

FREE STATE BOULEVARD AND THE STORY OF THE EAST 9TH STREET PLACEKEEPERS

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I am a 30-year resident of East Lawrence, Kansas, a community-based artist and neighborhood organizer. I was drawn to this place right after I left (I should say quit) graduate school in search of a way of being an artist that aligned better with the work I was doing as an organizer and activist. My neighborhood of East Lawrence is the oldest in the city. It has been and continues to be a working-class neighborhood full of radical history and commitment to social justice, but it didn't start that way. Many Lawrencians would like to forget that the land the City now occupies was taken from the Kanza and Delaware people as part of an early placemaking project that concluded with the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854. That tragic history is too often obscured by the wild pride residents have for the Bloody Kansas years leading up to the Civil War, when transplants from Massachusetts fought to ensure that Kansas would enter the Union as a 'Free State.'

Adjacent to present-day downtown, East Lawrence gradually slopes down to the railroad and old factory buildings that run along the Kansas River. It's still full of small single-family homes and backyard gardens. It's where Langston Hughes went to church as a young boy, where Civil Rights marches began and ended and more recently where a massive creative placemaking project funded by ArtPlace was proposed to revitalize us. That project, known as *Free State Boulevard* is the subject of this chapter. As a firsthand witness to it, I was a participant in fighting it and, in the end, one of the people who reimagined it as a more just and equitable endeavor.

The panel

It was a big deal, for me at least, to be invited to present on a panel with the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts about Creative Placemaking. The panel, hosted by the Spencer Museum of Art, included professors from Haskell Indian Nations University and the University of Kansas, a noted architect, and the chair of the Nebraska Arts Council (the Kansas Arts Commission had been defunded by our governor, so there was no chairperson to attend.) The auditorium was full.

It was early 2012, and there had yet to be an official placemaking project in town, so I think most folks didn't fully understand the term (and I still wonder if I do), and because of that, most of the panelists talked around the idea, instead commenting on the disconnect between nature and culture, the overuse of cell phones, and the need for strong arts education. As a community-

based muralist, I was familiar with and often a part of placemaking projects. But this was new. Never had the Spencer Museum or any other arts organization in Lawrence taken notice of this work in such a formal way. Chairman Landesman's presence and the knowledge of big new funding opportunities through NEA's 'Our Town' grants, and ArtPlace changed that. And that new attention made me a little nervous. I felt that not so comfortable feeling of something scary approaching, like when the barometric pressure drops before a storm, and it came out in my comments, where I ended by asking, 'I wonder if maybe we should adapt the phrase Creative Placemaking, to creative place-sustaining, place-keeping, or place-enhancing, because in some cases the places don't need to be made, they just need to be recognized and cared for' (Lowenstein, 2012).

When I think back, there had been signs that something was brewing. There was new real estate speculation happening along East 9th Street (a real estate agent cold-called me to ask if I wanted to sell my studio, but wouldn't say who they were working for), a hotel and new farm-to-table restaurant were being built on what had been a beloved community green space, and there was lots of talk from the chamber of commerce about how East Lawrence artists were an engine for economic development. What I didn't know then was that Chairman Landesman's visit coincided with a yet-to-be revealed effort by our local Arts Center to mount a massive placemaking project in East Lawrence.

And then it hit; news broke that the Lawrence Arts Center was proposing a \$4.5 million project funded by ArtPlace (a privately funded placemaking organization initiated in part by Rocco Landesman in 2011) and the City called 'Free the Radicals' that would 'revitalize' a seven-block stretch of East 9th Street, comprised of small single-family homes and a few local businesses (including my studio), into a kind of hip outdoor arts and culture corridor. I couldn't believe it, even though the proposed project cut right through the middle of our neighborhood, the East Lawrence Neighborhood Association (I was and still am a member of the ELNA board), had not been consulted on the development of the proposal at all. That was not a good sign.

East Lawrence

The eastside comprises about six neighborhoods east of downtown. East Lawrence, the City's original townsite now adjacent to downtown, is one of them. For more than a century, it was known as the Bottoms (closer to the river and railroad), where working-class people lived and few others visited. It's always been a working-class neighborhood with a progressive spirit. East Lawrence's proximity to downtown has always made it a place of contention. For a long time, it was thought of by people who didn't live there as a place to ignore and to go around. This was true in the 1970s when plans were hatched to build a four-lane bypass, the Haskell Loop, that would go straight through East Lawrence into downtown. The fight to stop it (and it *was* stopped) gave rise to new neighborhood activism and led to the formation of our neighborhood association. A similar road project was proposed 20 years later, this time called the Eastern Parkway, which was also defeated in large part by the work of neighborhood activists. Both projects were pushed by City Commissioner Bob Schumm, who will reenter this story later. In more recent years, the relatively cheap property and preserved vernacular and old factory architecture has ignited a flurry of plans to flip East Lawrence into the next hip place for young white professionals to move. Through these challenges, East Lawrencians learned how to stand up for their values and fight back against developers and their cheerleaders in City Hall. This would prove to be crucial in the struggle that would follow.

The proposal

'Free the Radicals' made it to the final round but did not win a grant. ArtPlace's two main criticisms were that the project did not fall within an already existing Cultural District and that the City did not have a specific Arts and Culture staff position. So, guess what happened? The Arts Center with the support of City Commissioner Bob Schumm fast-tracked the designation of a Cultural District that conveniently circumscribed East Lawrence, and the hiring of a full-time Director of Arts and Culture. Within a year both of these objectives were achieved, and the Arts Center made its second proposal to ArtPlace, this time titling it *Free State Boulevard*. It worked. In April of 2013, the headline on the front page of the newspaper read, 'Massive undertaking aims to transform Lawrence from arty to ArtPlace.'

Here's how the Arts Center's new winning proposal began:

Free State Boulevard: From the Studios to the Streets, led by the Lawrence Arts Center, the City of Lawrence, and a Creative Team, will revitalize six blocks of 9th Street that link the Warehouse Arts Area and Downtown Lawrence, creating multi-modal paths, upgraded amenities, and a new model of urban infrastructure that will enable local artists to engage our community in ways inspired by the revolutionary and counter-culture spirit of Lawrence and our favorite iconoclasts John Brown, Langston Hughes, and William S. Burroughs.

And under Economic Impact, the proposal said:

Free State Boulevard will encourage new investment along 9th street, including investments in real estate development, small businesses, and original art. Specifically, Free State Boulevard will connect major 'bookend' development investments, each emblematic of the diverse character of the Cultural District.

This was not the first time residents here had been faced with a development project that aimed to erase their history in the name of progress. But the way the Arts Center was exploiting Lawrence's Civil War and 'Iconoclast' history for a project the real aim of which was to speed gentrification, was alarming.

Early organizing

Dread. That was my initial feeling upon reading the proposal. I knew that not consulting with the neighborhood on a project this big could only mean they thought they could push it through without us. The potential impacts, intentional or not, were clear – bars, restaurants, lofts, and sky-rocketing property values, which would push many long-time residents out of the neighborhood. In a word, gentrification with placemaking as a catalyst. Trying to understand what we were up against led me to Roberto Bedoya's 2013 essay, 'Placemaking and the politics of belonging and dis-belonging,' where he says,

The blind love of Creative Placemaking that is tied to the allure of speculation culture and its economic thinking of 'build it and they will come' is suffocating and unethical, and supports a politics of dis-belonging employed to manufacture a 'place.'

That was it. The question was what to do.

It was a strange sort of upside down for me. Since I was a community-based artist whose studio was at ground zero of *Free State Boulevard*, friends and neighbors asked me what role I had in the project or how I participated in drafting the proposal. None, I had to tell them, I heard about it just like they did, through the media. I had spent more than 20 years in this neighborhood doing exactly the kind of work this proposal claimed to support and no one talked with me or asked me to collaborate. So, no consulting with the neighborhood or with one of the only local artists who actually had experience doing this type of work. That couldn't be good. But I am an organizer and my first impulse was not to complain, it was to plan. What was the strategy and what could the tactics be to give us a chance at gaining power within the project, or if that failed, building public support to stop it? First, I thought, people needed to know what was actually being proposed. Second, we needed to demand transparency in documents and meetings. And third, we needed to provide a different vision for the project, alternatives not just critiques.

A group of neighborhood friends and supporters began meeting at my studio to talk about the implications of the project, what we were feeling and what we wanted to do. I was asked to facilitate the meetings and led them in a way that was similar to the way I organized community-art projects. We got to know each other. We used a story-circle format where each person got a chance to share without interruption. One of us took notes and shared them back with the group after the meeting. We discussed action items and got people to commit to certain tasks. And, we agreed to try to limit speculation and personal attacks. Our first action items included: beginning formal dialogue with the City and Arts Center; writing letters to the newspaper; sharing public documents with the neighborhood association; demanding representation on all committees; and requesting an access to the full ArtPlace proposal including the budget.

The Watergate moment

This last action item was one of the first chinks in the armor of *Free State Boulevard*. The Arts Center refused to provide their full proposal, claiming since they were a private non-profit they didn't have to. We pushed. We knew that the project was dependent on \$3.5–4 million in public funds and that most people would want to know how that money was going to be spent. And this is the only real thriller part of this story. Out of the blue, we received a copy of the full proposal, anonymously. Someone on the inside wanted us to know what was in it (we never found out who). Reading it over it was just as we had feared, but seeing it on the page was still surprising.

In the income category were big cash donations by developers at the east and west ends of 9th Street (the 'bookend' developments), and among other private donors was by-then-former NEA Chairman, Rocco Landesman who contributed \$25,000. Also surprising was that a design firm, el dorado (who was then working for one of the 'bookend' developers), had already been named in the Arts Center's application to run the project even though at that very moment there was a public search, led by the City, to choose a design team. It was no surprise when out of the seven candidates, el dorado was chosen. There was never such a search for the lead artists. They came with el dorado, a Canadian duo, known best for working on arts-based city infrastructure projects. Local or regional artists were never considered. With no response from repeated outreach to the Arts Center about these issues, we decided it was time to go to the press and to do a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, since most of the emails about the project included City staff and or commissioners in conversation with the Arts Center and ArtPlace.

It doesn't matter if you're right if they have the votes

The newspaper picked up on our concern about the full proposal and for the first time asked critical questions about the transparency of the project. We also received hundreds of emails

through our FOI request, many of which exposed a cavalier and dismissive attitude about East Lawrence and especially ELNA. But we were still losing. The City Commission which had initiated a Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) for the project, stacked it with supporters and only due to our protest allowed more than one person from East Lawrence. I was one of them. In our meetings, the votes were consistently 13 for moving forward with the plan and 2 against. I recognized that our token representation on the CAC committee gave the Arts Center cover and didn't really help us at all. There had to be another way.

If one or two seats at the table weren't going to work, we were going to have to build our own table, so that's what we did. It was called 'Imagine East 9th Street,' a community event to engage in conversation about the ArtPlace proposal and to envision alternatives to it. We modeled it after the community Imagining we had held earlier in the year at the kick-off for the new US Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC), a performative (not real) government agency dreamed up by Adam Horowitz and Arlene Goldbard, whose motto was, 'Together, We Create' (Horowitz and Goldbard, 2019). Changing the frame around the ArtPlace proposal proved to be critical. A big crowd gathered in an old barbed wire factory along the river to share food, memories, and dreams for the neighborhood. We also were able to build trust and share a set of facts about the project that many were unaware of. The media was also there and reported on the event. We still didn't have the votes, but we were building support and arming people with the information they needed to ask tough questions.

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution

In meetings and City Hall, it had been difficult to describe the value of this place when the frame for the discussion was always centered on economic development and vibrancy, whatever the hell that is code talk for. What I realized thanks to a certain fox from the book *The Little Prince* was that what was most important was invisible. It was our memories and aspirations that were woven into the social fabric and sparked by the bricks and trees and porches and sounds and smells of the neighborhood: things that were apparent to those of us who knew the place but invisible to those who didn't.

This couldn't have been made clearer than when the project's lead artists, the duo from Canada, came to engage the community in what they called a charette (first mistake.) As a part of it, they presented a 3D model of East Ninth Street made from what looked to me like sugar cubes. It was pure white and only included built structures: no trees, no people, no life at all. It was as if the street was a blank slate available for others to project their desires onto without concern for who lived there or what meanings and stories were embedded within it. And that was our next revelation. We had to bring the street to life, sharing our collective internal visions for everyone to see. Luckily, many of them were artists we had organized in the past and we knew just what to do. It was going to be fun!

How could we tell our stories in a way that would make people stop and listen? I thought they needed to be larger than life and in a form that would be inviting. I had just seen the video fountains in Chicago in front of the Art Institute depicting regular people, who because of their scale and presentation were completely captivating doing simple things like smiling or blinking, and I thought, that's it! I shared these thoughts with my filmmaker friend Nicholas Ward and we came up with the idea for *Facing East*. We did short interviews shot in my studio and gave our subjects prompts that never appear in the film (you only hear their answers). Nicholas edited them down to create a beautiful and funny 12-minute film that celebrates and worries for East Lawrence. We showed it outside on the front of the studio during the monthly artwalk to an audience of neighbors and passersby. Those beautiful images of our friend's giant faces sharing

stories of their love for their place and concerns about its future was one of the biggest reasons I kept on fighting.

One of our other big concerns was that people in Lawrence did not have a good grounding in what placemaking actually meant, and that other communities across the country were also facing problems with projects like ours. A piecemeal approach of putting up flyers and social media posts didn't seem like it was enough, so we created the 'East 9th St. Placekeepers' website (Placekeepers, 2013). It would be a serious space for information and also a place that collected all of the creative ways in which people had been responding to placemaking projects across the country. We also decided it wouldn't be a place for us to editorialize, beyond choosing the material we put up. We would let folks read for themselves. It included all of the media stories and public documents related to *Free State Boulevard*, and also many articles about placemaking from around the country.

One of the 'media' sources appearing on 'Placekeepers' was the intrepid neighborhood muckraker, Biff Beluga. He was a regular on *Live TV Live*, a short-segment local news program inspired by the *Daily Show*, created by Nicholas and another friend of ours, Amber Hansen. Biff, a send-up of a 1940s newscaster mixed with John Waters and John Stewart, could say things we couldn't and in a way that made you laugh even if you disagreed. His riffs on carpetbaggers, backstabbers, and gentrifiers were cutting and hilarious. Even if we lost this fight, we were gonna have blast going down.

The surprise(s)

By this time, it was April of 2015. In spite of our efforts, *Free State Boulevard* was sailing through City Commission and was nearing the point of no return. And then, three things happened that we never could have planned or expected. All along, one of the biggest obstacles to the project was that we didn't have the votes in City Commission. The mayor, Jeremy Farmer, and long-time commissioner Bob Schumm, were two of the project's biggest cheerleaders and the other commissioners were either nominally for the project or on the fence. But elections change things and that city commission election changed everything. The two incumbent candidates, Terry Riordan and Schumm whose campaign focused on how East 9th Street could become like the bucolic scene depicted in a famous painting by Georges Seurat, both lost. A third decided not to run again, and in their place came three new commissioners, two of which we knew had serious doubts about *Free State Boulevard*.

And then, Mayor Farmer was arrested for embezzling from a local food pantry and promptly resigned. In his place, a new commissioner, Lisa Larsen, was appointed, and she had serious reservations about *Free State Boulevard*. So, all of a sudden, we maybe did have the votes to affect some change. But turning around this behemoth of a project with all of its momentum was not going to be easy, unless... Unless – and this was the case – the Work Plan already approved by the previous Commission was found at the last minute to be on an official truck route, meaning all of the street-narrowing and multi-modal paths would have to be scrapped. el dorado would have to start over after nearly two years, while the new sitting Commission was no longer an ally.

The end and the beginning

For the next year, el dorado presented altered versions of their plan, none of which met with Commission approval. They presented to the Historic Resources Commission and endured four-hour-long meetings with residents. Skins began to wear thin while the Placekeepers and Biff Beluga kept reporting. By the time July of 2015 came around, the project came up for a

final vote to approve funding allocation in the budget for the City portion of the project. There weren't enough votes to pass it and the issue was tabled, to be brought up again 'at future date.' With no funds in the coming year's budget, *Free State Boulevard* as it had been conceived was effectively dead.

In 2016 and 2017 there were a few attempts to revive the project, but none of them got anywhere, and I got to thinking that if we accepted the circumstances as they were, what would a good ArtPlace project for East Lawrence look like? In January of 2016, the Arts Center CEO, who had almost singlehandedly pushed the project and fought against those who questioned it, announced her retirement, but the organization still held the funds from ArtPlace, and so what began as an exercise, turned into a plan. I had been so demonized by some at the Arts Center that the thought of reengaging with them about the project seemed ridiculous, but I also knew I would always wonder what might have happened if I didn't at least try. I made the call, in this case to the interim CEO, Cindy Maude. I asked if she'd be willing to meet. She said yes.

Role reversal

Paradigm shifts are hard on the brain and heart. To see what was once the ground as the figure or what was once the disaster as the opportunity takes, simultaneously, concentration and letting go. I had spent years fighting alongside my neighbors to contain and or stop *Free State Boulevard* that to imagine now switching roles and trying to imagine our own vision of an ArtPlace project was disorienting and risky. At the same time, I realized I probably could do it. I knew the neighborhood. I was a community-based artist and many folks trusted me. So, I went to work drafting an outline that I called 'Rebuilding East 9th Street Together.' To help me and give me confidence I called on Arlene Goldbard of the USDAC and cultural activist Julia Cole from Kansas City. They were instrumental in guiding my thinking and encouraged me to go for it. It took about a month to get it into shape. Here's how the intro read:

Rebuilding East 9th St. Together

How to move forward with the East 9th Street project may seem fraught with difficulty due to its contentious past, but what if we viewed what happened as an event that allowed us to see circumstances anew, and act to change them for the better? Like rebuilding after a storm, or adjusting to an unexpected tragedy, we could see the East 9th St. project not only as a failure or loss, but as an opportunity to create new ties, fortify important relationships, and develop more sustainable and equitable planning processes.

Artists, like scientists, often learn most from experiments or projects that don't go as planned. It is in those moments when they reflect most deeply and honestly, and open themselves to solutions previously unseen. This also happens in the aftermath of some natural disasters as Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (Solnit, 2010). Communities are often at their most creative, collaborative, and empathetic at times of disaster, she says. Why? Because in order to recover and plan for the future, they need each other. And this can lead to new ways of working together and new solutions to formerly intractable problems.

We are in a similar situation with the East 9th Street project. New circumstances provide an opportunity to reevaluate and rebuild – the street, mutual trust, and a measure of shared agency and responsibility. The alternative would be to ignore or try to forget what happened, hiding the wounds but not trying to heal them. Instead we could reimagine this perceived failure as a platform to explore the fundamental issues that bind and challenge us, and then act to address

them with new strategies led by artists and neighbors. The process of this work would likely be healing in and of itself. It also might reveal new pathways to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the questions East 9th Street has raised.

The new plan kept some of the original structure, giving 15 artists or artist teams grants, while removing the biggest expense, the three \$100,000 integrated art commissions. The new plan also added or adapted many key points, including: grantees did not have to be traditional artists, but did need to show some connection to the neighborhood; the projects no longer had to happen on East 9th Street; and jurors, two from Lawrence and one from out of town, were chosen and paid to evaluate the proposals. They could be located or occur anywhere in East Lawrence. We also added two new categories for participation: Neighborhood Specialists, who had special knowledge or skills that could be useful to the selected Project Artists; and a Youth Corps, which funded five projects designed and executed by young people.

I added an updated budget and timeline and shared the whole thing with Cindy when we met. She was encouraged and agreed to partner. Next, we brought it to another ELNA board member, Josh Davis, who had been a strong advocate for the original project, understanding that there was going to be resistance if it were just me. The three of us then presented our plan to ELNA, the City and the Arts Center board. Eventually they all approved, and my job was done. I knew that as the main designer of the plan, I would not be able to apply to be a project artist or the project manager. That was the bargain I made going into it.

The Arts Center led a search for a project manager (I was on the search committee), and were lucky to get Amanda Enfield, an arts administrator who had worked for years with Van Go another highly regarded arts non-profit in town. In the spring of 2019, the 15 artist projects were selected along with the 5 neighborhood specialists and youth corps projects. All of the projects were set to be completed by June of 2020 but have been pushed back due to the pandemic. And although the new plan didn't require projects to exist on East 9th Street, the City followed through and funded a basic street repair of those seven blocks. Go to rebuildingeastninth.com to find out more.

I'd like to say that this resolution healed our neighborhood and that we all buried the hatchet, but that's not true. Although the rebuilding project has been well received, the anger and resentment born of the years of conflict remains to some degree. And, we also didn't stop the developers from continuing to buy property and add to their fantasy of neo-Soho in Kansas. Gentrification continues, it's just not bolstered by a shortsighted placemaking project. What I feel today is that we did what neighbors do – we looked out for each other. We stood up even when there appeared to be no chance that we would prevail, and at least part of the time we had fun doing it. We made our place, East Lawrence, a little better by strengthening our bonds, articulating and sharing our stories, and providing opportunities for our neighbors to celebrate together. We were good placekeepers.

Coda

I can't finish this chapter without talking about what it means to be writing this in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The idea of creative placemaking and its focus on vibrancy and density feel pretty distant, almost nostalgic today. Most of my work has been cancelled or postponed, and like many of my peers in the community-based art world, I applied for unemployment for the first time in my life. But there's something else. East Lawrence and our neighborhood association ELNA has come together during a difficult time once again. We have set up a mutual aid network to ensure that everyone has what they need, including the opportunity to just talk. And there's been some interesting new art that's gone up on the street too – hopeful signs that our spirit is strong.