



I SPY...Christopher Allen of the YellowArrow project

It's hard to say what's most appealing about the YellowArrow: it's ability to make the streetscape legible, the way it helps you make your mark in a city where you often feel anonymous, the secrecy of the symbol, or the fact that it's a public game. Christopher Allen told us all about the little yellow sticker.

The L: Let's start with the nitty-gritty - how does it work?

CA: Ok, so you've got a YellowArrow sticker. You want to point something out and leave a message for someone else to find. You place the sticker, and then you grab your cell phone and send a text message to 646 270 5537. You begin with the arrow's unique code and then follow with your message about the place. When someone else comes along later and finds your arrow in the city, he or she sends a message with ? and the arrow's code to 646 270 5537 and immediately receives the message you left there.

The L: How many arrows are out there? Where?

CA: About 6000, I think, and more every day. It was launched in NYC, but it's happening all over the world. If you go to the global gallery online at yellowarrow.org, you can see arrows placed by people in Boston, Berlin, Los Angeles, and other cities.

The L: How do you distribute the arrows?

CA: You order them on the website. We ship them off to you at cost. We also give them away at different events, parties and concerts and stuff.

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The L: How have people been using the arrow?

CA: It's designed to be a flexible creative tool, and people place arrows in very different ways. The details of everyday life, minute and overlooked – most of the arrows fall into this category. They're about the things that are important to people about place. That's why that word "counts" is on the sticker. The overall message is "this counts," this is worth your attention. There are personal anecdotes, historical facts, political opinions, game-like commands to action, and even linked arrows that create a narrative.

The L: What role does the website play?

CA: The project is designed to be totally mobile, but the web is where you check in with the community. When you place an arrow, the system associates your phone number with a tagname. You can log into "my arrows" on the website and attach a photo or a map to your arrow which makes it pop up in the gallery. Sometimes arrows get taken down, so photos make the message permanent.

The L: Because you can view all of the arrows posted by a certain user, do you think a kind of celebrity could come out of that?

CA: There are already people who have trademarks. "Newurban" from Boston always puts a bike in his pictures, for instance. We are interested in identity play, too. We just launched a uniquely coded T-shirt which you can buy on the website. You can update your message every time you put it on, like a wearable blog.

The L: Or a personal barcode?

CA: Exactly, your very own UPC.

The L: Do you consider yourselves as part of a movement?

CA: Well, for a lot of people YellowArrow introduces a sense of what living in the world of wireless information will be like. But it's also part of a movement of massively collaborative projects and of a growing cultural interest in reality and daily life, a movement that challenges the dominance of marketing messages in our psychological and physical space by giving people tools that allow their personal and local messages to compete.

The L: Do you see the YellowArrow as in opposition to marketing's encroachment on our visual space?

CA: Not opposition, really. It just gives people the ability to annotate and improve images they encounter. More than anything, it's about paying attention to what surrounds us – whether that be a crack in the sidewalk or the brightest billboard in Times Square.

-- Paul Kiel

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