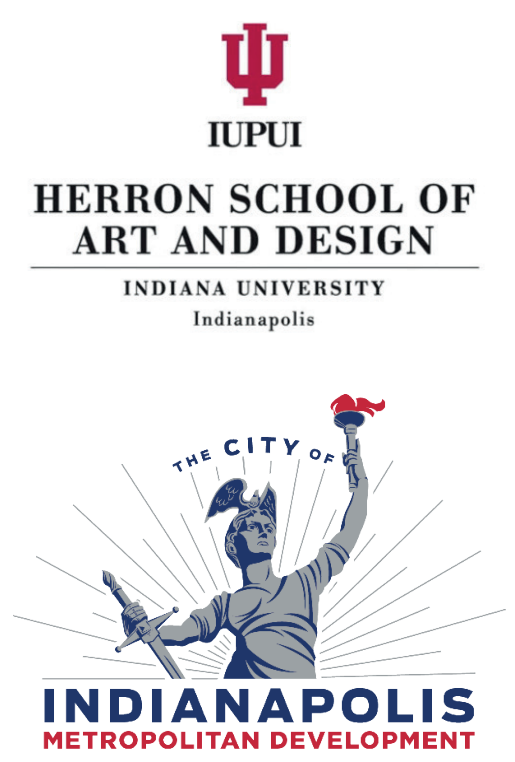


How might we re-imagine public spaces using a people-centered design approach?

A case study in the canal walk of Indianapolis



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BACKGROUND

In August of 2019, the City of Indianapolis, through the Department of Metropolitan Development and the Department of Public Works, published a Request for Qualifications looking for potential Placemaking partners. As described in the document, it meant an opportunity to craft and deliver a holistic, world-class public space experience for all those who live, work, and play in Indianapolis. The mission of the City was to engage and enliven the following four signature downtown public spaces through community collaboration, creativity, and interaction: Downtown Canal Walk, Lugar Plaza, Georgia Street, Monument Circle.

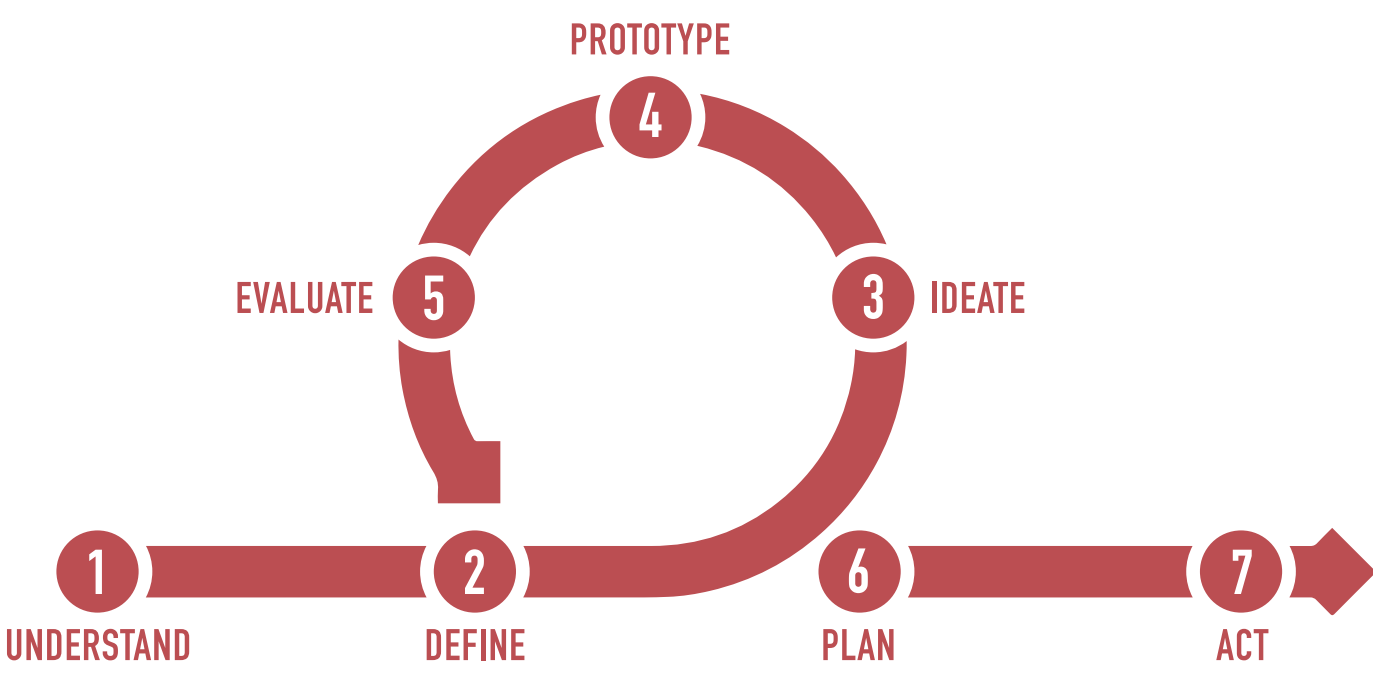
The Herron graduate program in Design was invited to be part of this initiative by investigating the people’s experience in the Downtown Canal Walk. The project was conducted in the course setting of the Collaborative Action Research in Design class. Research activities began in the Fall of 2019 and continued through the Spring 2020 semester. This project aimed to serve as an instrument to inform stakeholders of this initiative and contribute to delivering a holistic, world-class public space experience.

METHODOLOGY

The research team adopted a human-centered design perspective for understanding people’s needs in the public spaces in Indianapolis. The human-centered design approach values solutions derived from keeping people’s needs at the center of the problem-solving process. Furthermore, this approach emphasizes methodical engagement to engage with people that actively participate in the process.

The team used the Herron Design Process Model as a research framework. This process consists of seven steps: Understand, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Evaluate, Plan, and Act.

During Fall 2019, the research team focused on understanding people’s experiences in the Canal Walk. For Spring 2020, the team concentrated their efforts on engaging with stakeholders and future users of the Canal Walk and surrounding public spaces.



The Herron Design Process Model

PERSPECTIVES	ROLE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE	METHODS
Visionaries	Decision-makers and authorities	Interviews
Operators	Maintenance and operations of infrastructural elements in the space	Interviews
Service providers	Providers/owners of services and cultural experiences in the space	Interviews
Local collaborators	Organizations working to support people and communities	Interviews
Future users	People with desires for the space	Design facilitation
Current users	People using or living in the space	Observations & Participatory sessions

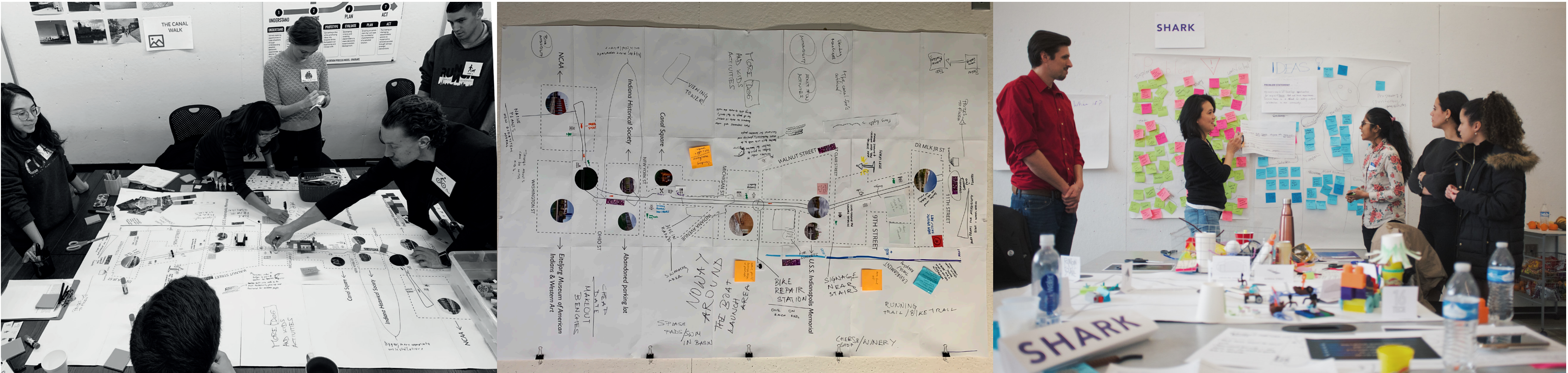
SAMPLING STRATEGY AND METHODS

This project dealt with public space and the people that inhabit it. We refer to people as all who currently and potentially use the Canal Walk.

To specify the meaning of "people," the research team defined different categories of participants and appropriate methods to engage with each. Through sampling, the research team aimed to understand people's behaviors, experiences, and desires in public spaces. Moreover, this sampling strategy intended to ensure a proper understanding of how users and stakeholders were interconnected within the Canal Walk and related areas.

The research team identified the following categories based on decision-making levels from creating to using a public space: visionaries, operators, service providers, users, and future users. Finally, depending on the category, we selected a data collection method that best suited each perspective.

On the left: a summary of the identified perspectives, their roles in the public space, and methods for engagement.



CONCLUSIONS

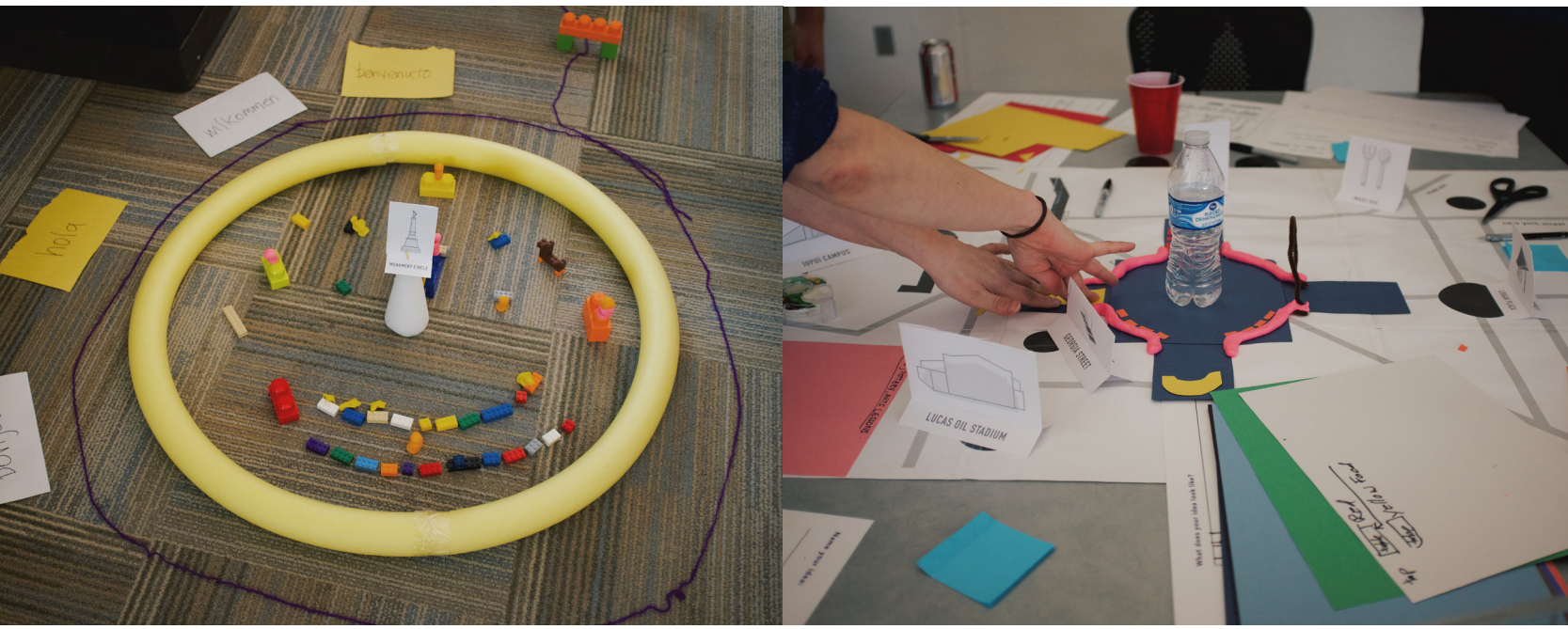
There are three overarching results of this project. First, from the **Current Users** perspective, an Experience Matrix and Persona profiles. The Experience Matrix reflects behaviors and artifacts, interacting with each type of user. Personas represent larger audiences that help all stakeholders empathize with the needs and preferences of their users. Second, after an Open Innovation event, participants from the **Future Users** perspective, produced three physical prototypes, several maps, and hundreds of sticky notes with phrases on them. All of this data was examined and synthesized into thematic maps. The research team was able to identify the public's values and desires of public spaces as a part of their living by examining their perception of living in Indianapolis and utilizing its public spaces. Finally, for the **Service Providers, Local Community, Operators, and Visionaries**, the research team synthesized all the data from interviews into thematic maps.

Three significant conclusions from this project are as follows:

Sense of Belonging: The first is related to equity. Namely, certain groups of populations are drastically underrepresented in the public space of our city.

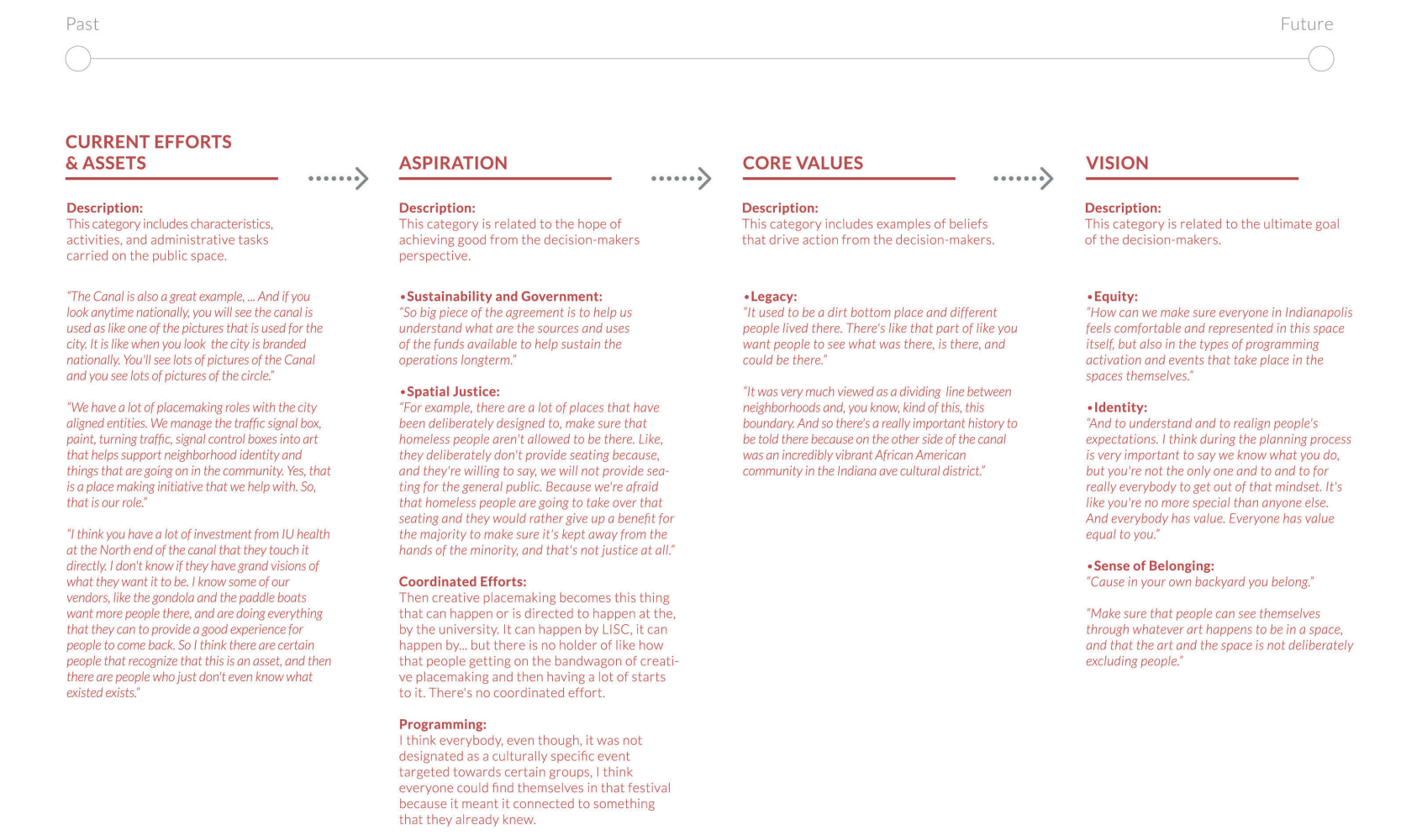
Historical Debt: Secondly, thanks to our research and groups of people with which we have talked, we have identified a particular historical debt to marginalized populations within the city of Indianapolis. The city's efforts to repay this debt should focus primarily on involving these people's voices in building the city going forward. How to encourage them to raise their voices and make them feel a part of the process are all addressed through the efforts of people-centered design. What we have done here, by observing, interviewing, and understanding the stakeholders, users, and the public, is that we have tried to change the perspective on the space by putting people in the center of the problem.

Human-centered design: Lastly, and perhaps most clearly: Building a city where people can live, learn, work, and play is what we, along with many other great residents of Indianapolis, are trying to accomplish. There is a lot of work to do ahead, but through these great democratic and human-centered processes, the future looks bright!



VISIONARIES

This category includes a summary of the perspectives from decision-makers and people with positive aspirations for the city of Indianapolis. The research findings show that goals from decision-makers range from creating spaces where people can experience a sense of belonging, improve their perception of the area, and address equity issues. Overall, a place where people can live, work, and play.



Examples of the prototypes and thematic maps of this project are presented above.