# echo))))
connecting neighbors + nations

PROCESS BOOK

Last fall I had the opportunity to take my senior studio class with two visiting professors at the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon, Gill Wildman and Nick Durrant of Plot Design, London. The goal of the class was to develop ideas for new products, services, experiences or interventions that played a value-creating role in the world. Through fifteen weeks of process work, researching, prototyping, discovering, thinking and designing, the final result was Echo, a micro news app. This book shares my journey with you. I hope to give you a better understanding of how Echo came to be.

January 2011
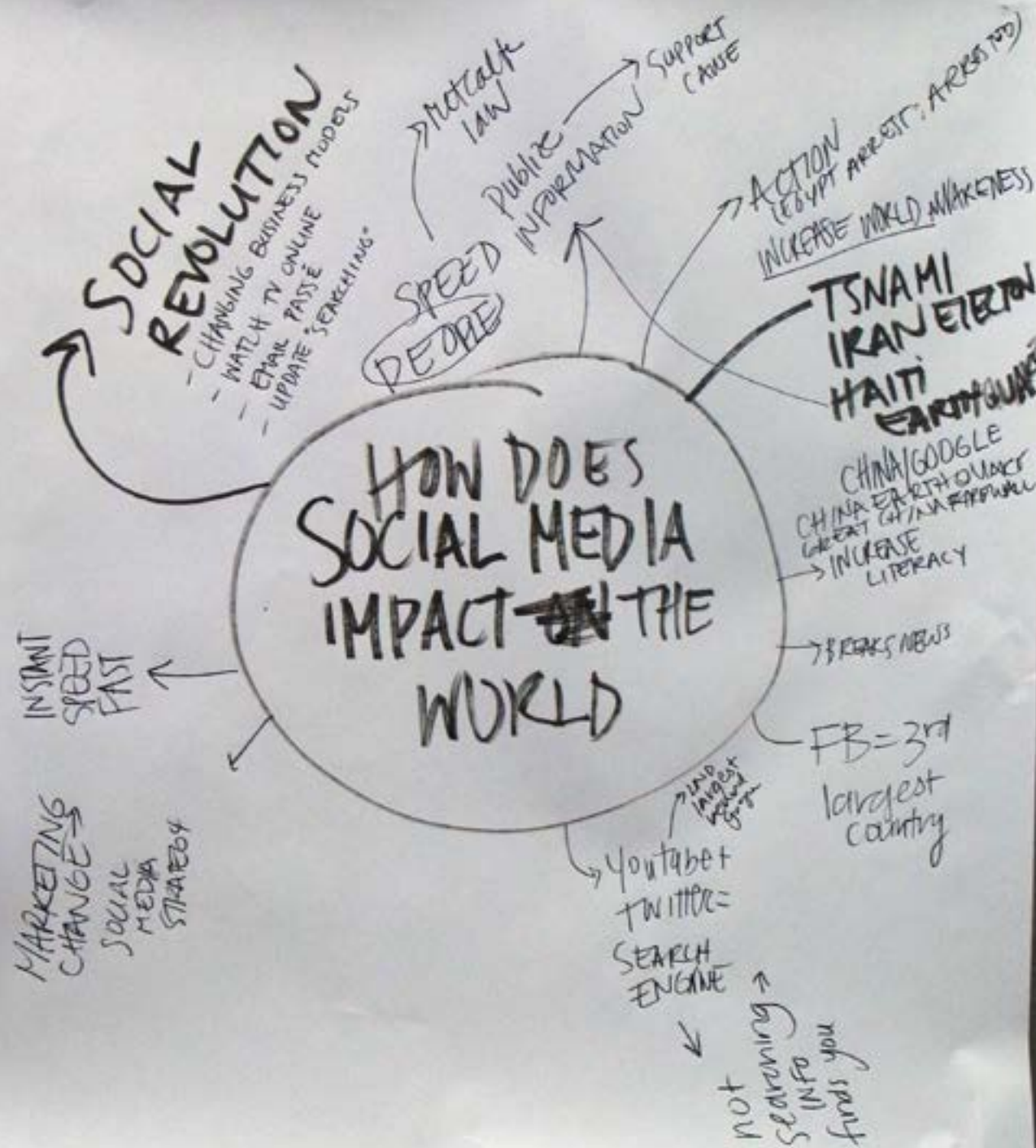
As a class we began by looking at the big issues that are pressing in society today. These topics ranged from sustainability, healthcare, new technology and customization. I began by focusing on new technology, specifically social media. Knowing that social media has changed my life, I set out to find out how it has changed society.

I began to focus on where social media was used to do something more than provide a meaningless update about your day. Unsurprisingly, the superficial use of social media is much easier to find than the beneficial use I was looking for. After lots of searching, I discovered, Ushahidi (ushahidi.com). Ushahidi became one of the most beneficial sites in guiding my direction of the project. Ushahidi uses crowdsourcing to report smaller incidents within a single larger event. It was first used to report incidents of violence and peace efforts in Kenya during the post-election fallout of 2008. Since then, Ushahidi has also been used to track numerous events including crime in Atlanta, the crisis in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, the Swine Flu outbreak of 2009 and countless elections.

Social media has been used to increase awareness about politics in the US as well as across the world. In 2009, Iranian citizens used Twitter, YouTube, blogs and Flickr to inform their fellow citizens about protests and people across the globe about the events going on in their country. Within just under three weeks, there were over two million posts on Twitter alone. Other sites that I found included PatientsLikeMe.org, which allows patients with similar diseases to connect.

Compared to superficial social media use, powerful examples of how social media has a beneficial impact on society are infrequent and not sustained. Events tracked on Ushahidi, for example, only occur every few months, if that often, and are only tracked for a relatively short period of time. After the earthquake in January 2010 in Haiti, Ushahidi was heavily used (100-400 posts per day) for about one week before it dwindled to under 50 posts a day after two weeks. After March, there was only the rare posting.

NEWS?
HOW DO PEOPLE GET NEWS?

GOOGLE "A NEWS FROM"

1. CNN
   — JOURNAL STATION
2. MSNBC
   — CABLE NIGHT CHANNEL
3. FOX NEWS
   — CABLE NEWS
4. GOOGLE NEWS
   — ONLINE NEWS AGGREGATOR
5. WIRED
   — MAGAZINE
6. YAHOO NEWS
   — ONLINE NEW AGGREGATOR
7. ABC NEWS
   — TV NEWS STATION
8. NEW YORK TIMES
   — NEWS PAPER
9. CNET NEWS
   — NEWS WEBSITE (TECH)
10. DRUDGE REPORT
    — ONLINE NEW AGGREGATOR

I continued to look at the relationship between traditional news and social media as news. Many traditional news corporations like MSNBC, CNN and the New York Times have been developing multimedia areas on their websites to compete with social media as blogs, Twitter and Facebook are becoming more popular places for news postings.

My research led me to accept that all social media postings are essentially a news form. No matter how silly your post on Facebook is about your great day, it is still a form of news. My early concept ideas grew from this observation that social media is news and the means to connect people through time and space.

CONNECTION MAP
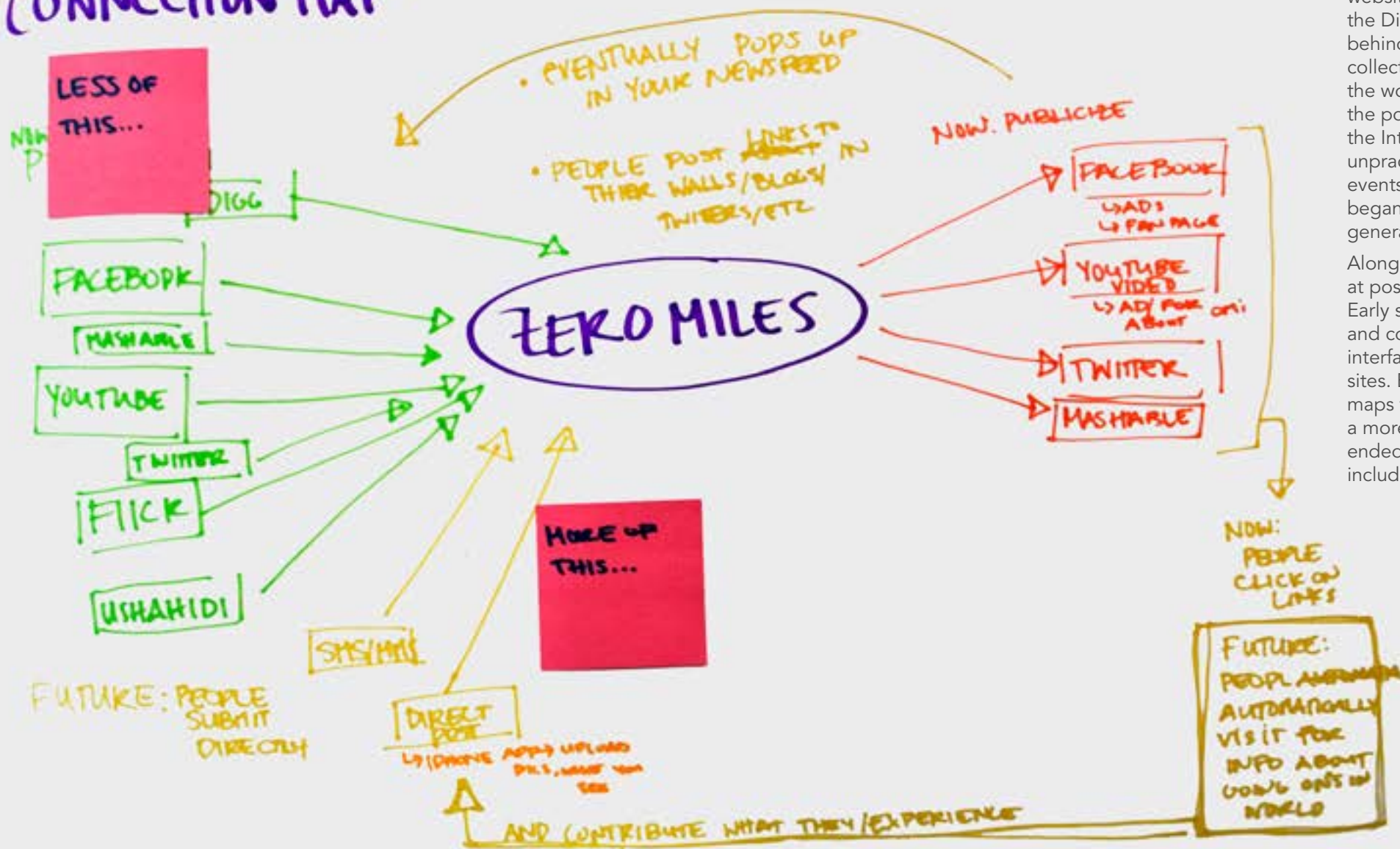
The earliest concepts involved creating a website, later named ZeroMiles: Removing the Distance Between People. The concept behind ZeroMiles was that it was a tool that collected data about what is going on in the world, specifically near you. Originally the posts were gathered from other sites on the Internet like Ushahidi but this became unpractical due to the lulls between "big" events. To try and lessen the lulls, ZeroMiles began to develop into a site with user-generated content.

Along with content development, I looked at possible brand identities and interfaces. Early stages include name ideas, tag lines and colors along with an in-depth study of interfaces for current news and social media sites. Early interface studies included using maps to show the locations of posts versus a more standard blog approach. The result ended up as a blog approach with filters that included location.
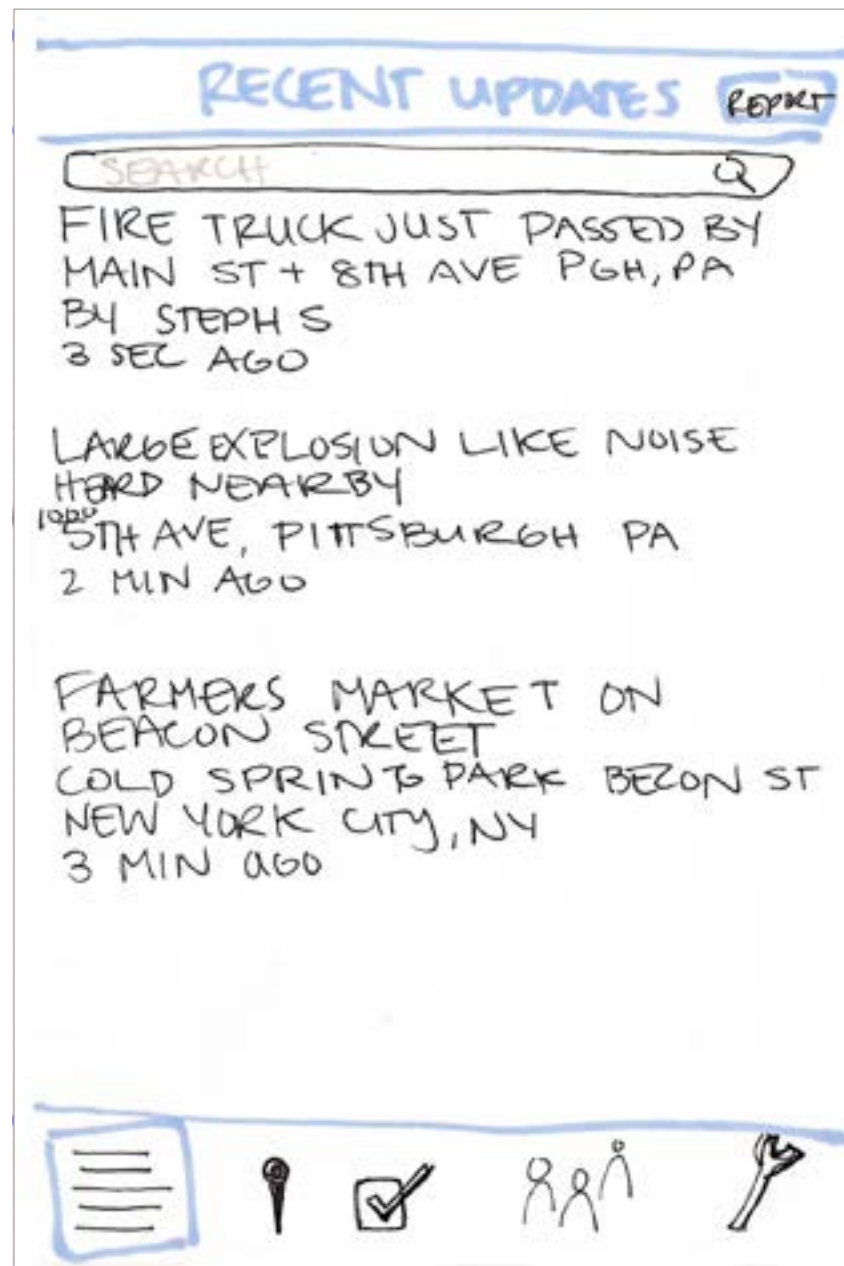
As the website became more about user-generated content, I concluded that it also needed to exist as a phone application to allow for on-the-go reporting. The focus of my project changed from being solely web based to encompassing a variety of social media phone apps. The next stages focused on information architecture and developing user-interface for the app.
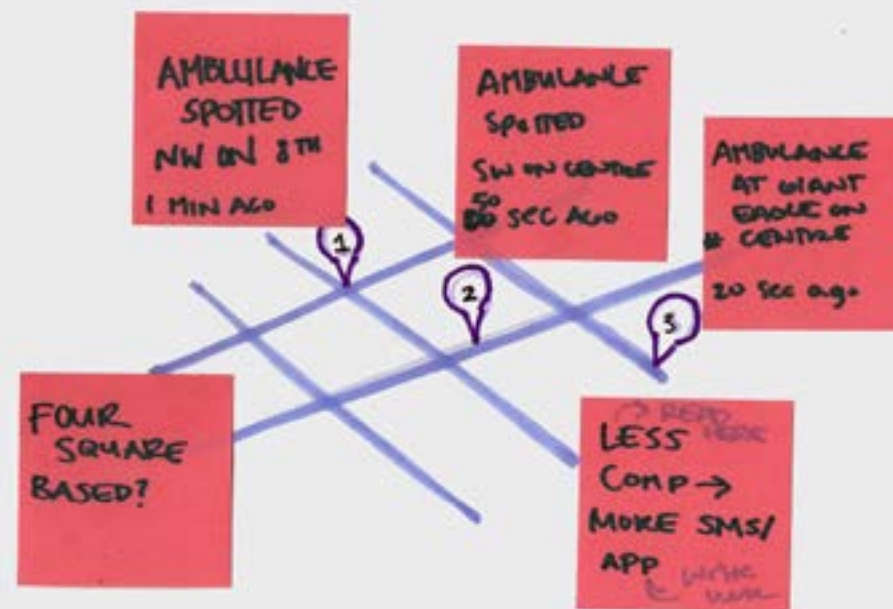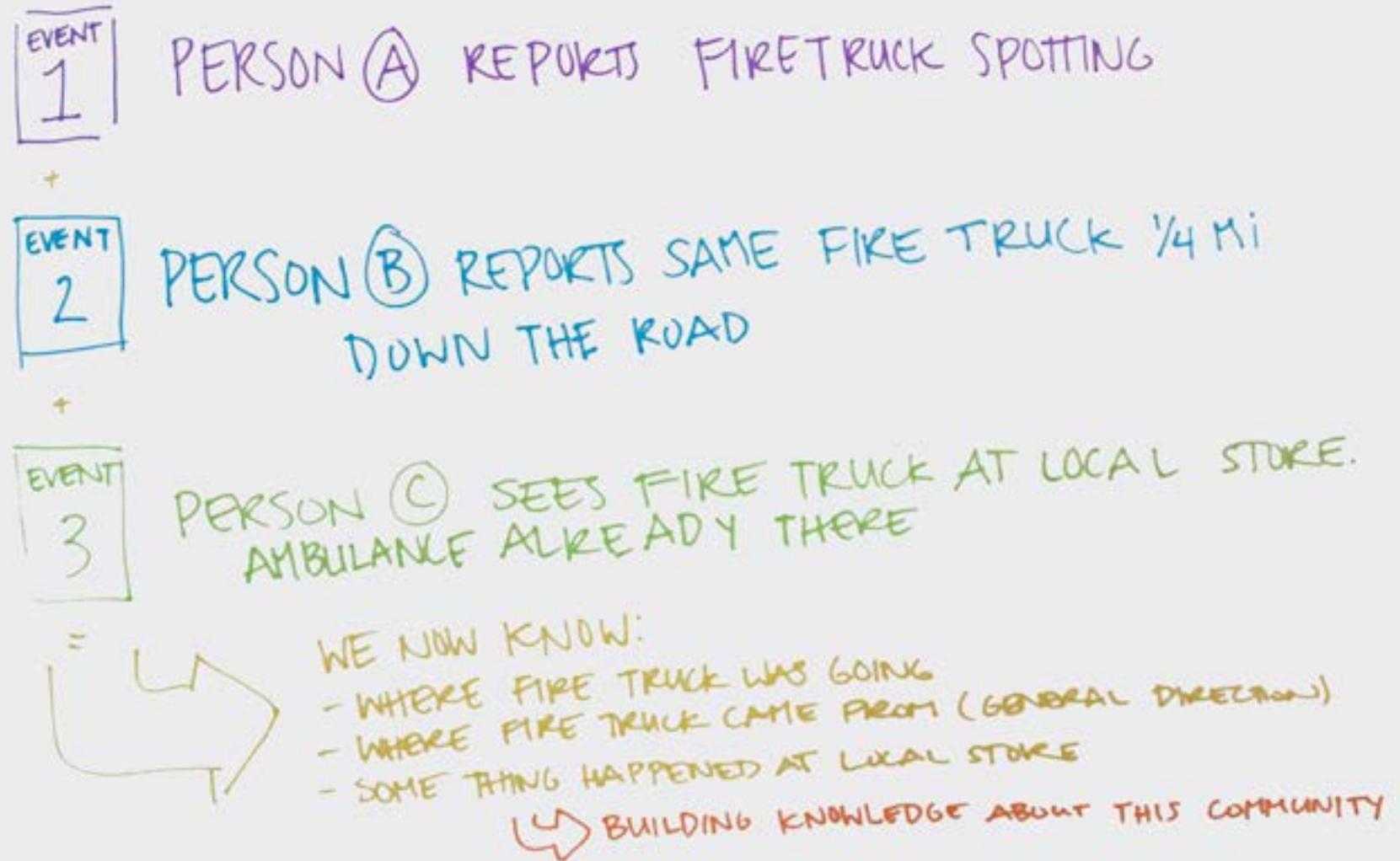
Using Flowella, an interface development tool from Nokia, I was able to mock up possible interfaces and then test them out electronically without worrying about the cosmetic appearance of the app.
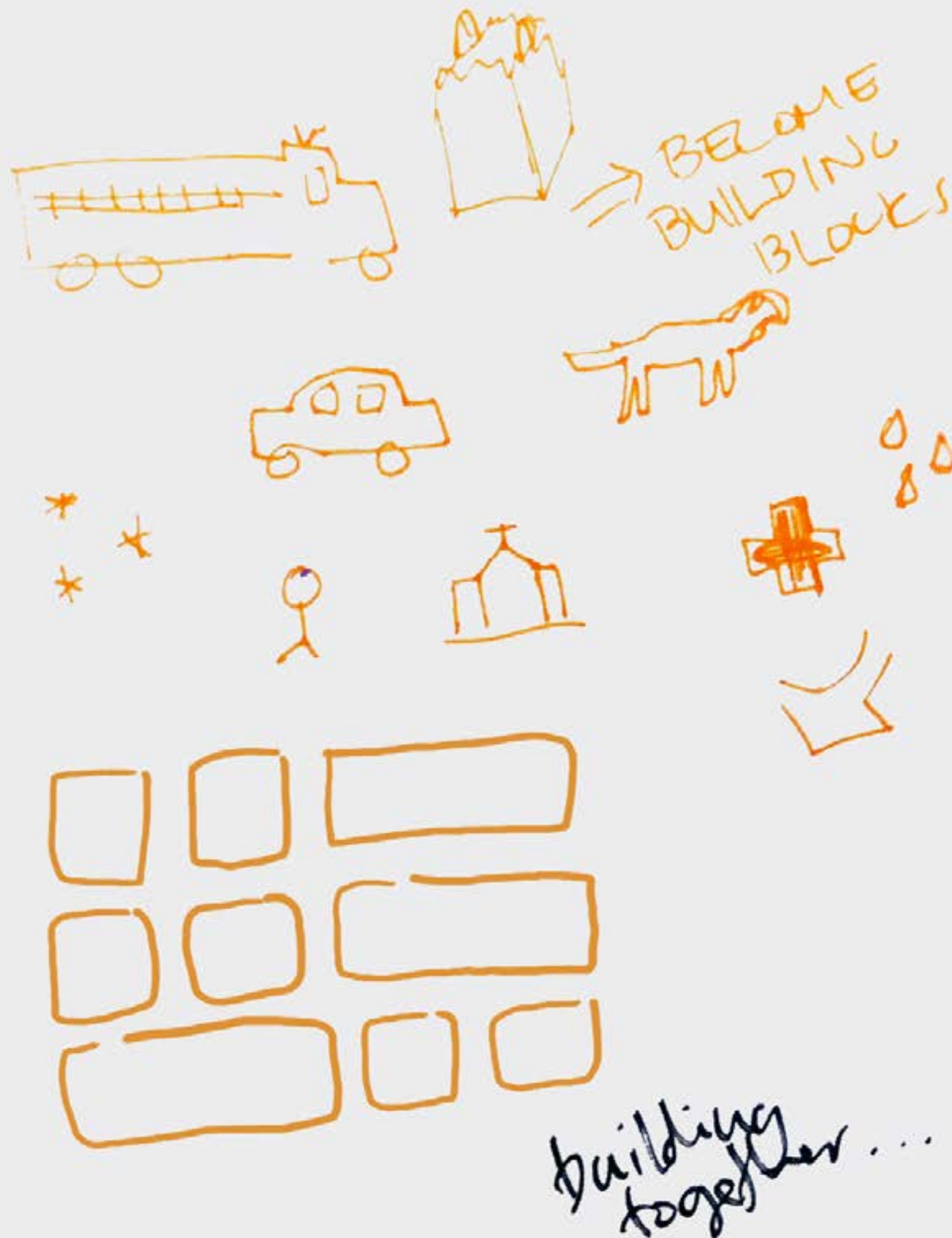
Through various personas and potential user journeys, I began, to storyboard the user's experience and interactions with the application. From storyboarding, I chose to re-incorporate the use of maps back into the application along with written reports.

From the storyboards, a modified concept arose—that people would post small events they witnessed instantly. Then as other people witnessed the same event, they would also post their observations. As the number of similar reports grows, the report became validated, similarly to crowdsourcing. The reports would allow a single, possibly small, event, to become relevant news for people to access. All the reports from a given area would create a larger image about that community.

For example, Person A reports seeing a fire truck driving. Person B reports seeing a fire truck driving three blocks away from where Person A saw it. Person C sees it around the corner stopped at the local store. There is also an ambulance there. Just from these three incidents, we know where the fire truck came from (general direction), where it went (the store) and that something happened at the store that required the dispatch of a fire truck and an ambulance. Just with three reports, we are already learning about the events of the community and building a database of knowledge.

After this point, ZeroMiles evolved into a tool that connected people with events (news) from around the globe. While any one of these events may not seem "newsworthy," together they tell a bigger story about a community.

EVENT 1 — PERSON Ⓐ REPORTS FIRETRUCK SPOTTING

EVENT 2 — PERSON Ⓑ REPORTS SAME FIRE TRUCK ¼ MI DOWN THE ROAD

EVENT 3 — PERSON Ⓒ SEES FIRE TRUCK AT LOCAL STORE. AMBULANCE ALREADY THERE

WE NOW KNOW:
- WHERE FIRE TRUCK WAS GOING
- WHERE FIRE TRUCK CAME FROM (GENERAL DIRECTION)
- SOMETHING HAPPENED AT LOCAL STORE
    ↳ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THIS COMMUNITY

AMBULANCE SPOTTED NW ON 8TH 1 MIN AGO

AMBULANCE SPOTTED SW ON CENTRE 50 80 SEC AGO

AMBULANCE AT GIANT EAGLE ON # CENTRE 20 SEC AGO

FOUR SQUARE BASED?

LESS COMP → MORE SMS/ APP

→ BECOME
BUILDING
BLOCKS

building
together...

With the focus on global and local communities, one of the sketches I had done for the landing screen of ZeroMiles changed the direction of the application. From the sketch arose the idea of "community blocks," a visual way of representing the recent reports in the community—locally or globally. This new concept led to renaming ZeroMiles to something that incorporated the local/global aspect of community blocks. After several brainstorming sessions, the final choice was Echo because it emphasized the connection between events. When users submit reports, they are given the option to "Echo" a previous report—create a connection between the two events.
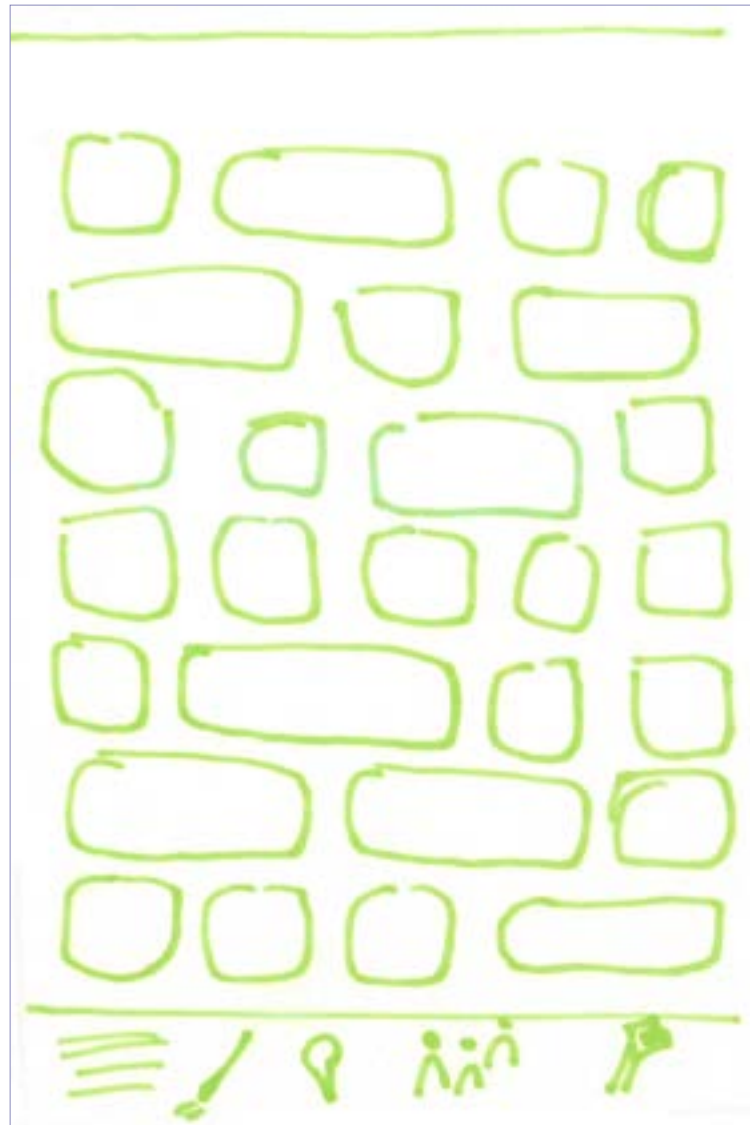
Left to right: Early sketches show connected events by increasing the block size. Later concepts included a search feature to find communities across the globe. The final version uses colors to represent types of posts: light report is a single report, dark blue posts have been "Echoed," and your posts are in orange.

START POINT
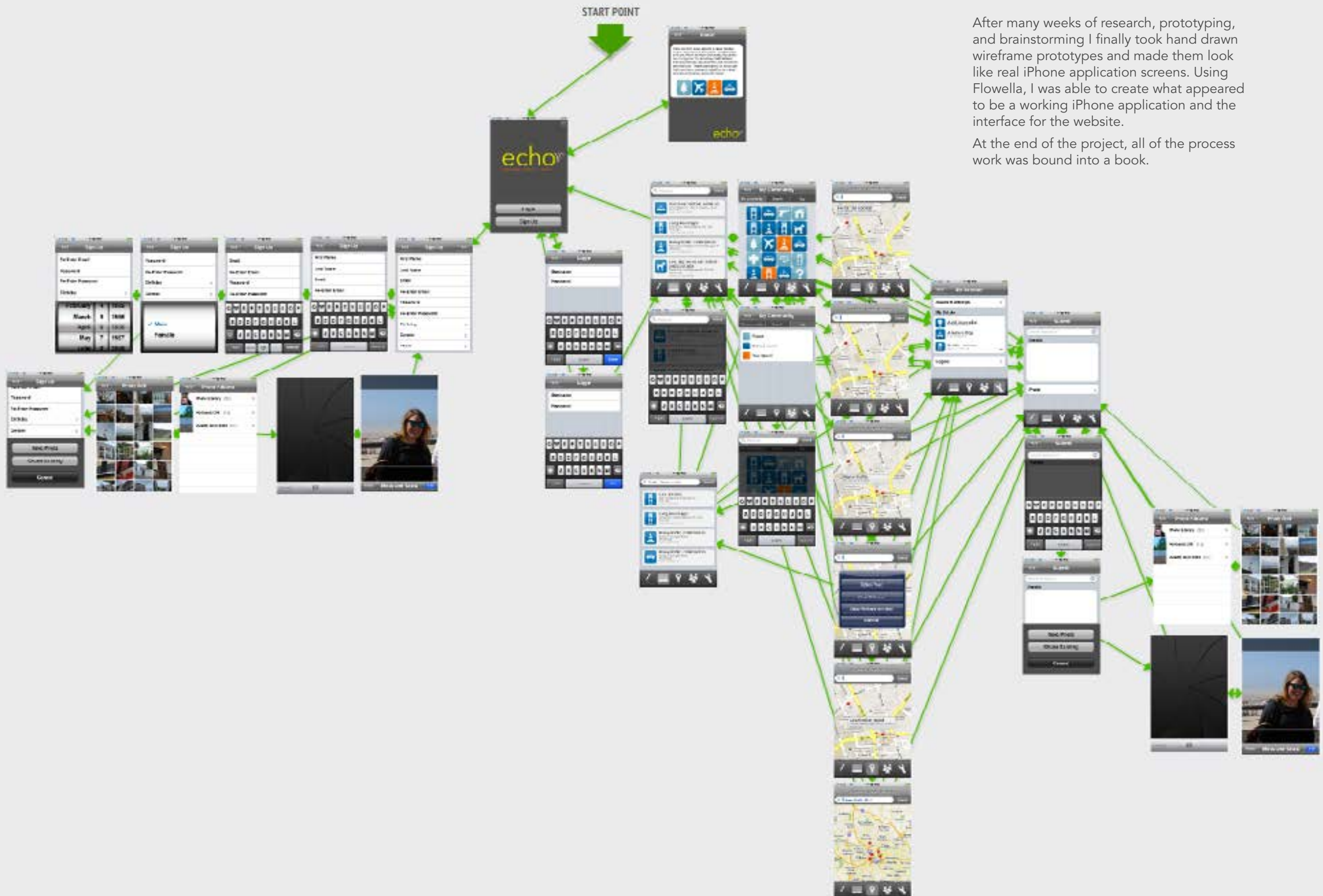
After many weeks of research, prototyping, and brainstorming I finally took hand drawn wireframe prototypes and made them look like real iPhone application screens. Using Flowella, I was able to create what appeared to be a working iPhone application and the interface for the website.

At the end of the project, all of the process work was bound into a book.