READY OR NOT

THE COST OF CULTURE — USC Villard Museum

DESIGN CONSTRAINTS

Modding an Existing Game, Real-World Architecture, Creative Decisions

Wilson Xhaflaire
Historian, Level Designer

Working Under Constraints

Designing a mission for an existing, released game is not the same as designing a level for an original project. Every system, rule, and asset the player will interact with already exists and already works a certain way before I place a single wall. This document outlines what that meant in practice for The Cost of Culture: where the base game itself, Ready or Not, sets a hard boundary I had to design inside of, where the real-world architecture of a Californian university museum set a second boundary, and where I allowed deliberate liberties to serve the level, always justified by a design reason or a real-world reference.

On the Name: USC Villard Museum

The name Villard does not belong to the real building this mission is modeled on; the real museum is the USC Fisher Museum of Art. The substitution is a deliberate personal tribute. Pierre Villard (1958–2023) was a French historian, archaeologist, and assyriologist specializing in the ancient Near East, and one of my professors during my history studies. His career was built around the administrative, religious, and legal history of Mesopotamia and the wider ancient Near East, the same historical and geographic horizon that Yemen, the region at the center of The Hand's fictional backstory, belongs to.

The connection between a professor of ancient Near Eastern history and a fictional museum built around a dispute over Near Eastern cultural heritage felt too direct to leave unacknowledged. Naming the museum after him is intended as a tribute, not a hidden reference: this document is where that intention is made explicit.

Design Intent: Building Inside a Shipped Game

The core ambition of this mission is for it to read as a level that could plausibly ship inside Ready or Not itself, using the vocabulary the base game already established for The Hand, rather than as a standalone shooter level that happens to be reskinned with Ready or Not's assets. That distinction shaped every decision documented below.

What the base game fixes: existing systems and conventions

Because this is a mod and not an original production, the tools, AI behaviors, objective types, and weapon systems available to me are the ones Ready or Not already ships with. I cannot add a new suspect behavior, a new objective category, or a new weapon class through the mission editor; I can only place, configure, and sequence what the base game exposes. The suspect and civilian AI archetypes, the barks and voice line pools, the bomb-threat and hostage systems, and the three objective types used in this mission (Bring Order to Chaos, Rescue All Civilians, Defuse Bomb Threats) are all pulled directly from systems that already exist in every other Ready or Not mission, official or modded.

What remains mine to design

Inside that fixed system, the level itself, the building, the room-to-room flow, the placement of suspects, hostages, and charges, the pacing of escalation, is entirely my design work. The constraint is not a limitation on creativity so much as a requirement that the creativity stay legible within a language the player already knows from the rest of the game.

Constraint 1: The Base Game as a Starting Condition

Because the mission runs on Ready or Not's existing mission framework, certain technical and tonal parameters were not design choices but starting conditions, in the same way the street grid of a real city is a starting condition for a historically grounded level.

Map scale and pacing had to sit within the range established by the base game's own missions. Neon Tomb and Relapse, The Hand's two existing appearances, are dense, mid-sized interior spaces built around close-quarters engagements rather than open sightlines. The Cost of Culture was scaled to sit in that same family, so that a player moving from an official mission into this one does not feel a jump in scale the base game never establishes elsewhere.

Suspect and civilian behavior had to use The Hand's existing presentation: the same faction voice-line pool, the same uniform and equipment logic seen in Neon Tomb and Relapse, and the same willingness to execute hostages and use improvised explosives already established as this faction's signature. Inventing a new visual identity for The Hand inside a single fan mission would break continuity with the faction as the base game already defined it.

Constraint 2: Real-World Architecture, U.S. West Coast Public Buildings

The USC Villard Museum is modeled on the USC Fisher Museum of Art, a real university museum on the University of Southern California campus in Los Angeles. Because the fiction is anchored to a recognizable building type rather than an invented one, the layout had to follow the same architectural logic that governs real public and institutional buildings on the California coast, not an arbitrary floor plan built purely for gameplay convenience.

USC Fisher Museum of Art, main entrance facade.

USC Fisher Museum of Art, aerial view (Google Maps).

USC Fisher Museum of Art, rear courtyard facade: brick banding and punched window openings used as the direct material reference.

Corridor width and door swing

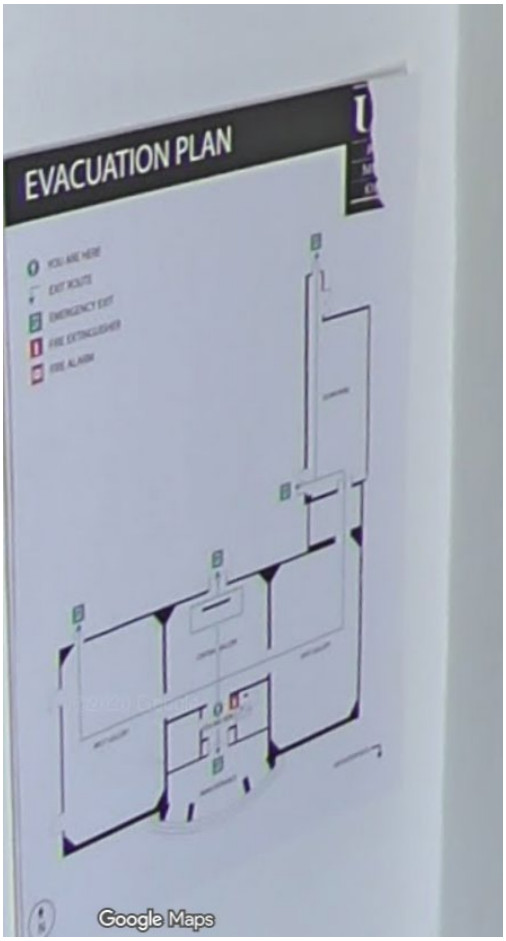
This is the constraint that actually shows up in the mod, not as an abstract code reference but as concrete numbers that dictate the layout. Under the California Building Code, a corridor serving an occupant load of 10 or more must be at least 44 inches clear, and a door in that corridor cannot reduce that width by more than half in any open position. Exit and exit access doors serving a room of 50 or more people must swing in the direction of egress travel, outward, toward the corridor, not inward into the room. A dead-end corridor with only one way out cannot exceed 20 feet.

I used these as literal layout rules rather than background flavor. Every corridor connecting the main galleries was built at or above the 44-inch minimum, wide enough for two suspects to flank a player entering from a doorway, which is a direct tactical consequence of a code minimum, not a level design invention. Every exit door off the main galleries swings outward into the corridor, which means a player pushing through one takes a half-second of exposure to whatever is on the other side before they can see past the door leaf, a real breaching problem

inherited directly from a real door-swing rule. The 20-foot dead-end limit is why the collections storage wing (see Liberty 1) loops back into the main corridor instead of ending in a single locked room.

The evacuation plan as the spatial backbone

The single most direct source for the museum's ground-floor layout was not a set of architectural drawings but the real building's posted evacuation plan, photographed on site. It shows the actual room adjacencies, the position of the two main galleries relative to each other, the central atrium, and the marked emergency exits and stairwell, exactly the information a real occupant would need in an emergency, and exactly the information a raid scenario needs to be spatially credible.



USC Fisher Museum of Art, posted evacuation plan, photographed on site and used as the spatial backbone for the ground-floor layout.

This document was treated as a constraint, not a suggestion. The relative position of the east and west galleries, the central atrium between them, and the marked stairwell and exit routes were fixed before any gameplay consideration was applied. Rooms not covered by the

evacuation plan, the collections storage and logistics areas discussed under Liberty 1, were added beyond what this document shows.

Campus integration and material palette

The real Fisher Museum was designed to present two faces at once, one toward the street and one toward the university, joined around a central courtyard added after the building's initial construction. The USC Villard Museum keeps that same logic: a formal, public-facing entry sequence on one side, a more utilitarian, campus- and staff-facing side on the other, connected through a courtyard that anchors the building's circulation the way it does in the real reference.

Liberty 1: Programming the Building for a Hostile Scenario

Not every space in the museum is drawn from the real Fisher Museum's actual floor plan. A raid scenario needs verticality, sightline breaks, and a service zone that a small real university museum does not necessarily have at this scale. Where the real building's program was silent or too small for the mission's needs, I added spaces that are architecturally plausible for this building type rather than inventing freely: a second interior atrium, a logistics and warehouse zone for crate deliveries and art handling, and an expanded upper gallery floor.

The rule I set for myself was simple: any added space had to be something a real university museum of this kind could plausibly contain, even without a specific source confirming it does. A loading dock and a collections storage area are standard for an accredited art museum; adding them is a program-accurate extrapolation, not a stylistic invention.

Constraint 3: Adapting the Museum for Tactical Gameplay

Real institutional corridors are wide, evenly lit, and designed for calm circulation. That is close to the opposite of what a tense breach-and-clear encounter needs. The tension between code-compliant real architecture and readable tactical level design is the central design problem of this project.

The resolution applied here was consistent: preserve the identity of each space (its function, its relationship to adjacent rooms, its approximate real-world scale) while adjusting sightlines, lighting, and cover placement to serve pacing and threat readability. Gallery partitions and freestanding display cases were positioned to break long real-world sightlines into shorter tactical ones without contradicting how a real exhibition would be laid out.

Liberty 2: Faction Presentation Within Existing Assets

Because The Hand's suspect models, voice lines, and equipment are fixed by the base game, the liberty available to me was in how those existing assets are deployed, not in redesigning the faction itself. Suspect placement, the specific improvised-explosive dressing, and the museum-specific barks referencing the artifacts were built using the modding tools' existing customization range: reusing the base game's asset pool in a configuration specific to this mission, rather than introducing new character content the mod tools do not support.

Summary: Design Brief

The constraints and liberties documented above can be summarized as a working brief, the kind that would govern a mod built for a live, commercially released game in a professional context:

- Ready or Not's existing systems, AI behaviors, objective types, and The Hand's established presentation are fixed starting conditions, not design choices.
- Map scale and pacing must sit within the range already established by the base game's own missions featuring the same faction.
- The building's layout must follow real Californian public-building egress rules: minimum corridor widths, door swing direction, and dead-end corridor limits.
- Any added space not present in the real reference building must be program-accurate for a university museum of this kind, not a stylistic invention.
- Spatial dimensions and sightlines may be adapted for tactical readability, provided the identity and real-world plausibility of each space is preserved.

Working within these constraints produced a mission that is grounded both in the mechanics of an existing game and in the logic of a real building type, without becoming a straight recreation of either. The discipline of the brief is what gives the final design its coherence: every room and every faction behavior reads as belonging to the same specific game and the same specific kind of place, because they were all held to the same set of requirements.