



NeighborWorks® America

CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Montgomery Housing
Partnership
Bright Spot Case Study

April 2018

Working Together for Strong Communities





COLORFUL ARTS BOLSTER BUSINESS COMMUNITY

“Sewing the Fabric of our Community” by Kate Deciccio and Rose Jaffe. Chosen through the 2015 call for proposal process, traditional fabrics inspired the artists, and each person featured in the mural lives in the community.

Photo credit: Edgar Alvarado

Partnering to use creative community development strategies to strengthen these commercial districts.

It takes all day to tour each business on a five-block stretch along Piney Branch Road in the Long Branch neighborhood of Silver Spring, Maryland. Two major commercial nodes on either end sandwich multi-family housing and a park. Home to more than 100 businesses, these nodes include multiple dollar stores, bakeries, barbers, banks and grocery stores. Immigrants and first-time business owners run most of these mom-and-pop establishments. In the not-so-distant past, these businesses operated behind bland gray façades, which had been neglected for decades; some of the shops still sported signs from the previous owners. Their uninviting appearance made the corridor feel like “a place to drive through as quickly as you can,” says Paul Grenier, Montgomery Housing Partnership’s community economic development specialist. As a result, many establishments had trouble attracting patrons.

Business owners and residents have partnered with NeighborWorks network member Montgomery Housing Partnership to use creative community development strategies to strengthen these commercial districts. Started in 1989, the organization seeks to preserve and expand quality affordable housing in Montgomery County, Maryland, just north of Washington, D.C. It provides housing but also develops initiatives to enrich community life, like a teen program and homework club, and collaborates with residents and business owners to improve

Montgomery Housing Partnership started its creative community development work with an attitude that many little, colorful, fun actions can humanize space more effectively than one big project.



Creative installation by University of Maryland students outside a boarded-up historic theater.

Photo credit: John Ruppert

the area.¹ About seven years ago, the county asked the organization to provide technical assistance to small business owners in the corridor who struggled to obtain the permits needed to implement projects to attract more customers. Thanks to the nonprofit’s assistance, many shops and eateries now boast brightly colored façades with large, easy-to-read signs that complement the enterprises inside. Colorful art also brightens this five-block stretch, including murals, flower planters and custom-designed chairs.

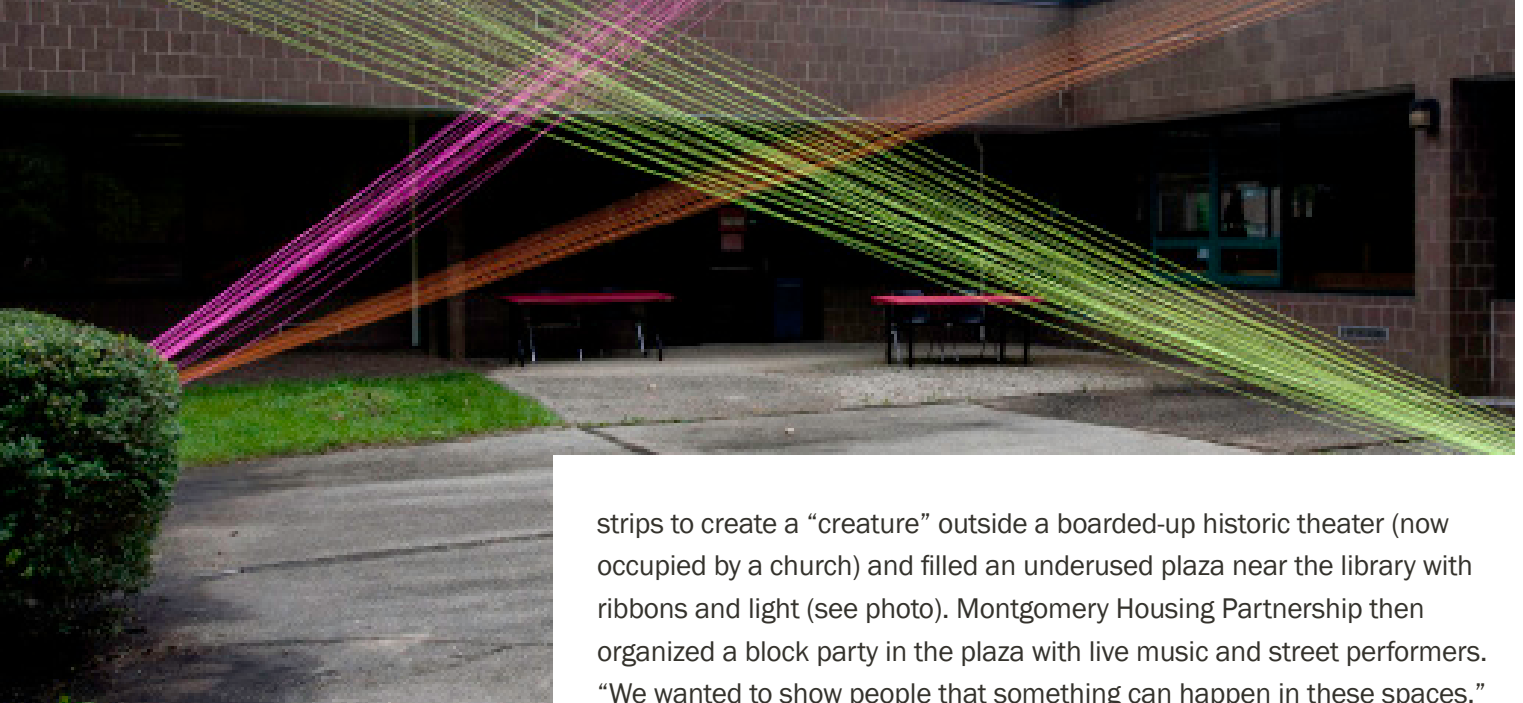
‘Activating’ space with small, colorful actions

Long Branch has the largest concentration of immigrants and low-income residents in the county. A mix of low-rise apartment buildings and single-family homes surround the corridor, which is designed to cater to pedestrians. The street is narrower and building setbacks shorter than in most commercial areas in Montgomery County, allowing residents and visitors to walk easily between the businesses. In addition, the county soon will begin construction on the “Purple Line” light-rail system, with a planned stop just off Piney Branch Road. The organization “wanted to stake a claim for people who currently live and work in the area before any of these changes come along,” explains Ilana Branda, the organization’s director of policy and neighborhood development.

To reverse the perception of neglect and strengthen neighborhood businesses, Montgomery Housing Partnership has tried a variety of community development strategies, such as temporary creative installations, design guidelines for local businesses, façade improvements and murals. All of these strategies are incorporated into a branding effort led by the organization and the local business league called “Discover Long Branch!” As business owners see results, they’re jumping on board to contribute financial resources and energy to improve their community.

Montgomery Housing Partnership started its creative community development work with an attitude that many little, colorful, fun actions can humanize space more effectively than one big project. Spearheaded by its AmeriCorps VISTAs in 2013, the organization partnered with the University of Maryland to create temporary creative installations in and around the commercial corridor. Architecture and art students used film

¹ “MHP Mission,” Montgomery Housing Partnership, accessed October 23, 2017, <http://mhpartners.org/mhp-mission/>.



**Creative installation in the library's plaza
by University of Maryland students.**

Photo credit: John Ruppert

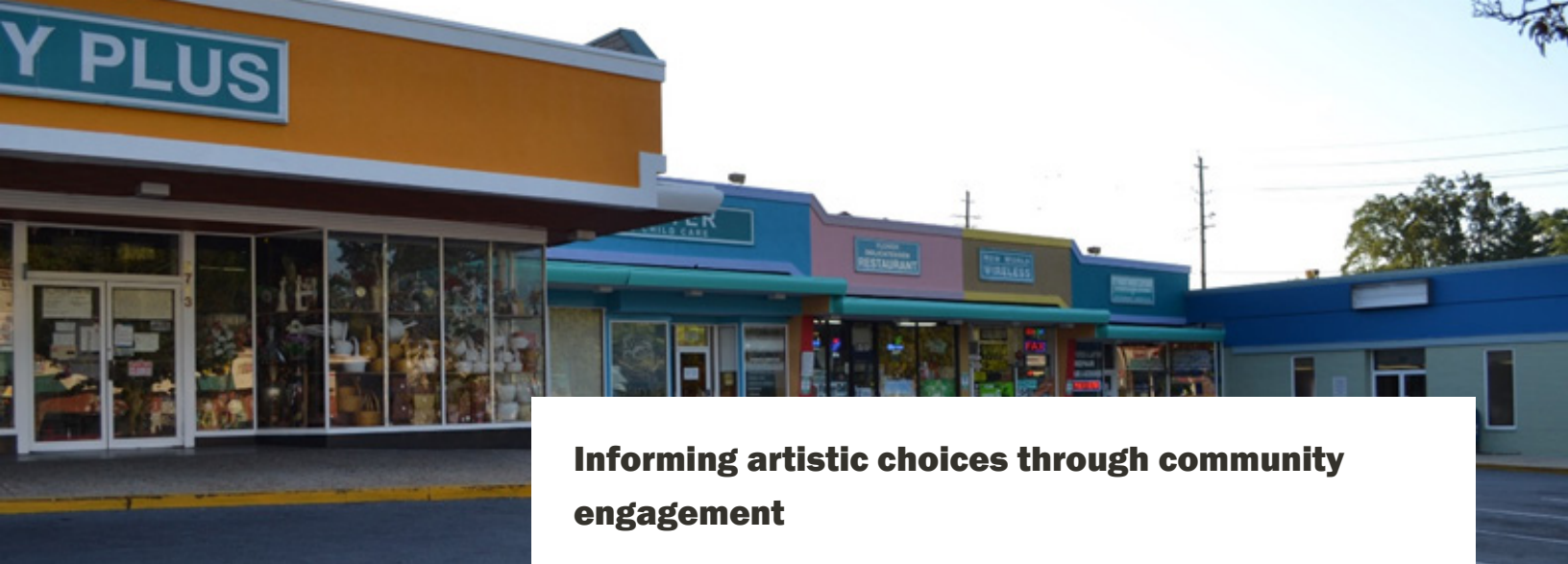
As individual businesses feel a greater connection to others around them, they're more likely to identify as part of the wider community and take action to positively shape the neighborhood's future.

strips to create a “creature” outside a boarded-up historic theater (now occupied by a church) and filled an underused plaza near the library with ribbons and light (see photo). Montgomery Housing Partnership then organized a block party in the plaza with live music and street performers. “We wanted to show people that something can happen in these spaces,” Branda explains.

Next, Montgomery Housing Partnership developed a program to improve store façades and signage; the organization hoped that sprucing up businesses’ exteriors would reverse the perception of neglect and help potential patrons feel more welcome. To assist businesses in aligning their efforts with the Discover Long Branch! campaign, the organization created design guidelines. The document outlines how to design and execute successful exterior improvements to signage, entrances and lighting, and also includes many inspirational images. The organization asked businesses to contribute 25 percent of the cost of new facades and signs, and at first, recruiting participants “was like pulling teeth,” Branda says. It took a couple of years to get them on board, but after the first few businesses signed up, other owners saw the impact and requested help as well. Over the past year, three new businesses joined the Long Branch Business League. As individual businesses feel a greater connection to others around them, they’re more likely to identify as part of the wider community and take action to positively shape the neighborhood’s future.

Through an annual business survey, Montgomery Housing Partnership has collected evidence that the combined efforts have made a difference in how people view the corridor and its commercial operations. Over the past few years, the survey has documented an increase in businesses’ revenues and their number of customers.

Business participants in Montgomery Housing Partnership’s façade improvement and signage program. Photo credit: Edgardo Alvarado



Business participants in Montgomery Housing Partnership's façade improvement and signage program.

Photo credit: Edgar Alvarado

Informing artistic choices through community engagement

Before Montgomery Housing Partnership undertook any permanent public art projects, it knew it needed to ask for community input. The nonprofit consulted several local arts organizations for advice on how to balance community engagement with artistic excellence. These organizations argued against creating community committees to make decisions for each piece of public art. The reason? The outcome often “ends up being a mishmash that tries to please everyone, resulting in no artistic integrity,” Grenier says. Instead, Montgomery Housing Partnership conducted a visual preference survey via focus groups to understand the community's preferences for artistic media and styles. Before attendees took the survey, staff members shared examples of each type of medium, as well as potential locations for the projects.

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The Visual Preference Survey focus group presentation included this image that shows potential locations for wall art.



Respondents to the visual preference survey used this tool to vote for artistic media and styles.

PLACEMAKING PROJECTS

Community PLACEMAKING Workshop—1006 Friday, January 17, 2014

PLACEMAKING—PROJECTS
CREANDO ESPACIOS—PROYECTOS
 Please rank each idea from 5 to 1
 Clasifica cada idea de 5 a 1

5—I love it 4—I like it very much 3—I like it 2—I don't like it 1—I hate it	5—Me encanta 4—Me gusta mucho 3—Me gusta 2—No me gusta 1—Realmente no me gusta
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STREET ART / ARTE CALLEJERO

<input type="checkbox"/> Wall art Arte mural	Other: Otro:
<input type="checkbox"/> Fence Cerca	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pavement Painting Pintura de pavimentos	
<input type="checkbox"/> Street Equipment Art Equipo de arte público	

PUBLIC FURNITURE / MOBILIARIO PUBLICO

<input type="checkbox"/> Sitting Para sentarse	Other: Otro:
<input type="checkbox"/> Flowers Flores	

EVENTS / EVENTOS

<input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor events Eventos al aire libre	Please list some event ideas: Por favor enumere algunas ideas de eventos
<input type="checkbox"/> Community gathering events Eventos de reuniones comunitarias	
<input type="checkbox"/> Indoor events Eventos adentro	

Please rank each idea from 5 to 1

- ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 5 – I love it
- ★ ★ ★ ★ 4 – I like it very much
- ★ ★ ★ 3 – I like it
- ★ ★ 2 – Don't like it so much
- ★ 1 – I hate it

Clasifica cada idea de 5 a 1

- ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 5 – Me encanta
- ★ ★ ★ ★ 4 – Me gusta mucho
- ★ ★ ★ 3 – Me gusta
- ★ ★ 2 – No me gusta
- ★ 1 – Realmente no me gusta

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The survey highlighted the community's preference for arts and cultural events, gathering places and murals; Montgomery Housing Partnership chose to initially focus on murals because of their dramatic impact, Grenier says. The organization has completed six to date, reflecting many of the corridor's brightly colored facades and survey respondents' desire for warm colors, nature scenes and realistic images. "We saw the murals as a way to inspire other activities," explains Branda. The organization hosts at least one arts and culture event every year, such as an international art and music festival, a pop-up concert in the park and a Cinco de Mayo celebration. The murals serve as attractive backdrops for many of these events.

Montgomery Housing Partnership covered the entire cost for the first two murals. But in 2015, to help sustain its creative community development work, the organization partnered with two property owners. Together, they issued a call for proposals for two wall-based permanent public art projects; the organization and the property owners pledged to split the cost. The proposal articulated objectives for the pieces that reflected the desires of businesses as well as community members:²

² Montgomery Housing Partnership, "Art Competition/Call for Proposals," n.d., https://doh.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcart/page_content/attachments/MHP%202015%20Art%20Competition_Call%20for%20Art.pdf.



“The American” by Maxx Moses. Selected through the 2015 call for proposals, the artist engaged community youth to help paint the mural.
Photo credit: Edgar Alvarado

Since Montgomery Housing Partnership started its creative community development work, Grenier has noticed changes in peoples’ attitudes and behaviors: “Even if they don’t do all of their shopping in the area, they have a greater sense of identification with and pride in their neighborhood.”

- Incorporate artwork that makes Long Branch distinct in its artistic impact, encourages neighborhood pride and serves as a positive symbol for the community.
- Enrich the aesthetics of the surrounding neighborhood.
- Connect with residents and support neighborhood identities.
- Create easily recognizable and distinctive landmarks, so someone can say “meet me at ‘x’ mural.”

Montgomery Housing Partnership surveys residents every three years about their perceptions of the neighborhood. The most recent survey (August 2016) showed positive responses to the resulting murals: Sixty-five percent of respondents expressed excitement about the new murals and desired more.³ The organization then expanded its reach to other media: “We’re muraled out,” explains Branda. She learned through the visual preference survey that people wanted places to gather together, so the organization commissioned an artist to paint chairs with a design that reflects one of the murals along the corridor. Branda often sees people lounging in the chairs that now sit outside of Long Branch businesses. The organization also recently installed large, colorful flower planters; this spring, the Long Branch Business League provided financial support for the planters, a cost that Montgomery Housing Partnership had covered in the past. Branda sees this gesture as evidence of the business community’s willingness to help bear the load of improving the corridor.

Since Montgomery Housing Partnership started its creative community development work, Grenier has noticed changes in peoples’ attitudes and behaviors: “Even if they don’t do all of their shopping in the area, they have a greater sense of identification with and pride in their neighborhood,” he says. As the appearance of the corridor improves, Grenier adds, residents do their part, too, whether it’s cracking a smile or throwing trash in the garbage can instead of the street. With so many businesses now sporting handsome exteriors, and flower planters, chairs and murals adding color to the corridor, the organization now hopes to turn its focus to helping businesses improve their interiors.

³ Long Branch Business League, “Long Branch Survey Finds Optimism (and Room for Improvement),” Long Branch Business News 10, no. 6 (September 2017): 1–2.

Promoting sustainability as business owners take the reins

Business owners see the benefit of creative community development strategies and are willing to support them on their own.

The visual preference survey revealed a desire for activities, gathering places and reasons to come together. This type of activity requires more capacity than other types of creative community development tactics, and Montgomery Housing Partnership once again has turned to the business community for help. Branda sees her organization's role as helping business owners understand the benefits of activating space through creative community development and empowering them to plan and execute events with minimal support from the nonprofit. She believes the local business community has reached the "cusp of a turning point." For instance, one business owner recently took over a salsa dancing event that Montgomery Housing Partnership started a few years ago, and another even organized a kids play day in the park with musicians and arts and crafts. Montgomery Housing Partnership provided financial support, even though it knew the event might not match the caliber of its other events. The risk paid off; more than 50 kids showed up to participate and even inquired, "When are we doing this again?" The business sponsor already has approached the organization with other event ideas. These examples show business owners see the benefit of creative community development strategies and are willing to support them on their own.

Kids play day.

Photo credit: Artist Solidarity Fund



LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ **To ensure sustainability, involve the business community.** AmeriCorps VISTAs helped Montgomery Housing Partnership get many of its creative community development strategies off the ground. However, due to the short-term nature of the VISTA program, the organization had to build capacity to support the work in the long term. In addition, the county asked the nonprofit to serve more neighborhoods. Therefore, the organization has called on businesses to shoulder more of the cost of both façade improvements and murals. Fortunately, they're willing to do so because they've seen other businesses with facelifts supported by Montgomery Housing Partnership reap the benefits. Last year, the organization leveraged \$30,000 in grant dollars to bring in another \$20,000 in matching funds from businesses and property owners, which resulted in more activity and color on the street.
- ▶ **Engage residents up front.** The visual preference survey proved helpful in providing community input that artists could use to create murals and other public projects. However, focus groups were used to collect responses, and they were sparsely attended. To ensure perspectives represent the entire community, Branda recommends engaging residents and leaders in multiple ways when planning creative community development strategies.
- ▶ **Be intentional about connecting creative community development activities to broader revitalization efforts.** Branda says she wishes the organization had more clearly connected each creative community development activity to the larger Discover Long Branch! initiative so residents and business owners see their work as part of a strategic vision for the neighborhood. If members of the public had better understood the connection between individual tactics and Discover Long Branch!, they might have been more likely to get involved. To reinforce how Discover Long Branch! activities connect together, the organization is working with a marketing consultant to redesign the campaign website and logo.



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