



T H O U G H T

INTRO

Civic Art (architecture, infrastructure, monuments and public art) is a key component of a city's expression of identity. It can be imagined as the skeleton, the structural anchor points that help broadcast the values, interests and priorities of a municipality. It is the very bones of how the city presents itself to its residents and the outside world.

We see the readers of this book as civic thought leaders, contributing to the redefinition of this collective skeleton through their thoughts and actions. As leaders you can help establish the framework for this conversation. You can help expand what is possible by helping people to imagine new ideas that otherwise might never be incorporated in our shared public space.

After speaking to more than 200 people about how they see the future of art and equity in Brownsville, we learned about their vision for the future and their distinct dreams for the region. Based upon that input we have created this series of recommendations for everyday thought leaders, a compilation of ideas that together make a map of how this group can contribute to the advancement of justice at the local level.

Thought leaders exercise their capacity to rehearse the skill of imagining in collaboration with others. This chapter of our book provides a series of recommendations based on community input, through which to strengthen the your muscles of imagination in order to advance the values the community would like to see implemented in public space. The fundamental standpoint of this chapter is that together we can practice collective leadership through the lens of civic responsibility .

You have the potential to be a bridge. You can be a communicator who helps imagine possibilities, inspire action and translate ideas. The community looks to thought leaders for ideas on how to embody and implement their dreams and values within civic life. The thoughts laid out in this plan outline actions you can take to advance those dreams towards their realization.

Thought Leader: Who you are.

We believe that anyone and everyone is a thought leader: anyone who self identifies with this title, and even we speculate those who do not. The fact is that we all lead with our thoughts. We all influence others in different moments in our days and lives with the ideas and actions we put forth in the world. More than directing this book at a specific subsection or demographic of our community, we hope to direct this book to a shared sense of responsibility and civic possibility.

As Project Collaborator, Advisor and Brownsville Native Edna Ledesma reflects "Society has conditioned us to assume that only those in positions of power can be thought leaders. Power is generally obtained through capital gains, land ownership, education, etc. We on the other hand are reacting against this normative value to assert the power of ALL people towards what we think democracy actually should be."

We therefore encourage everyone to actively view themselves as thought leaders, to understand how their actions-as-thoughts and thoughts-as-actions maintain elements of civic leadership. Every action from our carbon footprint to the way we greet people is an act of leadership. These actions create impact and outcomes. Each action creates models, good or otherwise, enacting an example for others in the world. Actions become reference points for what is acceptable, accepted and expected.

Inspired by the large ensemble of community voices that we consulted over the course of this project's development, this chapter invites us as readers to understand the capacity of our influence, how to direct that capacity towards the intention of advancing equity in public space.

KNOW

1) YOUR STORIES

As a thought leader your community requires you to be knowledgeable and constantly curious. Imagine yourself as a rogue archaeologist, digging for the facts in unusual contexts. Or as an anthropologist of the ordinary, asking why and how we do what we do. Your job, is to understand and engage with frameworks of the past in order to unpack the experience of the present. Look for the joy in the process of investigation and inquiry.

As a leader of civic thought, part of your responsibility is to get to the bottom of things and to investigate counternarratives. You have been thinking through history and the stories we tell about our place and our space impact the collective public consciousness. What stories about our space do we celebrate? What stories do we ignore? Why or why not? Who benefits from the stories we tell? Who loses? What do the stories we tell say about who we are? What do they say about who we are not? Question the stories that are told to you and actively seek the stories that are under-told or missing, especially from people who are historically and systemically marginalized.

2) DECODE

We are all trained to read space in different ways. Based on where we have lived, from our city to our neighborhood, what we have learned in school and what we have been acculturated to, we all have implicit biases in the ways that we interpret and value space.

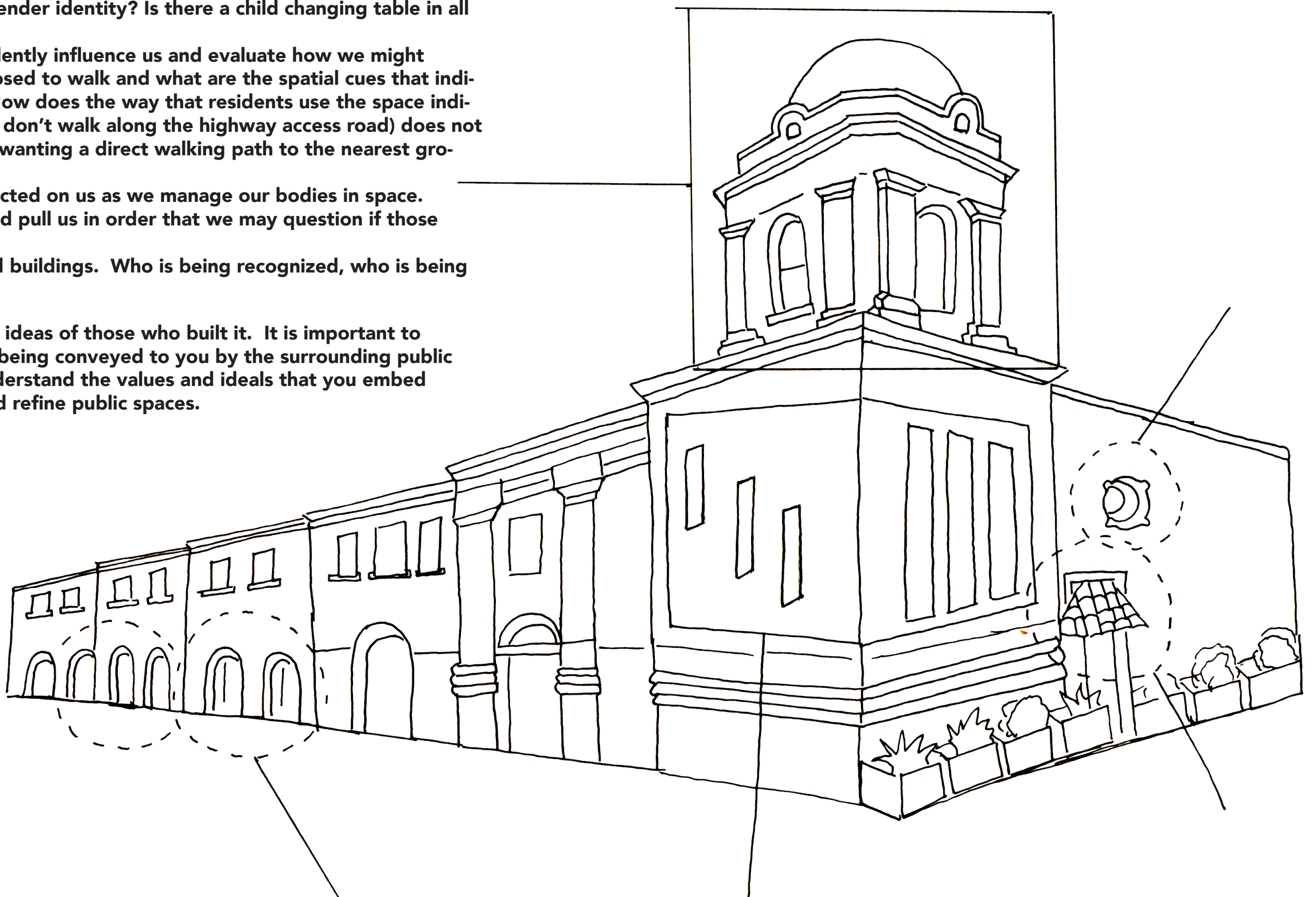
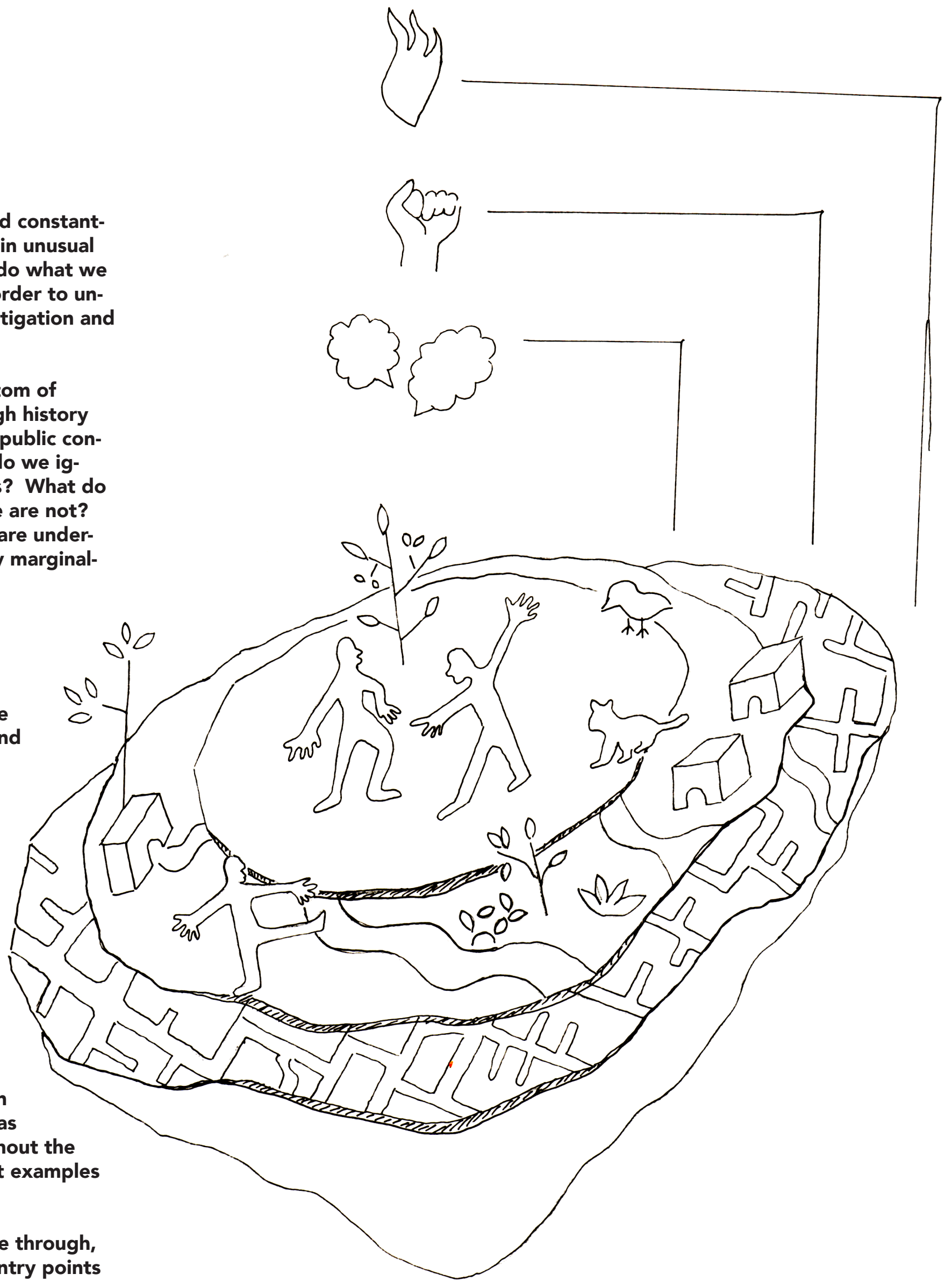
Developing spatial literacy can be a lifelong practice in your own biases in the way you read space. The process can begin with a series of questions and inquiries and can be expanded to include a larger investigation to understand the values that are reflected in the built environment around you. Our preferences for certain styles of architecture, design or infrastructure can be linked, even unintentionally, to the continued oppression of historically marginalized peoples.

Noticing that the dominant architectural styles where you live are not representative of the region's indigenous people, ask yourself what is the reason that their architectural legacy has not been preserved or given preference. When the border space of the now called Rio Grande Valley was mostly occupied by nomadic tribes, colonizers established churches throughout the very rural area as a way to claim ownership of land. What are other current examples where architecture functions as a political tool?

Critical reflection as an active process can inform the ways we occupy, move through, and construct our built environment. Consider these prompts as series of entry points for decoding the space around you:

- Ask questions about how our built environment imposes economic, sexual, and gender inequity. Is there a bathroom for everybody? Do trans people feel safe using the bathroom that matches their gender identity? Is there a child changing table in all bathrooms?
- Consider the spatial forces that silently influence us and evaluate how we might rebuild them. Where are we supposed to walk and what are the spatial cues that indicate where we should not walk? How does the way that residents use the space indicate when the public narrative (i.e. don't walk along the highway access road) does not line up with community needs (i.e. wanting a direct walking path to the nearest grocery store)?
- Detangle the different stories enacted on us as we manage our bodies in space. Unpack the narratives that push and pull us in order that we may question if those systems indeed serve all of us.
- Consider the names of streets and buildings. Who is being recognized, who is being left out?

Public space reflects the values and ideas of those who built it. It is important to understand the messages that are being conveyed to you by the surrounding public space and equally important to understand the values and ideals that you embed into your work as you influence and refine public spaces.



3) YOUR COMMUNITY

It is important to know communities from two perspectives, qualitatively (interviews, experiences, stories) and quantitative (data measured by numbers with graphs, charts or statistics). We need to fundamentally know the soul and essence of a community (qualitatively); and once we know our community within a qualitative human dimension, then we can begin to also try to understand the statistical and economic context (quantitatively). But we must work to dig into the qualitative before we make assumptions about the quantitative. Seek out opportunities to genuinely get to know and understand your neighbors. Listen to their stories. Invest yourself in new experiences in your community. Then contextualize and broaden that qualitative information with quantitative data.

Know:

- What are the cultural traditions in the region?
- What cultural assets are distinct to the area (i.e. is it home to the most tortillerias per capita?)
- What percentage of the city budget breakdown and priorities? How does it compare to other regions with comparable statistics?
- What are the stories the region tells about itself?
- What industry employs the majority of people in your area? What are the interests of those industries? Do those interests align with the interests of the region's most vulnerable populations?
- Who in the region carries historical knowledge of the way the community has grown and changed?
- What is the average household income and highest level of education attainment in your region?
- How many people live in poverty?
- Who does the community identify as a champion for their interests?
- Which regions are vulnerable to gentrification? How can you support those fighting forced displacement or gentrification?

- What community supports are available for LGBTQIA people?
- How does the community acknowledge the history and presence of indigenous people in the region?
- How many people committed suicide in the region last year? Is that number going up or down compared to previous years?
- What percentage of the budget is spent on cultural programming that is free and open to the public? What percentage of the budget supports non-institutional cultural programming?
- How many people were deported from the region last year? How many immediate family members were impacted?

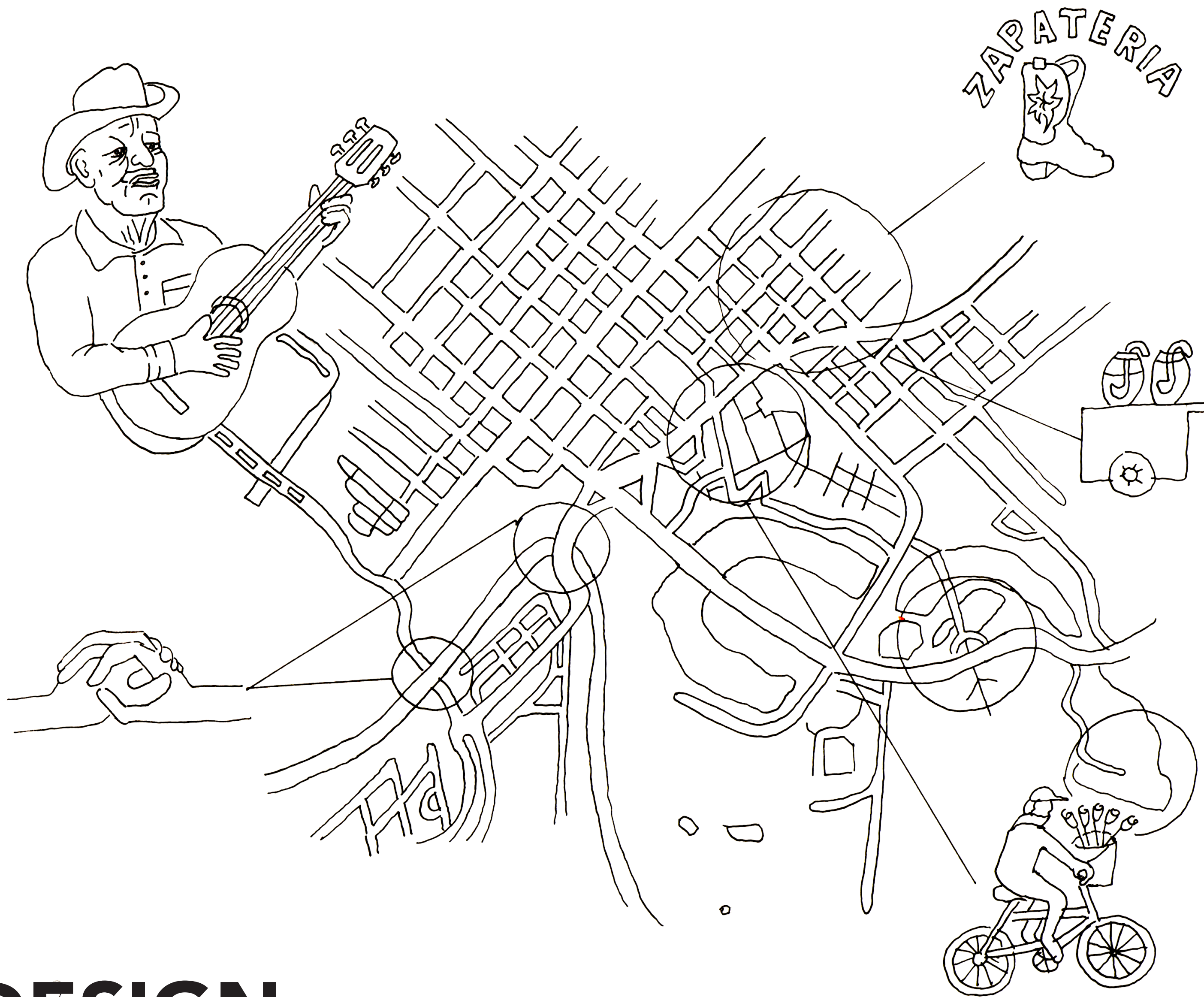
Ask yourself: how can I know my community better? Expand your definition of community, make it an ever expanding circle!

CELEBRATE!

What are the cultural choices of your region that are being disregarded or minimized? Could they be reframed? Could they be thought of as community assets? What needs have led to the aesthetics of your region? Focus particularly on those in your region who have been minimized or marginalized. Look for the intelligence and ingenuity in their choices in music, color, textiles and lawn decoration. Celebrate the hyper regional. If you don't no one will.

MAP

How do the pieces of your region fit together? Make yourself responsible for understanding the cultural mapping of the region! Who are the important players? Who is making important work in your region? Expand your sense of what you consider a cultural contribution! Who lives on your block who can tell the stories of the neighborhood? Who is the best at boot repair? Who has the best rotolo signs? What street has the best cinder block decorations? See all these pieces at play together! Mark them in your mind, document them as resources, tiny beacons of light that help you know where you are and make the community brighter!



DESIGN

Your process of investigating the environment and community around you will be ongoing. It will be a core part of your practice as a thought leader. As you speak to an auditorium of people you will do it knowing the history of the land you are standing upon. As you purchase elote you will know the challenges of wage theft in the region. As you purchase a prescription you will know how many people are denied secondary care in the region. But your job as a thought leader is not just to know, it is to respond and to engage. As a thought leader you are tasked with understanding the key and critical issues of your community, designing solutions and engaging new people in these perspectives.

Based on what we have heard from the community we are highlighting 5 processes that are particularly useful for addressing inequity and constructing justice.

1) IMAGINE

As creative practitioners, we understand that the imaginary is limited by what we are capable of imagining. In her 2015 book *The Racial Imaginary*, Claudia Rankine argues our imagination is not outside of us. It is tethered to our real life, conscious or subconscious biases. It is reflective of our own biases, fears and subconscious desires.

In our own communities, we see that until we are able to expand what we are capable of imagining, we cannot yet build it. Your job as a thought leader, as an artist, an academic, a mother, a teacher is to cultivate your imagination, to strengthen it like a muscle. A critical component of your work is your ability to dream. You must cultivate that skill. It is perhaps your most powerful weapon of hope and change.

Treat your imaginative process with care. Listen to it. Foster your intuition. Take yourself and your dreams seriously. Take time to imagine a better future and think seriously about the details of that world. Investigate your dreams. Be a scientist of your own imagination. Explore its limits and question them. Perform experiments.

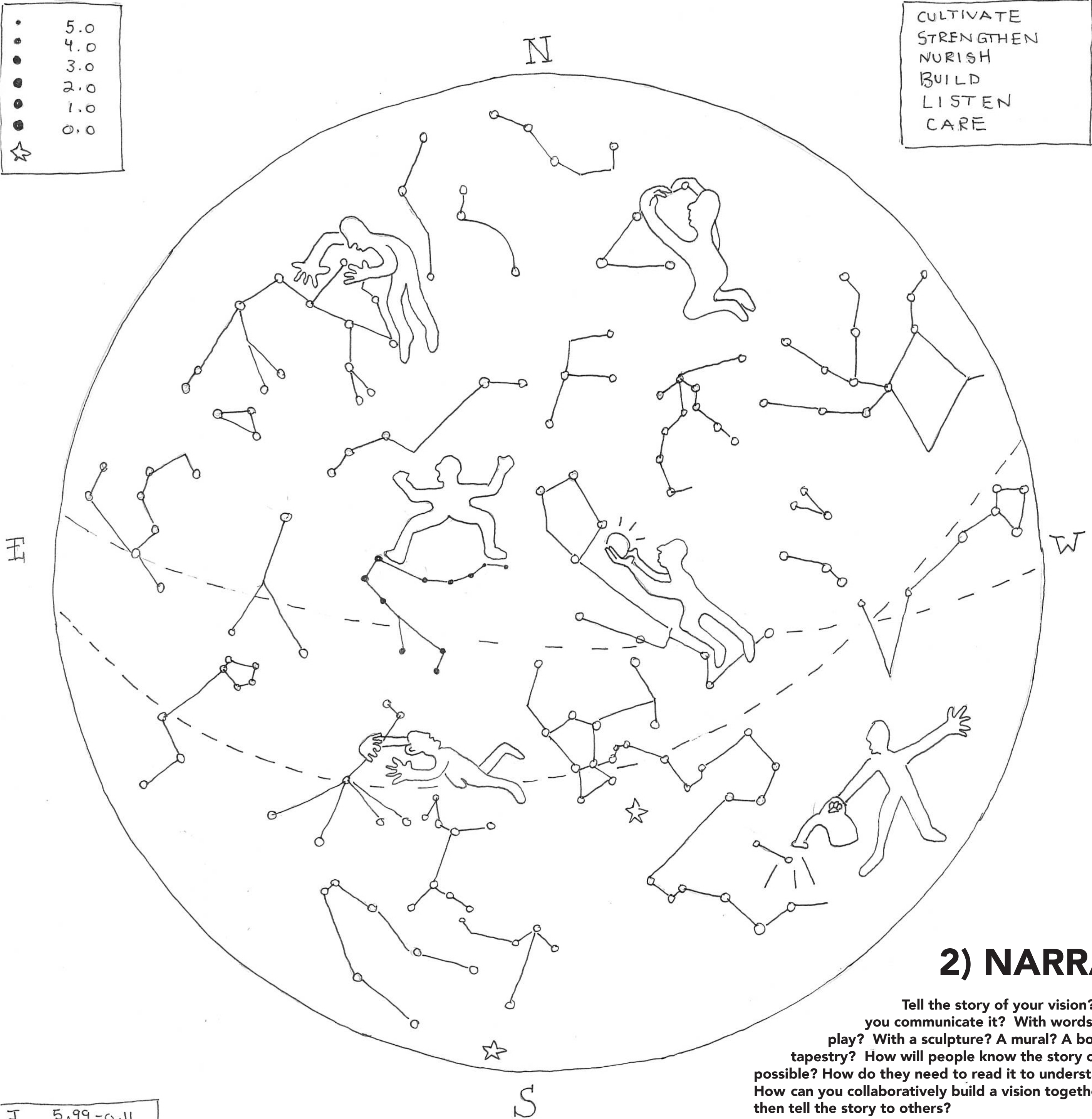
What are you struggling to imagine? What do you assume? What are you attached to? Can you imagine another way? What are your neighbors attached to? What is limiting their vision for the future? Can you imagine a different possibility?

Some of the practices we find to be particularly helpful during this process are

1. *We treat what interests us as important.* We seek out textures, images, and spaces that we find compelling. We think of our attention as a Geiger Counter, helping to indicate to us what is important and worthy of exploration.
2. *We treat our dreams with care.* We share them with people who we know will help us to nurture them and build, when we are ready, a pathway to bring them into reality. We nurture our dreams by giving voice to them, through drawing, writing and research.
3. *We are vigilant.* We protect and fight for our dreams even when others can not envision them. At the same time flexible in our visions and committed to supporting them in growing towards success. We are committed to making them the best we can and actively seek feedback and ways to strengthen them.
4. *We build teams.* We know that in order to test the things we imagine in reality we need the support and witness others. We are constantly assembling new teams, looking for new people to collaborate with, who can help us form new ideas and imagine new ways of making.
5. *We practice.* We know we will not always get things right the first time and we make space to practice and prototype. We make space in our work to try things multiple times and share them with multiple audiences before setting our ideas loose in the world. When things do not go as planned we reflect and refine.

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2) NARRATE

Tell the story of your vision? How will you communicate it? With words? With a play? With a sculpture? A mural? A book? A tapestry? How will people know the story of what is possible? How do they need to read it to understand it? How can you collaboratively build a vision together and then tell the story to others?

The history of determining a geography's identity is one that is intricately tied to capitalism. Through constructing the narrative of a geography it can be sold. The fear of telling a different or new story of a geography could be tied to the fear of losing capital, losing land and losing resources. Maintaining and crafting the narrative is power. And whose stories are told in the visual sphere is power. Use your power to tell the stories that you think need to be told. Know that storytelling in all forms is power.

3) INTERVENE

In Catherine D'Ignazio's words, History and geography "impos(e) arbitrary lines upon territories that are essentially continuous. Everyday life then fixes these lines in place by reiterating the performances on which (they)... depend."

The construction of structural inequities takes time, resources and money. It can be based on decisions that were made long ago that may even have been decisions of convenience or self interest.

Question which lines you fix into place through your daily performance of life. Use your own agency strategically! Understand which authorities you are reifying and which ones you are disrupting. How and when do your thoughts, decisions, eye contact, attention, and money may affirm structural inequity? Question how you can disrupt these performances of daily life? Consider how you can draw attention to the sleepiness and ease of these performances. Reperforming inequity is deceptively easy. It can be an act of convenience that lacks intended malice. As Edward W. Soja argues in Seeking Spatial Justice "Maintaining... discriminatory practices does not require evil people intentionally making... biased decisions, just well-trained experts following conventional procedures to make decisions and plans that will almost always favor the wealthier and more powerful segments of urban society."

The construction of structural inequities takes time, resources and money. It can be based on decisions that were made long ago that may even have been decisions of convenience or self interest. These decisions very often were about the application and ownership of capital. The way these resources are directed in a geography (local, regional, state or federal) can be viewed as a map, similar to a map of neural pathways that show the firing of electricity when a person thinks. In this case, resources light up a region, they bring attention to it, and, just as with neural firing in the brain, the more resources that are committed to a region the easier it becomes to use resources in the region and the easier it becomes to attribute more resources to the region.

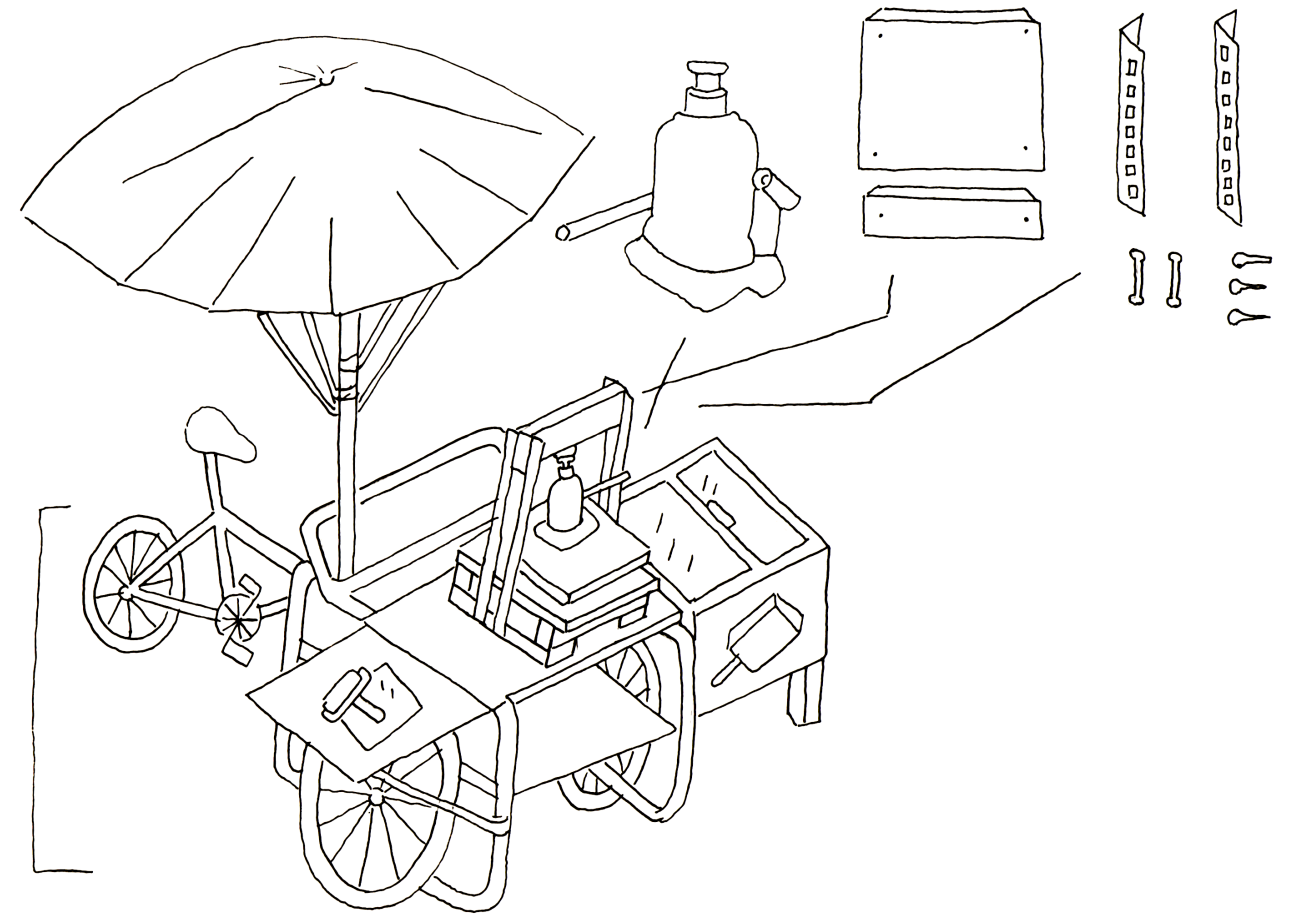
Our daily life patterns form pathways in our brain. They become like little sidewalks paved in the forest that help us know the way we like to get from here to there. The pathways are reinforced every time we use them. It is like everytime we travel to the grocery store on the same street our brain is pouring a bit more cement on the road, making it the better and more preferred pathway of choice. Structural inequity works much the same way. The more we do it, the more concrete we pour on it. It may not even be a road that we built, it may have been built by our parents, our grandparents, our neighbors or our founding fathers. But regardless of who formed the structural inequity, each time we walk down the path we pour some more concrete on the road. Through our actions we make it a more attractive pathway for not just ourselves but for others in the future.

Instead of pouring more concrete on those paths, seek out points of intervention. Scan the horizon for nodes of choice: moments when we make decisions about how to perform or not perform our individual identities, our relationship to our communities, our sense of geography.

Imagine how your art, words, actions, performance, can call attention to these moments. How could you intervene to draw attention to these choice points that we forget about, ignore or choose not to see? Highlight a choice point and invite your neighbor, the community, an elected official, a law enforcement agency, your grandfather, to investigate it with you.

To return to our earlier metaphor, instead of taking the same path to the grocery store consider if there is a local vendor you can buy fruit from in your neighborhood. If there is but it is not legal for that fruit vendor to sell in your neighborhood, consider if you can gather community support in introducing new legislation that would support this kind of vending. Creating a new path is certainly harder than using the existing ones because you have to clear space for each new step along the way. It can be helpful if not critical to find allies in this process, people who can support you and help co-create a new vision for the future. Sometimes we need new pathways. If we don't build them no one will.

If you imagine yourself with a can of concrete, reinforcing each pathway you walk down, encourage yourself to disrupt the normative pathways and ask how you could encourage others to do the same. Maybe you can not make an entirely new path all the time but maybe you can spill your concrete around a new bend for a few paces, maybe you step off the paved pathway to build new ways. Maybe someone will follow you.



4) COLLABORATE

Define the region you want your work to impact and work collaboratively to integrate the voices of those who live there. Who your audience is and ask how they will be engaged? It is not enough to say my audience is everyone, try to get more specific. Think about your practice in relationship to goals and be strategic in your engagement.

We cannot realistically engage everyone on everything, so we regularly reflect on who we have already engaged and which key audiences we are missing. We strive to be honest with ourselves and access new, hard to reach demographics. We ask ourselves: Who we talk to in our daily life and who is our work is reaching. When making new work consider: Does the average person you are reaching reflect the demographics of the larger community? Are there marginalized voices that are not represented? How can those individuals be reached? We strive to approach inclusion with the same rigor and metrics we use to for project evaluation. Our success moves at the pace of inclusion.

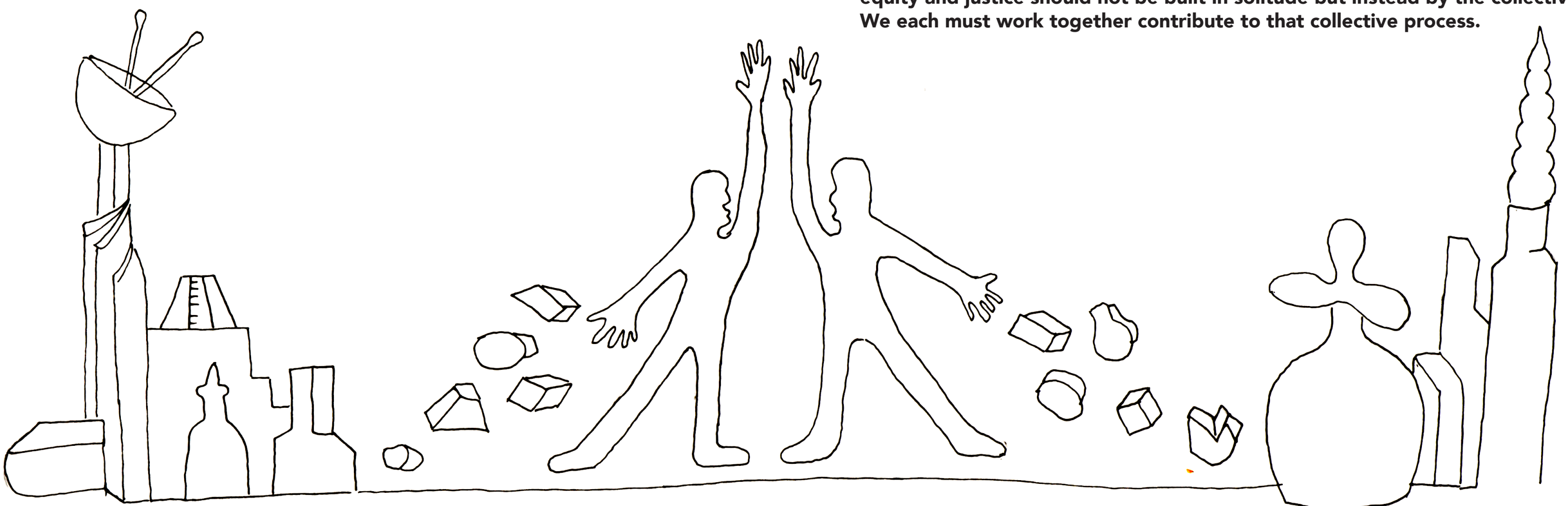
Actively seek out each other's voices and the voices of those that would otherwise be marginalized. These individuals need to be decision makers in the process, not just commentators. People who have been challenged by marginalization are crucial thought partners. Their lived experience of what it is like to encounter the most challenging components of life in the region is critical. We need to make sure we compensate each other for effort, time and fully acknowledge the value of each other's contributions.

Those of us in our community who have been historically marginalized should not be expected to buy into any shared project presented, without evaluation first and collaborative consent. Therefore projects/ ideas/ concepts can only offer to be relevant to each other. Never assume relevance fully on each other's behalf. When community criticism comes in a form or tone that is unpleasant, find the kernel of reflection that could be learned from.

Strive to be flexible in your vision and open to feedback. Understand privilege (both in yourself and in group dynamics). Work to counter your own impulses of defensiveness. The success of our community's collective work to advance justice and equity depends on it. Similarly, as Project Advisor and Collaborator Lori Lobenstien states "we need to address the times when it's our marginalization that makes us the target of (unjust) criticism."

We have a representative democracy. We must work harder to reflect it back to itself. The few cannot accurately reflect the experience of the many without first hearing their voices. We must help elected officials and local partners understand our position. How can we see our communication with these individuals as a key component of our own duties as civic thought leaders. If we do not regularly talk with municipal decision-makers, they cannot know our concerns. Be active, be kind and be persistent. Be invested in these relationships with municipal decision-makers for the long haul. Some things may not change immediately; so we must establish a strategic timeline accordingly. Trust, but verify.

So we build allies and recruit collaborators. We make our visions inherently flexible and invite others to collaboratively construct the future with us. The vision for equity and justice should not be built in solitude but instead by the collective. We each must work together contribute to that collective process.



5) HEALING AND RESTORATION

The construction of our collective identity as a city is tied to the construction of our identity as a country. The our identity as a country is one that is lined with beauty but also tied to trauma. In many cases those traumas have not been addressed by our nation. Instead it has become the unquestioned foundation of our country, tethering itself to the ways in which we build our lives. Many times the residue of our country's trauma sets the backdrop for our daily lives: it can be built into monuments to those who inflicted trauma on others, it could be ignored or oppressed through structures that don't acknowledge the historical significance or trauma in the region, or it can be directly implemented through the creation of infrastructure that causes environmental trauma.

Trauma is something our bodies hold individually and also through generations. It is something that can impact our DNA, the very fabric of our beings. We can also imagine cities like bodies, entities that are impacted and mutated through trauma. The being itself, the land, the infrastructure and the public space are all informed, silently or otherwise, through these traumas. We Look for those need to study its impacts together. Ask what they needs to be healed? and magine solutions!

What is it that we need to heal? What would help our communities to understand historical traumas, and impositions of power? What is needed to illuminate those stories, histories or current conditions in a way that ultimately leads to true healing and restoration?

ARTICULATE

COMMUNICATE

Our collective work does not stop with a drawing or an idea, it must continue into the realm of direct communication. Ideas built in collaboration and response to community interests need to be heard, workshopped, adjusted and built into the space.

Thought leaders are in essence communicators. Our job in this role is to make our ideas communicable and tangible. Ideas must A) travel B) move fluidly C) be fully articulated and D) reach intended audiences. Communication is a two way process: placing ideas in the world will allow others to respond and provide further opportunities for adaptation and refinement.

EXPAND

Let's consider your audience. Who are you talking to and who should you be talking to? Whose voice is not being heard? Who holds the power and influence? Who should have a seat at the table so they can directly represent their own experience? How can you get them to the table and how can your work influence the actions of both groups?

Consider who you are not reaching and who you should be reaching. Think about how to reach them where they are, work to understand their motivations and interests. Work to understand how to make your ideas relevant to those you are trying to reach and work accordingly. Work strategically to expand the conversation on equity and spatial justice.

EMBODY

Trevor Paglen theorizes that the production of culture is material and therefore impacts space and the built environment. In some ways you could consider the production of culture an act of civic art, an action that shapes the material world and our built environment. The creation of art and ideas results in the production of space. When you think, act and make art about the equity you literally build a space for it.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the last year the community has come together, reflected, written on objects, performed in public, held meetings, collaged onto postcards, built new structures.... all of these things take up space and impact the space around us. These activities impact the very bones of our city. As we have dreamed, communicated and built together we have take steps to infuse the marrow of our city with new ideas, waiting to germinate forward.

Civic Art can seem immutable, steadfast ways that at times is reassuring and at other times daunting. However this perception is partially an illusion. The first step to changing public space is changing the way we think about it. The second step is changing the way we interact with it. These two steps, which we can continue to take in the immediate present, bring us inevitably closer to changing the tactile world of our surroundings, the material and spatial worlds we create in our environment.

Together we are building more space for equity. There more space for equity and justice in Brownsville as a result of our actions together. The built environment has already shifted. We have planted seeds of new ideas in the cracks of the sidewalk. Those roots will grow deep and that new grass will grow tall. Take up space with your thoughts, ideas and dreams. Remember the power of your actions and imagination to crack concrete and shift the world around you.

