

WHY BOTHER? ENGAGING TEXANS IN DEMOCRACY TODAY



Citizen's Guide to Implementing Your Own Civic Pop-Up Space

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Based on the Why Bother? Civic Pop-Up Space at The Texas Conference on Civic Life*

The Why Bother? Civic Pop-Up Space is an interactive, multi-station experience that was first piloted at [The Texas Conference on Civic Life](#) (TCCL) on November 9th, 2013. The space was envisioned as a civic engagement experience for citizens to engage around an issue or subject of importance to their community. At TCCL, the focus of the pop-up space was neighborhood identity and involvement.

This guide serves as a quick reference for individuals and community groups that are interested in creating their own pop-up space in their neighborhood around an event, to explore an issue, as a community-building exercise, or all of the above. The guide will walk you through the process of creating your own pop-up space from the ground up.

I. Basic Structure & Subject of Space

The basic structure of the civic pop-up space consists of three "stations," though there could be more or less, depending on your needs. Each station encourages citizens to engage around civic issues, neighborhood placemaking, and personal experiences. The three stations at the pilot space on November 9th were an issue prioritization board, a neighborhood art activity, and a listening booth, each of which we discuss in greater detail below.

The subject of your space is up to you. We chose the general theme of neighborhood identity, but it is possible, too, to focus on specific issues: light rail in your neighborhood, gentrification, and household affordability are just some examples. The space can be tailored to your theme.

The location of your space is also important, as are the logistics. We found it relatively easy to keep the space simple, but you will need some supplies and tables. If you have the space outside, you might consider a tent. The civic pop-up space works best alongside another event, or at a location in your neighborhood that has a significant amount of foot traffic.

For our space, we had both indoor and outdoor components. We used a tent with a floor and two tables with folding chairs outside, and a number of existing tables and chairs inside of our building for the indoor components. Because our stations were not located directly next to each other, each station had a large printed foamcore sign with its number and name (for download on the Civic Pop-Up Space page). Additionally, maps were made available to participants to navigate the space.

II. Station 1 – Issue Prioritization Board



The issue prioritization board is a physical board that allows participants to prioritize the issues that are most important in their neighborhood and add them to a shared board that will help them see patterns across neighborhood and city lines. For this station, we used post-it notes (various colors can make for a more engaging board), a large piece of gator board (whiteboard, chalkboard, and other boards could easily be used), an easel to hold the board, and pens.

Citizens are encouraged to start at this station, and a volunteer guides them through the prompt, which was to “write the three most important issues to you in your neighborhood.” The volunteer will then help the participant place their sticky notes on the board by category – transportation issues may go in section, parks and beautification in another, etc. Over time, the board will begin to offer interesting insights into issues across neighborhoods.

In the case of our event, we also had two large foam-mounted maps – one of the city of Austin, and one of the state of Texas. Participants were encouraged to pin their business card to their neighborhood area. Because TCCL was a statewide conference, two maps were provided, as were pins, and spare paper if participants did not have business cards. This was an interesting concept, and allowed us to see a visual of our participants. If your event is significantly more local or hyper-local, however, this may not be appropriate.

This station should take participants 5-7 minutes, and it is a good idea to direct them to the next station in the sequence after they are finished. Additionally, if your stations are not located next to each other, a map of the stations for hand out to participants may be useful.

If you are hosting your event outside, keep in mind factors such as wind or light rain that may make it logistically difficult to keep your board upright, and have a back-up plan.

III. Station 2 – Neighborhood Art Activity



The neighborhood art activity was the keystone of our civic pop-up space and the task that individuals routinely spent the most time on. Led by a local artist, Michelle Dahlenburg, the activity paired participants up to discuss what their neighborhood meant to them before allowing each individual to craft a visual manifestation of their neighborhood identity. For this station, the following supplies were provided: legal size card stock, construction paper, art markers, old magazines (variety of titles), glue sticks, scissors, pens, pipe cleaners, and stickers.

The local artist led this station, with volunteers assisting; however, it could be solely volunteer-led. Individuals were paired up and given a set of 5 questions to ask their partner in an interview-style. This allowed each person to learn more about their partner and their partner's neighborhood. At the end of the interview portion, individuals broke off to create a map of their neighborhood using the supplies provided. They were encouraged to think creatively and represent their neighborhood however they wished.

The variety of maps produced was stunning. Feedback from individuals indicated this station was the most highly enjoyed of the three. This station took the average participant 30-45 minutes, though many people elected to stay longer. At the end, individuals were directed to the final station, the listening booth.

Depending on the traffic expected at your event, it may be a good idea to offer a sign-up sheet for times to participate in the activity throughout the day. This way, if you run out of space for more people at any given time, no one needs to be turned away for too long.

As a means of archiving the artwork, we photographed everything with a DSLR and uploaded it to Flickr as well as a Tumblr we created for the day. This allowed everyone access to others' artwork, giving citizens the opportunity to view a virtual lookbook of Austin neighborhoods through the eyes of their residents.

IV. Station 3 – Listening Booth



The KLRU/KUT listening gave citizens the opportunity to share their stories about civic life in their neighborhood and community with KUT News and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS. The booth itself was a KUT recording booth. Though we used professional sound recording equipment, we used an iPad for video recording. A simple adaptation for those without access to a professional recording booth for their pop-up space would be to use an iPad for video and sound recording. A plug-in mic for the iPad could also be used to enhance sound. Alternatively, a DSLR with video recording capability could also be used for video and sound. Even an iPhone would produce usable recordings with usable quality for the average group.

The listening booth was structured around approximately 5-minute interviews with citizens who had signed a media release. They were asked to name their neighborhood, and then were asked to define its boundaries. After that, they were interviewed briefly about their neighborhood's qualities and characteristics. Interviews are available for viewing on The Annette Strauss Institute's [Vimeo](#) page.

This station took most participants approximately 10 minutes, including setup and interview time. If you choose to use a listening booth format, keep in mind that you should choose a relatively quiet, well-lit space if possible. Indoors is ideal for noise, but not required. Interviewees must sign a media release as well if you wish to use the content for any reason.

A sign-up sheet for listening booth style activities is highly recommended. The listening booth was in high demand and it is best to have the ability to offer someone a slot later on in the day to ensure all voices are heard through the process. In our case, 3 individuals were allowed to sign up per 15 minute slot, which made it easier to proceed if someone was late or easier to catch up if we fell behind. If you had the ability to film more than one participant at once, a sign-up sheet might be less useful, but for us, it was an important part of the process.

V. Logistics

Depending on the scale of your event, more or less planning may be required. A dedicated budget is not a must, but some investment of time and skill on the part of the planners will be needed. Below are some logistical considerations to keep in mind:

- Securing the location for your pop-up space (rental – cost or free)
- Recruiting volunteers (6-8 for the most successful space)
- Hiring a local artist (will they be paid or unpaid?)
- Gathering materials (many can be sourced for free, though some budget helps)
- Promoting the event (email marketing, flyers, etc.)
- Offering more information to participants (after pop-up space, do they have takeaways?)
- Distributing created content to participants (generally or specifically)

Promoting the event can be done easily – a flyer will need to be made, and if you wish to distribute it physically, it will need to be printed. It is also possible to send it out solely over email through your contacts.

Distributing content after the event is also very important. We used Tumblr, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter as means of pushing content during and after the event. Vimeo was used to archive our video and our website is the central repository of information from the event.

Logistical concerns should not keep you from creating a pop-up space – it can be done easily, without a dedicated budget, and with a small investment of time, depending on the scale. The beauty of this type of engagement is that it offers a wide range of possible implementations.

VI. Conclusion

This guide is intended to serve as a quick reference for individuals and community groups that are interested in creating their own pop-up space in their neighborhood around an event, to explore an issue, as a community-building exercise, or all of the above. We hope it has been informative and helpful toward your final goal, and that you will use and adapt the resources toward your own needs. Please feel free to pass on the guide to others, near and far, that may be interested in this idea.

For more on information on the pilot Why Bother? Civic Pop-Up Space that was held at [The Texas Conference on Civic Life](#) (TCCL) on November 9th, 2013, or to get more information about hosting a civic pop-up space in general, please visit <http://whybothertexas.org> or contact Debbie Wise, deborah.wise@austin.utexas.edu.