In an increasingly connected world, how are we responding to the challenges and opportunities that come with immigration? With over forty million foreign-born citizens and more than twenty-five percent of the population consisting of second generation immigrants, the United States is the epitome of a nation of immigrants. Every day, newcomers arrive to the country seeking opportunities to start a new life. There is no modern day Ellis Island. There is no immigration terminal to receive them. In some cases, they come through airports across the country, others fleeing conflict trying to survive. They all come for the same reason: the idea of America, where the freedom to make decisions and choosing your path exists. The road to this dream is difficult, but the destination is where the true challenge begins.

Several factors impede the integration of immigrants into the social and political fabric of society. The language barrier, social and cultural barriers, policies, and lack of access to services are obstacles on the way to integration. Combined, these factors impact the public perception of newcomers and hinder integration, new perspectives, the flow of ideas, and innovation. For this reason, a new architectural prototype is needed to address these integration challenges: one that provides not only economic and educational aid, but cultural and social opportunities as well.

How can architecture transform the perception of immigrants and act as a social platform to create more socially and culturally inclusive communities?. A contact zone to induce actions, events, and relationships is needed. Through conscious design and planning, architecture can serve as a social unifier and educational threshold that brings cultures together and enhances opportunities for social exchange and communication. This proposal will focus on the exploration of an immigration center that serves both as a place of interaction and transition, and a place that culturally and programmatically motivates engagement between local communities and immigrants.
The Culture House is designed with the idea of convergence and connectivity in mind, or the merging of distinct cultures, users, and activities into a unified whole. Through carefully designed spaces, this center reaches out to two distinct users: immigrants and host communities. Immigrants are the newcomers in these communities that need a space to ease integration, through educational and cultural initiatives to help them start their life in a new place with a sense of belonging. Simultaneously, integration is not a one-way process; with the arrival of new members, the local community must adapt as well to reach out to the newcomers with understanding and sensitivity, not preconceived notions, and cultural bias. Ultimately, the Culture House will help break down the real and imagined barriers between communities and celebrate diversity and unity.
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ABSTRACT

Every year over one million immigrants come to the United States seeking opportunities for a better life. How are we dealing with the challenges and opportunities presented by this shifting demographic? This project is a proposal to investigate and articulate the purpose of the immigration center and the value it can bring to all the community. The rise of globalization has led to an increasingly connected world with increasing rates of immigration. This movement of people and ideas presents a variety of challenges and opportunities for the receiving communities. Helping newcomers transition to their new home and building more inclusive communities is vital to preserving the diversity they bring to American society. An architectural intervention is needed, a space where events and relationships begin, where the contact zone exists, the Culture House.
about the CHALLENGE
Every year over one million immigrants from around the world come to the United States. With over forty million foreign-born citizens and more than twenty-five percent of the population consisting of second generation immigrants, the United States is the epitome of a nation of immigrants. Every day, newcomers arrive to the country seeking opportunities to start a new life. However, there is no modern-day Ellis Island. There is no immigration terminal to receive them. They come for a variety of reasons, but most share a common belief: the idea of America, where the freedom to make decisions and choosing your path exists. The road to this dream is difficult, but the destination is where the true challenge begins. Multiple factors impact the public perception of newcomers and hinder integration, the flow of ideas, and innovation. For this reason, a new architectural prototype is needed to address these integration challenges: one that provides not only economic and educational aid, but cultural and social opportunities as well.
INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

**LANGUAGE BARRIER**
Most Americans agree that speaking English is essential to becoming American and maintaining a national identity. For all immigrants English has a direct connection to citizenship and is essential for a successful transition.

**ECONOMIC OBSTACLES**
Sometimes, even economic and educational opportunities can be limited for immigrants, impacting their level of income and homeownership. This makes the ladder to success slower and more difficult.

**ACCESS TO RESOURCES**
Even though the United States has the highest number of immigrants in the world they lack easy access to resources to ease transition. This impacts newcomers’ citizenship, economic, and educational advancement.

**CULTURAL BARRIERS**
Combined, these factors highlight cultural differences and negatively impact the public perception of newcomers and hinder integration, new perspectives, the flow of ideas, and innovation.
WHAT EXISTS NOW

In some cases, the built environment has intensified challenges for newcomers. The built environment has struggled to adapt and keep up with social changes in our communities. To this day, the way we design cities has sometimes amplified this negative perception by segregating and separating people instead of integrating them into the community. By separating groups of people, the struggles immigrants face are further enhanced and lower their chances of social and cultural progress. This spatial assimilation among immigrants can be detrimental to their journey towards integration by decreasing their chances of improving their language skills, earning higher levels of income, and owning a home. Current immigration centers are no exception, and need to change to improve the experience of joining a new community.
INTEGRATION

The ultimate goal of this project is to help transition from immigration to integration. Architecture shapes the landscape for social interaction and for this reason should be designed with the experience of the users in mind. In this proposal it is important to define integration. Most people confuse integration with assimilation, but in the context of this project integration is defined as a two-way process. Bilateral integration means that not only must immigrants and their children adapt and learn from their new community and surroundings, but also that the existing communities must adapt to the changing demographics and reach out with understanding and sensitivity. For this reason, the Culture House is not just a space defined for immigrants but also an urban space for the entire community. It represents a place of connection at the urban, architectural, and human scale.
about the LOCATION
Finding the ideal site where the Culture House could be the most beneficial was essential to the success of this proposal. Many factors were considered in the site selection process. To begin with, it was important to select a metropolitan city with a fast-growing immigrant population. However, historically traditional gateways like New York, Miami, and Los Angeles already reflect the integration of immigrants and have become hyper diverse so a center like this is not necessary here. In the last decade, the southeast region of the United States has become the new emerging immigrant destinations. Upon further investigation, the city of Charlotte became the ideal candidate for this proposal. In the last fifteen years, the city has experienced one of the highest influx of immigrants in the country and lacks the necessary resources to meet the challenges of the changing demographics.
In the last decade, immigrants have strayed from historically traditional gateways, like New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami, and opted for new gateways with more socioeconomic potential emerging in the country. The city of Charlotte in North Carolina is one of these new gateways and possesses the ideal conditions to test this architecture proposal. Up until the last two decades the demographics of Charlotte constituted of primarily White and African American citizens, with foreign-born citizens making up less than 4% of the population. By the turn of the century, Charlotte changed from an industrial to a financial district generating the rapid growth of the city. The foreign-born population has increased from 1.2% to over 15% in the last twenty years. The little previous immigrant history in the area has left Charlotte lacking the social and service infrastructure to facilitate the transition of incoming immigrants.
SITE

The Culture House will be located in the eclectic neighborhood of Midwood. An up and coming cultural district surrounded by historical residential areas and diverse neighborhoods but lacks spaces for community use. This district is surrounded by a variety of programatic uses ranging from commercial, industrial, residential, and educational spaces. The location of the site is located on a corner with high visibility with multiple important roads merging in this area. The proximity to downtown makes this a desirable area and further extends the art and education program originating downtown. Furthermore, this site was chosen for this proposal specifically because it is located among the most diverse neighborhoods of Charlotte with the highest population of immigrants. Within this context, a successful urban space is needed to positively shape the local community response to the changing demographics.
about the PROGRAM
This program integrates the best elements from existing immigration centers, cultural centers, and community centers to create an urban hub for the city of Charlotte. Efforts have been made to help develop immigration centers in the United States with education and economic aid programs, but they fail to encompass the full spectrum of integration required for newcomers to transition into society. This will be accomplished through the creation of a social platform that provides education services, art exhibits, and collaborative spaces to enhance the mutual understanding between immigrants and the local community. The programmatic layout of the building will provide services for the entire community, inviting through public space with cultural and educational activities that expose them to the growing and diverse society.

THREE INSTITUTIONS COMBINED IN A NEW HOUSE:
immigration center + cultural center + community center
PROGRAM BREAKDOWN

EDUCATION
- successful immigrant integration connects immigrants into the city and community life.
- cultural programmatic elements are included in the new center to help stimulate greater understanding between immigrants and the communities that receive them through arts programs and exhibits.

CULTURE
- creating opportunities for conversation and interaction can happen in collaborative spaces for social and educational events, this helps create a bridge for newcomers and locals.

INTERACTION
- specific program is used to activate the street and attract the locals into the space through organization of cultural events, space rental, and art exhibits will be source of revenue for the center.

EXCHANGE
- staff and volunteer spaces are necessary for people running the center, even though the building is very public, workers still have their own areas to keep them connected to the activity on the site.
about the PROCESS
The Culture House is designed with the idea of convergence, or the merging of distinct cultures, users, and activities into a unified whole. The inspiration for this proposal came from mapping the diverse range of immigrants coming to Charlotte every day. With its fast-growing immigrant population Charlotte is slowly becoming a contact zone, where events and relationships can begin. This building is designed for the people, leading to inclusive and engaging public spaces inside and out. High quality design and the power of placemaking are designed hand in hand to produce bold and iconic architecture that adds civic value. The Culture House will become a place of connection that not only promotes integration but will become integral to the community fabric.
The selected site is located at a highly visible intersection where many roads merge. Due to the urban context, the site is only 60,000 SF and has to accommodate a program of approximately 45,000 SF. The site is located on a gradual 12 FT slope allowing part of the building to be underground, making for a highly dynamic building.

The design emphasizes a public space that creates a contact zone the community is currently lacking; by extending the program to the perimeter of the site and leaving the center space free for gathering, the building directly works to activate the street and welcome people to use this public zone.

To open up the corner and make the site more inviting the building is rotated to match the direction of the two main roads merging in the intersection. Additionally, the geometry of the building changes in the center to match this change. This also makes the sunken plaza more visible to pedestrians.

Next, the envelope is added for protection and to further emphasize the building and entrances. This skin of the building is designed with diffusion in mind with wood louvers getting closer together towards the top. This transition emphasizes the change from public to more private levels of the building. Additionally, light wells are added at the street level to illuminate level minus one.

The plazas, urban stair, and green areas offer a wide range of activities for users and a space to enjoy on a day to day basis. Finally, the Culture House becomes an urban hub for all of the community by maximizing human interaction and opportunities for connection and conversation.
The Culture House is a redefined immigration center that provides a space of support, community, and purpose to help newcomers integrate into the American way of life. The Culture House is designed with the idea of convergence and connectivity in mind, or the merging of distinct cultures, users, and activities into a unified whole. Through carefully designed spaces, this center reaches out to two distinct users: immigrants and host communities. Immigrants are the newcomers in these communities that need a space to ease integration, through educational and cultural initiatives to help them start their life in a new place with a sense of belonging. Simultaneously, integration is not a one-way process, with the arrival of new members, the local community must adapt as well to reach out to the newcomers with understanding and sensitivity, not preconceived notions, and cultural bias.
The layout of the Culture House follows very simple rules. The plaza is the center and hub of activity and all formal and informal program surrounds this dynamic space. The center plaza is the most public space of the site surrounded by circulation on all sides and pushing the formal program to the periphery of the site. This maintains the program simultaneously connected to the plaza and the street. The transition from public to private spaces is also applicable in section. The plaza and plinth serve as an extension of the urban environment and house the most public program on the site for all the community to use. The street level serves as a transition level between the plinth below and building above and helps connect the change of program seamlessly. The building above is the most private level on the site including the educational and economic program of the center. With this layout the building remains highly connected regardless of the activity and offers multiple opportunities for interaction.
Level minus one is a dynamic level, part of this level is underground below the entrance plaza and part of it is exposed and surrounding the central plaza. This level has a secondary entrance and is easily accessible by vehicles and pedestrians. This is an interactive level with a focus on a seamless transition between interior and exterior spaces, including a café, multipurpose hall, and a mezzanine overlooking the art gallery below. There are numerous lightwells and an oculus to bring light down to this level and maintain a visual connection to the street level.
Level minus two is twenty-seven feet below street level at the south end of the site and only fifteen feet down at the north side with views to the plaza. This level is used as an art gallery and a flexible space that will be used as an exhibition venue for art discussing questions of immigration and integration, prioritizing artists with migrant experience, in the hopes of starting a conversation among users. This is a two-story level and is visually connected to the plaza above through the mezzanine and lightwells that illuminate the art space. The rest of the level is used for utility purposes like storage, mechanical, and a communications room.
Level one houses the more formal program of the Culture House. This is the education level of the building that will include a variety of programs for the advancement of immigrants and the local community. To achieve this, the level includes a resource center with computers and books available for research; classrooms for English classes, citizenship classes, and extracurricular activities for children; also, a grand auditorium for meetings, plays, and performances for all the community to use. This level even includes a terrace for classes or leisure that highlight the activity as soon as you enter the building.
Level two of the Culture House is the most private floor in all the building. Even the building envelope becomes more condensed to help maintain more privacy in this level. This level includes the offices of the people working here with a break room; has access to the auditorium through a mezzanine for a more private experience; and more importantly houses the career center and immigration services for new immigrants in Charlotte. This will aid the economical advancement of newcomers and help make their transition smoother. Nevertheless, this level is still very connected to the rest of the activity in the building and the plazas.
This proposal explores the importance of creating a place of connection as a tool for understanding what is otherwise unimaginable. The Culture House will work as a bridge that brings newcomers and locals together to truly accomplish successful integration into the American way of life and understanding of new cultures. Successful integration connects immigrants into the community life. This process requires a supporting framework of community outreach, resource access, and education to help the new residents adapt to their new life. Successful integration also relies on outreach and communication with the established community to build support and cultural understanding. These aspects ensure that immigrants and locals work together in building a community and recognizing the importance of integration. Ultimately, the immigration center will help break down the real and imagined barriers between communities and foster understanding.


