

Building Healthy Communities: Providence Parks Project



DESIGN THINKING FOR COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING

Thinking like a designer transforms the way we approach problems and gives us a process for engaging invested community members in generating innovative solutions. Design Thinking can help people creatively tackle any challenge. The basic approach is simple: You start by identifying and exploring a problem you want to take on. Then you brainstorm, imagining a whole slew of possible solutions. You choose the best few ideas and test them out with prototypes, using feedback to help you evolve and refine your ideas. And once you've tested and refined and arrived at a solution that works, you make your vision a reality.

For specific activities that align with each step in the process outlined below, please visit our free online Design Thinking Toolkit, the Change Agent, at www.changeagenttoolkit.org



IDENTIFY

Choose the problem you want to tackle. Start by identifying a place or experience in your community which you think could be improved...and which your group could have the power to change.

KEY STEPS:

- Decide what issue or place you want to focus on.
- Convene a group of community members with an interest in that issue or place.
- Discuss challenges you've noticed within that theme or place.
- Notice what seems to excite and engage the group, what they most care about—this is a powerful place to start.



EXPLORE

Understand your challenge, in all its complexity. This could take the form of online research, mapping, observing the problem in action, and/or interviewing people close to the issue.

KEY STEPS:

- Identify your audience: Who will use/benefit from your solution?
- Develop a list of questions that will help you better understand the problem.
- Spend as much time in the presence of the problem as you can. Record your observations.
- Figure out where you can go to get more information: Reliable websites? local experts? the library?



IMAGINE

Brainstorm as many possible solutions to your challenge as you can. Open yourself up to zany ideas, without worrying (yet!) about how to make them happen. Sometimes a wacky, idealistic idea will spark a solution that's both creative and practical.

KEY STEPS:

- Create / review guidelines for brainstorming, emphasizing the need to create a safe, supportive space for sharing ideas.
- Revisit your guiding question, and help everyone stay focused on coming up with potential solutions that answer it.
- Remember to go for quantity! You want to generate as many ideas as possible.



EVOLVE

Choose a few of your strongest ideas and test them out. Get feedback from your stakeholders and end users. Identify what's working and what's not. Then go back to the drawing board to make your ideas even stronger.

KEY STEPS:

- Take some time to evaluate your ideas and narrow your list to the most promising few.
- Test your ideas by making quick sketches or models of what they might look like in action.
- Share your ideas and ask for feedback. Remember that constructive criticism will help you make your idea stronger—it's way better to see the weak spots now, before you've invested too much time, effort, and money in the solution!
- Be patient! It often takes many rounds of testing, sharing, and evolving before you arrive at a solution that works.
- If your plan will have a public impact, make sure you have permission to put your solution into action. This can take time, so start these conversations with key municipal partners early on.



SHARE

Present your prototype to the people who may benefit from your work. Talk about the challenge as you've identified it, and get feedback on your proposed solution. Go back to the Evolve phase to refine your prototype based on their feedback.

KEY STEPS:

- Identify people who have different perspectives on the problem you're solving, and invite them to review your proposed solution and offer feedback.
- Present your ideas, using as many formats as you can to share information (visual, verbal, interactive).



MAKE

Now it's time to make things happen! What will it take to make your idea a reality and put your solution into practice?

KEY STEPS:

- Identify people who have special expertise that could help you realize your solution. Do you need a graphic designer? A carpenter? A structural engineer? Now ask around in your network to see if you know anyone with that expertise, and give them your best pitch to convince them to help you out.
- It's important to get permission to carry your project out, especially if it will alter the built environment. Figure out who has authority over the site you are working at, and pitch your plan to that person or agency to win their support. Partnerships are critical to this work!
- Make a detailed budget of time, money, and other resources you will need to complete your project. Do you have what you need? If not, what can you do to get what you need?
- Come up with a work plan, and decide on specific roles your team members will play and specific action steps everyone will take to get the job done.
- Think about how your solution will be sustained for as long as you would like to see it last. Make a plan for maintenance and sustainability, and make sure everyone understands their responsibilities.
- Don't forget to celebrate! Invite everyone who has helped you along the way to share in the festivities, and thank them all for their help.