

Small Cities Co-Lab

Booklet Series

Book 3: Social and Cultural

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Investigating how small cities can strengthen, expand, and reimagine the social and cultural resources that determine who belongs — and who gets to shape the future of their communities.



**College of Arts
& Sciences**
LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

Small Cities Lab



Students build a pavilion at the Compass MHC in Trumansburg, NY. (Reese Greenlee and Emma Silverblatt)

“Who is included?”

Are there “insiders and outsiders?”

Small cities are often praised for their close-knit communities. But close-knit for whom? Across the *Co-Lab*, participants described a social divide between those who are considered “from here” and those who “came here.” Over time, population change, economic transition, growth, and decline have produced and reproduced this divided social fabric, shaping the sense of who does and does not “belong.”

This booklet traces that divided social fabric across time, drawing on cities in Pennsylvania, with additional perspectives from the Midwest and Northeast. Their histories differ and converge, but a common thread emerged: participants placed high value on their social and cultural resources – festivals, traditions, community organizations, and civic institutions – while recognizing that their cities “could do more,” “need more,” and they “would love to see more” opportunities for connection.

Social and Cultural Themes

Are the social and cultural resources in smaller places sufficient to provide meaningful entry into social and civic life for newcomers? How are small cities accommodating the demands of old and new? How can small cities invite participation in the social life of their places, expanding access for all residents, including newcomers, to help shape the future of their communities? And can they begin to dismantle the insider-outsider structures that have, for over a century, determined who gets to belong?

Four themes surfaced consistently across Social and Cultural discussions:



Insider and Outsider

Small cities are often celebrated for their close-knit communities and social networks, but participants questioned who gets to belong. Many described a divide between those who are “from here” and those who “came here” later, shaped by decades of economic and demographic change, including recent immigration and in-migration.



Resistance, Regulation, Segregation

Participants acknowledged the ongoing tensions of demographic change and growth. Some described “Not In My Backyard” attitudes that resist neighborhood change and new residents in the community, contributing to social division. recreation and open space, or creating new housing.



Resources as Bridge/Entry

Participants valued arts, festivals, and community events as important spaces for connection. Low-barrier opportunities, including university programming, public art, and free cultural institutions, can create entry points for newcomers, while culturally specific festivals and organizations help residents maintain connection to their identities and build civic participation.



Engagement and Access

Participants raised concerns about awareness of and access to community resources. In many small cities, information about events and opportunities circulates through established networks that newcomers may not have access to, reinforcing the role of insider relationships in shaping participation and belonging.



*Once the fire of play and creative
collaboration catches, the learning
process takes off.*

–William George

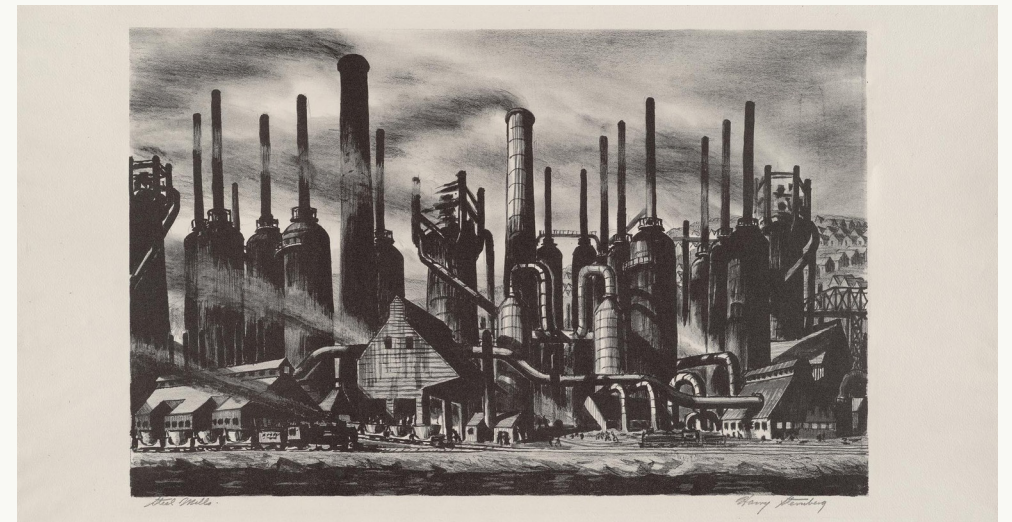
Who Gets a Say: Immigration, Exclusion, and Identity

Small cities were built by newcomers, and have spent the better part of a century deciding who counts as one. Across Co-Lab cities, a consistent pattern emerged: generations of arrivals, once settled, shape the boundaries of belonging for those who followed. The specific groups have changed across time — European immigrants, Black Americans migrating north, and today's arrivals from Latin America and larger cities — but the underlying logic of insider and outsider has proven durable. It shifts its terms while maintaining its structure, and increasingly finds expression in the built environment.

The Building of Small American Cities

Many of America's small cities in the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, and Midwest were built, in large part, by waves of European immigrants who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

for work in manufacturing, mining, and other industries. Steel plants, textile mills, brickyards, weapons factories were often the largest single employer in small cities that relied on immigrant workers for cheap labor and the explosive growth of America's industrial age.



Steel Mills. Harry Sternberg. 1937.

Newcomers from each wave of immigration were not always immediately welcome. Social hierarchies emerged based on job status — ethnic groups were often assigned specific tasks in mills and factories — as well as how long different immigrant populations had been in town.

But people of different ethnicities continued to come and were able to build their own homes for their families. These largely white ethnic groups often lived in close proximity and formed their own hyper-local neighborhoods within an urban and social landscape that was largely ordered by the city's

primary industry. Many small industrial cities were also shaped by the labor and presence of Black Americans, many of whom migrated from the South during the Great Migration seeking industrial work and an escape from Jim Crow, and by Indigenous communities who were displaced and dispossessed of their land to make settlement and extraction of resources from these places possible.

Within their neighborhoods, newcomers of all kinds built their own social and cultural infrastructure. These community institutions and their physical spaces shaped the built environment and social bonds. Ethnic churches, fraternal lodges, social halls, and parish schools gave form to community identity and linked ethnic groups together to sustain themselves in a new place.

While this social and urban landscape was fragmented at the onset, over time the boundaries between people groups eroded. As one Co-Lab participant described it, industrial employers “created a shared social consciousness” that continued to define relationships between people moving both in and out of small cities.

Nativism and “Insiders and Outsiders”

While many Co-Lab participants held

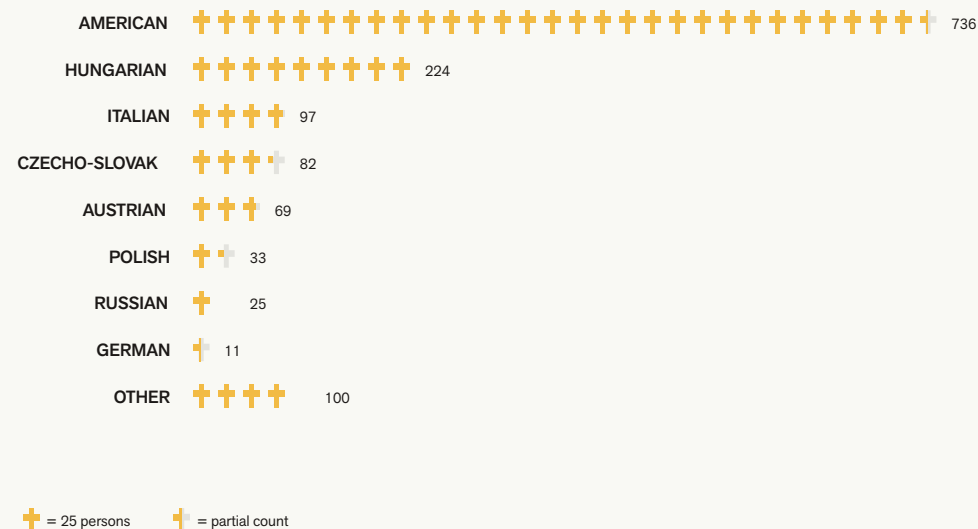
relatively positive views of the social and cultural fabric in their small cities, many described the distinctions between those who are “from here” and those who “came here.” In Stamford, one participant observed that “old timers” are “less open to change and newcomers than when they arrived,” describing a pattern in which each generation of established newcomers can become the gatekeeping population for the next. This insider-outsider divide is a recurring condition, reinforced through successive waves of demographic and economic change.

By the late 19th century, earlier immigrant communities from Western Europe had begun to claim “native” status, distinguishing themselves from newer arrivals from Eastern Europe, East Asia, and beyond. These claims erased the history of settler colonialism and Indigenous displacement, while Black Americans who migrated north for industrial work faced more durable forms of exclusion: racial covenants, segregated housing, and barriers to homeownership increasingly available to white ethnic groups. What began as informal social hierarchies were eventually codified through housing policies and land-use regulations. Many of these legal barriers continue to exist today.

South Bethlehem Congregations by National Origin

1910–1920

1,377 total members surveyed
1 symbol = 25 persons



Source: W.C. Carson, "South Bethlehem, PA 1880–1920" (U. Penn thesis, 2000).

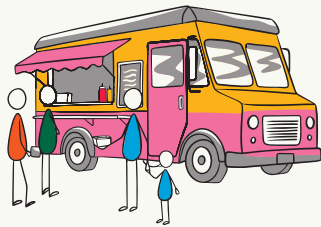
"Other" includes Spanish, Greek, Mexican, Windish, Portuguese, and 16 additional nationalities.

The slow collapse of America's manufacturing economy added a new layer. When industries eroded, many people left and younger generations rarely returned. Those who stayed weathered decades of decline and were, as one community leader in Beaver County described it, "told for generations that their best days are in the past." The act of staying through downturns and crises became its own claim to belonging.

Today, many small cities are experiencing another demographic shift. Since the pandemic, cities like Allentown, Hazleton, and Springfield have seen an influx of immigrants, mostly from Latin America, overlapping with domestic migration from larger cities. In Bethlehem, the city's "quaintness" is attracting newcomers, which is "good" but "harming local housing prices and availability." In Hudson, New York, the city was described as "segregated" between New York City transplants and longtime residents. While specific populations have changed, these underlying tensions endure.

What makes this latest iteration particularly consequential is that the divide is now enforced through the built environment itself. Zoning laws restrict new construction and density, while efforts to increase supply are

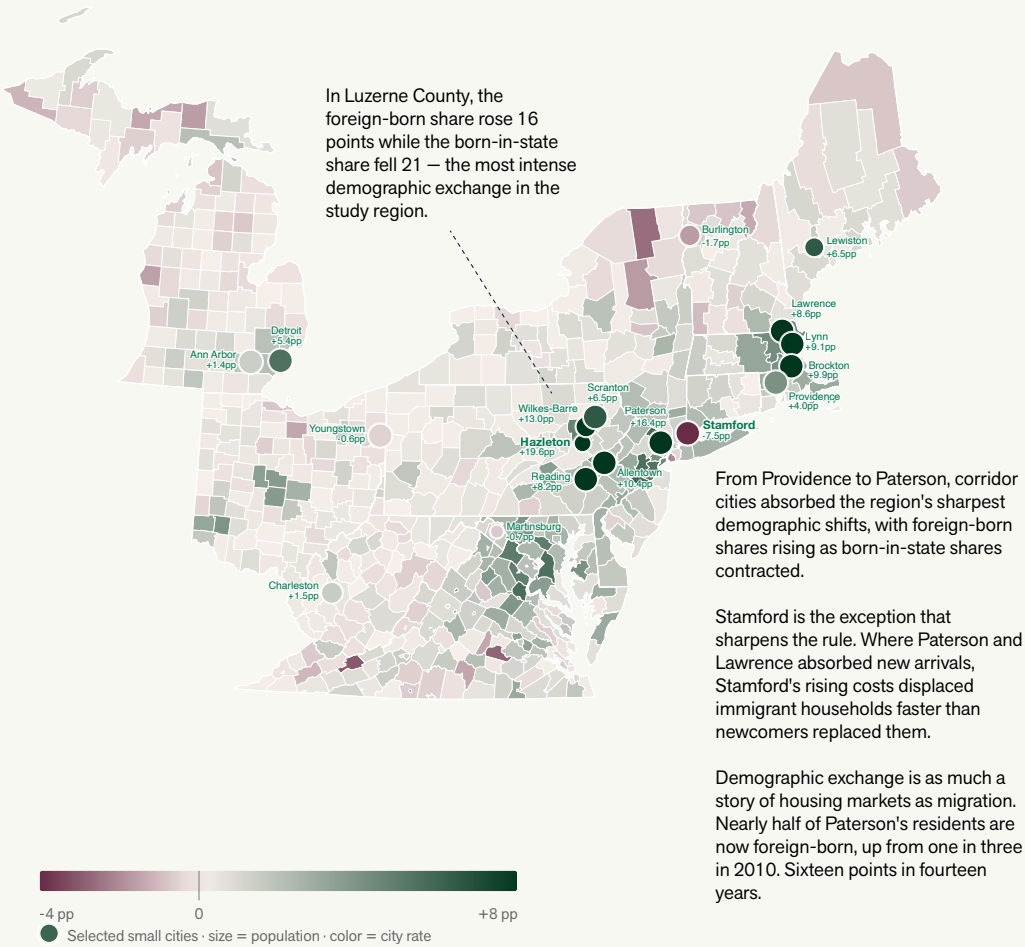
met with organized resistance framed as preserving "built character." This resistance – the familiar "Not In My Backyard" refrain – is the contemporary expression of the same insider-outsider logic that has defined these places for centuries, buttressed today through zoning regulations, historic preservation protections, and unequal access to state investment.



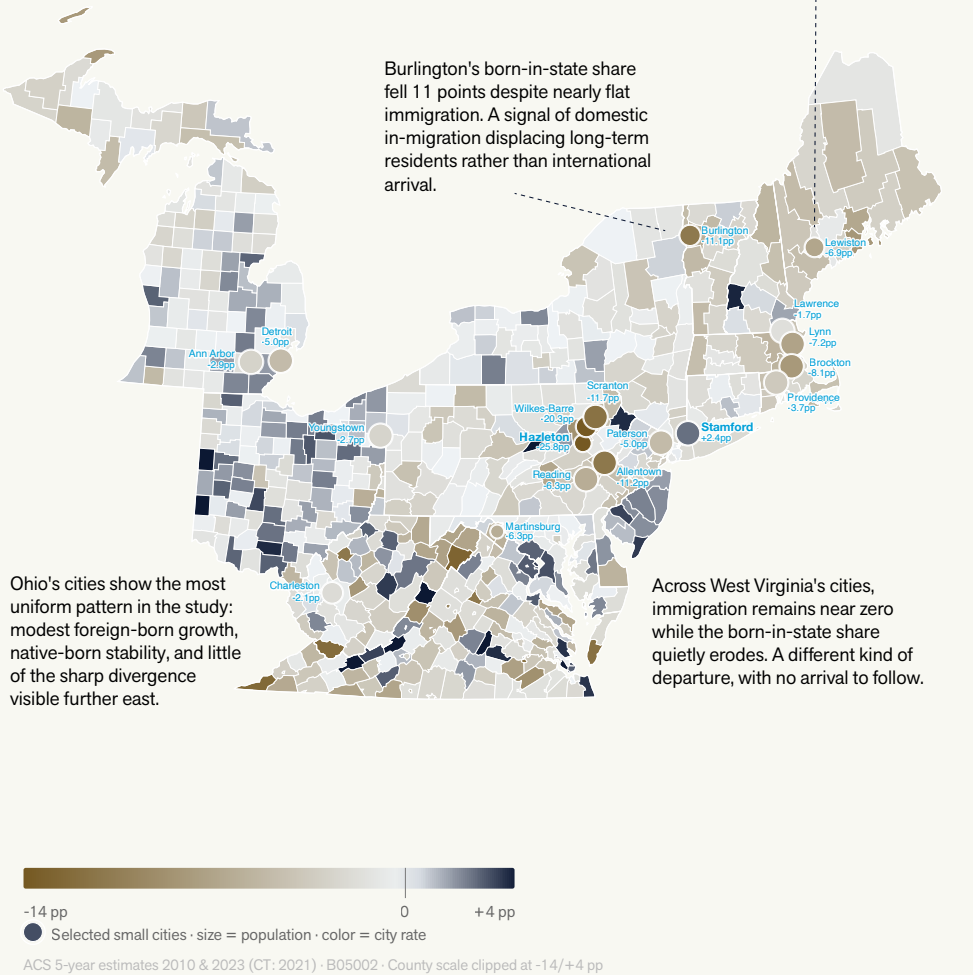
Who's Coming, Who's Staying?

Shifting population composition across 603 counties
15 Co-Lab states · ACS 5-year estimates

Foreign Born Share, Δpp 2010–2024



Born In-State Share Δpp 2010–2024



Social and Cultural Resources

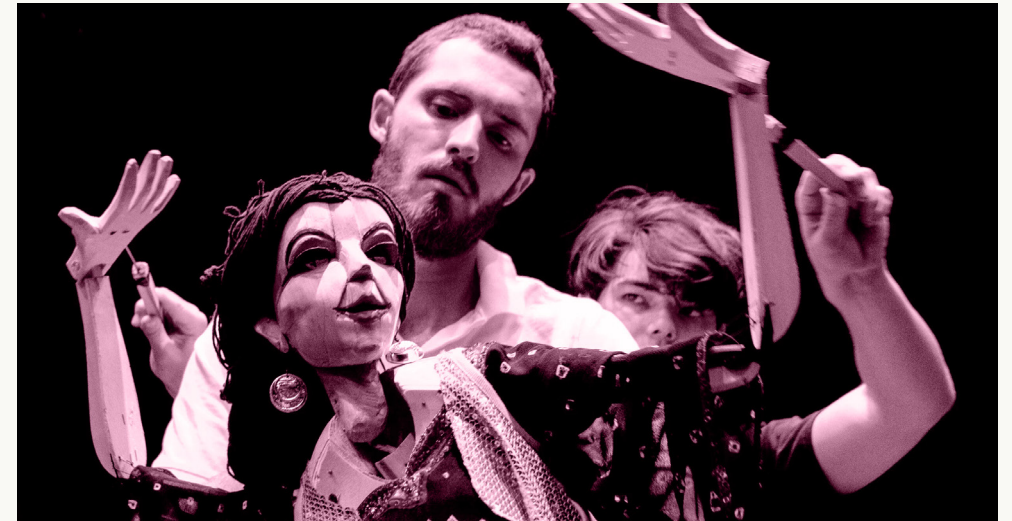
The majority of participants at the Co-Lab described various social and cultural resources in their city. Social resources include neighborhood networks, community organizations, and trusted relationships between residents and institutions. Cultural resources are described as arts and music events, traditions, festivals, and cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and community centers. These assets often become “strategies” for coping with and adapting to change, helping both longtime residents and newcomers navigate cities in transition.

Community Organizations

During earlier periods of economic upheaval, some communities had existing organizations that helped process that disruption collectively. In many cases, the “right ingredients” were already in place.

In Bethlehem, Touchstone Theatre was familiar and trusted, and the organization

was able to support and even lift the community during the closure of Bethlehem Steel in 2001. Through its production of *Steelbound*, Touchstone helped residents work through the anger, grief, and loyalty many steelworkers felt toward the plant and created one of the first opportunities for former workers to return to the site. Similarly, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, through its play *Hard Coal: Life in the Region*, helped communities



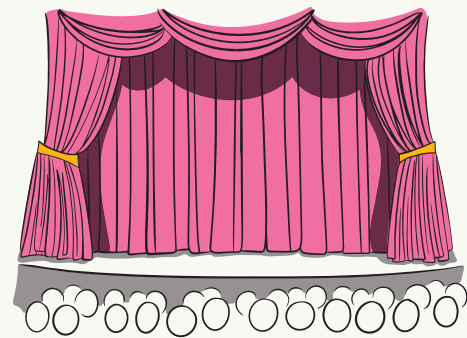
Marionette Dancer
(Mock Turtle Productions)

across Northeastern Pennsylvania process the profound social and economic impacts of the coal industry's decline. These organizations had been part of the community for decades – established in 1981 and 1978 respectively, with roots extending even earlier – and were deeply embedded in local life. As a result, they were able to help residents process the loss of an identity that was beginning to dissolve in the late 19th century.

In many places, however, comparable community organizations were not in place during early periods of economic transition.

More recently, amid significant demographic change in several small cities, a new generation of organizations has emerged to help communities navigate change and bridge divides between longer-term residents and newcomers.

Participants pointed to the Hazleton Integration Project in northeastern Pennsylvania as one example. Founded in 2011, the organization works to ease tensions where long-time residents have been resistant to the arrival of Hispanic immigrants. The organization offers ESL classes, after school programs, and support to run for public office. This helps immigrants establish themselves amid local and national resistance and shape the future of their city.



Festivals and Traditions

Across geographies, participants emphasized the importance of festivals in their social and cultural life. Many participants from the Lehigh Valley described “a fest happening once a week” or “venues offering something to do every night of the week.” Others expressed a desire to expand the

arts and cultural offerings in their communities. In both cases, a handful of participants mentioned they “need more info” and would like “more visibility” of these events. These comments from Bethlehem and New Haven underscore the effects of the insider-outsider divide on access to social and cultural resources. In communities organized around insiders and outsiders, newcomers may be less likely to know about events that circulate primarily through established social networks.

In contrast to this perspective, participants mentioned that these festivals and events create “belonging,” celebrate “diversity,” and “encourage connection.” In New Haven, one participant mentioned the city’s “cultural diversity” with “parties! belonging! acceptance!” These events are often tied to specific ethnic communities and bring people together around food and shared heritage. In Bethlehem, one participant pointed to “cultural festivals” and said, “as a community of immigrant cultures, it’s great when these are highlighted.” For many newcomers, cultural festivals and traditions offer a way to maintain a connection to their cultural identity while also inviting other residents to participate. This creates opportunities for newcomers and longer-term residents to come together, and ideally, create a shared appreciation for cultural differences.

The same participant from Bethlehem – also the creative director at Touchstone Theatre – noted that “modernization may diminish this,” referring to the cultural meaning in Bethlehem’s festivals. Artists are increasingly concerned that these events, as they become further removed from the communities and identities where these traditions exist, risk losing their significance because of whitewashing or greenwashing.

Cultural Institutions: Access and Engagement

Participants also highlighted cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and community centers as low-barrier entry into a city’s social fabric. In Ann Arbor, their library functions as “a community center and social safety net.” Libraries have often become a “third space” outside of work and home where people can gather and also access free resources. They can also become places of support and safety during times of hardship, and they often extend their care to unhoused residents looking for safe and warm spaces.

In addition, academics at the convening described how university infrastructure extends their spaces for the broader public and has increased access to arts and culture. At Wesleyan in Middletown, Connecticut, film services

are “open to the public.” At Yale in New Haven, theatrical productions are “free and accessible,” and the university’s museums are described as “world class and mostly free.” These institutions lower the threshold for participation, offering people an easy entryway. This is especially significant in small cities, where theaters and museums are often actively working to engage with local conditions and relationships and foster spaces for dialogue. In this way, universities can serve as effective gateways into new forms of civic and cultural engagement.

From here, larger questions emerged:

Can social and cultural resources become more than coping mechanisms?

Can they become the means through which newcomers and longer-term residents together reshape the future of their cities?

In doing so, can they ultimately help dismantle the physical and legal barriers that prevent full participation and deter entry?

FEATURE

Appreciating Value

Reassessing the Potential of Manufactured Housing

Reese Greenlee and Emma Silverblatt

Reframing Manufactured Housing as a Site of Architectural Inquiry

Manufactured homes (MHs) house millions of people across the United States and represent the most significant source of unsubsidized affordable housing in the country (Department of Housing and Urban Development). Yet, they remain largely absent from architectural discourse and carry negative social and cultural stigma. Emma and Reese reframe manufactured housing as a valuable model worthy of study and social consideration.

Their work highlights the conflict of “mobility” in manufactured housing; it is both a key factor in its affordability but introduces several constraints. As factory-built units, MHs have lower construction costs compared to housing built on site. However, this same

dependence on mobility also produces distinct regulatory and financing barriers that shape how these homes are classified and sited. In addition, the policies regulating mobility have reinforced perceptions of manufactured homes as impermanent or “less than,” further marginalizing MH communities both within public perception and the discipline of architecture.

In response, Reese and Emma work with residents and nonprofit developers to better understand these communities, highlight their strengths, and challenge persistent stigma. They integrate this research into their pedagogy through studios and seminars, where students engage manufactured housing communities as sites of analysis, documentation, and design. This work has found that despite being framed as mobile or impermanent, many of these

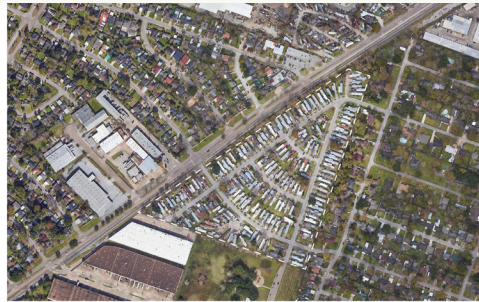
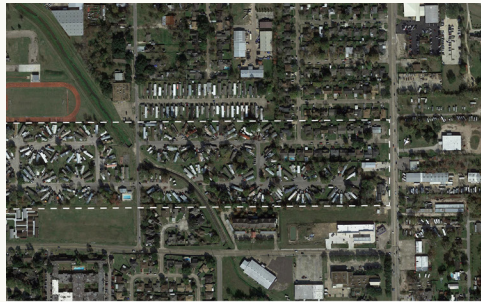


Yards at a resident owned community in Pasadena, Texas. (Reese Greenlee)

homes remain in place for decades, with residents continually adapting and personalizing both interiors and exteriors in ways that both parallel and differ from other forms of homeownership. As a result, their work challenges the regulatory and social conditions that have pushed MH communities to the margins of cities.

Regulatory Constraints

Manufactured housing occupies a distinct legal and regulatory position that differs from most other housing types. MHs are governed by a single federal code administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which standardizes construction. This code imposes specific physical requirements, most notably the



MHC Patterns in scale. (Greenlee and Silverblatt)

permanent chassis and limits on size and form, that produce a recognizable, repetitive housing type. Over time, these constraints have effectively codified an aesthetic, meaning the look of manufactured homes is not incidental but regulated into existence.

This standardized form reinforces perceptions of manufactured homes as temporary or inferior. With design innovation constrained, industry practices tend to focus on cost reduction through materials and assembly, at times

contributing to lower-quality construction and associated health concerns, further deepening stigma.

At the same time, manufactured homes are classified as personal property rather than real property. This classification has significant consequences; residents often lack access to the financial tools, protections, and long-term security associated with traditional homeownership, including the opportunity to build equity on their properties. The instability that results is

not a function of the homes themselves, but of the regulatory frameworks that govern them.

These legal and financial conditions are compounded with zoning and land-use policies that further reinforce this marginalization. Manufactured housing communities are frequently grouped alongside industrial or infrastructural functions and pushed to the edges of cities and towns. Often located in industrial zones, peripheral landscapes, or environmentally vulnerable areas, manufactured housing communities are spatially marginalized through planning decisions that treat them as incompatible with conventional residential development.

These overlapping legal and spatial conditions have also made these communities attractive to private equity investment, where ownership models prioritize profit through rent increases or redevelopment. In some cases, this leads to displacement and the loss of existing affordable housing stock, further exacerbating housing instability in places where manufactured homes once provided an affordable pathway.

Community-Driven Design and Spatial Agency

Despite these constraints, manufactured

housing communities demonstrate significant forms of spatial agency. Residents continuously adapt their homes and surroundings, adding porches, extensions, gardens, and shared amenities that challenge the standardized form of the manufactured unit.

Using typological studies, mapping, and spatial analysis, students uncover manufactured housing communities as far more diverse, adaptable, and spatially complex than they are typically understood to be. Their work traces how these environments have been incrementally adapted, extended, and built upon over time, revealing a significant capacity for customization. This is made possible by the longevity of inhabitation, access to yard space, and the ability to purchase and materially alter one's home – conditions that are often absent in other forms of affordable housing. Close attention to patterns of lot organization, circulation, density, and shared space reveals a range of spatial logics that challenge assumptions of uniformity or impermanence that have perpetuated MH's marginalization. In addition, through partnerships with residents and nonprofit organizations, students participate in community visioning exercises, surveys, and on-site engagement to identify what residents value most in their environments. This



Countryside Mobile Home Park. Phoenix, AZ.
(Greenlee and Silverblatt)

work informed the development of an affordable pocket neighborhood adjacent to an existing MH community.

These engagements inform design strategies that prioritize:

- Density as a social and spatial asset, supporting walkability and shared ground
- Yard space as a key interface between private and collective life
- Accessory structures and incremental building, allowing for flexibility and phased development
- DIY construction and local knowledge, leveraging existing skills

within communities

- Modular systems and shared infrastructure, balancing standardization with adaptability

Rather than imposing external design solutions, these approaches build from the existing conditions of manufactured housing communities, recognizing them as sites of ongoing experimentation in affordable living.

Emma and Reese's work reveals manufactured housing as a critical component of the nation's housing landscape. Their work highlights the spatial, social, and architectural potential

of manufactured homes to meaningfully address housing affordability.

At the same time, by confronting regulatory frameworks, disciplinary biases, and cultural narratives that have long constrained manufactured housing, they raise a broader question for small cities: how do the systems that govern land use and design shape who is able to belong? Reframing manufactured housing as legitimate and valuable expands recognition of these communities and access to participation in the social life of a place, rather than pushing entire communities to the margins.

Reese Greenlee is an architect and Assistant Professor at Kansas State University. Emma Silverblatt is an architect and the Judith Kinnard Early Career Design Fellow at Cornell University. Their collaborative research examines manufactured housing as a critical yet overlooked form of affordable housing, engaging questions of legal liminality, spatial stigma, and resident agency. Through community-engaged pedagogy — including partnerships with non-profit developers and residents of manufactured home communities — they bring this underrepresented typology into architectural education and discourse. Their work has been presented at the ACSA/AIA Intersections Research Conference and published in Log.

FEATURE

“Fighting to Have A Place”

A Conversation with the Hazleton Integration Project

Rossanna Gabriel, Executive Director
 Bob Curry, Co-Founder
 Elaine Curry, Co-Founder, Program Director
 David Dominguez, Hazleton Area teacher

Hazleton, Pennsylvania experienced remarkable growth in the 21st century, driven largely by an influx of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. After decades of population loss and economic decline, the city found itself in the midst of a resurgence. In the 2010s alone, the population rose by 20 percent.

Across the country, other post-industrial small cities are undergoing similar demographic shifts. In Springfield, Ohio, a growing Haitian community has helped revive the local economy. In Kalamazoo, Michigan, new waves of residents are contributing to population and economic growth. This story of revival, however, has been met with local resistance and heightened national attention amid aggressive federal immigration detention efforts.

In Hazleton, the city that had been aging and emptying was suddenly young again. “All of a sudden you have families coming in. You have children,” says Elaine. “It brings a different aura to the city.” Families bought and rented homes – the same duplexes built a century prior. Downtown, which had sat hollow for decades, began to fill as well. Small businesses opened and “are mostly run by people that came from other countries,” says Rossanna. “All the supermarkets, all the stores... everything grows because of the amount of people.” As David puts it, “Hispanics are the labor force. They are the economic force.”

Along the same I-80 corridor that once anchored the region's mining economy, a new warehousing industry is flourishing and providing steady work,



Downtown Hazleton
 (Discover NEPA)

and immigrants are “starting to settle in Hazleton for all of the same reasons that previous generations landed here,” Bob explains.

In the foothills of the Poconos – where I-80 connects New York City to places westward – sits one of the only places in the United States where there are large deposits of anthracite or “hard coal”. During the nineteenth century, anthracite coal became one of the most important

fuels for heating homes and powering industries in cities like Philadelphia and New York. Once the coal deposits were discovered and transportation routes expanded, companies rapidly opened mines across northeastern Pennsylvania. Along these routes has left a desolate landscape of extraction, where mining sucked out most of the natural landscape. Hazleton sits on a high plateau directly above several anthracite seams, which made it an ideal location for shafts and

rail connections. “Patch towns” – small, planned settlements, sometimes referred to as “coal patches” – were established down by these seams by coal companies to house workers.

These patchtowns were satellite grids of those found in Hazleton. The streets are lined almost entirely with duplexes – which immigrant workers built to house their families – and the spires or ogee domes of churches built by different ethnic groups from Eastern and Southern Europe arriving for work. Although tensions often existed among these pan-European immigrant communities, the opportunity to build, worship, and create distinct religious and cultural institutions made it easier for newcomers to establish and sustain themselves.

Over time, these neighborhood grids came to reflect both the original vision of planned mining communities and the later expansions that accommodated continued waves of immigration in the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s, the region, built by successive waves of newcomers, gradually emptied. The city’s population peaked around 40,000 in 1940 and had dwindled to 22,500 by 1990. David described Hazleton in the 2000s as “a ghost town.” Rossanna added that the streets were filled with “empty storefronts, empty houses, and empty buildings.”

“What happens when your population shrinks like that?” asks Bob Curry. Elaine describes the moment: “Our children and everyone else’s children had left and were not coming back.” Bob continues, noting that “a brain drain of the young, entrepreneurial set, the young professionals” were driven away by the lack of opportunity. This mass exodus of people left a void in the social fabric as the industry that had structured daily life disappeared. Limited municipal capacity and weakened civic institutions left few mechanisms to help residents process these moments of social and economic transition.

Today, the city’s infrastructure is straining in the opposite direction. Unlike earlier periods, when newcomers were able to build their own homes and physically expand the footprint of the city, little new physical infrastructure has been created to support the city’s population increase. Nearly 60% of the city’s housing stock is still made up of duplexes built pre-1930, while suburbanized zoning codes adopted in the 20th century effectively prohibit the construction of these very duplexes. As a result, families who have recently immigrated to Hazleton are living overcrowded in these aging duplexes, sometimes six families in housing meant for two.



If there are so many people here, we need representation. We are fighting to have a place. We are rebuilding this community.

–Rossanna Gabriel

Executive Director, HIP

These physical barriers to secure housing are compounded by social resistance, as third-generation residents of Hazleton’s earlier pan-European immigrant communities feel they are “losing” their city. These anxieties are shaped by both past demographic change and racialized notions of who “belongs.” In 2006, the city and its residents advocated for a discriminatory ordinance, titled the “Illegal Alien Immigration Relief Act.” As David recalls, these “prohibited speaking Spanish and renting to Spanish tenants.” These laws would make it exceedingly difficult for Hispanic immigrants to establish livelihoods in Hazleton, preventing immigrants from securing housing or participating in civic life. The law was ultimately struck down by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court as unconstitutional in 2007, but it underscored how social resistance and

tension has built policies to deter physical and civic entry into communities.

In 2011, Bob and Elaine, alongside Joe Maddon, established the Hazleton Integration Project to counter this resistance to immigration. They created a civic institution designed to enable Hispanic residents to participate in shaping the city’s future, lowering language barriers, expanding access to civic voice, and building the social infrastructure necessary for communities to accept change and new residents.

The organization began by focusing on youth programs, launching the area’s first bilingual pre-kindergarten. Recognizing that language barriers affected entire families, the programs expanded. “We added ESL classes for adults, because we realized one of the biggest problems

in the area is the language barrier," Rossanna explains. ESL and language classes provide immigrants with language skills and confidence to engage in community life.

In addition, Rossanna Gabriel was elected in 2025 to serve on the Hazleton Government Study Commission. She is the first Latino to serve in an elected office in Hazleton. "If there are so many people here, we need representation," she says. Roles like hers are essential to ensuring that Hispanic residents are represented and empowered to participate. "We are fighting to have a place... we are rebuilding this community," she continues. Yet, as both David and Rossanna note, significant barriers remain. Few Hispanic residents have run for office, and those who have often struggled to gain traction. Expanding access to these pathways, through greater awareness, mentorship, and support, is key to their work. David is now running for election, a goal shaped in large part by his involvement with HIP.

HIP's efforts to expand civic participation have become a key strategy for fostering broader acceptance of the city's growth and creating an environment where newcomers shape what the city can become. While tensions and resistance have not disappeared, the past fifteen years of work have begun to soften



Afterschool Scholar students receiving recognition for improving reading literacy.

and blur longstanding lines of division. HIP has served as a consistent bridge between long-time residents and those who have recently arrived, building the kinds of relationships that many small cities with limited municipal capacity struggle to support on their own. "The idea was to have a place where everybody can come together without thinking we are different," Rossanna says. "This is a place for everybody, open to everybody."

More recently, however, a charged federal immigration climate has threatened their progress and introduced new uncertainty into everyday life in the city. For many immigrant residents, heightened enforcement and the visibility of federal authorities have created a pervasive sense of fear that makes it harder to participate openly in community life. Activities that once

served as important points of connection have begun to see lower attendance as some residents choose to stay home. "People, on average, are more afraid of coming out and being out and about," says David. "Even our students, who always felt so safe, don't feel safe anymore," says Elaine. They have seen a significant decline in enrollment in ESL classes over the past year. In addition, their monthly community dinners that brought members of the entire community together – usually 600 people – has seen a decrease in attendance by "30 to 40%," says Bob. As HIP has worked for years to build the social infrastructure that allows residents to belong and thrive in the city, that progress now faces new challenges from the federal government's extreme and violent detainment efforts of immigrants throughout the country. In this climate,



HIP's Summer Camp Program

the organization keeps its doors open and programs running. Will the broader community of Hazleton show up to protect and support its immigrant neighbors, as has been the case in larger places like Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles? Having spent fifteen years working to soften lines of division, its leaders hold onto a cautious optimism that the broader community will show up and support one another now. They find that unlike the beginning, "they aren't alone," says Elaine.

As a new generation of immigrants repopulates neighborhoods, fills pre-zoning duplexes, and reactivates local businesses, organizations like HIP work to create the social change needed to make these transitions easier. In a small city with limited municipal capacity and a built environment unequipped to support its current population, this civic infrastructure has become the primary means of accommodating growth and expanding the community's sense of belonging. Ultimately, these institutions will create the social conditions necessary to ease and undo the barriers to new housing development. Hazleton remains a patchwork, not only in its geography but in the ongoing process of weaving new residents and institutions into its fabric.

FEATURE

What We Need to Do

What Fifty Years Making Theater in Bethlehem Taught Me About Art and Cities

William George

It was a disaster. We lay on the ground while the children threw grass at us, broken bottles and soda cans. We were supposed to be dead, the ending of our new street theatre play, “The Geronimo Show”, but we couldn’t really stay on the ground; they’d be in the performance area and kicking us any second. So I got up, like a rising ghost, the rest of our small troupe following the lead, and we began to walk, slowly, in line, out of the city park where we’d just opened our new street theatre piece, and down the sidewalk as the children followed, yelling at us in Spanish and English.

At least we’d gotten away from the glass and aluminum cans, and after about three blocks, they grew tired of us, getting no reaction, and left us to nurse our mostly existential wounds. The next day, our director, John Pearson, died of an aneurism, aged 39, and we were left

to pick up the pieces of a much greater grief.

That was fifty years ago, and thus was born Bethlehem People’s Theatre, eventually to become, after an extraordinary struggle to survive, Touchstone Theatre.

Circumstances are not, on the whole, conducive to the growth of art creation in small cities—or big ones, for that matter. Not then; not now. Some of that is because of the universal struggle involved with living in general, but too much of it is the result of a variedly limited understanding of the arts, how they work, and a similarly confused and discordant political/economic process for affecting change. Often, we professional artists ourselves accept the status quo and just do our best to make enough money “to fight again another day”, thus



Bridget George talks about the birth of Touchstone Theatre

perpetuating our compromised position as artists—our growth, our effectiveness in the community to do good, and the ability to do our most beautiful work.

What is a beautiful city anyway? Does that mean it’s pretty? Or heterogeneous? Or that it has award winning hospitals, schools, clean water, a particular ratio of micro-breweries to population...? What are the defining metrics of a beautiful small city? I’d have to think Rumi’s Masnavi couldn’t hold all the stories and existential lessons that

await any serious attempt to answer these questions. And how would one sensibly go about finding answers that effectively represent the whole of our unique and diverse communities?

As we dusted ourselves off after the disaster of “The Geronimo Show” we couldn’t be fully aware of all the varied forces that were working at cross purposes in our effort, but we didn’t quit. We returned to the rehearsal hall and worked and worked as if our lives depended on it. And they did, in truth, in



Candid shots and a press blurb from the 1976 production of *The Death of Geronimo* (it eventually became a terrific success).

many ways. We didn't quit because we believed that art deeply matters, beyond words. To engage with the arts and art-making is to engage deeply, fully, heart and soul, in the "play" of life. It means the stakes are probably higher than we may be used to. It's about love. What else, other than love, can get us through the grass, bottles, and sharp-edged and sticky soda cans we're sure to meet along our way?

That being said, here are three basic ideas, crossroads of understanding if you will, to take us a bit deeper. I have included brief video excerpts from a documentary film I recently co-produced with three other colleagues—Bridget George of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Dave Fry of Godfrey Daniels Music Club, and Doug Roysdon of Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre—called *Rooted*, a story of artists embracing place.



Art is most powerful and effective when it grows organically from a deep understanding of identity.

The City itself is a living, creative being, and like any artist, it must first know who it is, what it cares about – its history, its landscape, its wounds and glories, what it loves – before it can know what art it should advance and how to do so. "What should we do," a City might

ask. To answer that question, don't think so much: "What do we **want** to do?" (Personally, I want to do everything, don't you?) Instead ask, "What do we **need** to do?" And to answer that question most effectively, you need to know who you are. As a City. And embrace it! Art most effectively grows from that ever-evolving feeling/understanding of identity. Stealing ideas from others is fair play; just make sure that the ideas or approaches you've taken are used to organically advance this understanding of what's right "for you", who **YOU** are as a City.

Once priorities are set, concerns and dreams identified, there are many possible ways forward; it can be confounding:

- Should we make available inexpensive housing for artists to build families to live locally over long periods of time?
- Could we provide no-to-low interest loans for repurposing spaces for performance sites or public "sharing" venues?
- How might we inaugurate cross sector dialogue or even intrasector dialogue. (It's not surprising that the arts community suffers the same fractured and alienated culture that surrounds it, thus inhibiting growth and creativity.)
- How might we advance programs



Seth Moglen, English Professor at Lehigh University and Greg Funfgeld, of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, speak about a few of the major influences on the identity of Bethlehem, Pa, and the importance of art and place to City identity.

that stimulate local artists to “tell our story, enchant the space”?

- How might we encourage funding organizations and foundations to better stimulate art creation that serves fundamental needs in the City's unfolding understanding of its creative and practical life?

a healthy City/Community, one box that needs to be checked off first and foremost is the “attitude box”, our belief and understanding in the importance of the arts. To put it bluntly: the arts are not icing on the cake, but, as Greg Funfgeld says, fundamental “like bread”—at the center of what makes a healthy, vibrant community. To accomplish this, you gotta' get your hands dirty, experience for yourselves what it's like to collaborate and work with artists to advance the considered needs of your city.

2. Mindset and Collaboration

When it comes to building

- How might we most effectively collaborate “cross-sector” with artists?
- How might we best promote the voice of artists in the city-building work of housing, healthcare, homelessness, drug addiction, etc.?
- How do we move from thinking that art is a kind of expensive variation of the entertainment business or some sort of “economic engine” to a deep realization that art is, if properly applied, a sophisticated sort of “play” that allows us to better understand the mystery of being alive and how

we might more harmoniously live together.

In all this, what will best serve the entire community must be at the center of the conversation, and that understanding, as much as possible, is most successful when all elements of the community have their voices heard when deciding where its center resides.

Not all artists are created equal. This is not to say that the effort alone, to collaborate with the arts sector, isn't an important victory unto itself, but there



Anisa George, arborist, on how the collaborative process being proposed is a cultural shift in our arts/city ecosystem.

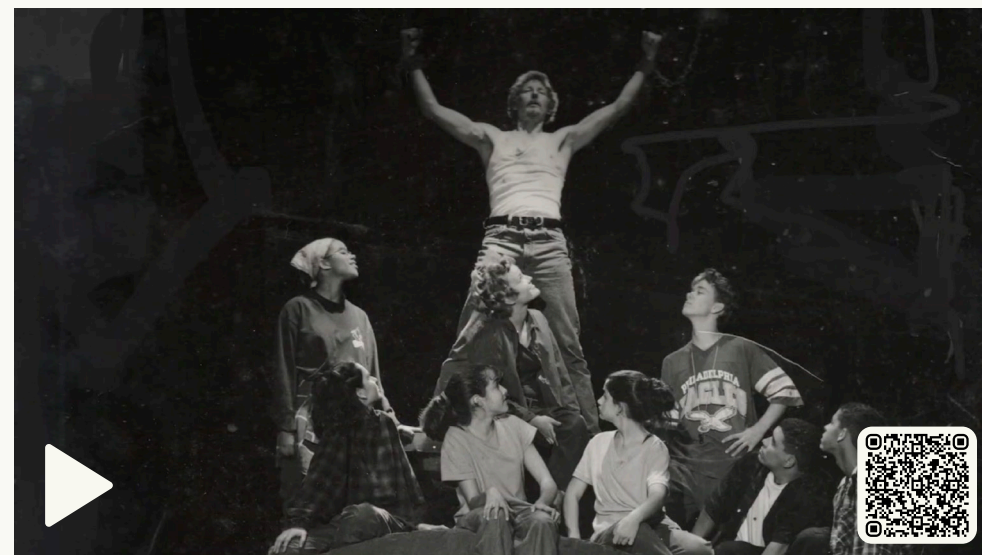
are art creators who are trained, ready, and willing to think “out of the box”, and prepared to collaborate. And there are also many art creators that prefer more of a “leave me alone to do my thing” sensibility. The City must choose its partners carefully, and different kinds of artists are appropriate for different kinds of initiatives. I’m partial to ones who are willing to learn, in a reciprocal creative dialogue, along the way. There are going to be mistakes. Toes will be stepped on. There is a lot to learn, a lot of trust to build, on both sides of the City/Artist divide.

Conversations can center around questions such as:

- What steps can be taken towards strategies that advance organic creation to serve the whole?
- How might we best work the local cultural soil or build an attitude of creative passion?
- How can we turbo charge a mindset where structuring opportunities for young artists to fail is an essential part of healthy growth?
- How can we utilize the arts more effectively in the schools to advance



Doug Roysdon, Artistic Director of Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre, describes how his work grew from his little puppet theatre into a City venue, the Ice House, serving hundreds of community artists.



The story, in part, of the creation of Steelbound.

the learning process, in the chamber of commerce, on main street?

Once the fire of play and creative collaboration catches, the learning process takes off. The conversations that come with it, the ideas for action that follow, the proposed initiatives, and of course, eventually, the realization of new money sources and stimulating strategies will be revealed. But it's important to make something clear: artists (and remember, we are all to one degree or another, artists) must grow and expand the perhaps limited, self-protecting shell we've erected around our sphere of work. Our culture

is changing, and our culture-creating processes are changing. Artists must recognize the importance of “audience” as a fully collaborative partner in those processes to advance this more socially rooted and less marketplace driven endeavor.



In it for the Long Haul

Take a breath. This can't be done in a hurry. Fifty years ago, as the grass and glass rained down on our little street theatre finale, we had no idea where

the work would lead. We were entering into a daring collaboration – between the Bethlehem Parks and Recreation Department and our Lehigh University Improvisational Street Theatre Troupe – and failing spectacularly. The clash of differing agendas (those of our audience, the City recreation department, and the artistic leadership of the production) should have been no surprise. The key to whatever success we have managed to accomplish since then is: we kept at it. We didn't give up, and we learned. We entered into an ongoing process that led to changing our stage techniques, our performance styles, our subject matter, our preparation of the audience before performance, our relationship with the City and other artists around the country, and on and on.

Emblematic of the maturation that took place, was the production of *Steelbound* on the grounds of Bethlehem Steel's Iron Foundry, where iron was first forged in the City back in 1863. Twenty three years after *The Death of Geronimo*, our first embryonic efforts on the playgrounds of the City, we co-produced with Cornerstone Theatre, a mammoth effort – over 70 performers – in 1999, a production that still reverberates in its implications and power throughout the country.

From what we'd learned from our street theatre work, the relationships we'd

built through collaboration over the decades, and the opportunity provided by a region-wide and national trauma—Bethlehem Steel went bankrupt and, over a several year period, shut down—we were in a position to address our psychic needs as a community through performance creation.



*Bill George is a co-founder of Touchstone Theatre in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he has worked as a performer, director, and community collaborator for fifty years. He was a founding member of Bethlehem People's Theatre, which grew from street theatre performances in South Bethlehem's parks and neighborhoods into one of the Lehigh Valley's most enduring civic arts institutions. He recently co-produced *Rooted*, a documentary film exploring the relationship between artists and place, with colleagues from the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Godfrey Daniels Music Club, and Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre.*





Social and Cultural Respondents

The responses that follow were developed in conversation with the *Co-Lab*'s ongoing inquiry into the social and cultural life of small cities. Each contributor brings a distinct vantage point — arts educator, community organizer — and together they reflect the relational, slow-building nature of the work the *Co-Lab* seeks to document and advance.

Mark Valdez

How Can We Weave the Social Fabric Before We Need It?

Artist, cultural organizer, and facilitator, responding to the Hazleton Integration Project, reflecting on the arts sustained solidarity during federal immigration detention efforts in Minneapolis.

As I look at the work of the Hazleton Integration Project (HIP), I do so through my lens as a Latino, living in Minneapolis. Between December 2025 and February 2026 an estimated 3,000 federal agents descended on the Twin Cities, ushering unprecedented violations of laws and civil rights abuses by U.S. agents against its people, including the murders of two U.S. citizens, Renee Macklin Good and Alex Pretti. Certainly, this was a time of tremendous fear and violence, but it was

also a moment of incredible community resilience and strength. Neighbors showed up for each other, putting their own bodies and safety at risk to defend and protect the most vulnerable.

During that time, I noticed a change in my own behavior. I knew I was a target because of my brown skin, so I limited the amount of time I spent out on the streets, mainly going from home to work, with occasional stops at my local grocery



You Can't Take it With You An American-Muslim Remix
(Cornerstone Theater Company)

store. At the same time, I would have to remind myself: I am a U.S. born citizen, entitled to the rights and freedoms guaranteed to me by the Constitution. I am educated. I have access to lawyers. I have access to money. I am safe.

After psyching myself up, I would drive down to the Whipple Federal Building which is located about one mile from my house and a site of daily protest. I would stop by, on my way to work, joining

hundreds of others chanting obscenities at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and demanding the release of those arrested and detained. Now, this is Minnesota. It's cold. No. It's fucking cold. The kind of cold where you no longer take the will to live for granted. But you show up, outside, anyway because your community needs you. And so, someone brings pots of hot chocolate and urns filled with hot coffee. There are boxes with hand and foot warmers for the



Studies have proven that places with high social cohesion are able to withstand disasters, recover faster from shocks, and adapt to change.

—Mark Valdez

taking and some printed protest posters for people to use and distribute.

One day, the officers from the Sheriff's Department were trying to move protestors. They announced that they would be deploying tear gas and instructed people to move back. Some people came prepared with gas masks. They were not going to back down. I feel a tap on my shoulder. A White woman, who appears to be in her 60's, says to me and a Black woman standing beside me, "Please move. We want to keep you safe. This is for us to do. We got this." I don't know how the woman next to me reacted, but I do know that I broke down in tears. It was too much. The terror and the compassion. I don't know that are bodies are meant for these kinds of extremes.

On Fridays I would join tens of thousands

of others, and we'd march across downtown Minneapolis, demonstrating our collective demand for the end to the occupation. We'd chant and hold up our protest signs. Who knew there were so many puns about ICE?! It felt like the entire metro population was there. Kids and their parents. Teenagers, skipping school to make their voice heard. Every ethnicity and race, putting their bodies on the line, because they had no choice. We'd all read the poem, "First they came for the Communists. . ." we knew how it ends, and we were determined to write a different ending.

I run a theater company called Mixed Blood Theatre. Our mission is to "disrupt injustices, advance racial equity, and build community." We were made for this moment. We kicked into rapid response mode, commissioning plays to help

young people talk to their families about ICE, offering Know Your Rights legal sessions for arts organizations, hosting "Say Your Rights" training sessions where people could practice saying their rights out loud through role-playing scenarios. We raised money for our local food pantry and offered support to our local safety patrol volunteers.

What the world saw—what we did at Mixed Blood and what took place across the Twin Cities—is the embodiment of a city's social and cultural power. Every small city has this. It may not look like what it does in the Twin Cities metro, but it's there. Perhaps it's a neighbor dropping off a bag of groceries on someone's front porch. Maybe it's a church taking up a collection to help a congregant in need. Perhaps it's someone taking in a family in need of shelter. These acts of mutual aid build and strengthen the social fabric of a place.

Studies have proven that places with high social cohesion are able to withstand disasters, recover faster from shocks, and adapt to change.

But fostering social connection takes time and intention. Places like HIP serve to unite people across difference. On the surface, HIP is a community center for those on the margins. But look closer and you will see that HIP is

a center for belonging. Offering help with homework, classes to learn a new language, supporting sporting events, and bringing people together to share a meal helps residents practice culture, civic participation, and inclusion.

As community members build relationships, they strengthen bonds. Simply put, they begin to care for one another. They become invested in each other's safety and well-being, so that when someone is in need, others will show up.

Culture exists and adapts. We can change. It happens slowly, to be sure. but then suddenly, it tips over. It happened in Minneapolis and it seems to be happening in Hazelton, too. What's in look like in your community?

Mark Valdez is an artist, cultural organizer, and consultant.

Mark partners with communities, organizations, civic institutions, and others, using theater and creative tools to address community needs and to lift up community voices and stories.

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Cassidy Rubio

How Can We Weave the Social Fabric Before We Need It?

Arts educator at the Newark Museum of Art, responding to Bill George, on how museums and arts education create belonging by bringing newcomers and longtime residents together.

I fell in love with art at twelve years old. My sixth grade art teacher noticed my enthusiasm outpaced my talent and encouraged me to create a special project. I worked with her everyday during my lunch hour for several months. In the end I finished a beautiful colored pencil drawing and jumpstarted my passion for the arts.

As an adult, I have worked at several art institutions including the Lehigh

University Art Galleries as an intern and the Newark Museum of Art as an educator. I watch every day as children and adults joyfully reconnect with their inner-artists. The saying “There’s no such thing as bad art” is trite, but true. I believe the process of creating any kind of art matters more than the outcome. When we draw, paint, write or perform, we slow our brains down and work at expressing ourselves. So even “bad” art teaches us something about how we view the world.



This Land Our Community
<https://luag.lehigh.edu/event/current/land-our-community>

Often students in my classes are learning English as a Second Language. They eagerly show me their animal sculptures and coil pots. We move beyond language and connect over shapes and colors.

Arts programming, like other social and cultural programs, unites people. Together these resources build bridges between newcomers and longer-term residents. People begin to create and converse with their neighbors when they have a purpose for gathering. They can use these meeting spaces to engage in dialogue about the needs of their communities and how to address them. Longer-term residents better understand the history of their cities. Newcomers bring their previous experiences in communities with them. Both groups can find commonalities by stepping out of distinctive corners and opening up to new ideas. I truly believe creative spaces allow that conversation to happen in a more thoughtful, generous way.

Crucially, these organizations facilitate the expansion of social circles. This allows for greater dissemination of information. Longer-term residents have expansive information channels. They know more people who can share announcements about city governance and other events. Newcomers struggle to acquire information about their cities without those channels. Community

centers, museums, theaters, and other spaces work to form that connection. They provide resources like after-school care or arts programming that families can depend on.

I see arts programming impacting the lives of children and their families every day at work. Just last week a young girl told me in Spanish that the museum was her favorite trip she'd ever been on. She learned new things and used art to do it. The more we seek out opportunities to support our local social and cultural organizations, the more we strengthen our communities.



Cassidy Rubio is an arts educator who has worked at the Lehigh University Art Galleries and the Newark Museum of Art.

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The background is an abstract composition of various geometric shapes in two shades of pink. A large, light pink circle is positioned in the upper left. A dark pink triangle points downwards from the top center. To its right, a light pink quadrilateral is tilted. In the lower left, a large light pink triangle points upwards. In the lower right, a light pink semi-circle is visible. The dark pink shapes fill the remaining spaces, creating a dynamic, layered effect.

Small Cities Lab