



CivicLab's 'Democracy Design Studio' To Launch New Tools, Programs For Activists

Ellyn Fortino - June 27th, 2014 - <http://tinyurl.com/CivicLabProfile-PI>

Progress Illinois profiles the Chicago-based CivicLab, which turns one year old next month, and its latest efforts to aid local activists.



July marks one year since the [CivicLab](#), a non-profit organization, opened its "democracy design studio" in the West Loop of Chicago.

Looking ahead, one of the CivicLab's co-founders says big plans are in the pipeline for year two of the co-working space, which is dedicated to collaboration, education and innovation for social

change and civic engagement.

Seven organizations focused on issues such as housing justice, voter registration and health care are currently working out of the CivicLab's storefront, located at 114 N. Aberdeen St.

Other activists, designers, educators and tech experts also gather and do research at the space, which is housed in a rehabbed 1890s firehouse that sits across the street from Harpo Studios, where "The Oprah Winfrey Show" was previously filmed.

In addition to offering a place where people can collaborate, the CivicLab hosts educational workshops and is behind the volunteer-based TIF Illumination Project, which is working to promote transparency around Chicago's controversial tax increment financing (TIF) program.

The TIF Illumination Project, which launched in February of 2013, has traveled to 27 Chicago wards, providing residents with a snapshot of what the city's economic development program is — or isn't — doing for their communities. Check out Progress Illinois' coverage of the Chicago TIF data revealed by the CivicLab [here](#).

Overall, the CivicLab's goal is to develop ways to make civic life, and complicated policy issues like TIFs, as fun and engaging as something like sports, explained Tom Tresser, the CivicLab's co-founder and chief TIF illuminator.

People are "passionate about sports and will argue to the death about my team versus your team. Well, how can we get people as engaged about public life in America where, literally, it is a matter of life and death, not like you're team loses and you feel like you're going to die," Tresser said.

"No, we're going to die if we don't solve some problems on this planet [and] in this country ... We've got some serious issues, but we don't have a lot of serious attention to it ... This is a place of experimentation, innovation and trying stuff, doing stuff, to try to answer that question," he added.

Over the past year, the CivicLab has held more than 50 workshops on topics ranging from how to read spreadsheets to how to run for public office. Other classes involve computer coding, vegan cooking and building hydroponic gardens. The CivicLab also runs a "Myplace" program for teens to learn about geocoding and geographic information system (GIS) tools, and then use that technology to tell stories about their communities.

Logan Square resident Dana Norden visited the CivicLab for the first time Wednesday evening to take a "Leadership 101 — Servant Leadership" workshop taught by Tresser. Norden, who works as a buyer for the [Dill Pickle Food Co-Op](#), 3039 W. Fullerton Ave., participated in Wednesday night's class with three other co-workers as well as her husband, a cinema engineer.

Norden heard about the CivicLab through the Dill Pickle Food Co-Op's general manager, who suggested it as a "good place to fine tune our skills as leaders within our organization," she said.

Adam Norden, Dana's husband, said he was impressed by the CivicLab and its mission to engage people on civic issues.

"You have to fight to even be able to create as space like this ... just affording the real estate to do it," Adam said. "And then fighting to organize people is increasingly difficult because there's more noise, and everyone has to work more to make the same amount of money, and it's getting harder and harder to live in the city."

"It's pretty important to have a place like this where people can come together and do work and actually see what other people are doing," he added.

The CivicLab itself has no paid staffers. It is able to run the democracy design studio in the West Loop in part from the monthly \$200 co-working fees paid by groups that use the space. It also raises funds through its workshops, which typically cost \$10 to attend. The CivicLab also charges a \$250 speaking fee for TIF Illumination presentations. Additionally, the CivicLab received a \$23,000 grant from the [Voqal Fund](#), which supports "non-profit organizations and individuals using media and technology to empower those who are politically, economically or socially disenfranchised."

The seven organizations that currently use the CivicLab as their workspace include [Chicago Votes](#); [Young Invincibles](#); the [New Organizing Institute](#), the [Roosevelt Institute](#); [Move to Amend](#); [Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration](#); and the [Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance](#). Chicago Votes is the CivicLab's anchor tenant, but the organization is moving out soon because it has outgrown the space.

In the past, some of the groups that have worked out of the CivicLab's storefront include the [Raise Your Hand](#) education coalition; [DemocracyInAction](#); [Restore the Fourth](#); [Women Who Code](#), and the [Imagination Foundation's Global Cardboard Challenge](#).

The CivicLab space has a lot planned for its second year, Tresser said.

First, the CivicLab will be launching a three-month fellowship program in July. Four fellows will be brought on to explore subject areas including information visualization, the arts, citizen science and journalism, Tresser said. The idea is for the fellows, who will be paid \$1,000 each for the three-month program, to develop a class for the CivicLab and produce a product, such as an investigation or publication.

Additionally, a media lab will soon be opening at the storefront where people can learn how to tell stories with digital media. And CivicLab volunteers are currently in the process of installing a workroom equipped with a woodshop and screen printing equipment to "make art for social change," Tresser said.

"We'll be building stuff, making stuff," he added. "We're makers here, not just policy wonks. This is a do tank, opposed to a think tank. The things we do here are supposed to be put into action for justice."

Once the new screen printing equipment is in place, activists and organizations will be able to create t-shirts, posters and other materials on site.

The woodshop will be used to build technology for a new "balloon mapping" program for teens at the CivicLab, among other projects. The youths will learn how to build balloons with cameras attached to them, which are then deployed outside to capture images. The photos are stitched together using software to create aerial maps.

Plans are also in the works to convert the CivicLab's basement into a storage space for posters and other signage used at rallies or other demonstrations.

"People spend a lot of time and effort on all the signage and paraphernalia, and then what do they do with it? They throw it away," Tresser noted. "We're going to have a lending library for signage ... People love to make signs for the rallies and things. It's part of the fun, but also it would be nice to know at least there are ... signs [here to borrow that] you don't have to make."

Tresser, who calls himself a "public defender," is a long-time Chicago grassroots organizer and civic educator.

He spearheaded the No Games Chicago effort, which opposed Chicago's 2016 Olympic bid, and was a co-founder of Protect Our Parks, which fought the privatization of Lincoln Park. Also, prior to launching the CivicLab, Tresser ran for Cook County Board President in 2010 as a Green Party candidate.

"I believe the public should be defended and the commons should be extended," he stressed. "I put my action behind that belief. Everything I've done over the last couple years is because of that — I fought the privatization of Lincoln Park, I fought the Olympics, I ran for office and opened the CivicLab all for those reasons."

Tresser said the CivicLab is all about "getting something done" to create "a city that we're proud of, that's open, and where everybody has a fair shot."

"That's what's driving me and the work that I do," he said.



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