

## Middle Neighborhoods Best Practice: Creating Engagement During COVID-19

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The Arts Commission  
Toledo, Ohio

Public art, while most notably recognized for its beautification and cultural effects, is equally important as a community engagement strategy. In Toledo, opportunities to connect took on a new importance during the 2020 pandemic. At a time when people were feeling alone and isolated, the Community Mural Project created a chance to connect and be part of a larger picture.

Arts and culture are important to the city of Toledo – funds are written into the annual city budget – so when the pandemic began, the Arts Commission knew they had to find a way to keep going. They swiftly converted projects and events so work could continue despite the challenges.

The Community Mural Project created a special opportunity to bring people together. The project was open to any Toledo resident and the first 200 residents to sign up were able to participate. Art boxes were assembled and distributed by the Arts Commission, each box including one color-coded tile, paints, and instructions. Tiles were made of MDF board, a building material that is similar to chalk board and easily used by artists. The mural design was built with community input and created by a local artist, who did a black line drawing on each panel and included color coded instructions for each. Art boxes included supplies, but participants could use any material they wished, as long as they followed the color guidelines, and people got creative! Some used google eyes, glitter, and even candy wrappers to decorate. Tiles were six by six inches and once assembled, the mural will be about 16 x 16 feet.



Lindsay Akens, Creative Placemaking Manager at the Arts Commission, said the value of the project far outweighs the cost, which was around \$2,500. (This includes the artist, art supplies and panels. Installation will be an additional, but minimal, expense). “Art should not be a privilege,” said Akens. “Art helps people to feel part of a bigger action, plus is simple and affordable.”

*Photo courtesy of the Arts Commission*

## Mural sections on display at local businesses



The mural will eventually reach its destination in a community center or public building in downtown Toledo but while being assembled, different sections decorated business storefronts around town. This allowed community members to witness the project coming together, plus benefited the storefronts as well: they became a destination as community members made trips to see progress.

The Community Mural Project created a display of art and culture but went well beyond that; it created a collective experience that the community could get excited about. “Our job is human interaction,” said Akens. “Everything is about the public. When you have a situation like COVID, you have to shift what you do and how you do it.”

*Photos courtesy of the Arts Commission*



## Toledo Cares About Art

A city ordinance established in 1977 sets aside “one percent for art” annually for purchase, conservation, and public education of art in Toledo. Those funds, administered by the Arts Commission, have funded over 80 works of public art, including sculptures, murals, functional structures, and so on, and have benefited almost every neighborhood in the city including multiple middle neighborhoods. [The Art in Public Places Field Guide](#) shows the locations of public art works in eight different zones of the city.

### RESOURCE: How to Build Public Art Projects

Get resident buy in	Work closely with residents and local businesses to determine a message and identify cultural and historical elements to include. Hold community meetings and seek input from community leaders and neighbors. Contributors do not need to be artists themselves, but it helps if they know the history of the community.
Have a point person	Carefully choose a point person who can lead, inspire, and keep the momentum going. Your point person will need to help you reach people you would normally not be able to reach.
Find funding	You will need funders that are willing to support art as an engagement tool. Reach out to those that care about healthy families and communities.
Embrace culture	Art can help solve the social determinants of health and fits into a bigger picture of culture and society. If possible, build upon something that is pre-existing to support and unify the community.
Provide direction	Create clear directions and a simple process for sign up, distribution and pick up of completed tiles. Provide ideas, resources, and suggestions for creativity, including links to blogs or videos.
Provide supplies	Not everyone has access to supplies so it is important to provide a basic kit, but give participants permission to get creative. Encourage them to embellish or use other items as long as it does not hinder the overall design.
Finding participants	Open the project to all residents plus reach out to groups and entities like universities, schools, businesses, and nonprofits who can help build an audience.
Create an easy sign up	Use a Google form or other sign up that is quick and easy so participants can simply click a link, sign up, and have clear instructions.
Provide an easy pick up and drop off process	Set a schedule for residents to stop by and pick up art boxes, and a simple strategy to drop tiles off when they are done. The Arts Commission had specific days where they set out art boxes for pick up and a collection box for drop offs.
Display sections as they come together	Create a public display of tiles coming together so people get excited about the progress. The displays drove traffic to the storefronts so it was very easy for the Arts Commission to find businesses to participate.
The final destination	Before you begin, have a plan for the end. You do not want to be searching for a final destination afterwards.
Learn more!	<a href="#">The Momentum Festival</a>  <a href="#">Art in Public Places: An Art-Lover’s Field Guide to Exploring Toledo, Ohio</a>

## RESOURCE: Other Engagement Examples

In September 2020, the Middle Neighborhoods CoP hosted a webinar on strategies to stay engaged during the pandemic. Click on the links below to see specific examples or watch the entire Engagement Webinar [here](#).

Interactive Website	The Resource Café in Tucson, AZ provides an up-to-date online resource for the local community. It is coordinated by Arizona State University and is regularly updated with events, discussions, resources, and information. They also offer a 'warm line' for those who need someone to talk to during this challenging time and a community bulletin board. For more information, visit <a href="#">Thrive in the 05</a>
Facebook Live	<a href="#">Old Brooklyn CDC</a> creates live Facebook stories and events to share with local residents. Stories included events and guest speakers. The events were streamed live so staff could interact with viewers and also share them on their Facebook page after.
Community Texting Strategies	Community texting strategies may help you reach those who do not check email often or prefer to use their phones for communications. They can also be used for surveys or registration forms. You can learn more on <a href="#">Slide 19</a>
Mobile Festival	Layton Boulevard West Neighbors' <a href="#">Annual Festival</a> went mobile by transitioning to a parade. Rain changed plans but they were still able to live stream. LBWN also employed Community Resource Navigators during COVID-19 to help provide support to community members in need.
Virtual Community Meetings	It is important to keep communities connected, despite the pandemic. NeighborWorks America has ideas for creating successful virtual community meetings and other resident engagement strategies such as virtual potlucks. Visit: <a href="#">Four Steps for Engaging Residents</a>
Using QR Codes for Surveys	The city of Plano, Texas used QR codes as a way to engage the community and gather community input on local projects and community needs. QR codes are a quick and easy strategy that can help you determine what is needed or preferred in your community. Example QR code generators include <a href="http://www.qrcode-generator.com">www.qrcode-generator.com</a> or <a href="https://www.qrcodemonkey.com/">https://www.qrcodemonkey.com/</a>