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# **Placeworx: A Model to Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment**

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## **Abstract**

*The Placeworx project is an innovative community-university partnership between the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum located in Pilsen, the heart of Chicago's Mexican community. This field report describes a participatory research initiative that created opportunities and spaces for young people to creatively participate in planning the future of their community. The Placeworx project offers a model for engaging and empowering young participants. The participants used a variety of communicative tools and techniques to describe community assets as well their concerns about rapid urban development and gentrification in their immediate neighborhood. Based on our experience, we provide some guidelines for creating and sustaining community partnerships.*

**Keywords:** [partnerships](#), [participation](#), [planning](#), [gentrification](#), [art](#), [digital technologies](#)

## **Background and Context**

For the past two years, Pilsen, Chicago has served as the site of an innovative after-school program called Placeworx. The program, a community/university partnership between the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (MFACM) was designed to challenge young people to think critically about neighborhood change.

Placeworx had its genesis in 2002 when we began a series of conversations about developing the capacity of young people to be catalysts and agents of social change in their communities. Our professional training as urban planners and our varied experiences in community organizing, advocacy, and youth work shaped our initial proposals. Our proposal development was grounded in the belief that young people have a rich understanding of their immediate neighborhood, both as a physical setting and as a social unit. However, their knowledge and experiences needed to be organized and codified in order to be used to effectively address critical community concerns. Based on this premise, we developed the idea for Placeworx to meet the needs of the Pilsen community. After an extensive period of negotiation, the Placeworx program was formally launched in partnership with the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum with major funding from the Ford Foundation (2003-2005). Additional support was provided by the Great Cities Institute and the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at UIC.

This field report describes the program and highlights aspects that we consider central to its success and sustainability. We begin with a brief overview of the Pilsen neighborhood.

## **Pilsen in Words and Pictures**

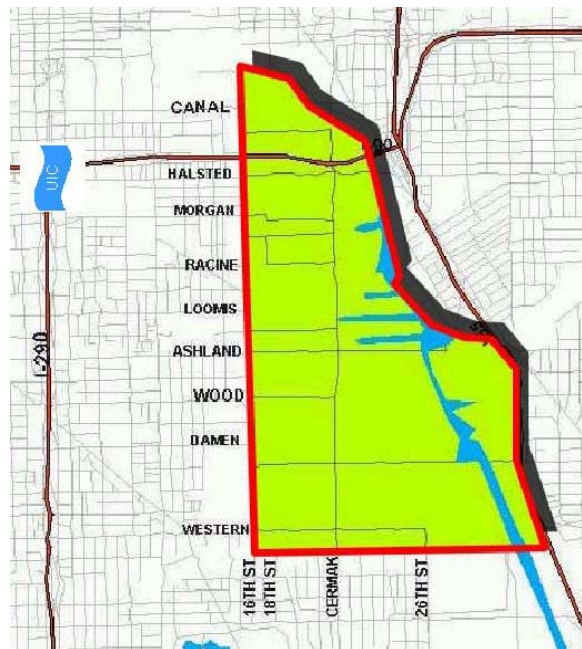
The Pilsen neighborhood has a long tradition of serving as a port of entry for new Americans. Located only a few miles southwest of downtown Chicago (Figures 1 and 2), Pilsen was once a largely Czech and German working-class neighborhood. Later, Croatians, Lithuanians, Italians and other immigrant groups settled in the area.

Today, according to official 2000 census figures, approximately 44,000 people call Pilsen their home, and about 89 percent of these residents are Latino, predominantly of Mexican heritage. Pilsen is often regarded as Chicago's largest Latino community, and the community profile compiled by the Neighborhoods Initiative reveals that conditions there are less-than-ideal. Approximately 70 percent of Pilsen adults have not completed ninth grade, have limited mastery of English, no marketable skills, and few of the basic skills necessary for survival in Chicago. Pilsen's main high school, Benito Juarez, reports that a sizeable majority of their students are classified as low income. 2000 Census figures indicate that 40 percent of the Pilsen population is less than 21 years old, and teen pregnancy and parenthood are alarmingly common, as are gang involvement and substance abuse. According to the Chicago Board of Education, a total of 65 percent of youth in Pilsen drop out of high school, with dire consequences for their future participation in the work force.

Figure 1. Map of Chicago along the shores of Lake Michigan



Figure 2. Map of Pilsen



However, the demographics do not tell the complete story. Pilsen has a very vibrant informal economy and a majority of its residents are very entrepreneurial and hard working. The community's main commercial strips feature stores that cater to the Mexican community such as markets for Mexican cooking, photography studios, immigration attorneys, bakeries, family restaurants and fast food *taquerias*. The Pilsen area restaurants attract tourists and customers from across the city, and the streets bustle with the activity of sidewalk vendors and other entrepreneurs. Pilsen is also a well-organized community with a large network of community organizations, social service agencies, churches, and schools. Residents have taken leadership roles in many community improvement efforts at the local and city-wide level, including Chicago public school reform and community policing programs.

Pilsen has also been at the center of the muralist movement in Chicago since the early 1970s. Many artists call Pilsen home, attracted by its affordable rents and access to live/work spaces. Street art is common in Pilsen and as we learned through our project, there is a great diversity in the types of art that can be found all around Pilsen, ranging from gang/graffiti art and religious art to collaboratively designed and implemented community murals (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Plaza with murals**



The next section describes the overall structure of our program and some of the highlights of our work over the past two years.

## Program Planning and Design

The broad outline of the Placeworx program was established early and with relatively little disagreement between the partners. Both university and community partners (henceforth referred to as the planning team) quickly agreed that the program would be implemented as an after-school program and would be based in Pilsen, rather than at the university.

We agreed that the program would recruit between ten and 15 young people between the ages of 16 and 21 years who would *choose to participate* in the program. Accordingly, youth expressing interest in the general themes of the program (exploring the built environment to understand neighborhood change, learning about urban planning as a profession, acquiring new communication skills) were encouraged to attend an open house where we introduced ourselves and spoke briefly about our own backgrounds and our work at the university. Using jargon-free language, we described the project's goals and the types of activities that we envisioned undertaking with youth. Participants' interests and their willingness to commit to the 15-week program were used as selection criteria.

Approximately 15 young people initially expressed interest in the program. Some of these participants had previous experience working with community groups and in team settings, while others had never participated in a group activity before. Some of the participants were young parents, some were going to school and excelling, while others were on the verge of dropping out. Many of them were holding at least one job outside of school to support themselves and/or their families. Although the age group defined by our project was 16 through 21 years, students as young as 13 showed an interest in participating. Eventually, seven young people ranging from ages 13 to 21 made the commitment to participate in the first year of the program, from February to June 2004. They had diverse goals and interests, but they all wanted to learn more about their neighborhood and community, and ways to "make a difference." In the second year, eight students participated in the program. Although the program was held at the Radio Arte station/Yollocalli Youth Museum space in the primarily Latino community of Pilsen, participants also came from adjoining neighborhoods, bringing with them different perspectives that enhanced group discussions and experiences.

It is important to note that all of the planning team leaders (the university-based principal investigators and graduate research assistants, and museum staff), acknowledged the absence of young people during the preliminary goal setting and curriculum development process and therefore resolved to build in some feedback loops (process evaluations) to ensure that youth voices were heard as the curriculum was implemented.

The curriculum that emerged from the complex negotiations between UIC and the MFACM encouraged individuals or small teams of youth participants to identify a theme or a topic that they wanted to explore in greater detail. The lessons and activities were then tailored around these themes and accommodated the specific interests of the participants. For instance, in the first year of Placeworx, we encouraged the students to come up with questions that they wanted to ask the

community—questions about the quality of life of their neighborhood. Participants had a group discussion to come up with the questions, then transferred them onto stencils (Figure 4). Once the stencils were created, youth participants placed them in strategic locations in Pilsen and used them to create opportunities for dialogue with adults (e.g., local business owners who were approached to put up these stencils on store windows) (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Youth making stencils**



**Figure 5. Youth placing signs in shop windows**



The development of a collaborative curriculum was an intensive process. This was partly because the planning team was trying to achieve two goals: 1) to help youth understand the complex nature of neighborhood change, and 2) to develop their skills to represent and articulate their own solutions to pressing community issues. Some of the concerns that the planning team had to negotiate included:

- Who makes decisions about the appropriateness of the curriculum content?
- Who delivers the content? Are these presenters culturally appropriate role models for youth?
- Are instructors or participants required to maintain a “neutral” stance about contentious issues related to neighborhood change such as gentrification?
- How can non-traditional techniques (such as poetry or art) be adapted to discuss and describe neighborhood change?

The conversations helped to make the biases held by different members of the planning team visible. For example, some members of the team were skeptical about using popular education methodologies to teach formal planning concepts. Likewise, some members of the planning team viewed neighborhood change processes as inevitable, even desirable, while others felt that the neighborhood change occurring in Pilsen was generated by external market forces that ultimately undermined the integrity of the neighborhood.

We also identified many institutional barriers that limited the establishment of a truly experiential learning process. For instance, the very act of planning—i.e., making decisions about the curriculum and programming the day-to-day activities—often limited opportunities for creative expression by youth. As we recognized these barriers, the planning team members agreed to support a less-structured approach to accommodate day-to-day activities to be planned in partnership with youth.

### **Program Implementation**

MFACM secured the meeting spaces, assisted with the recruitment of youth participants, and agreed to support a community organizer/youth coordinator who maintained day-to-day contact with the youth participants. In each of the two years that the program was in operation, the participants came to a community facility located in the heart of Pilsen, a familiar and safe space that was already being used for youth activities. Each year, the planning took place during the fall (September through December), while the program activities took place for about 12 to 15 weeks in the spring (February through June). This arrangement accommodated the university calendar as well as the students' school schedule.

Participants met twice a week for two to three hours after school. Sessions were led by the principal investigators, graduate research assistants, and staff from the museum. As instructors, we viewed ourselves as facilitators, assisting students in exploring topics of interest to them, and placing the issues they identified in a problem-solving context so that they could learn more about how to make positive change happen in their communities.



The different groups of youth participants explored a wide range of topics that related to the theme of neighborhood change. At the end of each spring term (i.e., in June 2004 and 2005), the participants gave a public presentation to the community. These presentations were opportunities for celebration and for adults in the community to hear what youth had to say about the quality of life in Pilsen (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Final community presentations**



In Placeworx's first year, learning new technologies became the organizing theme that held all the activities and projects together. Students learned to use a variety of software programs like Adobe's Photoshop and ImageReady, and Microsoft's PowerPoint. Participants used the software to manipulate photographs and create animated sequences and presentations about neighborhood change. The technologies also helped them organize their ideas and link qualitative and quantitative data to make a coherent set of observations about a particular issue, such as the potential positive benefits of street art, the disadvantages of losing traditional models of health care, the use of public and semi-public spaces in the community, the impact of gentrification, and so on.

In the second year of Placeworx, the emphasis was on understanding gentrification as a way to think about neighborhood change. Many students had never heard of the term "gentrification" at the start of the program, and were not even able to pronounce the word. In addition, we came to understand that there is no direct

Spanish translation of the term, which made it even more difficult for many students for whom English was their second language to comprehend. Students first learned about different traditional definitions of the concept. They then heard from local community leaders about their experiences with gentrification, and attended a community rally on the proposed conversion of an industrial building into a high-end market-rate housing development in Pilsen. After several weeks of discussing gentrification in various ways, students then created their own definitions. This interactive learning model gave students several different ways of looking at the issue, and then allowed them to express their own ideas about gentrification using a variety of techniques including group discussions and brainstorming sessions, interactive team projects, exercises, games, role playing, written reflections and poetry, drawing, conducting interviews with family members and neighborhood residents, photography and technology.

### **Program Reflections**

As we reflect on the accomplishments of Placeworx, we recognize that one of the main strengths of the Placeworx model was its ability to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of community partners and youth participants without compromising the goals of youth development and empowerment. Our insistence on grounding the program in the community and creating a safe “neutral” physical space in Pilsen for youth to come and hang out to talk about community issues strengthened the program. In addition, the creation of an electronic space (<http://www.placeworx.com>) to archive youth work preserves a collective community memory about the potential of Pilsen’s youth. Placeworx supported documentation of the project by creating final presentations at the end of each year. Students, parents, and community members were able to celebrate the accomplishments of their youth, so often seen in a negative light. Last but not least, Placeworx incorporated community-based educators working with youth, rather than having the content delivered solely by university-based educators and facilitators.

Young people in communities like Pilsen have been directly affected by the elimination of many social and recreational programs and facilities for youth, as well as the decline in the number of “youth-friendly” places in their neighborhood. Youth-friendly places are accessible indoor or outdoor settings that offer young people opportunities for different types of activities and interactions with peers, and a place to “hang out” without being harassed or intimidated. It is regrettable that places designed to be youth-friendly are sometimes inaccessible to young residents. For example, UIC requires that community residents be 18 years or older to use school recreational facilities to bowl or play pool. Further, youth facilities in the community are sometimes inaccessible because youth seldom have the financial resources to pay entry fees to use local youth facilities. The Placeworx project created a safe physical and electronic space that allowed young people to explore, describe, and critically examine the changes taking place in their neighborhood.

## **Tips to Create a Successful Community/University Partnership (from a University Perspective)**

Based on our experience, below are some suggestions for creating a successful participatory learning program as a community/university partnership. While our own unique experiences through Placeworx shaped these observations, they are generalizable across different university/community settings.

- Take time to build a trusting relationship with your community partner. Resolve conflicts as they come up and maintain an attitude that almost every difference about the specifics can be negotiated as long as there is trust.
- Begin initial conversations with the community partner starting with senior management. Secure buy-in from management before speaking with program directors or individual program leaders. Often program directors or staff are excited about collaborative opportunities because they are constantly exploring ways to showcase the unique benefits of their program and leverage support for their ideas. This is undoubtedly a good thing. However, senior managers are more aware of how the collaborative partnership can be integrated with the organization's overall strategic plan. In the long run, the enthusiastic support of senior management will ensure program sustainability.
- Plan for regular team meetings with all partners. To ensure continuity, make sure that at least two team members from the university and two members from the community are able to attend all meetings.
- Keep written notes of all meetings and circulate them. When necessary, develop memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that can be agreed upon by the different organizational partners. Often the process of developing a MOU helps to bring underlying conflicts out into the open where they can be discussed and (hopefully) resolved. Typically, these MOUs are written before the youth activities commence; however, it may become necessary to add an addendum or draft a new MOU while the project is underway if significant changes are made during the course of the project.
- Keep conversations about budgetary and personnel matters separate from content and curriculum matters. As a practical matter, those individuals involved with the arcana of budgeting are rarely the same individuals who are involved with determining the quality and appropriateness of curricular content. In addition, involving faculty, staff, graduate students, or youth participants in discussions about budgetary matters may not be relevant or appropriate to them.
- Recruit community-based persons who are close in age to youth to deliver content and manage day-to-day activities. We have found that teenagers are more responsive to peer educators than to older persons. Peer educators are able to connect with youth participants because they are likely to share similar interests, especially in their choice of music, clothes, language, and

other cultural trends. Furthermore, using peer educators makes the program seem less like school.

- Secure space in the community to house the project activities. The space should be safe, and accessible by public transportation, and in a location that is familiar to youth participants.
- Plan for a community-wide presentation of project activities and advertise it widely. Garner publicity for the event using mainstream and niche media resources. The presentation serves the important role of showcasing young people who are often perceived as “self-absorbed” and “detached” in a different light. At the community presentations, youth have an opportunity to show that they care about their neighborhood and community and want to have a say in shaping its future development.

Our project, with the support of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum offered safe and artistic ways for youth to describe issues related to neighborhood change that were important to them. Both researchers and community partners learned the depth of youth-specific knowledge and their potential to question and redesign their surroundings in constructive and meaningful ways. As one Placeworx partner said,

*Youth know this community better than anyone—we [adults] just drive to work, school, and then home. They walk it, work in it, and understand it. By working with youth, [and developing] the tools to articulate their unique understanding of the community, we open ourselves up to a world of possibilities.*

## **Acknowledgements**

Many individuals participated in Placeworx over the two-year period that the project was active. We thank each one of them for their hard work, their support and commitment to the process and we share credit for the project’s success with them. However, as the principal investigators, we take responsibility for this written narrative.

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