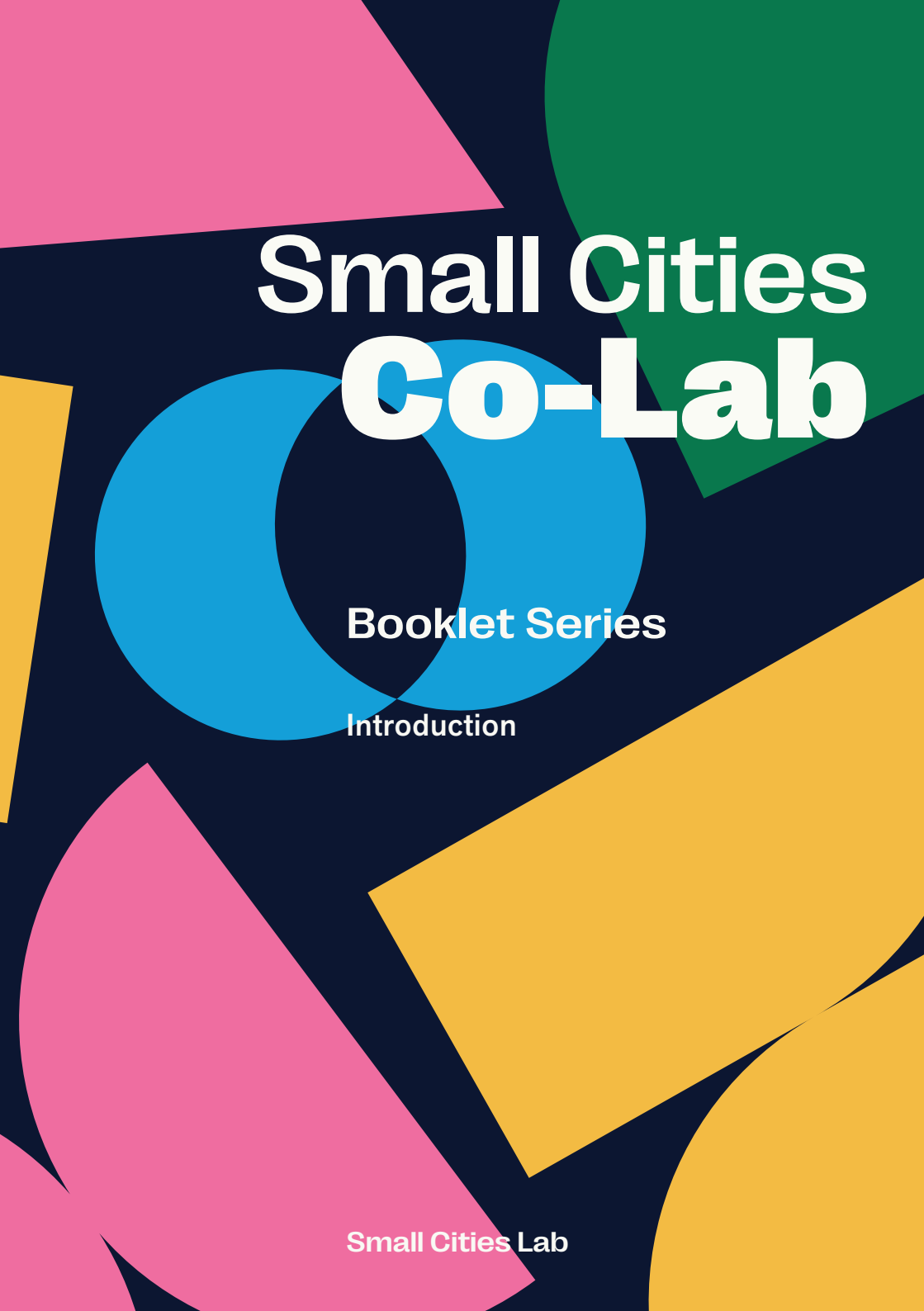




Small Cities **Co-Lab**

Booklet Series

Introduction

Small Cities Lab



Small Cities **Co-Lab**

Booklet Series

Introduction

An introduction to *Co-Lab* workshops and activities. Linking stories, assets, and tools for small cities.



**College of Arts
& Sciences**
LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

Small Cities Lab

Introduction

What is a Small City Anyway?

The core mission of the Small Cities Lab is to help close the knowledge and resource gaps faced by smaller places across the country. Since embarking on this work, we are often asked: “What is a small city, anyway?” While it’s tempting to start with a population range (100,000? 250,000?), we know that those numbers fail to capture the huge variety of smaller places where the majority of Americans live. These classifications also fail to reflect how these places actually operate. When that happens, the similarities and differences among small cities, their common challenges, pressures, and possibilities, get overlooked. That lack of recognition often translates into less support, less visibility, and fewer tools to tackle big issues.

Book Structure

This Small Cities Co-Lab booklet series distills key insights from the convening across four themes central to how small cities are organized and understand themselves. Each booklet features three contributors whose work explores these open questions, alongside additional collaborator responses that push toward collective research and action.

These booklets are designed not as final reports but as working documents. They will be living resources that will evolve as our partnerships and projects grow. They reflect a core belief of the Small Cities Lab: that small cities deserve research methods, policy tools, and collaborative infrastructures equal to the scale of the challenges they face and the opportunities they hold.

We invite you – whether you work in a city hall, a community organization, a university, a design studio, or just simply care about your neighborhood – to read, respond, question, and contribute. This is the beginning of something we are building together: a network that recognizes small cities not as afterthoughts, but as central to the future of urban research, innovation, and justice in the United States.



Share findings from the Co-Lab through four reoccurring themes:



Housing

What exists and what is missing in small city housing, and how to build more of the diverse housing types communities value.



Waterfronts

How rivers and coastlines have shaped small cities' origins, growth, and identity, and how these relationships can be restored and reimagined.



Social and Cultural Resources

The recurring divide between residents “from here” and those who “came here,” and the role civic and cultural resources can play in bridging it.



“Meds & Eds” Cities

Small cities' growing dependence on universities and hospitals as economic anchors, and the resulting housing pressures, town-gown divides, and questions of genuine partnership.



Feature collaborators whose perspectives broaden and deepen the network – scholars, designers, policymakers, organizers, and students committed to advancing small-city research and practice.



Respond to an open Co-Lab question. Collaborators reflected on one of the questions featured at the end of each booklet, helping build the Small Cities Knowledge Network and advance project-based collaborations among small city actors.



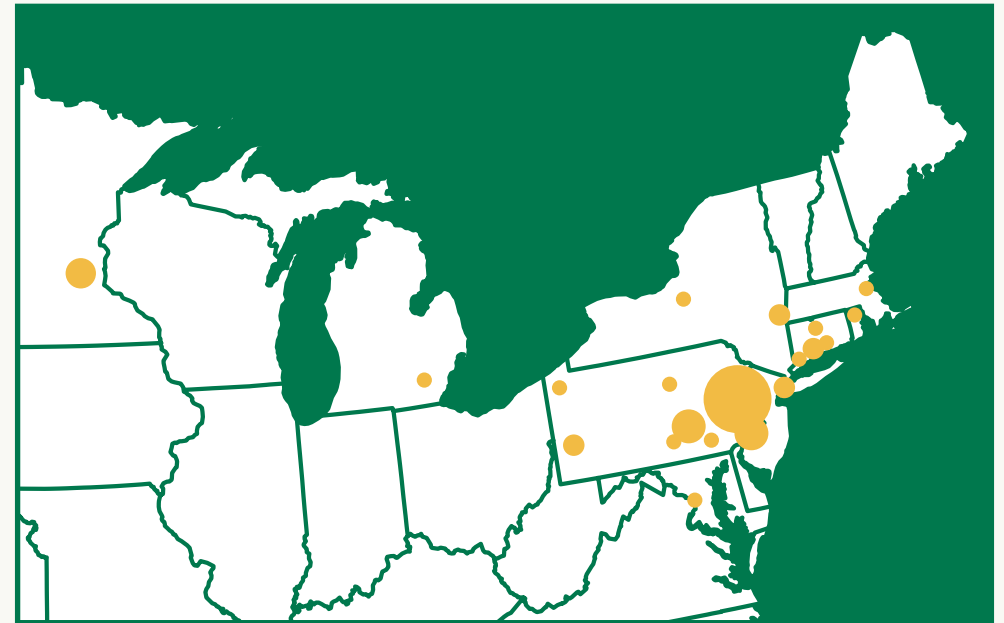
*Every place has their story to tell,
some places are good at telling
them, others have their stories
told for them.*

–Co-Lab Participant

Co-Lab Recap

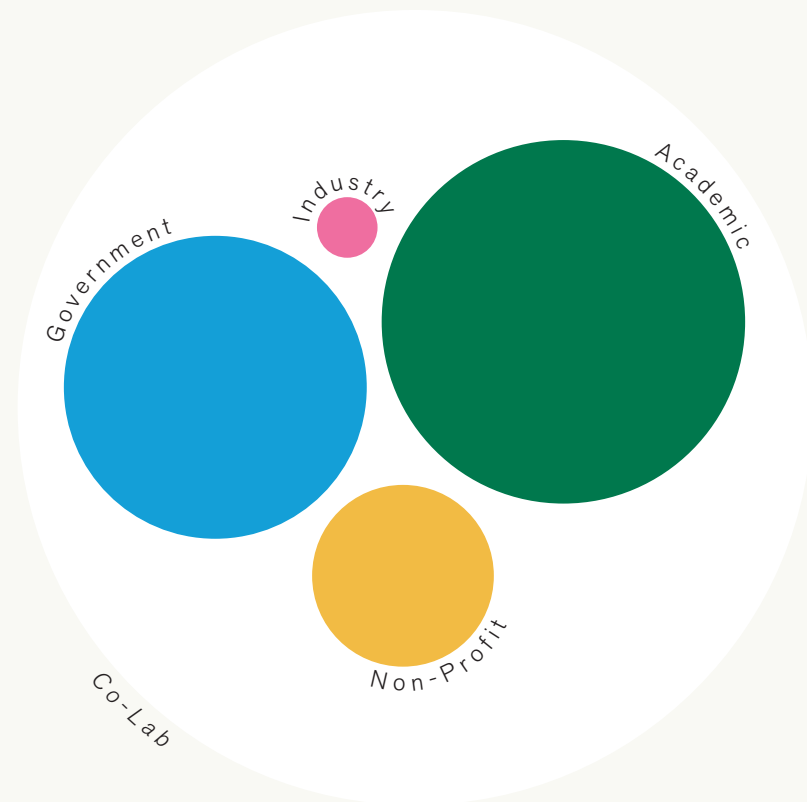
A purpose of the Co-Lab is to build networks of colleagues working across sectors, regions, and disciplines who live in or care deeply about small cities. The inaugural convening marked the beginning of this new network, expanding our collective understanding and jump-starting collaborative projects. Through group exercises and facilitated discussions, participants emphasized the need for more consistent, coordinated collaboration across small cities. There are countless people working and innovating in their respective cities and with increased coordination, people could share knowledge, supporting places with similar conditions to their own, identify specific opportunities to partner, and ultimately, take action together.

Participant Facts



These 60 participants represented 23 communities across Pennsylvania and the broader Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and Northeast.

Participant Facts



The Co-Lab gathered 60 participants from local governments, universities, nonprofits, and community organizations.



Non-Profit

Bloomsburg Theater Ensemble, Bloomsburg PA
The Center for Rural Pennsylvania
Community Action Lehigh Valley
Enterprise Community Partners
Groundwork Bridgeport
Lehigh Conference of Churches
Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living
New Bethany
Pew Charitable Trust, Housing Policy Initiative
RiverWise
Touchstone Theater, Bethlehem PA

Government

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Business PA
Office of the Governor
Department of Community and Economic Development

Government

Connecticut Municipal Development Agency
City of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
City of Allentown, Pennsylvania
City of Lancaster, Pennsylvania
City of Meadville, Pennsylvania



Industry

Artefact, Inc.
Mark-n-Sparks
Metris Arts Consulting
Omnes Studio



Academic

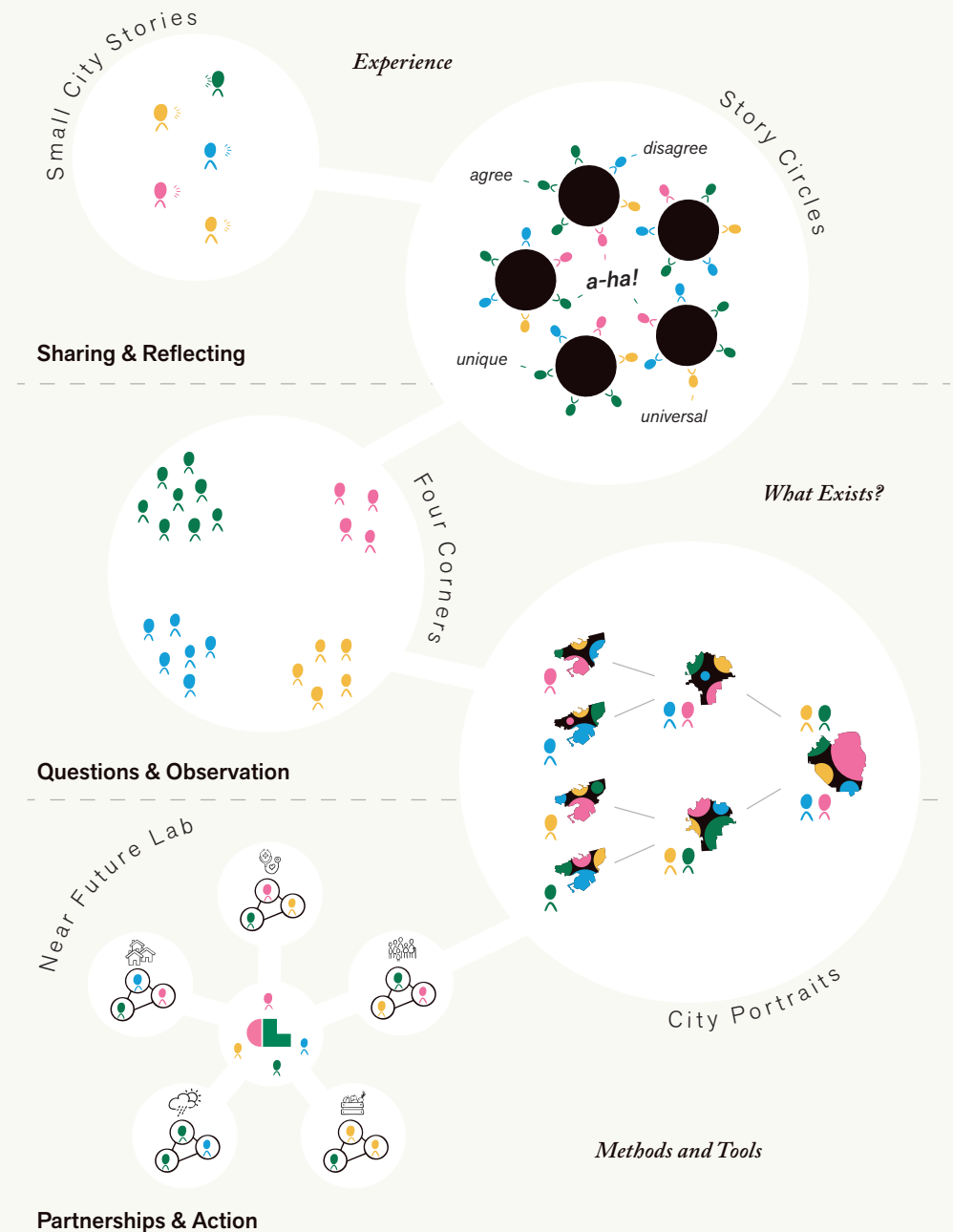
Bard College
Brown University
Lehigh University
Lehigh University Art Galleries (LUAG)
Lehigh University, College of Education
Lehigh University, College of Health, Department of Community and Global Health
Lehigh University, South Side Initiative
Moravian University
Rhode Island School of Design
Taubman College, University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Michigan
Wellesley College
Wesleyan University
Yale University



Collaborative Sessions Overview

The Small Cities Co-Lab was structured around a series of collaborative sessions, workshops, and workshares designed to build a collective research and action agenda for small cities. These exercises doubled as data-gathering mechanisms and visioning tools, supporting knowledge-building across diverse stakeholder groups. The flexible, participatory structure invited creativity and ownership over the activities, which appeared through the variety of responses and approaches people brought to each session.

Co-Lab activities and workshops were designed to build momentum toward the development of future collaborative projects.



Small Cities Stories

At cross-sector tables, participants shared stories about the small cities where they live or work, guided by prompts that asked them to reflect on their own life in their small-city or on how current social, economic, and political changes are shaping their communities. The exercise doubled as a distillation process: after listening to one another's stories, participants individually identified common themes and noted which characteristics felt universal and which were unique. They then brought these reflections back to their tables, selecting two shared and two unique characteristics. Groups moved from personal narrative to individual analysis to collective consensus.



Co-Lab participants reflected, responded, and identified common themes and unique characteristics relevant to small cities.



Co-Lab participants draft their city portraits.

City Portraits

The Small City Portraits workshop was created for participants to identify what their cities have, what they wish they had more of, and what is, and isn't, working. Participants selected prominent attributes and characteristics about the built environment, natural environment, economy and institutions, and social and cultural resources within the places they live and work.

The exercise surfaced various types of responses. People included both tangible elements (e.g., festivals, local organizations) and intangible qualities (e.g., belonging, inclusion, identity). As patterns emerged across the different Small City Portraits, new trajectories for research, action, and potential partnerships became clearer, especially among participants who recognized similar attributes in their own communities.

City Portraits

During the next round, when participants completed portraits in pairs, they noted the key concerns they shared in their cities. Interestingly, many of these were framed as questions – even without any prompting – underscoring a desire for further inquiry and collaboration that was evident throughout the convening.

A Small City Portrait of Allentown, made by Jennifer



A Small City Portrait of Hudson, NY, made by Betty Cooper



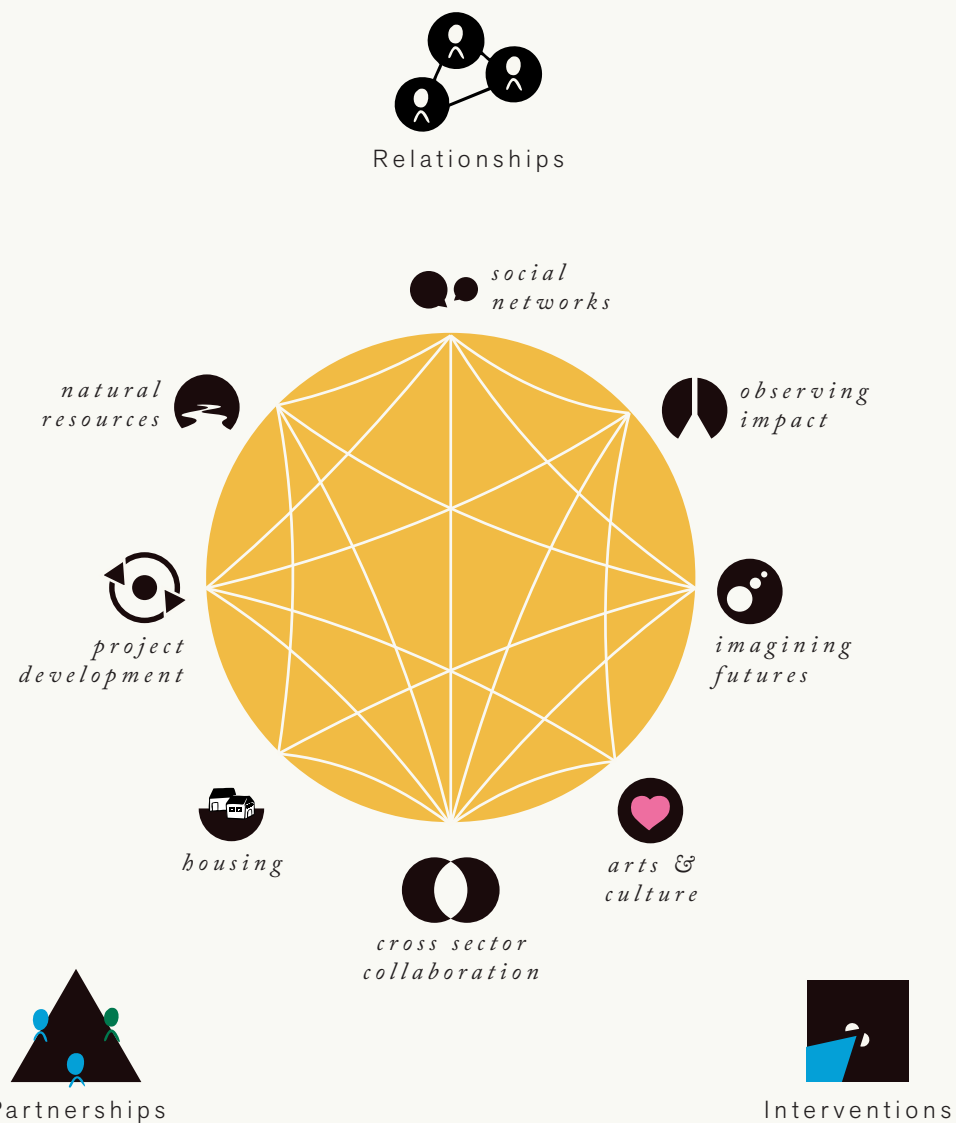
A Small City Portrait of Providence, RI, made by Kylee



A Small City Portrait of New Haven, CT, made by Christina



City Portrait boards detailing natural and built environment, social & cultural, and economy & institutions in Hudson, NY; New Haven, CT; Allentown, PA; and Providence, RI.



Near Future Lab

Insights from the convening sessions helped set the stage for the *Near Future Lab*, a space focused on developing collaborative projects. A key part of this process was the overnight distillation, where the team synthesized Day 1 discussions into five themes that guided Day 2 breakout sessions:

1. Housing
2. Social Networks
3. Arts and Culture
4. Natural Resources
5. Cross-Sector Collaboration

These themes will continue to shape the policies, programs, and partnerships that strengthen small cities and support ongoing collaborative work.



*We should focus more on our similarities.
That helps with problem-solving. If
everyone thinks they're so unique... it's easy
to say, 'Oh, we can't fix this here because our
problems are just different.'*

—Christina Smith

Four Thematic Booklets

The books in this collection build on the Co-Lab's research distillation and synthesize findings from each workshop. The resulting series includes four books, each focused on a core theme from the convening: housing, waterfronts, social and cultural resources, and medical and educational institutions that shape small cities.

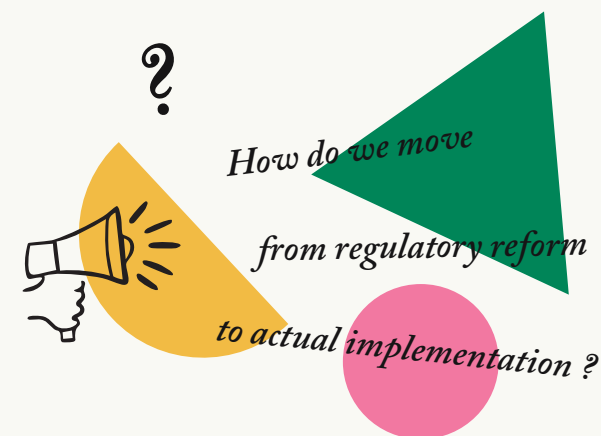
Too often, small cities are understood almost entirely through the lens of population decline, as if industry shifts or economic trends alone determine their trajectory. These four overarching categories surface the experiences, conditions, and attributes of small cities that this narrative overlooks. More importantly, they show how the physical environment, social fabric, and economic landscape interact to shape each place differently, and how these elements continue to evolve, especially as other pressures and conditions change over time.

Booklet 1:

Housing



This booklet looks at housing conditions across a range of small cities, examining what exists looks like, what is missing, and what's driving change. It explores recurring themes: regional affordability pressures, the limits of single-family zoning, aging and blighted housing stock, and the value of diverse "missing middle" housing types, including how these patterns tend to cluster based on shared regional and market conditions. It also traces the gap between policy reform and actual housing production, featuring a case study of one city's effort to rewrite its zoning code around real building types, an interview on the relational and institutional work needed to move from planning to implementation, and a set of outside contributions on faith-based housing partnerships.



Booklet 2:

Waterfronts

This booklet looks at how small cities relate to their natural environments, with a particular focus on rivers, coastlines, and waterfronts. It examines why waterfronts are so central to small-city identity and history, while also tracing the tensions that shape them today, including lingering industrial pollution, competing pressures between conservation and new development, infrastructure that has cut neighborhoods off from the water, and the growing threat of climate change. It traces common trajectories across cities, from industrial decline and reclamation to mismatches between built infrastructure and the natural landscape, and considers how small cities might learn from and collaborate with one another given their shared waterfront histories. The booklet closes by reflecting on what it would take to reconnect residents socially and culturally to these landscapes, including approaches like interim activation, and features additional voices and projects working on these questions.

Booklet 3:

Social and Cultural Resources

This booklet examines the social fabric of small cities, focusing on the long-standing divide between residents who are considered "from here" and those who "came here." It traces how this insider-outsider dynamic has been shaped historically through waves of immigration, the rise and decline of industrial economies, and racial exclusion, and how it persists today amid new patterns of immigration and in-migration, often reinforced through zoning, housing policy, and resistance to development. It also looks at the role social and cultural resources play in helping cities navigate these divides, including community organizations formed in response to economic upheaval, festivals and traditions that foster belonging while risking commercialization, and cultural institutions like libraries, universities, and museums that can serve as low-barrier entry points for civic and social life. The booklet raises questions about how these resources can reshape who gets to participate in and shape the future of their communities.

Booklet 4:

"Meds & Eds"

This booklet examines the role that "meds and eds," universities and medical institutions, play as economic anchors in small cities. It traces how these institutions grew to prominence in the mid-to-late 20th century and became primary employers and stabilizing forces in many small cities, while also considering the risks of over-reliance on them, particularly when they falter or close. It looks at how these institutions' large, tax-exempt landholdings strain municipal budgets and intensify housing pressures as enrollment and workforces continue to grow. The booklet also explores the frequently strained "town-gown" relationship between these institutions and surrounding neighborhoods, shaped by class and cultural divides, transient populations, and institutional footprints that can feel disconnected from community priorities. It follows questions raised in the convening about governance and partnership: how universities and hospitals might engage more genuinely with local decision-making and better balance their national/global missions with responsibilities to the small cities that host them.

Booklet Participants

ARCADE
 Bard College
 Brown Univeristy
 City of Allentown
 City of Bethlehem
 Cornell University
 CT Municipal Development Authority
 Hazleton Integration Project
 Kent State University
 Lehigh Conference of Churches
 Lehigh University, College of Health
 Mark-n-Sparks
 Mass Design Group
 Metris Arts Consulting
 Omnes
 RiverWise
 Syracuse University
 Touchstone Theatre
 University of Michigan
 University of Virginia
 Yale Univeristy



*Having the capacity and resources
necessary to rethink and mobilize
assets into strategy will lead to
success.*

–Co-Lab Participant

Contributors

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Thank You	Lehigh University College of Arts and Sciences	Dean Robert Flowers Natasha De Luna Lehigh University OVRP



The background is a dark navy blue. It features several large, overlapping geometric shapes: a large green semi-circle in the top left, a pink triangle in the top right, a yellow parallelogram in the middle right, a large blue triangle in the bottom left, a pink parallelogram in the middle left, and a pink semi-circle in the bottom right.

Small Cities Lab