Digital Cultural Probing Tool: Collecting Lived Experiences of Senior Korean American Immigrants in Gwinnett County

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Introduction

The practice of city planning had traditionally been top-down and technocratic. Until the 1960s, design or policy authorities approached what they regarded as problematic in cities with a rational, unilateral, and deficit-based method of development. In the recent decades, both asset-based community development and participatory design practices have been institutionalized to remedy its shortcomings in the past. To overcome the unilateral nature of traditional city planning, civic participation has been promoted and public engagement activities have regularly been implemented. From the inception of a development project to its completion, city planners, government officials, and design professionals conduct public hearings, participatory design charrettes, and community meetings; however, limitations still exist within these efforts. Not only today's public engagement practices Eurocentrically standardized, the city planners' use of jargon and inability to tap into a community's existing communication channels prevent all members of the society from being reached.

Moreover, there are intersectional barriers to civic participation. The immigrant populations, especially those of senior age, encounter a multitude of barriers when it comes to community engagement. Since immigrant communities in the United States have historically been left out of decision-making conversations, there is a general lack of awareness of community events where they get the chance to offer their inputs. Compared to settler populations, immigrants are also less likely to be subscribed to electronic newsletters or email listservs that circulate information about participatory events. Many first-generation immigrants work demanding jobs around the clock and do not have the time to attend community meetings. Furthermore, many immigrants' trust toward local government officials have been severed due to a history of oppression, over-policing, and gentrification in their communities. Due to discrimination, segregation, and a lack of belonging, many immigrants do not feel attached to their cities and are thus indifferent about city development projects. Lastly, immigrant populations come from diverse cultures with a different understanding of collective decision-making. Language and cultural concepts often do not translate perfectly, and oftentimes, a confirmation bias intrudes relationships with authorities where immigrants feel that there are specific responses that city planners want to hear and do not open up to offer authentic insight. In the end, intersectional immigrant experiences are invalidated, and community engagement becomes a traumatic experience for immigrant populations; nonetheless, community engagement should in fact be the quintessence and embodiment of healing.

Design Objectives

Considering the above, we can conclude that participatory design in city planning is inaccessible to immigrants as planning jargons do not translate and conventional community engagement methods use questions that do not elicit organic insight. In addition to yielding confirmation bias, these questions do not encourage participants to think outside of the box for their community when it comes to development as oftentimes, they are close ended (e.g., multiple choice). It thus becomes apparent that an entirely novel set of questions, perhaps that which opens the floor for participants to integrate their lived experiences, is needed. If immigrants are asked to speak on alternatives to Eurocentric city planning by reflecting on the things that worked well in their respective home countries, not only would the process become a true embodiment of asset-based community development, it would also be an opportunity for city planners to gradually step out of ethnocentric standards of practice.

For this project, we have focused on operationalizing intersectionality in a participatory design process for the senior Korean American immigrant population in Gwinnett County, where a significant number of them reside. Our design objectives were to first, equip senior Korean American immigrants in Gwinnett County with a digital cultural probing tool that collects lived experiences, memory, narrative, and artifacts; and second, to support city planners with a tool that enables learning about ways of planning outside of conventional Western methods.

Practitioners Interviews

To refine our design concept, we reached out to two practitioners in city planning and participatory design technology. First, we spoke with Marian Liou, the Principal Program Specialist of Community Development at the Atlanta Regional Commission, the regional planning and intergovernmental coordination agency of Metro Atlanta. Marian's insights and guidance were instrumental in shaping our design objectives discussed above. The main takeaways from our 30-minute Zoom conversation with Marian on the topic of community engagement in city planning were as follows:

1. City planners must acknowledge community control and tap into the community's existing modes and channels of communication.
2. In general, citizens are unequipped with the language to talk about city planning.
3. City planning concepts do not translate across cultures.
4. When engaging with an immigrant community, there is a need to ask different types of questions based on the immigrants' lived experiences in different cultures and environments.
5. City planners must be cautious of confirmation bias where participants do not disclose the entire story nor go beyond a superficial conversation.

Following this, we spoke with Chris Le Dantec, the Associate Professor at the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech. The main takeaways from our 30-minute Zoom conversation on the topic of communication tools for data collection and participatory technology were as follows:

1. Community engagement is not meant to be an empirical method with grounded empirical data and feedback; rather, it is a sensitized method of meeting people where they are.
2. Researchers and facilitators must step out of formal communication (i.e., surveys). Cultural probing and the use of artifacts have proven to be effective methods when working with seniors.
3. The way that participants speak to researchers and facilitators is different from the way they speak with peers. Training a core team of community members will provide more data coverage and authenticity.

Cultural probing, or a research method that helps understand the everyday challenges, goals, and needs of users at the beginning of a design process (Think moto, 2019), resonated well with the design objectives of our project. Chris referred to a past project looking at the lived experiences of seniors living in shared or multifamily housing where disposable cameras, postcards, and blank maps were distributed to participants to provoke inspirational responses from seniors in diverse communities (Gaver et al., 1999). These "packages" were subsequently sent back to the research team to conduct further sensemaking.

Design Concept

With the above input from practitioners, we finalized our design concept to digitalize cultural probing by distributing a mobile web link to participants. Digitalizing a data collection tool for working with senior immigrants may sound counterintuitive as technological literacy levels vary across populations; however, we saw the merits for this method which will be further detailed in the Future Development section.

With our digital cultural probing tool, data on personal stories of lived experiences and environments in the past, present, and future would be collected using various types of media. Once data collection is complete, we would provide the opportunity for the participants to further take ownership and control of their data—we designed an additional collective sensemaking tool for this purpose. This supplementary tool would improve the interpretation process, facilitate collective decision-making, and provide further context to the data.

Design Prototype

We initially built a design prototype of the digital cultural probing tool to visualize our concept. Participants will receive a link to a mobile webpage to provide artifacts and narratives of lived experiences and environments in different time periods in either visual or audio formats.
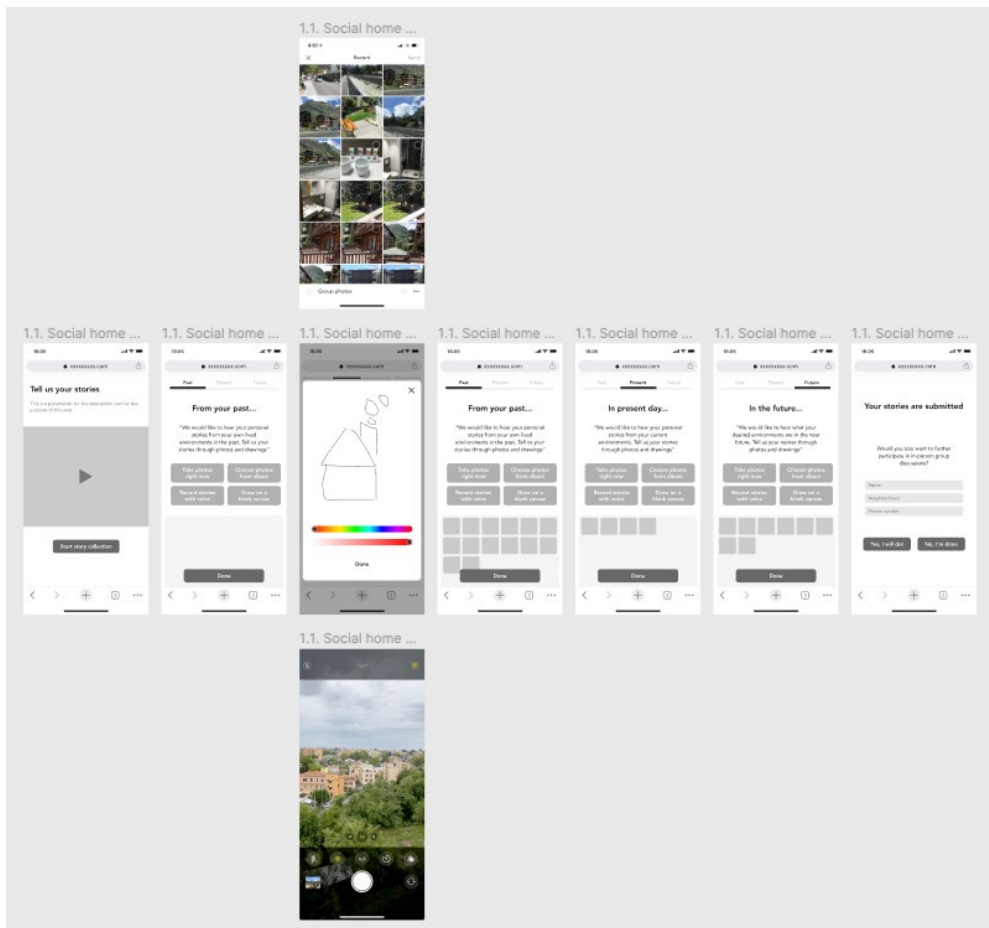
After submission, participants can choose to further participate in the sensemaking process with peers and city planners. In these sessions, a desktop webpage of the data results will be projected on a big screen for the facilitators and participants to identify and analyze trends in key words on the map.
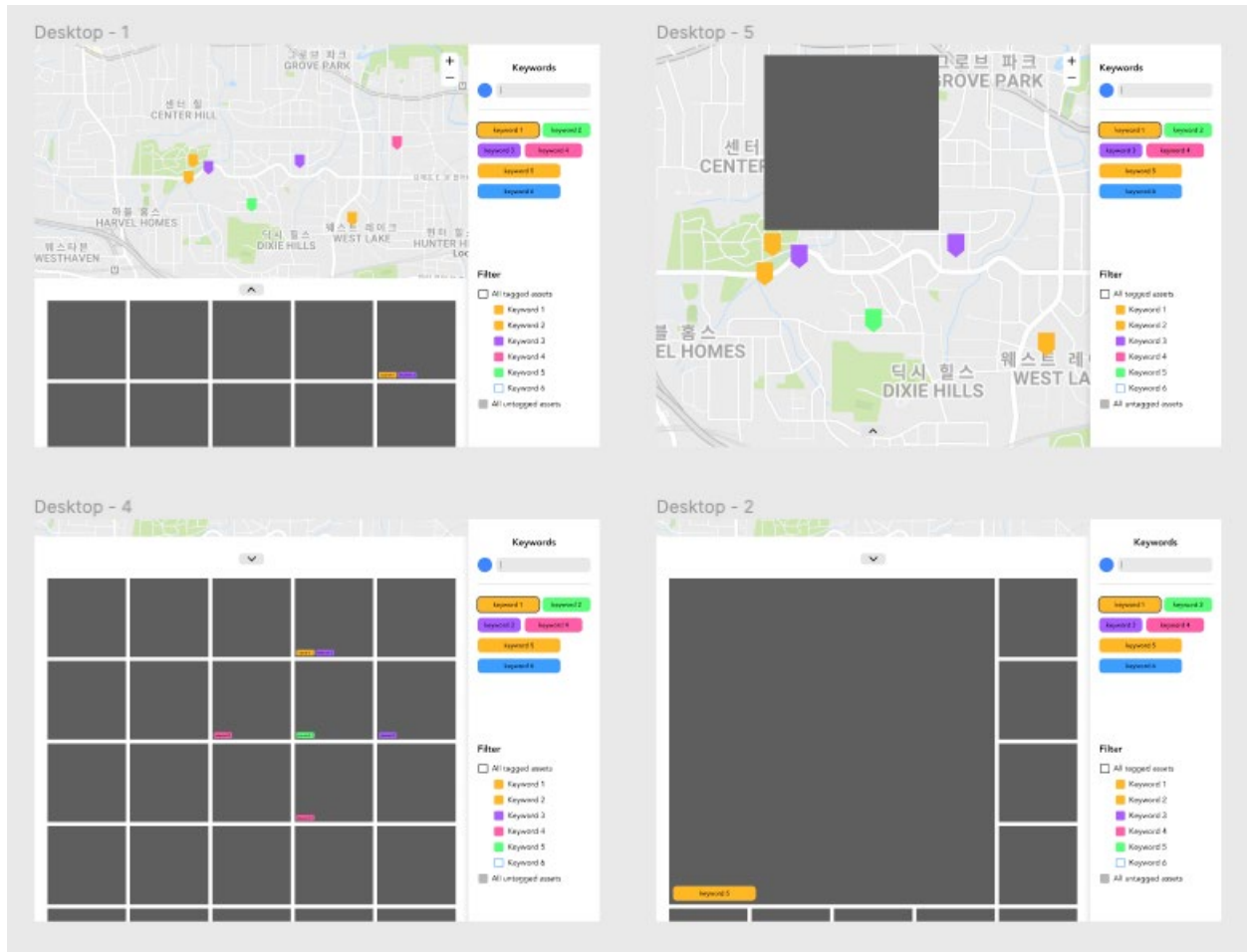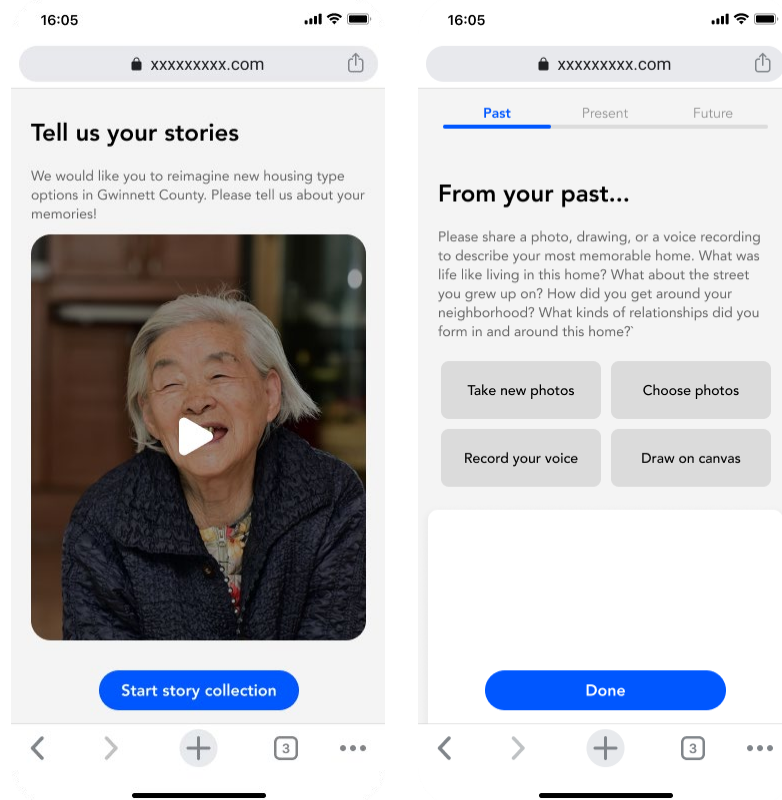

Practitioner Feedback

We took our prototype back to the practitioners for feedback. Due to time constraints of the project timeline, we were only able to meet again with Marian from the Atlanta Regional Commission. Marian's key points from our 30-minute Zoom conversation were as follows:
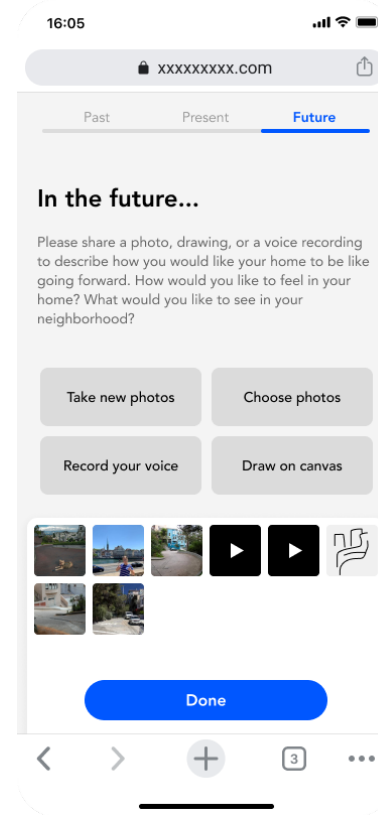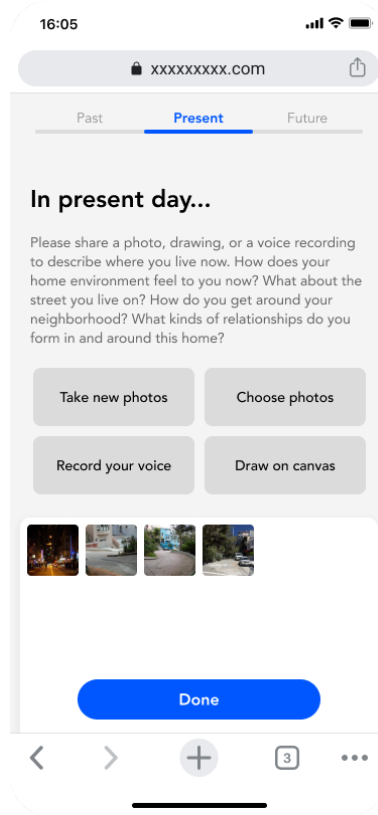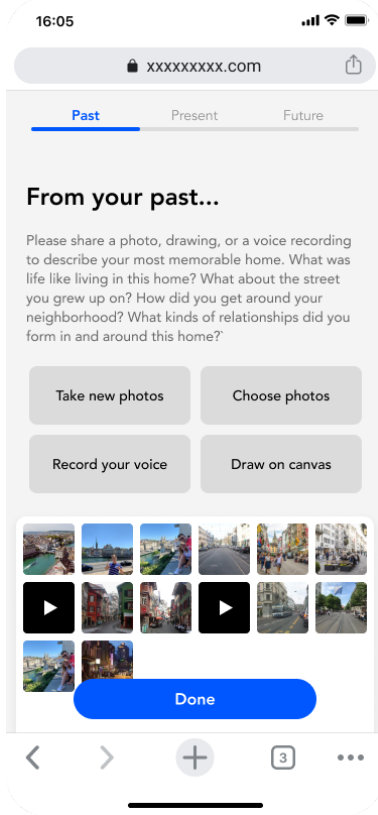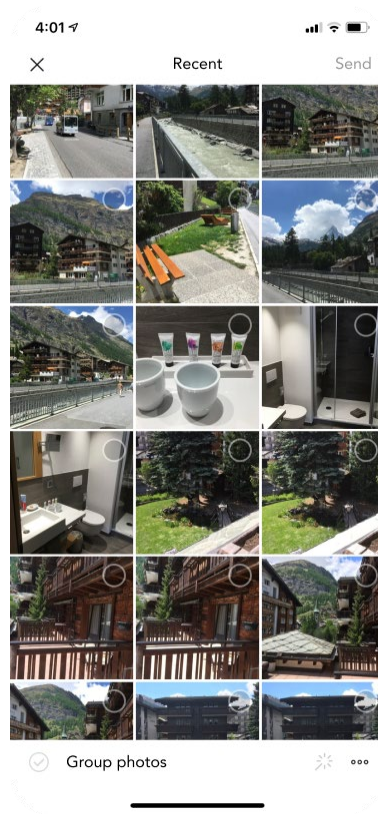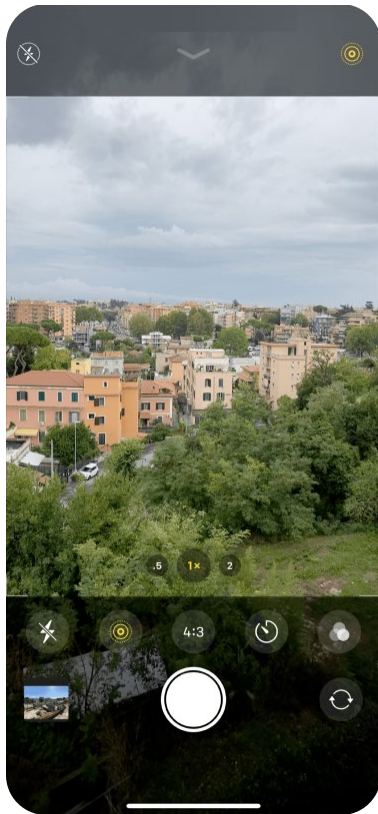
1. Specify the questions according to the project. There is potential for this tool to be replicated for various city planning projects.
2. It is not a good practice to always let the researchers do the interpretation. A follow-up collective sensemaking process is needed.
3. It is difficult to see significant patterns of keywords at a glance on the collective sensemaking tool. A way to upvote keywords and to show preference over data is needed.
4. Preferences are determined by how the built environment already is. However, recollecting stories from the past allows for exploration for different ways of living.
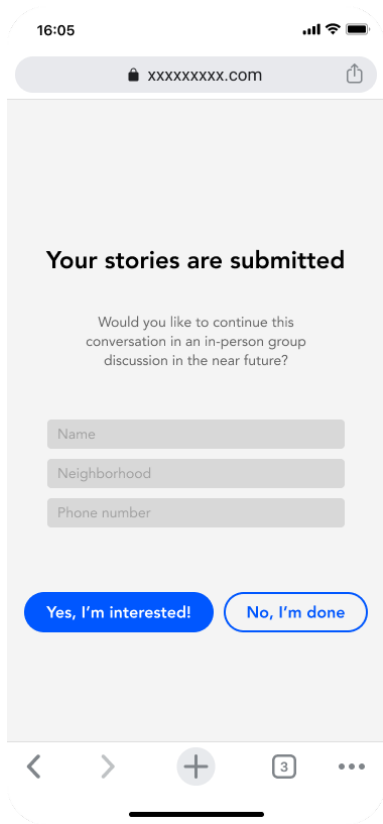
Final Design

       Our digital cultural probing tool can be widely applied for a range of projects in city planning; but for the purpose of this project, we have framed our probing questions around housing option types in Gwinnett County. We have simplified the question wording as well as the user interface and navigation as much as possible for ease of translation and use for all levels of technological literacy. What is more, the questions are rooted in memory to allow exploration for different ways of living for senior immigrants. This, we believe, is the core of asset-based community development in contrast to conventional methods that are meant to support a response that the city planners already want.

       Please use this link to access the English version of the final prototype design of our cultural probing tool. The landing page of the mobile webpage provides a short description of the purpose of the data collection and an introductory video (not embedded on the prototype). As the participant begins the story collection, they are prompted to take or provide a picture of their environments or artifacts, record an oral narrative, or draw a depiction for three different time periods: the past, present, and future. Upon completion, they can choose to participate in in-person collective sensemaking sessions with city planners.

From your past...

Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe your most memorable home. What was life like living in this home? What about the street you grew up on? How did you get around your neighborhood? What kinds of relationships did you form in and around this home?`

Take new photos   Choose photos

Record your voice   Draw on canvas

Done

In present day...

Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe where you live now. How does your home environment feel to you now? What about the street you live on? How do you get around your neighborhood? What kinds of relationships do you form in and around this home?

Take new photos   Choose photos

Record your voice   Draw on canvas

Done

In the future...

Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe how you would like your home to be like going forward. How would you like to feel in your home? What would you like to see in your neighborhood?

Take new photos   Choose photos

Record your voice   Draw on canvas

Done

In the collective sensemaking tool (continued in the above link), participants and facilitators can tag keywords on collected media assets which later enables easy viewing of trends on both the map and the library. An additional function also allows the management of filters and time periods to support different stories with evidence.
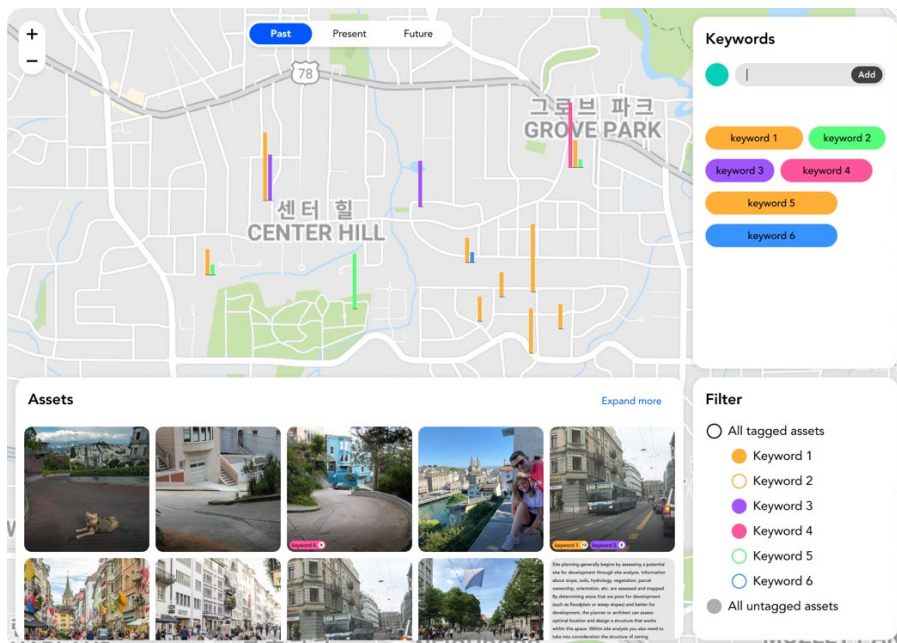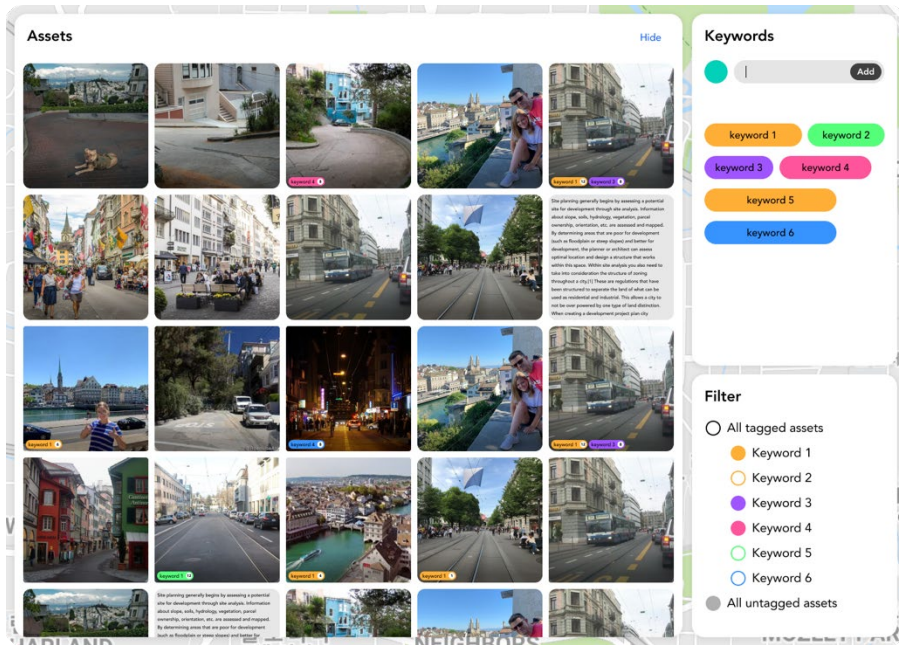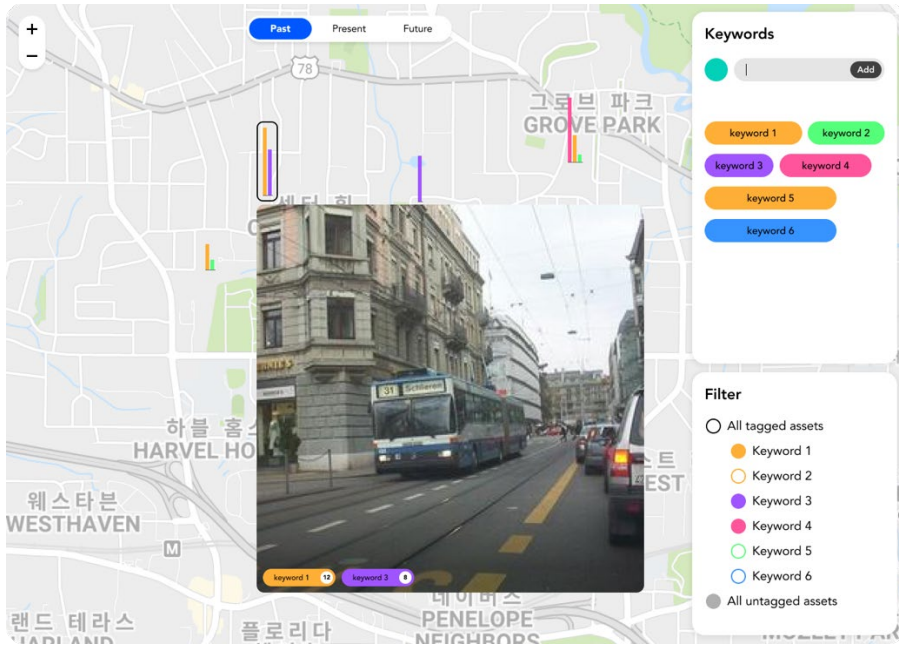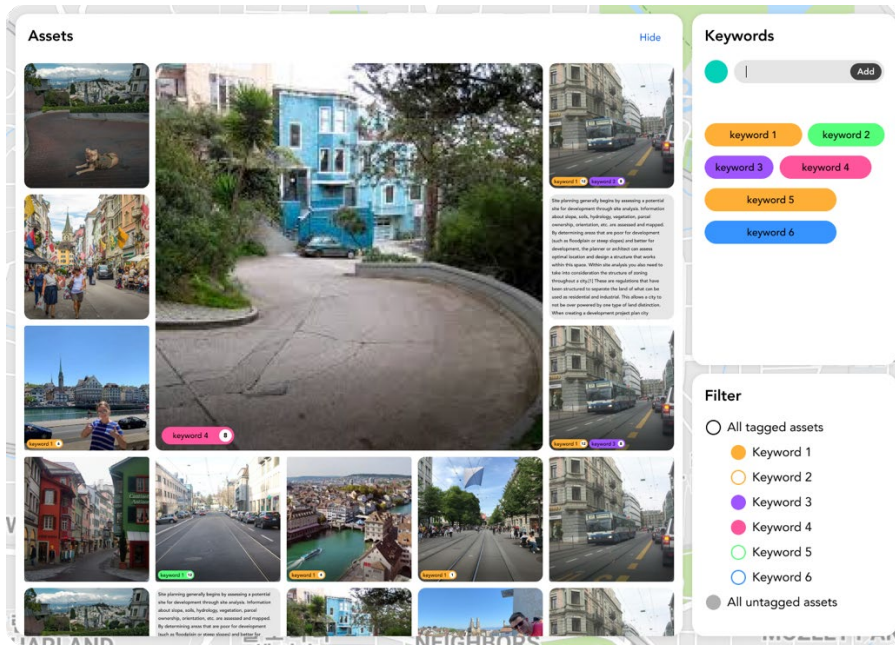
For Korean seniors who may have the English language barrier, we also created the design in Korean language for their convenience. Below are sample images of the prototype.
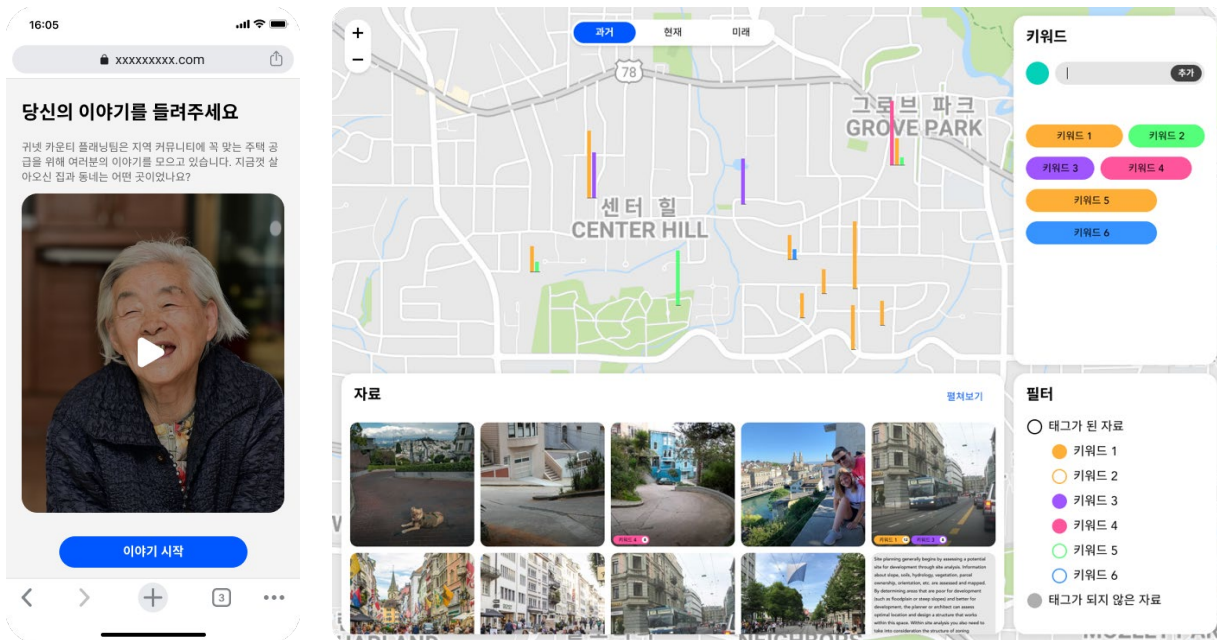
Future Development

Ideally, we would have sought more feedback and collaboration with practitioners. Going forward, this project would benefit from reviews by various industry professionals and experts. Pilot tests with different regions and demographics of senior immigrants would also polish and perfect our tool. Finally, regarding digitalization of this cultural probing tool, we acknowledge that the best practices of community engagement are for the city planners to go to the community rather than expecting the community to come to them. Nevertheless, during public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic we are currently experiencing, vulnerable populations such as seniors would benefit from having an easy, simple to navigate tool for providing their input. Digitalization of cultural probing tool also makes artifact collection and archival easier. Lastly, our tool has the potential to be made into a repository that city planners can utilize as a platform for networking or knowledge sharing with others working on similar projects, or it can be made into an on- or offline exhibition or archive.

References

Think moto. How cultural probes make your user research even better. Jan. 2019. Retrieved from https://medium.com/usabilitygeek/how-cultural-probes-make-your-user-research-even-better-8bb27d40af17#:~:text=What%20are%20cultural%20probes%3F,a%20longer%20period%20of%20time.

Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti. 1999. Design: Cultural probes. Interactions 6, 1 (Jan./Feb. 1999), 21–29. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/291224.291235

Appendix

Tell us your story
We would like you to reimagine new housing type options in Gwinnett County. Please tell us about your memories.
귀넷 카운티 플래닝팀은 지역 커뮤니티에 꼭 맞는 주택 공급을 위해 여러분의 이야기를 모으고 있습니다. 고향에서 귀넷 카운티까지, 지금껏 살아오신 집과 동네는 어떤 곳이었나요? 그곳에서 좋았던 점과 나빴던 점에 대해 들려주세요.

From your past…
Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe your most memorable home. What was life like living in this home? What about the street you grew up on? How did you get around your neighborhood? What kinds of relationships did you form in and around this home?
가장 기억에 남는 집은 어떤 곳이었나요? 아래 버튼을 이용해 사진을 올리거나 그림을 그리실 수 있습니다. 녹음 버튼을 눌러 집의 모습과 집에 담긴 추억을 들려주세요.

In present day…
Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe where you live now. How does your home environment feel to you now? What is working and what is not?
현재 살고 계신 집은 어떤 곳인가요? 아래 버튼을 이용해 사진을 올리거나 그림을 그리실 수 있습니다. 녹음 버튼을 눌러 현재 집의 모습과 장단점을 알려주세요.

In the future…
Please share a photo, drawing, or a voice recording to describe how you would like your home to be like going forward. How would you like to feel in your home? What would you like to see in your neighborhood?
미래에 살고 싶은 집은 어떤 곳인가요? 바라는 집의 형태, 분위기, 동네의 모습 등을 알려주세요. 아래 버튼을 이용해 사진을 올리거나 그림을 그리실 수 있습니다. 녹음 버튼을 눌러 설명을 더해주세요.

Your stories have been submitted
Would you like to continue this conversation in an in-person group discussion in the near future?

- Yes, I'm interested
- No, I'm done

답변이 제출되었습니다.

집에 대한 소중한 이야기를 들려주셔서 감사합니다. 사진과 녹음 내용을 바탕으로 추후 플래너와 주민이 함께 하는 대면 집담회를 개최할 예정입니다. 집담회에 참여하시겠습니까?

- 네 관심있습니다.

- 아니요 참여하지 않겠습니다.