

January 2020

Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Global Year in Review





Portal in Times Square in New York City

**The power of
the portal
is truly magical**

REFLECTIONS FROM CEO:
LUKE BAKER

When Shared_Studios began five years ago, it was an experiment in human nature and human interaction—a small art project with lofty ideals but an uncertain future. Founders Amar and Michelle wanted to challenge the dominant media narratives that come to define entire communities, while giving people around the world an opportunity to tell their own stories and draw inspiration from one another.

5 YEARS LATER, we’ve built a global team across six continents. We have forged strategic partnerships with world-leading enterprises and local community organizations alike. We’ve fostered distant collaboration, inspired global learning, helped shatter stereotypes, and brought together hundreds of thousands of strangers from all over the world in conversation. And yet, this international band of dreamers is still driven by the same radically simple notion that propelled our humble beginnings: the world needs more human connection, more conversation, more eye contact, and more strangers embracing their similarities and differences alike.

The world we live in today is more complex, more diverse, and more interconnected than ever before. For the first time in history, each of us can learn from, exchange with, and co-create with almost anyone on earth. This should be the greatest moment of collective thriving and prosperity in the history of the world.

Instead of collective thriving and prosperity, we have polarization and mistrust. Our worst instincts, shaped for survival in an ancient world, prime us to fear difference and outsiders. Online platforms and other forces stoke these instincts, pushing us inwards into our own echo chambers, isolating us from different perspectives, and cementing our belief that our way is right, our perspective is true, and that others are ignorant, immoral or worse.

When we see things in black and white, we turn away from all the incredible opportunities that this moment affords. That is why we need portals more than ever.

By bringing people and communities together across vast distances and deep differences, we

can recognize our shared humanity, explore what makes us unique, and embrace the full potential our interconnected world provides.

Over the past twelve months our global network has gathered strength – in numbers, in depth, and in commitment. In 2019 we curated twice as many connections and welcomed three times the number of guests into our portals, vs. the year before. In addition,

- We celebrated our first long-term city partnerships, with Stamford, Connecticut; Richmond, Virginia; and Ede and Wageningen in the Netherlands.
- We formed our first enterprise partnership, with Juniper Networks in Sunnyvale California, upgrading our portals around the world with their technology, and working together to bring global connection to their campus and events.
- We deepened our work in education, connecting more universities and schools with one another and with distant communities for collaboration and global learning.
- We organized our first portal tour around a country, connecting UAE residents and visitors to the world. And we launched our first portals in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Japan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Uganda.
- And we put the social back into social media with a bold #Tweetups program launched with Twitter. With portals in more than a dozen of the most prominent public squares on the planet, we helped strangers build new relationships and put a human face to online friendships. Over the course of 10 days, 20,000 people came together across forty sites to share “what’s happening” where they live.

CEO REFLECTIONS

The public's warm embrace of our work energizes us to extend the portal experience into new communities over the coming year. We're constantly exploring new collaborations that will strengthen our foundations and broaden our reach. This doesn't necessarily involve installing ever-more gold shipping containers or inflatables. It means being intentional about the alignment of our strategy, our purpose, and our social impact. And it means being highly engaged with all of you as our plans take shape.

To each of you who calls Shared_Studios home, thank you for your tireless commitment. None of this would exist without your efforts and dedication to this cause. To all of our partners, from local schools to global institutions, thank you for believing in and investing in this vision, bringing portals to your communities, and sharing what makes you so special with the world. We wouldn't be here without you.

Thank you all for making this journey with us.
Together we can build a better world.



The Global Portal Network

Portals by the numbers in 2019

Portal Connections

4,237

81 connections per week

Hours of Connection

7,298

Avg connection of 100 min

Total Guests

58,900

13 per connection

Sites Added

17

Now in 23 countries

UNITED STATES

Andover, MA, USA
Arlington, VA, USA
Baltimore, MD, USA
Bronx, NY, USA
Brooklyn, NY, USA
Colorado Springs, CO, USA
Dallas, TX, USA
Floyd County, KY, USA
Greenwich, CT, USA
Hartford, CT, USA
Long Island, NY, USA
Los Angeles, CA, USA
Manhattan, NY, USA
Milwaukee, WI, USA
Richmond, VA, USA
San Juan, Puerto Rico, USA
Stamford, CT, USA
Sunnyvale, CA, USA
Washington, DC, USA

ASIA AND OCEANIA

Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh
Herat, Afghanistan
Kabul, Afghanistan
Lahore, Pakistan
Nur-sultan, Kazakhstan
Yangon, Myanmar

AMERICAS

La Paz, Bolivia
Montréal, Canada
San Pedro Sula, Honduras
Tampico, Mexico

EUROPE

Berlin, Germany
Ede-Wageningen,
Netherlands
Lesbos, Greece

AFRICA

Bamako, Mali
Dakar, Senegal
Kigali, Rwanda
Lagos, Nigeria
Nairobi, Kenya
Nakivale, Uganda

MIDDLE EAST

Amman, Jordan
Doha, Qatar
Erbil, Iraq
Gaza City, Palestinian
Territories

Italics indicate upcoming portals



“ This portal really does bring people together – both visually and in terms of creating mutual understanding.

– Portal participant, New Haven, CT

Made from recycled materials, the Nakivale portal is located in Africa's largest refugee community



Building New Structures

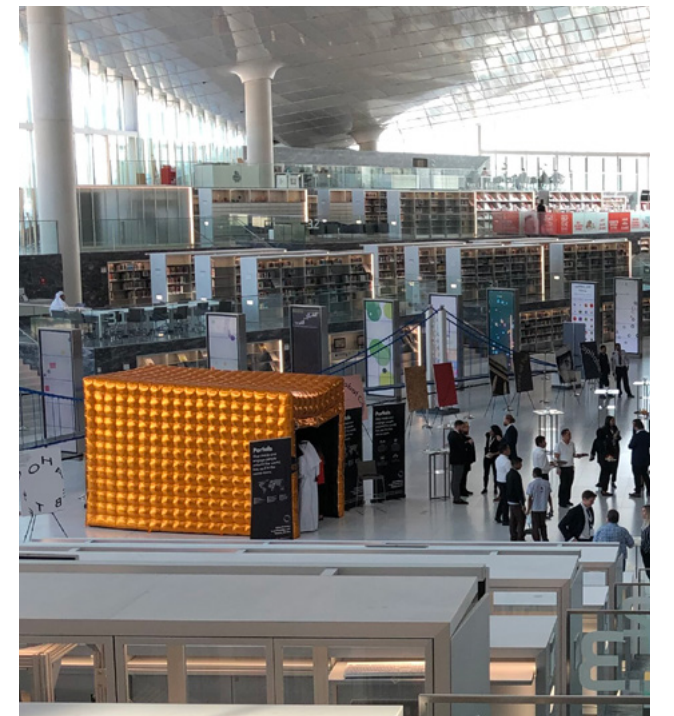
In 2019, Shared_Studios deployed inflatable portals to dozens of sites and events around the world. Their portable design means they can be easily moved from one community to the next, expanding the number of people and places that can connect across distance and difference.

DOHA DEBATES

To solve global problems, we must first solicit global voices. In 2019, we partnered with Doha Debates using a custom portal inflatable to engage a new generation of voices in the search for solutions to pressing global challenges. By empowering people to speak face-to-face across the world, our portals are bringing together diverse global perspectives to help build a better world. And we're just getting started. Keep an eye out for more global programming with Doha Debates from Twitter to the BBC.



Inflatable portal in Athens at an event hosted by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation



Inflatable portal at the Qatar National Library as part of our partnership with Doha Debates

Building New Partnerships

In 2019, Shared_Studios expanded the portal network to new kinds of public spaces. From some of the world's busiest parks and plazas, to tech campuses in the heart of Silicon Valley, portals brought people together in new and unexpected ways.

JUNIPER

When guests enter portals, we want them to feel closer to their counterparts, not frustrated by lags. Thanks to our global technology partner, Juniper Networks, we have substantially upgraded the reliability and security of portals across our network. Juniper understands that we don't just connect people across distance; we also strengthen bonds within and between communities. Juniper is the first company to bring a long-term portal to its corporate headquarters. This is a place for employees to engage and collaborate with our global network. It also enables Juniper employees to connect with one another around shared activities. With Juniper, we are building a network that cares.



TWITTER

Technology has incredible power to connect, empower and awaken. Recognizing this, Shared_Studios and Twitter partnered together to challenge people around the world to break out of their bubbles and meet face-to-face. As part of a global #Tweetups activation, we added 16 new sites to our global network. Over 10 days, 20,000 people transformed their Twitter feeds into records of intimate human interaction.



Portal located in Juniper headquarters in Sunnyvale, CA

“ I left with the overwhelming feeling that we're all good, we all want to be better, and that we must give everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential.

— Portal participant, Washington, DC



A portal in downtown Sao Paulo as part of the global #Tweetups activation with Twitter

Growing A Global Team

2019 saw Shared_Studios grow from a team of 4 to a team of over 20 people committed to turning these little gold boxes into spaces for connection, discovery, and transformation. Our operations and programming teams tripled in size, and we built out dedicated teams in software development and industrial design.



BRANDON FERDERER
DIRECTOR, GLOBAL
COMMUNITY

Brandon oversees the global community and works with curators to implement portal programming. He holds a Doctorate in Communication from Arizona State University and is an expert in intercultural communication and dialogue facilitation. His academic works explore the impact of new communication technologies on cross-cultural communication practices, and how such technologies might be harnessed to create a more informed public policy.



MEERA DUGAL
PROGRAM MANAGER,
GLOBAL CURATION

Meera works with partners around the world to ideate and create portal programming. She has 10+ years in the NYC performing arts industry, sharing her passion for the ecstatic and bonding experience of live music as a curator and producer. Previously, she enjoyed 4+ years at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts as the Programming Manager and producer of the first-ever Gnaoua Festival Tour.

Curators Power the Network

“Portal curators facilitate dialogue, provide live language interpretation, and conduct local outreach. They are the glue that binds our global network. These artists, activists, teachers, translators, and professionals work to ensure every portal connection ignites the transformative spark of connection when we engage communities on a global level.

Curator Spotlight



KHALED SALAR
HERAT, AFGHANISTAN

Khaled is a doctor and entrepreneur. He is an internationally trained dialogue facilitator through Pennsylvania State University’s World in Conversation. Additionally, he works with Code to Inspire, a nonprofit committed to teaching female students in Afghanistan how to code. He loves working with people, events and interactive projects.



MIRA BAKRI
GAZA CITY

For the last twelve years, Mira has worked with Mercy Corps and Gaza’s largest tech hub, Gaza Sky Geeks. She has dedicated her career to helping Gazan youth connect with people beyond their borders. She has facilitated public health hackathons with Gazan entrepreneurs and international organizations including Johns Hopkins and the World Health Organization, and has played a vital role in building bridges between her community and youth across the world.

Forging New Connections

Every portal's programming is co-created with local community partners. We work with schools, universities, cities, and their stakeholders to ensure each portal's programming reflects the interests and goals of the local community. Our work expanded significantly in 2019, allowing us to activate public spaces, create global classrooms, and redefine what it means to build community both locally and globally.



A juice farmer in Veracruz, Mexico performs for audiences around the world



Employees at Starbucks in Washington, DC in conversation with refugees from Syria near the Moria Camp in Lesvos, Greece

In 2019, Shared_Studios expanded its work with students in K-12 institutions and at the university level. Educators use portals to foster empathy, build cultural literacy, and give students the skills they need to thrive in our interconnected world.

PORTALS ON CAMPUS

Shared_Studios returned to Boston College in 2019 in partnership with the schools International Studies Program. We worked closely with professors and student groups to ensure the portal in Boston College added to student life both in and outside of the classroom. Professors incorporated portal programming into their curriculum by hearing directly from people affected by the topics they study. At the same time, student-designed connections opened the campus to the rest of the world.

BOSTON COLLEGE



PORTALS IN THE CLASSROOM

We partnered with Andover Public Schools to connect students across the Merrimack Valley through global conversations — or what Andover Schools calls “Global Conversations.” Shared_Studios also partnered with Narrative 4, a school-based story exchange program, connecting youth in Tampico, Mexico; the Bronx, New York; and Floyd County, Kentucky in exchanges designed to build empathy and improve confidence and communication skills. In 2019, nine schools around the globe joined the portals network, with many more joining in 2020.



Left: Students at Boston College speak with peers at the Harsham Refugee Camp in Erbil, Iraq

PORTALS IN THE WORLD

We launched our first portal made from recycled materials in Nakivale, Uganda - the oldest continuously operating refugee settlement in Africa. Home to more than 100,000 people, the 71-sq. mile camp has grown to become a pan-African city in its own right. Working with our partners at Promise Hub and To.org, the portal in Nakivale serves as a global classroom and furthers our work connecting displaced communities.

Right: Grade school students in San Pedro Sula, Honduras after their portal connection



Shared_Studios deepened ties to communities throughout the US and the world in 2019. In cities like Colorado Springs, Stamford, and the towns of Ede and Wageningen, long-term portals served as a new kind of public resource, like a library or civic center. In large cities like Richmond, and Dallas, portals moved between multiple neighborhoods, bringing people together in public parks, state fairs, and urban farms.

RICHMOND

The Richmond portal was the first of its kind, a year-long placement that moved between multiple sites across the city. Shared_Studios partnered with 20+ local organizations allowing the portal to travel between parks, universities, high schools, and even the Virginia State Fair! At each site, the portal brought something new to a local public space and gave Richmond residents and visitors opportunities for global learning and cultural exchange.

DALLAS

The portal in Dallas launched at Klyde Warren Park, moved indoors for the summer to NorthPark Center, and ended the year at Bonton Farms, an urban farm and community space in South Dallas. At each site, portal connections reflected its site's goals and programming: hosting field trips at Klyde Warren, cultural events and performances at NorthPark, and lessons in farming and agriculture at Bonton Farms

Activating Spaces Across the City

DOWNTOWN TEMPE

The portal in Tempe was a hub for community engagement, attracting new visitors and adding \$46,000 in economic value per month on site. In addition to cultural, arts, and entrepreneurship programming developed with local partners, Shared_Studios and the City of Tempe designed listening sessions for residents to speak freely about local issues. Topics included safety in public parks, public mobility challenges posed by electric scooters, and long-term aspirations for the city.

SAN ANTONIO SPURS

The San Antonio Spurs charitable organization, Spurs Gives, wanted an impactful way to inspire young people to lead healthier lives. Spurs Gives created a first-of-its kind portal that encourages healthy habits and athletic routines among youth and enriches the San Antonio community through unique experiences.



MILWAUKEE

The Milwaukee_Portal is located in a neighborhood with one of the highest rates of incarceration of Black men in the country. Working with COA Youth & Family Centers, Curator Lewis Lee turned the portal into a community space, using global connections to encourage residents to identify as fathers, husbands, and neighbors. Lewis's work in the portal was also instrumental in building out the Portal's Policing Project, which invited communities into conversation about policing in 14 neighborhoods across 6 cities. Learn more about the project here: [Portals Policing Project](#)



Community members and press enter the portal during the launch of the Tempe portal in Arizona



Richmond Public School students visit the portal during a field trip.



Sziget Festival in Budapest, Hungary

While most portals are semi-permanent, Shared_Studios also brings portals to events, conferences, and festivals around the world. We then activate the network around the theme of the event, and host a global conversation featuring attendees, experts, and communities across different sites. From smart city conferences to fundraising galas, Shared_Studios brought portals to dozens of events in 2019.



STARBUCKS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Three inflatable portals operating in parallel connected over 900 Starbucks Store Managers to communities close to the heart of employee-led initiatives. For the first time, Starbucks store partners met their coffee farmers in Kigali and San Pedro Sula and shared meaningful conversations over cups of coffee. They also spoke with displaced communities in Uganda, Iraq, and Greece, strengthening the company's commitment to hiring 10,000 refugees by 2022. A third group met with veterans and families living in Colorado Springs to share stories of Starbucks' commitment to the U.S. Military.



BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC (BAM) DANCE AFRICA

Over three days, the Brooklyn portal connected attendees at BAM's DanceAfrica Festival to musicians and performers in Kigali, Rwanda. In the Kigali portal, DJs and dancers performed and spoke about their love for movement and music. In Gold Book comments left by participants, one portalgoer described the experience as "a beautiful extension of reality through the Internet." Another visitor, a 7-year-old, drew a Rwandan flag in crayon and shared it in the portal with new friends in Rwanda.



SZIGET FESTIVAL

Music transcends borders. With a portal at the Sziget Festival in Budapest, Hungary, festival goers listened to the only all-female orchestra in Kabul, Afghanistan, talked about the power of music for social change with artists from Mexico City's punk music scene, and danced to hip-hop performed by musicians in Milwaukee.

“What would make today a good day for you?”

It's a simple question. Most people assume it's an ice-breaker. When we connected our first portals between New York and Tehran 5 years ago, we discovered that it's also a bridge-builder. Sheer distance and the animosity between governments meant that residents of each city entered portals as skeptical strangers. They left as friends.

By inviting each guest to reflect in personal terms on the lives they seek, we opened a space through which to puncture stereotypes and welcome curiosity. Participants went beyond merely conversing to truly connecting. We were profoundly moved when we saw people take time out of their busy lives to enter a portal nervous and uncomfortable only to emerge later laughing, crying, smiling, and deeply touched.

At first, people thought this work was crazy or dangerous. Amar remembers the time an FBI agent came knocking at his parents' home, looking into a complaint that there was a self-described “Portal to Tehran” in the yard, which could, the

neighbor apparently feared, be a terrorist cell.

But these setbacks didn't stop us, because we knew that if we could capture this magic and cultivate seeds of understanding worldwide, we'd be creating something historic – maybe even something fundamentally important to our future.

One experience in particular explains why we have worked to grow an art experiment into a global organization. Women in Iran are not allowed to dance in public. But a young woman in Tehran stepped inside of the portal and started to dance. She stared into Michelle's eyes and the others in the room for the entirety of the performance and



used our movements to inform her dance. She didn't do this for fame or publicity. She merely wanted to share her art.

Today, thanks to our dedicated team, these moments are happening all around the world. A thirteen year-old girl and her mother entered our portal in Colorado Springs not long ago and were connected to Australia. The girl has down syndrome and her mother said that she was non-verbal with strangers. Despite this, the young man from Australia spoke with her and asked her many questions. After ten minutes, the girl burst out in sounds, saying “Aw” and “Hug” several times. She got up and went to the screen to hug the young man in Australia. The mother began crying, telling the local curator, Mary, that she had never heard her daughter interact with a stranger like that before.

These moments remind us why we do what we do, and why we work so hard for this idea.

Sadly, our dream of connecting people across distance and difference is not one that's universally shared. Multicultural societies are fracturing. Exclusionary nationalism is rising. Walls are going up. People are being classified and demonized. Polarization is eroding democratic deliberation. Technology is defining us into increasingly antagonistic tribes.

For all of recorded history, human beings have found comfort in their own tribes, and meaning in fighting others. We face aspects of our own

biology that predispose us to see difference as threatening. But we are overcoming this. For all of recorded history, there have also been people who were relentlessly curious — who painted on walls, inscribed knowledge on stone, and explored the furthest reaches of their known worlds. Over the millenia, these people persuaded their peers that the building of schools, libraries, and museums, staffed by teachers, librarians, and artists, would make everyone's life better off. They argued that knowledge and beauty were fundamental goods — keys to living full lives.

We extend that tradition. Our central argument is that in our interconnected age, where we constantly encounter people unlike ourselves, we need to collectively invest in a new civic infrastructure and community function. We need to invest in spaces, staffed by curators, to remind people of the beauty and potential of human difference and guide them toward embracing it.

We are gradually building the most diverse and distributed group of colleagues that has perhaps has ever been assembled, working together daily.

Our lives are richer for being a part of this mission. We hope you feel the same way. With your help, we will spread this feeling – this understanding – around the world for years to come.