Payphones used to be prominent in the urban landscape but with the advent of mobile phones, few people are still using them. Many have been removed from city streets and those that remain have fallen in disrepair. Several cities have challenged designers to reinvent payphones – perhaps the most prominent effort was New York City’s Reinvent Payphones Design Challenge in 2013.

Over the past year in Los Angeles the Leimert Phone Company has brought together Annenberg School students and faculty with Leimert Park artists and community stakeholders to transform payphones into portals for local culture. One such prototype, Sankofa RED, anchored a game featured at last year’s indiCade game festival. One outcome of this project is the PiPhone board, a printed circuit board that connects the buttons and handset of payphones to a low-cost Raspberry Pi computer that can be programmed using the common Python language.

Participants in this workshop will be invited to re-imagine a payphone and build a prototype that will be installed in the streets of L.A. They will build on the work that begun in a similar workshop last year. They will be able to use and remix the technical tools developed so far, including the PiPhone board and basic python programs developed for Sankofa RED. They will work in groups of 4 or 5 and each group will be given an actual payphone (including its pedestal and outdoor enclosure) to transform. The workshop embraces a participatory design approach that will include activities such as “rapid-prototyping” exercises, programming tutorials, neighborhood visits, hands-on creative work on the payphones, and many more.

No specific technical expertise is pre-requisite, but skills ranging from programming to welding, painting or sculpture will be useful. Most of all, participants should be curious, eager to engage with the community surrounding USC, willing to experiment and learn new skills.