

Boston App Lab - September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
Open Web, Art, and the Civic Realm

Tuesday, September 30, 2014, at the BSA Space: The open web offers opportunities for enriching experiences at the intersection of art, public, and place. For civic technologists, art in public places is an untapped avenue for impactful citizen engagement. What collaborative possibilities can be unlocked – and “incubated” -- by bringing together the arts and civic web communities to weave a richer social fabric?

**Chief “Incubators”:**

Lyre Calliope: Code for Boston’s Community lead and contributor to the Mozilla project. Before moving to Boston, Lyre helped co-found C4 Atlanta, a non-profit organization based in his hometown that helps arts entrepreneurs build successful artistic careers.

Kawandeeep Virdee is a co-founder and open web technologist at New American Public Art (NAPA), an interdisciplinary design-build firm that brings interactive art into public spaces.

Kawandeeep and Lyre: Setting the stage for the workshop

Creative space for hackers, artists and citizen expression: What does it look like?  
What and where are the opportunities?

- **Opening comments by Ron Mallis**

The goal of the Lab and this session is to come together over new projects and collaborations and come up with things that bring together the open web, art and the civic realm.

- **Kawandeeep discusses his work and New American Public Art:**

Kawandeeep talked about art he has been working on over the last few years: we will use these ideas as inspiration for tonight’s workshop. He is a partner in New American Public Art, which was launched a few years ago with the goal of introducing works into the public space that are free and interactive. He and his colleagues viewed this undertaking as opportunity to make cities more exciting and more engaging.

Kawandeeep’s work has focused on “Relational Aesthetics”: social experiences and social interactions as a medium for art. When he first heard about this type of art, he was skeptical. He referenced one example: an artist in a gallery cooking food. He points out that the way to look at and experience these situations is that the food and the performance of cooking were not the intended art. Instead, the art was the moments of people eating and interacting together. The idea was to curate social situations and together people find meaning and art in the moment.

His goal is to make work that is interactive so people can be engaged and create meaning together. This medium and idea works perfectly in public art.

A good example of these ideas is a project from Kawandeeep and Jason Edward Davis: *PDX I Love You*, where people were invited to put hearts all around the city and take photos. By inviting people to do this, people were essentially given permission to put up the hearts. People became really engaged and sent in photos of their work to Kawandeeep and Jason. These kinds of pieces help people see and engage with their environment in a new way. When they see other people doing it as well, then they engage together causing people to see the city in new way and meet people.

Additional examples of NAPA's work can be found on their website: [NAPA.com](http://NAPA.com)

This interactive art gives audiences meaning, interactivity, creativity, and agency -- the agency to be expressive. If you give people permission to have fun in public, they will do so, and they love it. This kind of art, by bringing people together, makes a space more welcoming and more expressive.

Since the public is whoever can get to these pieces, Kawandeeep started to look at the browser as a canvas, with the idea that if you make a collaborative screen, then wherever you are in the world you can engage with it. Using this kind of technology can then be utilized in public various ways, such as projecting onto buildings.  
([prettydots.com](http://prettydots.com))

We can create online commons inspired by successful public spaces: places that are public, welcoming, and bring people together. There can also be the additional level of anonymity, which can be powerful. In [danceydots.com](http://danceydots.com) people can click around and play sounds as a little dot. If we are both on the site, I can see your dot and you can see mine. I can hear your's and you can hear mine. But we can't see each other. So this little dot represents a person. And maybe you follow me around, or I do the opposite of what you do, but we notice each other and respond to each other. There is a surprising effect in this, in noticing and responding to each other. It feels oddly intimate, but it is a safe space. That is a powerful and unintuitive effect.

Kawandeeep has also started working on cell phone and sound work, and prototyped this, by getting movement from a website and converting it into sound (<http://cell-flight.com>). A physical thing being changed by a phone can impact public sculpture in a huge way. The open web is creating standards for people to build things that work on many platforms, and make it easier to collaborate. This powerful technology can be used with public art to create works that allow people to "touch" across public space, across the internet, and across the digital and physical. They can communicate and know each other and create together.

This leads to many exciting possibilities: think about things that seem fixed but are not:

- Concert: sound can come from your phone instead of the stage. Invert the concert model.
- Think about going into Times Square, where everything is controlled by ad companies, and ways in which we could go into these spaces and change things.

We can widen the commons and make it more welcoming. We can design new ways for people to engage with public spaces.

- **Lyre presents on his work and Code for Boston:**

Lyre is motivated by an activist mentality and by social justice, focusing on how we make the world a better place. How do we organize for collective action? Lyre has a background in technology, and previously lived in Atlanta where he cofounded C4 Atlanta. He wanted to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century arts organization that fused arts and tech with a focus on helping artists create sustainable careers through the region.

Change the world: start with arts and culture. This is the grassroots level where you can have a systemic impact. It's hard to start an organization and it's really hard to start, create, and sustain collaborations between organizations without appropriate legal and technical infrastructure. With that in mind Lyre, focused on this lack of infrastructure and went back to tech to address these types of problems.

Since Lyre moved to Boston he has been involved in Code for Boston ([codeforboston.org](http://codeforboston.org)). Code for Boston meets every Tuesday evening to create apps, explore data, and work with communities to solve problems using technology. Code for Boston is part of a larger organization called "Code for America" which has 70 "brigades" around the world now. Tens of thousands of civic technologists are working within the civic innovation space to figure out how to benefit their communities. They want to make it useful for communities to solve problems for themselves using the tools Code for America has created in collaboration with them, instead of using a "top down" approach to problem solving.

Examples of the works:

- MBTA Alerts. A web page that uses MBTA data, taken over by Code for Boston to give people current updates on the status of the trains in Boston.
- Map projects: Lyre was originally working on a project called Adopt a Hydrant, with the idea that if it snows, fire hydrants are covered in snow, and we as a community can deputize the public to scoop out fire hydrants so the state doesn't have too. It took the form of a map, and later on there were other applications. Code for Boston realized they were making the same type of map application over and over and that they could generalize it, and make it easy to deploy for anyone who needs a map. They are now building a "Finda" platform, a super-simple way to create an app using geo special information.

At Code for Boston the rules for projects are that they must be open source, publicly available, and built for reuse so anyone across the world can reuse the applications we create.

Making things is the spirit of the creative nights at Code for Boston, using open media data and programming languages. In the future they hope to have hardware projects, and be able to program physical objects to do things. One of the things that inspired Lyre to have this discussion tonight is how does Code for Boston step up their game in multiple dimensions? As a civic technology organization they have been building up a group of technologists, and scores of organizations have been getting into this civic tech space to solve problems. If the need is to go out into communities, start democratizing this and bring people into the process of solving problems together, then what is the next step?

- **Intro to the Workshop:**

Questions to keep in mind:

- How do we bridge the tech capacity that all this cutting edge technology gives us?  
Public art is an amazing context for civic action.
- Why are we doing these things? Why art and the civic realm? As we go forward understand the why we are doing this.

Example:

Matt Rouser has created a project with Code for Boston to have an impact on gentrification around Boston by bringing together data and modeling of systems to inform policy and the public. This project started as a collaborative document, then Matt took over and created a mapping application that shows gentrification of Boston in a time lapse. Creative, beautiful, educational, and though provoking.

How do we use this project to engage the public? What if this webpage isn't the only place to represent it? What if we went to places and we project the data on the buildings in the places that are experiencing gentrification? How else can we combine data and art?

- **Discussion:**

Is this project about gentrification art? Is it design, why is this art?

It doesn't matter if this is considered by some to be or not be "art." We want to get people to play with stuff and learn, and they can see and learn from this. That is art and it is important.

One of the ways in which this is a aspect of art has to do with its impact on building

connections and community: often in public spaces, younger people are sitting together looking at their cell phones. How do you make that into a positive?

One reason these people might sitting in one space on their cell phones is they are looking for information together or faster. Code for Boston could grab that information and put it out there in a bigger place.

Back to the questions what is the interrelationship between the open web, civic realm, and public art? What does it mean to “humanize the built environment and invigorate public spaces”?

Can we consider art a problem solver?

We can say that art is used as a way of looking at resolving issues of a public space.

Look at what makes a great public space, what are the good elements of that? Possibly, that it has a reason, a way to interact, an excuse to talk to a stranger or engage with a group that is different from you. Great public spaces have that sense of an event, a time component and allow you to talk to people you wouldn’t normally talk to.

Let’s use those as a list of desired outcomes which in turn begins to constitute a framework.

- **Workshop and results**

Break into small groups and workshop, with these ideas and questions in mind. Try and emerge with a project idea of what the next steps could look like.

- **Group Discussions:**

*Group One:*

How do we share public space? What do people use space for, and how we monitor that? Consider places like laundromats that have a focus but don’t create any real interaction. What if you could pay for someone’s laundry? Or to expand, pay for a parking space for someone, or reserve it? That allows you to interact with someone in a pay it forward kind of way. What if there was an easy way to do that –create things that allow you to interact with others positively? How do we create advantages for each other?

But where is the art?

How do you bring a group of people together and let them interact and create that, with no incentive. You can just pay for anyone’s coffee at anytime.

When non-artists think of art, they think of art that looks like other art. When artists

think of art they try to make something new – this could be the beginning of that something new.

What if you buy coffee for someone you get special cups to include the art?

*Group Two:*

Talked about Downtown Crossing and taking empty storefronts and the demographics of the area - how do we bring people together and get their buy in for something artistic? One idea we talked about was having and creating a “Me” avatar. People then interact with others both digitally and then if they wanted, physically. Creating a larger digital fabric for interactions.

Also talked about the idea that for people to feel welcome, we need to represent the demographics coming in and out – the message of what the community is in a way that ties into the different generations uses of technology. Another idea was having a changing digital mural that people can interact with. Or a traditional mural that is done by the community and centered on the community members, but you can go to a website to see a more interactive version of it. Once you are in the space, it pulls up an image and you can just add to it, along with others, creating your own additions to, and interactions within the mural.

*Group Three:*

Discussed the idea of aggregating information from Facebook or Twitter, or tags that people are using (trending words) and having that relate to emotion. Then changing that emotion to an emoticon that you can put on a building or in a public space. That building would represent the mood of that city.

Additionally discussed one of the first questions asked as this was being discussed...has this been done before, and how do you collect the data and what is the opportunity afterward for people to make art or create something or do something about it.

*Group Four:*

Good public art either brings you to a space or keeps you in a space. What if the art came to you? What if your phone pinged, if you were near an art piece or experience or even something that you could have a meditative experience on? Then they would have the option and the ability to share that moment and taking a photo and hashtag it #artfoundme. Could be used simply with open sourced hardware and used in a mobile platform for any city.

For the person experiencing this, what is exciting is that, with many of us glued to our phones, this experience of the art finding you encourages you to come out of your

phone and witness other things surrounding you right now. Activate a new part of your brain, allow you to use the tech you were using before to experience the natural world or the artistic experience, or both. Not in opposition to technology, but compatible with technology.

*Group Five:*

Conversation about different things – including the issue of what is art. Unsurprisingly, we didn't resolve it. We talked about a couple projects, like one that was a solar power fence, giant tree fences that collect solar energy that give some of it back. Being tied by what Kawan was presenting and how people could access it.

We could use these as jumping off point. What if you saw those in Harvard yard, you wouldn't sit on your phone...you'd be instagramming it and running around on your phone with it. Bring it to Boston and see what could happen. Then put it on the web!

I heard that "what is art" and can it be defined, I think that is a bad start. We don't know what art is right now, and the only one who can tell what art is, is time, and even so art is subjective. We should be open. Coding has a lot of possibilities to interact or be integrated with art.

• **Post-script**

*This was a particularly rich, productive, contentious Lab session, and want to hear more – not only from those who were at the session, but from those who, reading these notes, are "inspired" to weigh in with their reactions, additional ideas, etc.*

*To that end, which of the ideas that emerged from the individual groups resonated with you? How would you envision a next step or series of next steps? What additional resources would you need? We're looking to generate updates – not only on behalf of the Lab, but on behalf of the ideas themselves, so that they eventually begin to take root and are implemented as important new projects in and for public spaces. I truly hope we can keep the conversation going – and generate the kinds of actions that will bring one or more of these projects to life.*

*Thanks.*

*Ron*

