

Co-designing Public Space for the Unhoused with Manna Community Center  
Project Dates: June 6th- August 5th, 2022 in Northampton, MA, USA  
Amrita Acharya, Smith College '23

**Abstract:** The goal of this project is to develop a program for unhoused individuals in Northampton, MA focused on community organizing and skill building. As part of a co-design model, this program will bring community stakeholders together to solve issues of poverty collaboratively.

**Organization + My Role:** Manna Community Kitchen and Center is a nonprofit in Northampton, MA that has been serving over 1,000 meals weekly to unhoused and food insecure individuals. Located at St. John's Episcopal Church, Manna's mission has been to foster community and peace with local unhoused individuals through meals between volunteers, members of the clergy and recipients. In response to the grueling New England Winter and the pandemic in February 2021, Manna opened a community center in the basement of the church. The space has showers, laundry, a clothing rack and a quiet room for resting. Over the past 10 months this center has been widely used and has become a haven for individuals who have nowhere to go during the day. In November, the City of Northampton appointed Manna as the interim location for the City's ongoing Resilience Hub project. The Resilience Hub will be an umbrella center for social service resources, including Manna and other organizations that specialize in mental health, harm reduction, food insecurity, housing and sexual health.

I started volunteering at Manna in April of 2021. As a student of architecture I am interested in co-design, a process that prioritizes collaborative decision making with community members as opposed to a traditional top-down approach. I am currently working closely with Smith College's chaplain and trained social worker, Reverend Matilda Rose Cantwell, on an independent study to understand how psychosocial sensitivity in co-design practice can create spatial equity in neighborhood and public space planning. As part of this study, I teach weekly writing workshops at Manna to give individuals a safe space for expression and to build skills in thinking and group sharing. My proposal for Projects for Peace builds off of this workshop.

**Proposed Goals:** The goal of this project is to support a group of 10 Manna participants in gaining important life skills and introduce them to the opportunities of co-design. This will lead to increased self confidence and efficacy. My project will embody themes of **reciprocity**, **agency** and **co-design** through networking, skill building, and service. Something one of my supervisors, KB McConnell, reiterates is, "Many individuals who come to Manna have been taught to only strive for the necessities. I want to instill a sense of agency where they know they can shoot higher and look past the idea of 'beggars can't be choosers'." An overarching theme of this project is thinking beyond the necessities, providing individuals with skills and ambition to ask what's next for them. This project is broken into two parts: the first, skill building workshops and the second, design charrettes. Together, these pieces inform each other for individual development and collaborative organizing. I acknowledge that I am not licensed to work with vulnerable individuals. I am cautious about my positionality and only conduct my interactions when my supervisors, KB McConnell and Jess Tilley, are present. We have debriefings after each volunteer session so I can ask questions, get feedback and address issues. I also have weekly meetings with Reverend Matilda Rose Cantwell, who supervises the curriculum planning and advises me on methods of interaction and peer support. Both forms of supervision ensure that I am learning the best practices to protect the individuals I work with.

### **Proposed Objectives:**

**Skill Building Workshops. (June-July)** I will hold weekly workshops that will cover topics of resume and cover letter writing, public speaking and research, as well as finding future jobs and education. With KB McConnell and Jess Tilley, we've identified that these skills are the most needed by individuals who come to the center. The public speaking and research workshops will focus on the specific issues brought up in the design charrettes and be supplemented with outside readings. For example, if an issue from the charrette is lack of public bathrooms, we'd research case studies about other cities to inform an argument. We'll compile this information into a book to give to stakeholders in the second workshop. Through the writing group, I've already built trust with the individuals I work with and have grown my teaching abilities around their needs. We will be using laptops and cameras for workshops and charrettes which, after they end, will become part of Manna and be managed by the staff there, the same way the center's current technology (1 laptop and a printer) are managed.

**Design Charrettes. (June 6th, August 5th)** Commonly used in architectural projects, charrettes are community engagement workshops that pose questions related to space, and ask individuals to think creatively, collaboratively and often visually. I will hold a charrette at the beginning of the project and one at the end at Manna. In the Spring, I'll recruit three individuals and all staff from Manna, three other staff members from other organizations, two individuals from the city of Northampton involved in city council and/or city planning, three local business owners and three Smith College staff to be part of these two events. I recognize the individuals listed have different positionalities, and this is important as co-design functions on empathic listening and communication about shared values between different people. Smith College, specifically, has a large cultural and financial presence in the city, and inviting individuals from the college will facilitate discussion on its responsibility to city issues. During the first event, mixed groups of individuals will be sent to a public space in Northampton to conduct a site analysis, take photographs and question how it could be improved in terms of amenities and accessibility. Then, all the groups will come back to Manna to discuss and put together visual presentations with photos and drawings of what they found, ideas for improvements and how each group of stakeholders might contribute to that change. We will compile a list of these issues and ideas to be used in the workshops. The second charrette will use the deliverables from the research workshops, and we'd open a dialogue between stakeholders on potential solutions for public space in Northampton broadly, using the specific site analyses as cases. I've already spoken with stakeholders from Cathedral in the Night (another service provider), the City Council and researchers on local poverty, who have all expressed interest in collaborating on this issue. I will use the Spring to collect ideas from these specific stakeholders and individuals at Manna to craft the charrette, as part of the co-design model. In my architecture studios with Professor Reid Bertone-Johnson, I have conducted multiple stakeholder engagement processes and have acquired inclusive tools for working with groups.

**Sustained Impact:** At the end of the summer these initiatives won't end. I will be continuing at Smith through the end of 2022, and will be able to use that time to transition the model. The Jandon Center for Community Engagement at Smith College is currently in the process of collaborating with the Resilience Hub to create future partnerships between students and the city. The Center has committed to integrating my work into unfolding work with the Resilience Hub. This project also stresses the power of Projects for Peace in one's local community. It can grow with the college, and can morph into classroom education for generations of students to come.

## Proposed Budget

Individual Expense	Quantity	Individual Cost	Total Cost
Housing	3 (months)	\$800	\$2400
Food	3 (months)	\$400	\$1200
Total			\$3600

Project Expense	Quantity	Individual Cost	Total Cost
Laptops for Research	3	\$1000	\$3000
Cameras + SD Cards for Site Visits	3	\$333	\$1000
Workshop refreshments	10	Per workshop \$30	\$300
Charrette 1 Meal	20 people	\$15 (per person)	\$300
Charrette 2 Meal	20 people	\$15(per person)	\$300
Miscellaneous (notebooks, books+textbooks, pens + markers, scissors, stationery, printing ink and paper, glue)	Full project	\$500	\$500
Honorariums for Charrettes	Per participant from Manna	\$25	\$500
Honorariums for Social Service Organizations	Per Participant from Organization	\$50	\$500
Total			\$6400

Project total: \$10,000



To whom it may concern,

I am writing on behalf of the leadership of Manna Community Kitchen to express our support for Amrita Acharya's Davis Projects for Peace proposal. When Amrita began volunteering with our Community Center last April, we immediately knew that her interest, drive, and dedication would be a large asset in the evolution and progression of services we would be able to provide the unhoused community of Northampton. The information which Amrita collected and reported to us not only helped us to better gauge our target population, but also foster relationships and understanding with our guests about the Community Center's motivation and goals.

Working directly with one of the most vulnerable populations locally, Manna grounds itself in the understanding that we as an organization are not here to set an agenda. Instead, we are here to act as an agency where everyone has a seat at the table and can voice their needs, wants, hopes, and brainstorm collaboratively to set and achieve those goals. In the same vein of Manna's emphasis on co-planning, giving agency, and building equity, Amrita's Projects for Peace proposal nests itself perfectly in the foundation on which our organization was built.

Due to geographic fate, Manna sits directly in the heart of Smith College's campus. This results in an almost constant intermingling of our guests and their students. Manna is about as local as it can get for Smith students, who have for many years been some of our most dedicated volunteers. For this reason, including Manna's relationship with the Jandon Center for Community Engagement at Smith College, we believe whole-heartedly in the sustainability of Amrita's project. The skill building workshops that are part and parcel to the co-designing of public space for the unhoused, are opportunities that are not only needed amongst the local unhoused population but asked for. We at Manna believe in the power of this project growing into something where Manna is able to consistently hold workshops led by Smith students years after Amrita has moved on from this collegiate experience to bigger and even more impactful projects wherever life may take her. While we will be sad to see that day come, her impact at Manna has already proven itself of great benefit only to be augmented by this larger Projects for Peace proposal which brings even more stakeholders to the table to reimagine how our city can develop accessible public space for the unhoused population.

We thank you for your consideration of Amrita's project which will greatly benefit the population of guests that our organization serves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nora Finnerty", written in a cursive style.

Nora Finnerty

Development Director  
Manna Community Kitchen  
48 Elm St, Northampton, MA  
(608) 432-8216



Center for Religious and Spiritual Life  
Helen Hills Chapel  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
(413) 585-2750 F (413) 585-4595  
[mcantwel@smith.edu](mailto:mcantwel@smith.edu) (413) 374-2541

January 4, 2022

To whom it may concern,

It is my great honor to recommend Amrita Acharya for a Davis Project for Peace. I have been consistently and exceedingly impressed by, and deeply engaged in, the project Amrita is undertaking; which as I'm sure her application material indicates addresses a confounding problem in this community and so many others which has grown more dire during the pandemic.

In a time when higher education increasingly emphasizes specialization, Amrita's project is uniquely interdisciplinary and imaginative. Her investigation of and research on the best methods to employ for this work has been not only diligent, but demonstrative of a very high level of intellectual maturity and curiosity. In an instance where one could have eschewed more conventional models if they did not suit the goal of their project, Amrita has instead probed each discipline and framework, drawing from the fields of community engagement, design thinking and landscape studies among other things; always in conversation with instructors/ mentors in each are.

Amrita's deep passion about the issue at hand and care for the population she works with is abundantly clear, and her inquiry into how to determine the most humanizing way(s) of working with them has been exceptionally sensitive. She seeks to-- and I know despite the inevitable complexities of this work she will succeed-- in offering a sense of dignity and respect to the population she is engaging; working with them as true equals; each offering grounded knowledge from different perspectives to one another.

As a social worker and then minister in this community for 25 years I can speak to the deep and profound importance and urgency of the issues that Amrita's work is addressing. The resilience hub she mentions is requiring many resources and hard and sometimes confounding work from community members who see the gravity of this

problem. To have a bright and imaginative member of the Smith academic community engaged is a huge boon to all parties involved. I along with other colleagues are thrilled that she would this on; not to mention how humanizing and innovative and unique her approach is. Her framework is drawn from various academic disciplines as I mentioned, yet the method of engagement that we are working on together is a relational one, taking into account and looking closely at issues of status, trauma, and interpersonal boundaries. Principles of community organizing also inform our work.

I wish I had more room to say more about how thrilled I am to see this unique, innovative and necessary project being undertaken. Amrita has been patient and thorough in her broad inquiry about the best ways to undertake this work, but in the end has been bold in her belief in obtaining grounded knowledge from those she works with toward the end of a more equitable community. I have been familiar with the Davis Projects for Peace since its inception a little over a decade ago and I am also impressed by the relevance of this project to the mission of Davis. The problems of houselessness and extreme poverty, intertwined as they are with trauma and substance addiction in our society certainly has reverberations with and connections to the violence inherent in late stage capitalism and the disenfranchisement of so many of our fellow citizens.

If Amrita's project goes forward I anticipate it will have a legacy that will be of benefit to both the Northampton and the Smith community and beyond. I hope I have made clear the enthusiasm with which I recommend Amrita, and would be more than happy to answer a question you might have and engage in farther conversation about this important undertaking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matilda Cantwell". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Reverend Matilda Rose Cantwell, MSW  
Director of Religious and Spiritual Life, College Chaplain, Smith College  
mcantwel@smith.edu