The Damen Silos are resilient. They have endured fires, shifting industries, and many curious trespassers. They anchor Chicago to its blue-collar past. A precursor to today’s skyscrapers, they also frame Chicago’s skyline and offer an iconic silhouette to surrounding neighborhoods.

At the intersection of a waterway, freeway, and pedestrian paths, the site is ripe for an intervention that makes the silos a public asset for the Pilsen neighborhood. Their cylindrical forms, once used to store and refine grain, beg to be occupied and activated.

By enhancing the infrastructure of the Damen Silo site and allowing direct access, the curiosity which already attracts so many will slowly permit occupation as people return repeatedly to be a part of a developing space. As displayed in the nearby Pilsen community, allowing a series of surficial interventions and new place-defining markers will activate but not overtake the character and history of the site. This will literally pave the way for growth of new culture and purpose of the Silos, while still maintaining their iconic image.

A series of new place-defining markers and interventions will enhance but not overshadow the character and history of the Silos while maintaining their iconic silhouette.
The Pilsen neighborhood, just north of the Damen Silos, has long been a point of entry for immigrants for the last 150 years. It continues to welcome waves of Eastern European workers and transitioning to a predominantly Latino area today.

Affectionately called the “Heart of Chicago,” Pilsen is home to many thriving institutions—such as the community studio Elevarte and the National Museum of Mexican Art.

From this thriving art scene, the residents of Pilsen have made steady interventions on the surfaces of the neighborhood that contribute to the community’s character. This work ranges from the commissioned mural painting at the Pink Line “L” station to the community’s collaborative tile collages on houses and yards.

These visual interventions lend a sense of exploration, curiosity, and individuality to Pilsen and add yet another layer of history; they provide a model for how the nearby Damen Silos may be integrated into the surrounding community, as both a resource for the community and a place of interest.