North End Recreation Center, Boston

6.0 Design Studio I 12h x 10 weeks
CRN: 10400/10477
Time: M W F 1:00 pm - 4:50 pm I Location: TBD
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Office Hours: By appointment

Topic and Context

The North End is Boston’s oldest residential community, continuously inhabited since 1630. The area’s well-preserved, dense urban fabric and characteristic lively streets evoke the heritage of one of America’s most famous Italian-American neighborhoods. Its roots in early American immigration made of it one of the most iconic part of Boston and a magnet for tourists. While current private investments are catering to short-term visitors and a small number of affluent residents, most of the neighbors suffer a decrease in their quality of life due to the a lack of accessible public services and the overall rise in the costs of living.

Acknowledging that the beauty and success of the North End doesn’t only lie in its historic structures and picturesque streets, but in the livelihood provided by local residents, this studio will develop a new recreation facility that doubles as a community and wellness center. The proposed recreation center is a building aimed to improve the quality of life of the North End residents and tighten their social ties between each other.

The building will respond to a comprehensive diagnosis of the site – its physical and social environment. To fulfill the role of a community center, the building will be designed as open, welcoming, and flexible. Students are expected to achieve this goal through form and its relation to the surroundings – relating space and time – allowing a mixture of uses within the same building and its site. Students will conceive strategies for creating multifunctional interior spaces such as allowing for different collectives to take ownership of it on different days and hours and enhancing collaboration with the neighborhood’s social organizations and local small businesses.

The project will be developed on two potential sites – waterfront and neighborhood center – each with a distinct topographic condition that will ask for a creative response and add complexity to the exercise. The waterfront site will tackle questions of how to build in an area directly affected by climate change and sea level rise. The site in the center of the North End is currently an open space used as parking lot and for outdoor sport fields. The 20-feet grade change from one side to the other will encourage students to approach the design through sectional explorations.
Learning Goals and Outcomes

Through this studio, students will get acquainted with how to design in a context that is environmentally and culturally different than the Pacific Northwest. After learning about the urban development of Boston and its many successful modern and contemporary buildings and urban designs, the project will be an intervention within a well-preserved historic urban fabric with a contemporary building that is highly contextual and sensitive to its surroundings.

Students are expected to develop an understanding of how to program a sport facility and knowledge of its functioning, current standards and requirements. Encouraged to think of a contemporary recreation facility as a wellness/community center – and not just as a building for physical recreation – will support exploration of program components that can complement and create new synergies with sport and recreation.

Designing a building that typically has at least one large venue (gymnasium and/or swimming pool), this project will allow students to explore the role of large span structures beyond their support role – exploring their expressive qualities, their form in relation to natural lighting, and their impact on the building mass and scale within the dense and urban Boston’s North End.

The challenging waterfront site in the era of climate changes and sea level rise, and the tight site with a significant grade change, are geared to add complexity to the design problem, while developing a welcoming and flexible public facility for residents of various age groups, family types, and interests.