

THE VISION IS YOURS 2026

Play, Participation, & Place

Gamifying Co-Design for Healthier,
More Connected Communities

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Founder & CEO, Open Space Sandbox

April 23, 2026 | Joe's Movement Emporium



The Engagement Gap



9%

of Americans have attended a town meeting

Source: AmeriCorps / U.S. Census Bureau, 2023



85%

don't think elected officials care what people like them think

Source: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023



Post-it notes
lost to the void

Traditional engagement is evolving. The loudest voices win. The data can be limited. The people who need it most don't participate or feel welcome.

What If Engagement Felt Like Play?



Lower the barrier from "attend a meeting" to a web-based tool



Let people design on real maps of real places



Connecting user visioning, experiences, and social infrastructure needs in one seamless experience



Turn community input into actionable spatial data

Why Play Works

The research behind play-based civic engagement



Lowers Cognitive Load

Visual, spatial interaction is more intuitive than written feedback or verbal debate



Increases Emotional Investment

People care more about outcomes when they've actively shaped them through hands-on design

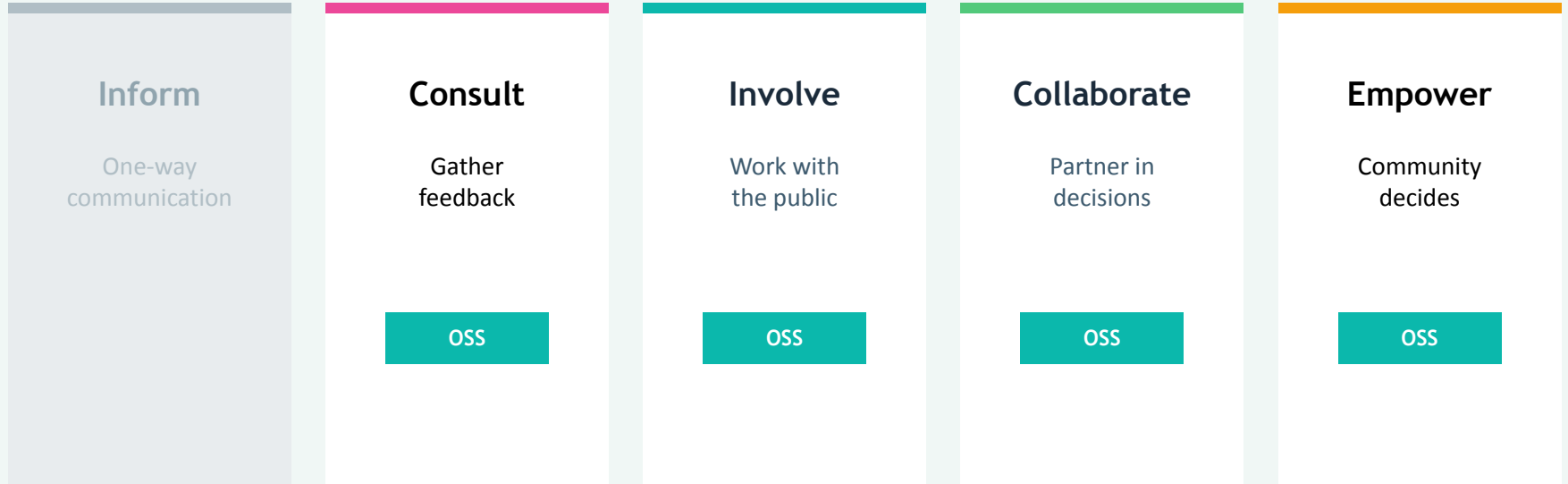


Surfaces Latent Preferences

Play reveals priorities people struggle to articulate in surveys or town halls

The Participation Spectrum

Where play-based co-design fits on the IAP2 framework



Play-based tools move engagement from passive feedback toward genuine co-design — participants don't just comment, they build.

Designing for Inclusion

How play-based tools address equity gaps in engagement



Language barriers

Visual, spatial interfaces reduce reliance on written/spoken fluency



Time & transit access

Participate from any device, any time — no evening meeting required



Power dynamics

Anonymous input prevents dominant voices from steering outcomes



Intimidation

Play lowers stakes — exploring ideas feels safe, not performative

Replicating Commercial Video Game Design Theories

01



Challenge

Give participants real choices with visible consequences.

02



Limitation

Make constraints tangible so users have challenges to overcome and are forced to negotiate priorities.

03



Accomplishment

Allow users to come away with an accomplishment to provide tangible acknowledgement of their work and achievements.



Games in Action

What is the Challenge, What is the Limitation, and what is the Accomplishment?

65

9290

2708

41

70

23H 59M

CLIP CAPTURED



0:11 51 3 3

krecik17 (33) shotgunned **DickeWumme01**
FacelessPanda56 is now spectating you

4236 32 160 53

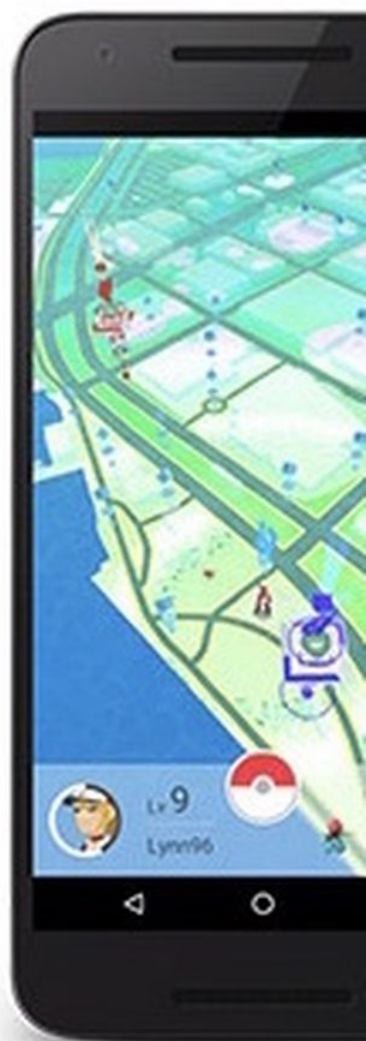
1

100
100

24 | 29 ||
RED-EYE ASSAULT RIFLE

- [Sword]
- [Red-Eye Assault Rifle] 53 ||
- [Pistol] 93 ||
- [Med Kit] 4
- [Bandage] 1
- [Shield] 3

[L1] [R1]





25

356 423

100%

13

11

53454675

6212

78

324

42

22min

26t

26t



**How Do We Replicate This
With Open Space Sandbox?**

The Gamified Co-Design Journey

01

Set the Stage

Define the site and introduce the assignment.

02

Visioning

Community members play a mad-libs style game to create their vision statement.

03

Design

Collaborative drag-and-drop placement on real spatial data with budget tradeoffs and interactive route mapping.

04

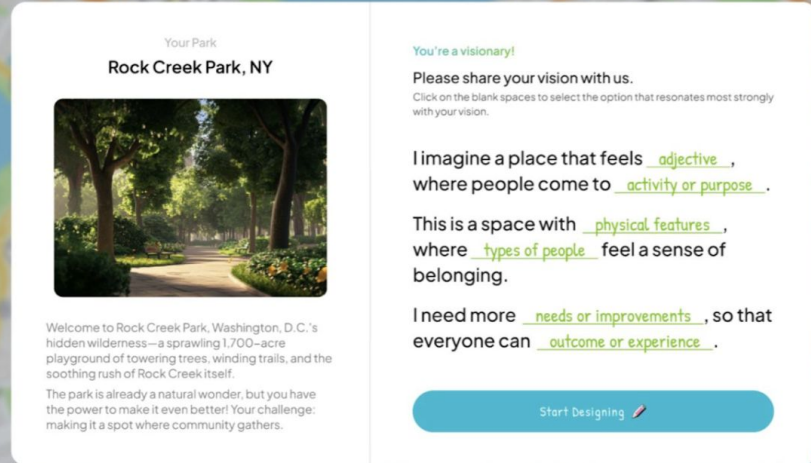
Share & Analyze

Export analytics, share results, close the feedback loop


The Gamified Co-Design Journey

01 Set the Stage

Define the site and introduce the assignment



Your Park
Rock Creek Park, NY



Welcome to Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C.'s hidden wilderness—a sprawling 1,700-acre playground of towering trees, winding trails, and the soothing rush of Rock Creek itself.


The park is already a natural wonder, but you have the power to make it even better! Your challenge: making it a spot where community gathers.

You're a visionary!
Please share your vision with us.
Click on the blank spaces to select the option that resonates most strongly with your vision.

I imagine a place that feels adjective, where people come to activity or purpose.

This is a space with physical features, where types of people feel a sense of belonging.

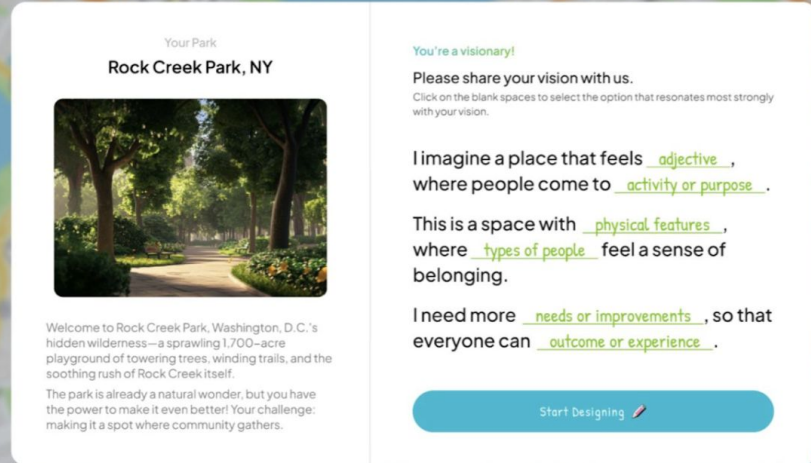
I need more needs or improvements, so that everyone can outcome or experience.

Start Designing 


The Gamified Co-Design Journey

02 Visioning

Community members play a mad-libs style game to create their vision statement



Your Park
Rock Creek Park, NY



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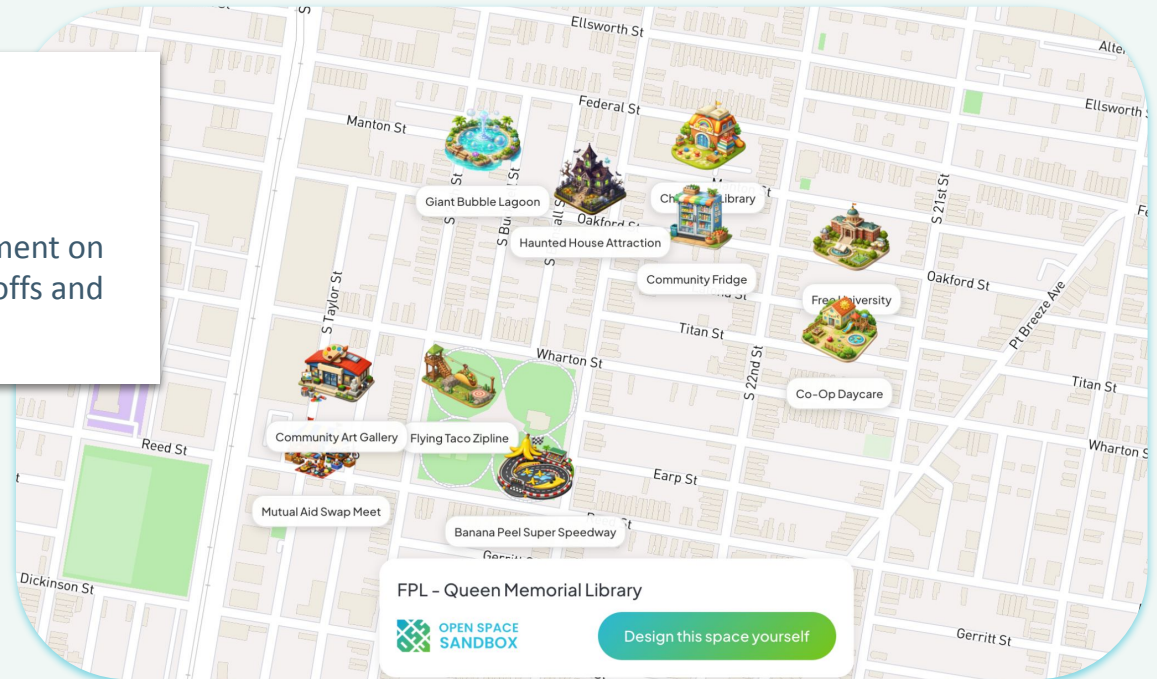
Start Designing 

The Gamified Co-Design Journey

03

Design

Collaborative drag-and-drop placement on real spatial data with budget tradeoffs and interactive route mapping



The Gamified Co-Design Journey

04

Share & Analyze

Export analytics, share results, close the feedback loop

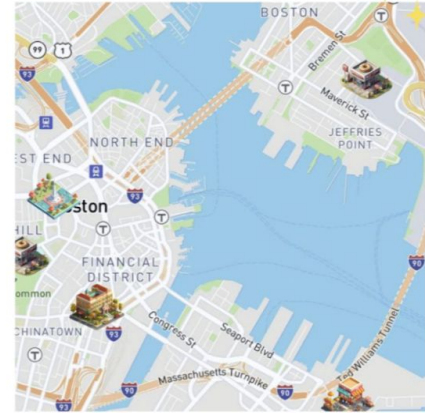


Submission Successful

Thank you for submitting a design! We appreciate your insight into your community.

[Copy a URL to your design](#)

[Download JPG of your park](#)



Rock Creek Park
February 2025



Open Space Sandbox

A gamified civic engagement platform for community co-design of public spaces



**Digital
Charrettes**

Interactive visioning sessions



**Drag & Drop
Design**

Place programs on real maps



**Route
Mapping**

Trace paths & connections



**Participatory
Budgeting**

Allocate resources together



**Real-Time
Analytics**

Live dashboards & exports



**Social
Sharing**

Amplify reach organically



Examples in Action

Completed and Live Pilot Samples

Youth Community Design



CHALLENGE

How can we introduce and contextualize community planning to 8-10 year olds, what unique perspectives could we gain if we gave youth tools to design their needs?



APPROACH

Facilitated a series of in-person design sessions where youth built personas and were then provided devices to design their neighborhood. Youth we're able to work independently and in groups and were welcomed to present.



RESULT

Youth as young as 8-years old were able to intuitively use the tool and took initiative in sharing their designs and perspectives. Some shared and designed their current lived experiences while others shared and designed their needs and wants.

What Did We Learn?

Independent Design Encourages Creativity, But Paired Design Encourages Debate & Negotiation

Persona Exercises Help Youth Think About Community Needs

Sharing Designs Sparks Meaningful Discussion

Students Learn The Platform Quickly

Vision Statement

I imagine a place that feels safe where people come to connect

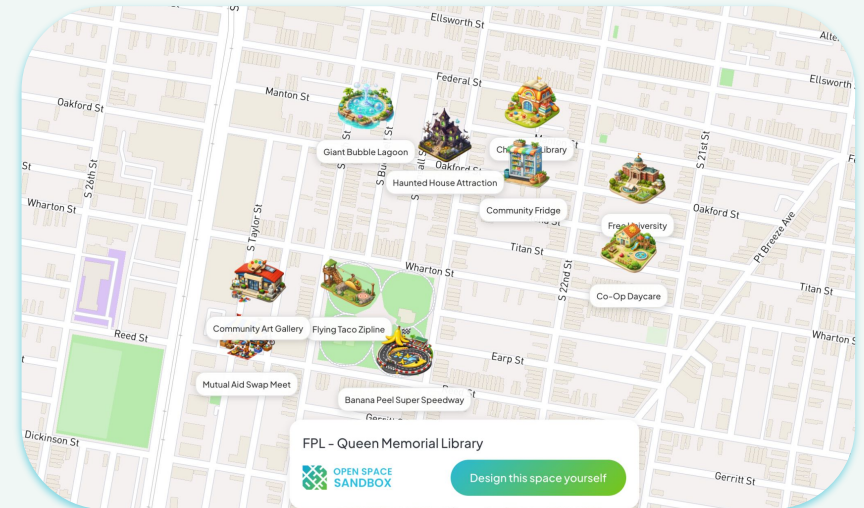
This is a space with walking paths where children

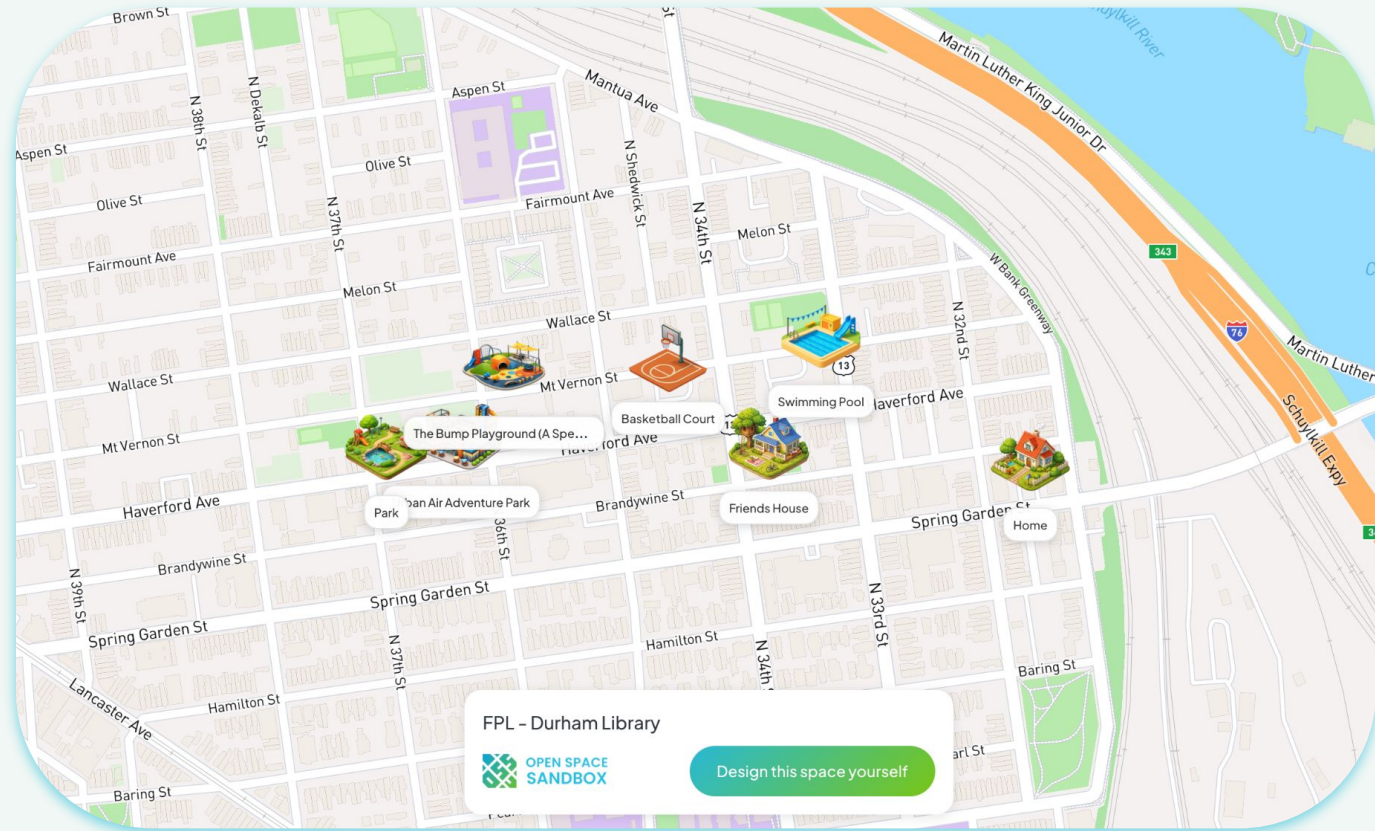
feel a sense of belonging. I need more programming so that everyone can be active.

FPL - Queen Memorial Library

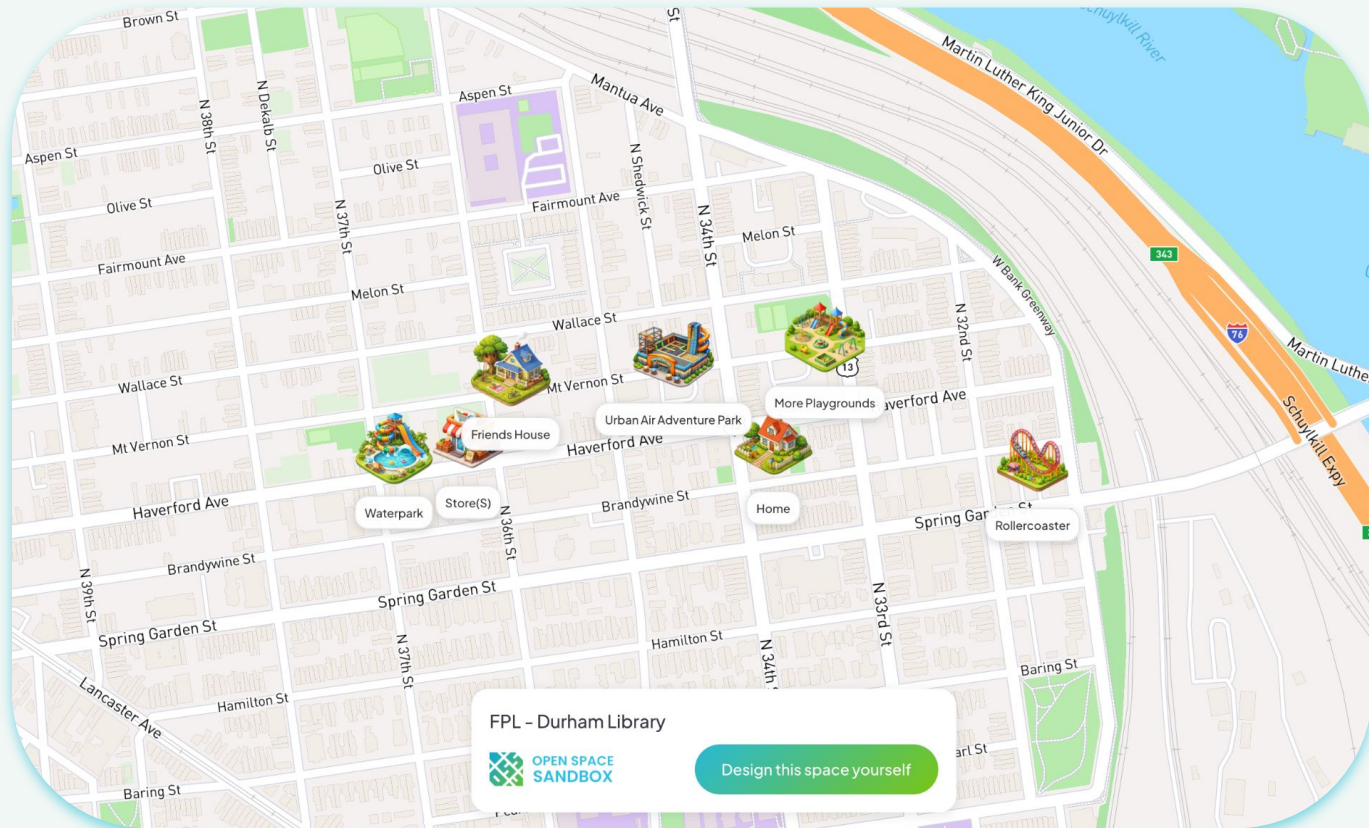


Design this space yourself





Participant Design



Participant Design

TOD Retail Visioning



CHALLENGE

How do we identify retail priorities for existing residents as part of a broader, digitally-focused engagement campaign?



APPROACH

Deployed digital charrettes, participatory budgeting, and a prioritized retail asset menu to surface resident retail priorities within the corridor.

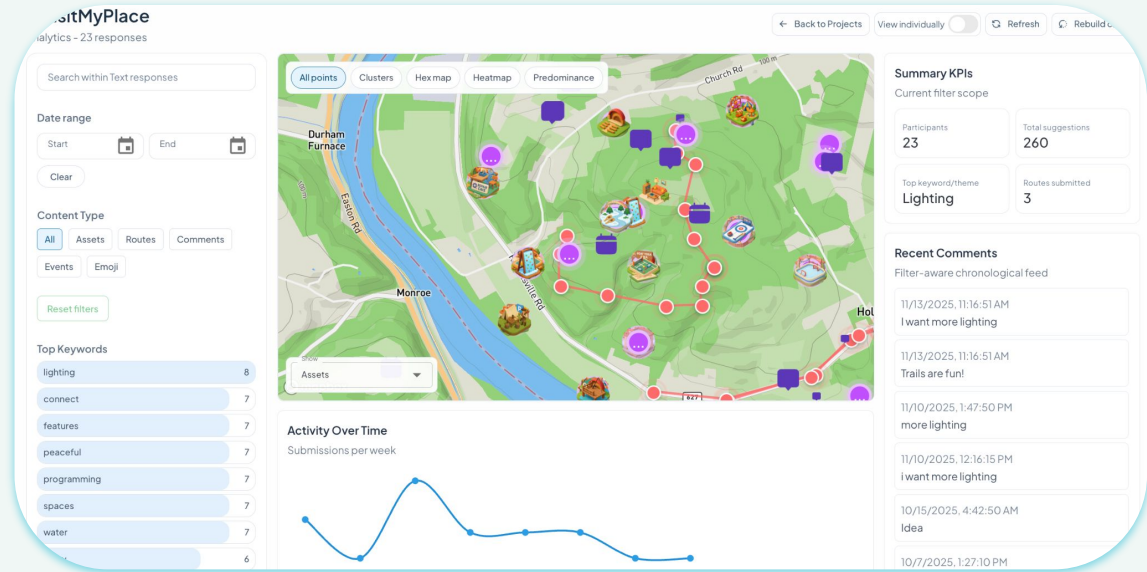


RESULT

Produced data-rich, spatially referenced outputs that planners can directly integrate into future decision-making processes.

Data Output Strategy

All retail decisions are logged and exported to a spreadsheet, with each data point assigned a geo-coded location. Users can also connect psychographic data (drawn from resident vision statement responses) directly to the corresponding design decisions through an anonymized UID.



Sample analytics dashboard

Youth Services Design



CHALLENGE

Can our tool help pinpoint what suite of programs and services should be included in a new youth resource center?



APPROACH

Worked with teens to create a list of assets, then facilitated an in-person design session where youth were provided devices to design the neighboring block.



RESULT

We were able to get in-depth conversations about needs and wants through the paired vision statement and design process. It is important to note that the teens requested mental health assets over traditional services and amenities.



Vision responses

physicalFeatures
incubator space

experience
find inspiration

improvements
opportunities to create

Top assets

- 1. Basketball Court 1
- 2. Bleachers 1
- 3. Community Bulletin Board 1
- 4. Community Centre 1
- 5. Conversation Pit 1
- 6. Event Lawn 1

Related comments

5/22/2025, 5:00:57 PM
I think it should be HIGH ceiling's and lots of sun light

5/22/2025, 5:00:57 PM
Nice size and lots of different seating

Participant Design

Evidence & Impact

What changes when engagement is play-based

WWW.

Web-based tool that allows deployment flexibility

24/7

Access vs. single evening meetings

GIS

Spatially-referenced output, not sticky notes

The Shift

- Removes time, cost, and location barriers to participation
- Produces map-based data planners can act on directly
- Lets participants see collective impact in real time
- Lowers intimidation factor vs. formal public forums



PLEASE STAND BY

4



Live Demo

Let's co-design a space together.
Right now. In this room.

The Co-Design Journey

01

Set the Stage

Persona building exercise to identify community needs and wants

02

Visioning

Community members share priorities, react, and vote on ideas

03

Design

Collaborative drag-and-drop placement on real spatial data

04

Share & Analyze

Export analytics, share results, close the feedback loop

1.

Set The Stage

- 1 Use the template & pens to develop a persona
- 2 Discuss & Share Your Persona
- 3 How might you apply these traits to your decision making process in the game

Share Your Personas



Introduce your persona to your table



What habits and needs came up most across your personas, and what is your table's collective needs & wants?



Which persona would be least likely to show up to a traditional public meeting and how do we reach them?



If your personas could co-design this space together, where would they agree, and where would they conflict?

2.

Visioning

- 1 Scan the QR code on your phone
- 2 Develop Your Vision Statement
- 3 Share & Discuss before moving on



Scan Here!

Share Your Vision



What words did you use and why did you pick them?



Did any themes emerge in your vision statement?



Were there any similarities between your vision statements?



Were there any differences between your vision statements?

3.

Design

- 1 Place assets onto the spots
- 2 Place comments and program ideas
- 3 Add routes, images, and emojis



Scan Here!

Share Your Design



What patterns emerged?



What surprised you?



Where do you see tensions or tradeoffs?



How does this compare to your current process?

4.

Share & Analyze

- 1 Submit and share the link to your design & vision

From Input to Action

Closing the feedback loop — what happens after engagement



Collect

Community designs, comments, votes, and route traces — all geo-referenced



Analyze

Real-time dashboards aggregate input into heat maps, priority rankings, and spatial patterns



Report

Export GIS-ready data, summary reports, and visualizations for decision-makers



Integrate

Findings feed directly into plans, RFPs, budgets, and design briefs

Key Takeaways



Play isn't frivolous — it's a proven method for lowering barriers and generating richer input



Spatial, visual tools produce data planners can actually use — not just sentiment



Digital co-design removes the biggest equity barriers: time, location, language, and intimidation



The feedback loop matters — engagement only works when input visibly shapes outcomes



Start small — a single site, a focused question, a defined community



Let's Build Better Places – Together

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