

Small Cities **Co-Lab**

Booklet Series

Book 4: Anchor Institutions

Small Cities Lab



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Book 4: Anchor Institutions

Small cities are navigating the benefits and costs of anchor institution economies, and what more equitable arrangements could look like.



**College of Arts
& Sciences**
LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

Small Cities Lab

How can anchor institutions partner more effectively in small city governance?

Many small cities are also college towns, and they often have medical centers tied to their universities. By the late 20th-century, the center of gravity in smaller places shifted toward education and healthcare following the decline of manufacturing. Medical and educational institutions grew rapidly as they received enormous amounts of government investment and research dollars for 'national prosperity' and 'global prominence.' Locally, this growth often contributed to uneven recovery of post-industrial cities. Cities came to see "meds and eds" as ideal partners; they were perceived as rooted, embedded, and far less likely to relocate than the industries they replaced. They anchor local economies and catalyze future community and economic development. But this stability and recovery isn't guaranteed, and in financially strained cities, it can create overreliance and vulnerability if they decline or close.

Lehigh University's Health, Science and Technology building (opened 2022) marks the contemporary campus edge, buffered from the city by privately managed student housing.

Meds and Eds Themes

At the same time, the institutions whose missions are to care for and educate people also hold outsized local political power, possess large sums of capital, hold large percentages of a jurisdiction's land that is often tax exempt, and place mounting pressure on existing housing while limiting vacant land available for new development. The divide between anchor institutions and the residents of surrounding neighborhoods can run deep, especially when institutions act in opposition to community priorities, or when their more transient populations make little effort to integrate or engage.

Within this context, policymakers, executives, academics, and activists are asking: how can anchor institutions participate more effectively and responsibly in place governance? How do universities and healthcare institutions facilitate more productive relationships to improve how decisions are made and who can participate in making them?

During the Co-Lab, four themes emerged about the role of meds and eds in small cities:



Anchor Institution Reliance

Hospitals and universities are anchor institutions in many smaller cities, providing employment and critical services, while influencing local spending and investment. Several participants emphasized that their communities would face serious hardship, or even struggle to survive, without these anchor institutions.



Large, Tax-Exempt Footprint

Universities and hospitals often have some of the largest and most valuable landholdings in small cities, much of it acquired during urban renewal. As tax-exempt nonprofits, they reduce the local tax base, while continued expansion increases housing demand and competes for developable land.



Anchor Institution - Community Divide

Anchor institutions often have a complicated relationship with surrounding communities. Participants described institutions as “out of touch” or failing to be “integrated or engaged,” with institutional priorities in opposition to community needs. This divide is reinforced by class and racial differences between those affiliated with the institution and neighboring residents.



Governance Actors

Beyond their economic role, meds and eds shape local governance and civic life through their engagement, or lack of it, with surrounding communities. In New Haven and Bethlehem, the relationship between institutions and local government stood out as a defining feature of city decision making. Participants described a desire to collaborate more effectively in local governance.

The Largest Employers

In the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, industrial employers were the primary economic anchors driving the growth of small cities in the Mid Atlantic, Northeast, and Midwest. These included steel and coal production, weapons manufacturing, and textiles, among many others. Following the national decline of these industries, the primary employers in many small cities shifted to meds and eds. These institutions were often the “last ones standing,” rooted in place and far less likely to relocate. They were therefore viewed as stable, mutually invested partners in local recovery and development, though an overreliance can concentrate power and create precarity.

In the mid-20th century, there was extreme growth and investment funneled into meds and eds. Universities expanded with increased public investment, federal research dollars, and subsidized higher education to grow

the student body and research capacity. Programs such as the GI Bill, along with increased federal funding for research tied to Cold War priorities, including science, medicine, and space exploration, accelerated institutional growth. At the same time, the healthcare sector



St. Lukes Hospital, Bethlehem PA.
(Postcard: R. Ramsay Mebane, Wilkes-Barre, Pa 1930-1939)

grew rapidly, driven in large part by the expansion of university-affiliated medical centers. As a result, universities and their medical centers became increasingly central to local economies and American research leadership worldwide.

By the 1990s, the center of gravity had clearly shifted in small cities away from industry to “meds and eds.” These historically working class industrial communities were reconfigured as more white collar workers, academics,

researchers, doctors, nurses, and students moved to these places.

In Allentown, Ann Arbor, Bethlehem, Erie, Providence, New Haven, Meadville, Middletown, Quakertown, Stamford, and St. Louis Park, meds and eds became the primary economic anchor in the wake of their industrial decline. For many of these cities, this transition helped stabilize or recover their local economy; hospitals, medical centers, and universities provide high-wage jobs and often become

catalysts for future economic and community development.

Meds

Participants from Allentown, Quakertown, St. Louis Park, Meadville, and Erie mentioned their hospitals or medical centers as a “large employer,” “biggest employer,” and an “employment hub,” providing important job opportunities for residents. In many cases, universities host these medical centers, including the University of Michigan’s Michigan Medical which provides “access to great healthcare” in Ann Arbor.

Medical institutions tend to have higher contribution and reliance scores (Figure 1) and are often larger drivers of economic development, with bigger employment bases.

Today, the healthcare sector also receives more direct government funding and private investment than higher education, further reinforcing its central role in local economies.

Eds

Participants from Meadville, Ann Arbor, Providence, Bethlehem, and Middletown described their educational institutions as “anchors” or “large employers.” These

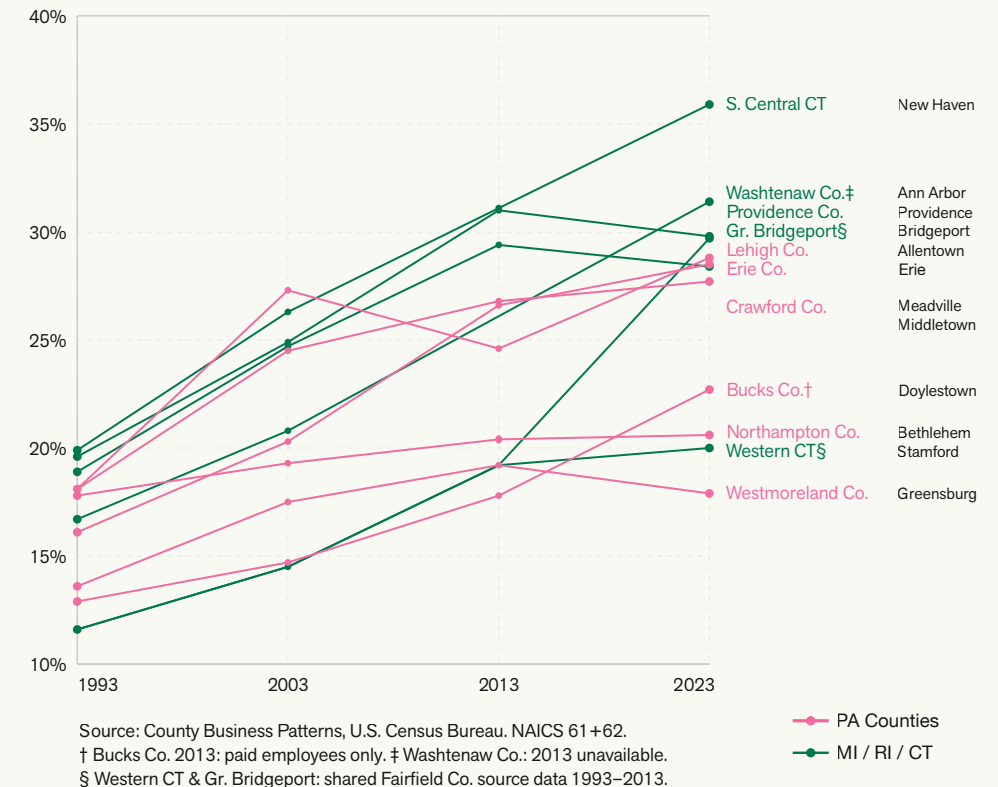
cities are “college towns,” with reliance indexes and higher education enrollment numbers well above the national average. Ann Arbor stands out most, with a reliance index of 3.08 (national average is 1) and a higher education enrollment percentage of 35.2% (national average is 6%). While lower, Meadville, Providence, Bethlehem, and Middletown have significant populations enrolled in higher education, roughly 13 to 17%, about 3 times as high as the national average. Providence hosts several educational institutions, including RISD, Brown, JWU, and Providence College. These were described for their ability to retain and “train talent/expertise,” channeling students towards similar career paths in education and medicine in the city.

Over-Reliance

However, the presence of a medical or educational institution does not necessarily indicate that the local economy is strong. In cities with fewer financial resources, over-reliance on failing institutions has created precarious conditions and limited long-term stability.

In Erie, the city’s healthcare industry is “amazing where it exists,” but it would be “devastating to the community if they shut down.” Erie is more reliant on their medical institutions for employment and community investment than the

Co-Lab Cities, Eds & Meds as Share of Total Workforce, 1993–2023



national average, with a reliance index of 1.39. Its reliance poses a serious risk; if Erie’s medical institutions were to close, the community would struggle to survive. These institutions are shrinking in capacity, enrollment, and funding, and their imminent closures will have detrimental effects on the community’s well-being, job opportunities, and access

to care.

A similar dynamic is at play 90 miles south in Sharon, Pennsylvania. The Shenango Valley region depends on Sharon Regional Medical Center as a central economic and healthcare anchor. Following its bankruptcy and closure, Tenor Health Foundation stepped in to

reopen the hospital after a few months. This raises a broader concern about external companies operating hospitals and institutions from the outside – increasingly this includes private equity involvement. As one participant mentioned, this “leads to floundering systems” or a “failure of systems.” External companies may lack direction and do not have the same investment in the community. If an institution struggles financially, an outside operator may be more willing to accept downsizing or closure despite the high stakes for local residents. Hospital networks may face similar risks if their primary campus is in a different region, and similarly for educational institutions and state colleges with satellite campuses. The main institution can contract or move their satellite campuses to other places or close them outright.

Large, Tax-Exempt Footprint

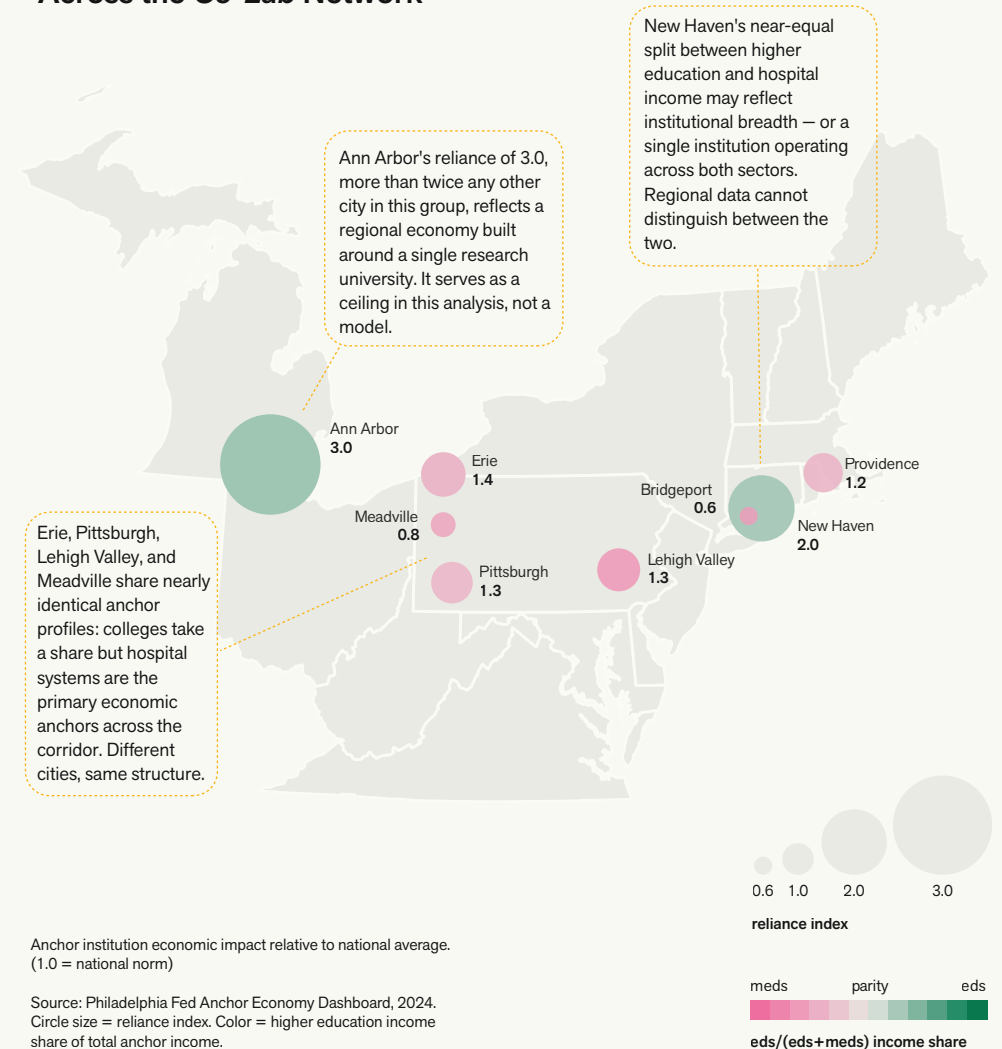
Meds and Eds institutions occupy a large share of their cities' physical footprints. In many small cities, they are the largest property owners, acquiring vast amounts of land over time. These land and building acquisitions manifest new “satellite” or “innovation” campuses on a city's fringe while expanding university footprints in central locations and historic cores. As their enrollment and workforces continue to expand,

there is compounding pressure on already constrained housing markets. Participants from Ann Arbor, Bethlehem, Erie, and Stamford cited their “meds and eds” as “eating up land” or “eating local real estate,” referring both to property acquisition and how their large footprints limit space for new development. When discussing geographic footprints, participants referred mainly to “eds”.

Eds' footprints grew largely from urban renewal projects in the 60s and 70s, as they expanded their campuses to keep pace with growing enrollments and employment bases. Urban renewal laws initially focused on residential redevelopment, allowing municipalities to designate areas as “blighted” and seize private property, often through eminent domain. These laws were later amended to include universities, enabling campus expansion on renewal land. Universities frequently partnered with cities to acquire land and carry out redevelopment projects that displaced existing residents to add academic buildings and even expand university-affiliated medical centers.

In Bethlehem, the development of Lehigh University's Farrington Square displaced a predominantly black neighborhood on the Southside. That pattern of acquisition has continued in smaller ways. Lehigh has since purchased local

Anchor Institution Reliance Across the Co-Lab Network





Comparative Institutional Map of Selected Co-Lab Participant Cities: Areas shaded in yellow represent land designated for institutional use or university overlays. In cases where institutional zoning is not formally defined, yellow instead indicates parcels owned by educational or medical institutions. These areas are shown in comparison to land that allows residential use.

Key

City Name
 % Institutional or owned by educational / medical institutional
 % Land zoned residential

churches and are occupying existing buildings in the neighborhood. Yale similarly has expanded through small land acquisitions, leaving institutions with holdings that dwarf most private landowners in their cities. Today, the University of Michigan owns 1,920 acres in Ann Arbor; Lehigh's 2,355 acres make it Bethlehem's largest property owner; and Yale controls 1,108 acres across 300 parcels in New Haven. In all these cases, none of this land generates tax revenue. Being 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, these institutions do not pay property taxes on their holdings. With a sizable percentage of their land exempt from taxes, cities receive far lower revenues. Participants from Meadville, Providence, and Ann Arbor directly mentioned their institutions "tax-exempt" status, which is especially problematic given the amount of land these institutions hold. In New Haven, where Yale's holdings represent the majority of the city's assessed value, the fiscal stakes are particularly high. The city totals \$8.5B in tax-exempt property, about 60% of the city.

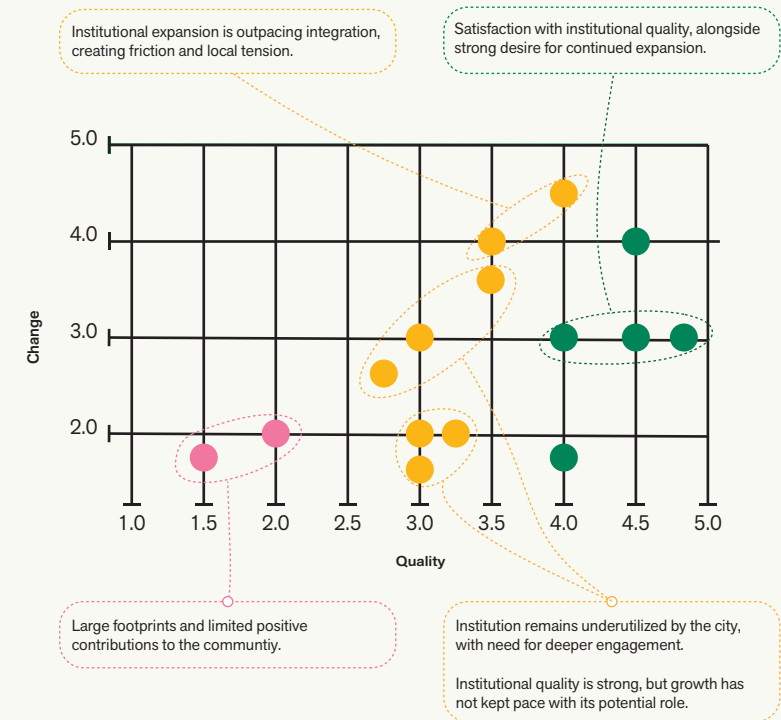
University Growth & Housing Pressures

Participants also mentioned that their cities' anchor institutions enrollment and workforce numbers are still "growing" in recent decades. In Stamford, the

"university and hospital are growing fast," referring to the University of Connecticut-Stamford, which has one of the fastest growing doctoral programs in the country, and has seen a record high first-year enrollment up 50% since 2014. In Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan is "growing rapidly," with a 7% enrollment growth in four years, totalling 53,000 students in a city of 122,000 people. In Bethlehem, Lehigh University is described as "a boom." Since 2010, Lehigh's student enrollment has increased by 30%, with the goal to expand to 6,000 students by 2030.

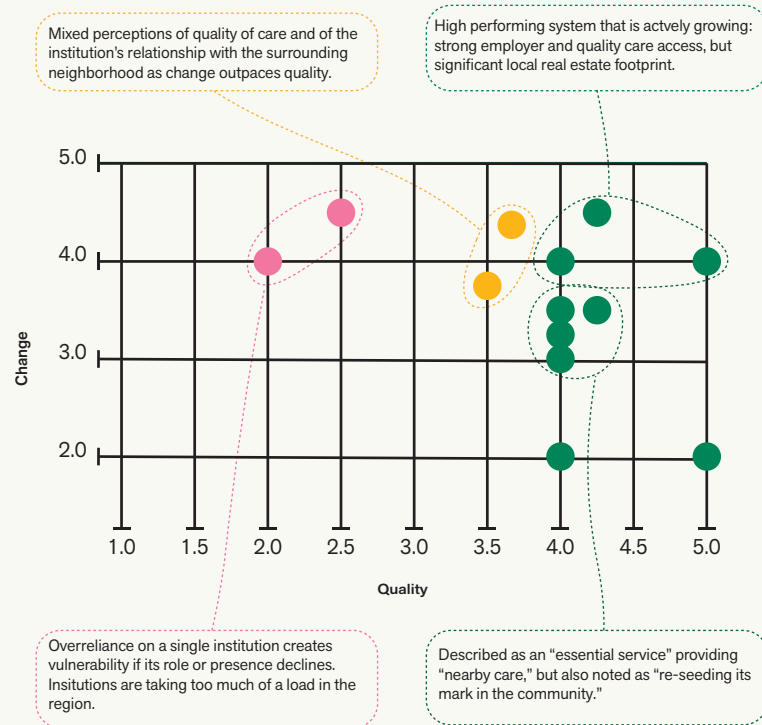
As these institutions expand their student populations and workforce, they increase housing demand without proportionately increasing supply, rarely building new dorms or residential living spaces. Among all higher education, only 15.6% of students live on-campus (this is much higher among private 4-year institutions at 43.1%). Students nationwide must live off-campus, driving up competition and pricing out long-term residents in surrounding neighborhoods. These gentrification pressures are intensified by rental agencies that enter neighborhoods with the sole purpose of renting to students at higher prices where residents cannot compete. This has hollowed out historic neighborhoods surrounding universities and led to a "studentification" of housing, where existing homes are

Eds Quality and Change, Co-Lab City Portraits



The chart above displays participants' ratings of educational institutions in their small cities based on quality and change. Each bubble represents one institution. The X-axis measures the institution's quality, rated from 1 (liability) to 5 (asset) by each participant. The Y-axis measures the pace of change, from 1 (slow) to 5 (fast). Each bubble therefore shows how participants perceive an institution's quality in relation to how quickly it is changing.

Meds Quality and Change, Co-Lab City Portraits



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converted into higher density student rentals; properties have declining upkeep and poor waste management; and neighborhoods have "high turnover" with "students/faculty cycling in and out." At the same time, the institutions' large footprints limit the land available for new housing, which would take pressure off of the existing housing stock.

"Anchor Institution - Community-Divide" (Town-gown divide)

As they are large employers and may provide important services locally, meds and eds have outsized power and influence that, at times, has not been used to the benefit of communities. This has contributed to strained relationships between anchor institutions and neighborhoods, especially when institutional goals verge away from community priorities. As one participant mentioned, one of the biggest challenges is that "institutional agency is in opposition to community," and that institutions are often "out of touch." Participants from Ann Arbor, New Haven, and Bethlehem spoke directly about the anchor-institution-community-divide, or a "town-gown divide". In Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan has "a complicated relationship with the city!" There is also "lots of conflict" between the university and the surrounding

community. In New Haven, the Yale New Haven Hospital is cited as "not always a good neighbor."

This persistent divide between anchor institution populations and local residents is especially pronounced in post-industrial, working-class cities. In many cases, there are class and racial differences between people affiliated with anchor institutions and residents of the neighborhoods in which those institutions are physically embedded.

These populations are more transient; even if the overall number of people remains the same, the specific individuals, students, faculty, and staff are changing. As a result, people do not necessarily view the city as home, but instead, identify that feeling with their campuses. Institutions, as a result, remain insular and faculty and students may make little effort to engage meaningfully with their local context or weave themselves into the community. This separation reinforces social boundaries, positioning the institution as distinct from, rather than a part of its local context. For example, Lehigh University was described as needing to be "much more integrated and engaged," with community efforts that are "sometimes strong, sometimes deeply problematic," and a clear need to listen to and incorporate local feedback.

Many university-based community design centers emerged in response to town-gown tensions and to engage with local challenges. The Yale Urban Design Workshop, Minnesota Design Center, and University of Michigan's Collective for Equitable Housing were represented at the Co-Lab.

The cultural and social division between institutions and communities are exacerbated by housing shortages, creating a negative feedback loop. There is often a political aversion to multi-family housing for fear that new stock will become student housing. It's true that developers may prioritize higher density to serve students, but there are also demands from other populations. This perception leads residents – who might otherwise support more housing – to resist the prospect of density they associate with students and institutional expansion. The town-gown dynamic creates a political environment in which multi-family housing struggles to gain traction, even when the need for it is clear.

Governance Actors

Town-gown tensions appear especially pronounced among educational institutions. Eds frequently have more strained relationships with their

neighbors and the city community, often marked by uneven or inconsistent engagement. These qualitative insights are reinforced by the Co-Lab Small City Portrait Exercises, where educational institutions received some of the most polarized scores. In particular, tensions surfaced when high “change” scores, reflecting institutional growth and expansion, were paired with lower “quality” scores, indicating dissatisfaction with their role as community actors. This divergence suggests that growth without meaningful integration can exacerbate existing divides, intensifying perceptions that institutions are expanding in ways that are disconnected from, or even detrimental to, the communities around them. On the other hand, “meds” have a higher quality score, clustered around 4 to 5. The data suggests hospitals are evolving faster while remaining or becoming more responsible community actors. They're growing while maintaining quality relationships with their surroundings.

At the same time, academics are looking to improve their role in their city's governance.



Participants asked...

How can practice and community realities better inform academic research?

What role can universities play in fostering strong, collaborative relationships between designers and communities?

How can we create better partnerships between city and academic institutions?

How can academic institutions partner with municipalities to help translate research into practice?

FEATURE

How Can Academic Institutions Partner With Municipalities to Help Translate Research Into Practice?

CL Bohannon

I approach partnerships between academia and municipalities with a simple premise: research is most meaningful when it is created with, rather than for, communities. Translation, in this sense, is not about delivering academic expertise to cities, but about co-producing knowledge from the very beginning in ways rooted in local experience and lived reality.

This is where design research methods are especially powerful. Design research is inherently place-based, iterative, and relational. Methods like mapping, visual storytelling, participatory workshops, and scenario building don't just help us analyze conditions; they help us learn about place alongside communities and municipal staff, rather than in parallel. They surface lived experience, spatial relationships, and everyday realities that



Student work. UVA School of Architecture.

are often invisible in more traditional forms of research.

A good example of this approach from my own work comes from the Landscape Architecture program at the University of Virginia, where we have committed to community engagement as an essential component of design education. Our students work with communities across the Commonwealth of Virginia and along

the East Coast, engaging with place-based challenges through sustained partnerships that emphasize listening, trust-building, and shared learning. In Apalachicola, Florida, a small coastal city facing intersecting challenges related to climate vulnerability, economic transition, and community identity, we applied this same framework. Rather than beginning with predefined solutions, we worked closely with local residents, city staff, and

community organizations to understand how people were experiencing change on the ground, how flooding, tourism pressures, and housing instability were shaping daily life and long-term concerns.

Design research methods were central to that process. Through a regional atlas assignment, we used mapping and visualization to situate local conditions within broader environmental and historical contexts, documenting community knowledge of coastal flooding patterns, ghost forests, and informal adaptations that were not captured in official data. The atlas allowed students and community partners to layer environmental systems with local and regional histories, making visible how climate processes, land-use change, and cultural narratives intersect over time. Through workshops and design scenarios, residents and city staff were able to see how environmental, economic, and social systems were connected spatially. That process didn't just generate information; it created a shared understanding of place that became a foundation for dialogue and decision-making.

One of the challenges municipalities often face is that research arrives in formats that are difficult to act on, lengthy reports, abstract recommendations,

or timelines that don't align with policy and funding cycles. In Apalachicola, design research helped bridge that gap by producing visual, testable ideas rather than fixed plans. Those drawings and scenarios became shared reference points that the city could use in conversations with funders, agencies, and residents. Instead of a report sitting on a shelf, the work became something people could point to, debate, adapt, and build from.

Equally important was the relationship-based nature of the partnership. This wasn't a one-off project. Academic involvement helped provide continuity in a context where local capacity was stretched thin. The goal wasn't to replace municipal expertise, but to support it, building local capacity and expanding what the city could imagine and advocate for over time.

What struck me most in Apalachicola was how design research expanded the vision of what was possible. In a small city with limited resources and real risk, imagination can feel like a luxury. Design research created a low-risk space to explore futures that weren't immediately feasible but were deeply meaningful to the community. That imaginative work became a critical step toward implementation, because it helped residents and leaders articulate what



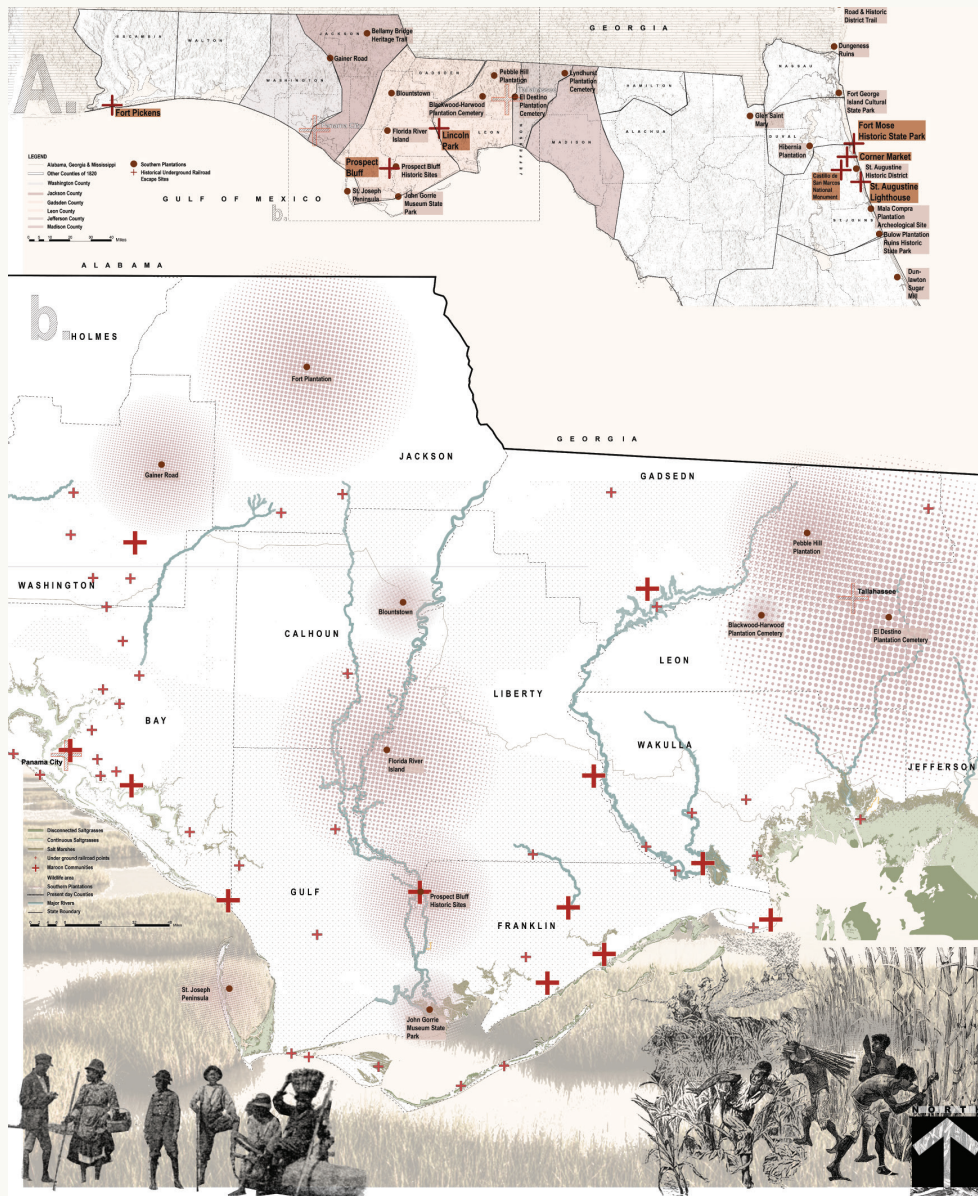
Community Design. Apalachicola, Florida.
UVA School of Architecture.

they wanted, not just what they were reacting to.

At the heart of this work is a recognition that communities are experts in their own places. Municipal staff bring deep operational knowledge, and residents bring lived experience. Academic institutions contribute by structuring processes that bring those forms of expertise together and by using design research to redistribute power in

decision-making. Research becomes not just a way of understanding problems, but a way of building trust and aligning action.

So when I think about how academic institutions can help translate research into practice, I don't see that as a linear process. I see it as a collaborative, place-based effort, one where design research helps communities and municipalities learn together, expand the range of what feels possible, and move toward



projects that are grounded in shared understanding and shared ownership.

Ultimately, the goal isn't just to translate research into practice; it's to expand the range of what practice can be by using design research to deepen our understanding of place and to build projects with communities, not just for them.

Conversely, how can practice and community realities better inform academic research?

I approach academic research through the lens of practice and community experience. For me, the most meaningful work begins not with fully formed research agendas, but with listening, allowing questions to surface from the conditions communities are already responding to. In community-engaged design, this reorientation fundamentally changes how knowledge is created and shared.

Practice and community realities become powerful drivers of research when we spend time listening before defining the problem. Municipal staff

and community members are navigating layered constraints every day, including environmental risk, economic pressures, policy limitations, and long histories that shape trust and decision-making. When those realities shape what we study, research becomes more grounded, more accountable, and ultimately more useful.

Design research methods are especially well-suited to this because they allow research to be embedded in place. Through participatory mapping, walking interviews, visual documentation, and co-design workshops, researchers encounter forms of knowledge that rarely appear in formal datasets, informal adaptations, cultural memory, and relationships to land and water that are deeply lived rather than formally recorded. Those moments when community knowledge challenges academic assumptions are often the most generative for research.

A clear example of this from my own work comes from Apalachicola, Florida. Initially, the research focus was framed around familiar questions of coastal resilience and adaptation. But as we engaged more deeply with residents, city staff, and local historians, it became clear that the issues people cared most about were not just technical or environmental; they were deeply tied to place, history, and cultural identity.

Student work. Adrian Robins.
Ephemeral Tidings. UVA School
of Architecture.

Two sites in particular, Money Bayou Beach and Prospect Bluff, became central to reshaping the research agenda. These landscapes hold ecological importance, but they also carry layered cultural and historical meaning that has been marginalized in conventional planning and environmental research. Community members spoke about these places not simply as sites of vulnerability or recreation, but as landscapes tied to memory, freedom, labor, and belonging.

Through design research, mapping, storytelling, and spatial documentation, those narratives began to surface in ways that challenged existing frameworks. The work shifted from asking how these sites should be “protected” or “managed” to asking how reconnection to place and history could shape future decisions. Community knowledge revealed that understanding flooding patterns, land use, and resilience required understanding how people had historically inhabited, adapted to, and valued these landscapes over time.

In this context, practice didn't just inform the research; it redefined what the research was about. Money Bayou Beach and Prospect Bluff became lenses through which broader questions emerged: What counts as expertise? How do cultural landscapes inform environmental decision-making? And

how can design research make visible histories that have been overlooked or erased in planning processes?

This experience also reinforced the idea that practice itself is a form of research. Municipal staff and community organizations were already experimenting, navigating access, preservation, and stewardship in real time. Academic research became more meaningful when it documented, reflected on, and learned from those practices rather than attempting to replace them with abstract models.

Community realities also reshaped the pace and ethics of the research. These were not semester-long problems or grant-cycle questions. They required patience, trust, and accountability to people who would live with the outcomes. That accountability improved the research; it made it more careful, more inclusive, and more attuned to long-term consequences.

So when I think about how practice and community realities should inform academic research, I don't see it as a secondary step. I see it as foundational. Community knowledge, cultural landscapes, and lived history are essential sources of research insight, not contextual background.



The goal isn't just to translate research into practice; it's to expand the range of what practice can be by using design research to deepen our understanding of place and to build projects with communities.

–CL Bohannon

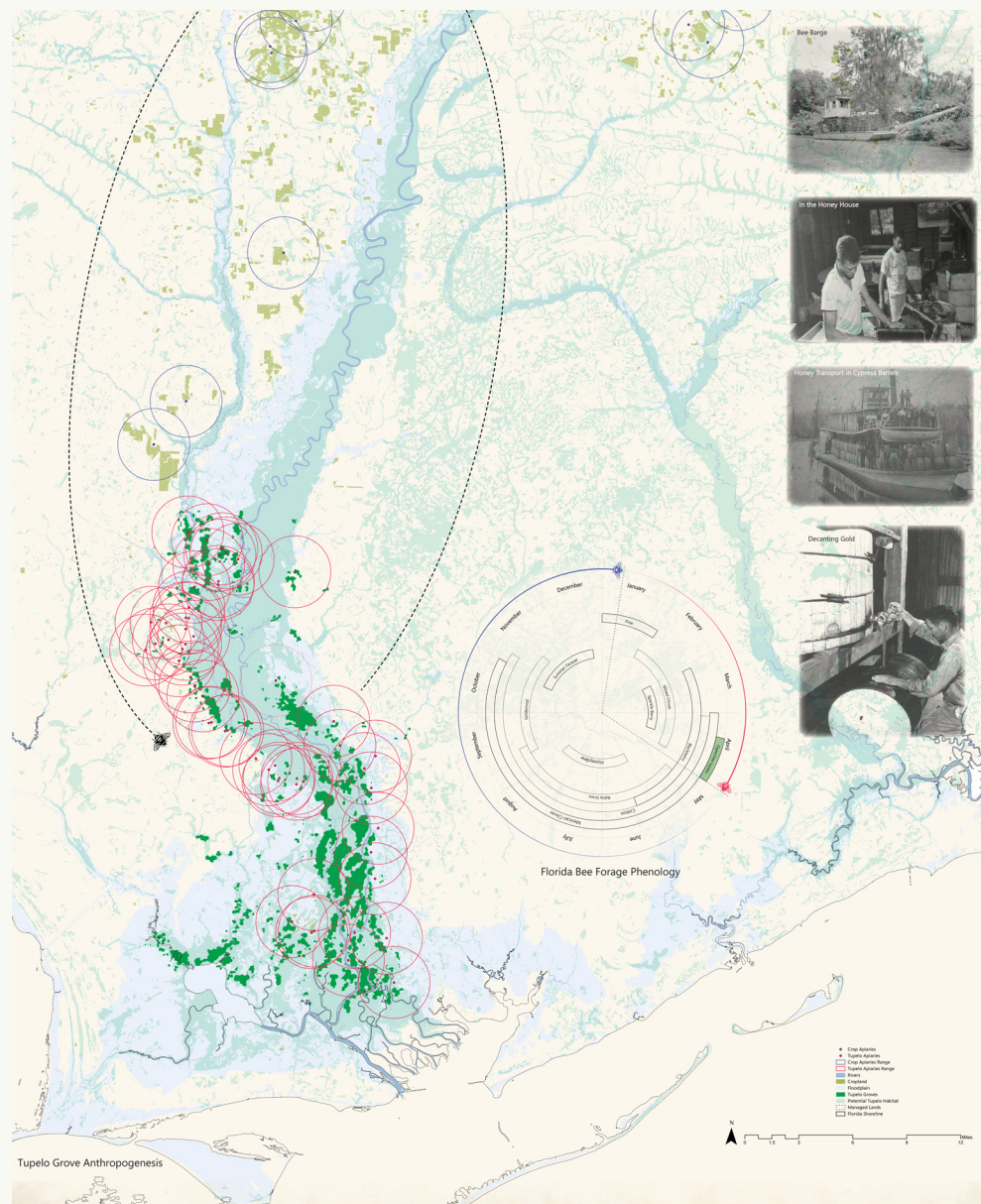
And I'll close with this: When community realities inform research, the academy doesn't lose rigor; it gains relevance, accountability, and new ways of knowing.

What role can universities play in fostering strong, collaborative relationships between designers and communities?

When I think about the role universities can play in fostering strong, collaborative relationships between designers and communities, I see it as both a structural role and a cultural one. Universities are uniquely positioned to slow things down, create space for learning, and support relationships that aren't driven solely by immediate outcomes or market pressures.

First, universities can act as long-term partners rather than short-term consultants. Communities and municipalities often experience design engagement as episodic projects come in, extract information, and then disappear. Universities can counter that by committing to sustained engagement over time. Through labs, studios, and research centers, universities can provide continuity across political cycles, funding changes, and staff turnover. That consistency is foundational to trust.

Second, universities can help reframe how designers are trained to engage with communities. Strong collaboration doesn't happen automatically; it requires skills in listening, facilitation, humility,



and shared decision-making. Universities can make these capacities central to design education rather than peripheral. When students learn early on that design is as much about relationships and accountability as it is about form or technique, they enter practice better prepared to work collaboratively with communities.

Another critical role universities can play is as honest brokers and conveners. Academic institutions can bring designers, municipal staff, community members, and other stakeholders into the same space in ways that feel less transactional and more exploratory. Universities often have the perceived neutrality and institutional support to convene difficult conversations about history, power, displacement, or environmental risk without immediately needing to produce a finished product. That convening role helps establish shared language and mutual understanding before design decisions are made.

Universities can also elevate community knowledge as legitimate expertise.

Student work. Mary Cotterman.
Bee Temporality. UVA School of Architecture.

Through community-engaged research and teaching, academic institutions can help shift whose knowledge is valued and documented. Design research methods, such as participatory mapping, storytelling, and co-design, allow community knowledge to shape projects from the outset rather than being treated as feedback at the end. When universities model this approach, they help normalize more equitable designer–community relationships across the profession.

Finally, universities can support collaboration by being reflective institutions themselves. That means asking hard questions about extractive practices, timelines that privilege academic calendars over community needs, and who ultimately benefits from engagement. When universities hold themselves accountable, by sharing credit, returning knowledge to communities, and sustaining relationships beyond a single project, they set a standard for ethical, collaborative practice.

So for me, the role of universities isn't to mediate design for communities, but to create the conditions where collaboration can genuinely take root. When universities invest in time, trust, and shared learning, they help designers and communities move from transactional relationships to true partnerships, ones

where projects are shaped by mutual respect, shared ownership, and a deeper understanding of place. At their best, universities don't just teach collaboration, they practice it, model it, and sustain it over time.

How can universities support, encourage, and advance more productive relationships between designers and community planning departments?

Universities can play a critical role in supporting more productive relationships between designers and community planning departments by acting as connectors, translators, and capacity builders. Designers and planners often share similar goals, but they work within different constraints, timelines, and professional cultures. Universities are uniquely positioned to help bridge those differences.

One important way universities can do this is by aligning academic work more closely with the realities of planning practice. Community planning departments are typically under-resourced and operating within strict regulatory and political frameworks. Universities can support better collaboration by designing studios, research projects, and partnerships that respond to those conditions, working

within realistic planning timelines, producing usable materials, and being explicit about what academic partners can realistically deliver. That alignment helps build trust and reduces frustration on both sides.

Universities can also serve as translation spaces between designers and planners. Designers often bring speculative thinking, visualization, and imagination, while planners work within policy, zoning, and implementation frameworks. Academic institutions can help create a shared language and tools, through mapping, scenario-building, and visual storytelling, that enable designers and planning staff to work from the same reference points. Those tools make collaboration more productive by turning abstract goals into spatially grounded conversations.

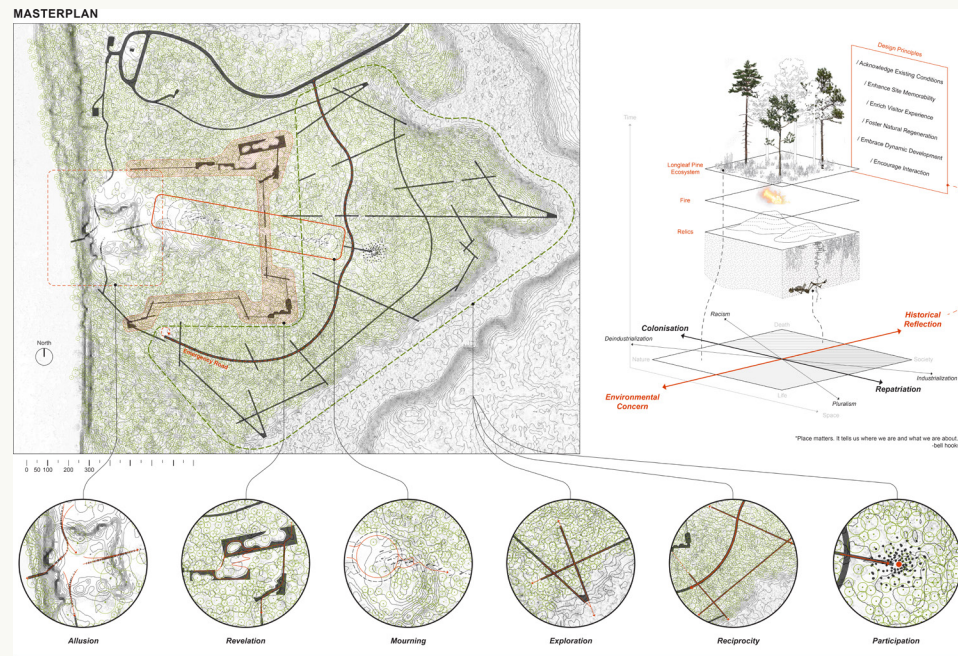
Another key role universities can play is building shared capacity rather than producing one-off projects. Instead of positioning themselves as external experts, universities can structure partnerships so that designers, planners, students, and faculty learn together. This might include co-developed research questions, joint workshops, or tools that planning departments can continue to use after a project ends. The goal is to leave behind capacity, not dependency.



Community Design. Apalachicola, Florida.
UVA School of Architecture.

Universities are also well-positioned to create low-risk environments for experimentation. Planning departments often have limited room to test new ideas because of public accountability and legal constraints. Universities can provide space to explore alternative approaches, pilot engagement methods, or test design scenarios before they are formalized. That shared experimentation helps designers and planners build confidence working together and opens up new possibilities for practice.

Equally important is the way universities can model ethical, community-centered engagement. Productive relationships between designers and planning departments depend on trust with communities. When universities demonstrate accountable, respectful engagement, center community knowledge, are transparent about limits, and sustain relationships over time, they foster better collaboration among all parties.



Finally, universities can advance these relationships by institutionalizing partnerships, rather than relying on individual champions alone. Through labs, memoranda of understanding, and long-term programs, universities can provide continuity even as staff, students, or political leadership change. That consistency is especially valuable for small cities and under-resourced planning departments.

So ultimately, the university's role is not to sit between designers and planners, but to create the conditions in which collaboration can thrive through alignment, translation, shared learning, and long-term commitment. When universities take that role seriously, they help transform designer–planner relationships from transactional interactions into durable partnerships grounded in trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for place.

At their best, universities help designers and planning departments not just work together, but learn together, building relationships that endure beyond any single project.

Student work. Yuan Shuai.
Longleaf Pine, Prospect Bluff.
 UVA School of Architecture.

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FEATURE

A Look into Connecticut's Meds & Eds with David Kooris

The Small Cities Lab spoke with David Kooris, the Executive Director of the Connecticut Municipal Development Authority, a quasi-public entity launched by the governor to support municipalities across Connecticut. The organization represents a newer approach to economic development through hybrid governance, operating independently from the government while advancing public goals.

CMDA focuses on the intersection of housing and economic growth, recognizing that expanding housing supply and supporting residential development are essential to a strong economy. When communities can offer adequate housing for their workforce, they are better positioned to retain and grow businesses. CMDA identifies strategies that reflect local conditions and needs, and the assets and

constraints major institutions contribute to their economies – in order to tailor their services to each municipality. They provide a range of tools to support local development, including gap financing, third-party zoning review, and district-scale state permitting. To date, 44 municipalities across Connecticut have opted into the zoning review process, a step that enables CMDA to designate Development Districts. These

participating communities are largely small and mid-sized cities, including Bridgeport, Stamford, and New Haven, as well as suburban municipalities seeking to strengthen walkable, mixed-use corridors and neighborhood centers.

Connecticut's small to mid sized cities offer useful case studies into how anchor institutions benefit and harm small city economies. Hospitals and universities are often the biggest employers in these places; they are embedded and less likely to relocate, providing stable jobs. This can also create an appearance of stability; some communities are overly dependent on these institutions, and this vulnerability is heightened if the institution's governance is misaligned or operating from afar. David Kooris describes how these challenges are playing out across two small cities where CMDA operates, as well as the efforts institutions and government are making to address them.

In Waterbury, CT, the local economy was disproportionately dependent on its medical system. The city's primary hospital, Waterbury Hospital, was owned by an out-of-state private equity firm, exposing the community to significant risk as ownership did not have long-term stake in the community's well-being. When the hospital was facing financial hardship, the decision to

close was simple enough from the firm's perspective, but for the city, it was a potential economic catastrophe. "Ultimately, the state orchestrated a buyout by the UConn health center," said David, effectively pushing out the private equity owner and tying the institution to a state anchor with long-term staying power. The outcome changed the governance structure so that the institution's future was bound to the city's.

In New Haven, Yale University controls a significant share of the city's real estate, owning 1,108 acres of tax-exempt land across 300 parcels, while continuing to expand through small land acquisitions. Their presence is deep and outsized. Yale's real estate arm even manages and curates a portfolio of mixed-use retail along Broadway which until recently, has not prioritized new housing development.

Yale has begun to deepen its fiscal and civic partnership with the city, "expanding its commitment to revenue to the city," says David. It has renegotiated its payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) agreement to New Haven's benefit, increasing its financial contribution and adding a \$5 million community investment. On top of this commitment, he also describes how Yale has taken on "a more entrepreneurial role in sort of joint development around housing,"

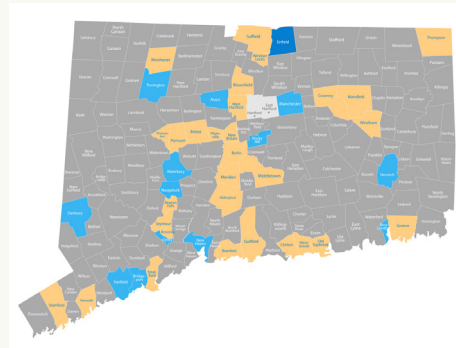
focusing on developing housing for students, staff, and faculty on its own land rather than limiting it to commercial or academic uses.

Here, the difference between a stabilizing anchor and one that creates vulnerability depends on governance structure, ownership patterns, and the institution's willingness to engage as a civic or financial partner.

Developable Land & Zoning Reviews

In Connecticut, there is limited developable land across the I-95, I-91, and I-84 corridor, combined with the large footprints of anchor institutions, making intentional land-use decisions especially important. CMDA works with a mix of suburban municipalities seeking walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods and cities pursuing growth. Despite these shared goals, both face a common frustration that development isn't happening at the pace or scale they expect.

The problem is that many zoning codes are not clear, and developers aren't going to spend weeks parsing complex zoning codes to determine whether a residential project is possible. Even when municipalities undertake zoning rewrites with the goal to encourage more progressive development, codes are



CMDA Map.

undermined with detailed regulations that silently kill projects.

CMDA performs third-party zoning reviews to help municipalities simplify and clarify their codes. David recalls three of the most common reasons why zoning codes in Connecticut have failed to encourage development: mixed-use requirements mandating 51% commercial space across all floors, which makes typical upper-floor housing infeasible because “no one’s putting commercial on the second floor of your four story building.” The second is restrictive side yard setbacks (such as 5–10 feet plus additional requirements tied to building height), and the third: density caps that limit the use of otherwise allowable building envelopes.

After completing these zoning reviews,

CMDA works with municipalities to map Development Districts around transit stations and walkable corridors to guide future regulatory and infrastructure investments. To date, 11 communities have partnered with CMDA to co-develop these zones to expand housing availability, even if land is limited, and support greater economic stability.

Town-Gown Relationships Kills Housing

In many of these communities, “meds and eds” cities both limit housing availability and distort local housing politics. The “town-gown relationship has created this kind of fear and aversion to certain housing typologies,” says David – a pattern he has seen repeatedly in cities with significant student populations that are contending with the “studentification” of housing in their neighborhoods: parties, low upkeep, and temporary populations. This political aversion to new multi-family housing occurs often even when a proposed project outlines intentions to target a different population.

CMDA has to navigate this as they provide recommendations and zoning reviews for cities like Bridgeport, Fairfield, Stamford, and New Haven, that cusp the Merritt Parkway and I-95 corridor. Fairfield is where the main campus of Sacred Heart University is

located, but since the institution does not offer on-campus housing for all students, upperclassman and graduate students tend to rent in Bridgeport's north end. In the same neighborhood, at the Fairfield border in Bridgeport, there was a proposal to build a multi-family housing unit intended to provide a smaller housing type for Fairfield divorcees, as this population has gone up and people are looking for an apartment style housing type, rather than a larger single family property. The city ultimately denied this proposal because of “a political aversion to any multifamily housing because of the risk that it would be dominated by graduate students.” Given the location, the city of Bridgeport



Development District; New Haven, CT.

has a strong incentive to think strategically about land use, particularly for parcels directly bordering Fairfield, where housing development could represent an important opportunity for increased tax revenue and more efficient use of constrained land. However, the site ultimately became a church – another tax-exempt use in the city that is in need of more revenue for public services.

State and Local: Urban Revitalization or Suburban Sprawl?

When it comes to understanding regulatory and land-use policy, CMDA is able to mediate between local and state actors, translating insights and priorities in both directions. In many cities, anchor institutions can significantly constrain the amount of developable land, even as housing demand remains high. CMDA communicates to the state that expectations for housing production and growth must be grounded in the physical and institutional limits of each city. David says it's about striking a balance, resetting state expectations with the ultimate goal to encourage municipalities to think more expansively and identify overlooked sites and development approaches. This is important as the state is able to set expectations for how municipalities approach development in

the phase of growth.

In Connecticut, “there is still a limited number of small cities that remain oriented around industrial job creation.” In the southeastern corner of the state specifically, there is a sudden industrial workforce surge as an electric aircraft manufacturer broke ground on a 100-acre factory, with plans to bring in 8,000 new hires. Currently, the region is not built to absorb this growth and housing demand, and the two focal regions that are grappling with this impending demand are New London and Norwich, and the suburban places surrounding them. In New London, they have many mutli-family buildings on their main streets that have been abandoned for decades and are starting to see mixed-use conversion already. The state now faces a choice to either reinvest in the urban core of New London and Norwich to channel growth into walkable, transit-supportive areas, or allow development to spread outward, risking low-density sprawl. David says the natural check on sprawl may be infrastructure costs (roads, sewers) that make it prohibitively expensive to build further out.

New London, which recently completed its first new construction project in 50 years, is one of the 14 cities with certified zones eligible for CMDA funding. The agency is now providing gap financing



The town-gown relationship has created this kind of fear and aversion to certain housing typologies.

–David Kooris

for several projects to create housing with ground-floor retail – exactly the kind of development that could absorb new industrial workers without pushing them into car-dependent subdivisions on the suburban fringe.

Future Development Strategy

The CMDA is scaling in two directions: the agency is developing a district-scale state permitting framework that would allow cities to permit 2,000 or more units through a single process, rather than evaluating each project individually for its incremental impact. “A city should be able to wrap their heads around what the impact of 3,000 units will be,” Kooris says, “without relitigating it project by project.” Supplemental funding for taller buildings in land-constrained cities is also under discussion, a recognition that some cities face a simultaneous paradox of high housing demand and very little developable land. At the small

end, the CMDA is expanding its target range downward, from a floor of 25 units to just 6, an attempt to reach smaller infill projects that don't fit the traditional development finance model. ADU revolving loan funds are being explored for even smaller communities where the scale of need is different but the problem is the same.

CMDA's work to increase housing is fundamental to economic development. A city cannot attract or retain businesses if workers have nowhere to live, and it cannot grow its tax base if its most strategic parcels sit vacant or become tax-exempt by default. The challenges Connecticut faces, with institutions that consume land, zoning codes that block the projects they were meant to enable, and divisions that create aversions to important diversity in housing, are ultimately challenges about who can live and work in the city.

FEATURE

Jess Myers: on Pioneer Homes & Syracuse's 15th Ward

The Small Cities Lab spoke with Jess Myers, Assistant Professor at Syracuse University, about her research on Syracuse's 15th Ward. Within these 8 blocks, the city has actively produced the conditions of urban blight through racialized zoning and discriminatory lending practices. These same conditions are then used to justify successive "transformation" plans, rooted in a paternalistic belief in the physical and "moral uplift" of residents. These projects repeatedly promised that displaced residents would be able to return, which have gone unfulfilled—a story that looms as the city pushes for another redevelopment initiative. The narrative that follows is based on Jess' research and weaves together excerpts from her conference paper "8 Blocks in Downtown Syracuse" and insights from our recent conversation.



Syracuse Newspaper

During the progressive era, Sergey Grim's concept of "scientific urbanism" infused empirical methods and top-down visions in city planning, thinking "how can I move the parts of a city in the same way that you move the parts of a machine? And some of those parts are people," says Jess. This approach reflected a broader desire to rationalize and control urban systems, and grew out of planners' anxiety about losing control, especially as cities that depended on a single industry

or institution were facing economic decline. Planners and officials wanted empirical proof that certain investments could work:

"It's scary, actually, to invest in any one thing that you're not sure is going to get pulled off. So the idea of scientific urbanism was a way of saying, this is means-tested. We have some kind of empirical proof behind the efficacy of this type of housing or this type

Negroes' Lack of Housing Gives City 15th Ward Keg of Dynamite

Modern Ghetto
Threat to Peace
And Progress

Race Riot Looms
As Result of Evils
Nurtured in Slums

BY WALTER CARROLL
(Editor's Note: Walter Carroll came to The Post-Standard from North Carolina seven months ago. He was an editor and illustrator of agricultural publications at North Carolina State College and before that worked for several years as a reporter and editor for a North Carolina newspaper. He attended the University of North Carolina and Yale University. He began his newspaper work as a copy boy for The Washington Post.)

FIRST OF A SERIES

Migrant farm labor may be profitable to the New York farmer, but it's paying off in a rotten slum area for Syracuse. At least, that's the opinion of those close to the problem.

The increase in Negro population (120 per cent since 1940) is becoming something more than a problem and it threatens to trail off in a number of unsavory ways if it continues to grow among them, notably, a possible race riot.

Syracusans boast that this is one of "the fastest growing cities" in the United States, but few of them are willing to admit that, like all fast growing youngsters, the city has anything more serious than can be cured by "wise and intelligent" officials.

STILL A CHANCE TO ACT

If the fuse to a case of dynamite were lit and you were sitting on top of it you could do one of two things: snuff out the fuse, or make a big bang out of it. The city, unless it is being confined to a...

When the pot runneth over: Trouble!



...it was once the rotten of abolition, the scene of the under-round railway and the famous Jerry Rescue. Some Syracusans would find it hard to admit that the principles their forefathers held dear and fought for are in some respects being trailed through the dust.

SEED OF RACE RIOTS

The most serious race riots in the United States have had their roots in poor housing and ghettos. On June 20, 1943, the worst race riot since the East St. Louis, Ill., riots of 1917, exploded in Detroit. When the knifings and shootings...

of infrastructure. And that's very appealing at a time when cities seem unmanageable and beyond control."

During this period, Jewish immigrants and black migrants moving north during the Great Migration settled in the city, becoming the backbone of the workforce. Many people lived and worked along the Erie Canal, often in dense, overcrowded housing near industrial sites. These tenement conditions, marked by poor sanitation, fire risks, and weak building standards, intensified as demand for housing grew.

This internal densification which are tenements where crowded conditions create unsanitary and unsafe from fires and poor building codes. "So even before public housing ever happens, you have this idea that a concentration of poverty like really packed into these structures creates, not only like physical unhealth and unsafety, but it also creates "moral decay."

To the city, this framing justified intervention: improving housing conditions was cast as a way to reform residents themselves into more "moral" urban subjects. As Jess notes, this was a deeply paternalistic logic, rooted in the belief that wealthy reformers could reshape working-class populations into "ideal citizens," effectively denying their agency.

In this way, the city both produced the material conditions of poverty and used those same conditions to rationalize intervention. The narrative of moral and physical decline positioned elites as saviors while obscuring the structural forces and internal contradictions.

This logic culminated in an urban renewal effort to create a scientific dream for the city in which the 15th Ward was officially labeled "blighted," clearing the way for the construction of a public housing project, Pioneer Homes.

"The blight that the city identified on these eight blocks almost two decades after Allen had marked up the city map, was a blight that the city itself had manufactured in its first racial zoning scheme. It was also a blight that built off of local fears related to the movements and visibility of Black and Jewish communities."

The project was labeled as a "transformation" project to alter the conditions the city produced in the 15th ward through racialized zoning, while promising the possibility that displaced residents could return. The project, however, resulted in widespread displacement and the remaking of the neighborhood from a desire to paternally uplift the moral and physical conditions

of residents but instead displaced the majority of people – who were predominantly Black and Jewish.

“The majority of families surveyed paid higher rents, were farther from their employment, and did not intend to apply for the housing program... of the 700 applications initially lodged with the Housing Authority, only a small fraction were from the original demolition site,

meaning that the residents whose lives were improved by Pioneer Homes would not have been the families who were displaced.”

By the 1950s, redlining and racialized zoning had systematically confined Black residents to a small number of neighborhoods; over 90% of the city's Black population was living in the 15th ward. Within this context, Pioneer

Moving forward requires addressing those unanswered demands. Otherwise, there's not really a possibility for success, because you don't have any mutual stakes.

–Jess Myers

Homes underwent a rapid demographic shift. Although the development was predominantly white in 1955, by 1960 it had become largely Black as housing practices restricted where Black residents could live, rent, and find mortgages.

At the same time, management and services declined. A large-scale infrastructure project disrupted the neighborhood. The construction of the Interstate 81 corridor cut directly through Pioneer Homes, leading to the demolition of several buildings through eminent domain and further destabilizing the community.

As these changes unfolded, maintenance standards and amenities at Pioneer Homes declined. What had once been framed as a model of progressive,

“scientifically” planned housing began to deteriorate, both physically and institutionally. This decline contributed to increased tenant organizing, as residents pushed back against neglect and unequal treatment.

“In October 1964, an incident in Pioneer Homes' Dablon Court saw sewers overflow onto streets and sidewalks. Instead of completing repairs and cleanup, Authority workers unclogged the sewers but told residents to clean the rest themselves, reportedly saying, ‘you'll have to clean this mess yourselves... If you people didn't stop up the toilets with diapers, this wouldn't happen.’

This tenant organizing led to an SHA tenant advocacy report, where residents brought their demands and “grievances to the attention of the Syracuse Housing



Pioneer Homes
"Site Improvement Plan"

Authority,” but these went unaddressed.

“In just 25 years, the promise of Pioneer Homes had changed. By the time Black residents had access to the development, the Authority no longer saw it as a place that would scientifically improve the lives, morality, and social standing of working families. Rather, it became a space where so-called ‘ungovernable’ tenants were expected to discipline themselves through managing maintenance at their own expense.”

Pioneer Homes, once justified through paternalistic ideals of “scientific” uplift, was recast as a site of disorder, where residents were no longer seen as subjects to be improved but as problems to be managed. In place of institutional responsibility, blame was redirected onto tenants themselves, reframing systemic disinvestment as individual failure.

Redlining and racially discriminatory lending practices fundamentally shaped the economic landscape of housing. In neighborhoods like the 15th Ward, banks systematically refused to issue loans to Black residents, preventing property from appreciating in value over time. As a result, this land remained some of the cheapest in the city, and especially vulnerable to top-down intervention. Devalued land became an easy target

for large-scale “transformation” projects. Today, the neighborhood faces yet another intervention. As the city plans to remove the Interstate 81 corridor, it has introduced the East Adams Transformation Plan, a proposal that would demolish Pioneer Homes and replace it with new residential development. Framed as a redevelopment effort, the project once again promises that displaced residents may be able to live.

The first institutionalized tenant voice came through the Blueprint 15, a non-profit who claims to advocate for the needs of residents. Its role, however, has largely functioned as a liaison, communicating the city's development strategy to residents affected by demolition. As Jess explains, “Blueprint's position has largely been used as a resident liaison that communicates the city's new development strategy to Syracuse Housing Authority residents impacted by the most recent wave of planned demolitions.”

She continues, “It is a liaison, which is not the same as having a democratic voice.” Rather than enabling meaningful participation, this structure limits residents' influence over outcomes: “There's no power. You are taking a report, and you are telling the contents of that report to the people who live there.

There's no mechanism built in at this time for Blueprint 15 to go back to the city and say, okay, the tenants have said this, what are you able to do to accommodate these demands?”

While the East Adams plan echoes earlier promises of return, its implementation suggests otherwise. Instead of guaranteeing residents a place in the redeveloped neighborhood, the plan relies on housing vouchers, pushing residents into the private rental market. These vouchers often carry less weight with landlords and offer no assurance of securing stable housing.

“The current scheme for transformation leaves residents with echoes of the past, where promises of holistic and even scientific considerations of their needs uphold the march of development over residents' own interests and desire for decision-making power. As these 8 blocks of Syracuse's downtown continue to churn, the city has yet to manufacture the ideal resident that it has long sought. Instead the residents whose circumstances have largely been shaped by the city's past attempts, remain in an unaddressed limbo.”

At this moment, when large institutions are working to “repair” their role in city planning, after their own contributions to urban renewal and amid their



I-81 corridor construction

ongoing role in gentrification, Syracuse is a key example of how residents have used their voices to organize or articulate grievances. Moving forward requires “addressing those unanswered demands,” says Jess. “Otherwise, there's not a possibility for success, because you don't have any mutual stakes.”

Meds and Eds Respondents

The following contributions come from Co-Lab Respondents who, after engaging with the housing booklet and participating in the webinar, developed their own creative responses to the open questions raised in both. The reflections add another layer of color to the questions explored, and illustrate the iterative, evolving nature of this work.

Kyra Zimmerman

Bard College Class of 2025, incoming Master of Architecture student at Rice University, responding to C.L. Bohannon on how disability studies and community-engaged research redefine design practice.

What role can universities play in fostering strong, collaborative relationships between designers and communities?

Since our landscape of Eds and Meds has been effectively described in its dedicated Small Cities Co-Lab Booklet, I thought that I might use this response to speak about my own experiences as a student engaged in community-based research at the Small Cities Lab.

For the past year, I have been collaborating within a larger project facilitated by Lehigh University faculty Christina Zhang (architect), Austin Duncan (disability anthropologist), and Jiin Jung (social psychologist). Together,

we have been working to surface and visualize the ways that disabled residents of the Lehigh Valley care for each other informally, in order to navigate a landscape of inadequate systems and ableist experiences. Through individual interviews and group mapping sessions, we have attempted to make legible the spaces and the social relationships that disabled people depend on for their everyday survival.

At the same time, these conversations reveal how the same scarcities that make informal care necessary also prevent informal networks from forming, resulting in a cycle of danger and isolation for disabled individuals.

What has emerged from this project is evidence that everyday care practices should be amplified, even while they reveal an urgent need for structural change. The everyday acts of care we identified in our research include negotiations of need, identity, ability, labor, vulnerability, and agency that are politically important because they complicate our deep cultural/economic esteem for “independence.” In a shift from earlier disability rights movements, which emphasized independence as an antidote for infantilization and institutionalization, our work positions independence as one ingredient among many in a landscape of disability well-being. More broadly, collective care allows us to challenge social narratives that idealize competition and individual decision-making, and justify the removal of social safety nets. Care impels us to build a world where limitation is no one’s fault, and collective survival is everyone’s responsibility.

In our project, the overlap between our area of research and a community-engaged research method has been generative. For example, mapping sessions that included members of the research team, disabled individuals, their loved ones, and self-identified allies became opportunities for participants to validate each other’s experiences and share knowledge, enacting collective care

within the space of the research itself. However, I would like to emphasize that working between disability theory and community-engaged research, I have come away with lessons for each based on how the other has affected my reading of the world. Thinking about disability requires a responsibility to questions that deepen and expand a community-engaged practice. For example: where do I end and the intervention of other people begin? How do we find shared ground, despite differences in how we interpret the world, from within our minds and bodies? How do we continue to center care, when and where our needs conflict? In turn, community-engaged methods ground questions that quickly become abstract, or whose embodied implications might exceed the scope of theory to capture.

It is perhaps obvious, but it stands to be stated that opening universities to something like community-engaged research or design is beneficial in multiple directions. Community-engaged methods are not a means to an end, but allow us to see new opportunities and constraints within the modes of working that we have access to. At the same time, community-engagement becomes its own form of knowledge, made richer and more productive by a diversity of disciplines, issues, and participants. CL Bohannon (Associate Professor in the

Landscape Architecture Department and Senior Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs and Community Engagement at the University of Virginia) wrote in his Meds and Eds booklet feature that: "Universities are uniquely positioned to slow things down, create space for learning, and support relationships that aren't driven solely by immediate outcomes or market pressures." I could not write more succinctly how these qualities, among others, lend the university toward fostering relationships between designers and communities and supporting the kinds of cross-pollination I have described above.

As a student working within community-engaged methods, I see the ways in which it clearly acts toward good: redefining expertise, producing empathetic and justice-focused designers, or protecting the social-spatial realities that are meaningful for community life. But there were less expected ways in which the project's combination of method and content induced new ways of seeing. My experience of either community engagement, or of disability studies, would be completely different if they had not taken place together. For me, the combination has redefined what it means to create the space of a "project" in the first place, taking seriously what is afforded between the tools, structures of

thought, and relationships that we carve as a practice, as we attempt to create a more equitable world.

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