Common Place
The City as a Shared Entity

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................... 5

Part One: The City as a Shared Commons .......... 7

Part Two: Disinvestment .......................................... 11

Part Three: The Formal and the Everyday ............ 23

Part Four: Tomorrow’s Urban Paradigms ............... 33

Part Five: Precedent Studies ................................. 37

Part Six: Site Analysis ........................................... 45

Part Seven: Commonground ..................................... 63

Reflection ............................................................ 92

Bibliography ......................................................... 95
Abstract

Over the last several decades, urban development patterns in the U.S. have shifted increasingly to segregated, privatized, and dispersed development. Largely due to mass car culture, the way we move through our cities has shifted to over-capacity, high-speed individualized transport, causing major lacerations in the urban tissue of the city. This has had the effect of the civic commons being left inaccessible due to increased foot travel distance and uninhabitable due to noise, air quality, and lack of shade or other environmental buffers. In order to re-formulate a city that is inhabitable at the scale of the pedestrian, the civic commons must be re-stitched along the same axes that have eroded them. Excess roadways must be taken back for multi-modal transportation and be bordered by multi-programmatic use.

Thesis Statement

Neglected urban infrastructures must be re-imagined as a new typology of public space that challenges the disconnect between institutional civic anchors -- such as parks, libraries, and public transit -- and "leftover space" as public space through activation -- such as can be seen on neutral grounds, levees, parking lots, etc. Through the pairing of institutional anchors with leftover space, a democratic commons may emerge that help meet its inhabitants needs while remaining in a constant state of interpretation and evolution.
Part One

The City as a Shared Commons
Why does the Civic Commons matter?

Humans are a communal species. Our unique ability to communicate complex ideas and collectively adapt to changing technologies has allowed the development of the complex society that we know today. As the epicenters of activity in contemporary society, cities have become the largest human habitat. Despite being human-made, cities are organic in nature, arising out of their populations social needs and geographic restrictions. Historically, cities would arise as opportunities to cooperate and combine resources became available. Because of this, the actions of each individual and the resources of the collective were able to mutually reinforce each other. Therefore, if we can understand these two concepts -- that humans are naturally communal and that cities are organic human habitats -- we can formulate an understanding of the city as an intrinsically shared civic commons.

The earliest prototype of formalized public space can be seen in the Greek agora. The agora was a civic commons dedicated to public discussion and was viewed as a pillar of early western democracy. It was in this space that the citizens of the polis would gather and collectively decide on issues in the name of the common good. As stated by urbanist and architect Teddy Cruz, “Democracy is defined by the co-existence with others in space, a collective

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1 Hesse, Jena “Humans evolved by sharing technology and culture”
2 Hirvi, Vard Noah “Sapiens”
3 Ziau-Polo, Alejandro “The Posthuman City”
4 Mumford, Lewis “The Culture of Cities”
5 Horvat, Sreko “Without Public Space there is no Democracy”

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Fig 1: Frequent forms of civic commons include schools, libraries, parks, recreation centers, streets, vacant lots, markets, public transit, cultural centers, homeless shelters, and affordable housing. Diagram by author.
ethos", implying that democracy has inherent spatial qualities and relies on the participation of a diverse people. Through centuries of democratic use of the civic commons, humanity has been able to pool together collective resources in order to achieve greater innovation and higher standards of living. The public market, for example, allowed work specialization by providing space for surplus farmers to sell their product to citizens, who then did not have to spend their time tending to crops. Likewise the advent of the lending library laid the basis for public access to knowledge and expertise.

As our societies become more and more technologically complex, so too do the needs of their inhabitants. This has led to the advent of a wide range of formalized civic commons which have become commonplace in our understanding of cities today. With contemporary technologies, new commons have also emerged, both physical and digital, though they are not always fully public. These new commons can have developed the "sharing economy", which is characterized by the sharing of an excess resource for private gain. Examples of the sharing economy include home-sharing services such as Airbnb and Kozaza, ride sharing platforms Lyft and Uber, and workspace rental offices in the case of incubators and startup spaces. The sharing economy must not be seen as a replacement to the civic commons, as its private nature allows assets to be available only to those who already have significant capital.

Both new and old technologies and practices present opportunities for the widening of the civic commons today but act as a double-sided sword. If the opportunity for sharing urban resources is not made accessible to all, our so-called commons may actually serve to undercut democracy and reduce equity.

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6 McLaren, Duncan and Agaman, Julian. "Sharing Cities"
Guerilla public art installations like this one off of St. Claude Ave. in New Orleans create landmarks and foster a sense of place in public spaces. Photograph by author.
Part Two

Disinvestment
Part Two: Fading Commons

"Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn’t state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen”

- Charles Dickens, Description of Coketown in “Hard Times”

With mass population growth and increasingly complex urban technologies, new practices of governing and new urban geometries have arisen. Generally, practices have moved towards a *figures* approach in which decisions are based off of quantitative data rather than qualitative lived experience. This philosophy can be traced back to the industrial revolution, in which products were to be created with unitized and efficient practices in order to maximize returns, as well as in the proclamations to efficiency and predictability of architectural modernism. This is reflected in the trademark declaration of Le Corbusier and the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne that, “a house should be a machine for living in”. More broadly, the machine philosophy was adopted by planners such as Ebenezer Howard and Daniel Burnham in what urbanist Jane Jacobs mockingly refers to as the “radiant garden city beautiful”, combining the titles of the simplistic utopian masterplans of Le Corbusier, Howard, and Burnham. Each the radiant city, the garden city, and the city beautiful provided a statement on how urban life should be gone-about and an accompanying city planning philosophy. Le Corbusier’s Radiant City, for instance, asserted that life

1 Mumford, Lewis "The Culture of Cities"
2 Choisny, Frapinne, "Le Corbusier"
3 Jacobs, Jane "The Death and Life of Great American Cities"
should be lived entirely in identical towers which one would never have to leave.

The programming of the towers was based on 4 categories of living that Le Corbusier and the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne had established: work, leisure, residence, and transport. While these plans provided enticing and beautiful visions of future cities, their adoption by municipal governments proved to be a hollow promise, as urban life proved to be a much more dynamic organism that could not be solved in grand gestures. With the implementation of top-down, visionary planning cities have become no more effective of human habitats, with violence, poverty, and inequality still rampant.

Cities today have become characterized less by the role of the common resident and more by their ability to generate economic growth and relative efficiency. This characterization is reflective of the politics of a total capitalist society in which nothing is motivated by societal well-being and everything is driven by profits. In the past century, a few key urban transformations have dominated our experience of urban life as society drifts towards total capitalism. These transformations have eroded the civic commons and undercut democracy. I analyze these transformations mostly through the lens of metropolitan New Orleans, and the region of coastal Louisiana. Following an analysis of issues, in parts three and six I explore strategies to reclaim the commons.

1. Neglected Assets

The continual redevelopment and evolution of the public assets of cities do not affect all residents equally. Often times, in the redevelopment of public spaces, some are people planned against just as much as others are planned for as target users. While this is no new phenomenon, vague generalities such as “benefit the community” are often used by planners and politicians to portray a lens of public interest, despite only serving a small sect of the actual user base. As movements for public interest design and participatory governing expand, it is paramount to constantly identify that the goals of planners, officials, architects, or anybody in a position of power are defined by the actual needs of residents and not agendas of self promotion or saviorism. There is also a distinction between the right to use a space and the right to define a space’s use. In otherwords, the right to use a space addresses who may use public space, as was the case with the desegregation of Jim Crow-era public facilities, whereas the right to define a space’s use deals with what a space may be used for, such as fighting against public sleeping bans.

This is blatantly evident in the 1970’s redevelopment of New Orleans’ Palmer Park. Named after an 1800’s leading segregationist and slavery advocate, Benjamin Palmer, the park was one of the last in the country to desegregate, not achieving legal integration until 1977. Following the desegregation of the park, wealthy (and mostly white) residents complained that youths from other neighborhoods were coming to the park and using it for “unruly activities” such as football. Insisting that the park was meant only for promenading and

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4 Levis Colin “Total Capitalism” 
5 Leukas M. Silfver, Anawalt and Ehrenfeucht, Besie “Sidewalk: Conflict and Negotiation Over Public Space”
“gentleman’s games” such as croquet, concrete paths and berms were installed to break up the playing fields. Today, Palmer Park is poorly upkept and scarcely used.

Many other parks have similarly malicious histories. Louis Armstrong Park in the Treme neighborhood began as a “slum clearance” effort next to the historic Congo Square, in order to build Municipal Auditorium which was followed by more destruction of the Treme with the US Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954. Today the park is wrapped by an 8-foot tall fence with few pedestrian entrances. The grounds are often near empty with the exception of a few special events that occur annually.

Furthermore, between the 1,650 acres of City Park and Audubon Park, 400 acres are dedicated solely to private golf courses. That same land would be highly valuable to the city to use as stormwater storage/groundwater recharge gardens similar to Metairie’s Pontiff Park or Gentilly’s Mirabeau Rain Gardens.

Alterations in the civic commons can also be seen in the constant reorganization of the public school system. Historically in the US, public school funding has come from the property taxes of the school’s district. Unsurprisingly, this has the effect of institutionalizing access to quality education and thus access to fair-paying jobs. New Orleans, alternatively, has adopted a charter school system that aims to contract this system. Unfortunately, the charter system has a deep set of flaws of its own. Under the charter system, the parents of students have the opportunity to send their kids to a school district of their choosing through an application process. Many schools have unified the application process to a simple tool called OneApp, but some of the highest ranking schools have elected to maintain their own application.

In 2016, the Times-Picayune detailed the application process for Lusher Charter. Parents of applicants must attend meetings, fill out questionnaires, turn in their child’s portfolio (children are expect to maintain an art portfolio even if they are only 4 years old) and attendance record, and have them take a standardized test. Additionally, applications must be submitted to the school in person during business hours, excluding 11 am to 1 pm, making the application process next to impossible for working parents or those who do not have access to individualized transport.

Stark divides between the extents of commons across neighborhoods can be seen in New Orleans public library system. Well organized and wealthy neighborhoods have well-upkept and extensive libraries that offer a wide range of opportunities to residents. The Keller Library and Community Center of Broadmoor offers subsidized meeting spaces, after-school programs, study spaces, and a lab of 18 computers. Likewise, the Latter Library of Uptown features vast, landscaped gardens, outdoor gathering places, private reading rooms, and free printing. Contrarily, the neighborhood of Hollygrove is located miles away from the Nix Library, the closest location. The Nix Library features only physical stacks, a small children’s section, and 6 computers. The facilities have fallen into disrepair, having to close twice in 2018: once in the summer due

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6 McQuerry, Kevin. "Palmer Park History."
7 Fowell, Lawrence. "Unhappy Trails in the Big Easy: Public Spaces and a Space Called Congo."
8 Waggonner & Ball Architects. "Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan."
to malfunctional air conditioning and once in November due to malfunctional heating.

Additional assets have become less frequent as well. Public recreation centers have largely been replaced by paid fitness clubs and gyms. Transit stations are often left entirely outdoors, exposed to the elements and largely underserviced, lacking access to water, bathrooms, and electricity (which has become a vital resource in the age of the smartphone).

2. De-Pedestrianizing
Urban life over the last half-century has largely turned indoors. Many corridors that once bustled with streetfront activity have been left vacant, while shopping centers fronted by vast parking lots have proliferated (largely due to parking requirements on new construction). Street vending has seen a steep decrease, due to prohibitive and targeted policy, and sidewalk and porch activity has largely decreased in many residential areas, leaving streetfronts unattended and, therefore, unsafe.

This can be partially attributed back to 1960’s urban redevelopment patterns as described by Loukaiou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht in “Sidewalks”:

“In the 1960’s, many white, middle-class residents left the cities and settled in suburbs as mass redevelopment projects restructured central-city neighborhoods, displacing thousands of residents and moving downtown shoppers into mall-like complexes.”

As commercial activity moved to shopping malls, shoebox stores, and online markets, the diminished role of the storefront allowed for urban development to exclude any sort of streetfront presence. In these new commercial centers, off-street parking requirements
implemented shortly after the second World War forced newly constructed buildings to feature parking lots that would often amount to over twice the square footage of the building itself. On the flipside of this redevelopment, urban downtowns were left desolate. The lack of streetfront activity meant a lack of motivation to make a pedestrian-friendly street-level facade. Downtown high-rises that were developed in this period usually featured private lobbies with little-to-no public utility.

Pedestrian sidewalk activity has also been pushed indoors by regulations regarding street vending and public demonstration. In New Orleans, all street vendors are required to obtain a permit to conduct any sort of business. Block parties, protests, parades, etc. are most often required to apply ahead of time as well. These restrictions have been implemented in the name of orderly conduct and public safety, but also place severe limitations on who may conduct commerce in the public sphere. Vending permits in New Orleans typically range between $100 and $500 in up-front cost, an investment that many simply cannot make.

These restrictions have been and still are often used to target specific groups, often along race and class divides. At Palmer Park in 1934, an African-American resident’s shoe-shining stand, “Sam’s Shine Parlor”, was forcibly removed from the park, despite the fact that the city allowed white vendors to continue operation in the park.

One of New Orleans’ oldest traditions that has historically activated sidewalk and street

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10. *The High Cost of Free Parking*.
11. *City of New Orleans: Open Streets*. 
presence is its porch culture. A necessity prior to the advent of air conditioning, the New Orleans porch serves as a semi-public living room that allows for communication, invitation, and a center of leisure. While air conditioning systems now satisfy many New Orleanians seeking refuge from the often sweltering heat, porch culture persists as a cultural cornerstone for many city neighborhoods. New development, however, has value-engineered porches out of residences in order to maximize interior square footage. Even design programs such as Tulane School of Architecture’s UrbanBuild Have Failed to provide substantial streetfront presence in new builds. While buildings are not going to be stripped of air conditioning any time soon, the erasure of porches from contemporary building ultimately has the effect of further reducing public activity.

3. Sprawl

Much like the modernist urban visions to maximize efficiency, 1950’s city infrastructure projects adopted a machine-mentality as well. In the 1950’s to 1990’s in the US, large portions of city land were taken by governments to build high-speed roadways for the booming automobile market. The direct result of this project can be seen in blighted properties across the US along urban highways, often destroying already disenfranchised neighborhoods. Indirectly, the new network of highways allowed urban activity to decentralize and sprawl, as cars could easily allow the urbanite to live, work, and shop in less expensive outskirts, as opposed to the dense and often expensive city centers.

Those who could not afford cars, however, were less fortunate. Many cities spent the late 1900’s
disinvesting in public transit, leaving transit networks inefficient and unkempt, and facilitating the stigma that public transit was only intended for those who had no other option. In 2017, St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana posted to their governmental website, “If you have your own vehicle, please use it instead”, illustrating their almost non-existent public transit efforts. From 1950 to 2016, the cost of an average new car rose from $15,816 (adjusted to inflation) to $35,000, while national median income remains similar to what it was, making cars unaffordable to much of the population. Consumers are encouraged to finance cars on long term loans, but as of 2018, 78% of the US is living paycheck to paycheck. A reliable public transit system has the ability to eliminate a large part of the capital investment that comes with purchasing a car.

The intrusion of multi-lane highways has also severed previously continuous walking and bicycle paths, cutting off neighborhoods from access to nearby civic commons. This fragmentation of neighborhoods favors those with reliable automobile access and has been a catalyst for segregation in many cities. In New Orleans, the Pontchartrain Expressway bisects the city, making neighborhoods like Gert Town and Broadmoor seem miles from the neighborhood of Mid-City.

4. Environmental Threat
Natural disasters and environmental woes have plagued metropolises for as long as cities have been around. More recent developments have exacerbated environmental concerns. This ranges from the broad threat of climate change to local issues such as deltaic Louisi-

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13 Brain, Benz  "As New Orleans Awaits Struggle with Regional Transit, Jobs are Affected"  
14 Felch, Robert "Almost 80% of US Workers Live Paycheck to Paycheck"
Deltaic soils are made stable by the buoyancy of groundwater. When the groundwater is not recharged, the soil dries out and shrinks, causing the ground to sink. This is known as subsidence. Diagram by author.

Disaster-prone areas of cities are often required to maintain expensive insurance, despite frequently being underprivileged and underserviced by the infrastructure that safer (and usually richer) areas of cities enjoy. New Orleans' pump system, for instance, is set up in a way which quickly sheds floodwater from the affluent uptown Garden District through large underground culverts. These culverts allow gravity to move the water until several pump stations raise the water once again. The effect of this is that all of the water from the Garden District and other high-lying areas will pool at the pump stations along Broad St. Because most of the city's floodwaters are coming through these few choke-points, Broadmoor residents have to deal with, not only their own floodwaters, but the floodwaters that pool at the pump stations.

Constant battering from natural disasters acts as a catalyst for disinvestment in such neighborhoods, making it continually harder for them to recover. The politics of who and where we put disaster mitigation efforts are heavily social and must not be treated as the concern of only the environmentalist.

Infrastructure that seeks to prevent flooding in New Orleans, when not underground, currently offers little use to the pedestrian. Open drainage canals are little more than concrete ditches, and act as an eyesore for the neighborhoods that they cut through and only offer discouragement to potential investment in the corridors that they create.
5. Hostile Policy
Recalling Sam's Shine Parlor, it is evident that policy does not affect all residents equally. Policy may be used against certain groups, just as much as it is created for others. As a general framework for urban activity and development, policy must be considered when re-thinking the commons.

Housing policies can help regulate who gets access to live in what neighborhoods. According to the New Orleans tribune, only 47 affordable housing units exist for every 100 low-income residents and 36 percent of residents pay over half their income in rent. City experts say that about 5,000 affordable units are needed to satisfy the crisis. The Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) has detailed a plan to add 33,000 affordable housing opportunities (new or refurbished units) between 2015 and 2025. As of October, 2018 HANO has delivered on about 750 units.

Furthermore, New Orleans' renters laws place no requirement on landlords to maintain reasonable rent prices. This allows rent prices to increase based solely on demand, offering units to the highest bidder over long-time residents. The city has seen constant population growth ever since plummeting immediately after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As of August 2018, 21 New Orleans neighborhoods exceed their pre-Katrina populations. As the civic commons substantiate, the value of the neighborhoods that they service will increase, housing demand will increase, and lower-income residents will be priced out if more substantial renters laws are not created.

Policy also controls what lot parcels may be used for. Along trafficked corridors, empty lots may be used for commerce (as is the case with a taco truck that parks in a lot on the corner of Erato and Willow). The city, however, places requirements to purchase a permit before conducting commerce, as previously noted. If the city could lighten restrictions and provide an opportunity to waive permitting fees, more residents would have the opportunity to earn a living through the making and selling of individual goods.

These are but a few examples of the many public issues that face New Orleans as well as other cities nationally and globally. Though they are broad and complex, much of the problem deals with the idea of access. Access to knowledge, to tools, to transportation, to democratic space. They are issues that will likely never be "solved", only worked at an improved upon. Improvements to any one of these commons have the potential to affect the others and create a ripple, mutually reinforcing the unified civic commons. Starting through small moves and continuing up from there, in time we may be able to stitch together a diverse civic commons and provide a robust public network.

15 Housing Authority of New Orleans "2016 Assessment of Fair Housing Plan"
16 The Data Center "Neighborhood Change Rates"
Pre-industrial urban patterns, motivated mostly by foot traffic

Cities retrofitted with high-capacity roadways for automobiles
New development, propagated by the advent of parking requirements becomes dispersed, inaccessible by foot

For those without access to a car, the new city has little to offer
Part Three

The Formal and the Everyday
What does it mean for space to be “public”?

In her book, Everyday Urbanism, Margaret Crawford details a concept that she coins “everyday public spaces”. These are public spaces that aren’t planned, cannot be genre­ized, and are often not necessarily public at all. Crawford details these spaces mostly through the lens of marginalized populations in Los Angeles'. Parking lots that are occupied by unoff­ficial fruit salesmen, front yards that have been turned into year round thrift stores, dumpsters that have become landmarks for social meeting grounds, the possibilites are endless.

I have found this useful as a juxtaposition to the typical notion of the commons which limits public space to parks, plazas or other easily recognizable place-types. For this reason I have dubbed the concept of planned public spaces and amenities as the “Formal Commons”. This includes parks, schools, rec centers, libraries, and more. These spaces are typically operated by a local government and seek to provide shared access to resources that we deem valuable to the urban experience.

However, the Formal Commons are far from perfect. City governments have agendas and, as earlier noted, these spaces are not planned for everyone. Specific codes of use and curfews determine who gets access to these resources and when.

The Everyday Commons, conversely, is inher­ently democratic space. It contrasts the Formal Commons in that it is not a place, nor does it have a program. The Everyday Commons occurs when an otherwise “leftover space” is activated by public activity. On a small scale this happens every day... dog walkers and runners using New Orleans levees as a trail, cookouts and other social gatherings on neutral grounds. On a larger scale this is often seen in the form of protest or other public political dissent as well

as during times of emergency, such as the use of overpasses as some of the only high ground in many neighborhoods, such as along Broad Street during Hurricane Katrina.

By occurring only through activation, the Everyday Commons necessitates some degree of interpretation. Because of this, the Everyday Commons has a great potential to be subversive and challenge what the expectations of public activity are, creating a malleable urban culture. But the Everyday Commons faces its own challenges as well. Due to its temporal nature, it lacks the ability to substantially accumulate resources in the same manner that the Formal Commons can.

If the Formal Commons are lessened in their capabilities when fewer people are able to access them, then the Everyday Commons are eroded when they are uninhabitable. High noise levels, air pollution, lack of shade, and oversized scale make these spaces ill suited for a human to occupy. Impromptu accommodations may be made to improve these conditions, but it is likely in cities in the US, that if jerry-rigged interventions are not permitted by the city government, they will be taken down. Spaces that are more habitable, such as well-maintained parks often profile those who are deemed unwelcome -- most often populations of color and the homeless.

There exists an opportunity to reapproach the current paradigm, however. If new forms of commons can be both accessible by many modes of transit as to reach the widest population possible and developed with a high degree of inhabitability in the leftover space that inevitably surrounds them, we can work towards an equitable common place, acting as a social leveler and a melting pot of people of many backgrounds.
A man using a riverfront park known as The Fly as a fishing location
Several percussionists parade down a side street near A.J. Davis park during Super Sunday.
It is New Orleans tradition for dozens of small vendors to set up on the street during carnival season.
The Lafite Greenway features an urban garden complete with vegetables in raised beds and a chicken coop.
Even the neutral grounds of busy streets have the malleability to become vibrant public spaces when occupied.
Something as simple as one of New Orleans (delicious) taco trucks can transform a laundromat parking lot into a public living room.
Traces of interpretive use can be seen all around the city if you look close enough.
Part Four

Tomorrow’s Urban Paradigms
Just as developments in technologies as well as urban occupation and mobility patterns shaped the landscape of 20th century cities, new parameters are currently changing the way that we live in and think about cities today. Though it is impossible to project an exact ideation of what cities might look like in the future, a few key parameters might give us some insight as to what the future beholds. Predominant among these parameters are technological advancement and environmental degradation.

As previously pointed out, changes in technology surrounding the arena of urban mobility have been one of the key parameters in determining the physical expression of the city. The mass production and widespread availability of cars caused significant damage to the city at the scale of the pedestrian, but is not a static condition. The way that we view and use cars has always been in flux, and with the advent of ridesharing and the looming promise of self-driving vehicles, has reached a critical point of reconsideration.

Ridesharing by itself, thus far, has done little to reduce the amount of low occupancy vehicular travel. In fact, many studies actually show that ridesharing has increased the amount of low occupancy travel. Nevertheless, the ethos of ridesharing is reflective of a changing set of priorities, particularly amongst young, urban populations.

Young urbanites are a growing social class. In the US, urban populations are rising, particularly among young people (it must be pointed out that although most US cities are actually still seeing more suburban growth than urban growth, this does not effect the general densification of American urban centers). This same group of Millenial Americans are also pursuing drivers liscensure at a rapidly decreasing rate, reflecting a general desire to move away from owning a car.

Ridesharing has capitalized on this sentiment, and exploded in popularity throughout the 2010’s. Transit ridership has not. This is no accident, however. Transit systems simply do not
get the public funding that cars get. In the Department of Transportation's 2004 cost analysis report, typical highway upkeep projects were shown to cost millions of dollars each, annually. One project outside of Tampa Bay, Florida cost over $82 million to widen a highway from 4 lanes to 6 lanes over a 5 mile stretch. By comparison, New Orleans 2016 bus system operational cost totalled just over $62 million. This imbalance of funding, gives urban transit systems no other option than to operate at a minimum viable condition.

The results of this lack of funding show through in a lack of dedicated infrastructure. At best, New Orleans bus stops feature a small shelter and signage. The lack of permanent infrastructure makes the bus stops near-invisible -- daunting for a non-experienced rider. With a larger budget, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) would be able to make bus stops into destinations, could feature conditioned spaces and provide restrooms, electricity, and water for those waiting for their bus. These locations could then clearly indicate what color and number bus lines meet that station, providing a greater degree of transparency for potential bus riders, that instead are opting for the simple process of ridesharing.

Of course, it seems unlikely that we will ever take cars completely off the road. However, we can work within a set of parameters to reduce the impact that traffic has on cities by regulation of new technologies. In a late 2018 interview, Blaine Merker of Gehl Architects in San Francisco detailed how self-driving cars could potentially incentivize a push towards smaller vehicles, since companies such as Waymo would likely operate whole fleets of these vehicles. It is then in their best interest to make the most time-efficient an experience as possible... this is not a trait that bulky, traffic-jamming cars possess, thus smaller, more efficient cars could become the favored variety.

Another consideration of self-driving vehicles is that they don't necessarily need to park in the city. Under the current Waymo paradigm in Phoenix, AZ, cars return to a single parking garage where they recharge overnight before hitting the streets again. This could essentially eliminate the need for off street parking and potentially eliminate many parking lots that plague the urban fabric of post-1950's development.

These are possibilities, not guarantees. In order to successfully reverse harmful urban mobility practices, policies such as off street parking requirements need to be eliminated and denser development must be incentivized.

Perhaps they won't be. Already off street parking is far over the capacity that is needed in most cities. Municipalities argue that their requirements are based off of hard data, which can be difficult to argue with, but lived experience shows that many mega-lots often sit near empty. Throughout the 2010's this has gained an increasing amount of attention from frustrated urbanites. A movement called #BlackFridayParking has encouraged social media users to go to parking lots on Black Friday (which is of course when parking lots may be expected to be most full) and share photos of the still vacant, paved land. If these movements are successful, we can move towards taking back this land to address a variety of other concerns such as lack of urban green space, public plazas, or simply denser development.
Part Five

Precedent Studies
Civic Commons was a 2016 study done by Studio Gang Architects with Reimagining the Civic Commons. Studio Gang focused on identifying neighborhood anchors and providing programmatic overlap and connectivity to mutually reinforce these existing anchors.

Studio Gang identifies a few universal anchors and methods of how they may be substantiated in any city. Among these civic anchors are Libraries, Parks, Recreation Centers, Police Stations, Schools, Streets, and Public Transit. These techniques are then applied to the area of Southwest Philadelphia, along the corridor of Woodland Ave.

Critical to Studio Gang’s study was a thorough engagement process with neighborhood constituents. The project packet was distributed with select sections left blank where readers were encouraged to sketch their own ideas. Different prompts were provided for city officials, adult residents, and children.

The study provided an index of other important plans, visions, and official documents of importance to help provide an interdisciplinary understanding of unified civic progress.
A project of Reimagining the Civic Commons, the Fitzgerald Civic Commons of Detroit MI, seeks to use under-utilized vacant parcels to connect the blighted neighborhood of Fitzgerald with civic commons at two nearby universities. The design was headed by the Detroit planning office and Spackman, Mossop, Michaels Architects, in coordination with neighborhood residents. The goals of the project are fourfold: civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability, and value creation. These four virtues take a cross-disciplinary approach to ensure that neighborhood improvements benefit residents of all backgrounds.

"Sleeping assets" were identified in the surrounding Livernois-McNichols area as potential opportunities to re-imagine the civic commons. Notable among these sleeping assets were access to the two neighboring universities, vacant parcels, and vacant structures. The empty parcels that connect the two universities were organized into greenways, market/gardens, orchards, meadows, and a city park. Vacant buildings were rehabbed into spaces for select non-profit organizations and public gathering spaces.

The project is also described as cumulative and will continue to build off of its own successes and/or failures to reduce risk to subsequent projects. This allows each phase of the project to learn from its mistakes and constantly evolve.
The Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA) began in the 1960's as an organization dedicated to fighting blockbusting of New Orleans' neighborhoods. It has since emerged as one of the most extensive neighborhood associations in New Orleans.

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, BIA took on an intensive rebuilding effort to strengthen Broadmoor's civic commons. In 2010 the Broadmoor Improvement District was established by Louisiana Legislature, allowing for the creation of an elected governing board.

Broadmoor has enacted a $100/yr parcel fee for each property in the defined neighborhood parameters which goes to neighborhood improvement projects. Three major civic commons have since been substantiated in the Rosa Keller Library (rotating programs, subsidized rentable meeting space, computer lab), Arts & Wellness Center (rentable performance spaces, practice spaces, counseling and wellness), and the South Broad Community Health Center.

Access to these commons has been improved by the establishment of bike paths on Fontainbleu dr, Nashville dr, and Napoleon ave as well as the arts and wellness walking trail that leads down the neutral ground of Napoleon from Claiborne ave to S. Broad st.
Crescent Park was designed along New Orleans east bank of the Mississippi river with the intention to "reconnect people to the river" and transform the city's industrial past into a community asset. The park is a continuously expanding project, but currently occupies a 1.4 mile stretch of the riverfront in New Orleans' Bywater neighborhood. The park is sandwiched between the water and heavily active rail lines, effectively cutting it off from the adjacent neighborhood.

In order to connect the park to the city, two large corten bridges have been installed at either end of the strip. The bridges are unique and are each something of an art object, helping to give the park a unique place-identity and perhaps even a signature "branding" so-to-speak.

The gesture of "bridging" is a common form that can be found in transit-oriented architecture. The bridge often serves as the solution to the basic geometry issue of how to bring pedestrians across an unsafe or impassable transit route. Pedestrian bridges have often been implemented in large cities to varying degrees of critical reception and use, but have rarely been of architectural consideration beyond their functionalist nature. If the bridge can be seen as an asset or at least an object of aesthetic consideration, it has the opportunity to encourage greater use for both sides that it connects.
At the heart of Mid-City in New Orleans, 3 major pedestrian corridors meet, creating a lively junction and well trafficked bike and foot route. Each of these 3 corridors is unique and each serve as a park in addition to being major circulation routes.

The Parkway is one of the widest neutral grounds in New Orleans. Along the continuous park in the neutral ground you will find public bulletins, art installations, a playground, a volleyball court, and tree-covered walking and cycling path. The space is frequently used by dog-walkers, cyclists, and residents of the adjacent neighborhoods. The river-side terminus of the Parkway includes a pedestrian and cyclist bridge, one of the few choke points connecting Mid-City to neighboring Gert Town over the Pontchartrain expressway.

Bayou St. John is a natural bayou that winds into the heart of New Orleans from Lake Pontchartrain. The portion of the bayou between Lafitte Ave. and City Park is a popular leisure destination for fishing, kayaking, or simply relaxing on the grass. During the summer, a free music festival, Bayou Boogaloo, is held on the fields along the bayou while New Orleanians fill the bayou with kayaks and ramshackle rafts.

The Lafitte Greenway is a 2.6 green corridor along a former canal. The greenway contains a continuous strip of rain garden, helping recharge groundwater and reduce flooding. Along the stretch are recreation fields, playgrounds, bike and walking trails, a pool, and a small urban farm.
As part of the Buffalo Outer Harbor revitalization project, the Industrial Heritage Trail is a 3-mile pedestrian and cyclist corridor that connects the inner harbor and downtown with a series of lakeside parks and marinas.

Along the 3-mile stretch are a number of strategically located stops that include signage detailing the city's industrial roots, gardens, and rest areas. Specific nodes are fitted with bike racks to encourage cycling as a viable means of transit.

Despite the fact that the harbor is ill-suited to swimming, the project is able to capitalize on the maritime setting. The trail winds along the edge of Lake Erie, offering bridges, piers for fishing, and a few kayak launches, allowing pedestrians to make the most of the water.

The trail is intended as a catalyst project, with the hopes of sparking further development along the formerly industrial outer harbor. As it stands right now, the lack of residential programming and difficulty of access render the Industrial Heritage Trail inconvenient for everyday commutes, but with eventual development, the trail could become a vital pedestrian commuter-way in addition to a leisure circuit.
Place Montrealaises sits in the heart of Montreal between the old and new city at the Ville Marie highway. The park seeks to offer an experience which contrasts the rigid order of the adjacent city. To achieve a plurality of experience, Lateral Office has broken down the park into 7 separate “rooms”, each serving a unique function and user group.

The three largest rooms are the Square Marie-Josephe Angelique, Place Jeanne Mance, and Cour Ida Roth Steinberg, the only 3 hardscape rooms. These three rooms tell the stories of historic figures as symbols of justice. All three hardscaped rooms serve as gathering spaces, intended for public markets and gathering.

The four softscape rooms are designed to facilitate structured and unstructured play. These rooms transform during the winter to allow for seasonal recreation, such as a common that is turned into an ice rink in the winter.

The park has a continuous path running through it that terminates at a pedestrian bridge to cross the Ville Marie highway, serving as a stitching point between the old city and the new.
Part Six

Site Analysis
SITE

Requirements
1. Numerous “sleeping” civic assets
2. A largely underprivileged residential population
3. Located locally to allow consistent site interaction
4. Room for urban growth (vacant lots, neutral grounds, blight)
5. Medium to heavy foot traffic

Site Selection
Claiborne/Carrolton Corridor
Located between the Leonidas and Hollygrove neighborhoods
Public Transit Routes

New Orleans public transit consists of the 60 bus routes and 5 streetcar lines, each branching out from the central business district. The RTA of Orleans Parish is minimally coordinated with JCT of Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Transit. Long layovers occur at the transfer stations at parish lines.
Bike Lanes

Cycling in New Orleans is rapidly growing in popularity. New bike lines are popping up all over the city thanks to efforts from the city government and non-profits like Bike Easy. As a flat city, cycling has high potential as a mode of transit in New Orleans.
Neutral Grounds

Neutral grounds (elsewhere known as medians) are stretches of raised grass or paving in between the two directions of a multi-lane street. Beneath these islands in the middle of the road is the city's major drainage infrastructure, above pedestrians occupy many neutral grounds such as Martin Luther King Blvd. and St. Roch Ave.
Leonidas-Hollygrove is situated at the RTA's furthest upriver routes. Serviced by the S. Claiborne line, the Carrollton line, the Tulane line, and JeT's main line.
Parish Lines

New Orleans Metropolitan Area is defined as New Orleans - Metairie - Kenner. Jefferson Parish has a higher population than Orleans Parish, yet there is little connection between the parishes at their border.
Public Transit Routes

The Leonidas and Hollygrove neighborhoods have an extensive number of bus stops but lack much permanent transit infrastructure. Without an explicit map or app it is hard to tell what buses will come and where they will go -- disappointing inexperienced riders.
Boundaries

The Leonidas neighborhood is bordered by the 6 lane Claiborne Ave, the 4 Lane Carrollton Ave, the Mississippi River, and an industrial park west of Dakin St. The Hollygrove Neighborhood is bordered by Claiborne, Carrollton, the 4 lane Farhart Ave, and the Monticello canal. Without intervention, these barriers separate their respective neighborhoods from the greater city.
Footpaths

Much of the area is already heavily trafficked by foot. The streetcar tracks of Carrollton Ave, the Levees along the river, and the intake berm of Monticello all bear desire paths in their soil, indicating their use as public right of way.
Parish Lines

At the neighborhood scale, the parish border sees a dissolution of connective tissue that would otherwise allow New Orleans and Metairie to mutually benefit from
Part Seven

Commonground
Commonground is an Architectural and Urban Planning proposal that addresses the reclamation of over-capacity monomodal roadways as a gesture of returning damaged urban space to the public right of way. As an architectural thesis proposal, this project does not include many of the steps that would be necessary to implement such major urban changes. Most notable amongst these steps is a comprehensive engagement process with the two neighborhoods that the site borders. Rather, this project seeks to highlight a misplacement of governmental infrastructure priorities and hopes to shed light on the fact that the right to occupy the city is that of the citizens, not just property owners, car drivers, or any other non-holistically inclusive group.

That is not to say that the proposal isn't grounded in reality. I have chosen to build my theoretical framework off of several existing New Orleans city plans. Chief amongst these are RTA's Urban Mobility Plan, the Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan, and the Public Library Master Plan, which are all publicly available.

The selection of the site was rooted in the existing transfer station that links the RTA bus and streetcar system and the neighboring Jefferson Transit (JeT) bus system. These non-coordinated transit systems meet at this corner, but often require riders to experience a long wait time with no amenities available. From this corner the site occupies the next 12 block stretch of neutral ground along Claiborne Ave. to the Monticello canal and parish line.

This stretch is unique because of its enormous untapped potential to act as a public network between the existing pedestrian and cyclist paths, 2 parks, a grocery store, drug store, laundromat, corner store, canal, and the treatment plant for all of the city's drinking water.
Raised boarding platform allows level entry to bus as well as providing a raised plinth as an emergency evacuation ground.
Bus Rapid Transit Dedicated Riderway Configurations

1. BRT lanes on side of neutral ground
   - Allows for 90' of remaining neutral ground
   - Maximum crossing distance of 40'
   - Works primarily for one sided streets

2. BRT lanes on side of neutral ground with crossing island
   - Allows for 80' of remaining neutral ground
   - Maximum crossing distance of 20'

3. BRT lanes on either side of neutral ground
   - May connect to existing traffic lanes
   - Allows for boarding from 70' center platform
   - Maximum crossing distance of 20'
Curvilinear form is derived from identifying nodes, tracing direct walking paths, and intervening in the remaining negative space.
Distinct form is repeated to give visual cue to public network
Hijack existing, underutilized infrastructure for the public domain
Roof runoff may be collected in rain barrels or directed to rain gardens, where the runoff will recharge the groundwater.
If flood levels exceed rain garden volume, the overflow will drain into the city's grey infrastructure.
Consistent deployment of native trees can reduce flooding through transpiration, remove pollution, and soften noise levels.
Zone 1

12. Dublin Library

Media and Book Stacks
Classroom/Meeting Room and Computer Lab
Woodshop/Makerspace
11. Carrollton Transfer Station

Tickets/Information
Convenience Kiosk
Waiting + Restroom Facilities
Zone 2

21. Claiborne Bicycle + Repair
22. Cambronne Street Garden
23. Cambronne Street Public Kitchen
Zone 3

21. Harrell Park Pavilion

Concessions
Equipment Rental
Equipment Storage
Restroom and Changing Facilities
Enclosed Soccer Field
Zone 4

41. Sewerage & Water Board Viewing Tower
   Views into the Sewerage & Water Board treatment plant
   and down the Monticello + 13th Street canals

42. Discount Corner Patio
   Seating area for customers of corner store and taco truck
Zone 5

51. Monticello Activity Center
   Kayak Rental
   Restroom Facilities
   Public Storage Lockers
   Skate Park

52. Monticello Pedestrian Bridge
Sewerage & Water Board Viewing Tower
Reflection

"Most new movements start this way: hundreds or thousands of individuals and groups, working in different fields and different locations start thinking about change using a common language, without necessarily recognizing those shared values. You just start following your own vector, propelled along by the people in your immediate vicinity. And then one day, you look up and realize that all those individual trajectories have turned into a wave."

- Steven Johnson

In time, the effects of substantiating our civic commons have the potential to affect broader complex issues, though a margin of uncertainty must be accepted. I approached this process originally with the goal of helping all our planet’s environmental woes, a topic that I take no less seriously today than I did before dissenting from studying low-tech building design. What did change is my outlook on who would be the ones making change.

Eventually the empowered populace would become more self-sufficient and not have to rely so heavily on the global industrial machine. Or so the thought went.

But the reality is these are today’s issues. Even if our civic commons could be fully realized into a robust network tomorrow, it would take years, if not decades for the corresponding social, economic, and environmental benefits to make an systematic impact. And by then, there’s no telling if our issues or our understandings of them will mirror what we see them as today. If New Orleans suddenly came up with the money to invest in the perfect public transit system, I have doubt that anyone would immediately sell their car in exchange for a commuter pass. However, the outlook is not bleak, rather, it simply requires trust that an informed and empowered populace will be able to make the best decisions regarding their temporal issues. The civic commons functions to amplify that empowerment.

71% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from a mere 100 corporate entities. The number stuck with me for months. What difference would it make if some wealthy clients hired forward-thinking architecture firms to design environmentally conscious wooden high-rises if the industrial system that has perpetuated our climate crisis remains intact? The whopping greenhouse gas footprints of beef and lamb, the long distance travel of food and goods, the harmful plastics used in composite building products... all posed temptation to tackle the industrial-environmental issue through the means of setting up localized assets which would facilitate a culture of sharing and using goods through their entire life-cycle.
The role of the architect in the public interest then, is not in their genius, their honed in and specific expertise. The role of the architect in public interest is in their privilege... and their unique ability to coordinate and mediate between others. The architect, for example, may be able to clearly demonstrate how improved use of public space can stimulate higher spending in urban centers to a city government, who then make higher mandates regarding the amount of public space (as was the case with San Francisco’s POPOS). I have long held the belief that people are not good or bad, that people don’t “do right” or “do wrong”, but that people simply do what they believe they have to do and many of our moral misalignments would be lessened with mutual understanding and a more equitable playing field. The only way to achieve this is to interact; cooperate and communicate in a universal and collaborative space... a civic commons.

“I believe in the world and I want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in that”

- Fred Moten
References


Waggonner and Ball Architects. Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan.


