

# HARLEM COLLABORATION PROJECT

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Social Lab Report



## A PROJECT BY

Students from the Transdisciplinary Design (MFA) program

### **PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN**



## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



[reospartners.com](http://reospartners.com)

**NO LONGER** **EMPTY**

[nolongerempty.org](http://nolongerempty.org)

# BACKGROUND

## Revitalize NYC

Revitalize NYC, a collaboration between The New School and No Longer Empty, is one of 886 projects nationwide to receive an NEA Art Works grant.

Revitalize NYC is a recommended grant to explore ways to foster community collaboration by activating neighborhood sites in New York City neighborhoods

that are in transition, through participatory inquiry, artistic engagement and design-based curatorial activities.

A joint project uniting The New School with No Longer Empty, Revitalize NYC completed its first year in Manhattan's Lower East Side before shifting focus to Harlem in 2014. Planned programs include site-specific initiatives that examine issues of urban spatial

justice; the accessibility of public services; and alternate urban economies. Revitalize NYC is part of The New School's Collaboratory, a Rockefeller Foundation supported initiative exploring how The New School can enhance its engagement with diverse communities and be a hub for social justice and social innovation in New York.

## THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY MFA

Emphasizing collaborative design-led research, the MFA Transdisciplinary Design in the School of Design Strategies at Parsons serves as an academic laboratory in New York City for graduate students seeking to define the next phase of design practice globally.

The complex problems that confront a networked 24/7 global culture call for broad design approaches. Parsons created the MFA in Transdisciplinary Design for a new generation of designers who want to address pressing social issues using new ideas, tools, and methods.

Students work in cross-disciplinary teams, consider issues from multiple perspectives, gain insight from industry leaders, and emerge with a portfolio of projects showcasing design as a process for transforming the way we live in the 21st century.

## ABOUT PARSONS

A pioneer in art and design education since its founding in 1896, Parsons has cultivated outstanding artists, designers, scholars, businesspeople, and community leaders for more than a century. Today, when design thinking is increasingly being employed to solve complex global problems, Parsons is leading new approaches to art and design education.

## PROJECTS STUDIO

Projects Studio is a course that brings together first and second year students to explore strategies and practices of turning social and cultural observations and analysis into design projects with instantiated outcomes. By investigating the ways in which design blurs the lines between the public and the private, students learn to assess and identify patterns of social practice and change and to communicate those patterns using design methods. Students also familiarize

themselves with the design processes for complex projects done by collaborative teams.

In the Fall '14 edition we collaborated with No Longer Empty, a New York City based not-for-profit arts organization, and Reos Partners, a multi-national social enterprise that helps businesses, governments, and civil society organizations address complex social challenges, to explore the establishment of a Social Lab to address complex social, cultural, economical and environmental challenges in New York City.

In this studio we engaged and supported the Harlem communities to co-design:

- (1) a multi-stakeholder platform for community collaboration;
- (2) strategies and propositions that include problem-setting statements;
- (3) service proposals and prototypes.

We approached design from multiple viewpoints – strategic, material, spatial, temporal – resulting in tangible artifacts and outcomes.

# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Lab is to imagine new futures for the youth in Harlem. Our goal is to generate ideas to support the great work that many organizations are already doing.

## LAUNCHING THE HARLEM COLLABORATION PROJECT

Our Lab focused on how to create a collaborative platform building upon the work of individuals and local organizations, aiming at defining methods and tools to be used in the design of new community-led services and initiatives.

We have decided to use the youth perspective because we perceived youth as a vulnerable population that needs to be empowered to become a part of building the future of their neighborhood.

What we as designers can do?

- we are not here to solve the problems, we are here to discuss ideas on how to approach those problems and support the community to take action.
- share experimental tools to approach these issues.
- present ourselves as a resource to sustain these discussions.

Harlem is a large neighborhood within the northern section of the New York City borough of Manhattan. Since the 1920s, Harlem has been known as a major African-American residential, cultural, and business center. Originally a Dutch village, formally organized in 1658, it is named after the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands. Harlem's history has been defined by a series of economic boom-and-bust cycles, with significant population shifts accompanying each cycle.

African-American residents began to arrive en masse in 1905, with numbers fed by the Great Migration. In the 1920s and 1930s, Central and West Harlem were the focus of the "Harlem Renaissance", an outpouring of artistic work without precedent in the African American community. However, with job losses in the time of the Great Depression and the deindustrialization of New York City after World War II, rates of crime and poverty increased significantly. Since New York City's revival in the late 20th century, Harlem has been experiencing gentrification. Despite

this influx of new wealth, much of the population must rely on income support.

Harlem's black population peaked in the 1950s. In 2008, the Census found that for the first time Harlem's population was no longer a majority black, transitioning to 4 in 10 residents. For more than a century, Harlem has been the epicenter of black America, the celebrated heart of African American life and culture—but it has also been a byword for the problems that have long plagued inner-city neighborhoods: poverty, crime, violence, disinvestment, and decay.

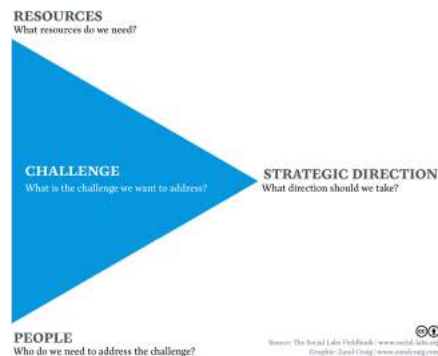
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# SOCIAL LABS

A social lab is a multi-stakeholder platform for addressing a particular complex social challenge. Social labs build on the active participation of diverse stakeholders, and take an experimental and systemic approach to designing potential solutions.

## THE SOCIAL LABS REVOLUTION

Social Labs bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to develop a portfolio of prototyped solutions, test those solutions in the real world, and use the resulting data to further refine those battle-tested solutions. The social lab orientation is systemic—it is designed to go beyond dealing with symptoms and parts to get at the root cause of why things are not working.



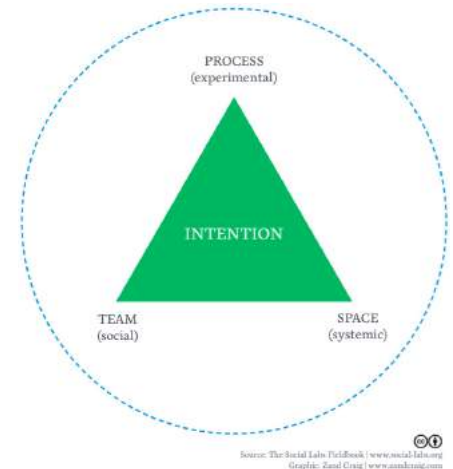
We are exploring the social lab concept as a platform to define the problems we face, identify human and technical resources, make connections between current projects, and strategize toward better outcomes and ways of working together. We value the social lab concept as

a flexible starting point to gather stakeholders and begin to address the complex challenges you have identified in your research and work in Harlem. Social labs have three core characteristics:

1. They are social, composed of diverse stakeholders: government, civil society, businesses. The people involved should reflect the lab's challenges and take action collectively.
2. They are experimental, they approach complexity through trial and error, approach and embrace an iterative process, document and create a portfolio of promising solutions.
3. They are systemic: they address the root cause instead of the symptoms. Problems require an ecology of responses, complexity is emergent and requires adaptability.

The Harlem Collaboration Project worked with Zaid Hassan to advise the process of building a social lab. Zaid is author of *The Social Labs Revolution* and helped found Reos Partners in 2007. See [www.social-labs.org](http://www.social-labs.org) for more. In his book *Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges*, Zaid Hassan builds on a decade of experience—as well as drawing from cutting-edge

research in complexity science, networking theory, and sociology—to explain the core principles and daily functioning of social labs, using examples of pioneering labs from around the world: current responses to our most pressing societal challenges—from poverty to ethnic conflict to climate change—are not working. These problems are incredibly dynamic and complex, involving an ever-shifting array of factors, actors, and circumstances. They



demand a highly fluid and adaptive approach, yet we address them by devising fixed, long-term plans. 'Social labs', says Zaid Hassan, 'are a dramatically more effective response'.

# COURSE PARTNERS



Reos is a social enterprise that helps businesses, governments, and civil society organisations address complex social challenges. We convene, design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships and initiatives on issues such as education, health, food, energy, climate change, and peace. Our approach is systemic, creative, and participative. Reos was founded in 2007 in South Africa by 9 people based in 3 countries. Since our inception, we have been an international organization, working across distances and cultures. Our diverse team of partners, staff, and associates enables us to work in a variety of contexts, both locally and globally, and at multiple scales.

**NO LONGER** **EMPTY**

No Longer Empty activates public engagement with contemporary art through curated, community-responsive exhibitions and education programs that revive underutilized properties. We harness the power of art to explore the history of buildings and community narratives. No Longer Empty collaborates and co-programs with local organizations, residents, civic leaders and businesses to ensure relevance, to promote cultural vibrancy at the neighborhood level, and to craft legacy programs. Every experience is welcoming and informative, free of the constraints of traditional venues. We inspire lifelong interest in the arts through access, involvement and inclusion.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TIMELINE OF THE PROJECT	8 - 11
HARLEM COLLABORATION PROJECT	12
PROJECT INITIATIVES	13 - 17
DESIGN AS SOVOIR-VIVRE	18
KEEPING THE FAITH	19
CREDITS	20

# LAB TIMELINE

COLLABORATIVE MAPPING

ANALYZE COMMUNITY GROUPS AND AREAS OF WORK  
List/Visual Map of potential lab members and areas of work

ENTRY POINTS



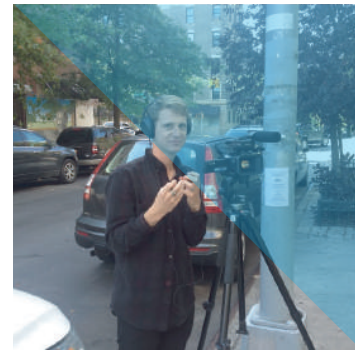
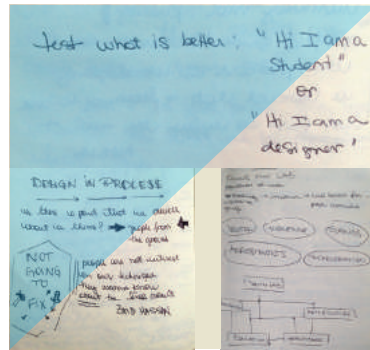
CRITICAL, THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL QUESTIONS  
Diagram with main conceptual frameworks and guiding values



SOCIAL LAB MODELS  
Diagram(s) explaining how a lab works, including possible formats, processes, approaches



IDENTIFY ASSETS, CHALLENGES AND THEMES  
Statement and visual element with departing core question, purpose and themes

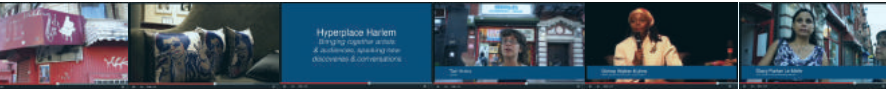


WEEK 2

WEEK 3

WEEK 4





# EDUCATION

Our investigation includes interviews with three public school teachers working with 7th and 8th graders in East Harlem public school and the Director of Evaluation at Harlem RBI, a community-based organization providing after-school programming to youth. Topics we addressed are services and support provided by educational institutions, and the “cracks” that the system is unable to fill.

# ARTS & CULTURE

This brief investigation into the status of the arts in Harlem covers the collaborations and cooperative endeavors of the Harlem Arts Alliance as well as the individual projects of a few artists. It aims to provoke a conversation on how the arts continue to be a key factor of Harlem life today, and what the future of Harlem might look like.

# HEALTH

What does health mean to you? This is what residents of Harlem were asked to consider. Their various viewpoints, experiences, and suggestions are curated here and begs the question, “What can help better prepare locals to interact with the healthcare system and take ownership of their experiences and needs?”

# HOUSING

Anchored in the multi-layered subject of housing and gentrification, our work surveys various Harlem residents and organization, both in terms of physical space and the neighborhood, to capture a sense of community, emotional character, and an absence of communication, Harlem’s strength, and an absence of communication, connection and trust between all its members activates tension in the community.

# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

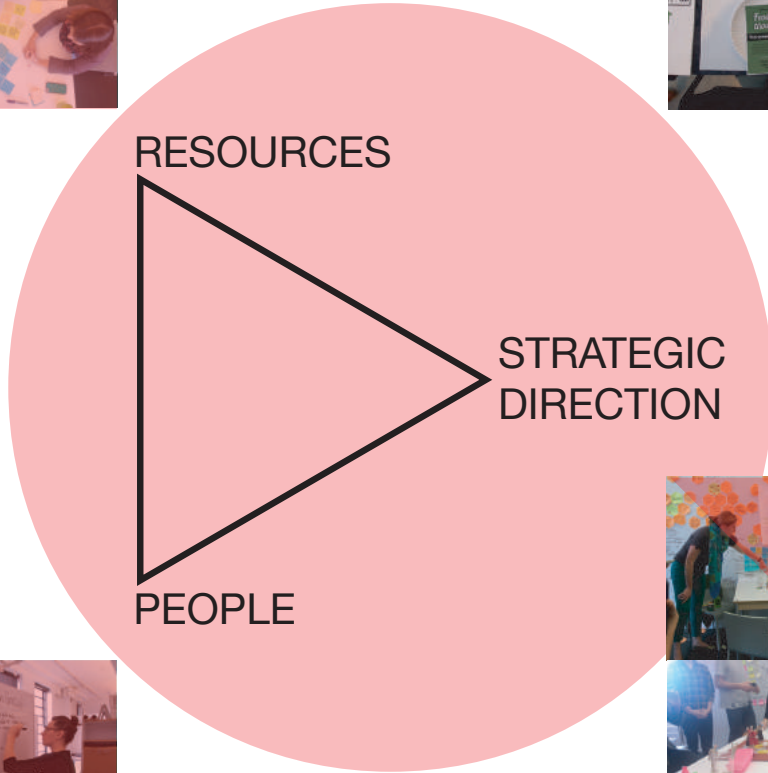
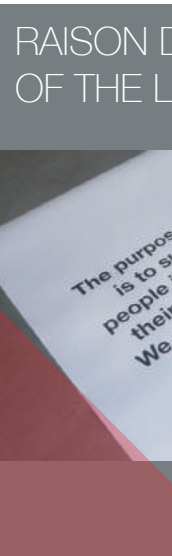
This brief examination of youth engagement practices illuminates the voices of individuals committed to authentic and meaningful relationships with youth in their work as community organizers. Many organizations work to improve the quality of life for youth in Harlem, but few ask youth to articulate their own needs. These interviews are testimonials to importance of asking (rather than telling) the youth of Harlem what they need.

# FOUNDATION WORKSHOP

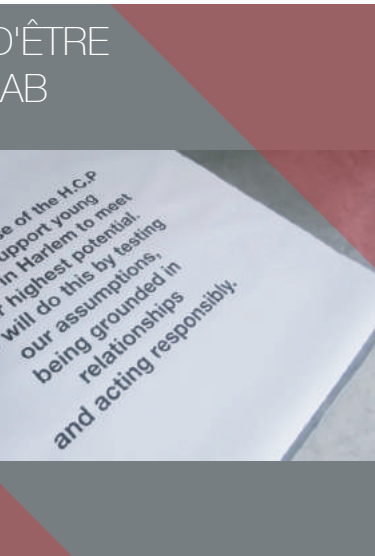
WEEK 5

WEEK 6

WEEK 7



WEEK 8 and 9

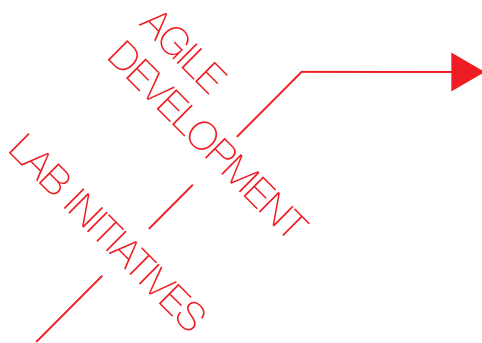


## LET'S

Let's was conceived based on insights the insight that youth thought the best teachers and programs were good because they took time to listen and that, for adults, the most effective strategy to stay engaged with youth in their programs was to simply sit down and talk to them.

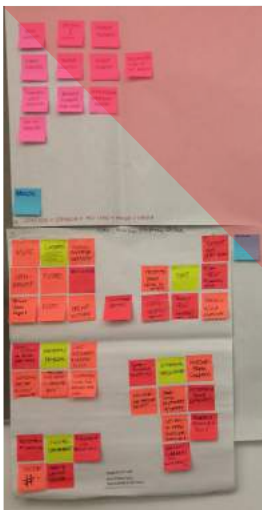
## LEAP

Our preliminary insights showed a need for exposing Harlem youth to future possibilities and choices. With high schoolers as our audience, we strategized ways to re-invigorate the traditional career day model and increase engagement. Our prototype is not only a workshop and field trip, but a framework of processes and materials that can be replicated for future career days.



## THE PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO CROWDFUNDING

We started off as the Food For Thought team. We met with GRAAFICS for feedback, and after further conversation, discovered that what GRAAFICS really needed was help with crowdfunding. We responded to this need and began investigating crowdfunding formats, and areas of intervention. We are now in the final stages of building an interactive PDF to help organizations understand the steps, processes, and strategies for telling their stories and needs in an efficient way. This document will be able to be



## HARLEM YOUTH FORUM

Our hypothesis was that enhancing networks of organizations could help turn competition over grants into collaboration around supporting youth. Preliminary research led to the development of workshop materials and a website to trigger and support conversations between organizations. We tested these in a pilot workshop with five organizations working on youth employment.

## BIO THE BLOCK

After the workshop, we got together with the intent of narrating historical documentation in Harlem. We analyzed the disconnect between youth and their understanding of Harlem's history and place. Within this sphere, we discussed resources, people and a strategic direction, resulting in a game that we prototyped several times.

WEEK 10

WEEK 11

WEEK 12

# HARLEM COLLABORATION PROJECT

“The purpose of the Harlem Collaboration Project is to support young people in Harlem to meet their highest potential.

We will do this by testing our assumptions, being grounded in relationships and acting responsibly.”

## LAB INITIATIVES:

### *BIO THE BLOCK*

*Know it to own it.*

### *LEAP*

*Where do you want to be?*

### *LET'S TALK*

*An interactive communication tool to support and encourage adults to take time to engage with and listen to the youth in their programming.*

### *THE PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO CROWDFUNDING*

*Successful Campaign Strategies for Indiegogo.*

### *HARLEM YOUTH FORUM*

*Connecting organizations and community members working to envision a better future for the youth of Harlem.*

# BIO THE BLOCK

*Know it to own it.*

**IDEA:** Focusing on Middle school level education, Bio the Block's toolkit connects questions that can be responded to at home with others that may need the assistance of teachers or other educational resources connecting formal education to informal curiosity.



**GOAL:** To facilitate the youth of Harlem's ownership in their physical space through guided exploration of personal and community narratives and investigations into their surroundings.

**INITIAL RESULTS:** After Bio the Block was well received at the public forum on October 20th, we were inspired to redesign the game to incorporate it into NYC's MTA system. Advertising youth's responses and activities on MTA's displays would allow the project to scale and youth to share their stories.

**PROJECT BY:**

Ashley O. Graham  
Stephanie B. Beattie  
Chisun Rees  
Peter Rednour

# LEAP

*Where do you want to be?*

**IDEA:** Organising a two-part interactive career day for higher schoolers. The first part is an hour-long workshop in the school to expose students to future career possibilities, the second part is a field trip that allows students to physically experience a career possibility.



**GOAL:** To expose youth to future possibilities by helping students self-discover their personality types and possible career paths, and to devise an action plan to achieve their goals.

**INITIAL RESULTS:** Our first prototype focused on the arts and students were brought to Parsons to experience college life in person and to learn about scholarship opportunities. Our preliminary insights revealed a need for exposing Harlem youth to future possibilities and choices. With high schoolers as our audience, we strategized ways to re-invigorate the traditional career day model and increase engagement.

**PROJECT BY:**

Isabella V. Brandalise  
Cameron L. Hanson  
Mollie West  
Sneha Srinivasan  
Mei Ling Lu

# LET'S TALK

*An interactive communication tool.*

**IDEA:** Designing a game-like interaction to support and encourage adults to take time to engage with and listen to the youth in their programming. It is played around co-created cards of adjectives and nouns, applicable to the everyday experiences of the participants.

**GOAL:** To encourage participants to talk to one another and emphasize the importance of listening between adults and youth.



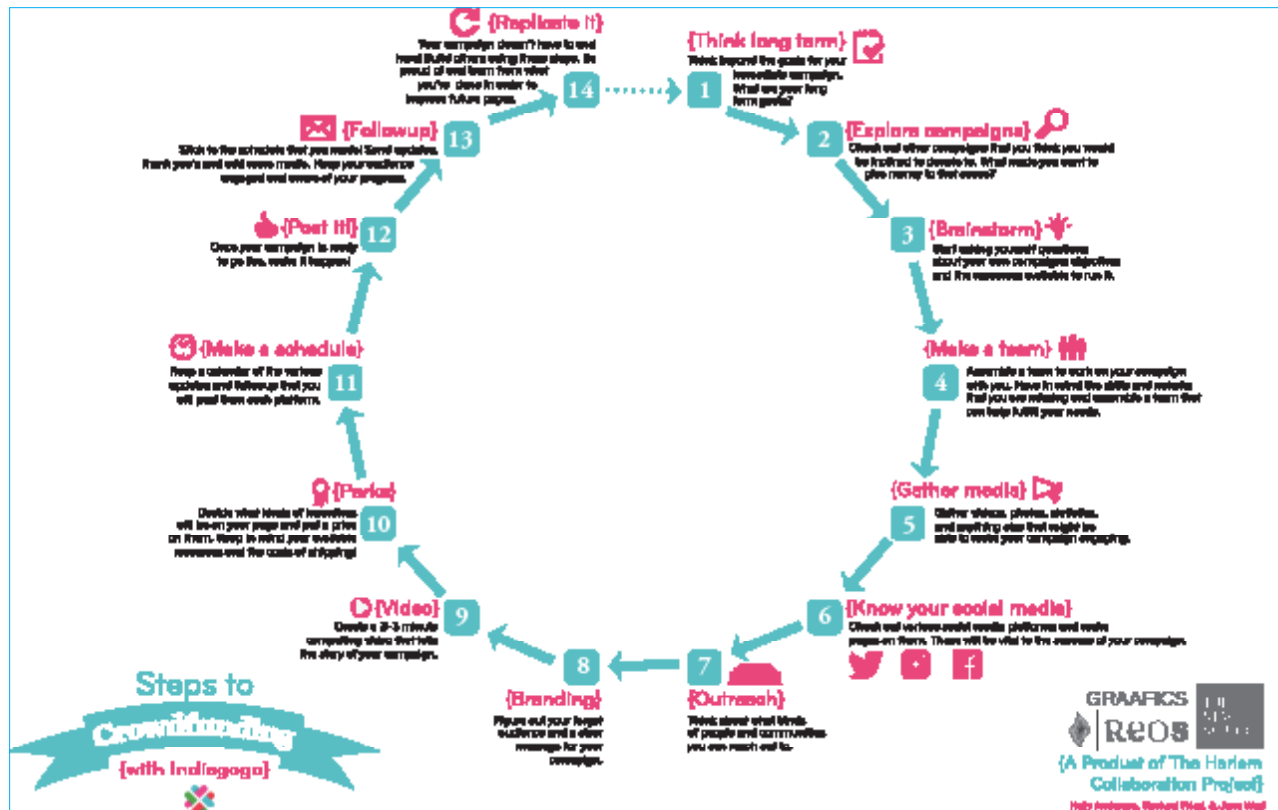
**INITIAL RESULTS:** The game facilitates fun and casual interaction for use in a setting in which adults are creating programming for youth as a way to take time to talk and listen to one another and reflect on what is being discussed.

**PROJECT BY:**  
Kate McEntee

**ORGANIZATION INVOLVED:**  
Elijah Stroud Middle School  
P.S. 206, Manhattan.

# THE PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO CROWDFUNDING

## Successful Campaign Strategies for Indiegogo



**IDEA:** an interactive guide that walks users step-by-step through crafting a sustainable campaign that will exist on and offline.

**GOAL:** To help organizations building a cohesive schedule for planning, implementing and following through with the campaign.

**INITIAL RESULTS:** The guide is available free and open-sourced from the Harlem Collaboration Projects website.

**PROJECT BY:**  
 Rachael N. Fried  
 June C. West  
 Kelly L. Anderson

**ORGANIZATION INVOLVED:**  
 Graffics



# HARLEM YOUTH FORUM

Connecting organizations and community members working to envision a better future for the youth of Harlem.

*IDEA:* Implementing a social platform for organizations and individuals working to address the issues facing the youth of Harlem today.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>TIME</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>SPACE</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>COMMUNICATION</b>
HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>OUTREACH</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>MARKETING</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>MANAGEMENT</b>
HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>LEADERSHIP</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>MENTORING</b>	HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT... <b>PROCESS IMPROVEMENT</b>

## YOU & YOUR CORE PROGRAM

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ ORGANIZATION: \_\_\_\_\_

WHO YOUR PROGRAM SERVES:

Write and draw in the boxes how your program works now

Before entering service      During service      After exiting service

NOW			
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Write and draw how you envision it to be in a near future (ie 5 years)

IN NEAR FUTURE	
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*GOAL:* To connect the great people doing great work around the community and to better coordinate these efforts in a way that maximizes potential.

## PLAN OF ACTION

Define the three next steps you need to take, in order to achieve what you want, need or give what you have. The more specific you are the better. Define the timeline of each step.

WHAT I WANT:

WHY I WANT IT:

WHO CAN PROVIDE IT:

BEST CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATION:

STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3
TIMELINE: _____	TIMELINE: _____	TIMELINE: _____

*INITIAL RESULTS:* Youth Employment is chosen as the workshop theme. A two hour workshop and website has been presented at a bookstore in Harlem. Five organizations that work with youth in Harlem and The Bronx attended.

### PROJECT BY:

Kathleen G Edmonds  
 Laura De Alencar Dusi  
 Alix Gerber  
 Samuel J Haddix  
 Tamar Roemer  
 Gertrud Hoegh Rasmussen

### ORGANIZATION INVOLVED:

Harlem One Stop, Exodus, Rev. Williams, La Casa Azul Bookstore, STRIVE, Bronxworks,

# DESIGN AS SAVOIR-VIVRE

It is not a delusion — the world is becoming increasingly artificial, more specific, clear-cut, predefined and predesigned. At the same time, things still happen, encounters occur, neighborhoods transform, living conditions change, people move, and energies fluctuate. And this to an increasing extent.

## MARIA HELLSTRÖM REIMER

The 'real world' is mostly a mess, and the recurring question is of course what should be done about it.

As a visitor at Parsons during the fall, I have had the pleasure of joining a design environment where questions have been raised— questions about the role of design, about the state of society, about the need for change. And not only verbally; questions were also being articulated in practice, in dialogue with other practitioners in the so-called 'real world', outside of the walls of the academic institution. Yet, while this interrogative onset

was a vital feature of what has now become The Harlem Collab Project, it would have been nothing without the experimental and materializing drive. Important, necessary and thought-provoking questions have indeed been articulated, but they have also been applied, they have been materially voiced in concrete encounters and specific situations.

This is what design is about, and even more so 'social design' or design that sees as its main objective the engagement with collective activities and processes of social transformation. Social design can be but applied; an issue-driven undertaking, a practice fuelled by collective questioning and shared learning. It is a form

of design that sets out to identify common matters of concern in order to commonly try them out, to recompose and also compromise. Exploratory, yet grounded in everyday situations, it is a design that is acted out as a 'living laboratory', allowing for digressions from assumed paths and rejection of pre-formulated answers.

Design as savoir-vivre— indeed a grand challenge for designers to take on. Yet perhaps not more than a logical step; an expansion of the traditional skills of the designer, if there are any. For what is a designer other than a person that finds a pleasure in messing around with the most meaningful things?

Maria Hellström Reimer is professor in design theory at Malmö University, School of Arts and Communication and Director of Studies at the Swedish Design Faculty for Design Research and Research Education. Maria is a visiting professor at Parsons DESIS Lab.

# KEEPING THE FAITH

## Z Aid Hassan

Designing and running a social lab over the course of one semester seemed like a tall order. Then considering that the goal was to set up a social lab that would be community orientated was an even taller order. Community relations take time to build and develop. Eduardo persuaded me to try, after all the heart of the work concerned experimentation and prototyping. While I've guest lectured at many universities this was a different experience. It was the first time I've tried running a full-blown social lab in the context of a university, in this case at the Parsons School of Design at the New School. Then added to these challenges was the fact that I lived in Oxford, while the New School was in New York City.

Overcoming these challenges has left with an overwhelmingly positive experience. I'm left with a real sense of how social labs in the context of a university can help build real capacities through practical action around complex social challenges. Social labs I believe represent a new process for the creation of intellectual capital and more. I sense this as a

space rich with opportunity. The most interesting aspect of the whole experience was how the students reacted to the experience. Running a lab is an emergent process. Running a social lab in the context of young people in Harlem was bound to be challenging. I found it interesting what challenged the students and what they took in stride. Three things surprised me. I was surprised, for example, that "first contact" with communities in Harlem was such a tough experience. During a debrief one of the students referred to "the imperial gaze," while another raised the question of our legitimacy and authority to intervene and if the wisest thing to do wouldn't simply be to slowly back away.

In contrast, it was interesting to note how quickly and skillfully students took to the work of creating prototypes. As design students this probably shouldn't have been a surprise...but the quality of the physical prototypes surprised me. In the labs I've run, where most participants are representing an organization, these practical design skills don't really exist. The prototypes that groups I've historically worked with seemed crude when compared to what the students came up with.

Then the one thing that was common with all labs I've run was that the group struggling to believe in the value of its own prototypes. All groups I've worked with have this challenge. They invest in understanding the challenge, in investigating needs, reflecting on what they might do, and from this process emerges a set of prototypes. These prototypes represent beginnings, and not endings. As such they are fragile...and need to be nurtured. It's incredibly easy to dismiss them. While the students were better than some groups I've worked with at not dismissing them, there was also doubt about the value of what had emerged.

In many ways this doubt is the core challenge to widespread social change. I'm left with the question of how to instill faith in our own creativity, in our own ability to start with something simple and evolve it over time. How do we allow our fragile creations to do their work in the world? How do we believe in ourselves sufficiently to run the experiment?

# PROJECT STUDIO - FALL 2014

## **Students**

Isabella V. Brandalise  
Kathleen G Edmonds  
Cameron L. Hanson  
Kate McEntee  
Sneha Srinivasan  
Kelly L. Anderson  
Stephanie B. Beattie  
Rachael N. Fried  
Chisun Rees  
June C. West  
Laura De Alencar Dusi  
Alix Gerber  
Samuel J Haddix.  
Mei Ling Lu  
Tamar Roemer  
Ashley O. Graham  
Gertrud Hoegh Rasmussen  
Mollie West  
Peter Rednour

## **Faculty**

Lara Penin  
Eduardo Staszowski

## **Partners**

Zaid Hassan - Reos partners  
Naomi Hersson-Ringskog - No Longer Empty

## **Teaching Assistant**

Ron Morrison

## **Research Assistant**

Andrew Moon

## **Visiting Scholars**

Maria Hellström Reimer  
(Professor, Malmö University, Sweden)  
Antonio Iadarola  
(PhD Candidate, Second University of Naples, Italy)

## **Special Guests**

Anasa I. Scott  
(Adjunct Faculty, Parsons The New School for Design)  
Ann Yoachim  
(Professor of Practice, Tulane University School of Architecture)