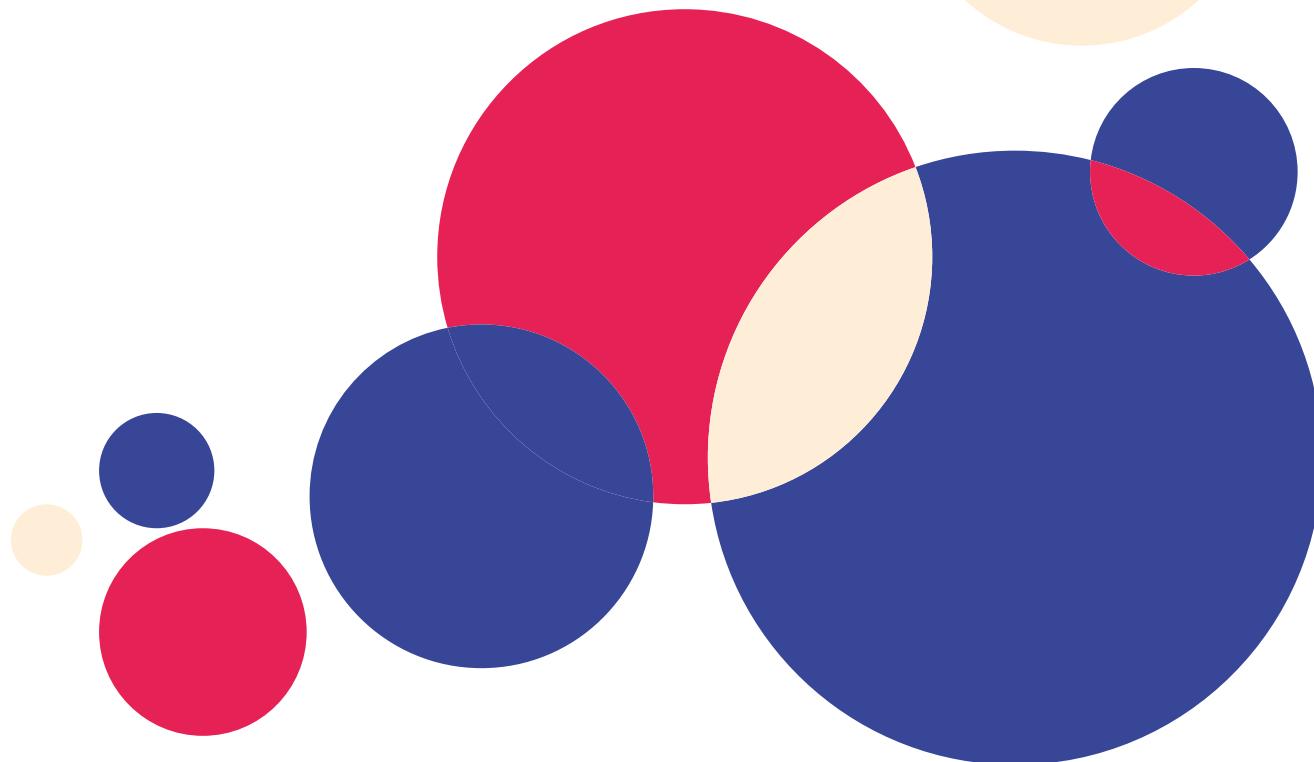


TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE, COMMUNITY- BASED VISION FOR DETROIT'S DESIGN ECONOMY

Design Action Plan Stakeholder Workshop Report
June 2025

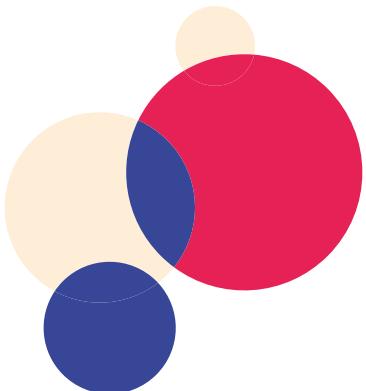


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FOREWORD

This document captures the ideas, aspirations, and collective hopes that emerged from the February 2025 Design Action Plan Stakeholder workshop. Design Core holds the UNESCO City of Design designation as an advocate and connector. The recommendations outlined herein are meant to inspire further dialogue and collaborative investigation with a broad range of stakeholders, partners, policymakers, and funders. It is an invitation for further prioritization, collective action, and advocacy to build the necessary infrastructure, investment, policies, and political standing to grow Detroit's Design Economy.

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INTRODUCTION

“Decolonise Design”

“Pop Our Sh*t”

“Hire Detroit”

10-years UNESCO
City of Design

“Write to the Mayor”

Ten years after Detroit was designated a UNESCO City of Design and seven years since the first Design Action Plan was unveiled, this workshop provided an invaluable space to dream broadly about the city's design future. The ideas collected here reflect the workshop participants' ambitions—a passionate list of what many believe could transform Detroit's design landscape. They are bold aspirations that require further research, additional resources, and, crucially, a broad coalition of public, private, and community partners.

Design Core serves as the champion of this dialogue and the steward of the UNESCO City of Design designation. Design Core supports Detroit's vibrant design community through programming, services, training, and networking opportunities. This work is further amplified through our Design Economy Council, whose members reflect the diversity of our design community. The proposals in this document are meant to spark conversation and guide further investigation, rather than serve as a ready-made blueprint for immediate implementation.

With the 10-year anniversary there is an opportunity to reimagine what it means to be a UNESCO

City of Design and catalyze the vision for collective action for the future through action planning with stakeholders.

The 2018 Detroit City of Design Action Plan included 19 recommendations around the themes of talent development, inward investment and policy engagement and had the vision that:

“Inclusive design practices can shape systems, processes, places, and products to generate sustainable and equitable results that will benefit all Detroiters.”^[1]

It was also accompanied by a study of design stating:

“Although Detroit's core design economy makes up only 1% of the industries and a little over 5 percent of all occupations, it fuels a design ecosystem that represents over 20% of the region's economy.” (2018, Detroit City of Design Action Plan, Design Core Detroit)^[2]

The key principles of the Design Action Plan are that it should be inclusively, collaboratively and iteratively developed with a broad range of design stakeholders. These stakeholders should represent all parts of the Detroit design ecosystem – designers, businesses, communities,

philanthropists, city administrators, educators, researchers, advocates and funders. A design ecosystem is a theoretical construct used by policymakers, advocates, funders, governments and academics to understand the supply of and demand for design expertise in a particular place.^[3]

On February 24, 2025 we convened 50 participants for a daylong workshop to shape future forward visions for action to strengthen and transform Detroit's design ecosystem. The participants engaged in hands-on exercises to validate the Detroit design landscape, explore the strengths and opportunities, and envision the future of Detroit Design. The workshop and its exercises were developed and facilitated by Prof. Anna Whicher of PDR. PDR, the International Design and Research Centre at Cardiff Metropolitan University is an applied research centre. PDR has led workshops and produced other design action plans globally for Ireland, Latvia and the Philippines (among others) as well as with peer UNESCO Cities of Design including Berlin, Kortrijk, Kolding, Geelong, Montreal and Whanganui.

The debate was lively, and participants did not hold back in sharing some hard truths. It is important to acknowledge these upfront.

Decolonize Design:

First and foremost, there was a strong call to action to decolonize design[4]. This is about challenging and deconstructing the ways design has been taught, practiced, and institutionalized - especially those rooted in Eurocentric worldviews - and to make space for a broader plurality of voices, ways of thinking and creating.

Growing the Pie:

There was a strong sentiment to keep design spend in the State whenever possible and encourage any outside design firms to work with local firms, when appropriate. There was also a comparable desire for local designers to gain networks, visibility, and opportunities to regional and external markets.

Visibility and Storytelling:

There was a recognition of the need to better define design in Detroit, celebrate it, and powerfully communicate its value to the city and its residents and to future clients.

Talent Pathways:

A significant theme centered on design education, nurturing design talent, and creating career pathways for graduating designers to remain in Detroit.

Following the workshop-insights, actions, and recommendations were synthesized and are shared within this report for further consideration on how to advance and support the local design ecosystem. These suggestions are a vital first step on the journey Towards an Inclusive, Community-based Vision for Detroit's Design Economy. The high priority actions surfaced by the workshop participants include:



Short List (clustered, prioritized by participants)

Shorter Term (1-2 Years):	Medium Term (2-4 Years):	Longer Term (4-6 Years):
<p>Narrative Review: Evaluate the past decade of the UNESCO City of Design designation and develop a narrative that aligns with future City Plans. (Note: Implementation depends on additional support from city planning and policy experts.)</p> <p>Visibility Initiatives: Enhance public recognition of the UNESCO designation at entry points such as the airport and city hall. (Note: Requires coordination with civic authorities and tourism partners.)</p> <p>Engagement of Political Candidates: Organize a moderated debate with mayoral candidates focused on design and secure engagement of electeds at relevant UNESCO network events. (Note: This is an engagement tool rather than a binding policy commitment.)</p> <p>Design Ambassadors: Explore appointing Design Ambassadors to advocate for the community. (Note: This concept is in the exploratory phase and would require additional resourcing.)</p>	<p>Career Pathway Mapping: Develop an initial framework to chart “0-21 Creative Career Pathways” aimed at nurturing local design talent. (Note: Requires further data collection and collaboration with educational institutions and industry leaders.)</p> <p>Council of the Arts: Advocate for the re-establishment of the Council for the Arts within the city government to better integrate design into civic initiatives. Consider opportunities to re-establish this as a Creative Economy Council or an Art, Design, and Cultural Council. If not able to be accomplished in name, its composition of appointees and role of the council should reflect this. (Note: The feasibility is contingent on political will and resource allocation from the public sector.)</p> <p>‘Hire Local’ Campaign: Explore launching a campaign to encourage local hiring in the design sector. (Note: This action is dependent on market analysis and strategic partnerships with private-sector entities.)</p>	<p>Global Showcase: Investigate the development of international platforms—such as a design Biennale—to celebrate and promote Detroit design. (Note: Would require extensive collaboration between design organizations, cultural institutions, and external funders.)</p> <p>Youth Engagement Programs: Design a suite of youth programs aimed at early exposure and continuous engagement in design. (Note: Implementation would hinge on integrating these initiatives within existing educational frameworks.)</p> <p>Design Districts: Consider outlining plans for dedicated Detroit Design Districts to attract both local and international attention. (Note: Success in this area will depend on a clear articulation of market demand and infrastructural feasibility.)</p>

Again, it is important to note that this list of suggested actions was co-authored by 50 participants from Detroit's design ecosystem at a single day workshop. To finalize an actionable and time-based set of priorities for Design Core and the design economy at large, it's necessary to consider what resources are currently available to achieve these goals, including expertise, time, funding, and implementation partners. As with all high impact projects and true systems change, the effort and achievement of measurable success will require inclusive voices, collective action and shared ownership of the implementation.

CONTEXT & APPROACH

What does it mean to be a City of Design?

It's a call to action!

17 UN SDGs

What does it mean to be a UNESCO City of Design?

The United Nations (UN) was formed after the Second World War for peacekeeping and diplomatic activities. The UN established the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to drive economic opportunity and tourism, foster sustainable development, preserve cultural heritage and exchange knowledge. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network covers 8 disciplines – architecture, folk art and craft, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music. There are 9 Creative Cities in the USA and Detroit is the only UNESCO City of Design. In total around the world, there are 350 Creative Cities and 49 Cities of Design. The UNESCO City of Design designation is a call to action to harness local assets and achieve the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Detroit was designated a City of Design in 2015 in response to the city's long-standing legacy of design and its potential to jointly create its future. Led by Design Core, in close collaboration with the wider design community, the first Detroit City of Design Action Plan was published in 2018 to create a long-term vision and

corresponding set of actions to leverage the impact of the designation over the subsequent decade. What worked well from the previous planning process was its focus on learning from a broad range of stakeholders in an iterative and inclusive manner. This approach will continue across this next phase of work. The action plan encapsulated a clear Declaration:

“Detroit City of Design believes in the power of inclusive design to shape a more equitable, sustainable, and compassionate society.”^[5]

Examples of the recommendations for developing and promoting talent for tomorrow include creating an Inclusive Design Certification program and committing funding for global exchange opportunities to promote Detroit designers. Examples of recommendations for investing in design businesses included working with lenders to enhance their understanding of the offerings of creative businesses and promoting new and existing makerspaces with move-in-ready facilities. Examples of policy recommendations included treating every public and private development as an opportunity to invest in inclusive design and using data and design

to improve mobility in Detroit.

Design Core Detroit developed a working definition for Inclusive Design as noted within the Detroit City of Design Action Plan. It states that

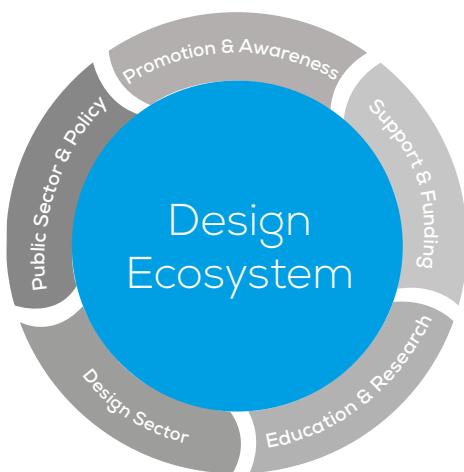
“INCLUSIVE DESIGN takes into consideration the spectrum of human diversity and the individual experiences of each person to create solutions that have a broader social impact.”

This working definition evolved from the participatory qualitative research and engagement efforts led by The Work Dept for the 2018 report.

The Detroit City of Design Action Plan has guided the activities of Design Core and wider design players since 2018. With the ebb and flow of political tides, there is an opportunity to review the achievements of the ten years of Detroit City of Design and catalyze a forward-looking vision and set of recommended actions for the future.

What is a Design Action Plan?

Design Action Plans are government or sector-led articulations of the priorities for design in a particular place and sometimes focus on enhancing the performance of the design ecosystem. A design ecosystem is a theoretical construct used by policymakers and academics to understand the interactions and connections within the design landscape as well as the supply of and demand for design expertise.



The Design Ecosystem concept originated and evolved from the innovation system and ecosystem concept developed and adopted in Europe in the 1970s. This design ecosystem framework resonated with policymakers as they were able to create parallels between design and their broader innovation policy work. As such, the design ecosystem

concept has been used to develop design action plans in Europe over the last 15 years. There is an opportunity to explore the extent to which models such as innovation and design ecosystems developed in Europe are applicable elsewhere. There was lively debate in the Detroit workshop around the design ecosystem framework.

Firstly, and less significantly, it did not fully communicate how design sits within a wider ecosystem including design buyers, businesses and communities. Secondly, and more significantly, the design ecosystem construct may perpetuate the colonization of design by Europeans. Participants stressed that Detroit, as a majority Black city, needs to decolonize design. The design ecosystem construct has been useful in the other UNESCO cities of Design perhaps because the participant cities have been predominantly European or Western. This in no way suggests that Europe is a monolith, without diverse people functioning in multi-cultural societies. Instead, it is an opportunity to directly reflect design constructs and systems emanating from Black, Indigenous, and all People of

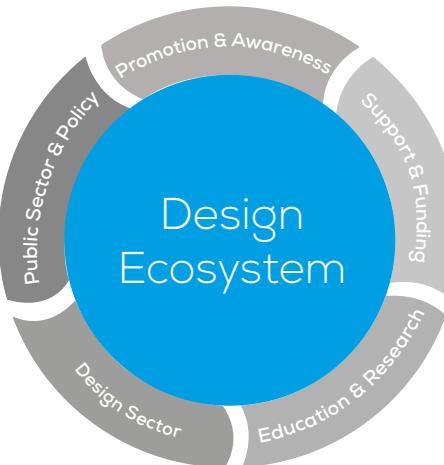
Color within the US context.

The 2018 Detroit City of Design Action Plan was based on the design ecosystem and as a concept there is an opportunity to explore alternative models for the design landscape in Detroit. Participants reflected on the categories of the design ecosystem in relation to Detroit's experience.

Detroit is different from some of the other Cities of Design in the network because there is a strong sense of community-led activism rather than relying on the city government. This makes the design community in Detroit entrepreneurial, driven and invested in its success. Whereas efforts to develop Design Action Plans in Europe and Asia have been largely led by city governments, in Detroit, the design agenda is driven by the design community. And it will be the design community that co-designs and co-produces the next Design Action Plan for Detroit.

What was the workshop approach?

The workshops involved a series of collaborative, hands-on exercises to 1) map the design ecosystem, 2) understand the strengths and weaknesses, 3) envision the future ecosystem and 4) develop, prioritise and refine a set of actions to get there. A call for participants was circulated widely by Design Core to ensure a representative cross-section of Detroit's design ecosystem could attend. There were 50 participants in the session and people were divided into eight groups. The design ecosystem refers to the enabling factors within a location that collectively foster a vibrant and sustainable design environment. It encompasses both supply-side components, such as skilled professionals, design education, and robust industry networks, as well as demand-side factors including funding mechanisms, public sector integration, and promotional activities.



Mapping Detroit's design ecosystem represents a renewed attempt to conduct a field scan of the design landscape. It is a second iteration to explore the players, the strengths and weaknesses of design in Detroit. Before the start of the workshop, Design Core and the Design Economy Council pre-populated a map of stakeholders and initiatives in the design ecosystem for further discussion and validation by participants. Subsequently, the groups explored each element of the ecosystem in turn and

discussed the various strengths and weaknesses. This provided a baseline against which the groups imagined what they wanted Detroit's design ecosystem to look like in two, five, ten and fifteen years' time. From this, the teams plotted a route and identified concrete actions to reach their vision. These actions were then categorized according to whether they had short-term or long-term effects, and whether they had higher or lower impact. The actions were reviewed and sense-checked across the wider group and then subjected to a clustering and prioritization exercise. While there was a representative cross-section of participants in the room, there is an opportunity to share and validate the participant recommendations more widely. This report is a transcript of the workshop for wider exploration and validation. Next steps will include a working session with the Design Economy Council to further evaluate, prioritize, plan, and perhaps assign, future projects.



STRENGTHS & OPPORTUNITIES OF THE DESIGN ECOSYSTEM IN DETROIT

"We see opportunities not weaknesses"

"Tell the Detroit Design Story"

"Detroit: design factory for the world?"

"Designers and policymakers are not in the room together"

Exploring the strengths and opportunities of Detroit's design ecosystem was a baseline attempt to understand the current state of play and to begin layering nuance on how the design ecosystem operates. This was a collaborative approach to understanding what is working well and what can be enhanced. Participants also iterated the components of the design ecosystem to ensure they represented Detroit's experience and focused on: 1) Promotion and Awareness; 2) Support and Funding; 3) Design Sector; 4) Education and Research and 5) Public Sector and Policy.

"Tell the Detroit Design Story"

Promotion & Awareness

Workshop participants identified promotion and awareness as a key strength of Detroit's design ecosystem, underpinned by both local pride and international recognition. A cornerstone of this visibility is Detroit's designation as a UNESCO City of Design, which, in conjunction with the work of Design Core Detroit, provides a globally recognized platform to elevate the city's design identity. With the upcoming tenth anniversary participants wanted to "Tell the Detroit

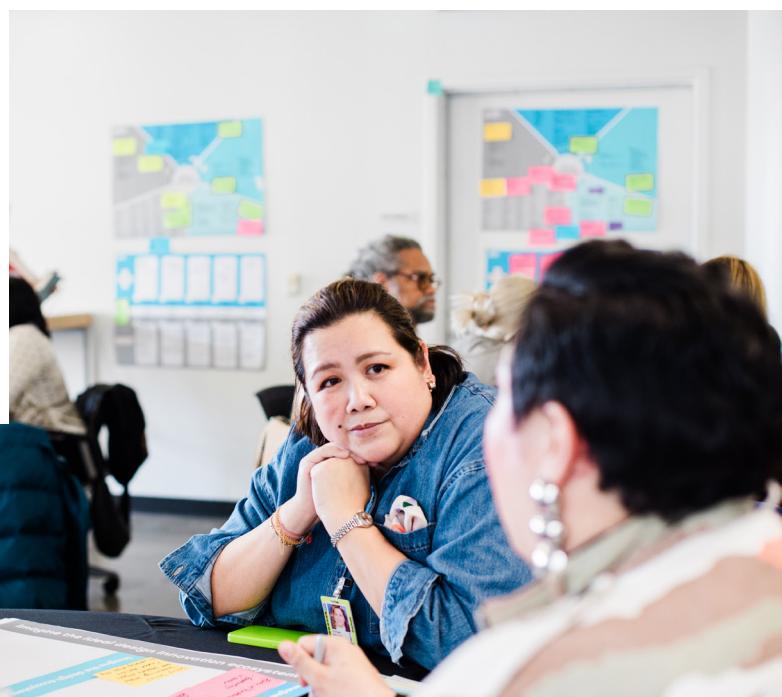
Design Story". Local initiatives such as the Detroit Month of Design and Drinks x Design were praised for generating community engagement and public awareness, thereby helping to embed design into the city's cultural fabric. These events, along with new efforts from organizations like Visit Detroit, were seen as powerful vehicles for storytelling and promotion, both locally and to external audiences. Participants also noted the city's strong community pride and advocacy

as a driver of design visibility, suggesting that local enthusiasm and grassroots efforts are instrumental in shaping Detroit's image as a design-forward city. Detroit's architectural heritage was highlighted as a distinct design asset. The city's rich stock of historic and modern buildings not only provides a backdrop for design innovation but also serves as a tangible expression of Detroit's creative identity—something that can be leveraged more intentionally to promote the

city as a hub of design excellence. Participants went on to identify several untapped opportunities to enhance the visibility and impact of Detroit's design ecosystem. A key area of focus was the need for greater awareness and coordination, both locally and beyond. While Detroit holds the prestigious status of a UNESCO City of Design, there is still relatively low awareness among the broader public of what this designation means and how it benefits the city. Participants noted the need for more consistent, year-round promotion and celebration of Detroit-based design firms, creative talent, and the career opportunities that exist in the design sector. With the establishment of the City of Detroit Office of Arts, Culture, and Entrepreneurship, we gained a dedicated agency within city government. However,

the absence of a representative body, such as the Council of the Arts, which previously existed and as provided for in the City of Detroit's Charter, hampers efforts to more broadly connect and coordinate efforts to align and integrate design into city agendas and policies. The absence of a central governmental body to connect and coordinate design efforts—such as an Arts and Culture Council—was also noted as a missed opportunity to unify and amplify the city's diverse and vibrant design initiatives. There was also a call for stronger collaboration across public and private sectors, particularly in how the city's design identity is promoted at the regional and national level. Initiatives like the Pure Michigan campaign were cited by participants as examples of opportunities to better incorporate Detroit's design

narrative into broader tourism marketing strategies. Whether Pure Michigan is the right vehicle for this or not, it is clear participants felt that there needed to be an emphasis on creating strategic communications campaigns to increase visibility and influence for Detroit's design community. Further opportunities emerged around access and engagement. Participants felt that the value of design is not widely understood or accessible to all communities; attributing this to a lack of engagement with neighborhoods and underinvestment in public spaces that could serve as vital community hubs for creativity and dialogue. Improving access to other design markets and cities, as well as investing in architecture-focused tourism, were suggested as ways to build bridges between Detroit and the broader global design community.



Support & Funding

"We find money when we need it"

Funding was cited both as a strength and a weakness. Participants highlighted strong philanthropic, business, and grassroots support as a key pillar of Detroit's design ecosystem. There was a sense that "we find money when we need it". The city benefits from high levels of philanthropic investment in design and creativity, with organizations like the Kresge Foundation and programs such as the Detroit Arts Support grant playing a crucial role in nurturing talent and enabling innovative projects. In addition to philanthropy, Detroit's ecosystem is bolstered by a range of funding programs and resources that specifically target creative entrepreneurs, small businesses, and neighbourhood revitalisation. Initiatives like TechTown, Motor City Match, and various matching grant programs were recognized for their role in supporting startups and independent designers, contributing to a more resilient and diverse support landscape. An example of a successful grant program is the Strategic Neighborhood Fund. The Strategic Neighborhood Fund (SNF) is a transformative initiative that

champions inclusive and resilient growth in Detroit's neighborhoods. With leadership from Mayor Duggan, Invest Detroit, and the City of Detroit, SNF brings together the power of community, philanthropic funders, and public sector support to revitalize the city's most treasured communities. A core challenge lies in the lack of public sector investment in design. For one participant: "Design is rarely explicitly highlighted in calls and grants and there is not a sense that funding is joined up, structured or streamlined." Low levels of public funding were perceived as a barrier to achieving a broader reach and long-term stability. In particular, emerging creative practitioners, small design businesses, and projects that sit outside traditional place-based development frameworks—such as those focused on community organizing or social design—were described as under-resourced and vulnerable. Participants raised concerns about the fragmentation of funding sources. There is currently no structured coordination to help connect funders with designers and design-led initiatives, and the available

funding is often short-term "seed money," rather than sustained investment capable of driving lasting impact. Additionally, the design procurement process was described as overly complex and burdensome, especially for smaller organisations with limited capacity. Some participants went so far as to report "exploitation of design where design is just the poster child," with rhetoric around design but no long-term engagement or commitments. Perhaps most significantly, participants noted that large infrastructure projects and state initiatives often employ designers from outside the state. It is ironic, as a City of Design, that design spend goes outside Michigan. Beyond financial mechanisms, participants highlighted unmet support needs—notably the scarcity of resources for artists' mental health and well-being, which are crucial for sustaining creative careers. Alongside this, they called for more accessible and inclusive spaces—such as public maker spaces and cultural hubs—that could serve as platforms for co-creation and innovation across the city.

Design Sector

“Black Design Leadership”

“Decolonize Design”

Detroit has a “vibrant”, “organic”, “resilient”, “diverse”, “inclusive” design community and a strong history of Black design. Participants discussed a mindset of design activism, reflecting on how to further empower designers. Ultimately, the design community is self-organized and self-advocating. However, participants also called the design sector “reactionary,” getting involved too late in larger, city-wide or state-wide initiatives. Participants highlighted the city’s deep design history, shaped by influential institutions and figures such as Cranbrook, Yamasaki, and the Ford design legacy, which continue to inspire and inform contemporary practice. Over the past decade, the sector has experienced a notable revitalization, with creative industries playing a central role in Detroit’s broader economic and cultural renewal.

A major strength of Detroit’s design ecosystem is its natural integration with entrepreneurship and manufacturing. This unique intersection supports innovation and positions Detroit as a hub where design, production, and enterprise converge. Participants also pointed to the organic collaboration and entrepreneurial energy that defines the city’s creative sector, crediting these qualities with driving growth and increasing national and international recognition. While the design sector is becoming more inclusive and representative, with concerted efforts to grow and support Black architects and designers and foster leadership that reflects Detroit’s demographics, more could be done. There was a strong call to action to decolonize design to make space for a broader plurality of practice and create “Black Design Leadership”. There

was a strong sentiment to keep design spend within the State and not bring in outside design firms, or to encourage more collaboration between local and outside firms where opportunities exist. There was a recognition of the need to define design in Detroit to better celebrate it.

A pressing challenge is the attraction and retention of design talent, particularly among emerging local designers. Participants noted a shortage of accessible, well-paying, and compelling job opportunities that would enable young designers to build sustainable careers in Detroit. As a result, many local firms continue to hire talent from outside the city, missing opportunities to invest in homegrown designers and creatives.

Education & Talent

"Detroit: design factory for the world?"

"Tech leadership by design"

"Lifelong Design Detroiter"

The city and region is home to a diverse mix of higher education institutions that offer strong design programs, including the College for Creative Studies (CCS), Cranbrook Academy of Art, Lawrence Technological University, University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), University of Michigan, and Wayne State University, alongside notable recent and forthcoming entrants like Pensole Lewis College of Business and Design and the University of Michigan Center for Innovation. Participants also praised the strength of university partnerships and the growing number of community-engaged research and inclusive design initiatives. Notable examples include the Community Development master's program at UDM's School of Architecture and Design Core's Inclusive Design Training Program (IDTP), both of which help integrate design thinking into pressing social and civic challenges.

In terms of early years

engagement, participants saw strong potential in the city's K-12 schools that offer art and design education, including institutions like Cranbrook, U-Prep, and Detroit School of Arts (DSA). Community Arts Partnership (CAP) collaborates with Detroit community organizations to create art and design education, experiences, and resources for local youth and their families. There was a pervasive sentiment throughout the workshop for the need to develop a talent pipeline and career pathways in design from early childhood through to continuous professional development. There is limited youth engagement in fostering a design mindset from an early age. It was cited that the 50,000 public school students are not equipped with the tech and design skills meaning they "cannot compete". Although Detroit has world class design schools, participants expressed concern that many design subsets like

service design, circular design and design for policy, among others, are absent from higher education curricula. Participants called for clear career pathways in design to retain design talent in Detroit. There is a lack of data on the number of design graduates and the percentage of them who leave the city. Data and clear career pathways may create "lifelong design Detroiter." There was a strong desire for Detroit to be the "epicenter of city, region and state tech leadership by design." Detroit has long been known as the "factory of the world." Can it also become the "design factory of the world?" In terms of research and innovation, participants noted the underutilization of design for policy and systems-level impact. Areas such as service design, design research, and design for public policy are not yet widely recognised or integrated into education programs or city strategy.

Public Sector & Policy

"Designers and policymakers are not in the room together"

While there have been notable advancements in how the public sector engages with design, participants identified several persistent gaps and systemic barriers that limit the integration and impact of design in policy and governance. Participants reported that "designers and policymakers are not in the room together" stressing a disconnect between designers and public governance. The fallout of this is that design is not well understood by policymakers and public administrators so design is not well procured by the state. There is a need to incorporate inclusive procurement principles to enable local suppliers to access state contracts. Grassroots funding is effective but diverts energy away from designing. A central concern is the lack of formal recognition and investment in design as a public good. Participants noted

that there is currently no public funding allocated explicitly to design as a sector, and design is not formally included in the city's innovation or development strategies. This results in underutilized potential, especially in areas where design could play a transformative role—such as urban regeneration, sustainability, and civic engagement.

Even where design is nominally supported—such as through the Arts, Culture & Entrepreneurship (ACE) Department—action is viewed as insufficient to meaningfully support citywide impact. Participants noted the absence of clear standards or policies for design excellence in public projects, resulting in inconsistent quality and a missed opportunity to set a higher standard for public-facing infrastructure. A lack of focus on

sustainability and environmental design practices within city-led projects was also flagged. Concepts such as circular economy design or environmental protocols are not yet embedded in Detroit's public design approach, despite their relevance to long-term resilience.

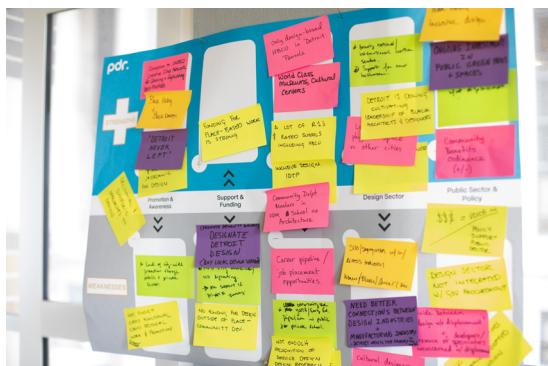
Workshop participants raised concerns about the underutilization of design for circular economy, digital service design, systems design and design for policy—fields that could significantly enhance Detroit's public and civic innovation efforts but remain under-recognized and underfunded. Without greater emphasis on collaboration, infrastructure, and inclusive access, the design sector risks missing the opportunity to fully leverage its creative capacity for systemic impact.

Defining the Vision in Challenging Realities

The strengths and opportunities were the result of extensive workshop discussions, where participants—ranging from designers and educators to community advocates and local business owners—shared their perspectives on current barriers

and recommended ideas for interventions that may help create a more inclusive and robust design ecosystem in Detroit. Participants throughout the day also acknowledged the shifting and challenging realities and constraints of this current moment,

as well as the capacity of any one organization to be responsible for implementation. Instead, there was a belief that a holistic and collaborative effort was needed to drive these transformations.



ENVISIONING DETROIT'S DESIGN FUTURE

"Pop our sh*t"

"Road to Design Detroit 2040"

"Hire Detroit"

"Creative2Creative Fund"

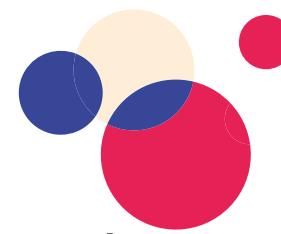
To stimulate strategic and imaginative thinking, participants were guided through an exercise to reimagine Detroit's design ecosystem over four distinct time horizons: two, five, ten, and fifteen years into the future. Participants were guided through a structured speculative process to explore how design practices, roles, relationships, and infrastructures might evolve in response to social, technological, political, environmental, and economic drivers of change. The exercise

prompted participants to consider emerging signals and current tensions shaping design today, as well as what they would look like further down the line. Working in groups, participants then co-designed future scenarios for each time horizon, identifying key shifts and imagining new possibilities for how design might be organized, valued, and practiced in the future. Each time horizon is built on the last, encouraging participants to stretch their thinking incrementally and consider both

near-term developments and long-range transformations. The activity concluded with a cross-horizon synthesis, surfacing recurring themes, points of divergence, and strategic opportunities for intervention. This exercise enabled participants to move beyond incremental change and engage with bold, systemic visions for the future of design, while also anchoring these visions in plausible developments over time.



TIME HORIZONS (CLUSTERED, NOT PRIORITIZED)



Vision for Detroit Design Ecosystem in 2 Years

There is a digital Detroit Design Directory.

There is a public art fund and design is explicitly highlighted.

There is a sign outside City Hall saying Detroit UNESCO City of Design.

There is a design showcase at the airport.

There is an education program for city administrators on design leadership.

There is a suite of youth engagement programs on design across the city.

Vision for Detroit Design Ecosystem in 5 Years

There is a targeted endowment for Design Core.

There is data collected on design, particularly metrics on the number of design graduates and how many stay in Detroit.

The design return on investment in Detroit has been captured (Design Detroit ROI study).

There is an expanded definition of design that everyone can buy-into.

There is a support package for creatives and all designers have healthcare.

There is an Arts and Design Advisory Council in City Hall.

There are incubators for fashion design and service design.

There are clear career pathways for designers.

Everyone knows what the UNESCO City of Design designation means.

There is a showcase, place-based biennial celebrating Detroit Design specifically Black design or design parade.

Vision for Detroit Design Ecosystem in 10 Years

Design is being used as a problem-solving tool to address Detroit challenges like taxation, social housing, mobility, medical debt and storm water management. There is a vocational school for design after high school. There is reinvestment in public education.

The Detroit Design Districts are well-known and are an attraction for locals and international tourists. There is a collaboration with Visit Detroit.

There is a 10 year reunion event celebrating 20 years of the UNESCO City of Design and a new Design Action Plan.

There is funding from creatives for creatives.

Design talent is retained in Detroit.

Design is a priority for elected officials. Designers are at the table with policy-makers (e.g. on topics like AI).

Vision for Detroit Design Ecosystem in 15 Years

Detroit Design is an international brand providing thought leadership locally and internationally.

There is a clear road building capacity for design, solving tech challenges by design and getting a job in design.

The design and tech sectors are holistically integrated.

There is a Public Works project linking young designers and larger firms through a mentoring scheme.

There is a Design Department in the City administration.

Design is the key approach for all urban planning initiatives in the city.

EMERGING ACTIONS

Following the future scenario development, participants translated the vision into tangible actions that could be taken in the present to move towards the envisioned futures. Drawing from insights across the different time horizons, participants generated a wide range of potential interventions, initiatives, and enablers that could shape the future design ecosystem. These ideas were then clustered thematically through a collaborative sensemaking process. Using visual mapping techniques, participants grouped similar or complementary actions, surfacing key areas of opportunity and leverage.



LONG LIST: (NOT CLUSTERED, NOT PRIORITIZED)

- Create an Arts and Design Council within the city government.
- Conduct research on the design sector and tell the sector's story.
- Perform a categorization of design and its subsets to inform the data collection.
- Implement a "Hire Local" campaign and engage with influential marketing companies.
- Develop a Creative2Creative funding initiative.
- Map out career pathways in design.
- Evaluate the past 10 years of UNESCO City of Design and create a future-focused narrative exploring how to integrate design better into City Plans.
- Implement a Public Works initiative where emerging design talent is connected with larger companies through a mentoring scheme.
- Create a global showcase for Detroit design such as a Biennale.
- Create a 0-21 Creative Pathway to nurture design talent and keep designers in Detroit.
- Create joint tech and design programs to ensure design is synonymous with tech.
- Develop a package of wraparound services for creatives including healthcare.
- Use design to tackle major challenges in Detroit like storm water management and mobility.
 - Embed design in non-design education courses
 - Focus engagement, promotion and awareness activities on non-designers to communicate the commercial, social, sustainable and democratic value of design.
 - Engage Mayoral candidates in a debate during the September Month of Design.
 - Run training on design for leaders in the city government.
 - Develop and maintain a digital Design Directory for Detroit to enable companies to find designers.
 - Create a public art fund for the city where design is explicitly highlighted.
 - Unveil a plaque outside City Hall saying Detroit UNESCO City of Design.
 - Highlight the City of Design designation at key entry points to the city like the airport and Amtrak train station.
 - Create a design showcase at the airport.
 - Create a suite of youth engagement programs on design across the city.
 - Support Design Core as the connector across the design community in Detroit.
 - Seek sponsors for a showcase Detroit Design Biennial.
 - Create Detroit Design Districts as an attraction for locals and international tourists and collaborate with Visit Detroit.
 - Appoint Design Ambassadors to advocate for the community among key audiences.

SHORT LIST:

Short Term (1-2 years)

- Narrative Review
- Engagement of Political Candidates
- Design Ambassadors

Medium Term (2-4 years)

- Career pathway mapping
- Council of the Arts
- 'Hire Local' campaign

Longer Term (4-6 years)

- Global Showcase
- Youth Engagement Programs
- Design Districts

Short List:

Once clustered, each group was invited to prioritise actions based on criteria such as potential impact and feasibility and share these with the wider group. This enabled the whole group to balance ambitious thinking with practical considerations, identifying actions that could catalyse momentum in the shorter

term while laying the groundwork for longer-term transformation. Participants then refined the highest-priority ideas into a draft action plan. Each selected action was elaborated with a clear intention, potential collaborators, enabling conditions, and next steps. This stage supported a shift from speculative exploration to

strategic commitment, equipping participants with a shared roadmap of interventions aligned to their collective vision of the future design ecosystem. A key consideration was a shared sense of ownership of the actions rather than relying on only one or two stakeholders to take responsibility for implementation.



The following represents the input and prioritization of the workshop participants:

Shorter Term (1-2 Years):	Medium Term (2-4 Years):	Longer Term (4-6 Years):
<p>Narrative Review: Evaluate the past decade of the UNESCO City of Design designation and develop a narrative that aligns with future City Plans. (Note: Implementation depends on additional support from city planning and policy experts.)</p> <p>Visibility Initiatives: Enhance public recognition of the UNESCO designation at entry points such as the airport and city hall. (Note: Requires coordination with civic authorities and tourism partners.)</p> <p>Engagement of Political Candidates: Organize a moderated debate with mayoral candidates focused on design and secure engagement of electeds at relevant UNESCO network events. (Note: This is an engagement tool rather than a binding policy commitment.)</p> <p>Design Ambassadors: Explore appointing Design Ambassadors to advocate for the community. (Note: This concept is in the exploratory phase and would require additional resourcing.)</p>	<p>Career Pathway Mapping: Develop an initial framework to chart “0-21 Creative Career Pathways” aimed at nurturing local design talent. (Note: Requires further data collection and collaboration with educational institutions and industry leaders.)</p> <p>Council of the Arts: Advocate for the re-establishment of the Council for the Arts within the city government to better integrate design into civic initiatives. Consider opportunities to re-establish this as a Creative Economy Council or an Art, Design, and Cultural Council. If not able to be accomplished in name, its composition of appointees and role of the council should reflect this. (Note: The feasibility is contingent on political will and resource allocation from the public sector.)</p> <p>‘Hire Local’ Campaign: Explore launching a campaign to encourage local hiring in the design sector. (Note: This action is dependent on market analysis and strategic partnerships with private-sector entities.)</p>	<p>Global Showcase: Investigate the development of international platforms—such as a design Biennale—to celebrate and promote Detroit design. (Note: Would require extensive collaboration between design organizations, cultural institutions, and external funders.)</p> <p>Youth Engagement Programs: Design a suite of youth programs aimed at early exposure and continuous engagement in design. (Note: Implementation would hinge on integrating these initiatives within existing educational frameworks.)</p> <p>Design Districts: Consider outlining plans for dedicated Detroit Design Districts to attract both local and international attention. (Note: Success in this area will depend on a clear articulation of market demand and infrastructural feasibility.)</p>

NEXT STEPS

Key Themes & Takeaways

1. Power Building and Influence:

Harnessing the collective power of the design community to influence policies, priorities, and plans which better integrate design to improve the quality of life, outcomes, and services for Detroit residents and neighborhoods.

2. Business and Talent Development & Promotion:

Identify and / or develop opportunities for talent attraction and retention and for the promotion and sale of Detroit design services and products.

3. A Visionary Roadmap, Not an Immediate Mandate:

Participants outlined transformative scenarios for Detroit's design ecosystem during this daylong workshop, for example:

2-Year Vision: Proposals include establishing a digital Detroit Design Directory, showcasing the UNESCO

designation at key civic entry points, and initiating targeted education programs for public officials.

5-Year Vision: Ideas extend to forming a targeted endowment for Design Core, creating clear career pathways for local designers, and developing a suite of public-private initiatives.

10-Year Vision: Bold proposals envision design solving key urban challenges—from mobility and tax reform to

environmental sustainability—anticipating the development of a well-defined design district and enhanced local retention of design talent.

15-Year Vision: The long-run scenario imagines Detroit's design community emerging as an internationally recognized thought leader, with fully integrated urban and tech ecosystems.

4. Celebrating Local Assets While Recognizing Systemic Constraints Mandate:

Detroit has long been a beacon of creative spirit and community pride, with a globally recognized legacy bolstered by the UNESCO City of Design designation. Local initiatives such as Detroit Month of Design, grassroots public engagement, and the city's distinctive architectural heritage serve as powerful

symbols of this potential. Participants in the workshop spoke passionately about "telling the Detroit Design Story" and harnessing this identity as a means of spurring economic and cultural renewal.

The present findings are therefore a starting point—an aspirational narrative rather than a set of actionable mandates. The envisioned improvements do not yet account for significant barriers such as:

The absence of a structured, comprehensive definition and measurement of Detroit's design ecosystem, both in terms of supply and demand.

A fragmented funding landscape where high levels of philanthropic investment are compensatory rather than complementary to robust city governance.

The reality that a strong local advocacy spirit, while vital, does not automatically translate into the capacity to drive scalable change given limited resources and systemic challenges like decades of disinvestment and talent drain.

By acknowledging these limitations up front, we invite stakeholders, in addition to our efforts and next steps, to further explore these ideas in depth.

5. Fostering Dialogue & Collaborative Investigation:

In light of these insights and the aspirational nature of the report, the immediate next steps will focus on initiating dialogue with key stakeholders:

Stakeholder Engagement:

Design Core will use this document as a conversation starter, encouraging

policymakers, funding organizations, and community leaders to engage in further research and joint planning sessions.

Communication Outreach:

Design Core and key members of the Design Economy Council will engage civic leaders in conversation about this report and the community's recommendations for actions related to the growth of our design economy. This correspondence will underscore that our proposals are intended to open constructive dialogue

and are not to be interpreted as immediate directives for change.

Feasibility and Market Analysis:

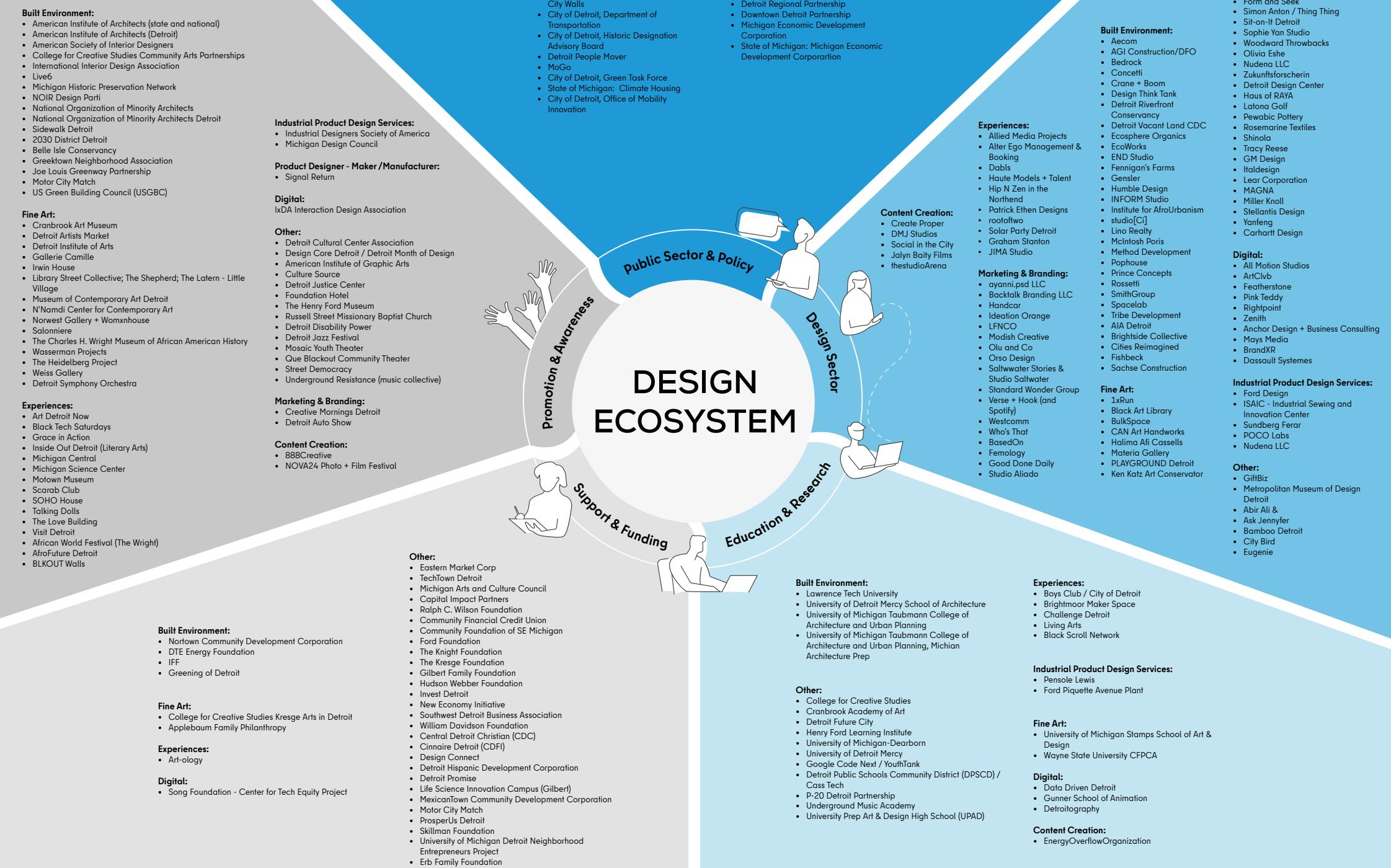
We plan to commission further studies to articulate and quantify the Detroit design ecosystem, which will help validate and refine the recommendations presented.

These steps are designed not to promise quick fixes but to pave the way for sustained, collaborative efforts to address longstanding challenges in Detroit's design landscape.

APPENDIX: DESIGN ECOSYSTEM

Note: The design ecosystem map included here represents an initial exploration of the interactions across local design stakeholders. It is a starting framework that requires further refinement and data-driven analysis to fully capture the complexities of supply, demand, and resource flows within the ecosystem.





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This report has been commissioned by Design Core under the umbrella of the UNESCO City of Design designation as part of a wider knowledge sharing initiative with the network. This report is intended to be as fair and accurate a reflection as possible of the discussions in the Design Action Plan workshop on 25 February 2025. The ideas presented are collectively owned by the workshop participants.

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Footnotes:

- [1] Design Core (2018) Detroit City of Design ACTION PLAN. Leveraging Detroit's UNESCO City of Design designation to drive inclusive growth, p.20.
- [2] Design Core (2018) Detroit City of Design Action Plan: Fast Facts, p.1
- [3] Whicher, A. (2017) Design Ecosystems and Innovation Policy in Europe, Strategic Design Research Journal 10(2), pp.117-125. .
- [4] Schultz, Tristan & Abdulla, Danah & Ansari, Ahmed & Canli, Ece & Keshavarz, Mahmoud & Kiem, Matthew & Martins, Luiza & Oliveira, Pedro. (2018). What Is at Stake with Decolonizing Design? A Roundtable. Design and Culture. 10. 81-101. 10.1080/17547075.2018.1434368.
- [5] Design Core (2018) Detroit City of Design ACTION PLAN. Leveraging Detroit's UNESCO City of Design designation to drive inclusive growth, p.21.

