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## Theme - Shared Studios - Portals to Better Understanding

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THEME

Shared Studios —

# Portals to Better Understanding

Digital devices are a cornucopia of information, but they are also attention vortexes and a suit of armour protecting us from having to engage with nearby strangers. While often decried for its negative effects, one organisation is actively using the power of the internet to create global public spaces. People actively seek out strangers in these spaces, to learn about others, and better understand themselves.

Text by Steve Jarvis  
Photographs by Shared Studios



Shared Studios



At a tech-hub in Rwanda, an art space in Mexico City, a refugee camp in Iraq, and in New York's Times Square—gold-coloured shipping containers are popping up in seemingly random places around the globe. While it may sound like science fiction, these containers are actually “Portals” connected via the internet: shared spaces defined by matching interiors, camera positioning and lighting to provide a uniform and immersive audio-visual experience for all who enter. While the people visiting each Portal most likely have never physically met, they are seemingly sharing a common space, as if transported into the same room seeing a full-body sized person before their eyes.

These Portals are operated by Shared Studios, a design and art collective

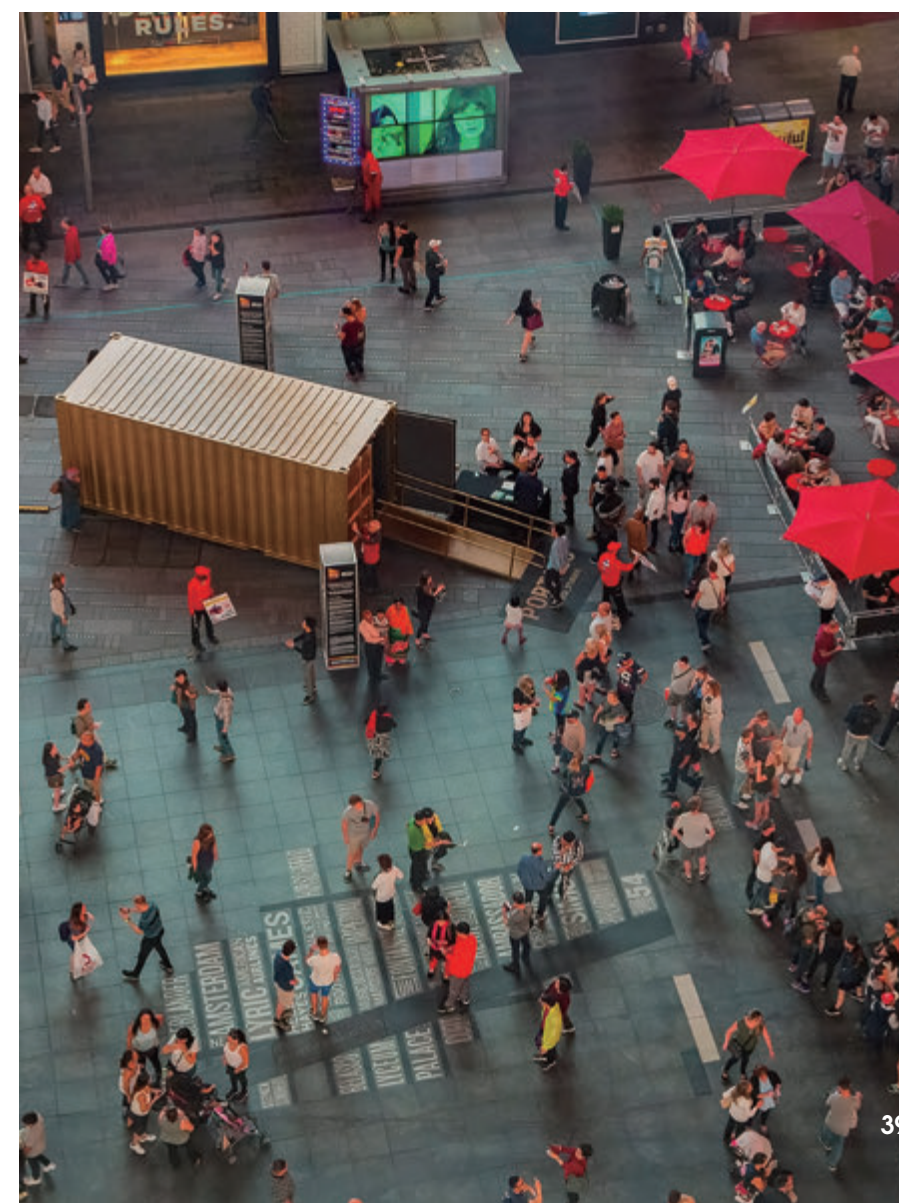
orchestrating chance encounters between strangers in “global public spaces.” The brainchild of Amar Bakshi, a journalist turned artist, the goal of Shared Studios is to bring people together in a somewhat random but meaningful way. He elaborates, “We have incredible technology at our fingertips, but we tend to use it to talk to people we already know or to get ever-more grounded in the groups we are already part of. The goal of Portals is to encourage people to embrace the value of diversity, to engage people unlike themselves, both around the world and even at home in their city.”

It is this chance for people to go beyond their immediate bubbles of human interaction and electronically-mediated world experience, that elicits an emotional connection and reaction

from Portal visitors. The first Portals, an art experiment connecting New York and Tehran, made it clear that this type of direct connection has the power to remove barriers of preconception, even within countries as seemingly politically and culturally estranged as the United States of America and Iran. With time, the project has taken on a life of its own, and in addition to meeting complete strangers on an individual basis, the Portals are becoming shared spaces for artistic collaboration, on-going personalised teaching, family reunions and events such as sitting down to a meal with strangers. Moreover, every new Portal added enriches the network and magnifies possibilities.

Starting in December 2014, the Portals have now expanded to 42 locations in some 21 countries around the world.

Part of the secret to their success is the simplicity. Bakshi deliberately chose shipping containers for their ubiquity, ruggedness and ability to easily be refitted for conformity. Each Portal is connected via the internet, and is managed by a local concierge; somebody with connections to the surrounding community to generate local visitors and an ability to curate matchings with visitors in other Portals and interpret if necessary. Bakshi contends that “Grounding digital technology in physical shared space, and having community curators makes the meetings meaningful and builds a sense of trust that would be otherwise hard to get over the internet.”



Shared Studios



Not only are Portals being put to use overcoming international divides, they are playing a role in bridging social and geographical divides on a smaller scale in the United States, where the distance between neighbouring cities, and even different sides of the same town, can hold deep divides that rarely have opportunity for dialogue. Pointing to possibilities for dialogue on subjects such as the justice system, Bakshi elaborates, "Portals is not about great geographies. Rather, it is about creating a space, context, and moment for a certain kind of dialogue. Our hope is that Portals not only connects public spaces around the world, but revitalises public spaces at home."

thousands of Portal visitors will attest, discovering someone's truth helps better understand your truth in their reflected light. It is a powerful force for change. Far from dressed up shipping containers, what Shared Studios has created are Portals for generating compassion, understanding and empathy.

In a world where social divides and polarised politics can shake communities and feed animosity between countries, it is more important than ever for people to understand the experience of others. Having the opportunity to go beyond stereotypical images portrayed in the media, and to directly experience a world beyond your horizon, challenges visitors' preconceived notions. As tens of



Name: Shared Studios  
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