Unpacking Engagement: Strategies for Context-Specific Community-Driven Design

CEARA O'LEARY
University of Detroit Mercy

Keywords: community engagement, design development, community development, COVID response, collaboration

For the past 27 years, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) based at the University of Detroit Mercy has worked with community organizations and nonprofit partners across the city of Detroit to envision neighborhood spaces resulting from community-engaged design processes. For the past decade, since co-leading a broad and deep citywide civic engagement effort, DCDC has expanded its methods and tools of engagement with intention and in collaboration with partners and in the context of diverse projects in distinct neighborhoods. Engagement methods aim to enable community-driven design of spaces for and with local communities. Central to the mission and methods of DCDC is the belief that the best design solutions merge discipline and community expertise, which results from relationship-building, two-way exchange of information, and meaningful partnerships. This approach relates to design processes on projects ranging from building rehab and pocket parks to neighborhood plans and citywide infrastructure.

This paper will situate DCDC's work in a broad history of community-engaged design, call out lessons for effective engagement from decades of practice, highlight lessons from recent projects, and situate the work in light of recent challenges. A discussion of principles and methods will unpack strategies that draw a direct line from community conversations to design decisions at a variety of scales. This work recognizes shifts in strategies to be responsive to scale, cultural and community context, and capacity, and considers influencing variables such as trust-building required, project pace, participating partners, and COVID constraints. In turn, this paper articulates lessons for community engagement practice at DCDC as well as the broader field.

"Community engagement fosters the transformative relationships and increased ownership necessary to build sustainable communities of opportunity."

—PolicyLink, The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities, 2012

"[The practice of participatory design] is actually a living out of a set of values, it's not just a formal process or a prescription...it's an acting out of a set of values."

—Erik Howard, Inside Southwest Detroit, 2021

The practice of community-engaged design and the collaborative structure that enables projects to effectively respond to their neighborhood context is evolving within the design field, with an increasing demand for engagement services and a corresponding need to advocate for meaningful processes. For the past several decades, community design centers – university-based and nonprofits, as well as like-minded for-profit firms – have worked alongside community partners to define participatory processes that meaningfully engage residents and stakeholders in design decision-making and support resident leadership in planning and design. Community-engaged design ensures that residents and other stakeholders have an active role in the decisions that impact their neighborhoods and spaces. This has the potential to support community ownership of neighborhood processes and spaces, centering and celebrating local voices, planning with and for existing residents, and working toward more equitable outcomes that reflect the culture and character of the community. Our cities have a legacy of spatial injustice and community-engaged design plays a part in creating an alternate process and future.

For the past 27 years, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) at the University of Detroit Mercy has been partnering with community groups across the city of Detroit on a range of projects at a multiplicity of scales that work toward community development and neighborhood goals. DCDC focuses on community engagement and participation in planning and design processes, with the belief that local expertise is essential to design excellence. The office works with community partners

to develop engagement activities embedded in design processes, responding to context and integrating local culture. This paper will review the evolution of community-engaged design practice at DCDC, begin to unpack lessons learned from a quarter century of collaboration that provide a framework for community engagement, and examine activities that inform design decision-making, particularly in response to unique project parameters and recent COVID constraints.

BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY DESIGN + PARTICIPATION

Community design originated with the rise of community development, corresponding with the swell of the Civil Rights movement in the middle of the 20th century. Major social movements of the time focused on a push to share power more equitably while demanding greater rights, particularly for those traditionally and systematically underrepresented and resourced. Community design also arose in response to urban renewal, which coincided and intersected with larger social justice movements. The top down planning that typified urban renewal in the name of public health and order often decimated communities, replacing dense and culturally rich neighborhoods with infrastructure and megaprojects, displacing communities of color. The first community design centers – Architects Renewal Committee of Harlem founded in 1963 by J. Max Bond and the Pratt Center for Community Development – positioned architects and planners as advocates, organizing with communities in response to the pressures of urban renewal.[1] Their community development, design and engagement efforts operated in support of the belief that people should play a role in the forces that shape their quality of life and communities. Bolstered by federal funding for social programs, a generation of community design centers followed, centering community partnerships and neighborhood priorities, with the next generation following in the 1990s, including DCDC.

Community participation in planning and design processes also intersected with the evolution of public policy and protocol. While "advocacy planners" and "equity planners" were professionalized in the planning field, federal policy attempted to formalize participatory processes, requiring resident input but often falling short through rote requirements. Famously in community engagement circles, Sherry Arnstein penned the "Ladder of Citizen Participation," assessing the integration of engagement into federal programs and identifying participation as a means for power redistribution. This ladder remains both a scathing critique of nominal participation and a roadmap for effective community ownership in planning and design processes.[2]

Seminal voices documenting community design came out of University of California, Berkeley and North Carolina State University in the 1980s and 90s, namely Mary Comerio and Henry Sanoff. Sanoff provides underpinnings for community-engaged design, elevating partnering with local resident groups, shared decision making, and methods to achieve meaningful engagement. Sanoff's work and teachings are practical in nature, focused on making impact with resident leadership and underscoring lessons that resonate today – emphasizing information exchange and a focus on relationship building, partnerships and working across sectors.[3] There are many other voices that have elevated and defined community-engaged design practices in recent decades, notably Nick Wates and his Community Planning Handbook, which maps out an array of engagement tactics.[4] More recently, David de la Pena, Diane Jones Allen, Randolph Hester, Jeffrey Hou, Laura Lawson and Marcia McNally compiled a collection of likeminded voices and examples of engagement in practice in their "Design as Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity."[5] And community design practitioners are sharing lessons from their work.

Increasingly, practitioners are embracing community-engaged design processes and the field is expanding and innovating alongside community partners, who are driving and demanding thoughtful resident ownership of planning and design efforts. Lessons from practice are essential to evolve the field and inform meaningful engagement practices that support resident participation, contributing to more equitable communities. Impactful engagement processes are critical to creating spaces that capture the culture of community and ensure more beloved and well-used neighborhood places.[6]

DEEPENING ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCE OVER DECADES OF PRACTICE

For nearly three decades, DCDC has been building a body of work with community organizations across Detroit and deepening practice through collaboration and integration of diverse voices in the design process. In its first dozen years, DCDC developed the Neighborhood Engagement Workshop (NEW) method to invite representative stakeholders into the design process, focusing on workshop activities that intentionally place design direction in the hands of participants who contribute local expertise and user knowledge to the process. Importantly, workshop participants include a range of representative stakeholders from the community at hand in an effort to include variety of voices– this could include faith-based leaders, neighborhood elders, business owners, kids, artists, etcetera, depending upon the context. This workshop process has been documented in Sheri Blake's film "Detroit Collaborative Design Center: Amplifying the Diminished Voice."[7]

From 2011-2012, DCDC co-led the Civic Engagement team of Detroit Works Project Long Term Planning (DWPLTP), an expansive planning effort that resulted in a 50-year vision for the city and a publication and organization now known as Detroit Future City. This citywide engagement effort was herculean, connecting with people over 163,000 times and totaling 30,000 conversations with participants over the course of two years.[8] Notably, engagement included a wide range of strategies in an effort to reach a wide range of people across the city and engage them
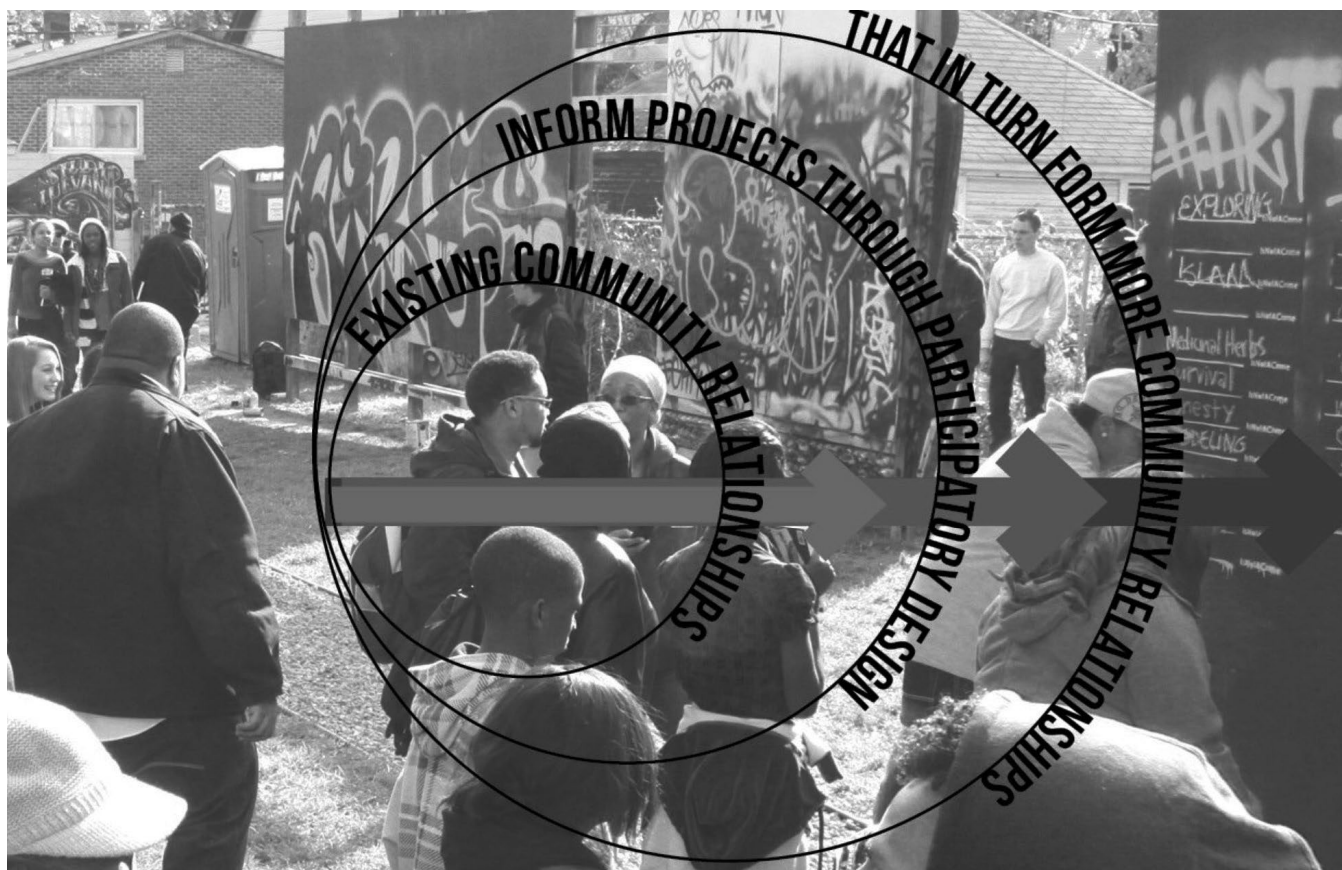
Figure 1. *Community-engaged design features a two-way exchange of information and values local knowledge and lived expertise. Image from the community-engaged design web resource co-created by DCDC and ISWD. Photo by Erik Paul Howard. Diagram by Julia Kowalski.*

in planning dialog. More than a dozen tactics included townhall workshops known as Community Conversations, a Roaming Table reaching people at coffee shops and bus stops who might not otherwise attend a planning meeting, Telephone Townhalls to reach seniors, an online game Detroit 24/7 to reach kids, a physical Homebase and a traveling Roadshow. The process also included a robust engagement tracking and evaluation effort, reinforcing a feedback loop and the flexibility to respond to meet evolving engagement needs. Importantly, the structure included community boards that played a leadership role guiding engagement efforts. Through this work, DCDC and its partners developed, refined and articulated community engagement at an unprecedented scale, and developed both guiding principles and tactical lessons that influence its practice today. The essence of these lessons is articulated in the Civic Engagement chapter of the resulting published planning document: "Civic engagement is the open and ongoing two-way dialogue among all stakeholders. Essentially, civic engagement is people working together and talking together to move forward together. It entails transparency, accountability, and mutual trust."[9]

In the last decade, DCDC has continued to grow a community-engaged design practice rooted in relationship building, working in partnership with neighborhood-based groups to define how

residents and other stakeholders meaningfully participate in design and planning processes. Community-engaged design and planning projects at the center of DCDC's work range from pocket parks and building renovations to neighborhood plans and citywide infrastructure strategies, all focusing on spaces and plans that benefit and reflect local communities. Engaged-design retains the methods of the NEW process, now integrating lessons and tactics that grew from DWLTP, and ongoing collaboration with partners similarly driven by community-engaged practice. Deepening of shared knowledge over time has led to the evolving definition of principles, activities and lessons for community-engaged design that are responsive to context and contemporary challenges.

PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Lessons from past collaborative work have resulted in several engagement principles that center DCDC's practice and offer guidance for the field.[10] This work relies upon meaningful partnerships with communities, where decision making is shared and engagement is defined within the local context, where trust is already established. Testimonials included here are sourced from conversations with community partners and design workshop participants on a recent project in collaboration with Inside Southwest Detroit (ISWD).[11] The engagement framework and

Figure 2. *Engagement requires a variety of strategies to engage a variety of people.* Images feature a range of engagement activities meeting residents where they already gather. Photo by Erik Paul Howard. Diagram by Julia Kowalski.

lessons from this work are documented and shared via a multimedia web resource co-created by DCDC and ISWD featuring the design process for the Avis + Elsmere building renovation project. Principles articulated below are drawn from this resource and are central to DCDC's work at large.

Engagement is building relationships, which require trust, transparency and time. Meaningful engagement is not transactional and often leverages existing relationships to build new ones throughout the design process. As a community collaborator shares: "You need to have relationships or at least some foundation of relationships to facilitate quality engagement, but at the same time, a good engagement process can help to facilitate the relationship itself. They really feed into each other…It's reciprocal…You need one to have the other… And they build on one another."[12] Trust and relationship building takes time and anticipated timelines must shift to accommodate new engagement needs. This flexibility and responsiveness in turn breeds trust.

Engagement is a dynamic exchange of knowledge and is far more than outreach. Engagement is a two-way exchange that celebrates a range of expertise and invites diverse perspectives. Both designers and community members learn through the process,

as the design team shares design language and approach and community members share cultural and place-based expertise. It is essential to truly *value local knowledge and lived expertise.* Residents offer essential talent and wisdom to contribute to creating spaces at their doorsteps. Further, they are invested in outcomes. From the perspective of DCDC's partners: "…with the right amount of knowledge and information and an environment that's healthy, inviting, accessible, and engaging, [participants] are prophetic in their ability to design in a way that meets the needs of the community, inspires people, and is sustainable in the long term."[13]

METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

On the ground approaches to engagement have also evolved based on lessons learned over the course of DCDC's practice. Framing engagement considers local context and community character and takes into account who participates and how.

Define your community. Every community and project is different. A first step toward effective engagement is determining who should be involved in the design process and who are key types of community members. This varies widely by project and is context specific. In the case of ISWD, community included neighbors, elders, artists, skaters, kids, and nonprofits. In the

Figure 3. Within the engagement process, a variety of activities invite participants to set design intentions, define program, and delineate space. Photos by Erik Paul Howard.

case of a planning project in Eastern Market, Detroit's working food district and public market, community included wholesalers, farmers, market visitors, brick-and-mortar businesses, residents, and more. Representative voices must be included in the conversation, and new ideas are generated and relationships built as a result of convening perspectives. "When people who don't know each other meet and talk, dormant community assets are activated."[14]

Engagement requires a variety of strategies to engage a variety of people. Effective community-engaged design warrants a range of ways for people to participate in order to include a range of voices in the process. The extent of the reach varies by project as different engagement strategies invite people into the conversation. In addition to the workshop process developed over time and building from lessons from DWPLTP's array of engagement tactics, DCDC and partners consider the different types of community members and how they might participate in the design process. Resulting engagement strategies include meetings at all scales as well as less traditional forms of creative engagement in an effort to make it easy to participate, especially for those who may not have the time to attend yet another meeting. For example, a recent broad scale engagement effort in the creation of a new cradle-to-career campus included "roaming conversations" at neighborhood hot spots to meet people in their daily lives. A nearby streetscape project included mock-ups

and a block party as a means to show design possibilities and elicit dialog. A neighborhood planning process invited young people to participate with cookouts and "activity days." A range of strategies helps make design and planning processes more accessible by integrating with existing social infrastructure and gaterhing places. Similarly, within the context of a meeting or another engagement strategy, facilitating multiple ways to participate generates greater dialog in the design process – planning for different audiences and learning styles by including multiple modes of delivery, scales at which to participate, and methods to provide feedback.

It is important to *integrate engagement in multiple phases* of a project, not just during preliminary design phases, or any other phase. It is also critical to *build in feedback loops* so people see how their input impacts design. DCDC frequently creates "What We Heard" documents to share back ideas that were generated via engagement and to ask the question "Did we get this right?" This process and onoging touchpoints in turn contributes to trust building.

ACTIVITIES INFORMING DESIGN DEVELOPMENT
With feedback loops in mind, it is key that community-engaged design methods directly inform design development. An important lesson from DWPLTP was the importance of not only inviting people to participate but also making sure their participation is
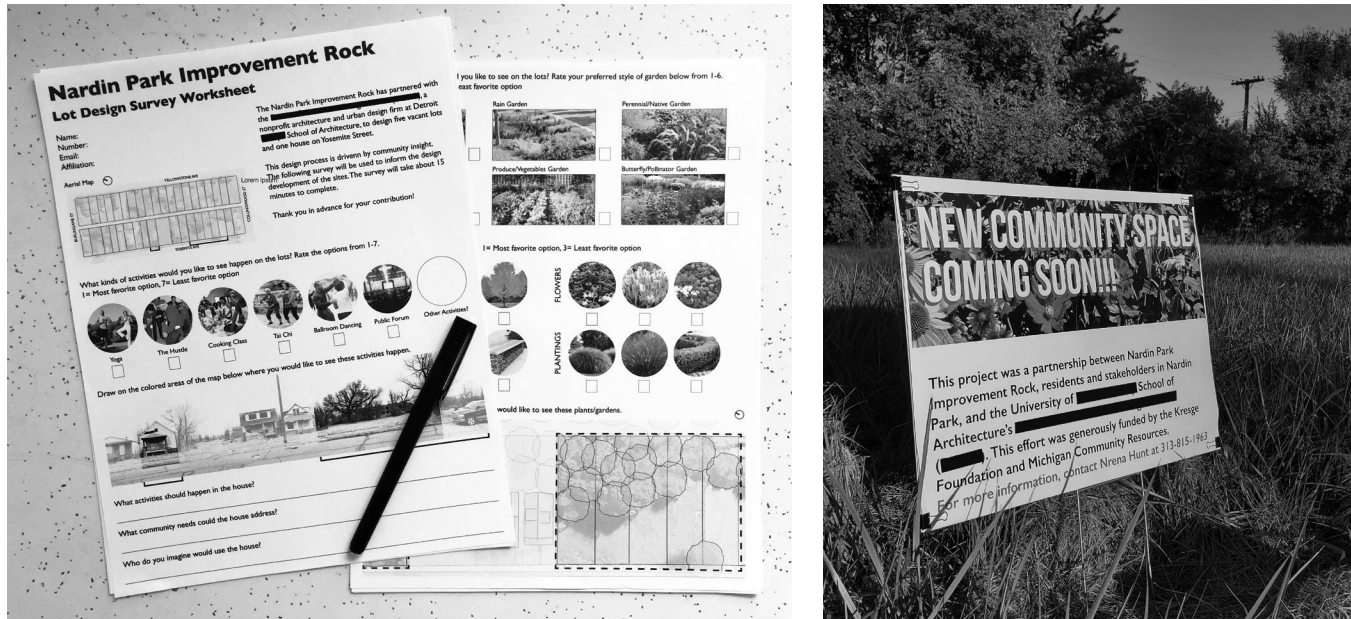
Figure 3. Engagement materials prepared in the midst of COVID-19 including a mailed visual survey and lawn signs. Engagement materials prepared by DCDC.

meaningful. This requires thoughtful development of engagement activities that invite participants to envision their spaces, equip residents with design tools and language, and document design ideas. A sample of engagement activities developed by DCDC and partners included below illustrate examples of how engagement is integrally linked with design decision making at different phases. Example activities are illustrated in the context of the collaboration with ISWD but are used in a variety of projects, shifting to respond to context and community.

At the outset of a design process, DCDC invites participants to set design intentions by completing the prompt: *"If nothing else, this project should…"* Responses are written and then shared out loud, providing multiple means to engage, documented live so it is clear that people are being heard, and coalesced into a series of project-specific design intentions. Once compiled, the design team asks: "Did we hear this right?" to confirm that ideas were captured correctly. The "If nothing else" activity is also used for visioning and to generate expansive ideas while identifying central project values.

In order to generate program ideas, DCDC focuses on *verbs rather than nouns in the design dialog*, inviting participants to brainstorm uses for the project at hand while asking for action verbs to enable creative responses. For example, focusing on verbs allow for a range of solutions for "sitting" rather than assuming a noun-based solution such as a bench or a chair. Verb-driven brainstorming and prioritization activities inform community-led programming. Subsequent activities define space layouts by engaging with plans or maps, using the programming verbs previously developed and thinking about scale and adjacency.

Additional strategies that directly link engagement conversations and design decision making include the *celebration and integration of community culture*. Community participants know the local assets and talent that can be incorporated into design, including artists and other fabricators. In the case of ISWD, street art was always central to the building concept and a neighborhood walk with residents identified other materials intrinsic to the community that were subsequently integrated to achieve design goals. Specifically, decorative wrought iron fabricated locally balanced dual needs for a sense of security and openness. A participant highlighted this connection: "This neighborhood has a lot of wrought iron. And I remember discussions about wrought iron [in the design workshops]…[The porch] has an accordion fold that you can open up…But what's really cool about it is the reflection of the glass, is the way the sun hits. And then the image, there's the wrought iron shadows coming in."[15]

ENGAGEMENT WITHIN COVID CONSTRAINTS
Over the past year and half, the safety constraints created by the COVID pandemic have challenged the field to rethink how to continue engagement while physically distanced. While urgent needs understandably shift priorities for many community organizations, engagement cannot go by the wayside in these challenging circumstances. Engagement principles remain true in this context and DCDC continues to learn alongside partners in Detroit and nationwide. While DCDC and partners shifted to digital platforms, embracing new collaborative workspace tools to enable interactive workshops on the web, in Detroit, as in many other places, limitations to digital access and literacy impact many people's abilities to participate online. In those cases, the development of new analog tools have enabled greater access to design including visual surveys, lawn signs, and neighborhood

bulletin boards, coupled with the investment of time in canvassing and phone conversations.

It has also become increasingly important to recognize how people are already receiving information and forming circles of support, as these venues provide opportunities to meet people where they are at and invite participation.[16] For example, meal delivery early in the pandemic provided an avenue for survey delivery as well. Additionally, while we could not convene in person, relationship building and storytelling became even more central to the work of building community as well as community spaces. Recent intentional efforts to reach more people in a greater variety of ways will endure in DCDC's engagement practice. A project partner summarized this shift: "Normally, we'd have big meetings, design charrettes and all sorts of activities that require in-person engagement. Instead, we made phone calls, sent out snail mail and emails, hung flyers and canvassed door-to-door to let people know about the project. We posted colorful signs all over the North End, the kind you use for elections, to let folks know how to access our survey. We needed to get substantial input on what the community wanted… We engaged with about 600 people on this project in one form or another. It was more than we thought possible during COVID-19…"[17]

CONCLUSION: EXPANDING THE WORK AND THE FIELD

This paper endeavors to position the work of DCDC in the broader context of community-engaged design and offer a framework developed through practice and partnerships. Responsive to context-specific assets as well as constraints, meaningful engagement builds relationships that enable residents to participate in design and planning processes. Lessons from this work continue to grow and are best learned in collaboration with community partners. DCDC seeks to expand the documentation and analysis of community-engaged design methods and their impact via a growing body of evaluative work folded into engagement activities and partner relationships. New knowledge sharing tools offer opportunities to co-create takeaways with partners and develop resources for peers in the field as well as students aspiring to enter the field.

> "All of us have different opinions and different ideas, but they were able to take those ideas, those differences, and pull them together to create something that we all could have a part in. The building has multiple uses in a small container. This little container…and when you open the lid, it just flows."
>
> —Mary, *The Avis & Elsmere Project: A Community-Engaged Design Tool*, 2020

ENDNOTES

1. Henry Sanoff, "Participation Purposes," Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning (2000).

2. Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Journal of the American Institute of Planners (1969).

3. Henry Sanoff, "Participation Purposes," Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning (2000).

4. Nick Wates, The Community Planning Handbook: How People Can Shape Their Cities, Towns and Villages in Any Part of the World. Earthscan Tools for Community Planning, 2000.

5. De la Pena, et al. Design as Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity. Island Press, 2017.

6. PolicyLink's "Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities" expands upon key benefits of engagement including: legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects; improved community/government relations; deeper understanding of the issues; increase community capacity; reduced long-term costs; democracy in action.

7. Sheri Blake, Detroit Collaborative Design Center: amplifying the diminished voice. Sou International, 2006.

8. Detroit Future City, 2012.

9. Detroit Future City, 2012.

10. PolicyLink's "Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities" recognizes the following key principles: honor the wisdom and experience of residents; treat participants with integrity and respect; be transparent about motives and power dynamics; share decision making and initiative leadership; engage in continuous reflection and willingness to change course.

11. ISWD promotes youth and community development through cultural and place-based initiatives in Southwest Detroit. Starting in 1999 with The Alley Project (TAP), a transformation of vacant lots and alley to a graffiti art gallery and gathering space, ISWD continues to support programming ranging from media and storytelling to youth programming via Young Nation. Avis and Elsmere entails the re-design of a small commercial building that houses the program space of ISWD and includes space for neighborhood businesses. The design extends to a vacant lot across the street, which will feature a skating plaza and performance space as well as seating areas. The community design process led by DCDC included a series of workshops with a key group of neighborhood stakeholders and informed schematic design. Et al. Collaborative, the Architect of Record for this project, was an active partner throughout the engagement process, and brought the design to fruition after the community, DCDC, and Et al. Collaborative completed schematic design. The process and engagement are document as a resource here: https://www.insidesouthwest.com/participatory-design-educational-tool

12. Erik Howard, The Avis & Elsmere Project: A Community-Engaged Design Tool, https://www.insidesouthwest.com/participatory-design-educational-tool. This tool was created in 2021 by Julia Kowalski and Erik Howard, with contributions from Mary, Freddy and Nyasia.

13. ibid

14. ibid

15. Mary, The Avis & Elsmere Project: A Community-Engaged Design Tool.

16. These areas of emphasis for engagement during COVID were developed in conversation with peer organizations in Memphis and Fresno, through conversations made possible by The Kresge Foundation.

17. Pamela Turner, "Vanguard CDC finds new ways to engage Detroiters on community projects during COVID-19," August, 2021. https://www.secondwavemedia.com/features/vanguard-community-development-covid.aspx