

# Phone Booths Are Back in Times Square. No Quarters Required.

By **Tamara Best**

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Even amid the cacophony of Times Square, the sounds of telephones ringing every seven to nine minutes are hard to miss. No, it's not coming from your pocket or your purse, and no, you're not imagining things.

The source of the calls — and of the curiosity of passers-by — is three phone booths in Duffy Square, between 45th and 47th Streets. Yes, phone booths: They may be reminiscent of a yesteryear largely confined to the movies, but they are now back for public use.

Well, sort of.

Salvaged from LinkNYC, the city program replacing pay phones with Wi-Fi kiosks, the booths are part of the latest installation from Times Square Arts, the public art program of the Times Square Alliance. The project, “Once Upon a Place,” by Aman Mojadidi and on view through Sept. 5, examines the immigrant experience through oral histories presented in the form of phone calls, broadly touching on themes of belonging and displacement.



Three phone booths were salvaged and retrofitted, with the telephones turned into audio recorders through which passers-by could listen to immigrants' stories.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

“The idea of the stories and use of the phone booths were conceived together,” said Mr. Mojadidi, an Afghan-American artist. “I was already fascinated with the removal of phone booths and the fact that they were dying out. I’ve used them quite a bit before mobile phones came, so to see them start to go away, I figured you could imagine all the stories that have already been told through phone booths.”



Although Mr. Mojadidi originally envisioned the booths around the city, their final location was symbolic and practical.

“It made sense with the notion of what Times Square is — a highly visible, international space,” he said, adding that he hoped that the installation would prompt listeners to explore their lineage and to challenge stereotypes about immigration. “This issue of immigration has become so politicized. Globally, any sort of major city is built on immigration rather than destroyed by it.”



A “phone book” is available in each booth to provide context about the communities featured. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Mr. Mojadidi and his team spent two months reconfiguring the phone booths at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. There they made sure that the doors actually closed; installed a swivel apparatus to hold a mock phone book containing information about the storytellers’ communities in New York featured on the calls; and put in plexiglass skylight domes, among other items. While he

originally favored an opaque material for the booths, to heighten a sense of intimacy, Mr. Mojadidi ultimately opted not to “fight against the visual chaos of the place” and left the booths translucent, with graffiti intact.

The phones themselves were converted into audio players and loaded with 70 stories collected across the city over several months.

Mr. Mojadidi said that gathering the oral histories proved to be challenging, given the current political climate and concerns among immigrants over the Trump administration’s travel ban. (The Supreme Court has allowed parts of it to be enacted, and is expected to hear arguments on the measure this fall.)

“Everyone was quite dubious and suspicious about what we were even doing — most people walked away,” he said, adding that participation dropped further after President Trump’s election. To combat skepticism, Mr. Mojadidi occasionally worked with cultural centers that helped organize events where people could share their stories in a familiar environment.





Each immigrant's tale listened to by phone lasts two to 15 minutes.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

In the end, New Yorkers from a wide cross section of countries, including Tibet and Nigeria, shared their personal journeys. The stories run two to 15 minutes and are told in a variety of languages.

Visitors to Times Square on the Fourth of July stopped to admire the booths for their novelty and take selfies.

“You don’t see things like this anymore,” said Jonathan Barrientos of New Jersey. “It’s kind of unexpected.”

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