

**Narrative Report on the Digital Environmental Atlas of New York City (City Atlas)
Submitted by the CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities at Hunter College
2010 CIF 313**

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Executive Summary

This report outlines progress made on the development of City Atlas from October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012, with notes on developments continuing up to the present.

The Research Foundation of the City University of New York (RF CUNY) administered this grant for the City University of New York Institute for Sustainable Cities (CISC) at Hunter College based on the agreement between the RF CUNY and the Rockefeller Foundation. There was one sub-award to the project, Artist As Citizen (AAC). The City Atlas project was funded at \$100,000 by the 2010 Cultural Innovation Award and the contract agreement runs from October 1, 2010 until September 30, 2012.

This report specifically covers progress made in achieving milestones, lessons learned throughout our work process, and challenges we overcame while creating the Atlas for the second year of the agreement: October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012.

City Atlas is a user's guide to a sustainable New York. We provide event listings to inform and introduce the public to a sustainable lifestyle, and we produce written content that brings attention to various initiatives blossoming in the city. Our interview section includes a growing list of innovators and leaders from various fields, each discussing their hopes for the future of New York.

There are three broader functions of City Atlas:

- A new way to educate the public about climate change, by blending ideas about the future into the activities of everyday life. We show how 'lived culture' can help the city adapt and become more resilient.
- A new platform for prominent New Yorkers, experts, and ordinary people to talk about their ideas for the future of the city.
- A new educational brand that can be cloned to cities around the world. (We have a test site in Barcelona, and there is team developing a test in San Francisco.)

Over 81 designers, contributors and interns have worked on City Atlas since inception, and

contributors and interns have come from schools across the metro region and beyond, including CUNY, NYU, SVA, SUNY, Parsons, Cooper Union, Yale, Columbia, the University of British Columbia and the University of New Mexico. Four students from Stuyvesant High School have also worked on City Atlas.

The written content for the New York site is produced by rotating teams of interns working at CISC; creative elements like photographs and interactive programming are provided by Artist As Citizen, and both non-profits share in the direction of the site. Over the past year, we've created managing editor positions, for which interns receive a stipend from AAC. The project manager position receives a stipend from CISC.

Donations and in-kind support include Richard Reiss's work as creative director (pro bono), and CISC's provision of office space at Hunter. AAC received a \$7500 grant from the Irvin Stern Foundation in June, 2012, and matched it with additional funds to provide a \$15,000 resource for summer content production, photography, and the managing editor position. A second donation is expected in March of 2013.

We are interviewing development consultants now to help us create ongoing and stable fundraising methods, build an advisory board, and help the project grow. Because City Atlas is built with teams of interns, it is a very efficient return on investment.

Milestones:

City Atlas contains 752 posts to date. Between September, 2011 and September, 2012, more than 25,000 people visited the site.

The article with highest traffic is our interview with Michael Bierut, designer at Pentagram; this interview was retweeted by DesignObserver.com, reaching over 570,000 followers, and then was shared virally. More than 2000 have read the piece. Among the dozens of Twitter responses came this compliment: "One of the best things I've read on design in a long time." (This came from a faculty member at BDWCU, the noted digital design program of the University of Colorado at Boulder.)

We've also had articles retweeted by MoMA/PS1, the Guggenheim, and the President of Uruguay (whom we featured in a post because of his own views on sustainability).

Other benchmarks from 2012:

- The addition of a temperature widget to the site, on the upper left corner of the homepage, showing today's temperature against the historical average for the day (measured from the beginning of record-keeping in 1876).

- Feedback from readers, participants, and interviewees, including Projjal Dutta, Director of Sustainability for the MTA:

“City Atlas is a great project. The wide-ranging and growing set of interviews have added interest and legitimacy to the discussion of sustainability in New York, and I’ve been sending the URL of my interview to new colleagues, as a way to describe what it is that I do. Thanks for capturing my work and packaging it so wonderfully!”

...and Maria Iosha, senior at Stuyvesant High School:

“City Atlas is really refreshing to me because it collects ideas, thoughts, events, projects, and people who care and who are willing to make a difference, or who have already made one. I’m excited to be in on the action, to get up off my posterior and go out and change someone, somewhere, somehow, soon! I want to be part of this movement because it affects me!”

Academic collaboration:

Laura Sansone, a design professor at Parsons, brought City Atlas to her first year design studio at Parsons in fall 2012, with eight interdisciplinary teams of new students working on City Atlas-themed investigations of neighborhoods in New York. Their projects will be presented on the site in coming weeks.

Public installation and participation with New Museum:

We plan to continue our street presence in collaboration with existing projects in order to combine resources and audiences. Until we can secure additional funding, our early plans for a custom installation (with initial proposal by architects Arnaldur Schram and Ouida Biddle) will remain on the shelf, because it’s more efficient to join forces.

Through 2012, City Atlas was represented at New York City greenmarkets by Laura Sansone’s Textile Lab project, which is an Atlas Lab project of ours, and is branded with the City Atlas logo. (Laura also distributes our card.) In the South Bronx, Kaja Kuhl’s Field Lab also carries the City Atlas logo. Our hope is to continue to fund micro-projects and be able to link the awareness of the projects together across the city.

In addition, we submitted ideas for the next New Museum Festival, IDEAS CITY, which will take place May 1 - 4 in lower Manhattan. Our City Atlas booth concept for the festival has been approved by the New Museum and we are excited to participate.

Objectives going forward:

Apart from acquiring funds to allow us to continue City Atlas, our most important goal is to raise the visibility of the project, to bring the value of our discussion to the broadest group of people possible. Among the audience-oriented strategies we have in progress are these two programs:

- Refining an interactive map with events

Our aim is to increase daily usefulness by streamlining and improving our events listings, and delivering them via our new interactive map. They will be capable of sorting by category and by geography. We seek an emphasis on usability for people with common interests: things to do with kids on a weekend, or information about bike routes, for example, which have been common requests. We also plan to create mobile apps to make listings accessible on more devices.

- Expanding range of interviews

We plan to leverage our content in association with institutions and individuals that are already highly visible in New York. This draws traffic, creates awareness, and provides a space for people who have achieved prominence in many fields in New York to talk about their hopes for the city. The long term potential is to make City Atlas the center of a New York conversation about the future.

2012 interviews include Christine Gaspar (CUP), Mary Miss, and physicist Klaus Lackner (Columbia Earth Institute). Interviews being edited now for early 2013: Claire Weisz (designer of the East River Blueway and Transmitter Park), Marielle Anzelone (botanist and New York Times writer), and Curtis Ravenel (Director of Sustainability, Bloomberg LP).

Lessons learned from our first two years:

A compelling lesson from our first two years is how the 'sustainability community' is a relatively small subset of a larger group of communities in New York. Through two years of following organizations, covering events, and conducting interviews, we've developed a fairly comprehensive overview of the sustainability scene, which is vibrant -- but overlapped and supported by cultural communities that are larger and more powerful (the art world, the tech scene, the music scene, and universities).

Twitter followers are an easy measurement of popularity, and can give a sense of proportion between these public worlds: Treehugger, the largest green blog, has 208,000 followers. The design blog DesignObserver.com has 572,000 followers. The Guggenheim Museum has 716,000, the chef Bobby Flay has 763,000, the blog TechCrunch has 2,568,000, and the singer Alicia Keys has 11,063,000 followers.

The most important goal in reaching the public is to actually reach them. Our aim should bend towards this larger public -- and to begin to engage a socially relevant number of people in both using City Atlas, and joining our dialogue about the future. What is most valuable is not only the traffic per se, but the crossover potential of bringing the subject of the city and sustainability into much, much larger circles that do not already have an exclusive focus on environmental issues. Bridging out from the insular world of 'sustainability' to these larger circles -- which are already sympathetic to the aims of City Atlas (and have begun to exchange social media and content with us) -- would allow us to catapult to much greater readership.

The better we can make our product (event listings, articles, interviews, experiments) the faster widespread adoption can happen. New interns are now given strategic grounding in how to write for an online audience via research from the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard. Writing online is a double-edged sword. Because the transaction cost is low, it's relatively easy to build a project like City Atlas, but there is a torrent of competing content. To reach the public, we should learn from every example, from the nytimes.com to buzzfeed.com. Our strongest tools are the subject area (the future of the city, particularly post-Sandy), and our method of marrying a creative perspective and fresh writing talent to a discussion of the city and sustainability. This recipe has also been appealing to teams in other cities that have opened discussions with us to clone the brand.

Lessons learned from new research:

The concept for City Atlas began with a thorough review of research on how to communicate about climate change, including the comprehensive 2006 report from the British government titled "I will if you will," and the 2010 essay in *Nature* by Dan Kahan of the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale, "Fixing the communications failure."

URLs for source pdfs --

"I will if you will" (Sustainable Development Commission, UK Government)

http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/data/files/publications/I_Will_If_You_Will.pdf

"Fixing the communications failure" (Kahan)

http://www.artistascitizen.org/Atlas/Fixing_Communications.pdf

The basic principles of both pieces of research are that people perceive reality not through facts, but through emotions and relationships.

As a result, people can accept the kind of fundamental social and economic changes required for sustainability not because of scientific information presented, but only when they see other people changing. Particularly when they see people they identify with, or look up to, changing in a genuine way. People also respond best to a positive view of the

benefits of their own actions. We designed City Atlas on the basis of this research and similar studies, and the principles behind it have been borne out by subsequent reports and our own experiences.

The larger purpose of City Atlas is to educate and motivate the public, and to help prepare the way for the kinds of deep economic and behavioral changes necessary for society to adapt and flourish in coming decades. City Atlas exists as a resource to be developed and harnessed for that purpose, and so research from the broader arena of national climate politics is important for us to learn from as well.

On the national level, two reports on U.S. climate politics have just been released, and they put new emphasis the value of communication initiatives like City Atlas. One paper is from a Harvard political scientist, Theda Skocpol ("[Naming the Problem.](#)" January 2013), and the other is from Yale Law School student Nathaniel Loewentheil ("[Of Stasis and Movements: Climate Legislation in the 111th Congress.](#)" January 2013).

URLs for source pdfs --

Skocpol:

http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/skocpol_captrade_report_january_2013_0.pdf

Loewentheil:

<http://isps.yale.edu/research/publications/isps12-020-0#.URrf51petek>

Loewentheil summary:

http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/ssn_key_findings_loewentheil_on_climate_legislation_and_the_111th_congress.pdf

Both reports find that without a broad base of commitment, climate change initiatives like carbon tax proposals will be rejected by Congress, leaving U.S. policy paralyzed at the national level.

In brief, the writers find that the absence of outreach and education doomed the recent multiyear, very expensive and ambitious campaign to establish cap and trade.

As Theda Skocpol puts it:

"Reformers will [now] have to build organizational networks across the country, and they will need to orchestrate sustained political efforts that stretch far beyond friendly congressional offices, comfy board rooms, and posh retreats."

Nathaniel Loewentheil presents a critique of the "inside-the-beltway" strategy relied on in the past by environmental groups, and the absence of a coherent, consistent effort to educate and engage the public on the scale necessary to have an impact, as resources were instead concentrated on DC lobbying and legislation:

"None of the key environmental members of the [USCAP] coalition -- [EDF, NRDC, Pew,

Nature Conservancy] -- are focused on public opinion, public relations or even public education...none have programs explicitly focused on educating the public or shifting public opinion, with the one exception of high school education program run out of the Nature Conservancy...Just as the key institutions in the reform effort ignored public communications, so too did they largely overlook grassroots organizing, underestimating its importance for successful policy change.”

Theda Skocpol duplicates that point in her report:

“Ordinary American citizens and street-level activists were not presumed to have an interest in or a need to know about the “how” of anti-warming legislation; they were just supposed to be persuaded to endorse the general principle of a legislative solution to a pressing problem.

This division of labor in the cap and trade effort – insiders work out legislation, pollsters and ad-writers try to encourage generalized public support – reflects the way most advocates and legislators in the DC world proceed nowadays. ‘The public’ is seen as a kind of background chorus that, hopefully, will sing on key.

It all has a very distanced, antiseptic quality to it...”

We are reminded again of the importance of projects like City Atlas. In particular, we think the chemistry we have set in place, where young people can participate in developing the communications methods to reach their peers and the broader public themselves, has tremendous potential to serve as a catalyst, and to create a positive feedback loop in moving the public dialogue forward.

We also make a distinction between what we do, in terms of education and dialogue, and what an advocacy group like 350.org is built to do, in terms of delivering the public activism that Skocpol and Loewentheil also recommend. Both roles are needed; what is often lacking in activism campaigns alone however, is a sense of what a successful future might actually look like once society responds to the climate challenge. We believe that is the most powerful narrative we can offer, and that it is essential to building the level of public trust that makes change possible.

From these lessons, can City Atlas serve as a pilot for new ways to engage the public?

Both papers point to the essential role a project like City Atlas can perform. Skocpol quotes sociologist Robert Brulle, who has studied how opponents of climate legislation have actually used their own resources to greater effect than the environmental movement, at

times with even less money:

“Brulle estimates...[opponents have spent] less over recent decades than the amounts spent in support of environmental efforts. ‘It’s the nature of the spending that makes the difference,’ he explains. The environmental movement ‘actually tries to spend its money on developing solutions to climate change...[but] spends hardly anything on political or cultural processes.’”

Beyond City Atlas, the idea of creating a regional communications incubator:

Reading the reports, and based on our own experiences with City Atlas, one wonders if a more efficient and dynamic ongoing system of innovation workshops, specifically designed for the role that the two reports see missing, could be devised. Bearing in mind that communicating to the public about climate is a time-sensitive aim, and that succeeding next year would be better than waiting five years to succeed, which in turn would be better than waiting another ten years to succeed -- this suggestion is a hypothetical, and described here only in the interest of sharing ideas that can speed this process up.

By direct experience we know that there is tremendous interest among bright, talented young people to engage with the subject of climate change and public communications. At the same time, structured advocacy campaigns, like 350.org, offer little access for gifted, young entrepreneurial outsiders. (The traditional environmental groups offer even less access.) And, because of the fragmentation of current youth culture, until recently, we found that college-age interns often had not even heard of 350.org. This may have been because they did not see themselves as ‘activists,’ or as joiners ‘involved with the issue,’ while at the same time they were concerned and wanted a way to creatively engage.

To overcome the regional resistance to environmental issues astutely described in Loewentheil’s paper, projects like City Atlas could be independently developed in several cities, allowing each to speak in its own voice. The basic ingredients are a university connection, a science/research partner, and a coordinating team to provide a framework for the labor pool of interns.

The economic resources at work on cap and trade were substantial: the major environmental organizations have annual budgets of \$100 million and up, and together represent over a billion dollars of institutional wealth. Given that most of the creative community of the United States is sympathetic to their aims, it’s ironic that they couldn’t get their message out to the public in a less antiseptic manner, to use Skocpol’s term. But communications was not their primary strategy, and a review of those choices is better found in her paper and Loewentheil’s report. A series of City Atlas-type projects, built to engage a much larger group of young people, and ultimately reach the entire citizenry,

would cost less than 5% of the cumulative budgets dedicated to the failed effort at cap and trade.

We are left thinking about what an effective “cultural process” (to use Robert Brulle’s term) would look like. In looking for organizations that have a greater draw for young people’s enthusiasms than the traditional environmental groups, it is intriguing to compare to the Sundance Institute, which operates on comparatively miniscule budget of \$26 million. One outcome is the film “Beasts of the Southern Wild.”

It’s not only financial support that Sundance offers, but expert advice and persistence. In a recent interview with the New York Times, the film’s producer Dan Janvey said that “Beasts of the Southern Wild” would not remotely be what it is without Sundance. “Once they take on a film, they will nurture it through its completion. And that’s an unbelievable level of commitment.”

The Sundance Festival itself -- separate from the institute -- receives about 3000 submissions a year. Win or lose, each film entered probably averages more than 50 years of cumulative work by the team that created it. The winning slate of films at the festival is selected from about 150,000 person-years of collective effort. That’s one way to gauge a dynamic cultural process. How to begin enlisting that level of creative energy is a valuable challenge to take up.

Having a cultural impact is hard to predict and hard to accomplish, but like it or not the fate of the planet is still disproportionately in U.S. hands (as Skocpol points out in a closing statement, below). Because of that, it is particularly important for American initiatives to think deeply about communication and be prepared to take risks with new ideas.

“The United States stands increasingly alone in the advanced industrial world in its unwillingness to fully acknowledge the threat of global warming, let alone use government to do anything systematic about it, and the consequences are global in scope. As journalist Ron Brownstein explains, ‘it will be difficult for the world to move meaningfully against climate disruption if the United States does not.’”

All terms of the Grant Agreement between the Rockefeller Foundation and the Research Foundation of the City University of New York have been met in compliance.

Signed:

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