In the wild

A collaborative playground
for sharing patterns.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on improving how product designers work with design libraries. I looked into what they struggle with, and how their experience could be improved.

What is a design library?
They are often made up of foundations (like color and type), smaller components (buttons, switches, sliders), and larger ones (sidebars, dashboards). They help maintain consistency and reduce the need for repeated design work.

Manifesto

Good component documentation is **easy to read** and **understand**.
Good component documentation is **not overwhelming** to the reader.
Good component documentation provides **clear visual images**.
Good component documentation is **concise** and **focused**.
Good component documentation uses **consistent formatting** and **structure**.
Good component documentation includes **real-world usage examples**.
Good component documentation highlights **best practices** and **common pitfalls**.
Good component documentation is **easy to search** and **navigate**.
Good component documentation is **regularly updated** to reflect changes.

People, Places, and Things

Here are some objects and visual representations that inspired my work.

Design libraries are like gardens. Components are the plants, and without proper documentation, identifying them can feel like being lost in the wild.

Research

Understanding the problem

I used various research methods to deepen my understanding of giants and history in my project space.

Overview

I'm researching how product designers use design libraries in Figma, what they struggle with, and how their experience could be improved.

Questions

Who are the giants in my project space?
What are the best approaches for design libraries and documentation?
Which companies could I study to learn how they approach documentation?

UX methods

- Surveys
- 1:1 dicussions
- Co-design sessions
- Vocabulary list (50 words)
- Competitor analysis
- Writing material

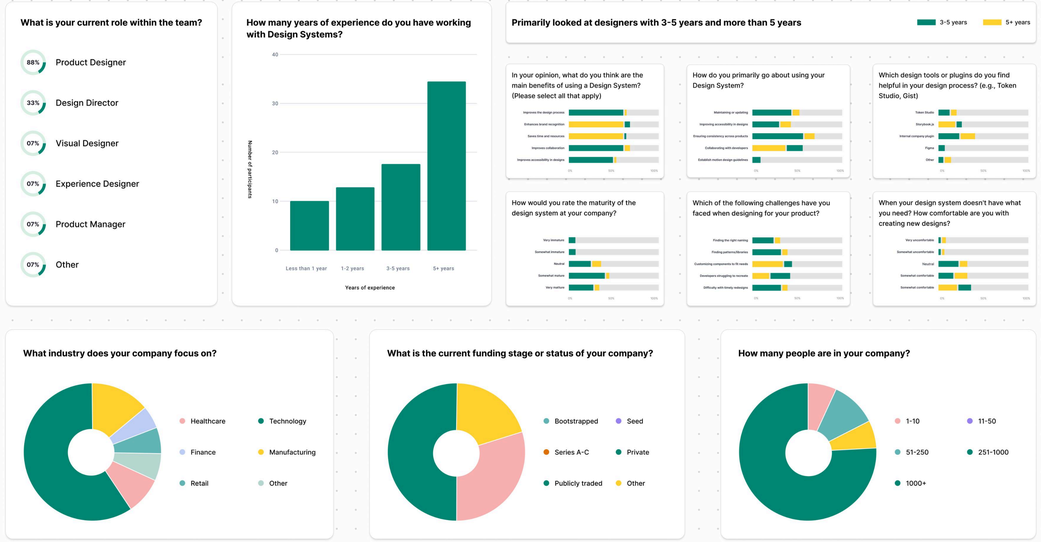
How designers use design systems?

Understanding how designers working at different sized companies use design systems

***What is a design system?** A design system is a set of reusable components, guidelines, and standards that help teams create consistent, scalable, and efficient user interfaces across products or platforms.

Difficulty in **finding components** for specific use cases.

Survey demographic [46 responses]



"It's frustrating when you can't find a component for what you need, which happens a lot. I just don't understand why our filter system is so primitive and it just never get prioritized to work on, it's been two years."

-Cindy N

"Initially faced challenges in locating the right components for specific use cases."

-Cindy N

"Having difficulty managing custom components that are build off TDS design system."

-Cindy N

Disconnect between components for product and core components.

"The main challenge I face is that for mobile, what the engineering team has built doesn't always align with the Spectrum design system. It tends to lean more towards desktop and web, so there are things you need to learn along the way."

-Joe M

"At SAP, we really had to just like work almost, you know, directly like in that product team to try and fix everything. And I'd always turn into a lot of like, like, not necessarily arguments."

-Lucas C

"Another challenge that we have is that the product itself has its own sort of variant of spectrum, it doesn't necessarily match spectrum one to one."

-Joe M

Confusion over which components can be implemented by engineers.

Yeah, I'll design it and then I'll show the designs to engineers and they'll be like, 'no, you can't do it.' It's only a couple of days, but I think the frustration is that we can't do a good experience sometimes because of all these constraints."

-Elias M

"So you'll see designers using components that are more or less don't have a 1:1 in engineering. And so the design team then has to come up with something else because the engineering team isn't able to pursue it."

-Elias M

"Our engineering team told us we can't implement all the new components, colors, or icons. So we had to revert our designs back to Spectrum 1, which was frustrating."

-Elias M

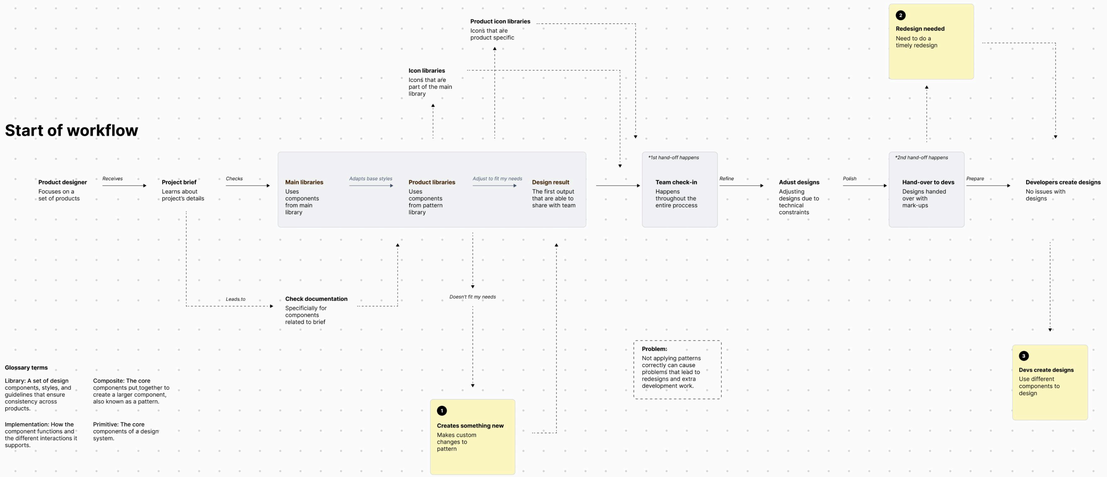
How designers at large companies use libraries?

Mapping out designers workflow to pinpoint struggles with utilizing component libraries

***What is a pattern library?** Similar to a design system, a pattern library is a set of reusable UI components and patterns that help teams create consistent, scalable interfaces for a group of similar products.

*The following map was created through collaborative sessions with designers who have 5+ years of experience at large companies (1,000+ employees).

Start of workflow



*Matrix of different companies I looked into

COMPANY	COST	BACKLOG	AI	EASE OF USE	BEST FOR	COMMENTS	TIMELINE VIEW	REPORTS	INEGRATION OPTIONS
FIGMA	Free and paid plans (starting at $12/editor/month)	No (Focused on design and prototyping tasks)	Yes (AI for design suggestions and automation)	Easy (intuitive design interface)	Design teams working on UI/UX projects	Yes (Comment on design files)	No (Focused on design and prototyping)	No (Focused on design collaboration)	Broad integrations (Jira, Slack, Notion)
AIRTABLE	Free and paid plans (starting at $10/user/month)	Yes (Customizable tables for backlog management)	Yes (AI-powered automation and data processing)	Moderate (requires setup for complex workflows)	Teams needing structured data management	Yes (Comment on records)	Yes (Timeline and Gantt views)	Yes (Custom reports with data)	Wide integrations (Zapier, Slack, Jira)
JIRA	Paid plans (starting at $7.75/user/month)	Yes (Designed for backlog tracking)	Yes (AI-powered insights and recommendations)	Moderate (designed for Agile but customizable)	Software and Agile development teams	Yes (Supports comments on issues)	Yes (Roadmaps and sprint timelines)	Yes (Advanced reporting and analytics)	Broad integrations (Bitbucket, Confluence)
TRELLO	Free and paid plans (starting at $5/user/month)	No (Kanban-focused, limited backlog features)	No (Does not include AI capabilities)	Very Easy (simple drag-and-drop UI)	Small teams needing simple task tracking	Yes (Comment on cards)	No (Focused on task boards)	No (Limited to task tracking)	Google Drive, Slack, others via Power-Ups
ASANA	Free and paid plans (starting at $10.99/user/month)	Yes (Supports task history and reference)	Yes (AI task suggestions and workflow optimization)	Easy (intuitive UI with templates)	Cross-functional team collaboration	Yes (Comment on tasks and projects)	Yes (Timeline view for tasks)	Yes (Basic reporting features)	Slack, Google Drive, Microsoft 365
AZURE	Paid plans (starting at $6/user/month)	Yes (Backlog management for Agile workflows)	Yes (AI for DevOps automation and code analysis)	Moderate (technical for developers)	Development teams using Microsoft stack	Yes (Comments on work items)	Yes (Sprint timelines and roadmaps)	Yes (Built-in analytics and reports)	Microsoft tools, GitHub, Jenkins
NOTION	Free and paid plans (starting at $8/user/month)	No (Primarily for documentation and tasks)	Yes (AI for content recommendations and templates)	Moderate (requires setup for optimal use)	Teams combining docs and project workflows	Yes (Comment on documents and tasks)	No (Timeline features are limited)	No (Focused on documentation)	Wide integrations (Zapier, Slack, Jira)
MONDAY	Paid plans (starting at $8/user/month)	Yes (Supports task history and reference)	Yes (AI automation and workflow suggestions)	Easy (customizable UI, ready-to-use templates)	Teams requiring flexibility and automation	Yes (Comment on boards and tasks)	Yes (Timeline and Gantt views)	Yes (Customizable reports)	Extensive integrations (Slack, Zoom, GitHub)
GITLAB	Free and paid plans (starting at $19/user/month)	Yes (Supports backlog and issue tracking)	Yes (AI-assisted code suggestions and reviews)	Moderate (technical setup required)	Development teams managing code and pipelines	Yes (Supports comments on issues and merge requests)	Yes (Milestones and roadmap views)	Yes (Built-in CI/CD pipeline and code reports)	Broad integrations (Jira, Slack, Kubernetes)

Problem

Identifying the core Issue

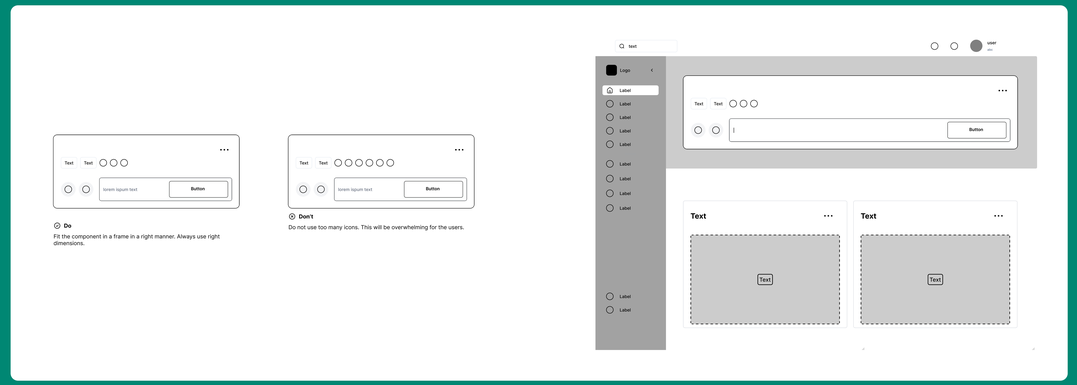
Product designers creating **components that don't adhere** to their system, often **leads to issues** with developer hand-off.

Ideations

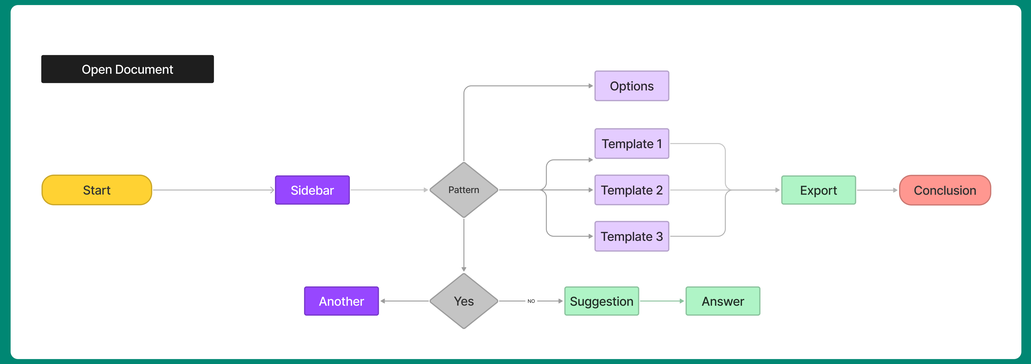
Exploring possible solutions

Product designers creating **components that don’t adhere** to their system, often **leads to issues** with developer hand-off.

Sketches



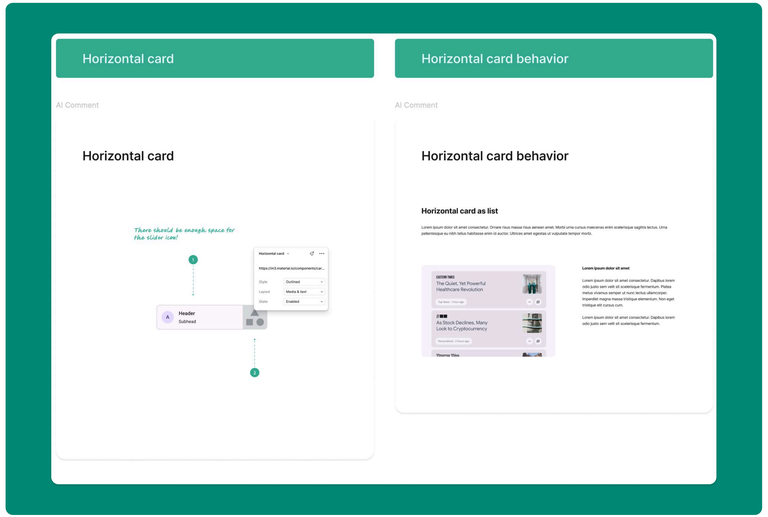
User flow



Design Proposal

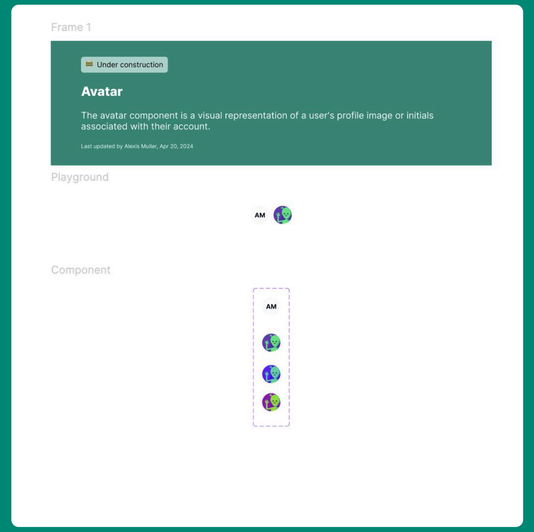
A vision for the solution

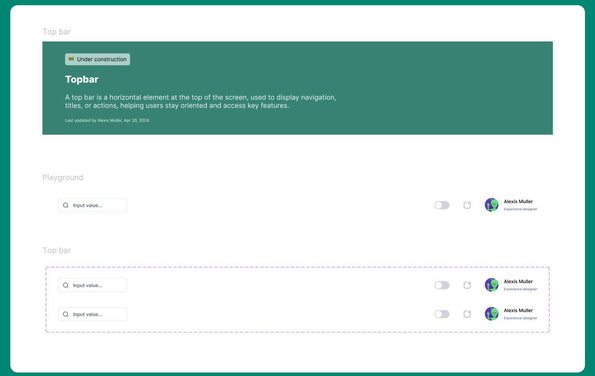
Initial plugin idea



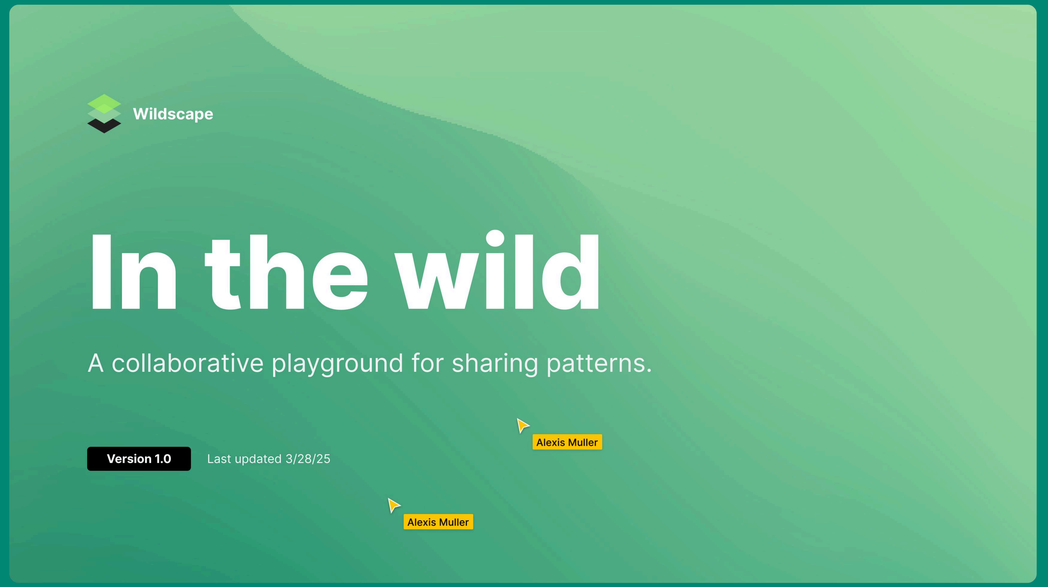
A collaborative **Figma playground** where designers share actual use cases of **components in their products**.

Components & their Variants

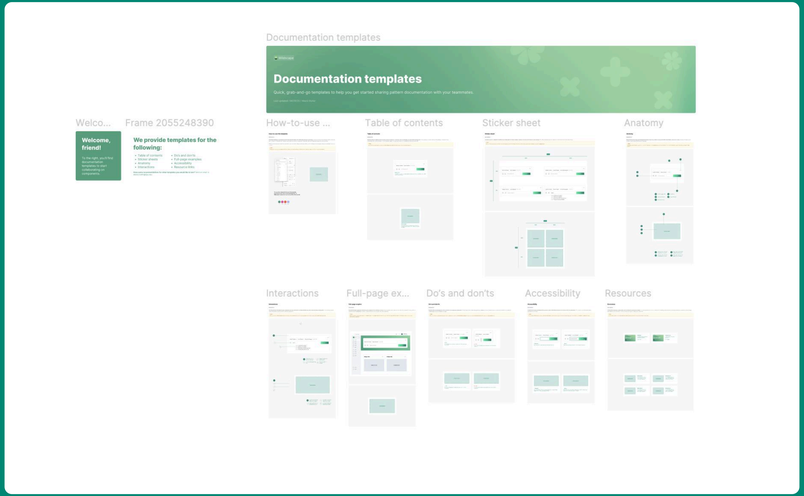




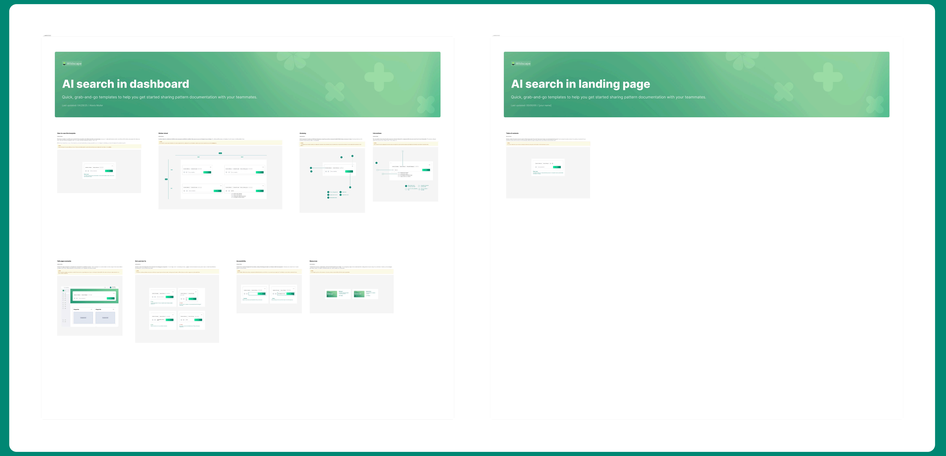
Thumbnails



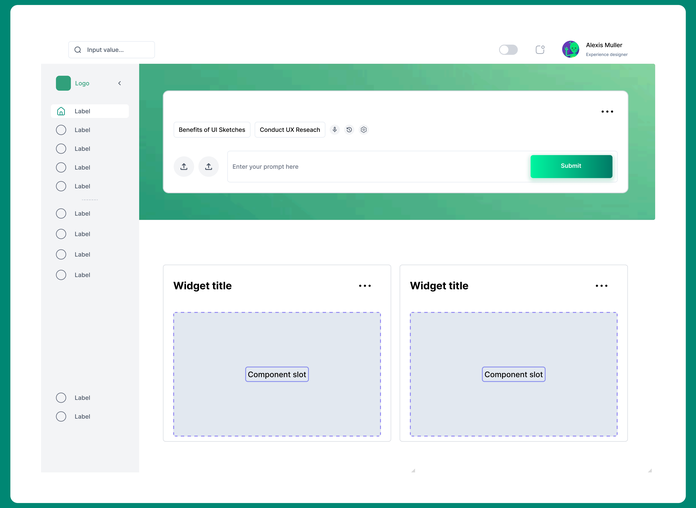
Documentation templates



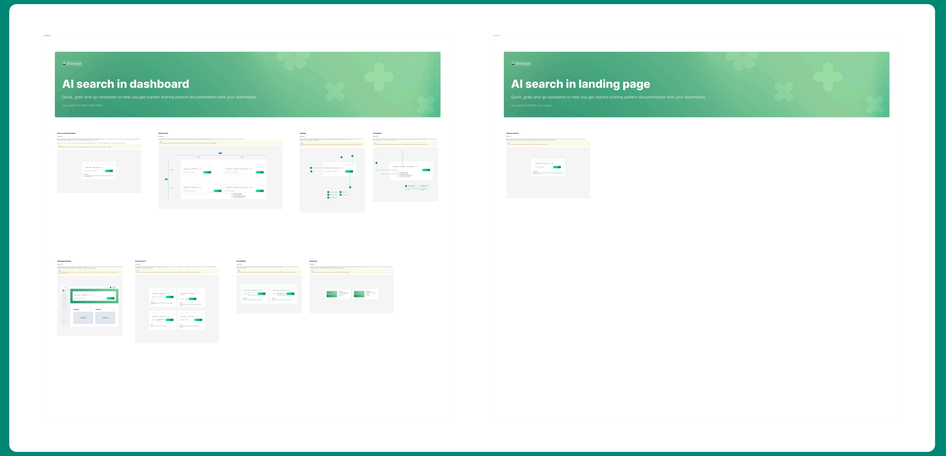
Inserted component examples



Full page Examples



Inserted component examples

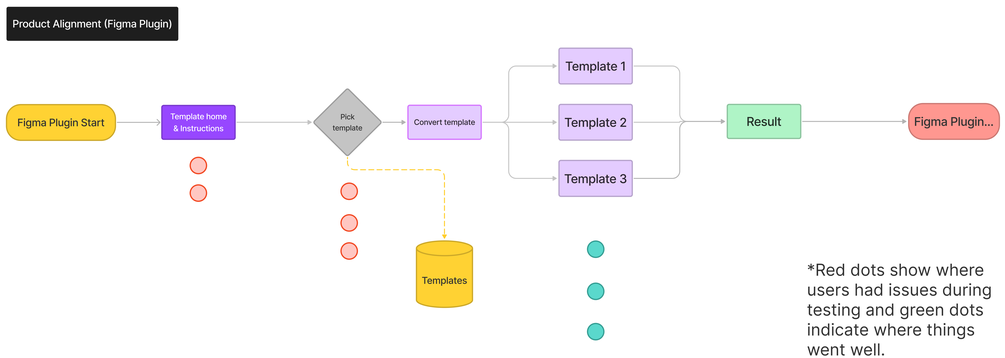


Testing

Validating the approach

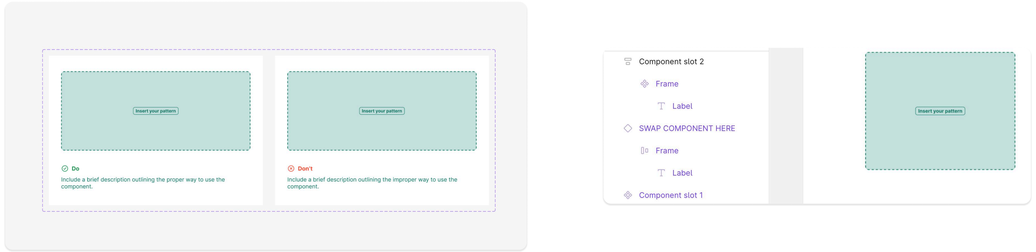
To evaluate how effectively the **proposed solution helps designers find**, understand, and use components within Figma, **and to validate that the design decisions actually solve** the identified user problems.

User flow (updated)



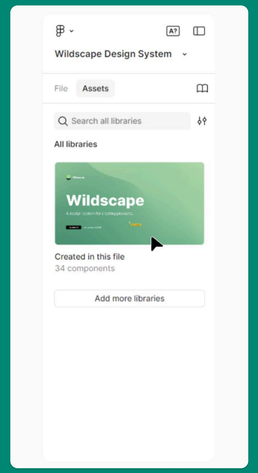
*Red dots show where users had issues during testing and green dots indicate where things went well.

Important things to consider

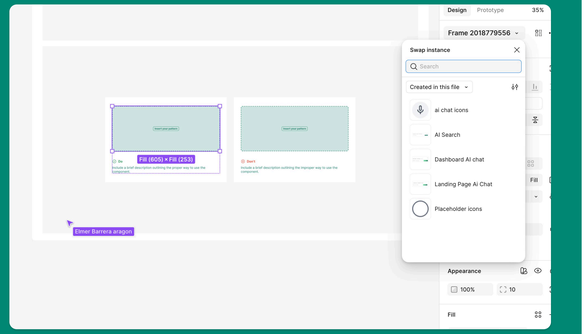


Library set-up guidance

Adding Library in Figma file



Swapping instances



Conclusion

Reflecting on the journey

I loved learning about **product designers challenges** at large companies when working with design libraries, and how a **fun**, **simple**, **non-AI solution** could help them.

Next Steps

- Additional user testing to continue improving it.
- Componentize templates and add properties for further customization.
- Make it available on the Figma Community so designers can use it.
- Create a feedback form where designers can contribute back to it.

Glossary Terms

Governance: The framework and processes established to guide, standardize, and manage the evolution and usage of the design system across the organization.

Component: A reusable and modular building block used in design and development to create a consistent and efficient user interface.

Pattern: A repeatable and reusable solution to address common design problems.

Token: A value that represents a design attribute, such as color or typography, within a design systems.

Guidelines: Suggestions and rules about how to best use the design system.

UI Kit: A set of pre-designed components that designers can use to build mockups.

Playground: A sandbox environment where developers and designers can experiment with and test components.

Properties: Attributes that allow the modification of components to create variations.

Foundations: A core set of guidelines

List of Sources

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