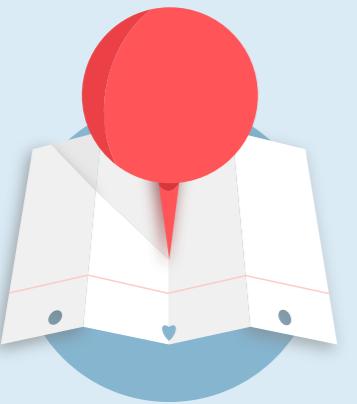


Agora

Study how you please.



Research



Planning



Development

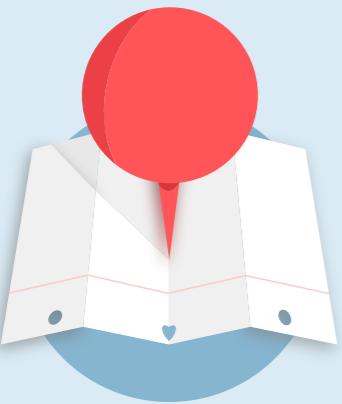


Creative Brief

Students and professionals need a location-based service, to find a place for work or study--but filtering for their preferences can be a battle with long comment sections and bad filters. While there are ways to approach finding a study spot, none of them feel as effortless and enjoyable as finding a place to go for a quick bite.

Given this, how do we leverage our filters and trackers to help users find their new, perfect study location in a matter of seconds?





Research

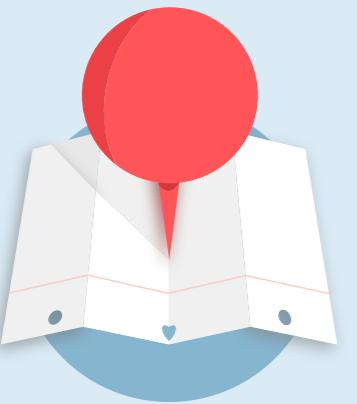


Key Learnings:

1. Our competition, in general, had all the features that we'd need to make a successful app.
2. However, those features were broken across platforms, and their presentation was not tailored to our ends.
3. Several similar concepts existed with mildly different focus (business and seat selling), but they were not large in the market yet.
4. We had the ability to draw on APIs to supplement our own features.

Competitive Analysis

	Yelp	Word of Mouth	Workforum	Cafe Wifi
Amenities	Excellent overviews of things like food, parking, bike access, disability, etc. Many locations have rich data, including actively updated menus.	Can deliver high accuracy, including temporary concerns which would not show up in other apps. May also have heavy lag & outdated info.	Some really specific-to-work and detailed information on not only availability but vibe.	Amenities are listed and broken down with gradations, giving a sense not only of what's there but how it's there.
Ambiance	Pictures and reviews give a good idea, but there is no way of categorizing by a 'vibe,' in search or detailed info.	Limited only to the cognitive skills of the teller.	Again, pictures can give an idea, but only reviewers' statements give the user an idea of what 'vibe' they're dealing with.	Photos seem to be the only way that this information is conveyed. The app is also focused on 'crowded' ones.
Free/Paid	Results are 'assumed' paid, and searching study spots only shows paid locations. Offers free spot reviews, but doesn't display them under keywords.	High degree of accuracy, and the ability to convey conditional information such as, "They'll let you study without buying anything, if it's not busy."	The site gives the option to include Public Spaces, but, in tests for New York, Los Angeles, and Portland, it was unable to provide any. Thus, all places shown are 'paid.'	Due to the focus of the app on monetizing seating, there was practically no interaction with free spaces.
Noise	While listed, no detail is given. Thus, it is only 'how much noise,' not which types, or what music may be playing.	As accurate as is the musical knowledge of both parties.	Users can search on the platform for 'quieter' places, but this function only turned up one result total. Noise evaluations aren't graded, or given context.	Of the apps, this is the only one which notes genre / artist of music that is playing (or generally playing), but does not highlight volume.
Snacking	A good mid-high range of accuracy on offerings, with incentive for owners to keep info up to date.	Super accurate in the short term, with more nuanced evaluations, though potentially months or years out of date.	Highly limited information, often only if the reviewer or business owner has provided some information.	These are not front and center, as the idea of the app seems to support the name/picture being what conveys said info.



Research

Analysis

Interviews

Persona

Key Learnings:

1. Knowing if you'll be welcomed for an extended time is key - no one wants to feel rushed out from a location.
2. Including 'unconventional' places like parks, libraries, or plazas can capture a segment of the population who prefer to study in open air.
3. The 'vibe' of a study location is of the greatest importance.



Timothy D

1. Timothy spoke of having no way to find outdoor places in Yelp, and no way to filter them like Yelp in Google.
2. Tim heavily emphasized the desire never to feel at risk of getting kicked out, if he wanted to spend two hours working.
3. The 'vibe' of a study location is of the greatest importance.



Michelle E

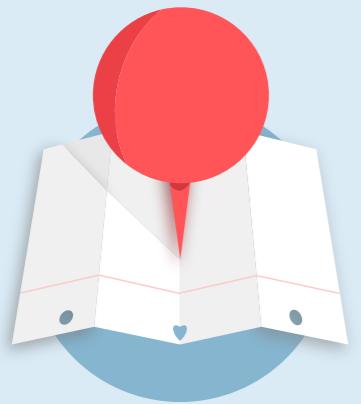
1. Michelle raised the difficulty of crossing the trust divide, separating Word of Mouth from comment sections & reviews. Too much noise, and nothing can be trusted.
2. Michelle discussed the value of 'curators' one follows—be it for reviews (like YouTubers) or content channeling (like Pinterest). These might be better approaches to ratings.



Ashlee W

1. Knowing which place is likely to set out a place for comfort is the best. You want a personal relationship with a study spot.
2. This should be your second home. Beyond any branding, how it supports you makes you loyal to a study spot.
3. Filters are great, and could expose unexpected spots.

User Interviews



Research



Key Learnings:

1. Knowing if you'll be welcomed for an extended time is key - no one wants to feel rushed out from a location.
2. Including 'unconventional' places like parks, libraries, or plazas can capture a segment of the population who prefer to study in open air.
3. The 'vibe' of a study location is of the greatest importance.

Domain Expert Interview

Richard,
Ad Analyst, Google

I sat down with a member of the Google team who works in user analytics and ad targeting. His insights drew some interesting lines of research that we'd inevitably have to answer. They also revealed to us interesting ideas about how to utilize the data our users would naturally generate to provide a better, more accurate experience.

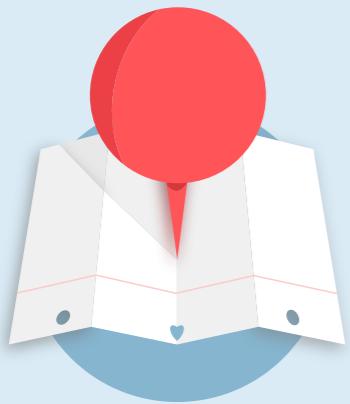
Each Step is a Final Step -

No matter when they download it, the first time a user opens your app is your only opportunity to make a positive first impression. Features can be held until they are ready, but what is presented needs to feel finished and must offer a clear value to the user.

Users as Authors -

Applications which bring Users into the fold create more accurate, real-time, responsive applications. The User's ability to contribute flags, as seen in Waze, allows for more accurate and flexible information than static information like that on Yelp's dashboard or Google's graphs.

Persona



Research

Analysis

Interviews

Persona

Sophia

23

Full-time Student
With a Part-Time Job

*“My current study location is fine,
but not ideal.”*



Motivations

- I want to have increased productivity & efficiency
- Better time management
- More variety when I study
- An on-time graduation

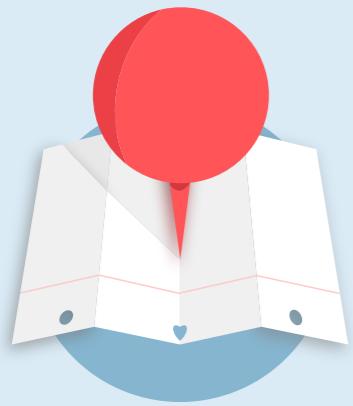
Pain Points

Too many distractions at home (roommates, family, etc), current study locations are far too busy and loud to have peace in my already tight schedule.

Goals

I want a study place with little to no noise, near home or my campus. I want snacks, to be open late, and to have free wifi. I never want to feel like I'm going to be kicked out for staying too long.

Experience Map



Planning

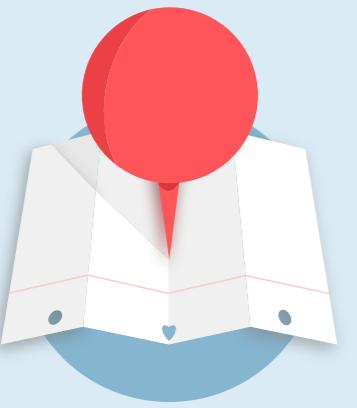


Key Learnings:

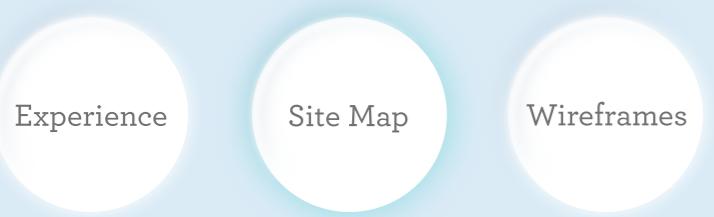
1. Your interaction with your customer extends beyond your app. How they map it into their life can deeply affect their emotional and problem solving maps.
2. There is a time when Agora might be less useful in a user's life, and that's fine! Giving them a very positive experience helps them pass it down and pass it along.

PROJECT: CJM for Mobile App MAP: CJM for Mobile App

		AWARE	SEARCH	INSTALL	USE	FEEDBACK	DELETE
		Aware	Search	Install	Use	Feedback	Delete
User Goals		Tired of using Yelp. Sophia wants an app that actually cares about what a student needs.	Sophia would like to find a few options to try and compare.	Sophia really hopes this app is the one she'll need.	Sophia hopes for a good deal of results around her, and for a really spot-on recommendation.	Having now explored a few spots. Sophia feels confident recommending Agora to friends. One day, it helps her so much she even goes on the AppStore to write us a review.	Years down the road. Sophia's all done with school and ready to move into the next phase of life. She wants to free up some space on her phone, and sees one she used to rely on--but no longer.
User expectations		"I mean, I haven't heard of this, but maybe it exists?"	"There's gotta be at least one, right? I wonder if it'll be full of ads like Yelp."	"I wonder if it will let me select places only if they serve coffee."	"This might not be easier to use for this than Google maps, but I hope it is!"	"My endorsement will help others find this great resource."	Though she won't be using it herself, Sophia knows she'll have it in pocket to recommend to a new generation.
Touchpoints		The AppStore search	The App Store page	The AppStore Page	Agora App	The App Store	The little grey x of goodbyes.
Process		Sophia searches the app store, putting the words 'study spot' into the searchbar.	Sophia Browses the results	Sophia downloads the app	Sophia boots up the app	Sophia taps a courteous reminder to rate us, feeling like we've now earned her suggestion!	Sophia lets the app and that phase of her life go, excited for the next one.
Storyboard							
Experience							
Pain points		vigilance	annoyance	interest	optimism	trust	love
Problems		Having to use apps that are poorly calibrated for her needs.	There aren't actually a ton of apps to do this!	// That long install wait.	'Hmm, seems like the cool, weird places get the fewest reviews. Figures, but it's a shame.'	The AppStore can feel like a hell of a lot to navigate, just to drop a review.	People who park in the electric vehicle bays with non-electric vehicles.
Ideas		"What do I even type in? This feels kinda vague."	// We need to be SEO'd correctly to make sure we capture a wide array of possible searches.	"I wish this bus had WiFi."	"I'm not sure if I should make a profile yet..."	// We should think of when and if to ask users to review us, with a shorter link to do it.	The newborn is sleeping poorly. Because of course it is.
		"Maybe I'll just try caveman wording and see."	"Well, at least this one looks cute!"	"I'm going to see if it can find me a place with printers!"	"Oh wow, I'm excited to see other places, when I feel like different filters for a day!"	// Review requests	"Maybe Jenny's kids should know about this?"



Planning



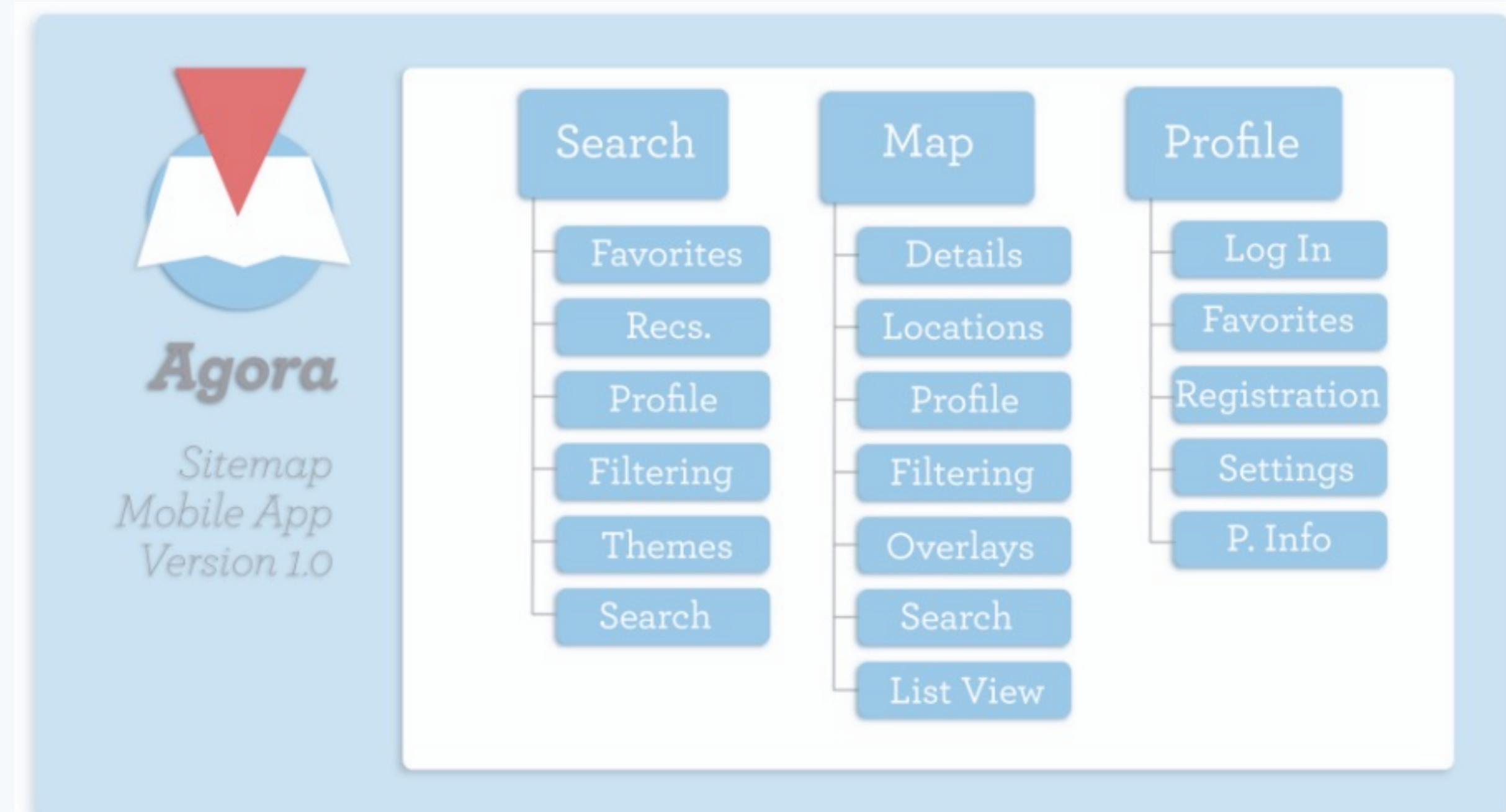
Key Learnings:

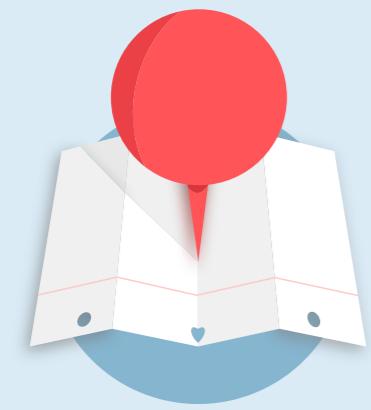
1. The app should be natively constructed for the 'depth not width' architectural philosophy of Apple's design regime. App will be produced first for IOS, and then ported.

2. Separating by the feel of tasks seemed most important. Search should hold lists, maps should hold on-interface overlay and filtering. Profile should be only what is personal to a user.

3. Subpages should not be separate spaces but layers of interface which can be called and dismissed with rapidity.

Sitemap





Planning

Experience

Site Map

Wireframes

Wireframing

The wireframes illustrate the initial design of the filtering interface. Each screen includes a search bar, a 'Current Location' button, and a 'Cancel' button. The first screen has three sliders for Price (\$1-\$5), Distance, and Noise. The second screen has two sections: 'Vibes' (Business, Uptight, Hipster, Stuck, Sleek, Campus, Honest, Techie, Artsy, Vintage) and 'Traffic Level'. The third screen has two sections: 'Amenities' (Wi-Fi, Couches, Coat Rack, Printers, Coffee, Snacks, Meals, Boxes, AC, Outdoor, Indoor) and 'Music Genre' (Rock, Rap, Jazz, World). Each section includes a 'more filters... this way' link.

Initial filters presented options in a manner which did not efficiently illustrate affordances to users. What was a radio button & what a checkbox was unclear. Sliders could also be substituted on Price.

Original Filters

Key Learnings:

1. Color was unintuitive. Switching to icons would allow quicker inference of meaning to the different pins.
2. Too many objectives were being handled in app, including rating systems, which could be offloaded to other apps and public databases.
3. Cards were best used as a 'second tier' of details, with a new 'bounce' presenting only the three most important details being a better initial response to a press.

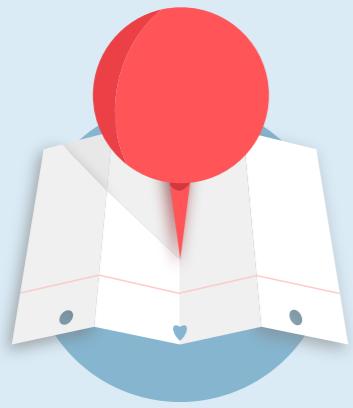
The screenshots show the original implementation of map overlays. The first image shows the 'Overlays Menu' with a grid of colored pins and corresponding labels: Foot Traffic (green), Cost (red), Vibes (blue), Noise Level (purple), Ratings (pink), and Loitering (yellow). The second image shows the 'Overlays Applied' state where these pins are overlaid on a map of West Los Angeles. The third image shows the 'Route' screen, which includes a 'Cancel' button and a blue line indicating a route path on the map.

Color coding proved difficult for users to match to meaning. Shifting to icon-based interface with a key would provide more clarity.

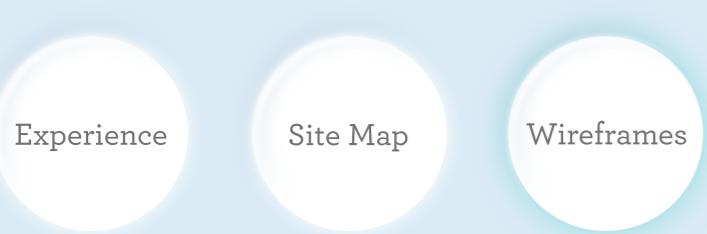
Original Map Overlays

There was no need for the app to handle ratings and navigation, both of which could

Wireframing

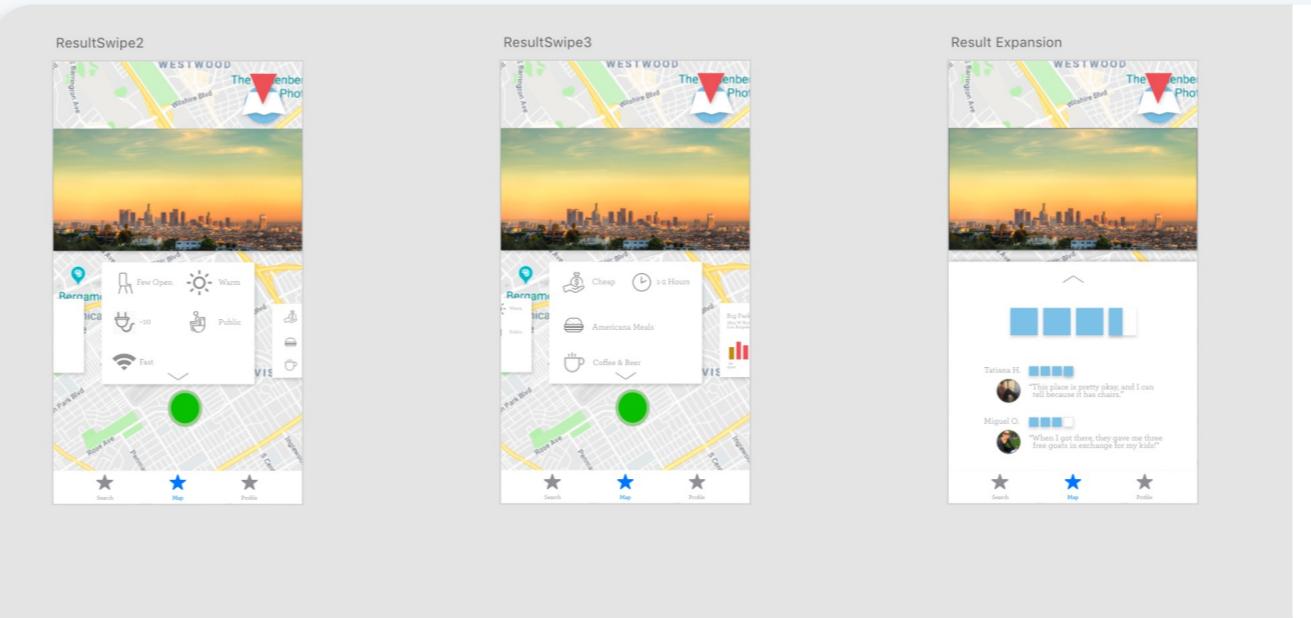


Planning

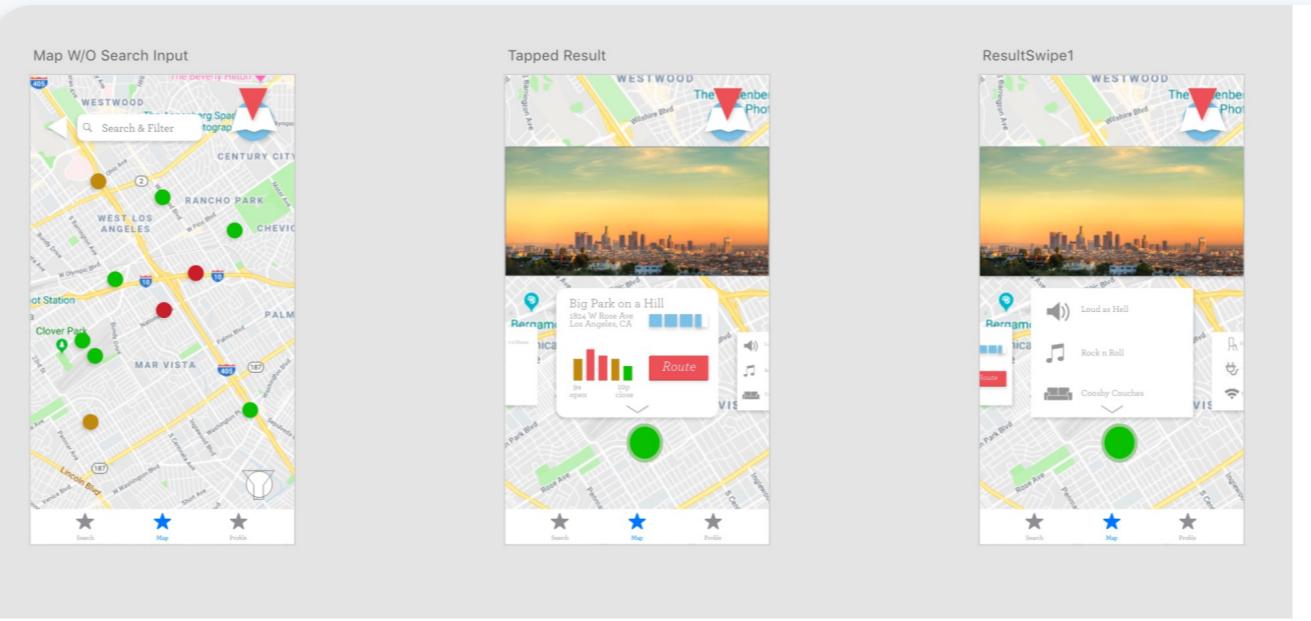


Key Learnings:

1. Color was unintuitive. Switching to icons would allow quicker inference of meaning to the different pins.
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Location Details, First Pass

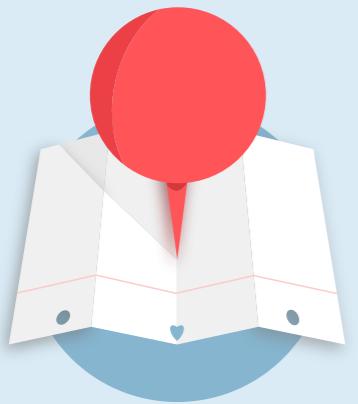


Information Cards, First Pass

Location cards seemed to present all data at once, instead of allowing for a 'peck and roam' method. Cards were useful, but seemed onerous as a first screen default. Color coding seemed, again, to miss the mark.

Location cards also did not seem to suggest the affordance of 'further details' on any category, despite expansion buttons. This mirrored issues around the initial tap discouraging 'peck and roam' behavior.

Usability Testing & Features



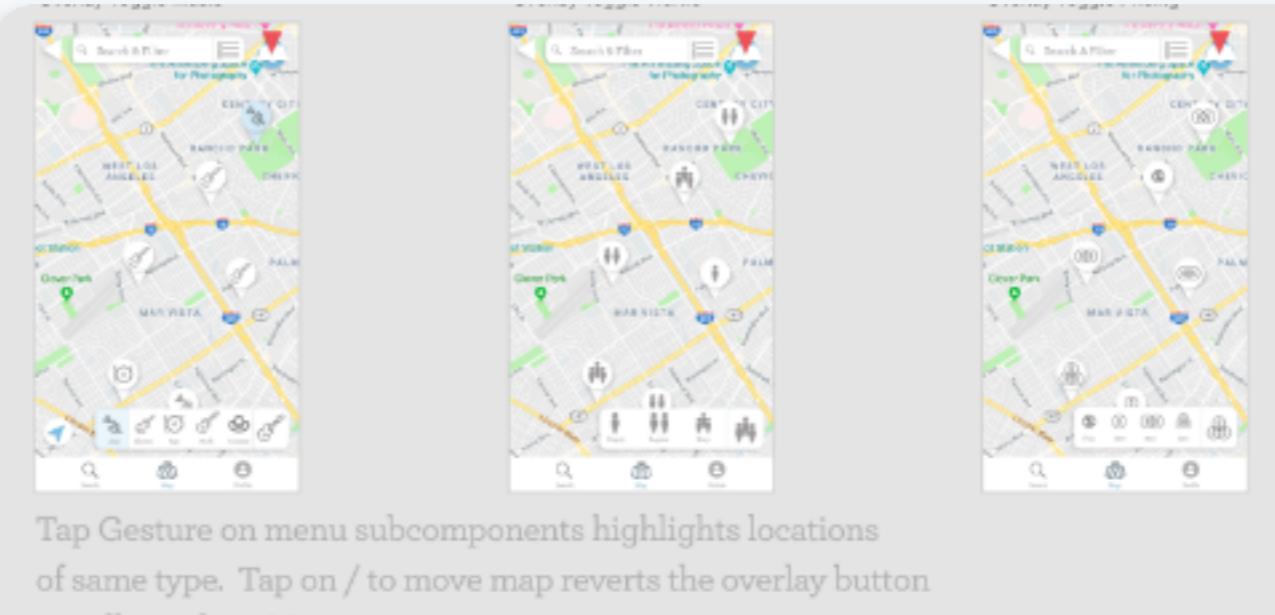
Usability Aesthetic Revision

Key Learnings:

1. The new overlays seemed to encourage unprompted 'exploration' of what icons in the key might do; users clicked anything and everything without suggestion.
2. New filters felt more intuitive and fun.
3. Icon driven design allowed for quicker acquisition and task completion than color-driven pins.



Revised Filters



Revised Map Overlays

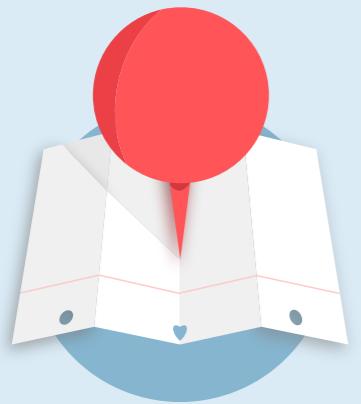
Users noted that icons would be excellent indicators for the filters menu as well. We tested this, with temporary images, and found a positive response.

The icons were finalized and the feature completed.

With the new icon focus, the map overlay was also given a legible key that would flag out as users selected a filter. The default of foot traffic was comprehensible without the key, in testing. This let the key be a fun discovery, which removed our need to onboard users to it.

Feature completed.

Usability Testing & Features

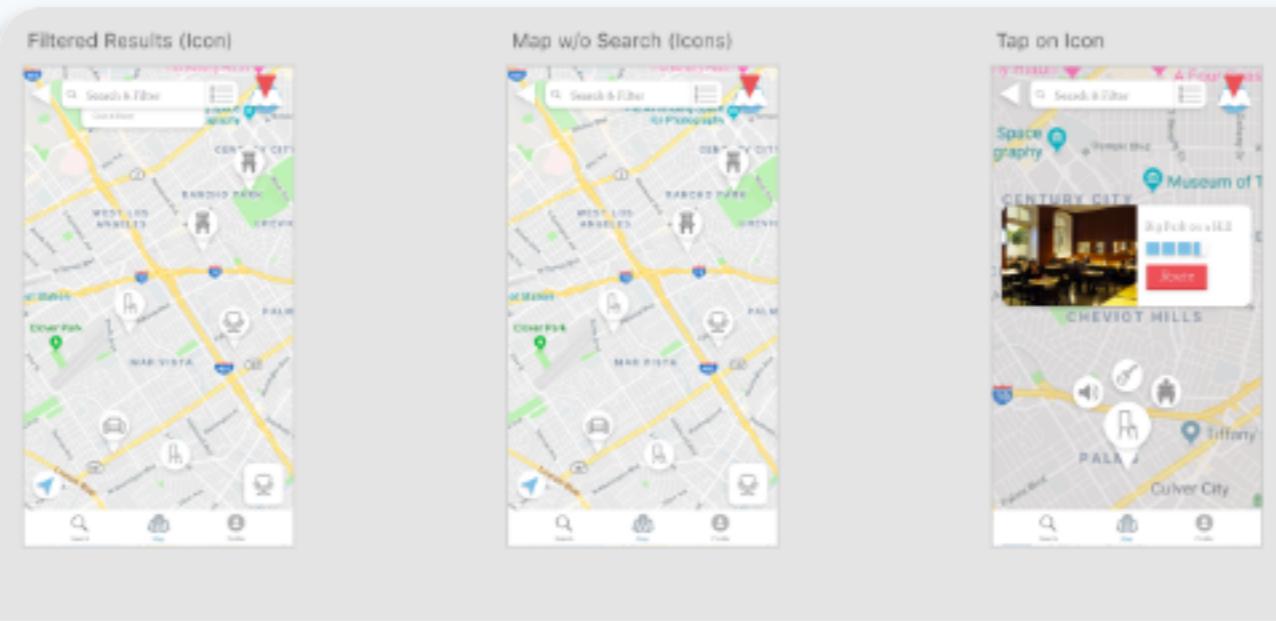


Development



Key Learnings:

1. The new overlays seemed to encourage unprompted ‘exploration’ of what icons in the key might do; users clicked anything and everything without suggestion.
2. New filters felt more intuitive and fun.
3. Icon driven design allowed for quicker acquisition and task completion than color-driven pins.

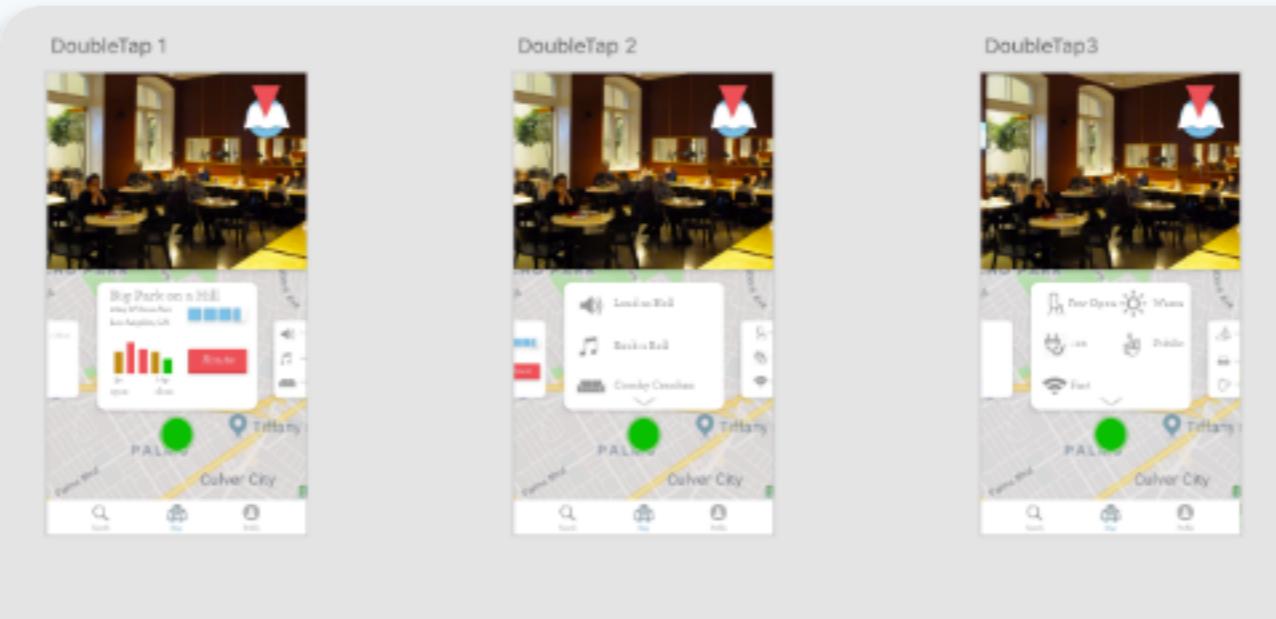


Location Details, Revision 1

Locations were changed to a three-layer system. A first touch gives a springy overview of the top-three filters. A second offers a deeper look at the location.

This details spring also reduced screen real estate.

Feature completed.

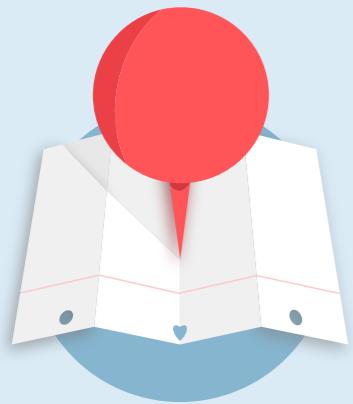


Information Cards, Revision

Location cards were parsed down. After our third-round user testing, the ‘further details’ card was removed for all but the reviews section. As one tester said, “I don’t really need more information about AC than ‘do they have it or not’”

Feature Deprecated

Aesthetics



Development



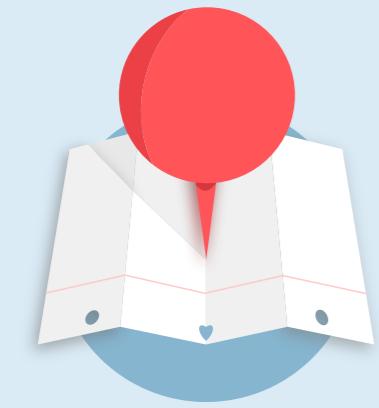
Key Learnings:

1. Style communicates expectations of the user/developer relationship
2. Avoiding generic icons allows the UI to reflect Agora's ethos, not just its function.

The interface features a header with three tabs: LIBRARY (book icon), MAP (map icon), and NOTES (notebook icon). Below the tabs is a search bar with a magnifying glass icon and the placeholder 'Search & Filter'. A button labeled 'Current Location' is also present. The main content area displays a photograph of a bookstore interior with bookshelves and a person sitting at a desk. A white callout box over the photo contains the text 'Book Soufflé' and '1824 W Rose Ave, Los Angeles, CA'. A red button labeled 'Route' is located below the address. At the bottom, there is a timeline with bars labeled '9a', 'Now', and '5p'.

Agora needed a UI that expressed its values through its aesthetics. I redesigned the icons and UI elements around notebook paper and doodly illustrations flowing with personality.

These were playful, without being condescending, and offered more immediate identification of the represented elements.



Development



Key Learnings:

1. Users enjoyed the proposal of badges to collect, but whether or not the correct implementation is what's present has yet to be determined.
2. Avoidance of a traditional column feed had ended up becoming an end in itself. Through user feedback, it was clear to see that they felt more comfortable with a less-experimental interface.

Feature Additions

Profile Click (HAS PROFILE)

Profile Badges

Profile Badges – 2

Though the intrinsic rewards of a study location are nice, there's nothing wrong with some extrinsic additions.

Badges and achievements were added for exploring, helping 'take notes' on locations, and diversifying your experiences.

Achievement Badges

KuaLoungeDetails - 1

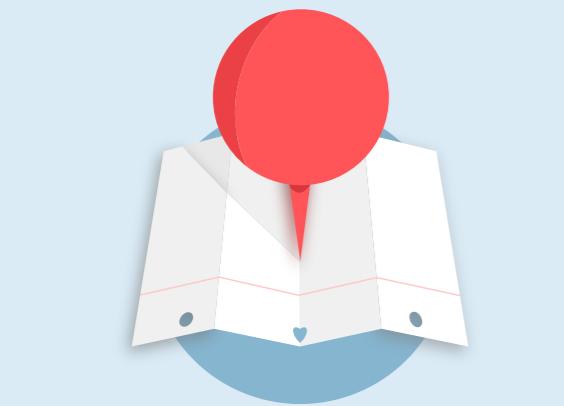
CafeDanteDetails - 1

BookSouffleDetails...

Another pass was made at the location cards, changing them to a column layout that allowed for easier information digestion.

Information Feed

Rather than keep users' focus split between the map and the location, this view let them hone in only on the information relevant to this one choice.



Development

Usability

Aesthetic

Revision

Loadup

Landing

Local Favorites

Formal Lunch

Places to suit up and set down. It's a tie heaven.

Kua Lounge
Shorelines
Murasaki Cafe

Cozy Reading

Get out a book and drift off into its pages.

Big Park on a Hill
Book Souffle

Study Guides

User-generated guides, whether based on themes or metrics, will help users find what they don't realize they're missing.

Presently, Agora is back in paper prototypes for these, as I work out the structure and affordances users would be best served by, in implementing these guides.

Notes - From Routes

Notes - From Tab

Under Construction

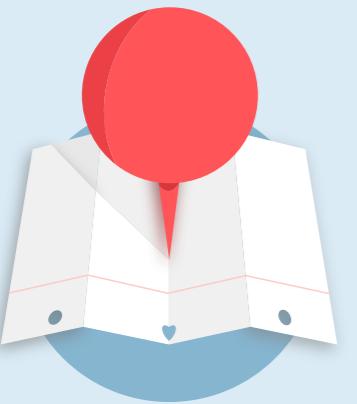
Thank you for your patience as Agora receives an update to its prototype!

Return

Note Taking

The most critical component still missing from Agora is its 'notes' system. This allows users to provide real-time information on the locations they visit.

Though the function is decided, its interface is being experimented with. They will be the next prototype pass made.



Development

Usability

Aesthetic

Revision

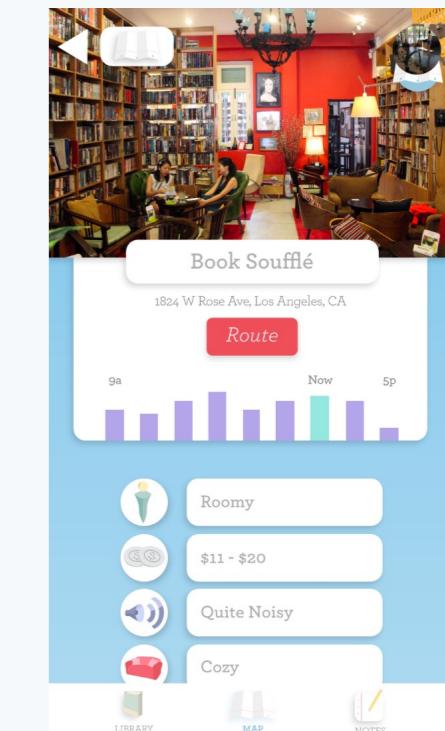
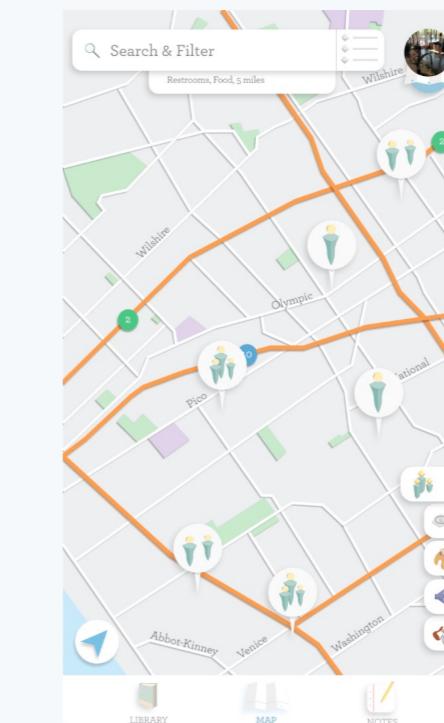
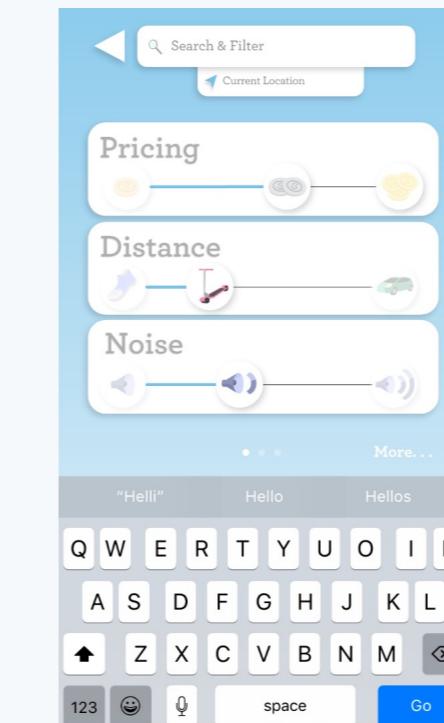
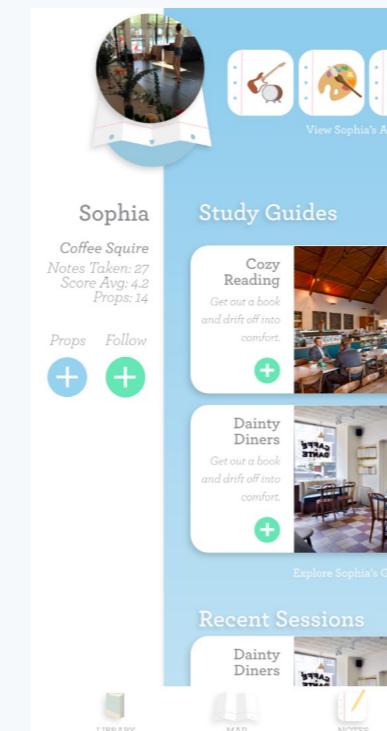
The New User Journey

Sophia has a midterm due, but can't focus at home. She opens Agora, hoping to find refuge from the distractions.

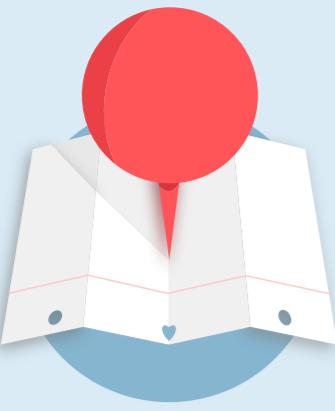
She quickly sets some parameters for her ideal study spot, from its price down to its vibe. She needs cozy and cheap, stat.

There are tons of options, so she quickly toggles to 'traffic.' She can get cozy, cheap, and empty without a second search.

Once she's chosen the best option, she routes right to it. Agora supported her in setting down for a good night's work.



Try the Prototype



Appendix

Reflections

Documents

Reflections

Splitting Off

Agora was an interesting challenge. At the beginning, it was a group project, with me and three teammates collectively constructing the concept. However, by the end of the project, our prototypes had begun to diverge wildly. We had all split on what was the essential difficulty of the app.

The greatest confine of this project was always going to be the tension between the difficulty of categorizing and automating something as ethereal as a ‘vibe.’ In the end, I decided that it wasn’t necessary to decide. Agora’s notes system was a direct solution, which placed users as the arbiters of difficult to quantify concepts. While one of my team mates simply prescribed them, and the other cut them out, I reframed the ‘vibes’ question entirely.

This has lead to further divergence, now that the group has been disbanded. Agora, today, is just as much an adaptation of the mechanisms that make Waze and GoogleMap’s transit crowd reporting work as it is a Yelp alternative.

Next Steps

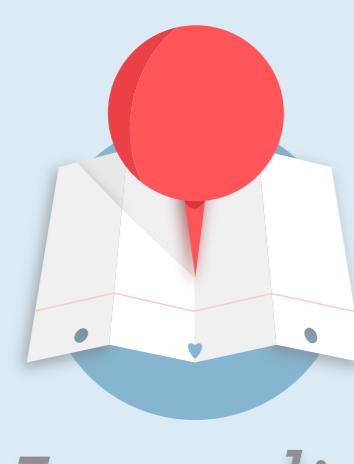
If Agora continues development, one of its key hurdles will be in generating enough of a user base to keep the app’s data relevant and differentiating. Though API’s of Google and Yelp may fill some gaps, like pricing and traffic history, these aren’t the real differentiating features.

Agora’s edge is in giving a intersubjective evaluation of things which would be far too difficult for a company to populate itself. The categories of vibes and amenities provided therefore become super important. Only what I’m delivering in the design can be evaluated, and noted against. This exclusion is and must be intentional. The alternative, of forcing users to scrounge through the infinite possibilities of comments, is just a return to the systems as they exist now.

Therefore, in Agora’s next phase, I will be thinking very deliberately about which of these are present. Some must inevitably be ‘common denominator’ issues, like price and traffic. Others are less obvious.

At present, Agora provides affordances that indicate the importance of assessing some issues, like the Trans* inclusivity of a location. But it’s lacking extremely stupid and obvious amenities flags, like ramps and wheelchair-friendly architecture.

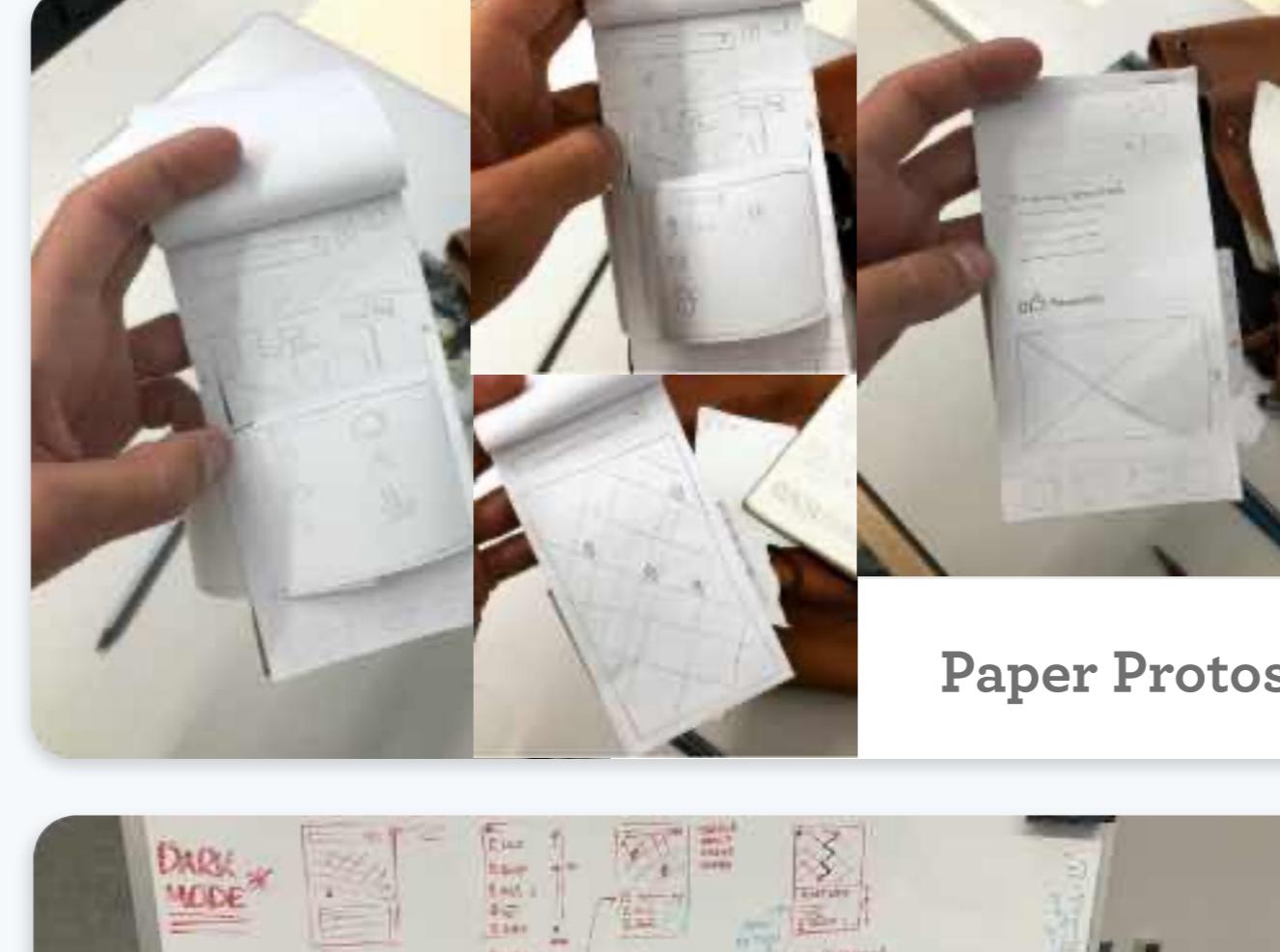
This means that Agora has moved temporarily back from the User Interface to an anthropological and philosophical pause. Before its next iteration, I need to conduct further research on what user concerns I am blind to. After all, I only arrived at what I already have by listening to needs I hadn’t known to design for.



Appendix

Reflections

Documents

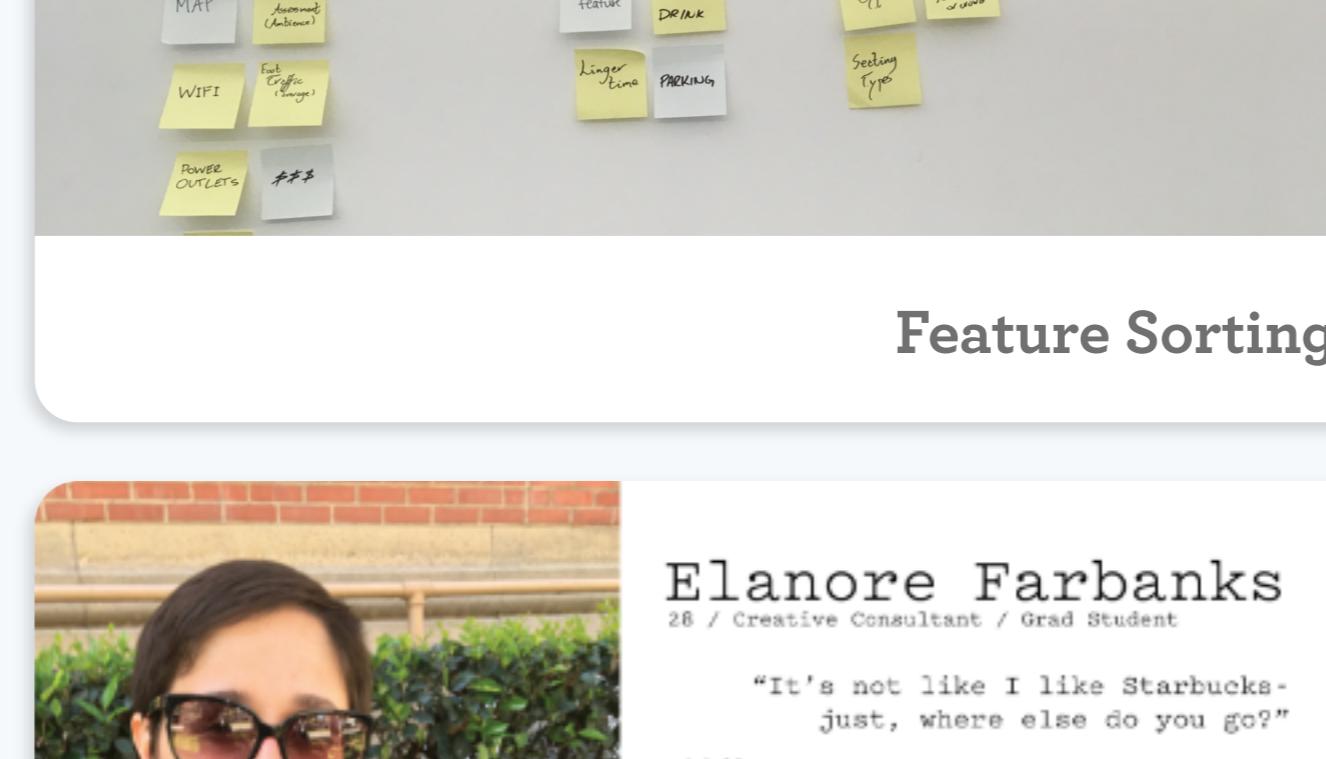


Paper Protos

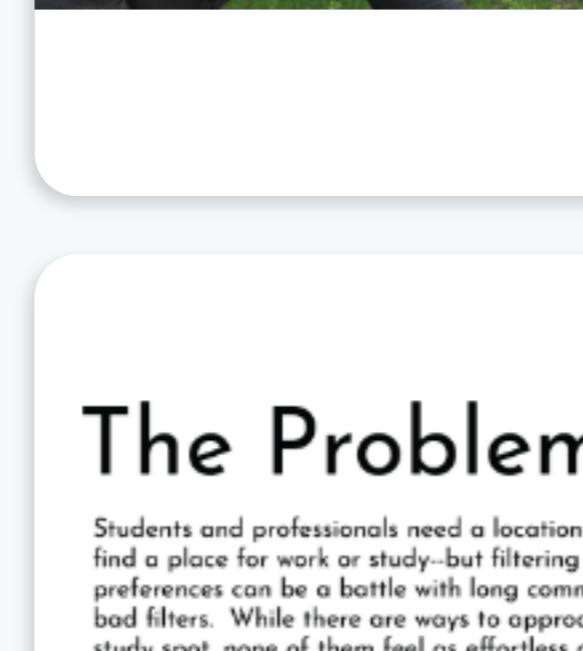
With the adoption of the 'wheel,' our prototype allowed our users to swipe through options in easily digestible and navigable chunks—rather than scroll without direction.



Flows



Feature Sorting



Elanore Farbanks
28 / Creative Consultant / Grad Student

Students (now):
Professionals,
Parents,
Employers,
Employees,
Job seekers,
Friends,
Family
Hobbies:
Reading,
Cooking,
Gardening,
Gardening
Hobbies:

"It's not like I like Starbucks—just, where else do you go?"

When she was 19, finding a place to study was a challenge. She was in class. A decade later, surrounded by people who have moved on to other fields, and classmates who she only knows online, that's a pipe dream.

Penny is in a house with six roommates, keeping down a part-time job as she pursues her graduate degree in a field she loves. She plays drums and piano, and reads. After college, she found it hard to get a job, so she got a part-time job at Starbucks. Penny has been there ever since, and now she's a barista. Starbucks has been her only resort—the easiest common denominator.

Initial Persona

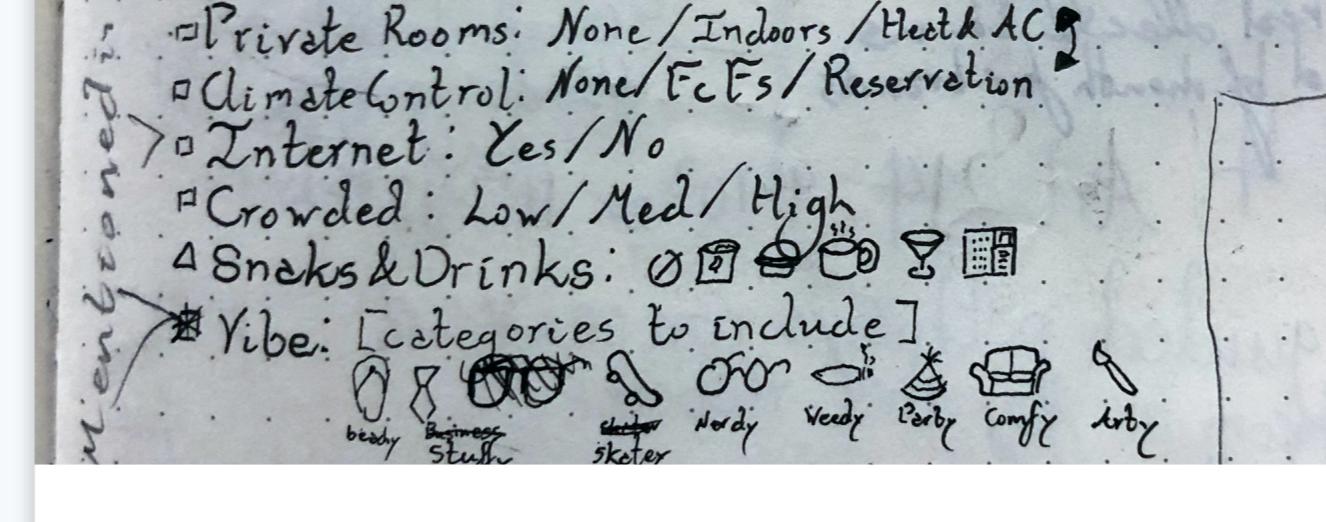
Sorting our proposed features by priority allowed us to see which of our ideas to focus in on, in the first implementation. It was critical to understand that not all things could or should make it into an initial release.

The Problem

Given this, how do we leverage our filter settings and active location tracker to help users find their new, perfect study location in a matter of seconds?

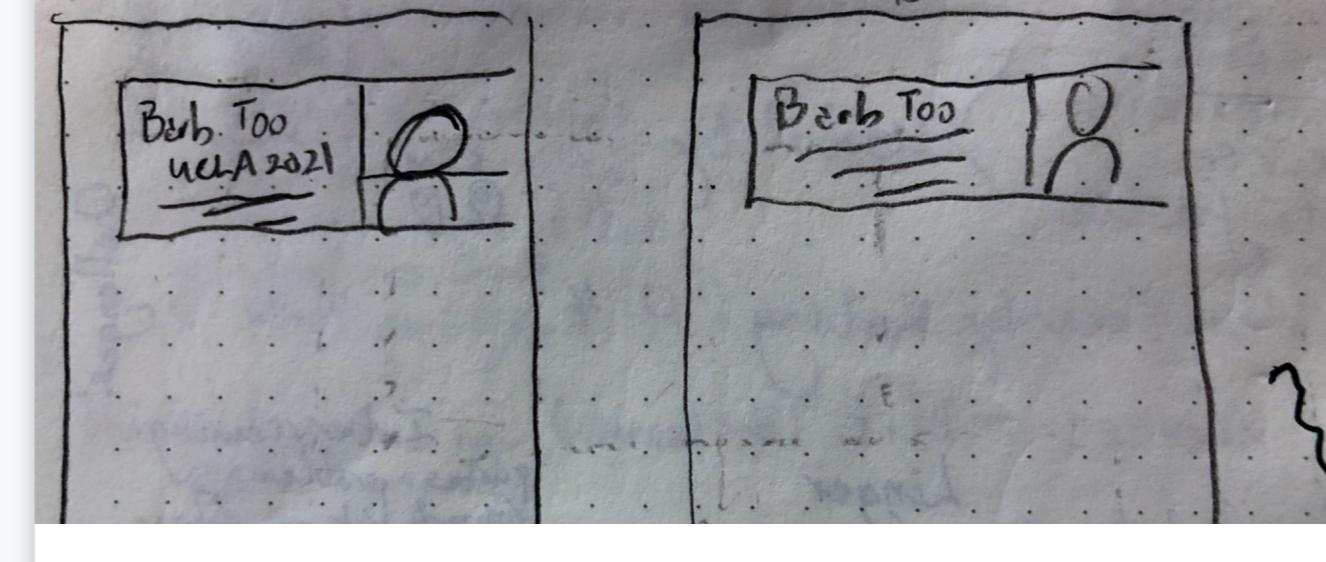


Initial Research Brief

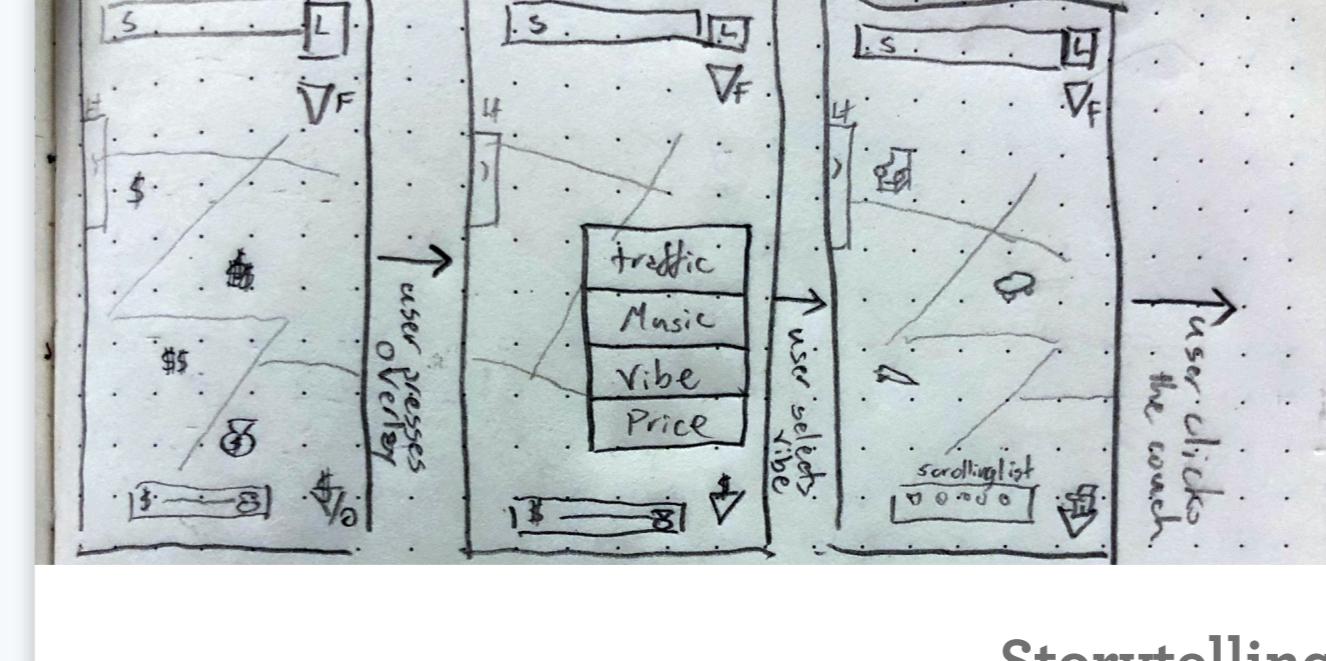


Storytelling

Revisiting the story of when and how our app would be used was a positive segue as we moved into prototype and design. Affordances and the feel of use in vivo again became a central focus to the whole team.

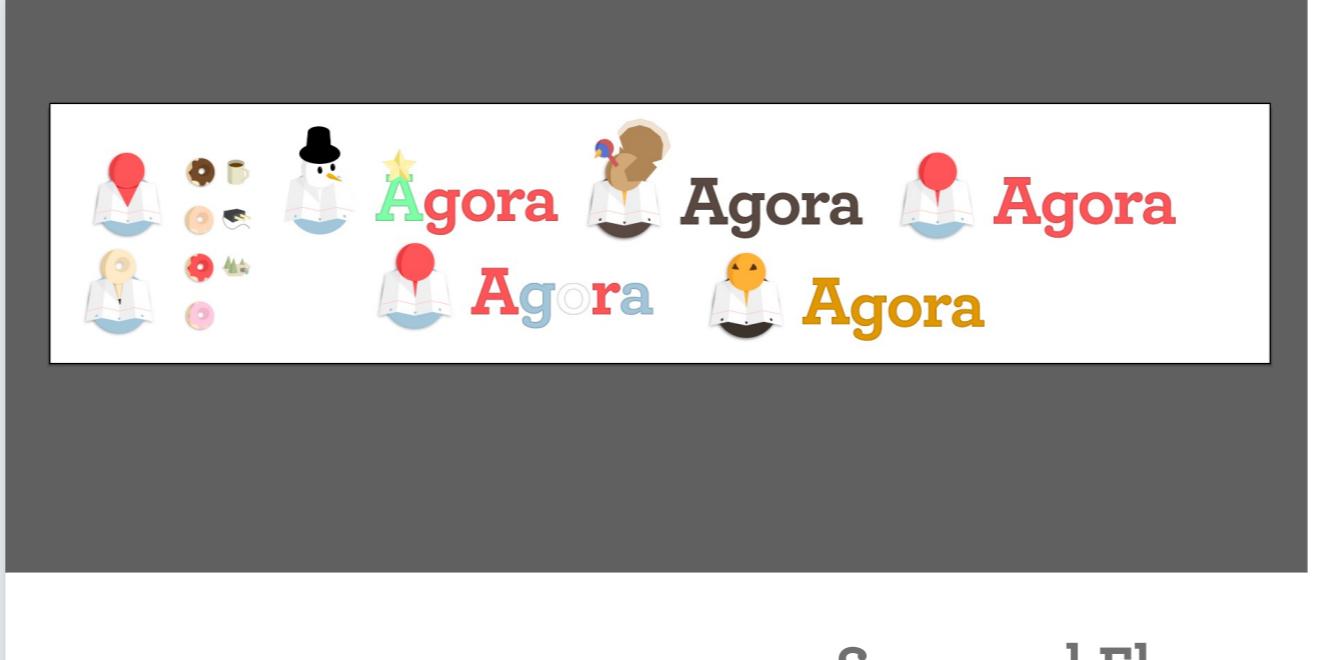


Early Icon Ideation



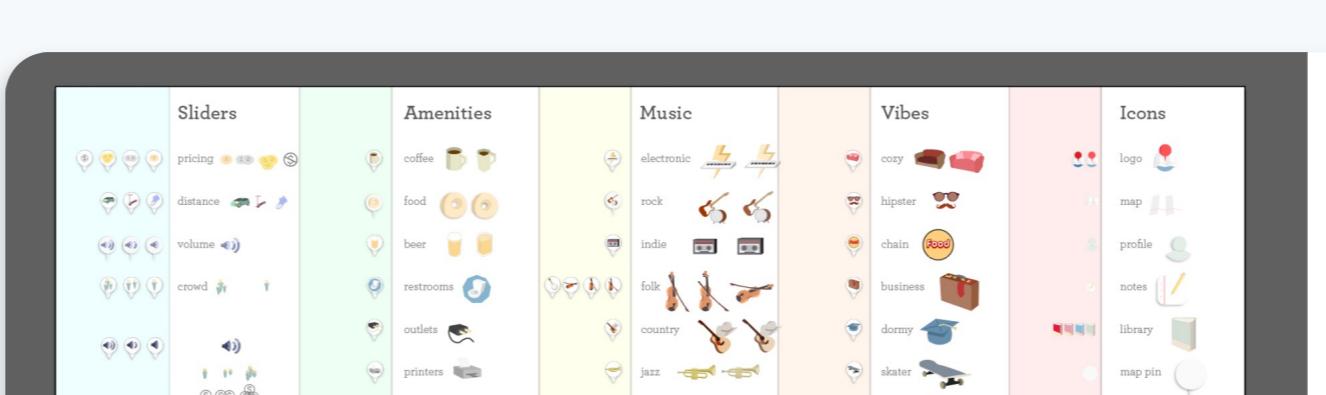
Ratings and Trust

Our earliest icon iterations began in the first weeks of thinking, but were disposed for a time. They later came back as a central feature, with a slightly more parsed down set of representations.



Storytelling

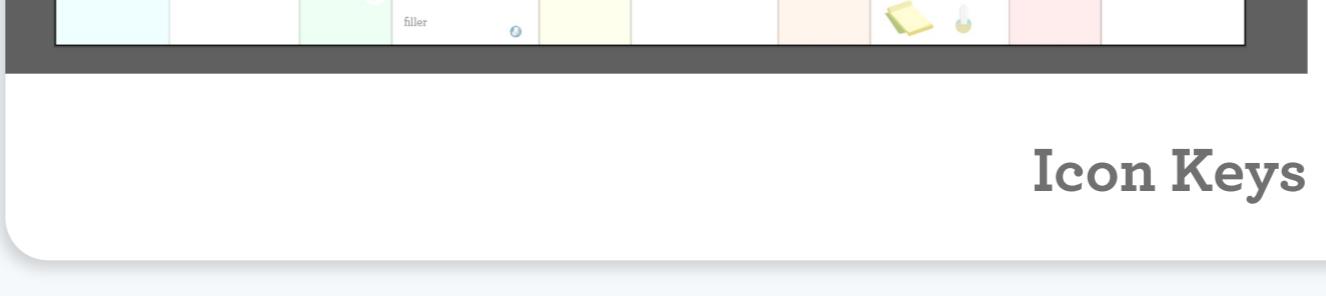
An early idea of what the keys and the filter flags would look like still showed the two as separate entities. They were later merged, and that merger space to invent the soft-filter method of tapping key icons to highlight locations of the type without clearing map.



Seasonal Flavors

Once the rabbit hole of illustration got plunged down, there was no stopping the ideas.

These are a few of the logo variations that I created, to give Agora an appropriate seasonal flare during holidays and other special events.



Icon Keys

Every icon was revised at least twice, with some (such as the traffic indicator) getting almost a dozen passes.