

# Service Design as a Way to Engage Communities

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## Abstract

In an equally distressed and burgeoning community just outside of our major metropolitan city, there is a history of transformation efforts—from creative placemaking, to affordable housing initiatives, to economic re-development—which have all seemed to fall short in the area of community engagement.

From the creation of neighborhood festivals that have low resident turnout, to a backlash of discouraged citizens who feel unheard and uninformed, there was a need to re-consider how to involve this unique community—made up of four very distinct neighborhoods— in the imminent re-development of the area in which they live.

In the winter of 2016, our service design and creative strategy consultancy was brought in to a city-wide visionary community development project tied to our rapidly approaching bicentennial, in order to utilize service design methodologies as a way to engage communities and to design with organizations and community residents according to their needs and desires.

This short paper will highlight a case study of an ongoing collaboration between our consultancy; a non-profit organization dedicated to the growth of it's community; a higher-education institution with a legacy of community engagement; a local office of the country's largest community development corporation focused on Creative Placemaking and community revitalization; and, most importantly, various residents and stakeholders.

The accompanying poster will visualize the process of engagement of various community stakeholders, tailored design research methods, and mechanisms for assessing short- and long-term community impact.

*Community Engagement, Design Research, Service Design, Participatory Design, Creative Placemaking*

## Introduction

Walkability. Public art. Vibrant commercial and community activity. These are some of the many calling cards of great places in great cities. Great Places 2020 is a visionary community development project to transform strategic places in Marion County—located in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA—into dynamic centers of culture, commerce and community. Through a partnership with Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) Indianapolis, and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), part of this Great Places initiative centers around the notion of “creative placemaking.”

With a specific focus on the River West Great Place, our service design and design strategy consultancy, Collabo Creative, was brought in to work collaboratively with Big Car Collaborative—a nonprofit arts organization and collective of artist focused on creative placemaking and socially engaged art—and Indy Convergence—a nonprofit Indianapolis arts organization dedicated to the growth of artists, located in the epicenter of River West—to engage with residents in this close-knit community.

Collabo was engaged specifically to lead resident engagement and participation in order to improve the current, as well as inform the new development of community programming. This research prioritized resident inclusion in shaping a neighborhood festival named “Near West Flow Fest: A Block Party on West Michigan Street,” as well as other community-vetted programming, including an “Art Walk” series and “Portrait Project,” which were developed and put on by Indy Convergence.

Working closely with Indy Convergence, Collabo carried out a 5-month engagement strategy that included strategic planning meetings, planning and facilitation of multiple engagement events, “pop-up” community listening sessions, and 1-on-1 interviews.

As defined by LISC, creative placemaking is seen as: People coming together to make positive physical, economic and social impacts in their neighborhood through art, culture and creativity. LISC invests in creative placemaking to help people and places prosper by advancing arts- and cultural-based strategies in comprehensive community development. Specifically, LISC creative placemaking work seeks to accelerate traditional community development outcomes in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color including: Community cultural development, Physical Transformation, and Economic Benefits. Their work is informed by six guiding principles: 1. Artists as leaders; 2. Racial Equity; 3. Development without displacement; 4. Community-driven, comprehensive, collaborative; 5. Building Capacity; and 6. Escape Velocity.

Based on our practice and knowledge in People-Centered Design (or the more well-known of “Human-Centered” Design) and Service Design, involving neighborhood residents in the shaping or reshaping of programs and the touchpoints that create those services seemed apparent and imperative. According to Service Design Network—a global platform dedicated to strengthening the growing discipline of Service Design—Service Design is the activity of planning and organizing people, infrastructure, communication and material components of a service in order to improve its quality and the interaction between service provider and customers. The purpose of service design methodologies is

to design according to the needs of customers or participants, so that the service is user-friendly, competitive and relevant to the customers.

Given this definition, we understand that the notion of a service expands beyond the service itself, and instead explores a balance and blending between the actions carried out by providers with the behaviors and desires of users, customers, or in our case— participants. Service Design, in the service of engaging communities, seems to be a perfect fit when we consider the want for creative placemaking under the guise of LISC’s definition.

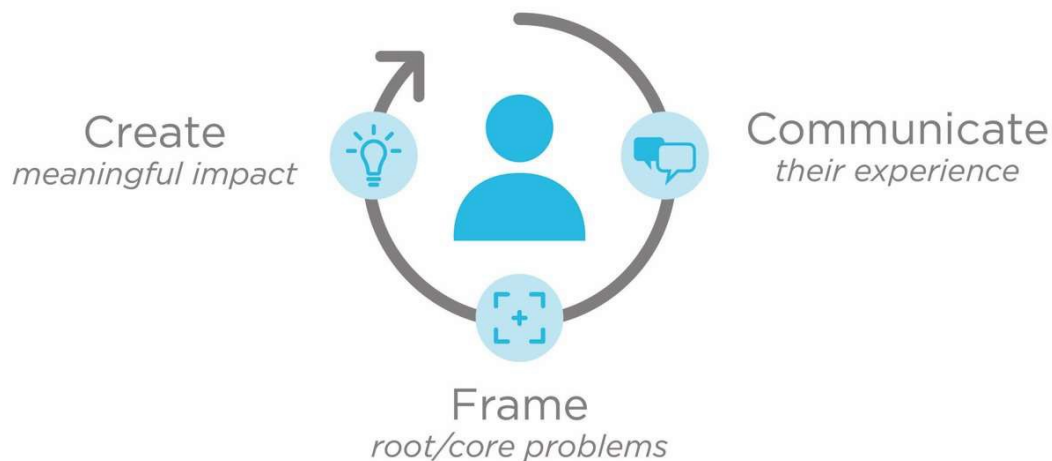
## **Approach and Methodology**

Collabo's work within the River West and Near West communities used LISC's Guiding Principles for creative placemaking to help guide their people-centered approach in the following ways: 1. Working collaboratively with Indy Convergence and their “Artist Corps,” looking to them as artists as leaders who are leading transformation in their communities, and collaboratively hosting events and resident recruitment; 2. Focusing on racial equity, by seeking out residents who represent people of color and others historically marginalized in order to enable them to be at the center of transforming their lives and communities; 3. Efforts made in creating communication materials and using culture-based approaches that allow residents to identify and celebrate their neighborhood as their own in order to encourage development without displacement; 4. Using methods and activities that were community-driven, comprehensive and collaborative, placing the highest priority on uncovering and communicating the hopes, dreams and desires of the residents, while working collaboratively with local organizations and businesses; 5.

Placing focus on engagement efforts that are driven by building capacity within the community—enabling residents to communicate their vision for how they want to improve their community, and providing the tools and opportunities for them to express their vision in a collaborative way; and 6. Helping key partner organizations look to the future in order to have enough escape velocity to embed creative placemaking in their core work, by engaging residents in the conceptual planning of opportunities for future community-driven programming.

People-Centered Design is Collabo’s approach and methodology to creating innovative solutions through focus on designing with people, rather than for people. This approach combines a process that utilizes Design Thinking and Participatory Design Research methods in order to empower the people who ultimately use a product, service, or system— along with those who have the most to gain or lose—to collaboratively create positive impact and innovation. And by ‘people’ we mean users, customers, stakeholders—the actual people involved in the initial problem or challenge. It is this ‘bottom-up’ approach that is inclusive and participatory, to help people:

Communicate their experiences, in order to frame root—or core—problems, and collaboratively create meaningful impact through solutions developed by the very people who will use or implement them.



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Figure 1: Collabo's Approach

## Resident Engagement/Design Research Methods

Resident engagement methods were focused on further developing and supporting current community programming in River West, including the “Near West Flow Fest: A Block Party on West Michigan Street”, as well as other community-vetted programming, including the “Art Walk” and “Portrait Project,” developed and put on by Indy Convergence. The focus for these methods was to go to residents and meet them “where they were,” selecting specific locations at optimal timeframes for resident input and engagement. In addition, as a way to start to explore and shape potential future community-driven programming and events in this community, methods also included inviting residents to participate in 1-on-1 interviews and engaging them in activities that allowed them to share their daily lives and rituals.

Resident engagement methods included: 1) Hosting the “River West Street Festival Kickoff Party.” This included canvassing the River West community and surrounding neighborhoods to gather information and invite residents—whether they had volunteered at the previous festival or not—to celebrate their successes and share their challenges of the last year’s festival; 2) Engaging residents at the first annual “Art Walk,” which included creating tools and probes to enable people to share their thoughts and ideas for creating resident- and community-driven programming; 3) Facilitating multiple

“Community Outreach Pop-up Sessions,” including using tools and prompts that asked residents (specifically youth and minorities) to share their ideas and challenges with the previous festival; and 4) Conducting 1-on-1 Resident Interviews, which allowed for deeper discussion around exploring daily routines, hopes and desires of both short- and long-term residents.

### Resident Recruitment

Working closely with Indy Convergence and their Artist Corps, Collabo created a series of recruitment tools. These tools served three objectives: 1. To gather information from residents to understand how they prefer to obtain information, both from a broad perspective, as well as community-focused; 2. To invite residents to the “Near West Flow Fest” (formerly called the “River West Street Festival”), as a way to celebrate past volunteers’ successes, and elicit volunteers for the 2017 festival; and 3. To enable residents to share their contact information to receive news and updates about other events and engagements, as well as getting involved in the planning for the 2017 festival. Indy Convergence and their Artist Corps canvassed the neighborhood and surrounding areas with these tools by going door-to-door and delivering the invitation, as well as asking the questions on the prompt sheet.

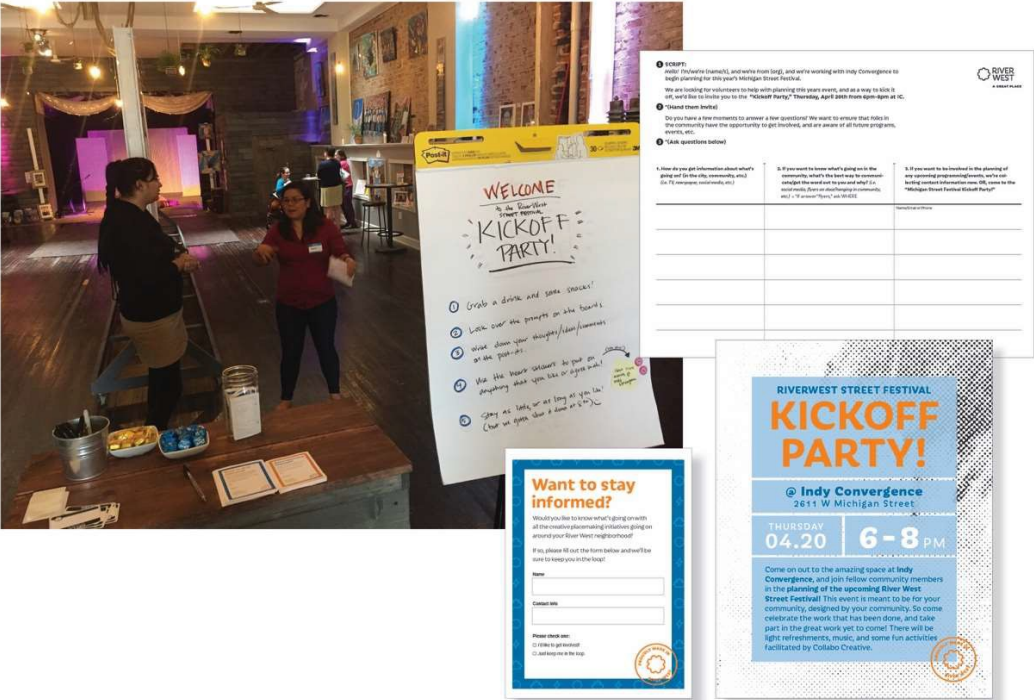


Figure 2: Recruitment Tools

## River West Street Festival Kickoff Party

Indy Convergence (IC) was in need of not only understanding what the community's perception was of the previous year's festival (formerly called the "West Michigan Street Festival"), but also needed a way to begin to uncover their thoughts and ideas surrounding new programs/events/initiatives that IC could help shape. In April 2017, Indy Convergence and Collabo hosted the "River West Street Festival Kickoff Party." Collabo worked closely with IC to design the engagement and developed participatory activities that were centered around not only gaining information and opinions around the previous and future festival, but also enabling them to generate ideas for future programming that they would like to see in their community, and give input on existing projects that IC was currently developing. The party was designed to be a "drop-in" event, where residents could come and go as they pleased, enjoy beverages and other refreshments, and engage with the activities, as well as each other.

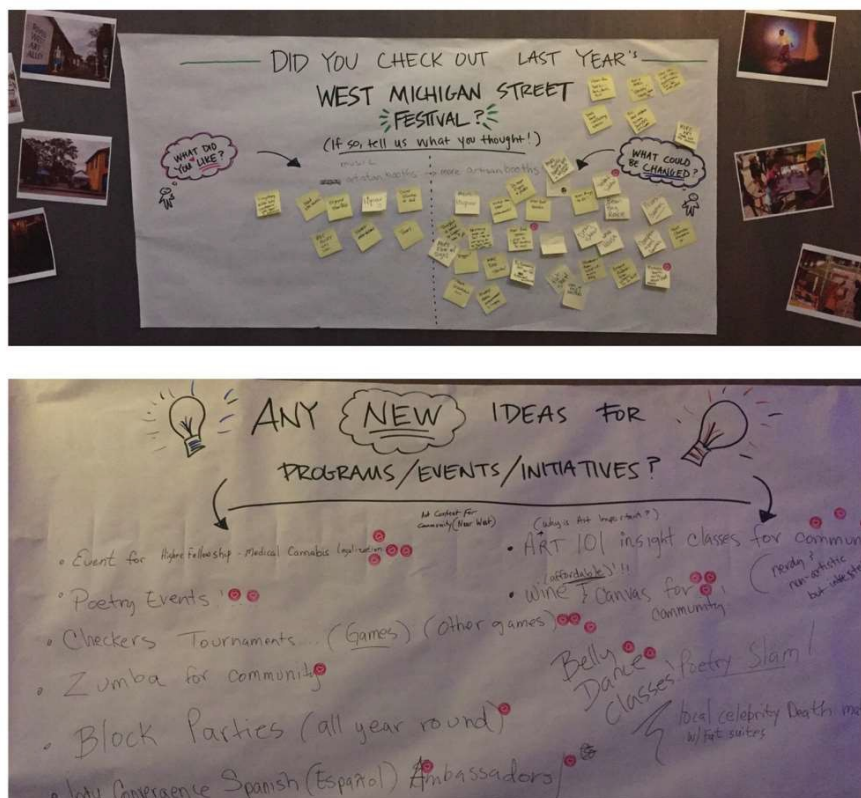


Figure 3: Kickoff Party

## Art Walk and Portrait Project

Indy Convergence was in need of gathering input for not only the development of future “Art Walks” (interactive art walks in River West which included new art work displayed in their gallery, live music in the Art Alley, and refreshments), but also for informing the “Portrait Project,” using recorded interviews and collected stories from residents about their neighborhood, which would then be given to a local artist to use as inspiration for a new work of art, to be displayed at Indy Convergence during events and later in a more permanent location. The portraits would be synced with the actual interviews with a QR code so the stories and artwork could be experienced at the same time. For Indy Convergence's first of four Art Walks, Collabo created probes and tools to engage with the Art Walk visitors to share stories and suggestions for people to include in the Portrait Project, as well as envisioning what future Art Walks could include and look like.



Figure 3: Kickoff Party

## Community Outreach Pop-up Sessions

In an effort to not only engage more youth in the shaping of the future festival, but also residents who represent people of color and others historically marginalized, Collabo developed a series of “Community Outreach Pop-up Sessions” at three key locations for residents in the Near West. These engagements were designed in such a way to enable both youth and adults to respond to a series of prompts around understanding their perceptions of last years’ festival, as well as gathering ideas for the future festival.



Figure 5: Community Outreach Pop-up Sessions

## Resident Interviews

In order to gain a better understanding of people's daily behaviors within the community, Collabo conducted 1-on-1 interviews with a diverse group of people in the Near West. Criteria for recruiting participants required that they were either living or working (or both) in this area. The main objectives of the interviews were to dig deeper into the residents' daily activities, and their thoughts and feelings about the area where they live. Each interview lasted less than 1 hour, during which two maps were generated as visual prompts to enable participants to map out daily routines and frequent places visited.

Participants used stickers with visual icons to represent activities and places as they mapped out a narrative of their daily routines, and were provided with gift cards as incentives for their time. Questions and prompts focused on using the map as a visual tool to discuss daily activities and behaviors as they aligned with key locations in their community, uncovering insights into how the residents felt about their community, and describing challenges in their daily lives within their community.

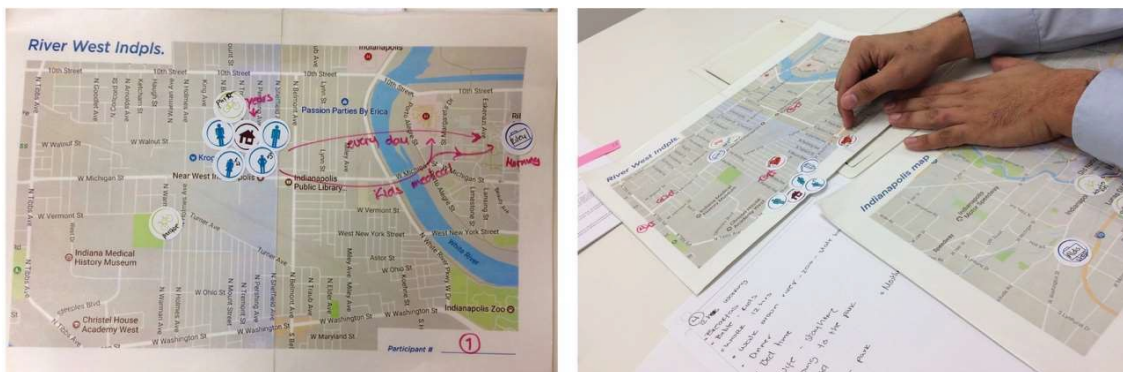


Figure 6: Interview Maps

## Data Analysis and Key Findings

All of the data sets collected through each of the community engagement methods were analyzed, grouped, and interpreted within each of the focus areas: Near West/River West Street Festival, Art Walk & Portrait Project ideas, and Community Creative Placemaking.



Figure 7: Data Analysis

From the combined engagements focusing on the Street Festival (the “Kickoff Party,” and the “Community Outreach Pop-up Sessions” at three key locations in the Near West), three main components were uncovered through the process of analysis: the environment, the activities, and the advertisement. Data collected was broken down into folks that participated last year, and folks that didn't participate last year, with common categories in each focusing on what people liked, what they would change, and what they would like to experience in the next festival.

The categories of experiences then led to a synthesis of common areas identified, as well as new ideas to explore for the festival, and ideas for how the community could become involved and take more ownership of the overall festival experience.

RIVER WEST - COMMUNITY OUTREACH TO UNDERSTAND THE STREET FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE - DATA ANALYSIS



Figure 8: Festival Data Map

From the activities and engagement during Indy Convergence’s first Art Walk, which focused on generating ideas for future Art Walks, as well as ideas for the Portrait Project, two key themes emerged during data analysis: Environment & Atmosphere, and Art Experience & Activities. A data map and transcription of the findings were presented and delivered to Indy Convergence, which they were able to use in subsequent meetings and recruitment for participants. From the 1-on-1 interviews, personas were created to represent to sub-sets of Near West/River West residents: Long-Term and Short-Term Residents. Based on the insights gained through this research we were able to frame in on key opportunity areas, two of which would align well with creative placemaking efforts:

1. Holistic or Integrated Family Programming
2. Environment/Beautification of abandoned & neglected homes

# NEAR WEST/RIVER WEST NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS

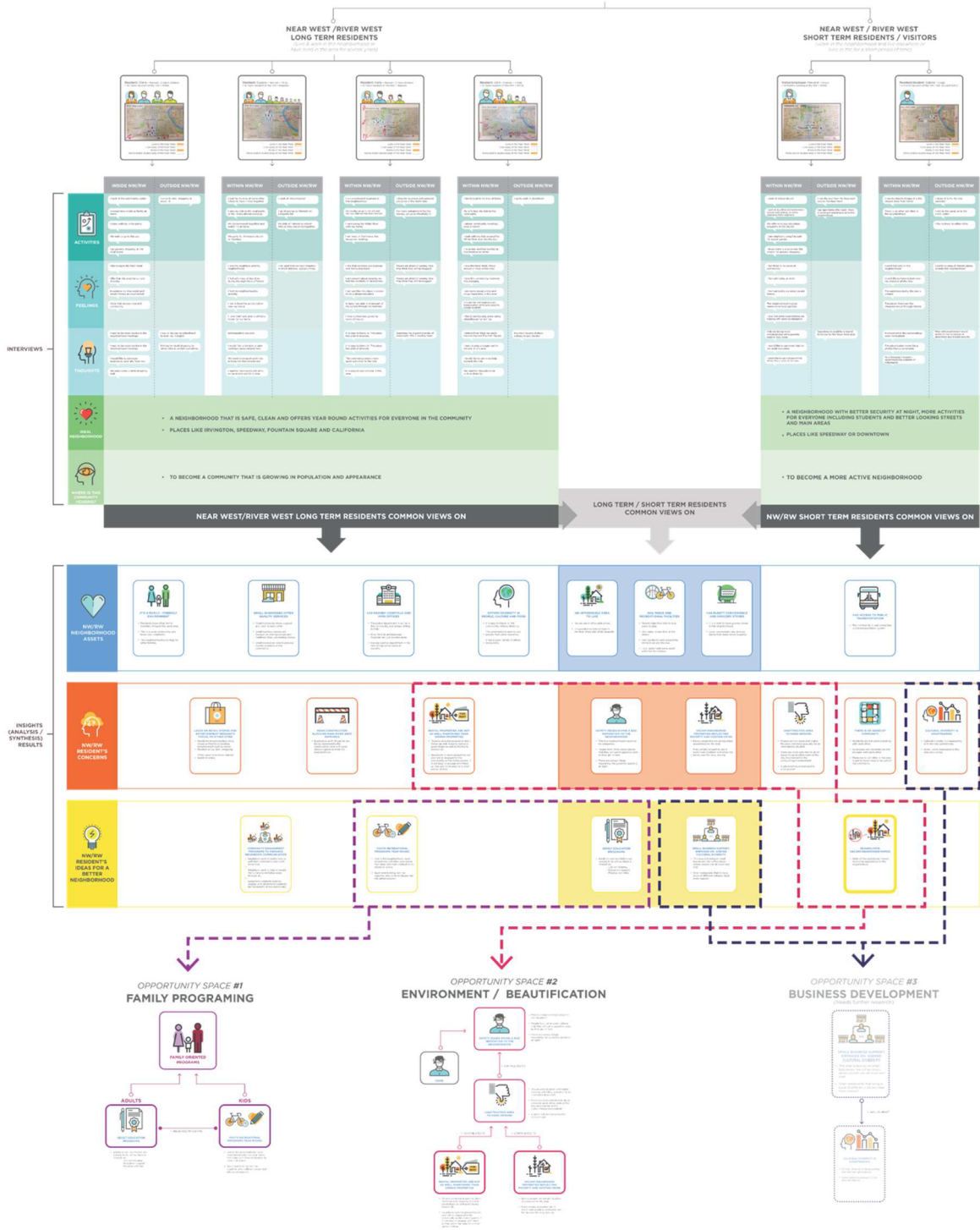


Figure 9: Placemaking Synthesis Map

## **Discussion**

One key takeaway within this research, has been the consideration of cultural behaviors in conducting community research. Within the context of this project, a key focus has been on needing to “meet people where they’re at,” and even before being able to go where they are in order to engage with them, you must be able to know where they frequent, and why. We also found that there was an increased need for rich, “quick- touch” engagements, that were not too time-consuming and easily enabled people to express themselves. As this paper is being written, we are still working through the process of assessing engagement, impact, and community capacity.

## **Conclusion**

The next steps in this particular project, would be to generate community-driven ideas for future creative placemaking initiatives within these specific areas. If possible, participatory or generative sessions with Near West/River West residents would be ideal to get actual residents’ input for future initiatives. Additionally, further research is necessary to understand why local, cultural businesses are (according to residents) on the decline with in the Near West/River West area.