

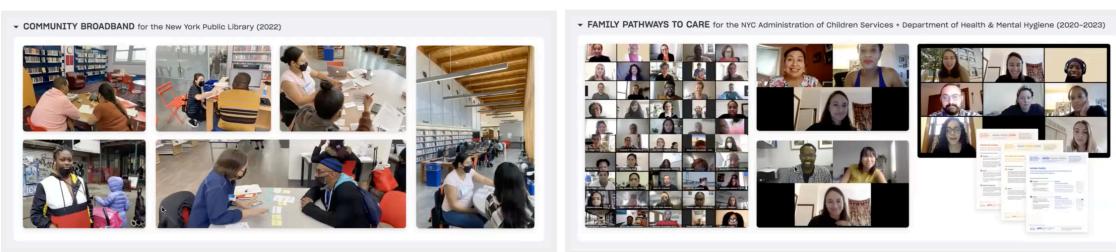
Prototyping in Urban Tech: Project, Product, People

James Piacentini, jsp2199 - Columbia GSAPP - Spring 2026

User Research Principles & Tactics

Public Participation - *Meaningful Collaboration with Stakeholders*

- Reflect on our goals for engagement
- Identify where we are and where we want to be
- Budget our time and money (when relevant) for participation early



Power Shift - *Include the Excluded*

- Identify people with marginalized and relevant meaningful lived experiences
- Map out stakeholders and find the gaps
- Be thoughtful and sensitive in crafting our outreach

Transparency - *Explain Purpose & Expectations*

- Be explicit about your expectations
- Clarify how information will and won't be used
- Avoid specific promises for outcomes that you can't guarantee

▼ RAPID for NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (2023)



▲ RECRUITMENT FLYER

What will I be asked to do today?

If you agree to participate, we will ask you questions about your general experience with Housing Choice Vouchers and any systems, processes, and assistance you use when interacting with the Housing Choice Voucher Program. We will also ask you about any challenges you experience and opportunities for improvement.

Continue press Enter ↵

Will you keep my participation totally confidential?

We will never share your name. We will only share things you tell us or your photo with your permission. However, if you agree that we can share things you say or your picture, someone who knows you might recognize you. Because of this, we can't promise you complete and total confidentiality.

Here's how we'll protect your confidentiality:

- We will never use your name or photo without your permission.
- We will avoid including identifying information in our publicly shared materials.
- We will use anonymous codes so that our research notes are not tied to your name.
- We will combine information from different research participants. Usually, no single person is the obvious source of the information we share.

Continue press Enter ↵

▲ CONSENT FORM

Benefits & Harms Disclosure - *Identify and Share the Risks*

- Explain any benefits and risks you can identify
- Remind participants that they are in control of how and in what ways they participate
- Provide consent forms, and clarify when (if ever) you may need to break confidentiality
- Encourage participants to say and do what makes them most comfortable, and that they can opt out at any time for any reason

Accessible Language - *Avoid Jargon & Be Context Responsive*

- Check materials aren't filled with jargon and complex language
- Plan for translations if needed
- Walk through consent forms and accommodate impairments

Fair Compensation* - *When Feasible, Pay for People's Time*

(this is likely not going to be relevant for the scale of our projects)

- When possible, offer compensation that is fair
- Don't bias recruitment with particular monetary values
- Always compensate at the start

Data Control & Privacy - *Minimize Data Collection & Keep it Safe*

- Allow for opt-in and opt-out
- Limit what data you collect to directly meaningful information
- Avoid or anonymize personal identifiers
- Clarify how data is stored, who gets access to it, and what you will do with it

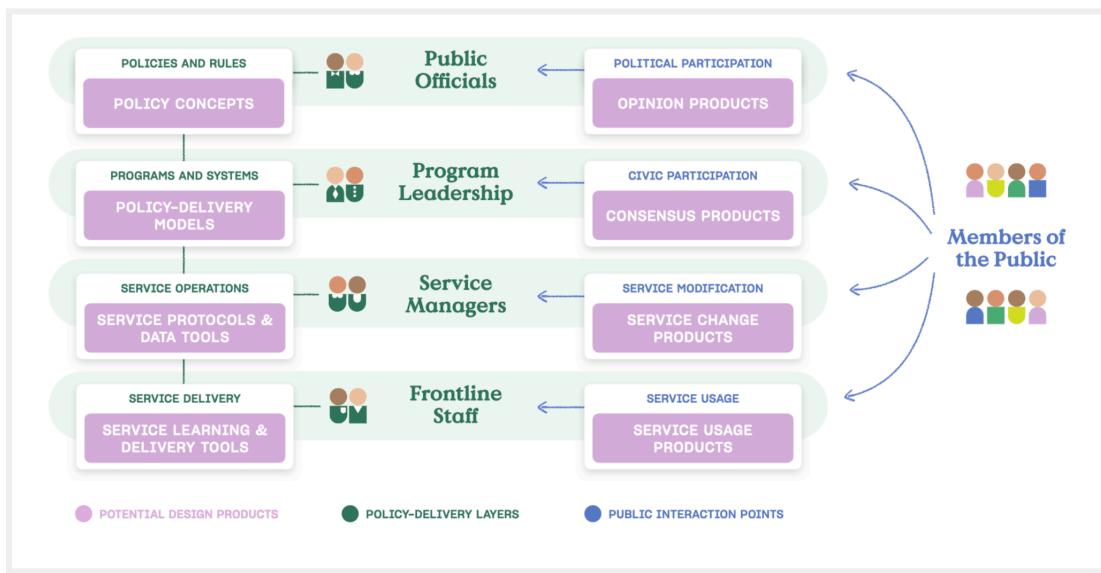
Resource Connection - *Point People to Meaningful Resources*

- If you want to discuss sensitive topics, be a support system or ally
- Think through potential scenarios and be ready to help
- Consider how your help is appropriate and how it is not

Conducting User Research

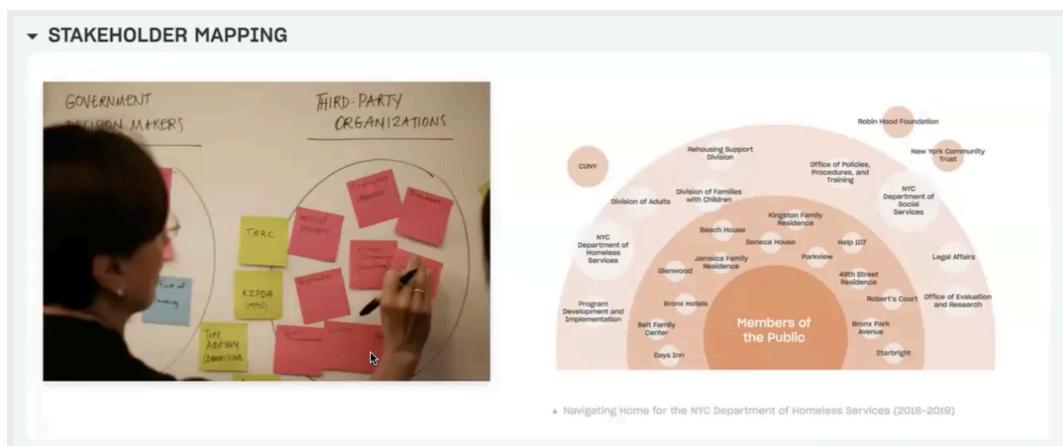
Defining Scope - *What we need to discover in order to start our design process*

- Think about systems and understand which part(s) you want to engage with
- Develop research questions that are relevant, focused, and answerable



Determining Participants/Potential Users - *Recruit a diverse and meaningful group*

- Map relevant stakeholders and their relationships to one another
- Seek out 'extreme' users as well as typical users
- Collect a large enough sample size for meaningful findings (aim for 10)
- Adapt your recruitment strategies to fit your populations
 - On-the-ground: meet people at your site of interest
 - Snowball: ask your network for their network
 - Advertising: post digital/physical ads with links to material



ON-THE-GROUND

RECRUITMENT FLYER

SNOWBALL

WARM INTROS

ADVERTISING

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Determining Methods - *Choose methods that fit our scope and needs*

- Make sure our methods align with the findings we want and the nature of the project
- Employ multiple methods when possible
- Typical research methods include:
 - Semi-structured interviews
 - Surveys
 - Contextual Observations
 - Secondary Research
 - Intercept Interviews
 - Usability Tests
 - Probes/Diary Studies
 - Discovery Workshops

Semi-Structured Interview

Survey

Contextual Observation

Secondary Research

Intercept Interview

Usability Test

**Probe/
Diary Study**

Discovery Workshop

Executing the Research - *Conducting the research plan and documenting findings*

- Come prepared with interview/survey questions, research materials, consent forms, etc.
- Have a method for organizing your materials and findings