



Invest DSM pilots Des Moines' first Artist in Residency

With the encouragement and guidance of Group Creative Services, Bravo Greater Des Moines and Invest DSM commissioned Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist Eleanor Kahn as the city's first Artist in Residence, piloting a creative process for resident engagement and civic improvement. Kahn's work pushed the context of the Dogtown business district into connections that strengthened identity and created momentum for continued growth and development of Des Moines' Drake Neighborhood as a welcoming and inclusive place.

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PURPOSE

The cities that lead the world increasingly turn to artists to help address complex municipal and social issues -- to engage residents and improve communities. It was time for such work in Des Moines.

A six- to nine-month Artist in Residence pilot aimed to demonstrate that civic goals can be realized faster and better when the arts play a leading role, embracing a process without a known outcome. Specifically, the work aimed to develop a sense of place for a business district, making the ideas of business owners visible and influencing shared identity for future transformative effects.

TEAM

Encouraging experimentation is Invest DSM's charter. The nascent not-for-profit serves as the catalyst for public and private resources strengthening 'middle market' neighborhoods – four pilots designated as Special Investment Districts (SIDs) by the City of Des Moines – using a mix of loans, grants, incentives and other partnerships.

Bravo Greater Des Moines, working to maximize the impact of arts, culture and heritage to advance regional priorities, seeks to demonstrate the power of aligning arts and social impact.

In late 2020, Group Creative Services helped Invest DSM become a host agency for Des Moines' first civic Artist in Residence. With funding support from Bravo, Group led the search for local and national artists who were the right fit, selecting Eleanor Kahn from among three finalists for the pilot aiming for cultural invigoration.

Kahn is a Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist with a focus on scenic and installation design. Her work is centered around the power of context – the idea that where, when, and how we receive information is most important. She believes that art creating and shaping environments can directly affect how people view and experience the world.

ACTION



Eleanor Kahn began by pursuing an understanding of the relationships at work across the city. Her tours and interviews led her to select the Drake Neighborhood, one of the oldest, largest, and most diverse neighborhoods in Des Moines. Invest DSM's action plan there calls for making the internal business district – Dogtown – into a destination within a historic, diverse and safe neighborhood.

The Des Moines West Side Chamber of Commerce and local business owners stepped up for Kahn's identity work. She expanded Invest DSM's capacity to reach stakeholders and brought an open mind to where Dogtown could go.

Following weeks of outreach, the emergent themes were presented to stakeholders with proposed activations for Dogtown ranging from wayfinding and corridor beautification to unexpected, multipurpose uses for alleys, parking lots and other unusual spaces in the multi-cultural dining and entertainment district.

Ultimately, the concepts selected by business owners were shelved due to logistics; the ideas could not be executed with the timeline and budget.



A SIMPLE ACTIVATION WITH OUTSIZED BENEFITS

Regrouping on the themes found the core was the value of welcoming everyone to Dogtown, especially the neighbors. Kahn's new concept took a queue from adjacent Drake University's seasonal sidewalk paintings to connect the Dogtown identity with the sprawling residential blocks.

Wading through layers of permissions and process eventually produced a compelling pair of expressions.

First and foremost, a sinuous expanse of paint asking neighborhood pedestrians about their dinner plans as a nod to the way food connects people across cultures and the many cultures represented in area restaurants and homes. The hot pink sidewalk painting was hard to miss as it stretched for blocks and generated discussion in the streets. It was interactive, too; there was chalk on hand to contribute to the expression.

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Second, there were a set of block parties – seven across two weekends – aimed at building social cohesion, generating neighborhood pride to amplify shared identity.



SCOPE

Timeframe: 6-9 month window

Budget: \$20,000 paid to the artist + \$5,000 operating budget

Hours: 300 staff/volunteers + 250 artist

Note: This information should be viewed as guidance to make similar work attainable. It is a reference, not the only way. Importantly, the process will likely take more time than anticipated and the budget must be sufficient to pay the artist and implement the project. Expect indirect expenses.



RESULTS

Stakeholders say they're thinking differently about Dogtown as a neighborhood – a solidifying identity reinforced by sidewalk art that remained a point of intrigue for months, giving a reason to return and generating word of mouth. Local businesses had more circulation during and after the activation.

Importantly, stakeholders say Dogtown is now a more inclusive, welcoming place. Again, Kahn's central theme was on the value of welcoming everyone to Dogtown.

The buzz was powerful enough to generate expectations that the work will continue – repeating walking tours and block parties annually and making additional placemaking improvements to sustain social cohesion.

In short, the work created a point of temporary engagement that brought people together in a lasting and transformative way. Kahn amplified the work of Invest DSM. As a memorable public engagement project, it's a testament to collaboration and a belief in the power of art for social impact.



Given the success of a pilot project delivering foundational work, here are some considerations for what's next...

WHAT WORKED

It was the right team. Invest DSM is confidently chartered for innovation, carrying the strength of long-standing relationships to support the City and property owners in testing what works to improve Des Moines neighborhoods. Bravo funding was essential, as was their vision to directly align arts and culture with other regional priorities. Group introduced art as creative problem solving, managing expectations and finding the right artist. Kahn built trust with her flexibility, skills and experience to deliver work centered on context, carrying the belief that art can directly affect how people view and experience the world. A regular meeting cadence kept everyone connected to the work, using relationships to push for outcomes.

It was the right place at the right time.

Among the four SIDs, Kahn saw Dogtown's energy building with an array of engaged stakeholders eager to do work. The business district has strong support from the Westside Chamber, local business owners and the Drake Neighborhood Association. Dogtown's momentum was palpable.

It was the right goal. Given the short timeline and modest budget, Invest DSM and partners hired Kahn with a focus on supporting a commercial district -- a narrowed purpose that still allowed space to decide on the best artistic interventions. Notably, the process built relationships as the pre-requisite to outputs. Kahn's creativity amplified the outcome, delivering an engagement process that was memorable and transformative.

WHAT NEEDS TO WORK BETTER

Getting the needed approvals required **"an enormous amount of work for a temporary thing."** Even with Invest DSM's working knowledge of City Hall, the critical path could not be smoothed out over 60 days. Certainly, there are risks in doing something for the first time, but more time may not solve the challenges of authority and process that greeted this work. Ultimately, Kahn's activation was less bold, but perhaps not less transformative, as a result.

Timelines matter. The iterative work to build concepts against the project calendar was a threat to success. Resources -- budgets, time investments, donations -- all deserve detailed attention. Dreams are best when actualized.

The activation was chaotic for the team. A lack of volunteers, an under-defined schedule for outdoor work subject to Iowa weather and a dispersed set of tasks led to "an exhausting couple of weeks". It was, literally, messy work. Future activations deserve explicit instructions for distributed work.

PERSPECTIVES

“I felt like we were getting very positive feedback through the whole thing. I’d like to think that it started to build more inclusion and awareness in the neighborhood. I mean, we had [people] that didn’t even know they were living in the Drake neighborhood. It gave us a great opportunity to talk about all those new things that were coming, and then it was great, because it came through natural conversations.”

– Lori Calhoun, **Drake Neighborhood Association**

“There are already all the [Invest DSM] yard signs that folks maybe are curious about and then the unique street art and people wonder: what’s that? You saw the connectivity through the art. People are talking about it outside the Special Investment District. This was a great way to engage folks in the neighborhood, which is the first step to getting all of the other investment and engagement that we want.” – Josh Mandelbaum, **City Council**

“We saw a pick up of business activity during the project; people were there because there was art on the street. It was just a cool vibe. People need vibrancy – a place to come and take pictures for Instagram. As a business owner, it’s great to have people wanting to be around your neighborhood. And the block parties were a great way for us, as business owners, to go and engage with the neighborhood. There are times I’m scared that we’re not brave enough to do more; with just this test, we know art can increase activity.” – Kuuku Saah, **Mars Café**

Are you ready?

An Artist in Residence can lead a creative community engagement process pursuing co-creation -- a way to develop common goals and reach them together. The goal is often innovation of process in support of outcomes. While each engagement measures success differently, there must be room for the exploration and discomfort that comes with innovation.

ASK YOURSELF..

Do we have the **political will** to change our community planning conversations?

Do we really understand **local needs**?

Is there a **policymaking window** that aligns with the process and outcomes?

Do we have the right **partner organizations** ready to support this work?

Do we have the **funding** necessary to pay for the artist and their implementation?

Will we have the **time** to support the artist and others leading the work?

If so, proceed with confidence, acknowledging uncertainty as the inspiration to meet challenges with the creative power of art.



Who let the Dogs out?

Artist Eleanor Kahn!

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