

FRAMING MAXO

SPATIAL NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Christine Mondor

QUESTIONS

This studio will examine the legacy of social justice advocacy of artist Maxo Vanka through the design of a visitors' center campus to complement the artist's murals in Millvale, PA. Vanka's murals, painted between 1937 and 1941, depict the social striving of an immigrant community dislocated by economic crisis and global warfare as modernization scribed a new social order. It was a time of great flux and inspired visual narratives that are relevant to today's dialogues. Our design will pay deference to the mural artifacts and speculate on how design might embody and enable spatial narratives of social justice.

PROMPT

Through reading, writing, mapping, and designing, we will explore multiple themes, including politicized space of capital, global identity and citizenship, and the construction of social order in periods of great flux. Our exploration process will include a personal reflection on the intersection of geographic territory, power, and agency and the evolution of discursive practices. In our first exercise, MICROsettings, we will document spaces of social discourse to become familiar with their functioning. In MACROsettings, we will use mapping as an interpretive tool to understand alternative geographies connected by shared narratives. These exercises will inform the semester-long design of a 3-acre campus and structures that will enable the expanded program envisioned by our M3V client.

CONTEXT

The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka (referred to here as M3V) is actively preserving the murals and extending their themes to invite a broader, contemporary audience. Our studio will propose material and ideological spaces for M3V's physical and virtual engagements as they foster dialogue on social justice issues and welcome a global community to participate. We will engage the M3V organization, community members, interpretive design experts, artists, and CMU SoA alum to build our knowledge.



AUDITORIO EN EL CONVENTO DE SANT FRANCESC,
Spain, David Closés



INJUSTICE (100 sf), Maxo Vanka

RESOURCES (links available upon request)

Save Maxo Vanka, website.
<https://vankamurals.org/>

McKee, Andrew. "Kolosalno!...Power, Energy, Future..." Master Thesis on Maxo Vanka's murals. University of Missouri-Columbia. 2013.

Ryden, Kent. **Mapping the Invisible Landscape**. 1993.

van der Veer, Gerrit et al. "One Museum, Multiple Doors: Design for Experience of Living Cultural Heritage." Chapter from **Museum Experience Design**, 2018.

Hutton, Jane. "Rivers of Steel: Steel from Pittsburgh to Riverside Park." Chapter from the book, **Reciprocal Landscapes**. 2019.



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PROGRAM

Architecturally, we will anchor ourselves in the field of interpretive design, most commonly used in the design of museum environments, and will examine how museums function as catalytic social settings. In museum design, the visitor's stay unfolds in time and space with spatial organization and artifacts to engage the body and orchestrate the experience. While we have much to learn from this approach, we will be conscious that the embeddedness of the campus in the community and the desire for serendipity and self-determination in the public realm will inspire moments of creative tension.

In addition to our design sprint preludes, we will design a campus of spaces that augment the visitor experience while seeing the murals. This may include the repurposing of existing structures on site and the weaving of the experience into Millvale, as well as the connection to programs and sites well beyond the immediate vicinity. Functions will include gallery spaces, visiting artist spaces, spaces to gather, spaces to learn, as well as the service spaces required for full functioning. Students will be encouraged to consider the materiality of the campus as a tool for structuring experience.

Note: This studio will require students to consider social, religious, and environmental justice material that some might find difficult or disturbing.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

During this studio, students will gain technical, procedural, spatial, and experiential design skills, and will be able to:

- articulate historical threads and develop a narrative around the evolution and continuity of social justice issues
- understand social models of change and how design, art, and engagement can catalyze or contribute to cultural transitions
- identify and speculate on key drivers of urban design, including experience, materials, context, cultural practices, political space, capital, and administration
- define and apply design theory describing behavior settings and micro-scale spatial practices
- define and apply design theory describing mapping spatial and geographic contexts that describe macro-scale spatial practices
- analyze museum and exhibit design and understand and apply the fundamentals of interpretive design principles