

Design Thinking for Parks:

Activating communities to increase park use.



PARCS
STUDY

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SPH

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PUBLIC HEALTH & HEALTH POLICY



KEY FINDINGS

- A vibrant park indicates a vibrant, engaged community.
- Parks are valued as much more than places for physical activities, they are viewed almost as an extension of the home for New Yorkers.
- Community members see the potential for parks to be more connected to the local economy.
- Parks provide an opportunity for civic engagement.
- Parks are important to people from all walks of life, cutting across social and economic barriers.
- Parks are a vital place for social interaction—they help communities feel connected.
- Parks need to be safe spaces, physically and emotionally, and accessible to everyone.

Young community members enjoying a newly renovated community park.

The **Physical Activity and Redesigned Community Spaces (PARCS) Study** is an exciting collaboration between the **CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy** and **NYC Parks**. As part of that project,

we looked to apply design thinking towards generating ideas that might increase communities' use of their

Project Introduction

local parks. We first reached out to community members to participate in a series of co-creation workshops. We asked people to think about what their parks meant to them. How did they value their parks and how were they important? Drawing on these values, we asked them to imagine what it would take to increase community usage of those parks. We looked at all of their ideas (and there were lots!) and found many common elements. Our research team took some of the most popular ideas and developed them into several concepts that reflected what we learned. Then we took those ideas back to the community for further input in a co-design workshop where participants built on our ideas and created several designs.

WHAT IS CO-CREATION?

Co-creation and co-design are human-centered design research methods where researchers engage participants in the creative act of making, telling and drawing, in order to gain insights into their specific needs. In a co-creation session designers prompt participants to interpret and answer ambiguous questions; discuss problems; describe future experiences, concerns or opportunities; make “things;” and create prototypes. Co-creating allows us to quickly understand complex social problems, explore possible solutions, detect mistakes in design ideas, and create solutions tailored to people’s needs. Ultimately, co-creation taps into the tacit knowledge of the co-creators (participants) and provides insights into the needs, hopes, and desires that may not be captured in traditional research methods such as interviews and surveys.

Participants at the first co-creation session exploring their values around parks.



For this project we led participants through a series of creative activities that probed for the meaning local parks held for them. We asked them to consider how they valued parks and what specific activities might be associated with those values. To help people visualize complex and abstract ideas, we led

Co-creation around values

them through a series of narrative exercises, using pre-drawn and blank comic book elements to help them

build comic strips that expressed a narrative or idea around community and parks. From there, we had them build a park with similar elements, but rather than focus on equipment and activities, we asked them to consider and express how values were associated with those activities. Finally, we encouraged them to explore ideas around building a stronger connection between communities and their parks. Suggestions included ideas such as “local businesses could sponsor events”, “farmers’ market”, “food vendors”, “set up community volunteer programs”, and “a place where you can host your community activities”.

Researchers brainstorming ideas from the co-creation session.

Making sense of what we learned



We recorded every piece of information from the sessions on a sticky note. We then grouped these notes according to emerging themes, in a process called “affinity mapping”. What emerged was some common expression of values that included feelings of safety, connecting with nature, social connectedness, civics, growth and education, and joy. This helped us understand the motivations people have for using their local parks and how and why they are important to communities. We learned that parks are far more important than simply places to relax or be active. They are also seen as key places for a community to express itself, a place where people can connect with others and learn about different cultures. Many participants discussed the

potential of parks as venues for strengthening the social fabric of their communities and as places to engage in self improvement or personal growth. These, and other values were carefully represented by researchers as we brainstormed ideas that might activate communities to increase their use of local parks.



Affinity mapping results of the co-creation session.

Co-design—getting input about the concepts



1. BUSINESS PLATFORMS

Select a platform for the business, or draw a rough sketch of an

Bookstore
Library
Comics
(Creative, own)
Comics

Interactive Food
Local vendors would use special carts to sell goods and services.
Healthy snacks for kids
Food incubator showcase
Shred Truck Week X
Clear carts

From dozens of concepts we selected three that we felt best represented the values of our participants. These were:

- an interactive screen/web space that would help communities see what was happening in their local parks
- a vending platform in the park created for local businesses to gain community exposure
- a story-telling platform for community members to share their stories/history/culture/talents.

Participants working in the co-design workshop.

We presented these ideas as intentionally rough prototypes, and invited further input from community members in a co-design workshop. Participants first ranked the prototypes, indicating strong support for the interactive screen and vendor platform concepts. They were then asked to comment on the ideas and to develop them further with another series of guided activities. This included designing content for interactive screens that would be placed in parks and looking at what the optimal features of a system might be that provided park access to local vendors.



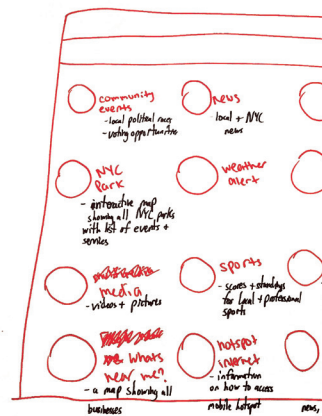
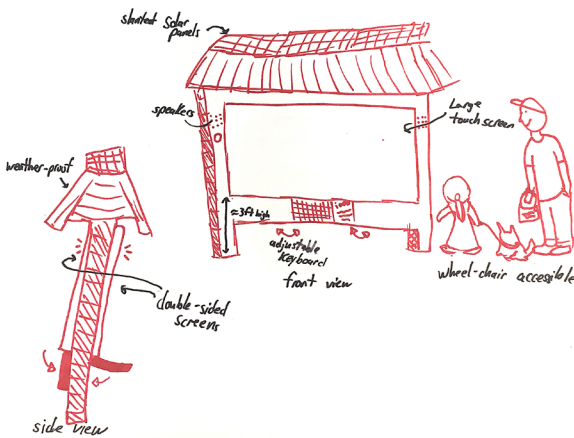
This concept reflected participants' suggestions to connect local businesses with parks as a way to encourage more community engagement. People were interested in sampling locally made foods, or gaining access to services

Local Vendors


and seeing individual crafts. These businesses might be given access to a portable cart or table. Or individuals might simply display their goods on a blanket. Participants were invited to suggest what such a system might look like and what might be offered. Any concerns were solicited. Diversity and flexibility were particularly important to participants. They emphasized that the system should be able to accommodate different types of vendors to appeal to a wide range of neighborhood residents. They saw the potential for this system to encourage face-to-face interaction among community members. Moving beyond traditional vendors, this system could facilitate other types of programming such as informal book swaps or potlucks, recreational activities or continuing education such as parenting classes or homework help.

Co-design participants respond to prototypes through activities designed to consider concepts in detail.

Interactive Community Screen







Through the design thinking process, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the values which inform participants' beliefs and behaviors around parks. The workshop activities were designed to get at this richer context

Lessons learned

rather than focus on surface level issues such as the physical features of parks. We learned that local parks provide a great resource to enrich communities with a sense of vibrancy and purpose. Drawing on the insights generated by community members, we were able to develop strategies embedded in the unique context of each community.

For public health practitioners, design thinking offers a systematic yet flexible approach to collaborate and innovate with community members around a specific issue or problem space.

Thank you to all of the workshop participants and community organizations without whom this work would not be possible.

For additional information, please contact the Center for Systems and Community Design at cscd@sph.cuny.edu.

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