

# Youth Urbanism Summit: The Future City

Report of a Year's Reflection and a One-Day Conference  
University of Orange

The University of Orange, with support from the Kenworthy-Swift Foundation and the Columbia Center for the Study of Social Inequalities, organized a year-long reflection on youth urbanism, which resulted in a one-day conference, held on October 25<sup>th</sup>.

## The Reflection

The reflection was led by Molly Rose Kaufman, provost of the University of Orange, and included over the course of the year, participation by many other people, including Robert Sember, Aubrey Murdock, Havana Fisher, Nancy Uddin, Celeste Russell, Natalie Marrero, and Khemani Gibson. In addition to the people representing the partner organizations, students from three classes – one each from Pratt institute, Lehman College, and Mailman School of Public Health – provided useful advice on issues of youth, likely conference activities and ways to evaluate the conference.

The reflection consisted of regular meetings of the working group. Its goals were to build the partnership sponsoring the conference, consider ways to use the time of the conference, and to outline the issues that compose youth urbanism. The concept – *"Cities in Crisis"* – emerged from the conversations, capturing the participants' belief that youth of today will live in unstable times, requiring and producing new forms of social organization. Preparing youth with an understanding the city will be an asset as they develop strategies for negotiating difficult times and will help them create cities of solidarity instead of cities of violence.

Because social engagement was seen as central to the management of crisis, everything about the day of the conference was considered in light of its ability to promote connection, engagement and, ultimately, solidarity.

From these conversations emerged an initial plan for the day, set in Wollman Hall at The New School. It used the concepts align, create and connect to make a score for the day, and to prepare a call for participation. The group worked closely to develop these ideas into a solid plan for the conference, constantly assessing whether the activities and presentations reflected the spirit of solidarity in the face of crisis. The group weathered its own crisis when the Wollman space was withdrawn by The New School in favor of another activity. The Mailman School of Public Health provided support and obtained a space for the conference on short notice.

The following description of the day was sent to youth organizations around the city:

The Youth Urbanism Summit will bring together young people, youth workers, artists, designers, public health workers and more to celebrate the many ways youth lead their cities through their storytelling, art, activism and visions for the future.

The Summit will include a screening of youth made media from across the country. The call for submissions asked for work the themes: cities in crisis and the impact on youth, youth action and our future city. The work that will be shared includes submissions from Baltimore, Maryland, Richmond, California and Chicago, Illinois and covers many issues important to young people including racial profiling, immigrant's rights and finding a supportive community.

In the afternoon the Ya-Ya Network will lead a workshop called the Village in which participants identify their dreams and obstacles for their city. Following the workshop is the Community Explorers' Five Senses Scavenger Hunt to Highbridge Park, an adventure on the streets of New York City promoting appreciation, listening and connection. The day will also feature visual art displays, homemade treats and more.

The conference sponsors included these organizations: the University of Orange, YA-YA Network, ORNG Ink, Group for Community Recovery, Urban Atlas, and the Cities Research Group.

## Youth Urbanism Summit: The Future City

October 25th 2014, 10am-5pm,  
Wollman Hall, The New School

### Event Outline

#### Act 1: Align

In Act 1 our goal is to realize a common intersection that we can reference, put on the table something we have in common and begin to prepare a substantial statement about issue of youth urbanism. We will open with the *memory call*.

We will experience the media submissions and performances we received through our call out: movies, music videos, spoken word, songs, podcasts in the following categories--

Cities in crisis and the impact on youth  
Youth Action  
The Future City

Collective conversation

#### Entre Act

#### LUNCH

#### Act 2: Create

During Act 2 there will be hands-on workshops with the shared theme of creating the future city using methods of our contributing partners including making music, zines, podcasts, environmental interventions, campaigns, mural making, improv

#### Entre Act

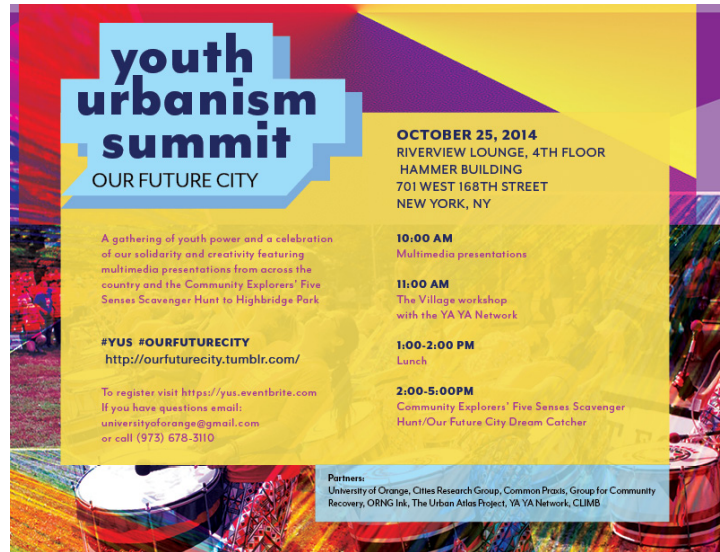
#### Act 3: Connect

In Act 3 we share what we created in Act 2. Then we will close with something really BIG

## The Conference

The conference was held in Riverview Lounge at the Columbia University Medical Center, a large space with massive windows looking out onto the Hudson. The room was filled with art and homemade food. Molly Rose Kaufman, Aubrey Murdock, Robert Sember, Mindy Fullilove, Havana Fisher, Natalie Morrero, Lena Greenberg, Nancy Uddin, and Khemani Gibson served as the host committee.

The morning opened with ice breaker activities and welcome remarks by Khemani Gibson and Havana Fisher. One student wrote, “I thought that the Stomp and Shout exercise was the perfect icebreaker because, to me, it reflected the core message of the day: to speak out and to not be afraid to do so. After the Stomp and Shout icebreaker, I was particularly impressed with the things that both Khemani and Havana had to say. I thought that Havana’s comment about ‘finding a common language’ so that a community can better advocate, organize and coalesce was very insightful. Additionally I thought her comment regarding investment in your community to be extremely enlightened. Youth who have had educational opportunities should not leave their community of origin, but instead should return to their original communities to avoid the ‘brain drain’ from which many communities suffer, as mentioned by Khemani. I thought both Khemani and Havana demonstrated a tremendous maturity of thinking, reflection and commitment.”



The opening segment was followed by a film festival. Films had been submitted from around the country. Films from Global Action Project (NYC, NY), Wide Angle Media (Baltimore, MD) and RYSE (Richmond, Ca) were shown. A participant noted, “I think the video submissions were a great way to begin the summit because they introduced participants to the realities of living in various poor communities around the United States. One submission that particularly stood out to me was one that interviewed two young boys who described how many shooting takes place in their neighborhood and how they both had lost family members to this kind of violence. Stories like this were very emotional for me and really began to give me a true sense of how difficult life is in many of these communities.”

The film festival was followed by “The Village” exercise, led by youth from the YA-YA Network. The Village is an exercise in which people work together to imagine a place they’d like to live. After the villages are created, then each group shares their ideas with the other teams. In the second part of the exercise, “Happy Corp” arrives, and attempts to disrupt the happy homes people have created. The groups came up with an array of ideas

about what makes a happy home. A student noted, “The Village activity did a great job of introducing participants to the notion of gentrification. People became very emotionally attached to the communities that they had created. When ‘Happy Corp’ came and tried to take parts of their communities away, people became very angry and protective. It was interesting to see the various communities band together and form a tight circle to prevent Happy Corp from having their way. I think that this activity did a great job of demonstrating that when people have a real stake in their community, they become very protective of it and do anything they can to defend it.”

After a lunch of pizza, provided by the Mailman School of Public Health Group for Community Recovery, the participants all went walking around the area in the “Five Senses Scavenger Hunt,” looking for places and people with whom to engage. People had great adventures on the hunt, and returned with photos and stories of what they had seen and heard.

The final part of the day was writing hopes for the future city that were attached to a large “Dream Catcher.” Its beauty and meaning helped all of us to leave with a sense of possibility and determination.

### Evaluation of the Day

The reflection process leading up to the Youth Urbanism Summit highlighted 1) the importance of community-building in the face of cities in crisis and 2) helping youth own their voices and speak their truths.

With these as the central goals of the conference, every activity was effective in promoting these ends. By watching films, people gained a deeper understanding of the process. By participating in The Village, people got to act on their concerns. By

#### **Youth Urbanism Summit Community Explorers' Five Senses Walk**

##### **Materials**

butcher paper  
crayons with the paper peeled off  
sidewalk chalk  
route map

##### **Time**

25 minutes

##### **Step 1: Select Roles**

##### **Roles**

**Navigators** find the way

**Documentors** take photos and post #yus #ourfuturecity

**Letter Writers** hit the streets with sidewalk chalk

**Wall Rubbing-ers** find a surface to collect a wall rubbing

**Dream Collectors** meet someone on your walk and find out their dream for the future city

**Sound Collectors** Listen for the sound of the city and find one for your group to perform

**Time Keeper** Make sure the group keeps time and watch our for the 4:07 challenge

##### **To complete the scavenger hunt your team must do the following:**

##### **Rubbing**

Find a wall with an interesting texture, a plaque on a statue or numbers carved in stone on the side of a building. Make a rubbing using the butcher paper and crayon. Feel free to make more than one.

##### **Love Letter**

Using the sidewalk chalk select a person, place, tree, business, anything you see on your walk that you like and write it a love letter on the side walk. Be descriptive. Why do you love it?

##### **Sound Collection**

Listen the sounds of the neighborhood. Select one that you want to share. As a group learn how to perform this sound.

##### **Dream Collection**

Meet someone on your walk. Ask them their dream for Future City so it can be included on our dream catcher.

##### **4:07 Challenge**

At 4:07 everyone in the group will turn towards the sun and listen to the city for 60 s

moving around the city in the Five Senses Scavenger Hunt, they were able to connect abstract ideas to the real space of the city.

The team had initially hoped to have 100 participants. While the number of participants was 42, the organizers reflected that this was a perfect number because of the intensity of the engagement. Had there been more people, it might not have been possible to have as intense or as success an engagement.

The participants were also older than initially envisioned, including many college and graduate students. However, the mix of ages was fun for all.



A video about the day was made by students in the Engage Media Lab at The New School. <https://vimeo.com/117936383>



## **Comments on the Youth Urbanism Summit from urbanist Joel Stein**

*"The historic diversity of the city - the source of its value and magnetism - is an unplanned creation of many hands and long historical practice. Most cities are the outcome, the vector sum, of innumerable small acts bearing no discernible overall intention"*

--James C. Scott, *Seeing Like the State*

The reality of the modern city is that its functions, shapes, and forms are not determined by master builders or urban planners, and it cannot be understood as a singular thing. Rather, it is a way of life - or many ways of life under which groups of people try to make their way through life. What defines urban life, then? And who shall inherit it? These are questions that underscore the premise and importance of the Youth Urbanism Summit: to expose youth to cross-cultural perspectives of the city, and to develop forms of solidarity in building a city for all.

The energy and insight of the participants was astounding – to understand the complexity of issues faced by today's youth gives a glimpse into the challenges urban society as a whole will have to face – from issues of immigration and climate change, to urban violence and racial inequality. To understand it from the perspectives of youth, in a conference organized by youth, is of utmost importance for urbanists of all ages. Not only that, but the space the summit afforded gave youth a chance to express their own hopes and dreams. Often, the skills and opinions of youth are disregarded in official urban planning, and giving them the confidence to speak and be listened to was essential. They are the building blocks for our future city, and this summit was the first step in giving them the tools to make lasting change in their own communities and homes.

Moving forward, the Summit should be incorporated into an ongoing dialogue between youth in different cities. A dedicated platform, one in which youth can articulate their insights in a range of mediums, should be maintained in an ongoing fashion. Furthermore, seeing this type of event take place in different cities would allow for the exchange of lessons in youth across many cities. Secondly, the YUS should continue to maintain the youth-led ethos, while also drawing in adults and others to learn from these youth - not the other way around.