Spatial Stories in Northern Manhattan

"I urge you," Cantal continued, "to find the paths to the rivers and to recreate those paths…to celebrate your ancestors and the way they lived."

"Tamanika Howse stopped me at that point. "You mean to tell me my community is dead?" she asked accusingly. I was terrified by the look in her eyes. If I did mean that, I wanted to take it back."

Mindy Fullilove, *Urban Alchemy: Restoring Joy in America's Sorted Out Cities* (New Village Press: New York, 2013), p.59 and 58

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The comparatively recent resurgence of community engagement in architecture and architectural education has produced a host of methodologies and techniques for approaching unloved spaces and addressing populations traditionally under- or poorly served by architecture.[1] The opportunity to take stock of these techniques is a chance to compare them to their precedents in Event Art and community activism, both different manifestations of the productive dissatisfaction that characterized the late 1960s and 1970s. The loose contemporary use of the term "Participatory Design", with its roots in Human Computer Interaction research in Scandinavia, deserves equal scrutiny. But it also begs the question of whether any of those methodologies are inherently "architectural" – or how architecture's contribution can compare to a methodological approach derived from sociological practice or to ephemeral event or installation art.

Dr. Mindy Fullilove's book, quoted above, documents her undertakings to restore urban communities progressively destroyed by the practices around "urban blight." Through desigNYC, a New York-based not-for-profit that matches designers and not-for-profits, we worked from January, 2013 to October, 2014, with CLIMB (City Living is Moving Bodies), a group co-directed by Dr. Fullilove, Professor of Public Health at Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, and Lourdes Rodriguez, Program Officer at New York State Health Foundation. It is dedicated to the revitalization of Northern Manhattan's most easterly parks. The quotations correspond to two aspects of the "urban alchemy" described by Dr. Fullilove and central to our collaboration: the recognition of a spatial story's power to affect the strength and health of a community, and the

surprisingly indirect communication lines along which diverse cohorts can contribute to that recognition.

On the basis of our work with CLIMB, our paper suggests architecture's unique contribution is its capacity to locate that story and communicate it *within the spaces at stake*.

EVENT ART, HAPPENINGS AND COMMUNITY WORK

The history of art and design as social catalysts is complex, but one definitive shift from artifact to explicitly social, participatory occurrence is allied to the politicization of everyday life in the late 1950s and 60s. From Alan Kaprow's "Happenings" to Fluxus' Food restaurant in Soho to Ant Farm's DIY videos or pick-up truck university, the era's art production showed disciplines how visual culture offered techniques, outcomes and effects with which to include people outside the usual audiences. More earnest inclusionary work was done by architects and schools of architecture in support of Community Development Corporations, first created by an amendment sponsored by Senators Robert Kennedy and Jacob Javits to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act; Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Development (PICCED), founded the same year under the directorship of Ron Shiffman, is the oldest university-based CDC in the US. Using the visualization techniques of architecture and urban design coupled with participatory meetings and outreach education, such organizations as PICCED (now PCCD) proved the efficacy of visual practice and design as tools of political advocacy (Pratt Center Story, accessed September 16, 2013).

Event Art, Fluxus and such Neo-Avantgardists as Ant Farm have been lionized by recent exhibitions and publications as part of the resurgent art historical interest in the 1960s. Their advocacy contemporaries have garnered less attention, perhaps because their "design" quotient is less obvious. They are nonetheless valuable and understudied precedents for engaged architectural practice.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND ITS ROOTS IN IT RESEARCH IN SCANDINAVIA

The phrase Participatory Design was first used in the Human Computer Interaction (HCI) field in the 1970s. As the *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* describes, "Participatory design is about the direct involvement of people in the co-design of the technologies they use. Its central concern is how collaborative design processes can be driven by the participation of the people affected by the technology designed." This approach has its roots in 1970s Information Technology (IT) research in Scandinavia, some of the least hierarchical countries in the world. Participatory design aimed to increase workers' participation in how the design and use of computer applications affected them. The first example was the Norwegian Iron and Metal Workers Union in which IT researchers and union workers collaborated to improve working conditions through the use of computers; both parties became stakeholders and beneficiaries of the research (Bodker 2009, 276). The Florence Project, conducted between 1984 to 87 by the Institute of Informatics at University of Oslo and State Hospital of Oslo initiated a series of participatory design efforts in healthcare. High on the project's agenda was to elicit input from female nurses whose voices were often suppressed by those of more skilled male colleagues (Kensing and Greenbaum, 29).

By definition, CLIMB's desire to draw out its constituency shares similarities with these studies. When the residents of areas near the parks partake in community input activities, they become stakeholders and are more likely to invest

themselves in the projects' success, an effect well known in the social sciences. This approach to expanding the users' stake in their workplace (or parks and institutions) has parallels in the design of architecture. As the Scandinavian IT researchers did for the workers who ultimately used the software, architects can actively assist the client in reflecting upon their spatial interactions.

One of the primary insights offered by Dr. Fullilove's books is the importance of the physical, spatial context of social interactions, even if that space is only vaguely or subconsciously registered. The charrettes and workshops we designed foregrounded the spatial context of CLIMB's cohort, drawing out insights anchored in the physical world that will make for active users/occupants in the long run.

DESIGN THINKING

By the early 1990s, the disparate threads of IT, post-war Avant Garde and visual communication for community activism were entangled with what had been designated "design thinking." In a Neo-Liberal twist on the enthusiastic conflation of art and life, innovation and creativity are now marketed as a proprietary consulting methodology that conjoins a "human centered" approach to the capacity for business "growth" by "uncovering latent needs, behaviors, and desires." (Ideo.com accessed 9.19.13). The business community's acknowledgement that risk-taking and creativity have now been outsourced should ratify design culture's validity. Instead, it seeks to make repeatable methodologies out of art and architecture's potential to act inclusively, focusing on ensuring that companies will "innovate without interruption to drive growth and profitability" (Turnali 2013).

In many corporate conference rooms, the Post-it and Sharpie have become the sine qua non of design engagement. "Public art" struggles to innovate when its techniques have been appropriated as a fixed consulting repertoire. As design threatens to become saturated with facile symbolism, what should architecture contribute, beyond the clichéd workshops? As we worked to understand the value of our contributions to a group of clients well versed in the human centric and participatory practices of urban public health, both physical and psychological, we were cautious to foreground our essential goal: to capture the spatial context and its significance for CLIMB's cohort.

WORKING WITH CLIMB

CLIMB is founded on the belief that safe parks and neighborhoods are essential to community health. Its mission is to enhance the physical, social, psychological and economic health of deprived neighborhoods by re-integrating a series of parks into everyday life (CLIMB report 2007, 1). Advocating for Northern Manhattan's economically and culturally diverse communities, CLIMB is comprised of an equally diverse group of individuals and organizations. This area includes Washington Heights and Inwood's 71% Hispanic and 17% African American population, and Morningside Heights and Harlem, which are 67% African American and 20% Hispanic (CLIMB report 2007, 4) within a total population of ca. 530,000. This area suffered from 'planned shrinkage' in the 1970's where the city shut down fire stations in poor neighborhoods and let them burn down. This caused population displacement and triggered epidemics of AIDs, crack cocaine, mental illnesses, and related violence. (Fullilove 2013, 16-17). CLIMB formed out of a group of social and medical scientists studying the impact of such illnesses, division, and neglect suffered by these residents.

Although CLIMB is led by public health experts and promotes the parks as a means of maintaining physical and mental fitness, it does not communicate its mission overtly. There is no preaching about obesity or bad eating habits; rather, the focus is on taking back spaces and reinforcing the identity of the archipelago of parks as a shared physical and social asset. This attitude is reflected in the name CLIMB gave to the trail unifying the parks: the Giraffe Path. The name derives from the parks' outline on a map, with Fort Tryon Park at the north as the giraffe's head, followed by its neck - Highbridge Park, Jackie Robinson Park, St. Nicholas Park, Morningside Park - ending with Central Park at the south.

The most visible, ambitious event that CLIMB organizes is the annual Hike the Heights, in which thousands of residents walk from six different starting points along the Giraffe Path, culminating in a party in High Bridge Park. For the "Parade of Giraffe" organized by Creative Arts Workshops for Kids, one of CLIMB's partners, school children make giraffes that are displayed along the path.

When CLIMB submitted their application to desigNYC, they had recognized the need to consolidate the path's identity. The design collaborators, led by two teams of architects and educators, Aki Ishida and Lynnette Widder, and Kaja Kühl, agreed to 1) run a series of charrettes and workshops, including a laboratory for community input during the annual event; 2) design a hiking path map to foreground the unique identities of these parks; 3) provide a concept design of physical markers and connections to be installed in city streets and parks; and 4) assist CLIMB in seeking ways to identify and enhance those park features that are distinct from other iconic parks in Manhattan such as Central Park and the Highline.

WALKING IN SEARCH FOR PARKS' IDENTITY

We began our work with a cold February walk through the parks from top to bottom. At the first charrette shortly thereafter, CLIMB's key members each contributed ten printed photos of their favorite places or items along the Giraffe Path, which were then located on a large printed map of the trail. Seeing the photos together allowed us to identify six spatial categories of primary features: Topography, Vista, Nature, Historical Reference, Infrastructure, and Microclimates. This process revealed that defining the parks' shared identity was no less significant than the map. CLIMB had asked for help in "making the path": a clear identity would in turn 'make' the path, first psychologically, then physically. We noted that the Latin root of the word identity is *identitās*, which means to repeat again and again. Taking cues from this root, we speculated that those physical features, which repeat along the Giraffe Path, were synonymous with its identity. We distilled these features to the vastness of infrastructure; the overgrown park as wilderness; and the dramatic views that juxtaposed infrastructure with wilderness. We then proceeded to verify these features within a larger cohort.

THE STORY: 100 BLOCKS OF DRAMA

At the outset, we took a more instrumental view towards the charrettes and workshop, assuming that they would produce information to be directly incorporated into a printed map. By the end of the first charrette, however, the focus changed. The images captured ephemeral qualities – seasons, passing views, flora – rather than static landmarks. The parks' story unfolds through revisiting: *identitās*. Personal favorites were extrapolated to general spatial qualities. It was at this point that the two design teams disentwined their efforts to focus either on artifacts or, as CLIMB called it, "the story," which we took on.

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Figure 1: top: 16-foot long chalk map of the Giraffe Path became a center of conversations during Hike the Heights 2013, bottom: Under Highbridge, hikers show the thoughts they wrote on their bubbles. One says, 'I like how much COOLER it is in the parks'.

The parks all express dramatically Manhattan's geological past: a steep schist escarpment runs north from the western edge of Central Park through Morningside Park, where it dies into Amsterdam Avenue. Just north of 125th Street, it reappears, subdividing St. Nicholas Park longitudinally, with basketball courts on the flatland and City College's Neogothic campus on its western ridge. The public pool at the south end of Jackie Robinson Park lies below an enormous 40-foot retaining wall cut from the escarpment. In Highbridge Park, the most feral of all, the living rock creates promontories vast enough to face off with the I-95 extensions through the Bronx to the east as well as rock walls and craggy climbs appropriate to urban rock climbers and mountain bikers. The escarpment became the backbone of the spatial story: *100 blocks of drama*.

THOUGHT BUBBLES AND CHALKED MAP

June 1st, 2013 was the ninth Hike the Heights, the activity around which CLIMB has coalesced each year since it's founding. Some 1,200 children and adults, many affiliated with organizations sharing common values, hiked the linked parks from the north and the south to converge on a playground at the escarpment's upper side in Highbridge Park. The playground party was a vibrant, cacophonous mixture of dance contest, picnic, arts and crafts stands, nutritional coaching, sacks of apples for the taking. With its mobile and celebratory moments, Hike the Heights was the ideal, productively unruly environment to gather information and responses from the people who already knew the Giraffe Path, and to make observations that could fuel productive speculation about how to expand that cohort.

Part life-size comic book dialogue, part out-sized Post-it note, yellow and brown construction paper "Thought Bubbles"/location markers were distributed to each hiking group; several of our volunteers accompanied each group to encourage their fellow hikers to record wishes for or direct responses to the park spaces through which they were moving. Planted into the ground on small stakes, fields of Thought Bubbles were meant to recall giraffe markings and to chart affinities among ideas, people and places. The inscribed bubbles were then photographed on location and posted onInstagram, where they were logged with geographic coordinates. At the playground, we chalked a 16 foot-long version of the map with the path people had just hiked in red. Although we had intended for people to write in chalk, cross-referencing their experience with map locations, our best intentions were offset by the arrival of a group of kids who just wanted to chalk. The map filled up pretty quickly, amid stories of trails that included quicksand, barracudas and tentacle-grass – a chalked video game? – but also became a center for activity, conversation and introductions over the course of the afternoon. That first enthusiastic group of kids proved just how receptive they were to the idea of a trail, especially one that offered adventures along the way.

Learning from Happenings and participatory community meetings of the 1960's, our workshops gathered data from a wide section of participants, including those who regularly attend community meetings to those who otherwise may not, such as children and enthusiasts who came as a result of desigNYC association.

SPATIAL DEPICTION OF DATA

By the end of June 1, we had amassed information for a more differentiated assessment of CLIMB's cohort and its interests. We grouped the 170 photographed Thought Bubbles according to several different categories, each of which highlighted different readings of the data:

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- age of contributor (there were plenty of kids)
- location of comment, and presumed locale to which it responded
- expectations of how a park would be used, based upon the comments' content.

This last category proved most relevant to the question CLIMB had first posed: what is the parks' story and what lines of communication can convey it?

Our findings are summarized in the Thought Bubble map. The comments on some Thought Bubbles reflected the idea that the parks were spaces for reflection and codified recreation. These appeared as requests for better maintenance, more seating, playgrounds, tended playing fields. Other Thought Bubbles challenged these expectations, advocating for the unique landscape space that has developed in these parks, especially in Highbridge, after years of disinvestment: the wild or feral park, the forest, the sheer rock walls, the expanses of untamed vegetation to contrast the scale of the adjacent highway infrastructure of the Cross Bronx and Bruckner Expressways. Between these two extremes of tamed and wild were Thought Bubbles that documented the park's cool, breezy microclimate; its animals; and its varied flora.

Conversations around the chalked map resulted in other insights: that CLIMB's current strength is its capacity to draw together a broad set of aligned groups and activists, including city agencies, school groups, Eagle scouts, not-for-profits and university affiliates. An inventory of these groups and people suggested communications paths forward, to expand the cohort of CLIMB participants. It also gave a context to our Thought Bubble analysis: the comments upon which we were basing our assessment were all drawn from a group that already actively knew and used the parks. What could their comments tell us about how to reach CLIMB's yet-untapped cohort, including those who live near to the parks? What were the limits of our data and how could we avoid preaching to the converted?

Figure 2: Left: Map of Northern Manhattan with thought bubbles located geographically.

Right: Enlarged detail of map with red and blue bubbles keyed into the map.

Basemap by youarethecity, Thought Bubble summary by Aki Ishida Architect.

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Figure 3: Thought bubbles and park features were photographed, posted on Instagram, and geographically located on map of Nothern Manhattan.

Participant input from Hike the Heights 2013 on Thought Bubbles was related to its spatial triggers on a Giraffe Path trail map. Comments in blue were written by adults, red bubbles by children, and they are keyed into the map. The green bubbles are comments that were not location-specific.

EXPANDING CLIMB'S COHORTS

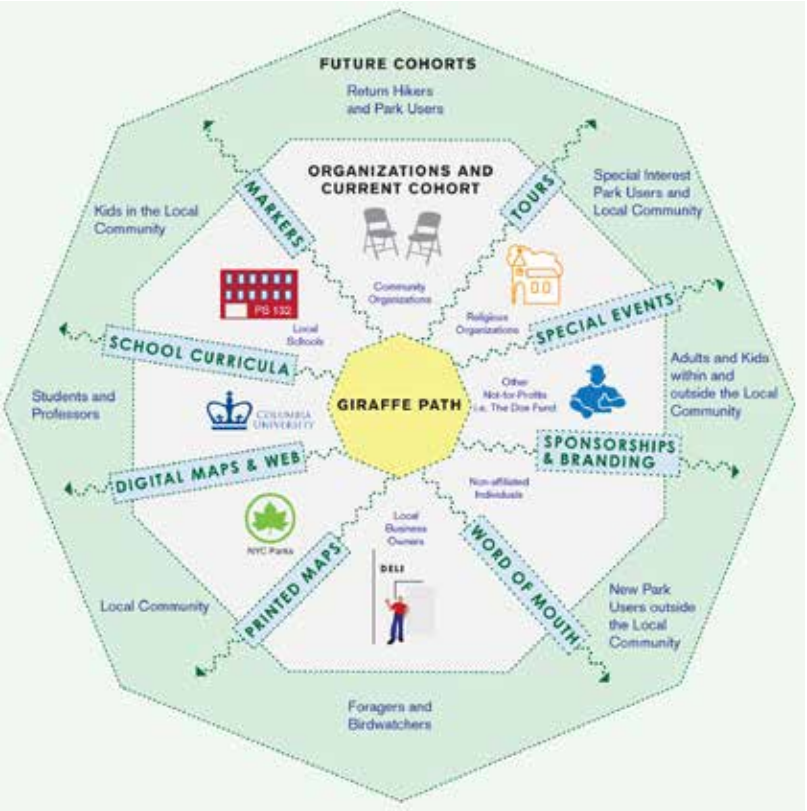
The DesigNYC project marked a watershed for CLIMB, after three earlier collaborations with architects. They had consolidated the groups and individuals who are part of their constituency, and wanted to extend knowledge of the trail to access new groups. Our work helped to distill the parks' identity as dependent upon shared spatial characteristics, especially the escarpment; and to chart in visual terms the spatial desires that the parks inspire. As Dr. Fullilove explained to us, "East-west movement is how people use the park…the escarpment and its stairs were a really central conceptual insight. Your work brought in more voices but also helped to pull together what other designers had already said to us." (In conversation, 1.16.14)

The diagram we developed below maps the way CLIMB and the Giraffe Path register within the current key cohort. Within the innermost circle is the Giraffe Path trail. The next ring includes current participants in Hike the Heights. The left-hand side of the diagram shows tangible, targeted outreach tools; the right-hand side focuses on more ephemeral and flexible approaches. Each vector indicates the means by which CLIMB could expand to new potential constituencies. For example, the scaled map, one outcome of the desigNYC/CLIMB collaboration, can, in its printed form, become a tool for local business owners to inform people who frequent their stores about the trail. It can also be used to demonstrate synergies to the Parks Department, as Parks invests in some of the more neglected sites. The strategies mapped here play out a conclusion drawn from Hike the Heights, the potential effectiveness of intergenerational communication: many children participated in the hike and the Thought Bubble exercise, indicating the strength of CLIMB's ability to motivate kids. Providing these kids with artifacts (such as maps or booklets) and ideas that will also interest their parents could have significant positive effect. Intergenerational communication could anchor the parks as a shared space in the daily life of the adjacent neighborhoods.

CONCLUSIONS

As Dr Fullilove remarked, "the difference is not in architects' data collection but in the cognitive frame: architects look at spatial data whereas public health people see social processes, whereas space is a black box." (In conversation, 1.16.14) Neither our data per se nor the conclusions we drew, although useful to CLIMB, were beyond the capacity of a careful survey or study. We concluded that the distinction was in the ways we staged events at which information was gathered, and our spatial depictions of that information. We took the post-it notes from the conference room whiteboards into the real space of the Giraffe Path in the form of Thought Bubbles. Coupling story and space allowed us to summarize the outcomes on a trail map, keying narratives to locations along the path. To further transmit this spatial component, we developed a binder of working strategies that now functions as a guidebook for CLIMB's future path-making, offering ideas for spatially located activities and ways of asking questions which will provoke visually communicable responses.

Participatory Design, as the term is loosely used, does not reside in formulaic recipes for activities or outcomes. Instead, its principles support mutual learning, in



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which architects learn about the context of their project just as clients and future occupants of a space learn about themselves: it gives populations not usually empowered to speak new influence on design decisions and facilitates co-realization through visual prototyping among participants that may have conflicting interests and a range of visualization skills (Bretteteig et al 2013, 132-133).

By helping to record the dialogues that residents of Northern Manhattan have with their park spaces, we began to discover aspects of these methodologies that make architects' contributions distinct. We helped CLIMB visualize in spatial terms the physical and social assets that they already have. Qualitative analyses and documentations of their hiking activities existed as reports, papers, photos, and videos. As architects, however, we applied our skills to move fluidly between the full-scale of the parks, which we marked with the paper bubble narratives, and the scale of paper representations that will help them tell distinctly spatial stories. Learning from, rather than applying formulaically, methodologies developed by Human Computer Interaction, the social sciences, and Event Art may suggest effective principles by which architects could give their clients and their constituencies' voices through the power of spatial stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank CLIMB, desigNYC, youarethecity, New York City Park Partners, and our adviser Alfred Zollinger for this collaboration. We are also grateful for volunteer designers who contributed their time and talent: Catherine Cieslewicz, Carolina Cohen Freue, Claire Davenport, Dan Dobson, Colin Embrey, Vanessa Espaillat, Marisa Ferrara, Sagi Golan, Nancy Kim, Kevin Lê, Adrienne Milner, Floren Clare Poliseo, Natalie Sippel, and Kristin Washco.

Figure 4: Diagram of future cohorts. Graphic design by Catherine Cieslewicz.

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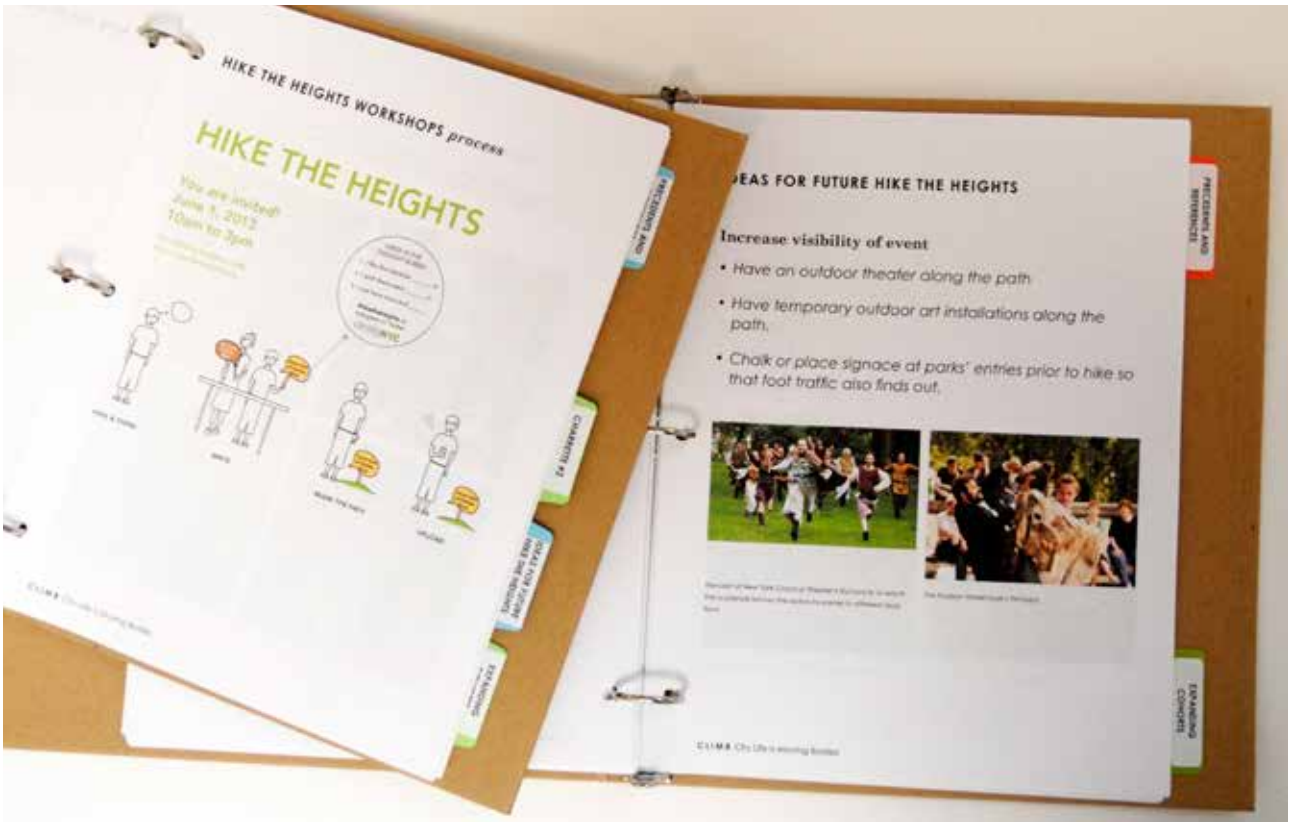

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Figure 5: 'Making the Giraffe Path' Resource binder edited by Aki Ishida and Lynnette Widder. Graphic design by Catherine Cieslewicz.

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ENDNOTES

1. The founding of Architecture for Humanity in 1999 and its meteoric growth, as well as its two Design Like You Give a Damn books, is but one high-profile story of the recent movement towards civic engagement in architecture and design. A combination of case studies, graphically represented statistics and IKEA-style how-to diagrams, the books describe a world in which ingenuity, some fundraising and design/build commitments are enough to change society.