

Armatures for Inclusive Placekeeping

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As community-based design projects and charrettes continue to play an increasing role in the discourse regarding public space, it is clear that the ideologies of inclusiveness that these participatory processes engender must be critically considered. Approaches that, on the surface, support community participation and engagement can run the gamut from top-down architects-know-best strategies to uncritical acquiescence to community desires. Developing a critical practice that works to contest conventional engagement processes requires the recognition that there is a dialectical relationship between social processes and spatial practices. (Figure 1)

Aware that normative models of creative place-making can result in gentrification, displacement and a sense of dis-belonging, “El Corazón / The Heart of Holyoke” project emphasizes an inclusive and socially just framework to create armatures for creative placekeeping.¹ As a counter to place-making, placekeeping has been described as “the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there.”² This project is being developed in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a post-industrial city that is characterized by a large Latinx—mostly Puerto Rican—community that is 50% of the city’s population. El Corazón’s placekeeping

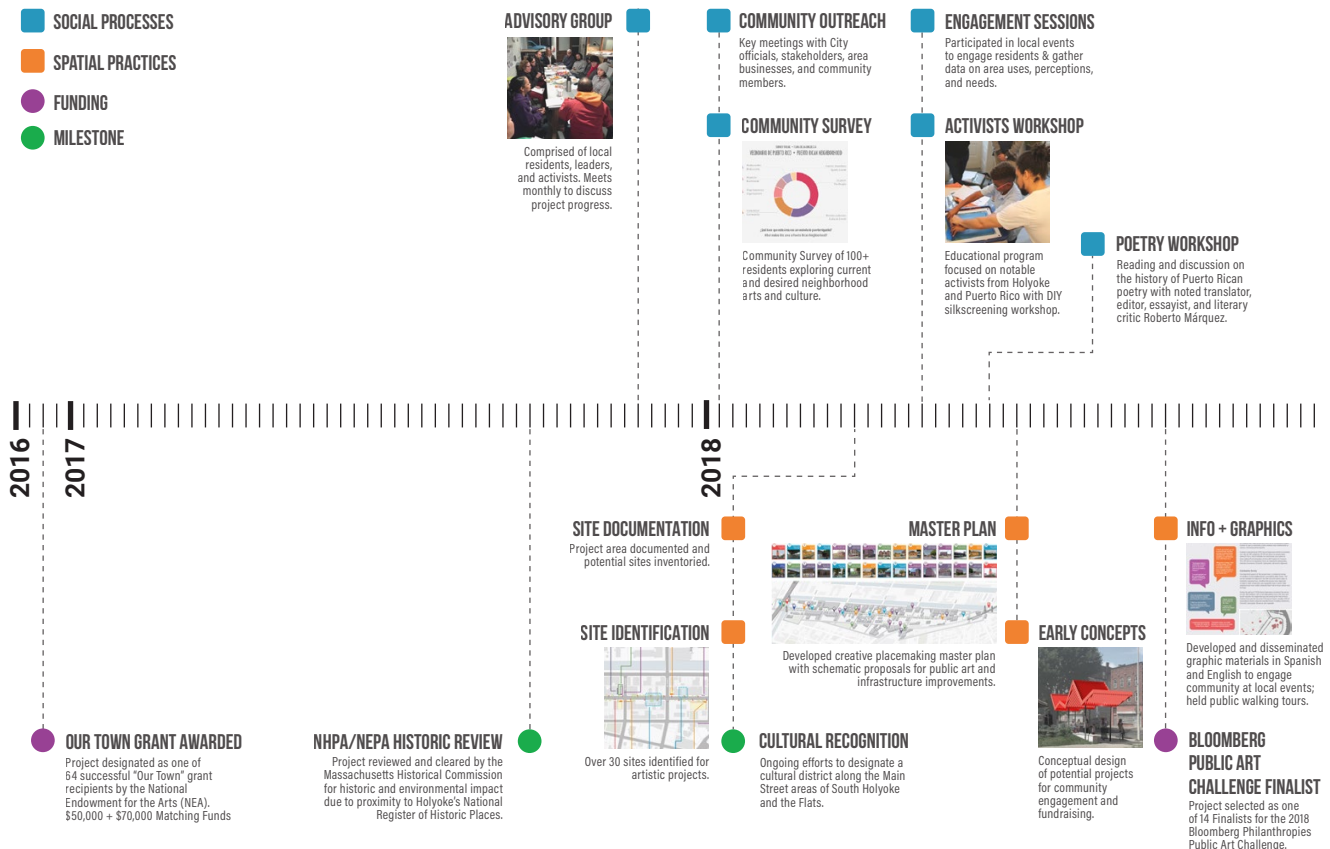
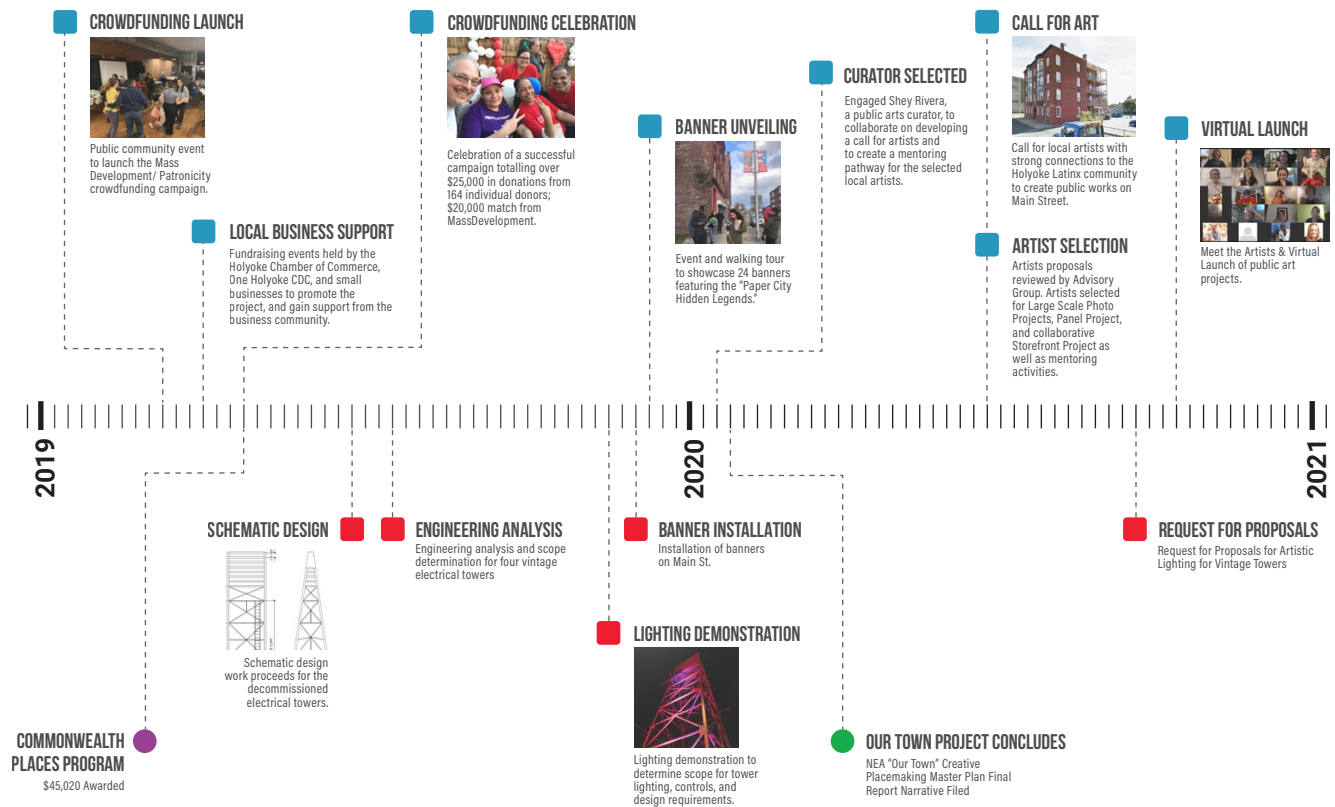


Figure 1. Timeline of select project activities and milestones. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.



Figure 2. Monthly El Corazón Advisory Group Meeting in Holyoke, MA. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.



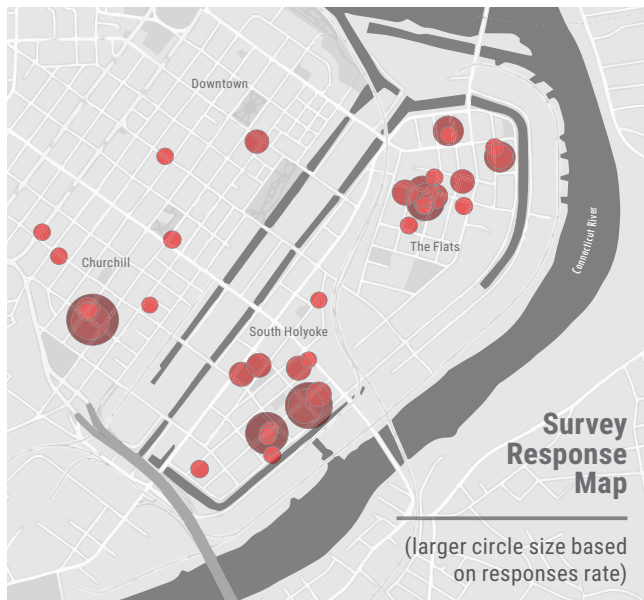


Figure 3. Community Survey Response Map for downtown neighborhoods in Holyoke, MA. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.

strategies focus on participation and representation, and draw on the assets of this resilient Latinx community which is contending with significant challenges, among them historic ethnic marginalization and a recent influx of Puerto Rican climate refugees.

El Corazón's work is proceeding concurrently with efforts to develop Holyoke's Puerto Rican Cultural Area, a district centered on a one mile long strip of Holyoke's Main Street that celebrates and makes visible the cultural vitality of the city's significant Latinx population. Originally supported by NEA's "Our Town" program, the project is being developed through support from public, private, and community sectors.³ Through a community-driven process that values trust-building as much as information sharing, the project team incorporates diverse actions and continuous reflection to recalibrate the balance between social processes and design praxis. The goal is to develop a flexible master planning process for artistic interventions that the community's creative capacity to develop just and representative places of belonging.

Inclusive strategies have been developed from the outset by first forming a project advisory board comprised of local residents, leaders, and activists. Meeting monthly for over three years, this group continually shapes the project's direction, vets approaches for inclusivity, and promotes social cohesion among the neighborhood groups in the project area. (Figure 2) At the project's outset, the partners conducted a community survey of over 100 neighborhood residents. This involved direct outreach to residents through door knocking, as well as participation in neighborhood events. The survey responses revealed the important role that arts and culture plays in



Figure 4. Community Survey sample of responses. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.

residents' everyday lives, identified the places most important to them in their community, and suggested ways in which their neighborhood could more visibly celebrate their Puerto Rican culture and heritage. (Figures 3 and 4) The findings helped to build an agenda for the project that values and recognizes the deep wells of knowledge, experience, and creative practices within the community, and draws upon those for operative strategies that amplify and bring resources to developing the community's arts and cultural initiatives.

One organizational and spatial strategy has been to create a flexible Creative Placemaking and Public Arts Master Plan that identifies over thirty sites for artistic interventions that are to be activated to by local artists and project partners as federal, state, and local funding opportunities materialize. (Figure 5) An initial inventory revealed key sites along Holyoke's Main Street that are prominent, visible, and significant to the community, have ownership that is sympathetic to the project, and that have the potential to turn vacancy into opportunity. Spatial Strategies were then developed that define the district's gateways, intensify visibility within the district's core, and install artworks in underutilized vacant spaces as placeholders for future use.⁴ Among the interventions proposed are two decommissioned electrical towers that will be transformed into gateway markers through dramatic lighting and imagery. Additionally, along a four-block section where many Puerto Rican organizations and businesses are located, the master plan includes sites for large-scale photographic images, participatory murals, installations, and a pavilion that aim to catalyze artistic, economic, and cultural activities.



Figure 5. El Corazon Creative Placemaking and Public Art Master Plan. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.



Figure 6. Cultural and artistic hands on workshops. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.



Figure 7. "Paper City Legends" Banner Unveiling Flier. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.

An associated project design strategy has been to imagine interventions as armatures for community contributions so that they reflect the personal, social and cultural meanings constructed by residents in their daily lives.⁵ All of the proposed works will be developed through residents' engagement with emerging and established Latinx artists. One capacity-building strategy employed in the project is the pairing of creating artistic works with hands-on workshops for residents with the selected artists. (Figure 6) In this manner, the project aims to cultivate artistic skillsets and build sustainable public participation while encouraging the community's intrinsic production of its own space.⁶

The work will be realized over several years through emergent collaborations. For example, the first pilot project implemented was the installation of street banners installed on light poles along Main Street that feature portraits of local leaders selected by Holyoke High School's restorative justice group, who had identified inequities in visual representations of people of color in their school and community. After years of participating in municipal planning processes, the well-received installation of the "Paper City Hidden Legends" marked the community's presence in the public realm and demonstrated the potential for the project's long-term goal of spatial representation. (Figures 7 and 8)



Figure 8. Holyoke High School Restorative Justice Group leading walking tour of installed Banners. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.

In the currently active second phase, the advisory group has surveyed the community for meaningful cultural themes and we have crafted an inclusive process for selecting, and then mentoring, local artists who will respond to these themes in large scale art works. (Figure 9) These nimble, more easily realized projects build community trust and capacity, setting the stage for future, more infrastructurally and financially intensive, phases of the project. (Figure 10) Through these tactics, the project is testing ideas for centering community voices while creating placekeeping strategies that support Holyoke's Latinx community's everyday patterns of being and belonging.

ENDNOTES

1. Roberto Bedoya, "Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-Belonging," *Grantmakers in the Arts*, February 2013, <https://www.giarts.org/article/placemaking-and-politics-belonging-and-dis-belonging>.
2. USDAC, "Creative Placemaking, Placekeeping, and Cultural Strategies to Resist Displacement," 2016, <https://vimeo.com/158270365>.
3. Eleonora Redaelli, "Creative Placemaking and Theories of Art: Analyzing a Place-Based NEA Policy in Portland, OR," *Cities* 72 (February 1, 2018): 403–10; Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking" (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010).
4. Terry Schwarz et al., *Pop up City* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University, 2009).
5. Roberto Bedoya, "Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race and the City," *Creative Time Reports*, September 15, 2014, <https://creativetime.org/reports/2014/09/15/spatial-justice-rasquachification-race-and-the-city/>.
6. Jeremy Till, "Architecture of the Impure Community," in *Occupations of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 61–75.



Figure 9. Sites for large scale photography. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.



Figure 10. Proposal to repurpose decommissioned electrical towers as gateway markers for the Holyoke Puerto Rican Cultural District. Credit: Center for Design Engagement.