

NORTH HILL BETTER BLOCK SHORT TERM OUTCOMES

JULY, 2015



Susan Grant Photography



Fitzwater Photography



courtesy Tim Fitzwater of Fitzwater Photography



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Welcome

The report you are about to read is designed to give you a summary of the impact of the North Hill Better Block on the North Hill neighborhood of Akron, OH. The Better Block was held on 15, 16, and 17 May 2015. On May 17, the City of Akron also held its first Open Streets Initiative, connecting the Better Block to the Downtown with a motor-vehicle free route.

“Food places!” -before

Quotations

Throughout the text, the reader will notice quotes like those at right:

Quotes in green are taken from a survey of the participants performed by Smile Minded Smartworks after the Better Block. Those in red-orange are taken from surveys done before the Better Block and are responding to questions like “What is holding the area back?” and “What would make you want to visit the area more often?”.

*“I enjoyed meeting
the business owners.”
-after*

Thanks and Appreciation

Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC would like to thank the Knight Foundation for making the Better Block and this report possible. A special thanks should go out to the Akron Metropolitan Area Transit Study (AMATS), who brought the idea of the Better Block to Akron and contributed resources and manpower to help make it a reality. Thank you, Team Better Block for sharing your model with Akron and for your curation of the project. We would also like to thank all the individuals and groups that put forth an amazing amount of effort to make the North Hill Better Block such a wonderful event.

*Wonderful event! This event
exceeded my expectations which
were pretty high already!*

 **Knight Foundation**



Introduction

On 15, 16, and 17 May, 2015, the area known as Temple Square in Akron's North Hill neighborhood was temporarily transformed into a vibrant cultural and economic hotspot with complete green streets. In a project known as a "Better Block", many temporary changes were exhibited to and enjoyed by residents and visitors alike in order to give people a concrete sense of the area's best potential as both a commercial and neighborhood center. The planning for the event took place over nine months, and during that time, Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC was asked to attempt to document and, to whatever extent possible, measure the impact that the process and the event had for the neighborhood.

Pedestrian friendly would be huge. Restaurants representing ethnicities in north hill. Coffee shop like angel falls. Book store. Biking friendly.

Not Just Another Better Block

The Better Block concept was created by Jason Roberts in Dallas, Texas. Jason now co-leads an enterprise called Team Better Block, which seeks to help people execute the concept in other cities. Team Better Block contributed a great deal of planning and experience to the process, as well as coordinated much of the logistics for the physical changes on the block for the weekend.

Each Better Block is a unique exercise, to be sure. However, this project was noted by the team to be quite large (possibly the largest they have ever done) and to have had more "moving parts" than their other projects. However, with cooperation from the City of Akron and North Hill's many champions, the event was widely regarded as quite successful.

The Dimensions of a Better Block's Impact

As prelude to our attempts at recording and measuring a Better Block, Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC identified four different dimensions in which the Better Block Process could impact the surrounding neighborhood: Social Capital, Neighborhood Identity, Physical Changes, and Economics. During the timeframe between the event and the writing of this report, some of these dimensions will not have had as much time to mature as others. Additionally, some of these dimensions enjoyed tremendous development during the planning process leading up to the Better Block.

Social Capital

For the purposes of this report, Social Capital is defined as the as the availability of resources through relationships across multiple individuals, groups, and both new and extant provider organizations (NGOs and non-profits, merchant groups, churches, incubators, banks, etc.) Social Capital grew greatly during the planning process as networks were formed.

Neighborhood Identity

Difficult to quantify, Neighborhood Identity is the way that both residents and outsiders view the neighborhood. Some consider it similar to branding for the neighborhood, although that is a bit of an oversimplification. In many ways, this was perhaps the most profound success of the North Hill Better Block, as a great deal of that identity had changed through the process leading up to the Better Block.

Physical Changes

One of the goals of a Better Block is to provide a tangible vision of what the block would be like as an inviting space for meeting and lingering, as well as making it more accessible to bicycle and pedestrian traffic. With success, political will is generated to make such changes permanent.

Economics

In addition to any earnings generated during the weekend of the Better Block, a Better Block stimulates the local economy both by providing nascent entrepreneurs with a chance to experiment with a new business in a pop-up shop and by example to other potential entrepreneurs in the area. Economics is the dimension which has had the least time to mature. Although the weekend was an economic success for many of its participants, there has not yet been time for most of these businesses to take a more lasting form.

North Hill and Temple Square

The North Hill Neighborhood

Akron's North Hill Neighborhood has a long history, the comprehensive details of which are beyond the scope of this report. The Neighborhood is a large, primarily residential area, with commercial development along several larger streets (North Main, Tallmadge, Cuyahoga Falls Ave.), most of which dates from thirty to near a hundred years old (as of 2015). Until very recently, the area has generally been considered an Italian, Polish, German, and Irish neighborhood, since immigrants of those ethnicities flooded the area during Akron's industrial heyday.

The boundaries of North Hill are not legally or clearly defined and, depending on who is asked, at least two

Table 1: What issues do you see that are holding the block back from its greatest potential?	Responses
Safety/crime (includes juveniles roaming in groups/homeless/drug users...)	26
Lack of reasons to go (only one restaurant, few shops, no events...)	20
Lack of bikability, walkability, and sitability	16
Vacancies/abandoned spaces	14
Lack of parking	13
Lack of beauty (ugly facades, billboards...)	12
High traffic/wide Street	10
Lack of community cohesiveness between different nationalities	7
Income level of residents	7
Limited Investment and low-end Businesses	7
Lack of signage and branding	4
Not meeting community needs	3
City regs and permits	2

Table 1: Response themes from a survey about Temple Square taken in Nov. & Dec 2014. There were 92 respondents, but a single response might hit multiple themes.

separate City of Akron Council Wards cover the area. While the popular imagination seems to relegate African-Americans to living only on the Western and Southern slopes of the eponymous Hill, in reality, that population is much more diffuse across the Neighborhood.

Table 2: What would make you want to visit this block on a regular basis?	Count
Restaurants (Stray Dog Grille, ethnic, vegetarian, smoothies/juice bar, ice cream shop, brunch...)	48
Boutiques/Shops/Small Biz (e.g. bookstores, florist, thrift clothing, consignment, barber shop, bakery, sushi bar, biz rep diversity in area, hair salons...)	32
Coffee and/or tea shop	26
Outdoor space (places to play games like chess, pet park, parkour, community garden/urban nursery...)	17
Build on ethnic/diversity/culture/nations	13
Markets (farmers and open air)	12
Entertainment/performance venues (including music and cultural festivals)	11
Walkable, bikable, sitable	11
Wine bar/neighborhood pub/beer garden	10
Other	46

Table 2: Response from 11/2014, themes appearing in open response questionnaire

In recent years, the International Institute of Akron continued its historical role of welcoming and aiding new immigrants to the city.

Ethnic food and a cool coffee shop

In this case, many of these newcomers were refugees resettling from a variety of Southeast Asian countries, including; Burma (Myanmar), Nepal, Bhutan, and Thailand. A 2012 article on the local High School soccer team noted “There are eight languages — Nepali, Thai, Hindi, Karen, Uzbek, Twi, Burma and English — spoken on the team.” (*Teens from around world come to Akron’s North High, merge into one soccer team*, Michael Beaven, Akron Beacon Journal, 20th September, 2012). As is often the case, there was some friction between the existing and new communities.

Temple Square

Temple Square (named for an old Masonic Temple which still stands on the block) served as a commercial and transportation center for the neighborhood in Akron’s industrial prime. Not only was it a local trolley stop, but riders could take an electric rail line North into Cleveland. As recently as the 1980’s, the block was still performing this function in a far more limited capacity. The block and neighborhood endured a process of decay all too familiar to Northeast Ohioans. Little was left after the strip clubs were gone. That period of time left the surrounding neighborhood with an enduring perception of being crime-ridden.

The physical space and condition of Temple Square also suffered, decreasing its ability to serve as a neighborhood center. Buildings were razed, the street became very wide leading to faster traffic and more danger to pedestrians and accidents. AMATS (Akron Metropolitan Area Transit Study) noted 17 accidents between 2011 and 2013 at the intersection of the Cuyahoga Falls Ave. and North Main St. which formed the Northern end of the Better Block. One of those involved a pedestrian.

Scarcity, seems like an area you would just drive through, little to no curbside appeal.

As the idea of doing a Better Block began to take root. Brief, open-ended surveys were conducted (10 Nov. 2014 to December 2014) to determine how people viewed the area and what they wanted to see there. When asked “What issues do you see that are holding

the block back from its greatest potential?” respondents cited issues of Safety and Crime the most, followed closely by some version of “Nothing to do here.” Other issues that stood out include: “lack of bike-ability, walkability”, “Traffic”, “Parking”, “Abandoned buildings” and “a lack of beauty”.

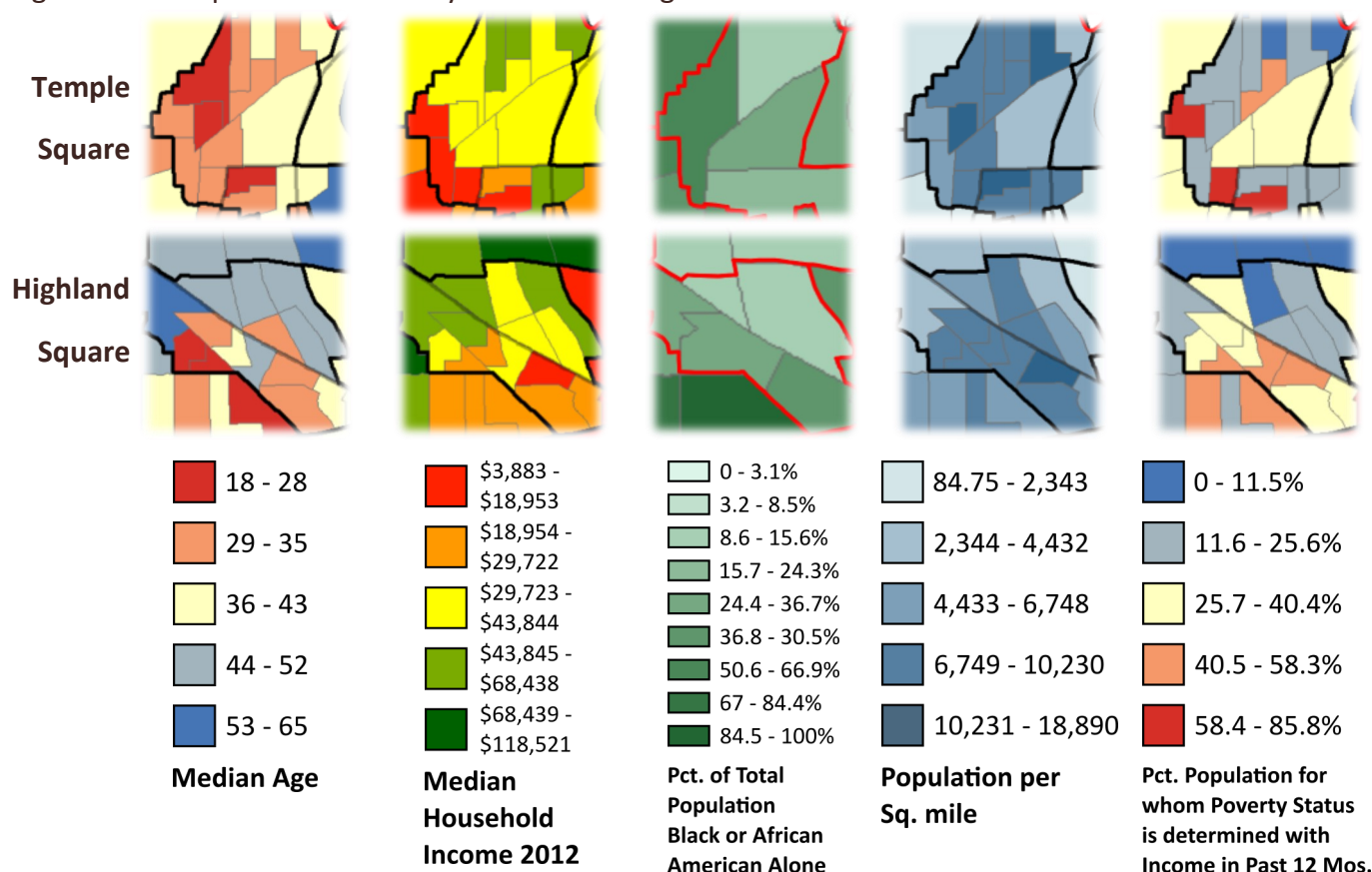
Additionally, respondents were asked what might draw them to the area more often. Restaurants and shopping opportunities were far-and-away the most common themes found in the responses. A variety of other responses were also somewhat popular.

Comparison with Highland Square

Within Akron, there is a place that already resembles what people desired to see in Temple Square. That area is called Highland Square. In this case, we are referring primarily to the commercial district at the heart of the neighborhood also called Highland Square. How does Temple Square compare to Highland Square, and how can they be compared? As public spaces, methods developed by architects Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, can serve to help give some measure of the two locales. However, as functional components of a neighborhood, evaluation of the spaces also need to consider social environmental conditions as well as architectural composition.

One aspect of the social environment which is often either overlooked or misunderstood is diversity. Diversity within a neighborhood increases the chances of meeting someone interesting or of having a chance encounter that leads to something new and exciting. In turn, those are motivations to utilize a neighborhood commercial center, to linger there, to “see and be seen”. For the neighborhood and the city as a whole, they

Figure 1: A comparison of diversity for the two neighborhood centers.



Images and data derived from http://www.wrlandconservancy.org/pdf/WRLC_TCI_Akron_Property_Inventory_FOR_DISTRIBUTION_20150406.pdf, © Western Reserve Land Conservancy. Original GIS work: Paul Boehnlein 2015

create new ideas, businesses, expressions of art, organizations etc. Simply put, they provide opportunities that might not occur otherwise. (The Creative City Index, Landry & Hyams, Comedia 2012) This is important to note, only because, as is often the case with human perception, we tend not to recognize the value of diversity.

Particularly with its new populations, cultural diversity within North Hill cannot seriously be questioned, but casual observers might question whether Highland Square also enjoys much diversity. Fortunately, modern technology helps to offer some insight. Analyzing and presenting data with GIS software allows us to see things in ways that only a few years ago would be impossible. The maps in Figure 1 (p 6) illustrate several aspects of diversity for both the North Hill and Highland Square neighborhoods. Each map is centered on Temple Square and Highland Square, respectively. Data is taken from the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey Estimates for 2012 and displayed at the “Block Group” level. This means that small chunks of the city are displayed as one.

Lovin' the international feel of where we live, was happy to see that overflow into Better Block. :)

Examining Figure 1, we can see a few things. While the North Hill population is a bit younger, and perhaps as a consequence not quite as wealthy. It is important for our purposes to note the configuration of the colors. In both neighborhoods, the square seems to anchor “corners” or edges of the colors. This indicates that not only is Highland Square affixed in such a confluence of diversity, but that Temple Square is as well (even if it currently isn’t taking all possible advantage of it). No data is currently available that accurately reflects the actual breadth and geographic distribution of cultural diversity within North Hill, as most such sources do not distinguish cultural groups with enough refinement. Instead, outmoded terms of “race” are often used and widely varied groups within North Hill all become “Asian.”

This does not mean that every neighborhood commercial center requires the same sort of diversity. Indeed, for Akron as a whole, it would be best if each neighborhood center developed its own unique flavor. This sort of diversity of diversities gives the city more appeal, as newcomers can choose not only which of the neighborhoods they might wish to visit on a Friday night, but also in which they might prefer to reside.

The Highland Square neighborhood center has also not experienced the same sorts of changes in its physical environment that degrade its attraction. Abandoned buildings are not always as problematic as often presumed, even the buildings in Highland Square have known vacancy at times. However, something drew people back and kept reactivating that space for public use. This is where the physical differences between the two blocks become important.

Traffic, bad intersection

Physical Characteristics of Public Spaces

One important difference between Highland and Temple Squares, is in the street itself. West Market St., one of

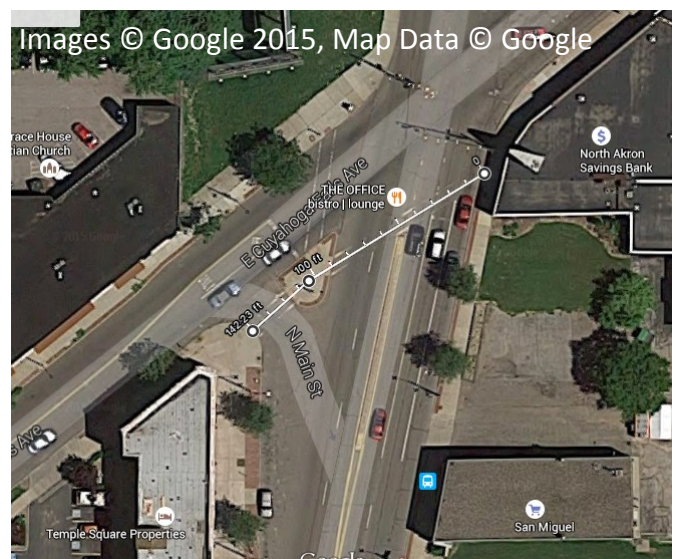


Figure 2: Temple Square’s solitary crosswalk. The white line is a Google Maps ruler left in place to help the reader identify the actual crosswalk.

Akron’s major thoroughfares passes directly through Highland Square. Similarly, North Main St. passes directly through Temple Square. That, however, is about where the similarities end. In Highland Square, West Market ranges in width from about 36 ft to a maximum of about 62 ft. Meanwhile, North Main ranges from about 65 ft. wide to about 95 ft wide at the Better Block site, and for many blocks in either direction. North Main has two lanes of through traffic in either direction, with parking lanes along the edges. Right-turn only lanes with no left turns permitted at Cuyahoga Falls Ave. West Market has only two through lanes, two parking lanes and a turning lane (which is sometimes a striped buffer zone). Traffic through the Temple Square area moves much more quickly than in Highland Square.

Main street is way too wide and fast. All the vacant lots need to be filled in with parks or at least greenery.

Furthermore, for pedestrians, Highland Square boasts two crosswalks each from 8 to 10 feet wide. One is only 48 ft. long and the other 60 ft., the latter also has a turn lane in the middle and parking lanes on either side, so only about 28 ft. of it’s length is subject to through traffic. Additionally, both crosswalks are distinguished by brick surfacing which visually contrasts with the asphalt street surface. The two crosswalks are about 225 ft. apart. At Temple Square, there is only one crosswalk, it is along Cuyahoga Falls Ave, which intersects with North Main at a highly skewed angle. The crosswalk doesn’t even go directly across the street (~100 ft.). This makes the pedestrian’s crossing distance nearly 140 ft. Adding insult to potential injury, the crosswalk is marked only with traffic-worn striping over warped asphalt, and ~120 feet of it is across lanes of through traffic. The next crosswalk to the South is almost 500 ft. away.

Both areas feature sidewalks, and in fact the Temple Square sidewalks are in better condition with fewer buckled or broken sections. The Temple square sidewalks are also spacious and wide. If all else were equal, this would be an advantage for Temple Square. However, the missing buildings, fast traffic, scarcity of amenities such as planters, art, trees or other shade, benches or other seating leave pedestrians feeling exposed and vulnerable. (*Best Practices for Complete Streets*, Sacramento Transportation & Air Quality Collaborative, 2005) As noted by other observers, humans tend to congregate around “edges” in public spaces (*How to Study Public Life*, Gehl & Svarre, Island Press 2013). Temple Square is lacking in such edges. Under normal conditions there social activity or lingering would remain unappealing, despite the spacious and well-maintained sidewalk.

Table 3: Comparison of Pedestrian Amenities

	Highland	Temple Square	
Amenity	25-Apr	18-Apr	16-May (BB)
Bike Racks	8	2	2
Benches	16	2	44
Trees	4 small 4 med 5 large	8 medium	8 med 35 small
Tree Wells	11	5	5
Planters	6 small 7 large	12	73
Shade Awnings	3	0	22
Patio Space	4 with 5 more possible	1	5
Trash Receptacles	7	3	14
Public Art	5	0	3*

*In conjunction with the Akron Art Museum’s Inside|Out Program and the League of Creative Interventionists

Table 3 Compares the availability of Pedestrian Amenities at the two locations. Data is also shown comparing Temple Square “as is” on 18 Apr 2015, and during the Better Block on 16 May 2015.

Crime, Perception and Reality

The Akron Police Department provides its reports online (where permitted by privacy concerns), and reports for Temple Square and Highland Square were compared for the months of June, July, and August for 2014. DUI's were excluded from the search, due to the transient nature of that offense. During that period, Temple Square experienced only 9 incidents, only one of which was violent (Criminal Menacing). Most of the rest involved burglary or breaking and entering. Highland Square experienced 20 incidents, 6 of which were violent (an Aggravated Menacing, a Robbery, and 4 Assaults).

Also, this is not a block I'd feel particularly comfortable at at night. The lighting is poor, or at least not inviting.

The nonviolent acts are primarily crimes of opportunity based on the availability of targets. Since the Highland Square area is generally about twice as large as Temple Square, the ratio of 8 to 14 is not remarkable aside from its near-direct proportionality. Similarly, the intrapersonal nature of the violent incidents depends on the coincident presence of perpetrator and victim. Measurements of the activity levels of Highland Square, similar to those in Table 5, indicate that Highland Square is around five to six times more active than Temple Square on a normal weekend. Again, this makes the incidence of violent crime in the two areas remarkable in its proportionality. Simply put, Highland Square is about twice as big and so experiences about twice as much property crime. It is also about six times as active and experiences about six times as much violent crime.

The common conception of Temple Square as a high-crime area (see Table 1) may then be ascribed to either lingering historical factors, or to subconscious perceptions from being in the area. That is, the open spaces and lack of other people make humans feel exposed and vulnerable, which predisposes them to worry about their safety. It should be noted that no survey responses after the Better Block mentioned safety in a negative light. Only one mentioned it at all.

I felt safe for once in 28 yrs. Never walked in that area before Better Block. Thank You!

Economics

While not a perfect measure of wealth the value of properties at the sites is a good proxy for the economic potential there. Using data from the County of Summit Fiscal Office, the Highland Square area had a value of roughly \$3.6 million, while the Temple Square properties came to roughly \$1.2 million. However, the Highland Square properties cover a little more than twice the area of the Temple Square properties. Adjusting for this indicates that similar properties near Highland Square are valued at about 150% the value of their counterparts at Temple Square. Additionally, as may be noted in Figure 1, Highland Square is in closer proximity to a low-density high-wealth area.

The Better Block Weekend

The Better Block brought many changes to Temple Square for that weekend. North Main Street was temporarily re-stripped. The restriping not only reduced to one lane in either direction with parallel parking on both sides, but the parking spaces protected bike lanes which ran the length of the block. The awkward turn lane which takes motorists from Eastbound Cuyahoga Falls onto Southbound North Main was removed and replaced with a plaza that included a Bocce Ball court, seating, many of the potted plants, and a shaved ice

Figure 3:

Temple Square Before
the Better Block

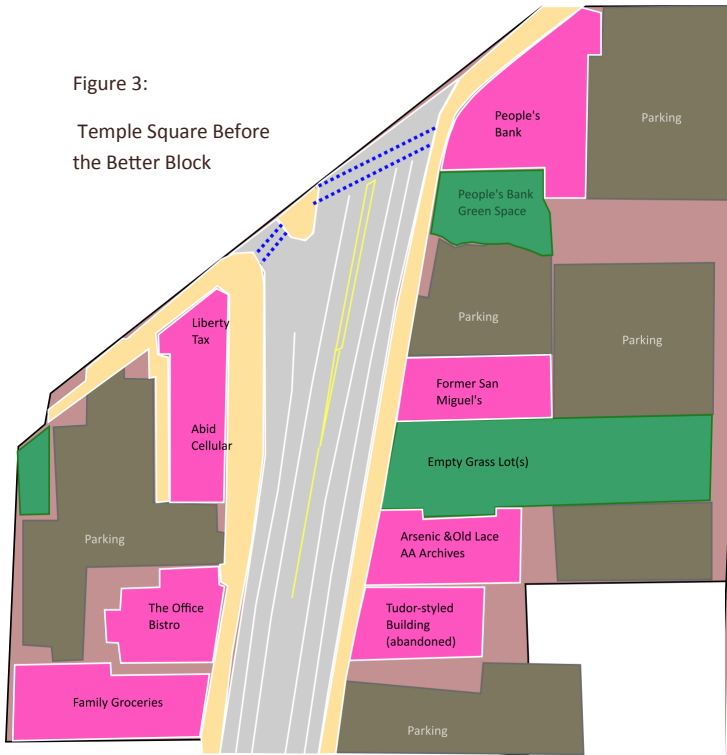
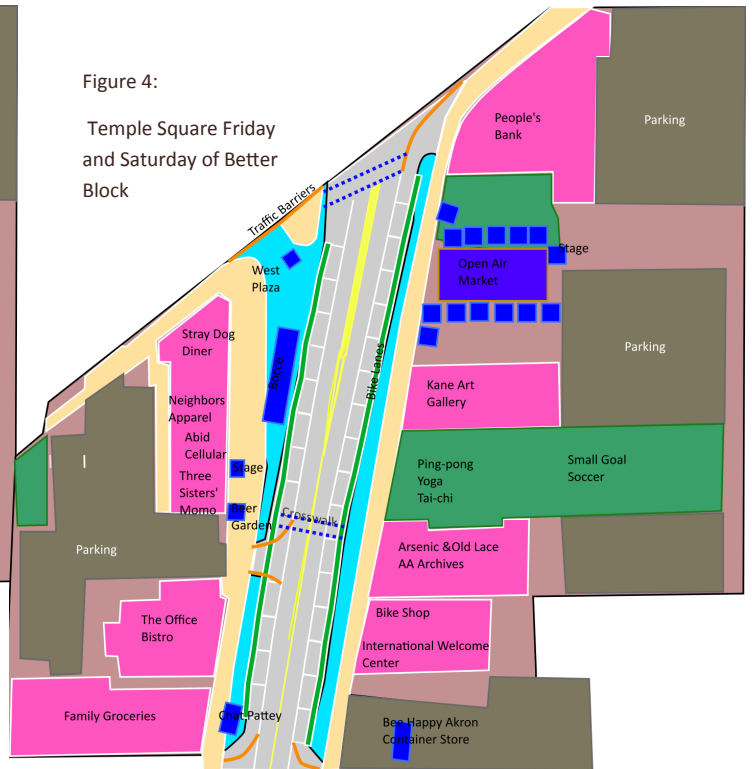


Figure 4:

Temple Square Friday
and Saturday of Better
Block



Figures 3 & 4 illustrate some of the larger features added for the Better Block Weekend. Not all changes are shown for the sake of clarity. Trees, planters, and numerous tables and seats were left out of Figure 4. Figure 5 presents a bird's eye view of the changes, taken on Friday, before the Better Block started. On the Sunday of May 17th, Akron also engaged in its first Open Streets Initiative. This event closed North Main St. from the site of the Better Block, through a good portion of Downtown. Motorized vehicles were not permitted along this route. With the street closed, many Better Block activities moved into the street, including dances.



Figure 5: View of the physical changes. Image Courtesy of Fitzwater Photography

stand. A mid-block crosswalk was added, crossing North Main in front of the old Masonic Building.

Seven different Pop-up shops occupied six vacant storefronts and a shipping container. Vacant lots next to People's Bank were transformed into an Open-air Market which over 24 vendors utilized over the course of the weekend. Two small stages were constructed, one in the Open Air Market and another across the street. Over 30 groups or individual acts performed over the weekend including multiple ethnic dance troupes. Ruts in the other vacant lot were filled in and a small-goal soccer tournament was held with the proceeds donated to Earthquake relief in Nepal. Additionally, that lot hosted Yoga and Tai Chi classes as well as a startlingly popular ping-pong table.

Impact on Traffic

Narrowing the street had a dramatic and positive effect on traffic speed. Generally speaking Pedestrians feel more comfortable around slower traffic. Its even better if the traffic is buffered by plantings or other permanent objects. Team Better Block worked with volunteers to use a Radar gun to track the speed of cars passing through the block. Before the Better Block changes, both Northbound and Southbound traffic was measured as passing at an average speed near 30 mph, with some vehicles traveling over 40 mph. During the Better Block, average speeds were solidly below 20 mph, with only a few vehicles exceeding 20 mph. Roughly speaking, the Better Block changes halved the speed of traffic through the block. Precise numbers are in Table 4.

Table 4: Automobile Speed				
Time & Direction		Minimum	Average	Maximum
Before BB	North-bound	15	29.6	42
	South-bound	13	28.9	40
During BB	North-bound	10	13.4	17
	South-bound	12	16	22
Decrease	North-bound	5	16.2	25
	South-bound	1	12.9	18

Economic Impact of the Weekend

As mentioned previously, the long-term impact of the Better Block, whatever it may be, has not yet had time to mature and develop. In the short term, the impact was anecdotally tremendous. The Office Bistro manager reported their best Friday in memory and very good showings on Saturday and Sunday as well. However, the latter two days involved unusual business hours for the establishment, and comparisons cannot be drawn. Some of the pop-up shops also had previous data for comparison (either from mobile business at fairs and festivals or contracted sales through other locations.) Three Sister's Momo claimed that Friday and Saturday doubled and tripled their previous sales records. Neighbors Apparel also cited Saturday as their best single best day to date, and by Sunday they were running out of inventory. Stray Dog Diner,

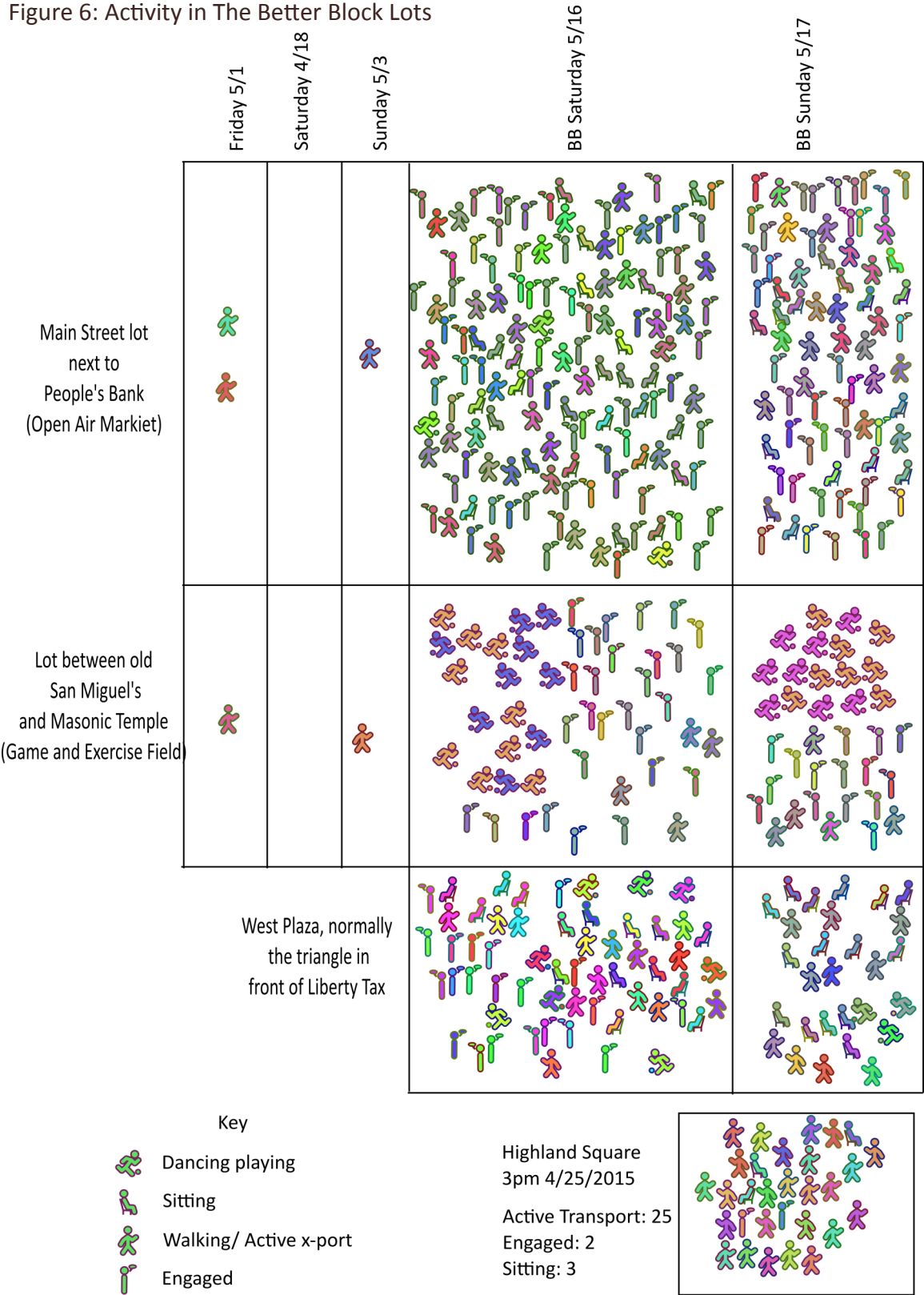
I thought it was a great event! I enjoyed the art gallery and Neighbor's Apparel shops. It would be great to see little shops like those open permanently in the neighborhood.

operated by an experienced food cart vendor (Charly Murphy) reported "very good" sales for the weekend.

Many of the other vendors did not have previous comparable performances, due either to the unusual format of the event or (as in most cases) the business being new. The vast majority of participants surveyed

indicated very positive and profitable results for the weekend. Not Yo Daddy’s Salsa sold out all three days, since that time, they have expanded with another product (Not Yo Mama’s Salsa) and have engaged in continued online sales as well as being a featured product at Urban Eats restaurant in downtown Akron. Only

Figure 6: Activity in The Better Block Lots



Each figure represents one person

one vendor in the Open Air Market reported disappointing sales. The Farmer's Market on Sunday may not have performed as well for all of its vendors, but its sponsor organization (Countryside Conservancy) did not find this surprising. In their experience, a farmer's market needs several repeated events to become established in its customer's minds. Nonetheless, they reported that they did better than they expected overall.

Active Transportation

A note should be made here on the methods used to quantify activity levels and active transportation. Active transportation is any method of transport that doesn't involve a motor, but primarily walking or bicycling (the occasional skateboard also counts.) In this case, primary interest is in the amount of activity, not the actual paths of travel. Therefore, observers used imaginary "trip lines" and a hand counter to monitor the active transportation crossing the line, with each person crossing counting as one. These observations were done for ten minute periods, as close to 3 pm as possible, both before and during the days of the Better Block. Only weekend days were used for reasonable comparison.

Measurement Locations were selected primarily to measure the amount of motion along and around the Better Block as a whole, not activity levels within those spaces, which were measured using another method. Crosswalks were also used during the weekend of the Better Block to compare the new Mid-Block Crosswalk. As noted in Table 5, Active Transport on the block increased enormously. The Sunday numbers may not be quite as applicable since The Open Streets that day generated a great deal of additional transient and repeat traffic. Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely discounted, because many of those people also engaged with the Better Block while there. Friday numbers for the Better Block are not available, due to inclement weather skewing measurements.

This sort of measurement is one of the key components to describing how well "activated" a public space is.

Table 5: Temple Square Active Transportation					
Active Transportation	Fri	Sat	Sun	BB Sat	BB Sun
"Trip Line" or crosswalk	5/1	4/18	5/3	5/16	5/17
Temple Square Park to People's Bank Entrance	2	12	0	39	52
Across Main (A&OL to Cell Shop)	9	17	12	225	335
Past Liberty Tax Entrance	N/A Traffic already in TS-PB measure			25	56
Northern East to West Crosswalk				69	61
The Office Bistro parking lot entrance onto N. Main	2	11	0	14	35
Across Main Street just South of Family Grocery	9	0	2	72	247
Mid Block Cross Walk	N/A	N/A	N/A	35	Open Streets
Total	22	40	14	479	786
Entering/Exiting Area	23	2	125	150	390

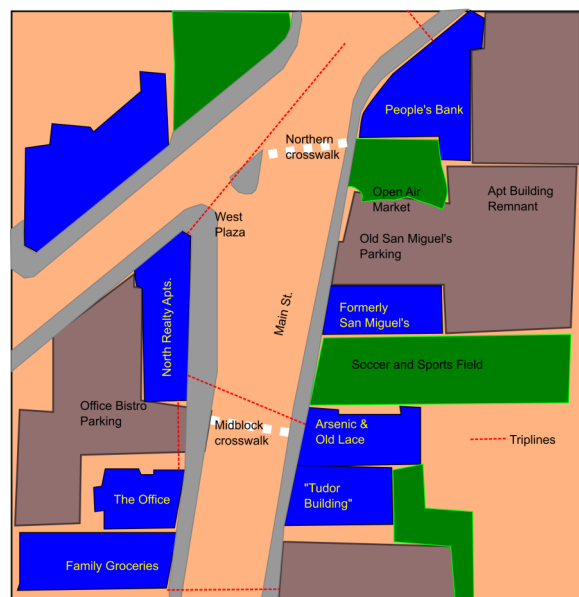


Figure 7: "Trip Line" locations

Table 6: "Snapshot" Counts of People in Plazas

Location	Activity	Fri 5/1	Sat 4/18	Sun 5/3	Sat 5/16	Sun 5/17
Main Street lot next to People's Bank (Open Air Market)	sitting	0	0	0	26	16
	walking	2	0	1	36	20
	dancing/ playing	0	0	0	4	0
	engaged	0	0	0	69	40
	Total in plaza	2	0	1	135	76
Main Street lot between old San Miguel's and Masonic Building (Soccer and Sports Field)	playing	0	0	0	18	16
	walking	1	0	1	4	5
	engaged (mostly spectators)	0	0	0	29	15
	Total in lot	1	0	1	51	36
West Plaza	sitting	0	0	0	14	14
	walking	0	0	0	14	10
	engaged	0	0	0	21	0
	playing	0	0	0	8	3
	Total in plaza	0	0	0	57	27

Utilization of the Plazas

Activity levels and occupation within the Plazas were also measured. In this case, observers used hand counters to rapidly count the number of people in each location. Separate counts for each type of activity were recorded in rapid succession to give as accurate a "snapshot" as possible. The counts are available in Table 6 and visually represented in Figure 6. The Open Streets initiative on May 17 had a large impact on the event. With the street closed to motor traffic, performances and much of their audiences moved into the center of the street. This drew participants away from the plazas and into an area without clear demarcations. Measurement of this crowd was not possible in any meaningful way. The crowd rearranged itself to accommodate things like changes in the sun and shade, vendors movements, variations in the density of bicycle traffic, etc.

Surveys of Reactions to the Experiment

Team Better Block used volunteers to conduct surveys of 119 people (91 were registered voters) during the Better Block. This survey contained two open-response items of interest here: "Of the demonstrations, which would you like to see more of?" and "If you could recommend one physical change for the area, what would it be?" The responses seemed somewhat muddled but the themes of the responses are still useful to note (see Table 7). Furthermore, some respondents seemed to confuse the Better Block and Open Streets Initiative events on Sunday. This confusion was confirmed anecdotally at the time, but is also understandable as the events

Thoroughly enjoyed it and thought it was one of the best events that has been put on in Akron since I've lived here.

had each used their concurrence as a point of promotion.

In addition to that survey, Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC sent out an electronic survey invitation a few weeks after the event, which collected 313 responses (95% were registered voters). In this survey, respondents were provided an itemized list of the strictly physical changes and asked which they would like to see made permanent. The responses to the physical changes are displayed in Table 8. There were also 51 “other” responses which were themed and displayed in Table 9.

Both surveys indicate a very strong desire to see bicycle lanes made permanent on the block, and even extended well beyond that to downtown Akron. This demand has been persistent, even in the face of disruption and confusion surrounding the Mayor’s Office in the City of Akron.

Table 7: Team Better Block Survey Results			
"Of the demonstrations, which would you like to see more of?"		"If you could recommend one physical change for the area, what would it be?"	
Theme	Count	Theme	Counts
Activities	56	Shops/Restaurants/Market	25
Seating	22	Bike Lanes	10
Bicycle Lanes	18	Narrow Road/Slow Traffic	9
Street Narrowing	16	Bigger	6
Plantings	9	Plantings/Trees	6
Food	9	Close Streets	4
Music/Performances	9	Entertainment	4
Plaza	9	Crosswalk/Crossing Guard	4
Art	4	Seating/Lingering/Plaza	4
Shade	4	Ethnic Diversity	3
All of it	3	Safety	3
Vendors	3	On street parking	2
Pop-up shops	2	Recycling	2
European Feel	1	Lighting	1
Yoga	1	Signage	1
Multi-cultural displays	1	N/A or None	29
Dogs	1		
None or N/A	8		

Strong support for additional seating, with plantings (preferably trees) exists in both surveys. Taking the various responses into account, a stage or other public space for programming is also in demand. Spin-off groups from the North Hill Community Leaders group are currently (July 2015) investigating the process of recreating a plaza and having some kind of “Open Stage” event regularly on the weekends.

Seeing a lower than expected demand for the narrowed streets, Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC conducted some ad hoc “show of hands” surveys at community events to confirm a theorized explanation. Had the response been phrased “slower traffic” it would have received a much higher positive response (although it cannot be known how much so.)

Social Capital

The planning and execution of the North Hill Better Block led to the development of a great deal of Social Capital. This took place in many ways and many dimensions. In the following lists, similar types of Social Capital are grouped together for the sake of comparison. There is no significance to the order in which these

I volunteered some, but I wish I would have helped more. :)

groups or relationships are presented. The information was gathered through numerous conversations, meetings, and observations.

Table 8: Smile Minded Smartworks Survey What physical changes to the block would like made permanent?			Table 9: Smile Minded Smartworks "Other" responses	
Permanent Changes	Count	%	Response Theme	Count
Additional trees	226	72.2%	Active Storefronts	10
Sidewalk seating	224	71.6%	Stray Dog	10
Bike lanes	218	69.6%	Year-round international market/farmer's market	5
Extension of bike lanes to downtown	195	62.3%	Roundabout	3
Plaza space with seating and stage	174	55.6%	Permanent art display	3
Play spaces (e.g. bocce court, ping pong, small goal soccer...)	152	48.6%	Stage	3
Mid-block cross walk	151	48.2%	Flowers/landscaping	2
Parking lanes	130	41.5%	Changes to Cuyahoga Falls Ave	2
Plaza in front of Liberty Tax (removal of turn lane)	125	39.9%	Arch over street/signage	2
Narrowing of the street to two lanes	117	37.4%	Neighbors Apparel	2
Additional bike racks	115	36.7%	Water feature	2
Awnings/tents	96	30.7%	Awnings over sidewalks	1
			Beer garden	1
			Coffee shop	1
			Keep lanes "as is"	1
			International Welcome Center	1
			Park	1
			Rooftop restaurant seating	1

Neighborhood Leadership

The North Hill Better Block was first championed in the neighborhood by John and Tina Ughrin as a method to revitalize the area in which they live. As the central point of the event's organization they developed many relationships with participants that they had often not even been aware of before the process began. Almost every organization or person in the rest of this catalogue has a connection to them now.

Among the first contacts the Ughrins discovered as the process began was the North Hill Community Leaders. This ad hoc council was formed in response to some tensions with and amongst the new communities which have recently arrived in North Hill. Coincidentally, those tensions had been mostly resolved just prior to the Ughrins' quest for a North Hill Better Block began. In danger of dissolving without a purpose, the group adopted the Better Block as a cause. When the Better Block was delayed until the spring, the group wanted to "keep up the momentum" and began to organize Market Tours of North Hill's specialty shops. The group now regularly boasts 25-40 diverse people in attendance at its monthly meetings. Since the Better Block, they have been eager to capitalize on the energy created.

In addition to new leadership, older neighborhood champions have experienced a reinvigoration. Many of these leaders expressed feelings of exhaustion or hopelessness after years of feeling as though their efforts to improve the area were fruitless. However, even those that expressed initial skepticism seem to have

I loved it all! The trees (i.e., tree-lined roads) and the seating groups made the biggest difference. What a marvelous change. We loved it.

derived new energy from the Better Block. Some of these leaders have now recently hosted Jane's Walks in North Hill and now look forward to other projects.

The Neighborhood and the City Government

The City of Akron was a great partner and contributor to the success of the Better Block, this brought several city agencies into contact with local volunteers. Coordinating with the Open Streets initiative on the Sunday of the Better Block also opened up the Neighborhood for more of the city. Even before the Better Block, a group of newly-connected residents, at the urging of the International Institute, successfully asked the City Council to declare Akron a Welcoming City.

Learning about the Nepalese and Bhutanese Community was amazing. Showcase more of their culture!

Perhaps more importantly for the neighborhood, the event seems to have re-energized the Ward 2 meetings and the Ward 2 Councilman. Post Better Block Ward meetings have been attended by a wider range of citizens and topics have culturally broadened considerably. The tone of the meetings has become palpably more positive and upbeat about the future of the neighborhood.

Community Growth

The new cultures in North hill, composed of refugees and immigrants, are generally insular and shy. However, as a result of their positive experiences at the Better Block and the reception that their cultural performances received, they have begun to engage with the rest of the community. For example, the Bhutanese Cultural Association of Akron has begun taking steps to open one of their upcoming festivals to other cultures.

The aforementioned Market Tours have also created a connection between the neighborhood and many of Akron's young professionals. Participants in the Market Tours discovered new opportunities for activism and engagement within the neighborhood. Additionally, many young professionals volunteered for the Better Block.

Business and Community Relations

As part of the process, both the local businesses and property owners needed to work with volunteers and participants in the Better Block. This fostered relationships that are still playing out. Negotiations between North Realty and a few pop-up owners are ongoing. Tensions between a faith based organization and a local business appear to have lessened. People's Bank, owner of four of the properties involved (including their branch office on the corner) are interested in helping to keep regular activity returning to the lot that served as the Open Air Market during the Better Block.

People's Bank purchased the previous North Akron Savings Bank, and is making this sort of community outreach a part of its strategy to appeal to many of the new communities in North Hill. To this end, they are working with International Institute of Akron to effect better relations and service to those communities.

It was an incredible project to work on and be a part of, from Keep Akron Beautiful's experience. ... overall we loved it! Thanks for letting us participate!

The market atmosphere is what brought me back day 2 and 3. If that feel was maintained then I would return to Temple Square on a weekly basis.

Organizations and the Community

The wholly positive nature of the Better Block provided a “no excuses” opportunity for organizations within the community. Two of the organizations, Asia Inc. and The International Institute of Akron, took the opportunity to work together on the performance and market schedules, putting aside longstanding nebulous tensions in the process. The International Institute is also serving as the fiscal agent for a grant to increase signage in the Neighborhood, identifying North Hill as welcoming with its slogan: “Many Cultures, One Community”.

The Library has also used this opportunity to deepen its community outreach, and the possibility of bike lanes running from Temple Square to Downtown Akron has prompted the local branch to investigate becoming a Bike Rental station. Trinity United Church of Christ made two important connections. They acquired a new grant-writer and a neighborhood advisor for constructing an accessible community garden, both through Better Block connections.

The energy and activity in North Hill leading up to the Better Block also attracted the attention of the Akron Art Museum, which then selected the neighborhood for the first round of their Inside|Out program. This program brought reproductions of 10 of the museum’s pieces out into the neighborhood, including one at the aforementioned Trinity UCC. Tours were organized that brought people around the neighborhood to see the works. The museum also threw a celebratory “Block Party” that featured North Hill dancers and a docent-led tour of the actual pieces in the museum.

Random Connections in Public Spaces

One outcome of the size of this particular Better Block was that many people (young professionals, community organizers, artists, etc.) reported seeing and making the spontaneous re-acquaintance of many people who had come to the block. Additionally, many reported meeting new potential clients, patrons, and partners. This sort of random encounter leading to future endeavors has been noted by Charles Landry to be fundamental mechanism of Creative Cities (*The Creative City Index*, Landry & Hyams 2012). Given the short-term nature of the event, hearing reports and anecdotes of this sort of occurrence was a pleasant surprise.

Neighborhood Identity

Until recently, North Hill was broadly known as Akron’s “old Italian neighborhood.” North Hill has a rich history of diversity with African-American, Central American, Croatian, German, Irish, Italian, Middle Eastern, Serbian, South American, and many other communities migrating and immigrating to the neighborhood. In order to establish a history of North Hill’s identity in the surrounding area, a survey and review of news articles, blogs, Tweets, and Facebook postings was conducted to examine the topic and tone of each entry.

People from all walks of life
gathered together in harmony!

The review indicated that, prior to the fall of 2014, coverage of North Hill was relatively limited. Most sources tended to either look back on the “glory days” of North Hill or speak of the present in terms of concerns about crime and concerns about the most recent wave of immigrants (largely from Southeast Asia). News coverage of recent immigrants was often tepid or even negative. One article in 2008 outlined overcrowded

living conditions and the perceived inability of former refugees to advocate for themselves in rat and roach infested apartments. Some sources noted festivals and other neighborhood activities, but a clear or positive sense of a future story or identity for the neighborhood was not prominent. Other news articles of North Hill covered crimes (including those perpetrated *against* recent immigrants).

The North Hill Community Leaders in their work to resolve tensions and barriers that arose with the wave of new immigrants from Southeast Asia were the first to publicly talk about re-branding North Hill with the slogan “Many Cultures, One Community.” They worked with Urban Vision and the North Hill Branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library to produce a sign bearing those words that hangs in the children’s section of the library.

As planning for the Better Block continued, a new emphasis on this aspect of the neighborhood began to emerge. This overall sentiment snowballed through the fall and winter of 2014 and spring of 2015. The North Hill Community Leaders hosted North Hill Market Tours sharing the international markets and organizations in the neighborhood and building momentum toward the Better Block. The first mention online of North Hill as an international district appears in November of 2014 under the hashtag “#ImagineAkron” where a North Hill resident tweets “#ImagineAkron where North Hill is a thriving, culturally enticing, and welcoming International District.” The tag line created by the North Hill Community Leaders of “Many Cultures, One Community” became the tag line for the Better Block as well and appeared on the posters as well as in social media. It was part of the design for a t-shirt sold at Neighbors Apparel (one of the pop-up shops at Better Block) and sponsored by a number of businesses.

In the spring of 2014, a number of news articles covered faith-based work done to assist those in need in North Hill. This was a positive shift, but one that still viewed North Hill as a downtrodden neighborhood in need of rescue. However, as the Better Block was announced in late summer and early fall of 2014, the news coverage began to shift. This shift away from a perception of North Hill as depressed and struggling with crime in the present or longing for the past to excitement about the future of North Hill as an emerging

This was a tremendous experience. I live in North Hill and I believe this will get people to understand each other better. We have such a large group of new immigrants and we need to get to know each other.

I saw the potential of North Hill that weekend. Please make at least some of these changes permanent!

International District is also evident in news coverage. News stories covering the Better Block, the North Hill Market Tours, urban farming initiatives, etc. were published. Most importantly, an article depicting recent immigrants as shop owners and contributors to the community was published as a sharp contrast to

the coverage of the new communities in past news publications.

In the weeks leading up to the Better Block and the weeks after the Better Block, social media, news outlets, and public meetings demonstrated a distinct shift in how those who live, work, and play in North Hill view the neighborhood. Many comments on surveys taken at the Better Block and afterwards reflected participants deriving value from different groups meeting each other. The event even impressed the Bhutanese Community Association of Akron enough that they are trying to open a previously tight-knit August celebration to the entire community. Additionally, more representatives from the new communities

are appearing at Ward 2 meetings. This is a positive sign indicating an increased sense of belonging and ownership of the neighborhood on their part.

Conclusions

Legacy cities have undergone an identity crisis in the last several decades. Many are lost in the past and have difficulty seeing a future. Thanks to the Better Block, this has changed for a part of Akron. In the neighborhood of North Hill, residents, businesses, and organizations have started to discuss what the neighborhood will be. This future story in North Hill has two components.

I don't think it would take too much work to make the block look like that all the time, and I would love to be able to spend more weekends on North Hill.

First, the popular sentiment amongst residents has changed from “getting things back to what they once were” to doing new things and taking new directions. This includes, but is not limited to, changing the physical nature of the neighborhood with changes to transportation infrastructure, social



activities and programming, and architecture. Even though there may not be broad agreement on every proposed change, the fact that residents are willing to consider (sometimes massive) changes to their ways of thinking is an impressive achievement in itself. Akron’s recent political turmoil provides some concerns that it will prevent the Neighborhood from making their favorite parts of the Better Block experiment permanent. Hopefully though, the improvements in social capital created by the Better Block process will increase the likelihood that North Hill will be successful in making some changes permanent.

Secondly, recent immigrants feel and ARE more welcome as they are no longer viewed as a drain on community resources, but widely seen as an asset for future growth and development of a new prosperous era for North Hill, and possibly Akron as a whole. Particularly notable is the manner in which this was accomplished. Rather than a massive information campaign, with easily-forgotten statistics, the Better Block brought people of different cultures out together in the same space for a shared experience. For the vast majority of the participants, the experience of eating some Chatpattey or Momo’s while watching kids perform traditional dances did more to change their minds than a report with data about immigrant contributions could.



Finally got a chance to meet the lovely people of Nepal.... Very cool.

Images this page courtesy of Fitzwater Photography