On Community Engagement for Civic Space Design Projects
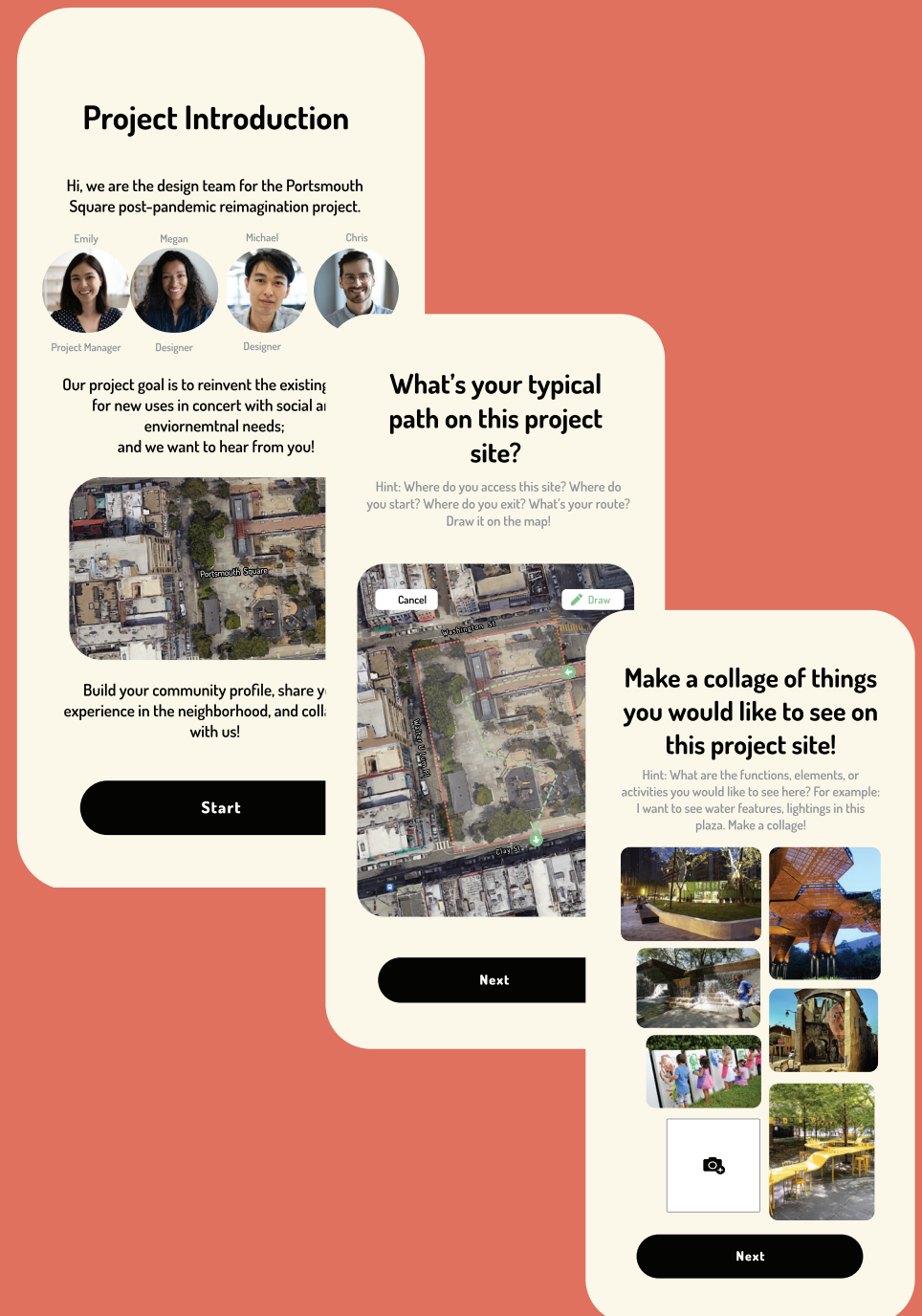
A Mobile App Solution to Unequal Participation and Incomplete Feedback Loop

Candice Ji

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Candice Siyun Ji

Project Introduction

Hi, we are the design team for the Portsmouth Square post-pandemic reimagination project.

Emily — Project Manager
Megan — Designer
Michael — Designer
Chris

Our project goal is to reinvent the existing for new uses in concert with social ar enviornemtnal needs; and we want to hear from you!

Build your community profile, share y experience in the neighborhood, and coll with us!

Start

What's your typical path on this project site?

Hint: Where do you access this site? Where do you start? Where do you exit? What's your route? Draw it on the map!

Cancel — Draw

Next

Make a collage of things you would like to see on this project site!

Hint: What are the functions, elements, or activities you would like to see here? For example: I want to see water features, lightings in this plaza. Make a collage!

Next

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Civic Space Design. Dancing in Congress Square, Portland, Maine. Source: Corey Templeton

INTRODUCTION

In the spectrum of public participation designed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), current practice for public engagement in design projects has typically been limited to "consulting" and "involving" the public. Existing researches have demonstrated that the higher is the level of engagement, the higher is the requirement of physical time or digital knowledge, and therefore, the less accessible the method is for underrepresented communities.

The goal of this project is to create a learning model for civic space design and planning projects to achieve public participation on the higher end of the spectrum and facilitate a two-way "collabrating" and "empowering" engagement process.

The design outcome of this project is a mobile app that addresses existing challenges such as unequal representation, digital literacy gaps, and incomplete feedback loops. It is my hope that this project provides a two-way learning facilitation model to serve the underrepresented population, and to ultimately enhance inclusivity and equity in planning and design projects.

CONTEXT

Through literature review and interviewing practitioners in planning and design, the author highlighted and examined a few existing guidelines and digital tools that are often used for public engagement.

EXISTING GUIDELINES

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING PLAYBOOK, HOUSING NEW YORK

A set of people-oriented guidelines for neighborhood planning process across New York City agencies with four core elements: governance, planning framework. Neighborhood analysis, and transparency.

EXISTING TOOLS

MIRO

virtual whiteboard, often used for live note-taking, workshop facilitation

MENTIMETER

live polling with instant feedback, often used along side large virtual meetings, generate simultaneous results

SOCIALPINPOINT

live platform for collecting locational and topic specific input

KONEVIO

online portal to collect crowdsourced feedback, often used for collecting input on documents
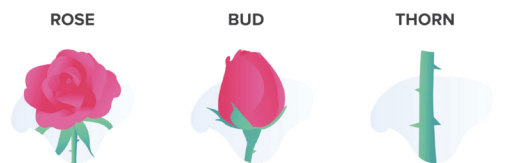
ROSE BUD, THRON

an accessible design thinking exercise consisting of three phases of questioning

NEIGHBORLAND

an online platform that allows organizations to start projects by asking questions to public to collect ideas.

MINDMIXER

an web-based platform for community members to engage in an online public process.
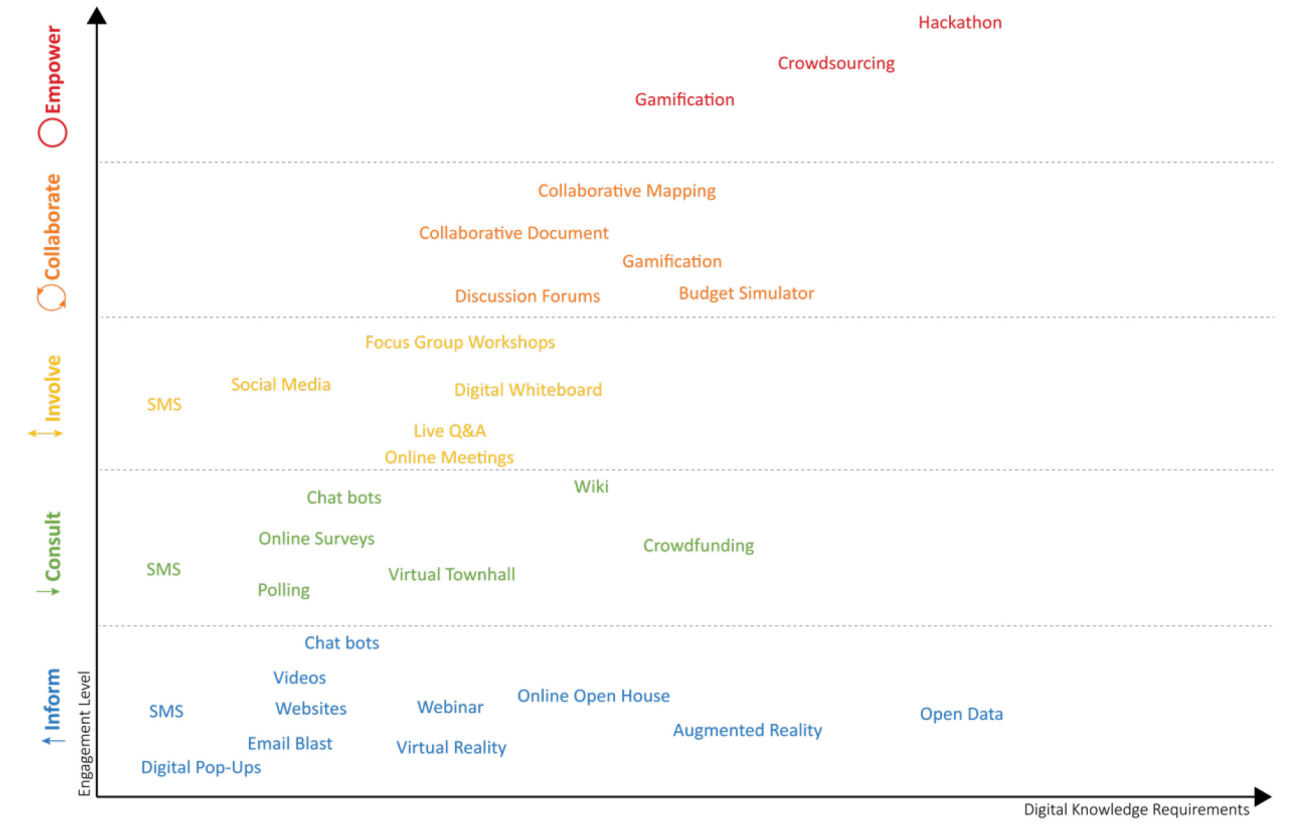

Existing online digital tools used for public engagement.

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. Source: IAP2.

Matrix of Online Public Participation. This matrix shows that the current practices of digital engagement are perpetuating relations of exclusion and power. Source: Ali Estefam, 2021.

ISSUES

Unequal Participation

One major issue with existing engagement methods, both in-person and online, is unequal participation, culminating in a divide between both access and representation.

In-person engagement requires schedule coordination and time management. Not all stakeholders have time to participate in a public meeting or workshop, even when planned for multiple times with a long drop-in hours option.

Online engagement requires digital fluency and access. Disparities in aspects such as quality of equipment, the autonomy of use, presence of support networks, experience, and online skills can all result in partial public participation, in which only those with technological and social access can participate and give their opinion.

Furthermore, there is a gap between people who participate and those who do not in both engagement methods. The level of public participation is influenced by personality, cultural differences, community context, age, gender, level of ability, professional status, access to digital infrastructure, policies, regulations, and many other factors (Estefam 2021). These underrepresented communities risk further marginalization and exclusion.

Incomplete Feedback Loop

During interviews with multiple practitioners, practitioners all emphasized the importance of the iterative feedback loop process in transforming community inputs into helpful feedback that informs planning and design decisions. The translation from community inputs to how they inform decisions is often not entirely transparent in the design and planning processes.

OPPORTUNITIES

To mitigate the impact of unequal participation, an accessible tool to engage the underrepresented community should be developed. To define underrepresented, this project focused on youth and working-age populations that generally do not have the ability to participate in existing engagement activities due to lack of time commitment and social incentive.

An opportunity exists to engage these populations via a mobile app platform. According to American phone usage statistics, most mobile phone users check their phones up to 63 times daily, and 13% of millennials spend over 12 hours on their phones daily (Deyan 2021). Furthermore, today, 30% of the world's youth have been active online for at least five years; it is expected that within the next 5 years the digital native population in the developing world will double (ITU 2013).

In many cases, working-age and youth are actively involved in an online participatory culture with relatively low barriers to civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005). The online medium has helped them to mobilize and collaborate, and it has given them a voice.

In leveraging medium and accessibility, there are great opportunities in empowering youth and working-age populations to participate in the engagement process for planning and design projects.

GOALS

The scope and goals of this project are:

- To empower community engagement for civic space design projects
- To facilitate two-way learning dialogues between practitioners and community
- To encourage the participation of often underrepresented in conventional community engagement activities
- To supplement in-person offline engagement activities
- To bridge the gap between listening, learning, and informing design decisions

METHODOLOGY

This project's method to address the issue and achieve the goals illustrated above is an accessible mobile app.

To create the mobile app, the author first explored existing tools and researches that discusses digital engagement tools. In addition, the author interviewed four practitioners to gain a full picture of the challenges faced in the industry today and what would be the most helpful solution. The interview participants were

Ali Estefam, Vice-President/Practice Lead – Planning & Design at Melissa Johnson Associates

Dave Javid, AICP, LEED AP, Founder + Principal at Plan to Place, Engagement and Facilitation Specialist

Stefan Pellegrini, Principal at Opticos Design, Urban Design and Architecture Firm.

Al-Tariq Shabazz, Former Director of the Office of Affordable Housing, City of Newark.

Building off of existing research and digital engagement tools, this app is designed to be used, modified, and reused throughout a planning and design project to collaborate and empower a high level of public participation.

The audience of this project are practitioners, including planners and designers, for civic space projects. They will have the ability to adapt the questions and activities to their respective projects. The promotion of this app usage in a project will depend on the project's physical outreach (QR codes on site, mailers) and online stimulation (email blast, social media, spread the word through community partners).
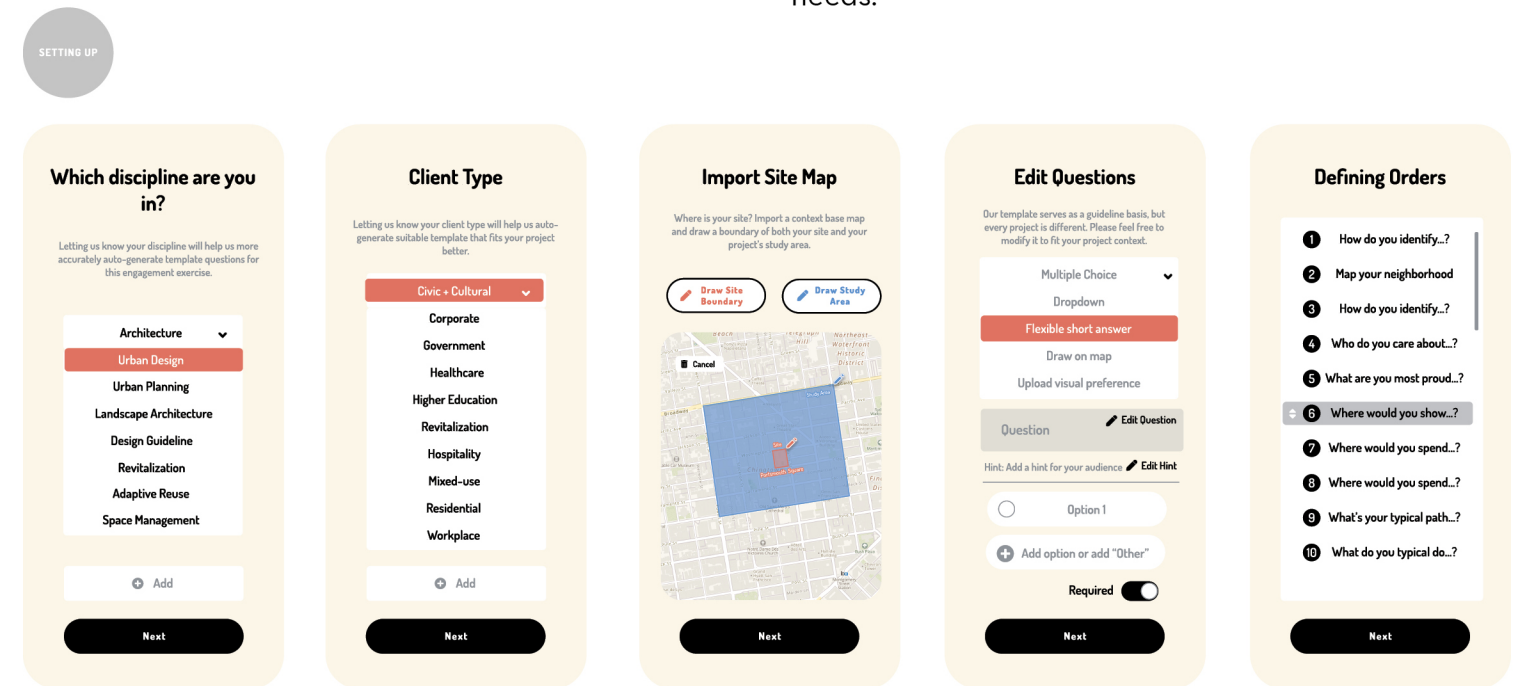
Centering on community engagement for civic space design projects, the author chose Portsmouth Square in San Francisco Chinatown as an imaginary project site; and created a fictional post-COVID-19 pandemic redesign project.
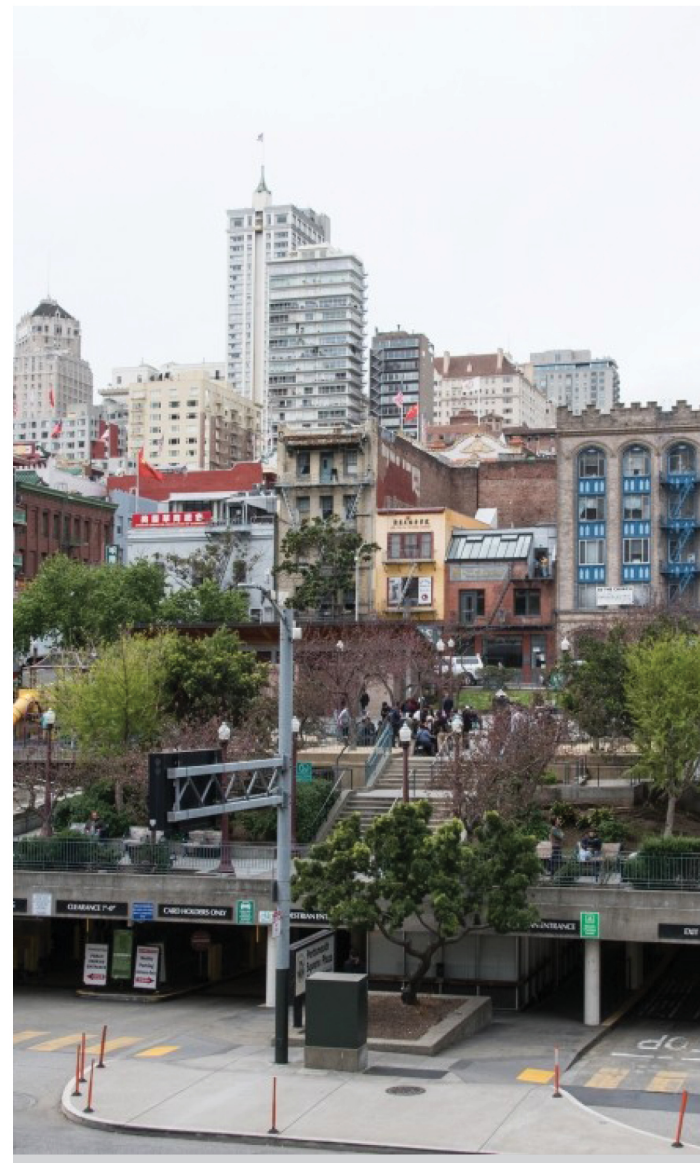
Imaginary Project Site: Portsmouth Square in San Francisco Chinatown. Source: SFMTA Photography Department

DESIGN

This app starts with a practitioners setup section. Practitioners will be asked to select basic project information and upload a site context map. Then, the practioner can continue to edit questions.

This section will set up the framework for the rest of the questions when in completion. The app will provide the following templates as guidelines, and the practitioners can edit each feature to adapt to their needs.


To start the engagement process, the public user will first use their own words to identify themselves, draw boundaries of their neighborhood, and demonstrate their relationship to the space by identifying key people and features they are most proud of.

This section will inform practitioners who the responders are and how they relate to the places. Identifying people they care about can potentially generate a snowball effect to reach broader participants.
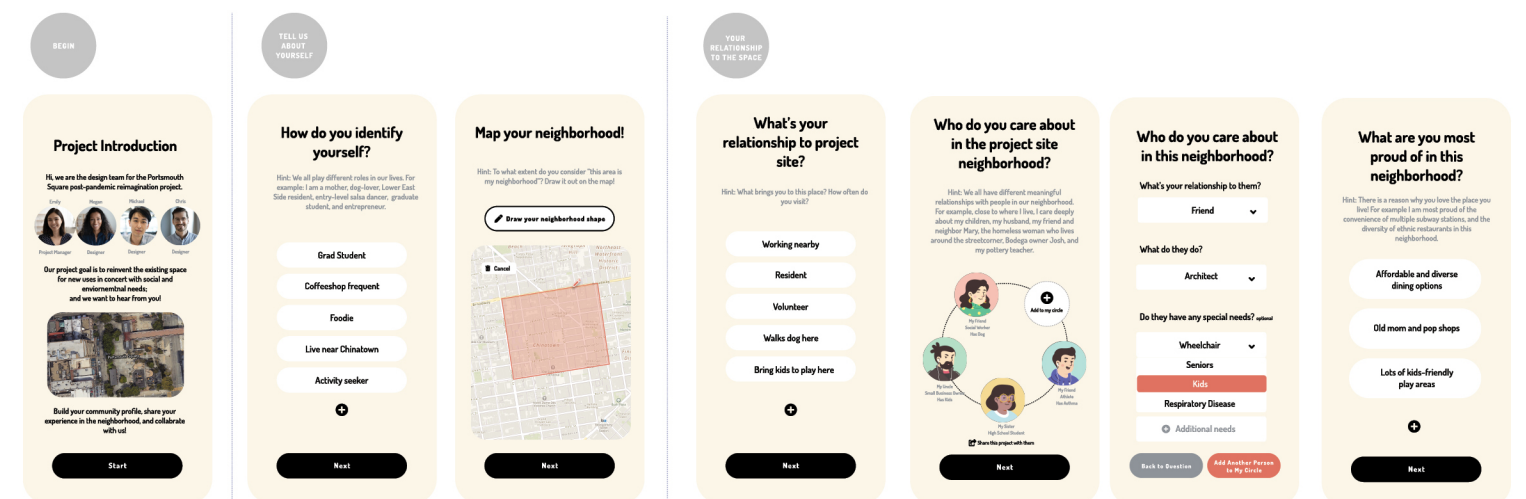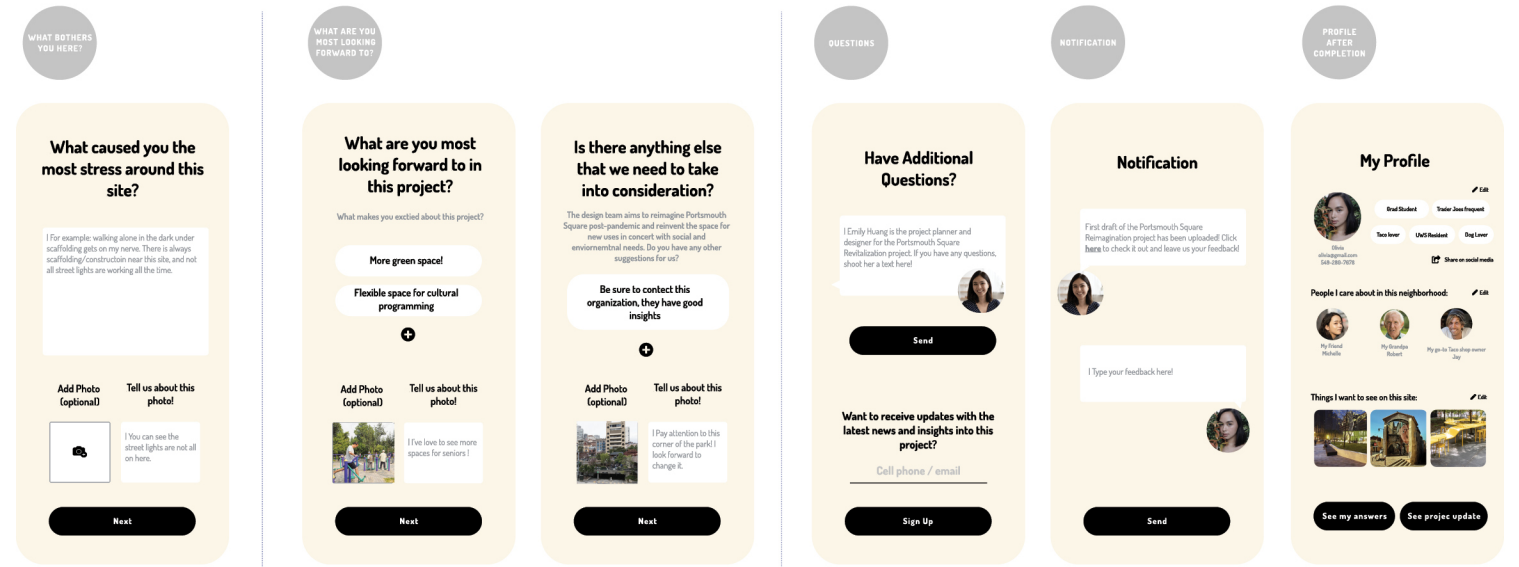
The public user will then show how they use the existing space by pin-dropping the places they would show their family and friends, places they would like to visit alone, draw their typical path through the site, and list the activities they do there currently.
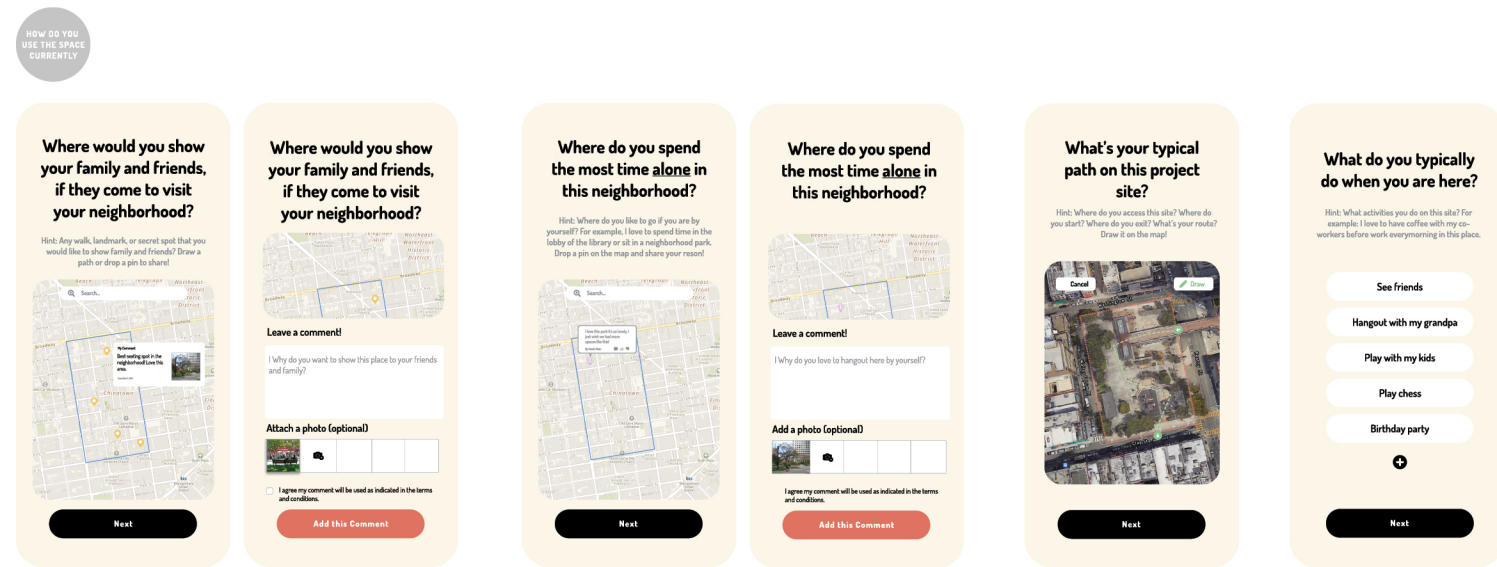
These approaches will provide practitioners with valuable spatial and contextual information of the existing site's qualitative condition.

Lastly, the user will explain places that need improvement on the project site. They will also have the opportunity to add additional information and ask questions directly to the project team.

This final section completes the feedback loop and provides a base for further discussion amongst the practitioners and the public.

Following the previous section, the public user will now show what they would like to see on site. This section includes exercises guiding the user to explain their favorite civic spaces and make a collection of things they would like to see on the project site.

This critical participatory section empowers the public user to brainstorm with the practitioners and inform decisions.
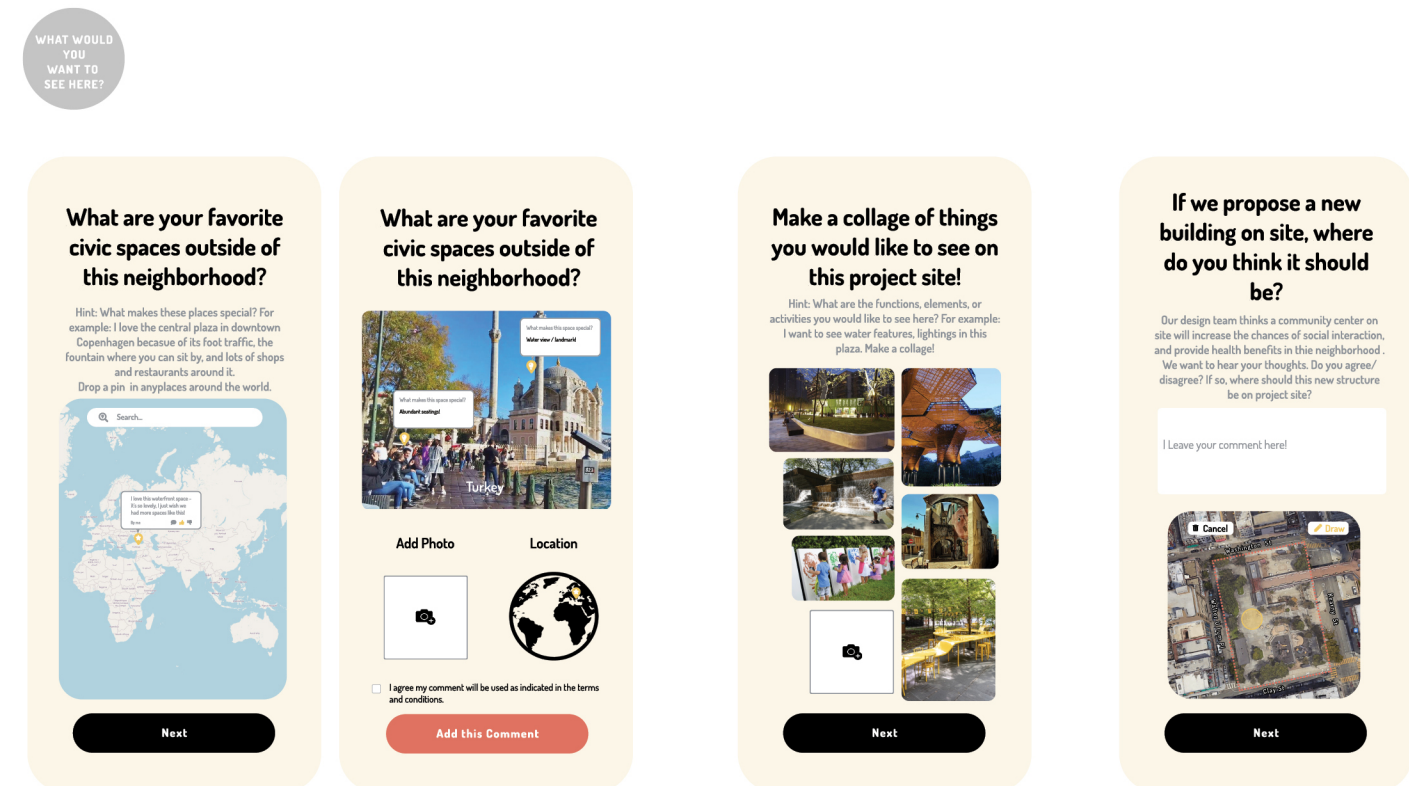
RECOMMENDATION FOR NEXT STEPS

This project's final app design is not a catch-all product. The app is intended for youth and working-age populations that are deemed underrepresented in conventional engagement methods.

While a mobile app for engagement provides greater access to a broader audience, disparities in digital access and literacy should not be ignored. As a next step, a "convert to SMS (Short Message Service)" option from this app would be beneficial to reach audiences unfamiliar with mobile app platforms.

To build on this app, below are a few recommendations from the author:

1. Plan and execute a feedback loop to build trust with the engaged population.

    •   What is the objective of this engagement exercise?

    •   What are the anticipated outcomes?

    •   What did practitioners do with the public inputs from the engagement exercise?

2. Use simple messaging and authentic facilitation questions to attract and retain community interest.

It's also worthwhile to emphasize that depending on each project context, an inclusive and equitable, and high-participatory-level engagement process that captures all different profiles of stakeholders, will require the usage of multiple avenues of tools, both in-person and online. This project aims to add to existing engagement tools and provide insights into engaging with underrepresented populations. It is the author's hope that this design project-based public engagement tool will empower high-level public particiaption and help bridge the gap between listening, learning, and informing design decisions

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