

# Refugees & Neighborhood Design

## Introduction

Around the world, there are many people who have been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence. In 2018 there were 25.9 million refugees around the world, and only a minuscule fraction of those individuals will be relocated to the United States (UNHCR, 2019).

Utah welcomes approximately 1,100 refugees each year. The majority of refugees in Utah represent countries such as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, and Burma (Gardner, 2017). Arriving here for the first time can be overwhelming as so many experiences are new, including the language. Refugees often need help learning how to use transit, navigating the city, purchasing groceries, finding employment, and communicating.

Supportive neighborhoods can help unite families, foster friendships, and ultimately help refugees assimilate into their new communities and shape comfortable and happy lives. In these neighborhoods, they, just like anyone else, need clean, comfortable, dependable, and affordable housing where they can feel at home in their own place.

## Research and Core Values

All people need to feel safe, independent, and that they belong to a greater community. These human needs are interdependent and crucial factors to any quality of life. Refugees starting a new life in a new country face countless experiences that are difficult to understand and adapt to. When refugees feel secure, it is easier for them to settle into their new lives and feel like they belong. When they can feel ownership and independence, they contribute to the strength of their families and communities with confidence in the future. When refugees feel that they are needed and valued, they can help others feel the same.

Fulfilling these core needs is a central priority of the non-profits who have influenced the foundation and design of this community. In Utah, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Utah Refugee Connection, the Asian Association of Utah - Refugee & Immigrant Center, and the Cache Refugee and Immigrant Connection (CRIC) currently try to fulfill these needs as volunteers and caseworkers greet new residents at the airport, provide furnished and supplied housing, and temporarily assist in housing cost. They also try to assist by providing access to healthcare, affordable nutritious food, English language classes, elementary and early childhood education, career assistance, computer access, financial literacy training, social services, community support, legal services towards residency and citizenship, and small business development (IRC, 2020). Inspired by these efforts, this neighborhood was created to support the core values in service and design.

## Design Overview

Located in Providence, UT, the community is set up in two smaller neighborhoods on either side of a community center. The neighborhoods contain three different home styles that surround a central courtyard with community gardens and places to play, relax, and gather. Pathways connect the neighborhoods with the community center, playground, and a playing field. Outside there is plenty of space for children to safely run and play, and for families to gather and connect with each other.

The community center was designed to help individuals gain confidence and enhance their skills. There are three classroom spaces for classes, taught by nonprofit organizations,

from learning English to citizenship. These classrooms can also be used for events and gatherings like the CRIC's Neighbor Program--which encourages successful integration by fostering connections between refugees and local families (CRIC, 2020). The community center also has spaces for youth to gather, play games, read, and make new friendships.

### Safety & Security

The site and set up of the community lends itself to openness, visually and in the type of amenities. This helps individuals to self-survey their surroundings and feel safe. The select use of foliage also helps to create boundaries, visual and physical, for the community from the highway, and the individual outdoor areas on the site. The community center is designed around a central courtyard and is intended to be lush with foliage, creating a view of nature from every angle inside the building and a personal oasis for those inside the courtyard. Having exposure to nature and natural elements helps to create a sense of peace and security. The community center's youth areas feature window seats designed to create a sense of refuge and protection while individuals observe the comings and goings of the space. There are also plenty of windows to help the youth see and be seen adding to a sense of security and openness.

### Independence and Ownership

Each family will have their own affordable home. Their home will be something they can be proud of and can help them see just how far they've come. They will also have space in their neighborhood to garden. This will give them opportunities to contribute to their community and grow food for their family. The location of the community is just off Highway 165 and can easily connect to the local Cache Valley Transit District routes making it possible for individuals to travel around the valley without needing to own a vehicle. The function of the community center and classes offered will help individuals and families gain greater independence through their education and help them to truly become self-reliant.

### Belonging

There are many opportunities within the community to foster belonging for individuals and families. These include places to gather indoors for classes and events and for youth to have fun and unwind. Outdoor gathering places--such as the playing field, playground, and picnic areas--also provide ways to connect, play, and foster friendships. The modern use of color and pattern throughout the community also helps to incorporate the refugee's different cultures and foster a sense of unity and connection.

### Conclusion

Each year, Utah becomes home for refugees from all over the world. Supportive neighborhoods help refugees assimilate into their new communities and shape their new lives. Research suggests these communities serve their purpose best when refugees feel safe, independent, and a sense of belonging. This community combines many focused design principles to naturally foster these experiences.

## Works Cited

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