

Problem

Urban environments in the United States are trending toward fragmentation. As demonstrated by a variety of metrics, allowing our cities to become more divided creates toxic human conditions related to inequality and structural violence. Economic segregation and concentration of poverty have notably increased over the last 40 years, which is of particular concern because the negative effects associated with poverty—including poor mental and physical health, higher crime, and obstructed economic mobility—are amplified when a large fraction of a low-income person's neighbors are also impoverished. These problems are exacerbated by negative police-community relations, which result in more dangerous neighborhoods and over-incarceration. Further, as 75 percent of residents in high-poverty neighborhoods are African American or Latino, these effects disproportionately burden the lives of people of color.

We can also see that social capital is decreasing in America, a trend that appears to be related to a weakening public realm. Whether demonstrated in declining levels of trust, time spent socializing with neighbors, use of public transportation, or a number of other metrics, it appears that disinvestment and disengagement from the public realm has damaged cities' ability to support the diverse human connections that have historically made them flourish.

Goals

At Studio Gang, we have been exploring the role that the civic fabric can play in empowering communities and building "positive peace" in the United States. The spaces and institutions that have historically made up the American public realm—from parks, schools, and libraries to transit and recreation centers—have been key sites where people access opportunities and form relationships across demographic boundaries.

Our overarching goal with our work in the public realm is to use design—practiced using a highly inclusive process—to help reactivate and strengthen the ability of our shared civic fabric to connect people, to serve their needs and offer opportunities, and to empower them to realize the future they want to see.

Specific goals of this work include:

1. Make public services more accessible
2. Activate public space
3. Increase public safety
4. Improve police-community relations
5. Support integrated wellness (physical and mental health)
6. Provide and open up economic opportunity

Solution (Urban Design Approach and Case Study: Polis Station)

Rather than focusing on conceiving entirely new structures, our urban design approach for the public realm "starts with what's there"—the publicly owned spaces that already exist in cities, including civic buildings, streets, water bodies, parks, and vacant land. In total, these spaces comprise an impressive 30 to 50 percent of US cities' land. Our approach focuses on leveraging communities' existing assets by revealing their possibilities, connecting them for mutual benefit, and helping them better engage the public at a neighborhood scale.

This work entails building a multifaceted understanding of a neighborhood and its assets through research, community engagement, and analysis (including first-person observation, data analytics, and conversations with residents, community leaders, policymakers, and other key actors) to identify specific possibilities and develop design ideas that bridge present conditions and collective goals. The methodology and overarching aim are therefore consistent between projects, but the results are unique to the communities from which they emerge.

This urban approach has been tested in Polis Station, an ongoing project exploring how one type of civic building—the police station—can be reimaged to better serve neighborhoods and the urban environment as a whole. Police stations have always been a sensitive piece of the public realm, and recent acts of violence by and against police officers have further laden them with sociocultural complexity. These tragedies and resulting protests have highlighted systemic inequities connected with policing (a notable manifestation of structural violence), and calls for policing reform have led to updated recommendations for policy and training.

Polis Station posits that police stations—both in spite of and because of the tensions surrounding them—can be leveraged to address systemic challenges. Recognizing that stations are publicly funded institutions with a

civic mandate, the project's foundational idea is to reframe them as part of their surrounding community fabric (rather than nodes in spaces of patrol like police precincts or districts). This is captured in the project's name, which refers to the classical idea of the *polis*, the urban body politic. Polis Station seeks to reshape stations in response to critical advances in our understanding of how public institutions and spaces can help foster safer communities. These advances include issues such as mental health and returning citizen programs, universal education, and collective efficacy.

To do this, the project approaches the police station from two angles: the station building and the neighborhood. It targets the core role of stations by exploring how altering their programming and physical spaces could support healthier police-community relationships—above all, toward establishing common goals and greater trust. It also explores how police stations can expand their capabilities as public assets by imagining them as part of larger civic networks.

The project proposes a set of six design principles that communities across the US can use to “re-tune” their own local station. These principles incorporate recommendations from the 2015 *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Developed by a federally commissioned panel, the recommendations are structured under six thematic “pillars”: Building Trust and Legitimacy, Policy and Oversight, Technology and Social Media, Community Policing and Crime Reduction, Training and Education, and Officer Wellness and Safety. The report's recommendations are the most comprehensive set of policing reform ideas to emerge in the post-Ferguson era. They do not, however, address the spatial aspects of policing, which prompted our work of translating their policy goals into design principles.

The Polis Station proposal for Chicago's 10th District police station in the North Lawndale neighborhood—an initial case study site—uses these design principles to explore how the site's built environment can support the goals and suggestions of local community members and officers. Their input was gathered through a variety of community engagement formats to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives. These included one-on-one conversations with community leaders, community café workshops bringing together police officers and residents, and roundtable sketching sessions with local youth and officers.

The proposal's design vision (please see attached Appendix 1) illustrates how the spaces of the existing 10th District station could be reconfigured. It accommodates new programming informed by the *President's Task Force Report* as well as local stakeholders' suggestions, including athletic and play facilities, an ATM, and computer stations. It also envisions how these opportunities can expand throughout the neighborhood, forming a network of recreational, educational, entrepreneurial, and green spaces that tie into the community's existing assets and strengthen them with new investment. Importantly, these new programs and spaces appeal to and serve both residents and police officers. This overlap provides them with multiple new opportunities to interact with each other in non-enforcement situations—the everyday encounters and exchanges that can lead to more trusting relationships. In addition, it provides both groups with access to services, activities, and spaces that underpin safer, healthier, and stronger communities.

One of the strongest wishes that emerged from conversations with community members and officers in North Lawndale was for more safe spaces for youth to play. Seizing this shared aspiration, the project's design team worked closely with police and community leaders and the local alderman to design and build a half basketball court on a little-used portion of the station's parking lot. As of this writing, the court has become so popular among local youth that community leaders and officers have asked the design team to expand it into a public park, extending the half court into a full court and adding more green space and amenities.

Going Forward

As we continue to build on this work in Chicago, as well as in Philadelphia, Memphis, and New York, we have had to learn how to articulate, practice, and coordinate a broader set of skills and consultants than is typical for architects and urban designers. Additionally, we must routinely generate new ways to ensure that the people who have the most at stake in these projects—community members themselves—are at the table, heard, and that their voices are reflected in the design. Finally, we are working to overcome the often-siloed nature of local government by challenging departments, agencies, foundations, non-profits, and for-profits to collaborate in unprecedented ways.