

COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTER PLACE-SHAPING PROPOSAL

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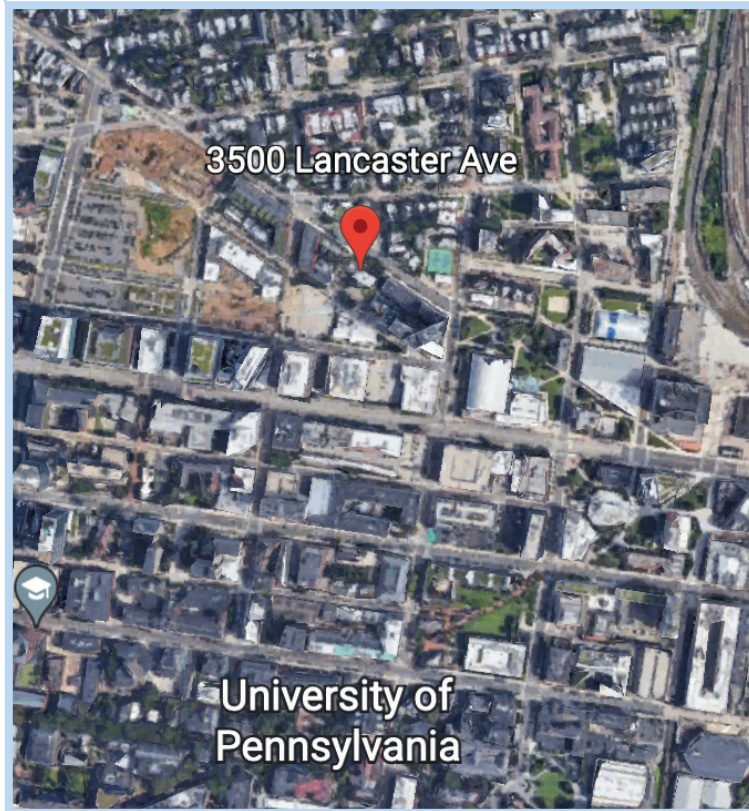
CPLN 629: Mapping Publicness in Commercial and Cultural Space



SPATIAL REFERENCE



Community Education Center
3500 Lancaster Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19104



BACKGROUND CONDITIONS

Origin Story

Prior to 3500 Lancaster Avenue being known as the Community Education Center, this site held historical significance for both Philadelphia and the United States. As many residents began to migrate out of Philadelphia's Center City towards suburbs such as Germantown and Haverford in the nineteenth century, some chose to relocate in West Philadelphia, creating a branch of the West Philadelphia Friends Meeting House. The schoolhouse complex built in 1901 was commonly used for the Hicksite Friends, an organization formed as a branch of the Quakers who were in a sense more liberal and also included Abolitionists (Quaker Info). 3500 Lancaster Avenue also served as a known stop along the Underground Railroad.

Figure 1: 3500 Lancaster Avenue Facade and Interior



Site-Corridor-District Relationship

The site displays a significant relationship to both the Lancaster Commercial Corridor and New Freedom District. Positioned at the end/start of Lancaster Avenue depending on what direction an individual is placed, the site serves as a final destination or gateway to the corridor and district.

Corridor: surrounded by many chain establishments such as Chipotle and Insomnia Cookies, this site is where the urban form begins to shift from urban to suburban. Passing 3500 Lancaster Avenue is the pivotal transition from corporate to locally owned businesses (Bañez, 2022). This in itself is a notion of **freedom**, where one has the freedom to take charge and control of their craft and capital. It is rather symbolic to understand that the site will be the first or last impression of the Lancaster Commercial Corridor.

District: from the Quakers and Abolitionists using the site as a meeting place to advocate for freedom to being a stop along the Underground Railroad, the site is a physical manifestation of the notion of **freedom**. The site is even tied to other spaces within that corridor that also pay homage to the Underground Railroad such as the Underground Railroad Museum at 2000 Belmont Mansion Drive. This showcases how the site is one of many places of freedom within the New Freedom District as a cluster of spaces that hold significant meaning and histories for certain communities.

Although there are no city plans that incorporate the site, it is zoned as RM1 essentially for residential use and surrounded by CMX2 and CMX3 for commercial use.



DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS

Motivation

This site was chosen as a result of the rich history rooted in community and the notion of “freedom” through the lens of the Underground Railroad, Abolitionists, and Quakers. The Community Education Center was also chosen for the spatial component it possesses being a historic site amongst a transition in the urban form from modern buildings to a suburban and residential environment.

Research Findings

Prior to discussing the proposed place-shaping design, it is important to understand the top five attributes and dynamics that were found from researching and developing a relationship with the site (Bañez, 2022).

The beginning or end of Lancaster: with its location at 3500 Lancaster Avenue, the site can either be seen as the first point of entrance for anyone entering Lancaster Avenue, or the last point of departure for anyone leaving Lancaster Avenue. The position of this site indicates that there is great potential in leveraging the opportunity for **making an impression** on individuals to understand that they are entering an existing world of history to discover, or leaving one of Philadelphia’s most culturally rich area.

Proximity to chain restaurants: unlike most of Lancaster Avenue where there is an abundance of locally-owned businesses, the surrounding area of the site is predominantly large chain establishments such as Chipotle and Insomnia. This is due to the large student population in the area from both Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania. This leaves a great opportunity to create a design that **pulls** the clientele of these businesses into the site.

19104 inflow and outflow: after conducting a travel trend analysis utilizing the Census Bureau’s On The Map, the 19104 zip code has 75,251 people that are traveling into the zip code from elsewhere, and of the 17,123 residents in the zip code, 14,244 travel out of the zip code (fig 2). With this in mind, it is imperative to ensure that the proposed place-shaping design has the power to harness attention that would **attract the large transient population to engage** with both the Community Education Center and entire Lancaster Avenue Commercial Corridor.

Nexus of neighborhoods: the site is in a unique position being the central point for multiple West Philly neighborhoods including University City, Black Bottom, New Freedom District, Lancaster, Mantua, and Powelton Village. This means that not only can the design proposal cater to cultural significance, but also to spatial significance by propogating itself as a **wayfinding tool**.

Lack of physical identity: the building facade has “CEC” and “Community Education Center” written across the top with signage on the sidewalk that reads “COMMONWEALTH.” Beyond these factors, they do not exude the significance of the identity that the site holds in both Philadelphia and United States history. As a result, the place-shaping design should take into account how to **showcase the site’s meaning and importance**.

Inflow: 75,251

2,879

Outflow: 14,244

Figure 2: Inflow/Outflow Analysis
Source: Census Bureau On The Map



PRESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS

Activation Idea

To materialize the idea of “freedom” the Community Education Center proposes a permanent site-based urban design project highlighting the historical significance that the site has played for the Underground Railroad, Abolitionists, and Quakers as well as displaying the significance of surrounding neighborhoods.

Intentions and Purpose of Activation

/ *Aesthetics*

In honoring the history that the site has played for American history particularly as a stop along the underground railroad, the design proposal upholds **communal meaning**. Garnering symbols pertinent to the experience of the Underground Railroad such as the North Star as the hallmark of this site displays **cultural integrity**. The overall impact of the design generates both an **emotional experience** as well as **disruption**. Those who understand the history of not only the Underground Railroad, but that of the Abolitionists and Quakers find themselves enthralled in the way that this design blatantly instills the significance of these groups and experiences. As a result of this process, the design also interferes with the “conventional” urban form, as the area lacks public art and is surrounded by university buildings. This design surely disrupts the mind and calibrates a new sense of understanding the space you are in as the design serves as a gateway to the New Freedom District.

/ *Purposes*

As the nature of the design is rooted in preserving, showcasing, and activating the sense of place and history for the Community Education Center, this project is a place-keeping project. Place-keeping is the framework in which the design will serve and function, as the design is not creating a new sense of place. Rather, it is simply enhancing the existing space and utilizing the present resources to create a street mural and parklet that permanently exhibits the significance of the site and surrounding area. The primary spatial agents of this design includes the Community Education Center, where individual or organizational stakeholders from surrounding neighborhoods will serve as a secondary spatial agent that contributes to the creation of the design.

Meaning

/ *Avatars*

Those that are invited to this site include: members of the African-American diaspora, supporters of the Abolitionists and Quakers, and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. This site is not accessible to *everyone* due to the depth of knowledge that an individual would need to possess in order to fully and intentionally engage with the place-shaping design. The design utilizes symbols of the Underground Railroad as a hallmark with references to the Abolitionists, Quakers, and identity of the surrounding neighborhoods. As a result, the mentioned invitees or avatars, will find the most meaning and opportunity for full engagement in the design’s space. However travelers along Lancaster Avenue and customers at surrounding businesses are somewhat invited. Due to the findings from previous research, the site is near many businesses and is along a route that is frequently traveled by many. Therefore these avatars are invited in the sense that they will see the design and can only engage with it if they *desire*.



PRESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS

/ Design Philosophy

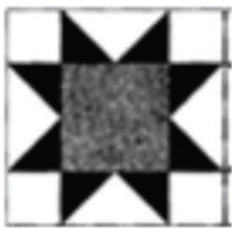
The nature of the design proposal envelops a sense of place, history, and honor for those invited. As a result, this design furthers **place-belongingness**. The design brings the history of the Underground Railroad, Abolitionists, and Quakers as well as the heart of the surrounding neighborhoods to life, evoking their auto-biographical narratives and significance into the built environment. In bringing the past history, experiences, relations, and emotions that are tied to this specific location to life, this allows for descendants and supporters to seek this design as a site that not only acknowledges their existence, but also serves as a site of refuge, comfort, and solace.

/ Anticipated Impacts

As arts and culture serves as a catalyst for change, the proposed place-shaping proposal satisfies the first three concepts of the *Continuum of Impact*: knowledge, discourse, and attitudes (Miller-Kenyatta, 2022). Due to the proposed design paying homage to history, it will enhance an individual's **knowledge** of what they already know, and inspire those to garner a greater understanding and awareness of history, hopefully through the avenue of engaging with the site and Lancaster Avenue. After concluding that the site lacks a physical identity that is tangential to its significance, individuals may also find themselves unknowing of this significance. The proposed design will enact **discourse** by inspiring curiosity in those who see the design, disrupting their knowledge of the area and creating dialogue about the site. Following knowledge building and engaging in discourse, the proposed design will change people's **attitude** of how they think and feel whenever they return to the site/area. Prior to the development of this design, people may have seen the site simply as a building with community services, however their attitudes will change and now see the site as a place of honor, resilience, and freedom.

Visualization of The Future

The proposed place-shaping design has two components: street art and a parklet. The two components however, serve as complementary assets rather than separate designs. As previously outlined, the research found that the proposed activation incorporates five elements based on the spatial dynamics and attributes: make an impression, pull people to the area, appeal to a large transient population, serve as a wayfinding tool, and showcase the meaning and importance to the site.



**North
Star**

Street art: this design will take inspiration from various symbols and surrounding neighborhoods. The hallmark includes the North Star, a prominent figure utilized during the time of the Underground Railroad signifying “the path to freedom.” The eight points of the star will serve as a navigation to the surrounding neighborhoods such as Lancaster, the New Freedom District, Powelton, Mantua, and University City as well as to the Community Education Center itself. The specific design for the points will be dedicated to a local artist from each neighborhood whose boundaries culminate at 3500 Lancaster Avenue, and the site to promote local talent and a mural that answers “what does freedom look like for your neighborhood?”

Figure 3: Underground Railroad North Star

Source: American Historama

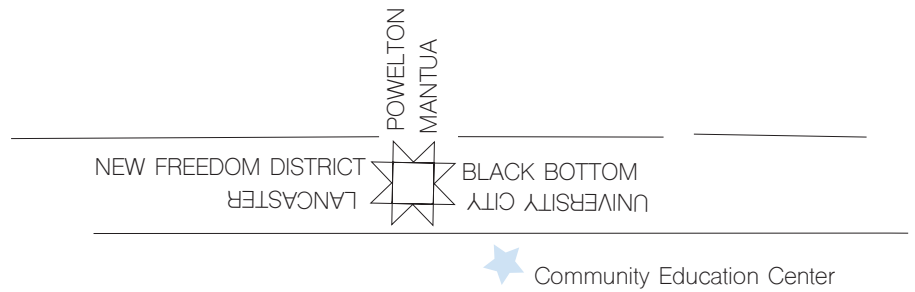


PRESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS

The main square of the North Star will have the word “FREEDOM” written across and similar to the points, will have an artist with a close relationship to the Community Education Center. To serve as a grounding theme, each design of the North Star must satisfy a brief revolving around what freedom means to their neighborhood and prominent points of their history. It is also important to address that according to the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission’s Crash Data Viewer tool, the section of Lancaster between 34th and 35th St is a safe area that is pedestrian oriented and has not experienced significant accidents.

Figure 4 depicts the positionality and sketch of what the proposed street art design is envisioned as. Previously mentioned, the design serves as a wayfinding system that will have surrounding neighborhoods labeled onto the street. This approach is similar to the Black Lives Matter mural in Washington D.C. (figure 5).

Figure 4: Street mural sketch of proposed place-shaping design



Providing inspiration for the design of the street mural’s North Star, figure 6 gathers a prominent mural in each of the surrounding neighborhoods. Murals similar to these will be placed within the different points of the star visualizing the answer to the question, “what does freedom look like for your neighborhood?”

Figure 6: Design idea for street mural
Source: see Sources page.

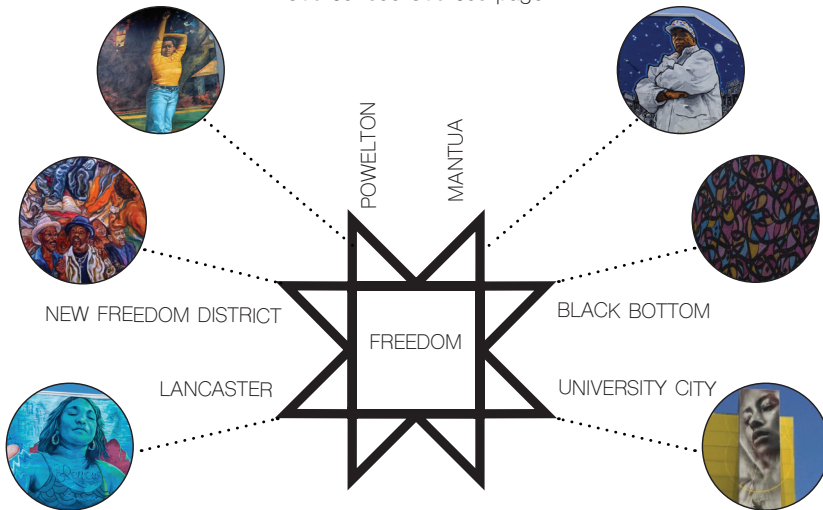


Figure 5: Black Lives Matter mural in Washington D.C.
Source: Artnet



PRESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS



Figure 7: Example of parklet
Source: *The Urbanist*



Figure 8: Example of plexiglass
Source: *Rhode Island School of Design*

Parklet: situated at the front of the Community Education Center, the parklet serves as a space for individuals to sit and engage with the street art while simultaneously understanding the multiple histories of the Underground Railroad, Abolitionists, and Quakers as well as the numerous surrounding neighborhoods. Providing a view that allows individuals to sit, observe, and reflect on the street art is a powerful tool in ensuring that the meaning of the design is also understood by those who are unaware.

While parklets often provide a place for people to gather, parklets have the capacity to ignite conversations and educate the mind. In addition to the traditional approach of a parklet (figure 7), this design proposes the use of see-through plexiglass (figure 8) that lines the perimeter of the parklet counter. The glass will have art and figures displayed that show historic moments of the Underground Railroad, Abolitionists, Quakers, and surrounding neighborhoods along with important assets that define their history. This idea is to connect the past to the present, to allow those who utilize the site to see what this space use to be, who use to be here, and to garner a greater appreciation for the area.

The implementation of this place-shaping proposal would allow for both the street art and parklet to navigate the space in a more straightforward, symbolic, and intentional way. The use of the North Star as the hallmark of the street art allows for folks leaving and entering the space to see talent from the various neighborhoods and have a clear wayfinding system that indicates the neighborhood they are entering. This is essential as these neighborhoods are in an overlapping place where individuals may not know where they are besides being in West Philadelphia.

The parklet allows for people to truly understand the history of the various groups and neighborhoods while visually seeing how the past is intertwined with the present. The use of this parklet even has the capacity to create agency that will empower those who enter and engage with the parklet to learn more, and perhaps even get involved with the Community Education Center or surrounding area.



PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Partnerships

To implement the design idea, the Community Education Center must work with the following community organizations: New Africa Center, People's Emergency Center, Lancaster Avenue 21st Century Business Association (LA21), University City District, Mt. Vernon Manor CDC (Mantua), and Powelton Village Civic Association. The participation of these organizations is primarily geared towards garnering support and community engagement for the art and historic elements of the project. Additionally, it is important for the CEC to also engage in partnership with stakeholders such as Mural Arts Philadelphia and various City of Philadelphia entities such as the Office of Arts, Culture, and The Creative Economy, the Art Commission, and the Office of Transportation, Infrastructure and Sustainability (OTIS). To enact this vision, CEC must execute the following strategies: identify a key person as their point of contact at the community organizations, define logistics with the organizations that specialize in the arts, present this design proposal, engage with community members, obtain funding, gather materials, and execute the design.

Resources and Leverage Needed

/ Loans, Grant Programs, and Partners With In-House Funding

There are a handful of local loan and grant programs in the Philadelphia region that may be leveraged to materialize this design. This includes the Philadelphia Cultural Fund's Art & Culture Grant Program and the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance's Entry to Program Stream. Additional partners who may provide in-house funding includes a handful of the partners previously mentioned such as the People's Emergency Center, LA21, and University City District.

/ Entities With Space and Technical Assistance

Luckily, the Community Education Center can be utilized as a space to carry out many of the community engagement and design workshops. It is equally important to ensure to meet communities where they are. For example, when conducted community engagement with the Mantua neighborhood, it is imperative to ensure that meetings are held in an accessible location in this neighborhood. In conceptualizing the street art, meetings and engagement opportunities can be performed at the previously mentioned organizations. Mural Arts Philadelphia would serve as one of the premier partners to provide technical assistance in carrying out this proposal, especially regarding the street art. Seeking technical assistance must also be extended to local urban design and architecture firms for the proposed parklet. Lastly, it is pertinent to ensure that there is clear and guided communication with the Office of Arts, Culture, and The Creative Economy, the Art Commission, and OTIS to ensure that the work is being performed accurately, appropriately, and following proper policies and regulations.

City Review Process

Due to the nature of the two part design proposal, there are two city review processes that may take place. First, as the street art is on one of the city's major streets, this is considered public land. As a permanent installation, this project must be reviewed by a decision-making entity at a public meeting who will discern the viability and appropriateness of this project. This review will most likely include stakeholders such as the Office of Arts, Culture, and The Creative Economy and the Art Commission. Second, although the parklet will be in front of the Community Education Center, this will be considered as public land and work with OTIS for the city review process (Berryman and Liss, 2022).



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