

CASE STUDY

CULTURAL PROGRAMMING



Creative place making, and cultural programming are becoming increasingly popular economic development strategies. Neighborhoods and local cultural organizations are banding together to transform their cultural attributes into celebrations that attract people into the area. Cultural programming has been shown to help revitalize communities by increasing economic investment and strengthening social ties among residents. Creative place making also brings people into an area, helping reduce crime and improve the perception of safety in a neighborhood. Cultural programming can take many forms, including: festivals, monthly arts and music events, open studio sessions, celebrations of cultural and ethnic experiences unique to an area.

BENEFITS

ENVIRONMENTAL

Communities carrying out cultural programs may be more likely to embrace historic structures in the community. This can catalyze preservation/ rehabilitation of the structures, diverting building materials from landfills and reducing the need for new building materials.

EQUITY

- Many cultural events are free, and no one is excluded due to prohibitive costs.
- These events can provide individuals with the opportunity to experience a culture other than their own, helping facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

ECONOMIC

- Cultural programming introduces people to new neighborhoods and districts.
- New programs and events can spur the creating of jobs and increased spending in an area. After the events, attendees may be more likely to return to a neighborhood and patronize the businesses.
- In the long term, these events can help attract new residents and businesses to the area.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

INSTITUTIONAL

Cultural programming requires a dedicated group of individuals to coordinate events, which can be challenging if there is a lack of cultural organizations in a community. There is also the chance that communities have cultural groups that have experience long-term disagreements and therefore may not be able or willing to work together. There may also be a lack of motivation to organize these events, because the economic gains aren't always immediately quantified.

FINANCIAL

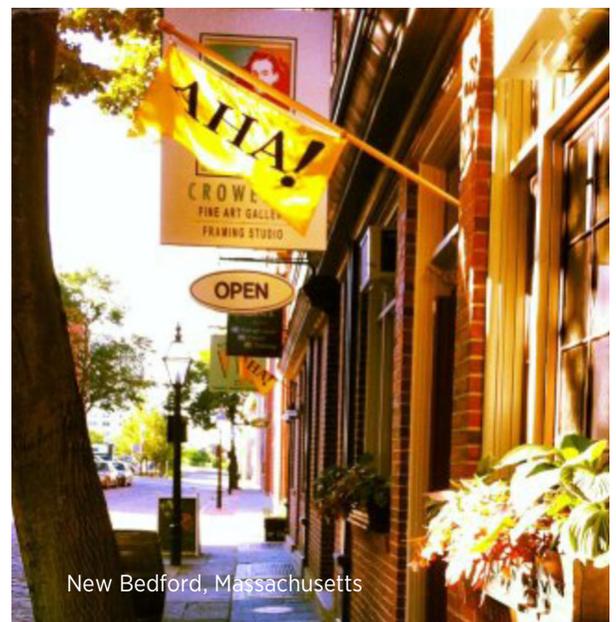
Cultural programming and events requires staff and money for supplies, advertising, etc. to operate.

In recent years, there has been a decrease in funding for the arts, leaving many organizations to rely on grants. If cultural programming is carried out with financial support from municipal sources, the organization must contend with changes in leadership and funding priorities when new individuals take office.

CASE STUDY: AHA! NIGHT — NEW BEDFORD, MA

AHA! (Arts*History*Architecture) Night began in New Bedford in 1999 with a mission to establish a cooperative venture to help reinvigorate New Bedford's cultural scene.

AHA! Night is a monthly cultural event on the second Thursday of every month in downtown New Bedford. Over 61 museums, galleries, stores and restaurants open their doors to upwards of 3,000 visitors — many hosting free events that highlight local performers and artists. To ensure that a variety of New Bedford's cultural organizations and experiences are highlighted, organizers established changing themes, including included Kids Rule, Made in NB, and Festa, Fiesta, Fete: Celebrate NB Cultures.



New Bedford, Massachusetts

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Partners for AHA! Night include the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts and community partners. Community partners are the 61 businesses and organizations that participate in the monthly event, including museums, art galleries, stores, restaurants and community organizations.

FINANCING

Financing is achieved with money from the City of New Bedford, the Massachusetts Cultural Council's John and Abigail Adams Art Program, local business and community sponsorship, individual donors and partner revenue dues. In 2009, \$289,093 was raised to implement AHA! Events. This includes monetary funds and in-kind donations.

IMPLEMENTATION

AHA! Began in 1999 with 14 partners, and by 2009 had expanded to the 61 partners involved today. At the same time that the organization was expanding, the downtown core of New Bedford was as well. Since 1999, New Bedford has seen over 500,000 square feet of commercial space in the downtown area renovated for new commercial or residential uses, equaling approximately \$55 million in value. A study carried out by the Center for Policy Analysis at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth found that for every dollar spent on AHA! implementation, 2.5 dollars were generated in the local economy on event nights alone. Surveys have also found that many people had an improved perception of downtown New Bedford after attending AHA!. The event has helped New Bedford's cultural scene thrive, boosted the local economy and helped residents strengthen their ties to the local culture of the community.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Must create a plan to be financially sustainable, ensuring a diversity of funding. By securing a variety of funders, an organization can withstand the ups and downs of funding cycles.
- Partner up businesses for greater programmatic success. AHA! partners up businesses either by sectors or geographic proximity for event nights. The pairing allows for a sharing of knowledge on what types of programming tactics have or haven't worked in the past. It also helps integrate new businesses into the activities smoothly.
- Understanding their audience catalyzed greater success for AHA! night. What started out as a family friendly event from 5:00pm to 9:00pm evolved to cater to both families and adults with the creation of AHA! After 9. The expanded hours help bars and dining establishments attract people to downtown for the festivities and encourage them to stay after 9:00pm for more entertainment.

OTHER EXAMPLES

- First Fridays, Portland, OR; Pittsfield, MA; Denver, CO; etc.
- WaterFire, Providence, RI
- South End Art Hop, Burlington, VT

REFERENCES

- Building Vibrancy: Creative Placemaking Strategies for Gateway City Growth and Renewal
<http://www.ahanebedford.org/creativeplacemaking.pdf>
- The Economic Impact of the Vibrant Market Place in Downtown New Bedford: 4 Project in the Cultural Economy.
http://www.umassd.edu/media/umassdartmouth/seppce/centerforpolicyanalysis/aha_fy09.pdf
- AHA! New Bedford <http://www.ahanebedford.org/>