READY OR NOT

THE COST OF CULTURE — USC Villard Museum

LEVEL DESIGN DOCUMENT

Gameplay Intentions, Verticality, and Replayability

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Level Overview

The Cost of Culture is built as a replayable, objective-based mission rather than a fixed narrative sequence. Unlike a level built around one specific historical event with a set order of beats, this mission is designed to be played many times by different teams, in different orders, with a different threat picture each time. The design intentions documented below are the rules I set for myself to make that replayability meaningful rather than arbitrary: every recurring element (verticality, courtyard routing, bomb placement, door behavior, sightlines) is built around a specific reason tied to how the mission is meant to play, not placed for visual variety alone.

The building's layout itself, the galleries, courtyards, and upper floor, follows the constraints documented separately for this mission. This document focuses on why those spaces are used the way they are during play, not on where they came from.

Gameplay Intentions

Verticality: Exhibition Hall Height Over Partition Walls

The exhibition galleries are built with a ceiling height well above the freestanding partition walls that divide the display floor. This is a deliberate gameplay decision rather than an aesthetic one: the gap between the top of a partition and the ceiling is an available throw arc. A player on one side of a partition can lob a flashbang over it into the adjacent bay without needing a doorway or a floor-level gap. Partitions block sightlines and gunfire, but they do not block area-denial tools thrown over the top, which turns the exhibition floor into a puzzle of vertical cover rather than a simple maze of walls.

Interior Courtyards: Speed Versus Exposure

The two interior courtyards are the fastest connective routes in the building: a team that commits to crossing one closes the distance between the east and west wings far quicker than by looping through the interior corridors. A courtyard is also the most exposed space in the museum, visible from the surrounding gallery windows on multiple floors at once. Crossing one is a deliberate high-risk, high-reward trade: it can save several seconds of clearance time, but it also means spending those same seconds visible from more angles than anywhere else on the map. The courtyards are meant to reward a team willing to gamble on speed over a slower, safer route through the interior.

Bomb Placement: Spawn-Equidistant Threat Design

Bomb threats are not clustered near a single spawn point. Each charge is positioned so that, whichever of the mission's spawn points a team starts from, at least one threat sits within a

comparably short, direct route. This mirrors the base game's own design intent for bomb-defusal missions: rush a charge, defuse it under time pressure, then clear the remaining rooms methodically. If one spawn had a significantly shorter path to a bomb than another, the mission would effectively play as two different, unbalanced missions depending on where the team starts. Keeping threats at roughly equal effective distance from every spawn preserves the rush-then-clear rhythm regardless of starting position.

One-Way Doors: Controlled Difficulty

A number of doors throughout the museum open in only one direction; once through them, a player cannot return the way they came without finding an alternate route. This is a deliberate difficulty and pacing tool. It prevents a team from freely retreating to a cleared, safe area every time it takes pressure, forcing forward commitment and making route choice matter. A wrong turn carries a real cost, which raises the tension of navigation decisions above what a fully reversible layout would allow.

Courtyard Window Placement: Crossfire and Overwatch

The windows overlooking both interior courtyards are positioned so that suspects and players stationed at different points around the courtyard's perimeter, on different floors as well as different sides, can all bring fire to bear on the same courtyard space from different angles. Rather than a single overwatch position, the courtyard is ringed by several viable firing positions. A team pushing through has to account for multiple potential angles of fire rather than one learnable choke point, and defenders in turn have a distributed set of positions to fall back to as pressure builds.

Vertical Bomb Visibility: The Director's Office Sightline

The central bomb charge is placed so that it is visible from the director's office on the floor above, through an interior opening between the two spaces, and the reverse is also true: a player near the central charge can see up into the office. This is not an incidental piece of geometry. It lets a team member watching from the office call out threat information for the floor below in real time, and it gives a suspect posted in the office a direct sightline down onto anyone approaching the charge, adding a vertical threat axis to what would otherwise be a purely horizontal defusal problem.

Multiplayer Coordination: Simultaneous Multi-Angle Assault

The window and open-area placement throughout the museum is meant to support a specific multiplayer behavior: a team splitting into two or more elements, each throwing a flashbang into a different opening at roughly the same moment, and pushing multiple entry points simultaneously rather than funneling through a single door one player at a time. This is the payoff of the flashbang throw arcs over the exhibition partitions and the crossfire windows around the courtyards described above: a coordinated team can turn several small openings

into one large, saturated breach, which is a more satisfying and more skill-expressive way to clear a room than a single-file entry.

Replayability and Difficulty Scaling

The mission is built to be replayed rather than solved once. Its spawn ranges are set so that no two sessions place suspects, civilians, or bomb threats in exactly the same configuration:

- Civilians: 8 minimum, 11 maximum
- Suspects: 9 minimum, 15 maximum
- Bomb threats: 1 minimum, 3 maximum, tied to the selected difficulty

The number of bomb threats scales with difficulty rather than being fixed independently of it. A lower difficulty setting is more likely to spawn a single charge, closer to a straightforward rush-and-clear mission. A higher difficulty setting can push toward the three-charge maximum, which forces the multi-threat prioritization described under Bomb Placement above: a team has to split attention across the building rather than defusing one charge and then working through the rest of the mission uncontested. Combined with the wide range on suspect and civilian counts, no replay of the mission presents quite the same threat picture, which is the intended replayability hook for a mission built on a single, fixed floor plan.

Summary: Design Brief

The gameplay intentions documented above can be summarized as a working brief for the mission's systemic design:

- Verticality over partition walls exists specifically to support flashbang throws between exhibition bays.
- Interior courtyards are the fastest routes through the building and the most exposed, a deliberate speed-versus-exposure trade.
- Bomb threats are placed at comparable effective distance from every spawn point to preserve a consistent rush-then-clear rhythm.
- One-way doors remove the option of free retreat, making route choice and forward commitment matter.
- Courtyard windows are placed to create distributed crossfire positions rather than a single overwatch choke point.
- The central charge and the director's office share a sightline, adding a vertical threat axis to the defusal objective.
- Suspect, civilian, and bomb-threat counts vary within set ranges, with bomb-threat count tied to difficulty, so that no two sessions play identically.

Together, these intentions are meant to make a single fixed floor plan support many different playthroughs, where the building stays the same but the threat, the pacing, and the viable routes through it do not.