EVERYBODY HAS A STORY
the people of the rio grande depot district

the hub
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UNIVERSITY OF UTAH HONORS THINK TANK

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The American city should be a collection of communities
where every member has a right to belong. . . .
It should be a place where each individual’s dignity and self-respect
is strengthened by the respect and affection of his neighbors.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON
ome voices are heard and others are submerged. Audible voices often represent politicians, lobbyists, corporate executives, and the media—powerful elites who create and perpetuate agendas and policies. The subaltern voices are not excluded because they lack articulation; they are not absent from the decision-making arena because the speakers are unable to formulate their complaints; nor does their relative silence denote consensus. These voices are all around: residents, commuters, small-business owners, and the homeless. The perspectives of these diverse individuals on the state of the area surrounding the Intermodal Hub was the subject of the Think Tank’s ethnographic research.

Ethnography is the “branch of anthropology that deals with the qualitative description of human social phenomena, often based on months or years of fieldwork and may describe society as a whole; or it may focus on specific problems or situations within a larger social scene” (Wikipedia, n.d.). It is a subjective science that focuses on the human story and voices of those who experience what is being explored. For example, reviewing data about crime perpetrated by the homeless presents one perspective of homelessness; talking to homeless individuals evokes a different impression of what it’s like to be homeless and puts a face on the lifeless data that is so often the basis for policy.
Our ethnographic study focused on the Hub area of downtown Salt Lake City, specifically blocks 46 and 63—between 500 and 600 West and 200 and 400 South—plus the surrounding two block radius. We began with a vague understanding of ethnography. Our grasp of the subject came in two phases: (1) dispelling preconceived assumptions about what to expect from ethnographic research; then (2) developing a methodology that laid the groundwork for effective information gathering. Some issues such as communication barriers with non-English speakers and the impacts those barriers had on our ability to interview minority members of the neighborhood complicated the process.

...but I know who holds the future.”
RALPH ABERNATHY
PRECONCEIVED ASSUMPTIONS

We assumed that a list of questions could capture the complexities of downtown and enable respondents to impart their concerns in a quantifiable manner. However, we realized that an open conversation allowed us and the respondents to become more comfortable with the interview process and provided a more comprehensive awareness of the respondent’s analysis of downtown. The eventual paradigm was more a cordial dialogue than a rigorous interview. For example, we found business owners who were ignorant of the complexities of the homeless situation and homeless people who were conscious of the contradictions imposed on their situation from the outside.

Our initial assumptions about the type of establishments stakeholders would want in the Hub area had us focused on entertainment and social interaction—bars, clubs, restaurants, and coffee shops. We imagined that respondents would have similar visions of downtown, and we even discussed coffee shops as a possible addition to the neighborhood. However, few respondents’ ideas matched our assumptions and some adamantly opposed more bars and restaurants.
Each person we interviewed presented us with a distinct perspective of Salt Lake City.

METHODOLOGY

When we asked people questions randomly, their answers seemed vague. Our interviewees had an intricate knowledge of downtown, but most of them had never been asked their points of view about the development of their city; they hadn’t been asked to consider specific problems and possible solutions.

It was necessary to allow respondents to speak for themselves and at the same time help focus their answers by asking for descriptions and anecdotes—and all this without imposing our perspectives. We did not want the inherent control we had in the ethnographic process to yield an overrepresentation of our opinions.

Qualitative and ethnographic research methods require capturing individual voices, finding common themes, and organizing the research around these themes. We group our research results under the headings The First Day, Artspace, Pioneer Park, Pierpont, and Gateway.
THE RESULTS

The First Day
Cup of Joe’s became the designated meeting place by default. It wasn’t that there weren’t other choices; it was the place that met our two criteria: (1) it was near the Hub district and (2) it served coffee and muffins. The first day of field research, we stared at each other from around a small, Formica-topped table at Cup of Joe’s, sipping our coffee and making small talk, while working up the nerve to conduct that first interview.

Before arriving, we had anticipated profound conversations with downtown stakeholders, imagining ourselves posing brilliant questions and receiving insightful answers that would immediately contribute to our study and point us in a constructive direction. There we were, on the edge of our seats, vaguely recalling our previous confidence and our desire to enlighten and be enlightened.

So we theorized about our research, but finally decided to call someone we knew from the area to get us started. The acquaintance agreed and presented us with our first perspective—"I hate corporations, [The] Gateway, and everything mainstream." Though his language seemed derivative, his worldview—that big business is bad for communities and neighborhoods—was compelling. Chain stores often drive locally-owned stores out of business. Rather than investing back in the community, they send most of their profits to out-of-state headquarters. On the other hand, large companies provide many jobs to local residents that might not exist otherwise.

Artspace
We thought that residents would have the highest level of interaction with the neighborhood, and therefore would be the greatest source of information about what was, what is, and what should be in this place. The two elements of the area’s past that have most influenced its present condition are its historic low-income roots and its more recent artistic sensibility.

The continuation of the low-income tradition of the neighborhood means there are affordable living spaces for people like Pete, the executive director of a non-profit organization, permitting him to engage in activism with low overhead. It also enables Lyndsie, artist and owner of Artisan Frameworks, to run her own business outside her back door. However, Lyndsie notes that when she first moved to the area, drug deals were a common
occurrence. While the amount of dealing has decreased, the continued presence of the homeless population in Pioneer Park eliminates a possible outdoor play space for her preschool-aged son Jack. Her neighbor, Franco, does not seem particularly bothered by the homeless population, but he expressed concern over drug deals in the area, while noting their decrease in recent years. Still, he prefers the solitude of his apartment to the environment outside, and apart from his relationship with a few businesspeople in the area, most of his interactions take place outside the neighborhood. Despite the negative aspects attributable to the area’s low-income status, however, these residents claim to feel safe here.

Most residents saw the neighborhood’s support of artistic endeavors as an important feature of its character. Three of the existing apartment projects and one that will be built soon are part of Artspace, an organization providing a combination of housing and workspace to local artists at relatively low cost. That has led to a vibrant ambience and a variety of local businesses that cannot be found elsewhere in downtown Salt Lake City. While residents appreciate the avant-garde nature of the community, they do not have what we understand as a sense of neighborhood. A limited interaction among neighbors appears to contribute to this.

One of our researchers, Julianne, formerly lived in the Cup of Joe’s building, but recently moved to an area of with a mix of single-family residential and apartments because she wanted a better sense of neighborhood. During the first day at Cup of Joe, Julianne realized that although she recognized many friends, pets, and faces, they were only from the building where she had lived, not from other neighborhood buildings. It appears that few people walk from place to place or bump into one another in the course of daily activities. Instead, many residents travel to other parts of the city by car for many of their daily needs, including human interaction.

By comparison, the people in Julianne’s current neighborhood who know one another are those who spend time in the neighborhood. They play with their children, hold yard sales on their lawns, relax on their front porches, walk their dogs, and walk to work and to a variety of other area businesses, most frequently a local market, a Vietnamese restaurant, a coffee shop, three bakeries, and a laundromat.

The apparent lack of interaction in the Hub area raises some important questions for planners: What will get people out of their cars and onto the street? What will get them to cross the park on their way from here to there? What will get them interested in the neighborhood outside their apartment buildings and workplaces?

"The grocery store is the great equalizer where mankind comes to grips with the facts of life like toilet tissue."
JOSEPH GOLDBERG
Some residents had ideas about what would foster community interaction while allowing the neighborhood to better meet residents’ needs. The most often mentioned need was for a local grocer. Although a few residents mentioned that they would like to see a Super Target at The Gateway—an idea that has been discussed by planners and developers—most were interested in small, urban corner markets that carry affordably-priced, everyday necessities such as dog food, toilet paper, canned and packaged foods, and a small selection of meats, dairy products, and produce. This would allow transit-dependent and vehicle-owning residents to make frequent trips on foot for groceries, rather than occasional trips by car or bus. Symbiotically, this would provide more sidewalk activity and opportunities for neighbors to encounter one another outside of their respective apartment buildings. Local business owner Tony Caputo recognizes the need for a general purpose grocery store, but believes that the neighborhood’s residents alone could not support such a store. Still, with several new housing projects currently planned or under construction, as well as an influx of commuters that the new inter-modal transit hub is expected to bring, a local grocery store may prove to be viable in the near future.

Some residents also indicated that they would support more nightlife, especially from small, locally owned restaurants and bars. Indeed there are few evening activities to generate street activity outside of The Gateway. The Gallery Stroll, held one Friday evening each month, brings visitors to the neighborhood. There are also several nightclubs in the area, but they are isolated and chiefly accessed by automobile.

The Farmers Market, held Saturday mornings during the summer months, is the largest generator of foot traffic. Residents unanimously viewed The Market as representative of what urban life could be like in their neighborhood. The market includes a variety of material and performance art, locally-grown produce, and vendor carts from local shops and restaurants. It provides a place where residents, the homeless, commuters, and small-business owners mingle. The event has become so popular that the city recently added Wednesday afternoons to the Farmers Market schedule.

The Gateway is a mixed-use brown field redevelopment project that most people know as a large outdoor shopping mall. It includes numerous national chain stores, a movie theater, a planetarium, several restaurants, and a large fountain where people gather and children play. This mall has inspired strong but mixed feelings among residents. For some, it is a welcome addition because it is accessible on foot. Shaun, a photographer and screenwriter, loves the freedom to see movies across the street from...
his home. Lyndsie shops there regularly, and enjoys having a fun, clean, and comfortable place to visit with her son Jack.

For others, The Gateway represents the invasion of corporate homogeneity in a unique area that supports artists, activism, and homeless and lower-income populations. In their opinion, it does not interact with or complement the neighborhood; in fact, it does just the opposite. Mike, artist and owner of Green Glass Art, and Franco noted that The Gateway has brought a dramatic increase in automobile traffic. Pete feels that it has motivated a push to drive out the people who currently occupy the area, especially the homeless and the people who serve them.

**Pioneer Park**
We stood out among the homeless in Pioneer Park more than anywhere else in the city. We walked into the park with good intentions, armed with cameras and notepads. We practiced our best ethnographic techniques and we listened and we observed. Perhaps most importantly, we used the things we saw to evaluate the things we heard.

Storytelling seems to be a regular pastime among the homeless. We met one homeless man when he spotted a Noam Chomsky book one of us was carrying. The man, who called himself both Eddy and Artemis, engaged us in a long, and at times philosophical conversation about his life and the homeless community. Artemis was a very convincing storyteller.

According to Artemis, he had hopped freight trains across the country for years. He migrated with the seasons, preferring to spend his time in college towns in their libraries. As he peppered our conversation with tidbits from Chomsky, Nietzsche, and other scholarly authors, it was obvious that he had either attended college or was highly self-educated. He had just spent some time in jail in Delta, Utah, after being caught riding a freight train.

We encountered another homeless man who gave his name simply as It Don’t Matter, and thus we began calling him It Don’t Matter or IDM. We could have given him a fake name for research purposes, but his response seemed too poignant to dismiss. IDM had a less credible presentation than Artemis. He seemed slightly intoxicated and was visibly dirty. He spoke with a slight slur, but presented a valuable and compelling view. He claimed that although he was once homeless, he currently had a home, a computer and a job as a paramedic. In addition, he told us that some obscure member of the city government had tasked him with patrolling the homeless to ensure order and that he had contacts in the city government, the homeless shelter management, and Big-D...
Construction, a local business housed in a large building adjacent to the park.

IDM described alleged corruption within homeless services, including how donations intended for one of the shelters were sent instead to a local thrift store for resale. He described homeless service workers who took donations as they pleased, including one woman who stole nearly 50 pairs of jeans. IDM was frustrated because the newspapers reported that the homeless services received $40 million in one year and he could not determine where it was being spent.

Although their presentations differed, Artemis and IDM shared some qualities. They both claimed to be claustrophobic and they both spoke disapprovingly of homeless services, preferring to do things on their own.

We spoke to another homeless man, whom we nicknamed Bob. Bob spoke candidly about the problems the homeless face with police and addictions. While Bob was not the only man who spoke on this issue, he spoke more about it than the others and he appeared to be, at the time of the interview, under the influence. Bob said that the homeless people were just trying to “live their day-to-day lives, trying to be a part of society.” Bob said they weren’t out to hurt anybody or to create a problem for the system. To Bob, the problems the homeless face do not invalidate the role they play in society.

Pierpont
We assumed that our interviews with Hub area business owners would reveal a strong connection to downtown as well as a deep sense of concern for the neighborhood. The actual results were mixed, however. Even the small business owners and workers seemed somewhat removed from the pulse of the neighborhood, either physically or ideologically. Nonetheless, all of the business people with whom we spoke were at least marginally invested in the area, even if for no other reason than to boost business.

The most prominent business owner we spoke with was Tony Caputo, owner of Tony Caputo’s Market and Deli. Tony was the person mentioned most often by other respondents: residents, the homeless, and other business people spoke enthusiastically about Tony’s contribution to the neighborhood. Tony seemed very proud to be a part of the neighborhood, and felt that rather than his business benefiting the neighborhood, the neighborhood benefited his business. Of all the business people we interviewed, Tony felt the most positive about the homeless presence in the neighborhood. He remarked that sometimes it is “good to step over a bum, because it
makes you see how lucky you really are.” But even Tony is somewhat removed from the area because he lives elsewhere in the valley.

Another business owner, Cindy Kindred, director of Vanguard Media Group, founded a local business group called Friends of Pioneer Park. The group seeks to make Pioneer Park a place for families and picnics, but Cindy said nothing about where the homeless people who sleep there in the summer months would go.

The Gateway
We conducted most of our commuter interviews in or near The Gateway. The commuter category included anyone who traveled to the neighborhood, but did not reside or own a business there, primarily shoppers and employees. The Gateway is a key destination for people who live in the suburbs, as well as out-of-town guests. It was near The Gateway fountain that we first discovered some problems that can occur during interviews: From midway up a flight of stairs, we watched people in pairs and groups traversing and stopping to relax in the fountain area while we tried to decide who we would approach first. We felt that many people were there for a specific purpose or might be in a hurry and would not want to be disturbed by students asking questions. We had just decided to ask a couple with two young children for an interview. They were sitting on a bench while their children played in the fountain but as we approached, several people walked up and joined them. We felt like we would be invading a family gathering, so we decided to choose someone else. We thought a well-dressed Asian couple might be foreign tourists and would therefore know little about the area. In addition, there could be a language barrier. Another couple seemed to be having a romantic moment. A middle-aged couple with teenage children was walking too swiftly for us to comfortably intercept. We finally settled on a Hispanic man and his preadolescent son. He did not speak English, but from this proximity, we could hear the Asian couple speaking English. So much for our assumptions.

Next we selected a couple in their early thirties accompanied by a woman who appeared to be the mother of one of them. They were from out of town, so likely would have a different take on the area than locals. First, they noted that while some of the stores had already opened, none of the public restrooms opened until noon on Sundays. Because the younger woman was pregnant, she saw this as a major inconvenience and an unfriendly gesture to visitors. Second, they had passed Pioneer Park as they walked from their downtown hotel to the mall. While most locals would characterize the park as having great potential were it not for its homeless, these
We interviewed some skateboarders who had been harassed by mall security for skating on the premises. How was their activity different from ours? We both used the space for a constructive purpose—ours academic; theirs athletic. Neither of us received permission for our respective actions. Nor was either of us economically supporting any establishments. Is it that their image legitimized dismissal while ours received courtesy?

people described it, without reservation, as a beautiful park, noting that it was nice to see so much green in the middle of a city. When we arrived at the park an hour or so later, it was filled with homeless people sleeping, walking, and gathering for the food that is distributed there on Sundays. Was it empty when these people passed by, or did the homeless people there not strike them as significant or problematic? Not “knowing” about the area gave them a unique perspective.

Part way into the interview, the nearby fountain became so noisy we could scarcely hear the people talking in person, much less on the recording later. Although we could consider their perspective as we analyzed the common themes of our body of research, their comments were unusable as part of the short film we were making to document our research. In addition, some of their most critical observations came when the interview was officially over and the recorder turned off. They asked about the local liquor laws and whether it was possible to “get a beer in this town.” In truth, beer, unlike hard liquor, is relatively easy to obtain in nearly any restaurant, but this question demonstrated how a city’s reputation can influence the behavior and perceptions of visitors.

Near the end of an afternoon of interviews at The Gateway, we became actors in our own ethnographic study when we were approached by mall security who asked what we were doing. We replied that we were University of Utah students working on a research project about downtown. The officer told us we needed permission from mall executives to conduct interviews on mall property, but that permission would not be hard to come by because of the nature of our project and our status as students. When we left, we discussed how our status grants us rights and privileges unavailable to other segments of the population. For instance, Julianne mentioned that she used to run at The Gateway early in the morning when mall security removed the sleeping bums. Though both runner and bums were using the space, one use was deemed unacceptable while the other was deemed appropriate and even received genial waves.

Further, our experience raised questions about public versus private space. The Gateway resembles a public street but is actually privately owned by a corporation with economic interests. As a result, activities that would be acceptable on a public street, protesting, “soap-boxing,” pamphleteering, and loitering are all prohibited. Nationally, as more Main Streets give way to Gateways, we wonder: What public rights do people have in private spaces that resemble public ones? Are privately owned malls functionally equipped to replace the truly public domain? What is to become of political
activities that traditionally occur on Main Street but are prohibited by private malls?

On our way back to Cup of Joe’s, we interviewed some skateboarders who had been harassed by mall security for skating on the premises. Unlike the officer’s response to us, however, mall security had not suggested the boys obtain permission to skate; instead, they were forcibly removed and legal action was threatened. We both used the space for a constructive purpose—ours academic; theirs athletic. Neither of us received permission for our respective actions. Nor was either of us economically supporting any establishments. Is it that their image legitimized dismissal while ours received courtesy?

Many commuters seemed surprised by the idea of this area as a neighborhood. The absence of street-facing front doors and balconies makes it appear that there are no residents here. It is even difficult to tell from within The Gateway development that it includes apartments and condominiums. It also seems that commuters do not so much visit for a vibrant downtown experience, but instead travel to a specific destination for a particular purpose. We spoke with a middle-aged husband and wife in biker attire whom we called the Motorcycle Couple. They were spending their day as they do a few times each year, enjoying a ride on their motorcycle in the pleasant spring weather, with The Gateway as their sole downtown destination. Thirty years earlier when railroad operations were the primary activity here, the man had worked right on The Gateway site. It was easy to see why he would view it as the one bright spot worth visiting. He noted that Main Street is in need of revitalization and that he would have no reason to visit it. When we described the Hub area, he found it challenging to imagine the neighborhood outside the walls of The Gateway.

Melissa, who works for a neighborhood service agency, noted that most visitors drive to the area. When we asked her to describe what she sees when she walks in the neighborhood on her lunch hour, she noted that there are few people out on the sidewalks and the area lacks “that neighborhood feeling.” Because she contrasted it with neighborhoods like Sugarhouse and Ninth-and-Ninth, we felt that it was important to observe what qualities these two neighborhoods have that the Hub area lacks. Both are bordered by a predominance of single-family homes. Both have a greater emphasis on small local businesses. Both have their fair share of automobile traffic, but they also have a healthy mix of pedestrians and cyclists. Both have sidewalk sales and sidewalk dining, bringing life out of building interiors, inviting activity and interaction. Rather than being environments with isolated pods of activity, both
neighborhoods could be described as having high levels of integration.

Although many Gateway area residents cited the neighborhood’s diversity as an asset, a young woman working the counter at Cup of Joe’s noted the lack of integration of its diverse elements. She said that visitors stayed within the confines of The Gateway while other areas were almost exclusively populated by the homeless. She was interested in seeing more green space downtown, but felt that no one really uses Pioneer Park because of the homeless people there. She also remarked on the stark divide between the row of homeless services on the south side of 200 South and The Gateway’s shops on the north side, a divide that creates a close but unsettling juxtaposition of poverty and affluence. However, she saw no obvious solution, “I don’t know where else they (the homeless) would go.” She reflected upon how interesting it would be to see a true mix of people and activities in the neighborhood, such as that observed by many during the Farmers Market. While it seems a complex task to create an environment that would foster such integration, it is clearly something that would enhance the sense of neighborhood in the area.

“I have an affection for a great city. I feel safe in the neighborhood of man, and enjoy the sweet security of the streets.”
HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW
People are the blood of downtown. A downtown can only prosper when the people love it, when it speaks to them, when there is the potential that it can fulfill their wants and needs.

The purpose of our ethnographic study was to present a perspective of downtown Salt Lake City that is often overlooked. We hope we have given a voice to the voiceless and encouraged those we encountered to envision and pursue a vital urban life.