

# DIY Utopia



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## Cultural Imagination and the Remaking of the Possible

Edited by  
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## Chapter 2

# Civic Imagination and a Useless Map

Catherine D'Ignazio

AQ 6: Please note that punctuations were found inconsistent before and after the quote marks, hence as per style they are moved to before the quotes consistently. Kindly check and confirm

“The use of street names for commemorative purposes is instrumental in transforming the urban environment into a virtual political setting.”

—*Maoz Azaryahu, The power of commemorative street names, 1996*

AQ 7: Can the opening and closing quotes be deleted for epigraphs? Kindly suggest

“A publication of this order allows no scope for the play of the imagination, being a simple exponent of facts.”

—*Boyd's Lancaster Directory (An early index of street names & numbers), 1857, as quoted in Rose-Redwood, 2008*

“I want to rename ‘Wood St’ to ‘Boodle St’ because it’s my dog’s name.”

—*Participant, The City Formerly Known as Cambridge, 2006*

In 2008, a group called the Institute for Infinitely Small Things published a useless map. From 2006–2008, the Institute held “renaming parties” where members of the public were invited to propose new names for any public place in Cambridge, MA. These submissions formed the basis of the “useless” map—so named because it would be hopeless to use it to navigate the city of Cambridge. What in Google Maps is called the “Cambridge Common” is referred to on the map as “That Place Where Freaks Gather to Hula Hoop And Do Other Circus Tricks.” Harvard Square is “Cash Money Land” and Main Street is “Lafayette Under Repair St.” Many places on the map are named after dogs and boyfriends and babies. I am the Director of the Institute for Infinitely Small Things<sup>1</sup> and this is an accounting of the provenance, process and reception of the map of *the City Formerly Known as Cambridge*.

In this essay, I will show why inviting people to rename public places in Cambridge was not merely an exercise in supreme silliness. It was also an exercise in cultivating civic imagination and practicing civic power in a semi-fictional and bounded scenario. Street names are infinitely small things—sites of historical and political power made manifest in the landscape and typically regarded as background. In making *the City Formerly Known as Cambridge*, people “tried on” the role of author in relation to their everyday landscape and reflected on history, power, and their favorite snacks in the process. I posit that these experiences of “civic art” (a term defined later in the text) build speculative collective capacity by helping people dream together in a place where the stakes are low and the potential for fun is high. While the results may be idiosyncratic, personal, even useless (as the title of this paper claims), the real utility of such endeavors is to train the collective muscle for civic dreaming so that it can be mobilized when it truly matters. Cultivating civic imagination is about extending the invitation to be an author of the world and to make new worlds in the process.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for Infinitely Small Things is a performance research group that sometimes exists. We are brought into being on certain special occasions by a passion for spatial justice and rolling around in public space and a shared ethos that changing things together is the only way to truly study them. We are artists and computer programmers, architects and filmmakers, curators and students, accountants and children. There are about 25 of us counting by an infrequently used mailing list but a project may be done in the Institute’s name by as little as 0 or as many as all. By “infinitely small things,” we do not mean the little odds and ends like cigarette butts that hide between urban sidewalk slabs. Rather, we mean the social and political tiny things that permeate the public spaces of our everyday lives. They are those things typically designated as “background” and regarded as neutral, natural and inevitable which nevertheless hold an enormous amount of history (and thus inequity), politics (and thus contestation), and social life (and thus promise for fun).

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## STREET NAMES ARE INFINITELY SMALL THINGS

Commemorative street names—those that honor historical, mythical figures or events versus simply being numbers—are a very good example of infinitely small things. Street names are “ostensibly visible, quintessentially mundane, and seemingly obvious.”<sup>2</sup> They are in the background of our lived



experience of the city (when we are not lost) and literally the background on Google Maps when we are lost. Artist Michael Rakowitz notes that the quickest way to forget someone is to name a public place after them “so that their name disappears into an address, into an architecture.”<sup>3</sup> Azaryahu calls this “semantic displacement” and emphasizes how there is a continuous erosion of the historical meaning of a name in favor of the idiosyncratic, personal meanings of place inscribed by people conducting their everyday lives in a city. Our hypothesis is that everyone reading this chapter lives on a street with a name and that most do not know where the name comes from. Please fill out our survey at <http://goo.gl/forms/qHjWa1koal> to tell us if we are wrong about this.

Street names would seem to be mundane facts. But by whom and for whom? And since when? Prior to the Revolutionary War, for example, “very few streets in Manhattan had street signs posted at intersections, and the population relied chiefly on shop signs, descriptive designations, and local familiarity when navigating through the city’s streets.”<sup>4</sup> Names, such as they existed, were vernacular and related to the particularity of a spot, for example, “Take a right at the red house.” One does not need names for navigation until one has *strangers* in the landscape.<sup>5</sup> With the increased mobility of people and things, street names became systematized in the nineteenth century in the United States and institutionalized by the early twentieth century. Azaryahu calls this the “city-text”<sup>6</sup> and Rose-Redwood details this as the process of rationalization of the urban landscape through the production of “legible” urban spaces.<sup>7</sup> There is high economic value to legible spaces, particularly for global capitalist markets of goods and services. Legibility is a value that we in the Global North have now internalized, equate with modernity and bring as “development” to the Global South.<sup>8</sup> The project of naming and numbering urban space in order to make it rational and legible is one that continues today through increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous Google everything, GIS, satellite imagery and crowdsourced geographic information which make everything from social use to environmental data geocoded, rational and legible.<sup>9</sup>

The tricky thing about the systematized, legible city is that it is primarily the official government administrators that mold the symbolic infrastructure of the urban landscape. “The administrative act of naming streets is an example of the appropriation of the public domain by official agencies that have specific political agendas.”<sup>10</sup> These agendas may not be nefarious but they are instrumental in “substantiating the ruling sociopolitical order,”<sup>11</sup> which is to say that those histories which are officially sanctioned, widely recognized, and not troublesome or contestational will be commemorated as places where others will not. As such, everyday personal geography is conflated with official, some might say, “hegemonic” history. And it is precisely in this conflation of history and banal everyday life, a “low-voltage interaction”

from a casual encounter, that “enables an official version of history to be incorporated into spheres of social life which seem to be totally detached from political contexts or communal obligations, and to be integrated into intimate realms of human interactions and activities.”<sup>12</sup> The background character—the infinitely smallness—of street names is precisely their power.

Yet street names are not always background, as anyone who has lived in Soweto, Berlin, Bucharest or Moscow can tell you. Street names may especially come to the foreground of our collective attention upon the shifts of power such as the fall of Communism that usher in a drastic change in worldview that is subsequently made manifest in the landscape by the new regime in power. While most municipal names change slowly and incrementally, these are the cases where the relationship between place names and political, economic and military power is most clear. Indeed, it was the experience of one Institute member from Podgoriça, Montenegro, that led to the seed of the idea for *the City Formerly Named as Cambridge*. He noted that all of the names in Cambridge were “Anglo-Saxon” and he would like to introduce more consonants into them (as his mother tongue adores consonants and has words like *smrt*). This started the initial investigation into the names of public places in Cambridge—where are the names from? Who are they commemorating?

## PLACE NAMES IN CAMBRIDGE, MA

Who would you think names in Cambridge, Massachusetts, commemorate? It is very likely what you would guess: white guys, lots of them, mostly associated with Harvard. The above image shows a small sample of the area around Harvard Square with important streets noted with their corresponding image of the white man for whom they are named. Indeed, if you scan the excellent online historical reference compiled by librarian Christopher Hail<sup>13</sup> for the history of street names in Cambridge you will find that the only streets that do not honor white men honor trees,<sup>14</sup> other cities,<sup>15</sup> or local topography.<sup>16</sup>

Here it may be interesting to take up a thought experiment. If you were an alien anthropologist and wanted to use the names of public places in cities to learn about the people on this planet, what might you use them for? It certainly would not be for learning about the current demographics of a city. In certain neighborhoods of Cambridge, 35 percent of the population is African-American. There are significant Brazilian, Haitian, Hispanic and Ethiopian immigrant populations. And yet, there are no place names that commemorate these histories. One of the few place names for a non-White/Anglo person that we located was Cardinal Medeiros Avenue, named for the Portuguese

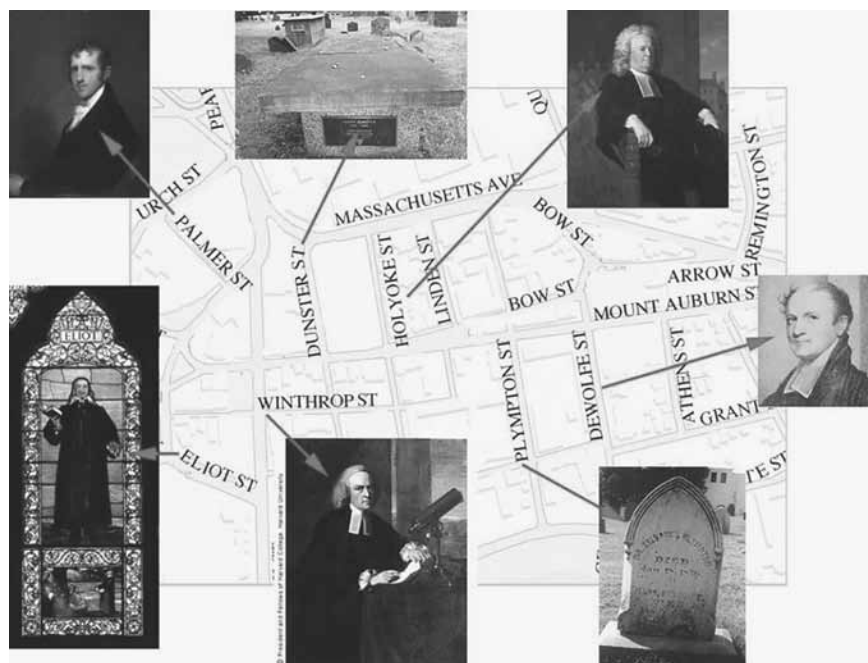


Figure 2.1 The White Men of Cambridge, MA.

American who served as the Archbishop of Boston for many years. And the funny-slash-not-funny story about that street is that the Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers worked really hard to make that name happen. When the City came to install the street sign, it turned out they had actually spelled his name wrong and had to send it back for refabrication.

Another interesting story is the case of the Maria L. Baldwin school in North Cambridge. Until 2002, it was named the Agassiz School after Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz, a professor of zoology and geology at Harvard. He was also a racist who fought hard to keep Irish and Jewish students out of Harvard and expounded the idea that the human races were created with unequal attributes.<sup>17</sup> After learning more about the origins of his school's name, ninth-grader Nathaniel Vogel spearheaded a successful campaign to change the school's name to honor the first African-American principal of the school, Maria L. Baldwin.<sup>18</sup> After a lively debate, the School Committee voted for the renaming.<sup>19</sup> Numerous other places in Cambridge, including the surrounding neighborhood, remain named after Louis Agassiz.

In Cambridge, the names of public places tell the alien anthropologist about the make-up of the ruling class or the "default citizen"—they are white, they are men, they are of Anglo-European descent, and they have money

and history on their side. In this, the names of Cambridge public places render natural the authorized, official version of history<sup>20</sup> and provide for “the intersection of hegemonic ideological structures with the spatial practices of everyday life.”<sup>21</sup> This particular city-text does not necessarily incorporate the social reality of a large percentage of its current inhabitants, nor of its former inhabitants (as we must imagine that around 50 percent even in colonial times were likely women, not to mention immigrants, minorities and people of color). In order to officially change a name in Cambridge—and the process is similar in other US cities—you must go through the City Engineer’s office and collect signatures of all of the abutters and indicate whether or not they agree to the change. Then, the City Council will vote on the new name. The only stipulation is that you may not name a street after a living person. So part of the reason that the names of public places do not change in step with the changes in population is that the process of gathering political will for an actual name change is somewhat difficult and time-consuming. An individual or community group needs social capital, time, and possibly financial capital to effect this kind of “authorship” on the landscape. And there is the weight of history to consider—one had better be completely sure of the name if it’s going into the public record.

### CIVIC IMAGINATION AND THE BEGINNINGS OF BEGINNINGS

But contesting space need not be so onerous nor happen so infrequently. Before arriving at a new name for anything, the Institute felt a broader, more open space of reflection, conversation, and contestation about names was possible. For *the City Formerly Known as Cambridge*, we wanted to challenge the names in Cambridge, and the narrative of the “default citizen” that they represented, by radically opening up the space of authorship. We were drawing specifically on our knowledge of and participation in open source communities such as Wikipedia<sup>22</sup> and Open Street Map,<sup>23</sup> where individuals contribute volunteered information to create a comprehensive system. The key difference is that we were not interested in mapping “what is” but in mobilizing what Henry Jenkins calls the “civic imagination” to create a collective vision of what could be. Jenkins et al. explain the concept of the civic imagination as “. . . the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political or economic conditions. One cannot change the world unless you can imagine what a better world might look like, and too often, our focus on contemporary problems makes it impossible to see beyond immediate constraints. One also can’t change the world until one can imagine oneself as an active political agent.”<sup>24</sup>

There are therefore two key components to the civic imagination. The first is that it remains in the speculative realm and is defined by the capacity to develop creative *potential*, *future alternatives* to current conditions. While many critical projects step back to assess injustice or inequity after the fact, projects that engage civic imagination represent generative contributions<sup>25</sup> that offer new ways to approach a problem together. The corollary to this first part of the definition is that the people undertaking it must have an understanding of the human-designed, historically contingent, highly malleable nature of the world. Things that seem inevitable—street names, advertising, gasoline, mass incarceration—must become denaturalized from the everyday environment and converted into objects of direct contemplation, action and design. The infinitely small things must be identified. More than anything, this is a shift in individual and collective perception of the world. It is not about the dreaded “raising awareness,” a terrible, patronizing turn-of-phrase if one ever existed, but about “changing the frame,” as Ivan Sigal, director of the Global Voices network, has asserted.<sup>26</sup>

The second component of the definition centers on empowerment. You cannot change the world until you can imagine yourself as an active political agent. Nor, we would add, until you *have hope* and *personally care* enough about a collective issue to make it worth changing. This shift—from apathy, cynicism or ironic distance to designerly investment—is possibly the most critical for cultivating civic imagination. Civic authorship is a muscle and it needs to be activated, nourished and trained.

The training of this collective civic capacity to dream is where “civic art” comes in. There is a long history of scholarship that shows that civic activity can be a gateway to political engagement.<sup>27,28</sup> But there has been far less research on intentionally cultivating civic imagination, and by extension political hope, personal agency, and design thinking about social and political concerns, as a gateway to civic activity. I would assert that this is, or could be, the realm of civic art. Gyorgy Kepes<sup>29</sup> and Doris Sommer<sup>30</sup> are two scholar-practitioners who have attempted to articulate why we need civic art and given compelling examples. You might see this as akin to the emerging field of “social practice art”—a subgenre of art that renewed the interest in the intersection of art, politics and everyday life for practitioners, theorists, funders and educators. Social practice art often takes “the encounter” as the medium through which art unfolds. But evaluation of this kind of work as well as the relationship of the artist to the community remain open questions.<sup>31</sup> Where social practice takes any kind of social relations as fodder for art (and often appropriates and aestheticizes those relations in problematic ways in the process), civic art is more exclusively concerned with processes of governance, dissent and protest, citizen participation in political processes, and the production of collective, explicitly political imaginaries.

In *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*,<sup>32</sup> Steven Duncombe makes the case that fantasy, dreaming and imagination are not peripheral to the business of politics and the public realm but constitutive of it. These highly human proclivities are *the beginnings of the beginnings* of new worlds. While traditional political advocacy, movement activism and community organizing certainly have their place, there is an opportunity to think more carefully and intentionally about cultivating civic imagination in order to include more people and perspectives in the civic process. But the beginnings of beginnings of new worlds are fragile, provisional, experimental, and it is necessarily so. Cultivating civic imagination is about offering people a low-stakes opportunity to try on a new kind of authorship, to perform a new kind of political agency, and to envision a new (possibly silly, personal, trivial, useless) world. And this is exactly what we did in Cambridge in relation to the names of public places.

### How it Worked

The renamings took place in a series of thirteen “renaming parties” staged in different locations around the city. At each site, the Institute erected our large white tent, a banner that said “The Institute for Infinitely Small Things” and set up two renaming stations along with a research library where people



Figure 2.2 The Institute Staged 13 Renaming Parties Across the City of Cambridge. Photo by Lino Ribeiro.

could review the history of names in Cambridge. Each event was carefully planned in conjunction with another event or reason people would be present. We were seeking what Kim Pruesse calls “the accidental audience.”<sup>33</sup> We held renaming parties at Farmer’s Markets, museums and local festivals. We sought to stage renaming parties in places of leisure and recreation where people would have time and incentive to stop, be curious, and spend a couple minutes talking with us.

The experience of renaming worked as follows: Participants would be drawn in either by the large banner with the Institute’s name or possibly by one of the Institute members asking them if they would like to rename Cambridge. An Institute member would explain that we were seeking to rename every public place in the City of Cambridge. Together they would look up the street the person lived on in our printed copy of Hail’s directory of Cambridge street names.<sup>34</sup> For example, if you looked up Cushing Street in the binder you see that it was established in 1691 as a through street without a name that linked Belmont Street and Huron Ave. In 1847, it was named Cushing Street for John Perkins Cushing. At this point in the renaming experience the Institute member and the participant might likely check Wikipedia or one of the numerous books we had in our library for some history of Cushing. It turns out he was a merchant, opium smuggler and conservatory founder from the nineteenth century. He was very well-liked by women and the town of Belmont (adjacent to Cambridge) is named after his lavish estate. As Hail’s history of buildings and street names is quite detailed, the participant might even be able to see the history of their particular building/address in the historical record.

After some discussion and possibly looking up some other names together, the Institute member might again offer to the participant to rename a place in Cambridge. The participant might browse the books, maps, and prior renamings contributed by others for a little longer in order to make a decision. Once they determined which location they wished to rename, the Institute member gave them a map where they marked the location with a star. The participant then filled out a renaming form and noted the old name of the place, the new name and the reason they wanted to bestow the new name.

People would often want to rename the same place. As the Institute did not want to curate any of the names on the map, we devised an economic system. The first name was free, that is, if no one had named the street that you wanted then you did not have to pay any money to bestow your name. If the next person came along and wanted to rename that same place they had to pay us a quarter (\$0.25). The next person that came along would have to pay \$0.50, and so on. As in real life, those who paid more money got their name on the map. Most places were not renamed more than once or twice, but Massachusetts Avenue was renamed 10 times and it’s going “price” by the end of the project was \$2.50.<sup>35</sup>

## DESIGN GOALS FOR A SPECULATIVE CIVIC CONVERSATION

There are several conscious design decisions to note from the above description of the experience of the project. These translate into three design goals that we had for the project. First of all, we wanted to create a *fun, lighthearted and playful* experience. This is what Duncombe calls an “ethical spectacle”—a symbolic action that is participatory, open, transparent, realistic and utopian.<sup>36</sup> Key to the experience being both realistic *and* utopian is the use of fun, personalization and imagination to dramatize real-world power dynamics underlying street names as well as the orientation towards the future, for example, the ability to rename any place to whatever name you choose, even if you know City Hall does not want Hancock St to be called “Land of the Evil Chipmunks.”

The second goal was to produce *a meaningful conversation and learning experience with each participant* about names of public places. To this end, the renaming experience was consciously located in physical places in Cambridge, MA. Since a number of Institute members are software programmers we have often been asked, “Why didn’t you digitally crowdsource it? Why couldn’t people online do a renaming?” This was a very conscious design decision that we made. While we did not want to require any kind of proof of residence in Cambridge, we explicitly wanted to limit the participants to those who were currently experiencing the city. As we are the Institute for Infinitely *Small* Things, the goal was not to aggregate the largest number of new names but to focus on the quality of conversation with each person. In this, our goal was to move street names from the realm of the inevitable—the infinitely small and “quintessentially mundane”<sup>37</sup>—and into the focus of attention in order to produce a new way of seeing the space around them.

Finally, *we created a speculative situation to place the participant in a position of power*. Rather than “users” of the city, we created a semi-fictional space where participants could experiment with a different kind of civic agency—that of authorship in relation to the landscape. Though we hoped to create a learning experience, our goal was not to “educate” the public about history but activate people’s curiosity through the ability to make space one’s own and to inscribe a personal mark onto a collective landscape. This relates back to the second part of the definition of civic imagination regarding political agency. The default frame for participants in *the City Formerly Known as Cambridge* was one in which they had and were expected to exercise political agency. These three design goals were designed to re-orient the participant to the space around them, to provoke reflection about the names of public places, to “try on” a kind of civic power that they had never had and to invite creative, personal, fun, contestational responses to the everyday landscape.



### A HYPOTHETICAL (BUT ENTIRELY POSSIBLE) MAP OF CAMBRIDGE

The renaming parties took place over two years—from 2006–2008. In total we conducted more than 300 conversations about place names in Cambridge and collected more than 330 names for the map. We published the map in 2008. All participants who had filled out their address on the renaming form received a free copy of the map in the mail. The map looks fairly conventional but includes only the new names that were submitted.

We used yellow callouts with photographs on the front of the map to highlight particularly interesting new names. For example, on the right-hand side you can see a picture of a large painted smokestack with the logo of the NECCO candy company. This is because one resident renamed the “Area 4” neighborhood to “Candyland” in order to commemorate that neighborhood’s industrial past in candy manufacturing. Another callout features a photo of a gentleman who renamed Massachusetts Ave to Prince Hall Blvd. He had been working for the past couple years to effect that name change through the

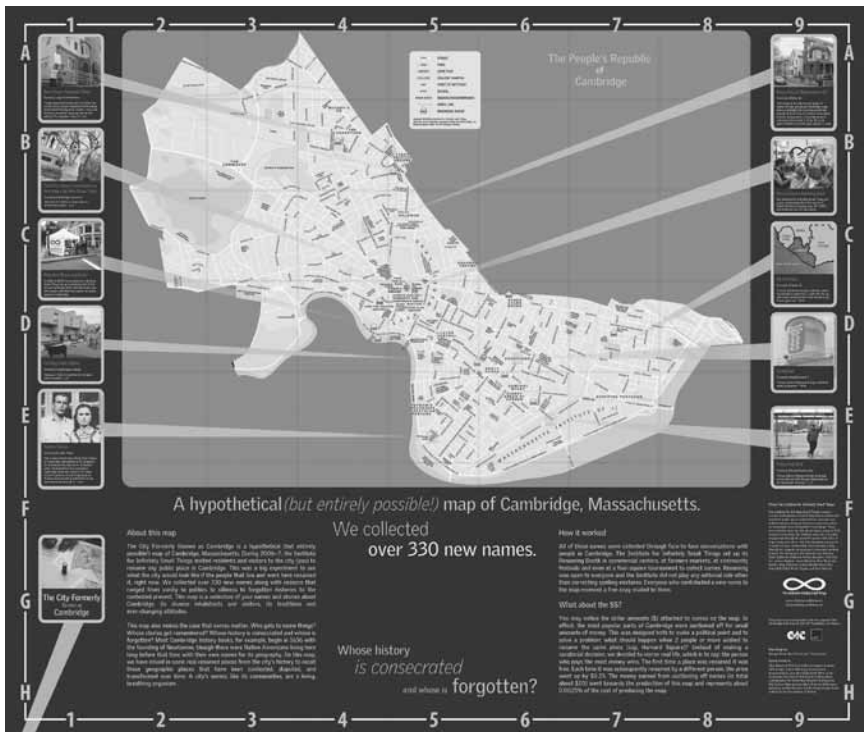


Figure 2.3 Map of the City Formerly Known as Cambridge, 2008.



Figure 2.4 Map of the City Formerly Known as Cambridge, 2008, Detail. People had many creative and critical suggestions for the areas around Harvard Square and Central Square.

City Council and decided that doing it on our map would be a good interim step. The front of the map also describes the project and asks in large type, “Whose history is consecrated and whose is forgotten?”

The back is an alphabetical index that contains the text of every new name and every new reason submitted by participants as well as insets that discuss famous renamings, Native American names, and a how-to guide for renaming your city. The back of the map includes names that did not make it onto the front because they were outbid. For example, one woman renamed Harvard St to Ann Radcliffe St because she said “After John Harvard donated about 100 books to establish Harvard University, Ann Radcliffe was the one who gave all the money necessary to maintain the university. Now Radcliffe is only commemorated through a Harvard Institute and not through any other place in the area (no streets after Ann or Radcliffe).” This renamer actually gave us \$5.00 to preserve her name. But unfortunately, she was outbid by Sean Effel who asked which name was going for the most money and then promptly gave us \$7.00 to name Ann Radcliffe Street after himself to Sean Effel Promenade.

### **WHAT PEOPLE RENAMED AND WHY**

People renamed places for a variety of reasons and exhibited various levels of attention, contestation and silliness in the process. In order to develop the yellow callouts for the front of the map, we categorized the data in a systematic way using a thematic approach.<sup>38</sup> We categorized the names into eight groups: (1) Fun: Random, silly, funny renamings (2) Personal Commemoration: Renamings that commemorated something personally meaningful such as a loved one, dog, favorite book, or home country (3) Social Use: New names that described how a place is currently being used by people (4) Contestational: Renamings that were either contesting something objectionable or complaining about something in the city (5) Vanity: People renaming places for themselves (6) History: Either celebrating or contesting history (7) Reduce Confusion: Renamings to clear up misunderstandings and inconsistencies such as duplicate street names in neighboring towns and (8) Aspirational: New names that sought to ascribe aspirational values, such as peace, love and wellness, onto a space. The chart below gives specific examples of renamings from each of these categories.

### **A USELESS MAP, TEN YEARS LATER**

What is the lasting effect, if any, of participation in such an exercise in civic imagination? Would participants remember the experience and what

**Table 2.1 Example Reasons for Renaming Places**

Fun	<p>A seven-year-old renamed her school, King/Amigos, to the "Farming Cows School" because she said <i>"I think it would be fun to have cows at school."</i></p> <p>Fayerweather St was renamed to "Attack of the Giant Moms St" because <i>"it sounds funny."</i></p> <p>Green St was renamed to "Pink St" because <i>"Pink is just plain better. Thank you!"</i></p>
Personal Commemoration	<p>A man renamed Riverside Press Park to "Kno Park." He said, <i>"My 'little brother', a child who I mentor, used to meet me here every weekend to go skateboarding. He made up his own skateboard team and named it 'Kno'. I'm naming it for him because our friendship was very important and influential to him. The park kind of symbolizes our friendship."</i></p> <p>Wood St was renamed to "Boodle St" <i>"Because it's my dog's name."</i></p> <p>Magoun St was renamed to "Jaybear Ave" <i>"Because my boyfriend lives there and this will make him blush."</i></p>
Social Use	<p>Windsor St was renamed by a resident to Redemption Alley <i>"Because all the cart people use our street as a thoroughfare to redeem their cans at the Redemption Center on Columbia St."</i></p> <p>The Cambridge Common was renamed to "That Place Where Freaks Gather to Hula Hoop and Do Other Circus Tricks" because <i>"that's what it is, especially on Wednesday nights."</i></p>
Contestational	<p>Bryant St was renamed to Pothole Rd because <i>"This very short street is possibly the worst paved in Cambridge."</i></p> <p>One resident renamed Dunster St to "Get Over It St" because <i>"I have been harassed multiple times by the same homeless man on this street for being queer. He needs to get over it."</i></p> <p>Notably, one participant used their renaming to protest the project itself as well as the renaming of the Agassiz School. The Baldwin School was renamed to "The School Formed to Prevent Irreverent Name Changes" because <i>"we don't need to rename things."</i></p>
Vanity	<p>A young woman renamed Walden St to "Ciara's St." She said, <i>"I chose this name because it's my name and I want something named after me!! :)"</i></p> <p>Charles St was renamed to "Da Liberiana St." The namer said, <i>"I chose this name because Liberia is where my ancestors came from. I want this for my new street because that is the nickname my friends gave me."</i></p>
History	<p>Massachusetts Ave was renamed "Prince Hall Boulevard" <i>"to honor the first African American Freemason and a prominent Boston citizen during the Revolutionary War."</i></p>

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Reduce Confusion	One resident renamed Upland Rd to “Bruegger’s Bagels St.” They said, “ <i>Nobody knows how to get to my house when I tell them to turn on Upland Rd so I have to say ‘Bruegger’s Bagels St’.</i> This would make it <i>MUCH</i> easier for me to throw parties! Thanks!”
Aspirational	A name that did not make it onto the map for the Charles River was “The River of Hopes and Dreams” “ <i>Because it is a source of inspiration.</i> ”

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they renamed? Did the project still resonate? Had it inspired other renaming thoughts, conversations or applications? We decided to try to evaluate the experience almost ten years later against our original design goals: (1) fun, lighthearted and playful experience (2) a meaningful conversation and learning experience with each participant and (3) create a speculative situation to place the participant in a position of power.

In June 2015, ten years after the project began, we sent out a short survey to the almost 300 people who contributed new names to the map. The survey asked the participants if they remembered the project, if they had wanted to rename anything else in the city after that, and several questions about their experience.<sup>39</sup> We tried to keep the questions open-ended so as to not lead participants towards our goals.<sup>40</sup> Many of the participants’ email addresses had expired and only 169 emails were delivered. Of those, twenty-two people responded to the survey. We used a thematic approach to code their responses based on our three design goals.

### **(1) Fun, lighthearted and playful experience**

More than 100 renamings on the published map fell into the “fun” category so participants clearly felt that they had permission to be playful and silly in their choice of names. New names such as “Nostril,” “Munchkin Land,” “Pookie Island” and “Humpty Dumpty Street” abound. Some survey respondents stated simply that “It was fun and funny” (Participant 13) and “This was a wonderful experience” (Participant 23). Others noted that the fun part came through the conversations with their friends, “I really enjoyed reading some of the names others had put down for places and debating with friends and others what we would rename places.” (Participant 14). A couple said that they took pleasure in just thinking about what to rename (Participant 18 & 19) And several noted that the project evoked “fond memories” for them. One survey respondent even continued the playful spirit of the project to tell us other things he desired in the future, “I’d like a really hot gay boyfriend, overthrow capitalism, and have many more discotheques (that actually play classic seventies disco) open in the City of Cambridge. Oh, and affordable housing, we need a lot more of that too.” (Participant 21)

We can state with fair certainty that fun was had in the course of this project. We believe this is because the project invited personal marks in a collective landscape. Participants may have even purposefully been silly as a response to the idea that we intuitively *know* that our public places are going to reify a sanctioned and sanitized notion of history and propriety. The freedom to decommemorate officialdom and personalize a bland, administrative landscape is exciting. So while it's possible to read personalization as vain and silly, another way to read it is the pleasure of speaking and being heard (and interrupting official discourse). As Duncombe says, "Perhaps the problem is not that people don't want to get involved in politics, but rather that they don't want to take part in a professionalized politics so interested in efficiency that there is no space for them."<sup>41</sup>

## **(2) A meaningful conversation and learning experience with each participant**

As a baseline for creating a meaningful conversation and learning experience, we asked participants to state whether they remembered participating. Though some respondents did not remember the places that they had renamed, all respondents except for one remembered participating in the project almost ten years ago.<sup>42</sup> In their responses to open-ended questions, many participants remembered the experience but very few mentioned conversing specifically with members of the Institute (other than that we were "nice people"—Participant 20). Those who recalled conversations were more likely to emphasize talking with their friends, "I remember encountering the booth at the Cambridge River Festival when I was walking around with a few friends. I remember we got really excited about re-naming streets, and I remember that there were bidding wars on all the major arteries." (Participant 24) And no participants mentioned talking about or looking up prior historical names of public places in our books and binders. What several people do mention browsing were the new names that other participants had suggested, for example, "Participants could give their reasons for renaming a street or landmark. I read a number of the entries. Some of the reasons were spot on." (Participant 17). The same participant mentioned wishing for more names on the map, "I wished only that there had been even more entries, because I felt sure many other places in the City Formerly Known as Cambridge deserved to be honored with more fitting names."

So, while many respondents emphasized that the experience was fun and enjoyable, nobody mentioned learning more about Cambridge, street names or the process of renaming public places. Two people noted that while they enjoyed the experience the goals were not entirely clear. Participant 20 said that it was a "vague concept" and Participant 19 advised us to use clearer

language, “As a suggestion for future projects, it would be good to keep in touch a little more frequently and to lay out in more clear language what the deal was with the project.” From these responses, we gather that much of the meaning for participants came through browsing other renamings, discussing them with friends and the prompt to “make one’s mark” on the landscape by coming up with their own name and not through the conversation with the Institute members, the description of the goals of the project or through the historical materials we had on hand.

However there were a few participants for whom the experience provided an inspiration and an on-going prompt for reflection on history. Participant 10 said they had not thought about the project until they moved away. “[T]he project is more relevant to me now that I live further south and see place and street names all around me honoring, say, Confederate figures, and as I watch as the ongoing development in my current home of Washington DC rather garishly reflects an absurd concentration of disposable income.” Participant 24 mentioned that they have discussed the project very frequently in the years following their participation and it directly inspired their work on local history, “Anytime we talk about the streets in Cambridge that share names with Boston streets, the project comes up . . . In part because of this project, I was inspired to start working on a podcast about local history in the Boston area.”

### **(3) A speculative situation to place the participant in a position of power**

As a baseline for participants feeling empowered, we asked people if, after participating, they saw other places in the city they would like to rename. This question was an attempt to indirectly get at whether they perceived themselves as having the agency to be able to rename public places. Participant 16 said they speak about the project often as a way of illustrating how “we personally map our own experiences onto the built environment.” Participant 11 chose to use the last question of the survey to re-assert the inadequacy of their current street name, “Fairmont St should be renamed for real,” ostensibly because of confusion as there is both a Fairmont St and a Fairmont Ave in Cambridge. While they used this survey to advocate for their position, it isn’t clear that they are doing anything about it through official channels. Interestingly, placing participants in a speculative and somewhat fictional position of power made some of them take their power fairly seriously. Many spent a lot of time reading names, deliberating (alone or with friends) and even regretted their decisions afterwards. “I remember which streets I named, what I named them, and that I knew immediately afterwards that I could have chosen better names.” (Participant 10) And Participant 5 said “I think I regretted my street name choice. I guess it got me thinking

about how we choose names for public institutions and functions, and how they tend to last, for better or worse.”

While it is hard to exactly measure a feeling of personal agency ten years after an experience, we believe these responses show that empowering people with semi-fictional civic agency has real weight and can be imbued with personal meaning and relevance that resonates long after the fact. For example, Participant 13 said that “We remind our kids of our ‘real’ street name all the time.” Participant 10 noted that “I’ve never looked at the map again but when I see the place I renamed, I remember it and I remember renaming and making it mine. I don’t live in Cambridge (or even in Boston) anymore but I remember the spot and often see it when I’m back.” Giving participants the agency to name their space shifted their relationship to that place in a significant way. Azaryahu writes, “Renaming a street has a substantial effect not only on the city but also on its human experience and cognition. A rude intervention in routinized practices and traditional relations between ordinary people and their habitat effects a cognitive dissonance and mental and communication disarray, at least temporarily.”<sup>43</sup> We can extend Azaryahu’s position to make the case that even temporarily and speculatively renaming a street has a substantial effect on one’s personal experience and cognition of place. From the standpoint of cultivating civic imagination, the speculative renaming is not so much “rude intervention” as it is a way to foster a more personal relationship and a manner of caring for the landscape that the participant had not previously had. Survey respondents referred to the places they renamed in a personal, possessive way—for example, “my street,” “my renaming,” “my choice”—in the same way that one refers to the street that one lives on. One’s street is special and personal.

And having engaged once in renaming provides opportunities to think about doing it again. This opens a possible gateway for civic agency in the future. While not all participants alluded to this idea, Participant 10 stated that if they were to do it again today, “I think my renaming choices would now likely be more pointedly political, and would likely reflect my perceptions of the tacit intentions reflected in the developmental trajectory of a given street or square.” Perhaps the value of empowering participants with semi-fictional agency is that it opens a door to true political authority, both exercising their own and evaluating that of those who literally have the power. The beginning of a beginning.

## ON THE POSSIBLE UTILITY OF USELESSNESS

As an artist, I am loathe to suggest that there might be some utility to uselessness, but I have already broken the unstated rules of art by administering



a survey so let us just speculate a little further. Gordon and Walter use the idea of “meaningful inefficiencies” to address the importance of designing civic systems that let participants *play* as opposed to carrying out prescribed desirable behaviors such as attending a town meeting or voting. According to them, “Meaningful inefficiencies represent the design of systems for civic action, not behaviors. They can be civic tools, systems, or events, etc. that temporarily halt normal civic processes and create a delineated time or place in which play, disorder, messiness, and the ability to experiment and fail safely are utilized in productive—though not necessarily practical—ways.”<sup>44</sup>

Whereas the focus in government has been on “civic tech” that streamlines citizen engagement with administrative services, Gordon and Walter are making a case for creating spaces that foster playful, possibly messy, possibly critical, possibly inefficient engagement with civic life. I would posit that these meaningful inefficiencies are about intentionally cultivating civic imagination *in ways that designers cannot always and should not always anticipate*. They are also about ceding power, control, and definitions of success to the participants to fill in the blanks. What might result is a “vague concept” for some (Participant 20) but the inspiration of whole body of work from another (Participant 23). Participation in open ended systems has a ripple effect. Rethinking street names ripples out into the world thought by thought, conversation by conversation. These thoughts and conversations lay the groundwork for mobilization at a later date in time. As Gordon and Walter state, the results of meaningful inefficiencies may be “increased civic learning, reflection, empathy, and increased awareness of civic systems and their effects—which citizens can then leverage in creating new action in the normal processes of civic life.”<sup>45</sup> Just a month ago, for example, I received the following tweet from a stranger named Nse Umoh:

*@kanarinka: thinking abt ur project of collaborative street renaming. #Charlestown needs that kind of intervention! <http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/change-name-calhoun-street-emanuel-nine-way/>*<sup>46</sup>

The link leads to a campaign being run by ColorOfChange.org, an online advocacy organization whose mission is to strengthen Black America’s political voice. They were running a campaign to change the name of Calhoun Street in Charleston, SC, to Emanuel 9 Way. John C. Calhoun was a staunch advocate of slavery. The Emanuel Church, located on Calhoun St, is one of the oldest African American churches in the country and was the site of the racially-motivated slaying of nine people in 2015.

While projects such as *the City Formerly Known as Cambridge* are more playful, preliminary and diffuse than a focused renaming campaign such as this, these types of civic art projects can lay groundwork that can be initiated

and activated at a later date when personal engagement, community organizing and political will converge. At the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, we think the ability to “try out” civic systems and “try on” political agency, even in a semi-fictional context, has real world consequences. Namely, these preliminary performances are essential to activate civic imagination, prompt reflection and initiate critical action on the naturalized, mundane power systems that maintain and structure civic life. Exercises in civic imagination also help to broaden the sphere of who participates in that civic life. There is a growing body of research that shows that political participation is unfolding in increasingly mediatized, participatory, personalized and cultural ways.<sup>47,48,49,50</sup> In this new climate, it is not enough to exercise the right to vote. We also need to exercise our civic imaginations and practice ways of dreaming together.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Reuben Rose-Redwood and Derek Alderman, “Critical Interventions in Political Toponymy,” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 10, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–6.

## NOTES

1. The unwritten rules of governance for the Institute for Infinitely Small Things state that anyone who is affiliated with the Institute may represent themselves as the Director. And anyone may affiliate themselves with the Institute without informing anybody.

2. Maoz Azaryahu, “The Power of Commemorative Street Names,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14, no. 3 (1996): 311–30, doi:10.1068/d140311.

3. “Apr 27 Michael Rakowitz on Redirective Practice, Problem-Solving and Trouble-Making,” *Videos*, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GH7xZj>.

4. Reuben S. Rose-Redwood, “Indexing the Great Ledger of the Community: Urban House Numbering, City Directories, and the Production of Spatial Legibility,”

*Journal of Historical Geography* 34, no. 2 (April 2008): 286–310, doi:10.1016/j.jhg.2007.06.003.

5. Who are the strangers? They are imagined to be of the desirable, male, capitalist type—bureaucrats, merchants, businessmen. The 1838 Philadelphia directory advertised itself as “a convenient and intelligent pocket companion for the *stranger*, *merchant*, or *businessman* in Philadelphia, by affording him a ready and desirable guide, promptly directing him where to obtain the various goods which comprise his required assortment of merchandize, with as little delay as possible: thereby economising time, and expediting his general business transactions.” (as quoted in Rose-Redwood, 2008, italics added.)

6. Azaryahu, “The Power of Commemorative Street Names.”

7. Reuben Rose-Redwood and Derek Alderman, “Critical Interventions in Political Toponymy,” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 10, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–6.

8. Catherine Farvacque-Vitković, *Street Addressing and the Management of Cities*, Directions in Development (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005).

9. John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-Coded World* (Psychology Press, 2004).

10. Azaryahu, “The Power of Commemorative Street Names.”

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Christopher Hail, “Harvard/Radcliffe On-Line Historical Reference Shelf: Cambridge Buildings,” Reference, *Cambridge Buildings and Architects*, (November 2002), <http://hul.harvard.edu/lib/archives/refshelf/cba/index.html>.

14. Maple Ave—<http://hul.harvard.edu/lib/archives/refshelf/cba/m.html#mapleave>

15. Akron St—<http://hul.harvard.edu/lib/archives/refshelf/cba/a.html#akronst>

16. Reservoir St—<http://hul.harvard.edu/lib/archives/refshelf/cba/r.html#reservoirst>

17. Lurie, Edward. “Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man.” *Isis* 45, no. 3 (1954): 227–42.

18. Olivia S. Solomons, “MARIA LOUISE BALDWIN,” *Negro History Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (1941): 19.

19. Lauren R. Dorgan, “Committee Renames Local Agassiz School | News | The Harvard Crimson,” May 22, 2002, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2002/5/22/committee-renames-local-agassiz-school-the/>.

20. In doing research for the project all historical texts we found about Cambridge and Massachusetts started with the white people with only a token mention, if any, of the fact that native populations may have previously inhabited the area.

21. Azaryahu, “The Power of Commemorative Street Names.”

22. “Wikipedia:FAQ/Contributing,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, July 17, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:FAQ/Contributing&oldid=730254941>.

23. “File:Osmdbstats1 Users.png—OpenStreetMap Wiki,” *Open Street Map Wiki*, accessed July 25, 2016, [http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/File:Osmdbstats1\\_users.png](http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/File:Osmdbstats1_users.png).

24. Henry Jenkins et al., "Superpowers to the People!: How Young Activists Are Tapping The Civic Imagination," in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, eds. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (MIT Press, 2016).

25. Shaowen Bardzell, "Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI '10 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2010), 1301–10, doi:10.1145/1753326.1753521.

26. As quoted in Dalia Othman, Catherine D'Ignazio, and Rahul Bhargava, "Measuring Impact | Berkman Center," 2015, [https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/getinvolved/studygroups/datastorytelling\\_impact](https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/getinvolved/studygroups/datastorytelling_impact).

27. Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

28. Alexis de Toqueville as cited in Benjamin Bowyer and Joseph Kahne, "Revisiting the Measurement of Political Participation for the Digital Age," in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, eds. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (MIT Press, 2016).

29. Gyorgy Kepes, "Toward Civic Art," *Leonardo* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 1971): 69–73, doi:10.2307/1572235.

30. Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014).

31. Carolina Miranda, "How the Art of Social Practice Is Changing the World, One Row House at a Time | ARTnews," April 7, 2014, <http://www.artnews.com/2014/04/07/art-of-social-practice-is-changing-the-world-one-row-house-at-a-time/>.

32. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press; Distributed by W.W. Norton, c2007., 2007).

33. Kim Pruesse, *Accidental Audience: Urban Interventions by Artists* (Toronto: offsite collective, 1999).

34. Hail, "Cambridge Buildings and Architects."

35. Though we did have conversations with a few people who questioned this logic, we felt that a symbolic nod towards the role that money plays in the naming of places was very apt. All in all we made less than \$25 this way.

36. Duncombe, *Dream*.

37. Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names."

38. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Transaction Publishers, 2009).

39. Survey questions are accessible here: <http://goo.gl/forms/tU6XwDpXEJ>.

40. Bernard CK Choi and Anita WP Pak, "A Catalog of Biases in Questionnaires," *Prev Chronic Dis* 2, no. 1 (2005): A13.

41. Duncombe, *Dream*.

42. This could, of course, be self-selection in who chose to respond to the email survey versus who regarded it as meaningless spam.

43. Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names."

44. Eric Gordon and Stephen Walter, "Meaningful Inefficiencies: Resisting the Logic of Technological Efficiency in the Design of Civic Systems," in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, eds. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (MIT Press, 2016).

AQ 9: The year seems to be repeated twice in note 32, can the duplicate be deleted

45. Ibid.
46. Nse Umoh, “@kanarinka Thinking Abt Ur Project of Collaborative Street Renaming. #CharlestonNeedsThatKindofIntervention! [Http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/change-Name-Calhoun-Street-Emanuel-Nine-way/ ...](http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/change-Name-Calhoun-Street-Emanuel-Nine-way/),” microblog, @nseabasi-umoh, (July 9, 2015), <https://twitter.com/nseabasi-umoh/status/619222634216222720>.
47. Cliff Zukin et al., *A New Engagement?: Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
48. Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen : How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, c2008., 2008).
49. Bennett W. Lance and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action,” in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, eds. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (MIT Press, 2016).
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