

King Artist Residency Project by artist Kirti Bassendine

Overall Project Goals

1. To facilitate a dialogue between residents living and working within the city of Palo Alto through creative workshops. Participants included renters, home owners, RV dwellers and seniors. Each participant shared their experiences with housing and housing insecurity, equity and sense of belonging within the city which sparked deeper conversations within the group.
2. To have the participants create artwork that fitted thematically with the questions posed during the workshops.
3. To document the personal stories and histories of residents both old and new by creating a safe place where they each participated in a deeper dialog about their living situation.
4. Use the artwork created as an inspiration for a final piece that will go on public display on the King Plaza. Artworks created during the workshop included: cyanotypes and shadow painting and use of text.

Research Phase:

Palo Alto, a city established in 1894 by the prominent American industrialist Leland Stanford, stands as a testament to his vision and serves as the home of Stanford University. As of the [2020 census](#), Palo Alto boasts a population of 68,572 individuals. Often referred to as the "Birthplace of Silicon Valley," Palo Alto is renowned for its pivotal role in the emergence and growth of the technology industry. With its economy revolving around the tech industry, it makes Palo Alto one of the [highest cost of living](#) cities in the nation.

Palo Alto is characterized by a significant population of renters, accounting for 45% of its residents, many of whom face rent burdens. The cost of living in Palo Alto is nearly five times the national average, making it the 24th most expensive city according to [cost of living](#). Rental housing constitutes 45% of the city's housing stock, which corresponds to nearly 12,000 homes, as reported by [Bigelow and Campbell](#). On average, the monthly cost of a two-bedroom home in Palo Alto ranges from \$2,511 to \$3,691, varying depending on the neighborhood, as indicated by [rentcafe.com](#).

Research and outreach and meetings with organizations and stakeholders: scope of questions/discussion points for community outreach

My outreach and research phase commenced in mid-February, encompassing a range of interactions with diverse stakeholders and organizations. Strong collaborations were forged with PARA (Palo Alto Renters Association), Move Mountain View, ALTA Housing, Housing Authority of Santa Clara- Buena Vista Mobile Park, and Avenidas Senior Center.

As my research progressed and my conversations with various organizations deepened, I discovered that housing insecurity and socioeconomic challenges extended beyond renters and

homelessness in Palo Alto- I learned about non-traditional dwelling communities, such as RV dwellers, who faced housing insecurity and sought safe and stable living conditions.

Fortunately, I was able to foster supportive collaborations with stakeholders who were enthusiastic about implementing creative workshops and facilitating story-sharing within their communities that would help bring a better understanding of their residents. These activities not only offered a creative outlet but also contributed to the healing process. Additionally, through workshops and interviews, I gathered valuable information and feedback on **housing insecurity, equity**, and the **sense of belonging** experienced by these communities in Palo Alto.

Creative Community Engagement:

1. Creative community engagement workshops included listening circles and personal story sharing. Activities involved participants responding to prompts and placing sticky notes with their responses which helped spark deeper conversations.
2. Participants engaged in creative activities using paints, colors, markers, and writing to express themselves.
3. Cyanotypes were created using flat objects and plants from their homes or the local area. Some participants brought personal items from home including: leaves from their garden, toys, feathers, keys, coins, feathers, and phones.

These workshops ran from June until September. They typically began with snacks and refreshments and a gathering where each participant introduced themselves and shared what had encouraged them to attend the creative workshop.

During the workshops, participants began by sharing their personal stories, their housing situations, and their sense of belonging and equity in living in Palo Alto. This facilitated conversations within the group and helped build a sense of trust. Once the listening session were over, participants used items they had brought from home or provided materials to create either a cyanotype or a painting related to their feelings during the sessions.

The act of listening while others share their stories can be a **transformative, healing, and cathartic** experience. As participants actively listened to each other's housing experiences and their sense of belonging, they might have become more aware of the inequalities and challenges faced by their peers, reinforcing the themes of equity and belonging.

The direction of these discussions resulted in the establishment of a number of themes that influenced the direction of the overall project. These themes included **housing, equity**, and **sense of belonging** in the city of Palo Alto. These themes emerged as a result of the workshops' structured activities, personal storytelling, artistic expression, and the community context. The workshops provided a safe space for participants to explore their thoughts and feelings about housing, equity, and belonging, and through shared dialogue and creative expression, these themes became central to the workshop experience.

Listening to each other's stories have allowed them to understand the challenges and emotions associated with housing insecurity, and this understanding can naturally lead to discussions about equity and the need for everyone to have a safe and stable place to call home. Often the participants left the sessions expressing how grateful they were for the opportunity to share their personal story, listening to other community members and for the experience of the creative workshop itself. They usually left feeling a sense of inclusion and grateful for the safe space. One participant noted the importance of small gatherings like this for community cohesion and belonging.

Throughout the interviews and discussions, I have provided a number of quotes from participants who were comfortable sharing their stories and personal histories divided into the themes.

Emergent Themes:

THEMES: housing, equity, and sense of belonging

SENSE OF BELONGING:

Emily (renter)

There's a lot of positive things about Palo Alto, I love it. The residential streets and architecture are among many of my passions. I love that each home has its own character and a lot of them are from the 30s and 40s; those are the ones I like the most. **It's such a delight to just walk down a residential street** and look at them. Each front yard is so thoughtfully created. It's so different than if you go to Sunnyvale and lots of other cities. They're usually very bland, still with their bermuda grass lawn and they have, like the same flowers and shrubs as the neighbors, **there's so many positive things, so many unique qualities about Palo Alto.**

Synopsis:

The speaker contrasts Palo Alto's distinct and diverse residential areas with other cities like Sunnyvale, where neighborhoods are described as more uniform and less creatively landscaped. Overall, the quote emphasizes the speaker's genuine affection for Palo Alto and its distinctive qualities.

Blanca (affordable apartment renter)

I graduated from Los Altos and then (the area) started changing to a little more Hispanic and Spanish. But we do have a couple Japanese, a couple Chinese, a couple are American or Caucasian families from here. But it's a little more Mexican Americans, **but I think we are all the same. We're all the same blood.** That's what I learned when I became a US citizen. That we have to love each other because we all have red blood. That's why I love whatever needs help. I'll give it, we're all the same. **Maybe one day I'll need it, maybe one day you need it.** And that's one of the reasons I became USA American because they taught me at my graduation that I am an American person. Everybody, it's the whole world should be loving together and be happy together. I was very happy. I love that it was very welcoming here.

Synopsis:

Blanca has lived in Palo Alto for 33 years and moved in as a teenager. They were the first

Hispanic family to move into Buena Vista Mobile Park. She goes into how much she loves and enjoys the community aspect of living in the city and how connected she feels to her neighbors.

Barbara (home owner)

I feel I have a lot of belonging and community support in Palo Alto. I have quite a few friends. But mostly I've been at the university and have lots of friends on the street. Actually, our name is accidentally Greenwood- Greenwood Avenue. I wouldn't want to go anywhere else. **We own the home.** And our kids we have four three are in college, one is about to be, they all have fun coming home and **I wouldn't go anywhere else.** I really love the area. I love the people I meet.

Synopsis:

Her deep love for the area and the people they've met underscores their strong attachment to Palo Alto and their appreciation for the community they've built there.

Anna (renter)

[participant is originally from Europe]

We found what Palo Alto was like, rent was crazy high but what it looked like more safe, play green, like slower pace, pace. So we came here only for a year. And I was really hesitant to move here. I didn't want to because I mean, for me, you were a great country to visit for a holiday. But I was really afraid to come here for longer. And what I was like one more year, one more year, one more year. **So I'm renting a house for five years in the same neighborhood.** And we were trying to meet our neighbors and say hello and you know the families in the area. Familiarize yourself. But it didn't work. Some of them, **they don't even say hello back to us. So I don't have it here.** I was trying to attend some courses like American History and Culture **to try to understand why people act like this or like that.** It helped a little bit. But I still have, like, not too many people to speak to besides supermarkets or you know, places like this. (...) **But I still cannot say that it's like my place on earth.**

Synopsis:

They express a sense of not fully belonging or feeling like the neighborhood is their true "place on earth," indicating a desire for a stronger sense of community and belonging.

Laura (home owner)

What I worry about is who will I drink coffee with? If I can't get around much, you know, and thanks for asking me that that's really good. Because I'm, you know, I'm looking at other communities where I might want to live. And I have to be able to afford them. For one thing, they're extremely expensive. So there's a certain category of place I would be able to move into. And I have found a place that is decent. So I found two places, actually. So it's so in a way I feel if I stay right where I am, I can always pay my bills, you know, till my dying day. But it's Who do you drink? Who do I drink? **You know, if you're in a community, you get up in the morning and you can go find somebody. That's probably why I live alone. And I'm not you know, I say hi to my neighbors and it's but it's not a community. It doesn't feel like a community.**

Synopsis:

The resident enjoys living in the city, but worries that the sense of community that she feels is not as strong as it could be.

Judi (home owner)

Downtown is very much vibrant. But it's changed a bit. We sold our house and my husband got sick and we bought a condo downtown. And **I love it. I can walk everywhere.** I walk here. Walk and go to church. I walked in Whole Foods, to the Town and Country, walk to the medical center.

Synopsis:

This highlights the convenience and accessibility of living in downtown Palo Alto.

HOUSING:

Karinna (renter)

I live in Palo Alto with my husband and my two daughters, and **I DO like living in Palo Alto** in a lot of ways. It's very family friendly. But I know that I won't own a home here. And so that is a huge problem for me. I think it's partly cultural. So I grew up with a typical middle class lifestyle in a home that my parents owned. And I went to college after high school, and **I just always had the expectation that I would own my own home** when I was in my 40s. And when I had kids, I think that's just the model that I saw, and that I expected and I grew up with.

But then when my husband took a job in Palo Alto, I had to go back to the reality of not only being a renter, but having **home ownership completely 100% out of reach.** So there's absolutely no way that we can own a home in Palo Alto that we could ever save for a down payment considering our rent. So our rent is so expensive, that it takes up so much of his income, that we can barely get by month to month, we don't have savings, and we will never save the hundreds of 1000s of dollars you would need as a downpayment here in Palo Alto. And **so I live here, but I don't feel that I belong here.** And I don't feel that I'm a part of a community. And I know that that is a reflection on Well, not everybody can own a home. And do I think that those people shouldn't be part of my community? No, I don't believe that. **But at the same time, I cannot get over the fact that I want to be a homeowner and I don't feel like I belong unless I achieve that.**

Synopsis

This family is unable to afford homeownership due to high living costs, which clashes with their upbringing's middle-class ideal. Despite acknowledging that not everyone can own a home, they feel a sense of exclusion and disconnect from the community, as their dream of homeownership remains unattainable.

Maria (home owner)

A key represents safety and security. Yeah, definitely have to have it, you have to lock your house. Right now I have two locks that don't work very well. Like to go out and buy new locks and have to rekey everything. You have a panic feeling if you keep you can't find your keys. I can get a replacement for my car key. Some people live in the car, those people would say their cars are more valuable. Yeah. You know, **I'm lucky I have a home** so yeah, I would say the key to my house is valuable, more valuable.

Synopsis:

Asking people about the items they carry daily is a relatable and non-confrontational way to start conversations about critical issues like housing, equity, and belonging. It allows individuals to connect their personal experiences to larger societal challenges and can inspire collaborative efforts to address these issues within the community. She feels lucky that she has a home and she felt her keys symbolized her safety, security, and access.

Mary (renter)

Home is or should be a refuge, a place where folks can have protection from the outdoors, coexist with loving household members, biologically related or not, bathe, dress for the day, share meals, nap, read, write, watch TV, listen to the radio, interact peacefully, supportively, compassionately. The idea and experience of home is deeply meaningful and very bittersweet. In a way, home is where the heart or where friends are.

So, home is where I have a sense of community, which I do and have had increasingly here in the last 2 years. Home is a place we folks are fed to meet and exceed our tangible and intangible needs and wants....a place where...Inside the home and outside the home.

Synopsis:

Home represents where the heart is and where friends can be found, signifying a sense of community. Over the past two years, she has experienced an increasing sense of community in their current home. It's a place where people come together to fulfill themselves wholly, both inside and outside its walls.

EQUITY:

Judi (home owner)

I have three children and six grandchildren. And **I'm using my money to keep them up, but I'm hoping to save some money for them.** I have Social Security, I was a school teacher. I mean, I was a librarian. So I have some medical, I have some from that and Social Security. And that's, you know, a little bit of savings but my condo was really, we sold our house, bought the condo. And so that's where money is.

Synopsis: She is a mother and grandmother to many children and is worried that her Social Security will not be enough to save for the future despite selling her home and moving into a condo. She worries about what she will be able to leave behind to them if something happens to her.

Elizabeth (affordable housing, renter)

So all of the basic necessities like food. It takes money, right? So you don't feel like you're going to get evicted. And peace or no fighting in a lot of homes are abusive. So **making sure that you have a safe place to come back, meaning no fighting and stuff like that.**

Synopsis:

I spoke to a former university student in Palo Alto who is working in the city after she graduated.

Now as a mother and spouse, she feels lucky that she was fortunate to get affordable housing at Wilton Ct stressing that money was the main barrier to feeling safe in the city.

Hector (RV dweller)

My name is Hector and I'm 65 years old. I went to the Navy for many years. I did different types of work. Well, I fell sick. And I lost my ability to live in a house. I lost. **I used to own a house, and I owned a ranch.** I was farming. And I fell ill. I was in an accident at work, I lost my ability to provide for myself. And I was lucky enough to find this place. They allow me to stay here and I've been living here too close to a year. I am in an RV.

The house price is a little bit unattainable for some people, some of us at this moment and the rent is just as well... Kind of high. **It's very competitive.** And that's what's bringing the prices up. And you know if you can afford it, you know, this is okay. But yeah. Competition is fierce.

You need wages, wages, wages to be compensated for the cost of living. That's \$20 an hour wage, you can hardly find a house and that's what their wages are going for.

Synopsis:

He points out that housing prices are becoming unattainable for many people, and rent is also quite high, driven by intense competition in the housing market. The demand for housing has raised prices significantly. Hector emphasizes the importance of higher wages to cover the rising cost of living, as a \$20-an-hour wage is barely enough to secure a house in the current market.

Bobbi (home owner)

The thing that I enjoyed the most as I was growing up, without recognizing at that time was, while it might not have been as much racially or culturally diverse, **it was economically diverse.** And **it became less so as the decades went on.** So I'm glad for the diversity. **I think it makes for a more inclusive and vibrant community.** And I hope we can find solutions so that there isn't just a town of affluence.

Synopsis:

Bobby expresses his appreciation for diversity, believing it contributes to a more inclusive and vibrant community. They hope that solutions can be found to prevent their town from becoming solely a place of affluence, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balance of economic backgrounds within the community.

Carlos (RV Dweller)

House price... it's really high when you put down the price and offer the stability and everything and renting, **the prices either run high, it's super hard. We don't have the pay right now because we don't have jobs and we don't have money.**

We haven't had a home that's affordable to rent- because the situation right now, it's super hard. **It's super expensive to live here, It's not possible, you know and not enough hours to be able to have enough money to afford a rent.** I am working but I don't have enough hours of work, it's not enough pay.

Synopsis:

Explaining that both buying a house and renting are prohibitively expensive in the area, making it challenging to secure stable housing. He also points out that the lack of jobs and sufficient income is a significant barrier to affording rent, despite their efforts to work. This highlights the financial strain and limited opportunities for housing in Palo Alto.

Karrinna (renter)

My husband's income with our rent and childcare, which is also very expensive, is 50% of our rent. So our rent is about 30% of his income, which **I know they say nationally, if you spend 30%, a third of your income on rent, you're fine. Except in Palo Alto,** everything else is so expensive. So summer camp or just going to a restaurant. **We don't take vacations.** So we are not going on vacation at all this summer, **we have one car.** And yeah, we're not doing the trip to Hawaii, have a trip to Mexico that I can say the majority of people in my daughter's schools might in her public school go to, so **because everything in Palo Alto was so expensive, that third of his salary being our rent or 50%** when you can still sit or consider childcare. That makes the other 50% **Just you know, kind of disappears.** And we're doing three days of camping in the eight weeks of the summer. So **I don't think we live an extravagant lifestyle** but I do want my kids to be able to go to camp and they do after school activities and we got a summer membership to the pool. **So all of those great things that have also been offered but they're so expensive.**

Synopsis:

She emphasizes that despite their efforts to budget and not live extravagantly, the high expenses in the area make it challenging to provide certain experiences for their children, even though they want them to enjoy opportunities like summer camp, after-school activities, and memberships to facilities like the pool. This illustrates the financial strain and trade-offs many residents face in high-cost areas like Palo Alto.

Emily (Renter)

Kirti's idea for the theme of our conversation this evening and the things that we shared among strangers or at least relative strangers. **It felt almost like healing, you know, to discuss these things that we never talk about unless we're with people with whom we're very close. And it's a good thing for people in the community to know more in depth what their neighbors are thinking on these subjects.** I very much enjoyed it. I've never been in anything quite like it and it was so simple and yet so wonderful.

Synopsis:

The participant also emphasizes the value of such conversations within a community context. They believe that it's important for people in a community to engage in these deep discussions to understand better what their neighbors think about these subjects. This can foster a sense of connection and mutual understanding among community members.

Take away from Creative Community Engagement workshop participants

The emergent themes of housing, equity, and a sense of belonging underscore the need for continued dialogue and action to address these critical issues. The personal stories shared by community members offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of Palo Alto residents and provide a foundation for future initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive and equitable community.

It is essential to build upon the momentum generated during the creative community engagement phase and explore opportunities for collaborative solutions. By fostering a sense of belonging and working together to address housing insecurity and economic disparities, Palo Alto can continue to evolve as a vibrant and welcoming community for all its residents.

This report serves as a testament to the power of art and community engagement in sparking conversations and driving positive change. It is a reflection of the collective voices and experiences of Palo Alto residents who are committed to building a more equitable and inclusive city.