

A Place Of Our Own

A chronicle of our search for community in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA Eleni Bastea with Terron Cox, Paul Gibson, Caroline Itoi, Louvenia Magee and Jode Nyboer.

It might have had to do with the fact that the architecture students who gathered at my house about a month ago to tackle this question were all from somewhere else. Or, it might have had to do with the fact that my own default notion of community centres as places of my earlier lives: Greece, Philadelphia, Berkeley. Or, maybe, architecture students are by nature romantics and social critics at the same time. For whatever reason, our first discussion, which lasted several hours and was fuelled by tea and baklava, did not lead to any positive results.

We agreed that Albuquerque, with its population of more than 400,000, lacked a sense of community. You could try to make it happen, you could look for it, but it would be in vain. One could find community much more easily in Santa Fe—a town an hour away, with a population of 70,000. One could go to a small town in Germany and find a viable community now, as one could have done ten or twenty years ago. Community happened somewhere else, often in the places of our childhood. Distant but familiar places pulled us back. They evoked powerful personal memories of a full life lived somewhere else, casting a long shadow on our present life. Defined mainly by school and work, life in Albuquerque seemed colourless and one-dimensional.

Did we really believe that there was no community in Albuquerque, or were we just externalising a personal propensity towards privacy and introversion? Wasn't our responsibility to help make community happen through architecture? To recognize if and how architecture may help create community? Shouldn't we be sending a positive note to our readers who are also cruising down the electronic highways but still yearn for the comfort of a drink in a familiar pub or café?

When I met with the Cent editors in London, they had suggested that architecture students could draw a row of houses, front and back, and show how buildings help create community. But no one here was ready to show how his or her architecture could do that. Maybe this is a preposterous thought in and of itself. Maybe the first step in architectural training is to recognise

where community may happen, because of or despite architecture, and then, gradually, gain the tools to recreate that answer. Building upon earlier comments by Jode Nyboer, Paul Gibson decreed that "architecture cannot create community. The community exists, either revealed or not". Our next task, then, became just that: Let's find places in Albuquerque where community does exist and photograph them.

I spent most of a day in mid-November going around Albuquerque to record where community happens. I asked my husband, Mark Forte, to join me, not only because he drives and I don't but also because I identify my experience of this city with our outings together. This is our sixth year here and we still feel like relative newcomers to town. We started by visiting Old Town, which is a major tourist attraction because it still retains much of its older architecture and folk-art-type stores. We ended up in Nob Hill, another attraction for locals and tourists alike, known for its eclectic stores and more urban character. Of course, I worried about being too old to really know the hip and exciting places that my students undoubtedly knew, but I kept that to myself. I tried to quiet my rational mind and allow the camera lens to lead me to spots of community and engagement. I found myself photographing places around institutions and places where people came together to eat. Old Town is planned around a central plaza, defined by the church of San Felipe de Neri. I think it is the church and not the shops that make Old Town one of the focal points of our city. In Nob Hill, it was at the Flying Star café, a long-time anchor of the neighbourhood, where community clearly happened.

When we came together a couple of weeks later with our findings, almost everyone else had also stopped and photographed the Flying Star—a local chain that also runs the Satellite Café. But there were also photographs from other cafés and restaurants, the local Co-op supermarket, a public library and Hyder Park, which is especially popular with people walking their dogs. After a marathon eight-hour meeting the following week, the team narrowed down the places of community to four: RB Winning's Coffee House, the Satellite Café, the Frontier Restaurant (open 24 hours) and the Flying Star Café in Nob Hill. All are places where you can sip a cup of coffee, have a snack, read the paper or connect on the wireless network and stay for an hour or ten. At the Frontier and the Flying Star, you can also have lunch, dinner or dessert with southwestern, mainstream

American or eclectic flavor. Clearly, food brings people together. What I did not consciously realise until I put these places on the map, however, was how close most of them were to the University of New Mexico. Curiously, we did not discuss that in our meetings. We thought that the cafes allowed us to avoid the university. But as I am reflecting on our findings I realise that it is the co-existence and occasional tension between institutions and the surrounding eating places that create the strongest centres of community.

A few issues back, I contributed to the Cent "Memories" issue with an essay on the memory of buildings. For that project I delved into my own, private past and examined how it colours my life and work today. By focusing on community and architecture for this issue, I found myself reaching out to my students and listening to them more carefully. Our task was to describe not the places of our diverse past experiences elsewhere, but the places where we came together here in Albuquerque. In the process of developing this photographic essay, we began to recognise the social fabric of the city a little bit better and to realise that we are, indeed, part of that fabric.

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RB Winnings Coffee House

Satellite

Sometimes I want to get a cup of coffee without having to put on my chipper and approachable face. I don't want to talk to anyone I know. I don't want small talk to distract me, chance encounter to put me off my track. This used to be relatively easy to do here. When you spend so much caffeinated time in the architecture studio, though, relying upon the same supply hotspots, community is hard to avoid. I see the same, predictable faces, the baristas smile at me more knowingly. It's harder and harder to be alone, and harder to want to be, either. ↪ *Louvenia Magee*

Public Library

As I walk into my library, I see a group of children from a nearby childcare center. They seem torn between their excitement at being there and their desire to be on their best behavior. I see a gentleman getting help from a librarian to locate a book. A local library provides immediate insight into the nature of a community. All the information you need in one stop from bus schedules to support group listings; books about the area and reading groups for people with common interests. Young and old all come and rub elbows in local libraries – sometimes we even find how much we have in common. ↪ *Caroline E Itoi*

On Community and the World

I see the world as my fundamental community, fractured by language, perspective, ideology, misunderstanding, and, of course, geography. Architecture gives me a place to go, to argue, to reflect and to understand. It facilitates the occasions by which my community is revealed to me. I find myself hoping that somehow architecture could do this on a global level, not to homogenise but to unify discrete elements, helping people to build common ground with their ideas poured into words, simply by providing space and occasion.

Today, in my town, the café serves as a public gathering space, allowing such diversity so that perhaps the only common element is the café itself. Cafés are the melting pots of ideas, smelters of edifice, communication, arguments and agreements. I have met people from the world over in local cafés. This worldly bunch (and I) will chew on the conflicts and triumphs, sometimes not agreeing on which is which. In the end, we will have argued, laughed, agreed, and agreed to disagree, and will have built entire cityscapes from ideas poured into words. Architecture plays a role by providing shelter, structure and infrastructure made of the mundane materials of this small world. Inside of these humble edifices, people will gather, and through the most modern and mundane miracles of our day will transcend their place and will build an entire world together... a world united by their collective ideas. ↪ *Paul Gibson*

Loitering

Enoc had recently learned a new word while sitting in a park during his New England visit. Loitering. Relatively fluent in English, this foreign word confused him, so he asked for the definition, which confused him even more. 'Hangin' out all the time in a place that's not your home, doing nothing? That's forbidden!' But I'm Spanish!' he exclaimed, 'that's the definition of my life!!' Eight hours in R.B. Winnings coffeehouse, sprung for just one cup of coffee. I'd purchased more time to park my butt in that plastic chair for less than it cost to park my car for 2 hours. Huddling around the community table from open till close, at first just one corner, then one whole half of it; branching out to co-opt time at another table's power outlet; anchoring in friends, colleagues, classmates; watching every other table around us turn over and over again. Were we just embodying that other definition? Loitering? Sitting around doing nothing all day, trying to define community, we became the very definition of it. This establishment, I realised, doesn't thrive on the cash of its products, rather its livelihood depends upon the capital of community the customers create and perpetuate with their so-called loitering. ↪ *Louvenia Magee*


RB Winnings Coffee House

The experience at Winning's Coffee house begins at a distance. Walking towards its entrance, I notice tables with umbrellas scattered outside its windows. Here a scene reminiscent of the 1960s play-out: Batista military jackets and dreadlocks, home-made jewellery for sale and groups of smoking college students, collectively engaging in conversations that animate this sidewalk café. These characters can be seen in their familiar posts most days. This counter-culture ensemble serves as the façade, the public face of this establishment.


Once inside, I stand in line surveying the two rooms that house the restaurant. People are spread out between thrift-store couches and utilitarian tables and chairs. I find a seat in the second room with a steaming cup of coffee. Papers, books, coffee mugs and laptops fill every corner of the neighbouring tables. An art exhibit wraps the walls, displaying an ad-hoc culture and Modigliani themes. This room may be the modern Greek agora, a place of heated debate and civic awareness, where people can truly speak their mind.

Every time I visit Winning's (almost daily), my antenna for design loses its signal. In fact, the physical design of Winning's seems completely irrelevant. The energy that continually pulls me back lies in the human relationships and open forum of this environment. An overwhelming sense of ownership seems almost palpable among the cast of characters who call Winning's home. It is this sense of ownership, not the physical design, which establishes Winning's as a hallmark of my community. ↪ *Tarron Cox*


RB Winnings Coffee House

If life is a dance, then the café must surely be a dance hall. I have been frequenting the various cafes in town, and have lately ended up at this one. Its under-designed (or even not designed) interior and furniture seem to embody a refreshing lack of pretension. Not to say that I think all designed space is pretentious, but sometimes either the space or the people in it can inspire that reaction in me. Not here. Sure, there are your basic trustafarians, hippies, and slackers hanging out by the bucket on the patio. But if you can make your way through the smoke, bo, and patchouli incense, the inside is much more civilized. It is here that I meet with many of the same people on most mornings to kick around ideas, solve the world's problems and gain new perspectives. A place like this, and all of these, reveals many facets of my community. Without them, I may be less aware of the rich fabric in which I live.  *Paul Gibson*

The Flying Star Café

It's a beautiful fall day as we walk into the restaurant. We place our order at the counter, and go and sit at a sunlit table on the patio. Our dog watches the people around us, waiting to be noticed, to get some pats. It doesn't take long – the older couple sitting next to us soon notice her and everyone is content as greetings are exchanged. This Flying Star diner, one of a local chain, has only recently opened on our side of town. Already, we've established it as our place to go, our place to meet friends and relax after a stressful day.  *Caroline E. Iral*

The Flying Star Café

A simple concept: a place with comfort food, sweet cakes, and strong coffee, located no more than twenty minutes from any home in the metro area. Food will bring me but atmosphere will keep me. Few other places in Albuquerque match the presence of the local chain of cafés, slicing the demographic of the city into equal parts and providing a turf for me and my community to eat, work, read, socialize, and loiter. The characteristic buzzes of the consistent and addictive ambience are generated partly by the design and architecture, with dynamic tectonic character and textural appeal. But the ambience is more accurately an artifact of social enigma. My city has infused this place with equal tenure and curiosity. My place promises the gathering of all my neighbours, and continues to render an image of my community, usually hidden in the fabric of the city.  *Jade Nyboer*


The Flying Star Café

Upon entering the Flying Star Café I am struck by the overwhelming visual experience. The doorway is often blocked with a serpentine line wrapping out into the east dining space. Waiting in line here, as opposed to most other consumer experiences, I

feel like part of a theatrical production. The volume and sightlines of the architecture constantly unfold as you move towards the seductive pastry case. Looking around, I notice tables strewn between circulation paths and bookstore-scaled magazine racks, about which runners swiftly navigate with trays piled high with food. Inching closer to the pastry case, my view reveals the hidden section of the restaurant I typically prefer. Here, groups of individuals are aglow in the natural light brought down from the north-facing light wells.

A young waitress greets me with her pad and pencil, leaning just above the refrigerated case displaying an assortment of pies and cookies. I order my usual Fiesta muffin (a soft roll with green chiles and cheddar laced within) and coffee. "Meet me at register two". The assembly line sequence seems softened by the opportunity to watch these waitresses slide gracefully around one another. After receiving my tray (à la cafeteria style), I find a seat and settle in by bringing out the Mac and fetching a few magazines.

The scene is particularly eclectic this afternoon: several students, quite a few business folk on mobile phones, a big group of elderly women playing cards and a handful of families. From my seat, I can see into the main dining space, through the storefront windows out onto Central Avenue. Talk about a visual layered cake!

In this saturated visual landscape of excessive décor, mounds of pastries and endless magazines, everything seems to be in the right place. The miracle in all this over-stimulation is the number of people who are quietly talking; the number of dialled in laptop users (free Wi-Fi is available) who seem completely unaware that the place is shaking at unmet decibels. This exemplary public spectacle features an interesting cross-section of ages and persuasions. The best part, the one that brings me and many of my friends back, is that you can stay as long as you'd like, without any hassles. In this sense, the Flying Star does serve as the elusive home-away-from-home, the third place of our community.  *Terron Cox*



Flying Star Café, Jade Nyboer



The Frontier Restaurant

The Frontier Restaurant. La frontera, on the old Route 66. "Good food, good people, good weather. What more could you want?" queried Mr. P.K., extolling the virtues of New Mexico. Under our big desert sky and backdrop of the Sandia (watermelon) mountains, the Frontier stands as the confluence of possibility, the stronghold of our city and state. A landmark. An institution. THE cog of the Albuquerque machine. The city runs on the fuel of Frontier tortillas, breakfast burritos, green chile stew, Frontier rolls. One fine dining chef touts the carne adovada, the best in town, even if you have to stand in line to get it in a styrofoam cup. Open 24 hours, students, city council men, the homeless, the affluent, all stand in line for their Frontier fix. It is Albuquerque's true social, economic, cultural condenser. In Albuquerque, all roads lead to the Frontier.

✈️ Louvenia Magee

The Frontier Restaurant

It was 14 years ago when I first stepped foot into the legendary place, funneling the city into a single point on the map. Open 24 hours for fresh tortillas, greasy breakfasts, green chili stew, kitschy portraits, study groups around the clock, and a saucy sample plate of my city. My secluded booth is frequented by passing feet, food trays, and theoretical talk, and decorated with dusty wall hangings. A man hastily eating, two friends uniting, and a woman staring out the window accompany my stay. This place is time-capsule-laboratory, where community is preserved, discovered, considered, critiqued, and mocked. Attracted by the sense of experience I am promised once I walk through the doors, I come and I stay. Everyone eventually finds time to loiter, and everyone eventually becomes part of the story of the Frontier, either as a main character or narrator. ✈️ Jade Nyboer

The Frontier Restaurant

I step from the pre-dawn chill outside and into the diner. Although it's not much brighter inside, with the warmth, the low light feels embracing, cozy. When I step to the counter to order my breakfast, the counter clerk and I don't exchange unnecessary words. But an unspoken agreement passes between us – maybe it's earlier than we think anybody ought to be out and about but if I am going to be out this time of morning, I'm glad to be in good company. I sit down with my breakfast. At the table in front of me, an older couple sits reading their paper – they seem to operate in a smooth, habitual process. She picks up a section, reads it, and passes it on to him, and he folds it neatly and puts it back in a neat stack. Not a word passes between them, but they emanate easy companionship. I look around the room and realize that that's what I come to this place for – easy, quiet companionship. With its eclectic, unpremeditated design, I feel as if all are welcomed here without judgment – young and old, poor and rich, all are welcomed. In that way, it feels most like a home. ✈️ Caroline E Iru