

Whitepaper. DRAFT

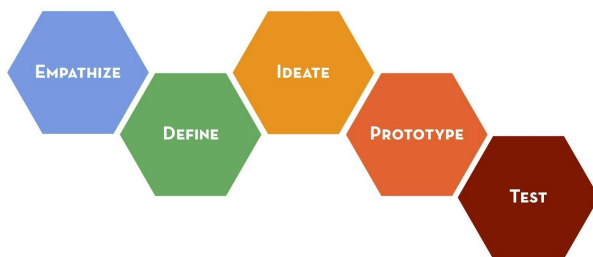
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According to Cathy Lang Ho, curator of the Guggenheim Lab's exhibition *Participatory City: 100 Trends*, there seems to be “a larger movement in which citizens all over the world are devising and implementing clever, low-barrier urban interventions to make their cities more inclusive, sustainable, pleasurable and safer.” However, these trends are also at risk of losing spontaneity and vitality if politicians, entrepreneurs, professional designers and academics succeed in formalizing, normalizing, and coopting this movement.

Design professionals, inspired by this movement, have an interest in participatory practices centered on social justice. Well-intentioned design professionals, academics and entrepreneurs may identify problems to be solved, proposing interventions that attempt to address the issues that they consider important. Sometimes, front-end research and consultation with local participants is included as part of the design research and inform the process but in most cases the problem to be solved has already been determined. Participation is reduced to consultation as a way to inform how a predetermined problem might be solved democratically or to validate the assumptions made beforehand.

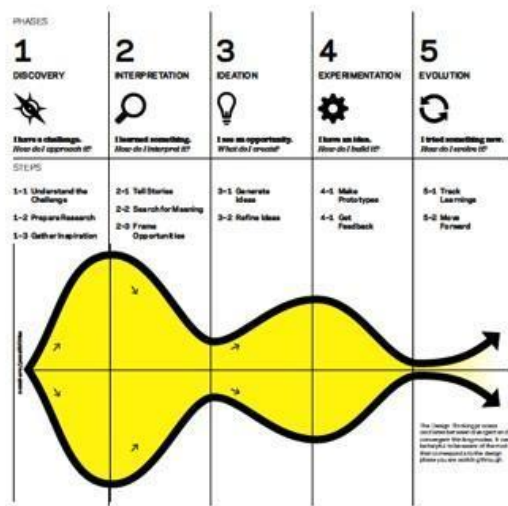
What is a problem?

Most design methodologies start by defining “the problem” through research.

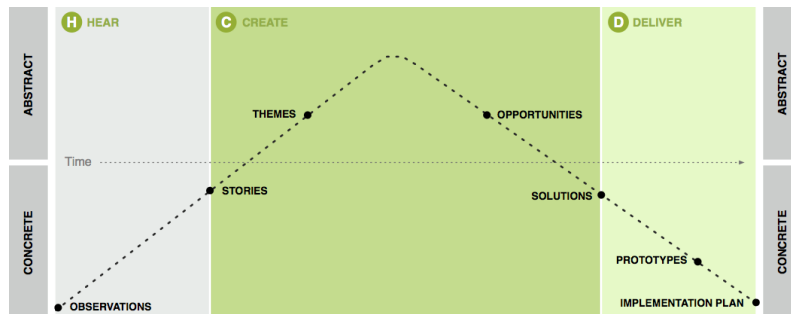


d.school crash course on design thinking diagram. d.school Stanford, CA

Design Process



IDEO's design process. *Design Thinking for Educators. Toolkit v 2.0*



Human Centered Design process diagram in the toolkit by IDEO.

However, not every participatory engagement should be about solving problems, just as not all design should be about finding solutions. We must critically ask: what is a problem, for whom is it a problem, and by which means do we agree if something is a problem? In many cases, somebody's solution becomes somebody else's problem. Sometimes, the things we come up with, like the clever app or the beautiful design are not really solutions to problems, as Mozorov argues (2013) but are instead merely clever apps and designs that do nothing to solve the problem at hand.

Fake participation

How do we expand community participation in deep and inclusive engagements, so all potential voices are heard without being criticized for spending "too much time talking"? Design methodologies that are led by first identifying a problem to be solved dictate that one must

constantly be moving forward. Design is more than problem-finding and problem-solving. Design is also about human activities, quality of life, and intangible things that cannot be seen in terms of problems and solutions. The potential for gathering around participatory design may open opportunities for unforeseen transformations.

It should be noted that repeated engagements in prescriptive processes might lead to participation exhaustion and eventually foster feelings of disenchantment and suspicion. Are we just offering the illusion of participation? Is this a covert way to survey potential users and clients, or even worse: are we trying to use participation as a way of selling people a solution fit for a problem they may or may not have?

More than design

We should continue growing the field of design by looking at other disciplines, such as the arts, community organizing, and fields that have shown long-term investment in participation. What we propose might not be design anymore, it might be something else, placed somewhere between art, pedagogy, community organizing, and anthropology. This is not about blurring the boundaries between disciplines. This is about going beyond disciplines, embracing chaos and messiness, giving up expectations and avoiding prescriptive methodologies.

The proposed engagements should incite public participation with a passion for inclusion, equality, impartiality, and more importantly, deliberation around the competing underlying values and paradoxes brought by public engagement, where we can promote, instead of putting at risk, the synergies of participatory and grassroots initiatives.

The issue at hand is to be as inclusive, impartial and as open as possible. We can't just say we will include everybody and solve all of their problems for them. In the end, these conversations may just illuminate the issues at hand instead of proposing solutions, leaving the community to decide how they want to move forward with the insights collected. We will face similar questions like those brought up in community organizing and deliberative dialogue. We do not need to re-invent the wheel.

Participation is messy, so live with it

If we give up the notion of problem and solution, we may find ourselves more open for unexpected outcomes, learning to live without the material measure of success or failure. This

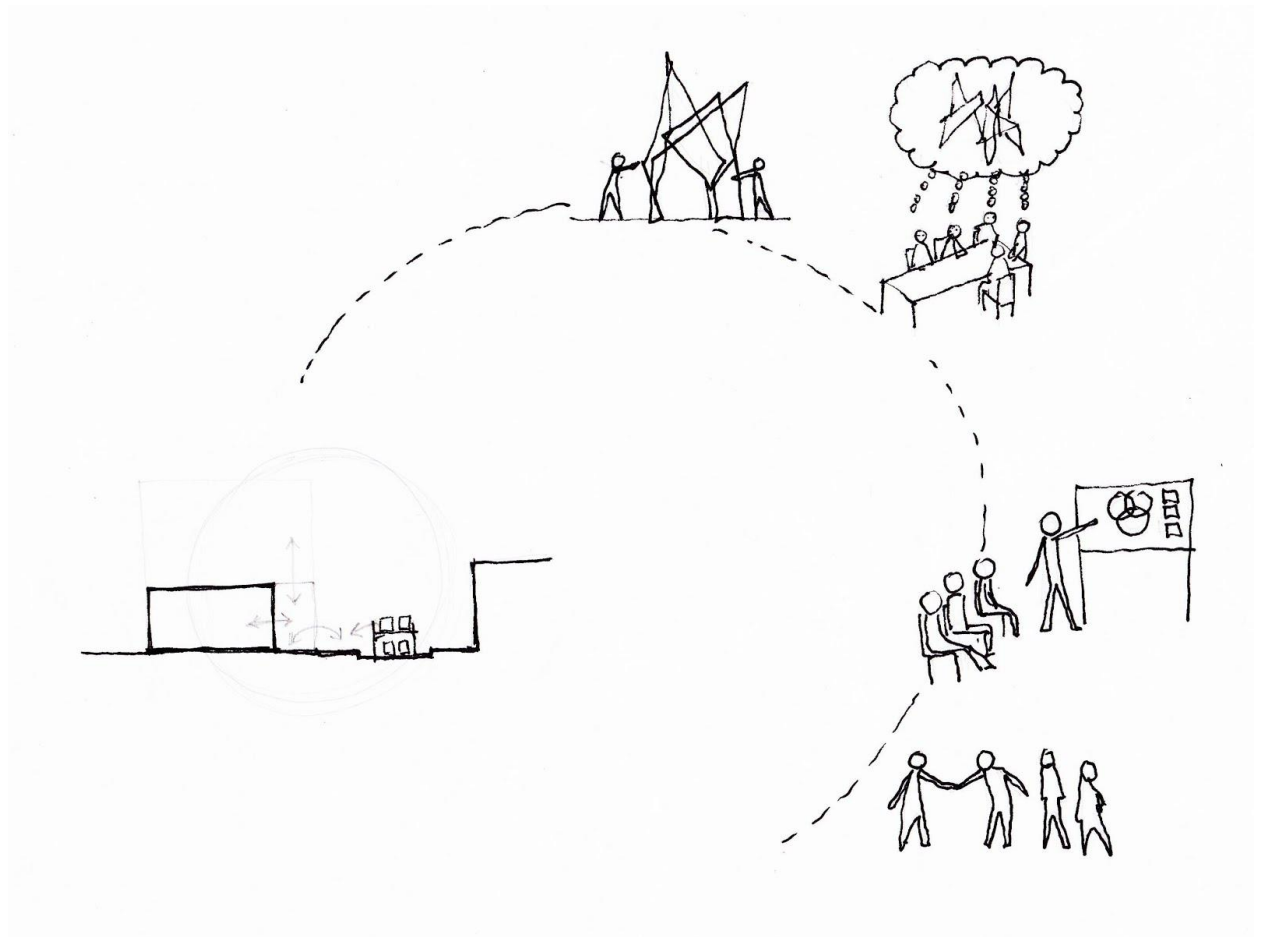
attitude may open space for uncertainty, complexity, innovation, complication, and open-ended exploration. Art and participation can be about finding new questions.

“Unpredictable knowledge production, in a continual undoing of what we take for granted and think we know, requires a resistance to closure on the part of the educator and learner, along with a refusal of the one-way logic of learning. This is risky business.” (Kalin, 2012, p.10)

Designers are accustomed to delivering tangible results in the form of concrete objects and actions. For design professionals engaging in questions and deliberations for too long seems like an exasperating waste of time. Designers prefer to jump directly into ideation, craving the thrill of generating that new thing, the prototype of the concrete object, system or service that can be fully defined with precision. In contrast those who work in the arts carry on with few if any expected outcomes (Kalin, 2012, 2013), uncovering in a more ambiguous process new questions, inaugurating a new discourse, or identifying something that was previously hidden.

Art interventions to invite conversations

By bringing in strategies from the arts, we are able to explore new modes of active participation in public space, in the form of reflective and disruptive art interventions, art performances, public art installations and public art events that act as invitations for open-ended modes of exploration of public space. The pairing of art interventions with the right design strategy may help concretize specific actions and build trustworthy, deep and meaningful relationships within the community. To be clear, this is not about proposing art as a tool in the service of design, but about the intrinsic value of both art and design, and the immense potential of crossing boundaries to open spaces for possibility where everything seems impossible.



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