

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING ON VACANT PROPERTIES:

Lessons Learned from Four Cities



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ABOUT METRIS ARTS CONSULTING

Launched in 2009, Metris Arts Consulting believes in the power of culture to enrich people's lives and help communities thrive. We believe those benefits should be broadly shared and inclusively developed. Metris seeks to provide high-caliber planning, research, and evaluation services to reveal arts' impacts and help communities equitably improve cultural vitality. To accelerate change, we seek to share knowledge and amplify the voices of those closest to the work.

ABOUT CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PROGRESS

The mission of Center for Community Progress is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods. Founded in 2010, Community Progress is the leading national, nonprofit resource for urban, suburban, and rural communities seeking to address the full cycle of property revitalization. The organization fulfills its mission by nurturing strong leadership and supporting systemic reforms. Community Progress works to ensure that public, private, and community leaders have the knowledge and capacity to create and sustain change. It also works to ensure that all communities have the policies, tools, and resources they need to support the effective, equitable reuse of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties.

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Cover Photo: We Are Edison installation in Kalamazoo.
Credit: Fran Dwight





2016 Vacant Home
Tour in Wilksburg.
Credit: Greg Sciulli

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INTRODUCTION

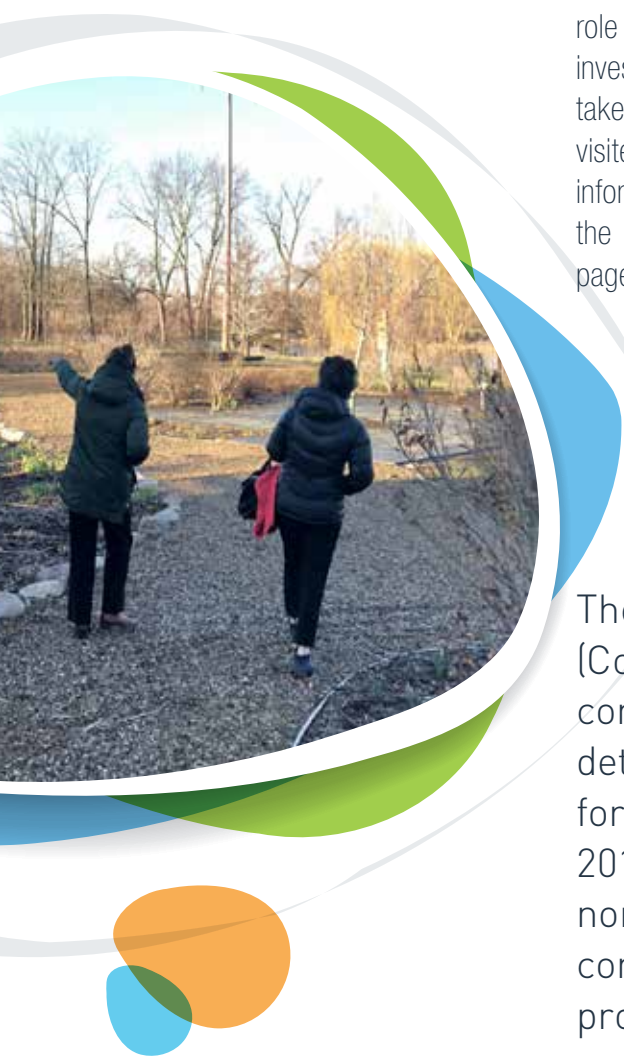
When you walk past a vacant house, you are likely to speed your steps and pass it quickly. Vacant properties, especially those that are long vacant, can feel unsettling and unsafe. They detract from the appearance of the neighborhood, can attract crime and, as they deteriorate, lead to unsafe conditions and bring down surrounding property values. They also cost municipalities significant amounts of lost tax revenue, and code enforcement and public safety headaches. When these properties are present in large concentrations, as has happened in many American cities and towns in the wake of the Great Recession and foreclosure crisis, it can have a staggering effect on the surrounding neighborhood.

But what would you think if you saw an abandoned house painted entirely gold? Or went to an art show in the old mill building down the block? What if the house on the corner, where no one had lived for years, suddenly bore a sign telling you all about its history? You would probably look at all of these properties in a new way, as places, rather than as gaps – or worse – in the fabric of the community. These examples are not hypotheticals. They are real projects that artists, residents, and the public sector have undertaken in and around vacant spaces in their communities. What they have in common is that their creators used arts and culture to bring new life to vacant and abandoned properties.

In this report, we start with a definition of “creative placemaking” and then describe how we explored the use of arts and culture strategies on vacant properties. We then dive more deeply into the essential elements of creative placemaking and its



The House of Gold in Wilkinsburg.
Credit: Natalia Gomez/Dee Briggs Studio



role in revitalizing distressed communities, including outcomes around property investment and community building. Finally, we transition to a discussion of key takeaways and lessons learned from communities that engage in this work. We visited four communities in the course of researching this report and drew on the information from these visits for most of our analysis. Case studies describing the four cities' work on creative placemaking for vacant properties begin on page 18 and we draw examples from the communities throughout the report.

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As Community Progress has grown its body of work in recent years, it has intentionally sought to strengthen the relationship between creative placemaking — as a community-driven process — and vacant property revitalization. It views creative placemaking, described in more detail below, as a critical tool to support equitable revitalization. This report is part of those efforts.



RESEARCH APPROACH

In this report, we explore how four cities use creative placemaking on vacant properties: Kalamazoo, Michigan; Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania; Newburgh, New York; and Macon, Georgia. We will highlight their work, the impacts of their efforts, challenges they faced and lessons learned about how local governments, community organizations, and artists can use arts- and culture-based approaches to arrest the decline of neighborhoods affected by vacant properties.

Community Progress engaged Metris Arts Consulting, a firm that provides planning, research, and evaluation services to reveal arts' impacts and help communities equitably improve cultural vitality. Metris brought to the project its deep knowledge of arts and culture, particularly as they intersect with community planning and engagement. Metris' prior work on creative placemaking in communities across the country greatly informs our efforts on this project.

This report is not intended to be an exhaustive review of prior studies and literature on this topic, but a slice of real-world experience from four communities grappling with high rates of vacancy and using creative means to mitigate the problems it causes. This report does, however, integrate findings from Metris' and Community Progress' related past work and existing knowledge of creative placemaking and vacant property revitalization.

SELECTION OF HIGHLIGHTED CITIES

Public officials and community developers do not typically lift up creative placemaking in their conversations about vacant property revitalization. Because using arts and culture can help to ensure revitalization plans keep community needs front and center, we looked at places where arts and culture *are* part of the conversation around vacant properties to learn what made that integration possible and how to make it happen even more effectively and in more places.

We chose the four cities in this study to represent a variety of types of projects and to provide some geographic diversity. We intended to feature projects that are replicable even in places that do not have dedicated funding to do creative placemaking, as we believe funding should not be the driving force behind this work. We also looked for places where the local leadership, specifically at the city government level, has demonstrated buy-in to using creative placemaking on vacant properties, as well as cities that have engaged the community and multiple stakeholders in this work, including their local land banks.

While we chose communities where stakeholders have demonstrated an interest and made efforts to implement creative placemaking on vacant properties, these communities are at different stages of implementing and institutionalizing these

In this report, we explore what is working well and what challenges remain, helping to inform the burgeoning efforts in these cities, as well as more broadly, to help shape the field of practice.

practices. In this report, we explore what is working well and what challenges remain, helping to inform the burgeoning efforts in these cities, as well as more broadly, to help shape the field of practice. Our engagement with the four communities provided some key takeaways for creative placemaking on vacant properties. Community Progress is learning along with these cities, and we hope other cities will learn from our experiences, as well.

We divided the cities into two groups, pairing together places of similar population, and hosted each pair for a learning exchange in one of the cities. In early 2018, a delegation from Wilkinsburg went to Newburgh and representatives from Kalamazoo visited Macon. The delegations represented a variety of stakeholders and included a mix of City staff, land bank and community development corporation (CDC) staff, representatives of arts organizations (such as arts commissions and museums) and other community organizations (such as historical societies), developers, individual artists, elected officials, business owners, and others. See Appendix 1 for a complete list of participants.

The day-and-a-half-long learning exchanges included a tour of creative placemaking projects and a group discussion, which allowed the attendees to learn from one another and provided us opportunities to gather information from both delegations. Following these exchanges, Metris and Community Progress then visited the cities that had traveled to the exchanges (Wilkinsburg and Kalamazoo) and dove deeper into aspects of their work highlighted during the exchanges. We toured their creative placemaking projects and conducted one-on-one and group interviews to learn about their experiences, what challenges and opportunities creative placemaking on vacant properties presents, and how they have navigated them so far.

Finally, we hosted a multi-city convening with all four 2018 learning exchange cities, along with Community Progress' previous delegation of cities from 2016 exchanges, including Detroit, Michigan; Flint, Michigan; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. This convening, held at the national Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference in May 2018, provided an opportunity for all eight cities to share their creative placemaking projects and brainstorm solutions to key creative placemaking on vacant property challenges in cross-city discussion groups.



Learning exchange between Kalamazoo and Macon leaders at the Mill Hill Community Arts Center in the East Macon Arts Village in early 2018.



A PRIMER ON CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

WHAT IS CREATIVE PLACEMAKING?

In its seminal white paper on the practice commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts, Metris defines creative placemaking as follows: “In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.” It “animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”¹

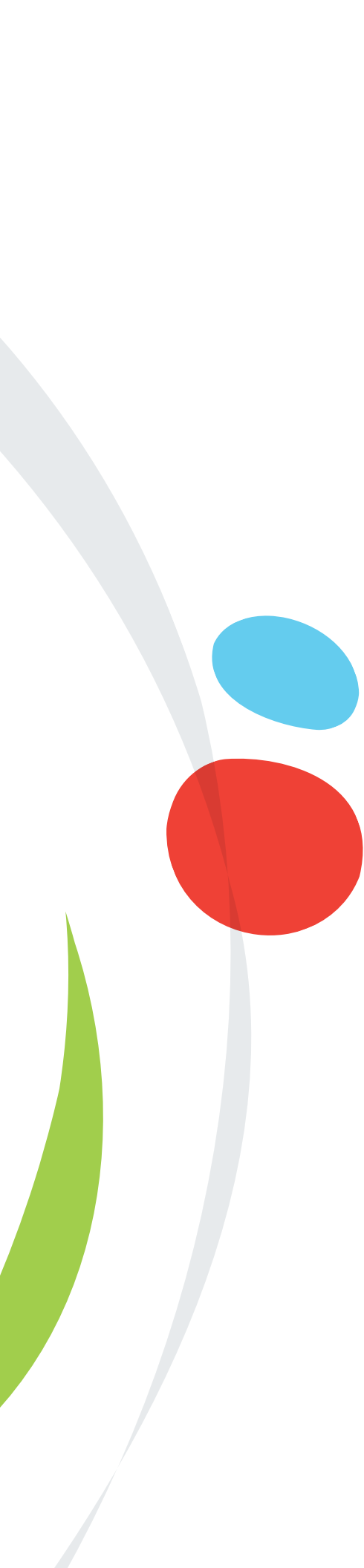
What this looks like in practice can take varying forms, from temporary visual installations to performances to permanent, brick-and-mortar spaces. In creative placemaking, local artists work with residents to create artworks that enhance their neighborhood and encapsulate their shared experiences. A nonprofit art center might provide after-school lessons and apprenticeships so that neighborhood children in a low-income area have a safe place to hang out and



Art Hop, a monthly arts walk in Kalamazoo's Washington Square.

Credit: Fran Dwight

¹ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking,” White Paper (Washington, D.C.: Mayors’ Institute On City Design, National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), <http://www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.



learn marketable skills. A neighborhood business association might start an art walk or cultural festival that draws new visitors and their dollars to the small business corridor, where they mingle with residents and bring new life to the street. Municipal government might work with a neighborhood to designate an arts district and provide incentives, infrastructure, and safety upgrades to turn it into a destination while improving the quality of life for residents.

Recent research has shown how creative placemaking can transform buildings, neighborhoods, and communities, while also having a profound effect on the neighborhood economy; creative placemaking can bring physical transformation, economic growth, and greater community and cultural cohesion.² In late 2017, Community Progress launched a study of creative placemaking's role in vacant property revitalization. We visited and spoke with municipalities that, to varying degrees, use creative placemaking to address vacant properties. What we heard from our investigation confirmed the value of this work. This report summarizes our findings.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

A neighborhood resident or organization paints a mural or hosts a concert; afterwards, they declare their neighborhood improved. These creative additions may deserve praise, as people can enjoy taking in a colorful mural or a music performance. But these efforts may not, in and of themselves, create a sense of place. Communities engage in a spectrum of creative efforts, from one-off projects to thoughtful, purposeful plans that incorporate arts and culture more systemically. Leading proponents of creative placemaking emphasize intentional and strategic practice rooted in comprehensive community development. ArtPlace defines creative placemaking as “projects in which art plays an intentional and integrated role in place-based community planning and development.” In its recent book *How to do Creative Placemaking*, the National Endowment for the Arts argues creative placemaking “basically means giving the arts a seat at the community development table.”³ And Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) posits creative placemaking “works best when embedded in a broader program of community development that addresses affordable housing, education, health and safety.”⁴

² Markusen and Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking”; Walker, Gadwa Nicodemus, and Engh, “More than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development”; Gadwa Nicodemus, Engh, and Mascaró, “Adding It Up: 52 Projects by 30+ Artists in 4 Neighborhoods”; Gadwa Nicodemus, Engh, and Walker, “Not Just Murals: Artists as Leaders in Community Development”; Walker and Nicodemus, “Arts, Culture, and Community Outcomes: What Four LISC Projects Accomplished”; How to Do Creative Placemaking: An Action-Oriented Guide to Arts in Community Development.

³ *How to Do Creative Placemaking: An Action-Oriented Guide to Arts in Community Development*, 1.

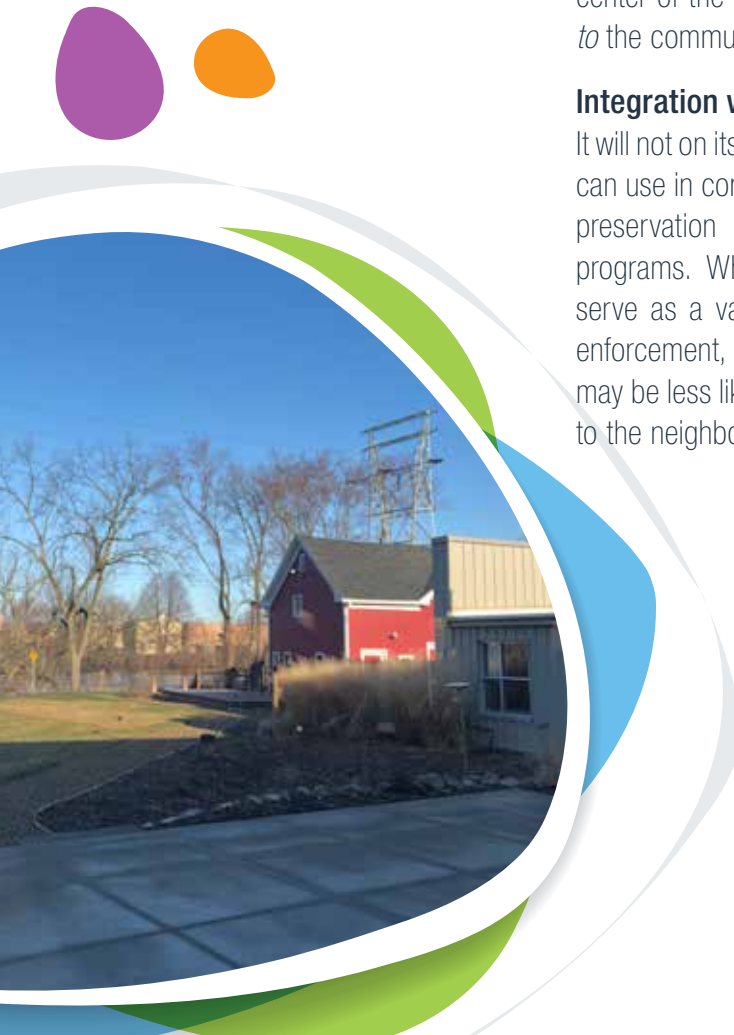
⁴ “Creative Placemaking,” Local Initiatives Support Corporation, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.lisc.org/our-initiatives/economic-development/creative-placemaking/principles/>.

This three-part focus — **specific place-based**, **a community-centered process**, and **strategic integration with other strategies** — sets creative placemaking apart from more diffuse creative activities.

Place-based: True to its name, creative placemaking practitioners root their work in a specific place. A concert hall that serves a whole city may act as a cultural boon, but unless its owners collaborate with community members and non-arts entities to achieve community development objectives, it does not rise to the level of creative placemaking. Creative placemaking asks, “How can arts and culture-based strategies help us achieve community priorities (physical, social, or economic)? How can we leverage the community's existing assets?” Practitioners sometimes use arts and culture for *placekeeping*, an attempt to preserve a cultural heritage or community dynamic that may be in danger of disappearing as socioeconomic forces encroach.

Community-centered process: Effective creative placemaking is centered not only on a specific place, but around the people who live, work, and play there. Community-centered efforts include engaging the residents and business owners to brainstorm what the place can or should be, to inform what it is and how it should remain. Placemaking worth emulating is not about buildings and blocks, but about the people who experience the place. If practitioners approach this work with a singular goal of maximizing real estate value, their efforts may lead to physical or cultural displacement. Keeping people at the center of the process ensures that the art is done *with* the community and not *to* the community.

Integration with other strategies: Creative placemaking is not a silver bullet. It will not on its own turn around a neighborhood; rather, it is one tool practitioners can use in concert with other tools as part of an approach that includes housing preservation or development, economic development, and resident-serving programs. When applied to vacancy in particular, creative placemaking can serve as a valuable approach alongside more traditional strategies like code enforcement, demolition, and resale. For example, a building with artwork on it may be less likely to be vandalized, or an event on a vacant lot may bring people to the neighborhood who might consider purchasing property there.



THE ROLE OF CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN REVITALIZING DISTRESSED COMMUNITIES

Creative placemaking impacts communities through a series of physical, social, and economic factors. Researchers have shown how creative placemaking efforts helped advance community economic development,⁵ housing,⁶ and community building goals.⁷

Arts and cultural activities help light a spark of interest and investment in the community itself that attracts buy-in from neighbors and other stakeholders and eventually becomes self-sustaining. The 2010 white paper on creative placemaking outlines how this happens: “Each effort starts with an entrepreneurial initiator; demonstrates a commitment to place and its distinctive character; mobilizes public will . . . wins the active participation of arts and cultural leaders; and succeeds in building partnerships across sectors . . . , missions . . . , and levels of government.”⁸ How does a focus on vacant property change this model? Communities with high levels of vacancy have long struggled with disinvestment. We argue arts and culture can play a role in generating investment in vacant property, both from existing residents and outside actors. We emphasize community-centered investment and development so that a place’s current residents have a voice in current and future neighborhood change.

Select highlights of creative placemaking’s impacts from recent research

ECONOMIC

Invigorates markets and provides income opportunities for residents through arts-related and culturally relevant businesses (*More than Storefronts*)

HOUSING

Makes connections between disparate residents and stabilizes vulnerable communities (“Exploring the Ways Arts and Culture Intersects with Housing”)

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

Creates opportunities for residents to express themselves, share language and culture, and engage in decisions that affect them (*More than Storefronts*)



⁵ Walker, Gadwa Nicodemus, and Engh, “More than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development”; Walker and Nicodemus, “Arts, Culture, and Community Outcomes: What Four LISC Projects Accomplished.”

⁶ Danya Sherman, “Exploring the Ways Arts and Culture Intersects with Housing: Emerging Practices and Implications for Further Action” (ArtPlace America, April 2016), https://www.artplaceamerica.org/view/pdf?f=public%3A/pictures/artplace_field_scan_housing_sherman_apr_2016.pdf; Ann Gadwa et al., “How Art Spaces Matter II,” 2011; Anne Gadwa, “How Artist Space Matters: Impacts and Insights from Three Case Studies Drawn from Artspace Project’s Earliest Developments” (Minneapolis, MN: Metris Arts Consulting, March 2010), <http://www.metrisarts.com/>.

⁷ Walker, Gadwa Nicodemus, and Engh, “More than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development.”

⁸ Markusen and Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking,” 5–6.

Of course, this process is not truly linear, nor one that has a distinct end point. In effective creative placemaking efforts, the community continues to engage and invest. These elements begin to feed one another. The community pride generated helps attract more buy-in from more residents. The investments – financial, social, and emotional – encourage greater creativity and spur more arts and culture outputs. A strategy or framework for creative placemaking activity rooted in shared values and goals can help ensure equitable development and keep negative unintended consequences at bay. When a community's arts- and culture-based identity begins to attract outside attention – from developers, for instance, or outside artists who want to work in the community – the existing community can encourage these emerging actors to operate within the community's already articulated strategy or framework. Therefore, future development preserves literal places for existing residents as market forces come to bear on the community. A local CDC in Cleveland spearheaded a transformation in the Collinwood neighborhood that illustrates how this process works.⁹

In the early 2000s, the main commercial strip of Cleveland's Collinwood neighborhood, Waterloo Avenue, had a reputation for harboring prostitution and drug trade. Along the corridor, 40% of the commercial space sat vacant. But then a long-time neighborhood resident bought the old Croatian social hall and turned it into an indie rock venue; other arts-related businesses followed. And Northeast Shores, the local CDC, created renter-equity and purchase initiatives for residential and commercial properties – suited for artists – and redeveloped a vacant building into a six-unit building for artists to live and work, as well as contribute to community projects. In 2017, the corridor enjoyed 94% commercial occupancy, entirely with locally owned and operated businesses.

Northeast Shores and its partners also empowered local residents and business owners to play a bigger role in creatively shaping their community. When Waterloo Avenue experienced a substantial streetscaping construction, Northeast Shores provided modest grant funds for 12 businesses to pair up with artists to come up with creative ways for people to find parking and business entrances. And through the CDC's Ballot Box 18 project, residents voted on what community art projects to fund; residents selected artists and projects that addressed neighborhood history, vacancy, and youth engagement. Plus, local high school students, trained and paid by Northeast Shores, staffed the effort.

⁹ Walker, Christopher, Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, and Rachel Engh. "More than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development." Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Fall 2017.

Read more about Collinwood in: Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, and Northeast Shores Development Corporation. "When Artists Break Ground: Lessons from a Cleveland Neighborhood Partnership." Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, 2014.

And "Creative Placemaking Case Study: North Collinwood." The Kresge Foundation, June 2017. http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cleveland_cp_full_case_final_sep_25_1_links_corrected_6282017.pdf.

All the communities we visited want to reduce the negative impacts of vacant property, and a variety of community members, such as artists, community-based organizations, and City staff, see creative placemaking as one tool to help make that happen. The broader aims of each community — economic revitalization, affordable housing, or increased public safety — influence the kinds of creative placemaking activities communities engage in, but communities ultimately want to eliminate entrenched, systemic vacancy.

Communities often work years, if not decades, to achieve this larger outcome.

Creative placemaking practitioners and their cross-sector partners therefore use arts and culture to achieve smaller, incremental outcomes, which they hope will influence properties and communities to reduce vacancy in the long run and build stronger communities along the way. These incremental outcomes often focus on 1) improving or maintaining the condition of vacant property, 2) increasing quality of life in neighborhoods during the time of vacancy, and 3) engaging community members in planning or revitalization efforts. Below we unpack these outcomes in two broad categories: property outcomes and community outcomes.

Property Outcomes

Practitioners often use creative placemaking on vacant properties to improve or preserve the state of the properties while they sit vacant. This approach can also help move properties toward reuse by bringing attention to structures or lots that might be available for resale and reoccupancy.

Mitigate blight and prevent nuisance uses: Creative placemaking can bring vacant spaces visibly to life. Simple cosmetic efforts can send clear signals that a community looks after a vacant lot or structure, which can deter vandalism and other negative effects. Many cities, including Wilkinsburg and Newburgh, have used artistically painted boards to cover the windows of vacant properties. In Flint, Michigan, the City's Blight Elimination and Neighborhood Stabilization division works with local artists to design the boards. Even small attempts at beautification can discourage nuisance uses: a participant from Newburgh noted that illegal dumping has not been an issue on sites where the land bank has programmed creative placemaking activities.

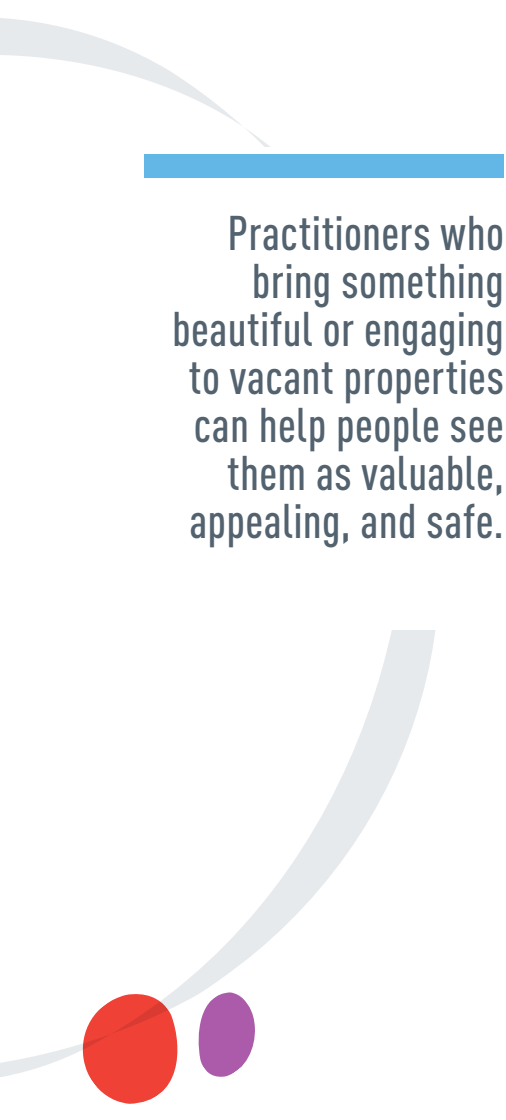
Beyond simply preventing nuisance uses, creative placemaking — through performances or visual installations — can even bring healthy activity to a space. Newburgh's Artists in Vacancy strives to activate space during the span of time after the land bank acquires the property and before it sells to a developer, a period that could last up to two years. In Kalamazoo's Washington Square neighborhood, the "Art Hop" monthly arts walk served as an experiment to activate and attract people to underutilized spaces. For details on these initiatives, see case studies beginning on page 18.



A creative board-up in Wilkinsburg.



Charger, a performance in Newburgh with high school track athletes. By artist Stephen Kwok and produced by Artist in Vacancy Laura Genes.
Credit: Newburgh Community Land Bank



Practitioners who
bring something
beautiful or engaging
to vacant properties
can help people see
them as valuable,
appealing, and safe.

Shift perceptions to view properties as assets: Research has shown that arts and cultural strategies can change, or even create, the image of a neighborhood.¹⁰ Practitioners who bring something beautiful or engaging to vacant properties can help people see them as valuable, appealing, and safe. And the positive impact can extend to the neighborhood around the properties as well, just as the negative effects did.

In Wilkinsburg, Vacant Home Tour organizers wanted people to see vacant structures as not just dilapidated buildings, but as places with histories. “We said, ‘Let’s put a face to these vacant homes, let’s put a personality on them,’” says Anne Elise Morris, president of the Wilkinsburg Historical Society. Storytelling, which can “showcase what was and what could be,” proved an effective tool in this context, Morris explains.

Inspire action: Cities have used creative means to draw attention to vacant properties in an effort to reoccupy them. As the creative uses increase the perceived value of the properties, land banks and municipalities can use creative means to market them to new people who might not know they are available or how to access them. Participants in Wilkinsburg’s Vacant Home Tour could attend workshops led by local banks that highlighted opportunities to purchase vacant buildings, offered tips on how to navigate the complexities of the process, and explained available resources for purchase and rehab.

Cities and neighborhood groups can also tailor their creative placemaking activities to attract specific businesses or groups. One Kalamazoo interviewee stressed that alongside the goal of occupancy sits another goal: sustainable and community-focused tenants:

“If the redevelopment was done in a traditional way of just selling [or] leasing to whomever just to . . . make the most revenue possible, they would have seen a lot of payday loan, liquor stores and things of that nature. There would have been issues of crime and safety, drugs, prostitution like there was before . . . [when] it was occupied, but contributed to the disinvestment in the community.”

Kalamazoo County Land Bank used the Art Hops and other activities to attract artistic and creative small businesses to the vacant storefronts it owned in Washington Square. The land bank also prioritizes renting space to local companies that have plans to engage in the community, such as hiring and training formerly incarcerated neighborhood residents.

¹⁰ Christopher Walker and Rachel Engh, “Vacancy to Vitality in Pittsburgh’s East End,” Case Study of Culture in Community Development (Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Fall 2017); Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, “The Many Sides of Fountain Square,” Case Study of Culture in Community Development (Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Fall 2017); Tunheim, “Irrigate: Earned Media Impact Report,” n.d.

Community Outcomes

In addition to reoccupying and improving the physical appearance of vacant properties, creative placemaking can also help municipalities, artists, and neighborhood-serving organizations pursue a host of outcomes focused on the *people* who live in communities affected by vacancies.

Empower people to participate in planning and revisioning of the area:


A history of urban renewal and oft-repeated poor planning processes have left many communities with a legacy of harmful investment decisions, promises unfulfilled, and a deep suspicion of revitalization efforts. Community members may view a traditional neighborhood planning process with distrust, but one that takes a creative approach and makes participation fun can draw people in and surface ideas and concepts that might not come up in a more conventional setting.

Community organizers in Macon launched a planning process with block parties and celebrations rather than typical planning meetings. In Kalamazoo, the land bank found creative placemaking helped highlight local artists and community culture “and attracted people who would not have shown up as part of a traditional planning process,” according to Kelly Clarke, executive director of the Kalamazoo County Land Bank. The neighborhood told the land bank they did not want “a traditional planning process,” says Clarke. “They had been involved in many other planning processes and were eager to see activities beyond planning materialize. [We asked ourselves], ‘What are assets in the local community?’ and we identified Art Hop” as a way to highlight those assets. Creative placemaking, Clarke notes, allowed the land bank “to dialogue with the community in a fun way that attracted diverse audiences beyond the usual suspects.” Read more about Macon and Kalamazoo in the case studies beginning on page 18.

Engage residents with one another: When people participate in a positive community activity, they are more likely to feel invested in the neighborhood as a whole. A study of creative placemaking in Minneapolis found that the work “inspired neighbors and the artist project leaders to think more expansively and optimistically about possibilities for themselves and their community.”¹¹ In Kalamazoo, “joyful celebration was a powerful element to build community and generate excitement about dealing with challenges that seemed intractable,” says Clarke. “Inclusive celebration helped us get that work done.” Plus, researchers have found that community arts and cultural programs and events can bring

¹¹ Gadwa Nicodemus, Engh, and Mascaro, “Adding It Up: 52 Projects by 30+ Artists in 4 Neighborhoods.”






people of different races, ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds together who might not otherwise socialize with one another, which can lead to greater understanding among people and groups.¹²

Help practitioners build trust and relationships across sectors: Parties involved in creative placemaking projects must build trust among people who have different outlooks and do different work. Artists work with City government staff, for instance, developers work with arts nonprofits, and government or practitioners work with the community. In the process, they learn one another's roles and responsibilities and discover how best to interact and problem-solve. When this interaction goes well, it creates stronger bonds that smooth the path for future projects. We heard from our four case study communities that they built trust and good working relationships between city staff and artists/ arts organizations while working together on projects. This trust in turn helped move future projects along with fewer issues. The community benefits when practitioners work well together to bring more arts and culture projects to fruition.

In Newburgh, Kelly Schroer is the Founder of Strongroom, a recently-created arts organization that facilitates pop-up installations in vacant spaces around the city. Because of its newness, Schroer intentionally invests time in building relationships with partners. Her small organization worked with a private building owner to create a recent installation, completing items on a City code enforcement checklist to qualify for the occupancy permit. The partners' total compliance with code requirements ensured safe use of the building and grew Strongroom's credibility with the City. When Schroer proposed her next project to City Council, the vote passed immediately, and she was able to get a contract in place right away. "It's a question of having people who want to work with you and believe in what you're doing. [They need to] trust that you're doing something that is both high-quality and safe," she says.



There's a level of trust. I don't dig holes before calling because I don't want to do things that are dangerous.

*Artist Dee Briggs,
Wilkesburg*

Wilkesburg artist Dee Briggs has earned similar confidence from her local authorities: "We follow the rules. As a result, things go pretty smoothly." She elaborates, "When I've needed a permit for something . . . I go in and five minutes later they give me a permit. It happens easily."

¹² Maria Rosario Jackson, "Toward Diversity That Works: Building Communities through Arts and Culture," in *Twenty-First Century Color Lines: Multiracial Change in Contemporary America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, n.d.); Rachel Engh and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, "We Are, All of Us Together, Beginning a Good Life," *Case Study of Culture in Community Development* (Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Fall 2017); Walker, Gadwa Nicodemus, and Engh, "More than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development."



CASE STUDIES

As described above, in this report, we explore how four cities use creative placemaking on vacant properties: **Kalamazoo, Michigan; Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania; Newburgh, New York;** and **Macon, Georgia.** The case studies in this section “lift up the hood” to reveal the nuts and bolts of their efforts.

The four communities represent different geographies, different partnerships, different funding mechanisms, and other unique contexts. They are also, importantly, at different stages of implementing and institutionalizing creative placemaking in their revitalization efforts. These case studies, therefore, function as an illuminating snapshot of a burgeoning field that will continue to evolve.



Riverview Launch in Kalamazoo, Michigan. *Credit: Fran Dwight*

KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

Celebrating a Neighborhood's Diversity: Washington Square Commercial Revitalization

You're standing in the middle of Washington Square, the commercial node of Kalamazoo's Edison neighborhood. You have two choices for lunch. By design, either choice will result in money flowing back into the community. Pho on the Block, one of the options, committed to engaging the community once it moved into the storefront built out by Kalamazoo County Land Bank. A state franchise, Jersey Subs, just a couple storefronts down, provides jobs for ex-offenders. As you choose between pho and a sandwich, you will also notice the faces of people of many ages and ethnicities smiling out from a series of large photographs that cover a vacant building across the street. These photographed neighborhood residents proudly proclaim, "We Are Edison."

The Kalamazoo County Land Bank dreamed up We Are Edison, as well as other creative placemaking activity in Washington Square. The Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo's monthly "Art Hops" – studio and gallery tours – started in downtown Kalamazoo and for five years and counting, the land bank has worked to bring Art Hop to Washington Square, too. Now creative businesses, including a guitar shop and a belly dance studio, populate some of the once-vacant storefronts. The land bank's creative placemaking work also goes beyond



We Are Edison installation in Kalamazoo. *Credit: Fran Dwight*



**The Riverview Launch campus
along the Kalamazoo River.**

the Edison neighborhood. It renovated the RiverView Launch campus along the Kalamazoo River; the campus includes the land bank offices, space for the community to gather and watch outdoor movies on the refurbished barn, a youth bike nonprofit, and six acres of native plant restoration, paths, and way-finding and other signage by a local artist.

COMMUNITY PROFILE:

A city of 75,000 in southwestern Michigan, Kalamazoo lies midway between Chicago and Detroit. Home to Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo College, the city highly values education, as evidenced by The Kalamazoo Promise, an initiative that pays tuition and fees to Michigan colleges for students who graduate from Kalamazoo Public Schools. Kalamazoo features parks, lakes, and open space, along with cultural attractions such as museums and performing arts venues.

According to the American Community Survey, Kalamazoo's poverty rate has increased dramatically since 2000, from 24 to 32 percent. But with two healthcare systems and a wide variety of industries and businesses, the city has a strong foundation of employers. Edison is the largest and most racially diverse neighborhood in this majority-white city.

VACANT PROPERTY ISSUES:

As in many Michigan cities, the market downturn of the last decade hit Kalamazoo hard. Kalamazoo experienced a wave of foreclosures and vacancies. However, the tide of vacancy shows signs of leveling off.

The Kalamazoo County Land Bank acts as a not for profit developer in the city, a role unique for a land bank, but one the entity took on because Kalamazoo lacks strong organizations, such as CDCs, that would normally fill this need. It faces typical challenges in trying to repurpose vacant properties, including the lack of a market to acquire properties; one land bank property, for example, has been for sale for 18 months. Because the cost to improve vacant buildings runs much higher than the eventual sale price, the land bank must opt for demolition for many properties. The land bank also uses this tactic because, like many if not most land banks, it lacks enough resources to deal with all of the properties that it could receive from tax foreclosure; therefore, it needs to keep its inventory low. Instead, the land bank brokers "as is" sales to responsible buyers and focuses its energy on transformational projects. "We focus on impactful projects," says Executive Director Kelly Clarke. "We focus some of our energy on facilitating projects that will leave lasting legacies for the community."

**"We focus some of our
energy on facilitating
projects that will
leave lasting legacies
for the community."**

*Kelly Clarke, Executive
Director, Kalamazoo
County Land Bank*

CREATIVE INITIATIVES:

Until about 2005, Edison had a high concentration of adult businesses and was a hub for prostitution. The community pressured the adult businesses to leave the neighborhood but struggled to fill the vacant spaces left behind. In 2013, with funding from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the land bank acquired several vacant properties in the commercial node and began working with the Edison Neighborhood Association to find tenants. While the land bank envisioned revitalization and reactivation of this commercial hub, it faced a challenge in getting businesses and potential customers to come to Edison when fear and negative perceptions of the area had long kept people away.

The land bank used an existing asset, monthly Art Hops, to temporarily activate vacant spaces in Washington Square. The success of these Art Hops even attracted arts-based businesses to locate in Washington Square: Tremelo, a guitar shop; and BellyDance, a belly dance studio. BellyDance participated in ArtHops in Washington Square before making the leap to moving into one of the commercial core's vacant storefronts, it's first physical location.

As a second effort to populate vacant storefronts it owned in Washington Square, the land bank hosted "Fare Games," a contest in which local food businesses vied to win occupancy of a built-out storefront; legal, accounting, and marketing help; and restaurant supplies. Perhaps most critical, the winner — Pho on the Block — enjoys a graduated rent schedule for the first few years, starting out with reduced rent for three years and working up to market-rate. Ideally, this strategy stabilizes the restaurant's expenses enough to allow it to remain open, even if market forces influence rent increases. Fare Games participants also could attend a three-hour course, "Developing a Business," as well as multiple Q&A and mentoring sessions. Here, too, the established Art Hops played a role: the businesses vying for the storefront served bite-sized portions of their fare to Art Hop attendees, who gave their feedback on the food.

Community members acknowledge the impact of the land bank's efforts to strategically choose community-minded businesses for vacant storefronts in Washington Square. One community member commented that the land bank's strategy has resulted in quality businesses that serve resident needs, that they feel safe going to, and offer better job opportunities for area residents to learn new skills. Since the land bank started leasing out space in Washington Square, only one tenant has transitioned out, meaning Washington Square enjoys a much lower turnover rate than downtown.

Art Hops and new businesses provide visual proof of Washington Square's creative activity, but We Are Edison is perhaps the most visible of them all. Based on a global art project (Inside Out), We Are Edison showcases the beauty of the neighborhood through the power of portraiture. In this visually arresting creative placemaking project, a local photographer, Fran Dwight, took portraits



A dance class at Kzoo Nutrition, occupying a formerly vacant space in the Washington Square commercial corridor of Kalamazoo.

Credit: Fran Dwight

**“We wanted to make
[the residents of
Edison] visible to
rest of the city, that
was a big goal”**

*Fran Dwight,
Photographer*

of more than 100 people in the neighborhood. These sessions happened in the senior center, at an Art Hop event in a vacant storefront, and at El Concilio's Children's Day Festival. “We Are Edison” strengthened relationships between the land bank and its project partners. Anna Roeder, the project manager for We Are Edison and the land bank's administrative assistant, notes that the land bank's relationship with El Concilio (formerly known as the Hispanic American Council) “has continued to blossom.” “They feel seen and valued,” through the portraiture, she continues. El Concilio has participated frequently in the Art Hop events by arranging music and partnering on dance activities.

We Are Edison generated a lot of positive press and changed people's perceptions of the neighborhood. “We wanted to make [the residents of Edison] visible to rest of the city, that was a big goal,” says Dwight. He continues to hear from people who had habitually avoided the neighborhood out of fear but went out of their way to come see the photos. The combination of this recent art installation along with dozens of arts and culture events on this busy corridor over the past several years has helped to demonstrate the land bank is about much more than demolition and blight removal.

Kalamazoo County Land Bank's creative work in Edison has accomplished the goal of reactivating vacant space, attracting businesses, and even drawing civically engaged private developers to invest in vacant properties. One private developer plans to open a distillery and another, a current neighborhood resident, will create a cabaret. The neighborhood association just partnered with LISC, a local artist, and the land bank to commission a gateway mural on a land bank-owned building. As one community member articulated, “arts and culture has primed the pump” in terms of attracting people who want to be an active part of the neighborhood. Multiple residents agree that creative placemaking has led to greater community investment that will propel the area for long-term success in a way traditional re-occupancy and redevelopment never would have.

**Art Hop, a monthly arts walk in
Kalamazoo's Washington Square.**

Credit: Fran Dwight





WILKINSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

New Perspectives on Old Buildings: The Vacant Home Tour

The House of Gold in Wilkinsburg.
Credit: Natalia Gomez/Dee Briggs Studio

Empty houses dot every street in some parts of Wilkinsburg, overgrown with vines and facing the street with lifeless facades. If only these walls could talk. In Wilkinsburg, they can and here is what they say: “I didn’t always look like this, and for many years, I was loved and cared for.” “You might not notice me because I’m wedged between this big, nice house on my right, and this gigantic church on my left, but here I am, the old brick house at 744 South Ave.”

These stories and others headlined the Vacant Home Tour, a brainchild of students from Carnegie Mellon University. It’s one of several ways that local artists and organizations use arts and culture to enliven vacant properties and call attention to the neighborhoods surrounding them. The Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC), the Wilkinsburg Historical Society, and individual artists are bringing art to the business district, restoring a historic train station, and planning a sacred spaces tour that highlights the community’s many churches. Flower House, a community art studio started by two Wilkinsburg residents, occupies a storefront in Wilkinsburg’s business district and provides gallery and work space for artists of color as well as popular programming for neighborhood children.





COMMUNITY PROFILE:

Wilkinsburg, an independent borough, borders Pittsburgh to the east. Its current population – less than 16,000 – only amounts to about half of its 1950 peak of 31,500. African American residents make up about two-thirds of the population. Although it was once one of Allegheny County's wealthiest communities, nearly a quarter of Wilkinsburg residents now live below the poverty line. Median household income is around \$28,000, compared to \$56,000 for the Pittsburgh metro area.

Strong neighborhoods anchor the outer ring of the community, with mostly single-family ownership, but in and near the center of town, housing tenure is about 65 percent rental and vacant properties become more common. The combination of a declining population and a high percentage of chronically tax-delinquent properties strains the borough's and school district's finances. More than 40 percent of properties owe some back taxes to the school district, borough, or county, which equates to \$55 million unpaid.

Wilkinsburg abounds with rich, beautiful architecture, including stately homes, a historic train station that the WCDC just began renovating, and an abundance of churches. Its proximity to Pittsburgh, and especially its thriving arts district along the Penn Avenue corridor, bring travelers through Wilkinsburg and make it a desirable location for affordable homeownership.

VACANT PROPERTY ISSUES:

Wilkinsburg has a current vacancy rate of nearly one in five properties, with 40 percent vacancy in the business district. With more than 860 properties listed as abandoned in a town measuring just 2.2 square miles, the effect is significant, especially for the blocks that suffer from very high vacancy. Many of the properties are so far gone, they are candidates for demolition rather than rehab. Vacant buildings in the business district “need significant investment to be brought back up to code,” says Josh Rolón, the WCDC's Main Street manager. “We have buildings with vacant upper floors and beautiful architectural features threatened by neglect over time.”

“We have buildings with vacant upper floors and beautiful architectural features threatened by neglect over time.”

Josh Rolón, Main Street Manager, Wilkinsburg CDC

Acquiring the properties and bringing them up to code is expensive, even through the County's Vacant Property Recovery Program, which allows applicants to purchase properties that have been vacant and tax-delinquent for at least three years. A purchaser acquiring a property would have to pay the appraised value, typically between \$5,000 and \$8,000, and then would pay the entire renovation cost. With renovation costs reaching \$75-125/square foot, it could cost an additional \$60,000-150,000 to renovate a home and completed

properties do not sell at high enough prices for purchasers to recoup the costs of rehabilitation. Thus, a robust market does not currently exist in Wilkinsburg for private developers to come in and acquire these homes.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES:

With these challenges, how can you inspire people to care about the properties and the neighborhood and see the value in them? Enter the Vacant Home Tour. The project originated when Carnegie Mellon University students embarked on a project to bridge the gap between available resources for acquiring vacant homes and people's access to these resources. The students found inspiration with neighborhood artist Dee Briggs' House of Gold project. Briggs lives and works out of an old fire station and decided to acquire the adjacent vacant property through the County's Vacant Property Recovery Program. Too damaged to save, Briggs planned to hire a company to demolish the house. Then she found items still in the house from the previous owners – clothes, toys, photographs. She started researching the history of the home and the people who lived there. Having “fallen in love” with the house and previous owners, she decided she couldn't go through with a traditional demolition. So, she hired a crew of neighborhood folks to paint the entire structure gold to show that it had inherent value, just like the people in the neighborhood; they then manually deconstructed the house. After talking with Briggs, the WCDC staff, and other neighbors, the Carnegie Mellon students planned an event that would not only achieve their goal of alerting people of resources to acquire vacant homes but also help people see the vacant structures not just as dilapidated buildings, but as places with histories and value.



2016 Vacant Home Tour in Wilkinsburg. *Credit: Greg Sciulli*

With help from the WCDC and the Historical Society, neighbors volunteered to select homes to research and then acted as docents during the tour, providing information and welcoming tour participants to the homes. Tour participants – both Wilkinsburg residents and some from outside the borough – traveled from vacant home to vacant home to hear stories and see images, sometimes mounted on doors salvaged from other structures. Participants couldn't enter the properties, often because they were privately owned and unsafe, but the signboards outside told the stories of their histories: their original owners, what the homes used to look like, and what structures and uses once stood nearby.

People who participated in the Vacant Home Tours saw glimpses of what once was and, Tour organizers hoped, get inspired about what *could* be. Armed with this vision, Tour participants could attend an accompanying workshop to learn about available resources to acquire and fix up vacant properties themselves. For the second year of the tour, the WCDC included completed rehabs to inspire people with successful projects; participants could also attend a workshop on resources that could help them stay and improve their own homes.

The Vacant Home Tours have successfully gotten Wilkinsburg residents to explore parts of the borough that they might not otherwise, and they have helped engage the community. Anne Elise Morris of the Historical Society said she has noticed that people involved in the Vacant Home Tour have started showing up to participate in civic activities. “More and more there’s a sense of pride in Wilkinsburg,” Morris continues. While arts and culture activities can’t claim sole responsibility for this change, the increase in creative placemaking in Wilkinsburg by local residents and business owners indicates people want to put energy into improving the borough.

The Vacant Home Tours have inspired other tours that draw attention to vacant spaces and help people identify them as assets. The WCDC and the Historical Society spearheaded a haunted walking tour to kick off last year’s Vacant Property Week and artist Jennifer Chenoweth plans to organize a sacred spaces tour to showcase Wilkinsburg’s churches, many of which suffer from leaky roofs and gaping holes for windows. Similar to recruiting neighbors to act as docents for the Vacant Home Tour, Chenoweth has spent the last year building relationships with congregations and will ask them to program church spaces to showcase their talents and assets, like choirs.

In Wilkinsburg, the work of creative placemaking has encouraged creativity not only in the artistic works themselves, but in how to envision the possibilities for a site, who the partners can be, or how to tackle issues that arise. Working with a local artist “opened my eyes,” Rolón says. Now, he looks at old buildings and thinks, “What could that be?” Artists make up some of the members of Wilkinsburg Borough’s Community Art and Civic Design Commission. The group formed after community members found fault in a mural project’s community engagement process and level of transparency. Sallyann Kluz – then an independent consultant and now director of the City of Pittsburgh’s Office of Public Art – helped the Commission draft design guidelines and protocols to review proposed public art and design projects. The Commission continues to define its role within the borough government but its very existence goes a long way in terms of recognizing the value of arts and culture and the need for policies to ensure high quality and community-driven projects. Eric Parrish, director of Wilkinsburg’s Code Enforcement Department, emphasizes the importance of artists and designers on the Commission. He believes they fill gaps that exist in the government, specifically around knowledge of and passion for public art and design.



2016 Vacant Home Tour in Wilkinsburg. *Credit: Greg Sciulli*

Train station under redevelopment in Wilkinsburg.



NEWBURGH, NEW YORK

Bringing Spaces Back to Life: Safe Harbors of the Hudson and Artist in Vacancy



**Safe Harbors of the Hudson
Green in Newburgh, NY.**

*Credit: Safe Harbors of
the Hudson*

One day last year, kids flew through the air on Broadway, Newburgh's main drag. Zip Zap Circus, a circus for social change that works with disenfranchised youth, set up in a half-acre park that not so long ago sat as a vacant lot owned by a negligent landlord. Zip Zap Circus is just one of many creative uses in the park that "showcase what can happen in a formerly vacant space," says Lisa Silverstone of the hybrid affordable housing and arts center Safe Harbors of the Hudson that manages the park.

And the park serves as just one example of how artists, community organizations, and the local land bank activate vacant spaces in Newburgh through arts and culture. Besides the park, which includes artistic elements such as a mural, Safe Harbors' supportive housing development houses a gallery, performance space, and artist studios; plus, the organization is in the middle of rehabbing an old theater that's currently vacant. Just across Broadway, the Newburgh Community Land Bank's Artist in Vacancy program brings visual and performance installations to vacant properties. And curator Kelly Schroer recently started Strongroom, an organization that brings high-quality pop-up art and programming into, and responsive to, underused spaces. Schroer's next project — a sound piece and park — will take place in a City-owned vacant building with no roof.



**Zip Zap Circus on Safe Harbor
Green in Newburgh.**

Credit: Safe Harbors of the Hudson



COMMUNITY PROFILE:

Situated on the Hudson River, Newburgh lies 60 miles north of New York City. Some 30,000 residents live within its 3.6 square miles, 60 percent of them people of color, mostly Latinx. Thirty percent of Newburgh's families and 40 percent of its children live below the poverty line. In a county where the median household income reaches \$86,000, Newburgh's median household income only is \$33,000. A legacy of urban renewal and a recent contaminated drinking water crisis continue to feed a decades-long history of suspicion and mistrust of the government in some parts of the community.

With much of Newburgh's downtown developed in the mid- to late-1800s, historic homes fill the city. About two-thirds of its structures and one-third of its landmass exist within a national historic district, which makes policy decisions interesting, according to city planner Ali Church: "Everyone in Newburgh knows what a historic tax credit is." Newburgh's waterfront along the Hudson and proximity to New York City brings tourism, though tourists typically do not leave the waterfront and venture up the hill into the rest of the city.

VACANT PROPERTY ISSUES:

A second wave of foreclosures hit New York State hard after the original crisis during the Great Recession. Newburgh proved no exception, hitting a high of 780 vacancies in 2016. The town currently has 655 vacancies, most in poor condition. Many do not have a roof or four walls and most have lead or asbestos issues or both, while much of the vacant land meets brownfield qualifications.

Aside from the condition of the properties, other factors complicate rehab and reuse attempts. One factor is resistance from a community still scarred by urban renewal projects of the 1960s and 70s, in which the municipality bulldozed an area with much of Newburgh's African American community, the downtown commercial district, several streets, and more than 1,000 buildings. The national historic district that dominates the town also factors into rehab and reuse attempts. Adding further complexity, some parts of Newburgh teeter "on the cusp of gentrification," according to city planners, so land use and equity issues are particularly fraught.

Like many communities in New York State, Newburgh has a land bank to strategically acquire, hold, and reuse vacant properties for the good of the community. The Newburgh Community Land Bank has focused on revitalizing instead of demolishing buildings, largely because of the city's significant historic district. Working primarily in a 25-block area, the land bank concentrates its efforts on a targeted geography to show impact. The area includes 750 parcels, 25 percent of which sit vacant (counting just the residential buildings). This area has about 2,100 residents, 50 percent of whom live under the poverty line. Nearly

Aside from the condition of the properties, other factors complicate rehab and reuse attempts. One factor is resistance from a community still scarred by urban renewal projects of the 1960s and 70s.



Charger, a performance with high school track athletes. By artist Stephen Kwok and produced by Artist in Vacancy Laura Genes.
Credit: Newburgh Community Land Bank



Beyond Utility by Laura Genes, an art installation created through the Newburgh Community Land Bank's Artist in Vacancy program. *Credit: Newburgh Community Land Bank*



Safe Harbors of the Hudson Green in Newburgh, NY.

half of all housing units here sit vacant and owner-occupied homes comprise fewer than nine percent of units. Between 2016-2018, however, vacancy in the area decreased by 12 percent. Newburgh has seen increasing investment over the last few years, but gentrification pressures are confined to localized parts of the city and little private investment has reached the focus neighborhood outside of land bank projects. To magnify its impact within this area, the land bank leads the effort to enliven vacant spaces using arts and culture.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES:

In its Artist in Vacancy program, the land bank engages interdisciplinary artists to create artwork on vacant properties that the land bank owns but has not yet sold to new owners. Artist in Vacancy projects not only serve to temporarily activate a space, they also strive to “disrupt the stigma against vacant properties as not approachable,” says Diana Mangaser, director of Artist in Vacancy. Artists in Vacancy produce temporary installations that include visual and performance pieces. Laura Genes began her work as an Artist in Vacancy by asking herself: What are Newburgh residents proud of? The high school has a nationally ranked track team and she worked with the young athletes to perform Charger, a site-specific performance with water sprinklers on a vacant grassy lot. With the help of the land bank, Genes successfully navigated potential roadblocks, such as working with the City to temporarily bring water to the lot and paying for the water she used.

Newburgh residents also have pride in Newburgh's historic buildings. As an Artist in Vacancy, Genes also worked on Beyond Utility, an installation in a large historic home; once owned by an early 20th century photographer, a local developer is now renovating the home into affordable apartments. Genes' installation highlighted the work of wood workers and carpenters who reconstruct deteriorating historic buildings, and as part of the project Genes invited a speaker to give a public talk on historic preservation. Beyond Utility served as a stop on Newburgh's annual Open Studios tour. Open Studios had never featured a location in the land bank's focus neighborhood and Beyond Utility “drew awareness to the land bank and its mission,” Burke Blackman, the land bank's project director, said. For Open Studios participants who live outside the focus area, Beyond Utility offered an opportunity to experience the neighborhood in a positive way.

Safe Harbors has embraced both temporary and permanent creative placemaking on vacant properties. With the help of a landscape architect, engineer, the City's planning department, and lots of volunteers, Safe Harbors transformed the adjacent vacant lot into an ADA-accessible park with native plantings, solar lighting, a stormwater garden, and pieces of art, including large photos and a mural that covers Safe Harbors' wall bordering the park. The successful park transformation has not always come easily. Safe Harbors' vision calls for the

park to function as the entrance to the restored four-story Ritz Theater, for which the organization has worked hard to raise money over the last 12 years. While the park itself was an “easy lift” in terms of raising necessary financial resources, Silverstone acknowledges the difficulties of funding the much larger theater project.

Safe Harbors invites the community to help program the park. “If you provide the community with a resource, they’ll come and figure out how to make the best use of the space,” Silverstone says. On any given evening, residents flock to the park to salsa dance, jump double dutch, and perform spoken word. Safe Harbors initially struggled to engage the Latinx community in park programming, so it started holding salsa nights. They were a hit and members of the Latinx communities have taken ownership of the programming. The park has even become the anchor location for the annual Newburgh Illuminated festival, an annual event that celebrates the city’s diversity through music, dance, food, visual art and poetry.

Zip Zap Circus on Safe Harbor Green in Newburgh. *Credit: Safe Harbors of the Hudson*



MACON, GEORGIA

Finding the Right Footing: Mill Hill East Macon Arts Village



A Mill Hill block party in Macon.
Credit: CISmith Photography

Things seemed to be looking up for Macon's Mill Hill neighborhood by the fall of 2015. Years before, this area, adjacent to downtown, bustled with mill activity; then the mill closed, and a highway created a rift between Mill Hill and downtown. More than 50 percent of homes in Mill Hill now sit vacant. But the Macon Bibb Urban Development Authority (UDA) acquired many of the vacant homes and Macon Arts Alliance (MAA) received dollars to embark on a planning process to envision a Mill Hill arts village. Would this be the spark that brings the neighborhood back to life?

**MAA and UDA are
midway through
an arts-infused
revitalization of the
Mill Hill neighborhood,
with a specific focus
on two blocks – Schell
Avenue and Hydrolia
Street – where more
than 14 properties
sat vacant.**

Multiple organizations have worked for more than a decade to bring new life to vacant and underused properties in Macon using arts and culture. College Hill Alliance, for instance, has forged numerous partnerships on projects that include starting a successful concert series in a park and redeveloping another, Tattnall Square Park, with many creative elements, including artistic entryways made by a local ceramicist. Historic Macon, a historic preservation entity that acts as a developer, has partnered with various organizations, including College Hill Alliance, to preserve historic homes and neighborhood character in multiple areas of Macon. And in partnership, MAA, Historic Macon, and other organizations engaged in a community-involved cultural planning process to establish an artists' village in Mill Hill, which includes a community arts center, live/work-oriented homes with artists as target owners, artists in residence, and favorable zoning for home-based artist/entrepreneurs.

COMMUNITY PROFILE:

Macon is the largest of the four case study communities, with a population near 90,000. The city operates under a joint city-county government with Bibb County. African American and white residents each make up about half of the city's population, and about a quarter of its population lives in poverty.

The East Macon area, where Mill Hill is located, suffers from particularly high poverty and vacancy. Ocmulgee National Monument, which preserves ceremonial and burial mounds of the ancient Mississippian culture, attracts visitors to Mill Hill, as do other nearby assets, such as Mercer University, Macon Coliseum, and the downtown entertainment district. Across the river from Mill Hill and close to downtown, neighborhoods like College Hill are booming, attracting new residents in market-rate lofts and single-family homes.

VACANT PROPERTY ISSUES:

Seven years ago, half of Macon's downtown was vacant, with one million square feet unoccupied. Now downtown features more activity, new businesses, and life on the street. Macon-Bibb County as a whole, however, suffers from 50 percent residential vacancy.

Georgia's recent Urban Redevelopment Plan allows governments to declare portions of their jurisdictions 'slums.' Before the City government of Macon merged with the county, the City designated the majority of Macon's footprint as a 'slum,' which planted the seed for the local Blight Initiative. Through this initiative, the City inventories vacant properties, identifies unsafe structures, performs targeted demolition, and undertakes capital improvements like sidewalk, bike lanes, drainage, and recreational fields.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES:

MAA and UDA are midway through an arts-infused revitalization of the Mill Hill neighborhood, with a specific focus on two blocks — Schell Avenue and Hydrolia Street — where more than 14 properties sat vacant. The centerpieces of this arts-based revitalization in Mill Hill include rehabilitation of vacant houses into live/work spaces for artists and a newly completed Community Arts Center in what was once an old auditorium. Project partners will also turn a grassy vacant lot adjacent to the Arts Center into linear park, which will eventually span four neighborhood blocks and include a soccer field. Project partners see all the components of the village — homes for artists, the Arts Center, and the park — as assets that together will provide reasons for neighborhood residents and visitors to come together in Mill Hill.



The Mill Hill Community Arts Center in the East Macon Arts Village BEFORE its renovation.

Credit: Macon Arts Alliance



The Mill Hill Community Arts Center in the East Macon Arts Village AFTER its renovation.



A Mill Hill block party in Macon
Credit: CISMith Photography

To realize the vision, MAA received planning support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to gather input on what exactly people wanted to see and do in an arts village. Historic Macon, UDA, and other partners in earlier neighborhood transformation efforts are working with MAA in Mill Hill, but expectations and context differ this time. Mill Hill sits off the beaten path, for example, and the partners have struggled to walk the line between engaging the small population that currently lives in Mill Hill with the artists they wish to attract to the neighborhood. An early effort to bring in artists in residence from out of town ended prematurely when the artists and MAA/UDA did not see eye-to-eye.

The team recovered quickly and adjusted as necessary, hiring a firm to produce a cultural plan to help intentionally guide neighborhood development. The Roving Listeners were a key component of the planning process. This group of Mill Hill residents walked through the neighborhood interviewing residents to identify talents among the neighbors. The information they gathered in this innovative way helped guide the cultural plan. As part of the planning process, the team also threw community block parties with music, food, and art-making. These parties served to bring people together and strengthen relationships, as well as creatively collect information for the cultural plan. And, after the first artists in residence left, the team engaged an “artist partner,” Christopher Logan, with family ties to the neighborhood. Logan facilitated arts programming with kids at the community center, where he already had a connection.

The Roving Listeners in the Mill Hill neighborhood of Macon.
Credit: Macon Arts Alliance



The East Macon Arts Village is already having a visible impact. Historic Macon has rehabbed several homes; their colorful doors and bright white siding starkly contrasting with the houses that wait to get a facelift. MAA has used several of the rehabbed homes to host visiting community project coordinators and resident artists. MAA has now hired its first artists in residence for the Mill Hill Community Arts Center charged with programming the space, including providing at least one free event per month. Artists from across the country applied for the position, but MAA ended up hiring a husband/wife pair who moved to Macon a year ago. The couple is uniquely suited to bring both the local and outside perspectives, MAA project director J.R. Olive notes. After a couple of months on the job, the artists are working to fill the gallery spaces with work from local artists and have launched a summer events calendar with over 15 unique events planned for kids and adults.

MAA and its partners still have a way to go before realizing the arts village in full. They have just started conversations, for example, about a potential “Pink Zone” for the neighborhood, an overlay district to allow residents to have retail at home with commercial access and light manufacturing, such as making and selling baked goods in their own homes. However, with the Arts Center and multiple homes already rehabbed, they have made visible strides toward realizing the vision.



KEY TAKEAWAYS AND LESSONS LEARNED

from Communities Engaging in Creative Placemaking on Vacant Property

During the learning exchanges, we heard from **Kalamazoo, Macon, Newburgh, and Wilkinsburg** about some of the common themes and lessons learned through their experiences engaging in creative placemaking on vacant properties. They spoke with us about their challenges, successes, and what they learned along the way.

The key takeaways from their conversations focused on the importance of partnerships, ways to generate momentum, engagement of residents and other stakeholders, how to overcome regulatory barriers, and creative means of funding projects. In this section, we present what they have learned so far, so that local leaders in other cities can leverage these lessons to further arts- and culture-based revitalization of vacant spaces in their own communities.



1.

Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

PARTNERSHIP: CRUCIAL, BUT COMPLICATED

Creative placemaking projects often require three- or four-way relationships among city government, artists, residents and community developers.

For robust creative placemaking and authentic community engagement, as well as sustained creative, neighborhood-based efforts, cross-sector stakeholders must act in partnership. By definition, creative placemaking involves engagement; partnership is imperative. Additionally, partners — funders, businesses, neighborhood groups, city departments, individual artists and culture-bearers, and nonprofit community, arts, cultural, or business organizations — bring different resources (knowledge, funding, connections) that enable creative placemaking projects to get off the ground more quickly, effectively, or cheaply. In Newburgh, for instance, the city encountered trouble with its procurement policy when trying to make improvements at a bus stop, so the director of a local nonprofit facilitated the necessary purchase. “It’s about figuring out who can do what” most easily, according to Newburgh city planner Ali Church.

Partnerships can attract interest and new resources and enhance partners’ capacity to do the work, which helps sustain creative placemaking. In Kalamazoo, “we have the trust of the community,” says El Concilio Executive Director Adrian Vazquez-Alatorre. “We don’t have resources [ourselves] to help businesses, but we have the knowledge.” As mentioned in the case study, the land bank’s relationship with El Concilio has become stronger since We Are Edison, and the organization has taken ownership over cultural events.

However, forming and maintaining successful partnerships can be difficult. Creative placemaking projects often require three- or four-way relationships among city government, artists, residents and community developers. Sometimes no two members of that array speak the same “language,” meaning they envision and approach their work in fundamentally different ways and have different — sometimes competing — ideas and priorities. For example, an arts organization may perceive city government staff to be rigid in their thinking about what can and cannot be done and feel they are being dismissive of the value of art. A real estate developer may find artists to be non-linear in their thinking and expression and have a hard time understanding what they are trying to accomplish.

But the effort to connect across sectors is worthwhile, as Metris writes in *Not Just Murals: Insights into Artists’ Leadership in Community Development*: “Why should community developers tap artists to lead social, physical, and economic change in low-income communities? At their best, artists bring a questioning spirit, creativity, sensitivity to community, and tolerance for risk. Community developers bring commitment, expertise, and determination. This is a potentially powerful combination.”¹³

¹³ Gadwa Nicodemus, Engh, and Walker, “Not Just Murals: Artists as Leaders in Community Development.”

Ways to Create Successful Partnerships

Each artist and arts organization operates differently, as do cities, and even departments within cities. Therefore, each partnership among practitioners and their partners is unique. But each trusting and productive relationship requires time, good-faith effort, and patience. Practitioners and their partners in our four case study cities create successful partnerships by **casting a wide net to identify out-of-the-ordinary partners; trying another partnership if one doesn't work out; and working with local players.** We explore each strategy below.



We Are Edison installation in Kalamazoo. Credit: Fran Dwight

Look for out-of-the-ordinary partners and cast a wide net: While artists and arts organizations, neighborhood-focused nonprofits, and municipal governments play the obvious role of practitioner and partner for creative placemaking on vacant properties, many other organizations and people have similar goals and may want to pursue their goals through creative means.

Working with organizations already in and of the community – even non-arts organizations, such as churches, health organizations, schools, museums and historical societies, and major employers – can help practitioners reach residents and engage them in their work because the residents already come to that organization or location for another purpose. With a captive audience, practitioners can more easily reach people who are busy or may simply be skeptical of the effort and unsure what it has to do with them. For *We Are Edison*, a photographer took portraits of residents in the Edison neighborhood of Kalamazoo and displayed them, larger than life, on the side of a building. The organizers of the project partnered with the local senior center and El Concilio, leveraging their existing activities to find portrait subjects.

If one partnership doesn't work, try another partner: Partnership doesn't always work out on the first try. Not every organization is ready or willing to partner, especially on a project outside their comfort zone. City staff, nonprofits, and artists can keep looking for willing partners who understand their vision and share project goals. A successful partnership might help tip other reluctant partners their way. "If you go to the most logical partners and they're not open to partnering, you can pivot to another organization that's more amenable," suggests J.R. Olive of the Macon Arts Alliance. "If you have community support and that project turns out really good, the organization that turned you down is more likely to change their ideas," he continues.

Work with local players: Cities and organizations sometimes hire renowned artists from *outside* the community to bring their art *into* the community. While the artist might deliver a high-quality piece of art, community members might not be part of the process and nor feel reflected in the final product. Many organizations and cities overlook or undervalue the talent that exists in their communities. Effective creative placemaking initiatives seek the assets that exist



Renovated housing for artists in the Mill Hill neighborhood of Macon.

within the community, among both residents and local businesses, and leverage their talents and abilities. For one of Newburgh's Artist in Vacancy projects, a local furniture manufacturer designed and fabricated the supporting structure for free because the company "believes in community and believed in the project," said Diana Mangaser, director of Newburgh Community Land Bank's Artist in Vacancy program. In Wilkinsburg, a local company in the business district designed and manufactured trash cans and planters for the district. Josh Rolón, Main Street Manager for Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation, appreciates the ability to leverage local assets: "It's cool that we can source benches and planters for the business district within the business district."

Engage partners early and often: Effective partnerships require patience and cultivation. Practitioners will want to engage the City and the community for input as they plan a project, rather than presenting a fully "baked" idea for approval. Local leaders, too, will be most effective when they engage artist input before determining artistic uses on vacant spaces. These efforts make a difference. Engaging early and maintaining that engagement over time can help secure and keep partners' project buy-in. Engaged partners will be more likely and willing to advocate for the project with other stakeholders and invest their own resources in making it a success.

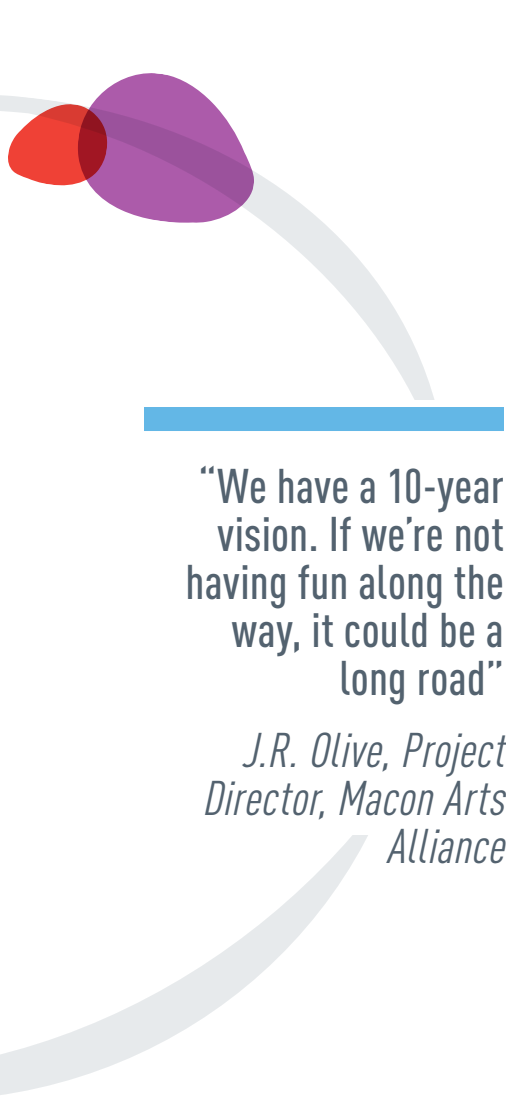
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Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

MOMENTUM: SHORT-TERM WINS FOR LONG-TERM GAINS

The four communities we visited suffer from significant vacancy. Communities may feel overwhelmed with the sheer scale of the problem, and progress may be slow to materialize. "We thought we might complete our work in Washington Square quickly," recalls Clarke in Kalamazoo. But the land bank realized the neighborhood deteriorated over decades, so the community would have to work years to truly change it. The work of creative placemaking, and community development in general, is iterative. Smaller, short-term projects can keep the space alive and help maintain interest, enthusiasm, and funding over the longer timeframe required to implement a transformative revitalization plan.

Securing successes in the short term can also help attract support. Partners and funders may be more likely to support practitioners' efforts when the practitioners have a track record of past accomplishments, especially if they can demonstrate success in harder and riskier projects. In Macon, organizers secured funds for the Mill Hill Arts Center rehab from the local Blight Fund in a matter of hours, according to Olive. "We said to the Blight Fund, these are the partners at the table and it just happened. It was a result of having done quality work before."



“We have a 10-year vision. If we’re not having fun along the way, it could be a long road”

J.R. Olive, Project Director, Macon Arts Alliance

By showing people what is possible and paving the way for how to accomplish goals, one small project can inspire others. In the course of doing the earlier projects, practitioners will also get a feel for the community, form relationships, and learn the process to get projects done, all of which they will need to take on larger-scale work.

Ways to Build and Maintain Momentum

Practitioners must strike a balance between actively engaging in short-term, temporary projects and crafting and pursuing a long-term plan. How do practitioners find the time, energy, and funding to put in place long-term projects when more immediate, short-term projects demand attention? And what level of activity is sufficient to keep people interested? To build and maintain momentum, practitioners and cities in the four case study cities **engage in temporary activities; adopt a hyper-local focus; and cultivate leadership who will sustain creative placemaking activities.** We explore each tactic below.

Engage in temporary activities: Municipalities can engage in smaller or temporary projects while working toward a bigger project (e.g., brick and mortar) or plan. While the Kalamazoo County Land Bank was completing its capital campaign for its Riverview Launch community space, the land bank hosted regular, free events like yoga on the lawn, dance parties, and kids’ garden days. These events helped demonstrate to cautious funders that there was a groundswell of interest in the project and build public awareness of the project. Wilkinsburg’s Vacant Home Tour acted as a “springboard for people to discover other community opportunities,” says Anne Elise Morris of the Historical Society; she’s noticed that Tour attendees have shown up for other neighborhood events.

Adopt a hyper-local focus: Practitioners can make more immediately visible impacts by concentrating efforts in a small area, rather than spreading the work across an entire neighborhood or town. The Newburgh Community Land Bank took this approach. Executive Director Madeline Fletcher explains, “We said, ‘We’re going to focus on four critical blocks and do it very well. Once we’ve made a visible, measurable impact, we can begin to shift our effort.’ Some stakeholders express concern about our small focus area, but using data helps us support our plans and our logic. We can explain, ‘This is the area with the highest vacancy, poverty, crime rates, but is also rich in community assets [and that’s why it’s our focus area].’” Likewise, Historic Macon, the city’s historic preservation entity and a main developer, focuses on one neighborhood at a time. Success in one neighborhood, helps build momentum when Historic Macon begins work in another neighborhood. In Macon’s Mill Hill neighborhood, the target community for an arts-based planning process, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and Macon Arts Alliance are “hyper focused” on 14 parcels, using historic tax credits for rehabilitation and targeting artist buyers.

Cultivate leadership and pass creative placemaking activities on to partners: When multiple partners share the financial, logistical, and labor burden, projects are likelier to remain viable, even if one person or organization drops out. Often in the course of a project, people will emerge with the passion, capacity, and dedication to take ownership of some of the work. “One surefire way to fail is that one group is doing a project. It will be easy to identify the next wave of leaders if you’re doing this work right,” according to Alex Morrison, executive director of the Macon-Bibb UDA. In Macon, the neighborhood organization College Hill Alliance started a successful concert series that it then handed off to volunteer group to manage.

3.

Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: SERVING THE PEOPLE, AS WELL AS THE PLACE

The experiences of the four case study sites demonstrate that project planners and leaders can engage residents and key stakeholders, such as small businesses, to increase the chances that creative placemaking efforts truly serve the community. Doing so can help get to the heart of some fundamental questions: Who gets to decide what constitutes “art”? What kinds of arts and culture projects do community members want to see, and what do they hope to achieve? At the same time, arts and culture activities themselves can give city staff and CDCs fresh ways to engage the community in more traditional community development pursuits.

As with any community development endeavor, the activities of creative placemaking should happen *with* rather than *to* residents. When municipalities or CDCs use arts and culture efforts to drive larger community development outcomes, community buy-in takes on particular importance. Many — if not all — communities, including Newburgh and Macon, have histories of urban renewal and top-down planning, with a resulting legacy of distrust. The people we interviewed sometimes came up against this legacy when they started looking at how to grapple with vacant properties. “Last time a lot of these neighborhoods saw investment was during urban renewal, when a highway was built in the ‘60s. A lot of people hear ‘revitalization’ and you’re already starting behind the 8-ball. We’re dealing with sins of the past,” notes Morrison. When done well, however, arts- and culture-oriented strategies can help overcome distrust, ease trauma, and empower people to make decisions about their communities.¹⁴

Planning with communities will also result in better spaces and sustained energy around creative endeavors. Community residents and small business owners bring their own skills and assets to creative placemaking on vacant properties.

“It takes a long time to build trust, but a short time to break trust.”

Kelly Clarke, Executive Director, Kalamazoo County Land Bank

¹⁴ Sherman, Danya, “Exploring the Ways Arts and Culture Intersects with Housing.”

Clarke recognizes, “There’s a whole lot of talent in the community other than [just] in my office. [Some of the] ideas wouldn’t have come forth without tapping into that resource.”

But quality community engagement and trust building take time and resources, especially across differences given community history, context, and power dynamics. And it requires effort to engage *authentically* rather than on the surface. Practitioners unsure of the difference can ask themselves: did we hear from the community about what they want, need, and can contribute, or did we just have a meeting and tell them what we are going to do? “You have to work really hard and be dedicated to wanting to engage people who are radically different than you are,” says Wilkinsburg artist Dee Briggs.

Fortunately, creative placemaking gives people a variety of ways to engage, ways that may feel more welcoming and less intimidating than attending a formal planning meeting with its echoes of urban renewal. People disengage from traditional planning processes for a variety of reasons, including boredom, inconvenience, and the sense that they are not welcome or the effort is not for them. By contrast, community members can simply show up to a performance or help work on an art project, engaging in a manner that feels joyful, rather than burdensome. Sometimes those events can open the door for people to contribute to the community in other ways. Yoga in the park and other events helped the Kalamazoo County Land Bank reach more of the community. Through creative activities, “you can bring people to sites that they might not have come to otherwise,” says Clarke. “[P]eople become excited; they want to be part of change.”

Ways to Engage Residents and Other Stakeholders

In our four case study cities, practitioners and their partners have successfully engaged residents and other stakeholders by **providing a variety of entry points to engage; identifying key stakeholders who will help achieve project goals; and involving youth**. Below, we explore each strategy.

Provide a variety of entry points to engage: Different community members bring different assets, abilities, and energy levels to community work. Practitioners in the four case study sites found they could allow people to engage in creative placemaking work on different levels, and as little or as much as community members would like to, by identifying both leadership roles and smaller roles. This prevents people from feeling unwelcome, if they can’t commit to high-level involvement. They can help plan the project, work on the project or event, or just show up and take it in. For Wilkinsburg’s Vacant Home Tour, community members helped with planning and served as docents at the tour stops. Other community members showed up as participants on the day of the Tour.



Deconstructed materials from the House of Gold in Wilkinsburg.

Identify key people who will help achieve goals: Any effective engagement effort must include identifying trusted leaders and connectors. Community members listen to these leaders and connectors and look to them for guidance. They may have formal roles, such as neighborhood association leaders or religious leaders, or they may simply be people who are so “plugged in” that everyone knows them. Such influential figures can be a project’s biggest cheerleaders or can derail a project they view as threatening or undesirable for the community. If these neighborhood leaders support a project, the community is likely to come along because they trust them. Conversely, if they are against the effort, practitioners will have a much harder time breaking through to win community trust and support.

Local advocates (artists and non-artists) may take on leadership roles in creative placemaking projects on vacant properties. Local residents, employers, and employees often have skills and talents to offer that can enhance arts and cultural activities. Artists who live in the community can be well-positioned to surface community culture and knowledge for outside participants, help frame community work in a fresh light, and encourage other community members to assume leadership roles.¹⁵ Practitioners can provide room for non-artists to contribute as well. People who see their friends and neighbors involved with a project are more likely to engage themselves and to be receptive to what the project offers. Anna Roeder of the Kalamazoo County Land Bank spoke of why she chose a neighborhood artist for We Are Edison. “[I think it was important to] have the Edison community [portrayed] through the lens of an Edison resident; it decreased people’s resistance [to participate].” Macon’s Roving Listeners live in the community and interviewed their neighbors. This familiarity ideally makes people more willing to open up and share their thoughts and stories.

“Because kids were involved, family members came to the event, too,”

*Burke Blackman,
Land Bank Project
Director*

Involve youth to attract more participation: Involving neighborhood young people in both the design and execution phases of a project infuses energy, taps into fresh artistic voices, and cultivates community involvement from a young age. Youth participation also expands the range of community involvement because children’s parents and siblings often come with them. The Newburgh Community Land Bank has supported multiple projects for kids, including Charger, an Artist in Vacancy performance piece with the local high school track team. “Because kids were involved, family members came to the event, too,” says Land Bank project director Burke Blackman. “Charger had great, diverse attendance.”

¹⁵ Walker, Nicodemus and Engh, “Not Just Murals”

4.

Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

**REGULATORY ISSUES:
OVERCOMING RED TAPE**

Working with vacant properties presents unique challenges compared to other kinds of property. These difficulties include getting site control due to muddled ownership and liens, as well as safety, liability, and repair costs. The traditional City systems and policies that impact vacant properties and their reuse — such as municipal property disposition, property tax and mortgage foreclosure, code enforcement, and zoning — can, at times, be antiquated, unclear, and obstinately rigid. Inefficient, ineffective, and inequitable vacant property systems and policies serve as a barrier to reuse, and that barrier will generally only grow more impassable for a creative initiative.

Even if a City has been diligent about improving and modernizing its vacant property systems, since creative placemaking projects, by nature, introduce a new or novel approach to reuse of space, these projects will still face some degree of barrier in terms of policies and regulations, which municipalities have designed to respond to more traditional uses of space.

Creative placemaking practitioners run into barriers, such as site control, certificate of occupancy, fire suppression, and insurance coverage requirements. While any development project would run into these same regulations, they serve as steep barriers for creative placemaking projects on vacant properties due to the high costs and dilapidated and neglected nature of the land or structure. In many instances, a group tries to use temporary tactics, such as creative events or installations, to highlight a vacant property as an asset, convey a new vision, and catalyze a redevelopment effort. At that early stage in the reuse process, practitioners will generally lack adequate funding or time to fully rehabilitate that property to get a certificate of occupancy for the art installation to move forward. In other cases, the practitioner may not have the ability or desire to purchase the property from the City to host a single event.

Municipalities have put various regulations and policies in place to help protect the health, safety, and welfare of residents, and officials are charged with upholding them. “It’s my job to ask, ‘What if?’” explains Bill Horton, Assistant Fire Chief for Newburgh. “Like, what if we have a party and there’s property damage or injuries? Sometimes it seems like we’re putting a damper [on projects], but we need to be even with our treatment with everyone. I do want [the projects] to work and we need to do it in a manner that’s safe for everyone.”

Local regulation is necessary to preserve public health, safety, and welfare; however, the design and application of these regulations must also accommodate the critical reuse work of creative placemaking to support the positive transformation of distressed communities. Achieving these concurrent



2016 Vacant Home Tour in Wilkinsburg. Credit: Greg Sciulli

“I do want [the projects] to work and we need to do it in a manner that’s safe for everyone.”

Bill Horton, Assistant Fire Chief for Newburgh

objectives requires mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration between the private and public sectors – this tends to be the largest barrier to creative placemaking on vacant properties.


We have not been able to determine a singular, one-size-fits all policy change that will better enable creative placemaking on vacant properties. By nature of the properties and projects, each initiative will be somewhat unique. For this reason, the evaluation of potential liability issues, for example, will change even within the same city. Municipalities must adopt a degree of flexibility in regulations that were written assuming market stability and with new construction, single-use structures in mind. This adaptation or flexibility can only happen when public and private sector partners communicate about regulations effectively.

On the practitioner's end, the first step includes simply understanding the relevant regulations. Practitioners can encounter great difficulty just trying to identify what they need to do to access and work on these properties. Sometimes the process to receive permission is unclear, leading people to view regulations as unnecessarily complicated and impassible barriers and become frustrated.

Artists or small organizations can find working with architects, engineers, and lawyers to fulfill all the permitting requirements expensive and time-consuming, even if they only need a simple approval. City staff sometimes lack the capacity or will to help troubleshoot problems with creative projects or to work with the “little guys,” like artists and cultural organizations.

One frustrated practitioner told us “[We don’t know] how to get an actual project to the next step. The City is not there to help answer those questions, so we end up getting stalled. We need them to offer tangible support, so we can get to the next steps.” City staff are not intentionally unhelpful, but municipal governments often lack specific personnel devoted to arts and culture and/or community engagement. Problems also arise when staff work reactively, seeing their role as keeping undesirable things from happening rather than finding ways to make desirable things happen.

The people making decisions about arts and culture at the city level may not have a background in the creative placemaking work needed to respond effectively to opportunities. Artists and practitioners face particular challenges when governments lack a specified process for public art. The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council addressed this deficiency by creating an Office of Public Art, where Director Sallyann Kluz serves as a liaison, offering practitioners valuable insight into the local government. She helps artists schedule zoning meetings, for instance, make calls to the right people in the planning department, go through the application process, and know how much to budget for the cost of a permit.



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A practitioner

Ways to Overcome Regulatory Issues

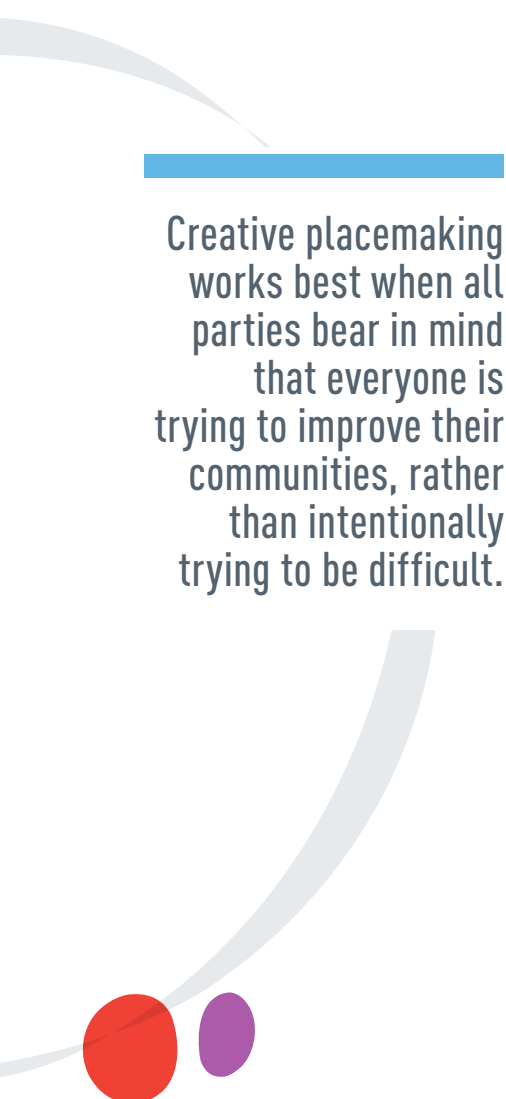
Practitioners and their partners in the four case study cities found they must navigate such obstacles, however difficult, to move creative placemaking projects on vacant properties forward. And when all parties learn to do it well, future projects benefit, too. To overcome regulatory barriers, practitioners and their partners **identify and cultivate liaisons; set transparent expectations and communicate clearly; entertain multiple possibilities and give each other the benefit of the doubt; and adapt or work around regulations.** We explore each tactic below.

Identify and cultivate liaisons for this work: Practitioners can help their cause by finding advocates among the city staff who believe in the work and will help them navigate city systems. According to Newburgh practitioners, both the planning and code enforcement staff have proved to be helpful advocates. “We’re trying to be part of the solution and not just a rubber stamp at the end of it. . . I try not to send anyone away. If you take the time, I’ll take five minutes to talk with you,” says Horton, Newburgh’s Assistant Fire Chief. Many larger cities have staff members, such as Kluz in Pittsburgh, who focus only on public art. Some cities, like Saint Paul, Minnesota, even hire artists to play unique roles across government departments.

Set transparent expectations and communicate clearly: Arts and culture project leaders and city officials both must clearly articulate their plans and expectations. Practitioners need to be very clear about what they are doing and how, as well as their end goal. City staff may have to spend extra energy on these projects to interpret how regulations or requirements may apply, and if they can understand the end goal, they may more easily buy in to the vision and have the necessary context to brainstorm how a project can move through the regulatory end successfully.

In turn, city departments need to clearly communicate the required processes, timeline, contact persons, and cost; and not only how to access that information but also whom to direct questions to. City officials cannot assume that arts and cultural organizations will know that they need to reach out to a buildings department for a permit if they are erecting a temporary art display, for example. Sometimes the rules hide “behind closed doors,” says Jason McKoy, a creative placemaking practitioner. “You don’t know who to go to and when you find out, [the regulations are] not communicated in a way that’s accessible. They’ll say, ‘refer to code 6b.2’ and I say, ‘That’s just a bunch of letters and numbers, tell me what to do and I’ll do it.’” Clear communication requires more than simply making the regulations available. Artists, nonprofits, and community members should not need legal or construction expertise to complete their projects.





Creative placemaking works best when all parties bear in mind that everyone is trying to improve their communities, rather than intentionally trying to be difficult.

Closely related to setting clear expectations, creative placemaking on vacant property works best when project organizers and relevant city officials maintain ongoing communication at every stage of a project, from planning to completion. Practitioners need to keep the City informed about what they plan to do, before they do it, and be ready to answer officials' questions; and city staff need to communicate with practitioners about what information they need and what they can do to help the project along.

If a City wants to cultivate more creative placemaking activities, city officials may consider proactively meeting with arts and cultural organizations to build awareness of city regulations, establish a clear point of contact, and begin building productive relationships. The code enforcement officer in Kalamazoo, for example, holds weekly "office hours" during which people can drop in and ask questions. He hopes to establish himself as a point of contact for information and assistance interpreting the code. Using this approach, coupled with proactive outreach to the arts community to ensure they know about the office hours, city officials could make significant strides to overcome barriers.

Be open to possibilities and give each other the benefit of the doubt:

City government, artists, and developers all operate differently, and each party approaches creative placemaking on vacant properties from its own perspective and with its own set of values. That can sometimes lead to conflict and tensions, requiring practitioners and city staff to cultivate patience and respect for one another's efforts. For example, an artist working on a shoestring budget may not flout regulatory requirements; the artist may simply lack the capital to hire a professional to help with compliance. Creative placemaking works best when all parties bear in mind that everyone is trying to improve their communities, rather than intentionally trying to be difficult.

With a respectful attitude that assumes good intent, practitioners and local leaders can even learn from one another. In Newburgh, Horton oversees code enforcement and has learned to see the value of creative placemaking, even if it is not his day-to-day work. "I signed off on a project the other day that had white walls," says Horton. He continues, "I said to myself, 'This would be a perfect art gallery.' Three years ago, I couldn't spell 'art gallery.'"

Adapt or work around regulations: Municipalities as well as artists and community groups must remain flexible to work through the nuances of creative placemaking on vacant properties. Sometimes cities might consider amending regulations that impede creative uses in specific areas. In Macon, creative placemaking advocates are working on a "Pink Zone" for the Mill Hill neighborhood, an overlay district to allow residents to have retail at home with commercial access and light manufacturing, such as making and selling baked goods in their own homes. This overlay does not represent a complete overthrow of commercial and residential zoning, but tweaks the code specific to the creative goals of one neighborhood.

At other times, city staff and practitioners can figure out ways to adapt a project, so it can achieve creative placemaking outcomes without running afoul of code restrictions. The public cannot always access vacant properties where creative activities take place, due to structural issues, fire hazards, and lack of utilities and sanitary facilities. Newburgh's Artists in Vacancy worked in vacant lots, but the people who experienced the art did not necessarily need to go on the properties. By situating some projects on corners, artists could enable people to view the work without entering the property.

5.

FUNDING: PATIENCE AND CREATIVITY REQUIRED

Even the smallest and simplest creative placemaking projects require funding. Practitioners must pay material costs for art installations and equipment rental or permit fees for performances. City staff and nonprofits must also recognize the professional contributions of the artists and make sure to allocate resources to compensate them accordingly. Too often, people assume artists create just for the sake of creating and will work for free, and artists themselves may feel the weight of that expectation, but “artists should be paid for their time, not just for materials,” says Kluz, who reminds artists of the often-considerable time they spend meeting with community members and obtaining permits.

Larger-scale and more permanent projects, including brick-and-mortar spaces such as art centers and historic building restorations, require a great deal more funding. Practitioners undertaking vacant property rehab projects often find they underestimate the amount of time and capital they need because many vacant structures require significant work to bring them up to code, especially after suffering years of neglect and the ravages of weather. Between city, state, and federal code compliance, sometimes people need to spend more on construction than the building is worth, explains Horton.

People may not see change at a corridor or neighborhood level for many years because the vacancy and disinvestment are so pronounced. Even once the work has started, people's perceptions may change slowly, and the private market may move slowly, too. Because of the gradual nature of this work and because practitioners may struggle to articulate the value proposition of creative placemaking, they may find excitement and financial investment in the work difficult to sustain. Safe Harbors in Newburgh struggled to obtain the needed capital for a planned rehab of a historic theater. “It's tough to raise \$21 million anywhere, and especially when the most generous donor gives you \$10,000. We seriously underestimated the cost of the rehab. The roof alone is \$1 million,” says Executive Director Lisa Silverstone. Safe Harbor currently conducts its fundraising for the theater behind closed doors because so much time has

passed without a change despite fundraising efforts. The budget for a project to rehab an old train station into a community gathering space in Wilkesburg ballooned similarly.

When community or arts partners have unsustainable and insufficient funding, they struggle to make long-term decisions or plans about creative placemaking work on vacant properties. Entities engaged in creative placemaking often end up in competition for scarce dollars because of the small pool of available funds.

Ways to Secure Funding

Communities have employed several strategies to secure funding for their work. Practitioners and their partners in the four case study cities **demonstrate the value of creative placemaking on vacant property; cultivate cross-sector partnership; and piece together funds from a variety of sources.** We explore each strategy below.

Demonstrate the value: Practitioners must show potential supporters how arts and culture projects can help achieve goals to activate and reuse vacant property and improve conditions in communities hard-hit by vacancy. Practitioners can demonstrate what arts and culture can do with “early wins,” projects they can accomplish quickly and with few resources. Safe Harbors’ park makeover “was the easiest lift,” says Silverstone. “It was a visible and accessible project; it was an easy project to like.” At the same time as practitioners show the value of this work, both public and private funders need to shift their thinking to see investment in the arts as an investment in people, says Kluz, “rather than thinking about using arts as a cheap fix.”

Cultivate strategic cross-sector funding partnerships: Artists, arts organizations, and nonprofits can expand their funding possibilities by thinking expansively about their work and their goals. Practitioners can work with partners in other sectors – arts organizations with community developers, or city departments with historical societies – to open up the funding possibilities for a project. An arts nonprofit might qualify for grant opportunity that is not open to non-arts organizations, while a developer might have access to capital streams that have nothing to do with art. Partnering across sectors allows project leaders to assemble capital from traditional community development sources and non-traditional sources. For example, partnering on a mixed-use redevelopment of a vacant building could bring together capital that includes housing, arts, government funds, economic development and health. If a project combines art and housing, housing funds may cover the entire cost of the project, not just the housing component. If the project will have an impact on public safety or health, practitioners can explore grant opportunities in those areas. Funders also appreciate these partnerships because they speak to different capacities that the partners bring to the table, be they arts disciplines, real estate, or community organizing.



Safe Harbor park, Newburgh.
Credit: Safe Harbors of the Hudson

Piece together funds from a variety of sources, public and private:

For larger projects in particular, practitioners cannot expect to find a single funding source that will cover the entire project budget. Project sponsors have assembled funding from sources including foundations (particularly local or family foundations); local, state, and federal grants; and resources that project partners bring to the table. Alex Morrison of the Macon Bibb UDA notes that practitioners should look for a mix of resources, including public funding: “If you want something transformational, bonds are a good way to do that. Government funding is essential to doing all this work. If it’s all philanthropic or community groups, it doesn’t have the sustainability.”

Practitioners will want to take care, however, not to go too far in seeking alternative funding sources. They ideally will not alter their projects to match unrelated grant opportunities. The result would be a compromised project and a grant that will not fulfill what they are trying to do. I’ve never tried to chase a grant,” says Tracey Evans, executive director of Wilkinsburg CDC. “We say, ‘Here’s the goal, now we have to find funding for it. In community development, it’s critically important to stick to a strategic plan, to be consistent to the long-term vision.”





CONCLUSION

Creative placemaking on vacant properties requires not just artistic and cultural creativity, but creativity on the part of the city and all partners in terms of what a space can be and how to accomplish their goals. The process of learning and partnering to bring arts and culture projects to fruition can be difficult at times, but cities, community groups, artists, and neighbors can work together on these efforts to achieve equitable community development goals that vacant property enforcement alone cannot do.

When local leaders partner with artists and practitioners to bring arts and cultural activities to vacant spaces, productive reuse of the properties can ultimately occur. But this work can also have a number of beneficial outcomes along the way on the properties themselves, the quality of life in the surrounding neighborhoods, and the social and cultural bonds among people who live there.

We garnered several key takeaways for local leaders from our exploration of four communities at various stages of implementing creative placemaking for vacant properties. Local governments and practitioners can encourage successful art and cultural activities on vacant properties by partnering effectively with practitioners, building momentum with early wins, engaging the community in planning and participating in the projects, helping partners overcome regulatory challenges, and identifying a variety of funding sources.

With this report, Community Progress hopes to further the field of practice around creative placemaking for vacant properties. We hope to equip local leaders with the knowledge, systems, and tools to transform vacant lots in ways that support equitable revitalization. We encourage local leaders will use the learning summarized in this report to overcome barriers to creative placemaking and integrate it into vacant property plans in their own communities.



APPENDIX

2018 Learning Exchange and Interview Participants

Thank you to the participants and interviewees whose willingness to share their insights, experiences, and ideas made this report possible.

KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

Kristen Chesak, Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo
Shay Church, Kalamazoo County Land Bank
Kelly Clarke, Kalamazoo County Land Bank
Steve Dupuie, Edison Neighborhood Association
Fran Dwight, Artist
Mike Flynn, Byce Architects
Monica Harris, Bellydance Kalamazoo
Rebekah Kik, City of Kalamazoo
Laura Lam, City of Kalamazoo
Bob McNutt, City of Kalamazoo
Anna Roeder, Kalamazoo County Land Bank
Roger Schmidt, Local Building Owner
Belinda Tate, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts
Patricia Taylor, Kalamazoo Eastside Neighborhood Association
Tammy Taylor, Edison Neighborhood Association
Patty Townsend, Community Promise Credit Union
Adrian Vazquez-Alatorre, El Concilio

WILKINSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

Kevin Boyle, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
Dee Briggs, Artist
Darnell Chambers, FlowerHouse
Naomi Chambers, FlowerHouse
Jennifer Chenoweth, Fisterra Projects

Tracey Evans, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation

Marlee Gallagher, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation

Sallyann Kluz, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

Pamela Macklin, Borough of Wilkinsburg

Jason McKoy, McKoy Creative

Anne Elise Morris, Wilkinsburg Historical Society

Eric Parrish, Borough of Wilkinsburg

Joshua Rolón, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation

NEWBURGH, NEW YORK

Burke Blackman, Newburgh Community Land Bank

Ali Church, City of Newburgh

Madeline Fletcher, Newburgh Community Land Bank

Laura Genes, MIT

William Horton, City of Newburgh Fire Department

Diana Mangaser, Newburgh Community Land Bank

Kelly Schroer, Strongroom

Lisa Silverstone, Safe Harbors of the Hudson

Cher Vikers, Newburgh IDA

MACON, GEORGIA

Ethiel Garllington, Historic Macon Foundation

Alison Goldey, Macon Bibb Land Bank Authority

Cass Hatcher, Georgia Behavioral Health Services, Inc.

Christopher Logan, Loganic Arts

Alex Morrison, Macon Bibb Urban Development Authority

Lynn Murphey, Knight Foundation

J.R. Olive, Macon Arts Alliance

Sarah Tims, AF Farms

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