

Leadership-in-Action Reflections

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The Downstream Impacts of Sustainability Retrofits on the Wellbeing of San Francisco Chinatown's Low-Income Renters Project

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1. Introduction

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined by the United Nations address two fundamental aspects of sustainable development: health and well-being (SDG 3) and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). These goals aim to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, as well as to make cities and human settlements resilient and sustainable. Why are these goals essential, and how did they motivate my LiA project?

Our built environment is not merely a living space; it shapes our existence, profoundly influencing our health, well-being, and social interactions. Since we spend the majority of our time indoors, it is crucial to address this environment from the perspective of well-being. Moreover, given the increasing pressure to reduce CO2 emissions, particularly in the building sector, it is imperative to implement renovation strategies that not only reduce energy consumption but also improve the living conditions of residents, especially the most vulnerable ones.

2. Project

It was with the belief that, as a student architect, one can improve living conditions and promote health that I had the opportunity to contribute to a project led by Stanford and the Chinatown Community Development Center in San Francisco. This project aims to understand the downstream impacts of sustainability retrofits on the wellbeing of San Francisco Chinatown's low-income renters.

The Chinatown Community Development Center manages 38 properties in San Francisco neighborhoods, providing affordable housing to more than 5,000 residents, including low-income families, adults, and seniors.

My work focused on one of these 38 properties, specifically on a social elderly building. My role was to assist the team in measuring the living conditions of the residents, particularly in terms of access to daylight, analyzing the impact of thermal façade renovations on wellbeing, including health and financial security, and creating a 3D model of the building for various simulations to better understand their conditions.

3. Challenges

One of the initial challenges was entering residents' homes to observe their environment and take measurements. This process of entering the intimate spaces of strangers was particularly delicate. These rooms or studios, often shared by two or three people, carried intense personal and emotional dimensions. I had to exercise great sensitivity in my actions, words, and gestures while developing cultural agility to navigate respectfully in an environment deeply

influenced by Chinese culture, which was unfamiliar to me. This experience not only allowed me to quickly adapt to a different cultural context but also to set aside my preconceived ideas.

This cultural agility was even more necessary as most of the residents were elderly and spoke only Chinese. The language barrier was a significant obstacle. In such situations, it became crucial to pay attention to gestures, facial expressions, and other forms of non-verbal communication to avoid disturbing or inconveniencing the residents. This experience taught me about the importance of non-verbal communication and the many other ways to communicate when words fail. I now feel more capable to step out outside my comfort zone with greater confidence and respect.

Alongside this experience in San Francisco's Chinatown, being at Stanford was also a significant experience. The Stanford environment has everything one could imagine from a movie. At first, I felt extremely fortunate. However, this sense of luck was accompanied by a challenge to my self-confidence. Being on a campus where 82 Disneyland parks could fit, surrounded by students from around the world working on impressive projects, and finding myself there without fully understanding how things work can be intimidating. This tested my self-confidence and my sense of legitimacy in being there and working on such a project. At first, I felt somewhat out of place, but by reminding myself of my goals and why I was there, I managed to overcome this sensation. I eventually realized that, like everyone else, I had my place there. This experience definitely helped me to fully gain confidence in myself and my abilities. It also encouraged me to reach out to others and meet students from all over the world. Meeting so many people has undoubtedly opened new doors and opportunities for the future!

4. Learnings

This project heightened my awareness of the importance of the human aspect behind every building or renovation. I realized how much certain simple improvements, like a warmer home and reduced bills, can significantly enhance residents' well-being and encourage them to adopt more sustainable behaviors. For me sustainability, the kind that will allow us to reduce our carbon emissions, rests primarily on a built environment that has a positive impact on individuals. A sustainable impact is ultimately about well-being and quality of life. This project showed me that sustainability begins at home, in the lives of each individual, and that is where our efforts must focus.

Broadening this reflection, my experience in the United States revealed to me how much we live in a contrasting and unequal landscape. Moving from Stanford to San Francisco's Chinatown, from one neighborhood to a street, from one street to a house, and from one house to another, allowed me to observe the deep disparities in living conditions. These disparities, existential for the inhabitants, made me realize that we are far from being equal in our environment. There is a considerable inequality in how people live and interact with their

surroundings. In essence, the profound impact of these disparities on people's lives underlines the inequality in the way different people experience their environment.

This journey was rich in contrasts and nuances. Behind Stanford's immaculate lawns, I saw the homeless in San Francisco; behind the grand villas of Palo Alto, I saw the caravans lining the same streets; behind the ambitious speeches at this summer's Democratic convention, I saw hope, but also the day-to-day difficulties, of Jose, a student and son of Cuban immigrants, to live and study at Stanford. This experience made me aware of how fortunate I was to observe these contrasting realities and to realize how thin the line is between opposites and boundaries. This was not the story I expected to encounter when I came here, but it is a reality that deserves to be told. I am extremely grateful to have witnessed it. Addressing these inequalities, particularly those related to our living conditions and the built environment, is now a central goal for me. This is the direction in which I want to steer my future career and make an impact.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, my LiA this summer not only allowed me to closely observe the disparities, contrasts, and inequalities in the living conditions in which people live, but also revealed to me that sustainability goes far beyond energy efficiency. It is deeply human. The buildings we create and renovate are not just structures; they are living spaces that can condition the health, well-being, and dignity of individuals. In a world where inequalities are increasingly visible, it is our responsibility, as architects and citizens, to build a future where every person, regardless of their background or income, can live in conditions that foster not only their basic needs but also their wellbeing. True sustainability is that which places the human being at the center, and it is this vision that will guide my future projects.

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