

# **GEOHUMANITIES**

## **Art, history, text at the edge of place**

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## 5

# The City Formerly Known as Cambridge

A useless map by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things

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### About the map

The City Formerly Known as Cambridge is a hypothetical (but entirely possible!) map of Cambridge, Massachusetts. During 2006–7, the Institute for Infinitely Small Things invited residents and visitors to the city to rename any public place in Cambridge. This was a big experiment to see what the city would look like if the people that live and work in Cambridge renamed it, right now. We collected over 330 new names along with reasons that ranged from vanity to politics to silliness to forgotten histories to the contested present. This map is a collection of the public's names and stories about Cambridge, its diverse inhabitants and visitors, its traditions and ever-changing attitudes.

This project makes the case that names matter. Who gets to name things? Whose stories get remembered? Whose history is consecrated and whose is forgotten? Most Cambridge history books, for example, begin in 1636 with the founding of Newtowne, though there were Native Americans living here long before that time with their own names for its geography. On this map, we have mixed in some real renamed places from the city's history to recall those geographic places that have been contested, disputed, and transformed over time. A city's names, like its communities, are a living, breathing organism.

### How it worked

All of these names were collected through face-to-face conversations with people in Cambridge. The Institute for Infinitely Small Things set up its Renaming Booth in commercial centers, at farmers markets, at community festivals, and even at a four-square tournament to collect names. Renaming was open to everyone and the Institute did not play any editorial role other than correcting spelling mistakes. Everyone who contributed a new name to the map received a free copy mailed to them.



Figure 5.1 The City Formerly Known as Cambridge, produced by The Institute for Infinity Small Things, 2007.

## What about the \$\$?

You may notice the dollar amounts (\$) attached to names on the map. In effect, the most popular parts of Cambridge were auctioned off for small amounts of money. This was designed both to make a political point and to solve a problem: what should happen when two people or more wished to rename the same place (say, Harvard Square)? Instead of making a curatorial decision, we decided to mirror real life, which is to say: the person who pays the most money wins. The first time a place was renamed it was free. Each time it was subsequently renamed by a different person, the price went up by \$0.25. The money earned from auctioning off names (in total about \$20) went towards the production of this map and represents about 0.0025 percent of the cost of producing the map.

## The new names

People renamed streets for many reasons ranging from vanity to politics to silliness to the commemoration of local histories. For example, Long's Funeral Home was renamed

to Sam Azzam Plywood Palace by a leader of the neighborhood council who had protested Sam Azzam's construction for many years. Massachusetts Avenue was renamed to Prince Hall Blvd to commemorate the famous African-American Mason. And a gradeschooler renamed the King/Amigos School to the Farming Cows School because she thought it would be fun to have cows at school.

So, we spent two years creating a useless map with public parks named after pet goldfish that have long since passed away. Why? Because names are really important! Names of public places reflect who is included (and who is excluded) from a city's history. Names of public places also create a shared sense of community and belonging. For example, despite its astronomical property prices, Cambridge is a very diverse city with significant Brazilian, Asian, and Ethiopian populations. Speaking strictly demographically, one neighborhood is 30 percent African-American and another is 40 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. But you would not guess these facts from biking around Cantabrigian neighborhoods with their Anglophone street names.

But renaming public spaces is a long, contentious process. As the head of a Brazilian community organization said, "Well, after several years we did finally get a street named after a Brazilian religious figure but then they spelled his name wrong on the sign." Rather than undertaking actual renaming, the Institute wanted to symbolically open the renaming process to the public and allow anyone to rename a public place that meant something to them. In the process, of course, we ended up with a bit of silliness and some really great stories. Hopefully we also piqued public interest in the place names around them and planted the seed that things could look a lot differently than they do right now.



Figure 5.2 A detail from the map, The City Formerly Known as Cambridge.

## **Where can I get a useless map of Cambridge?**

You can purchase the map for \$5 at [www.infinitelysmallthings.net](http://www.infinitelysmallthings.net).

## **About the Institute for Infinitely Small Things**

The Institute for Infinitely Small Things conducts creative, participatory research that aims to temporarily transform public spaces dominated by corporate and political agendas. Using performance and conversation, we investigate social and political "tiny things." These have included corporate ads, street names, and post-9/11 security terminology. The Institute advocates for public engagement through its research reports in the form of maps, books, and videos. This interdisciplinary group has a varied and open membership which includes artists, filmmakers, computer programmers, historians, and hula hoopers. For this project, the Institute was Catherine D'Ignazio, Dave Raymond, Heather Ring, Heloisa Escudero, Jaimes Mayhew, James Manning, Katharine Urbani, Matilda Sabal, Max Sabal, Nicole Siggins, Rob Sabal, Savic Rasovic, Shannon Coyle, and Toby Kim Lee.

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