
an itty bitty reflexive design guide

**a reflection guide for early
research & design**

by raissa xie

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questions to ask yourself to paint a fuller picture of the
systems at work, and why it matters.

**a reflexive field guide
for identifying and
understanding systems
at play when you're
under a time crunch.**

table of contents

1	introduction	5
2	a brief overview of systems thinking	7
3	values	9
4	interactions	11
5	systems	13
6	relationships	15
7	moments	17
8	players & currencies	21
9	power	25
10	trends	27
11	research plan	29
12	setting boundaries & conclusion	33
13	reflection	35

**a designer's
guide for
designers —
an exploration
of integrating
systems-level
thinking into a
scoped project**

introduction

hello there,

my name is raissa xie. for the past three years, i have worked in product design teams at technology companies. the purpose of this guide is to create a quick resource for designers - such as "past" me - to pose and ponder and give space to ask questions that i wasn't able to ask while in the industry.

in a world where the success of design (specifically product design), is often tied so exclusively to business timelines, user, or immediate stakeholder needs, there is a healthy balance to be aimed towards of both understanding broader systems at play, and designing within a practical scope with recognition of those systems.

this guide is meant for designers who, like myself, want a way to start questioning and bringing in systems-level thinking into the design process we accept and assume as "correct." please view this guide as a provocation to broaden and deepen your understanding of a specific topic or space that you're working within, by adding in your personal reflections and touching on various systems at play that aren't typically included in project scopes. the goal is not to broaden the scope of your project or to lengthen your timeline, but rather to begin informing a conversation and to craft how *you* might start thinking about what other systems your project may touch, to further inform and create a broader understanding in which you may want to explore for your research and your design practice.

my motivation is to create something i wish i had myself, and to give the opportunity for design leaders and organizations to think about how they may incorporate such inquiries in a design practice.

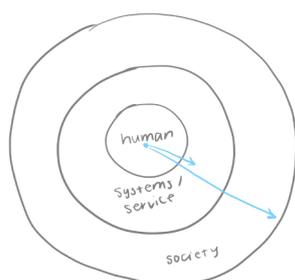
i hope you find this exploration helpful.

all my best,

raissa xie
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parsons school of design

“once we see the relationship between structure and behavior, we can begin to understand how systems work, what makes them produce poor results, and how to shift them into better behavior patterns” - donella meadows

a brief overview of systems thinking



systems lens

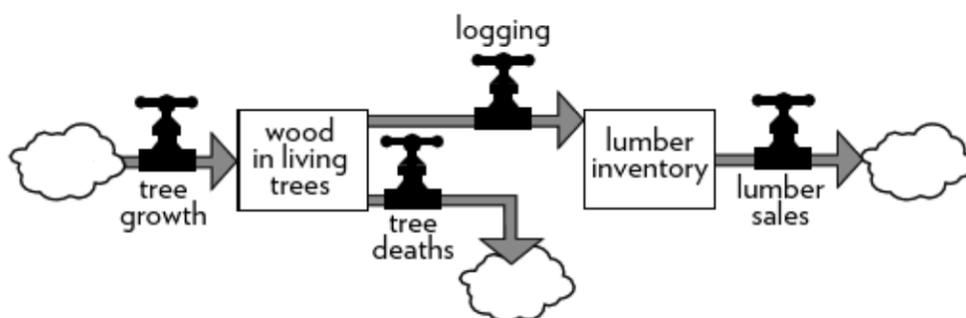
a system is “an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something...a set of things - people, cells, molecules, or whatever - interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time.” systems already exist, but bringing them together can be a form of understanding how things are already working, or imagined to work, by drawing relationships and flows of currencies to see how things are interconnected.

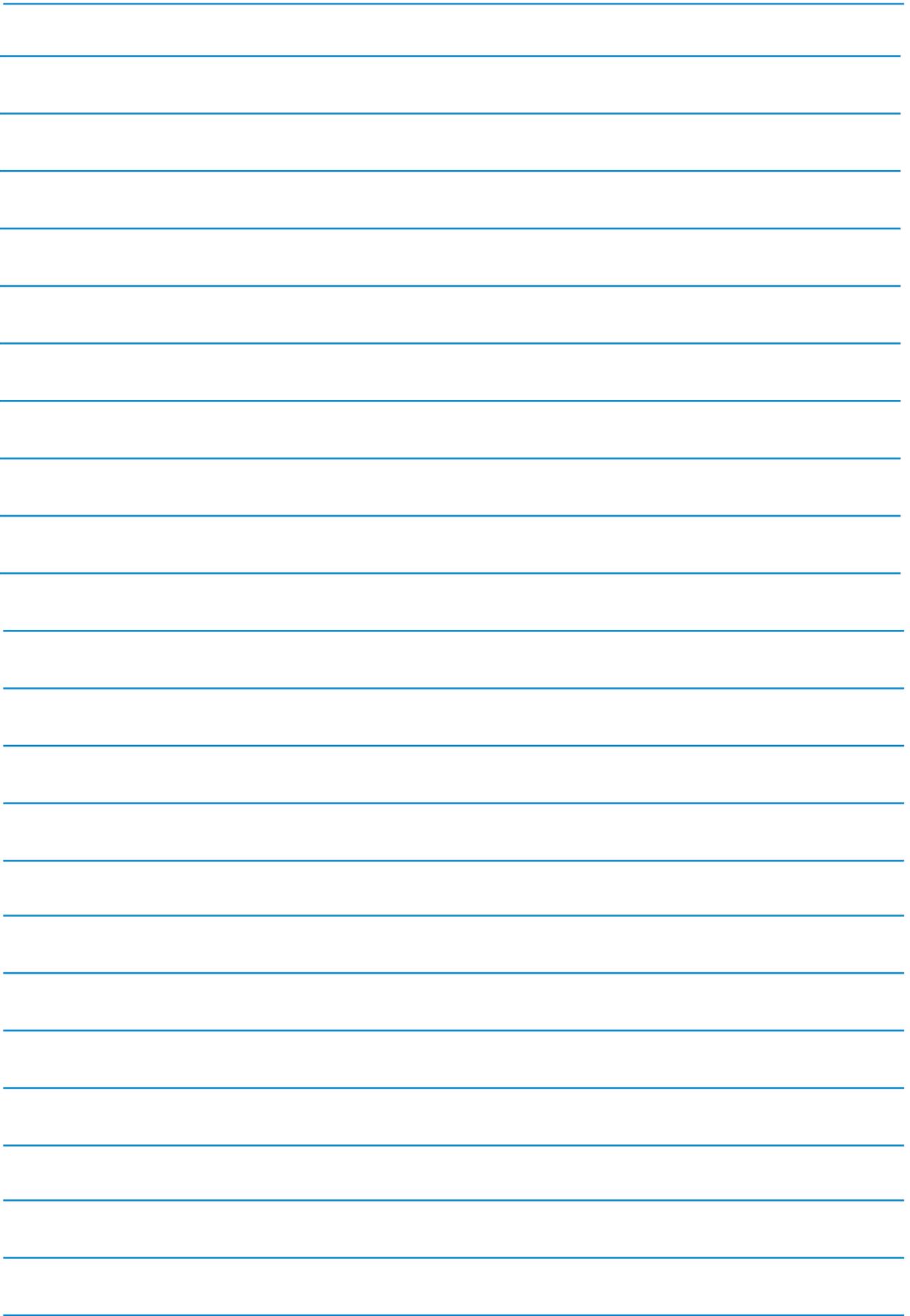
why is it important?

systems are at play in everything we do, but we seldom think about the systems at work, especially in business contexts. as written by meadows, “once we see the relationship between structure and behavior, we can begin to understand how systems work, what makes them produce poor results, and how to shift them into better behavior patterns.” adopting a systems lens and being open-minded to see how different systems influence your project scope is really important, because it can bring visible the previously ignored. while designers sometimes have the privilege of not dealing with the systems level, i believe that designers have a responsibility to think, address, and create something knowing how it might touch different systems.

how systems thinking shows up in this booklet

this is the lens that i find useful in referencing systems thinking. throughout the examples i share in my thinking process, you will see that i am quite loose with my definitions of “systems,” and i am not rigid in breaking down the flows. meadows’ stock and flow method indicates clearly the “stock,” as well as the flow and direction that something happens. while i don’t stick strictly to meadows’ flow charts, they are helpful to sometimes refer to. when i refer to systems thinking, i simply refer to beginning to think outside of just the human level. in this booklet, i walk through some examples of quick reflexive exercises that inform my systems knowledge of research i conducted on the union square farmers’ market.





values

why are you using this field guide?

why do you want to incorporate more systems-level reflection into your design practice?

how does this reflect in your values as a designer?

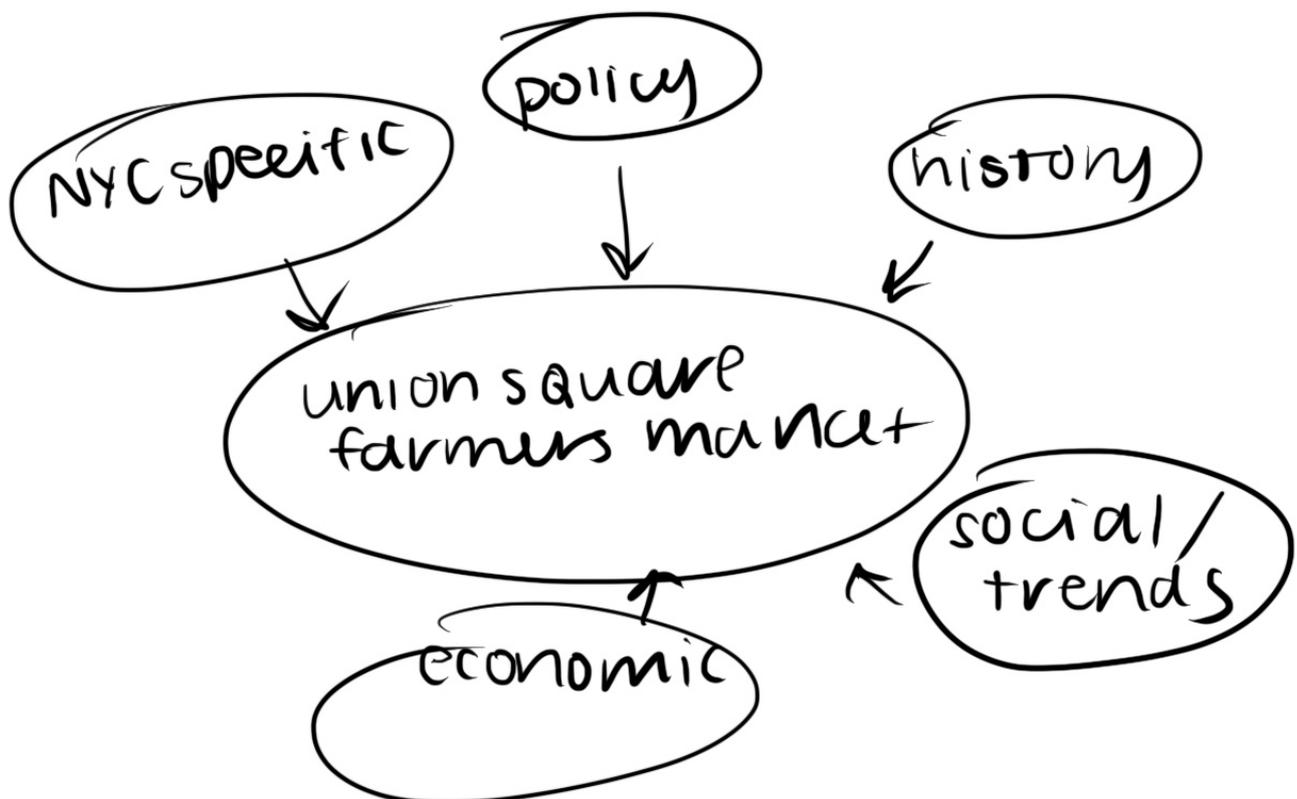
interactions

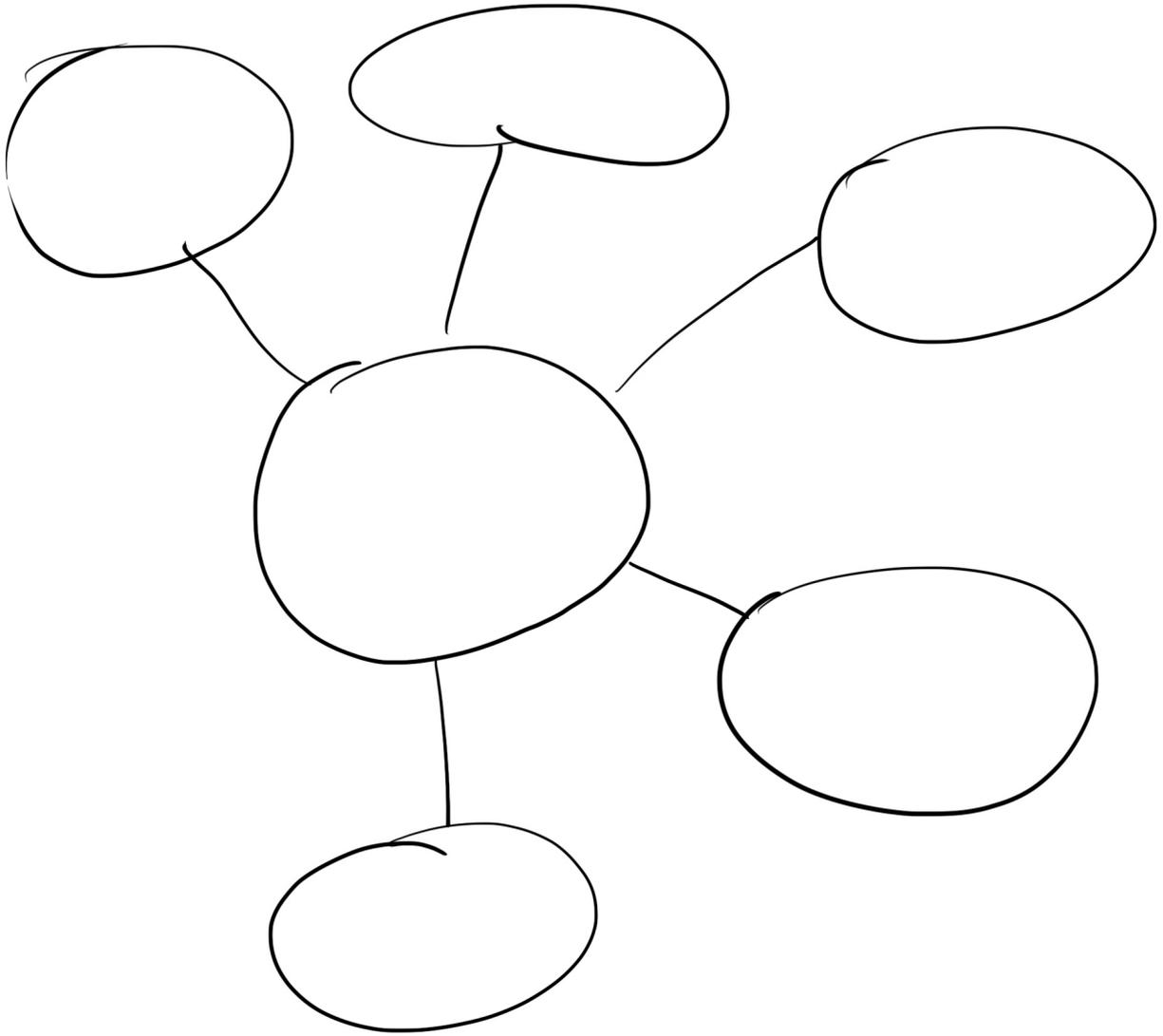
observing your place/ object/system, what or who does it interact with?



systems

what are some different systems that your place/object/system depends on?

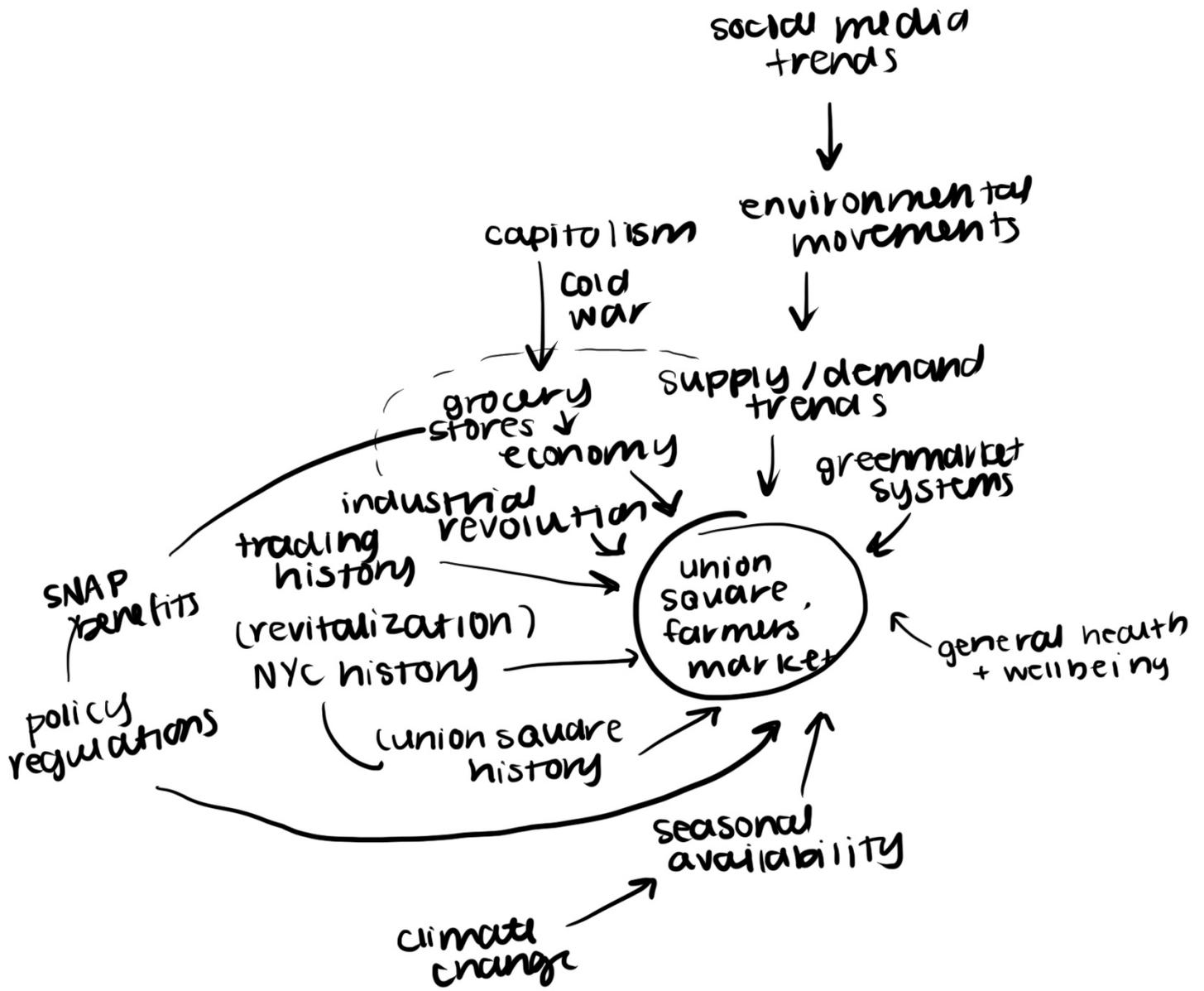




relationships

what relationships do you know or assume are at play? What systems influence your object/place/system?

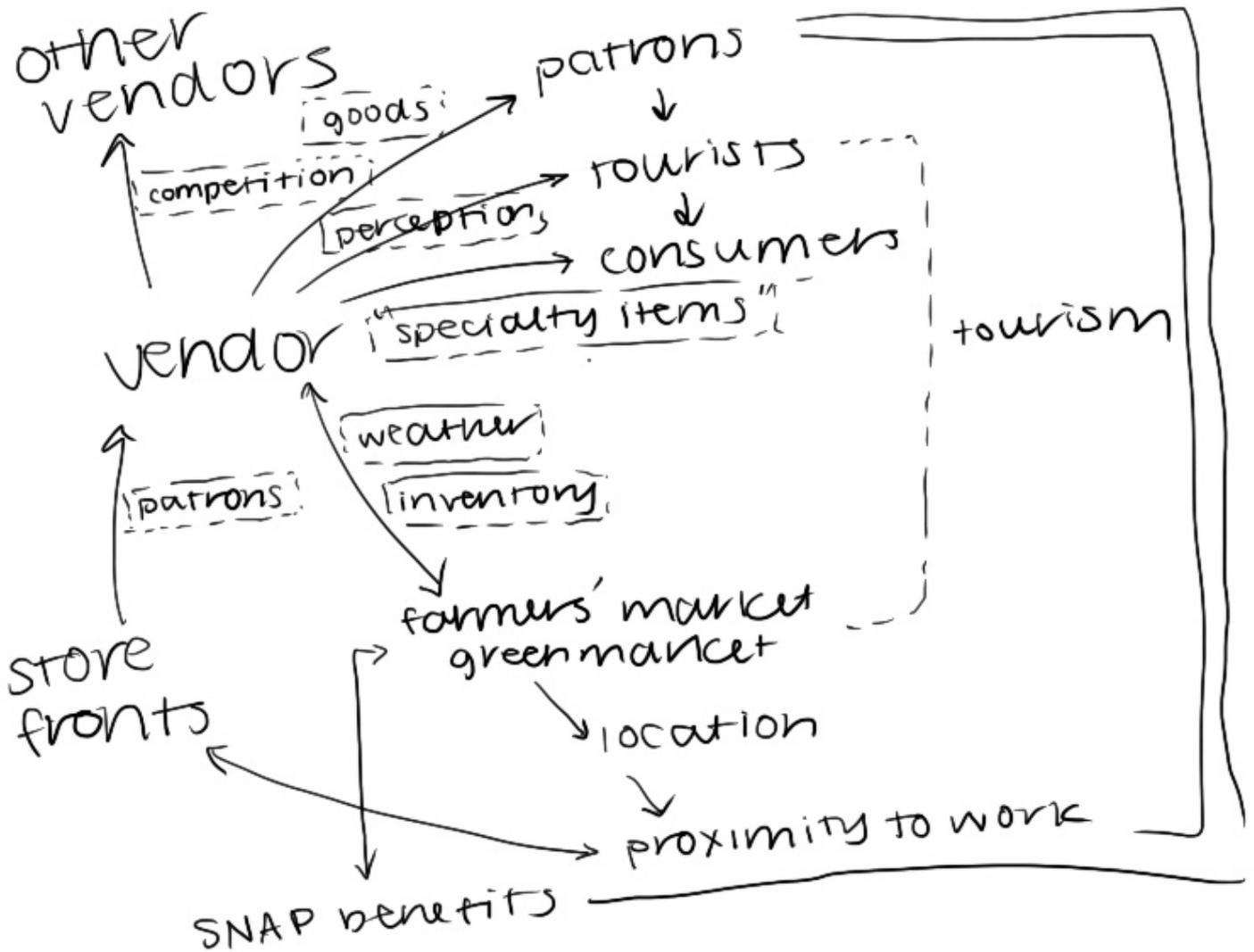




moments

**how do the systems
at play compete or
complement one
another? What are
some moments in time
could have influenced
your object/place?**

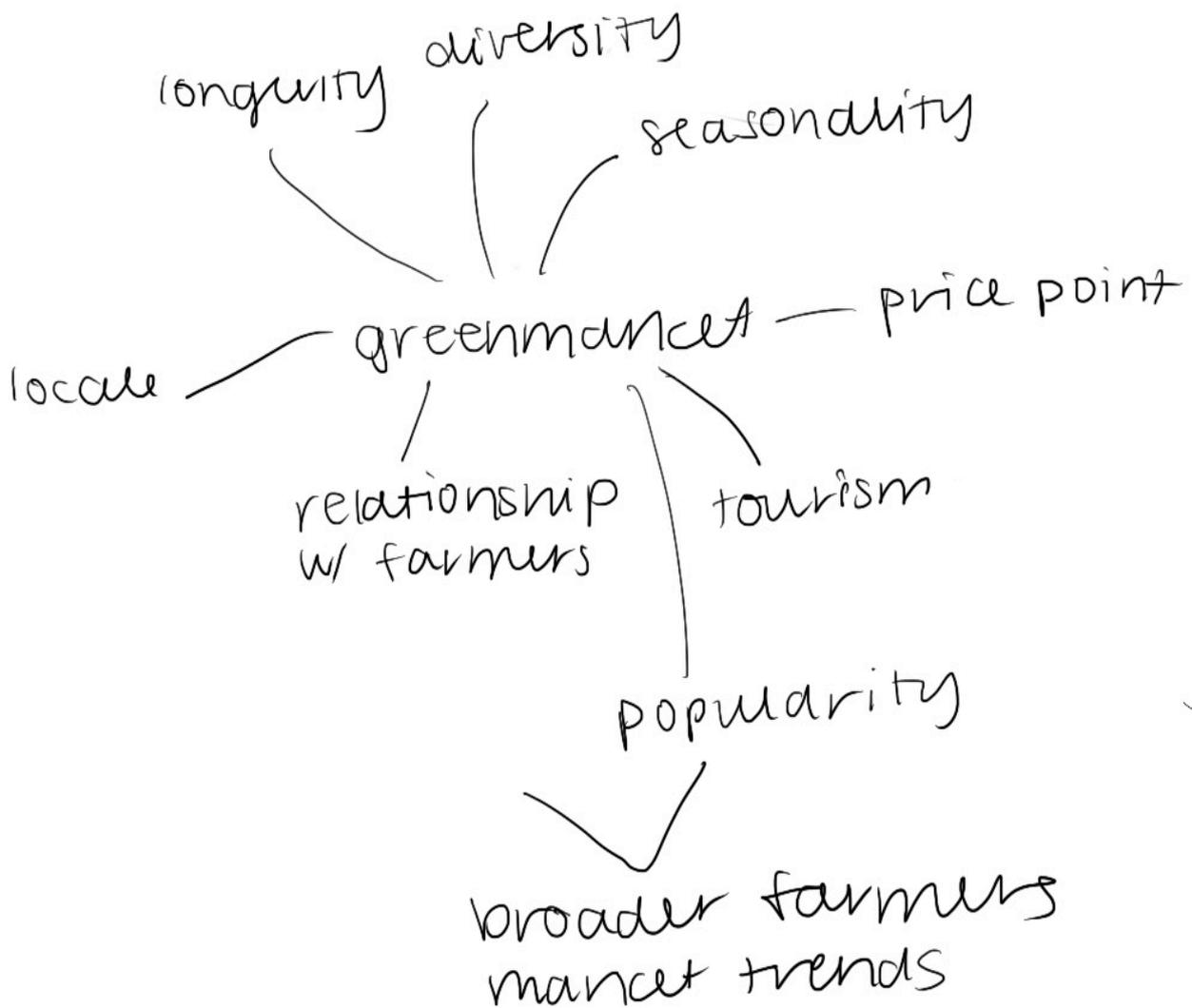
For the Union Square farmers' market, I began to think about how the relationships on the previous page begin to manifest in trends or moments that have impacted farmers' markets in general, and the Union Square farmers' market. This is when it can be helpful to start weaving in secondary research guided by the different areas of inquiry, to start informing your perspectives.



players & currencies

which players are involved and how do they interact or inform one another? What currencies of exchange (trust, goods, network, etc.) are present?

What kinds of visible or invisible exchanges are occurring? For example, vendors sell patrons "goods," but the Greenmarket NYC system impacts vendors depending on the weather and other inventory of other vendors, and vendors may be in competition with one another.



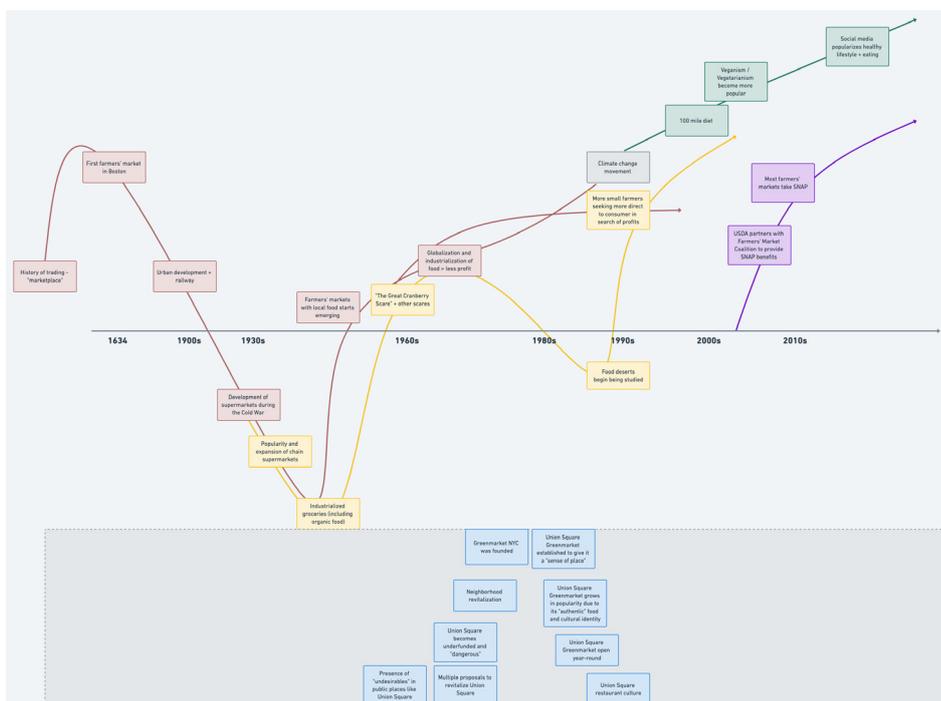
power

**who is the system
designed for? Who holds
power? Who makes
decisions?**

trends

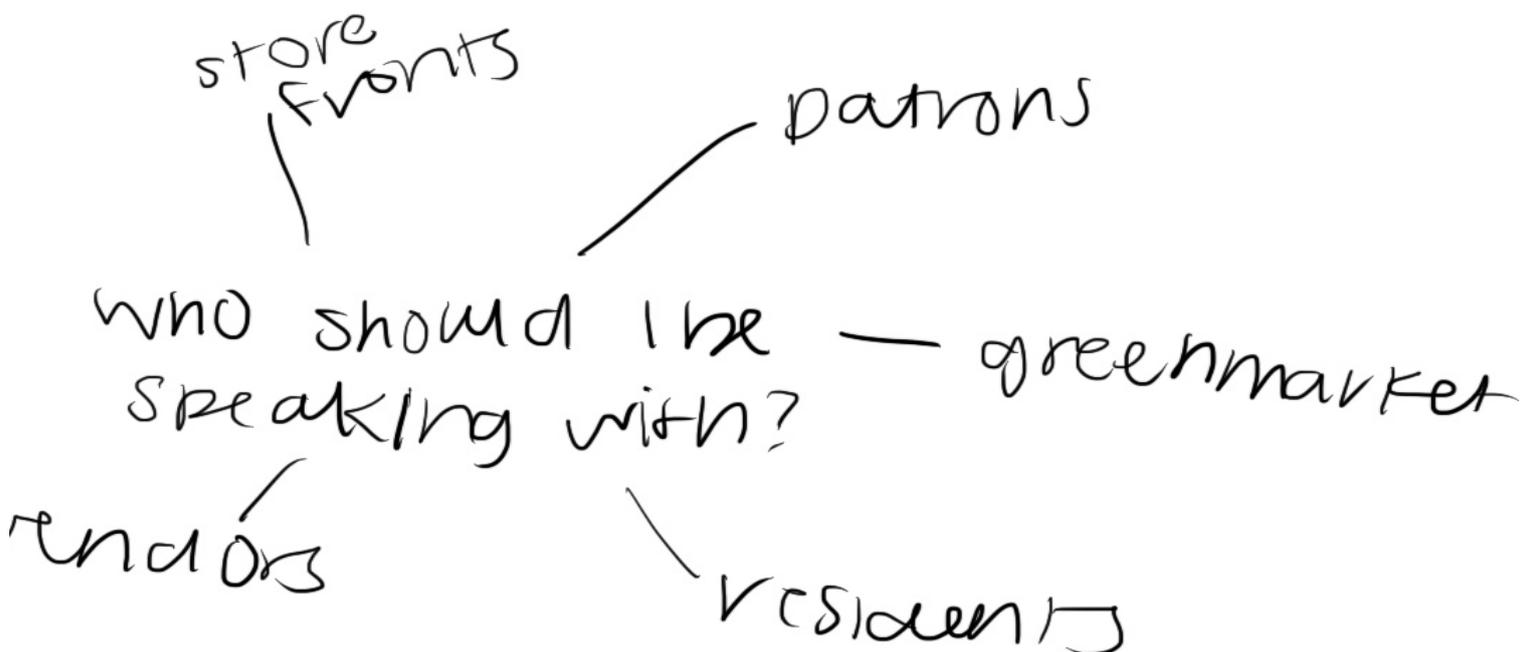
what are broader trends or economical events that have contributed to how your place/object/system is the way it is today?

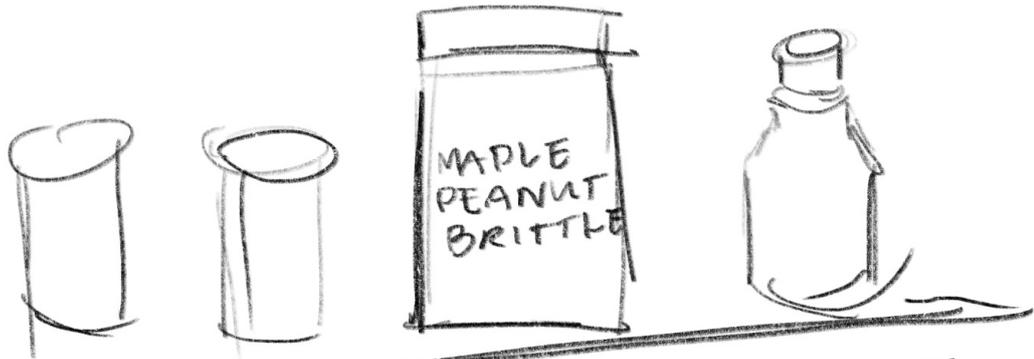
how can this inform areas of further research?



research plan

jot down how you might design your research and who you need to speak with, with these systemic lenses in mind.





I used to have a lot more people in suit & tie with briefcases, but now its a lot more young people, and young people don't spend money... but they "sample us forever."

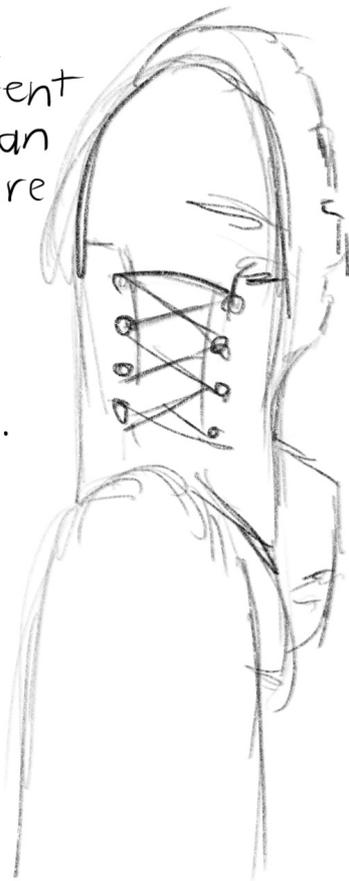


taste this is Amazing!

“ More people
walk by my tent
in one day than
live in my entire
county...

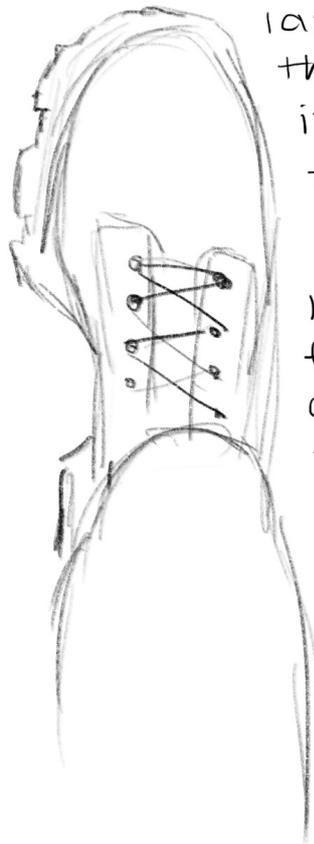
people don't
have a sense
down here...

they have no
clue.



when they make
laws for instance.
they might think
it's the greatest
thing but it
kills us up there.

if it was just
farmers' market,
and I didn't have
to deal with
politics, that'd
be great. ^^



setting boundaries & implications

setting boundaries

in doing this work, i recognize that it is important to draw boundaries, because you can't conduct research in a vacuum that expands over years and years. particularly from a private business standpoint, timelines and expectations do exist.

i would definitely suggest beginning to think about boundaries earlier on. some boundaries that i drew in my process included time boxing myself to a few hours a week within the timeline of a few weeks, as well as selecting which variables i thought were important to investigate through secondary research. while it is important to recognize that this research is nowhere near perfect or thorough, the value lies in bringing systems level thinking to the forefront of our research to, in fact, help scope our research to direct it in more contextual ways, *before* diving in, drawing conclusions and designing solutions; therefore, i think it is possible to conduct "quick and dirty" systems-level research, and embodying this mindset into your research, even if the timeline is short.

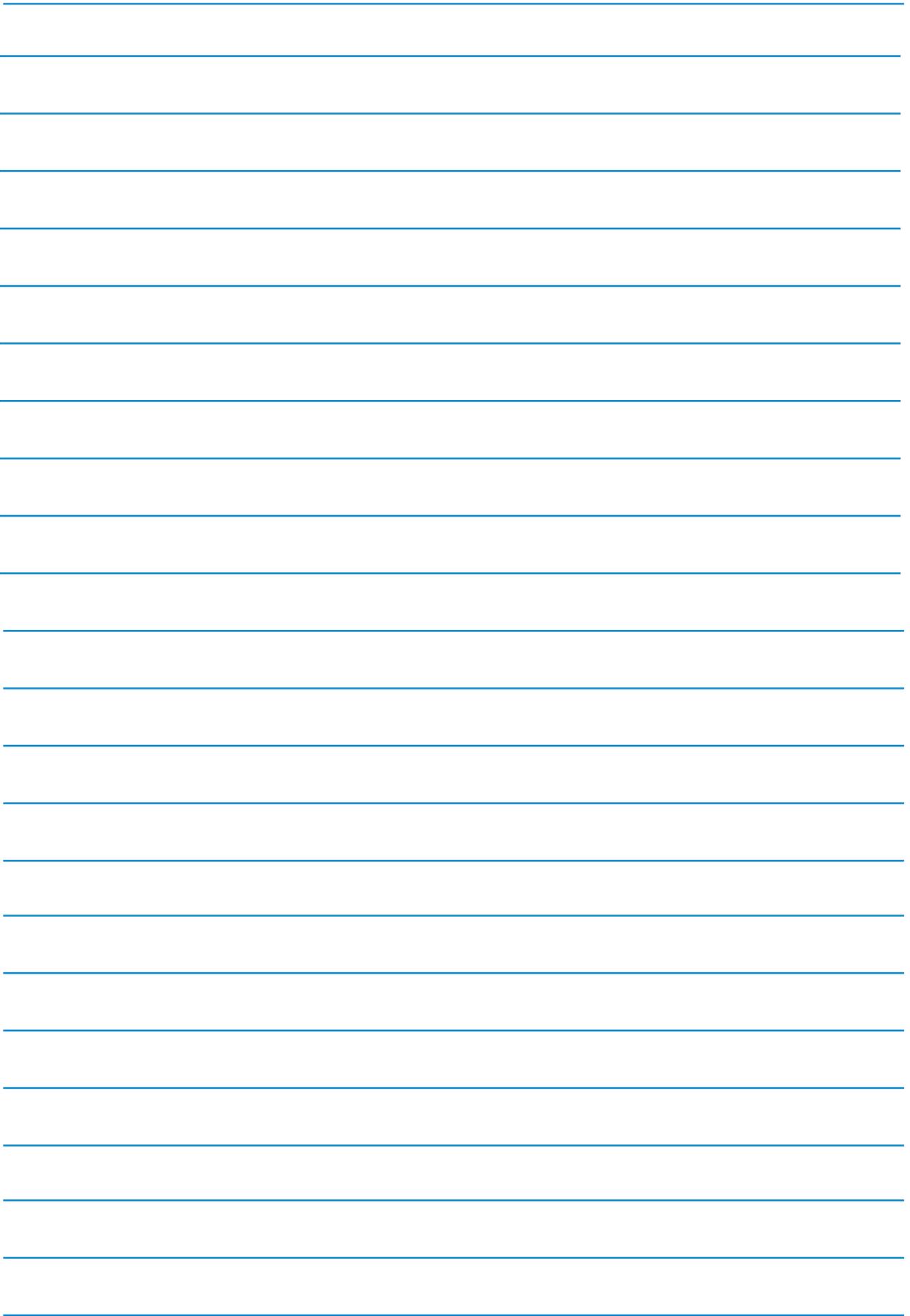
to conclude

as designers, we have the responsibility to design responsibly. what this means, includes informing ourselves of the systems-level relationships that are at play. this is not to say that we should be replacing any lived experience, but can learn from experts who have already done this research, and inform ourselves of a broader picture before jumping in and speaking with individuals. designers are constantly critiquing our own processes and approaches, especially since what we make can have such an impact on others. this power is something we should be aware of and hold responsibly. i believe that using a systems thinking lens helped me break down and get to a better understanding of who we really want to speak with. as this work continues to evolve, i can only imagine how other approaches might be integrated.

though these reflexive questions don't lend themselves to a full analysis from any lens, they do help illustrate relationships and the flow of information from a higher level.

designers are not resolved for playing a "neutral" role. design is a tool that can be inherently political and infused with bias. if we don't stop to question motives and scopes of projects, we are guilty of letting design be a tool that can be manipulated to prioritize certain people over others, assert power over others, if we don't recognize the broader impact we might be having.

to systems and beyond.



reflections

What is your role as a designer? What is your responsibility as a designer?

