

2014 - 2015

# Community Impact Report

**synapcity**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from our Executive Director	03
Why engagement?	04
Synapcity by the numbers	05
What is the Synapcity impact?	06
What has Synapcity been up to?	12
What's Next for Synapcity?	19
Sponsors & Funders	20

**“FEED FORWARD”**

It seems both like yesterday and a lifetime ago that the founding family sat around my kitchen table and dreamt boldly about changing the way Ottawa engages. Did we dream too courageously? I don't think so. Ottawa is full of passionate and creative citizens who continue to show up, step up and step into creating our city. We all know Ottawa is a truly great place to live, but let us expect more: from ourselves, from business, from communities, and from governments.

At Synapcity (formerly Citizens Academy), we have always believed that no one person, organization, or sector can or should tackle complex issues alone. We challenged ourselves to create programs that would shift minds and hearts, shifting conversations and the way we work together. We started small: our Civics Bootcamps served to create empathy, mutual understanding, and ownership of civic issues. We have been astonished by the response and the results. Our alumni are creating outcomes and impact - we feel privileged to have played a small role in their success.

We learned a lot from the brave people who joined us on the roller coaster ride of learning and iteration. In the last 12 months, we connected back to our bigger aspirations to create more spaces for shared CityMaking where diverse stakeholders feel they are creators and contributors in making our city thrive for everyone. We haven't figured it all out yet, but we believe in what we see, hear and feel from participants and collaborators. They want more. We are excited about next steps - experiments in dialogue, placemaking, community-making, workshops to drive civic entrepreneurship, and the expansion of our Boot Camps.

Your contributions as partners, advisors, collaborators, volunteers, and participants enabled us to serve and work with more people in the past 18 months than ever before. To the core leadership team - no words can express my joy and gratitude to be working with you. We are building this movement together: Ottawa has a strong heartbeat. For that, and your commitment to an inclusive and energetic civic life, I thank you. Join us for the next phase of a journey that's all about “feed forward”.

Sincerely,

**Manjit Basi**

CO-FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## *Because we believe in people.*

We get excited when people have the opportunity to get involved in a meaningful, respectful and inclusive way in shaping their city. Whether it's policy, urban planning, public health or local enterprise, citizens are willing and able to offer decision makers valuable insights, sensibility, and knowledge.

At Synapcity, our collective experience is embedded in deliberate dialogue, community leadership, social and economic policy, and systems thinking. By enabling effective engagement, we catalyze people's agency to be contributors.

- **Individuals transform** as we learn new skills and gain confidence that we really can make a difference. We feel connected to each other, creating a deeper sense of belonging and community support.
- **Communities transform** as engaged and connected citizens stimulate a sense of belonging in their neighbours. Communities become more harmonious, resilient, resourceful and safe.
- **Institutions transform** through better-informed decisions, with less conflict! More people are included and understand the decision-making process.
- **Society transforms** through increased trust and social capital. Trust creates a strong foundation for joint action, innovation and economic growth!

## WHAT DOES ENGAGEMENT MEAN TO US?

### *Shared CityMaking.*

Fundamentally, a city is the people. Engagement is everyday political and civic action and participatory processes fuelling long-term, sustainable solutions. Citizens from all walks of life, academia, not-for-profits, governments, business, cultural institutions and unusual suspects participate in dialogue for change. At Synapcity we embrace:

- Uncertainty and risk vs. power and control
- Systems approach vs. silo expertise
- Appreciation vs. aversion

Balancing these tensions reduces the fear of engagement, increases trust, and opens the possibility for a shared pathway forward.

Diversity lies at the heart of how we engage. By inviting diverse voices to the table, we begin to understand and feel empathy towards each other. Trusting relationships emerge from open, exploratory and judgment-free conversation. Dialogue in search of solutions becomes a positive sum game.

87

VOLUNTEERS

*5900+ hours contributed*

70

BOOT CAMP  
GRADUATES BRINGS  
THE TOTAL TO 140

*100% would recommend the  
program to a friend*

*80% plan to increase their  
community involvement*

*84% plan to join their  
community association*

220

POP-UP VOTING  
SITES WITH SAMARA

7

WE ARE CITIES  
ROUNDTABLES

*150 citizens*

3

AWESOME ALUMNI  
EVENTS

*80+ citizens*

4

CITY BUDGET  
CONSULTATIONS

*350+ citizens*

1

FUTUREBLOCK  
PARTY

*Pop-Up Urbanism*

1

INTERACTIVE  
ART PROJECT

*1500+ participants*

*We bring people together to create the city we want.  
We think public engagement is about more than one-way  
information: we get results that reflect community needs.  
But don't take our word for it!*

**Boot Camp Graduate, Community Association President:** I now know where and when to access information and/or people at City Hall. Plus, I now have access to a rich and varied network of friends upon whom I can call for various questions. It's the whole 'connectedness' piece that is so very invaluable. It's like a spark that keeps our motivation high.



JOAN KUYEK, GOTTAGO CHAIR

*The GottaGo! campaign grew out of a Civics Boot Camp practicum in late November 2013. Challenged to engage with a hypothetical issue, a few of us seized on the opportunity to strategize about getting a network of public toilets in Ottawa. We presented our pitch and strategy to a wildly enthusiastic panel of civic experts who told us to “go for it”. We have not turned back.*



GOWOON LEE, Y2Y

*It is with Synapcity that I was inspired to start an initiative, Y2Y! where the youth help one another find jobs. People now compliment me on what I do, and I realize it is very important to have an organization like Synapcity that would remind me that I too can make a difference.*



**JEVONE NICHOLAS,  
CANDIDATE FOR OTTAWA CITY COUNCIL WARD 13**

*Synapcity provided me with additional motivation to run for City Council. Seeing and meeting so many engaged citizens gave me further inspiration to take a bold step myself. I also appreciated the direct advice we received from sitting and former councillors who came in as guest contributors.*



**JULIE HODGSON, HNATYSHYN FOUNDATION**

*Julie Hodgson, Hnatyshyn Foundation: In 2014, I participated in the Synapcity Civics Boot Camp, which I loved. It was a terrific opportunity to meet a creative, enthusiastic leadership team who gave participants the tools required to put together a project and to see it through. The Civics Boot Camp broadened my knowledge and encouraged me to dream big. In 2015, I heard about a philanthropic group in Toronto that supports the visual arts and I thought, "We could do that in Ottawa." I consulted with a number of people and set up the Ottawa Art Society Fund with the Community Foundation of Ottawa, which provides grants to visual arts organizations. I would like to thank the Synapcity for providing the spark to help me realize my strengths, and the framework to bring this very personal legacy forward.*



MITCHELL E. KUTNEY, JUST CHANGE

*Mitchell E. Kutney, Just Change: Whether you are authoring a handwritten letter to your local councillor or starting a new social media campaign with like-minded advocates, the Synapcity's diverse and whole-of- community approach to collaborative engagement has brought city and citizen closer than ever before.*



SUNEETA MILLINGTON,  
CO-FOUNDER, PRIME MINISTER'S ROW

*Suneeta Millington, co-founder, Prime Minister's Row: I don't love Ottawa. But when I moved back I decided I needed to stop complaining and start making it the dynamic, vibrant, innovative place I wanted it to be. I was thrilled to discover Synapcity, which afforded me a unique opportunity to learn how to leverage change, build networks and implement ideas within the municipal system. More importantly, Synapcity connected me with an engaged group of intergenerational citizens from across the city whose stories, passions and ideas helped me see a different side to the multilayered places and spaces I now call home. Prime Minister's Row is creating Canada's first street museum in the heart of the Nation's Capital, a cultural space designed to encourage reflection on questions of governance, identity, culture, values and history.*



MICHELLE REIMER, CITIZENS FIRST

*Synapcity is the only organization I have found in Ottawa where civic-minded change-makers come together to share and create ideas to strengthen our Nation's capital. I can't wait to see what they come up with next! Michelle Reimer is currently organizing a Lebreton Flats citizen-led survey to get a sense of what the citizens of Ottawa want to see for their Lebreton Flats development. We can't wait to see what SHE comes up with next!*



MARK BLEVIS, DIGITAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGIST AND CITIZEN OF OTTAWA

*Synapcity has developed an engaging and immensely valuable program. The Boot Camp and CA's ongoing events equip the people of Ottawa with the knowledge and tools they need to get involved and help make our city better.*



JACKIE HOLZMAN, FORMER MAYOR OF OTTAWA

*Preparing citizens for constructive participation supports good city-building. I've seen how the Synapcity Boot Camp not only provides knowledge exchange but an opportunity for diverse citizens from across the city to work on ideas to improve our city. The GottaGo campaign is a great case study on how a tiny "class" project can be brought into fruition to affect change.*

**KAREN SECORD, PARKDALE FOOD CENTRE**

*During the recent federal election, we were thrilled to have the help of Synapcity at the Parkdale Food Centre. Every month we provide food and food-related programming to approximately 700 neighbours who lack the financial means to purchase nutritious food. Since living in poverty can be quite isolating, it is not unusual for this demographic to report feeling disenfranchised, without a voice. Synapcity demystified the voting process and answered lots of questions. We are confident that low-income residents better understood the voting process because of the efforts of Synapcity.*

**BETTINA VOLLMERHAUSEN, OTTAWA TOOL LIBRARY**

*As a participant of the Synapcity Boot Camp I have gained an understanding of how citizens can participate in the building of the city they want to live in. During Boot Camp there is ample time to listen to experts, exchange and discuss ideas with people in the cohort, and build confidence in being able to shape the city we live in. It was an amazing experience riddled with fun, fabulous people with heart, and the desire to drive innovation in Ottawa. The Ottawa Tool Library is a library where people can borrow tools. We offer access to hand tools, power tools, and kitchen tools. With a yearly membership fee, members gain access to tools, knowledge, and a community of makers.*



SHARON JEANNOTTE,  
SENIOR FELLOW AT THE CENTRE ON GOVERNANCE  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

*Synapcity, in hosting the We Are Cities consultations in Ottawa, provided a rare opportunity to meet a cross-section of Ottawa residents and to think about what we valued about the city and what improvements we would like to see. The format allowed us to explore the issues in a productive way and to have a meaningful conversation about the way forward. We all emerged with a better idea of the challenges and opportunities facing our city, and of our role as citizens in bringing about positive change.*



TAMMY CORNER, HEALTH PROMOTER AT  
PINECREST-QUEENSWAY COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE

*Alumni of Synapcity return with Increased confidence and ability to do advocacy, to use their voice, to influence decision-makers either at City committee meetings, during elections or within our Safe People Advocacy group. One has also begun reaching out to involve other people.*

## *Civics Boot Camp*

Synapcity encourages constructive problem-solving between citizens and their city, and we see open dialogue and shared understanding as the first essential step. Civics Boot Camp is an interactive and experiential six-week learning opportunity for citizens of all walks of life. Participants come together to explore the local context in municipal government, to understand where the City spends money, how cities and communities are built, and how to engage others in city-making actions.

### **IMPACT:**

Civics Boot Camp has not only become an essential resource for citizens seeking a different way to get involved with their city, but it also serves as a space where citizens experience the city's diversity. Participants come from all over, bringing together diverse life experiences, skills, and knowledge. Mentors, panelists, and guest storytellers come from multiple sectors – creating a rich exchange of perspectives and understanding of the complexity of issues, decision-making, and local governance. We realize now that the Boot Camp is much bigger than its municipal framework: it is a place where people can throw off cynicism, feel hopeful, and leave with the connections, confidence and information to be agents of change in their neighbourhoods. Alumni impact is ongoing, whether it's setting up a Free Public Library in their community, or getting involved in an anti-poverty initiative.

### **LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:**

Although the Boot Camp is a powerful product, we realized that the creation and delivery of the Boot Camps are equally significant. The curriculum was co-created and co-delivered with citizens from multiple sectors and varied levels of expertise. Our collaborative approach increases pride, engagement, and ownership. We now field over 100 applications for every 40 spots, and feel confident that we are delivering a service that Ottawa believes in. Moving forward, we notice that from cohort to cohort, our participants tend to share areas of interest. We can better leverage their passion by introducing knowledge exchange with existing city initiatives, earlier in the curriculum. What will remain the same is the process of co-generation and collaboration to support and amplify the efforts of others.

## BudgetSpeak

In 2015, five urban City Councillors were seeking more participatory ways to engage with residents. With Synapcity, they used the complex topic of the City Budget to experiment with new models of engagement: we call it BudgetSpeak!

The February sessions included a Budget 101, a chance to learn together about the budget, followed by collective deliberation on priorities and trade-offs. Feedback from all involved resulted in a richer experience in Fall 2015 as we delivered another two BudgetSpeak sessions. The City Treasurer's Office partnered with us to explain the Budget numbers and process.

### IMPACT:

Over 350 citizens stepped up to understand complex budgets and deliberate over what can be done with dollars. Residents and leadership are coming together to generate meaningful solutions, compromises and priorities that are taken back to Council. Citizens can hear their voices and ideas deliberated in session.

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT:

The City Treasurer's Office released their own Budget 101, and City Budget consultations have been delegated to Councillors to organize. Councillors provide an ever-increasing amount of data to each BudgetSpeak. We are happy that our work helps to nudge change towards pro- active participatory processes.

### LEARNINGS & NEXT STEPS:

Citizens enjoyed getting involved in a different way of engaging with the City Budget. And they still want more! More and better data, more advance information, more longitudinal trends, and more time for dialogue and deliberation. We are keen to continue working with Councillors to support meaningful and inspired engagement. Participatory design can offer creative outcomes for both ward-specific and city-wide initiatives.



**TOBIN NUSSBAUM,  
CITY COUNCILLOR FOR RIDEAU-ROCKCLIFFE**

*Synapcity continues to make a huge impact in Ottawa. Through its people training, consultation facilitation and civic leadership, Synapcity is generating increasing enthusiasm about, and engagement in, our city. Ottawa is an even better place as a result of this important contribution.*

## We Are Cities

Synapcity was selected by Evergreen CityWorks and the McConnell Family Foundation as the Ottawa convenor for We Are Cities, contributing to a national urban policy agenda. We hosted, co-hosted and supported 7 of the 75 roundtables hosted in 33 cities! After Toronto, Ottawa had the highest citizen participation.

Ottawa generated dozens of creative ideas, including a tri-region governance forum across Ottawa/ Gatineau/ National Capital Commission to enable more inter-agency cooperation, increased recognition of Algonquin people as custodians of our region, connecting a network of “villages” using bike trails, and free transit for the elderly and children, among others.

### IMPACT:

Over 150 people got creative about the possibilities for our nation's capital and the potential for Canadian cities. The We Are Cities Action Agenda was released in January 2016 - the first ever participatory urban policy agenda. This agenda is heading straight into the hands of our new Prime Minister, to start working towards more connected, resilient, co-designed Canadian cities.

Synapcity will be releasing Ottawa's local We Are Cities agenda this spring. Stay tuned!

### LEARNINGS & NEXT STEPS:

We were the first to convene nationally for this project. Being a keener comes with challenges, but we learned that we can be nimble and pivot as needed! We built terrific relationships with dynamic organizations across Canada who believe in the power of people and cities. Ottawa's dynamic as both a city and the nation's capital meant we had the opportunity to engage and facilitate for different groups. Varying interests helped strengthen our dialogue muscles. We listened deeply at the urban Aboriginal roundtable, and recognized we needed better representativeness at our own tables.



### ROBERT PLITT, EVERGREEN CITYWORKS

*Synapcity was a dynamic and enthusiastic collaborator on the We Are Cities initiative. They provided a valuable perspective, advocating for a strong and representative process. Their ability to convene and connect diverse individuals cross-sectorally and facilitate tough conversations makes them an asset to any project.*

## *FutureBlock Party*

Montreal's Cities for People challenged Synapcity to support a local project that mobilized and connected people in a city-building activity. Synapcity responded by creating the space for connection and collaboration between business, government, and civil society in the Vanier and Rideau- Rockcliffe communities.

30 organizations transformed an empty lot on Montreal Road into a gathering place for all ages and interests. We saw collaborative mural painting, a subsidized healthy food market, a platform for live music, pre-scheduled and impromptu, local Francophone and Indigenous heritage, free bike tune-ups by a local social enterprise, and much more. Many stayed for hours, proving public spaces can be designed to encourage people to slow down and interact with each other and their surroundings.

### **IMPACT:**

The community is talking about hosting an annual festival. Groups, from multiple sectors, worked together to showcase the unique qualities of their neighbourhood. Vanier has a lot to offer, and the community feels galvanized to capture that momentum! The Quartier Vanier BIA and PrototypeD's leadership made the project a huge success.

### **LEARNINGS & NEXT STEPS:**

We love collaboration and the community came together beautifully, but it was a tight timeline for so many partnerships. Sometimes our exuberance for co-creating gets in the way of taking the time necessary to build trust and align values. Moving forward, we will better allow for time to set up a project versus the coordination and delivery. Collaborative placemaking is a powerful way to create a sense of belonging. We will explore ways of raising awareness about lighter, quicker, and cheaper projects that strengthen neighbourhoods.

Rose Anne Leonard, Velo-Vanier: Having witnessed their Boot Camps in action, I knew that Synapcity's could galvanize community activists in creative and collegial ways. As people waited to have their bikes seen to, they commented on how unusual and pleasant it was that the [FutureBlock] party was happening right on the main street. Synapcity's greatest gift to the neighbourhood was to show how creativity, art and talent could generate a delightful gathering place along Montreal Road. Bravo to Synapcity for the inspiration, sponsorship and partnering which made it happen.

## #VotePopUp

Leading up to the 2015 federal election, Samara, a national think tank, invited Synapcity to lead Ottawa's #VotePopUp campaign. Samara hosted an awesome training, and we filled the room with volunteers to help make it happen!

Volunteers later "popped up" at 12 different sites including a rock concert, the Adult High School, the Bookmobile, the Market Mobile, the Parkdale Food Centre, the Catholic Immigration Centre, and more!

Participants cast a trial ballot, discussed why they chose to vote and checked out ID requirements. For many who had never voted, it was a welcome trial run. It took 10 minutes. No speeches. No arm-twisting.

### IMPACT:

Another example of the power of volunteers helping their neighbours get ready to vote – one of the most precious rights of citizenship. This initiative brought democracy to the people! Sometimes we have to work a little harder on the front end to create equitable outcomes; this outreach program was designed to do just that. We had over 220 direct interactions with people looking to exercise their democratic rights, and then Ottawa topped the whole country in voter turnout. Thank you, Samara, we look forward to working together in the future.



JOSÉ RAMÓN MARTÍ,  
PROGRAM COORDINATOR, SAMARA CANADA

*In the run-up to the 42nd federal election, Samara Canada was thrilled to collaborate with Synapcity on our Vote PopUp initiative! Drawing on the knowledge and support of their staff, local organizers found the confidence and resources to carry out voter engagement activities in communities across Ottawa. Owing to the strong reputation and relationships they have built, Synapcity ensured that Samara's toolkit made its way into the rights hands and gave first-time and infrequent voters the opportunity to learn about voting and have their voices heard.*

## Ottawa on Purpose

Prop a big blackboard at the entrance to a community hall and ask people to complete this sentence: “In my Ottawa, I want . . .

We wanted to test some quick ways of gathering citizen input on their communities. We thought, why not an interactive art wall? The response was awesome! From 8-year-olds to 70-somethings, people wrote ideas that were serious, funny and just fun. Examples: “In my Ottawa, I want: “traffic slowing,” “more single men,” “more ice cream shops,” “more bike lanes,” “more public and community art.” What’s your pick?

### IMPACT:

Interactive art walls do inspire participation. People were hesitant at first, but soon we were running out of room. A permanent installation would provide the opportunity to collect more data or simply give more opportunity for community building and placemaking. We are exploring options for partnerships with community groups and local businesses to see if semi-permanent installations are a possibility.



### JULIE LAPALME, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

*Synapcity made a significant contribution to the Beechwood Summer Solstice by inviting participants to write down their thoughts on giant chalkboards. The project was called Ottawa on Purpose and people filled up two boards with ideas for a better Ottawa. It was my first time collaborating with Synapcity and their enthusiasm for this community event was most commendable!*

## Creating an Alumni Community

Synapcity has over 140 people, graduates and an ever-growing network of mentors, moderators, panelists, volunteers and enthusiasts. People want to continue to connect with Synapcity, so we have been exploring ways to curate programs using the skills and knowledge of our networks. How could we support alumni while providing space for peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange?

We experimented with networking, a Pitchfest, and in fall 2015, we piloted a workshop format with two Synapcity loyals, Dick Stewart and Mitch Kutney. They walked us through two different but complementary approaches to building network capital. How do you play well with the ‘competition’? How do you get your voice heard in all that social media racket?

### IMPACT:

A wide range of alumni return to re-engage with one another. Alumni appreciate the opportunity to network, as well as more formal opportunities like “speed talks” that engage one another in ongoing projects. Our alumni provide regular feedback to inform the learning topics and dialogues that will best support their interests and endeavours.

### LEARNINGS & NEXT STEPS:

Alumni prefer some meaningful learning alongside networking, but sometimes, we try to combine too many outcomes in one event. As hosts, we find ourselves trying to make up for lost time, or presuming what’s needed. We need to better identify and communicate each event’s purpose and value. Hosting regularly and engaging our network into curation will be a key component for our success. We will continue to explore ways of supporting this dynamic community. 2016 will see the launch of regularly curated events for both alumni and the community at large.



DICK STEWART

*Cliché aside, there is more power in numbers! I participated in Synapcity’s Finding Our Allies event late last year. I was fascinated by how people were very open to reframe and build on their ideas and passions for our City to connect, and build a more powerful strategy with others. What I saw was a community of interest being formed in order to shape our City. Powerful stuff!*

**SYNAPCITY**

We currently field almost 100 applications for every 40 spaces available for our Civics Boot Camps. It's clear we need to scale up! So, in 2016, we are adapting our Civics Boot Camp to create more entry points for more diverse people to engage in community life.

**CIVICS PRIMER**

To be more inclusive of the unique challenges facing Ottawa's 108 neighbourhoods, we are launching a Civics Primer. These half-day sessions are designed for citizens who aren't ready or able to carve out the time for the longer program. We are exploring opportunities with partners and specific communities of place and people.

**CITYMAKER CAMP**

In response to alumni feedback, Boot Camp will be adapted to focus on civic engagement tools while better connecting participants to our vibrant and active Ottawa network. We are preparing participants to move more easily from ideas to action, providing mentorship and peer-to-peer learning. This means more new community creations in Ottawa. We can't wait!

**CITYMAKER SKILLS: WORKSHOP SERIES**

Successful community building and citizen engagement are as much about the 'soft' skills as it is about detailed planning and organization. A series of CityMaker Skills workshops will support alumni and CityMakers at large in deepening their knowledge about engagement, dialogue, and building movements. These elements are actually what makes the work of Synapcity stand out from the rest.

**CITIZEN SPACES: DIALOGUE SERIES**

In a world where we need to deepen our sense of belonging, Synapcity intends to create the space to spark and nurture connections and conversation about topics of public concern. We strive to create moments where minds meet and hearts shift. Citizen Spaces: Dialogue Series brings diverse citizens and organizations together for inspired, thoughtful, and inclusive dialogue. Synapcity will publish a white-paper series to accompany these dialogue sessions.

**SYNAPCITY FOR HIRE!**

Is your organization ready to deeply engage the public? We offer customized services for organizations who know they want to work with diverse stakeholders, but don't really know how, or have the time to dive deep. We provide a range of services including engagement workshops, design, convening and facilitation to organizations and public institutions. Let us know how we can best support you in your work.

Dialogue and deliberation can be used to serve many purposes. Are we fact-gathering? Are we trying to discover common ground? Are we looking to strategize and plan action? Different approaches will enhance the journey and amplify your outcomes.

## Thank you!

To all the individuals who have worked with us to create our programs and our projects, providing everything from expertise to muscle to faith. Too many to mention, but all deserving a special acknowledgment. None of our work is possible without the partnerships and collaborations; we are truly nested in community.

## A big thank you to our sponsors



## A big thank you to our funders

THE J.W. McCONNELL  
FAMILY FOUNDATION

LA FONDATION DE LA  
FAMILLE J.W. McCONNELL

**METCALF**  
**FOUNDATION**



**synapcity**