People Pedal Power is a collaborative initiative between students from Harvard Graduate School of Design and the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association in Lowell, MA. Through participatory design methods, we are constructing a bicycle rack for the CMAA community center. Our aim is to explore place-based approaches to infrastructure design that are culturally-specific and foster social cohesion in the public realm. By doing so, we hope to spark dialogue that is community-led and rooted in self-initiated methods of long-term capacity building at the micro-scale.

PROJECT SUMMARY:
In response to the city of Lowell’s plan to increase bicycle ridership over the next five years, this project explores the cultural and social complexities of mobility and transportation for the city’s Cambodian American community, which makes up roughly thirty per cent of the total population. Through the participatory design of a bike rack for my partner organization, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell, along with educational activities and cultural programming, my long-term objective is to facilitate necessary dialogue between the city and its residents, which I hope will inform more just and sustainable pathways for the future of transportation in Lowell.

PROJECT AIMS:
• To pursue a mode of intervention that designs with rather than for community partners.
• To create a process that bridges design disciplines and fosters student collaboration.
• To invite a wide range of voices from different age groups to articulate their vision for the CMAA project.
• To lay the groundwork and build momentum for a larger-scale process of community building through creative place-making in Cambodia Town.
• To explore and implement lower-cost interventions that addresses contextually relevant themes of mobility, accessibility, history, identity, culture, and equity in the built environment.
PROJECT PARTNER: The Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association was founded in 1984 in response to the overwhelming number of refugees who arrived in Lowell from Southeast Asia after the Khmer Rouge genocide and the Vietnam War came to an end in the 1980s. In the past thirty years, the city has become a hub for Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian individuals and families. As the post-industrial mill city makes plans to reinvigorate and revitalize the local economy, Cambodian refugees and other diaspora groups continue to face significant educational, economic and health disparities.

PROJECT SITE: Also known as Cambodia Town, the Lower Highlands is the most highly concentrated Cambodian neighborhood in the United States, and the CMAA’s is strategically located in the heart of this community. The organization is uniquely positioned to advocate on behalf of the city’s foreign-born residents and their office is a touchpoint in the larger city for services and cultural gathering.

PROJECT CONTEXT:
Municipalities from Massachusetts to California are making the transition to a more bicycle-friendly urban form as part of a wider movement around sustainability. Recently, Lowell’s Open Space Plan 2025 prioritized cycling as an alternative mode of transit and lays out clear objectives for increasing bicycle ridership over the next five years. Earlier this year, a public private partnership with the bicycle sharing app, VEO Ride, was also launched. Recognizing that a shift away from automobile dependency requires a more holistic investment in change, the question this project-based study addresses is: how can the city go about centering the mobility needs of a foreign-born, working-class, lower-income population as it invests in non-motorized modes of transport?

This project-based independent study emerged from the MUP Core II Studio in Lowell where students engaged with community-based organizations to explore ways the city could be a more welcoming place for its refugee and immigrant residents. The relationship that was started in the spring semester evolved into a CSFP at the CMAA. During this time spent living and working in Lowell, I gained insight into the historical, spatial, and cultural specificity of the Cambodian community and cultivated meaningful relationships along the way. I witnessed first-hand some of the challenges facing the city and listened to the concerns of residents as well as their hopes and desires moving into the future. These interactions were instrumental in the framing of my approach and the resultant outcomes of my intervention. The process that unfolded centered around moments of continuity, which introduced new voices to the conversation and took the work into unforeseen directions.

**DESIGNING AN ITERATIVE PROCESS FOR LONGER TERM ENGAGEMENT**

An interactive activity that was co-designed with the CMAA during the CSFP Summer to seek input for the project-based intervention.

A JTerm workshop led by Loeb Fellow, Michael Smith, to redesign the basement of the CMAA community center.

Future Directions: Participatory Design Workshop for a Temple in Lowell in collaboration with the Loeb Fellowship

Malika Leiper - Award for Excellence in Project-Based Urban Planning
PROJECT OUTCOMES

Through this project-based independent study, I explored modes of practice that extended urban planning pedagogy beyond merely intervening in the built environment, to a focus on advocacy, knowledge creation and dissemination, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. This included a series of workshops to center the CMAA in the design process and build trust with our partner. I also planned and executed two activities: a metal shop tutorial to introduce students to metal fabrication techniques, and an open space planning workshop for the CMAA afterschool program, which introduced participants to key concepts about the built environment and urban planning.
My project began as a way of addressing the cultural gaps within a larger conversation around sustainability in urban planning and design. Using the participatory design of a bike parking rack as an entrypoint, People Pedal Power challenged, “the selective deeply racial politics of mobility that produce movement for some through containment for others”³.

The focus on infrastructure, in addition to cultural processes inherent in spacemaking practices, insists that we ask how power works and how alternative infrastructures can begin to unravel embedded supremacies within our built environment.

Building from the intersectionality of thinking and doing, my goal was also to use this project-based course as a mechanism to translate concepts and skills from the classroom through an intentional, iterative approach to the design process in itself. While the objective to build a bike rack was realized⁵, the more meaningful outcomes of this process were the relationships that were made through operationalizing knowledge.

Operating at the micro-scale and partnering with the CMAA in the process, demonstrates how student-initiated design interventions can redirect resources to community anchors and participate in the co-production of knowledge and space⁴.

In the project’s final months, conversations emerged with first year MUPs about sustaining the relationship with the CMAA over the summer. This is one example of the continuities that arise from a holistic design approach which centers relationship building in the process.

I hope this project-based course serves as an example of what becomes possible when students across disciplines come together outside of the classroom agenda to address a social issue with design as the point of entry.

⁵ The bike rack will be installed at the CMAA community center on May 27th and an outdoor event is being planned to activate the new space.