Make Yourself at Home: The Sunday Breakfast Dining Hall Makeover Project

BY SUE BELL YANK
I think about home when I visit Asian Arts Initiative. Not my own home, but the concept of home as a vehicle for the formation of identity, and as a complex emotional staging ground. Wrestling with the meaning of home is unavoidable in Philadelphia’s Chinatown North.

With such a large population of people who could be considered homeless, walking through the streets one can’t help but think about the rooflessness or the roofed status of passersby, or notice the self-care people can afford or have had to let go. These contrasts become painfully evident when the new luxury loft building across the street from Asian Arts Initiative ejects (mostly) white (mostly) young professionals and their dogs through glass doors on to the Pearl Street alleyway, an undersized street once made for carriages that now sees a constant flow of (mostly) black and brown men walking, always traveling, to find work or grab a meal or to seek something else entirely.

So close to Chinatown’s commercial core, I am also reminded of the emotional resonance of home, and the complex mental and physical conditions brought on by its lack. Displacement, and the fear of being forced from one’s home, reverberates in the emblazoned murals depicting past protests, when the diverse residents of Chinatown rallied together to defeat plans for a stadium, a casino, a prison, and even the massive Vine Street Expressway, a process through which many concessions were won (though the highway was still constructed). Then, a blank beige monstrosity that smells of urine and spans several blocks reminds me that they couldn’t stop the Convention Center, nor the

eddies of empty, hidden corners in the lee of its walls. Yet all around it, spaces that strive to replicate the signifiers of home flourish: warm, cozy restaurants; lounges; bakeries; the smells of cooking meat stirring grows in bellies.

Perhaps it is only through loss, through the trauma of displacement and rootlessness, that home gains its vivid meaning. In environmental psychology, Altman and Gauvain describe home as “both a way of expressing individual identity and a way of belonging to a culture,” in short, as a “cultural discourse.”1 Under this rubric, one could argue that Asian Arts Initiative developed its own distinct aura of home through its community-engaged programming, where individual expression, discourse, cultural belonging, food, and physical place-making all play a role. AAI began in 1993 as a program of the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia’s Old City neighborhood in the wake of tensions between Asian American and black communities following the Rodney King riots. It eventually became its own organization and made a new home in Chinatown, only to be displaced by the expansion of the Pennsylvania Convention Center. Resilient and persistent, AAI purchased and renovated a three-story building on the north side of the Vine Street Expressway in 2008, and began to see that space as an anchor to bridge the physically divided north and south sides of the Chinatown community. As it became landlord to a host of other arts organizations and design offices, AAI’s vision of home expanded to encompass the strata of its neighborhood.2

Chinatown North has many names3 and as many distinct economic and


2 From the Asian Arts Initiative website and field report research. <http://asianartsinitiative.org/>

3 The boundaries of Callowhill and Chinatown North are currently ill-defined, and the area north of the Vine Street Expressway bounded by Broad to the west, 8th Ave to the east, and Spring Garden to the North is commonly called both Chinatown North and Callowhill. Because of a recent spate of luxury loft conversions in that area, developers have taken to calling it the Loft District. Less popular is the name Eraserhood, which according to Jeff Gammage of the Inquirer in his September 27, 2013 article on Asian Arts Initiative, was given “because of the inspiration [the neighborhood] lent David Lynch, creator of the cult movie Eraserhead.” Finally a few refer to the neighborhood as Trestletown because of the railway trestles that still dominate the landscape (and hip dive bar the Trestle Inn) but that name is not in common use.
enrolled in the long-term recovery program known as the Overcomers.

Increasingly, consumed by the complex collaborations and engagements spawning from these residencies, AAI desired to infuse what it called the Social Practice Lab artist residencies into the rest of its programming -- specifically, its exhibition program.

Inspired by the community curatorial program of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, who sent key leadership staff to act as facilitators and advisors in this process, AAI embarked on an initial discovery and research phase to develop a community curatorial model specific to its unique context.

To pilot the model, it ultimately decided that working in collaboration with a community partner to develop and curate an exhibition fit best with its mission and capacity. Naturally, it gravitated towards the exhibition topic "Home and Homelessness" for their first community-based curatorial experiment, and Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission emerged as natural partners. I was able to follow this process from its inception several years ago until the present, and

Asian Arts Initiative's history of being displaced due to the development of the Pennsylvania Convention Center, its new role as a landlord and grassroots leader in neighborhood renewal, and the pressing issues of immigration, gentrification, and disempowerment in its neighborhood made homelessness a persistent focus for the organization.

Prior to the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage research grant that prompted its most recent partnership with the neighboring homeless services organization Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission and the resulting Dining Hall Makeover, AAI had developed a series of artist residencies that proposed to embed socially-engaged art practices with neighborhood partner organizations or in the public spaces of Chinatown North. Because of the prevalence of homelessness in the neighborhood, many artists chose to focus on that population and worked in partnership with Sunday Breakfast. By coordinating these efforts, AAI accrued a five-year history of engagements around homelessness with both visiting artists and local artists. Visiting artists included Rick Lowe, who engaged in a multi-year residency around homelessness in collaboration with Aletheia Shin and Emily Chow Bluck, as well as Jody Wood, who brought her mobile beauty salon to the neighborhood for a week. Local artists Meei Ling Ng, Colette Fu, Yowei Shaw, Anula Shetty, and Mike Kuitemeyer each created distinctive in-depth projects around homelessness as part of Asian Arts Initiative’s Social Practice Lab. These artists and collectives conducted intensive, sometimes multi-year residency projects in close collaboration with Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission staff and guests, particularly the men

**Note:**


5 This program involves members of the Wing Luke community, organized in a Community Action Committee, and staff working together to develop, design, and implement culturally-specific exhibitions at the Seattle-based museum.

Newly renovated Sunday Breakfast Mission's Dining Hall
authored a series of reports to the field documenting its evolution.

Around this time, spring of 2015, artist Meei Ling Ng’s urban container farm was flourishing. Tended by the Overcomers, it produced vast amounts of herbs, vegetables and flowers in a previously unused strip of land in the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission parking lot. Much of what the farm produced ended up being used in the mission’s cafeteria and meal service. AAI and SBRM met to discuss the ongoing maintenance of the farm and its impact on food service, when the leadership staff at AAI brought up the exhibition opportunity. Nick Lordi, Director of Men’s Ministry, became very interested, but was a bit skeptical based on the range of artists’ projects that had previously attempted to engage the men of Sunday Breakfast. “Some did a better job than others of incorporating our men’s ideas and getting them to buy in to the value of what they’re doing and making it relevant to them.” He insisted from the outset that in order to be involved, he wanted a project that would have “lasting impact on the men and would help to improve their quality of life.”

Ultimately AAI and SBRM, represented by Lordi and fellow staff and guests at the shelter, agreed that a physical and social overhaul of the mission’s dining hall, where hundreds of meals a day are served, would be the most impactful exhibition the partners could produce together. Lordi explained, “For Sunday Breakfast, it’s everything we do here. We have a lot of ministries and services but central to our name is serving food … we took a look at the environment that we were offering and … it was what we thought would have the greatest impact on lots of people.” For Asian Arts Initiative, engaging in collaborative design, recalibrating traditional systems to allow for greater depth of social interaction, and partnering to ensure lasting impact was a natural integration of the goals it had developed in collaboration with artists in previous residencies. Now, rather than working in collaboration with an artist’s vision, AAI and SBRM were acting together as a lead protagonists in a multi-faceted, socially-engaged design project.

Yet remaking the dining hall was about more than increasing simple social interaction or improving systems of food delivery; it was also about creating a space of belonging. From its early history, socially-engaged art has always explored the less tangible socio-emotional qualities of space. From Guy Debord’s psychogeographic maps of the early 20th century, which tracked the emotional affect of public spaces; to Allan Kaprow’s Happenings in the 1960s; to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s meals in galleries and the whole genre of relational aesthetics in the 1990s – in which social interactions, occurring within spaces and around activities arranged by an artist, became the aesthetic medium through which art unfolded. This has long been a space of artistic exploration, but analyzing the socio-emotional implications of space through the lens of home or homelessness as a distinct order gained traction in architecture and planning (sometimes called environmental psychology) in the 1990s and 2000s. Perhaps it is no coincidence that “socially-engaged art practice” or “social practice” was so named as a genre around the same time.

Key environmental psychologists, including Jeanne Moore, Kimberly Dovey, and Peter Somerville, produced a flurry of investigations into the complex, non-binary relationship of home and homelessness around this time. Although sociological studies and policy analysis underlie much of this work, some, such as Dovey’s 1985 introduction to the subject, also venture into literary, artistic, and poetic renderings of home as a social construct. All agree that notions of home and homelessness are far from purely oppositional. Though homelessness is so often characterized as lack -- physical, emotional, and social -- home is not necessarily its fulfillment. Dovey begins her essay with this definition:

Although a house is an object, a part of the environment, home is best conceived of as a kind of relationship between people and their environment. It is an

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6 Nick Lordi, interview with author, March 14, 2016.  
7 Lordi interview, March 14, 2016.
Remaking the dining hall was more than improving systems of food delivery; it was also about creating a space of belonging.

emotionally-based and meaningful relationship between dwellers and their dwelling places.\(^9\)

To appreciate the ramifications of redefining Sunday Breakfast’s dining hall space, we must understand the nuances in the contrasts between homelessness and home. I argue that both the physical and, even more importantly, social remaking of the dining hall at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission created a space of emotional and bodily belonging that allows more elements of “home” to infuse the lives of the people who experience it on a daily basis.

Just as home is multi-dimensional, evoking nostalgia, emotional connection, social relationships, and the peculiarity of lived space, so too is homelessness. Jeanne Moore points out, however, that homelessness is apparently objective, whereas home is subjective and intangible. She writes:

Homelessness is presented in material and physical terms, such as rooflessness, while home is considered in emotive terms. It would be easy to be drawn into the concrete physical condition of homelessness whilst paying insufficient attention to the shades of grey in the experience of homelessness.\(^10\)

Somerville attempts to draw attention to the “shades of grey” in the homeless experience by delineating several signifiers that carry different meanings depending on one’s roofed or roofless status (shelter), as well as the self-care

that home affords (hearth), the loving and caring social relationships one experiences (heart), one’s control of boundaries (privacy), and one’s source of identity and ontological security (roots).\(^11\) Although material shelter precedes some of these elements, like self-care and physical security, it does not guarantee them. A person could have an apartment or a stable place to stay, and lack privacy, or loving relationships, or ontological security. Likewise, a person who has no access to regular shelter could still experience spaces of belonging and security, with meaningful social relationships and a strong sense of identity. When it comes to policy, however, Somerville laments that “most attempts to explain homelessness do not recognize it as ideologically constructed. Rather they represent it as ‘fact’ and accept official or commonsense definitions.”\(^12\) With a more full and nuanced understanding of the many material and emotional conditions that could comprise homelessness, perhaps policy around homeless services could also better facilitate and empower the creation of home.

A person who has no access to regular shelter could still experience spaces of belonging and security.

Dovey talks about home as a social order, as the “patterning of experience and behavior” that does not necessarily have to be embodied in a fixed house or building. She writes, “It is a way of relating to the environment that may be transposed from place to place, and in this way the meanings of home may be re-evoked if the patterns are recreated.” Home may be the engagement with beloved activities and relationships, such as between “two lovers, a gardener and a garden, a cook and a kitchen, a pianist and a piano.” The location is often crucial to the activity, but it is


\(^10\) Moore, 148.


\(^12\) Somerville, 534.2013
the constant movement required by life on the streets. Little vases with yellow flowers are on each table. The large room is clean and freshly painted in neutral grays and blues, and large blue sound baffles hang from the ceiling, dampening the echoing calls of the preacher, who is thoroughly worked up now. When lunch comes, the tables will fill up, and volunteers will serve large crocks of food to the guests, family-style. They will introduce themselves as table hosts, sit down, break bread, and start conversations. People can serve themselves as much as they want, and they stay a bit longer to talk.

At first, this may seem counter-intuitive to SBRM’s primary goals. Round tables fit less people than long ones. The cooks have to make more food than they used to because of the family style service -- people eat more when they are serving themselves. There are never enough seats, and some go hungry. But that’s the way it was before, too. “I think it comes down to what we want to offer people that come through here, “ Nick Lordi says quietly.

And if our goal is to feed as many people as possible... what we were doing worked against that. But if our goal is to try to love people -- meet them where they are and connect with them -- then I think it’s good to slow down the meal process and

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13 Dovey, 10.
14 Lordi interview, March 14, 2016.
15 Dovey, 8.
have time to chat with someone. So I think that this is what we need to be doing now and where we need to be, and the project is a way of getting us there.16

Though simple and relatively modest in scope -- the budget for the makeover was just barely more than $25,000 -- this design project encompassed spatial, emotional, and cultural shifts. It sought to capture the dynamism and dialectic properties of home -- the multitude of small gives and takes, manners, jokes, appeasements, and various other social orders that give meaning to our dwelling places and communal spaces of belonging. The way the meal service has shifted has allowed for more social interaction, with volunteers and guests on the same level, talking to one another. Nick Lordi acknowledged, “Now they’re sharing a meal together and not coming in to serve or be served. And I think that’s where these connections are going to happen. This is a valuable way of interacting.”17

In the beginning, the two organizations went directly to the long-term resident group, the Overcomers, to have conversations about what tack this project should take. And planning conversations between the partner organizations and the men kept emphasizing socializing during meals, one of the primary signifiers of the meaning of home for so many people.

The collaborative group embarked on a series of research trips and discussions over the spring and summer of 2015. One of the most impactful trips for both partner organizations was to the Vetri Community Partnership, a foundation that works with local public schools to makeover their dining halls and lunch programs. Some of the core values of Vetri are that kids both participate in the cooking and serving of healthy, nutritious meals, and they almost always install round tables and implement family style service at their partner schools.18 Nick Lordi visited with his head food services coordinator, and he was struck by the emphasis the Vetri had on social connection over food. “We were told a lot of them [the students] didn’t sit down to eat at home,” he said. “Part of the vision was to put healthy foods in front of them to teach them this was just another way of coming together and eating. And that stuck.”19 Gayle Isa of AAI remarked that she didn’t hear much back from Nick for a few weeks after visiting the Vetri, and she was worried that he would be resistant to transitioning to family-style food service, round tables, and other program-impacting changes. She felt that the changes perhaps seemed too drastic, and wouldn’t be possible or practical to implement. But Nick was profoundly inspired by these experiences. Beyond the physical changes, the paint and even the dramatic installation of windows that would bring natural light, the project became about connections. “It became more than just a physical makeover of the space,” he said. “It became a project that tried to do what we could to deepen the connections that people have when they are having a meal or sitting together.”20

Simultaneous to this, some of the key design elements of the project emerged out of conversations with members of the long-term resident Overcomers program at SBRM. Architect Nancy Bastian, who had worked on refurbishing AAI’s building on Vine street and also had done prior shelter renovations with her firm Cecil + Baker Partners, leapt at the chance to do pro bono work on the project. She knew firsthand the transformative effects of the kind of material and programmatic change that the group was considering.

Many of these elements mirrored or complemented revelations inspired by the Vetri program. The Overcomers valued each others’ company, so pressed for round tables, while everyone insisted on natural light in the form of three tall windows. The men also suggested adding music, which led to the idea of a playlist curated by the Overcomers. New paint felt like a given in the drab space, and elements like a stage, podium, altar and new projector and screen helped support its programmatic usage. Serving crocks, aprons, chef’s hats and menu boards bolstered the aura of inclusiveness in the new family style service. Because the budget was so lean, every stick of furniture purchased, every bit of paint,
every inch of window cut through the cinderblock wall, all had to play an outsized role in impacting the lives of the people who entered that space. The Overcomers had suggested a mural or art on the walls, but the group decided not to pursue that in the initial stage. There was no room for architectural flourishes -- every member of the collaborative fully understood that their design decisions would become the props to support desired behavioral interactions. Dovey describes the architecture and design of home in much the same manner:

As patterns of experience and behavior stabilize over time, so do the spatial arrangements and environmental props that support and evoke those experiences. Patterns of dining, talking, sleeping, studying, and watching television form the bulk of the assumptions that go without saying in housing design. These are patterns that orient us in space, in time, and in the sociocultural context.21

The dining hall represents a communal space of belonging, rare in present society, but also a place that empowers people to attain some qualities of home in their daily lives. The varied aspects of the homeless experience are often ignored in the pressure to place roofless people in conventional temporary housing. But just as important are practicing the skills and processes that reproduce the sociocultural orders of home, such as sitting together for a meal, serving one another, conversing, and feeling security and identity in relation to others. As Moore urges:

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21 Dovey, 11.
In understanding the fabric of homeless lives, more appropriate support can be offered. When home is understood as an ongoing process, resettlement work and help in making home will become as important in policy terms as finding temporary accommodation.\(^{22}\)

That is, one can certainly experience qualities of home within the condition of homelessness. A month after the new dining hall opened, Nick Lordi was not only still enthusiastic about the changed meal service, there was a telling shift in his understanding of the use of the cafeteria. He admitted that before, he didn't necessarily want the men to be hanging out in the space outside of meal service -- he would encourage them to leave and be as productive as possible in their daylight hours. Now, he is actively thinking about what services could be provided in that space on an ongoing basis, like art therapy, clinics, and other classes, so that people could stay longer and be served in that space.\(^{23}\)

**THE PARTNERSHIP**

One broad criticism of homeless services in the past has been that sweeping policy dictums and one-size-fits-all housing solutions do not accommodate the diverse identities of the people who must dwell in those places.\(^{24}\) Spaces for homeless services are often highly regulated both spatially and temporally, and can sometimes experience difficulty allowing for the kind of freedoms and social interactions that engender true connectedness. This partnership between an arts organization and a rescue mission was successful because it was so particular, in the way home is particular (and homelessness is general).\(^{25}\) Rather than the colonization of the mind that can infiltrate resource-poor and high-stakes environments, shutting down new ways of viewing intractable challenges, this peculiar partnership allowed for a more radical imagination. It became an opportunity for reflection and aspiration, and a catalyst to realize deeply held values.

Openness and availability also played a key role on all fronts; openness to one another in considering how art, design, and meal service might merge, and how broad the exhibition-making process could be. AAI experienced how much more an arts organization might attempt in society, and Lordi was spurred to enact a larger vision for this aspect of SBRM's service:

> I had values of what I'd like the service to be like here and what I'd like our men to experience here, but I hadn't had any vision for changing anything the day before we started the conversation, so that all came out of this.\(^{26}\)

Likewise, Gayle Isa of Asian Arts Initiative attributes the lasting rigor of the partnership to Lordi's openness, availability, and broad understanding of the possibilities of art. Despite some of the initial bureaucratic hurdles of working with a larger organizational partner like SBRM, Lordi had a "clarity of vision," and was empowered to gather resources, reprioritize budgets, and recreate the system and infrastructure around meal services as the project developed.\(^{27}\)

**CHALLENGES**

Each of the partners in this project had to make compromises because of the aggressive timeline, lean budget, and organizational restrictions, among other contextual factors. One of the greatest missed opportunities that all separately cited was involving the guests of SBRM more consistently in the design of the space itself. Although men from the Overcomers program were polled for their biggest design priorities early on in the process, their input was not consistently offered. Lordi suggested that, despite the group's high rate of turnover, a representative from that group should have been present in all the planning meetings, from beginning to end. He also felt that the emergency shelter guests, who frequent the dining hall for meals only, should also have had transparency into the design decisions, and an opportunity to offer feedback or participate more deeply.\(^{28}\) This aspiration speaks to what Dovey calls

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\(^{22}\) Moore, 152.

\(^{23}\) Nick Lordi, second interview with author, April 13, 2016.

\(^{24}\) Dovey, 5.

\(^{25}\) Lordi interview, March 14, 2016.

\(^{26}\) Gayle Isa, Discovery grant reflection retreat notes, March 12, 2016.
\[ \textit{Appropriation involves both a “caring” for a place and a “taking” of that place into our own being...} \]

\[ \textit{It’s very difficult to break quarter-inch glass. She also felt that the small narrow windows on the north wall could have been bigger. “Any space can use more windows and light... we were really challenged budget-wise, so probably we couldn’t have, but I would have loved to have made the windows bigger.”} \]

\[ \textit{For its part, AAI would have desired some additional paint color options as well – more vibrant than the neutrality of the final palette. As an arts organization, they also lamented the lack of budget and time to engage an artist in addition to the architect on the design team. Bastian and Lordi likewise admitted that there was a lot more to be done artistically to the space. But in the end, all parties felt that the budget had been stretched beyond what they initially thought possible, and were pleased with all they had accomplished. As Nancy Bastian marveled, “Somehow we took the very, very tiny amount of money and just squeezed it as far as possible. That’s a real skill, to have the ability to make that happen. It was just amazing.”} \]

\[ \textit{WHAT’S NEXT} \]

Just after the new dining hall opened, AAI was very concerned that the volunteer protocols around the family style service would be a burden for SBRM to maintain. For his part, Lordi suggested that it would be a transition, but wasn’t necessarily more difficult. Physically, it was actually less demanding, but it required a mental shift, where volunteers were asked to act as table hosts and encourage conversations rather than directly serving the guests. One month later, Lordi was even more bullish on the new style of service, and was looking to expand to both breakfast and dinner services. “Everyone’s gotten used to it, that this is how we do it here,” he said. “It has become routine.” He admitted that the new style does take additional staff oversight, and the cooks need to prepare more food than they used to, but the change in service is having profound long-term effects. When people come for lunch, Lordi says, they are experiencing community and a sense of belonging. He wants to extend...
that feeling to all of the meal services. Since the dining hall opened in March, many more people have been coming to the lunch service. Initially, 61% more people were attending. It’s hard to say if the makeover is the direct cause, but Lordi has shared several anecdotes -- one person stopped him on the street to gush about the dining hall; another thought they were in a different building when they entered the room for the first time since the renovation, solely because of the natural light. Nancy Bastian recalls one guest saying to her, “You know, nobody wants us here in the city. They would love for us not to be here.” She shook her head. “Just imagine walking around with that sort of feeling about yourself. Having a space that you feel that you can be in makes a difference.” The Sunday Breakfast Dining hall now feels intentional, and welcoming. Somehow, it feels a little bit more like home.

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