



# Cultural Innovation in Action

Case Studies from 2011 Grantees  
of The Rockefeller Foundation's  
NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

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**The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)  
Public Access Design**

PREPARED BY:

EmcArts Inc.



CUP creates visually powerful, accessible materials that explain complex policy and economic issues.

# Introduction

## About The Center for Urban Pedagogy

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) uses art and design to increase civic engagement in New York City, particularly among historically underrepresented communities. Through interdisciplinary collaborations that bring together community organizations, advocacy groups, students, artists, designers, educators, and others, CUP seeks to improve urban life in New York City by empowering communities to advocate on their own behalf. CUP uses a variety of media approaches to create visually powerful, accessible materials that explain complex policy, infrastructure, and economic issues. CUP's annual budget is approximately \$650,000.

## About the Project

Public Access Design is a rapid response design clinic that provides community social justice organizations with grass-roots organizing tools. Working with CUP staff and community advocates, Design Fellows create timely and powerful materials that help advocates explain complex issues to constituents in easily understood language. The goal of Public Access Design is to demystify complex urban issues and enable community groups to respond quickly to social justice challenges in their lives and neighborhoods.

# Process

## Starting Conditions

Since its founding in 1997, CUP had developed a successful model for stimulating what it calls “a new kind of civics education.” CUP’s Envisioning Development Toolkits—a set of tools and workshops to help communities understand development and planning concepts—were being used by community organizers and groups to engage their communities. An Affordable Housing Toolkit, for example, was being used by over 40 NYC organizations to train their constituents, and CUP had already provided dozens of housing workshops. Overall, CUP had helped community groups reach well over 50,000 constituents. Urban Investigations—a youth education program—had trained hundreds of high school students each year in the inner workings of city government and urban infrastructure.

“Our projects always begin with questions,” says Executive Director Christine Gaspar. “Where does our garbage go? Who built public housing? What rights do street vendors have?” Using a research-based, design-driven approach, collaborators produce posters, brochures, and other print media that are distributed free of charge to city organizations.

Many of these projects, however, have long lead times of a year or more and cannot respond to immediate social justice crises. “We were doing four big projects a year in our Making Policy Public program,” says Gaspar, “but we were beginning to see a demand from our constituents for help with projects that were more time-sensitive.” Hearing from organizers that they needed material more quickly, CUP began to consider how the organization might respond.

With a grant from the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, CUP’s new Public Access Design program was born.

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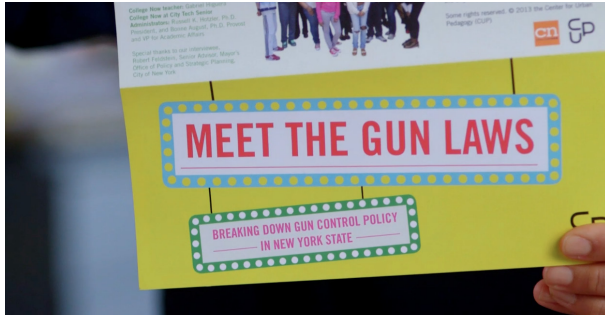
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- Christine Gaspar  
Executive Director

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# Prototyping

*Using a research-based, design-driven approach, collaborators produce posters, brochures, and other print media that are distributed free of charge to city organizations to spread information about development and policy in New York City.*



In typical fashion, CUP began by asking questions. What needed to be changed in the current program structure to allow collaborators to work more rapidly and effectively together? How could the application process be restructured to enable rapid turnaround? What forms of media would be most effective for shorter-term projects? What was a realistic timeframe for completing projects?

To help answer these questions, CUP turned to its previous partners, including designers and community advocates, through a series of focus groups and brainstorming sessions. Based on these conversations, CUP staff designed a prototype for a new program that would, they hoped, answer the emerging need they were seeing. While Public Access Design was built on the foundation of CUP's other successful ongoing programs, it also was quite different. Rather than selecting four projects that each would take up to a year to complete, CUP now began implementing an open call to community groups every two to three months, asking them for topics and projects they needed to turn around rapidly.



CUP's relationship to designers is also different in Public Access Design, which operates as a fellowship program for a pool of 9 to 12 annual Design Fellows who are selected by a jury. Historically, CUP designers in the Making Policy Public program had worked primarily in print media, but for this project, CUP intentionally expanded the pool of designers by including filmmakers, illustrators, and other experts in motion graphics, interactive design, and information graphics. Each Fellow receives a \$200 stipend and participates in a learning network that includes training in community organizing principles and other skills critical to forming strong working partnerships. Designers who are chosen to work on a Public Access Design project receive an additional \$2,000.



Working with a more diverse pool of designers, CUP was able to expand the types of media used in the program. They identified four media: pages (a 4-8 page print publication); frames (a 30-60

second animation or motion graphic); pixels (a web-based interactive graphic); and folds (a wallet-sized map, graphic or illustration that unfolds to a larger size). Community partners select a preferred media format based on their topic and intended audience; designers select formats based on their experience and interests.

Public Access Design begins with a teach-in for the community advocate, designer and CUP staff in which the advocate explains the context of the project, their needs, and where there are gaps in materials. The group then breaks down the project into component parts, and the designer creates materials for review by the advocate organization. Finally, CUP hosts feedback sessions with prospective users prior to creating the finished product.

Early in the prototyping period, CUP decided to devote one round of projects to the communities affected by Hurricane Sandy. Working with the Red Hook Justice Center and Design Fellow Jenny Kutnow, the team developed materials that Red Hook residents could use to advocate for themselves in housing court. “We anticipated a huge back log of claims for repairs,” say Gaspar and Program Manager Clara Amenyo, “so the request was really timely and we were eager to work on a project with a clearly bounded audience.” They also knew the project had huge potential impact. “In housing court, landlords always have lawyers,” says Gaspar, “but tenants generally represent themselves. There is a real imbalance here coupled with the complexity of the public housing system in New York City.”

According to Amenyo, the project has already been extremely successful, and other organizations are keenly interested in using the materials, including the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. “We have a strong sense that this was definitely a gap that needed to be filled,” says Amenyo.

## Obstacles and Enablers

Feedback sessions were especially important to creating an effective program design, and CUP staff report that these sessions helped them get a better understanding of the perceived benefits to partners of working with the organization. “It made us better able to design programs to meet their needs and resulted in new ideas for outreach,” they say. “We’re a small staff of six and that fosters intensive collaboration when shaping programs,” says Gaspar. “It has helped us plan Public Access Design in a comprehensive way, with full staff participation and a great deal of input from our design and community partners.”

Managing this input was not without its challenges, however. A fundamental challenge, staff say, was that graphic designers and grassroots constituencies often represent quite different cultural, ethnic, and/or economic communities. In addition, designers and community advocates sometimes produced contradictory feedback in the brainstorming sessions. Bringing these groups together requires careful attention and sensitivity to ensure that any potential differences work in favor of the design process rather than hinder it.

These differences play out in the design process, as well. “There’s always a point in every project,” says Gaspar, “when it just looks terrible and everyone is completely stressed about it.” These moments are not surprising, she adds, because community advocates—who have not been through a design process previously—get nervous when they see their unfinished, messy project alongside other finished materials from previous projects. “To see a work in progress can be really terrifying,” says Gaspar, “and we have to step in and let them know that this is a normal part of the process, and that talking about it is the best thing we can do.”

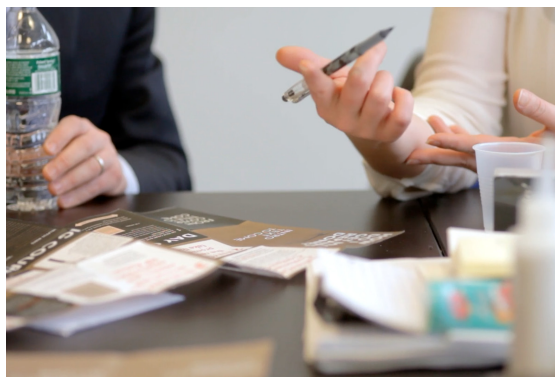
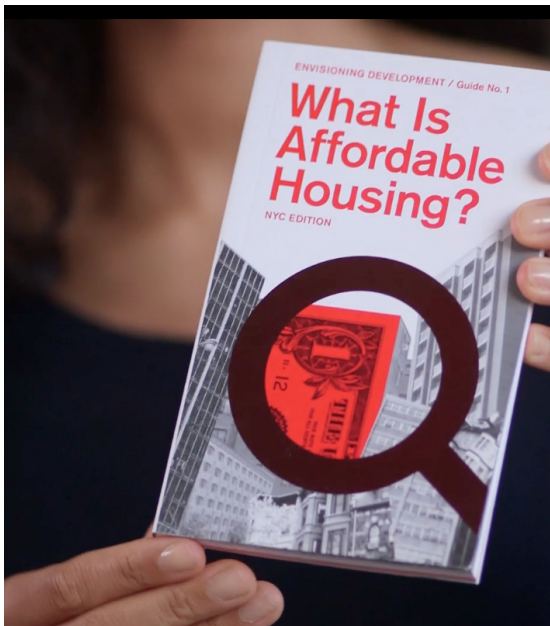
CUP’s experience in managing collaborations and facilitating partnerships among people who don’t typically work together helped immeasurably in this process. CUP provided guidelines and other support to community groups to help them understand the components of a successful design process; at the same time, CUP integrated

formal training in community-oriented design as a requirement for Design Fellows. Finally, CUP took a very hands-on approach, facilitating the entire collaboration from concept to distribution to ensure open communication, shared learning, and good teamwork. One of the most important keys to the success of the project was the hiring of Clara Ameyo as Program Manager. “As we saw differences of opinion emerging during the brainstorming sessions, we knew we would have to be very careful in hiring a program manager who could reconcile competing ideas,” says Gaspar. “Clara made an enormous difference in our ability to move forward quickly. She had an immediate and extremely positive impact,” says Gaspar.

Gaspar says that CUP staff had to be flexible throughout the development and prototyping process, being careful to bring different kinds of visual language to the table without prioritizing any particular design aesthetic. They also had to be nimble in making adjustments to the website to accommodate changes to the program as it evolved. It was especially difficult, she says, to develop the program without concrete examples of projects to show to potential collaborators.

*Fellows in the Public Access Design program were required to complete formal training in community-oriented design.*

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# Impact

## By the Numbers

Through Public Access Design, CUP has more than doubled the number of community partners it collaborates with in a year, and significantly increased its connections with designers. With three projects completed and others nearly finished, CUP can already point to an expanded reach. Materials from every project are being used by a range of organizations, in addition to the original community partner. A video created as an anti-trafficking campaign for the Damayan Migrant Workers Association, for example, has been viewed thousands of times, shown at national conferences, and even used in the Philippines as a tool to reach large numbers of people.

## New Pathways to Public Value

While the impact of Public Access Design is still emerging, CUP reports that it has already raised the organization's profile and made more people aware of its work. The model has also strengthened CUP's reach and impact, increased the immediacy of its work in the community, and created a closer network of designers and community advocates. The impact on designers has been a big surprise, Gaspar says, noting that a network of designers is "taking on a life of its own." When designing the program, CUP aimed to create a valuable experience for all the Design Fellows,

since not all of them would be chosen to work on a project. "We had no idea," Gaspar says, "how much they would benefit just by being in a cohort with peers, and after the first year, some designers even began working on other projects together outside Public Access Design." She adds that designers "are so excited to get in on a project from the beginning conceptual stage because in their commercial work, they often come in at the end."

The project is also helping CUP build infrastructure and reducing administrative burdens. A web-based framework for applications created during the prototyping of Public Access Design will eventually be used in other CUP programs, contributing significantly to increased institutional efficiency and capacity. The custom programming that undergirds the website, say staff, "will streamline our other collaborative programs, enable us to handle a larger volume of applications, and present a forum for projects to enter into public discourse."

While Public Design Access has helped CUP think more deeply about its process, sharpen its focus, and better understand its mission and effectiveness, Gaspar cautions that the organization has no long-term plans for radical expansion of the program. "We usually think of innovation as a radical departure," she says, "but we see innovation as building on what we've been successful at in the past. We're merging the best of cutting-edge



art and design with popular education and advocacy to incorporate mutual learning and build the capacity of both designers and community groups.”

There is no doubt, however, that Public Access Design has created new pathways for CUP to engage with the community. In particular, staff note that the shorter timeline fosters experimentation, expansive thinking, and bold ideas. In addition, CUP is integrating designers in a different way through the pool of Design Fellows who receive professional development as part of their year-long tenure, fostering their ability to undertake these kinds of projects in the future. In this and other ways, Public Access Design is already creating new avenues of thinking, creativity, and action.

*Public Access Design works on a shorter timeline than other CUP programs, which fosters experimentation, expansive thinking, and bold ideas.*

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# Learn More

Visit [ArtsFwd.org](http://ArtsFwd.org) to watch a short documentary about this project and learn more about the 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

*Profile written by: Catherine Maciariello for EmcArts*

*All images: Meerkat Media*

## About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

Through the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation invested \$16.3 million over six years to increase capacity for cultural innovation. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund sought to reflect the creative aspirations of low-income and minority people, and to contribute to the development of theory and practice of integrating the arts into efforts to achieve cultural equity and community resilience.

The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund supported a diverse portfolio of experiments, explorations and innovations by 86 different cultural and community organizations in New York City. The Fund helped organizations experiment with new artistic programs and imaginative audience engagement strategies; involve community residents in creating work; present art in unconventional venues where it can be seen by a larger public; showcase work of minority artists and immigrant cultures; and pilot new revenue-generating approaches to sustain artists.

[www.rockefellerfoundation.org](http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org)

## About EmcArts

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

[www.emcart.org](http://www.emcart.org)

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