Eastside Community Center: Art Brief
Chris and Kenji LLC | July 2017

Project Overview

The new Eastside Community Center (ESCC) is planned to open in 2018, and is a partnership between Metro Parks Tacoma, City of Tacoma, Tacoma Housing Authority, and Tacoma Public Schools. The partnership supporting the ESCC was created to address concerns about the reduction of community services on the Eastside, combined with undersized and aging facilities in the area. This effort is inspired by the vision of Billy Ray Shirley III, a youth leader whose life was cut short before he could pursue his dream of building a community center on the Eastside.

Once completed, the center will house state of the art facilities, including a basketball court, aquatic center, multi-purpose rooms, an audio recording studio, community kitchen, and after school programs through the Eastside Boys and Girls Club. In addition to these amenities and programs, the new center also hosts multiple opportunities to integrate community and create site specific artworks. This Art Brief will highlight historical context around the Eastside community, discoveries from the community engagement process, and recommendations for specific arts projects to integrate on-site.
Community Context

The Eastside of Tacoma is one of the oldest and most ethnically diverse communities in the city. Located on what was originally Puyallup tribal land, the Eastside is now bordered by the Puyallup Reservation to the east, the Port of Tacoma to the north, Tacoma’s South End to the west, and unincorporated Pierce County / Midland to the south. Development in the Eastside expanded in the 1940s to accommodate port workers during World War II, and soon became a hub for African American families immigrating from the South. Later in the 1970s it became a hub for refugees leaving Southeast Asia and has seen large waves of immigrant communities from Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Central America since.

In 2001 Tacoma Housing Authority started demolition and construction work for a new Salishan, an affordable housing community originally built in 1942, and in 2009 First Creek Middle School was opened to combine and replace the neighborhood’s two older middle schools, Gault and McIlvaigh. During this time the Eastside community also saw the closures of Swan Creek Library and the Boys and Girls Club branch. The site for the new ESCC is located next to First Creek Middle School, off the corner of East 56th Street and Portland Avenue, and at the southern tip of the Salishan neighborhood. The demographics of First Creek Middle School show that its student body is 2.1% Native American, 19% Asian, 3.4% Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, 23.7% Black, 30.7% Hispanic, 16.7% White, and 4.3% identifying as multiracial; 88% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 14% of students speak limited English.
Engagement Process

(top) Students at First Creek Middle School during an arts workshop. (bottom left) Youth at the Eastside Boys and Girls Club redesign the front entrance of ESCC. (bottom right) Youth at Roosevelt Elementary School’s Family Night add ideas to the ESCC’s front entrance. (below left) Student ideas for the center.

Throughout early 2017, multiple workshops, creative pop ups, and interviews took place to gain deeper insight into the community’s needs and vision for the new center. Activities for many of the workshops and pop ups revolved around giving youth the opportunity to budget and design their own community center with $15,000,000, which resulted in great feedback about what local youth would prioritize in a center of their own, and the aesthetic aspects that appeal most to them.

As more information and images of the ESCC’s design were gathered, activities were adapted to allow youth to directly modify pictures of the building’s entrances and rooms in real time.
A First Creek student’s concept artwork for a community center constructed as a boombox.

A Lincoln student’s layout concept for their community center.
A Lincoln student’s concept artwork for the exterior design of their center.

A Lincoln student’s concept artwork for the exterior design of their center, featuring a football field on the roof, indoor skydiving, a water trampoline, and a go-kart track.
A Lincoln student’s concept artwork for a mural project titled ‘We Are Eastside’, that highlights the different cultural backgrounds representing the Eastside.

In addition to workshops at schools and pop up community events, multiple adult community members were interviewed to give context on the Eastside’s history and provide feedback on the center. These interviews focused on Eastside residents and/or people with historical connections to the Eastside who represented a spectrum of experiences and backgrounds. Among those interviewed were people who identified as community organizers, social service providers, educators, parents, young adults, local creatives, faith leaders, and currently incarcerated. Below is a list of key findings from the engagement process.

Key findings emphasized by multiple participants include the following recommendations:

- ESCC staff represent and are hired from the Eastside community.
- The space is vibrant, colorful, inspirational, and energetic. Specific recommendations included: murals, LED or neon lights, and lava lamp sculptures.
- Comfort is key. The ESCC should not look or feel like a government building or police substation from the outside.
- Facilities and programs are accessible to community members from ALL socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Signage and outreach is accessible and welcoming to communities that don’t speak English as a first language.
- ESCC programs are adaptable and meet the unique needs of the Eastside community.
- Artwork for the center acknowledges and reflects the influence of Indigenous and immigrant communities.
- ESCC provides opportunities to engage community Elders and reinforce intergenerational relationships.
- ESCC is a resource for grassroots organizations based in the Eastside.
- ESCC looks and feels like a community owned center more than an amenity center.

**Emphasis**

![A group of youth adding ideas to the ESCC design at Roosevelt Elementary’s family night.](image)

Creative opportunities associated with this art brief are open to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background. Given the cultural and historical context of the Eastside, creative opportunities outlined in this brief will have a strong emphasis on cultural relevancy and equity, and will prioritize artists who can exemplify these connections and experiences.

Eastside artists and residents, people who have strong historical connections to the Eastside, people of Indigenous ancestry, and/or people of immigrant and refugee communities are especially encouraged to participate.
Arts Opportunities

The ESCC campus provides a wealth of opportunities for a variety of integrated arts projects. The highlighted opportunities below were selected based on feedback from the community engagement process, and sorted into the categories: exterior, interior, programming, and additional recommendations. Each opportunity is described with the intention to potentially become an individual call for artists.

PHASE ONE

[1] COMMUNITY CALL FOR ART (PORTABLE WORKS)
High priority given to artists with roots in the Eastside neighborhood, and to Indigenous artists, people of color, and/or immigrants
$14,000
Location: Throughout the center

“We have some of the most artistic, visionary, talented, and driven people in on the Eastside. We’re just overlooked and under-resourced.” - Michael Chansavang

Description: The community call to artists is our first project. It acts as an umbrella to extend the broadest, lowest barrier opportunity possible to reach the diversity of artists practicing in
the Eastside neighborhood. The responses from this call will both serve to give us a sense of local creativity permeating the space, as well as to provide jurors with a sense of the landscape and an informal roster of potential applicants to invite for the artist cohort process and future opportunities. This call to artists will seek existing works to collect at or below $1,500 per piece.

[2] OUTDOOR SCULPTURE
Local or regional artists with a strong priority to Indigenous or immigrant artists
$45,000
Location: ESCC’s west entrance/courtyard sculpture could be secured into the ground or attached to the walls. Location flexible

Description: This mid to large size sculptural installation will create a vibrant, colorful and unique entrance to the center. The outdoor sculpture would set a tone for the ESCC and help offset the reserved and modern design of the building’s exterior. This outdoor piece could also complement and/or speak to the Totem Pole at the entrance of First Creek, while still giving the ESCC a landmark that distinguishes it as its own space. The piece will serve as a form of invitation to the broader community commuting down Portland Avenue to approach the building and feel both curious and welcomed.

View of the back entrance looking northeast with the pool on the right. This entrance will be used by the Boys and Girls Club after school and borders the lake at the southwest corner of the site.

PHASE TWO

[3-A] ARTIST COHORT/MICRO-GRANT
Ten Eastside artists invited, leveraging pool of respondents from the community call for art
$25,000
Location: Around Eastside, at the center, and at Swan Creek Park
“The thing that I always thought was lacking is an artistic outlet, there isn't any. Would be dope to have a small gallery or something on this side of town. It is so rich with culture that so many amazing things can happen artistically by giving our babies our youth, that visual. I wish I was exposed to art at a young age - it was my calling I just didn't know - no one ever told or showed me.” - Dion Thomas

Description: This is a capacity building program for ten Eastside creatives. Over the course of a few months participants will learn about public art, practice responding to calls, write their own proposals, and develop technical skills. Each artist will receive a small micro-grant upon completion of the program and approval of their project proposal. We propose that a lead artist is selected to run this training and that the artist cohort participates in hands-on training, possibly utilizing Swan Creek Park as an exhibition site. $10,000 would go towards artist trainer/facilitator, a $500 attendance-based stipend would be paid per participant, with an additional $1,000 budget for a hands-on training project.

[3-B] MEMORIAL PIECE
Proposal selected from pool of applicants in artist cohort
$20,000
Location: Outdoor cafe area near east entrance of building or main lobby, lounge, and/or the cafe space; location flexible

“During the 80s and 90s they lost probably a quarter of those boys.” - Mrs. Virginia Hankins

"How can we create a memorial and be mindful of the community? That's one of the most important parts of the art aspect. Don't forget about the reason why the community center is there, why it needs to be there. Be reflective of the community as a whole not necessarily just the situations." - Dion Thomas

Description: We propose the commission of a piece of creative work that brings the story and creation of the ESCC full circle by acknowledging the loss of young people in the community. This piece should not be a predictable memorial, but should invite reflection and honor the resilience and initiative of young people stepping forward to support and inspire their community.
View of the lobby after walking through the front entrance. Stairway is directly ahead, cafe and walking track are to the right, and the media lounge is to the left.

PHASE THREE

[4] YOUTH INVOLVED PAINTED MURAL
Priority given to an Eastside local muralist, especially with strong community engagement experience
$25,000
Location: Main hallway walls below the front lobby and/or the north and south walls spanning the basketball court and running track.

Description: A painted mural work was a popular recommendation among young people throughout the engagement process and was even visually represented in many student’s concept artworks. It responds to the need for something vibrant, energetic, and custom within the space, and provides a great opportunity to tie in local history, cultural influences, and source youth engagement in its creation. Concepts that are imaginative and futuristic surfaced as potential intergenerational themes for the artist and youth team to play with.
[5] COMMUNITY HISTORY EXHIBITS
Priority given to community members with roots or family ties in the Eastside neighborhood
$15,000
Location: Empty walls within the main lobby, cafe, and hallways.

“The majority of young people living in Salishan don’t have a history. People grow up
with the perception of the neighborhood always having been how it is, but there are
roots...lots of transformation and change.” - Mrs. Virginia Hankins

“Youth are following trends, doing things because it’s what their friends like or it makes
them fit in, and we need to do a better job at teaching them to be proud of who they are
and where they come from.” - Vanna Sing

Description: Multimedia arts installations will highlight different communities, their histories,
and influences within the Eastside. This project could include separate calls to specific ethnic
community groups who have strong ties to the local area (ie: Indigenous, Eastern European,
 Southeast Asian, African American, Hispanic / Central American communities, etc) to curate
their own exhibits. Installations could be created in a variety of media, including but not limited
to: videography, audio projects, visual artwork, photography, interactive technology, writing,
and any combination in between. The context for this project was inspired by stories of
community members’ grassroots work to create home museums and independent
documentaries, as well as the need to preserve history in a community that is rapidly changing.

[6] CONTINGENCY: ECO-ART PIECE:

“I think some kind of dope like greenscape kind of art, because of that area specifically:
Lake McIlvaigh. When it rains it fills up bro - we call it Lake McIlvaigh [the swamp/pond
near First Creek Middle School]. Vegetation is a big part of that corner, that area over
there.” - Dion Thomas

Recognizing significant feedback addressing community’s connection to the landscape, green
space, nature and plant life, as well as permaculture, we want to highlight the role of eco-art as
a part of this continuum. This can be a component that surfaces in several artworks, such as the
outdoor sculpture and or portable works collection, but it could also be its own component if
the resources are available. Though the budget is tight, we see the need and want to highlight
this as something to consider.
HOSPITALITY

“When you walk in, what says ‘welcome’? People need to see it and feel it.” - Carmetrus Parker

Throughout the engagement process, there were a lot of recommendations that came from young people and community members specifying integrated design opportunities intended to promote a sense of ownership in the center. As we continued to investigate we found the underlying theme of hospitality weaving throughout their selection of concepts and design ideas. Many of the following recommendations could appear as low-hanging fruit for promoting the authenticity of the space. Some of them come with a weight of context and nuance that make them difficult to pass on to a design team without creative stewardship. For this reason we want to recommend a specific role for an artist or artist team to facilitate the integration and implementation of these ideas into the ESCC design. We believe that a community-based artist is best equipped to maintain the creative spark of the community’s design intent, while also considering the logistical needs of the space in partnership with ESCC’s architects and design professionals.
[7-A] MULTI-LANGUAGE LIBRARY
A small library collection of children’s books from different cultures and languages. Taken directly from a Lincoln High School student’s concept drawing, this project addresses the need for a library in the Eastside and multilingual resources.

“We don’t have a library in this neighborhood. What if they had children’s books in different languages and invited elders in to read and tell stories? These are things that not only help kids feel more comfortable with this space, but things that also bridge generations, cultures, and faiths.” - Pastor Sahara Chea

![Creative display of international flags.](image1.jpg)

[7-B] INTERNATIONAL FLAG INSTALLATION
A gallery of flags hung from different countries, specifically including countries with large diasporic communities on the Eastside.

“Something that would help this community feel ownership of the space is creating a welcome sign in different languages. For an older Khmer person bringing their kid to the center, it would be a big deal for them to read that in their native language. You could reach out to some of the local schools about the ethnic and language make up of their students and base the signage in the center off of that. You could also hang flags from different cultures in the building. Kids need to be able to see themselves in this space, otherwise it won’t feel like it’s for them.” - Holy Chea

[7-C] MULTILINGUAL SIGNAGE
Located throughout the building, signage and materials can have multiple language options relevant to immigrant communities with large populations on the Eastside. Multilingual options not only reduce barriers for people that don’t speak English as a first language, but also encourage intergenerational use of the space.
[7-D] NEON / LED LIGHTS
Colorful lighting contributes to the atmosphere, vibrancy and energy of the overall space without taking too much infrastructure to install. Whether it highlights a wall, sits underneath some trim, accents entry points, or serves as an interactive feature - a little attention to custom lighting can go a long way. This was an especially popular piece of feedback among youth.

![Terrarium installation in Brooklyn, artist unknown. Flowers at Wright’s Park Conservatory.](Image)

[7-E] COOL FURNITURE
Located both indoors and outdoors, furniture should be welcoming, comfortable, and aesthetically interesting. People should feel encouraged to lounge, hang out, and relax, either by themselves or in a group. Extra bonus if the furniture is able to be moved around or reconfigured by community members.

![Quad couches at the Seattle Public Library. Reconfigurable furniture.](Image)

[7-F] PLANT LIFE
Located throughout the interior of the space, eco-art and plant life create a bridge between outdoor nature and the modern design of the center. Feedback from youth in particular emphasized tropical plants, which usually have vibrant colors and give a sense of warmth. Plants integrated into the space will also add to a lounge like atmosphere in spaces that aren’t
bustling with activity and could potentially provide educational opportunities for youth interested in horticulture, gardening, or natural medicine.

[7-G] WELCOME SIGNAGE
Location: At the front and back entrances
Description: Welcoming signage, lettering or marker that identifies the center’s entry points. Signage pieces should be accessible, clear, and visually communicate that the ESCC is a separate entity from First Creek Middle School. Signage creators should also consider the possibility of incorporating multilingual options. Unique or locally significant names for the center were also highly suggested among youth participants in the engagement process as a way to make it feel less institutionalized, more locally centered, and community owned.

[7-H] NON PERMANENT COLORS
Location: Integrated into interior and exterior components of the building
Description: Dozens of participants and interviewees have recommended the use of “neon colors” throughout ESCC. We believe an artist can help align the fixed colors so as not to over-brand, intrude or clash with the working palette of future installations in the space.

[7-I] COMMUNITY GALLERY
Location: TBD
Description: The need has been demonstrated for some form of accessible community fixture that can have either rotating artwork or installations from community members, be it seasonal or yearly, to exhibit local work and highlight emerging creativity within the Eastside on an ongoing basis. This stems from an interest in promoting the timelessness and ongoing aesthetic relevance of the space.

[7-J] COMMUNITY SOURCED MUSIC
Location: Intercom
Description: In order to bring the cultural relevance of the center to life, we recommend the incorporation of some type of music submission system. This could be something as open ended as a jukebox system - or something as thorough as guest DJ sets for the overall center. We believe that individual community members should be able to add their own music recommendations and perhaps even their own original compositions to the ESCC intercom playlist. This could be during a dedicated timeslot in the day or a shuffled playlist of tracks curated from their submissions.

“Music is something that binds everybody, across the board, communication wise.” - Dion Thomas

[7-K] SPACE GRANTS
Description: Developing an accessible platform for space usage that supports ongoing activations led by ESCC’s neighbors including but not limited to:
- In-kind space grants for cultural events
- In-kind space rentals for grassroots service providers
- Low barrier, low cost space for private events hosted by local residents
RFP ROLLOUT TIMELINE

PHASE ONE
Community Call for Art (portable works):
Call Released: August 30, 2017
Workshop: October 7, 2017
Call Due: October 24, 2017
Selection: November 2017
Completed/framed: March 2018

Outdoor Sculpture:
Call Released: August 30, 2017
Call Due: October 24, 2017
Selection: November 2017
Completed: July 2018

PHASE TWO:
Cohort -> Memorial Artwork:
Call Released: December 2017
Call Due: January 2018
Selection: February 2018
Training: March – May 2018
Memorial Proposals: June 2018
Memorial Complete: fall 2018

PHASE THREE
Youth-involved Mural:
Call Released: January 2018
Call Due: February 2018
Selection: March 2018
Completed: summer/fall 2018

Community History Exhibits:
Call Released: January 2018
Call Due: February 2018
Selection: March 2018
Completed: summer 2018

Eco-Art (if funded):
Call Released: January 2018
Call Due: February 2018
Selection: March 2018
Completed: summer 2018
TENSIONS

"We make a lot out of nothing. We’ll have a community BBQ at an abandoned house or an abandoned lot. The community garden that started way before any of the City’s efforts to restore Swan Creek - and then once they get a hold of it [they corporatized it]...for me it’s a huge part of the cool part of the Eastside: it used to be an undiscovered place where we actually had green space as kids, it wasn’t manufactured and manicured, it was post apocalyptic. It was awesome!” - Vicky Murray

“It’s great for it to be nice, but there’s a point where it can be uncomfortable. It's like going to someone's house and you're afraid to relax because you don't want to mess anything up. It needs to feel like home for people.” - Pastor Sahara Chea

1] Development and Displacement
How can the design, the employment, and the cultural emphasis on-site combat the ongoing displacement of low income populations from the city limits? How can the center’s function as an amenity support rather than displace people?

2] Youth and Architects
How can we translate the imaginative integrity of young people’s vision through the experience and design insights of the architects and other design stakeholders?

3] “Nice things” vs “Local things” aka “Starbucks” vs “local cafe”
How can we support, incubate, and cultivate the stakeholdership of local creatives and enterprises as a way to ensure that Eastsiders get the best of what is possible in this city?
OBSERVATIONS

1) Displacement is layered
When we think about displacement it is not sufficient to consider the current housing crisis in a vacuum. In order to recognize what is at stake we must recognize the historical context of displacement and the upheaval faced by Indigenous and immigrant communities. As we consider the implications of gentrification and displacement on the Eastside we must consider Urban Indians who have migrated, often through coercion or force, to urban centers like Seattle and Tacoma from other homelands around the country. Consider El Salvadorian, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Guatemalan, Cambodian and other populations migrating in the wake of civil wars. Consider African Americans who moved to East Tacoma escaping white supremacist terrorism of the South as part of the largest migration of its kind in recorded history.

When we look at the significance of establishing and maintaining a sense of home on the Eastside considering this historical context we realize there are greater implications for residents of the Eastside than perhaps any other sector of our community. In this context we cannot afford to look at issues such as gentrification as trivialities of contemporary city politics, instead we must grapple with the larger question that displacement implies. The foreground issues of who is represented, catered to, centered, and supported both structurally and culturally in this community center should be framed within an underlying question: "Who is allowed to consider Tacoma home?" As we strive to make the Eastside Community Center a welcoming and inviting place, we must consider the ways that the development can further displace our most underserved residents. How do we create the probability that intergenerational Eastside residents can claim this center as a second home?

2) Cultural production is a connection to home:

“DANCE is a big part of it - That's the way people communicate across the board is dance. There's people who are first generation Americans in this side of town, more than any other part. They're getting their traditions directly from their families. It's pure - it's still there, that connection is home.” - Dion Thomas

Performing arts, dance, theater, ceremony and ritual are some of the ways that many folks in the Eastside maintain resilience, connection to community, and connections to their homelands however near or far they may be. We must make sure there are low barrier opportunities for continued, ongoing cultural production and traditional cultural art forms within the Eastside Community Center to keep the center relevant. We can have all of the fixed cultural artworks we want on the walls, but without ongoing opportunities for the embodied performance, community led celebrations, and sacred connections the center would be incomplete. We recommend in-kind, low barrier space grants for cultural functions led by Eastside residents to ensure that the center can be a nexus for community celebration and keep the ESCC connected to home.