

## Shared Distance

*Team: Noha Eid, Alex Goldmark, Mohammed Mubarak, Verdana Partalo*

### Goal

To help break down stereotypes, encourage interaction, and improve relations between the US and Egypt, and to make people rethink their preconceptions about each other. The project attempts to answer the questions: To what extent can an interactive urban intervention address the similarities and differences among people around the world? How could it affect the way people perceive their environment?

### Issue

There is significant coverage of opinion polls depicting attitudes of "everyday Egyptians and Americans" toward the people, policies, and governments of the two nations. Increasingly, the dominant attitudes are ones of disapproval or disaffection. Yet, those perceptions are largely driven by a second-hand understanding of the nation and its people.

Citizens' attitudes are essentially crafted by media stories about political leaders, complex events, and popular entertainment—none of which provides comprehensive portraits of the issues or citizens involved. In the most accessible media outlets, countries and their people are painted in broad strokes that overlook the cultural, economic, educational, and professional diversity in both societies. Add to this a lack of opportunity for "average" US and Egyptian citizens to interact with their counterparts, and the result is that these "everyday members of society" who are being surveyed are not providing opinions as much as reflecting images provided by the media. Egyptians and Americans lack the information necessary to offer truly informed opinions about each other. During the Fellows program, team members recognized the critical role personal contact plays in breaking down stereotypes and prompting individuals to rethink preconceptions about other countries and their citizens. They recognized that the future of cross-cultural understanding and dialogue lies in creating opportunities for individuals representing the full spectrum of society to interact with their overseas counterparts.



## **Project**

Shared Distance will provide a forum for real-time, digitally enabled cross-cultural interactions between citizens from Egypt and the United States. Created as an urban art installation, two large screens—one in Cairo and the other in New York—will serve as communication portals. Individuals can engage in activities as simple as waving to each other or as complex as performing a group activity. The project will not pre-screen individuals, ensuring that the interactions are spontaneous, voluntary, cooperative, dynamic, and diverse in scope.

The interactions will be recorded and used in an archival video, which will be available online. Participants would be able to tag themselves and share the videos with others. This not only creates a living documentary of the exchanges, but provides opportunities to influence perceptions of greater numbers of individuals through a second-generation user experience. The Shared Distance experience can help to generate mutual respect, challenge perceptions, and bridge cultural chasms.

