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
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 thought about:

• What should happen here? And more importantly, what should happen first?

• What does New York City not have?*

*and does it make sense on an island?
Our mission:

To transform Governors Island into a vibrant resource for NYC with extraordinary public space, educational, not-for-profit and commercial facilities.
Lesson 1:

It’s all about the customer, stupid.
In our world

The Customer = The Public
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.
Lesson 2:

Understand your assets.
Act on it.

A flexible, free space for public programming.
How we approach programming:

1. Open ideas
2. Friendly bureaucracy
3. Funding
4. Curation

a.k.a. The Spaghetti Strategy
Island as a magnet + Press + DIY graphic design + Social media = A citywide audience and platform
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
Growth in visitor experiences offered

- Theater and Dance Productions
- Indoor exhibits
- Special events
- Open rehearsals and studios
- Workshops

Lesson 3:

Market share is **priceless**.
In our case, the **psychological market share** of an entire city.
Lesson 4:

Have a strategy and stick to it.
✓ Expanded public access and early signature uses
✓ Public investment in stabilization and infrastructure
✓ Multi-phase, mixed-use development strategy
✓ Early creation of new world-class park and public spaces

Circa October 2006
Lesson 5:

**Execution is All.**

**Think Big, Act Small.**
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.
Lesson 6:

If you (your organization) was to disappear tomorrow would it matter?
Growth in number of organizations presenting

Number of Programming Organizations

- 2011: 45
- 2012: 28
- 2013: 34
- 2014: 63
Growth in Governors Island’s popularity

Total Visitation

Year

2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014

2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
Lesson 7:

Indifference curves matter....sometimes
Indifference Curve:
Public Space Resources/Public Spending
Governors Island is New York’s shared space for art and play.

Created by and for New Yorkers