BUILDING A HOME FOR CIVIC TECH IN NEW YORK CITY
Findings from a discovery of community needs

Prepared by Personal Democracy Media
Micah Sifry, Andrew Rasiej, Kate Krontiris, Matthew Burton, and Elana Berkowitz
Winter 2014
Executive Summary

For the last ten years, Personal Democracy Media (PDM) has produced the annual Personal Democracy Forum (PDF) conference and daily techPresident.com news-site, both focused on the ways that the spread of connection technologies can change politics, government and civic life for the better. Over the course of that time, we have developed tremendous understanding and expertise on what works, and doesn’t work, in digitally-powered civic engagement. This is reflected in our broad knowledge of the key actors in the field, and the content that we have published on techPresident and curated through our various conferences.

Now, we are focused on building on that foundation by undertaking critical research on how a new year-round community center for technology-enabled civic innovation might best promote more strategic collaboration and action for civic problem-solving in replicable and scalable ways. The center will be a space for convening and experimentation, as well as the ongoing research, community weaving, professional development and education, building on PDM’s core assets and activities, including the PDF conference and techPresident. It will be based in New York City – a hotbed for civic activism and tech entrepreneurialism – but running pilot activities with much more national and global applications.

In the Fall of 2013, a team from Personal Democracy Media set out to investigate what a new center for civic tech might look like. As a starting point, we developed a concept note for circulation among advisors, peers, and experts in the space, and interviewed these individuals for their feedback.

Our discovery goals were threefold:

1. To vet our assumptions about the needs of our diverse community
2. To gauge what offerings a center for civic technology could provide to meet those needs
3. To understand how our peers view PDM’s core competencies

Over the course of about 100 interviews with representative stakeholders from nine target audiences (civic entrepreneurs, foundations, private funders, journalists, scholars, advocates, technologists, government, and center peers), we amassed a huge wealth of information - not only about our own concept, but also about the state of the civic tech ecosystem itself.

What follows in this report is a detailed substantiation of these findings, including perspectives on the broader needs of the civic tech ecosystem, about context for this center, and on desired program elements themselves. Although this report is rich with insights from across the range of stakeholders we interviewed, it is not a statistically significant, peer-reviewed, PhD-level dissertation.

This report highlights three key findings from this research process:

1. The civic tech ecosystem is still growing and developing, where more investments in financing, meaningful evaluation of impact, and greater coordination among players could prove extremely helpful.

Overall, the civic tech movement is showing promise. But there are holes in the movement. According to our interviewees, there persists a tendency to address huge problems with one-day hackathons instead of sustained, multi-year efforts. Our interviewees also voiced frustration with the investment community, whose expectations of high returns are unrealistic in the civic space. And they were nearly unanimous in their desire for more collaboration with other sectors—policy actors want more engagement with technologists, and vice versa. They see this lack of communication as a key gap in the civic tech space that needs to be filled.

2. PDM provides unique value to the civic technology community: the connective tissue that bonds many individuals into a community, and the reach to grow that community.

The concept as described intrigued many people, but they were clear that a successful center would have to make the most of its network to bring together individual communities —communities that, right now, are saturated with incubators and co-working spaces. The center must not become another one. Our interviewees stressed that PDM is good at weaving communities, and that to enjoy continued success with the center, it must leverage that strength instead of duplicating the efforts of the many incubators and co-working spaces that have appeared over the last several years.

3. Incubating solutions to civic problems among multiple stakeholders represents an approach that is complex, but feels fresh, smart, and very needed.

Start-up incubators abound. According to our interviewees, the field needs an institution that exists for the sake of solving civic problems, not for the sake of building companies. This entails building alliances with multiple organizations to research, design, build, implement, and maintain technologies one at a time in pursuit of a stronger field. Given the importance of community facilitation and PDM’s strengths as a community builder, this is the model the center team should pursue.

Over the next two months, we plan to convene our community to help us design the Center, based on this feedback. By sharing the findings of our work, we hope they may be of benefit to the larger community of our peers.
# Table of Contents

- **Findings Part 1:** Civic Tech Ecosystem  
  - State of the sector 4  
  - Context factors 5  
  - The government:public relationship 5  
  - Civil servant’s perspective 6  
  - Stakeholder challenges and needs 8  

- **Findings Part 2:** Reactions to the Center Concept 10  
  - General reactions to the concept 10  
  - Programmatic reactions: education 10  
  - Programmatic reactions: laboratory 11  
  - Programmatic reactions: convening 14  
  - Stakeholder willingness to share 15  

- **Conclusions** 16  

- **Acknowledgments** 17
Findings Part 1: Observations on the civic tech ecosystem

State of the sector

In our conversations with stakeholders, we found that many of them had valuable perspectives to share on the state of the civic tech sector. What follows is a synthesis of those ideas, with some sample quotes for flavor.

Across the board, we heard that the sector is starting to mature into adolescence, but that there is still a need to nurture it.

“I’ve spent the last few years standing up a Medicare enrollment project. The open gov crowd acts like it could be done in a hackathon, and that’s not very respectful.” – Civic entrepreneur

“This isn’t such a hot investment space that we are trying to beat people away. It’s still in early stages. There are a few big deals and a very small number of players.” – Private funder

“A lot of people who pitch to private investors don’t have any kind of hypothesis that they are testing and think they can figure out their business model later down the road.” – Private funder

There’s a need for community-weavers and cross-sector translators, since people are still the key links for innovation to spread.

“We need people who can bridge those multiple worlds - not just service designers and UX people, but also community facilitators who can generate empathy across different backgrounds.” – Civic entrepreneur

“What allows good solutions to scale and be repurposed transformatively are people with enough credit accumulated among government agencies to be able to share lessons.” – Scholar

“Civic innovation people are different than those who know more traditional BID, economic development, community benefits systems, and municipal finance frameworks - in other words, there are a lot of tools available to us that we aren’t tapping into yet.” – Private funder

Resources remain a real need, although entrepreneurs can see market opportunities. Foundations have a special role to play in developing the sector, but their combined reach is limited – thus, for-profit innovation is of interest among key foundations.

“Fundraising is sooooooo hard. And it’s not unique to me or to the space - it’s hard and everybody hates it. But it seems like there is enough of a community out there, that it can’t just be Omidyar and Knight who are prepared to make the investments in the space.” – Civic entrepreneur

“A strong for-profit innovation sector is important because 1) there is not enough philanthropic capital to fund all the change that needs to happen, 2) for-profits are best-positioned to experiment and make solutions scale across the sector, and 3) if they are able to do the first two, we’ll get innovation and disruption.” – Foundation officer

Not everything can or should move quickly. Successful civic tech is slow, relies on committed tech talent, and understands user needs very deeply. Also, there are values, morals, and politics to consider in the broad shaping of this sector.

“Civic enterprises that are successful have 1) picked an issue that already had predecessors and universal impacts and 2) taken a slow and steady approach, with stability over innovation, so as not to alienate government. You don’t convince government [to work with you] with radical change.” – Civic entrepreneur

“We can no longer be excused from the fact that we are messing with social structure” – Private funder

“The tech movement needs to be a social justice movement. Otherwise, there will be backlash.” – Private funder

Gaps for government stakeholders include knowledge of community-level needs, capacity building, issue-agnostic resources, and enthusiasm around IT workflow issues. In addition, confusion about technology and the power of “the media beast” further impede progress.

“We don’t really know at the level of communities what are the right tools and contexts for the work we are doing.” – Government official

“Foundations bring lots of resources, but they have their own particular and different theories of change and are so issue-driven that it is hard for them to think about platforms.” – Government official

“The media’s watchfulness for failure can be a real challenge for people in government to take risks.” – Foundation officer

Even though this is a new space, respondents felt that it is time to solve harder civic problems, perhaps even by redefining “civic;” fortunately, we have a good sense of what’s impeding our progress.
“We are ready for outputs beyond just apps.” – Former government official

“In the scale of the world, the civic tech sector is a very small group of people - it’s still a new space and it’s new to many other people.” – Foundation officer

“There are three challenges to private actors in solving public problems: 1) getting access to people in government, 2) getting investors to invest in stuff they don’t understand, and 3) normal entrepreneurial challenges.” – Foundation officer

We should remember that startup life often involves holding your ideas close, civic or not.

“It’s hard to get civic startups talking to each other about their common challenges, unless they are in a non-competitive setting, because they feel they are going out there ‘with a target on their back.’ The result is leaning hard on legal counsel and racking up massive legal bills.” – Private funder

In different ways, there’s a need to facilitate technologists’ participation in the sector more robustly.

“There is a body of technologists who do civic projects in their free time, picking a skill that they feel is often being put to very selfish uses, and trying to use it in a way that gives back a little to the community. Because they are hobbyists, they find most hackathons ‘thin’ and not very satisfying.” – Technologist

**Contextual factors**

In addition to observations about the sector itself, our interviewees had some interesting things to say about external factors that are influencing the civic tech ecosystem.

Respondents noted that citizens will always want to engage with their governments, although government is not and will not be the only actor that can make a difference – in part, because the polarization of politics continues to prevent problem-solving. In addition, some key actors don’t see technology as central to their efforts.

“It’s a fact of life that citizens are going to communicate socially and openly and governments have to respond to that.” – Civic entrepreneur

“Consider that changing a government for the better through tech is not the same thing as making a city better - you can empower yourself to change the city in ways that are outside of government, and that’s good.” – Foundation officer

“Partly what leads people to get into the social sector is not because they are technologically inclined, but want to solve pressing problems in their communities, and don’t see data as necessary to their efforts.” – Advocate

Market factors can help support civic innovation, but with unpredictable results as of yet. Technologists believe that the private market structures their public-facing career options, and policy graduates don’t see civic startups as a natural career choice. Additionally, other observers are concerned that corporate actors are driving too much decision-making in government.

“We anticipate that incumbents will ignore ‘the fringe innovative stuff’ but that they will eventually attempt to acquire these companies when it grows too painful - but this might not positively change the sector, as acquisition often means killing the company. The preferred path is that incumbents lower their prices so that actual public benefits accrue, but we doubt that that will happen.” – Private funder

“There are lots of kids graduating who are idealistic and have skills, but are entering an awful job market and will get jobs doing boring stuff. Developers can earn a big paycheck, but you’ll end up writing spam filters for Google. It’s the tech equivalent of flipping burgers. You can afford a nicer lifestyle, but I don’t see the Silicon Alley economic engine creating a very, uh…we’re solving problems that are very limited in scope.” – Technologist

“The people who are doing deep government IT problem-solving are Accenture, IBM, etc. – not the New York tech community.” – Former government official

The government: public relationship

Representatives of the many stakeholder groups with whom we spoke had some observations about how government and non-governmental groups relate to and collaborate with each other (or don’t).

Respondents generally recognized a wide gap between citizens and government, in part fueled by negative perceptions of counterparts on the other side of the table.

“Citizens will never be comfortable going into the city space and government people won’t feel comfortable coming out of it - but if you create a third space where it’s safe for both of them to be, in the way that hackathons do in a tightly time-bound way - that seems like it could be useful.” – Technologist
People who talk about government do so in a very foreign way that does not connect with everyday people.” – Technologist

“A positive vision for 10-20 years from now sees citizens feeling more like co-creators alongside their cities, looking at government as a co-making relationship.” – Private funder

Techies and government people are perceived to have almost opposite viewpoints …

“The general vibe in civic tech is ‘I can do this job better than government’ and it’s not a productive approach - there has to be better collaboration between government and civic tech.” – Technologist

“Older politicos are still very fearful of change, fearful of losing control, and stand in the way of younger more junior staff who already ‘get it.’” – Civic entrepreneur

“The perspective within government is that there’s not much that solves a real, complicated problem they are actually working on - technology ‘feeds the media beast’ but has not yet led to a lot of transformative work.” – Foundation officer

… and it’s not clear that immersion is the answer, although partnership is clearly valued.

“Throwing programmers into government is not a great approach - building one-off apps is not going to revolutionize the world and government is actually skeptical of CfA apps because they don’t seem to be meaningful.” – Foundation officer

“Finding ways for people to get experience working in government is important, so there is greater understanding of how government actually works.” – Government official

“We have shifted from investments in organizations that poke on government from the outside to those that work within government.” – Foundation officer

There was widespread agreement that procurement is in dire need of reform. Civic entrepreneurs and foundations were particularly focused on this issue.

“Procurement processes are set up to make government purchasing more fair and egalitarian, but in reality, the process is so opaque and full of jargon that it requires a person with an advanced, esoteric skillset to accomplish - and young startups don’t often have the resources to pay for a government sales person.” – Civic entrepreneur

“Procurement reform could 1) increase competition, 2) create access for small businesses and thus economic development, and 3) promote greater transparency in how taxpayer dollars are spent.” – Foundation officer

“Garbage collection works the same way pretty much everywhere. Cities replicate the same problems hundreds and hundreds of times over.”

Learning about and with local government was a recognized need and a shared ambition, particularly among scholars and government officials with whom we spoke.

“We have a very poor understanding of local government’s capacity to innovate.” – Scholar

“The essential resource to get this right is learning as you go - governments get this wrong almost all the time, and thus are not able to build on any understanding of the problem in order to improve.” – Government official

“The mayor and co-chair of the city council are afraid of not being able to control the message. They are afraid even if someone is in charge, they will have other work and the content on the site will get stale. They are afraid it will get hijacked by a minority. A fear of the unknown, …

Civil servant’s perspective

The government officials with whom we spoke had frank and interesting reflections both about their own peers in government and about what innovation looks like from their perch, at this point in time.

Fear and ignorance are the most common blockers of innovative behavior …

“The laws pertaining to public meetings aren’t equipped to handle the world of 2013. My peers use this as an excuse to not move forward.” – Government official

“The mayor and co-chair of the city council are afraid of not being able to control the message. They are afraid even if someone is in charge, they will have other work and the content on the site will get stale. They are afraid it will get hijacked by a minority. A fear of the unknown, …
lack of comfort online. Little experience online themselves, which leads to misunderstanding. Making people more comfortable would help.” – Government official

“The complexion of the vendor pool is a creature of cities’ own making - they are lethargic because the city doesn’t ask for something different.” – Government official

... But there are incentives and processes that could enable more risk-taking.

“Cities have a vested interested in teaching other cities how to replicate their successful programs; this means that they get to demonstrate scaled success and have positive peer/funder/federal government recognition.” – Government official

“You can’t just ask government people a series of questions to surface a problem - you have to bring them into an environment of learning, growing, and experimenting, and the problems gradually emerge.” – Government official

“Time and again, my peers are given a charge to do homelessness or public safety or something else differently in a city - and where they falter is not understanding the problem, but taking action - they do things randomly, without developing learning and feedback mechanisms.” – Government official

To government officials, innovation looks like:

Process improvement, almost overwhelmingly ....

“Approaching problem solving in a different way.” – Government official

“More efficient workflow for town services; keeping large capital projects on time and on budget.” – Government official

“Engaging in actual experiments - see if an idea adds value to residents, see if they like it, if they don’t like it, tweak it.” – Government official

.... and getting information and messaging out more broadly.

“Enabling residents to self-serve via web tools saves lots of money and staff time.” – Government official

Innovation is listening more carefully to constituents and building for their needs ...

“Giving people what they need, not what we think they need” – Government official
### Stakeholder challenges and needs

Throughout the course of our interviews we asked representatives from our stakeholder groups (civic entrepreneurs, foundations, private funders, journalists, scholars, advocates, technologists, government, and center peers) what their biggest challenges were – and how a new center for civic tech in New York City might help them meet their needs.

#### Our challenges are:  We would be served by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic Entrepreneurs</th>
<th>Resources / revenue • People • Product development • Strategic decision-making • Partnerships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to people, resources, and ideas and information • Opportunities to experiment • Safe space to ask deeper questions about impact • Credible brand association • Logistics • Opportunity to renew and refresh, periodically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundations</th>
<th>Understanding impact • Steady stream of relevant information about the civic tech landscape • Understanding technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Credible support for entrepreneurs … • … and then introducing them to our foundation. • Regular information and press on unresolved issues • Convenings of new groups to research and/or problem-solve on foundation issues of interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journalists</th>
<th>A center for brainstorming / action on tech and journalism • Understanding the backend of technology • Relationship with government staffs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to credible experts, especially in tech • Space for different kinds of activities, like informal sharing of expertise, help testing ideas and getting early community feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholars</th>
<th>Access to interesting and relevant data sets • Distribution networks for research findings • Institutional support, especially for “nomads”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistance translating research into action • Distributing research findings to wider audiences • Access to information, ideas, and inspiration • Access to a “home-base” (especially for independent scholars)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocates</th>
<th>Training campaign workers for digital era • Figuring out how to apply technology and scalable approaches to their work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to PDF crowd to inform client projects • Fellowship opportunities • Community of “brain partners” • Support for meaningful relationship-building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technologists</th>
<th>Going from building a technology product to running an organization • Design, communications, research strategy services • Leading and mentoring others • Finding customers • Building for government • Building for citizens • Robust success metrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Space for convening and collaboration • Connections with tech talent • Feedback and expertise • Connections with people who have different and necessary skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our challenges are:</td>
<td>We would be served by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government Officials</strong></td>
<td><strong>Professional development</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technical capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work context is outdated, with pre-internet legal framework</td>
<td>• Introductions to innovators in safe and productive ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology discovery process has lots of friction</td>
<td>• One-stop for information and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Misinformed journalists</td>
<td>• Improved problem-solving processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private Funders</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support for entrepreneurs to map and plan effective strategies for overcoming obstacles and scaling effectively</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greater understanding of civic tech business models, market prospects, and investment returns</td>
<td>• Deeper understanding of civic tech prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Credible pipeline of firms in which they can invest</td>
<td>• Convening foundations to invest at earlier stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Facilitating nuanced conversations among investor peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings Part 2: Reactions to the Center concept

General reactions to the concept

In the fall of 2013, we shared a concept paper with advisors, peers, and experts in the space, and interviewed these individuals for their feedback. The concept note outlined a case for the center, and laid out at a high level what the programming of the space might include.

As we conducted interviews over the last two months, we were learning and updating our concept. Whereas we started with a vision that combined educational offerings with an incubator and large-scale convenings, we finished with a concept that focused more strongly on building a community center that would function as a home for like-minded individuals and institutions. It would be a place that would run an innovation lab conducting problem-solving built around the interests and activity of resident fellows, with informal educational activities as relevant, and convenings happening in many different formats. The people we spoke with later in the process were reacting to concepts that had slightly evolved from those we had shared earlier in the process.

What follows here are general reactions to the concept from our respondents. The acronym “PDC” refers to the holding name for the center: Personal Democracy Center. Some people refer interchangeably to PDF and PDM, the conference and the organizing entity.

People liked this concept for a number of reasons, among them:

“The PDC is a network of people who would be willing to act as an ‘expert network’ for civic entrepreneurs.” – Civic entrepreneur

“The idea of the center is great and there isn’t anywhere in New York that is like the described center.” – Journalist

“I love what you mentioned about focusing on the problems, instead of the solutions.” – Technologist

Where there were cautionary warnings, we were advised about how, not whether.

“The three programmatic goals [you have described] are pretty different from each other; it might help to focus priorities and order them for what is most valuable.” – Scholar

“The viability of this center is dependent on its users: who are they and are there enough of them? Is the center’s added value worth their while?” – Technologist

Programmatic reactions: education

In addition to their general feedback, we were seeking from respondents their targeted reactions to three general areas of programming that we had envisioned for the center: education, incubating problem-solving, and convening people and ideas. What follows is a synthesized overview of their thoughts first on educational offerings.

Civic entrepreneurs and government officials, while they appreciated the value of learning, were not convinced that the Center could best serve their needs by providing classes or “boot camp”-style intensive education. When they seek learning, entrepreneurs want practical information, not necessarily inspirational dialogues – and even their funders thought that they were not uninformed about the policy and sales challenges they face. While there is a market for educating government officials, that market is small and gap between the gap between the learner and the payee is problematic. Investors themselves, particularly new investors, thought they could benefit from some education about the business landscape in civic tech. Journalists know to turn to Hacks and Hackers when they need to understand some aspect of technology more deeply.

“Entrepreneurs are very strategic about their time and thus would only spend time on something that they desperately needed to know - the class would have to make them feel like they need to know or they will fail.” – Civic entrepreneur

“I have ultimately come to the conclusion that any big ideas are going come from my team - I am very doubtful that any big ideas will come from outside the team that is working on these issues every day. Outside experts are most useful for learning from things from the past.” – Civic entrepreneur

“Companies that are running into policy problems are working there because they want to break something that’s bad, burn it down, and build up a new network.” – Private funder

“Somebody in government who would want this training is usually not empowered to buy it, so there
Programmatic reactions: laboratory

As mentioned previously, we began this discovery process wondering whether the civic tech community in New York felt a need for such an incubator/accelerator space. We heard a general consensus that another start-up incubator is not needed in the city, but that the process of incubating problem-solving is. What follows is a synthesized overview of their thoughts on what a “problem-solving lab” could look like.

In the big picture, making an incubator/accelerator that is a productive and valuable space for entrepreneurs is a complicated and delicate task.

“Accelerators can be very helpful for fundraising - the ones who do it right collect a great network of partners/mentors who have the relationships needed to get to end-resources.” – Civic entrepreneur

“Consider having a screening process to ensure that serious people are accepted into the space (both entrepreneurs and mentors); there’s a lot of crazy people in the entrepreneurial world.” – Center peer

“Be meticulous about bringing in mentors - not just big names - the mentors that are actually willing to spend the time and make some sort of commitment to spending time with incubated startups.” – Center peer

As with any physical space, community really matters.

“The most valuable thing there is people - space is a relative commodity, computers aren’t expensive - what’s valuable is actually having the people around, in a day to day way.” – Civic entrepreneur

“It’s important to have people around who are doing interesting stuff, because it potentially guarantees that whenever anybody shows up in the space, they will bump into others doing interesting work.” – Civic entrepreneur

Including government realities adds a special twist.

“If you’re planning to sell to government, then you have to build wireframes, test it with government officials, get...
feedback, iterate, etc. That level of research will be most successful at their office or remotely/virtually. Having government come to you [at the Center] to test your idea seems difficult." – Civic entrepreneur

“A lab to facilitate government use of tech productively would have to be able to deliver pretty quickly; in city government, things move really quickly." – Foundation officer

“Consider that the people in government agencies who think differently may not be the ones with the clout to say that they are taking off for a problem-solving session at this Center." – Government official

More specifically, designing this center as a laboratory for problem solving (and not as an incubator) seemed like a very worthy – and complicated – goal. The lab concept feels new in a useful way...

“If a project had a $500,000 budget, a strong relationship with New York City, and focused on [issues I'm expert in], I would dedicate a person to come work for 5 months. There’s the possibility of getting some business as a result." – Civic entrepreneur

“If I had to pick of all the program options, I would pick the lab. Only PDF can actually figure out how to infiltrate and get work done. Others can convene or run classes.” – Scholar

“Partnering with the city and bringing the client in-house to make something is radical, because it says to the city, ‘You have to commit to this. You can’t issue a PO, an RFP etc. You have to commit to this as part of the daily working order of your agency.’ It says, ‘Tech is not a product. It’s a process. For someone to do this, they have to stop doing some other job.’ – Scholar

The lab could be useful for bringing down the wall between local government and local tech community here in New York - and for that, you need a good interface, somebody who can act as an honest broker between many worlds without seeking to be famous." – Scholar

“A good expert helps a startup understand a failure in ways that still leaves them feeling inspired." – Center peer

… and thus undeniably complicated.

“Consider making the problem definition something that happens among the community - there is power in defining what problems the lab would solve. Perhaps we solicit public opinion by figuring out the classes of problems we think will work and then doing some transparent and inclusive test-runs to see what takes.” – Technologist

“The problems government folks are trying to solve are often second-level problems - not just technical, but managerial problems that require process changes, or at least the buy-in of other people in government. Taking them out of their environment may be a hurdle for some sorts of problems that the lab would incubate.” – Scholar

“This won’t be something that the center can charge participants for; government or foundations will have to pay for it - and the entity with ‘the problem’ should have to pay some amount as well.” – Advocate

We were advised to consider retaining as a goal building relationships, not simply solving problems. In that vein, the lab should operate on two tracks: open to the public for any kind of activity, and focused around a time-bound problem to solve

“The lab is not just about problem-solving but about deep relationship-building across multiple platforms and people." – Advocate

“Part of the vitality of the space will be that it’s open, anyone can come plug in and get connected to a project.” – Technologist

“Orienting around problems, and not people/startups, gives PDF the leverage to make the right introductions and get the right people in the room - good ideas attract people in.” – Technologist

Stakeholders from organizations that we would consider “peers” to the eventual center had some unique insights about running an incubator space.
In general, the design of an incubator or accelerator needs to take into account a number of variables: whether to launch with “anchor tenants;” how to structure partnerships; the quality and extent of community programming, membership programs, and peer networks; the selection of topical themes or problem foci; the value of a real estate play; including a diversity of revenue streams; whether to incubate non-profits, for-profits, or both; and how to productively structure relationships with government.

We heard that the elements of good incubation include:

- Offering people some basic structure
- Offering people a credible space to invite their collaborators, funders, recruits, etc.
- Beautiful gathering spaces that can attract people
- There need to be quiet spaces or satellite nodes, so that people can get work done
- Making clear that funding is contingent upon participating in all required programming
- A social component that helps incubatees make connections on their own, regularly
- Structured learning sessions, taught by outsiders as office hours, not classroom
- Enough time to build a prototype or iterate, at least 3.5 months
- Knowing who the right investors are for the incubated organizations; being connected to funding networks
- Helping incubatees find the right customers
- Know how to help people connect online and offline
- Community manager
- Internal listserv for sharing info and hiring searches
- Leadership that really understands the things that the incubatees are producing (from a technical point of view)

Our peers noted how important the culture of the space is.

“A diversity of actors is what keeps the space vital and prevents against mediocrity; you need people who can challenge the vision of the space.” – Center peer

“Avoid being self-congratulatory in the general social entrepreneurship self-congratulatory kind of way.” – Center peer

“Day-to-day culture is hard to establish, but will be the thing that determines how this all plays out - being reliable and always having something on offer goes a long way.” – Center peer

They noted that partnerships help expand offerings, and four categories of partnerships seemed to resonate most strongly:

- University affiliations: offer space and a connection to academic research
- City partnerships: are a source of projects, and insight about how government works
- Business partnerships: help to scale ideas from early-stage to mature organizations
- Retailer partnerships: could provide material outfit of space

Our peers had some useful reminders about the up-front investment of time and care needed to build the most successful and robust partnerships.

“Two things motivate people to do work: love and money. This isn’t money, so it’s love.” – Center peer

“Partnerships allow for shared communities, but take away from strong connection to a single host.” – Center peer

“It is not necessary to have the smartest people on staff to accomplish your goals; great networks can pull the right people in.” – Center peer

Physical space was widely viewed as a critical component of the experience, valuable in a few notable ways.

“Don’t underestimate how important the physical space is – shared spaces that don’t work really don’t work.”

“Our peers noted how important the culture of the space is.

“Consider the benefits and disadvantages of a ‘benevolent dictator’ as a space organizer – but realize that ‘collaborative governance’ model could get people to invest for greater accountability and remove bottlenecks.” – Center peer
Space logistics:

- Have a mix of public and private space
- Build flexibility into the space (ex. wires on the ceiling, not into the walls)
- Ensure fast wifi and the ability to live-stream
- Have space for people to build stuff
- Use non-centralized or "field" spaces strategically.

Programmatic reactions: convening

The last area of activity outlined in the concept note involved gathering PDF’s network together in curated and thoughtful ways. What follows is a synthesized overview of their thoughts on this function of a new center.

For most of our stakeholder groups, the need for space to convene is a given in New York. Willingness to pay, however, was not.

“Young civic startups are in need of space and, more importantly, community.” – Civic entrepreneur

“In comparison to ‘conference culture,’ there’s a lot more value in creating convening and meeting spaces where people can stand on the same floor and talk with one another.” – Technologist

“I love, love, love the idea that I pay a membership fee and work out of it if I’m in New York, and do meetings there - an exclusive club where I run into friends. I would pay more than $2,000 for that. But it’s dangerous to be too anecdotal about willingness to pay for space - some people will totally pay, others might not, for the same offering.” – Civic entrepreneur

PDM should build on its own unique way of convening people, and pay attention to ensure high-quality implementation.

“PDF’s ‘special sauce’ is bringing together super smart and diverse perspectives that end up creating new things - no need to lock out the government folks, everybody is welcome, but they are not the target of relationship-building.” – Journalist

“You have to recreate the buzz of 1500 people in a room there to see Clay Shirky. He’s not going to come to a room of 100 people, and you shouldn’t expect the experience to be the same. Half of your events are going to have nobody there. Is that room really going to be full all the time?” – Foundation officer

“Every now and again a foundation dumps resources to get government peers together. The challenge is that nothing gets done. … It doesn’t advance the state of the art in terms of what people are doing.” – Government official

PDM should be very mindful to diversify the space, both for a vibrant center culture and for the long-term returns.

“There is something about a place that people feel is theirs - but whose space is this? I haven’t heard from you yet about an unusual suspect who is interested in being a part of this. Do you have people who will help you fulfill the goals of this being a space for the expansion of the field?” – Foundation officer

“While we want to serve people specific to the culture already, we should also reach people who feel they do not have an entry point to the space, but could come get ideas and then become an evangelist in their own institutions.” – Technologist

“If you invite 10-25 fellows who are not just writing articles, but are developing actual apps and mechanisms for public engagement, then the old fogeys with money will come so that they can rub elbows with the kids who are running the next big thing.” – Scholar
Stakeholder willingness to contribute

At the end of our interviews, we asked all of our respondents what they would be willing to share with the center – in essence, asking them to define how they see themselves contributing to our efforts to transform the impact of civic technology.

We would contribute:

For example ...

- Lessons learned: “under the hood” informal working groups with newer entrepreneurs
- Office hours with civic startups on “funder perspective”
- Presentations on recent investments
- Participation in ongoing projects at intersection of tech and journalism
- Research and writing
- Training and teaching
- Participation in events
- Helping people think of applications for new technologies
- Presence in-residence as fellows
- Teaching sessions on interaction or service design
- Working on lab problems
- Thinking about how to manage risk in creative ways in public institutions
- Support development of graduate fellowship program to work in gov at senior levels
Conclusions

Technology can change democracy and governance for the better. It can facilitate more transparent and participatory policy-making; make elections fairer and the electorate more informed; streamline the delivery of government services to the public; and enable citizens to self-govern and self-regulate in ways that expose – and fill – cracks in our official government.

Technologists, civic leaders, and philanthropists live in different worlds and seldom interact. They speak different languages. They frequently clash when new technologies threaten the status quo or butt up against outdated regulations - or when technologists fail to understand the purpose and function of needed regulations. This divide can be bridged. New York City has the necessary talent and conditions present to be the testbed for this new era of technology-enabled civic life. What it does not have is the proper infrastructure to take advantage of these strengths.

PDM is in a unique and strategic position to build a much-needed and transformative institutional resource. People who come from different disciplines but find themselves doing some form of civic technology work need a home where they can work side-by-side and network together. They need expert curation of regular convenings to inform their work and nurture new networks focused on solving particular civic problems. Thus, we envision a center that will not only be an intimate and stimulating work space for its core tenants, resident fellows and paying members, but will also function as a living laboratory for hacking on such problems together.

The exact details of how we do that and what topics we do that on remain to be finalized, but our research points us toward the following tentative conclusions:

1. Action-oriented research around tech-enabled civic problem-solving has to be built around specific individuals and topic areas. Incubating solutions to civic problems among multiple stakeholders represents an approach that, while complex, feels fresh, smart, and very needed.

2. The following topic areas may be of greater interest and value, and they may also be best suited to building on PDM’s existing network and community:
   - When does thick online civic engagement happen and why? How can we foster more SeeClickFix or GitHub levels of public engagement?
   - What kinds of tools for democracy are needed and will be used by local government, community organizations and advocacy groups? Are there ways to move past the top-down A/B testing model of democratic conversation to more lateral, open and networked models?
   - How can we develop new kinds of public-private funding streams to support civic tech, beyond the existing models of foundation support and the private VC arena? Would community groups or individuals in a neighborhood support a “civic development district”?
   - How should policy-makers update or modify existing local laws to make their cities more friendly to innovation and the sharing economy?
   - What are the implications of the rise of more personal hardware, ranging from civilian-operated drones to wearable computers?

3. PDM provides unique value to the civic technology community: the connective tissue that bonds many individuals into a community, and the reach to grow that community. PDM is good at weaving and nurturing communities, and to be successful, it will leverage that strength and not duplicate the efforts of the many incubators and co-working spaces that have appeared over the last several years.
Acknowledgments

After a decade of investment in a community of civic innovators, we were honored to receive such warm, open, and honest feedback from this group over the past few months in reaction to our center concept. We are grateful to all of the following people for their good ideas, probing questions, and lively debates.

Erin Barnes  
Andrea Batista Schlesinger  
Lois Beckett  
Daniel Ben-Horin  
Ben Berkowitz  
Alissa Black  
Darren Bloch  
Ron Bouganim  
danah boyd  
Catherine Bracy  
Clara Brenner  
Jake Brewer  
Helen Brunner  
Evan Burfield  
Brad Burnham  
Jeremy Canfield  
Scott Carpenter  
Elizabeth Christopherson  
CivicPlus  
Drew Conway  
Jay Cranman  
Susan Crawford  
Keya Dannenbaum  
Stacey Donohue  
Sam Dorman  
Hazel Feigenblatt  
Peter Fein  
Alison Fine  
Seth Flaxman  
Stan Freck  
Tom Freedman  
Thomas Friedman  
Archon Fung  
Sue Gardner  
Chris Gates  
Christie George  
John Geraci  
Jim Gilliam  
Erhardt Graeff  
Erine Gray  
Nick Grossman  
Allen Gunn  
David Evan Harris  
Mark Headd  
Noel Hidalgo  
Michael Holland  
Andrew Hoppin  
Daniel Ben Horin  
Sascha Haselmayer  
Peter Hirshberg  
Ginny Hunt  
Tom Igoe  
David Isenberg  
Geoff Isenman  
Norm Jacknis  
Nigel Jacob  
John Kaehny  
David Karpf  
John Keefe  
Brandon Kessler  
Neil Kleiman  
Matt Klein  
Scott Klein  
Justin Kosslyn  
Jenny 8 Lee  
Julie Lein  
Eli Malinsky  
Mike Mathieu  
Lori McGlinchey  
Sascha Meinrath  
Nicco Mele  
Ines Mergel  
Jerry Michalski  
Ellen Miller  
Parker Mitchell  
Jason Mogan  
Ben Moskowitz  
Antonella Napolitano  
Craig Newmark  
Timothy Nichols  
Beth Noveck  
Katy Peters  
Dan Phiffer  
Carole Post  
Jordan Raynor  
Steve Ressler  
Ethan Roeder  
Jack Rosenthal  
Alec Ross  
Douglas Rushkoff  
David Sasaki  
Jim Schacter  
Mark Schmitt  
Scott Schwitzberg  
Nancy Scola  
Doc Searls  
Ryan Senser  
Kevin Sheekey  
Clay Shirky  
Dan Sinker  
Brian Sivak  
Anne-Marie Slaughter  
Kevin Slavin  
Jon Sotsky  
Matt Stempeck  
Matthew Stepka  
Marleen Stikker  
Arun Sundararajan  
Jed Sundwall  
Mark Surman  
Eddie Tejada  
Yvette Alberdingk Thijm  
John Tolva  
Jenny Toomey  
Alex Torpey  
Anthony Townsend  
Volkan Unsal  
Tracy Van Slyke  
Yanev Suissa  
Jon Werbell  
Christopher Wong  
Jill Miller Zemon  
A Reporter at the New York Times