Project Team and Sponsors
Photos by:
Grant Fanning
John Murden

Transcript:
Catherine Komp
A project that temporarily transformed two blocks of North 25th Street in Church Hill North neighborhood of Richmond, VA into a model active community. Team Better Block conducted a series of workshops to build pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, active public spaces and pop-up shops with the community.
Community Walk

Richmond’s Better Block targeted a commercial intersection along North 25th Street in the Church Hill North neighborhood. The initiative began in March, with a community walk and discussion that asked residents what changes they’d like to see on the block. The walk informed the build plan on the next page.
Better Block is a Texas-based organization that has worked in dozens of cities around the country. They use a placemaking method called tactical urbanism, which brings residents together to create rapid, temporary improvements. Through the process, neighbors meet each other, share skills, tools and resources, and the community builds social capital. In the lead-up to the Richmond project, dozens participated in hands-on workshops like how to build pallet furniture and make a street more pedestrian friendly. Those skills were applied directly to the block, with newly created seating to encourage socializing, and bike lanes and a mid-street crosswalk to calm traffic.
Tamera Tazewell: The classes have been awesome. The pallet class was awesome, we made benches and chairs and everyone’s been helpful, I just like the area and I think it’s going to turn-around for the better and we’re having a good time out here.
In just three months, the efforts of an estimated 100 volunteers culminated in a two-day event that showcased building improvements, local artists and entrepreneurs, and ways to make the area more safe and welcoming.
5 Pop-up Shops
2 Parklets
650 Feet of cycle track
Over 100 Volunteers
3000 SQ feet of new public space
6 existing business storefronts remodeled w/ $1300 grants
Pam Crews: *By Capital One and the Better Block project coming in, it’s given us a chance to paint the building, redo the storefront and the glass, it made it so much better, it gave it an uplift.*

Crews was one of five property owners who received a $1300 grant from Capital One to fix up the outside of their buildings.
Jacole Thomas: This is kind of a depressed area if you will and I thought it was something positive and it really, really has been. I’m re-energized because being an entrepreneur can be hard, it can be discouraging. This is good, this puts me back to where I knew I wanted to be, to realign my vision. So I just think it’s a great project.
David Marion: They wanted to get a collection of artists out to help enlighten, inspire, bring some inspiration to the area. We were brought together as joint community of artists to help out with the effort and the community, which is really important.

Richmond’s Better Block also emphasized local talent through an open air art studio in the large brick courtyard of the upcoming coffee shop Miracles. There, painters worked on murals sized to fit in windows previously boarded up with weathered plywood.

Community Fab Lab
1105 N. 25th Street
Other artists included Sir James Thornhill, Hamilton Glass, Latasha Dunston and Ed Trask, who independently sought permission from a property owner to transform the side of a brick building. Already painted mossy green, it became the canvas for Trask’s large piece depicting a youth playing the violin, a blue bird perched on the top of bow.
Michael Wynn: What this event did is bring out the diversity that was already in the neighborhood, it was just everybody was in their own corner. There’s a lot of demographics in this neighborhood, rich, black, white and poor so this event brought everybody out.
Along with a 5k run/walk hosted by Sports Backers, local leaders also held the East End Economic Development Summit. The city has been working on revitalization plans for the larger area for years, investing in the new MLK Middle School, library renovations and healthy food access. Bon Secours Community Hospital says it’s also committed to the physical, social and economic health of the East End. The healthcare organization plans to build a “Center for Healthy Communities” and a medical office building which officials say will create dozens of new jobs. And they’ve allocated $300,000 in grants to small businesses and start-ups in the neighborhood.
A vacant lot featuring a giant sculpture spelling out the word “love” became a Public Plaza for the diverse crowd. On a grassy area, youth tossed a beach ball and swung inside hula hoops while listening to local musicians No BS! Brass Band. Many other improvements were made to public spaces and the street.
A parklet is a small space serving as an extension of the sidewalk to provide amenities and green space for people using the street. It is typically the size of several parking spaces. Parklets typically extend out from the sidewalk at the level of the sidewalk to the width of the adjacent parking space.
A **cycle track** is a form of cycling infrastructure consisting of marked lanes, tracks, shoulders and paths designated for use by cyclists and from which motorized traffic is generally excluded. The term includes bike lanes, cycle tracks, separated bike lanes, road shoulders and side paths located within a road right-of-way.
The Better Block allows for innovation and in this project a buffered bicycle lane used green skip markings to highlight an approaching driveway and vinyl colorful markings for a crosswalk. These and other improvements led to quantifiable changes to the safety and livability of the block.
Metrics: North 25th Street

10% decrease in average decibel level
Average noise levels on N 25th Street measure 65db, which is louder than a typical conversation. During Better Block ambient noise decreased to 58db due to parklets, café and pop-up spaces.

30% decrease in average speeds
Average speeds decreased from 20 mph to 14 mph during Better Block, which significantly reduces the risk of fatality.
Before/After Perceptions: North 25<sup>th</sup> Street

**Most** like the history, barbershop, and potential of the area.

**Most** feel the area is safe, but needs:
*To be cleaned, more police, more light and businesses that activate the street with food and neighborhood services.*

**What is missing?**
*More police, lighting, access to healthy food and activities for children.*

**What would make you walk or bike more?**
*More destinations to walk to and clean up area.*

**Does** the area feel safer? 100% Said Yes!
*More people and activities make it feel safer.*

**What would make it even safer?**
*More police presence, program the public spaces and keep the cycle tracks.*

**What is missing?**
*More retail, restaurants and a grocery store were the most mentioned along with programming of public spaces with events.*

**What would make you walk or bike more?**
*More cycle tracks and parklets.*
Recommendations: North Church Hill Merchants Association

Association:
Starting with the property owners and businesses that participated in the Better Block develop a partnership between them and the Robinson Theater to program the area with events at least once a quarter. Build off this doing model with the formation of a formal merchants association after one year of loose affiliation.
Recommendation: North 25th Street

**Clean It:**
Multiple property and business owners began cleaning and repairing buildings during the better block! This indicates a strong perception change in the area and appetite for revitalization.

**City:** Conduct a free building permit month once yearly to aid in building repair and upgrades.

**Private:** Assist owners with design and continue storefront grants. Also, the roll-off dumpster was a big hit. In conjunction with the free permit month, stage two free dumpsters.
Recommendation: North 25th Street

Activate It:
Make the Better Block and 5k an annual event! The combination of community performances, food trucks, pop-up shops, bicycle lanes and placemaking created a lively scene. It allows the community to continually test improvements, build-momentum and advertise the budding destination of Church Hill North.
Recommendations: North 25th Street

City of Richmond: Use cycle tracks in the City’s Bicycle Master Plan and integrate North 25th Street into the network.

Community: Advocate for wheelchairs and scooters to use cycle tracks with proper signage.

Private: Advance crowdfunding and public – private partnerships to fund infrastructure.
Recommendations: 
Church Hill North Fab Lab

**Community Fab-Lab:**
A fab lab (fabrication laboratory) is a small-scale workshop offering (personal) digital fabrication. A fab lab is generally equipped with an array of flexible computer controlled tools that cover several different length scales and various materials, with the aim to make "almost anything".

**Owner:** Consider hosting a Fab Lab on North 25th Street.
**City:** Support a zoning change that allows for small scale manufacturing, gathering, housing, retail and restaurant.
**Private:** Incentivize and fund the machines, materials, build-out and first year operating costs.
Recommendations: North 25th Street

City: Create a policy and incentive package to convert parking spaces into parklets and bicycle parking spaces on North 25th Street as a pilot project for entire city.

Private: host a competition for parklet design and award construction grants.
Recommendaions:
1006 North 25th Street

**Pop-up and Public Space:**
*Property owner:* use the space to develop a series of pop-up businesses that activate the building and adjacent vacant lot at least once a quarter.
*Private:* Continue grants for pop-up shops.
*City:* Loosen rules for temporary certificates of occupancy and purchase adjacent vacant lot and allow for food trucks and community markets. Building a permanent stage and adding public art should be a public-private partnership.
Recommendations: Walking Tours

During events, local REALTORS®, members of Historic Richmond Foundation, City of Richmond Economic and Community Development should host walking tours of vacant and underused properties aimed at attracting potential investors.
Recommendations: Development Strategy

Block by Block:
Capital One, Bon Secours, the Richmond Association of REALTORS®, DaVita, the Sports Backers, Councilmember Newbille, and many other people and organizations invested significant time and resources to make permanent changes to the area. Several investors and property management firms were there, checking out the vacant buildings and speaking with the property owners about possibilities. In short, it is going to take East End people and new people from outside of the area to revitalize Church Hill North.
Recommendations: Next Steps

Action:
Schedule a meeting of the potential Merchants Association (better block businesses and property owners/ Robinson Theater) and create an action list based on this report’s recommendations. Don’t meet again until progress is made (don’t over meet).
In a short amount of time, we rehabilitated four vacant storefronts to house pop-up shops for the weekend, and reprogrammed public space to house many more. Some of those vacancies were more work than others to restore and we definitely went above and beyond the call of duty! For example, we painted a historical building the right color scheme, cleared a fire exit where there wasn’t one before, built 15 picnic tables, created a number of canvasses for local artists, pulled a ton of weeds and mowed a lot of lawn, and a whole lot more than that. Over the week of June 8, those two blocks of saw quite the transformation. Max Hepp-Buchanan - Sports Backers