

Michigan Municipal League

# The Alley Project



michigan municipal league  
Better Communities. Better Michigan.



## PROJECT DETAILS:

### NAME:

The Alley Project (TAP)

### DATE:

2004–Present

### LOCATION:

Detroit, Michigan

### CATEGORIES:

Public Art

Education

Built Environment

### THE GIST:

TAP is a garage studio and alley gallery that showcases legal street art produced by local youth and community members. Professional artists, teens, and neighbors have worked together to build an infrastructure for creative expression and community responsibility in a neighborhood that is diverse and thriving but also sees a high rate of illegal activity.



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## PROJECT SCOPE:

### Challenge:

How can you build interest around things that youth are passionate about to promote positive development?

### Overview:

TAP provides a creative outlet for over a hundred youth living in Southwest Detroit. It's a neighborhood with both the most inspiring and most challenging social and physical climates in Detroit, with a healthy level of diversity and a thriving commercial district, but also abundant exploitive opportunities for its young. Highly visible drug traffic, frequent incidents of vandalism including gang graffiti, and other illegal activities have plagued the community for generations. The neighborhood quickly realized that there was a group of youth interested in street art and subculture with no outlet or space to claim ownership of. The TAP footprint includes a small studio, garden lot, and an alley gallery showcasing 1,800 square feet of high-quality murals produced by local artists and students.

### Accomplishments:

- Engaged 120+ youths in creative work through weekend workshops and other social gatherings.
- Decreased gang graffiti in the neighborhood footprint while highlighting its eclectic and multi-cultural identity.



- Built unexpected relationships between renters, homeowners, artists, youth, and service providers, increasing community pride and social responsibility.
- Lead local and international conversation on the value of street art and empowering youth.
- Showcased student work at the Venice Biennale and throughout Europe during an international visit.

**Organization:**

TAP is an initiative of Young Nation, a nonprofit organization promoting the holistic development of youth in urban settings through building relationships, community education, and passion-driven projects. Since 2004, The Alley Project has evolved from 4 garage canvases and 8 to 12 students to a creative hub that welcomes 30 to 50 participants a month. Artists, youth, and neighbors gather weekly in the studio and alley to work on new projects, discuss challenges, share ideas, and maintain the space. TAP also hosts longer mentoring workshops called Graphik Jam and onsite tours.

**Budget:**

TAP is currently unfunded. Small donations, resources, and materials are contributed by neighbors and local service providers. A one-time \$38,000 community grant provided by Community + Public Arts Detroit allowed The Alley Project to host a community design charrette and build its garage studio.

**Funding:**

For TAP, each phase of the project is planned for long-term sustainability. All labor and materials are donated by community members, providing a strong sense of ownership and value. Unexpected partners work together to maintain and build the space, utilizing resources at hand. TAP's parent organization is also seeking additional grant support for future projects.

**Participants:**

TAP participation has grown primarily through word of mouth. Teens and artists bring friends to the site who have not seen their work or are simply interested in what's going on. Door-to-door outreach among neighbors has also increased awareness and action.

**Inspiration:**

A creative outlet can stir major change in a community. The Alley Project's primary mission is to create a place that facilitates and supports the themes of creative expression, positive youth-adult partnerships, and community responsibility. While TAP can boast global and domestic accolades, the project's primary measure of success is the frequency and depth of unlikely relationships that are formed on site. The space is an intergenerational and cross-cultural hub, and relationships are built to last longer than the paint on the walls.

**Actions Taken:****1) ADDRESS THE OBVIOUS PROBLEM.**

Clearly defining site-specific challenges will lead to stronger solutions. While the larger community might have targeted vandalism as a problem, TAP partners realized the potential value of working with street artists and providing a space dedicated to creative expression.

**2) BUILD SUPPORT AND PARTNERS.**

Primary stakeholders need to be engaged in the project on the front end. When you are working in the public realm, it is very important to make connections with the local government, neighbors, and other organizations that are engaged in similar work. TAP grew interest and support by knocking on doors and building strong relationships early in the process.

**3) TAKE MATTERS INTO YOUR OWN HANDS.**

Physical action can often catalyze engagement. After reaching out through traditional methods of approval, the neighbors decided to move forward with the project and paint in spite of raised concerns. This allowed community members and local officials to visualize the project and then engage in constructive dialogue. Often, taking the first step prompts further action.

**4) MAP NEEDS AND ASSETS.**

Making a plan can be time-consuming and ineffective if the right stakeholders are not involved. By creating a needs and asset map with dedicated partners and participants, a project can articulate a series of to-do's and the resources needed to accomplish them.

**5) INVEST IN SOCIAL CAPITAL.**

For TAP to succeed, it needs to remain primarily unfunded. Neighbors must work together to maintain and showcase the space utilizing resources and materials that are readily available. In this case, low budget does not mean low impact. The project focuses on people, passion, and relationships to build social economies over monetary ones.

## 6) DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE PLANS.

While projects often focus on immediate goals with limited foresight, TAP has consciously developed self-sustaining plans for each phase of growth. From engaging neighborhood gardeners to care for the planter boxes to hiring architects who could design an multifunctional art studio, the project has been carefully programmed for adaptability and long-term use.

## 7) BUILD A PORTFOLIO FOR THE COMMUNITY.

TAP's evolving space is a reflection of people that are engaged in their work and process. If the community is not actively building a critical dialogue about art and creativity, the project impact would not be as strong.

### Lessons Learned:

- Make the Physical Space Support Social Activity.  
"Focus on what you want to do and create physical design interventions accordingly. While other projects spent money on high-quality materials and pieces of art, we created an environment that evolves and supports our programs. The physical space will promote social activities 10 years beyond our funding. Make the design process participatory."
- Act Now. Ask Later.  
"We reached out to the city and nonprofits, but a lot of times you don't become great partners until after you have started and proven yourself."
- Involve Your Resistance.  
"People often ask if everybody around here loves art...No, this is a neighborhood, it's not a compound. If we didn't have people who were critical, we would not be creating an honest assessment of where we are at. If it wasn't for people that hate the project, it would have a fence around it. They nixed it. The fence was our attempt to accommodate the most conservative neighbors, they got involved with the project and declined the fence. If you lock the fence, then its a challenge to get into it. If you leave it open, we can watch it all the time. The project is open."

### Experts:

Erik Howard, Founder and Artist, [support@youngnation.us](mailto:support@youngnation.us)

### Similar Projects:

Public Art Workz

### Documents:

Brochure

# The Center for 21st Century Communities

## Building 21st century communities

Experts from around the world—in academic, business, and public sectors alike—agree that investing in communities is a critical element to long-term economic development in the 21st century. Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract and retain knowledge-based workers. Central to attracting this priceless commodity is *place*. Research proves that successful 21st century communities effectively leverage the assets summarized in this brochure. Learn more and stay engaged at [mml.org](http://mml.org).

## Who we are...

The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. We are a nonprofit, but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs; our people are dynamic, energetic, and highly approachable, passionately and aggressively pushing change to achieve better communities and a better Michigan.

## What we know...

Never before have so many diverse interests, from academic researchers to the business community to government leaders, shared a single conclusion: Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract knowledge-based workers. And what is central to attracting this priceless commodity? *Place*, specifically vibrant 21st century communities.

## What we offer...

Through its Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3), the League provides education, technical assistance, public outreach, and unprecedented access to experts and resources. The 21c3 is a “one-stop-shop” for communities interested in creating and sustaining livable, desirable, and unique places that attract the highly skilled, creative, and talented workforce of the next century.



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