Notes From Workshop #27:
Facing History: Enriching Boston's Historic Places Through Art

JULY 27, 2016
FROM THE WORKSHOP ANNOUNCEMENT:

For the last 50+ years, Historic Boston, Inc., has been devoted to restoring and repositioning much of the historic fabric of Boston’s neighborhoods. Overseeing a remarkable portfolio of sites ranging from the Eliot Burying Ground in Roxbury to the Everett Square Theatre, the organization’s mission goes far beyond one of maintenance to one of activation and enlivening the urban environment. Working with BostonAPP/Lab, HBI is now eager to engage artists in opening up new perspectives on some of the elements of this fabric:

- How might public artists respond to one or another of the places and spaces within this portfolio?
- Through deployment of whatever technologies or disciplines are deemed appropriate, how might artists open up new perspectives on Boston’s history and on the physical – and the related social – components of that history?
- How might artists provoke a kind of “reimagining” of one of Boston’s historic sites?
- How, in fact, does activation through art contribute to a broader and deeper definition of preservation?
- How, and with what resources, can the ideas emerging from the workshop begin to be implemented?

This workshop first introduced participants to the shape and scope of Historic Boston, with a more in-depth examination of several specific sites. For the major part of the workshop, participants were given the opportunity to brainstorm responses to these sites – via the questions posed above as well as questions that haven’t yet been asked! Leading the discussion was Kathy Kottaridis, executive director of HBI.

Kathy began with an overview of Historic Boston’s portfolio, underscoring the organization’s role as a developer while promoting vibrancy in its preservation of historic places. HBI will, for example, renovate a place and then sell it to investors, with stipulations. Part of that vibrancy comes about through telling the story behind the place while saving it. Why was it brought back? And in bringing it back, what does it mean to “work with art” in the context of historic structures/places? What role can art plan in “extruding” history from a place?

With participants divided into three groups, much of the workshop focused on generating responses to these questions. The results follow. We will be digging into this list, hoping to identify short-, medium-, and long-term possibilities as well as sources of support. We invite readers to respond to this list with comments, additional ideas, recommendations for specific sites, etc. Drop a line to...
Meaning Thru Art/Architecture/Place

How can art/expression reveal more about what happened here and when?

How can people engage more fully with places through various art media?

Table 1

- Artists engaging with spaces
  - Call to artists within community to provide something temporary to evoke/engage with identify/history of spaces
  - Art scavenger hunt, a la Pokemon Go (virtual/dynamic media; augmented reality
    - Some sort of digital platform based on personal interests/place/location
    - Co-working maker spaces as way to repurpose spaces
    - Interactive exhibits that engage people
  - Film viewer, a la “ViewMaster,” to include historic images
- All installations should be accessible to all
  - Temporary vs. permanent
• Call to artists inspired by some aspect of a place’s history
• Permanent art that stays relevant, that doesn’t blend into the background
• Digital art that isn’t broken after a while
• Develop Boston historic app that lets you overlay information

Table 2
• “Enriching”: who is enriched, and how?
  o Homesteading
  o Transitional artists’ residences
  o Programming: live events
  o Augmented reality; overlay; non-hardscape
  o Curating tenants/businesses – experiences
  o Temporary spaces for tenants; pop-up areas; theatrical installations
  o Family activities
  o Rotating exhibits
  o Spaces for public events: e.g., block party/music festival; family activities
  o Tenants as part of the curatorial process
• Tithing: % for arts
• Didactic vs. emotive: not a plaque
• Access technical resources, e.g., MIT Media Lab
  o Interactive works
  o Cf. NAPA “Culture Tap” in front of BCA: accessing recorded voices of South End residents
  o “Sleep No More”: Theater piece in building under renovation; could be dance, music, etc.
  o Illuminus-type projections, incl. historic photos
  o Projection mapping: life of the building through projection
  o Giant Tetris game on side of building
  o Locative voice system; audio that speaks history
  o Specialized media: music from the period, projections (e.g., porn stories)
  o Augmented reality (Pokemon Go)

Table 3
• Develop a competition for each property, to be responded to by all sorts of artists/architects/designers
• Boston Open Space Invitational
• New app that reveals historic structures (Pokemon Go, but with history instead of critters)
• Peek into the historic context: leads you to the next space (almost like View Finders, or tromp l’oeil)
• Community conversation – historic structures tend to get stuck in history; oral history is important and could enrich structure/programs
• Cf. “Humans of New York” (www.humansofnewyork.com) as model for interviewing/gathering information about buildings, places
  o Jump to senses immediately, then work back to story/history
  Attention grabber is important: different senses can be engaged through a scavenger hunt of sorts
Cf. “Stolpersteines” in Germany: applying the idea of incorporating some history into “stumbling stones”
§ Odd object out of place causes one to pause
  o Temporary pavilion/new construction
  o Lending library, physical and digital
    • Engage people from the neighborhood
    • Fixed bike that would power the story/project history of the site
    • Re Old Corner Bookstore:
      o Cf. Krzysztof Wodiczko’s projections on historic structures: Bunker Hill Monument; statue of John Harvard; Krakow City Hall
  o Interactive billboard installations
  o Needs to be multi-faceted to get as many people involves as possible
  o Smells: cf. London’s spice district; molasses flood in North End; etc.
    • Different senses applied to history: kinetic motion related to farm, e.g.
    • Using actions of the past to enliven the present