

2022 Houston Design Research Grant

Rice Design Alliance has provided research grants for architecture and design students and faculty since 1999. With the generous support of The Mitsui U.S.A. Foundation, RDA relaunched the renamed Houston Design Research Grant in 2020 (formerly known as the Initiatives for Houston Grant) to more actively support research that can make a significant contribution to the Houston community through quality design-thinking.

Starting in 2020, applications were expanded nationally to students and faculty looking to work on research projects of relevance to Houston's urban environment. The grant now awards \$6,000 each to a student and faculty winner who are invited to present their project at a public lunchtime lecture at Rice Architecture and to publish their research in *Cite*. Every year the grant addresses a different topic.

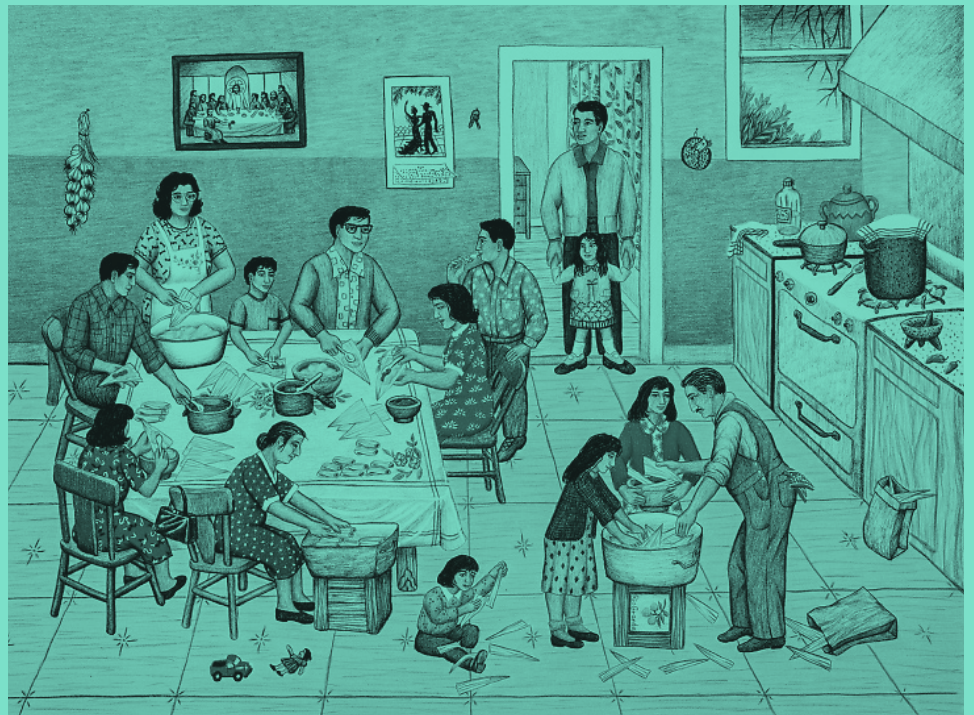
The overarching theme for the 2021 grant was Urban Food Systems. The 2021 winners were selected by a six-member jury that included Margaret Wallace Brown, Director, City of Houston's Planning & Development Department; Juan José Castellón, Assistant Professor, Rice Architecture; Maria Nicanor, Executive Director, Rice Design Alliance; Tommy Garcia Prats, Founder and General Manager of Small Places; Justin Smith, Senior Associate, Walter P Moore; and Nicola Springer, Executive Vice President, Director of PK-12 Projects, Kirksey Architecture.

The Houston Design Research Grant is made possible thanks to a generous gift from The Mitsui U.S.A. Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Mitsui & Co. (U.S.A.), Inc. ("Mitsui USA"). Established in 1987, The Mitsui U.S.A. Foundation currently supports more than fifty initiatives across the US in the areas of Education, Community Welfare, Arts and Culture, and Employee Matching and Volunteerism.

2022 Houston Design Research Grant Faculty Award

Liz Gálvez

Cooking to Transgress



Bottom: Carmen Lomas Garza, *Tamalada*, 1990, color lithograph, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by John B. Turner, 1997.5, ©1990, Carmen Lomas Garza. Other images by Liz Gálvez.

When I was a child, my father and mother sold trinkets at a Phoenix-area flea market on Sundays. And every Sunday, without fail, we had tamales for breakfast. *La Señora de los tamales* punctually arrived at our stand and delivered a warm, weighty, foil-wrapped package. *Rojos*, read a homely piece of masking tape.

On a humid July midday in Houston, I recognized *la Señora de los Tamales* from the anonymity of the carwash queue. I observed her movements in my rearview mirror. A couple parked their Texas-sized pickup truck. With quick gestures, the man untangled a rope and slid an ice chest towards the edge of the truck bed. The woman stealthily maneuvered through the workstations, collecting money and memorizing orders. She relied on her partner to assemble the orders, then she carefully walked each one back to the workers. As quickly as they had come, they also went. As I sat in my car, I wondered *where* and *how* the tasty tamales were made. While informal food vending is well-studied and documented in typologically gridded urban settings—for example those of Mexico City—how do these informal food systems respond to Houston’s suburban sprawl? Given the dominance of the single-family home here, how does this economy relate to the contemporary space of the home? The two separate *Senoras* suggest a type of informal food worker: a homemaker, typically a woman that cooks out of her domestic kitchen, selling and delivering prepared food to immigrant and working-class peoples.

While progressive socialist- and constructivist-era models for collective living such as Moscow’s Narkomfin Communal House imagined the kitchen as a collective space, the efficient, standardized kitchen of the single-family house assumes a private room. Its theorized individualism and domesticity holds it captive within the private sphere, as if the domestic kitchen were not urban, public, or a contributor to the economic cycles of the home. Yet, women (and men) use their knowledge of cooking towards economic enablement within Houston’s informal food systems, especially in immigrant working-class communities. In doing so, they transgress narrow understandings of the home kitchen as it relates to the city.

Due to the traditionally gendered domestic realm, cooking is an important form of knowledge formation and research for many Mexican and Latina women. For many Mexican women, especially in smaller towns or in previous generations, cooking, domestic labor, and homemaking constitute an education. Historically, for Mexican women, kitchen knowledge often represented their most extensive training and education. Feminine

identity as a “good cook” continues to hold significance in Latinx culture.

Cooking is an entangled act of creation that links it to larger productive systems of agriculture, commerce, and infrastructure. As a processing center that must respond to the highly specific climatic conditions required for cooking, the domestic kitchen provides specialized equipment, fuel, and water piping, in conjunction with precise environmental controls that consume substantial amounts of energy and require expertise in technical and thermodynamic processes. To develop and grow this skill set, cooks constantly share cookbooks, annotations, and techniques, and they often adapt and change their operations over time and in response to technological developments in home cooking equipment.

Even today, as in the case of the popular cooking show *De mi rancho a tu cocina*’s Doña Ángela from Michoacán, matriarchal figures in small towns continue to be venerated for the accumulation of cooking knowledge and expertise. Not only are women often at the forefront of technological innovation, but they often have a direct understanding of the ecological systems involved in cooking.

This research addresses the suburban kitchen as an economic and ecological space, foregrounding narratives of migrant populations and their experiences within Houston’s urbanity. Embedding the politics of building with the processes of domestic labor addresses questions of global concern. This happens through careful, deliberate, discrete, and repeatable everyday acts. Cooking to transgress focuses on nonhegemonic experiences of inhabiting interior spaces and their exterior reciprocities. The consumption of resources and the manufacture of home goods for local markets open up new ways to relate to our environments through the overlapping lenses of domesticity and the city.

This work takes the form of *From Masa to Maps*, a short documentary film that follows three home cooks in Houston to document the kitchen as an entangled space of speculation within the urban setting. The film explores culturally constructed yet widely accepted understandings of femininity in Latinx culture—in order to transgress these very same assumptions. In documenting the lifestyles of informal commercial cooks, their families, and those who consume their food, this research explores ongoing transformations to Houston’s single-family housing stock.

Taking cues from Carmen Lomas Garza’s *Tamalada*, this effort also examines the collective knowledge and ethos passed from older to younger generations of home cooks.

For Victoria Elizondo, lead chef at Cochinita & Co., this relationship is made clear as she describes her transition from home cook to entrepreneurial chef:

Our tamales are made by moms. My mom specifically started to make them from home in order to survive her layoff. It started in a small kitchen, then a garage, and now a restaurant that manufactures tamales for three different stores and nationwide shipping.

Cooking to transgress may start from familial lessons in the home, yet these collective acts of domesticity enable the creative shepherds of these recipes to further the boundaries of their homes.

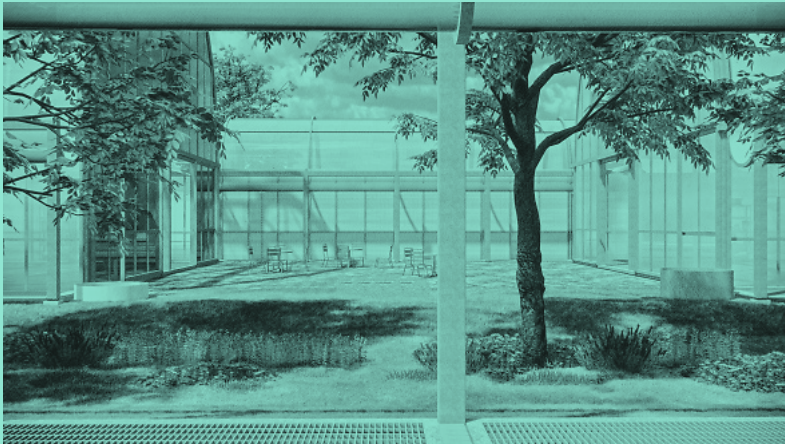
The imagined kitchen of *la Señora de los Tamales*, in conjunction with “collective” living conditions in immigrant communities, already transcends the private heteronormativity of the single-family home, creating opportunities for transgressive interventions that move beyond the individual to the collective. This expansion showcases incongruities between the living practices of immigrants and Houston’s single-family housing typologies, which most typically provide three-bedroom, two-bathroom homes designed for “family-scaled” kitchen arrangements. The social reality of immigrant laborers in Houston raises the need for collective and experimental ways of living that continue to transgress the established norms of dwelling for a nuclear family. The domestic kitchen, when understood in relation to migrant populations and informal food supply chains, addresses social, economic, and biological issues. It exists as an entangled space of speculation.

Liz Gálvez is Mexican-American. She is a registered architect, directs Office e.g., and teaches as Visiting Critic at Rice Architecture. She holds an MArch from MIT and pursued her undergraduate studies in architecture and philosophy at ASU. Her work focuses on the interface between architecture, theory, and environmentalism. Her work has been exhibited at the Hohensalzburg Fortress in Austria, The University of Michigan, the Space p11 Gallery in Chicago, and the Farish Gallery at Rice University. In 2021, Office e.g. was awarded the Architectural League Prize.

2022 Houston
Design Research Grant
Student Award

Estefanía Barajas

Tables in Deserts and
Swamps



Images by Estefanía Barajas.

Food, like architecture, stages a cultural act. Its gathering, cultivation, preparation, and consumption shapes contemporary life.

For a second, imagine working a busy schedule and arriving home late at night. What's for dinner? How much energy and time do you have? More importantly, what are your options? What's open? This might be the predicament of a single parent making minimum wage. These considerations evidence the correlation between obesity and hunger in underserved communities. In these situations, those below the poverty line often consume a nutrient-poor diet, which contributes to obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. More importantly, this is a common story that evidences the spread of food swamps.

The phrase “food swamp” is often used to describe this type of urban environment where an abundance of “fast food, convenience stores, and liquor stores outnumber healthy food options.”¹ Recently, however, some have argued that the terms *food swamp* and *food desert* should be replaced with *food apartheid*, a term introduced by food activist Karen Washington to call attention to and emphasize the “intersections of food and issues like poverty, racism, a lack of health-care, and joblessness.”²

The USDA Economic Research Service found that more than 10 percent of households in the United States—about 38 million people—experienced food insecurity in 2020.³ Houston far exceeds the national average on issues related to food insecurity and obesity, as an astonishing 20 percent of Houstonians live under food apartheid. Overall, 19 percent of Houstonians and 25 percent of Houston's children do not know where they will find their next meal.⁴ Often, this is a disadvantage shared by ZIP code. Sola Lawal writes that in the Third Ward, “it's a lot easier to pick up fast food than fresh greens for a salad. [...] The nearest supermarket is about two miles away, which means you'd need to cross over sixteen lanes of highway or walk half a mile to the nearest bus stop if you don't have a car.”⁵

Scholars and advocates of food justice understand the source for this scarcity to be systematic, arising from a lack of sources, physical and monetary access, time, and dietary habits. Programs such as food pantries and food banks are essential but are ultimately Band-Aid solutions to the underlying causes of food insecurity. Sustainable solutions require reinvestment in education, public space, green infrastructure, economic development, and family support.

This project proposes that urban farming should be integrated into education. It shows that agriculture can synthesize with architecture to produce community, resiliency, and care. Hopefully, the result can even amend the unequal distribution of green spaces.

The project is intended as an urban intervention for all 153 HISD elementary schools. Like any government project, the implementation materializes in stages, prioritizing schools in flood plains, food swamps, and locations where public green space is limited.

The project begins by introducing a pilot program in schools with the smallest and largest populations: Alcott Elementary School, located in the South Park neighborhood; and Rodriguez Elementary School, located in Gulfton.

The programmatic elements of this new typology include a food hub (urban farm), a distribution center (food pantry), and outdoor classrooms for after-school programs and community events. Because of its urgency and inherent connection to food, this project is centered on water collection and reinforcing existing school infrastructures.

The idea is to have a space within a space: one structure can be more permanent and resilient, while the other invites change and is more ephemeral. The design pays homage to the greenhouse by using prefabrication, modulation, and repetition. The program is flexible and can grow and adapt to different site conditions and needs. The system consists of a steel barrel vault greenhouse (with polycarbonate skin), prefabricated structure (including items for classrooms, kitchens, and storage), and a series of hydroponic and conventional planters that stack like a children's game.

To work as a piece of water infrastructure, the structure acts as an umbrella with an extensive gutter system on the side; the water is collected in small water tanks and small pools at the ends.

The structure would be located at the back of schools, adjacent to parking. The organization consists of two rows with an opening to create an internal courtyard and allow for air circulation. For safety, the first row remains more private and meant for after-school functions, while the second row is open to the public after school hours and on weekends to host cooking demonstrations, job training, and community events.

Overall, the project aims to provide a missing threshold between domestic life and the public. It develops a multiscale system that

introduces an alternative collective space within schools—a new system of care and consciousness.

Notes

1 Angela Hilmers, David C. Hilmers, and Jayna Dave, “Neighborhood Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods and Their Effects on Environmental Justice,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 9 (2012): 1644–54, <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2012.300865>.

2 Anna Brones, “Food Apartheid: The Root of the Problem with America's Groceries,” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/15/food-apartheid-food-deserts-racism-inequality-america-karen-washington-interview>.

3 Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., “Household Food Security in the United States in 2020,” *Economic Research Service Economic Research Report Number 298*, September 2021, 7, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=624.1>.

4 “Edible Academy,” Urban Harvest, May 27, 2021, <https://www.urbanharvest.org/education/edible-academy/>.

5 Sola Lawal, “Serving America's Food Deserts,” Nuro, July 15, 2020, <https://medium.com/nuro/serving-americas-food-deserts-a7442e922053>.

Estefanía Barajas is a first-generation Mexican-American architectural designer and an MArch candidate at Rice Architecture. She graduated in 2018 from the University of Texas at San Antonio with a BS in architecture. She has worked at AbleCity and Lake|Flato. During her time at Lake|Flato and as a committee member of AIA San Antonio Latinos in Architecture, she helped facilitate community meetings for the revitalization of San Antonio's historic Plaza Guadalupe.

Barajas is a recipient of the ACSA COTE Top Ten for Students Award and SARA's National Design Award. In 2020, she was an editor and contributor for PLAT 8.5 t|dr and PLAT 9.5 Leave Space.