

Creating Community out of Occupation

Adapting Space in the Rohwer and Jerome Concentration Camps

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SUBJECT	GRADE LEVEL	DURATION	FORMAT
AR History / US History	Grades 7–12	65–70 minutes	Discussion + analysis

Summary

This lesson asks students to examine how the physical design of a residential block at Rohwer and Jerome shaped daily social life and how incarcerated people adapted the camps to fit community needs. Using the [interactive maps](#) and a [3D reconstruction](#) from the Rising Above website, students will compare the block as it was built by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to the block as it was lived in by Japanese American families.

Students will see how policies and the built environment shaped what adaptations were possible, and how small acts of building, planting, and renaming turned a military grid into a home.



Arkansas State Standards

Course / Grade Band	Standard	Relevant Focus
Arkansas History (Grades 7–8)	H.1.AR.H.11	Investigate social, economic, and political effects of WWII on various segments of the population in Arkansas, including Japanese-American internment camps, women at work, war production plants, and war casualties.
Arkansas History (Grades 9–12)	H.5.AR.H.7	Analyze social, economic, and political effects of WWII on various segments of the population in Arkansas, including Japanese-American internment camps (Jerome and Rohwer).
United States History Since 1929 (Grades 9–12)	H.5.US.H.4	Analyze primary and secondary sources to evaluate the social impact of historical events on the American people.
United States History Since 1929 (Grades 9–12)	H.5.US.H.23	Analyze effects of domestic policies on Americans in marginalized groups.

Lesson Objectives

Knowledge Identify the standard components of a WRA residential block and the adaptations incarcerated people made to it.	Analysis Examine primary source maps, images, and a 3D reconstruction to understand how spatial design affected social structure and family life.
Critical Thinking Evaluate how the layout of the block both built community and strained family structures, and consider how restrictions shaped what incarcerated people were able to do.	Reflection Consider how people respond when they must live in a space they did not choose, and what their responses tell us about resilience, community, and place-making.

Lesson Outline

Note

Previous lessons provide an introduction to the Japanese American incarceration. This lesson assumes background knowledge from those lessons or another source.

STEP 1

10 minutes

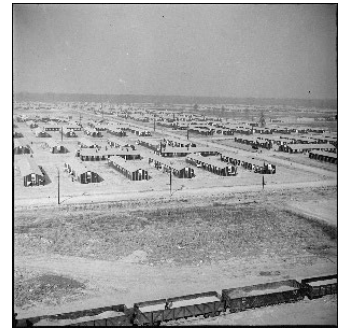
Introduction and Framing

Begin by asking students to name three things in their bedroom (or home) that make it their room and not just any room. Take a few quick verbal answers. Then ask which of those things were already there when they moved in and which they added themselves.

Show a photograph of a barren barracks block linked below. Explain that more than 8,000 Japanese American men, women, and children were forced into these camps in Arkansas in 1942. Today, the class will look at what the government built and how the incarcerated adapted that space to better suit their needs.

Jerome: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/538820>

Rohwer: <https://risingabove.cast.uark.edu/archive/item/2311>



Ask: *How does the physical design of a space shape the daily life of the people forced to live in it?
How do people push back or resist when a space was built to confine rather than support them?*

STEP 2

30 minutes

Map Investigation: The Block As Designed and As Lived

Students work alone or in pairs using interactive maps on the Rising Above website, comparing the original WRA design of a residential block with the adaptations incarcerated made during occupation.

Interactive maps: <https://risingabove.cast.uark.edu/maps>

Part A — The Block As Designed (12 minutes)

Direct students to the “Building the Camps” section. Students click through each chapter/subchapter to identify and record:

- The buildings in a standard residential block and how many of each.
- How many people lived in one block on average.
- What was inside each apartment when incarcerated first arrived.
- The location, layout, and overall design of the camp.

Part B — The Block As Lived (15 minutes)

Direct students to the “Creating Community” section. Students click through each chapter/subchapter to identify and record:

- Specific adaptations incarcerated made, such as shelves, interior partitions, porches, back doors, gardens, kitchenettes, and boardwalks.

- How the central mess hall affected family mealtime.
- Japanese words incarcerated used to rename camp spaces: ku, baraku, and tonari gumi.
- Why these modifications mattered for the incarcerated families.

Part C — Brief Share-Out (Optional)

Have students create a three-column chart titled “WRA Designed,” “Incarcerees Added,” and “What This Fixed / Made Possible.” A completed sample chart appears at the end of this lesson plan. This chart will anchor the discussion in Step 4.

STEP 3 15 minutes

3D Reconstruction Walk

3D Reconstruction: <https://risingabove.cast.uark.edu/visualization>

Students view the 3D reconstruction of Block 12 at Rohwer, set in July 1944.

Important Note

To run the Rohwer 3D Reconstruction, the .exe file needs to be downloaded and installed on a Windows computer from <https://risingabove.cast.uark.edu/visualization>. Note that administrative permissions may be required to complete the installation. Educators may choose to navigate the reconstruction on their own device, or, if time and materials allow, students may interact with the model on individual computers.

When opening the visualization, choose “Good,” “Beautiful,” or “Fantastic” for the Graphics Quality setting. If the visualization performs poorly or is glitchy, close and re-open it with a lower quality setting. Select Continue on the next screen, then select the “Guided Tour” option.

Choose the format that fits your classroom:

- If students have Windows devices, they may download and explore the reconstruction in pairs.
- If only the teacher has a Windows device, project the reconstruction and walk the class through the guided tour.

Next, ask students to find adaptations not mentioned in Step 2 and to note one thing about the camp’s scale or materials that surprised them. Points of focus might include:

- Cultural materials and lived conditions inside apartment 12-8-A and the mess hall.
- The actual size of a single apartment relative to a human figure.
- The texture, cheapness, and gaps of tarpaper walls.
- The distance from an apartment to the latrine/laundry building.
- What a flower or vegetable garden in front of a barracks looked like against the surrounding landscape.

STEP 4 15 minutes

Class Discussion

Lead a whole-class discussion using the two-column chart from Step 2 as a reference. Encourage students to respond to each other rather than only to the teacher.

Discussion Questions

- The WRA did not make rules about whether families had to eat together. They built one mess hall in the middle of each block. How did that one design choice change family life?
- Incarcerees built porches, planted gardens, gave Japanese names to the lanes between barracks, and built kitchenettes inside their apartments. Were these acts of resistance, survival, or community building? Defend your answer.
- What were incarcerated not allowed to do, and how did those restrictions shape what they could do?
- The WRA called them residential blocks and used numbers like Block 8 and Block 12. Incarcerees called them *ku*, the barracks *baraku*, and the lanes between barracks *tonari gumi*. Why does it matter what you call a place?

Optional Extension

A 1961 newspaper article described Rohwer in its heyday as looking “like a cross between a concentration camp and a museum garden.” What did the writer mean? Is it a compliment? Is it dangerous to call a camp beautiful?

Additionally, local Arkansans criticized the camps, claiming the WRA was providing incarcerated with a luxurious lifestyle. Although incarcerated testimony contradicts this, what evidence might support the local claims and what evidence from this lesson helps refute it?

STEP 5
10 minutes

Exit Ticket

Students respond to one of the following prompts in five to seven sentences, using at least two specific details from the maps or the 3D reconstruction. Exit tickets may be collected digitally, on paper, or through discussion.

Exit Ticket Prompts

1. The WRA designed a block to hold 225 people in a small grid surrounded by barbed wire. The people who lived there turned it into something the designers never planned. Describe two specific adaptations and explain what each tells you about what those people needed and wanted.
2. Did the design of the residential block break Japanese American family life, or did it create new kinds of community? Make an argument using specific evidence from the maps and the reconstruction.
3. What does the layout of Rohwer’s residential blocks tell you about how the government viewed the people it was incarcerating?

Sample Chart: WRA Design vs. Incarceree Adaptations

Reference for Step 2, Part C. Students create their own version; this is provided for teacher reference.

WRA-Designed Feature	What Incarcerees Added or Changed	What This Fixed / Made Possible
Bare earth between buildings (muddy)	Boardwalks built from scrap lumber	Walkable connections between barracks, mess hall, and latrine
One undivided room per family	Interior partitions from scavenged wood	Some privacy for sleeping, dressing, and religious practice
No furniture beyond cots & stove	Shelves, tables, chairs from scrap lumber	A home that could function for daily living
Thin tarpaper walls (hot summers, cold winters)	Covered porches, awnings, pergolas	Shade, cross-breezes, outdoor social space
Only a front door, no airflow	Back doors added	Cross-ventilation; access to backyard
No outdoor private space	Backyards: clotheslines, koinobori, firewood	Domestic chores; cultural expression
Bare lots, no plantings	Flower & vegetable gardens in the tonari gumi (lane)	Food, beauty, Japanese cultural expression, shared block pride
Mess hall as only shared interior space	Venue for social events, dances, meetings, and classes	Religious, cultural, and athletic life for each block
Standard block numbering (Block 8, Block 12)	Block reputations; Japanese names (ku, baraku, tonari gumi)	Reclaimed community identity inside imposed grid