

# Towards a Community-Led Design Studio: Cultivating Relationships and Stewarding Projects

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**ABSTRACT:** : In its second year, an urban design studio works with community members on neighborhood design, in an area grappling with a complex history of displacement, violence, racism and redlining resulting in sustained poverty, inequitable wealth accumulation and inequitable public investment. The studio goal is to catalyze a paradigm shift in urban design towards equitable design. The studio embraces a community-led, long-term approach to developing and implementing sustainable and just urban plans that reflect the values, concerns, priorities and ideas of residents, youth, businesspeople and community organizations. The project is a partnership between the university/college/school of architecture and several community organizations.

In response to the student evaluations of and community participant reactions to the 2021 studio community engagement approach, the research team aimed to design a community-led process centered on sustainability and equity for the 2022 studio. The studio engaged in a variety of methods to recruit participants, to develop appropriate pedagogy, to develop community co-design methods, and to work with community organizations. This paper describes and evaluates the successes and limitations of 2022 project, presenting proposed approaches for 2023.

**KEYWORDS:** Community engagement, Community-led, Participatory design, Design studio, Urban Design

**PAPER SESSION TRACK:** Planning, Policy, and Resilience or Pedagogy

## INTRODUCTION

The fall 2022 design studio, *Investing in North Minneapolis* is the second year of a four-year design research project that seeks to co-create sustainable and just urban designs with the community that reflect its values, concerns, and priorities. In contrast to existing urban design practices driven by city professionals and developers, this project aims to foreground a grass roots urban design approach. The 2022 studio methodology builds on the findings from undergraduate studios on urban design in fall 2021 (Robinson et al, 2022, [investinginnorthmpls@info](mailto:investinginnorthmpls@info)), and on work preventing of youth involvement with the justice system in 2018-2021 (Robinson and Price, 2021, [designforyouth@info](mailto:designforyouth@info)).

The project is organized around North 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which connects Theodore Wirth Park to the west to the Mississippi River to the east. Minneapolis is a culturally diverse neighborhood, and home to various migrant and immigrant groups both international and from within the United States. As a result of displacement, natural disasters, violence, racism, and redlining, and inequitable public investment, the economic disparities between this neighborhood and nearby white areas of the city are extreme. The studio goal is to catalyze a paradigm shift in urban design towards equitable design. by co-creating designs with community participants that develop existing and new sustainable community structures to serve all incomes and enable wealth-building as a part of developing the civic commons (American Planning Association, 2022, Minneapolis Parks Foundation 2023).

### 1.0 Studio Fall 2021

In 2021, in addition to an architecture faculty member, and a community engagement research expert from the University of Minnesota, the research team consisted of a leader of a neighborhood group, a local businessman, and a developer. Funding was provided by the developer and the neighborhood group to support recruitment and stipends for community participants and youth interns. The community recruiter identified 10 community participants, and one intern. During the semester, an alliance with a community gardening organization led to another five community participants for the last half of the semester. Students were concerned to have more age diversity since most of the participants were estimated to be over 50 years of age. Responding to the students' concern, an alliance with a housing organization for post-high school youth generated five young adults in their twenties who joined one review and another of whom also attended a second review.

Due to the pandemic, community meetings and project reviews took place using Zoom. The one-and-a-half-hour community meetings did not include professionals other than team members, while reviews were four hours, and included BIPOC professionals, university researchers and instructors, and community members who chose to join, usually three or four from each group, divided into two review teams. While successful for reviews, this did not work well for community meetings designed to incorporate a Geodesign approach that uses GIS maps to develop and share designs (Steinitz 2012). Remote meetings did not allow manipulation of design elements, so co-design was not possible. Design ideas were presented and responded to, leading instead to community-informed design. Furthermore, while a Geodesign approach typically includes several types of community group, this group was exclusively residents. Additionally, the community participants did not appreciate large scale design representations on a map or bird's eye perspective, which led us to develop urban design projects that addressed residents' concerns for their neighborhood, without a comprehensive mapped urban plan typical of a Geodesign project.

The student projects in fall of 2021 included three urban scale projects addressing street design, three projects addressing housing (2 middle housing projects and one project for young adults homeless, coming out of foster care or coming out of detention), two projects addressing after school programs, one project addressing business development, two projects addressing food and agriculture and one project addressing development along the river ([investinginnorthmpls@info](mailto:investinginnorthmpls@info)).

### **1.1. Evaluation of the 2021 project -Community Research**

Project Team member Timothy Griffin took the opportunity to evaluate the project as a part of a methodology class for his PhD studies. He looked at the experience of the predominantly Black community members interacting with the predominantly white University of Minnesota undergraduate architectural design class that focused on Northside Minneapolis community design issues, needs, and opportunities. The research method consisted of interviews with four North Minneapolis community members who participated in the studio, questioning their experience participating in this conversation, asking 1) how the final student projects reflected community issues, needs, and opportunities (in the student work); 2) if student ideas were helpful in furthering the North Minneapolis agenda; and 3) if and how the student-community relationship as it changed over the course of the semester.

The research findings and recommendations were helpful in adjusting the studio 2022 syllabus. There was a strong desire to have students, presenters, and teachers of color more involved in the future. Community issues, needs and opportunities were nicely represented in student work and student projects reflected community comments and illustrated ideas for a community agenda. These exhibits of student work were seen as potentially creating a catalogue for community members and organizations to advocate specific development projects and redevelopment policies. A recent example is the 2022 announcement of the NEON (Northside Economic Opportunity Network) Food Hall, which inspired the design of a 2021 student project now shown on the project website.

While there was too short a time to build a true relationship between students and community members, there was time for a respectful introduction of students and community participants. They advocated for relationship between community members and the University-based research team to be developed with more time in the community through additional class, research, and social engagement. North Minneapolis community wealth and overall wellbeing could improve with ongoing interaction with students and access to university resources to propose and support community development. Over time, a stronger community co-design tradition could emerge for University of Minnesota students and other institutions and organizations with more diverse student and practicing professional populations, such as Metropolitan State University and Dunwoody College of Technology, American Institute of Architects Minnesota (AIA-MN) National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) chapter and collaborating with community resident groups including youth and elders.

Finally, the University of Minnesota's anchor institution role in North Minneapolis could learn from the current effort to map the University of Minnesota's engagement footprint to deliver more inclusive and better outcomes for design students and North Minneapolis residents and organizations. The participant experience was positive and worthwhile. The community participant interviewees (s have) indicated a willingness to continue and recruit others for future class engagements. Additionally, the candidate pool of professional designers from previously excluded groups could be increased by early exposure and skill building for youth participants.

### **1.2. Evaluation of the 2021 project -Student Course Evaluations**

The 2021 studio students' assessment included many comments and suggestions. The students were disappointed in the lack of age diversity of the community participants and with the one-and-a-half-hour length of the Zoom meetings (employed to substitute for in-person meetings and scheduled to fit participants schedules). They were appreciative of the limited opportunity to work with the young people that was able to be arranged, but felt it was insufficient. Additionally, although happy with the project reviews, especially the two that took place in person, students found that the Zoom format of the community meetings limited constructive interaction with community members. In a previous studio some of the students had engaged in informal interviews with community members, and during the semester had sought to talk informally in the street with people in the neighborhood. They were angry and dissatisfied with the instructor's prohibition due to the pandemic being in full force, shooting taking place in the neighborhood, and concern about participating in extractive practices in this exceedingly well-studied neighborhood.

## 2.0. Studio Fall 2022

### 2.1. Approach

The 2022 studio goals were to deepen community engagement through relationships with community organizations and individuals, and to develop urban design methods that supported co-design and community-leadership. We committed to a three-to-five-year project. We also sought to foster connection between design students and community members to encourage collaboration. Students were asked to relate to the work as design stewards rather than design owners, and to see their work as a continuation of the research and design from previous studios.

Rather than start fresh, students were asked to review research and design work from the earlier studios and to address that work in their research and projects. We instructed students to view their projects in the context of earlier studio work and community ideas.

We held all instruction and community engagement in-person in response to the feedback from the fall 2021 studio that desired deeper relationships. The studio shifted from bi-weekly virtual meetings to weekly in person design sessions with youth interns and bi-weekly reviews with community member. This was possible due to the reduction of pandemic threat.

We took a multi-pronged approach to community engagement. Our project exhibits many of the justice approaches described by Cruz and Forman, including decolonizing knowledge, confronting inequality, and curating new urban pedagogies (2022). Perhaps most importantly, our approach collaboratively designs *with* the user, recognizing and employing user expert knowledge (Hoffman 2014:15-18). Also, the project aims to change the existing sequence of city planning from an unjust process that is generated by the city, to one that originates in the neighborhood. The normal planning process is controlled by the city, may include some citizen participation, but prioritizes economics of scale that benefit large white-owned developers. In contrast, our process originates in the neighborhood with an economic approach and scale that will directly benefit the neighborhood. This requires a leadership strategy and pedagogy that develops collaboration with local individuals and organizations so that the design studio's role is to manifest the neighborhood ideas in the form of urban plans and specific projects. That is why the project is several years in length, as developing relationships within the neighborhood, and creating designs that represent neighborhood goals and aspirations requires an investment of time in the place.

To achieve these larger goals in the context of the design studio and responding to the critical responses to the first year, we instituted several changes for 2022. First, the studio included six North Minneapolis youth interns from Northside Safety NET's Environmental Initiative program who worked with the university students during the fifteen-week semester. Additionally, in-person community engagement included five project reviews in class, two co-design events, participation in various community events, local tours, and interviews of community members by students. Weekly studio workshops with interns, bi-weekly reviews, and Saturday co-design events were held at Farview Park in the project area, to increase accessibility and comfort for interns and community members. Farview Park is considered a safe, welcoming community space, not associated with the university. The 2021 studio site was too far from the study area and had a history that induced negative community feelings. We will continue to use the city park community center for future studios and project exhibits.

To expand BIPOC leadership and representation that reflects the North Minneapolis community, the research team expanded to include a co-instructor, youth interns, and a community organizer from the neighborhood. Further, the class invited BIPOC presenters, professional reviewers, and community members.

### 2.2. Collaboration with Interns

To shift from community-informed design to community-led design we partnered with Michael Chaney and Project Sweetie Pie. This relationship that engendered collaboration with the five Northside Safety NET youth interns that brought a consistent youth perspective. Northside Safety NET is a multi-year internship program for North Minneapolis high school youth focused on green career exploration and leadership development. Prior to their participation in this studio, the interns participated in training focused on various environmental topic areas, like sustainable land care, forestry, and renewable energy. Furthermore, the interns worked closely with community members and organizations, like Project Sweetie Pie, to better understand the environmental context in North Minneapolis.

In "Stage 2" of the internship program, which coincided with the university's fall semester, Northside Safety NET interns worked with the graduate students at Farview Park one day a week for one and a half hours. They also participated in the two six-hour community co-design events. During the studio time, interns generated ideas with the students and provided feedback on their work (see Figures 1 & 2). The goal was to develop sustainable, community-based designs by blending the interns' experience of their community and expertise on environmental issues with the design expertise of the students.



**Figure 1:** Interns and Students Brainstorming at first Wednesday class  
*Photo by Anukriti Misra*



**Figure 2:** Intern Modeling Rain Garden Entry at 2<sup>nd</sup> Co-Design Event  
*Photo by Julia Robinson*

The integration of the Northside Safety NET interns from Environmental Initiative as community and sustainability experts proved critical to the design of this research approach. Students and university instructors participated in a two-hour training session to learn about best collaboration practices before the first meeting. The interns co-created design solutions in real time rather than community members informing the designs as in past studios. Their contributions as community and sustainability experts and as co-makers of designs enriched the proposals creating genuine co-authorship. The interns' participation on reviews alongside BIPOC professionals exposed them to the academic design process, as did visits to Rapson Hall at the University of Minnesota, once in the middle of the semester, and once at the final review (the end of the semester).

The studio benefited from the interns' feedback, but their involvement provided bi-directional value. Not only did the interns learn about the design process and architecture as a career, but they also gained confidence and developed the skills necessary to communicate their experiences to reach a tangible outcome.

That said, there were still challenges integrating the Northside Safety NET interns into the studio. As high school students, the Northside Safety NET interns were only able to join the last 1-1/2 hours of the studio after school on Wednesdays. Given the priority placed on community empowerment within the design process, it was also a challenge to provide appropriate time for communication between the interns, graduate students, community members and other participants and to facilitate relationship building ahead of design iteration.

We plan to expand collaboration with the Environmental Initiative interns, by changing the class time to start and end a half hour later on Wednesdays, and increasing the number of interns and adding another half hour of interaction. We expect the size of the studio class to increase as well.

### 2.3. Studio Pedagogy

The approach to student work and assignments was different in 2022, partly because we were instructing graduate students, but largely because we wanted to be cognizant of the distinction between teaching a typical urban design studio and using the studio to investigate community co-design methods. We emphasized hand-drawing and rough model-making to encourage our non-professional partners, both interns and other community members to join with us as designers and feel comfortable to develop their own skills. The project assignments, rather than prescribing outcomes the project assignments provided a container for creative content development.

Another concept fundamental to our studio was equity. We used the Just City values as a starting point, and the studio was influenced by projects on the Just City website (2022). As mentioned above, we defined the student role as steward of their project rather than author, and envisioned projects as connected to past and future research and design.

At the very beginning of the semester, we had two ungraded assignments. The first was to create a just studio arrangement. Using the Just City values as compared to the normal "first come, first served" studio desk arrangement, we charged the eight students to come up with an arrangement of desks and other studio furniture that would advantage every student. Then we asked them to complete the "Where I'm From" exercise from the Just City website as a way to become familiar with the values.

For our first project, in what in previous years had been separate exercises in precedent analysis and GIS mapping of neighborhood resources, became a single first exercise that asked students to critically explore precedents and research from the four previous studios that had worked in North Minneapolis, and the one previous year that focused on urban design. The purpose of the work was to develop a description of our study site at three scales, 1) urban, 2) neighborhood and 3) architecture and urban landscape. This work preceded the first Co-Design Event, where it was presented to community to start a conversation about the community assets and needs.





**Figure 3:** Drawings studying early designs for landscape proposal  
*Photo by Emily Sanchez*



**Figure 4:** Exploratory models explain project & generate discussion at a review  
*Photo by Julia Robinson*



**Figure 5:** Sketch models explore play space between house & alley  
*Photo by Marshall King*

The subsequent exercise, which we revised as students showed their work, asked students to interpret their findings and make some proposals for the neighborhood based on what they had learned from the first Co-Design meeting. The project “What is Important about North Minneapolis & Design Options” included the creation of a cognitive map, and a hand drawn eye-level perspective of their proposals. The first project review was held just before the second Co-Design event and gave students the opportunity to field test their ideas and ways to generate co-design (Figure 3). At this point, the students and interns had worked together two afternoons, and both groups were getting the hang of how to co-design together. The first review became a co-design event with reviewers including interns working on the projects.

Having learned from fall 2021 experience that the community members were more interested in urban design projects than urban design plans, in 2022 students were asked to develop urban designs at a landscape or architectural scale. While encouraged to link their designs to a neighborhood urban design, urban plans were not required of students. Additionally, in response to community interest in seeing immediate changes to the neighborhood, students were asked to develop small projects that could be implemented in the spring or summer.

The third exercise, Urban Design Proposal: Program and Site, asked students to develop a project proposal that addressed issues of concern to the community participants. Students were again encouraged to build upon past student work, but also to base their proposals in research about the neighborhood and precedent projects. There were three phases: programming, site analysis and proposal-making. Students again were encouraged to diagram, draw, and make models, both physical and digital. They used sketch models to explore different design alternatives and expressions (Figures 4 & 5). On Wednesdays they worked with the interns on developing the ideas and getting feedback on their applicability.

At the co-design events and in class various small projects were proposed, and some were lightly developed. As the end of the semester approached, a list of possible projects was compiled by the students and the two best ideas were chosen to pursue. One afternoon was designated for the interns and students to work on these together, with the goal of applying for project funding for construction in spring or summer.

The final project was to develop the students’ proposals as a buildable design. A list of possible deliverables was developed that included material at the three scales, and the requirement that projects be linked to research that supported their benefits to the community in terms of equity and sustainability. They were also asked to include experiential drawings at eye level that incorporated humans and activities. But students were given freedom to choose representations that showed their projects most effectively. The one requirement was for each student to design a summary board for their project in a format for exhibition of their work, to be shown in the community over the summer, and on the project website.

#### **2.4. Relationship with Community Organizations**

The 2021 students’ desires to talk with community members, and our awareness of the importance of collaborating with community organizations led us to contact thirty-nine local organizations over the summer. We sought to have them guide the design process by developing Community Liaisons that would recommend community participants and people willing to be interviewed, as well as providing advice on the organization of the community design events. Of this group, two community organizations became part of our research team, nine organizations participated in one or more liaison meetings, and representatives of seven joined in reviews or co-design events.

We had hoped for leadership of the Co-Design process from several of the organizations in the form of a group of Community Liaisons. In the end only the two organizations that joined the research team formally affiliated with the project, although representatives of seven organizations (ten people) attended one or more Co-Design events or reviews. Those that participated, had interests that coincided with ours, largely in connection with the site we had selected. However, many additional local organizations publicized our community design events, which demonstrated the potential for developing more relationships in the future.

Additionally, about ten Individual community members participated in both reviews and Co-Design Events, some from past years, some responding to publicity, as well as some community professionals. Combining students, interns, team members and community members, the Co-Design and Reviews were attended by between 21 and 28 total participants, with community members (including interns) comprising 50% of Co-Design events and 30- 40% of reviews. This next year we hope to further develop our relationships with community organizations and recruit more community participants through them, and directly through publicity.

Part of our relationship development with the community in summer and fall of 2022 was participating in community events. The summer exhibition of work from the previous fall was presented at a city-wide green summit (as well as at three community sites including the park center where we met all fall) helped to identify potentially interested people and organizations, as did a workshop with a local Green Zone taskforce.

In the fall students and faculty participated in several community events. In this third-year studio of our graduate program, in the 6<sup>th</sup> week, classes are canceled, and students travel. We took the opportunity to travel at home to deepen the relationship with the neighborhood. Prior to the travel week, we had tables at two or three fall community events. During and after our travel-at-home week we volunteered at a Project Sweetie Pie community garden, and at a community meal.

## 2.5. Community Engagement

In 2022, community engagement took place in-person at project reviews (Figure 6) and at Co-Design events (Figure 7). Community members who had worked with studios in previous years were invited to participate in reviews alongside professionals, although this year, there was no budget for participation, so people volunteered their time. Community attendance at co-design events was generated by publicity (press releases to news organizations and community organizations and by social media), and again was voluntary.



**Figure 6: Design Review #1**  
Photo by Emily Sanchez



**Figure 7: Co-Design Event #2**  
Photo by Lizzie Cai

Our engagement plan changed the character of reviews from evaluations of student work to co-design opportunities. We substituted the seven Zoom community participation meetings with five in-person reviews with community members and professionals, and two community-wide design events. In the end we had to cancel one review (due to participant burnout) so had four reviews, only one of which, the mid-term, was a traditional jury review. The others were round robin reviews in which the seven student projects were presented at individual tables in our meeting room, and reviewers and interns joined in a discussion with, and engaged in design with the students. Students developed questions and models that offered opportunities to draw, to use cardboard and clay for community members, interns and professionals to propose and respond to the work. Many reviewers used the provided forms to comment on the student work.

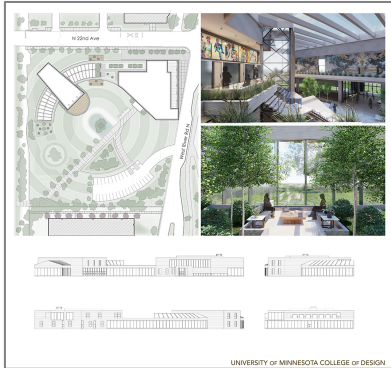
The Co-design community events were structured to provide background information in the morning, to have two community speakers participate in a discussion at lunch, and, to provide ideas and design input in the afternoon. After lunch at Co-Design event #1, participants voiced and drew their ideas for the community needs, and at Co-Design event #2, like reviews, participants responded to the student work with drawings, models and discussion. People who participated at the Co-Design Events were invited to the last three Wednesday project reviews.

Interaction with community members was essential to the work in the studio. The reviews and co-design events buzzed with activity and discussion. Although we would have liked to have more participants, those who worked with us were very generous with their time, expertise and candor. In addition to those who participated in the reviews and Co-Design events, students interviewed community members with expertise related to their projects. These contacts came from the organizations we had developed relationships with, from contacts provided by research team members and community participants, and from internet research.

In the end, many people interacted with the project to create a total of upwards of 50 community members and professionals. They contributed in a great variety of ways from serving as reviewers, co-design participants, organizers of volunteer events, speakers, participants in organization meetings, mentors and interviewees.

## 2.6. Stewarded Work

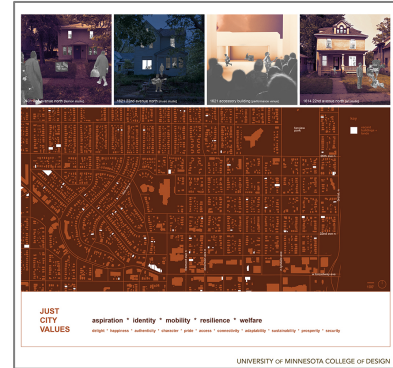
The range of projects reflected the diverse interests of the students resulting in 6 projects stewarded by individuals, and one project by a team. Issues addressed include mental health for young Black women (Figure 8) , peacemaking to reduce street violence (Figure 9), using vacated properties to develop live-work residences (Figure 10), developing 26th Avenue to create neighborhood identities, providing access to the river for fishing and celebration, developing co-housing in existing city blocks, and renovating a vacant middle school to create job training and housing for older youth coming out of foster care or detention.



**Figure 8: Wellness Center**  
Logan Schaub & Emily Sanchez



**Figure 9: Peace-Keeping Hub**  
Anukriti Misra



**Figure 10: Wealth Woven**  
Julia Freidrichsen

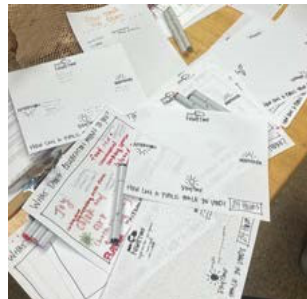
The three small projects revolved around 26th Avenue, one promoting connection to the river, the other developing trash receptacles, and the third a rain garden for Farview Park. One small project was selected for implementation, creating wayfinding to local resources for outdoor recreation.

## 2.7. Exhibition & Website

As in 2021, the student work will be shown in an exhibition to be developed in the spring and mounted in several community locations over the summer. The website and community exhibits are a way to publicize the idea of the Northside public commons, including investments in parks, institutions, connections and wealth building endeavors. The project website will be redesigned to integrate the additional research and student projects with past work, so that it can continue to serve as a repository for potential North Minneapolis investments.

## CONCLUSION

Working with the interns greatly enhanced the 2022 project. Focusing on building and landscape scale, we developed tools for active engagement with the interns that applied to co-design with the community as well. Some of these were: providing questionnaires that encouraged people to answer in words or images (Figure 8) models designed allowed participants to try out different design options (Figure 5), and provision of hands-on materials that participants could use to model their ideas (Figure 9).



**Figure 11: Pages with questions**  
used to elicit words and drawings  
*Photo by Emily Sanchez*



**Figure 12: Models made by community**  
participants to show their design ideas  
*Photo by Julia Robinson*

Defining the relationship to student projects as one of stewardship allowed students to see their projects as a shared design while also taking responsibility toward it. The students listened, as well as adopting and creating new approaches and new ideas that engaged with community values. The concept of building on past projects was supported in that students willingly examined and borrowed ideas from earlier projects, although no student decided to start from and develop a previous project.

The community participation was highly valued by the students, who took full advantage of the opportunities to ask questions and develop designs together. Identifying a wide set of organizations generated a great variety of expertise, design ideas and design goals for the students to address. Some participants had very specific projects they wanted the students to pursue (such as developing a music venue, creating a connection to a bike path, or developing the



26th Avenue corridor), while others were interested in addressing broader issues (e.g., neighborhood safety, support of the arts, growing healthy food, support of mental health, developing green space). The instructors encouraged students to develop new projects that manifest designs for the broader issues, concerned that taking up particular already-existing community projects might favor one part of the community over another.

In both 2021 and 2022 we had an average of 10 community participants at our meetings. In 2021 we had consistent community participation with the people recruited by our community liaison, no doubt due to the stipends we were able to provide to participants, but no regular participation by young people. This year we provided stipends to the interns but had to ask community members to volunteer their time. We believe participants should be given stipends, if at all possible, to support the time and expertise they are contributing to the project. Community participation will be increased if we can provide stipends to all. Therefore, we are seeking funds to support stipends for all community participants next year.

The best way to generate participation is through relationship building. For the future we would like to have more leadership from the community so that an even broader spectrum of people is involved. The project focus on community members is different from the Geodesign approach which promotes discussion between sectors like developers and government. Our goal is that the people that live and work in the community should envision their own future and then present their ideas to those responsible for building them, rather than compromise the ideas at the start with so-called realistic obstacles that may not be obstacles if seen in a different light.

Community leadership for this project is a long-term goal that we will work toward by continuing to engage with community organizations and individuals and by participating in community events. Already, the research team includes more community members to organize the project, which brings interns, individual community participants and students to steward North Minneapolis investments.

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