

The background is a dense, vibrant collage of tropical plants. It features large, light green monstera leaves with characteristic holes, clusters of small, round, lime-green leaves, and various types of ferns in shades of green and brown. The overall aesthetic is lush and organic, with a color palette dominated by greens and browns.

# THRIVAL MODE

Imagining sovereignty for immigrant neighborhoods

# DRAFT AGENDA

1. INTRODUCTION + ABOUT THE COUNCIL  
↳ names + pronouns
2. Agenda overview
3. ROUNDTABLE ACTIVITY (30 min)  
↳ potentially in pairs. encourage dialogue.
4. DE-BRIEF - pick one topic at a time to discuss + de-brief the opinions of biz owner. Senator can clarify what the policy meant.  
= What do we do with this information now that we've collected it?
5. Open Forum: TIME TO TALK ABOUT

# SCAFFOLDING

ROUNDTABLE FORMAT  
 - run the idea of different tables by biz owners  
 - set topics and schedules for future months.  
 do biz owners want this meeting to be? \* \* what do they want to get out of these gatherings? \*

REACTIVE FORMAT  
 DE-BRIEF

UNOPENED:

VOTE ON THE BUDGET  
 FOR THE THINGS YOU MOST AS A SMALL

BACK:

DEEP DIVE OF DESCRIPTIONS.

<p><u>POLICY</u></p> <p>WHAT THE BID DOES: WHAT YOU WOULD D:</p> <p><u>COMMERCIAL LEASE</u></p> <p><u>MARKETING</u></p>	<p><u>CULTURAL PROGRAMMING</u></p> <p><u>TASTE OF SUNNY SIDE</u></p> <p><u>PACK THE PLACE</u></p> <p><u>WORKSHOPS W/ SMALL BIZ SOLUTIONS CENTER</u></p> <p><u>YOUR CHOICE:</u></p>	<p>VOTE ON THE BID BUDGET FOR 2021:</p> <p>What is the BID?</p> <p>Why should you vote?</p> <p>What is the process like?</p> <p>INCLUDE SUSTAINABILITY</p>
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MFA Design for Social Innovation Thesis  
 School of Visual Arts, New York City  
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## Preface

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My journey to become a social designer stemmed from longing to bring my values into greater alignment with my actions, for an equitable world, and for freedom. On this journey I realized the role of a designer could be to create spaces to imagine systems level change, build community, and practice our values. I use mapping heavily throughout my process, to understand the history of injustice broadly, and also more specifically how it shows up in every element of the systems. Then a reflective practice to help imagine what future systems that honor sovereignty could be.

As a first generation Indian woman, the privileges I hold and don't hold live in tension with each other. I often reflect on how my privilege can be used to shift power within systems and take big risks where I can afford it. Where I don't have privilege lies solidarity, a step beyond empathy towards action and mutual searches for freedom. My process as a reflection of my values is slow and steady. Moving at the speed of power for all, designing for accessibility, and practicing the values of anti-capitalism.

Above all, this work is not meant to be done alone. Though I am solo on this thesis journey, I am building and adding upon the work of the many community organizers in Western Queens. Who have long been fighting against the erasure of culture at both systemic and individual ways. Community organizing is the original social design. My practice melds years of community organizing principles with social design methods and tools, creating a warm stew of radical imagination combined with radical practice, to demonstrate that radical means we can find ways to be free and we don't have to wait for permission.

## Forward

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Land, the one thing we all inhabit is a large source of oppression and subjugation. Access to land, land ownership are all signifiers of wealth and the ability to control other people. This thesis discusses neighborhood character and intentionally designed neighborhoods. It is a hard topic to discuss without recognizing the history of American land. Particularly the power struggle over land that is stolen from Indigenous folks and then transformed by slave labor. To today, where not all of us are able to recognize that the land is stolen and there is little willingness to work with the Indigenous population today to bring truth to our history and our land planning processes.

As our land planning processes become more liberal, we shouldn't mistake their practices of participatory design to be a power shift. There is no intention for people to lose power or wealth in the current processes of land planning. There is no liberation in ULURP.

Neighborhood character and land planning go hand in hand. I define neighborhood character as the culture the neighborhood holds, the people, how they are living, and what they are interacting with. As current land planning practices gentrify communities, they also seek to change neighborhood character. This change in neighborhood character is the introduction of one culture and an active displacement of another culture. Often the culture that is displaced is not often talked about, discussed, remnants of the cultures imprint on the land maybe erased. This is called cultural erasure

In this thesis I examine a hyper local institution that wields a lot of power in designing neighborhood character, Business Improvement Districts (BID). During the time of thesis I worked for a Business Improvement District as a fellow through the New York City Department of Small Business Services, and was able to learn the nuances of these organizations and the relationships to land planning. Though the organization I specifically worked at had relationships with the small businesses, I witnessed the system BIDs operate within that perpetuating oppression amongst immigrant and communities. Though BIDs are hyper local institutions, and are called micro-players, the amount of power they wield and their common use by local governance to manage land makes an impact at the macro scale. This thesis dives deeply into the micro-players of neighborhood character and is inspired by the living breathing anti-colonial acts that immigrant neighborhoods in Queens create by existing.



Land is perennially the thing that we  
share that hold us apart

JEDIDAH PURDY



# Land Acknowledgment

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"The land of the five boroughs that make up New York City are the traditional homelands of the Lenape, Merrick, Canarsie, Rockaway, and Matinecock Nations.

These lands are also the inter-tribal trade lands, and are under the stewardship, or many more Indigenous nations.

New York City is home to the largest populations of inter-tribal Native America, First Nations, and Indigenous individuals out of any urban city across Turtle Island (the United States)

Some of them born here with family roots in New York City and the NYC areas surrounding Nations that go back for generations.

Others of us coming to NYC to find what we could find anywhere else. Each one contributing to the rich and diverse culture that is the NYC urban Indian community.

This is our story, and our experience. We are a living culture that thrives here.

We acknowledge the Peoples of these Nations- their cultures, their communities, their elders. Both past and present, as well as future generations.

We acknowledge the over 115,000 inter-tribal Native America, First Nations, and Indigenous peoples who call New York City home right now. One of the largest in the country.

We acknowledge and offer deep gratitude to Manhatta - the land and waters on which we stand upon. "

- American Indian Community House

# A Very Simple History of Urban Planning



Map of land how land was planned during colonization of America



Displacement and erasure of Indigenous populations from colonized land

The intentional displacement of Indigenous people is built into the fabric of American land planning. Since the beginning of this country's American existence, people, especially people of color have been displaced so that the white middle class can occupy land, acquire wealth, and build their own community.



Map of land in America from home lending banks showing the intentional segregated communities



The intentional segregation of Black communities and disconnect from resources

In the 1930's a practice began within a federal agency, Home Owners' Loan Corporation. They created "Residential Security" maps to identify which areas people would get access to credit to buy or develop a home within. The areas that were "high risk" were deemed unworthy of investment. These areas were predominantly inhabited by Black people. This process denied Black communities access to resources and aid from the government, but also from individuals who were looking to buy homes. The outcome is still felt today, the segregation of people of color into neighborhoods that are physically denied access to resources that create healthy communities.

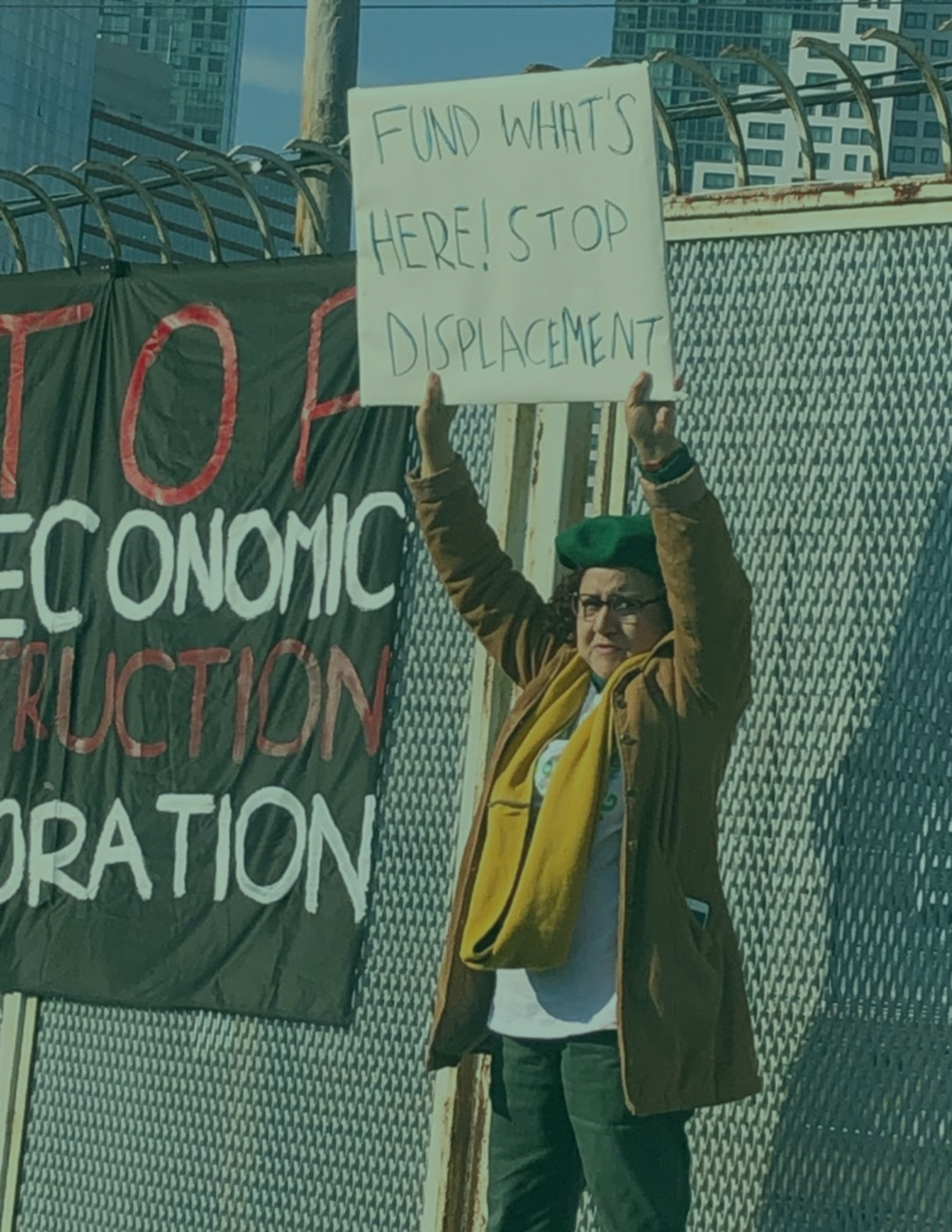


Renderings of transforming neighborhoods into white, middle class aesthetics



A resident protesting the development holding a sign that says "Fund what is here, stop displacement"

Fast-forward to today, urban planning seeks to transform low-income neighborhoods for commercial revitalization purposes. This investment into communities that have long been segregated often results in the creation of opportunities for white-middle class people to inhabit an area. Rarely are the opportunities for those who already live there. This transformation increases the cost of living in an area and often drives out those who already live there, yet again displacing communities of color.



## Table of Contents

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### 15 Context

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Sunnyside, Queens

Immigrant Owned  
Small Businesses

Problem Framing

### 26 Process

---

Design Principles

### 29 Research

---

Learnings

Co-Creation

### 39 Prototyping

---

Building Infrastructure for Long-Term Change

### 43 Interventions

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Participatory Budgeting

Small Business Advisory Council

### 61 Outcomes

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Impact Measurement

Moving Forward



**Context**



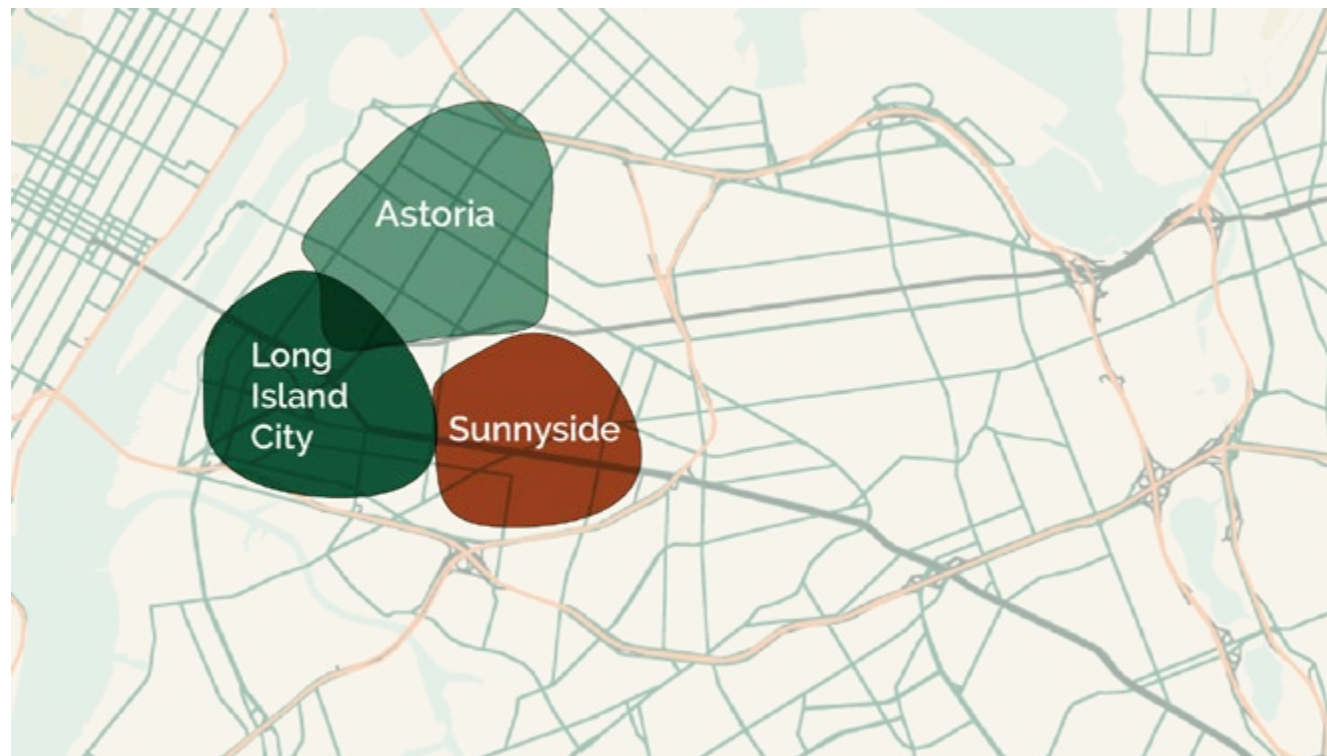
# Sunnyside, Queens

Sunnyside, Queens is an immigrant neighborhood without anyone one dominating culture. It's a community that consists of South Asians, Southeast Asians, East Asian, Caribbean, South American, Mexican, Central American, Irish, and Italian immigrants. Sunnyside is considered a middle- low income neighborhood.

This neighborhood is abundant with small businesses, many owned by residents of Sunnyside, the majority of them are restaurants and salons. Sunnyside is uniquely positioned in western Queens. It sits between the gentrified portions of Western Queens (Long Island City and Astoria) and long established immigrant neighborhoods

(Woodside, Jackson Heights). This also means it is at high risk of gentrification, as the wave of gentrification moves deeper into Western Queens.

Gentrification is a movement that happens over several years, in Sunnyside we already can see the beginnings of gentrification on the outskirts of the community where constructions for high rises apartments, offices, and condos have begun. This gentrification is soon to be exacerbated by Sunnyside Yards, currently a rail-yard used to service MTA and LIRR trains.



## “Sunnyside is a small town neighborhood with access to big city resources”

- Tania, Resident of Sunnyside for 54 years



The neighborhood is culturally divided between the “White” side and the “Latinx” side as the residents call it. North of Queens blvd is where the majority middle-class white Americans reside, it is also home to Sunnyside Gardens a historic district with brick townhouses and lush courtyards. Greenpoint Ave is where the majority of Spanish-speaking businesses reside, mainly run by families creating foods, services, groceries, and theater from their home country accessible to people in Sunnyside.

# Immigrant Owned Small Businesses

## Why Immigrant Owned Small Businesses?

Immigrants open small businesses in America not only as a way of economic stability and a lifeline for their family, but also as a way to bridge their culture from back home to here. As immigrant neighborhoods are created, a large part of the neighborhood character comes from businesses owned by immigrants that also reside in the neighborhood.

These businesses largely employ people from the neighborhood, creating a local economy and structure for support beyond just providing goods and services.

## Who are the immigrants that own small businesses?

In Sunnyside, Queens there is no dominant immigrant culture in the neighborhood. Most of the business owners that are immigrants live in the neighborhood or live very close by. And lots of them are women of color that presents its own set of challenges in a country defined by racism and patriarchy.

## What are the challenges that they face?

Opening a new business is tough in New York City already, with an ever growing list of regulations to follow, licenses to obtain, and inspections to stay on top of. For the immigrants in Sunnyside, Queens, many of them are English learners or are new to the

language, navigating everything in English is a challenge.

Typically this manifests in a lease with requirements that are usually not imposed on English speakers. Business owners have told me about conditions they have in their lease that they didn't know about when signing. Leases for commercial businesses are typically 5 or 10 years long, so now the businesses are locked into binding agreements which they didn't have conscious consent to.

**““Honestly, rent is okay, it's the property taxes that are killing us. I have to pay \$7k in rent then also another \$100,000 in property taxes a year.” - Butcher**

Additionally, many are low-income immigrants or only have enough to open a business - New York City has exorbitant fees related to opening a business. Combined with the upfront payment to sign a lease and licensing fees, the business owners start in a deficit that takes years to overcome before they can see a profit. And when profits do come in they are usually at small margins. They also don't always have access to the same type of technology that people with more wealth do. So applying to resources online

**“What's killing us is the rent, then the property tax on top of it. We're working 7 days a week day and night, and still we're left with nothing.” - Go Natural Health Foods**

isn't always possible.

Access to resources like grants and loans are difficult for immigrants who don't have a credit score, or may not be connected enough to find out about these resources.

These businesses become their entire life because of these hardships, making it very difficult for the business owners to have time to look into other resources, attend a meeting, attend a workshop.

**“What are they going to do for me? Pay my rent? Stop charging me all these fees? I just started getting charged an extra fee this month and I don't know for what. I can't pay for that, can they pay for that?” - Mary,**

Mary's Hair Salon

## How does it relate to neighborhood planning?

Immigrant owned businesses are one bad policy or one bad crisis away from closing their business permanently. Currently, policy makers, developers, urban planners, are not working in solidarity with the needs of immigrant business owners. Making them at great risk of displacement. Furthermore, displacement of their business also means loss of financial stability for their family and their employees (if they have employees). It is a waterfall affect that impacts whole communities.

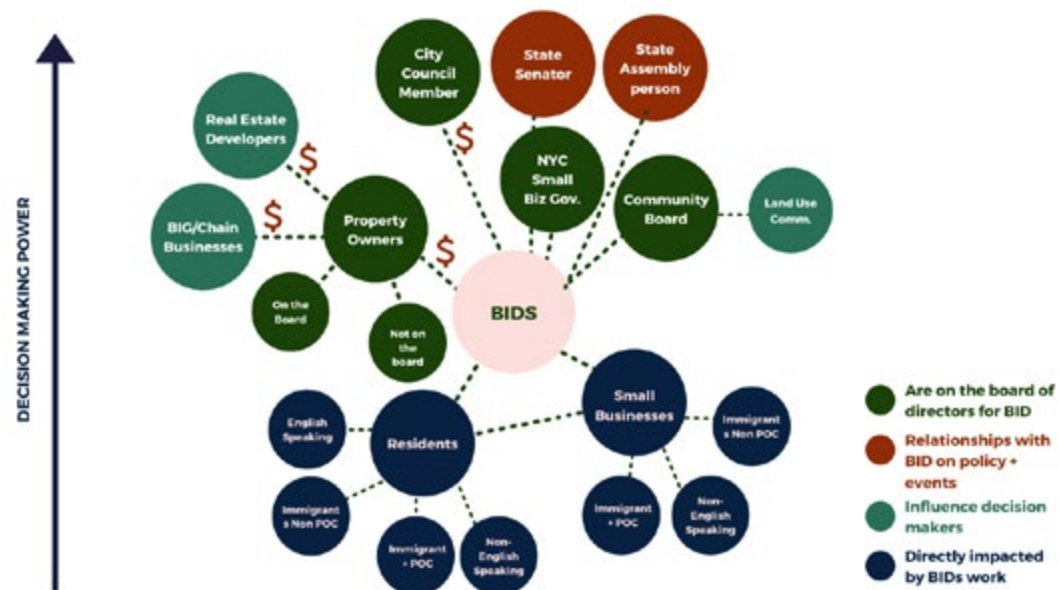
## What is a small business?

New York state defines a small business as a business with less than 100 employees. In Sunnyside, Queens a small business is less than 10 employees. These are micro-businesses that have big impacts on the culture of a neighborhood. The same policies that a 100 person employed business, or even larger than that can withstand are very different that those that have less than 10 employees. This distinction is important, because the current system does make the distinction and the policies they create end up harming these micro-businesses.

# Business Improvement Districts

## Structure of BIDs

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are non-profit entities formed by commercial property owners to create safe and clean districts within a bounded geographic area. The commercial property owners within the bounds of the BID then become members. The BIDs are managed by the New York City Department of Small Business Services, who has a voting seat on each NYC BID's board of directors. Intentionally designed, the majority of the Board of Directors for each BID are property owners (they have to maintain 75% majority). In addition to property owners one residential seat and one business owner seat is allotted on the board. Non-voting class members of the BID include the city council representative for the area, community board representative, the comptroller, and the borough president. Often the levy that commercial property owners pay as part of their membership to the BID is passed onto the businesses that rent their properties, although those businesses do not get the voting power with a BID.

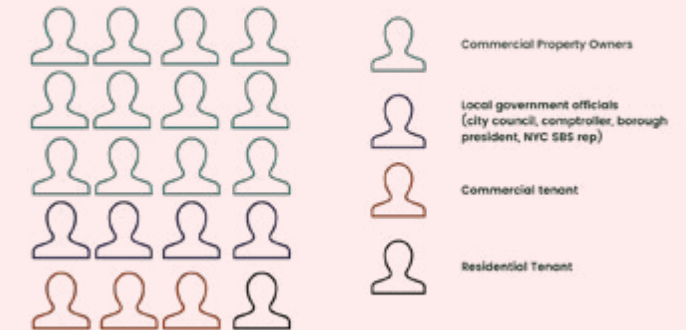


## Understanding Power Through History

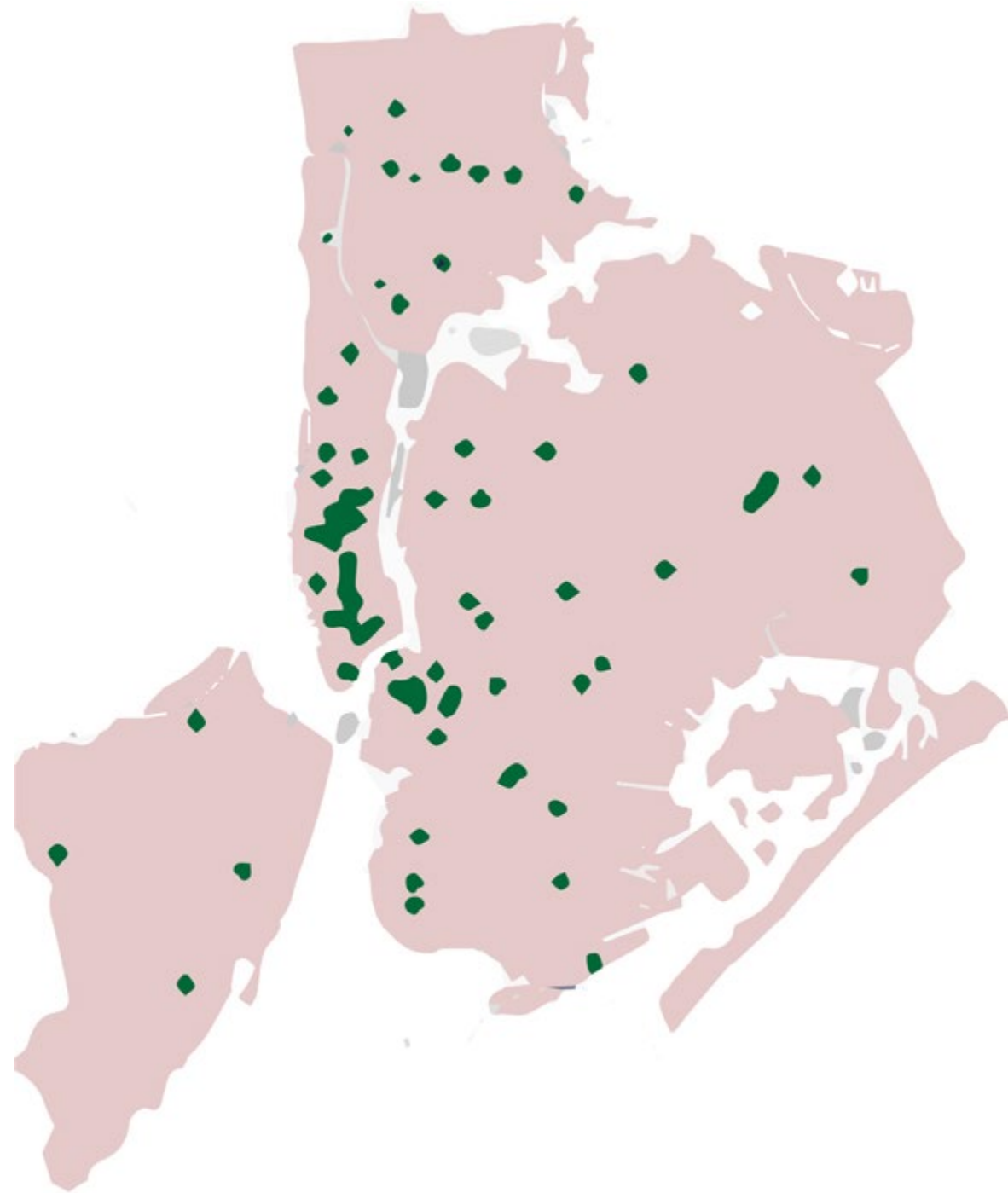
BIDs originally formed during the Great Depression Era when property owners (who also owned the small businesses) wanted to compensate for lack of funds from the government to create "welcoming" spaces so people would want to shop in their neighborhoods, therefore helping attract business.

Fast-forwarding to present day, the majority of property owners within BIDs are not the actual business owners themselves. The main purpose of starting a BID varies from BID to BID, however in examples such as Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, several BIDs were formed to manage the newly rezoned property that had transformed this historically Black neighborhood into corporate box stores. The lead planner of the Downtown Brooklyn re-zoning now sits as the President of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, managing three BIDs in the area.

A similar occurrence, though to a smaller degree, in Jackson Height occurred with the 82nd St BID. This BID only covers 4 blocks of area, but the property owners created the BID to commercialize these blocks. Which the BID successfully accomplished without a re-zoning and with pushing out several small South Asian locally owned businesses. The result in essence a strip mall in the middle of one of the most well known South Asian immigrant communities in the US. BIDs consolidate power, of land-owners and local governance officials to make it almost impossible for business owners who are renters to fight back. In fact, they aren't even given a vote on whether a BID should form or not.



## In 2019 New York City Business Improvement Districts Invested \$167 Million Dollars in the neighborhoods they manage



### Function of BIDs

The BIDs main responsibilities are as follows:

- Street cleaning and maintenance (supplemental sanitation and graffiti removal)
- Public safety and hospitality (often takes the form of building relationships with police to surveil homelessness and street vendors)
- Marketing and events (Put up light pole banners, host restaurant week, highlight specific businesses in media)
- Capital improvements (physical transformations of an area, like tree beds, park benches, creating plazas + installing plaza furniture, etc.)
- Beautification (Holiday lighting, planters, flower beds, etc.)
- Advocacy (A very vague term to describe a group of BIDs that advocate for certain policies, however who and what they are advocating for changes BID to BID)
- Business development (putting forth energy and resources to attract certain businesses to an area)

## Problem Framing

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The majority of the work that BIDs do steadily creeps property value of an area, causing already unfordable rent prices to surge. This is not to say that neighborhoods shouldn't feel safe, have access to the arts or beauty, or that all of the functions that a BID does is bad. Rather the argument is the stakeholders in the area should be the ones directing the needs of the community, rather than external urban planners that have a vision for neighborhood transformation, and who's vision does not include the inclusion or existence of those who already live there.

This value of sovereignty extends through BIDs to every form of planned environment, sparking the question

**How might immigrant owned small businesses develop access to decision-making power regarding neighborhood planning so that they are able to affect forces that cause displacement?**

This scoped in question seeks to understand how we can reclaim power within ourselves and our communities to build lives full of sovereignty and transform oppressive systems into new ways of being.

This question calls us into collective power, it requires movement, and pressure. It requires us to imagine new ways of being together, taking into account ancestral ways of relating. Then propels us into practicing those new ways.

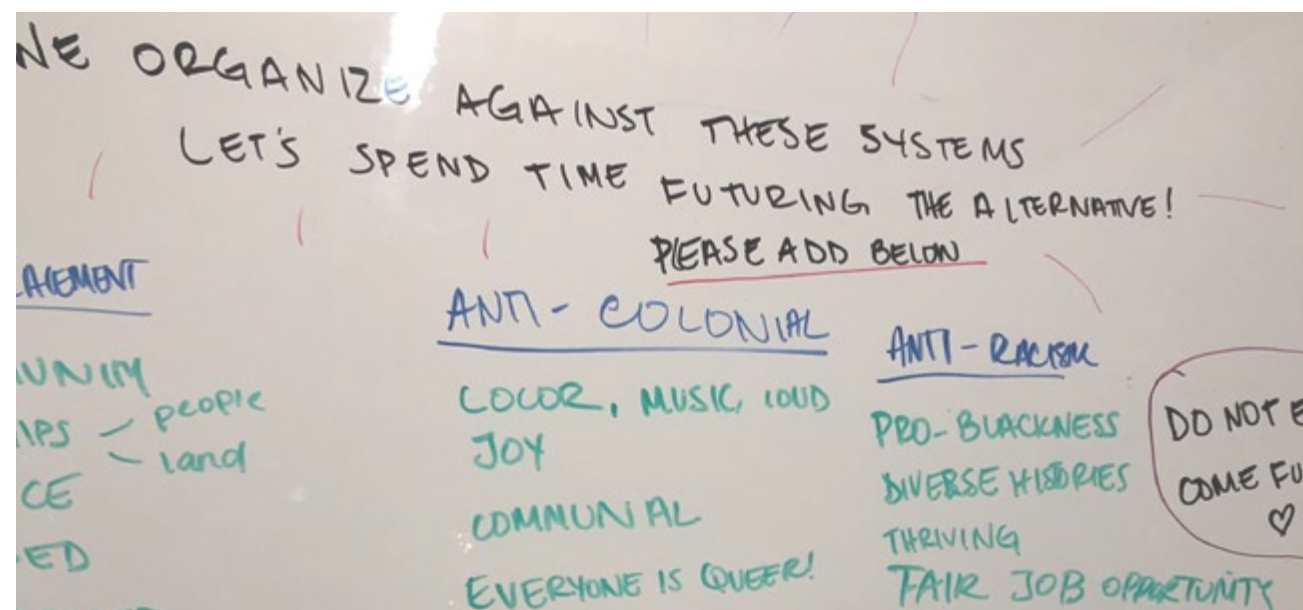
**How we can reclaim power within ourselves and our communities to build lives full of sovereignty and transform oppressive systems into new ways of being?**

# Process

My process as a designer began years ago in the community organizing sphere. With understanding the interwoven aspects of power, identity, and oppression then moving into collective action and through a personal anti-capitalism practice. Merging my political analysis and my love for design I created the following personal design practice.

## Practicing through experience design

Experience design considers the senses, environment, and systems at hand. It asks the question "what do we want people to feel?" and "what do we want people to do" then designs around that feeling. Visioning sessions or "futuring" sessions are often used in community organizing practices to help imagine that future that is being struggled for. It helps create strategy for movement building and helps unlock our creativity to create new futures outside of oppressive systems. Using experience design, I can intentionally design and practice the futures we crave and write about. With an emphasis on details and equity we can begin to shift power by how a meeting, a workshop, a service is designed. Experience design requires attention to detail, and so does practicing equity through an anti-oppressive lens.



## Solidarity is Empathy in Action

In a typical designers process, empathy is the first step. However it is hard to empathize with identities and the intersection of identities that I do not hold. Further more, truncating empathy to a step robs it of its intention, which is to eventually act in accordance to the needs of who design is being conducted with and for. Solidarity is both taking the time to understand the differences in privilege and power in a room, then leveraging the privilege and power to act in accordance to the needs through every step of the design process. It also means taking risks with designers privilege.

## Design research + building relationships and collective power

Typically in design research there is a separation between the "designers" and "the community". There's a clear distinction of what the role of the designer is and what the role of the designer is not. When working on systems change projects, these roles can be limiting to understanding the intersection of various issues that affect the issue at large. Building relationships to strengthen understanding and build community around an issue deepens the work. It also calls for long-term work, rather than "fly-in, fly-out" projects.

## Cautious Prototyping

There is definitely a space for prototyping quickly and failing quickly. However in merging community organizing and design, there is a lot to risk for already marginalized groups of people, if a prototype were to fail. Understanding these risks and potential impact is crucial when its people who have the most to lose from a failed prototype. (Insert something about the design tarot cards from Esther)

Moving at the pace of power for all + accessibility design (deepening impact)

We are only as free as the person who has the least freedom. In leading with my values I move at the pace of who is able to not only participate but lead. This means slow, steady, and intentional work. It looks like having multiple languages available, finding times that work well for everybody, or hosting something at many times so people can come. It requires having deep knowledge of who I am designing with. These needs turn into design specifications for co-creation and final intervention.



Research

# Access to the Community

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## Background

During the course of this thesis, I was also working at the Sunnyside Shines BID office as a fellow through the Neighborhood 360 program with New York City's department of Small Business Services (SBS). Part of my fellowship was often outreach to the business owners on the corridor. At this point I knew that I wanted to work within the realm of gentrification and land planning, through the lens of immigrant small business owners but the open question of what their priority needs are remained. I didn't want to impose a thesis topic on small business owners if this was not a concern to them.

## Sunnyside Specifics

Though Sunnyside houses 600 businesses, only 300 of those businesses are within the boundaries of the BID. Therefore my focus was to prioritize relationship building with the immigrant owned small business within the BID boundaries. Early stage "research" was lots of casual conversations with the businesses to build relationships and trust.

## Facing Challenging Topics

Because this project is on BID accountability, this was a difficult subject to navigate. Some businesses loved the work the BID was doing, some businesses did not have a good relationship with the BID or blatantly said "I'm anti-BID." Either way navigating both working for a BID and on BID accountability require transparency, honesty, and room for conflicting opinions to both be true and exist. This took time, repetition, and a deep sense of understanding my position within this political space. Over the course of 3 months I went door to door and spoke to over 75% of the businesses within the corridor. I built relationships with 65 of them and close relationships with 20.

## Stakeholders

### Primary Stakeholders

- Immigrant small business owners
- Immigrant residents
- Employees of small businesses
- Sunnyside Shines Business Improvement District

### Secondary Stakeholders

- Local community organizers
- Queens Neighborhood United
- Stop Sunnyside Yards
- Chayya CDC
- Queens Community Board 2
- Non-immigrant residents
- Non-immigrant business owners

### Secondary Research

- Capital in the City by Samuel Stein
- Association for Neighborhood and Housing Displacement
- Business improvement districts (BIDs): An economic development policy or a tool for gentrification (Bakry Elmendi)
- Business Improvement Districts and the Contradictions of Place-making: BID Urbanism in Washington, D.C. SUSANNA F. SCHALLER



# Learnings

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## Before small businesses can fight for a healthy neighborhood, they have to be free of survival mode

Most immigrant owned businesses in Sunnyside, Queens are operating in survival mode, e.g. living from paycheck to paycheck barely making ends meet for both their business and their families. The ability to participate in current practices related to land planning is near impossible for those business owners who can never leave their storefront.

## Organizations like BIDs are not using systems thinking to analyze the impact of their work on neighborhood development, which by default enables the existing issues within urban planning.

Without understanding the system of land planning, who it impacts and how it impacts them organizations operate how they always have been operating, which is without justice or equity for those who are most impacted by their work. If there is not a critical understanding of the power dynamics the existing problems with urban planning will continue to perpetuate.

**“It’s either I pay rent, or I take care of my family, I pay rent, I have nothing left for myself”** - Enam, Waqiah Travel + Tour + Cellphones

**“I mean we don’t really deal with gentrification... it doesn’t impact our work”** - Sr. Program Manager, Neighborhood Development Division of Small Business Services

## BIDs, even the small ones, are not working in solidarity with the experiences of small businesses, rather the impact on small business tends to be an afterthought.

By design BIDs are not required to be accountable to small businesses, their main stakeholder are commercial property owners in an area. Because they are structurally beholden to property owners there is no driver of these organizations working in solidarity with small business. Efforts to support small business is a by-product of wanting to create safe and clean neighborhoods, not a priority.

## Small businesses are seen as disposable by those who have the privilege to imagine land

In the conducted research, small businesses feel that the businesses are not valued in their community by the property owner. A lot of businesses have been threatened to be replaced by tenant who can pay more rent. There is a feeling that property owners do not care about who inhabits their property as long as rent is paid.

**“Small businesses are not at the table, a Queens person isn’t at the table- that’s the whole problem”** - Take Back NYC

**“Developers say “win-win” to say the neighborhood can win from the development, but the profits are not for us, the development is not for us, who is really winning?”** Libertat O. Guerra, Activist (at Hindsight Con)”

# Relating it Back To The System



This figure shows the confluence of forces upon immigrant small business owners. The center are the business owners, the next ring are the forces that influence them directly, the third circle are forces that tangentially affect the small business but still has an effect, these forces may not directly be in communication with the small business but still impacts the small business. The fourth ring shows attitudes, mindsets, and rhetoric about immigrant and immigrant businesses that affect all stakeholders.

# Co-Creation

## Challenges of Co-Creation

In a typical design process, co-creation sessions in the form of workshops would be held during the prototyping phase. With immigrant business owners, this proved to be difficult since many of them are both employee and owner and cannot leave their storefront for an unpaid meeting. Hosting a workshop would attract only those business owners who would have the capacity to attend, leaving the opinions of those who are in worse situations to the wayside. I had to do some creative co-creating to ensure proper problem scoping and to refine ideas so that they are not just sustainable for this project but beyond this project. The co-creation needed to be in-person, door-to-door, in multiple languages.

## Creative Co-Creation In Person

From the learnings I brainstormed 6-7 options with the Sunnyside Shines BID, it's staff, and a few of the business owners. From these 6-7 options 4 ideas were settled upon based on who was most affected (centering the immigrant small business owners), what was viable within the time-frame of a thesis, and what per-conditions existed for some of the ideas.

**Goal:** To understand if these solutions would be viable options for the problems business owners were facing.

**Process:** Creative co-creating meant going door-to-door to business owners and presenting the 4 ideas that emerged from brainstorming sessions with the business owners, community stakeholders, and local community organizers.

**Result:** 30 businesses were visited to build upon the ideas we discussed, gather their feedback, refine details, and vote on which ideas were most suitable to their needs.

PACK THE PLACE

PACK THE PLACE

PACK THE PLACE

PACK THE PLACE ★★

marysdnairsalon@gmail

- collect advertising
- invite residents to come, with the idea.
- marketing and use the
- high schools hit them up.
- "imagination builds future"

TU

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING ★★

- maybe → propose ideas
- dialogue + learn around the manage. streetfront improvement.
- help get ready for plastic bag ban.
- good idea don't go to our nepotie push nepotie continually
- public marketing
- more spanish speaking support
- ↳ bilingual. / futeo,

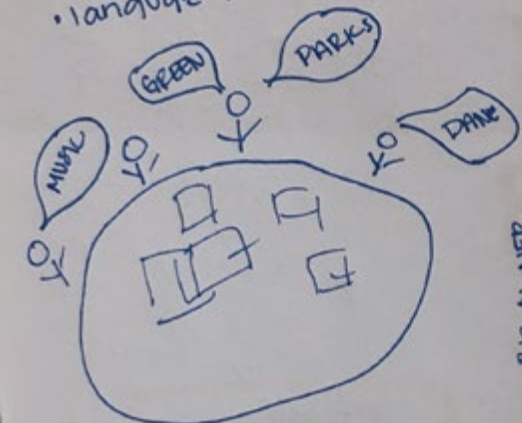
You propose a project or you vote on the things you want from the BID.

TOWN HALL

- difficult to come
- Better line - foot traffic people.
- ↳ plastic bag.
- math appeal thing, cant go.
- ↳ rent is the biggest thing crime is going up.
- work 2 days a week we pay property tax and we see nothing
- they promise things

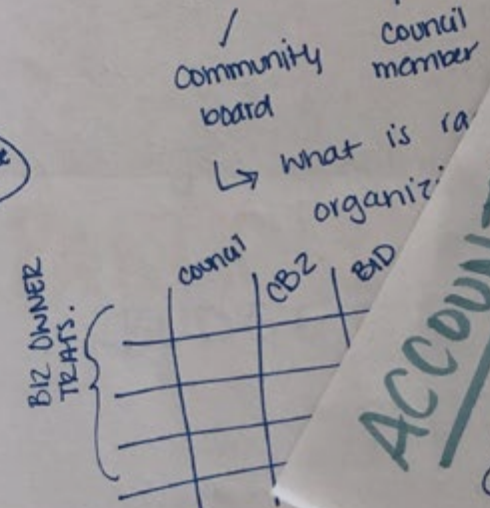
### BUSINESS NUANCE

- small / med / large
- immigrant owned
- Pbc owned
- language justice



### FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY DRIVEN LAND USE:

What if communities were stewards of the land?  
↳ what if people in power listened to the community?



## ACCOUNTABILITY

Opened:

### BID 2019/2020 BUDGET

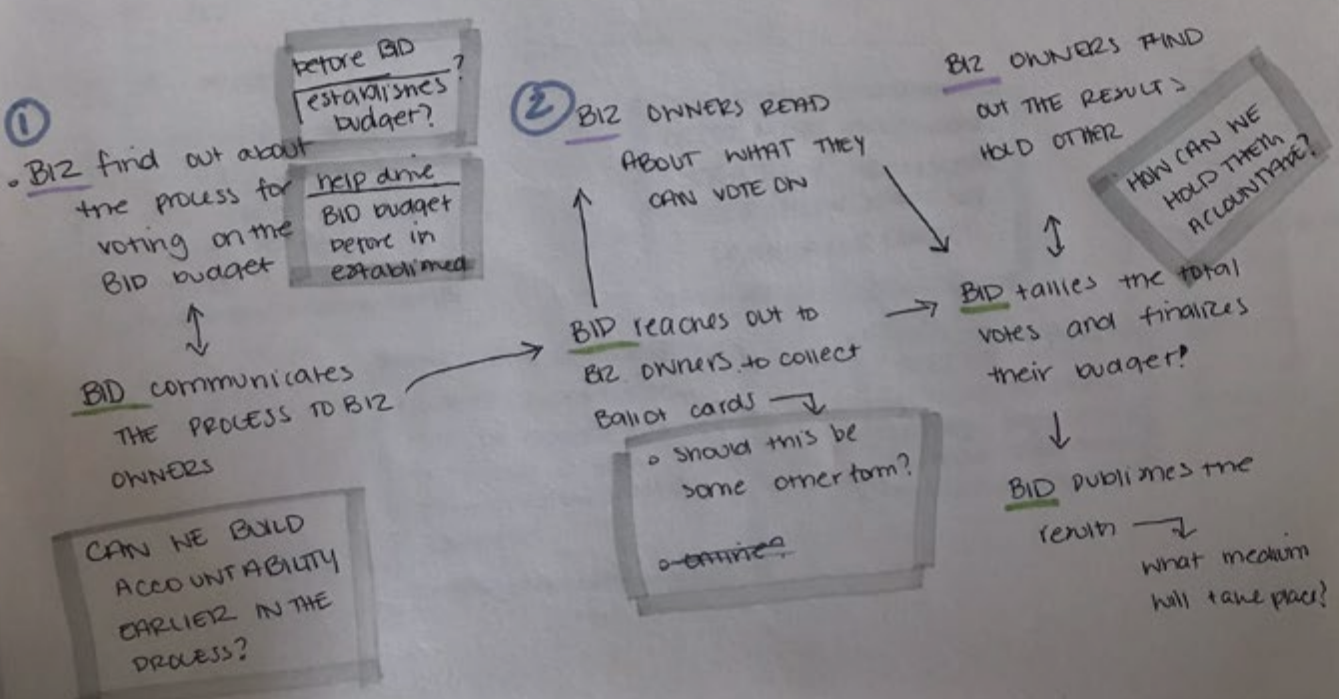
VOTE NEED BIZ

- o Policy
- o Commercial
- o Manufacturing
- o storefront imp
- o Your option:

IN 2019 the BID spent x amt of \$\$\$

① giving biz owners an idea of how BID are currently u...

## JOURNEY MAP



Prototyping

# Building Infrastructure for Long-Term Change

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## Weighing Options

The options presented within the co-creation process tackle important aspects of the system small business owners reside within. One (Pack the Place) addressed an immediate need of business owners; rent and finding new customers, so that they are able to pay rent and continue their business within the neighborhood. Many immigrant businesses are hurt during the process of gentrification because the new people in the neighborhood may not find the "aesthetic" of the business pleasing to their white middle class taste. Immigrant businesses are often overlooked even if they carry the same products that their American counter parts sell at a mark up. The purpose of the pack the place

package was to both direct resources and attention to the business that otherwise exist in an unaccessible ether (for example consultations with the Small Business Support office, consultations with NYC SBS, etc according to the businesses need). Then to share the culture that the business represents with the community in a culturally responsible way, being mindful of cultural appropriation within the changing neighborhood.

The other options seeks to set foundations in order to create ripple effects for longer term systems change. For example, a participatory budgeting process aims to reclaim collective power for the small business owners, prioritizing the needs of

immigrant businesses. Then overlaying that with a system of accountability to help hold the BID in Sunnyside accountable to the needs of immigrant business owners.

**When meeting with local community organizers, I was challenged by how much these solutions attempted to reform BIDs rather than work on their accountability or eventual abolition. My values as a designer and organizers were held in-front of me as I grappled between the short-term immediate solution that would heavily require BID support or a longer-term solution that helps build community power and hold harmful institutions accountable to community needs.**

## Pack the Place

The BID would work with businesses at risk of closing to direct attention and resources to the business, then also help the business engage with the changing neighborhood.

## Equity-Centered Workshops

A series of customized workshops for BIDs in immigrant neighborhoods to understand the power dynamics of BIDs and neighborhood character. Then create customized action plans to help shift power towards immigrant business owners within their area.

## Participatory Budgeting

A system to vote on what the BID should be working on within the neighborhood using equity-centered ranking and a deep engagement strategy to capture all voices within the community.

## Re-Design Small Business Advisory Council

Re-designing an existing business advisory council for a state senator to become more accessible and eventually to be community owned focusing on the experiences of immigrant business owners.



## The Intervention

# Guiding Questions for the Interventions

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## Specifying Design

The interventions created as part of this thesis project was to set the foundation for the community to build resiliency over time. However, a major challenge was that the business owners very rarely could leave their storefront and gather all together. The following guiding questions helped create design specifications for interventions that were rooted in solidarity, equity, and systems change.

## Multi-Step Approach

From the door-to-door conversations, conversations with local organizers, and conversations with the BID, we decided on two interventions that would begin to build a system of accountability between the immigrant business owners and the BID as well as the immigrant business owners and local governance.

The BID has an annual budget that is presented to the board every year. In the current phase the community has very little say on how the budget is used. What if we could have the business owners vote on what they would like the BID budget to be spent on, using an equity centered lens to center the needs of those who are most marginalized?

Additionally, the State Senator had begun hosting small business advisory councils, as a direct line to small business. How could we re-design these meetings so that immigrant business owners can also have a seat at this table?

Values for creating design interventions:

Solidarity

Equity

Systems Change

How can we build power within a group of people that share so much yet are unable to come together?

How can we hold institutions that should be accountable to the community, actually accountable to the community?

How can we begin to practice principles that can be antidotes to white supremacy culture, capitalism, and oppression through how the interventions are formed and what the interventions are?

# Participatory Budgeting

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## The Vision

What would happen if the business owners within the BID boundary were able to vote on what the BID should be working on? What would happen if the needs of the immigrant small business owners were prioritized, particularly the immigrants of color? Using the spirit of participatory budgeting, I aim to re-design the participatory budgeting process to help understand what the immigrant business owners want investment into and to design accountability into the process.

## Inspiration

Council-member Levin's of the 33rd District in Brooklyn has designed a participatory budgeting process that is bespoke to his community. Drawing inspiration from that work, I wanted to create a bespoke process for Sunnyside given the nuances of the neighborhood. Additionally, the current participatory budgeting system asks the community to create ideas for a project they would want funded by their tax dollars. This participatory budgeting process is different, instead of voting on a special projects, almost the entire BID budget would be opened up to the business owners to vote on.

## Gaps in The Current Process

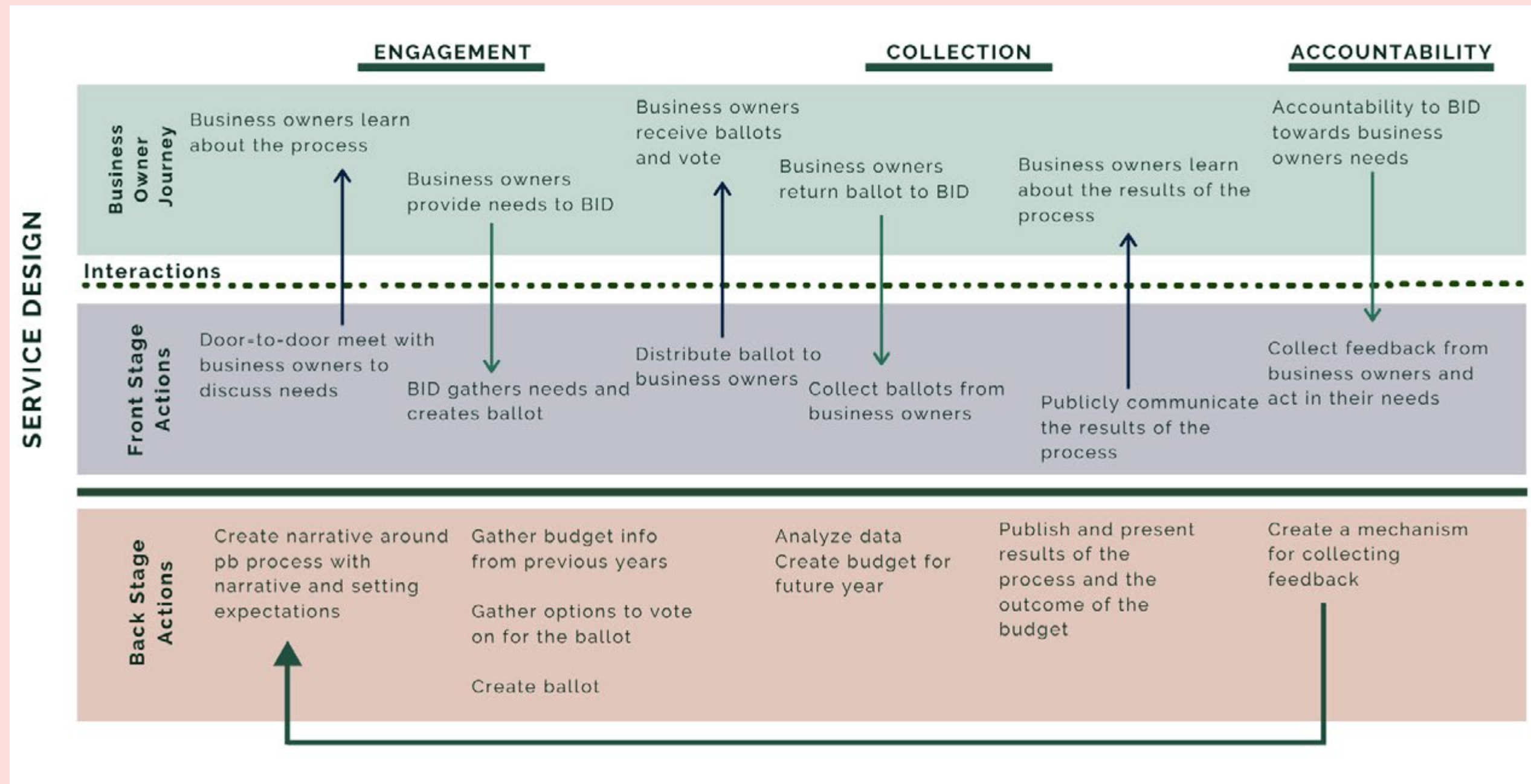
1. Voting is online or require additional in person meetings to attend.
2. Monolingual, most of all the materials are in English, most of the meetings are in English.
3. It's a multi-step effort for engagement
4. All votes are counted equally, there isn't a way to balance the needs for the most marginalized population
5. The current system allocates a portion of the budget on a special project. This means tax payers do not vote on how funds in other areas of the budget are being used.

## New Design Specifications

1. This would need to be a process that could be done in person, without the limitation of technology.
2. Language Justice - provide materials in multiple languages to meet the accessibility needs of the business owners.
3. This needs to be a simple process that allows each business owner to vote and get results.
4. Weigh the needs of the businesses at most risk of displacement higher, consider weighting based on if they are an immigrant owned business or ran by people of color.
5. The elements to be voted on will derive from early research and be validated by the business owners. Also leave room for emergence and voting of new needs.

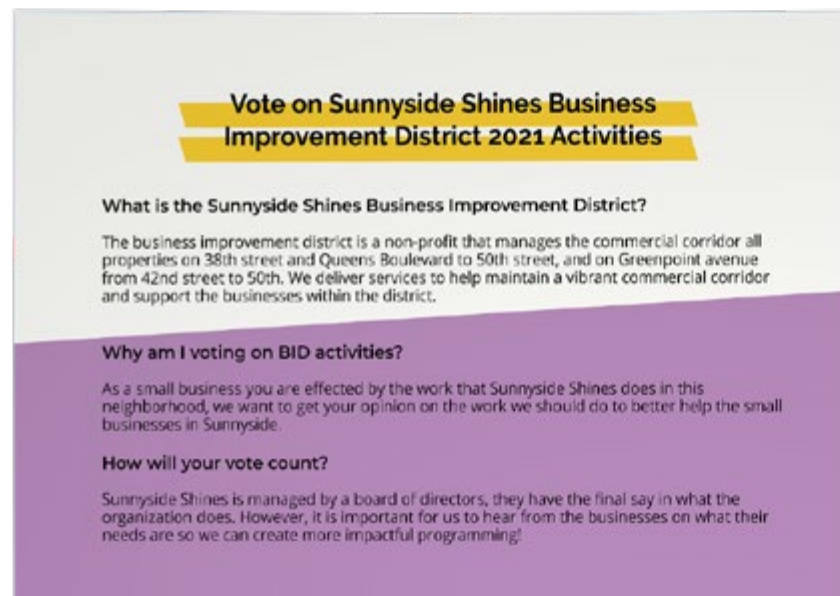


# Journey Map of the Re-Design



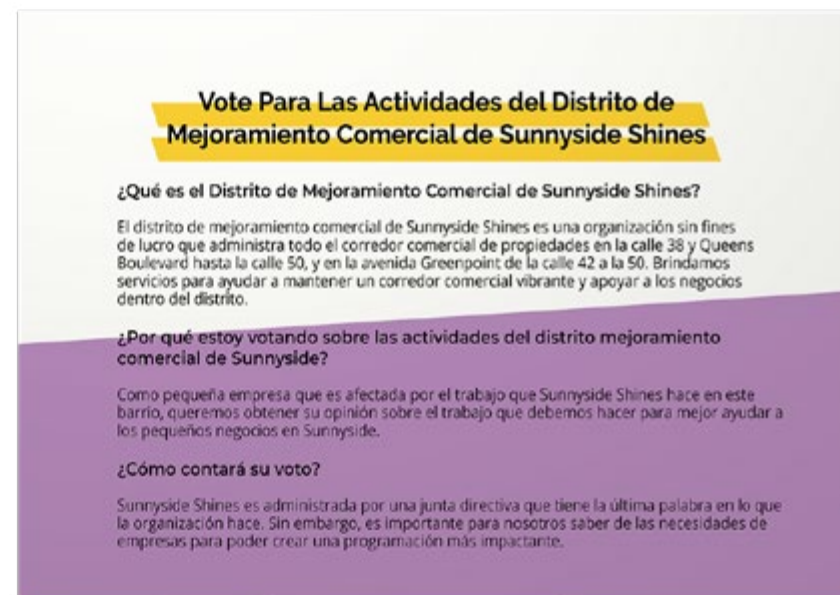
The participatory budgeting process re-designed requires heavy communication and participation from those who collect votes. Though we created packets that accompany the ballot, it is important to have 1:1 communication about this process with the business owners, especially for those who were not involved in the design of the process. Going door-to-door and following up with not just collecting the ballot but also to communicate results is the key to this process.

# Elements of the Process



A packet was created along with the ballot to provide context and more information on what the business owners would be voting on. Both were created in multiple languages so there wasn't a barrier to participating for people who are new to English.

The front cover is intended to discuss the background of a BID (since many small business owners were unsure of what the BID is and does, then to help understand how the budgeting process works and how their vote matters.



The left inside of the ballot shows what the BID's budget the previous year was, so that the businesses know what their funding is going towards. Additionally, there are certain contracts the BID is locked into year to year, and certain parts of the budget that cannot be changed, and those are also explained in the front cover.

The right inside of the ballot details all the items that business owners were able to vote on. These ideas were co-created with the business owners and also discussed with the BID so that the needs of the business owners were adequately represented here. There was additional free space for people to write in their ideas.

# Ballot Design

**Vote here for 2021 BID activities**

**Step 1:** Fill this part out first. This information will help us understand the different needs for different types of businesses.

Type of Business: \_\_\_\_\_ Immigrant Owned Business:  Yes  No  
 Street: \_\_\_\_\_ Do you pay real estate taxes as part of your lease?  Yes  No

**Step 2:** Cast your vote by selecting the top 4 categories in order of importance to your needs. 1 would be the most important, 2 the second most important and so on.

Additional beautification services     Pack the Place Program  
 Cultural Programming     Policy Advocacy  
 District Marketing Programming     Support Services for Businesses  
 Holiday Lighting     Other: (write your idea here)

The ballot itself was a loose card inside the packet, either the business owner can fill it out with their employees or they can fill it out with the help of who is collecting the ballots.

The first step is collecting demographic information about the identity of who owns the business and where they are located. This is crucial in an equity-centered process since we know the identity and

geographical location of the business determines its existing access to resources.

The second half of the ballot matches the language on the packet, Here the business owners rank the top 4 items that they would like to see the BID invest their money and time on for the following year.

**Por favor vote aquí por las actividades de Sunnyside**

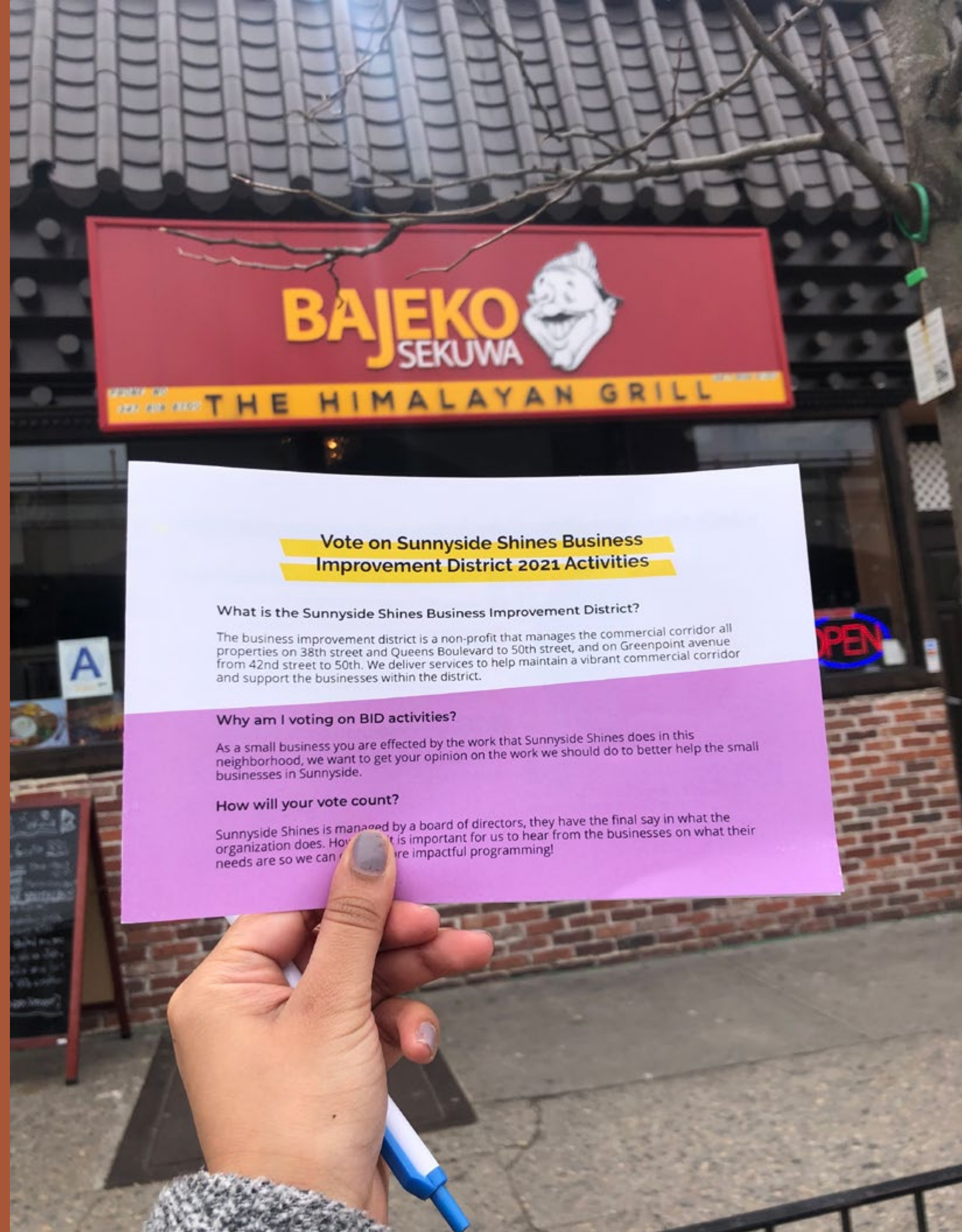
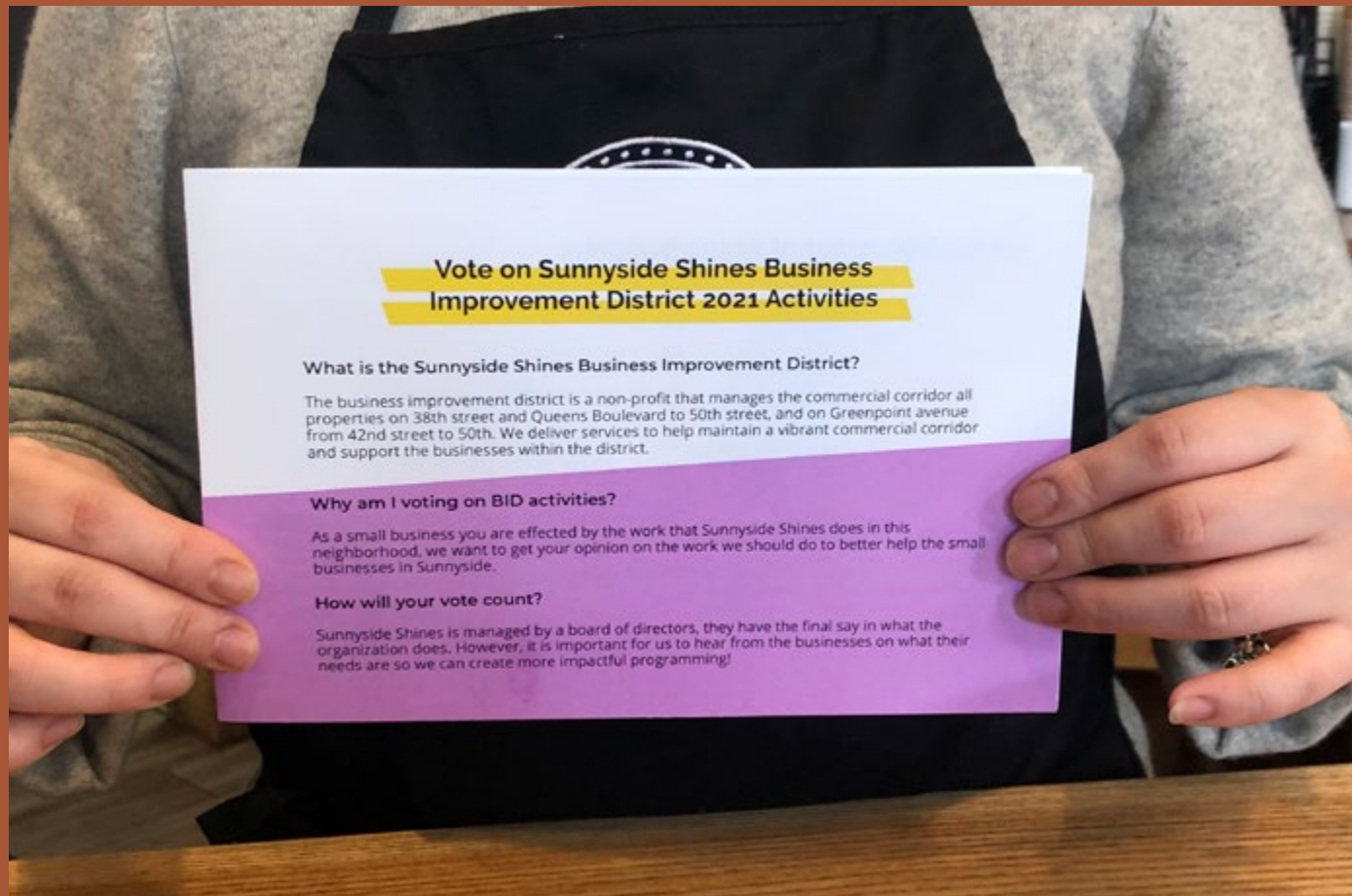
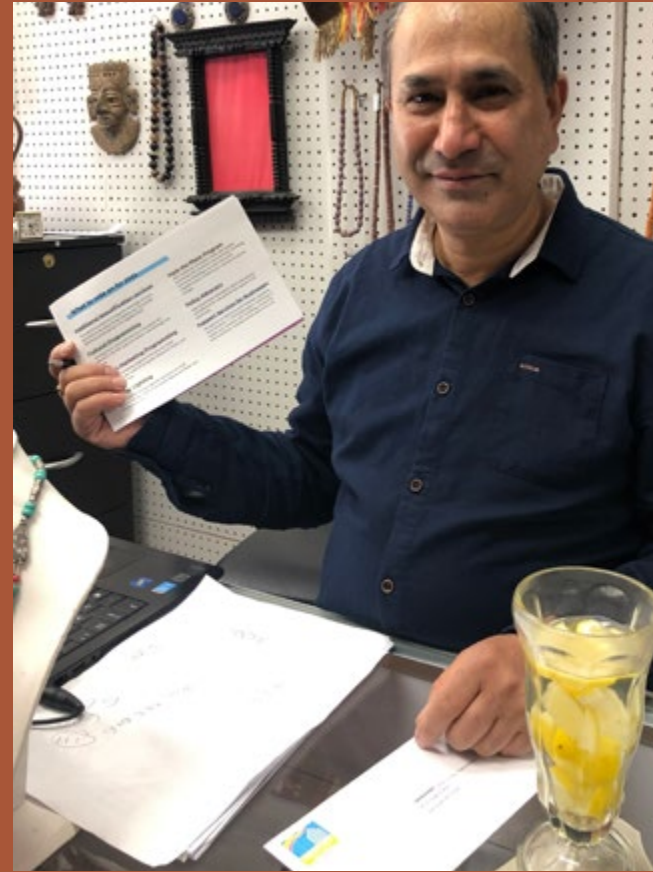
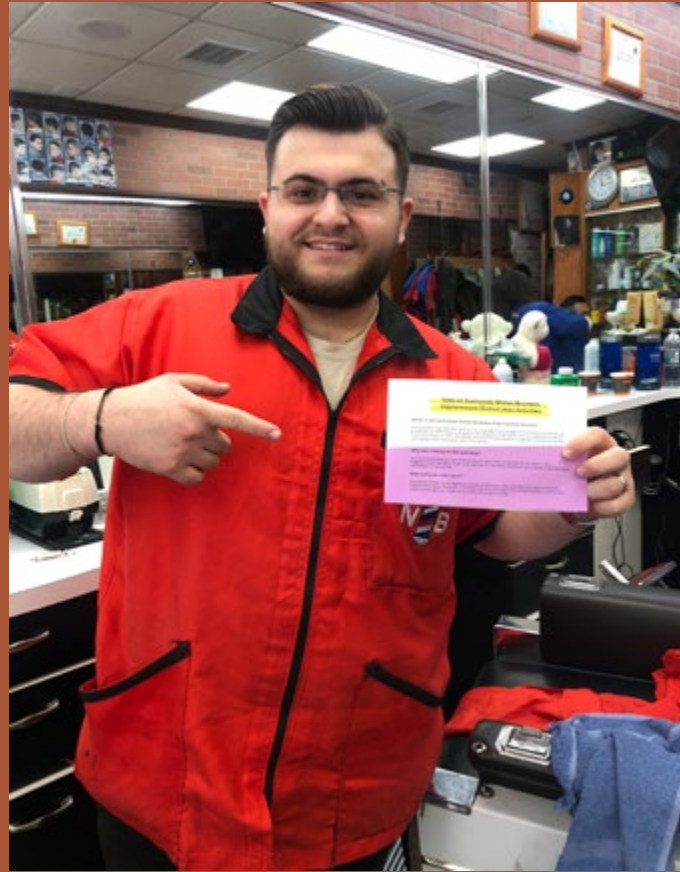
**Paso 1:** Complete esta parte primero. Esta información nos ayudará a comprender las diferentes necesidades de los diferentes tipos de

Tipo de negocio: \_\_\_\_\_ Negocio es propiedad de inmigrantes:  Yes  No  
 Calle: \_\_\_\_\_ ¿Paga impuestos sobre bienes inmuebles como parte de su contrato de arrendamiento?  Yes  No

**Paso 2:** Emita su voto seleccionando las 4 categorías principales en orden de importancia para sus necesidades. 1 sería lo más importante, 2 el segundo más importante, y así sucesivamente...

Servicios de Embellecimiento Adicionales     Programa de "Pack the Place"  
 Programación Cultural     Incidencia Política  
 Programación de Marketing del Distrito     Servicios de Apoyo de Empresas  
 Holiday Lighting     Otros: (escriba su idea aquí)





### Vote on Sunnyside Shines Business Improvement District 2021 Activities

#### What is the Sunnyside Shines Business Improvement District?

The business improvement district is a non-profit that manages the commercial corridor all properties on 38th street and Queens Boulevard to 50th street, and on Greenpoint avenue from 42nd street to 50th. We deliver services to help maintain a vibrant commercial corridor and support the businesses within the district.

#### Why am I voting on BID activities?

As a small business you are effected by the work that Sunnyside Shines does in this neighborhood, we want to get your opinion on the work we should do to better help the small businesses in Sunnyside.

#### How will your vote count?

Sunnyside Shines is managed by a board of directors, they have the final say in what the organization does. However, it is important for us to hear from the businesses on what their needs are so we can create more impactful programming!

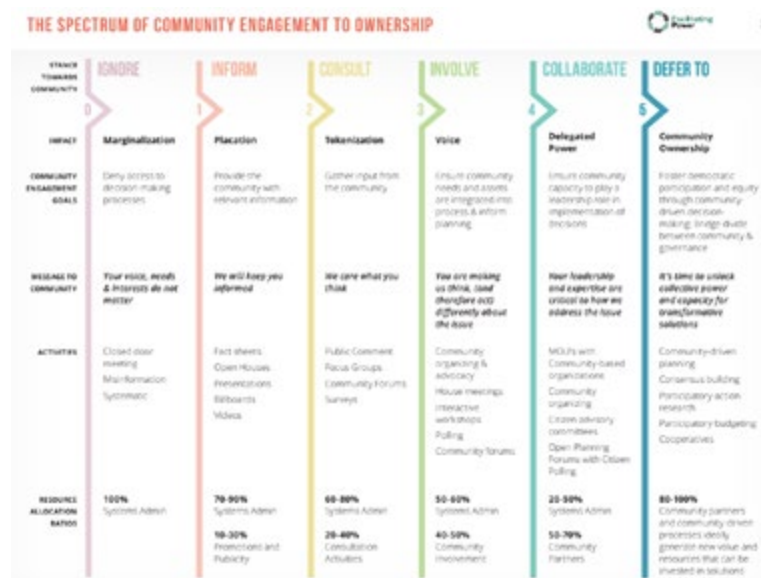
# Small Business Advisory Council

## Background

State Senator Gianaris began convening a small business advisory council to help him understand the issues that small businesses are facing within his jurisdiction in Queens. These meetings were largely inaccessible to the business owners in Sunnyside because they were held in a neighboring area, and the immigrant business owners were unable to attend. Largely because leaving the storefront is not an option and because they are often business owner and employee. Additionally, the senator would often set the agenda for the meeting without input from the business owners, and there was no clear direction on the strategy of these meetings.

## Vision for Re-Design

The small business advisory council meetings are a direct line to a policymaker. How might we create space that is accessible to the immigrant population and that moves the immigrant population from participant to ownership? If the immigrant business owners are able to share their challenges and foreseen impact with the senator, the senator then has the information needed to act in solidarity with immigrant business owner needs.



The spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership from [Movement Strategy Center](#) helped me evaluate the type of engagement that is desired from these meetings and to co-create a scaffold of meetings towards community ownership.

## Design Specifications

### 1. Access

- Location
- Language
- Physical space
- Time + length

### 2. Equity

- Co-create agenda
- Seating arrangement to share power
- Sharing talking time

### 3. Creating Mutual Benefit

- Senator + business owners are able to co-create an agenda to help both their needs
- Having space for attendees to address concerns specific to their needs

## 1st Meeting

Host the meeting in Sunnyside  
Share information on upcoming policies  
Co-create the agenda with co-chair based on immigrant owner needs  
Create community agreements and rituals for the meeting

## 2nd Meeting

Co-create agenda ahead of time  
Share information about upcoming policies in advance  
Continue rituals  
Implement items from feedback

## 3rd Meeting

Iterate on meeting based on feedback from business owners  
Continue to co-create agenda items  
Consider ed-centralizing the meeting to discuss policy items individually

# First Re-Designed Meeting

## Pre-Work

We invited the small business advisory council to host the meeting in Sunnyside. When choosing a location we wanted to find a center point within the neighborhood that was also accessible via public transit. However our options were limited since we also didn't want the meeting to disrupt business. We decided on Maggie Mae's an Irish-immigrant owned bar with a downstairs that wouldn't disrupt the business. We also offered childcare and brought catering from a Mexican - Immigrant owned business, Arriba Arriba.

## The Invitation

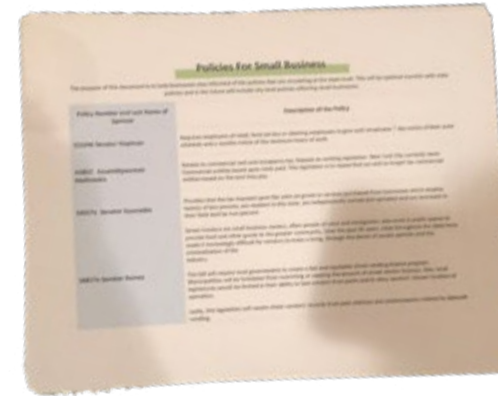
Typically invitations are sent via email, however for immigrant business owners that would not work as they prefer phone or in-person communication. So I and members of the BID went door to door to invite the small businesses, and ask them what topics they would like to discuss to begin co-creating the agenda.

## Co-Creating Agenda

The co-chair of the committee is a small business owner in Astoria, the BID staff and I met with her ahead of time to share some of the topics that the business owners from Sunnyside wanted to discuss to co-create an agenda.

## Co-Created Agenda for Feb 28th

1. Welcome + Introductions
2. Administrative Updates
  - i. Mission + Membership
3. State level policy discussion
  - i. Proposed policy A315 Rozic, requires employers of retail, food service, or cleaning employees to give 7 day notice of work schedule and a months notice of minimum hours of work.
4. Counsel on City Level policies
  - i. Small Business Job Survival Act
5. Policies to discuss at next meeting
6. Closing

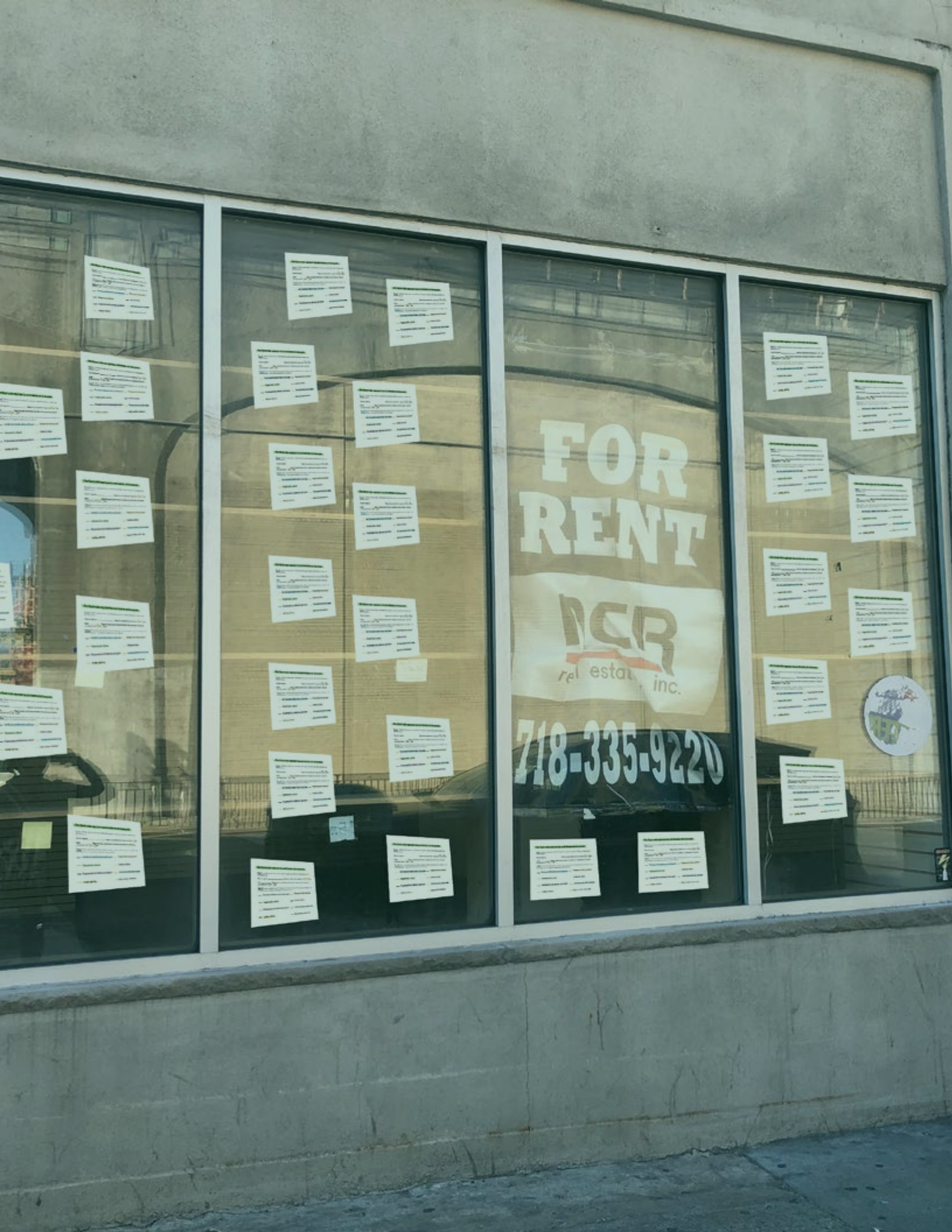


## Policy Research and Knowledge Share

An intention of this meeting is to discuss policies that affect small businesses. However, business owners often do not find out about policies until they are already implemented, and do not always have the time research policies on their own. For the first meeting, we research which policies would broadly affect small businesses and created a handout for the meeting which described the policy using pithy digestible language.

In the future we would collect and disseminate this information ahead of time prior to co-creating an agenda so that business owner would be informed about what is coming up that would be a priority for them to discuss.





Outcomes

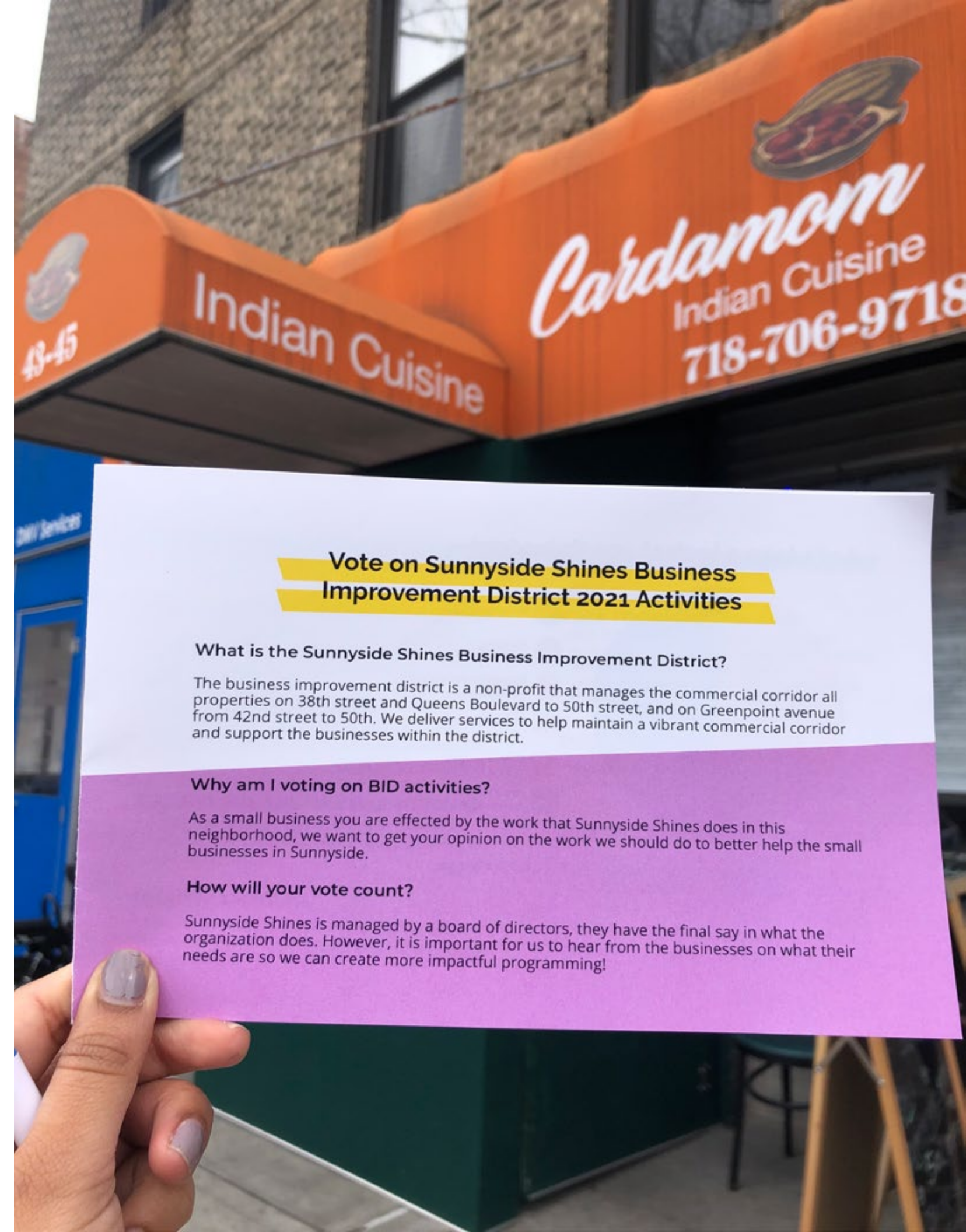
# Participatory Budgeting

## Results

Participatory Budgeting began on March 9th and was planned to go until March 23rd. Due to NYC Pause related to COVID-19, the collection period only went until March 12th. The premise of the budgeting process was to be equity centered and inclusive, since many immigrant business owners do not have access to Internet or a computer a whole population would be excluded from participating. Therefore we decided to post-pone the budgeting process. Within this time-frame, 20 ballots were collected from business owners. From an initial analysis, it was clear that the needs of the immigrant business owners were different from the needs of non immigrant business owners. The immigrant business owners wanted more 1:1 attention for their business, access to capital, where as the other business owners were interested in district marketing and holiday lighting.

## Accountability

The participatory budgeting process is only as effective as how the budget is planned. Once all ballots were tallied through using an equity centered lens, the results would be presented to the local BID. When the BID's budget was finalized the results would be displayed publicly, both on the internet and shared in person with the business owners. If the budget did not align with business owners need, a next step to co-create an accountability process would happen.





# Small Business Advisory Council

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## Feb 28th Meeting Attendees

17 Small Business owners from Western Queens attended the meeting on Feb. 28th. Typically one or two of the attendees would be immigrant business owners, this time 9 of the attendees were immigrant business owners, and not just from Sunnyside.

## Outcomes

The business owners discussed the Commercial Rent Stabilization act that was stagnant at city council, hoping the state senator could support. While the state senator can do little about city level policies, in a follow up email his chief of staff did say they were drafting legislation on commercial rent stabilization policies that would mimic the policy at the city council level.

## Moving Forward

Similar to participatory budgeting, convening in person had to pause for this effort, however business owners decided to group together on WhatsApp, a more accessible medium to communicate and collaborate during the COVID crises. From this medium, we were able to support each other in applying for loans and providing support in the unique circumstance that each business is in.

## Virtual Meetings in Corona

In early May, the co-chair of the committee wanted to re-start the meetings virtually, creating a sub-committee of business owners who would guide the topics that the larger council would discuss. While it is extremely important that business owners organize together, especially right now these meetings online still remain inaccessible to immigrant business owners. The participants of the sub-committee are hand selected, and usually based on who leadership already knows (usually wealthier white non-immigrant business owners ). There is still work to be done at the leadership level of the small business committee to change mindsets around who is able to have a seat at the table and influence decision-making.

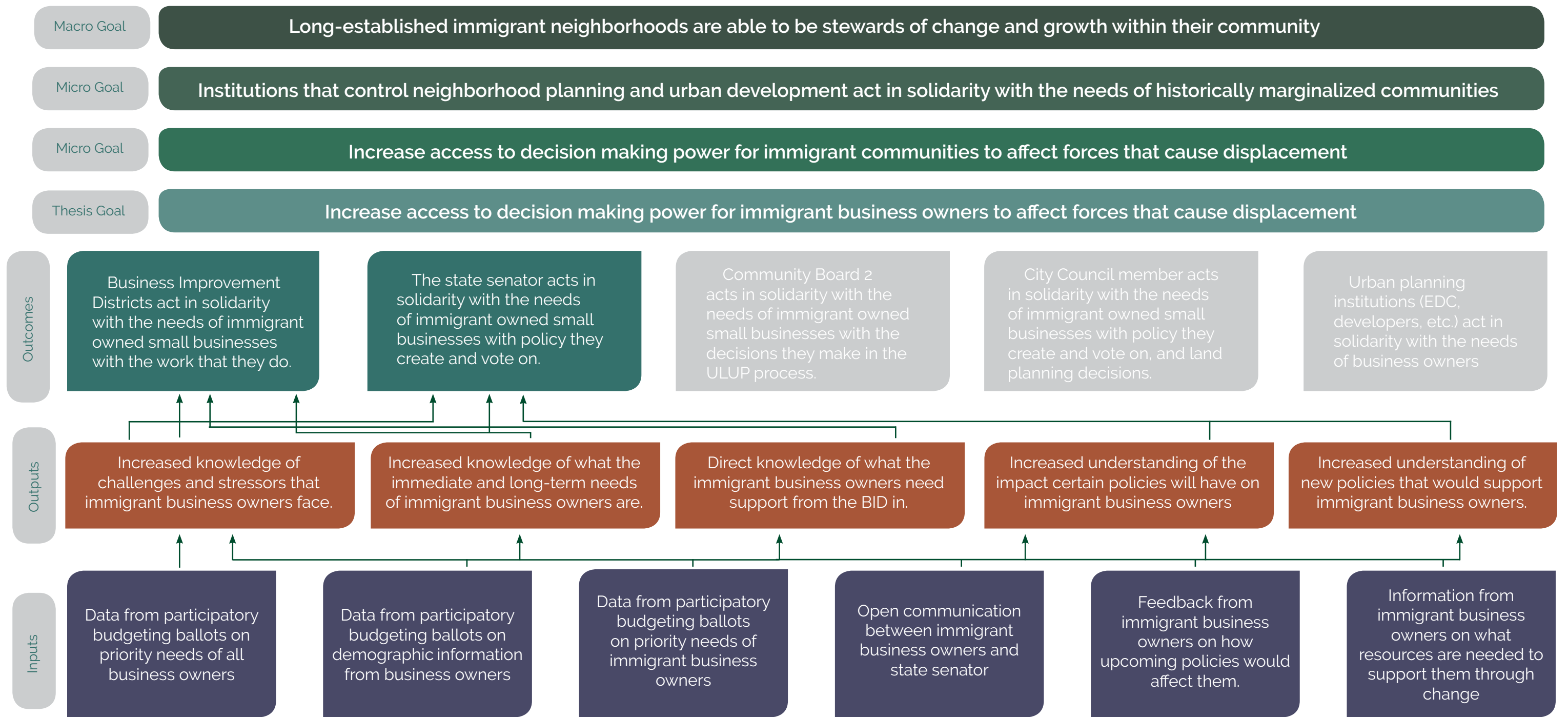
**“I think the meeting was very good, it’s very helpful to know what is going to happen in the future”**

- Norma, employee from Oasis Pizza and Gyro

**“The new design is going very well, we have a say, in fact we’re the ones who are leading what’s happening”**

- Co-Chair from Small Business Advisory Council

# Theory of Change



## Participatory Budgeting

Short Term:

- Number of ballots collected
- Number of businesses visited
- Final BID budget (if it is alignment with the results from business owners)

Long Term:

- Activities that the BID invests in
- Retention of immigrant businesses

## Small Business Advisory Council

Short Term:

- Number of immigrant small business owners
- Number of business owners from Sunnyside
- Participation in agenda co-creation
- Immediate actions the Senator takes

Long Term:

- Co-created policies with immigrant business owners
- Resources given to business owners
- Decisions on policies that affect business owners

**What if our decision-makers were us?**

**Not just a reflection**

**but an actual us**

**We commune and create  
and imagine and then make.**

**Our thoughts paintbrushes,  
our landscapes reality**

**What if we had the gift of time  
- without compromise?**

**Our relationships to each other strong,  
our neighborhood full of music  
with trees and stretches of grass  
so that we can feel the sun on our face**

**Languages plentifully spoken,  
and we still understand each other.**

**We commune and convene  
How we commune and convene**



## Moving Forward

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### The Impact Of Corona Virus on Immigrant Communities

By now, we've realized that our immigrant small businesses are one crises away from closing their doors permanently. And here we are in the middle of a global pandemic, where all people of color and immigrants are going through some sort of crisis. 6 weeks into the pandemic, businesses have started shuttering their doors permanently. With no financial buffer to keep them going, and no safe or legal way to continue working they have no other choice. I wonder what will become of these neighborhoods, what will our immigrant neighborhoods look like in the future. How can we design systems that support their ability to thrive, not just recover from the pandemic.

The current federal and local aid packages are not designed with people of color and non-English speakers in minds. Grants are offered within a short window with confusing financial requirements, loans require a good credit score and a confidence in a stable future, everything is in English and everything is online.

To begin to address the needs of the immigrant communities we have to design equitable solutions and targeted solutions for that population. Grand gestures will only continue to perpetuate a history of marginalization.

As designers, our greatest power is our ability to form relationships and act in solidarity. We also have designers privilege, we have the ability to create new systems that are not just anti-dotes to the existing oppressive systems, but create possibility, joy, and hope.

My wish moving forward through this state is, the voices of those who are most impacted are lifted, that freedom is not a privilege, and that we continue to find ways to fulfill our needs without seeking permission from these oppressive systems so that we are all able to be in a Thrival Mode.

MFA Design for Social Innovation Thesis  
School of Visual Arts, NYC  
May 2020

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