



# ACTIVATING VACANCY

*project guide*





The Ark, Activating Vacancy Tenth Street, 2014

# WHAT IS ACTIVATING VACANCY?

Vacancy comes in many forms. While empty lots and abandoned spaces may first come to mind, vacancy more broadly refers to the absence of something: absence of cultural programming, of a neighborhood identity, even the absence of a community’s story being told. Activating Vacancy is a process by which artists and community members come together to leverage those vacant spaces, physical or otherwise, to create temporary art installations that directly engage and celebrate the neighborhood. Managed by a diverse set of partners, arts professionals, and community leaders, Activating Vacancy is a way to shift perspectives from focusing on a neighborhood’s problems to seeing an area’s vibrancy and opportunity. It is a way to engage neighborhood residents to think about their cultural history and future in a creative way, and to galvanize forces inside and outside of the community around civic and artistic participation. Previous bcWORKSHOP projects include:

- Activating Vacancy Tenth Street; Dallas, TX
- Crossing the Street; Washington, D.C.
- Activating Vacancy Arts Incubator (AVAI); Brownsville, TX

## ACTIVATING VACANCY PRINCIPLES

- *Shift perceptions of vacancies from challenge to opportunity*
- *Be driven by a set of goals defined and articulated by the neighbors and residents of a particular place*
- *Elevate voices and encourage civic participation*
- *Strengthen neighborhood identity and cultural history, challenging gentrification and displacement*
- *Foster collaboration and creative participation between a diverse set of individuals, culminating in a work co-created by artist and community*
- *Empower residents to address the future of their own neighborhood, and pursue larger outcomes related to community goals*



Community Kickoff, Activating Vacancy Tenth Street, 2014



Ivy City Day, Crossing the Street, 2016

# HOW IS IT DONE?

## BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Begin by building partnerships with organizations that can augment your own capacity and help to administer the Activating Vacancy process and outcomes. These could include municipal organizations that can leverage government resources and help shape policy goals that may come out of the project. These partners could also be organizations more directly involved in a community outreach. Partnering with a group that has been involved with a neighborhood for an extended period of time is especially helpful if you are relatively new to the community, as knowledge and connection with a neighborhood is vital to the project’s success. For this reason, neighborhood context research should be done prior to or concurrently with the partnership building process.

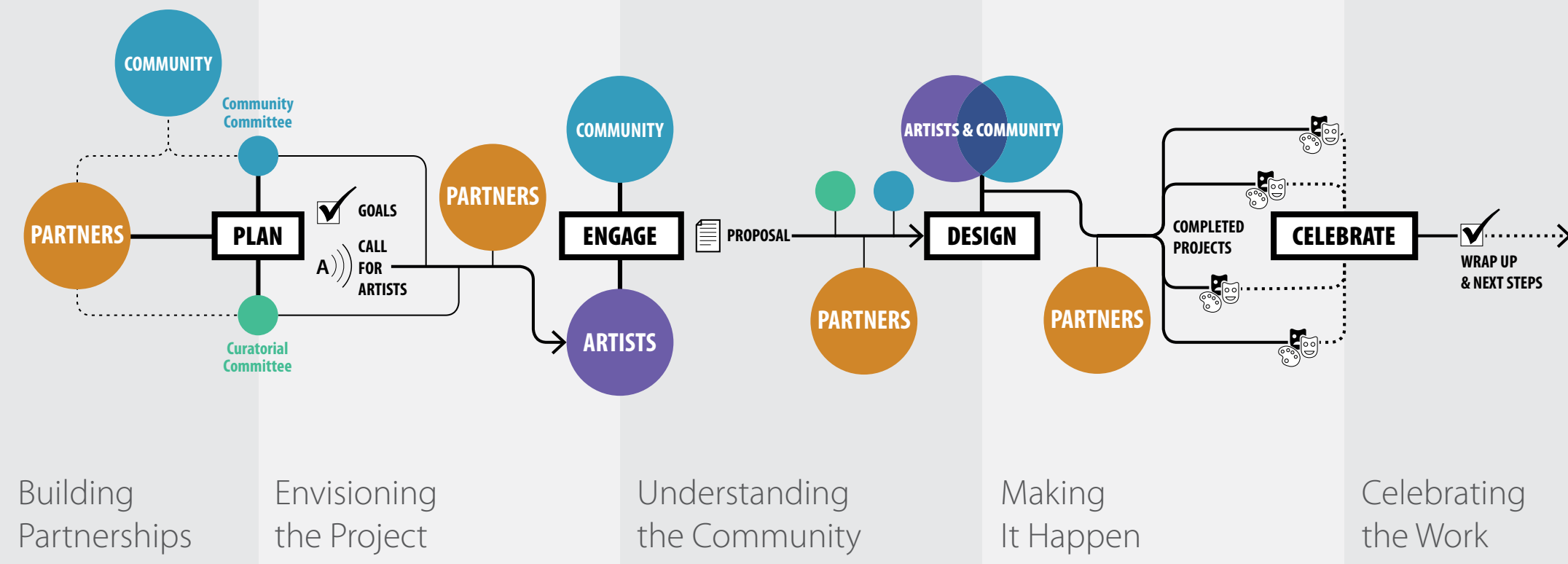
Next, with the help of your partners, begin to reach out, formally or informally, to local stakeholders in the neighborhood to build membership of a committee of invested citizens that will represent the larger community. At the same time, along with your partners, contact local arts organizations and professionals to form a curatorial committee that will inform arts-based decisions. This committee should not only be drawn from within the neighborhood, but from prominent arts organizations throughout the region. Reaching out to such organizations can help raise the profile of a project, and, since the organizations are neutral third parties, they can add legitimacy to the process.

## ROLES

- **Larger Community:** *Participants and collaborators throughout entire process; responsible for providing feedback during larger events, and working directly with the artists on the final project.*
- **Partners:** *Organizations offering management, resources, and administrative oversight of project; can also be responsible for community organizing and coordinating outcomes.*
- **Curatorial Committee:** *Established arts community representatives; responsible for arts administrative and technical advising; informs artists criteria and evaluation; part of artist selection and proposal refinement process*
- **Community Committee:** *Representative of larger neighborhood; responsible for defining goals, themes, project sites, and proposal refinement.*
- **Artists:** *Creators and drivers of projects; responsible for implementation, writing proposals and reports, and facilitating and/or participating in community engagement.*



# ACTIVATING VACANCY



Community Event, AVAI, 2016

## ENVISIONING THE PROJECT

Hold a meeting with both the curatorial and community committee to set the goals, themes, desired outcomes and artist evaluation criteria for the project. Groups can be met with separately or together at the same time, but distinct curatorial and neighborhood goals should be determined by each committee.

After this meeting, the call for artists is sent out, distributed with the help of the curatorial committee. Along with the curatorial committee, reach out to artists you feel would be a good fit for the project and invite them to apply.

## UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

Introduce the artists to the neighborhood with a large scale kick-off event: partnering with an existing, well-attended event can be especially helpful. This is the artist's chance to start to learn from and about the community, and for the community to get to know the artist. Other events, such as a resident-led tour where possible installations sites are introduced, can also be facilitated. Once the artist has had the chance to begin to connect with

### CALL FOR ARTISTS

- *Set geographic parameters for the call for artists. Should the call be sent out nationally? Or should it be limited to artists who have worked or are from a similar cultural context? Also consider inviting local individuals or organizations that may not be considered professional artists but have been involved creatively with the neighborhood.*
- *Be clear in what is expected. Although the Activating Vacancy process is not extremely unusual, it is also not entirely common. Explain clearly the amount of engagement and involvement of outside groups that the process entails.*
- *Do not necessarily focus only on artists who have had extensive community-engagement experience in the past. This can be a good opportunity to involve artists who may be relatively new to community-focused art.*

and understand some of the concerns of the community, they will formulate an initial proposal for the work that they hope to create. Vet the proposal with the artists, discussing and pushing

them on scope of work, outcomes, and possibly suggesting pairings of artists and/or sites. The artists will then further refine their proposals based on feedback received after meeting with the curatorial and community committees. After this iterative process is complete, the artists will present the final proposals at a neighborhood social, a chance to hear any thoughts from the wider community.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

After the proposals are finalized, artists then begin work on their respective projects. Every project is different, but community engagement is the common and most important thread that must run through everything. Based on artist and community factors, community engagement itself can take many forms. This includes, among others: facilitating larger community meetings or events; working with individual stakeholders and connecting them to the artist; artist-led informal community participation; and workshops or meetings organized and facilitated by the artist. Be sure to keep in mind not to overwhelm residents with too many meetings, so be intentional when planning the engagement process. Once the projects are complete, there should be an event to unveil the projects to the public. They can be unveiled all at the same time, or separately as they are

### SITE SELECTION

- *Possible locations for installations can be discussed as early as the initial community committee meeting, but it can be difficult to pivot from goals and themes to physical locations.*
- *Another good opportunity to discuss locations is when the community and artists are first introduced, especially during a tour of the neighborhood. Selecting sites before the artists create proposals allows them to respond to a physical space.*
- *Whenever locations are discussed, be sure to obtain written permission from the owners to use the space before moving forward.*

completed. The event, or events, should be an opportunity to celebrate the work of the artist and the community. The audience should be not just be the neighborhood itself, but the city at large, bringing in those who may be intrigued by the art but may have not otherwise visited the area.





Celeste Artist Workshop, AVAI, 2016

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

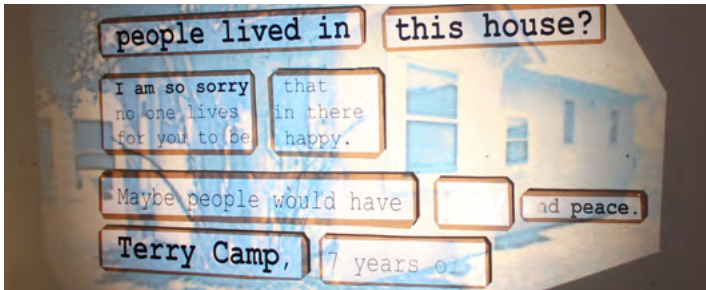
Activating vacancy is a way to shift perspectives in a community around vacant spaces, but also around power dynamics and the perceived story of a neighborhood. Successful projects creatively engage the cultural and social history of a place, and empower the community to address their own future, amplifying the voices that may not normally be heard. Just as vital as the completed projects is the Activating Vacancy process itself; by bringing the community together around these artistic goals, a framework of civic engagement and neighborhood cohesion is established and strengthened.

## ANTICIPATED & UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Activating Vacancy can have multiple outcomes and impacts that were previously discussed and planned in the initial phases of the process. Activating Vacancy can and should be a part of a larger planning process, such as, for instance, a city-wide urban design initiative. However, the activating vacancy process can also have a variety of unanticipated outcomes, perhaps the most important involving relationship building. For example, one indirectly related consequence of the increased community involvement of Activating Vacancy Tenth Street was the re-establishment of the neighborhood watch group, Operation Tenth Street, at around the same time.



Ivy City Sign Workshop, Crossing the Street, 2016



Dear House, Activating Vacancy Tenth Street, 2014

# ABOUT [bc]



informing



analyzing



mapping



activating



making



storytelling

The buildingcommunityWORKSHOP is a Texas based nonprofit community design center seeking to improve the livability and viability of communities through the practice of thoughtful design and making. We enrich the lives of citizens by bringing design thinking to areas of our cities where resources are most scarce. To do so, [bc] recognizes that it must first understand the social, economic, and environmental issues facing a community before beginning work.

As the only community design organization working across Texas, [bc] is unique in its approach to community engagement. We form strong relationships through our collaborative design work, educational outreach activities, and social media channels, enabling us to engage with a broad segment of the population. The success of our work is contingent upon reaching those residents not typically sought out by the design and planning community.

[bc] has been fortunate to receive several awards from AIA Dallas & LRGV AIA, the 2010 National AIA/HUD Secretary's Award for Community-Informed Design and a 2011 National SEED Competition award. In 2013, [bc] was awarded the prestigious Rudy Bruner Award Silver Medal for the Congo Street Initiative. We were recently awarded the Texas Society of Architects Design Award for the La Hacienda Casitas. Little Free Libraries/Libros Libres was also awarded the 2014 SXSW Eco Place by Design award.

[bc] was established in Dallas in 2005 and opened a field office in Brownsville in 2011. A Houston office followed in 2013, and a Washington DC office in 2015. We organize our work into six methods: informing, analyzing, mapping, activating, making and storytelling.

## FURTHER READING

- National Endowment for the Arts: Exploring Our Town  
<https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town/>
- Creative Placemaking, white paper for Mayor's Institute of City Design  
<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>

## PROJECT LINKS

<https://vimeo.com/album/2732062>  
<http://www.bcworkshop.org/activating-vacancy>  
<http://www.bcworkshop.org/activating/>

contact:  
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Cast of "Past," Story Corners, Activating Vacancy Tenth Street, 2014

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