Interactive Placemaking

Anijo Punnen Mathew
Assistant Professor
IIT Institute of Design, Chicago

"Placemaking" is a term that architects and planners use to describe the process of creating urban spaces which attract people because they are pleasurable or interesting. Project for Public Spaces defines placemaking as a process that fosters the creation of vital public destinations: the kind of places where people feel a strong stake in their communities and a commitment to making things better. But today's urban citizen is a different social being. Hyper-mobile interactions, technology rich products, and disruptive social networks create unprecedented opportunities for citizens to create, share, cooperate, and take collective action. Digital tools are also changing the balance of participation and spectatorship among younger and more technologically savvy citizens of the city. With new mobile technologies, ubiquitous computing, sensor and actuation systems, becoming accessible and readily available, designers now have the ability to take what was once invisible to the naked eye and make it a visible part of the architecture of the street. As communities become more socially connected through technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare etc., these connections become the key element by which placemaking can happen. Interactive Placemaking redefines placemaking in the context of this new social connectivity. At the IIT Institute of Design, we are experimenting with experiential installations which serve as "constantly on" participatory environments for citizens to share, view, and collectively build on each other's ideas. These installations are playful, interactive, and have a portable component, they allow a diverse population to easily engage with information and participate in building place.

Here are two examples of interactive placemaking:

Art Loop Open, with the Chicago Loop Alliance, installed at Block37
Art Loop Open (ALO) is an innovative city-wide art exhibition designed with the intention of mobilizing the general public to engage with art, artists and each other. Modeled on the very successful ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Michigan, ALO had 200 unique pieces of art juried and exhibited across 13 different venues in the city of Chicago. The venues were selected from the 200+ merchants in the Loop district of Chicago and included high profile stations such as Macy's Flagship Store, the historic Palmer House Hotel, the Burnham Hotel, the Hard Rock Hotel, Merchandise Mart, among others. One of the primary motivations behind ALO was to integrate businesses in the Loop with art using technology as a mediating layer. Thus, the historic Loop district became an urban art experience and brought art into the open to communities who might not otherwise go to the art. In this manner, the Chicago Loop Alliance (CLA) used the city as a museum where people who come to shop could stop to view the art; and people who come to see the art could move into the Loop's many venues to shop and eat.

Over the course of Summer 2010, CLA worked closely with IIT Institute of Design to craft an innovative placemaking experience for ALO. The experience of ALO was based off two distinct technology experiences:

Located technologies at ALO included an arrayWall with all 200 pieces of art in the form of magnets which could be placed on Surface Tables that recognized the art, or posted onto a commentWall where people could leave comments, a pivotTable where you could search through the art, and a twitterWall which converts people's tweets into community art visualization.

Located technologies are interconnected in such a way that their specific location adds meaning to the interaction. Located technologies at ALO focused on crowd behavior and allowed for participative trajectories at a technology rich space like Hub37. Hub37 housed technologies such as Surface Tables, a TwitterWall, and an analog CommentWall. Located technologies allowed participants to learn more about the different art projects around the city as well as interact with other (co-located and non-co-located) participants in the experience. On the other hand, distributed technologies are non-located,

essentially distributed either in physical space or in virtual space. These technologies are intended to polarize non co-located people around specific interests. All art work was tagged with MS Tags as well as SMS which allowed the participants to vote and comment on their favorite pieces of art. The tags allowed the participants to query for more information and interact with other participants (both co-located and non-co-located) through comments and Tweets.
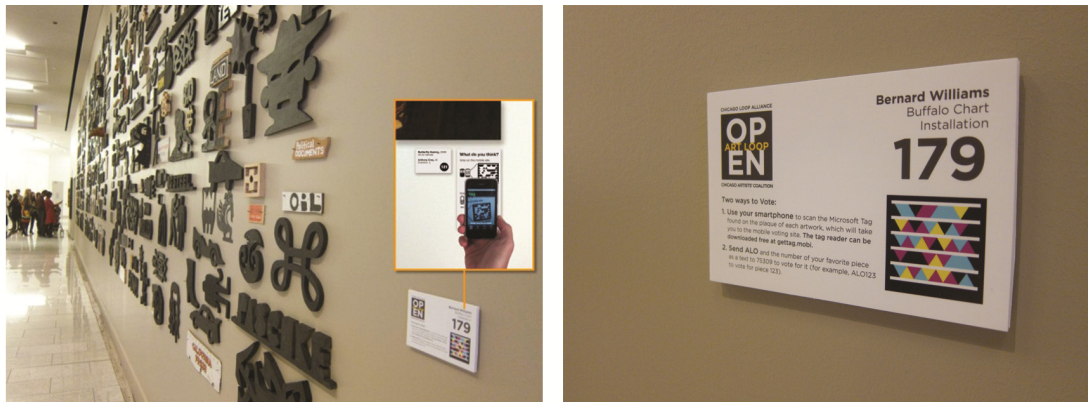
Distributed technologies at ALO allowed participants to use MS Tag technology to identify the artwork, read descriptions, comment on the art, as well as vote for their favorite pieces of art.

Zero Zero, for the Chicago Loop Alliance, installed at the Sullivan Center
The intersection of State and Madison is the center of the addressing scheme for the city of Chicago and has been so since 1909 when this new system was implemented. With its iconic architecture and urban significance, State and Madison is a prime placemaking opportunity. State and Madison at one time used to be the busiest intersection in the world and even today has a large pedestrian traffic. Chicago Loop Alliance worked with IIT Institute of Design to design a unique placemaking experience for ZeroZeo.

The ZeroZero installation has two embodiments: a physical one and a virtual one. ZeroZero's physical embodiment was designed into the corner windows of Louis Sullivan's most recognized designs, the Sullivan Center (or the Carson Pirie Scott building). The window installation consists of a sculpture, an iconic world map, and instructions on the windows. ZeroZero's virtual embodiment consists of a website and a mobile page. At the website, one can read about the history of State and Madison, and contribute to the place by adding an address anywhere in the world and describing why it is important to him/her. The website then uses a Google Maps API to pull an image from the address entered and add it to a database. The visualization pulls all of these images to show the many different stories of people who have interacted with ZeroZero – not just location, but also the place narratives.

ZeroZero's front end experience showed that people were willing to add their place narratives – in the end 2344979 blocks were traveled. But its integrative power comes from its back end tracking. By tracking place information, we are able to track where people on State Street were coming from – not just through quantitative metrics (which we were able to derive from Google Maps) but also through

qualitative metrics (through the descriptions that they add to the story they share). Moreover, no identifying information was asked for, no login was required, no names or identification data had to be provided during the interaction. Any information provided was purely voluntary and with the knowledge that it would be shared among others visiting the interface. This meant that CLA could take the data and use it both at a macro aggregate level (were the users primarily tourists or residents?) or at a micro specific level (what makes certain places valuable for people?).

ZeroZero had two embodiments – a physical embodiment using a sculpture, a stylized world map with Chicago as it's center, and instructions on the window of Sullivan Center; and a virtual embodiment where people could add their own place narratives into a compilation of narratives.

About Prof. Anijo Mathew:

Anijo Punnen Mathew is an Assistant Professor at IIT Institute of Design. His research interests fall within two broad categories: a scholarship of pedagogy—developing strategies for companies to adapt and change as we move from an industrial economy into an information economy, and a scholarship of research—evaluating new semantic appropriations of place as enabled by new technology and media convergence. Anijo has a Master of Design Studies (MDesS) from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and a professional Bachelor of Architecture (BArch) from Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, Ranchi (India). Prior to joining ID, he was a tenure track assistant professor at Mississippi State University's College of Architecture, Art, and Design (CAAD) where he taught in the graduate program and led the interaction design track at the Design Research and Informatics Lab (DRIL). He is currently completing a PhD exploring the intersection of computing and design with Yvonne Rogers and Peter Lloyd at the Open University in the U.K.

Anijo has consulted with and/or conducted research for the City of Chicago, Hyatt, Hong Kong Design Centre, Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority/River One, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Tribune, Motorola Mobility, Gensler, Godrej & Boyce, Gravity Tank, Chicago Loop Alliance, Chicago Artists Coalition, and the Chicago Architecture Foundation. His projects have been exhibited at the National Museum of Mexican Art and the Old Town School of Folk Music, installed in Chicago's City Hall, Cultural Center and on State Street. He has published in international conferences, and has been recognized by PSFK, IxDA, and IDEO. In 2007 the Architectural Research Centers Consortium (ARCC) selected Anijo as their New Researcher of the Year for 2006-07. His research has led to experience design for the City of Chicago's 2012 cultural plan, events such as Art Loop Open, and the re-branding of Chicago's State Street. He has served as a design chair for CHI 2009 and 2010, the premier conference of Association for Computing Machinery (ACM)'s Special Interest Group on Computer Human Interaction (SIGCHI) and on the board of directors of the Association of Computing Aided Design in Architecture (ACADIA). He currently serves on the Digital Task Force of the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) and is a member of the Placemaking Advisory Board of the Chicago Loop Alliance.

For more information about Interactive Placemaking and how your organization can employ such experiences, contact:

Anijo Punnen Mathew
Assistant Professor
Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology
350 N.Lasalle St., Chicago, IL 60654
Ph: 312-595-2213, Email: anijo@id.iit.edu