Արտասահմանի Կառույցներ

(Re)Making Armenian Space in Three American Cities

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Cover photos by **author**.
Taken at various research sites,
in Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles.

Արտասահմանի Կառույցներ (‘Constructing Identity’)

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Preface

In an attempt to seal the fate of a nation, Azerbaijani forces occupied my homeland, the Republic of Artsakh, in September 2023. What followed was a concerted effort to destroy all traces of Armenian life, through the destruction of churches, civic centers, and sacred monuments. Armenian sites in Artsakh were destroyed because (1) they represented cultural heritage in material form, and (2) they supported identity maintenance across generations. These aggressions heightened my understanding of the existential threats facing my nation. I witnessed how architecture and built infrastructure could be weaponized in (attempted) ethnic cleansing.

Cultural sites in Artsakh once served as a point of orientation for ten million Armenians. The loss of tangible heritage led to a greater sense of urgency regarding our community spaces elsewhere. While cultural assimilation is gradual and may not be as physically destructive, it poses similar existential threats over generations.

Following this realization, I looked to my Armenian community in the United States. I became interested in exploring the relationship between identity and place in diasporan communities, something I've spent my lifetime experiencing and contributing to, without critical assessment. I began searching for answers to the following questions: How can we better understand identity, by exploring the environments out of which it arises and is maintained? How can we better understand built places through the particular identities and ideologies that drive their transformations? These questions have become the foundation for this project which examines the relationship between identity and place within and across Armenian communities in three American metropolitan areas: Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles.

I have spent the past year visiting each city, exploring dozens of sites with priests, farmers, journalists, educators, artists, and activists. My conversations in each place have helped inform my understanding of the narratives and dynamics that bind these communities. Together, they illustrate how identity is woven into our built and natural landscapes.

My research is the first step in a much larger project. This BA thesis has started to identify the tangled relationships between built places and communities and how these relationships evolve over time. My work aims to empower a future generation of community leaders. It rests on the assumption that architectural agency in the urban realm is procurable—at least, more so than is widely recognized. An awareness of processes that bring community spaces to life can support future relationships to place that draw from meaningful tradition, while remaining radically open to urgent crises, challenges, and new opportunities.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the gracious support and encouragement of countless individuals and several communities.

I would like to begin by thanking my thesis advisor, Luke Joyner, who has been instrumental to the entire process of preparing and executing this project. Luke's commitment to my project was extraordinary, from his hands-on presence during fieldwork in Greater Boston, to the countless hours of mentorship and *many* pages of feedback he provided. I am grateful for his generosity and wisdom, as it helped me navigate layers of complex environmental and urban histories.

I am also incredibly thankful for the academic and financial support I received from faculty and staff at the Committee on Environment, Geography, and Urbanization (CEGU) at the University of Chicago, particularly, Dr. Christopher Kindell, Nina Olney, Dr. Sabina Shaikh, and Dr. Evan Carver.

This project was in many ways a shared endeavor between myself and the dozens of American Armenians who helped illustrate their communities' colorful relationship to place. These community members opened up their homes and community spaces to me, and welcomed my project and curiosity with such excitement. Specifically, I would like to thank the following interlocutors:

> **Fresno:** Barlow Der Mugrdechian, David Sarabian, Michael Sarabian, Virginia Sarabian (d. 2023), Ani Hovannisian, Nazik Arisian, Rev. Father Greg Haroutunian, Rev. Father Nerses Balabanian, Raffi Santikian.
>
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> **Los Angeles:** Dr. Alina Dorian, Dr. Talin Kargodorian, Aram Alajajian, Gevik Baghdassarian, Rev. Father Shant Barsoumian, Sarig Armenian.

There are many other community members who supported me during my fieldwork and in shaping my growing understanding of this complex topic. They are too many to name, but I am forever grateful for their hospitality.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Saro and Christine, and my sister, Sareen, for their unconditional support. This project is in many ways inspired by my experiences growing up in a household where Armenian traditions and values were celeberated alongside American ones. I feel especially lucky to have received hours of advice and mentorship from my parents throughout this entire process.

This project is dedicated to my grandparents, Shavarsh and Maryam Stepanian and Haroutune and Sona Armenian, whose generation worked tirelessly to rebuild Armenian communities around the world.

Introduction

Built and natural environments are vehicles through which we can read community dynamics and evolving local histories. Conversely, deep engagement with community life provides us with a richer understanding of shared spaces. What we practice and how we practice collectively are inextricably tied to the places we regularly inhabit: place and identity are wound up in a dialectical relationship. And, by internalizing this relationship, we allow ourselves to consider and position physical space as a pillar of community life.

Urban historian Dolores Hayden has written extensively about this relationship. She argues, in her book, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, that "the politics of identity [...] are an inescapable and important aspect of dealing with the urban built environment."[1] Matters of human identity and sensibility are explored, contested, and negotiated in shared physical spaces. Therefore, these "politics" must be uncovered before engaging in any place-related inquiry—be it history, preservation, or design. Often, however, through these inquiries, it becomes evident that these "politics" may have emerged from experiences in the built and natural environment. Hayden writes:

1 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 7.

> "Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities. Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes."[2]

2 Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 9.

Built and natural environments are conduits for making, remembering, and shaping collective memories. Place is, therefore, a powerful, yet unspoken agent in the construction of identity.

This project is interested in physical expressions of diasporic identity. Specifically, it examines these processes as expressed through Armenian community spaces in the metropolitan areas of Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles. In the process, it takes up Hayden's suggested framework and examines both the various identities that have contributed to the construction of Armenian communities, as well as the influence of place on the communities themselves.

Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles are recognized as the most prominent Armenian communities in the United States. Boston and Fresno are the most historic, dating back to the 19th century; and Los Angeles is by far the most populated, counting 500,000 Armenians. This project constructs a comparative analysis between the three communities as a way of interrogating questions of identity and place along temporal and geographic axes. The three exist within a greater American and Armenian 'national'[3] context, which allows specific regional and period-related qualities to surface during project analyses.

3 'National' or 'nation' here refers to 'the Armenian Nation,' a conceptual identifier most Armenians have adopted as a way of conceptualizing the aggregate network of 10 million Armenians, globally. For an extended discussion of this topic, see "*Hye Azg*: A Transnational Armenia" in the "Armenia (Terminologies & Typologies)" section of this paper.

Community spaces are the most apt medium for this investigation, since they are, in their essence, built for shared use. Community spaces serve as material embodiments of their users and sensibilities.

Armenian communities in the United States are marked by stories of exile and displacement from their homeland, but also of diasporan resilience and identity maintenance. Armenians have sought refuge in the built and natural environments of Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles, which they have reacted to and transformed in the process of maintaining identity. Therefore, these three communities are diasporan in the fullest sense; they are derivative of two disparate worlds: a 'host' state and an imagined or relocated homeland.

This project relies on a multidisciplinary analysis, whereby ethnography, visual documentation, and cartographic illustration are interwoven to draw out relationships between place and identity in each of the three communities. This analysis uncovers the various ways in which Armenians in Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles embrace unique spatial and architectural languages to navigate processes of identity maintenance. These languages can be implicit or explicit, but they underlie Armenians' responses to place over time—be it their initial reaction to place, or their eventual transformation of it.

a. In Fresno, Armenians have cultivated a relationship with a conceptual and tangible pastoral landscape, relying on "the land" as a physical marker and insurer of identity.

b. In Boston, Armenians have harnessed the power of spatial proximity and the city's irregular street network to create an insulated "island" comprised of proximate cultural institutions.

c. In Los Angeles, Armenians participate in existing patterns of spatial expansion, constructing multi-institutional complexes throughout the city as anchoring points for residential and commercial life.

Armenians' response to and employment of these urban and environmental languages demonstrate an outstanding ability to adapt to complex and unfamiliar environments, particularly in the pursuit of community building. However, these efforts are by no means foolproof. As my research demonstrates, an overreliance on these particular themes or patterns can indeed be detrimental to broader 'identity construction' projects. In each city, these same themes and patterns leave Armenians in a precarious position.

a. In Fresno, a national and global shift toward industrial farming has complicated Armenians' cultural dependence on the local environmental landscape. These transformations have led to a dispersion and suburbanization of the community's spatial imprint. In the process, they have abandoned their once-vibrant Armenian quarter in Downtown Fresno, developing one-off cultural institutions across suburban neighborhoods.

b. In Boston, Armenians' gradual emigration from Watertown (toward more affluent suburbs) has left its cultural island largely without a resident Armenian population. Non-Armenians have moved into the neighborhood, barring Armenian institutions' much-desired expansion efforts. This has led to growing tensions within the community about potential redirection, leaving community organizations in a stalemate.

c. In Los Angeles, Armenians' multi-institutional complexes have become increasingly recognized as breeding grounds for Armenian cultural, political, and financial capital. Non-Armenians have, in turn, pushed back on the development of similar complexes.

These challenges threaten the longevity of diasporan Armenian communities. Each example suggests that Armenians are inadvertent participants in the undoing of decades of identity construction and maintenance.

Ultimately, this project raises these concerns to initiate critical assessment and more engaged planning when confronting issues of placemaking. By uncovering the strata of this relationship between place and identity, potential trajectories related to cultural longevity and sustainability can be outlined. And in doing so, this project asks Armenian communities to take up these trajectories as a starting point for future work that contends with our place in built and natural environments. Because, as Dolores Hayden argues, "the power of place [...] remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history."[4] Place has transformative qualities that, if recognized, can help community users develop and further the skills and perspectives they need to serve as agents of change in their immediate built and natural environments.

4 Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 9.

Armenia
(Terminologies & Typologies)

Our History, On Our Land

The Armenian people are an ethnic group originating from Western Anatolia, the Armenian Highlands, and the South Caucasus. Armenians are descendants of "a very ancient people who emerged in the mountainous region of northeast Asia Minor some twenty-five hundred years ago."[5] This region is formally referred to by Armenians as *Haiastan* (meaning 'Armenia'); it is also commonly referred to as *Yergir* (meaning 'the country') or *Hairenik* (meaning 'fatherland' or 'homeland'). Armenians refer to themselves as *Hye* or *Hyer* (pl.) or as the *Hye Azg* (meaning, 'Armenian nation').

5 Anny P. Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Transaction Publishers, 1993), 2.

Since 301 CE, Armenians have adhered to the Christian faith, under the organization of the Armenian Apostolic Church. (There are other, more recent dominations of Armenian Christianity; however, nearly 90% of Armenians belong to the Apostolic Church).

Armenians have faced foreign occupation and ethnically-driven conflicts over the last two-and-a-half millennia. In the Middle Ages, members of the Armenian nobility established a series of kingdoms that successfully occupied much of Western Asia. The territorial expanses of these empires, at their height, are referred to as 'Greater Armenia.' However, from the 13th to the 16th centuries, Armenians were conquered and ruled over by Mongolian and Turkic invaders. From the 16th to the end of the 19th century, Greater Armenia was divided into three, and was occupied by the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Persian Empire. Armenians experienced varying degrees of social, political, and economic mobility in each state, but were increasingly marginalized and persecuted throughout the 19th century.

During the late 19th century, Ottoman authorities orchestrated a systematic effort to scrutinize, and later ethnically cleanse the Armenian population. They organized pogroms and massacres, such as the Hamidian Massacres of 1894 and the Adana Massacre of 1909, and inflicted racial violence upon dozens of Armenian communities across Eastern Anatolia. In the 1910s, under the pretense of World War I, Turkish authorities, led by the Young Turks' Committee of Union and Progress, organized what is now referred to as the Armenian Genocide. Death marches, hangings, rape, forced labor, and economic exploitation were employed by state officials in a deliberate effort to wipe the Armenian nation off the map. By the early 1920s, nearly 1.5 million Armenians were killed at the hands of Turkish authorities, and several million were exiled from their indigenous homeland. Refugees of the Armenian Genocide were scattered across the globe, and quickly formed diasporan communities in their places of settlement.

In the aftermath of World War I, as the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian Empires collapsed, Armenians fought to establish an independent state for the first time in seven hundred years. Armenian libertators, led by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation were encouraged by a global geopolitical landscape that had welcomed a slew of other nascent democratic nation-states. In 1918, the First Republic of Armenia was established, containing those territories outlined by President Woodrow Wilson in the Treaty of Sevres. However, the First Republic was short-lived, becoming Sovietized by invading Russians in 1920. Nevertheless, the First Republic holds great social and cultural significance for Armenians, particularly for diasporan Armenians whose ancestors fought in the national liberation army and led the initial democratic republic.

Map:
Historic Armenia. Made by Mardiros Kheranian (1922). Courtesy of *Armenian Weekly.*

Armenians lived under Soviet occupation, as members of the Armenian SSR, until the USSR's collapse in 1991. For the second time, Armenians announced their independence and established the Second Republic of Armenia (or, the Modern Republic of Armenia). From 1992-1996, Armenians fought in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War against Azerbaijan, and successfully liberated Nagorno-Karabakh, establishing the Republic of Artsakh. Life in Armenia during the 1990s was particularly challenging, given the ongoing war with the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the difficulties of raising a democratic and free-market state following seventy years of Sovietization. As a result, thousands of Armenians emigrated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, settling in existing diasporan communities across the globe.

In the last thirty years, the Republic of Armenia has blossomed into a free and thriving independent state. Diasporan Armenians have cooperated with homeland Armenians to establish state, cultural, and commercial enterprises that support the local population and a global network of diasporan communities. This has contributed to a sense of cultural and existential orientation toward the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh.[6]

6 This section was sourced from the following texts:

Anny P. Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Transaction Publishers, 1993).

Daniel Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs: Outsiders Inside Armenian Los Angeles* (Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2023).

Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands*, 2nd Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Waves of Immigration, Diasporan Formation

Today's Armenian diasporan communities are a product of several major waves of immigration over the last 150 years. The historical point of origin for all of these waves is somewhere within the 'borders' of Greater Armenia. As these borders shrank due to various foreign occupations and conflicts, Armenians moved to or were exiled to foreign 'host' countries. In each of these places, Armenians developed lively diasporan communities, many of which have sustained to date.

Around the early to mid-nineteenth century, several small groups of Armenian merchants and unskilled workers left Western Armenia (modern day eastern Turkey) in search of better employment in rapidly industrializing American and European cities. Mostly young men, these Armenians settled in areas such as Paris and Marseille in France, Fresno and New England in the United States, and Istanbul, Turkey (then Constantinople). Family and friends soon joined these Armenian immigrants, forming some of the earliest diasporan communities.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in the largest wave of Armenian immigration, to date. In response to several decades of massacres, pogroms, and genocide, millions of Western Armenians fled or were exiled from their indigenous towns and villages. Survivors of the Hamidian and Adana Massacres and the Armenian Genocide fled to existing diasporan communities in New England, Fresno, Paris, and Marseille. The several hundred thousand Armenians who participated in death marches (through the Syrian desert) ended up in Damascus, where they either stayed, or moved to Aleppo, Beirut, Tehran, or Baghdad. These diasporan Armenian communities developed into some of the most culturally-insulated ones, since they were granted relative socio-political autonomy and were located in less culturally-assimilative environments.

However, from the late 1970s through the 1980s, a wave of civil unrest caused major Armenian emigration from the Middle East. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Lebanese Civil War forced tens of thousands of Armenians to emigrate, either joining existing diasporan communities or creating new ones. This wave immigrated to London, Paris, Toronto, Montreal, Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles (which had the largest influx of Middle Eastern Armenian immigrants). This wave transformed smaller mostly subculturally-homogenous diasporan communities into highly multi-local ones. These transformations led to increased intra-cultural exchange, which produced hybrid approaches to identity maintenance and at times, social and political tensions.

The most recent large wave of Armenian immigration came as a result of economic and security challenges within the Republic of Armenia, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. The majority of these immigrants moved to Los Angeles from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This wave influenced the social and cultural landscape of Los Angeles' Armenian community since post-Soviet Armenians brought with them a different, more Sovietized set of cultural attitudes. This has led to increased tensions between post-Soviet Armenians and more nationalist, Middle Eastern Armenians (who arrived one to two generations prior).

The future of Armenian's relationship with their homeland is unpredictable, given ongoing territorial conflicts and crises in the homeland. Armenians in Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia are facing existential threats as a result of continuous Azerbaijani aggression, and are slowly losing fragments of their indigenous homeland. New waves of exodus are becoming increasingly inevitable and would result in the formation of new diasporan Armenian communities.[7]

Hye Azg: A Transnational Armenia

Armenians across the globe see themselves as members of a transnational nation—one made up of a population of 10 million Armenians (not 3 million in the Republic, and 7 million diasporans). There are nuanced, and sometimes serious ideological differences between these Armenians. Nevertheless, most Armenians associate their cultural identity and sense of self with a transnational nation and center this around a physical site, located in the modern Republic of Armenia and Artsakh. This is primarily a response to shared exilic trauma (19th-century massacres and the Armenian Genocide), and continued existential threats in the homeland (the ongoing military conflict in Artsakh, with the Republic of Azerbaijan).[8]

Differing Cultural Attitudes: Institutional Affiliations & Divisions

This is a generalization, but most Armenian communities (especially high-population ones, like Boston, Fresno, Los Angeles) are divided along political and corresponding religious lines. These can largely be divided into three camps: (1) the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and the Western/Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church; (2) the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) and the Western/Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church; and (3) Presbyterian and Catholic Churches.

The ARF is a political organization that operates across all spheres of transnational Armenia. The party represents a democratic-socialist platform, with a strong emphasis on grassroots nationalism (particularly the establishment of a "free, independent, and united Armenia"). A series of affiliated organizations fall under the ARF's umbrella, supporting community-wide social and cultural programming. These are the Hamazkayin Educational & Cultural Society; the Armenian General Athletic Union (Homenetmen); the Armenian Cultural Foundation; the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF); the Armenian Relief Society (ARS). These organizations are pillars of most diasporan Armenian communities and provide an accessible medium for heritage practice and engagement. The Western/Eastern Prelacy of the Apostolic Chruch strongly supports these organizations and their general attitudes toward issues of national identity. Each Prelacy has a Board of Regents that supervises and supports a range of Armenian-language day schools and Saturday schools in various diasporan communities. The Church is seen as one of the ARF's affiliated organizations (like the ARS, Hamazkayin, etc.). This general camp comprises a majority of diasporan Armenians. It has historically consisted

7 This section was sourced from the following texts:

Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans.*

Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs.*

Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands.*

8 Altuğ Yılmaz and Hrag Papazian, eds., *Critical Approaches to Armenian Identity in the 21st Century: Vulnerability, Resilience and Transformation* (İstanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation Publications, 2021).

of middle and working-class Armenians, who traditionally, have a stronger grassroots nationalist orientation. Members of this camp associate themselves with a transnational Armenia, but advocate for the reunification of historic Armenian lands (reparations for an indigenous homeland lost during genocide).

The AGBU is a cultural, educational, and humanitarian organization that operates across all diasporan Armenian communities. There is a major overlap between the membership of the AGBU and the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party (Ramgavar Party), a center-right political organization that advocates for classical liberalism and capitalism. This camp also includes the affiliated Tekeyan Cultural Association. The Western/Eastern Diocese of the Apostolic Church also strongly supports these organizations. However, while the Prelacy is a predominantly (if not totally) diasporan institution, the Diocese's membership also includes all residents of the Republic of Armenia (since its activities are overseen by the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenia). This camp includes a majority of diasporan Armenians who hold a more globalist, conservative attitude. It has historically consisted of upper-middle-class and wealthy Armenians. Members of this camp tend to be less nationalistic, and open to more loose interpretations of national identity, assimilation, and inter-cultural integration.

Members of Presbyterian and Catholic Churches do not typically overlap with the various political and cultural organizations just described. Religious activity and the church congregation anchor community life and all its cultural aspects. These congregations make up a slim minority in most Armenian communities and have a smaller spatial presence (fewer churches and community spaces, when compared to the two camps described above).

The distinction between these major camps is important because it informs how their respective affiliates (especially diasporans) treat matters of Armenian life and cultural heritage. The camps reflect the most pervasive cultural attitudes within diasporan communities, which are often in conflict with one another. This lends itself to isolated cultural practice and interpretation, which is often reflected in each camp's relationship with its built and natural environments.[9]

9 Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands.*

Graphic:
The three primary camps of institutional affiliation. From left to right:

(1) ARS, Hamazkayin, Prelacy, Homenetmen, ARF; (2) AGBU, Diocese, Ramgavar; (3) Catholic and Protestant.

Odar-ism & Cultural Enclosure

Armenians, typically those affiliated with more nationalistic factions (the ARF et al.), are protective of their cultural identity. Projects of identity maintenance are sometimes positioned in opposition to all things *odar* (which translates to 'other,' and is used either as an adjective or identifier). *Odar* peoples, customs and traditions, spaces, and even behaviors are seen as threatening to Armenian projects of identity maintenance. These attitudes are a defense mechanism—a response to the perceived vulnerability of Armenian identity, in the face of cultural assimilation (particularly in societies with stronger assimilative cultures, like the United States). Today, most Armenians embrace these attitudes more moderately and try to strike a balance between the 'Armenian world' and an *odar* one. Nevertheless, a general sense of cultural enclosure still underlies many Armenians' everyday lives, particularly their relationship to immediate built and natural environments.[10]

10 Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs.*

Typologies of Community Space

Most diasporan Armenian communities share a distinct set of community space typologies. Although these spaces vary in form, arrangement, and proximity to one another (which are discussed at length in this project), their general type is common and present in most places where Armenians reside. These include churches, schools, *agoumps*,[11] monuments, and performance/artistic spaces. Sometimes, certain types are combined into a singular space, especially within small communities; for example, an *agoump* might also have spaces for performance and artistic engagement. Additionally, community spaces can also exist adjacent to one another, forming multi-institutional complexes. This arrangement is a popular spatial strategy employed within many diasporan Armenian communities (also discussed at length in this project).[12]

11 *agoump* : 'community center'

12 Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs.*

Graphic:
The five major Armenian community space typologies:

(1) churches; (2) schools; (3) *agoumps*; (4) performance/artistic spaces; and (5) monuments.

Kef: Celebrating the Homeland, on New Land

Kef, meaning 'celebration,' in Armenian, often refers to a common form of social gathering that is practiced in many diasporan communities. It is also used to describe the various cultural elements that comprise these gatherings (for example, the *kef* music genre). *Kefs* resonate with core, general Armenian social and cultural traditions. In a sense, *kefs* are all about recreating life in the homeland, in 'host' environments. Each of a *kef's* constitutive elements—food, music, dances, setting—are intended to remind its participants of their ancestors' life in the homeland.

As Armenian immigrants arrived in foreign environments, they brought with them certain traditions and cultural staples. On a regular occasion, diasporan families gather and practice these traditions as a way of maintaining their identity, despite

living thousands of miles from their homeland. These *kefs* are typically held outdoors, in agricultural fields, parks, mountains, and along the banks of creeks or the shores of small ponds. By doing so, diasporan Armenians transport themselves, even for a few hours, to the green, mountainous landscape of their homeland.

Kefs usually take place during midday and consist of large feasts prepared by multiple generations of men, women, and children. Staple dishes include grilled *kebab*, fresh *lavash* flatbread, rice *pilaf*, stews, cheeses, and fresh fruits and vegetables. These feasts also include several rounds of *oghi*[13] shots and fresh fruit juices.

13 *oghi* : a fruit-based moonshine, typically made of apricots, mulberries or grapes

These lavish feasts are usually accompanied by *kef* music and circle dances, drawn straight from diasporan Armenians' ancestral villages. *Kef* music is played with a variety of Anatolian and Armenian instruments, including the *oud*, *saz*, *doumbek*, *kamancha*, and *qanun*; it also incorporates more global instruments, such as the clarinet, guitar, and keyboards. Diasporan Armenians engage in a variety of circle dances, which are often tied to specific villages or regions in Historic Armenia.

Kefs are an important part of diasporan Armenians' efforts to maintain their cultural identity through social tradition. This paper describes several examples of *kefs*, examining their relationship to built and natural environments.[14]

14 Project Save, "The Armenian Picnic: A Connection to the Old Country," *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, May 21, 2018.

Photographs:
Various Armenian *kef* celebrations in New England and the Central Valley. Courtesy of *Smithsonian Folklife Festival* and *Project Save Photograph Archive*.

Literature Review

This project draws on scholarship exploring diasporan (Armenian) identity, vernacular architectural history, and urban sociology. Scholarly interpretations of 'hybridity,' 'exile, and 'nationalism' are critical to understanding narratives regarding diasporan identity and associated cultural assumptions. This project also engages in literature that explores the relationship between (non-Armenian) vernacular architecture and the identities of its makers. I also engage in an adjacent literary tradition that grapples with the relationship between identity and built environments, as well as questions regarding placemaking and political and cultural agency. And, finally, this project builds on an existing sociological scholarship on contemporary diasporan Armenian life, reinserting the question of 'place' into the existing discourse. Later analyses work through the intersection of these traditions, applying a theoretical understanding of cultural identity and the diasporan experience to the arena of vernacular architectural history and urban sociology.

(Armenian) Diasporan Identity

Khachig Tölölyan, the founding editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, remarked in the journal's introductory manifesto, that "to affirm that diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment is not to write the premature obituary of the nation-state."[15] Any recognition of or study into transnational diasporan communities must recognize their relation to a 'home,' and, in this case, the nation-state of Armenia and its historical incarnations. These communities defy national boundaries, blurring the lines between a global network of diasporan communites and a homeland (which is situated within an internationally-recognized nation-state). Tölölyan notes that diasporan institutions serve as "the source of ideological, financial, and political support" for their homeland, operating across and between defined borders, bridging a gap between disparate national realms.[16] Therefore, members of diasporan communities are oriented toward the maintenance of their institutions (in exile), as well as their homeland, even if positioned thousands of miles away. Reflecting on Armenia during its Soviet occupation, Tölölyan states that "the Armenian nation existed both on a fragment of its homeland and in diaspora."[17] This understanding of transnationalism has been upheld by many diasporan institutions in the years since, which has been articulated through Armenian spaces outside the homeland.

15 Khachig Tölölyan, "The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 5.

16 Tölölyan, "The Nation-State," 5.

17 Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 7.

This symbiotic relationship between 'homeland' and diasporan communities is archetypal; it is a defining feature of the term 'diaspora,' according to sociologist Rogers Brubaker. Brubaker defines 'diaspora' as constitutive of three core elements: "the first is dispersion in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary maintenance."[18] Diasporan communities and their members define themselves and their collective identity in relation to a distant homeland, regardless of dispersion or national boundaries. Thus, cultural life in one community will resonate with that of others, since they operate under the umbrella of a larger

18 Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005): 5.

nation, headquartered in the (real or imagined) homeland. This certainly applies to material elements of cultural life, including the built environment. Cultural spaces in different American Armenian communities share common features; they are in indirect dialogue with one another because of their shared orientation toward Armenia—both the modern Republic and its historic extents.

Forging a relationship with an imagined homeland is inevitable within diasporic groups, especially those marked by forced dispersion. Hamid Naficy states that "placement is tied to its opposite, displacement."[19] He argues that "exilic deterritorialization necessitates an enhanced stress on territoriality,"[20] whereby defining 'home' becomes an instinctual reaction to forced dispersion. When diasporan communities are stripped of their territorial claims, they develop a "fetishization" of the homeland—a state in which "home colonizes the mind."[21] As later discussed, community spaces constructed in American Armenian environments serve as pseudo-surrogate 'homelands' for constituents, and help address this "fetishization." These spaces reflect the material and emotional qualities of 'home,' in response to multi-generational trauma and eventual resilience.

19 Hamid Naficy, "Chronotypes of Imagined Homeland," in *An Accented Cinema* (n.p.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152.

20 Naficy, "Chronotypes of Imagined," 155.

21 Hamid Naficy, "The Cultural Politics of Hybridity," in *Making of Exile Culture: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 169.

Hand-In-Hand: Identity & Vernacular Architecture

This project engages with a body of literature that repositions questions of identity and process within a discourse on vernacular architecture. Architectural historian Henry Glassie wrote that architecture is, like any creative product, a "projection of thoughts."[22] The process of designing, and of building, "blend[s] memories with a reading of the immediate situation."[23] Glassie challenges conventional understandings of architectural practice, especially those that limit 'architecture' to a singular professionalized form. Often with vernacular traditions, architecture reflects a cultural group's response instincts *and* its heritage and making traditions. Thus, built spaces serve as a stand-in for group identity; Glassie argues that "all creations bespeak their creators."[24] Accordingly, architecture must be read as a material expression of identity—something that "gives physical form to claims and names, to memories and hopes."[25]

22 Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture (Material Culture)* (Indiana Univ. Pr., 2000), 18.

23 Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture,* 18.

24 Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture,* 22.

25 Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture,* 22.

Glassie also suggests a reading of architecture as a social language, particularly within communities. He argues that "architecture shapes relations between people. It is a kind of communication."[26] Built spaces can help facilitate interactions within and between generations of a community. Thus, an examination of vernacular architecture alongside that of its creators' traditional mores can lead to a better understanding of its position within complex cultural systems.

26 Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture,* 22.

Jayden Ali, co-curator of the British Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale of Architecture, extends Glassie's reading of vernacular architecture, applying it to diasporan contexts. Ali argues that "through everyday ritual acts…[diasporans] shape the architecture of the world we live in."[27] Diasporan citizens navigate the heritages of two disparate worlds (of both 'host' and 'homeland') at once. In their imagination, the built spaces they physically inhabit exist alongside those of a distant homeland; the diasporan urban experience is a radically hybrid one. Therefore, spaces constructed by diasporan groups, such as Armenians, should be examined alongside their hybrid identities. This practice will lend itself to an understanding of the "will and wit" of these groups, which craft the making of diasporan space.[28]

27 Jayden Ali, "Towards a Diasporic Architecture of the 'In-Between,'" ArtReview.

28 Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture,* 22.

Ultimately, the works of Glassie and Ali underline the significance of examining vernacular architecture alongside matters of identity and process. If we examine the spaces that host cultural activity, then we can develop a stronger understanding of the subjectivities that have contributed to their making, and vice versa.

Multi-Layered Built Environments

Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History,* explores the agentive power of identity and identity groups in urban landscapes. Drawing from the works of urban sociologists and historians, as well as her own ethnographic research, she proposes a new mode of engaging with urban landscapes. She argues that since the vernacular landscape is "layered with the traces of previous generations's struggles," it becomes "the image of our common humanity—hard word, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love."[29] Hayden suggests that built environments can and should be read like the story of their inhabitants since the everyday citizen constantly (often unknowingly) serves as a cultivator and shaper of built form. Referring to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Hayden explains that "the production of space begins as soon as indigenous residents locate themselves in a particular landscape and begin the search for subsistence."[30] The act of embodying and finding comfort in space inevitably lends itself to some transformation of it.

29 Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 15.

30 Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 20.

Diasporans, especially, are pronounced cultivators of space. In exile, often without a preexisting familiarity with their host environment, diasporans adapt to the existing conditions of a place, as a means of survival. Survival takes many forms, and is often initially tied to 'productive' work undertaken under the command of some powerful 'other'. But survival leads to stability, which then leads to gradual processes of reconstructing cultural and social tradition (often through the infrastructures of the initial survival). Hayden states that investigating the genealogies of these processes can "turn an abandoned set of railroad tracks or a decaying freight shed into a potential resource for projects concerned with larger public meanings in the urban landscape."[31] Sites of social, cultural, and political meaning are sprinkled everywhere in diasporan communities with even a few generations of history.

31 Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 22.

This project searches for "public meanings" within the ordinary places diasporan Armenians inhabit. These spaces can serve as a vehicle for understanding larger stories that may have been previously written over or looked passed. And in doing so, they may expose the hidden forces that dictate the quality and vitality of our cultural life.

Contemporary Diasporan Armenian Inquiry

Dolores Hayden, explaining the impetus for her project *The Power of Place* states:

“In recent decades, as geographers John Agnew and James Duncan have shown, social scientists have frequently avoided “place” as a concept, and thus have sidetracked the sensory, aesthetic, and environmental components of the urbanized world.”[32]

32 Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 18.

Hayden’s critique certainly rings true within contemporary social science inquiry that deals with diasporan Armenian contexts. ‘Place’ and questions of physical environments have been repeatedly left out of the discourse, relegated to the sidelines when studying diasporan Armenian communities.

Daniel Fittante’s *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs: Outsiders Inside Armenian Los Angeles* provides a fascinating examination of Armenian life in Glendale, California. It is one of a handful of examples of social science scholarship that grapples with diasporan Armenian life in Los Angeles (which is surprising, given that Los Angeles boasts the largest population of Armenians outside Armenia). However, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs* focuses primarily on the political agents that have cemented Glendale’s reputation as the ‘capital of the Armenian diaspora.’ It skims over Armenians’ relationship to and transformation of physical environments.

Referring to Armenians in Glendale, Fittante writes that “they seized the opportunity to transform a sleepy, prejudicial sundown town into a domain of ethnic political mobilization and newcomer incorporation.”[33] This is an accurate assessment, one supported by my later analyses of the Armenian community in Glendale and the Greater Los Angeles Area. However, it fails to mention the urban transformations that were made alongside this political mobilization, which, in many instances, enabled the mobilization in the first place. Later, he argues that Armenians, “in the process of making a place for themselves [...] have become influential participants in US political history.”[34] Fittante is correct in making this claim, but once again leaves out the urban-spatial factor.

33 Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs*, 6.

34 Fittante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs*, 21.

I recognize that questions of urban and spatial transformation may not be within the scope of Daniel Fittante’s research project. However, my project seeks to fill that gap. I will be uncovering and identifying diasporan Armenians’ relationship to place, because I argue, as Dolores Hayden did, that political maneuvers and mobilization are supported, if not shaped by the spaces from which they emerge.

My Contribution

As mentioned, the existing literature on diasporan Armenian life is limited. Scholarship that focuses on diasporan Armenian spaces is even more so, especially concerning secular or ‘common’ sites. This project marries the conceptual frameworks and methodologies applied to urban/architectural inquiry with that of diasporan (Armenian) studies. My methodologies and analysis synthesize and build on the intersection of the presented scholarship

Any study into the story of diasporan communities should also examine questions of ‘place,’ since in diaspora, “home colonizes the mind.”[35] This project seeks to draw out this relationship between ‘place’ and ‘identity,’ treating the two as indispensable, constitutive parts of a single equation.

35 Naficy, “The Cultural Politics of Hybridity,” 169.

Methodologies

Methodological Framework

This project explores the relationship between place and identity, as materialized through diasporan architecture. This question is investigated within the context of three diasporan Armenian communities in the United States: Boston, MA; Fresno, CA; and Los Angeles, CA. Across the three communities, this project focuses on community spaces constructed for cultural use, which are then analyzed within a comparative framework. Throughout the project, select features of the built environment and scales of attention are brought into focus to highlight relationships across geographic and temporal scales.

‘Identity’ is an abstract variable, difficult to articulate through a single data form. Therefore, I have collected and employed three forms of data to better draw relationships between diasporan Armenian identity and the built environment. The first is in-depth interviews conducted on-site with community representatives in each city. Cultural identity is relatively intrinsic for most people. Through interviews, community representatives can express their emotional relationships to a place, via spoken word. The second is visual documentation in the form of photographs and videos. This form visualizes the full material culture of each place, be it architectural elements (iconography, lettering, structural elements, material choices, etc.) or urban-spatial ones (use of public infrastructure, site-neighbor interaction, on-site spatial arrangement, etc.). Finally, the third data form is maps that illustrate relationships between place and identity. Identity is not static, and cannot only be observed through singular examples. Therefore data from various community sites (institutional affiliation, functional typology, degree of ownership, etc.) has been mapped to illustrate how identity operates as a plural and ever-changing force. Prior literature has employed each of these data forms individually, or in pairings. However, this project strings the three forms together, introducing an interdisciplinary approach that treats each as an equally vital methodology.

In-Depth Interviews: Methods & Data

I have conducted nearly 40 in-depth interviews with community representatives in Boston, Fresno, and Los Angeles. These interviews were mostly recorded on-site, during fieldwork (a handful were conducted remotely, over Zoom). The interlocutors range in professional and personal background, including (but not limited to): priests, farmers, educators, journalists, artists, students, and activists. In most cases, the conversations ranged across three topics: (1) the history of the specific site; (2) the history of the broader community; and (3) the interlocutor’s relationship with the site. These conversations provide an oral history, articulating complex dynamics that contribute to each community’s built environment (such as conflict, tradition, and transformation). This paper attempts to serve as a vehicle through which community members can better communicate their stories to a

wider audience. It presents a patchwork of perspectives, tied together to tell a more meaningful story.

(On-Site) Visual Documentation: Methods & Data

Photographs of nearly 45 sites were taken during fieldwork (comprising about 6,500 photographs). The photographed subjects range in scale, but they mostly capture the context in which the site sits, or specific architectural details. Similar to the interview responses (described above), these photographs support my paper in two ways. First, photographs are placed throughout the paper to help draw out some of the specific arguments made in the writing. For example, when describing a particular informal use of public infrastructure, an image of that moment is included, alongside the text. Second, these photographs have informed my writing process. I had the images by my side, for reference, when I was writing about a particular site; this allowed me to pick up on certain observations that I had missed during active fieldwork.

Mapping & Diagrams: Methods & Data

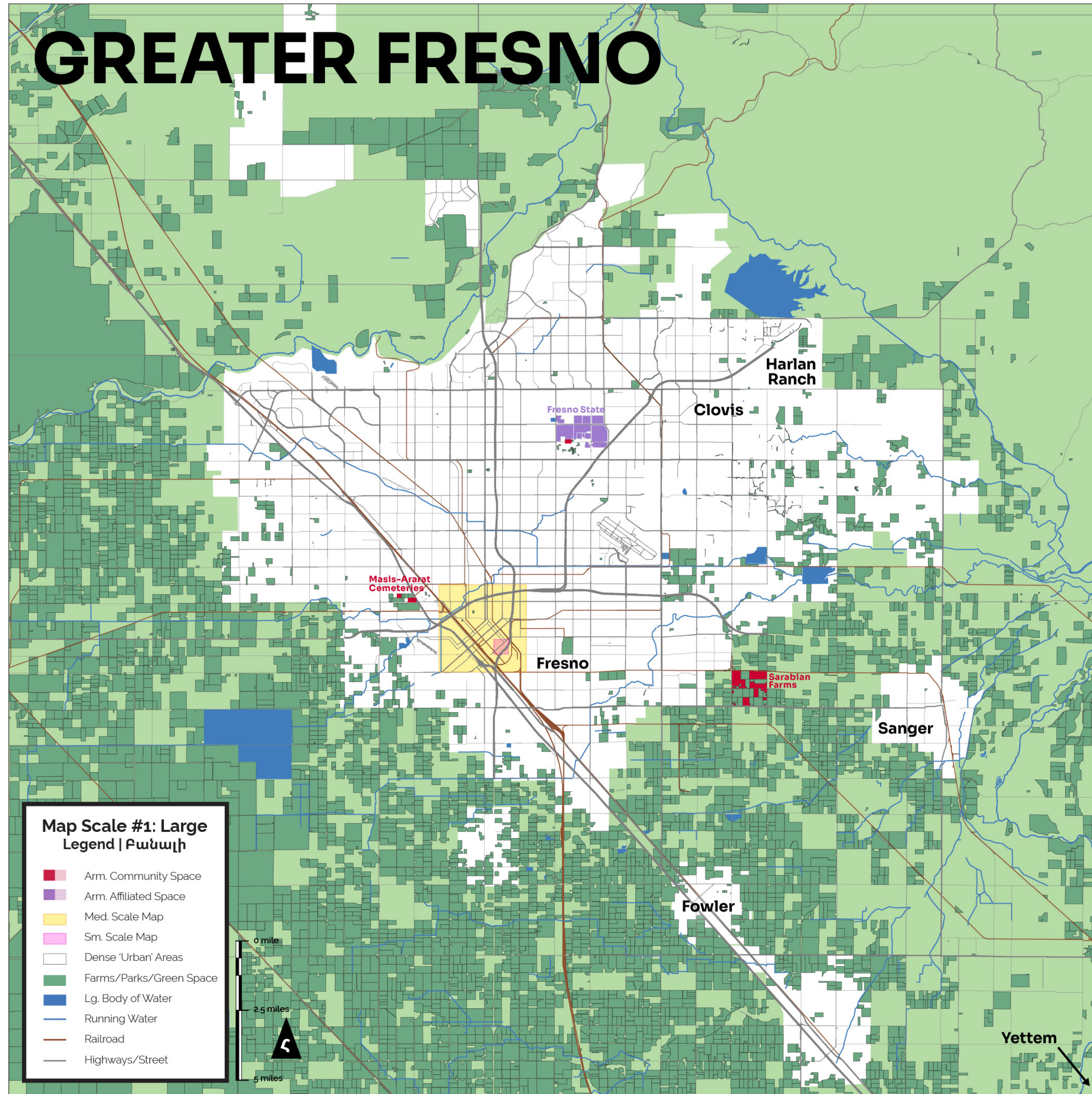
I have prepared a set of maps and diagrams to illustrate relationships described in writing (similar to the role of photographs, described above). The data for each of these maps is drawn from fieldwork interviews and general information that is relevant to my research questions (such as institutional affiliation, functional typology, degree of ownership, etc.).

Mapping data serves as an additional form of visual evidence that helps support my writing process, as well as the text itself. Collecting data is a prerequisite step in constructing a larger research argument. However, in between, I needed to visualize this data so that I could understand the relationships between identity and place in each of the three communities. Mapping supports this process, helping interpret findings in a way that would not have been possible, if only referencing interviews and photographs.

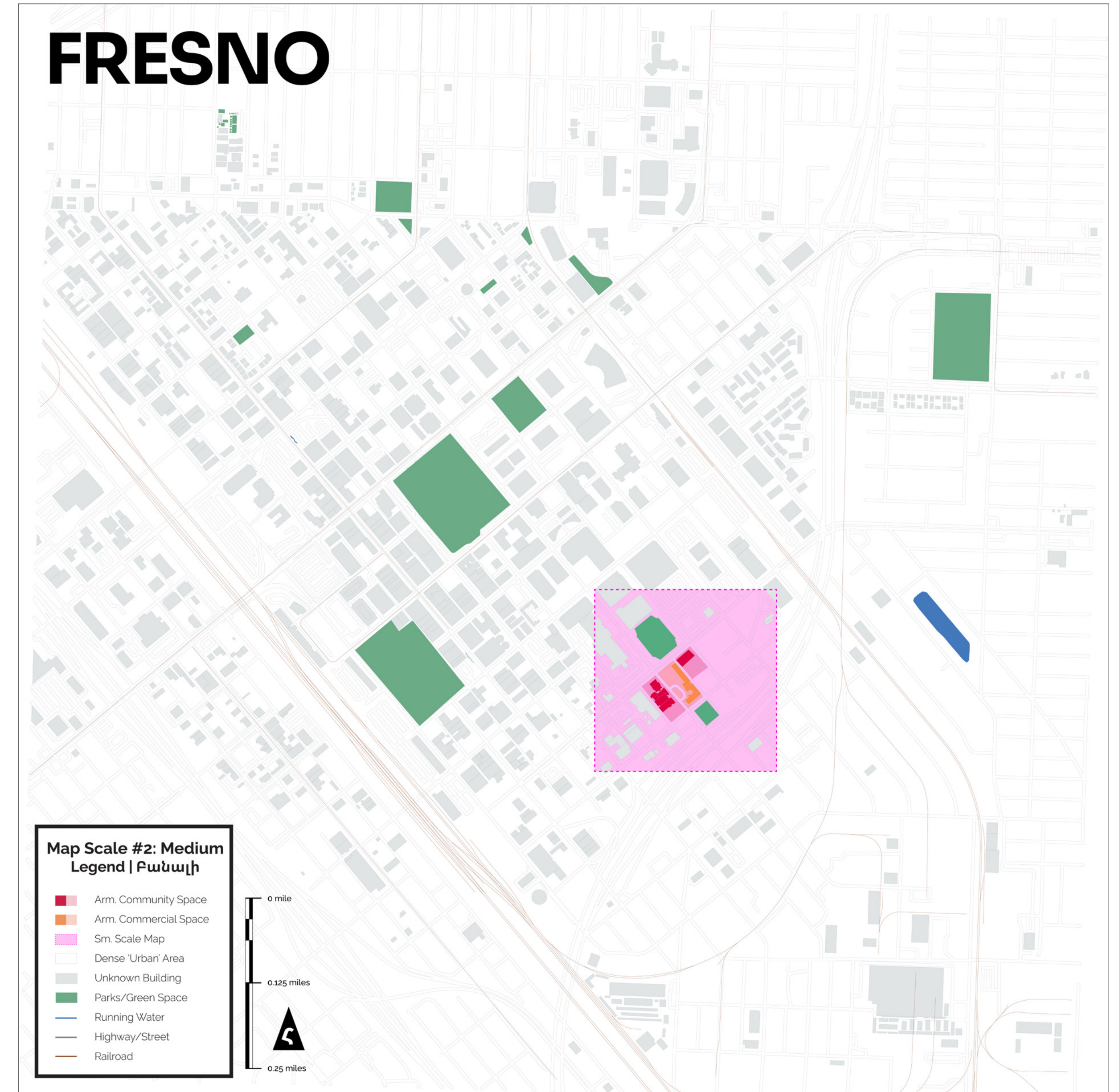
“Raisins, Everbody Grew Raisins”

Armenians in Greater Fresno

Armenian Landscape with Cypress Trees, Mariros Saryan



Large Scale Map of Greater Fresno.
Indicates extents of Medium and Small Scale Maps.



Medium Scale Map of Fresno Proper.
Indicates extents of Small Scale Map.

"Trains howl away across the valley. The sun goes down long and red. All the magic names of the valley unrolled—Manteca, Madera, all the rest. Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries. I stuck my head out the window and took deep breaths of the fragrant air. It was the most beautiful of all moments [...] He drove me into buzzing Fresno and let me off by the south side of town. I went for a quick Coke in a little grocery by the tracks, and here came a melancholy Armenian youth along the red boxcars, and just at that moment a locomotive howled, and I said to myself, Yes, yes, Saroyan's town."[36]

—Jack Kerouac, *On The Road.*

36 Jack Kerouac, On the Road, 36th ed. (New York, N.Y: Penguin Group, 1955).

"I was born in a town called Fresno, which is now a famous town, and I don't mean I made it famous. Raisins made Fresno famous."[37]

—William Saroyan, "I Remember Fresno."

37 William Saroyan, "I Remember Fresno," 1954, William Saroyan Papers, Stanford University, Manuscripts Division.

Staring Into a Saryan Painting

Professor Barlow Der Mugrdechian leads me out of the Center for Armenian Studies, and I follow him, through a maze of outdoor hallways, up a flight of concrete stairs. Der Mugrdechian serves as director of the Armenian Studies Program at Fresno State, one in a small group of Armenian studies departments in the US. Founded in the late 1970s, the Program is now a global leader in Armenian Studies and provides an array of robust Armenian language and history courses. As we climb up the concrete stairs, Der Mugrdechian turns back and points out the words engraved in stone above: "This is the Leon S. Peters Building. You know who he is, right?"

"I don't, no. Is he Armenian?" I guess, given the recurring pattern of Armenian-named stores and buildings.

"Yep. The Peters are a big Fresno family. Last name used to be Bedrosian...which became Peterson. And that became Peters."

He continues onward, his face shining under the late-summer valley sun. As we move up, at each landing, I catch a new glimpse of Fresno State's pastoral campus. In the foreground, clusters of brutalist concrete buildings emerge amidst green blots of California redwood and oak. The buildings and blots line up with a grid of pedestrian arteries that stretch out to the formal boundaries of the university.

I follow Professor Der Mugrdechian's lead, and we arrive at an observation deck five floors up.

From this vantage, it's easier to situate the campus within the broader valley. The grid of paved pedestrian-ways now bleeds into the crop lines of sprawling farmland. Fields of corn stalk, grapevine, and strawberry bush span the length of the valley, a blanket of green hugging miles of lumpy yellow hills. In the distance, rows of narrow cypress trees line two-lane farm roads, connecting a network of small red barns. A sun-washed blue sky towers overhead, falling into the jagged snowcapped teeth of the Eastern Sierras, fifty miles away.

"It's really something, huh?" Professor Der Mugrdechian's face beams with pride.

"It kind of looks like Haiastan,*" I responded.*

"Makes you wonder why they moved here..."

I can't help but notice the similarities between this view and the pastoral landscape of Armenia, particularly the Ararat Valley. It's like staring into a Martiros Saryan painting, or a calendar of 'great Armenian views.' Although this was only my second visit to Fresno, I had certainly seen this view dozens of times.

And, to Professor Der Mugrdechian's point, it's not hard to imagine why the earliest diasporan Armenian immigrants settled here. This landscape provided a visual and atmospheric surrogate for a homeland they had recently lost, or were in the process of losing. Yes, the Central Valley was a booming place to move to at the turn of the twentieth century. But it was also an environment that helped an exiled Armenian community heal from its wounds.

Social Geography of Fresno, CA

The city of Fresno is located at the heart of California's Central Valley, which stretches, narrow and long, 450 miles from Northern California to Bakersfield, and 50 miles from the western Coast Range to the eastern Sierra Nevadas. The Central Valley covers 18,000 square miles of farmland, waterways, and small urban clusters, of which nearly 6,000 square miles fall under the jurisdiction of Fresno County. Fresno County is the primary site of Armenian inhabitation in the Central Valley. The extents of the Armenian community's spatial imprint were historically limited to the city of Fresno and adjacent farmland further south (in the areas of Sanger and Fowler). In the past fifty years, suburban towns have sprung up 10-15 miles north of Fresno proper—a result of major transformations in the local economy. In turn, many Fresno residents' spatial imprint has shifted toward these suburban towns, including much of the Armenian community.

In *The Dreamt Land: Chasing Water and Dust in California*, author Mark Arax describes Fresno at the turn of the twentieth century as a "creature only half a century in the making [..] situated on blazing hot ground because that's where Leland Stanford and his railroad had put it."[38] Arax chronicles the evolution of Central California from a pre-expansion 'frontier' into the agricultural powerhouse it is today. This evolution—which Arax argues was manufactured by political and entrepreneurial actors—served as the impetus for the arrival of more than 45,000 Armenian immigrants and refugees to Fresno.[39] Early Fresno Armenians were sold on the idea of "the small farm," a culture that had been "ginned up by the old wheat barons and exalted by their real estate men."[40] This maneuver helped save hundreds of thousands of acres of exhausted land that had been resurrected through government-sponsored irrigation projects and the emancipation of water access. These barons prepared elaborate promotional literature to disseminate

38 Mark Arax, *The Dreamt Land: Chasing Water and Dust Across California* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 228.

39 Berge Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians: History of a Diaspora Community* (Fresno, CA: The Press at California State University, Fresno, 2000), 7.

40 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 229.

the idea of the 'small farm' throughout the United States. Literature promoted "the realization of man's entrepreneurial destiny."[41] through "stories of nature producing wonderful monstrosities in one blessed ground or another."[42] Tales often left the impression that "gold could now be plucked from trees,"[43] something that enticed an entire generation of exiled and orphaned immigrants.

41 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 229-230.

42 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 221.

43 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 221.

Drawing from his family's accounts, Arax describes the first wave of immigration following this early promotional effort. His great-great-uncle Yervant had arrived in Fresno, and, enamored by the promise of agricultural fortune, started writing to his family in the 'old country.' In one letter he wrote:

> **YERVANT:** "Here find an Eden of pomegranate and peach, [...] Grapes that hang like jade eggs. Watermelons so capacious that when you finish eating their delicious meat, you can float inside their shells in the cool waters of irrigation canals. Armenians by the thousands have come. We are farming raisins. We have started two newspapers, a theater group, a literary group, and two coffee houses. You must see it with your own eyes to believe it!"[44]

44 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 220.

Uncle Yervant and other Armenian refugees in this first wave had escaped years of torment and horrors in their homeland, only to find themselves surrounded by opportunity in California. They were blinded by early success, and called on their loved ones to join them in the 'promised land.' And so a second wave of immigrants, hooked on the promise of 'entrepreneurial destiny,' joined their relatives in Fresno. Arax's grandfather, Aram, left to join his uncle and traveled across the Atlantic, and over the Sierras on Stanford's transcontinental railroad. Mark Arax recounts his grandfather's voyage:

> "As the engine chugged down the mountain and descended into a valley knifed by two rivers and a webwork of ditches, Aram Arax finally gazed upon the country his uncle had written about. Outside his window, beneath the snowy caps of the Sierra, the big valley shimmered. Vineyards and orchards and vegetable fields, row after perfect row. [...] As he stared out the window, he kept muttering the same words in Armenian: 'Just like the old land.'"[45]

45 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 223-224.

Aram Arax traveled to Fresno because of perceived fortune and temperate climates. He stayed because this landscape reminded him of his homeland—a land now ravaged and stolen. Many Armenians were drawn to stay in Fresno for these reasons, and developed a powerful relationship with 'the land,' based on a perceived sense of economic, cultural, and existential security.

As this second wave of immigrants settled down and committed to a life of agriculture and frontierism, Fresno experienced an economic boom. Farmers made larger investments in the land and were supported by state infrastructure projects. Arax notes that "from 1900 to 1920, [...] the irrigated crops in California [tripled] to 4.2 million acres."[46] This was a direct result of $200 million of investment on behalf of the U.S. government, an effort to "make reclamation and settlement happen in California."[47] These investments translated into immediate financial success for all parties involved. Arax explains:

46 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 224.

47 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 224.

> "In 1920, the year of my grandfather's landing, banks across the state swelled with $400 million in deposits—the greatest annual increase in California history. The value of the harvest had doubled over the decade to $588 million. More than 153 million grapevines [...] had been planted. The raisin crop now weighed 185,000 tons. [...] the proportion of farms 1,000 acres or larger had fallen slightly from 1910 to 1920, reflecting the arrival of more small farmers. Likewise, the average farm size shrunk from 400 acres to 246 acres."[48]

48 Arax, *The Dreamt Land*, 224-225.

As a greater number of immigrant farmers took out loans for their small farms, banks swelled in profits, harvests became more bountiful, and agricultural production diversified.

Photograph: Armenian grape pickers in the early 1900s. Courtesy of *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*.

However, immigrant farmers also ran into various economic problems upon arrival. Armenian farmers were discriminated against through restrictive covenants and limited job opportunities, which favored "'native' or western European hands [...] over the Armenians."[49] Over-planting, reduced demand, and the 18th Amendment (Prohibition) plagued small farmers in the 1920s.[50,51] The Great Depression made matters worse, inflicting further hardship in the early 1930s. Nevertheless, Armenians continued to buy farms for one of two reasons: (1) "they did not understand the economic conditions;" or (2) "they wanted a place to re-establish roots with a hope for a better future."[52] Confronted with these challenges, Armenian farmers either assumed debt or managed to support themselves through some other unknown measures. A significant portion managed to maintain or reclaim their farming estates, which suggests a profound sense of faith in agriculture. It was something that carried Armenians through the twentieth century, allowing them to deepen their ties with the natural landscape of the Central Valley and develop a unique diasporan identity in response.

49 Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 55.

50 By the early twentieth century, "Armenians owned at least 16,000 acres of vineyards, about one-sixth of the total" (Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 57). Grapes harvested in these vineyards were either packed and distributed as fresh produce, dried as raisins, or used in viticulture. The 18th Amendment ushered in the Prohibition era, which outlawed the production and sale of alcoholic beverages. Armenians who farmed vineyards were severely impacted since they supported and relied on the production of grape-based alcoholic beverages.

51 Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 57.

52 Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 58-59.

Setting the Tone: Between the Grapevines and Fig Trees

Armenians first arrived in Fresno as orphans, widows, and single men searching for freedom in the face of prejudice. As a means of establishing a viable source of income, Armenians bought small agricultural lots with morsels and chump change, all the while dreaming of fortune. It was a direct response to hundreds of years of instability and foreign occupation. This fire produced generations of successful farmers in the Central Valley, many of whom went on to become key players in the agricultural business—on a domestic and international scale. These burgeoning farms and farmers grew to cover much of the Central Valley, and not long after, the Armenian community and Fresno's environmental landscape became synonymous.

I had the opportunity to spend a day at one of these megafarms, owned by the multigenerational Sarabian family. My conversations with them helped underline the importance of 'the land' in the Fresno Armenian experience—a relationship that has continuously defined and informed the community's interaction with its natural *and* built environments. As I gathered, much of this was due to existing skills, habits, and sentiments Armenians brought with them from the homeland. They were able to translate and apply these to the 'the land,' defined here as both the real and conceptual pastoral landscape of Fresno.

Photograph:
Produce-packing and cooling facilities at Sarabian Farms in Sanger.

I sat down with the Sarabian family inside a prefabricated office, within a large produce-packing and cooling facility in Sanger, California (a 20-minute drive east from downtown Fresno). The Sarabians operate a five-generation family farm that focuses on vegetable production, cold storage, packing, and agricultural consulting. As we sat in the farm's offices, hosts of younger family-members-turned-employees dropped in to ask questions of David and Michael Sarabian, two brothers who now steer this growing ship. We were also joined by their 90-year-old mother, Virginia, the matriarch of their empire. Virginia, born in Modesto, CA, told stories of her parents and her in-laws' generation, some of the earliest to migrate from Western Armenia. She explains:

> **VIRGINIA:** "My husband's parents, came here in 1920-1921. They came here from Armenia during the massacres. My mother-in-law was captured by the Turks. She was 14 years old. She was later a nurse, and she had to do surgeries, amputations, etc. with nothing but whiskey. She escaped and she found her sister and the two migrated to Syria. And then from there, they were able to come to the United States; they had a brother here. After she got here, she married my father-in-law."[53]

53 Virginia Sarabian, Michael Sarabian, and David Sarabian, Sarabian Farms (Sanger, CA), August 22, 2023.

This was the generation that immediately took to farming, or whichever profession they could most easily access as genocide-fleeing refugees. Her father-in-law joined thousands of Armenians and gambled whatever he had. She explained: he "bought a place by Tarjan. They had a house over there in Sanger. Along Highway 180. And he started farming right before the Depression." Although he lost his land in the Great Depression, he started over again, hooked to the promise of agricultural fortune, all the while cultivating a deeper relationship with 'the land.'

> **VIRGINIA:** "Yeah, they started all over again. And they worked all the way and kept at it. I mean, they work hard. I mean, physically hard. My mother-in-law would go out and tie vines...like 60-70 acres all by herself."

> **MICHAEL:** "She did whatever she could. But I remember she cut peaches in the summer. They used to have a peach-cutting thing right over here where the lady would cut peaches for drying. So she did that...she did whatever needed to be done."

Photographs:
[Left] Raisin grapes set out to dry under the hot late-summer sun, at Sarabian Farms.
[Right] David Sarabian picking raisin grapes off vineyards at his family's multi-generational farm.

As explained, this promise consumed entire families. It transcended mere sustenance or livelihood and everyone was invested, from children to the matriarchs. When asked about what the farming business and lifestyle meant to her father-in-law, her husband, and subsequent generations of Sarabians, Virginia responded, stating that "it was love, you might say."

AUTHOR: "What kind of farming was that?"

MICHAEL: "Raisins, everybody grew raisins. Well, grapes or raisins."

VIRGINIA: "That's all they did then. And that's all we did for how many years..."

Ultimately, as Fresno Armenians became increasingly tied (financially and professionally) to 'the land,' they began to sow the seeds for a more fruitful social and cultural landscape that resonated with their new home. These Armenian farming families developed close kinships, and in doing so transformed the fields of the Central Valley into an Armenian community. David mentioned that during their heyday, all the Armenian farmers would gather on weekends and visit each other. The fields became, above all, "a social setting." Virginia expanded on this, explaining that since the area was predominantly Armenian, they'd regularly drive down the road, cutting through rows of vineyards and fig trees, to go "visit each other, or play cards."

David later drove me through these dusty roads in his large, white pick-up truck; we were taking the same drive as many of these families. As we retraced arteries of social and cultural exchange, I could imagine kids running alongside the edges of the road, while parents and older family members tended the grapevines and fruit trees just beyond. He tells of his parents' and grandparents' generation:

DAVID: "And, you know, they would just drive to each other's house. Right through this avenue. You'd never get on the [main] road. This whole area was just a great Armenian community. Everybody. There were so many Armenians around here."[54]

54 David Sarabian, Driving Through Sarabian Farms (Sanger, CA), August 22, 2023.

Photographs:
[Left] Raisin grapes at the Sarabian Family's vineyard.
[Right] Raisin grapes drying amidst rows of vineyards. Sarabian Farms, Sanger.

David pointed out farm plots as we drove by, identifying them with dozens of Armenian names. "This used to belong to the Gostanian family. [...] Mr. Bulbulian lived over there. [...] All this used to be the Mesropians'." And he went on; we passed the Melkonians, the Kaprelians, the Melikians, and the Bedrosians. Fresno Armenians had inscribed their names onto miles of agricultural fields. They saw themselves and their community in relation to, if not an extension of 'the land.'

David pulled over into a largely empty lot and parked the truck near a small white home with bright green trimmings and fascia all around. David's parents, Sarkis and Virginia built this two-bedroom, 1,000-square-foot home in 1956 where they raised their three young boys. Today it stands a little derelict and empty. As David shows me around, I imagine the Sarabian boys racing through the dirt patch beyond the home's concrete porch—off to play in a dense grove of fig trees just a few yards away. Farm homes and barns often served as sites of ongoing cultural exchange. Front lawns and porches on homesteads hosted formal picnics, parties, and holiday celebrations. These spaces supported Armenian families as they celebrated their heritage and helped an immigrant community maintain its cultural ties.

Photograph:
David Sarabian, standing in front of his childhood home. The home was built by his parents, Sarkis and Virgina, and now hosts the family's annual *oghi* celebrations.

The Sarabians have, for generations, prepared barrels of *oghi*, a fruit-based moonshine often made of apricots, mulberries, or grapes. Each spring, when the *oghi* is ready, the family invites the "whole Armenian community [...] friends, and anybody in the Sanger area" to join them in celebrating the harvest, and the months of summer celebration ahead. Hayrigs and hopars grill a variety of *kebab*, while mothers prepare *lavash* or cut fresh cucumber and tomatoes. On cracked concrete porches, *dedes* battle in fierce *nardi* competition, as *nenes* exchange gossip over rounds of Rummy. *Kef* bands play Anatolian tunes from the old country, commencing hours of circle-dance on the dirt patch just outside the old Sarabian home. Throughout the celebration, endless toasts are made with the

fresh *oghi*, in honor of the homeland, their ancestors, and the next generation of Fresno Armenians. These are features that comprise similar *kefs* across the United States, or in other diasporan communities. However, rather than celebrating in brick community centers in dense urban neighborhoods, Fresno Armenians have adopted the fields as their site of *kef*.[55]

55 Terms used in this paragraph:
hayrig : 'father'
hopar 'uncle'
dede : 'grandfather'
nardi : 'backgammon'
nene : 'grandmother'

As David describes this scene, it reminds me of similar *kefs* I've experienced, out in the open, in deep agricultural farmland. These are memories from *kefs* held in the Republic of Armenia and Artsakh, 7,000 miles from Sanger, California. Everything about this imagined scene—the music, food, and general spirit—resonates with any Armenian who's visited the homeland. Ultimately it is the physical landscape that helps make this connection.

Once again, I'm standing in pastoral fields that stretch across the valley, punctuated by dominating mountain peaks in the distance. The sun looms overhead, and all you can see for miles is a dense band of green that meets another band of blue at the horizon. Economic and social factors aside, it is not hard to imagine why Armenians invested in this environment, and why they define themselves in relation to 'the land.' Fresno's landscape transports Armenians to a distant homeland, where identity was once maintained with greater ease. The Central Valley helps bridge that gap, placing them in an environment that closely resembles 'home.' It advanced the starting point for identity maintenance and has made this project a little bit easier. The emotional and cognitive conflation of Fresno's landscape and Armenians' homeland became widely recognized and harnessed by the community as it sought to establish itself, within and beyond the vineyards and farm-lines.

Photograph:
Fields of agricultural farmland, in Sanger. The Eastern Sierra Nevadas are in view, in the far distance.

Calculated Architectures: Hallowed Grounds & Sacred Lands

By the early twentieth century, Fresno Armenians started to amass a wealth of financial and political resources, which they directed towards efforts to expand their community's spatial footprint. In the process, even the choices the community made within greater Fresno that were not directly related to agriculture reflected a general sensitivity to 'the land'.

One such community site is the Ararat and Masis-Ararat Cemeteries complex. It is a palimpsest of Armenian history, etched into the local natural environment. In the 1880s, Armenians were offered the cemetery lot, which they immediately purchased as an opportunity to further invest in their future and their past.

Photograph:
Various Armenian gravestones and grave markers at Ararat Armenian Cemetery in Fresno.

I toured the cemetery complex with Professor Barlow Der Mugrdechian, who possesses an encyclopedic understanding of the community's pedigree. On site, he shared dozens of anecdotes and tidbits regarding the hundreds of Armenians interred at the cemetery complex. We walked through a maze of waist-high gravestones and cross-shaped markers, featuring countless stone-etched faces of past Armenians, carved names in the Armenian alphabet, and imagery featuring Mount Ararat and the *haverzhutyan*[56] sign. Along the way, Der Mugrdechian pointed out familiar names and relatives, which reflected the familial nature of the community.

56 *haverzhutyun/-yan* : '(of) eternity'

I imagine that this is what the cemetery's early benefactors might have envisioned. It provided an ethnically-specific site in which deceased community members could rest peacefully, in the company of loved ones whose company and cultural heritage they enjoyed while living. Meanwhile, it became a space in which living family members and friends could mourn and celebrate together, for generations.

As we strolled through the Ararat Cemetery, passing by rows of "-ian"-marked gravestones, Professor Der Mugrdechian gets flagged down by groups of other Armenian families, visiting family at nearby gravesites. Along the way, he shouts, *"Inchbess es? Hi! Lav es?"*[57] He chuckles, turns to me, and exclaims: "Everybody knows me!"

57 *Inchbess es? Hi! Lav es?*: 'How are you? Hi! Everything good?'

The decision to purchase and develop the cemetery complex paid dividends. In doing so, the Armenian community planted a flag for itself, demarcating a space that would reflect its presence and contributions to the region. In Professor Der Mugrdechian's words, "It becomes like a community. It is part of the community, right? Like whatever happens, this is Armenian."[58]

58 Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian, Masis-Ararat and Ararat Cemeteries Complex (Fresno, CA), August 20, 2023.

Photograph:
Large family burial plots at Masis-Ararat Armenian Cemetery in Fresno.

"Whatever happens, this is Armenian." Members of the Fresno Armenian community recognize that physical environments can serve as a means of securing identity. The Masis-Ararat and Ararat Cemeteries complex is a material display of this community and its heritage. The gravesites of revolutionary heroes like Soghomon Tehlirian of Operation Nemesis and Monte Melkonian of the Artsakh liberation movement are fashioned as grand monuments. The Seropian brothers (the first Armenian settlers in the region) are interred here, as well as the man who put Fresno and its Armenian community on the map, writer/playwright William Saroyan. The complex features memorials like that of the Unknown Martyr from Der-Zor, and is in the process of constructing new ones, such as the Monument to Descendents of Musa Ler. In the context of the greater cemetery complex, these sites help bolster the community's longevity, as they remind Armenians of their collective strengths and achievements. It also helps secure relationships with local non-Armenians. Today's Fresno Armenians can point back to the Masis-Ararat and Ararat Cemeteries as a physical record of their contributions to the Central Valley. Armenians' stories have, for generations now, become fused with Fresno's cultural and environmental landscape.

Photographs:
[Top] Soghomon Tehlirian's burial site at Masis-Ararat Cemetery.
[Middle] Monument to Descendents of Musa Ler *(in construction)* at Masis-Ararat Cemetery.
[Bottom] William and Lucy Saroyans' burial site at Ararat Cemetery.

The Masis-Ararat and Ararat Cemeteries were an important first step for the community, in terms of calculated environmental transformation. More than a century later, the Armenian community found itself in a position to cash in on an increased wealth of social, financial, and political capital; they decided to construct a neutral common ground through an Armenian Genocide monument. They drew from the successes of the cemetery complex, and once again tapped into their history as stewards of the Central Valley. The monument's designers were also influenced by the local community's growing relationship with a newly independent Armenia and Artsakh. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, diasporan Armenians were granted access to visit Armenia; they became instrumental in developing the Republics of Armenia and Artsakh, as governmental, commercial, and cultural actors. Many of these compatriots were also visiting their homeland again for the first time since their initial exile. Thus, the monument reflects the past 150 years of Fresno Armenian life, as well as diasporans' cognitive, cultural, and newly-philanthropic relationship with their homeland.

In 2015, the Armenian community constructed the Armenian Genocide Monument at California State University, Fresno. The monument's planning committee (comprised of representatives from various subethnic groups and affiliations) decided to build the monument along a high-traffic artery at the center of Fresno State's campus. This would bring more visibility to the monument, engaging a greater volume of the student body. For this to be successful, the monument needed to open itself to passers-by. Its designers aimed for an overall lightness in the monument's structure, as well as a sense of porosity achieved through the open gaps between steel columns. These gaps allow the monument and its 'Armenian' features to become fused with the backdrop of Fresno State's campus. 'Armenia' and Fresno's landscape are drawn into an environmental and historical relationship, encouraging meditation on 'the land' and its cultural significance for American Armenian identity.

Photograph:
Several students walk by the Armenian Genocide Monument at California State University, Fresno.

The planning committee felt this experience would be enhanced by, in a sense, recreating 'Armenia' on the relatively small plot. This would entail creating a space that engaged passers-by with the material and environmental qualities of 'Armenia.' As with the farmland and cemeteries previously discussed, this lot of American land became a sacred space on which Armenians could construct a surrogate homeland.

So the planning committee and the monument's designers dug into the literal soil. At the center of the monument, a manhole-cover-like concrete base features the traditional *haverzhutyan* sign. Professor Barlow Der Mugedchian (who played an instrumental role in the planning process) explains that "underneath the base of this concrete, we, the committee, brought soil from Nagorno-Kharabagh, modern Armenia, and Western Armenia, and put it here."[59] The community held a groundbreaking ceremony, during which major Fresno-area priests consecrated the soils added to the monument's foundation. The monument thus became "sacred, like sacred land." This has, in Der Mugrdechian's words, contributed to a community-wide recognition of the monument as "our land...like we're on our land."

59 Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian, Armenian Genocide Monument, California State University, Fresno (Fresno, CA), August 21, 2023.

The planning committee and designers brought together tangible pieces of both real and imagined homelands, and cast them onto a previously *odar* plot. In doing so, they recreated 'Armenia,' dissolving thousands of miles between them and their ancestral home. Professor Der Mugrdechian told me about a myth that inspired this decision. He explains:

> **PROF. DER MUGRDECHIAN:**
> "There's a story in Armenian history. There was an Armenian King (one of the Mamigonians, or one of the Bagratunis). He was taken in front of the Persian king. On one side was Armenian soil, and on one side was not. Whenever he was on Armenian soil, he was strong, and on the other side, he was weak. So it's like, you feel like this is part of your land, right?... Even though you're in Fresno."

Photograph:
Inside the Armenian Genocide Monument at Fresno State, featuring the *haverzhutyan* sign-inscribed concrete base.

For Fresno Armenians, there's something in their blood that ties them to this soil. It's a relationship that they've cultivated for 150 years, which has helped them sustain their community and their relationship to Armenian identity. The Genocide Monument at Fresno State recognizes this relationship and reintegrates it into the architecture of the space. In addition to the soil, the monument incorporates other

60 *tufa* : volcanic rock commonly used in vernacular Armenian building practices

61 *aveluk* : wild sorrel, native to Armenia

environmental elements that help evoke 'Armenia': the use of *tufa*[60] stone at the base of the steel columns, flowing water canals that symbolize Armenia's rivers, and landscaping that uses plants and grasses native to Armenia (pomegranate trees and *aveluk*[61]). When the features come together, they create a peaceful Armenian garden that prompts reflection on 'home,' belonging, and identity maintenance.

Photographs:
[Left] Columns of the Armenian Genocide Monument, featuring *tufa* stone bases and plants native to Armenia
[Right] Inside the columns, featuring flowing water canals

Like any garden, this space needs to be tended to and maintained. On site, Professor Der Mugrdechian explained: "It's like my yard, I check everything. Sometimes the drain gets blocked up, and then it overflows. [...] I do it all the time, I come by." Der Mugrdechian then kneeled and opened the water drain for the fountains, removing strands of grass that had fallen in and clogged the drain. He explained that he regularly visits the site, and serves as a quasi-groundskeeper of the monument. His commitment to this site is a continuation of 150 years of stewardship. Armenians have cemented their place as caretakers of Fresno's environmental landscape, be it the sprawling fields of farm country, the final resting place for hundreds of community members, or spaces for collective reflection and cultural engagement.

Challenges & Problematics: The 'Armenian [Ghost] Town':

As much as 'the land' has served as a source of identity maintenance for Fresno Armenians, it has also, in some respects, ushered in the community's most pressing challenges. The Central Valley's economic landscape has shifted dramatically over the past century, which has impacted social and cultural life at all scales. The agricultural industry no longer operates under a 'mom and pop' model; gone are the days of small farmers, whose only concern was supplying local groceries and distributors. Instead, the rise of megafarms and large agricultural corporations in the 1960s and 1970s pushed out small farming businesses, including many Armenian ones. A handful have remained, including the Sarabians (who have, albeit, had their share of hard times). But many other Armenian small farmers were squeezed out of their estates, and voluntarily or involuntarily left Fresno and Sanger for northern suburban town, 10-15 miles away, or even Los Angeles, 200 miles south.

Many Armenians now reside in the suburbs of Northern Fresno, Clovis, and Harlan Ranch. Armenian families are scattered across these areas, and so are their community institutions. You could drive for miles through blocks of small white-picket-fenced-homes, and then suddenly arrive upon a monumental Armenian church. In these suburbs, Armenian institutions are mostly stand-alone churches, either of the Western Diocese or of Evangelical denominations. These institutions and residential settlements have, over the past fifty years, led to the erasure of historic high, density Armenian neighborhoods in Downtown Fresno.

In the early twentieth century, Fresno's urban center was densely populated with Armenian life, earning the nickname, 'Armenian Town.' As Armenian farmers established their estates just outside the city, their friends and family moved into the downtown area, benefiting from this blossoming urban center. As Berge Bulbulian explains in *The Fresno Armenians*, "During the early life of 'Armenian Town,' Armenians occupied almost all the houses east of Ventura Avenue."[62] 'Armenian Town' boasted countless businesses and cultural institutions and was home to dozens of families, including William Saroyan's. These are the same streets that Saroyan described in his various novels and short stories.

62 Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 38-39.

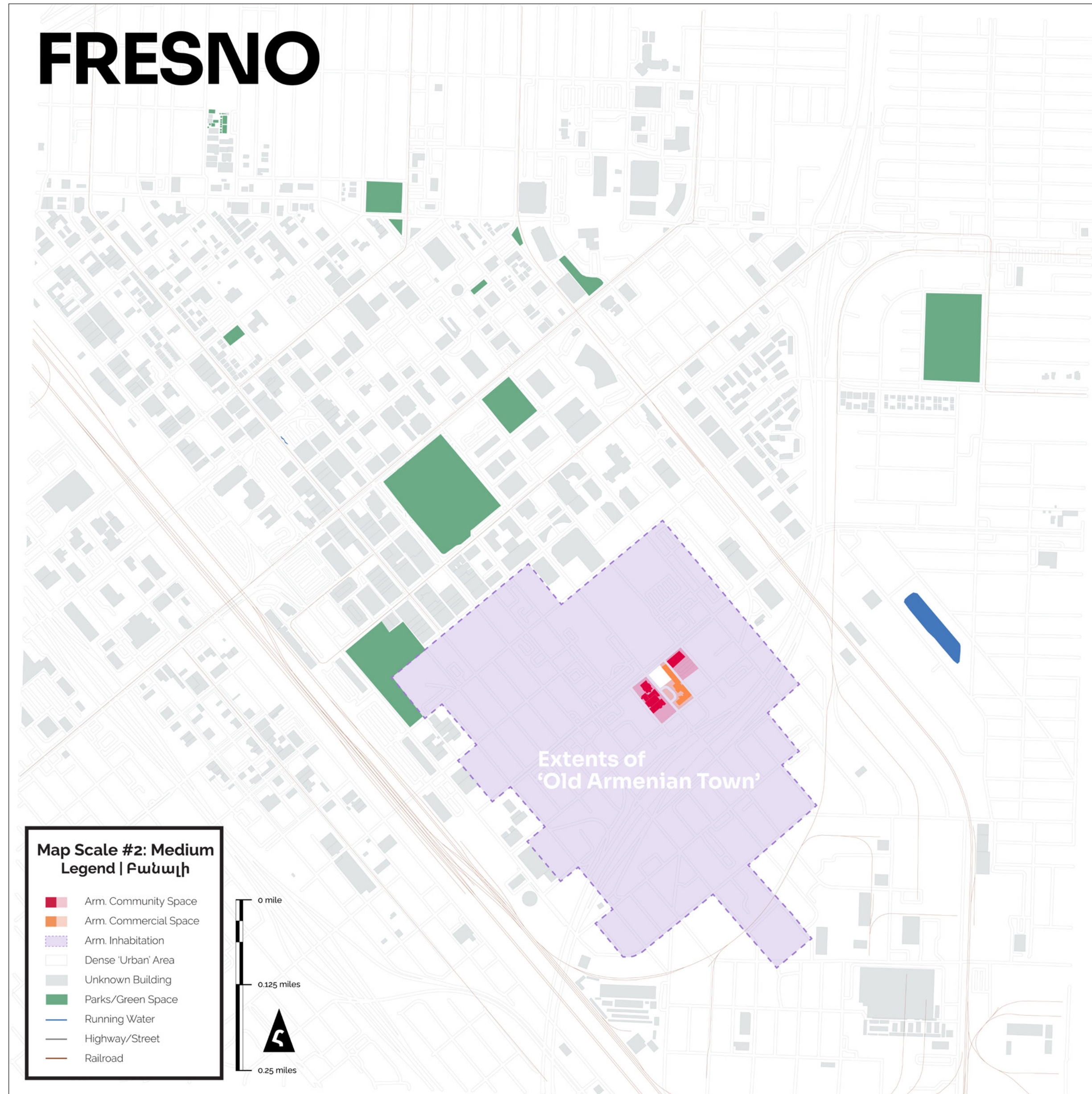
However, in a matter of a few generations, the area was emptied of its vibrant Armenian community. This is, in large part, due to the rise of industrial agriculture, and the various social and environmental changes that accompanied it. As small farming collapsed, Fresno's population dwindled, which led to a general abandonment of Fresno's urban center. This was expedited through the construction and continued expansion of State Route 41, which in Professor Der Mugrdechian's words "destroyed 'Armenian Town,'" cutting right through many of its residential blocks.[63] Fresno faced the same fate as many agricultural cities as it headed toward rampant suburbanization, in the face of industrial expansion.

63 Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian, Armenian Town (Fresno, CA), August 20, 2023.

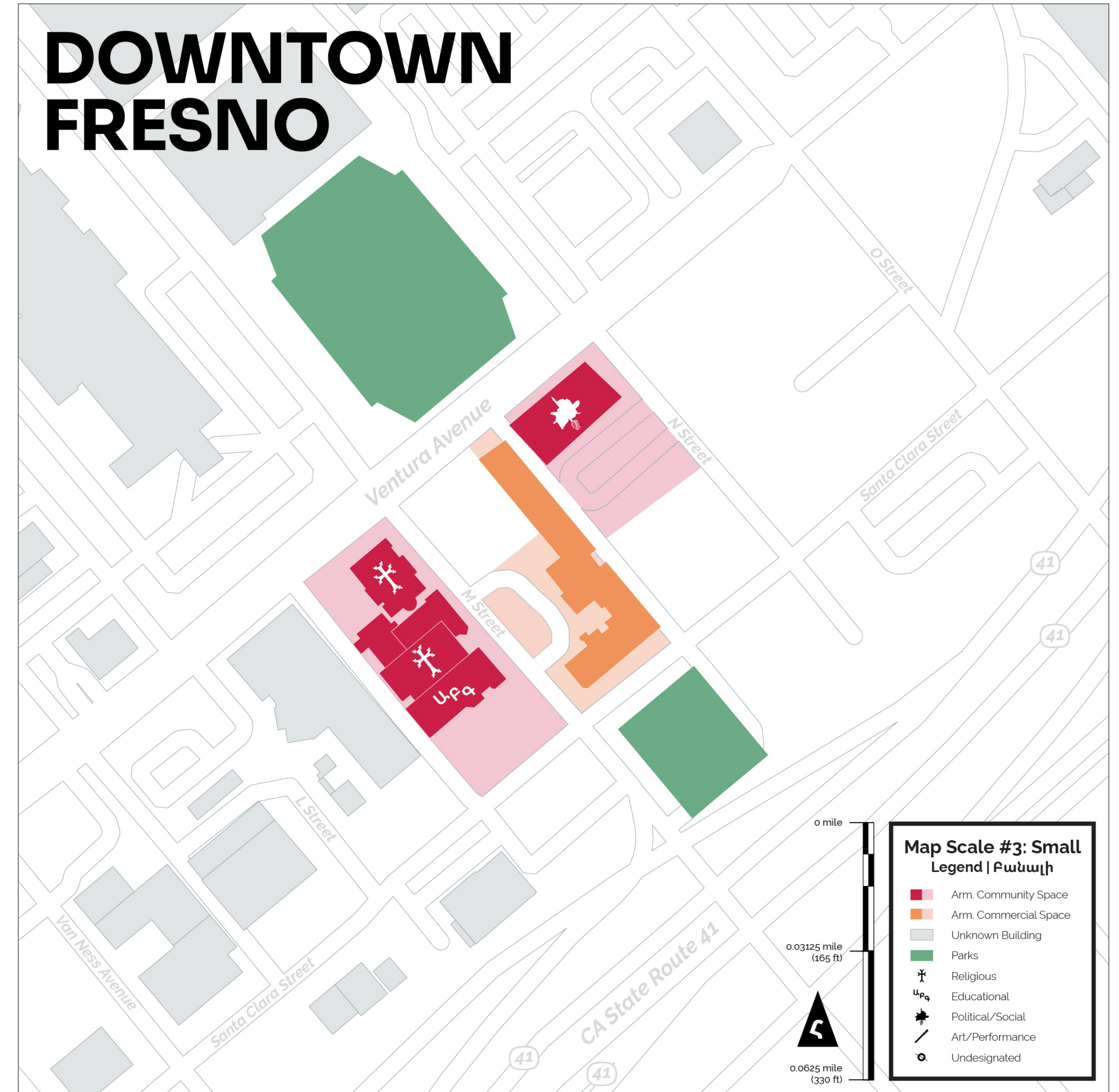
Photographs:
[Left] Armenians, standing outside Valley Lahvosh Baking Company, on the corner of M Street and Santa Clara Street (c. 1930s). Courtesy of *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*.
[Right] Valley Lahvosh Baking Company, today.

Bulbulian notes that "by the 1960s and 1970s, 'Armenian Town,' was no longer identifiable as a community."[64] Fresno Armenians, following general American tendencies and living patterns, left their ethnic quarter behind. Having lost their pastoral estates to big industry, they sought to reestablish their home spaces out

64 Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians*, 39.



Medium Scale Map of Downtown Fresno.
Indicates extents of 'Old Armenian Town.' The shaded purple area was, for much of the twentieth century inhabited by Armenian families and commercial businesses. Remaining Armenian insitutions are limited, and are indicated within these extents. Data drawn from Berge Bulbulian's *The Fresno Armenians.*



Small Scale Map of Downtown Fresno.
Indicates various Armenian community spaces, in the Downtown area.

in the northern suburbs. However, in the process, they were drawn away from their roots in 'Armenian Town' and in Fresno's farming fields—an important contributor to their social and cultural strength. Today, in 2024, all that remains of "Armenian Town," is the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church (Western Prelacy), the Armenian Community Center (ARF-owned), and Valley Lahvosh Bakery. The neighborhood is a shadow of its former self.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Armenian community began organizing efforts to help revitalize 'Armenian Town.' These efforts were led by a coalition of representatives from various organizations. The vitalization project sought to reclaim much of the original area of 'Armenian Town,' salvaging a few remaining residential homes in the area (that were occupied by Armenian families), and they proposed a multi-story commercial complex.

Photograph:
'Armenian Town' sign, at the corner of N Street and Santa Clara Street.

However, for 25 years, the community has yet to advance this project and realize its development plans. The organizing committee has had to overcome several hurdles, many of which are deeply ingrained, self-destructive features of the community. Fresno Armenians (like virtually every other diasporan Armenian community) are politically and culturally splintered. Successful developments in other cities are often led by specific political or religious factions and are rarely a product of intra-community collaboration. The variety of community interests involved in the 'Armenian Town' project has led to a lack of clear direction and little room for shared vision. Additionally, the project is a tough sell for a community that has, for several decades now, settled into suburban towns beyond the city limits of Fresno. Attracting the necessary financial investment and political support has been a challenge for the revitalization project, since the broader community seems to no longer value spatial proximity, particularly in dense urban centers like Downtown Fresno and equally dense segments of farmland that could promote easy spatial interaction. Jamming cultural and commercial enterprises into 'Armenian Town' would only go so far. The success of a hypothetical 'Armenian Town' would rest on residential or professional draw, which at this point seems near-impossible. Professor Der Mugrdechian explains that "[Armenians] wouldn't live here. They might come because the church is here and if there is something here to see...maybe a museum or something. But they're not going to come and live here...No."

A once-vibrant community now sits empty, vacant lots covering most of its storied blocks. At each of the proposed corners of 'Armenian Town,' community members have erected small metal signs on lampposts. On it, in purple Times New Roman text, the sign reads "Armenia" with a small image of the Ararat Valley on one side, and the Forget-Me-Not flower on the other. In Professor Der Mugrdechian's words: "So we're reduced to a couple of signs, right? A couple of 'Armenian Town' signs. That's our 'Armenian Town.' It's sad."

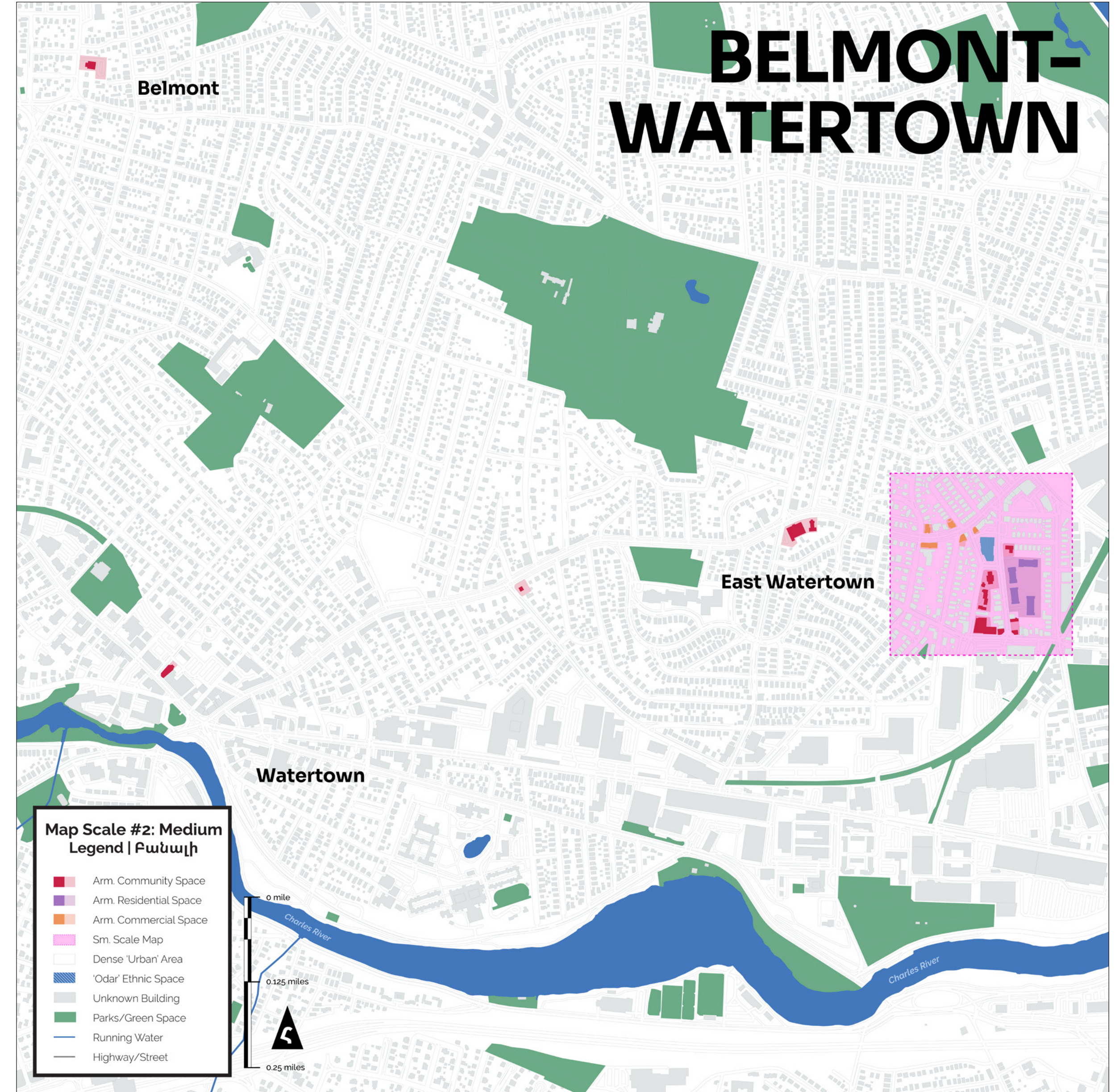
However, he goes on: "It's the ultimate blank page. You can do everything you want with it." He then directs his words to me, asking: "What are *you* going to do?"

"We Call It 'The Island' Our Island":

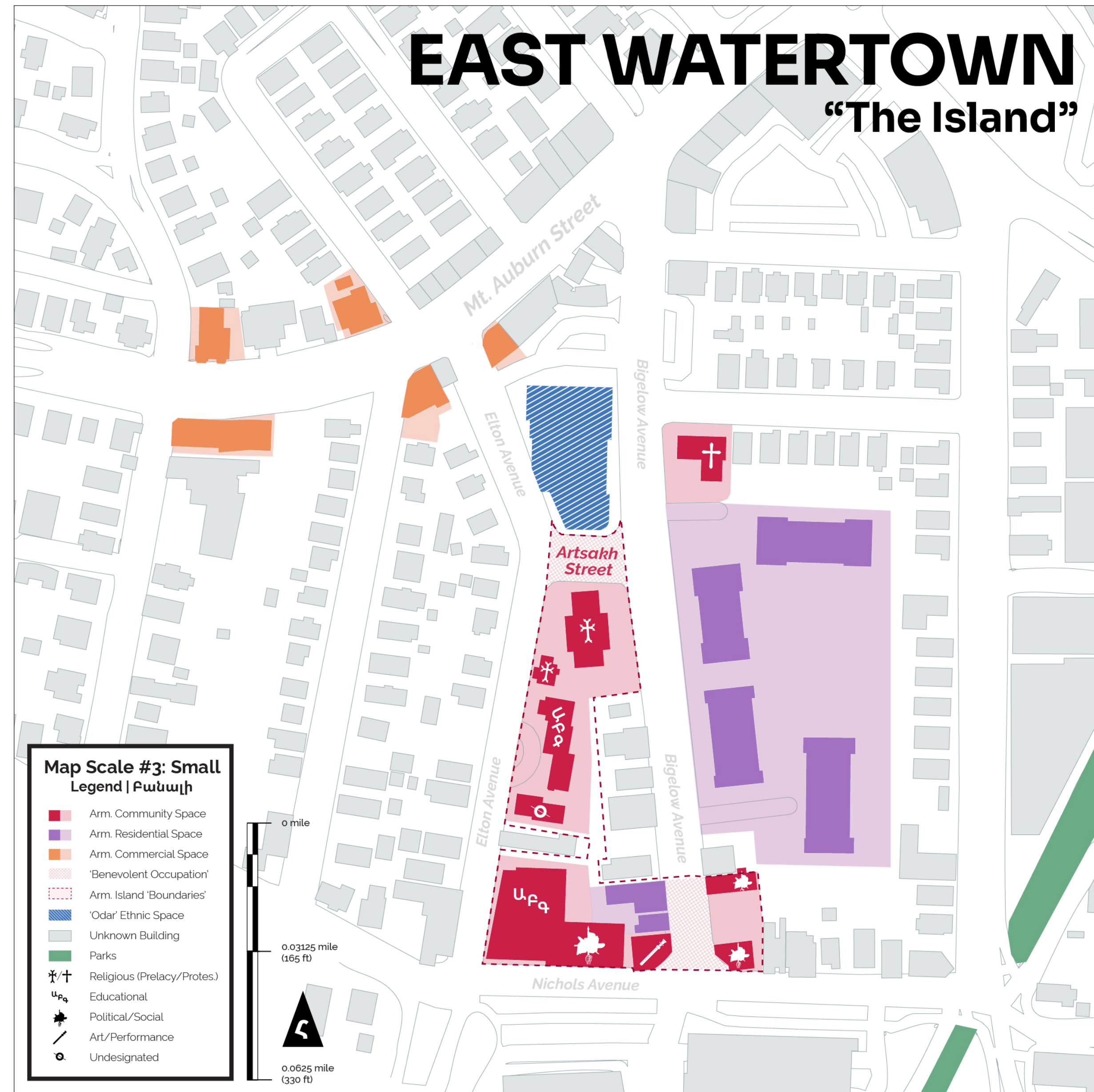
Armenians in Greater Boston

The Spirit of Armenia, Haroutiun (Harry) Shahbegian

Large Scale Map of Greater Boston.
Indicates extents of Medium and Small Scale Maps.



Medium Scale Map of the Belmont-Watertown Area.
Indicates extents of Small Scale Map (East Watertown).



Small Scale Map of East Watertown.
Indicates various Armenian community spaces in East Watertown, and the informal boundaries of 'the Island.'

"The Boston of my youth was a city of neighborhoods, clannish, suspicious, and a little territorial. People were neighborly—up to a point—but also fiercely protective of their turf."[65]

—Charles McGrath, "A Boy's Boston."

"But I am a person of the grid no longer. [...] My new normal is the dense tangle of short, curving streets converging raggedly on a "square" with no 90-degree angles"[66]

—Carlo Rotella, "The Landscape of Home."

65 Andrew Blauner, ed., *Our Boston: Writers Celebrate the City They Love* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013).

66 Blauner, Our Boston, 291.

The Black Asphalt of Artsakh Street

On a hot July afternoon, the sun beats down strong on the black asphalt of Artsakh Street. The sounds of jangly ouds *and sharp percussive* doumbeks *fill the air. The smell of burning charcoal and marinated* kebab *teases passers-by with the prospect of a delicious feast.* Nenes *and* morkoors[67] *exchange juicy gossip over piping hot* soorj[68]*, while young altar boys race around in red velvet regalia, preparing for their first Blessing of the Grapes. A choreographed reenactment of life in the homeland. Yet this performance also reveals a deeply obvious and overwhelming sense of Americanness. I can't put my finger on it—on what exactly makes this scene so distinctly Armenian* and *so distinctly American. Perhaps it's because this performance and all its constitutive elements both challenge and respond to features of an existing spatial geography. This state of feeling slightly 'out of place' is what renders the whole scene distinctly 'American.' You are not entirely transported to some mythical Armenia; participants still recognize and feel like they are in New England.*

67 *morkoors* : 'aunts'

68 *soorj* : 'coffee'—here, refers to Armenian coffee. It is strong and bitter in taste, and is typically infused with cardamom.

Photograph:
Local Armenians participate in St. Stephen's Apostolic Church's annual summer picnic. A group of women engage in traditional circle dances in the middle of Artsakh Street. Meanwhile, a young family joins several others in the background who are enjoying the kebab feast under a white tent. (July 30, 2023. Watertown, MA).

Today, hundreds of American Armenians have gathered around St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church in Watertown, partaking in the community's annual church picnic. It's an event that draws regular visitors from across New England, many hailing from Worcester, Lowell, and Providence, cities spread fifty miles to the north, west, and south. It's an opportunity to indulge in delicious flavors from the old country, grilled, seasoned, and presented by multigenerational families of American Armenians. A kef *band composed of legendary octogenarians play their grandfathers' melodies on the grand steps of St. Stephen's. Beneath them, between the two sidewalks of Artsakh Street, a group of middle-aged* digins[69] *lock pinkies, commencing circle dances drawn from their ancestral villages. For the duration of this picnic, Artsakh Street is a dance floor, a dining hall, and a prayer ground, not an automotive road. The picnic completely encircles St. Stephen's, making use of every patch of grass, cement, and asphalt available. These Armenian flavors, sounds, and movements find their way through cracks in a dense landscape, reminding generations of now well-integrated Americans of their ethnic ancestry and heritage. For the duration of this picnic, Armenian life permeates the neighborhood, rendering East Watertown an 'Armenian Island.'*

69 *digin(s)* : 'lady/ladies'

Photographs:
[Left] Several Watertown Armenians set up Artsakh Street for the Blessing of the Grapes ceremony.
[Right] Watertown Armenians collect small bags of consecrated grapes, following the Blessing of the Grapes ceremony.

In the small garden plot adjacent to the cathedral, a dozen circular tables host families catching up with old friends over styrofoam-packed kebab *meals. In an effort to catch my breath, I sit down in a far corner, at one of these tables, and start digging into my large pile of noodle rice* pilaf *and* amarayin *salad.*[70] *Seated on my left, an 80-something year old man grumbles and chows down on a rich chocolate cake, his eyes scanning the animated attendees.*

"Parev,[71] *my name is Shant." I catch him off guard. His eyes finally focus on me.*

"Hi! I'm Roy Dermanuelian. Nice to meet you."

70 *amarayin* salad : 'summer salad'—traditionally made with diced tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions, and dressed with olive oil, lemon, salt/pepper, and vinegar.

71 *parev* : 'hello'

Dermanuelian's outfit is impeccable. He sports a navy suit, held up by American flag suspenders. His tie's covered in red-white-and-blue GOP elephants, and his face is shaded by a straw cowboy hat, boasting small tri-color stars. Atop his suit, Der Manuelian proudly wears a synthetic scarf, colored red, blue and orange. "ARMENIA" is stitched across the scarf in white thread, and the national coat of arms is displayed at each end, leading into golden regal fringes.

"You know, *I'm running to serve as the next President of the United States. I'm going to be the first Armenian president," he states with much resolve.*

For the next half hour, Dermanuelian lays out his agenda and political aspirations. He's an unlikely candidate. But his ramblings are well-meaning and reflective of a generation that has sought integration above all else. He is a product of a storied Armenian community, but is also a product of a complex American landscape. His life is emblematic of a delicate balance struck between these two identities—a balance that his family, their ancestors, and generations of New England Armenians have worked hard to perfect.

Photographs:
[Left] Armenians gather on the side lawn of St. Stephen's Church, during the annual summer picnic.
[Right] Roy Dermanuelian, at the St. Stephen's picnic.

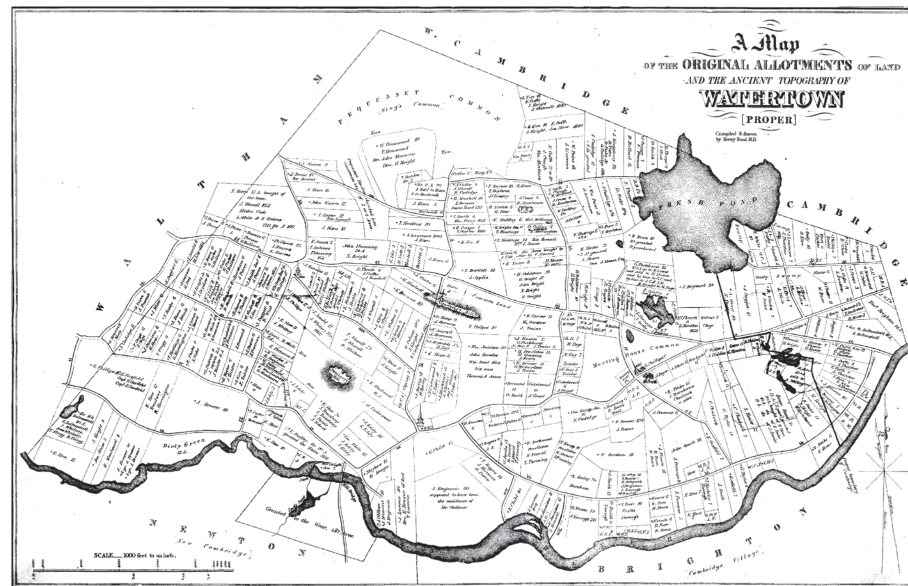
Social Geography of Boston, MA

In his seminal 1960 book, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch described the Greater Boston Area as "rather unusual among American cities because of its age, history, and somewhat European flavor."[72] Age, history, and "European flavor" have contributed to an urban landscape defined by a fluid network of irregular streetways and dense ethnic enclaves. Greater Boston's "unusual" character is pronounced. In response, ethnic groups have worked hard to build culturally unique neighborhoods, from within the cracks of a nearly-four-hundred-year-old

72 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960), 16.

colonial town. One such group is the Armenian community, which has developed an ethnic enclave in the Watertown area, across and down the river from Boston proper.

Boston is a city built by immigrants; in turn, these communities have left their imprint on the city's urban fabric. Throughout the nineteenth century, Boston witnessed major industrial transformation. The city became a haven for unskilled workers, attracting an influx of immigrants from various ethnic and social backgrounds. Many of them arrived in the United States escaping economic hardship or political and ethnic persecution. When they arrived in Boston—a city already three centuries in the making—they settled in close proximity as a means of supporting one another through identity maintenance, employment, and other kinds of support. Proximity meant ease of access to those who speak the same language, who practice the same traditions, and who have similar skill sets. Naturally, these clusters attracted more immigrants, who arrived in subsequent waves. Clusters grew into large populations that soon needed built spaces and material infrastructure to support community building.



Map:
Original Allotments of Land and the Ancient Topography of Watertown, made by Henry Bond, M.D., (1860). Courtesy of the *New England Historic Genealogical Society*.

Since Greater Boston's urban form predates the Land Ordinance of 1785, it follows an irregular street network pattern that converges at awkward angles, defies cardinal direction, and creates unique block shapes and patterns. Kevin Lynch, reflecting on a series of interviews with Boston residents, notes that "many persons interviewed took care to point out that Boston, while confusing in its path pattern even to the experienced inhabitant, has, in the number and vividness of its differentiated districts, a quality that quite makes up for it."[73] Lynch, or, his interviewees, suggest that Boston's "confusing" street network pattern lends itself to unique neighborhoods defined *by* this pattern. Boston's street network and its irregularity contribute to a general sense of compression and density. As streets weave through the city, they converge at irregular angles and create tight neighborhoods in which layers of history accumulate and become etched into the urban fabric. Residents directly respond to these distinct spatial conditions and contribute to these processes of layering and etching. Throughout Boston, communities identify cracks and gaps in their otherwise dense neighborhoods, using these as the starting point for establishing highly local, community-driven environments.

73 Lynch, The Image of the City, 66.

We see this unfold within the Armenian community in Watertown, which has embraced the unique spatial conditions of its neighborhood. Armenians have found opportunities to gradually transform their community through Greater Boston's urban language. They have informally occupied in-between spaces, consolidated significant cultural institutions, and gradually acquired entire blocks of property. In the process, Boston Armenians have been able to build out spaces for themselves that support identity maintenance and hold immense value for their community.

Setting the Tone: 'Benevolent Occupation'

Armenians in New England have served as social and cultural makers, builders, and constructors since the late nineteenth century. Upon their arrival, escaping genocide and ethnic cleansing, Armenians settled in booming industrial cities like Worcester and Boston, Massachusetts. Many of them unskilled laborers, they found work in industrial production and were employed in factories and plants throughout the region. A sizable number worked at Hood Rubber Company in Watertown, MA. As this number grew, they built a small community around Hood Rubber, situating themselves in the neighborhood around it. Over the next century, this small community grew into an ethnic enclave, making Watertown the Armenian cultural, social, and political capital of the Eastern United States.

Photograph:
Hood Rubber Company and the area of Watertown, MA, taken by FayFoto, (c. 1955. Boston, MA). Courtesy of the *Northeastern University Library's Archives and Special Collections.*

Raised in Worcester, Rev. Archpriest Antranig Baljian is the first American-born priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, House of Cilicia. Father Antranig now serves as the pastor of St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church in the heart of East Watertown. He has seen his now-adopted community flourish over his lifetime and takes pride in this omnipresent sense of Armenianness. He notes:

> **FR. ANTRANIG:** "The Watertown community has always been the largest Armenian community in the eastern United States...Maybe rivaled by the greater metropolitan areas, but they're all spread out so much that it doesn't really have the same impact on the community. I know it's nothing like California, but we're proud of our Mount Auburn Street with the Armenian stores and things like that. At one time, I think there probably used to be more of that."[74]

74 Father Antranig Baljian, St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church (Watertown, MA), August 2, 2023.

Armenian life found itself everywhere within the boundaries of this neighborhood. Pauline Getzoyan was born and raised in Providence, Rhode Island, and now serves as editor of the *Armenian Weekly* (the oldest English-language Armenian newspaper). Today, when she visits Watertown, she 'sees' "the descendants of the Genocide survivors, because that's how [she remembers] it." She says: "I remember [Watertown] from the days of my grandparents who survived the Genocide and came to this country. I see the homes they lived in [today]." Pauline remembers her *morkoors* and *hopars* chatting on the porches of wooden townhouses, or her childhood friends playing ball games in the middle of Bigelow Avenue, in front of St. Stephen's Church. The history and cultural spirit of the community is palpable throughout Watertown.

This atmosphere encouraged a sense of collective ownership and a blurring of traditional boundaries between public and private space. When Armenians first started to build community spaces (largely as a mechanism for survival and sustenance), they relied on this—maybe, overestimated—recognition of cultural dominion. Describing the construction of St. Stephen's Church, Father Antranig explains:

> **FR. ANTRANIG:** "As you can see, we have no parking as a church. I mean, the people back then wanted to build a big temple to God, but they didn't think about parking."

Foresight was thrown out the window, and the community laid faith in their ability to assume jurisdiction over in-between spaces. Watertown Armenians started to engage in an informal use of public space, eventually developing a habit of 'benevolent occupation.' Armenian life frequently spills out onto the sidewalks and streets of Watertown to support community needs, most notably from the gates of St. Stephen's Church.

The most frequent example of this phenomenon is described in the anecdote that started this section. The short stretch of Artsakh Street (no more than two hundred feet in length), which connects Bigelow and Elton Avenues (flanked on either side by St. Stephen's and a Greek Orthodox Church), provides a blacktop platform for a number of community events and gatherings. Father Antranig comments on this in-between space, stating:

> **FR. ANTRANIG:** Over the years, we've had commemorations on the church steps. It's a perfect place, because it's almost like a stage that spills out. They put the speakers up on the stairs and whatever. We've had rallies and all those kinds of things. Events by the church, by AYF, by outside organizations. They've come to use that, to be on Artsakh Street, and also to use the facilities that we have. Just recently, our school started a 5k run, and that's the start and ending point. So it's really cool because everything is closed off."

Father Antranig sees Artsakh Street as an asset for his church, the neighborhood, and the broader community. For generations, this stretch has been treated like an outdoor hall—an extension of the church property. It has served as an informal, occupiable space, which the community claims ownership of with a name and a few hours of intense activity every couple of months. This 'occupation' is certainly not dramatic or contested. It is an instinctual response to the existing conditions of the neighborhood, *and* a local culture that views East Watertown as a fluid, yet insulated Armenian enclave.

Photograph:
Blessing of the Grapes Ceremony on Artsakh Street. St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church (July 30, 2023. Watertown, MA).

This response, particularly on Artsakh Street, is supported by Greater Boston's irregular street network and a resultant compression of space. This peculiar chunk of passage—more like a plaza than an alley—yokes two parallel streets at their closest point. Occupying this space casts the streets on either side of it as two halves of something larger, defining the enclave far more naturally than when the space is empty. And this is internalized by the community. Father Antranig notes: "We call it the island, our island." 'The Island' has served as a focal point for the community, influencing construction patterns and urban relations in Armenian East Watertown for much of the last century.

Calculated Architectures: (Re)situating 'the Island'

In the late 1970s through the 1980s, tens of thousands of Armenians fled the Middle East, escaping strife and civil unrest. The Lebanese Civil War and the Islamic Revolution in Iran reduced the Armenian communities of Beirut and Tehran to a fraction of their once-sizable populations. These communities mostly immigrated to the United States, and many arrived in Greater Boston. Along with this influx of Middle Eastern Armenians came several national and international institutions. These institutions had played an instrumental role in projects of identity construction and maintenance in the Middle East after the Armenian Genocide, and immigrant Armenians and New England Armenians collectively decided to headquarter these institutions within the existing 'Island.' This would anoint Watertown as a 'capital' for Armenian communities in the Eastern United States, and it would serve as a further investment into an already lively community. This process was effectively launched when *Hairenik Weekly* moved to 'the Island,' from its former location in downtown Boston.

Hairenik Weekly (or more commonly, *Hairenik*) is one of the most storied cultural Armenian institution in the United States, if not all of the Armenian diaspora. *Hairenik* was founded in 1899 in the back of a New York City tailor shop, as one of several global publications under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), and was intended for a primarily American Armenian audience. *Hairenik* published content about the growing national liberation movement in the homeland (late 1890s-1910s), and eventually detailed the horrors of the Armenian Genocide, covering the resultant refugee crisis and the lives of now-scattered diasporans. The publication served as a point of cultural, emotional, and political connection for the Armenian community in the United States, supporting them in their efforts to maintain their identity 'in diaspora.' In 1901, *Hairenik* moved to Downtown Boston, anchoring the local community.

Hairenik's eventual move to East Watertown, or 'the Island,' in 1986 marked a significant moment in the community's history. It elevated the cultural, social, and political value of 'the Island,' which encouraged other diasporan institutions to follow suit and invest in this enclave (by means of physical relocation).

The decision was made to construct a three-story building on a church-owned lot at the corner of Bigelow and Nichols Avenues. The new building, dubbed 'Hairenik Association' (more commonly, 'the Hairenik Building') would house *Hairenik Weekly* as well as the other national and international headquarters that had moved to Watertown. In fact, this project became so popular that the planning committee decided to add another story to the building, making it a four-story building with a basement level underneath. To this day, the Hairenik Building is eye-catching and it stands out within 'the Island.' It is set back dramatically from each of its corresponding sidewalks, and the 'corner' of the building is sliced, creating an additional southwest-facing facade. Its tall, brown-colored brick facades are reminiscent of flat-walled medieval towers. The primary 'corner-facing' facade is punctured at the bottom with a two-level windowed opening. On the ground level, the opening features a glass double door. Above it, tinted window panes bring in light into the building's upper floors, and showcase a row of four, large hanging flags. These architectural choices bring a sense of grandeur, which reinforce the cultural significance of the various institutions housed within the Hairenik Building.

Photographs:
[Left] The Hairenik Building, at the corner of Nichols and Bigelow Avenues, (Watertown, MA).
[Right] St. Stephen's Church and the rest of 'the Island,' seen from a window at the Hairenik Building.

These efforts translated into a blossoming space that thrives on the synergy between its various residents. I met with George Aghajayan, who serves as director of the ARF's Archives (located in the basement of the building). Over the years, George has spent hundreds of hours at the Hairenik Building, and he admires the space deeply. He shared his feelings about the spirit of the Hairenik Building, stating:

> **GEORGE:** "So when I first started coming, let's say in 1989, I was working. And I would come here, and it was a hotbed of activity...political activity, media, etc. And I was envious. I mean, I was jealous, right? I wanted to be here. My circumstances didn't allow it. I had a wife, three kids, I had to earn a living. And my skill set was something different. [...]. But what I did was I accelerated my career, so that I could retire at 50, so that I could then come here and be here. For me, it was an exciting place to be around. You get that sense, in our offices. [...] You just get a sense that [this is] where the work is really being done. [...] That's what you get here, that communal sense of working towards a cause with people that share that cause. In this physical space."[75]

75 George Aghjayan, Hairenik Association (Watertown, MA), July 31, 2023.

George's words reflect a sense of excitement that many—both immigrant and second-/third-generation—Armenians felt about the Hairenik Building. The consolidation of significant Armenian institutions in one building helped it garner this reputation as an iconic site—a "hotbed of activity." Armenians wanted to spend time here, and this excitement fueled a growing reverence for the building and the storied neighborhood in which it was located. George explained that the Hairenik Building "still [draws] people here because anybody that comes to Boston, from anywhere around the world, wants to come to the Hairenik Building. [...] I

mean, people come *here* because [of it].” The building has symbolic importance for a global community, which then becomes universally recognized and associated with the neighborhood around it. The Hairenik Building has helped the Armenian community strengthen its hold on East Watertown, and cement the neighborhood’s identity as an Armenian enclave.

And this spirit is palpable. I visited the building on a weekday summer afternoon, and the space was alive with a sense of community and camaraderie. I was scheduled to meet with Pauline Getzoyan and George Aghjayan, but the two were hard to locate amidst a herd of pre-teen Camp Haiastan participants. These young American Armenians had bussed into Watertown from Franklin, MA for a tour of the iconic Hairenik Building. They listened intently as Zaven Torikian (*Hairenik Weekly’s* editor) told dramatic ‘revolutionary’ stories about *Hairenik’s* role in the national liberation movement. The kids covered nearly every square inch of the ground floor, filling the gaps between each journalists’ offices, doorways, and the central foyer. In the meantime, *Armenian Weekly* journalists and volunteers from the Armenian Relief Society and Hamazkayin raced up and down the building’s stairwell, up to their offices on the second, third, and fourth floors. The stairwell’s black, lacquered steps and thin, metallic rails drew my eyes up toward a row of four bannered flags. Soft beams of light traveled through the gaps between each flag, lighting up the central stairwell and the narrow hallways of each floor.

Photographs:
[Left] The Hairenik Building’s central foyer.
[Right] Camp Haiastan participants gather in the offices of *Armenian Weekly* journalists during their tour of the Hairenik Building.

Pauline, discussing her favorite feature of the building, explained:

> **PAULINE:** “The stairway. That’s always struck me. When I walk in, that floor, from the bottom to the top, is open. And I was always struck by that. And then seeing the flags, of course up that always struck me. [...] To me, it symbolizes the connection between all the floors. The fact that it’s open. If it was closed at every floor, I don’t know that we would necessarily feel that connection. But the fact that this stairway is open all the way up to the top is a very different feeling to me. To me, that symbolizes the connection between all of us in this building.”[76]

76 Pauline Getzoyan, Hairenik Association (Watertown, MA), July 31, 2023.

The stairway symbolizes the building’s greatest achievement: cultural strength through consolidation. The open foyer created by the stairwell provides a spatial and emotional recognition of the interplay between each of the institutions housed at the Hairenik. The relationship between them is what makes it a ‘mecca’ for both a local and a global Armenian community. People come here, in search of this shining example of cultural strength and vitality; they find it on a small oddly-shaped corner lot in East Watertown, at the edge of ‘the Island.’ The building’s dense consolidation contributes to Watertown’s status as a center of Armenian life—a dense island where one can see and feel what it means to maintain Armenian identity ‘in diaspora.’ The construction and maintenance of this island happens at the scale of the block (Artsakh Street), and even at the scale of the building (Hairenik). But, it also requires attention and care at the scale of the neighborhood—an inevitably more complicated responsibility.

Challenges & Problematics: Nowhere To Go

In a matter of a few generations, the Armenian community in Watertown outgrew its church basements and small lots. The influx of Middle Eastern Armenians and the growing appeal of the Hairenik Building demanded more Armenian-owned community spaces to help fully realize ‘the Island.’ So, Armenians started to expand their spatial footprint through multi-block property acquisition, initiating a series of construction projects and land purchases near St. Stephen’s Church and the Hairenik Building.

Photograph:
The Armenian Cultural and Educational Center (ACEC), Sayat Nova Dance Company, and the Hairenik Building, along Nichols Avenue. The southern edge of ‘the Island,’ (Watertwon, MA).

These acquisitions and developments took place within a spatially dense, residential area, beyond Watertown’s most trafficked zones. Mount Auburn

Street lines the northern edge of 'the Island,' and boasts a series of Armenian-owned small businesses. It is a wide, four-laned artery that connects Watertown to its neighboring towns. Mount Auburn Street and its Armenian businesses only tease the scale and extents of 'the Island, since these lie beyond Mount Auburn's commercial storefronts. Standing on the sidewalks of Mount Auburn, 'the Island' and its cultural institutions go largely unnoticed by the average non-Armenian passer-by. They only come into view upon entering Bigelow or Elton Avenues, and after crossing Mount Auburn's commercial threshold.

Photographs:
[Left] *Digin* Houry, standing in her office, in front of the portraits of Levon Shant and Hamo Ohajanian (statesmen in the First Republic and founders of Djemaran).
[Right] *Digin* Houry, in the central atrium of the ACEC.

In the 1980s, a coalition of community organizations constructed the Armenian Cultural and Educational Center ("ACEC"), which housed athletic, educational, and youth programs that had been previously outsourced. The ACEC was constructed on the southern end of St. Stephen's block, along Nichols Avenue, between Elton and Bigelow Avenues. The facility featured office spaces, classrooms, kitchens, a library, and a large gymnasium. The ACEC expanded the community's range of programming and led to the establishment of a preschool to second-grade day school, St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School (SSAES).

I met with Houry Boyamian at the ACEC, principal emeritus of SSAES. *Digin* Houry was born and raised in Beirut's Armenian community, which was, then, the cultural and political capital of all diasporan communities. Her father, Karnig Panian was also an educator and served as vice principal of Djemaran, the Armenian Lyceum of Beirut. Djemaran's star-studded cast of revolutionary statesmen-turned-educators raised a generation of Lebanese Armenian community leaders, artists, and activists. This project was supported by Djemaran's insular campus, which was located immediately adjacent to Beirut's other significant Armenian institutions. Naturally, when *Digin* Houry arrived in Watertown with her family (fleeing the Lebanese Civil War), she translated much of her first-hand experiences and understandings from Djemeran into her newly assumed position at SSAES. She recognized the value of density and concentration within an Armenian community and sought to create a similar environment within Watertown.

Photograph:
St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School's Preschool and Kindergarten Campus, along Elton Avenue. The steeple of St. Stephen's Church is barely visible in the background, covered by trees.

As the community and its leaders embraced the ACEC's expanded capacities, their organization and institutions continued to develop and grow in membership. *Digin* Houry herself added three grade levels to SSAES, making it a preschool-to-fifth-grade program. However, the community soon outgrew the ACEC; Armenians needed to continue expanding. *Digin* Houry explained:

> **DIGIN HOURY:** "I added, third, fourth, and fifth [grades], and the number of students increased. We couldn't accommodate all the students in this building. So I asked for a new space and the church gave us a church-owned old building that we tore down and built a state-of-the-art new preschool building."[77]

77 Houry Boyamian, Armenian Educational and Cultural Center (ACEC) (Watertown, MA), July 31, 2023.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the ACEC's board, with support from St. Stephen's Church, acquired several homes between the ACEC and the church grounds. In 1998, several of these properties were developed into SSAES's preschool campus; and, in 2012, a kindergarten campus was built on the same lot.

The ACEC, the Hairenik Building, and St. Stephen's Church share distinct, similarly 'institutional' design characteristics; they're built of red or brown brick, typical of the 1980s and 1990s, are three to four stories tall, and take up a large spatial footprint. But the new SSAES campus tried to blend into the more historic, residential parts of this neighborhood. From afar, it looks like a series of red, white, and green-colored New England homes, remodeled with large industrial windows and vinyl siding. It has one of the largest spatial footprints in the neighborhood, yet somehow feels less pronounced, shaded by dense tree coverings from all angles. These decisions suggest both the Armenian community's integration into the existing urban landscape, and their careful manipulation of it.

Digin Houry saw the school's expansion as a way of moving the community forward—in a sense developing a 'new Beirut' on the East Coast. She believed that if the Armenian community in Boston could expand its programming, community life would advance, ensuring a degree of cultural longevity. Zaven Torikian, editor of *Hairenik Weekly*, echoed these sentiments, stating:

ZAVEN: "If we were in New York, we would be totally gone. New York is a cosmopolitan city...a cosmo-biter. You're done, you're gone. The melting pot of New York is very aggressive. You're a New Yorker, that's it. Rarely can you resist, can you fight against Manhattan. I mean, it's difficult. But it happened here. And that's why it's stronger here, let's say. It's better to stay in Boston."[78]

78 Zaven Torikian, Hairenik Association (Watertown, MA), August 3, 2023.

In recent years, these expansion efforts and ambitions have become increasingly out of sync with the realities of today's Watertown, and the Armenian community's dispersed spatial imprint. Until roughly ten years ago, community institutions had been able to expand within 'the Island,' with relative ease. This is no longer the case.

As with other diasporan communities, Armenians in Boston have acquired greater social and financial capital. But, instead of investing this capital back into their existing domain ('the Island'), many Armenian families have moved out of post-industrial Watertown, settling in more affluent northern suburbs such as Belmont, Lexington, and Bedford. Today, Watertown has lost much of its resident Armenian population, leaving only its community institutions behind. Armenians rely on these institutions as stand-ins or markers of their territorial hold on Watertown. However, having lost its permanent army of residents, the community's reliance becomes increasingly unstable, even as the Armenian population in Greater Boston is still growing. Institutions like St. Stephen's Church and SSAES are intent on expanding and joining their campuses. Father Antranig outlined some of the community's more recent expansion plans, stating:

FR. ANTRANIG: "We sat down and tried to come up with a master plan—what we would like to have. [...] What we came up with was a complex, which started from the church and connected the school. It incorporated school offices, church offices, meeting facilities, conference rooms, and even residential [for our priests]. And it was found that because of the difference in grading and [the brown house], we couldn't connect it to the church."

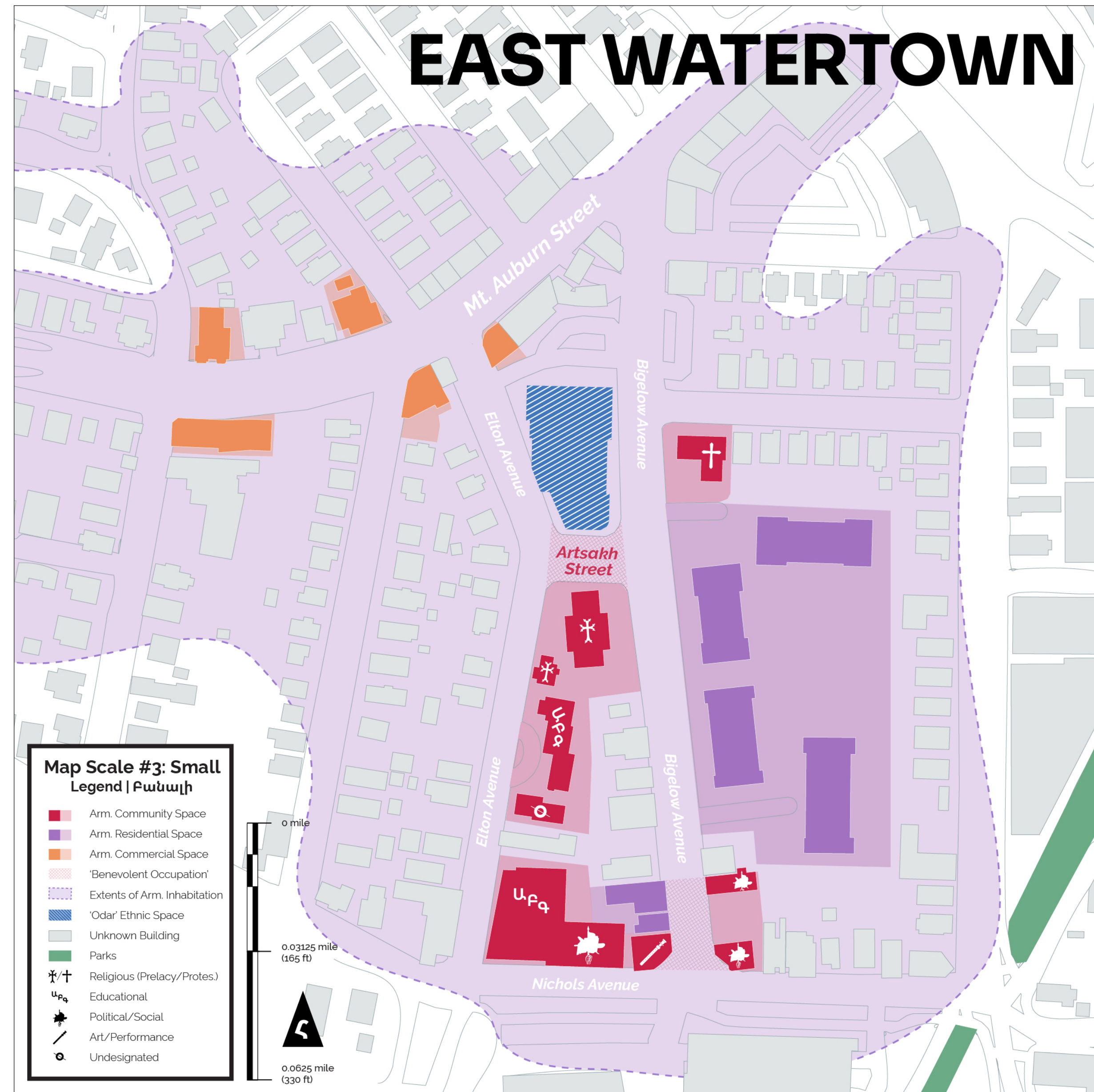
'The Island' could no longer grow, in other words, without becoming an archipelego. Since Armenian residents vacated their homes, non-Armenian families have moved in and acquired the remaining, unincorporated properties. There are several homes within 'the Island' that have not been acquired by the Armenian community, barring expansion and enclaving efforts (such as the brown house on Elton Avenue). The same issue arises on the other side of the block, on Bigelow Avenue, and a few blocks away, on side streets along Mount Auburn Street. Community members have tried to buy out these remaining properties and have pressured non-Armenian residents to move out. However, residents have continuously resisted, forcing expansion projects to go on hold. Without residential ownership or around-the-clock stewardship, the Armenian community's claim to 'the Island' loses strength.

These circumstances present layers of challenges for the Armenian community—challenges that have grown into internal divisions and eventual stalemate. As previously mentioned, community institutions are in desperate need of more space. 'Satellite-ing' these needs would defeat the purpose of developing the projects since it would dilute and disperse an existing pattern of built concentration (which is recognized as a contributing factor to cultural vitality). But, on the other hand, it is, at the moment, impossible to expand *within* 'the Island.'

For example, at the northern end of the ACEC complex, along Elton Avenue, there is a half-constructed lot that provides access to a courtyard at the heart of the ACEC. The ground floor is an open plane of gravel and construction debris. A row of large brick columns supports an extension of the ACEC's second floor above (which hosts SSAES's middle school classrooms). This is the *only* remaining site of possible expansion within 'the Island.' At multiple points in the past two decades, the community has discussed developing this space to either serve SSAES's everyday needs (adding a larger industrial kitchen, building new classroom space, etc.) or to become an access point, from which a larger complex could build out, tying together the rest of 'the Island.' These discussions have never made any headway, since the use of the space could never be agreed upon. Left in a state of disagreement, Armenian community leaders have been unable to manage spatial constraints brought on by non-Armenian occupation. In doing so, they have compromised the pressing needs of their local Armenian school.

Photograph:
A half-constructed lot at the northern end of ACEC's lot. As it stands, this is the only remaining site of possible Armenian expansion *within* 'the Island.'

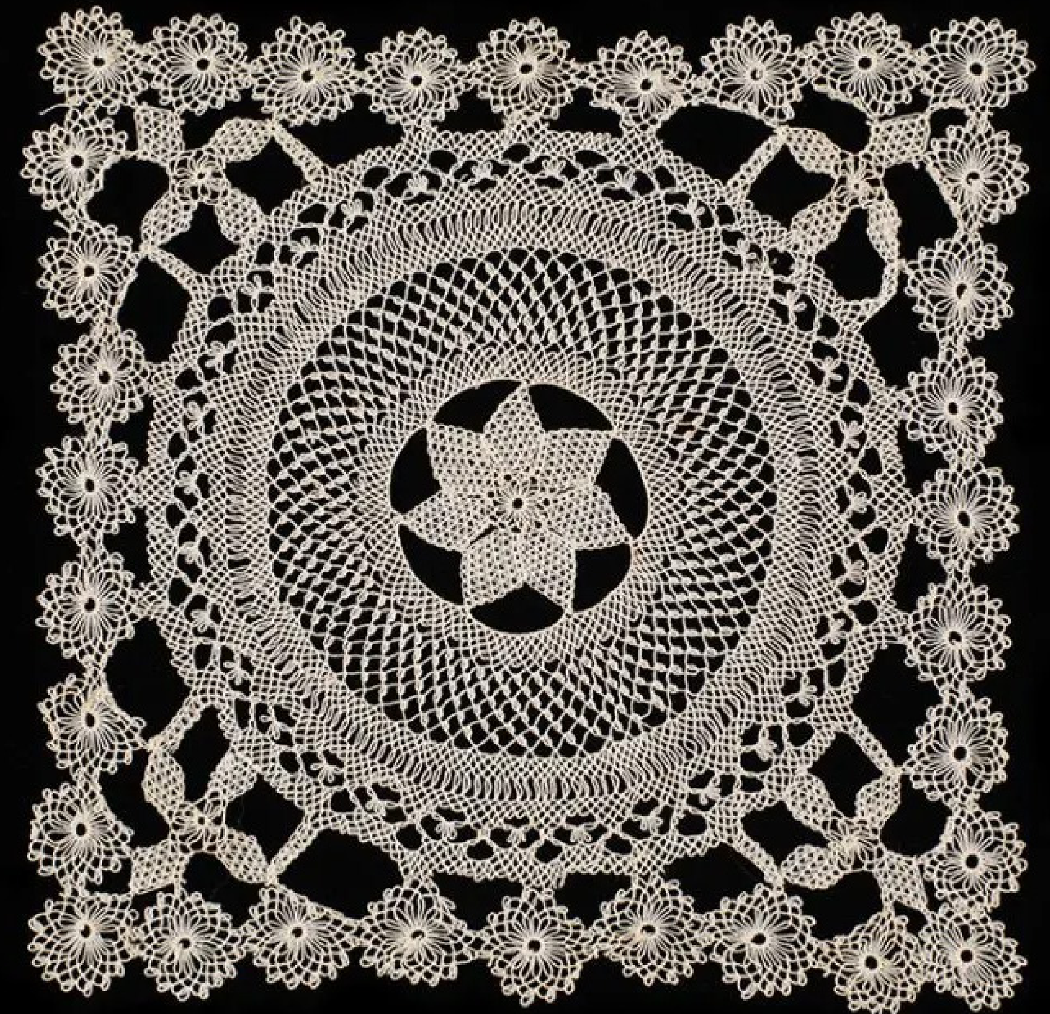
In the meantime, community members have decided to wait until unincorporated properties go up for sale, which puts a lot on the line. Today's generation of Armenian parents and grandparents grew up in a Watertown that relied on 'the Island.' This compels them to return to Watertown regularly, even if they reside in suburbs further away. But a lack of continued development may lead to a weakening of community institutions over subsequent generations. Internal pressures to expand could cause these institutions to either (a) buckle and splinter, or (b) move out of Watertown (closer to where most Boston Armenians now reside). Expecting future generations not only to recognize the value of, but also to invest in 'the Island' is wishful. The two potential consequences (either buckling or moving out) seem increasingly likely, which is alarming when assessing the community's longevity, and its dependence on its density. Watertown risks becoming an Armenian ghost town like Fresno, where community infrastructures remain, without the actual social and cultural life that has, for generations, animated them.



Small Scale Map of East Watertown.
Indicates imagined 'extents' of Armenian inhabitation in East Watertown in 2024, following significant Armenian emigration from the area.

"Constitutes & Reconstitutes"

Armenians in Los Angeles, CA



Armenian **janyak**, *or needlelace,* **Marie Pilibossian**

Large Scale Map of Greater Los Angeles.
Indicates extents of Medium and Small Scale Maps.

Large Scale Map of Greater Los Angeles
Indicates major waves of Armenian expansion. Also features the locations of prominent multi-institutional complexes throughout Los Angeles.

"This is a multi-layered city,
unceremoniously built on hills,
valleys, ravines.
Flying into Burbank airport in the day,
you observe gradations of trees and earth.
A "city" seems to be an afterthought,"[79]

—Luis J. Rodriguez, "Love Poem to Los Angeles."

79 Luis J. Rodriguez, "Love Poem to Los Angeles," Rattle, Tribute to Angelenos, no. 52 (Summer 2016).

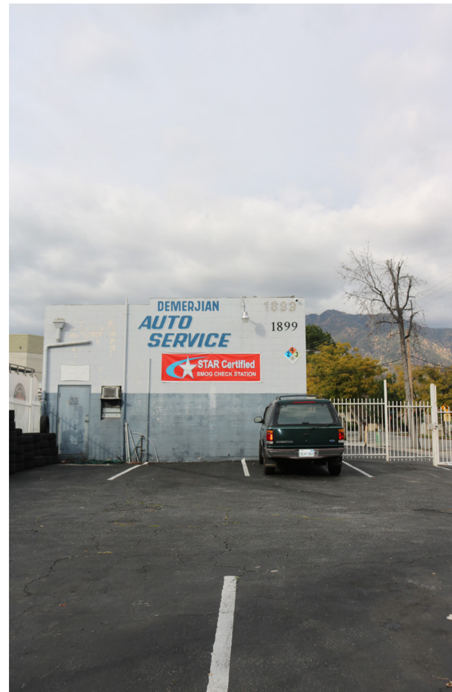
""Los Angeles is also Main Street and E.5th. and East L.A. and Watts. Los Angeles has its poor and Los Angeles has its real, and Los Angeles has its poets, some of them pretty damned good. [...] Los Angeles is also Pasadena, Long Beach, Irvine—anyplace you can get to within an hour drive or two. Technically, no; spiritually, yes." [80]

—Charles Bukowski, "A Foreword to These Poems"

80 Charles Bukowski, Neeli Cherry, and Paul Vangelisti, eds., Anthology of L.A. Poets (Laugh Literary/Red Hill Press, 1972).

Fifteen Miles Between Spicy Cheese Boregs

I drive past a series of familiar storefronts: Massis Weekly. *The A.E.B.U. Center. Vrej Pastry. Garo's Basturma. I pull my car to the side of the road and park along Allen Avenue, just beyond the terracotta roofs and stucco arches of an* odar *Lutheran Church.*



Photographs:
[Left] Outside Garo's Basturma Market on Allen Avenue, in Pasadena. The San Gabriel Mountians are in view, in the background.
[Right] Demerjian Auto Service on Washington Boulevard, in Pasadena. Washington Boulevard is known for its high concentration of Armenian commercial businesses, and is just aroung the corner from Old Sassoun Bakery.

Old Sassoun Bakery looks different since the last time I was here; its owners have given it a complete makeover. Its worn-out white brick facade is now covered in a mosaic of earth-toned tiles, and the entire stuccoed building is painted a muted orange. Along the windowfront, glossy cardstock posters hang, illustrating high-definition images of warm puff pastries, colorful sweets, and savory wraps. Red sail-shaped canvas shades span overhead, entrapping the narrow parcel of sidewalk and seating arrangements that lie between Old Sassoun and Allen.

*But some things remain the same. "OLD SASSOUN BAKERY" still banners overhead in red lettering, and the bakery's iconic neon sign still hangs in the building's corner. Stacks of local Armenian newspapers—*Asbarez, Molorak, Baikar, *and* Massis*—sit atop a large trash can, encouraging patrons to catch up on local events over their morning* ful[81] *or* khatchapouri.[82] *And, the smell of dough and oily cheese draws me in, nearly a decade since the last time I had indulged in Old Sassoun's delectable array of baked goods—straight from the Armenian ghettos of Beirut and Aleppo.*

81 *ful* : pronounced 'fool'—a traditional Egyptian breakfast (akin to a stew) made of fava beans and topped with olive oil, cumin, and various other garnishes.

82 *khatchapouri* : a Georgian/Armenian breakfast with thick boat-shaped dough, filled with melted cheese and fried egg.

Photographs:
[Left] The red neon corner sign at Old Sassoun Bakery in Pasadena.
[Right] Several local Armenian newspapers (*Asbarez, Massis, Molorak, Baikar*) laid out on top of a trash bin at Old Sassoun.

As I walk in, Old Sassoun's storeowner, Joseph Geragosian, emerges through a swinging door from the depths of the store's kitchen. His sister follows right after and crosses over the counter to check on their father, who sits at a window-side metallic table, patiently drinking his cup of Armenian coffee. I'm reminded of my countless visits to Old Sassoun as a child. On Saturday mornings, my father and I used to come here. My father used to put me in a BabyBjörn, and we would walk here from our first home in Pasadena. My father jokes that we essentially grew up with the bakers and their bakery. This was like a second home, or at the very least, it was a second kitchen.

I order my usual: a za'atar mana'eesh[83] *wrap with mixed veggies, a spicy cheese* boreg[84], *and a mint-flavored bottle of* tan[85] *to wash it all down. Plates of sweet treats tease me from behind the display counters, but I decide to come back for these later. (My sister would be envious if I didn't get a batch to go.)*

I make my way outside and sit at one of the tables along the sidewalk. An endless stream of cars zooms by, and each time a gust of wind blows the napkins off the table.

83 *za'atar mana'eesh* : a Middle Eastern dish, consists of flatbread topped with za'atar (wild thyme)

84 *boreg* : an Armenian dough-based pastry, filled with various ingredients including cheese, meat, potatoes, spinach, etc. Can take several forms, but the two most popular types are 1) triangular and flaky, or 2) diamond-shaped and thick.

85 *tan:* pronounced 'tahn'—a savory yogurt drink, often flavored with mint or cucumber.

A group of unmistakably Armenian boys—probably four or five years younger—sit at the table in front of mine.

"Why don't you be an electrician?"

"Whadoyoumean? *That shit'll shock you bro."*

"Okay then, what about a plumber?"

"Nahhh...be a dental ceramist. You'd make bank."

"Yeah my cousin Sako does that. And he drives an M3 bro."

Dressed in all black, hair slicked back, sporting patchy beards...they're the local dghak[86]. *One of them catches a glimpse of me and makes a snarky comment to the others. One look and they assume I'm a gentrifying white hipster who read EaterLA's feature on Old Sassoun, and came here looking for a slice of 'authentic' Armenian cuisine. Ten miles away from my home, I'm mistaken as an outsider at a place I once frequented weekly (before they were all born).*

86 *dghak* : 'boys'—a term of endearment

Photographs:
[Left] The elder Geragosian, sitting at a table along one of the street-facing windows at Old Sassoun Bakery.
[Right] My usual Old Sassoun order: mint-flavored *tan*, *za'atar mana'eesh* wrap, spicy cheese *boreg*.

My family goes to a different bakery now, much closer to our neighborhood in the eastern foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. We moved to this area around ten years ago, as it was becoming a more desirable place to raise an Armenian family. A trip to Pasadena's Armenian neighborhood rarely happens nowadays. But, when it does, when I get to indulge in their one-of-a-kind spicy cheese boregs *and chunky sesame cookies, it feels like home—even if I live fifteen miles away.*

Social Geography of Los Angeles, CA

Sprawl, expansion, diversity, polarization, luxury, real estate. These are just a few words often associated with Greater Los Angeles and its urban landscape. In 1990, social geographer Mike Davis published *City of Quartz* in an effort to uncover these competing forces and the historical legacies that have (re)made Los Angeles throughout the twentieth century. The Armenian community arrived in Los Angeles amidst this era of tumultuous change. Since arriving, it has responded to the city's social and political conditions, finding opportunities to assert its cultural sensibilities through the spatial language of LA's broader urban landscape.

This Los Angeles story, both Armenian and non-Armenian, is tied to questions and patterns of spatial growth and expansion. Davis explains that "whatever the immediate balance of forces, there is no question that growth controversies continue to polarize and reshape the Southern California political landscape."[87] As Davis suggests, growth is steeped in tensions between competing interests, who react on the basis of class and ethnic distinction. He describes the 'slow growth' phenomenon, which is omnipresent throughout LA, stating that it is both "about homeowner control of land use and much more."[88] Davis continues:

> "Seen in the context of the suburban sociology of Southern California, it is merely the latest incarnation of a middle-class political subjectivity that fitfully constitutes and reconstitutes itself every few years around the defense of household equity and residential privilege. These diverse 'movements' have been notoriously volatile, but their cumulative impact upon the shaping of the socio-spatial structure of the Los Angeles region has been enormous."[89]

Political and economic "subjectivity" drive the trajectory of urban transformation in Los Angeles, and tracking these movements can help us understand their histories and future incarnations. The primary drivers of these movements are middle-class Angelenos of European-white backgrounds. When the prevailing social, political, and economic circumstances unsettle this class, they respond and, in turn, transform the greater region.

Davis points to a particular moment in LA's history in an effort to illustrate these "movements" and corresponding transformations. He describes Los Angeles in the 1970s, stating:

> "The new, deeper causality was an epochal change in the regional political economy, an unexpected clouding of the California dream. The postwar virtuous circle of good jobs, rising incomes, cheap land, and quality public services was beginning its slow disintegration into the present vicious cycle of social polarization, expensive land and a declining public sector."[90]

White middle-class Angelenos found themselves surrounded by a declining social and economic environment, and sought comfort elsewhere, beyond the boundaries of their existing neighborhoods.

Davis argues that this was also a response to increased density, instigated by developers and real estate magnates. Middle-class homeowners were enraged by

87 Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990), 158.

88 Davis, City of Quartz, 159.

89 Davis, City of Quartz, 159.

90 Davis, City of Quartz, 159.

"the Vietnam-boom apartment and condominium construction that was perceived to be drowning Edenic landscapes of detached, single-family homes on quiet streets," seeing it as a challenge to their immediate comfort.[91] These concerns grew over the 1960s, especially as changes began to compound in neighborhoods across the city. Davis explains that most homeowners were "angered by the rate of infill, the deterioration of the physical aspect of their communities, increasing traffic congestion, rising numbers of poorer people (and sometimes minorities), perceived tax costs, and the dilution of their political clout."[92] And, as a result, throughout the 1970s, they either revolted or fled their neighborhoods—an effort to "prevent the 'contamination' of their lifestyles."[93]

91 Davis, City of Quartz, 173

92 Davis, City of Quartz, 176

92 Davis, City of Quartz, 173

Photographs:
[Left] A typical midcentury 'dingbat' on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, CA. Courtesy of *LAist*.
[Right] A typical 1970s medium-denity townhouse on Isabel Street in Glendale, CA. Courtesy of *Coldwell Banker*.

This described process is not an isolated incident. Rather, it is one moment in a continuous cycle that takes place throughout Greater Los Angeles every few decades. The continuation of this cycle has resulted in a highly unique form of 'density' in Los Angeles. With each phase of the cycle, social, political, and financial capital becomes invested in new zones beyond existing sites of settlement; as the city expands, so do its sites of investment. This differs from other regional contexts, such as Boston or 20th century Fresno, where capital investments are applied to and layered within specific and stationary sites. These other regions place a greater emphasis on permanence, whereby specific sites accumulate capital over several generations. However, in Los Angeles, existing 'dense' areas serve as incubators for future expansion efforts; its urban landscape is less 'permanent' and far more sprawled than Boston's or Fresno's. These qualities go hand in hand with Los Angeles' reliance on automobile transportation. LA's urban landscape is perceived as far more dense than it really is (compared to other American cities), since nodes of investment are connected through an ever-expanding network of motorways.

Armenians in Los Angeles operate as 'agents' at various spatial scales, reacting to *and* instigating these periodic expansions. They have developed a unique spatial mechanism that allows them to maintain their role as 'agents': physically consolidating *shared* community spaces. Armenians have established multi-institutional complexes across Greater Los Angeles, which help them establish or centralize nodes of residential and commercial life. In certain cases residential and commercial life precedes the establishment of multi-institutional complexes, and in others, vice versa. Ultimately, this mechanism allows Los Angeles Armenians to maintain pockets of spatial proximity and ethnic density within an otherwise ever-sprawling landscape. In the process, this network of complexes connects Armenian

communities in each of these neighborhoods. The network *and* each complex serve as physical representations of Armenians' imprint within Greater Los Angeles—recognized by both Armenian and non-Armenian Angelenos.

Setting the Tone: Making and Remaking an Armenian Enclave

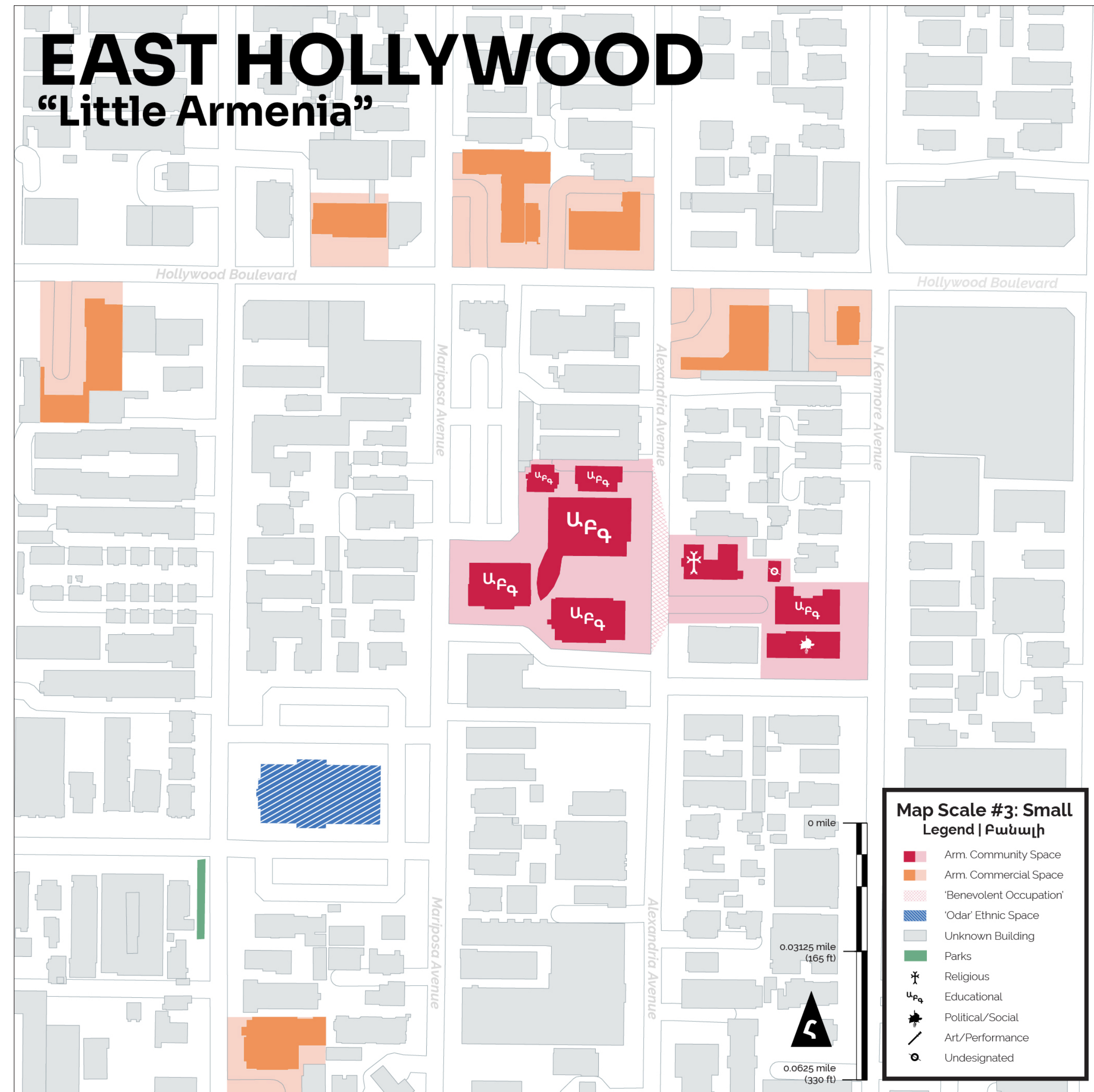
The Armenian community in Los Angeles, much like the city itself, is a product of the mid to late twentieth century. Although Armenians have resided in the area since the early twentieth century, their presence then was nominal. The community swelled in population around the 1940s, largely concentrated in East Hollywood. Around the mid 20th century, Hollywood lay halfway between the white, affluent suburbs in the north (Glendale, the San Fernando Valley, La Cañada/La Crescenta, Pasadena), and a working-class urban core (further south near Downtown Los Angeles). Hollywood had taken off in the 1930s with the success of the entertainment business; over the next decade, wealthier Angelenos retreated further into mountainous foothills, distancing themselves from the neighborhoods in which they worked. As a result, Hollywood's evolved real estate market appealed to Armenian immigrants, who could afford to move into this area (which was still relatively quiet and safe), while avoiding the economic and racial persecution they would face in wealthier, majority-European-white suburbs. The Hollywood Armenian community grew over the subsequent decades, evolving into the first hub of Armenian life in Southern California; it soon rivaled the historic Fresno community 200 miles north.

As European-white residents fled their single-family homes, the neighborhood was transformed into medium-density condominiums and apartment complexes, with low-rise commercial corridors along Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. Armenians embraced this neighborhood as *their* paradise in a flourishing Los Angeles. As more Armenians moved to Los Angeles over the 1950s and 1960s, they settled into many of these apartments and condominiums and became drivers of a local commercial economy. They opened countless bakeries, grocery stores, automotive shops, and other small businesses. East Hollywood soon became known as "Little Armenia," a name legally recognized by city officials in 2000.[94]

94 Los Angeles Times. "Part of East Hollywood Is Designated 'Little Armenia.'" October 7, 2000.

Photographs:
[Left] Garo Keurjikian, 'Honorary Mayor of Little Armenia', standing in front of the newly-designated 'Little Armenia' street sign (October 2000). Courtesy of Kristina Keurjikian.
[Right] Several local pedestrians walk by of a mural portraying various facets of Armenian life in the United States, along Holywood Boulevard, in East Hollywood.

Over the next few decades a series of community-building projects took place at the heart of "Little Armenia," aimed at creating an isolated Armenian enclave between Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. Hollywood's growing population of Armenian



Small Scale Map of East Hollywood.
Indicates Armenian community spaces in ‘Little Armenia’—most notably, the Pilibos Armenian School/St. Garabed Church/ACF *agoump* multi-institutional complex.

residents needed a series of cultural spaces. So, a multi-institutional complex was developed (the first of its kind in Los Angeles), primarily driven by members and affiliates of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. This complex contained St. Garabed Armenian Apostolic Church (Western Prelacy), the Armenian Cultural Foundation’s *agoump*, and Rose and Alex Pilibos Armenian School (Western Prelacy Board of Regents).

Photographs:
[Left] St. Garabed Armenian Apostolic Church, along Alexandria Avenue, in East Hollywood.
[Right] Entrance to Rose and Alex Pilibos Armenian School, on Alexandria Avenue, in East Hollywood.

I met with Dr. Alina Dorian, Associate Dean of Public Health Practice at UCLA, who served as Pilibos’ principal for 10 years (2011-2021). Dr. Dorian was born and raised in East Hollywood and grew up around the corner from the complex. She attended Pilibos until sixth grade and experienced the neighborhood during its heyday—as a center of cultural life in Los Angeles. She remembers her grandfather walking her to school, and notes: “My grandfather was sort of someone people knew. It’s funny because people my age would always say he would wait while we all prayed outside [...] so those feelings are still there.”[95] The individual buildings within the complex certainly provided the spaces necessary for engagement. But it was ultimately the spirit of Armenians like Dr. Dorian’s grandfather and his generation that brought the neighborhood to life.

95 Dr. Alina Dorian, Rose and Alex Pilibos Armenian School (Hollywood, CA), Virtual (via Zoom), February 6, 2024.

However, gradually, during the 1970s and 1980s, East Hollywood’s “Little Armenia” lost its shine, as well as the majority of its resident Armenian population. As Los Angeles continued to expand, accelerated by a growing highway system, rising inner-city crime rates, and a general depreciation of quality of life, its boundaries were redrawn and the more desirable middle and upper-middle-class neighborhoods now lay 5-10 miles out. Armenians responded to these changes and relocated to these new neighborhoods; more affluent Armenians settled in Pasadena and the San Fernando Valley, while working class Armenians moved to Glendale and Burbank (closer to East Hollywood). Dorian’s family moved to the Valley, and she continued her education at Holy Martyrs Ferrahian High School in Encino, which was now considered the “posh” Armenian day school. The community’s gradual abandonment of East Hollywood persisted through the 1990s, and the neighborhood lost its vitality as an enclave.

However, in the 2000s and 2010s, this area witnessed an influx of Armenians from a newly-independent, struggling Republic of Armenia. This wave of immigrants, in need of an Armenian day school, enrolled their children at Pilibos, which was also facing a host of internal challenges (which stemmed from a general lack of local investment). In 2011, Dr. Alina Dorian was called on by Pilibos’ school board, to

serve as its head of school. Dr. Dorian, a disaster-public-health specialist, imagined that she would "go in for two years, try to get some things together, and then [the board] would get a real principal and things will move forward from there." However, she realized that reviving the school, its multi-institutional complex, *and* the neighborhood needed careful investment, and prepared for a longer tenure at Pilibos. At the time, she thought:

> **DR. DORIAN:** "How do we turn this around? We have this incredible complex: the school, the church, the *agoump*. There is no way that we're going to close the school and move out. And if the school closes, honestly, that whole site... it would have been very difficult to bring humans to the site. Because the church had a difficult time drawing in people. And the *agoump* truly exists because of people through Pilibos—not just through Pilibos—but through the idea of Pilibos."

Drawing from her own experiences, Dr. Dorian recognized the opportunities provided by this complex (which spanned 500 feet in width and nearly 300 feet in length, slicing through two city blocks). She recognized the strengths of the complex's institutional intermix, and its relatively sizable surface area. Instead of focusing on Pilibos in isolation, she leaned into the idea of a "campus," and integrated the various cultural institutions spatially. Dorian explains:

> **DR. DORIAN:** "So when I first came, the whole campus was seen as [...] inner city, small, loud. It's T-K through 12th grade on the same campus. How do you manage four-year-olds and 18-year-olds? A lot of it, for me, was this idea of soul searching, of coming back [to our roots]. 'You've been given this opportunity to raise the new generation of Armenian leaders.' That was the tagline in my head. So how do we do that? Again, I think, being the daughter of an architect, I realized that space was everything. [...] How do we create spaces where people feel important, right? [...] But at the same time, we're a community. So how do we start to really understand that we truly are a family? You're important as an individual, but you're also very important as a part of this community. And how do you create spaces that a five-year-old feels good growing up in and an 18-year-old does?

Photographs:
[Left] Homenetmen Los Angeles Scouting Division's cub scouts doing their morning exercises during weekly scouting activities, in the central courtyard of Pilibos Armenian School.
[Right] A young cub scouts plays near the front entrance of Pilibos Armenian School, with St. Garabed Church in the background.

Dr. Dorian tapped into the qualities of the physical environment that had, at one point, made East Hollywood the center of Armenian life in Los Angeles. She treated the entire complex as a unified site, whose shared features could accommodate a variety of community uses. Dr. Dorian repainted the entire campus. She installed banners that covered all the main buildings, displaying Armenian writing and inspirational messages, which she hoped would guide them toward deeper relationships with the campus. She told students: "You are all responsible for picking up the trash. You are all responsible for your home." In turn, students became involved in "creating [a] community and creating good citizens, and really thinking about this as their home." In the absence of a now sprawled and scattered resident population, investments in the physical environment helped unite the neighborhood and reinvigorate it as a hotbed of social, cultural, and educational activity.

I visited the campus on a Sunday morning, and despite the school not being in session, the site beamed with energy and Armenian activity. The complex is occupied all day, most days of the week. On Sunday mornings, the scouting division of the Los Angeles Homenetmen Chapter takes over the entire complex. Concurrently, church services are conducted at St. Garabed Church. Later in the afternoon, ARF and ARS meetings are hosted at the agoump and in the church basement. As I walked around the campus, cub scouts popped out of classrooms, some playfully avoiding their leaders' planned activities, others playing intense games of hide-and-seek. I witnessed a young girl scout collide into a group of elderly churchgoers leaving St. Garabed as the service ended. Another group of scouts did their morning stretches on the basketball court of Pilibos' high school quad. Parents guided their children across the street to the agoump in preparation for an Eagle Scout Court of Honor scheduled for later that day.

Many of my childhood friends attended Pilibos Armenian School. Having visited them several times, I know how the complex is used as a day school. But this visit

Photographs:
[Left] A young cub scout races through the narrow walkways of Pilibos Armenian School, during her weekly scouting activities.
[Right] Several young cub scouts are led by their leaders across Alexandria Avenue, from Pilibos Armenian School to the Armenian Cultural Foundation's *agoump* during their weekly scouting activities.

upended my understanding of this *particular* set of uses. Spaces 'prescribed' for clerical activity became sites of community organizing and deliberation. Blacktop athletic facilities serviced scouting flag ceremonies. Alexandria Avenue became a high-traffic pedestrian artery that supported regular intra-complex mobility. The complex served as a flexible multi-use site for a community that has learned to maximize space, especially as it supports larger projects of identity maintenance and community revitalization.

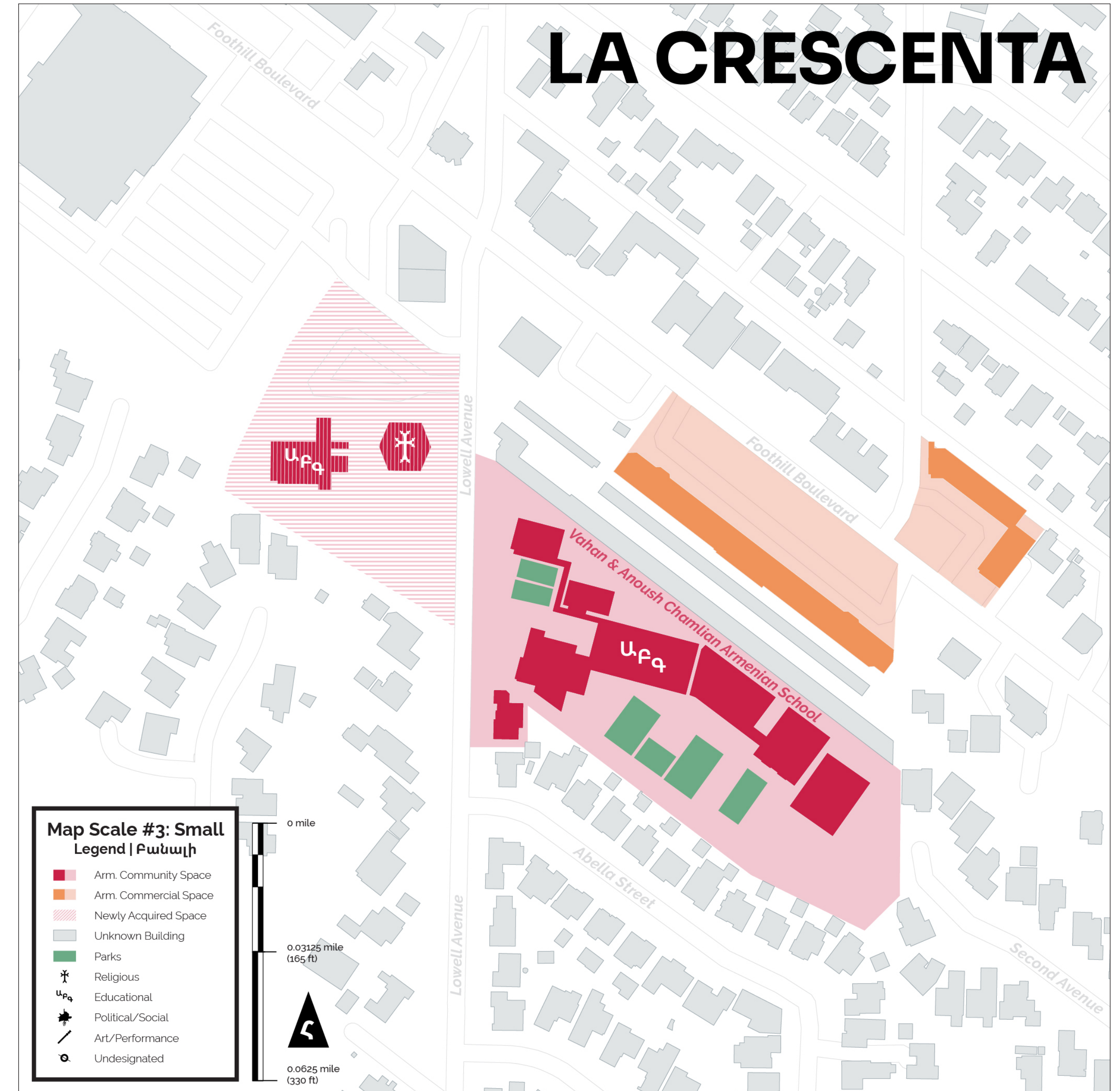
Calculated Architectures: From Within the Odar

I grew up in an area that, at least until recently, had been considered a predominantly European-white neighborhood, unpopulated by the Armenian community. My parents and both sets of grandparents live near the San Gabriel Mountains, in the cities of La Cañada, La Crescenta, and Tujunga ('the Foothills'). I attended an Armenian day school in this area and was considered one of the few 'local' attendees. Many of my classmates commuted from more established Armenian communities like Glendale, the Valley, and Pasadena. However, in recent years, 'the Foothills' have witnessed an influx of Armenian residents. It now boasts a significant Armenian community that has its eyes set on growing a multi-institutional complex, like those developed in older communities (e.g. East Hollywood, described above). The site of this new complex is the existing Vahan and Anoush Chamlian Armenian School, my alma mater.

In the 1980s, thousands of Middle Eastern Armenians immigrated to Los Angeles, fleeing the Lebanese Civil War and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The demand for institutional spaces (particularly schools) was urgent, and the community needed to quickly acquire new land. The Western Prelacy's Board of Regents searched for areas of possible expansion (i.e., safe areas, outside of settled Armenian communities). They landed on the northern fringes of Los Angeles County, or 'the Foothills.' In 1983, the Board of Regents purchased a four-and-a-half acre lot in the La Crescenta area, supported by the Chamlian family of Fresno. The lot featured brick, mid-century, classroom buildings from a previous public elementary school, which were converted to accommodate the eventual St. Mary's Vahan and Anoush Chamlian Armenian School. It had several large blacktop yards and a decent-sized driveway for pick-up and drop-off. It felt and looked a lot like most standard American public schools from the 1950s.

I met with Dr. Talin Kargodorian, head of school at Chamlian. She describes the attitudes of many community leaders at the time of the school's founding:

> **DR. KARGODORIAN:** "Our needs were very different in 1983 when they bought this property. The needs at that time were: people are moving here, let's support the immigrants, let's just give them a space where they can feel safe and included. There was transgenerational trauma from the Genocide. [...] Our great-grandparents were killed in the Genocide...and then they had to move to the Middle East...and they had to leave the Middle East...and they had to come here. And their response was: 'Let's give our children a safe space and let's teach them Armenian so that our nation can survive.' And that was it. That's all that they needed to do. Whatever else happened, it was fine."[96]



Small Scale Map of La Crescenta.
Indicates Armenian community spaces in La Crescenta—most notably, Chamlian Armenian School and the community's newly-acquired lot across Lowell Avenue (the site of a new multi-institutional complex).

96 Dr. Talin Kargodorian, Vahan and Anoush Chamlian Armenian School (Glendale, CA), February 2, 2024.

As Dr. Kargodorian implied, the decision to settle in La Crescenta was almost instinctual. It was a response to a moment of crisis and an unexpected surge of Armenian immigrants that had arrived in Greater Los Angeles. Dr. Kargodian explained that "La Crescenta wasn't as developed before. When Armenians came to this area, they all wanted to live in Glendale." However, in the process of building a school, the Foothills were ideal, since land was plenty and the area was safe. Dr. Kargodorian attributes this to a "Middle Eastern mentality," or in other words, a desire to find a secure space amidst chaos.

However, over the course of a few decades, the neighborhood developed into a low-density residential area. The social and political landscape of this area was different from that of East Hollywood or Glendale. Yet, Armenians' approach to community development had not changed. This led to an increasingly tense relationship with the school's European-white neighbors, especially as its student capacity started to grow.

> **DR. KARGODORIAN:** "All around us, we have homes that are million dollar plus homes where people feel entitled to a quiet, comfortable life without noise. They originally bought their homes by Lowell Avenue Elementary, or a Chamlian with less than 500 students. And as we're growing, our noise is growing, our traffic is growing, our events are becoming more lively. And they are very unhappy—our neighbors. They don't want the school here, and if the school stays, they want us to have less students."

Photograph:
Chamlian Armenian School's residential neighbors. The school's blue classroom building appears in the background, behind tree coverings and a metal fence.

The Armenian community and its leaders have tried to better navigate this relationship. Dr. Kargodorian mentioned that despite growing their student capacity from 500 to 700 in 2014 (which dramatically increased traffic on Lowell Avenue), Chamlian's PR team doubled down on its community outreach. The school established regular update systems, and coordinated with Glendale city and Police Department officials to ensure that they can "be a good neighbor."

These 'preventative' measures have encouraged the community to start planning for a larger multi-institutional complex around Chamlian Armenian School. It would be the first of its kind in the La Crescenta area, modeled off of similar complexes in East Hollywood, Glendale, and the Valley. However, unlike these complexes, the one in La Crescenta would be situated in an area with a less-integrated Armenian population.

Similar to Dr. Alina Dorian's efforts in East Hollywood, Dr. Kargodorian repainted the school and replanted much of its dying vegetation. Her vision was to create a cohesive and pleasant campus, which could lay the groundwork for further development.

These slight transformations have encouraged the community to feel invested in the space and to feel like they have ownership over the school lot. Over time, this has transformed Chamlian's campus into an anchoring point for the community.

Photographs:
[Top] Chamlian's renovated blacktop yard, which now boasts astro-turf fields, and repainted athletic courts.
[Bottom] Chamlian's several classroom buildings in view, with repainted basketball courts in the foreground.

In 2020, a rare opportunity presented itself, and the Los Angeles Armenian community came to Chamlian's support. On Lowell Avenue, across the street from Chamlian's campus, there sits a two-and-a-half-acre, non-Armenian church complex. For as long as I can remember, this lot has been vacant; my grandparents used to covertly park their cars in the church's parking lot when picking my sister and me up from school. Over the years, Chamlian's administration prepared for the denomination's expected and inevitable sale of the property.

Photograph:
The newly-acquired *odar* church sits across Lowell Avenue from Chamlian's kindergarten playground and its primary pick-up/drop-off driveway.

> **DR. KARGODORIAN:** "We made a plan to see if we could acquire as much of the surrounding neighborhood as possible. And it's great...assets for the school and for the future if we want to expand. [...] We were like, 'let's just get it and then.' It's just long-term planning. It's part of our strategic plan. So if we can obtain the land, why not?"

The decision to acquire this property was a combination of a present need for more space and a sense of foresight. Dr. Kargodorian did not want to make the same mistakes as her parents' generation and wanted to be at the forefront of a larger project to support her community through a multi-institutional complex in La Crescenta. Ultimately, once approval was granted from the Western Prelacy, Kargodorian's administration moved fast, "identified a couple of families who already were interested [in donating]," and purchased the property.

The land purchase was a foundational step in transforming the neighborhood around Chamlian Armenian School into a multi-institutional complex. By 2025, it will house Holy Archangels Preschool within a remodeled building. The existing non-Armenian church will be converted into an Armenian Apostolic Church, under the jurisdiction of the Western Prelacy. Spaces in the church basement will be converted into community meeting spaces and Sunday school classrooms. The expanded complex will now span both sides of Lowell Avenue, uniting Chamlian's 4.5-acre lot with the new 2.5-acre lot.

La Crescenta's residential Armenian population has swelled in the past decade. There is a growing need for an Armenian church in the area, as well as spaces to centralize cultural and social activity (beyond school hours). This new multi-

Photograph:
Chamlian Armenian School, as viewed from the newly-acquired church property. From this perspective, the two lots appear connected and continuous.

instituional complex is an attempt at addressesing these concerns. It is an extension and application of a well-established mechanism of urban relation. However, this time, the complex mechanism is not a response to white flight; it is being utilized in an anticipatory manner. La Crescenta Armenians are being led by a younger generation of more politically and financially equipped Armenians who are set on being more proactive agents in their immediate built environment.

As Dr. Kargodorian and I walked around the future site of Holy Archangels Preschool and the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Verdugo Mountains span the horizon out front. Behind us, the San Gabriel Mountains mirror the Verdugos and together, cradle a lush valley of tall pine trees and suburban homes. The expanded site will raise new concerns for Chamlian's neighbors, and this will, in turn, become an important question that the community will need to address. However, community leaders are willing to play with fire, in an effort to support a growing Armenian neighborhood—one that seems to be getting more dense, by the minute.

Photograph:
Dr. Talin Kargodorian guides me through the new site of Holy Archangels Preschool, across the street from Chamlian Armenian School. The Verdugo Mountains are in view, in the background.

Challenges & Problematics: Head-On Collision

> *"Even among non-Armenian Angelenos, the words* Glendale *and* Armenian *are practically synonymous."*[97]
>
> —Daniel Fitante, *Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs.*

97 Fitante, Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs, 3.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, non-Armenian (mostly, European-white) Angelenos once again fled their established suburban neighborhoods, and developed more-desirable communities beyond the city's already-extended periphery. Armenians gradually moved out of "Little Armenia," and settled in these now-vacated areas (Glendale, Pasadena, the San Fernando Valley), close to the San Gabriel and Verdugo Mountains. Many working or middle class Armenians moved into the Glendale area. At the time, this neighborhood presented itself as a *tabula rasa* for Armenian intervention. Almost overnight, Armenian businesses and cultural institutions were propped up throughout Glendale, and in a few short years, its Armenian inhabitants were well-integrated as agents of urban transformation.

However, to this day, in certain parts of Glendale (particularly in its northern end), non-Armenians still hold an ethnic majority. This population has, especially in recent years, challenged Armenians' efforts to build out multi-institutional complexes, recognizing this typology's political, cultural, and social value for the Armenian community. These competing interests collided in the late 2010s, as Armenians began exploring the possibility of constructing a museum that would celebrate the community's local and global contributions.

By the 2010s, Los Angeles Armenians had amassed enough political and financial capital to construct spaces that transcend cultural survival. A coalition of community leaders and organizations formed a committee that would steer the development and construction of the Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center. I met with Aram Alajajian, co-founder and principal architect at Alajajian-Marcoosi Architects, who is tasked with leading the museum's design. Since the 1980s, Alajajian has been deeply involved in the construction of several Armenian community spaces throughout Greater Los Angeles.[98]

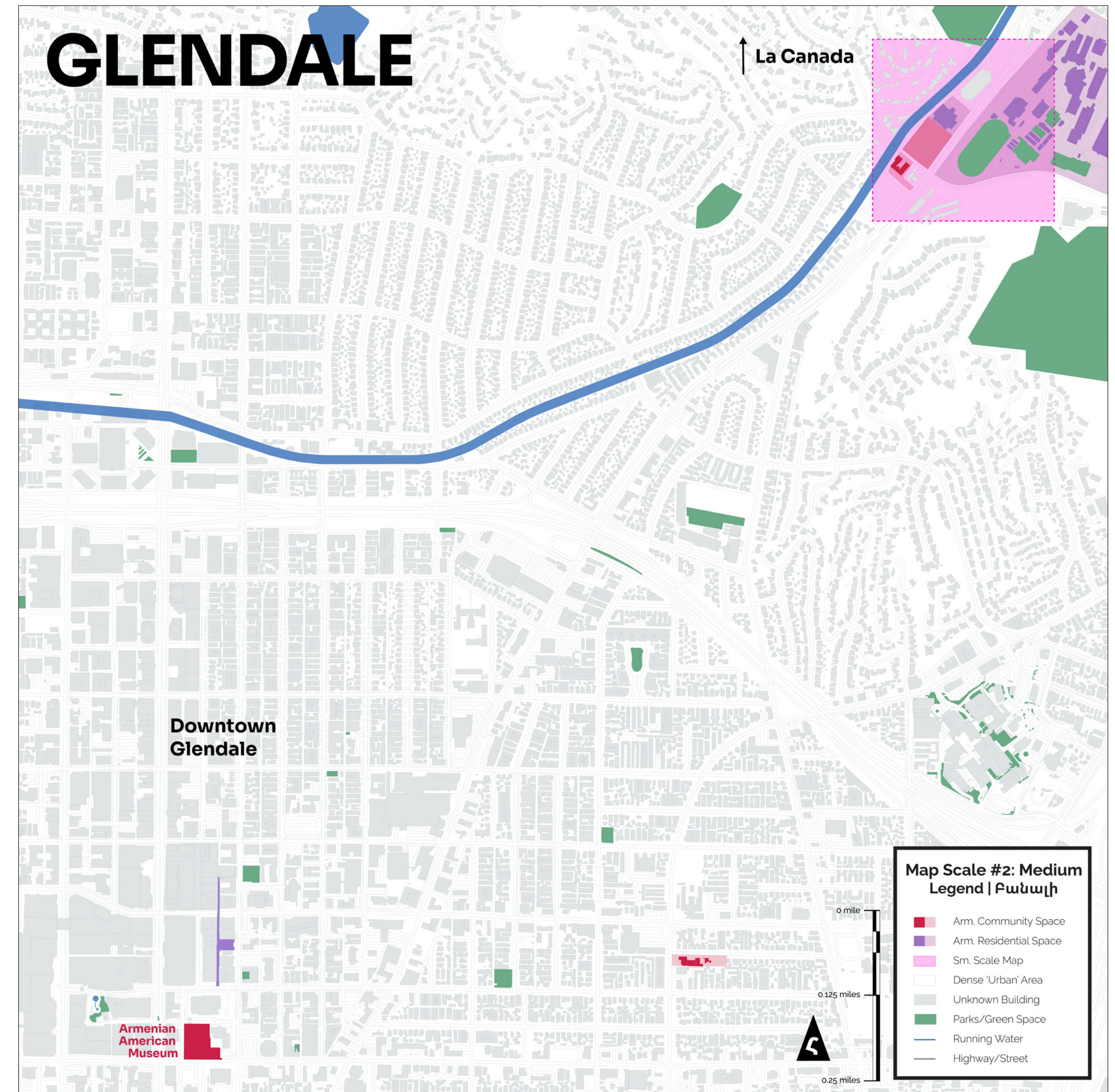
98 Alajajian-Marcoosi Architects are designing both the Holy Archangels Church and the Holy Archangels Preschool in La Crescenta. They also led the design of St. Gregory Armenian Catholic Church in Glendale.

Alajajian has been involved in all phases of the museum project. He explains the early phases, stating:

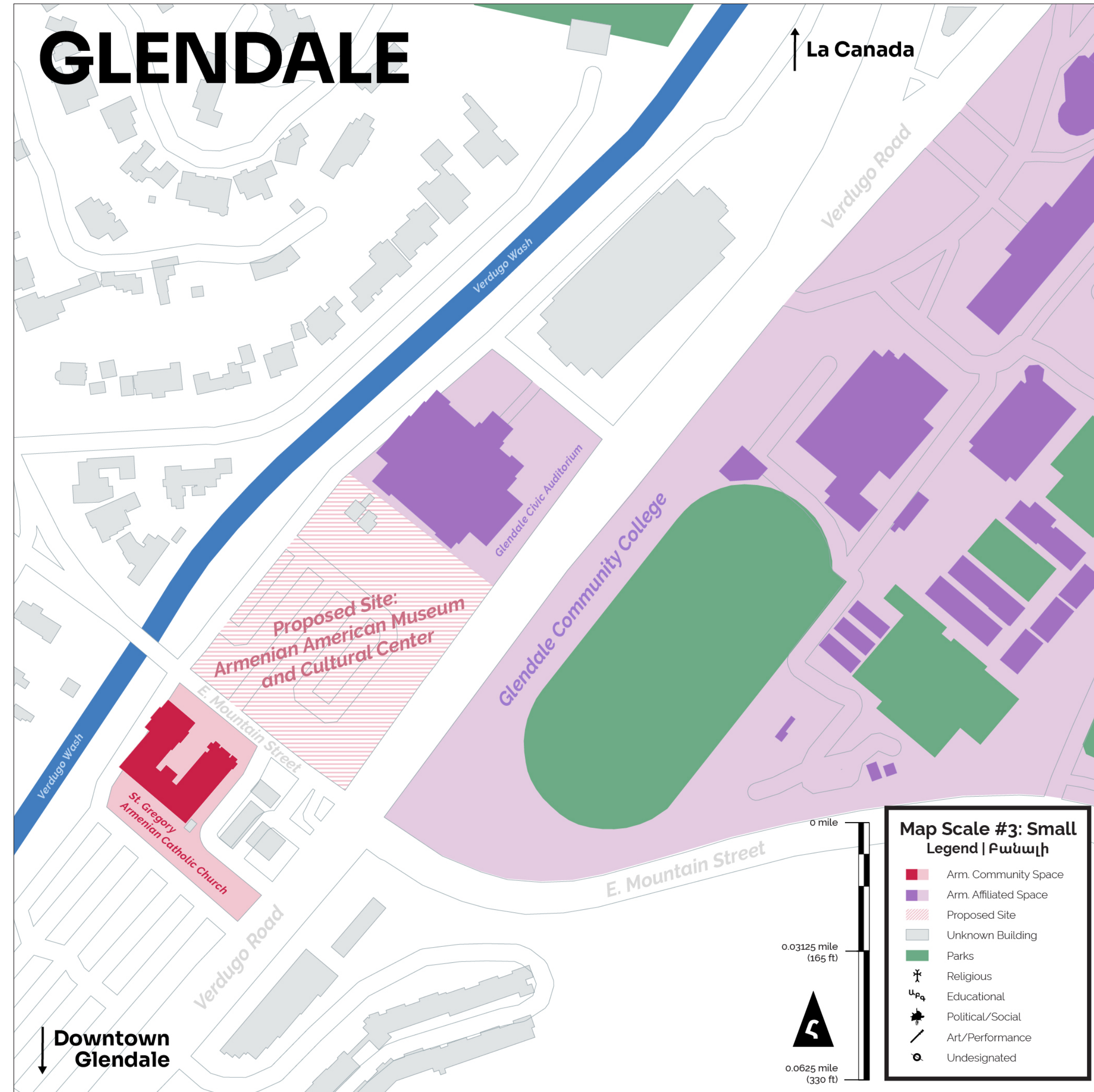
> **ARAM:** "We had a Museum Site Selection Committee. Actually, I'm one of three members who started this museum project in its early days. So I was part of that committee to select the site for the museum and we looked all over to find the property which is publicly owned, owned by the city. First, we looked at many cities such as La Crescenta, LA City, Pasadena, and places like that. But then the committee thought that the epicenter for Armenians is Glendale, so it's better to locate that museum in Glendale, where it's closer to the community."[99]

99 Aram Alajajian, Alajajian-Marcoosi Architects (Glendale, CA), February 5, 2024.

In the eyes of the Museum Site Selection Committee, locating the museum in Glendale would allow it to draw from other Armenian institutions in its vicinity



Medium Scale Map of Glendale.
Indicates extents of Small Scale Map. Features both the initial and eventual sites of the Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center.



Small Scale Map of Glendale.
Indicates the proposed, initial site of the Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center in northern Glendale. Its adjacency to St. Gregory Armenian Catholic Church, Glendale Civic Auditorium, and Glendale Community College would have made this area a *de facto* Armenian multi-institutional complex.

(of which there are many). As Alajajian explains, the Committee landed on a site that complemented this vision.

> **ARAM:** "Now, the first site that was selected belongs to the City of Glendale. It's a parking lot that's hardly being used. It's right next to the [Glendale] Civic Auditorium. We thought if we placed the building there, right across from St. Gregory Church and closer to [Glendale Community] College, it would [...] emphasize the educational element. And a two-story museum or three-story museum would benefit from the students coming in and having more cultural displays and exhibitions and so forth. And yet [we would maintain] the parking around it or [add] additional parking, because that Civic Auditorium was hardly being used. It would also complement the Civic Auditorium by occupying [the parking lot]."

Alajajian's comments need clarification. This site that he's referring to—the original one considered and selected by the committee—lies at the northern end of Glendale, on the border of La Cañada (one of the towns in 'the Foothills'). This part of Glendale hosts a smaller Armenian population than Downtown Glendale (further south), and has a dominant white, non-Armenian population. As opposed to Downtown Glendale's multi-story towers and commercial districts, this northern end mostly consists of large single-family homes. However, the Site Selection Committee was drawn to this initial site because of the existing Armenian institutions in its vicinity. As Aram Alajajian mentioned, the St. Gregory Armenian Catholic Church complex sits across the street from the initial museum site. Across Verdugo Road, on the other side of the lot, is Glendale Community College (GCC), whose student population is nearly 50% Armenian.[100] And, the Glendale Civic Auditorium, which is on the same block as the proposed site, hosts regular community events organized by various Armenian institutions. This neighborhood was essentially a multi-institutional Armenian complex already. The Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center would have cemented this status and would have made it a cultural and educational focal point for Armenians in LA, similar to how East Watertown is perceived by Boston Armenians.

100 "Campus Profile - Noncredit Demographics." Glendale Community College, Fall 2016.

Photographs: (clockwise)
(1) St. Gregory Armenian Catholic Church, viewed from the initial site of the Armenian American Museum; **(2)** Glendale Community College, along Verdugo Road in Glendale; **(3)** Glendale Civic Auditorium, along Verdugo Road, adjacent to the museum's initial site.

However, the local non-Armenian population pushed back. They recognized the Armenian community's tendency to replicate multi-institution complexes across Greater Los Angeles and feared a sense of ethnic territorialization that might emerge. These concerns were brought to the attention of the Museum's organizers. Alajajian explains: "We had a number of town hall meetings with the neighborhood, and the neighbors thought that [it] wouldn't be a good location for the museum."

As tensions rose, the Glendale City Council, "under tremendous pressure" from the local non-Armenian population, took matters into their own hands. They tasked the City Manager with helping the Armenian community find a new site for the museum. The City Manager selected a site in Downtown Glendale, in the city's growing 'entertainment district.' However, the constitutive institutions in this district (Neon Museum, The Americana at Brand, and LOOK Dine-In Movie Theater) comprise a completely different cultural landscape than the one around the initial Museum site.

The Site Selection Committee considered the new site a suitable alternative, given the scale of investment being made into this district by City Hall. They took up the City Manager's suggestion, deciding to locate the Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center in Downtown Glendale. This decision limited the museum's potential to feed off of adjacent Armenian institutions, instead deferring to a host of non-Armenian commercial enterprises.

The decision also opened the floodgates for a reimagining of the Museum's intended audience and its curatorial focus. Alajajian explained:

> **ARAM:** "Now it wasn't *just* going to be an Armenian museum. The museum would now serve the *entire* community. One of the purposes of doing (sic) this museum now was the idea [of bringing] all the other cultures together. Yes, it's a permanent Armenian museum, which has a permanent exhibition on Armenian history and culture. However, we have one-third of the space available for other cultures to come and have an exhibition of their culture and a demonstration kitchen [that] will serve their food during this time. So it's a melting pot, and at the same time, it's a place where the people will come together."

For many in the community, this reprogramming is controversial, given the museum's history of financial, social, and political support. For more than a decade years, the museum's funding has been sourced from Armenians across various diasporan communities. The museum has been marketed as an Armenian-centric space and it has relied heavily on the political and social support of the Los Angeles Armenian community. Armenians invested financially and emotionally into this project because it was presented as a facility in which Armenian life could flourish, without penetration from other cultural interests. Armenians in Los Angeles have, for generations, lacked designated spaces to showcase their contributions and cultural heritage; their work has been relegated to one-off rooms in galleries, or in the corners of large exhibition halls. An explicitly Armenian museum would have provided the community with a space to transcend this history of under-representation. The museum's reprogramming and resiting minimizes these considerations, which many Armenians consider necessary. However, it also would help avert political and social tension. If Armenians had picked this particular fight, they would have likely burnt bridges with local government officials and non-Armenian residents in Glendale. Doing so would have jeopardized the community's potential to develop future institutional spaces in Glendale.

Photograph:
Renderings of the future Armenian American Museum and Cultural Center in Downtown Glendale. Courtesy of *Los Angeles Business Journal*.

This controversy is an inadvertent consequence of Armenians' evolving relationship with the built environment of Greater Los Angeles. As Armenian residents have spread out within Greater Los Angeles, they have constructed multi-institutional complexes, both as a marker of spatial dominion, but also as a means of securing sites of active identity maintenance. However, in the process, they have inadvertently announced their ethnic motivations, which, have not always been well-received by other Angelenos. In certain neighborhoods, like Glendale, this mechanism (of replicating multi-institutional complexes) could support an imbalance of cultural, financial, and political strength between Armenians and their non-Armenian neighbors. Non-Armenian groups have felt threatened by this imbalance, and have responded with strategic political maneuvers.

Frustrations pile on, and Los Angeles' Armenian community continues to cling on to its mechanism of spatial transformation, especially in the face of inter-cultural conflict. The Armenian community continues to make spatial decisions that try to anticipate and fit into an otherwise complicated and unpredictable urban landscape. In the process, they are losing sight of the (waning) effectiveness of their spatial decisions. Armenians' imprint is being stretched thin, especially since the spawning of new multi-institutional compexes attracts residents from existing Armenian 'strongholds'. Now, when they are confronted with social and political challenges, they no longer have the critical mass necessary to respond to these confrontations. This raises the imperative for a much-needed reckoning—one that critically evaluates the merits of Armenians' replication mechanism.

Discussion

The previous sections presented the stories of three diasporan Armenian communities by tracing and illustrating their evolving relationships with built and natural environments. This Discussion section builds on these three stories, exploring relationships between place and identity across these communities and within them. In an effort to draw out these relationships, four thematic questions are brought into focus: (1) Scale of Spatial Imprint; (2) Waves of Immigration; (3) Institutional Affiliations; and (4) 'Projects' of Identity Maintenance.

Scale of Spatial Imprint

The scale of each Armenian community's spatial imprint has shifted over time—a response to broader political, economic, and environmental forces. Armenian communities in all three cities began as dense consolidations of residential and institutional life (which varied in specific form in each). The earliest Armenian immigrants arrived in each city, settling in affordable neighborhoods (urban or agricultural) where they could maintain identity and support one another through direct spatial proximity. In Fresno, these forms of support took place in proximate arrangements of small farming estates, or the densely gridded blocks of Downtown Fresno ('Old Armenian Town'). In Boston, Armenians consolidated residential (and eventually, institutional) life around the Hood Rubber Company in Watertown. And in Los Angeles, Armenian residents established a lively ethnic neighborhood near Downtown, in East Hollywood. However, in a matter of a few decades, the scale of Armenians' spatial imprint expanded in all three cities. Armenian communities scaled up, distributing themselves within and between suburban developments, beyond the boundaries of their former neighborhoods.

The expansion of each community's imprint was, in all three cities, a product of large-scale political and economic change. In Fresno, small farms were either absorbed or pushed out with the introduction of industrial farming practices. Armenian small farmers and their friends and family left behind their former neighborhoods in and near Fresno proper. If they were unable to grow their estates to match the new economy of large-scale farming (which the majority of farmers couldn't), they abandoned farming altogether and settled in suburban communities on the northern outskirts of Fresno County, or left the Central Valley entirely. In the late twentieth century, the collapse of urban manufacturing economies made towns like Watertown less desirable places to live for those with upward mobility. As second and third generations of American Armenians became more affluent, they moved out of Watertown and into nearby suburbs, such as Belmont, Lexington, and Bedford. And, in Los Angeles—a city defined by urban sprawl—Armenians chased periodic extensions of the city's 'desirable' zones (which were driven by real estate developers and racial separatism). In the process, Armenians developed a string of multi-institutional complexes in each neighborhood they inhabited, which centered a gradual concentration of residential and commercial life, but with a less unitary or permanent quality than 'the Island' in Watertown.

However, these initial scales of imprint (read: dense, residential-institutional intermix) now serve different, evolving meanings for each of the communities. Armenians in each city relate to their sites of former inhabitation to varying degrees. In Fresno, Armenians have mostly abandoned their once-lively 'Armenian Town,' in favor of developing one-off cultural institutions in their new suburban neighborhoods. The handful of remaining community spaces in 'Armenian Town' are now only occasionally populated. Today, Fresno Armenians' spatial imprint is scattered and expanded, with little connection to its historic epicenter. In Boston, 'the Island' still serves as a point of social, cultural, and political significance for the Armenian community. Armenian *residential* life has been expanded and lies further out in Boston's suburban neighborhoods. Yet, the same Armenians that live in these suburbs still return to 'the Island' on a regular basis. Because a large number of Greater Boston's Armenian institutions are still concentrated in Watertown, the suburbs have become more like satellite zones of inhabitation, whose residents still consider themselves active stewards of Watertown's Armenian enclave. In Los Angeles, Armenians continue to maintain and relate to their initial forms of residential-institutional intermix, by replicating the original multi-institutional complex typology throughout the metropolitan area, and then residing around these centers. Los Angeles Armenians have used the smaller scale of imprint of institutional imprint as a device in their efforts to construct a larger scale of residential imprint.

Waves of Immigration

New waves of immigration have, in each Armenian community, played a significant role in the trajectory of urban transformation and spatial relations, complementing American Armenians' relationship to the places they inhabit and build. The earliest waves of Armenian migration to the United States took place during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This first generation of American Armenians adapted to highly complex urban and environmental landscapes, and established unique spatial and architectural approaches to support identity maintenance. However, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a significant influx of Middle Eastern Armenian immigrants who had left culturally insulated communities like Beirut and Tehran. This new wave revitalized and re-awakened existing approaches to identity maintenance. In the late 1990s and through the 2000s, an influx of Armenians arrived from post-Soviet Armenia, which ushered in deeper relationships with a newly-accessible homeland. First, second, and third generation American Armenians visited their homeland more regularly (many of them, for the first time) and became increasingly influenced and inspired by the material and emotional qualities of 'home'.

American Armenians' relationship with built and natural environments reflects evolving social and cultural attitudes, which is a product of several waves of immigration. The social and cultural attitudes of new Armenian immigrants have collided with those of more-integrated American Armenians, which has informed subsequent urban and environmental transformations.

The first generation of American Armenians (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) had fled an environment in which they were persecuted, exiled, and massacred on the basis of their ethnic identity. This generation's perception of cultural identity (and its maintenance) had been shaken, making them vulnerable to external influence. Arriving in the United States, they were confronted with a social and cultural environment that cheered on assimilation and globalism, particularly in the aftermath of World War I. 'The American way' was commonly percieved as being the most secure path toward achieving social, financial, and cultural stability. Therefore, Armenians' relationships with built and natural environments during this period reflect a more assimilative approach. They embraced the spatial and architectural language of their broader environments, with the hope of *eventually* asserting and/or maintaining their distinct cultural identity.

The second wave of American Armenian immigration (late 1970s through 1980s) left charged environments in which they had been afforded social, cultural, and political autonomy for several decades. These American Armenians had previously resided in cities such as Beirut, Tehran, Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus. In many of these communities, Armenians had been able to practice their cultural identity with little interference or assimilative pressure. They developed relatively 'Armenian-centric' relationships with their built and natural environments to help support community-wide projects of identity maintenance. However, civil unrest and war in the Middle East drew many Armenians to emigrate to the United States. They brought with them their social and cultural attitudes, which collided with more 'assimilative' ones embraced by the first few generations of American Armenians. As a result, Armenian communities in the United States witnessed a revitalization (or introduction) of more Armenian-centric relationships, which built on existing, multi-generational attitudes and approaches.

In each community, these new waves of immigration helped lead to specific evolutions of their existing relationships with the built and natural environments. In Fresno, the influx of Middle Eastern immigrants led to a growing demand for bonafide cultural spaces across an already-dispersed community. By the 1970s and 1980s, Fresno Armenians had already abandoned their 'Armenian Town' and their small farming estates, and had moved into suburban neighborhoods. Middle Eastern Armenians found themselves in residential neighborhoods devoid of physical community centers or churches. Their cultural and social concerns reignited those of more-integrated or assimilated Fresno Armenians, which ushered in the development of one-off churches and community spaces across these newly-populated suburban towns.

In Boston, Middle Eastern Armenians recognized the value of 'the Island' in Watertown, and witnessed how first and second generation American Armenians enlivened this enclave with regular social and cultural activity, despite living in other suburban communities. Middle Eastern Armenians helped extend existing patterns of spatial density and proximity in and around 'the Island.' The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a materialization of 'benevolent occupation,' through expansion and development projects that fueled off of the new energy brought by Middle Eastern Armenians (the construction of the ACEC, the Hairenik Building, SSAES extensions, and various property acquisitions).

Los Angeles witnessed one of the largest influxes of Middle Eastern Armenians, and later, high volumes of post-Soviet Armenian immigration. The local Armenian community was confronted with an urgent need to expand and create viable communities. In response, Los Angeles Armenians replicated existing multi-institutional complexes throughout the city, which could be supported through a critical mass of residential and commercial life. Smaller, subsequent waves of immigration have built on these nodes and enclaves, which have helped contribute to a network of Armenian centers across Los Angeles.

Institutional Affiliations

This paper has spoken at length about dense concentrations of Armenian community institutions and the resultant creation of complexes, enclaves, or neighborhoods. These concentrations are not the *only* built elements of a community but are *connective* ones. They help anchor community life in many of the examples, including Fresno's 'Old Armenian Town,' 'the Island' in Watertown, or the various multi-institutional complexes in Los Angeles. This consolidation of institutions is often employed by nationalist, left-leaning organizations, namely, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and its affiliated organizations. In all three communities, this pattern of institutional clusterings became associated with the ARF, while other organizations (Western/Eastern Diocese Church, Protestant/Catholic Churches, AGBU) sought different choices, sometimes parallel and sometimes distinct.

The remaining non-commercial institutions in Fresno's 'Armenian Town' are Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Community Center; the church belongs to the Western Prelacy, and the center belongs to the ARF. Meanwhile, parishes of the Western Diocese and Protestant denominations lie further out, in Yettem, Fowler, Northern Fresno, and Clovis, and are exclusively religious complexes. While it isn't certain what exactly prompted this segregation, the patterned distribution of institutions (along political/religious lines) suggests that the construction of community space is, to some extent, politically charged.

In recent decades, Boston's Diocese, Catholic, and Protestant churches have expanded to neighborhoods beyond 'the Island'—either in central Watertown, or in Belmont. However, for more than a century, East Watertown (in which 'the Island' sits) has included both ARF/Prelacy and counterpart institutions. Armenian Memorial Church (Congregational) is located across the street from 'the Island,' and St. James Armenian Apostolic Church (Diocese) is located a few blocks west, along Mount Auburn Street. The disconnect between these institutions and the ones that comprise 'the Island' (all ARF/Prelacy-owned) is jarring; per its name, 'the Island' *feels* like a cultural and political island. The other institutions are not integrated into the ARF/Prelacy's multi-block enclave, but rather treated as a distant more-assimilative other, even though they are physically adjacent.

Armenian Memorial Church
(Congregational)
Watertown, MA.

Holy Trinity Armenian Church
(Apostolic—Eastern Diocese)
Cambridge, MA.

First Armenian Church
(Evangelical)
Belmont, MA.

Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church
(Catholic)
Belmont, MA.

Instiutional Affiliation & Architectural Detail

While this project does not focus on architectural detail and iconographic expression, these were considered and examined during initial fieldwork. The photographs above illustrate various architectural choices made by Greater Boston Armenians in the design and contruction of their places of worship. The variety of architectural forms exhibited here demonstrates how built expression is informed by institutional affiliation and sub-cultural ideology.

In Los Angeles, multi-institutional complexes were initiated by the ARF and the Western Prelacy and were gradually replicated throughout the city. In response, Diocese and Protestant churches, as well as AGBU schools, have developed similar complexes, in different parts of the city. These counterpart complexes have developed in Pasadena, Canoga Park, and Burbank, while ARF/Prelacy ones are located in East Hollywood, Glendale, and La Crescenta-Tujunga.

The ARF and its affiliated institutions believe that they are working in the best interest of each of these communities. Within their cultural and political perspective, the consolidation of their complexes serves to benefit the *entire* Armenian community, in each of the three cities. In their view, if other organizations feel threatened or shut out by their community-building efforts, it is a matter of political or cultural disagreement. On the contrary, the ARF's counterpart organizations (Diocese Church, Protestant/Catholic Churches, AGBU) feel that the ARF is acting in a rigid, or culturally conservative manner. They believe that the ARF's particular enclaving methods are exclusionary and that they hinder the success of collective, community-wide efforts to maintain cultural identity. Within their best ability, they respond with alternative spatial and architectural choices. Yet, both sides have not been able to find common ground and develop meaningful relationships with built and natural environments that speak to a broad range of political and cultural perspectives. A handful of projects have been able to achieve this, including the Armenian Genocide Monument at Fresno State. But, these examples are limited and do not represent the majority of 'collective' projects, which have left the community splintered and in a stalemate.

These spatial decisions are primarily a response to differing historically-based and ideological perceptions of 'cultural assimilation.' Members of the Diocese Church, Protestant and Catholic Churches, and their affiliated cultural organizations have historically come from wealthier socioeconomic backgrounds and have been equipped with greater social and political status. Under the Ottoman Empire, their class and status shielded them from persecution and massacre, and, when needed, they leaned into their identities as Ottoman bourgeois over their Christian Armenian ones. Class and status allowed them to develop more flexible understandings of Armenian cultural identity—as something that should submit to the broader conditions of an environment, even if this signals assimilation. Generations later, this attitude still holds, particularly within culturally assimilative contexts, such as the United States. Members of this camp are far more willing to embrace the conditions of an American landscape and allow them to influence their communities' relationships to built and natural environments.

Members of the ARF, the Prelacy Church, and their affiliated organizations have historically come from working- or middle-class backgrounds. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this class faced severe persecution and massacres on the basis of their ethnic identity. As a response, members of these organizations led the Armenian national liberation movement (1890s-1910s) and organized self-defense battalions during the Armenian Genocide. Members of these organizations also fought for and established the First Republic of Armenia. Cultural identity has, for generations, been perceived as an existential matter by this camp—something they have needed to continuously fight for. Therefore, this camp has developed a more resolute sense of protectionism in the face of 'cultural assimilation.' They believe that without community-wide preservation of cultural identity (its practices, heritage, and spaces), Armenians run the risk of losing their sense of self, becoming targets of external persecution. These attitudes have resulted in highly protective, 'Armenian-centric' relationships with built and natural environments in the United States. Members of this camp believe that consolidating community resources can help secure exclusively 'Armenian' spaces that help strengthen cultural identity in the face of cultural assimilation.

'Projects' of Identity Maintenance

A central concern at the heart of this research project is the looming and perceived threat of cultural assimilation. At what point, and in what ways can diasporan Armenians serve as agents of change in their immediate built and natural environments? To what extent do their established relationships with these environments *actually* support identity maintenance? To what extent do these compromise their own capacity to serve as agents of change? The stories of American Armenian communities in Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles demonstrate that built and natural environments are arenas in which questions of cultural survival and community-building can be explored, materialized, and contested.

In each of the three cities, Armenians have continuously observed and taken in the physical qualities of their local contexts. In response, they have translated these explorations into unique relationships with place, driven by a desire to create meaningful spaces that support diasporan life outside the homeland. Whether it has been explicitly recognized or not, these relationships are based on a belief that the spaces we regularly inhabit, and that house our cultural traditions and practices, have subtle and sometimes profound impacts on our collective identities. In different diasporan contexts, American Armenians have built up different spatial and architectural strategies in this effort; each has resulted in a very different relationship with its corresponding built and natural environment.

In Fresno, Armenians adopted an early attachment to the pastoral landscape of the Central Valley, embracing both the economic and cultural spirit that was tied to it. Armenian communities have followed the evolution of this landscape, especially as it transformed throughout the twentieth century. Farming fields provided a sense of cultural security since they brought together communities of Armenians who were all chasing the same dream of agricultural fortune. It helped Armenians buy into the notion that the physical landscape could serve as a cultural constant, ensuring that their cultural identity would remain strong as long as the community continuously invested in 'the land.' And, for a while, these spatial decisions bore fruit, as evidenced by the cultural impact of the Masis-Ararat and Ararat Cemeteries Complex and clusters of Armenian farming communities, like that of the Sararbian family. But, when major economic transformations upended traditional farming practices, they pushed out thousands of small Armenian farmers, proving

the frailty of this perceived relationship. In a matter of a few generations, Armenians not only lost their small lots of agricultural land, they lost their 'Armenian Town,' which had supported and united several generations of American Armenians. The Armenian community is now scattered across the northern suburbs of Fresno County. This has come at the cost of the community's cultural vitality as well as the loss of physical spaces that had previously helped them maintain their identity. These are consequences of conscious and unconscious compromises that the community made, in the name of advancing a perceived relationship between themselves and 'the land.'

When Greater Boston's first Armenian immigrants arrived in Watertown, they were confronted with a dense, storied urban landscape that seemed to offer no room for physical manipulation. Armenians found refuge within the irregular street network and block patterns around the Hood Rubber Company, before realizing that these spatial idiosyncracies could support their cultural practices and heritage. Soon, plaza-like chunks of automotive passage, like Artsakh Street, became de facto church spaces, which, in time, led to a community-wide recognition of the surrounding area as an ethnically distinct Armenian island. Armenians in Watertown embraced the street network and the opportunities it offered for informal use and spatial proximity. In turn, Armenians were able to build up a secure site for multi-institutional practice and intermix. However, as large-scale manufacturing vacated urban centers like Greater Boston, post-industrial areas such as Watertown fell into decline. Many Armenians, having already built up a wealth of financial resources, moved to more affluent areas where they could raise their families with more peace of mind. In the process, they left their cultural institutions behind, hoping that these could serve as stand-ins for their territorial claim over the neighborhood. However, the homes they vacated were soon taken over by non-Armenian residents, who rejected this so-called claim. In recent decades, their resistance to Armenian expansion efforts has rendered further Armenian investment in Watertown impossible, leaving the Armenian community in a state of paralysis. These challenges have been further exacerbated by intra-community disagreements regarding how to proceed, in the face of stalemate. Without finding common ground, Armenians in Watertown risk the gradual decline or collapse of their island, which could lose its social and cultural significance for future generations of suburban Armenian residents. In the process, they would lose the physical spaces that supported projects of identity maintenance for more than a century.

Since the early twentieth century, Armenians in Los Angeles have been responding to large-scale urban transformations, led by regional real estate magnates and European-white Angelenos. Early Armenians' sphere of spatial dominion had been cordoned off to working-class areas like East Hollywood, while wealthier Angelenos expanded the limits of their own settlement. Armenians responded to these social and spatial conditions by doubling down on their limited space and made deep community investments through built infrastructure. Armenians constructed dense multi-institutional complexes that would center residential and commercial life and help create Armenian neighborhoods in an otherwise densely populated and ethnically diverse city. This approach evolved into a powerful mechanism that Armenians could employ to create culturally, socially, and politically generative environments. As the city's de facto boundaries shifted in the late twentieth century, the Armenian community applied this mechanism as a means of asserting spatial agency. They have, in recent years, started to build complexes as a means of *introducing* new neighborhoods of Armenian inhabitation. Complex development now precedes and anticipates population influx, such as the one being built around Chamlian Armenian School in La Crescenta. However, Armenians' relationship with this spatial strategy has become widely recognized by non-Armenian Angelenos. Projects such as the Armenian American Museum have been challenged by these residents, who see this mechanism as something that exacerbates an imbalance in ethnopolitical power in cities like Glendale. Armenians have been compelled to compromise on these lines, reprogramming community spaces away from a more Armenian-centric orientation, toward multi-cultural, city-wide use. Compromises like these set a precedent for a devaluation and limiting of the power of multi-institutional Armenian complexes in Los Angeles. This precedent could curtail efforts to carve out culturally-distinct spaces that have historically supported the community as they spread across Greater Los Angeles. A weakening of this typology could result in cultural dilution, and would reduce the power of an otherwise-overwhelming settlement of 500,000 Armenians.

The described circumstances in each of the three cities leave us asking whether physical spaces can serve as stable insurers of cultural identity. Identity maintenance rests upon the social, political, and cultural maneuvers of a community. But it also hinges upon people's relationships with place, as evidenced through presented historical examples. The extent to which it does is constantly evolving and unclear. The answer to that question rests upon each community's decisions over subsequent generations.

Conclusion

Built and natural environments provide a lens through which we can better understand ongoing projects of identity construction and maintenance. The unique conditions (social, cultural, political, financial, and geographic) of a place inform how its residents respond to their immediate environments, and remake it in their image. The story of diasporan Armenians in the United States is best read in the context of the interplay between place and various identities.

In this project, the relationship between place and diasporan identity is told through the story of Armenian communities in Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles. Through ethnography, visual documentation, and cartographic illustration, this project has uncovered each community's process of responding to and adopting unique patterns of urban relations.

My analysis demonstrates that each community's relationship to place hinges upon the conditions of a broader American urban and environmental landscape. Diasporan communities in the United States are confronted with an omnipresent pressure to assimilate, socially and culturally. These assimilative pressures place a heavy hand on processes of community building. Armenian communities are uniquely affected by these pressures since they are caught in active processes of identity maintenance, prompted by existential threats to their national identity (both in the homeland and in exile). Therefore, social and cultural norms, pressures, and frictions come into view when examining diasporan Armenians' relationship to built and natural environments.

Armenians' relationship to place differs across Fresno, Boston, and Los Angeles, since Armenians adopt context-driven spatial and architectural languages in each city. In Fresno, Armenians view their diasporan identity in relation to a cognitive and tangible pastoral landscape; 'the land' is treated as a physical marker and insurer of their contributions to a local and national context. In Boston, existing patterns of spatial density and ethnic enclaving have encouraged Armenians to develop a unique cultural island in Watertown, defined by a proximate arrangement of cultural institutions. In Los Angeles, Armenians have responded to processes of endless spatial expansion, employing a mechanism of multi-institutional clustering throughout the city as its 'boundaries' are periodically redrawn.

I underline the inherent challenges that arise as byproducts of Armenians' adoption and employment of these context-driven languages. By examining the genealogy of each community's relationship to place, this project demonstrates how Armenians' spatial relationships sometimes serve as an obstacle in projects of identity maintenance. The compromises that Armenians have made (in the name of perceived identity maintenance) have, at times, led them toward self-destructive paths, inching them closer to cultural assimilation. These trajectories become all the more threatening if they are not widely recognized or critically interrogated.

This project has undertaken the first steps in this critical examination. It uncovers the strengths and detriments of Armenians' relationship to place, to prompt a careful readjustment of tendencies and habits. The onus is on Armenian communities to further this line of work—to anticipate the trajectory of urban transformations, so that diasporan identity can be maintained without inadvertently compromising itself.

In *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Dolores Hayden argues:

> "Learning the social meanings of historic places by discussing them with urban audiences involves the historian in collaboration with the residents themselves as well as with planners and preservationists, designers and artists. It engages social, historical, and aesthetic imagination to locate where narratives of cultural identity, embedded in the historic urban landscape, can be interpreted to project their largest and most enduring meanings for the city as a whole."[101]

101 Hayden, The Power of Place, 13.

We are starting to understand the "social meanings" of Armenian spaces in American cities. This conversation can be furthered with involvement from a greater collection of community agents, leaders, practitioners, and allies to "project their largest and most enduring meanings." This sort of engagement can usher in an imagining and eventual realization of urban spaces that speak to both diasporan and host sensibilities, without hindering either's capacity to exercise cultural heritage and political agency.

Limitations

This research project faced several methodological limitations as a result of time constraints and my personal identity. Certain maps featured in the text of the paper imagine the historic or contemporary expanses of Armenian residential inhabitation. These are derived from my estimations and impressions while conducting on-site research. Ideally, these would have been sourced and crosschecked using census data or other records. However, achieving this level of methodological specificity was not possible due to time constraints, so I have made educated guesses as a placeholder that helps illustrate something close enough to what more rigorous spatial data would likely show. It must also be reiterated that the presented groups of interlocutors serve as samples of much larger communities. The perspectives included in this paper by no means reflect the life experiences of *every* Armenian community member. Rather, these are intended to reflect tendencies and relationships shared by *most* diasporan Armenians (in each community).

This is a deeply personal project that has emerged from my own experiences as a diasporan Armenian from Los Angeles. My writing is certainly based on objective research conducted on-site, with community members in each city. However, it is also naturally affected by my personal biases and affiliations. For example, the pool of interlocutors is largely—though not always—drawn from people with whom I have some degree of relation. This is simply because Armenian communities are relatively small in size and well-connected. However, I have in many instances reached out to interlocutors with whom I have no familiarity, especially in the cities of Fresno and Boston (which are not my native communities).

Further Research

My research inquiry began with a much broader question about the relationship between Armenian identity and place. I was interested in this question as it stretched across all geographic and cultural scales of the Armenian nation. I also wanted to explore Armenian identity as expressed through all constitutive elements of built and natural environments. This ambition stemmed from a general excitement regarding the limited scholarship on diasporan architecture and placemaking, and about Armenian communities' relationship to place.

During fieldwork, I paid attention to these various scales of attention, doing intake on all variables that came into view. I paid attention to various subjects that have, in the process, been shed for the sake of project feasibility. Nevertheless, these are important inquiries that should be taken up by further research. Further projects can examine intra-community distinction with greater emphasis, and how material expression reflects subculture within communities.

My research could also be extended to an international scale, whereby questions of place are interrogated across national contexts (for example, comparing Armenian communities in France, Ethiopia, Canada, and the United States). Other projects might hone in on specific cities, examining how different ethnic groups relate to the same built and natural environments (comparing Korean, Salvadoran, and Armenian communities in Los Angeles). Additionally, future research might conduct formal analyses of community architecture, thinking exclusively about design and explicit articulations of identity through material expression. These various questions operate at different scales and investigate the intersection of different variables. However, each helps reinforce a wider understanding of the interrelationship between place and identity.

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