

Hacking the Drought at L.A. Futurethon

Connie K. Ho | June 16, 2015



Groups meet to work on the ideas for the hackathon on June 6 at LADWP

The average American uses 88 gallons of water per day. Californians use an average of 123 gallons per person per day. Dripping faucets waste around 200 gallons of water each year. These are just a few of the statistics highlighted at Futurethon: Saving Water, a 48-hour hackathon that addressed the issue of the drought in California. Dozens of individuals from around the city attended the program on June 6 and 7 in hopes of developing innovative solutions to the drought, and maybe even win a prize in the process.

Hosted at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) in downtown Los Angeles, the Futurethon was a collaborative effort among the

City of L.A., advertising and digital agency Deutsch, community organization Global Shapers, Hack for L.A., and USC. Hack for L.A., the largest civic hackathon in Southern California, addresses community challenges through tech innovation and application development. The weekend hackathon corresponded with the National Day of Civic Hacking, where individuals around the country gathered to drum up solutions to specific issues. The Futurethon had its focus on drought and water conservation, but the weekend hackathon posed other challenges to participants, including the areas of immigration, health, and transportation.

"I'm a huge believer that creativity can fix huge things in the world," said Winston Binch, chief digital officer of Deutsch North America. "What we're looking for is original, feasible, impactful, and shareable ideas that have the power to create true behavioral change. It's not an easy thing, but it's attainable. We want to recognize that, with the hackathon, this is just the beginning of the conversation."

Mayor Eric Garcetti kicked off the program with a few opening remarks and cited the datasets available to the public. A handful of high school and college students joined professionals from the advertising, design, entertainment, marketing, and technology spaces; all were tasked to combine out-of-the-box problem solving with passionate storytelling, all using technology. The event also appealed to a diverse age group, with participants ranging from early teens to those in their 70s and 80s.



Mayor Eric Garcetti makes opening remarks at Futurethon on June 6 at LADWP



Hack for L.A. founders Catherine Geanuracos and Lilly Kam speak at the presentations on June 7 at LADWP

"Technology and democracy kind of rely on the same values," said Mayor Garcetti. "In order for technology to be successful and democracy to be

successful, they need participation, they need collaboration, they need enterprises."

Over the two-day period, attendees listened to experts and worked with mentors on crafting their proposals. The Futurethon drought challenge focused on ways to motivate the public to change landscaping habits, to implement water-recycling practices, and to become knowledgeable on personal water consumption habits. The teams could put together a strategy, a product, a campaign, a technology, or any other new approach to solving the drought. At the end of the 48-hour period, teams submitted documentation on their projects, and finalists were invited to pitch their idea. A total of 14 teams submitted solutions for the Futurethon.

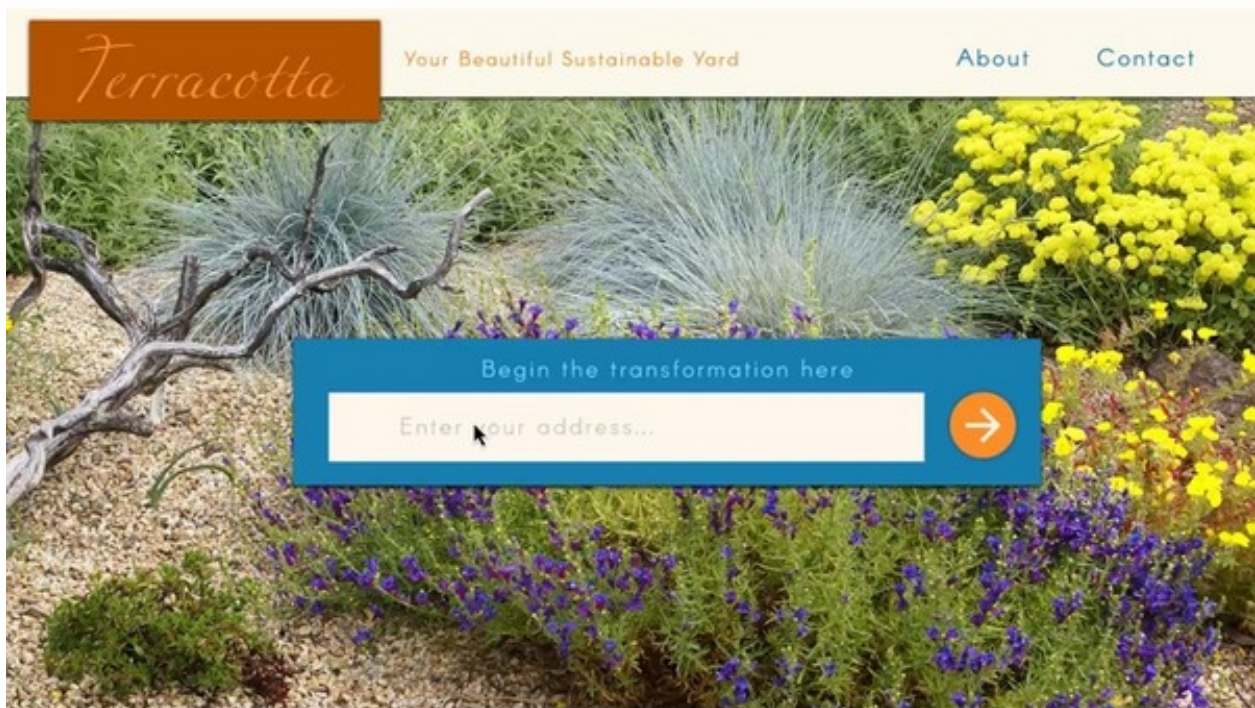
With images of Kim Kardashian and Caitlyn Jenner, the Deutsch Overall Drought Futurethon winning team was recognized for their tongue-in-cheek, celebrity-infused, savvy social media campaign, Save a Californian, that incorporated social currency and encouraged people to save water while interacting with influencers. With the aim to raise awareness about the drought, the group proposed partnering with nonprofit Change the Course to put thousands of gallons of water back into the Colorado River. For their efforts, the Deutsch Overall Drought Futurethon winning team was awarded the choice of an Apple or Samsung smart watch.

"I think that the biggest issue in California with water is that people know that we're in a drought but they're not necessarily doing anything about it -- they don't know what to do about it, it's not personal enough yet," said Lena Khouri, a member of the winning team. "I think that having a digital campaign, something where people can be a part of it and make it fun and get the conversation going, could help solve part of the problem."

The Deutsch Overall Drought Futurethon runner up, DewGood, took home a swag bag with water-saving goodies such as a water-saving showerhead and a charcoal filter water bottle. Their team presented an atmospheric water condenser that was prototyped and built with a 3D printer during the weekend. Disguised as a solar powered garden lamp, the device could lower the air temperature so that dew forms; the dew is then collected and could be used to water plants in the area surrounding the lamp.



Terracotta team presents at Futurethon on June 7 at LADWP



Terracotta screen shot

The award-winning student submission, Terracotta, detailed an application that provided consumers a way to redo their yard with helpful educational resources. Individuals could learn about different native plant life and connect with qualified professionals on designing a drought-friendly garden. During the weekend hackathon, Terracotta's team consulted with landscape specialists Claire Latane and Margot Jacobs of Mia Lehrer + Associates, who inspired them to develop an app that was fun and utilitarian.

The group began by outlining the purpose and needs of the project, quickly agreeing to develop a web app on landscaping. The next step was researching plant life, the technical aspects of the app, the engineering components as well as designing the graphics of the product.

"It was a learning experience for all of us - hopefully a lot of the projects that were developed here continue on, and they can spread that awareness and that knowledge. L.A. is so great about open data, we need to make the most of it," said Camille Kanengiser, a Terracotta team member who graduated with a degree in animation and digital arts from USC this past spring.

The team were awarded a summer fellowship with USC, which includes access to mentors, venture capitalists, and drought experts to help further develop their project in time for L.A. Innovation Week in October. Along with the Deutsch Overall Drought Futurethon winner and the runner up, Terracotta's team was extended an invitation to participate in USC's Wrigley Institute's programming at Catalina Island.

"I think the support we've seen from the community and from everybody involved with the hackathon was so tremendously useful. We did more in this one weekend than we usually do during any school week," said Max Pittsley, a 2015 USC School of Cinematic Arts grad and Terracotta team member. "So if that mentorship that accelerates us can continue, then I'm excited to see what can happen."

Photos: Connie K. Ho

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