

# PLANNING

THE SCALES OF GENTRIFICATION  
 NEW ROCHELLE REDEVELOPMENT MODEL  
 THE ART OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT  
 A NEW DIRECTION FOR NATCHEZ



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# THE ART OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Planners and communities get creative with the planning process.

By ERICK MERTZ

BRIGHTLY COLORED PAINTS, string, modeling clay, and purple craft paper. Those aren't the traditional tools of a planning process. In fact, they seem more at home in an art class or at a craft show. But think again. What about using these supplies at a public meeting to plan a new park space or outreach campaign for a citywide transportation project?

Art means different things to different people, which is just one of the reasons why public art is so effective at engaging community members of all backgrounds. For many planning departments, art in the public sphere is becoming less of an end goal and more of the means to capture community members' imaginations and draw them into the broader planning process.

That was certainly the case in Fargo, North Dakota, where planners combined a stormwater management project with public art to serve the overlapping needs of ecological protection and bringing the changing community together. In Indianapolis, planners teamed up with local artists to tie transportation planning concepts to tangible, fun activities. And in Oklahoma City, murals do more than brighten up the neighborhood—they give residents a hands-on role in crime-prevention efforts.



*The Listening Garden in World Garden Commons at Rabanus Park, once a barren stormwater drainage basin in Fargo, North Dakota.*  
PHOTO BY RACHAEL ASLESON FOR THE FARGO PROJECT



Girls play on the slit-gong drums in *The Listening Garden* by Dwight Mickelson, one of the artists who engaged Fargo residents to help shape the World Garden Commons. PHOTO BY AMU PRODUCTION FOR THE FARGO PROJECT

## THE FARGO PROJECT

FARGO, NORTH DAKOTA, was dubbed by *Forbes* in 2014 as one of the fastest-growing small cities in the U.S. With 122,000 residents, it is the most populous city in the state. Though significantly smaller than many of the country's larger metropolitan areas, Fargo is experiencing many of the same pressures of urbanization—rapid development, gentrification, and population growth, including a steady influx of Chinese, Indian, and Nigerian immigrants and refugees—all while managing the considerable strain that urbanization places on the ecological sphere.

For Fargo and the surrounding areas, an effective system for draining floodwater from storms is an ongoing necessity for protecting roads and property. However, planning and development director

Nicole Crutchfield, AICB, ASLA, her team, and other members of the community noticed that their existing basin system was only seen as effective during times of heavy rainfall. The rest of the year the dry basins were stark, unattractive places that did little to build a sense of community, let alone accentuate native beauty by fostering wild or plant life diversity.

As a way of addressing this, a community team led by artists and ecologists hatched "The Fargo Project," an initiative that sought to serve the community's needs for ecological protection and connecting people with the land. Crutchfield and her team helped the group navigate the planning and city government processes. Funding came from a National Endowment for the Arts grant, Art Place America, and the Kresge Foundation, with a small match from the city's stormwater funds.

"The Fargo Project is about stormwater management," Crutchfield says. "But really, it's more about process . . . process of design, process of outreach, process of inclusion. Stormwater was the vehicle to change our outreach processes and mechanisms."

And the best part? It brought their diverse community together. Globally recognized New York City ecological artist Jackie Brookner, who led the project, developed a creative, bottom-up solution to build community interest through art.

"We started off by teaming up with artists in the community to reimagine our stormwater basins in the terms of neighborhood designs," Crutchfield says. "We wanted our artists to lead a process for the community, listening and learning about our cultural needs and issues to co-create this project with city and community leaders."



Fifth-graders use modeling clay to design features of the World Garden Commons. PHOTO BY MAEGIN ELSHAUG FOR THE FARGO PROJECT

The two-year grassroots process included a team of five local artists who had free reign to reach out in their own ways—riding buses, developing communication, or setting up shop at the YMCA.

Working together, artists and planners put together a series of public meetings aimed at involving a wide range of community members. Without outside-the-box thinking and engagement through art, Crutchfield says its likely they would not have been able to reach so many of Fargo's underserved citizens, particularly those not fluent in English.

The first installation of The Fargo Project was christened the World Garden Commons at Rabanus Park. Out of what had once been a barren storm-water drainage basin arose an ecological community commons that also serves as public space. Functional during the summer rain and flood seasons, a series of pathways and green spaces today connect the neighborhood to an aspect of their culture that had, until that point, been invisible.

"This process was crafted out of our creative placemaking process," Crutchfield says. "We worked with a lot of refugee populations, who are used to larger spaces." That meant they first had to help the stakeholder groups define beauty through this multi-cultural lens, and from there form a mutual understanding of the meaning of a public place. "Some of our refugee population didn't understand they could just go to a park and use that space," says Crutchfield. To talk about these community values and develop a common language, The Fargo Project group used art, including puppet shows and modeling with clay—activities that transcend language.

Indeed, one of the challenges in crafting plans that are responsive to communities' needs is one of familiarity, says Jack Becker, director of consulting and creative services for Forecast Public Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota, who consulted separately on Fargo's *Public Arts Master Plan*. Citywide plans in particular, he says, "may involve a few people directly, and the rest of the people don't know it's going on. They don't know that they get to participate too."

Becker has been a national leader in the area of public art for the last four decades. He envisions the future of public engagement as an exciting one, especially as planning processes flip from top to bottom to bottom up. In this view, artists serve as a primary point of engagement on everything from infrastructure to parks to transportation, all the way to public art master plans. His team works to make sure "there are processes in place to get 'unheard voices' to the table," he says.



*Hey Now* by Cassie Stover for Plaza Walls—a curated, rotating mural project in Oklahoma City's Plaza District.

## BETTER TOGETHER IN OKLAHOMA CITY

IN OKLAHOMA CITY, oversight of Arts Commission matters resides in the city's planning department. According to arts liaison and program planner Robbie Kienzle, this puts planners in a beneficial position. "It helps our planners provide meaningful input to different sectors," Kienzle says. "Whether that be transportation, neighborhood development, or economic development projects, people see the arts and cultural affairs office as a major tool for solving problems."

Kienzle points to the perception of crime, demonstrated by graffiti, broken playground equipment, and low lighting in a city park as an example. That might bring a presentation on crime prevention through environmental design to the community, Kienzle says. Planners can work with local artists with input from community members to develop murals to counter the perception of crime—images with people and faces and eyes. The community members are often very proud of the resulting public art and the part they played in realizing it, which often helps build capacity and enthusiasm around addressing problems because they've already accomplished major change and want to do more.

Indeed, murals are a significant aspect of the public art landscape in Oklahoma City—and they are also very cost effective. "You can spend a few thousand dollars commissioning a high-impact mural," Kienzle says, "and leverage change around what had often been viewed as a derelict property in the past."

Often, Kienzle relies on artists to reach out to community groups. "We do a lot of work on the front end of the process to educate and engage stakeholders about what is possible and the process to make it happen," she says. "And those stakeholders can then reach out to their constituency with confidence and pride."

That pride in the ownership of public art, Kienzle believes, has lasting benefits for planners because community engagement is critical for maintenance. "After the completion of a mural or other project, we have to know who is going to take care of the art. Engagement goes a long way in creating a culture of stewardship," Kienzle says. "People tend to support what they helped create."

## STRING AND PINWHEELS IN INDY

AS THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC ART at the Arts Council of Indianapolis, Julia Muney Moore directs projects where connection with the public is a critical aspect, both for community involvement and tone. So it comes as no surprise that she works a lot with city planners. "Artists are being used in planning processes all the time," she says.

One example is the *Broad Ripple Park Master Plan*, a 20-year effort to transform a signature park in Indianapolis.

The Parks Department consulted Moore about the wisdom of including artists on design teams, and the Broad Ripple Park process was the second time they had done so.

It's well known that people work better when they're engaged visually, so the team's artist used a stringboard to get citizens involved. It resulted in a map connecting the various aspects that the community believed were important.

"How these different elements connected told the planners how people's minds were working," Moore says. "The idea was to create a visual thread of thought, which was great because it allowed planners to reach beyond the usual public meetings."



Purple-and-white pinwheels came to symbolize the public participation progress for IndyGo's new Purple Line. This group made their pinwheels at the Tacos y Tacones Festival at the Avondale Meadows YMCA last summer.



PHOTO THIS PAGE BY OKLAHOMA MURAL SYNDICATE; FACING PAGE PHOTO BY W/PURPOSE

Everyone got a chance to contribute. Standing up, sitting down, regardless of language or disability," she says.

Moore recommends working with artists who come from the neighborhood where an art project is being planned. "It's ideal when they're already in touch with the goals of that neighborhood," she says.

She also recommends deploying the artists to meet the people where they are. "We like to see artists out there at farmers markets and community events," Moore says. "Places where people don't necessarily expect to be involved in a planning process."

More recently, the Arts Council engaged an artist in residence for the Indianapolis Public Transportation Corporation, better known as IndyGo, to help connect with the community around a series of new rapid transit lines that will be game changers.

Wil Marquez is a 40-year old artist who has, for the last 10 years, been on the cutting edge of developmental architecture and urban design. After receiving his master's degree in architecture from the University of Michigan, he taught at Ball State University. Ultimately, though, Marquez's passion brought him around to working in public spaces.

As an artist in residence working with IndyGo, Marquez appeared with the transportation organization whenever they had a public meeting, focusing on connecting the new Purple Line with the community.

"We felt we needed to bridge the gap between transit engineering and the questions of what these decisions meant to the public," Moore says.

Similar to the *Broad Ripple Park Master Plan*, Marquez's point of connection was visual. Most memorable were the purple pinwheels that came to symbolize the public participation process surrounding IndyGo's Purple Line.

Marquez was present at IndyGo's public meetings, helping facilitate and teaching people to make a pinwheel out of paper as they talked about their concerns. He also attended community events that were not associated with formally scheduled public meetings.

"By the time the conversation was over, they had this physical thing they could hold that represented what their engagement was in that conversation," Marquez says. "Soon these purple pinwheels were popping up everywhere, in windows and planter boxes."

"The pinwheel helped people visualize it," Moore said. "We got input and engagement from people who would never have gone to a public meeting." ■

Erick Mertz is a writer in Portland, Oregon.



Bayshore Boulevard in Tampa experienced some flooding during Hurricane Michael in October, despite being more than 300 miles from landfall in Florida's Panhandle.

## Putting a Resiliency Plan in Place

**R**ECENT EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS have alerted planning commissioners all over the U.S.—and the world—to the need for resilience, a term that is becoming a key element of the planning vocabulary. In the wake of Hurricane Michael, the state of Florida is particularly sensitive to the threat of hazards. Hillsborough County, where I am the executive director of the city-county planning commission, is continually taking steps toward greater resiliency.

### What is resilience?

The U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines resilience as “the capacity of social, economic, and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity, and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning, and transformation.”

Although the types of hazardous events in the U.S. vary, the planning required to overcome them generally remains the same. It includes cooperation and coordination by governments at all levels. That means involvement by public agencies within a planner's jurisdiction and in neighboring ones.

Taking measures to lessen the impact of known hazards is the first step toward preserving communities. The next step

is to identify vulnerable locations and to adapt social, economic, and environmental systems to respond to catastrophes. The ultimate goal is to minimize the long-term impacts of extreme events.

### What can governments do?

Every community should have plans in place to prepare for hazardous events that affect public safety. The general population should be informed about evacuation processes or the resources required to weather the storm, and the aid they can expect from local, state, and national governments. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the disabled, may require additional care and preparation. Populations with limited English skills may need additional guidance.

Resiliency planning addresses more than the potential loss of life and property that results from a disaster. It calls on

communities to reevaluate the existing infrastructure, land-use patterns, and public facilities that could be affected by a catastrophic event, particularly a repeat event.

An important factor for local, state, and regional governments to consider is a disaster's economic impact on a community. The faster an area recovers from the damage, the sooner businesses can reopen and begin the recovery period. Frequent disruptions in economic activity stemming from recurring events may indicate the need for a careful study of the area's vulnerabilities.

### The commissioner's role

Commissioners have multiple tools at their disposal to aid in resiliency planning. These tools range from local mitigation strategies, which can reduce or even eliminate risks, to capital improvement plans that can identify needed projects and options for financing them.

Perhaps the most important tools are comprehensive plans and long-range transportation plans. In 2015, the state of Florida enacted the Peril of Flood Act, which imposed new requirements for local governments to prevent flooding—including floods caused by sea-level rise.

The city of Tampa was one of the first local governments in the state to respond. Its location along Tampa Bay and the Hillsborough River makes it particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise even though much of the riverfront is given over to yards and public parks.

The local planning effort was aided by a vulnerability assessment based on sea-level rise projections for the area calculated by the Tampa Bay Climate Science Advisory Panel. The Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission, serving as project manager, worked with city staff and the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council to complete the assessment.

In 2017, the Tampa planning commission approved new comprehensive plan policies to bring the city into compliance with state law. It is now updating its

land-use codes and stormwater infrastructure plans.

Another useful resiliency planning tool for commissioners is a long-range transportation plan. Transportation systems are the backbone of a community. They facilitate the daily flow of jobs, commerce, education, and recreation. They are also key to maintaining security and emergency services in extreme weather conditions. Long-range transportation plans can direct federal and state infrastructure funding 20 years into the future.

An example of using an LRTP for resiliency planning is the transportation vulnerability assessment funded by the Federal Highway Administration in Hillsborough County. As part of the project, the county's Metropolitan Planning Organization included a performance measure in its long-range transportation plan. The measure calls for reducing the hurricane vulnerability of county roads to minimize economic loss.

Let's say, for example, that a Category Three hurricane hits Tampa Bay and disrupts major road networks, causing a huge loss in productivity and wages. With adequate planning to protect against flooding, the road recovery time could be shortened from eight weeks to three. According to the LRTP analysis, investing in mitigation measures could reduce the economic losses in Hillsborough County from \$266 million to \$119 million. Additional community savings are possible if mitigation projects are included with scheduled infrastructure upgrades.

### Takeaway

Resilience can be achieved through a combination of effective tools and agency collaboration. By identifying vulnerabilities and adapting systems to respond to unpredictable hazards, the impacts on a community can be reduced. Most important, communities will be better suited to adapt to a changing climate and other hazards in the future.

—Melissa E. Zornitta, AICP

Zornitta is the executive director of the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission.

PHOTO BY JAMES BORCHUCK/TAMPA BAY TIMES VIA AP

ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA 1922: BY R.C. MAXWELL COMPANY, WIKIMEDIA (CC BY-SA 3.0)

## HISTORY MAKING AN INDUSTRIAL CITY WALKABLE

In 1792, Pennsylvania acquired the Erie Triangle—a 300-square-mile tract bordering Lake Erie—with the aim of giving the commonwealth, and especially Philadelphia, a connection to Great Lakes commerce. Surveyor Andrew Ellicott laid out a fine street grid that would become the framework of the future city.

Today, the question facing Erie (and many other industrial cities) is how to adopt that grid to today's fierce challenges. The factories are mostly gone, and the city's population has shrunk from 138,000 in 1960 to about 98,000. State Street, the spine of the downtown retail district, is far less active than when I was growing up just beyond the city line in the 1960s.

Erie still possesses strengths. Charles Buki, principal of CZB planning consultants in Alexandria, Virginia, identified the city's best qualities in 2015 when he devised a revitalization strategy called *Erie Refocused*. The city's core, he wrote, reminded him of Savannah, and he started to think about inserting small parks into the grid east and west of State Street.

Today, Kathy Wyrosdick, AICP, the city's first planning director in decades, is looking for ways to carry out Buki's ideas, from narrowing traffic lanes downtown (notably on State Street) to restoring eroded sidewalks on the East Side. Her mandate is to take the Erie Refocused plan and “move the action forward.”

Erie business and civic leaders formed the nonprofit Erie Downtown Development Corporation. After raising \$27 million through an equity fund, the corporation recently purchased a series of contiguous, mostly three-story buildings—including some on State Street.

The upper stories will be redeveloped as apartments, says John Persinger, the organization's CEO. Ground-level spaces will get an upgraded set of commercial, restaurant, and retail occupants.

Recently, controversy has raged over whether the city should demolish or refurbish the McBride Viaduct, an overpass that for decades carried traffic over railroad tracks that divided the East Side in two. The deteriorated viaduct has been closed to vehicular traffic since 2010.

Erie's mayor, Joe Schember, has proposed demolition. But various citizen groups (aware of the success of New York's High Line) argue for rehabbing the structure for use by pedestrians, cyclists, and skateboarders. As of this writing, the viaduct's fate is being debated in federal court.

—Philip Langdon

Langdon is a writer in New Haven, Connecticut. He is the author of *Within Walking Distance: Creating Livable Communities for All* (Island Press, 2017).



The intersection of State and 9th Streets in downtown Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1922. The main retail district is much less active today.