers will get all of the social development they need simply by attending school and learning with their peers, but what of teens with social or behavioral problems? What of homeschooled teens, or those with special needs? What of teenagers who simply have a hard time making friends and socializing?

Even without those specific issues, the shift from physical socialization to digital socialization has rendered many spaces inaccessible. Many places like roller skating rinks, shopping malls, and skate parks are being shut down due to inactivity, and many teens are left without viable third-places. This lack of a proper third-place leads to many teens spending all of their free time at house parties, empty parking lots, or online adult-filled spaces. Teens that don't find the motivation to search for a proper third-place end up without one, and socialization becomes quickly replaced by doom-scrolling on social media. The rise of social media and post-Covid isolation in recent years has all but exacerbated this issue, and many teens are now stuck without proper, viable third-places.

ACCESSIBILITY & UNIVERSAL DESIGN

The following notes aim to present new research findings on accessibility and universal design, to be understood in addition to the original paper's findings. One major disadvantage that teens face, specifically, in finding an accessible third-place is their lack of access to a vehicle. Children have a wide variety of program to engage in, and parents are usually encouraging them to participate socially, thus parents will drive them to those places. Adults usually commute to their workplaces, and thus have easy access to transportation. While some teenagers are old enough to have their own driver's license, affording a vehicle is another issue entirely, and many rely on their parents or on school buses as their only means of transportation.

Another accessibility issue that arises in designing a community space for teens is having to consider a wide variety of backgrounds, personalities, behaviors, and preferences. For most teenagers, finding a third-place is already a difficult task. For homeschooled children, children with special needs, and children with social or behavioral issues, this issue becomes even near impossible. This means that a space aimed to garner social engagement and personal growth must include features and design interventions that promote personal interests and social engagement, while also mitigating the stress of a public environment. This can involve the inclusion of break spaces or low-sound areas as well as simply providing personal spaces.

Thesis Goal and Proposed Solution

This thesis research's goal is to highlight how the creation of a dedicated community space for teenagers would not only benefit the students directly, but would sow the seeds for a strong, tightly-knit community. Many cities across the country struggle to earn funding for public spaces, and struggle to keep people within the community. When cities lack public community appeal, people tend to feel unengaged with others around them and will look for belonging elsewhere. Alternatively, when cities are able to foster a strong sense of community in children and teenagers, they are more likely to stay in the city when they become adults, and have a higher chance of wanting to see the city and the community grow. By investing resources and community services into the youth, cities can garner strong, tightly-knit communities that feel individually and socially fulfilled. Communities that want to invest their time and motivation into more community projects.

Project Site Choice & Relevant Research

This thesis project will take place in Youngstown, Ohio. Like many cities in the US's midwest it is home to many abandoned steel factories, and suffers from a declining population. While it is true that the city hosts some successful community buildings, like their YMCA and Covelli Center, the city's own Community Center has fallen to the wayside, no longer hosting in person events or providing physical spaces for people to interact. Because of this lack of community engagement and social cohesion, many people leave searching for something better, and those left behind are surrounded by vacant lots and isolated neighbors. The lack of a true sense of community has done nothing but hurt the city as a whole, and new community initiatives are required to reinvigorate the Youngstown Community.

A quick look at Youngstown's history can help us to better understand the circumstances that this project will be addressing. In the late 19th century, Youngstown had become a major American steel producing center, and found its roots along the Mahoning River. There, many steel plants would open, and the city was able to produce and ship steel to places across the US. By the 1920s, Youngstown was the third largest steel producer in the country, securing its role as a major city in the country. This success would allow the population to grow steadily, as more people moved to the city in search of work at the steel factories. This population boom would continue through the 1960s and 70s, but by 1980 most of the existing steel mills had become abandoned or had less work, and significantly reduced their workforce, leaving many in the city without a stable source of income. This led to a major drop in population during the 80s, but those that had not yet left the city held on while they could, and the population was relatively stagnant during the 90s. This lasted until 2001, where the population began steadily declining once again. Just recently, in 2023, the city has seen a small increase in population, and seems to be rising each year. During this time of observed population increase, an attempt to rebuild and reinvigorate the community's strength could be extremely successful. This thesis project aims to capitalize on the population increase, framing the community center as a Fresh Opportunity for Community Growth.

Recently announced, on June 18th of 2025, is a new project run by the Youngstown City School District, called Youngstown Unified. This project is described as a 'two-phase district reconfiguration plan' that will see Chaney High School being demolished, and an expansion to East High School to be completed for the 2026-2027 school year. Chaney High School students are located on Youngstown's West Side, but will now have to commute to Youngstown's East Side in order to continue their high school education. Because all of these high school students will be located in one place during school, on Youngstown's East Side, I've determined that the optimal location for the thesis' Community Center

will be close to the East High School Site. This location also opens up opportunities for high schoolers from different original schools to get to know one another outside of a school environment.

This thesis project's community center was originally to be located just north of the East High School, about a half-mile walk along main roads. The project site is 275,000 sf, and will take the place of an abandoned football field. The site is relatively flat, and has an overgrown basketball court and bleachers on the west and north edge, respectively. There is no road that directly connects the major roads and the site, so one will be proposed for this project. This site provides ample space for indoor and outdoor program, has relatively flat ground for sports and events, and is within a safe walking distance from the high school. This close distance would help to ensure the safety of teens walking to the building, and would make commuting to and from the space simple. The project site can also be connected to existing bus routes to allow students living on the West Side to get rides across the city. While I believe that this site could still work for the project, I want to take the opportunity to visit the site, and explore different options for where this intervention could take place. There are a few viable sites, and some of my major requirements for the site include walkability from the East High School, distinct character from the high school site, and student safety. Students from the West Side may have a hard time feeling a sense of belonging on the opposite side of the city, so finding a place that feels distinct from both sides, without being out of walking distance, is the goal for the chosen site.

Overall, Youngstown Ohio works well as the site for this project. As a rustbelt, post-industrial city that lacks a strong sense of community, an intervention that encourages social interaction, and can sprout the seeds of community, will encourage the city and its community to grow stronger and more connected. This project, acting in this place, will serve as a strong starting point for community betterment.

Thesis Project Results

This thesis project will culminate in the design and programming of an accessible community center that will act as a third-place for teenagers. With the goal of enriching and socially engaging teenagers, a variety of program will be designed for the building. Social athletic spaces, such as gymnasiums, sports fields, and outdoor recreation will serve to enrich teens physically, while providing ample opportunities for socialization. Program designed for personal growth and opportunity will also be incorporated, such as tutoring spaces, trade courses, and volunteer opportunities. Integrating specific program that can be used by a more general community during school hours would allow the space to be a shared, community hub for everyone, and would provide the city with ample opportunity space for planned events.

Two major pieces that will prove to be important pieces of the Schematic Design puzzle are Universal Design & Accessibility, and Holistic Design in Programming. Both of these design interventions and tactics will be implemented throughout the community center's design process. As a public building that is meant to serve the needs of all, the building needs to be able to do that through its organization and programming. In order for everyone to feel comfortable and accepted into the space, specific universal design and accessibility practices will be implemented. This includes major moves like meeting and exceeding ADA requirements, designing wayfinding in an effective and engaging manner, and providing spaces & amenities that address mental and social needs, such as quiet spaces and break rooms. The core principles of universal design include: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use. Keeping each of these design principles in mind throughout the design process will result in a space that considers, and caters to, the needs of all, and will serve to benefit as

many people as possible. Holistic Design in Programming is a unique approach to community centers, that I believe will serve to encourage social interaction and strengthen third-place engagement. This thesis project defines holistic design as "ensuring every space within a building contributes to the total image and experience created by that building."

This approach aims to break down the barriers between program that currently exist in the traditional community center model. By particularly organizing program in such a way that uses bleed into one another, people will experience activities and interactions that they otherwise would not, leading to more moments for social engagement and physical interaction. Simply allowing people to see unique program spaces encourages them to want to explore and engage with others in those spaces when they otherwise would have no interest. Non-Linear exploration of spaces also allow people to explore and feel welcomed into spaces they otherwise would not interact with. When people experience activities and program on their journey, they may be more likely to stop and chat along the way, or to return to those spaces after a planned event in order to socialize or just spend time. Those who are willing to take more time just to 'be' in the space, will be exposed to new people and new experiences, encouraging them to interact with others and grow both personally and socially.

Conclusion

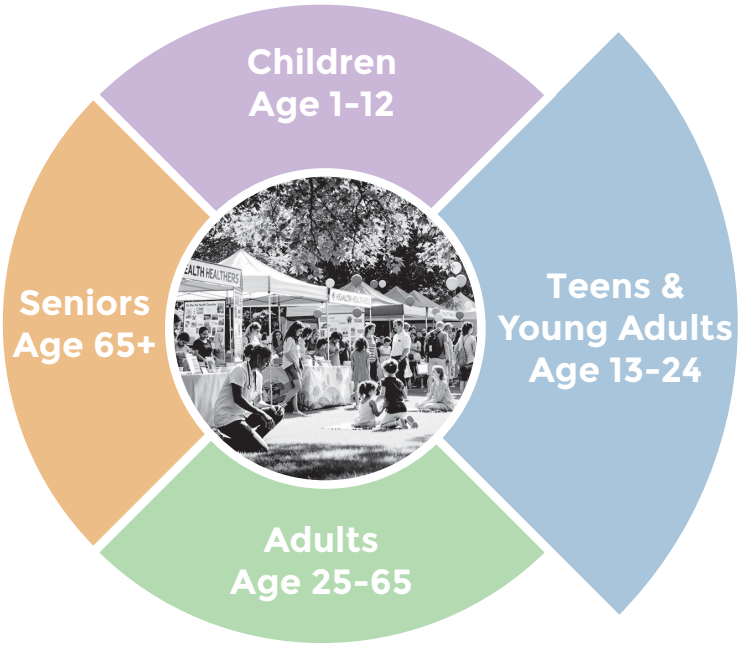
The building designed as a culmination of this thesis' research will exist as a safe, accessible third-place for teenagers to be personally and socially fulfilled outside of their first and second places, while also giving them the opportunity to grow as members of the community. Providing teens with a safe, comfortable space allows cities the opportunity to cater to the growing need for physical, community interaction, in a world so void of physical socialization, and so reliant on digital spaces. I am proud of how this thesis project is developing, and while there are still some holes to be filled in terms of schematic design and specific site decisions, I have no doubt that the research and outcomes of this thesis project will have a lasting impact on myself and those who choose to listen to what I have to say.

Design Context / Analysis

DEFINING COMMUNITY

Community can be defined in a literal sense as a group of people sharing similar characteristics, this often being that they live in the same place. However, the 'sense' of community gives meaning and weight to this definition. Community is fellowship, belonging, support, trust, and connection. It's a powerful force that can improve not only individual mental and social wellbeing, but promote pride and reinvestment in the physical definition of community.

COMMUNITY ANCHORS



COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Time for Volunteer Opportunity
Innovative Energy
Promotion of Empathy
Social Cohesion and Mentorship

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Engagement in the Community
City Retention
Lack of Belonging
Ostracization

The graphic above depicts significant anchors of communities, each with unique contributions and challenges. Because 'community' itself is such a broad subject, these endeavors will be most successful if each is addressed individually per their specific needs. While each of these anchors is undeniably important, this project hones in on the anchor of teenage youth. This group faces some major challenges that must be addressed in order to bring them a sense of belonging within their community.

WHY INVEST IN THE YOUTH?



By making an initial investment in communities, a cyclical relationship is formed where community members feel as though they belong and that they have the ability to contribute to their community. This sense of community identity and strength encourages young adults to reinvest into their community, further developing physical community spaces. This is especially important for Teens and Young Adults, as they're the most likely to leave the community in search of something better if they miss out on developing a connection to their community.

UNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS

1. Most existing youth centers are targeted towards young children. Teenage youth often turn to unintentional alternatives, like malls.

2. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these alternative spaces were closed, further limiting access to safe physical spaces.

3. Teenage youth in the United States are reporting heightened rates of behavioral, mental, and social wellbeing concerns.

4. Positive and safe social interaction is a significant component in healthy teenage development that often cannot be fulfilled by school alone.

5. The prevalence of social media and digital "connectivity" has contributed to the lack of motivation to engage in-person social activities.

6. Independence and inclusivity are significant in developing a positive sense of self, yet often overlooked by existing community spaces.



INVESTMENT
IN YOUTH



CONNECTION
DEVELOPMENT



RETENTION
OF MEMBERS



REINVESTMENT
& GROWTH

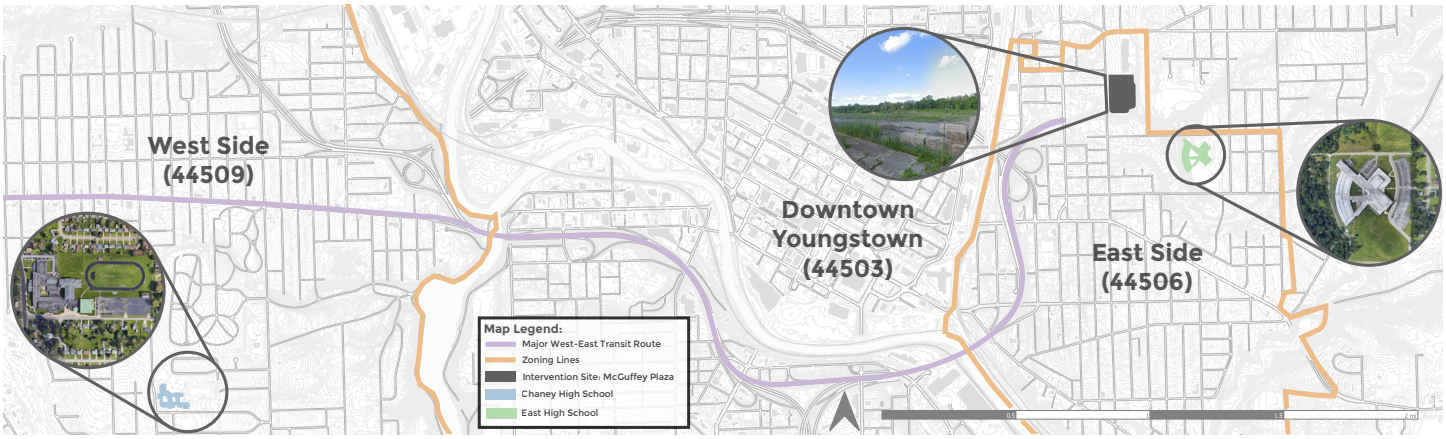


STRENGTHENING OF
COMMUNITY

Site Analysis

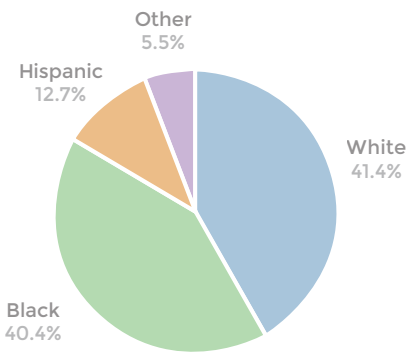
YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO

The best way to demonstrate the potential benefits and success of this research is to develop a model. This project focuses on how this approach can be applied to the city of Youngstown, Ohio. Youngstown, like many Rust Belt cities, has seen a significant loss of population from the 1970s to present day. Most of this loss stems from a lack of connection to one's community, or for a desire for something better. This project involves the creation of an intermediate, teen community space for use before/after school and weekends. Within a ten minute walk from the high school, and close to Route 62, this site is accessible for East High students.



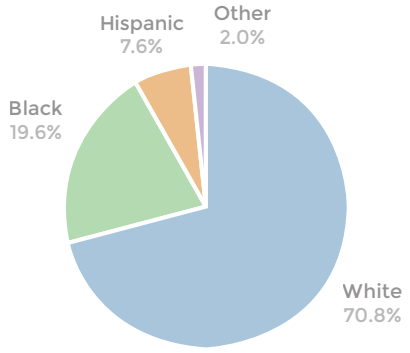
DEMOGRAPHICS

YOUNGSTOWN, OH



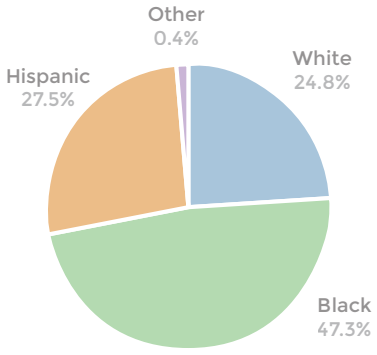
TOTAL POPULATION:	59,300
MEDIAN HH INCOME:	$34,408
POVERTY RATE:	37.3%

WEST SIDE, YOUNGSTOWN



POPULATION:	10,562
MEDIAN INCOME:	$36,570
PEOPLE / HOUSEHOLD	2.16

EAST SIDE, YOUNGSTOWN



POPULATION:	2,096
MEDIAN INCOME:	$21,018
PEOPLE / HOUSEHOLD	1.83

MAJOR SITE CONSIDERATIONS

1. Youngstown Unified will see the consolidation of the Chaney and East High Schools on the current East High School Site.

2. This consolidation will see teens from very different demographic backgrounds, coming together to learn and grow.

3. Youngstown City School District does not currently have the funds for school busses, so students rely fully on their parents for transport.

4. The site exists within a half-mile walk to the High School, and is only a half-mile from the major West-East connector, US Route 62.

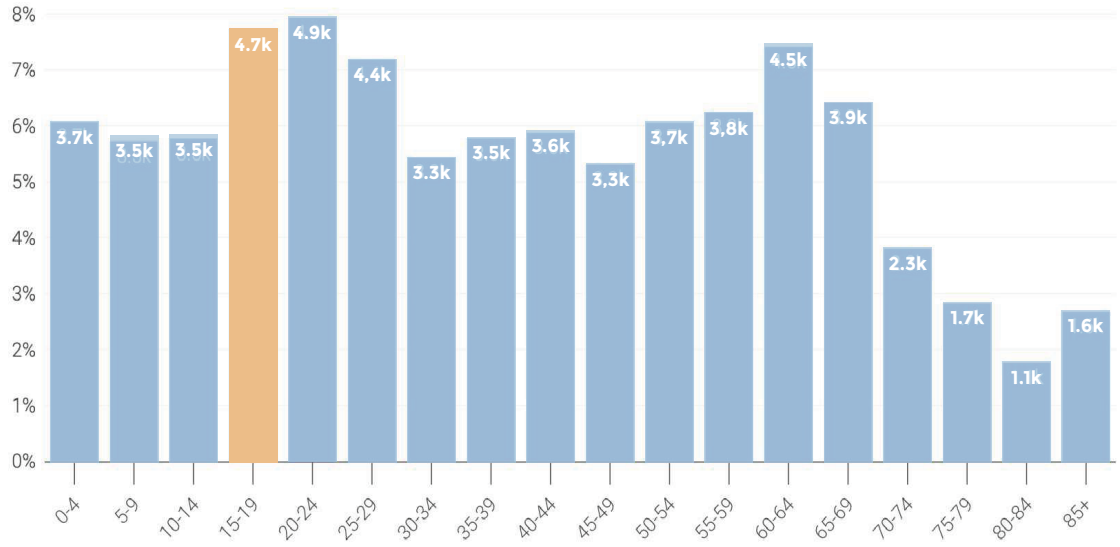
5. At a point in time, the site was used for manufacturing, then was used as commercial space before becoming vacant and demolished.

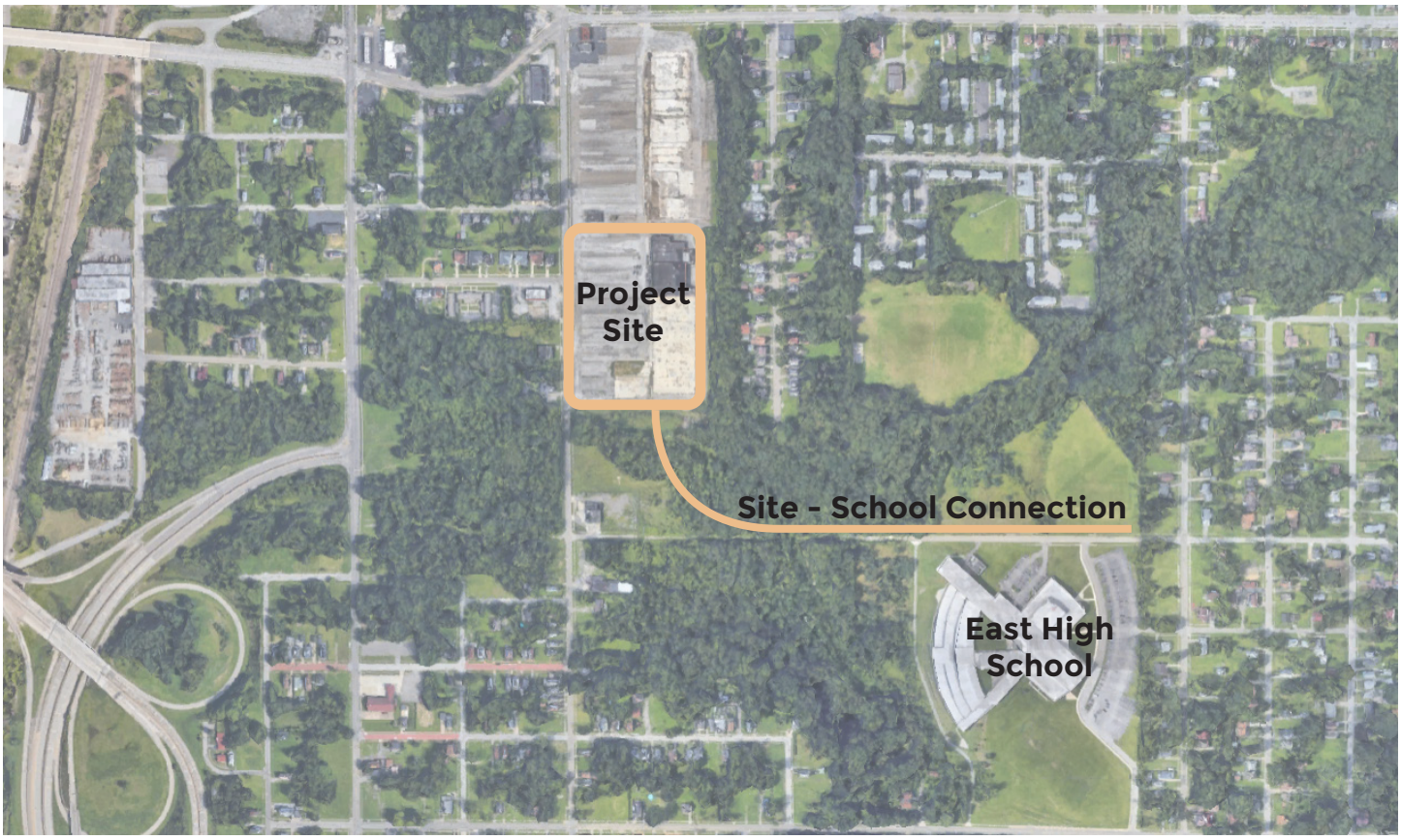
6. The site now exists as an overgrown lot with distressed asphalt, and is an eyesore. This presents an ideal Reclaiming Opportunity.

AFFECTED POPULATION

POPULATION OF YOUNGSTOWN, OH BY AGE GROUP

The 15-19 age group is second-highest with a population of 4,700





The teen community center will exist on this abandoned site just northwest of the East High School site. Connected by a pedestrian road and trails, students will have a half mile walk from the school to the community space. The site served manufacturing during the 20th century, then was repurposed to a commercial site with parking. In 2015, the strip mall was demolished, leaving the site to exist in ruin to present day. In 2022, the site was acquired by the Western Reserve Port Authority, who plans to use the site for manufacturing and commercial space, but precedent shows that the site needs something new and exciting for the community in order to succeed.

The architectural intervention proposed within this thesis presentation is meant to address the teen population, as they represent a large portion of the population and have major issues that need addressed. That being said, this project serves as the base for a typology that can be applied to cities across the country. By initially investing in the community's youth, the seeds for a strong, healthy, energetic, and innovative community are planted, and community endeavors will be sought out and achieved more often following the initial investment. This project purposefully only takes up about half of the abandoned site, leaving room for future projects like non-profit hosting, small business commercial, etc.

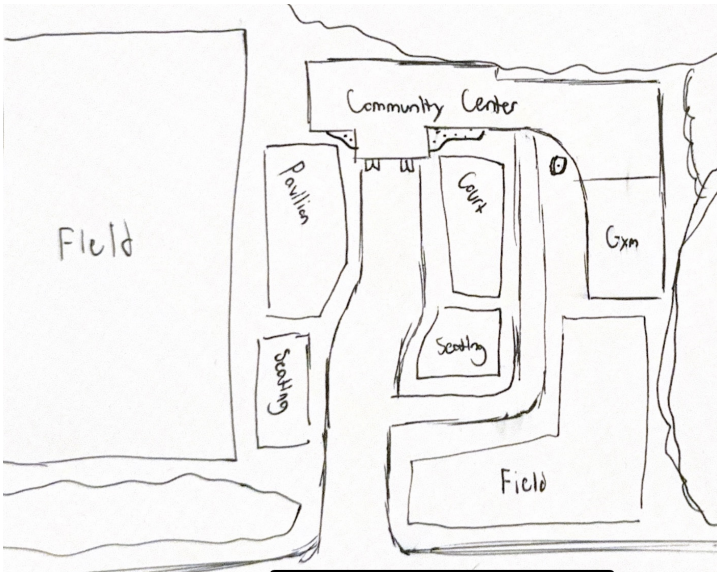
SITE HISTORY



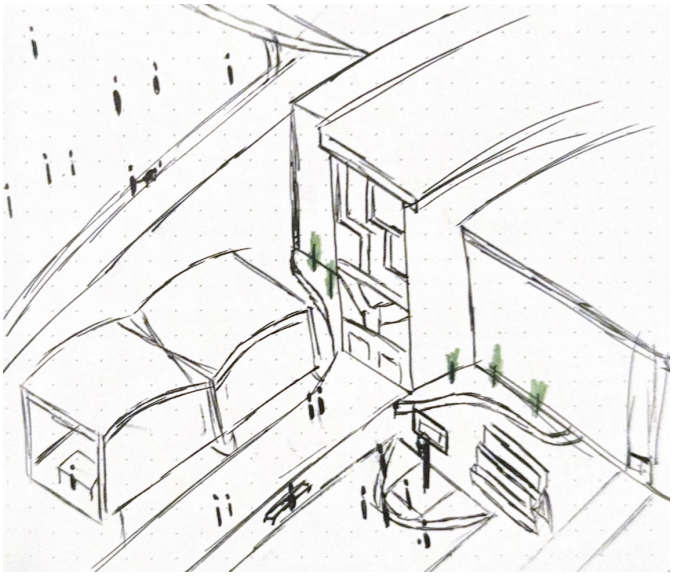




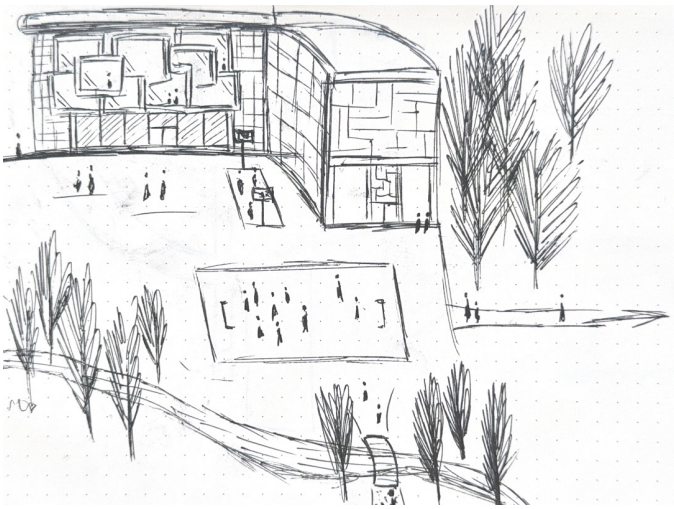
Design Process



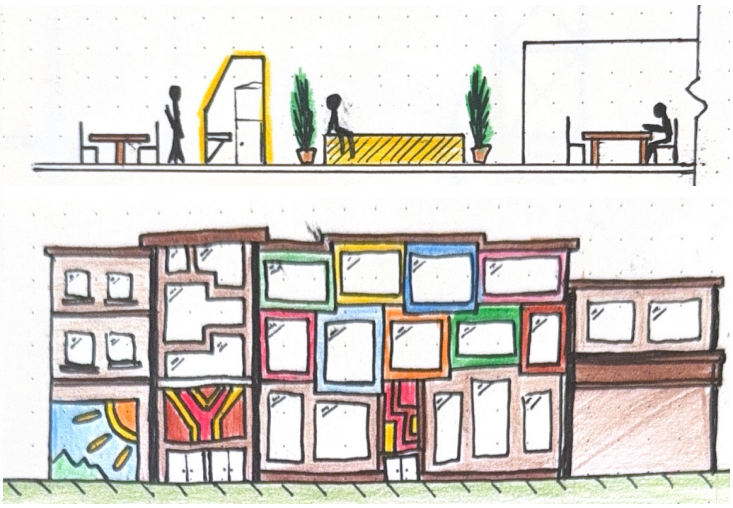
Early Master Planning Sketch



Early Perspective Sketch

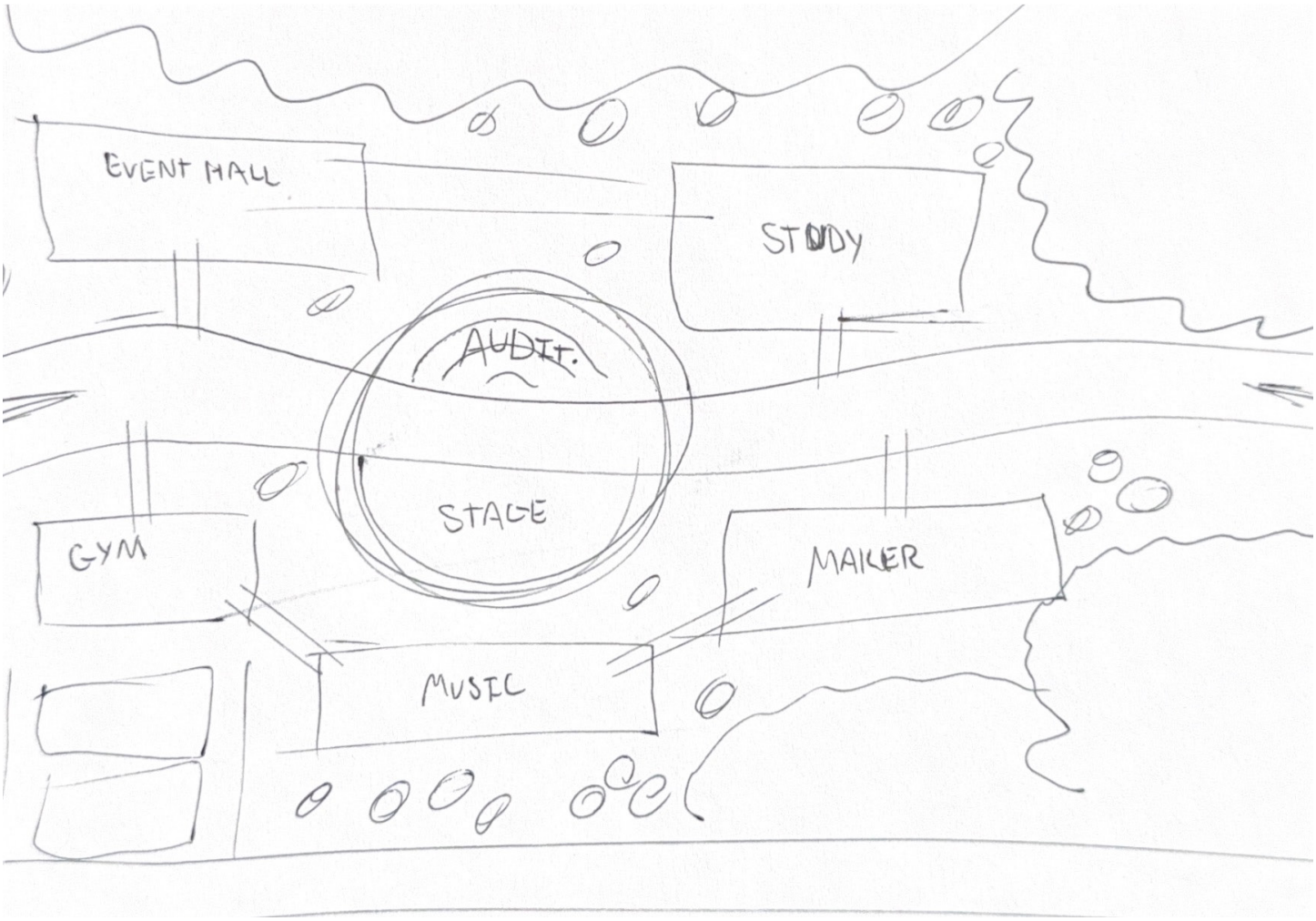


Early Perspective Sketch

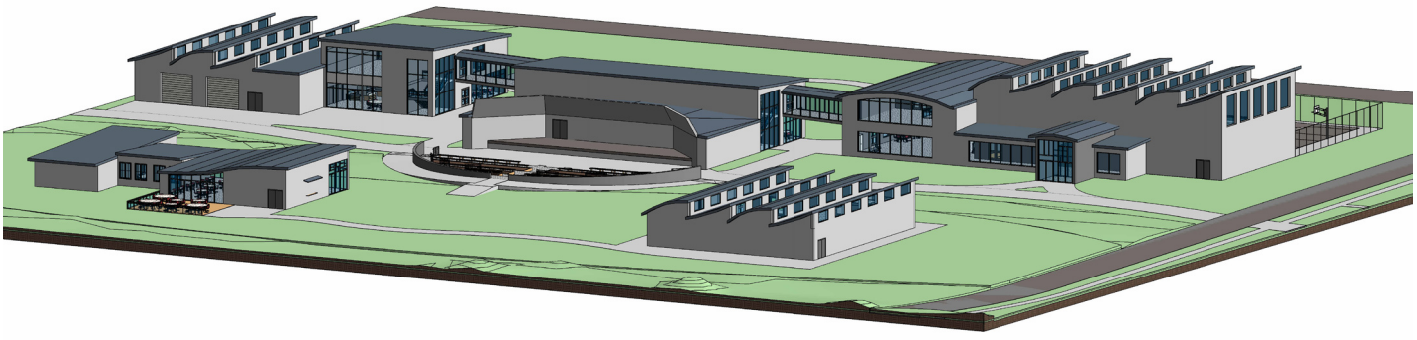


Early Elevation & Concept Sketches

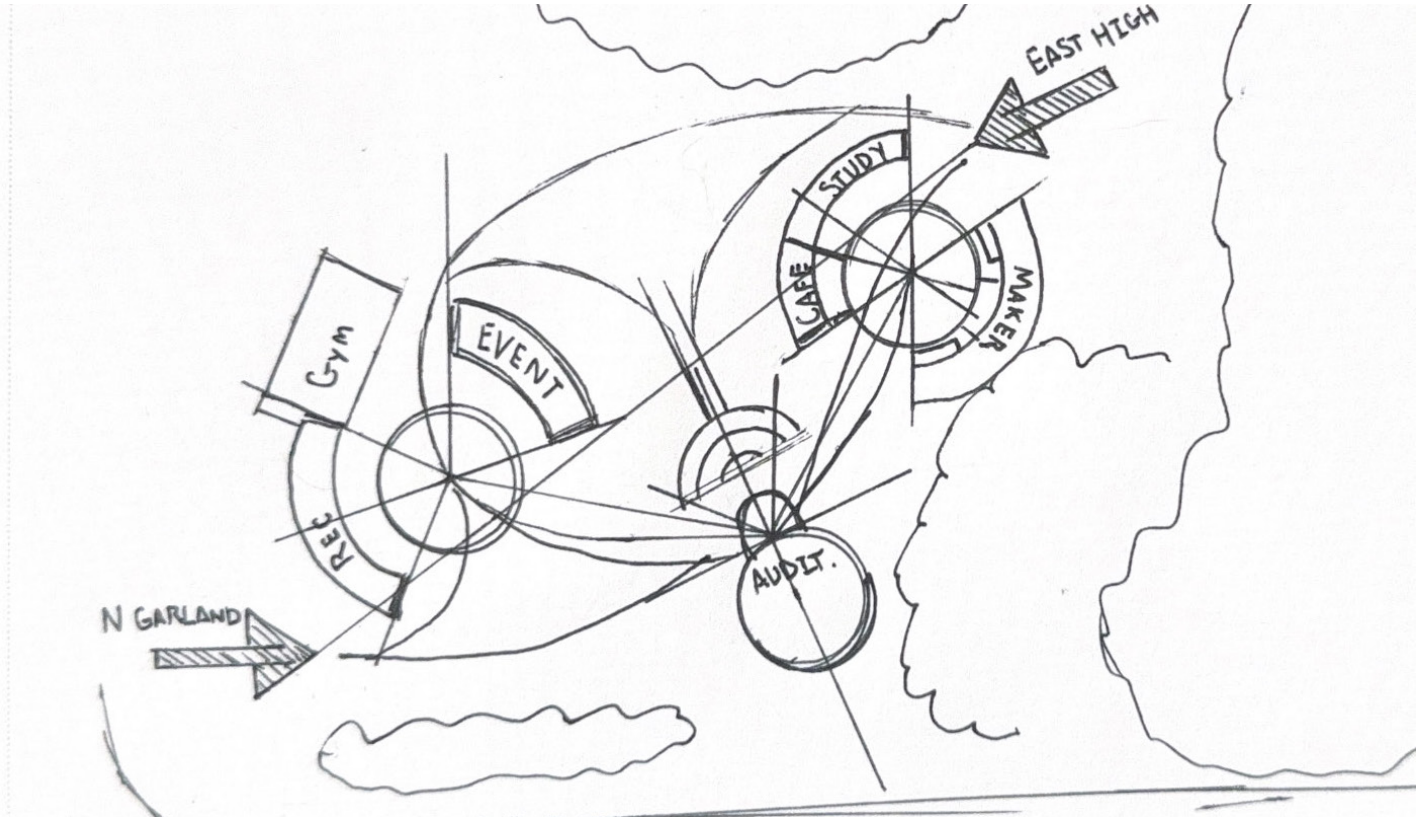
My first attempts at designing the community center involved the creation of one major building located towards the back of the site, with intermediate spaces filling out the rest of the site. While these designs worked, they didn't feel like they truly addressed the issues that this thesis was meant to. The building still felt institutional, everything was too open so feeling comfortable in this new space would be difficult, the building, while including elevators, felt truly inaccessible, etc. These initial ideas were eventually scrapped, but the core elements of their design helped to shape future design iterations.



Through redesigning and reiterating, this design was eventually landed on. The major concepts consider a long community connector from the East High School (far right, off page) and the parking (left, off page). This connector acts as a major axis that hosts different 'nodes', building spaces that each serve primary and secondary program including a gymnasium with courts, auditorium with music practice, maker space with resource libraries, study space with a cafe, and an event hall with outdoor hosting space. All of these program allow for tertiary program to form in between built spaces. While this design was also not chosen to be the final layout, it informed an organizational pattern that served the required needs and created a campus-like space for teens to belong.



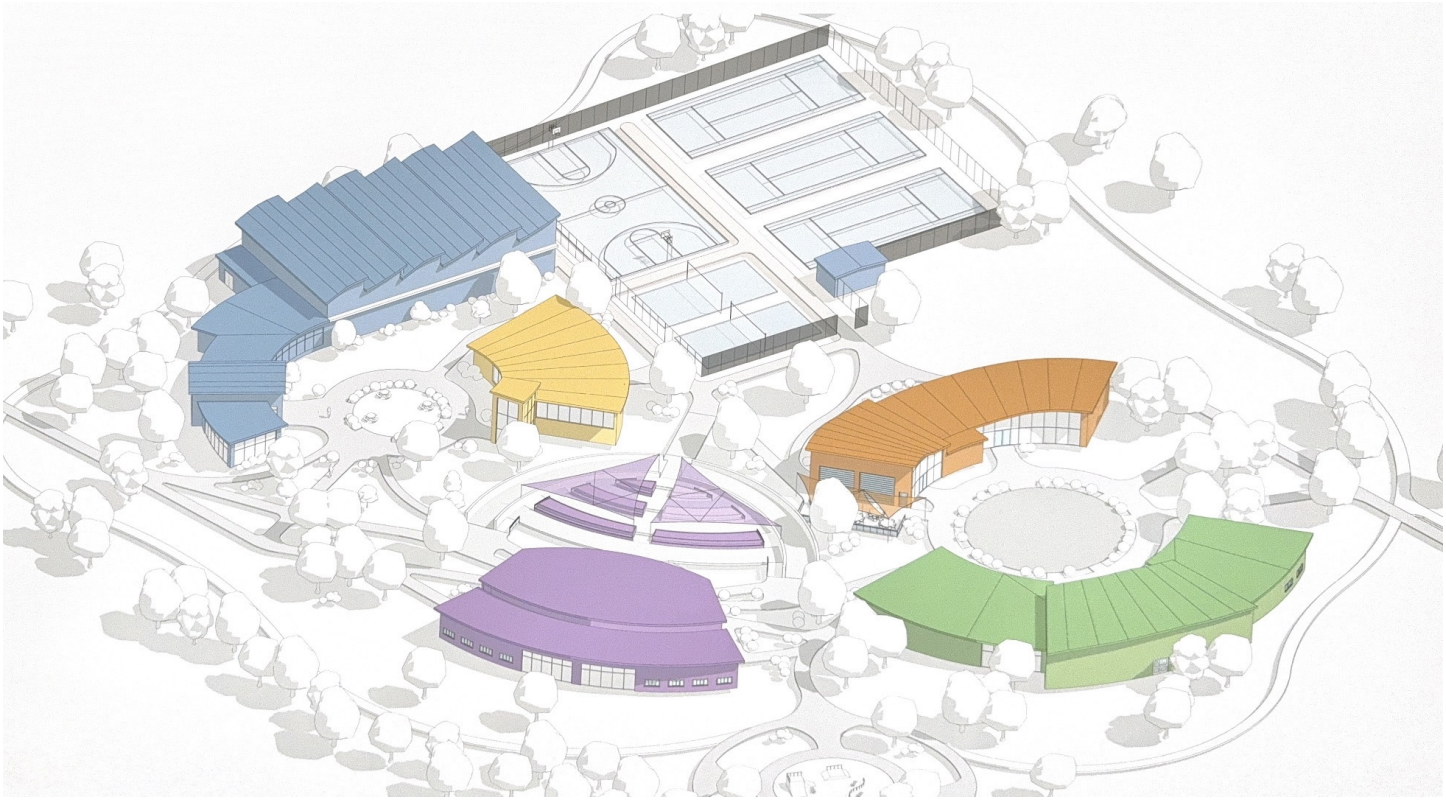
FINAL DESIGN DECISION



This parti diagram shows the final design chosen for the culmination of this thesis research. Many design decisions made in the last iteration are carried over to this design, and adapted to fit this new scheme. The presence of a community connector between the East High School and North Garland street is still present, but the buildings are pulled much closer together to create a safe and engaging campus. Along the connecting path, circular nodes form within the path, creating ample space for community engagement and interaction, and the buildings each follow the form of their node, creating a series of courtyards. The auditorium and stage are unique in this aspect, as the connector passes straight between the stage and seating, and paths radiate out from that point. The buildings, paths, and open spaces are all formed radially from the center of the nodes, where exterior walls and path lines exist at 30, 60, and 90 degree lines from their nodes' center. Once the radial extents of each of these buildings is set, each space is pushed or pulled from the center of the node based on the programmed functions. For example, the maker space is pushed further away to allow for outdoor working space between the courtyard and the building, and the cafe is pulled closer to the center so that it can interact directly with the courtyard.

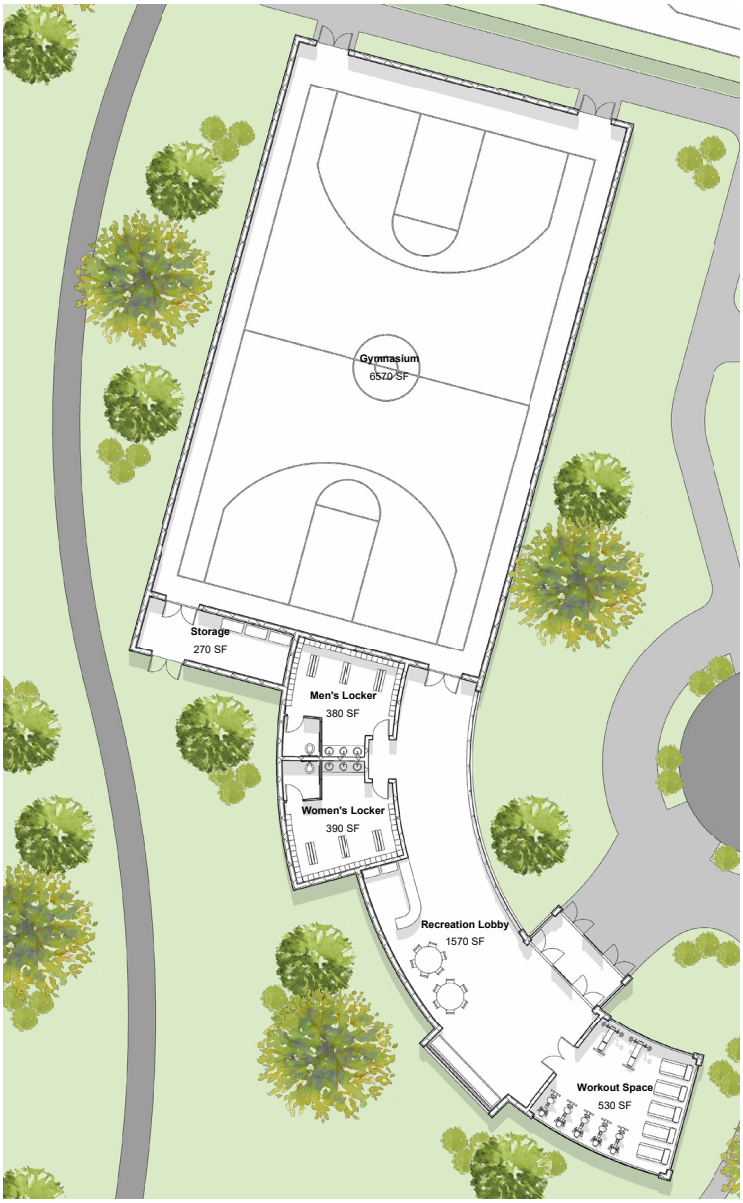
Presentation



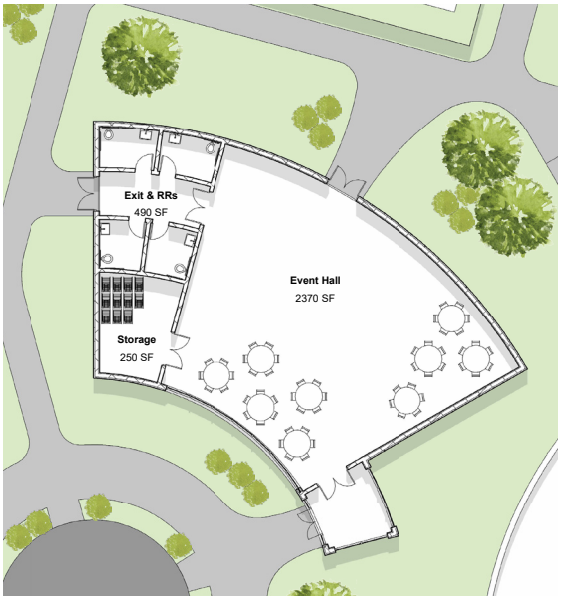


YOUNGSTOWN YOUTH COMMUNITY CENTER

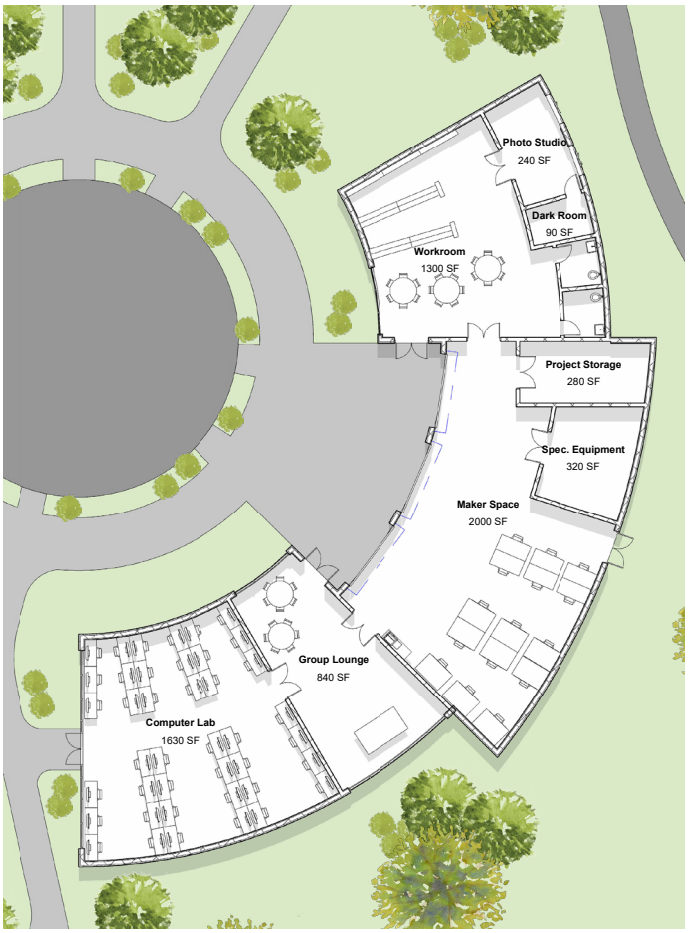




The gymnasium building connects directly to the north courtyard. It hosts a reception and lounge space, a workout/weight-room, a large gymnasium, and a sports storage room. Just east of the building (above from this view) is a series of large sports fields that serve the students with room for tennis, basketball, and volleyball.



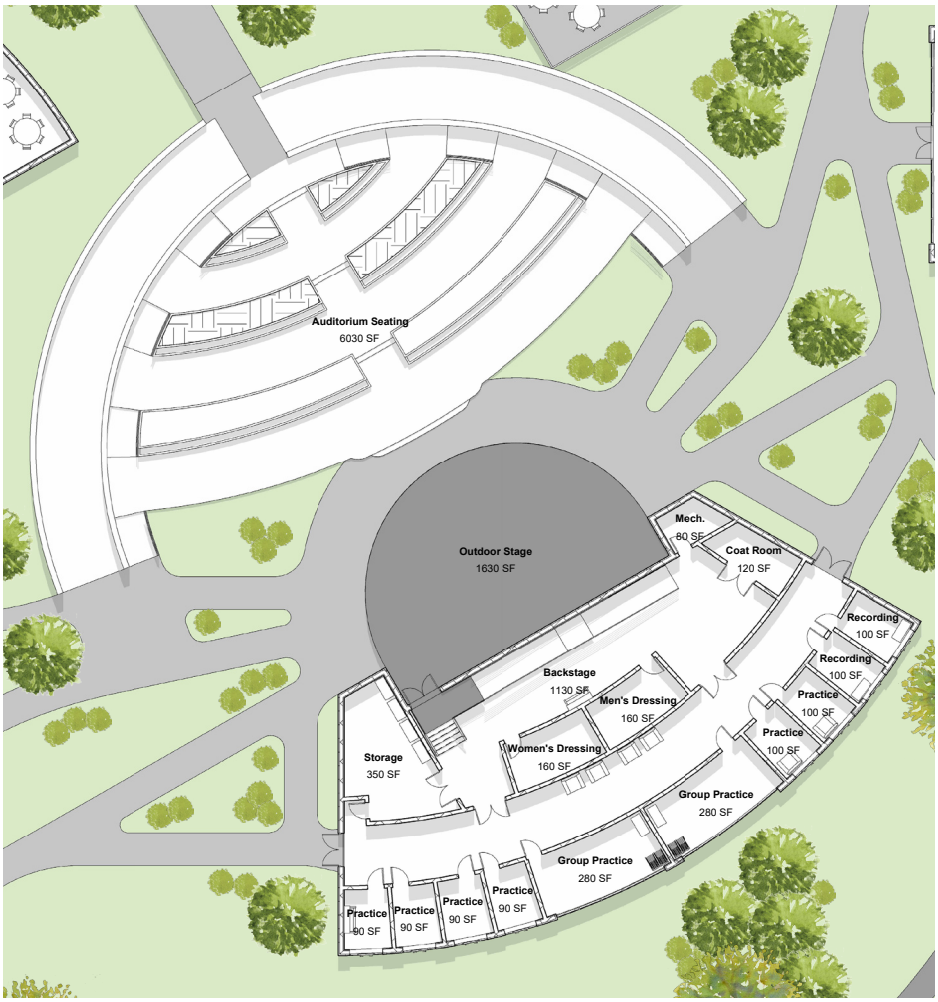
The event hall exists just across from the gymnasium building, and exists to host large programmed events. As a multi-purpose hall, the space is flexible, and can be used for a variety of activities. While it exists on the site of the youth community center, the space may be used by the greater Youngstown community to host events.



The resource building exists on the south courtyard, and hosts a variety of program. The primary function is the maker space, encouraging students to create and learn about new technology and building tools in a safe environment. Secondary functions are the workroom, which hosts a small library and photo studio, the computer lab, and the group lounge. Each space gives teens a space to gather with friends and engage in what interests them.



The cafe building consists of the cafe's kitchen and dining space, with a connected outdoor dining area. The east side of the building hosts individual and group study rooms that can be used as quiet focus space or club collaboration space as needed.

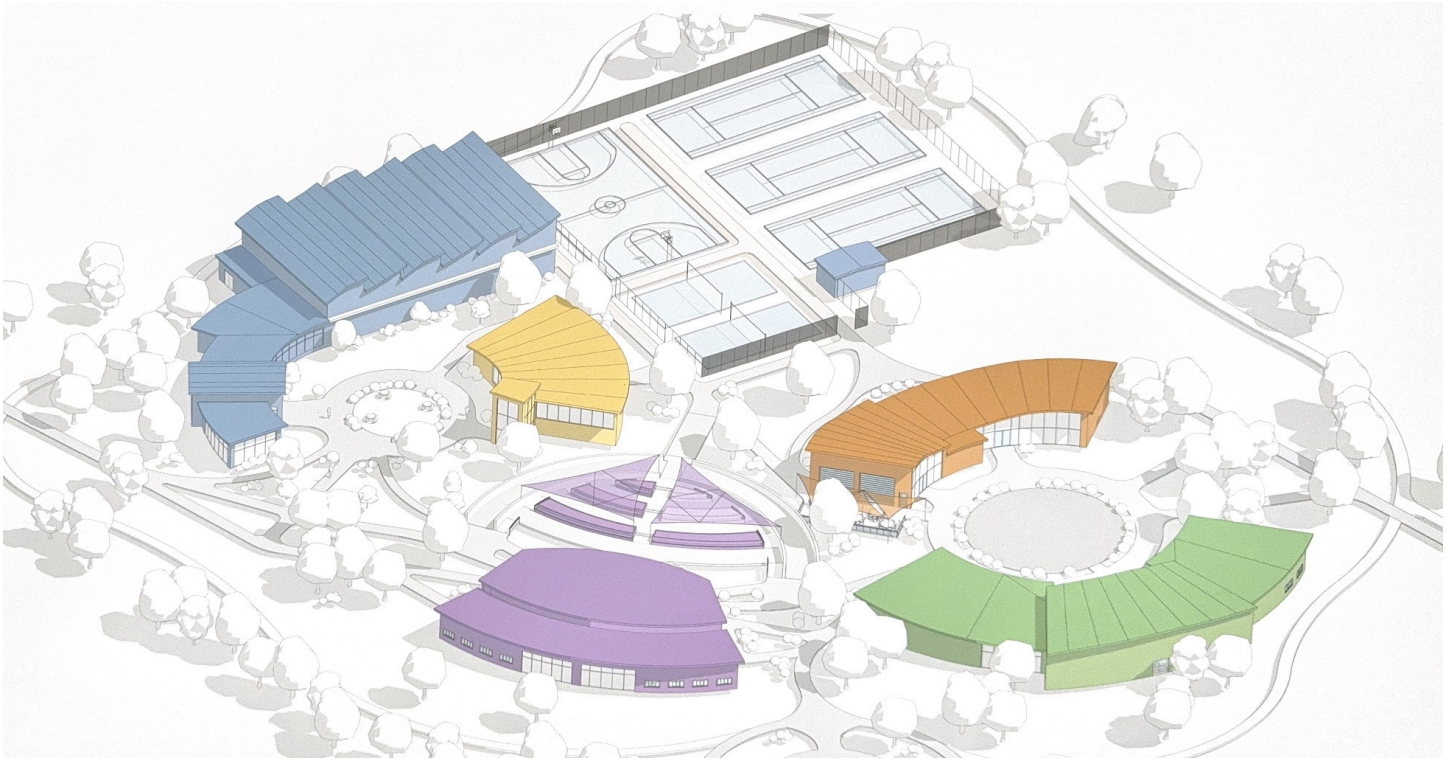


The auditorium building consists of an outdoor seating area, a main stage, a backstage, and music practice rooms. The building serves as the main traversal path through the entire site, offering loitering space, engaging seating, and a large public space, even when the main stage isn't in use. While it mainly exists to serve the youth, it can be utilized by the Youngstown community to host performances.









AREA TOTAL

SITE:	**280,000 SF**
BUILDINGS:	**34,870 SF**

RECREATION	**9,710 SF**
GYMNASIUM	6,570 SF
STORAGE	270 SF
LOCKER ROOMS	770 SF
ENTRANCE	1570 SF
WEIGHT ROOM	530 SF

AUDITORIUM	**10,980 SF**
OUTDOOR STAGE	1,630 SF
BACKSTAGE	1,130 SF
DRESSING ROOMS	320 SF
STORAGE	430 SF
COAT ROOM	120 SF
GROUP PRACTICE	560 SF
INDIV. PRACTICE	760 SF
SEATING AREA	6,030 SF

EVENT HALL	**3,020 SF**
EVENT HALL	2,370 SF
STORAGE	250 SF
ENTRANCE	160 SF
OTHER	490 SF

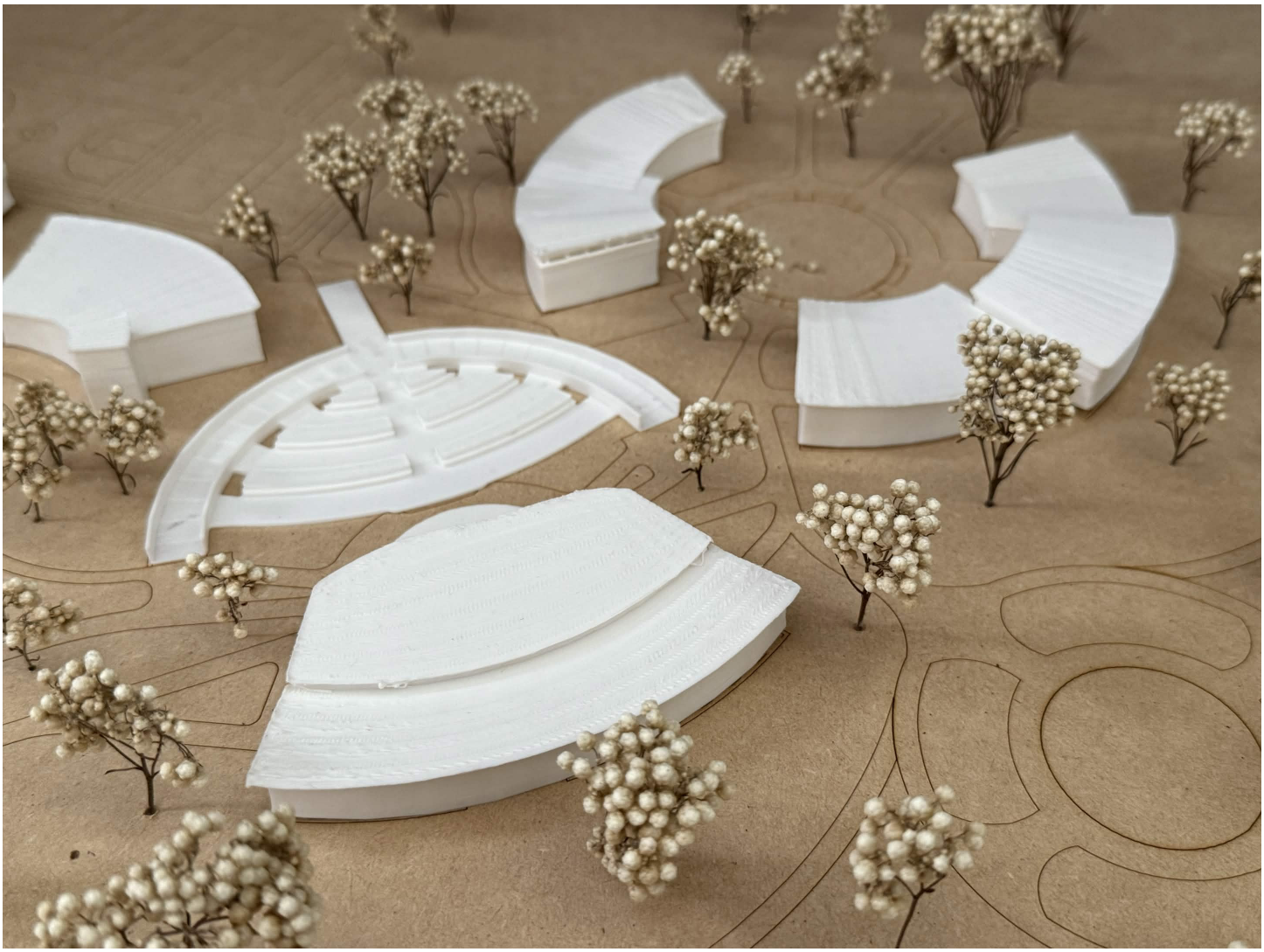
CAFE	**4,460 SF**
CAFE & DINING	1,340 SF
OUTDOOR DINING	820 SF
GROUP STUDY	640 SF
INDIV. STUDY	400 SF
OTHER	1,260 SF

RESOURCES	**6,700 SF**
WORKROOM	1,300 SF
PHOTO STUDIO	240 SF
DARK ROOM	90 SF
PROJECT STORAGE	280 SF
MAKER SPACE	2,000 SF
WORKSHOP	320 SF
LOUNGE	840 SF
COMPUTER LAB	1,630 SF









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