

PROJECT

Canal Commons
Green River, Utah
Ongoing

CLIENT

Epicenter

DESIGN TEAM

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BUILDING RURAL PRIDE + SELF-DETERMINATION

Nestled at the base of the Book Cliffs, Green River (pop. 847) is a small but mighty town in southeastern Utah's high desert. Throughout the years, Green River has seen its share of boom and bust cycles, from outlaws in the late 1800s to a Cold War-era missile test site. Today, it's known as a prolific melon producer and a welcome stop on a long stretch of empty interstate. But thanks to the hard work of Green River's residents and Epicenter, a local nonprofit dedicated to community-led development, the town is charting a new course for rural communities in the American west. Through investments in the built environment, cultural identity, and resilience, Epicenter is helping create a future for Green River driven by the vision of local people, not outside extraction.

HOUSING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

A key part of that future is increasing affordable housing options in a town that sorely lacks accessible, high-quality homes. Located along the historic canal near downtown, Canal Commons will provide a mix of rental and owner-occupied affordable units designed for energy efficiency, durability, and accessibility. The ABLE team worked with Epicenter and Green River residents to envision shared public and semi-public spaces to connect the new housing to the canal and the adjacent Pearl Baker Park. Through a site walk and workshop with community collaborators, we heard that the space should feel cozy, welcoming, and sheltered, with spaces for family and community gatherings that feel separated from the neighboring homes. We also learned how deeply connected Green River residents feel to their rich local desert ecology.

ROOTED IN LOCAL LANDSCAPES

The design for the Commons reflects the local blend of working and wild landscapes, transitioning from the rigid geometry of the irrigation canal to the flows of the arroyo. Sunken spaces for gathering also serve as overflow detention basins for Green River's rare but intense rainstorms, with rocky swales and scrambles offering opportunities for informal exploration and play. The planting highlights local desert species like rubber rabbitbrush and Utah serviceberry, while also offering space for community education and stewardship through an orchard and pollinator garden.