Polis Station is a research project that seeks to contribute to the national dialogue on policing reform by exploring how design can help people imagine changes in police-community relations. By taking a close look at the police station—the architectural space of policing—the project, and resulting proposal, offers ideas that can help transform urban police stations into neighborhood investments that strengthen their communities in return.

Polis Station proposes reorienting police stations toward their communities to become sites of social connection where police officers and neighborhood residents can find many opportunities to interact in non-enforcement situations. It lays out a series of physical and programmatic steps that can be taken to activate police stations as civic assets. It also illustrates how these opportunities can expand throughout a neighborhood to form a network of recreational, educational, entrepreneurial, and green spaces that support a healthier and safer community.
Illustrating how the spaces of the police station can be reconfigured to accommodate new programming, Polis Station explores how stations can become full-service community centers that improve public safety, enhance social cohesion, and strengthen the economy of the surrounding neighborhood.

At “Community Café” workshops, we led conversations with local officers and residents of Chicago’s 10th District to learn how their station could offer more activities and amenities. We also led workshops with local teens, including a “Round Table” event where, through talking and sketching with students from the Al Raby Public High School, we learned about the spaces and programs they want to see in their neighborhood. Video still courtesy Spirit of Space.

In order to understand what a community-oriented police station can do and be in Chicago, Studio Gang undertook a significant engagement process, beginning with one-on-one conversations with community leaders and public officials with strong ties to their neighborhoods. These leaders and the issues they raised led to connections with community members, activists, and youth, each with a unique perspective on the spaces of policing. In addition to individual interviews, the Studio also organized gatherings
that brought together neighbors, youth, local police officers, and designers to initiate dialogue and ideas.

As the project progressed it became clear that realizing a physical intervention was key to establishing proof of concept. After analyzing five potential sites, the 10th District police station in North Lawndale was chosen. Here, a strong desire for more safe spaces to play—basketball, especially—emerged from conversations with community members and officers. Seizing this aspiration, Studio Gang worked closely with police, community leaders, and local alderman to develop and build a half-court on a little-used portion of the station’s parking lot.

By providing safe, shared outdoor recreational space on police property, this simple intervention is supporting new, everyday overlap between the worlds of police officers and neighbors. It has also built productive relationships between residents, officers, local officials, and donors that are leading to future investments in the neighborhood.
While Polis Station was developed for a specific community in Chicago, the proposal's ideas and principles are intended to help communities everywhere reimagine their police stations as beneficial neighborhood assets.

The Polis Station Proposal
Awards

Finalist, Spaces, Places and Cities category, Fast Company Innovation by Design Awards, 2018