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Participatory Mapping Exercises:  
A Toolkit Made in Crown Heights

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Salome Asega  
asegs578@newschool.edu

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## Introduction

In the midst of an economic and social shift, Crown Heights is finding itself questioning and answering to displacement-- characteristic to many Brooklyn neighborhoods presently and historically. New York City's neighborhoods have always had to consider changes to their landscapes, but the rate at which these changes occur is now distinctly quickening (Velsey). As rent continues to rapidly escalate, gentrification has taken on an epidemic and infesting trait. Lines get drawn and binaries tied to race and class are birthed. The New versus The Old is a demarcation in urban ecologies that hinges on the emotional and personal accounts of the players-- residents, landlords, business owners, and elected officials.

But is a neighborhood, with its many overlapping communities, able to complicate these divisions simply by talking *and* listening? Can a neighborhood create structures for horizontal communication? And in what ways can these structures incite radical action? Through this research project, I am asking how can residents of a quickly changing neighborhood engage in facilitated and/or non-facilitated conversations about housing that do not feel forced or planned? How can a neighborhood's members speak openly about their individual interests to enact methods for collective survival?

## Motivation

Abstractly, my initial questions come from my interests in jazz and funk. Because of its improvisational nature, jazz demands active listening between the group members to produce quality solos. There is a really great moment in Miles Davis's "Seven Steps to Heaven" that explains how collaboration can spark others into action:

In jazz it's called "comping" (an abbreviation of "accompanying") when one

instrumentalist plays a phrase or group of notes to support or provoke the soloist. There's a point in a live version of Miles Davis' "Seven Steps to Heaven" (at 4'39") when the drummer Tony Williams, listening to George Coleman lay down an unremarkable tenor sax solo, abruptly cuts the tempo in half, briefly turning the song into a drowsy ballad. Coleman steps up his game, plays with more invention, and is on high alert for the rest of the concert. (McDowell)

By giving each other room to express each other, the musicians were able to encourage each other, while strengthening the group. I want to be able to creatively capture this sentiment in this research project.

More concretely I am influenced by social practice artists like Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe, and Candy Chang. All of these artists have laid the foundation for the work I do with Sidewalk Assembly, a participatory mapping and co-design collective I co-founded in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The collective is committed to understanding ourselves and our communities through engaged arts in public spaces. We like to say we are resource mappers and public interventionists, the ears to each others joys and sorrows, stories and trials. The mapping exercises that I have facilitated with this group have led me to have many difficult and complex conversations about neighborhood almost always related to housing and the hyperlocal economy.

#### *Previous Literature Review*

##### The “G” Word, Gentrification

Crown Heights is a neighborhood undergoing rapid socioeconomic change. Fifty-two new businesses have arrived on Franklin Avenue alone in the past six years (Rotondaro and Ewing). And of those fifty-two new businesses, sixteen of them opened just within the past two years (Rotondaro and Ewing). Put simply, gentrification, the buying and renovation of houses and stores in low-income neighborhoods, stirs complicated

emotional responses and produces unclear benefits to local economies and social structures. As Spike Lee said in a recent talk at the Pratt Institute:

You can't just come in the neighborhood and start bogarting... You have to come with respect. There's a code. There's people. So, why did it take this great influx of white people to get the schools better? Why's there more police protection in Bed Stuy and Harlem now? Why's the garbage getting picked up more regularly?  
We been here! (Coscarelli)

Lee's points come from a place of wanting to understand for whom these unclear benefits are put in place. When designers, urban planners, and realtors aim for "progress" or "change" in a neighborhood, who are they addressing? Who are the key players involved? Whose voices are included and excluded? These are all difficult questions that neighborhood stakeholders and investors have to begin to unpack.

### Public Probing

Probes, as defined by Gaver, Boucher, Pennington and Walker, are "collections of evocative tasks meant to elicit inspirational responses from people-- not comprehensive information about them, but fragmentary clues about their lives and thoughts" (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker 1). By collecting fragmentary clues generated by participants, designers are encouraging and embracing dissensus, exploration, play and subjective interpretation when it comes to knowledge production (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker 1). Probes produce results that are not clear nor "objective," but instead highlight the complexities of producing singular solutions or responses (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker 5). By employing probes, researchers and designers are then able to approach problems empathetically and creatively.



Candy Chang *I Wish This Was*

There are many social practice artists that use probes as a way to prompt participants into public dialogue. One such artist is Candy Chang. In her project *I Wish This Was*, Chang puts up vinyl stickers on the side of vacant buildings in Brooklyn that read "I wish this was..." Passersby are provoked by the stickers bright design to fill in the blank. This type of public prompting does not solve the problem of the vacant building, but instead invites participants to collectively imagine ways in which the spaces in their neighborhood could be made of better use.



Steve Lambert *How Change Happens*

Another, maybe more artistic, precedent for how public prompts are useful can be explained through Steve Lambert's *How Change Happens*. In this installation, Lambert has drawn out "100%" using light bulbs on a wall. Only one light bulb stays on until a group of people have organized around the installation. Only then do you see the entire 100% sign completely lit. This symbolism collective effort suggests that only when a group of people are together can we begin to see a complete picture and begin to find solutions. This metaphor of sight as a means of challenging hierarchy and power for more inclusive methods is nothing new and is found throughout antiquity. My favorite example comes in a Persian poem "The Elephant in the Dark" by Sufism teacher Rumi. A number of men touch and feel an elephant in a dark room and depending on where they each touch it, they believe the elephant to be a water spout (trunk), a fan (ear), a pillar (leg), and a throne (back) (Arberry 208). Rumi uses this story as an example of the limits of individual perception:

The sensual eye is just like the palm of the hand. The palm has not the means of covering the whole of the beast...We, like boats, are tossed hither and thither, We are blind though we are on the bright ocean. (Arberry 208)

Rumi does not present a resolution to the conflict in his version of this story, but concludes with, “if each had a candle and they went together the differences would disappear” (Arberry 208). The story recognizes the need for communication and to respect the multiplicities in perspective to find the overlaps. In the same way that Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker are not set on finding “objective” results, Rumi is not so much interested a conclusion, but more so a process in which people are working collectively and horizontally to unveil the structures that typically blind or separate us.

### Mapping and Diagramming

Participatory mapping and diagramming exercises can inspire non-hierarchical forms of knowledge production. Although diagramming requires a level of facilitation, it does not require researchers become “centre of attention as they manage a series of solo oral contributions” (Catherine Alexander et al. 114). Mapping and diagramming are more participatory for the following reasons:

- several people can contribute simultaneously
- participants engage with the research tools directly
- power, knowledge production, and evaluation of collected data becomes more balanced

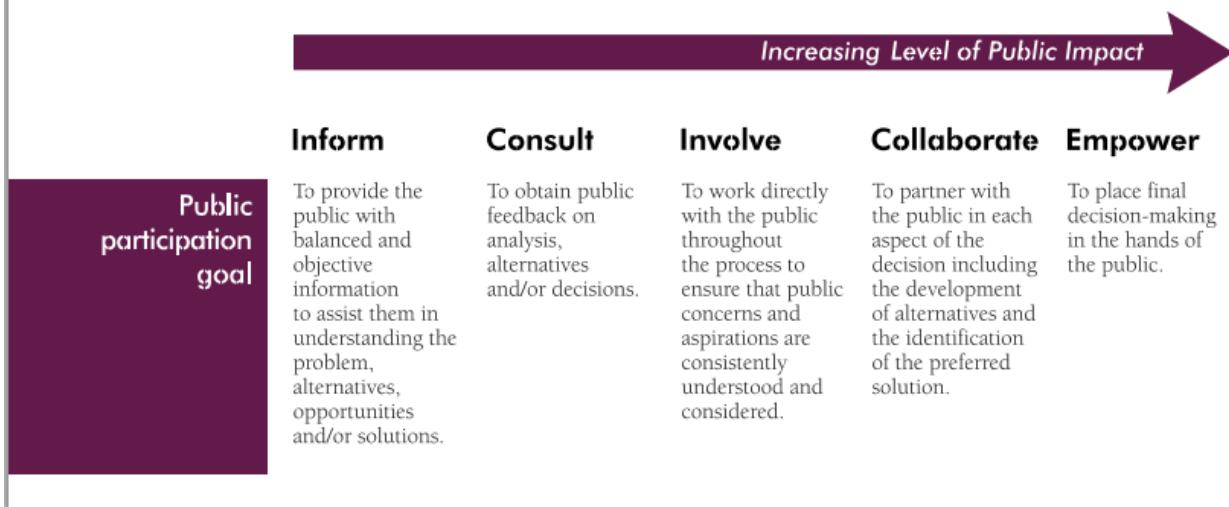
(Catherine Alexander et al. 114)

To measure the level in which an exercise is truly “participatory,” I often refer to International Association for Public Participation’s Spectrum of Public Participation. This spectrum moves from Inform to Empower, where the latter signifies a high level of public impact.

# IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



*Increasing Level of Public Impact*



Participatory mapping exercises have the ability to fall in the latter categories of collaborative and empowering because they ask those participating to be lead the prompting, analyze the data, and offer conclusions.

## Objectives

The goal of this research project is to understand how public interventions and mapping exercises can aid in carrying out more difficult conversations related to local neighborhood issues (ie. tenants' rights, affordable housing, etc). By probing Crown Heights residents through fun and lighthearted public activities, this study aims to sense what levels of comfort can be achieved to then engage in more serious dialogue.

## Research Questions

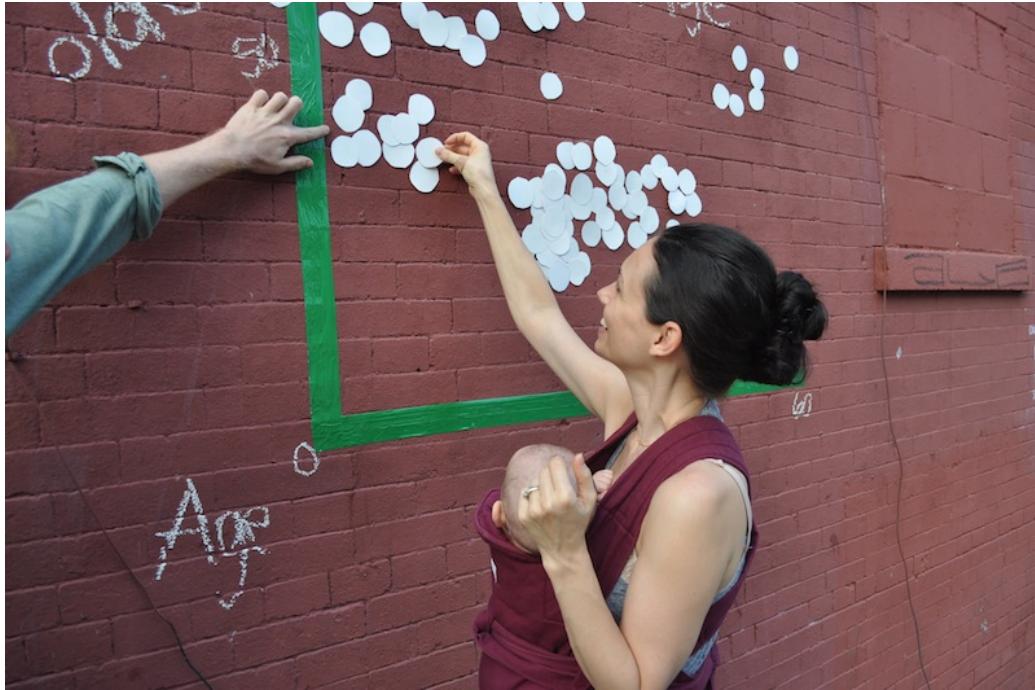
- How do residents of Crown Heights, a quickly changing neighborhood, respond to facilitated and non-facilitated public probes?
- What motivates someone to participate in public probes? What discourages someone?
- How do participants engage in the analysis of these public probes?
- How do participants shift from analyzing specific probing exercises to making larger cultural claims?

## Approach and Methodology

### *Participants*

Similar to the work I do with Sidewalk Assembly, the participants were those present and on the streets. Because most of the research was done through one day public interventions, participant groups were comprised of those walking by the intervention site. Through four different and carefully designed participatory mapping exercises, I aimed to engage passersby in varying sites throughout Crown Heights. I chose to hold the exercises at different locations to explore how setting influences a resident's decision to participate. In collecting data, I made sure to ask participants if they are indeed Crown Heights residents.

### *Participatory Mapping Exercises*



A Sidewalk Occupation by Sidewalk Assembly

As stated above, I carried out four different diagramming exercises throughout Crown Heights. With each mapping exercise, I brought in partners from the Laundromat Project, Project 2x1, and my own group Sidewalk Assembly to help source exercise materials and also to contribute to early brainstorm sessions. Each probe was a one day activity that aims to map one question. Here are the questions for the four:

Exercise 1: What are the iconic sites of the neighborhood? Can you map them in relation to other the other sites people have noted?

Exercise 2: Where else in New York did you live before moving to Crown Heights? Do you identify as an artist?

Exercise 3a and 3b: What is new and what is old in Crown Heights? Which parts of the neighborhood do you consider safe and unsafe?

Exercise 4: This exercise was determined by a resident and will be explained in later section.

Passersby were able to answer these questions using graphs, maps, chalk, colored tape, and paper. Starting with these questions, I want to encourage residents to analyze the graphs and make claims to larger hypothesis about the neighborhood. In each of these exercises, we were able to talk with somewhere between 30-50 participants during a 5 hour duration.

### Exercise 1

In this first exercise, we set up on the corner of St Johns and Franklin Avenue to ask residents which sites are iconic to the neighborhood. Because we were outside, we tried to arrange our exercise space so that it was approachable and could be clearly described as a site for play. We set up a table with a patterned cloth, brought cookies, and had a bubble making station.





As people would curiously walk past our setup, we would ask them to contribute their thoughts on a very minimal map (see image below). About 40 participants stopped to talk with us this day and each interaction ranged from 2 minutes to no more than 10 minutes. We gave participants index cards and markers to add what they deemed “iconic” to the map. Although participants asked us again and again how we would define iconic, we never offered our own definition. The goal of the exercise was to see in which sites participants place value and for what reasons.



After a participant wrote their “iconic” site on an index card, we asked them to place the card on the wall in relation to other participants’ answers. On the map, we only highlighted two major streets parallel streets --Fulton and Franklin. By the end of the day, we were left with an inaccurate map of the neighborhood, but one in which collage of key places were seen in relation to each other. Our favorite moments came when residents would see that other people had incorrectly mapped a site and would have to creatively work around a broken compass.

I want to make sure to highlight a significant reason why people stopped to participate was because of the bubble making station. This became the entry for a resident to participate in the intended activity. Families with children would almost always stop and while the kids played with the bubbles, the parents would contribute to the mapping exercise. My partner in this

exercise, Andy Ollove, even found himself bartering with passersby saying he'd trade time with the bubble wand for a contribution to the map.

### Exercise 2

For the second exercise, I teamed up with the Laundromat project to unpack the ways artists' migration around the city affects gentrification. What was meant to be an outdoor activity became impossible because of the weather. The temperatures had dropped from the last activity and as facilitators we were unwilling to stay outdoors for a long period of time let alone ask residents to stop for an outdoor conversation. We instead moved our activity indoors to a bookshop where we know the owner, and took turns asking customers to participate. Because we were now in a closed space, I felt as if I was pressuring people to participate. The freedom to engage or just walk past that is available to a passerby in public space disappears when you are in an enclosed space. I began to feel as if I was interrupting their book browsing experience, so we packed up and called it a day after about an hour and talking with only twelve participants.

Leaving this exercise, I felt compelled to find a way that an indoor mapping exercise could feel more inviting and less preying. Although I originally wanted to keep all of the activities outdoors, I knew the weather for the following exercise was not going to get any better and at least now I'd be better prepared to brainstorm ways in which an indoor activity could be successful.



### Exercise 3

For this mapping exercise, I teamed up with Project 2x1, a Google Glass documentary film group in Crown Heights. We hosted a two part mapping exercise at Medgar Evers College as part of a screening for their first Google Glass film.



What is **new** and what is **old**?

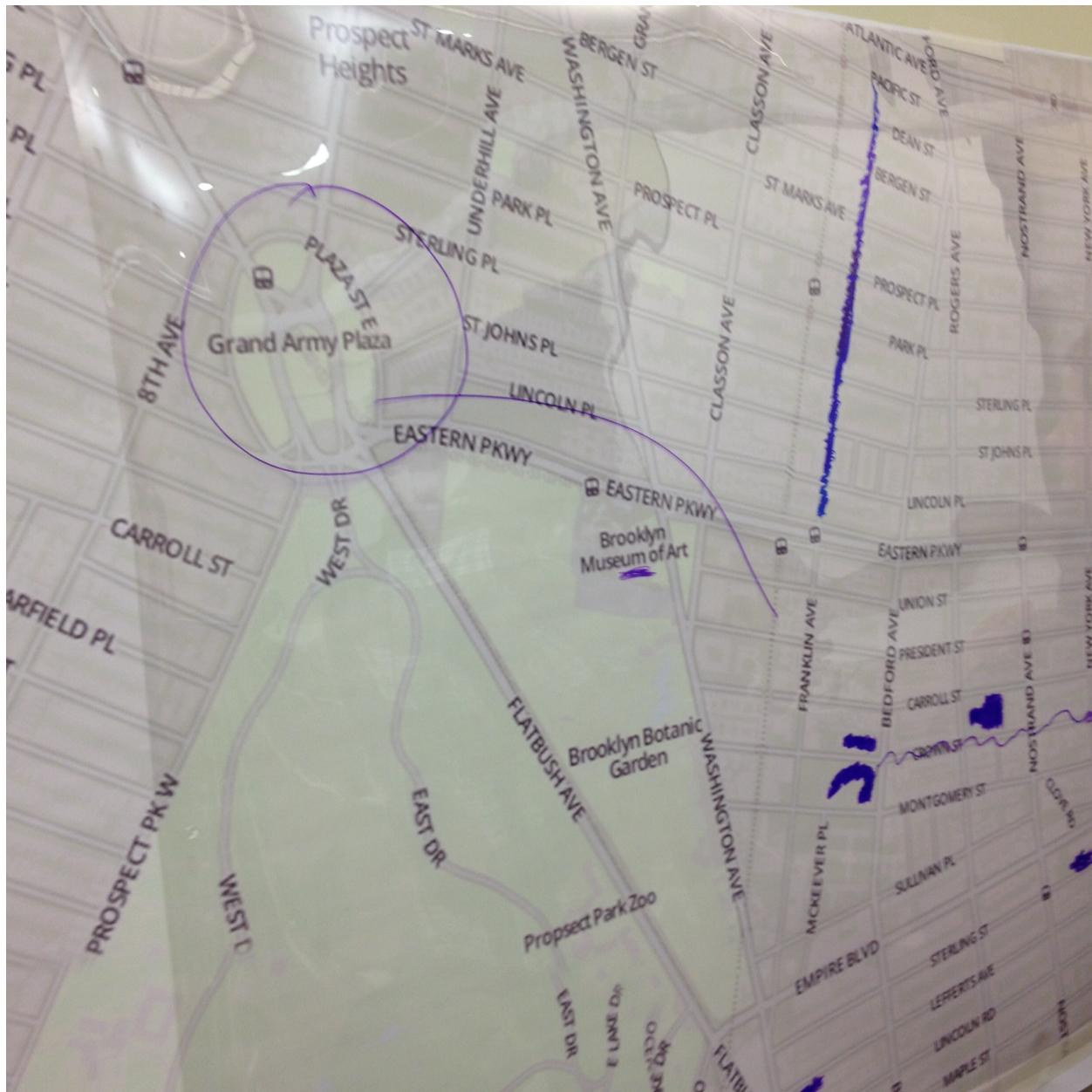


Where do you **hang out** and where do  
you **not hang out**?



I printed two large maps of Crown Heights and covered each with transparency film. For one of the maps we asked residents to outline the sites they consider new or old through a colored code. For the second, map we wanted residents to highlight the parts of the neighborhood in which they feel the most safe. But knowing the words “safe” and “unsafe” would be contentious and emotional, we had to be careful of the language we used. We carefully framed this question as, “Where do you hang out and where do you not hang out?” Again, this question was color coded.





Because this activity was done in conjunction with an already programmed event that was bringing a dedicated audience interested in having these conversations related to the health of Crown Heights, these mapping exercises were easier to facilitate indoors. Once we put up the maps and left out the markers, we did not have much else to do. We looked on as participants approached the map, filled in areas to answer the questions, and discussed the findings.

between each other. The exercise was set up in a manner that it was intuitive and encouraged discussion between members. The only part of this exercise that seemed to still need work was the framing of our second question. Residents could confidently highlight the areas where they hang out, but had a more difficult time annotating the map where they never hang out. As one participant asked, "What if I was marking blue over the guy behind me's house? That would be weird." Forming a question about safety in the neighborhood continues to be a very difficult endeavor and one in which another type of activity or workshop is necessary to formulate the appropriate wording.

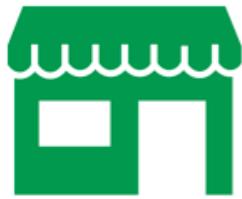
#### Exercise 4

Because up until this point all of the activities were constructed and facilitated by me and a organizational partner, I really wanted to find a way for a resident to take lead in a mapping exercise. Kameelah Janan Rahsheed, a printmaker and longtime Crown Heights resident asked me if she could partner with Sidewalk Assembly to ask residents where they feel the most loved in the neighborhood. We constructed an color code in which, residents could use chalk to fill in the tiles on Eastern Parkway with their responses. We envisioned that by the end of the day, we would have this beautiful mosaic on a stretch of the Parkway that visualized the places we give and receive love in the neighborhood.

# SIDEWALK ASSEMBLY

*featuring Kameelah Janan Rasheed*

**GREEN**  
business



**BLUE**  
religious center  
(Church, Synagogue,  
Mosque, Temple, etc)



**RED**  
home



**YELLOW**  
park



Unfortunately, when it came to the day we planned to host the activity, Kameelah became unavailable. We were left with the choice to either carry out the activity without her or reschedule. Because this was Kameelah's vision and it was really important to me to see someone new take charge of a mapping activity, we ultimately decided to reschedule. Although we were no longer going to carry out her activity, we did not want to waste what was a beautiful, sunny day, so Andy and I tried to quickly brainstorm another activity we could do on Eastern Parkway. Given the number of people who stop to sit and relax on the benches on the parkway, we thought an oral narrative station might be an interesting activity.





We brought out the same setup as in our first exercise (table, cookies, bubbles, etc). On the ground in front of our table, Andy wrote “Oral Narrative Station” in bright yellow chalk. Completely upfront, I want to say this activity was unsuccessful for a number of reasons. First, it was a total assumption that we could draw residents to sit with two strangers and share personal stories. Although our setup was just as inviting in previous exercises, to move residents to stop for a nondescript amount of time was asking too much. It also was not as playful as the previous exercises, which brings me to the second reason this was unsuccessful. This exercise lacked any real visual or tactile experience. Participants were not actively doing anything. You could argue that storytelling is active participation, but I do not think it compares to the handling of

physical materials that contribute to a larger picture. I think for this reason, the participation carried more weight and felt like more of a commitment. In the three hours we were set up outside, we only had four people stop to talk with us.

### *Open-Ended Exit Interviews*

After participants finished engaging in the above mapping exercise and have offered some analysis of the collected material, I tried to find a comfortable moment to shift the conversation towards a more reflexive evaluation of the exercise as a whole. I asked residents to elaborate on what they liked about the exercise, what did not work, and ways in which it can be improved. Through my own observation notes and notes collected from these casual interviews (see Appendix), I have developed seven considerations for those interested in this type of playful public probing:

#### **1. Placemaking**

Create a friendly, unintimidating venue for participants to contribute their ideas and opinions. Pay attention to the details. Try bringing in visual cues that show you as the facilitator are aware of the space you are inhabiting. As noted in earlier sections, we brought tablecloths with West African patterns and treats from favorite local bakeries. The exercises should feel like an impromptu street party meet census inquiry.

#### **2. Adaptability**

Not everything will go as planned, so make sure to plan for the unknowns. If the weather does not work in your favor, it might be better to reschedule your activity. If you decide to move it indoors, find ways to create flow within the enclosed space so that potential participants are able to assess from a distance whether or not they want to engage. The

more you can diffuse pressure in the setting, the more comfortable people will feel to participate indoors.

### **3. Partnering**

Organizing a mapping exercise in conjunction with an already planned event can work to your benefit in three ways. It guarantees an audience, this audience is more trusting because they are familiar with your partner, and those who participate will be more willing to do the extra step of analyzing the data. A partnership is also beneficial for the other party involved in facilitation because a mapping exercise is able to frame their work in a new and participatory way. In the exercise where we partnered with Project 2x1, a participant said she did not know if she would stop if she saw us on the street, but because there was an established social norm to the documentary screening, she knew to be prepared to have conversations around gentrification in the neighborhood. Inversely, if we caught her on her way to the grocery store she might not be as interested or willing to contribute her opinions.

### **4. Language**

This might be one of the more obvious considerations, but I want to make sure it is noted. When framing your prompts, make sure you are versed in the language already used to describe your site. Working in Crown Heights, I had to become aware that certain words are able to elicit negative reactions.

## **5. Participant Freedom**

Similar to point number two, make sure that you are engaging with your activity does not feel pressing or forced. You do not want passersby to feel like you are peddling a product. Become comfortable with people walking right past your activity and maintain an upbeat attitude. The more relaxed and fun you look, the more willing people will want to stop to talk with you. And when people do not stop to talk with you, consider the reasons why they did not. This is an opportunity to enhance your activity.

## **6. Transfer Tools**

Although I was unable to really test this point out myself, I still think it important to pass off facilitating duties. Share your resources and tools with former participants or those invested in your site to host their own mapping exercise. Everyone is an expert and can bring their own insights to how an activity can be successfully carried out. And because mapping exercises are more about process than arriving at a clear answer, learn from each other's methods.

## **7. Tactility**

Participants across all four mapping exercises agreed that an activity where there was something for participants to touch (ie. index cards, stickers, tape, makers) eased their involvement in the activities. A participant from Exercise 1 said that the activity itself could “almost be described as a distraction” from the real work of addressing where residents place value in the neighborhood. He did not mean “distraction” in a negative way, but rather that by participating in an informal exercise the labor he was exerting seemed less academic or serious and more amusing and genuine.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Although I hold my seven considerations to be very true to my experience hosting mapping exercises for this research, I think there is a lot of work still to be done. Considering I am basing these considerations on only four activities, this toolkit is not complete.

Because I hope to continue doing this work over the summer, I am going to partner with Shoestring Press, a printmaking lab in Crown Heights, to produce a zine that better illustrates this toolkit. Throughout Crown Heights, Bed Stuy, and Flatbush, I am seeing a greater number of public prompting done by individual artists and collectives. It would be ideal to collect everyone's experiences and advice into a document. In addition, it would be beneficial for us to start creating shared spaces in which we can incite thoughtful play in more collaborative ways that allow us to share resources.

For this project, my research was more focused on how to produce a mapping exercise that is engaging to those passing by. I would like to follow up with a research project on how these types of street interventions create interactions that spur others into action. This project made me realize that a follow up research project that's purpose is to articulate the usefulness of these types activities is necessary. I hope to include this work in the summer zine.

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