

GroundZero Action Network



Mission

GroundZero Action Network is an open network of doers, makers, and creative people who collaborate on projects focused on Pittsburgh's urban environment and culture. Blurring the boundaries of social, political, cultural, and economic agendas we seek to capture the creative energy of the City. Our means to action are all-inclusive and boundless, with the general goal of providing a creative, multi-disciplinary approach to connecting people, harnessing ideas, and generating projects. We pursue projects with three interrelated themes: projects that encourage and spawn creativity and the arts, defined in the broadest possible terms; projects that advocate for a just, democratic, open, diverse, and sustainable city, region, and society; projects that strengthen social, cultural, and physical connections – bringing people together and making things happen.

Structure

We are not an incorporated entity. We have no offices, we take no money, and we have no formal hierarchical structure. Instead we are a loose all-volunteer network run by a core group of people who create and organize projects. We have three loose levels of structure: a core group of organizers, a series of project teams, a general membership of subscribers to our email lists, and participants in our events.

The core is an evolving group of 10-to-20 people who are active organizers and project leaders. Some have participated since the beginning, others have joined recently, and some have fallen away. Internally we have no official hierarchy among the core members. Our core members are involved with one or more of our projects and often have connections to related organizations. We meet monthly to share information, discuss projects, and direct the overarching organization.

Each project team is led by a core member and is generally composed of volunteers assembled to formulate and implement the project idea. The structure of our project teams ranges from very informal to semi-non-profit-status boards. Project teams are responsible for seeking and securing independent funding sources to make the project happen. Some of our oldest projects have graduated from the organization, becoming autonomous entities with a dedicated funding stream and a more organized structure than the network itself.

Beyond the projects, we have a general “membership” of people who subscribe to our email lists and participate in our projects and events. We consider anyone who participates to be a member of the network. In order to engage this general membership creatively in our projects, we hold project-generation events under the name “Activate Pittsburgh.”

Network

We have chosen this loose network structure in order to stay flexible, virtual, and nimble. In a region of ossified physical and institutional infrastructure, we seek to make change happen now through what ever channels offer the least resistance. We believe in connecting and utilizing what is already present, whether it be organizations, money, infrastructure, or ideas. Our virtual structure forces us to partner with others to make our projects happen, and thus our network builds.

Our network resides primarily on the web connecting people through a series of list-serves. We use this network to communicate information, solicit ideas, build project teams, and advertise our events – our lists directly reach some 2000 people in the Pittsburgh region. From the start, we have utilized web-based communications to create the network. Without the informal uncontrollable forwarding of email, we would never have existed. Our invitations and manifestos were sent to everyone we knew, this in turn went to those they knew and on and on, until those who showed up were people we had never seen before.

Later on, we formalized this network in the form of a pair of interconnected d-lists. One is our announce list, which pertains only to our own projects. It communicates information, solicits volunteers, and advertises events. The other is a project called “Happenings,” which is a short weekly email digest of regional cultural and political events that are submitted to us. People can

sign up for jointly for Happenings and Announce on our website. We also have a secondary set of smaller internal d-lists based around our projects and for our core group.

Creativity

Creativity is the key concept for GroundZero. Our network is composed of creative people from all different disciplines. We seek participants who are creative in the broadest sense of the word. Among us are artists, designers, writers, programmers, musicians, architects, gardeners, chefs, waiters, lawyers and so forth. We embrace anyone who is willing to work creatively to build culture with us. Rather than seeking a specialized creative class, we follow Joseph Beuys in the belief that everyone is an artist. Thus we seek to tap and harness the creativity of all citizens, allowing people of all disciplines to realize their creative potential.

Methodology

We believe in building culture from the bottom up. Our goal has always been to capture people's creativity and energy. To do this, we have used a variety of techniques borrowed from professional design and planning practice as well as more artistic ideas, such as Joseph Beuys' Social Sculpture. In our public sessions we attempt to engage whom ever shows up by asking them to share their ideas and visions. Sometimes this is done verbally in a group; sometimes we ask people to write on post-it notes that are collected on the wall. Through group discussions about project ideas, we are able to tap people's creativity and often to inspire them to participate as leaders or volunteers. By engaging people in the process of developing the idea, we are able to build teams of volunteers to move the initial project ideas forward. As the projects develop and grow the project teams typically partner with other organizations, seek grants and donations, and evolve into their own entities. Some projects have produced one time events, others have responded to a specific crisis or issue, and others have evolved into quasi-autonomous entities with a greater level of structure and organization than the network itself.

Based upon the success of our early projects, we have continued to hold public idea generation sessions under the project name "Activate Pittsburgh." These sessions have been used to generate new project ideas, develop existing projects, and to connect more people to the network. Generally our projects fall into four categories.

1. Developing projects coming out of "Activate Pittsburgh" (Literary group, Urban Hike).
2. Seeking resources for existing projects to take them to a new level (SALVO, Students Uncensored).
3. Individuals coming to GZ wanting to do a project about something specific (F7).
4. Coalition building (literary group, Mon Fayette, voting event).

Catalysts

Our group evolved out of a series of design charrettes that had taken place in various locations around the city. There were two initial catalysts for our formation. The first was anger about a particularly destructive urban renewal project called "Fifth and Forbes." The city's proposed plan was to demolish and redevelop several blocks of Downtown Pittsburgh into a shopping mall, eradicating dozens of historic buildings and small businesses. This strategy of wholesale removal and replacement was being promoted in the name of attracting more young professionals to the city. The fury over this project created a buzz of energy among the creative community in the city who felt the proposal was completely misguided and unethical. We felt that something needed to be done to show that creative growth could come from within based upon existing resources and ideas.

The second catalyst was a meeting held on March 24, 2000 at Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory to discuss, vent, rant, praise, invent, solve, and create ideas relating to Pittsburgh as a "Center for the New Economy." The premise was to bring creative individuals of Pittsburgh together to discuss the perceived amenities and weaknesses in Pittsburgh's built environment and socio-cultural landscape. This event, attended by about 150 people, was organized and led by Professor Richard Florida and his students at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz School.

The large turnout and constructive dialogues that resulted from the idea-generating charrettes were impressive. It was felt that the issues raised and ideas brought forth could easily be transformed into projects that could help to celebrate the existing culture within Pittsburgh while also serving to attract and sustain elements of the New Economy. The attending group was urged to keep the momentum going and hold the next event. A small group of attendees took it upon themselves to take action. The first action was a direct invitation to the creative masses via an e-mail Manifesto. This call to arms invited the public to attend a session similar to the process held at the Mattress Factory.

Beginnings

This next event, Cinco de Mayo – Pittsburgh's Independence Day – was held May 5, 2000. A downtown site was selected

because of its location at the heart the proposed Fifth and Forbes demolition zone. Approximately 250 people participated in the Cinco de Mayo information-gathering session. We asked people what was good and bad about Pittsburgh and what solutions they saw to addressing the problems. We asked them to specifically to focus on ideas that we could implement working together. Specific design and policy solutions/interventions were proposed, and it became clear that action towards implementing these ideas was the next step.

The Cinco de Mayo organizers decided that the best way to harness the interest and passion generated by the two events was to establish a group with a mandate of developing a network infrastructure to connect, promote, and nurture the talented individuals and resources in the city, and taking action to develop projects that celebrate Pittsburgh. The ideas and observations generated at the Mattress Factory and at the Cinco de Mayo meeting were compiled into a document called “The Yellow Book.” Four projects identified in the book were quickly taken on by members of what became the GroundZero core group. A second major meeting was held to distribute “The Yellow Book” and to build teams for our first four projects. The initial projects focused on improving local public transportation, creating an internet-based information network and website, starting a multidisciplinary local arts event, and fighting the Fifth and Forbes redevelopment project.

Critique

In three years of existence GroundZero has transformed the arts and culture of Pittsburgh beyond our own expectations. However, the organization does have its problems – some that are probably inherent and others that we are striving to address. Our chosen structure is inherently disorganized and loose and, because we have no official leader, we often have trouble with routine organizational tasks. Our core model can at times be personality driven, causing internal conflict and questions of long-term organizational sustainability. The fact that funding happens at the level of the projects means that the central organization is perennially penniless. Our decision to remain a volunteer organization often results in failure to effectively follow through on tasks and projects. Our informality and virtual nature make the organization hard to understand and communicate with from the outside. This has led to some issues of legitimacy when we have tried to take a stand on public policy issues, and it has also sometimes led to a perception of the group as being a closed clique promoting its members’ personal agendas. Because of this perception and because of our project-based structure, we have often times had difficulty engaging people in the overall organization. Lastly, to date, our audience has been limited by technological accessibility, and we have had a limited level of racial diversity in our audience and our internal core.

Current GroundZero Action Network Projects

Project: HAPPENINGS

Happenings is our information network project. It is a subscription email list that sends out a weekly short edited list of arts and culture events submitted to GroundZero. Attached to the Happenings list is our network Announce list which informs people about our own projects, events, and project participation opportunities.

Project: FLUX

The intent of FLUX is to provide a new forum for artists to perform, interact with and promote themselves in non-traditional settings. The settings for these events are carefully chosen to represent locations that are in a state of transition or “flux” between a rich past and a promising future. FLUX events occur a few times a year with a different set of artists each time. They typically draw upwards of a 1000 people.

Project: ACTIVATE PITTSBURGH

Activate Pittsburgh is about making Pittsburgh better from the inside out. This is our project that seeks to capture creative energy, engage new audiences, and start new projects. A few times a year, we hold a session to introduce people to GroundZero, provide a forum for discussion of ideas and projects, and engage people in the network.

Project: ULTRAVIOLET LOOP

The UltraViolet Loop (UV Loop) is a new bus route that circles the city. It started as a small demonstration project. Since our initial project launch, it has evolved into a non-profit UltraViolet Advisory Board, which collaborates with the Port Authority of Allegheny County to run the buses. The UV Loop is designed to showcase many of Pittsburgh’s diverse neighborhoods and nighttime entertainment venues.

Project: MON-FAYETTE EXPRESSWAY

The Mon Fayette is a proposed expressway that will have a profound impact on many of the city’s most valued amenities and assets. The Ground Zero Action Network played a significant role in the creation of the Mon Fayette Alternative plan based upon

upgrading existing roads, introducing new public transit and reinvesting in existing communities. The project has not yet been stopped.

Project: THE ART OF NEWS

The Art of News is a live local news program reporting on Pittsburgh's urban environment and culture in a visually interesting and content diverse manner. The Art of News began as a small project last year. Through the GroundZero network of doers, makers, and creative people, the scope of the project has broadened and has become a truly collaborative project. The show will air on PCTV21.

Project: SKINNYBUILDING

Ground Zero with a variety of partners, transformed the upper two stories of this six foot wide building into a highly visible showcase for the arts located right in the heart of Pittsburgh's downtown. Each month, we transform the 24 windows in this space into a public display space for innovative works by outstanding Pittsburgh artists.

Project: MAKING A SCENE

"Making A Scene" was a 10-day multidisciplinary event that brought artists to the Downtown Cultural District to make art collaboratively with public involvement. MAS took place from October 12-21, 2001 and has had long-lasting influence on collaborative art efforts in the years since its' inaugural event.

Project: URBAN HIKE

Urban Hike aims to connect Pittsburghers to the various neighborhoods of the city – it is a project to educate any willing participants about this great city, via urban hiking. We learn about the various neighborhoods of Pittsburgh by eye-witnessing what makes each so special and unique – their art, culture, and way of life.

Project: ART VOTES

Art Votes is a project dedicated to making Pittsburgh a city that promotes a culture that supports the arts. Art Votes does this through voter registration, mission-focused events and fundraisers, and through education on issues and candidates. The intent is to make artists a visible voting constituency.

Project: BUSK PITTSBURGH

Busk Pittsburgh is a project to promote street performance in Pittsburgh. It has launched an educational campaign that will run throughout the winter and is designed to foster street performing. Efforts include working with performing artists and venues to facilitate the growth of street performance throughout the city, and gaining public acceptance by informing the community about how busking enhances the vitality of city streets.

Project: THE FORGERY

The Forgery is a collective of independent journals, magazines, presses, writers, and literary organizations dedicated to exposing Western Pennsylvania communities to the literary process we offer through educational workshops, readings, events, and publishing to retain and attract literary talent, nurture a literary scene, and help realize a literary voice within those communities.

Project: SALVO

SALVO stands for Salvage Artists Linking Venues and Opportunities. The goal of the project is to foster art making with salvage materials through events and ultimately through a permanent salvage arts work and exhibition space. SALVO will be a hands-on place where people can recycle, create, and collaborate on salvage art. The long-term goal is to create a permanent home for this kind of activity, but the project will start this fall with a major salvage arts festival.

Project: F7

F7, named after the key on the keyboard that launches Microsoft's spell check feature, maintains that spelling has as much to do with intelligence as French kissing has to do with speaking the language, that descriptive spelling is the work of the devil, and that a spelling bee is nothing short of a bloodless battle royal.

Project: COMMUNITY MURALS

The Community Murals project promotes murals and other public art all over the Pittsburgh area. The project idea was adopted and funded by the Sprout Fund. Starting with seven murals, the project strives to make quality art, create a lasting source of employment for local artists provides a source of mentoring for younger area artists, and offers a way for communities to come together to collaborate on the mural process.