CONTENTS

Our Contributors 4
About This Ebook 5
What If All Community Development Started with Local Arts and Culture? 6
Plaza Heralds New Era of Afrocentric Development in Seattle Neighborhood 9
A Divided Neighborhood Comes Together under an Elevated Expressway 12
Santa Fe Artist Housing Backers Hope Third Time’s the Charm 19
How One Museum Is Tackling Its Diversity and Equity Challenges 21
How the Creative Placemaking Tide Lifts All Community Boats 23
Formerly Incarcerated Women Sell Art to End Cash Bail 30
A Banner Year for San Francisco’s Filipino Cultural District 33
Conversations about Confederate Monuments in the Former Confederate Capital 35
New Mural Brings Spotlight to Chicago Bike Trail 37

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“Anybody who comes out here on a Sunday knows how this space is used for community. We just take it back with our feet, with our music, with our art.” — Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, speaking about the Claiborne Corridor, in New Orleans.

The journalism we have produced for the series “For Whom, By Whom” chronicles how creative placemaking can expand opportunities for low-income people living in disinvested communities. These stories give lie to the false narrative that such neighborhoods are home to violence and deprivation instead of talent, imagination and solutions. Here are communities that produce incredible feats despite being terminally under-resourced, and despite systemic neglect that has persisted for generations.

The writers who contributed to this collection report with curiosity and energy on all the ways that placemaking manifests in urban society — in museums, small-business corridors, urban farms, bike trails, affordable housing complexes, and under highway overpasses, among other transformed spaces. As each story unfolds, we hear an urgent, recurring question: Even with deep community engagement, how do you place-make responsibly and equitably for the people who should benefit, in a manner that prevents displacement and gentrification? Neighborhood improvements all too often spark additional development and attract the attention of profit-minded investors. But the hands-on work done in these communities provides a roadmap for how equitable placemaking can be replicated from city to city.

Many supporters made this ebook possible. The entire “For Whom, By Whom” series has been generously underwritten by the Kresge Foundation, and we thank them for their enthusiastic support.

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Finally, no thanks are enough for you, our members, who support Next City through your donations. As a nonprofit newsroom, we depend on reader contributions to fund not only our journalism, but our ebooks, special issues, events and webinar programming. When we are able to report on what works in one city, other cities will follow. To tell these stories, we need your support.

These stories inspire, and everyone could use some inspiration right now. In a world where your phone pings regularly with crisis alerts, we must continue to amplify this message: Change is possible, and it’s already happening. Pass it on.

Kelly Regan
Editorial Director
WHAT IF ALL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STARTED WITH LOCAL ARTS AND CULTURE?

Inclusive processes matter as much, if not more, than inclusive outcomes.

BY JARED BREY

The House of Gold before its “gentle demolition.” (Photo by Dee Briggs)
Dee Briggs was expecting to do a routine demolition when she bought the vacant house next to her art studio in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania.

But when Briggs walked inside for the first time, she found a bunch of personal effects left behind by the families that had lived there before it was abandoned. It got her thinking about the long series of lives that had moved through and past the house since it was built in the 1870s, she says, and a normal, quick demolition soon seemed inappropriate.

“It really put me in a position to think about the people who had lived there, their relationships with the people in the neighborhood and my relationships with the people in the neighborhood and what makes up a community,” Briggs says.

So instead of simply tearing the house down, Briggs enlisted a group of neighbors to paint it solid gold and later launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a “gentle demolition,” taking the building apart as carefully as it had been constructed. Now, years later, she’s using some of the former materials from the house to build a new coffee shop across the street. She hopes it will be a place that will bring people together and provide jobs for young people, something that will “add to the economic and social agency of my existing neighbors,” Briggs says.

At the time Briggs created the House of Gold, the term “creative placemaking” wasn’t in her lexicon, and she wasn’t trying to accomplish anything specific, says Briggs, a sculptor, and trained architect.

“It was more of a feeling, a sense of responsibility to the neighborhood, to the property, and to the history of the neighborhood [rather] than having a particular goal or intention,” Briggs says.

But creative placemaking is the label the project earned, according to a report from the Center for Community Progress and Metris Arts Consulting. The report, “Creative Placemaking on Vacant Properties: Lessons Learned from Four Cities,” highlights creative placemaking work focused on reactivating vacant spaces in Wilkinsburg; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Newburgh, New York; and Macon, Georgia. It documents initiatives in each city that used arts and culture as a vehicle to remake vacant properties in ways that also model inclusive community development.

“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 report says. “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.”

In Wilkinsburg, according to the report, around one in five properties is vacant, with nearly 40 percent vacancy in the business district. The town, which borders Pittsburgh, has a population of 16,000 — half what it was in the mid-20th century — and a median household income of $28,000. Two-thirds of its residents are African American.

“The central core of Wilkinsburg has so many vacant properties it doesn’t look like any place where people would want to live,” says Tracey Evans, executive director of the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation.

Partnering with students from Carnegie Mellon University and the Wilkinsburg Historical Society, Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation helped coordinate a Vacant Home Tour, partly inspired by the story of Briggs’ House of Gold project. The tour highlighted information about property histories and included a workshop where people could learn about acquiring vacant property through city programs. In the second year of the tour, the report says, the experience included recently completed rehabs to give attendees a sense of the possibilities. That tour inspired an upcoming tour of “sacred spaces” in the community.

“I think that activating a space in the short term to help improve the perception and the look of a community, to make it more welcoming, is incredibly important for us,” says Evans.

“There’s a lot about the Wilkinsburg community that people want to preserve, Evans says, like the diversity of people and of architecture. But there’s a lot of vacancy, too, she says, “and we don’t want to keep that.”

The creative placemaking report builds on a previous Center for Community Progress report called “Placemaking in Legacy Cities.” In 2018, the Center for Community Progress and Metris Arts Consulting hosted a “learning exchange” with the four cities in the new report and those featured in the earlier one, Detroit; Flint, Michigan; and the Twin Cities.

The projects highlighted in the new report emphasize cooperative processes as much as project outcomes, says Rachel Engh, a researcher/planner for Metris Arts Consulting.

“In addition to including the community throughout a project, the community then sees that as a normal practice or an expectation,” Engh says. “So when the community continues to change, as all communities do — and maybe that change includes outside developers
wanting to come in—there’s already that expectation on the ground that this is how we do the work.”

Wilkinsburg needs outside investment if it’s going to be improved, Briggs says, and if the creative placemaking work in Wilkinsburg can generate more interest from outside investors, she hopes it comes from investors who reflect its population.

“I’d love to see more real estate developers of color, people nationally who are African American, to invest in Wilkinsburg,” Briggs says. “I feel that, statistically, we know that black-owned businesses and black-owned real estate companies are more invested in supporting black employees and black renters than white business owners and white landowners and white property owners.”

Danielle Lewinski, vice president and director of Michigan initiatives for the Center for Community Progress, notes that the Center for Community Progress has been working on vacant land issues since its founding in 2010. For its latest research, it turned to creative placemaking as a strategy that helps generate interest among a wide sector of communities, says Lewinski, and can be effective in improving vacant properties.

“What’s particularly exciting to me about the role of creative placemaking is it’s really not just about how to occupy a single property,” says Lewinski, “but also the process of how, and who and what matters.”

This story was originally published on nextcity.org on August 30, 2018.
PLAZA HERALDS NEW ERA OF AFROCENTRIC DEVELOPMENT IN SEATTLE NEIGHBORHOOD

Placemaking strategy begins with art and an intentionally-designed public space, and new architecture guidelines for developers.

BY GREGORY SCRUGGS

Destiny Harris, who did her primary and secondary schooling in Seattle's historically-black Central District, adds a splash of green to the block-sized paint job at Midtown Center. (Photo by Gregory Scruggs)
Destiny Harris was one of over 200 volunteers who turned out on Sunday, July 8, to paint the walls and parking lot of the Midtown Center strip mall, a large parcel being redeveloped in Seattle’s historically-black Central District.

“I see my neighborhood getting torn down every day so I decided to help my community around me,” said Harris, who attended elementary through high school in the Central District. “It does feel more empowering to show people that we can build our community back the way it was.”

Once one of the only areas in the city where black families were permitted to buy homes or rent apartments, the Central District has faced a ton of change over the past few decades. The area’s black population dropped from a peak of over 70 percent in the 1970s to less than 20 percent today. The remaining black community itself has also changed, with Ethiopian restaurants just as likely examples of black-owned businesses as soul food spots.

At the Midtown Center parking lot, volunteers painted a kente cloth motif, referencing African diasporic roots extending from formerly enslaved persons to newer neighborhood arrivals from Ethiopia and other East African countries. Local artists painted “IMAGINE AFRICATOWN” on the walls facing the kente cloth parking lot. A collage of photos submitted by nearby residents covers the top of a “community coffee table” on the lot. On Saturday, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan cut the ribbon on the mural and street furniture installation, formally christened the “Imagine Africatown Pop-Up Plaza.”

The Central District’s black residents will be making their historic legacy and remaining presence known in a more permanent fashion, thanks to new design guidelines and community-led efforts to develop properties in the neighborhood, including the Midtown Center strip mall.

Africatown, a community land trust that owns 20 percent of the Midtown Center property, received a $1 million grant last month from the Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development. The grant promises to advance the land trust’s efforts to develop affordable rental, homeownership, and business opportunities in the Central District. Community land trusts are specialized nonprofits that take ownership of land usually for the purpose of renting or making housing or commercial and cultural space available for ownership at permanently affordable prices.

The intersection where Midtown Center sits, at 23rd and Union, once found itself at the center of the city’s gentrification debates after a flashy legal pot store opened on the same corner where police once harassed young black men who sold cannabis pre-legalization. The episode earned the area the label of “the most controversial block in Seattle.” (The store, it turns out, is owned by a Jewish businessman with his own roots in the Central District, which was a Jewish neighborhood before it was a black neighborhood.)

Founded by K. Wyking Garrett, a third-generation Central District resident, Africatown wants to reclaim the history of a neighborhood jazz scene that nurtured both Ray Charles and Quincy Jones, while also incorporating the thousands of immigrants from East African countries who have settled in the Seattle area in recent decades.

The stake in Midtown Center is the second property in the Africatown’s portfolio, which also includes a partial ownership stake in an affordable housing development a block away, on the former site of the first black-owned bank west of the Mississippi.

Future developments in the Central District, by Africatown or others, will all be subject to city-approved design guidelines that call for Afrocentric design standards for projects in the neighborhood.

“Africatown is pioneering this [approach],” says urban planner Nmadili Okwumabua. “The architecture will preserve their presence, the culture, the history, the story.”

Based in Atlanta, Okwumabua came to Seattle in July to give a lecture as part of a weekend effort to solicit design ideas for Midtown Center from local residents. Attendees talked about Afro-diasporic food, music, and festivals as amenities they hope for in the new development. Okwumabua made the case that brick and mortar is just as important as the arts and food.

“Architecturally it’s important that Africatown include [African influence] in their buildings — not just the festivals, the food, the music—the buildings as well,” says Okwumabua. “A thousand years from now archaeologists will ask who were these people and why did they do this?”

Meanwhile, Africatown’s resident engagement has already yielded design changes for Midtown Center from the for-profit developer who controls the other 80 percent of the property, including paving patterns and an art wall inspired by the recent mural installation; a proposed media wall on the public-facing corner with content covering neighborhood history; and increased public space that will give neighborhood residents a place to congregate like they customarily have at that corner of the property. (The for-profit side will also include over 400 units of affordable housing.)

There remains some neighborhood concern that this
80 percent of the Midtown Center property not owned by Africatown, which is further along in the development process, won't have commercial tenants that reflect the needs of the remaining black community. At a recent design review meeting, Lake Union Partners, the developer of the 80 percent, publicly committed to offering below-market rents to recruit black-owned businesses in the smaller retail spaces while charging a chain drugstore at or above market rate on the corner to subsidize the lower rents. But no leases have been signed, yet. The block is slated for demolition by the end of the year.

Although Africatown lags behind the faster pace of the for-profit developer, the non-profit group continues to build momentum. Perched alongside the city’s now ubiquitous blue-and-white land use signs heralding a new development, a new sign catches the eye with architectural renderings inspired by the fictional cityscape of Wakanda, from the comic-book-turned-blockbuster-film, “Black Panther.” Its message reads: “Coming Soon.”

This story was originally published on nextcity.org on August 7, 2018.
A DIVIDED NEIGHBORHOOD COMES TOGETHER UNDER AN ELEVATED EXPRESSWAY

Fifty years ago, New Orleans razed a thriving African-American business corridor to construct an elevated expressway. Now, the Claiborne Corridor community reimagines the space below as a hub of culture, commerce and play.

BY KATY RECKDAHL

A pop-up second-line procession along Claiborne Avenue, from July 2018. (Photo by Jamell Tate)
Where North Claiborne Avenue runs through the 7th Ward and Tremé neighborhoods of New Orleans, old men play dominoes, a farmer sells watermelons from the tailgate of his pickup truck, a young man washes cars and a man in checkered cook's pants walks alongside a woman in a hotel maid's uniform, both coming home from a day's work in the nearby French Quarter. All of this activity happens daily beneath the wide elevated highway that parallels Claiborne's street-level lanes.

For as far as the eye can see, the concrete pillars that hold up the elevated interstate are painted with the images of oak trees. It’s like a grove of concrete trees.

Once, there was a grove of real trees here. More than 300 massive live-oak trees, which stood in four rows along a wide grassy median on North Claiborne that served as a picnic and play area for the historically black neighborhoods around it. Before the highway went up in the 1960s, some 326 black-owned businesses also thrived along the stretch, making it a commercial and cultural destination for black families across the Deep South.

“It was drop-dead gorgeous, an oasis, a place to meet friends,” says Jessie Smallwood, 85, whose family often headed to Claiborne. “You were underneath trees. You knew people a block over.”

For nearly a half-century, people have mourned how this raised section of federal highway sliced through more than two miles of the city's historically black neighborhoods, dooming Claiborne Avenue's thriving business corridor. (Tulane's School of Architecture has an image gallery that juxtaposes before/after pictures of the Corridor.)

Today, the outermost pillars along this stretch of Claiborne Avenue are painted to look like trees, while about 40 of the inner pillars are the canvas for original paintings by some of the city's finest artists. They were created as part of a project called “Restore the Oaks,” spearheaded by painter and teacher Richard Thomas through the city’s New Orleans African American Museum of Art and Culture.

The result is an open-air art gallery that reflects the live oaks, people and culture of Claiborne Avenue, Tremé, the 7th Ward and New Orleans as a whole. Those strolling under the elevated highway on ground-level asphalt can walk past both Charlie Johnson's and Charlie Vaughn's images of Big Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana, the famed Black Masking Indian who lived a few blocks away. They can view a detailed image of a typical jazz funeral, painted in by Nat Williams, who works as a barber nearby.

“We were given sour lemons and what happened? We kept our culture. We evolved,” says Mona Lisa Saloy, a highly celebrated poet and English professor who is active in the neighborhood.

The pillars are just one of the ways that the neighborhood has sought to make the best of what was forced upon them. Whenever social aid and pleasure clubs pass underneath the highway, during funerals or Sunday-afternoon second lines, horns point upward and play a triumphant call-and-response flourish. Inadvertently, highway crews fashioning this concrete box created a makeshift urban cathedral that broadens a brass band's sound and sends it across the neighborhood. Saloy describes the effect as “joy multiplied.”

“It is the soundtrack of our lives and we are not letting it go,” says Saloy. Over the past few years, she and her neighbors have gone through a contentious debate over whether to keep what they collectively call “the bridge.”

But, instead of bringing in the bulldozers yet again, the concrete grove will remain in place according to a different vision—the recently released Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District Master Plan, rooted in the ideas and desires of residents.

Informed by a series of 11 design charrettes held with residents and architects from May 2017 to February 2018, the master plan sets out to beautify the corridor while increasing jobs and economic stability through innovations such as a marketplace built with green infrastructure, which will run within a 25-block segment of the corridor.

Cosmetic work on the corridor has already begun, as part of a demonstration phase made possible thanks to an $820,000 construction grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration, matched with operational support from Ford Foundation, Chase Global Philanthropy, Surdna Foundation, Kresge Foundation and Greater New Orleans Foundation. Through a contract with the city, fiscal sponsor Foundation For Louisiana has raised money and helped to form a separate entity, Ujamaa Economic Development Corporation, that runs the daily operations of the Claiborne Innovation Corridor. Construction on the public market is slated to begin early in 2019 and wrap up by that fall.

The community-organizing work, on the other hand, started long before the charrettes and will be necessary long after this demonstration phase of construction ends. Residents are determined to shape future phases of the corridor, claim a fair share of projected economic opportunities and prevent the widespread displacement of longtime inhabitants—a feared but too-frequent outcome of rising neighborhood investment.
**A PLAN DECADES IN THE MAKING**

As a native and current resident of the 7th Ward, Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes lives and breathes the history and culture reflected in the painted concrete pillars. Today, her office window looks out onto Claiborne Avenue and the concrete structure that divided her childhood neighborhood. From her vantage point, the artwork, parades and festivals are evidence of how the bridge's neighbors have incorporated the bridge into their lives.

“Anybody that comes out here on a Sunday knows how this space is used for community. We just take it back with our feet, with our music, with our art,” says DeVan Ecclesiastes, who has played a key role in crafting and implementing the new master plan, initially as the city’s program manager for the Claiborne Corridor and now as director of strategic neighborhood development at the New Orleans Business Alliance.

“We reclaim [the corridor],” she says. “And now this project is an effort to formalize that reclamation and to transform at the same time.”

An avid student of area history, DeVan Ecclesiastes also knows the larger arc of her project, which dates back 40 years. It's rooted in a landmark 1976 report called the I-10 Multi-Use Study, conducted by the Claiborne Avenue Design Team, which included noted African American leaders Rudy Lombard and Cliff James and was rooted in the activism of the Tambourine and Fan club, a neighborhood education and cultural group whose members, many of them children, traveled to City Hall to advocate for Claiborne Avenue improvements.

In the report’s introduction, Lombard, a gifted and influential writer, began: “We are no longer at home in our cities. They are too large and too disintegrated to reflect our humanity.” He decries how the freeway divided communities, untethering people from schools and each worker’s job, “which may have no noticeable relationship to his community or to the rest of his life.”

Lombard, like DeVan Ecclesiastes, believed that the structure that tore apart neighborhoods needed to be completely re-thought, to help spur a resurgence of the most elemental concept behind cities, which were once sought out because people realized that living near others had economic and cultural advantages. If done right, Lombard wrote, what was built underneath the concrete, car-centric edifice would promote biking, walking and interacting and cooperating with others, making cities once again “conducive to enjoyment of life.”

**TEAR IT DOWN … OR MAYBE NOT**

The corridor's renaissance is also tied to a post-Katrina period when it was a prime discussion point. For a while, during that time, demolition of the interstate above Claiborne seemed increasingly possible, at times inevitable.

The idea of demolishing this raised portion of Interstate 10 that follows Claiborne was included in some of the city's earliest rebuilding plans drafted after Hurricane Katrina. From there, two strange bedfellows latched on to the concept: preservationists who saw the freeway as a scar upon the urban landscape, developers who saw it as a real-estate boon.

The tear-down project was a no-brainer to John Norquist, then head of the Congress for New Urbanism and a former mayor of Milwaukee, who had removed a stretch of elevated highway in that city while in office.

“The data and analysis show that Claiborne doesn’t need to be a freeway,” Norquist said, referencing his group's 2010 report that had outlined why the expressway should be taken down. Included in the findings were state traffic data showing that the elevated section of Claiborne was basically being used as a shortcut between neighborhoods, for short trips that averaged only 1.6 miles.

At that time, the plan to tear down seemed like a slam-dunk for urban planners. In the fall of 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development jointly awarded the city of New Orleans a $2-million federal planning grant for a Claiborne Corridor Study with a goal to “reconnect a neighborhood divided by an elevated expressway.” Even today, some residents feel like the process, its design and its execution is out of their hands, because of undue influence from the project’s earliest champions, who came from influential sectors of the city.

New Orleans City Council Member Kristin Gisleson Palmer captured the sentiment of the time as she recalled her childhood experience with the raised expressway, at a December 2011 forum about the corridor hosted by the Congress for New Urbanism.

“I just remember driving with my parents and turning onto Claiborne. And then the sun was immediately blocked out. As a child, I remember thinking, ‘How horrible it that?’” Gisleson Palmer says. “And I think we all feel that way when we turn onto Claiborne — it’s the emotive response that this huge, monolithic thing elicits to us.”

Gisleson Palmer says that she didn’t think of the
process as reversible until after Katrina, when people began positioning demolition as part of the city’s recovery. “Sometimes you have to tear down to rebuild. This was one of those examples,” says Gisleson, who shifted gears once she heard that residents could not reach a consensus to demolish the structure.

As part of the 2010 federal grant, residents and stakeholders met for nearly a year. Among those who attended the workshops and planning meetings was Ed Buckner, 58, who lives nearby on Elysian Fields Avenue, where his house is the home base for both the Big 7 Social Aid and Pleasure Club and the Red Flame Hunters, a child-teen tribe of Black Masking Indians, commonly referred to as Mardi Gras Indians.

Buckner says that some people came to the meetings hoping to restore the glory days of Claiborne.

“IT’S NOT A THING OF BEAUTY BUT IT IS OURS”

Instead, Buckner and others seized on maintaining the culture that had continued to flourish on Claiborne even after the highway was built.

“It is not a thing of beauty, but it is ours,” Buckner says, explaining how, once the construction dust cleared, residents had returned to Claiborne to gather again, underneath the ugly concrete and steel. Old men once again played dominoes. Music rose. Black Masking Indians in bright feathers and intricately beaded suits chanted and struck their tambourines. People clowned around, discussed the day’s events and danced. Often someone drove up in a pickup that held a grill in the back and cooked a few rows of hot sausage and hamburgers.

When Saloy looked at the data assembled for Claiborne Corridor planning meetings, she wasn’t pleased with the level of traffic projected to travel along Claiborne at ground level if the freeway were demolished. With a grimace, she envisioned, the projected 10,000 cars jamming city streets, complete with 18-wheelers and rumbling dump trucks. Economic data was even more alarming, she says, noting that other cities had seen exponential increases in housing costs after freeways came down and were replaced by greenways, markets and new developments.

An instructive example would come later, from a few miles away, after St. Roch Market, damaged and shuttered after Katrina, reopened as an upscale food market in 2014. Taxes on nearby properties taxes tripled and even quadrupled, according to DeVan Ecclesiastes.

The results of those discussions were captured in the “Livable Claiborne Communities Study,” a report published after the workshops and meetings supported by the 2010 planning grant. That report contained multiple scenarios, some in which the I-10 overpass stayed and some in which it came down.

In the end, after the Livable Claiborne process was complete, it became clear, through surveys, focus groups and public discussions, that there was no consensus to demolish the bridge. Instead, neighbors opted to keep speculators and displacement at bay by holding on to their hulking overhead neighbor. “You take the monster away and it will be total gentrification. People will build things and they will not build them for us,” Saloy says.

It was a tough decision. For some, the deciding factor was the estimated $300-million demolition price tag, which was required to demolish the bridge structure and re-design the city streets that would carry re-routed traffic. People decided that they’d rather see that money spent to stabilize the existing neighborhood with jobs, transportation and flood protection.

“The split was about 50-50 between those who wanted the bridge to come down and those who didn’t,” DeVan Ecclesiastes says. “But 100 percent said that we need better jobs; 100 percent had environmental concerns; 100 percent said that we need to be able to stay here in this, our neighborhood.”

STABILIZE HOUSING
IMPROVE OUTCOMES,
PRESERVE CULTURE

To retain existing residents requires the kind of investment and economic opportunity that has long been absent in the communities that line the Claiborne Corridor. Though New Orleans is a majority-black city where minority-owned businesses make up 36 percent of all metro-area firms, those businesses only received 2 percent of all business receipts in 2012, according to a study by The Data Center.

The Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District Master Plan is expansive, going far beyond job creation, including proposals to provide residents with access to financial training, technical assistance, investors and expertise from more seasoned business people working in the same sectors as ambitious younger entrepreneurs. For instance, scholarships for a Community Development Finance certificate program at the University of New Orleans (UNO) provide a way for
neighborhood entrepreneurs to present their business plans to a group of potential investors.

The plan’s goals also include improved health and public-transit outcomes, with health outreach workers and small neighborhood vehicles called “circulators” that can pick up neighbors for doctor’s appointments.

Stormwater management was residents’ second-greatest concern. The plans show bioswales, holding ponds and rows of live oak and cypress trees. Notably, it also calls for development of a drainage system able to divert up to two million gallons of water annually into canals—from the profusion of water that pours like waterfalls off of the interstate during tropical rainstorms, flooding nearby neighborhoods.

The plan also calls for spaces for children to play and learn, and seeks to address housing through a range of proposed policies including an innovative mechanism that holds onto city-adjudicated properties within the corridor. Instead of being auctioned to private buyers and gentrification-fueling developers, the city would funnel the tax-delinquent properties to selected non-profit developers, who will repurpose them to add affordable housing to the neighborhoods.

Cultural preservation is pivotal, enmeshed within every goal for the Corridor.

“Keeping people here is the most important part,” DeVan Ecclesiastes says. She believes that the distinct culture of New Orleans’ black neighborhoods is also the key to innovating and creating opportunity, since it’s long been a fascination of filmmakers, artists, musicians, chefs and tourists from around the world.

The key is to make sure that those who create the culture of New Orleans can benefit from their talents, said Saloy. “We don’t build a culture to be tourist toys. It’s our culture. It’s a treasure.” New institutions such as the Black Masking Indian Cooperative are designed to help directly support musicians, artists, musicians, chefs and tourists from around the world.

The outsiders attracted by culture also bring income to the artists, performers, restaurants and hoteliers in the area. But that’s not the only outside money that culture can attract. It can also draw new investors and developers whose goals may align with existing residents—or not. DeVan Ecclesiastes has those investors on her mind, too.

THE ONGOING THREAT OF DISPLACEMENT

Demetrius Chapman, age 60, saved up earnings from her job at a childcare center and bought a house in 1976, three blocks from the elevated Claiborne expressway, which is visible from her front porch. “It’s been the family house ever since I bought it,” she says.

In addition to her late mother, various siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews have stayed here for years at a time. They worked jobs in nearby kitchens, schools and clubs while helping Black Masking Indians sew, helping to run social aid and pleasure clubs and playing in local jazz bands.

Despite their importance to the local culture, no one in the Chapman family has become rich from these jobs. Most work in the low-wage tourist economy.

“Our culture-bearers make the culture we know possible,” DeVan Ecclesiastes said. “But so many of them work in the service industry or the gig economy, which doesn’t offer lots of potential for growth.”

A few years ago, to pay rising tax bills, the Chapman Family fired up their kitchen stove and began selling plate dinners: $10 for a plate loaded with fried fish, stuffed bell peppers, potato salad, green peas, a triangle of white bread and a brownie.

That sort of fundraising became necessary when, all around the Chapmans’ home, the neighborhood began changing rapidly. Since Tremé is bounded by the French Quarter on the side closest to the Mississippi River, Airbnbbs have proliferated here. Though Tremé families used to stay in homes for generations, only a smattering of those intergenerational households remain. That makes the Chapmans a rarity.

“Ask anyone here, they’ll tell you, ‘Those people have been there forever,’” says Chapman.

As the neighborhood has gentrified, bringing with it rising property taxes and an increase in speculators, keeping these homes hasn’t been easy for the Chapmans and other longtime residents.

Last year, the Historic District Landmark Commission (HDLC), which oversees the exterior architecture of the city’s historic neighborhoods, issued the Chapmans a “demolition by neglect” citation, which means that a section of the structure has been neglected to the point that the Commission’s staff believes that the entire building could deteriorate if repairs aren’t made. The notice has thrown the Chapman family into a state of worry because it means that they could lose their home.

So far, the HDLC has granted an extension. But the family still frets every day. Once a demolition-by-neglect citation is issued, the Commission can levy daily fines against the property owner. If the fines go unpaid and the work isn’t completed according to HDLC standards, the Commission can hire a contractor to complete the work and place a lien on the house, against the amount of the fines and repairs.
For DeVan Ecclesiastes, keeping families like these in their homes is a critical part of cultural preservation along the Claiborne Corridor. She is working with community partners such as Housing NOLA and with the city’s Department of Code Enforcement to strategize and implement larger fixes. But at this point her approach is also granular: she attends individual hearings and makes phone calls whenever she gets wind of a similar situation.

“It takes the same kind of commitment it takes to sew an Indian suit,” DeVan Ecclesiastes says. “You have to keep your eye on every little bead and be so dogged every day.”

Part of what keeps her going is the stories behind the households that are now struggling. Until Gloria Chapman, Demetrius’ mother, died 10 years ago, she frequently stuck her head out of the back kitchen window. “My mom was a person who thought that every child in the neighborhood was her child,” Chapman says.

When Gloria Chapman was done cooking, she and other family members liked to retire to the house’s front porch, elegantly constructed with beautiful turned columns and a pretty frieze of carved-wood decorations that line the top of the porch.

Today, the porch-sitting tradition continues. Other neighbors tell their children to walk home on a route that passes the Chapmans’ corner, because someone will always be there to watch them. “If we’re not out here on the porch, the door will be open, looking out onto the street,” Demetrius Chapman says.

The orange double-shotgun house with its well-known porch looks out onto Ursulines Avenue. Even beyond the architecture, the porch has become a cultural icon in its own right. For 35 years, it has been the first stop for the Sudan Social Aid and Pleasure Club during the club’s annual parade, in November. Crowds gather outside to hear the brass band and watch club members in colorful outfits dancing up and down the house’s two sets of front steps and onto the broad front porch.

Last year, with great regret, the family told club members that termites had weakened the support beams, putting the porch into disrepair and making it unsafe to dance on. The club still paid respects by making its first stop at the house. But, for safety reasons, the family strung yellow tape between the porch columns to mark it off-limits for second-lining.

In the HDLC citation, the family was ordered to repair a list of violations, all of them porch-related. But working low-wage service jobs doesn’t bring in the money to repair the posts, railings, floorboards and termite-damaged beams with the required craftsmanship and the cypress wood and other historic materials that are mandated to bring the porch to HDLC standards.

The citation notes that an anonymous “citizen” was the source of the complaint. The Chapmans see that person as a vulture of sorts; shortly before they received the citation, they say they saw a local real-estate investor standing on the corner, snapping photos of their home.

“That’s common,” says DeVan Ecclesiastes. “Someone who wants your house can call HDLC or Code Enforcement to complain about you and in short time, your house can end up on the auction list [for city-adjudicated properties].”

Not long after the citation arrived, a realtor left a note on their front door, asking if they were interested in selling. Larry Bruce, 60, who has lived in the house since he married Valerie Chapman in 1992, replied with a note. “I told him that this is a family home and that it is not for sale. We are keeping it for future generations,” Bruce says.

**THE STIRRINGS OF CHANGE**

DeVan Ecclesiastes likes to recall a short story about an imaginary town where white folks at first want the land in the mountains, then the beachfront from one generation to another. The black people who live in “The Bottoms” – the undesirable land — first live on the beach but then are forced to the mountains, then back to the beach to make way for the whims of their wealthy white neighbors.

“That’s the story of black neighborhoods in America,” she says. It also alludes to the history of the Claiborne Corridor. “But our next chapter is still being written,” she says. “And this time with a commitment to equity.”

Earlier this year, bridge pillars and girders near the intersection of Orleans Avenue were painted with fresh new murals in anticipation of what’s to come. Just past the paintings, at the point where North Claiborne intersects with the new **Lafitte Greenway**, a prototype hints at the future. There, a brightly painted shipping container called **Veggie Nola** is a food stall serving Bissap Breeze fresh juices and packaged snacks on demand along with pre-prepared salads and food, ordered in advance. Veggie Nola is a catering company owned by New Orleans musician and herbalist Tyrone Henry, who also runs Bissap Breeze, a successful hibiscus-tea manufacturing company.

For Henry, who grew up in the area, this fledgling market is part of his dream. Soon, he said, his shipping
container will be joined by other neighborhood entrepreneurs including his colleague, Gary Netter, who will work with other retailers to create “Backatown Plaza.”

Beyond the healthy food he sells, through his business, Next To Eat, Netter is able to provide technical assistance and commissary-kitchen services to other culinary businesses in the plaza, once electricity and plumbing infrastructure are added to the site.

That would mean that Henry could also sell prepared food from his catering company, also called Veggie Nola.

Henry said he’s particularly encouraged by conversations he’s had with his customers, who range from people who have never left the city to those who have traveled the world. “The way I see it, it is a learning tree. And the tree I’m talking about is the community. It’s like a tree, even though it’s underneath the bridge,” Henry said.

Smallwood believes the orange shipping container is a small harbinger of the larger successes to come. “You can’t undo what’s done. They’re not going to replant the trees,” she says. “My position is that we should make the best of the talents that are already there. We should be asking residents, ‘What are your dreams? Can those be put into place?’”

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SANTA FE ARTIST HOUSING
BACKERS HOPE THIRD
TIME’S THE CHARM

The developer and artist overseeing the project calls the obstacles to low-cost working space “huge.”

BY EMILY NONKO

Siler Yard would add 65 units of live-work space for artists in Santa Fe, but it’s been slow going thus far. (Design by Atkin Olshin Schade Architects, Trey Jordan Architecture, da Silva Architecture, and Surroundings Studio. Visualization by Go West Projects.)
In the early days of 2019, a proposal for affordable artist housing in Santa Fe, New Mexico, went before the City Council—again.

At the meeting, the city of Santa Fe re-committed $2.1 million (which included land valued at $1.3 million) for the $16.3 million, 65-unit project on the former site of the city’s sewage treatment plant. It was a good sign the project’s third application to the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority, which previously declined to offer tax credits to the project.

“I’m glad you are going forward with this again,” City Councilor Chris Rivera told Daniel Werwath, the project’s lead developer, at the meeting. “I think this is going to be our year.”

Werwath also hopes 2019 will be the year his passion project, known as the Siler Yard: Arts+Creativity Center, will finally come to fruition. Werwath is chief operating officer of New Mexico Inter-Faith Housing, as well as an artist, so he knows more than most about the importance of affordable housing for artists.

He also might know more than most about the difficulties in building it: he first proposed affordable artist housing for Santa Fe in 2005.

“From my own experience as an artist and craftsman, the obstacles to low-cost working space in Santa Fe are huge,” he says. “We don’t have a big, abandoned warehouse district, and houses here are small.”

His idea found community and city support but in the process of negotiating land, the economic downturn hit and put an end to the plan. Then, in 2011, the nonprofit Creative Santa Fe kickstarted its own process to build affordable artist housing, and Werwath eventually joined the team.

Creative Santa Fe took on the challenge after their own outreach revealed a growing need for affordable housing. “We found our young creative people were leaving because there was not enough,” says Cyndi Conn, the group’s executive director.

Four years ago, the city and Creative Santa Fe released a request for proposals to secure a local developer, bringing Werwath on board. That was followed with a search for a locally led design collaborative.

As the team came together, funding remained a challenge. “We have been fighting,” Werwath says, “to fit this very non-conventional project into very conventional funding sources.”

The obstacles are significant. The state tax credit program selection criteria awards more points to projects using less subsidy. Since the Arts+Creativity Center would be in a high-cost area, it is at a disadvantage. The ambitious design also brought up costs. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts allowed the team to carry out an intensive, inclusive engagement process including all stripes of Santa Fe creatives, from a rock musician to Native American ceramicist to lowrider car artist.

“We started looking at how to re-invent live/work housing,” says Shawn Evans, one of the project architects. The collaborative came up with a transformative proposal for the former sewage treatment plant, with eight residential buildings rising two or three stories with a range of bedroom configurations.

Every home features high ceilings and an attached work studio. Large windows lining community rooms look out to a centralized “spine” which connects a plaza and playgrounds. A shared resource center will be part makerspace and part workforce development.

“The design reflects what [the team] was hearing from people,” says Alexandra Ladd, director of Santa Fe’s Office of Affordable Housing. “But we’ve had counselors concerned that if there’s public investment, the dollars should be stretched as far as they can possibly go.”

At the January City Council meeting, tensions arose when a counselor questioned what he felt was a high subsidy for just 65 units. Ladd wanted to get away from the notion that “you can make each unit less expensive [by building] more units,” she said at the time, adding that “we are taking big steps away from the idea that you warehouse poor people.”

As the city and state weighed in on subsidies, the Arts+Creativity Center team got increasingly creative in securing funding. Energy efficiency was an early priority, but the tax credit program stopped offering points for green building, Werwath says.

But as the cost of solar dropped, the team took a second look at building sustainability last year. The future energy savings would significantly reduce operational costs, they found. To help offset the cost of installation and lower their need for subsidy, they pitched a fundraising campaign to locals.

“There was a huge response to building affordable housing and climate change intervention,” Werwath says. In two months they raised over $350,000.

Conn believes this project can be a prototype for tackling Santa Fe’s affordable housing need in more creative ways. According to the city’s Office of Affordable Housing, Santa Fe’s market lacks at least 2,400 units to serve renters earning less than 50 percent of the area median income.

The goal, however, should be facilitating projects at a faster pace, Conn says. “We still need to figure out a lot of other ways to build affordable housing in our city short term,” she adds. “If it takes eight years to build 65 units, we’re never going to solve the problem.”

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HOW ONE MUSEUM IS TACKLING DIVERSITY AND EQUITY CHALLENGES

“I think that the field is recognizing that the three words, diversity, equity and inclusion all mean different things and they’re not interchangeable.”

BY AUDREY F. HENDERSON

From left to right: Jovonna Jones, Nanette Yannuzzi, Edi Dai, Claire Schwartz, Key Jo Lee, Oana Sanziana Marian, and Kenturah Davis view works in the Donna and James Reid Gallery at the Cleveland Museum of Art. (Photo by McKinley Wiley, courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art)
Like many cultural institutions in the country, the Cleveland Museum of Art did not reflect the demographics of the city in its staffing or in its patronage, according to Cyra Levenson, deputy director and head of public and academic engagement at the museum.

According to the 2015 American Community Survey, approximately 390,584 people lived within the city of Cleveland: 51 percent were African American, 34 percent Caucasian. The remaining 15 percent belonged to other minority groups, including a rapidly increasing Latinx population.

“Our field has been recognizing like many other fields that diversity and equity have been a challenge historically,” Levenson says.

Levenson points out a landmark 2015 report from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that documents how, across the field of cultural institutions, senior leadership is predominantly white. The gap has been closing and there are more women in leadership positions, but not in the largest institutions. “[The report] galvanized many efforts that have already been in place to think about how to address the institutional and staffing issues that have led to less diverse institutions,” Levenson says.

That report, along with feedback from visitors to the museum, provided the inspiration that eventually led to this month’s unveiling of “For the Benefit of all: the CMA’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan.” Along with the museum’s comprehensive strategic plan, “Making Art Matter,” the plans encapsulate the museum’s commitment to becoming more representative of its city, according to Levenson.

The two-year process of drafting the museum’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan involved several steps and input from a variety of stakeholders.

One of the major aspects of the plan was developing working definitions for “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion.”

“I think that the field is recognizing that the three words, diversity, equity and inclusion all mean different things and they’re not interchangeable,” Levenson says.

The report defines diversity as, “the characteristics that make one individual or group different from another, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, educational status, marital status, language, age, and mental or physical ability. Also, the interactions among individuals that shape ideas, perspectives, and values.”

Equity is defined as, “the outcome of policies and actions that create a more diverse and inclusive institution that reflects its community.”

The report defines inclusion as, “the confrontation of historical exclusion based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status by bringing those affected into institutional activities and decision-making to address disparities, increase awareness, and foster understanding.”

While the final plan was enthusiastically received by the board and embraced by the staff, the process of drafting the plan did not involve lockstep consensus, according to Levenson.

“We had very, very healthy and honest conversations along the way of the work that we need to do,” she says.

The final section of the 19-page plan lays out a series of action points that the Cleveland Museum of Art plans to undertake within the next two years. These include items such as adding exhibits by women artists and artists of color; creating a fellowship for graduate students to research and document Cleveland Museum of Art acquisitions; curating a collection of art by African American artists for ArtLens, the museum’s mobile app, as well as creating a dedicated web page for African American artists.

A $368,400 grant, from the Ford Foundation and Walton Family Foundation’s joint initiative on diversifying museum leadership, will fund the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Diversity Leadership Initiative, a program for undergraduate student guides, graduate student fellowships and scholars-in-residence programs at the museum. A $368,520 Cleveland Foundation Grant will fund the Curatorial Arts Mastery Program (CAMP) for high school students. Both grants will also fund two national conferences to be held at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Cleveland Museum of Art, which has a staff of approximately 500, has also implemented a requirement for developing a diverse candidate pool for every open position, effective immediately. In addition, a board committee was tasked with assessing the contracts and the contractors to ensure that minority and women-owned businesses are included in the museum’s vendor pool.

“We’re trying to create structural change. And so that requires setting [processes] in motion so that we are becoming as inclusive as possible and not simply doing business as usual,” Levenson says.

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HOW THE CREATIVE PLCEMAKING TIDE LIFTS ALL COMMUNITY BOATS

In the fight against gentrification, these placemaking programs activate community networks and help artists and residents lay down economic roots.

BY JAMES A. ANDERSON

High school students from Chicago’s Washington Park neighborhood contribute to Sweet Water Foundation’s aquaponics program. (Photo courtesy of Sweet Water Foundation)
On a Sunday afternoon in June, with the temperature well above 80 degrees, the Perry Avenue Commons on Chicago’s South Side bustles with a remarkable amount of activity. By the end of a warm weekend, you’d expect things to be winding down. But six or so volunteers and mentors tend vegetable plots of kale and leafy greens at one end of a four-block-by-four-property, part of a commercial farm and community garden managed by the nonprofit Sweet Water Foundation. A group who met at the commons for the women’s retreat earlier in the day wraps things up. Meanwhile, a half-dozen locals share recipes in the kitchen of the Think-Do House, a structure Sweet Water began to transform five years ago into a meeting place for workshops. Once upon a time in the early 20th century, the building was a reform home for delinquent boys.

A couple attending church service nearby peeks in the community garden to marvel at the goings-on. These newcomers are drawn toward the commons with a curiosity borne not only from seeing people milling about the grounds, but because of the 50-foot barn that leaps out of the sightline. The structure is a surprise on two accounts. First, because it appears in a part of town where overgrown abandoned lots are typically punctuated only by the sporadic tree, or a handful of boarded-up houses. Second, as history buffs will note, this happens to be the first barn raised within city limits since the infamous legend of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow and the devastating fire that burned through much of Chicago in 1871.

Sweet Water Co-Founder and Executive Director Emmanuel Pratt calls all the activity that abounds here part of his regenerative development strategy. “We’re investing in human infrastructure,” he says. “We are creating a place that feels like home for a population that has been displaced, and food is one of the starting points to trigger memories that are at the root of people’s identity.”

Pratt stresses the fact that the commons were built not so much as a showpiece but as a catalyst to spark a variety of teaching and nurturing activities. The farm and gardens, by Sweet Water’s estimates, feed more than 200 residents weekly. The headcount of leaders and students fluctuates during the course of the year. A core team of 12 works year-round to coordinate—and balance—mentoring, planting, building, teaching and event-planning. From there, the organization can take in eight to 15 work-study students from Chicago-area colleges and high schools, along with a bumper crop of mentors and volunteers that show up in the summer. The organization also works with another 30 to 40 teens as part of a training program in conjunction with the Chicago Housing Authority.

Sweet Water is something of an anomaly in the world of creative placemaking, where art is the catalyst that drives community development. Practitioners typically use murals, spoken-word performances, music, dance and other art forms to draw people together, articulate issues, rally support and ultimately give neighborhoods and communities both the agency and capacity to change. Target issues range from housing to health, economics, education and more. The work makes a statement both within the community and to the world beyond the confines of that community.

Such programs frequently spark a jolt of life that, over time, makes previously downtrodden neighborhoods alluring to outsiders. It may begin as a boon—an economic upswing for existing restaurants, shops and other businesses. But ultimately, the groundswell attracts outsiders who can move in, bid up real estate and price longtime residents and businesses out.

The question of just how to execute creative placemaking without inviting gentrification sits at the forefront of creative placemaking circles. Jamie Hand, a researcher for ArtPlace America, says the friction between placemaking’s benefits and the onrush of gentrifying forces has happened frequently enough to spark vigorous discussion and dialogue on the efforts to walk a tightrope between uplift and displacement of the community.

One camp argues that for creative placemaking to be successful, efforts must generate an economic benefit for participating artists. “Linking arts to employment is at the leading edge of creative placemaking,” says Patrick Horvath of the Denver Foundation, a funding organization. “What we see is the potential for art in the community to act as an economic anchor. When we work to redevelop places, we invest in design to enhance the experience, but it can also create jobs for people in the neighborhood.”

Ultimately, placemaking must begin and be sustained with grassroots involvement. As Juliet Kahne, director of events and education for the Project for Public Spaces, writes in her essay Does Placemaking Cause Gentrification? It’s Complicated:

“Placemaking is a tool that connects community members to physical changes within their neighborhood, as well as to each other; it can help tackle the divisive, top-down, neighborhood change that is often associated with gentrification. It’s the importance of creating places that benefit everyone — places that connect existing residents, instead of dividing, alienating, or displacing them, and places that enhance the existing character of a
neighborhood, instead of erasing it. Rather than watching passively as non-local or private developers consume neighborhood public spaces, we can use placemaking to enable citizens to create their own public spaces, to highlight the unique strengths of their neighborhoods, and to address its specific challenges. While gentrification can divide communities and build upon exclusivity, **Placemaking is about inclusion and shared community ownership.**

In the case of Sweet Water, the key lies in reconnecting neighborhood residents to the land, and in building relationships that extend within Washington Park and outward to the world. In this feature, Next City digs into how Sweet Water has activated and engaged the surrounding community. And how other groups, in suburban Boston and Denver, leverage entrepreneurship and education as the means to strengthen target groups in the face of change.

**ON CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE, THE DEEP ROOTS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE**

Sweet Water has launched an extensive effort to teach the fundamentals behind a wide variety of its projects, including sustainable science, agriculture, design and carpentry. Besides the farm, garden, barn and meeting center, Sweet Water has built a customized greenhouse that serves as a carpentry workshop and makerspace. There’s also a pod made out of what was previously a shipping container for concentrated grape juice that has been repurposed as a grow-space classroom.

In many ways, Sweet Water started down a path that roughly parallels Pratt’s career in architecture, design and agriculture. Pratt, who has a bachelor’s in architecture from Cornell and a graduate degree in urban design from Columbia, has already led Sweet Water through a period of organic growth into several quite different, but interrelated projects. The organization launched about the same time Pratt created and ran an aquaponics department for Chicago State University. He secured funding to install demos of small sustainable aquaponics environments at schools in Chicago and in Milwaukee — connected installations that displayed the balance of fish and plant life and their ability to cycle the necessities of life (carbon dioxide, oxygen, water and nutrients). The U.S. Department of Agriculture took interest in the aquaponics project as well as urban farming prompted Pratt to think both within and beyond the classroom at the same time. He approached the city of Chicago about starting a farm and in time, those talks opened the way to Perry Avenue, an abandoned house and the four plots of land that Sweet Water took over.

While the group’s bedrock is a two-acre farm, under Pratt’s direction, Sweet Water took a turn from its education and farming roots into art and design installations as a way to better publicize the broad range of its work and vision. The carpentry and design enterprise manufactures furniture out of discarded wood pallets and glass that local contracting firms or the Chicago Transit Authority would normally pay to be sent to landfill. Sweet Water donates the tables, chairs and benches to open spaces in the area, and includes their creations in museum installations to promote the group’s work. They even build made-to-order pieces on commission.

In 2017, Pratt unveiled an exhibit at Chicago’s Smart Museum entitled “Radical [Reconstructions],” made up of several pieces. One was the representation of a house made of salvaged wood, which apprentices at Sweet Water charred using a traditional Japanese technique. An exhibit of Sweet Water furniture designs also appeared at the same time in the museum’s sculpture garden. Sweet Water has also installed its designs at Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Pratt, meanwhile, has served as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan’s architecture school.

Sweet Water still has a hand in education, both in training young people in basic agriculture to work on the farm and in woodworking, “We started things out with our community garden, and then realized that we needed to build more infrastructure,” Pratt recalls.

Even as Sweet Water makes inroads in the Washington Park and Englewood neighborhoods that constitute its home base, Pratt senses the threat of gentrification. While not immediate, it remains a distinct possibility, and one that’s likely to arrive sooner rather than later given what has occurred on Chicago’s South Side over time. The area abounds with anchor institutions that, while a bit beyond walking distance from Perry Avenue, could still spark a land rush. Less than 15 minutes away by car are The University of Chicago and its medical center, as well as the Obama Presidential Center, slated to open in 2020. And Pratt’s Perry Avenue farm is less than five blocks from the Dan Ryan Expressway, making it essentially a 15-minute commute to the Loop.

The mortgage crisis of a decade ago was particularly hard on South Side neighborhoods, driving home prices down and African-Americans out. The city’s black population dropped more than 20 percent, from nearly 1.1 million in 2000 to 840,000 in 2016.
And Sweet Water’s immediate neighborhood is mired in a struggle that is decades in the making. A 2010 University of Illinois at Chicago study summarizes what Washington Park still faces, compared to more affluent Hyde Park, the neighborhood surrounding the University of Chicago. Washington Park’s population has steadily shrunk over the past half-century, from 46,024 in 1970 to less than 12,000 in 2016. Neighborhood residents are 94 percent African American. The yearly median income for families is below $25,000 a year, compared to $51,430 in Hyde Park. In Washington Park, 43.5 percent of families live below the poverty line, compared with 11.4 percent of families in Hyde Park. Under 20 percent of adults in Washington Park have a college education.

Pratt characterizes his work as an effort to recreate the immediate community’s many interwoven relationships and sufficiencies from the grassroots. He characterizes the connections forged from Sweet Water’s disparate projects — the farm, the apprenticeships, the installations and even big celebrations the organization holds such as its day-long Juneteenth festival — as mycelia, the almost invisible filaments that join together forest fungi and mushrooms into extensive colonies that represent the world’s largest organisms. Here, the vast unseen network is comprised of relationships. Pratt posits the example of a high schooler who signs on as an apprentice, someone whose world experience before Sweet Water probably extends no further than a 10-block radius around home. By working with mentors, conducting tours and presentations, leading workshops, coming in contact with graduate students from Harvard, or leaders from the Urban Farming Institute, the same South Side teen now easily gains direct contact and relationships with more than 1,000 people.

**AN INCUBATOR FOR IMMIGRANT FOOD ENTREPRENEURS**

Just outside Boston in Somerville, Massachusetts, the local arts council has landed on a crafty way to hitch creative placemaking to the ever-expanding foodie boom. In this venture, immigrant chefs gain a stake in the game.

The program, called Nibble, grew out of walking tours of Union Square, a downtown area where 10 or so international markets had sprung up selling food from India, Brazil, Central America and other points around the globe. Nibble Program Director Rachel Strutt says the culinary walking tours seemed like a natural outgrowth of gallery walks or other ways to generate interest in local arts, while bringing together groups in greater Boston to commingle over a universal interest: good food.

Strutt says the walking tours were so popular that the arts council brainstormed additional ways to capitalize on the momentum. Nibble started with a blog to chronicle the stories of chefs, share recipes and spread the word about the ways local markets connected with groups around the world. It culled favorite recipes of local international chefs in a 130-page book that’s filled with stories, art and interviews about global cuisine and culture. Nibble also organized cooking classes marketed to yuppies and hipsters; at between $35 and $50 a ticket, it was a bargain compared to nearby adult-learning locations.

As these promotions stirred up interest, Strutt says several cooking instructors asked about establishing more permanent culinary careers and even opening restaurants. It was clear, she says, that entrepreneur workshops were a natural next step. “We had all these great cuisines and chefs who had something to share, so it made sense,” she says. The curriculum focuses on the facets of starting and running a successful restaurant. One session covers promotion and marketing, while others focus on pricing and developing the type of replicable yet delicious recipes that are a cornerstone of a busy establishment.

“This type of workforce development aims to reduce the barriers that exist in taking a food business from dream to reality,” says Strutt. “Our program is a hybrid that marries workforce and entrepreneurial development with cultural programs. Our graduates are doing things like catering, teaching cooking classes or even helping us set up festivals.”

Nibble has an even bigger project on deck: A 420-square-foot kitchen vending space under construction in downtown Somerville. Nibble Kitchen will feature seven graduates of the program’s entrepreneur classes, each scheduled to run the restaurant in one-day shifts during the week. Strutt envisions a menu that will change cuisines daily, from Ethiopian to Mexican to Indian to Venezuelan fare, and beyond.

ArtPlace finds that culinary projects tap into a number of cultural trends. Food, after all, is a storehouse of memories, events and lore, a glue that binds people together. The foodie craze has swept into the American landscape with farmers markets, local production, agricultural tourism, community gardens and food festivals across the states. Food trucks are parked from coast to coast, and millennials regularly flood Instagram with snapshots of their meals. A Kresge Foundation announcement for Fresh, Local and Equitable funding generated a rousing 500 applications from across the
Nibble fits quite well within Somerville. Just north-west of Boston proper, the city is a community of just over 81,000 people and home to Tufts University. It is densely populated—32,000 households packed into 4.2 square miles. Somerville has long welcomed immigrants. Starting around 2000 new waves of immigrants from Haiti, Brazil and Nepal arrived, and the city is now home to thriving Caribbean and Latinx communities. Presently, almost 25 percent of the city’s population was born outside the U.S. As an active sanctuary city, Somerville has established an office of immigration affairs and started a legal defense fund with neighboring Cambridge earlier this year to help with immigration, DACA and even deportation issues.

Somerville takes pride in its civic gourmandise and its culinary lore. The city is home to Fluff, the sticky marshmallow confection still stocked on grocery store shelves from coast to coast, and the focal point of the “What the Fluff?” food festival each September, which takes place in Union Square not far from Nibble’s future restaurant. Residents celebrate that and any number of other delicacies in as many as five outdoor food festivals during warm-weather months, including the Ignite Global Street Food and Fire Festival and YUM: A Taste of Immigrant City, a food festival that marked its 10th anniversary in April of this year.

Perhaps Nibble’s biggest contribution is to help immigrant chefs put down economically viable roots in a city that’s rapidly changing. Somerville’s location just outside Boston and next to bustling Cambridge has made it an attractive bedroom community. The city is in the midst of a housing squeeze that has caused average rents to surpass $2,300 a month as of 2015.

Carolina Garcia wasn’t in the food industry before coming to Boston in 2015 from Caracas, Venezuela. She previously ran an engraving company, but through Nibble hit upon the idea of selling arepas, a cornmeal pancake wrapped around pulled pork, black beans or plantain, a handheld favorite back home thicker than but not unlike a tortilla. While other Venezuelans modify arepa dough with cheese or milk, she always favored a simple version using cornmeal, water and salt—a recipe that turned out to be a hit at fundraisers for her son’s school.

In the summer of 2016, she teamed up to run a Somerville food festival booth with longtime friend Carolina Salinas, who had moved to Boston a few years earlier. The two Carolinas found their cuisine was a hit with American palettes as well; they sold more than 200 arepas that day. “When we saw the lines, we wanted to cry for joy, but couldn’t stop because the two of us had to work fast to keep up,” Garcia says.

Together, the duo enrolled in Nibble’s entrepreneur’s program, and after that in the “Food Biz 101” program, run by Boston’s Commonwealth Kitchen. They won second place in a pitch contest held at the end of the course, and as their prize received pro bono consultations on licensing and business structure. Eleven months ago, Las Carolinas, as they call their venture, secured a license and since then have been negotiating with a local craft brewer to set up operations in the pub’s kitchen. In the meantime, Las Carolinas will vend arepas a few days a week in the Nibble Kitchen, once it opens.

**IN DENVER, HIGH SCHOOLERS PUMP UP THE VOLUME TO GRADUATE**

Another program centered on helping artists establish paying careers is Denver’s Youth on Record (YOR), a nonprofit that offers free music and studio production courses to high school students as an incentive to finish school and get a diploma. The program was started just over 10 years ago by members of a local hip-hop group, The Flobots, which gained brief national success with the release of a hit song “Handlebars” in 2008. The organization focused its efforts on how to address a staggering 38 percent drop-out rate at Denver’s public high schools—a crisis that disproportionately affected the city’s Latino and African-American teens. Youth on Record garnered support from state and local agencies, including the Colorado Department of Education, A+ Colorado and Chalk Beat.

Youth on Record’s backdrop is a Denver that grapples with the companion ills of gentrification and a crisis of affordable housing, both of which have unfolded in several parts of the city over the last few decades. The Denver Foundation’s Horvath calls out one example in the Santa Fe district, formerly the center of the city’s Chicano community. Fifty years ago the city launched an urban renewal project which pushed out original residents to break ground on a community college campus. The gentrification of the area started picking up momentum nearly 20 years ago, when a district of art galleries publicized art walks on Fridays. And in Denver’s Five Points, long a majority African-American neighborhood, the recently dubbed RiNo, or River North Art District, has seen a more recent transformation as upscale restaurants, high-end housing and craft breweries have pushed rents and real estate prices skyward.

The underlying idea behind YOR is to offer classes in music production, performance, basic musicianship,
piano and guitar as a means to lure back into classrooms students who had left high school or who were leaning toward quitting. Once enrolled, they could work toward earning diplomas or GEDs. The program not only teaches professional-level skills, but gives students access to a $2.2-million state-of-the-art media studio, which stays open six days a week.

Executive Director Jami Duffy estimates that 10,000 students have come through Youth on Record since its launch. The program is linked to nine schools in Denver and offers a series of programs at local public libraries as well. “We’re a social justice organization that seeks to inspire young people to organize in their home communities and take on civic engagement issues ranging from voting and planting gardens to healthcare,” says Duffy. “We’re about so much more than building music—I’d say our success rests on several pillars such as academics, mentorship and community activation.”

The Youth on Record curriculum is divided into two parts. Half of the classes are held in nine public schools and treatment centers, which reach about 1,000 students annually, Duffy estimates. Youth on Record instructors work with students from 14 to 21 years of age and enrollees are typically students who are struggling to complete the necessary credits to graduate from high school. The course offerings are as varied as audio production, how to produce backing tracks or beats or basic music engineering skills, all of which go toward satisfying mandatory elective credits.

There are a fair number of classes that help students charge their creative muses as well including music fundamentals. Offerings such as creative writing for the composition of lyrics, storytelling through music and slam poetry help fulfill English electives. Students find the classes not only beguiling but cathartic as well. “Allowing a young person to share their viewpoints is a creative outlet the students [we reach] look forward to every day,” Duffy explains. “Allowing a young person to tell their own story gives them a sense of agency in both their own lives and in their community.”

A second curriculum of classes takes place after school at the world-class 5,000 square-foot recording studio Youth on Record has set up in the Denver Housing Authority’s recently opened Mariposa housing development. Duffy describes those as smaller workshops that accommodate maybe 10 students at a time. Classes concentrate on honing skills both in the studio and on an outdoor performing stage in the development.

Youth on Record has also opened special classes. The Deep Dive program is a nine-month fellowship awarded to 14 handpicked students who have graduated high school or completed a GED. Those students receive a stipend and work toward a capstone recording or performance project while taking classes that cover the business of music, artistic principles and even personal wellness.

Early on, Youth on Record’s faculty noticed that young women in the program felt intimidated by the boys’-club atmosphere that pervaded this program’s classes as well as the music industry at large. In response, directors devised a special track of courses open to female students, called Fempowered.

Duffy ties Youth on Record’s success to the program’s ability to help students realize their dreams to become artists, even as they witness firsthand how artists work and pay their bills. “One thing I think sets us apart is that we’re employing professional artists and musicians,” she says. “One hundred percent of our staff are local musicians, grant writers, operations managers and teachers who live in the community.”

A number of other Youth on Record faculty, in fact, came up through the program itself. Jesus Rodriguez, the organization’s program coordinator and an accomplished recording engineer, interned with YOR before coming on as full-time staff in 2016. Fempowered’s lead teacher, Mona Magno, who also goes by the stage name Monalicious, is an alumnus who also runs a local organization called FreeMusicForFreePeople (FM4FP), which hosts showcases and fundraisers. “I’ve been performing since I was 13, and Youth on Record helped me establish my professional presence even more,” she recalls. “I released an album with one-on-one support from Molina Speaks, who helped me put together my vision and approach.”

It was a watershed moment, says Magno. “My work here provides a full-time salary, and I feel devoted to my work,” she adds. “I’ve become more aware of social justice issues and I am bringing more of that type of content to the classroom. Magno says the faculty hold readings as part of professional development efforts that have featured the likes of “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” “Borderlands” and “A People’s History of the United States.” For Magno, “It’s opened my lens to my and my students’ realities. It helps me serve them more, and offer more resources relevant to their experience.”

Another instructor, Devin Urioste, is an artist who goes by the handle “Mace.” He began taking classes at Youth on Record in 2012, all while he was developing a personal visual-arts style inspired by the skateboarding circles he was frequenting. Youth on Record helped him finish high school. After graduation, he signed on as an intern to help run open labs and work as a...
co-teacher. He’s now working full-time, even while composing commissioned murals and preparing acrylic and collage works in mixed media for an exhibition at Rochelle Johnson Studio on July 6.

Duffy sees leveraging that lived experience as a critical aspect of YOR’s work, given how rapidly the cost of living in Denver proper has jumped as a result of development and climbing real estate prices. “An important part of truly creative placemaking is figuring how to keep artists in place, which in turn keeps vital cultures alive,” she says, adding, “We think we’ve found a balanced structure which allows artists to give back, and which keeps them [in the community].”

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

Questions about gentrification in many ways set some of the challenges urban creative placemaking faces in stark relief. Advocates debate how much utility or economic outcomes should serve as a yardstick of placemaking success, and mull over what lessons from a specific program can be applied in other communities. “We’ve known that the arts have a role and we have spent time helping policymakers grasp their significance in community development,” says Jamie Hand. “In the last 10 years, we’ve begun to get feedback from people on the front lines about what we need to address, particularly in relation to complex issues of race and equity.”

But Hand cautions that there may not be one quick fix. “How we think about replicability in this line of work—especially when it is so place-based and contextual—makes it risky to copy-and-paste a certain kind of project,” she notes. “It will take many more years to evolve the field in how to scale or replicate.”

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‘FREE OUR MOTHERS, UNCUFF OUR COMMUNITIES’: FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN SELL ART TO END CASH BAIL

Women in Philadelphia are aiming to raise $100,000 to post bail for women who can’t afford it.

BY JEN KINNEY

Faith Bartley, who began at People’s Paper Co-op as an intern and became a lead fellow, holds up a print from the Women in Reentry project. (Courtesy of the People’s Paper Co-Op)
Before she spent a year in jail, unable to post bail, Latyra Blake did not think of herself as an artist. But at a pop-up exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania earlier this week, she was surrounded by artworks she made in collaboration with other formerly incarcerated women: posters, t-shirts, banners. All bearing slogans.

“Free Our Mothers, Uncuff Our Communities” is her favorite, printed with an illustration of three women, arms raised, open handcuffs at their feet. Blake is one of the women in the picture, joyful and free. She likes that it points out how entire communities are impacted when family members go to prison.

“We need to free women because the women hold the communities together,” said Blake. “They are truly the backbone to our world.”

Blake and her collaborators made the artworks as part of Women in Reentry, a project of the People’s Paper Co-op. Together, they’ve spent months learning to make paper from their own shredded criminal records, coming up with sayings that reflect their experiences behind bars, and then collaborating with artists across the country to turn their words and images into art.

And from art into action. Now, these works are on sale to raise money to bail out other Philadelphia area women for Mother’s Day.

The Black Mama’s Bailout is an annual national campaign that takes place every Mother’s Day. (The website clarifies that the term “mama” is used inclusively, to encompass cis, trans and gender-nonconforming people “who mother and care for their families and communities in various ways.”)

The Philadelphia Community Bail Fund, a volunteer group that agitates to end the practice of cash bail and raises money to post bail for Philadelphia residents who cannot afford it, has participated in the Mother’s Day action since 2017. The first year, they were able to free 13 women; the next year, 23.

Though Blake and other Women in Reentry collaborators marketed to support the campaign and welcome home the women last year, this is the first time they’re selling original artworks to raise funds. Already, they’ve raised $13,000 towards the bail fund’s goal of $100,000. They’ll use it to bail out as many women as they can.

Blake will be there to welcome them, like she was last year.

“When the women came out of the prison, we were waiting across the street. And we welcomed them home, with open arms, cries, tears and enthusiasm,” she says. “We gotta fight and help each other.”

Blake knows intimately what a toll it can take to remain behind bars. She was arrested on conspiracy charges and incarcerated for over a year — without being found guilty — because she couldn’t post bail. Her four children, the youngest of which was just seven months old, went to live with their grandmother. Blake lost her home, all of her belongings were thrown into storage, and then she lost that too, when she couldn’t pay the bills. Finally, she took a plea deal, just to get free.

Today, Blake’s criminal record still haunts her, making it difficult to find housing, but she’s turned her energy towards helping other women in the same situation.

“You’re transforming your thoughts, you’re healing — you’re helping others. That’s a wonderful feeling, because you’re helping not just yourself.”

Over the past few years, the push to end cash bail has intensified around the country. Critics say the system penalizes defendants simply for being poor, keeping them locked up without a verdict, on the flimsy premise that otherwise, they will not show up for court. (Hence another of Blake’s favorite poster slogans: “It’s innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proven innocent!”)

That’s how Kalief Browder, arrested in New York City in 2010 for allegedly stealing a backpack, ended up spending three years in jail waiting for trial: His family couldn’t afford the $3,000 bail. The charges were eventually dismissed, but Browder’s life had been irreparably damaged. In 2015, he committed suicide.

His story and others like it have fueled calls for reform. Last year, Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner ended cash bail for certain low-level offenses, like prostitution and some burglaries. A year later, a report showed the reform seemed to be working: Short-term jail stays decreased, but defendants still showed up for their day in court.

Next door, New Jersey eliminated cash bail in 2017. Since then, reports have shown similar results: no spike in crime, recidivism, or failures to appear.

All of this is sparking hope among Philadelphia activists that cash bail will soon come to an end.

In the meantime, the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund and People’s Paper Co-op will be raising money to bail out as many mothers as they can — starting on May 12, Mother’s Day, and running until the money runs out. Blake and other Women in Reentry collaborators will welcome the women home with a pop-up art exhibition outside the prison.

“We use art because first and foremost, art has been part of every successful social justice movement in the history of the world,” says Mark Strandquist, co-founder of the People’s Paper Co-op with Courtney Bowles.
We really believe that stories are the seeds of real change. So until people are seen as fully human, laws, social services, programs and policies will never reflect their full humanity.

Women in Reentry fellows share those stories through their art and their activism. Two days after the bailout, on May 14, they will celebrate with a parade in Philadelphia, culminating in the 3rd Annual Women in Reentry Day rally and call to action around ending cash bail.

Antoinette Carter, another Women in Reentry collaborator, says being able to turn her creativity into bail money for other women means everything to her. “My art and my support and my resources is going to help these women when they come home,” she says. “You should have seen me when I got home, I wanted to kiss the ground.”

Carter served five years for a crime she admits she did commit. Through the program, she says she has improved her relationship with her mother and her wife. And she’s explored new parts of herself. At first when her wife suggested she apply to the program, Carter didn’t know if she could make art. But her perspective quickly changed. “Everything you do, it is art,” she says today, showing a poster she made.

It’s about the three years parole she was sentenced to after her release, another practice she says can unfairly punish people caught up in the criminal justice system. On the poster, there are two photos of Carter, back to back. In one, she’s dressed in a blazer, ready for work. In the other, she’s in an orange jumpsuit. “I did my time, don’t make me feel confined,” it says. “Parole feels like double jeopardy.”

Carter’s still on parole. She says even when she’s trying to move forward with her life, her criminal record is always there, beside her. “That’s my past, I did my time already, why do I have to feel confined?”

The Women in Reentry program takes fellows twice a year. Participants are nominated to join, or hear about it through reentry programs, like halfway houses. It’s a paid fellowship, so the women are compensated for the two days a week they spend making artwork and participating in conversations about conflict resolution and other skills they need on the outside.

Posters and t-shirts are available through the People’s Paper Co-op, and donations can also be made directly to the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund.

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A BANNER YEAR FOR SAN FRANCISCO’S FILIPINO CULTURAL DISTRICT

Seasonal night markets are a success, and banners bring visibility to the neighborhood’s cultural heritage. What’s next?

BY ALINE REYNOLDS

“Undiscovered SF,” hosted by SOMA Pilipinas, attracted 35,000 shoppers and generated $250,000 in sales for Filipino vendors in 2018. (Photo courtesy of SOMA Pilipinas)
2018 proved to be a banner year—literally and figuratively—for SOMA Pilipinas, San Francisco’s first-ever Filipino cultural district. The designated area, located in the city’s South of Market (SoMa) neighborhood, is meant to revive and preserve the Filipino-American community that has a storied history there.

“Filipinos have been in the neighborhood for over 100 years, but throughout that period, they have faced constant threats of displacement,” says SOMA Pilipinas Director Raquel Redondiez. “The [cultural] district has been a platform for us to bring back not just residents that have been pushed out, but also small businesses—and also to push for economic and social justice.”

After several years of planning and organizing, the cultural district received state designation in Summer of 2017. It’s now home to a seasonal night market, Undiscovered SF, which features established and emerging vendors and artists, offering Filipino food, art and live music. Held once a month from July to November, the market attracted over 35,000 people in 2017, far more than the organizers anticipated. With $250,000 in sales, the 2017 markets generated twice in sales what the city provided in grants to the program.

Vendor Deanna Sison, who operates three restaurants in SoMa, believes “Undiscovered SF” is a great platform for local businesses to exhibit their products.

“There is such a large Filipino community that has made major contributions to the city that haven’t always been recognized,” Sison says. “To have a stage where they can showcase that has been an amazing opportunity.”

In August 2018, SOMA Pilipinas received a $100,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant for streetscape design improvements in the cultural district. The funds will be used to develop a strategic plan for “creative placemaking” in SOMA—including new crosswalks, murals, and street furniture that pay homage to Filipino art and culture, according to Redondiez.

In July, banners went up along Market Street, a primary corridor of San Francisco, to promote the 25th anniversary of the Pistahan Parade and Festival, an international celebration of Filipino culture and cuisine. In October, to celebrate Filipino-American History Month, the organization hung up 300 new banners all around SOMA.

“It celebrates our residents, our community workers, and cultural bearers, and basically declares that we’re here,” says Redondiez of the cultural activities.

Meanwhile, Kultivate Labs, led by Executive Director Desi Danganan, is launching a business development program called “SEED” as part of the vision for the cultural district. The accelerator, for starters, will provide $35,000 in professional development services to six emerging businesses. Eligible entrepreneurs who are being interviewed for the program run fashion, retail, or food businesses that are located in the cultural district. Danganan, who also serves as economic development chair for SOMA Pilipinas, says the goal is to eventually expand the program to include more businesses and pave the way for a Filipino commercial corridor within the cultural district.

SOMA Pilipinas also received a grant of around $300,000 from the Mayor’s Office for the continuation of the seasonal night market and for the creation of a pop-up-to-permanent retail incubator program. Partnerships with two local businesses are also underway, with the goal of renting commercial spaces to Filipino businesses at affordable prices.

“[Affordability] is a big concern,” says Danganan. Undiscovered SF is the sandbox for identifying businesses with potential, Danganan explains. “Next, we move them into the pop-up-to-permanent incubator, and then we move them into below-market-rate units,” he says. By late 2020, Kultivate Labs envisions a commercial strip of Filipino retail and other storefront shops peppered along Mission Street between Fourth and Eleventh Streets.

To further spur local economic development, SOMA Pilipinas and Kultivate Labs also plan to establish a merchant’s association with the goal of connecting customer-oriented businesses, like restaurants and stores, with wholesale and manufacturing firms. Eventually, the merchant’s association may merge with the SEED accelerator program, Danganan says. “We want to start to pair [these different types of businesses],” he explains, “so they can transact and so we can build a much stronger local economy.”

Sison believes these new initiatives are crucial in helping to counter the harsh realities of commercial displacement caused by gentrification. “It’s excruciating, sometimes, what small business owners have to go through,” she says. “It’s really important for organizations to help these small businesses stay in business.”

Golda Sargento, co-owner of Arkipelgo Books—a candidate for the SEED program—expressed excitement about the future economic development prospects for SOMA. The local bookshop, which has about 4,000 books in its collection, has national significance as one of the nation’s few brick-and-mortar Filipino bookstores. “It’s a small niche when it comes to businesses within the Filipino community,” she says. “We’ve been keeping that alive and really enjoying the position that we’re in... to provide a cultural resource.”

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CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS IN THE FORMER CONFEDERATE CAPITAL

A design collaborative hopes a new exhibition opening this week will move a challenging conversation in a positive direction.

BY EMILY NONKO

Black Lives Matters protesters led a chant in front of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va., Saturday, Sept. 16, 2017. The group of Confederate demonstrators were escorted out by police after a 50 minute protest. (AP Photo/Steve Helber)
In Aug. 2017, a town hall forum took place to discuss the future of Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. The thoroughfare was conceived during a site search for a memorial to Robert E. Lee after his death in 1870. Today it is a tree-lined mall, dividing east and west-bound traffic, lined with the Virginian Confederate veterans Lee, J.E.B Stuart, Jefferson Davis, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and Matthew Fontaine Maury. In 1996 Richmond integrated its most famous street, erecting a monument to Richmond native and African-American tennis champion Arthur Ashe.

Decisions to remove Confederate monuments in Charlottesville and New Orleans prompted Richmond to consider its own. But the August 2018 meeting—which drew over 500 attendees—ended up a two-hour shouting match that “bordered on chaotic,” according to the Richmond Times-Dispatch. A few days after the meeting, about an hour away, the “Unite the Right” rally erupted in Charlottesville to protest Confederate monument removal.

A group behind a Richmond design collective was paying close attention. mObstudIo is a partnership of three design departments of Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts. Storefront for Community Design is a local nonprofit design assistance center. Working together as mOb+Storefront, the two organizations share studio space and often collaborate.

Monument Avenue has long been of interest to mOb+Storefront. This Thursday, Feb. 14, the collaborative will unveil one result of its sustained conversation around the thoroughfare. An exhibit it’s mounting at The Valentine, a local historic center, will display proposals from around the world that re-imagine Monument Avenue, exploring “its role as an historic urban boulevard, its viability as a 5.4 mile interurban connector, its presence in Richmond given the city’s emergence as a diverse and progressive city, its significance in the history of the United States and in the current debate about Confederate statues in public spaces,” as the collaborative puts it.

mOb+Storefront won’t simply exhibit the proposals. They want the city to discuss them. “Race is on everybody’s mind, and has been on everybody’s mind for a long time here,” says Camden Whitehead, an architect, cofounder of mObstudIo and the competition director. “And nobody knows how to talk about it.”

mOb+Storefront’s work around Monument Avenue dates back to 2015. Following the shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, mObstudIo faculty asked a group of Virginia Commonwealth University design students to design a prosthetic for Monument Avenue’s statue of Robert E. Lee that would alter its meaning.

In November of 2015, mOb hosted a show and standing-room-only panel discussion around the student proposals. “Having all these proposals around us sort of diffused the situation,” says Whitehead. “It enabled us to talk about the proposals, and not about where an individual stood on the issues.”

It was a stark contrast to the heated Town Hall meeting that summer. “It seemed to enhance the discussion, and make it a lot more constructive,” Whitehead adds. mOb+Storefront applied for and received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to hold an international design competition to further reimagine Monument Avenue. The competition opened to submissions in May 2018 and closed this past December.

The collaborative invited planners, architects, landscape architects, designers, artists and individuals to submit designs; a separate youth competition included workshops to assist students in designing monuments to heroes they think worthy of the next monument for the avenue.

The Valentine will exhibit all the entries, highlighting the 20 proposals that jurors selected as finalists. Youth entries will be displayed at the Branch Museum of Architecture and Design on February 16th. Visitors will have a chance to weigh in on submissions through a People’s Choice Vote.

But the most crucial aspect of the exhibit will be a series of discussions, the group says. They hope the proposals help steer conversations, while prompting visitors to themselves envision a new Monument Avenue. “A unique aspect of design is that it can focus a conversation,” Whitehead explains.

Sandy Wheeler, a graphic design professor who is also part of mOb, hopes such conversations can serve as a blueprint for more to come. “It becomes a model for other issues that have to deal with race, and can be extended to other contemporary issues we’re dealing with, like gender,” she says.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney formed a Monument Avenue Commission in 2017, which released a report last summer recommending the removal of the Jefferson Davis statue as well as the addition of signage to the four others of Confederate leaders. Though the City of Richmond is aware of the design competition, there is no commitment or mandate to implement ideas from any of the proposals.

For mOb+Storefront, “it’s a speculative effort to put an offering out there and hope something sticks,” Whitehead says. “Primarily for us, it’s about keeping the conversation going.”

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NEW MURAL BRINGS SPOTLIGHT TO CHICAGO BIKE TRAIL

Organizers behind the community-driven project want to see more cyclists on the path and more awareness of the African-American champion racer for whom it’s named.

BY AUDREY F. HENDERSON

I would advise all youths aspiring to athletic fame or a professional career to practice clean living, fair play and good sportsmanship... it will require great morale and physical courage to adhere to them... despite the fact no one of my color was able to offer me advise gained through experience as I started up the ladder of success.

Bernard Williams designed a Chicago mural that captures the life of champion cyclist Marshall “Major” Taylor. (Photo by Bernard Williams)
Fans of an underused Chicago bike path that's more than 6 miles long hope a welcoming new mural will encourage more cycle traffic and amplify the green space's value as an important community asset. They want the artwork, which was created with input from current users, to spur additional investment and boost the larger effort to make Marshall "Major" Taylor Trail a more popular destination.

"[The trail] has brought the community together," says Peter Taylor, president of Friends of the Major Taylor Trail. He says that back when the path was a defunct rail line, it was a "dividing line, a dumping ground, an eyesore. Now residents use the trail to walk and ride. But many are still unaware and uninvolved."

The Major Taylor Trail runs north to south through several far south side Chicago neighborhoods. The new 400-foot-long mural is on a bridge that crosses the Little Calumet River in the West Pullman neighborhood. The work documents the life of Marshall "Major" Taylor, for whom the trail was named when it opened in 2007.

Born in rural Indiana in 1878, Taylor grew up in Indianapolis. He got his first bike when he was about 12. A local bike shop hired him to perform stunts outside the shop wearing a soldier's uniform. That's where he picked up the "Major." At age 13, Taylor entered his first bicycle race as a joke—and won. He went on to race regularly and frequently called out racism in the track competition world. By 1899, he held seven world records. He wrote an autobiography called "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World."

Despite his talent and accomplishments, at the end of his life, Taylor faced poor health and poverty, and he died in 1932 in the charity ward of Chicago's Cook County Hospital. In 1938, a group of bicycle enthusiasts, including Frank Schwinn, arranged to have Taylor's body exhumed and reinterred in a gravesite in Mount Glenwood, Illinois, not far from the bicycle trail that bears his name.

"We should be honoring him the way you hear Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens. That's how the name Major Taylor should be known as well," says Brenda Dixon, who founded Community and Neighborhood Improvement Projects (CNIP) to keep the mural project moving forward. Dixon lives eight blocks away from the 115th Street section of the trail.

The muralist, Chicago artist Bernard Williams, designed with that educational goal in mind. The mural panels include dates of Taylor's championships, names of cities where he raced, and visual representations of the cyclist. Williams, who was born on the far south side, read "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World" after he got the commission.

"It really situated him as kind of an international individual and a person who traveled the world in a time that very few African-Americans were maybe able to do something like that," Williams says. "And that's what I really tried to communicate in the mural. This person who maybe opened up the space for us to think about ourselves as part of an international arena. And that there's a large world out there in front of us and there's a potential to kind of experience that in some way, through our talents, our gifts and whatever interests or motivations you might have."

Williams got input from people who currently love and use the trail too, including members of the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Chicago.

"We talked about Major Taylor's personal story, the historical moment, you know, the early 1900s in America and across the globe, because he was kind of an international star," Williams says. "So I just kind of gathered information from them about their interest in Major Taylor and what they envisioned the mural might accomplish. I asked questions like 'Who is Major Taylor to you?,' 'Why is Major Taylor important for the community?'"

Much of the trail runs through picturesque preserved forest. Nonetheless, large segments are uninviting, especially on its south end. There are few amenities such as benches and lighting. And before the creation of the mural, the bridge that forms the portion of the trail that crosses the Little Calumet River was covered with graffiti, according to Dixon.

"It's such a beautiful area but people are afraid because you see the graffiti, and you're like 'Oh my God, I don't want to go there,'" says Dixon.

Dixon was determined to see the graffiti eradicated—especially since future plans are in place to connect Major Taylor Trail to other trails in the city. The future network of trails means a potential increase in rider-ship. Dixon applied for grant funding, and that eventually led to her forming CNIP, in order to administer the funds that were awarded, along with the Active Transportation Alliance, which served as fiscal agent for the grant.

According to Dixon, now that the mural has been completed and unveiled—there was a ribbon-cutting on July 21 and Taylor's great-great-grandson held the ceremonial scissors—there's plenty more to do on Major Taylor Trail. She is especially concerned with making people aware that the trail is a continuous entity through the neighborhoods it connects. One way to do so is by creating consistent signage, according to Dixon.
The trail runs through five different wards and is managed by three different entities: Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the Chicago Park District and the Chicago Department of Transportation. All three use different trail markers.

“One of my dreams and visions for the trail is that we would get all five of those wards [and] all three of those entities to sit at the table together and agree on ‘OK, let’s use this logo as the consistent theme that all three of us will use for the trail.’ So that people know that this trail runs from the Little Calumet River all the way up to the Dan Ryan Woods at the north end, that these aren’t separate entities from each other,” Dixon says.

She won’t stop there when it comes to her mission to bring proper recognition to Major Taylor and enhance his namesake trail.

“I travel all over the country for cycling,” Dixon says. “And it just saddens me when … I come home to my neighborhood and I see that I have a trail but it doesn’t have any of the amenities that the other trails [have] when I go to other cities and ride. [Major Taylor Trail runs] through the heart of our community, named after just a phenomenal athlete, an African-American athlete. Let’s make it something beautiful that’s going to be the pride of our community. … Give me about five years and it’s going to be transformed.”

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