

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Notes from the Anti-Displacement Studio

by Lily Song



"VISION FOR VACANT PARCEL". DESIGN CONCEPT BY KALAMU KIETA. VISUAL BY ANASTASIA LEOPOLD.

## Introduction

Since fall 2021, I have been teaching the anti-displacement studio to architecture and urban planning students at a Boston-based university. The community-based participatory planning and design research studio offered at Northeastern University activates the role and responsibility of the designer as creative accomplice to anti-displacement activists and movements. The course partly stems from the tradition of the design studio, a foundational pedagogical model in architecture and planning education for teaching practice through open-ended problem setting, skills synthesis, real or constructed clients, and teamwork (Long 2012). However, it departs from the traditional design studio's tendency to neglect community activism and place-based movements adjacent to campus and reinforce professionalized norms and career trajectories. In bridging between academic and local contexts, the studio pushes designers to interrogate their identities, privileges, biases, and blind spots while centering the perspectives and agential capacity of community-based activists and leaders. It further incorporates a reparative pedagogy and methods that shift the design process from a solution orientation to one of collectively reimagining and rebuilding from spatialized injustices and harms.

This article examines and reflects on two-years of teaching community-based participatory planning and design research in the context of Roxbury, a historic African American and Black neighborhood of Boston, in partnership with the district-level city councilor, neighborhood leaders, and artists. A spring 2022 seminar course helped develop a planning framework for the ARTery, a 3-mile community-arts corridor connecting neighborhood squares and secondary commercial areas. The fall 2022 anti-displacement studio next codesigned urban planning and design strategies reinforcing the cultural identity of long-time residents and businesses along the ARTery. The spring 2023 anti-displacement studio then focused on community-based activation and redesign strategies for vacant parcels in Roxbury. After providing some topical and contextual background and touching on the studio's significance in design education, this article describes the process of building the university-community partnership and reiterating studio work in alignment with community-driven planning and design processes across three semesters. The analysis focuses on teaching strategies to build on the strengths of the studio model while addressing current gaps in design studio education, and is followed by a concluding discussion on the implications for radical planning and design practice.

## Background

Urban displacement refers to the forced relocation and exclusion of people from places of origin, residence, or belonging. The spatial development of American cities and towns relied on the forced removal of Indigenous people and appropriation of their lands for resource exploitation and property ownership at a continental scale (Witgen 2021). 20<sup>th</sup> century US metropolitan growth was predicated on urban renewal and highway projects that cut through and

displaced urban communities of color so that suburban communities could conveniently access the cities they were fleeing (Avila 2004). During decades of national economic boom, discriminatory land use and housing policies constrained investments and wealth building opportunities for racialized communities (Rothstein 2018). In the 21st or "urban" century, the restructuring of cities as engines of economic growth based on knowledge and service sectors, commodification of housing as financial assets and instruments, and escalating socioeconomic inequality have routinized urban displacement (Marcuse and Madden, 2016; Florida 2017).

Such historic forces and trends are strongly present in Boston, a colonial educational and economic center with high levels of segregation and racial wealth and health disparities (Boston Public Health Commission 2023; Federal Reserve Bank of Boston 2015). The city's ever-expanding constellation of college and medical campuses encroach on surrounding communities and compound housing unaffordability (Elton 2004). Northeastern University occupies a particularly contentious position in Boston, next to Roxbury, the South End, and Mission Hill—historically red-lined working-class, Black and Latinx neighborhoods that are rapidly gentrifying (Pan 2020). Over the past few decades, Northeastern's Boston campus has grown along Columbus Avenue, where entire blocks were demolished as part of mid-century urban renewal and highway projects, and the university later took possession of vacant parcels (Sasani 2018; Pattison-Gordon 2016; Bluestone et al. 2003). The campus-oriented development has further crept into surrounding neighborhoods through students seeking private housing options as on-campus housing units fail to keep pace with surging enrollment (Cutler & Comer 2002).

In Boston—as in many cities around the world—a growing number of residents are pushing back against exclusionary real-estate development and trying to reclaim their neighborhoods from speculative capital and external control (Serrano et al. 2023; Kern 2022; Chapple and Sideris 2021; Marcuse 1984). They build on community-led struggles to stop urban renewal and highway projects, and advocate for better social/public services, tenant rights, inclusive workforce policies, and fair housing/lending (Vrabel 2014). Many are rooted in long-standing acts of collective refusal and cultural preservation among Indigenous, Black, decolonial, and poor people's movements. Notwithstanding community frustrations over Northeastern's expanding footprint, various local organizations and change leaders engage with university staff, faculty, and students through teaching, research, and other initiatives. Some have called on the support and collaboration of university-based partners in undertaking community-led anti-displacement planning and design initiatives. Such an invitation catalyzed the teaching and learning practice described below around the central question: to what extent and how can design pedagogy and methods be reformulated and retooled to support community-led anti-displacement planning and design initiatives?

## Design Education and Studio Pedagogy

The anti-displacement studio builds on the tradition of the design studio, a pedagogical model that has been foundational to architecture and planning education since their inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Studios distinctly serve goals of synthesis and learning-by-doing, and incorporate open-ended problems, real or constructed clients, and teamwork (Nemeth and Long 2016; Long 2012). As pedagogical practices, material spaces, and creative design practices, studios can be invaluable in: (1) making artefacts and selves; (2) bridging between academic and professional contexts; (3) conferring meaning on educational activities; (4) enabling or constraining activities, experiences and interactions; (5) backgrounding the activity of learning; and (6) expressing and shaping disciplinary identities (Corazzo 2019). Noted challenges of design studios include: (1) engaging current contexts of students, (2) refocusing from solutions-driven design process to exploring, feeling, and empathizing as integral parts of design process, and (3) overcoming disconnection from real-world problem scenarios (Corazzo 2019). Traditionally, design studios have been better at inculcating professionalized norms and reinforcing corporate career trajectories than engaging community activism and place-based movements adjacent to campus. Studio courses have also been critiqued for reproducing societal tendencies of class, race, and gender discrimination and asymmetrical relations of power in the classroom setting (Dutton 1987).

In addressing the limits of the studio model, the anti-displacement studio draws inspiration from K. Wayne Yang's concept of *third worlding universities* (2017). Writing as his avatar, *la paperson*, the decolonial educator proposes:

*First worlding universities are machinery commissioned to actualize imperialist dreams of a settled world. Second worlding universities desire to humanize the world, which is a more genteel way to colonize a world that is so much more than human. A third worlding university is a decolonizing university. This frame helps us assess the academic-industrial complex with its current neoliberal machinery and its investments in colonialism, but more importantly, it is a frame that describes the decolonial desires that already inhabit and repurpose the academic machinery (p. xiv-xv).*

Calling to action all “decolonizing dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery and part machine themselves” (p. xiii), he asks, “how might we operate on ourselves and other technologies and turn these gears into decolonizing operations?” (p. 24). Yang extends the technologies framework to further redefine settler colonialism as a set of technologies that generate patterns of social relations to land and can be reappropriated for decolonizing purposes. This includes technologies of settler supremacy (i.e. citizenship, private property, civil and criminal innocence, normative sexuality), indigenous erasure (i.e. military terror and genocide, partitioning of earth into resources and commodities, land privation and privatization, boarding schools and institutions of cultural assimilation), and anti-Blackness (i.e. criminal presence, landlessness, lethal geographies, carceral apparatuses, non-personhood) that circulate across bodies and spaces. The

idea of repurposing the academic machinery and reappropriating settler colonial technologies is particularly ripe for consideration by educators in the built environment disciplines and professions, immersed as we are in the politics of land.

For studio instructors seeking to align university-based teaching and learning with community-led decolonizing agendas, the indigenous studies and education scholar Eve Tuck's “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” (2009) is additionally instructive. Tuck calls for a moratorium on damage-centered research and narratives “that [establish] harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” yet carry long-term repercussions of rendering marginalized communities depleted and broken (Tuck 2009). She argues for re-envisioned research on Native communities, city communities, and other disenfranchised communities that not only document the effects of oppression but more importantly “capture desire” in ways that recognize the complex intricacies, contradictions, and informed seeking of lived lives that point towards becoming more of who they are (Tuck 2009, p. 416). Tuck writes, “Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore” (Tuck 2009, p. 417). To “capture desire” requires grounding research projects in the lived lives and ongoing efforts of communities, which in turn requires trust-based relationships between researchers and communities. As examined in the following sections, developing such relational, grounded, and desireful approaches to university-based research and learning can help address current gaps in design studio education, in part by unsettling and complicating underlying assumptions, professional norms, and creative practices.

## Laying the Groundwork for University-Community Partnership

I began teaching the anti-displacement studio from my first semester at Northeastern University (fall 2021) as a faculty hire in the area of race, social justice, and the built environment. Tasked with teaching an architecture option studio, I chose to embed my studio teaching in community-based organizing and advocacy for development without displacement. To some extent, I was responding to student demands for design studio projects that support racial equity and inclusivity and meaningful community engagement in the wake of 2020 mass protests in defense of Black lives.<sup>1</sup> The first iteration of the anti-displacement studio in fall 2021, which enrolled 12 students across the master of urban planning, master of architecture, and bachelor of science in architecture programs, conducted participatory planning and design research with the Alliance for Community Transit-Los Angeles (ACT-LA), an organization with which I previously conducted design research to promote non-policing public safety investments on LA Metro transit systems (Song and Mizrahi, 2023). Virtually meeting with ACT-LA staff and members throughout the fall semester, studio participants researched and codesigned different social housing typologies for ACT-LA's advocacy campaign for housing and land use justice—helping visualize

community-owned and managed housing on public land with state-of-the-art green building and urban design elements that simultaneously harness and enhance existing neighborhood infrastructures and amenities.

As universities returned to in-person instruction and Boston experienced political transition, this opened up new teaching and learning opportunities. Michelle Wu became the first woman and person of color to be elected Boston mayor and was joined by an incoming class of city councilors representing Boston's growing diversity. Among them was Tania Fernandes Anderson, Boston City Councilor for District 7 (D7), consisting of Roxbury and parts of Dorchester, Fenway, and the South End. Before becoming the first Muslim American, African immigrant, and formerly-undocumented person elected to the Boston City Council, Anderson worked as a trauma-informed social worker, main-streets director, theater/fashion designer, small-business owner, and foster mother/caregiver. Having connected through a peer-learning and leadership development program for place-based organizations and public space stewards launched by the Boston Foundation in late summer 2019, the two of us stayed in touch. While campaigning for the city council seat, she asked for and received my advice on questions of urban policy, planning, and design. Stopping by the fall anti-displacement studio just after her electoral win in November 2019, she asked if I could offer a course that would support anti-displacement efforts in D7. My answer was yes! Notwithstanding the successful collaboration with ACT-LA, I was eager to immerse course teaching in the local context.

## Planning Study for the ARTery

Among Anderson's immediate priorities was to address the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses and public spaces in Roxbury along with the lack of safe, well-maintained open spaces for communities to gather outside. Through brainstorming sessions with the D7 office (including the newly hired chief of staff and directors of community relations, constituent services, and budget and operations), we arrived at the idea of the ARTery, a cultural corridor connecting neighborhood squares and secondary commercial areas across Boston's Roxbury and South End neighborhoods. Running from Jazz Square in the South End through Nubian Square down Dudley Street and

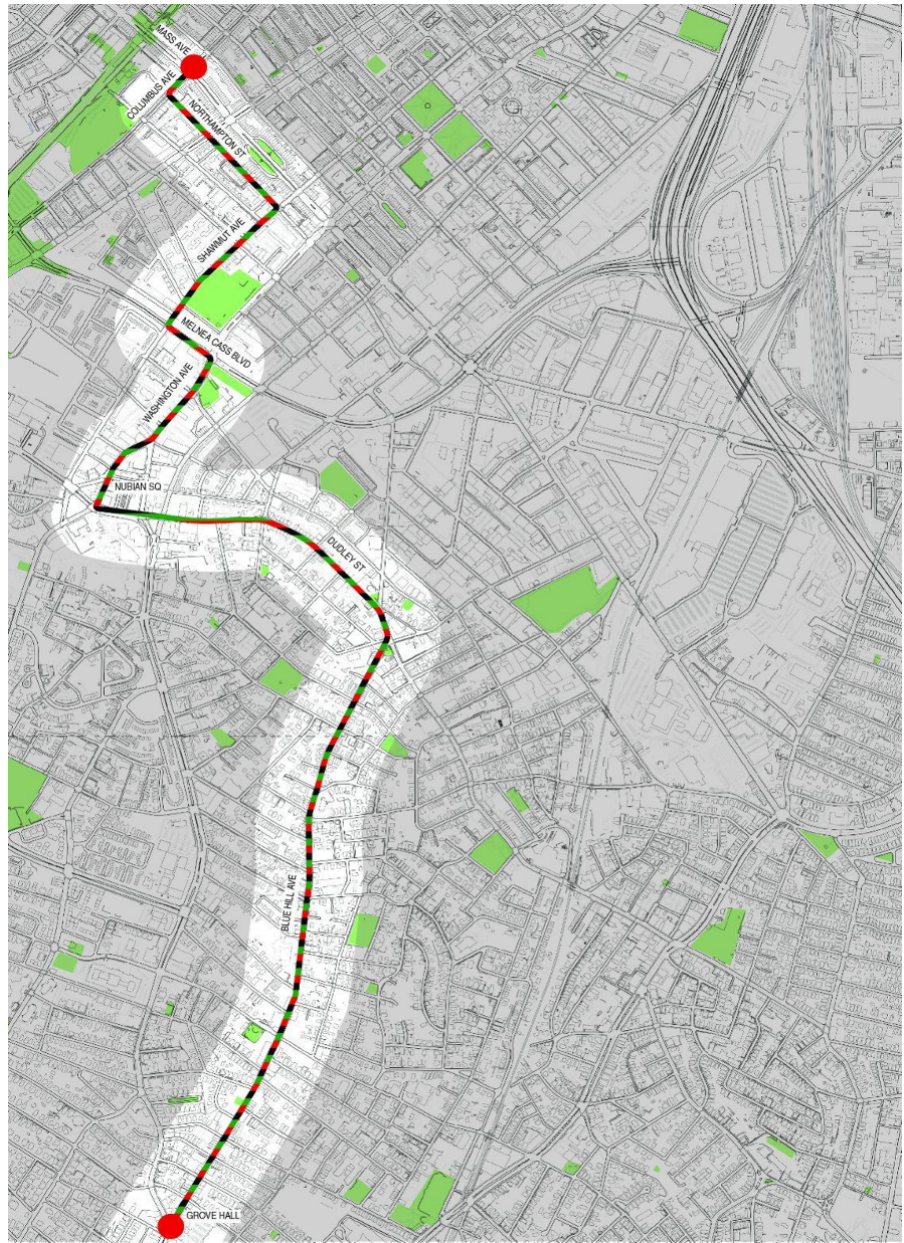


FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE ARTERY ROUTE. DESIGN CONCEPT BY TANIA FERNANDES ANDERSON. VISUAL BY KATELYN KEEN.

along Blue Hill Avenue to Grove Hall, the planned 3-mile route contained a high density and diversity of local businesses, numerous vacant lots, low foot traffic, and diminishing number and quality of public spaces. The idea was to hire local artists, activists, and entrepreneurs to reface and beautify small businesses, paint public murals, activate green/open/community spaces, and improve street safety in historically-disinvested neighborhoods. Many of them were already doing this work and could utilize funding support through the City of Boston. Anderson shortly filed a resolution establishing the ARTery and gained funding allocation (\$1.6M) through the City budget.<sup>2</sup>

Leaning into Northeastern's location in Boston's District 7 and partnering with Anderson, I adapted a spring 2022 graduate-level professional practice seminar to inform the planning framework for the ARTery initiative. Enrolling 13 master of architecture students, the seminar course was

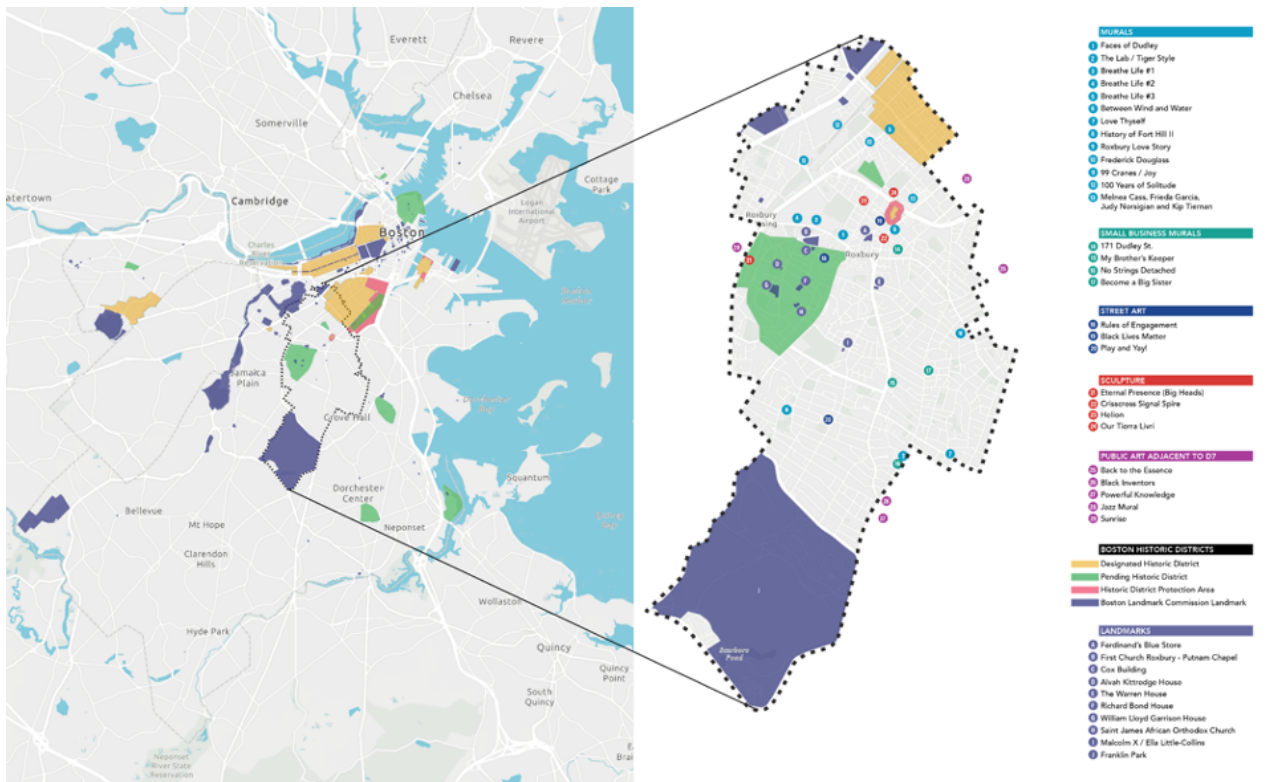


FIGURE 2. CITY OF BOSTON DISTRICT 7- COMMUNITY ASSET MAP. CREDIT: KATELYN KEEN.

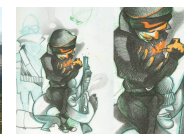
structured around a series of community-engaged design principles and exercises. The class started at the individual level with students mapping their personal and social identities as well as home and chosen communities (the first where they grew up and the latter where they decided to live as adults). Then in groups of two to three, they shared thoughts on their own privileges, biases, and blind spots related to their positionality and living environments (as predominantly white people in their 20s from middle-class and affluent households who were new to the area) before discussing overall themes and takeaways as a class. Next, we used the Boston Area Research Map created by the Boston Area Research Initiative (BARI) at Northeastern to spatially analyze data about the population, housing, land value, transit access, crime, public safety, medical emergencies, and other characteristics of D7. Subsequently visiting Roxbury and learning about public landmarks and neighborhood assets as well as meeting with community activists and leaders allowed the class to partly challenge the deficit and damage-based narratives about the neighborhood that surfaced in the data mapping exercise.

With this preparatory training, the students were ready to conduct more hands-on work to support the ARtery initiative. Students conducted exercises mapping community assets with the D7 Office and interviewing Boston Black artists and makers (with whom Anderson and her team had pre-existing relationships) about how they would artistically

approach public space activation on city-owned parcels. On site, they worked with the D7 directors of constituent services and community relations to conduct street audits along the ARtery route, and canvas local businesses, neighborhood establishments, and community members to learn what city agencies could do to improve streets, public works, and public spaces. Over the summer, I hired research assistants to follow up on the street audits and canvassing conducted by the spring class—analyzing the data files, filling in the gaps, and synthesizing needed city actions and



## Kalamu E. Kieta



### Artistic Practice

Kalamu is an artist that works primarily in illustration, but whose greater practice engages public art and community organizing. Kalamu's work spans media from pen and ink to sculptural installation. Raised in Roxbury by artist parents, he values building community and opportunities for other artists.

### Vision for Vacant Parcel

If he had control over a vacant parcel in Roxbury, Kalamu would make it a space that allows other artists to be able to show their work without the barriers and "red tape" that comes with other opportunities. He would create a program that pairs up artists of different disciplines to create an installation together. The installations would rotate, providing two installations per season, or eight annually. This would employ 16-48 artists per year. Culinary arts would be incorporated on site, showcasing the talent of local restaurants from Roxbury and providing an opportunity to draw people onto the site. Art from the exhibition would then be sold or donated, maybe even on site in an auction, to produce income for artists and give the art a life beyond the installation.

### Budget

Budget for artists should be enough to sustain them beyond 2 months.

- \$15-20k per cohort (2-3 people) of artists
- \$2-7k for materials
- \$2k for logistics (set up, break down, transport of art)
- Paid position within D7 to organize
- Budget/position to advertise artists' work



Created by Anastasia Leopold as part of Lily Song's ARCH 6440 course at Northeastern University • Spring 2022

FIGURE 3. SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH KALAMU KIETA. DESIGN CONCEPT BY KALAMU KIETA. CREDIT: ANASTASIA LEOPOLD.

improvements. Within the City of Boston, Anderson shared our research findings from the street audit and canvassing with the Chief of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion, Chief of Arts and Culture, Chief of Environment, Energy, and Open Space, and Chief of Streets, and gained their unanimous support for the initiative. Utilizing funds allocated by Anderson through the city budgeting process, the Chief of Arts and Culture additionally hired a program coordinator and put out a Request for Proposals for artists and teams to reface businesses, produce murals, and organize events along the D7 ARTery.

Trash + Recycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited trash and recycling bins (along Blue Hill Avenue, Dudley Street, and around Nubian Square)</li> <li>Discrepancy between trash truck arrival times and street signs (near Brunswick/Intervale Streets)</li> <li>Potholes in multiple locations along the ARTery</li> <li>More street lighting needed</li> <li>More frequent street cleaning needed (Blue Hill Avenue, Nubian Square)</li> </ul>
Parks + Greenery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More public benches/seating needed</li> <li>More shading needed</li> <li>More tree coverage needed</li> </ul>
Buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many buildings have unwelcoming grated entry</li> <li>Signs on storefronts need to be replaced for more curb appeal</li> <li>Storefronts themselves need to be renovated and/or painted</li> </ul>
Sidewalks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many cracks in the sidewalks</li> <li>Uneven sidewalks in some areas</li> <li>Lack of ADA accessibility pads for street crossings</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of overall parking availability for both customers and staff in Nubian Square</li> <li>Need for more parking with time limits to create more turnover on Blue Hill Avenue</li> <li>Lots of traffic issues including bus accidents and congested intersections by the Roxbury BPL branch</li> </ul>

FIGURE 4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM STREET AUDIT AND CANVASSING. CREDIT: AUTHOR.

## Guiding ARTery Implementation

Going into fall 2022, Anderson requested that the anti-displacement studio work with members of the D7 Advisory Council to help guide ARTery implementation. Comprising over 40 neighborhood association leaders, the Advisory Council physically embodied Anderson’s approach of organizing and uniting her constituents to hold the mayor, city council, and public agencies accountable to D7’s communities of color and working-class households. She met with this group of predominantly African American/Black leaders and long-time residents on a weekly basis to discuss district-wide policy and planning priorities, and coordinate strategies and actions. For my 16 students (from the master of urban planning, master of architecture, and bachelor of science in architecture programs) to effectively work with D7 partners required understanding the history of spatial injustices and collective traumas sustained by local communities as well as cultivating empathy, respect, and humility. While I had a diverse mix of Black, Asian, Latinx, and white students, they were all new to the area and largely from middle-class and affluent backgrounds. Again, having them map their personal and social identities as well as draw cognitive maps of both where they grew up and were now living helped unpack their positionality and privilege in terms of class as well as ableism, gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and citizenship. To mitigate any potential sense of superiority or benevolent prejudice, we discussed the cognitive biases and blind spots accompanying privileged statuses along with the necessity and power of working in solidarity and complementarity with D7 partners.

For the first studio exercise, we leaned into Northeastern University’s location in District 7 and

interrogated problematic practices of institutional land banking and expansion in addition to reading and watching informational videos about urban displacement. Students researched how housing, commercial, cultural, and climate displacement showed up in Roxbury and created data narratives summarizing their findings. For the second studio exercise, they conducted a listening session with the D7 Advisory Council about important sites of cultural heritage and memory that the ARTery must help preserve and lift up (e.g. churches, theaters, jazz clubs, community gardens). Following up with archival research and summarizing their

findings in posters, they shared back with community leaders what they learned. Showing studio partners an initial set of outputs based on what we learned from/with them—rather than design solutions—allowed us to gain their trust and invitation to codesign spatial propositions [together]. For the final project, Anderson and the D7 Advisory Council asked the

**ARTery**  
**Bodega Beautification Guide**

**Commercial Displacement**  
The displacement of long-term store owners and residents

**Anti-Displacement Framework**

- Educate local business owners about existing city programs
- Create ARTery Bodega Beautification Guide to facilitate visualization and understanding of
- the impact of changes funded by these city programs.

**Existing City Programs**

- City of Boston: Streetfront Improvements Program Restore Boston:** Resources for business signs and storefront improvement
- City of Boston: Streetfront Improvements Program Small Business Development:** Our new window of opportunity connects small businesses with resources and assistance to grow, thrive, and build businesses in Boston.
- City of Boston: Reimagine Boston Main Streets:** The successful regeneration process aims to strengthen the fabric of Boston and its street program.

**Grants:**

- Helping to rebuild your business
- Helping with signage for storefronts, signs, or art
- Creating murals
- Making signs and storefronts safer
- Making small businesses more visible and accessible to the public

**Design Guidelines:**

More information can be found on: [www.cityofboston.gov](#)

**Weekly Small Business Calls:**

More information can be found on: [www.cityofboston.gov](#)

**Precedents**

**Toolkit**

- Awnings:** Shading, Gives businesses a stronger presence, Makes storefront more inviting
- Roll-Down Grates:** Added security for businesses, Removal of added roll-down grates required for businesses to join existing city programs
- Window Improvements:** Safety, Hygiene, Safety
- Facade Flower Boxes:** Livability & Greenability
- Branding Template:** Clear visual identity, Recognizable brand, Shows the culture/product/service of the business attracting customers more easily

Veronica Fadel & Elizabeth Guerrero | Northeastern University

FIGURE 5. MINI-GUIDE FOR BEAUTIFYING LOCAL BUSINESSES. CREDIT: VERONICA FADEL AND ELIZABETH GUERRERO.

students to focus on spatial planning and design strategies for utilizing public investments and improvements to reinforce the cultural identity of long-time residents and businesses and strengthen community building along the ARTery. For the final outputs, students co-created with D7 partners a series of mini-guides for beautifying local businesses, creating public art, activating vacant lots, repurposing churches, and improving walkability/street safety.

For Anderson and the D7 Advisory Council, the ARTery was part of a larger strategy by which Roxbury community leaders and residents could guide public investments and spatial improvements in their own neighborhood. They were especially concerned about the City's growing control of land use planning and development at the neighborhood scale. In Wu's first year as mayor, the City of Boston conducted an audit of city-owned land, released a land inventory and mapping tool to improve public transparency and information access, and initiated Article 80 development review and approval reform to expedite affordable housing development, particularly on city-owned land.<sup>3</sup> The higher presence of publicly-owned parcels in Roxbury due to historical redlining, urban renewal, highway demolition, public disinvestment speculative/sub-prime lending, and arson and insurance fraud—in other words, racialized and spatialized injustices of top-down policy and planning processes— meant the neighborhood would inordinately bear the impacts of yet another set of top-down decisions from the City. Our D7 partners spoke back. In November 2022, Anderson co-sponsored a council measure calling for a moratorium on the development of affordable housing on city-owned parcels in D7 until the City agreed on how to best involve the community in decisions regarding what will be built in their neighborhood. In December 2022, she hosted an anti-displacement studio showcase (of our semester-long work) at Boston City Hall with the aim of showing the council and city staff the possibilities of community-based land use planning in D7<sup>4</sup>

place-based leaders whose families and neighbors would be most directly impacted by the land use changes forced me to reexamine my ideological beliefs and assumptions. Attending a D7 Community Moratorium Listening Session, I witnessed heated discussion and debate among D7 residents, including renters, homeowners, and developers, not to mention people of different ages and ethnicities, about what should be done with vacant parcels, some of which were previously taken from Black property owners through eminent domain and tax liens. I also learned that the moratorium was not actually legally enforceable but more of a political strategy to pause or slow down rapid-pace parcel disposition and redevelopment while initiating a community-led planning process that serves the needs and interests of long-time residents, not just broader city goals.

Setting up the spring 2023 anti-displacement studio to engage with Roxbury-based activism and advocacy campaigns to gain community ownership of vacant parcels and shape land use planning and development, I incorporated background reading on the D7 moratorium and candidly discussed with students tensions and opportunities of our focus on non-housing anti-displacement strategies. As most of my 13 students were white and Asian women from the bachelor of science in architecture program, I again used identity and cognitive mapping to introduce concepts of positionality and privilege, flag corresponding biases and blind spots, and emphasize the importance of working with D7 partners. For the first studio exercise, students created comic-based stories about urban displacement and anti-displacement focused on vacant parcels in Roxbury that could be used by D7 partners for community organizing and coalition building purposes. For the second studio exercise, students responded to the request from D7 partners to explore historical precedents of community-driven vacant parcel activation and placemaking in Roxbury (e.g. food gatherings, health clinics, urban gardens) by conducting archival research and creating summary posters of their findings. For the final project, students worked with Anderson and other D7 leaders, including a place-keeper's cooperative comprising Black artists, to develop six ideas for

## Vacant Parcel Activation and Redesign Strategies

Meeting regularly with Anderson, her staff, and the Advisory Council provided the contextual understanding to orient continuing iterations of the anti-displacement studio. For spring 2023, the D7 partners requested that the anti-displacement studio focus on community-based activation and redesign strategies for publicly-owned parcels in D7. Cognizant that our collaboration was embedded in their larger contestation of the City's efforts to accelerate affordable housing development on city-owned parcels in D7, I initially felt perplexed and alarmed. Built environment professionals widely embrace new affordable housing as an inherent good and straightforward solution to displacement, and interpret any opposition as "Not in My Back Yard" (NIMBY) reactionism, and I was no exception. However, knowing the D7 partners as

## SENIOR VILLAGE

Alex Israel & Emma van Geuns

### SITE CRITERIA

- 1 Accessible Location  
Proximity to transit, bus, and other public transit options for access
- 2 Adjacency to Existing Parks  
Close proximity to existing parks, playgrounds, and open spaces
- 3 Close Context: Calm, Quiet  
Proximity to residential areas with low traffic volume and low noise levels
- 4 Near Shops & Cultural Spaces  
Proximity to existing shops, cultural centers, and community spaces

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Designed as a modular system, this public space is meant to provide a safe, flexible, and adaptable environment for programming and activities. The design is intended to be a model for other public spaces, providing a framework for future development. The design is intended to be a model for other public spaces, providing a framework for future development.

### COST ESTIMATE

Legal Fees: 2,000  
Design Services: 63,750  
Construction/Purchasing: 425,000  
Landscaping: 65,000  
Contingency: 122,500  
**TOTAL COST: \$678,250**

For an audio description of our project, follow this QR code



Site Entrance Render. Walking up to the entrance of the senior home, featuring a landing area with an info screen bus schedule and local events.



Context Plan. We selected the site for its proximity to an existing playground, Franklin Park, and the businesses/centers along Blue Hill Avenue.

Site Plan. The site hosts a myriad of accessible activities, including a flexible day center, shaded pavilion, and outdoor stretchbar and planting space.

FIGURE 6. D7 VACANT PARCEL REIMAGINED AS SENIOR VILLAGE. CREDIT: ALEX ISRAEL AND EMMA VAN GEUNS.

public, open, green, and recreational spaces, partly based on the historical precedents: a community theater, food gathering space, senior center, game spaces, small business incubator, and multi-sensory recreational and healing space.

During this time, Anderson and her team continued to meet with city departments that held the largest share of vacant parcels in D7 to negotiate their usage. The studio's task was to create concept diagrams, plans, sections, and perspectives and generate high level cost estimates for each of the six ideas. By giving form to their ideas using standard tools of the trade, so to speak, the studio outputs were intended to convey that these alternative proposals for shared spaces of joy, rest, creativity, and connection were as viable as any developer-driven project. At the end of spring semester, Anderson invited us to share studio outputs at the D7 Anti-displacement Town Hall at the Dewitt Community Center with community leaders and residents. At the event, Anderson introduced the anti-displacement studio as participatory planning and design research partners and true allies to the D7 office and Advisory Council. I noted the importance of the university-community partnership in educating and training architects and urban planners to work with community leaders in place-based ways that amplify their continued advocacy and struggles against displacement. Then we asked the attendees to go to the six stations where students set up posters presenting the ideas for vacant parcel activation and redesign. Many took time to examine the posters, ask students questions, and offer their thoughts and suggestions. As a next step, Anderson would seek funding for the ideas from a major foundation and through the city's budgetary process.

## Reformulating and Retooling the Design Studio

What did this teaching and learning experience across three semesters teach me about repurposing “the academic machinery” to support community-led anti-displacement planning and design initiatives (la paperson 2017, p. xv)? For one, it was imperative to meet students where they were and accommodate their strengths, including the aesthetic and design sensibilities of architecture and urban planning students. In the case of the identity and cognitive mapping exercises, I incorporated diagramming and drawing activities to open up conversations about identity and privilege. To help my students process the somewhat dense readings and informational videos about different forms, drivers, mediating conditions, and effects of urban displacement, I designed studio exercises that incorporated visual representation and communication techniques such as concept maps and graphic stories. Immersing students in a process of making appeared to spark a sense of buy in—they became observably more interested to see what their peers were doing and share their own work. Second, it helped to adopt standard teaching formats for the design studio such as mini-workshops, desk-crits, and pin-ups with which students were already accustomed. Introducing students to key concepts, ideas, and exercises through mini-workshops, I then transitioned them to desk-based work and used desk-crit sessions to provide one-on-one feedback on their work-in-progress. After that, we held pin-ups, giving each student

the opportunity to pin up their work-in-progress before the entire class and receive constructive feedback on the merits and areas for further development.

Gaining some level of conceptual understanding about urban displacement, the students next attended to “the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” in D7 as central to anti-displacement planning and design strategies (Tuck 2009, p. 417). Going beyond the traditional design studio model, we visited with D7 leaders to learn about neighborhood histories and assets and their ongoing struggles for racial, economic, and spatial justice. Students practiced active listening with D7 partners, affirmed and expanded on what they heard using web-based research and archival materials (e.g. historical photos, oral history collections), and created visual summaries (posters) re-presenting what they learned. Through this iterative process of learning from and with studio partners, we established a collaborative working relationship. The codesign process was largely consistent across semesters. The main ideas came from Roxbury community members—rather than the instructor and students as in the case of most design studios. Students researched design precedents and strategies, conducted site analyses, and gained community feedback as they designed spatial structures, programs, and other intervention. The process clarified for us the difference between developer-driven development based on speculative capital and external control, and spatial planning, design, and investment that reinforce and amplify community-based advocacy and struggles against displacement.

Where most design studios have a final review with faculty members and leading professionals serving as critics, the anti-displacement studio culminated in the city hall research showcase in the fall 2022 semester and D7 town hall in the spring 2023 semester. We held two rounds of pre-final reviews leading up to these public/community events—with our community partners and university-based allies respectively. After these feedback sessions, students had another week to finalize studio outputs (slide presentations and boards), and upload corresponding raw files to the shared drive (for needed edits and adaptations over time). The final class session was devoted to reflecting on critical moments of learning and growth throughout the semester. These were moments of key decision, action, negotiation, beginnings, endings, or transitions when students may have felt uncomfortable, nervous, surprised, ecstatic, or other strong emotions. Students were asked to each take a moment to jot down notes about their critical moments at the personal, team, and class level. On a whiteboard, I drew a timeline and asked students to mark critical moments with their initials. Proceeding from the beginning of the semester to its end, I called out initials along the timeline, and students shared their critical moments. Every one of my students was new to this practice of reflecting on studio practice.

Some of the critical moments noted by students reveal key tensions and challenges of the anti-displacement studio, one of which had to do with moving students from a conceptual understanding of positionality and privilege to actively reckoning with one's biases and blindspots. Each semester, the class walked over from the architectural



studios at Northeastern underneath Ruggles Station to Nubian Square and met one of the community leaders for a guided walk around the neighborhood. Most students were new to the 15-minute walk from campus in that direction. During a debrief session one semester, some of the students expressed how they felt self-conscious walking as a large group in a predominantly Black neighborhood and would prefer to instead volunteer in an organizational setting. Part of their critique had to do with the fact that studio participants were merely observing the neighborhood setting rather than being of service to people there. Subsequently meeting the D7 partners for listening sessions and codesign exercises at City Hall, the students appeared more comfortable and enthusiastic in that setting. Later as a class, we unpacked their assumptions and expectations of frictionless movement through urban and institutional spaces associated with majority status. Reflecting on the issue long afterwards, I wondered if I could have further addressed how racialized perceptions of space show up in our work and interrogated the desire to be of service as potentially paternalistic.

For me, another critical moment for the studio was when Anderson, with the support of the Advisory Council, issued the moratorium on affordable housing development on publicly-owned parcels and received public criticism and backlash. Despite my initial skepticism, affirming the right of the most-impacted communities to determine courses of action and sitting in on the D7 Community Moratorium Listening Session allowed me to realign my position with the values of empathy, respect, and humility that I wanted studio participants to espouse and practice towards our D7 partners. What I learned—in part by sharing and processing observations together with my students—was that D7 communities were heterogeneous as any and wanting to have fuller conversations about what happens in their neighborhoods. They distrusted the profit motives of developers and outside investors, and opposed the advancement of citywide affordable housing goals on their backs. Noting that Roxbury already has the highest proportion of subsidized and income-restricted rentals among Boston neighborhoods, they inquired about alternative housing options—including pathways to home ownership and wealth building. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and in light of racial disparities in chronic health conditions and mortality rates, D7 residents further sought public investments in community-serving land uses such as green, open, and recreational spaces that are safe, healthy, and culturally affirming, and enhance quality of life.

## Implications for Radical Planning and Design Practice

The anti-displacement studio expands on the design studio tradition in ways that bear on radical teaching, that is, planning and design pedagogy which proceeds from the root, whether it's unraveling root conditions or supporting grassroots movements. It maintains the studio's defining pedagogical, material, and creative functions through the making of artifacts (such as posters, diagrams, maps, plans, sections, and renderings) and selves (individual, social, political), but in a grounded and relational way that enlists

the perspectives, ideas, and guidance of place-based partners. In bridging between academic and professional contexts, the studio explores the role and responsibility of the designer as creative accomplice to anti-displacement activists and movements—rather than hired hand to profit-maximizing real estate developers and other corporate agents. The studio confers meaning and significance on educational activities such as critical moments reflections—for instance, taking time to reflect on practice as an integral part of the design process. It additionally enables connections and interactions with place-based communities, who bring rich knowledge and insights about needed spatial investments and improvements that further shape shared inquiry and codesign activities. As the studio provides a container for these essential teaching and learning activities to take place in, it also expresses and shapes disciplinary identities that interrogate straightforward solutions and underlying beliefs and assumptions, among students and instructor alike.

Conducting participatory planning and design research with D7 partners through the anti-displacement studio allowed us to address the noted challenges of traditional design studio education in engaging current contexts of students and overcoming disconnection from real-world problem scenarios (Corazzo 2019). We did this by leaning into Northeastern's location in Lower Roxbury and harnessing my existing relationship with community leaders as an anchor for ongoing collaboration. By coordinating how students enter and exit the ongoing community-driven planning and design process, I tried to promote iterative efforts while reducing engagement fatigue by community partners and knowledge loss with student turnover from semester to semester. Incorporating reflective practice into the studio helped surface difficult and conflictual aspects of this work, including my own hesitation to follow the partners' lead at times, and the self-consciousness and discomfort of predominantly white students from our private high-tuition university being shown around Roxbury by D7 leaders instead of volunteering in an organizational setting. Yet introducing students to community settings in this way helped combat professionalized norms along with internalized societal hierarchies and power asymmetries (in relation to local communities) that may have only been perpetuated had we remained in the classroom setting (Dutton 1987). Taking time to reconcile the D7 moratorium and the studio's focus on non-housing anti-displacement strategies further provided the chance to practice exploring, feeling, and empathizing as integral parts of studio work and move away from a straightforward solutions-driven design process.

As a final point, working with D7 community leaders on anti-displacement planning and design strategies over two academic years—from the spring 2022 graduate-level professional practice seminar to two semesters of the anti-displacement studio over fall 2022 and spring 2023—renewed my appreciation for grounded, relational, and reparative methods of teaching and learning. I thoroughly understood that to practice urban planning and design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to reimagine and rebuild the world from harm. The disproportionate number of publicly-owned parcels in D7 result from targeted and systematic injustices of top-

down policy and planning processes such as redlining, urban renewal, and highway demolition. The sum result perpetuated the profound racial wealth and health gap that mars Boston today. The City appears slow to acknowledge and make amends for past harms and quick to move forward with land disposition policies and procedures that inordinately impact and are contested by D7 communities. As an educator, I can begin with my own students in mitigating further harm by guiding built environment professionals to wrestle with their own limitations and discomforts, center localized, community-based knowledge and insights, and work in solidarity and complementarity with place-based activists and movements, who seek to build collective power with respect to the land and self-determine land use planning and development. I can try to clear up misperceptions that any one of us is serving those in need but rather showing up and working together as best as we can to nurture seeds of change.

## Notes

1. After the George Floyd murder, the students and faculty had a series of conversations about how race and social justice were being addressed in the curriculum and in the School of Architecture. Among identified priorities were to ensure design studio projects support equity and inclusivity, and not reinforce racial exclusion and displacement. Another was to create strategic community engagement that establishes long-term community partners; avoid superficial understanding of communities; scrutinize impact of student work on communities; avoid being a political tool of community groups; avoid "extraction" of information from communities of interest; consider Service-Learning opportunities through Northeastern's established relationships and offices.
2. The ARTery was just one of Anderson's projects—in her first year, she filed a series of ordinances, resolutions, and orders for hearings to address racial injustices and harms in District 7 (e.g. the ARTery, a health center in Nubian Square, senior recreational center in Roxbury, Black historical landmarks, re-naming streets and places, studies on free life insurance for low-income residents, and reparations for Boston's role in the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing detrimental impacts on Black Bostonians).
3. In 1996, the Boston Redevelopment Authority adopted Article 80 to make Boston's Zoning Code's development review regulations easier for all residents to use and to understand, and to apply those regulations consistently throughout the city. Article 80 development review requirements apply to all large projects, small projects, planned development areas, and institutional master plans.
4. We organized a mini-exhibition of our semester-long work around the questions: (1) How do we center the joy and beauty of Roxbury communities while wrestling with present racial and spatial injustices? (2) How can urban design and planning support community stabilization and development amidst gentrification and displacement pressures? (3) How do we get ahead of external development forces with community-led ideas and initiatives? Scheduled on the same day as a city council vote on the formation of a task force on reparations (to help the Mayor and City of Boston on healing racial inequities for descendants of slavery), the showcase drew various city councilors and staff along with community organizers and members of the public, who stopped by to view our posters and speak with students on their way to the council meeting.

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