Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:
Perceptions of Boston as Undesirable Tourist Destination for Racial Minorities

April 19th, 2016
2:00pm - 4:50pm
Brandeis University
Rose Art Museum

Summary Report

Introduction:

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. This design lab was a collaboration between CAST students, faculty, staff and members of the Greater Boston area whose experiences and careers offered vital perspectives for discussing possible solutions to address the perceptions of Boston as an undesirable tourist destination for African-Americans and other minority groups. The purpose of this design lab was to discuss the ways in which arts and cultural work could help to address these negative perceptions of Boston.

Racial discrimination is an ongoing reality in the lives of African Americans and Latinos in Metro Boston. Although the region has experienced significant growth in racial and ethnic diversity over the past several decades, racial minority groups continue to struggle for full acceptance and equal opportunity. African Americans and Latinos report persistent discrimination in the workplace, in seeking housing, and in their day-to-day encounters with other metro area residents. Large shares of African Americans and Latinos say they feel unwelcome in marketplaces and residential communities throughout the region. Substantial shares believe that racial discrimination in Metro Boston is a serious problem. These sentiments arise within a region whose majority population may believe that racial discrimination is no longer a serious issue.

In the mid-1970s, the city of Boston erupted in racial violence over the desegregation of its public schools. Since those turbulent times, thousands of racial and ethnic minorities have settled in the city and region. Growing diversity and the passage of time may have led to a sense among some area residents that the city of Boston’s racial divisiveness is a relic of the past, and that the area’s wells of racial intolerance have subsided. Although racial strife is nowhere near the levels of the 1970s, racial intolerance and racial inequality have not fully subsided. Instead, they have taken new forms and have moved across the region. As greater numbers of racial minorities have come to reside in the region’s central and satellite cities, Whites have continued their decades-long migration to the farthest reaches of the outer suburbs. Metro Boston today is thus a deeply segregated region, and such segregation has had the effect of isolating many racial minorities in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and severe social and economic distress. Within this context of significant racial inequality, perceptions of racial discrimination among the region’s most disadvantaged groups—African Americans and Latinos—remain very high. This finding emerges from a poll of over 400 African American and Latino adults in Metro Boston. These perceptions discourage many potential African-American and Latino tourists from choosing Boston as a suitable travel destination resulting in a loss of real profits for the city’s tourism industry.

Key Questions:
1. What is known about the perceptions of African Americans about Boston as a tourist destination?
2. How has this situation emerged? What historical dynamics and contemporary realities have contributed to this situation?

3. What role could arts and cultural work play in increasing opportunities for communities of color and for improving perceptions of Boston as a tourist destination?

4. Who needs to be brought into this conversation? What additional information/perspectives are needed?

5. Can this issue be reframed to generate creative approaches?

**Explanation of CAST 150b:**

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

**Explanation of CAST Minor:**

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

**Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played:**

Prior to the design lab, the students in the Spring 2016 CAST 150b course were assigned to research different organizations in Boston that use art and/or cultural expressions to address or facilitate social change. Students were asked to compile information about the organization’s mission, practices, challenges, and solutions. This information was consolidated in a session prior to the design lab in an effort to expose students to the similarities and differences between Boston-based organizations doing socially engaged work through art. During the design lab, students were able to draw upon this knowledge and offer relevant examples from these other organizations in order to describe how the arts and cultural work more generally could work to change the perceptions of Boston as an undesirable tourist destination.

Additionally, students were assigned with different roles during the discussion. The notetaker was tasked with keeping detailed notes, and the rapporteurs was tasked to summarize and report the discussion to fellow students and participants, who engaged in different design labs.

**Participants:**

- Dan Terris (Director, International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, Brandeis)
Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST)

- Tim Phillips (Director, Beyond Conflict)
- Dr. Atyia Martin (Chief Resilience Officer, City of Boston)
- Rick Lowe (Artist/Community Organizer, Project Row Houses, Houston)
- Brandon Leahy (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)
- Tyfanny English (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)
- Alona Weimer (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)
- Queen White (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)
- Brandon Leahy (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)
- Subhasinee Sapkota (Undergraduate student, Brandeis)

Key Learnings:

Our discussion generated many useful insights for beginning to address this challenging problem. Due to the all-encompassing nature of the problem, we agreed that the City of Boston should make concentrated efforts at engaging large cultural institutions in processes of self-reflection in order to address racial issues and incorporate minority communities in those processes. While art has the potential to generate new narratives for individuals and communities, it is clear that many of Boston's cultural institutions are woefully inaccessible to large swaths of the community it purports to serve. Since the perceptions of Boston as a racist city are linked to its history and most of the region's tourism is related to its history, the City of Boston should invest in institutions that devote themselves to the preservation and pursuit of African-American and Latino history. This would serve to dispel the belief that Boston is not interested in its minority communities and could be an opportunity for the City of Boston to recognize its own role in racial and economic injustices in the region while leading the way in correcting some of those injustices. However, the City of Boston should be wary of cultural institutions that promote their minority art and history collections in order to generate publicity but who do not ensure that their space is inviting and accessible to those minority communities. One way to circumvent this issue is by encouraging cultural institutions to create partnerships with local churches and/or community organizations that serve the African-American and Latino communities. While it would take time to build a reasonable level of trust between these institutions and the community because of the legacy of the region's racism, the investment in these partnerships would be a sign of commitment to the African-American and Latino communities in Boston that would be reflected onto potential tourists. It could also serve as a model for other cities who seek to make efforts at reconciliation with their own minority populations.

Alongside this, it was noted that the City of Boston could focus on ensuring that the curriculum for public schools at all levels include some analysis of the history of racial inequality in the U.S broadly and in the region specifically. This education should include the positive legacies that African-Americans have contributed to the region—for instance, both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X spent considerable amounts of time in the city and it was in a Massachusetts prison that the latter underwent his spiritual and political maturation—as well as the contributions that Latinos have made in
the region. Through the incorporation of this education in the public school system, fruitful and generating conversations about race could be pursued. This could lead to a sense of inclusion amongst African-American and Latino communities because they would see the contributions of their community members honored. By increasing the sense of inclusion and dignity of the city's African-American and Latino communities, the perceptions of Boston as a racist city would likely decrease leading to a rise in interest from minority tourists.

References:

http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/metroboston/synopsis.php


https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/08/08/did-busing-slow-boston-desegregation/5HXQbNFyuvD0SV4UdhNgAL/story.html

http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/color-of-wealth/