STREET SMARTS—
AN EXPERIMENT IN URBAN SOCIAL SCIENCE
Designing for a Very Varied Audience

The Project: Create interactive experiences about the social sciences in the middle of San Francisco's Civic Center open space.

How do we design this to work for all walks of life?

Goals:

Create a place that feels welcoming for the whole community; be widely seen as a positive addition to the neighborhood for the wide variety of audiences that use the area.

Encourage social interactions among users, including strangers.

Provide compelling learning experiences based on social psychology, especially in the areas of bias and stereotyping.

Have people reflect on their own social responses, ideally moving towards greater compassion and empathy for others.

Challenges—how to:

Communicate with a wildly mixed audience

- Huge demographic variety (socio-economic status, age, education level, language, and culture)

- Many walks of life, including homeless people, government employees, tourists, residents from a nearby low-income neighborhood, people with addiction and mental illness, children and families, cultural/arts visitors, commuters, and tech workers

- Varied personal experiences with bias and stereotyping

Soothe, not stoke, concerns about gentrification and exclusion in the area
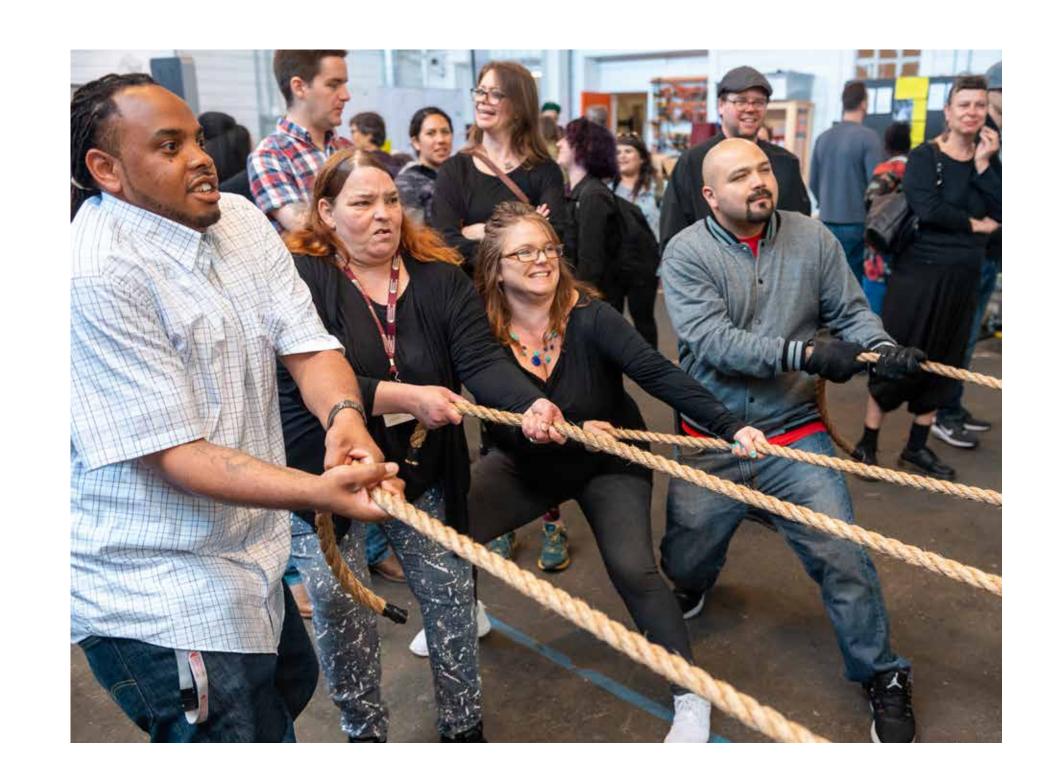
Make everyone feel welcome and heard

Help everyone get engaged and find something relevant to their lives

Strategies:

Design with the audience and for them.

- Formative evaluation: multiple rounds of exhibit testing in the neighborhood

- Community partners: sharing work-in-progress with key groups for feedback

- Communication design: making graphics and AV as visual, multilingual, and understandable as possible

- Engage a community therapist to work with the team on our own biases about class and race.

- Plan for the presence of community-based stewards in the installation.

Practitioner impact:

Techniques for reaching non-museum and non-traditional audiences

Practitioners' Guide for placemaking and addressing social science in public spaces

Contribution to theory:

Placemaking and City Planning

- Energizing spaces

- Enhancing safety

- Increasing social trust and openness

Social Science

- Increasing awareness of social biases

- Increasing sense of human interconnectedness, which might lead to greater compassion for self and others