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Coding It Forward
Civic Innovation Corps 2021
New York Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity
Service Design Studio

Background Information

Title: "A Civic Service Designer's 10 Unanswered Questions"

Form: [Zine](#) (a kind of booklet) with simple illustrations, personal reflection, and academic references, introduced in a blogpost.

Audience: This will most likely live digitally on the civicservicedesign.com Medium page as a part of other works from the Service Design Studio at the NYC Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity. Readers come to the post with an interest in civics and design.

Intent: After 10 weeks of working with the Service Design Studio as a Coding It Forward Civic Innovation Corps member, Ava Nordling composes a zine and corresponding blogpost to finalize and celebrate her learnings as a designer.

Below is the final copy for the blogpost

A Civic Service Designer's 10 Unanswered Questions

Introduction

What happens when we leave with more questions? I created a little zine, a friend, a tool for introspection to have around and keep us company. Please download a [ready-to-print pdf here](#) and test it out yourself!



In this zine, readers can explore 10 unanswered questions I harvested after 10 weeks with the Service Design team at the New York Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity. These questions have been growing around me for a long time, and now I invite you to try them on for size. Practice breaking these questions apart with a pen and paper to journal on your own, or introduce the zine into your circle and see what more questions you return to.

This reflection article lives separately from the zine tool, and what follows now are my own ruminations and visions with the questions.

Context

During my time with the team, I worked closely on their first iteration of a special project called, "[Designed by Community](#)". Designed by Community offers Service Design curriculum and funding to New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) residents to lead their own community design projects. Through the Designed by Community fellowship, the Service Design team tested where or how design can serve as a tool or tactic to advance fellows' goals; and where it still has gaps.

In the following bullet points, I invite you into my reflections through notes, trails of thought, attempted answers, and doodles for when words fall short. My goal here is to

unfold the ever-elusive “Design” and “Government” professional sectors by keeping my questions close and ready to break open.

Q1: What is Civic Service Design?

- A process of solving for users' needs combined with government initiatives.
- Improving public services based on evidence from residents. At a local level, this evidence might look like quantitative and qualitative evaluations of city programs and services such as the New York City Mayor's [Office of Economic Opportunity's](#) approach to evidence.
- An experiment in unifying government services with everyday folks' lived experiences.
- Combining resident's lived expertise and community power with government power to create more equitable, more humane living conditions on a city, state, or federal level.

Q2: What is Community Design?

As with the many reflections in this collection, these notes are guesses.

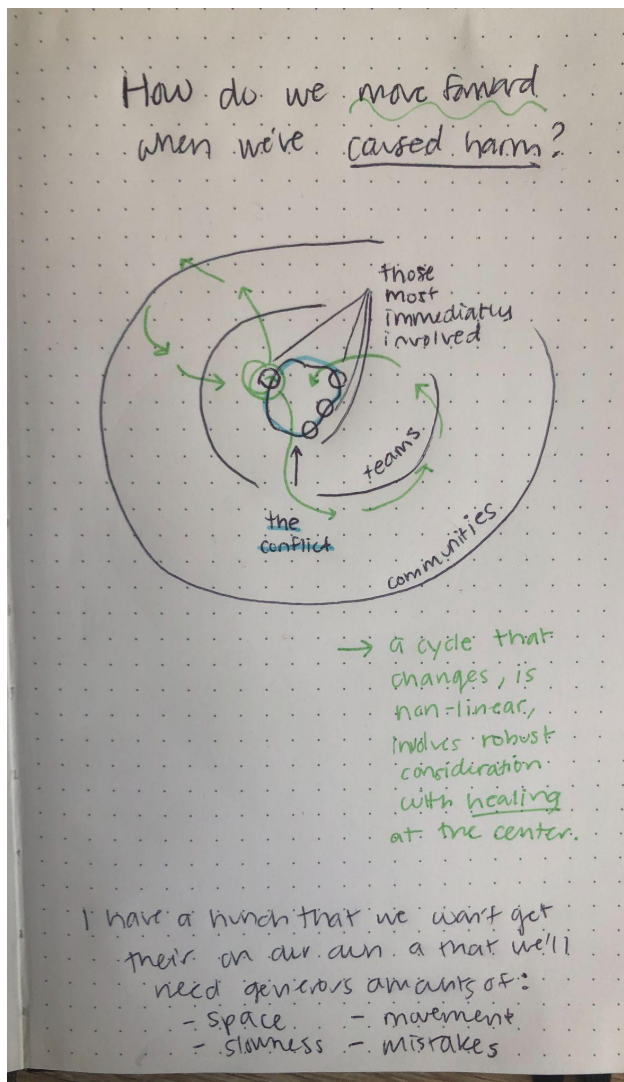
- A historically Black and Indigenous gathering practice which prioritizes community autonomy, choice, and interdependence in the face of systemic oppression.
- A problem solving approach which centers relationships, equity, and horizontal organizing to solve problems for mutual benefit.
- When we arrive/go/return/depart/plan/move together.

Q3: What makes me a “designer”?

- If Service Design is so unique for involving the user in solving their own problem, then, is my goal as a service designer to become obsolete? Should we even name ourselves as separate than those we seek to serve?
- Mari Nakano, Design Director suggests facing this reflection with multiplicity, sharing how, “The first step is understanding yourself as a designer and a person, then you see what “widget of self” you pull down to create the you you need to be in a specific instance. [Every day], ask yourself, “ What is my role today? And fluctuate roles based on your proximity to the community you're working with and the power at play.”

Q4: What are my assumptions?

- My biases go into my work and as a result I make a lot of assumptions. As a team of designers, we constantly make assumptions. For example, during the Designed by Community fellowship, the Service Design team relied on fellows to communicate over slack and complete work over google docs, and assumed these tools would be easy to use. However, one fellow shared during a feedback round that these tools can be inaccessible, challenging, or impractical to work with.
- This made me wonder, when we assume, how do we limit each other?
- **Q5:** How do we move forward when we've caused harm?



Q6: How do we move “at the speed of trust”?

Writer-in-residence at the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, [Adrienne Marie Brown](#), calls in a critical reflection for me in her revolutionary work *Emergent Strategy* when asking us to “Move at the speed of trust”.

Reflecting on this quote, my time in City-level work, and my hesitations with Civic Service Design:

- When we laugh together over zoom meetings and prioritize each other's need for rest, I believe we move at the speed of trust.
- When I rush myself and another team member towards an unexamined, hierarchical goal, I do not move at the speed of trust.
- Should government entities use the word “trust”? When should I use this word? I might exacerbate further harm if I interview a resident on government services and ask them for trust without calling in the systemic, historical oppression from governing systems. Then, really, how might I be trauma-informed?
- Where does trust root? Grow? Propagate? If we grow trust together, how do we consider a cyclical relationship rather than linear?

Q7: Where do we meet again? After the case study, after the slack channel falls silent?

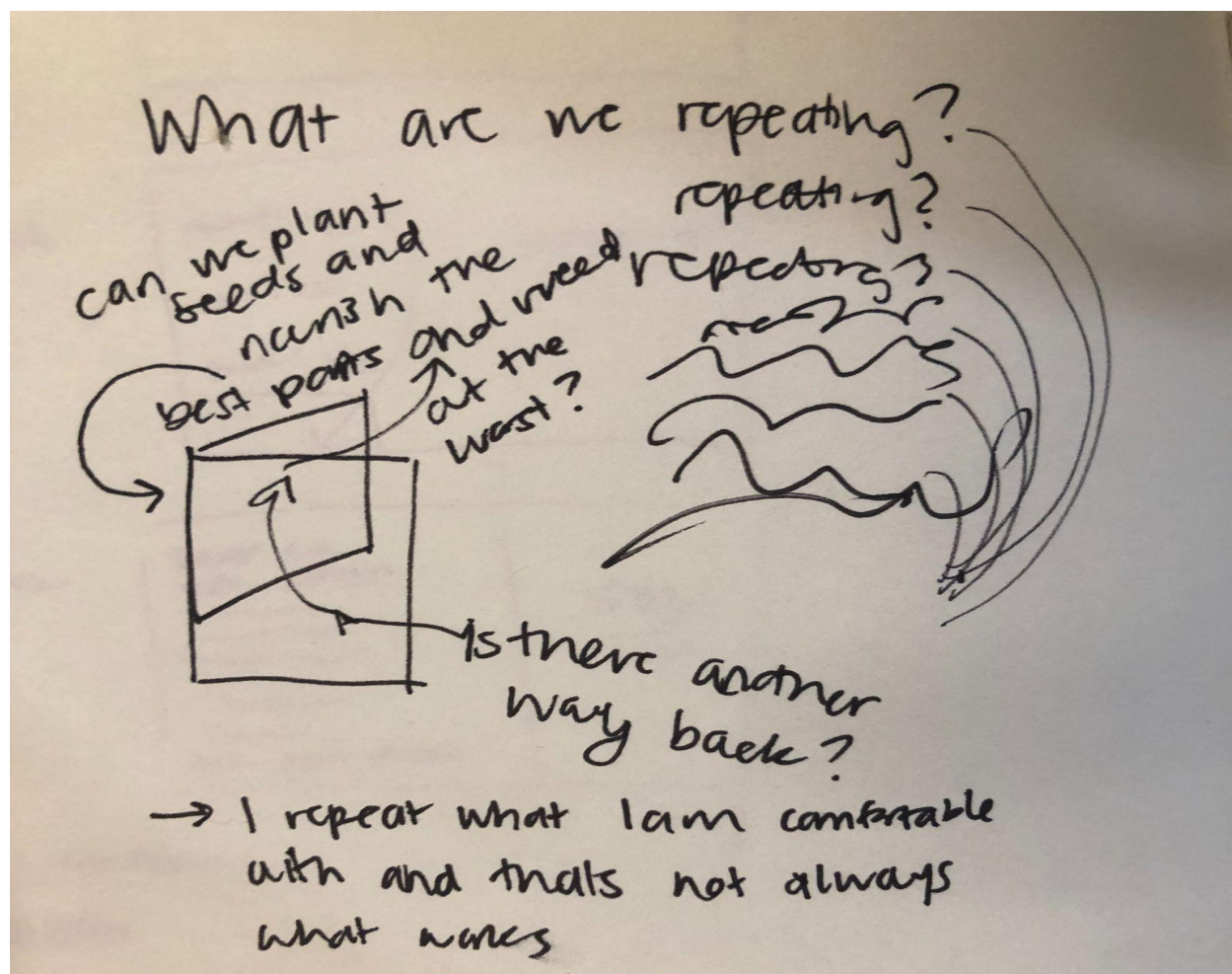
- I've been thinking a lot about case studies and slack.
 - A case study breaks down the core piece of a project and “brings key principles and methods of field research to life.” as defined by designer Dr. Sheila Pontis in her book, *Making Sense of Field Research*. For designer's, your case study is the way to prove all that time was valuable. In my experience reading, building, editing, and publishing case studies, the experience feels like a never ending “show and tell”, in which I never feel satisfied. The documentation process is nasty and messy, but ultimately necessary because it's the most common way we make closure out of a project. So, I'm wondering now, after that closure, how do we stay in touch? Where do we stay in touch?
 - Over 10 million people a day use slack, many of whom are in the design and technology field (Bulao '21). Slack is an online, instant-communication app that I first learned about in my school design club. I remember feeling overwhelmed and fascinated by the structure. It was so shiny, so bright! Now after years on the platform, I am utterly burnt out. Something about it makes me feel hyper-vigilant and anxious. One empirical study from Austria and Hong Kong named this phenomena

as “constant availability” and traced an overwhelming collection of work-stress studies back to the impact of instant messaging, mobile messaging, and work burnout (Ninaus ‘15) even before the impact of COVID-19.

- This makes me wonder, how we might simplify and slow our long-term communication plan after a project closes? How can we actively set communal boundaries around when and how we talk to one another?
- Maybe we flip the question and make space to not stay in contact, and to even feel good about that silence! Maybe we just call each other. Maybe we send letters, paint postcards, or plan monthly walks in the park. Whatever the practice, it would require some sort of plan/ritual/ repetition.
- Thinking about, what forms of communication serve us best?

Q8: What are we repeating?

Here’s my doodle depicting the messy and cyclical nature of testing, guessing, making mistakes, feeling unsure, celebrating wins, and restarting in the design process



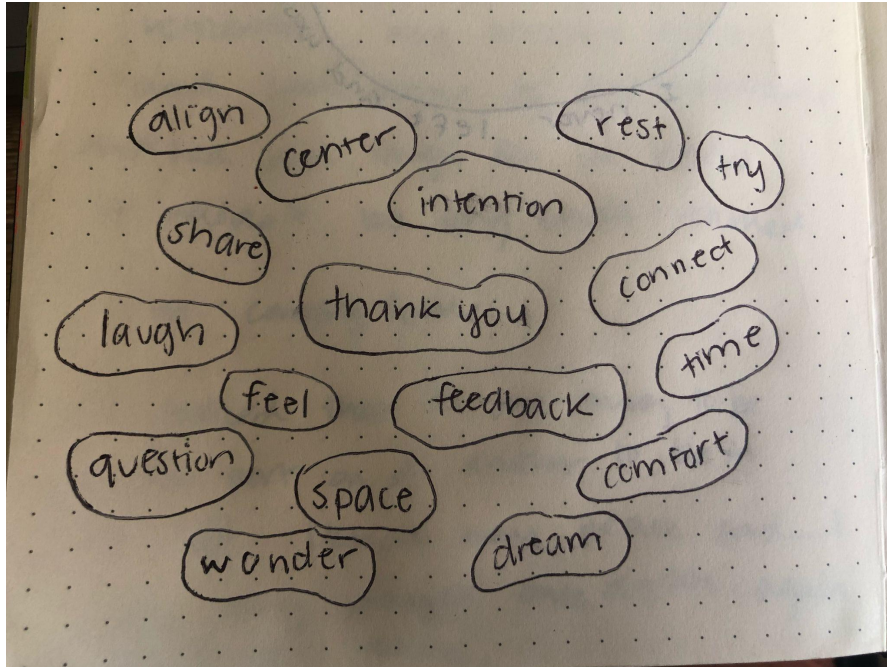
Q9: Where is Civic Service Design going?

I don't know. This question feels like a test, so I have more questions.

- Do we go there together?
- How will we disrupt White Supremacy as we evolve?
- Assuming it still fits, How does this practice title serve us?

Q10: What more can we say?

This is our last unanswered question. Like every other question, I don't have a clear answer. I want to close this with this acknowledgement and poem/language soup I made of words that stick with me after this time with Designed by Community.



I want to leave with acknowledging the challenging landscape of gathering remotely during a pandemic. I will miss working with this team very much. In the absence of physical space and movement, maybe it was the words we shared that connected me to this community the most. Over screens, choppy audio, react emojis, or end-of-meeting-laugh, I found myself cherishing the words our small team of four used daily. Maybe, it is each and every one of our words that act as their own kind of questions, the way our language immediately changes shape upon leaving our minds and living in the world on their own. Within every little word, an exponentially expanding amount of space and possibility to design together. We're in this possibility, together.

what happens
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carry this reflection tool around
in your pocket, and share your
unanswered questions

a civic service
designer's

10
unanswered
questions

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this is the front cover

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