

# **A Proposed Curriculum for the Wildrock High School Leadership Program**

**Alexa Angelo, Willow Davies, Sabiya Davis, Neeka Samimi, Keren Shi**

**In Partnership with Carolyn Schuyler**



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## **Executive Summary**

The following report describes a community-based partnership facilitated through Barbara Brown Wilson's course, Community-Engaged Methods, with a student team at the University of Virginia assisting Wildrock to create a design thinking process curriculum for Charlottesville High School Students to design pop-up parks.

Here, we detail a partnership between Carolyn Schuyler and Wildrock (community partner) and five University of Virginia students (student partners), Keren Shi, Willow Davies, Alexa Angelo, Neeka Samimi, and Sabiya Davis. The research team is composed of graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Virginia in Urban and Environmental Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Public Policy programs.

Central to the project's mission is to create a reproducible curriculum to engage with high school students so they can bring their best to plan and create neighborhood pop-ups. With the curriculum, we hope we can support students to be design leaders in the future.

The project began on September 11, 2021, and was completed by December 7, 2021.

The student partners would like to thank Carolyn Schuyler and Barbara Brown Wilson for helping establish, support, and encourage this partnership and research effort.



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## Project Overview

Wildrock is a nonprofit dedicated to promoting nature play for health and happiness. Their goal is to introduce children of all ages and their families to the wonders of the natural world and the powerful mental, physical, and emotional health benefits that are felt by creating a relationship with nature.

Wildrock has begun to partner with Charlottesville High School students in order for the high schoolers create pop-up parks for younger children in the city. Pop-up parks are temporary installations which allow for children to play in urban spaces like parking lots. Wildrock initiated this project with the University of Virginia and its students in order to help guide high school students toward a well-rounded understanding of equity and inclusion, and how to incorporate community-based research into the world of design. Our mission here was to create a reproducible curriculum to engage with the students so they can develop their own ways to plan and create neighborhood pop-ups.

This concept came to fruition after meetings with the Wildrock team. Our original intent was to meet regularly with the students virtually and during the neighborhood pop-up events, but due to scheduling conflicts we decided the best course of action would be providing a curriculum that we could work on asynchronously. Providing Wildrock with a uniform curriculum will allow for a self-guided and individually-paced learning process between all students who currently participate in the program as well as future students who enter the program.



## **Project Contributors**

### **Carolyn Schuyler**

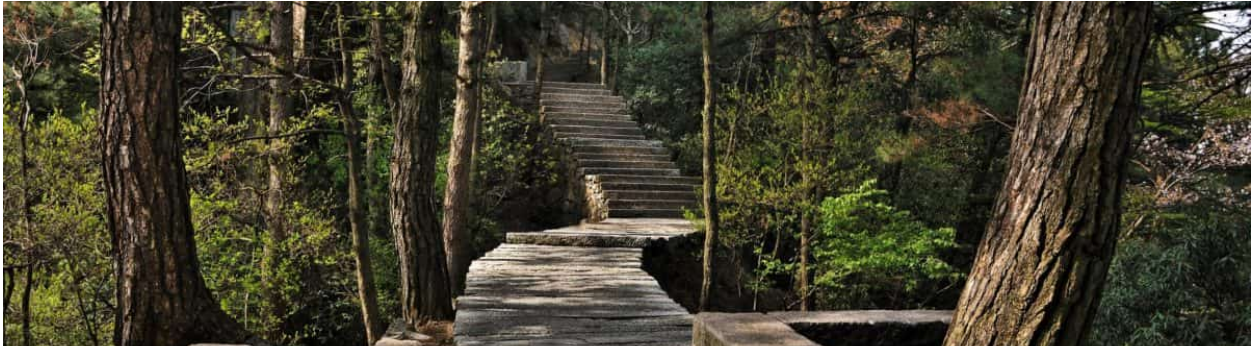
Carolyn Schuyler is the founder and executive director of Wildrock since April of 2015. Raised in Hamburg, New York, Carolyn attended Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts before settling down in Charlottesville, Va. Here, she has found her passion for creating spaces where people of all ages can come to strengthen their connection with nature and reintroduce the joys of play into their lives. Wildrock works with local schools, non-profits, and public housing communities to create an operational plan for nature play opportunities in urban green spaces including Play Streets and Pop-Up Parks.

### **Barbara Brown Wilson, Community Engaged Methods: Tools for Equitable Research and Practice**

Barbara Brown Wilson is an associate professor of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia and Faculty Director of the UVA Equity Center. Her course on Community Engaged Methods equipped student partners with the knowledge and skills necessary to work with community partners. This course is taught in partnership with the UVA Equity Center, and through her work, she has been able to immerse students in engaged scholarship with several community partners.

### **Student partners**

The student partners, and co-authors of this report, include the following individuals: Keren Shi (Master of Landscape Architecture, '21), Willow Davies (Bachelor of Urban and Environmental Planning, '23), Alexa Angelo (Master of Public Policy, '22), Neeka Samimi (Bachelor's in



Politics and minor in Urban and Environmental Planning, '23), and Sabiya Davis (Bachelor's in Urban Planning, '23)

## **Partner Responsibilities**

The student partners were responsible for conducting a reproducible curriculum, which is comprised of six sequential lesson modules:

- What is Design Thinking
- Empathy in Design Thinking
- Group Development
- Benefits of Play and Community Building
- What is Placemaking
- Feedback in the Design Thinking Process



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## The Methodology

### The first two zoom meetings with high school students:

- Design Thinking:



- Feedback in the design thinking process





## **The shift in our method**

Based off of initial meetings with Carolyn and the Wildrock team, our original goal was to virtually present about design thinking to the current set of high school students involved with the program. However, due to scheduling constraints that made synchronous presentations challenging, we decided that providing a creative design thinking curriculum would be the best plan of action. This curriculum would provide Wildrock with presentations that could be shown to each starting class of high school students who enter the program, allowing for uniformity and continuity amongst all students who entered the program.

Once we switched our goal to designing a curriculum, Wildrock provided us with themes that they thought would be the most helpful in pursuing their goal of involving students in community-driven design thinking. Based on these themes, we decided on 6 modules that we thought would fulfill Wildrock's needs. Each student researcher then worked on the modules based on their previous knowledge base and experience.

The curriculum was developed using our knowledge and experience as students of design, along with research about how to create an effective curriculum. An appendix at the end of this report includes some sources we used to develop our design thinking curriculum.

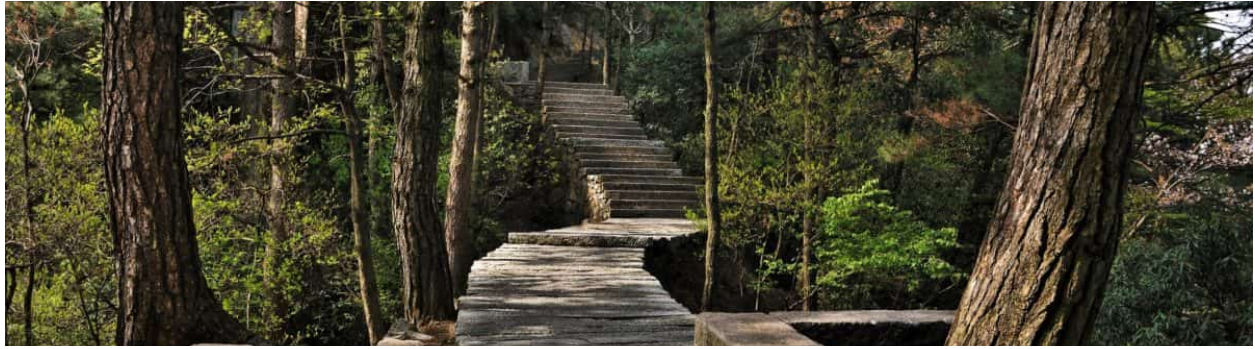
Unfortunately, due to the scheduling constraints mentioned above, there was little conversation between the student researchers and the community throughout our project.



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## **The Curriculum**

# **A Proposed Curriculum for the Wildrock High School Leadership Program**

## **Introduction**

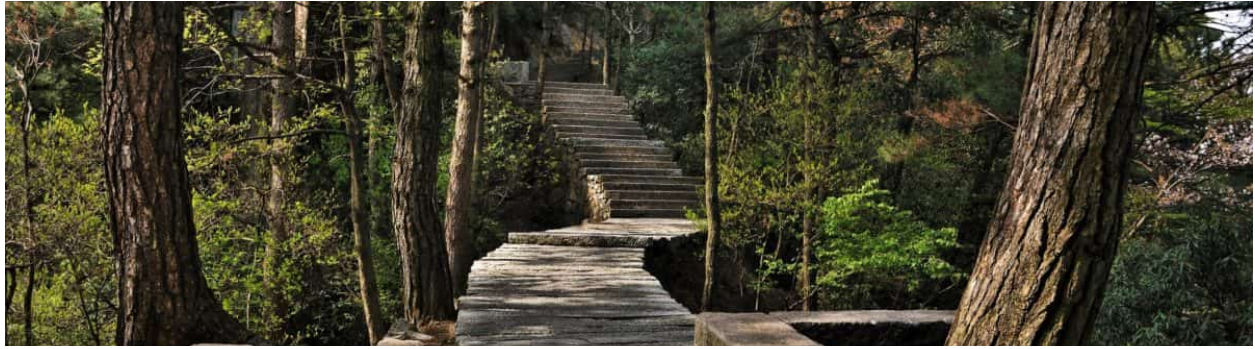
Wildrock's neighborhood outreach program works with students at Charlottesville schools to bring nature play to schools and urban green space. High school students can get involved by working to bring some of these neighborhood pop-up events to life. Our mission was to create a reproducible curriculum to engage with high school students so they can bring their best to plan and create neighborhood pop-ups.

## **Content of the curriculum**

The curriculum consists of six sequential lesson modules, each building off the last and creating an understanding of the Design Thinking process and how it can be applied in the context of community engagement in nature play. The modules are:

**What is Design Thinking?** - An introduction to the ideas behind design thinking, and why it might be useful. This module encourages students to think about the ways design thinking works behind the scenes in so many aspects of their lives, from the dials on their toaster to the experience of going to a theme park. Rather than a long lecture, this module aims to open the conversation and expand the imagination of students, while establishing a learning environment for further modules.





**Empathy in Design Thinking** - The second module aims to develop empathy as the first and most important tool in a designer's toolkit. First and foremost, we believe that our students should learn about how designers should not speak over a community and produce solutions to problems without real outside input. By compassionately listening to the needs of their community, students can develop projects that are creative and helpful.

**Group Development** - Group development serves to educate both about how group development fits into the process of design thinking, while also encouraging to group of students to figure out how to work as a group of designers themselves.

**Benefits of Play and Community Building** - This module is focused on why pop-up parks are genuinely beneficial for their target users and why they are a good tool by which young people can develop a sense of community.

**What is Placemaking?** - The placemaking module educates students about the application of design thinking for pop-up parks. This lesson answers some of the "how?" questions that may have arisen during the previous modules.

**Feedback in the Design Thinking Process** - The concluding module reflects upon the lessons so far, and may take place following a pop-up facilitated by the students. It emphasizes the importance of iteration in design, and the value in having built-in methods for feedback and revision.



## What is Design Thinking?

### Introductions in Design Thinking

What is design thinking exactly? According to Harvard's definition, Design Thinking is a mindset and approach to learning, collaboration, and problem solving. It encourages learners to think divergently, choose iterative problem solving, and develop self-awareness during the researching process. The approach affirms empathy, curiosity, constructiveness, and retesting ideas. Design thinking also has five specific steps that make it up- identifying challenges, gathering information, generating potential solutions, refining ideas, and testing solutions. The process is circular by nature and demands iteration. Each stage in the process should be revisited and invoked throughout a learning experience to encourage experimentation, solution feasibility, and reflection (In eta, 2014).

Students should be encouraged to also realize that design thinking methodology is something that they see every single day of their lives. Everything manmade you see, from the clothes you wear to the way your lunch is served to you every day at school, has required someone to spend time designing and redesigning it to be more convenient or more attractive to you and others. One exciting example is amusement parks, especially because there are multiple examples within amusement parks that are the products of design thinking. But also very simple products such as toasters, blenders, or even a pencil may have gone through many iterations of design thinking. Design thinking can also be used for personal projects such as art and music.



## Empathy in Design Thinking

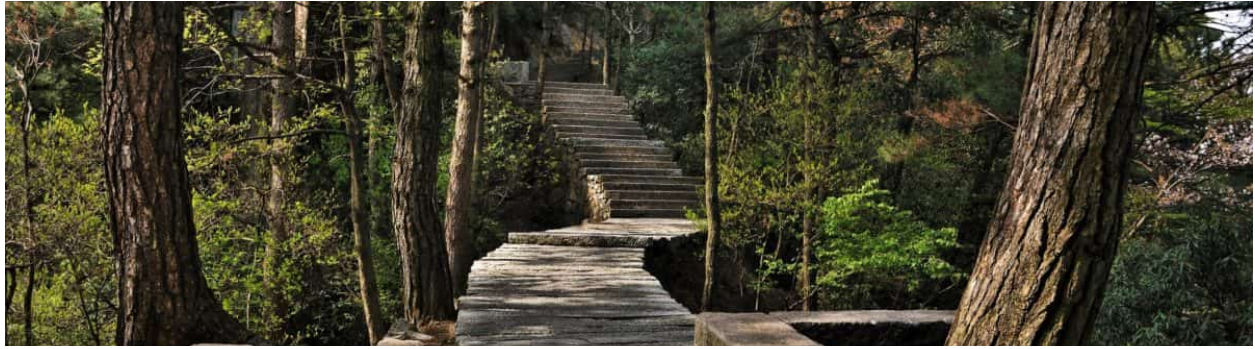
### **What is empathy, and why is it important to the design process?**

Empathy is a deep understanding of the lives of the people you're designing for. It is important for design professionals to be empathetic to communities that they work with, and especially knowing you're not an expert compared to them. It is important to learn as much as possible about the background and history of a community you plan to work with, so you may be empathetic to their needs or understand why they may feel untrustworthy about your involvement. However, it is also important that students understand that the people they design for will always know more about their own community than they will be able to uncover while doing their due diligence before a visit. Empathy includes understanding that sometimes it is important to be open to learning about different ways of thinking about a problem.

This lesson is also an important opportunity for students to learn about the importance of asset-based vs deficit-based community engagement. A deficit-based approach that strives to answer the question of "what are the problems in your community?" may leave participants feeling like all their community has is problems. On the other hand, an asset-based approach recognizes that while there may often be very real and sometimes serious problems, there are also resources yet to be uncovered or catalyzed.

Individuals, organizations, and communities may have capacities that may remain dormant if they are reinforced to believe that all they can do is tell an outsider all of their problems and hope that this time they may be fixed. By affirming these unappreciated assets, community work can create waves of positive action through a neighborhood and beyond, as feelings of empowerment can beget success which can beget further feelings of empowerment and so forth.





## Group Development

### Introduction

Group research is effective for creating questions, solving problems, and gaining new perspectives. For projects like these, you want to find individuals with similar goals in mind. Others who are looking for the advancement of their communities through community-driven place-making.

(Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being.)

It is important to seek out differing opinions, but finding others with similar values will encourage healthy and productive dialogue to further your project planning. Focus groups are one excellent tool to achieve this.

### Focus groups

A focus group is often described as a research methodology that brings participants together to discuss topics that are of mutual interest to the participants but that are introduced by a researcher or moderator (*SAGE*, Fernando J. Bosco & Thomas Herman). By interviewing participants, you can gather information of how others might want to experiment with different methods of design-thinking

### Group Development Model

One useful way to think about group development is through the metaphor of a rowing boat.

1. Getting on board





- a. Some of us start our journeys with both excitement and anxiety, while others may throw caution to the wind and hope for the best. Learning about yourself and tuning into how you feel about starting a journey with a group is the first step in group development.
  - b. Personal reflection comes into play here- think about the ‘luggage’ you’ll bring on board. What can you contribute to the team? What are you looking for from your teammates? What ‘luggage’ can your group members bring on board to ensure a successful journey together?
    - i. Are you comfortable taking the lead or are you more comfortable letting others lead? Always do whatever seems best for you, and remember to honor yourself and your feelings through the group development process.
    - ii. Types of people that may come on board: rescuer, leader, facilitator, carer, teacher
      1. This list isn’t exhaustive, just an example!
      2. Where do you see yourself?
2. Setting off
    - a. Establish group norms! What would you like the meetings experiences to look like?
      - i. Examples of group norms: Trust, step up and step back, physical environment, how to handle conflict, etc.
  3. Learning to row
    - a. Suppose we’re all enthusiastic sailors, ready to travel distances together. This is great, but we need structure! Clear guidelines and expectations should be set here to ensure smooth sailing.
      - i. For example, should we make time settings for people to talk so that everyone can have their voices heard? How do we handle silence? What can we put in place so that there is room to reflect after each meeting? What’s the best mode of communication for our group?
  4. Undercurrents



- a. Despite all efforts, we may run into undercurrents that cause our ‘boat’ to become stuck.
  - i. What mechanisms can we put into place to ensure we keep moving, even through rough waters?
- 5. Singing and Sailing
  - a. Once our group begins to sail, there will be times where we all sing in unison, and times where some are singing solos. Reflecting upon our group purpose is useful here to remind each other the importance of our group and the impacts we’re making together!
    - i. Make space to relate to each other. Share experiences, feelings, and hesitations to enable the group to work through them together.
    - ii. Reiterate the purpose of the group in order to calm anxieties and center the group.
    - iii. Reflect upon our experiences so far and share our dreams of where we’ll end up sailing together!
- 6. Conflict
  - a. Conflict within the group happens naturally. Establishing group norms in the beginning helps navigate any tensions that may arise along the way.
    - i. Come up with strong communication mechanisms in the beginning to ensure that any feelings of conflict can be voiced confidently without fear of repercussions.
    - ii. Trust within the group allows for the group to voice their concerns aloud and have concerns solved together.
    - iii. Differences within the group should be celebrated. Remember that we’re all in the group for the same purpose and that purpose can serve as a tool that reminds us of our similarities.
- 7. Putting it into practice
  - a. The group will go through times of smooth sailing and times of traveling through dark waters.
    - i. Being supportive of each other throughout the process will allow the group to get through the tough times together.



- ii. Create designated check-in times, individually and collectively, to make sure that all conflicts and concerns are being addressed throughout the process.
- iii. Remind each other the end goal and purpose that we all share.
- iv. Incorporate play into each meeting in order for everyone to be their most fun, creative selves.





## **Benefits of Play and Community Building**

### **The importance of playing**

#### **Current situation:**

Insufficient physical activity is a significant issue for young children today. Play opportunities are also seen to have been continually reduced. Children have fewer brothers and sisters with whom to play. Less school time is devoted to active play, and public outdoor play spaces are disappearing whilst those that remain are often regarded as unsafe. It is argued children are increasingly enclosed at home, in school and in cars, and within rigid schedules of time.

Research suggests that such decreased independence could have negative effects on young children's well-being development.

And many parents no longer view urban existing spaces as appropriate places for outdoor play. Overall, there is a lack of stimulation and opportunity for local outdoor day-to-day play for children – including poor use of public realm space.

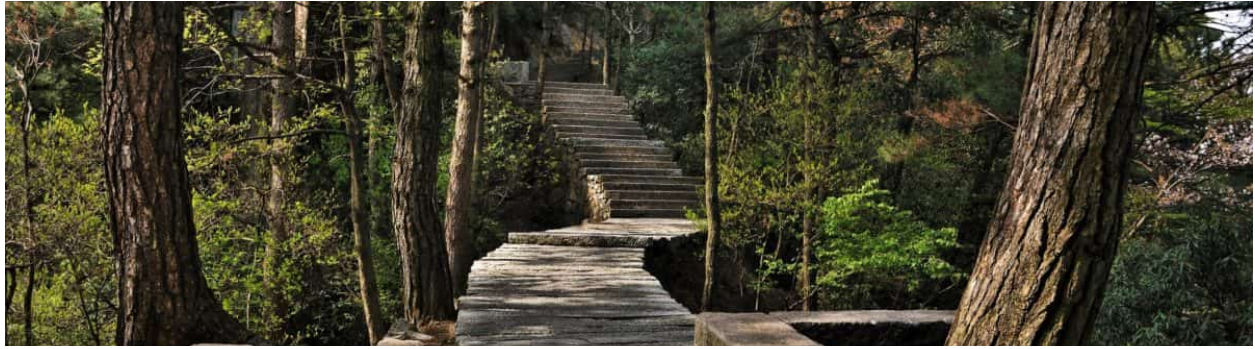
#### **Benefits:**

Pop-up parks can occur anywhere that space is available and inviting to kids, and it can quickly transform under-used urban places into playful outdoor environments for children, their parents and carers, and to inspire a new way of thinking about urban space and outdoor play.

During the time playing in Pop-up Parks, children can learn more things about nature and biodiversity. Through play, they develop physically and discover a slew of emotional skills, and they learn how to process the world. Creative, open-ended play helps children conceptualize, brainstorm, and exercise critical thinking skills, learn to think creatively and interact socially.

Physically, play benefits children in a few ways, namely in the development of their fine and gross motor skills.





## **The importance of Community-building**

### **Current situation:**

The pandemic has drastically altered society by restricting gatherings, resulting in people flocking to the internet and socializing behind screens. In addition to the mental stresses of the pandemic, civil rights issues and politics have caused a general fear and distrust of those who are unfamiliar.

### **Benefits:**

Community-building such as Pop-up parks can help to achieve the goal of trusting others in community and beyond, reshape the urban spaces to allow for comfort and diversity in shared experiences as people come together face-to-face.



## **What is Placemaking?**

### **What is Placemaking?**

Placemaking is both a process and a philosophy. It is centered around observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space in order to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for their community as a whole.

Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.

With community-based participation at its center, an effective placemaking process capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness, and well being.

### **What is a Pop-Up Park?**

Pop-up parks involve the temporary—or permanent—transformation of underutilized spaces into community gathering places, and is based around the desire to create playful, creative and engaging play areas within urban environments, that initiate projects with an ecological and social focus, encourage children and families to spend more time being playful, creative and active outside the home.

With its origins in the tactical urbanism movement, the concept of a pop-up park has often been applied to the reclamation of auto-oriented places, such as streets, parking lots and spaces that are used by pedestrians.



## **Ideas for pop-up parks**

- Enlivening a sidewalk, streetscape or corridor with one or more play installations
- Closing off a street for a few hours, a few days or on a regular basis to create a "play street" with a variety of creative play experiences
- Creating playful parklets by reclaiming one or more parking spaces as community gathering places and play spaces.
- Creating a "pop-up park-within-a-park," by setting up a play installation within an existing park as a one-time event, or on a short-term or regularly-scheduled basis.
- Locating play installations at schools. During the week, a special pop-up play event can infuse the school day with surprise and wonderment; during weekends, the installation can bring schoolyards to life for the entire community's benefit.
- Occupying indoor spaces, such as gyms, event halls, building lobbies or auditoriums, to create meaningful indoor play experiences, particularly during the winter months or inclement weather.

## **Why should I consider a Pop-Up Park?**

- Low installation & maintenance costs

Pop up Parks reject more traditional “fixed” equipment (e.g. roundabouts, swings) in favour of equipment and activities that are multi-purpose, relatively inexpensive and interact with existing street furniture and features.

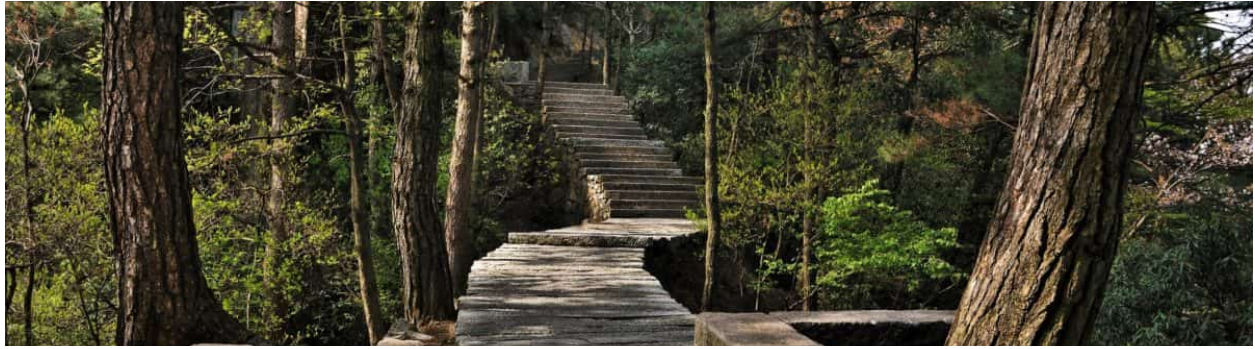
- Frequently paired with nearby businesses to help with their use and upkeep.

The parks intentionally disrupt public space and are located in highly visible areas (where possible) to entice passers-by to interact with the space.

- Parks can be hosted or sponsored by local groups and organizations that pays to design and build them and agree to keep them maintained.

- Can be installed in a way that does not require reconfiguring the streetscape, doing much demolition, or altering utilities.





- Are usually small scale, affordable, flexible, and often temporary or mobile.
- In dense urban environments with plenty of small, underutilized spaces, PUPs can help people spend time in nature, as well as foster community and in particular, creativity.

### **Understanding of stakeholders**

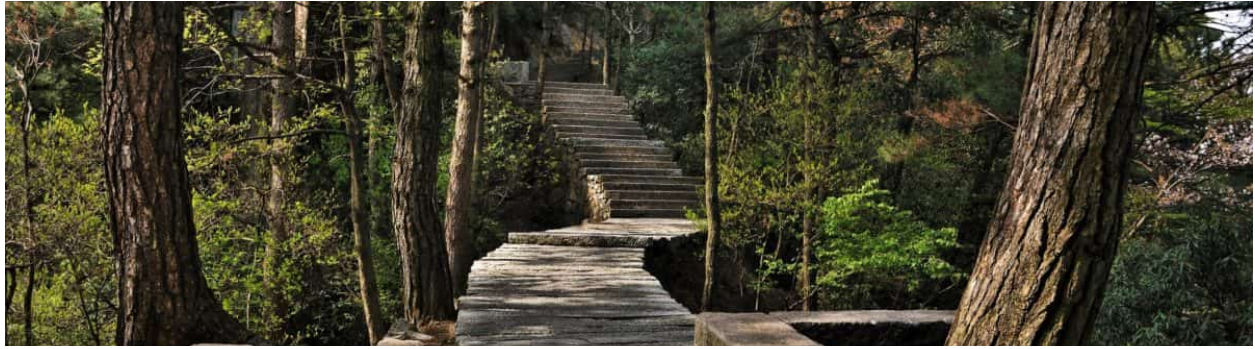
There are a number of distinct groups which benefit from Pop up Parks:

1. Children
2. Parents
3. Permanent users of the space – nearby business users and residents
4. Passers-by – workers, visitors and residents from further afield
5. Developers / land owners: those with responsibility for the use of land – e.g. Housing Associations, Local Authorities
6. Local commissioners – e.g. Southbank Centre / British Council

### **Things to Keep in Mind When Planning a Park:**

- Cleaning agreements.
- Snow removal.
- Landscaping & planter maintenance agreements.
- Furniture upkeep & daily maintenance like removing trash.
- Graffiti removal.
- Cleaning out the cavity underneath the park.
- Making sure permanent elements are secured to withstand storm-water and wind stresses.
- Requesting partnership businesses to include the park in their business insurance policy.





## Feedback in the Design Thinking Process

### Introduction

By this point, we have gained a well-rounded understanding of how to set up the foundations for a successful project rooted in design thinking. As we move forward, though, there will naturally be hurdles. You may face interpersonal conflict or have trouble with some aspect of the project which you thought would go smoothly. This is okay! Design thinking is helpful in part because of its flexibility. This means that you have built-in mechanisms for resolving problems when they come up.

### Identifying problems and gathering feedback

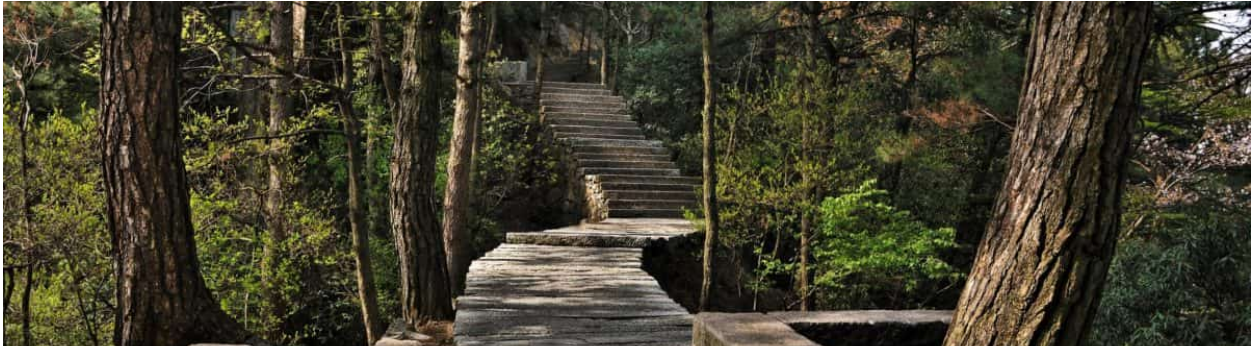
1. You can only begin to work on solving problems if you address their cause. When you feel frustrated with something, be sure to use the self-reflection we've talked about before. Return frequently to the initial group norms and goals you set. These will be extremely useful for bringing the team together.
  - a. Articulate the problem in a way that keeps in mind what a solution might be. Simply calling a situation bad is not as helpful as identifying precisely what has gone wrong so that you can course-correct.
    - i. Gathering different people's opinions and putting them together to assess the situation is called synthesis. One example of synthesis could be: "It seems like a lot of people feel like we are getting off-track from one of our group norms. What do you all think?"
2. It is important to value all people's knowledge and viewpoints. Sometimes, you might not see a problem with the way things are going, but another team member might. In order to work well as a team, all members should feel like their input is valued. Gathering feedback is therefore important for the project.



- a. Asking open-ended questions is very important for feedback. Instead of something like “Do you think things are going well?”, which is a yes-or-no question, ask “What do you think is working well, and where is there room for improvement?” Gathering feedback can also occur anonymously. People could fill out a Google form with their thoughts or write things down on a piece of paper.
- b. When asking for feedback, make sure to emphasize your group norms. That way, people can openly express their opinions while remaining mindful of how their words may impact others.
- c. If one person is in the position of being the leader of a group, they should try to be open-minded and neutral about the feedback coming in. It is in the best interest of the entire group to receive productive feedback, so resisting it because it conflicts with the most popular opinion of the group is not beneficial. Because everyone is working collaboratively, you should try not to feel too attached to any one idea and feel like you have to defend it from being altered in any way.

## **Types of feedback**

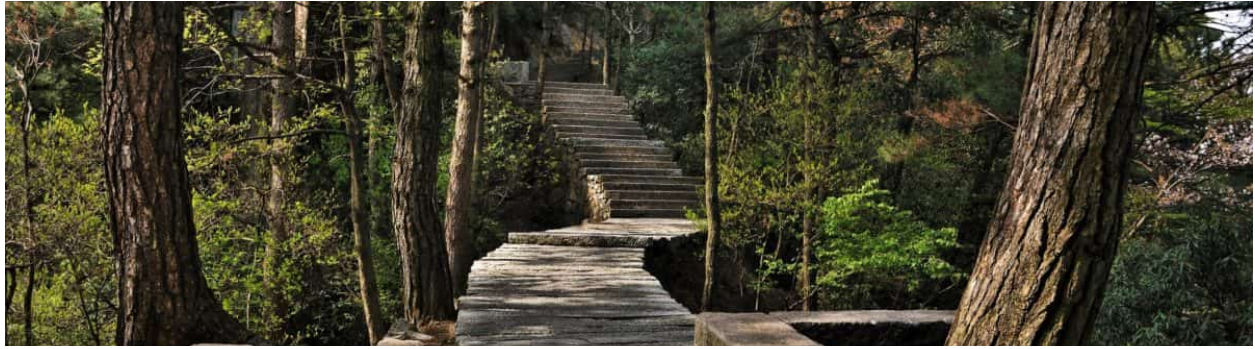
1. Productive feedback: this is the best kind of feedback, as it is presented in a way that lets everyone know exactly what could be improved.
2. Restraining feedback: this is given by people who want things to be done their way. They are very attached to their initial ideas. By reflecting on the shared goals of the group, these people can come to understand that collaboration is more important than any one person’s idea. Therefore, their restraining feedback can become more productive.
3. Toxic feedback: this is very unproductive feedback which does not fall in line with the spirit of the group. If any toxic feedback arises, you can refer back to your group norms on how to handle conflict.



## **Why feedback matters**

Once you have feedback, you can return to the cycle of question formation and brainstorming that design thinking sets up. The best projects will have many points for feedback and re-evaluation!





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## Conclusion

### What We Have Learned

- Through our research and through our exposure to Wildrock, we have learned about the benefits of nature play, and the role it can serve in childhood development.
- Through creating a curriculum, we learned how to make lessons that build off of one another and hopefully can engage high school students interested in community outreach.
- We also learned, through our challenges, some grace, flexibility, and adaptability.

### Challenges

There were also some challenges we faced in this semester. Originally, we had planned to have a deeper partnership with the organization and Caroyln, and at the beginning of the semester we started by meeting with the high school students and introducing them to the ideas that ended up transforming to become the first lessons of our curriculum. We had hoped to continue working with the students as they created their pop-ups, but because of scheduling difficulties, these meetings were difficult and some members never had the chance to meet with the students on zoom, and an in-person meeting never came to be. While two of the modules were originally developed as presentations with the students, only one was a live zoom presentation, and not all of the University students in the group were available for these presentations.

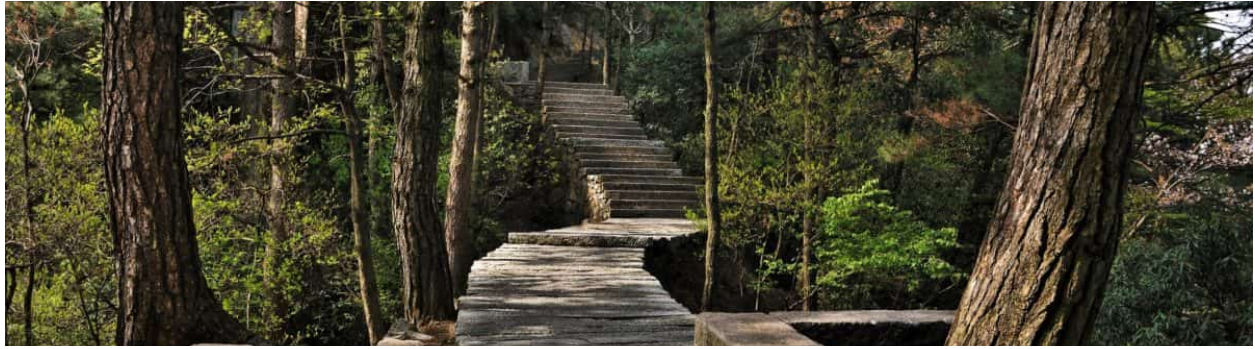
### Moving forward

We hope that by morphing our focus to creating a reproducible curriculum, we may have created something that can continue to help classes of high school students in future years and possibly even for other organizations in other cities and towns. Much of the curriculum is not specific to



pop-up parks, and could be adapted by many other organizations hoping to educate middle school and high school students to be future leaders in design fields and beyond. We hope that the skills we emphasize in terms of group development, team-building, and community-engaged thinking will be helpful to students as they move forward no matter what they do. In the future, we hope that student engagement and feedback can help improve the curriculum to build upon this set of modules.





## Appendix

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