

Reclaiming Lost Spaces: Activating Alleyways

Background

Alleys provide a unique opportunity to create positive public spaces within a city. When successful, alley activation may: create a more walkable city by introducing shortcuts and establishing more interesting, quieter routes than city streets; establish green infrastructure including habitats, native plants, stormwater drainage, and other green initiatives; create intimate spaces for residents to connect with the city on a human scale; create space for additional storefronts or entrepreneurial ventures; and open up additional space for cultural activities and public art.

In an analysis of alleyway revitalization conducted by the University of Washington Futures Lab, Scan Design Foundation, and Gehl Architects, stakeholders established the Seattle Integrated Alley Handbook outlining the key elements of successful alleyway activation. In the analysis, researchers identified the following:

I. Quality of Public Space

For an alleyway activation to be successful, people should be able to enjoy spaces off of busy city streets. Alleys must be part of a city's identity and not a forgotten space. Alleys with names, art, businesses, or public landmarks that can be included on maps are typically more successful than alleys without these attributes.

II. Ecological Health

Successful alleys contribute to the functioning of a city's ecosystems by providing space for habitats and movement of plants, insects, and birds. This can be done by using permeable materials when paving, and incorporating indigenous plants into alley design.

III. Safety

Alleys must be safe at all hours, and all people should be able to use them, including the very young and the very old. This may include ensuring the space is clean, well lit, and regularly paved.

Further Considerations: When reclaiming an alley, it may also be necessary to consider heavy concentrations of dumpsters, low lighting, fire code, alley entrances and traffic control, special events permitting, supported services, wayfinding, funding, access to electricity, and adjacent property and business owners. Further, as essential passageways for services like delivery trucks and dumpster trucks, it is necessary to work in collaboration with these service providers.

Program Snapshots

Below are snapshots of alley renovation programs in select cities around the world. Each project's goals vary but typically include downtown beautification, public safety, economy, sustainability, and public space.

San Francisco, California

Linden Alley

In the 1990s, the City of San Francisco commissioned a master plan for alleys. This plan has played out as the Living Alley Project, designed to transform urban alleys into vibrant public places, including street furniture, art, plants, and names. Linden Alley is the city's most successful living alleyway inspired by shared streets in Europe and feature seating, landscaping, and local businesses. The “greening” of Linden Alley took four years in partnership with Place Lab and architect David Winslow. In



January of 2017, the alley was awarded a \$189,000 grant by the San Francisco Community Challenge Grant Living Alley Program to fund improvements, including overhead lanterns, sidewalk gardens, and planter benches. Since this initial project, the City of San Francisco has established a Living Alleys Toolkit and a Plazas Program to facilitate the conversion of similar spaces into pedestrian amenities.

Plazas Program: <https://oewd.org/plaza-program>

Living Alleys Toolkit: https://default.sfplanning.org/plans-and-programs/in-your-neighborhood/market-octavia-living-alley/Market-Octavia-Living-Alleys-Toolkit_FINAL-WEB.pdf

Tipton, Indiana

The Alley

Struggling with population decline and uncertainty, The Alley project in Tipton, Indiana, was used as a community-building effort to signal a unified, caring city. Funded by volunteer hours and private money, as well as a \$20,000 grant from the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority, The Alley includes work by local artists and murals painted by local students. The space also includes tables and chairs as well as strings of lights spanning building rooftops. To introduce the space, project organizers facilitated an opening day event with live music, a DJ, and speeches from the Mayor and Main Street Association President.

The project was spearheaded by the Economic Vitality Committee of the main street, which used \$40,000 of a crowdfunded campaign and a matching grant to:

- Remove alley asphalt
- Put in stamped concrete
- Build "The Alley" archway
- Commission murals and art pieces
- Provide various seating types
- Station lights and lamps throughout the alley
- Set up outdoor heaters
- Install landscaping



Melbourne, Australia

The activation of alleys into public amenities has been part of Melbourne's city plan since the 1980s. Designed to improve livability in the downtown through public space engagement, dozens of alleys in the city have been transformed into public spaces with art installations, cafes, residences, and retail. Melbourne's alleys have become a vital part of the city's urban landscape and attract hundreds of visitors each year. The City of Melbourne operates a "love your laneway project." (In Australia, an alley is referred to as a laneway). This program partners with local stakeholders to revitalize alleys through waste management, amenities and access, public lighting and road surfacing, and artistic and cultural uses. In 2001 the City further created a laneways commission program to commission artists to transform alleys into art galleries.



Cincinnati, Ohio

Five Points Alley

Five Points Alley in Cincinnati, Ohio, is a commercial corridor where five alleys intersect into a busy block. Despite successful revitalization in the neighborhood, alleys were slow to change and public safety became a growing concern. In an effort to transform the alley as a public space, The Walnut Hills Redevelopment Foundation organized a series of community cleanup days followed by pop-up beer gardens centered in the alley.



Bolivar Alley

Also located in Cincinnati, Bolivar Alley was once covered in rotting plywood and glass blocks but has since been transformed into a pedestrian-friendly space.

In partnership with Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, ArtWorks created a series of 12 small murals strategically curated to introduce colorful, contemporary art. The goal of this project was to "help reduce blight, improve the perception of alleyways, beautify surroundings and, ultimately create a



more vibrant and walkable community." The project resulted in greater community engagement with alleyways and improvement of the overall perception of the alleys.

Seattle, Washington

Pioneer Square Alleys

Much of the effort to transform Seattle's alleyways centers around the Alley Network Project, a community organization that works to transform Pioneer Square's alleyways into vibrant public spaces. The International Sustainability Institute has performed a comprehensive study of downtown Seattle's public spaces and identified Alleys in Pioneer Square as having the most significant potential to transform pedestrian spaces in the city. As a result, the city has adopted several policies to reclaim these spaces. New permit policies make it easier to host special events in alleys, and the City's Clear Alleys Program has removed 700 downtown dumpsters, replacing them with smaller containers and garbage collection multiple times a day. The city also banned permanent storage of containers in the right of way.

In 2011 the City of Seattle designated Nord Alley as a festival street, allowing the International Sustainability Institute to close the street to cars on select days. The alley hosts a monthly art walk, showings of the world cup, and has become a destination unto itself.

World Cup Watch Party in Nord Alley



Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago Green Alley Program was among the first in the United States to apply sustainable building principles to alleyways. This program is focused on sustainable infrastructure, which includes permeable pavers to redirect water flow away from sewers. Unlike cement alleys where water has nowhere to go, permeable surfaces and garden beds allow alleys to be activated as stormwater management tools.



Detroit, Michigan

The Belt

The Belt is a redefined alley in Detroit, Michigan, named for its location in a former downtown garment district. The Belt is driven primarily by public art and houses murals and installations by local, national, and international artists.



The Belt also houses Public Matter, an exhibition platform curated by the Library Street Collective. This platform features rotating outdoor exhibitions of large-scale paintings. Permeable pavers have also been used for improved water drainage. By utilizing pavers and garden beds, planners could circumvent the cost of fully replacing the city's water drainage system.

Fort Collins, Colorado

In 2008, following a pilot program in which two alleyways were renovated in downtown Fort Collins, the Downtown Development Authority commissioned an alley master plan. The plan uses tax revenue from a downtown Public Improvement District to fund the renovation of 14 downtown alleyways. The project aims to provide safe pedestrian access, enhance alley aesthetics, and stimulate economic vitality. Five alleyways have been renovated so far at the cost of roughly \$900,000 each. Improvements include new trash enclosures, benches, and an Art in Public Places program which has provided 40 granite pavers engraved with children's drawings. Following renovations, the city found that private improvements quickly followed, including several new storefronts and retail spaces associated with increased pedestrian traffic.



Baltimore, Maryland

Alley Makeover Project

Alleys became a concern in Baltimore as increasing amounts of trash were disposed of in residential alleyways. As more trash piled up, rain washed garbage and waste into the harbor. The Baltimore Waterfront Partnership's Healthy Harbor initiative sought to engage the local community in maintaining a fishable waterway. Funded through a \$30,000 grant from the Rauch Foundation, 20 alleyways in six neighborhoods have been transformed into art centers and murals, as well as sites for community block parties. The goal was to involve the community in the cleanup and make small, inexpensive infrastructural improvements to reset the community's expectations of what an alleyway could be. The Alley Makeover Project is part of a more comprehensive public information effort including block meetings, free recycling bins, distribution of educational literature, and strengthened relationships with city agencies including the Department of Public Works and Code Enforcement.



Flint, Michigan

Buckham Alley

To attract pedestrian traffic to businesses located alongside the alley, Flint organizers created a one-day music festival called Buckham Alley. In the first year, they had 50 vendors, nine bands, and almost 1500 attendees. Since then, the project has raised over \$50,000 from a Patronicity campaign to permanently affix lighting to the buildings along the alley and provide areas for sponsor banners. The campaign was spearheaded by the Friends of The Alley organization, which hopes further improvements will spur increased interest in the alley and contribute to an increased sense of security for downtown visitors.



Austin, Texas

20Ft Wide

In the fall of 2012, the City of Austin Downtown Commission established a working group to examine opportunities for activating Austin's downtown Alleys as well as contribute to a more vibrant network of people-oriented spaces. Named for its 20-foot width, 20Ft Wide seeks to foster awareness and appreciation for urban alleys and facilitate public discussion of the role of alleys in

the city. To do this, Art Alliance Austin has organized a series of pop events as collaborative, temporary activations of Austin's downtown alleyways. Events include an opening night party, a PechaKucha session, a pop-up commuter breakfast, a candlelit dinner in the alley, an alley kids' family day, and an open day for the community to experience the alley without any programming. The purpose of temporary installations is to increase public participation with the alley while remaining accessible for service functions.



Los Angeles, California

East Cahuenga Alley

In 2013 the East Cahuenga "EaCa" Alley was reimagined by the Hollywood Business Improvement District as a pedestrian space with outdoor dining and a Sunday Artist's market. The project began when a restaurant owner wanted to use the alley as extra seating space and began privately cleaning up the alley. Not long after, the Hollywood Property Owners Alliance approached building owners with the idea of turning the space into a public alleyway. The alley, designed by the city's Bureau of Engineers, cost \$800,000, including grading and new pavers as well as stormwater and drainage improvements. Businesses are allowed to add seating up to 10 feet behind the space and may obtain permits to serve alcohol. Art installations will begin to appear in the space as well.

Before



After



*Authored by Hannah Stewart, Policy Researcher
For Questions Contact: Jason Ilstrup, DMI President, 608.512.1330*