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Barriers: An Exploration of Architectural
Structures as an Indication of Wealth and
Socioeconomic Status

By

Lisa DeMoranville

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Organizing Theme

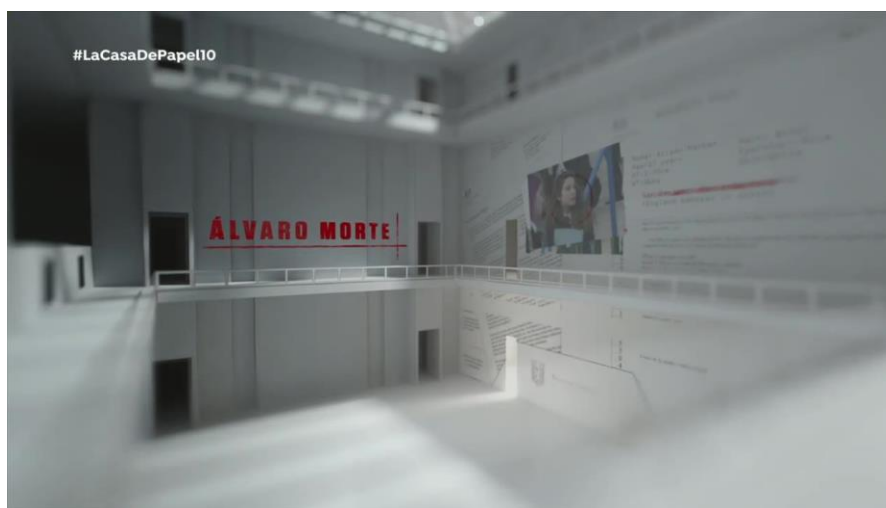
UNION COLLEGE

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For my thesis, I decided to explore the barriers and limitations of wealth through an investigation of architectural structures, focusing on popular industries and institutions on which our society commonly depends. I have noticed that places such as hospitals, schools, grocery stores, and restaurants differ dramatically depending on the neighborhoods in which they were located. This topic sparked my interest after living in Lima, Peru for a month, as I was able to observe the developing economy and dramatic division of wealth among the population. Certain questions about the divides and differences within a society and its culture started crossing my mind; not just about the physical preservation or business of certain industries, but also their success and performance. I started thinking about whether recovery rates among patients were different between private hospitals and free local clinics. I wondered whether education was different between private and public schools. But with all of these questions coming to mind, I also wondered why? Is money the only barrier between these institutions? It was my goal to portray the drastic differences between economic class and status, and how daily lives of people throughout society can look so different as a result. Architecture is an important representation of life and wealth in every society. I decided to use architecture as a means to represent this topic, because such structures reflect the barriers between the socioeconomic status of our nation and of other nations as well.

The idea of creating these virtual scenes began fall term while taking a 3D computer modeling course. Instantly, I was drawn to the art of 3D graphics, and eventually that of 3D motion graphics. The Cinema 4D software opened up new doors that I knew I had to explore. At that time, I had developed a certain fascination for introductions to movies and TV series, commonly known as title sequences. Title sequences have inspired much of my artwork, and for this project it was no different. I happened to be watching a series on Netflix called “Money

Heist” which had a great title sequence evidently created using a 3D processing software (Pictured below).

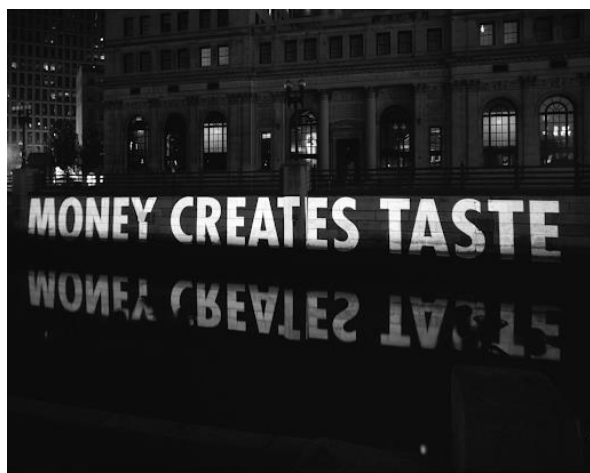


Clip taken from the title sequence “La Casa de Papel” or “Money Heist” in English. This title sequence inspired the direction in which I took my thesis project.

Although challenging, I knew that creating something similar to that title sequence would be doable, so for my final project of the 3D modeling class I decided to create my own version of the title sequence that showcased my own skills and creativity. This was how the idea for my thesis came to life, though many other factors took part in motivating and shaping how I visualized the final product.

One of the artists that inspired me to go this route in creating this senior thesis project is Jenny Holzer. Holzer is known for using a variety of different mediums to display her artwork, including projections of poetry and rhetoric. She has projected her artwork on the sides of architectural structures around the world since 1996. Her projection artwork stood out to me because of her ability to take words and turn them into pieces of art while simultaneously sending a message. She uses the public dimension as a means of delivery for her work, bringing awareness and thought to her wide array of audiences.

Another artist that inspired me is Barbara Kruger. Her work incorporates art and politics, and has a somewhat propaganda-like feel to it. Though her work is mainly collage pieces, she has done exhibition pieces that incorporate projection mapping into them. Both Holzer and Kruger are able to integrate important messages into their artwork and use the beauty of text to do it. After considering these two artists and their work, I had a better idea of where I wanted to take the project.



*On the left: One of Jenny Holzer's pieces being displayed in downtown Providence, Rhode Island.
On the right: Barbara Kruger's projection mapping piece being displayed at an exhibition.*

Throughout the month of December I spent my time living and working in Lima Peru. My mother was born and raised there, so I thought it would be a good opportunity to spend time with family and improve my Spanish speaking skills. During my stay there, I was able to observe the culture and the lifestyle of a developing country. My family and friends informed me a lot about the history, the poverty, and the corruption that has dominated the country over the last several centuries. I quickly learned that there is a great divide between the wealthy and the poor, and virtually no middle class in between. I saw families living in shacks with no electricity or running water, and people on the streets begging for anything that could be given. There were people working in the scorching summer heat for less than a living wage, working makeshift jobs that I had never seen in the United States. But even though I was seeing and experiencing all of

this, I also saw and experienced a form of privilege that almost made me forget about the poverty around me. I lived in a beautiful home, went to extravagant parties, and ate some of the best food in the country. I was living in a dream while others around me were struggling to survive.

Such a divide was extremely evident in the developing world, and originally I wanted to focus my project on that. I thought that I could incorporate my mother's culture and heritage into my final thesis project because it is something that I am very passionate about. However I began thinking about the United States, a developed country that the rest of the world sees as prominent and superior. These issues of poverty and of wealth started crossing my mind in terms of my home town, my state, my region, etc. In a developing country like Peru, the poverty, the hardship and the divide are all elements of the society that are visible, evident and real. Almost everywhere you turn you are faced with the hardships of the third (developing) world. However, here in the United States, especially on the east coast, such hardships are not as discernable or obvious. On the surface, the United States appears to be a land of opportunity, success, riches and fame. But digging deeper reveals that there may not be as many differences between the developed and the developing world.

We as a society are heavily influenced by our access to education, food, and healthcare. Primarily, we are conditioned to believe that our worth is determined by our level of education, and that our chances of success are much higher if we graduate high school and college. How can one achieve success if the path to it is virtually unaffordable and inaccessible? People who live in districts with inadequate public education are unlikely to be able to afford a private education, creating a domino effect of hardships and struggles. For example, these same people are often struggling to put food on the table, buying cheap and unhealthy foods. According to Kansas Food Bank, "82 percent of households report purchasing inexpensive, unhealthy food

because they could not afford healthier options” (“Hunger Statistics”). This can then lead to health issues that the people cannot afford or understand well enough to take care of properly. Research has shown that 66 percent of people relying on food banks have had to choose between food and medical care (Jones). Though this is not the case all of the time, it demonstrates one example of the ways in which the education system, food industry, and medical care system influence and impact society as well as one another. This is why I chose them for my thesis project.

As I started doing research on schools, hospitals, and grocery stores, I realized that there was an overwhelming amount of data I needed to sift through. I still didn’t exactly know what I was searching for, so I gradually started narrowing down my search. I started with schools, researching the differences between public and private schools. Sifting through the data, the information that seemed to be repeating the most was graduation rates and college acceptance. Studies found that students who attended some kind of private school were, on average, three times as likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree as those who attended a public school (“Private School Students More Likely to Succeed in College”). I had never previously seen a figure like this, therefore I never comprehended the reality of the situation. As I kept digging, there continued to be an overwhelming amount of data from studies done over the years. An array of studies were coming to my attention, ranging from the difference in crime rates to SAT/ACT scores, to parent satisfaction, the list goes on. What I found was that the private school system really seems to dominate education in our society. Not only do private schools have high performance rates, they also have access to technology that many public schools can’t afford to use. Students as young as kindergarten have access to iPads and computers that contain applications and software that expose them to a new and efficient way of learning, leading to a

more developed brain at a much younger age. Though there are many towns and districts that have exceptional public school systems, it is an unfortunate reality that many of the public school systems throughout the country are less than satisfactory and do not have the funds or means to improve.

I started reading different articles, analyzing the information and deciphering what I believed to be most important in distinguishing the differences between the two schooling systems. I then tried to focus on medical research, looking for articles on access to quality health care, cost of medication, accessibility, etc. Because my mother is an endocrinologist, I was able to have certain discussions with her about the medical industry and its ups and downs. What she is most concerned about, as it applies to her medical practice and her patients, is the cost of medication and medical care. Over the past years, prices of certain medications have shot up, doubling or even tripling in cost. In many cases, the U.S. prices for prescription medications are around or over 50% higher than any other country in the world. For a 30 day supply of the medication Tecfidera, a common drug used to treat adults with Multiple Sclerosis, Americans are paying 174% more than Switzerland and 668% more than the United Kingdom (Kamal et al.). Many of my mother's patients cannot afford insulin, a crucial factor in the health of all of her patients suffering from diabetes and irregular blood sugar levels. Big corporations are increasing the costs of vital, life-saving medications and people are actually dying because of it. I found that the U.S. RX spending per capita is \$228 higher (\$1011) than the second leading RX spending country (Switzerland at \$783) (Kamal et al.). I came across numerous articles mentioning the repercussions of not being able to afford medications. What I found the most devastating was that the medications that saw increases in cost are medications that are vital to certain people's health and survival. They are not basic, over the counter drugs used by just anyone: they are

specific drugs that large pharmaceutical companies know people need to survive. Because of this, they know that they can price these medications however they want as these people can't live without them. "There are few if any segments of the American economy where a manufacturer could raise prices by 92% and have people consume the same quantity of that product," (Johnson).

The last bit of research I did was on the food industry. It took me a while to find a focus because I knew so little about the topic. Before I began my thesis, I had never heard of the term "food insecurity" nor did I know how widespread it happened to be in the United States. Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In the United States, one in seven people are suffering from food insecurity, and around 12.4% (1 in 8) of U.S. citizens rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to fund their meals (Stebbins). This means that the person sitting next to you or walking past you could be struggling for food on a daily basis and you wouldn't even know it. In a report published by the United States Department of Agriculture, data showed that SNAP households were spending the most money on sweetened beverages, accounting for 10% of the money they spend on food (O'Connor). These examples represent the nature of the challenges to food insecurity and promoting healthy food choices that we face as a nation.

Finding adequate and relevant information was the longest process of my project; even if I was able to find the information I wanted, I still had to incorporate it into the models in a visually appealing way. It took me a long time to decide how I wanted to display this information in my structures, and took me many tries to get the end result. During this time of research, I decided to take a trip to Schenectady High School because I wanted to model a typical public school classroom. I was given access to one of their history classrooms where I took

measurements and pictures. Since I attended a private school in Rhode Island, I decided to get in contact with one of my former teachers and ask for pictures and measurements of the typical classroom we had there. With this, I was able to create my first structures. Obtaining real measurements and reference pictures allowed me to create accurate 3D replicas of the spaces I chose to model. This was crucial for the imagery because it helped the compositions feel more real.



A still clip of one of the compositions I created for my project. This model represents classrooms commonly seen in a private school setting, equipped with a Harkness table that allows for a more interactive classroom environment.

I chose to design the interiors of schools, grocery stores, and medical centers because I believe they are fundamental institutions that our society depends on the most. They are structures that symbolize our livelihood, representing elements that define our success and prosperity in many ways. Each structure contains three significant and symbolic components that embody the patterns of society. The most straightforward is the information displayed on the interior walls of the structures. The different information being displayed represents larger

questions at hand and sheds light on the topics that are easily forgotten in our society surrounding wealth and poverty. Each set of information was carefully chosen to allow the viewer to understand the problems being addressed and think about the topics in their own personal ways. By confining the information to a smaller area rather than displaying multiple sets of information throughout the entire space, the viewers are able to focus on that small piece of information and interpret it in their own way while still being able to absorb the architecture and meaning of the interior structures.



Still clip of the public school classroom. The information is confined to one place rather than being displayed in multiple areas.

Another distinguishable feature to the project is that each structure is colorless and empty. This feeling of abandonment reflects the lack of conversation surrounding the issues of poverty and wealth distribution throughout our society. Many who are faced with the hardships of poverty can feel alone and neglected as if they have been left to fend for themselves. The apocalyptic nature of the imagery creates a connection between a community and the impact these issues can cause even in a developed society like the United States. If we continue to

ignore the problems that are mentioned in each composition, the message behind each structure will become less theoretical and much more literal. What will happen to our society if we continue to ignore the constant pleas surrounding us? Ignoring these issues and refusing to fix them will not make them go away, arguably they will just continue to get worse. The lack of color allows the viewer to focus on the information that is being displayed, making it the center of the composition rather than just another element.

Lastly, the sunlight in each composition brings the whole piece together, as it emits the most abstract and undefined symbolism within the compositions. The movement of the sunlight represents the passing of time. Time doesn't stop for anyone, and life moves forward no matter who you are or what obstacles you are trying to overcome. We must learn to defeat life's obstacles rather than letting them defeat us. Sunlight is often a representation of hope and happiness. Good education, sufficient food, and quality health are not things any human should be deprived of. There is hope that one day no one will have to be deprived of these rights, but the change has to come from those who are aware and willing to help. In addition, some may view the sunlight as a representation of religion and its influence on our lives. Many people tend to turn to faith in times of need, seeking help and answers to questions from their respective God. In Hinduism, one of the highest praised gods is the sun god Brahman. He nourishes the world and keeps it going. In Christianity, the sun symbolizes the light that shines through darkness, overpowering evil. The sunlight in each composition can be interpreted in a personal way and does not have one specific meaning. Ultimately it is up to the viewer to decide what kind of message the sun is adding to the piece and why it is so important in the composition.

Architectural structures are the frameworks of an economy and society. They reflect the affluence and/or adversity of a community by manifesting themselves in different ways. It is

easy to form a certain perspective about a community by looking at its buildings and structures, but hardly anything is ever done to try and fix what has been broken. It was my goal to bring awareness of the issues that many people throughout the United States have faced and continue to face every day. Americans throughout the country continue to struggle to obtain good education, substantial amounts of food, and efficient health care, and many lives are influenced by the limited resources to which they are given access. Opportunities are easily missed and potentials are not reached because certain people cannot afford them. The United States does well compared to other countries, but it could still do more to try and help the communities in need. The focus that should be given to these problems is far too often directed elsewhere to smaller issues with lesser impact. It is easy to forget the reality of certain situations when no one brings enough attention to them. My project was designed to display valuable information in a new, visually appealing way. Research papers and articles can be hard to understand for an audience that doesn't know how to interpret the data that they produce. For this reason, people tend to skip over what is most important or not read it at all. By creating virtual scenes and comparing them side by side, viewers are able to visually see and compare the differences between higher and lower quality industries. This project began after seeing the detrimental impacts on the developing world, but was easily applicable to the issues we see (or don't see) here in the United States. Our country has seen setbacks that have affected every community big and small. Once this barrier is built, it is hard to break down. My project is a visual representation of the divide that this society has created, and aims to bring light to the facts that can easily be ignored by the rest of society.

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