
From Welfare Island to “Silicon Alley”: Negotiations of Access, Agency and Accountability at a New University Campus

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ABSTRACT

Cornell Tech is a new graduate campus on Roosevelt Island focused on technology innovation and entrepreneurship, built on land that was previously occupied by Goldwater Memorial Hospital, which was part of the largest hospital system in the world providing affordable long-term acute care to poor and low-income patients. The arrival of Cornell Tech also coincided with a number of other cultural, socio-economic and demographic changes on the island, including a decline in the black population, reduced availability of affordable housing and the closure of several long-standing programs serving marginalized communities. In this paper, we describe some initiatives that have sought to bridge between this new campus and the existing community on Roosevelt Island, and between the visions of the city that Goldwater and Cornell Tech represent. We reflect on what we have learned from these efforts, and about the responsibility of academic institutions to the ideas and communities they have displaced.

KEYWORDS

participatory design, service learning, action research

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SETTING

Cornell Tech was created as a result of a competition organized by the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC), one part of an initiative to diversify New York City’s economy through academic innovation and entrepreneurship, and to further establish its presence as the “Silicon Alley” of the East. As the winner of this competition, Cornell University was given a lease on 12 acres of land on Roosevelt Island to develop a campus and set of research graduate education programs that could support employment and economic growth across the city and the region. The campus opened in the Fall of 2017 and currently offers a number of Masters and Ph.D. programs in fields like Computer Science, Information Science, Operations Research, Electrical and Computer Engineering as well as professional programs in Law and Business.

The land where the campus now stands was previously the location of Goldwater Memorial Hospital, founded as The Welfare Hospital for Chronic Disease when it opened in 1939. Along with its sister hospital, Coler Memorial, which still operates on the north end of the island, the combined Coler-Goldwater was the largest long-term acute care hospital (LTACH) in the world. It was also one of the few to provide care to patients without insurance and any other means to pay¹. In this sense, Coler-Goldwater reflects an earlier institutional era of the island’s (and city’s) development. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, Roosevelt Island (then called “Welfare Island”) was the setting for a number of institutions that served various marginalized populations that were considered less desirable to have in other neighborhoods of the city - including a prison (before it moved to Riker’s island), a poor house, a smallpox hospital (in an earlier time) and a mental asylum.

In the early 1970s, when the city was bankrupt and facing a declining population, it began to seek other uses for the island. The city leased the land to the New York State Urban Development Corporation, which commissioned a master plan for the island from leading architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee. The centerpiece of the design was a complex of four mixed-income residential buildings designed to provide affordable housing to a range of income levels, accessible to people with disabilities, including the former residents of Coler and Goldwater hospitals. The buildings were financed under New York State’s Mitchell-Lama program, which provided land and tax abatements to developers in exchange for building affordable housing.

In the 90s and 2000s, along with the general trend of residential real estate development across the city, a set of “market-rate” luxury apartment buildings sprung up on the north end of the island,

¹<https://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/coler/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2016/08/chna-goldwater-2013.pdf>



Figure 1: A tale of two campuses. Goldwater Memorial Hospital on the left, Cornell Tech on the right.

and later on the south end, near the new subway station. Several of the WIRE buildings also exited Mitchell-Lama, which opened the door to additional market rate development and privatization. This had a notable impact on the island, displacing many long-term residents in favor of newer and more transient inhabitants, often younger urban professionals. There was and is significant concern within the community that the arrival of Cornell Tech would accelerate this demographic transition.

CHARACTERS

The first author, Tapan Parikh, is a professor of Information Science at Cornell Tech who identifies as an Indian-American, and who is a resident of the island. He arrived in 2016, one year before the campus opened, while Cornell Tech was still temporarily operating from borrowed office space in Google’s building in Chelsea. Parikh has worked on community engaged research for almost twenty years, much of it in India and other international contexts. More recently, and with an intentional desire to increase his accountability and connection to research collaborators and subjects, he has become more involved in local efforts within and around the university community. He worked on and supported several projects in the bay area while he was a professor at UC Berkeley supporting youth civic participation and learning with mapping and data science technologies. Having grown up in and around New York City, he saw moving back there as an opportunity to deepen this community-engaged work through his local knowledge and connections to places and people.

The second author, Julia Khadijah Abdurahman, who is Ethiopian-Irish and identifies as Black, grew up on Roosevelt Island and returned to raise her children there in 2015. She lives in Westview, a WIRE building that is the only remaining development on Roosevelt Island that has not yet exited the Mitchell-Lama program. She is an independent researcher studying the implementation of predictive analytics in the child welfare system as well as more broadly engaged with discourse around the social implications of automated decision making. She has facilitated conversations around racial inequity and data at the Rudolph Steiner School on the Upper East Side as well as led a professional development workshop on intersectional race theory, disability and access with Open Doors, a local performance arts organization composed of gun violence survivors with spinal cord injuries based at Coler Hospital (including some former residents of Goldwater Memorial Hospital)².

²More info about Open Doors can be found at <https://www.opendoorsnyc.org/about>

ACT 1: REMAKING THE CITY

During the first semester of the new campus’ operation, the first author taught a service learning course, titled “Remaking the City”, to provide students an opportunity to work with community-based organizations from the island. While the stated goal of the course was to use participatory and speculative design to imagine creative solutions to urban problems, another perhaps more mundane objective was to provide an opportunity for the island’s residents and organizations to get to know the students and vice versa [1].

Parikh worked with Jane Swanson from the Cornell Tech Community Affairs team, who had spent several years getting to know the island as a community liaison throughout the planning and construction process, and who also had a deep knowledge about the island and the city from her prior work in city government, to identify potential partner organizations for the course. The final list of partner organizations included in the course included the local art gallery, garden club, historical society, senior center, a dance and theater group, and Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIO), the state-appointed non-profit organization that manages infrastructure and public services on the island.

Each student was expected to commit approximately five hours per week to work with their partners. During this time, students were to use their technological expertise to directly contribute to some issue the organization was actively facing (the “service” project). They were also directed to work with their partner organizations to creatively envision new solutions to urban problems using technology (the “design” project). Beyond these high-level instructions, expectations and deliverables for the course were kept deliberately vague, forcing students to negotiate questions of scope and priority directly with their partners [3].

Predictably, several of the service projects in the course centered around redesigning or extending existing organizational websites. While the students generated creative and original designs in response to these needs, organizations were often hesitant to adopt these designs due to questions of long-term

maintenance and sustainability. Most of these new designs required the organizations to adopt new platforms (e.g. Squarespace, Wix, Wordpress) and/or modify their existing hosting arrangements. In one typical case, the students designed and prototyped an entirely new website for an organization, only for it to be rejected by the board, in favor of the current solution which was maintained and managed by a longtime supporter of the organization.

While all of the projects generated significant enthusiasm, few of the proposals or designs were ever further pursued or adopted. After the course, students (many of whom were enrolled in one or two year professional masters programs) became engrossed with other courses and activities, including pursuing their career objectives (i.e. getting a job). That said, in several cases, the partner organization were able to take the students' proposals forward independently. Moreover, participants (both students and their partner organizations) reported enjoying and valuing the experience, primarily because of the new friendships and relationships that were created.

ACT 2: WORD TO RI

As discussed earlier, the opening of the Cornell Tech campus has coincided with a range of other cultural, demographic and institutional transitions on the island. The black population, in particular, was cut nearly in half between 2010 and 2016. This community was particularly affected by the closure of the Roosevelt Island Youth Program (RIYP), which operated both the local after-school program and youth center, under contract from the city's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and RIOC, respectively. RIYP and the youth center had served as an important anchor in the community for many years, especially for black youth and youth from lower-socioeconomic classes.

Between the Fall of 2017 and the Spring of 2018, both DYCD and RIOC declined to renew their contracts with RIYP due to allegations of unethical behavior against the organization's leader. While the specific circumstances are out of scope for this paper, what is important to note is that this did generate a significant amount of controversy and discussion amongst the community - about the “representativeness” of various local organizations and programs and underlying feelings of racism and social exclusion. Some of these discussions were carried out on a Facebook group for local parents, as well as on playgrounds, at PTA meetings and eventually at a public hearing discussing the closure of RIYP in the Spring 2018, where emotions finally bubbled over, with some members of the community walking out of the meeting while chanting “gentrification”.

In response to this outcry, the second author organized an event where these simmering tensions could be raised and discussed. The event began with a screening of the Jordan Peele film *Get Out*, which she saw as emblematic of her experience on the island. Following the film, there was a panel discussion with community members sharing their experiences of racism and racial exclusion. Invited participants included a white Unitarian Universal Minister, an Asian-American former radical immigration attorney who became a student midwife, and an African-American server from the Cornell Tech Cafe. She

also invited the first author, whom she met while trying to arrange space for the event, to share his perspective as a member of the Cornell Tech community, and as a racial and ethnic minority who grew up in New York.

While the event was well-attended and appreciated, one complaint was that it was dominated by only a few people’s voices, and that others did not have an opportunity to share their experiences and ideas. To address this, Khadijah initiated an oral history project to document people’s experiences with racism on the island and elsewhere. She recruited Parikh to help with the project, as he was already involved with an oral history project at the local middle school, and so was in a position to contribute both equipment and human resources (i.e. students).

Parikh’s group had also developed a technology platform (Local Ground) that he wanted to use to place these oral histories on a map [4]. After their first meeting, Khadijah shared her significant concerns about the use of this platform. She had considered displaying the oral histories on a map, deciding against it due to privacy and security concerns. She questioned the intention of a university project that intended to collect community data without any accountability as to how it could be used and/or potentially commercialized. Finally, she was put off by the fact that Parikh’s interest in the initiative seemed to be centered around the use of this technology, rather than on the other ideas she proposed (including organizing future events on topics like civic technology and citizen journalism).

Eventually, they were able to work past these issues through discussion, partnership and, eventually, friendship. Together, they launched the Word To RI project, which catalyzes discussions about race, disability, data, technology and access on Roosevelt Island and neighboring communities by 1) hosting events that connect community members and academics to learn from one another, 2) curating an oral history archive of local perspectives and experiences and 3) producing films and other media to expand this discussion to a broader audience. Since its founding in the Fall of 2018, Word To RI has hosted several events at Cornell Tech and elsewhere on the island, including an evening of reflection on artificial intelligence through spoken word poetry and dramatic performance, and an island-wide set of workshops using hip-hop, sculpture and art to Reimagine the End of Life, as well as building its own oral history archive, which now covers a range of themes affecting Roosevelt Island and its residents³.

³More information about these events and the oral history archive can be found at <https://wordtori.com/>

REFLECTION

The concerns raised by the second author at the initial meeting and subsequently continue to influence our discussions, and illustrate a more general set of issues regarding university / community collaborations, particularly when centered around design and technology interventions. The second author, after reading LeDantec and Fox, 2015 (finding it in the first author’s syllabus for Remaking the City), referenced it in her critique of the design of the course and its stated intentions [2]:

You're not just a Good Samaritan airdropped from Berkeley to solve Bluetooth connectivity issues through flash mob hangouts. There's a power dynamic - you are a tenured tech professor employed for better or worse by an institution formed in partnership by Israeli Technion, Weill Cornell, backed by Bloomberg etc. that displaced a public hospital and is regarded by the community with a mix of open excitement, suspicion, hostility and curiosity - establishing relationships through teaching a course on remaking the city with students who don't come from here. I enjoyed reading through the syllabus materials and appreciate the critical lens you are pushing the students to have in doing this work. The geopolitical context does not negate potential to do good locally through this course; I just cannot personally purchase this product as a value neutral reiteration of Genius Bar. I'm also one of this “public” who has focused on trying to bring the community into these conversations and had built a relationship with you and your students right? We have fought and collaborated, agreed and disagreed. I'm part of this equation and it seems disingenuous to me put the onus on the community to frame the relationship especially given the lack of preexisting leadership like the neighborhood featured in “the Strangers at the Gate”. (lightly edited excerpt from an email correspondence between the authors)

In this section, we reflect on this quote and our experiences to extract some themes for further reflection and discussion at the workshop.

Relationships not Platforms

Repeatedly, community partners rejected efforts to “migrate” or “upgrade” their web sites to new platforms. They recognized that these new platforms, while perhaps more functional, would leave them without the capability of managing and updating their content within their existing network of relationships. Students and faculty, as new and relatively temporary entrants into the community, can not be relied upon to stay engaged and committed and regularly attend to content and administration requests. Existing solutions, while perhaps limited technologically, were more robust from a social perspective.

The architect of Goldwater Memorial Hospital, Isadore Rosenfeld, said that the lighting and beds in each room, “were designed from the ground up to serve two purposes, seen as one: the well-being of the patient and the ability for the doctor to care for him or her.”⁴ As technologists and designers, we must remember that we are both doctors, as well as designers of hospital beds. What if we saw making a website not just as the design of a technological artifact, but as a reification of a long-term social commitment between people within communities? How would this change how we

⁴<https://urbanomnibus.net/2014/04/autopsy-of-a-hospital-a-photographic-record-of-coler-goldwater-on-roosevelt-island/>

see ourselves and our responsibilities as technologists and designers? How might it change the design of the platforms we use to make and maintain these relationships?

Access and Positionality

As researchers, we are keen to gain access to “field sites” where our users work and live, and to become “insiders”. But we do not often ask ourselves how access to our infrastructure (social and physical) might benefit our partners and collaborators. Cornell Tech public spaces, meeting rooms and event spaces are frequently used by community members and groups. to convene meetings, hold events, record oral histories and conduct other related activities.

Access to university space has been a frequent source of tension between the authors, and with others in the community. Even on a campus designed to be “porous”, it has proved difficult to provide the second author with access to project spaces, equipment and other campus resources, including a permanent ID card. While security personnel have been very accommodating in providing access on an ad hoc basis, it is clear that having community collaborators on campus on a regular basis is not something that they had expected or planned for. The provision of an official university designation or title could also help community collaborators in advancing their own projects or ideas.

Negotiations of Agency

Community partners have their own agendas that we must respect even if they come at the expense of other goals. However, in deferring to community agendas, we must be careful not to deny our own agency. Solidarity implies not only support but also responsibility, and that to “walk together” means sometimes taking the lead, and sometimes being willing to follow. We must recognize that the negotiation of agency is itself a reflective and discursive process, and put in the time and effort it requires to be a true partner in collaborative efforts. We must also be willing to use all of the tools that we have at our disposal in support of community-led efforts towards inclusion, equity and social justice, including the power and credibility afforded by our institutional affiliations and networks.

Who owes What and to Whom?

Dr. S.S. Goldwater, the New York City Health and Hospitals Commissioner who designed the original plan for the hospital, and for whom it is named, foresaw Roosevelt Island as a center for affordable care for all of the city’s residents. Goldwater was to be just one of seven hospitals (only two of which were realized) specializing in different areas and disciplines. What do we owe to this seemingly abandoned vision where all who live could survive and flourish? And more specifically, what are our obligations to the displaced inhabitants of that vision, like the former patients at Goldwater Memorial Hospital? While a few Open Doors members have participated in events, meetings and classes at Cornell Tech (including a 3D printing workshop led by Niti Parikh, Creative Lead of the Maker Lab),

and faculty, students and other collaborators (including both authors) have supported their work through volunteer and other engagements, we must ask ourselves, is this enough?

Cornell Tech is very engaged with the local community, working with city agencies on technology projects, supporting CS education programs at several public K-12 schools, and providing educational programs for senior citizens, young adults and disabled populations. Many of these efforts have been initiated and led by individual students, staff and faculty, who then find resources that can support their participation. While this is the typical mode of operation for the modern, “entrepreneurial” university, we must ask ourselves, especially in light of recent events, how we as universities can demonstrate a deeper set of social and moral commitments, both in our interactions with our community neighbors, as well as with the people and ideas that we might be displacing.

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