

# The Tiny Good Place



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# The Tiny Good Place

Shared Public Objects as Catalysts of Social Capital in  
Fragmented Urban Neighborhoods

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This book is dedicated  
to my mom for her listening,  
to my dad for his wild ideas,  
to Dylan for his carpentry advice,  
to Killeen for paving the way,  
to Rae for her sunshine,  
to Barbara for garden therapy,  
to Carlos for his can-do attitude,  
to Jeff for his generosity,  
to Alix for opening windows,  
to Isa for championing the small,  
to Clive for his mind,  
to Gertrud for her motivation,  
to Lauren for her enthusiasm,  
to Rachelle for perspective and  
to Lara for her guidance.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how design can bolster social capital in fragmented urban neighborhoods. Social capital – defined by Robert Putnam as the commodity of trust, reciprocity and respect between people – is a vital component for neighborhoods to be self-sustaining. However, in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in which this thesis is focused and I reside, the rising gentrification breeds a de facto culture of in-group silos. This project posits design’s capacity to create space and opportunity for trust and reciprocity. The starting point for this exploration is through the physical structure of a Little Free Library, in which free books are made available to “leave an item, take an item.” Constructed in collaboration with a general store in Bed-Stuy, the tiny library serves as a platform for testing methods of garnering social capital. The main hypothesis of this thesis is that if a neighborhood is entrusted with caring for and engaging with artifacts that are left outside at all hours of the day, then heightened respect and reciprocity in the neighborhood will follow. This theory of object-based change builds on the already demonstrated success of Little Free Libraries and incorporates specific designed components to probe engagement. Designed touchpoints include: branded labels for the book spines so users are reminded of the source of the books, bookplates inside the front covers posing questions about the neighborhood, promotion of a neighborhood tool library, and installation of a chalkboard to encourage passive dialogue. Also core to the library is its location; it’s purposefully installed in an intermediary public space in front of the general store so that it bears residual neutrality and welcomeness customary to that of a “third place.” In the two months thus far that the library has been installed, there has been a continues flow of book inventory, resoundingly positive response over social media and in-person, and even a neighbor that volunteered to build a library for the community garden. Although the lack of tangibility makes social capital a difficult asset to assess, feedback from neighbors indicates that the library installation makes them feel valued and that they are thankful for the structure. Only time will tell if this hyper-local platform will continue to nudge connection. From my own perspective, the project has added tremendous value to my social life. I truly feel like a member of my neighborhood, and the new friends, connections and sense of belonging will stay with me long after I close this thesis book.





BELONGING AND THE BIG CITY

New York City is a global magnet. People from all walks of life come to the city to set up home, simultaneously disrupting and invigorating the residents who already live here. It’s a city of intense pride, whether one’s residence here is deliberate or forced upon because of no other options. We sacrifice physical space for access to conveniences, culture and people. The diversity brought upon by this melting pot of backgrounds and experience is socially enriching, but also draining. As transient lifestyles increase, people more frequently move in and out of neighborhoods, to a degree that there is a palpable lack of social cohesion.

Notable Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam describes this phenomenon as the “decline of social capital” (Putnam, 2000) and bases his seminal 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* on this founding premise. Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam). As we spend most of our time with people that are like us – be it in ethnicity, education-level, income, interests – we build silos around ourselves and miss out on connecting with those that are not like us. Call it stranger danger or our increasingly individualistic society, but this mounting distrust in people we do not know has wide-reaching social ramifications.

The majority of city-dwellers don’t know the name of their next door neighbor. We live physically close to each other, but hesitate to break the social barrier with strangers. We escape the buzz of the city and retreat to our private apartment oases, blind to the untapped social, mental and physical gain that awaits if we just knocked on that neighbor’s door.

Add on today’s rampant gentrification and growing income gap, and it’s obvious that there are potent social tensions, of varying degrees, in neighborhoods. Sociology studies reveal “how there is little spontaneous mixing between newcomers and locals. Middle-class newcomers tend to ‘bubble’ and seal themselves off in their exclusive enclaves apart from their surrounding poorer neighbors” (Watt, 2014). It is this tension and sense of othering and alienation that motivates me to pursue this thesis.

**Social Capital:** The connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

I’ve included relevant lexicon throughout the book to add clarity to my propositions and to ground my theory.



I am supremely aware of my status as an educated hipster yuppie twenty-something gentrifier in my historically black Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. I wanted to live in the neighborhood for its location, its price and its culture (both the encroaching latte establishments and the energy of its longtime residents). But I can’t deny that I often feel like an outsider. My skin immediately gives me away and signals that I am relatively new in the community.

Once, when striking up a conversation with a black woman in my local park, she blamed me for her being kicked out of her apartment and being sent to a shelter. While this exchange in no way exemplifies my experience in Bed-Stuy – cat-calling is about the most aggressive confrontation I tend to experience, which is quite minimal – it does demonstrate that we as humans tend to separate ourselves by category. Categories are easy and natural ways to assign blame. These assumptions in turn direct us to seeing difference rather than common values, which ultimately damage our social relationships and weaken our social capital and collective bargaining power.

What if we amplified commonality over difference? Interaction over separation? We’re not talking kumbaya drum circles here. Rather, designed strategies for increasing interaction with one’s neighborhood in order to foster trust and belonging.

Thus, the initial question for this thesis was: **How can design foster social capital in neighborhoods?**

## HOME, PLACE & CONNECTION

We all desire to feel belonging where we live; it’s in our human nature. The “notion of belonging or social identity is a central aspect of how we define who we are” (Marsh, 2007). We want to feel pride, contentment and connection in our place of residence. “Residential place continues to matter since people feel some sense of being at home in an increasingly turbulent world” (Savage, 2005). Safety is also a key criteria of placemaking in one’s neighborhood; “if you know the person next to you, you feel like someone has your back” says my classmate Sneha Srinivasan. In our ever-increasing transient lifestyles, feeling a connection to your geographic neighborhood is a rarity.

Previous to moving to New York City for the Parsons MFA program, I lived in Los Angeles for four years. It wasn’t until I joined the environmental community group Transition Mar Vista/Venice that I felt like I actually belonged in my westside neighborhood. Instead of interacting solely with my college and work friends, my social network expanded to a diverse range of ages, life experiences and perspectives. It was

“A community of neighbors helps make the strong, resilient communities in which we all deserve to live.”

– *Laundromat Project*

immensely gratifying to know familiar faces at the farmers market and to have monthly potlucks that provided a safe and inviting space to meet people and discuss neighborhood issues. Not only did I gain tremendous pride and responsibility for my neighborhood, but I became another link in the social web, building connections ever-wider.

## SPACE FOR DESIGN

**How might design intervene in this space? How can design fill the gap of what churches, community groups, local government and city planners cannot do?**

From the preliminary research stages of this project, it was apparent that the scale of this project would have to be small. How else could I trigger change within a semester? Likewise, I knew that trying to foster social connection in my neighborhood could never be top-down, rather it had to be organic. **Micro and bottom-up became the initial attributes of my design thesis**, solidified by community organizer Peter Block’s advocacy that small groups of three to twelve are the ideal “unit of transformation and container for the experience of belonging” (2008).

Though the scale of my intervention may be small, the potential of design invigorated me with the confidence that a targeted and transdisciplinary approach to addressing social change was possible. Wearing the hats of community organizers, sociologists, urban planners, artists, librarians and economists, this thesis demonstrates the multi-faceted shape that design can possess.

Design’s unique capacity for nuance is critical too. Unlike government initiatives that are often clunky and take a long time, or community groups that depend heavily on individual leadership and internal politics, design can be nimble. Design strategist Lauren Wong stresses design’s value because of its “participatory aspect and ability to be flexible and run on very light infrastructure and programming” (2016). Pair design thinking with grassroots efforts and the ability to impact change is palpable! This thesis aims to demonstrate design’s potential for building social capital.





*These photos are from my time living in Mar Vista, Los Angeles. Here I am celebrating the third annual Easter Egg Hunt with my lovely and delightful Coptic Christian Egyptian neighbors.*



*To me, the local Mar Vista Farmers Market was the tent pole for my neighborhood because it was an inclusive and relaxed weekly event that embraced community and fun. It was also an increasingly homogenized experience, one which is not yet accessible from where I live in Bed-Stuy, for better and for worse.*

*Core to the Transition Mar Vista/Venice community group was its monthly potlucks. Pictured here is one of the four dinners I hosted at my apartment with my roommate.*



*At one of the monthly potlucks, city controller Dennis Zine stopped by to campaign for a city position. He learned about the meal because it was promoted on Twitter.*







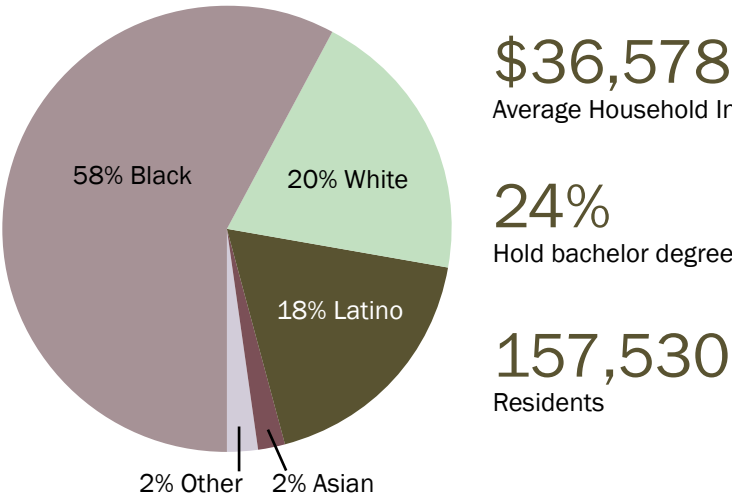
WHY BED-STUY?

In choosing where to focus my thesis, it was a no-brainer to select Bed-Stuy because it’s where I’ve lived for close to two years. It is a place of deep fondness, but also a site of historical struggle for belonging. It exemplifies social fragmentation, from the migration of Harlem blacks in the 1930s in search of greater housing availability, to the resulting White Flight, to the influx of Latinos, to the domination of Hasidic Jewish landlords, and the more recent return of a white creative class.

With 157,530 residents in Bed-Stuy alone (Census Tract 2015), the project scope was still way too broad. I decided to hone in on a specific area to assess its needs and values as a way to ground my perspective. Wanting to place myself in an area where strangers convene, I focused my research on the commercially zoned Tompkins Avenue. Observational research and chatting with people on the street and with business owners solidified this choice. Ultimately, this thesis concentrates on a four-block area that is loosely bound by Vernon Ave to the north, Tompkins Ave to the east, Dekalb Ave to the south, and Marcy Ave to the West. I live in the midst of this area, a purposeful decision since understanding the nuance of residential life is of such critical importance.

As the aerial view shows, this slice of the neighborhood borders NYCHA housing to the north and east, has close proximity to the Myrtle-Willoughby G subway stop.

**Gentrification:** Modernization, commercialization and homogenization of a neighborhood that leads to higher property values, often at the expense of low-income minority families.



\$36,578  
Average Household Income

24%  
Hold bachelor degrees

157,530  
Residents



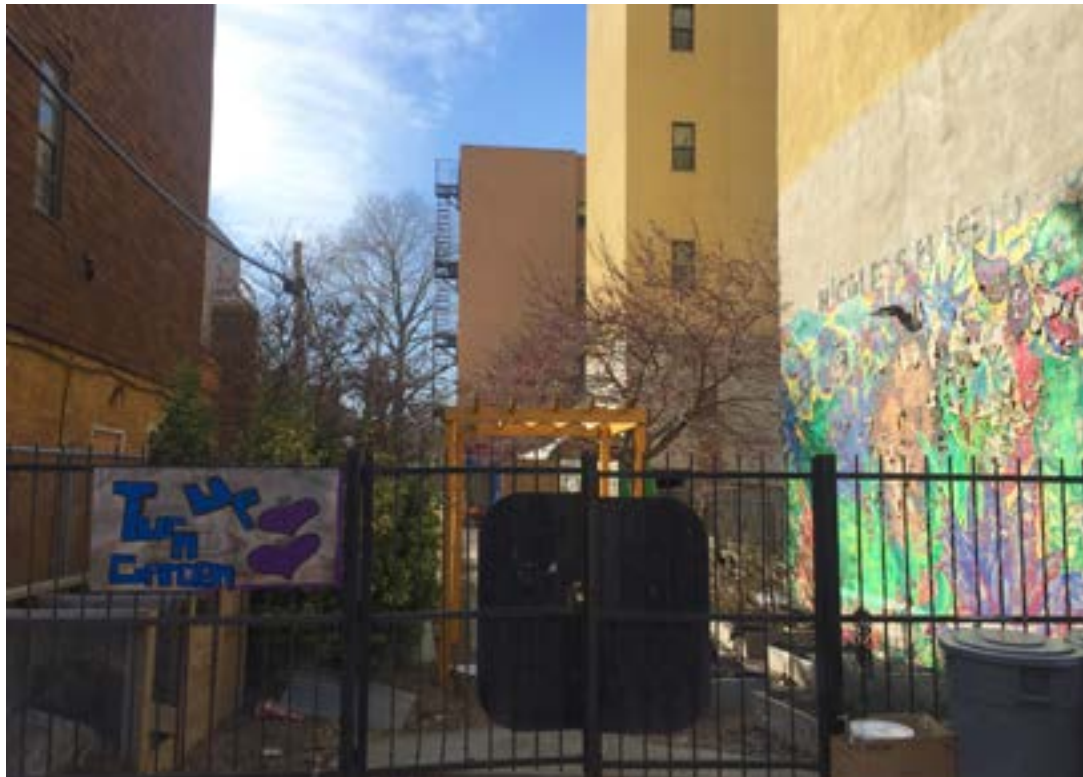
Census Tract 2015

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) houses over 400,000 New Yorkers in 328 “projects,” as they are popularly known. 13 developments are in Bed-Stuy, as shown in the bottom map.

On the four-block stretch of Tompkins, there are five churches, three bodegas, two cafes, two laundromats, two hair salons and a real estate office. The street is a hodgepodge of mixed zoning; occupied units, shuttered buildings and construction for new condos. The east/west streets offer stunning brownstones as well as facades made of siding.

















NEIGHBORHOOD LOWDOWN

Research was an essential component of my thesis. Seeing as the testing ground was my own neighborhood, my research strategies range from informal to more designed. At the publication of this thesis, I will have lived in my Willoughby Ave apartment nine months. Prior to that, I lived a mile down on Tompkins Ave for a year.

>CENSUS

Raw data from the US Census outlines variables at play. But it takes being in the actual location to draw connections and extrapolations.

>PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It’s been a challenge in this thesis to maintain objectivity in my neighborhood. My opinions are just as relevant as the next neighbor’s. But they are certainly not comprehensive. It is with this conscious lens that I conducted my primary research.

>STREET INTERVIEWS

I spent weekdays and weekends walking around the neighborhood to actively observe lifestyle patterns. I struck up conversations with some people on the street – some of them were spontaneous and others were intentional “man on the street” style interviewing. It was uncomfortable to start conversations without any pretense and I had much better success when the situation brought about the interaction. For example, when a group of young men made a comment to me, I was then able to pause in my walk and actually respond and start a dialogue.

Conversations over transactions were the most natural. When one bodega owner saw me taking street photos, he invited me in and offered me a tea. The owner of the brand new cafe Brooklyn Blend also remarked about photo-taking and was thrilled when he learned I was adding those pictures to his establishment’s very first Yelp review. The most surefire method was playing basketball on my local court. When you’re engaged in a game, conversation will also flow.

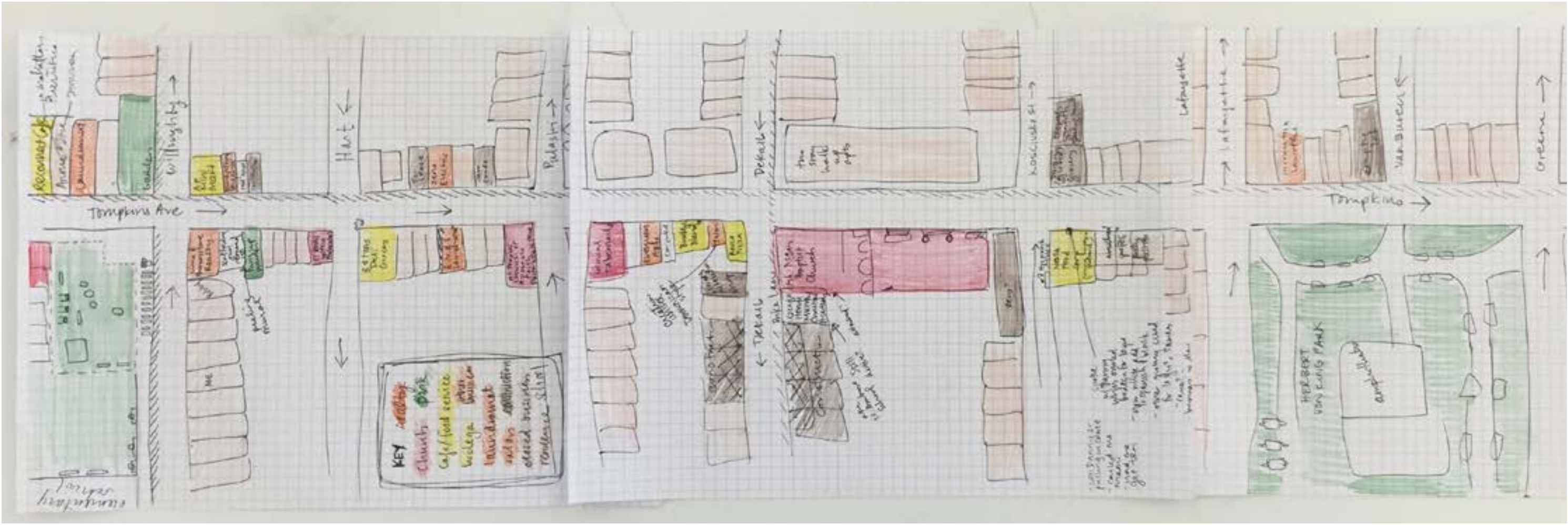
**Neighborhood:** A finite geographic area in which people reside, work and move through.

**Community:** Group of people that share a set of experiences, values or perspectives. In my thesis, I use the word to describe the sense of shared experience in a neighborhood.

Top: Working on the map of the neighborhood.  
Bottom: Chatting with a woman who said “this neighborhood has this special energy to it, not like in the Bronx, where I live.”







>PAPER SURVEYS

I hand wrote questions on a clipboard and approached various people on the street if they'd answer questions. Some ignored me, some said they were busy, and a few engaged. It was in this activity that the black woman in the park accused me of being the cause of her eviction and said that my having lived in the area for a year in a half wasn't enough for me to claim resident status.

Although I knew this data would be useful, I resented having to have uncomfortable conversations. It felt unnatural and I felt like an outside researcher brought in to investigate a culture to which I didn't belong. Natural conversations are so enlivening for me, but when it's a forced interaction with an insider/outsider dynamic, all I wanted to do was drop my clipboard and race back inside to my apartment.

Survey Questions

- How long have you lived here?
- How many neighbors do you know?
- What do you like about Bed-Stuy?
- To what degree do you wish you knew your neighbors?

"You've got to get out and walk. Walk, and you will see that many of the assumptions on which the projects depend are visibly wrong."  
- Jane Jacobs

>MAPPING

Taking inspiration from the way Kevin Lynch visually dissects public space and how Jane Jacobs advocates exploring on foot, I mapped the neighborhood using colored pencils. Lynch promotes highlighting certain intersections and pathways, but I ended up mapping more the zoning and ownership of spaces. It helped illuminate the ratio of commerce to residence and show the prominent gathering places – namely churches and a few cafes and bodegas.

By color-coding by function of a space, I was responding to my hypothesis that spaces affect the type of interactions, the type of people who interact there, and the assumptions that one carries in that space. For example, churches are wonderful neighborhood institutions, but if I'm not part of the congregation, I actually feel excluded from that space.





## >POSTER SURVEY

Despite the discomfort of stopping people for questions on my clipboard, I pushed myself to use a large trifold poster as a prompt for neighborhood opinion. **This strategy was even more painful.** I felt like one of those street corner and subway Christian evangelists trying to talk to passersby about the glory of God. I held the trifold poster on a street corner during rush hour and when people were approaching I asked them in varying ways: “can I ask you a few questions about Bed-Stuy?” For the very few who answered, I ended up transcribing their answers on the poster to make the transaction easier.

Eventually, I decided to post the board on the park fence thinking there might be higher engagement if I’m not hovering, and that it wouldn’t require my presence throughout the day. When I checked the board a couple hours later, there were some comments added. In particular, someone had circled previous comments and called them out for being racist and wrote that what the neighborhood needs is “not more cafes for white people, but more bodegas for poor people.”

“What the neighborhood needs is not more cafes for white people, but more bodegas for poor people.”  
-Survey Respondent

By nightfall, the poster had been taken down, without any evidence of it in nearby trash cans. Did a park attendant take it down? Did an angry resident do it? Was it just a random act? It was a lesson about the use of public space. **The park may be our neighborhood’s commons, but because it’s not owned or managed by a specific individual, there’s actually less leniency about installations in that space.**

## >COMMUNITY BOARD MEETING

Attending a CB3 meeting was a testament to the many men and women who care deeply about the well-being and success of Bed-Stuy. Over 150 people were in attendance and it pushed well past three hours.

What this meeting also illuminated is that **my primary entry point need not be directly through community groups.** The groups have much more legacy, expertise and manpower than my meager thesis can amass. Instead, my focus is how to leverage the nimbleness and varied capacities of design to incite small scale change and fill in gaps of CBOs.



Left: Poster survey I stood on the corner with, and then posted on a fence that was later taken down.

>MAPPING WORKSHOP

I conducted a session with my fellow Parsons classmates to create hand-drawn maps of their neighborhood to uncover what places of residence mean to people. Fully aware that the data extracted from this activity is from educated New York transplants, it nonetheless revealed a common desire to be connected to one’s neighborhood.

Cafes, and the interactions they generate was a common comment. Janson Cheng says that “I like going to this one cafe in my neighborhood because the man knows my cappuccino order.” Not all cafes offer Mr. Roger’s type of warmth; Isabella von Mühlen Brandalise states “I avoid one cafe because it has small talk awkward, but purposefully pause at this one pop-up Japanese coffee cart because the man always greets me with a hello.” **Store proprietors certainly impact the experience.**

Sneha Srinivasan only wants to engage with people “if they’re my friends.” Conversely, Lara Penin describes the mundane connections with merchants in her neighborhood are invaluable and that one of the biggest social costs of relocating is having to rebuild those relationships.

“Me and my bodega man, we need each other.”  
– Lara Penin

Mapping workshop at Parsons



NEIGHBORHOOD INSIGHTS

DISCOMFORT OF STRANGERS

- Strangers tend not to talk to each other when passing on the street.
- It is often socially uncomfortable to strike up a conversation with someone you don’t know because it takes too much effort.
- Building connections with people takes time and energy.

TENDENCY TO OTHER

- It is in human nature to otherize those you do not know.
- It’s easier to see difference between people rather than commonality.

TRANSACTIONAL EXCHANGES

- A common experience is often what prompts a stranger to interact with another stranger, be it a transaction at a bodega, making eye contact at a funny sidewalk moment, picking up a dropped item for someone.
- Neighborhood events are ephemeral.
- Postings in public are subject to be taken down.

DESIRE FOR BELONGING

- Existing neighborhood cohesion practices – such as block parties or stoop-sitting – can feel exclusive if you’re not part of the in-group.
- Residents do want to feel pride for their neighborhood.
- Residents wish they knew more of their neighbors
- People feel special when others in their neighborhood recognize them.

VALUE OF PRIVACY

- New Yorkers need varying degrees of privacy and escape from the hecticness of city life





## FOUNDATIONAL THEORY

Complementing my design-led field research in Bed-Stuy, is a depth of theory in fields ranging from sociology and psychology, to architecture and industrial design. Though the tools of each of these trades are different, they all approach what it means to be a resident and what the compelling strains and joys are a part of the experience. They provide excellent launching points from which I built my own propositions.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AS AN IMPERATIVE

Robert Putnam describes in his book *Bowling Alone* the various components that make up our social fabric. Critical to society is social capital. Just like any other type of capital – a commodity that holds value – social capital is the store of goodwill and respect between people. It is simultaneously a public good and a private good (Putnam, 2000). Unlike the transaction of dollar bills exchanging for a cup of coffee, social capital does not always have immediate pay-off. Picking up the trash on your street or watering your neighbor’s plants when they’re out of town might not reap dollar rewards. But they do improve the sense of respect and camaraderie in the neighborhood. And maybe more people will start picking up trash, or that neighbor will invite you over for a slice of pie. Social capital can also be construed as a shared set of values. “Values – such as respect for people’s safety and security” argues Putnam – “are an essential linchpin in every social group. Put together, [social] networks and understandings engender trust and so enable people to work together” (2000).

Renowned urbanist and defender of public space William Holly Whyte echoes Putnam when he said that “social capital is built through hundreds of little and big actions we take every day” (1980). Maybe it’s the inconsequential moments at the bodega, or the mom’s group in the park, or the pattern of early morning dog walkers or the ritual of church groups. These sparks all amount to what it means to belong in a neighborhood. Whyte stresses that magnitude is not what fosters connection, but that it’s the minute actions and interactions that build up to amount to making a place and feeling a part of a given community.

**Social:** Interaction between humans, normally involving conversation through words, looks, or body language.

**Capital:** Commodity that has value

**Placemaking:** The collaborative act of designing a public space to strengthen its value to a community.

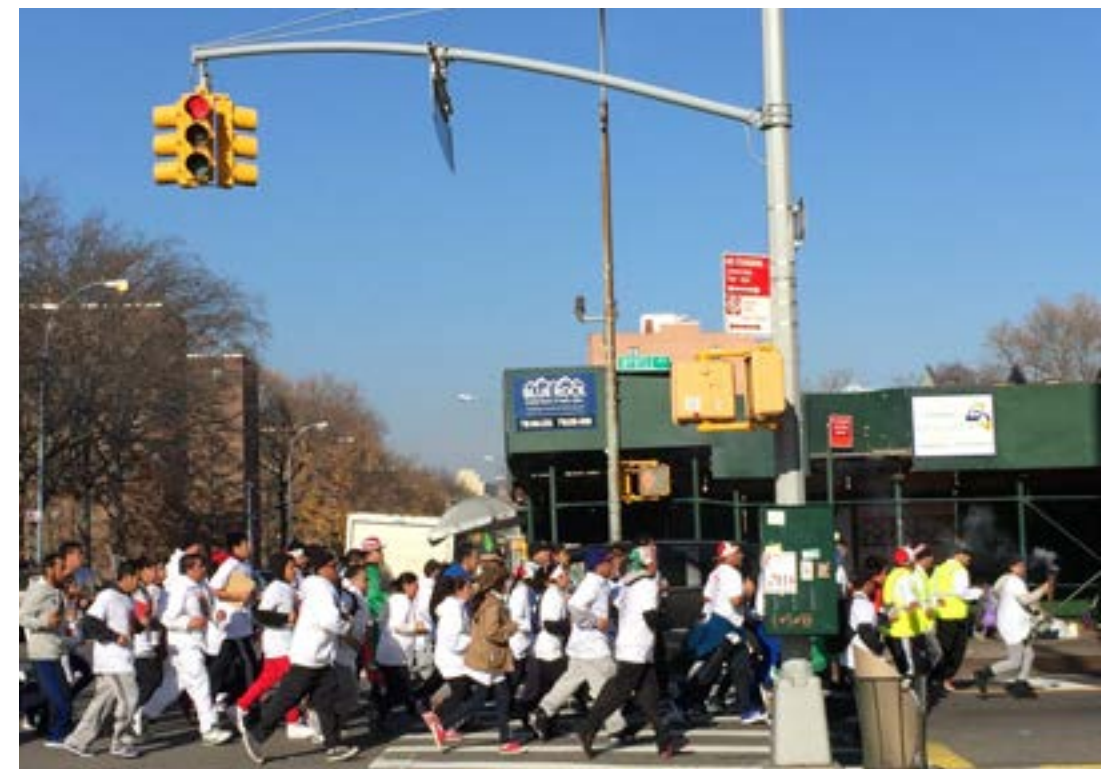
**Collective Bargaining:** The power to vouch and fight for the needs of a group of people

“Social capital is built through hundreds of little and big actions we take every day.”

– Holly Whyte

In the fragmentation of Bed-Stuy social networks, it is increasingly necessary to improve the social capital of the neighborhood. The more trust and reciprocity that can be built, the more equipped we are to build a better future and the stronger we become. And by strength I mean collective bargaining power – the power to vouch and fight for the needs of a group of people. As the founder of the Bed-Stuy based Laundromat Project (which injects arts programming during regular laundromat routines) says: “a community of neighborhoods helps make the strong, resilient communities in which we all deserve” (2014).

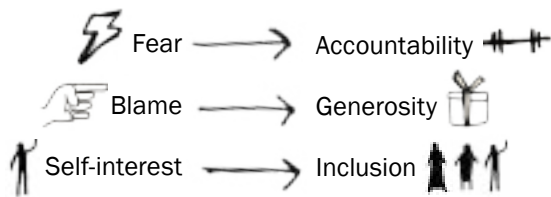
Social capital becomes the invisible force that gives autonomy to a neighborhood, filling in the cracks that city government and policy cannot achieve. Code for America representative Jennifer Palikka goes so far as to say that “a neighbor is a far better and cheaper alternative to government services” (2012).



DECLINE OF ASSOCIATIONALISM

One factor in the decline of social capital in America is that people are increasingly living in silos, be it staying within the comfort of one’s in-group, or choosing the ease and lack of confrontation that online relationships afford. Putnam asserts that “the United States has undergone an unprecedented collapse in civic, social, associational and political life since the 1960s, with serious negative consequences.” His book title *Bowling Alone* alludes to the fact that groups on a local level, such as bowling leagues, are decreasing and people instead are retreating from democratizing social activities.

Organizational change expert Peter Block considers selfishness as the poison against building community. In his 2008 book *Community: The Structure Of Belonging*, he says that the “fragmented communities of today market fear, assign fault and worship self-interest” (Block). Too often he believes, people focus only on difference, are quick to cast blame, and ultimately focus on the self. He presents strategies that prioritize building connections, widening perspectives and promoting reciprocity. He sees small groups of three to ten as the most effective unit of change for a community and thus posits grassroots efforts at transforming the following negatives into strengths. Block argues that “we can only exert our freedom and accountability if we can shed the outdated assumptions and mindsets that have colonized our culture and ourselves” (2011).



ELECTIVE BELONGING

Sociologist Mike Savage contends in his book *Globalization and Belonging* how important place is to a person’s sense of belonging. Rather than it being a battle of inside (born and bred in the neighborhood) versus outside (transient), he suggests that “the feel of a place is much more

**Associationalism:** Term often linked to French political mastermind Alexis de Tocqueville. It’s the idea that individualism – a preferential focus on oneself and people like you – is negative for communal life. Associating, interacting and gathering with a broader spectrum of society breeds local democracy and promotes American freedoms.

“We need to look at front porches as crime fighting tools, treat picnics as public health efforts and see choral groups as occasions of democracy.”  
– Saguaro Institute



A pleasant encounter with bodega owner Danny and his son.

strongly influenced by the values and lifestyles of those migrating to it” (2005). His concept of “elective belonging” argues that “places are not characterized by tensions between insiders and outsiders, but that instead they are defined as locales for people electing to belong (and not just reside) in specific places” (2005).

The goal in building community is “to transform isolation to connectedness and caring for the whole.”  
– Peter Block

In approaching this project, I’ve been overly focused on how the neighborhood is being affected by outsiders intruding and moving in. This book helps frame my perspective of neighborhood life as a collective effort that evolves and is shaped by its inhabitants. It presents a ripe space for design because a neighborhood is like an organism that needs various inputs to prosper. It’s not characterized solely by its past, but is a compilation of constantly changing and updating factors.

There’s a subtle difference between residing and belonging, and that nuance gets to the emotional core of neighborhoods. They form the backbone of a person’s livelihood. The beauty and the challenge is that neighborhoods are made up of varied vertebra that must somehow come together to hold up the metaphorical back.



STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

Putnam and Block emphasize the collective power of knowing and gathering with neighbors. Similarly important are the casual relationships we keep from day to day. It’s in fact the “weak ties” we have, from the manicurist to the babysitter to the mailman, that widen our world, strengthen connections, and foster future opportunities.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter puts it this way:

“The more weak ties we have, the more connected to the world we are and are more likely to receive important information about ideas, threats and opportunities in time to respond to them. Societies and social systems that have more weak ties are more likely to be dynamic and innovative. If the system is mostly made up of strong ties, then it will be fragmented and uncoordinated” (1983).

SIDEWALK BALLET

Where are these weak ties created? Most often in the public sphere. Thus, I bring in the esteemed Jane Jacobs to round out my thesis theory because she so marvelously and poetically celebrates neighborhoods. No one better than her appreciates and promotes “what a city is, bits and pieces that supplement each other and support each other” (1961). She describes the “eyes on the street” that bring common security to a neighborhood, promotes that “public characters” add personality and vibrancy, and posits the neighborhood as a place of wonder and connection, like “sidewalk ballet” (1961).

While I admittedly am a devotee of her activism and ideas, I do recognize that her Jacobsian theories can veer toward the utopian. Asks one critic: “where are the outcasts, the loners and the criminals? How do communities serve them too?” (Mennel, 2011). In assessing strategies and interventions for my thesis, I am cognizant to balance my passion for neighborhood connections with checking in on any utopian or kumbaya ideals. To design for a neighborhood is to design for as many people as possible. It’s crucial to consider and be aware of the wide swath of humanity that calls a place home.

**Weak Ties:** Casual social relationships that lack the closeness and familiarity of deep social relationships with friends, family and co-workers.

“The weak ties with our acquaintances are paradoxically much more important than the inwardly-focused conversations with our closer friends.”

– Mark Granovetter

**Public Space:** Outside space that is technically the commons, such as streets, sidewalks, parks and public transportation.



“Jacobs depicts this kind of ‘warm’ community as lively and engaged, with positive social benefits arising from the free association of people who might have different functions and beliefs but who all exist within a circumscribed social environment called the neighborhood.”

– Timothy Mennel







SCOPE OF THESIS

So where do I go from here? The aforementioned ideas offer a comprehensive and lofty theoretical overview of what it means to connect person-to-person in the context of a community. Given that I have had only a semester for execution and I am but one designer, I am not viewing this concepts as expectations with which to judge my thesis, but am using them as foundational premises on which to carve a situated niche.

GUIDING INSIGHTS

- Forced interaction between strangers is uncomfortable and requires too much energy
- Grand sweeping initiatives are impractical for my thesis given my time and manpower parameters, particularly those interventions that require a high amount of human capital or financial capital
- Starting at a small scale and focusing on grassroots strategy holds high potential for hyperlocal impact
- Scalability should be a key criteria for thinking about the future

INITIAL OBJECTIVES

From the onset of this thesis, I have been particular about various aspects of my process and my outcome. Listed here is a summary of my priorities.

>INCLUSIVITY

The intervention should be inclusive of the entire neighborhood. It’s easy to make generalizations based on my experience in Bed-Stuy and my own value systems. It’s critical that I continually consider and incorporate the views of a varying cross section of Bed-Stuy in order to be inclusive.

>IMPLEMENTATION

The intervention should be implementable within the semester. I view this thesis project as an opportunity for putting my two years of MFA

A sense of place is built up, in the end, from many little things too, some so small people take them for granted, and yet the lack of them takes the flavor out of the city.  
- Jane Jacobs

study into practice. That means producing and implementing products or services that can live fully in the world. Too often in this program we stay in theory. While it’s valuable to think about future implications and to understand the larger systems at play, I also find tremendous worth in what is actionable. I want to look back at my thesis and feel pride that I made some sort of progress in the neighborhood I call home.

>LASTING AND GENERATIVE

The intervention should be lasting and generative. Too often in the academic context, we study and work within an area and then close up shop as soon as the semester ends. For me, it’s important to create something that can live on without me. Not only do I want my thesis to have some legacy, but as a resident of this experimental space, I want to walk through my streets with my head high, energized by the demonstration of design to foster social capital. Keeping that in mind, I don’t and can’t expect to solve all problems in my neighborhood. Even the slightest nudge in a positive direction will be a success to me.

>CAPITAL

The intervention should not require a dedicated person or budget to maintain. Not to discount the countless successful community initiatives that require human and financial capital, but for the parameters of this project, it’s crucial that the final output be nimble enough to live without relying heavily on manpower or money. I’m conscious that this objective could limit some of my output.

>NUANCE AND SCALE

Embrace nuance and small scale. Change takes time. There is value to all types of entry points and scales. For me, I want to investigate design’s potential to nudge change and encourage neighbor interaction. This thesis book is where I will project future potential and scaling up for the project. But for the sake of experimentation, testing and reflection, I am purposefully focusing on the four-block radius of Bed-Stuy so that I can better manage the controls of my intervention.

DESIGN BRIEF

I entered this project wanting to increase neighborliness. While that has remained the focus, there’s been a shift in my specific design question and a slight reinterpreting of the true mission of my project. That’s what getting my hands dirty with research and prototyping will do!

MEANS OF CONNECTION

Getting people to physically connect and interact is an effective way to foster relationships. Psychologist Ken Muir recommends “fostering shared identity through contact” (2008). He asserts that bringing people into contact with one another will “build social capitalism [and] in turn should reduce prejudice and challenge stereotypes, creating the conditions through which an inclusive understanding of local identity can develop” (2008). I do not deny the power that contact and person-to-person engagement can have, but I question its immediate feasibility in the scope of my project.

My objective with this design brief is to uncover nuanced forms of engagement than can build organically in the neighborhood. I’ve increasingly been drawn to the nuanced assets of passive engagement as a way to gradually build up trust and reciprocity.

OVERARCHING DESIGN QUESTION

How can design foster trust and reciprocity in fragmented urban neighborhoods?

Specifically, I’m exploring the potentiality of publicly shared objects within the realm of “third spaces” (Oldenburg, 1999).

How might designed objects and experiences in public space in fragmented neighborhoods spark trust and reciprocity?

How can third spaces be the ambassadors or sponsors of the neighborhood?

**Interaction:** An exchange between two things; be it human to human, or human to object. To interact does not mean to connect.

**Connection:** Deeper and more lasting interaction in which the human feels a link to someone else, with some sense of value and joy.





# POWER OF THE THIRD SPACE

The common discomfort of interacting with strangers on the street became such a repeating trend in my research that I came to a realization about situations that were natural versus forced. The most pleasantries and reciprocation comes from businesses. Business owners, be them cafes, laundromats, bodegas or realtors, have it in their interest to engage with and build relationships with its surrounding residents. Likewise, patrons see mutual benefit in knowing their local proprietors.

What makes these spaces inviting and unique is that they are not fully public and yet not so private that access is exclusive. These entities are known as “third places” (Oldenburg, 1999). Coined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg, the third place is the place separate from your first place of home, and your second place of work. He summarizes its potential here:

In order for the city and its neighborhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and potential, there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather. There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which no one is required to play host, and in which we all feel at home and comfortable (Oldenburg, 1999).

Reading his book *The Great Good Place* is almost a continuous affirmation of what I want to achieve in my thesis. Oldenburg recognizes the “importance of informal public gathering places for a functioning civil society, democracy, and civic engagement” (1999). He highlights the neutrality of the third place, but also that the people who serve the space and how it is decorated have impact on a patron’s experience. Oldenburg stresses that “there must be places in which people can find and sort one another out across the barriers to social difference” (1999).

These insights about the power of the third place helped me pivot my thesis. I began to explore more specifically how third places could be a platform to foster trust and reciprocity.

“There’s nothing like being recognized by the vendors in my neighborhood. I love it.”

– Lara Penin

**Third Place:** The space that is not work or home, where one can gather and take pause. Typically more of a public space, such as a park, cafe, sanctuary, or community center.

“There must be neutral ground upon which people may gather.”

– Ray Oldenburg

# CAFE POP-UP SESSION

With my newly-honed focus on third places, I jumped straight into prototyping. I hosted a Valentine’s Day card-making party at a three-week old cafe called Brooklyn Blend on Tompkins Ave. I had been to the cafe a couple times before, and the co-owners Keishon Warren and Ali Coutard were immediately receptive to the idea.

I did all the prep for the event, including buying the materials, creating card samples, posting a flyer in the window, and decorating the outdoor sandwich board with the event information. The event went off without a hitch and it was a joy to get to meet new people and add a bit of cheer into people’s evenings.

One drawback of the evening was that no one came to the event because of the advertising. Participants – ranging in a five-year-old to a grandma – paused at the craft table because they had walked into the restaurant for food or saw the event from the outside and decided to come in.

# BIGGEST LEARNINGS

- Conducting a common activity gave me social permission to talk with new people and engage them in questions. My final design should incorporate a probe that prompts interaction.
- Having sample cards to point to for examples made it much easier for people to visualize what design they could do.
- When I got playful or teasing with people, younger kids and adults alike, they responded positively.
- Event planning and executing require a lot of time and effort, and true momentum often doesn’t come until later. As experiential and personal as events are, they are probably not the most sustainable model for my semester-long thesis.
- Events can impact and include only so many people. Maybe I should consider going back out into the setting of the street.







# OBJECT-BASED THEORY

The card-making event proved to me that when there is a common artifact or experience for which to gather, interaction and conversation follows at such a higher rate of ease and comfort. Thus, I focused my efforts on what probes could promote interaction. What is the power and potential of artifacts? I draw lessons from three theorists to nail down my object-based strategy.

## >AESTHETIC POWER OF OBJECTS

Elaine Scarry writes about her love of beautiful things in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*. She poses the question: “What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird?” (Scarry, 1999). She describes beautiful things as “generative objects,” and I see in her insights almost the *Field of Dreams* cliché of “if you build it, they will come” (1989). What delightful offering or experience could I produce for which people can smile and pause?

## >GIFTS VS. COMMODITY

When thinking about the design of objects, one should consider its purpose and value. If I’m trying to infuse a sense of trust and reciprocity in Bed-Stuy, it’s critical to consider how an object is construed. Lewis Hyde writes in his 1983 book *The Gift* that there are two kinds of property: gifts and commodity. He classifies a work of art as a gift; as the contribution of “creativity and the artist in the modern world.” He highlights the status that can be achieved “by giving things away instead of pulling them up” (Hyde, 1983). How can a sense of gift-giving and reciprocity be fostered into the thesis process and output?

## >OBJECTS AS EVOCATIVE

Christopher Bollas positions object theory from a psycho-analytical perspective. His book *The Evocative Object World* looks at how “architecture and built environment interact with individual and societal dream life.” He stresses that we’re unconsciously “shaped by our use of evocative objects” and that “each place we visit triggers intricate chains of associations.” What artifact(s) can evoke heightened pride and reciprocity?

## >SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

These theorists fit near the sociology idea of social constructionism (different than constructivism), that contends that artifacts are created through the social interactions of a group. The power of objects is less about their physical attributes and more about how they stir social interaction. For this thesis, designed objects will not be the entire output, rather one part of a system. The design of objects should consider the potential for scalability, adaptation and appropriation. It’s in the comprehensive understanding of the surrounding system that this project should exist.

# BACK TO THE BRIEF

By funneling down from broader social theory to the tangible outputs of objects, the scope and the scale of the thesis becomes more feasible and more testable. The next portion of this book shows my exploration through objects to test their ability to augment social capital in fragmented neighborhoods. Objects become the entry point of this thesis.

# NEIGHBOR NOTES

Another prototype was a series of notes left in five doorways on my street in Bed-Stuy. I prepared five note cards and paired them each with a postage-stamped and pre-addressed postcard. I introduced myself as a neighbor and asked them to send the postcard. I signed them all from Cameron. Each note was of slight variance, using phrases such as: “I’m doing a social experiment,” and “My friend just moved to the city and doesn’t believe New Yorkers are kind, can you help me change that?”

None of the five addressed postcards were ever sent or received. There are only so many conclusions I can draw about this experiment since I wasn’t able to speak to anyone who received the note and postcard for me. What I do extrapolate is that the anonymity, targeting of the private space of one’s home, lack of incentive, and absence of one-to-one interaction are reasons why these random neighbors might not have sent the postcards.

For me, I'd never hesitate to write a few lines and drop a postcard in the mail, seeing as the hurdle of postage and address were already taken care of. I view written and handmade correspondence as a sincere and feasible way of building relationships. But I'm not blind to the fact that it is not everyone's style.



*Although the response postcards were pre-addressed, I did not receive any responses. And since the experiment was anonymous, I wasn't able to garner any feedback.*

### THIRD PLACE AS SPONSOR

Both of these first two prototypes – the cafe craft session and the notes left on neighbor's doors – had shortcomings that helped illuminate what my next intervention should be.

- Asking people to do something (i.e. write notes) without any context or reward likely won't work. **There needs to be an incentive for people in order to interact.**
- Although the cafe is a wonderful example of a third place, there is **still the barrier of entering the space.** Likewise, in-cafe programming takes time and repeated efforts to build participation.

I decided to expand the platform of a third place to a more public realm. Maybe I could find a happy medium between the truly public space of a park fence (from which my survey was removed) and the inclusive-but-still-a-tad-intimidating format of a cafe event. Perhaps the **sidewalk outside of a cafe?** Accessible 24/7, but connected to the welcoming and community vibe of the third place.

“The character of a third place is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres.”

– Ray Oldenburg





DESIGN PRECEDENTS

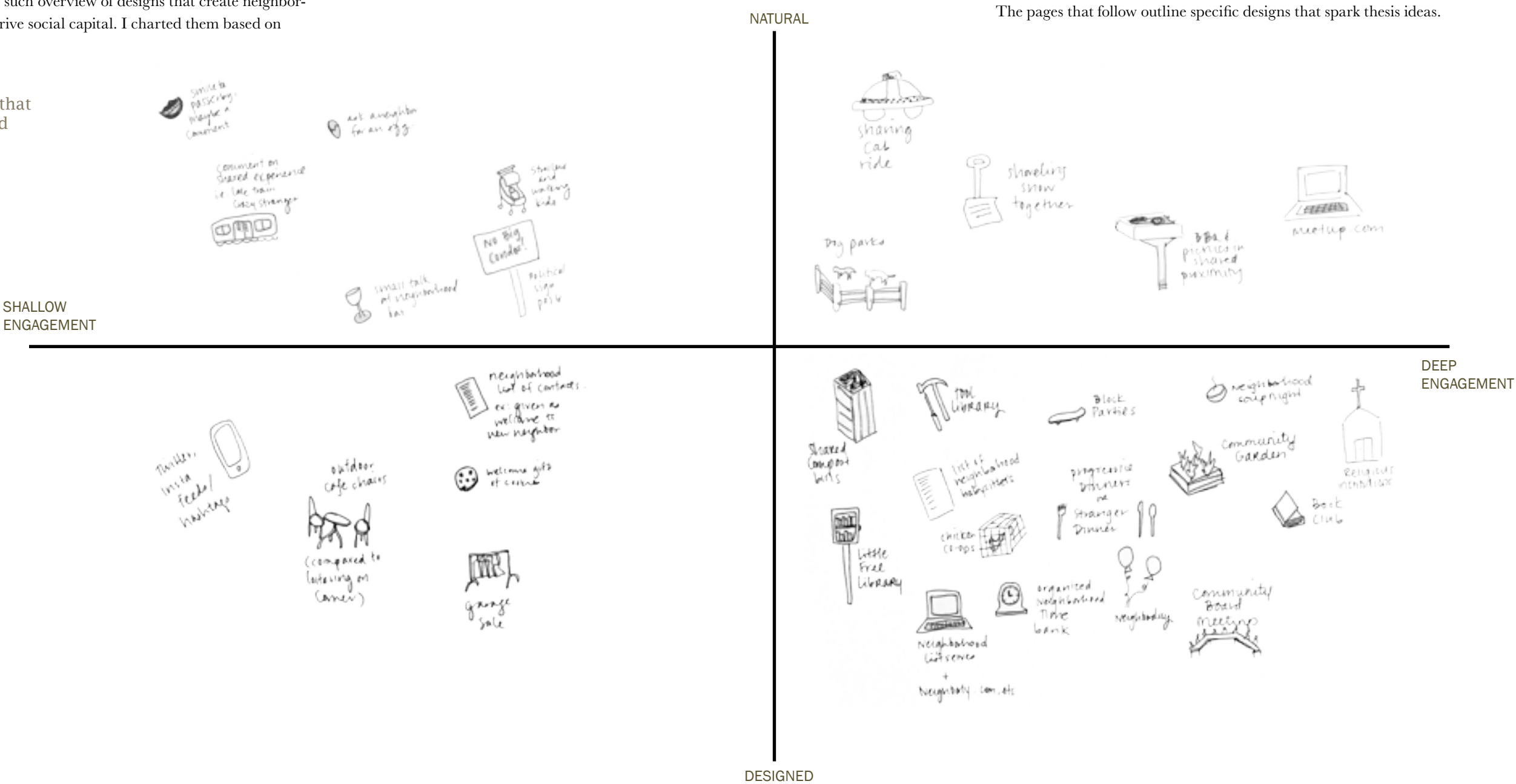
There are many object and location-based projects that inspire me in my thesis work. From the expertly designed to more organic everyday creations, objects, events and installations can play a role in generating positive energy in a place.

The matrix below is one such overview of designs that create neighborhood engagement and drive social capital. I charted them based on

What are designed objects and events that foster neighborhood engagement and connection?

where they lie on the spectrum of shallow and deep engagement, and natural and designed. Walking your dog, smiling at a baby, chatting at a yard sale – these are organic moments that gradually build engagement. On the other hand, churches, community boards, block parties, organized meet-up groups – these associations drive much deeper engagement, but require manpower and funding to operate.

The pages that follow outline specific designs that spark thesis ideas.





DESIGNED OBJECTS

>LITTLE FREE LIBRARY

Constructed lending libraries posted outside of homes. Passersby are encouraged to leave a book or take a book. It’s a designed object that facilitates community connection, albeit at a distance. These boxes are less about introducing people to one another, but they demonstrate neighborhood value and respect for installations. They can become stimulus for conversation and connection. Furthermore, the boxes can be registered in a nationwide registry, amplifying their gravitas and stickiness.

>PULSE OF THE CITY

An interactive public art installation on sidewalks that turns pedestrians’ heartbeats into music. It makes a destination out of infrastructure.

>HELLO LAMP POST

Interactive scavenger hunt that connects people’s cell phones to public infrastructure. Serial codes and other number demarcations on the pieces of infrastructure trigger conversations between human users.

>HOSTESS GIFTS

When my family first traveled abroad in 1997, we passed out engraved pencils that read “Thank You from the US Hanson’s.” They were a hit, granted, it was back when it was cool to be American.



George Zisiadis

Right: Pulse of the City (2013)  
Left: Hello Lamp Post (2013)



<http://www.hellolamppost.co.uk/>



Left: Little Free Library that I built outside my apartment in LA  
Right: Public refrigerator in India (2016)



Cosmopolitan India

SHARING ECONOMY

>FREE PILES

It’s common in Brooklyn that when people no longer want something but value it enough not to throw it away, they will leave items outside on the sidewalk. It is a learned cultural action to collect the discards.

>PUBLIC REFRIGERATORS

Recent initiatives in India, Spain and Argentina demonstrate how leftover food can be left in sidewalk refrigerators. It uses public space to safely transfer a common good. The refrigerators are commonly powered by an adjoining restaurant and institution. With minimal rules, people naturally figure out a system of sharing.

>TIME BANKS

Regardless of skill-level or market rates, community time banks value every person’s time equally. You accrue hours and “cash” in hours in this localized and managed barter system. It’s a physical manifestation of social capital.

COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS

>CANDY CHANG

Candy Chang creates art installations in public space to trigger dialogue and display collective sentiment. The size and boldness of her aesthetics are very eye-popping. So too are the depth of her inquiries, but her questioning does not often lead to resolution or action steps.

>COMMUNITY CENSUS

Interactive public street installation that captures community perceptions around key neighborhood resources and issues. Data is aggregated into crowd-sourced “community perception maps” (Tythe Design and 3x3) to be used to pinpoint opportunities for neighborhood growth.

>PIE LAB

Experiment in a downtrodden part of Birmingham, AL to hand out slices of pie to incentivize people to gather about ideas. Born out of the design collective known as Project M, it intends to be a combination pop-up cafe, design studio and civic clubhouse.

DIGITAL TO PHYSICAL CONNECTORS

>COUCHSURFING

Digital social network that connects travelers around the world with hosts that have available couches to “surf.” No money is exchanged, instead, the focus is on sharing unique cultural experiences.

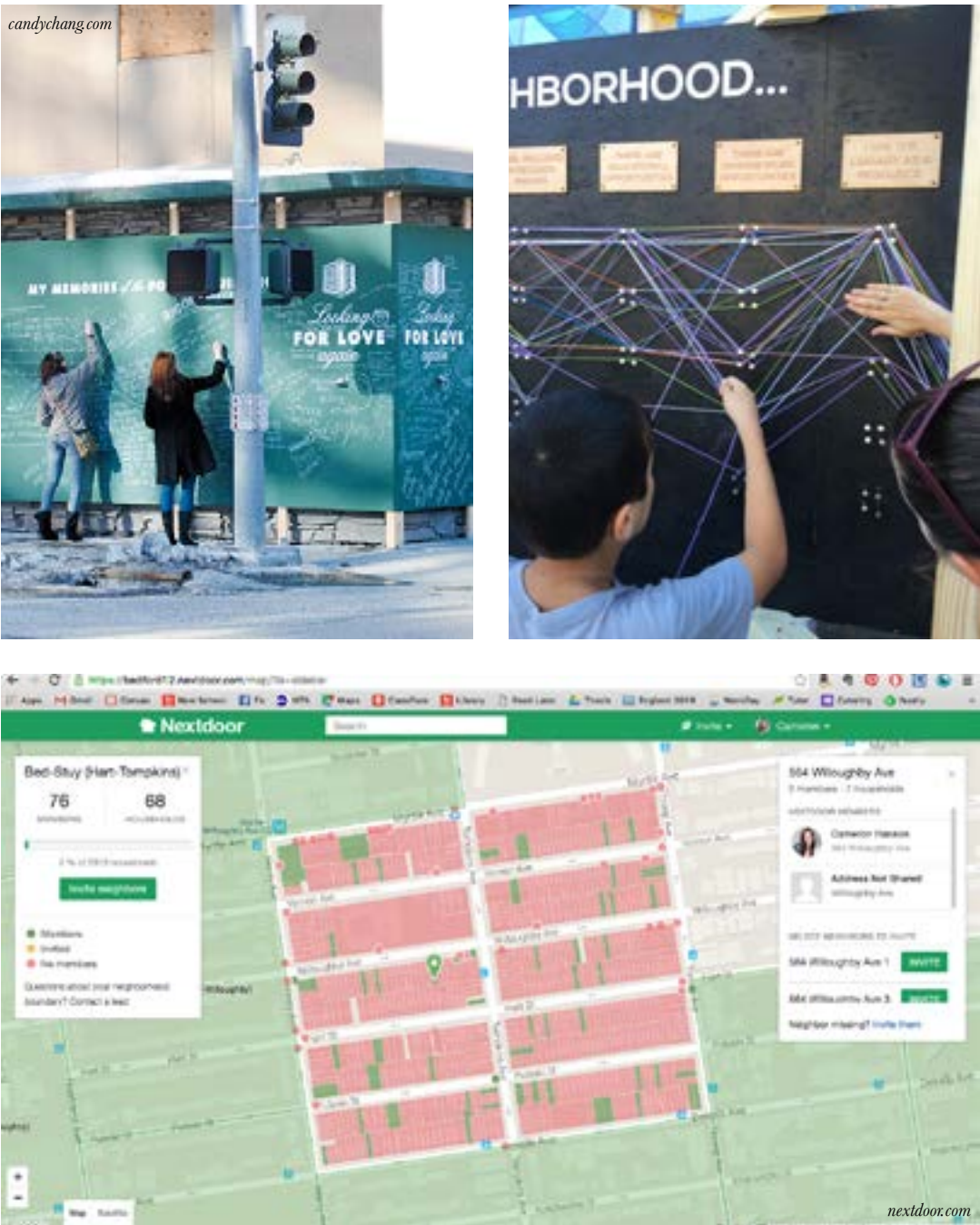
>EATWITH

Digital social network that promotes dinner parties at people’s private homes. Anyone with a profile can ask to be part of a dinner, and once accepted, pays through the website.

>NEXTDOOR

Private social network based on where you live. Has great potential for connection, but requires active engagement and buy-in.

“How powerful our public spaces can be if we’re given the opportunity to have a voice and share with one another.”  
- Candy Chang



Clockwise from top: Candy Chang's installations grab your eyes, Community Census makes surveying fun, Nextdoor shows hyperlocal neighborhood activity





## EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES

### >NEIGHBORDAY

The organization GOOD established a make believe holiday called Neighborday in order to encourage people to go outside their comfort zones – emotionally and physically – and meet their community. I absolutely loved the idea and led two initiatives in April 2013. I designed a series of postcards and flyers to promote two initiatives. One was a parking lot party at my apartment where I literally knocked on unknown doors. At work, I encouraged people to hand draw maps of their community. Over forty maps were submitted at the events!

### >BLOCK PARTIES

Planned events for residents on a particular block, normally organized by a block association. My particular block in Bed-Stuy does not have an association. Summertime is especially popular for block parties in Bed-Stuy, but honestly I've been hesitant to attend because I questioned whether I belonged and I didn't know how I would be judged for my potluck contribution. **What is it about an inherently open event that seems exclusive?**

### >LITERARY FEAST

The crowd-funded neighborhood association of Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C. hosts annual Literary Feasts. Residents sign up to host book-themed dinners in their homes based off of a novel of their choice, be it a French meal for Hemingway or gothic decor for Edgar Allan Poe. **\$100 minimum cost for attendance means it's not accessible to all.**

### >LAUNDROMAT PROJECT

Currently operating in certain neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the Bronx, this non-profit offers arts programming in laundromats. **It leverages the set time and routine of frequenting a laundromat each week and layers creative opportunity on top of it.** It's localized and micro efforts can create lasting change.

*Clockwise from top: Neighborday flyer I created in 2013, some of the 40 maps collected from neighbors and co-workers for Neighborday, Laundromat Project in Bed-Stuy*



COLLECTIVE ACTION

>NEIGHBOR.LY

Website that promotes and aggregates local support for community projects. More action-based than NextDoor.com.

>PAY IT FORWARD

Social concept that when someone does a good deed or kind gesture to you, you selflessly pass it on to another person, without any expectation in return. This website promotes this social practice, tracks the movement and encourages other people to pay it forward.

>DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

Incubator that transforms and evolves public space with city agencies and community collaborators.

>TRANSITION MAR VISTA/VENICE

was an active member, host and web designer for the Venice Beach chapter of the global Transition Towns network. Born out of collective passion to fight against oil fracking and promote sustainable lifestyles, the Venice group hosts regular potlucks, maintains a public garden, leads many educational workshops, and rallies around community issues. This group solidified my interest in pursuing an MFA.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

>RED HOOK HUB

Bulletin board based communication system that allows “residents and stakeholders to share and access neighborhood information online and at the Hub location” (2016).

>LINKNYC

Latest infrastructure to hit NYC. The structures are beacons of information, wifi, charging and of course advertising. Installed in busy places, they are meant to serve the needs of passersby.



MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Four design precedents especially resonate with my aspirations for Bed-Stuy: the Laundromat Project, Candy Chang’s installations, Pulse of the City, and Little Free Libraries. Outlined below are the components of each design that are so noteworthy, and extrapolations on how I can apply it to my own thesis project.

LAYERS SERVICE ON A ROUTINE

For something to be introduced and adopted by a neighborhood, it cannot be force-fed. What’s brilliant about the Laundromat Project is that builds upon the weekly routine of going to the laundromat and having a set amount of time there. It’s a place and practice of wide diversity.

**Organic layering on the quotidian is a major criteria for my project.**

FIDELITY OF SIZE AND SPECTACLE

Candy Chang’s work is often criticized that the conversations that she opens up don’t always have a feedback loop. But what they do really well is us size, public location and bold visual design to grab people’s attention.

**Aesthetics and placement in public are important elements of neighborhood design.**

DELIGHTFUL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

These structures that transform your heartbeat into a song is a fun idea. How great if Bed-Stuy installed these and made this part of Brooklyn a destination to experience.

**I don’t have the technological skillset to replicate such an installation, but the fact that it requires interaction and is incorporated into public infrastructure is what I want out of my thesis project.**

SHARED COMMUNITY ARTIFACT

What makes Little Free Libraries such a standout idea is that it positions sharing and trust in the public domain.

**For this thesis, I want to build upon the Little Free Library to expand its domain and capacities in a fragmented urban environment.**

Considering these criteria, I finally arrive at an actionable point of entry.







LIBRARY AS PLATFORM

Okay, time to put my theory and experiments in practice: I have finally arrived at my big idea. I decided to construct and install a Little Free Library to encourage public sharing and increase reciprocity. I intentionally settled on a Little Free Library because it is already established as a successful practice in the United States. My objective here is to use the library as a platform to test engagement in the urban setting of Bed-Stuy and to explore how I can design can add even more value.

THEORY OF CHANGE

By entrusting an attractive and homemade wooden structure of the library, along with its book contents, to live outside, the neighborhood is given the opportunity to treat the artifacts with respect. By caring for the shared objects, neighbors in a sense are caring for each other. This in turn can nudge an increase in social capital.

STRENGTH OF A NETWORK

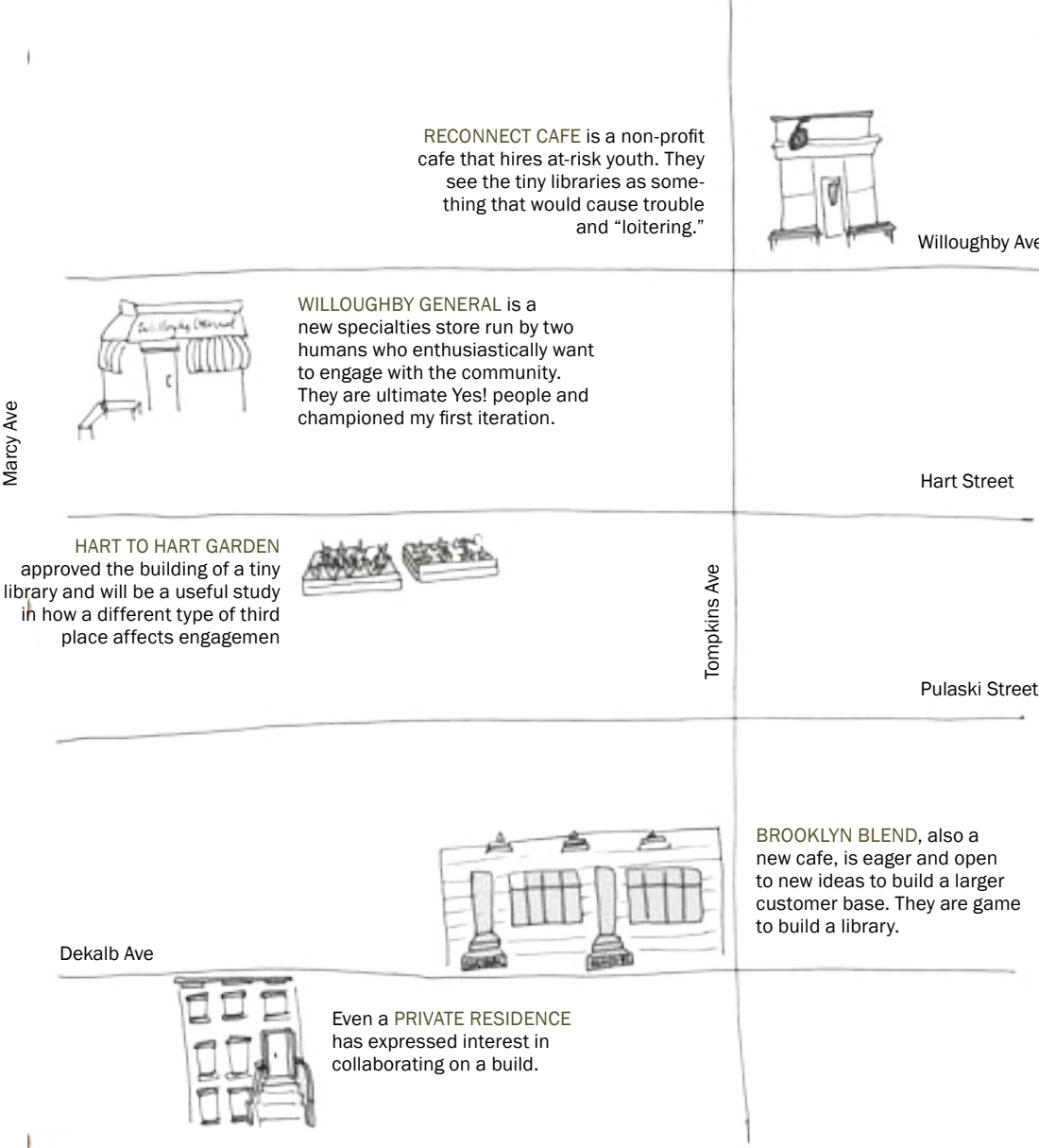
My initial proposition was to create a network of tiny libraries. By physically putting this pocket of Bed-Stuy on the map, the ares could become a destination. Symbolically, the libraries could demonstrate to residents and visitors alike that the neighborhood cares about each other. The group of libraries could carry greater impact than the sum of their parts, and together they could grow into other social realms. I ended up focusing on the impact of one pilot library.

PARTNERS

My neighbors were at the center of this project. Throughout my semester, I established four key relationships with proprietors of third spaces:

- Willoughby General Store
- Brooklyn Blend
- ReConnect Cafe
- Hart to Hart Garden

“The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else. The way people use a place mirrors expectations.”  
- Holly Whyte



### >WILLOUGHBY GENERAL

This adorable little store is on the same block where I live; I pass it by every time I walk to the subway. Owners Rae Tuter and Barbara Lester have thrown their full support to my endeavors and have introduced me to opportunities at the community garden and a local residence. I initially did not consider them as partners because their appearance and position in the neighborhood seemed too much like mine, and I was deliberately trying to partner with long term residents (and didn't appear as a hipster yuppie). The more I get to know these humans, the more I understand that they too are trying to connect with neighbors. They've lived around the corner for eight years and did a Kickstarter campaign to open up their shop.

*Barbara Lester and Rae Tuter*



### >BROOKLYN BLEND

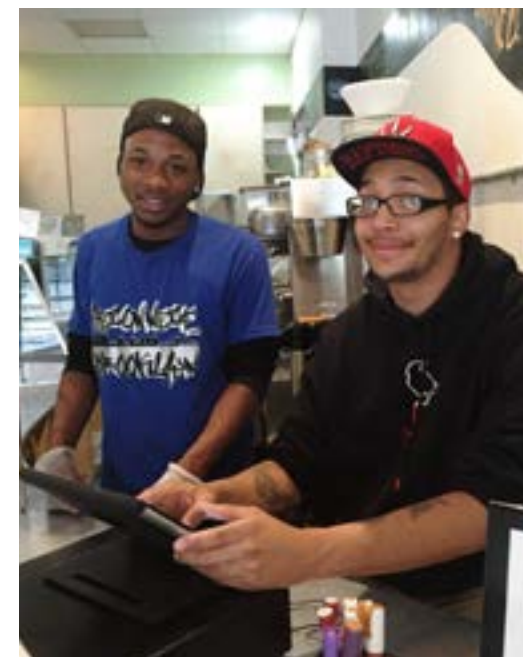
Keishon Warren and Ali Coutard are long-time Brooklynites and opened the juice bar and vegetarian cafe Brooklyn Blend in January 2016. They are first-time café owners and are game to try out all my ideas in an effort to reach a broad sect of the neighborhood. Keishon calls me “the ideas woman.”

I hosted the craft session at their cafe and we are in discussions to build a tiny library together. Keishon has invited me to join him on one of his upcoming trips to a local lumber yard.



*Keishon Warren*

*Deon Burns and John Negron*



### >RECONNECT CAFE

ReConnect Cafe is a non-profit cafe with a mission of “improving Bed-Stuy one block at a time” (2104). It hires at-risk youth and was started by Catholic priest Father Jim O’Shea. While their vision is aligned with mine, we have not seen eye-to-eye on strategy. Father Jim and manager Efrain Hernandez have not approved installing a tiny library because they are wary of it being a loitering magnet. Efrain says he “knows the neighborhood inside and out” and that he doesn’t trust leaving something outside. Regardless of their views on the library, I always leave their cafe feeling more connected to the community and happy for the conversation.

### >HART TO HART GARDEN

Barbara is the president of the Hart to Hart Garden and presented the library idea on my behalf and got it approved. One of the gardeners, Jeff Shepherd, is a carpenter who offered to make the library for me! The garden represents more of the homeownership base of the neighborhood, as these are coveted garden plots for which people have to demonstrate commitment. As such, the demographic of the garden is older, ranging in the 30s to 50s. Comparable, Willoughby General attracts a younger 20s to 40s age bracket. These ranges are gathered only from my personal observation.



*Jeff Shepherd*





LIBRARY PROTOTYPE AT WILLOUGHBY GENERAL

I knew Rae (and by extension her business partner and mother-in-law Barbara) would be a fantastic thesis partner when she quoted Ray Oldenburg in a casual conversation. She was immediately on board with my rough prototype idea of leaving a wooden crate outside on her bench to stand in as a library. When I presented the crate idea to the other two cafes, they were weary of having something that was moveable. ReConnect said they’d never trust the crate to live outside after hours.

Clockwise from top: Testing out crates at Willoughby General, Brooklyn Blend, a bodega and ReConnect Cafe



As soon as the crate of books hit the bench of Willoughby General, there was engagement – books continually were added. Even when the crate was taken inside during off-hours, books were left on the stoop.

Rae posted some photos on the store’s Instagram account, which picked up some buzz. The following screenshots show how people were already responding and reacting positively.

Said one Instagrammer: “#BEDSTUY I am never quitting you.”

The books started pouring in! So much so that they were dropped off when the store was closed. Sidewalk chalk helped with the promotion as well.







Positive feedback via the @WilloughbyGeneral Instagram



“When people see me with my headphones, I bet they think I’m listening to rap music. But they’re audiobooks!” – Bria

## THE BUILD

The engagement with the crate library was definitely enough fodder to jump to the next step of actually constructing the first permanent library. I’ve never built something this sturdy out of wood before, and definitely not by myself. I’m thankful for the patient technicians in the Parsons wood shop to answer all my questions. Measure twice, cut once!

Any anxiety and self-doubt about the project was quickly erased as soon as I took the next stages of construction outside of Willoughby General. Almost instantly, people started pausing and chatting with me to inquire about what was going on. Many assumed I was part of the store or being hired for my work. When I told them I was a neighbor with an interest in social cohesion, people seemed pleasantly surprised.







The artifact of the library gave permission for conversations I otherwise would not have had. I chatted with a canner, Bria, who explained Willoughby Ave was her Saturday route and that she had lots of books that she'd add to the library. She described how much she loves reading and said "when people see me with my headphones I bet they think I'm listening to rap music. But they're audiobooks!"

Mike, who was working on his car, inquired about what I was doing and when he learned I lived on the street and that my Hasidic first floor neighbors have an untamed backyard, he handed me his business card for basement and garden clean-outs.

I petted dogs, oohed at children and said hello to strangers. All because the magic of a wooden box! Up until this portion of my thesis, I was overwhelmed with my outsider status and frustration that I couldn't wrangle the powers of design to build connection in the community. The library build out has continued to motivate and fuel me in the progression toward neighborliness.

### INITIAL IMPACT

The full turnaround time from plywood sheet to completed library was six days. There were multiple trips to Home Depot (only two blocks away!), a visit to a friend's Bed-Stuy backyard to use his saw, and even a few car rides from Rae and Barbara to transport heavy materials. With every new person's involvement, I was reminded how this little wooden box was expanding my neighborhood network like never before.

Almost without fail, the library continues to rotate a steady flow of inventory. It is not as much of a novelty as it was in its initial weeks, but people continue to pause around it and make comments.

- "I love the children's books here. I wish there were even more."
- "I think it's so cool that people are respecting this thing!"
- "You mean... they're... free?" (very common question)
- "I have so many books I can bring. This is awesome!"
- "I told my friend to meet me at the cute purple thing."

"Right to the city as a right to create, to participate, to be represented - it is the right to see oneself reflected in the place they live."

- Project for Public Spaces

"Placemaking is not the product, but a means to an end."

- Project for Public Spaces



"I walked my boyfriend over here just to show him the library."

- Leah, with Mike





> ANALYSIS METHODS

Given that this social experiment is testing the intangible asset of social capital, there are no tell-tale methods of assessing use and impact. My primary strategies for gathering data were conversations with people on the street, checking in almost daily with Barbara and Rae and leveraging social media.

I also used a hidden camera to take photos of how the library is being used. It's a 2x2 inch camera that is set to take a photo every sixty seconds. I set it up in three different locations – inside the library, attached to a fire escape and attached to a stair railing – and surprisingly it was never poached!

The photos only show a small slice of usage, due to frequency of picture-taking, battery longevity, and number of days the camera was set up. My main takeaway is that people might actually not be engaging with the library as much as I thought. With all the buzz from passersby, social media, and Willoughby General, I had inflated its presence in the neighborhood. Most of the photos show no movement at all. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. The tiny library is not expected to be a part of every single person's quotidien existence; how many times does one need to look for a book to read? Likewise, opening the library door is not the only quantifier of use or appreciation.

Another takeaway is one of demographics. The photos taken of people who opened the library door are mostly white, while the people walking past the library are more black. I could extrapolate use based on demographic, but I don't think enough photos have been taken to make a solid point. My personal (and probably biased) experience standing outside of Willoughby General is that it is a broad cross section of the neighborhood that stops by the library and who engages me in conversation about it.

If I had more time, I would set up a more formal video investigation, as well as engage neighbors in a more thorough survey to dig deeper into the impact, if any, this tiny library has had on people.

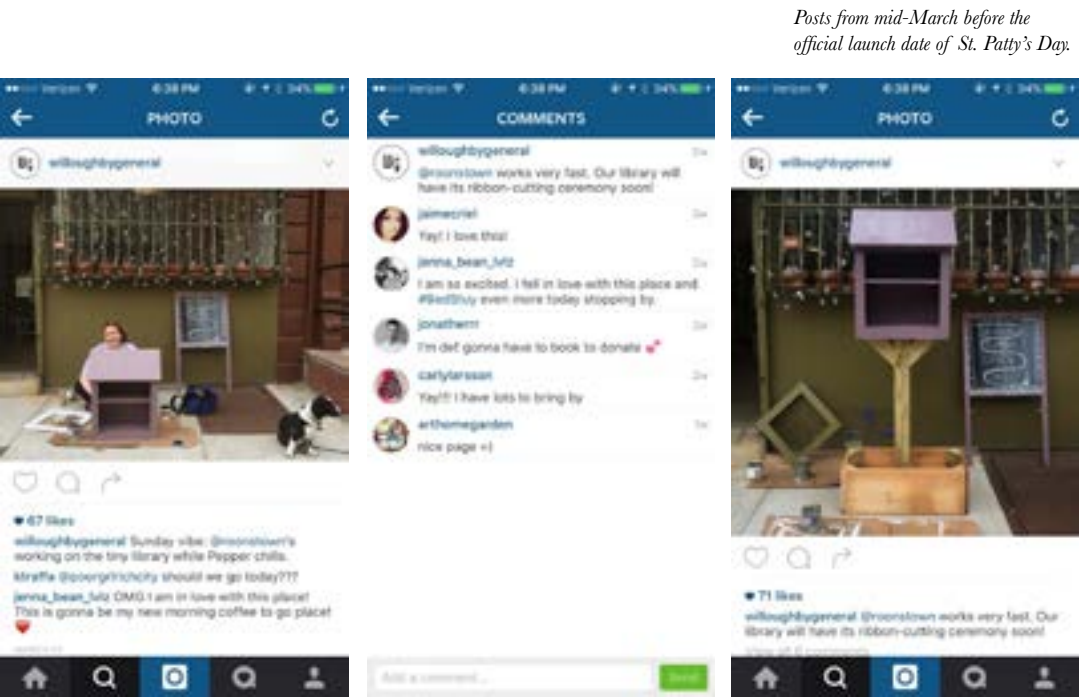




SOCIAL MEDIA REACTIONS

>INSTAGRAM

Seeing the reaction from anonymous strangers was really affirming. One can't not think about increased neighborliness when someone says "I'm so excited. I fell in love with this place and #BedStuy even more today stopping by" (@jenna\_bean\_lvlz, 2016). As the maker and a resident, these comments feel so good. But I'm also conscious that talk, especially on social media, does not directly translate to action. My hope is that the library and its designed components can be a platform for more engagement in the neighborhood.



Posts from mid-March before the official launch date of St. Patty's Day.

>FACEBOOK

Facebook has provided an even more illuminating peek into neighbor responses. The followers of the Willoughby General Instagram account are a self-selected slice of the community, while the broader Bed-Stuy Facebook group cuts across a more representative cross section of the neighborhood. For the most part, comments were enthusiastic and people asked for ways to donate and connect with other endeavors. There was a standout negative comment in which a woman declared the library an act of gentrification.



I privately messaged this woman to tell her that I was interested in hearing more about what she had to say. She did not respond.

1 share

 **Natascha Johnson** aka Ola Ronke  
Like · Reply ·  2 · April 12 at 12:31pm

 **Marilyn Gore** And what kind of info do we expect the offering to be? "How to survive the rampant gentrification and rent gouging . greedy assed landlords and developers?" or, "How poor, hardworking people are being priced out of a community we have inhabited for decades. I don't think anybody gives a poot about your little stupid "library" project. to "promote sharing and reciprocity. you people never see the big picture. do you?"  
Like · Reply ·  2 · April 13 at 10:01am

 **Ronica Webb** Its a free library...geez..  
Like · Reply · April 14 at 6:19am

 Write a reply...


 **Bernadette Okeke** I Did Just Yesterday. 4-12-16 !!!, There is One On The Block I Live On.  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 11:09am

 **James Sanford** That's wonderful...I live in the neighborhood. will stop by...do you need any children books?  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 11:40am

 **Cameron Hanson** The childrens books are by far the most popular in the little library. So much in fact we're thinking of building a shorter version of the library so that the kids can reach it at their level. Would love anything you can contribute!  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 10:53pm

 **James Sanford** Great...we will gather them a bring...  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 11:30pm

 Write a reply...

 **Bernadette Okeke** These Book Drops Are Growing All Over BKLYN !!!  
Like · Reply ·  1 · April 13 at 11:43am

 **Nakia Haskins** Hi, I'm working on a district 16 literacy night on June 2. We are trying to map all the free libraries in Bed-stuy. I love to speak to you. How do I contact you?  
Like · Reply ·  3 · April 13 at 7:29pm

 **Letty Bell Hawthorne** You need books soror?  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 6:51pm

 **Cameron Hanson** I'd love to chat about the literacy night! My email is hanson.cameron@gmail.com  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 10:51pm

 **Nakia Haskins** Cameron Hanson i will email you later today

 **Jamila Godd** I like the idea of a free shared library. The promotion of open access knowledge should always be appreciated. Plus, the community has the opportunity to become librarians; sharing what they feel is important to learn, know, and become aware of. Best of luck!  
Unlike · Reply ·  1 · April 13 at 9:44pm · Edited

 **Ola Ronke** FYI - to all who might be interested I have a mobile library that travels around the Bed stuy area, it features a collection of 400 books written by Black women, all are welcome to donate or trade books with the library. The FB page is <https://www.facebook.com/FreeBlackWomansLibrary/>

  
2,222 Likes  
872 talking about this  


Like · Reply ·  13 · April 13 at 9:49pm

 **Cameron Hanson** This is a fantastic idea! When will the library next be open and where will it be located?  
Like · Reply · April 13 at 11:01pm · Edited

 **Cameron Hanson** What a fantastic concept! It reminds me of the #1000BlackGirlBooks project led by the 5th grader who's trying to collect 1,000 childrens books with a black girl as the main character. <http://www.ew.com/.../26/marley-dias-1000-books-black-girl>

**403 Forbidden**  
EW.COM

Like · Reply · Remove Preview · April 13 at 11:01pm  
 View more replies

 Write a reply...

 **Dan Costello** Passed it yesterday! Gonna bring something over tomorrow.  
Like · Reply · April 14 at 6:54pm

 **BedStuy Pop-Up** Awesomeness!  
Like · Reply · April 15 at 9:11am

 **BedStuy Pop-Up** Such a great idea 4our babe! Would like to discuss other options with you guys.  
 we do indieFILM promotions (all PRO-BONO) for now ... See More

 nyc bedStuy Pop-Up Cinema |





## nyc bedStuy Pop-Up Cinema | Underground Movies Outdoors

Brooklyn pop-Up Cinema, bedStuy Films, Film Consulting...  
NYCPOPUPCINEMA.COM

Like · Reply · April 15 at 9:15am

 **Ola Ronke** <https://www.facebook.com/events/1604862053166124/>



MAY  
8

### The Free Black Women's...

Sun 12 PM - 462 Halsey Comm...  
355 people interested · 99 peop...

★ Interested

Like · Reply · April 20 at 8:15am



Write a reply...



**BedStuy Pop-Up** A sharing library's a good thing....so's your comment! Very true happenings, indeed. We're in BedStuy too...

📞CALL-OUT for Films!

Bstuymovies@gmail.com [www.nycpopupcinema.com](http://www.nycpopupcinema.com)

Chk out @bstypopupcinema's:

<https://twitter.com/bstypopu.../status/720803591111788018...>



## nyc bedStuy Pop-Up Cinema | Underground Movies Outdoors

Brooklyn pop-Up Cinema, bedStuy Films, Film Consulting...  
NYCPOPUPCINEMA.COM

Like · Reply · April 15 at 9:17am



**Hollie Harper** I was there with my daughter a month ago. GREAT SHOP! ❤️

Unlike · Reply · 2 · April 19 at 10:29pm



**Julia Chance** Great concept! I'll visit soon.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · April 20 at 7:52am

Like · Reply · April 15 at 9:17am



**Hollie Harper** I was there with my daughter a month ago. GREAT SHOP! ❤️

Unlike · Reply · 2 · April 19 at 10:29pm



**Julia Chance** Great concept! I'll visit soon.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · April 20 at 7:52am



**Ola Ronke** <https://www.facebook.com/events/1604862053166124/>



MAY  
8

### The Free Black Women's Libra...

Sun 12 PM - 462 Halsey Community G...  
355 people interested · 99 people going

★ Interested

Like · Reply · 1 · April 20 at 8:14am



**Cameron Hanson** It's on my calendar, check!

Like · Reply · April 20 at 1:53pm



Write a reply...



**Kerika Fields** Do u need books. I have BOOKS!!!

Like · Reply · 1 · April 20 at 9:15am



**Cameron Hanson** The more books, the merrier!

Like · Reply · 1 · April 20 at 1:53pm



**Kerika Fields** Is there an ideal time to drop some off??

Like · Reply · April 20 at 1:55pm

👉 View more replies



Write a reply...



Write a comment...



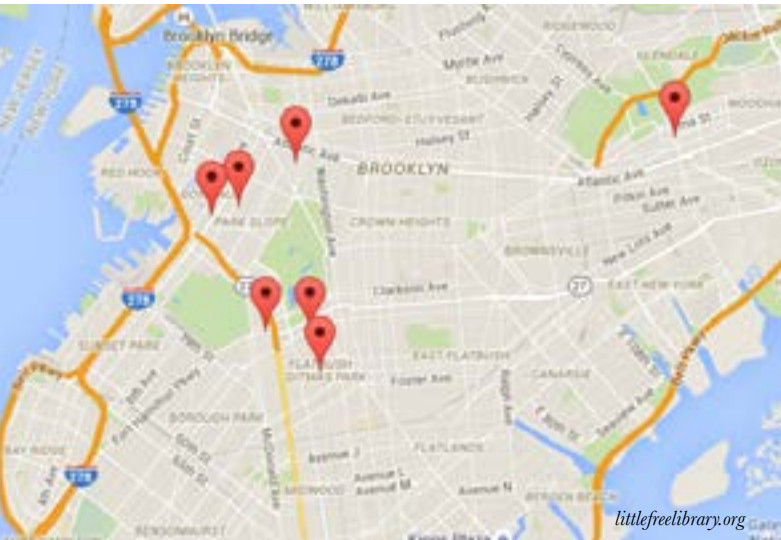


MORE THAN A REPLICATION

At first glance, this tiny library could seem like just a replication of the already demonstrated engagement of Little Free Libraries. That interpretation however, is shallow. I intentionally chose to build off of a successful model to use it as a platform for further experimentation.

In all of Brooklyn, only seven Little Free Libraries are registered! The urban environment is the main reason for this. Little Free Libraries are commonly installed outside of suburban homes. In New York City, residents have minimal control of the sidewalk space outside of their home. Furthermore, there’s hardly any exposed earth in which to post the libraries; there’s only concrete! Figuring out how to build the Willoughby General library was a challenge – it had to be sturdy and difficult to move, but not permanent enough to cause sidewalk damage. I’m thankful for Barbara’s suggestion to fill the planter with pebbles.

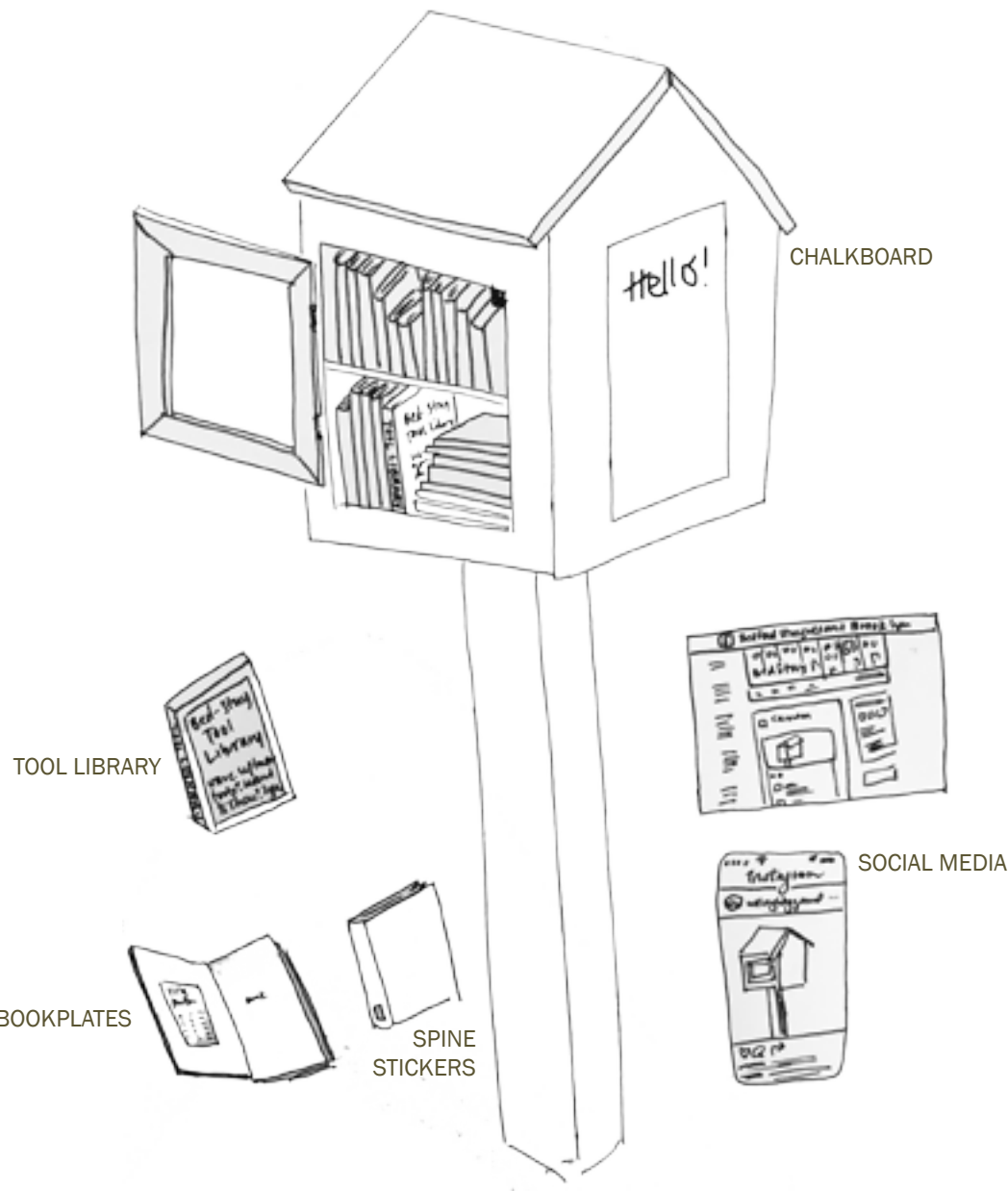
The Bed-Stuy library is also distinguished by the fact that it’s partly sponsored by Willoughby General. When approaching Little Free Libraries outside of homes, I feel like I’m intruding slightly. But in the context of in front of a business, I feel welcome and unintimidated.



There are only seven registered Little Free Libraries in Brooklyn (2016).

DESIGNED TOUCHPOINTS

The tiny library is a vehicle for which this thesis evolves. I designed various components that more deeply address the core thesis question of how shared public objects can bolster trust and reciprocity.





Questions posed on the bookplates:

- What do you love about Bed-Stuy?
- How'd you rate this book?
- How do you define neighborliness?
- What would you like to see in Bed-Stuy?
- What's your favorite Bed-Stuy memory?
- Why did you select this book?
- What can neighbors lend to each other?
- How do you describe Bed-Stuy?

>BRANDED SIGN

The name – Bed-Stuy Lending Library – is intentional. It is straightforward, comprehensive and demonstrates that it’s for everyone.

>SPINE STICKERS

Branded stickers on the spine of each book do two primary things:

- Brand the books as from the tiny library so that when the books go home with people, they are reminded about the book’s origin.
- Allows easy inventory-checking for Rae and Barbara. They’ve been managing most of the day-to-day inventory and flow.

>BOOKPLATE

Inside of each book posted in the libraries are bookplate stickers that give room for check-out details, as well as pose such questions (shown to the left). Due to the casual instructions to “leave an item, take an item,” the bookplates aren’t expected to be used as a check-out method. Most people who take a book will probably have that book sit on a shelf for months and likely might never return the book to the library. And that’s no big deal. The stickers then serve as branded reminders of the book’s origin and that the books are part of a larger effort to build neighborhood engagement and foster social capital.

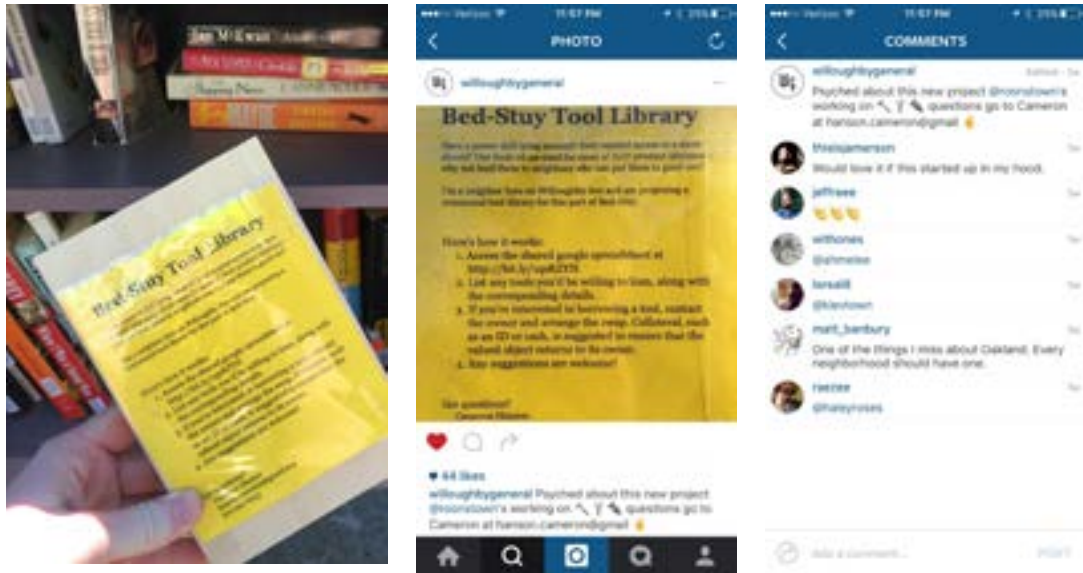
>TOOL LIBRARY

How can this library foster trust and reciprocity? That’s the guiding question of this thesis and one that I continually turned back to whenever I was brainstorming another component or pivot. Nested within that question is element of community need. What do the residents of Bed-Stuy want and need? How can their needs be matched, and in turn, be manifested into trust and reciprocity.

Thinking in utilitarian terms, tools are something that are prohibitively expensive and space-consuming, and yet have high need. I proposed a neighborhood tool library. I did so by sticking a flyer in a plastic sleeve on a block of wood that resembles the size of an average book and tucked it inside the library.

Clockwise from top: laser-cut sign, spine stickers and bookplates.





Willoughby General promoted the concept on Instagram. While it was met with some fanfare, no one has actually logged onto the Google spreadsheet I proposed. This experiment may be exactly what Clive Dilnot summarizes as “it works in theory, but does it work in practice.” People recognize the unmet need to sharing tools. But it seems that my surface level attempt at organizing is not enough to prompt someone to engage with a stranger and then put a valuable asset on the line.

*Above: Responses to the tool library idea.*

To what degree should this tiny library try to offer public services, and to what degree should it embrace being a passive beautiful thing?

>CHALKBOARD

The tiny library is intentionally passive. It’s meant to be an unintimidating object that welcomes people and adds value to their day, all the while sowing seeds of trust and reciprocity. Secondly though, I wanted to allow some sort of communication channel by installing a chalkboard on the side of the library. Just like my hesitation when I constructed the library, I didn’t know if the chalkboard would be used for productive engagement or not.

In the eight weeks that the board has been up, there have been mostly positive messaging. Various anonymous messages of thanks and some playful doodles. One person even taped a petition to the library door to add speed bumps to Willoughby Ave. A longer time period is needed to more fully assess the impact of the chalkboard on fostering communication within the neighborhood.

*Right: A neighbor jumped in to advise me on my screwing technique, and a series of messages have been left on the chalkboard.*





*Petition for a speed bump to be added to Willoughby Ave.*







## FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Willoughby General library is just the beginning. In its eight weeks of existence, I've experimented with strategies to prompt engagement and explore what it truly means to foster trust and reciprocity. There are four primary directions that I could take this thesis:

- 1. Build out a network of the tiny libraries
- 2. Deepen the designed components of the existing library
- 3. Project future iterations of object-based sharing in public
- 4. Broker knowledge for other neighborhoods

## LIBRARY NETWORK

### >COLLECTIVE IMPACT

If there were libraries outside each of my four partner's spaces, would that generate lasting impact on the neighborhood? Their utility might decline because of their proximity, but their collective strength could increase. It would localize this pocket of Bed-Stuy as the area that cares about its neighbors to a degree that physical assets are made available in aesthetically-pleasing containers.

### >SHARING MORE THAN BOOKS

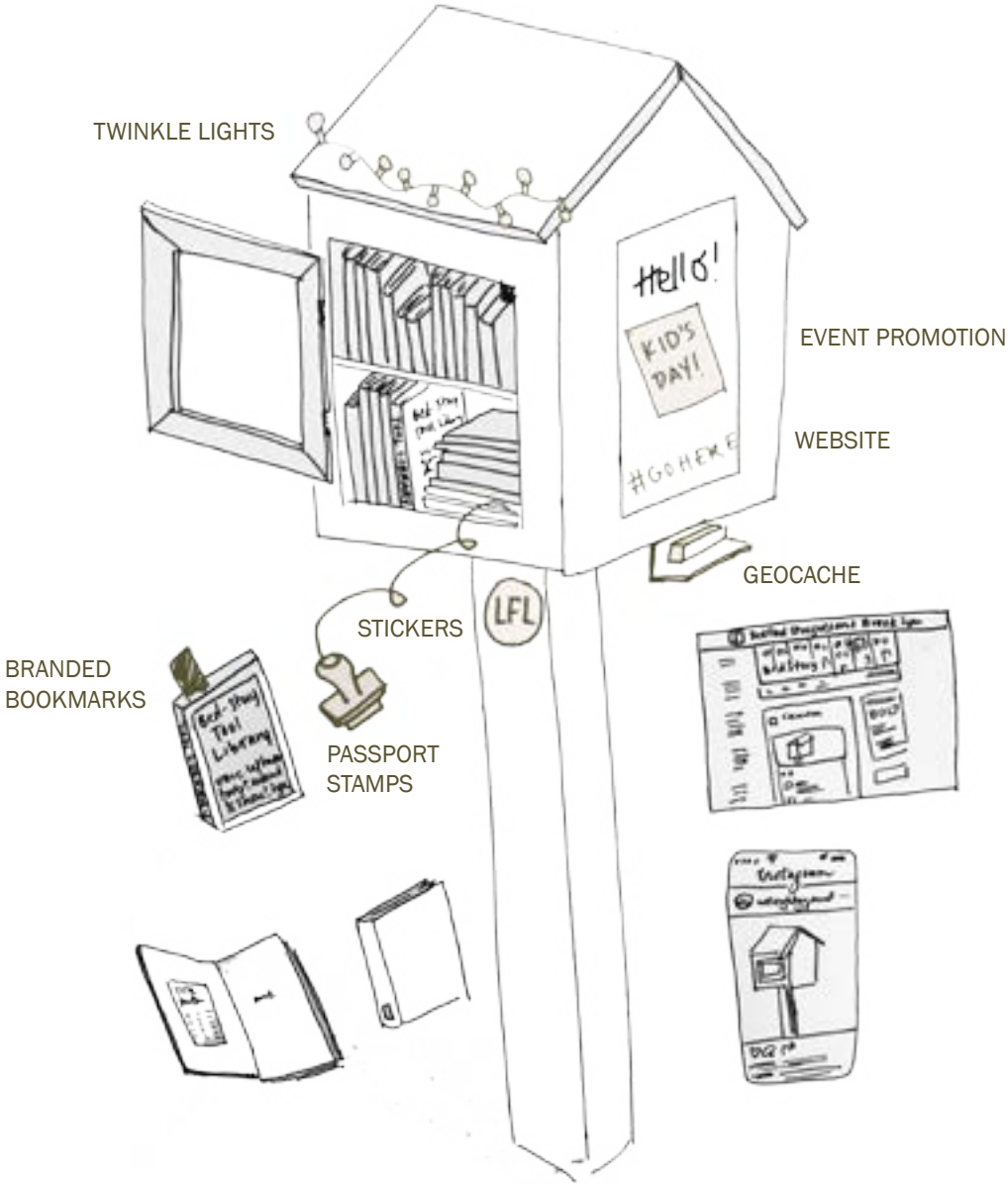
What makes the lending library successful is that books are a valued but inexpensive commodity. You can read a book once and then pass it on. Though it needs to be covered from rain and wind, a book is a low maintenance object that carries with it an inherent sense of goodness and reverence.

The network of libraries could take on different shared items. Objects of value and utility that could be exchanged could be a tool library, food, clothes, kitchen supplies, toys, magazines, notes, quotes or event announcements. Rae suggested distributing condoms and doggie bags from their library in order to provide the neighborhood with something for which they might be too bashful to ask. Because most of these items require special storage and carry social stigmas (i.e. expired food or dirty clothes), the rationale might work better in theory than practice.

The other libraries could offer other items, such as: food, tools, kitchen supplies, clothes, toys, magazines, notes, or event announcements.

## DEEPENING LIBRARY COMPONENTS

There's a fine line between adding components to the existing library that deepened connection in the neighborhood versus adding unnecessary bells and whistles. When contemplating these touchpoints, the immediate question is whether it promotes trust and reciprocity.



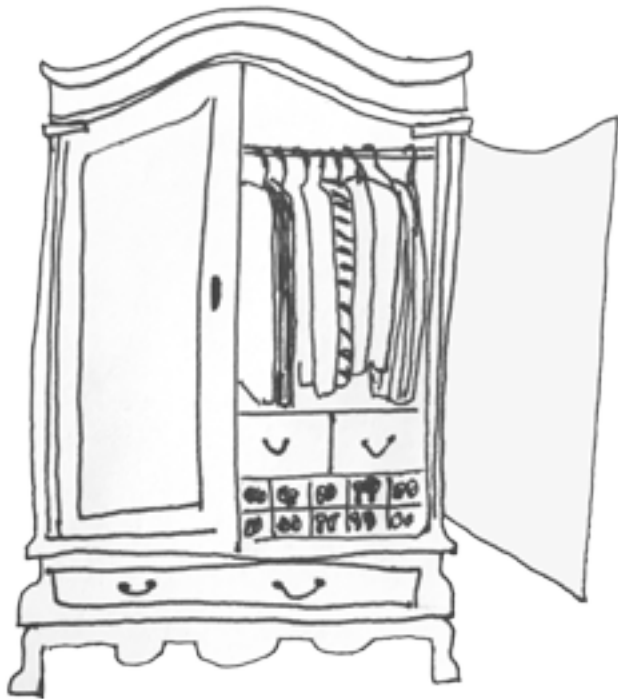




## DESIGN SPECULATIONS

When thinking about what neighbors could share and what their needs are, ideas surrounding clothing, food and communication repeatedly come up. Below are three ideas of providing those needs via a shared public object that lives on the sidewalk.

In each of these designs, issues of feasibility arise. However, just because something is difficult or socially unacceptable (leaving food and clothing out) doesn't mean it's not worth pursuing.



There's a known tradition in Brooklyn to leave unwanted clothes on the curb or wadded up in a bag. What if they were organized in a wardrobe? And had a dry cleaner sponsor it!



This refrigerated outpost would incorporate technology that indicated freshness, as to avoid food safety concerns.

## BEYOND BED-STUY

How can this project push past the four-block radius of Bed-Stuy? Can the network model be reinterpreted in other neighborhoods? Relaying best practices could be a valuable strategy in transferring learnings to other communities. I could create a shareable pdf guide that details the main components and attributes of this project, with special attention describing how the idea could be appropriated by others. I am not interested in becoming the expert in the industrial design. Rather, it's brokering of system-level knowledge and empowering neighborhoods themselves to build the network that could be the most lasting and impactful.

## HART TO HART GARDEN

Barbara (of Willoughby General) is also the president of the Hart to Hart Garden one block down from her store on Hart Ave. The garden committee approved the building of another library and one of the gardeners volunteered to construct it! Jeff Shepherd effortlessly built it in one weekend with wood found in a junk yard. I took it to the garden to paint on a sunny Saturday and gleefully “Huck Finned” young neighbors to help paint. It is really heart-warming to see the library concept already grow organically in the neighborhood.

This second version is intentionally built lower to the ground because Rae commented that children can't reach the bottom shelf at Willoughby General. The children-focused design was especially apt because Jeff has a two and a half year old daughter. We painted the library in Viv's favorite colors – blue and yellow!

This installation was so close to the end of my semester that I cannot offer any learnings on it, except that it's a great example of co-production with the neighbors. Now I know even more familiar faces on my block!



This would be the tech-savvy version of a community bulletin board. It would have the latest info and provide tailored videos that would foster trust and reciprocity.



*Latest image of the newest library installed outside the Hart to Hart Garden.*



*Young neighbor, Junion, helped me paint the library, along with his brother Max.*



*Chatting with two women who are suspicious of letting the library be left exposed on the sidewalk and not behind the garden fence.*



*This girl says she's excited to see this library pop up on her street.*



*This man paused for the photo on his way to work on his garden plot.*

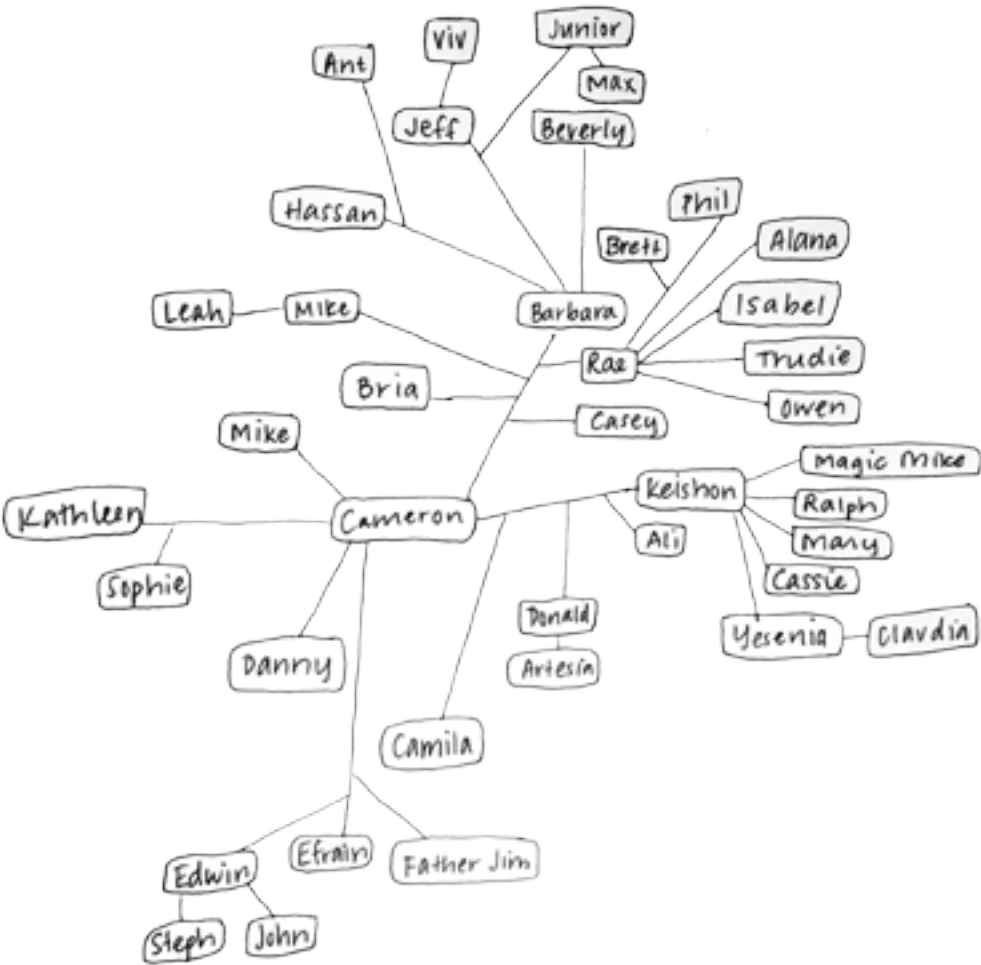




WHAT THE PROJECT ACHIEVES

The construction and implementation of the Bed-Stuy lending library demonstrates the power and impact of micro-level community efforts. From a simple wooden box, an entire web of relationships and interactions have emerged. Some neighbors were initially weary about posting an object so vulnerably in public, but the continued engagement, respect and admiration of these little boxes of delight proves them wrong. The physical act of sharing public artifacts and leveraging curated touch-points has impact. I'm not taking credit for large scale change, but I do believe that this platform has ever so slightly nudged the sense of value, trust, camaraderie, respect and reciprocity in Bed-Stuy.

A map I drew from memory of all the neighbors I've met and interfaced with during this project



WHAT THE PROJECT DOESN'T ACHIEVE

This project is not a kumbaya catch-all for community needs. It's intentionally micro in scale.

The intervention has also had various pitfalls. It's also not a fail proof strategy. When I posted in the Bed-Stuy open Facebook group, one woman wrote:

I don't think anyone gives a poot about your little stupid 'library' project to 'promote sharing and reciprocity.' You people never see the big picture, do you? (2016).

The woman who posted this is black and she could tell by my profile picture that I was white. She did not respond to my private message when I told her I'd like to hear more of her side of the story. Maybe the library is another artifact of gentrification, but do all pretty and new things have to be construed in that light?

ReConnect Cafe repeatedly has said that the library is not a good idea. Stating that they "know the neighborhood inside and out" they said creating a public landmark would invite bad behavior and loitering. Loitering, in one sense, is actually what this project aims to do.

Unfriendly behavior has also found its way to Willoughby General. After weeks of positivity and constant refreshing of the inventory, the library went through a few days where all the books were taken every night. It's unknown what the cause is, but sure did make Barbara and myself uneasy. We discussed how when we first installed the library we wouldn't have been surprised if something negative happened. But after so many weeks of positivity and the gradual building of trust, the negativity hurt more. Even a neighbor noticed and expressed concern. The neighborhood is certainly not a controlled environment. For the library to be deemed successful, it must embrace the ebbs and flows of urban life; the good and bad.

"Design is not a deterministic factor. It creates opportunity."  
- Isabella von Mühlen Brandalise

# TRANSDISCIPLINARY VALUE

The thesis demonstrates the value of a transdisciplinary approach. The project came about because of the varied approaches to addressing social capital. Rooted in theory by sociologists, architects, urban planners and historians, the breadth of academic perspective exposed the various angles and entry points at play. Industrial design is what got me through the physical wood construction of the library, and effective communication design was essential for the touchpoints of the library. Implementing the service design tenets of co-production ensured that this project was representative of the neighborhood and not just myself. My status as a neighbor and grassroots organizer was just as important as the knowledge gained from experts. To intervene in a “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) means acknowledging the complex factors at play and “actively leaning into the face of uncertainty” (Hunt, 2014). It takes translating across and with multiple disciplines to tackle a problem.

- This thesis demonstrates a system-aware strategy for bolstering social capital in a fragmented urban neighborhood.
- The libraries are a manifestation of what Putnam calls a public good, and little by little they can contribute to the neighborhood’s supply of social capital.
  - The placement of the library in front of a third space leverages Oldenburg’s theory of neutrality and welcomeness.
  - The entrusting of valued goods gives emphasis to generosity, which Block deems a critical attribute in building community.
  - The library’s totem-like quality and interactive chalkboard adds to “the hundreds of little and big actions we take everyday” (Whyte).
  - The cast of characters that I’ve interacted with through the library exemplify the ballet of the sidewalk that Jacobs so eloquently describes.
  - The playful aesthetic contributes to the lighthearted and good-naturedness of the intervention, to which Scarry assigns high value.

It will take more time to assess deep impact of these tiny libraries, but the demonstrated interest via the exchange of books, comments on social media, and anecdotes from users signify that these truly is the little box that could.

In the meantime, the current scale of the project is comfortable and approachable. It fits my initial objectives of being inclusive, unthreatening, replicable and implementable.

The success doesn’t stop here though. Community projects are not self-enclosed objects. Either I leave the libraries to organically progress as the neighborhood sees fit, or I start the next stage of scaling up and implement some of the ideas listed previously. As I close this chapter of thesis and start wearing my neighbor hat more than my designer hat, I’m optimistic about the future of my northern pocket of Bed-Stuy.



PERSONAL VALUE

My roommates and I recently discussed if we wanted to renew our lease. We have agreed to continue to live on Willoughby Ave, and openly acknowledged that our relationship with Willoughby General is a main factor in keeping us in the neighborhood. Rae and Barbara were basically strangers to me only weeks prior and now I can count them as my friends. I feel solidly more a part of my neighborhood and already am running into more people on the street and engaging in conversations.

It was one Saturday in particular that illuminated it all for me. I was rounding the corner from the subway and saw my roommate sitting with Rae in the back of Rae’s red pick-up truck, outside of Willoughby General. My friend and I joined them in the bed of the truck, soaking up the precious sunshine and chatting with passersby. Rae’s wife and dog eventually showed up and also hopped in the truck. At one point, my friend, who was visiting from Los Angeles, asked: “is this what Brooklyn life is like? Just hanging out in pick-up trucks and knowing everyone that walks by?” If she had asked me that question one month earlier, I’d have said “I wish!” But now that the tiny library has catalyzed my connections in the neighborhood, I can say that neighborliness is in fact a tangible and real thing in Brooklyn.

Eloise, Mimi, Rae and Kathleen



SUMMARY

INPUT

- Location: fragmented urban neighborhood
- Materials: wood, screws, paint, plexiglass
- People: third space willing to co-sponsor a library
- Need: expressed desire for a neighborhood object, based on feedback from residents

OUTPUT

- Tiny library customized to a location, such as height of shelves for access by children
- Branded sign and spine stickers
- Customized bookplates to prompt neighborhood discussion
- Chalkboard to allow for passive communication and information
- Information on how to participate in a tool library

OUTCOME

- Steady flow of book inventory
- Positive buzz on Instagram and Facebook
- Anecdotal feedback on how happy the library makes them feel and how its a valued part of their neighborhood world
- Surprise from many people that items could be trusted in the public domain at all hours of the day and be respected
- Replication of the library from a neighbor, and later installation at the community garden
- Interest in constructing a library outside of a cafe and a home

IMPACT

- Heightened trust from the overall care, interest and participation in the library
- Increased reciprocity by the continued donation books and the vocalization that sharing gives people satisfaction.



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All photos and sketches are mine, unless noted.



