

# Natick Center Creative Placemaking Demonstration Projects Evaluation Report

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## Introduction

In late 2017, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and the town of Natick partnered to develop a creative placemaking strategy for Natick Center, a downtown hub of the town. As part of the strategy development, MAPC and the town implemented a series of temporary creative placemaking demonstration projects to test potential recommendations for the strategy. Part of the impetus of the Natick Center creative placemaking strategies is to provide information and resources to the American Planning Association's (APA) current National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)-funded development of a Creative Placemaking KnowledgeBase to support planners implementing creative placemaking initiatives around the country. The APA project also included partnerships with Americans for the Arts (AFTA) and The Townscape Institute. AFTA's role in the Natick Center portion of the project was to evaluate the impact of the creative placemaking demonstration projects to see if the artworks addressed the goals outlined below.

This document, prepared by AFTA, is the final report outlining the evaluation of the temporary creative placemaking demonstration projects that were installed for the weekend of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 for a two-week run until the week of November 12<sup>th</sup>. Six creatives, or artists, were selected to design and install their projects through a request for proposals (RFP). The proposals were reviewed by an artists' selection committee with the final selection approved by the Natick Public Art Commission. The projects once installed were evaluated based on the impact of the temporary projects on Natick Center and how the projects were able to address the Natick's creative placemaking goals. This report does not specifically address the selection of the creatives or the development of the projects and focuses on the impact and success of the installed projects.

## Evaluation Process

The evaluation process was developed based on the above goals, discussions with MAPC and town of Natick staff, review of the timeline and correlated public engagement touchpoints. The "[Aesthetics Perspective](#)", developed by Animating Democracy at Americans for the Arts, was used as a framework to develop the methodology, devise the collection tools and develop questions for local stakeholders and the general public. The evaluation process was developed to understand how the projects addressed the goals and the potential impact that a creative placemaking strategy may have on Natick Center.

The collection tools to collect the data included:

- Onsite surveys designed for participants and passers-by to gather their response and general comments on the demonstration projects. The surveys were taken both in-person as provided by designated survey volunteers and staff during the opening weekend (November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>), and a link to the survey online was advertised throughout Natick Center during the two-week demonstration period.
- Tracking onsite engagement was collected during the opening weekend. Using visual counts and tracked by a ticket taker, this process collected the number of people who engaged with the projects.
- Interviews were conducted with creatives and local stakeholders over the phone prior to the opening weekend and a follow up email with a corresponding set of questions followed the completion of the two-week demonstration period. Interviewees were provided general information about the evaluation process and its connection with the work when setting up the interviews. The interviews

investigated how the interviewees perceived the projects as impacting Natick Center and if the projects addressed the goals. The phone interviews were transcribed during the calls.

## Goals

The creatives were provided seven goals to focus their projects on. The goals were developed by town of Natick staff with community input and direction from MAPC. Through the evaluation process and discussions with Natick Staff and MAPC only the top six goals were to be a focus for the evaluation process. Those six goals are:

1. **Guide People to Find Their Way.** Test ways to guide the public through Natick Center and/or notice certain local aspects, such as landmarks, civic resources, places of interest, historical narratives or personal stories.
2. **Include Everyone.** Provide experiences that are welcoming to the diverse range of residents and visitors of Natick, including intergenerational audiences.
3. **Engage the Public.** Create interactive experiences that provide varied opportunities to stimulate a variety of senses in Natick Center's public places and spaces (e.g., sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch).
4. **Be Bold.** Demonstrate an expansive definition of art and culture by taking a new twist on an old art form or invent new categories of experience.
5. **Respect the Environment.** Exemplify how the human and physical environment in Natick Center are regarded with care by using sustainable materials and processes and creating a project that is safe to interact with.
6. **Be Relevant to Local History, Present and Future.** Be mindful of the physical and human history and the character of Natick Center's past, present, and future. Be inclusive of Native histories, but also forward-thinking and not constrained by adherence to unspoken rules or mainstream aesthetic norms.

## Creative Placemaking Projects

Over summer 2018, following artists were selected through a request for proposals process managed by the town of Natick with support from MAPC staff. The projects and creatives selected for the demonstration included:

- "Let's Root for Each Other" By Beth Fagan. A series of aerial banners draped across Adams Street with images influenced by Tibetan flags.
- "Jump On Me Natick!" by Eddie Bruckner. A digitally printed image of a painted hopscotch court designed to be used by the public and includes a social media presence with #JumpNatick! The project was installed on a pathway in Natick Center near the gazebo.
- "Creature Comfort" by Mark Favermann – A series of benches designed to look like flatten cutouts of different animals, including a hippopotamus and an aardvark located on a corner of Natick Center.
- "The Wishing Tree" by Rebecca Tuck – A six-foot metal tree installed on a corner of Natick Center to be fitted with fabric ribbons with messages written by the public. The fabric with instructions and pens were placed in different areas around Natick Center, including the library and local galleries.

- “Musical Bridge” by Sahsha Kutnetsova – This two-part project included a series of light-based works hanging in Moran Park and series of artist-designed musical instruments placed along the Walnut Street pedestrian bridge. Made of recycled materials, the musical instruments included variety of drums, maracas, wind chimes, rain-sticks.
- “Wayfinding Floor Decal Stickers” by Shahreen Quazi – A series of gothic quatrefoil tile painted ground stickers digitally printed and installed in various locations on the sidewalks around Natick Center to raise awareness of shops, restaurants and attractions around Natick Center.

In addition to the six primary projects listed above, a series of murals were added to a gazebo located in Natick Center through a partnership with Common Street Spiritual Center, MAPC and town of Natick that were made by local artists of color, including Rohma Shirwani, Sepideh Golestani, Sofy Brinister, Fotios Mpouris, and Lewis Randa. Though not a part of the initial evaluation process, the timing and prominence of the gazebo murals were included in the survey.

## Expected Outcomes

Through discussions with town of Natick staff the following lists expected outcomes of the creative placemaking demonstration projects evaluation process.

- An understanding of how creative placemaking projects may activate Natick Center by enlivening the space and encouraging public engagement with works of public art.
- How public artworks can address the goals of a creative placemaking strategy.
- How public artworks will be received by the public, both in content and durability of materials.

## Data Analysis

The analysis is of the data collected from the end of October 2018 to November 2018 through interviews, surveys and onsite tracking. The analysis is divided into three primary engagement groups: Public, Creatives, and Local Stakeholders. For each group the collection method is outlined, and data is organized by themes that derived from the collection process.

### **Public Perception and Responses**

Public perception and response to the artworks was a key component to understanding the impact of the creative placemaking demonstration projects. Public responses were collected through surveys and onsite tracking as outlined above. Fifty-five people completed the survey and on opening weekend 126 people were observed engaging with one or more of the projects. Below is summary of responses to the survey.

- Relationship to Natick Center: Respondents were able to select as many categories when defining their relationship to Natick Center. Of the respondents, 76 percent were a Town of Natick Resident, 20 percent selected Non-Resident/Don't Work or Own a Business in the Town of Natick, 5 percent responded as Other, 4 percent were a Natick Business Owner and 4 percent listed they worked in the town of Natick. Those who selected Other included visiting and a craft vendor.

- Reason for Coming to Natick Center: Respondents were asked what brought them to Natick Center and were able to select all responses that applied. The majority response was Other at 62 percent, of which 24 percent listed going for a walk or some variation as their primary reason for being in Natick Center while other responses included visiting the restaurants, shopping and one was a local student who was working on a school photography project.

27 percent of respondents said that the Creative Placemaking Projects is what brought them to Natick Center while 11 percent said it was for the Farmer’s Market, 9 percent because they were passing through to another neighborhood, and 2 percent was for work-related business.

- Which Artworks Were Encountered: Survey respondents were asked which of the artworks they encountered while in Natick Center. The Common Street Spiritual Center “Visions of Community Artwork” and “Jump On Me Natick!” were visited the most at 56 percent each, while 47 percent visited the “Wayfinding Floor Decal Stickers”, 42 percent encountered “The Wishing Tree”, 36 percent encountered “Musical Bridge”, 31 percent encountered “Creature Comfort”, and 16 percent encountered “Let’s Root for Each Other”.
- Natick Center Creative Placemaking Goals: Respondents were asked to if artworks addressed any or all of the goals outlined by the Natick Center Creative Placemaking team. 84 percent of respondents said the artwork or artworks they encountered Engaged the Public, 51 percent said the artworks Included Everyone; 47 percent said the artworks Guided People to Find Their Way, 35 percent said the artworks were Bold; 31 percent said the artworks Respected the Environment, and 16 percent said the artworks were Relevant to Local History, Present and Future. 16 percent also selected Other which included not applicable/or didn’t respond to the question, and one respondent stated, “Interactive creative opportunity”.
- Open Responses: In addition to multiple choice questions, respondents were asked to tell us anything else about the projects in Natick Center. Overall the responses were positive as “loved” was one of the most used term of the 55 percent of the total respondents to answer this question.

Downtown Important Natick Creative Makes Place  
Loved Nice Art Kids Idea

What the responses highlighted varied from excitement about specific projects to criticisms about the works to a need for clarity as to why the projects were installed in the first place. Examples from the open response question included:

- *“Favorite is Jump Natick and wished it was there for everyone to enjoy all the time. Loved seeing everyone play on it. Kids [and] Adults!!! Tree was cool.”*
- *“Loved the Clootie Tree because we picked up the wish rag at the library and then tied it on the tree to join with the other wishes. Also the tree can be seen while driving by and it looks very festive!”*
- *“I don’t like the banners on the gazebo, there could have been other places to showcase that work. It cheapens the beauty of our beautiful downtown. Also the [wayfinding] decals were peeling up and not sticking. Loved those of all the things I saw but to done them dog water and peeling off already looked terrible.”*
- *“It’s an interesting idea...curious about the goals”*

- *“It was really fun to happen upon the art”*
- *“Nice to see something different. Art works around gazebo have a peaceful meaning. Played hopscotch. Creativity is important for our brains.”*

## **Creatives Perspectives**

Interviews were used to gather the perspective of the creatives. The initial interviews were completed by five out of the six creatives and four out of the six completed the follow up email questionnaire. These surveys didn't include the artists and the work associated with the gazebo artwork. Goal of the questions were to understand how the creatives thought that their projects addressed the above goals, how their projects were received by the public, how developing an artwork for public use influenced their design process, including materials selection, and how their projects influenced the location. Below is the analysis of the interviews.

### Addressing the Project Goals

Overall, when developing the artworks, the creatives considered the public heavily in the intention, design and execution of their projects. They looked at a number of variables when designing their works from how the pieces would be beneficial to the public, such as “Wayfinding Floor Decal Stickers” and the “Creature Comfort”, to engage with all ages, such as “Jump On Me Natick!” and “Musical Bridge”, to encouraging people to explore different parts of Natick Center, such as “The Wishing Tree” and “Let’s Root For Each Other”. These considerations aligned, from the viewpoint of the creatives with some of or all the goals outlined above.

During the pre-weekend interviews, “Include Everyone” and “Engage the Public” were the two goals which all respondents agreed that their work addressed. This is illustrated by Kutnetsova who said when discussing her work that “...everyone can use them, anybody can come and play...People can interact.” Bruckner observed of “Jump On Me Natick!”, “I felt that it was very well received by the public. Kids loved it, parents loved it, and even adults were seen hopping on it as they walked by. “

“Be Bold” was another goal that many of the creatives aspired to when developing their projects as three of the six creatives agreed that their work addressed this goal. Quazi stated about her project “Wayfinding Floor Decal Stickers”, “[The] colors are bold, bright and spiritual.” Tuck commented that “the look [of the tree] is bold and interactive.”

Tuck and Quazi were the only two who specifically addressed the goal of “Guide People to Find Their Way”. Quazi saw this goal as a way to assist people coming to Natick Center. She said “[The] town needs wayfinding. [To] see things, to help move people along a path.” Tuck on the other hand looked at this as a means of storytelling in that participants would “travel throughout Natick and then travel to the tree” using the experience of engaging with the projects to build an experience in Natick Center. Tuck also saw her project as an opportunity to engage with new businesses and to encourage others to visit those businesses as well. She explained, “All the places I went to were happy to be involved – bring [in] foot traffic. Bruno Barbara Shop is moving to Natick Center so something to encourage people to attend a new location. [The artwork is] bringing people to different areas to where they may not go.”

Tuck and Quazi also considered “Be Relevant to Local History, Present and Future” to be in align with their projects. Quazi said of her work that “[it] blends together all of the goals because it points out all of the features of the town and encourages people to get out.”

Two of the creatives specified that their projects addressed the goal of “Respect the Environment.” Though, it can be observed that that all the projects addressed this goal. The artists studied the area, worked with the town of Natick public works department, and took the weather into consideration when selecting the materials and installation methods for their projects. Brucker worked with a print copy and tested different types of materials that would be both easy to remove and safe in all weather. Quazi did similar research as her artwork was also placed in pathways to be stepped on. Anti-slip materials were a must to make these projects a success. Fauverman used his extensive knowledge of materials and installation methods when deciding on the design of his benches. Kutnetsova considered environmental impact of her project and selected recycled items and reused materials.

#### Received by the Public

Overall, the creatives felt their projects were well received by the public. Bruckner commented, “I felt that it was very well receive by the public. [...] Everyone was smiling, having fun, taking photos of their kids, etc.”. Tuck stated, “I think my artwork was very well liked by those who came in contact with it. I observed people over the course of the two weeks adding wishes to the tree. Some locations were more used than others. [...] I have had people email and [Instagram] me with pictures of them with the tree. I had people tell me how nice it looks blowing in the breeze.” Tuck went on to discuss an exciting opportunity that came out of the project with a local school, “I also have had someone from SPARK and Hopkington Public Schools contact me. Spark is using the tree at an event in December for a weeklong showing of the Mister Rodgers documentary. Hopkington [has] asked me for a budget to possibly create a tree for their elementary school!”

#### Integration and Influence of Space

Each of the responding creatives felt that their work positively impacted the location and that the location of their artwork in the Natick Center area worked well for their project. Tuck responded that “I believe the location of the tree was perfect. It was near walking paths and well seen from the road. It was happened upon as well as sought out.” And Quazi stated, “My work has integrated into the public space, as the design blends in with the existing architecture of the town center.”

The influence on the space was palatable as well. Bruckner stated, “People walking on the pathway to cut through to the other side of town actually stopped to enjoy the Common, it was an activity for people to stop to enjoy, a surprise. It added to the character of the town.” Tuck commented on how her piece “activated the Common” and Quazi noted that her project “changed the public space by giving people a way to find the landmarks easily without technology.”

#### Durability of Materials

The durability of the materials varied. Quazi’s stated that her work “held up well against the recent wind and rain”, but Bruckner’s work had to come down before the end of the two-weeks. He explained, “The poor weather and/or human interference unfortunately did not allow it to survive the full two weeks. [...] More expensive materials that would have definitely lasted longer, could have been used if the budget permitted it. Timing of the installation of the material was also a factor. Because of the quick deadline, a poor (but necessary) alternative installer was used in order to install the artwork before the rain and in time for the weekend event. “

## Stakeholder Responses

The local stakeholders for this project vary from a business owner, to a librarian, a police lieutenant, among others. Their relationships to the project varied from an artists' selection committee member to Natick Public Art Commission appointee to a community member who was involved with the development of the goals. In their interviews, they were asked a variety of questions to help understand how the projects will address the goals and impact Natick Center. Out of the six stakeholders recommended for the interviews, four responded to the phone interview and only one responded to the follow up email questionnaire.

The stakeholder's responses were informative about the selection process, logistics and provided observations on how the weather and time of year impacted public engagement with the projects. However, there were some responses that helped gauge their excitement and the role they felt the projects can play in Natick Center. One respondent stated "[I] like the idea of temporary artworks to test on what the public responses." Three out of the four respondents to the phone interviews said that "Guide People to Find Their Way" and "Engage the Public" were the top priorities for the projects and one specified in the follow up questionnaire that "the hopscotch and location medallions were very well received and their placement surprised people. They were simple but effective".

Additional comments included reflected on how creative placemaking can assist in drawing more people to Natick Center and highlighting underutilized spaces:

- *"Natick Center is on the fore front of suburban communities between a draw with the neighborhoods and communities. The more people are drawn and engaged with Natick Center the more likely they are to have an economic impact on the town."*
- *"Highlight and recognizing historical parts of Natick Center. Veterans park is [the] entrance to the commuter rail."*

## Conclusion

In review of the above data it can be said that art in public places can address the creative placemaking goals of the town of Natick. From the public to local stakeholders and the creatives involved in this project, the overall response to the six temporary creative placemaking demonstration projects highlighted enthusiasm and interest in continuing to have artworks located throughout Natick Center. The demonstration projects assisted in addressing ongoing concerns such as wayfinding and encouraged people to visit shops and other local attractions. The artworks engaged a variety of people from all ages and encouraged people to stop and participate in their surroundings. The thoughtful goals developed with community input helped the creatives develop artworks that were impactful and engaging to the Natick Center population. Overall, the demonstration projects were a successful test in understanding how artworks would be received in Natick Center.