

# Open City Lab

- a new collaborative model for public engagement with scientific research

## BACKGROUND

Bristol is a city pulsing with science, creativity and innovation. Our universities are filled with researchers pursuing questions that could shape our collective futures, and outside academia, curious citizens have questions too. Yet the opportunities for people to engage with contemporary research are still largely limited to one-off events and talks.

We The Curious has a new vision - to create a culture of curiosity - where science is repositioned at the heart of culture, and science centres become deeply connected cultural resources. We want to be a socially engaged catalyst for scientific citizenship and provide a space to celebrate and share the research happening in our cities, supporting:

- universities and other research bodies, in their need to demonstrate social impact
- researchers, with a meaningful and easily accessed platform for engagement
- diverse audiences, to connect with research through our shared human instinct to be curious.

Anyone walking into a science centre should be able to encounter not just interactive exhibits, and infrequent 'Meet the Expert' sessions, but ongoing authentic scientific research happening right now, every day.

## PROPOSAL

We The Curious would like to partner with local universities to set up an Open City Lab in our city centre venue - a space that researchers can occupy, with support from our staff, to carry out their research in progress for a period of time that includes opportunity for the public to participate in whatever form is most appropriate. This will be different for every residency - and we would like to be flexible, creative and collaborative in the way we consider participation possibilities - it might be an inter-disciplinary group that occupies the space with different team members for 6 months, or a single academic testing a new hypothesis with audiences for one week.

Crucially, in consultation with researchers, we hope to create a template for collaboration in this new platform that makes the process as easy as possible to get involved with - building a programme over the first few years into something that's widely understood as a new standard for engagement that can be included in planning at the outset of a research funding bid.



## CONSULTATION AND CO-DEVELOPMENT

We The Curious has been successful in applying to the Inspiring Science Fund that has been set up by Wellcome and BEIS to help science centres 'rethink what they do and what they offer to the public.' Our project is called Curious City and will re-imagine our ground floor exhibition and entrance spaces. Open City Lab will be part of the ground floor exhibition space.

We would like to scope out how we best work with interested universities and researchers in the development of Open City Lab. There are many examples of citizen science programmes, science cafes, collaborations that many of us have been involved in, but to provide a constant rolling programme of publicly accessible research in a city centre venue is a new concept and an innovative way of working for all of us, so it needs an injection of open, creative thinking.

We conducted consultation sessions with researchers at UWE, University of Bristol and University of Bath in January 2017 which generated a lot of support of interest and some useful initial feedback and input about the aims of the space - see separate document. As we progress we swiftly need to work out what sort of space would work best - to be flexible, professional, open and inspiring to work in and to visit.

A few seeds for discussion - we think Open City Lab can provide:

- a revolution in public engagement, that involves deeper learning and longer term connection to research as a result of audiences participating in science in progress. This might be taking part in an experiment as a subject in a behavioural study, taking a walk with an air quality monitor, preparing samples for microscopy, being part of an early research process stage to inform research direction (e.g. choice in use of renewable plastics) or influencing ethical approval processes (e.g. use of human tumour tissue in neurological disease research). The engagement is in the participation with real research processes, whatever form that takes.
- a solution to the problem of finding a meaningful impact statement at the start of curiosity driven, fundamental science. Rather than trying to invent a social application, or business driven outcome at the outset, we can begin to evidence the impact of sharing fundamental science questions in a participative public space.
- an opportunity to evaluate organisational change in our engagement practices through collaboration, and a model for evidencing impact that is meaningful to both audiences and researchers.
- a professionally curated and facilitated opportunity for researchers to work with audiences, where they are supported by ethical frameworks for working with audiences, data security of working remotely and a bespoke research lab that incorporates the needs of audience and researcher.



- a template for public engagement that shifts the whole sector.

We are inspired by the participatory approach taken by some institutions in the art and cultural museum sector - that has seen great results by allowing people to participate in a way that is relevant to them and provides deep engagement.

“As more people enjoy and become accustomed to participatory learning and entertainment experiences, they want to do more than just “attend” cultural events and institutions. The social Web has ushered in a dizzying set of tools and design patterns that make participation more accessible than ever. Visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives. They expect the ability to respond and be taken seriously. They expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life.”

*Nina Simon - the Participatory Museum*

#### ADDITIONAL INFO

- Likely footprint of Open City Lab within the new ground floor exhibition is about 80 square metres. tbc
- We The Curious welcomes over 300,000 visitors per year, 62,000 of which are schoolchildren.
- As well as our daily visitor demographic, we hold an open community weekend six times a year where people living in areas with the highest multiple indices of deprivation visit We The Curious for free - these are very popular weekends with up to 3,000 visitors each time.
- We also hold After Hours events which attract 18 - 40 age group, with DJ and bar and spaces to trial pilots and experiments with an adult only audience.
- Open City Lab will have a dedicated member of staff in We The Curious to work with researchers, build relationships, plan and programme the space.
- Timeline - we are currently waiting to hear how the fund will release money but we intend to begin September 2017. The design and development period will commence this year, and we are currently aiming to launch the whole new ground floor to include Open City Lab in Summer 2019. (also tbc!)
- We can run pilot programmes in our current spaces meantime - we have a small Live Lab on the ground floor, an enclosed Box gallery (80 sq. metres) which is more light and sound controlled, and aim to present art/science multidisciplinary work, and our open plan exhibition zones and outdoor spaces.

Please contact Helen Della Nave and Maca Gomez-Gutierrez for more information:  
[Helen.DellaNave@wethecurious.org.uk](mailto:Helen.DellaNave@wethecurious.org.uk)    [Maca.Gomez-Gutierrez@wethecurious.org.uk](mailto:Maca.Gomez-Gutierrez@wethecurious.org.uk)

