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## MAGAZINE



Anula Shetty and Michael Kuetemeyer, co-creators of the Time Lens Pearl Street project, hope their effort will document positive changes and inspire more of them. RACHEL WISNIEWSKI / Staff Photographer



Time Lens at its block party debut, viewed through a bioscope, a solar-powered kiosk and app featuring panoramas of Chinatown North and photos, voices, and memories of residents. ANULA SHETTY



Last year's Pearl Street Block Party. At this year's party Saturday, the Time Lens artists will show their work in the bioscope, a mobile cinema device designed for communal viewing. TIMOTHY LEE

## Cultured Pearl: Lens on a Changing Street

An interactive art project chronicles the gentrification of four gritty blocks.

By Samantha Melamed  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**O**n an overcast morning in June, Chaplain Jeff Harley of the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission cast a skeptical eye down Pearl Street, an alley that's been caught up in — but has not really caught up with — the burgeoning revitalization of the Chinatown North neighborhood.

"I wouldn't take any pictures down there. They're selling drugs, getting high — they'll get really paranoid," he told Anula Shetty and Michael Kuetemeyer.

The artists were there to collect panoramic images and video footage for what they're calling an interactive documentary, a mobile app that will explore the life of Pearl Street, and potentially create a chronicle of gentrification.

The four-block expanse of parking lots, back doors, and Dumpsters in question is parallel to, and just north of, Vine Street.

It runs behind luxury apartments in the Goldtex and Packard Buildings, beneath the trestle that will eventually support an elevated park, alongside the men's shelter where Harley serves as education chaplain, and behind the Asian Arts Initiative, which gave Shetty and Kuetemeyer a grant to begin this work as part of its Social Practice Lab.

The artists trained homeless men from the shelter's Overcomers program to become documentarians, conducting and filming interviews to capture how the life of this street is changing. See **PEARL** on C3

# Cultured Pearl Street, on an interactive app

**PEARL** from C1 under the pressures of gentrification.

The work, called Time Lens, can be viewed as a free iPhone and iPad app (search Time Lens Pearl Street to download). Users navigate the block, discovering embedded video, text, and images, including works by pop-up paper artist Colette Fu. It feels a bit like using Google Street View — except you can click through to find the stories of the people standing on the sidewalk, or toggle back and forth through time.

By revisiting the street over several years, Kuetemeyer said, “We want to see how things change or don’t change, what’s the nature of this place.”

On Saturday, at the Asian Arts’ Pearl Street Block Party, Shetty and Kuetemeyer will show the work via a solar-powered “bioscope” — a modern take on a type of mobile cinema device favored by street peddlers in India.

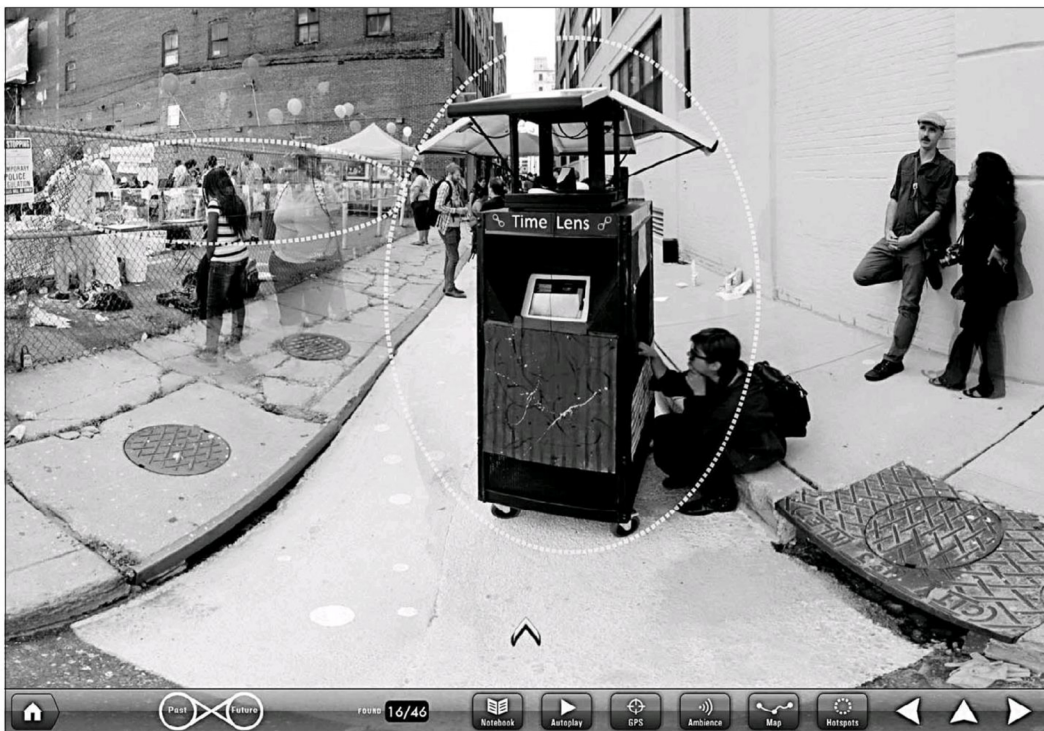
The bioscope also will be on view through Oct. 18 as part of the New Sight Exhibition to benefit the rail park at ThreeNineteen Studios (319 N. 11th St.). And it will be outside the gallery on from 6 to 9 p.m. Oct. 3, projecting the contents of the app in the rail viaduct tunnel.

The bioscope, which includes four iPads and a projector, is a means for communal viewing. Just as important, it’s an answer to the nagging problem that the people who helped create the work wouldn’t be able to afford the pricey iPhones to view it.

That was just one of the challenges, logistical and philosophical, that arose as Shetty and Kuetemeyer worked on Time Lens, which began last year and is still in progress, pending additional funding.

“It has been a bit tricky to film here. We had two instances where we really feared for our lives,” Shetty said. One was when they were interviewing a homeless man; a passerby grew enraged at what he perceived as exploitation.

“It made us question the ethics of it,” she said. “But by telling their own stories, I think what happens is they dispel a lot of the stereotypes about homeless people.”



Screen shot from the Time Lens app, showing the bioscope on Pearl Street. Users can click to find out stories of the people on the sidewalk, or toggle back and forth through time. The artists trained homeless men from the area shelter as documentarians, conducting and filming interviews.

They’ve been able to begin unpacking the nuances of life on the block, the details that emerge only through close examination, with the help of insiders like Harley to decode their meaning. For example, a piece of cardboard on the sidewalk doesn’t look like much, but Harley knows the man who sleeps on it every night, neatly folding it away in the mornings.

There also are the familiar tensions of urban renewal. Harley has heard rumors that a parking lot on Pearl will soon be home to a new gym for Roman Catholic High School. He knows men who sleep in the lot who will have to find a safe corner somewhere else.

“I see people in the morning coming down this street with scrubs on and they work proba-

bly in Center City. To look out their window and see that — I can see their issue with that. But is the solution to just displace people?”

But just by interviewing neighbors, artists, and activists, shelter residents were also able to alter the discourse, Shetty said.

“One of the artists being interviewed was about to say the typical response: The street is filled with homeless people,” she said. “When he realized that it was the homeless men who were interviewing him, he kind of shifted the conversation to talk about when he goes skateboarding a lot of times, he feels unwelcome.”

She expects perceptions of Pearl Street to evolve, given that Friends of the Rail Park, Asian Arts Initiative, and the Center

for Architecture recently won a \$644,885 ArtPlace America grant to rejuvenate the street with events and physical improvements.

Asian Arts Initiative executive director Gayle Isa said she had already been in conversation with the city about lighting and repaving Pearl Street. She expects that to happen in the next few months, and to be followed by greening efforts, including planter boxes and pop-up gardens, according to a design commissioned from landscape architect Walter Hood.

The goal, she said, is to make the street brighter and safer, and to activate it, “hearkening back to the century before, when there were many smaller buildings that utilized Pearl Street as a main entrance instead of just a

back alley, and bringing some more eyes on the street so that some of the negative and illegal behavior that takes place there now would be diminished.”

She said she was looking to develop an ongoing roster of events, including a potential pop-up art gallery under the rail viaduct, to create opportunities for neighbors to interact in a positive way.

“Suddenly, people are becoming more aware of Pearl Street, of this alley which earlier people would just pass by or avoid or ignore,” Shetty said. “While these changes are happening, we want to keep documenting it.”