

Salvation Army Thrift Store Project






DOING THE
MOST GOODSM

By Emmie Ruth Wise, Alicia Chan, and Tyler Lee
Your Design, Your Invention
2.23.16

Introduction

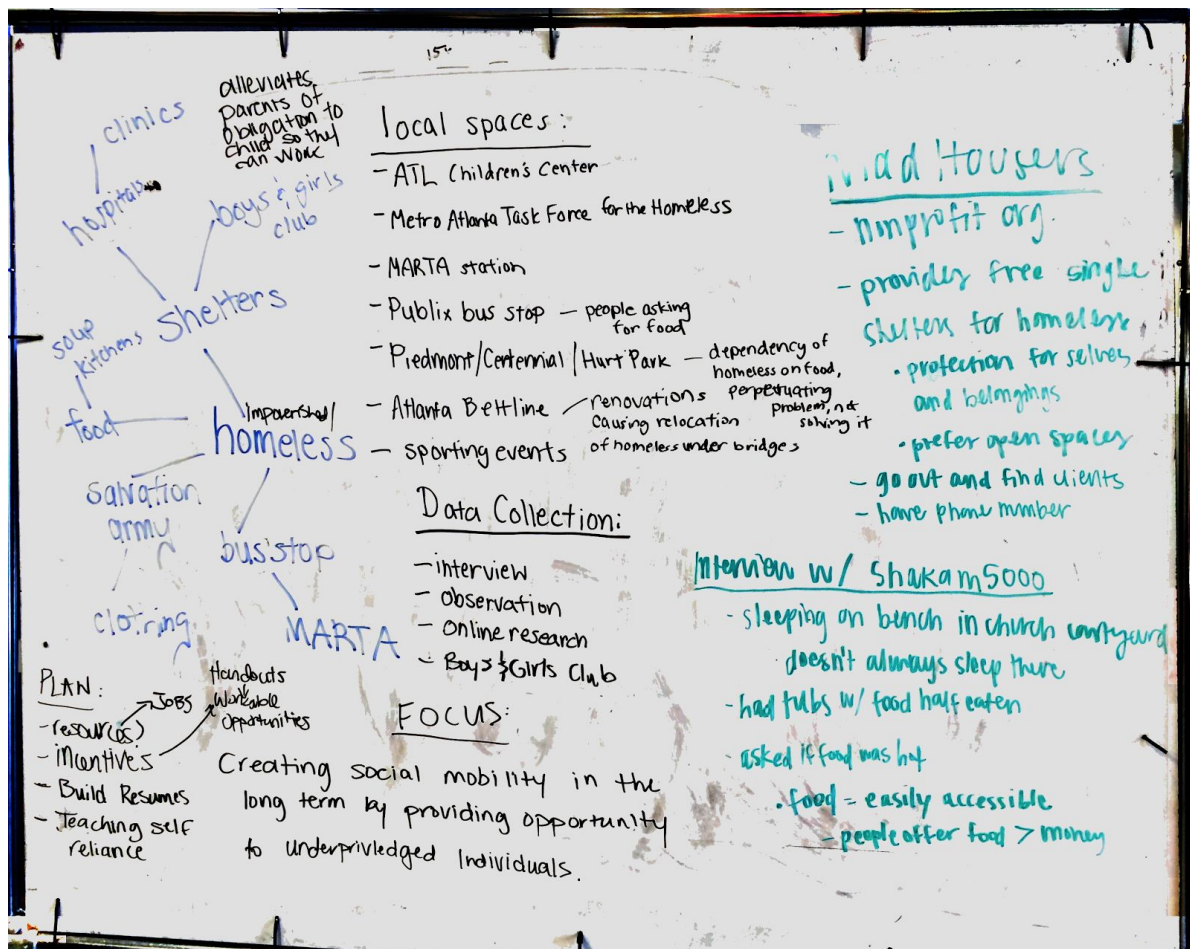
We were tasked with the challenge of finding a general community in a nearby location that could be improved upon. After deciding we wanted our focal point to be generally philanthropic, we set out to find areas which could be modified to better assist the homeless populations of Atlanta. Through careful observation and research we developed a compilation of data on where changes could be made. This report outlines the findings of our investigation to be converted into steps for the future.

Team Members	
	Emmie Ruth is a first year Industrial Design major and loves approaching problems through creative solutions. Through Madhousers, an organization started by Georgia Tech students, her heart for the homeless has grown, peaking her interest in the Salvation Army community. In the future, Emmie Ruth aspires to work for John Deere, combining her passion for the environment with her creativity.
	Alicia is a first year Computer Science major at Georgia Tech. She has a passion for projects that are both creative and meaningful, which is what drew her attention to work with her design team on studying the community of a Salvation Army store. For her future career, she hopes to work on user-experience projects and product design.
	Tyler is first year computer engineer with avid interests in philanthropy, the outdoors, traveling, web development, 3D design, and entrepreneurship. The inspiration to help the community is derived through his wonderful mother who taught him the value of hard work and kindness.

Project Overview

We investigated the Salvation Army thrift store located just outside of the Georgia Tech campus, on Marietta Street which is a general purpose store entirely stocked with donations. Anyone is permitted to shop in the store and it serves to generate revenue for Salvation Army programs such as the Boys and Girls Club daycare center, rehabilitation for adults with drug addictions, and overseas clothing outfitters. The store itself is about the size of a typical small warehouse, able to house rows upon rows of clothes, several sets of furniture, collections of books, and shelves of small housewares. Salvation Army has 1500 thrift stores nationwide which service over 216,000 people per year.

Below is our brainstorm of ideas after doing some preliminary research on the many ideas we brainstormed on sticky notes. We wanted our project to have a humanitarian focus, and initially thought about focusing on the homeless community in Atlanta, and from there branched out into the different places homeless people might be located at, as well as the different organizations that help homeless people and their families. After a class discussion, we decided to hone in on a specific organization so that we could better study the area and have a consistent target community to focus on.



Brainstorming



We began our brainstorming with one word: “homeless” and from there branched off into every possible avenue of reaching the impoverished. Many modern ideas emerged including the idea of an automated borrowing service, improvements to modern day systems commonly used by the poor, and general locations where alterations to help the misfortune could be made. Eventually we narrowed down our list to these ideas and spaces.

Spaces:

- Boys and Girls Club
- Salvation Army
- Food bank
- Madhousers
- Homeless shelters

Ideas:

- Communal home to support needs of homeless
- reduced cost transportation
- lending service for items (think lawnmowers, maternity clothes, etc...)
- more public access to internet
- modernized educational resources
- free job support
- paid internship in minor workforce roles

Research

1. As Atlanta is renovating areas like the beltline, people who used to live under the bridges are forced to relocated. As the article mentions, homeless people are generally regarded as an “eyesore”. A problem to address is how to integrate them into communities that are upgrading, such as creating homeless housing that blends into the artwork/installations?
<http://clatl.com/atlanta/beltline-is-no-home-to-homeless/Content?oid=3925607>
2. Another concern is the dependency of homeless people on certain places to get food, such as a park where they know religious groups will come and do community service. Feeding them alone is a temporary solution, but over time perpetuates the problem. Anyway to offer them jobs, so they can earn necessities like food, but also have a way to build up resumes and eventually re-enter the workforce?
<http://www.atlantadowntown.com/article/can-feeding-the-homeless-be-a-bad-idea>
3. Organizations already in place provide areas where improvement may be needed. such as Atlanta Mission and Madhousers. The latter is a local nonprofit started by architecture students from Georgia Tech that offers makeshift homes to homeless throughout the city. They are volunteer based and create simple “build it yourself” homes out of plywood and deliver directly to the homeless client. Madhousers rely on going out and find homeless people and also a phone number they can be contacted through, so advertising and publicity is definitely a weak point. According to Madhouser Tracy Woodard, homeless people prefer open, public spaces in contrast to wooded areas because they feel safer when they can easily see what is around them. Also, many homeless ironically avoid homeless shelters due to the high crime rates, as well as close quarters which welcomes disease. This could be an area in need of improvement?
<http://madhousers.org>, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/9460668061/>
4. Interview with homeless man:
 - food is most easily accessible because most people are willing to give away food before money
 - sleeping inside church gates on bench, doesn't always stay in same place
 - asked if food was hot, had tubs of half eaten food lying beside bench
 - friendly, personable, goes by “Shockem 5000”

Data Collection

Our process of data collection involved several visits to the Salvation Army store, becoming more involved with each iteration. Each visit, we took a notebook, pen, and our phones in order to take notes and take pictures.

The first visit made on February 9th consisted of touring the store. For some of us, it was our first time there, and we had no idea that Salvation Army had a location so close to Georgia Tech's West Campus Housing. Initially, we browsed the store, getting a feel for what it felt like to be a customer. We were greeted by an employee who told us that there was a half off deal for certain items of clothing. We then walked through the clothing sections, noting how clothes were organized by color, and also by gender. We used a pen and a notebook to record observations, as well as our phones to take pictures of the layout of the store. Initially, we asked employees, but the day we visited, they were very busy and directed us to the general manager, who offered to talk to Tyler on a less busy afternoon. In order to make efficient use of our visit there, we randomly walked to customers and asked them about their experiences with the store. We had no specific interview questions prepared ahead of time, and instead asked them about their general experiences, letting them guide the conversation, eventually leading to what they wished could be improved. We talked to one customer from a lower socioeconomic status, and two customers from an upper-middle class socioeconomic status.

The next visit was when Tyler visited and spoke with the manager during store operation and was able to observe the store functions in real time. The manager described the program in vastly more detail, outlining the purpose of each of the personnel and the format of the Salvation Army thrift shop. The idea behind the store is to follow policy to generate revenue for the programs which benefit communities around the globe. The interview involved discussing store problems and general issues involving the day to day practices such as why smart tags aren't used, how donations are processed, and why electronic goods can't be found in the store. The talk also outlined many of the value issues the store has including the commonality of stealing, the need for clothing and blankets, and the values taught by the programs which accept anyone in need of help.

The third visit was when Emmie and Alicia visited to create a physical diagram and a sequence model of the store. This time, we didn't really ask questions. We collected data by walking around the store, exploring every section, sketching out diagrams in a notebook, taking notes, and taking pictures with our phones. Later, we recreated our sketches on notes on the computer using shapes to create a neater physical diagram. We also purchased items there, and in the process we learned about how each week a different colored tag goes on sale for half off, and how they have student discounts.

The fourth visit to the Salvation Army began with clarifying some of the data collected from before. Data was collected via interviewing employees, and recorded in a notebook. First, we asked the manager specifics about the tagging system. We learned that merchandise is cycled out every 4 weeks, and that the oldest tag is put on sale for half off. Anything half off that isn't

sold is taken off the racks and back to the warehouse for selling off to foreign countries, and to make room for new merchandise. After asking the manager about the warehouse, we were directed to speaking with Jeremiah Hinson, the Director of Development and Advancement at the rehabilitation center right behind the store. He knew the warehouse well and walked us through the processes of how items were brought in, sorted, repaired, labeled, and sent to different places to sell. We took notes on the processes he described to us and also took pictures of the different rooms inside the warehouse.

All handwritten data was typed up on our design team's shared Google Drive, and pictures were also uploaded to this folder so we could easily keep track of and access all of our data. The first time we collected data, we weren't very sure how to go about doing so, so we did not have prepared questions, and visited the Salvation Army with vague goals of what information we wanted to collect. As we narrowed down to specific people and places we wanted to talk to, such as speaking with a manager, visiting the warehouse, or figuring out how their tag system worked, we would plan out what questions we wanted to ask beforehand, and take pictures of important sections of the store. Our data collection process became less random and more focused on accomplishing certain goals of filling in patches in our data.

Alicia			
Date	Time	Hours	Activity
2/9/16	3 PM - 4 PM	1	Interviewed customers, store overview
2/15/16	4:30 PM - 6:00 PM	1.5	Created physical sketch of store, asked about tag system
2/18/16	11 AM - 12:30 PM	1.5	Warehouse tour, asked questions, took notes
Total		4	

Emmie			
Date	Time	Hours	Activity
2/15/16	4:30-6:00 PM	1.5	Observed customer shopping patterns, talked to workers and customer
2/18/16	11 AM - 12:30 PM	1.5	Warehouse tour, asked questions, took notes
Total		3	

Tyler			
Date	Time	Hours	Activity
2/9/16	3 PM - 4 PM	1	Store overview, questioned customers, took notes
2/10/16	1 PM - 2:30 PM	1.5	Interviewed manager about store functions
2/18/16	11 AM - 12:30 PM	1.5	Warehouse tour, facility overview, met with staff
Total		4	

February 9th, 2016

Interviews at Salvation Army:

General Observations:

- how is stuff sorted?
- clothing is hand tagged, stapled to clothing
- dressing rooms are bathroom stalls, unisex
- neon lights depicting what areas there are “men”, “ladies”, etc.
- clothing sorted by type, and then by color

Manager:

- will obtain Wednesday at 1:30pm

Female Shopper:

- used to have half price on wednesday, would like for that to come back
- she comes very often
- when asked why she chooses salvation army over other stores, she said because it's high quality clothing at low prices “good buys, brands, quality”

Middle or Upper Middle:

- man is a real estate broker, not from the area, but are here every year for a convention, in particular this year they were at the capitol, meeting with a legislative committee
- go thrifting pretty often
- start off with artwork, books, clothing
- impulse buyers, saw one thing they needed and then picked up more
- said that the store was well laid out compared to other thrift shops
- had public restrooms, quite clean, staff was friendly

Donation Process:

- it's relatively easy to donate
- drive through, guy takes it out of car
- tax contributions
- sometimes salvation army will pick up large items like pianos

February 10th, 2016

Meeting With Salvation Army Manager:

- Personal
 - o Salvation Army has store policies and procedures that are applicable to every thrift shop
 - o Inventory is done in nearby warehouse, managed separately from store
- Donations
 - o Typically, people bring donations by car and this is sorted in warehouse into sellable items and things to be auctioned off
 - o there are call services if a donor has a lot of merchandise to give
 - o you can drop stuff off at any store, the store are managed so that each one remains stocked, surpluses and shortages are dealt with in this way
 - o if there is a severe shortage the store will likely go out of business
 - o store is generally popular, well maintained, regularly visited/donated to
 - o this is primarily due to location
- all proceeds go to salvation army programs such as nearby rehab center
 - o all someone has to do is ask for help and they are enrolled into programs
- public auction
 - o held from 9 to 10:30 on wednesday mornings
 - o any item that isn't sold in store or deemed unfit to sell in store are auctioned off here
 - o this includes computers, computer parts, and many electronics
 - o items that aren't sold are typically cycled through a few auctions before being sent elsewhere, given away, or discarded
- stealing
 - o stealing is a major problem for the store
 - o reduces income for Salvation army programs
 - o desperate need, especially during winter when people are trying to stay warm (ie blankets and jackets)
- clothing/apparel
 - o color sorting is salvation army policy
 - o furniture is grouped by sets (ie dining room set)
 - o nicer stuff is kept near front of the store
- pricing
 - o done in warehouse
 - o general guidelines which have been refined in recent years but no strict procedure
 - o guidelines are generally price ranges for items
 - o upper management has input, especially on rarities and expensive items
- smart tags
 - o too expensive to implement

- would prevent stealing
 - reusable
 - time consuming to attach/remove
- sporadic
 - metro atlanta is full of thrift shops and thrifting is actually competitive between thrift stores
- clothes closet
 - would compete with salvation army but would provide a huge service for impoverished individuals who can't afford warm clothes
- off the records
 - employees will offer reduced prices or free coats/blankets for desperate individuals without salvation army acknowledgement (turn a blind eye)
 - matter of life/death for some
 - customer regularly barter but salvation army has non-negotiable prices
- salvation army
 - brand brings in many more donations
 - people recognize it and donate more
- store bottlenecks
 - houseware department is hard to navigate
 - people typically spend longest time there, easily crowds
 - shopping carts can't maneuver there
 - checkout lines can be long, due to finding prices on tags...
- money/food donations
 - sent to Salvation army programs

A few more ideas/observations

- clothing closets at walmarts/highly populated places
 - would interfere with salvation army business but manager thinks it would be a wonderful idea because there is a huge need for free coats/blankets
- varied prices depending on customer
 - those who thrift for fun vs actual need
 - could reduce prices for those under poverty line, offset by raise prices for wealthy
- manager didn't do too much besides keeps store organized/stocked
 - did talk to a few customers on bigger ticket items

Follow up questions

- what happens to items that don't sell
 - probably auctioned off or given to programs
- is there a volunteer program which could help alleviate the workload?
- how is the inventory system managed, could there be an database to show what each store has?

February 18, 2016

Warehouse Visit with Jeremiah Hinson

Overview:

- rehab is 130 beds, 6 month program, on-site, near the SA store
- home pickups, one of the few programs that does so, but they would prefer home pickups to be of large items, other items they will direct you to use the store or donation bins
- they have 10 -12 donation trucks running a day to pick up donations
- beneficiaries sort and take items off trucks
- the warehouse we visited is the only one in Atlanta
- they also have trucks that leave the warehouse to go back out to the stores

Inside the warehouse:

- different sections for all the different items such as clothing, books, furniture, shoes, electronics (brick-brack items were in the basement)
- upholstery shop for cleaning and repairing furniture before selling

Auction:

- anything that's not fit for sale in the store goes to auction
- anything that sits in the store for 3-4 weeks and doesn't sell also goes to auction
- if things can't be sold during the auction, clothing will be compressed and shipped overseas where they may be sold by third parties in other country's stores, markets, etc.
- 9:00, \$2 for a bidder number, located in warehouse, and the outdoor area next to the warehouse
- about 15 people on a good day
- can buy a whole bin of "mystery items" like in Pawn Stars

Clothing Processing:

- hang 10,000 items
- process about 25,000 (essentially around half of them to ragout, which means they will be compressed, or thrown away)
- sorting done by beneficiaries, there are a bunch of tables, with a person on each side, sorting the clothing into different types
- pricing is done by paid employees, not beneficiaries, and essentially they go through the bags quickly, tossing clothing into either ragout or a labeled bin with a price
- that bin of one price of clothing will be hung on a rack, which all contains clothing items of the same price
- afterwards they are tagged by beneficiaries
- there is also a shoe section, with men who sort shoes and put price stickers on them, single shoes are sorted away, and sold to a company who takes single shoes

Beneficiaries:

- meetings every morning
- only job where if they meet a certain quota they are done for the day
- work everyday except sunday and one day that they get for break
- don't work anymore than a typical employee, 40 hour work week (breaks at 10am, 2pm)
- programs like Georgia Works
- after 6 months, they can stay a little longer, maybe pay rent if they found a job, essentially are allowed to slowly transition back into working world
- take AA, NA, Celebrate Recovery classes
- also GED classes through MetroTech, and have tutors available

Books:

- they have a barcode scanner for books that will show up either green, orange, or red
- the scanner scans the book and then compares it with online markets
- green means it sells very well, and they will sell it to a company that sells them at a good price, gives SA 50% of the profit
- orange means that it sells well, but that there's a lot of it online, so online sales for it would be slow, and so they'll stick it for sale in the store
- red means they need to put aside, it doesn't sell well, and they'll sell it to a company that takes them away

Recycling:

- Jeremiah mentioned that they don't recycle enough, something they're really working on changing
- they compact anything they can't sell
- furniture recycling is an issue because they can't recycle treated wood, no way to process

Ebay:

- really nice items, will go on ebay if they think they can make more profit that way
- usually about 50 items to sell
- up for a week, go to auction if they aren't sold

Stores:

- 4 locations in the general area
- Roswell, Duluth are the biggest
- Atlanta, Snellville are the smaller ones
- the amount of items a store receives is proportional to what the store needs
- if store is running low manager will call them to tell them what they need
- generally big stores get 6 trucks of clothing and 1-2 furniture trucks
 - drivers are paid employees (sometimes former beneficiaries)
 - usually there will be a driver and 1 to 2 beneficiaries to help

A Hectic Day:

- when asked about what is a hectic day, apparently every day is a hectic day because they constantly have trucks coming in and out and have to restock stores
- SA does not have an issue with donations because of the national branding and advertising
- when visiting warehouse, there was a whole section downstairs of overflow items waiting to be sorted, mostly from the Christmas rush of donations
- Wed and Sat are more busy because they are sale days

Community Relations:

- something they want to improve on, making connections with GT and GSU, getting the word out about what they do, and the rehab program that is being funded by the efforts and revenue from the SA store
- going to have an Earth Day event soon as a push to donate to SA

Stealing:

- not really a problem for the warehouse, they get so many donations
- Jeremiah said it's more of a problem for the rehab program and what it says about the thief's character, than it is a financial problem
- items of real worth are sold on Ebay anyways

Taking SA Online:

- when asked about making an SA ebay/website, just for SA, he said it's more than their current processes allow for them to do
- unlike traditional stores like target, they have ever-changing merchandise, and never a constant amount of a certain item, so it'd be a big tedious process to upload pictures of all the items they have available
- satrucks.org

*interesting to note that GT students for their capstone project worked on improving the efficiency of SA trucks

Tagging in the Store:

- items cycled out every 4 weeks, so the items with a tag that is the oldest will first go to 50% off, and then it will be taken off the racks to make room for new items
- for example, today they got rid of the green tags, which were week 4, and earlier in the week, green tags were 50% off
- now, week 5 items, with a white tag are 50% off
- in addition, week 8, the newest week will have a green tag and will soon be put on the racks

Hiring Employees:

- employees are paid

- some used to be beneficiaries, but they don't make a special effort to only hire homeless or people from the program per se

Transporting Merchandise

- store is not allowed to deliver merchandise, or even load into vehicles
- customers are connected with unaffiliated individuals who transport merchandise for small fee
- customers can also rent pick-up truck from Home Depot for small payment

Photos

Photos from Store:



Store generally has organization issues with many spaces being disturbed faster than they can be cleaned.



Clothing is often perturbed by customers and left in an unorganized fashion.

Photos from the Warehouse Tour:



Bales of unsold or unacceptable for sale clothing that is sold and shipped overseas.



Sorting and tagging floor. There are two beneficiaries per sorting table, organizing clothing by type. Behind them are employees who go through clothing quickly and assign prices.



Clothing is thrown into an appropriate bin labeled with a price.



Another sorting area, except for housewares and random trinkets.



Storage area of items from holiday donation rush, waiting to be sorted and priced.



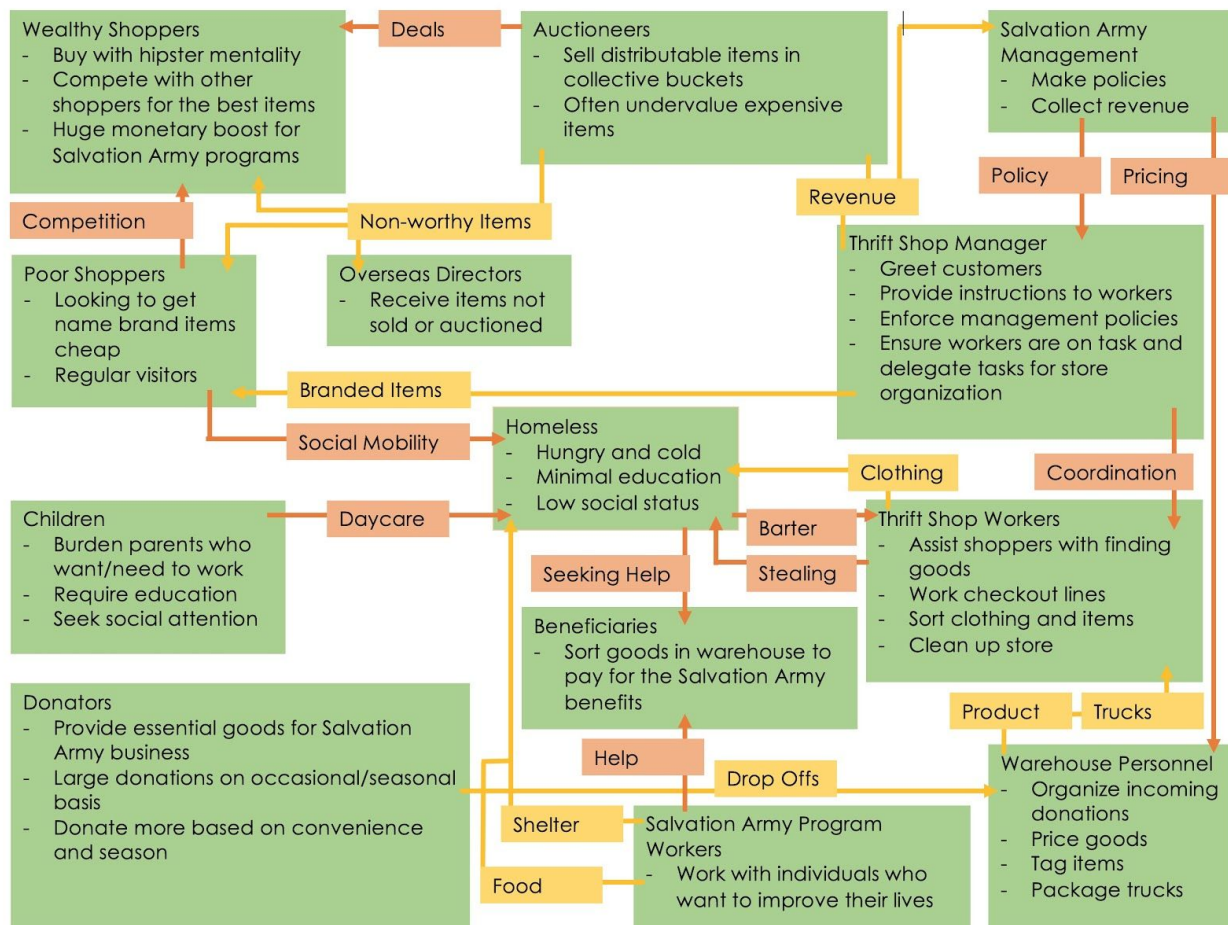
Information about their public auction that occurs daily to sell goods that did not sell well in the stores, or were deemed to be of unacceptable quality to sell in the stores.



The layout of goods for the auction.

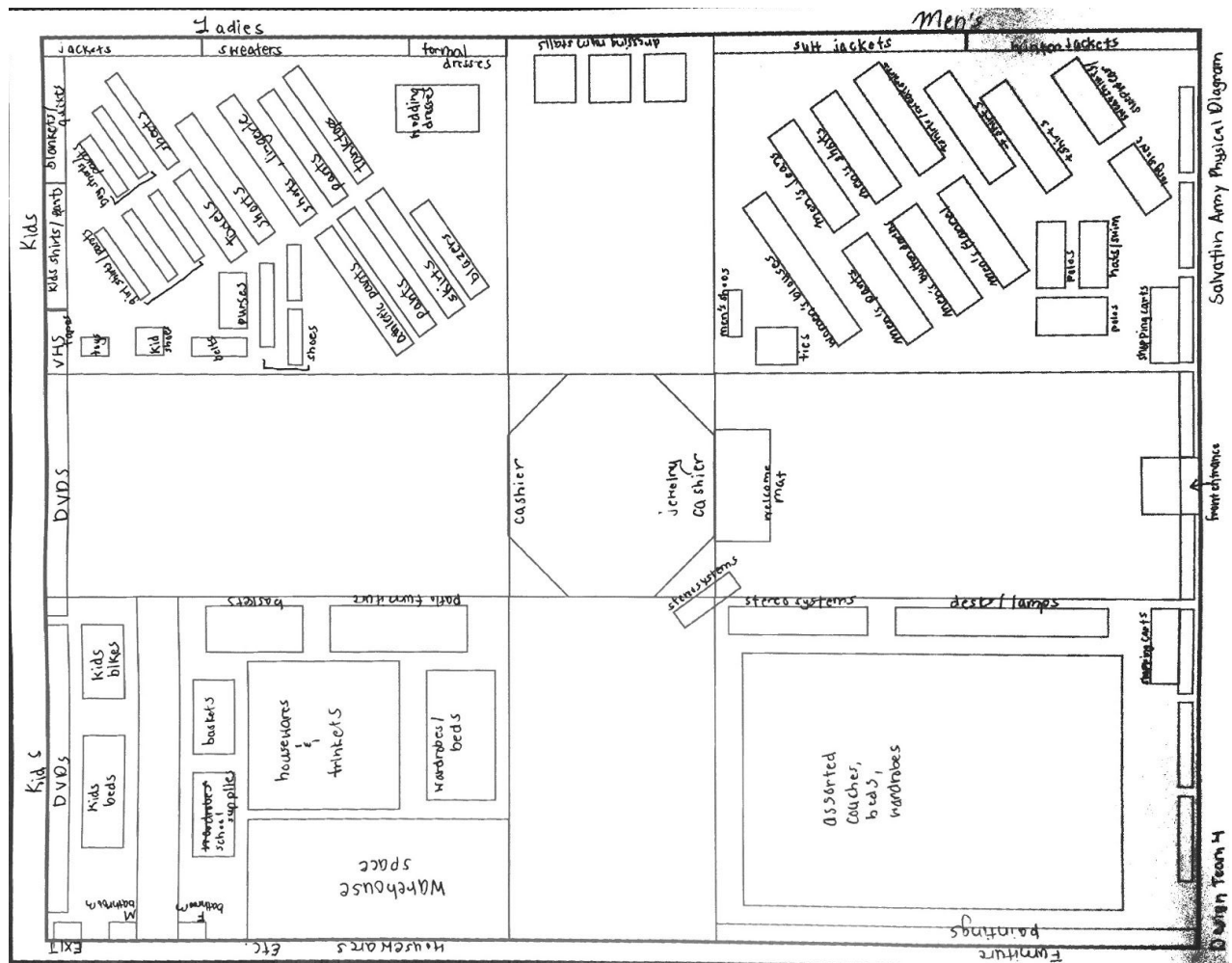
Models

Flow Diagram:



This model represents the flow of materials and ideas between people as it pertains to the current system for the Salvation Army thrift store. The green boxes represent people or groups of people, the yellow are items, and the orange are concepts or ideas which relate the people. The information portrayed shows the larger picture of how the store is organized and which items are related. It helps to capture the repercussions of events such as the auction system, the revenue the store generates, or the disadvantages of stealing on the store for the program beneficiaries.

Physical Diagram:

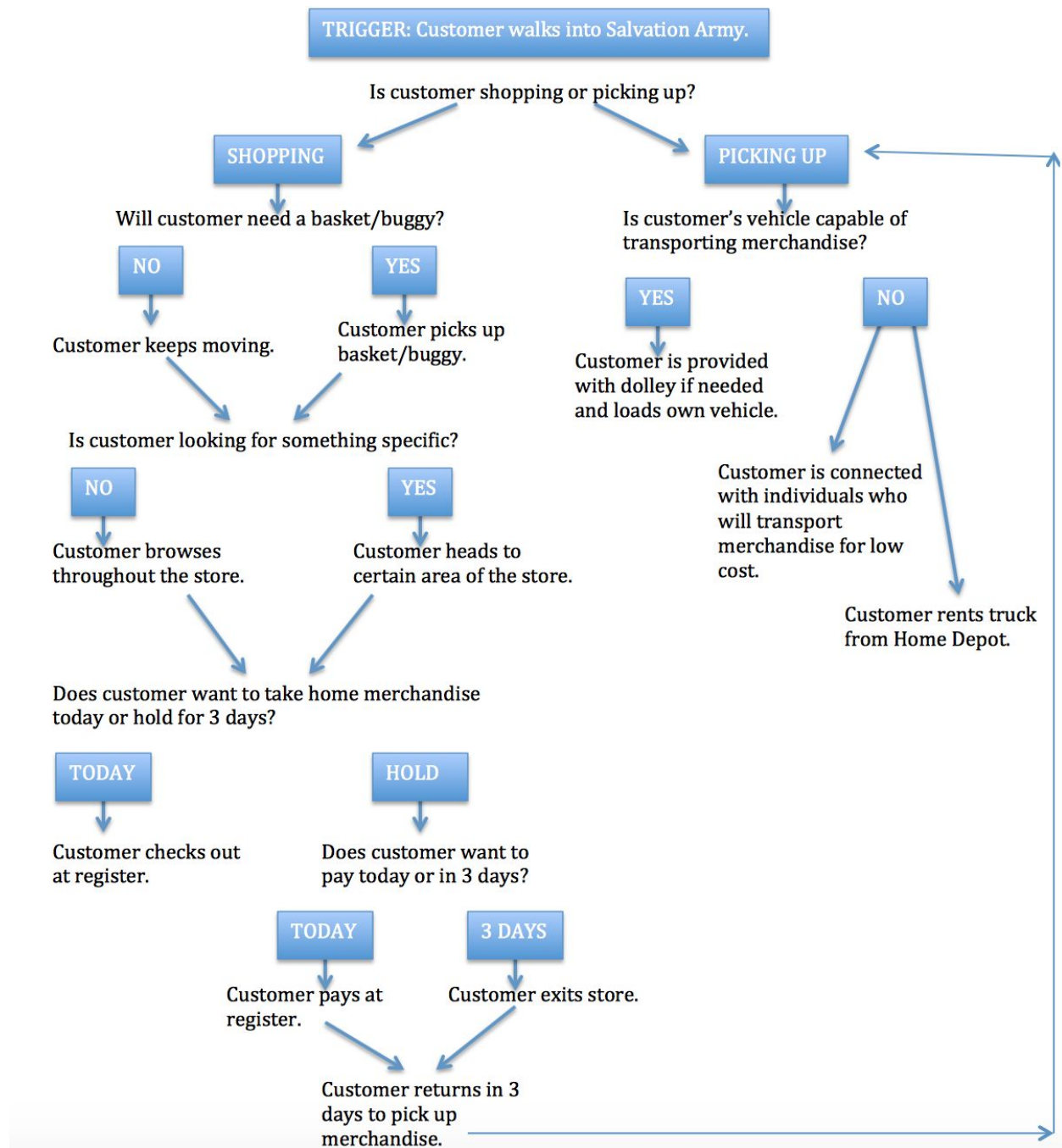


The purpose of this model is to capture the organization of the store, in order to better understand the flow of customers and goods, the process from entering the store to checking out. The model acts as a visual complement to the systems and processes diagrams as well as the flow diagram.

It can be clearly seen that the Men's and Ladies' sections are both crowded in the layout of the racks. This was also observed while walking around the store. It was possible to become trapped in certain corners of the store, or have to move out of the aisle for another customer to get through.

In the diagram it can be seen that there is organization in the store, such as for different genders, or for furniture, but within the respective sections, there is much disorganization.

Trigger Model:



The purpose of this model is to represent the different ways customers interact with the store. When a customer enters the Salvation Army (SA), they are either shopping or picking up merchandise. The model shows the cycle of customers, from first entering the store, to check out, and if needed, to pick up.

Based on observation, customers of a higher socioeconomic status came in the store with an idea of what they would purchase that day. Even if they left the store with no merchandise, this brand of customer tended to browse the store quickly compared to customers of a lower socioeconomic status. The latter, in contrast, tended to shop throughout the store more

thoroughly, in search of the best deals. These customers were also more likely to grab a shopping buggy or basket.

According to a worker, Salvation Army is not allowed to load merchandise into customer's vehicles during a pick-up because in the past, people have blamed damage to the vehicle or item on SA, and tried to sue. Often, people purchase merchandise that their vehicle is unable to transport, yet Salvation Army will provide contact information to unaffiliated people who will transport the item(s) for a small fee. Also, renting a pick-up truck from Home Depot is an option they suggest.

Because Salvation Army caters to a wide variety of customers, they have a rich environment for solutions. These solutions are able to cater to certain types of customers, based on the ways they shop throughout the store, or even to all customer types, because everyone enters through the front door, and purchases merchandise at the cash register, located in the center of the floor plan.

Findings

What we discovered from our visits to the Salvation Army and our interviews with the employees is that since 1865, they have developed and perfected a process that works for their purposes. Salvation Army is a national organization and held to a certain level of standards across the board, regardless of the location where a shop, warehouse, or rehabilitation center opens up. They have a specific system of having beneficiaries work in the warehouse sorting merchandise for sale, or loading trucks for shipping. They deliberately use humans employees as important “machines” in their merchandise sorting in order to include their beneficiaries who are going through rehabilitation and help ease them back into work life and the real world. Their warehouse is well organized, with different types of items separated into different rooms, and dedicated employees to sort, repair, or price each type of item.

One major pain point was one specifically brought up by Jeremiah when he was speaking about changes the organization was going through, was the problem of recycling. Throughout the tour, there were many times when we passed items that were deemed unsellable, or sold poorly in the stores. For clothing, the articles were baled together, to be sold and shipped overseas to their markets. For books, they were sold to another company. For furniture, because the wood was treated, it could not be recycled, so they would just compact it and send it to the landfill.

Another pain point that we as customers discovered walking through the store was that the aisles were tight. It was difficult for more than one customer to be in the aisle at a time without having to ask one person to move aside in order to walk through. With the addition of shopping carts, the aisles become more congested. In addition, because there is so much clothing and the clothing hangers are crammed on the racks, after customers go through the clothing, areas are easily left in disarray, and this happens faster than the employees can go through the store to clean it up.

Lastly, a minor but not insignificant pain point for Salvation Army in general was the problem with stealing. It poses no serious financial barrier for the store which receives enormous amounts of donations but it does pose a moral dilemma for an institution so closely focused on bringing those involved with crimes and drugs back into the light. The negative influence hurts those on the cusp of re-entering society and even though the store manager and employees keep a keen eye on the store, items still do get stolen. Also, people outside the program have been known to steal blankets and coats during desperate times.

From these pain points there are a couple places we could start in terms of brainstorming ideas for the Salvation Army. One place is recycling, including improving recycling processes or finding ways within Salvation Army to repurpose materials, instead of sending and selling things away. In terms of the store, we could think about how to make the aisles less congested, or how to prevent the store from getting so disorganized.

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from surveying this community is that a lot of the problems we thought were problems are things that the employees have gotten used to. All the clothing is hand-tagged, but that provides a task for the beneficiaries to do. In addition, they have so much different merchandise coming in that it would be impractical to be printing tags like they do at a big chain store such as Target. We also wondered if we could make it easier for people to donate to Salvation Army. However, after visiting their warehouse and hearing about their many advertising campaigns and trucks, it seems that they have little problem with getting donations, and actually had more than they could finish processing. It was extremely interesting to research this community, develop our skills in observation and refrain from letting our personal assumptions get in the way of our research. We feel that with what we have found there are several great starting points for ideation, and we hope to brainstorm innovative solutions to the problems we found during our time at Salvation Army.