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Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum: Leveraging Civic Engagement for Social Impact

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Summary

The Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum provided a unique opportunity to bring six cities in the United States and Europe together to explore how civic engagement can be used to address challenges in six neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity, and/or income. Through the design of VNF, city cohorts worked together to develop a plan to leverage civic engagement to address a problem or challenge in the neighborhood—and in VNF 2.0, to use creative placemaking as a specific tool to engage residents and foster dialogue and inclusion.

Three representatives from three distinct stakeholder groups drew on their networks, leveraged their positions and skills within neighborhood and city government to work together to bring resident voice into key decision-making processes that impacted their neighborhoods, while also working to connect with larger city initiatives. This report summarizes three years of work done by the participating VNF members and highlighted the successes and the challenges to civic engagement. While it is important to discuss the challenges, ultimately it was each participant's passion and dedication which created the great successes documented in these pages. In the end, no matter the challenges, it is passion and dedication that will win the day.

The successes and struggles experienced by the VNF cohorts are instructive for any city that strives to improve the quality of its civic engagement efforts. As the six projects progressed, three common ingredients for success became evident: leadership, community trust and enthusiasm, and capacity. These factors interact to create conditions that allow for success, while their absence makes the ability to engage all the more difficult. Without leadership and capacity, projects struggle to move forward and/or sustain themselves, which can in turn erode community trust, lead to burnout, and thus make engagement more difficult over time. The converse is also true: if community leaders build trust by consistently involving residents in the pursuit of tangible goals, their capacity to succeed will grow over time as their ability to raise funds, generate interest, and engage residents improves.

Whether the tradition of resident engagement is strong or weak in a city, the case studies presented here can spark conversations about what lessons may be learned and what new approaches may be tried to ensure that all residents feel included and heard in the building of a better community.

Introduction

The ability to engage in the public domain is essential everywhere, especially in neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity, and/or income that have been disinvested or purposefully excluded from public decision-making processes on issues that directly affect the well-being and quality of life of their residents. In tandem with equitable investment across communities and groups of people, civic engagement is critical to ensure that residents are equipped with the relationships, knowledge, and resources to effectively shape their future and ensure benefits to long-term residents and newcomers.

The impetus for the thematic framework of the German Marshall Fund's Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum (VNF) project was the findings from a 2017 study on Chicago, *The Cost of Segregation*.¹ This joint study by the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Urban Institute found the costs of racial and economic segregation to be significant. For instance, were the Chicago region to move to the segregation median of the nation's top 100 metros, the study finds that it could expect an additional \$4.4 billion in African American annual income, 83,000 more bachelor's degrees, and 30 percent fewer homicides.

These findings also have relevance for European cities that are experiencing an influx of refugees, migrants, and immigrants. As these new populations settle in and more continue to arrive, questions remain about how cities will respond. Can they avoid the kind of segregation that so many northern U.S. cities created during the Great Migration? Given the evident negatives—immediate and long-term—of racial and economic segregation, the imperative to create deliberately open pathways to integrated home, life, and school environments looms large.

Civic engagement is necessary to better understand the needs of a neighborhood in order to better execute change but, in practice, this can be difficult to achieve within a city. This partially arises from the twin issues of trust and apathy, which can discourage residents from engagement. After all, neighborhoods that experience social disadvantage do so, in part, because they have been ignored by the very political system residents are then asked to engage with. Why should they trust that new initiatives will yield different results?

In addition, city governance structure, the availability of financial resources, and policy precedents can impede change at the neighborhood level. There are many methods and tools that cities can use to engage residents at the neighborhood level, but it is the residents—working together as a community—who can take that engagement to the next level by breaking through engrained governance structures to access needed funding and shake up path-dependent policies.

¹ The Metropolitan Planning Council, *The Cost of Segregation*, March 2017.

This report documents how residents, groups, and partners in six cities—in Europe (Brussels, Belgium; Cologne, Germany; and Turin, Italy) and in the United States (Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, Tennessee; and New Orleans, Louisiana)—leveraged their voices through civic engagement to access resources, shape decisions, and work across groups, institutions, and sectors in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to their neighborhoods.

About the Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum

In 2017, the German Marshall Fund of the United States launched the Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum, (VNF) funded by the Kresge Foundation in Detroit, Michigan and the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo in Turin, Italy. VNF was made up of two initiatives. VNF 1.0 brought together three U.S. and three European cities to explore how to address social disadvantage in neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity, and/or income through civic engagement. VNF 2.0 built on the first iteration and focused on a specific tool of civic engagement, creative placemaking, as a way to foster inclusion, dialogue, and integration. The objective was to shift the discussion from the cost of exclusion to the opportunity to create places of inclusion as a key component to building vibrant neighborhoods. In both cases, civic engagement was the central focus of VNF.

The Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum was designed to:

- Engage three individuals to create a VNF city cohort to work through a common neighborhood issue with an express set of goals designed to advance change.
- Document the evolution of the goals and share the challenges and successes in making the goals a reality through transatlantic convenings and webinars.
- Present concrete outcomes of the work of each city cohort.

The project included the participation of twenty individuals from Europe and the United States. Three cities in Europe (Cologne, Germany; Brussels, Belgium; and Turin, Italy) and three cities in the United States (Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, Tennessee; and New Orleans, Louisiana) were each represented by one city government representative, one community development corporation (or similar) representative, and one neighborhood activist representative. Each city centered their work around a specific neighborhood, including Finkenbergl in Cologne, Molenbeek in Brussels, San Salvario in Turin, Jefferson Chalmers in Detroit, South City in Memphis, and Central City in New Orleans. Convenings were held between 2017 and 2019 in Detroit, Michigan; Brussels Belgium; Turin, Italy; and New Orleans, Louisiana.

What Is Civic Engagement?

Cities across Europe and the United States have been working to regenerate disinvested neighborhoods and find ways to address poverty. Yet, too often, outside stakeholders, rather than community anchor organizations, make crucial decisions about neighborhoods without consulting with or involving residents in key decision-making processes. This creates two sets of problems. First, new or external organizations that make decisions for residents of poor neighborhoods without asking what they need (as many, regrettably, still fail to do) risk failing to address local problems. Second, they risk ignoring the pool of local knowledge held by support networks, long-standing local organizations, and active residents who have been working within their communities for a long time to understand what matters for residents. As a result, “solutions” for regeneration and poverty reduction may completely miss the mark.¹

Increasingly, civic engagement is used by stakeholders to understand what changes in the neighborhood are needed, as determined by residents experiencing the lack of investment. Though civic engagement is a rather broad term, at the heart of the concept is the notion that residents of a neighborhood or community should play an active role in shaping its future. Civic engagement relies on tools and methods to engage residents and community networks to determine what is needed and how residents can influence, fund, and/or support other strategic partners to bring about change.

Beneath this broad umbrella term is the narrower concept of public engagement, which encompasses the full spectrum of ways in which the public becomes more informed about and influences decisions in order to play an active role in local governance.² Both the government and the people bear a share of the responsibility for this level of engagement. Ideally, the government should actively work to solicit the opinions of those who will be impacted by its decisions, while also being responsive to those opinions in order to build trust within the community. On the other hand, residents should take the initiative to participate in ongoing public discourse and make their preferences, needs, and concerns known. Strong public engagement requires that residents be actively involved in defining what issues should be addressed, prioritizing these issues to effectively allocate resources, and customizing solutions to their unique local context. Furthermore, resident expectations, administrative capabilities, and political will must all be aligned, and the government should be transparent about why it is making the decisions it makes.³ If residents get the sense that the govern-

1 Bert Provan, “Stop doing things to poor neighborhoods without asking what they need,” *The Political Quarterly*, November 2018.

2 Institute for Local Government, “[What is Public Engagement?](#)” July 2012.

3 Jennifer Lake, *Public Engagement-Back to Basics*, Papers in Canadian Economic Development, 2013.

ment is holding meetings as a formality and does not intend to act on their concerns, trust will inevitably break down, making future outreach much more difficult.⁴

Creative Placemaking as a Tool of Civic Engagement

In places where distrust is endemic, some experts recommend starting with small, concrete projects where progress is measurable and visible in the short term. Such projects can help city governments build a reputation of being accountable and trustworthy,⁵ engender long-term trust in the institutions themselves and make future engagement more likely. One facet of this approach is known as “creative placemaking,” a term coined in 2010 by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus to describe the process in which “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.”⁶ The idea behind the approach is that by bringing these groups together, they can use their diverse talents to work toward a common goal of improving the livability and economic development of a city. A creative placemaking project will thus not only result in the transformation of the physical spaces involved but also foster long-term partnership and provide a pathway to civic engagement that may not have been visible in the past. For its part, the government is able to use art to spur economic development because creative placemaking creates jobs for artists, local businesses, and construction; transforms vacant, blighted, and underused spaces into hubs of activity; and attracts further investment in the neighborhood. To be a productive step toward civic engagement it is vital that cities engage residents in decisions made about communities’ or neighborhoods’ cultural assets, so that the creative placemaking process remains an active and engaged one.

Over the past three years, the VNF has sought to put into practice the theories of community engagement outlined above. By bringing together experts, community members, and government officials from diverse communities on both sides of the Atlantic, GMF has had the opportunity to compare their approaches and gain a stronger understanding of how bolstering civic engagement—especially creative placemaking—can help communities address social disadvantage in neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity, and/or income.

4 Juliet Musso, “Toward “Strong Democracy” in Global Cities? Social Capital Building, Theory-Driven, and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Experience,” *Public Administration Review*, January 2011.

5 Robert Chaskin, “[Fostering Neighborhood Democracy: Legitimacy and Accountability Within Loosely Coupled Systems](#),” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, June 2003.

6 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, [Creative Placemaking](#), The Mayors Institute on City Design, 2010.

Six City Neighborhoods Advancing Social and Economic Advantage through Civic Engagement

This section provides a brief historical overview of the role civic engagement played prior to the start of the Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum, and what each neighborhood cohort did to advance civic engagement through their work with VNF. The following highlights the work of each city.

Molenbeek, Brussels, Belgium

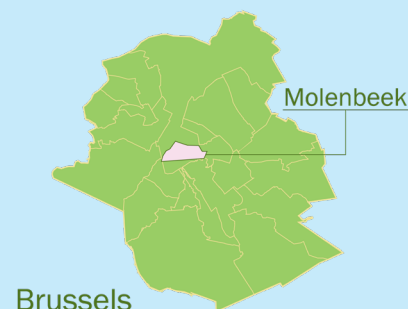
Molenbeek has historically been open to change from the bottom up, in large part because of its diverse social and economic fabric. Following the youth riots of the 1990s, there was a strong push by the inhabitants of the municipality to be heard and involved in local politics.

Multiple initiatives sprang from this time. Youth centers were created for youth to meet and participate in the social and political life of the municipality. MOVE, one of the most important organizations to advance social cohesion, was founded. At the same time, young, elected officials became more representative of the neighborhoods they were drawn from, including those that took part in the riots. The desire to involve the residents in local decision-making processes also resulted in the formation of neighborhood committees.

Objective for VNF 1.0

Over the years, and especially in 2015, when Molenbeek gained international attention as the base of terrorists who carried out attacks in France and Belgium, the neighborhood was perceived negatively. The project sought to change the popular perception of Molenbeek by transforming its neglected places into spaces of inclusion.

MOLENBEEK is a former industrial area that has been home to immigrants—primarily from Morocco—since the 1950s. A densely populated area (97,000 residents in just three square miles), the neighborhood has long been synonymous with high unemployment and low social and economic mobility. Its reputation was further tarnished when it was discovered that terrorists had used Molenbeek as a base for planning various attacks in France and Belgium in 2015.



The bad press spurred residents to invest in improving their collective image, leading to several new initiatives with an emphasis on including people of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Today, Molenbeek boasts over 200 civic organizations, including a youth council founded by city hall alderwoman Sarah Turine. The neighborhood was also honored by the Commission Communautaire Française as a Cultural Metropole, a distinction celebrating the cultural vitality of the neighborhood.

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

The cohort decided to revitalize a vacant lot in Molenbeek that had been used by residents to dump garbage. The garbage was removed, and the space filled in with new ground in 2017. This became the perfect launch pad as the empty space offered the opportunity to try new forms of engagement to better understand what the community wanted done with this lot.

MOLENBEEK VNF 1.0

Project funder: Residents

Project partner: Mama Ayesha

The Brussels cohort established goals and a timeline during VNF 1.0 that addressed how civic engagement would be used to engage the neighborhood in the renovation and maintenance of the space. Upon return, the cohort conducted resident outreach through meetings and found that neighborhood residents would like the space turned into a garden and meeting space.

In the process of developing a space that had been used as a garbage dump into a resident-accessible garden that could be used for weekly meetings and gatherings, the Brussels cohort engaged with multiple stakeholders and residents, from the butcher who supplied the water for the garden to the café that stored the gardening tools, the residents who maintained the garden, and Mama Ayesha, the non-profit organization overseeing the running of the garden. Building on an idea that stemmed from the New Orleans cohort, the Brussels cohort recognized the need for—and subsequently created—a contract between the different groups that outlined, identified, and formalized the role of individuals and organizations' in the garden's maintenance and how resources would be shared.

Creative Placemaking

Objective for VNF 2.0

Drawing on the work of VNF1.0, the cohort continued to build on the theme of cleanliness, this time using creative placemaking as a tool to engage neighborhood residents. This decision aligned with the priorities of the newly elected municipal officials who had taken over in December 2018. Khadija Zamouri, a VNF participant and alderwoman in charge of cleanliness in Molenbeek, proposed a plan to beautify the municipality by turning trash into works of art. By leveraging art, the community came together around the goal of beautification while fostering additional discussions about the status of the neighborhood more generally.

How did the city cohort use creative placemaking as space for civic engagement, dialogue, and integration?

The cohort worked with the Department of Cleanliness to identify areas especially hard hit by litter and dumping. During the VNF 2.0 convening in 2019, which included presentations and field visits in Turin, the cohort came up with the idea of including art as one of the solutions in their overall approach to the problem of litter. Once back in Brussels, the cohort created a three-pronged approach that included engaging the resi-

dents for their input and help, working with the relevant city departments to provide funding and support, and engaging local artists to work with the public on the design and creation of the neighborhood art projects. The three departments engaged in this project—Public Cleanliness, Civic Engagement, and Culture—had never worked together before. A great deal of energy was used to convince them that they had a shared purpose.

MOLENBEEK VNF 2.0

Project funders and partners: Department of Arts and Culture, The Public Department of Cleanliness, Department of Civic Behavior

The first task was to consult with different neighborhood groups to better understand their vision for turning trash into art. The cohort did this through neighborhood meetings. Once the vision was clear, the cohort needed to persuade the director of the Public Department to agree to the proposal to turn trash into art. The cohort brought together the director of the Public Department, the director of the Incivility Unit, and the director of the Culture Department for a meeting to discuss how they could coordinate their work and resources to use art to address the problem of dumping and trash in Molenbeek. After extensive discussions, the three departments agreed on their roles and responsibilities for moving forward.

The Department of Culture—together with the neighborhood committees—would be responsible for funding the project and selecting the local artist, while the Department of Cleanliness would provide the necessary logistical support to complete the project. The newly elected city council then developed a strategic plan and met with the directors of the different departments related to cleanliness. Finally, the cohort presented its plan to the residents and local artists for their input and, ultimately, their approval at a final consultation meeting. It was during one of the monthly meetings between the Department of Culture and the neighborhood committees that the cohort met Hamida Ouassini, a renowned local artist with a commitment to seeing her neighborhood thrive. She led the “Parcours des Écoliers” initiative, in which she worked with students to design artwork and paint their designs onto neighborhood trash receptacles. The students also designed and built benches in their woodworking classes to surround trees (as a way to prevent dumping). It is hoped that these efforts, combined with better trash pick-up agreed to by the Department of Cleanliness, will result in less dumping while also creating spaces in which people want to sit, relax, and enjoy the outdoors.

Next Steps

The Molenbeek neighborhood project reimagined several of the neighborhood’s public assets that were too often taken for granted and failed to be protected. The Brussels cohort met its objectives in that the creative placemaking project was implemented to beautify streets and successfully engage neighborhood residents in the execution of the project.

However, a long-term cleanup plan is still in progress. The cohort has called upon an organization specializing in the collaboration of cleanliness plans to advise them on the next steps of the project. A steering committee has been formed with different departments of the municipality and neighborhood committees. Several projects for the beautification of Molenbeek are currently underway with Hamida Ouassini.

Finkenberg, Cologne, Germany

Finkenberg was selected to take part in VNF because of its unique demographics—its residents speak 39 different languages—and because of the challenges it faces due to its lack of social cohesion, solidarity, and social capital. Finkenberg was designated by the city of Cologne as one of 11 neighborhoods with high social and economic deprivation. To address these issues, the Cologne City Council developed and unanimously passed a plan to work with non-profit actors to better leverage existing resources to identify and target the specific needs of each neighborhood. A key role of the municipal social worker assigned to the Finkenberg neighborhood as part of this initiative has been to coordinate social services in response to residents' needs and to actively engage residents in local decision-making processes.

Yet, where resident voices have been sought, the results have been mixed. For example, in 2015 some tried to establish a citizen's association in Finkenberg. While large associations were formed in other wards of the city (in some cases with up to 800 members), the attempt in Finkenberg proved unsuccessful. Only a handful of residents attended, and some of those who did attend expressed radical and antisocial views, such as tearing down the high-rise apartments. Other attempts at engagement have been more successful, such as quarterly neighborhood meetings that include key stakeholders such as non-profit service providers, local politicians, police, city administrators, and residents. In these meetings, current topics and problems are discussed and solutions are sought. When necessary, working groups are set up to examine topics in greater depth and develop solutions. The results are reported back to the network.

COLOGNE, with 1.1 million residents, is Germany's fourth-largest city. After its near destruction during World War II, the city had to be completely

rebuilt. In 1972, Finkenberg was created to illustrate what the urban future would look like—a mixed-income neighborhood with high-rise buildings, commercial spaces, schools, and other public facilities along with a number of single-family homes and apartments. Unfortunately, the real-estate developer went bankrupt and the condition of the neighborhood quickly deteriorated as higher-income residents left and were replaced by low-income and migrant residents, who bore the brunt of neighborhood disinvestment. This contributed to persistent and deep social divisions between existing and newer residents.

Today, Finkenberg's roughly 7,000 residents are younger, poorer, and more likely to be migrants than the city population; 83 percent had a migrant background, 43 percent received unemployment benefits (compared to 13 percent in all of Cologne), and about a quarter were younger than 18. To combat high levels of social and economic deprivation, the City of Cologne selected the neighborhood as one of 11 that would receive additional funding in 2007.



Objective for VNF 1.0

The top-down nature of Cologne's administrative system has sometimes hindered engagement efforts. For the Finkenberg cohort, it was important to start with the basics of civic engagement—to figure out first how to best engage with residents—especially when these hail from 39 countries.

The goal for the Cologne cohort was therefore to develop innovative civic engagement methods and tools to better include a range of residents in decisions being made about how to improve social cohesion and to maximize the utility of available public space in Finkenberg.

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

One of the biggest challenges the Cologne cohort faced was the inability to obtain input from residents. Past initiatives had been developed for the neighborhood, but not by the neighborhood. The Cologne cohort sought to change this. But first it had to better understand what the residents' needs, issues, and concerns were. To find out, the cohort adopted New Orleans' and Detroit's methods of engagement that sought to meet residents where they lived and relaxed. Since markets still play a vital role in gathering people together for shopping, trading, and leisure in Germany, the cohort created a winter market. Residents in Finkenberg set up stalls and sold food, beverages, and goods. It was at this event that the Cologne cohort set up a table and asked residents to fill out a simple three-question survey (translated into different languages). The survey asked: What would you like to see changed in your neighborhood? How would you propose to change this? What will you do to make change happen? Turnout was high as was participation in the survey. Some residents voiced pleasure at being asked what they thought was needed in their neighborhood.

COLOGNE VNF 1.0

Project funders and partners: The City of Cologne, Rhein-Energie-Stiftung (the foundation of the municipal energy supplier).

The survey results suggested that residents were overwhelmingly concerned about high unemployment in the neighborhood. In response, the Cologne cohort again adopted an approach learned from the Detroit and New Orleans cohorts and partnered with private companies working in the neighborhood. The cohort reached out to the local businesses and discussed the possibility of working together on a joint project with the Cologne Chamber of Commerce that would encourage the hiring of Finkenberg residents. The cohort has since received funding to grow capacity for its work, which includes connecting local companies in the neighborhood to possible opportunities to hire from the neighborhood.

Although citizen participation procedures are regularly implemented in Cologne, for example in construction projects, ideas gained from the Detroit meeting about outreach methods proved beneficial in understanding how connections are developed and fostered as well as how to communicate a shared purpose in meeting a neighborhood need. The stakeholder mapping exercise was particularly helpful in identifying who the Cologne cohort needed to work with and how to reach out and communicate with new stakeholders.

Creative Placemaking

Objective for VNF 2.0

Building on the theme of resident engagement, the aims of the Cologne cohort's VNF 2.0 project were to develop ideas for the transformation of the Finkenberg environment by its residents, to check with the administration about the feasibility of those ideas, and to implement them promptly in coordination with the residents and other stakeholders. The underlying principle behind the plan was “nothing for us without us,” which means that no proposals should be developed or implemented without the participation of the residents.

How did the city cohort use creative placemaking as space for civic engagement, dialogue, and integration?

The Cologne cohort engaged residents to ascertain how to turn a bland, unusable public space known as the Platz der Kulturen (Place of Many Cultures) into something more dynamic for the community. To do this, the cohort hosted a series of neighborhood convenings that offered food and music in a market-like setting. Prior to the event, interviews with residents at different locations were carried out. The cohort then distributed a questionnaire in multiple languages that asked residents what they wanted done with the Platz der Kulturen, among other issues facing the neighborhood. An overwhelming majority said they wanted to redesign the space in a way that brought the community together while also celebrating the diversity of its residents.

COLOGNE VNF 2.0

Project funders and partners: Ford Motor Company, Department of Culture, Bürgerstiftung (Citizen Foundation), City of Cologne

The first goal was to make the space an enjoyable place where people would want to come together. On September 4, 2019, the cohort started work on the greening and shading of the Platz der Kulturen. This project included the participation of neighborhood residents and was made possible by the Ford Motor Company, which supplied resources and assistance. Unfortunately, even with the support of a major corporation, this project did not come to fruition. This was in large part due to a breakdown in communication and a lack of capacity. It was decided that the planting would not take place at the Platz der Kulturen, but rather at another neighborhood location. This happened because the team captain (a resident) was overwhelmed by the tasks before him. The captain was unable to adequately build and lead the team of residents and coordinate with the project funder.

Despite setbacks, all was not lost. Drawing on the civic engagement work it had done prior as a part of its VNF 1.0 work, the Cologne cohort was able to secure additional funding from the Ford Company. Working together, the residents, city officers, and local companies decided that the community could transform the Platz der Kulturen into a more welcoming and useful space—even without making it greener—by setting up an intercultural café for residents to come together. They created the project “mein Spruch” (my slogan) where local children suggested slogans and designed small signs to promote mutual respect. The slogans were translated into 11 languages and placed throughout the neighborhood. Finally, Cologne's Department of Culture

has created a fund for “artists in residence,” in which artists will live and work with the residents in Finkenberg for a period of six months.

Next Steps

The project is still ongoing. The cohort secured the funding to invite an artist to live in Finkenberg and work with the residents. The intercultural café is open once a week and is visited by residents. It is a place where ideas for the neighborhood can be further discussed. The signs with the slogans for more respect are a visible sign of the residents’ wishes and document the outcome of the entire process.

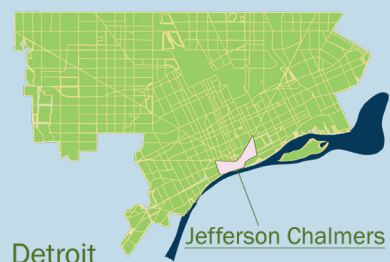
Jefferson Chalmers, Detroit, Michigan

Detroit was a major industrial hub in the early 20th century, particularly for automobile manufacturing. Beginning in the 1920s, the Jefferson Chalmers neighborhood was home to a thriving business and residential community, attracting immigrants and African Americans who found opportunities among the plentiful factory jobs. By the late 1960s, however, the deterioration of the automobile industry contributed to a reduction in employment, which prompted the erosion of neighborhood stability and created significant population loss that would continue for decades.

Despite these challenges, Jefferson Chalmers has a long history of civic engagement and community planning. Several key players shaping the neighborhood today got their start in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In accordance with federal urban renewal policies, the Jefferson Chalmers Citizens District Council was established in 1972 to ensure that citizens’ voices were heard regarding developments in the community. In 1983, the Creekside Community Development Corporation was formed by residents unhappy with how developments were being handled in the community. It was a primary housing entity and co-developer of 45 low-income homes in the neighborhood, with an additional focus on parks, land use, placemaking, and youth development. Eleven years later, the Jefferson East Business Association was

JEFFERSON CHALMERS

attracted many immigrants and African Americans to its automobile factories and other indus-



trial jobs in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, the neighborhood fell into decline in the 1960s as manufacturers moved abroad and residents left in search of other opportunities. In the decades that followed, abandoned properties fell into disrepair, disinvestment, and poverty. In 2014, for example, a survey of 2,117 structures found that 149 were in poor condition, 27 were recommended for demolition, 44 had fire damage, and 214 needed boarding. They also found 73 lots with dumping.

In an effort to improve both the physical space and the lives of nearly 6,000 residents after the 2008 financial crisis, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development selected Jefferson Chalmers to be a beneficiary of the Neighborhood Stabilization Program. This initiative was established to stabilize communities suffering from large numbers of foreclosures and home abandonment. Detroit was also part of the New Michigan Urban Neighborhood strategy, which integrated planning, targeted demolition, rehabilitation, and critical land assemblage to get neighborhoods ready for new market opportunities. Building on these projects, in 2017, Detroit's Planning and Development Department co-crafted The Jefferson Chalmers Neighborhood Framework Plan with residents to determine neighborhood investment strategies.

formed to encourage business development and façade improvements. It expanded into Jefferson East Inc. in 2013, with the goal of growing Detroit's east Jefferson corridor and its neighborhoods through leadership, partnerships, and programming.

Following the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, additional community organizations were founded. Hope Community Outreach and Development, for example, partners with and empowers youth and families to improve their quality of life, and the Southeast Waterfront Neighborhood Association works to improve the character and quality of life of the neighborhood. In 2010, the Riverbend Community Association began organizing community relations meetings with the Detroit Police on subjects including housing, land use, and recreation. In 2015, the Jefferson Chalmers Riverside Development Corp organized around reopening a recreation center in the neighborhood.

Objective for VNF 1.0

At the beginning of VNF, the Detroit cohort made it a goal to build on prior work by growing civic engagement in the Jefferson Chalmers neighborhood through active recruitment of residents to participate in projects to create a cleaner, safer neighborhood. To reach that goal, there were four underlying objectives. The first was to preserve and improve neighborhood assets, particularly parks and greenways, while encouraging volunteerism and building a sense of community. The second was to improve public safety by advocating the demolition of blighted properties, boarding up vacant homes, and coordinating local safety initiatives. The third was improving neighborhood cleanliness by reducing blight, improving the neighborhood streetscape, and managing public and open land. The fourth objective was encouraging investment in the neighborhood by providing small businesses with resources and building housing capacity.

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

Jefferson Chalmers created active avenues for resident participation through a committee during the year-long process for the Neighborhood Framework Plan. The planning process was guided by a resident committee called the Residents in Action (RIA). The idea for RIA emerged from the forums held in Detroit and Brussels as well as various workshops centered on facilitating residents' active participation in government decisions. VNF's goal setting emerged as a challenge for the cohort to think of ways to unify neighborhood voice in order to create a productive relationship between the neighborhood planning effort and residents.

JEFFERSON CHALMERS VNF 1.0

Project funders: City of Detroit–Planning and Development Department, Strategic Neighborhood Fund

Project partners: City of Detroit, Planning and Development Department, General Services Department (Parks and Recreation Division), Department of Neighborhoods
Jefferson East, Inc. (JEI)

At the conclusion of the Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum, the cohort collaborated on setting up the planning processes, including RIA, which included residents who were elders in the community and held active roles, as well as residents with strong voices. RIA met throughout the process of creating the neighborhood plan

and discussed the merits of proposed investment projects. In addition, the planning team engaged young people from Jefferson Chalmers Youth Connection through a youth-centered focus group and other activities such as door-knocking. Youth engagement was one of the most successful strategies in developing the overall vision for the neighborhood plan.

Results

The challenge of conceiving an inclusive outreach and participatory process for all Jefferson Chalmers residents came at a time when the City of Detroit was planning for future investment and needed resident input in the decision-making process. Prior to the Neighborhood Framework Plan, community efforts had reached most of their goals for stabilization and the planning effort presented the opportunity for a renewed shared vision. However, residents had deep-seated distrust for local government due to decades of disinvestment and broken promises, issues which were beyond a single engagement process. Thus, the goals set for VNF reflected the challenge of creating a participatory engagement process where decision-making was balanced between municipal government and residents from a cross section of the neighborhood, not dominated by a single group or voice.

Overall, creating a representative resident group improved the planning process by having resident voices at the table from the start, not just at milestone public meetings. Effective strategies that could assist future engagement might include: investing in seasoned facilitators that can navigate difficult conversations and bring a group to productive dialogue, planning for group stakeholders to be active through the implementation and not just the planning of projects, and setting up communication systems that will endure beyond any single project.

Creative Placemaking

Objective for VNF 2.0

For VNF 2.0, the Detroit cohort sought to rehabilitate community space to increase and promote community pride and identity. In pursuit of that goal, it developed two objectives: to ensure that re-developed community space reflects residents' needs as well as local identity, and to ensure that the process and the result are both creative and inclusive.

How did the city cohort use creative placemaking as space for civic engagement, dialogue, and integration?

The Detroit city cohort capitalized on formal administrative changes made as a result of Mayor Mike Duggan's election in 2013 to improve the quality of the interactions between the local community and the government bureaucracy. During Mayor Duggan's first term, he established the Department of Neighborhoods to place staff in each of the seven city council districts to help residents address concerns of blight in their community. At the same time, the mayor greatly enhanced the capacity of the Planning and Development Department (PDD). The Department of Neighborhoods and the PDD have worked closely on various initiatives, but especially on VNF, where Letty Azar from the Department of Neighborhoods and Maria Galarza from PDD,

whose jurisdiction includes Jefferson Chalmers, have worked with Jefferson East, Inc. staffer Michelle Lee and local active resident Minnie Lester. These administrative changes at the city level have greatly impacted the response times to residents' concerns, as well as the execution of large infrastructure investment such as the rehabilitation of the Lenox Center.

One successful initiative developed by the cohort was the inclusion of creative methods of engagement in the collaborative design sessions for the Lenox Center. These sessions, hosted by the cohort, prioritized the interests of neighborhood residents and facilitated collaborative interactions between city staff and stakeholders. Strategies included information sessions, visioning sessions, collaborative design sessions, creative placemaking/place keeping, and open-house-style events. The city also made sure to tailor multiple sessions so that they were suitable for various stakeholders and diverse age groups. The intent was to replicate lessons learned from the engagement developed through the Co-City Projects in Turin (see below).

In Detroit, the objective of the Lenox Center project was to activate a city asset for residents' needs. To ascertain what residents' needs were, the cohort designed a workshop and creative placemaking events to engage residents. The hope was to meet these two objectives, while also engaging the next generation of young civic leaders. As the city started the process for the Lenox Center by announcing the funding partners, the city cohort hosted a park meet-up to break barriers and talk about the engagement process with residents from the very beginning.

One of the challenges that the cohort encountered over the nine months between the Turin and New Orleans meetings was the overwhelming number of projects that it was involved in. There was a huge amount of information being communicated from the city to the community without clear timelines, which resulted in confusion and miscommunication. In addition, due to the slower nature of municipal projects, the over-saturation led to a loss of momentum and community buy-in. To counter some of these challenges, the cohort opened direct lines of communications with the Friends of Jefferson Chalmers Riverfront Parks, a group that meets monthly to improve and steward the neighborhood's riverfront parks

Next Steps

As a result of VNF 2.0 convenings in Turin and New Orleans, the cohort gained a better understanding of creative placemaking and how the process could be used as an engagement method to foster community interaction and dialogue. Although some efforts to incorporate art and creative methodologies were used as part of community outreach for Lenox, the process of creative placemaking required a more robust effort to include artists and community in the creation of a place where no "place" existed before. While the Lenox Center is not exactly suited to be a project for creative placemaking, techniques that foster high resident participation—

JEFFERSON CHALMERS VNF 2.0

Project funders: City of Detroit–Planning and Development Department, Strategic Neighborhood Fund-Penske Corporation Contribution

Project partners: City of Detroit, Planning and Development Department, General Services Department (Parks and Recreation Division), Department of Neighborhoods Jefferson East, Inc. (JEI)

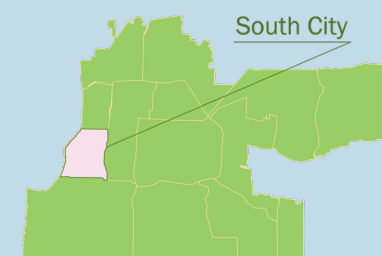
such as interactive engagement stations, recording community feedback during design sessions, and using community art in the project branding—are being used in the project engagement.

South City, Memphis, Tennessee

To confront a history of social and financial disinvestment, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) developed a three-part neighborhood plan for all cities awarded a Choice Neighborhood grant, including the South City neighborhood of Memphis, Tennessee. The plan's three main components were: people, neighborhood, and housing. Memphis' existing public and private partnerships helped with implementation of the plan, which provided an excellent opportunity for the city to demonstrate inclusive and equitable development. Residents, stakeholders, and philanthropists together engaged in developing the plan through a combination of community town halls, small group stakeholder meetings and resident surveys. There were no traditional Community Development Corporations (CDCs) operating in the South City neighborhood at that time. Instead, there was a renters' association within the former public housing development and a community-based organization that had limited capacity and was an offshoot of a historical church.

Prior to South City's participation in VNE, there was limited civic engagement in the neighborhood. There were, however, philanthropic funds available to support future civic engagement activities. The VNF cohort planned to focus on building the capacity and infrastructure necessary for engagement in South City. At the start of the project, the cohort identified two factors hindering and one factor helping engagement. The primary hindrances were the relocation of residents with criminal records due to Section 8 policies restricting housing for persons with felony convictions and the time lag between planning and implementation of projects. The HUD Choice Neighborhood Grant, however, was viewed as a positive because it required a comprehensive planning and engagement process that

The **SOUTH CITY** neighborhood is one of the oldest African-American communities (97 percent of residents identify as such)



Memphis

in Memphis. It encompasses the southern half of Downtown Memphis and the northern tip of South Memphis and is bounded by Beale Street to the north, Crump Boulevard to the south, Main Street to the west, and Walnut Street to the east. Despite the long and rich history of the area, 40 percent of its residents live in poverty today. This is due to a myriad factors including consistent population decline, low educational attainment, and a high unemployment rate. The neighborhood has also suffered from lack of investment for many years, resulting in blighted commercial and residential properties.

In an effort to reverse these trends, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the Memphis Housing Authority and the City of Memphis a five-year, \$29.75 million Choice Neighborhood grant in 2015. The city and private partners committed an additional \$30 million to a Capital Improvements Program in an effort to revitalize the neighborhood.

went beyond revitalization of public housing to include other factors that impact community development, like job creation.

Objective for VNF 1.0

The South City Urban Renewal Plan was expected to transform the neighborhood through new and renovated housing stock, new retail stores including a grocery store, job creation, and social service programs. The plan encompassed a portion of an affluent downtown Memphis area in one of the poorest zip codes in the United States, bifurcated by a four-lane street. Two major public housing sites—Cleaborn Homes and Foote Homes—sit adjacent to each other in the heart of the neighborhood.

The Memphis cohort made it its goal to ensure that the redevelopment of the South City neighborhood would create a sustainable place of choice where current and future families could live and thrive. To reach that goal, it determined that the redevelopment plan must address the following challenges:

- Actual and/or perceived displacement through gentrification.
- Current lack of capacity of community development organizations and engagement infrastructure resulting from a significant number of residents' relocation
- Increase in blight and crime
- Loss of community and resident' identity due to neighborhood rebranding
- Continued self- and/or system-imposed segregation of residents by income and race

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

The Memphis cohort was especially interested in applying Detroit's approach and process to civic engagement to the Memphis city government. This idea was reinforced by the opportunity to visit Detroit and learn firsthand how the city was structuring its response to neighborhood needs through the creation of a Department of Neighborhoods. The cohort also witnessed how this department worked closely with the Detroit Planning and Development Department (PDD) to engage neighborhood residents in the city's urban planning initiatives. Detroit's city-level support for civic engagement and the methods by which the city was engaging with residents in neighborhoods proved illuminating for the Memphis cohort and inspired it to replicate these ideas. The grassroots strategies that Detroit used to engage residents who do not normally participate in such decision-making processes—for example, the "traveling couch" used in the Jefferson Chalmers neigh-

SOUTH CITY VNF 1.0

The various initiatives comprised of a range of funders and partners: Clean Memphis, Memphis City Beautiful, LeMoyne-Owen College CDC, Lehman-Roberts, FedEx, Shelby County Mayor's Office, Shelby County Commissioner's Office, Memphis Black Arts Alliance

borhood—have likewise inspired their work. Notably, Rebecca Matlock Hutchinson (founder and executive director of SCORE CDC, a community development corporation serving the South City community that was developed as part of VNF 1.0) from the Memphis cohort plans to adopt this approach in her effort to engage a wider group of residents in the development of the HUD Choice Neighborhoods grant in the Soulesville neighborhood.

Using the strategies learned from the Detroit cohort to inform resident needs and concerns, Hutchinson hosted a number of events, the most successful of which was the National Night Out. Held at the historic Paradise Entertainment Center, this was South City's single largest community event, attracting over 200 residents in October 2019. The National Night Out offered an opportunity for residents to meet with neighbors while enjoying free food, games, and music.

Building civic engagement capacity in South City was a key component of the work completed during VNF 1.0. The methods below describe how the cohort went about engaging residents on key issues, including HUD's Choice Neighborhoods grant. They included:

Candidate Forums: SCORE CDC (South City Opportunity Revitalization Empowerment Community Development Corporation) hosted two candidate forums at the Emmanuel Center in the heart of South City. Candidates running for elected offices serving districts in South City were invited to meet residents and present their platforms. The event was moderated by Karanga Ajanaku, executive editor of the new Tri-State Defender, and news anchor Stephanie Scurlock of News Channel 3. Partners included the Emmanuel Center and the South City Advisory Team members.

South City Pastors' Luncheon: A luncheon focusing on South City pastors was hosted in collaboration with the Cornelia Crenshaw Library, the South City Advisory team, and the South City Resource Center. Choice Neighborhood partners providing updates on the Foote Park development included: City of Memphis Housing & Community Development, Memphis Housing Authority, ComCap Partners, and the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis.

South City Christmas Celebration: The event focused on the former residents of Foote Homes. Also in attendance were current residents of South City. SCORE CDC served as a community sponsor.

Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony: SCORE CDC served as one of the primary facilitators. The ceremony included live entertainment provided by the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, the Stax Music Academy and special guest, Carla Thomas; food vendors; and community entrepreneurs. Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris and Shelby County Commissioner Reginald Milton hosted the program. Other collaborators included LeMoyne-Owen College CDC, Memphis Black Arts Alliance, Shelby County Commission, and the Shelby County Mayor's Office.

The South City LEAD Team (formerly the South City Advisory Team): Composed of residents and other critical stakeholders, the LEAD Team is a program of the South City Empowerment Initiative, serving as a community liaison between SCORE CDC and South City. A reflection of South City, the diverse team of

“neighborhood navigators” includes approximately 11 residents, the faith-based community, nonprofits, and businesses.

Creative Placemaking

Objective for VNF 2.0

Leveraging creative placemaking was a natural next step in the process, given how integral arts and culture is to Memphis and especially the South City neighborhood. The cohort worked to implement two key activities that drew on the rich arts tradition in the neighborhood while at the same time using the events as a way to engage with neighborhood residents. Welcome to South City was the first event planned. The South Main

SOUTH CITY VNF 2.0

Project partners: Clean Memphis, Memphis City Beautiful, LeMoyne-Owen College CDC, Lehman-Roberts, with support of volunteers from FedEx.

ArtSpace Lofts is a new affordable housing development that serves as home to individuals primarily involved in arts and culture. SCORE CDC and residents from Cleaborn Point at Heritage Landing hosted a Welcome to South City event at the South Main ArtSpace Lofts. Participants included the City of Memphis Division of Housing & Community Development, Memphis Housing Authority, Urban Strategies, Advance Memphis, and Knowledge Quest. The subsequent event was a neighborhood beautification and clean-up effort, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, which focused on clearing debris around Booker T. Washington High School and the Mississippi Boulevard railroad overpass.

Next Steps

By the end of VNF 1.0, new affordable housing had replaced the old public housing development in Foote Park at South City, and more than 100 former Foote Homes residents had committed to returning to the neighborhood. To deal with the continued self and/or system-imposed segregation of residents by income and race, the cohort championed the development of new affordable housing. Foote Park at South City included mixed income and mixed-use buildings, and the South Main ArtSpace Lofts sought to draw in artists as well as racially and ethnically diverse tenants.

By the end of VNF 1.0, limited civic engagement was occurring. A structured plan, called the South City Community Engagement Initiative, was developed and philanthropic funds were in process to support future activities. SCORE CDC was actively engaged in developing and implementing community activities, though they still needed to build more capacity and infrastructure for engagement. SCORE CDC developed critical partnerships in 2019, while further leveraging those already established, and successfully recruited several enthusiastic residents who readily volunteered to help ensure the success of SCORE’s community outreach efforts. With the active support of SCORE CDC board members, they successfully raised \$80,000 in grants to support the South City Community Engagement Initiative and create a salary for the executive director.

Central City, New Orleans, Louisiana

Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard has long been a neighborhood anchor and, in recent years, a model for renewed development. The area is home not only to cultural centers and community non-profits, but also restaurants, shops, museums, and art installations. The post-Hurricane Katrina reinvigoration of the area owes its success to coordinated residential and organizational strategies as well as public-private partnerships. Alongside residents, the organizations that have been central to neighborhood revitalization in Central City and Oretha Castle Haley Corridor are: New Orleans Regional Authority, Hope Credit Union, Gulf Coast Housing Partnership, the Neighborhood Development Foundation, and Jericho Road both of which are Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance (GNOHA) members. The partners listed are newer organizations with actors that previously worked in service of Central City in other professional capacities and are now working on a macro level. These partners include Housing NOLA¹ (which aims to address the housing needs of New Orleans), Resilient NOLA² (which works to build a more equitable, environmentally conscious, and resident-involved city), the City of New Orleans Office of Human Rights and Equity³ (which collects resident feedback to make the governing process more inclusive), and the New Orleans Business Alliance⁴ (which focuses on small business growth, business attraction and retention, talent and workforce development, and strategic neighborhood development).

Objective for VNF 1.0 and 2.0

The challenge for the New Orleans cohort was to create a community to foster growth, prosperity, and equity in the face of structural and systemic racism,

Home to several communities of immigrants, **CENTRAL CITY** was ethnically diverse and rich with opportunity through the mid-20th century.



However, industrial decline after World War II led to years of disinvestment. Despite the challenges that this shift created, social activism in the area thrived. At the height of the civil rights movement in 1960, the neighborhood participated in the Dryades Street boycott, which was a key moment in the desegregation of Louisiana. That same year, Oretha Castle Haley became the founding member of the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. Building on those gains, in the 1980s and 1990s, faith, cultural, and civic leaders launched endeavors in the neighborhood and organized for its revival.

In 2005, the neighborhood completed an 18-month community visioning and planning process, developing detailed plans to attack the area's most pressing concerns. Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina devastated the neighborhood and derailed many of these plans, leaving many historic residents of Central City—particularly small business owners—struggling with the loss of their homes and work stability. In subsequent years, residents have found themselves crowded out by better-resourced transplants as the period of post-Katrina building and development has accelerated gentrification. Low incomes and high housing costs are a major contributor to this displacement, with African-Americans most deeply impacted.

¹ Housing NOLA, [HousingNOLA](#), 2020

² City of New Orleans, [Resilient New Orleans](#), 2020

³ City of New Orleans, [Office of Human Rights & Equity](#), 2020

⁴ New Orleans Business Alliance, [What We Do](#), 2020.

economic disparity, limited access to capital, and accelerated gentrification. One way to address this was through the cohort's idea of piloting a sustainable tourism model to engage a cohort of culturists, culture bearers, and culture makers in business planning and capital procurement.

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

The cohort examined the intersection of economic development, creative placemaking, and equity in developing a sustainable tourism model for New Orleans culturists, culture bearers, and makers. Key was leveraging civic engagement to develop a model and lift the issue of sustainable tourism onto the agenda of the New Orleans City Council.

New Orleans is internationally celebrated for its rich arts and culture, from which the city profits greatly. The economic gains though are not realized by the very people who make arts and culture happen—the musicians, artists, and entertainers, in addition to those who sustain the arts and culture infrastructure through the tourism and hospitality industry—gig workers, hotel and motel workers, restaurant and casino employees, pedicab drivers, second line vendors, trade show workers, tour guides, and horse carriage drivers. This in turn affects neighborhoods like Central City where a high proportion of those in the arts and culture, tourism, and hospitality industries work but live in poverty.

Drawing on sustainable tourism examples learned through VNF from Turin and Cologne participants, the cohort developed a custom concept for New Orleans. To do this, it leveraged its members' individual positions in neighborhood and city government to bring the community into conversation with city government, make stakeholders aware of the issues, and advance change through policy and practice.

To convert the idea into action the cohort did the following. First, the cohort gathered data to make the case for a sustainable tourism plan. It worked with the Arts Council of New Orleans to administer a “social determinants of health” screening tool to identify risks and vulnerabilities for those who work in the culture economy. Next, it raised funds to support the development of a Central City sustainable tourism plan and pilot. Here it received funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities to support the development of the plan as well as provide financial support to culture bearers of color who, without such support, are not able to fully access resources to do their work. Third, the cohort sought to address creative placemaking and youth development by employing program strategies co-designed with the Public Art School in partnership with local artists, educators, City of New Orleans, Art Council of New Orleans, and Net Charter School. Finally, the cohort sought to expand the practice of leadership by integrating creative placemaking, civic engagement, and resiliency in public art planning processes and working collaboratively with the Central City Renaissance Alliance/Water Leaders Institute, The Art Council of New Orleans, and the City of New Orleans-Gentilly Resilience District.

CENTRAL CITY VNF 1.0 and 2.0

Project funders: The Ford Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Chase Global Philanthropy, The Kresge Foundation, The Surdna Foundation, National Endowment of the Humanities

Project partners: Arts Council of New Orleans, Waters Leaders Institute, City of New Orleans, Public Art School, Net Charter School

The most important part of this process was bringing residents, neighborhood organizations, and city government stakeholders on board to build awareness and recognize the importance of developing a sustainable tourism plan for the Central City neighborhood and beyond. Historically, Black community leaders have not been represented or were underrepresented in these crucial conversations, giving preference to white, wealthier voices to decide both what the artistic standards should be and who should profit from them. Crucial here was building on the methods used by strong leaders from different sectors to exchange information. The New Orleans Taskforce of Sustainable Tourism was an essential civic engagement tool developed to build a coalition to advocate for change. Here VNF's methodology and transatlantic peer exchange helped build support for this process of engagement.

Consistent messaging across multiple stakeholder groups was essential for ensuring results and impact. The cohort worked, with a clear and cohesive message, to resolve tensions between stakeholders over social and political issues while laying the groundwork for better collaboration in the long term. Here, Tanya James was a driving force in using design learning methods to get different stakeholder groups to better collaborate and coalesce around a set of themes. She did this by creating a shared vocabulary between community and government. This built capacity for better leadership in how different stakeholders could relate to those they share a place with (that is, the neighborhood) and in what practices could help leaders collaborate more effectively.

Next Steps

The cohort's strategic advocacy with residents and legislators led to the New Orleans City Council issuing a request for proposal (RFP) for the commission of a Sustainable Tourism Plan to use tourism revenue to fund a more equitable cultural economy, greater climate justice, and environmental resilience. This idea was conceived at VNF and shepherded by the three cohort members who applied the idea to their work in New Orleans.

San Salvario, Turin, Italy

Turin has participated in various urban initiatives where civic engagement was framed as a long-term, integral part of regeneration efforts, using methodologies and tools first introduced in the early 1990s by the European Union's URBAN Initiative. From 1994 to 1999, this took an integrated approach to urban regeneration, focusing simultaneously on issues such as high unemployment, social exclusion, and the neglected physical environment. An outcome of the different urban

The **SAN SALVARIO** neighborhood, located close to the city center, is one of the most vibrant areas of Turin. Home to a thriving automobile industry for most of the 20th century, Turin has long attracted immi-

grants. However, San Salvario experienced a period of significant disinvestment in the late 1990s, which coincided with a new influx of immigrants. Local and national media saw these trends and began to portray the neighborhood as a symbol of urban decay and insecurity. In response to this negative press, in 1997, a group of neighborhood-based non-profits, cooperatives, parishes, and resident committees drafted a plan for neighborhood regeneration and development, including the creation of a Neighborhood House (community center). To formalize the implementation of this plan, in 2003, local actors merged into the newly created Agency for the Local Development of San Salvario, supported by the city administration.



regeneration programs (funded by the EU, the state, the region and the municipality) during the 2000s was the creation of eight community centers, called Neighborhood Houses, in Turin. These have become essential generators of civic engagement given that they are multi-functional community hubs located in different areas of the city. Though they are very different in their structure—some buildings have large halls that can serve as theaters, concert halls, or cinemas, while others have small spaces better suited to meetings, classrooms, or workshops—they are all open to everyone.

In 2016, Turin received additional funding from the EU Urban Innovative Actions initiative for the implementation of a project called Co-City. Co-City leveraged civic engagement to address socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Using innovative and coordinated methods, the Turin cohort supported community building and civic engagement promoted by its residents. Its efforts aimed to advance social innovation based on the principle of a “commons-based urban welfare,” as stated by the City Regulation on Urban Commons.

The City Regulation on Urban Commons promotes collaboration and mutual trust between the city administration and active citizens (including associations, the third sector, and informal groups) under the principle of subsidiarity; and fosters co-design, co-management, and the creation of pacts of collaboration.

Objective for VNF 1.0

The Turin cohort decided to work towards the twin goals of fostering civic engagement and improving public spaces by soliciting proposals for community projects using the Co-City “pacts of collaboration” framework.

How did the city cohort leverage civic engagement to reach its goals?

The EU funded Co-City project, of which the City of Turin was the lead partner, is an innovative, polycentric, “commons-based urban welfare” project composed of communities centered on the urban commons, low-cost service co-production, social mixing, and the care of public spaces. It starts from the position that residents are changemakers to be partnered with, and that the public sector is not just a service provider but also an enabler and partner in change.

Co-City is predicated on the formation of projects in communities with the objective to generate inclusive economic growth in socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The project has produced a toolkit including:

- An unconventional legal framework enabling neighborhood residents to be changemakers in partnership with the city administration,
- An innovative information and communications technology infrastructure for local networking, and

SAN SALVARIO VNF 1.0

Project funders: EU Urban Innovation Action initiative, City of Torino, University of Torino Computer Science and Law departments, Cascina Roccafranca Foundation, National Association of Municipalities (ANCI)

- Management training to promote economic sustainability.

The city of Turin thus entered into several “pacts of collaboration” with residents and organizations, a new approach to neighborhood management of projects. The pact of collaboration is the legal framework developed by the City Regulation on Urban Commons that outlines the nature of the collaboration between neighborhood residents and city administration for the care, shared management, and regeneration of the urban commons. The pact is the result of a co-design process that brings residents and neighborhood stakeholders together with city administrators to determine the nature of the project and how it will be implemented. Once the co-design phase is completed and approved, a pact of collaboration between the parties is signed. This agreement outlines the roles of all the parties involved, as well as the procedures for the realization of the care, shared management, and regeneration of the neighborhood, as agreed upon during the co-design phase. The pact is based on mutual responsibility and trust and is signed by resident’s organization representatives and the city. Between 2019 and 2020, the city of Turin approved more than 50 pacts of collaboration.

To further support the work agreed upon in the various pacts of collaboration, the city has provided neighborhood residents with access to unused or underused buildings and public spaces to serve as meeting spaces, as well as tutorials about how to develop and sustain local economies and community-led initiatives. In addition, the city of Turin has provided equipment, mentoring, and technical support from its own staff to assist in the design and management of the projects and training programs, specifically on how to develop and sustain social initiatives.

Next Steps

At the start of VNF 1.0, Turin was in the process of launching its request for proposals. Of the 124 submissions, 63 were selected for the co-design process. By the end of VNF 1.0, more than 200 associations and informal groups had been involved in the co-design phase.

Creative Placemaking

Objective for VNF 1.0

The Turin cohort elected to use one of the proposals accepted as part of the EU-funded Co-City project for their creative placemaking project. The goal of the project was to transform the Ginzburg Garden in the San Salvario neighborhood into a diverse and livable community garden that reflects the diversity of the residents. The three objectives of the project were to generate new community assets, to increase access to existing assets, and to seed civic engagement in the neighborhood.

How did the city cohort use creative placemaking as space for civic engagement, dialogue, and integration?

Between the Turin and New Orleans convenings, the cohort hosted a series of events that brought residents together with landscape architects and designers to decide on a proposal for the public square. City officers, as well as staff from the Neighborhood House, worked with the neighborhood residents to ascertain how they

would translate their goals into reality. Key here was the integration of community needs and wishes into the co-design process, which would ultimately result in a pact of collaboration.

During the co-design phase, residents, city officers, and Neighborhood House staff came together to design a diverse and livable community in the Ginzburg Garden. They identified several core issues that their planning needed to consider as they integrated community needs and wishes into the co-design process. These included how best to address the presence of vulnerable groups like the homeless, illegal activities such as drug dealing, and safety concerns in addition to spatial issues and creative placemaking. With the latter, the team considered a variety of issues, including how to accommodate the needs of diverse users like children, students, and the elderly as well as how to combat illegal car parking. Important was establishing how to manage long-term civic engagement and co-management of the garden in order to maintain the quality of the physical transformation over time. Other issues included how to transform the initial pop-up activities to long-term maintenance, and managing the collaboration between the municipality, the Neighborhood House, and the neighborhood associations.

SAN SALVARIO VNF 1.0

Project funders: EU Urban Innovation
Action initiative

Project partners: Neighborhood House
(Casa del Quatiere), San Salvario, City of Torino,
Co-City commoners

The cohort took steps to ensure that each of these issues were addressed as part of the co-design process. In order to address the social issues, Co-City social workers and members of the community were invited to participate in order to ensure that the process took multiple perspectives into account. Various spatial issues were also considered during the co-design phase. Residents worked with staff at the Neighborhood House to explore how best to open the space and allow flexibility by changing how cars accessed the Neighborhood House, connecting the Ginzburg Garden to the Neighborhood House Garden, and redefining the space through creative placemaking.

In September 2019, a creative placemaking initiative was organized for the celebration of the San Salvario Neighborhood House's birthday party. A local artist was engaged to paint a temporary layout on the ground of the Ginzburg Garden, based on resident input. The work of the co-design phase resulted in a pact of collaboration between the municipality and the Co-City partners, including the residents, for the redevelopment and design of the Ginzburg Garden. The pact took into account the aforementioned discussions and outlined the objectives and duration of the collaboration, the roles and responsibilities of the parties, and the management framework and tools.

Results

Phase one of the process has been completed. Following the signing of the pact of collaboration, initial work on the garden began. The next steps will involve defining a long-term vision, the complete transformation of the area as outlined in the project goals, long-term financing through grants, and scaling up the activities in the Ginzburg Garden.

Lessons for Successful Civic Engagement

Civic engagement has the propensity to be tokenistic and ineffectual if done for the wrong reasons. One of the issues can be the format of engagement. Although public forums on an issue may give an appearance of inclusivity, if they are poorly advertised, attended, or managed, they will not effectively encourage full and representative community input. In such cases, the perception may be that local government is “checking a box” and thus being disingenuous in seeking feedback. This perception breeds cynicism and discourages future participation. Moreover, the oft used method of the public forum tends to draw an unrepresentative crowd of participants. Participants in community meetings tend to be disproportionately white and wealthy.¹ And, because people of color are not represented (or under-represented), the meetings will naturally prioritize issues of concern to participants (for example, land use) over issues of greater interest to historically disadvantaged groups in the neighborhood like education, economic development, and jobs.²

One particularly strong example of an unhealthy dynamic between the government and the residents it serves is the one Jeremy Levine found in his study of community meetings in Boston. Over four years, he observed multiple instances in which decisions made in poorly advertised public meetings were later presented in a well-advertised town hall as the will of the “community.” In these cases, the outcomes were a forgone conclusion and the final meetings advertised were a formality. This frustrated residents, especially when the majority of attendees—who had not been made aware of the meetings in which the decisions were actually made—strongly opposed the government’s decision. In Levine’s view, the term “community” was weaponized by the local government as a way to silence dissenters. By hiding behind the argument that “the community” had already spoken on the issue at hand, the local government simultaneously legitimized its position and framed opposing viewpoints as going against the common good. In reality, Levine argues, the residents who dissented merely presented a case that failed to align with the interests of the government officials and contractors who attended the previous meetings. By deferring to the will of an abstract “community” rather than to the voices of the individual community members in attendance, “residents appear[ed] empowered, while officials retain[ed] ultimate decision-making authority.”³ Applying this lesson more broadly, if members of a community know that their opinions will not be taken seriously, a lack of participation on their part seems almost inevitable.

But civic engagement, as the Vibrant Neighborhoods Forum suggests, extends well beyond merely hosting meetings to garner interest in, support for, and input on city government policies, plans, and programs. Whether the neighborhood initiatives are large or small, it is about leveraging the assets of the community, namely the residents, to not only gather input, but to actively include them as stakeholders, as agents for

1 Jeremy Levine, “The Paradox of Community Power: Cultural Processes and Elite Authority in Participatory Governance,” *Social Forces*, March 2017.

2 Juliet Musso, “Toward ‘Strong Democracy’ in Global Cities?”

3 Jeremy Levine, “The Paradox of Community Power”

action, and, ultimately, change. This is not to suggest that change should rest solely on the shoulders of the residents themselves. After all, they are tax-paying constituents who have every right to expect that government will work to their advantage and meet their needs. It is understanding what those needs are that is the crucial point. Civic engagement is about the ability to ensure that those needs are not only elevated into key local government decision-making processes, but that as a result, they are met. This is an ongoing battle. The fight for resources, quality services, and investment is at the heart of what drives the need for civic engagement.

The six case studies presented in this report demonstrate the varied and unique ways in which civic engagement can be leveraged to address management of space, use of resources, desire for investment, and to highlight neighborhoods' assets as opposed to deficits. The types of engagement applied demonstrate a spectrum of options, allowing flexibility in approach and adapting that which suits the issue and needs of the neighborhood at a given point in time. Yet, for all the successes, the limitations and challenges faced in all six cases are emblematic of some of the limitations of civic engagement more broadly.

The Role of Champions in Leadership

The Brussels creative placemaking project brought together three distinct departments to work together in ways they had never imagined. The fact that the Brussels cohort was able to succeed in such a short time was due to Khadija Zamouri, who as alderwomen had the Department of Cleanliness in her portfolio. As an elected official, she leveraged her charisma and her position to challenge each department to think differently about arts, culture, and cleanliness. But having such a leader is a privilege that not all neighborhoods enjoy. She was able, in an incredibly short time, to change culture and leadership within the two departments. While this may not be as easily done in other contexts, it does signify the importance of strong, charismatic leadership in pioneering creative placemaking projects with unconventional stakeholders and partners.

The need for a champion leader was also expressed by the New Orleans cohort, which demonstrated the power of addressing a need by adjusting and changing policy and strategy. But without a champion leader, it is still very difficult to make projects happen. Moreover, ongoing and long-term barriers rooted in racism and classism in New Orleans prevents a wider audience from gaining a place at the table in city government. This remains essential but can still be inaccessible to many.

Community Enthusiasm and Trust

A key challenge Cologne and Detroit faced was keeping residents interested and engaged. In the case of Finkenbergl in Cologne, this was especially true with the implementation of the creative placemaking project. This was partly due to the struggle to find the best method to communicate the spirit of the project with not only local politicians, but also with residents who speak 39 different languages. In the case of Detroit, there were various successes and challenges throughout the planning phase. The successes in terms of engagement included: high attendance from residents in the Residents in Action group, lively discussions on potential neighborhood investment, and increased understanding about neighborhood dynamics and how municipal projects were structured. In addition, one of their great successes was engaging with young residents through the Jefferson Chalmers Youth Connection. These successes were signs that residents who were part

of the group were very civically engaged, providing their spare time and expertise to guide the neighborhood process. But, while resident involvement was very high, enthusiasm began to burn out toward the end of VNF 2.0. Maintaining a high level of enthusiasm required that the cohort continually rethink the methods of engagement, a task that presented a significant challenge.

Moreover, and unsurprisingly, the issue of trust played a key role in whether residents engaged or not. For Detroit, many of the challenges throughout the process were rooted in trust: Would the municipal government deliver a project that reflected the needs of residents? This challenge became difficult to overcome, and many group meetings veered away from active decision-making around future projects towards discussions of past, often negative, experiences. In addition, the neighborhood investments were earmarked for four pre-established categories—streetscape, housing rehabilitation, parks, and retail support—which limited the ability for the planning process to be truly responsive to residents' needs. This reinforced the perception that the municipality could not be trusted.

Local Capacity

Another key challenge rested in whether there was neighborhood capacity to participate in and partner with the relevant stakeholders to see projects to fruition. This was evident in Finkenberg, where challenges arose because of lack of experience in managing grant funds. Residents who volunteered to shepherd projects did not have the experience in managing grants as was the case with the requirement that grant money be spent down by a specified date, regardless of whether the project's status as completed coincided with the date by which the grant funds needed to be expended. In the case of Memphis, building neighborhood capacity was still in progress at the end of the VNF 2.0. Some ongoing challenges included the lack of adequate office space, insufficient staffing, and, therefore, limited ability to conduct outreach efforts. SCORE CDC aims to establish new community and corporate partnerships, continue to nurture and leverage current relationships, and prepare its participants to become informed, impactful, and effective advocates for South City in 2020. But the ability to achieve these things correlates with the ability to build capacity, which remains an ongoing challenge. This was also true for Turin. The risk of inexperience of local associations of residents called into question whether management and financing will be sustainable and whether the approaches are realistic in the long run. As the Turin cohort relayed, ideas presented by local groups were at times naïve and unrealistic, which made managing expectations difficult.

The successes and struggles experienced by the VNF cohorts are instructive for any city that strives to improve the quality of its civic engagement efforts. As the six projects progressed, three common ingredients for success became evident: leadership, community trust and enthusiasm, and capacity. These factors interact to create conditions that allow for success, while their absence makes the ability to engage all the more difficult. Without leadership and capacity, projects struggle to move forward and/or sustain themselves, which can in turn erode community trust, lead to burnout, and thus make engagement more difficult over time. The converse is also true: if community leaders build trust by consistently involving residents in the pursuit of tangible goals, their capacity to succeed will grow over time as their ability to raise funds, generate interest, and engage residents improves.

Whether the tradition of resident engagement is strong or weak in a city, the case studies presented here can spark conversations about what lessons may be learned and what new approaches may be tried to ensure that all residents feel included and heard in the building of a better community.

Appendix. Vibrant Neighborhood Forum Participants

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Sanae Jamaï, culture collaborator, Brass 'Art, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Mohamed Ouachen, co-founder and director, Diversity on Scene, VNF 1.0

Ibrahim El Ouakili, parliamentary assistant, Brussels Parliament, VNF 2.0

Khadija Zamouri, alderwoman and member of parliament, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

COLOGNE, GERMANY

Hubert Röser, supervisor-neighbour, Genussverein der Liese Meitner Gesamtschule, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Jochen Schäfer, municipal social worker, Diakonie Michaelschoven, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Günter Schlanstedt, social planner, City of Cologne, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

Letty Azar, District 4 manager, Department of Neighborhoods, City of Detroit, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Maria Galarza, designer and urban planner, Public Space Planning Unit, Parks and Recreation Division, City of Detroit, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Michelle Lee, director of housing and neighborhood services, Jefferson East Inc., VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Minnie Lester, neighborhood activist, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Chandell Carr, deputy chief operations officer, City of Memphis, VNF 2.0

Rebecca Matlock Hutchinson, executive director, SCORE Community Development Corporation, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Eric Robertson, president, Community LIFT, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Patrice W. Thomas, deputy chief operating officer, CPA City of Memphis, Executive Division, VNF 1.0

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, chief executive officer, Ashé Cultural Arts Center, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Tanya Renee James, executive director, Central City Renaissance Alliance, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Ayo Fayemi-Robinson, director, strategic neighborhood development, New Orleans Business Alliance, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

TURIN, ITALY

Giovanni Ferrero, officer and project manager, Co-City Project, City of Turin, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Hélène Monjarret, Staff, the Turin Neighborhood Houses Network – Co-City Project, VNF 1.0

Anna Rowinski, Co-City Project, Turin Neighborhood Houses Network, VNF 2.0

Anna Torroni, director, Department of Decentralization, City of Turin, VNF 1.0, VNF 2.0

Alice Zanasi, monitoring and evaluation consultant, Co-City project, City of Turin, VNF 2.0

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About GMF Cities

The GMF Cities program supports leaders, policymakers, and practitioners in the United States and Europe by facilitating the transatlantic exchange of knowledge for building inclusive, sustainable, and globally engaged cities.

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