

Research & Policy Brief Series

Creative Placemaking: Linking Arts, Culture, and Community Development

By Paula Horrigan, Cornell University

What is the Issue?

It is a familiar scenario in the downtowns of many “rust belt” cities across the Northeast: Oneida Square in Utica, New York, lacks social activity and aesthetic appeal, there are few places to sit or safely walk, and it is known around town as an unwelcoming and unsafe place. This area of Utica has seen some recent infrastructure upgrades—a roundabout, new sidewalks, and lighting—but it still falls dramatically short in the neighborhood and city’s eyes. Utica and underserved neighborhoods like Oneida Square bear a visible legacy of disinvestment, urban decay, and public spaces that prioritize automobiles over people.

Yet Oneida Square is a home to one of Utica’s most diverse downtown neighborhoods in a city hoping to benefit from the trend of people returning to cities. Cities rich in arts and culture attract people because of their quality of life, character, and opportunities for participation and investment. A growing movement called creative placemaking puts arts and culture at the center of community development efforts. Utica’s Oneida Square has been the focus of recent creative placemaking activities that have had positive effects on the neighborhood.



Paula Horrigan

The 2015 One World Flower Festival in Utica used creative placemaking strategies to attract activity and people to the neighborhood’s center, Oneida Square.

What is Creative Placemaking?

A 2010 National Endowment for the Arts’ (NEA) White Paper¹ describes creative placemaking this way:

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. 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. (p.3)

Creative placemaking simultaneously serves a community’s “livability, diversity, and economic development goals” (p.4) and recognizes and strengthens its distinctiveness. It often starts with an initiative tailored to a local place’s assets related to its history, identity, and people. Creative placemaking efforts cultivate a sense of place, emphasize artistic and cultural diversity, activate cross-sector partnering, and strategically attend to revitalizing local economies and social and environmental capital via arts and culture.

The NEA Our Town Program, ArtPlace America, and the Kresge Foundation are well-known programs funding creative placemaking. An excellent example of creative placemaking is the City of Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program. Funding for this \$6.5 million annual program, dubbed a “city agency-non-profit hybrid,” comes from a combination of grants and city monies. Each year the program engages “2,500 youth, 400 inmates and ex-offenders, 300 professional artists, and 100 communities... in arts education, restorative justice programs, and mural creation.”² The Mural Arts Program contributes to transforming Philadelphia into a city of murals that is enjoyed by citizens and visitors and fosters a shared sense of urban identity.

The Placemaking Movement

Creative placemaking is part of a larger, burgeoning placemaking movement. Much of that movement is grounded in participatory, community-driven, bottom-up processes aimed at taking back public space and remaking disused urban spaces into lively, inclusive, safe, and attractive places where people want to be. Among the growing cadre of placemaking strategies are tactical urbanism; D.I.Y. (“do-it-yourself”) or guerilla urbanism; and pop-up parks, plazas, parklettes, and festivals. The goal of placemaking efforts like these is to mobilize community members, generate experimentation and creativity, and try new ideas for revitalizing public spaces. Placemaking projects employ inventive, short-term, immediate, and low-cost actions, often in underserved

¹ Markusen, A. and Gadwa, A. (2010). Creative Placemaking: A White Paper for the Mayors’ Institute on City Design. Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with U.S. Conference of Mayors and American Architectural Foundation. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>

² NEA report, p. 49



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A local family enjoying the festivities and wearing handmade crocheted flowers during the 2015 One World Flower Festival in Oneida Square, Utica, NY.

and overlooked community spaces and neighborhoods, and use them to jumpstart community and economic development efforts and reinvestment, over both short and extended timeframes. Importantly, they build and develop social capital in large part due to their emphasis on place and collective “making” which is considered an essential, and too often underemphasized, ingredient of placemaking.³

There are many good examples of placemaking across the country. The Better Block Foundation, which began in Houston, Texas, has its own program, method, and tools for community placemaking and revitalizing public life and public space. The Project for Public Spaces, which calls itself the “central hub of the global placemaking movement,” offers extensive resources and services in support of placemaking. An excellent example of city-wide placemaking is the New York City Department of Transportation’s Plaza Program, which has been transforming car-dominant spaces into creative, sociable, people-friendly plazas by working with nonprofit community agencies and employing bottom-up planning processes.

Creative Placemaking in Practice: Utica’s Oneida Square

Like many post-industrial cities, Utica harbors significant arts and culture assets, such as its public library, art museum, theatres, and parks. But it also has many other cultural assets yet to be fully harnessed. These include diverse ethnic and cultural groups and neighborhoods, arts and culture makers and producers, food heritage and traditions, architecture and public spaces, and a changing population that is seeking cultural experiences and interactions in distinct settings.

In 2015, students and faculty from Cornell University joined forces with the Rust to Green Utica⁴ community project to co-create the One World Flower Festival. The festival’s emphasis on place and community-cultural development makes it an example of community-driven tactical urbanism and creative placemaking.

“It’s all about putting some love in Oneida Square,” said Karl as he took in the scene unfolding in Utica’s Oneida Square on

Saturday, May 9th, 2015. For Karl and the other residents of the neighborhood, the One World Flower Festival created a palpable feeling of optimism. Diverse members of the community had contributed to its success.

Brightening the square were multi-colored planters brimming with vibrant mixes of newly planted flowers. Artists had created sari banners waving from lampposts, and 35 giant flower orbs enlivened the sidewalks. A flowershop mural by local high school students brought new life to a derelict building facade. Giant flowers beamed from the traffic roundabout while spirited flower totems appeared to be “growing” around the square. The grout on the artful mosaic flower litter receptacles made by the Oneida Square Project was still curing.

At the information booth, nearly 500 crocheted flowers made at “community crochet nights,” clustered together on a canvas banner so visitors could “pick” one (for free) to adorn their outfit. Local musicians and dancers performed on the sidewalks. Many neighbors tested the 150 flower-topped moveable seats fashioned from buckets and painted by children in the neighborhood’s after-school program. Flower banners provided a dramatic backdrop to the “placemaking station,” where people shared their concerns and hopes for the neighborhood.

Building on Success

Utica’s One World Flower Festival originally aimed to transform Oneida Square for a single day to demonstrate the potential for public space improvements. But community partners quickly determined they wanted to create visible and enduring change in the neighborhood’s central hub. It was decided that after the festival, the community-made planters, receptacles, and artful flower totems would remain with a program for summer watering and maintenance.

The festival thereby fed into ongoing revitalization efforts supportive of the neighborhood’s environmental, social, and economic vitality. It followed on a 2013 study, *Taking Steps to Creative Placemaking in Oneida Square* by Rust to Green Utica community and university partners. By physically and socially transforming the square into an inviting, people-friendly place, the One World Flower Festival took a bold next step in shaping the neighborhood’s future. One resident, recalling her daily trips through the square, said, “It’s changed the way people think of Oneida Square, and it’s starting to drive away the dangerous elements, too.”



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Volunteers from the community and local organizations (such as the Mid-Utica Community Center, pictured) helped design the One World Flower Festival and created many of the art pieces used to transform the neighborhood for the event.

³ Silberberg, Susan, (2013). *Places in the Making*, how placemaking builds places and communities. Boston: MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

⁴ Horrigan, Paula. (2014) Rust2Green (R2G): Restoring Prosperity by “Restoring” the Rustbelt. Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) Research & Policy Brief, Issue 59. Cornell University: Ithaca, NY

