

Placemaking Webinar Series

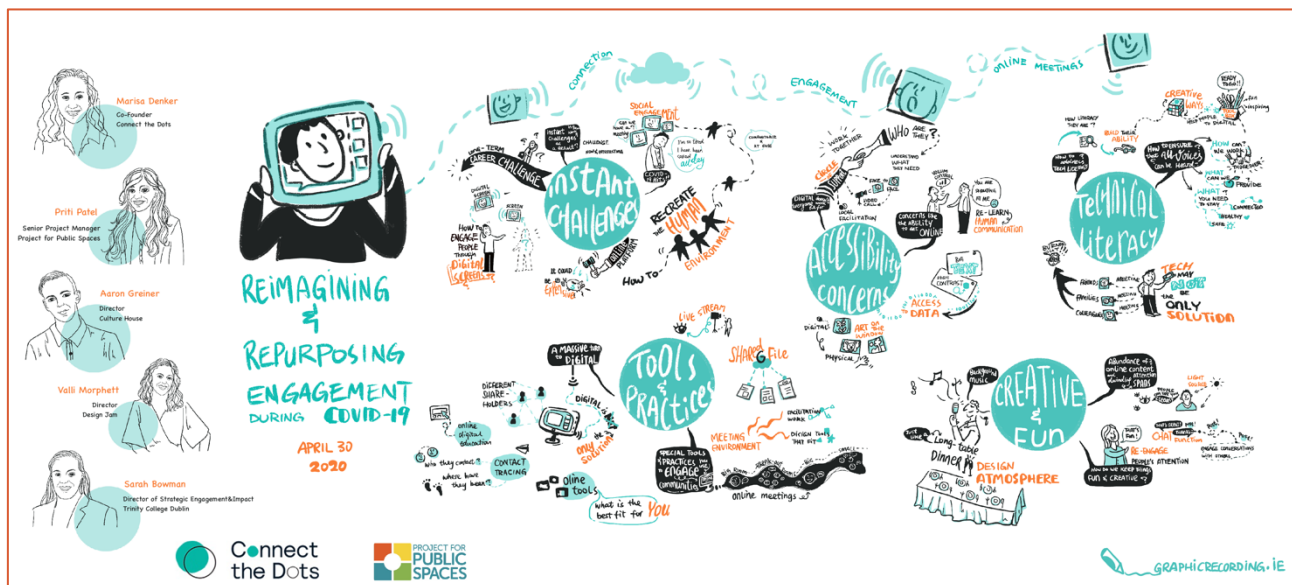
Reimagining & Repurposing Engagement during COVID-19



On Thursday, April 30th, 2020, **Project for Public Spaces** and **Connect the Dots** teamed up to bring you a discussion about re-thinking and re-imagining engagement during COVID-19. Priti Patel of Project for Public Spaces and Marisa Denker of engagement firm Connect the Dots hosted three additional international experts in the field of public engagement:

- Aaron Greiner, Director, Culture House - Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Valli Morphet, Director, Design Jam - Melbourne, Australia
- Sarah Bowman, Director of Strategic Engagement & Impact, Centre for Ageing and Intellectual Disability at Trinity College, Dublin - Dublin, Ireland

We were also extremely grateful to be supported by the talents of Angelina Yingge Xu, a Dublin-based graphic artist who created a Live Graphic Illustration (below) to represent the event and main talking points. Yingge often works with Connect the Dots and lends her talent to workshops, seminars, and discussions like ours, and can be found at graphicrecording.ie.



Questions for the panel:

The panel and hosts discussed various questions related to engagement, all crowd sourced from a survey offered during the webinar signup. All of the registrants' questions were carefully combed through, thematically organized, and synthesized to generate six questions that were representative of the most popular questions from audience members.

1. COVID-19 hits. Tell us some of the instant challenges faced in your work as a result.
2. There is now a massive turn to digital. What specific tools & practices are you using for building online engagement with communities?
3. Digital doesn't work for everyone. How do we approach engagement when there are still general accessibility concerns, like the ability to get online?
4. For those who are online: How can we address technical literacy and ensure all voices are heard?
5. How can we use this time as an opportunity to build equity into the foundation of our communication and engagement practices, so that it is here to stay post COVID?
6. There is an abundance of online content and dwindling attention spans. How do we keep things fun, interesting, and creative when engaging virtually?
7. Nobody's perfect! What is the worst thing that's happened to you on a live webinar/engagement activity/workshop?

As expected, the experts had some fantastic answers and insights, from the specific to the broad. What resulted was a generous and ethical exploration of how to continue meaningful and strategic engagement in a time when it is impossible to meet in person, and what that means for the future. Across the panelists, experts agreed as to how it is now more important than ever to involve stakeholders in key decision-making processes to bring everyone along together in developing equitable and resilient solutions for our cities.

Audience commentary:

We also heard from our participants during the webinar, and here are some of the thoughts that came up as they watched, and questions that fell outside what was covered in the talk.

This is a rather specific question, but how has "collaborative mapping" (something standard in an in-person workshop or charrette) been successfully used virtually? For example, asking attendees to note issues on a neighborhood map.

Thank you! Yes, interested to hear more about the different tools that are out there, the pros & cons of each, etc. For example, YouTube Live vs. Facebook Live, etc.

This is such a complimentary group of people: very well balanced, and all clearly experts in this field. This is so great!!

In answer of what might people need and what can be offered for engagement support: A stronger collaboration with educational facilities assets can be shared with the communities that lack access to such technologies- social and educational organizations need to work together

Object mapping have always been a successful interactive approach to deliver a message that is intangible. These methods can be used creatively with available objects to deliver a message and help virtually engage people in sharing their ideas, not being comfortable with online digital communication

Do any of the panelists find themselves having to rethink how to deliver summer camps for children? We usually have outdoor day camps but these are canceled for 2020. Families still want things for kids to do but not screen time!

I agree, I feel socially nervous now, when going into public spaces, it feels so foreign, as though, I forgot how to be around humans. What could be helpful to reconnect once we are allowed to access public spaces?

Priti's observation resonates---that C19 simply heightened long term challenges. We had just started making some progress with opening community dialogue (resulting in increased trust) and we're concerned about losing that momentum now.

I came to this session with my after hours, "city planning commissioner" hat on. However, I'm finding it extremely useful for my professional life which is in the area of education for students with disabilities.

How do you do collaborative mapping online?

In post pandemic crisis times when lock down is eased but indoor spaces for the arts will be challenged, e.g. concert halls, theatres, cinemas, etc., is there opportunity for public art to play an enhanced role in a more human public realm

Themes and insights from the panel

Several insights stood out over the course of the discussion, many of which are summarized below. We encourage you to watch the recorded version of the webinar and share it out with your networks. You can find a [full version posted here](#).

Challenges:

- What can we do now as practitioners to continue to support communities and ensure their voices are heard and needs met? As we are presented with immediate and new changes, we are forced to shift and rethink: creativity is essential
- The show must go on! Examine the original goals and intent of the engagement process, ensure it carries value right now, and then build upon the purpose to deliver a meaningful experience
- Focus on planning and capacity building. Online platforms are not fine-tuned for sensitive negotiation, but there are tools for making your face, expressions, and emotions clearer on screen: we must enable connection, expression, and emotion - we must humanize the digital and the remote
- In areas that require long-term planning (higher education and government, for example), we face an additional challenge of having to pivot after years of planning: however, challenges often come with incredible opportunities to rethink plans and programs
- People will need to relearn how to be human on the other side of this

Opportunities

- A higher value has been - and should continue to be - placed on engagement in the spotlight of COVID-19: long-term challenges or engagement are heightened and highlighted and forced to be re-examined
- This is a prime opportunity for full and careful technical analysis: go back to old projects and dive deeper
- It is clear how much facilitation is needed now, and there is a larger need for good facilitation training and capacity building
- With challenge comes great opportunity; there is the opportunity to reflect on engagement methodologies prior to this, what was working, what wasn't - and improve now and into the future
- Remote solutions for engagement and consultation do bring in new audiences than past in-person engagement - we can learn from this and bolster our engagement in future with more avenues to participate

- Work towards technical literacy yourself and share your knowledge with others
- Reassess goals of engagement, and find new and creative solutions

Tools:

- Don't look at digital tools as the end-all, but rather a complimentary offering to future engagement efforts. Ensure equitable processes via other remote strategies beyond the digital. Continue to consult trusted community ambassadors, and ask "what tool is best for you and your constituents?"
- Go back to the root of the challenge: ask "Why are we doing this? What are the objectives? What do our stakeholders need?" Then make your decisions.
- Human-facilitated engagement works on all levels, always, so use that core principle to broaden webinars, breakout groups with all kinds of tools (calls, facetime, whiteboard apps, google sheets, etc.), and work to integrate them intentionally
- Consolidate your resources: don't reinvent the wheel. Don't flood your constituents with information or newsletters, but think critically about when is the right time to engage and when you should pull back
- Examine your values and processes: recombine and rapidly prototype with the goal of a relevant human experience
- [Here's more specific tools](#) including collaborative mapping that we have been exploring

Accessibility:

- Engage with individuals and those in their "circles of support", and remember that digital outreach is only one strand: the foundation of engagement lies in relationship building
- Governments need to be forming close relationships with local organizations who are already solving problems on the ground. There is already success, so work to support and build capacity instead of taking on fully new efforts.
- Accessibility means something different with online engagement: you must plan to amp up your face-to-face time
- Use design thinking methodology - 'user-first' thinking' to plan your engagement event; imagine each user moving through the process of the event to ensure you are accounting for all details of the experience
- Much has changed and much is the same: we have always had accessibility barriers, and technology is no different. It is becoming clear that access to data should be a RIGHT, not a privilege, and we must appeal to the distributors accordingly
- Libraries, once an avenue for many to get online, are now inaccessible: how do we bring people up to speed with the resources at their fingertips?

Technical Literacy

- Consider why you are following through on a project at this time: is it because the original scope requires it, or what is in the best interest of the stakeholder?
- You must ask people what they need: this is not the time to be advocating for an agenda: don't lead by assumptions. Instead, discover and work through barriers
- Start by working to understand baseline literacy: if it is not advanced, build equity, capacity, and comfort beforehand
- Become an expert on all digital platforms before you choose the one that meets your goals, and then teach others

- Instead of top-down solutions, people need advocates for alternatives and must continue to be creative beyond technical solutions

Keeping it Interesting

- Discovering interesting ways to engage virtually has made it clear that in-person engagement coils be re-examined and improved as well. Use workshops, improv, games, stories and more to get a group energized on a topic
- Bring your face and emotions to the forefront: people need to be able to see your expressions and connect with you
- “Attention is the economy of our times”
- Consider and design an atmosphere for interaction: use design to create a mood for the meeting and differentiate it from others in the same day
- Get creative - reimagine remote engagement now to be more than just a workshop. What about a remote community dinner? Or a game? Or a virtual mapping tour?
- The art of hosting has become essential: create ways to greet guests, to move them through an event safely and comfortably. Use design thinking to manage a session

We hope this gave you some food for thought and ideas for action. As our new normal evolves, we will continue to explore and share our learnings.

Get in touch with our hosts:



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