

Community Co-Design Case Study:

DISCOVERY WALK DESIGN

The Destination Medical Center Economic Development Agency (DMC EDA) and City of Rochester led the process to design a linear, 4 block park in downtown Rochester. The DMC EDA is a non-profit organization focused on helping Rochester grow and stewarding the use of \$585 million in infrastructure funds provided by the State of Minnesota.

Why use co-design for the design of a public park?

During the community engagement process for the design of Discovery Walk, it became apparent that portions of the community had not been consulted about the design principles of the park. A discussion with the City for Health Steering Committee formed the basis for the pilot of a community co-design process where the DMC, Diversity Council, Olmsted County Public Health and other partners identified community co-designers or individuals that had access to diverse communities including communities of color, elderly, young people, accessibility and other targeted populations. The focus of this group was to identify elements of public space that worked well for these communities in Rochester and identify the key ingredients to make this new park successful, widely used, and accessible to our local community members.



Discovery Walk Co-Design Process Explained

The co-design process for Discovery Walk had several elements that set it up for success. The co-design team had seven co-design members to develop the project's design principles. The format of the co-design process was four design studios and three sprints. In the design studios, the co-designers, project team leads and design teams leads met to discuss the project concept and work through a facilitated process of interview questions to arrive at key project design principles. During the sprints, the co-designers asked their community the interview questions to best understand the assets that currently work for their communities and derive the key aspects of their success.

To identify and recruit co-designers, the project team, steering committee and partners developed several personas or perspectives that were of interest to the project engagement process. After developing the personas, community-based organizations like the Diversity Council and Public Health Department at Olmsted County helped identify individuals who were collaborative and recognized leaders within their communities to recruit them to engage in the process. Again, with the focus of incorporating the voices and perspectives of community that had most to gain from the public space, the group worked to recruit a diverse set of individuals in terms of race, ethnicity, ability, age, profession and lived experience to work closely with throughout the co-design process.

The DMC EDA and City of Rochester assumed there to be about 14-18 hours of work for each co-designer and a consultant fee of \$450 for their expertise and defined roles.

THIS TIME AND COMPENSATION INCLUDED THREE PRIMARY PROJECT ROLES:

- 1 Design Studio Participation:** Time for the co-designers to participate in the four design studios
- 2 Design Sprints:** Time for the co-designers to interview their community hold community member interviews in between each studio session.
- 3 Co-Design Check-ins:** Time for the co-designers to discuss the interview questions and prepare for community interview with the co-design facilitator.

Discovery Walk Co-Design Results

Through a set of four facilitated design studios and three sprints led by the co-designers, the team developed the following set of design principles that fell into three areas: spatial elements, programmatic, and policy. The information collected within each area and the specific themes themselves are explained in greater detail below.

SPATIAL

- › **Year-round function:** Community members noted that one of the most persistent issues driving isolation and being mentally unwell was the long, cold and dark winter. This was especially the case with immigrant populations that had moved from warmer climates. The community members noted the need for indoor spaces in the park or to be built out in future development along the park.
- › **Healing space:** Community members recognized that a good number of patients and their families receive a difficult diagnosis or “bad news” when visiting Mayo Clinic. They felt that it would be important to acknowledge that in the park space adjacent to the clinic.
- › **Accessible:** Those with mobility and/or cognitive challenges require spaces that adequately support their day-to-day realities like the provision of proximate parking, seating opportunities for all types of mobility, and ideally, no curb cuts that would prevent ease of travel.



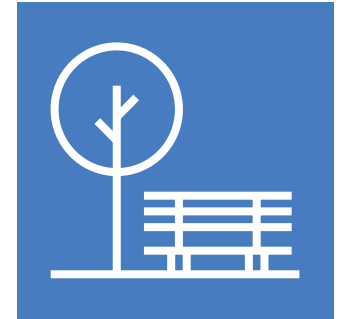
PROGRAMMATIC

- › **Broadly welcoming:** Community members noted that the most important way to help individuals feel welcome is to create familiarity with park spaces and programming through the incorporation of cultural symbols, flags, games and free services to encourage the spaces’ use like free internet.
- › **Interactive and Dynamic:** Communities noted that for Discovery Walk to attract and maintain visitors, it must have programming and spaces that allow for visitors to interact with (perhaps “leave their mark” in some way) and must offer a diversity of experiences for a diversity of audiences. This includes multi-generational spaces, interactive displays and art, active programming and an activities calendar.
- › **Friendship and connection:** Community members discussed that it is difficult to promote social connectedness when you do not meet new or different people. They felt there should be opportunities to induce meeting new people both through design elements, ‘instagrammable’ art spaces, and active and free programming.
- › **Safety:** Multiple communities cited not feeling safe as a primary reason they would avoid visiting a park. Community members identified the separation of car and pedestrian traffic, group spaces, children play space, and adequate lighting as several important design characteristics.
- › **Connecting healthcare and public:** Community members recognized that while community members have identified mental illness and isolation as key public health concerns, they also noted the challenges of burnout being experienced by clinicians. Clinician members noted that re-connecting with purpose and getting out of the clinic are important ways to address both burnout and support community in addressing their own health concerns.



POLICY

- **Affordable and accessible:** Community members, specifically younger and older individuals with fixed or no incomes, noted that downtown activities all have associated costs that can make it difficult to utilize downtown. To vitalize the park, older and younger community members may require incentives (and associated marketing) such as reduced event fees and reduced rental fees for religious or cultural holidays relevant to communities throughout the year.
- **Community participation:** Some community members mentioned a desire to participate in the building of the park and/or gardens within the park to help make it their own and ensure that the community's "fingerprints" are on the finished product – similar to habitat for humanity opportunities.
- **Non-smoking policy:** Community felt that if Discovery Walk is a park for health, there should be a full ban on smoking and vaping.
- **Year-round accessibility:** While the park will be designed to be accessible for those with limited mobility, the community (those with limited mobility) cited the need to keep sidewalks clean in the winter is equally important to accessibility.
- **Pets:** Some cultural communities find spaces with pets (primarily dogs) as unwelcoming for a variety of cultural and religious reasons. They suggest limited times or areas of the park to be accessible to pets and sufficient pet stations (poop pick up stations).
- **Alcohol:** In the past some cultural communities have felt un-welcome at events where alcohol was present. Additionally, other community members mentioned how spaces can feel unsafe when alcohol is served/over-served, thus some strategic restriction on alcohol sale/use in the park space may be warranted.
- **Cultural connectivity:** Important to reducing social isolation is finding ways for individuals and communities to connect with one another and not just within existing social networks. Because communities are and will continue to become more diverse, bringing people together in meaningful ways to better understand each other's perspectives, values, traditions, and practices is critical.



Co-Designer Engagement Post Project: How to continue to grow relationships?

As a means to build upon the new networks and relationships built from the Discovery walk co-design process, the DMC EDA identified other opportunities to keep the co-designers engaged in the Discovery Walk project and other community gatherings that the co-designers and their communities might value.

First, the DMC and City invited the co-designers to continue as design team members to interview and select the local artists to incorporate local art and culture into the design of the public space. Second, co-designers were asked to share their experience and perspective from the co-design process during the approval process with relevant boards, City Council and other bodies. Their collective voice and insight helped decision-makers understand the importance of design elements like snow melt and shelters to different local community groups. Finally, the DMC team has continued to reach out to co-designers on this project and see if they would like to attend business and community networking events since the completion of the co-design process. As one element of this engagement is to create new social networks and connections, this is one means to continue this work into the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the DMC EDA and City of Rochester believe this process, when done with equity in mind, helps to create more inclusive and equitable spaces, projects and programs in four primary ways. First, this engagement approach provides for deeper level of engagement with communities that can't be replicated in an open house through a government employee. The co-designers are trusted members of their community, thus making their perspectives and conversations extremely insightful and more meaningful. Second, we found this process helped us build accountability and trust with diverse Rochester communities. By investing in hearing from diverse communities, cultural, diversity and inclusivity competencies grew within the project team, design team and across co-design team. Third, this engagement also provided an opportunity for co-designers and their community to learn about public processes. Finally, this process helped build empathy and understanding, where the relationships cultivated would live beyond the project, and their perspectives as outlined above offered new and creative design guidance.



DESIGN TEAM MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

Discovery Walk Project Example



Britton Jones, Senior Associate PLA at Coen + Partners

For the Discovery Walk project the co-design process began in winter of 2020 between the phases of Schematic Design and Design Development and continued through the end of Construction Documentation. It was a year-long process in total. As the project manager of Discovery Walk, I was happy to have the Co-Design process integrate into the project as a form of focused engagement with a group of people from various backgrounds, abilities, and expertise. The Co-Designers' willingness to discuss issues of race, social equity, and design specifics openly created a collaborative environment for the design process.

The co-design process allowed for in-depth conversations about how public spaces are perceived and used, or not, by different cultures. This led to discussions about "sense of belonging" which brought new thoughts for the design team and client to consider in the design and programming of public spaces. The co-design process is successful as it creates a focused team of people who are willing to speak with honesty and challenge the norms of public space design.

The conversations were essential to the evolution of the design so that as a whole and its individual parts and spaces are welcoming to all. We had discussions about how people of various abilities experience a place which led to changes in the design, considerations of programming, and adjacent uses. Without the conversations and direct design feedback the project would not have addressed the issues properly for people of various cultures abilities to enjoy.

The Co-Designers spoke about how many East African and Asian families tend to gather or go for walks later in the evenings and therefore the need for more gathering places that were well lit later into the night are needed, as most park spaces don't offer this. With this information, the design team developed a strategic network of lighting, community gathering shelters and custom benches that will provide safe spaces for people to use and enjoy well after sunset. The Co-Designers offered input on who to make the streetscape feel more like a linear park that could be a more pleasant place to walk, talk to a loved one, or get exercise. The discussions led to all the plantings being on sloping plant beds to create more height and create a more immersive landscape experience while still being in the middle of the city. The Co-Designers also reviewed and gave feedback to the artists whose works are integrated into the lighting and seating site elements.

What would be some tips you can provide a future design team who is looking into co-design?

- 1** Integrate the Co-Designers into your team from the onset of the project.
- 2** Be willing to be vulnerable in this process - be willing to listen and learn.
- 3** Co-Designers don't typically come from design backgrounds so be sure to explain the design process and be willing to spend extra time with them as needed to make sure you provide them with the best information so they can provide you with the best feedback.