



CREATING POP-UPS IN VACANT STORES

A Short History & Inspirational How-To Guide

Jackie Lightfield & Margaret Bodell.

56 Church Lane, Westport

June 25, 2019

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

August 21, 2019

<https://youtu.be/tyg9HRgOT9s>

Jackie Lightfield and Margaret Bodell, both celebrated placemakers who have led successful long-term operations to bring the arts, and consequently vitality and enterprise, to vacant stores and storefronts shared the history of their successes and guided a group of artists in Westport, on June 25, 2019, in planning strategies for doing the same.

How to Build an Artist Storefront: Lessons from Norwalk 2.0

Jackie opened by presenting Norwalk 2.0, a nonprofit she co-founded in 2010 to "create, develop and implement conversation-changing public art projects." While determined "not to do the same thing twice," they still have a theme running through their work (perhaps "creating chaos in a vacant space"). Currently they have two shipping containers painted pink in the park across from the Maritime Aquarium where they bring exhibits and concerts.

"Iconic Norwalk," is a project started in 2016, that encourages residents to post images of what they considered iconic about Norwalk. There are now 2,500 entries (putting Norwalk on the Instagram map). The images live online and are also printed out and exhibited around town. The project works as a grass-roots way of seeing what people genuinely love about their town - rather than what they say in focus groups.

"Inside Out" is a project that encourages artists to occupy various spaces with a variety of arts activities. On Washington Street they convinced restaurant owners to have art installations in their restaurants during the day. 64 Wall Street was a 4,000 sq. ft. vacant property that had not been leased for 20 years. Norwalk 2.0 had been formed partly to highlight the fact that property owners "landbank" buildings, not leasing them unless there's a strong incentive. At the time, there was a 70% vacancy rate on Main Avenue. They proposed taxes on longterm vacancies. As a result, one landowner offered 64 Wall Street for the summer "to see what you can do." They put on many events (artists talks, exhibits, talks on entrepreneurship, etc), acting as a community

center, art gallery, incubator, bringing in wi-fi and other amenities. Their success was that the landlord quickly found a lessee for the space. The goal with these occupations was to get the space activated and leased - not to stay.

The shipping containers in Liberty Park that were used to build an artists village over three weekends also manifested the principle that although people enjoy listening and viewing, they come alive when they are actually playing music or making art. People from the neighborhood, who they did not know, came out and played in the shipping containers. They put blackboards on the interior for visitors and every night would wipe them down, ready for the next day's art.

The core of what N2.0 does is to match artists in the creative community with the business community, with government, and with property owners. Without such a matchmaker, these entities would operate in parallel and never cross paths. They ask "What is the outcome from an economic- and community-development point-of-view? What is the outcome from bringing the community together to build something bigger?" The key is not in the projects themselves but what comes afterwards - after you've activated a neighborhood.

Solving a problem is key: like changing the perception of downtown. An important goal is to change public experience and perception of a place. So bringing change, perhaps some chaos and definitely some vibrancy, is critical in creating public or place-based art. They find that the impermanent art is the more interesting as, if people are involved in making art in a particular place, it creates an emotional bond to that place.

N2.0 tries to partner with relevant other organizations, such as the Maritime Aquarium, Stepping Stones, City Hall, often working within their spaces (they credit the City's work on cleaning and labeling the WPA murals in City Hall to the work N2.0 did in bringing attention to the fact that these murals were inside the building). Working with partners and being attuned to their issues is important (such as, if working with restaurants on a project, to do it on one of their off-nights).

Jackie had strong advice about learning about, and getting involved with, zoning and permitting processes. Her experience was that if you were patient in explaining to officials why you wanted a permit or a variance that they would listen and most often accede. Asking for help when you don't understand a particular rule also opens doors. When you understand what their concern is (after-hours noise, for example) then you can more easily adapt your application to that concern. If you show you can be nimble and adaptable, you can develop a good reputation, which will make it progressively easier to get what you need. Jackie had several examples, including being allowed alcohol permits for an art show in Mathews Park if they met certain conditions.

Another metric for success is attracting people you don't know. Create a broad mailing list, including city officials, and try to actively involve as many a people as possible in actually putting projects together. Partnering will generally get you success both in getting the word out and in building a sense of community. Then, be sure you evaluate your projects by asking what expectations were, how people thought an event or project was successful, to help you measure whether a project met your goals.

Margaret Bodell (32:54 on video) spoke about the history of New Haven's Project Storefronts (founded 2010). She had earlier noticed that many art galleries in New York City were in former storefronts and suggested to the City of New Haven that she seed a project giving local entrepreneurs an opportunity to open a business and enliven the street. There were earlier examples of this, e.g., Phantom Galleries in L.A. and a project by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, but neither worked to improve the neighborhood.

It was hard to get started - landlords wouldn't play ball. Then she found a row of vacant storefronts owned by Related Businesses. She made a big effort to make it easy for the landlords to agree: she got insurance, she got seed money from the City and she got started. They applied for an NEA Our Town grant and forgot about it until she heard that they got the grant. She developed a program where community entrepreneurs were encouraged to put up pop-ups with anything imaginable that would attract crowds of people. At first it was slow-going but after a few successes, investors got interested. The key was to make the landlords the heroes: do all the work for them, have the insurance, clean up the place, put in facilities - and then show-off the results. As the program developed, applicants had to have a solid business plan. A co-working space, The Grove, started in one room and eventually took over the entire block.

Publicity is key, as is having a great graphic, and inviting everybody to the events - Yale brought musicians, the mayor always came. Issues included: security; managing the expectations of the entrepreneurs; and sometimes their lack of business training.

It was hard going initially, but they kept gaining traction. With Phase Two they got awards, a \$2500 Creative Economy award from the New England Foundation for the Arts and then the \$100,000 NEA Our Town grant.

Margaret showed an example of a terrible storefront in great disrepair in a "bad neighborhood." The landlord gave it over for no rent for a year. Margaret had it cleaned up, refurbished, painted: after a couple of years it was snapped up by a developer and is now a successful coffee shop.

One of their biggest successes was with a couple of Yale graduates wanting to try out what they'd seen on the West Coast: a "Free Store." Yale graduates, and others, would donate unwanted belongings, and it was all free for anyone to take. It was immensely popular and attracted a great cross-section of the public. Then it was bought by REI.

Another success was Neville Wisdom, a tailor, making clothes in a tiny workshop in Westville. Project Storefronts gave him a storefront. He started giving fashion shows, blocking off the street. Now you see a lot of the anchor people on TV wearing his clothes and he has taken another storefront - right across from the Yale Art Museum - and he's always giving lessons to the community.

There were many examples Margaret cited of the ripple effects of the success of Project Storefronts. People tagging each other, saying "Go to New Haven and create a piece of art," and the Project attracted people who wanted to make and sell work,

dropping by from other states, and from all around Connecticut. Having something unique always helps: like having a store where everything is handmade and unique. There were people in trucks who would come by to do a pop-up for a night. Margaret started the “LAMP” light festival that lasted 5 years. Storefronts would stay open all night, driving even more traffic and making for a new neighborhood.

Margaret also developed a program for Hartford: “I Connect,” with Christina Newman Scott. Hartford Prints is one example of a business that did well in that program, negotiating a long-term favorable lease with the landlord. Margaret also developed a program for Memphis called MemShop, in collaboration with Bloomberg Foundation’s innovation team, and that is still running today.

In conclusion, she said this kind of operation doesn’t have to be complicated. It can be as simple as putting a chess board out for people to stop and play. It doesn’t have to be big money: there are many ways of getting people to come in and get engaged: “come in and convene - walk-ins are always welcome.”