**COMMUNITY EVALUATION:**

**LESSONS FROM CREATING COVENTRY VIVO**

* **Identify the work and name it.** This should be a high-level concept at this stage. For us, it was “Create a long term, Coventry community parks redevelopment plan; like an ARP (area redevelopment plan), but for parks.”
* **Gather the latest information on your community’s demographics and needs. Ensure your work is data driven.** Examples of items we used included:
	+ Demographic data: this is usually provided by your city/town census and is available to download (e.g. for us it was: <https://www.calgary.ca/CA/city-clerks/Pages/Election-and-Information-Services/Civic-Census/CensusResults.aspx>).
	+ Walk zone data: in our case this was provided through community partnerships with Calgary Parks and Calgary Neighbourhoods.
	+ Systematic observations (SO): we used an amended SOPARC tool (<https://activelivingresearch.org/soparc-system-observing-play-and-recreation-communities>) to give us park useage, physical activity level, type of activity and participant interaction data. However, in different circumstances, we could have used any combination of tools for measuring public life by the Gehl Institute (<https://gehlinstitute.org/public-life-tools/>) or similar.
* **Get guidance from groups who may have done this before you.** In our case we engaged the sage advice of:
	+ Haysboro Community Association, who had done systematic observations (SO) before their playground planning; and
	+ Vivo, who had previously done some Systematic Observation in their catchment community parks.

We learned from both their mistakes and successes and took their advice that Systematic Observation was crucial to measuring the success of a playground/park redevelopment.

* **Identify the skills and gifts your community may offer and form great partnerships** by painting a picture of the potential benefits to the whole community.

By using an asset-based approach (e.g. <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/a-basic-guide-to-abcd-community-organizing?__hstc=193841970.8b16a9f4539a43ae63c80240c4416242.1557808055868.1557808055868.1557808055868.1&__hssc=193841970.1.1557808055868&__hsfp=3801741909>), we identified skills and resources we already had within our community, and discovered unique partnerships through organizational networking. For example, we worked with an older adults’ group who wanted to support their community, had the time to be trained and to do the systematic observations in all 15 park spaces.

* **Prototype EVERYTHING!** Test out your participatory decision-making tools on a captive audience.

For example, we tested our workshop plan on the local public library’s summer Action Squad (8-12 year-olds), and learned what worked great, as well as what not to do, when rolling out a series of:

* + World Café style workshops (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/>),
	+ dotmocracy charts (<http://dotmocracy.org/dot-voting/>)
	+ modified multivoting and affinity mapping

and other community decision-making tools, for the community-wide workshops.

* **Invite the community in and ask them to DREAM BIG. Bring them along on the journey.**
	+ For the best results, be brave enough to really co-create with residents and don’t just ask people to confirm a plan you have already come up with (often the fate of traditional “engagement”).
	+ Let people dream big! Yes, we know that in reality there are limitations (it’s unlikely we could build a 100 foot tall rollercoaster in a neighbourhood pocket park), but make people aware that despite these, you still want to know what their ideal choices would be, if there were no rules or budget ceilings, to get to “the why”.
	+ Make sure you are up front about limitations from the beginning. Build up trust and bring them along on the journey, so they can see the progress and know that all their work is paying off.
	+ Always, always capture *WHY* people suggest what they do, or say what they say, during engagements.
* **Review the information collected and look for trends and gaps, then go back out to the community to test and validate solutions.**
	+ Ask yourself questions like: Whose voices are missing? Do we need outside expertise to analyse the data?
	+ If you’re not getting the results you expected, ask in a different way; use a different tool.

Still not getting the results you expected…? Don’t make assumptions: go back to the community and ask them to validate what your data shows and what you think you heard.

* + Validation can be easily achieved by using social media and/or online surveys. Adapt and work with the data you’re given and conclusions that are drawn from analysis, as long as they are validated.
* **Revise and test again; rinse and repeat. Be flexible and adaptive in your engagement.**
	+ Workshops are great to garner lots of excitement and dive deeply into peoples’ ideas, but can have limited participation due to time commitment, so ensure that you follow up with shorter engagements, too.
	+ Go to where the people already are: take advantage of popular community events, or target specific groups that don’t always have a representative showing in community engagement and co-creation (e.g. youth, seniors) to reach as many people, and as wide an audience, as possible.
* **Publish your outcomes, and A PLAN.**
	+ Make sure to report your findings back to the community and partners. The community wants to know the outcomes of their work and partners want to know the collaboration was successful.
	+ Publish both your successes and failures, with lessons learned, to help others.
	+ Don’t just publish your results; make sure you include next steps and an achievable, future plan of action. Spending many months (or years) of co-creation just to have a report gather dust on a shelf erodes community trust and enthusiasm in the project.
	+ Get your reporting into the hands of those who can help facilitate action and change and can also give you valuable feedback on next steps and how to overcome regulatory hurdles.

For us, that included creating champions of our local politicians, government liaisons (e.g. Calgary Parks and Neighbourhoods reps), and community leaders by presenting our work to them followed by a Q&A.

* + Try to pin down buy-in from local government.
	+ We worked hard to produce evidence-based data and a community co-created plan. Validating this work through capital project funding can help to quickly achieve key goals and boost community confidence in the process.
* **Don’t drop the ball; keep the momentum going.** **Celebrate your successes along the way.**

Reach out to residents and volunteer groups who can help you to achieve your goals and keep them engaged. Stay visible.

* + We created profiles on common social media channels, and continue to publish updates on the various project pieces in our community’s newsletter, to reach different demographics and keep people interested. Regular updates let them know we haven’t disappeared post-publication of the community parks plan.
	+ We designed summer park activations, calling the series of events “Activating Coventry”, to keep the project alive in the community.
	+ We created sub-groups of volunteers to work hard behind the scenes to plan and implement the first few projects.
	+ We have continued to reach out to the community for more detailed planning co-creation, on individual park redevelopments.
	+ We have become a resource and mentor for neighbouring communities in Calgary who want to create their own community parks plans.
	+ Our willingness to share about this grassroots, resident-led, community co-creation project has seen our successes and lessons learned revealed via publications, workshops and conferences over the past two years, and our methodology being used by the City of Calgary for helping other communities to co-create their way to neighbourhood cohesion.