



SAN DIEGO
HOUSING
COMMISSION

 Morehead-Cain

FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY GARDEN DEVELOPMENT

Addressing quality of life and
opportunities for financial self-
reliance in vulnerable populations in
the City of San Diego.



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Executive Summary

It is clear why San Diego is nicknamed “America’s Finest City”. It has year-round sunshine, world-class attractions, diverse cuisine, and culture embedded into every corner of the city. Despite all of this, San Diego continues to be in the top five American cities with the largest homeless population. A major contributor to San Diego’s homelessness is that San Diego’s housing expenses are 123% higher than the national average. Agencies, such as the San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC), have a vision to end this cost-of-living crisis.

Our team of four Morehead-Cain scholars at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill worked alongside the SDHC for eight weeks this summer to improve the quality of life of low-income San Diego residents. Our team was tasked with data collection and planning for the implementation of future community gardens and computer labs in the SDHC’s low-income residence homes. Through various interviews with residents, other community garden owners, and SDHC staff, the need for these two resources has become evident. For example, one resident stated in an interview that prior to the community garden, she hadn’t eaten vegetables in two years and a SDHC staff highlighted that many members get fined for submitting rent late because of an inaccessibility to computers to streamline the process. Through the interviews and research, we have created a step-by-step manual on how to implement community gardens and computer labs and furthermore how to improve resident communication and engagement with the overall goal of improving the resident’s quality of life.

Why Community Gardens?

The first question that we need to answer is why community gardens? Why go through all of this time, money, and effort to implement this project?

Community gardens have the power to change lives. From Belden resident Lisa who had a \$70 budget to buy all her groceries who hadn't eaten a fruit or vegetable in years prior to the garden to resident Art who has no interest at all in the produce but simply loves to help out in the garden, the impact is already very clear.

Community gardens create opportunity. The first opportunity that they create is for a healthier style of living. This healthier living not only comes from the fruits and vegetables which previously may not have been affordable to residents, but also because gardening can be immensely helpful in reducing anxiety and stress and giving people a strong sense of self and control. Secondly, community gardens create the opportunity for strong community bonds. They create a space where people can come together to share knowledge, work together, and create a sense of belonging.

The most incredible aspect of gardening is that, even if you are old or young or less able-bodied or whatever it may be, anyone can do it. There is a range of tasks that need to be done in any garden that anyone regardless of any factor can get involved. Even if you are really uninterested in gardening, nobody can object to the beauty of the plants and flowers or the fresh produce being harvested from the garden!

So, in the wise words of the Lorax, we say let it grow!

CONTACTS

SDHC

Jessi Penrot - VP Property Manager
jessip@sdhc.org

Beto Juarez - Senior VP Property Management and Asset Management
betoj@sdhc.org

Juan Garcia - On-site Property Manager
juang@sdhc.org

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Polly Toledo - Grant Writer
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Stephanie Murphy - VP Workforce and Economic Development
stephaniem@sdhc.org

Marc D'Hondt - Senior Homeless Programs Analyst
marcd@sdhc.org

These contacts can be used when working inside SDHC to get approval for projects, or to ask questions regarding the properties that are eligible for community gardens.

- Polly and Michelle should be contacted if questions regarding funding through grants arise.
- Kristina, Juan, and Eddie should be contacted if there are questions regarding on site issues, or logistic questions about the properties.
- Beto and Jessi should be contacted to get approval for a project at a new property.

Smthing i wanna come back to is amy zink, she submitted request to county and got all of their fencing, beds, drip materials for free



CONTACTS

COMMUNITY GARDENS

Ocean Beach Community Garden

Email: obcg15@gmail.com

Golden Hill Community Garden

Email: goldenhillcommunitygarden@gmail.com

North Park Seniors Apartments

Name: John Keasler

Email: keaslerart@gmail.com

Escondido Community Gardens

Name: Elizabeth Mercurio

Phone: 760-580-4390

City of Carlsbad Harold E. Smerdu Community Garden

Name: Patrice Smerdu

Email: psmerdu@sbcglobal.net

Additional Community Gardens from the San Diego Community Garden Network

Having a network of established community gardens in the San Diego area is important when seeking advice and formulating new ideas. This list has some of the gardens we toured and people we have met along the way that have been helpful in figuring out how to have a successful community garden.

- Patrice Smerdu assists with project management and oversight at Carlsbad Community Gardens. We met with her via Zoom during our first few weeks and she gave us insight into what goes into planning and implementing a garden.
- Elizabeth Mercurio leads Escondido Community Gardens which we were able to tour. She gave us insight into the creation of a project management board, garden design, partnerships with Eagle Scouts to develop structures, and governance bylaws.
- John Keasler oversees different areas of the North Park Seniors Apartments community gardens. We met with him over Zoom with the team and further developed our understanding of project management roles as well as the importance of affirming residencies in establishing community.
- Though these are the gardens we created relationships with, others in the area can be found through the San Diego Community Garden Network.



4 MAIN PROBLEMS WE IDENTIFIED



**Project
Management**



Cost



Time



**Resident
Engagement**

Problem #1: Time

Belden gardens took 2 years to implement, and even now that it has gone through two harvests, there still has not been the official “grand opening” of the garden. No major and well-done project can be done quickly, however there are certain areas that we have identified that could hopefully expedite the process.

During the creation of the Belden community garden, there were primarily two people who did the implementation. There are many steps in producing a community garden and they often require manual labor, which can cause time lags when being solely dependent on two individuals.

In addition to manual labor, community gardens also require many materials from the smallest items such as seeds to the largest like fencing. With so many materials being purchased or donated and with no official storage space, people are often not informed about the arrival of materials. This hinders progress in the garden because steps are put on hold due to the miscommunication regarding materials.

The physical location of the community garden on Belden’s property has posed some logistical challenges in its development. Firstly, being on a slope disincentivized resident participation which slowed down the development process. Secondly, the garden was built next to a large tree with a vast underground system of roots which presented a myriad of issues when trying to expand the project. These unexpected logistical challenges took time to circumvent and still impact Belden today.

Problem #2: Project Management

“I kind of like doing it now. I never enjoyed it before.”
- Art, a Belden resident

In exploring different community gardens in the San Diego area, we have found that accountability in terms of project management and execution is key to ensuring success for a program.

At Belden Village, it is often difficult to determine who is responsible for different administrative changes, maintenance tasks, and executive decisions. Currently, there is not a defined role in which a person or group is accountable for overseeing the garden and computer lab program.

Without the creation of this managing role, many of these tasks tend to become the responsibility of the Master Gardener involved with the project. Though the work of Master Gardeners is crucial to the success of a community garden, having only the Master Gardener oversee the garden can limit community input that could contribute to an inclusive gardening space.

Additionally, without the garden being explicitly overseen by a person or group within the San Diego Housing Commission, communication issues are more likely to slow the development of the project. For example, there was confusion regarding the funding of the community garden at Belden as the grants were sourced by Shital, the Master Gardener working with the garden, rather than SDHC.

A lack of clearly communicated project management roles can also allow for an inefficient use of resources. Without proper oversight of garden maintenance and administrative tasks, certain problems, grants, or opportunities for development can be overlooked.

Problem #3: Resident Engagement

“[Residents] are kind of confined to their environment”
- a Belden resident

People are the heart of every community garden. At Belden Village, we have observed certain difficulties in establishing reliable resident engagement and communication.

Resident engagement with the community garden has been limited across different experience levels. Certain residents have never gardened before and are apprehensive about getting involved while others with gardening experience prefer to develop their personal gardens. Certain residents also described feeling a lack of connection to their community, possibly limiting engagement with the garden.

Communication regarding gardening events and curriculum is vital to develop resident involvement. We have observed that different residents rely on different forms of communication, making it more difficult to spread garden information. Many residents cannot be communicated with through emails or texts, though it is also difficult to pinpoint a convenient common space for physical flyers or documents containing information. Additionally, the vast language differences amongst residents further complicates the issue.

Physical abilities, especially amongst the senior population, also hinder resident engagement. The placement of Belden's garden on a slope exacerbates this concern.

Along with engagement difficulties surrounding the community garden, we have found that there is a lack of awareness of the computer lab at Belden. During a workshop, one resident said she thought the community space needed computers, not knowing they had been implemented.

Problem #4: Cost

"To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow" - Audrey Hepburn

Implementing a community garden involves various costs related to constructing the garden space such as: accessing a water supply, procuring garden materials, and ongoing maintenance.

The amount of funding required to implement and maintain a community garden can be substantial due to various costs involved.

During the implementation of the garden at Belden, the expected costs exceeded the available funding, primarily due to unforeseen or additional expenses that could have been anticipated. The effects of unclear funding needs created shortfalls, which delayed the project's success and disrupted its progress.

Grants require progress reports and proof of expenditure and any failure to meet these expectations can lead to the money being rescinded. Due to a lack of awareness surrounding certain grants in the building of Belden's community garden, it led to the loss of a few grants. For example, \$7,300 from the SoCal turf replacement program was missed due missed emails and miscommunication.

Identifying the sources and allocation of funding led to several issues, including discrepancies in funding reporting, miscommunication among those involved, and delays in project timelines. This lack of clarity caused confusion about financial responsibilities, hindered effective planning, and created challenges in securing additional resources.

Laws & Regulations

[ADA Guidelines](#)

The ADA Guidelines have to be abided by when implementing a new community garden not only to be inclusive to the residents but also to secure grant opportunities. This is a 12 page document.

[Landscape Regulations](#)

The Landscape Regulations document has every regulation that needs to be noted when creating a landscape for the community garden. This is an extensive 60 page document.

[Community Garden Regulations](#)

These regulations come from the City of San Diego for a property to be recognized as a community garden. This is a short one page document.

[Technology Laws](#)

The City of San Diego outlines what can and cannot be done when using technology and working for the government. This is a seven page document.

Solutions

Volunteer Partnerships

“It’s the sharing of knowledge between generations that’s priceless”
- Lisa, a Belden Resident

The impact of our presence as four young adults on Belden’s property has been evident—from the glowing faces of residents when they see us walking through to an above-average turnout rate at the gardening workshops. Many Belden residents go months or years without visits from their kids or grandkids due to the largely foreign demographic of the residency. While volunteers will never be able to fill this absence, it could provide residents with younger connections that they may lack on a daily basis.

There are two main types of volunteering partnerships that we have looked for: ones to assist with the garden and then ones to assist with the computer labs. The computer lab volunteers that we have contacted are from the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) from UCSD. The hope for this partnership would be for a group of students from this cohort to come once a week throughout the school year to give IT lessons and a technology education to residents in addition to answering any questions that the residents may already have. This particular group of volunteers is already well versed in data literacy, so no new curriculum would be needed. However, it would be helpful to ask the current technology helper at Belden what are the most frequently asked questions amongst residents, so that they can be well-informed prior to stepping foot in the SDHC properties.

The community garden volunteers, on the other hand, would work slightly differently. Similarly to the technology volunteers, there would be certain partnership groups, such as the UCSD Community Pathways Program, that would come to Belden once a week and engage with residents face to face and assist with garden maintenance tasks such as watering, pruning, seeding, mulching, etc. However, unlike the technology

Volunteer Partnerships

volunteers, it is not mandatory for these volunteers to have a specialized background, so a gardening curriculum would be required. Prior to helping in the gardens, volunteers should complete the “Beginning Vegetable Garden Workshop” through the Master Gardeners of San Diego County. It’s a 6-8 hour training which can be done in 2-3 hour increments that can be completed online or in person at the site and is free to all students. Workshops can also be completed by SDHC staff for \$5. At the end of the workshop, all participants will receive a certification and a booklet with information about how to start a vegetable garden. Once the volunteers have obtained their certifications, the goal would be to have them lead workshops and educate residents while working alongside them when they come in for their volunteer time. For the first few workshops, master gardeners should attend alongside the volunteers to ensure that they have the confidence and skill set to run the sessions.

Other community garden volunteering partnerships would be less focused on resident engagement and garden maintenance and more on helping with the initial setup of the garden. Experienced volunteers such as Master gardeners or members of SDCGN can be consulted for garden landscaping. Master gardeners can also assist with more technical installments and Eagle Scouts can be contacted for more physical projects (examples of such tasks are summarized on the following page and in the manual).

Name of Organization	Contact	Have they been contacted?	What they can help with
Master Gardener Association of San Diego County	Phone: 858-822-7711 Website	By need basis	Vast gardening expertise. Can advise on any stage of the garden and can help with tasks like bed installation, setting up drip irrigation, and general garden education
UCSD Community Pathways Program	Name: Kaylee Howard Email: k3howard@ucsd.edu Website	Yes + agreed	Cohort of 8-10 students to come in weekly to help educate residents and assist with garden maintenance.
Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers UCSD	Name: Shipra Gudekar email: sgudekar@ucsd.edu Website	Yes + agreed	Specialty in data literacy. Can send volunteers weekly to help with computer lessons and technology education
School for Entrepreneurship and Technology	Email: info@sethigh.org	No	Same as above
HandsOn San Diego	Email: info@handsonsandiego.org Website	Yes + agreed	When needed/ during workshop days, a member of the project management board can upload a volunteer opportunity event to the HandsOn San Diego app Engage. Volunteers can go and assist with whatever the project management board deems helpful like garden maintenance or garden installation.
San Diego Community Garden Network	Name: Jessie Case email: jessie@handsonsandiego.org Website	By need basis	Community garden mentors that can advise on things like composting, project management, bylaws, garden start-up, landscaping, sponsorship, garden design and more
Eagle Scouts	Website	No	For more physical labor like projects such as constructing benches, sheds, etc.

Project Management Board

“Gardening, it’s something to keep you going”
- a Belden resident

One of the values of community gardens is the ability to learn from others to develop new practices in our own programs. In working with Elizabeth Mercurio from Escondido Community Gardens, we established the importance of creating a board to oversee each community garden.

These project management boards would carry out important changes and decisions for the gardens that they oversee. Property managers, community members, and important stakeholders should populate these boards to ensure that relevant perspectives are taken into consideration.

In delegating the role of project oversight to a board rather than an individual, diverse ideas and opportunities for the garden can be employed to promote unique methods of problem solving.

Incorporating community members will better shape the garden around the needs of residents. Additionally, should one person step away from the board, practices could continue with support from the rest of the board compared to a system in which one person oversees the project.

With the creation of an executive board at each garden location, information regarding project development will be consolidated within a single group of people. Additionally, San Diego Housing Commission would be better informed of garden progress and changes. In prioritizing an efficient use of resources and time, decision making and communication through the board will expedite funding and development processes.

While the exact responsibilities of each project management board will shift based upon the needs of the community, the board should create and follow a set of bylaws that dictate project governance. An example of possible bylaws provided by Escondido Community Gardens can be found [here](#) under Article III.

Roles of the Board

While the roles of the board should be created based on what is deemed necessary at the property, here are some possible roles that we believe would be beneficial.

1. The Volunteer Coordinator

This person is responsible for keeping up communication with volunteer programs and reaching out to new ones if needed. Additionally, this person should be on site when volunteer groups arrive to guide them to their designated spaces and to ensure that things run smoothly. This person should be a member of SDHC.

2. The Financial Coordinator

This person is in charge of handling the finances of the project. They should work with the grant writers of the residence and keep track of grant money and donations. They also are in charge of tracking costs of supplies and managing the overall financial balance of the project. This person should be a member of SDHC.

3. Resident Engagement Coordinator

This person should be a resident. They should be an active member who cares about the project. This person is tasked with trying to get fellow residents engaged with the garden/ computer lab. They are the ones that will be in charge of delivering and collecting pamphlets and flyers (they have already been created and are linked on the guide) about upcoming workshops or updates with the project.

4. The Facility Manager

At Belden Village, this person is Eddie Contreras. This person oversees the garden installation and the maintenance of garden facilities such as the shed, garden beds, the fence, etc. If they are unable to do the repairs themselves, they are responsible for contacting subcontractors or master gardeners to assist.

5. Garden Maintenance Coordinator

This person is ideally a resident with gardening experience. This person should be present at gardening workshops with volunteers and decide what tasks are needed such as pruning, weeding, seeding etc. This person should also inform the financial coordinator when supplies have run out such as mulch, seeds, etc.

Further roles of these members are outlined throughout the manual.

Improving Communication

With improved communication, problems regarding project management, resident engagement, cost, and time get reduced simultaneously.

Having effective forms of communication is valuable for residents who want to be involved within the community garden as well as for the administration that is overseeing the project.

To improve communication all residents that show interest in the community garden should receive and continue to receive information that will remind them and educate them about the garden. To do this we recommend, first to source the most effective form of communication at the residence.

The three forms of communication we have found to be most inclusive and effective are fliers, emails, and phone calls/texts. Fliers are beneficial in a place like Belden where technology is not readily accessible or understood by the residents. Because it is an elderly residence the use of emails and text messages is less feasible than fliers because residents are commonly not technologically literate. For fliers to be effective they need to be posted in a central location where many residents can see them, or given out to residents in a door-to-door fashion.

In a community that is technologically savvy or has a younger demographic, the use of emails, texting and phone calls is the most effective variety of communication. Emails are great for communication but sometimes they can get lost in a sea of information. For this reason we suggest, if possible, to start by using an app called Remind to communicate with residents. Remind sends out mass text messages, is easy to use as an administrator, and has a simple onboarding process.

Being able to effectively communicate with residents improves engagement by providing relevant and constant information and updates about events or workshops that are coming up. Additionally, it mitigates wasted time by immediately identifying and utilizing communication strategies pertinent to the residents at the property.

Improving Communication Cont.

Intracompany communications is the second facet of communication that needs improvement. Having open and extensive communication within the SDHC is vital to being successful with projects like the community gardens. In our research we found that in many instances there was a lack of communication on an administrative level that led to delays in the project, wastes of money, and poor project management.

To address this problem we did research about successful types of communication within a company and concluded that zoom/in-person meetings and emails are the most effective forms of communication.

Zoom calls, while difficult to coordinate at times, are the most effective types of meetings because questions can be asked directly and information can be shared quickly. Like stated before, the issue with Zoom calls is coordinating time to meet. For a project like the community gardens it is vital that all people involved are informed on what progress is being made and problems that need addressing. Because of this we feel it necessary to schedule a weekly or biweekly meeting for as short as 20- 30 minutes for the people involved with the community gardens. For the Zoom calls we suggest having a moderator or a host who is well informed as to keep the meeting on task and to guarantee necessary information is being shared.

We understand that accessing Zoom doesn't always work for large groups. To combat this issue we also suggest a follow up email after the Zoom with all the information that is shared in the call. This way for people who are busy or have a reason they can't attend, the information is still readily available to them.

Having clear and open pathways of communication mitigates confusion within the company regarding the community gardens. It allows for all information to be accessed by administration, which will benefit the growth, accountability, and functioning of properties.



THE MANUAL

This manual can be used as a step-by-step guide on how to create a community garden, the materials necessary, and what practices and contacts we suggest to be the most successful.

From site selection to ongoing garden care, the manual will guide you through every roadblock you might encounter and will equip you with the right tools to develop the project while minimizing cost and time allocated.

The manual can be found [here](#).

Scholar Timeline

* WEEK 1: INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

During our first week in San Diego, we were introduced to the team and the project at hand. We began preliminary stages of research by exploring local groups and individuals that might act as important stakeholders, educators, and service providers in the future. We acquainted ourselves with the Master Gardener Association as well as general needs and concerns regarding community gardens, including the most frequently planted seeds.

* WEEK 2: SITE INTERVIEWS AND RESEARCH

During our second week, we focused on better understanding the project at Belden and the unique needs of their population. We met Master Gardener Shital as she informed us about the progress of the garden and introduced us to some residents that were particularly involved with the project. We conducted preliminary interviews with residents involved with the garden and began to make connections with different community groups that could provide volunteers for the project, including Hands On San Diego and the UCSD Community Pathways Program.

* WEEK 3: POWER MAPPING

During our third week, we focused on identifying the important decision makers at different sites and determining who holds different responsibilities within the project. We spoke with Property Manager Kristina Smith and began to consider the need for an explicit position to oversee garden maintenance and development. In speaking with Morehead-Cain President Chris Bradford, we established new interview questions to bring to residents centered around communication methods.

* WEEK 4: INTERVIEWS AND GARDEN RESEARCH

During our fourth week, we focused on conducting interviews at Belden by working on site in the community center. Through this, we learned that the community space is not frequently utilized by residents and we identified other locations more prime for communication. Additionally, in working at the garden again, we developed a better understanding of the typical maintenance tasks needed for the garden and worked more with residents to ensure their interest in a volunteering program. We spoke with Patrice Smerdu from Carlsbad Community Garden and visited Escondido Community Gardens to learn what factors and decisions allowed for success at other community gardens. Through these conversations, we developed our recommendation for a project management board, determined the importance of governance bylaws, better understood the pros and cons of different irrigation systems, and ascertained specific details about garden layout, additional structures, and tools.

* WEEK 5: WORKSHOP AND SITE IDENTIFICATION

During our fifth week, we visited Calle Primera to discuss the factors that influence location suitability and determined the importance of gauging resident interest before pursuing a garden project at a specific location. Additionally, we led a garden workshop and created flyers to accompany the work we completed, ensuring the incorporation of different languages and images to lessen communication barriers. We further determined that different communication methods work for different residents and that there is no singular way to reach the community. We also worked with Polly Toledo and Michelle Singerland to learn more about how garden projects are funded and determined that communication within SDHC regarding these projects would be supported by a project management board including SDHC personnel. In working with Property Manager Kristina Smith, we researched the timeline of development for the Belden community garden and roadblocks faced.

* WEEK 6: RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

During our sixth week, we were able to attend a garden workday in Los Angeles to learn more about how volunteering programs and outreach can generate community interest. Additionally, we worked with Shital to determine how a bulletin by the garden could be used to track maintenance tasks and to discuss how an online application focused around reminders for events could support resident engagement.

* WEEK 7: WORKSHOP AND MANUAL DEVELOPMENT

During our seventh week, we focused on completing our manual and deliverable utilizing the research that we had conducted throughout our time in San Diego. Along with the experiences noted in this timeline, we utilized many documents provided by Master Gardener Shital that detailed the source and cost of different materials, project timeline, grant opportunities, and other factors. We also conducted more research regarding important laws and regulations that impact community gardens. We also led a garden workshop at Belden that we created more flyers for and continued to develop our understanding of the impact that gardening has on different communities. As we saw our largest turnout at a workshop yet, we further established that residents are interested in connecting with non residents, especially young people.

* WEEK 8: MANUAL FINALIZATION

During our last week, we finalized our manual, deliverable, and presentation.

How Far Can Our Community Gardens Go?

Community gardens have the ability to alter lives in more ways than one. With the further development of the Belden Community Garden and five additional community garden sites, we are hopeful for the sustaining impacts of this project.

Our primary goal for the project is for the new community gardens to provide access to fresh produce for residents. The ability to know where your food comes from and trust that fresh fruits and vegetables will be apart of your diet is essential. Centering the community garden around resident engagement will ensure that more residents can take advantage of the produce while also allowing for residents who do not or cannot help with the garden to access the crops.

In addition to increasing access to fresh produce, we plan for community garden projects to develop a stronger sense of community at different sites. In the case of Belden, we have found that many people enjoy simply sitting by the garden and connecting with their fellow residents while others have found community through their newfound love of gardening. Community gardens dramatically benefit quality of life for residents, and we are excited for more folks to find their green thumbs.

Through our volunteering recommendation, we hope to introduce meaningful connections between generations, positively influencing both the volunteers and the residents. Additionally, as they play a role in gardening and technology education, our goal is for residents to progress so they can work independently, giving them a greater sense of ownership in the garden.

Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to garden, and the whole neighborhood gets tomatoes. Through community gardens, we can grow more neighborhoods and grow more tomatoes.

Acknowledgments

We wanted to give a massive thank you to the San Diego Housing Commission for hosting our team this summer. The joy, determination, and excitement of every member of staff made our work extremely enjoyable and tremendously easier. We would love to thank Polly Toledo, Michelle Singerland, Kristina Smith, and Shital Parikh for their time and help. We would also love to give a huge thank you to Jon Rios, Stephanie Murphy, and Marc D'Hondt for their constant support throughout this process. It wouldn't have been possible without your team!

We are extremely grateful for our experience here this summer. The memories and lessons that we have learned will continue with us long beyond our time here. We hope that our work will leave a lasting impact on the project just like it has to us. Please keep us updated; we can not wait to see where this project goes!

