

PLACEMAKING PROJECT CREATES DESTINATION

– Emily Brookover, Director of Community Development for Downtown Wichita

While "placemaking" has become quite the buzzword in recent years, the practice of creating inviting, beneficial and inclusive public spaces is as important as ever. Through placemaking, a community can envision and develop spaces that are a reflection of who they are while enhancing quality of life, increasing safety, and providing opportunities for attachment and kinship.

Placemaking isn't as simple as painting a mural or building a few benches. The entire space must be examined, including the experiences of the potential users and the neighborhood in which the space resides. In order for a space to be successful, the residents and visitors who use it must be considered and echoed in the physical components of the space as well as the activation and programming. Decisions around lighting, sound, safety elements and accessibility, must all be intentional. Incorporating public art is another significant and meaningful way to reflect the community and its history.







In recent years, Downtown Wichita has placed special focus on placemaking and community collaboration. One project we are very proud of is Gallery Alley. Through a grant from the Knight Foundation Fund at the Wichita Community Foundation and in partnership with the City of Wichita, Bokeh Development and Stoppel Investmenets, Inc., a temporary pilot project was launched in 2017 with the goal of creating a more walkable, safe area near a specific alleyway that runs between two residential buildings off of Douglas Avenue – downtown's busiest thoroughfare. Previously, the alley was hazardous for both pedestrians and drivers. Individuals walking through the space found themselves increasingly uncomfortable in such a dark and hidden environment. Vehicles driving through the alley were blinded by the adjacent buildings posing a concern for the drivers themselves and the pedestrians walking past the alley on the sidewalk.



Gallery Alley before activation

The 2017 pilot project closed the alley to vehicular traffic, added overhead lighting, public art and seating options. The pilot proved to be an instant success as the residents and surrounding businesses quickly began regularly using the space to gather, experience art, have a coffee and meet with friends.

Following these temporary improvements, the City of Wichita permanently closed the alley to vehicular traffic in 2019 in an effort to improve pedestrian safety and encourage walkability. With the opportunity to recreate Gallery Alley, Downtown Wichita received additional grant funding from the Knight Foundation Fund at the Wichita Community Foundation to reestablish the space as a permanent destination.

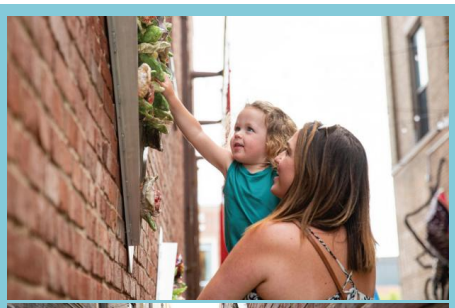






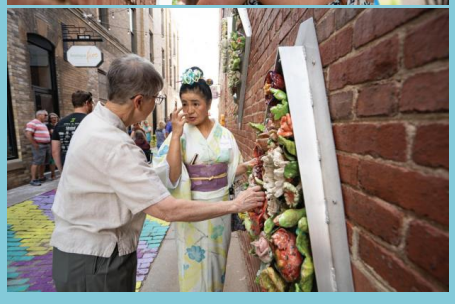
Following a call for entry, five Kansas artists were commissioned to create multisensory sculptures with a conscious effort to serve all visitors, including specific consideration for individuals with low to no vision, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Artists were asked to create work with visual and tactile elements that would explore movement, light, pattern and sound in order to allow visitors of all ages to experience the gallery in different, but equally powerful ways. Envision, Inc. acted as our project partner and expert consultant. The alley also flaunts a colorful ground mural, moveable bistro seating, and overhead festoon lighting; truly making the alley an intersensory experience.


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As an active, inclusive public space, Gallery Alley served as the catalyst for renovations to the adjacent historic buildings. The ground floor of the west-bordering building was transformed into three retail storefronts perfectly designed for new entrepreneurial ventures. The east-bordering building evolved into an updated commercial space that is now home to a local marketing firm.



Courtesy of SWA/Balsley





Naftzger Park, now a vibrant urban park located directly across the street from Gallery Alley, provides greenspace, the Evergy Pavilion, a large digital screen, seating areas and a dog run. With bordering retail, dining and office spaces, the connectivity of the park and Gallery Alley has created a lively, active area in the heart of downtown that is increasingly safe and walkable.

Gallery Alley is just one example of the work Downtown Wichita is incredibly passionate about and is very much a representation of the organization's continued mission of reigniting interest in our urban core, cultivating opportunities for local artists, emphasizing collaboration and creating opportunities for all members of our community to enjoy and feel welcome in our historic downtown.

Emily Brookover, Director of Community Development for Downtown Wichita

View more information on Downtown Wichita's placemaking initiatives

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