

# URBN.

Edited by Kyle Gee



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# ***FROM THE DEPARTMENT***

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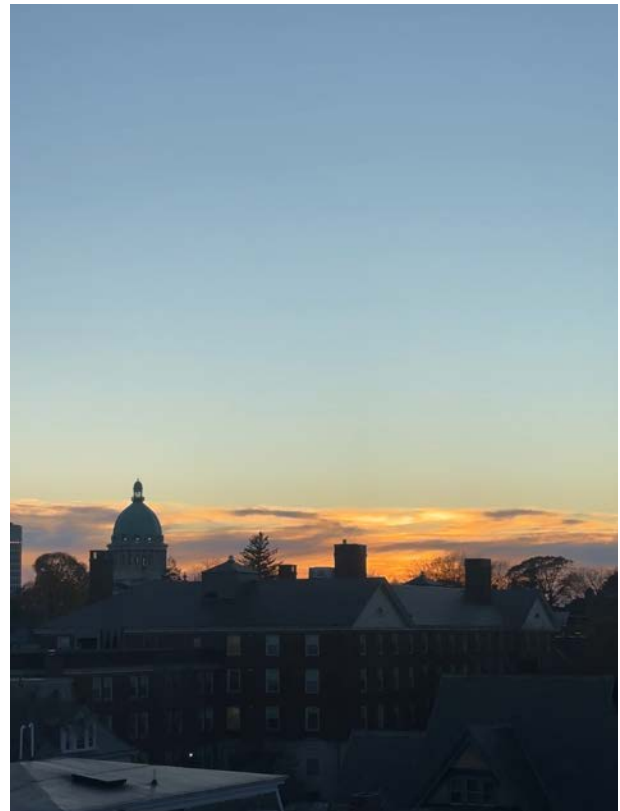
## **Letter from the Director**

Hello URBN:

Congratulations to all as we approach the end of the Fall semester! I hope everyone is looking forward to a restful holiday season. This has been another productive and inspiring semester in Urban Studies. The DUG has been going full speed ahead with activities this fall, many of them mobility related. We heard from our own Maddock Thomas about his research on the future of public rail transport and the DUG embarked on its own bike voyage south towards Bristol. Professors Marion Orr and Dietrich Neumann have new books either here or on the way. We're also excited to welcome Professor Nicole Pangborn to Urban Studies, a Providence native whose classes on urban research and life in Providence I hope many of you will check out. Thanks to the DUG and to Kyle Gee for this great newsletter, which covers this and more. Best wishes for the end of the semester and the holidays. See you in 2025! great culmination of this year of celebration, and I hope all will be able to check it out.

I hope you are looking forward to a peaceful holiday season, and a Happy New Year. See you in January.

Thanks,  
Sandy Zipp



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## Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the latest edition of the Urban Studies Newsletter! This year's DUG is proud to feature four seniors—Klara Davidson-Schimich, Josué Morales, James Hardy, and Riki Doumbia. Together, we've experienced a dynamic range of events, both on and off campus, that reflect the vibrant and multifaceted nature of urban life at Brown. From personal anecdotes to thought-provoking talks from outstanding speakers, there has been no shortage of insightful moments. As your editor this semester, it's been a true honor to curate this content, and I'm excited to share the work of our talented contributors with the Department. Enjoy!

Yours Truly,  
Kyle Gee



# PROVIDENCE EXCURSION

## Eliana C. Hornbuckle

I first learned about the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC) from a Brown alumna in Fall 2022. In September, I got the opportunity to join in on one of their paddle trips in Providence. After the experience, I caught up with Colleen Keenan, an Environmental Educator and Recreation Guide for WRWC and a 2021 Brown alum, over email to learn more about WRWC and how the paddle trips support their mission.

**Eliana:** What is the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council?

**Colleen:** The WRWC is a nonprofit based in Providence, Rhode Island. We're all about creating positive change—environmentally, socially, and economically—by breathing new life into the Woonasquatucket River, its Greenway, and the communities along its path. For years, the river had been a vital part of the local ecosystem and economy, but after heavy industrial use, it fell into disrepair and pollution. We've helped restore about 75 acres of land along the river, bringing abandoned parks back to life for the community to enjoy. But it's not just about physical changes—we're committed to connecting people with the river through community programs, environmental education, recreation, and bike education. Events like our paddle series help build bonds within the community and inspire a shared commitment to preserving the watershed.

**Eliana:** How did you become involved with WRWC?

**Colleen:** I became involved with WRWC while seeking meaningful ways to engage in climate resilience work within the Providence community. I studied Environmental Science, Technology, and Society at Brown, and during that time, I grew to love the city of Providence. I had the chance to connect with local organizations and initiatives such as the Providence Environmental Justice Task Force, the Environmental Council of RI, RI Department of Environmental Management, community gardens, Farm Fresh RI, and others.

I actively looked for ways to expand my perspective beyond the College Hill/East Side area, working at the intersection of outdoor education, science communication, and climate justice. I heard from so many people about what an excellent partner WRWC was and felt inspired by their approach to community-informed environmental projects. This led me to want to meet the team behind our beloved Greenway.

**Eliana:** Can you tell me more about paddle trips?

**Colleen:** WRWC has been hosting paddle trips each year from June-September at various sites throughout the watershed. Highlights include our very popular weekly free community paddle series at Riverside Park, and paid events like the downtown Providence paddle and Stump Pond paddle in Smithfield, RI. Our paddles, and recreation program more broadly, aim to facilitate restorative and enjoyable activities that activate our watershed spaces for the reciprocal benefit of people and our shared environment. We hope that participants in our recreation events will enjoy the myriad health benefits of connecting with nature, gain awareness of the work we do at WRWC, and be inspired to be environmental advocates and stewards in their communities.

**Eliana:** What was your favorite moment from our paddle in Providence in September?

**Colleen:** This was my first downtown paddle, and I loved exploring Providence through its inland waterways! I was really on the lookout for wildlife, and a highlight was spotting a great blue heron perched above the Woonasquatucket. It flew from tree to tree, almost as if guiding us along the river. Later, we gathered briefly in Waterplace Park before finishing our tour, and I was struck by this impressive feat of engineering from its watery center. I tried to envision the Great Salt Cove that once stretched across this area before it was narrowed and downsized into its current form. This cove was a diverse habitat and a rich food source that attracted many Native American tribes long before Roger Williams established Providence here. Today, it still hosts various species that travel upstream into the Woonasquatucket, like eels, herring, lamprey, and more. Looking up at the concrete arena of Waterplace, I felt humbled by the mutability of spaces that evolve over lifetimes.

I was touched by the camaraderie and friendliness of the group—many of whom were strangers at the start. It's not often that people come to public events with such openness and warmth. I left feeling more connected to the city, my neighbors, and the river. It was a beautiful trip to close out the summer season, and I'm already looking forward to next year's paddles.



*The paddle group after our excursion on the Woonasquatucket River on Saturday, September 14th. (photo credit: Andrew Middleton)*



*An old Narragansett Bay Commission sign alongside the Woonasquatucket River indicating where Providence's combined sewer system used to empty into the river before the construction of the Combined Sewer Overflow system. (photo credit: Eliana Hornbuckle)*



*The view from my kayak a few minutes after we passed under Providence Place Mall. (photo credit: Eliana Hornbuckle)*



*A selfie-worthy view of downtown Providence from the water. (photo credit: Eliana Hornbuckle)*

# STUDY ABROAD REFLECTION

## Barcelona:

### *The Streets and Metro*

Kyle Gee

I studied in Barcelona during the spring semester last year, and what struck me most about the city was its stark contrast to any place I had known before. It was a city both ancient and modern, chaotic yet perfectly ordered—a place where every corner seemed to hold a story of reinvention. One of the most fascinating aspects to me was the city's layout. Initially it seemed like a mere maze of streets, but once I understood the city's, I could see that there was a well thought-out plan guiding urban development.

If you dig into Barcelona's history, you find that it wasn't always the city we know today. Before the late 19th century, it was a traditional Roman settlement, enclosed by grand walls and narrow, winding streets that made it almost claustrophobic. As the population grew, the city became overcrowded, unsanitary, and suffocating, creating conditions ripe for a radical transformation. Enter Ildefons Cerdà, an urban planner whose vision would reshape the city forever. His bold reimagining of Barcelona in the mid-1800s gave rise to the iconic grid layout of octagonal blocks—wide, open streets designed to bring light, air, and movement into a city that had once been stifled by its own walls.

Walking through Barcelona every day felt like stepping into a puzzle, each corner offering a new perspective of the city, yet always somehow incomplete. The streets, while structured, never seemed to follow a straight path. The grid, with its geometric precision, made it almost impossible to walk directly from one point to another; you were constantly veering a little off course, curving around the octagonal blocks before finding your way again. It was a disorienting dance, but one that allowed the city's soul to unfold slowly, like a story told one chapter at a time.

But there was one street that broke the rhythm of the grid: Avinguda Diagonal. It was as if the city itself had a heartbeat—a single pulse that cut diagonally through the center of it all. This wide avenue sliced the city in half, defying the otherwise uniform pattern with its angled lines. It was the only street that didn't conform, a bold disruption in an otherwise calculated design. Yet, rather than feeling out of place, Avinguda Diagonal added a unique character to the city. It created a sense of dynamism and movement, as if Barcelona itself were alive, pulsing with energy that was both modern and timeless. The avenue was a connector of contrasts—linking the old and the new, the historic heart of the city with its vibrant, contemporary districts.



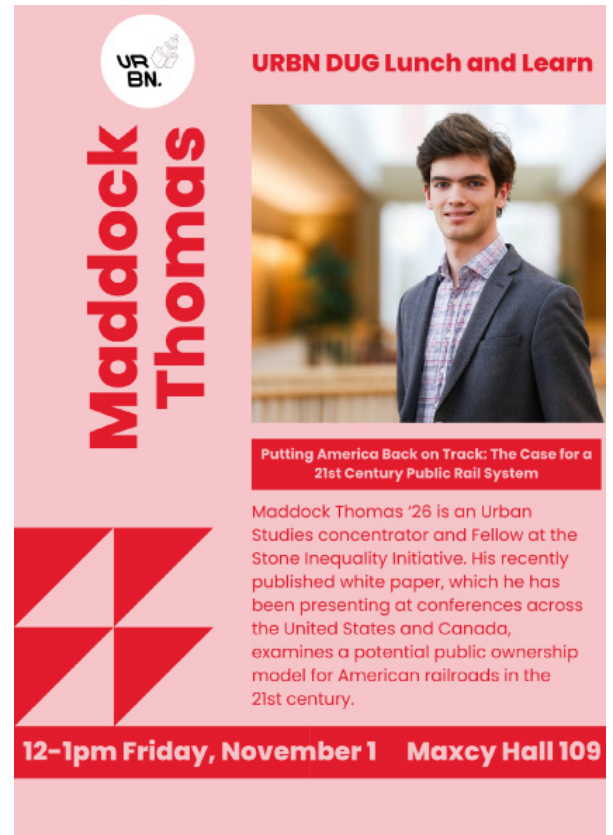
# DEPARTMENT EVENTS

## DUG Lunch and Learn Series: Maddock Thomas

*Putting America Back on Track: The Case for a 21 Century Public Rail System*

Kyle Gee

The DUG kicked off its first speaker event of the year as part of the Lunch and Learn Series, featuring Maddock Thomas, a junior Urban Studies concentrator. Maddock, who is also a fellow student, presented his published white paper on the topic of public railroad ownership. In his presentation, he made a compelling case for the creation of a 21st-century public railroad system, arguing for its potential benefits and outlining its feasibility in today's economic and political climate. This event marked the beginning of the URBN DUG's official guest speaker series for the year, setting the stage for more engaging discussions and thought-provoking presentations to come. There is more information on the urban studies website about future speakers and Moddock's work.



**URBN**

**URBN DUG Lunch and Learn**

**Maddock Thomas**

**Putting America Back on Track: The Case for a 21st Century Public Rail System**

Maddock Thomas '26 is an Urban Studies concentrator and Fellow at the Stone Inequality Initiative. His recently published white paper, which he has been presenting at conferences across the United States and Canada, examines a potential public ownership model for American railroads in the 21st century.

**12-1pm Friday, November 1 Maxcy Hall 109**



Scan to see presentation!!

## Urban DUG Fall Bike Ride

The Urban Studies DUG spent the Election Day afternoon biking down the East Bay Bike Path, a former rail line that now allows bikers and pedestrians to travel from Providence to Bristol with views of the Narragansett Bay. Here are some photos courtesy of James Hardy of the URBN DUG.



*James Hardy*

*Photo Credits: James Hardy*

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

### Professor Nicole Pangborn

We are excited to announce Nicole Pangborn as the newest member of the Urban Studies Program starting this Fall semester.

A Visiting Lecturer at Brown University, she is teaching courses at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs and in the Urban Studies program. These courses include Investigating the City (URBN 1100, F2024) and Senior Honors Seminar (IAPA 1816A, F2024).

Completing her PhD in 2019 at Princeton University, Nicole spent six years training to become an ethnographer, learning immersive fieldwork techniques, studying face-to-face interaction, and conducting in-depth interviews. Her dissertation was an ethnography of an Italian bakery on the outskirts of Providence, RI, where she lived and worked for two years.

*Matthew Roth*



# NEW PUBLICATIONS

## Professor Marion Orr

Kyle Gee

Professor Marion Orr is the Frederick Lippitt Professor of Public Policy and a Professor of Political Science and Urban Studies at Brown University. He teaches the course Urban Policy and Politics, which I took this past semester. Before joining Brown, he was a member of the political science faculty at Duke University. Professor Orr is an expert in American politics, with a particular focus on urban politics, race and ethnic politics, and African American politics. He has authored and edited eight books. His upcoming work, *The House of Diggs The Untold Story of Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr.: America's Most Consequential Black Federal Legislator* (unofficial title) (University of North Carolina Press), highlights the influential career of Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. of Detroit, Michigan, who is widely regarded as one of the most impactful Black federal legislators in U.S. history. From Orr's university bio.

### How did you go about researching Charles C. Diggs Jr?

Diggs served in the senate from 1955 to 1980, from Detroit and he was I show in the book the most consequential black person to ever serve in the US congress. I researched the book largely based on congressman Diggs personal papers. He left about 750 boxes of personal papers from his Congressional life and there's also some papers from his funeral home business. His father and mother own a prominent funeral home called the House of Diggs.

So it's largely based on archival data, papers from the Congressman. I also went to the archives of the six presidents that he served under from Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter. So, I also have papers from six libraries from the presidents.

### Oh wow! What initially inspired you to write this biography?

I learned about Congressmen Diggs when I was an undergraduate student attending Savannah State College. My professor, his name was Haines Walton Jr. who happened to be a very, very prominent political scientist. He is now deceased. But, I learned about Congressman diggs taking courses at Savannah State from Professor Walton. In many of the classes that Dr. Walton taught Congressman Diggs came up a lot, whether it was urban politics, he was a pioneer in African politics. So, when Walton talked about Africa, Diggs came up. When Haines Walton talked about the Congress, Diggs came up.

..So, what inspired me to write about it was that I learned about this man many years ago and I knew he was significant and consequential and I

knew no one had written a book about him.

### **What would you say the most important takeaway of the book is for its readers?**

I think the most important takeaway from the book is that Congressman Diggs was, as I said, the most consequential black person to serve in Congress and that he left some important tangible achievements. So that is what I want people to know. He has been overlooked. He was significant in many aspects. He was the founder of the Congressional Black Caucus. Today, Washington, DC has what is called “Home Rule” which allowed DC residents to elect the mayor, city council mayors. All of that was done by Congressman Diggs back in the early 70s. Before Congressman Diggs, DC could not elect its mayor, the president appointed the mayor of Washington DC.

...The other important thing people will learn from this book about the role Congressman Diggs played in the American anti-apartheid movement. This is the policy in South Africa where the white minority was ruling over the black majority. Diggs was the leading person in Congress pushing for a change in US-Africa policy. He was known on Capitol Hill as “Mr. Africa” because he knew so much and lobbied so much on the behalf of Africa.

### **What are the main lessons that modern activists can draw from figures like Congressman Diggs?**

Well, Diggs was a coalition builder. He was able to work with almost everybody, from the conservative

on one end to the progressive on the other. What I argue in the book is Diggs practiced what I call a “politics of strategic moderation.” He practiced a moderate approach to politics trying to work across the aisle with a lot of different people. And he did that because he figured in a very pragmatic way that being a moderate would help move things along.

...So what people can learn from him is that one, he was a coalition builder and two, that he was able to build a coalition across political spectrums.

### **Lastly, for our audience when does the book come out?**

It comes out next year, probably fall of 2025. The University of North Carolina Press.

**Awesome! Thank you for your time! Looking forward to the upcoming release.**



*Photo Courtesy of Brown University*

## Professor Dietrich Neumann

*Kyle Gee*

Dietrich Neumann is a professor for the history of Modern Architecture and Urban Studies at Brown University. I currently take one of his courses, HIAA0850 Modern Architecture, which deals with many of the works of consequential architects of the early 20th century. His publications have dealt with the history of skyscrapers, movie set design, architectural illumination, building materials and in particular with the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. He has won fellowships at the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montréal, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, at the American Academies in Berlin and Rome and won the Founder's (1996) and Philip Johnson Awards (2003) from the Society of Architectural Historians, where he served as president 2008-2010 and was named a fellow in 2018. He was the first Vincent Scully Visiting Professor at the Yale School of Architecture and is a member of the Committee on Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. His new book is called *Mies Van der Rhoe: An Architect of His Time*. From Neumann's University Bio.



*Photo courtesy of Brown University*

### **What inspired your book?**

I've always found Mies Van Der Rhoe fascinating because he's always had such a clear goal in doing architecture. He wanted to try out how you could reduce a building and its parts and details to their absolute essence. Take everything that was unnecessary away and get to the core of the building. He would design a house that was simply a glass box lifted up from the ground. There were no wall or windows because the outer walls were all out of glass so they are like windows. So, it was really just the ceiling, the floor, glass walls all around and everything in there. The sleeping area, living area, that's like the most essential house you can think of...Or he would think about details. He would break it down into something that was very clear and readable and simple. You would understand from looking at this detail how the whole building held together. I found that fascinating. The longer I worked on him, the more I realized how complicated it really was underneath and behind the scenes.

...Or something like that glass house I described...it would be very hard to live there because it would heat up in the summer and it would be cold in the winter...there were all kinds of problems with it...so I find that kind of fascinating...it's a grand idea of simplicity, the execution teaches you how complicated life really is.

....I also found that the books written about Mies were not critical enough. They would only address the one side, the great idea of simplicity, but not the problems that came with it. I called it a "gentle reevaluation of Mies," a little more fact based and less hagiographic.

*Kyle Gee*

**What do you want the readers to understand about the book and architect?**

I hope it is both a guide book towards his work and an invitation to engage and explore it. A lot of it is here in the United States, but also in Europe in Spain, Germany, and Czechia. At the same time, introduce this notion of complexity of the conditions of architectural production. You might have a simple message and a simple idea, but in reality it is hard to make it actually happen. So, I try to introduce that and also what often makes it complicated are the conditions of the time, the politics, the money, the problems with the law, building codes. I find this dichotomy fascinating with all of the simple ideas on the one side and all the complications on the other. I hope that makes the book more interesting than if it were just all about the genius he was.

**How does the book contribute to the deeper understanding of Mies's legacy or philosophy?**

I hope it adds a new, more complicated voice to the books that are already out there. This is maybe the 20th or 30th book on him, so I hope it offers something new or interesting about him that the readers can enjoy. It is also a window into the time in which he lived. It is during interwar Germany which was very vibrant and interesting and post war United States with its economic boom and all kinds of stuff going on. He had all kinds of things to offer in both scenarios.

**What does the book reveal about the architects work and historical context from where he emerged from?**

It is often overlooked how important it is to understand the impact of the social, cultural, and economic context. It is very important. How he responded to it is also quite interesting. He was quite stubborn, so sometimes he did not respond to it at all. He was almost tone deaf at times. For instance, in the Depression, everybody is out of work and money and he designs houses for the super wealthy. Big pieces of land, pools. He was criticized quite heavily for it. But later, years later, people only look at how beautiful all these houses are and forget how heavily criticized they were at the time. It adds a little wrinkle to the story, makes things more complicated.

**Where can people purchase your book?**

It is available on Amazon and local bookstores!

# STUDENT PHOTOS



Photo Credit: Leanna Le



Photo Credit: Adolfo Diaz

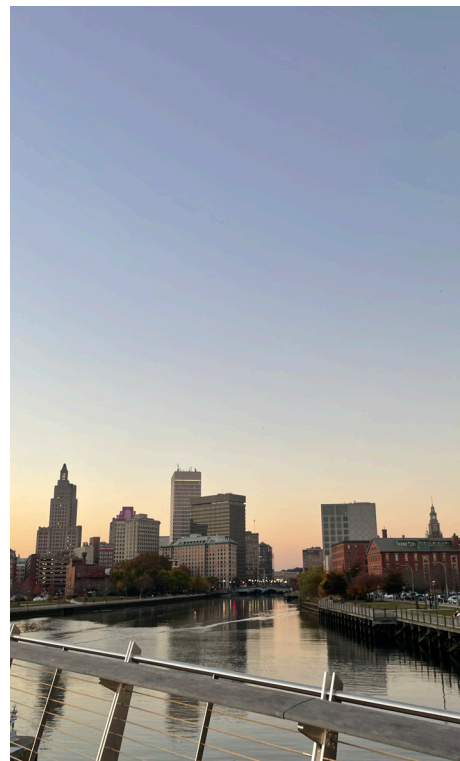


Photo Credit: Chloe Sik



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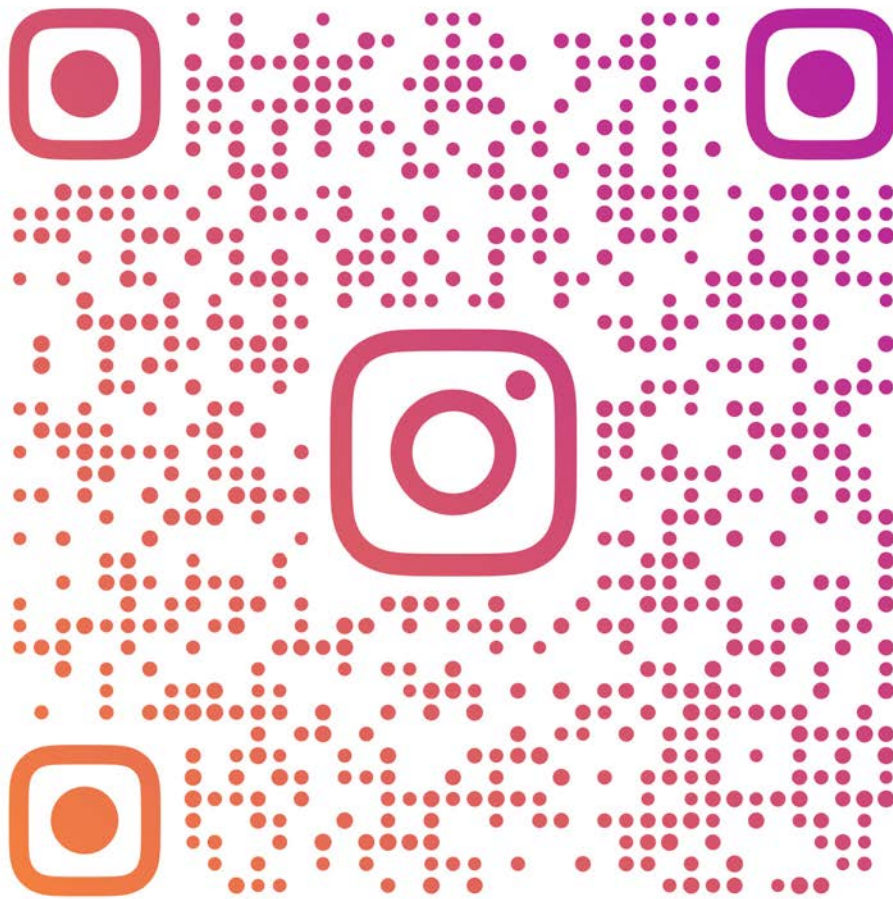
Photo Credit: Adolfo Diaz

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# ***SOCIAL MEDIA***

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