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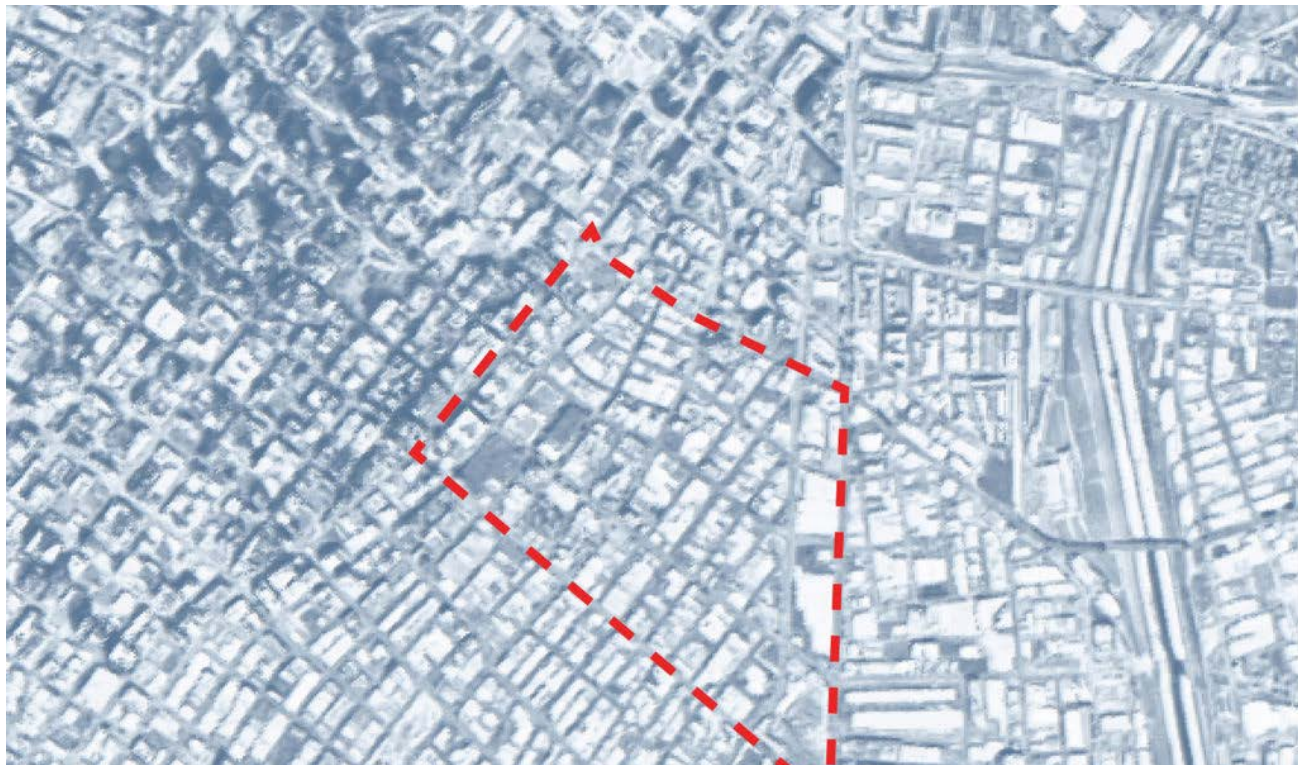
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Getting Creative About Affordable Housing in Skid Row

Jeremy Liu interviews Anna Kobara, Henriëtte Brouwers, John Malpede, and Rosten Woo



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Map of Downtown Los Angeles depicting the fifty square blocks that make up Skid Row.

Editor's Note

Theater artists & activists **John Malpede** and **Henriëtte Brouwers** of the performance group **Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)** and designer **Rosten Woo** are creating *How to House 7,000 People in Skid Row and How to Fund It*. The project aims to realize “**Skid Row Now & 2040**,” a community-generated alternative development plan designed for and by the Skid Row neighborhood of Los Angeles to challenge proposed upscale development and resist displacement by the Los Angeles Department of City Planning (DCP)’s DTLA 2040 community plan. *Skid Row Now & 2040* sets the following as guiding principles of their proposal:

“*Skid Row Now & 2040* wants generations of families and Skid Row residents to lead full, vibrant lives in Downtown LA. [. . .] No displacements of extremely-low-income residents should occur; policies that promote the Human Right to Housing should be enacted. The DTLA 2040 update shouldn’t include any policies or zoning changes that harm low-income communities of color. This includes policies that lead to criminalization.”

A Blade of Grass Fellows Malpede, Brouwers, and Woo will integrate an exhibition, public conversation, and research into financing mechanisms with the support of researcher **Anna Kobara** from the **Anti-Eviction Mapping Project**. They will engage the DCP and neighborhood residents about “*Skid Row Now & 2040*” to collectively enact a city plan that houses and protects all of Skid Row’s low-income and homeless residents. We’ve asked **Jeremy Liu**,

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working within the community planning and affordable housing sectors.

Jeremy: I've spent fifteen years running community development corporations. All along, the way I have tried to incorporate arts and culture into that work was inspired in many ways by the work of you all. You have been involved in Skid Row for a long while now. What's that journey been like for you, and did you think you would ever be delving into local land use and finance policy?

Henriëtte: Well, I certainly never thought I would get so deep into the policy. And to be honest, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it! When I arrived here in 2000 and started working with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, I saw so many people in the streets and thought things would get better. Instead, they have gotten worse. The only way to improve this is by delving into the housing. The City is updating its Downtown Community Plan, so things are really going to change if we don't do anything. For me, just making performances or exhibitions is not enough at this point—we have to study!

John: The reality is that Skid Row wouldn't even exist if it hadn't been for activists intervening in the land use process. The Bunker Hill redevelopment project would have obliterated Skid Row, but activists intervened and the result was that in fifty square blocks of downtown, the hotel stock was preserved and additional housing for extremely low-income people could be built. Those fifty blocks became the official borders of Skid Row. Subsequently, it's only been through the sustained actions of people living and working here that affordable housing and supportive services for low-income communities haven't already disappeared. There's been increasing amounts of money to be made by displacing us to build market rate housing in Downtown LA.

Rosten: Through a previous planning project I assisted with called [Our Skid Row](#)

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and is actually something that people want to preserve. I think we need to understand Skid Row as a success story. It's a really radical reframing of the conventional wisdom that mixed-income developments always create better social outcomes. If you don't know much about Skid Row, like most people in the city, it's easy to think of it as a problem area. Someone who hasn't been there and just has a fantasy of it might have an image that everyone in Skid Row actually wishes they were not there, and that Skid Row didn't exist. That's actually not at all the story within the neighborhood. In Skid Row, all the activists and folks like LAPD have built a story about how there's something special happening here, and it's something worth saving. I don't think that's necessarily something that just self-generates. It's part of the work of culture to tell that story and help create a collective sense of what this place is—that this is a recovery community, and that's a really vital thing to protect. It's very unique within LA, so far as it has a lot of community organizing history and a kind of connective tissue that many neighborhoods don't have.

Also, doing affordable housing in Skid Row challenges what truly affordable housing means for the people who live there, who basically have zero income —[working here] keeps you more honest in a way.

“Skid Row actually serves a lot of critical functions for people and is actually something that people want to preserve. I think we need to understand Skid Row as a success story.”

Jeremy: Is the goal to actually get the City to approve a new Tax Increment.

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John: We got the planners to come talk to the community, and then some of our community partners had an idea to get together and draft our own community plan, which we did as the Skid Row Now & 2040 Coalition. The goal of that plan is to build those 7,000 extremely low-income units, and we identify several different mechanisms for doing it, including TIFs. [TIFs allow municipalities to promote economic development by earmarking property tax revenue from anticipated increases in assessed values within a designated TIF district]. Obviously it will be an uphill slog to actually make this happen, since these are relatively new versions of these financial instruments in California that have yet to be tested in LA, but hey, let's push it!

Jeremy: Can you clarify the intent of the creative aspect of the project that you're bringing to the Skid Row Now & 2040 Coalition?

John: When the City's plan comes out and there's a public comment window, we plan to create exhibitions and performances as a mechanism for drawing attention to what's going on. Beyond that, it's also a way to get a deeper understanding in the community of all the different possibilities.

Rosten: I think there's kind of an element of fantasy to it, but no more fantasy than using a TIF to build a stadium or parking lot. The idea is to focus the conversation towards a collective vision of what we actually want our city to be spending its money on. Then we can explore the mechanisms to actually create a city that we feel is ethical. I wouldn't feel like this project failed if we didn't end up producing a TIF district. The goal is definitely to actually build the housing, and there are all these different theoretical pots of money to do that right now. We can raise billions of dollars to build extremely low-income and supportive housing in a place that wants it, so why don't we just do it! What are these policy mechanisms for anyway if we don't use them to build things we

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“What are these policy mechanisms for anyway if we don’t use them to build things we actually like?”

Jeremy: The way that I read what you’re proposing is that the TIF itself is an expressive thing. Creating one is an expressive act. The TIF structure and design certainly have visual dimensions, right? You’re drawing something, actually making markings on a piece of paper, and that expresses a set of values and a vision for a particular future. It’s not just a technical thing.

But presumably, if there’s a district where 28,000 new units are going to be built and only 25% of them are set aside for extremely low-income residents, that means that 21,000 will be market rate units for higher income folks. This is a question that faces a lot of enclave neighborhoods. How come the whole thing isn’t 100% affordable and created for the people that already live there? How are you all confronting that?

John: Yeah, that definitely sounds like a really scary thing to sign onto, because it would create a master class of higher income folks within Skid Row that would be hard to assimilate. I was a holdout for maintaining 100% extremely low-income housing in the neighborhood, but the consensus in our coalition was that that wasn’t going to be possible. The good news is that the situation is dynamic, and that in response to our advocacy the City has changed its plan to preserve one third of the current area—and we have compelling arguments for increasing that area. We’re continuing to work on it.

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left their board when they decided to start doing mixed-income housing. A lot of Skid Row residents felt like this was the beginning of the end, because if we let more rich people in, they are going to determine what happens in our neighborhood. In mixed income areas, often the poor people are pushed out of the building, or the rich folks complain to the police and all of a sudden there's more surveillance, and that leads to all kinds of problems.

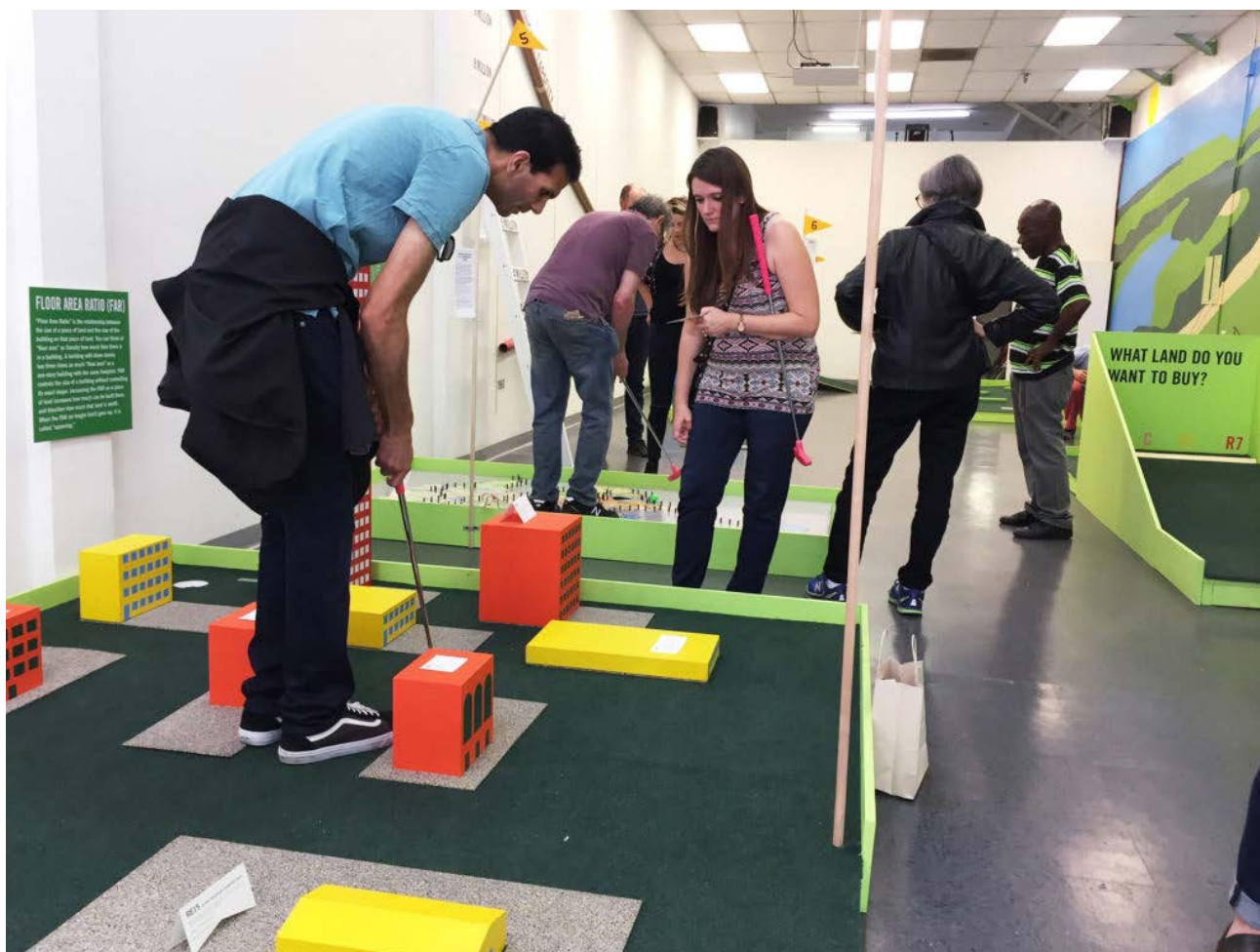
We don't want any displacement of the people in our community. So the next big challenge is to really imagine that if we can build all this affordable housing, how do we get our people to actually live there?

Jeremy: Have you seen any newer TIFs, or other public finance strategies, create differentiation in the districts? For instance, in Boston, where I spent fifteen years doing this kind of work, the City had a real estate value-capture mechanism called [Linkage](#), where there were contribution areas as well as benefit areas. So there was differentiation in the geography—projects in certain areas were contributors, benefiting other geographies. In some ways it's akin to developers buying out their inclusionary obligation by paying into a fund, but the fund is targeted to an area that needs a subsidy to develop rather than going citywide. Is that technically something that could be part of the consideration for Skid Row? Could you draw some line within a TIF district and say, we want the 7,000 affordable units inside of this line, and we want the 21,000 somewhere else outside of that? This would actually reinforce the existing containment strategy that preserves Skid Row's autonomy.

Anna: I don't think this non-contiguous designated beneficiary area exists right now in California through these new tools. But it's a really interesting strategy! Geographically, as a response to the upzoning they want to do in downtown LA, we might want to draw a TIF zone that includes it so that we can capture some of that value for Skid Row. That's a great variation because it really increases

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Jeremy: Do you have some ideas now of how you're going to translate the complexity of something like TIF for everyday folks? Your previous collaboration, *The Back 9* project, ingeniously used a mini-golf course as a teaching tool and a set for related performance work and workshops that challenged the city's efforts to rezone Downtown LA.



Participants engaging with *The Back 9* installation by artist Rosten Woo at the Skid Row History Museum and Archive in 2017. Image courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department.

Rosten: Not yet, as we're just starting. But we stand by the strategies and methods we successfully used in *The Back 9*. I try to create a hierarchy of information in my exhibits because there's always going to be the people who only spend fifteen seconds [viewing the work]. Can we give them something to

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hours actually playing the golf course or coming to a meeting can get deeper into this stuff. I think a lot of this is not actually super hard to understand. I don't necessarily think that everyone needs to know the intricacies of a TIF, but we do want to provide different layers of depth for different audiences, and I think that this learning can happen in public.

Jeremy: I feel like owning the idea that there have to be 7,000 units designated for extremely low-income individuals is not [meant to] shortchange what's possible before we even start to talk about it by claiming a desired result. Most community development corporations are on the treadmill of "how many units of housing can we produce a year," but are not as clearly focused on the implications of building that housing, and where, and for whom. Who do you feel like you have to convince to actually get behind your goal? Who are the audiences for this project?

Rosten: It helped to create a consensus, or close to a consensus, of what needed to happen. We gave lots of copies of the *Our Skid Row* plan [from 2015] to the Department of City Planning (DCP), but there was no sense that the City had any particular interest in it at any point. So it was interesting to me to watch the golf course idea get traction and interest from the press. Before we had done anything [on the project], the grant had only just been announced and *The Guardian* called us the next day! When we actually did build it [in 2017], there were then many more articles and suddenly that really did change the way that DCP looked at us. They became much more interested in incorporating all this stuff that had been given to them in our document years earlier.

That's the alchemy of cultural work. I don't know if it even mattered that City Planning staff came and played the golf course or came to some of the performances. But they affected DCP's interest level when there were all these articles about Skid Row being in danger. To me the city at large needs to be

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happen, to move beyond the sense that this is completely impossible.

Henriëtte: Now there's the HHH measure [a \$1.2 billion bond to build approximately 10,000 units of supportive housing across the City of Los Angeles] and everybody is like, "That's the solution because we have this big pot of money." Actually, a lot of that money has already been spent or committed to existing projects. So we're already at the end of that, but HHH is not the only solution. I think the other audience would be affordable housing developers —giving them new ideas about how to build and finance it.

Jeremy: What you're describing sounds a lot to me like a fairly endemic challenge amongst public sector folks about what's possible. The development community at large has done a pretty good job of training the public sector to feel like there's a scarcity complex. Do you think that's the way folks in Skid Row feel about these same things?

John: I'd say people who are engaged are standing up against the wrong kind of projects and happy to work with developers that want to do the right kind of projects. It's very motivating, and we're gonna keep fighting. I was at a meeting last night about a project that is going to be turned into 100% affordable housing by these really cool developers. The building was the Salvation Army for seventy years, it was a recovery program. We had worked there many years ago, and in 2009 they closed it down very precipitously and sold it to somebody who was going to do market rate micro-lofts because it's right down by the arts district and they thought it would appeal to [University of Southern California] students who could only afford smaller units. Meanwhile, people were living in tents right in front of the building! We did a press conference with Inner City Law Center after they closed down the project and sold the building. So we have gotten big wins, and it was just people mobilizing and getting on the streets.

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done a pretty good job of training the public sector to feel like there's a scarcity complex.”

Jeremy: It sounds like you're also saying that Skid Row has a history of fighting these things and actually achieving the goals it sets out for itself. Do you feel like you're building upon something from *The Back 9* in this new project that's effective in moving public perception internally and externally, while also landing on some technical details?

Rosten: We have very aligned goals and values, but very different working methods and creative strategies. I'm a visual designer, and LAPD is primarily theater and live performance. There's this fun overlap where we're building something together, but making stuff in parallel. My stuff is typically very understated and friendly and welcoming. Like, "We can we all understand this and come along." But the performance of *The Back 9* is just totally scathing satire, and kind of over-the-top in a way I would never do in my own work. But I could make the set! And these strategies were complementary.

Henriëtte: I don't know how wild we can get about TIFs.

Rosten: I bet it could get pretty wild.

John: *TIF the Musical* [laughing]! But I'm really anticipating that Anna can be on top of making the technical stuff clearer to us. Her work with the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) also had this storytelling and visual presentation aspect, so she brings these new skills to the project. It's another dimension we're adding to this thing that, who knows, might turn into a musical.

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John: I have an idea, let's just call it *Rent!*

Jeremy: Oh my God, *Rent: The Parody!*

One of the [findings] from working with seven organizations over the last couple years was that we really need to equip arts and culture organizations with a policy strategy person in residence. And you all figured out this prototype for what that could look like in this collaboration! That's definitely something I plan to lift up in my sector. How has Anna being part of your work changed the way you all think and do your own work?

Rosten: I usually spend a huge chunk of the project just trying to get my head around the policy, so it feels like we have a great head start! And I don't feel burdened with always knowing everything about this stuff. Just having someone with real expertise to bounce things off of is super great.

Jeremy: Your project description talks about exchange. Do you feel like the role of this project is to set up an exchange amongst the City, developers, Skid Row residents, advocates, and others? Or is it really internally focused towards different segments of the neighborhood?

Rosten: One of the things I really like about LAPD and this space, [The Skid Row History Museum & Archive](#), is that it has an inbuilt constituency thanks to all of the programming that happens here already, like the movie nights or creative writing workshops. It attracts an interesting mix of people both from and outside of Skid Row. And then when you add something like a policy expert coming in after the movie night, that gets publicized to the audience of other arts nonprofits and architecture nonprofits doing work about housing, so then their people come. And that generates a really different conversation with the

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Henriëtte: I think a big part of what we do, because of where we are located at the edge of gentrification, is to bring together Skid Row residents, but also the new downtown residents, and now even tourists come in more and more. They have the same questions: what is the community plan going to do? And they see many more people living in the streets, and they're worried about that. So to get all these people involved and have them talk to their friends, it just widens the circle. I think that's a good thing.

Jeremy: For many years I've said that so much of what ails us is the failure of imagination in really crucial moments when we have a choice or an opportunity to make a different kind of decision. I think it's exciting that you're holding space for that.

Rosten: One of the meta-goals of the project for me is thinking of public policy as a space of imagination and creativity. It sounds like an oxymoron, but why couldn't this all be really different? We want to make a space where people can share their ideas for good policy. We don't necessarily want to present the project as: "We did all the math and here's the best or only proposal." Rather, we want to ask, "Wouldn't this be amazing, and what else do you think could be amazing?"

For more information on efforts to create affordable rental housing using policy, public and political will, and cross-sector collaboration, please visit: [Fundors for Housing & Opportunity](#)

Jeremy Liu invents, samples, and remixes creative practices for equitable community development. As an artist, he has exhibited in museums, art centers, and communities around the country. He co-founded Creative Ecology Partners,

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promote the literal and poetic potential of bitter melon to address social bitterness. As a Senior Fellow at PolicyLink, he guides the integration of arts and culture into equitable development, including the Creative Change: Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development report and the website: www.communitydevelopment.art.

Henriëtte Brouwers *is a performer, director, teacher, and producer, and has been the Associate Director of LAPD since 2000. Prior to joining LAPD, Brouwers directed and performed original theater works in The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Poland, and the US.*

Anna Kobara is a California native whose background and education is in land use and affordable housing policy. She has worked with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project on various mapping projects that support state-wide and local tenant campaigns.

John Malpede is the founding Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), where he directs, performs, writes and makes multi-event projects. In addition to local productions, LAPD has produced projects around the US, Europe, and South America.

Rosten Woo is an artist, designer, and writer living in Los Angeles, and served as co-founder and former Executive Director of the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP). His projects aim to help people understand complex systems, re-orient themselves to places, and participate in group decision-making.

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