



Old Tech and New Spaces: Repurposing Payphones for Community Design

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Abstract

The Leimert Phone Company is an experimental community design collective based in South Los Angeles. Our goal is to shift from designing technology for a neighborhood by planning technology as part of the neighborhood. By repurposing unused payphones and other public furniture, our designs seek to reinforce the identity of the neighborhood and create new forms of civic engagement. The collective is run through workshop teams composed of university technologists, artists, and designers who work with local artists, musicians, and concerned citizens. Members bring a variety of knowledge sets that contribute to imagining alternative systems that are culturally specific to the historically black arts community of Leimert Park. Our workshops are structured around rapid-prototyping, embodied prototyping, radical accessibility, and speculative design. In this presentation, I'll explain the socio-cultural dynamics that inspired the collective, our methodology for maintaining a balanced participatory design process, and the impact the collective has had on reshaping public space and social relations in the neighborhood.

Keywords

Participatory Design, Social Art, DIY, Urbanism, Placemaking, Residue, Social Spaces, Speculative Design

Introduction: Alternative Systems

[Artist] invent new spheres of reference to open the way to a reappropriation and a resymbolization of the use of communication and information tools outside of the hackneyed formulae of marketing.

– Gilles Deleuze [1]

Modern neighborhoods are hybrids, emerging from the planning of physical space and increasingly digital layers of mediated communication. [2] The future of local communities may depend on the ability to plan their own technology, not just create content. As digital technologies permeate civic life and public space, the tension between top-down planning and local participation raises concerns about local empowerment. The possibility exists of planning technological systems that uncritically reproduce hegemonic or exploitative social relationships. [3]

Community participatory practices have developed in order to better address these socio-cultural concerns. [4] Yet current social models, including civic hackathons and community planning meetings, tend to privilege one kind of expertise at a time, at best designing a technology to address a community issue. The process rarely combines the user-centered methods of designing technology with explicit processes of community-centered negotiation.

Our community design collective, the Leimert Phone Company, seeks to address these issues through a nuanced methodology that develops technology from the bottom-up. Because our designs are centered in public space, they must be *radically accessible* in order to not exclude anyone nor exaggerate pre-existing spatial hierarchies through technology. Payphones and public furniture were ideal because of their simple usability, functionality, and pre-existing cultural significance. After two years of working together, we've discovered four major strategies for accessible and sensitive technological designs:

1. Sustain a Participatory Culture. Support a process that is playful and insistently open, feeding off the neighborhood's cultural practices. Specifically, we echo the criteria outlined for *participatory culture* by Henry Jenkins, et al., in *Participatory Culture*. This includes low barriers to participation and ensuring that all contributions are appropriately valued. [5]

2. Deepen a Neighborhood Story. The neighborhood identity has implications for economic development and civic engagement. Rather than presume to invent the grand narrative or avoid it, find a way to retell it that includes alternative visions. Begin by identifying the cultural assets that make the neighborhood distinct. Especially for historically marginalized neighborhoods, telling the story of "who we are" gives power and roles for local voices that lack elite technology skills.

3. Mix Technologies of Old and New. Frame the desired product as larger than any single technology, yet cheaper and more obvious than we might expect. For example, consider the role of "paper as mobile media."

Low-tech and low-cost shifts the conversation to planning the *social* side of socio-technical systems, and helps to build technology skills and confidence in design participants.

4. Rotate Institutions. A central practice of planning is to look beyond the most immediate users to consider all stakeholder groups, including non-users. Power relations between groups are at the heart of sustainability and equity concerns. To resist calcifying at one power hub, deliberately rotate the physical site of design, and recruit a rotating cast of institutional figures. (We alternate running workshops at USC and at the Kaos Network arts center in Leimert Park.)

Back Story: Prototyping Cultural Forms

Leimert Park has an exceptional cultural core and history. Yet, that identity is threatened with the next 5-15 years of projected growth and gentrification. [6] As a planned community developed in the 1920s, Leimert Park has a unique layout with a central plaza that is a perfect venue for festivals, events, and protests. [7] But the rich public space of the neighborhood is also ripe for redevelopment plans that come on the coattails of a recently proposed subway line.

Leimert Park is a beacon for African American culture and arts, whose residents have included Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, and former L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley. Filmmaker John Singleton calls Leimert “the black Greenwich Village.” [8] As South Los Angeles searches eagerly for urban development models, are there alternatives to the growing gentrification?

The most immediate limitation of tech-centric approaches is the equity of participation. Technical expertise is not evenly distributed. Concerns over the digital divide are replaced by a technological “participation gap”. [9]

So part of the process of incorporating technology was finding alternative methods of prototyping while teaching technical skills. Each step was incremental and playful. As Rita Raley claims in *Tactical Media*, these types of projects, “are not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event; rather they engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education.” [10]

The prototyping process was about teaching the logics of socio-technological systems as much as coding. Borrowing from game design theory, workshops were structured around rapid, paper-based prototyping. [11] Then groups would perform as the payphone itself, in order to work out an embodied sense of what the social relations around the payphones might look like. This type of *embodied prototyping* allowed the groups to quickly test the design before committing any materials to actual construction. It offers deep insights by engaging multiple senses of meaning making and observations on how social rituals might de-

velop around the design. Taking the performances further, teams also came up with more polished, *speculative design* videos called “scenarios.” Scenarios provide a compressed means for presenting short stories about the use of technological designs. [12] Much like the embodied prototyping, scenarios were a way to concretize multiple design concepts into an elegant example of the total user experience. In video form, scenario prototypes allowed teams to create speculative evidence of how their design would function.

The final group videos then were shown publicly as groups “pitched” their designs to interested community members and local stakeholders. This “pitchfest” was the first of a number of public exhibitions and events that we would hold. These events, which will be discussed in the “Final Designs” section, provide crucial feedback and dialogue within a larger social context. One of the major issues with community based art and design is the assumption that a community can have a singular, monolithic identity. [13] By constantly looking outward with each step of the designs, the collective engages with the complex, open identity of the Leimert Park Community.

Final Designs

Since the initial workshops, we’ve completed a number of designs and public interventions in Leimert Park. Our first finished payphone, the raspberry-pi powered “Sankofa Red”, was displayed in late 2013. In was a hybrid design that incorporated group concepts such as: a large speaker connected to a microphone and audio input for public performances, audio stories from local jazz legends, a cell phone charging station, and a digital display of local events. Through a class at USC (but open to Leimert Park residents), we moved beyond the payphone and created drum machine bus benches, digital archives in newspaper boxes, socially networked gardens, and a children’s public art display.



Figure 1. Workshops, public exhibitions, and the “Sankofa Red” payphone. Photos by ©Karl Baumann. Logo by ©Meryl Alper.

The later projects were exhibited during a public event in which we also collected signatures towards an application for a “pedestrian plaza” to permanently block off a street between the Kaos Network community art center and the central neighborhood park. The event and the application were a success and the pedestrian plaza has been constructed. Thus the collective is not merely centered on a single object but a larger project of building relationships, participatory infrastructure, and community capacity for shaping the future dynamics of public space in the neighborhood.

Acknowledgements

The Leimert Phone Company has a rotating membership of permanent and semi-permanent members across disciplines within the university as well as outside of the university. It is composed of communications, journalism, fine arts, and cinema students working with local artist, musicians, and community members. Many of the local artists are tied to Ben Caldwell and his Kaos Network arts center in Leimert

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3. Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 134.
4. Christopher A Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo, “Infrastructuring and the formation of publics in participatory design,” in *Social Studies of Science*, 43(2), (2013), 241.
5. Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice Robison, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media education for the 21st century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 13-14.
6. Erin Aubry Kaplan, “Leimert Park: Where Does It Go from Here?,” *KCET Departures*, November 20, 2013, accessed December 3, 2013, <http://www.kcet.org/social/departures/leimert-park/leimert-park-where-does-it-go-from-here.html>
7. Reginald Chapple, “From Central Ave to Leimert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles”, in *Black Los Angeles: American dreams and Racial Realities*, eds. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2010), 76.
8. Quoted in “Leimert Park,” *KCET Departures*, November 2013, accessed December 3, 2013, <http://www.kcet.org/social/departures/leimert-park/>
9. Jenkins, 15.
10. Raley, 1.

Park. Ben Caldwell is a cofounder of the collective, along with Prof. François Bar, Benjamin Stokes, and Karl Baumann. Often we run workshops at conferences, but our other core members couldn’t make this event due to scheduling conflicts. Parts of this document, particularly our four findings, are based on a recently published article, which is linked in the itemized list.

Itemized List

List of Additional Information on the Leimert Phone Company:

- Our recent “Neighborhood Planning of Technology: Physical Meets Digital City from the Bottom-Up with Aging Payphones” article in *The Journal of Community Informatics*: <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/1090>
- Our website with additional blog posts, videos, and information: <http://leimertphonecompany.net/>

11. Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* (Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufman Publishing, 2008), 181.

12. Giulio Iacucci and Kari Kuutti, “Everyday Life as a Stage in Creating and Performing Scenarios for Wireless Devices,” *Personal Ubiquitous Computing* 6, (2002): 302.

13. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 7.

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Author Biography

Karl Baumann is a digital artist, filmmaker, and scholar. His current work explores interactive and mobile media to navigate the complex layers of urban spaces. Karl's methodology is based on addressing complex social issues through immersive, participatory projects that explore the future of civic engagement, social networks, pedagogy, and public space.

After completing an MFA in Digital Arts and New Media (DANM) at UC Santa Cruz, Karl taught media literacy with the Boys and Girls Club and was active in Occupy Oakland. In addition to his locative and playable media projects, Karl has produced multiple award-winning documentaries and experimental videos, within the US and internationally. He is an Annenberg Fellow in the Media Arts Practice (MAP) PhD program at the University of Southern California. Karl is currently working with the Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) project, the World Building Media Lab (WBML), and the Annenberg Innovation Lab (AIL).