Creating New York City’s Shared Space for Art and Play:

The Story of Governors Island
Governors Island basic facts

• 172-acre island in the middle of New York Harbor

• Sits 800 yards from Manhattan and 300 yards from Brooklyn

• Former military base, closed to public its entire history

• Accessible only by boat

• First opened to the public in 2005
• In 2003, 150 acres of Governors Island transferred to New York, now managed by The Trust for Governors Island

• Remaining 22 acres of Island declared a National Monument, managed by the National Park Service

• Deed to the Island prohibits residential housing and gambling
Historic District: The Ice Cream

- Northern half of the island is 92 acre Historic District, protected by national and local landmark laws
- More than 52 vacant landmark buildings, totalling 1.4M SqFt
South Island: **The Cone**

- 80 acres of flat, featureless landfill
- New park required, new buildings and uses allowed
- Statue of Liberty views
- Dozens of derelict buildings
- Obsolete infrastructure
- Closed to the public
Our mission:

To transform Governors Island into a vibrant resource for NYC with extraordinary public space, educational, not-for-profit and commercial facilities.
In 2006, the question was:

What will Governors Island be?

Sometimes phrased as:

“Where is the master plan?”
“Is anything ever going to happen there?”
Instead we asked:

• What does NYC **not** have?*

• What should happen **first**?

• Why would anyone come here on a Sunday?

* And does it make sense on an island?
Our Answer:

Lead redevelopment with arts, culture and exceptional design.
Open House  Hammocks  Knish
NYC is the world’s cultural capital.

What does it not have?
A flexible, free space for public programming.
encourage

“If you build it they will come.”
How we approach programming:

Open ideas + Friendly bureaucracy = Funding - Curation

a.k.a. The Spaghetti Strategy
OpenHouseGI

150,000 SF of indoor space and 25 acres of outdoor space available free of charge

- Two dozen former officers’ homes
- Open, transparent permit process online
- Free for organizations offering free public programs
Island as a magnet + Press + DIY graphic design + Social media = A citywide audience and platform
A Typical Day: Saturday, June 21 2014

- Make Music New York’s Porch Stomp
- “A Curious Invasion” in Hammock Grove
- A dozen indoor exhibits
- Spontaneous Interventions
- FIGMENT’s mini golf and treehouse
- LMCC’s Trisha Brown exhibition
- FIGMENT’s pavilion
- Compost Learning Center workshops
- “15 Minute Hamlet”
- River to River Festival Dance Performance
Growth in number of organizations presenting

Number of Programming Organizations

2011 2012 2013 2014
Growth in visitor experiences offered

- Theater and Dance Productions
- Indoor exhibits
- Special events
- Open rehearsals and studios
- Workshops
Growth in Governors Island’s popularity


Total Visitation: 0, 30,000, 100,000, 150,000, 200,000, 250,000, 300,000, 350,000, 400,000, 450,000, 500,000
OpenHouseGI includes the nascent and established

• Performances range from Hedgepig Theater’s “15 Minute Hamlet” to Third Rail, the Lincoln Center Festival

• Exhibitions range from 4Heads and the Typewriter Project to the International Center of Photography, New York Historical Society, Cooper Hewitt
Space and platform for groups with no other presence in city or “home base”

• Nearly half of organizations have no permanent home elsewhere
• Half new to the Island each year

Mu Math’s workshops

Governors Island Art Fair, annual exhibit
“[Governors Island] is one of the few places in New York City where artists can have the time and space to collaborate with a site and be in a conversation with the public. It’s a perfect match, really.”

- Jennine Willett, artistic director of Third Rail, as quoted in *The New York Times*
OpenHouseGI is the **platform** where the City’s cultural communities **present**, **experiment**, and **reach** new audiences.

Governors Island is now a **lively** and **loved** destination where New Yorkers encounter all forms of **culture**.
Open House  Hammocks  Knish
Exceptional design

• International design competition 2007
• Selected West 8, internationally acclaimed firm
  • Adriaan Geuze brilliant designer
• Dramatic master plan creating artificial hills
• Won awards and critics’ plaudits
• Model of resiliency
• First phase opened 2014, new phase 2017
We listen to people.

• Solicited and collected more than 3,000 Post-It™ notes

• People said:
  • “Lots more hammocks!”
  • “Keep it car-free”
  • “Outdoor sculpture everywhere!”
  • “Yay for biking!”
  • “Playgrounds for big people”
We show the public that what you say matters.
We **learn** from what you do.

- Observing is just as crucial as listening.
Most importantly, we **experiment** and **improvise**.
A visitor had an idea.
We went **shopping**...
We **demolished** some buildings...
We **opened** Picnic Point...
And designed “Hammock Grove.”
Now the public enjoys it.
Open House  Hammocks  Knish
Everyone talks about engagement.
We act with knishes.

**Knish**
noun  /k(ə)-ˈniSH/
Yiddish: a small round or square of dough stuffed with a filling (as potato) and baked or fried
75% of our visitors live in NYC

- We do a lot of outreach to invite people from every community.
- And make you feel welcome when you are here.
Physiological needs: food, water, warmth, rest

Safety needs: security, safety

Belongingness and love needs: intimate relationships, friends

Esteem needs: prestige and feeling of accomplishment

Self-actualization: achieving one’s full potential, including creative activities

Self-fulfillment needs
Food is not just essential.

It’s welcoming.

And comforting.

And part of culture.
It must vary in taste points...

Vegan and organic

BBQ pulled pork

And price points.

Organic Ice Cream

Mister Softee
It must be flavorful...

Mahi Mahi fish tacos

Thai etnamese Fusion

And familiar.

Hot Dogs

PB&J
It must be for **everyone**.
Kosher knishes.

Hot Knosh,
Governors Island, 2010
Hot Nosh was necessary, but insufficient.
Now we are truly **Kosher**.

Schnitzi's food truck, Sundays on Governors Island 2014
Be open

Improvise

Be welcoming
Find your Knish.