

A Hurricane, Two Weddings and A Funeral: Lessons in Community and Bridge Building

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Introduction

I'm a typographer and an image-maker who became interested in ascribing time-based behaviors to visual systems. That interest in systems transformed into what was called Information Architecture in early web design (now called UX/UI), and eventually lead to designing experiences for and with the public in real time, under a framework that is now called Social Practice.

Social Practice is an art form that engages the social—the space between people—in one way or another. To me, it is the perfect synthesis of art and design. Situated in the art world, it is freed from the rigors of market constraints and commercial viability. Social practice asks questions of and engages with problems in the social world without solutions as design often seeks. However, in so doing it often employs tools of design: research, interviews, sketching, rapid-prototyping, play-testing.

Citizen Bridge is a contemporary re-imagining of a walkable sandbar that once linked Brooklyn to Governors Island. A temporary 1,200 foot floating sculpture for the powerful yet intimate experience of walking on water, it proposes a new kind of connection between New Yorkers and their waterways to catalyze a positive and empowered relationship with the water. It's name originated with the revelation that it was a project that could only find its form and construction through community participation: a bridge built by and for an entire citizenry.

Bridging history and isolation

Red Hook, Brooklyn, is situated on the coast of South Brooklyn, just across the water from Governors Island and the Statue of Liberty. Cut off from public transportation by the Battery tunnel and the cross-Brooklyn highway, Red Hook is known as home to artists and the largest public housing project in New York City. It has the feel of a small fishing village where one can still see the traces of its former 19th century shipping and manufacturing glories, but today it is socially and economically fractured. Van Brunt Street is known as the unofficial dividing line between Black and White, rich and poor, land and water.

Moving to Red Hook impacted me in several ways: it was the first time I realized that New York City is built on islands. I could see the water every day from my house, and walk down to a tiny beach. Consumed by the boats navigating the channel and Governors Island just steps away, research led me to a local newspaper article from 1900¹ describing a walkable sand bar that at low tide was used by farmers to take their cows to pasture on the island across Buttermilk Channel. The channel was a pedestrian thoroughfare: the water was a public space. A vision was born. I began plans to build a temporary pedestrian bridge as a form of reclaiming that space as public space.

Research and Development

The first phase of *Citizen Bridge* began in 2012 via an artist residency on Governors Island, and continued through 2015 through various residencies along the Brooklyn waterfront. These three years of research and development included what could be called a discovery phase, brainstorming, prototyping, play-testing and iteration. The methodology of this phase has been described as 'journalistic' and 'ethnographic'. Framed through the idea of project-based learning², it was a combination of both. I went out into the world talking to everyone I could—engineers on the ferry, to writers, architects, boat captains, boat-builders—everywhere I could—parties, restaurants, movie queues, etc.

Speculative Design and Social Form both served as assistive mechanisms in these conversations. Situated in Speculative Design³—design as a means of imagining how things *could be* through prototypes and designed artifacts—this project imagined a future return to the water due to climate change and population growth. While testing

¹ Author Unknown, "It's Really A Channel," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 19, 1900, 5, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/50353369/>

² Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a concept I learned working with the Institute of Play and Quest to Learn. A good definition of PBL can be found here: https://www.bie.org/about/what_pbl

³ Stuart Candy's dissertation "The Futures of Everyday Life: Politics and the Design of Experiential Scenarios," (PhD diss., University Of Hawai'i At Manoa, 2010) was formative in framing this work as speculative design.

assumptions of every waterways regulation, the bridge sparked an interest in everyone who encountered it. Simultaneous to the question ‘could this really happen?’ was often, ‘why doesn’t this already exist?’ By asking, ‘What would a floating bridge to Governors Island look like?’ a new possible future was born for everyone who encountered it. This was an especially tangible proposal because bridges are familiar architectural forms. And their architecture symbolizes a powerful Social Form⁴. Social Forms shape our interactions with one another. Defined by sociologist Georg Simmel, Social Forms “order the emergent, unpredictable and dynamic social space between two people⁵.” Like a meal, a newspaper stand or a haircut, each has syntax that structures human interaction. The Social Form of the bridge functions literally *and* metaphorically—it is simultaneously an idea that connects multiple maritime stakeholders and a structure that connects two pieces of land.

Over the course of these years the project grew from an idea into a viable engineered and sea-worthy rated design due to an incredible group of participants—a community made of many intersecting, but seldom interacting groups. Bridges connect people physically and metaphorically, and can be thought of as one of the earliest forms of community-building technologies. Using every possible communication channel, conversations with government officials, architects, engineers, environmental advocates, maritime workers and enthusiasts, educators, and community representatives shaped the project through over 6,000 emails, 2,700 phone calls, 1,200 documents and over 100 face-to-face meetings.

At the time, the idea of ‘temporary’ or ‘pop-up infrastructure’ was not a defined realm of urban thinking...until Superstorm Sandy collapsed sections of bridges in Jamaica bay. The storm intensified the urgency for the the need to rethink coastal cities, infrastructure, and a new relationship to the water: it woke New Yorkers up to their waterways.

1,000 bridges

But how does pop-up infrastructure—or any ambitious project—go from idea to realization? A thousand tiny bridges born in conversation and built through, perseverance, dedication, and repeated contact. The truth that has surfaced from this project is that community-building is slow and works at the speed of trust. Though there are many stories and emergent lessons around the topic of community building in this

⁴ My understanding and use of the idea of Social Form is owed to Ted Purves, artist, writer, and educator who started the first Social Practice program in graduate education at California College of Art in 2007. Ted first made the connection between Simmel and artists working in socially engaged forms at the 2011 Creative Time Summit in a short presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AS6Bu5g0YSM>

⁵ Ted Purves, “Throwing Stones at the Sea,” in *The Everyday Practice of Public Art : Art, Space, and Social Inclusion*, eds. Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 103-119.

project, this paper will focus on three. They are based in an ethic of care instead of a model of extraction, formed from earnest curiosity and embrace of 'non-productive' encounters.

Find a champion

John Doswell could be called a 'gatekeeper' to the the city's maritime community—sailors, historians, environmentalists, bureaucrats, educators, and impassioned amateurs. Our relationship began via email, but our initial meeting took place in the basement office of his duplex apartment in Hell's Kitchen, itself more like a boat or maritime museum than a city apartment. He connected with the historic foundation of the project, its logistical challenge and the political thrill of an poking at the grey area of regulation and policy. But mostly, it was the project's potential to enliven New Yorkers about the water that excited him, the man who had dedicated every available moment of his adulthood to bringing New Yorkers back to the water. Over the coming months and years, Doswell invited me as his guest to waterfront parties and gatherings, introducing me to anyone I could hope or need to know on the waterways. I met maritime advocates, politicians and regulators over sweaty cheese and crudités platters. I came to understand that his passion for the water, his drive to share it with others, and his laid-back inclusivity are what made him the heart of the maritime community.

Never once did he doubt the capacity of the harbor community to support the bridge, nor my ability to realize it. I knew he would be the one to christen the bridge. However, John was diagnosed with cancer in 2014. He broke the news during his first round of chemotherapy. He followed up with a wide smile announcing he was getting married. Though partners for already thirty-six years, John and Jean wedded in July amidst the din of crowds filling two historic vessels swaying in the Hudson: he dressed as a pirate, she a mermaid. He passed away on January 2, 2015. He is celebrated every July 3 on his birthday, but I miss him every day.

Demonstrate process in public

From 2012-2016, this project was a full-time commitment. For as much as I was learning and doing to make the project happen, I was also trying to show and share every bit with the public to continue building interest and participation in its process. But how does one show a bridge when none exists? A variety of creative strategies introduced the public to the bridge, starting with an Information Booth dedicated to giving information to — and getting information from — the public. I offered bridge design activities at community events. I made two seasons of a radio show about the waterways featuring the maritime community I'd met through this work. And most importantly, I showed full-scale prototypes in public as often as I could; and when possible, invited their participating in building and testing them. Every event was an invitation to participate in

the project at large; and every public event reaffirmed my commitment to those already participating in the project, signaling its continued development and progress.

Go deep

'Deep Hanging Out'⁶ is a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to describe spending long, unstructured amounts of time with other people to truly understand them. In the case of Citizen Bridge, my Deep Hanging Out has taken the form of holiday celebrations and pot-luck dinners, waterfront conferences and tug-boat races, boat-building, boat-painting, and ferry riding. It also took the form of Google Alerts to tend to all the newsletters, blogs, twitter feeds of the individuals and organizations becoming part of the bridge community. In addition to fully committing to learning about the complex world of the waterways, and seriously nerdy curiosity and excitement, the ultimate tool in community building was showing up. Being-there-just-to-be-there—interest in learning as much about families and softball games and soup recipes as the waterways—cemented my relationships to the maritime world. The truth of this work is that it takes honest love and care for others; and connecting in multiple ways that may start with a common interest and shared purpose, but ultimately encompasses all the stuff of life, too.

Conclusions, without completion

These lessons about community reaffirm themselves in my relationship with Red Hook Initiative. Gaining legitimacy and trust of the most powerful and expansive support mechanism for the public housing community took five years of building recognition for the project, volunteering in the community and showing up to community events. Together this past fall, we designed a flag for the neighborhood, and this summer, we'll continue together on new projects. Our relationship realizes the true goal of the project: to include *all* the voices and participation of the neighborhood and city at large.

It should be stated that the project has not been completed, nor will it be for many more years. Building a bridge is slow work, too. After eight prototypes, and a team comprised of five advisors, two legal firms and two engineering firms, the bridge is once again in the design phase. However, I consider the project a success for the imagination it has sparked, and the worlds it has brought together. Through this project I have been supporting the work of other artists dedicated to working on New York City's waterways that has grown exponentially since 2012. This past summer, a curatorial team of five other artists and I launched *Works On Water*, the first ever art triennial dedicated to art

⁶ I first came into contact with Deep Hanging Out through Public Matters (<https://publicmattersgroup.com/>), an Los Angeles-based social change enterprise that defines Deep Hanging Out as an anchoring methodology in its work.

that works on, in, or with the water to bring visibility to this new form of land art and galvanize the robust community of artists making it.

Speaking of love, the title of this paper mentions two weddings. One of the participants in the November 2013 prototype build became my husband in August 2016. The project has also seen three births and a high school graduation. Meanwhile, we wait for the landfall of the next superstorm. These outcomes can't be expected for every community-building project, but might just arise with the practices of long-term commitment, prototyping, and love and care.