Hacking the Archives

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Background

2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the People Before Highways protests, a remarkable milestone in the local history of activism. In January of 1969, thousands of residents marched to the Boston State House to protest against a destructive government project that would have carved a highway through greater Boston at the cost of innumerable homes and neighborhoods. Although the Inner Belt construction did begin, the protests ultimately compelled the state government to halt and eventually fully abandon the project altogether.

The People Before Highways protest is just one example of a massive wave of social activism that swept across the United States during the late 1960s. The activists of this era continue to be active today, but are growing older - they carry with them the strategies, values, understandings, and cautions that remain unknown to current and emerging activist communities. In this era of increasing political unrest, carrying an uncanny resemblance to the sixties, their wisdom is more important than ever. Thus, it is vital to connect activist individuals and groups across intergenerational boundaries in order to further knowledge and preserve the efforts of earlier years well into the future.

There are resources available for interested parties to gather information about political movements of certain periods, primarily within university and library archives. However, the histories contained within these archives tend to be limited in scope and difficult for many to access. We are currently developing an event that will bring together activists, residents, academics, youth, and other members of the community to brainstorm how we may rethink archive development and accessibility in the context of activist history and contemporary political engagement. Our tentative date is May 3rd and 4th.

Our goals in developing this hackathon and connecting together several significant and historic Boston-area organizations are threefold:

1) We must preserve the stories and histories of the activists of the 1960s to inform and inspire future generations.
2) We will connect activists between groups and across generations in order to form stronger and more cohesive social networks.
3) We should connect the history of Boston-area activism to modern-day struggles to better understand how we can shape our future by understanding the past.

Design Team

Our design team, or MIT-based "pit crew," comprises of one professor and five graduate students from the Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP), Architecture, and Comparative Media Studies (CMS) departments. They are as follows: DUSP lecturer Karilyn Crockett, who recently published a book on the Boston Anti-Highway Movement; DUSP graduate students Meesh Zucker and Carolyn Yang; Architecture graduate student Zainab Taymuree; and CMS graduate students Ben Silverman and Annie Wang.

Community Partners

Our community partners are Boston-based organizations:

- Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO)
  - Paired with Annie and Ben
  - METCO is an organization founded in 1965 to counter racial segregation in public schools through "voluntary desegregation." That year, it supported 400 Roxbury students to enroll in predominantly white schools in other neighborhoods. In 1968, METCO successfully advocated for state funding streams for any Massachusetts public school that would elect to voluntarily integrate through such programs. It has continued its bussing programs through this funding system ever since.
  - METCO is joining the hackathon in order to gather archival materials around desegregation activism and the Boston public school system.
- Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative
  - Paired with Carolyn
  - DSNI is an organization founded in 1984 to secure land ownership by the local Dudley community, thus controlling development of the area. It has organized efforts against toxic waste dumping in the area, towards a community land trust, and towards economic development through workshops and job fairs.
  - DSNI is joining the hackathon in order to organize its collection of oral histories of local residents.
- Boston Ujima Project
  - Paired with Zainab
  - The Boston Ujima Project is a recently-founded collectivist economic cooperative. In 2018 it launched its democratic community fund, where local community members invest and then vote on how their investment is to be used.
  - The Boston Ujima Project is joining the hackathon to seek archival materials relevant to cooperative economics and historical approaches to collectivism and utopianism.
- Activist Film Project
  - Paired with Karilyn
  - This is a project by local filmmaker Simeon Awosan to document the history of local Boston activism.
  - Simeon is joining the hackathon to provide archival footage of Chuck Turner and Mel King, and to get help organizing his footage and material. He also seeks additional footage and stories for his project.
- Boston Community Learning Project
  - Paired with Meesh

- ○ This is a project by DUSP professor Cesar McDowell. Cesar is joining the hackathon to provide his notes and video on activist stories of Boston organizing, and to get help organizing those materials for public distribution.
- Northeastern University Archives & Special Collections
  - ○ Paired with Meesh
  - ○ The archives at Northeastern are joining the hackathon to seek new avenues for public engagement with archival materials.
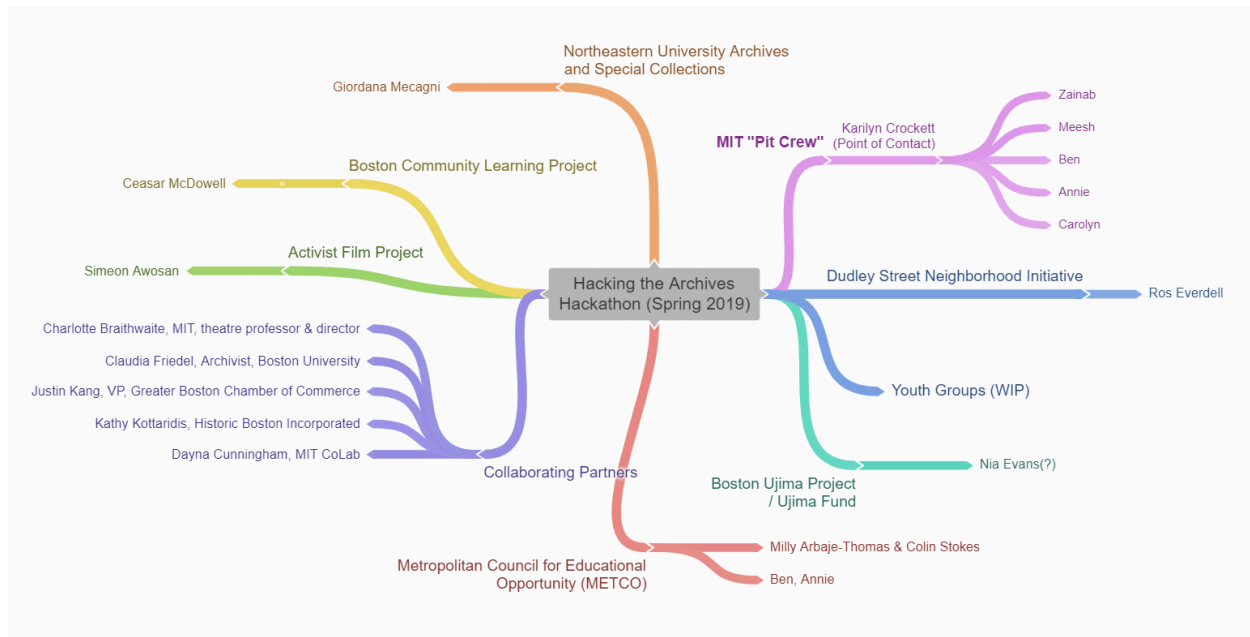
Listening Methods

Due to the large scale of the project, conflicting schedules, and the recent addition of our newest community partner (METCO), the graduate students have not yet met with our community partners directly. The initial meeting dates are set for the week of March 25. However, we have met with Karilyn who has served as our liaison thus far. We have utilized the following listening methods in our meetings with Karilyn:

- Defining the audience:
  - ○ The initial idea that Karilyn communicated to us was to create a hackathon that would facilitate community partners in completing some unfinished projects they had already brought to the table. But she also identified additional goals for the hackathon, which is where the audience definition comes into play.
  - ○ The first audience would be the members of the aforementioned activist organizations. One of the main goals Karilyn identified was to bridge the gap between generations of community organizers (50+ years), in order to share strategies and build a strong coalition between them. Through meeting in a shared physical space and working together with historical materials, we hope to form relationships between groups of people who are working towards common goals but may not have met.
  - ○ The second audience would be residents in the greater Boston area, especially new workers in places where gentrification is occurring such as Roxbury and the South End. Several of the community partners will be bringing archival and documentary material, and one of the goals of the hackathon is to start designing some kind of public exhibition using that material. The idea is that this public exhibition will be strategically placed over the summer to inform new residents of past struggles, stirring in them a political orientation towards the built environment and building support for present-day struggles.
  - ○ The third audience would be local youths, especially those attending public schools in the greater Boston area. Karilyn is in touch with a couple of local high schools and wants to bring them on board to take part in the hackathon. They would then be given opportunities for funded summer internships with the community partners and in completing the summer portion of the project (the aforementioned public exhibition).

- Background research/expert interview:
  - Since Karilyn is an expert on the history of Boston activism, we utilized her expertise in the background research summarized in the background section here.
  - We also did background research on the Tent City activists in the South End, where in 1968, activists occupied a parking lot where homes had been demolished and residents displaced. These activists erected a tent city to protest the displacement.
  - We next did background research on Chuck Turner and Mel King, two important activists in Boston history who are present in archival materials. Beyond being a leader in the People Before HIghways protests, Turner was involved in many other activist organizations: the South End Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP), United Community Construction Workers, and the Boston Jobs Coalition. These organizations were centered around alleviating housing and employment inequality. Mel King began his efforts as an anti-poverty organizer, founding the Community Assembly for a United South End (C.A.U.S.E.), and eventually leading the aforementioned Tent City protests against the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) in 1968.
  - Finally, we did background research on the various community partners as summarized in the community partners section.

Ecosystem Map

While the arrows moving away from the ecosystem map may indicate otherwise, this is meant to depict the vast and diverse variety of Boston-area organizations who will be coming together to participate in the Hacking the Archives Hackathon.

Anticipated Challenges

As we will be working with multiple organizations while planning this hackathon, each with their own background, goals, and desires, we expect that fulfilling all of their needs without coming into potential conflicts will be a formidable task as each respective project progresses. Facilitating communication between different generations of activists may prove to be similarly challenging.

We are also planning to reach out to youth groups to encourage youth involvement in revamping the historical archive. This will become part of a summer project where high-school aged students get the opportunity expand upon the ideas produced during the hackathon and lead community-based archival projects. Involving these youth, and understanding the "spaces" that they will carve out for themselves within and beyond this intersection of activism, will prove interesting as this project progresses.

Next Steps

In the next week, we will be meeting with our respective community partners to discuss further steps. In our case, we will be meeting with representatives from METCO. The hack challenge that they will focus on centers around their founding history beginning in 1965, when concerned parents banded together to organize a voluntary bussing process for desegregating Boston's public schools.

Next, we will be planning the logistics of the hackathon and reaching out to local residents, youth groups, and the MIT community to gauge interest. We will also be determining a location for the hackathon, which may prove challenging given that our community partners are located all around the Boston area. Currently, several of them have shown interest in traveling to MIT. We plan on finding a large, community-friendly space - the MIT Museum, for example - to host the hackathon.