The Intersection of Ethics, Empathy, and Agency in Architecture Education: Using the Design Studio to Research Client Needs

KEYWORDS: empathy, ethics, agency, design studio, education

ALEXIS GREGORY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
Mississippi State University

Introduction – Ethics and Empathy in Design Studios

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Paying attention to the designer, the student

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> "While considerable attention has been given to the research component, the needs of the change agent – the designer– has been less adequately addressed." (ARCC 2022)

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Lack of empathy – faculty to student, student to student, student to client

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- Faculty-to-Student

  "Recent conversations about Studio Culture and Learning & Teaching Culture have done a lot to raise awareness about and ultimately mitigate the ill effects of toxic environments that exist in some architectural curricula." AIAS Report from May 5, 2020 ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT?
  A Perspective of How Covid-19 is Affecting Architecture Students https://www.aias.org/are-the-kids-alright/

  "Why don't you have a laptop?"; "Why don't you have a camera? You're an architecture student."; "Why are you working so much when you are supposed to be focused on school?"
  Demar Matthews, "A Black Architecture Education Experience," accessed January 29, 2022, https://archinect.com/features/article/150132758/a-black-architecture-education-experience.

  - Students lacking adequate funds for software and appropriate computers
  - BIPOC students feel isolated
  - BIPOC students have never met an architect who looks like them
  - "…why is what we are learning in school almost entirely Eurocentric?"

  Demar Matthews, "A Black Architecture Education Experience," accessed January 29, 2022, https://archinect.com/features/article/150132758/a-black-architecture-education-experience.

  Unconscious or implicit bias, Faculty lacking cultural competency, Students who must work potentially considered "lazy or less dedicated"
  Alice Liao. 2019. "Practice: Increasing Diversity and Inclusion," Architect 108 (5): 66.

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- Student-to-Student

  “Going on these dates initially was a very unattractive idea to me. I felt as though I had found my people and I was comfortable where I was. After having experienced this, I realize I was very wrong. Talking to people that share even one similar interest with me (architecture) has been very enlightening and I have loved it thus far. I realize many people here share the same passions, opinions, and interests with me. While it is an assignment technically, I have brought myself to talk to more people outside of my comfort zone as this year has gone on, and i’m (sic) very thankful for it.”

  “I did not see the point of these dates at first because I have been with these groups for the past three years. However, I figured out that in the time I spent with the state is that I learned more about them just by spending time getting coffee with them than I did all those three years. I’ve discovered more about their families, their interests, their personalities, and how they are outside of the studio. Also, you learned a lot more about what people consider a date, like they go out to eat or get coffee, but you also know about them like what food they like to eat and how they want to take their coffee orders. I also learned a lot about myself.”

  “By going on these dates, I realized how much of a bubble I have been in throughout architecture school.”

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- Faculty-to-Student
- Student-to-Student
- Student-to-Client/Community Partner

  “I do think there is some sort of experimenting that happens, but is that a bad thing?”

  “I also think that the ‘clients’ are/should be expecting something a little different from a regular home. It is FREE. You can not (sic) argue with that.”

  “They are getting something that they want virtually for free. No one can argue about getting something for free. A client getting something for free is more open to ideas as opposed to a client who is paying.”

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Toxic architecture education

- “Hidden Curriculum” - Thomas Dutton
- “Gender and Racial Bias in Design Juries” - Mark Paul Frederickson
- Lack of faculty or professional mentors that look like them
- Competitive studio culture
- Tearing students down to build them back up
- Competition to please the professor

Methodology and Findings

Paying Attention to the Designer

Research into Client Needs

Empathy Exercises

Student Agency & Hierarchy

Paying Attention to the Designer - AIA “Equity in Architecture Education”

GOVERNANCE

“Be aware of ways white supremacy is manifested.” (AIA 2022, 21)

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STUDIO CULTURE

Center empathy. Offer a more human-centered focus during design studios. Balance the number of studios that are framed to result in formal geometry or technological solutions with those that place high priority on meeting social and/or human needs. (AIA 2022, 24)

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FACULTY SUPPORT

Equip current faculty to continue to develop empathy with students, staff, and peers that are of different identities. Knowing that developing empathy requires encouragement, awareness, knowledge, skills, practice, and accountability. Support cross-identity mentoring. (See the Mentorship and Sponsorship guide.) (AIA 2022, 34)

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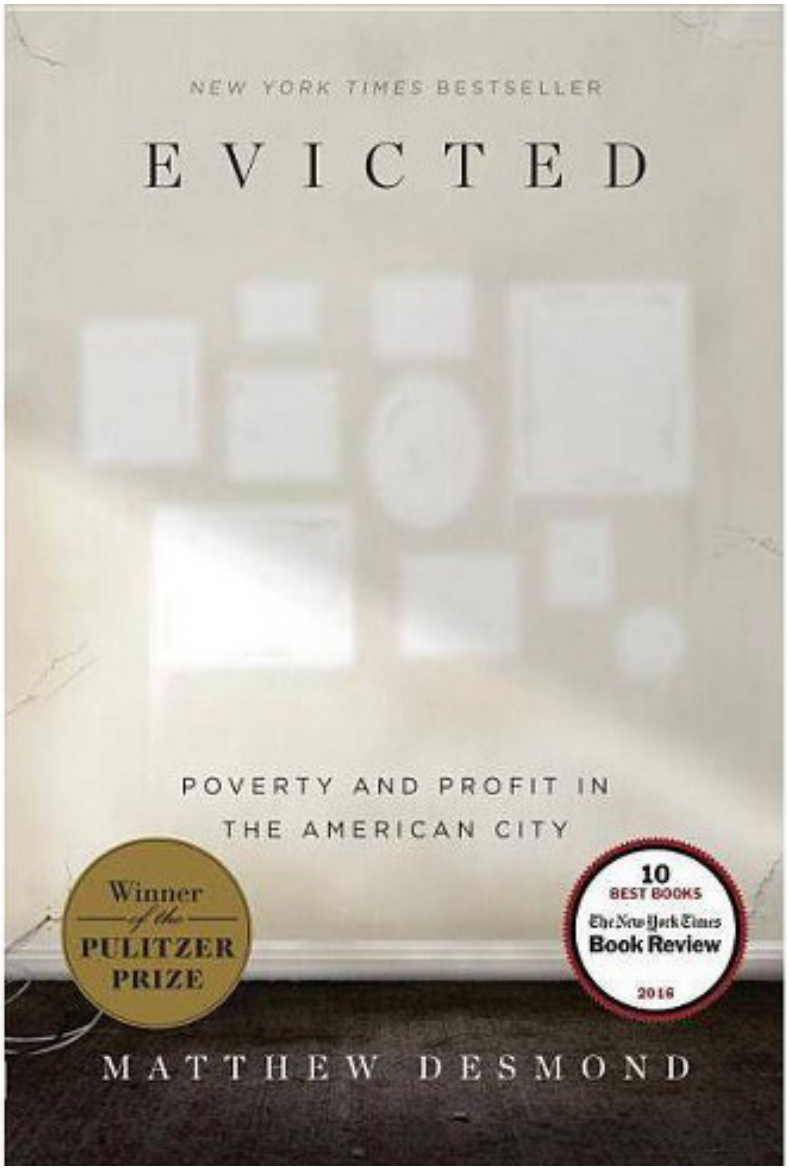
CONSIDER

“We are all related.” Summary of a quote from a Third Year Graduate Student, Large Public PWI, American Indian (Sicangu Lakota), Female, 30 (AIA 2022, 42)

I’ve heard deans talk about how we are so stuffed with accreditation requirements, that there is no room for me to teach public-interest design to freshmen or sophomores. (Part of a quote from an Associate Professor at a Mid-Size, Public, University for 7 Years, Non-Profit Founder and Director for 30 Years, White, 60’s, He/Him/His) (AIA 2022, 46)

Research into client needs

Reading ”Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City” by Matthew Desmond



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Research on Memorial Studio topics

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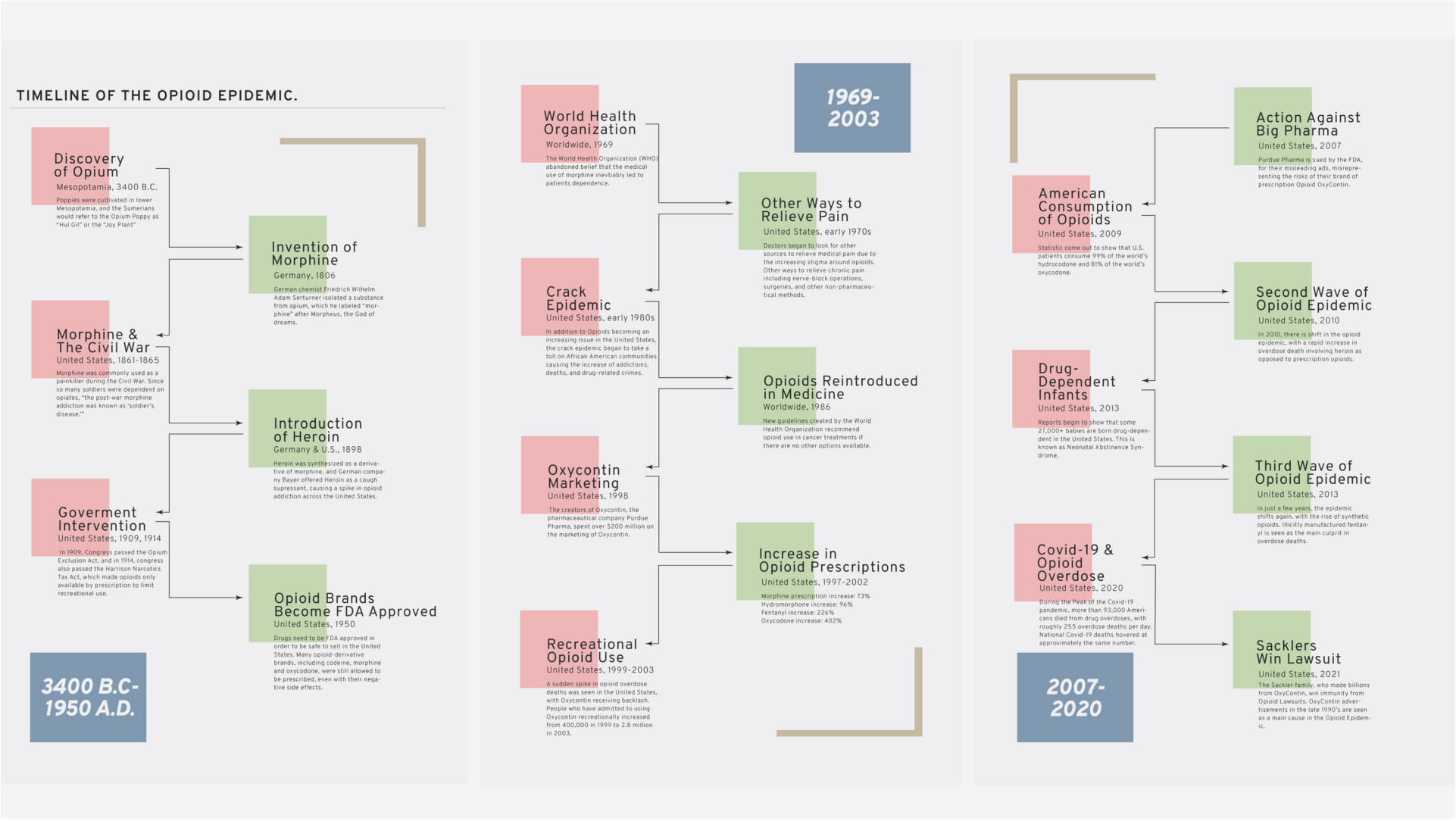
Opioid Epidemic

- Jacqueline Lee
- Ruthie Southall



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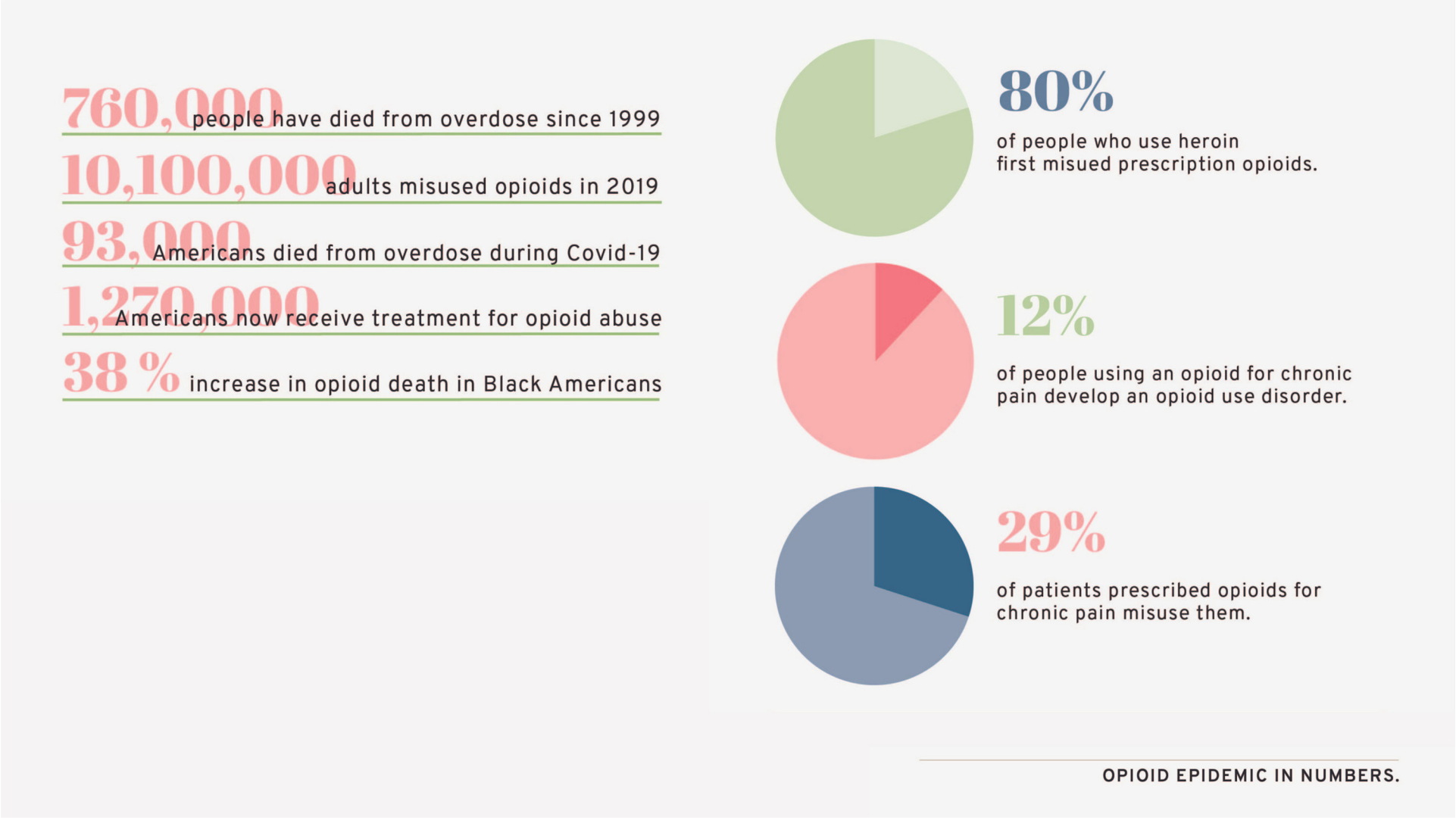
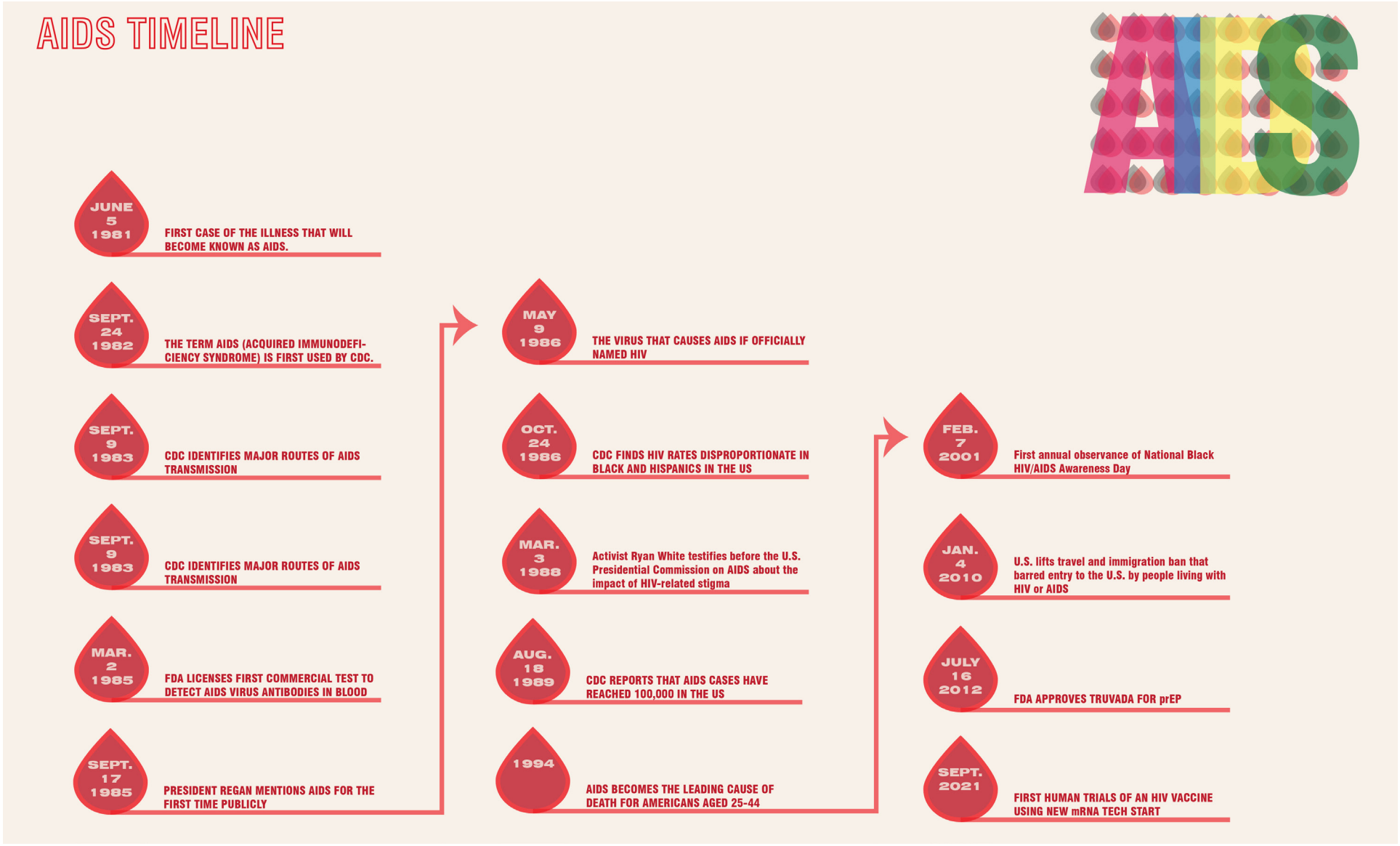


Research on Memorial Studio Topics

AIDS Epidemic

- Ethan Weinstein



Empathy Exercises

Pre- and Post-surveys

Reflections

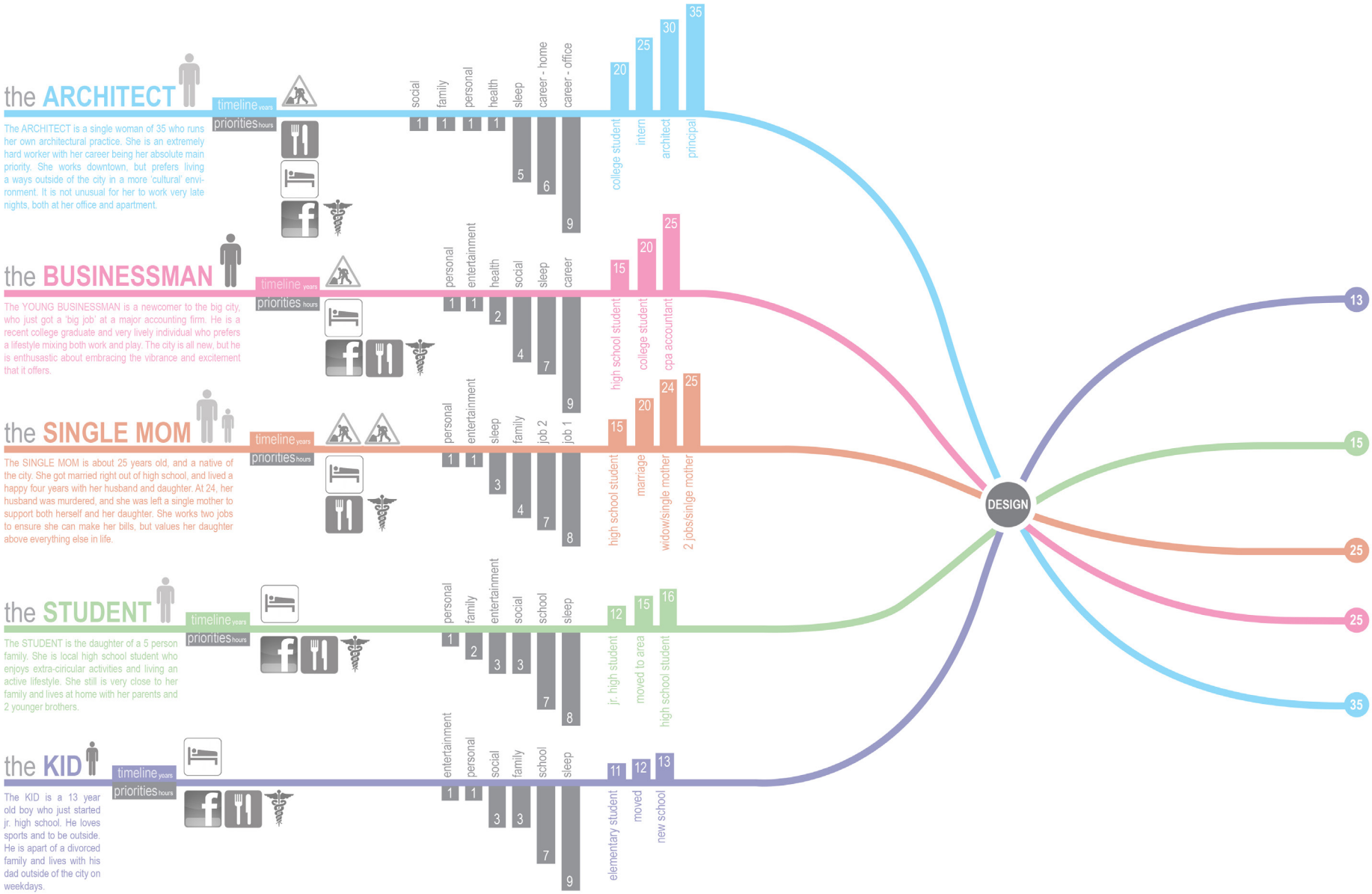
Examining inherent bias and internalized privilege

Role playing exercises – Daniel Pink and protagonist studies

- Development of the protagonists aid the students in Pallasmaa's idea of understanding life, as discussed in "Empathetic and Embodied Imagination: Intuiting Experience and Life in Architecture."

Protagonist Stories

Mixed-Use, Multi-Family Housing in Chicago



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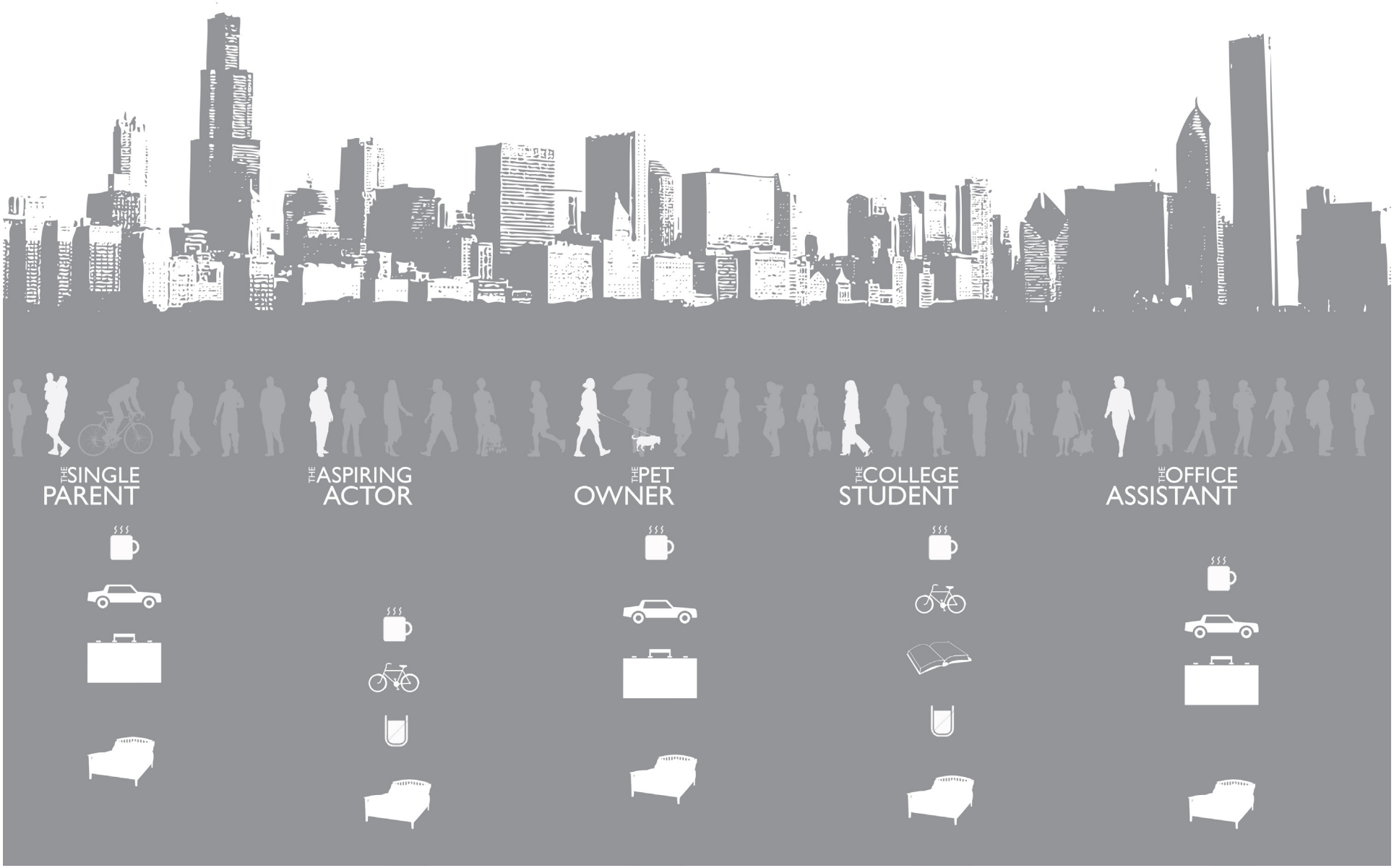

Protagonist Stories

Mixed-Use, Multi-Family Housing in Chicago

Student Agency & Hierarchy

Students choose topical projects

- Habitat for Humanity
- Audubon Society
- Starkville Strong
- Mississippi's Toughest Kids

Memorial Studio - Alternative studio practices

- Researching topics important to them
- Selecting their final memorial topic
- Presentations as "conversations" not juries
- Students select readings, podcasts, and videos on empathy and ethics
- Students develop assignments and requirements and how graded

Conclusion

Impact

- Developing empathy

Agency

- Ethics and empathy improves academics as well as agency

Self-Reflection

- Importance of reflections and reciprocity

Learning about others

- Research about needs of others
- Empathy and ethics must be taught and used together

Still some othering tendencies

- Architects must understand life and the human form in relation to space as a part of developing empathy as examined by Pallasmaa, Mallgrave, Robinson, and Gallese in “Architecture and Empathy.”

Conclusion

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