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Bridging Policy and Placemaking to Activate Vacant Properties: Exploring Barriers and Potential in Minneapolis

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ABOUT CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PROGRESS

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

Creative placemaking is a powerful tool to activate vacant spaces or abandoned buildings. Well-executed creative placemaking projects bring residents together to support artistic expression, lift up the cultural roots of the neighborhood, and support economic development and equitable revitalization. The Kresge Foundation defines creative placemaking as “an approach to community development and urban planning that integrates arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies.”1 It’s a process through which resident voices are heard, creativity can flourish, and profound positive change can result that extends far beyond aesthetic improvements. The National Endowment for the Arts recognizes that “creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”2

Arts and community development organizations are actively involved in creative placemaking on vacant or underused parcels of land in communities around the country, and residents are reaping the benefits (please see insert on page 5). Ensuring that principles of creative placemaking are leveraged more broadly, however, to help shape planning and urban design decisions in a systematic fashion, requires meaningful multi-sector partnerships among policy-makers, community development professionals, arts organizations, residents, and philanthropic leaders.

To support further creative placemaking efforts on vacant properties, in communities across the country, the Center for Community Progress developed this report (and its companion report on St. Paul), based on a series of stakeholder interviews in Minneapolis and St. Paul. This report is designed to improve the reader’s understanding of the bridges that can be built between policy-makers, particularly municipal government, and the arts, culture, and placemaking community, to support the reuse of vacant properties for creative placemaking projects. While more can be done to ensure that

1 http://kresge.org/programs/arts-culture-
neighborhoods in Minneapolis are reaping the benefits of creative placemaking on otherwise vacant or underutilized properties, there are a number of examples of successful creative placemaking projects in the city. This report identifies and highlights two that stood out as examples from which others can learn. The report then explores more broadly how placemaking has (or has not) been incorporated into city systems, the effectiveness of such programs, and how that integration of arts and culture into city systems has impacted, or could more effectively impact, placemaking projects on vacant land. This report should be seen as a preliminary exploration of strengths and opportunities to support creative placemaking on vacant or underutilized properties, particularly in the Minneapolis neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of vacant properties. The authors hope that this report becomes the jumping-off point for more in-depth discussions and, ultimately, collaborations, in Minneapolis. They also hope that this report informs conversations around the country, as part of a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of practice focused on creative placemaking as a key part of equitable revitalization in distressed neighborhoods.

**Benefits of Creative Placemaking**

Among its many benefits, creative placemaking fosters economic development. Excerpted from a 2010 NEA white paper, creative placemaking:

- Recirculates residents’ incomes locally at a higher rate re-uses vacant and underutilized land, buildings, and infrastructure
- Creates jobs in construction, local businesses, and cultural activity
- Expands entrepreneurial ranks of artists and designers
- Trains the next generation of cultural workers
- Attracts and retains non-arts-related businesses and skills

Source: Creative Placemaking (2010)
CREATIVE PLACEMAKING ON UNDERUTILIZED PROPERTIES IN MINNEAPOLIS: SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

There is an abundance of successful creative placemaking projects in Minneapolis. However, Juxtaposition Arts and Made Here are two that stood out as examples of projects that bridge policy and creativity. While very different in their approaches to creative placemaking, both projects have successfully engaged residents and artists to transform underutilized or vacant spaces, build the fabric of the communities they work in, and partner with the municipality to strengthen the scope and reach of the projects.

JUXTAPOSITION ARTS

Founded over 20 years ago, Juxtaposition Arts is a nonprofit organization developing community by engaging and employing young urban artists. Now housed on the West Broadway corridor, Juxtaposition Arts began as a studio arts program, pairing young artists with professionals to learn art history, to make art, and to exhibit and sell their work. From there, the work has multiplied, fueled by listening to neighbors and apprentices and by identifying and building on the neighborhood’s assets. This led Juxtaposition Arts to seek a permanent space on West Broadway, purchasing a series of connecting buildings and transforming one intersection into a workshop for their apprentices to make and exhibit their work. Now, these apprentices engage in an entrepreneurial approach to art supporting four microbusinesses. Many of the projects earn revenue to support Juxtaposition’s work.

As Juxtaposition’s work evolved, the organization took an active role in creative placemaking. Working with professional designers and landscape architects, Juxtaposition’s apprentices have completed several public space projects, including a pocket park and a sculpture park. This evolution coincided with a desire to make projects and planning more relevant to residents and artists in the neighborhood.

Building on this experience, Juxtaposition staff have taken on additional opportunities to impact the physical space where they operate. Over the last few years, Juxtaposition has taken on the role of
soliciting community input as part of the City of Minneapolis’s comprehensive planning efforts. As a neighborhood-based organization with deep roots, the involvement of Juxtaposition gives the planning process increased legitimacy. Juxtaposition added the use of social media and zines to modernize communication styles and reach a broader audience for seeking input into the process. What started in 2006 as work on a Master Plan led to work on several smaller area plans, such as bus stops and public space around the Mississippi River. This strategy has led to higher participation numbers among residents in the planning process and involvement by local artists. Most importantly, increased community participation helped shed light on a city process formerly a mystery to many neighborhood residents.

Like any planning process, the success of the planning will ultimately be revealed in the plan’s implementation. However, Juxtaposition Arts serves as a model for neighborhood-based organizations seeking to cultivate the creative spirit of its youth while pairing this creativity with job training and exposure to real-world processes. Plus, the North Minneapolis neighborhood benefits from the physical improvements and presence Juxtaposition has on the West Broadway corridor.

**MADE HERE**

*Made Here* a project of Hennepin Theater Trust, activates vacant commercial storefront windows in the heart of the downtown business district, creating a walkable urban art experience. Anderson Windows is a major financial backer of the project.

The Hennepin Theater Trust is dedicated to maintaining and operating historic theaters in downtown Minneapolis. Born out of a desire to see these theaters preserved as development threatened demolition for historic theaters, the Trust now is responsible for the operation of three historic theaters along Hennepin Avenue. The theaters provide venues for national touring theater and musicals as well as local performances and education initiatives.

The Trust took on Made Here as a way to infuse activity and beauty to the vacant commercial storefronts in the area around the theaters. Creating vibrant, creative spaces helps serve the Trust’s interest of activating the historic theaters by transforming a visitor’s experience. But, Made Here also works to provide a venue for a diverse array of local artists.

Twice a year, Made Here fills vacant commercial windows and other underutilized spaces in the West Downtown District with locally produced art. The project started with visual displays and has evolved to include live performances, artist markets, and pop-up galleries. While many cities have launched
public art in vacant commercial storefronts, Made Here is noteworthy for its longevity and ability to adapt, grow, and utilize various art forms as it enters its fourth year.

Since it launched in 2013, Made Here has produced 336 window displays in commercial spaces, making it the largest of its kind in the country. Excitingly, seven downtown spaces were leased within 12 months of participating in the project.

Not only is the project transforming way visitors view these vacant spaces, but it is opening the process to a variety of individuals interested in submitting an idea. The process to select artists is open to anyone with an idea for a window display. No background as an artist or portfolio is required, though an advisory panel selects participating artists. The panel seeks to select a diverse group of artists for each show, including gender and racial equity. The result is a dynamic variety of art displayed throughout downtown storefronts, representing visual arts, textiles, historic narrative, performances, and cultural heritage and future of the city.

Made Here is an example of how a traditional arts organization can activate vacant spaces, and the project demonstrates that the benefits of this work includes not only reducing vacancy but also cultivating artistic expression and spirit among residents.

FACTORS AFFECTING CREATIVE PLACEMAKING ON VACANT PROPERTIES IN MINNEAPOLIS

Straddling the Mississippi River, Minneapolis has long served as the gateway to the North. Founded along the river, the city served as a fur trading post and later as a center point for lumber and flour milling, earning the nickname “Mill City.” The river continues to play an important part in commerce and industry in the city, but the city’s proximity to numerous lakes and rivers also makes water recreation and outdoor activities prime attractions for residents and visitors alike. Likewise, the city benefits from a rich cultural heritage, boosting a thriving theater and literature communities in addition to its numerous contributions to the music world, most notably including Bob Dylan and Prince. The city’s strong commercial and industrial base paired with a deep commitment to health and culture create a thriving city with low residential vacancy. Yet, despite these assets, the city continues to battle
longstanding neighborhood dynamics that create pockets of vacancy and the need for neighborhood expression through creative placemaking. This is especially true in North Minneapolis, a community with a concentration of low income residents of color and a high vacancy rate. North Minneapolis residents have been historically under-represented at the decision-making table. Understanding the specific, and at times unique, characteristics of the city’s governmental and real estate environments as well as the artistic and philanthropic landscape is essential in evaluating the barriers to and assets for placemaking.

GOVERNANCE

Minneapolis is the county seat of Hennepin County, Minnesota. The city, along with St. Paul, forms the core of the 16th largest metropolitan area in the United States. Minneapolis has a weak-mayor form of government where the Minneapolis City Council holds the most power of the elected branches. The mayor of Minneapolis works with the City Council to approve the city’s budget and appoints some key positions of leadership but does not hold the administrative and executive powers that many mayors in “strong mayor” cities possess. Born in response to a corruption scandal, this consensus approach serves to restrain the executive branch and to temper extreme positions. However, it also translates to a slower, deliberative decision-making process where consensus building is necessary to effectuate change. Opportunities for placemaking projects on vacant lots or in underutilized spaces often present themselves rapidly. In these cases, decisions to grant zoning variances and permitting requests require quick decisions which can be difficult to obtain given the pace of governmental decision making in a weak mayor city.

VACANCY PATTERNS

Minneapolis benefits from a relatively strong housing market. In the latest statistics available, from the second quarter of 2016, the median sale price of residential units was $246,950. At this same time, only 90 units faced tax foreclosure and only 491 buildings were listed as vacant and condemned. Compared to many other Midwestern cities, this is a remarkably low vacancy and abandonment rate and one many cities struggling to maintain, redevelop, and sell vacant properties undoubtedly envy. Part of this strong housing market is undoubtedly due to Minneapolis’s low unemployment rate, which in mid-2016 registered at just 3.3% and falling.

Despite the city’s relatively low level of vacancy, many of the vacant properties owned by the city and listed as available are concentrated in North Minneapolis. Residents and nonprofit organizations
working in North Minneapolis note the “North Minneapolis” label incorporates approximately 25% of the city. This area has the highest crime rate in the city and nonprofit developers in the area note the presence of many investor-owned properties. One community development professional describes Minneapolis as a city of micro-markets—where demand is strong in certain areas and where perception and long-standing societal tensions, particularly around race, limit demand in other areas.

North Minneapolis is nearly 50% African-American compared to 18.6% of Minneapolis’ overall population. Additionally, while only 5.6% of Minneapolis’s population is Asian, North Minneapolis has a population that is 13.8% Asian. Unfortunately, poverty also hits these populations at higher rates—at least 25 percentage points higher for all racial categories compared to the White (non-Hispanic) population.³

The low level of chronic vacancy poses unique challenges for the creative use of vacant properties as city and county officials must balance the demand for redevelopment with the need for economic development based on neighborhood culture and expression. Particularly in neighborhoods with populations, including low-income residents and communities of color, whose needs and preferences are generally under-represented at the decision-making table, however, it is important to build opportunities for community-driven creative placemaking into redevelopment plans as one component of an equitable approach to revitalization. Where vacant properties are concentrated, the surplus of land and reduced development pressures may be an opportunity for local government to more easily support neighborhood-based, resident-driven arts and culture projects, which can strengthen community fabric, give residents a greater say in the future of their neighborhoods, and support neighborhood revitalization and development goals.

The City’s Community Planning and Economic Development Department lists fewer than 300 vacant lots for sale and 0 vacant structures for sale. Many of these lots have a list price of $2,500, but the price ranges from $1,900 to $56,200. This represents only the properties the City of Minneapolis is marketing for sale and does not include properties the City is assembling for a larger redevelopment project. Due to the relatively strong housing market, Minneapolis can hold these properties until development is deemed possible. Thus, the City also periodically solicits Requests For Proposals (RFPs) for some city-owned properties, bundling properties to maximize redevelopment impact.

Hennepin County, like most counties, sell tax-foreclosed properties through periodic Tax Sales. These sales typically occur twice a year. The Spring 2017 published auction list includes 28 properties. This volume mirrors the low volume of published Tax Sale lists for 2016 (92 total properties) and 2015 (77 total properties). And, not only are the published lists lower in number than those in many Midwestern

cities, the number of unsold Tax Sale properties available for immediate sale is also limited. Hennepin County lists just 11 properties, unsold from previous Tax Sales, as available for immediate sale. Thus, chronic vacancy and abandonment are not large factors in Minneapolis development patterns. This low level creates stable housing markets and property tax revenue which, long term, can boost city revenue and add to the funding available for creative placemaking projects. However, in the short-term, it limits the spaces available for neighborhoods and artists to gather for cultural events and commune through placemaking and art projects.

Finally, one market with high vacancy levels is the market for commercial properties. Minneapolis’ neighborhood commercial corridors have high numbers of vacant properties. Likewise, this high commercial vacancy rate also affects the downtown business district. The downtown business district has a struggling urban mall, Nicollette Mall, which comprises 12 blocks of the central business district and creates entire blocks of vacant windows and little street activity. These vacant spaces are opportunities for creative placemaking in the heart of the city.

ARTISTIC, CULTURAL, AND NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Minneapolis is known for its artistic and cultural institutions, including a strong history of musical contributions. The Minneapolis Arts Commission notes the city’s artistic and cultural resources generate an estimated $269 million annually. Some of the more established arts organizations include the Guthrie Theater and the Minnesota Symphony. Additionally, the Minneapolis Arts Commission, whose board members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, works primarily to cultivate, conserve, and maintain public art as well as public art in the public right-of-way. Complementing these more traditional arts organizations is a thriving network of neighborhood-based organizations with deep roots in preserving and uplifting the community’s culture and artistic expression. These neighborhood-based programs range from Juxtaposition Arts, a nonprofit organization (described above) developing community by engaging, training, and employing young urban artists, to Pillsbury House Theater, an organization combining creativity and community to operate a community center and a community theater in the same space, both of whom are spearheading successful placemaking programs. Well-funded and numerous traditional arts and culture organizations and philanthropic institutions support arts and culture activities in Minneapolis, both traditional and neighborhood-based, providing a rich foundation to draw upon for innovative and increased partnerships with city and county leaders.
BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN POLICYMAKERS AND PLACEMAKERS: OPPORTUNITIES AND EXAMPLES

Minneapolis’s strong artistic and cultural heritage translates into a depth of artists and community-based organizations working to create vibrant places throughout the city. These artists are also being tapped in new ways to bring new ideas to city government, resulting in greater participation and transparency in land use and community revitalization decisions. Likewise, these partnerships are key to developing policies to support the arts community’s placemaking efforts on vacant land and in underutilized spaces. Minneapolis is making strides in its efforts to uplift the arts and culture community and embed placemaking as a strategy for neighborhood stabilization and revitalization by building bridges to connect the arts and placemaking communities with municipal resources.

UTILIZING PUBLIC AND PRIVATELY-OWNED SPACES FOR PLACEMAKING

While many neighborhoods in Minneapolis are not impacted by vacancy and abandonment, there are some, particularly in North Minneapolis, which have disproportionately high numbers of vacant lots. In addition, commercial property is vacant throughout the city, particularly along significant commercial corridors in North Minneapolis and in the downtown business district. However, these properties are often privately-owned. Thus, artists and community development organizations have had to build unique relationships with private owners and units of local government to access these spaces. This is particularly true in North Minneapolis, which suffers from a history of racial segregation and disinvestment.

The West Broadway Area Business Coalition works as part of the ongoing revitalization of the West Broadway commercial corridor, located in North Minneapolis. In addition to the work of a traditional business association, the Coalition works closely with artists and creative organizations, including fellow West Broadway organization, Juxtaposition Arts. Some of this early work included working to activate vacant storefronts along the corridor with art and pop-up events. These pop-ups and art shows evolved into an annual event, FLOW, a program of the West Broadway Business and Area Coalition, now working with over 300 artists at 35 sites. As described on the FLOW Northside Arts Crawl website, communityprogress.net
“FLOW is a non-juried, self-guided tour of studios, galleries, theaters, commercial and vacant spaces over a mile and half of the West Broadway corridor. From b-boys to ballet, graffiti to graphite, rap to rhapsody, fine artist to artisan, practicing to professional, FLOW showcases the great art being made every day on the Northside.” This work brought further revitalization success as some of the buildings are now developed, including one as a coffee shop and artist studio. West Broadway Area Coalition has also worked to activate privately owned, street-facing parking lots for farmers’ markets and art and culture events, making use of vacant, privately-owned space. Yet, as the pop-ups become more and more successful and West Broadway Coalition’s work continues to evolve, the organization is finding that artists need permanent space to work and sell their goods.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Building on the Pop-Up culture, the arts community, working with private property owners, successfully activated vacant or under-utilized space for farmers’ and crafts markets. The partnership yielded such success that the arts community is working to identify permanent space to scale their pop-ups into a full-time endeavor.

Likewise, Pangea World Theater, an organization with a mission to build bridges across multiple cultures and to create real conversations about race, class, and gender, finds the lack of vacant space problematic but has mobilized its efforts around underutilized vacant lots and public parks in the near south part of Minneapolis. While not without its challenges, including facing delays in obtaining necessary permitting due to decentralized governmental structure, these organizations are finding ways to activate vacant spaces in a city with few city-controlled vacant properties. These projects provide an opportunity to amplify underserved voices.

Finally, projects like Made Here, a project of the Hennepin Theatre Trust described in more detail above, serve as an example of utilizing privately owned vacant spaces without some of the permitting and logistical challenges other creative placemaking activities face. Made Here is a walkable urban art experience that fills underutilized commercial windows with local art in the West Downtown Minneapolis District. Vacant commercial space is plentiful in sections of downtown Minneapolis, particularly, as mentioned above, around Nicollette Mall. The project is entering its fourth year, and while there are challenges due to unknown leasing schedules for retail space and changing personnel, it
is possible to replicate and even expand the program utilizing storefront window space in other underutilized commercial corridors through the city

ARTIST AND CREATIVE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PLANNING PROCESSES

Since art and culture play such a strong role in Minneapolis’ identity, it is not surprising that the city is tapping its artist community in new ways. The City of Minneapolis actively seeks and hires artists and creative placemakers to lead aspects of its comprehensive planning processes. This effort is led by Gülgün Kayim, Minneapolis’ director of Arts, Culture and Creative Economy in the Office of the City Coordinator. “As Kayim sees it, her job is to work with all or some of [the city departments] to achieve their goals partly by weaving in elements of the creative economy.” This creative approach to comprehensive planning recognizes the unique role artists and creative placemakers have in a neighborhood. The public input process for comprehensive planning can be stale and rote. Information is often presented and input solicited in ways that assume participants speak the same language and have the same values. Involving artists, specifically those grounded in a particular place, recognizes the need to reach diverse audiences and to infuse these processes with creativity to attract participation, spark ideas, and promote robust discussion and honest input. Working with these groups for the planning process has led to greater participation, increased transparency with decision-making, and new methods of communication, including zines and social media.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Minneapolis has embraced the arts and culture community by creating a position within city government to weave all elements of the creative economy into planning and community development decisions, guaranteeing placemakers a seat at the decision-making table.

* https://www.minneapolis.com/cityscape/2013/06/9-%28C%28C%28C%2C-kayim-aims-use-artists-remake-parts-minneapolis
Likewise, Hennepin County has hired community-based organizations who employ artists to conduct outreach for some of its work. One example includes hiring the West Broadway Area Business Coalition to lead community outreach following a destructive tornado. The Coalition employs at least two artists who work on their place activation strategies, including a videographer. Owing to the Coalition’s longstanding role in the community and its employment of neighborhood artists/residents, the Coalition was hired to solicit feedback on how to respond to the 2011 tornado’s destruction of many buildings, leaving largescale empty lots along a major roadway. Utilizing organizations with a proven track record of neighborhood engagement sets up these processes for greater success and participation, particularly if the implementation reflects the input.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Minneapolis government has connected with community-based groups to solicit feedback on development plans. Using place based organizations, trusted by the community, for traditional governmental functions, like soliciting feedback on proposed municipal programs, grounds the work and inspires more truthful and candid responses.

Minneapolis has incorporated the strengths of its strong artist community into city processes, and artists and community-based organizations are finding creative ways to utilize privately owned vacant properties for creative placemaking, in a city with the enviable situation of relatively few publicly controlled vacant properties. However, some policy barriers still remain that may prevent the activation of spaces in new and creative ways. These challenges are explored more fully below.

PROPERTY DISPOSITION POLICY

The North Minneapolis “micro-market” was hit particularly hard by the foreclosure crisis in 2008. Already facing the City’s highest concentrations of poverty and vacant and condemned buildings, the foreclosure crisis only deepened these trends. Many of the 300 lots owned by the City of Minneapolis were acquired during the crisis and later demolished, leaving vacant lots scattered throughout the neighborhood. These lots may be good candidates for infill development, when the housing market in the area demands it. Current city policy will sell these lots only for housing redevelopment purposes.
Typically, properties are sold through a Request For Proposals (RFP) process, geared toward developers with demonstrated experience in housing development. From a city perspective, working with developers with a proven track record ensures the greatest chance of success, generally defined as the development and sale of infill housing. Additionally, due to the relatively strong housing market and low levels of vacancy in other Minneapolis neighborhoods, the concentration of properties in North Minneapolis represents the bulk of the remaining opportunities for large-scale housing development to address the city’s need for additional housing units. However, neighborhood stakeholders report concern that only large-scale developers or those with extensive development experience are competitive for these opportunities and that these developers are typically not neighborhood-based.

Limiting RFPs to housing development may miss other opportunities for creative and neighborhood expression. By limiting development opportunities to housing efforts, the arts and culture communities have little opportunity to access permanent space for their craft, and neighborhoods miss out on the ancillary economic development benefits of such cultural ventures. Without long-term physical space for exhibitions or theaters or to create and sell art, organizations and artists hoping to launch creative placemaking projects have utilized a pop-up strategy. While pop-ups can be a successful short-term strategy, they tax the already limited resources of nonprofit and volunteer-led groups who must coordinate various logistics and details as the pop-up space changes. Plus, it is difficult to develop patronage and customer loyalty when locations frequently change.

Given the value these artists and related groups bring to the neighborhood and their express need for permanent space to move beyond a pop-up strategy, it may be worth identifying municipal owned properties that could be set aside for this purpose, particularly where development is not likely or feasible in the next few years. Another idea may be to work with the arts community and housing developers to create combined studio/housing space where artists can live and work with a shared studio space and a street level gallery space. These ideas, and others, could be the focus of a listening tour by the municipality where city staff from the housing and community development departments hold public forums to develop ideas for the best use of municipal owned properties.

**BUILDING BRIDGES**

Municipalities should consider the create/live/sell needs of the creative community in the development process. Consider a listening tour where municipal staff engage the creative community to better understand their needs for housing, studio space, and retail outlets in the community.
To support artist and neighborhood-based organizations in the development process, local government could consider a technical assistance program to make neighborhood-based organizations, and artists, better prepared to compete through an RFP process. This may involve pairing artists with more experienced nonprofit or for-profit developers and lowering the number of properties included in some RFPs to open the process to varying levels of capacity and experience.

Hennepin County’s disposition policy is often easier for artists and neighborhood-based groups to work through, simply because properties sold through this process are sold through an auction or at a set price. To make the properties even more accessible to the creative and placemaking communities, it may be necessary to explore an access point for these auctions that would allow for a lower price point for nonprofit organizations. For example, nonprofits could be allowed to purchase properties at a set fixed price, at or even lower than assessed value. Currently, those looking to create a community space for the public, such as Dreamsland, a vacant lot transformed into a community gathering place in South Minneapolis, can be forced to compete in the County’s auction process. Finding a way to bolster these efforts may lead to neighborhoods with vibrant places reflecting their unique creativity and identity.

DEFINING CITY PRIORITIES FOR VACANT PROPERTIES

Decision-making about the disposition of vacant property is directly related to the city’s priorities and capacity. For many cities struggling with thousands of chronically vacant and abandoned properties, it is not feasible for the city to hold and maintain these properties indefinitely. In these cases, cities may look at developing priorities for property sales or leases that vary based on a property’s size, condition, or location. While the need to do this type of prioritization may not be as pressing in cities with lower vacant property inventories, like Minneapolis, prioritization may help in the process of identifying properties to meet community needs beyond housing, alleviating some confusion about disposition processes and ultimately supporting to creative placemaking projects that add to the city’s rich cultural and artistic landscape.

Several groups and partners expressed confusion about the City’s priorities for the vacant properties it controls. Many assume future property tax revenue is a high priority, but without a clear articulation and discussion about these priorities, confusion and suspicion arise, particularly in communities where social and systemic bias has limited participation and transparency in the past. A public discussion of
these priorities may help the creative and artistic communities, and funding partners, know how to proceed. It may be beneficial for local government and community partners to explore ways to support the creative community’s vision for neighborhood revitalization, including:

- Making vacant properties available for creative placemaking opportunities, either on a short-term or long-term basis. This can be accomplished by setting aside municipally owned vacant properties for purchase or long-term lease. By setting aside vacant properties for the creative community, the municipality ensures that placemaking is a key to the neighborhood’s redevelopment efforts.

- Early studies of the viability or potential role of a community land trust to preserve space for artists while leaving the development and administrative aspects of property ownership to an organization devoted to real estate development. A community land trust can provide access to permanently affordable housing and studio space for artists struggling to live/work in areas with increasing housing demands and rising homeownership costs. To support this effort, municipal owned vacant properties would be made available to the land trust at a reduced cost.

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Navigating any city’s government infrastructure can be challenging, particularly for those who do not regularly work with real estate processes, such as noticing, permitting, and zoning. However, understanding how to work within these policies and procedures is essential for creative placemaking on vacant properties to succeed. Several groups and individuals expressed confusion about how to navigate city policies, including the RFP process for property disposition and permitting. Other groups, particularly those organizations with full-time staff and development experience, have learned to successfully navigate these policies and to build the relationships necessary to problem solve with city staff when necessary. While it is not possible to duplicate the expertise and experience full-time staff and development professionals bring, there is an opportunity to address some of the confusion and frustration and thereby help grassroots organizations or individuals strengthen access properties to be used for community benefit. Sometimes confusion is born out of a perception or reality that city staff and artists, or neighborhood-based groups, are speaking a different language. Expanding access to city officials through workshops, assigning a single point of access for permitting, zoning, and code enforcement issues, and publishing clear, transparent and easily accessible policies and procedures could alleviate this confusion and create a more even playing field for community organizations seeking to acquire vacant properties.
BUILDING BRIDGES

Municipalities should consider zoning and permitting workshops for the creative community (and other community groups). These workshops could address core points of confusion, such as how to apply for pop-up permits or seek zoning variances for permanent installations. Alternatively, the established, experienced nonprofit community could host such workshops for their fellow artists. Similar resources could be provided online through a “permitting and zoning for the arts and culture community” webpage, where permit types that the arts community often applies for are identified and the application process is described step by step.

CONCLUSION

Minneapolis’ strengths are numerous. From a rich artistic and cultural history, to a strong housing market low rates of abandonment and a small inventory of city-controlled vacant properties, the city has much to celebrate. City government recognizes the strength of its artistic and community-based organizations and is taking some steps to include their views and experiences to improve make the planning processes more inclusive of resident voices. The arts are cultivated by the philanthropic community, and community-based organizations regularly draw from the knowledge and resources of their neighborhood-based assets to enact change and transform places into vibrant hubs of activity.

However, there is room for Minneapolis to build on this strong foundation. Vacant properties are not widespread in the city. Yet, decisions about how to address these properties may impact the city more than is immediately apparent. These properties, and the ability of artists and community-based organizations to impact them, bolster a community’s strengths when development patterns start to change. Having public conversations priorities for vacant properties can help city staff and leadership work with community-based organizations to ensure they have a meaningful role in defining how their
neighborhoods develop. Developing a shared set of priorities will allow each group of stakeholders to operate more confidently, collaboratively, and successfully. Finally, finding ways to provide assistance around permitting and RFP processes for non-traditional developers may result in new approaches to vacant properties that serve shared priorities more fully.

Minneapolis is a dynamic city, and meeting any of the passionate artists, community-based organizations, or city staff reveals people who love their city and their neighborhoods. Finding new and increased ways to bring all of these actors together to reimagine and activate vacant properties will support a more equitable approach to development and revitalization — and even more cultural assets throughout the city.