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With not for: community design in Murphy Park

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**WITH
NOT
FOR**

**COMMUNITY DESIGN IN
MURPHY PARK**

joey more + ellie vamos

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Because this project was deeply rooted in collaboration, our list of people to thank is far longer than we have room for here. These are just a few of the people who made this project possible:

To everyone who took the time to engage with us: You are the heart of this project. There are not enough ways to thank you.

To Professors Leonard Nevarez, Tobias Armborst, and Lisa Brawley: Thank you for your guidance, inspiration, and support during our moments of panic. Your influence throughout our Vassar careers has changed how we see the world, and we could not have asked for better advisors.

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To Apoorva, Essie, Dushyant, Aditi and Jeh: Thank you for the absurd adventures, continuous cackling, and (mostly) keeping me grounded. Sorry I made the house reek of paint. Repeatedly.

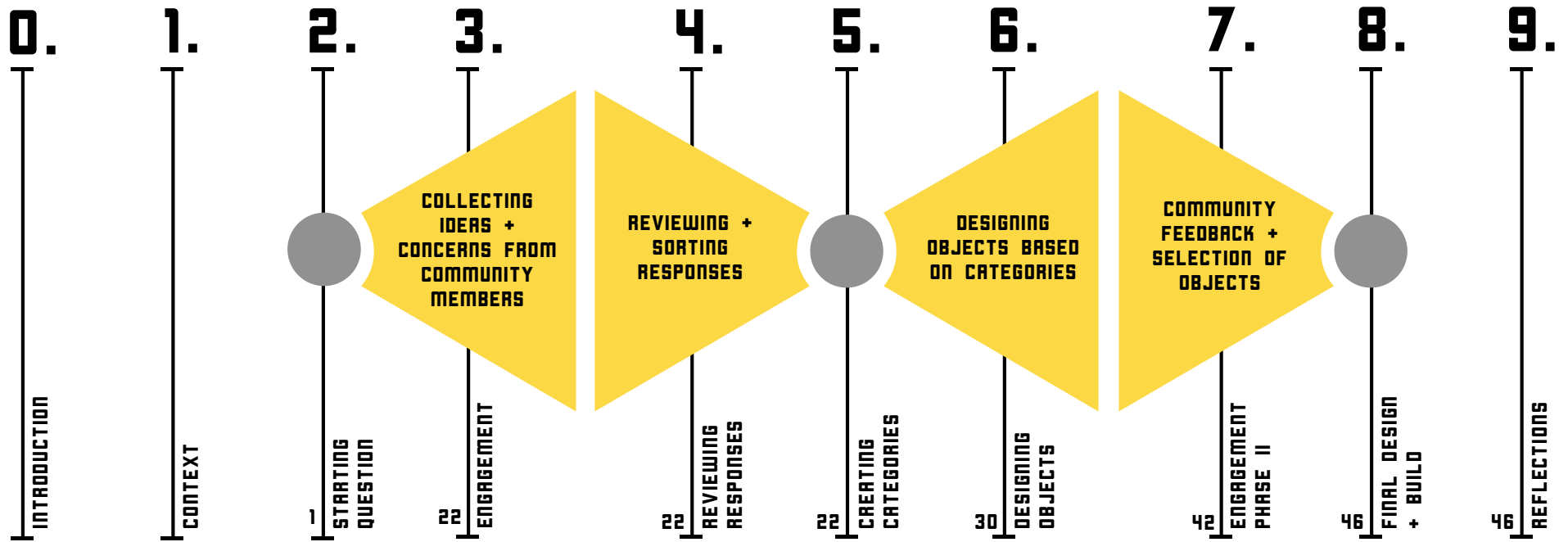
To Ellie: You continuously inspire me with your absolute brilliance and creativity. I could not have asked for a better partner in this process and am so humbled to have had the opportunity to work with you. You are absolutely the coolest person I know. Let's start a firm.

-JM

- EV

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0.
INTRODUCTION

**WHY ARE WE
DOING THIS?**

The idea for this project was born towards the end of our junior semester abroad, which we both spent in an urban design program in Copenhagen, Denmark. While the immersive studio setting was extremely helpful in honing our design skills, we both struggled with a recurring issue: urban design projects felt both meaningless and underdeveloped when they occurred in a purely academic setting. As we worked on designs for public squares and master plans for new developments, we both felt that our work desperately needed input from the everyday people for whom we were supposedly designing. The problem, of course, was that these were theoretical projects; how could we ask people to contribute their time and energy to academic designs that would never actually be constructed?

This question revealed a major gap between the theory we learned in Urban Studies classrooms and the practical skills we learned in design studios. We both believed in ideas of social justice, the right to the city, and giving people a sense of ownership over their neighborhoods, but we had not been given the opportunity to integrate these principles into our design work.

With the guidance of our Danish studio professor, whose firm focuses specifically on involving citizens in urban design, we began to formulate a plan: for our senior project, we would undertake a community-based design project. And to make that community engagement meaningful, we realized that we couldn't do a traditional theoretical design; we actually had to build something.

Because we were both deeply passionate about this idea, we decided to undertake it as a joint project. This, we reasoned, would both split up the daunting work of such a large project and better reflect the collaborative nature of real-world design work. Thanks to the advice of our studio professor, we also decided that we needed to work with an existing community organization in order to tap into preexisting knowledge about the community and better engage with Poughkeepsie residents. As our time abroad ended and we returned to the United States, we began to think more seriously about who our community partner might be.

During the spring semester of my junior year, I took a field work placement with the Middle Main Initiative, the community development wing of Hudson River Housing. While HRH focuses primarily on affordable housing provision, Middle Main deals with community empowerment and neighborhood investment in downtown Poughkeepsie. During my fieldwork there, I was struck by their strong connections to other community organizations, their interest in revitalizing public spaces, and the extensive work they were doing to engage Poughkeepsie residents through a variety of events and initiatives. While the relevance of their mission to our project was the main factor in my interest in partnering with them, it was also helpful that their affiliation with HRH, which owns a significant number of properties through Poughkeepsie, could give us access to a public space in which to work.

EV

In the spring semester of my junior year, I worked with the two full time staff members of Town of Poughkeepsie Recreation Department to develop the parks masterplan for the 21 town parks. The office had been working without formalized guidelines and understood the need for a comprehensive strategy for further changes to parks. As part of the process of creating the plan, I conducted "community meetings" that took the form of design charrettes. However, I quickly grew skeptical of traditional engagement techniques and their effectiveness as the information I was getting was not terribly helpful. With charrettes, it was especially difficult to get different voices in the room for meetings. My experiences with traditional engagement techniques informed our aversion to using them in our work in Murphy Park. Working to make change in a government, even from within, was an extremely difficult process. While in the end the Town Board did ratify the masterplan, the experience made me aware of how difficult it would be for us to work with the City of Poughkeepsie on public land instead of with a community organization in a privately owned public space.

JM

With these experiences in mind, we began to lean towards partnering with Middle Main for this project. This decision was supported by our advisors and even by the planning coordinator for the City of Poughkeepsie, all of whom suggested that working in a public space owned by a nonprofit would be much easier than trying to work with the city government, allowing us to actually complete the project within a two-semester time frame instead of getting bogged down in bureaucracy.

When we approached Middle Main, they were immediately enthusiastic about the project, and so we began to discuss potential sites. Although they brought up a wide variety of properties ranging from a retirement home garden to a shelter for homeless teens, one site stood out: Murphy Park, a small pocket park on Main Street. It appealed to us because it was a truly public space that attracted a variety of users, not just the clients of a particular HRH service. As a smaller park that already had basic elements such as paving, picnic tables, and some landscaping, it felt open enough for us to add to without being so undeveloped that we would need to start from scratch.

Middle Main was also interested in adding improvements to the park because it formed the main pedestrian access to the Poughkeepsie Underwear Factory, a historic industrial building that they were in the process of converting into residential, commercial, and studio spaces. Our project would coincide perfectly with the Underwear Factory's grand opening, which was set for April of 2017. So with their blessing, we decided to work in Murphy Park.

With our community partnership established and our site selected, we were ready to begin diving into our project.

**1.
CONTEXT**

**WHERE ARE WE
WORKING?**

DESIGN BACKGROUND

Our approach to this project has been deeply influenced by the tradition of community or participatory design. In order to situate this work within a larger design context, we must first examine the methods and outcomes of community design, as well as the ways its practitioners have defined it in opposition to traditional, professional design.

Community design has its historical roots in the civil rights and advocacy planning movements of the 1960s (Francis 14). The increasing failures of top-down urban renewal projects in the 1950s and 60s led to a growing crisis of faith in professionalism and technical expertise, both within the design professions and amongst the general public (Comerio 229). A number of designers and design educators began to question what was known as “technical rationality,” which dictated that a small group of highly educated, technically skilled designers could work to find a scientifically “correct” solution to the problems plaguing American cities (230). Since the failures of urban renewal had made clear, the dissidents argued, that there could be no objectively correct solutions to complex systemic issues, the only way to solve design problems was to include as many people as possible in the process (231).

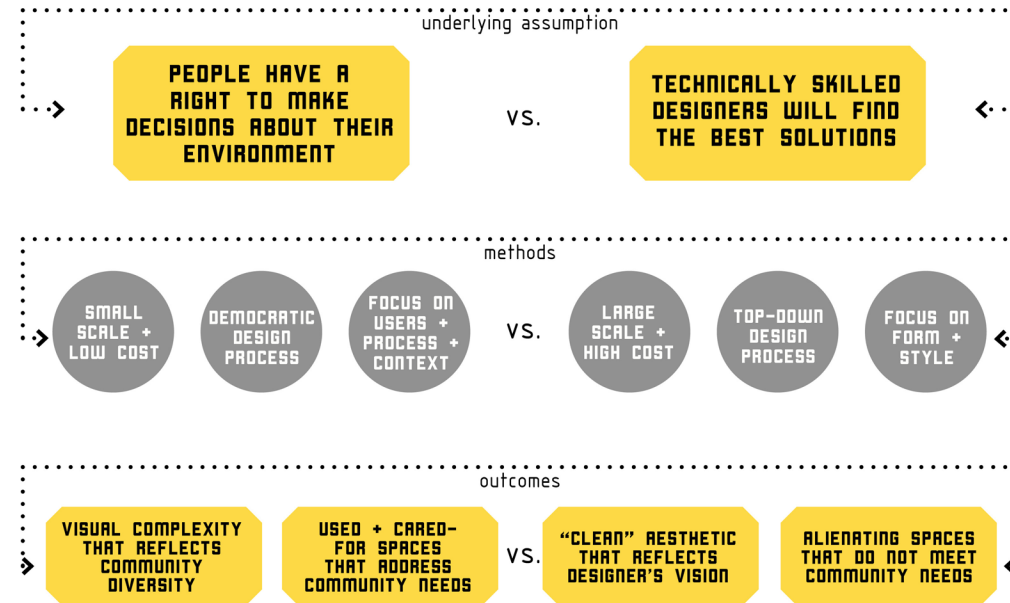
Along with this collapse of faith in top-down architecture and planning came the increasing recognition that designers could work as valuable allies to community organizers (Francis 14). As a number of communities across the country fought back against destructive urban renewal projects, they turned to designers to help articulate community needs and translate them into alternative design proposals. Combined with the growing skepticism of architecture’s historical objectivity, designers’ collaborations with community activists led to an increasing sense that professional designers could not remain neutral in the face of systemic injustice or allow top-down planning projects to disenfranchise citizens from design decisions about their neighborhoods (Comerio 238).

This central idea—that people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect the places where they live, work, and play—is one of the fundamental distinctions between community design and its traditional predecessor. Following from this main principle, community design practitioners have identified a few more key distinctions: a focus on client and community rather than built forms; a willingness to incorporate non-architectural tasks into the design process (Comerio 229); a focus on small-scale, local projects rather than

COMMUNITY DESIGN

vs.

PROFESSIONAL DESIGN



large-scale, international work; and a concern with use, context, and process over style, ornamentation, and product (Francis 15).

The outcome of this union of design and grassroots organizing, practitioners argue, is the creation of both successful public spaces and increased community power (Comerio 229). But what has community design’s impact actually been? While small-scale projects created through non-traditional methods have been notoriously difficult to document, a study conducted in New York City found that neighbor-built parks and gardens enjoyed greater usage and less vandalism than professionally-designed spaces (Francis 17). Practitioners also point to greater self-esteem and community involvement amongst direct participants in the design process, as well as greater satisfaction with and interest in the project amongst the community at large. And while design alone cannot solve major systemic issues, community design projects increasingly include alternative ownership and management strategies, improved social services and community education, and broad-based political advocacy to resist poverty, gentrification, and other problems affecting neighborhood stabilization (Comerio 241).

While community design may sound utopian, in the fifty-odd years since it began to appear, the practice has faced a number of pitfalls. A common issue is simply drumming up enough participation to develop a truly community-led project (Francis 15). Our community partner, Middle Main, has struggled with attendance at its design charrettes, and those with the time, resources, and energy to devote to long community planning meetings are often the least systemically disadvantaged within the community. Because of the inaccessibility of charrettes, alternative methods like observation, interviewing, and on-site simulation are important tools used to broaden participation.

Another common issue is the conflict between the desires of designers and the needs of the people they work with. Practitioners note that designers often focus more on aesthetics and specific spaces like parks, while their constituents have larger concerns such as unemployment and crime (Francis 15). This can create a problematic dynamic in which designers seek out community participation in order to validate their own preexisting design ideas, rather than responding to a community's request for technical assistance with a problem that residents have identified. In this way, community design methods have started to become co-opted by larger professional firms, which "may be turning to participation as a way of ensuring the approval of their projects rather than out of a sincere commitment to having users and the community inform their designs" (16).

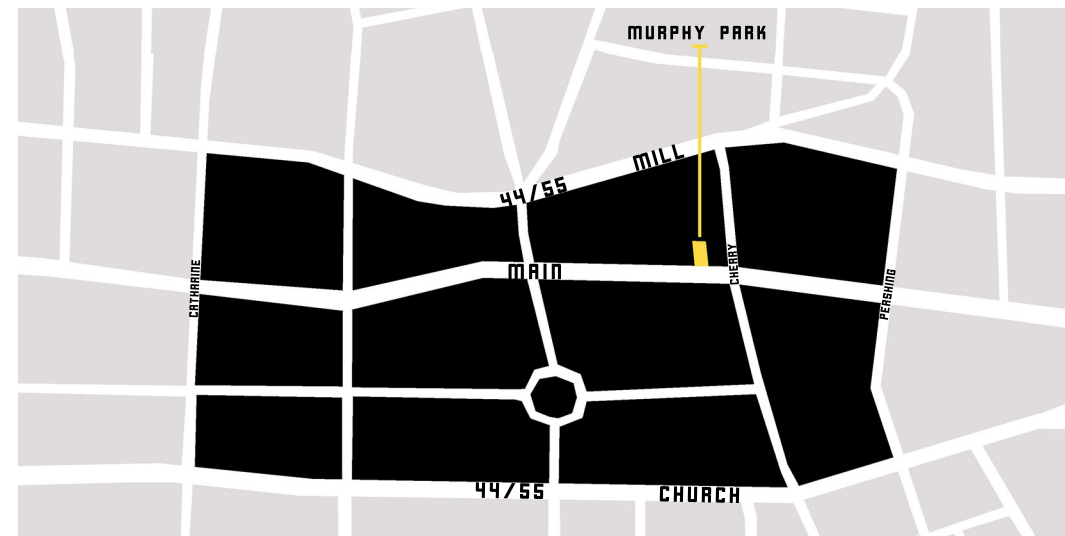
This history has been crucial to our work, since from this project's inception we wanted to remain mindful of community design's activist roots, its increasing cooptation by professional architecture, and the numerous issues faced by even the most well-intentioned designers.

NEIGHBORHOOD BACKGROUND

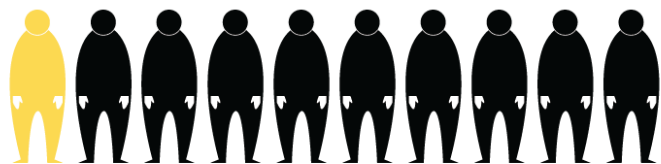
Before we could even begin the work of hands-on community engagement, we felt it was important to get a sense of the context we would be working in. While we had both spent time in the Middle Main area and had some idea of what we would be working with, we first looked to data in order to gain a birds-eye sense of the neighborhood. The demographic information and survey responses given to us by Middle Main helped us develop some general ideas about the makeup of the neighborhood, the challenges and opportunities it holds, and some of the key issues we needed to keep in mind when approaching this project. While we did not want to rely solely on data, it helped create a starting point from which we could jump into our engagement work.

The City of Poughkeepsie was severely impacted by urban renewal policies, which encouraged suburbanization and increasing disinvestment from the city's historic core. In recent years, there have been efforts to rejuvenate urban life in Poughkeepsie, with activism ranging from economic and racial justice to local food movements. Poughkeepsie has also been greatly influenced by the influx of a large Oaxacan community. The city faces dramatic issues, including food deserts, unemployment, increasing incarceration, etc. Public spaces in the city are few and underserved.

Murphy Park is unusual in that it is a public resource privately owned by Hudson River Housing. Situated in the Middle Main neighborhood, the park serves a highly varied constituency of about 1500 residents. About 29% of the approximately 565 households live below the



POVERTY RATE: 28.6%



AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION: 40.2%



HISPANIC POPULATION: 34.2%



POPULATION UNDER 18: 22%



POPULATION OVER 65: 10%



VACANCY RATE: 34.4%



poverty line ("Community Profile Report" 1). The community is mostly made up of people of color, with 79% minority race/ethnicity, 40% African American, 34% Hispanic (2).

In the neighborhood, only 13% own their home while 87% rent ("Community Profile Report" 3). Housing vacancy is high, at a rate of 34% (3). People tend to stay in the neighborhood for at least several years, with the majority of the community having lived in the neighborhood for at minimum 3-5 years ("Community Impact Measurement Report" 12). This may come as a surprise, "as the general perception is that the neighborhood is undesirable" (3), but long time residency has great potential to build community ties and investment. Resident perception is that most public services, with the notable exception of street cleaning, are good (4). Perceptions of the neighborhood vary within the community but generally seem to not align with outsider assumptions.

Safety is an essential component of public space design in any neighborhood, as both real and perceived safety has dramatic effects on community behavior. In the Middle Main neighborhood, 96% feel at least somewhat safe during daytime, but only 50% feel somewhat safe at night ("Community Impact Measurement Report" 5). It should be noted that there will be different perceptions and realities of safety across different identity markers.

Community members have a high willingness to take leadership and make change. Approximately 75% of participants in a Middle Main survey responded that they are willing or somewhat willing to "Increase [their] leadership skills so that [they] can help influence change" ("Community Impact Measurement Report" 8). This was especially relevant for our community engagement work, as we hoped to increase residents' sense of their ability to create change in their neighborhood.

The ages of constituents also influence the usage of space. In the Middle Main neighborhood, 22% of the population is below the age of 18, while 10% is above the age of 65 ("Community Profile Report" 2). The needs of community members change throughout their lifespans, and communities with large youth and elderly populations require intergenerational spaces that connect residents at differing life stages. The large youth population in the area also speaks to a need for fun, playable spaces that are free and accessible to everyone, a fact that played a major role in this project from very early on.

2.
STARTING QUESTION

**HOW MIGHT
WE DESIGN A
MORE INCLUSIVE
MURPHY PARK
THAT RESPONDS
TO THE NEEDS
OF THE DIVERSE
CONSTITUENCIES
AND
STAKEHOLDERS?**

3.
ENGAGEMENT PHASE I

**WHAT ARE THE
CONSTITUENCIES
OF THIS PARK
AND HOW DO
WE REACH
THEM?**

After framing our initial question, our first step was to start gathering community perspectives and input. We decided to do this primarily by working on-site and speaking to people using the park, passers-by on the sidewalk, and nearby business owners and residents. We chose to center our engagement work on the site for a number of reasons, the foremost of which was our dislike of design charrettes. After sitting in on a number of charrettes and community meetings hosted by Middle Main and other nonprofits in the Poughkeepsie area, we had noticed a number of issues with this approach:

1. Spending multiple hours in a design workshop was not feasible for many Poughkeepsie residents with multiple jobs, families to care for, and very limited free time.
2. The locations of these meetings, which largely took place in art spaces or nonprofit offices, were not welcoming to many Middle Main residents.
3. Even when Spanish-language resources were made available, meetings held entirely in English did not welcome Spanish speakers, who make up a large part of the Middle Main community.
4. Formalized design exercises were intimidating for those who had not engaged with them before and often limited the scope of ideas produced.

Due to all of these factors, as well as difficulties in advertising these meetings, the design charrettes we had attended mainly drew white, middle-class nonprofit and planning professionals already engaged with issues of urban development, rather than the low-income people, homeless people, and people of color whose perspectives we wanted to center. Even for the people who were able to attend, these meetings often felt long, taxing, and pointless; as Paul Hesse, the Poughkeepsie Community Development Coordinator told us, “The citizens of Poughkeepsie are charretted out.”

We were also interested in on-site engagement because we hoped to avoid presenting ourselves as experts or creating the hierarchy that inevitably arises between charrette facilitators and participants. This turned out, however, to be more complicated than we expected. Initially, we thought it would be best to avoid presenting ourselves as authorities or even affiliated with Middle Main – since we were trying to subvert the traditional designer-as-expert paradigm, we reasoned, we should look unassuming and try to blend in. The last

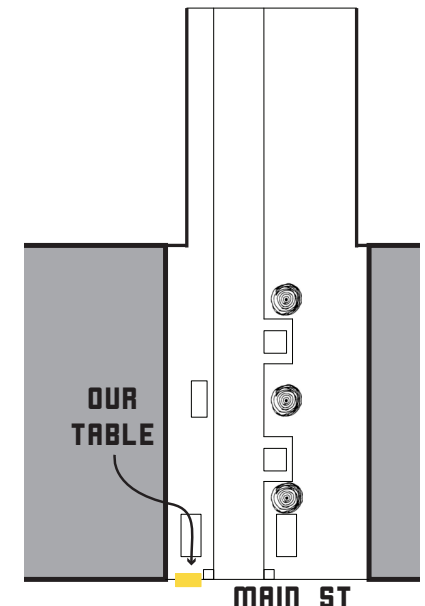
thing we wanted people to think was that we were Middle Main or City of Poughkeepsie employees there to surveil or police the space. This approach, however, backfired, mainly because we didn’t consider our positionality; as young, white, class-privileged students from a wealthy institution, we did not blend into a neighborhood that is primarily home to low-income and working-class people, people of color, and homeless people. Without clear markers of who we were and why we were there, people regarded us with suspicion, and our presence felt voyeuristic rather than unassuming.



After conversations with each other and organizers from Middle Main, we adjusted our approach. At the suggestion of Allan Co, Middle Main’s resident architect, who has done extensive community engagement work, we borrowed Middle Main volunteer badges and set up a folding table covered with signs explaining our project.

This immediately made a difference; placing ourselves behind a table and using explicit signage about our nonprofit affiliation gave us a clear purpose rather than looking like voyeurs or outsiders attempting to colonize the space. People even began to approach us with curiosity about what was happening in the park.

We also spent a lot of time thinking about how to position our table – we ended up settling on a liminal space, placing the table on the edge of the park and facing out into the street. This placement worked for a number of reasons: we were able to engage people as they entered, left, or simply walked past the park, which gave us a broader range of potential respondents on days when the park was not heavily used. We also felt it was important to face the table outwards in order to avoid the appearance of surveying or policing the space. While we made sure to walk through and speak to all the occupants of the park at least once per session, we were then able to turn our backs and let them use the





signage for on-site engagement work

space without feeling as though we were watching them, which reinforced our presence there as resources rather than guards.

The next challenge was framing the project and formulating our questions. Because we wanted to avoid imposing our own preconceptions on the project, we initially kept our language very open, asking questions like, "What do you think of this park?" "Do you spend time here?" "What would make you want to come here more often?" "How do you think we could improve it?" and so on.

Unsurprisingly, however, very open-ended questions proved difficult for participants to answer. Asking people to generate ideas right off the bat often yielded responses like, "It's fine the way it is," "I don't come here often," or simply, "I don't know." Our wording also unintentionally encouraged people to focus on the negatives of the space, prompting many complaints about littering, drug use, and homeless users in the park. While these responses were important for us to hear, they did not allow participants to imagine alternatives to the current state of affairs or get excited about possible changes to the space.



engagement dot voting exercise

After going back to Middle Main once again for advice, we began to experiment with offering participants options rather than relying on very open-ended questions. While Middle Main organizers suggested presenting a menu of possible additions to the space, we decided that we had not collected enough responses to reach that level of specificity just yet. Instead, we used the issues participants had already raised to offer some broader ideas that people could "dream into," imagining what specific items or programming they would like to see in the space. We also found it was helpful to provide a variety of ways to participate, ranging from very low-involvement (placing a dot sticker on the ideas they liked) to more demanding (writing down more specific requests and talking to us about them). This allowed people to give some amount of input regardless of how much time and energy they were willing or able to invest.

We had significantly better luck with this approach. First and foremost, we received more responses, since people were more willing to engage with physical objects than simply talk to us in abstract terms. The options we presented also proved to be good conversation starters that encouraged people to focus on positive future uses rather than calling for the exclusion of specific user groups from the space. While we had some reservations about "nudging" respondents in this way, we felt that we found a workable middle ground that sparked good conversations without imposing our own ideas of what people "should" want.

EV

The on-site work demonstrated that this project required skills that our academic training hadn't given us. Aside from making sure we framed our project in accessible terms, I also felt like I expended a great deal of emotional energy when talking to people. It was exhausting but rewarding.

JM

I personally found on-site engagement work to be both fun and exhausting. Simply interacting with that many people is tiring. On-site work also made me think about my positionality and what it meant for me to be doing this work in this community.

As the end of the fall semester approached, we began to think about the culmination of this phase of engagement. At the request of Middle Main, which had hosted a holiday celebration in the space the previous year, we planned a community holiday festival. Through this event, we hoped to create a final opportunity to survey Middle Main residents about the park and to test out a few more involved engagement tactics. By bringing more people into the space, we also hoped to encourage the community to view it as a space where events could happen and imagine other future uses for it.

The final event involved a number of components: holiday music and hot chocolate, a simple luminary craft provided by Middle Main, site photos and plans for people to draw on, and a simple prototyping tool. We envisioned this tool as a simple, modular system that participants could use to create physical prototypes of objects they would like to see added to the space. After experimenting with a number of materials, we settled on cubical cardboard boxes with small strips of Velcro that allowed them to be stuck together in any number of configurations – essentially, giant building blocks.

Over the course of the event, however, we realized that in addition to being a prototyping tool, these boxes were also a great toy. The most enthusiastic participants in our event turned out to be a group of kids, many of whom were waiting around while their parents worked at a clothing drive in a church down the street. Rather than acting as a medium for prototyping specific objects, the boxes transformed the space into one characterized by imagination and play. By keeping a large group of children occupied for over



poster for our fall engagement event distributed by middle main

an hour, the boxes proved how an incredibly minimal intervention can completely alter a space, and that providing kids with a simple, malleable tool can produce just as much excitement and imaginative play than an elaborate playground (if not more).

Aside from the inspiring use of the boxes, we also collected further survey responses, as well as a number of drawings that children did on the site photos and plans that we provided.

Since the fall semester was drawing to a close and the Poughkeepsie winter was making it increasingly difficult to interview residents on site, we ended our first phase of engagement and moved into the process of sorting through our responses and beginning to design.

JM

Playing with kids was among the most fun I've had working on this project. The creativity they brought to the site using the boxes was stunning – they built everything from playhouses to 12ft tall giant robots. I'm just a large child, but playing with kids reminded me why we really are doing this project.



kids making snowflakes, luminaries & drawings of the park at the crafts table

MURPHY PARK DRAW YOUR IDEAS HERE!

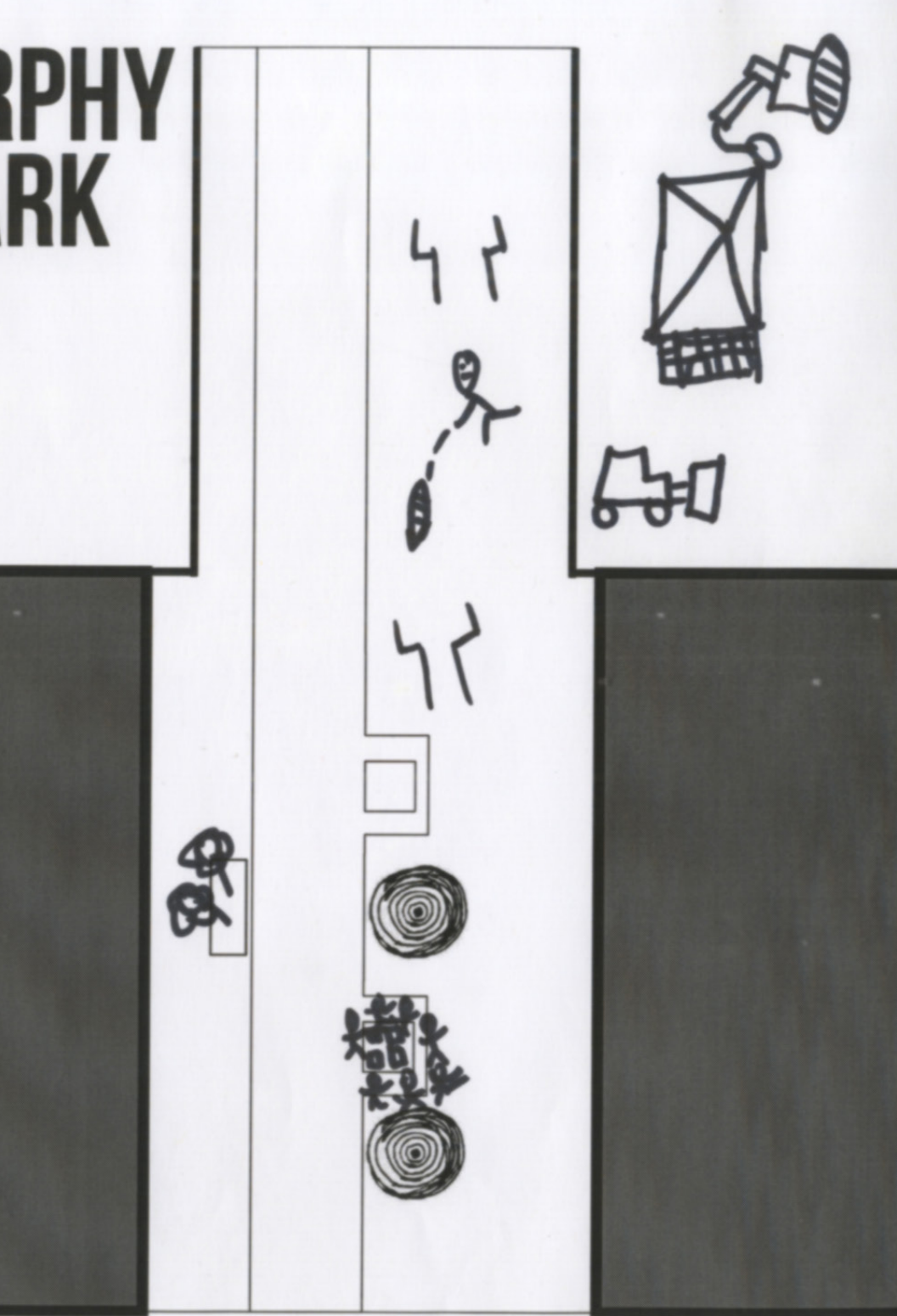


joey the tall child playing with a smaller child



a kid's drawing of what murphy park could look like

RPHY
RK



a kid's plan drawing including the best playground: construction equipment!

**4.
REVIEWING RESPONSES**

**WHAT IS OUR
INTERPRETIVE
ROLE IN THIS
PROCESS?**

After receiving an immense amount of input over the course of our engagement process, we were feeling overwhelmed. There was an abundance of desires from so many different groups of stakeholders, and these desires were often oppositional. While a number of social groups had laid claim to the park, their presence often dominated the physical space as well as other people's perceptions of it. We saw a particular focus on safety (or perceived safety), which often took the form of requests to "get rid of" users seen as undesirable, particularly homeless people and people using drugs.

While we certainly couldn't dispute many participants' desires to feel safer in Murphy Park, we were not comfortable with the assumption that a sense of safety had to be created through stepping up police presence, introducing surveillance technologies, and ejecting already marginalized people from the space. We were also struggling to negotiate many people's perception that homeless people were perpetuating violence, substance use, and litter in the space, when in reality we had found through our interviews that many homeless people valued the space as a quiet sanctuary from the constant stress of homeless shelters or the streets. In fact, many homeless users were just as concerned about drug use and violence in the park, and they were often the most proactive about cleaning up trash.

As with most urban spaces, the park is a place of contestation, and while we had read and studied the theory of this urban negotiation throughout our Vassar careers, actually interacting with and navigating such intense contradiction felt impossible. In a way, inaction felt safer, as though doing nothing would be the only way to do no harm. Although we had entered this project with the desire to do our best to directly translate the wishes of "the community" into physical forms, we were now forced to reckon with deep divisions between Middle Main residents, particularly along race and class lines. Not only was there no clear "community" for us to listen to, but we were now in the awkward position of deeply disagreeing with the wishes of a large number of the people we had spoken to. What were we supposed to do when significant numbers of our participants specifically requested surveillance cameras, fences, and uncomfortable benches, or simply told us to "get the crackheads out"? And how were we supposed to craft a cohesive design for the space when one group of our constituents wanted to exclude another group of constituents, who we viewed as having an equal claim to the space?

Holding vast contradictions brought us to the point of exasperation. We were finally able to move forward when, at the advice of Lisa Brawley, we took a step back and shifted our viewpoint. She recommended that we take what we had gathered and process it in the realm of the theoretical, so we decided to change course somewhat and pursue conceptual/speculative design. We realized that rather than attempting to create a single, cohesive design right off the bat, we could design for a range of different desires, exploring each idea by taking it to its extreme. By pushing the various responses we had received to the point of absurdity, we could think through the implications of the many desires we were hearing from engagement participants.

Creating this variety of extreme situations would help us better understand the oppositions between these different situations and the constituencies backing them. Seeing these oppositions would hopefully pave the way to mediate them in a number of ways: on the one hand, pushing desires such as surveillance and exclusion to their most extreme forms would allow us to create a rhetorical tool to help people understand that a design that emphasizes security creates a space that is uncomfortable for all users. And on the other, we felt that these designs could raise provocative questions about how supposedly neutral spaces and objects can reveal the intentions and ideologies behind them. Ultimately, we envisioned using bits and pieces of these extreme scenarios to create a final design that would embody the complex range of perspectives we had encountered through our engagement work.

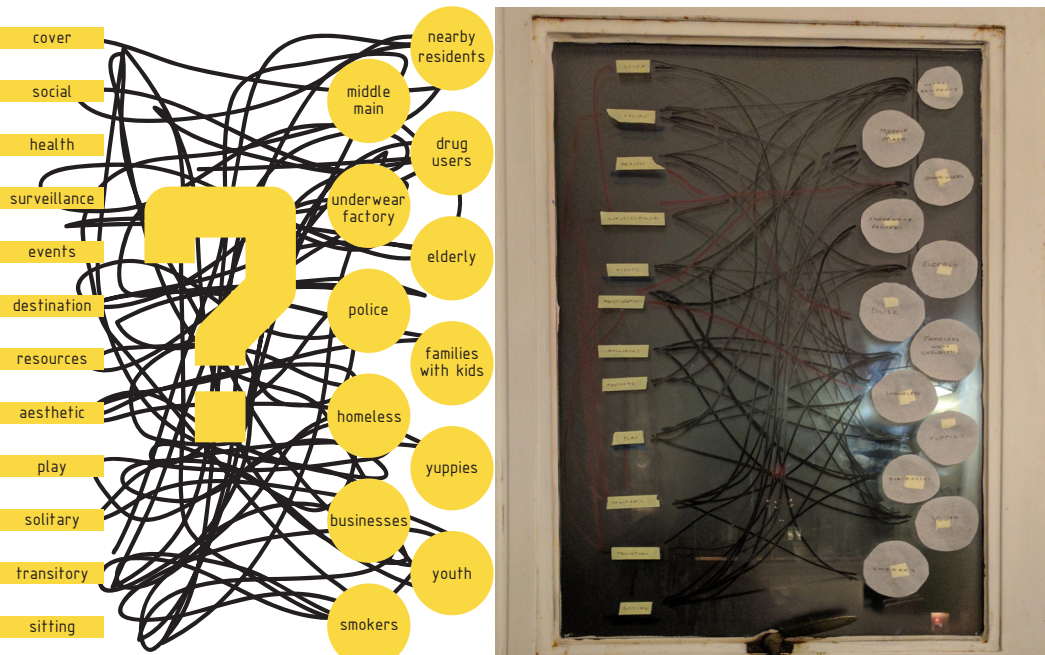
In order to undertake this process, we really had to think through our interpretive role as designers. Extrapolating simple requests or conversational implications to extreme situations was a useful thought experiment and allowed academic exploration, but it was not intended to produce buildable designs, and definitely not something that we would want to take back to people for on-site conversation. Yet as designers, our role was to design. Interpretation of requests, explicit and implicit, was the only way we could fashion design solutions that would have real impact. Looking for what people were asking for, even when they phrased it indirectly, was the only way to craft a design that would actually respond to our participants' needs and desires without mindlessly replicating specific requests. Extrapolation is interpretation, and while a thought experiment, it enabled us to generate useful ideas that we then reconfigured into more accessible designs.

ATTEMPT 1

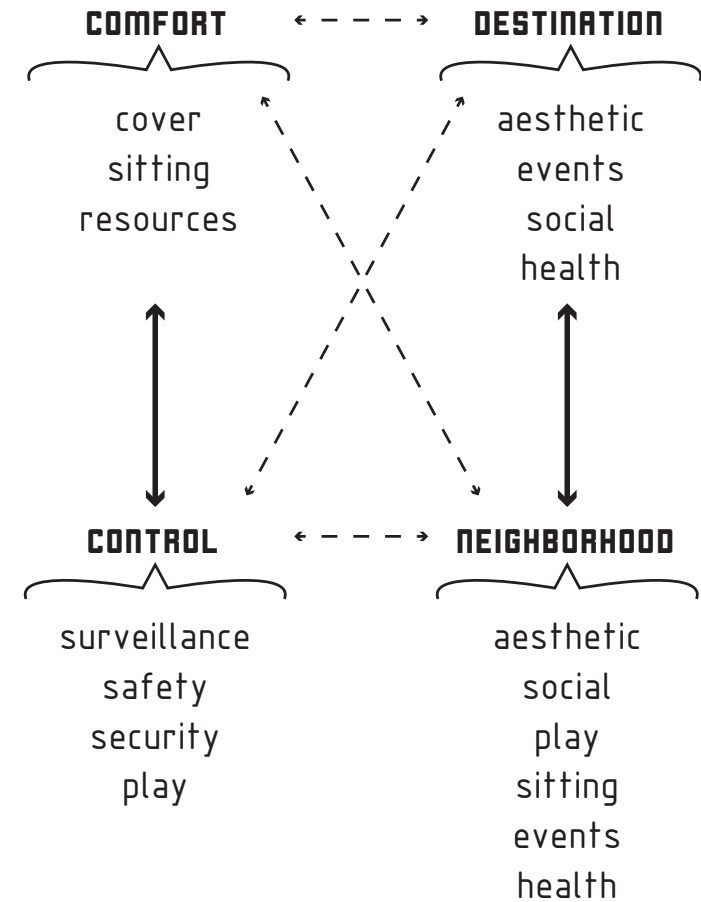
Interpreting the information we had gathered required us to shift our thinking from the very concrete realm of engagement to the conceptual realm of speculative design. In order to create extreme versions of the various desires we had heard, we decided to begin by sorting the results of our engagement into categories. Although our first attempt did not produce categories that we felt comfortable moving forward with, we did learn a great deal, which informed the methodology that produced the categories that we ultimately decided to work with.

Although this first attempt did not produce categories we liked, one thing that we did well was think visually and move around. We drew on windows and stuck notes all over walls. While the process of physically moving ideas around was fun, it was in our first step that we started going down the wrong path. We attempted to determine the constituencies for whom we were designing by imagining them in the abstract.

Our next step was to list desires and connect them to constituencies. The issue again was that we were making assumptions about what these mostly imagined users would want, instead of basing the process on what real people had asked for.



a very confusing diagram based on a process drawing we did on a window.



To make matters worse, our next step was to group desires (that were mostly imagined) into categories. Our categories got progressively more abstract and broad. Eventually we abstracted desires into umbrellas, that we saw as sitting on two spectrums intersecting with each other. We allowed ourselves to put desires into multiple categories to show how they could function in different ways, but in doing so we made them useless. We created false spectrums and oppositions based on abstract desires that we had attributed to non-existent constituents. The entire process was so completely flawed that when we tried to understand what we had created, we realized that this framework was not workable and fell into several of the traps that we had been hoping to avoid with this project. And so we threw it all away and started again.

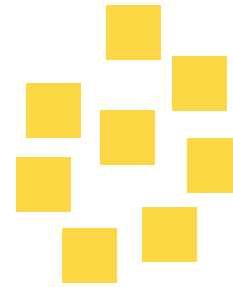
ATTEMPT 2

This time, we took care to avoid the pitfalls we had encountered in our first pass at this process. Since we had initially strayed too far from the actual responses we had collected, we went back to that data and used it as the basis of our second attempt. We started by sorting the long list of requests and responses we had received into over twenty groups. This allowed us to combine responses that were either redundant or similar enough to fit under one umbrella—for example, we grouped requests for a playhouse, a playground, and a climbing structure under “play structure.” As we were creating these groups, however, we made sure to keep them as concrete as possible, focusing mainly on creating a concise picture of the responses we had received.

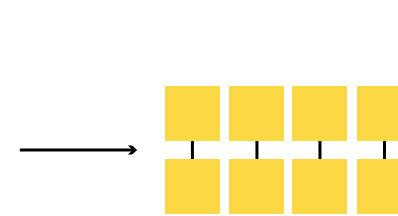
Once we had these groups, we began the process of creating more abstract categories. We started off by creating pairs of requests that seemed to fit together conceptually, and then combined those pairs into larger categories.

From there, we were able to think about what the various requests within each category had in common and what larger desires they

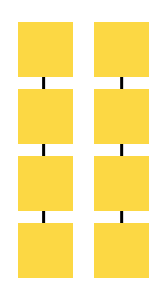
IDEA CLOUD



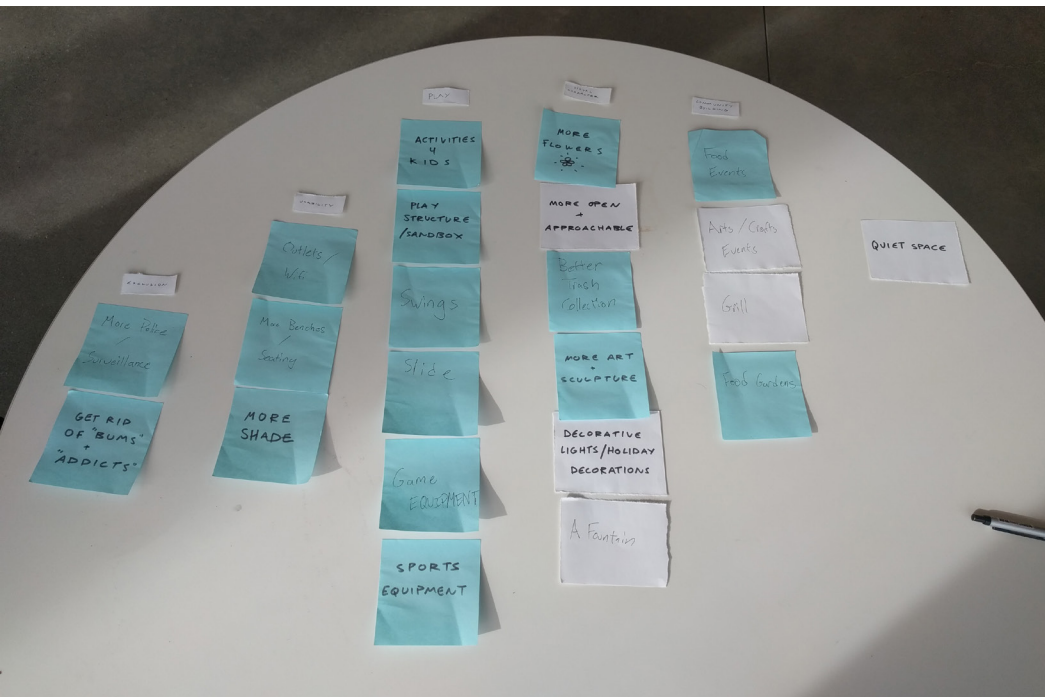
PAIRS



CATEGORIES



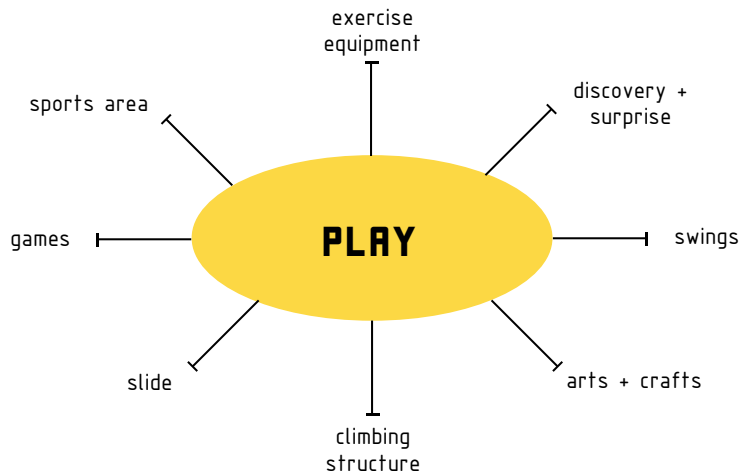
appeared to be speaking to. We felt that this process was much more successful because it was grounded in the specific responses we had gathered through our engagement responses rather than our general impressions of what people had asked for. Pairing and categorizing these specific requests also allowed us to move from the concrete to the abstract in a way that made sense. Ultimately, this process resulted in five categories that we felt comfortable moving forward with.



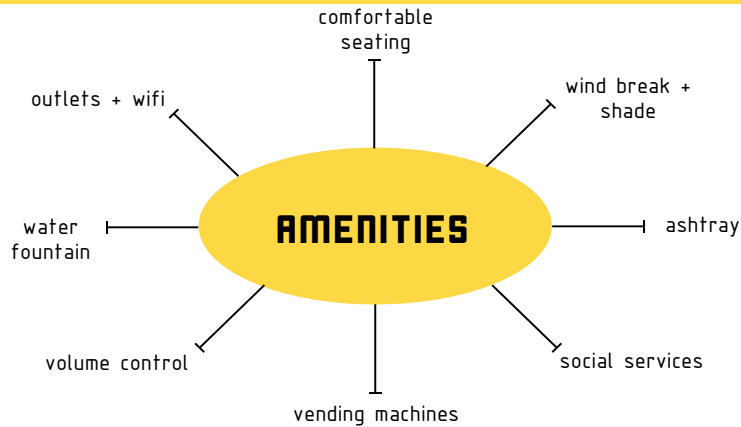
requests sorted on post-it notes

**5.
CREATING CATEGORIES**

**HOW DO WE
MAKE SENSE
OF WHAT WE
HEARD?**



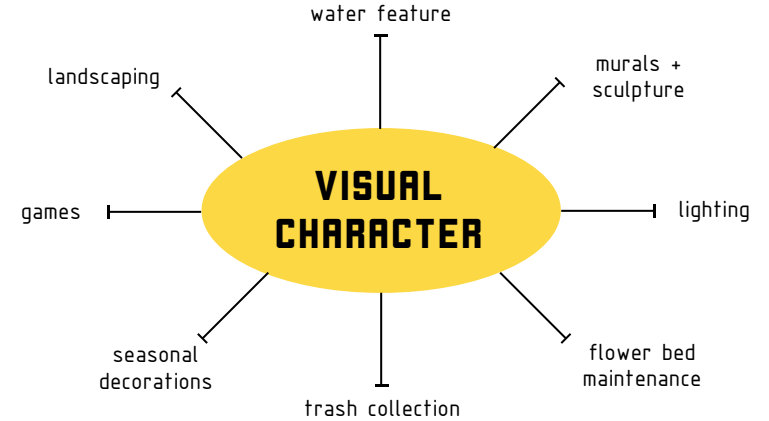
play includes fun, interactive elements for adults + children alike.



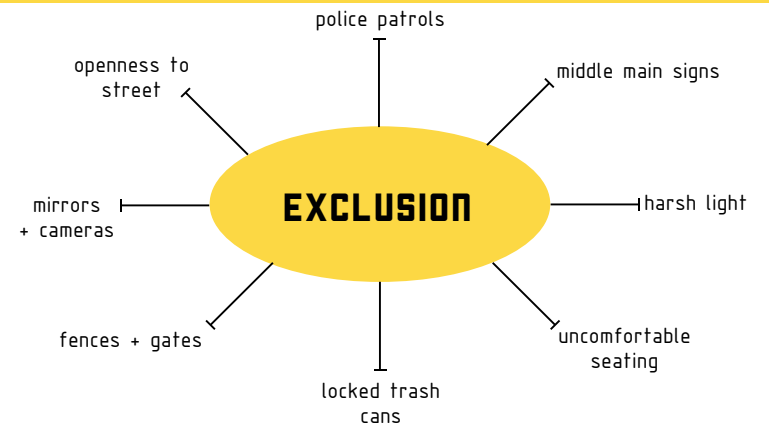
the amenities category encompasses all the things people asked for in order to make the park a comfortable place to stay for a while.



community building emphasizes interpersonal connection via special events and everyday use.



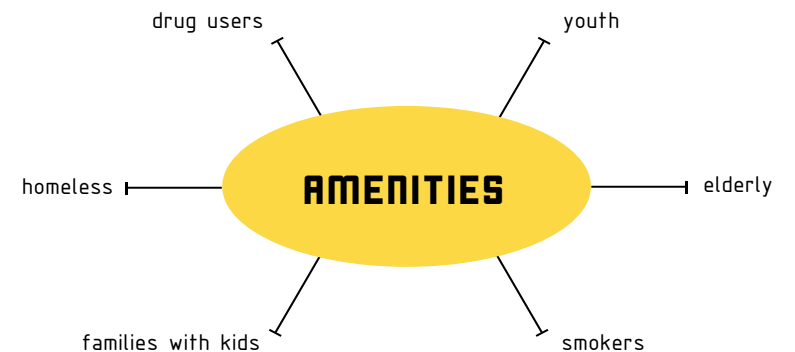
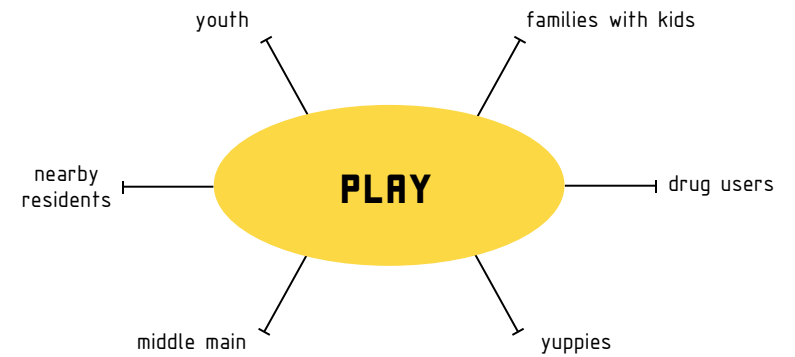
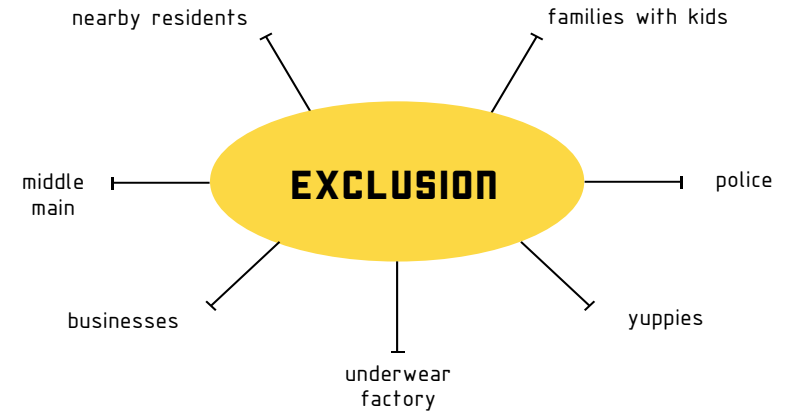
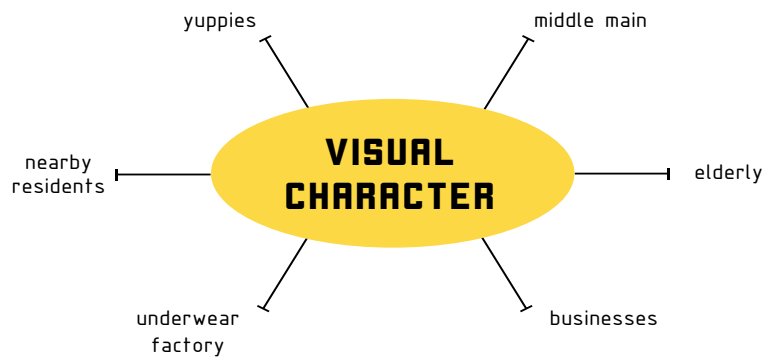
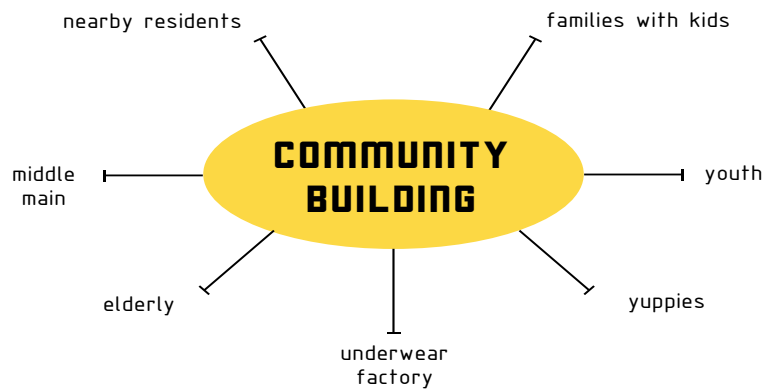
visual character focuses on creating an aesthetic identity for the space.



exclusion centers on excluding users + activities deemed "undesirable."

CATEGORIES + CONSTITUENCIES

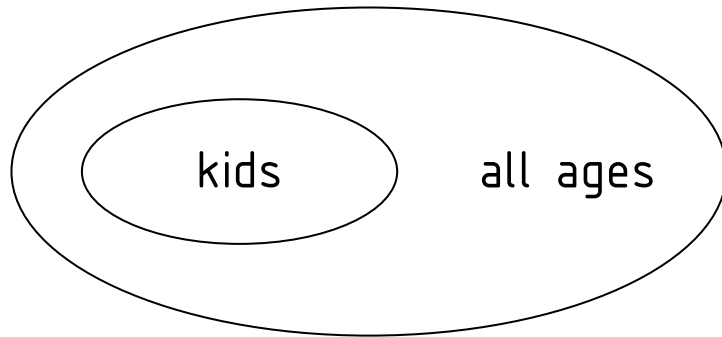
When forming the categories we observed who asked for what, and who the proponents of the different scenarios would likely be based on direct interactions with current and potential users and different community stakeholders. Thinking of the categories in terms of their proponents helped keep the project grounded in the complex (and often competing) needs of the many stakeholders we encountered.



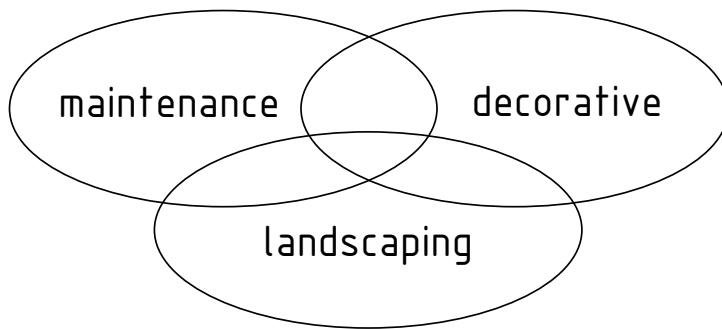
SUBCATEGORIES

To make sure we weren't oversimplifying, we broke down each of the broad categories into a few subcategories. Thinking through the ways that these subcategories did and didn't overlap helped inform our design work.

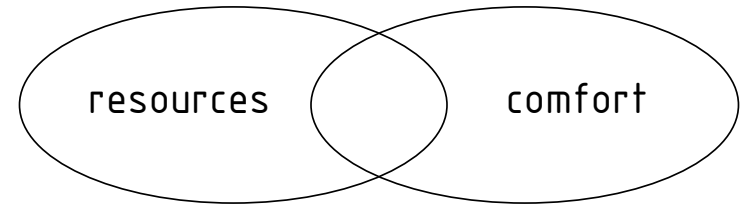
PLAY



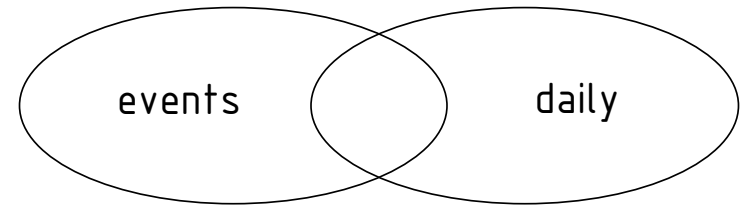
VISUAL CHARACTER



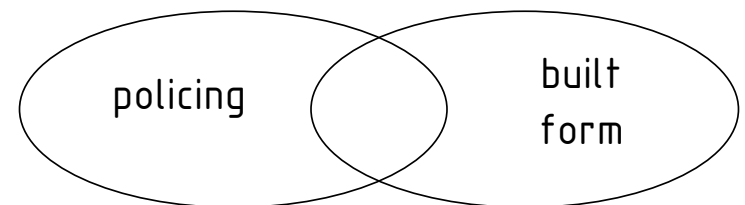
AMENITIES



COMMUNITY BUILDING



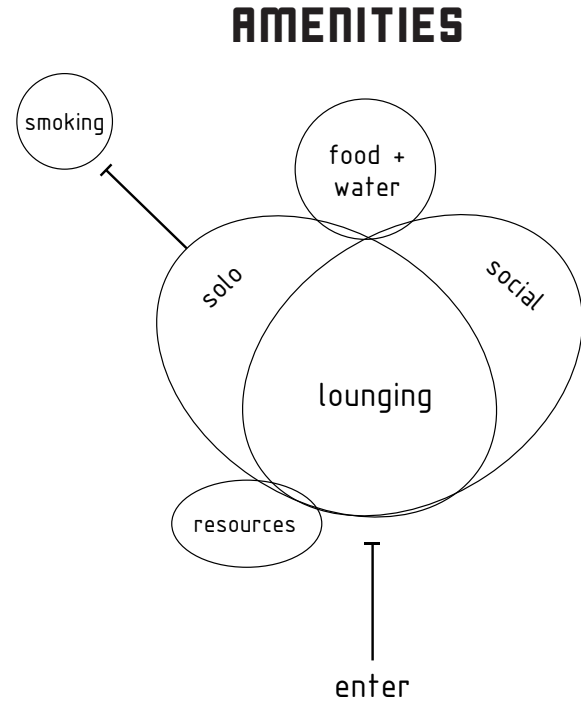
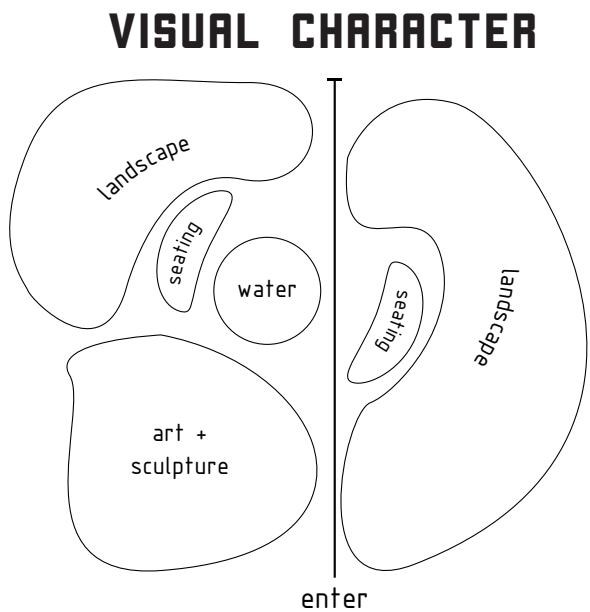
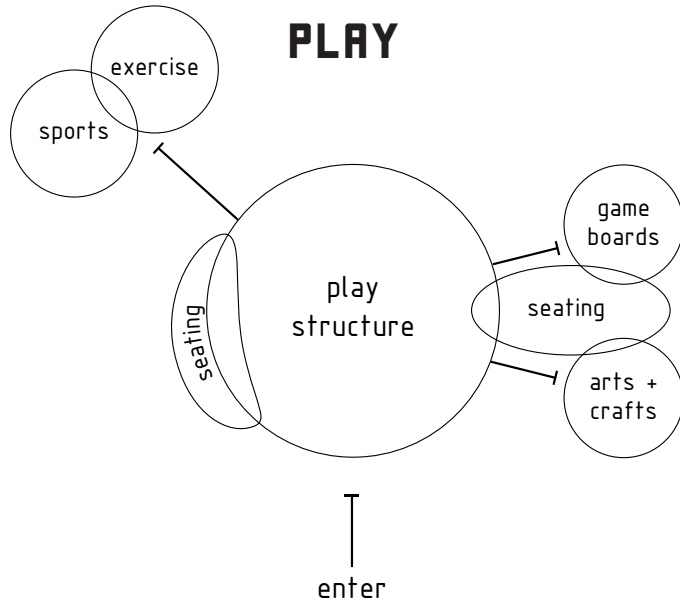
EXCLUSION



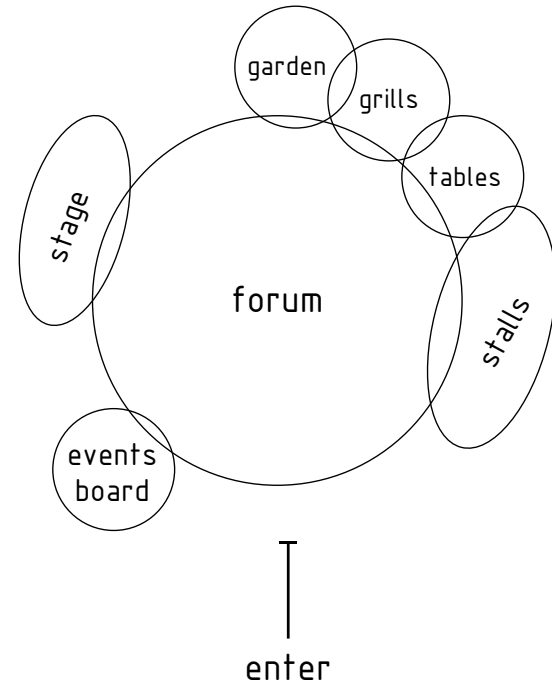
**6.
DESIGNING OBJECTS**

**HOW DO WE
START TO
TRANSLATE THIS
INTO DESIGN?**

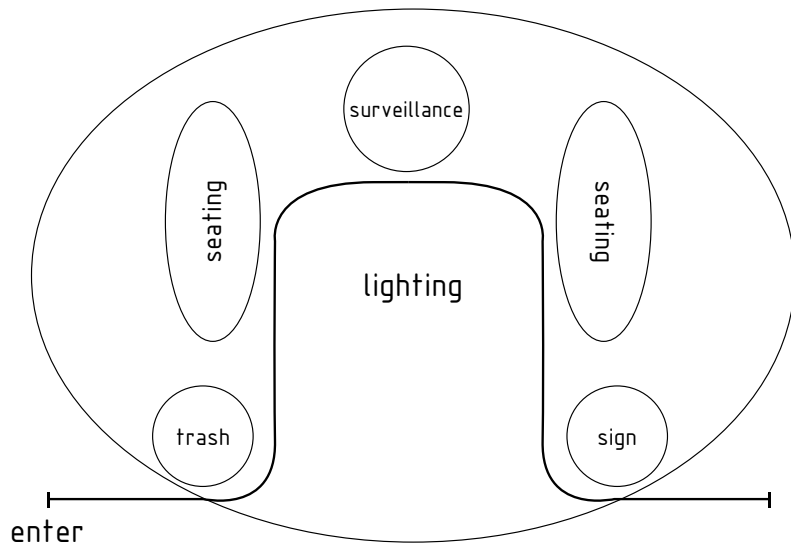
To begin the actual process of design, we started breaking down each category into the programs that made it up – that is, thinking about what users would want to do or experience in each type of space. Then, we spatialized the programs—how would they overlap and connect, and how would users move from one to the other? What order would they be in as users moved from one end of the park to the other?



COMMUNITY BUILDING



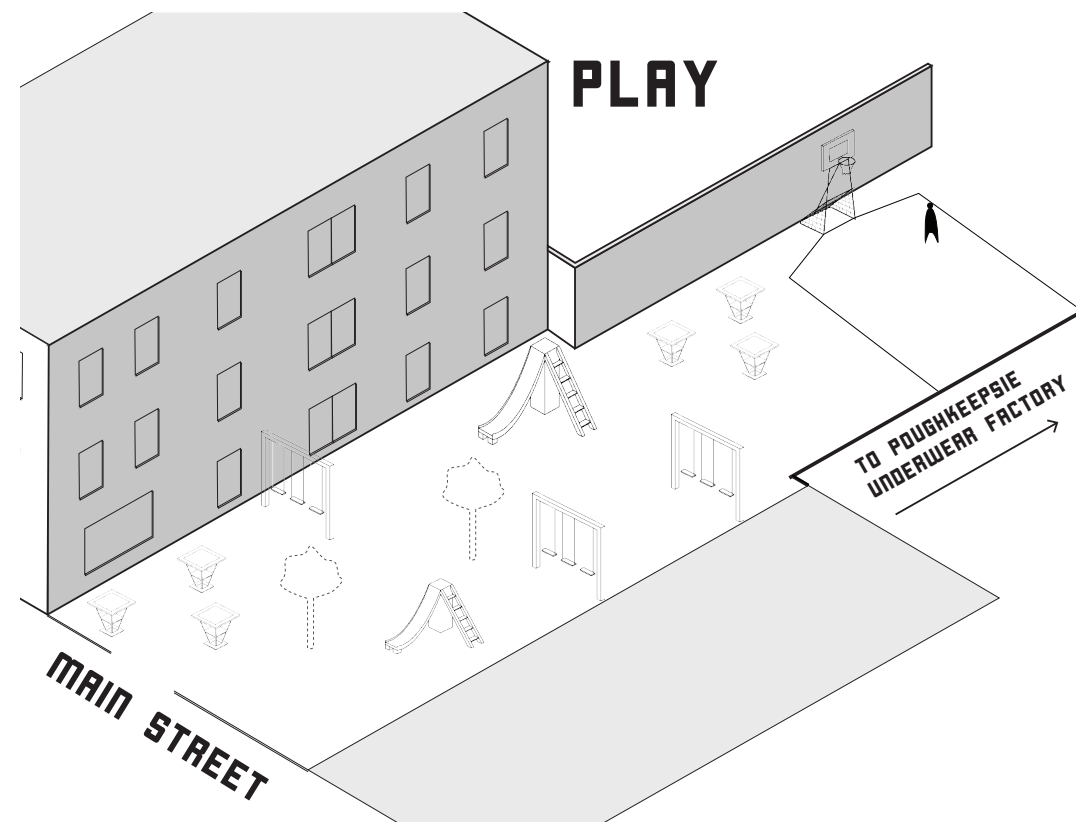
EXCLUSION



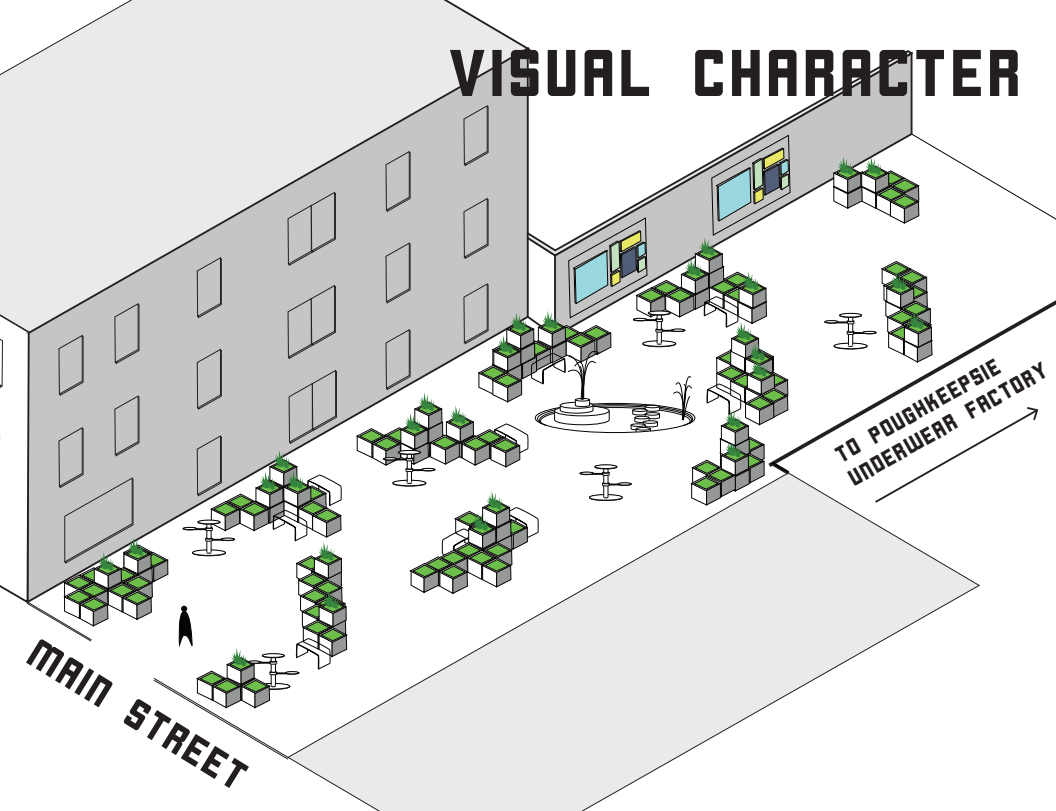
To produce these bubble diagrams, we thought about how various functions would be experienced, not in terms of their exact location in the actual space of the park, but in terms of order and flow. This exercise also allowed us to visualize how the intention behind each of the categories could be reflected in the actual organization of its functions. The community-building diagram, for example, is organized around a central social space, while the visual character scenario focuses more on delivering a continuously changing experience as the user moves through the space.

From these bubble diagrams, we then had to further break down the design into the specific objects that would make these programmatic functions possible. The objects we designed were based largely in the responses we gathered during our engagement process: they were either asked for specifically or implied by more general requests. This is especially true of the objects in the exclusion scenario, many of which were not asked for by name but were heavily implied by requests such as "stop people from sleeping here," "get the drug addicts out," and "we need more police surveillance." In some instances, we felt that we had to design what people were not willing to say outright.

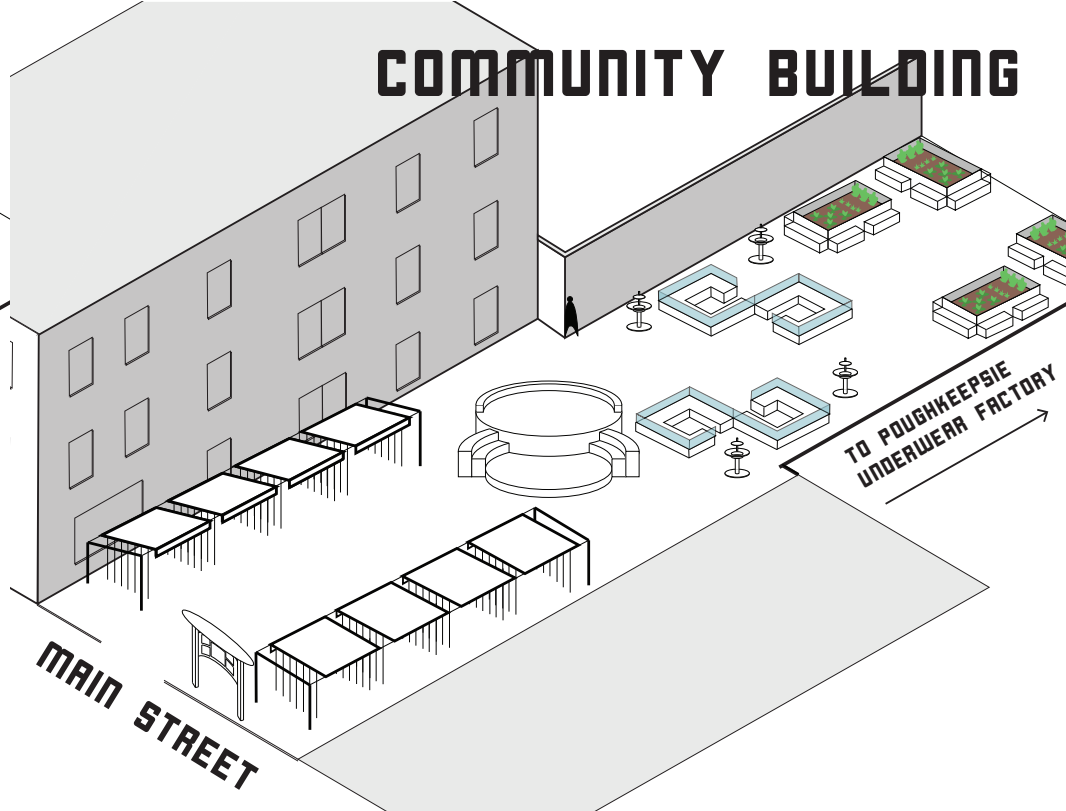
Using the bubble diagrams, we then placed these objects in the park, creating rough conceptual designs for each of the five scenarios.



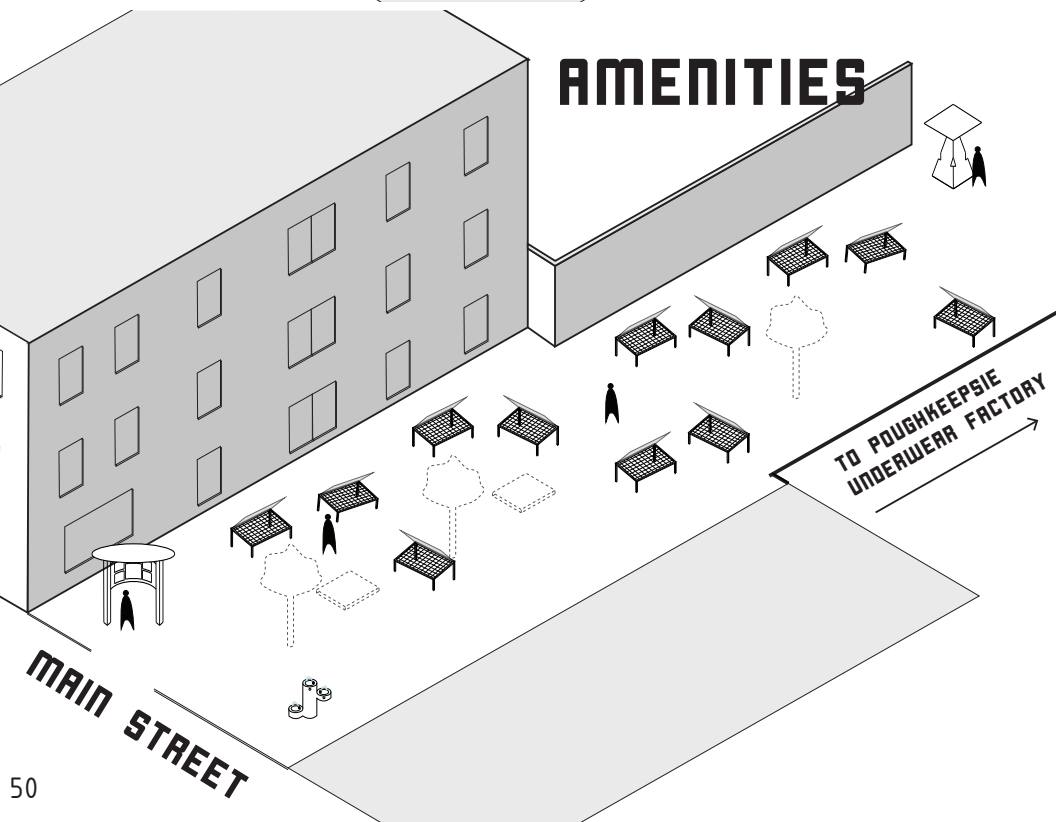
VISUAL CHARACTER



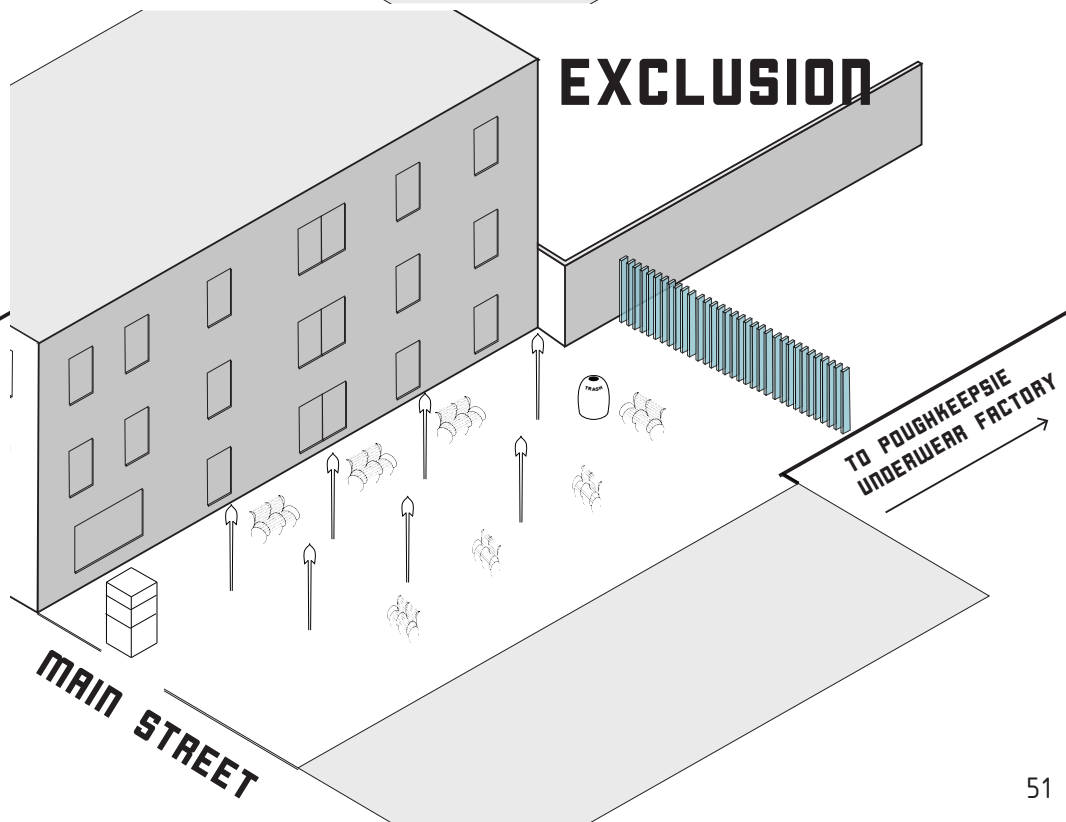
COMMUNITY BUILDING



AMENITIES



EXCLUSION

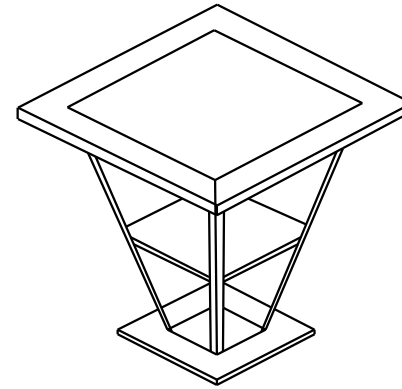


These design scenarios raised plenty of interesting questions for us: What would it be like to actually experience a space like this? Which of these scenarios would be possible? Which would be impossible, and why? What would need to change to make them possible?

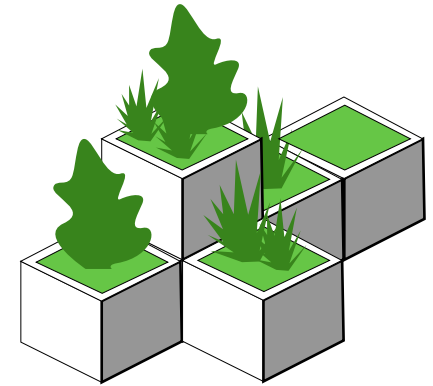
While these made for interesting conceptual work, however, we needed to contend with the two competing parts of this project: the academic design thesis and the built intervention based in the desires of Middle Main residents. In order to create a cohesive design that involved the input of community members in a more meaningful way than simply asking, "which design scenario do you like?" we decided to break each scenario up into the objects that composed it.

For us, exploding the categories accomplished a number of important things. Firstly, it made it possible to craft a design that incorporated elements of all five categories. Secondly, it opened up a broader range of possibilities and combinations for community members to play with. Thirdly, it helped remove us and our conceptual framework from the equation somewhat, recentering the process on engagement participants rather than the designers.

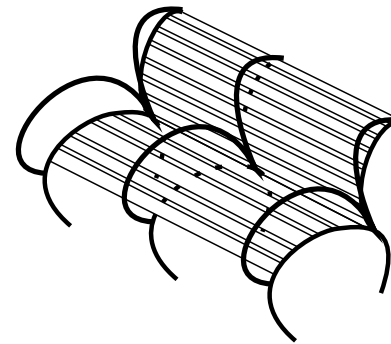
Finally, it made it possible to compare similar objects across scenarios and examine how their underlying intention informed their design. This is clearest, we think, in the case of the benches. Because there is one bench in each scenario, we thought of them as a kind of "design standard," a uniform component that showcases the distinctive purpose of each scenario. Although every bench theoretically has the same function, these benches demonstrate how widely that function can be interpreted depending on the designer's intention. For example, the bench in the community-building scenario is designed to accommodate groups and encourage conversation, the visual character bench is minimal and transparent in order to provide a nearly invisible viewpoint from which to observe the rest of the park, and the exclusion bench is impossible to sleep on and physically pushes its occupant away.



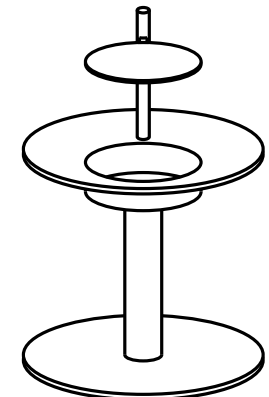
game table



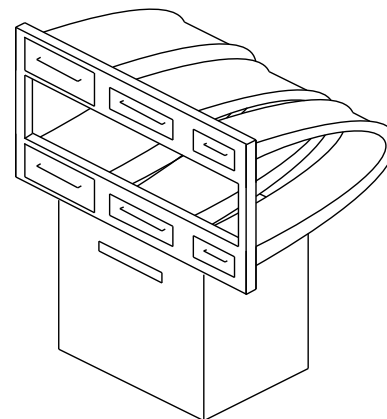
planter boxes



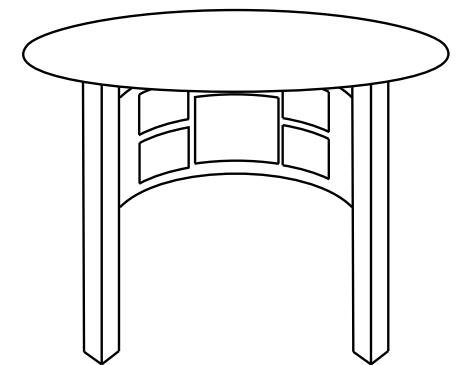
bench w/arms



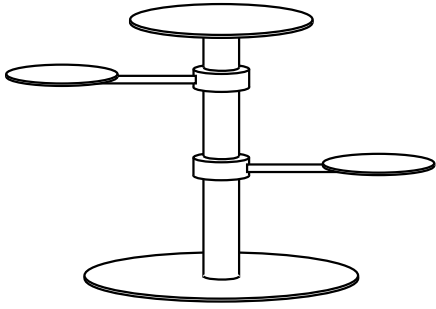
grill



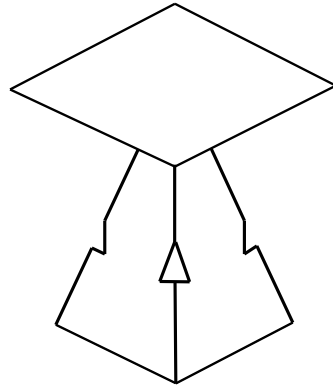
recycling bin



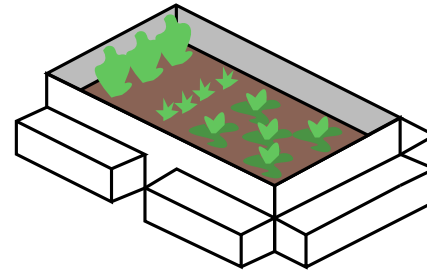
bulletin board



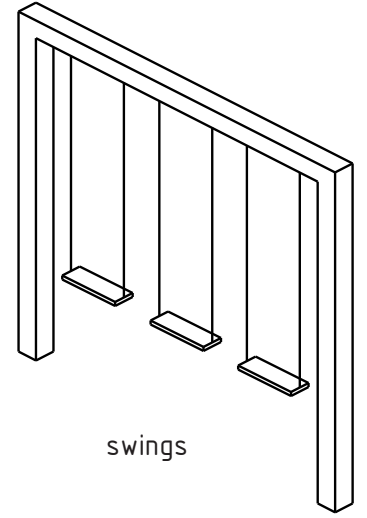
sculpture display



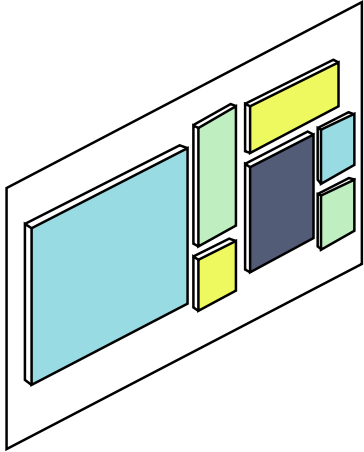
ashtray



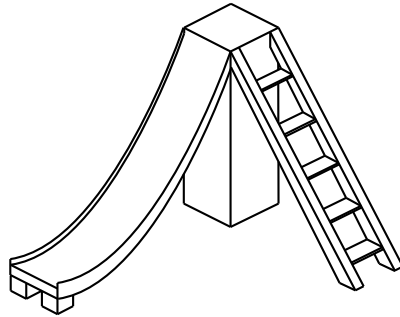
community garden



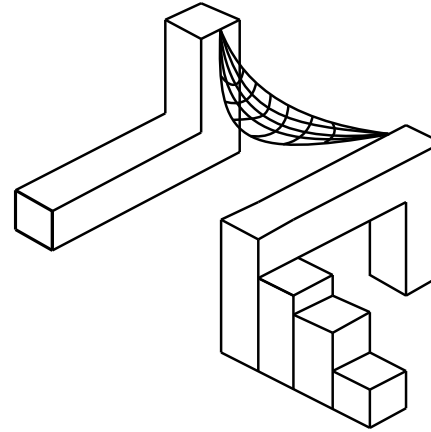
swings



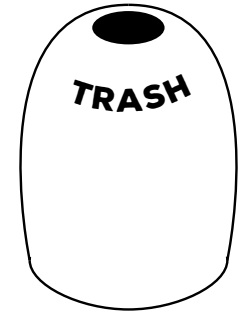
mural



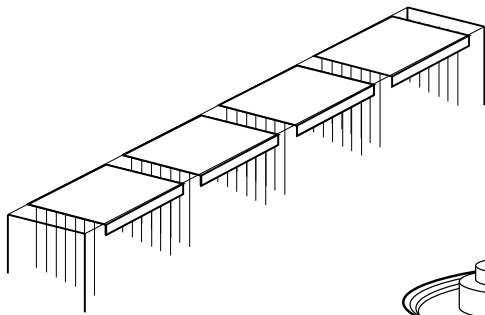
slide



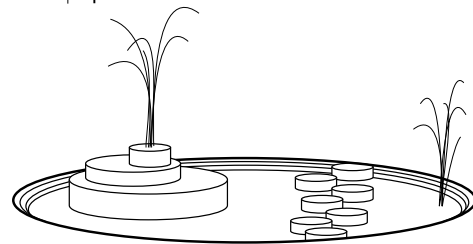
climbing structure



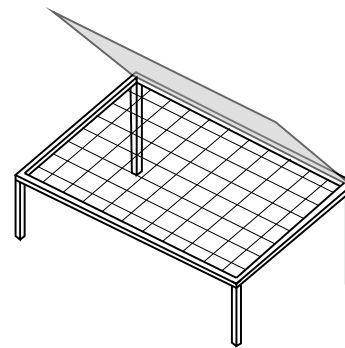
trash can



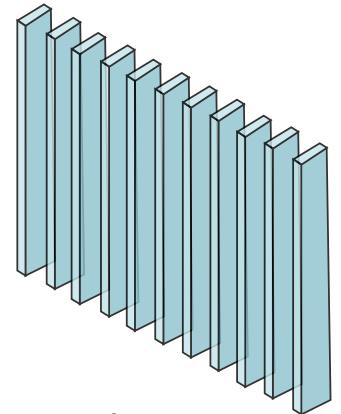
market stalls



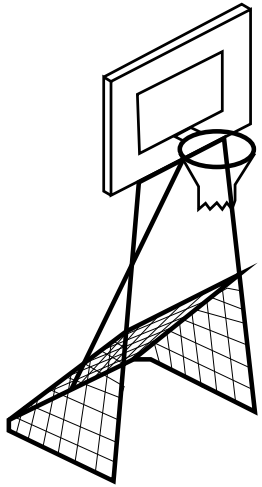
fountain



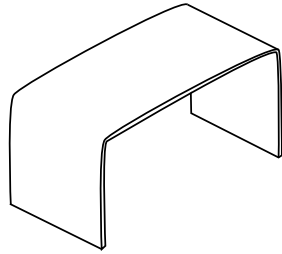
mesh bench



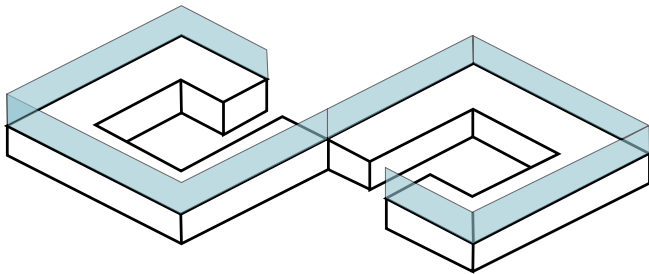
fence



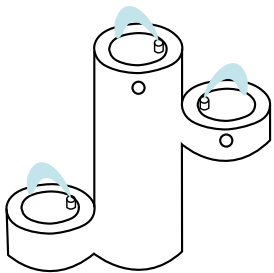
hoop + goal



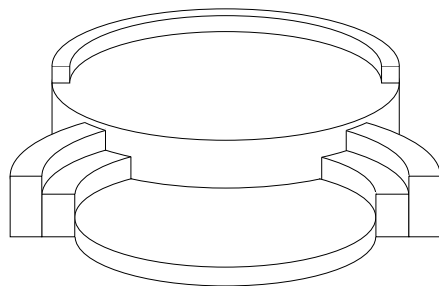
bench w/o arms



group seating



drinking fountain



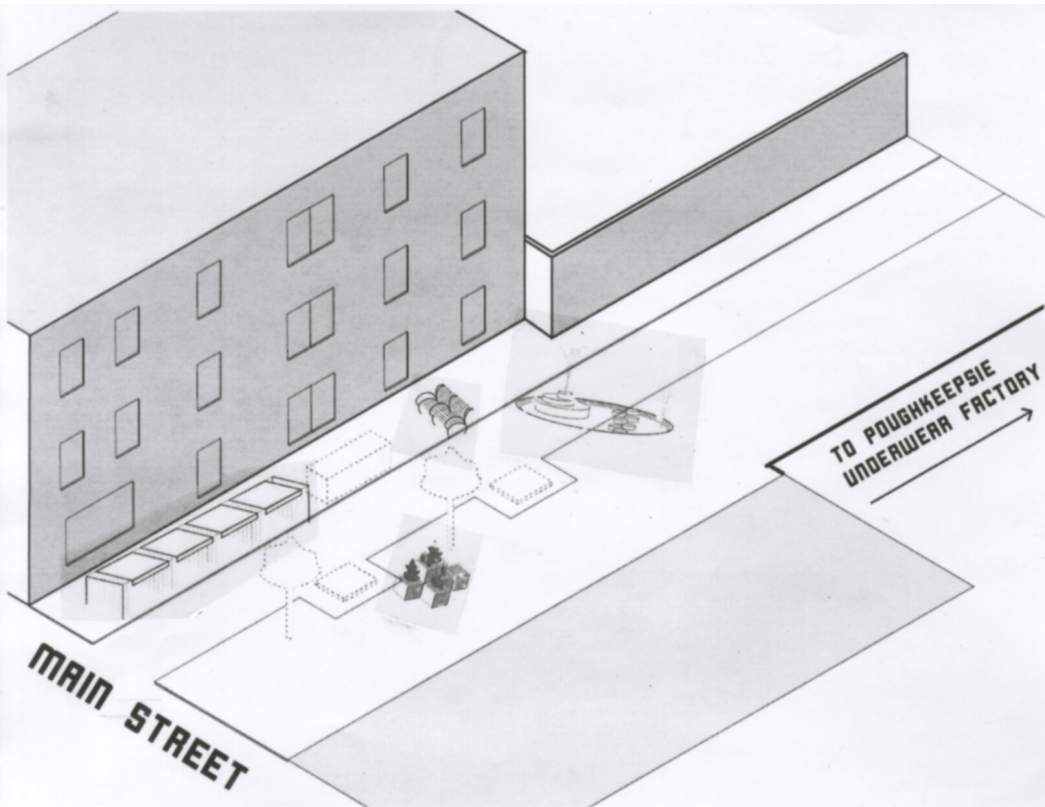
stage

7.
ENGAGEMENT PHASE II

**WHAT DO
PEOPLE THINK
OF OUR IDEAS
SO FAR?**

In order to assure the continued voice of park constituents in the design process, we took the component designs back out to the street in the form of stickers that participants could place on an isometric drawing of the park. Rather than merely voting for what they would like to see in the park, this allowed people to specify where they would like to see it.

Using isometric drawings was intended to make the diagrams as accessible and legible as possible to those without design training. While we had some positive responses to this tool, with both people on the street as well as Middle Main employees able to use it, we found that it was not quite as accessible as we thought. People struggled to understand the shapes that we had drawn as stand ins for real objects. The stickers were also clunky in that they only offered one view of the object, making it hard to rotate and place. The stickers themselves were also difficult in that they were hard to select and peel. Yet even though the tool was cumbersome, the rudimentary version we used was effective for getting input on object placement.

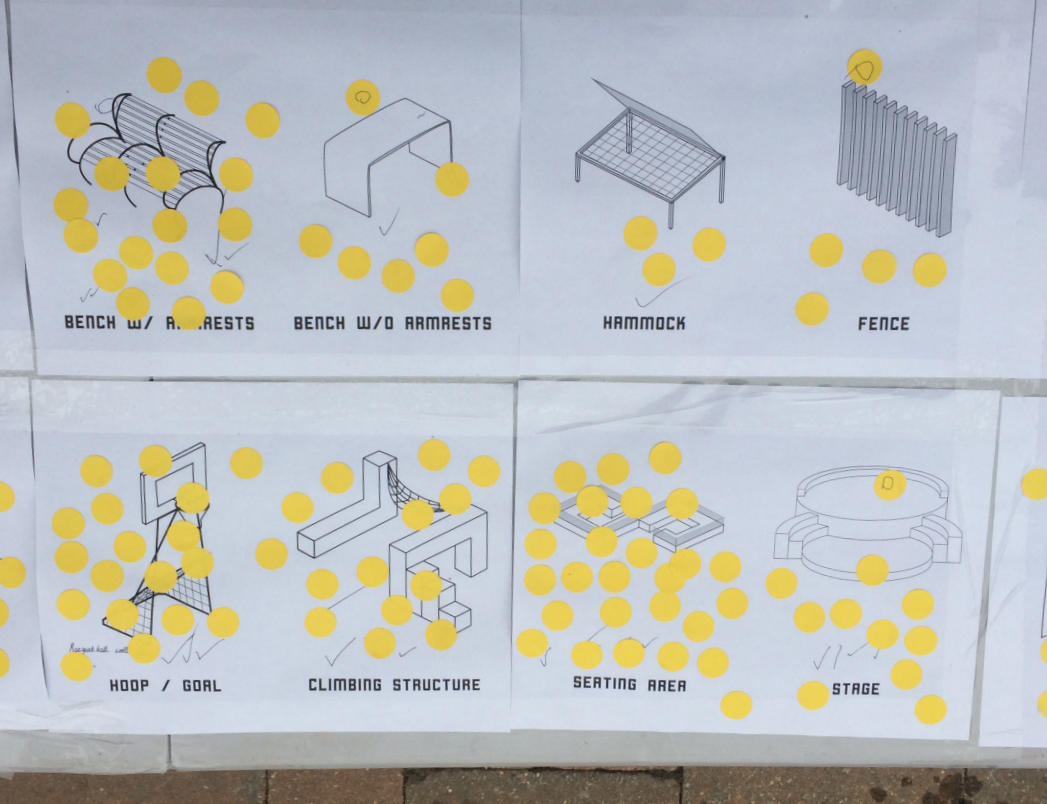


an example of object stickers placed on the isometric drawing of the park.

Our next major opportunity for engagement work came when Middle Main invited us to set up a table during the opening of the Poughkeepsie Underwear Factory, an event that drew hundreds of people. In preparation, we designed a poster that described our overall process. This proved useful to quickly explain the project and pique the interest of passersby. We planned to bring the same tool we had used on the street the week before, asking people to place stickers on drawings of the park, but quickly discovered that this seemed intimidating and asked too much time of participants, who were mostly passing by our table on their way into the Underwear Factory. As such, we improvised and re-set our tools to dot voting, asking people to place dot stickers on the components that they wanted to see in the park. This proved far more successful and we were stunned by the response we got from well over a hundred people.



running the underwear factory opening engagement table.



some of the dot voting results from the underwear factory opening.

After having received so much input, we struggled to understand our next step – we were overwhelmed by the variety of objects that had garnered positive responses. In order to parse what we had heard, we started with the numbers, tallying dot votes as well as stickers from the isometric plan tool. Plantings, trash/recycling bins, swing+slide, seating and a fountain emerged as the top selections.

Realizing that some of these components were outside the realistic scope of our project, we switched into our interpretive roles as designers. A fountain in the park was never a realistic idea, but by examining the desires behind this selection, we aimed to design not for the literal requests we heard, but rather the motivations behind these requests. What started to emerge was that people were, shockingly, asking for Murphy Park to look like a park.

We set about translating the top requests into desires for which we could design. Planters and trash/recycling bins were pretty simple – people wanted it to be pretty and clean. A swing and slide were often a request on behalf of children, but many adults

had also noted that they would enjoy swings for kids at heart, which we interpreted as not just a desire for play but also for interaction. We understood a seating area as a desire not just for seating and comfort, but also for collective use – the group seating area had won out over benches by a wide margin. The last request that ranked highly was for a fountain. This request had us somewhat stumped – we didn't expect something so infeasible and abstract to be so attractive. But as we began to wrap our heads around it, we came to understand the fountain as a stimulating and interesting feature of plazas, courtyards, and parks that feel special – fountains are generally an indicator of important places.

Before we could start designing, we decided that we needed to reaffirm some of our nebulous ideas about this project and make them into design principles. These came from ideas that we had as designers – our own ideals of how design should function – as well as what we had heard through engagement. Principles we arrived at through engagement were from our most recent work and from what we had heard throughout the year, desires both explicit and implied from a wide range of voices.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

Design for co-creation

Design for a range of publics

Design a space that inspires people to care about it

Design a space that encourages users to think about people different from themselves

Design for play and discovery for all ages

Design a space that makes its users feel cared for

Design for flexibility

Design that works with what's there

Design for a unified visual identity

8.
FINAL DESIGN + BUILD

**WHAT DO WE
BUILD?**

To begin the process of translating these design principles into physical form, we realized that we needed to meet with Middle Main. While we wanted to prioritize the direct input we had received from community members, we knew that Middle Main's perspective as a major stakeholder in this space held significant weight, and we were particularly curious about how they hoped to see Murphy Park relate to the newly opened Poughkeepsie Underwear Factory. In addition, we also felt it was important to get a sense of the limitations they were going to impose on us – whether we would be able to alter existing elements in the park, how permanent they expected our installation to be, and whether they would be willing to incur the possible liability of adding play equipment to the park.

This meeting was a largely positive one; Middle Main representatives expressed that they hoped to see Murphy Park become a gathering place for Underwear Factory residents while remaining a public space for the larger Poughkeepsie community. They responded well to our ideas about adding elements for kids and largely brushed off any concerns about liability, saying that they would rather have to deal with kids falling off swings than with people overdosing in the park. Surprisingly, they also suggested that our installation would be permanent and encouraged us to think about anchoring things to the ground as securely as possible, even stating that they would be open to altering the landscaping and ground contours. Overall, they indicated that they were essentially fine with whatever we wanted to do, since, in their words, "anything would be better than it is now."

ROUND 1: CONCEPT PROPOSAL

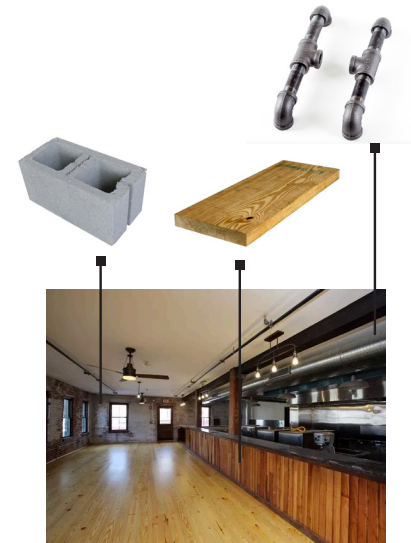
During this initial meeting, they asked for a proposal outlining our ideas that could be presented to their development team, which was meeting two days later. We set to work formulating a concept document, which mainly entailed translating our very broad design principles into more concrete ideas that could then be embodied by specific design elements later on. In order to think about how to connect community desires with the long-term community development strategy of Middle Main, we decided to frame our vision for the park as a meeting point: the location where Main Street and the Underwear Factory meet, interact, and work together to build a stronger community. We hoped to express Murphy Park's function as a meeting point both visually and functionally.

Visually, our goal was to extend the Underwear Factory's visual identity outwards and connect it to the visual identities of Main Street through materiality, color, and form. We planned to echo the industrial materials of the Underwear Factory, incorporating wood, pipes, and cinderblocks to reflect the Factory's interior and its evocation of Poughkeepsie's rich industrial past.

MATERIALITY

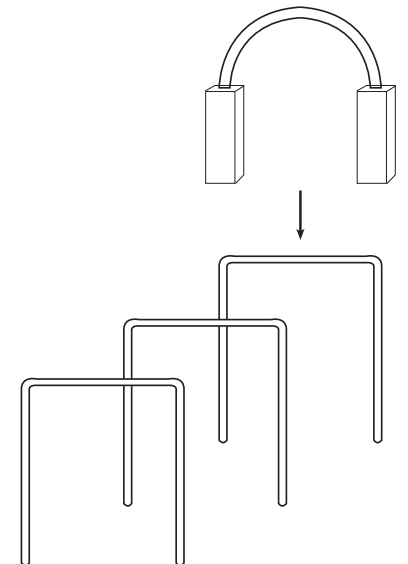
PUF's visual identity evokes Poughkeepsie's rich industrial past and its current revitalization. Echoing the building's industrial materials establishes Murphy Park as the gateway to PUF.

excerpt from april 12th
concept document



FORM

Our design takes the entry arch as a visual motif that reoccurs throughout the space, simplified into a rectangular shape that reflects the geometry of the surrounding buildings. Repeating the arch throughout the space draws the eye upwards and creates visual interest at multiple levels.

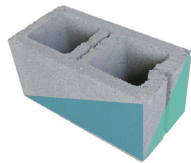


The colors, meanwhile, were intended to reflect the bright and varied facades of Main Street, such as the bright blue exterior of Tropical Fresh. By joining the Underwear Factory's materials with Main Street's colors, we hoped to create a fairly literal expression of their point of connection in Murphy Park.

COLOR THROUGH PAINT

Main Street is rich in colors which the community has generated or is otherwise comfortable, expressed through Middle Main's existing color palette. Using these colors draws Main Street into Murphy Park. Painted elements throughout the park create strong visual connections. This will include everything from cinderblocks to the existing fences and planter beds.

excerpt from april 12th
concept document



When it came to function, we wanted to emphasize Murphy Park as a space that would attract Underwear Factory residents and the broader Poughkeepsie community alike, drawing people in for both daily use and special events. We planned to achieve this by defining the space, creating flexibility, and building on what was already there.

One of the chief issues we observed in the park was uneven usage of the space and a lack of programmatic definition; there was very little clear purpose given to any part of the park, making it far less engaging for users. We proposed the designation of specific sections for specific uses, not to create harsh divisions, but to help structure the usage of the space and encourage people to interact with it.

excerpt from april 12th
concept document

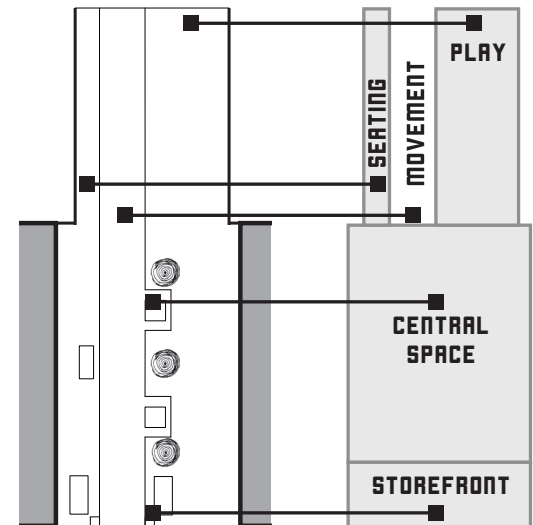
DEFINING SPACE

Murphy park is the Poughkeepsie Underwear Factory's frontage on Main Street, a place for meeting, hanging out, and playing. Our design gives different uses to specific areas of the park, not to create harsh divisions, but rather to help structure the usage of the space.

POUGHKEEPSIE
UNDERWEAR
FACTORY



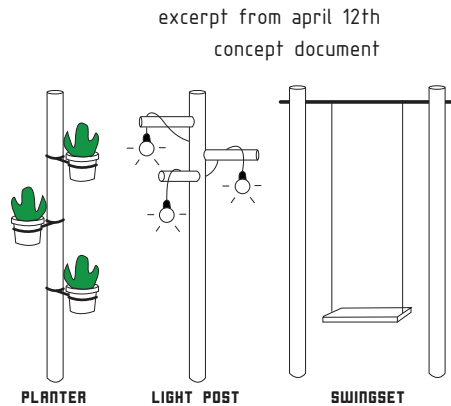
MAIN STREET



At the same time, however, we wanted to think about how to keep the design open enough to accommodate community events and differing uses over time. Ultimately, we settled on poles as a permanent, secure element with a small footprint that could be put to a wide variety of uses throughout the park without obstructing gathering space. We offered some potential usages, mainly to demonstrate the flexibility of this idea rather than to propose specific objects that we wanted to install.

FLEXIBILITY

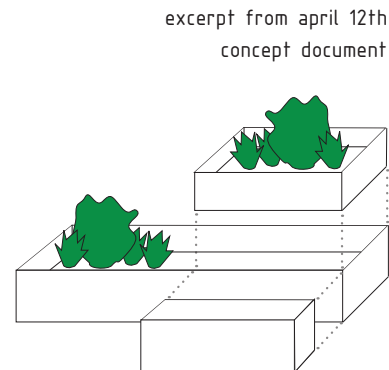
Because Murphy Park will be the site of a wide variety of community events, we will incorporate flexible elements that will not obstruct gathering space. Poles have a small footprint and can be put to a range of different uses throughout the space.



In order to create a sense of continuity between the current space and our redesign (as well as capitalize on existing elements rather than working around them), we also felt it was important to build on what was already in Murphy Park. In a very literal sense, we planned to do this by adding seating and more levels to the planter boxes, which had garnered praise from our engagement participants for adding more greenery to the space.

PHYSICAL

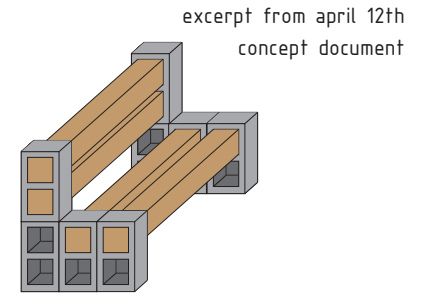
The existing planters in the park add greenery, but we can make them better! We plan to add seating and more levels to make them multipurpose and fun.



In a visual sense, we wanted to build on the existing elements in the park by designing seating that would visually connect to the materials already in the space. To demonstrate this, we proposed a tentative bench design.

VISUAL

Cinder block and wood benches will visually connect new elements with the existing planter boxes, the brick of the pavement, and the tables.



Finally, we wanted to emphasize to Middle Main that there were already positive activities occurring in the space; although they were preoccupied with the rising levels of drug use in the park, we wanted to point out the many users who were picking up litter and emptying the recycling containers in order to return bottles and cans. We saw this as a mutually beneficial behavior, since users were simultaneously cleaning up the park and receiving some material compensation. Because of this, we proposed reinforcing this behavior by making it possible to easily remove bottles and cans without forcing people to rifle through recycling bins, dignifying the act of collecting recycling and recognizing it as a public service.



After reviewing our proposal, the development team indicated that they liked our ideas about visual identity, flexibility, and kid-friendliness. Their suggestion was that we combine all of these ideas into a single element: soccer nets. Back when Murphy Park was an empty lot, we were told, neighborhood kids had often played soccer there. After Middle Main developed the space into a more traditional park they installed a set of soccer nets, but those went largely unused and were then destroyed by vandalism. While this

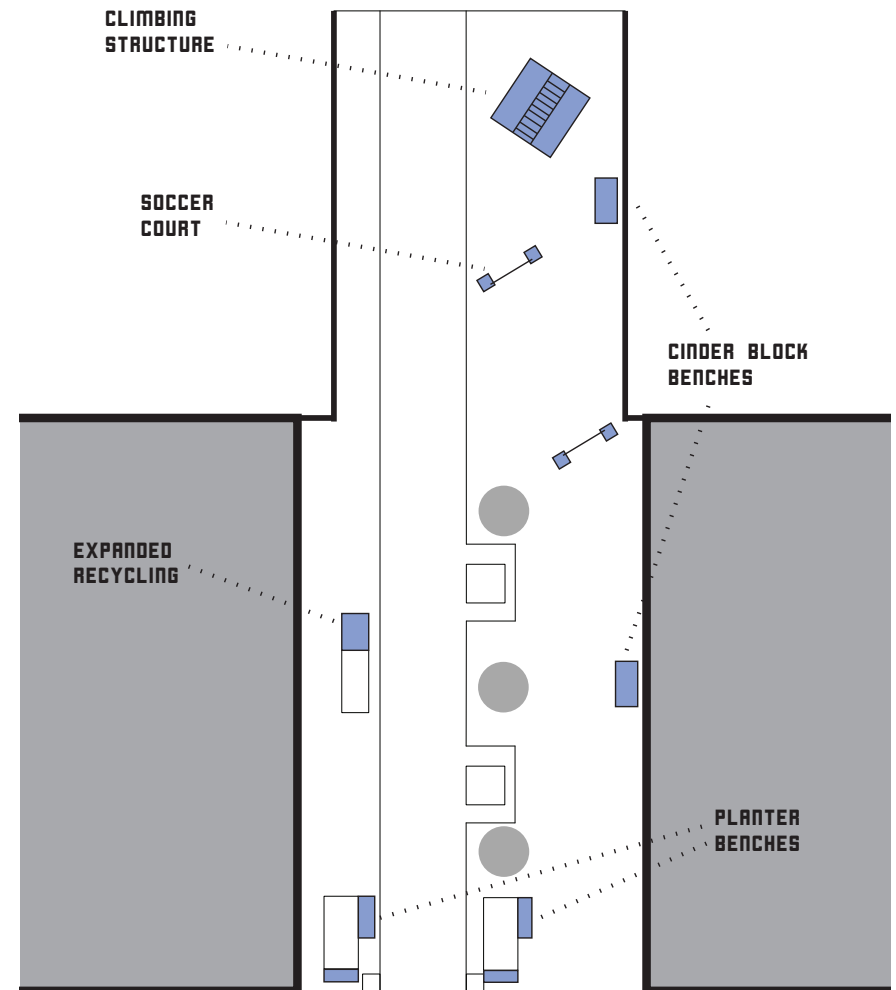
history had been explained to us very early on in the project, Middle Main had never before expressed a clear interest in reinstating the soccer nets, and we were surprised by this request.

We had some significant reservations about focusing the project around soccer nets. First and foremost, soccer had not emerged in our engagement process as a major priority for participants. Even when we presented a design for a soccer goal, it received far fewer votes than other play equipment options such as swings and slides. As designers, we also saw some major issues with soccer nets, the chief one being that they would take up a lot of space that would, at best, be used intermittently. Even one or two games per day would leave the soccer field empty for most of the day, and soccer games require fairly large groups of kids as well as access to a ball. Additionally, we were concerned about dropping in a single object without developing a consistent identity for the whole park.

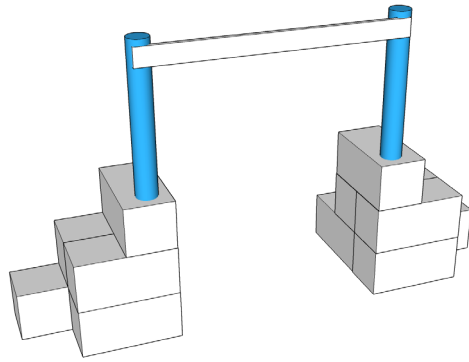
In order to honor our partnership with Middle Main, however, we decided to take the soccer net idea and build on it, since rejecting it outright did not reflect the collaborative relationship we hoped to have. We agreed to incorporate the soccer nets into a multipurpose design that would attract more consistent usage, preventing the soccer field from feeling empty or wasted when games were not actively occurring. With Middle Main's approval, we proceeded to work on more specific designs.

ROUND 2: INITIAL DESIGN PROPOSAL

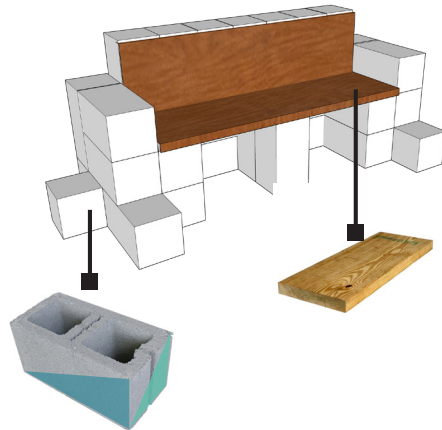
In this iteration, we expanded on the conceptual proposal. In a plan, we illustrated how we wanted to use a handful of components to subdivide the space and introduce more playable elements.



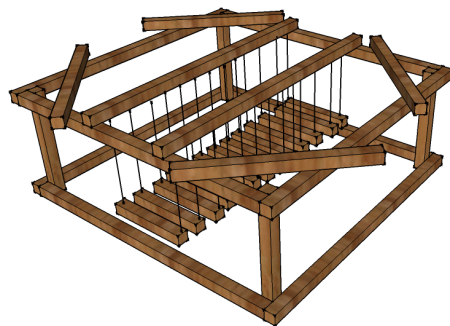
When creating detailed designs for the components, we were faced with the challenge of translating our conceptual ideas into objects that we could reasonably construct and affix to the ground, given the constraints of our limited budget and labor. Ultimately, we settled on a construction system based on cinder blocks, which appealed to us as a sturdy, heavy, modular building material that could be reused inventively in various elements while maintaining a repurposed industrial aesthetic. In our soccer net design, for example, we proposed creating a stable base of cinder blocks that could double as multi-level planters with a removable PVC frame.



We planned to carry through the cinder block motif in our bench design, which would also incorporate plantings while remaining very sturdy. We also intended to attach a simplified version of these benches to the planter boxes in order to create a variety of seating options scattered throughout the park.



Finally, we decided to add another play element: a sturdy, low-to-the-ground climbing structure made of 4"x4" beams. For us, this dealt with a number of the major issues with the soccer nets, offering a fun element that did not require group activities and could appeal to multiple age groups.



After we sent in this proposal, we received the most disappointing response of this process. In an email, Middle Main doubled down on the soccer net idea and rejected all other parts of our proposal. Further, the soccer nets were stripped of the multipurpose bases we had designed and reduced to a PVC frame – for which they sent us a link to a YouTube tutorial. Disregarding our reasoning about making the soccer field multipurpose, they instead suggested that we paint boundaries with chalk in order to “help people interpret the use of that area.”

Surprised and confused by this reversal, we requested another meeting with Middle Main. At the site, a representative informed us that the development team was uncomfortable with the use of cinder blocks in our design, which they felt did not reflect the level of investment that they had put into the high-quality materials of the space. When we offered to select a different material for the benches, she also indicated that Middle Main felt that adding more seating would encourage “more users” and “unsavory activity.” Similarly, they did not want to implement our recycling idea because they did not want to encourage the “negative behavior” of bottle collection in the space.

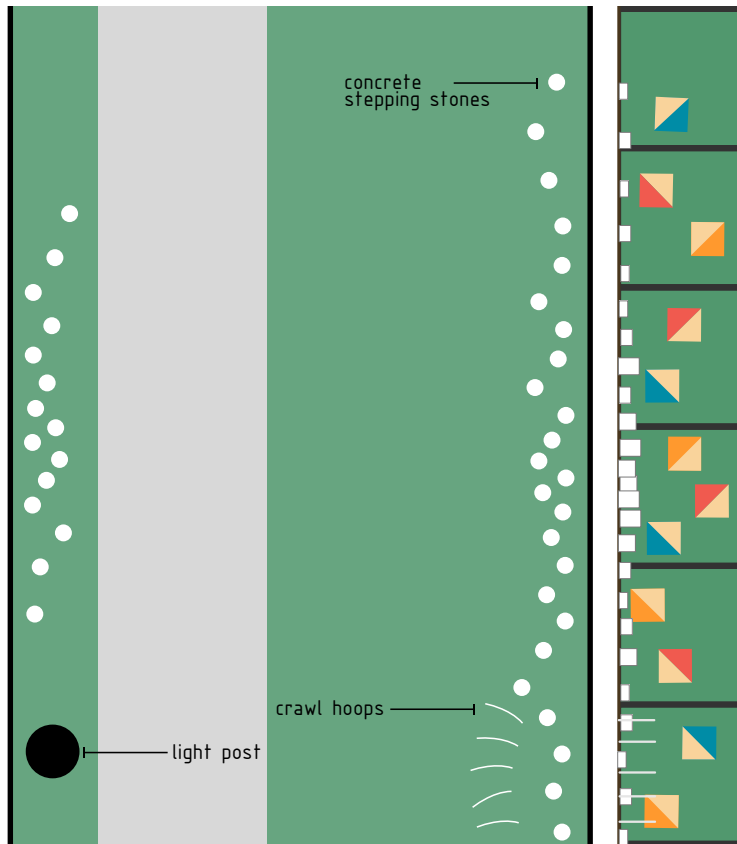
When we tried to voice our concerns about the soccer courts creating unusable space, she responded that Middle Main “didn’t really see that end of the park being used differently.” After some discussion, however, we proposed a long, narrow addition running along the edges of the park, leaving room for both soccer nets and any events that Middle Main might want to hold there in the future. This seemed like a viable possibility, particularly when we suggested that it could be a play area.

While the addition of child-friendly elements did seem to be a crucial point of consensus between us and Middle Main, this conversation raised red flags for us about the ways in which they were thinking about family-friendliness as an exclusion tactic. Rather than using play elements and seating to create the kind of multigenerational space that we had envisioned, it seemed that Middle Main was interested in focusing solely on play elements in order to attract a respectable family demographic and drive out users that they did not want.

But in spite of our reservations, we were now faced with a choice to either build a play element that we had misgivings about or build nothing at all. In order to honor the time, energy, and creativity that so many of our engagement participants had given to this project, we felt that it was better to move forward with an imperfect design than to make participants feel that their input had been ignored completely.

ROUND 3: THE FINAL DESIGN?

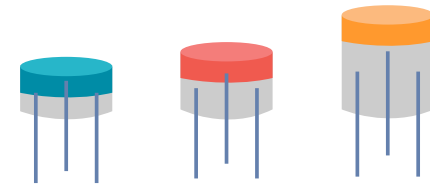
After our whirlwind early morning meeting, we had basically until the end of the working day to get a design back to Middle Main. We set about the seemingly impossible task of redesigning from scratch what we would build. We started with image research and sent Middle Main a document with a few options midday.



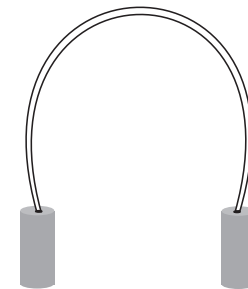
site plan

elevation

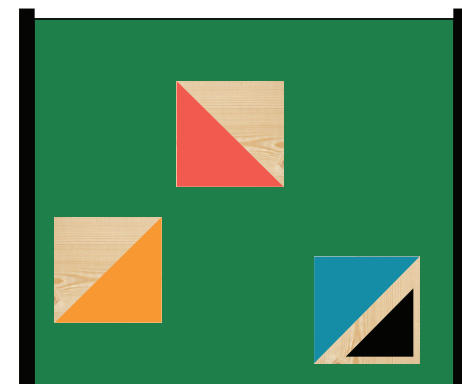
Following along the idea of narrow and long play space, we found images of wood stump and concrete stepping stones, chalkboard panels and crawling hoops. While waiting for their response, we began designing in depth components. When we heard back, we were pleased to hear that they liked what they had seen, but preferred concrete stepping stones to wood. With renewed vigor, we started churning out diagrams describing how each component would function and where it would be placed. By the end of the day we had produced a whole new design that we thought would meet the newly imposed constraints and was feasibly executable.



concrete stepping stones, tops painted, rebar anchors



crawling hoop, cement anchors buried below surface



painted fence panels with color, exposed wood and chalkboard paint

ROUND 4: DOWNSIZING

The next morning we heard back from Middle Main that while they liked our design, they wanted us to scale back from 40 stepping stones on both sides of the park to only 12 in only one corner of the park. While disappointed, we decided to move forward to build what we could.

With a now apparently finalized and approved design, we began the process of actually working out the specifics of construction. We made prototypes of different components to finalize methods in preparation of our full build. We worked extensively to assure that our paint colors would match the approved color palette. It rapidly became apparent that the 12 concrete stepping stones would be a large amount of labor in of themselves, and that perhaps scaling back had its benefits. The day before our community build day, we cast the concrete for the stepping stones in the basement of the Underwear Factory so that they would be dry enough for us to paint and install the next day.

ROUND 5: THE BUILD

We had planned our community build day with Middle Main to coincide with their community clean up day on Earth Day so as to maximize the number of people who would be available to help and to generate excitement. That morning, we moved our concrete stepping stones out into the park as people began to arrive, excited to work with the volunteers Middle Main had told us would be able to help us build. However, it soon became apparent that we would be doing the work on our own.

you are cordially invited to
EARTH DAY PARK CLEAN-UP
and
COMMUNITY BUILD
saturday april 22nd
MURPHY PARK

EV

This project wasn't our first foray into the realm of construction; we both have experience with building theater sets, and over the summer I helped build outdoor furniture for the community garden I was working in. Most recently, Joey and I also designed and built a sukkah on Vassar's campus. This design, however, was definitely the most challenging to build, since it had to be much more permanent and sturdy than anything we had built before.

As we began preparing to paint the fence chalkboard panels and go about installing concrete elements, the weather turned to rain and we were forced to halt work for the day. Abandoning the uninstalled stepping stones in the park, we looked to retreat to a covered place to at least paint the fence panels. We hoped that we might be able to use the basement of the Underwear Factory to paint as we had done to cast the concrete, but to our surprise, we were informed that the community clean up day ended at noon, and so the Underwear Factory was closed. In order to continue work for the day, we ended up painting back at Vassar.

It was difficult for us to build and paint without a dedicated workspace, especially when rain forced us to find cover. In order to stick to some form of schedule, we relocated to under the overhang of my house, a tight space to say the least. Working in a residential space presented a few challenges: blowing two fuses with hairdryers, searching for circuit breakers, avoiding paint smells, hand sawing lumber on kitchen chairs, and trying (but failing) to avoid painting the pavement.

JM

The next day we returned to the park determined to finish our installation. On a sunny Sunday, the park had a number of people coming and going all day, so we tried our hardest to talk to curious onlookers about our project while we went about pounding in the steps, mounting the fence panels, and burying the bases of the hoops.

After the previous day's community cleanup, when the park had been overrun by volunteers, this Sunday the park had regained its normal atmosphere with many of the regulars returning. One of the regulars even offered to help us with anything, noting that building things was his "new hobby, replacing a habit." While the park once again had the familiar smattering of litter, neighbors came through socializing with regulars, stopping in at the businesses in the area, and just going out for a moment in the sun.

During the build, the elusive owner of the Chinese restaurant next door came to look at our work. It quickly became apparent that his English was limited, and so I switched into Chinese. After months of smiling quietly while Ellie engaged with participants in Spanish, I felt so successful having my turn to communicate clearly and meaningfully with such an important stakeholder of the park in the language with which he was most comfortable.

JM

As we were packing up for the day, a few moments stood out. A middle aged woman smoking by herself brusquely told us, "good work, it looks nice". After putting the final note on the chalkboards surrounded by cute drawings, we heard from an apartment window: "what's that say out there?" "it says welcome to Murphy Park!" And as we were properly packing up to leave, a family walked by with a little boy pointing at our newly built brightly colored playthings with excitement, asking his mom to go play. She looked at us questioningly, to which we responded that the paint was still drying but would be ready tomorrow. As the family walked away, the little boy was pulling on his mom's sleeve asking to go back to play, and it was precisely in that moment that we both felt some sort of accomplishment. We made something that excited someone.



**9.
REFLECTIONS**

**WHAT DID
WE DO?**

The tumultuous final weeks of this project both frustrated us and forced us to seriously evaluate why we had undertaken this thesis and what we hoped to get out of it. After being forced to settle for a dramatically scaled-back build, we have had to ask ourselves some hard questions. What have we accomplished? Did we achieve what we had originally hoped to achieve? Were we able to honor the commitment we made to building something with, not for, Middle Main residents? How do we measure whether or not this project was successful?

These questions are complicated by a tension we've struggled with throughout the project: its dual identity as both an academic thesis and a community design project. There is no question that this has been an incredible learning experience for both of us, providing unique hands-on learning opportunities that few undergraduate students have. In the many periods where the process was challenging or confusing or just plain infuriating, it was comforting to remind ourselves that the more difficult the experience, the more we were learning. As we think about the future work we hope to do in design and planning fields, we can look back on the invaluable lessons from this project that will inform engagement processes we might attempt in the future.

However, we also have to reckon with the fact that for Murphy Park and its constituencies, this was not a test run, not a learning experience. Our installation is permanent, forcing us to seriously consider whether we impacted the space and its users in the way that we had hoped to. Especially given Middle Main's clear interest in using "family friendliness" as a tactic for excluding users they deem undesirable, did our project contribute to that exclusion? At the time of writing this, it is too early to know for sure.

What we do know is that there was no possible way for us to produce something ideologically pure. While we entered this project with an optimistic picture of a democratic, inclusive community design process that would make all voices heard, that image was quickly shattered by the complex reality of the many competing publics we had to work with. Given the many contradictory, mutually exclusive desires that we heard throughout this project, we have had to recognize that nothing we designed would please everybody. Early on in this process, we realized that working outside of a traditional academic realm placed us in a situation where real-world constraints and complexities would inevitably make it impossible for us to achieve our ideal vision. While this does not mean that there is no way to evaluate whether our built product had a positive impact,

it does speak to the ways in which this type of work resists the simple categorizations of "good" and "bad" that academic critiques often encourage.

This situation was, of course, further complicated by our partnership with Middle Main. Although we initially thought that working with a nonprofit would be much easier than going through government channels, this approach turned out to have significant trade-offs. The very nature of working in a privately-owned public space meant that no matter how democratic and inclusionary our designs might have been, Middle Main had full veto power and did not have to be accountable to users of the park. We also had to contend with differing opinions within the organization itself; while the Middle Main employees we mostly interacted with responded positively to a more inclusionary vision for Murphy Park, the final decision-making power was ultimately in the hands of development specialists and real estate coordinators with very different ideas about who the space should be for and who should be excluded. Through this bureaucracy, we watched our plan for a democratic, intergenerational space get reduced to a lone play area that the development team hoped would drive out "negative uses." For us, this experience raises significant questions about whether truly democratic community design can actually take place in privately-owned spaces, even when those private owners are community development nonprofits.

In spite of our complicated feelings about the final product, however, we still feel that the process had value. While the built component was not necessarily what we had hoped for, we found the engagement process extremely rewarding and believe it created the true impact of the project. In a neoliberal landscape of nonprofits that approach their work as service provision, our process engaged with Poughkeepsie residents as co-creators rather than as clients. The act of asking people about what they wanted to see in a public space was much more than a means of arriving at a final design; it encouraged people to see themselves as active stakeholders rather than passive recipients of services. Again, while there is no simple way to measure the impact of our engagement process, our hope is that the constituencies we built will outgrow and outlast the physical objects we installed. If our engagement work encouraged even a small handful of people to demand a more active role in determining the future uses of the spaces around them, we count that as a major success.

As part of its ongoing impact, we also hope that this project can serve as a resource for future Vassar students interested in

community engagement work. In order to facilitate this process, we are producing a number of supplementary documents. First, we are working with Middle Main to develop a field work position dedicated specifically to Murphy Park in order to create a sustained and consistent Vassar commitment to the space rather than a one-time experiment. Since Vassar is in the midst of reimagining its field work program, we are also submitting our suggestions about how the college can better support student collaborations with community organizations.

For both of us, this project has been both the most challenging and transformative work of our Vassar careers. While we have done our best to be honest about the difficulties we encountered, we hope that this will not discourage, but rather encourage future projects of this nature. In addition to creating incredible learning experiences for students, we believe strongly that working with, not for, Poughkeepsie residents is a crucial part of rethinking the relationship between Vassar and the city. In spite of the challenges we faced, this project further strengthened our belief in the power of co-creation to reshape our cities for the better.

A NOTE ON COLLABORATION:

It was important to both of us to do this project in the most collaborative manner possible. In the ideal, design for public space necessitates collaboration. In this community engagement project, our most important collaborators were the constituents of the park, the people who generously gave us their time to help shape this project. Working with community members, the people we met on the street, the people who came to our events, and the community stakeholders, has been the core of our work. This project is fueled by and designed in collaboration with the many communities that comprise the Middle Main neighborhood.

Collaboration with Middle Main was a vital part of this process. As our community partner, they gave us support, advice, and ultimately a place to build. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with them, and for the time and energy that their community development team contributed to this project.

Working with each other came about due to a desire to design in way that reflects real world methods and professional practice. Labor for this project has been split evenly, with both of us drawing and writing in equal amounts. Because the goal has been to create a cohesive project, we have tried our best to merge our styles and allow something unique to emerge. No single aspect of this project can be solely attributed to one of us. While we have each written and drawn, each element has been so thoroughly processed collaboratively, reviewed and revised collectively, that each part of this project is a result of our teamwork.

This document is a representation of the work we have to show, but the majority of our thinking developed in the conversations we had with each other. Working together has given us the opportunity to both challenge and support each other. Because so much of this project has pushed us out of our comfort zones, having someone to process the experience with has been absolutely vital. While working with another person can at times present difficulties, such as scheduling, health, and personal life, this project would have been impossible to do alone.

This was a collaborative project in that we wrote and designed together, but more importantly, it was a collaboration with the many participants in our engagement process. We are humbled by the fact that hundreds of people contributed their time and energy to this project; none of this could have happened without their generosity.

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