

JJCF Final Report

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My two months at Better Block passed by in flash. I have been able to learn many lessons from many inspiring people that I will keep for the rest of my life. I to be confident in my own work, and not to be afraid to try something I was not good at. Some of my favorite moments were when the we would brainstorm ideas and come up with something crazy, and then actually do it (it happened more than once).

In my second month, I got to help out with a Better Block event in Barberton Ohio, a community that does not get a lot of attention. The event was a two-day temporary transformation of a downtown street that saw very little use in its current incarnation. Over the course of the four days I was there, I saw the street go from an under-used strip of asphalt to a vibrant public space full of people. Along with two of my co-workers, I arrived in Barberton, a town outside of Akron, two days before the Better Block event. We met up with the local coordinator, and immediately went to work to implement the plan that had been developed over the past few months.



The temporary interventions included a four-corner bump-out in one intersection designed to slow down traffic, CNC-cut plywood street furniture, a beer garden, a dog park, bike symbols on the road, a mid-block crosswalk, a pop-up café, and a farmer's market. In order to make all of these elements happen, we worked for two and a half days along with the community volunteers. Using temporary paint, we completely changed the street. We added bike stencils to make it safer for bikers. We painted an entirely new crosswalk in the middle of the block to make it easier and safer for pedestrians to cross. And, in one intersection, we bumped out all four corners using white tape and plungers to create an intersection that was safer for all.



After a lot of hard work, everything as set for the Better Block to begin. Then, precisely at the start time, the sky opened up and it poured for 10 minutes. Luckily, everything stayed in place and soon it was clear again and people began arriving. When we started a few days before the event, we were lucky if we saw more than a few pedestrians walk down the street in an hour. There was not much reason to go, and no reason to stay. However, after the transformation,



hundreds of people gathered on and around the block. I heard many residents say they had never seen this many people on the block. Even though I had studied the theory, it was so powerful to see the difference that urban design can make on public life. With a few changes, the street was suddenly a place people wanted to stay in, and the happy expressions on everyone's faces said it all.

In addition to thinking about all the positive effects urban design can have on a community, I also got to think a lot about the potentially negative impacts. Often, when an urban space changed without input from the community, it can lead to families being forced out because of higher property prices. However, I was able to see that when you involve the community in a project, you can improve a space that benefits everyone and does not push people out.

Coming into the summer, I knew that I had a passion for using design to help others, but I wasn't sure how I could achieve that. After my experience at Better Block, I have found a way. I have been able to use my knowledge in design and apply it to the public realm. It was so powerful to see the difference that design made in peoples' lives in Barberton. The space was changed literally overnight and it was clear the difference it made to the community. This experience has inspired me to continue to pursue urban design in my last year at school, as well as after I graduate. I am planning to bring what I have learned back to my hometown in the Boston area and maybe even start something of my own.