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REVITALIZING NEIGHBORHOODS THROUGH
TEMPORARY URBANISM
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COLUMBIA



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While the global economic crisis beginning in 2008 has resulted in unfinished construction sites and broken retail leases in cities across America, some level of vacancy is part of the urban condition. At any given moment, even during times of great prosperity, many sites and buildings are in a state of redevelopment, demolition, pre-development, or adaptive reuse, resulting in a temporary state of vacancy. The District of Columbia Office of Planning's (DCOP) Temporary Urbanism Initiative seeks to transform these vacant spaces in the nation's capital into vibrant destinations through unique uses that offer cultural and neighborhood-enlivening opportunities. This initiative seeks to reverse the

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negative perceptions associated with vacant urban sites or spaces. Beginning in 2010, this initiative spearheaded an investment of resources into temporary or 'pop-up' retail stores and arts venues. Using vacant storefronts for weeks at a time allowed residents, entrepreneurs, and developers to see the potential of underperforming commercial streets to become vibrant retail corridors. Filling these vacant and underused spaces with dynamic programming generates foot traffic, attracts visitors, and encourages entrepreneurs to see the potential of vacant spaces. While these temporary projects fill formerly vacant storefronts for only days, weeks, or months at a time, the impact of temporary urbanism projects can be permanent.

The core implementing objectives of DCOP's Temporary Urbanism Initiative are the following: 1) stimulate community building and promote neighborhoods through seeding arts, retail, entertainment, recreation, education, or demonstration activities; 2) showcase the District of Columbia's innovation and entrepreneurship while building partnerships among private property owners, city agencies, and creative users; 3) highlight the long-term tenanting or creative use opportunities along a corridor; and 4) realize strategies identified through neighborhood planning efforts, the [Creative DC Action Agenda](#), the [Retail Action Strategy](#), and other citywide initiatives of the Office of Planning.

I. SUPPORTING CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURS AND FILLING RETAIL GAPS

The Temporary Urbanism Initiative implements key recommendations of DCOP's previous planning efforts to address the problem of vacant storefronts. The [2010 Retail Action Roadmap](#), coauthored with the Washington DC Economic Partnership, studied the economic potential of emerging retail corridors. This report identified four objectives for the city's larger economic goals that align with the objectives of the Temporary Urbanism Initiative. These were: filling the gaps in neighborhood markets; creating new business concentrations; cultivating and strengthening locally owned small businesses; and, marketing the city's retail offerings in innovative and effective ways. The Retail Action Roadmap further identified city support of pop-up retail as a way to encourage long-term tenanting by demonstrating the potential of vacant storefronts to attract customers.

In 2010, DCOP initiated the first of its temporary urbanism concepts with a 'temporium' marketplace inside of a former library kiosk on H Street NE. DCOP's 2010 Retail Action Roadmap identified the H St. NE corridor as a 'transitioning' neighborhood. The H Street NE corridor is in the process of rebounding from decades of decline and disinvestment into a nightlife hot spot with new bars and restaurants. Despite the corridor's new reputation as a trendy entertainment district, the neighborhood has struggled to attract significant retail investment. The H Street Temporium showcased 20 local artists and designers, creating a unique retail outlet for creative entrepreneurs to sell their products. In just four weekends, over 1,600 people visited the temporium, 75 percent of whom were not local neighborhood residents. Following up on the success of the H St. NE temporium, DCOP funded two additional temporiums in the Shaw and Mount Pleasant neighborhoods in 2011. These three

pop-up retail stores drove \$55,000 in sales to local artisans, crafts, and designers. By supporting local artists, animating underutilized storefronts, and testing an innovative economic development strategy, the temporiums provided evidence of the potential for these neighborhoods to attract more diverse retail options.

Despite recently being named the second coolest city in America by Forbes Magazine, many creative entrepreneurs fail to see DC as a great place to start an artistic business. Phrases like "buttoned-down" and "government town" are commonly used to describe the city and the sense of a pervasive federal government. Missing from this perception is DC's strong support of the creative economy. In 2010, DCOP published the [Creative DC Action Agenda](#), a first-of-its-kind survey of the impact of DC's creative economy. The report found that the creative economy supports 75,000 jobs and generates \$5 billion in revenue in Washington, particularly in media, culinary arts, and design. This report also identified partnering with artists and creative organizations to program vacant and underutilized temporary spaces as a strategy to bolster DC's creative economy. Temporary programming promotes the work of artists and lowers barriers for artistic entrepreneurs to enter the marketplace. By supporting DC's creative economy, the District has an opportunity to diversify its economic base, support entrepreneurs, and foster job creation in this growing sector.

II. PROMOTING NEIGHBORHOODS THROUGH CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

Creative placemaking is at the heart of DC's investment in temporary urbanism. Showcasing the arts is a low-risk method to demonstrate the potential of a vacant space and foster civic engagement. Instead of sowing fears of greater density or congestion that often accompany conversations about new development projects, the arts encourage everyone in the community to support local artists and entrepreneurs. From painting the sidewalk to show the potential for a future pedestrian plaza, to hosting a craft fair that showcases local vendors, the arts provide a way to capture residents' imagination for their vision of the future of the community.

In 2011, DCOP received a \$250,000 grant from [ArtPlace](#) America to continue our work with temporary urbanism. ArtPlace is an initiative of 11 of America's top foundations working in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts and seven federal agencies. Its aim is to drive revitalization across the country by putting the arts at the center of economic development. ArtPlace encourages its grantees to take risks with creative placemaking. Instead of doing more retail pop-up stores, like we had done on H Street NE, we proposed the creation of four distinct Arts & Culture Temporiiums in the Anacostia, Brookland, Central 14th Street NW, and Deanwood neighborhoods. These communities had been identified by recent neighborhood Small Area Plans and the Creative Action Agenda as neighborhoods that are poised to develop as arts districts. Instead of curating pop-up retail opportunities for local artists, we decided to bring arts to the community through pop-up art galleries, impromptu dance performances, and the design of colorful urban street furniture. Using the existing creativity of these communities, the

temporiums attracted visitors, encouraged conversation, and demonstrated the potential of these neighborhoods to attract a healthier retail mix to better serve community residents.

In Anacostia, identified as a high growth and transitioning neighborhood by the Retail Action Roadmap, the Office of Planning partnered with ARCH Development Corporation, an arts-focused community development corporation, to create the [LUMEN8Anacostia](#) festival. Although Anacostia has a rich history as one of the city's historic African-American neighborhoods, it has also faced significant challenges in terms of high unemployment, vacant storefronts, and a persistent negative perception that Anacostia is an unsafe neighborhood to visit. Instead of focusing on the challenges facing Anacostia, the LUMEN8Anacostia festival highlighted the potential of the neighborhood to become an arts corridor.

From April to June 2012, the three-month festival of music, art, and light transformed Anacostia into a whirlwind of dynamic arts programming. For the opening night festival, Anacostia's iconic Big Chair sculpture, a roughly 20 foot high sculpture of a chair, was illuminated by rainbow colored lighting. The former DC Police Evidence Warehouse was transformed into The Lightbox, a venue for music, arts, and creative vendors. The very popular DC restaurant Busboys and Poets operated a pop-up restaurant in the old Police Evidence Warehouse for the first two weekends of the festival. In addition, local restaurants in close proximity to the festival recorded record-high sales on LUMEN8Anacostia's opening and closing days. Neighborhood residents felt pride in their local artists who were the backbone of the festival and excitement about new nightlife and art opportunities in their community.

Sixty-two percent of the artists featured in the festival came from neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River. However, the festival drew people from all over the city with approximately half of visitors to the festival from other neighborhoods throughout the District, many in Anacostia for the first time. After the festival's

opening night, 30 temporium spaces were activated throughout Anacostia in previously vacant and existing gallery spaces for three months of use as art galleries and artist studio spaces.

Now the neighborhood is planning to make LUMEN8Anacostia an annual event. Next year's event may feature a parade and encourage more arts uses on sidewalks to attract passersby to the festival. Thanks to the festival, DC residents, creative entrepreneurs, and developers began to see a new potential for Anacostia's future as a creative arts district. The H Street Playhouse has decided to move its theater space from H Street NE to the warehouse in Anacostia that hosted the opening night festivities.

III. FILLING VACANT STOREFRONTS

While the temporium projects only lasted a few weeks, their legacy has contributed to the development of these neighborhoods as future arts districts with other retail and dining amenities. In addition to the H Street Playhouse's move to Anacostia, temporiums in other neighborhoods have attracted longer-term tenants for other previously vacant store fronts. Dance Place, the project manager for the Brookland Arts and Culture Temporium, recently decided to extend its lease on its gallery space in a former fast-food restaurant.

The now permanent gallery will host community artists and serve as a venue for open mic nights and slam poetry performances. Dance Place recently received a \$150,000 Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to continue its investment in creative placemaking in the Brookland neighborhood. On Central 14th Street, the vacant storefront that became the workshop for the neighborhood's street furniture design and build project has now become an attractive site for long-term tenantry. The H Street Playhouse's decision to invest in Anacostia has led to a ripple of interest in other vacant Anacostia properties that could one day become home to new restaurants, retailers, or arts organizations.

Without thriving retail corridors, small businesses lack critical mass as they struggle to survive, and residents leave the area to purchase goods. In Anacostia, it is estimated that residents will spend \$89 million at stores in 2012. Yet, only 42 percent of that total will be purchases in Anacostia. The remaining purchases will be made in other DC neighborhoods and adjacent suburban communities. Improving the quality of retail in DC's neighborhoods also improves the quality of life for the city's residents. The temporiums engaged communities and fostered long-term tenantry in ways that address DC's commercial vacancy rate and support community development.

IV. TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL TEMPORARY URBANISM PROJECT

Identify Your Needs for Temporary Urbanism
Although DC's temporium projects were different in scope in every neighborhood, DCOP's temporary urbanism projects have all been rooted in small area plans and economic development strategies that focus on promoting the creative economy and bringing retail to underserved neighborhoods. It can be tempting to do a temporary urbanism project as a short and quick pilot project to test a new idea, but without an underlying framework to identify the role of temporary urbanism projects, the results can be isolated and fail to build momentum for neighborhood change and investment. Previous planning efforts, such as the Creative Action Agenda, Retail Action Roadmap, and neighborhood Small Area Plans, provided a clear set of objectives that supported the Temporary Urbanism Initiative with data and stakeholder buy-in from local DC neighborhoods.



Select Your Partners Carefully

Our best projects resulted from strong partnerships. The ideal temporium project partner should have expertise in real estate development, art curation, marketing/promotion, event planning, and/or community outreach. The skill sets needed to implement this type of project successfully are very diverse and are rarely found in one organization. Thus, collaboration with multiple organizations with one lead organization is likely to ensure project success. In addition, it is important to work with organizations with a proven track record when there is a short timeframe for implementation. Temporium project partners with substantial experience in several of the above categories were most effective in the short 6-9 month time frame to plan and execute a temporium project.

The Theme Matters

The theme is the driving force for increasing the project's relevance and impact within the local community, launching a successful marketing strategy, and attracting quality collaborators, volunteers, artists, vendors, and performers. The theme of the Mt. Pleasant Temporium was storytelling—a theme conducive to showcasing the racially and economically diverse neighborhood's traditions, culture, and participatory action. Stories were woven throughout the space to fully engage all the Mt. Pleasant community, to provide a platform for storytelling and community sharing, and to give patrons a truly engaging experience with not only the products for sale, but the stories behind the artists who made them. LUMEN8Anacostia concatenated the word lumen (a measure of light), Ward 8, Washington, DC, where the event took place, and the historic neighborhood of Anacostia. It is loosely based on the all-night arts event, Nuit Blanche or White Nights, found in cities such as Paris and Toronto.

Develop Neighborhood Partnerships

Our first goal is to leave neighborhoods with positive outcomes. Instead of entering neighborhoods to talk about what might happen in the future, the temporiums allow our planning office to implement planning concepts/strategies and support communities directly. Our temporary urbanism work in the Central 14th Street corridor helped to implement the key recommendations of its Small Area Plan before it went to the DC Council for approval. Central 14th Street residents now consider the DC Office of Planning a partner in their neighborhood's revitalization. In addition, strong community partners are critical to project success. They are essential with helping to market and promote events and in getting neighborhood buy-in and participation. Through the Temporary Urbanism Initiative, we've built a reputation that the DC Office of Planning is committed to helping communities thrive.

Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

Every government agency has its unique set of roles and responsibilities. Thanks to the external support from ArtPlace and the support from our agency director, the DC Office of Planning was able to shift from a purely planning role to working with neighborhoods on plan implementation. It wasn't always easy coming up with the staff, time, or resources to implement the temporiums. The funding from ArtPlace confirmed our confidence that this strategy could help fill vacant spaces throughout DC. Even when facing challenges, our office learned from each temporium project and stretched our idea of what a planning office could do.

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RENAN SNOWDEN will graduate from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota in 2013. She is a candidate for the master of urban and regional planning with a concentration in housing and community development. Renan has previously interned for the DC Office of Planning and Americans for the Arts.