



Fig. 1. A typical Dearborn garage.

SPACES OF DIASPORA

COMMUNITY ARCHITECTURE AS EXHIBITION

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...spaces must exist for us to think and talk about, and theorize architecture as it reflects and informs culture. In this expansive and more inclusive understanding of architecture, the vernacular is as relevant as any other form of architectural practice.

—bell hooks, *Art on my mind: visual politics*

In October 2022, the Arab American National Museum (AANM) launched *Spaces of Dearborn: Architecture Tour*. Part tour, part program, and part exhibition, *Spaces of Dearborn* was an experiment that challenged us to think differently about how we engage our local community. From decked-out garages to infamous restaurant fountain wars, the architecture of Dearborn, Michigan, tells a special story of how Arab Americans have made the city home (fig. 1). By and for themselves, Arab Americans have created a place where they can be in community, share language, culture, and experiences, and foster a sense of belonging in a new

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country. Rather than attempt to replicate this city-wide placemaking within the museum’s walls, we experimented with a tour format that allowed us to share and preserve these values in the very places our community has built. With vernacular architecture and community stories as its focal points, *Spaces of Dearborn* was designed *with* the community members who shared their stories with visitors. Through this experimental project, we learned that exploration beyond the museum’s walls leads to greater learning and connective experiences for both visitors and our wider community.

SETTING THE SCENE

AANM’s public programming department embarked on this initiative to reconnect with local audiences after the museum closed to the public during the pandemic. Our institution’s history began with cultural programming in community spaces across the city – in schools, religious institutions, city centers, and neighborhood parks. We felt that meeting people where they are and building the tour collaboratively with them, especially after several years of not having any visitors inside our museum, made for an appropriate offering. *Spaces of Dearborn* was an intuitive project: Dearborn is the city with the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation. As an ethnic enclave, Dearborn exhibits many characteristics of Arab American cultural identity, especially in the places where residents live and gather. Homes, businesses, and places of worship are all spaces that hold stories; they are the physical manifestations of the shared values community members have built. At the museum, we saw our role as helping to bridge these stories together to create a narrative in which community members were presenting partners in a shared process.

Architecture is a tool that allows us to demonstrate meaning – the spaces we create tell stories about us and what is important to us. We structure our understanding of place and space through the lens of vernacular architecture, a style of building that is specific to a region or time based on local needs. Traditionally, architecture is in the hands of the architect – a professional – and removed from the hands of everyday people. But with vernacular architecture, anyone can contribute to architecture and influence their surroundings; all that is required is knowledge of your own personal needs and those of your community. Vernacular architecture contributes

to placemaking because it empowers communities to proudly define their identities and proclaim their belonging in new spaces. It is through this lens that we examine Dearborn, and its stories and contributions, as exhibition, and as a space where the museum can collaborate with community members as storytellers and experts; understand the past, present, and future of a place; and show up for our community in the places that already hold meaning for them.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Our first step in staging such a large-scale tour was to identify the key members of the community who had a story they wanted to tell. AANM staff had a sense of what we wanted covered on the tour through a narrative that would “check all the boxes” – a community gathering space, homes, and businesses. The team had identified these as key categories of buildings that had a vernacular architectural quality that spoke to the ways Arab Americans had created a space that was outwardly theirs in Dearborn. Research was conducted in several ways:

- We consulted the museum’s existing literature and archival information on important gathering spaces in Dearborn (and in Arab American culture).
- We gathered feedback and ideas from community members who had a long history in Dearborn and had observed the changes it has undergone in the past several decades.
- We interviewed scholars in the field who had particular insights on this topic.
- And, essentially, many of the staff members developing the tour were from Dearborn and/or had previous working knowledge in vernacular architecture and placemaking.

From this launching point, we began our outreach to community members, looking for individuals who wanted to join us in presenting *Spaces of Dearborn*.

Even with our storied history as an institution built by and for the community, we realized – through both this project and other strategic goals of the museum – that it was incumbent upon us to strengthen ties with our local neighbors to build programmatic partnerships.

These relationships had atrophied slightly since the early days of our cultural arts programming. This was partly due to the pandemic, which shifted our public programming to virtual and attracted an international audience, rather than our hyperlocal neighbors. Building out this tour would require more than creating the space and time for a one-off program; it meant that real relationships would have to be established and fostered. We saw *Spaces of Dearborn* as a way to renew and strengthen our ties to our community.

Partnerships with institutions that serve a shared community are key to work that intends to deeply engage local neighbors. We had already identified several such institutions through previous work, including the American Moslem Society (AMS) – established in 1938 by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, it is the oldest existing mosque in Michigan. The founding members, none of whom were actual builders, dug the basement and foundation by hand. Since then, the humble one floor mosque has expanded to be nearly five times its size. AMS, which has a strong commitment to outreach and community

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Fig. 2. An American Moslem Society representative tells visitors more about the mosque's history.

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work, is centrally located in a residential area that has grown alongside the mosque (fig. 2, p. 49). In conversations with a mosque representative, we discussed the building's architectural features and how they centered the needs and wants of the community, incorporating features like a youth recreation center as well as Islamic motifs.

In addition to our work with AMS, we wanted to reach our hyperlocal neighbors more directly. This meant that we needed to establish relationships with homeowners. When reaching out through staff networks did not result in any participants, a few members of the team went out and canvassed to invite people to have their homes featured in our architecture tour. We specifically sought out historical homes that had been amended in some way. We looked for houses with new or renovated porches, stylized ornamentation, additions, Arabic engravings, and/or outdoor living spaces. Porches, a highlight of Dearborn's vernacular architecture, speak to ideas important to Arab American culture.¹ We asked homeowners if they were interested in inviting guests onto their porch and telling us a story of their home and life. We asked them to commit to two 25-minute visits on the same day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In exchange, we offered each homeowner a \$150 gift card.² Knocking on doors and being able to introduce ourselves and the concepts gave us a chance to really speak frankly with the community. A few denied us kindly while many others did not answer at all. But what really mattered was that two agreed to participate in the project. Through stepping into a vulnerable position of direct outreach, we were able to connect with community members who did not often visit the museum. The fact that staff were Arab Americans from Dearborn who could communicate across language and cultural barriers undoubtedly assisted us in this work.

Lastly, we wanted to highlight the entrepreneurial ingenuity of Arab Americans in Dearborn. East Dearborn is a hub of Arab American small business activity, so we knew that it was important for *Spaces of Dearborn* to feature a business whose architectural choices reflected our shared heritage. We also decided to highlight a Yemeni American business due to a recent influx of this community. Yemeni stories are often under-told within the larger Arab American narrative, an imbalance that AANM is committed to addressing. After more canvassing, we identified a

Yemeni honey shop, Asal Bee,³ whose owner and employees were interested in sharing their stories. We found that canvassing for businesses was a much easier task than building relationships with homeowners, as the tour would provide opportunities to sell products to participants.

CONNECTING THE DOTS AND UPLIFTING STORIES

After community partners had been identified, we had to establish a route and develop a narrative framework for their stories. The route arose from many conversations with our community participants, researchers in architecture, history, and culture, and

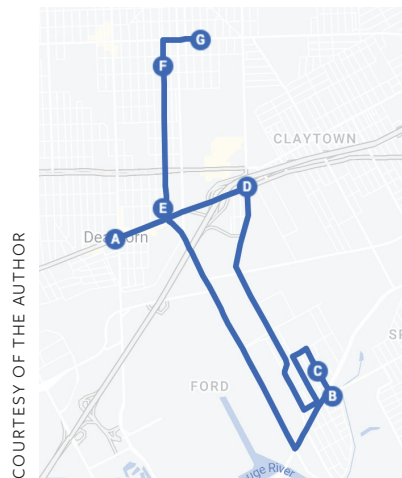


Fig. 3.

The tour:
A) AANM; B) AMS;
C) driving route through the Southend;
D) driving route through industrial Dearborn;
E) and F) general locations of our two East Dearborn home stops; and
G) Asal Bee.

conversations among tour staff (fig. 3). Because the route passed through many different neighborhoods, it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what needed to be included in our narrative. However, having our five key stops – AANM, the American Moslem Society, two East Dearborn houses, and Asal Bee – mapped out certainly helped. To plan out the tour and script, staff traveled between these five locations and explored what exists along the way. Because our stops were spread out across the city, we decided to make *Spaces of Dearborn* a guided tour that took visitors from location to location in a van chartered by AANM.

AANM was the natural starting point, as both the organizer of the tour and an example of what more “traditional” Arab architecture looks like (fig. 4). The museum is styled with nods to our Arab heritage, including choices that extend from aesthetic celebrations of Arab art to the complexities of Arab-influenced

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Fig. 4. The Arab American National Museum.



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Fig. 5. Visitors gather beneath AANM's dome.



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architecture. Both entrances greet visitors with colorful mosaics, an art form common throughout the Arab world. Once inside, visitors step into our courtyard, a traditional architectural space that calls for gathering. A dome above the courtyard is painted with our name in Arabic calligraphy; columns uplift the space; and mosaic and pattern art surround us (fig. 5). It is here that our tour began with a clear reference to where our heritage as Arabs begins – in the Arab world. Within the museum, it is easy to see how the intentional choices of designers, architects, institutional leaders, community members, engineers, and others was an investment in creating a space that called forward a sense of place – a place where Arab Americans could be proud of their heritage, and where everyone could learn the values of storytelling, art, nature, gathering, hospitality, and community.

Our next location was AMS, located in the Southend, a seven-minute drive from the museum. The Southend, a working-class and immigrant neighborhood, is where

the history of Arab American Dearborn begins. As most immigrant communities do when they settle down in a new place, early immigrants to Dearborn created a feeling of home by altering the architectural landscape. For these Lebanese and later Yemeni and Palestinian refugees, creating home in the Southend began with founding mosques such as AMS and establishing businesses. It made sense for the tour to highlight the Southend as the neighborhood where Arab American vernacular architecture began.

The Southend is extremely industrialized, with factories and smokestacks dotting the skyline. In the 1960s, the city planned to rezone and industrialize the area. This was an issue for the community. The Southend was theirs – after all, they had built their homes, established places of worship, and invested in their businesses. In response to the city's plans, Southend residents started a council and successfully took the city to court to stop the rezoning. AANM's parent organization, Arab Community Center for

Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), began in the Southend as a grassroots organization providing economic and social support to the community as they fought for their right to remain in the Southend. While this community organizing was happening, Arab American residents turned to their homes as a way to be seen and to exercise their freedom of expression. The outward appearance of Arab American homes created a sense of community-building, inspiring change and creating bonds of shared identity. The history of the Southend reveals how placemaking, even through individual homes, is a collaborative process that brings people together. This flourishing community is a testament to the intentional creation of home through vernacular architecture.

Our next stops were in East Dearborn, where we explored the movement of Arabs from the Southend into other parts of the city. Through the decades, and especially in the last several, the residents of Dearborn, who are now largely Arab American, have begun to make updates and additions to combine their homes' historic foundations with elements and symbols that espouse the values important to them – family, community, and the upward mobility of immigrants. Tour participants got the chance to visit with two homeowners while they told us stories on their porches (fig. 6). They each explained the importance of their porches as gathering spaces. The first homeowner bought their home because of its porch – it was a space for their kids to grow and in which to entertain. Our



Fig. 6. A homeowner welcomes visitors onto her porch.

second homeowner had designed and built their own porch after painstakingly matching decades-old brick and masonry. This point certainly hit home for us, as it defined placemaking and vernacular architecture as one: if placemaking is to design and build spaces people value, vernacular architecture is placemaking at an individual level.

Our final stop took us on a short drive on Warren Avenue, a core business artery in East Dearborn. Asal Bee is seemingly nondescript, tucked into a ubiquitous American strip mall. However, upon entry, Asal Bee's sophisticated design and bright colors evoke much wonder. The designs are informed by the motifs of the bee and honeycomb, which has a geometric nature similar to that of Arab art and symbols. The store has many murals and photos along the walls, which depict scenic landscapes of Yemen (fig. 7). The owners and



Fig. 7.

Visitors learn about the design of Asal Bee.

the Yemeni community are keen on maintaining their connection to their homeland and are proud of their heritage and legacy. Seeing the beautiful aesthetics and landscapes of Yemen helps the community to counter the narrative of their country as war-torn, which is often the only way it is depicted in the news. The products in the shop also counter this perception: the owners take pride in the fact that the honey, coffee, nuts, and other goods are all from Yemen. The employees at Asal Bee were very welcoming and eager to tell us these stories – and to share many delicious samples. As the employees were native Arabic speakers, tour staff translated for non-Arabic speaking participants. Our experience partnering with Asal Bee demonstrated the powerful stories that members of the community want to share, and the ways the museum can use its resources and platform to help them do so.

Presenting the tour was a difficult achievement, one that required the coordination of all our community partners and a fine balancing of time and information during the actual runs. Our two pilot tours were offered on the same Saturday, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, to accommodate people’s weekend schedules. Each tour hosted 12 participants, a number defined by the capacity of our vehicle and the space on homeowners’ porches. The tours lasted about two and a half hours each, and about 25 minutes was spent at each location. At each stop, our respective community partners would give a tour of their space, share their stories, and describe the architectural features unique to the building.⁴ A colleague and I developed the tour script and delivered the tour together. Having done the bulk of the research, we were well positioned to answer many of the questions we received during the tour. Our community partners were able to answer questions directly, too.

LEARNING AND MOVING FORWARD

The tour may have ended at Asal Bee, but the work certainly did not. From there, we began evaluation and follow-up with both our community partners and tour participants. We were glad to receive a lot of great feedback from participating community partners and guests alike, which has spurred us to envision what future AANM neighborhood tours could look like. From visitors, we heard that the diversity of the tour and combination of architectural features was enriching and holistic, thanks to the inclusion of history, community

storytelling, and cultural awareness. Some snippets of audience feedback include:

The tour was a terrific combination of architecture in different settings, as well as an experiential lesson in certain aspects of Arab American culture. I enjoyed the entire tour as it was.

I really liked the diversity of the tour and especially the porch visits.

I loved it! Fantastic. It was so fascinating to learn about the history of this beautiful community.

Visitors also walked away with an enjoyable learning experience: 100 percent of surveyed participants let us know that they have a greater understanding of Dearborn and its unique architecture; 82 percent rated the program “excellent,” while the remaining 18 percent rated it “very good;” and 80 percent of participants told us they were very likely to visit Asal Bee again. But really, the greatest feedback of all has been support from our participating community members – at the mosque, in their homes, and in their businesses – and from the museum’s audience, which has requested that we repeat and expand the tour to add more stories and to explore more sites. All our community partners have invited and encouraged us to visit their spaces again, while from audiences we heard, “I would love for this tour to be repeated, so that I can bring friends!” and, “I would definitely take a future tour. Maybe other areas of Dearborn or the surrounding area, businesses, etc.”

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There remains a lot to learn and much work to do. Due to the ethnic-enclave nature of Dearborn, and the fact that we do struggle to engage hyperlocal Arab Americans in the museum, we had many visitors to the

program who were non-Arab and not from Dearborn. We noticed that some audience members came to the program with biases and preconceptions about both Arab Americans and the city. While we aimed to protect and preserve the dignity of our community partners as best we could throughout the tour, there is more to do and learn in the future. First, it is our foremost goal to use these programs to bring Dearborn Arab Americans together to further engage in and learn about their city and to share their personal stories. Second, for non-Dearborners or non-Arab Americans who are visiting to learn and enjoy themselves, we are considering what materials the museum might provide so they arrive on the same page, or at least in the same chapter! For example, we might send cultural competency videos in advance to tour participants when they register. Ideally, these short videos would be produced by our museum's education and communications team and would deconstruct stereotypes and misconceptions people have about Arab Americans. We are also considering adding cultural competency preparations as a default "housekeeping" measure that takes place at AANM at the start of each tour. It is within our scope as a museum, a site of education and learning, to address misconceptions, so the benefit of collaborative work with the community is that we can take on the labor of this role so our community can share stories without feeling stereotyped or misunderstood.

We have also had to contend with the political implications of placemaking. Though Dearborn has become a haven for Arab Americans, it was not always like this. Throughout the decades, especially in the late 20th century, Arab American residents have had to face unjust words, regulations, and actions from the city government. The effects of this are still seen in Dearborn today, including underinvestment in the Southend and East Dearborn compared to other neighborhoods. This is why it was important for us to champion these two locales and to uplift stories of grassroots organizing, activism, and justice. We remain positive that this dialogue will continue – through this tour, other city forums, and through local activists and leaders, such as the first Arab American mayor of Dearborn, Abdullah H. Hammoud.⁵

Our next steps include building out the infrastructure to make the architecture tour a regular program. There are many components to coordinate, including maintaining relationships with all involved stakeholders. This requires a dedicated staff person who can do the

administrative and communications work involved. Future iterations of the program will hopefully evolve to include different areas of Dearborn, which will also require doing more of the research that is detailed above. As our staff capacity builds, we hope to acquire more funding that will allow us to train more staff to deliver the tour regularly.

As we look forward, we uphold the value of community collaboration which allowed us to examine Dearborn as a place that is proud of its heritage, vernacular architecture, and Arab-ness. By creating platforms through which local stories can be elevated, city-wide exhibitions do not rely on visitors for engagement, but on community participants as both presenting partners and audience. *Spaces of Dearborn* asks: What stories does your city's architecture hold? How does your community create a place for themselves through vernacular architecture? How can your community foster a deeper understanding of their homes and places? By exploring these questions, sharing institutional resources with their communities, and providing a platform for individuals' stories, museums can participate in and elevate a more holistic understanding of placemaking. ■

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1 These ideas vary and are plentiful. During the tour, we highlight the porch as: an important familial gathering space, a boundary between the public and private spheres, and an extension of both home and street.

2 Honorariums were also offered to the participating mosque and business but were declined.

3 Asal is the Arabic word for honey.

4 Community partners were prepped during our initial meetings, during follow-up calls, and were prompted with questions during the tours.

5 See, for example, Keenan Smith, "City of Dearborn launches health department to focus on residents' health," WXYZ Detroit, April 19, 2022, <https://www.wxyz.com/news/city-of-dearborn-launches-health-department-to-focus-on-residents-health>.