The City of Indianapolis, through the Department of Metropolitan Development, invited the graduate program in Design to collaborate on a project seeking to understand the experiences and desires of both users and stakeholders of the Downtown Canal Walk and surrounding areas. Multiple stages of a human-centered design process aimed to understand the past and present and reimagine the future of Indianapolis public spaces. This project focuses on two phases of the data collection process where, through a participatory design approach, people contributed with their vision for the future of Indianapolis.

The research framework for this project was the Herron Design Process Model. There are seven stages included in this model: Understand, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Evaluate, Plan, and Act. This summary concentrates on the Understand phase, defined as: “actively seeking opportunities in fuzzy situations through understanding people’s behaviors, experiences, and desires in context.”

How might we inform design research through participatory design approaches?

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Participants during participatory sessions and Open Innovation event.

Participatory Sessions
Through participatory sessions, the research team learned about users’ behaviors and experiences in the Canal Walk. Participants engaged in a series of generative activities, which enabled them to collaboratively and visually share their problems, insights, and desires in the area.

Open Innovation Event
During the Spring 2020 semester, students hosted an open innovation event to reimagine the future of downtown Indianapolis. The main goal was to include the perspective of the future workforce and ideas for places where people want to work, learn, and play. The session design included activities that facilitated divergent and convergent thinking amongst multiple groups of people. The main final output of the session was a set of scaled prototypes that respond to the criteria of being inclusive, impactful, and sustainable.