

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION-ORIENTED DESIGN AS A CATALYST FOR A CANADIAN COOPERATIVE HOUSING RENAISSANCE



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# Can a design methodology activate A Canadian housing cooperative renaissance?



The background of the slide is a blue-tinted photograph of a winter landscape. It shows a snow-covered ground, bare trees, and evergreens. In the distance, a small group of people can be seen on a path. The overall scene is serene and cold.

## Objectives:

- Produce alternative designs for coop reconfiguration
- Demonstrate a mixed use social economy model
- Test the hypothesis that design catalyzes action toward sustainability

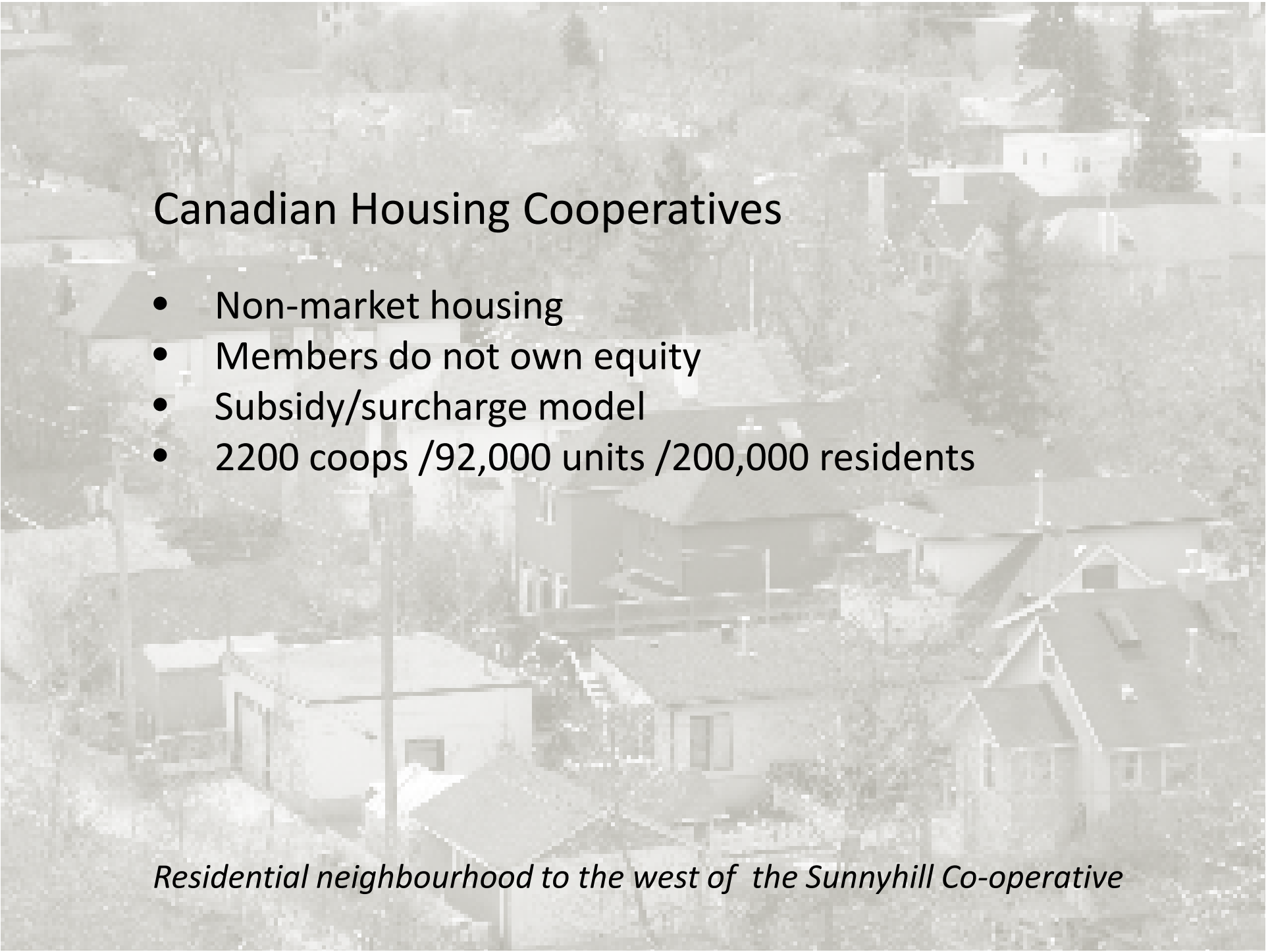
*Hillside trail north of the Sunnyhill Co-operative in winter*



## Intended outcomes:

- Enhancement of internal capacity
- Document incorporated into Vision 2020 exercise
- Design generates next steps
- Creation of an action research model

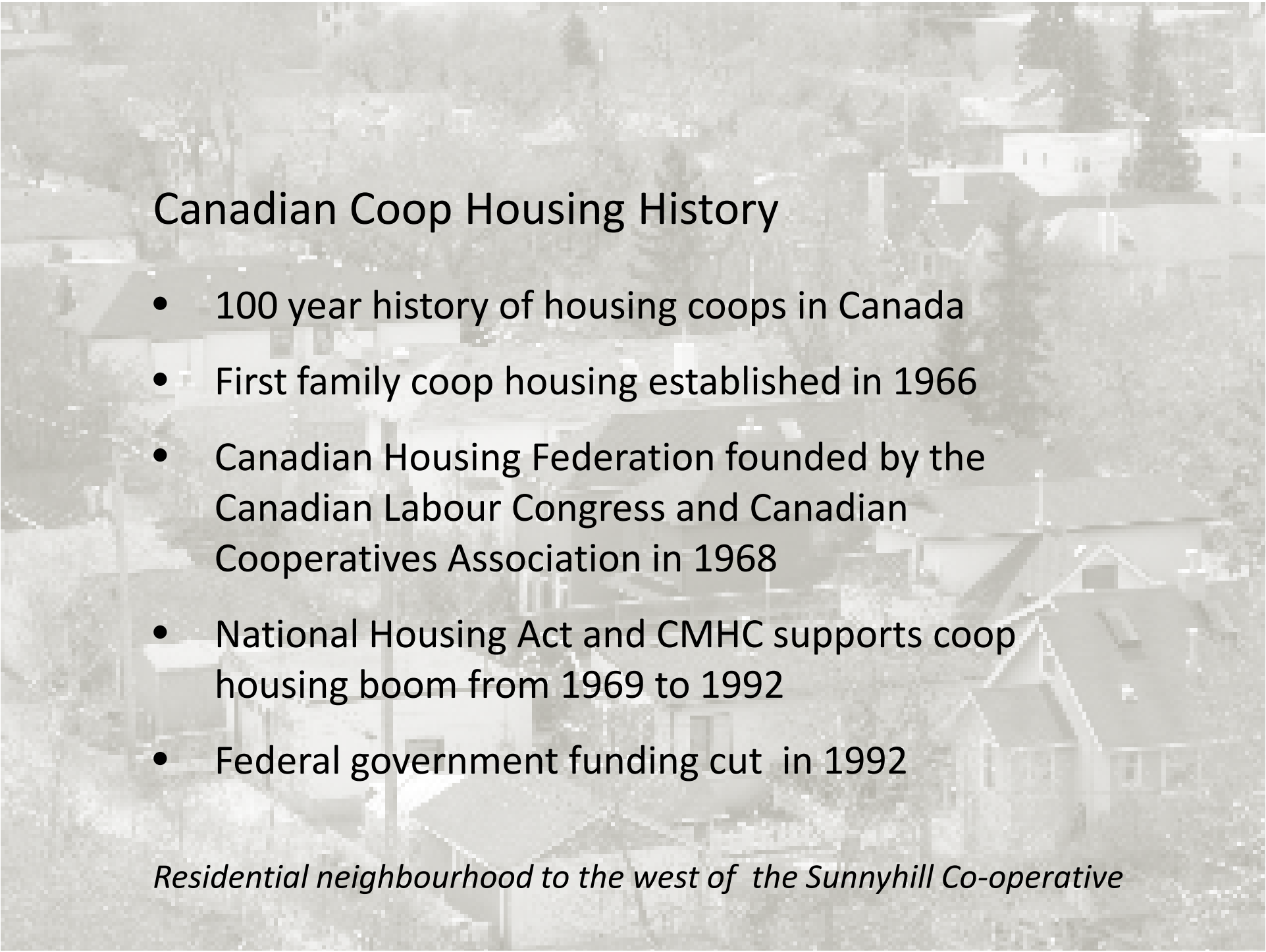
*Hillside trail north of the Sunnyhill Co-operative in winter*



## Canadian Housing Cooperatives

- Non-market housing
- Members do not own equity
- Subsidy/surcharge model
- 2200 coops /92,000 units /200,000 residents

*Residential neighbourhood to the west of the Sunnyhill Co-operative*



## Canadian Coop Housing History

- 100 year history of housing coops in Canada
- First family coop housing established in 1966
- Canadian Housing Federation founded by the Canadian Labour Congress and Canadian Cooperatives Association in 1968
- National Housing Act and CMHC supports coop housing boom from 1969 to 1992
- Federal government funding cut in 1992

*Residential neighbourhood to the west of the Sunnyhill Co-operative*

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a suburban neighborhood. The image shows a dense arrangement of houses with varying rooflines, interspersed with trees and greenery. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the community.

## The 2020 Vision Project

*“The co-ops we live in are getting older. The needs of co-op members are changing. With very few exceptions, we are not adding new co-ops to our sector”*

*“What kind of a co-op do you want to be in the year 2020?”*





## Sunnyside neighbourhood

- Inner city neighbourhood
- Circa 1900
- 5000 residents

# Sunnyhill Housing Cooperative

- 66 units
- Established 30 years ago
- Mortgage expires in 20 years
- Land lease expires in 30 years



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## **EVDS 702: Advanced Environmental Design Practice**

*The fundamental goal of 702 is to provide students with an opportunity to tackle contemporary environmental design challenges as part of an interdisciplinary design team.*

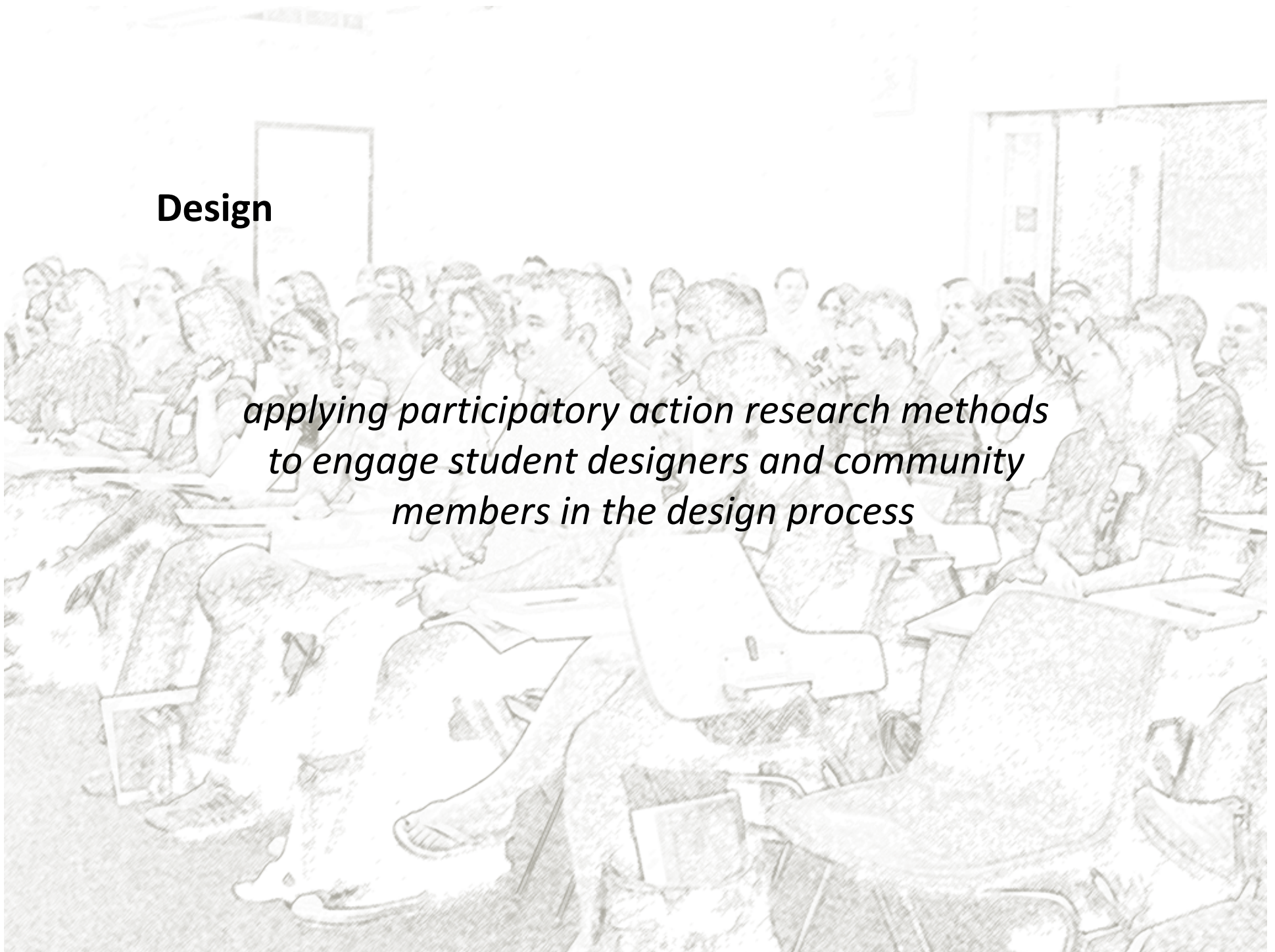
## Method

Two stages to the research: Design and Evaluation



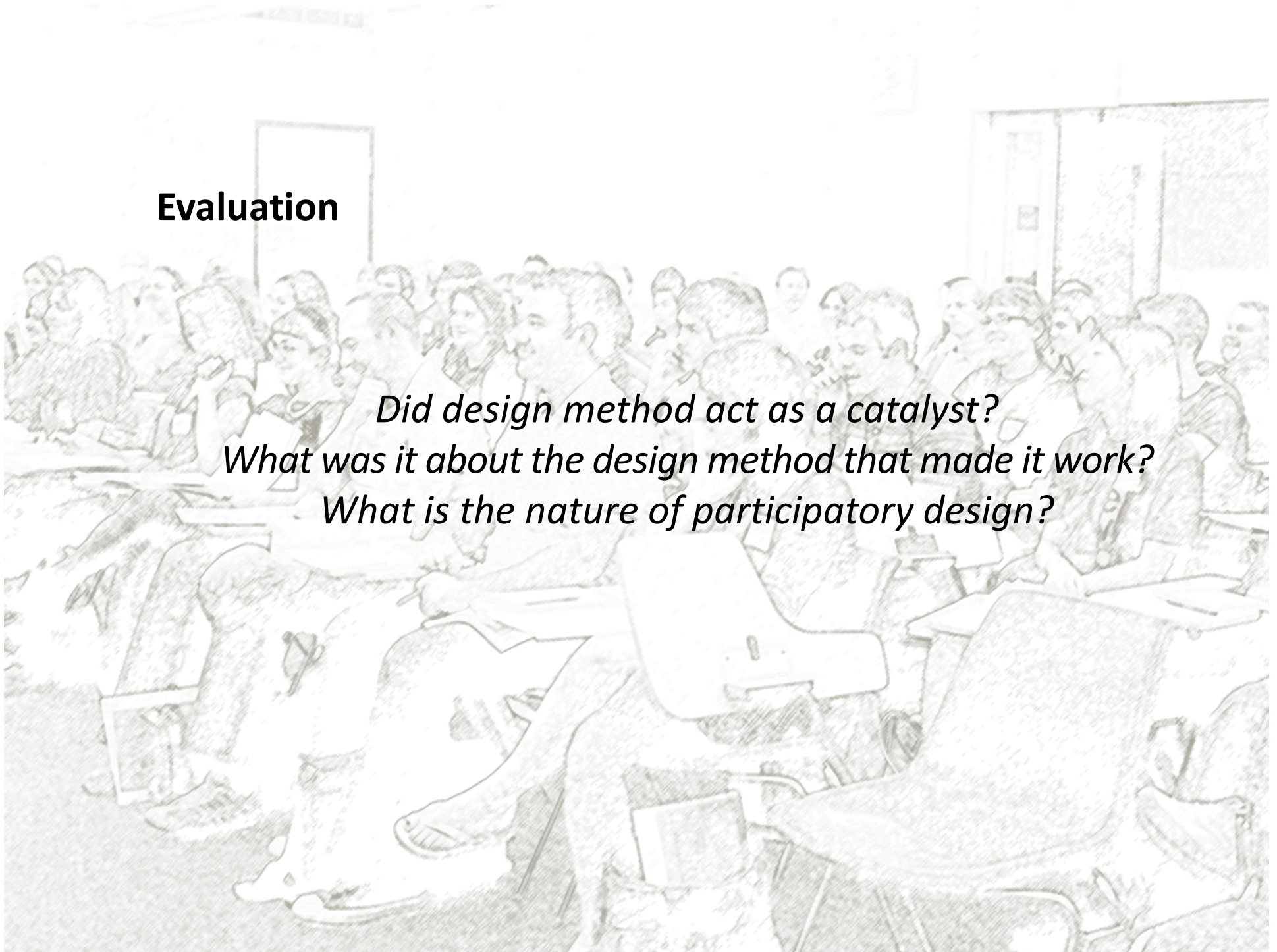
## Design

*applying participatory action research methods  
to engage student designers and community  
members in the design process*

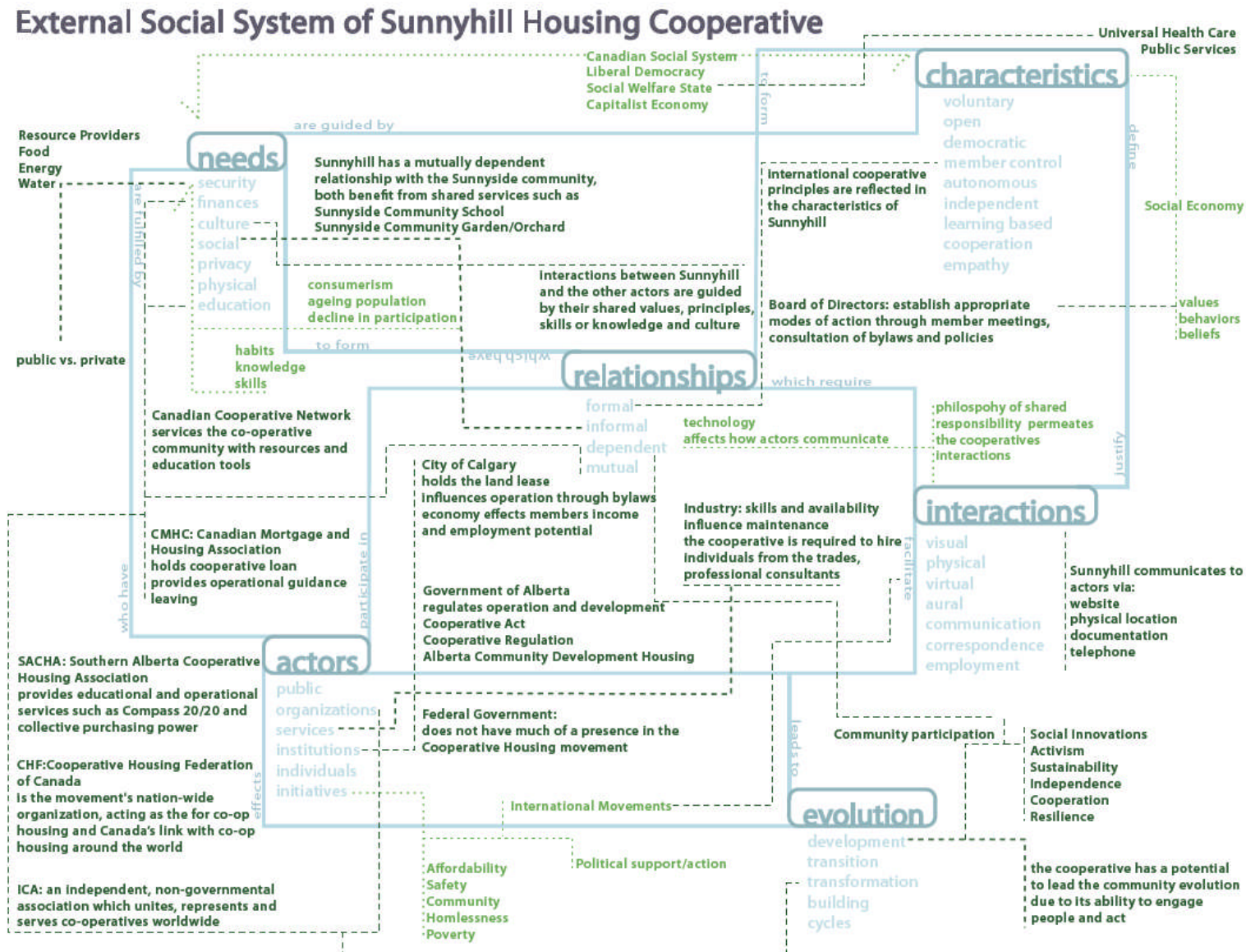


## Evaluation

*Did design method act as a catalyst?  
What was it about the design method that made it work?  
What is the nature of participatory design?*



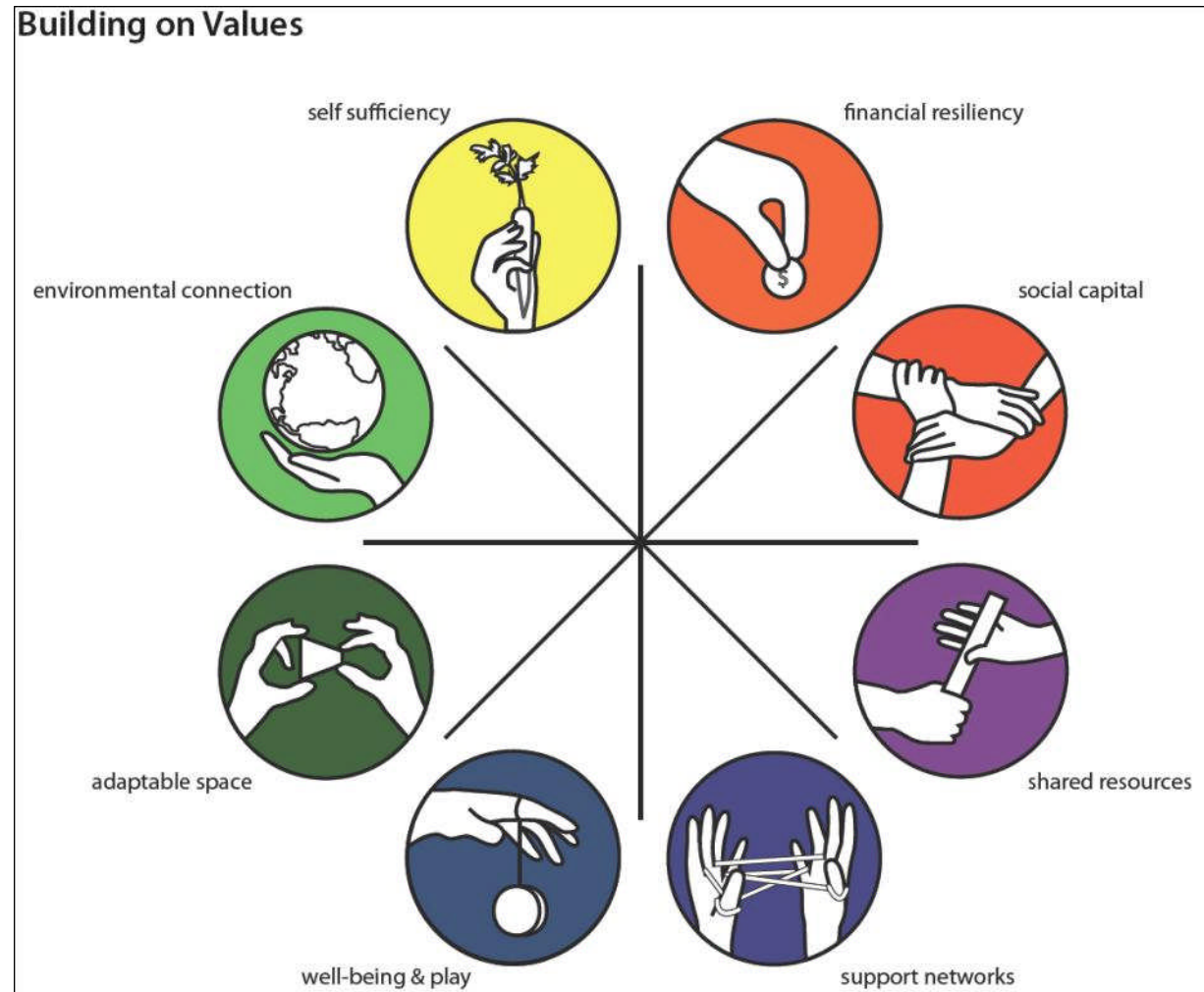
## Design Process: Systems and Context Analysis



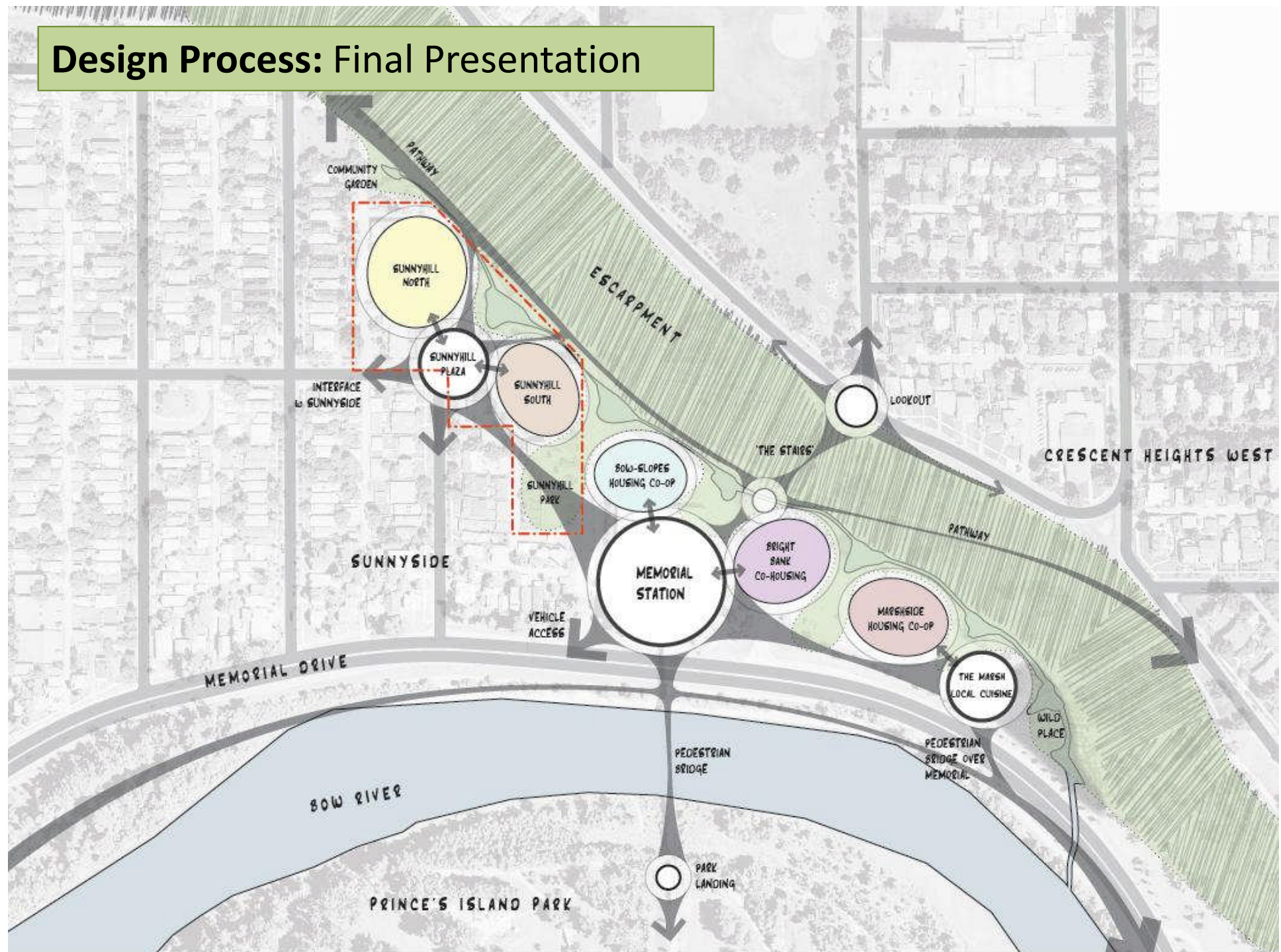
## Design Process: The Charette




# Design Process: Midterm Review



# Design Process: Final Presentation





## Evaluation:

- Student Survey
- Resident Survey
- Student Focus Group
- Resident Focus Group

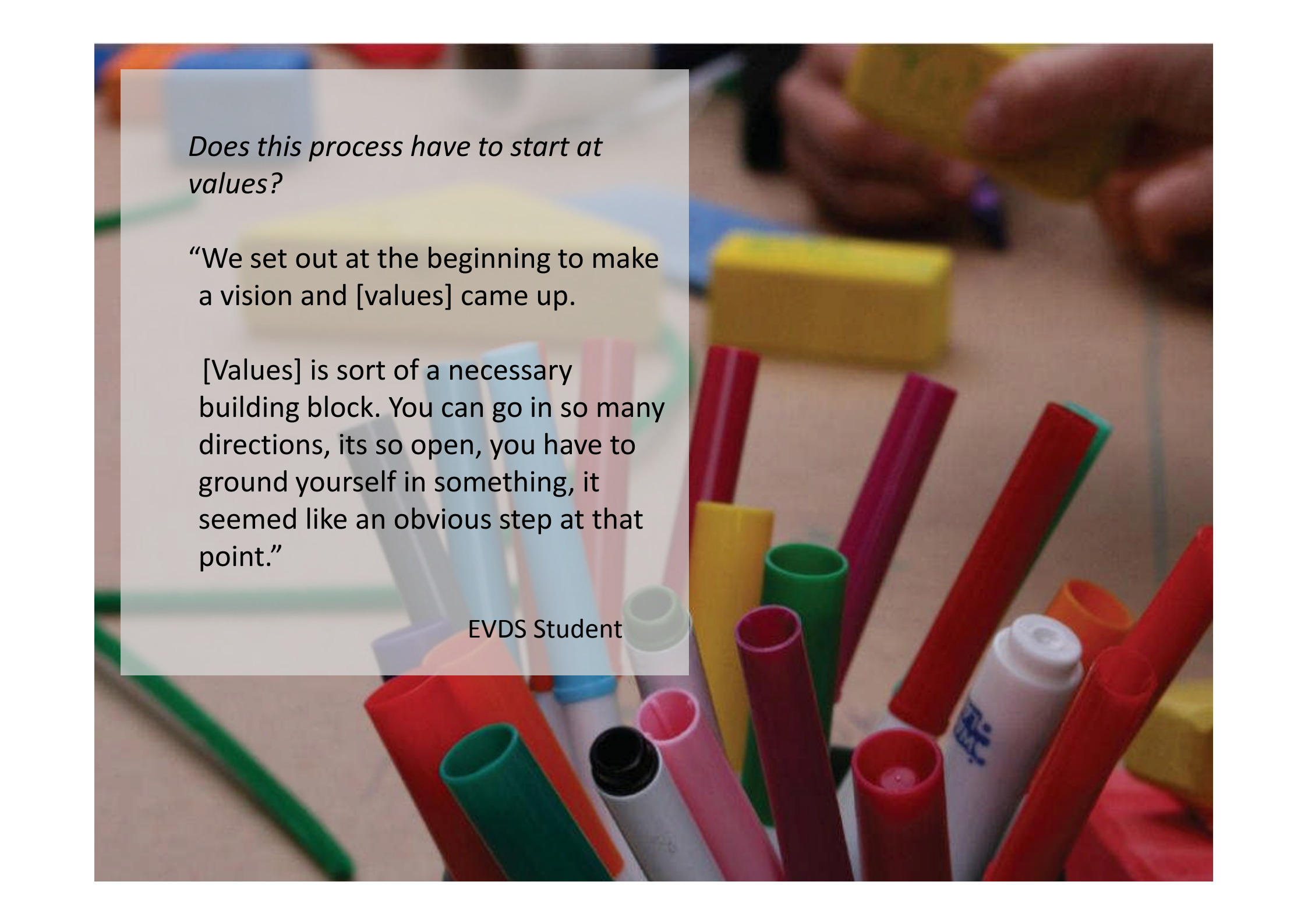
“I never received a notice like that before - we receive 4 or 5 a month. To receive a block told me this is going to be creative and interesting.”

## Coop Resident

“It was so much fun, what do I do with my block - where does this fit. Before I arrived I thought it would fit in a certain place or something. I was thinking the rest would be established. I wasn't thinking in the bigger picture - that everyone would be wondering where to put [their block]”

## Coop Resident




A background image showing a close-up of hands using various colored markers (red, yellow, green, blue) on a light-colored surface, likely a table. The markers are scattered, and some are being held by the hands. The image is slightly blurred, focusing on the text overlay.

*Does this process have to start at values?*

“We set out at the beginning to make a vision and [values] came up.

[Values] is sort of a necessary building block. You can go in so many directions, its so open, you have to ground yourself in something, it seemed like an obvious step at that point.”

EVDS Student



“The excitement we tapped into was important - the invites and the blocks and the colours . . . We were dealing with an established community and it was important to engage them”

“The hands on blocks exercises gathered more about values than spatial organization - when things became spatial it brought out value decisions through arranging blocks - things that didn't matter weren't brought to the forefront - it forced people to make choices”

EVDS Students

“we put a lot of trust into it when they told us that was a good way of living and was worth sustaining. We believed that, and that was important”

EVDS Students

“Those students were fantastic, they were encouraging to us. You never felt like this is our project and you guys need to be cooperative because we need to get this project done. They were all excited when the charette was happening. Their energy was palpable.”

Coop Resident



“we pushed people outside of their comfort zone.”

“Was it critical to establish that trust? Yes. You’re familiar enough that you can try something new with somebody and take that step together”

EVDS Student

# visioning sunnyhill


## Group Statement

It is our goal to provide the Sunnyhill Housing Co-operative with an interdisciplinary design vision that will offer inspiration, direction, and advocacy as they confront future opportunities and challenges.

Throughout our process we will seek to celebrate, cultivate, and embody the spirit of Sunnyhill and its members.

*[Signatures]*


## Sunnyhill Housing Cooperative, Calgary AB




The Sunnyhill Housing Cooperative was established in 1976, in the Calgary neighbourhood of Sunnyside. Sunnyhill was built through partnerships between a citizen's group concerned with maintaining families in the city core, The Hillhurst - Sunnyside Community Association, The City of Calgary and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Today, the Cooperative offers affordable, quality homes to a diverse population of approximately 150 residents.

## Charrette


More than 100 people took part throughout the day (2/3 of the co-op)




## Architecture (material & character exercise)



## Dislikes



## Likes



'Eye Spy' (photo documentation by residents)

## 'Block Party' (programming & spatial organization)




## Convergence: A Call to Action

Over the next two decades, Sunnyhill will be faced with several significant challenges and opportunities.

- The mortgage will be paid off in 2029
  - How will the surplus funds be directed?
- Land lease (from the City of Calgary) expires in 2039
  - How can sunnyhill legitimize their presence on valuable land as medium-density residential?
- How can existing land be optimized to improve outdoor space, offer common space, and offer the potential for intensification?
- What path will the cooperative pursue to maintain or update their 30-year old housing stock?



## Building on Values

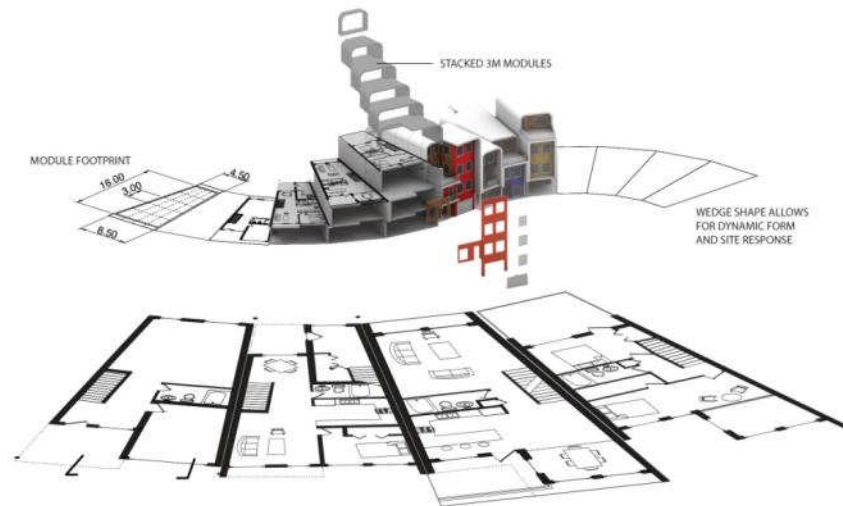


“we usually spend so much time hammering out one sentence in two hour meetings and to only be asked to participate and creative and think and talk and share ideas without any letters to write or reports to complete..... and somebody comes back to you and goes here look at this. Wow!”

Coop Resident

## housing concept

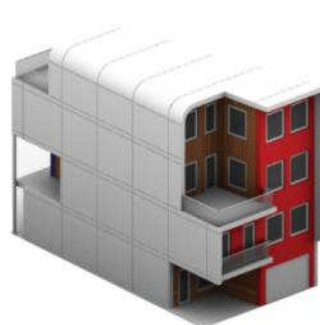
### System Overview



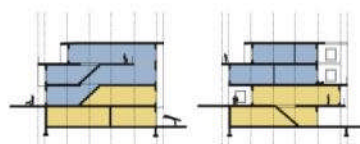
### The Modular Process



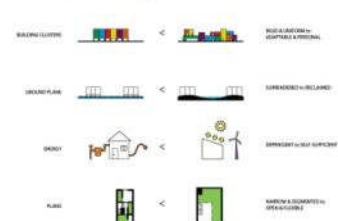
### Finished Unit



### Sectional Flexibility



### Pattern Book: Housing Scale



A prefabricated, modular unit has been designed to respond to the ever-changing needs of the Sunnyhill residents. The wedge shape of the residential units enables either a straight or circular form to emerge, making them adaptable to a given context and responsive to site conditions. This size of the module ensures that each module can be easily transported and placed on site. The modules are built off-site and brought in as needed. For resident's ease and quality control, the modules are to be built to a move-in-ready state.

Prefabricated modules are an affordable option given the economies of scale in the manufacturing process and the collective buying power of the Cooperative. There is an opportunity for Sunnyhill to partner with a modular housing manufacturer and become a demonstration site for their product.

“We could have shown them thirty different futures that would have [excited()] them. So it’s not the specific design proposal but the fact that there was one that had the most impact. In a way the same thing [happened] with the charrette, it wasn’t the activities we did but the fact there were activities.”

EVDS Student

## site development



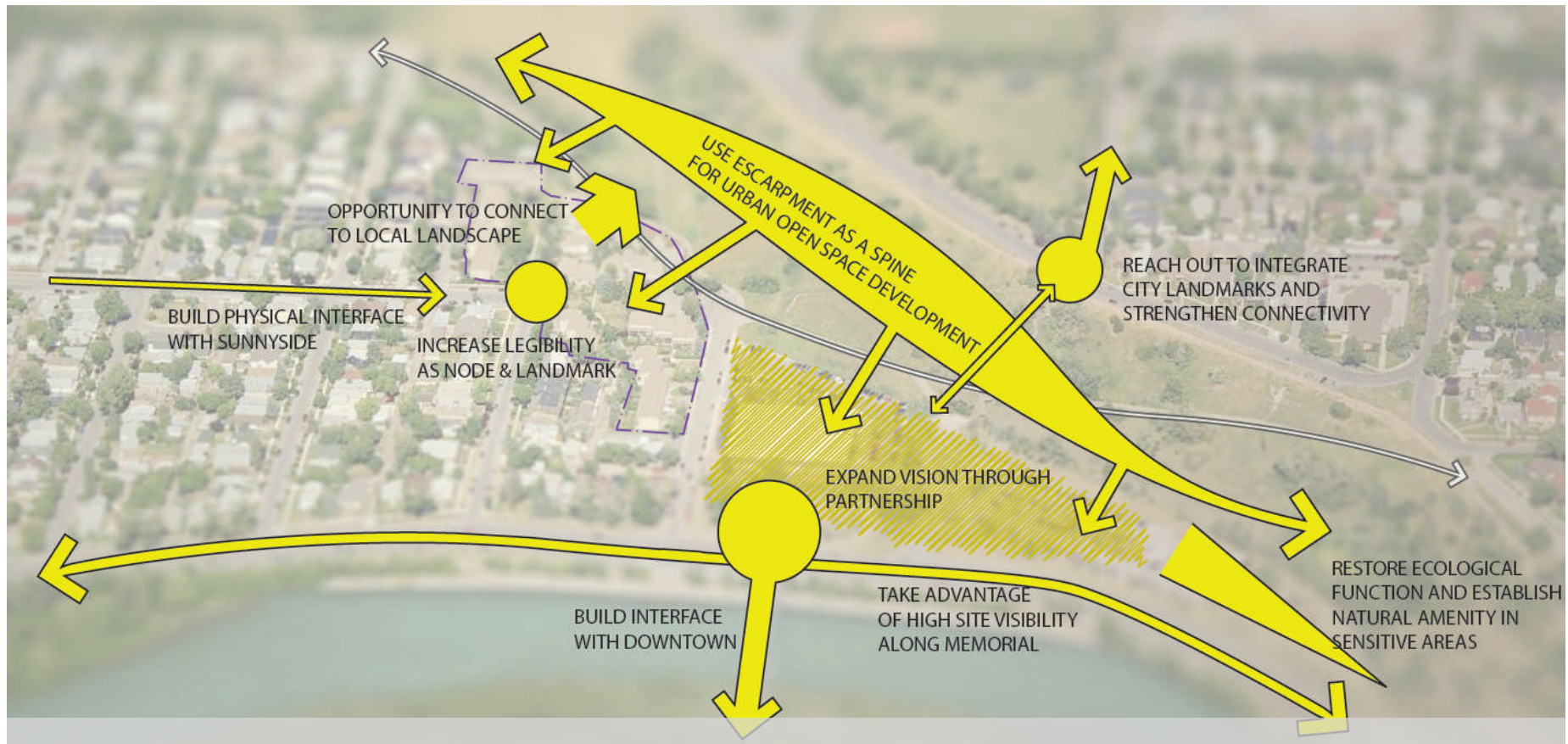


“The charette focused on design. It took us in a different direction than processes and policies... lets talk about what do we look like.”

Coop Resident

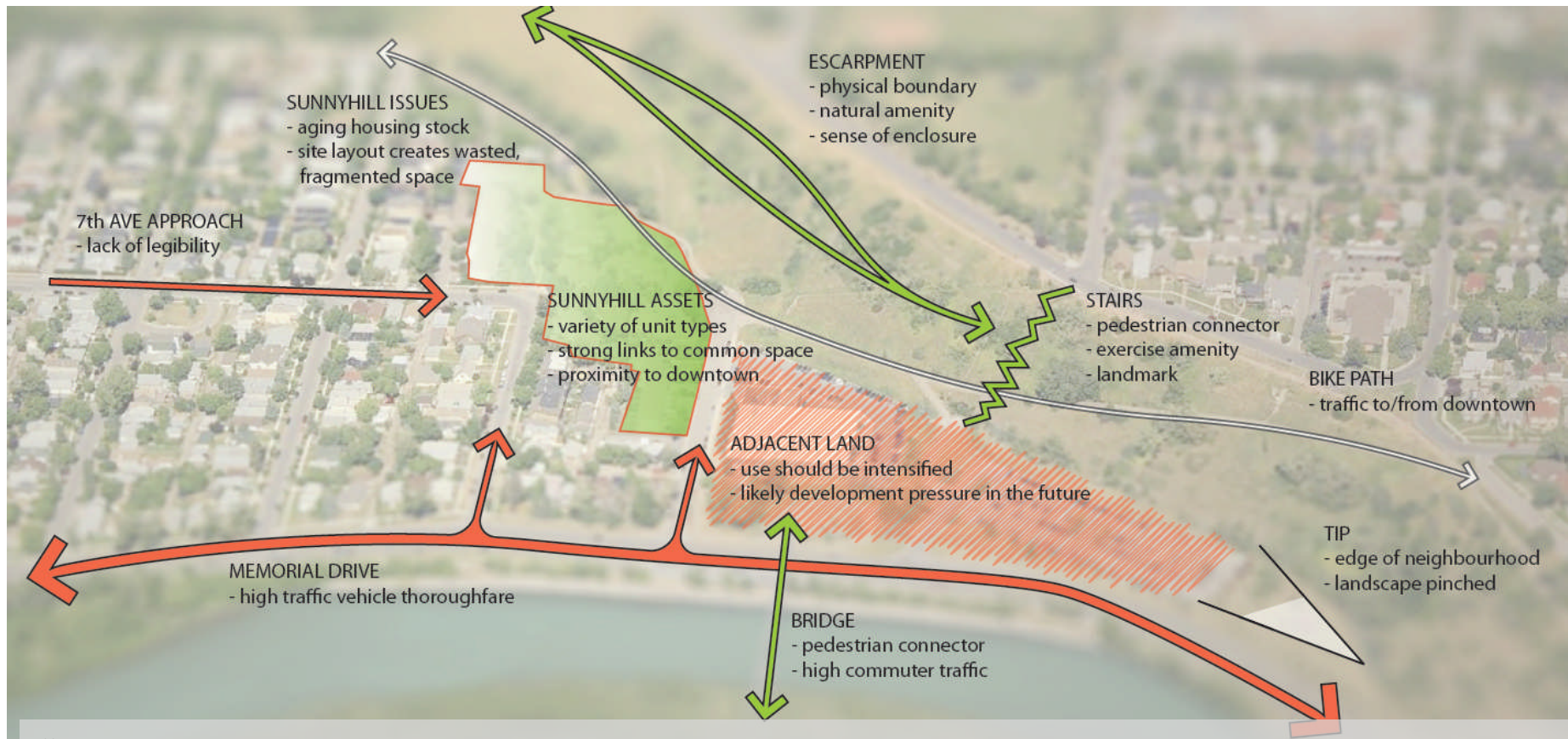
“It’s not necessarily the exercises we did in the tent that pointed towards the design methodology, but the fact that, we right away decided we were going to set up a tent . . . I think the key is that we had an event”

EVDS Student



“they completely awakened us up to our **environment** not just our buildings. Oh we have a bluff and oh we have a river on the other side, we are part of Sunnyside **community**, and now that gives us a completely different perspective”

Coop Resident



“So **people are having a conversation**, when we are at meeting and people are like have you seen those? I don’t know about the modules, I kind of like this better... I don’t know if we need that kind of a pond and what do we want with the hill? How does that bluff fit into it because we never talk about the bluff as part of the coop.”

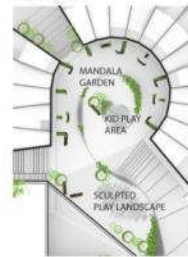
Coop Resident

“Challenge is to consider that we have a role to play as the east gate of Sunnyside as the welcoming portal on the east end of that connects downtown with the NW Calgary, I don’t know whether any of us ever had that in our heads before”

Coop Resident

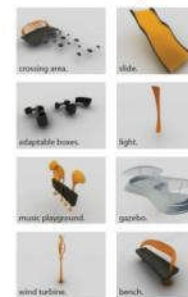
## outside spaces

North Plaza



The interior of the residential nodes contains semi-public green space designed to encourage interaction between Cooperative members. Each node contains a defined garden and a highly visible play area for small children. Residents can delineate an area of personal outdoor space in the front of their units with mutable boxes. The boxes serve as planters, storage and waste collectors.

Public Furniture Concept



Sunnyhill Park is designed to facilitate play activities for all ages, across the four seasons. While the focus is on fun, special attention is given to the security of children in the space. The water channel acts as a barrier between the city pathway and the play area, and the space is highly visible from the community building above.



Sunnyhill Park



View From the Escarpment



“one of the things this did inspire with one of our coop members . . .

‘I see a coop school and already we are generating ideas – we hook up with Calgary Coop- we hook up with First Calgary because we actually have a location that is a living coop and we get support to teach kids and aldermen, go to coop school and they come and they spend a week and they find out how do coops work.’

Coop Resident

# landscape & urban structure

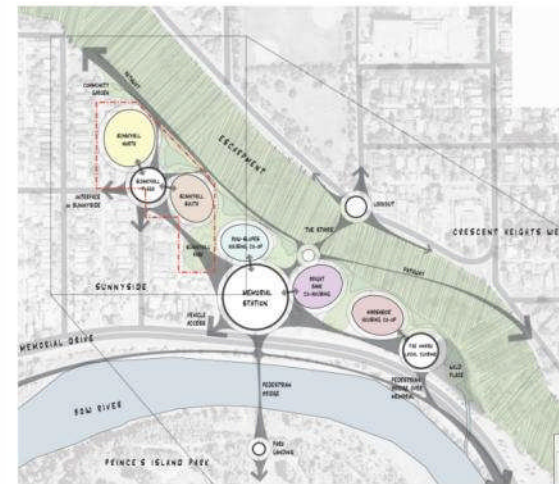
## Assets & Issues



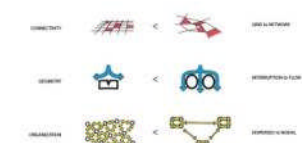
## Opportunities



## District Concept: Landscape Fingers & Connected Residential Nodes



## Pattern Book: District Scale



## The District Masterplan: Partnerships & City-Building

This long-term strategy provides an opportunity for the Sunnyhill Housing Cooperative to act as a leader and partner in the development of affordable housing and integrated urban spaces. Drawing on Sunnyhill's rich history, the community can sustain itself and enhance city-building in Calgary through collaboration and creative partnerships.

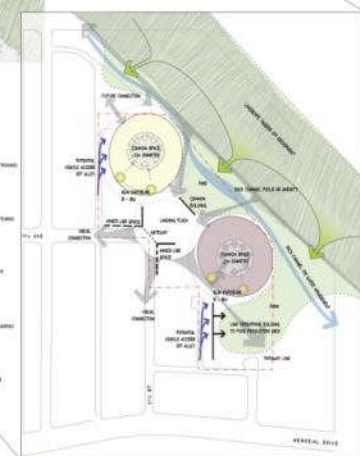
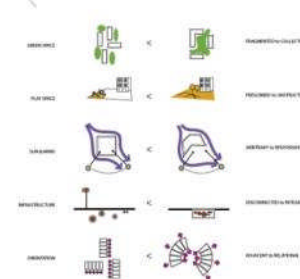
- Potential of adjacent properties
- Ecologically responsive
- Physical interface with Sunnyside and the City of Calgary
- Options for affordable and alternative housing models

## Sunnyhill Site: Collecting Space

The current Sunnyhill site holds immense opportunity to develop a built form that celebrates the strengths of the site and reflects the values and cooperative spirit of residents. The Sunnyhill site plan presents an achievable vision for maintaining the Cooperative at its current location while ensuring a resilient community for the future.

- Community building
- Integrated green spaces
- Ecologically responsive
- Pedestrian connectivity
- Consolidated parking
- Varying degrees of privacy
- Interface with Sunnyside and the city centre

## Pattern Book: Site Scale





“We have been putting money aside to redo things that have to be done – our kitchens, our appliances . . . Now when we are doing the 2010 budget in our back pocket we would say.... we wanna redo our windows, they are chilly and cold and drafty . . . [ But] why would we sink 300,000 into redoing windows if in fact what we want is totally new buildings.”

“The newer members who are thinking whoa! This is why I moved into a coop”

Coop Residents



“One thing that strikes me too is this kind of continuum of study and play, or of scientific method and artistic method and where does design sit . . . it may be on the more playful end or maybe on the more studied scientific end . . . but there’s still rigour”

EVDS Student



## Summary of Main Findings:

- A Cooperative/Social Economy vision of a Mixed Urban Community
- Values convergence between students and coop members was vital
- Participatory process combined design skills of students with experiential knowledge of the coop
- Successful Catalyst? Yes. Changed attitudes. Changed and expanded perceptions. Inspired action

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a suburban neighborhood. The image shows a dense arrangement of houses with varying rooflines, interspersed with trees and greenery. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the community.

## **Summary of Main Findings:**

- Design process attuned coop members to the importance and potential of its context
- The Coop has moved from an inward-looking to a more expansive and ambitious perspective.
- Clarification of missing pieces: Financial management, advocacy and member recruitment
- Design makes a difference – an embodied event.

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a suburban neighborhood. The image shows a dense arrangement of houses with varying rooflines, interspersed with trees and greenery. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the community.

## **Activity Theory**

Mind – body – spatialization

Embodiment and pleasure - place

Embedded or chained activities

## Activity Theory

three iterations of the subject-objective-tool dynamic:

1. *Instructor (subject) – Student learning (objective) – design action research pedagogy (tool)*
2. *Students (subject) – coop member mobilization (objective) – design method (tool)*
3. *Coop membership (subject) – coop transformation (objective) – design method (tool)*

“They never had been able to see Sunnyhill except with those buildings - never been able to get around that particular idea”

EVDS Student

“I think what is did was change the social dynamics”

EVDS Student

“Its given us a new sense of the extent to which we can dream”

Coop Resident

