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# **Social Belonging and Built Space: Using Contact, Contention, and Common Conditions to Create Multicultural and Multifaith Shared-Space in a Repurposed Aurora, Colorado, Church**

## **Abstract**

Global patterns of human displacement and migration are diversifying the user base of urban churches. This change produces new settings of cross-cultural encounter and adaptation of social space. This study examines the transition of a Lutheran church into a multifaith and multicultural community center. In Aurora, Colorado, a majority-minority city, the facility offers vital support for immigrants, refugees, and low-income community members while maintaining links with [previous] congregants. Using ethnographic methods, I explore the cultural dimensions of repurposed space for a diverse constituency. Discussed herein are the ways in which the physical space is interpreted, how contention and divergent experiences aid in the construction of shared-space, and the place of commonality in a diverse setting. Using these findings, this paper offers suggestions and strategies for accommodating religious and social diversity in globalizing cities.

## **Document Type**

Thesis

## **Degree Name**

M.A.

## **Department**

Anthropology

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## **Keywords**

Applied anthropology, Community center, Converted churches, Multiculturalism, Multifaith, Urban planning

## **Subject Categories**

Christian Denominations and Sects | Religion

## **Publication Statement**

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Social Belonging and Built Space: Using Contact, Contention, and Common Conditions  
to Create Multicultural and Multifaith Shared-Space in a Repurposed Aurora, Colorado  
Church

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Kassandra I. S. Neiss

June 2019

Advisor: Dr. Dean Saitta

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Title: **Social Belonging and Built Space: Using Contact, Contention, and Commonality to create Multicultural and Multifaith Shared-Space in a Repurposed Aurora, Colorado Church**

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Global patterns of human displacement and migration are diversifying the user base of urban churches. This change produces new settings of cross-cultural encounter and adaptation of social space. This study examines the transition of a Lutheran church into a multifaith and multicultural community center. In Aurora, Colorado, a majority-minority city, the facility offers vital support for immigrants, refugees, and low-income community members while maintaining links with previous congregants. Using ethnographic methods, I explore the cultural dimensions of repurposed space for a diverse constituency. Discussed herein are the ways in which the physical space is interpreted, how contention and divergent experiences aid in the construction of shared-space, and the place of commonality in a diverse setting. Using these findings, this paper offers suggestions and strategies for accommodating religious and social diversity in globalizing cities.

Key words: multiculturalism, community center, multifaith, converted churches, Colorado, urban planning, applied anthropology

## **Acknowledgements**

A big thank you to the Village Exchange Center (VEC) community and St. Matthew Lutheran Church. The community members and leaders who make up this dynamic group of people shared with me their impressions of and visions for the VEC building, and taught me about what it means to be a community and how to be a better researcher. Next, thank you to the person who introduced me to this project, Dr. Dean Saitta. Without your guidance, support, or knowledge of the urban form and diversity within it, this project would not have been initiated, nor completed. To the rest of my thesis committee, Dr. Alejandro Cerón, Dr. Richard Clemmer-Smith, and Dr. Sarah Pessin, who all shared their expertise on authorship, cultural anthropology, applied research, and interfaith dialogue. Family members, chosen and biological alike, were necessary supportive agents along this path. From encouraging me to attend graduate school to assisting my process with copy editing; I am not the sole driver of my future. Thank you to the Department of Anthropology and the University of Denver for the education I received, and funding supports along the way. Lastly, thank you to Denver, Aurora, Colorado, the Rocky Mountains, and the Great Plains where both my work and play happens in various urban and natural landscapes. Even though I was not born here, this landscape provided me with vital knowledge and wellness.

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## **Introduction**

Our planet is experiencing unprecedented levels of human migration. Large numbers of people are emigrating from countries in the Global South to those in the Global North in pursuit of safety and security, better opportunities such as jobs and education, and access to public amenities and civil rights available in democratic urban centers, although these are far from guaranteed in the urban center. These global patterns of human displacement and migration are changing the social fabric of destination cities.

Closely examining the demographic changes in cities, and the cultural ecosystems within them, allows for the study of cross-cultural interaction and the construction of new and adaptation of existing social spaces. One visible effect that global and local migration patterns have had on our cities today is the increasingly diverse religious public.

### **Study purpose**

Many urban churches are experiencing an increase in diversity within their user base, while mosques, temples, and storefront churches are becoming more populous in the urban fabric. Migration patterns of city inhabitants coalesce with declining religious affiliation among Americans resulting in diminishing congregations and, in some cases, abandonment of the church building and land. Amid this dynamic and potentially volatile urban landscape, many predominantly White congregations turn to marginalized communities to stave off the approaching termination of their church. Particularly in areas with large foreign-born populations, local churches have become nodes of diversity

such that groups hailing from a variety of faiths, cultures, ethnic groups, and nationalities walk through the doors on a weekly basis.

This phenomenon is two-fold. On one hand, church congregation members are leaving the community for a myriad of reasons; reasons which are specific to locality and circumstance but always tied to the brokering of power in the city. Often, the congregations in question are not able to gain new members in the quantity, or time frame, needed to sustain their institution and physical property. On the other hand, waves of immigration from Africa, Asia, and Central and South America have brought many foreign-born residents into US cities. These new arrivals come with faiths and practices, pain and pride, family and food, but one thing they cannot bring are houses of worship. Many churches, having fallen victim to patterns of urbanization that drain their membership, have found (some) financial relief in renting worship space to religious immigrant enclaves, creating a synergetic partnership. This reciprocity engenders the birth of a naturally occurring multi-ethnic and multi-faith space.

These organically diverse spaces present the opportunity to learn how space is planned and used by a collocated user base of a variety of backgrounds. This project is a case study of one such institution in Aurora, Colorado that went beyond the bounds of faith to save their church.

This case study examines a community center, Village Exchange Center (VEC), which is located in a repurposed church. The nonprofit community center serves immigrants, refugees, and other local low-income community members with social services and a space that is supportive of cultural and religious expression, celebration,

and sharing. This collaborative project set out to explore the ways in which repurposing a Christian structure as a secular, shared-space community center providing social services and civic engagement alongside independent multi-faith and multi-cultural practices benefits the community user base. Additionally, the research sought to identify challenges to this process that, if solved, can be used to strengthen the community center. Here I posit that community members' intersectional identities consisting of religious, ethnic, and civic parts is employed to produce shared-space and related feelings of belonging and therefor repurposed churches may be well suited for supporting the accommodation of religious and cultural diversity brought by increased immigration. Due to the variety of particular histories and experiences brought by a pluralistic user base, the Christian nature of the built environment may have attributes that are conducive to use as a diverse shared-space facility, while simultaneously presenting challenges.

This study found a clearly defined and shared conception and understanding of VEC and its role in the community. However, looking deeper into these shared values and beliefs uncovered variability on how this knowledge mapped onto the space. Five thematic findings emerged which help to define the ways that diversity and space interact to produce a user base that co-exists in the facility. The first finding was that the user base of VEC see education and empowerment as interrelated with feelings community and belonging. The confluence of these values, however, manifest differently based on a person's life experiences.

The second finding provides a deep exploration of how cultural diversity is conceptualized by this community. Cultural diversity was highly valued in ways that go

beyond celebration of difference. I found that the experience of engaging with multicultural and multifaith space created room for people to explore ways to navigate a highly diverse society. Interactions between users demonstrated that difficult conversations and contestation of space can help build bridges and bonds within the community. The valuation of cultural diversity was often expressed as a desire for classes and activities in which participants could share and learn about cultures and languages that have been brought to the US by other immigrants and refugees.

The third thematic finding examines the enactment of religious diversity, how it is separated from cultural diversity, and the ways different community members employ their religious identities. I found that life experiences may heavily inform a person's attitudes toward someone of a different religious affiliation. Due to varying life experiences, some individuals and groups seek to reproduce their ethno-religious identity while others seek to encounter and exchange with other groups and practices.

The fourth finding offers interpretations of and reactions to the built environment and architecture of the building. The space carries historical baggage related to Christian design and architecture which caused discomfort in certain visitors. However, some aspects of the architecture also allow for visitors to attribute their own interpretations of the aesthetic and this can be emphasized and elevated during renovation of the space.

The final finding describes the role VEC plays in the larger political, social, and physical landscape of Aurora, Colorado. VEC has defined a place for itself within Aurora, Colorado, a majority-minority city working toward sustainable and respectful

practices of accommodating difference. VEC's role in the local neighborhood, in the community, and in the larger cityscape is integral to how it emerged as an institution.

### **Study design**

I became involved in the community center in August 2017, shortly after VEC acquired their building and shortly before I began my graduate studies at University of Denver. The research was designed as a collaborative project, involving VEC team members and key community informants from the planning stages of the project through to the final output. After objectives were defined, I explored methodology that would assist in uncovering the desired information. This study employed two main methodologies: participant observation and a variation of cultural domain analysis. I became involved in VEC's operations and development as an intern and was also integrated into community events and activities in order to make community connections and record field notes. I then conducted free list interviews with eleven community informants to define the cultural values associated with the community center. After analysis of that qualitative data I administered a paired comparison survey to fifty-two center visitors. Using ANTHROPAC, Ucinet, and NVivo I analyzed the resulting data. The information gained from this project was used to create an executive summary for VEC directors to use when approaching funders, as guidance in exploring renovation options, and also to distribute to the community to increase knowledge, awareness, and visibility of changes happening in the Center.

## **Comments on applied anthropology**

In this study, I sought to garner the knowledge already embedded in the community. By elevating authentic community voices, I aimed to provide an educational document, based in existing knowledge and practices. The information contained in this research is aimed toward the community center, the City of Aurora, and other institutions interested in understanding the creation of multicultural space. Within this framing, the local community of immigrants and refugees were integral to the research and comprised an important segment of my intended audience. However, the scope of the readership was broader than the voices included herein. This project sought to reach the people who are organizing the Aurora community, providing services and spaces, creating policies, and making decisions about next steps and future directions. I explain this because I take the position that the culture created by the community is alive and thriving. It seems that the multicultural spaces created by the Aurora community are not in need of interventions because they are naturally blossoming, at least in this regard.

This approach to anthropological research falls under the category of applied anthropology, which Leslie Sponsel defines as “the use of anthropology to solve practical problems” (Sponsel 2015, 225). This approach to anthropology has been criticized by some. These critics believe that straying from 'scientific objectivity' reclassifies the research as social work or political activism (Sponsel 2015, 226). To the contrary, there is a long history within anthropology of playing the role of an advocate or public intellectual who elevates the narrative of those subjugated by recognizable power structures. Another criticism has been that the outcomes of such research, and activism,

may result in ill-informed or unintended consequences (Sponsel 2015, 226). However, it is important to note that traditional scientific objectivity is not immune to the social reality in which the researcher operates. Action anthropologists acknowledge that their bias, and mere presence as an outsider, will have an influence on the research thereby being better able to better identify the impacts their preconception and own enculturation has on the research.

Terms such as engaged anthropology, action anthropology, advocacy anthropology, practicing anthropology, and public anthropology all fall under the umbrella of applied anthropology. While some authors differentiate these by the focus and clientele of the research (Sponsel 2015) others use the level of (dis)connection to the academy to delineate these terms (Ervin 2005). Instead of either of these stances, I frame applied work in relation to the researcher and their approach to this undertaking. Sponsel states the applied anthropology is a matter of "personal morality and professional ethics" (2015, 227) and it is with this mindset that I approached this project.

Advocacy, sometimes called action, anthropologists "may help the people they study to perceive alternatives that had not occurred to them before, or that had not been available to them, but must do so without being so powerful as to inflict on those studied the anthropologist's choice among possible alternatives" (Wahrhaftig 2012, 23).

Advocacy anthropology has also been defined as,

The application of anthropological resources on behalf of the survival, welfare, rights, and self-determination of indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, and other groups... [to advocate for] the interests of a community, often as a practical plea on its behalf to one or more external agencies. (Sponsel 2015, 223)



In both definitions, the anthropologist has identified power systems or structures that actively work to the detriment of a socially bounded group and uses their expertise to open avenues of change to the system.

Public anthropology is the engagement in the broad picture of "public issues, concerns and debates; cultivates a more aggressive public presence through print and other media; and enlarges public outreach" (Lassiter 2008, 71). Other definitions of public anthropology contain nuanced differences but always center around the audience, so that "instead of a local community being the focus, society usually is, especially the anthropologist's own society" (Sponsel 2015, 225).

Placing this project within one of these definitions has proven difficult. While on the surface it seems that action anthropology would be an accurate fit, I would also argue that the community in which I worked was able to advocate for themselves, evidence by their ability to create needed space in their city. This project does however advance the interests of the community, centering them in the view of the Center's future, the staff's planning strategies, and zoning decisions for the city. This project also seems to qualify for a public anthropology classification as it intends to offer commentary on public issues and provide insight into possibilities for society, which of course includes host community members and newcomers alike. I suggest this project is a hybrid Public-Action anthropology which seeks to address public issues that affect a larger public body as well as advocate for certain community needs that are results of imbalanced power hierarchies, and does so without circumscribing and defining a community for the sake of easy analysis.

On a brief note, collaborative research is a growing field which is not synonymous with applied anthropology. While collaborative research can be located under the umbrella of applied, publicly oriented work, not all applied or public research is collaborative (Lassiter 2008). Luke Eric Lassiter argues that collaborative work “challenges the theory/practice divide” and “plants roots in locality, and assembles cooperative cocitizenships and coactivisms between and among anthropologists and local publics” (2008, 71). In this vein, I cannot rightfully call this project collaborative. There were moments of collaboration and mutually beneficial discussions, but the nature of academic constraints on thesis research guided this project much more than the community’s participation. I constantly sought input from VEC staff and key community members, but there were also points where I made decisions and analytical interpretations without direct involvement from the community as a whole. Acting as a lone researcher who has ownership of her work, I cannot in good conscious state that I created “cocitizenships and coactivisms” through my research in this community.

### **Terms and definitions**

With such a rich vocabulary in the English language, I am baffled when terminology falls short of satisfactory descriptions. This thesis, covering diversity within cities, relies on terms that remain unsatisfactory in their inability to accurately demonstrate complexity of social processes in diverse city settings. Furthermore, some terms are laden with historical and cultural baggage that refer to past US policies which stripped US subjects of their rights to maintain cultural practices and ways of life. One such word, that is not charitably treated in this thesis is assimilation. Assimilation has

been used as a tool of genocide, especially within US context with Native American communities, and refers to the intentional erasure of culture and replacement of previous belief systems, values, and practices with those of the mainstream. It devalues certain cultures in preference of others, reinforcing social rankings and hierarchies that produce class inequalities, Anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, American Indian erasure, and Anti-Semitism. There are a number of times in this paper that assimilation is used as a contrasting point to other policies or ideologies. The findings in this thesis run counter to the goals of assimilation and demonstrate the importance of diverse knowledges and experiences that inform the construction of community in a city.

Inclusion, while not as laden with histories of cultural erasure, is problematic in its framing of the process that occurs between host communities and newcomers. Inclusion indicates there is a pre-established entity that others are being included into, but may not have any agency in changing or altering. On a citywide level, this is not an ideal goal as it places the existing urban culture more centrally than the newcomers' who are contributing equally to successes and future directions of the city. Furthermore, due to traumas experienced over a person's life course and migration path, inclusion may not be their desired goal but rather the maintenance of their difference and connection to another home or community. The term inclusion is avoided herein for these reasons. In its place I use the term belonging which does not pre-define a hierarchy or system.

Integration is a term currently embedded in the discourse on multicultural cities and is often the preferred word to describe the city's goals regarding their non-White residents and can be located in Aurora's policies. The City of Aurora's 2015

Comprehensive Strategic Plan quotes the National Immigration Forum's definition of integration:

integration is a long-term process, through which immigrants and host communities communicate effectively, function together and enrich each other; create economic opportunities, and have mutual respect and understanding among people of different cultures. (Office of International and Immigrant Affairs 2015, 5).

In this definition, integration does not reference an unchangeable mainstream body into which newcomers flow into, but rather a meshing or melding of newcomers and hosts to create something new. In engineering, system integration is defined as the process of bringing together multiple physical and virtual components, or sub-systems, to function as a singular larger system. In such integration processes, things often do not remain static or unchanged during this weaving and meshing as different components, groups, or individuals need to learn to communicate with each other. Often, a new entity is formed consisting of the two or more previous entities, sometimes with resistance (as the US saw with social desegregation that began in the mid twentieth century). Calling on the motto of the US, *e pluribus unum*, integration has an end goal of creating a singular population that functions together as a whole, without issues.

While integration may seem like an excellent goal for a governing body in charge of keeping the peace and writing laws and policies, the findings produced from this research demonstrate certain faults. Conflict and points of contentions were integral parts of creating a social space where individuals felt they belonged. Focusing solely on the creating of a singular well-functioning system glosses over the importance of navigating difficult conversations and disagreements over space, and the role these interactions play

in creating a sense of belonging. The process of integration has its place in the diverse city, but there will always be places of contest and disjuncture, and these cannot be ignored or omitted. I have yet to find a term that satisfactorily communicates this complexity of coalescence and contest.

Accommodation, like inclusion, usually means there is a pre-set standard to which changes are made that enable difference to operate within the system. Mohammad Qadeer explains that “immigrants as the new members of a society have special needs, such as job search and housing assistance, language classes, civic education, counseling, etc.” (2009, 12). His definition of accommodation suggests that a city’s “objectives and outcomes should be uniform but the measures to achieve them (inputs) could vary by the culture of clients” (Qadeer 2009, 12). Accommodation in this framing posits a common ground which consists of the shared interests, norms, laws and values is based in the “historic mainstream” while also “reconstructing the common ground to reflect the , interests and values” of those who were previously not represented there (Qadeer 2009, 12). When accommodation is used in this paper it reflects Qadeer’s conception of processes that alter the patterns of a city and create new patterns. Accommodation, as defined here, is not merely doing the minimum to satisfy needs, but doing what is necessary to create space for all urban citizens to participate in city life and processes. In turn these empowered citizens have more agency to influence and enact alterations to the shared common ground.

## **Organization of this thesis**

In Chapter One I provide the context in which this study was conducted. This includes globalization and the resulting increase in urban diversity, the effects this increased diversity is having on urban churches, and an overview of the current discourse on multicultural urban planning. In Chapter Two I engage in a discussion of the theory that frames this project including anthropology of religious migrants, religion and secularism in the public sphere, identity and belonging, and the relationship between cultural capital and mobility. Chapter Three provides an in-depth description of the research design, methodology, methods, data collection, and ethics of the project. Chapter Four describes the field site to provide historical and local context of Aurora as a majority-minority city, the genealogy and history of the creation of VEC, and a description of the nonprofit and current center functions. Chapter Five covers the thematic and quantitative findings of the study with a surface level of analysis. Chapter Six discusses the benefits and challenges based on the findings, strategies that can be pulled from these lessons, and returns to the thesis's purpose and position. This chapter concludes with further research directions for exploring multicultural and multifaith use of space and how these findings can benefit urban planning projects in our ever-diversifying society. I hope US religious groups who are exploring options for their underutilized or underfunded city center infrastructure may finding useful insights and maybe even guidance for their institutions within this document.

## **Chapter 1: Background and literature review**

### **1.1 Global migration and increased urban diversity**

Anthropology can be described as the study of humans moving through space and time. Many anthropologists will point out that human migration is as old as our bipedalism, and encounter and exchange with others of our species has influenced *Homo sapiens* from the beginning. Today, advances in communication and transportation technology, global regimes of power, and environmental changes are driving mass migrations and displacements of people on an unprecedented global scale. Many Western countries and their urban centers are confronted with increased arrivals from Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. These changes in immigration patterns and the resulting cultural and religious diversity has begun to generate tensions in and over social space, infrastructure, and policy in US cities and elsewhere. Many of these changes are happening at the community level, challenging city planners and civic leaders to adjust their urban development policies and practices to account for the increasing diversity. Moreover, the changes that are happening tend to lean more towards an assimilationist approach rather than a multiculturalist one (Ruble, Hanley, and Garland 2008).

Between 1950 and 2015, Europe, Northern America, and Oceania received the highest numbers of international migrants, who were most frequently coming from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean (United Nations 2017). Concern over

how to handle these global migration patterns was (and still is) shared across the Global North. Responses to demographic changes often began at the local, city policy level. The growing Muslim population in Birmingham, England triggered the city's first place of worship policy in 1973 to systematize the city planners' responses regarding Mosques. In 1983, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and Commission for Racial Equity (CRE) jointly published *Planning for a Multi-Racial Britain* which was formative in defining 'race' in the planning debate (Gale 2008, 20). Thirteen years later, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) met in Paris to explore the links between immigrants and urban development and to understand the "nature and content of policies being implemented in cities to promote the integration of immigrants" (OCED 1998, 3).

In the US, the Immigration Act of 1965 marked the beginning of a demographic shift in US cities as the immigration to the country was opened to previously excluded or extremely restricted ethnic and racial groups. Prior to 1965 the vast majority of immigrants had been Europeans due to national-origins quotas that were instated in 1924, but within five years of the removal of the quotas this changed drastically. The Act coincided with the growing violence in North and South Vietnam and Cambodia. Many refugees fleeing this violence were resettled in US cities, creating marked change in the population demographics. By 1970, not only was there an enormous increase of newcomers, but the majority of them came from Asia and Spanish-Speaking Central and South America. Between 1981 and 1991 European immigration dropped to less than ten percent of the new arrivals (Muller 1998).



As is well known, early waves of immigrants arriving in the US around the turn of the 20th century played a prominent role in the growth of US cities. Later immigrants, who arrived in the US in the decades leading up to and the decades following the turn of the 21st century, also played a role in US urban centers. These cohorts often re-invigorated declining, depressed, and deteriorating cities by bringing change to US metropolitan areas including expansion of the labor force, rehabilitation of old infrastructure, capital investment, new business entrepreneurs, international trade, and social security funding (Muller 1998, 34-35). Change also came in the form of cultural impact with increased visibility of non-US foods, practices, clothing, philosophies, and beyond.

Since this thesis focuses on the immigrant influence on the revitalization of existing built environment by way of a repurposed church, it is important to further delve into the effects these 1970-1990 immigrants had on older infrastructure. In the US, they often initially moved into older neighborhoods in the city center to access the more affordable housing. This has been a pattern within immigrant communities in the US since the 1840's (Muller 1998, 44). In addition to housing revitalization, many ethnic enclaves brought new businesses which were located in small or medium sized shopping centers. Built in the 1950s and 60s, many of these malls had begun to deteriorate by 1980 and 1990, but these new business owners invested in the building infrastructure and aesthetic which rehabilitated the built environment. While scholars and policy makers tend to focus on the economic impact immigrants have within cities, it is important to

also acknowledge their material impact often increases capacity of ethnic enclaves, neighborhoods, and districts.

A watershed in human history came in 2008 when the UN announced that, for the first time ever, over half of the global human population lived in cities. This reality was made possible by the confluence of the global migration crisis and the increasing numbers of young adults who are choosing city life over suburbia or rural settings (OCED 1998, Eade 2012). Before this watershed was reached, the OCED acknowledged the key role of ethnic enclaves and ethnic businesses in urban development and revitalization. The research compiled in a 1998 OCED report ran contrary to the then commonly held belief that ethnic concentrations indicated disadvantaged neighborhoods and urban blight. Rather, it showed positive correlations between immigration and job creation, especially in enclave economies in which people are often self-employed or working for small businesses (OCED 1998). The cushion and protective bubble of the enclave can provide several advantages for the residents such as culture and language affinity, but it often offers employment (Neymarc 1998, 19). Employment within the enclave can ease the shock of integrating into the host economy by supporting entrepreneurs as they expand their business and gradually become part of the larger social and economic fabric of the city.

Today there are between 65 and 68.5 million forcibly displaced people around the world (not including the numerous voluntary migrants), according to Oxfam, the United Nations, and Doctors without Borders, with around three million in the United States. These organizations, as well as authors such as Reece Jones (2016), agree that the years

2014 and 2015 were not only marked by the remarkable increase in violence-caused human displacement, but also a growing awareness of the issue. The United Nations found that in 2015 twenty-four people per minute were forcibly displaced by “persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations,” which was four times more than a decade earlier in 2005.

In post-911 US, xenophobia is tangible in policy, social interactions, and cultural shifts which have resulted in toxic nativist movements and security states. While Western societies become increasingly diverse, ethnic enclaves and homogeneous neighborhoods are also becoming more prevalent. Public discourse on the topic is dominated by a dichotomy between integration and exclusion, and the dichotomy within integration which positions assimilation against acculturation. In turn, questions of coexistence and social mixing are coming back to the forefront of urban planning, design, and policy. Situated in the midst of this turbulence, social researchers are flooding the literature with studies on how these global migration patterns are affecting urban public spaces, neighborhoods, civic activity, community and religious spaces and beyond.

### **1.2 Changing religious landscape in the city**

Diversity in the twenty-first century refers to variation in not only race, ethnicity, and economic class, but also variation of religious and non-religious positions. Intellectuals and Urbanists such as Joel Kotkin, seminaries such as Harvard Divinity School, and various interfaith collectives are concerned by the declining religious affiliation among Americans, especially millennials, which has resulted in diminishing congregations in the US (Kotkin and Speicher 2003, Kotkin 2005). While a 2017

interfaith study estimates that minimally 3,500 churches are abandoned each year in the US (Thurston and Kulie 2017, and Kulie and Thurston 2017) a Christian publication put the number between 6,000 and 10,000 (Rainer 2018). However, part of this decline of US churches results from changes in neighborhood make-up (nationalities, ethnicities and religious backgrounds) in places where congregations were typically more homogeneous. As such, the decline of long-established churches has multiple influencing factors and cannot necessarily be equated to declining religion in the American public, nor does it inherently mean the complete erasure of churches from the urban landscape.

There are a variety of ways churches are responding to internal and external changes that affect their institutions. Many churches across the US and the rest of the Global North sell their property, often located in dense city centers where available land is limited and highly sought after. Many properties have been renovated and transformed into glamorous single-family homes, high-end apartments, fancy dining restaurants, and even night clubs (such as The Church, a nightclub in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood). A limited number of these churches are repurposed for use by another religious or non-religious community organization.

An example of such religious repurposing is Fatih Mosque in Amsterdam, which has lived many previous lives prior to this last conversion into a mosque. Originally the site of an 1890 socialist meeting house, the property was bought by Jesuits who eventually demolished the original building to construct a Neo-Romanesque Catholic Church (The Sower) in 1929. From there The Sower was forced to close its doors in 1971 due to an extremely diminished congregation and subsequently became a carpet store,

and then a music store, before it was bought by the Turkish-Dutch community in 1981 who converted the building into the Fatih Mosque (Beekers and Arab 2016, 144).

Daan Beekers and Pooyan Tamimi Arab explain that the previous histories of the building as well as the embedded and iconic history in the surrounding cityscape (close proximity to Homomonument, Anne Frank House, and Westerkerk) are significant motivators and influencers for the current mosque users. To demonstrate this, the researchers explain how the mosque also organizes public events for non-Muslims such as being part of art-walks, gallery events, theater performances, music, and inter-religious activities that are often held in the prayer space. The Turkish-Dutch community's goal with this participation is not solely to generate income for the building, as Beekers and Arab describe it, but rather to gain visibility, become more a part of their host society, and combat anti-Muslim prejudice (2016, 155). Mehmet, a volunteer spokesperson for the mosque, was quoted saying

If we could get a small fraction of the visitors of the Anne Frank House and Western Church [i.e. tourists] in a combined tour representing the three religions, Judaism [represented, in Mehmet's view, by the Anne Frank House], Christianity and Islam, then we would really be on the map. (Beekers and Arab 2016, 155)

In addressing the conversion of the building, an official of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam stated in an interview that the Catholic Church tends to avoid the sale of their churches to Muslims, and that it was the intermediary commercial businesses (i.e. the carpet store) that allowed for the sale to the Turkish-Dutch community (Beekers and Arab 2016, 145). However, the Fatih Mosque's website

recounts the story of a former priest of The Sower who came to the mosque and said that he was honored that the building was once again serving religion. He warned the mosque congregants to look after their community, because if the

building would lose its religious purpose, he would 'die of grief'. (Beekers and Arab 2016, 148)

This is far from the only church, synagogue, temple, or gurdwara (place of assembly and worship for Sikhs) that has been repurposed as a mosque<sup>1</sup>. These conversions are taking place in Western cities such as London, Paris, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Chicago, Philadelphia and seem to be strongly correlated with influxes of immigrants and increased diversity.

Another intriguing example is that of a historic Baptist Church located in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. After 140 years of services, worship, and gathering, the church was vacated, sold to a developer, fell into disrepair, and vandalized. Rescue came from an ironic source: the Atlanta Free Thought Society, an “educational non-profit dedicated to promoting life without religion” (Busby 2011). This group of atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers worked to refurbish and restore the historic building with the intent of using it as their headquarters and meeting house. While much of the religious iconography was removed (there was very little given that it was previously a Baptist structure), they restored the “church's original pews, though now they're called seating benches. The lectern also remained, but now it's used for guest lecturers, not preachers” (Busby 2011). The society kept the original hand-carved sign claiming “Collins Springs Primitive Baptist Church, Rebuilt 1866, Service every Sunday Time 10:30 AM” as a nod to the history and heritage of the structure.

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<sup>1</sup> The conversion of non-Islamic places of worship into mosques is deeply woven into the history of Islam and includes famous conversions such as the Hagia Sophia and the Parthenon for a short time.

As the narrative of ‘the struggling church’ continues to become more prevalent and more resources are created to help guide struggling congregations through the process, some decide to pursue the reactivation of their now-empty buildings, instead of vacating the property. The goal of these reactivation projects is to create a legacy within their community. This legacy process is highly variable and is often informed by both the needs of the immediate community and the traditional ministries offered by church. For example, Church at Clarendon in Arlington, Virginia has renovated their church and opened VPoint Apartments which provide 117 apartments, 70 of which are rented below market price (CBS News 2018). Like many other churches in the US, their aging congregation had shrunk, and they did not have the funds to maintain their building. CBS News labeled the congregation a “land-rich, cash poor faith group” (CBS News 2018). The congregation had learned that the property was worth tens of millions of dollars but felt that serving the community on a larger scale was a better use of the building and more in line with their spiritual values (CBS News 2018). Deacon Rob Ryland told CBS News (2018) “We looked up and thought, 'Well there's all this space up there [that] is not being used. What can we do?' Housing is a traditional ministry of the church. We had to do it right.”

Some churches are not far enough down the rabbit hole to need to drastically restructure the purpose of their building but are still changing the ways in which the building is used, and by whom. There are two models for diversification of the church user base in this way. One is to diversify internally by incorporating new groups into the existing congregation. This has been most effective for Catholic congregations because of

their higher international recognition. The other model of church diversification is to increase the number of congregations using the sanctuary for worship. These churches rent worship space to congregations that do not have their own place to gather. To serve this need, some groups choose to find an existing church in their community that is willing to open their worship space to other groups<sup>2</sup>.

One example of internal diversification of the parish is St. Catherine's multi-ethnic catholic parish, one of the field sites for the Religion, Ethnicity and New Immigrants Research (RENIR) study of immigrant congregations in Houston, Texas. At the time of the study, St. Catherine's claimed seven ethnic groups in its parish. This adaptation was a result of a neighborhood that had undergone drastic demographic change in the 10 to 15 years leading up to the study in 1997. In 1969, the parish's representation was 90% Anglo with the remaining congregants Hispanic and Black or African American. Then, in the early 1980's, large numbers of Vietnamese refugees, displaced by the war and violence in South Vietnam, had moved into the neighborhood and joined the parish. By 1982 the Vietnamese-speaking membership had grown large enough to warrant a separate Sunday mass held in Vietnamese, and by the early 1990's the demographic make-up of the parish was 20% Hispanic, 1% Black and African immigrants, 64% Asian (including 20 families from India and 15-20 families from the middle east), and 15% Anglo (mostly Czech and German).

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<sup>2</sup>There are a number of immigrant congregations that choose to transform residences or derelict store fronts into places of worship and eventually raise the funds to construct a purpose-built religious building or to purchase an renovate an existing one (Beekers and Arab 2016, Irazabel and Gomez-Barris 2006).



At the time of the study, Sunday mass was being offered in a variety of languages, the clergy was encouraging the various immigrant groups to make the church their home, and the many congregants felt that the Pastor was welcoming and accommodating. The researchers found that religious identity and ethnic identity seemed to play a different role in the lives of the immigrants within the parish. These identities were formed by a combination of their displacement experience and the cultural models in their communities of origin (Sullivan 2000, 274). Although the Pastor had hosted a number of strategic events to facilitate cross cultural interaction, attendance at these events was low, and segregation high. Many enclaves were not expressly against parishes unity, but used the church to strengthen ethnic ties, rather than using it to diversify their social network. The researchers found that,

while at a superficial level this parish appears to promote unification within the faith and integration in the broader society, my research reveals St. Catherine's to be a highly charged, contested arena for demonstrating and affirming racial and ethnic distance, even enmities. (Sullivan 2000, 276)

An example of diversification through offering sanctuary use to renters is Cross of Glory Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Cross of Glory hosts four different congregations on Sundays, three of which are comprised of immigrants or refugees (MPR News 2016). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has a traditional ministry of working with immigrants and refugees and, similar to the Arlington church, found a way to use their religious calling to guide the adaptation of the structure of their

church<sup>3</sup>. There are some parallels between Cross of Glory and St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Aurora, Colorado who “planted the legacy” of VEC, as they say at the Center.

Renting space to immigrant congregations alleviates some amount of financial strain caused by empty pews on Sundays, allowing the host congregation to remain in their building and pay the bills while they reconfigure their relationship with the community. This partnership also provides a place of worship for the newly arrived and allows them to focus on building a base for their congregation rather than initiating costly construction projects.

This reciprocity between the newly arrived and the hosts, in both the diversifying Catholic parishes and the church-sharing model, engenders multi-ethnic and multi-faith space that is shaped by all actors involved. These naturally diversifying churches present the opportunity to learn how space is socially constructed and used by a multi-ethnic and multi-faith user base.

### **1.3 Urban planning for a multicultural public**

Changes to urban make up and rippling effects of religious and cultural pluralism in the urban public has stimulated interest in multicultural planning approaches and policies. From their first creation, cities have been the site of exchange and encounter between cultures, religions, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes because they were populated by (im)migration. The city has become a site, sign, and symbol of multiculturalism (Saint-Blancat 2008). To say this another way, it is argued that the

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<sup>3</sup> Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service is one of nine resettlement agencies in the US and settled 13,000 of the 85,000 refugees who entered the US in 2016. While not officially an ELCA entity, some board members are Lutheran clergy and maintain close relations with the national religious organization.

residents and typical users of each city have constructed a shared historical identity consisting of their reality of diversity, or otherwise have found ways to live with diversity and accommodate multiple identities. The continuous confrontation of difference and the redefinition that shared historical identity constantly challenges the normalized identity. The city itself is both the physical location of this process and the social entity that is constructed by this process.

It is an effect of ethnocentrism that, while cities are a symbol of multiculturalism and cross-cultural encounter, consideration of this diversity did not find its way into the modern urban planning language, methods, or approaches in use today. Baron Haussmann's plan for Paris was designed for control and displacement, ordering socio-economic classes into insular units and reducing interaction between different social tiers. The Garden City movement was utopian and self-contained, not looking to expand. This planning style intentionally engages with the hinterlands and countryside, incorporates natural space in the city, and provides alternatives to overcrowded, industrial urban centers. However, it is highly criticized for inconveniencing low mobility residents, limiting interaction between city residents, and, in practical applications, producing a mono-cultural city with an exclusionary culture. Le Corbusier's city vision popularized the city with shining skyscrapers: Towers in the Park. This style of city planning was heavily influenced by modernist values and industrialism where inventions such as cars, planes, and sixty-story skyscrapers were more important to planners than the humans who used them. As a disciple of Le Corbusier, Robert Moses' city planning gifted many parks, pools, and recreation areas to the glorious city of New York, but this is not what he

is remembered for. Enacting bias in favor of the automobile, he is most remembered for his bridges and expressways. These construction projects evicted marginalized communities and may have been designed to control movements of low-income, non-white community members (Campanella 2017). These ideologies of using built space to control people were enacted as ethnic containment of minorities in high-rise towers, such as the mid-1950's public housing project of Pruitt-Igoe. In all, these historic and notorious fathers of city planning created urban built environments that were often downright destructive to the naturally occurring diversity of city life.

Enter Jane Jacobs, grassroots activist and antagonist to Moses, who spoke of a city by the people and for the people. Although Jacobs did not specifically discuss a multicultural planning framework, her ideas were easily incorporated into and still inform current discourse. Jacobs criticized unimaginative and ultimately unjust urban projects that offered only

one standard solution for every need: commerce, medicine, culture, government – whatever the activity, they take a part of the city's life, abstract it from the hustle and bustle of downtown, and set it, like a self-sufficient island, in majestic isolation. (Jacobs 1958, 1)

Jacobs also believed that reuse of old and historic buildings is vital to the health of a city as they “reinforce the quality of continuity that cities should have” (Jacobs 1958, 13). Unfortunately, this Jacobian vision of reuse and repurposing has been appropriated by neo-liberal and free-market development agendas that drive gentrification and displacement in renewed city centers.

So, how does a city approach planning for a multicultural public? This question is especially compelling and relevant because “researchers are careful to point out the

importance of avoiding a general model for the relationship between the city and immigration" because the political, economic, social, and cultural implications vary greatly when moving between various locales within the same country (OCED 1998, 21). Furthermore, the notion of integration itself is not a universal one and planners and policy makers discourage attempts to enact national, or global, policy on integration at the city level.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Religious anthropology of movement**

In a 2011 article, Sophie Bava makes a compelling argument for a religious anthropology of movement. She asserts that movements of people are best understood when paired with their religious affiliation and practice. Situating migrants, Bava contends, as autonomous protagonists whose ethno-religious identity reacts to the spaces they travel through is vital and often an overlooked aspect of immigration studies. This framework helps construct a comprehensive understanding of experiences and practices in the receiving country by linking them to the totality of the individual's life ways. Bava explains,

researchers must approach the religious dimensions among other attributes of identity and observing the freedom individuals may have to define themselves through their own memories as much as in relation to others and the societies they pass through or enter. (Bava 2011, 497)

This multisituated approach to immigration studies positions immigrant identities and practices in relation to movements across borders. A holistic understanding of migrant daily life is achieved only by looking beyond the practices in their current city of residence to also include previous traditions, practices, and experiences in their country of origin and travels across borders. "This multisituated approach, involving going back and forth and comparing, allows one to avoid mistaking preexisting practices from migrants' countries of origin for new religious constructs and reshaped practices" (Bava

2011, 497). The multisituated approach not only refers to the emigrant and immigrant as the same person, but also understands the coterminal nature of ethnic and religious identity. Religious networks and institutions are modes of support, both material and spiritual, and reinforce connection to their country of origin as well as to their receiving country.

Sophie Watson elaborates on the importance of this approach in the context of immigrant religious activity in an urban religious space,

Cultural practices performed in a church, which draw on traditional religious symbols and practices from a country of origin, are likely to be translated, invented and reinvented, and reconfigured by migrants on arrival to a new country in order to confer or stabilise identity and give meaning to their new, often uncertain, lives. At the same time, by their very performance, continuity is maintained with the cultural practices imagined or enacted in their place of departure. As time passes though, the practices and symbols deployed may bear little relation to their earlier forms. (Watson 2009, 320)

Both Sophie Watson (2009) and Sophie Bava (2011) argue the role of religion in the lives of immigrants should not be segregated from their ethnic identity, from their identity as an urban resident, or from their identity as a global citizen traversing localities. This intersectional approach to identity theory creates a holistic, global, and historically informed framework.

As Eric Wolf theorizes, history is a global process, thus when we segment people and their history into orderly, hard, self-contained objects we inhibit our ability to understand the larger systems at play. To say it another way, there is no difference between 'their' history and 'our' history, it is just history. When considering the daily life and practices of immigrants in their new home, one must consider their history in their place of origin, their experiences of traveling

through space to their destination, their experiences in that destination, and the interactions with other communities throughout this process. When framed this way, it becomes obvious that receiving cities also must be seen through this lens of flux, change, and adaptation. Although the dominant discourse often situates the city as simultaneously a locale of integration, and multicultural integration, it could be more aptly described as a site of constant negotiation and renegotiation between newly arrived and receiving communities regarding presence and place in the city.

Manuel Vásquez (2008) also offers tools and methodologies to enhance the understanding of migrant religion and how religion is altered through human movement across space and time. His use of the metaphor of networks and webs is slightly different from how Bava uses it. Bava (2011) uses the metaphor of a network as an object of study, using phrases such as a “social networks,” “networks of intercommunity exchange,” and “religious networks” (499, 501). Here Bava is speaking of networks medium through which migrants draw agency for their action, and which they use as a tool to construct community and feelings of belonging in transnational or diasporic communities. Vásquez, however, positions the metaphor of networks as a methodology that can be used to examine how power differentials influence religion in motion, and how religious migrants enact individual agendas and navigate a field of power differentials in a specified time and space.

As a Marxist, Vásquez strongly critiques current capitalist regimes that work in tandem with advances in communication and transportation technologies to accelerate the



pace of life and shrink distances, both geographically and conceptually. From this view, he considers globalization as a totality of cultural diversity, capitalist influences that concentrate wealth in cities of the Global North, and explosive resurgence of xenophobia as evidenced by security states and toxic nativist movements in our post-9/11 world (Vásquez 2008).

Vásquez posits that the best way to approach the study of religion in motion is to assume that complexity, connectivity and fluidity are predominate features of the contemporary world, and therefore also the religions that operate within this global reality. He leans on Geertz's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach and combines it with Talal Asad's emphasis on the importance of historical context, in which religion must be considered within a specified genealogy and history. Following this, he outlines the benefits of using the metaphor of networks and webs to "help us explore how positionality in a field of power differentials shapes and is shaped by relatively stable and embodied dispositions, propensities and competences to act in certain ways" (2008, 169). In his view, networks do not just circulate meaning, orientation, and intentionality, but are made up of them as well. Thus, it allows for the consideration of mobile religion in the context of relations of mutual dependence. A network has the ability to both embody and produce moral geographies, or relations of mutual dependence, and such geographies can be examined by taking in the network as a whole, or by looking at individual connections.

Vásquez and Bava are engaging in a dialogue about how to understand religion and migration in a holistic manner. Their theories attempt to account for the agency of

individuals as well as the influences of the systems of power they navigate through. Taking this into consideration, it is possible to develop understandings of how alterations to religion, and religious space, through migration manifest differently in different localities and times based on a specific religious actor.

## **2.2 Religion, secularism, and the public sphere**

Religion is a performative act and has a contentious relationship with the public sphere, especially in current turbulent times defined by intense national debates and anti-immigrant fervor. The current milieu is characterized by political acts such as, but not limited to, 'Brexit,' the US President's Executive Order 13769 (Muslim Travel Ban), and the banning of hijabs in French public schools. The public sphere in liberal democratic societies intends to provide a neutral space in which the public's common-ground is based upon equality, liberty, and fraternity (Taylor 2011). Charles Taylor positions secularism not as a relationship between religion and the state, but as the response of a democratic state to ever increasing diversity (Taylor 2011, 36). The diversification of the public body in democratic societies uproots and destabilizes, Taylor argues, the previously accepted and shared historical identity of the state. This disruption necessitates a reconfiguration of the public identity, and this redesigned collective identity needs to be reconcilable with a diversity of identities while also maintaining some continuity. Thus, secularism of the public became a strategy for devising a common shared identity. Taylor concludes that the goal of secularism and neutrality is "precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions but any basic positions, religious or nonreligious" (Taylor 2011, 37).

In practice, the leadership group that maintains social and political power embeds cultural values, even when attempting to create and define neutral space. In Taylor's framework, balancing these three goals (liberty, equity, and fraternity) counts for the variance between different models of secular modern western society. Taylor specifically points to the different treatment of hijabs in France and Germany. In France students cannot wear hijabs in school whereas in Germany, pupils are permitted but teachers are not. He posits that this is caused by the attempt to balance two goals: liberty and equality. The visible symbol of religion (the hijab) in the public sphere disrupts the preestablished neutrality of the space. In Germany, the socio-cultural reaction took a different modality. Here, a public leader who is granted a higher position of social or political power, such as a teacher, marking themselves with religion challenges the *equality* of all beliefs or positions imposed by secularism because of their influence over others. Whereas in France the concern was whether wearing the religious icon of a hijab was truly a free act or if it was a symbol of anti-freedom being paraded in the public arena, in Germany the concern was the perceived equality of all beliefs and the ability of leaders to influence the behaviors and beliefs of others. In both cases, the visibility of a religious symbol disrupted a preestablished balance and neutrality.

Secularism is also deeply embedded in the US. US citizens typically interpret the First Amendment as the freedom of religion, yet the written text specifies the 'church' rather than a more ambiguous, broader term. Judith Butler pushes back against Taylor's view on the place of religion in democracy by asking, "in what religious tradition was the public being discussed first created?" (2011, 71). Butler points out that the variety of

ways of conceiving public life across the globe destabilizes the notion that there is a singular conception or form it takes. She argues that religion is not, and has never been, outside of the public sphere. Therefore, asking the “question ‘how does or can religion enter public life’ is an invalid question. Rather, we must ask which religion is relegated to private and which circulates, unquestioned, in the public” (Butler 2011, 71). By seeking answers to this second question it is possible dissect the ways in which a secular public arena has religious and cultural values embedded and therefore is not truly neutral.

Butler examines Jewishness not only as an identity, but also in the context of its public practice. The diaspora, Butler argues, has had a lasting effect on the creation of modern Jewish identity and "being a Jew implies taking up an ethical relation to the non-Jew" (Butler 2011, 74). Because the Jewish identity is linked to displacement, cohabitation with non-Jews is a norm that had “configured religion in public life within Judaism” (Butler 2011, 74). To summarize Butler’s argument here, due to displacement and living in diaspora, the neighbors that Jews live alongside did not share their religious beliefs and practices, therefore it was imperative the Jewish identity develop an ethical stance that considers neighbors who are dissimilar to oneself.

If religious embodiment in the public disrupts a secular notion of what the public space should be, then the space is not neutral and in fact may harbor biases in favor for or against a specific culture or religion. Like Butler, Talal Asad (2003) also comes down in opposition to Taylor in the debate on secularism. He, like Butler, sees Taylor’s understanding of secularism, which lies firmly within modernism and liberal democracy,

as flawed because of the assumed “horizontal, direct-access society”, among other reasons (Asad 2003, 2-4). To this point Asad states,

secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. (Asad 2003, 5).

Instead of a static reality of neutral space necessitated by increased diversity, as Taylor defines it, Asad positions secularism as an active engagement in which contestation of public space, caused by differences in positionality, constructs a new space in which a specific set of core principles is influenced by specific histories and upheld by the same.

Asad highlights discrimination against Muslims and fear of their incorporation into Western, modern society in order to challenge European society on their ability to “represent a culturally diverse society of which Muslim migrants ... are now a part” (2003, 160). He demonstrates how European identity is constructed in a manner that incorporates Christianity and excludes Islam. He further explains that Europe’s colonial past is “not merely an epoch of overseas power that is decisively over”, but rather is “the beginning of an irreversible transformation that remains an intrinsic part of ‘European experience’” (Asad 2003, 168, 170).

Expanding this notion of representation in the identity of nationhood or citizenships, Asad claims that the way liberal democracy constructs and represents a political identity “makes it difficult if not impossible to represent Muslims as Muslims” (2003, 173). He reasons that liberal democracy is based upon commonality between all

citizens such that all citizens are individual and equal. Within this, it is the common historical narrative that is used to construct this identity. Minorities within nations, Muslims among them, often bring conflicting historical narratives to the table that a secular society struggles to confront, much less incorporate. This generates different responses that problematize the existence of minority groups, and in turn disproves Taylor's hypothesis that secularism is positioned to confront this exact reality. One approach to addressing conflicting historical narratives is pressuring outside groups to assimilate into the national identity, resulting in the loss of nuanced and complex histories. The example Asad provides here is the essentialization of French identity and (non)willingness of Muslims to join with this identity (Asad 2003, 176).

Another approach is more theoretical and aims to foster a "continuous readiness to deconstruct historical narratives constituting identities and their boundaries" to constantly incorporate incoming diversity (Asad 2003, 177). An example of what this might look like is a study conducted by Mansouri Fethi, Michele Lobo, and Amelia Johns which examined the "everyday, embodied and grounded acts and performances that blur the boundaries between the secular and the sacred in urban spaces of intercultural encounter and political engagement" (2016, 296). They found that the embodiment of Islam in the immigrant population in Melbourne, Australia was redefining the notion of citizenship from a legal status to a sense of social and civic belonging. This shift has directed attention to the urban public space and the claims expressed there. These claims are marked by increasing ethno-religious diversity which in turn engenders recognition and a sense of belonging embodied by these public and everyday encounters. Fethi, Lobo,

and Johns suggest that “increased visibility of Muslims living in the West does not erect barriers and segregate communities, but it does shatter silos and unite fellow human beings cross-culturally” (Fethi, Lobo, and Johns 2016, 308).

Shattering of silos and unification of the public is achieved through the embodiment in a public plaza, a material place that can be located on a map and facilitates the diversification of public expression which, in turn, is incorporated into a common public identity. However, such a deconstruction of historical narratives through embodied praxis in the public square is often fraught with contention and not welcomed. This can further dissemble a unified national identity, rather than redefining it, thus fostering xenophobia. These theories of secularism, religion and public space make clear that the public is not a neutral zone, but one of contest.

### **2.3 Built environment and social ordering**

Setha Low’s concept of spatializing culture seeks to “locate, both physically and conceptually, social relations and social practice in social space” (Low 2005, 111). Low theorizes that space plays a large role in the social ordering that happens within a given built environment and that this social ordering in turn has an effect on the material space. This theory is heavily informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* is a generative and iterative socio-cultural code that both forms social and material structures and reproduces the values and beliefs that gave rise to those same structures. In Bourdieu’s understanding, socio-cultural processes are cyclical and iterative where the cultural and material structures are produced based on past and present praxis, and in turn

these structures inform present and future praxis and reproduce socio-spatial ordering. It is “both product and producer of history” (Lawrence and Low 1990, 469).

When applied to architecture and the built environment, *habitus* of previous generations is instilled in structures that move through time differently than humans, thus influencing new users who have very different background of previous inhabitants.

Denise Lawrence and Setha Low convey a seemingly obvious, but deeply insightful observation of consequences to this process,

Buildings constitute substantial investments for any society, and in many societies their usefulness outlives the original builder. Because they are often able to span more than one generation, built forms become important repositories of cultural information. Their conditions of their original construction, and each successive layer of renovation, are integral parts of the cultures that create them. (Lawrence and Low 1990, 492)

These anthropological observations are echoed by many geographers, city planners, and critics, such as Jane Jacobs who supported the reuse and repurposing of historical buildings (Jacobs 1958, 13). This reproduction and persistence of history in the present is a natural phenomenon of human social and cultural processes, thus it seems only reasonable to embrace such practices. But, as mentioned in the previous chapter, capitalist regimes have the capacity to direct and influence development in ways that displace, segment, and exclude communities while also eliminating, erasing, and diminishing heritages and public spaces. Such hegemonic powers have the capacity to distort the urban heritage so that it serves to socially, spatially, and economically segregate city inhabitants. While Jacobs argued for urban continuity by way of historic preservation, she argues for this in a time when historic structures, and the cultural heritages attached to them, were being expunged from the urban landscape. Today she



would likely be appalled by the way these sites are now being used to disenfranchise and displace low- and middle-class residents to make room for high income communities in city centers.

Low further argues that conflict and contestation in public space is indicative of and can be used to expose “larger issues” (Low 2005, 112). In a study of two public plazas in Costa Rica she found a gap between “what [was] experienced and socially constructed by the users on the one hand, and the circumstances that socially [produced] the space and its current physical form and design on the other” (Low 2005, 133-134). She goes on to claim, “the contestation of the design, furnishings, use, and atmosphere of a plaza becomes a visible public forum for the expression of cultural conflict, social change, and attempts at the class-based, gender-segregated, and age-specific social control” (Low 2005, 134).

Although Low observes the power dynamics of conflict between social memory and material space that structure the public order, Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman frame conflict slightly differently in urban settings. In defining a ‘just city’ they call for an “experiential dimension of beauty” which “does not smother and suppress contradictions or conceal conflict, but emerges out of socioeconomic and political inclusion” (Cruz and Forman 2015, 41). Combining these two concepts of contestation allows the embrace and understanding of how conflict in public space is linked to social belonging, a diversity of religious embodiment, and the ways in which the material world influences social ordering and vice versa.

In a study of Christian Churches in Marrickville, New South Wales, Australia, Sophie Watson defines the term 'adaptive dexterity' as "the openness of an institution ... at any one historical moment to the sharing of space and different cultural practices" (Watson 2009, 320). In her work, this refers to the ability of a religious institution to adjust to or evolve with the fluid and shifting nature of globalizing cities, new influxes of immigrants, and suburbanization of their congregation members. One church in particular showed a propensity for adaptive dexterity in their practice by including "religious celebrations that had been performed in the migrants' places of origin" even though the celebrations were unfamiliar to the native-born congregation members (Watson 2009, 325).

Watson's case studies of multiple churches in the area investigated the ability of the church to attract immigrants and sustain their congregation. Watson explains her field site as,

Sydney's most multicultural inner city neighbourhood – Marrickville, which, since the 1960s has seen a shift in populations from Anglo to Italian, Greek and more recently migrants from South East Asia, as new migrants settle prior to moving to the outer suburbs once enough income for home ownership has been amassed. (Watson 2009, 321)

Her theory of adaptive dexterity can be used to gauge a church's ability to incorporate new members of their community into their religious practices. If successful, the church is able to expand their congregation, sustain their building, and continue to propel their church into the future rather than letting it fall into the past and come to an end. This often is accompanied by changing practices, encouraging new social interactions, and even in some cases producing new cultural traditions. Churches that are unable to adapt

will struggle to maintain a critical number of members needed to sustain their institution into the future and eventually their building may be repurposed for use by a different religion or for secular use.

Furthermore, Watson examines questions of belonging in conjunction with a church's level of adaptive dexterity. The prevalence of intercultural mixing and practicing of religion in a public realm evokes the question of the relationship between religion and civic engagement, while also challenging the assumed link between citizenship and secularization.

The importance for new migrants of performing different religious practices within the public realm ... further exposes and destabilises the dominance of a secular notion of citizenship. Sites such as these in the public realm can become places of intercultural mixing forging new possibilities for a multicultural citizenship, where difference can be performed publicly not only in the private sphere. This inevitably involves negotiation and open debate across cultures, a mutual recognition of differences – particularly the performance of religious differences, and a shift in dominant power relations which allow one group to tolerate – or not – the cultural practices of another (Watson 2009, 336).

Watson argues here that religious sites with the ability to promote intercultural mixing not only challenge the assumed synonymy between citizenship and secularization, but also leads to a better understanding of how religious space and community is used to construct belonging. The immigrant and host communities are interacting with one another in the material space of the church and in the process produce a new social context. This social context can very easily create social classes based on the material relation to the church building. For example, the long-term occupants often can feel a sense of ownership and use their acquired knowledge of the building as a way to enact power in the space. The hosting community has the power to create a social structure of “us” and “them”,

privileging themselves in a hierarchical system. Alternatively, when a community displays a high level of adaptive dexterity they can engender more balanced and equitable class structures. In Watson's study she found that certain churches were historically predisposed to high levels of adaptive dexterity and were already open to changes in their practice and culture, for various reasons (Watson 2009). Furthermore, the effect of the material nature of the church will depend on whether the previous inhabitants are still using the space or if they have yielded the space to the changing culture or new purpose of the building.

When a church or a temple is repurposed (as opposed to a building new structure) the practices within the building and how the culture is reproduced within the space will be affected. I argue here that the adaptive dexterity of the community can be studied and understood in relation to the material space of the building: How the space affects social interaction, how the individuals react to the building, and how the social power structures produced in the space produce and reproduce the social context created therein. Furthermore, the cultural contexts created are not static but remain in a state of flux as the community continues to act within the space, redefines identities, and reacts to persistent globalization processes.

John Eade also examines how religious diversity affects social ordering in urban centers, focusing on London. He finds Watson's adaptive dexterity a useful concept. He contends that "global migration has provided the Anglican, Methodist and Catholic communities with both an opportunity and a challenge" (Eade 2012, 481). He finds that material space is highly connected to social ordering,

local congregations could be revived by welcoming the newcomers from other countries through the kinds of adaptive dexterity evident in other rapidly changing globalising cities, which included material changes especially inside the churches to make them more [homey] and attractive. (Eade 2012, 481)

Eade also describes the Anglican churches as community hubs, not just a religious institution because it offered both secular and religious programs, which “enabled some churches to adapt to rapid social change wrought by gentrification, global migration, and suburbanization” (Eade 2013, 119). In effect, actions by both religious institution and individuals who embody religion in public space are reordering the urban social space to be more reactive and adaptive to “highly globalized, multicultural metropolises” (Eade 2012, 481).

#### **2.4 Mobility, capital, and capacity**

Many studies of immigrant communities talk of social and cultural capital as a framework to understand barriers to adjusting to new social realities and their capacity to succeed in these realities. Marc Pares, Ismael Blanco, and Charlotte Fernandez employ Bourdieu’s concept of social capital and define it as “a collective resource and asset that communities may or may not have depending on their capacity to organize at collective level, through social organizations, stakeholders, and networks” (2018, 70). This can also be framed, on a more individual level, as relationships between individuals that offer access to resources controlled by others.

Cultural capital, similar to social capital, is a resource that individuals or communities use to navigate institutional structures and systems and is based on the level of shared knowledge with the target culture. Whereas social capital is usually applied to social interactions or the scope of an individual’s social (or professional) network,

cultural capital applies more to knowledge of practices that are deemed culturally appropriate such as what is considered good manners or the intent behind a colloquialism. Both forms of capital, social and cultural, facilitate access to resources which enhance an individual's and community's ability to realize objectives, goals, or aims.

In a study of second reception centers in Sicily, Russell Rice Manzano, Joanna Mishtal, and Shana Harris found that “refugees often experienced losses in cultural and social capital after their arrival” (2018, 87). Furthermore, this “loss of cultural and social capital is a particular challenge for refugees, especially some of them enjoyed high levels of social capital in home countries” (Manzano, Mishtal, and Harris 2018, 82). The researchers identified language barriers, lack of socioeconomic assistance, lack of cultural orientations at the centers, and poor local economy and substantial barriers for these refugees in regaining new capitals in their receiving cities. One second reception center they studied stood out from the rest for a variety of reason including services, attitudes of the staff, and quality maintenance of the physical space. Specifically, to mitigate social and capital bankruptcy in the refugee youth they offered Italian classes, cultural orientations, and job preparation services which was found to mitigate the symbolic violence that traps refugees in cycles of poverty (Manzano, Mishtal, and Harris 2018).

The argument here that while some capitals are material, the knowledge of how to navigate and succeed in a foreign culture and society is also a necessary to have an spend. While this study specifically examined refugee capital, immigrants who do not fall into this category also experience low funds in their social and cultural bank accounts, so to

speaking. The ability of a community to mobilize, act upon, gain, and spend their capitals has been termed civic capacity. Defined as the "ability of a community to address problems involving multiple sectors and including both governmental and nongovernmental actors" (Pares, Blanco, and Fernandez 2018, 71), civic capacity is something the community as one whole is involved in. High levels of civic capacity are demonstrated by trust and networks that enable all actors to deploy citizenship skills and knowledge to navigate the political system and to get desired results. A community that is able to smoothly accommodate newcomers and their varying amounts of social and cultural capital is one with high civic capacity.

Together these theoretical positions provide a framework within which I can place this study. Using historical political economy, I can locate the phenomenon of church repurposing within the contemporary, complex dynamic of political, social and economic forces. Such contextualization is useful in generating a comprehensive interpretation of the data. Weaving practice theory in with historical political economy dimensionalizes and humanizes the possible conclusions. Through this framework, I pull together the threads of individual agency and action, the influence of the environment, and the global and historical contexts that confine the possibilities to knit together a comprehensive narrative. This theoretically informed narrative enables the identification of the different parts, actors, and influences at work in the production and reproduction of the outcome.

Examining how human actors both shape and are shaped by their built environment leads to dialectic understanding of social activity and material reality. The findings herein are informed by a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to data

collecting and analysis. The interpretation of experiences and actions, such as those of immigrants and congregants moving through space and time, is vital to data collection and analysis. However, this is useless without the historical context of the networked connections of people and goods and actor agency within this web.



## **Chapter 3: Research design**

### **3.1 Research objective**

This research project examined a community center, Village Exchange Center (VEC), operating out of a repurposed Lutheran church in Aurora, Colorado from the vantage point of the majority foreign-born user base. VEC, a secular, shared-space community center, encourages a holistic integration process by providing social services and civic engagement alongside independent multi-faith practices and celebration of cultural diversity. VEC is both a community center and nonprofit organization, therefore is able to provide their own, native programming, as well as offer rental space for other organizations to utilize, which in turn increases the services and events available to the local community and user base. My research goals were twofold. First, to find the ways in which repurposing a Christian structure as an immigrant and refugee community center benefits the different constituencies in the building. And second, to identify challenges to this process that if solved can be used to strengthen the community center.

This framing assumed benefits are present and influential. I take this position because the facility has already seen great success and community involvement in the first year and a half of operations. Through initial community studies conducted by VEC, praise for the Center has already been voiced by the community. However, challenges that are present may not be obvious and remain ill-defined. Thus, this study seeks to

uncover and define both challenges and benefits. By seeking to define and construct the user base's shared cultural knowledge of the community center we can understand the benefits and challenges of repurposing a church for such use while buttressing the community participation model being used by VEC for planning and development of facility and programming. Furthermore, the findings garnered from the data may provide valuable knowledge and guidance to the growing numbers of US religious groups who are exploring options for their underutilized or underfunded city center infrastructure, and urban planners who are seeking ways to accommodate changing demographics in their cities. This thesis is intended to engage in dialogue with the growing body of literature that examines urban planning strategies for embracing religious and cultural diversity by bringing insight and nuance to contemporary understandings of urban religious spaces.

I suggest that repurposing St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Aurora, CO as a secular community center that supports the integration and adjustment of foreign-born communities is well-positioned because religious, ethnic, and civic identity are employed in tandem in the production of shared-space and related feelings of belonging. However, there are certain material, social, and symbolic aspects of Christian churches that may complicate the adaptation of the building for use as a diverse shared-space facility. It is likely that the *habitus* of the different user groups will affect shared cultural modeling and cultural reproduction within the building and can potentially reproduce power hierarchies reflected in US society and culture. Conversely, the benefits of collocated multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities have great potential to create a culture of

support, reciprocal relationships, and interaction through actions and practices within the space.

### **3.2 Research design**

Using an empirical, mixed methods approach this project intended to define a cultural domain of a refugee and immigrant community center operating out of a repurposed church. If possible, a cultural model may also be constructed with the data collected. Briefly, a cultural domain is an empirically identified a grouping of concepts that determined a shared knowledge on a specific topic. Using a variety of survey tools, these items are organized by respondents and the resulting data is statistically analyzed to determine the level of agreement between participants. If the statistical analysis has determined that there is a considerable consensus between respondents, then the agreed upon organization of the concepts is their shared cultural model. The terms cultural domain, cultural consensus, and cultural model are defined further and in depth in 3.5 *Methodology*.

I sought to find qualitative data that would inform the production of quantitative data. From August 2017 to September 2018 I conducted participant observation including producing fieldnotes and collecting printed and digital artifacts produced by VEC such as town hall meeting agendas, handouts for VEC events, flyers, newsletters, and calendars. I used a hand drawn map of the building as a worksheet to structure certain field notes and record areas of use in the building (example in Appendix C). I also used qualitative data collection in free listing interviews which generated a list of important descriptors of VEC. Using the free lists, a rank ordered survey with paired comparisons was generated

and analyzed in ANTHROPAC (Borgatti 1996) producing quantitative data that was used to construct a cultural model of VEC.

During the research period I volunteered my time at VEC in many different capacities. As such, I built friendships within the user base of the community center and many of my key informants, free list respondents, and survey participants knew me personally. My approach is inductive and empirical, yet I cannot completely remove myself, or my influence, from my data. To curb my influence, I chose a methodology in which my voice would be minimized and instead would allow the voice of the user base to take center stage and structure the data.

### **3.3 Variables and dimensions**

Demographic variables captured in this project include gender, age, zip code, language(s) spoken, country of origin, reason(s) for visiting the Center, and religious affiliation. Some participants elected to provide more information about their Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or religious organization with which they affiliate. While immigrants of all statuses were included in this study by way of design, immigration status was not a variable, nor was length of time in the US. The project also examined descriptors of the facility, practices within the facility, likes and dislikes about the facility, and services offered by the different NGOs and faith groups. The paired comparison instrument recorded the independent variables that were the choices and perceptions of the participants regarding the list of characteristics of the Center.

### **3.4 Population, sampling, and field site**

As mentioned previously, the field site is in Aurora, Colorado in the Original Aurora neighborhood (for more information about this neighborhood, see Chapter 4: Field Site). The building has two types of tenant partners: faith groups that reserve the sanctuary for religious practice on Sundays and nonprofit organizations that rent office space, both of which have access to common areas, classrooms, and other resources at the Center. The building also hosts events such as citizenship and English classes, computer classes, community meetings, and cultural celebrations. In addition to the partner organizations who rent space in the facility, VEC also provide limited services and programming (see Chapter 4: Field Site for details on programming at VEC). This research is an evaluation and analysis of a nonprofit community center that serves refugees and immigrants in the Aurora and Denver area. As such the parameters of the study population is the user base of the facility including both leaders and participants in the programs, events, and activities which occur on the property, as well as VEC staff who use the building for administration purposes and service provision. The community user base of the Center is diverse in gender, age, national origin, spoken language, and religious affiliation. I included both male and female center participants who range from twenty-one to ninety years of age. The majority of study participants were foreign-born individuals, but native-born individuals are also involved in VEC activities and programming and were not excluded from participating in the study. Countries of origin included Ethiopia, El Salvador, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar/Burma, Mexico, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Somalia, and the United States. Participants in this study needed

to be fluent and literate in one or more of the following languages to participate: English, Spanish, Nepali, and Swahili. These languages were chosen based on the current user base of the Center and most common languages among VEC visitors. Religious identities include Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Atheist, and other non-Abrahamic religions. Some chose to identify themselves as spiritual while not affiliating with a religious institution. It is important to note that the aim of this study is to examine the repurposing process of a Christian structure for multi-cultural and multi-faith use, not to study the foreign-born community. Thus, the identities, immigration status, and life histories are not the focus of this research.

Unfortunately, while there is a sizable Congolese refugee population that uses the VEC facility for church service I was unable to gain approval from the pastor to survey his congregation. Although certain members of his congregation served as key collaborators on this project, his formal approval was a needed for them to participate in the survey portion of the data collecting. Although I do not have a complete picture of why this was the leadership structure, I do understand that while in the facility he was the caretaker and leader of his congregation and continuing without his permission would have caused discomfort in his congregants, if not also social upset on a larger scale. With this said, I feel that the spread of informants that I was able to survey still demonstrate a wide variety of the Center's user base. And, although I was not able to draw on the Congolese congregation for survey analysis their voices and input are still integrated into this project.

### 3.5 Methodology

The data collection in this research is split into three methods: participant observation and unstructured interviews, free listing, and rank ordered surveys using paired comparisons. Participant observation and informal interviews were integral to producing holistic data to inform the discussion and conclusions to this project. In anthropology, participant observation is used as a method to build bridges between the researcher, an outsider, and the community that is the focus of the research. In turn this relationship ensures the researcher remains invested in the wellbeing of the community and reinforces the moral obligations of maintaining friendships. Therefore, participant observation is more than just spending time at the field site, it helps the researcher's knowledge align with the community they are studying. An example of alignment with the community, as described by H. Russell Bernard, is when "you will know when to laugh at what people think is funny, and when people laugh at what you say, it will be because you *meant* it to be a joke" (Bernard 2011, 258). This allows the researcher to not only be a better fieldworker, but also an instrument of data collection and analysis (Bernard 2011). Alignment with community knowledge in the context of this study means that I knew of the services and organizations, both local and global, that were frequently referenced by community members, I knew what foreign-born communities were in the local area and languages each spoke, I could identify political networks and influences that affected nonprofits and individuals in the city, I understood what programs were offered at VEC and could help a visitor find the room, group, or class they

were looking for, and I became connected with community leaders so that I knew who I could call to gain more information.

Informal interviews are the other side of the coin to participant observation. These are intentional conversations that the researcher enters into with key informants but are not governed by a structured set of questions or written guidelines. These conversations are not audio or video recorded and hand-written notes are the only documentation. In the context of this study, informal interviews were conversations I engaged in with a loose overarching question I desired to answer, usually having to do with gaps in my knowledge of the local nonprofit networks and partnerships or a desire to understand more about an individual's life and work that brought them to the community center. As these are personal conversations that sometimes share traumatic or private information they are not used often in this project. Rather many of these informal interviews helped me align my understanding with the community in which I was situated and therefore design and implement well informed study protocol and analysis. However, when I do mention a specific conversation, I protect the anonymity of the respondent by omitting their personal narrative. Since the purpose of this study has more to do with the creation of shared-space than a phenomenological product, this omission will not discolor or inhibit the findings presented here.

Cultural Domain analysis is a two-step process that is used to construct a cultural model. Cultural domain analysis is based on the theory that shared knowledge is the basis of culture. When the focus of study is what a group of people think or know about something it is necessary to reconstruct a cultural domain (Weller and Romney 1988).



Simply put, a cultural domain is a set of related items, be they words, concepts, sentences or the like. Often, but not always, domains do not have finite and delineated boundaries. When boundaries are unknown, cultural domain methodology dictates that defining these boundaries must be done by the informants, in their own language, to ensure cultural relevancy (Weller and Romney 1988, Bernard 2011). To achieve this end the researcher can use free listing, a structured interview technique that elicits specific information. Free lists are often used in studies of public health and of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in indigenous communities to understand the patterning of knowledge and the reproduction of knowledge (or lack thereof).

Free lists generate an inventory of a domain of knowledge. This is done by asking a participant to list all of the things they can think of relating to a topic. For example, when studying maternal health during pregnancy you can interview young mothers and ask them to list all the things a pregnant mother should eat. The results produce an inventory of knowledge or ideas about prenatal diet. From this list the researcher identifies the most salient items between the lists, identifying the knowledge that is shared by the group of participants. There are two salience indices: the proportion of lists the item appears on and the position on the list. Taking into account these two frequencies, a master list is then created by coding and standardizing responses.

Weller and Romney suggest between twenty and thirty informants when defining a domain but argue that ten is better than none (1988, 14). Through observations and participation, I had become familiar with the different constituencies who use the VEC building and had a good grasp of the size of the user base. I decided that eight to fifteen

would provide an appropriate sampling of the various agendas at play in the building. Bernard (2011) states that when choosing participants for free listing it is important to choose wisely. In certain cases, it is helpful to find individuals who have a high enough level of cultural competency to provide well informed lists, while at the same time not using informants who have highly specialized knowledge which would skew the results. This is not a random sample. Using this and my knowledge of the user base as guidance, I identified a number of people who were regular users of the building thus establishing a base of knowledge they shared. However, I chose not to interview the executive director of the Center as her specialized knowledge and vision for the future of the Center could skew results.

The list produced from the free list interviews are then coded and reduced to a manageable number. Paired comparisons take the list of items and present the participant with the items in all possible combinations of two. When using paired comparisons each item needs to be paired with every other item but is not paired with itself. The equation for the number of pairs needed is  $n(n-1)/2$  where  $n$  is the total number of items in the list. This study used a list of twelve items thus the survey contained sixty-six pairs. Durrenberger explains that asking participants to rank a list of items “depends on the sometimes-fallacious assumption that people can or do rank elements of the lists according to some scale. Paired comparisons do not assume ordering but reveal them if people do rank items” (2003, 275). After raking, the data are statistically analyzed to measure the extent to which people agree which are the important characteristics of the Center; this is called cultural consensus (Bernard 2011). It is generally accepted that a 3:1

ratio of the factors is enough to say there is common knowledge or one culture present in the sample set (Bernard 2011, Weller and Romney 1988, Durrenberger 2003, Borgatti 1996). When interviewees have achieved a certain level of agreement on the elements within a cultural domain, they are said to have an agreed upon cultural model for this knowledge (Chavez 1995).

Cultural Domain analysis depends on three assumptions: (1) there is only one culture in your sample, (2) you have interviewed all informants individually, and (3) all questions relate back to the same, singular domain. In this study, we already know that there are a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and cultures both within the Center's user base and within this sample. While this built-in diversity may seem contraindicative of the selection of this methodology, part of the objective of this study is to identify benefits and challenges to the shared-space community center. If it is uncovered that there is some level of consensus between users, this can be identified as a clear benefit and may point to the community's ability to produce a shared cultural domain, even with diversity of backgrounds.

### **3.6 Data collection**

#### *3.6.1 Participant observation*

I was introduced to VEC in June of 2017 and attended a World Refugee Day and *Iftar* event there June 20, 2017. I began a volunteer internship in August of the same summer. Between that first June event and August in the following summer I spent between ten and twenty-five hours a week at the Center assisting in daily operations,

meeting tenants, participating in educational and engagement events, and attending various cultural and religious activities.

Regarding cultural and religious activities, I attended multiple events including a *Dia de Muertos* event hosted by the Consul of Mexico in 2017, and two multi-day Hindu *poojas* hosted by a consortium of Nepali and Bhutanese cultural nonprofit organizations. *Dia de Muertos* is a Mexican holiday that blends Catholic and Indigenous practices to honor dead relatives and family members through alters and public celebration. *Pooja* is the most common word for worship in Hindu and often refer to large religious celebrations or festivals where offerings are made to a deity. I also observed multiple religious services by the tenant congregations, including choir practice and performance by the Gloria Choir of the Congolese congregation and services on three different Sundays of the spring and summer of 2018.

I became a trained Natural Helper, a volunteer community leader who helps immigrants and refugees in the community become connected with resources and aids in the acculturation process. The program is geared towards foreign-born community members who already have friends and family coming to them for guidance and assistance. I was encouraged to participate in this 20-hour training in both September 2017 and March 2018 to meet the community and better understand how I can participate in the Aurora service provision network. Through these two trainings I met about thirty individuals, twenty of whom I maintained contact after the training. The training itself is a program created in 2016 prior to VEC's founding. VEC now manages the program and

it is sponsored by the City of Aurora's Office of International and Immigrant Affairs as it is responsive to the City's Strategic integration plan.

VEC held some events focused on community-building during my thirteen months of research. The event I attended as part of my participant observation research included their Opening Day Celebration on October 21, 2017, a Town Hall Community Dinner and Stakeholder Breakfast both held in March 2018, and a Community Networking and Happy Hour event in June 2018. During these events I was tasked with logistics and implementation duties, but I also freed myself to engage in conversations with attendees.

As an intern I was trusted with several responsibilities, including maintaining contact with tenant NGO staff and leaders in the congregations. I was often called upon to answer questions of tenants and I was able to develop relationships with the ones who used the building multiple times a week. Furthermore, while I assisted with front office duties throughout the week, I interacted with different people coming into the building including bible study groups, volunteers coming to lead programming, students of English and citizenship classes, and people who dropped in to ask questions about the facility and what is offered.

Additionally, I engaged in three events outside the Center for which VEC was a sponsoring partner. At the very start of my fieldwork I attended the City of Aurora's Global Fest in August 2017, a civic event aimed at celebrating the wide diversity of national origins of their residents. In June 2018, VEC partnered with the Sie Film Center for their second World Refugee Day event, although this time offsite, where they

sponsored a screening of the film *Human Flow* by Ai Weiwei. In August 2018, DRIVE Project (a tenant of VEC) was one of the hosts for “Conversations with Refugees featuring Yo-Yo Ma” at Nueva Escuela de Musica in the Peoples Building on Colfax Avenue. The event organizers requested VEC provide notetakers for the workshops. I recorded personal field notes and conversations with key individuals at both events which provide additional context to understanding the values instilled in the Center by the larger Aurora and Denver community.

To aid and structure my field notes I periodically used a worksheet of a hand drawn map of the community center’s floor plan. These maps were used for fieldnotes from February to June of 2018. On observation days, I recorded on the maps what spaces were in use, events and what organization was hosting, conversations I was engaged in, and other observations of the material space (such as when the cross was displayed in the sanctuary room and when it was removed). These maps were not created with consistency nor true randomization and therefore cannot be used for statistical analysis of the space use. However, they proved useful for quick notes and an understanding of how some groups used the space during the early part of 2018<sup>4</sup>.

In short, I became a familiar face to frequent visitors. During the thirteen months leading up to the summer of 2018 I maintained a notebook of field notes and

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<sup>4</sup> The timeframe for which I was using the maps was a period of turbulence as the VEC staff worked diligently to activate the space, bring in programming, new tenant partners, and explore event rental options. While this period of observation was very formative, it is not representative of current experiences in the Center, nor can it represent the whole year of 2018 as they gained many new partners and programs over the summer. I ended the space mapping project in June because over the summer VEC was making alterations the build space to create rooms and offices for a new partner, and to remove pews in the sanctuary rooms. Thus, the maps I created for this period were no longer an accurate depiction of the space.

observations. I also engaged in unstructured exploratory conversations with the variety of people with whom I came in contact. Although I was able to take on-the-spot notes at larger events, most of my involvement was participatory and active, forcing me to journal my field notes at the end of the day or intermittently. I used much of my participant observation as exploratory research, looking to gather empirical evidence that would inform the creation of a context driven study.

### *3.6.2 Free listing*

I conducted eleven free lists in English, ten interviews were one-on-one at the community center, and one was over the phone. Out of the eleven respondents, five were male and six were female. Each of four congregations that use the Center for religious practice were represented; three of the pastors and one congregant were included. Two of the twelve were VEC staff, three volunteered their time with VEC, and three were NGO staff whose offices were located in the building. Only two of the twelve were born in the United States, while others were from Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Ethiopia, D.R. of Congo, Nigeria, Iraq, and Mexico. All participants fulfilled some form of leadership role in their communities, allowing them to consider both themselves as an individual and the larger community to which they were tied, producing well rounded lists.

Through free listing I sought to define the domain of a shared-space community center located in a repurposed church. The domain is broad and covers a lot of territory, hence I choose to define the domain using multiple questions to elicit responses. The questions were ordered as follows for each interview:

- (1) What words can you use to describe the Village Exchange Center?
- (2) What do you like about VEC?
- (3) What could be done to the building to make it more responsive to the community?
- (4) How do you imagine this space being used? And,
- (5) Why do you or your community visit VEC?

These questions produced three data points. First the descriptors and desirable aspects of the Village Exchange Center. Second, a variety of specialized needs, met and unmet, of each group as indicated by the desired changes to the building. And, third, the current activities in which this group of respondents reported they participated in or activities they planned to organize.

Because the informants were at different stages of English language acquisition the responses varied widely and needed to be coded to create a uniform and manageable list. After coding in NVivo and consulting with a few key informants who were not part of the free list group I was able to produce a list of twelve characteristics of the Center which were to be used in the final data collection instrument.

### *3.6.3 Rank ordered survey*

Once the list of twelve characteristics was finalized a paired comparison survey was created. The paired comparisons were generated and randomized in ANTHROPAC (Borgatti 1996) and then a survey was created in Qualtrics to capture additional desired information. The Qualtrics survey was also exported and printed to maximize distributions. In addition to the sixty-six pairs, the survey collected demographic data and



finished with a question about involvement in the community center which allowed for written elaboration.

Participants were recruited by word of mouth with the aid of a recruitment flyer. The flyer, consent document, and survey were also translated into Spanish, Swahili, and Nepali using The Interpreter Network by The Spring Institute in Denver, Colorado. After translations were received, they were checked and translated back to English to ensure context and concept were not lost in translation. This survey was distributed via email to individuals who had previously expressed interest in participating. In addition to digital distribution, I attended Sunday worships, adult education classes, health and wellness classes, and other community events or activities held at the Center and approached tenants in the building as part of the recruitment process. In total, I collected fifty-two surveys: six in Nepali, eight in Spanish, and thirty-eight in English. The survey was conducted verbally eight times, four of which were with the assistance of a translator.

### **3.7 Ethics and collaboration**

This project is a collaboration with the VEC team and as such their input is integral to this project. Not only were they involved in the design stage but continued to inform the project as it progresses through bi-weekly meetings during the summer research. They also were invited to provide feedback and input after the analysis was complete to ensure that the output reflected their needs as a community and as a nonprofit organization. Their vested interest in the wellbeing of their strategic partners, tenant groups, community leaders, and center participants made them vital to the creation and implementation of a thoughtful and considerate project in which all members of the

community are not only heard but also respected. VEC staff and I worked closely during the research period to ensure that communication about progress is clearly understood from both sides. I provided periodic updates on the progress of the research and brought to their attention issues that needed immediate addressing.

The bi-weekly meetings during the research period opened an accessible communication channel. In the spirit of collaboration, we combined efforts in community consulting and outreach activities wherever possible. I was warned that there is a concern in Aurora of focus group fatigue as these communities frequently get tapped for their opinions and positions, but rarely see results materialize from the insights they share. To counter this, there were multiple times when we collaboratively approach community outreach activities so to complete both VEC's focus groups needs and gather relevant survey data for this project. This approach was sensitive to community research burnout and avoided repetitive discussions.

The future of US immigration has become uncertain under our current federal administration, not only for undocumented individuals but also specific nationalities, ethnicities, and religious groups. It is important to me to ensure that the utmost care is taken in safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of the participants in this study. To safeguard both the community members and the data I gathered, I followed the guidelines set by the American Anthropological Association and the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, 45 CFR 46, also known as the Common Rule, while conducting this study. I am aware that during this study I may have encountered participants who are here without the correct documentation, but this information was not

collected, and no individual elected to share this information with me. In order to protect study participants, I ensured anonymity in conducting the free lists and rank ordered surveys by not collecting names of respondents in these activities. In all stages of the research, I kept documents and computer files under locked security. As such I feel that the safeguards in place are adequate for protecting the safety of any such individuals in this study.

Additionally, previous research suggests that the experience of immigration is traumatic (Hirschman 2004), especially when entering an unfamiliar culture that may be hostile or prejudiced. Thus, it is possible, maybe even likely, to encounter situations or conversations that are psychologically or mentally taxing on the participant during my observation period. As such I had researched and compiled resources regarding mental health and immigration support services that were available to them in both VEC and the larger Aurora community. This resource packet was made available to participants, and was used occasionally during the study.

I am also concerned with reducing perceived hierarchy among my respondents. For example, if I used the name of a VEC Director but do not do so when referring to another high-profile leader of a different NGO due to privacy concerns, I may inadvertently reinforce an unequal power dynamic or hierarchy in the community. As such I coded all key informants and respondents in all notes and data and elected to only use respondent's position/job title or role in the community.

VEC is a large stakeholder in this project and as such has been made integral to the design and implementation of this research. At the time of this study, VEC was in its

first year of operations and, although tremendous strides had been made in development of services and programming, the organization had not achieved full funding for operation and was in the throes of growing pains that every young organization has to overcome. In order to hold myself accountable to VEC, their Board, volunteers, and employees, I have allowed their needs to inform the design of this project and have made room for their continued involvement in this process. In addition to bi-monthly meetings with VEC staff and their continued involvement with implementation, I have offered to provide an executive summary report at the end of the research period. My hope for this report is that it will help them continue to strengthen their center, develop with the community in center focus, and demonstrate to funders the benefit of the facility.

Lastly, considering the user base of VEC to be a singular culture by way of their use of a shared-space may raise some concerns due to the highly diverse nature of the community. For clarity's sake I state here that this position is not intended to erase distinct ethnic or religious communities. Instead, I argue that the practice of entering into relationships with other individuals and the shared environment transforms both the environment and the individual which creates a communal *habitus*. Thus, I must consider the user base in its entirety rather than a segmented, internally homogeneous entities. Dissenting voices will be recorded in the data and I acknowledge the idea that a singular community may not have fully existed in this facility at the time of the study.

## Chapter 4: Field site

### 4.1 Aurora, CO

Aurora, Colorado seems to have always existed in the shadow of Denver while simultaneously maintaining a distinct identity as a diverse community. For at least three decades the city's nickname, awarded by locals of the Denver metro area, was "Saudi Aurora" (Saitta 2017) (although recently that phrase has fallen out of use).

UrbanDictionary.com, an online user-run slang encyclopedia, has two entries for "Saudi Aurora":

(1) December 30, 2005

Located in Southeast Denver/Aurora, CO, it is the part of Aurora once known as 'Unincorporated Arapahoe Country' where there is nothing but cows and fields. Resembles the nothingness that covers the deserts of Saudi Arabia.

"There is nothing to do out here in Saudi Aurora."

(2) June 12, 2012

The name locals use to refer to the city of Aurora in Colorado because it resembles some Middle Eastern country war zone with daily murders, robberies, rapes, and a police force that is just as brutal against the population."

"Stay out of Saudi Aurora, it's like a war zone out there."

Taking these entries at face value, they demonstrate a tangible seven-year span when the terminology was active and in circulation in digital social networks. While the reason for the nickname varies based on who you ask, it represents a connection between Aurora's quickly growing foreign-born populations and perceived social, political, and

environmental blight. Although this nickname comes with negative connotations, Aurora has been working on changing perceptions of the city and its population.

Aurora's immigrant community has been increasing and in recent years the city has started paying more attention to how to better plan for the future. The City of Aurora recently published a report entitled "Who is Aurora?" using data from the 2016 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as well as data generated by city staff (City of Aurora 2016). The current demographic surveys of Aurora estimate the foreign-born population at more than 70,500 residents with the total city population nearing 360,000. According to the City's report, the top country of origin is Mexico with 30,272 emigrants in Aurora. The Ethiopian population come in second with 2,985 residents, 2,454 residents from El Salvador, 2,295 residents from Korea, and 2,151 from Vietnam. According to the Aurora Public Schools website their "students come from more than 130 countries and speak more than 150 languages. 36% of our students are second language learners, with 82% of them Spanish-speakers" (Aurora Public School 2017).

Aurora has spent time and resources in the past few years in an attempt to generate more exact statistics on their newly arrived populations. This data is being used to make informed strategies for future city planning and civic services. Unfortunately, there is a sharp drop in data on foreign-born communities in Aurora prior to 2010. The most detailed information available on foreign born communities regards the refugee populations because of the high regulation of the resettlement programs. According to the Division of Refugee Service in the Colorado Office of Economic Security, Aurora has

experienced a sharp uptick in refugees from Africa and Asia in the last few years. From 2015 to 2017 the top listed places of origin for refugees has been Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the third quarter of the 2017 fiscal year, the majority of newly arriving refugees in the Denver Metro numbered 226 from Afghanistan, 154 from Somalia, 145 from Iraq, and 130 from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A good place to start our story of Aurora's immigrant and refugee activism, political organizing, and social support services is in 2008 when day laborers gathered informally near the corner of Dayton Street and East Colfax Avenue in Aurora, Colorado. This neighborhood is known as Original Aurora, which spans north to south from 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue to 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and west to east from Yosemite Street to Potomac Street or I-225. The zip code 80010 more or less encompasses the same geographic area as Original Aurora.

Several nonprofit groups organizing in and serving the immigrant community in Original Aurora and the east Denver metro area, including the community of day laborers, began meeting regularly to explore common goals. It was determined that the co-location of their organizations would be greatly beneficial to all parties involved due to the considerable overlap among their constituencies. Together they formed a jointly-governed, shared-space facility, the Aurora Human Rights Center (AHRC). According the El Centro Humanitario's website, the AHRC opened in October of 2010 in a rented space at 1400 Dayton Street in Aurora, CO. Originally intended for community gatherings and human rights organizing, the space organically developed connections

between organizations and community groups and the focus began to shift towards providing services and support for newly arrived communities. In addition to El Centro Humanitario, organizations such as Rights for All People (RAP), the Somali Community Center, the Lowry Family Center, and the Strengthening Neighborhoods program of the Denver Foundation used the space at AHRC (Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores, 2017).

The exact timeline of the transition from AHRC to the Aurora Welcome Center (AWC) is a little fuzzy. The change reflected a division over the Center's mission and purpose: A social action orientation versus a support and services focus. In the end the funders of the Center put more weight in the latter and the groups that held differing views decided to seek out other avenues for their organizations' missions. The Aurora Public School system announced a ribbon cutting and official opening of AWC on Tuesday, April 7, 2015 (Aurora Public School 2015). Organizations who has partnered with the original AWC included the Aurora Public Schools, the City of Aurora, El Centro Humanitario, Focus Points, Rights for All People, Families Forward Resource Center, Colorado African Organization, Global Bhutanese Community Colorado and the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program of the Denver Foundation (Aurora Public School 2015). AWC was housed in the Aurora Public Schools Administration building (Aurora Public Schools Educational Services Center Building 4) and served as multi-tenant facility offering a variety of services focused on the international and immigrant community in Aurora, the majority of which supported education efforts.



In May of 2015, the City of Aurora released their Comprehensive Strategic Plan 2015-2018 which created the Office of International and Immigrant Affairs and laid out nine areas of integration initiatives. This plan publicly recognized the importance of the immigrant and refugee communities in the fabric of the City of Aurora and the proposed policies and strategies meant to enhance the city's integration efforts. The nineteen-page packet opens with a letter from the Mayor and City Manager which concludes, "This three-year plan is designed to meet the needs of our international community and fully engage them in civic, economic and cultural life, putting the city on track to becoming a national leader in the area of immigrant integration" (Office on International and Immigrant Affairs, 2015, 1). The policies proposed in the plan are as follows,

to maximize resources, develop innovative efforts, and avoid duplication of programs and services aimed at the local immigrant and refugee community. Rather than a constellation of related and at times disparate activities (e.g. Roundtable, Sister Cities, Welcome Center), the comprehensive plan organizes the city's immigrant and refugee efforts toward one goal: integration. (Office on International and Immigrant Affairs, 2015, 5)

AWC and the City of Aurora partnered to create the Natural Helpers Program as one avenue for realization of the goals in the Strategic Plan. This national program identifies, trains, and supports natural leaders in the immigrant and refugee communities with an end goal of giving these communities leaders who have the ability to build networks between service providers and community members. Over the last two years the City and AWC have worked on developing this program so that each iteration of the training caters more specifically to the Aurora community.

Different tenants cycled through AWC between 2015 and 2017, providing a variety of services. Families Forward Resource Center, Focus Points, Colorado African

Organization, and Global Bhutanese Community Colorado are some of the organizations that have stuck through the multiple changes the Center moved through. Due to the Center's location in the Aurora Public School building, many of the services provided through AWC and their partners were geared toward education, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship classes.

#### **4.2 Village Exchange Center's genealogy**

The field site for this study is the Village Exchange Center (VEC), non-profit organization and community center that was formed to serve immigrants and refugees in the Aurora and Denver metro area. VEC's mission as a community center and multifaith worship space is to celebrate cultural and religious diversity by creating an inclusive environment where residents from all background interact, share, and develop together. This mission is enacted through a framework of engagement, encounter, and exchange between foreign-born communities and the receiving communities in Colorado. This community center was made possible by the donation of a church building by the congregation of St. Matthew Lutheran Church.

St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Aurora, CO was established in 1949. At its height the sanctuary hall drew 400 congregants each Sunday, but over time they suffered dwindling membership and struggled to maintain their congregation. Up to about the 1990s, the City of Aurora was comprised of predominantly White residents (82.4%) with less than 6% of the population foreign-born (US Census 1990, 2), but over the turn of the century the demographics changed. By 2000, the White only population in Aurora had dropped to 69% and the Foreign-born population jumped to just under 16% (US

Census 2000, 83). Studying such neighborhood changes, Hans Skifter Anderson identifies four moving behaviors in Denmark which influence self-segregation within neighborhoods: (1) White flight, (2) White avoidance, (3) ethnic attraction, and (4) ethnic retention (2017, 297). The first three behaviors were identified as strong forces in the creation of majority ethnic neighborhoods. I suggest that the same moving behaviors that Anderson found relevant in ethnic neighborhood creation in Denmark are also visible in Aurora and influenced the decline of St. Matthew congregation which was, and still is, predominantly comprised of White members.

St. Matthew achieved some financial relief when they started renting worship space to non-Lutheran immigrant congregations, building a synergetic partnership between arriving and receiving Christian communities. This reciprocity created naturally occurring multi-ethnic and multi-faith space. St. Matthew's adaptation to their changing and globalizing neighborhood differed from other diversifying churches because of their willingness to share the space with non-Lutheran groups. Unfortunately, this first strategy did not produce the substantial change they needed to rekindle their faith and membership. Integration and social networking that would have bolstered the health of all groups involved was still notably absent. When the congregation found their membership still on a downward slope and a persisting disconnection from their neighborhood, they switched strategies for adaptation and continued to search for ways to make the building work for both their changing neighborhood and themselves.

St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, like many other churches with dwindling membership and globalizing neighborhoods, invited immigrant congregations

to share their worship space, but still found themselves struggling to stay above water. It became clear that even with income from renting to religious groups, St. Matthew would end up causing financial strain to their already dwindling congregation and losing the building if they did not change their course of action. At the end of 2016, the pastor and his step-daughter presented St. Matthew with the opportunity to leave a legacy for their community. By donating the church and all land and assets to VEC, a secular nonprofit founded by the pastor and his step-daughter, St. Matthew's members could provide a space that supported their changing neighborhood while also rekindling hope for renewal and growth of their congregation. The remaining members of the Lutheran congregation voted unanimously to donate the building and assets and in exchange for the donation received a commitment from VEC allowing St. Matthew to maintain an office on site and continue using the sanctuary on Sundays. Thus, the congregation was able to continue their spiritual practices and leave a legacy for the community while passing off the burden of maintenance to a more capable organization. VEC obtained ownership of the building in March 2017. Many of the foreign-born congregations renting from St. Matthew signed new leases with VEC and continue to use the shared-space facility.

St. Matthew was not the only precursor to the creation of VEC. The Aurora Welcome Center (AWC), a nonprofit community center providing education to immigrants and refugees, had been operating in the Aurora Public Schools administration building since 2015. It also had collocated programming and a variety of nonprofits geared towards supporting the local immigrant community. AWC had a long and complicated history of its own but ultimately the funding ran out and they merged with

VEC in 2017. The merger with AWC provided VEC with social capital within the community, tenant partners, a city sponsored volunteer leadership training program, and a satellite location in the Aurora Public Schools administrative building.<sup>5</sup>

As of September 2018, VEC rents to five Christian congregations and nine non-profit organizations whose missions align and integrate with VEC's. In addition to the main location at 1609 Havana Street Aurora, CO 80010, their satellite location in the Aurora Public School Administration Building houses another two organizations. Because of the collaborative and shared-space nature of the community center, there is a range of programs offered, some by VEC and some by resident organizations. VEC's native programming includes the following core programs: Natural Helpers, Natural Leaders (the youth branch of Natural Helpers), International Kids' Club Afterschool Program and Summer Camp, an English Conversation Circle, a bi-weekly community food pantry, open-hours computer lab, fitness and mental wellness classes, and a diabetes prevention class taught in Spanish. Additionally, the Lutheran pastor and nonprofit founder provides periodic pastoral services to various individuals who come seeking help. VEC shows no signs of stopping there, they currently have plans in place to create job readiness and employment programs and an Early Childhood Education center.

### **4.3 A snapshot of Village Exchange Center**

Village Exchange Center is a 15,000-square-foot building that sits across two city plots. The building is located on the northwest corner of 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Havana Street

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<sup>5</sup> Through negotiations with Aurora Public Schools, VEC was able to renew the lease with the administrative building and two nonprofit partners were able to maintain offices in the space. All partners were offered the ability to move into the new building and four organizations took them up on that offer, since then two have moved out but maintain a relationship with VEC.

in Aurora, Colorado with their parking lot on the south side of 16<sup>th</sup>. The building, built in the late 1950's, has its main entrance on the south side, facing the parking lot. There is also an east-facing entry which is used by many of the renting organizations for direct access to their offices or to the basement, and area often used for service provision. An alley runs along the west side of the property and leads to an accessible entry with accessible parking spaces and a ramp to the door. The building was built in two stages, the sanctuary was the original building, but soon after an addition was built on the north side with classrooms, offices, meeting rooms, and an industrial kitchen in the basement.

The main entrance on the south side leads you directly into the sanctuary, a large east-facing community hall with a twenty-foot tall arched ceiling with exposed wooden beams. The north and east walls display stained glass windows with various Christian iconography (Figure 1, 2, and 3). The north stained glass, originally outward facing, now separates the meeting room and kitchenette from the sanctuary. The pews, which have since been altered and made mobile, were heavy, 19-foot oak benches purpose built for this room when the building was constructed. The east wall is framed by floor to ceiling stained glass and a heavy wooden cross originally occupied center stage (depicted in Figure 1), which was later replaced with a smaller one that was easier to remove and stow after Sunday worship.

The northern part of the ground floor has a kitchenette and meeting room that St. Matthew's congregation had called the Martin Luther room. Since the transition the room has been retitled to be the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. room. The offices are occupied by nonprofits renters which range from service provision organizations, to ethnic

organizations promoting the continuation of cultural practices, to civic engagement groups.

In the basement, accessible via stairs in the back of the sanctuary or the stairs and a lift by the east door, has an industrial kitchen (in need of renovation), more offices, two classrooms, a dining room/youth room, and a large activity room. During the 2018 summer there were minor renovations to the basement which reduced the size of the activity room to provide more space to a nonprofit renter that needed a waiting area for the refugee clients coming to access services.

VEC offers community-oriented space that is available for community members and local organizations for rent so they can host events and programming in the building. Although many services target newly arrived groups, a variety of activities are open to the community at large, such as educational and recreational classes, a mobile fresh food bank, and some cultural events. When scheduling such events with partner organizations,

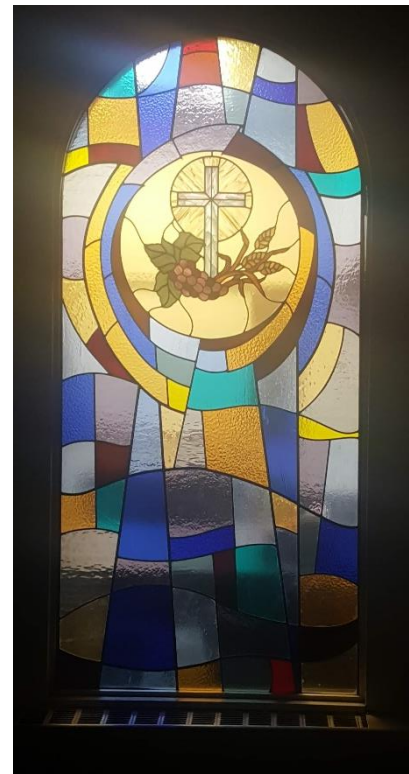


*Figure 1 - VEC Sanctuary in between congregations on Sunday in April 2018*

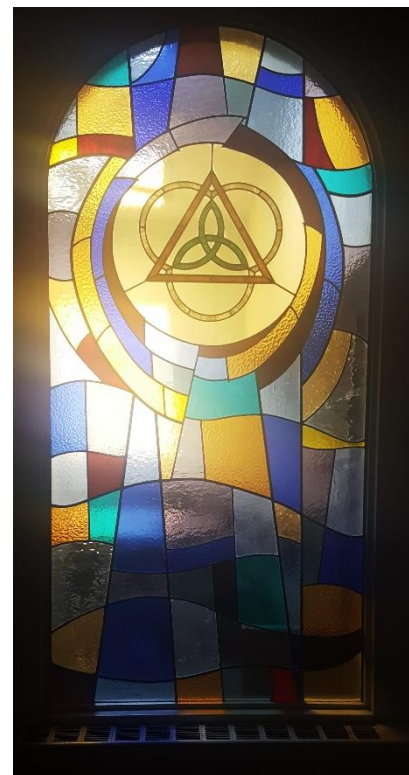
VEC communicates their mission to bridge gaps between the receiving and arriving communities and asks if the even can be marketed to the larger public.

It is important to highlight three VEC-run programs: Natural Helpers, Natural Leaders, and the International Kids' Club. The Natural Helpers program is implemented jointly with the City of Aurora, this program through which VEC identifies, trains and empowers local immigrants and refugees who understand the challenges of moving to a different place, learning a new language and establishing a new home in the U.S. They are then able to connect immigrants and refugees in their own communities with resources and opportunities.

The Youth Natural Leaders are selected from local high schools across the Aurora-Denver community and trained by community and City leaders in the dynamics of culture, leadership, public speaking, and the social services and civic engagement opportunities within the City of Aurora. The program also includes support navigating post-secondary educational options and tours of local universities.



*Figure 2 - Stained-glass 1*



*Figure 3 - Stained-glass 2*



The International Kids' Club provides a fun afterschool learning space for up to 40 kids per day, four days a week. The program is oriented towards students, ages eight to fourteen years old, who come from diverse refugee and immigrant backgrounds but is open to all neighborhood kids. It is offered free of charge and provides healthy snacks, social enrichment workshops, tutoring and homework support, STEM workshops, outdoor sports, karate classes, dance classes, cooking workshops, art workshops, and field trips (Museum of Nature and Science, indoor rock climbing, and swimming).

VEC's resident partners offer direct services to the community including ESL classes, citizenship classes, navigation and case management, asylum information and referrals, financial management classes, IRS compliance and tax support, support to trafficking survivors and activities and civic engagement opportunities.

Furthermore, VEC has made connections with a number of organizations in the community to develop strong and beneficial partnerships. These organizations rent rooms and offer workshops such as an Arabic women's driving class, a workshop on starting home-based businesses, voter registration drives, and mobile health clinic days, as well as various community organizing and educational events.

Due to the youth of the organization, VEC is still refining its data collection. By my best estimates, the facility served between 500 and 700 people each month between February and May 2018 through programs, classes and community events. On Sundays the building received anywhere from 200 to 300 visitors split between the four congregations. On Sunday November 4, 2018 St. Matthew Lutheran Church held their last service, stepping aside to allow another congregation to take their Sunday morning

slot. The legacy and impact are being carried forward by the current users of the building. In honor of St. Matthew's last service VEC wrote a Facebook post on November 4, 2018 stating, "Today is a day of deep gratitude to St. Matthew as they hold their last service before closing. The gift of our building and land has resurrected life into our community and provided so much joy and opportunity for many," and in response a leader of a tenant NGO commented "But the Spirit will live on forever!!!!".

Looking forward, VEC is embarking on a capital campaign that would provide funds to renovate the building, not just for functionality and to replace an aging sewer system, but to alter the space to increase programming capacity and be more culturally appropriate. At the time of this study, this campaign was in the early stages of planning, but had a number of pledged donors interested in assisting the effort.

## Chapter 5: Findings and analysis

The findings from this research are divided into six sections, the first of which is the are findings from the cultural domain analysis and the remaining five are emerging thematic elements the developed out of the marriage of the quantitative and qualitative data. The cultural domain analysis is positioned in the front not to give it a place of prominence, but rather to provide a baseline of information to work from. The key thematic findings grow from this initial baseline, but also go beyond this quantitative analysis to dimensionalize the findings with ethnographic data.

My analysis of the survey data uncovered a clearly defined cultural domain for how the user base conceives of and defines VEC. However, the data does not suggest there is one overarching consensus regarding the model of this cultural knowledge or hierarchy of items in the domain. What *did* surface were different models in subsamples of the survey participants. Notably there was a group of foreign-born respondents and a group of US-born respondents who each displayed cultural consensus. Yet, while there were overlaps between the two models, there were also some places of noteworthy divergences.

After exploring the results of the cultural domain analysis, the five thematic findings are presented. The first is that there were different perceptions about education and empowerment and the related roles of community and belonging. The second is a

deep exploration of how cultural diversity is conceptualized by this community. The valuation of cultural diversity was expressed in a variety of ways, but one of the most common was the desire for classes and activities in which participants could share and learn about cultures and languages that have been brought to the US by other immigrants and refugees. Third, I examine the enactment of religious diversity, how it is separated from cultural diversity, and the ways different community members employ their religious identities. Next, I offer interpretations of and reactions to the built environment and architecture of the building. Lastly, the chapter closes with a description of the role VEC plays in the larger political, social, and physical landscape of Aurora, Colorado.

### 5.1 Results of the cultural domain analysis

A cultural domain of the important characteristics of VEC was defined through the data gathered in the free listing interviews, thus was driven by community voice. The characteristics associated with VEC were widely agreed upon by the various users of the facility, key informants, free list interviewees, and survey respondents. The free list activity identified twelve characteristics that were mentioned by the vast majority of informants. The below list contains the percent of free list participants who listed the item:

1	Empowering, supportive and helpful	100%
2	Togetherness and connection with others	91%
3	Religious or spiritual space	82%
4	Celebrating cultural diversity	73%
5	Educational resources	73%

6	Local and easy to get to	64%
7	Multipurpose and versatile	64%
8	Religious diversity and sharing	64%
9	The building changes with the community	64%
10	Inviting and welcoming	55%
11	Peaceful	55%
12	The building is big and spacious	55%

Due to the variety of languages spoken and the various levels of English language acquisition of the free list participants, the lists were coded and analyzed to produce the above list. The final list was developed in consultation with key informants to ensure that original intentions were not lost in coding. The coding for each item on this list is broken down in Appendix A.

While the majority of informants throughout the study felt that all twelve items were highly important and expressed their conflict when faced with choosing between items, there was little agreement in the overall sample when it came to ranking the value of each item on the list. In a cultural consensus analysis model, the fifty-two respondents who participated in the paired comparison survey, three quarters of whom were women, did not display a consensus on the values or indicate a shared cultural model. This is to be expected because the total sample claimed seven different religious identities, came from fourteen different countries, spoke twelve different languages, ranged in age from twenty-one to eighty-seven years, and had a spectrum of reasons for visiting VEC.

However, what is of note is the unpredictability of the role of the built environment and the variety of agendas of the visitors. It could have been assumed that the more reasons a visitor has for coming to the building, the more likely they are to interact with others and begin to create a shared knowledge of the facility. Instead, the repurposing process generated a user base that had many different agendas for their use of the building. These agendas were influenced by both historical memories and interpretations of the space that were carried forward to the current context and the new experiences in the changing environment. Thus, the built environment and physical space plays a huge role in the cultural knowledge produced in the building.

During distribution of the survey, I was informed by many respondents that they found the survey difficult because they felt that all the characteristics included were of equal importance. One participant told me that she wanted VEC to “be all these things, you can’t leave any of them out”. Some expressed frustration when asked to choose between two options they felt were inherently related, such as ‘inviting and welcoming’ and ‘peaceful’ or ‘educational resources’ and ‘empowering, supportive, and helpful’, and pointed out that many times one follows the other or they are coterminal. I offered guidance by saying that if they think one quality results in the other, to please choose the one that they think is the starting point. For example, if you think that a welcoming environment brings peace than choose ‘inviting and welcoming’ over ‘peaceful’. I also advised for them to not spend too much time on choosing because the same item would show up later again in the survey so they would have another opportunity to choose the options they passed over on previous questions.

Although the study showed no overarching consensus on the cultural model (hierarchical ranking of the values), the agreement on the domain boundaries was well defined. This was made obvious in a response to the question “What would make you want to come here and be more involved?” where a Pashto-speaking Afghan woman at a women’s community lunch event wrote “Being able to talk to and meet different people, meet other families from other countries and cultures. People with different stories. Also, skills programs for getting jobs.” This comment demonstrates the incorporation of a large number of the values into a singular vision of the Center. The qualitative data gathered in this project indicates a shared value set of cross-cultural interaction, education, togetherness, and more, even if the expression of the inter-relations between these values vary.

While the total survey sample, fifty-two respondents, did not agree on the paired comparison test, there were subsets of the sample that did find agreement. A subset of nineteen respondents who were not born in the US, the total twelve respondents who were born in the US, and a combined group of twenty-nine (with two US respondents removed) displayed low-levels of consensus in their cultural values of the space with the standard threshold of a 3:1 factor ratio (Borgatti 1996). While it should be expected that the twelve US respondents would display cultural consensus, it was surprising that nineteen of the forty non-US born participants, or 47.5%, came to a loose agreement in their cultural model of the community center because of their varying cultural and experiential backgrounds. In the context of traditional uses of cultural consensus modeling, this is surprising because of the wide variety of backgrounds and experiences

they bring to the table. However, this study did hypothesize that shared use of this space may provide an opportunity for individuals who do not share the same culture to start to develop shared knowledge that can grow into the culture of the space.

The subset of nineteen foreign-born participants who came to agreement ranged from twenty-seven to seventy-four years of age, with an average of forty-four years and median of forty-five years. Men counted for four of the nineteen. Of these respondents, six were from Spanish-speaking Central and South America (Mexico, Peru), five were from sub-Saharan Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia), another five were from the middle east (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan), two were from Asia (Bhutan, Burma), and one declined to give specifics on her country of origin. As for their local residence, the vast majority, seventeen of the nineteen lived in either Aurora or East Denver. English was spoken by fourteen of the respondents and five spoke no English. Other languages spoken include Amharic, Arabic, French, Karen, Nepali, Pashto, Somali, Spanish, and Urdu.

Christians counted for ten of the nineteen (one of whom specifically indicated Pentecostal), Muslims counted for another six respondents (one of whom specifically indicated Sunni), while the remaining three marked “I am spiritual but do not belong to a church/temple/mosque”, “Other: Kirat” (a religion from North East India and the Eastern Bhutan/Nepal area), and, lastly, one respondent marked ‘prefer not to answer’. The reason respondents visited VEC varied widely. The most common reason for visiting was for a community event, although only five marked this option, other reasons for visits



were English class, Zumba class, attending a training or workshop, working for one of the organizations in the facility, and generally “meeting someone here”.

Notably absent in this foreign-born subset consensus were members of the refugee and immigrant churches that worship in the building. While I was unable to survey the Congolese congregation, members of the Nepali/Bhutanese congregation and the Myanmarese congregation did respond to this survey. None of these individuals were represented to the consensus sub-sample, while their responses were captured in the survey. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to draw a conclusion as to why immigrant congregants in the building’s user base were not in agreement with this subsample. In the following chapter I will provide some speculation as to why this might be, but it should not be accepted as a validated finding.

With this diversity of backgrounds and identities, it is notable that this group of nineteen foreign-born participants could agree on a hierarchy of characteristics. The agreed hierarchy of importance was as follows:

1. Empowering, supportive, and helpful
2. Celebrating cultural diversity
3. Multipurpose and versatile
4. Educational resources
5. Togetherness and connection with others
6. Inviting and welcoming
7. Local and easy to get to
8. Religious diversity and sharing

9. The building changes with the community
10. Peaceful
11. The building is big and spacious
12. Religious or spiritual space

The paired comparisons of this subset of nineteen respondents was structured as a proximity matrix such that the twelve qualities of VEC were listed both on the vertical and horizontal axes (Appendix B). If you were to move along each row you could see how many times that item was chosen over the item in the column. To indicate that no item was paired with itself, the cells that match an item with itself have the value of 0. Using this proximity matrix, a multidimensional scaling scatter plot was generated to visually construct the cultural model. (Table 1)

In this scatter plot, items that are close together were chosen a similar number of times and the items that are far away from each had greater differences between the number of times each were chosen. The data gathered in this study is non-parametric and therefore the scatterplot's axes are arguably arbitrary. Also, the items' location on the graph do not necessarily equate to a higher or lower ranking. Rather, the important information to be garnered from this scatter plot is the proximity of each item in relation to all other items. This visual representation of qualitative data allows another method of analysis of which items are similarly valued or have some perceived similarity.

With this all laid out, it is unfortunate that "length of time in the United States" and "frequency of visits to VEC" were not collected as demographic markers in the survey as these may be influential in the common knowledge displayed in this sample. I

had decided not to ask for length of time in the US because this project desired to avoid the topic of immigration status and periodic residency. After analysis this is an obvious void in the data as the percentage of life spent in the US could have been an important variable in the interpretation of the data. Neglecting to include frequency of visits to the building was an oversight in the research protocol. However, it may be important that the vast majority of respondents in this subset lived in East Denver or Aurora as this may be a contributing factor to their agreement.

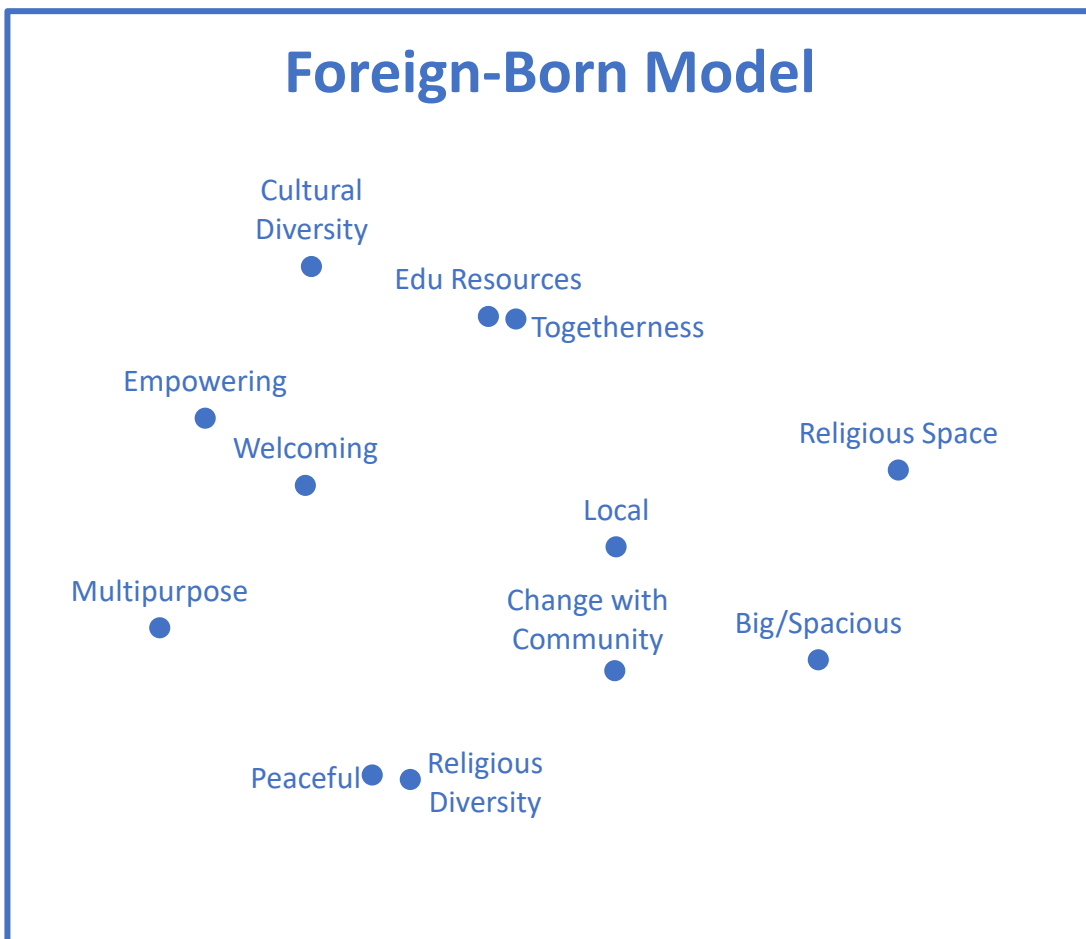


Table 1 – Foreign-Born Cultural Model

All twelve respondents born in the US displayed a loose cultural consensus, which is to be expected in cultural domain analysis methodology because it is assumed that they hold similar cultural knowledge resulting from growing up in the US. The age range was thirty-two to eighty-seven years of age with an average of sixty-four and median of sixty-eight. Of the twelve, four were men. Aurora and East Denver residents still made up the majority of the sample with only two of the twelve living outside of the immediate area. Seven of them held membership with the Lutheran congregation that donated the building and planted the legacy of VEC, but others identified as Atheist, Unitarian Universalist, other Christian denominations (one specifically wrote Baptist), and one marked “I am spiritual but do not belong to a church/temple/mosque”. Three of the twelve spoke Spanish, one of whom shared that she was a volunteer English teacher at VEC who helped with grammar, conversation, and citizenship test preparation. The agreed hierarchy of values in this US-born subset was:

1. Celebrating cultural diversity
2. Empowering, supportive, and helpful
3. Multipurpose and versatile
4. Inviting and welcoming
5. Togetherness and connection with others
6. Educational resources
7. Local and easy to get to
8. The building changes with the community
9. Peaceful

- 10. Religious diversity and sharing
- 11. The building is big and spacious
- 12. Religious or spiritual space

As with the foreign-born response matrix, the responses for this US-born subset were structured as a proximity matrix (Appendix B). Again, moving along the rows you could see how many times that item was chosen over the item in the column. A scatter plot was again generated to visually depict the model. The more closely related the items, the closer they appear on the scatter plot. (Table 2)

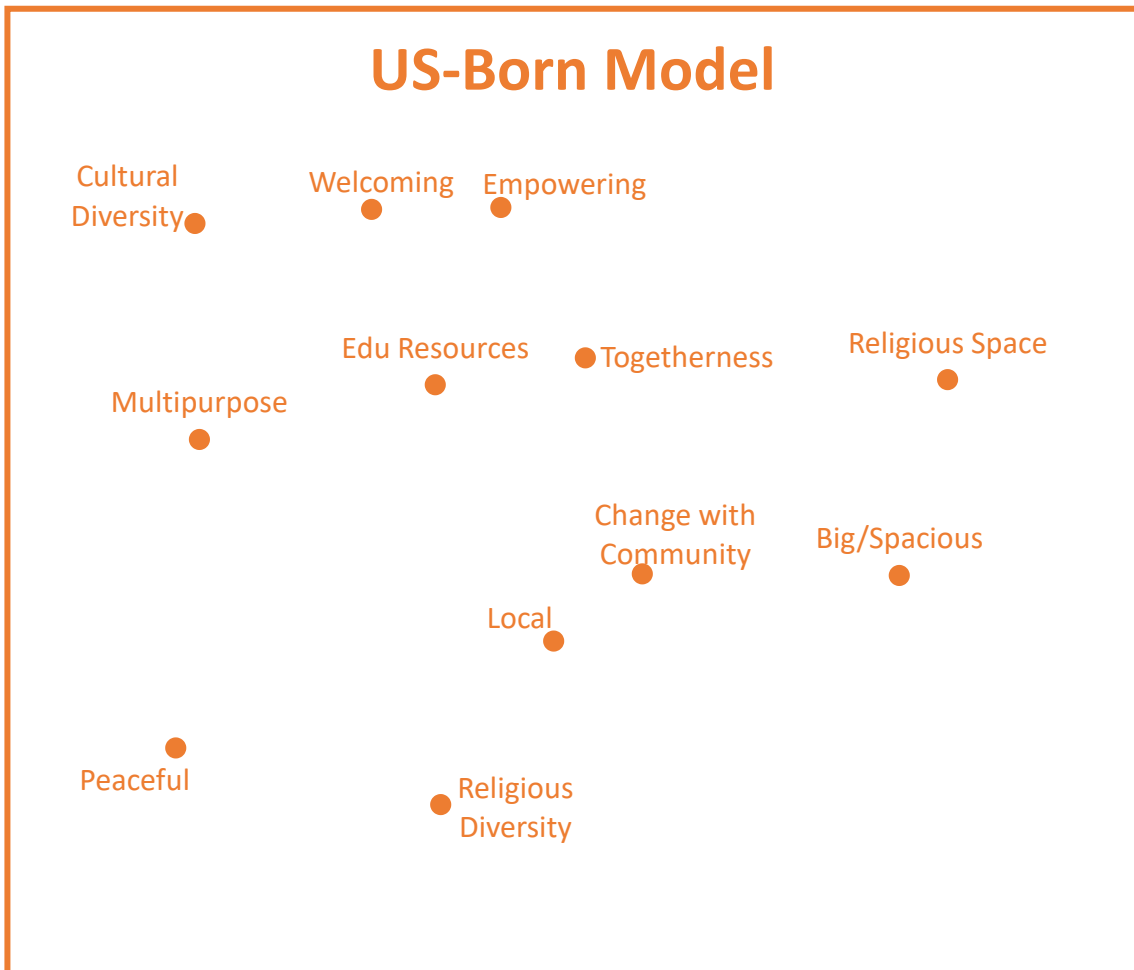


Table 2 – US-Born Cultural Model

While there are quite a number of similarities in the hierarchies of the foreign-born and US-born sub-samples, together they did not form consensus. However, when desire to be involved in VEC was taken into consideration and the only two participants who expressly stated they did not want to be more involved in the community center were dropped from the data set, a consensus was reached. Both of the respondents not wishing to further their involvement with VEC were members of the St. Matthew Lutheran congregation, one male and one female, and were eighty-seven and eighty-five years of age, respectively. Both felt that they could not be more involved in Village Exchange Center as they had “been part of St. Matthew since the church began. We are happy with the church.” When omitted, the subset of twenty-nine, 30% of which were US-born, reached consensus with the following order of importance:

1. Celebrating cultural diversity
2. Multipurpose and versatile
3. Empowering, supportive, and helpful
4. Educational resources
5. Togetherness and connection with others
6. Inviting and welcoming
7. Religious diversity and sharing
8. Local and easy to get to
9. The building changes with the community
10. Peaceful
11. The building is big and spacious

## 12. Religious or spiritual space

It is a helpful discovery to find that just under a third of the survey respondents display consensus regarding the values inherent in VEC because it allows us to acknowledge there is shared knowledge being produced in the building and as such, this production can be studied. This said, there are nuanced differences between the foreign-born model and the US-born model that should be expanded upon. When the two scatter plots of the models are overlaid upon each other, small variations become apparent (Table 3).

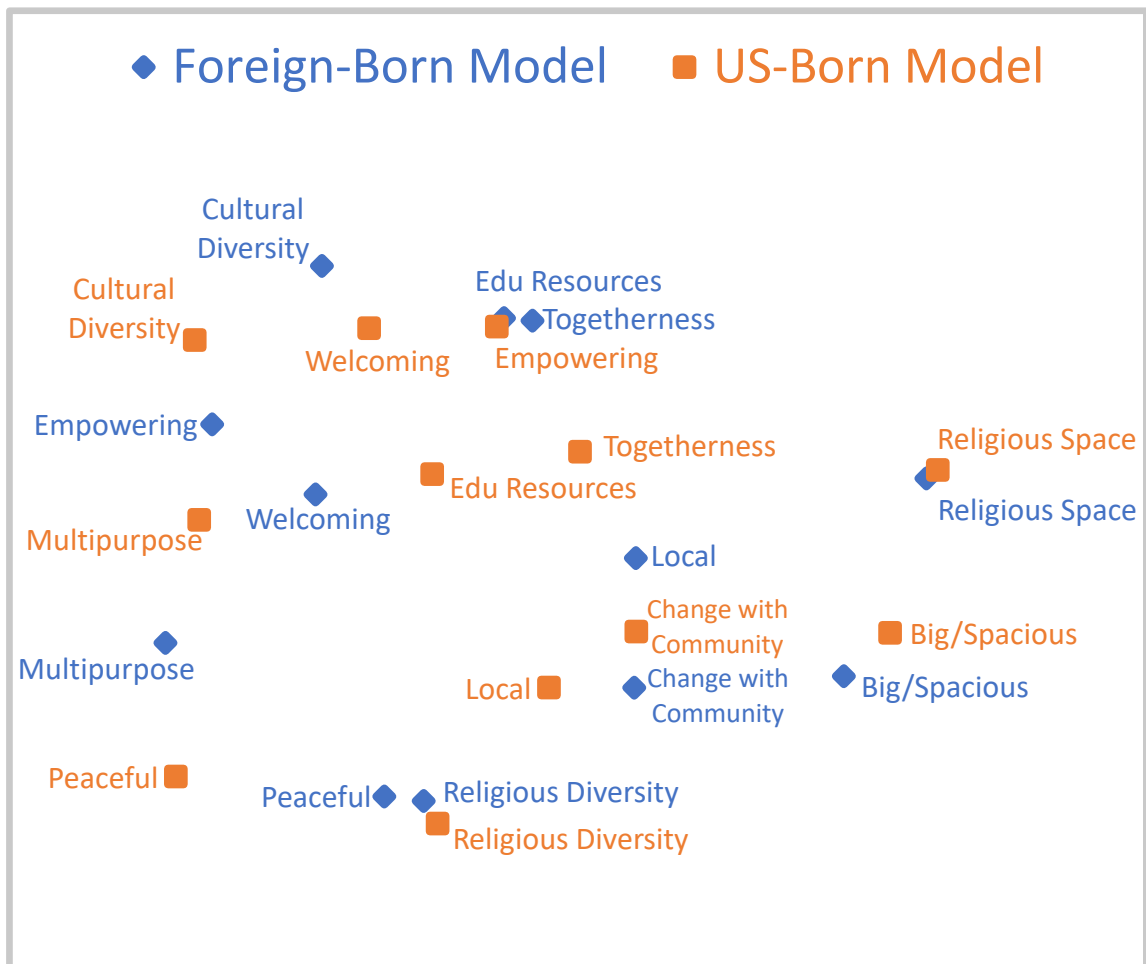


Table 3 – Foreign-Born and US-Born Cultural Models Overlaid

Some areas of interest are the differences in placement of ‘Peaceful’ and ‘Religious Diversity’ and the different formations of ‘Educational Resources,’ ‘Togetherness,’ and ‘Empowerment.’ These nuances between the two models are reviewed and explored further in this chapter. The interpretation and organization of these findings are guided by the ethnographic data garnered in this study.

## **5.2 Education and togetherness, empowerment and belonging**

At the end of the paired comparison survey, all 52 respondents were asked “Could you be more involved in the community center?” to which they could select Yes, Maybe, or No. The majority, 61.5%, responded affirmatively and only three respondents selected “No”. As a follow-up, participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their answer and respond to the question “What would make you want to come here and be involved?”

Many survey respondents said that classes or educational activities are what would most likely draw them in and make them want to be more involved. The majority of requested classes or educational resources fell into three categories: employment-related skills, English acquisition and conversation, and multicultural education. The first two will be discussed in this section and the last will be explored in depth in the following section.

Employment skills that were requested by survey participants sometimes focused on specific knowledge or training such as nursing or elder care, while other times were more geared towards general skills such as learning more about computers, how to start a business, and vocational training (“skills programs for getting jobs”). A couple women



who spoke no English specifically asked for “classes to help me make money weaving or sewing,” and “educational classes about how to start a business or make money from home.” From July to October 2018, VEC offered classroom space to ‘Fax Aurora’ (<http://www.faxaurora.org/>) and Colorado chapter of Small Business Majority (<https://smallbusinessmajority.org/>) who hosted a once-a-month workshop series at VEC educating adult students on how to start a home-based business. These classes were held bilingually in Spanish and English, however the aforementioned quotes from the survey were from women who spoke Pashto and Amharic, respectively. While the logistics for offering more translators during such services were not yet available at the time of the study, both the VEC staff and the larger service community in Aurora and Denver are aware of the need. Many local nonprofits were working towards catering to a wider array of language needs for future vocational and business classes. In addition to partnering with the existing employment support efforts, VEC was making plans for creating a native social enterprise that would bring more vocational training to the facility while also providing supplementary income to VEC which in turn would aid in the management and maintenance of the building.

In the cultural models generated by the surveys, ‘Empowering, Supportive and Helpful’ was closely linked to ‘Inviting and Welcoming’ by the Foreign-Born subsample. Taking a close look at the data, it seems the desire for employment-related skills are strongly connected to ‘empowerment and support’ for refugee and immigrant community members. A few key informants spoke to me about how they wanted to be gainfully employed because they wanted to independently support their family, to have their own

spending money separate from their husband's, or because they did not want to rely on the kindness of others to be able to get by.

However, this concept of empowerment was larger than simply supporting an increase in access to opportunity and supportive services. VEC was seen as a place that offered opportunities to increase self-sufficiency, but it also surfaced in the data that, as a welcoming and inviting environment, VEC played a role in improving feelings of confidence and ownership of the space. A free list informant who was a congregant of one of the renting churches spoke about how she felt welcomed whenever she came to VEC. In the free list interviews, she explained “when it used to be a church there was no one to ask for help with the building [e.g. turning on the swamp cooler, overhead fans, etc.] but now the staff here answer questions.” She felt that being enabled to take ownership of the building's logistics increased her sense of belonging and welcome at VEC.

Efforts of ‘empowerment, support, and help’ have generated a feeling of inclusion for many at the Center. This concept of empowerment relates to activities inside the Center which increase civic efficacy in their life outside the facility, but also related to the encouragement and ability to fully utilize the facility. This created a sense of ownership in the building. In other words, this category of empowerment is larger than mere trainings to improve self-sufficiency skills. Empowerment, support, and help fosters, and is fostered by, the notion that the user base belongs in this space and is welcome there.

Turning to the US-born cultural model of the Center, we see that ‘empowering’ is located in the same position that ‘educational resources’ and ‘togetherness and connection with others’ is located in the foreign-born model. This shows a divergence with the interpretation of ‘empowerment.’

English classes were repeatedly requested by the foreign-born study respondents and my experience in the field uncovered not only a desire for language services, but also an expectation that service centers and nonprofits provide them. English language acquisition is seen by the community as standard programming for any center or nonprofit catering to immigrants or refugees. While VEC has always offered English classes, only the English Conversation circle is a native program. This circle was taught by a volunteer who ran an informal meeting on Mondays and Tuesdays around noon with a group of Spanish-speaking women. While this program appeared on the public calendar, the teacher did not actively seek new students because the intimacy of the small group was preferred by the attendees and the volunteer teacher. VEC’s first structured English classes were offered by Colorado African Organization (CAO), which rented a classroom on Saturday mornings. However, at the end of 2017, VEC knew that they needed to expand their English class offerings, so they partnered with Asian Pacific Development Center (APDC), another nonprofit community center located less than a mile to the west. APDC began holding English and citizenship classes at VEC in January 2018 between 9:00 and 11:00 am on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. This expanded their existing English as a Second Language (ESL) programming and was sponsored by the City of Aurora’s Office of International and Immigrant Affairs (OIIA).

During this addition of APDC ESL classes in VEC, CAO stopped offering classes in the facility.

Unfortunately, the limited scheduling, the registration process, and APDC's logistical practices became challenges for some potential clients/students in the VEC user base who were searching for English classes. While at the front desk at VEC, I often met visitors who could not attend class at the time offered, who had missed the registration days, or were scheduled for a class at APDC's location instead of at VEC<sup>6</sup> and therefore decided not to attend the class.

Survey respondents who asked for English classes did not only want English classes but *more* of them. Over the summer of 2018, during my survey field work, VEC brought in Project Worthmore as a new tenant partner. As a well-known and well-respected nonprofit institution in Aurora, Project Worthmore dramatically increased the English classes offered at VEC beginning in August 2018, as well as the accessibility of those classes. Again, the ELS classes changed hands at VEC. APDC stopped offering their classes at VEC when Project Worthmore opened registration. From August 2017 to September 2018, the English classes offered had become increasingly robust, as each new organization offering classes widened the options for scheduling and learning levels. The improvement of the English class offerings is especially commendable considering that the majority of classes were offered through the partnerships VEC had developed, and not directly by VEC. Still, there is always room for improvement as some locals desired

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<sup>6</sup> Scheduling logistics were determined by a placement test. When a perspective student took a placement test on registration day, they were placed in an English class the was appropriate to their language level. APDC did not have the means to provide the same level class at two different locations, so the student's class location was based on their ability, not desired locale or center.

more options such as nighttime or weekend classes, which Project Worthmore did not offer.

In addition, both cultural models paired ‘Education Resources’ with ‘Togetherness and connection with others.’ English class, the predominant educational resource mentioned in the data, was often seen as both a social and educational activity. This social learning connected students with others who are also navigating a new culture. To many, access to a learning community was just as important as the curriculum. This was also evident in the English conversation circle where the small group of Spanish-speaking women were equally driven by a shared desire to improve their English-speaking abilities and the appreciation for having semi-structured time to get together and connect with other women going through, and coming from, similar experiences and backgrounds. Another such example of this is the bible classes that were held at the Center by the different congregations. Studying the bible was not solely an educational experience, but also one predicated on connection with others and being together with like-minded people.

### **5.3 Celebrating cultural diversity vs. valuing cultural diversity**

The survey revealed that the most likely motivator for being more involved in the community center was the cultural diversity present in the facility. Cultural diversity is deeply embedded in VEC’s mission and vision and is also a driver of the recent changes in the building. It was expected that cultural diversity would surface in the data, but it was not anticipated that it took such a prominent place in the cultural domain. The value of the cultural diversity was expressed in a variety of ways, but one of the most common

was the desire for classes and activities in which participants could share and learn about cultures and languages that have been brought to the US by other immigrants and refugees.<sup>7</sup> The opportunity to meet people from other cultures, to share experiences and learn together, and to celebrate different cultures was discussed in 46.3% of answers to the final survey question. One respondent wrote, “I would like to also have French classes and attend Buddhist services or classes to learn more about other traditions and cultures.” A second respondent shared that “being able to talk to and meet different people, meet other families from other countries and cultures. People with different stories,” would be her biggest motivation for going to VEC. A third survey participant responded, “I want to talk to and meet families from other places and cultures, I think we might have similar stories, but it is important to meet other people and learn from each other.” These respondents also mentioned that the Center should provide more educational opportunities to help them develop job skills, displaying a triangulation between cultural diversity, empowerment, and education.

However, an interesting disconnect in my data appeared here relating to the characteristic “Celebrating Cultural Diversity” as it may not have been the best terminology for this category, even though it was the top listed quality of the Center. VEC’s Mission Statement on the website reads, “as community center and multi-faith worship space it seeks to celebrate cultural and religious diversity by creating an inclusive environment where residents from all background interact, share and develop

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, indigenous groups and identities are not part of their diversity, but I have no evidence that suggests they would not be included if visibility and activity was increased in this community.

together” (Village Exchange Center 2017). While “Celebrating Cultural Diversity” was the terminology used in the survey and was validated by both VEC staff and community collaborators on this project, after careful consideration of the data it may have been more appropriate to term this category, “Valuing Cultural Diversity.”

A wide variety of events celebrating cultural diversity occurred at the Center during the research period and many informants spoke of their appreciation for such celebrations and activities. Yet, much of the data points to benefits that this diversity offered beyond the act of celebration. In fact, appreciating the communal exploration of differences and similarities between cultures, religions, and experiences seemed to be more prevalent than ‘celebration.’ As I will demonstrate, ‘celebration’ is not a broad enough term to demonstrate the sentiment that is expressed by the participants and collaborators in this study.

The value of diversity and perceived similarities within that diversity was evident in free list interviews. For example, when one of the refugee pastors who uses VEC for church service was asked to list the things he liked about the building, the last thing he listed was “we have no problem with the many different people. People are all refugee like us, we are the same.” I asked him to further explain this comment, to which he responded that his congregation had asked him why they were sharing their building with non-Christians and wondered who the other building users were. He said he felt it was important for them to know that they had something in common with the other building users; they all experienced the need to emigrate, so even if they weren’t Christian, they still had common ground. Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller call this concept

“domains of commonality” which are the “common conditions of precarity and displacement that mark the lives of many urban residents” (2018, 12). Through lived experiences and personal narrative, this pastor and others at VEC are enacting this theory of how they can construct commonalities in such a way that allows them to create feelings of belonging and “respond to their differential access to power, to their city’s position in regional and global playing fields, and to their relationships to the ongoing restructuring and repositioning of the neighborhood places where they build their lives” (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018, 12).

The central focus on cultural diversity was prevalent in the data, yet intercultural interactions did not always present where expected or intended. The user base of VEC communicated a desire for developing relationships with people of different backgrounds, but the realization of this is sporadic. During observations and participation, I noticed that the exchanges between people of different backgrounds were often occurring outside of the activities specifically designed for such purposes. First, I will outline one example of purposeful inter-cultural interaction and then will provide a second example demonstrating inadvertent and unplanned instances. The Natural Helpers training, a VEC leadership program, integrated intercultural exchange into the activities and such exchange was encouraged by the organizers and the curriculum. The registration form for the March 2018 training described this program as follows,

The Natural Helpers Program will provide training to help already existing “natural helpers” better serve the members of their community. It is not the goal to train people to become “natural helpers” – they already are “natural helpers.” The goal is to develop a network of person-to-person support services that will help immigrant newcomers more effectively access existing community resources



and work with community social service organizations. (Village Exchange Center n.d.)

I attended two Natural Helper trainings, the following notes are from a training with seven African immigrant participants, one Central American immigrant participant, one Asian immigrant participant, and three participants who were born in the US. Additionally, there were a variety of trainers including two from Central America, one from South America, and two from the US. The quotations in the following paragraph provide insight into the shared narrative while retaining confidentiality of the participants and their personal stories and experiences.

The majority of the first day of training provided space to explore and discuss the participants' own cultural understanding and lay groundwork for cultural literacy. Starting with a discussion about the differences between enculturation, acculturation, and bicultural identities, the training mapped the different roles that language, behaviors, beliefs, and values play in the creation and reproduction of culture. The activities and discussions created space for participants to share personal experiences, viewpoints, and opinions. During the training, participants were asked to contribute their personal definitions of Culture. Here are some examples, "culture is how we live, or the way we live," and "a way of living and thinking," and "it defines how you see the world, like glasses."

Through this discussion, language came to the forefront. Multiple participants pointed out that people who speak the same language can be from different cultures and that while language overlaps with culture, the two are not synonymous. One participant shared that his parents were from two different countries in South America and explained

he identified as bicultural. Elaborating on this comment, he said that he felt he was not really an insider in either culture but had inherited both from his parents. Another Spanish-speaking participant shared, "For me it's not about language, or communication, shared culture is about understanding, shared understanding." Later in the training, a participant from the DRC shared,

I'm Black and also speak with an accent. In my country there are over sixty different languages and then after that they have to come to learn English in America. It's like, two strikes against you. It's very hard for our seniors to get jobs, they are old, don't speak English and are dark skinned so people see that. Like it is different for Latinos, Spanish isn't as bad in America, sometimes you can find a job as an older person with someone who speaks Spanish. It's like less obstacles. (Anonymous. 2017. Group conversation recorded in fieldnotes.)

This participant was talking about prejudices, stigmas, and US racism, and definitely was not attempting to celebrating cultural diversity. Yet, this training offered a platform for this diverse group of individuals to explore the implications of living and leading in a majority-minority city. This comment about experiences of discrimination in the US demonstrated his feelings of safety and comfort in this diverse group and possibly eagerness to discuss such topics. This gathering of diverse individuals who felt safe and welcomed in this training environment jumped at the opportunity to gain a better grasp of what cultural diversity means in their lived realities. Thus, while this is not an instance of celebrating cultural diversity, cultural diversity was nonetheless appreciated, valued, and

employed to gain deeper understandings of community experiences and what belonging looks like this VEC and Aurora at large.

The central focus on cultural diversity was prevalent in the data, yet intercultural interactions remained elusive. The user base of VEC communicated a desire for developing relationships with people of different backgrounds, but the realization of this was sporadic. During observations and participation, I noticed that the exchanges between people of different backgrounds were often occurring outside of the activities specifically designed for such purposes.

While the Natural Helpers training is a purpose driven event, most of the intercultural encounters at the Center were not generated by events aimed at engaging cultural diversity. Rather they occurred in the liminal space between events and between groups holding events at the Center. The Nepali/Bhutanese *pooja* in early May 2018 spanned eight days, one of which was a Sunday and overlapped multiple church services. A *pooja*, or *puja*, is the most common word for worship in modern Hinduism and is often associated with a religious event in which there are offerings to a deity (Lochtefeld 2002, 529-530). This specific *pooja* involved the reading of the Shrimad Bhagwat, a Hindu religious text written in Sanskrit. The *pooja* organizers, one of whom was the director of a nonprofit leasing office space at VEC, had reserved the basement because of the large, open floor plan. The discount they received from being a community partner was an added benefit to using this space, rather than going elsewhere. Since this was a multi-day event, VEC staff spoke openly with the event leaders about the times and days that other events or activities were happening at the Center and discussed logistics that would

support simultaneous use of the space (such as which doors their attendees should use when entering and leaving the building on Sunday).

On the Sunday in question, the *pooja* attendance alone reach about 400 individuals, the vast majority of whom had never participated in any other VEC activities. With such a large gathering, crowd control was a huge undertaking, especially because this was the first time many of the attendees were in the space and, thus, were unfamiliar with the building. Furthermore, it is common for the religious leader's recitation of the Shrimad Bhagwat to be amplified at these events. While this was not a problem during between Monday and Saturday, it became very disruptive for the congregations attending service.

While volunteering for this event, I witnessed an interesting exchange caused by this confluence of factors. The Hindu community was downstairs and using a speaker system and the Congolese Pentecostal Congregation had arrived for their service and were upstairs tuning up electric guitars and other instruments, but after about twenty minutes they found themselves struggling with the multiple conflicting noises in the building. Leaders from the Hindu *pooja* and from the Congolese Pentecostal Congregation were put into a position where they needed to come together to discuss the navigation of the sound space in the building because both had been using amplification. The sound-space was in contest, forcing both men to advocate for their community's needs while respecting the mission of the Center to promote the celebration of cultural and religious diversity. The interaction was tense as each group struggled to acknowledge that the other belonged and had the right to use the space, while also holding firm to their

right to use the space as their rental agreement permitted them to do. Both had gained VEC staff permission to use the space, and both had been briefed by VEC staff about the simultaneous use of the space. However, the small details of timing had been left up to the groups to navigate. Both leaders remained respectful, letting the other speak fully and listen before responding with a counter argument and offer. There was no yelling, or any other displays of anger, however each stood their ground. In the end they decided on time frames for each group to use the sound space such that the Congolese could use the electric guitars and microphones for a set time upstairs while food was served downstairs, and then the ownership of the sound space would switch at a given time. This agreement seemed satisfactory to both parties at the end of the discussion, but the Congolese left earlier than they had originally indicated in the discussion.

Catching up with several community members about a month after this event I asked how this space sharing felt for them. A member of the Congolese church said she liked it, and it was no problem, especially because they were told by VEC staff this would not be a common occurrence. A member of the Nepali/Bhutanese congregation said it was okay because it was only that one time, but they would prefer not to use the same space as the Hindu community because it can be confusing to the youth and upsetting to older members, especially those who had converted to Christianity. A volunteer teacher of a Spanish-speaking diabetes prevention class was thrilled to use the space alongside the event, especially because she had attended the *Dia de Muertos* event held at the Center in November 2017 and appreciated the continued display of diversity. She was very happy to see that other cultural celebrations were happening at the Center,

because even though she was not participating in the event, the exposure to it and knowledge that it was happening demonstrated the purpose of the space and increased her comfort there.

A volunteer at the *pooja* said he loved holding the event in this space and saw no problem with it. He even suggested that next time they could hold it in the sanctuary upstairs because he felt the space was beautiful and would be a good fit for their attendee numbers. I asked about the pews and the stained-glass windows and he responded that he doesn't see a problem with it, especially because the pews already provide the seating and they wouldn't have to set up chairs for their older members who could not sit on the floor. He did add, almost as a second thought, that maybe some of the community would not like it and it might be good if they were allowed to redecorate for the event. During the event, he had grabbed me and pulled me downstairs to the kitchen where we talked about my project and I was lectured for a half hour about the event, the food, the religious leader, and what life was like in Nepal. When he found out that I was an anthropologist he was even more determined to share his knowledge of his culture and religious practices with me. He explained that it was wonderful he was able to share this with an American like me. I share this to show how visitors to the Center were welcomed into the space they had created in the basement. While others who were more frequent users of the space felt the changes, some even felt disrupted, the temporary users felt they were invited to make the space their own, and did just that.

This also touches on the difference (or similarity) of religious and cultural diversity. In the free listing these two categories were listed separately, but in practice

some groups see them as two sides of the same coin and others differentiate between the two. For example, in a free list interview a Congolese participant told me that she liked being able to share the choir's music with other people. Indeed, they have performed at several VEC events and many non-Congolese visitors, adults and youth alike, have been mesmerized by their music when they happen to come to the building during their practice. They see this as a blend of their culture and religion and welcome audiences. However, when it comes to actions of their church their community is more closed. This is not to say that they do not welcome outsiders to their worship time, but rather they consult with the larger community of US-based Congolese Pentecostals before making decisions about how to engage their faith community in the broader VEC network.

As such it seems that although cultural diversity may, at times, encompass religious diversity, religious diversity alone may be more bounded and clearly defined and therefore constructed differently. Cultural diversity, as this community defines it, is related to 'education,' 'empowerment,' and 'welcoming,' which encourages exchange and learning across identities and experiences. This may include religious identities and practices. In contrast, 'religious diversity and sharing' was linked to 'peaceful,' indicating nonviolent and amiable encounters between different identities, but not necessarily placing high value on mixing or crossing into other identities.

#### **5.4 Religious diversity and peacefulness**

As mentioned previously, none of the refugee or immigrant congregants were present in the consensus subsample. Considering this in relation to the placement of 'peaceful' and 'religious diversity and sharing' in the foreign-born model reveals how

certain positionalities and identities conceive of this space differently. It seems that some groups who were displaced due to religious discrimination, such as the Nepali/Bhutanese congregation, do not align with this view. In a conversation with a youth group leader from that congregation, he told me that he loves all the diversity here, but also wanted me to know that if there was a church space available, he would be willing to pay a little more to worship there instead. He explained further by saying that “worshiping alongside other Christians is great but once you start mixing with Hindu it is not as great. We can’t practice the love of Christ with other religions.”

Religious persecution, and fear of it, is one of the reasons a person may seek refugee status (UNHCR, 2018). In Bhutan, Buddhism is the national religion and in the 1990’s the government sought to rid the southern part of the country of a Nepali ethnic minority that practiced Hinduism. It was an act of both ethnic and religious cleansing. These refugees were displaced to refugee camps in Nepal, often comingling with people from different castes. At the same time many came into contact with Christianity. The pastor from the Nepali/Bhutanese church at VEC was introduced to Christianity by a missionary priest in a refugee camp. Many websites such as [CMAAlliance.org](http://CMAAlliance.org) and [Worldreliefdupageaurora.org](http://Worldreliefdupageaurora.org) mention that Christianity appealed to many of these refugees because it preaches equality and love, and also allows for interaction and relationships across castes. Furthermore, religious purging continued in Bhutan and in April 2001 there were international reports that “police stormed churches on Palm Sunday to register Christians, many of [whom] were detained and threatened” (CP World 2010).



There may very well be a divide in VEC's user base between those who have experienced extreme discrimination based on religion and those who have not. For example, the African Muslim women who did not wish to practice alongside Christians may have had negative experiences when entering or moving through secular societies constructed from Christian origins. In an informal interview, a Muslim community member from Afghanistan recounted an experience that a friend of hers had had in her neighborhood. Her friend was pregnant and, when out on a walk in her neighborhood, encountered a man who was walking an unleashed dog. The dog ran up to her and jumped up, unrestricted, severely frightening her. The way the informant tells it, she later miscarried due to the extreme stress she experienced from that interaction. While it may or may not have been due to this incident, her perception was that this type of interaction and living within a seemingly hostile environment towards Muslim women has been a traumatic experience. Reframing this experience within the context of VEC, visiting a facility that does not seem to be built with your needs or history in mind, especially after experiencing negative interactions in the host society that may seem synonymous with Christianity, would not be desirable.

Conversely, there is a significant segment of the survey respondents who see religious diversity as linked to the valuation of peacefulness. Just as some immigrants and refugees have had negative encounters with religious Others, some have had very positive experiences. One Muslim Syrian woman I met through the Natural Helpers program talked about how in Syria she lived alongside Christians and also knew Jews<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>8</sup> This is odd due to the miniscule number of Jews living in Syria, even before 2011.

and everything was fine before the civil war began. The women she knew would all cook together and talk together and there were never any problems between them. A Muslim man from Iraq has spoken to me numerous times about his Christian friends back in Iraq and the good relationships he had with them. A Nepali Hindu community member insisted that Hinduism is about peace and acceptance of all people and making everyone feel welcome. When I asked him about Bhutanese refugees, he expressed the opinion that Bhutanese refugees, and especially Christian ones, were not in any way separate from other people from Nepal because the Nepali culture is about acceptance and peaceful living. While his comments diminished and dismissed strife and trauma experienced by these refugees, the notion of peace and religious diversity is present in his and the other narratives.

Although it is unclear in the data what might prompt this same perceived similarity in the Christians in the foreign-born set, we may assume that it is due to the confluence of their individual religious disposition and their interactions with people of other religions in their migration path(s).

Whereas with the US-born set, 'peaceful' and 'religious diversity' are not so closely related. This is not to suggest that Americans think that peacefulness and religious diversity cannot be related, in fact both are located in the same quadrant in their cultural model. The greater distance between the two characteristics in the US-born model may demonstrate this group's heightened sensitivity to the security states, tensions created by secular nationalism, and religious embodiment in public spheres. Conversely it may be because there is a genuine belief that peace and religious diversity are difficult to create

in tandem. For example, when the Lutheran church opened their building for use by other religious identities, first when renting to refugee congregations and later when donating the church to VEC, there were tensions in the social relations in the building.

To be clear, the congregants of St. Matthew had a range of reactions to the space becoming a secular nonprofit. At one extreme, they welcomed the change and some joined VEC as volunteers. At the other extreme, some left and began attending a different Lutheran church in the area. In the middle were varying levels of discomfort with physical changes and treatment of the building. I listened to grievances from employees and congregants of St. Matthew about how other groups were treating the space. Often the comments had to do with other groups' lack of supervision of children, including food scraps and wrappers left in common spaces, on pews, and generally not disposed of properly. Another complaint was that the doors were not locked properly at night. Also, when available storage and changes of room layout (chairs, tables, etc....) began to shift as VEC staff started to rearrange and use the space as the donation had intended, this was met with questions and critique. When I spoke with the pastor about these tensions, it seemed that the congregants who felt this way were having difficulty letting go of a space that had been theirs to use how they wished for decades.

These complaints were not made (to the best of my knowledge) to the refugee and immigrant congregations directly. Instead they were shared with VEC staff who were the new managers and stewards of the building. This system made VEC aware of the building uses and areas that needed clarification with tenants, and also held VEC accountable for caring for the relations between the multiple tenants in the building.

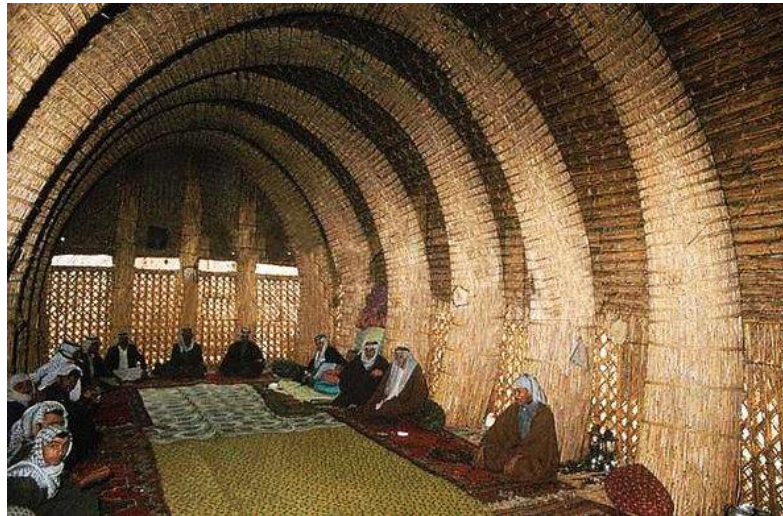
Unfortunately, without direct communication with the other congregations there may have been lost opportunities for developing bridging social capital, or “social relationships of exchange” between people with “shared interests or goals but contrasting social identities,” such as people of different races or religions (Pelling and High 2005, 310).

An example of this contrast is the interaction between the Congolese congregation and organizers of the Nepali/Bhutanese *Pooja*. The lack of interaction between the Lutheran congregation and the other groups in the building when learning how to coexist in the space may have hindered adjustment to the changes in the building for some in the St. Matthew community. Some of the Lutherans still referred to VEC as “their” church, although often unconsciously, thus displaying a perceived ownership. There was an observable difference between those who felt the need to advocate for their right to use the space compared to the assumed ownership and feelings of entitlement to the space.

### **5.5 Perceptions of the built environment**

Referring back to the cultural domain of VEC, there were two characteristics that emerged which specifically referred to the physical space: ‘the Building changes with the community’ and ‘the building is big and spacious’. The category ‘The Building changes with the community’ was synthesized from phrases such as “the way it turned over from one community to another” and “on Sunday it is a church but a community center the rest of the week ... we understand this as two places”. Many collaborators referred to the history of the building and how it was allowed to shift and transition with the neighborhood and user base.

The category ‘the building is big and spacious’ also showed value of the material space and many people spoke specifically of the architecture. The tall ceilings were mentioned as iconic of the space and the large open floor plan was appreciated by people who came for cultural gatherings, religious ceremonies, afterschool programs, and physical activity classes. In a conversation with a building visitor who was an immigrant from Iraq, he disclosed to me that this was his first time in a church. He went on to say, “I love the high, domed ceiling – it reminds me of these reed buildings built by the Ma‘dān – people in my home country who live in the southern marshes.” He told me the structures were called Mudhif and showed me a picture of one on his phone (Figure 4). The arched ceiling of the reed building and the arched ceiling of the sanctuary at VEC were unmistakably similar in form (Figure 5 and Figure 6).



*Figure 4 - Mudhif (Wikipedia)*



*Figure 5 - VEC Sanctuary facing front during a Sunday Sermon*



*Figure 6 - VEC Sanctuary facing rear of building*

Another instance when a visitor brought up the building's form was when the wife of a local rabbi came to visit and learn more about the work VEC was doing with refugees. Upon entering the sanctuary, she exclaimed "Oh My! You have an Ark here!" Delighted, the Lutheran pastor explained the architecture was indeed designed to evoke an over-turned ark. Their conversation passed on to discuss commonalities of flood stories across cultures and the iconic status of boats in the lives of many refugees today. Even a youth in VEC's afterschool program recognized the nautical form of the building.

She ran into the Center of the room, looked up and loudly asked, “why does this room look like a boat?”

Many of the Muslim respondents commented on the Christian nature of the building. One explained in her survey comment,

The building looks like a church when you walk by it outside, other women don't want to come here because they think it is a church. My children are too small to walk here on their own, but it is great to have this center close by now that we know it is not a church. (Anonymous. 2018. Survey Response.)

This sentiment was echoed by another Muslim African women I interacted with during the study. To better understand, I asked her how she thought the building could be more welcoming to people with her identity. She told me that there are Christian ‘marks, gesturing to the crosses, on the building in small places like the stained glass or on the bell tower’s dedication plaque need to be removed. Other than that, she explained, it will just take time for word to spread and increase her community’s dialogue about English classes and other services offered in the facility, reidentifying it as a community center instead of a church.

However, there was disagreement between different Muslim respondents. While two survey participants wrote that VEC should offer a prayer space for Muslim community members, a different woman told me in an informal interview that she would not come to VEC to pray. She explained that she felt this way because churches meet to worship at VEC and the remaining “marks” (cross) throughout the building made her uncomfortable. In the conversation she implied that her discomfort had to do with Christian worship within the same space as Muslim practice. While she was willing to come to the building for needed support and services (food, English class, and nursing

classes – if offered), the remaining Christian iconography in the building made her visibly unsettled and she vocalized her preference to pray in a Mosque rather than the VEC building.

*Church* is a common word to describe the building, even though it is now a community center. The symbolism of the architecture and artifacts in the space continues to manifest a Christian identity of the building. Many of the crosses have been removed but altering the stained-glass is a much larger undertaking the VEC staff are also pursuing. Removing the stained-glass is on hold until capital campaign funds for renovation have been source and acquired. Although the majority of the crosses have been removed, the churches that met on Sundays during my study period often display crosses. At times, these icons were not put away at the end of service. However, better habits of stowing crosses were developed over this year of research.

### **5.6 Place in larger landscapes of Aurora, CO**

In the cultural model, ‘Local and easy to get to’ referred to the accessibility of the building. Its location in a neighborhood made up of the very community both VEC and partner nonprofits wish to serve and activate was a highly valued characteristic of the facility. In the immediate area surrounding the building just under half of the residents are foreign-born (compared to the 20% city-wide). This neighborhood, the central part of Ward I, saw about a 30% increase in foreign-born population between 2010 and 2015 (City of Aurora 2016b, 35). Many of the nonprofit tenant partners at VEC mentioned the facility’s proximity to their constituency as a reason for choosing to lease an office in the building.



However, the importance of VEC's locality is more than just prime real estate because the institution has become embedded in the local urban fabric. Here I am referring to the influence it has had on the surrounding neighborhood. An example of this influence is evident at the intersection next to VEC, 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Havana Street (Figure 7). This was a two-way stop intersection such that the traffic moving north-south did not have a stop sign, but the east-west traffic did. The traffic

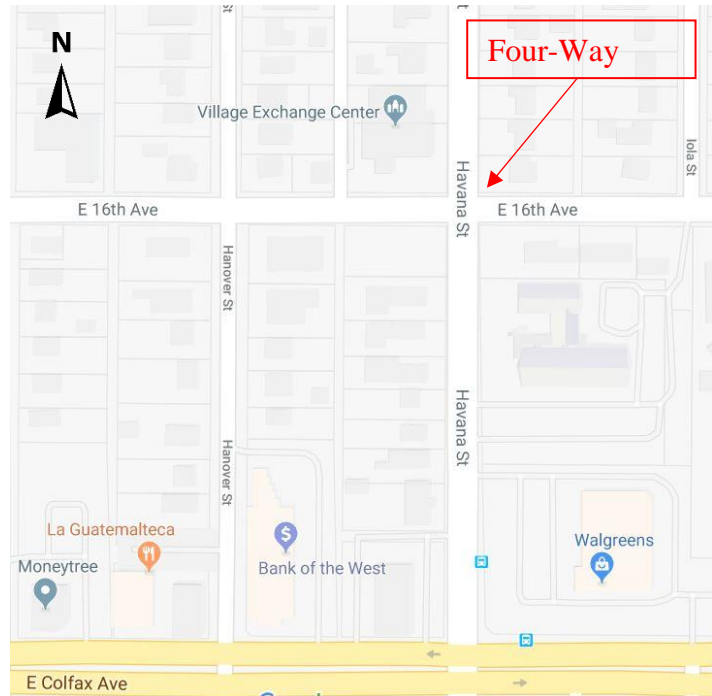


Figure 7 - Map of VEC intersection

light at the Colfax Avenue / Havana Street intersection, just one block South, created an unstable flow of traffic, making it difficult to cross Havana at 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue. After months of witnessing weekly car accidents at that intersection, a VEC employee contacted a colleague at the city government and was able to get a 4-way stop sign installed and create a safer intersection.

This change was highly noticed by the user base, especially the different congregations because of their frequent use of the building. Two individuals from separate congregations mentioned in our free-list interviews how great it was that the 4-

way stop sign was installed. They spoke about how it has made the intersection safer for their congregation when coming to church.

While this has made a positive impact for the immediate area, the building's user base is growing and VEC has begun conversations about how to address their need to increase available parking. At the time of the study, VEC had become friendly with the First Baptist Church of Aurora, located on the Southeast corner of the intersection. The relationship between the two institutions has allowed them to share parking lots and accommodate overflow parking during large events. This is another reason the installation of the 4-way stop was necessary. It increased the safety around the building since any visitors parking in the lot on the East side of Havana now have an easier time crossing over.

Over the year of my field work, VEC became more embedded, both physically and socially, in their neighborhood and the larger city landscape. Inadvertently, I bookended my research period with observation days at events beyond the walls of VEC. While I originally did not consider these observations to be applicable to this project, on reflection they provide additional context for the place VEC inhabits in the city. The two events were Global Fest in 2017 and the other was Conversations with Refugees with Yo-Yo Ma in 2018, both of which were held in August of their respective years.

VEC's role in each event was markedly different. For the first event, Global Fest, VEC was invited to host a booth to promote awareness about the new community center, the services they offered, the congregations that use the space, and the new youth program they planned to implement. This was VEC's first chance at a public introduction

to the community. Although they had hosted an *iftar*, the breaking of the daily fast for Ramadan, on World Refugee Day at the Center in June, this was the first time they were spreading the word about the new community center at a local event outside the facility. While the booth was colorful, well populated with staff, and offered a number of pamphlets about the Center and their vision for forthcoming and existing programming, they had not yet implemented most programs and were still navigating their path forward with the transition from church to community center. This event was a formal “hello” to the Aurora community, although the vision and direction was still in development. VEC desired access to community voices to help them guide and create the vision they had for the building. This event was one of their initial attempts to invite involvement and voice from the community.

Conversely, at Conversations with Refugees with Yo-Yo Ma a year later, VEC staff and volunteers had been asked to attend this event in order to take written notes of the conversations on behalf of the event planners. VEC had been identified as one of the vital community partners who would perform well in this role. This is evidence that they had gained the respect and trust of the immigrant community leaders who were doing the grassroots work of community capacity building. The purpose of the event was explained to me by one organizer as activating the local community voices and community-lead initiatives to help Aurora be an economically, socially, culturally, and civically healthy and integrated community. Interestingly, during this event I observed a number of conversations that reflected some of the items in the cultural domain of VEC such as creating a welcoming environment in Aurora, supporting and empowering the capacity of

the immigrant community, the importance and value of cultural diversity that is embraced in the US, and the vitality of a local community that is changing.

The contrast between these two, out-of-facility events demonstrate the changes in the relationship between VEC and the community they seek to serve. Upon founding VEC, the leaders were not integrated or connected with the local community. As such they put forth a lot of work and effort to garner authentic voice that could inform how VEC could engage with the active immigrant and refugee organizers and agencies. When VEC was first opened, the staff began outreach in the community, they were contacting them as outsiders, looking for input and involvement. Within a year they not only made vital contacts with community leaders, but also gained their trust. By the end of this one-year period, VEC had been incorporated into local happenings and the urban-social landscape.

Conversations with Refugees was a platform for the views and opinions of the active immigrant community in Aurora and not only was VEC invited to participate and listen to the stories, desires, and authentic voices of the community they serve, but also was entrusted with recording these voices for future action. Such a position in the community is not to be taken lightly as gaining trust from a wide variety of stakeholders takes much time and energy. Newcomers must show they are present to aid and support, not direct and control, the direction in which the community is headed. While VEC is still on a path of development and is in need of continuous guidance from the community, it is clear that community conceptions, understandings, and desires are integral in the formation and growth of VEC.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusions**

It seems prudent to start with a discussion of the challenges presented by the repurposing process in which VEC took part. From there I will turn to the benefits inherent in repurposing this church as an immigrant and refugee community center. Using these benefits and challenges, I pull forward a limited set of suggestions for VEC that could strengthen the community center. I conclude by extrapolating these analyses to isolate what can be learned from this project regarding strategies for embracing diversity in a Western city setting and the local institutions within.

### **6.1 Challenges**

Firstly, when addressing challenges here I intend to focus on challenges that, if solved, would strengthen the community center. There, of course, will be challenges that are beyond the purview and analysis of this project. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the challenges covered here are not a complete list but are specifically addressing the particular situation in which VEC finds itself and are limited by the scope and nature of this project.

Creating and maintaining the community's perception that VEC is a space that supports the equal standing of all beliefs will be a constant and ongoing challenge. The construction and re-construction of the building's identity takes place in a historical and social context. This situates the built environment in a field of power dynamics that stem

from its locality in Aurora, Colorado, its local, national, and global Christian history and heritage, and the temporal reality in a time defined by mass global migrations and increasing anti-immigrant fervor. In this reality, taking an ethical stance in relation to those not typically present or represented within US society, and more specifically in the VEC building, becomes complex and may not be uniform in application. In other words, VEC is carrying forward historical baggage; baggage related to Christian history, history of the previous users of the building and area, and history that is evoked by non-Christians who perceive the building from an external viewpoint. Thus, a non-user, and even a new user, of VEC may make assumptions based on built environment, influenced by their own experiences and positionality, about the building, why it is there and who it is there for based on clues from the material space.

However, this repurposing process has created new meanings and experiences for and by newcomers in the new user base. This has expanded the ways one can interpret VEC's historical baggage. Confronting these changes in an intentional manner that pays close attention to which religions and cultures "circulate, unquestioned" in the space will be a large undertaking and constant process (Butler 2011, 71). This study took place during a time of embryonic change and growth for VEC. They were developing new partnerships, gathering financial support for renovation of the building, and working on forming a core staff. These data and findings provide a snapshot of the reality within VEC. The reality of the space may have shifted since this study, especially because the research took place during a turbulent period of VEC's evolution. With that said, I can state that VEC was, and is, aware of Christianity's dominant visibility in the space and

sought to raise other religious practices up to this level of unquestioned presence, acceptance, and equity. Methods and approaches to this endeavor largely remain elusive and hotly debated among city planners and intellectuals in the field.

VEC's attempt to stow the cross before and after Sunday worship was one way that they had attempted to make room for other religious practices to become visible in the space. Unfortunately, due to logistical errors, and at times human forgetfulness, there were days the cross was not stowed after services. The constant visibility of the Christian symbology embedded in the architecture, visible during weekly religious services, and evident when the cross was not stowed after Sunday service was recognized by those who did not share that religious affiliation.

Another example of efforts to make other religions more visible is when the space is rented to events such as the Hindu *pooja*. This was in some cases effective, as with the *pooja* participants who felt comfortable making the space their own and inviting non-Hindus to come and experience the event alongside them. Other building visitors were able to witness the event, especially because it occurred over the course of a week, which increased the possibility of contact between this group and others.

Elevating all religions in this space poses an exceptional challenge, especially because of the high probability of a user base divided along lines of religious experience, and possibly even historical tensions and animosities. When it comes to practicing alongside other religions, the comfort levels varied widely in the user base. As a place where Christianity has, in the past, circulated unquestioned, individuals who had contentious and possibly traumatic personal histories with Christianity have experienced

some level of discomfort in the space. Conversely, there were Christians in this space who expressed feelings of discomfort when non-Christians were visibly present and practicing in their building. It is possible that this complication can be best understood through the current discourse involving secular and religious, and public and private.

While I have previously discussed VEC as a public space, churches have more recently been positioned as a private arena, not a public one, in the US. This was not always the case and in fact, US citizenship, nationhood, and collective identity has deep roots in public forms of Christianity (Bellah 2005, Stratton 2013, Braunstein 2017, Shoemaker 1997). Religion is again becoming more of a public topic with increased representation, visibility, and embodiment of religious diversity in public places. As public and private become more and more blurred, and the “neutrality” of the secular is shown to be false, it becomes clearer that certain religions may be given preference in public places. These preferences can be identified through areas of contestation, confrontation, and uneasiness. Herein lies a challenge as well. Although disruption of normalcy and conformity in public causes contestation of space, so too do processes of social reconfiguration when marginalized groups state their right to use a space from which they were previously omitted. Part in parcel of the challenge is providing a space where all have right of access. Moreover, VEC needs to be able to identify when conflict is caused by a group’s claims to their right to use the building in contrast to conflict that occurs from a group’s discomfort with sharing their space with those who are different. VEC may be able to create structures that are flexible enough to both allow for contest but intervene to moderate when others desire more direct support or empowerment.



Another looming challenge is the lack of an overarching shared cultural model. While this study's available data makes it difficult to understand variations in the way individuals ranked the characteristics and exactly why perspectives varied between subsets of the sample, I suggest there are valuable conclusions to draw from the data. First, that non-consensus in the total sample is most likely influenced by the multiplicity of backgrounds and experiences in the sample. The diversity of people who use the VEC building means that there is also a diversity of ideas. The realization of this diversity is an important facet of an institution such as VEC and should be seen as a benefit because this diversity is written into their mission, is a desired outcome of the establishment of the organization, and it contributed to the creation of the space in the first place. However, with plurality of backgrounds and identities comes a plurality of ideas and ways of understanding. Diversity is simultaneously a benefit and challenge for this institution.

Secondly, the various uses of the building and reasons for visiting did not correlate with the subsamples that agreed on the model. The repurposing process may have dislodged ingrained ideas about the building, creating vital space for new ideas, perceptions, and conceptions about the space. This new space is opened up to both new and old conceptions, and individuals are able to enact different and sometimes mutually exclusive ideas of the space. This will result in disagreements, both in the past and the future. VEC staff, as stewards of the building, will have to be prepared to identify and handle disagreements (overt or hidden) about who the space is for and who gets to influence change within it. I had assumed that, through shared use of the building and heightened interactions with the same place, the knowledge of the user base would begin

to align and coalesce into a shared model of the space. While there were subsamples that did demonstrate the expression of a shared model, even with their disparate backgrounds, this did not align with the number of activities they engaged in at VEC. Perhaps data on the frequency of visits, rather than types of activities, may have shown a correlation between the agreement and their frequencies of use.

The lack of single consensus for the total sample of fifty-two respondents means that there are multiple opinions, perceptions and beliefs regarding the best use and meaning of the space. The variety of reasons for visiting VEC could be contributing to this finding. For example, none of the refugee or immigrant congregants were represented in the subsample consensus. It is possible that the users' previous experiences and current reasons for using the facility could affect the cultural knowledge produced in the building. Those who attend church at VEC specifically because it represents a safe place for Christian practice may develop a different value system than those who attend for training, cultural gathering, or religious practice that is not so focused on creating bounded community.

Refugees, or for that matter a member of any other identity groups who may have experienced marginalization, may seek comfort in a community that shares and intimately understand that experiences of discrimination and marginalization. These types of communities offer intimate psychological support that is not available in settings that stress diversity and difference. Because of the multiple uses and private spaces available in the facility, groups are able to construct these spaces around shared experience. As with St. Catherine's in Houston, Texas (see Chapter 1), some religious communities

within the building may use the connectivity of their congregation to strengthen ethnic ties and create a tight knit ethnic community, not to diversify their social circles. While this is not inherently counter to a mission of celebrating cultural diversity, personal agendas may not include a desire to engage with people of different backgrounds, but in fact to draw closer ethno-religious ties. All this is to say that the lack of a widely agreed upon model presents a challenge that should be enticing and exciting, especially with 61.5% of survey respondents feeling they could be more involved in the Center. There is a desire to utilize and be present in the space.

It can be difficult to balance the line between supporting ethnic identity reproduction while also promoting exchange between cultures, especially for an organization dedicated to the furtherance of celebrating cultural diversity. This touches on the third challenge: the difference between celebrating and valuing cultural diversity. As a nonprofit whose mission includes the celebration of cultural diversity, VEC is confronted with the reality that their conception of cultural diversity differs from the user base it serves. Diversity and difference are highly valued by the user base, even when individual agendas may aim toward stronger ethno-religious ties, instead of building bridges with other identities.

Lived reality and experience for many in this area, US- and foreign-born alike, is embedded in the notion that the US is a place of immigrant diversity; the great American “melting pot.” Living amongst this diversity manifests differently based on individual experiences and identities. As Butler explains, there are certain identities that have specifically developed in relation to co-existence with difference, while others have not

been previously confronted with this need. Considering the variety of experiences present in the user base, some may place value on the space as a symbol and icon of diversity, and appreciate its existence in the community, without desiring to engage with others or celebrate other religious or cultural practices.

This challenge is a great one for VEC as they did originally set out to promote celebration of diversity and difference, at a time of increasing xenophobia, radicalization, security states, and general prejudice against difference. Valuing diversity and how it contributes to an understanding of others, and in turn one's own identity and values, is different than celebrating in a couple of ways. Referring back to the comment made about not being able "practice the love of Christ with other religions," this does not mean that the respondent did not appreciate the diversity present in both Aurora and the VEC facility. Rather, it indicates the inability to *celebrate* others in this space he finds sacred and safe for his identities and practices. Many, not all, of the immigrants becoming highly mobile today do so because of physical or structural violence. For them, moving quickly into a mindset of celebrating those who are different may be a difficult, if not impossible, leap. Bava's approach to a religious anthropology of movement positions the emigrant and immigrant as the same person (2011, 495 and 502). Therefore, as they enter a receiving society their lived realities are fresh, and many may still be grappling with new or unfamiliar experiences from migration that will then inform the reproduction and reformation of their values and positionality. Being bombarded with various new people seems to send these newcomers searching for familiarity in religious communities who share a religious affiliation of ethno-cultural practices and identities (Allen 2010). These

migrants may draw value from their interactions with people of different backgrounds and may even find commonality in experiences or practices. Celebration of others, however, may not be part of their personal agenda, at least not yet.

Watson suggests that an institution's level of adaptive dexterity and the willingness of an institution to the "sharing of space and different cultural practices" (Watson 2009, 320) has a great effect on its ability to survive in diversifying and globalizing cities. Taken in the context of this research, this can provide insight into why this quality of an institution is vital. If questions about how to share space and incorporate or accommodate other cultural practices are not considered in relation to the experiences of newcomers, institutions may take a wrong turn and end up distancing both original users and new ones. Since some groups may have interest in celebrating themselves, but not to celebrate others, the question becomes how can their cultural practices be accommodated and centered in such a way that allows others to celebrate them as well? Adaptive dexterity in this framing is considerate of the differing experiences and needs of all communities involved in the institution and may be asymmetrically adaptively dexterous depending on the desires and readiness of the community. Instead of mass sharing of space and practice, an institution with high adaptive dexterity would approach the diverse attitudes embedded in their user base with flexibility and consideration, understanding that desires and ability change and are affected by continuing experiences.

A last challenge, while not one I will give a lot of space to here, is logistical challenges. This project did not set out to evaluate facility management or service provision within this space. All newly established and young organizations have growing

pains and periods of turbulence as they develop programming and the capacity to realize their mission and vision. Furthermore, this development and capacity-building occurs in a political landscape of nonprofit funding options. The community of Aurora has a great need for the services provided by VEC and other nonprofits serving immigrants and refugees, but these organizations are saddled with the challenge of submitting proposals outlining why their programming is the best of its category and achieves the largest impact. While VEC has developed beneficial partnerships within the larger nonprofit and civic community, they have also navigated difficult setbacks related to the political reality in Aurora and will have to continue doing so in the future.

The challenge I am referring to is the overlapping of services and nonprofit missions in the service provider community in Aurora. Yet, as I have mentioned, the overlap and complications therein remain largely undefined by this project and further research into the intricate working of the local nonprofit infrastructure these organizations operate within would be highly beneficial for the Aurora community. The one example I can present here is the cycling of English classes at VEC. Little research has been done to quantify the need for English language acquisition in VEC's neighborhood, but my own ethnographic evidence indicates there is a greater need than is being met by the current services. The organizations that have offered ESL classes at VEC have rotated such that none offer English classes there in the same period of time. Although this could be due to a myriad of reasons such as funding stipulations, the possibility of competition for students, or classroom availability restrictions, it seems that this is a challenge that, if solved would greatly improve the community center. It would

be prudent to conduct a study of the community's need for classes and the different timeframes they could be offered. This would shed light on how best to maximize English class offerings within the current political climate these nonprofits function within.

## **6.2 Benefits**

The sample subsets that expressed a shared cultural model demonstrates the ability of a diverse community to agree on a cultural model for their shared-space. It seems there is cause for an optimistic outlook as this space has certain successes in transforming from a mono-faith and mono-cultural space to a one of diversity and multiplicity. An example of how people with different backgrounds can come to share the same values is evident in the example of the Mexican woman and Afghan woman who both desired access to cultural diversity at VEC. However, these two women are each guided by her own participation in VEC activities. The woman in the English class saw cross-cultural interaction through the lens of education and structured activity, while the woman attending a social community gathering pictured this same scenario framed in narrative-sharing and as an opportunity to develop social bridging capital (Pelling and High 2005). These two women agree on the value of cultural diversity even though the envisioned practice is modeled differently. This small difference demonstrates how disparate experiences in the same space can lead to an agreement on values and the co-creation of knowledge.

Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller, in their 2018 book *Migrants & City-Making* warn against methodological nationalism which defines societies solely by their national

identities and “assum[ing] that the members of these states share a common history and set of values, norms, social customs, and institutions” (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018, 3). This is damaging to research in the fields of social sciences, they argue, because it assumes all migrants from the same nation form a common identity. It then simultaneously contrasts host communities with migrant communities, creating a divide that runs counter to efforts of integration, acceptance, and unity. Using lenses that seek to organize ethnic and national identities into discrete units of study ignores commonalities across different migrant populations as well as between migrant populations and hosting populations. Similar to Bava’s framing of the immigrant and emigrant as the same person (2011), Çağlar and Glick Schiller challenge researchers to “discard the binary between migrants and non-migrants and yet keep in focus the migration experience” (2018, 5). While this study does separate migrants from the US-born population for analytical purposes, it also acknowledges the various social bonding and bridging that is present between migrants of different nationalities as well as between Americans, both newly arrived and long-time residents. In sum, the user base demonstrates a variety of ways to map their social realities onto VEC’s cultural landscape.

It is clearly beneficial for the Center to have a space where people with a diversity of experiences and backgrounds can come together and create common ground. This common ground is not without disagreement or struggle but is a place where individuals can explore what it means to create a space for themselves in a diverse society. VEC provides the opportunity to learn how to best negotiate space in a diverse setting for those who are not yet sure, or not yet confident in, how to accomplish this in a larger



(sometimes hostile) society. Using their experiences gained through migration, from countries of origin to receiving countries, and the interactions with people along the way, community members can use the social space of VEC explore how to employ these experiences to create a place where people of their identity belong. In turn, the new experiences of creating a space of belonging in VEC can and will inform their future actions beyond the walls of VEC. Additionally, VEC could consider implementing policy and infrastructure that would buttress this agenda by also providing social space in which it is expected and safe to try *and fail* and try again in this regard.

Furthermore, when this is done in tandem with others going through similar processes, overlaps and divergences occur. Living in a highly diverse society is a new experience for many. It seems that some feel the need to understand which experiences, beliefs, and values they have in common with others, while *also* exploring what differentiates them from others. Shared-space, in the context of VEC, is not one big place characterized by constant harmony. Contestation of space, difficult discussions about difference, and feeling comfortable and confident enough to exert agency in these contested zones is one of the benefits of shared multi-cultural space.

Another benefit is VEC's location, not only because of easy access to the community, but also because it was the community in the first place that initiated the transition and repurposing of the building. Çağlar and Glick Schiller use the terms "displacement and emplacement" to discuss how marginalized residents of cities play a role in the "processes of the restructuring of space and social relations at given points in time" (2018, 16). The authors offer further explanation in the example of slum

designations in India as a way for poor populations to accumulate capital through dispossession processes. They go on to eloquently explain why such marginalized populations are integral processes to city-making,

In cases where cities become depopulated or abandoned by wealthier people, some neighborhoods remain viable because they are claimed by the poor. These areas and properties within them are often constituted within multiscalar city-making networks of migrant and non-migrant small businesses and religious, political, social, humanitarian, and charitable institutions that cater to the urban poor (Morell 2015). Within these networks, poor people contribute to processes of accumulation by putting a brake on abandonment, decay, and devaluation as well as through the social relations their activities generate. (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018, 18)

These concepts align well with the process in which VEC took part. The community surrounding VEC has gone beyond just putting a “brake on abandonment” to move into reinvestment in their neighborhood and the amenities it offers. Many key informants, collaborators, and participants find this reclamation of space and accumulation of urban capital an appealing aspect and integral to the identity of VEC as an institution. As such, the voices and actions of the immediate community should continue to inform the progress and development of the facility. Following this line of reasoning, the institution and building should be open to mirroring future changes in the surrounding community.

Reconfiguration and repurposing did not come without conflict. As physical changes in the building began to manifest (like the removal of crosses and small-scale renovation) there was tension between various users. This is not only to be expected, but possibly beneficial in generating feelings of belonging and tools for navigating diversity.

Through community listening projects, focus groups, community gatherings, and developing friendships, VEC staff made concerted efforts to keep open lines of

communication with their user base during my research period. This is a vital and necessary practice and will provide structure that will continue to centralize and elevate community voice in future directions and development. Through these lines of communication, VEC has already begun to alter the space in ways that align with some of the findings in this paper. For example, the need for more multipurpose space prompted the removal of pews and the need for increased street safety led to the installation of the four way stop.

### **6.3 Strategies for accommodating diversity**

Diversity is creating a challenge for many urban planners today as they try to accommodate all the various agendas and needs across the citizenry. However, as Mohammad A. Qadeer points out “the multiplicity of communities of distinct cultures living in the same space has long been a characteristic of cities. ... Cultural diversity of cities is not a new phenomenon” (2009, 11). The City of Aurora is making great strides in policy and planning and is following Qadeer’s Policy and Practice Index of Multicultural Planning (2009, 13) such that one can find a manifestation of almost every one of the twenty guiding principles he offers in the strategic plan for the city (Office of International and Immigrant Affairs 2015). The scope of this project did not include an in-depth analysis of Aurora’s multicultural planning policies (although that would be an excellent next step for this research), so I am unable to say whether Qadeer’s Index was intentionally used to guide the authorship of Aurora’s policies. Nonetheless, this paper is about a microcosm of multicultural belonging in a city already recognized for making

strides in cultural diversity programs citywide (NLC 2017). What can be learned from this specific social construction of space in the context of a city leading this effort?

While there were mixed feelings about the Christian nature of the architecture of VEC, many in the community respected and valued the continued connection to the building's history. The appreciation expressed by the user base was not the history alone, but the emerging heritage that now encompasses community-centered change and adaptation of the material and social space. So, although a particular historical reality of the building continues forth, it is the community's ability to influence the space that makes this a valued characteristic. There is a noticeable segment of the VEC user base (mostly the nonprofit organizations and government offices) who, on many public occasions in the building, express great gratitude for St. Matthew's choice to donate and repurpose their church. The phrase "planting a legacy" is the preferred terminology within the community to describe this action by St. Matthew congregants.

Many urban planners who are guided by the principles of New Urbanism call for density and connectivity in urban, and suburban, developments. The location of VEC may not initially be acknowledged as 'density' in the sense that New Urbanists might typically recognize, but co-locating services, religious space, and the embedding of cultural diversity in the very neighborhood is not only increasing connectivity, but densifying connectivity. When the Lutheran congregation found their membership still on a downward slope and a persisting disconnection from their neighborhood, they switched strategies for adaptation and continued to search for ways to make the building work for both their changing neighborhood and themselves. By inviting immigrant congregations

to share their worship space, St. Matthew took the first step in densifying their neighborhood and creating multicultural space.

The category of the cultural domain 'local and easy to get to' further emphasizes the importance of accessible services concentrated in the neighborhood. Some community leaders valued the location because it provides easy access to clients who use their services. Others valued the locality because it was within walking distance from their house or just a bus stop away, which enabled them to access classes while their husbands were at work. Instead of selling to a developer who may have built an apartment building (another form of density), St. Matthew and VEC saw the opportunity to densify *access*; what Toni Griffin defines as "convenient proximity to, presence of, and/or connectivity to basic needs, quality amenities, choices, opportunities and decisions" (Griffin 2015, 8).

The opportunistic location of the building is not unique to VEC. Many church properties with reduced capacity for stewardship are often located in city centers. These properties are in highly desirable and sought-after real estate locations. S. Seward Salisbury provides some context for the placement of urban churches; "the churches of the representative American city were located and built in terms of the ecological pattern of the city, and the congregations, the programs, and vitality of churches have changed as the ecological areas in which they have been located have changed" (1964, 429). In the typical American city churches were erected in residential areas where their congregants lived, and as such these churches were "appropriate to the spiritual and social needs of the neighborhood" (Salisbury 1964, 440). Employing social and urban ecology, Salisbury

explains why urban churches find themselves in the middle of an unfamiliar landscape as time passes. This study critically examines one such example to suggest that sites such as these should be considered as possible opportunities for diversifying cityscapes. Disused or struggling urban churches can be put to use as sites of emplacement, connectivity, and density of access, but not without labor intensive engagement of the staff and challenges that need to be approached sensitively and intentionally. However, these desirable plots are coveted by ravenous corporate developers, and now various community actors have begun to examine which urban places should and can continue to serve the “spiritual and social needs of [their changing] neighborhoods” (Salisbury 1964, 440) rather than letting them be gobbled up by mass-produced urban renewal.

#### **6.4 Suggestions for VEC**

The concept and reality of VEC is imbued with the importance of cultural diversity at multiple scales. An important take away from this study is that the different individuals who make up VEC’s user base are employing their previous experiences to help them navigate the space. This means that while cultural diversity is integral to their experience, both in larger society and the enclave within VEC, their particular methods for navigating this reality will be different. Some will explore social, cultural, and religious difference with heightened interest and eagerness to engage with others in an exchange of knowledge. Others will approach the diversity therein with open minds and open hearts, but without intention to seek integration or to praise and celebrate others. For these individuals, previous experiences have provided a desire to build connections within ethnic boundaries as a mechanism of social-emotional wellbeing.

It would behoove VEC staff to take these different approaches to diversity into consideration with regard to their mission statements, statements of purpose, and other official documents. This is not to say that the phrase “celebrate cultural diversity” needs to be removed from their literature, but rather that it should be understood and communicated through the community that some individuals do not have this goal in mind when using this space. Furthermore, some individuals might eventually develop a desire to celebrate difference, others might not, and this is not something that I would suggest VEC endeavor to actively attempt to change.

Beyond the varying willingness to celebrate cultural and religious diversity, the interactions and conversations that are occurring within the user base are more complex than the term ‘celebration’ can encompass. Living, playing, and working within a diverse society presents new challenges every day and the participants in the Natural Helpers program demonstrate the need and importance of a space that encourages exploration of what this lived reality means for them. Future leaders in the broader Aurora community will need to have complex conversations in order to develop tools that will be successful in this climate. Considering this complexity, I suggest that VEC explore terminology that clearly and accurately demonstrates its commitment to meet the community where they are at. This includes acknowledging their own role in helping develop a better understanding of the cultural and religious reality in Aurora. In this way, VEC can continue to develop as a place for where community voices are amplified.

Furthermore, I suggest VEC explore ways to create policy and infrastructure which would be flexible enough to provide support to individuals learning how to

communicate across culture lines while also, as the situation calls for, allowing individuals the space to learn how to do this of their own agency and autonomy. As was demonstrated with the conversation between the Congolese and Hindu community members in navigating the shared sound space in the building, many individuals will be able to enter contentious conversations amicably and reasonably. It is also important to understand that some individuals may not be able to do so and would benefit from guidance, structure, and empowerment from VEC to develop their own strategies for engaging in productive cross-cultural discussion.

Another suggestion to be garnered from this study is to pay close attention to the way cultural values are organized when designing programs and space. Learning and education is seen as a social endeavor. Programmatic engagement would benefit from being organized around closely related items in the cultural domain. This not only means the encouragement of social interaction in educational spaces, but also designing educational spaces in such a way to allow for community building alongside intellectual growth.

Related to the previous point, the building renovations and expansion need to be reflexive of the current communities' values, but also should have the ability to change and adapt alongside the community. This will include some obvious infrastructural improvement for capacity increase. An example of needed infrastructural improvement that would build the capacity of the Center would be to bring the commercial kitchen up to code and renovate it to include spaces that are geared toward vocation training programs. Another would be to ensure there is common spaces for cross-cultural



gathering and contact, such as social hallways, courtyards, and meeting areas. As demonstrated in the data, cross-cultural contact happens in liminal space so the design of these should be considered within that context. Additionally, there should also be secluded spaces for communities who wish to gather together to reinforce their individual ethno-cultural identities. In other words, both bridging social capital and bonding social capital could and should be fostered inside the facility.

Along with these are other culturally relevant considerations, such as flow through the building and religiously/culturally necessary features. For example, considering needs such as separate entrances and washing areas for Muslim communities when they attend prayer. It is already well situated because the ‘front’ of the sanctuary room faces east because the *qibla* for Denver, the direction face while praying towards Mecca, is to the northeast. More generally, the architecture should be used to the advantage of renovation plans. Some of the more non-specific, yet recognizable features, of the building were recognized and interpreted in different ways by different people. If done correctly, playing up these aspects, instead of attempting to alter them, will allow visitors to assign their own interpretations and meanings. One way to approach this is with the hull-like construction of the sanctuary. This form does not necessarily need to be disguised, but rather reimagined to evoke memories of previous structures or cross-cultural flood stories. The one, and extremely important caveat is that the community voice needs to remain present and at the forefront. Focus groups can garner reactions of the proposed designs and could be one way to ensure that the new imagery and built

environment is truly appreciated as beautiful and welcoming to a broad spectrum of identities.

Finally, and related to this last point, VEC should be taking an intentional and critical approach to the remaining religious iconography in the building, including looking at how to handle the stained-glass windows on the north wall of the sanctuary and the bell tower plaque. It is not advisable to attempt to completely erase the history of the building. Instead I suggest to intentionally curate this heritage. Installing a permanent exhibit to curate and document history, while regulating its influence over the space is highly recommended and quite viable. Important and iconic items in the history of St. Matthew could be correctly contextualized in exhibit format. Furthermore, taking this route would both pay homage to the actions of St. Matthew's congregants as well as preserve the heritage of the building in an intentional way that guides visitors in understanding the transformations the space has gone through. If incorporated into an entry-way design it can be used to guide people into the history of the space, thus curating and directing first impressions. A project such as this could include a written narrative of this transformation and demonstrate the inclusivity by providing it in multiple languages.

An exhibit project aiming to preserve the building's heritage would be easily designed and installed by a consulting curator, but maintenance of the exhibit would be passed on to community members like the remaining congregants of St. Matthew. The exhibit would serve as a vehicle through which to educate the public while also inviting historical dialogue with the present reality in a closely managed setting. As time passes

and the user base continues to change and grow, the exhibit and institutionalized memory of St. Matthew would also be allowed to grow into the future alongside VEC. Annette Van den Bosch explains, "museums offer a unique opportunity to represent the historical past in ways that create a dialogue with contemporary issues and possible futures" (2007, 506). I believe that the same can be true with stand alone exhibits in community spaces such as VEC. An exhibit of this nature could play a role in anchoring the identity of VEC and generating a common understanding of the, now shared, heritage.

### **6.5 Suggestions for further research**

There were some gaps in this research and, admittedly, the data could have benefitted from a larger sample. However, more importantly, the format of the data collection tool could be improved. The results of the paired comparison survey could have been garnered from either a shorter survey or a pile sorting activity. In a Lean Research methodology, where research is guided by the four Rs (Rigor, Respect, Relevance, and Right-sized), this study fell short of a truly respectful project (Hoffecker, Leith, and Wilson 2015). The survey contained a total of seventy-five questions and was a tedious task such that a few recruited respondents chose not to finish the survey because of the length. The *respect* principle of Lean Research is accomplished when “subjects find the experience enjoyable and meaningful” and when “dignity and delight of the human subject at the center of the research experience” (Hoffecker, Leith, and Wilson 2015, 2). While I believe the majority of study collaborators and participants enjoyed the opportunity to converse and provide input into this research, many did not find the data collection tool enjoyable or delightful. In future rounds of research, I plan to take this into

consideration when designing the research protocol. A possible remedy is to break up the survey with more engaging questions throughout or utilizing multiple activities within the interview process, for example combining a pile sorting activity with close- and open-ended questions.

To return to the discussion about applied anthropology, there is a lot to be learned from this project. Most importantly that long term anthropological research should continuously give back to the community it is studying. In academia researchers are often pressured to publish or share work that they can defend as accurate and verifiable. This constraint often reduces the ability to share interim reports or preliminary findings with the people who contributed their ideas and knowledge to the project. To engage in applied work, as stated in the beginning, is a moral and ethical undertaking where the researcher is held accountable to the community and participants, and to themselves as a researcher. Reflecting on this project, I do not believe that you have to be engaging in collaborative research to be held accountable to the study population. My future anthropological projects will take this into consideration whether collaborative, public, action, or some other form of anthropological research.

As mentioned throughout this paper, there were some places of missed opportunity in data collection. Firstly, it is unfortunate that the congregants who responded to this survey were a limited sample. Due to time constraints and various scheduling issues, I was unable to include any voices of the Congolese congregation or a sufficient sample from the Myanmarese congregation in the paired comparison survey. While these voices are not missing from the project as a whole, the quantitative data sets

should be considered with this in mind. Furthermore, while there are vital and informative findings garnered from the survey, additional variables could have highlighted other patterns in the data. The variables, as previously mentioned, are frequency of visits to the facility and length of time residing in the US.

Looking forward, there are many directions a future study can take. Locally, an ethnographic analysis of the Aurora strategic integration plan could add texture and dimensionalize the effects and application of these policies. A landscape study of the political climate nonprofits operate within in Aurora would provide local individuals and organizations clarity and could help increase their efficacy. Along the lines of increasing nonprofit efficacy, a quantitative study of English class needs in the Original Aurora neighborhood would be beneficial to numerous educational institutions and organizations. Such studies could be guided by the preexisting data that the City of Aurora, and other organizations such as University of Colorado: Anschutz and The Denver Foundation, have collected and curated over the recent decade.

Lastly, this project focuses on the transition of a particular building in a community's effort to encompass new uses and a new user base. More research needs to be done on how this process varies between institutions attempting the same, or a similar, undertaking. (Salisbury 1964, 440). This growing phenomenon of repurposed churches is laden with other questions. How would this process look different in non-Lutheran churches, Jewish synagogues, or other well-established houses of worship? Will this cultural domain change in the next five years? Would replications of the Village Exchange Center's process in other scenarios also replicate similarly formed cultural

domains? In a far-sighted view of the future of city landscapes, where are these church buildings and are they being used?

## **6.6 Concluding remarks**

I began this research with the suggestion that repurposed churches may be well-suited for supporting the new and increasing immigrant-driven religious and cultural diversity in urban centers. This was based on the assumption that religious, ethnic, and civic identity are often employed in tandem to create shared-space and related feelings of belonging. Furthermore, I suggested that the material, social, and symbolic reality of Christian churches would complicate the adaptation.

With the findings of this study, I did not find that struggling churches are immediately well-suited for repurposing as multi-faith and multicultural refugee and immigrant community centers, but rather that they are imbued with potential. The complex reality and cultural knowledges that have grown within the walls of VEC are a testament to the invaluable space it has provided Aurora residents, both newly-arrived and native-born. However, the challenging obstacles and scenarios that VEC has faced and will have to confront in the future indicates that this is not a simple undertaking. The interpretation of the space by both Christians and non-Christians is rooted in their personal experiences with religious acceptance. As this thesis has discussed, the emigrant and immigrant are not only the same person, but also their migration experiences play influential roles in future actions they take in their receiving society. Experiences throughout the migration path continue to shape beliefs around belonging and attitudes towards bridging or bonding social capital. VEC will have to take this variety of

experiences into considerations to realize its full potential in the community. The required economic, social, and cultural capital as well as human labor and determination are key factors in VEC's future success.

This is not to say that repurposing and reusing this church was ill-conceived because any such undertaking to create multicultural space will also be laden with contention and struggle. People need to work through what it means for them to exist alongside those with different backgrounds, and how this may influence their relationship to their own identity. This is why I believe that both the benefits and challenges uncovered in this study point to the enormous potential of these community-oriented spaces. The type of space where community members can come together to discuss the meaning and reality of our diversifying cities is desired by the VEC user base. Additionally, space dedicated for those who want to build up internal bonds with others of the same ethno-religious identity is also something that VEC can offer. This complex reality of needs is what fills VEC with potentiality.

Furthermore, the finding regarding the valuation of cultural diversity indicates that intersectional identities seem to indeed inform the ways in which community members approach creating a space of belonging. However, this reality manifests differently for each individual based on how previous experiences inform current belonging needs. While some may seek to build bridges with others of difference backgrounds to broaden their social networks, others will instead seek stronger bonds with those who provide comfort in the form of a familiar ethno-religious identity.

Additionally, VEC is well positioned in the Aurora cityscape for this undertaking. The central locality of disused urban churches such as St. Matthew is an invaluable asset for cities facing urban blight, social concerns, and struggling citizens. VEC's locality alongside its developing capitals greatly increases its capacity to serve the community. The diversity that gives Aurora its unique city identity also builds VEC's capacity for successfully creating the place described in their mission. In fact, the placement of VEC in the urban landscape is one of the biggest advantages for the institution, partner organizations, and the local community.

The potential of Village Exchange Center is well documented in this research. This repurposing process, organically stemming from the needs of the community, continues to evolve as new visitors and their values and beliefs are added to the user base. The Christian nature of the built environment plays a large role in the challenges and benefits explored in this paper. These challenges, and others not mentioned herein, will no doubt be the focus of many long planning conversations as VEC moves into the future. Yet, the heritage of the building and its founding community played a formative role in the initial adaptations. If treated properly and with care, VEC's past and present can be used together to generate new and imaginative versions of the building and community in the future.



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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Coded Free List Items

#### Empowering supportive and helpful

Empowerment/empower  
Social services  
Helping us/helpful  
Recovery  
Support  
Something here that benefits them

#### Religious or spiritual space

Church  
Worship  
Sacred Space  
Sanctuary

#### Togetherness and connection with others

Collaboration  
Meet so many people/Meeting others/Group meetings  
Connecting  
People are all refugee like us, we are the same  
Together/togetherness  
Networking  
Unity

#### Celebrating cultural diversity

Cultural  
Intercultural  
Diversity  
Difference shows here/Many different people  
A place for people of different races and faiths

#### Inviting and welcoming

Welcoming/welcome/feel welcome here  
Want to come here  
Inclusive  
Inviting

#### Religious diversity and sharing

Interfaith/Multi-faith  
Four different congregations using the building

Multi-Christian
Sharing/Different people listen to the Congolese music, we get to share our music
All the other religious leaders here
A place for people of different races and faiths to build
<b>Educational resources</b>
Classes
Education
Resources
<b>Multipurpose and versatile</b>
Versatile
Multipurpose
Good for our needs
Many different type(s) of classes for the community
Many different things/Simultaneous events
Everyone will have a different reason to come here
The upstairs looks like a church, but we could use it for our needs, women on right men on left, and there is already a stage so we wouldn't have to make one
<b>The building changes with the community</b>
The way it turned over from one community to another
Sunday it is a church but a community center the rest of the week/understand this as two places
Change/It changes from church to a community center
History/Building has history
<b>Local and easy to get to</b>
Accessible in a way/Easy to access
Central/local
Close to constituency is an asset
Easy to find
Close to home
<b>Peaceful</b>
Peaceful/peace
<b>The building is big and spacious</b>
Spacious
Big
Huge
Unique Architecture with tall ceiling



## Appendix B

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
		WEL	PEA	TOG	EMP	CUL	EDU	MUL	LOC	BIG	REL	SPA	CHA
1	WELCOME	0	11	7	9	8	5	5	13	13	14	19	16
2	PEACEFUL	8	0	6	3	2	4	6	3	15	10	16	7
3	TOGETHER	12	13	0	10	7	10	2	9	17	16	16	12
4	EMPOWER	10	16	9	0	12	9	13	18	16	12	17	16
5	CULTURAL	11	17	12	7	0	12	12	13	15	16	17	16
6	EDUCATION	14	15	9	10	7	0	8	13	19	14	13	16
7	MULTIPUR	14	13	17	6	7	11	0	13	16	14	19	12
8	LOCAL	6	16	10	1	6	6	6	0	13	10	14	9
9	BIG	6	4	2	3	4	0	3	6	0	5	9	6
10	RLGS. DIV.	5	9	3	7	3	5	5	9	14	0	18	7
11	RSLGS. SPACE	0	3	3	2	2	6	0	5	10	1	0	8
12	CHANGE	3	12	7	3	3	3	7	10	13	12	11	0

Table 2 – Foreign-Born Matrix (n=19)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
		WEL	PEA	TOG	EMP	CUL	EDU	MUL	LOC	BIG	REL	SPA	CHA
1	WELCOME	0	9	4	6	5	4	3	10	9	10	12	11
2	PEACEFUL	3	0	2	1	1	3	3	2	11	8	12	3
3	TOGETHER	8	10	0	7	3	7	1	6	10	11	9	8
4	EMPOWER	6	11	5	0	9	7	8	11	10	9	11	9
5	CULTURAL	7	11	9	3	0	9	8	9	11	11	12	11
6	EDUCATION	8	9	5	5	3	0	5	7	12	9	8	9
7	MULTIPUR	9	9	11	4	4	7	0	9	11	10	12	8
8	LOCAL	2	10	6	1	3	5	3	0	9	6	10	5
9	BIG	3	1	2	2	1	0	1	3	0	2	5	3
10	RLGS. DIV.	2	4	1	3	1	3	2	6	10	0	12	3
11	RSLGS. SPACE	0	0	3	1	0	4	0	2	7	0	0	4
12	CHANGE	1	9	4	3	1	3	4	7	9	9	8	0

Table 3 - US-Born Matrix (n=12)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
		WEL	PEA	TOG	EMP	CUL	EDU	MUL	LOC	BIG	REL	SPA	CHA
1	WELCOME	0	28	17	20	21	14	19	29	29	34	42	37
2	PEACEFUL	24	0	22	20	19	19	24	19	37	23	34	24
3	TOGETHER	35	30	0	29	25	27	19	31	42	32	36	33
4	EMPOWER	32	32	23	0	33	24	33	41	41	24	34	35
5	CULTURAL	31	33	27	19	0	33	31	31	34	32	36	33
6	EDUCATION	38	33	25	28	19	0	19	35	36	27	27	30
7	MULTIPUR	33	28	33	19	21	33	0	38	37	28	39	30
8	LOCAL	23	33	21	11	21	17	14	0	27	23	31	23
9	BIG	23	15	10	11	18	16	15	25	0	15	27	22
10	RLGS. DIV.	18	29	20	28	20	25	24	29	37	0	38	23
11	RSLGS. SPACE	10	18	16	18	16	25	13	21	25	14	0	28
12	CHANGE	15	28	19	17	19	22	22	29	30	29	24	0

*Table 4 – Total Survey Respondents Matrix (n=52)*

Appendix C

