

Why We Keep

“Solving the

Wrong Problem”

A systems take on housing

**Insights from Year One of our Research & Knowledge Initiative project,
funded by the Government of Canada.**

Context and Funding

- This webinar shares highlights from the first year of our multi-year project funded by the Government of Canada through the Research and Knowledge Initiative.

Our Goal

To understand why infill and missing middle housing remain so difficult to deliver—even when everyone agrees it's needed.

This project is funded by
the Government of Canada.

Canada 

Our Partners

We're working alongside:

- Municipal governments
 - City of Kelowna
 - City of Salmon Arm
 - City of Colwood
 - Regional District of the Central Okanagan
 - City of Calgary
- Community organizations
- Data and infrastructure experts

What We Did In Year One

In the first year, we undertook a rigorous systemic inquiry into Canada's infill housing ecosystem:

- Built a cross-disciplinary team of subject matter experts, spanning systems, engineering, infrastructure, data, & finance
- Engaged with over 80 interest holders across government, community, industry, and academia
- Conducted multiple workshops and iterative research sprints
- Mapped systemic patterns, barriers, and blind spots that persist across efforts to build more inclusive, sustainable housing

What You'll Learn In This Overview

- Why current solutions struggle to shift the system
- The seven core system patterns we uncovered
- What's hiding beneath policy, data, and decision-making that keeps us stuck
- How a systemic lens reveals leverage points we often overlook

This isn't a policy critique

it's an invitation to see the problem differently.

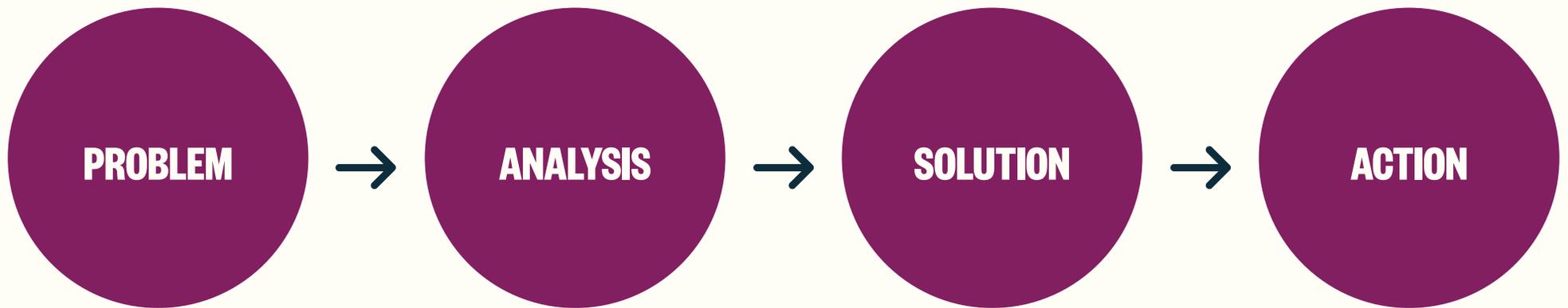
What Do We
Mean by

“Solving the

Wrong Problem”?

How We Usually Solve Problems

- One-directional flow:



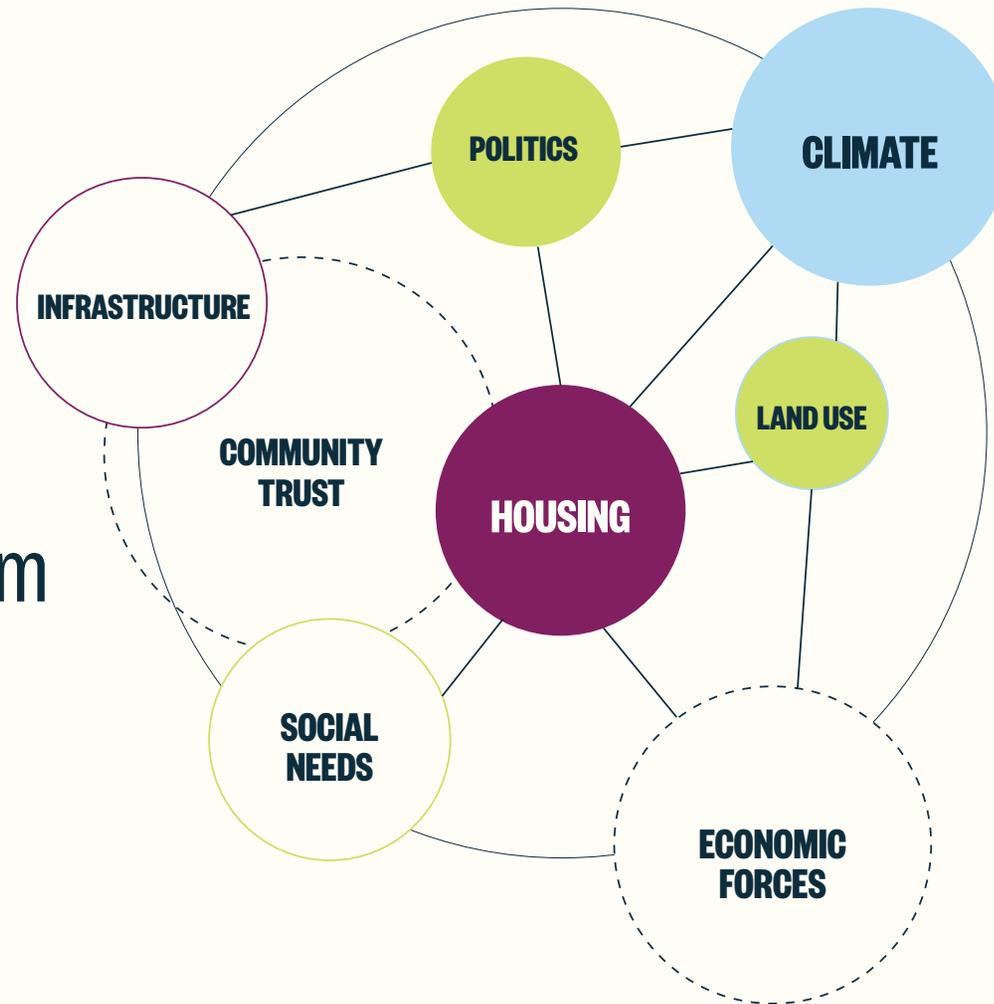
- Treats issues in isolation (e.g., zoning, design, approvals)

This works great for simple problems...

...but housing isn't simple.

Why Housing Is More Than Just Housing

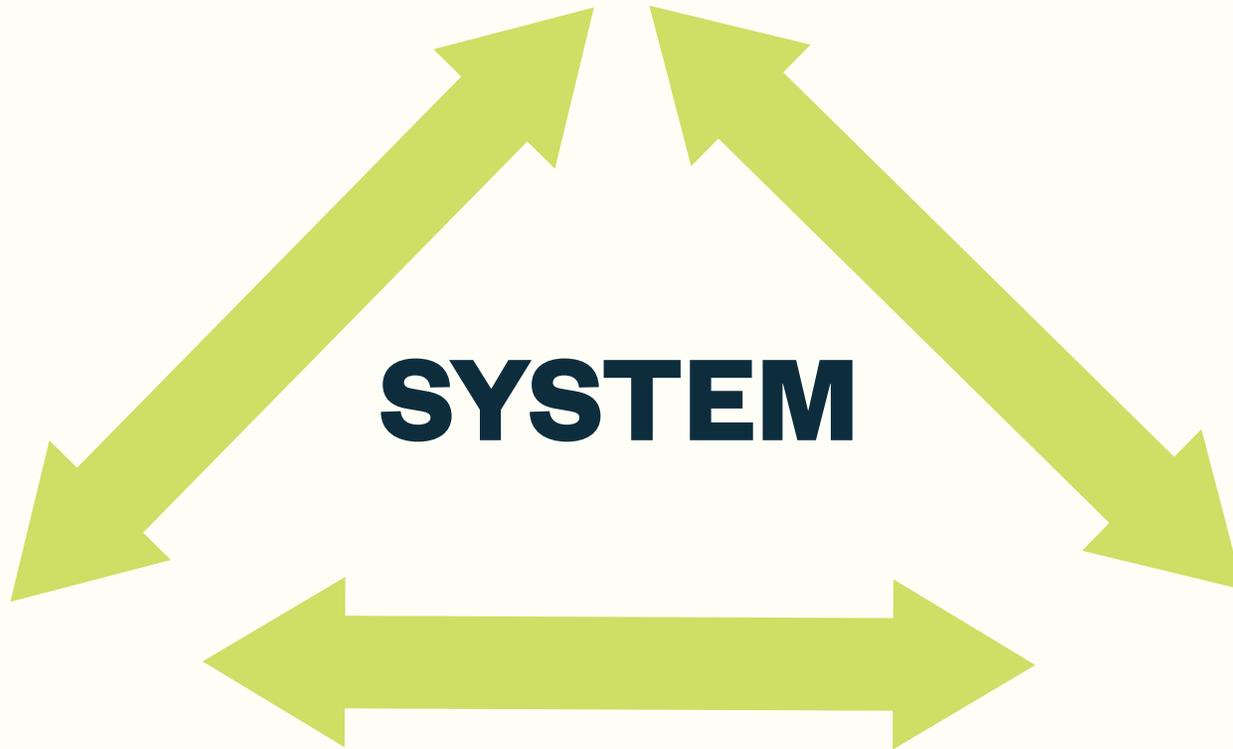
A “wicked” problem where there is not one cause nor one solution.



**When we treat housing as an isolated issue,
we miss the system(s) around it.**

What's a "System"

A collection of entities interacting together



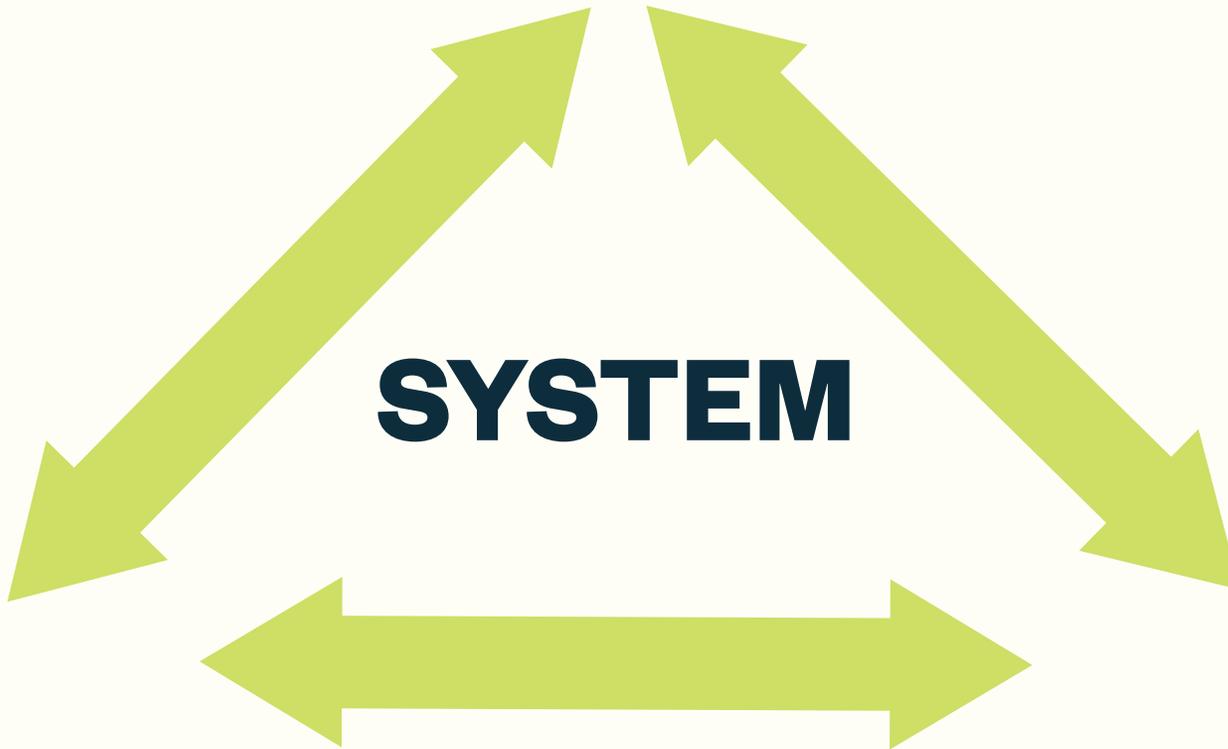
That are perceived by someone

To achieve something

What's a "System"

INTER-RELATIONSHIPS

A collection of entities interacting together



That are perceived by someone

PERSPECTIVES

To achieve something

BOUNDARIES

What's Systemic Thinking/Design?

Understand **INTER-RELATIONSHIPS**

What's the reality we're dealing with?



Engage with PERSPECTIVES

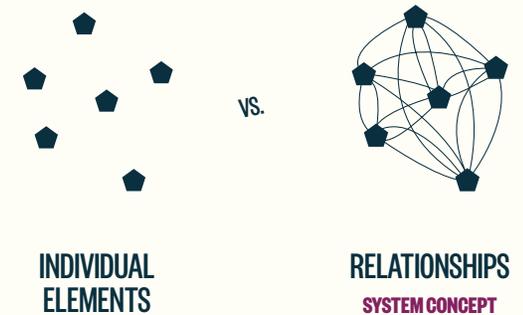
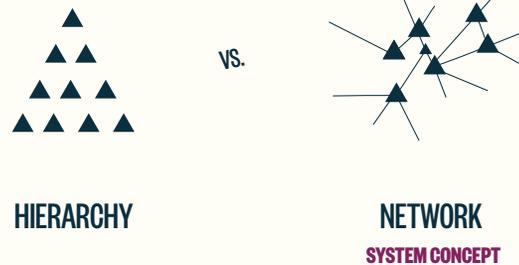
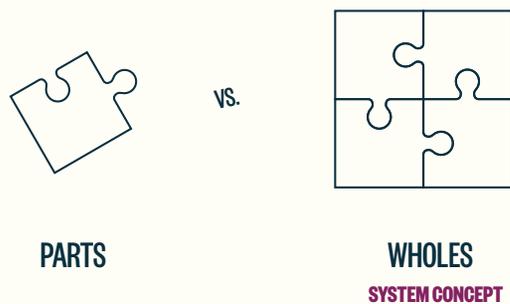
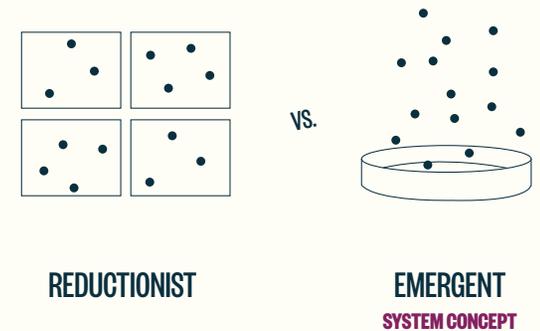
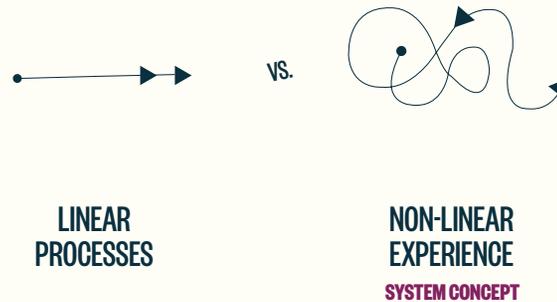
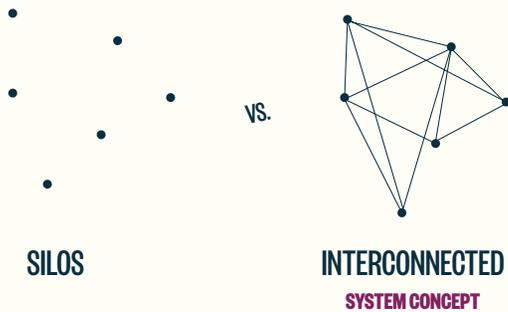
How do people interpret reality?

Decide on BOUNDARIES

What is desirable & feasible?

A Different Way to Think

- Systems thinking looks at how things connect, not just how they perform in isolation



An Analogy: Treat the Fever or the Illness?

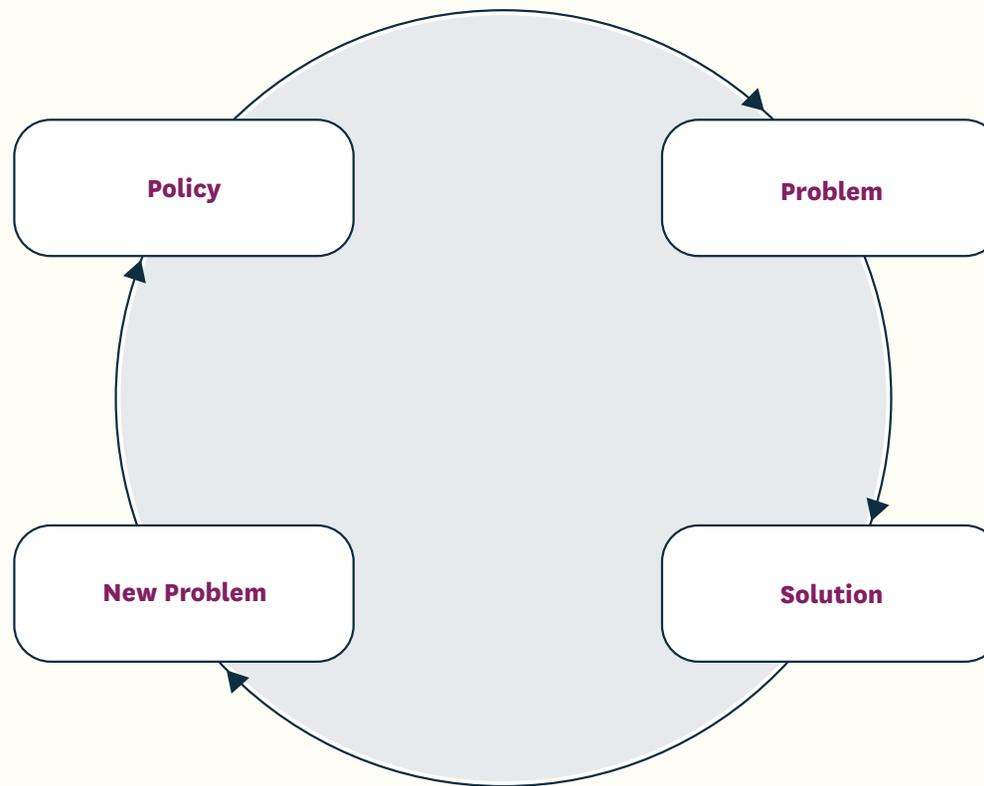
- Imagine someone has a fever
- A linear approach treats the fever
- A systems approach asks: *Why is the body inflamed?*

Housing symptoms are loud & visible.

The system causes are quiet and can be hard to see – but more powerful.

Why Our Solutions Keep Missing the Mark

- Faster permitting, but no infrastructure alignment
- Design guidelines, but no developer buy-in



We're trying to fix pieces instead of redesigning the system.

Seeing the Whole Picture

- Understand the ripple effects of decisions
- Spot bottlenecks and blind spots
- Design **interventions** not “fixes”

This is what our project set out to explore...

What We Learned

Key Insights

From Phase 1

Phase 1 Overview

WITH GRATITUDE TO OUR INTERVIEWEES

Wilma Leung BC HOUSING

Sheryl Peters BC HOUSING

Nick Hazzi VANTAGE WEST REALTY

Jamela Van Steinburg VLS DEVELOPMENTS

Alexa McPhee M'AKOLA DEVELOPMENT

Michelle Hoar HEY NEIGHBOR COLLECTIVE + HAPPY CITIES

Dave Sargeant DEVARA ENTERPRISES

Dane Lewis STUDIO UNION

Andrew Gaucher G GROUP

Birte Decloux URBAN OPTIONS

Paul Daniels XY VENTURES

Dave Stevens SILK STEVENS

Peter Corbyn NEW BRUNSWICK NON-PROFIT HOUSING ASSOC.

Wes Jones WES JONES REALTY

Rebekah Parker RENEWABLE CITIES

Gillian Matheson MRM CONSTRUCTION/WHITE BIRCH SUBDIVISION INC.

Erika Sagert BC NON PROFIT HOUSING SOCIETY

Renée de st Croix CITY OF COQUITLAM

Sharon Shepherd FORMER MAYOR CITY OF KELOWNA

Magda Szpala BC HOUSING

Corrinne Harris BC HOUSING

Madelaine Prince UVIC

Jodie Rechenmacher URBAN SYSTEMS

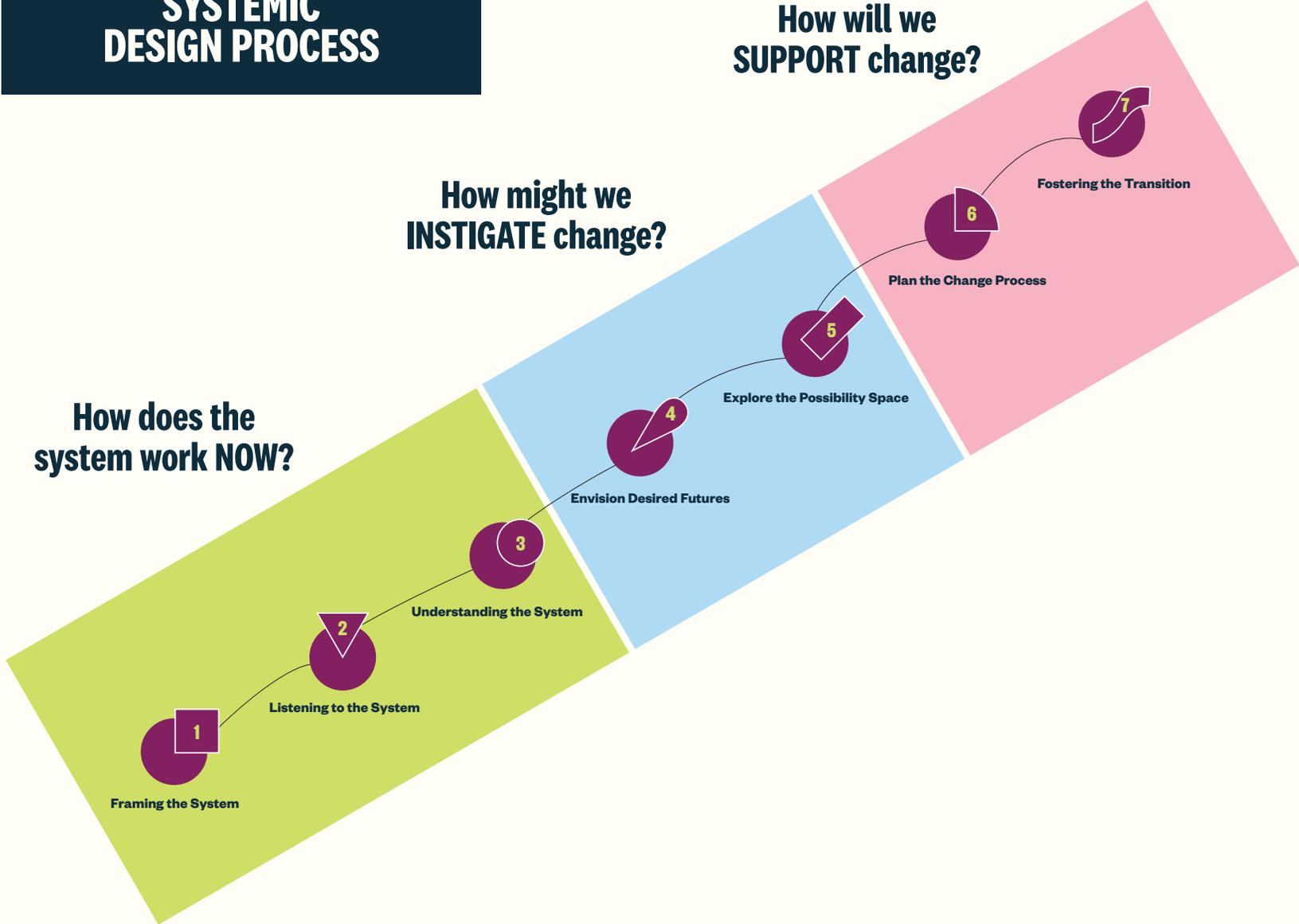
Nate Kasten GREY & IVY

Andy Thompson THOMSON ARCHITECTURE

50+ Staff FROM OUR PARTNER MUNICIPALITIES;
THE MINISTRY OF HOUSING INFRASTRUCTURE &
COMMUNITIES, CANADA; CMHC

Phase 1 Overview

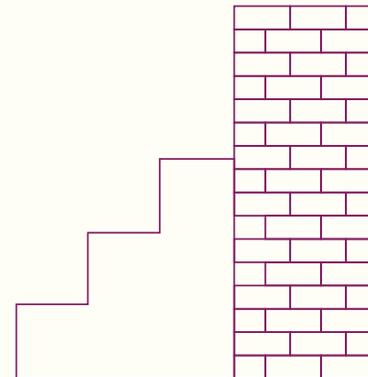
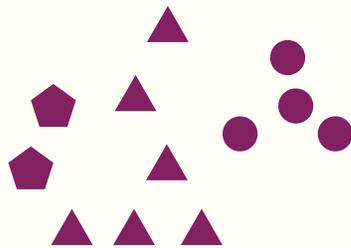
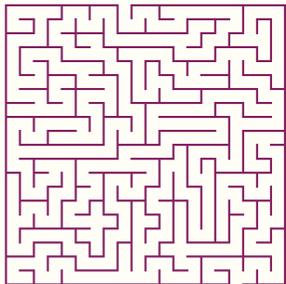
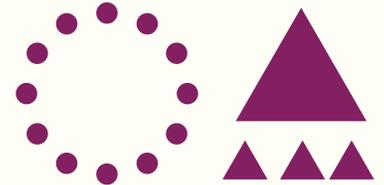
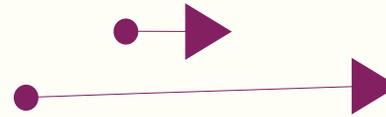
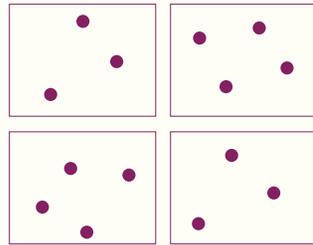
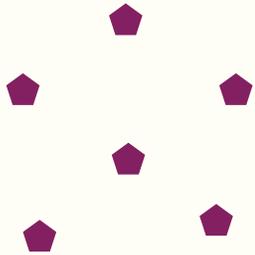
SYSTEMIC DESIGN PROCESS



What We Learned

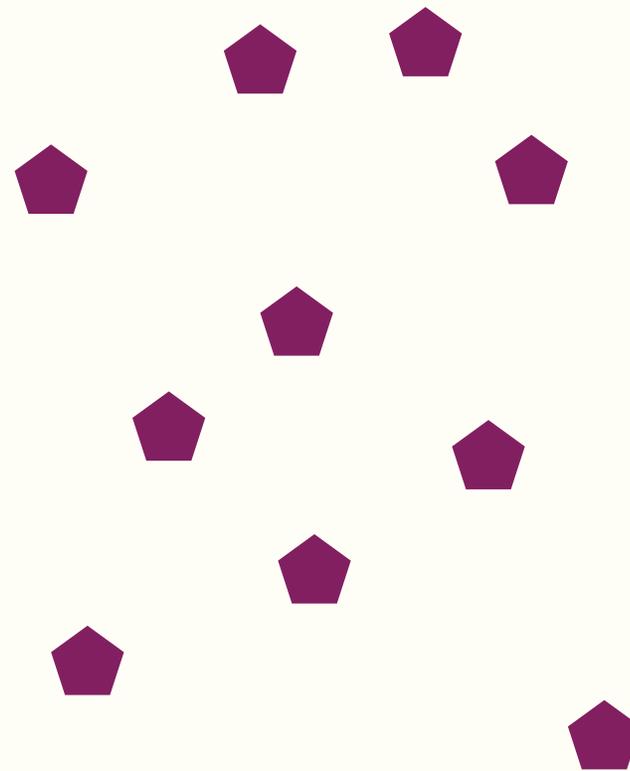
Seven patterns that keep us stuck

and why surface-level solutions keep failing



SYSTEM PATTERN 1

Fragments & Silos



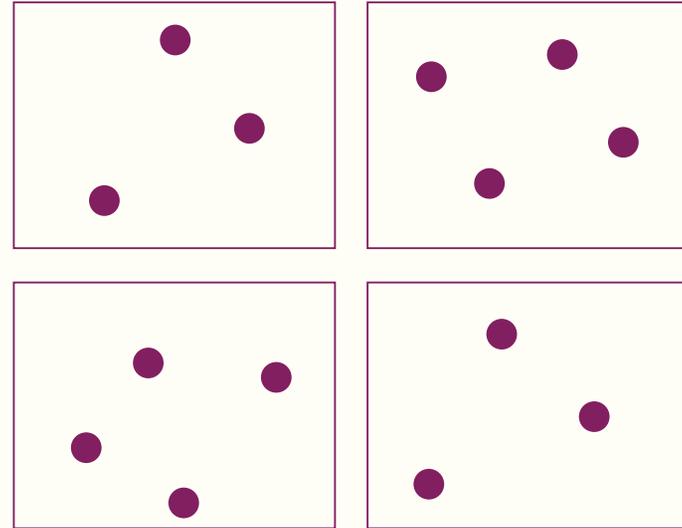
- Departments use **different data, goals, and timelines**
- **Disconnected silos** = misaligned decisions

EXAMPLE *Planning approves infill; Engineering flags capacity gap two months later*

Everyone's working hard—but not necessarily together.

SYSTEM PATTERN 2

Oversimplification



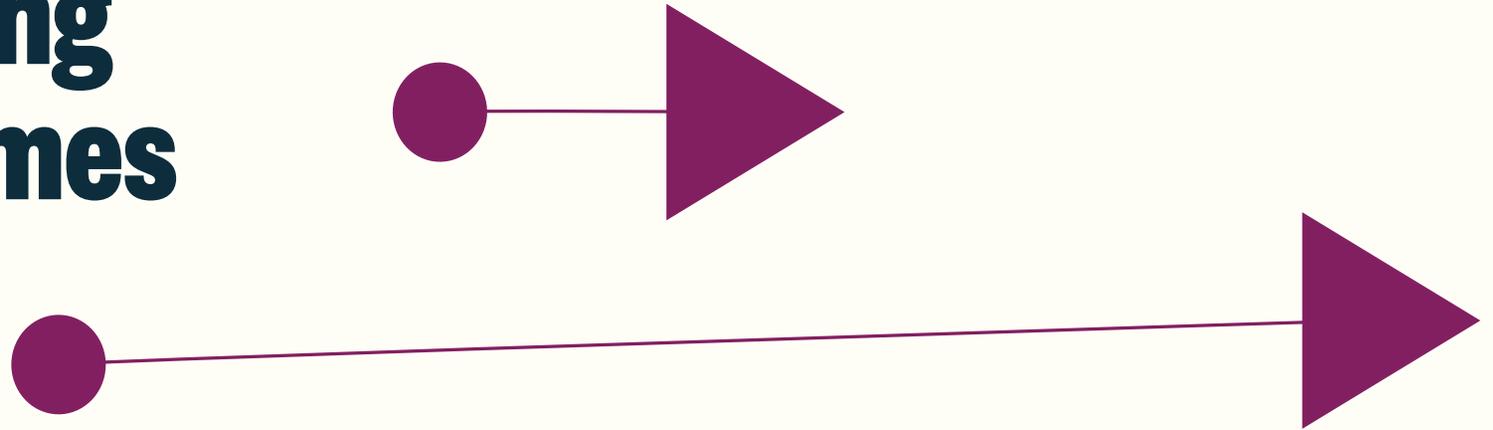
- **The “magic bullet” mindset:** quick zoning changes, pre-approved designs
- Ignores context, **unintended consequences & interdependencies**

EXAMPLE *City speeds up approvals but forgets to update infrastructure assessment models*

We rush to “fix” symptoms before we’ve understood the system.

SYSTEM PATTERN 3

Conflicting Timeframes



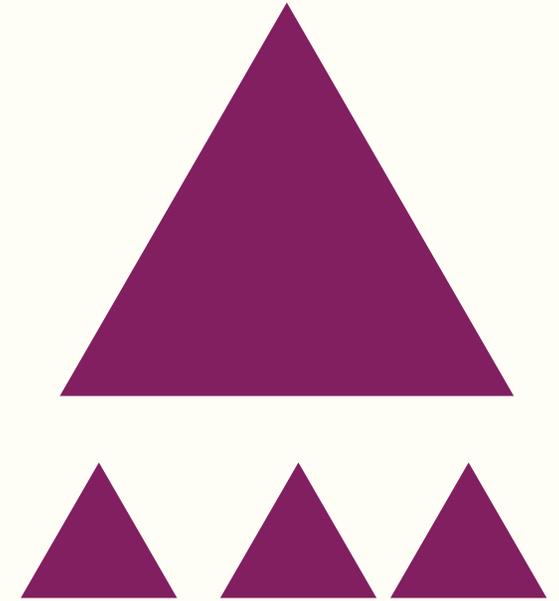
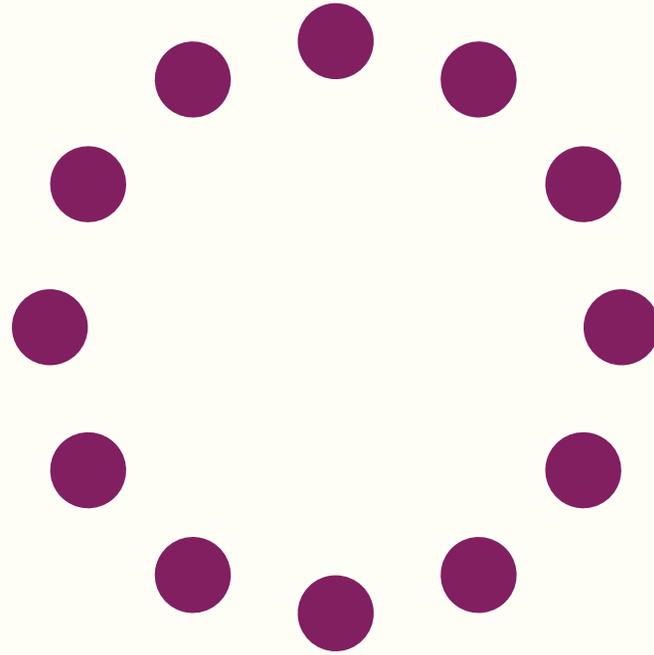
- Long-range infrastructure plans vs short-term budgets & election cycles
- Projects start, stall, or change with new leadership/legislation

EXAMPLE *Council approves density targets, but no infrastructure investment follows*

The system can't align if the clocks don't.

SYSTEM PATTERN 4

Conflicting Worldviews



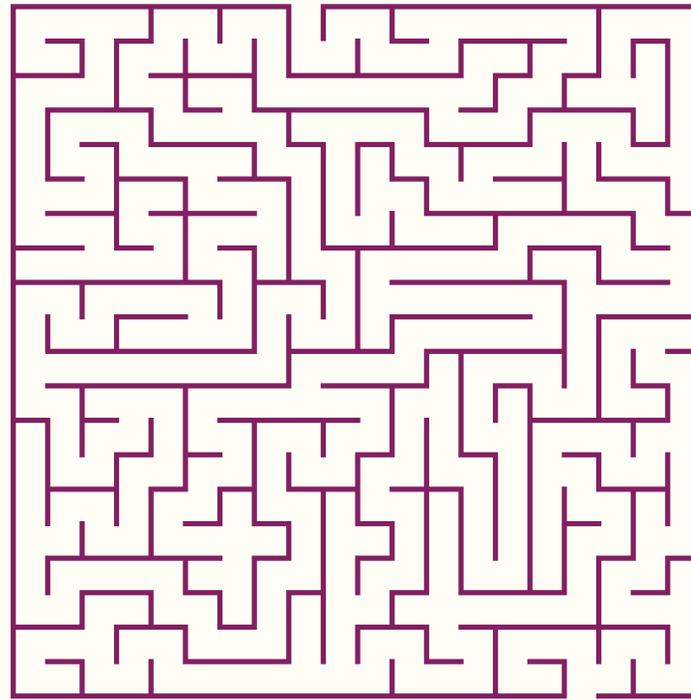
- Policy is often shaped by narrow economic models & mindsets
- Indigenous worldviews hold relations & responsibilities to land & time differently

EXAMPLE *A regional plan ignores community-based knowledge of fire management*

Whose knowledge do we count as data?

SYSTEM PATTERN 5

Limits of Cognition



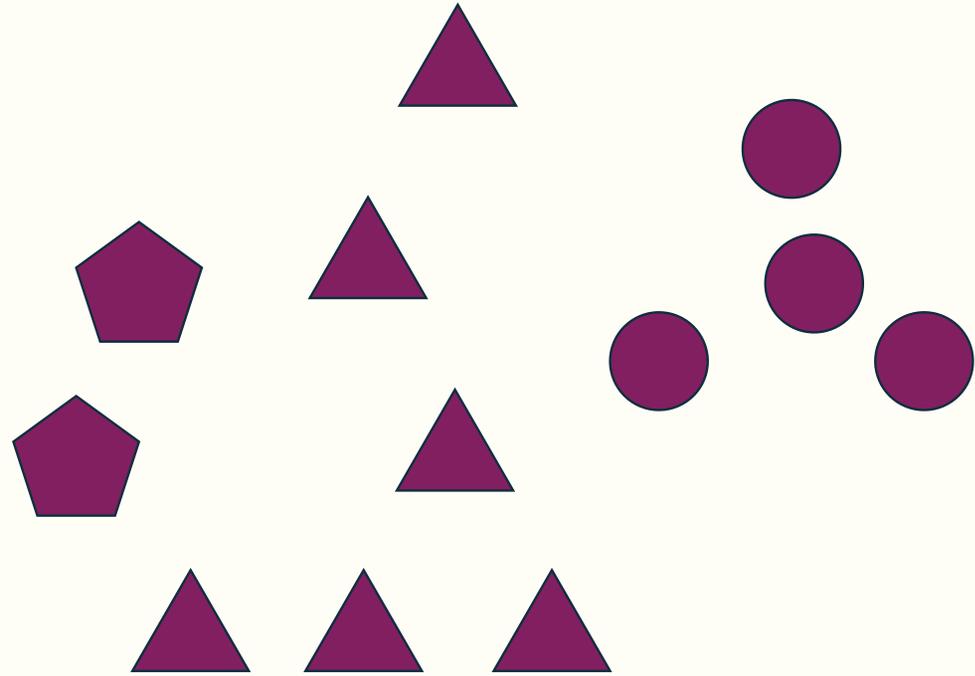
- Complexity is hard to navigate and challenging to understand
- Cognitive overload leads to simplistic decisions about complex problems

EXAMPLE *Team oversimplifies a 5-year challenge into a short presentation, knowing key trade-offs will be lost but complexity won't survive Council's Review.*

**Systems thinking is a vital cognitive capacity
without it, we default to safe, not smart.**

SYSTEM PATTERN 6

Challenging Data Quality



- Data is siloed, outdated, and often doesn't reflect equity concerns
- Mismatched priorities, definitions, and formats

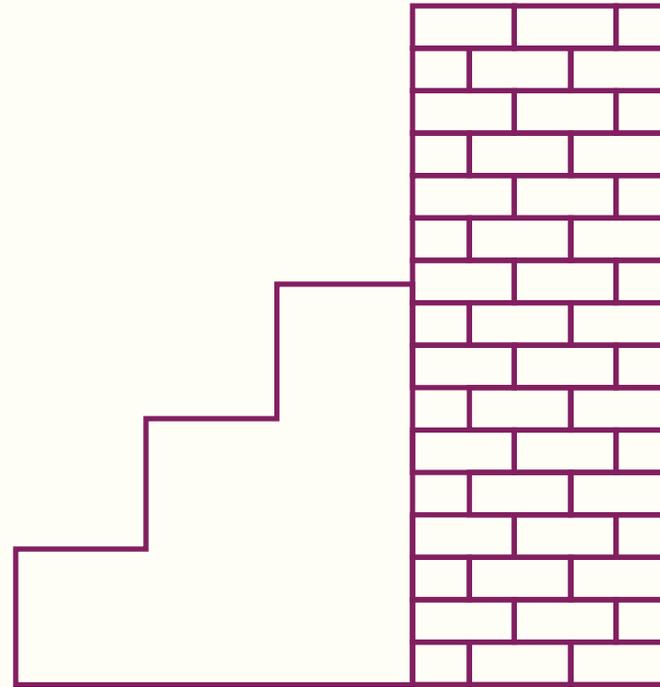
EXAMPLE

Engineers use ISO 55013, Housing Planners use 2021 census; local communities have real-time lived experience nobody sees; Host Nations have vital deep-rooted wisdom overlooked/erased by Western biases.

If our data doesn't align, our decisions won't either.

SYSTEM PATTERN 7

Resistance to Deep Change



- System rewards small fixes over transformative shifts
- Bottom-up energy often blocked by top-down structures

EXAMPLE *Staff have ideas but lack mandate or time to test them.*

**We're not stuck because of bad ideas,
we're stuck because dominant systems resist change.**

Reflection:

- Do any of these patterns feel familiar?
- How do they appear in your own experience?

From Insights to Action

What's Next



Data is the Connective Tissue

- In every conversation, workshop, and system map, one thing kept surfacing: **data is the invisible force that shapes what gets seen, prioritized, and built**
- Yet today, **data is often fragmented, unclear, and disconnected from the values** communities care about

**It's not just about collecting better data –
it's about connecting it to what matters.”**

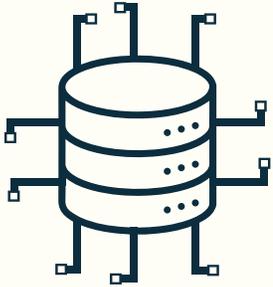
A Complex System Needs Coherent Signals

- Infill housing sits at the intersection of many systems: housing, infrastructure, land use, equity, and finance
- To move forward, we need data that makes sense across departments, jurisdictions, and worldviews
- That means rethinking how we generate, interpret, and govern data at every level

**It's not just about collecting better data –
it's about connecting it to what matters.”**

The Patterns We Found...

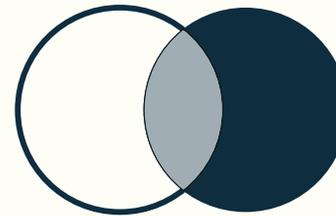
Show Up Most Clearly in the Data



**DATA
CONNECTS EVERYTHING**



**DATA REVEALS
HIDDEN VALUES**



**DATA IS WHERE
CHALLENGES CONVERGE**



**IMPROVING DATA UNLOCKS
BETTER DECISIONS**

Data is not separate from the system

it is where the system becomes visible.

What's Next?

If we can shift the data layer

we can shift the system logic

This insight is driving our Year 2 focus...