

# Illuminating History: Celebrating PS 64/ CHARAS

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Figure 1: Projected animations on PS 64

## ABSTRACT

Illuminating History: Celebrating PS 64/ CHARAS was an ephemeral guerilla video projection installation. The principle concern of the work was to amplify the thoughts and concerns of Loisaída, New York City residents regarding a closed community center through socially engaged design, visual communication and interaction design.



Figure 2: Loisaída Street Sign

**CR Categories:** Information interfaces and presentation

**Keywords:** *Social impact design; socially engaged art; pop up art installation; projection art; ephemeral art; stop motion animation; community action; local history; civic engagement; Arduino; intervention physical computing; interaction design; social design, co-design.*

## General Terms

Projections; Design; Interaction Techniques; Social Impact Design

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Celebrate PS 64/CHARAS was a project born from a desire to engage the Lower East Side/East Village community in New York City in a culturally competent activism design intervention.

On the evening of December 7, 2013 two animations illustrating the complicated history of the PS 64 building at 605 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street, NY, NY were projected on the front façade of the building. Interactive design elements were integrated into the installation that allowed for community input and impact.

## 2 DESIGN SOCIAL CHANGE

I earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in filmmaking, specializing in documentary and animation film techniques. From the 2011 – 2013, I worked at Dartmouth College directing a media program aimed at using media education as a tool for not only digital proficiency, but as a method for voice empowerment. I worked with primarily Native American and first-generation college students. My work sent me to reservations across the United States. I wound up seeing countless examples of shockingly poor design (education, roads, food distribution, resource delivery, etc.). Often these systems had been designed without a commitment to understanding the culture, customs, beliefs, habits, and history of the people they would be affecting.

As a result, I've made a commitment as a socially conscious designer to co-design, design with integrity, and use media as a tool for allowing more voices to be heard.

### 2.1 Design Goals

My principle goals in designing an urban intervention are as follows:

1. Increase my interactions and understanding of my

community

2. Amplify the voices of the community members
3. Create space for public dialogues
4. Add to the quality life of participants

My initial thoughts, before communicating in a substantial way with the community, were gathered around the concept of an interactive installation in a public space that allowed participants to vote on the conditions of their environment i.e. music on/off, prices of coffee, or films to play in public space. Another concept I was considering was that of projection mapping in an empty lot to show the community the potential for the space as a park, playground, or community garden. After formulating these ideas, I went in search of community stakeholders.

## 2.2 Stakeholders

I am often away from my neighborhood – Loisaida/Lower East Side-because I spend much of my time at my University in midtown Manhattan, so I made a commitment to shop locally, explore community gardens, town hall meetings, and go to the Tompkins Square Dog Park as ways to meet community stakeholders.

## 2.3 Socially Engaged Arts Practice and Co-Designing

Over the course of a few weeks, I asked community members what they thought of my envisaged installations. Claire Bishop, a London-based art critic, said that socially engaged art “rehumanizes” a “numb and fragmented” society (Artforum 2006) [1]. I wanted to use socially engaged arts practices to engage with my community and amplify the voices and efforts of those therein.

People generally felt like the ‘vote for your surroundings’ idea seemed interesting, but somewhat patronizing since many believed that voting for local matters never effected much change for them.

As for the projection mapping in ‘dead spaces’ concept, the response was also a bit lukewarm from long time residents of the community. Some initial discouraging feedback I received was in regards to how often the community garden organizations are desperate for more volunteers to manage the gardens they have now, and not to create more work for their organizations. I pushed back a bit with the idea that the city could tend a small garden for the community, but it wasn’t a convincing design pitch.

Feeling a bit discouraged, and honestly wondering if the process of co-designing ever allows for a designer to create anything, I stopped in the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS) in Loisaida, the staff there was incredibly helpful, and listened to my ideas. One of the volunteers asked if I had ever heard about CHARAS. He was new to the community, and he said that this community organization had an incredible history that ended abruptly when the city revoked their lease thereby ending decades of community organizing and assistance in a centralized space. The narrative immediately intrigued me. I reached out to local history coalitions, the community garden organization LUNGs, and local residents, and they all agreed on one thing: CHARAS was amazing, it was a significant part of their lives, and they thought it should be the heart of my installation. Finally, co-designing was getting me somewhere.

## 3 LOCAL HISTORY RESEARCH

I attended community meetings in Loisaida, (the often used ‘Spanglish’ name for the less gentrified areas of the East Village –

also known as Alphabet City) in an attempt to find points of entry into the committed community core.

Attending a community garden installation and panel discussion with the artists opened up a space to communicate the desire to make community based interactive art experience. The initial feedback was mostly positive, but people were wary of encouragement around participating in formal democracy. It was expressed that democracy didn’t help them sustain CHARAS. Follow up questions were asked, and it became clear that the eviction of the community organization, CHARAS, from their location in the historic PS 64 building, was plaguing the community.

First-person contact with community members with long stays in this neighborhood became the strategy for collecting community memories and desires regarding the intervention

## 3.1 Local History – PS 64

The PS 64/CHARAS building in the Lower East Side holds significant value to many long-term community members. The PS 64 building was designed by famed NYC architect CJ Snyder. It opened its doors in 1906 to a primarily Jewish and Polish immigrant population.

Snyder integrated what was then a revolutionary design element – a large auditorium with street side access. It immediately changed the landscape of the community. Social activism and a dedication to arts and theater took hold of the area’s primarily destitute inhabitants.

The community’s social and racial profile radically changed in the following 60 years. The Lower East Side faced a rampant expansion. The school closed its doors due to inadequate classroom allotments. Soon after, the building became a drug den and squat. The copper pipes were removed for their market value. Windows were broken and the building’s water heater flooded the first floor.

## 3.2 Local History – CHARAS

CHARAS, a community support organization founded by three principal members: Chino Garcia, Armando Perez and Bimbo Rivas. They acquired a lease from the city and provided space in the PS 64 building for artists, dancers, performers, actors, filmmakers, community gardeners, and Alcoholics Anonymous (which 800 people a month attended) alike rented space in the building for a low cost. The building hosted one of the most popular community-based film festivals each year. Spike Lee cast and screened his first film at CHARAS. Their experiment was a success.

However, in 2000 their lease was reneged and amidst numerous and regularly held protests, the building was sold to a developer named Gregg Singer. The organizations leasing space from CHARAS were evicted.

For many members of the Lower East Side community, the PS 64/CHARAS building is a symbol of political oppression of minorities and community-based organization.

Tensions have been high between the community and the developer ever since the sale and eviction. The building has been vacant for 12 years because Gregg Singer has been working on getting support for tearing the building down in order to make a dormitory tower.



**Figure 3:** December 2011 CHARAS protest

### 3.3 Local History Curation

It became evident to me that my role was shifting from designer/artist to something much more closely related to facilitator/curator of my community's collective and complicated history regarding land, property rights, space, activism and organizing.

The community didn't necessarily desire more art, writing, or organizing, but it needed a way to amplify the media, writing, history that dedicated individuals and collectives were producing. I wanted to provide a framework to make the invisible strife, visible.

#### 3.3.1 Local Resources

MoRUS, the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, was an early organization that provided a source of reliable community history regarding Loisaida. The director of MoRUS had lived temporarily in PS 64 as a squatter, leased art space, and was a member of the community gardens association that also leased space from CHARAS. He provided a wealth of first-person narrative around the organization and its subsequent unpleasant eviction.

East Village Community Coalition, an organization dedicated to preserving local culture, affordable housing, and promoting local retail outlets, was another reliable source of local history. The newly hired managing director scrounged up a file full of pictures and a cd with approximately 80 photos relating to PS 64 or CHARAS.

#### 3.3.2 Community History Gathering – Internet

Messaging the CHARAS Facebook account and posting on their wall asking for more information about the organization's history was not very fruitful. Eventually, a friend of one of the founding members of CHARAS gave me a call. He said he would look for pictures to email, but they never arrived.

Although people were reluctant to contact a stranger and tell them about CHARAS, I was able to find out a great deal of information about the past from commentary and discussions held on forums from years of posted public content. These conversations added to the historical narrative that formed the basis of the installation's animation.

## 4 AESTHETIC ITERATIONS

In my research phase, I discovered that since CHARAS and the number of organizations that leased space in PS 64 were evicted that there have been close to 50 demonstrations, actions, sit-ins, break-ins, squats, protests, marches, and petitions over the last 12 years.

People seemed tired of getting nowhere, so I decided to organize a peaceful celebration of the building, the history of CHARAS, and the people that have worked continuously for community space. I wanted to let these people take a break and enjoy the impact that they've had versus being burdened by organizing an event that might again have limited success in terms of changing the ruling in favor of saving the building from development.

I decided to proceed with the concept of allowing intervention participants to push buttons in order to dictate what they would be seeing projected. The front of PS 64 was the perfect place to project. Although it had large windows, which can interfere with the quality of projection, it was on a protected street (meaning less police interference) with limited street lamp light competition.

### 4.1 Intervention Logistics

Projection logistics were trickier than first imagined. With limited social capitol in the houses across from PS 64, there were no options for easy access to a power supply. Street lamps often have power outlets housed in their base, but the lamps on 9<sup>th</sup> street had all been stripped out their outlets.

After consulting members of the Graffiti Research Lab, I decided to purchase a generator, as it seemed to be the most reliable and least dangerous option for power. They also provided significant insight on projectors specs for optimum visibility and other tips and tricks for guerilla video projection. One such piece of advice was to not include sound in the intervention, as that is an immediate cause for the police to interfere.

### 4.2 Animations

Including sound was discouraged, so I concluded stop motion animations would be an ideal medium for illustrating the complicated history of the PS 64/CHARAS building. Amateur stop motion animations immediately give life to the objects or people in the frame by sheer micro-movements expressed in the frame-by-frame advancements.

I gathered images from MoRUS, EVCC, CHARAS' Facebook page, community members, and online. Images that best represented key moments in the history were printed and cut out. Short narratives were storyboarded out and eventually each frame was animated by use of a still photographic camera. When screened at 26 frames per second movement appears fluid.

The handcrafted and unpolished aesthetic appealed to the designer in that it reflected a lot of the art and signage used by CHARAS to promote community gatherings.



**Figure 4:** Animated Film Still

Two animations were created. One is a historical animated linear narrative, while the other is a shorter experimental sequence of related images that tell a looser narrative of the organization.

### 4.3 Technology

I was determined to use the platform, openFrameworks (oF), because of its capacity to process large packets of digital data with ease. I iterated many computer human interactions using oF over a series of weeks and decided that large appealing push-buttons would be the best conduit for getting people to interact with the exhibit instead of just looking and passing by.

#### 4.3.1 'Community Voice Buttons' and oF

The buttons were designed to look like glimmering geodesic domes as a tribute to CHARAS' work with Buckminster Fuller in creating domes for homeless members of the community in the 1970's.



**Figure 5:** 'Community Voice' interactive buttons

Once the 'community voice buttons' were pushed, a high/low signal would be sent via an Arduino microcontroller to the openFrameworks code using standard fermata. When pushed, page state of the code would change. The state for button1 could be "videoOn" which would play the historical narrative animation, or "videoOff" which would display "We Want Our Building Back" in large letters across the screen.

The state options for button2 were "videoOn" which again would play the narrative animations, or "videoOff" which would access a vector database of comments scraped from the CHARAS'

Facebook wall. I selected comments that were especially supportive of the community, CHARAS, the founders, and the local activist spirit. Additionally, I added comments that called the developer "Greedy Gregg," as the community had come to refer to him with glee.

### 4.4 Promotion

A Facebook event was created as a means to connect with the CHARAS Facebook community that had so graciously and unknowingly provided public fodder for my community voice amplification buttons.

I asked the organizations that I had been working with in developing the intervention to reach out to their networks to promote the event. They did so quite willingly.

Additionally, to promote the event in a manner that would attempt to reach community members that were not actively online included making posters and hanging them in visible places in the Loaisaida community.



**Figure 6:** Promotional Poster for Celebrate PS 64 / CHARAS

#### 4.4.1 Police Interference

While I often love to actively promote events I've organized, I held back a bit in order to make sure the event was not overrun with attendees. Local activists had cautioned me saying because CHARAS has had such a long lasting political battle rife with protests, riots, and even a car explosion, that I might be wise to keep numbers low in order to reduce risk of being confronted, or event arrested, by the police. I heeded their advice, consulted with more activists, and even consulted a lawyer in order to better understand the implications of my actions.

### 5 EVENT

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013 I directed the Celebrate PS 64/CHARAS video projection installation.

#### 5.1 Set up

I gathered the components for the installation and a few of my most trusted friends (to assist) and we walked the 7 blocks from my house to PS 64. A crowd had already gathered by the time we got there. The generator was behaving oddly, but after 40 or so strong pulls, we were able to get the projection show started.

Two projectors simultaneously screened the animations one vertically placed above the other. The buttons were an invitation for the gathering public to interact with the installation. People quite willingly stepped up to touch the large dome like buttons,

and the engagement with participants at that juncture was an essential way to find out who was in attendance.



Figure 7: View of logistical set-up

## 5.2 Attendance

Quite a few of the people from the organizations I had consulted with were in attendance; friends from Parsons Design and Technology, neighbors, and friends from my undergraduate years came out to help in whatever way they could. To me, the project felt most successful when friends from my various stages of life and members of CHARAS and local community organizations were discussing the content of the animations and sharing stories. The community members were telling personal anecdotes.

### 5.2.1 CHARAS in attendance

Chino Garcia, the only living co-founder came out to the event, and he was in very high spirits. He gathered my friends around to tell them some of his favorite memories of CHARAS and why he is so passionate about providing affordable community gathering and art spaces. Friends of CHARAS also came out. These are people that are affiliated with the organization and work to gather people for protests. One of these people was the widow of Bimbo Rivas, a deceased member of the 3 founders of CHARAS. When she pushed the ‘community voice’ button that accessed the database of user comments on Facebook, the message “Rest In Peace Bimbo” was illuminated on the construction façade. She turned to a group of us and said, “Can you believe this? This is so special!”

### 5.3 Adaptation of the event’s aesthetic

Initially, I had the two videos projecting high on the building, but as a happy accident (the leg of the projector was broken) resulted in the bottom video slipping down to project horizontally on the blue construction wall in front of CHARAS’ front entrance we noticed that people passing by were taking pictures of themselves in front of the video. It seemed to bring people pleasure including friends of CHARAS, so we kept the projection there.

## 6 FUTURE ITERATIONS

The installation was well received by the members of CHARAS that came out. Many locals are commenting the posts and pictures on Facebook on. New members of the neighborhood gave positive feedback as well.



Figure 8: Facebook image post about ‘Celebrating PS 64 / CHARAS’

## 6.1 Lower East Side Film Festival

Carolyn Ratcliffe, a longtime resident of Loisaida who lives directly across the street from PS 64 came to the event. She had heard about it from members of her garden organization. She enjoyed the animations and asked if she could get copies of the films for the Lower East Side Film Festival she is organizing. From what I gather, the event doubles as a fundraiser for the Lower Eastside Girls Club.

I was more than happy to submit my films to the festival. I approached these films as contributions to preserving and celebrating local history, so I am pleased that they will be screened for a larger audience.

## 6.2 Remembering Armando Perez

I was asked by Chino Garcia to install the projections again in the spring for Armando Perez’s remembrance in the spring of 2014. Warmer weather will inevitably draw a larger crowd.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

My curated event combined a number of principles sourced from standard design practice, socially engaged art practices, and civic engagement. While most socially designed projects meet the most basic design requirements i.e. moving the world from where it is to where we wish it would be. The strategic restructuring of my own position in relation to the project from designer to curator was a deviation from traditional design artist-project proximities and central to my desire to make a socially engaged project.

In retrospect, when I was developing ideas before consulting members of the community, I was so far off base about what they wanted and needed that it would have been doomed to be a flop.

I’ve learned a timely lesson about designing in a vacuum, a practice I don’t plan on repeating. During Celebrate PS 64/CHARAS when I looked around and saw seasoned residents of Loisaida enjoying the animations and pointing to pictures to tell my fellow students and friends what the images were representing, I knew I had designed something with my community - instead of for them. When you design for other people instead of with them, you’ll inevitably get it wrong.

Co-designing is an uncomfortable process; it means giving up control over your ‘vision,’ but I’m learning as I continue to make more and more socially motivated contributions that my initial ‘visions’ don’t incorporate enough voices, therefore they are inherently unable to maximize reach and depth.

Incorporating interactivity is messy, and often broken, but I’m glad I considered elements of interactivity as a means to draw people closer to the art and one another. I’ve directed and hosted

several film festivals, and my biggest grievance is the missed opportunity for so many like-minded people to meet one another, as the environment of a theater is so isolating and quiet. As people watched the animations, pressed the buttons, and told stories, I was having long-standing dream realized about the power of film events to connect a community.

I look forward to seeing this piece grow and live in many different places. I hope to continue to develop innovations for the interactive elements that would amplify the community integration and participation of all those in attendance, while heightening the social impact of design.

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#### **REFERENCES**

1. Bishop, Claire: 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006, pp. 179-185.