

## Removing Barriers Mobilizes Resources

I think we all recognize that our Cooper Union faces an existential crisis.

“I for one, have been blessed with...a moment in education...where I have had...A Social Contract and many of the people sitting today in this audience, have made my life...more *understandable*, because of their understanding of the Social Contract.”

John Hejduk

It is not that: The Cooper Union holds up free education, but that free education holds up The Cooper Union.

It is not that: we can no longer afford to: freely educate, but that we cannot afford to break the promise of Free Education

The largest single financial asset that the Cooper Union currently holds is its promise of free education: TO ALL. The value contained within this promise far exceeds our current endowment as well as the physical properties held by the institution including the land under the Chrysler Building.

Our challenge and obligation, our social contract, is to comprehend and make more understandable how to mobilize the resources contained within this promise.

Peter Cooper was directly involved in countless inventions. There are three specific inventions that offer direct lessons to the questions we face. When this Foundation Building was constructed it was one of the tallest buildings in New York City. It contained an elevator shaft that waited four years until Elisha Otis invented the ‘safety elevator’, an elevator containing a mechanism that secured the elevator cab if the cable was cut. This securing mechanism mitigated the risk of injury or loss from collapse and created the credibility necessary for the elevator to be widely used by the public.

The safety elevator removed the vertical barrier of walking above eight stories and the city EXPLODED upwards, creating an entirely new geography of human inhabitation. Removing the vertical barrier, mobilized the resources, that fueled the 150-year vertical rise that is: New York City.

Peter Cooper was also directly involved in pulling the Trans-Atlantic Cable between the two continents, compressing weeks into seconds, in the exchange of: information and ideas. The Trans-Atlantic cable removed the communications barrier of shipping speeds and the exchange of ideas EXPLODED between the two continents, creating an entirely new geography of human interaction and exchange. Removing the communication barrier mobilized the resources that fueled the 150-year continuous transformation of Global communications.

The massive resources invested in creating each of these transformations were mobilized as a direct result of removing barriers and articulating a credible vision of the consequences of their removal.

Peter Cooper's years of struggle in pulling the Trans-Atlantic cable were overcome by his clarity of vision, that through this connection. "Knowledge shall cover the earth as waters the deep"

Articulating this vision, keeping this promise, required the third invention, I believe, Peter Coopers greatest invention: the removal of barriers to education. Education is by definition a transformative pursuit, individuals come together and engage in transformative interactions and experiences: Knowledge evolves. Creating circumstances of proximity and interaction among a great multiplicity of ideas and questions, leads to mutual transformation and new forms of knowledge. In creating The Cooper Union, Peter Cooper invested in the profound idea that removing the barriers to education creates a dynamic crucible of free thought where a great diversity of people and their questions can interact and co-evolve, developing new linkages, new thought processes and new questions. Peter Cooper understood that the barriers to education were not only unjust to those that they excluded, but those barriers impoverished the internal life of an institution. Barring any segment of the population creates a diminished geography of human knowledge and experience within the educational community.

Like the vertical barrier removed by the safety elevator, the invention of The Cooper Union, removed the artificial age limit above which people could freely participate in the transformative interactions of education. Like the Trans-Atlantic cable, the removal of the financial barriers to education collapsed the distances within the vast and uneven geographies of resource distribution and accumulation, bringing into direct proximity those who would otherwise have an ocean between them. Removing the barriers to education creates an entirely new geography of human: proximity, interaction and transformation, a new geography of knowledge and imagination. The value and meaning of the Trans-Atlantic cable and the global communications revolution that it unleashed is

found in the exchange of: knowledge and ideas that pass through it. The Cooper Union is Peter Cooper's greatest transformative invention, because it creates transformation itself. It is the invention that sustains invention and contributes to the continuously expanding universe of knowledge that elevates mankind.

There are many forms of interaction where the introduction of a financial barrier to participation dramatically alters the meaning of the interaction. I would offer the example of participatory democracy. While the process of participatory democracy requires the mobilization of vast resources, gathered together from all of the participants, requiring an individual fee to participate in voting would alter the meaning of the process, to such an extent, that it would collapse the value of participation, it would no longer be participatory democracy.

In fact, the ultimate safety device, the mechanism that secures individual agency and gives credibility to all forms of collective judgment is the: Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Each and every Right guaranteed by this United Nations declaration requires the mobilization of resources. These rights are of such fundamental value to mankind that the burden of these resources must be borne by US ALL. Assigning an individual fee to those who are the supposed beneficiaries of these rights is to collapse the value of all of our rights. I imagine this principle was in mind when crafting: Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Article that designates education as a Human Right and specifically says: "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." They must have been quoting Peter Cooper.

This institution is a shining demonstration of the transformative powers of removing the barriers to education. We have been pulling this cable for 150 years and now we face the risk that we are out of resources, that our debt load is too heavy and the only way to keep moving forward, may be to "cut the cable" and introduce the barrier of tuition. This would not be moving forward at all, this would be a collapse in the value of the entire endeavor. For, in this journey, there is no other shore to reach; we are pulling the continuously expanding geographies of knowledge and imagination. The distance traveled creates the geography itself as we continue to move forward. Cutting the cable is not the solution; we must invent and construct the safety mechanisms that secure the continuous evolution of knowledge without barriers. We must articulate a credible vision of the value and consequences of removing the barriers to education, and this WILL mobilize the resources to continue the journey. As a way-finder at sea, uses the force of the storm to out-run the storm we must keep the promise of free education to all, in order to secure the many promises of free education to all.

In moments of existential crisis, time has a tendency to collapse, whole chains of events that may usually require years and decades to unfold, suddenly happen overnight. If we can get this right, if we can articulate a model that secures the credible promise of education without barriers, the transformative consequences will far exceed those of the ‘safety elevator’ and the Trans-Atlantic cable. We will have shifted the trajectory, unleashing new geographies of knowledge beyond our wildest imaginations.

There is a city to be built rising above the geography of our current models of education, a city built upon the many promises of education without barriers. A new city elevating mankind through the transformative forces of: Knowledge, Imagination and Ideas.

David Gersten

December 5, 2011

The Great Hall of The Cooper Union