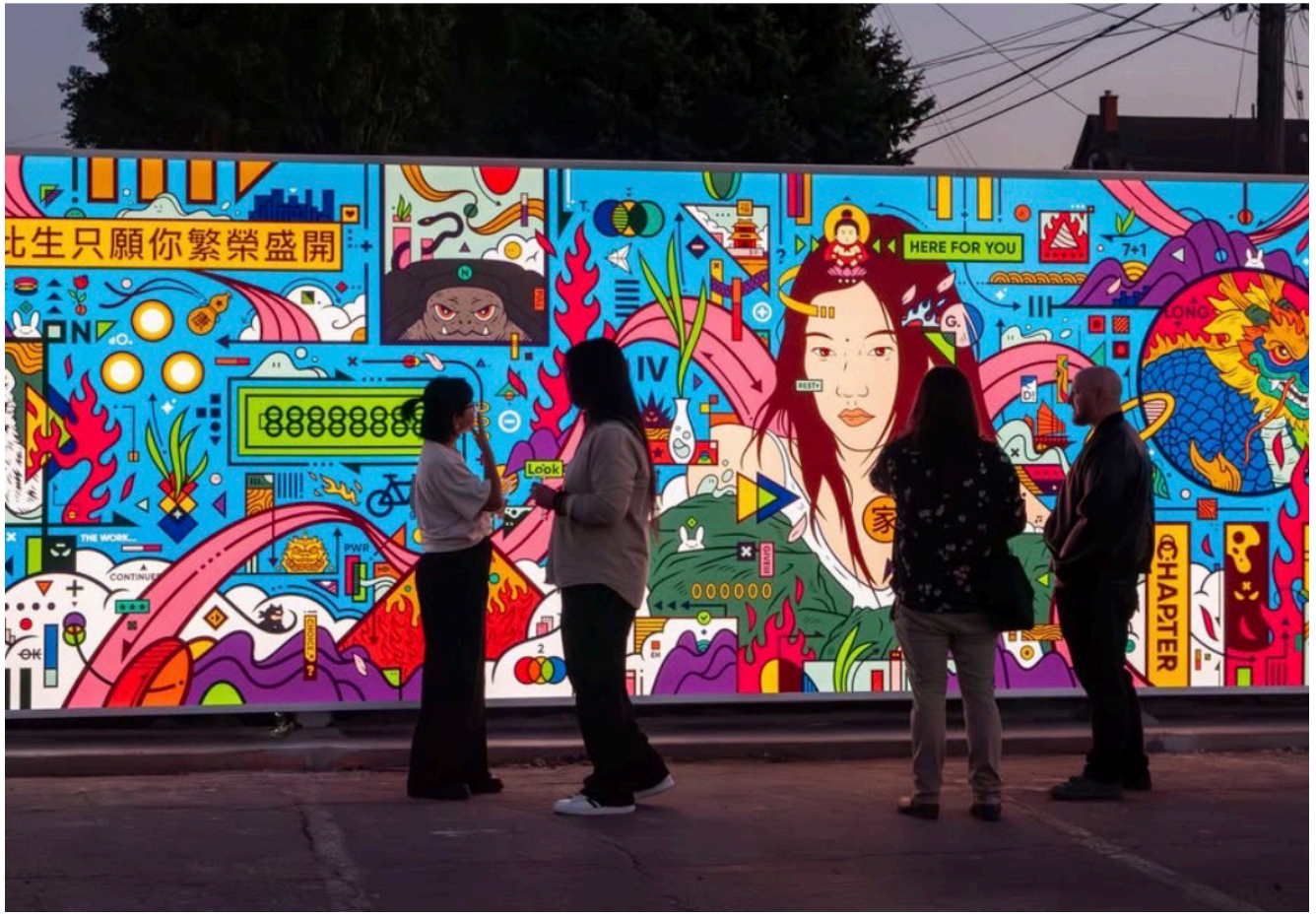




The Art of Civic Possibility: How Culture Connects People, Place and Community

MARGY WALLER

Introduction

Local officials are investing in planning and development initiatives that incorporate art, community-engaged design and cultural strategy, contributing to healthier places and positive change for communities. As these locally led efforts build on the investment of the last 15 years in creative placemaking, interest in this approach continues to grow as decision makers see the value added by artists and cultural organizations.



***INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLANNING ENHANCED
BY THE ARTISTS' INVOLVEMENT LEAD TO
BENEFITS FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY.***

Recent Local Action

We've learned of recent creative activity designed to enhance places through infrastructure planning, development, and implementation. Our scan reveals that officials are initiating this work by partnering with artists and arts organizations, notably recognizing the value by funding projects with non-arts sources.

These leaders assert that infrastructure and planning enhanced by the artists' involvement lead to benefits for the whole community.

The Role of Artists in Community Planning and Development

Committing to a thoughtful process means finding and engaging with the affected residents, including them in planning for a community's future. Historically, artists have played a critical role in finding new ways to bring people together. For residents with busy lives, attending a meeting at city hall or even the local library is rarely a priority or appealing. Instead, artists can design new ways to connect with residents, to share information about the process, provide educational materials, and facilitate organizing for action. Artists are creating easy on ramps to civic decision-making, meeting people where they are and where they want to be.

Artists can:

- **Design** engaging, accessible processes for planning, that reach all corners of communities.
- **Illuminate** a new view of challenges and unexpected ideas for problem-solving.
- **Reflect** the local culture, history, and values of a place in infrastructure and program design.
- **Connect** people, places, and opportunities with activities and spaces, leading to new relationships.
- **Facilitate** new partnerships across sectors to increase resident engagement.
- **Create** new ways of promoting desired social, physical, and economic change, eventually leading to systems change.

Recent local projects show a wide variety of ways decision-makers are adding significant value through creative approaches, including engaging artists to facilitate meaningful resident input. Leaders also report that while adopting creative approaches requires coordination across government agencies, the results are so well-received that they are setting new standards for incorporating art into public planning and implementation.

As local government officials continually develop and update infrastructure, this document and the highlighted programs can offer a roadmap for expanding initiatives with artists and for using creative approaches in designing and implementing for the public good and healthy places.



WHILE ADOPTING CREATIVE APPROACHES REQUIRES COORDINATION ACROSS GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, THE RESULTS ARE SO WELL-RECEIVED THAT THEY ARE SETTING NEW STANDARDS FOR INCORPORATING ART INTO PUBLIC PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION.



Photo Credit: Malcolm Ryder

📍 OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Project: EVOAK! 980: Repairing Harm & Reimagining Possibility

EVOAK! 980 is a unique community-led partnership between local organizations, neighborhood experts, public agencies, and West Oakland residents to leverage and expand the Caltrans-sponsored [Vision 980](#) initiative to mobilize the legacy Black residents to create a culture-fueled reimagination of the I-980 Corridor. EVOAK! 980 is a deliberate response to the harm of the institutional policies and practices of redlining, urban renewal, and the displacement of hundreds of families through eminent domain.

Vision 980 could reclaim up to 67 acres of buildable land in West Oakland, directly adjacent to the downtown core, for community revitalization. The construction of the I-980 freeway deliberately severed the area from downtown, creating an ominous physical border to thousands of families in a red-lined district and spurring disinvestment.

The Vision 980 Freeway Alternative Study is collecting resident sentiment on the possibility of re-envisioning the freeway route and developing initial feasibility scenarios. The flagship activation of the parallel and coordinated effort, the [980 Block Party](#), is sponsored by the nonprofit [EVOAK!](#) and the real estate and community development firm [Creative Development Partners](#).

The 980 Block Party is a landmark, locally powered festival that mobilizes people through art, storytelling, and participatory design to reimagine the future of the I-980 corridor through an equitable development lens. The inaugural event took place at Preservation Park, a historic site adjacent to I-980, built from Victorian homes where residents rescued from demolition and relocated from the original construction site. Hosting this event in the park provides a living symbol of both harm and renewal.



Photo Credit: Randolph Belle

Funding Sources: Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program Grant Funding to Caltrans, the Kresge Foundation, and AARP

Artist(s) /Arts Organization: **EVOAK!**

Lead Community Group/Community Role: **EVOAK!** organizes and facilitates core community partners in West Oakland to deploy a comprehensive arts and cultural platform and develop a durable neighborhood governance infrastructure for harm repair initiatives to redress the long-term impacts of the I-980 freeway. **Creative Development Partners** is an innovative BIPOC-founded real estate and community development company focused on building wealth across all asset classes.

Local Government Leadership/Champion: **EVOAK!** has garnered the support of local, state, and federal legislators.



ARTISTS ARE CREATING EASY ON RAMPS TO CIVIC DECISION-MAKING, MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE AND WHERE THEY WANT TO BE.

CLEVELAND, OHIO

Project: Transformative Arts Fund (TAF)

City leaders created the **TAF** to empower artists, creators, and residents to collaborate and produce art that celebrates Cleveland's diversity and cultural richness. The city awarded grants ranging from \$330,000 to \$482,000 to seven projects in August 2024. Applications required a partnership of lead artist(s) and an institutional partner from within the city. Key local leaders provided vital support: Assembly for the Arts served as the program's administrative partner, while LAND Studio served as the technical partner, supporting the artist-led initiatives. Together, the city, the Cleveland City Council, and these partners established an artist-centered program to fund transformative public projects within Cleveland's communities in 2024-2025. This investment generated income for hundreds of artists and community organizations, supporting nearly 600 artworks, events, and installations.

Funding Sources: American Rescue Plan Act

Artist(s) /Arts Organization: Assembly for the Arts, lead Artists: Kumar Arora, Malena Grigoli, Jameelah Rahman, Robin Robinson, Latecia Delores Wilson Stone, Ariel Vergez, Jordan Wong and more than 350 collaborating artists.

Lead Community Group/Community Role: Seven institutional partners, including Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority and Cleveland Clinic.

Local Government Leadership/Champion: Mayor Justin M. Bibb, Rhonda Brown, Senior Advisor, Arts & Culture, Calley Mersmann, City Planning Director.



Photo Credits: Annis Sengupta, MAPC (Top); Transformative Arts Fund (Bottom)

GREATER BOSTON MASSACHUSETTS

Project: Metropolitan Area Planning Council's Regional Trails Creative Placemaking Project

The **Regional Trails Creative Placemaking Strategy** established an arts-engaged approach to transforming the region's LandLine Trail Network from transportation infrastructure into a community asset. Regional leadership prioritizes trails in implementing their vision for a connected network of routes that reduces reliance on automobile transportation and increase equitable access to active recreation and healthy environments. Trails are a preferred option due to their proximity to commercial centers and other amenities as well as to low-income neighborhoods of color. The strategy demonstrated that artists can be key partners in bridging gaps between the trail, local businesses, and adjacent places. Through a combination of spatial analysis to identify opportunity sites, placemaking workshops that convened regional stakeholders and creative partners, and a demonstration of the strategy at work in Holliston, Massachusetts, the project spurred a broad interest in applying the approach, and it has already resulted in new calls for art to advance the larger strategy.

FUNDING SOURCES:

Federal funding source: Unified Planning Work Program (Transportation Department, MAPC)

State funding source: District Local Technical Assistance (MAPC TAP program)

Foundation funding sources: Barr Arts & Culture Planning Grants

Artist(s) /Arts Organization: Caoim O'Durgy, leading The Good Boy Collective, a trans-led group of artists.

Lead Community Group/Community Role: Archana Menon initiated this work as the MAPC Arts & Culture Fellow. As an artist and resident of Holliston, Massachusetts, Archana was the lead champion of the project within the Holliston community and MAPC. Community members included long-time trails advocate Robert Weidknecht; Sara Zerelli, a public historian, arts administrator, and member of the local historical commission; Pooja Pal, a member of the local cultural council; and Mary Greendale, a long-time resident and local historian.

Local Government Leadership/Champion: Tina Hein, the Chair of the Holliston Select Board, Kathleen Buckley, Assistant Town Administrator, and Melanie Hamblen, the Economic Development Coordinator

📍 NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

Project: New Bedford Passenger Rail Pedestrian Bridge

In 2025, the passenger rail connection between New Bedford and Boston was re-established—a milestone project that includes replacing a pedestrian bridge spanning a limited-access highway. This essential reconstruction meets modern safety standards but also offers a unique opportunity to create a visually compelling gateway into the city. Recognizing the bridge’s potential to leave a lasting impression, city leadership, in partnership with the **New Bedford Economic Development Council**, envisioned a design that seamlessly integrates public art, offering a bold and welcoming statement. Mayor Mitchell played a crucial role as an advocate for compelling design and secured the needed support from state officials to bring this vision to life. This groundbreaking project redefines the integration of public art within large-scale infrastructure, setting a precedent for innovation, design, and civic pride.

Funding Sources: *American Rescue Plan Act, Community Development Block Grant, local hotel tax*

Artist(s) /Arts Organization: *Tracy Silva Barbosa and Dena Haden*

Lead Community Group/Community Role: *New Bedford Economic Development Council*

Local Government Leadership/Champion: *Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell*

Photo Credit: “Equinox” glass elevator design by Tracy Silva Barbosa – photo by Andrew Kepinski for NBEDC



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Photo Credit: Gina Cipriano, ARC



ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Project: ARC's Community-Centered Design Program with Village Skatepark ATL

The **Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) 2024 Community-Centered Design Program** partnered with the Village Skatepark ATL to explore mobility justice as part of ARC's ongoing work on authentic community co-design, anchored in art and culture. The cohort included a diverse group of planners, organizers, government staff, and artists.

Located in Atlanta's Bankhead neighborhood, Village Skatepark ATL is a nonprofit centering on mobility, justice, youth engagement, and community building through skate culture. At a public engagement event, participants worked with the Skatepark and on-site fabricators on a creative wayfinding system to elevate the Skatepark's work in the neighborhood as development in the area moves forward. This immersive program examines the space between community building, arts and cultural work, and urban planning.

Funding Sources: *Federal Highway Administration planning funds, Federal Transit Administration funds, Georgia Council for the Arts*

Artist(s) /Arts Organization: ARC Community Centered Design class participants

Lead Community Group/Community Role: *Village Skatepark ATL*

Local Government Leadership/Champion: *Fulton County Arts and Culture*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARGY WALLER, SENIOR FELLOW, TOPOS PARTNERSHIP

Margy Waller is an advocate for creating community through the arts. She is a Senior Fellow at Topos Partnership (a national strategic communications organization), founder and Serendipity Director of Art on the Streets, and was a leader in the transformation of ArtsWave, an arts advocacy and support non-profit. She advises on national initiatives to such organizations as Americans for the Arts, LISC, and ArtPlace. Previously she was Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution, with a joint appointment in the Economic Studies and Metropolitan Policy programs.

Prior to Brookings, she was Senior Advisor on domestic policy in the Clinton-Gore White House. Before joining the Administration, Margy was Senior Fellow for Social Policy and Director of the Working Families Project at the Progressive Policy Institute. She also served as Director of Public Policy at United Way of America, and Director of Policy Development at Public/Private Ventures in Philadelphia.