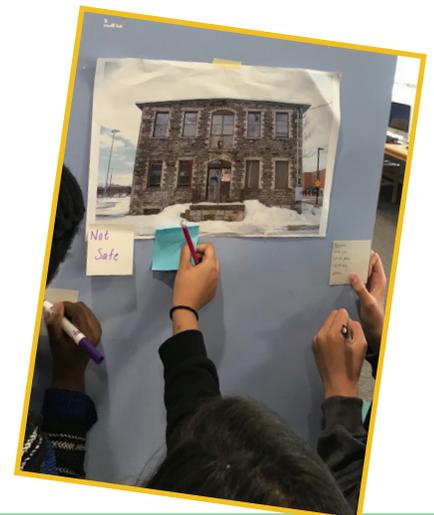


YOUTH-ENGAGED DESIGN FOR THE ACRE

A Case Study in CoDesign at the GSD

FALL 2019



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Fall 2019 Independent Study
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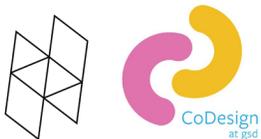


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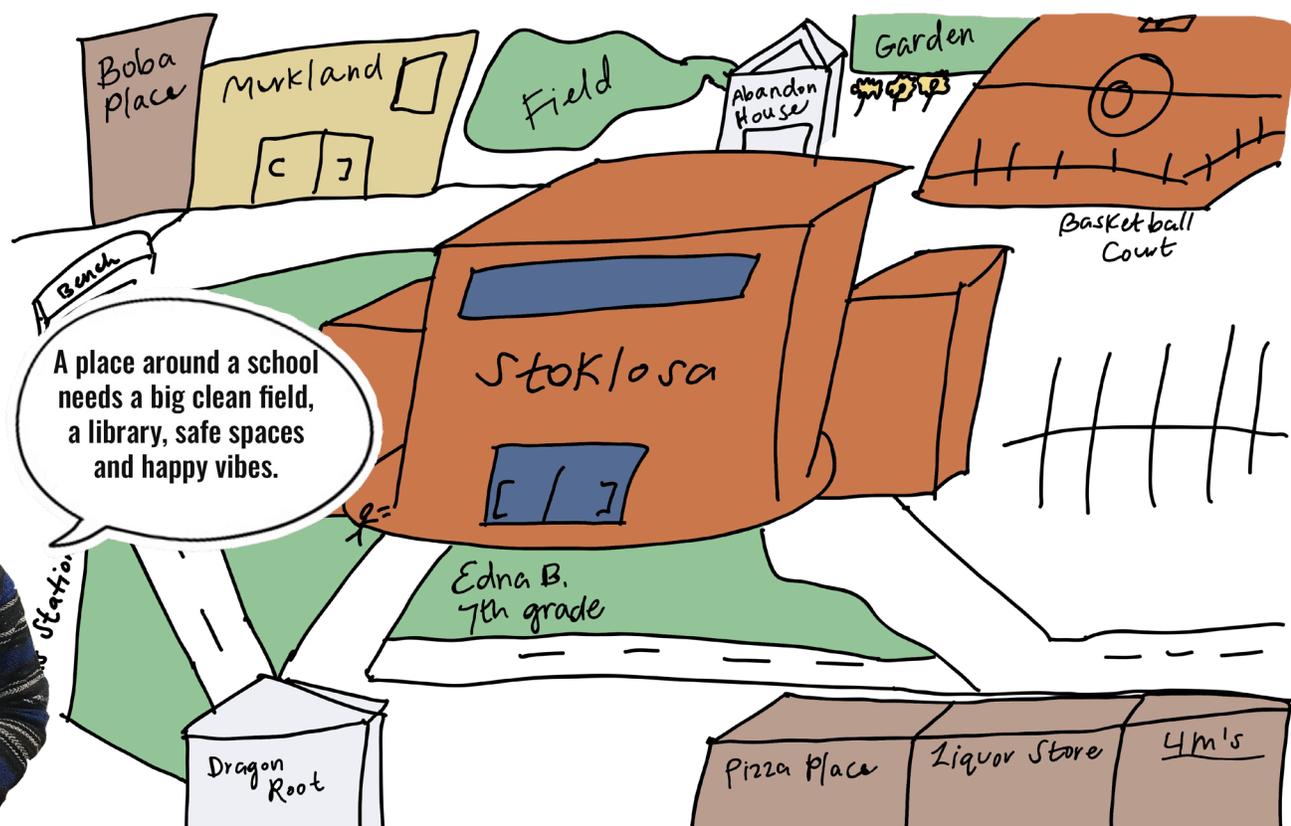
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Edna shows her drawing of the Stoklosa Middle School campus and surrounding neighborhood.



OVERVIEW

Project Collaborators



Youth leaders share their models at the end of the summer planning and design camp.

About the Youth

Youth leaders from fifth through eighth grade at Stoklosa Middle School dedicated their time to shaping this project. Through a series of planning and design workshops in the spring and summer of 2019, they proposed redesigns to their school campus in Lowell, MA. Special thanks to Kyle Dolliver and the 21st Century Program for helping organize and implement these workshops, as well as teachers Ann Carpenter, Michael Gratta and Janet Koza for supporting and shaping this project.



Margaret facilitates a participatory mapping workshop with the youth leaders.

About the Author

Margaret Haltom started this initiative in the urban planning core studio at the GSD. She is a Master in Urban Planning candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and a researcher for and co-creator of CoDesign, the GSD's community design initiative. A Gramlich Fellow for the Joint Center for Housing Studies and NeighborWorks America, Margaret's research centers on how planners and community developers can amplify the voices of those often excluded in conventional methods of community engagement.



The CoDesign exhibit at the GSD on the Boston Area Place Leadership Network.

CoDesign at the GSD

This community design project serves as one of CoDesign's exploratory projects. CoDesign aims to deepen the school's commitment to engage communities in the creation of the physical spaces that we share. The initiative seeks to tighten links between teaching, research, practice, and activism at the GSD; build learning-by-doing partnerships with community-based, civic, and public sector partners in Greater Boston area, and create venues for conversations about possibilities and pitfalls of community design and learning.



Sury, MUP '20, facilitates as the youth design a painted traffic circle for their school pick up and drop off area.

OVERVIEW

A Collaborative Planning and Design Project

This report documents the goals, activities and early outcomes of an ongoing community design project in Lowell, MA. The initiative began as a GSD studio project, when urban planning students first met with Lowell youth and teachers in the spring of 2019 to review the 1999 urban renewal plan that built their school. Youth leaders at Stoklosa had suggestions to the City Planning Department, including safer routes to school, a new play space, and an after school center. As this report details, Harvard students continued to meet with the youth to advance their ideas through a youth planning summer camp, after school program and Harvard Community Development Project. They also connected the youth to local non-profits and neighborhood leaders who wanted to further their ideas.

The collaboration now includes Harvard students from the design, education and policy schools; Stoklosa teachers and students from fifth through eighth grade; the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association active in the school's neighborhood; the Lowell City Planning Department; Massachusetts Safe Routes to School and the Greater Lowell Community Foundation. Harvard students are still working alongside the youth and other community-based leaders to advance a youth-driven vision for safe routes to school and a greener, healthier middle school campus.

The initiative seeks to not only amplify youth voices in the Acre neighborhood of Lowell, but also explore how and why urban planners and designers might meaningfully collaborate with youth to shape the future of their communities.

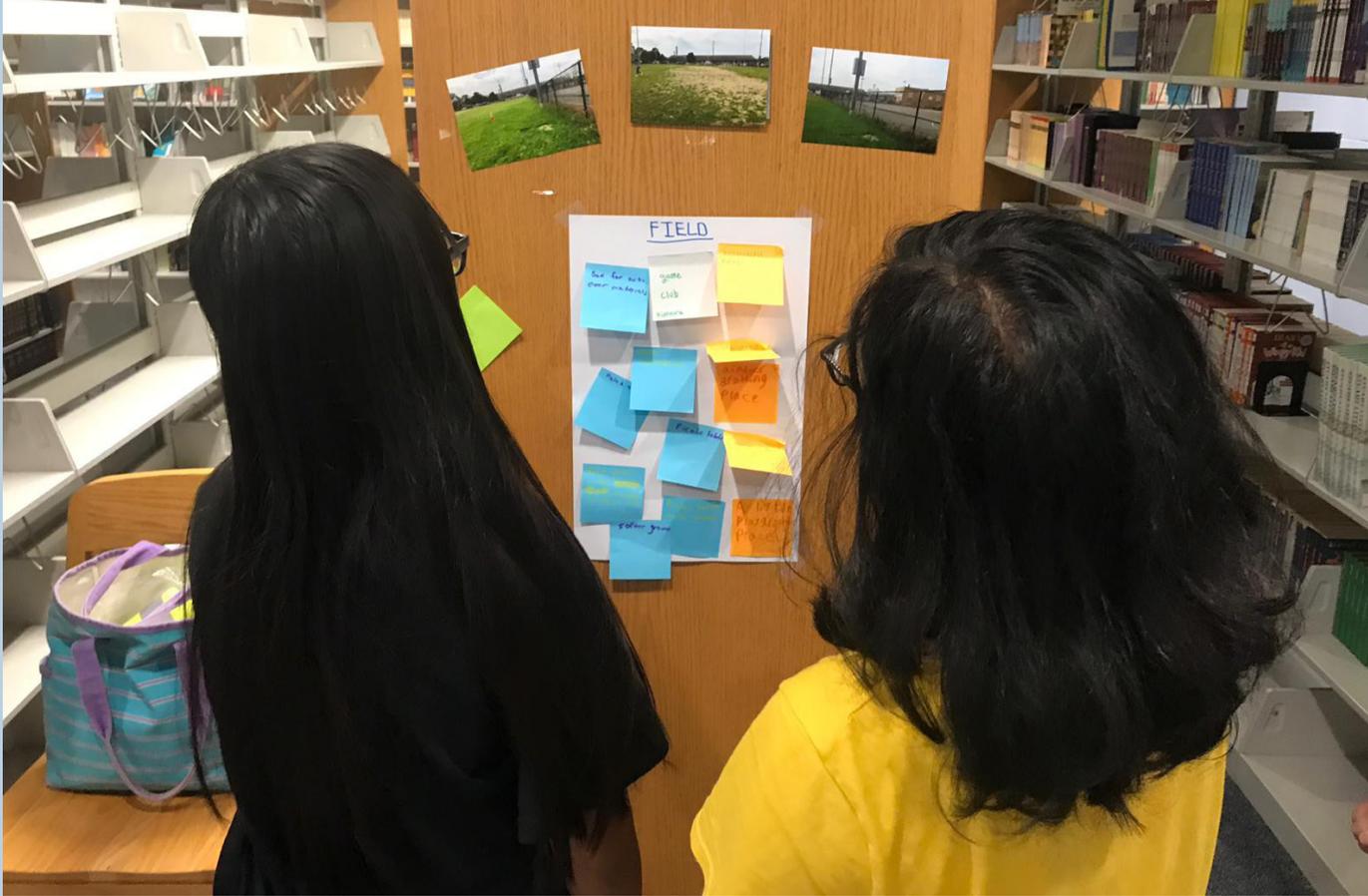
OVERVIEW

Project Goals

- 1. Provide educational opportunities to those traditionally excluded from the planning and design fields.** Introduce youth to urban planning and design fields, specifically youth with intersectional identities as lower-income, immigrant, youth of color to the urban planning and design fields by offering free design camps and after school programs.
- 2. Design from the margins, amplifying the voices of those often unheard in city planning and design decision-making.** Collaborate with youth to create a vision for the future of their safe routes to school and their campus, school and their campus, bringing their proposals directly to the City Planning Department. Explore how an under-resourced City led by people who do not represent the majority might respond to youth voices and what options are available to implement their ideas.
- 3. Build relationships within Lowell to explore how the project might be locally sustained.** Deepen relationships within the Acre neighborhood, connecting youth with community-based organizations and neighborhood leaders who want to advance their ideas, recognizing the short-term nature of student engagement.

Deborah, MUP '21, Brianna and Alize showcase the youth's proposal to install benches where they wait to be picked up daily.





Natalie and Vanessa review their photos of a vacant lot and former brown-field site on their school property, and propose alternative uses.

THEORY OF PRACTICE

Why youth in planning and design?

This project begins from the perspective that traditional methods of public participation in planning do not meaningfully amplify the voices of community members. As planning scholars have recently highlighted, methods like townhalls and public meetings create only an “illusion of inclusion” and particularly fail to meaningfully amplify the voices of marginalized community members in the future of neighborhood development (Few, Brown and Tompkins, 2007; Wilson, 2018). Planning scholars have further identified refugee and immigrant communities (Allen and Slotterblock, 2017; Sandoval and Maldonado, 2012), youth (Botchwey and Johnson, 2019); lower-income people (Wilson, 2018), and colonized people (Umemoto, 2001), as groups particularly excluded from conventional methods of public engagement in planning.

Yet recent planning scholarship has advocated for more equitable processes that directly tackle power imbalances in planning. One model, the “coproduction” process, seeks to sustain community power by building resident capacity and connecting community members to resources that can help them access higher levels of decision-making (Rosen and Painter, 2019). The project seeks to expand the planner’s traditional toolbox for community engagement by coproducing alongside youth with intersectional identities and exploring how planners can better design from the margins. In intentionally elevating the ideas of lower-income, immigrant youth to the city planning agenda, this project demonstrates how youth are uniquely positioned to propose and drive changes within their neighborhood.

As the next pages demonstrate, the youth know the precarious crossings, the unlit stretch-

es of sidewalk, the places where the sidewalk ends altogether. They know parts of their school campus collectively viewed as “scary” and “boring.” They have ideas for how the City can and should improve their everyday spaces. In engaging other community members who support the youth’s ideas and seeking funds from local foundations and federal grants alike, the initiative aims to demonstrate the importance of their local knowledge, and assist these youth in accessing higher levels of decision-making.

THEORY OF PRACTICE

Questions Informed by Practice

- **How can planners and design practitioners effectively amplify community voices**, particularly those of youth and other marginalized people, in the redevelopment of public spaces (in particular, schools, streetscapes, and community centers)?
- **What can engaging youth leaders teach us** more about engaging those traditionally excluded in planning, design and development decisions?
- **How can GSD students work alongside community partners** to drive a local initiative—where can we as students help, and when do we need to step back?
- **How do we form and sustain community relationships** that begin in studio or other community partner-based courses, and what are the ethical implications of deepening these relationships, given our brief time in the Boston area as students?

Alize photographs the abandoned building on his school’s block.



Amilya, Trisha and Vanessa map out where they go on their school campus.





Youth use icons to identify amenities they wish they had in their neighborhood.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

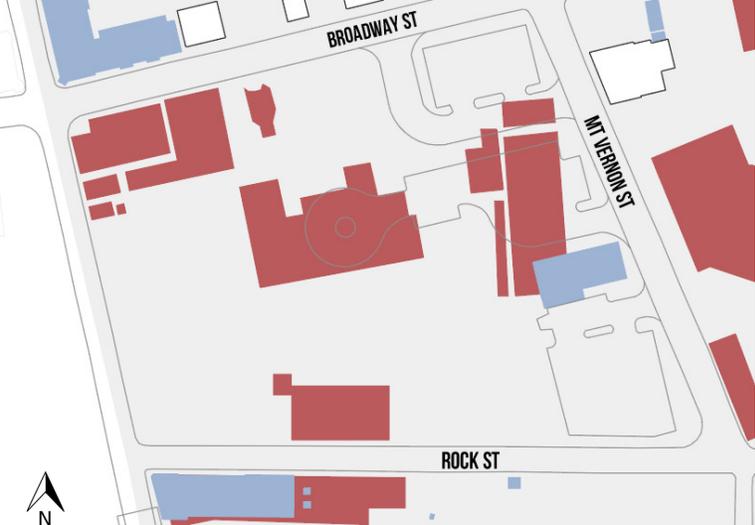
From Studio to Summer Camp

Spring 2019: MUP Core Studio

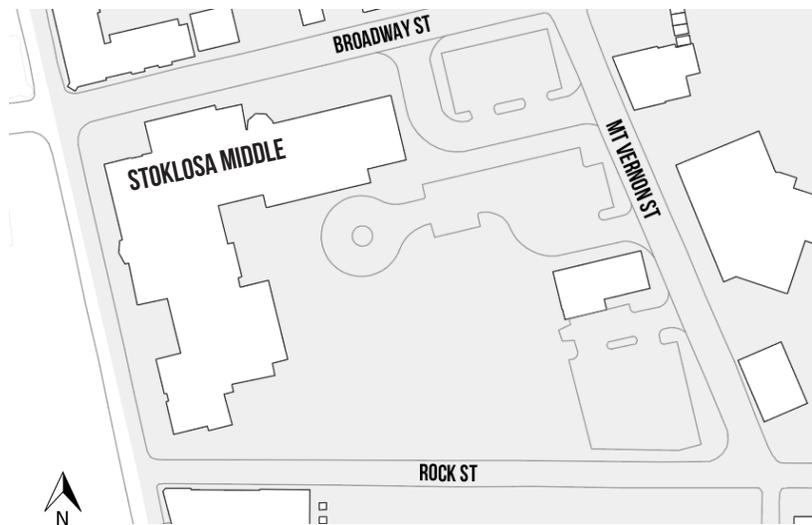
The partnership began as a Spring 2019 MUP Core 2 Studio project looking closely at how the 1999 Acre Urban Renewal Plan (“The Plan”) impacted Lowell’s Acre neighborhood, a predominately immigrant community directly west of Downtown Lowell. Tasked with assessing whether the City should renew the Plan, we looked closely at its cornerstone project, the \$24.5 mil construction of a middle school on a former brownfield site, redeveloped and from 2003 to 2005. The Plan further targeted areas around the middle school for rehabilitation, including the proposed creation of hosing across the street and the redevelopment of a vacant building on the school block.

Today, Stoklosa Middle School serves 600+ students—many from the Acre neighborhood—but spaces on and around school property were left undeveloped. In interviews and workshops with teachers, parents and students, we learned how places around the Stoklosa Middle are seen as “dangerous,” “scary,” and “damaging to our school reputation.” Close collaboration with teachers and a team of student leaders shed light on how community members would re-imagine places around their school.

Youth leaders took time to review the Plan, learning the history of their school and how the Acre neighborhood was redeveloped. They mapped out their daily routes, considering the places they frequent, places they avoid, and collectively voting on places they would change: the vacant field on their school property—which students and teachers described as contaminated with heroine needles and condoms—and the abandoned building on their



1999: Urban Renewal



2019: Stoklosa Today

school block, and the routes they took to school. From their recommendations came a proposal to the City, 1.) a safe routes to school initiative to build bike lanes and crosswalks, widen sidewalks across critical routes to school and 2.) the redevelopment of the school block to include a public play space on the field and after school center in the abandoned building.

Summer 2019: 21st Century Program Summer Camp

In the summer of 2019, GSD students sought to deepen relationships with Lowell community partners by meeting with and learning from community leaders across Lowell and teaching a youth design summer camp at the middle school. Community leaders from the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, the Greater Lowell Community Foundation, as well as representatives from the Massachusetts Safe Route to School and city officials including the city urban renewal manager, the transportation engineer, and two city planners, offered their insight into the goals, feasibility and community vision for the project, and took time to understand the youth's ideas.

The youth leaders spent a week mapping their routes to school, designing models for the vacant field, proposing a budget, identifying community partners to work with and meeting with the Safe Routes to School representatives. Together, they proposed a volleyball court on the abandoned field and places for benches across the campus and received a small grant to implement their early ideas.

Fall 2019: CoDesign and Community Development Project

In the fall of 2019, the project was incorporated into GSD CoDesign, an initiative to build learning-by-doing partnerships in the Greater Boston area, promote design activism in GSD teaching and research, and contribute to a dialogue on the opportunities and challenges of community design. Students shared findings from the summer with the CoDesign team and at a GSD-wide Pecha Kucha, and further considered how Harvard students might play a role in strengthening the youth's proposal to the City and finding local resources to make their ideas possible. A Community Development Project (CDP) team of sixteen Harvard students from the GSD, Kennedy School and Education school was mobilized to turn the youth's ideas into play space renderings, a feasibility study, cost estimates, channels for funding, and a robust proposal to present to the City of Lowell. Six landscape architects and four urban

planners joined to learn how they might elevate the ideas of youth in design, while four policy students and three education students provided insight into federal programs that may be available for school and former brownfield redevelopment. While building relationships at Harvard, we additionally sought to deepen collaboration with Lowell community members by meeting with the City Planning Department, presenting ideas to Lowell's Project Learn, engaging the CMAA and Stoklosa art teachers, and working with the students and teachers to brainstorm additional local partners who could help make the youth's visions can become a reality.

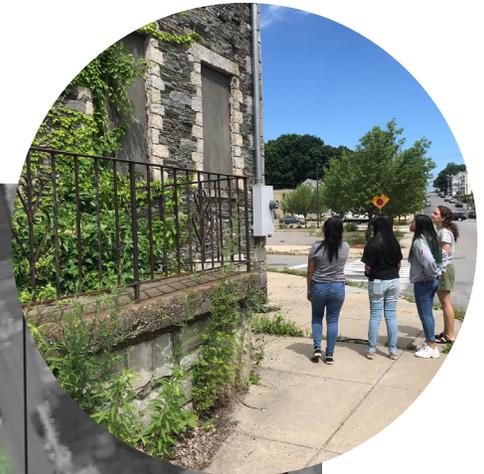
PROJECT BACKGROUND

Youth-Identified Intervention Areas

Youth recommend turning the abandoned building on the school block into a library or student center.



Youth propose seating where they daily sit on the ground as they wait to be picked up. They also proposed a painted traffic circle and public art piece at the school entrance.



Youth suggest cleaning up the vacant field and creating a playspace with safer terrain and a soft sand volleyball court.



The team prepares to map out places they frequent and places they want to change around their school.

DELIVERABLES

Fall 2019: CoDesign and CDP

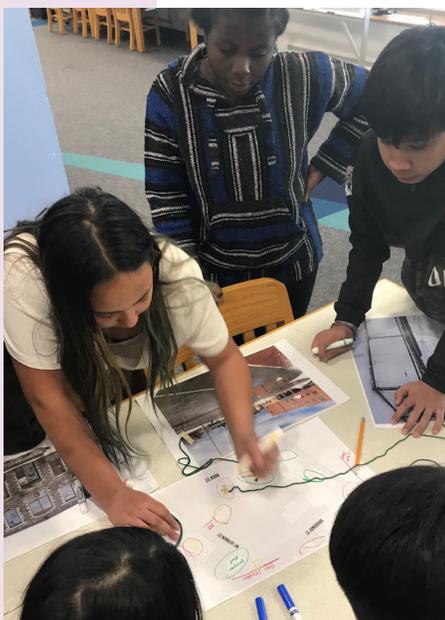
- 1.) Shared lessons from the work with GSD CoDesign:** Convened students and faculty working on community design projects across the GSD to present lessons from their work, share lessons from Lowell, and seek other ways to further incorporate lessons from this project into CoDesign.
- 2.) Created a database of Lowell community partners who will further this project:** Sought partnerships with the Stoklosa after school program and neighborhood organizations including ProjectLEARN, a local Lowell arts after school program and the CMAA after school programming; built relationships between Stoklosa's after school program and different neighborhood organizations who have similar goals to the youth, but had not been in communication before this fall.
- 3.) Convened a CDP team of sixteen Harvard students:** Recruited and mobilized landscape architecture, urban planning, public policy, and education students to advance the goals of this project as a Community Development Project (CDP). Divide up tasks of the project into three student teams (education and environmental policy, neighborhood development, community design), facilitate teams to work alongside and reflect the goals of community partners in their renderings, feasibility analysis, and funding proposals.
- 4.) Presented youth's proposals and project updates ideas to Lowell City Planning Department:** Received their feedback on what the City needs to advance these plans,

how the Community Development Project could be helpful, other community partners to engage. Received their support to collectively pursue a Community Development Block grant, as well as other grants offered by local foundations.

5.) Met with teachers and Stoklosa students to further the project: Considered what community partners to bring in, when Harvard students could facilitate more participatory planning and design workshops in the after school program.



Vanessa proposes designing and building a statue of the school mascot for the school entrance.



Jisella and Edna map out their routes around school.

DELIVERABLES

Fall 2019 Timeline

September 2019: Created database and map of Lowell stakeholders; documented fall and summer outcomes and continued conversations with teachers, local partners, City leaders; created and submitted application for project as a Community Development Project; Shared lessons with and learned from CoDesign team on September 13, received approval for CDP project on September 30.

October 2019: Shared Lowell updates on October 11 and began preparing for pecha kucha to share lessons with the GSD and learn from other students and faculty similarly working on community design projects; recruited a team of six landscape architects, four planners, four public policy students and three education school students to join the project by October 15; divided project intervention tasks into three student teams; assisted other CDP Co-Chairs in forming their Community Development Projects and recruiting their teams throughout November; prepared November presentations to the City and meeting with teachers and students

November 2019: Presented youth's ideas to the City of Lowell on November 13, learned new deliverables necessary to advance the proposal; met with teachers and students from the summer program to decide on next steps, community partners to involve, and how they may want the Harvard CDP team to be involved on November 13; contacted local neighborhood organizations alongside teachers, formed relationship with ProjectLEARN; co-coordinated pecha kucha, convened 30 students and faculty to share community design projects on November 15; convened all Harvard CDP students, presenting the goals of the Lowell project to 50 students on November 19, convened the CDP team and began facilitating committees to work alongside and reflect goals of community partners on November 19.



Alize proposes trimming the greenery around the abandoned building and painting new boards over the boarded up windows.

December 2019: Convened CDP team to identify four sites of the spring project: the field, the abandoned building, traffic circle, and streetscapes on December 7th; delved into CRA and CDBG funds for each site, created short and long-term deliverables as a group; prepared engagement workshops with ProjectLEARN to build mosaic bird statue.

NEXT STEPS

Short and Long-term outcomes

Quick Wins: The Harvard CDP team is working alongside youth leaders, art teachers, and Project LEARN, to implement two tactical urbanist projects. They will paint new plywood boards to be placed in the abandoned building windows and and build the youth-envisioned, mosaic school mascot statue for the school entrance.

Report to the City: The CDP team is also working to capture the youth's proposals in a report to the Lowell City Planning Department. They will supplement the youth's ideas, drawings, models, and their written descriptions with a feasibility analysis, additional renderings, cost estimates and possible revenue streams, among other requested information from the City. The Harvard student team will deepen relationships with Lowell community leaders, seeking their input in the direction of the project. They will explore options for local funding and federal grants aike to make the youth's proposals possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Literature, Courses and Community Conversations

Over the course of this project, I looked to the literature on participatory action research, and relied on the insight of community design practitioners, professors and members of my cohort alike.

Literature

- Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, 1990, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* informed the pedagogical decision-making of this project, the workshops and conversations seeking not to lecture to the youth leaders, but instead to learn alongside them. Freire and Horton's conversation challenged me to create moments for the youth to learn together and teach the planners, and further create moments of spontaneity, constantly prepared to pivot and reshape the future of the project based on the youth's suggestions.
- Urban Places Project and Ann Forsyth, 2000, *YouthPower Guide: How to Make Your Community Better* provided a roadmap for how to amplify the voices of youth in community decision-making, offering a detailed curriculum for youth workshops that I turned to while crafting our camp curriculum.
- Paulo Freire, 1968, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: further offered inspiration for the pedagogy, seeking to move away from the lecturing or "banking" model that suggests youth are waiting for Harvard students to teach them, and instead challenges us to co-produce and co-learn alongside the youth.
- Donald A Schon, 1983, *Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*: introduced a framework to critically "reflect in action" and continuously learn alongside the youth

Constellation of Courses

Participatory Action Research Theory with Professor Dayna Cunningham introduced me to the critical theory behind participatory planning; Urban Design Politics with Professor Lawrence Vale introduced me to the deeper, political implications of who is heard and who is excluded in planning processes; Housing, Community and Economic Development with Professor Justin Steil introduced me to frameworks for collective action in community development particularly relevant for finding funding and support for this project, including tools like the Community Reinvestment Act and Community Development Block Grants.

Community Conversations

I met individually with leaders in the community design and development field, among them Lily Song, Katie Swenson, Anne-Marie Lubenau, Beth Miller, Dayna Cunningham, and Jim Stockard and to learn how the community design and community development fields seek to amplify marginalized voices in design and policymaking processes. They shared with me different models of community design and offered insight on the challenges facing planners, designers, policymakers and community developers who to seek to advance community-driven planning.

GSD CoDesign Cohort

Special thanks to Sarah Zou for helping shape the direction of this project and creating Safe Routes to School designs for the Acre neighborhood; Sury Dewa Ayu and Deborah Kang for volunteering their time as planning and design teachers; and Fiona Kenney for assisting in creating the interactive materials for the workshops.

WORKS CITED