

# La Esperanza Community Center Dallas, Texas

*Transforming a vacant school into a community hub through design, diversity, and collaboration*



City Planner  
Future Engineer  
City Council Member

Architecture  
Pathway Teacher,  
Landscape Architect

Future Architectural  
Engineers

Future Architects  
Senior City Planner

Architect,  
Faculty,  
Mentor

Future Architects, Structural +  
Civil Engineers

Architect,  
Mentor

# La Esperanza Community Center Dallas, TX

**Transforming a vacant  
school into a  
community hub  
through design,  
diversity, and  
collaboration**

## **Project Title**

La Esperanza Community Center

## **Month/Year Completed**

June 2025 (completion of service-learning studio phase).

## **Role of Nominee (in the project)**

Faculty facilitator and project leader: designed and led the service-learning course, guided interdisciplinary design development, mentored all students, and coordinated partnerships with all community and civic organizations.

## **Collaborators & Funding Sources Expenses**

Collaborators included local government representatives, school district educators, university research centers, and nonprofit organizations. The collaboration involved in-kind contributions such as staff time, meeting space, and advisory input. For example: community partners donated over 100 hours collectively for participation in workshops, planning meetings, and public presentations. University service-learning infrastructure provided institutional support in the form of faculty fellowships and small-scale funding for student showcases.

## **Student Compensation**

Students received academic credit as part of a 5-credit service-learning design studio course (144 hrs/ student). Approximately 18 undergraduate students participated for credit, alongside 10 high school students who contributed as community experts through their school district's architecture pathway program. No direct financial compensation was provided, consistent with institutional guidelines.

# LEARNING OUTCOMES



## Collaboration

Students engaged with community partners to identify and address real-world challenges, fostering social responsibility and civic engagement.



## Multicultural, Community Cultural Wealth

Students analyzed and incorporated diverse cultural strengths and community resources into the design solutions, valuing the contributions of underrepresented groups in the built environment.



## Design as Multidisciplinary

Students developed an understanding of design as a collaborative field that integrates diverse disciplines and prioritizes social impact, emphasizing architecture's role in addressing social justice.



## Environmental Justice in Design

Students evaluated and applied principles of environmental justice, developing solutions that promoted equitable access to healthy environments for marginalized communities.



Photo: College student (L), High school student (R) at design charrette.

*"In the project, we integrated community engagement, cultural diversity, and justice to create sustainable, inclusive architectural solutions" - Jacqueline A., college junior*

# COLLABORATION MODEL



Photo: Peer feedback at design charrette during high school visit.

## Discipline - Based

Students have a presence in the community throughout the semester. They reflect on their experiences on a regular basis.



## Problem - Based

Students relate to community partner as client. Work to understand need. Students create schedule to identify problem and gather data.



*"Through our collaboration with community partners, we demonstrated how creative solutions can positively address school closures and support sustainable community development".*

*-Rebecca W., college senior*

# YOUTH DESIGNING FOR YOUTH

Our team realized we couldn't simply walk into the neighborhood and ask for ideas or input. The community was still mourning the closing of their school, the beating heart of their daily life. Faced with this reality, we shifted course and chose instead to have:

**High school students** as experts in their community, bringing their lived experience & fresh ideas into the designer's role. **Source of linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic diversity.**

**College students** as mentors and emerging professionals, balancing guidance, discovery, and design solutions. **Source of linguistic, cultural, non-traditional career diversity.**

**Faculty** as facilitators & mentors, guiding the process with care while modeling servant leadership. **Source of linguistic, cultural, discipline expertise diversity.**

**Industry experts and civic partners** as mentors, specialists, and connectors, grounding student work in real-world practice and civic responsibility. **Source of cultural, generational, multidisciplinary diversity.**

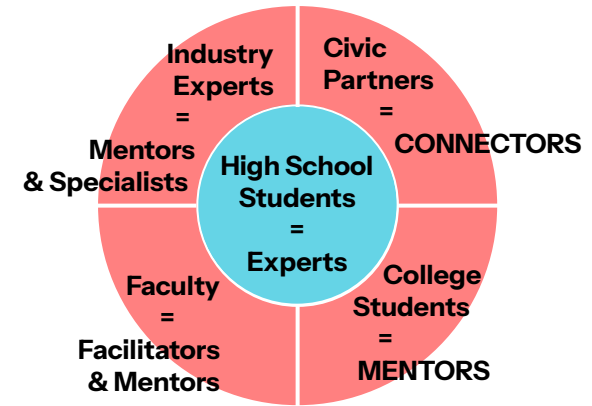


Photo: Rapid prototyping session during design charrette, massing models in pairs.

# PROJECT BRIEF

The **Esperanza Community Center** aimed to transform a former school into a **vibrant, multi-use hub** that integrated education, social services, & economic development. The existing building provides a strong foundation for adaptive reuse. Its transformation prioritized sustainability, preserving **embodied energy** while reimagining the facility as a **collaborative spaces**. Key features of the project included:

- **Early childhood and adult education**
- **Co-working spaces for nonprofits**
- **Health and wellness services**
- **Cultural and arts programming**
- **Green spaces and urban agriculture**

By leveraging the power of design for **social and environmental justice**, this project served as a model for **community-driven revitalization**, ensuring that the school site continues to be a place of learning, empowerment, and opportunity for local residents.

*"This whole program is completely innovative. To my knowledge, we've never as a city taken an area and said, 'How do we look at this holistically?'"*

*- Former City Council member*



Pre-K/ Elementary School  
14040 Rolling Hills, Dallas, TX 75240



Historical Aerial Photograph of  
La Esperanza Neighborhood, 1955

# PROJECT SITE

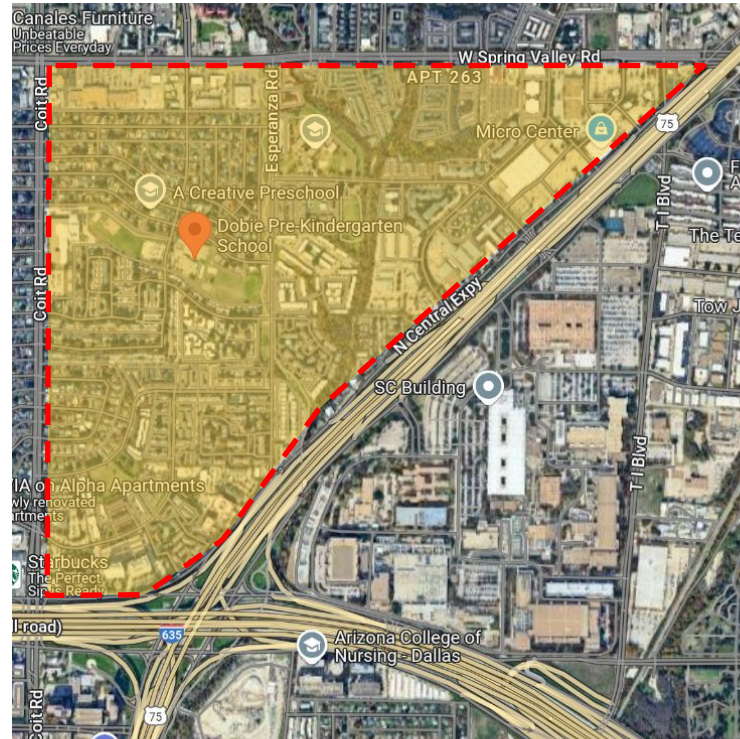
*La Esperanza: A neighborhood facing systemic disinvestment yet rich in cultural capital*

The site, an existing **Pre-K/ Elementary School** in **Dallas, Texas**, is located in a historically marginalized community, within La Esperanza neighborhood, a community that has long faced systemic disinvestment, infrastructure gaps, and educational inequities. The area consists of predominantly communities of color (~10,000 residents, **72% Latinx**), where recent public school closures from the local school district further exacerbate challenges for access to resources, economic opportunity, and social cohesion.

*"We need it. It's time for this little spot to get its little moment."  
- La Esperanza neighbor*



Elementary School - side view



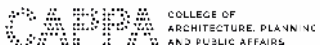
Site

La Esperanza Neighborhood

# PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



City of Dallas



## K-12

### LOCAL ISD + HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ARCHITECTURE

ISD owns the facility.  
**This is a unique partnership with city & county to avoid demolition or leaving the building vacant.**

HS students attended the Elementary, and live in La Esperanza neighborhood.  
**Demographics:**  
17% African American  
45% Hispanic;  
27% White; 45% At-Risk  
49% low SES

**Students that participated:** 50% Male, 50% Female, 20% Asian, 20% Hispanic, 50% White

**Faculty:** Female, White, expert in Landscape Architecture.

→ PIPELINE: K-12 →

## UNIVERSITY

### INSTITUTE OF URBAN STUDIES + CENTER FOR SERVICE LEARNING

Mentored students at design charrettes, provided opportunities to present and exhibit work at university venues.

**Students that participated:** 40% Male, 60% Female, 10% Asian, 70% Hispanic, 20% White

**Faculty:** Female, Hispanic, expert in Architecture, Interior Design, Community Engagement (HS Architecture teacher in a past life!)

→ COLLEGE →

## CIVIC

### CITY + COUNTY

The County will lease the building and sub-lease to service partners. Both County commissioner and City Council member are key leaders of this initiative. City Council member served as mentor for all students, was present during final presentations, with city planners, architects & engineers.

**Demographics:**  
90% Male, 10% Female, 100% White

### INDUSTRY ARCHITECTS, ENGINEERS + DESIGNERS

Mentors, experts, extended network for all students. **Emphasis on placing mentors of color.**

→ PROFESSION →

Sources of Linguistic, Cultural, Socioeconomic, Generational, Non-traditional career and Multidisciplinary Diversity



Photos: Sketching during design charrettes, in teams.



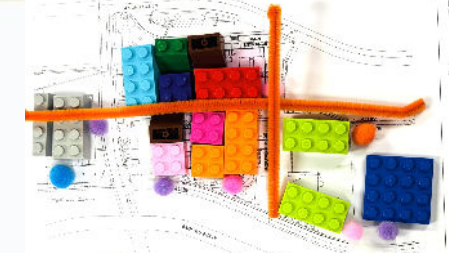
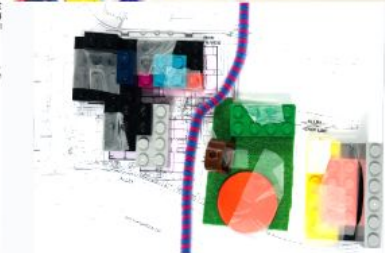
# DESIGN CHARRETTE 1

university + high school students



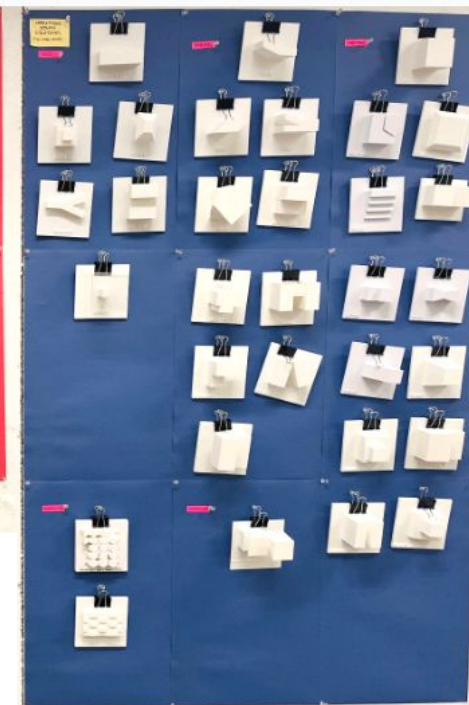
*"Working together, students developed massing models using a rapid prototyping method, highlighting main axes and site markers. Very quickly, everyone was mentoring everyone!"*

*- Faculty*



# DESIGN CHARRETTE 2

university + high school students



*"Throughout the project, we integrated community feedback, environmental justice and site considerations to develop conceptual designs and digital models. Collaborating with high school students, we used design strategies like bubble diagrams, site analysis, regulating lines and model building. Our process included studying historical precedents and creatively revising our design". Kevin G., college senior*

# DESIGN CHARRETTE 3

University Students + High School Students + Industry Experts



Top Photos: Peer feedback & precedent analysis presentations

*"Coordinating the university's calendar with the high school's calendar was a challenge, we had to prioritize and streamline the design process down to three major design charrettes, for all students and mentors to interact & learn from one another"* - Faculty



Bottom Photos: Industry expert feedback during design charrette

# CURRICULUM in ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



**What is Environmental Justice?**



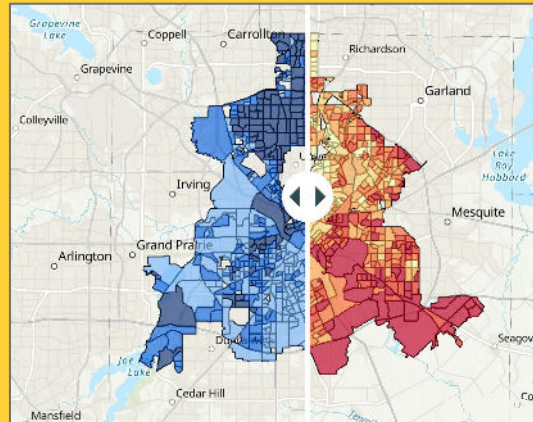
**Global vs Local Climate Justice**



**Energy Justice**



**Design, Engineering & Climate Justice**



**Mapping Environmental Justice**



**Indigenous Climate Action**

*Environmental Justice is:  
"the fight to advocate for a healthy environment for those closest to yourself, in where the possibility to thrive becomes a certainty"*

*- Jacqueline A.  
College junior*

*"the defense of equal living conditions regardless of social status, income, religion, or race, ensuring clean & healthy environments"*

*- Jesus V.  
College senior*

Students were exposed to this curriculum for six weeks prior to engaging with the community and before the design work began. This time also included discussions on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and priorities for La Esperanza community, based on a community survey shared by the city.



# STUDENT WORK + student presentations + exhibition at Center for Service Learning

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN DESIGN, LA ESPERANZA COMMUNITY CENTER (DALLAS, TX) - A SERVICE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Professor Lorena Toffer, AIA, ED.D. candidate (lorena.toffer@uta.edu)  
 UTA College of Architecture, Planning & Public Affairs  
 ARCH 3551 Basic Design for Engineers  
 Lizbeth Romo

Spring 2025

### Key Learning Outcome

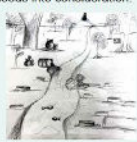
**Service Learning:** Engage with community partners to identify and address real-world challenges through architectural design, fostering social responsibility and civic engagement.

### Reflection

This project helps to address the needed resources for the community. By using the Environmental Justice lens, the students learn to design while taking nature and people's needs into consideration.



What is Environmental Justice? Riches, wealth and power at the expense of the place that gives us life and our health.



### Environmental Justice Curriculum



Climate Justice must be equitable to all, we all share this planet and we must take care of its population and nature.

For there to be Climate Justice, Global Warming must be taken seriously and all emission industries should take responsibility for the contamination they have caused.

Clean energy is the solution to lower contamination and increase energy access to marginalized communities. Engineers are necessary to create new solutions to deal with Climate Change in high income countries to decarbonize faster.

Mapping the areas affected by environmental injustices helps to analyze the areas that are the most affected and can help to create solutions. Indigenous communities have a history of having a good relationship with their homeland and nature, therefore we must take inspiration from them to be, while respecting the nature around us.

### Framework Analysis



The map shows the distance from the Doble Pre-Kindergarten School to nearest Health Services, this has shown that most health services range from 4-10 minutes. Some of the services have good rating, while others not as much. This has inspired me to prioritize a new clinic on the esperanza community center.

### Environmental Justice Framework



### Case Study (Local)



In Texas, specially in the Houston area, power plants release particles that stay in the air, and could damage the health of people. Based on the case study, it is believed to have a connection with the increase of Alzheimer, asthma, and stroke cases.

### Case Study (Global)

The air pollution around the world has caused several health concerns, such as millions of children and adults dying from poor air quality, it could lead to illness such as respiratory diseases, strokes, cancer, miscarriages, etc. Most of the affected population are from low and middle income countries.



### Environmental Justice Hero

**Beverly Whigh**  
 -She experienced living on a polluted land that could cause cancer  
 -She discovered that the way to stop the polluted industries was to increase the community involvement.  
 -She worked to create an environmental justice map that gives information on the proximities of pollutants in communities.

### United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

-Goal 3: Good Health and well-being  
 -13 targets, 67 events, 49 publications, 1304 actions  
 -This goal is focused on declining the rate of preventable deaths, by communication and/or medications such as AIDS neglected tropical diseases, and also decreasing the drug abuse  
 -Decreasing the death rate of children under 5 years, maternal death rate, and provide sex education in classrooms to avoid teenage pregnancy  
 -Accessible healthcare for everyone

**PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS**  
 City of Dallas, District 11 - Council Member Jaynie Schultz  
 Dallas County, District 2, Andy Sommerman  
 Richardson ISD, Richardson High School - Laura Bellone  
 UTA Institute of Urban Studies-Hannah Lebovitz, Assistant Director

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN DESIGN

LA ESPERANZA COMMUNITY CENTER (DALLAS, TX)  
 A SERVICE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Professor Lorena Toffer, RA, ED.D. candidate (lorena.toffer@uta.edu)  
 UTA College of Architecture, Planning & Public Affairs  
 ARCH 3551 Basic Design for Engineers  
 -Rebecca Watkins

Spring 2025

### Project Description:

Design a community center as a mix use project that integrates the needs of the community of the Esperanza Neighborhood in Dallas.

### Community Gathering and Sustainable Development:

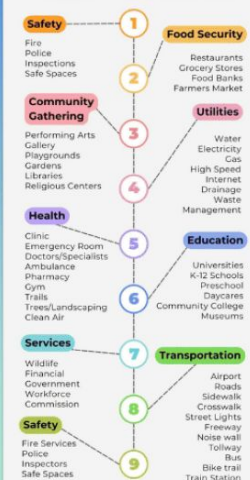


### Reflection:

Through our collaboration with community partners, we can demonstrate how creative solutions can positively address school closures and support sustainable community development.



### Environmental Justice Framework:



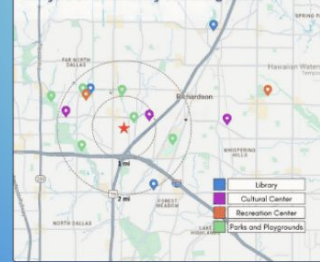
### Definition of Environmental Justice:

"True environmental justice requires equal access to resources for all people, regardless of race, background, or income. This can be achieved through inclusive decision-making, fair policy-making, and by holding violators accountable."

### Course Learning Outcomes:

- Service Learning:** Collaboration with Community Partners to solve real-world problems
- Community Cultural Wealth Competencies:** Celebrating the influence of particular groups on their built environment
- Design and Engineering as a Social Act:** Understanding the role of environmental and social issues and how we can work together to advance positive changes
- Environmental Justice in Design and Engineering:** Applying principles to create equitable solutions

### Analysis Of Community Gathering Sites:



### Environmental Justice Curriculum:



### Global Case Study: "Cancer Alley"

Mississippi River Corridor, LA  
 • 85-mile industrial corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge  
 • Region has highest cancer risk in the US  
 • Historically marginalized communities



### Sharon Lavigne: The Fight for Clean Air

• Founded RISE, St. James in October 2018  
 • Fights for environmental justice in "Cancer Alley"  
 • Blocked the development of pollution-causing industrial plants by Formosa and Wanhua

### Local Case Study: "P-13 Wells"

Permian Basin, West Texas  
 • Landowners can use former oil wells as water wells  
 • Nearly 2000 of these wells threaten fresh groundwater supply in West Texas



### Lake Boehmer

Precoos County, TX  
 • 60-acre saltwater lake formed by leaking "P-13" well  
 • Has been leaking since February 2003 at a rate of 200 gallons/minute  
 • Responsibility for remedy is disputed

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

City of Dallas, District 11 - Council Member Jaynie Schultz  
 Dallas County, District 2 - Andy Sommerman  
 Richardson ISD, Richardson High School - Laura Bellone  
 UTA Institute of Urban Studies - Hannah Lebovitz, Assistant Director



# FINAL PRESENTATIONS at CITY HALL

*“This project helped me understand the stages of the design process, from initial research and community engagement to planning with purpose and intention. By focusing on the specific needs of La Esperanza community, we were able to see how thoughtful design can directly improve quality of life, whether through safe gathering spaces, better accessibility, or sustainable features”*

*-Victor V., college senior*



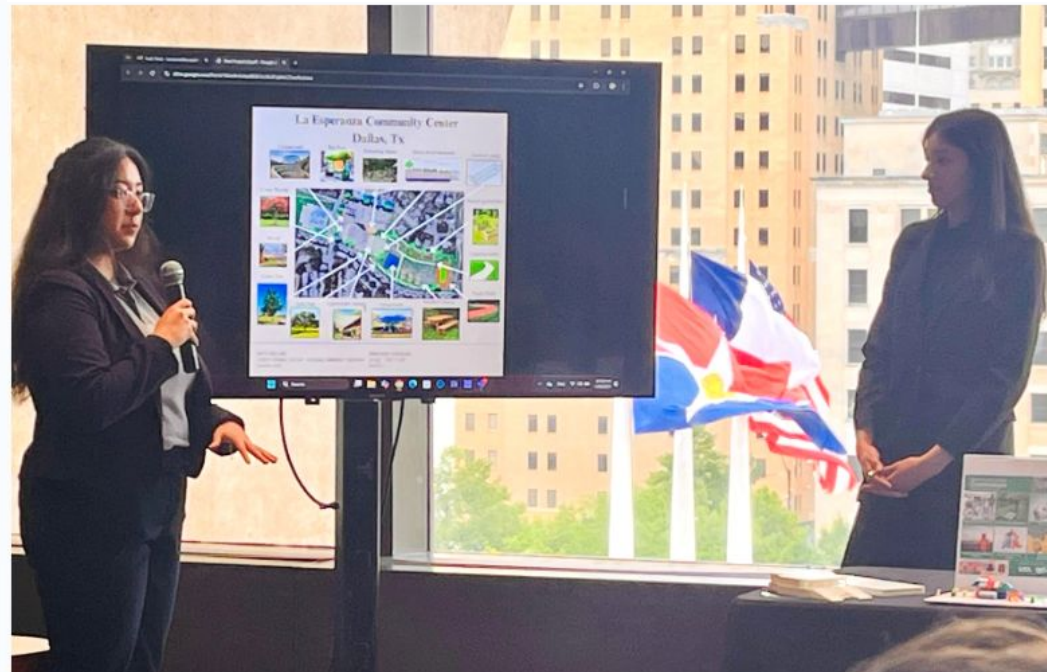
Photo: High School students presenting to elected officials, city planners and industry experts.

# FINAL PRESENTATIONS at CITY HALL



Photo: High School students “standing circle” with senior city planner.

*This was a fantastic program and we are so lucky you chose this project!*  
*My best, - Former City Council Member*



Bottom Photos: College students presenting to elected officials, city planners and industry experts.

# FINAL PROJECT

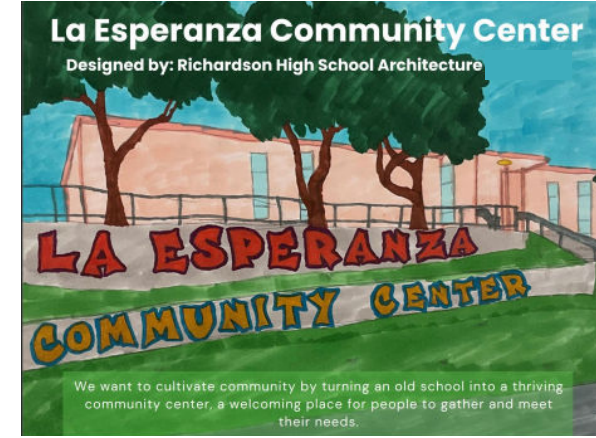
BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT TEAM

*"The neighborhood surrounding the proposed community center has a variety of cultures, but the predominant one is Hispanic. An effective method of cultivating a sense of community could be by creating a cultural mural. It could be done in a fashion that combines the various cultures, acknowledging the diversity within the neighborhood. This can highlight communities inside and outside the culture of the majority".*

-HS Design Team



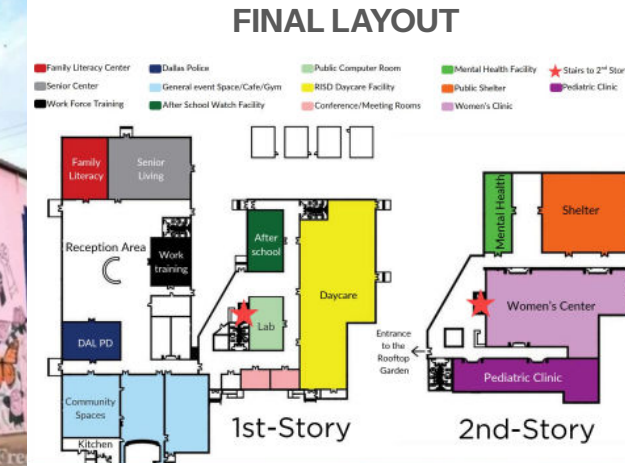
CULTURAL MURAL



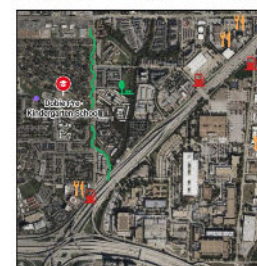
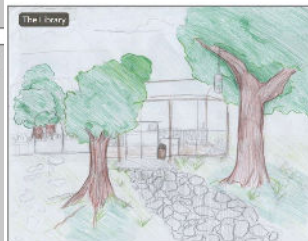
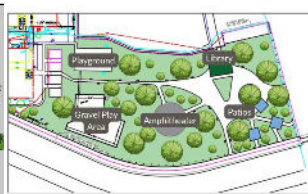
ROOFTOP GARDEN DESIGNS



OUTDOOR SPACE DESIGNS



SITE ANALYSIS



*"We want to cultivate community by turning an old school into a thriving community center, a welcoming place for people to gather and meet their needs".*

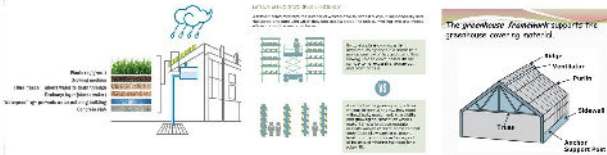
- HS Design Team



# FINAL PROJECT EXEMPLAR

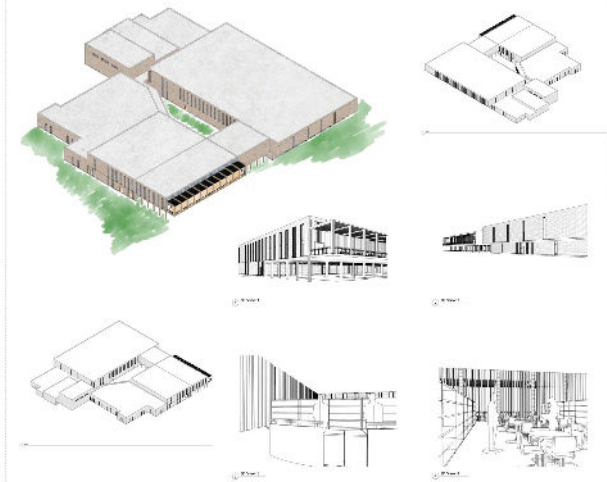
BY COLLEGE STUDENT TEAM

## PLACEMAKING

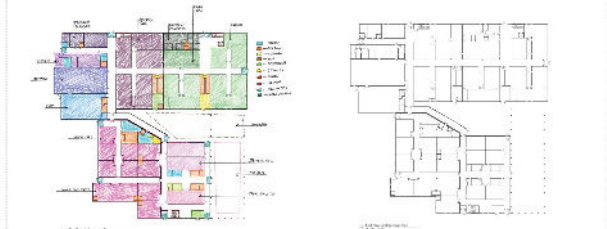


**URBAN FARM:** by Jacqueline Almaraz  
 Taking inspiration from my historical precedent I came up with five possibilities for potential urban harvest. First option was to do a rooftop greenhouse, as a step back to the green roof in the MIA, Memorial Library. The second was a green house placed in the east side of the building, on the outside. Everything that would be produced would be placed in the food pantry and be free for anyone to take. The greenhouses would be taken care of by staff and by members of the community.

## RENDERINGS



## FLOOR PLANS



## PLACEMAKING



La Esperanza means hope, and so the butterfly was chosen as the theme for the entry gateway. The butterfly is almost universally regarded as a symbol of new beginnings, transformation, joy, freedom, and hope. The gateway will embody the new beginning and transformation that the community will undertake with the community center. The gateway will be made using a concrete base for a steel structure and clad in white aluminum.

SCULPTURE: by Jesus Vegabonavides



## PLACEMAKING



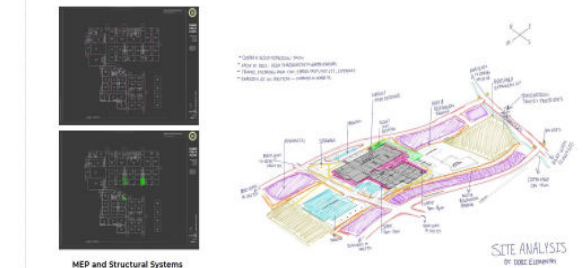
We are introducing a 'Fresh' fridge to ensure consistent access to fresh, healthy, and nutritious meals for the entire community, conveniently located throughout the building. The fridge will also offer options such as salads, soups, fruit, and more.

A small convenience store will be integrated into the building, providing a store offering a curated selection of everyday necessities and fresh goods. The store design creates the space to seamlessly transition between indoor and outdoor configurations, accommodating special events and community gatherings.

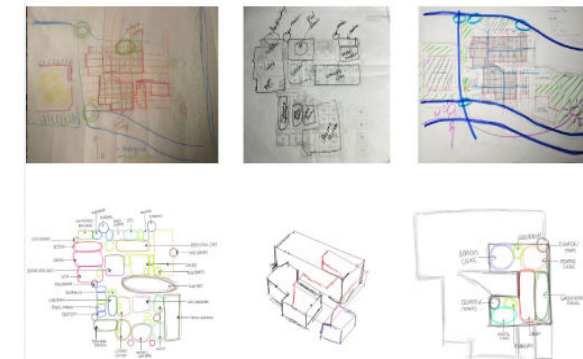
FOOD PANTRY: by Khusdia Shaik



## SITE ANALYSIS



## DESIGN PROCESS



# STUDENT WORK EXHIBIT

CITY HALL, COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT, WEBSITE



**130 YEARS CENTER FOR SERVICE LEARNING**  
ACULTY | ACE AMBASSADORS | ARE YOU COMMUNITY ENGAGED | SERVICE LEARNING COURSES | COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUN

**LATEST ARTICLES** | **DESIGN, SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY** | **"DON'T FORGET ABOUT THESE PEOPLE"**



*"We appreciate you and the students working on this project".  
- City Council & County Commissioner's offices*

**Design, Sustainability And Community**  
Lorena Toffer  
[READ](#)

# NEXT STEPS IN ONGOING COLLABORATION

- Prioritize direct engagement with La Esperanza residents to build trust, co-creation, and integrate community voices.
- Prioritize mural(s) project in collaboration with local Cultural Art Center.
- Formalize interdisciplinary collaboration with students in urban planning, landscape architecture, and public policy departments to support more comprehensive solutions.
- Expand on student leadership development through structured coaching, and peer mentorship.

**REPLICABILITY:** *What happened in La Esperanza can happen anywhere. When students, residents, and civic partners come together, even a shuttered school can become a blueprint for community renewal.*

*I think the murals would be a game-changer for the perception of the building!*

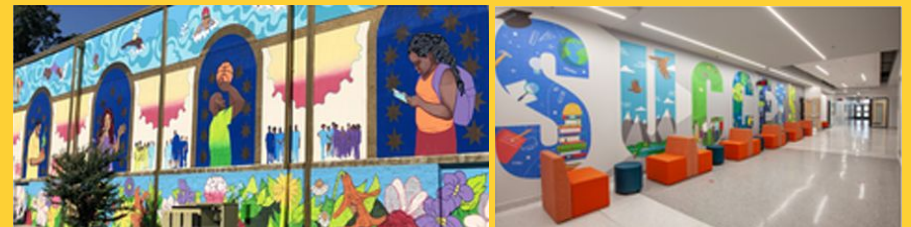
*- Former City Council Member*



**Proposed Logo/ Branding**



**Current Proposal for Interior and Exterior Murals.**  
**Actively looking for funding and collaboration with the City, County, and local Cultural Art Center.**  
**Volunteers: College students from several universities, High School students.**



**Inspirational Images, used by students as precedents.**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“This project had a profound impact on students, partner organizations, the community, and faculty. Students gained hands-on experience in socially responsible design, engaging with real-world issues while developing critical thinking and advocacy skills.*

*Partner organizations benefited from innovative design solutions and collaborations that aligned with their missions. The community received much-needed infrastructure and resources, addressing systemic inequities while preserving embodied energy. For faculty, this project reinforced the role of education in fostering civic responsibility & environmental justice, bridging academia and practice. Ultimately, it empowered youth to shape their built environment through design and activism”.*

*- Lorena Toffer, Laura Bellone - Design Studio Faculty*

## DALLAS COUNTY

Andy Sommerman, Commissioner for Dallas County District 2  
Tom Ervin, Chief of Staff, District 2  
Todd Hensley, District 2 Project Director  
Jonathan Toffer, Assistant Director of Public Works  
Erin Moore, Chief of Staff District 1

## CITY OF DALLAS

William Roth, Council Member District 11  
Jaynie Schultz, Past Council Member  
Sophia Figueroa, Council Director  
Ryan Secord, Policy Analyst  
Don Raines Jr., Senior Planner  
Gray Parker, Senior Planner

## SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

Roxanne Burlison, Ph. D.

## KTGY\GDA ARCHITECTS

Ray Tse, AIA, Principal

## RICHARDSON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Tabitha Branum, RISD Superintendent  
Alexander Donaghy, RISD CTE Admin.

## RICHARDSON HIGH SCHOOL

Christopher Choat, RHS Principal  
Laura Bellone Johnson, RHS Architecture Educator  
Kaitlin Thompson, RHS Educator

## RICHARDSON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Dawson Clemmons  
Dublin Harkins  
Sean Leblanc  
Sasha Miller-Idenoue  
Kevin Moore  
Reid Pope  
Emily Racu  
Choxie Reinking  
Inaya Reshid  
Ibraheem Siddiqui

## UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON, COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Lorena Toffer, RA, RID, NOMA, Ed.D. Candidate  
Hannah Lebovits, Ph.D, Interim Director, Institute of Urban Studies  
Susan Dequeant, M. Ed., Associate Director, Center for Service Learning

## UTA CAPP STUDENTS

Jacqueline Almaraz  
Kevin Grimme  
Kimberly Guzman  
Mayeli Rodriguez  
Lizbeth Romo  
Khudsia Shaik  
Victor Vazquez  
Jesus Vegabenavides  
Rebecca Watkins  
Anissa Velasco  
Giovanni Castro  
Bryan Nguyen

**La Esperanza Community Center project demonstrates how architecture can build pipelines of inclusion and transform underrepresented voices into leaders of change.**