

Creating Socio-Economic Value from Vacant Property



A Guidance to the Open Space use industry.

Message from Arts Recreation Specialist

On behalf of the DPRT and Arts Council of Prince William County I am pleased to present this Open Space Arts plan as a standard for utilizing boarded-up shops, under-utilized buildings, and vacant land throughout Prince William County as long-term and temporary creative spaces. This project will offer gallery space for artists, programming and workshop spaces for other art forms, and opportunity to ensure that all arts disciplines are accessible and available to all districts of the County.

The Art Gallery at Stone Bridge will be the premiere Open Space Arts multi-discipline arts facility that plays a significant role in promoting the value of art appreciation through classes, workshops, exhibitions, performances, culture and special programs. Stone Bridge and JBG Smith, the Management Company supports its commitment to serving the public through offering an opportunity to present in their vacant space creative performance and visual art works in various mediums from local artists.

Open Space Arts mission through the PWC Arts Council is to provide space and place for arts to be viewed, created, performed, exposed, and shared in Prince William County with a creative flair. This will help to reinforce on a grander scale the County government's commitment to development and ensure not only that our district spaces are attractive places but also spaces where people want to go. This can also stimulate a wide range of other uses such as community hubs, arts and cultural venue, and informal learning centers which can unlock people's talent and creativity; strengthening our arts and culture sector as set out in the Community Design plan announced by the Board of County Supervisors in 2017.

Our Open Space Arts project plays a central role in providing access to creative works for the people of Prince William County and our visitors. The Department of Parks Recreation and Tourism (DPRT), with its focus on culture in the broadest context, looks forward to supporting the Open Space Arts idea as it continues to pursue its mission in the years ahead.

Herb A. Williams
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Prince William County

What is Open Space?

There's an empty shop. Businesses have gone bust. They haven't been able to pay business rates; they haven't been able to compete with Amazon; the way we make and buy things has changed so radically, so fast, and they haven't been able to keep up. Or a shopping center has opened not far away and the trade has moved there or collapsed because of the competition. Or a developer has bought the space but has not figured out what to do with it or is awaiting planning permission. Whatever the reason, it's empty.

1. Introduction

Across the country we see shops that have closed, sites bought for regeneration sit empty while recession-shy developers wait for the right time, and people spend more time at out-of-town retail parks or buying online.

These empty spaces around our County are still useful. They're perfect places for short, temporary projects that embrace the meanwhile – the time between the last commercial activity and whatever comes next. Prince William County Arts Council would like to provide you with the skills to use these spaces, to be nimble and grab every opportunity while you can.

Ideas for these spaces include opportunities where Artists can exhibit, museums can create temporary local history collections, and pod-casters can record oral history before it's lost forever. People can create meeting spaces, workshops, studios, performance paces, community centers and places for play. This is a golden opportunity for the public to come back into the private, commercial spaces throughout the county and make them their own again.

Empty shops can provide the space for celebrating the locally distinct, culturally diverse, creatively rich nature of the County's districts. This toolkit will give you some inspiration, provide examples, signpost possible funding, highlight support and show in practical steps how to plan, deliver and evaluate a project, start to finish.

2.The History

...and some useful facts you can use to argue your case

Since the Pandemic we have had to think of clever ways to bring life and vitality back to our community businesses. Many areas have suffered badly and vacant shops are sitting with nothing but hope.

Firstly came the issues where local businesses were replaced by the same big retailers and coffee shops in every town - and then the pandemic hit causing many businesses to close.

“People are increasingly concerned about boarded-up shops and vacant land in their districts. It is vital that we do all we can to enable vacant properties to be used for temporary purposes until demand for retail premises start to improve. Not only will this help to ensure that our districts and streets are attractive places where people want to go, it can also stimulate a wide range of other uses such as community hubs, arts and cultural venues, and informal learning centers, which can unlock people’s talent and creativity.”

It is estimated that 25% of U.S. malls are expected to shut down within the next 5 years. Giving them a new life won't be easy. The COVID virus has accelerated a demise of many businesses that was already underway. According to data pulled by Moody's Analytics REIS, apartment development in the U.S. is expected to be down 15.6% in the post-Covid-19 world. Office development is set to drop 10%, it said, while retail falls 15.7%. While industrial development is expected to pick-up 3.7%, One cannot simply build industrial buildings in areas zoned for commercial use. This is where creative community ideas have to come into play.

As well as there being too many shops, there are other reasons for vacancy. If redevelopment or regeneration is planned, a process called 'land assembly' could take place, this is the idea of bringing all the buildings and land in one area together into one ownership. This is rare with the watchful eye of local government, but if it happens this can often mean shops and businesses are moved out leaving empty buildings.

There are many spaces and shops that are simply not worthwhile business spaces, with not enough visitors for many shops to survive. In some of these areas even lower rents are not enough to tempt business, so vacancies remains.

If nothing, the Medici method of bringing artists and creativity together has shown without doubt...

Variations of ideas, practices, processes, objects and constellations that are formed by a creative way of reinterpretation and redesign or that are brought up by coincidental variation and recombination that have been perceived and legitimated as improvements in an accepted way and that by imitation and diffusion has the ability to change parts of society in a sustainable way.

This is what Open Space Arts make happen!

Bringing secondary retail back to life

- **Using multiple spaces in a secondary location**
- **Working with a range of partners without compromising independence**
- **Building a diverse program of**

The PWC Arts Council, acting as arts development team for Prince William County and working closely with the Arts Recreation Specialist, would like to help you in gaining knowledge in the use of vacant spaces around the County. These vacant places given new life will be organized as multi-discipline arts spaces spread across the County, allowing access of the arts to many communities and spaces to produce workshops, performance, programs and classes for all of Prince William County.

Performance, Literary, Applied and Visual arts projects can creatively, all be scheduled to colonize these spaces, and can include gallery space that will be innovative public studios for artists as well as workshop spaces for private classes and other local community meetings and events.

As well as increasing foot traffic, these projects will generate national media coverage, as examples of innovation and best practice for community development and place making in the sense of public art.

Arts organizations can use these spaces to generate new production – products which can be sold to various markets– at a far lower cost than if they were to take a traditional route and use rehearsal rooms, theatre space and a full-scale production.

Overall, the mix of projects, and additional short-term use of these spaces will see additional foot traffic driven to various areas and districts and may identify a long-term branding and mix-use for the space – creating an adaptable arts center based in areas where there were none.

3 Writing a plan

Planning a project is always a good way to spend your time, as the process of writing a plan should help you to understand why you're doing the project and the benefits it will bring to other people. If you're working inside an organization your plan should talk to an audience both inside your organization, and to possible partners outside, so avoid jargon and slang and use Plain English.

However many people have a passion for your project, it's best if one person leads on the writing so that it conveys a coherent idea and a clear message. But different areas of the plan may need expert input.

At this stage of the plan, it's best to plan the project without having one individual shop in mind, so you are flexible when spaces become available. You'll soon have a rough idea of the size of space you need, and at that time you can ask shopkeepers with similar size premises to give you some idea of the costs involved. Once you've secured a shop, revisit the plan and budget and revise your ideas and costs.

Always be realistic about what you can do with the resources you have, and include options for different levels of resources and budget. Scrapping a project because you haven't secured the maximum amount of funding is a bit like throwing the baby out with the bathwater – if the project's really good, you'll find a way to make it happen.

A word of caution though - don't spend so long on this section of the toolkit that you're more involved with a plan than a project. Make this an adaptable document, and keep coming back to it when your information changes.

The need to be nimble is particularly true with empty shops, where things can change quickly; you need to plan ahead and be good at responding quickly to the unexpected (like finding the shop's full of trash, the roof leaks, or you're suddenly moved to a different unit than the one you expected!). If one person in an organization has written the plan, they have enough of an overview to act as captain when needed – and can swing things around quickly when the wind changes direction.

So be ready to adapt to the space, embrace the temporary nature of the project and cope with a little bit of chaos if it comes. Remember as well that you may be required to leave at short notice, so make sure you have contingency plans for moving equipment, storing materials and keeping the project alive if you are temporarily homeless. Make sure everyone involved in the project knows about these plans, so that there are no surprises.

On the next page is a business plan checklist, written as a series of simple questions. Answer them and you have a short, practical business plan for your project. This will help you understand the project,

keep the project and the people you're working with moving forward, and make sure that you can explain in clear, concise and coherent terms what the project's about.

Business Plan Checklist

- What is the biggest aim of the project, and how does that fit with the aims of the organizations involved?
- Are there smaller elements within the project that need their own planning workshops, classes, debates or meetings? Who will lead each of these elements?
- Why is an empty shop the right venue? Does the project need to be in the district centrally placed or would a location somewhere less visible be as good?
- How long will your project last – a day, a week or a month? How will you cope if that timetable is changed by, for example, the shop being leased? Map out a timetable, with planning, the project and the evaluation included.
- What will it cost – think about the initial costs, and the day-to-day running costs? You can estimate utility bills by asking a nearby shop.
- How will you promote the project to get visitors, and can you use social media like, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to support your work?
- Who will be the main organizer; are you working by yourself or as part of an organization? What's the structure within an organization to approve your plan, and how will that structure approve changes to the plan if a decision is needed quickly?
- Who are the possible partners who can help make your project a success, and lighten your load a little? Do you need formal documents to work with your partners, or just a friendly agreement? Consider that partners may take time to check things and approve them – how will this delay your project timetable?
- How will you manage the risks involved? (see the checklists in this toolkit)

- Where can you find funds – the local council, national funding bodies or local businesses? How will these funds be accessed, for example if they're only given when the project's completed how will you fund the running? How will different funding fit with your project's timetable?
- What resources do you need; display boards, paint, tables and chairs and so on?
- Why is your project good for a building – what does the landlord or leasing agent get from it? Will you improve the look of the unit, clear trash left by previous occupiers, or carry out essential building work?
- How will you record and document your project, and how will you measure whether it's worked or not? Look at light and easy ways to create an archive.
- What's the legacy – a booklet, an archive in an institution, a collection of podcasts online or a new partnership to run future projects?

Making a convoy and changing direction

- Bringing together a range of partners
- Creating an agile and adaptable structure
- Maximizing Wifi and web 2.0

Think local community groups, voluntary sector organizations and small charities: a wifi hub: art galleries, fairs and designers, an Internet radio station and a wide range of hands-on activity, all in one empty showroom for six weeks making creative magic happen. Get the vision in your head!

In response to unexpected low foot traffic possibly in the first week, a range of activities can be planned and presented, with the whole project turned around in a matter of days. At the center can be a charity connection – used as a mechanism to give a pathway for meeting the local community. This is the time to communicate your message, recruit volunteers and find potential artists or partners.

A great idea is to have a local pod-caster established a temporary recording studio, uploading a series of radio-style podcasts under the 'Open Space Arts' banner. Contributors to the project can be interviewed alongside visitors to the space, giving further profile to the groups involved as well as collecting an oral history of the district and its shops

The temporary event programs could include meetings, an art fair, workshops, live music and a Christmas Fair. This mix of semi-permanent and changing activity can ensure a wide, varied and changing audience will be brought into the building.

The project can be supported by almost any company, which will help leverage costs and reduce utility bills. With the current governmental wifi program backed by the FCC it should be easy to connect the project to gain free or low cost high-speed internet. Also the opportunity for support in practical resources like cleaning equipment, tables and tablecloths, banners and catering equipment can be solicited from local companies.

Be sure to develop a light, adaptable management structure to respond to problems and opportunities as they come up.

4. Managing Risk

Whether you're working directly for an organization, alone or with partners you will need to look at the risks involved in your project. Organizations and partners may have very specific requirements for how you assess these risks, and may give you their standard 'Risk Assessment' forms. Don't worry – managing the risks and the health & safety requirements of a project is largely down to common sense and being careful without being overly cautious.

Break the risks down into three areas, and use these checklists for your own risk assessment:

Fire Safety

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Rubbish cleared away, other materials & resources safely stored
- Fire exits marked, routes to fire exits clear of obstructions
- Any alarms and equipment tested
- An evacuation plan in place, and all staff & volunteers informed

Health & Safety

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Public areas clean, tidy & free of hazards, for example trip hazards or stacked boxes
- Areas not to be used by public closed and clearly marked
- Electrics and any portable electrical items safe, visually checked for damage or broken cables
- Any specialist equipment only used by responsible staff & volunteers

Security

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Windows shut & locked when premises not in use
- Doors locked & secured when premises not in use
- A safe, locked area available for private possessions like bags and coats

5. Planning a Budget

For your project to work, it needs to have a financial plan, which will help you make sure the funds you need are in place, and give you some outcomes to measure the success of the project. This will be vital if you're working within an organization, with partners or if you seek funding, and you should check what level of detail about your budgets your organization, partners or funders require as well.

Firstly, you'll need to write out what some rough figures for the cost of your Open Space Arts project. At this stage it's a mix of making estimates and making inquiries. You'll need to know the rough size of the shop you hope to use, and a vague idea of the location will help as well.

Expect staff costs to be the highest percentage of your budget; and expect to spend at least 10% of the total on marketing and publicity.

Initial costs

Start with the initial expenses, the stuff you need to get the project up and running and get the doors open:

- materials to do the shop up - paint and polyfilla, brushes, sandpaper
- furniture, fixtures and fittings
- electrical items - a kettle, vacuum cleaner, portable heaters
- printed publicity - leaflets, posters, business cards
- signs, window vinyls and graphics, and an A-board
- a website domain, building a website
- media advertising, leaflet distribution

Ongoing costs

And add the stuff that your shop will use up once you're up and running, and work out a weekly or a monthly cost for these:

- business rates (more about these later!)
- utility bills; usually only electricity and water
- insurance coverage
- tea, coffee and snacks for staff
- toilet paper and soap
- window cleaner and cloths

- mobile phone
- pay-as-you-go broadband, whether it's a dongle or a wifi router
- website hosting
- media advertising, leaflet distribution

Utility supplies

In most shops water and electricity are still connected, as the landlord and leasing agents need to use them. If they are, ask the landlord or their agent to keep a reading and charge you for what you use – this is much easier than transferring accounts for a short period of time. If they're not connected, you may have to factor in reconnection costs and be aware - there may be a minimum time for the contract to run, so you may have to keep paying after you've left. For short projects, it's easier to use mobile phones and mobile broadband than to have these connected, and a mobile wifi router which will let you run up to five laptops should be adequate for all but the largest projects.

Insurance cover

Insurance coverage does not need to be complicated; most major insurers offer packages tailored to the needs of small businesses and shops, which are very affordable and can be set up with a phone call or online. These will cover your property against the public having an accident, break in or damage to windows and doors and so on. All insurance is about managing the risks, and the best idea is to ensure nothing needs to be claimed. Take a common sense approach to safety by watching out for hazards, and making sure everyone involved is aware of those hazards.

If you are working for an organization, make sure that you keep within any health and safety guidelines that organization has.

Staffing

Now work out the costs of staffing the project – starting with planning meetings, get-togethers and workshops, and then moving into running the project, opening the shop and writing up evaluation afterwards. Keep a record for all the staff involved. Even if you're planning to work on a voluntary basis – do start keeping a timesheet. It's useful information to know, especially if you decide to move onto a more professional basis later on – or to help another project to follow your model in the future.

Your Expenditure

Add all of your expenses from the categories above and you have a cost for the project. Add in some extra as a contingency against unexpected costs, at least 10% of the total. Within an organization, check how you can purchase and pay for all of this.

Your income

- Now write up all the money that's coming in. This could include:
- funding or budget found within an organization
- donations from the public

- people paying contributions to the project, like artists paying to hang work
- small amounts of sponsorship from local business, including donations of goods to support your project
- grant funding from local authorities, Arts Council or corporations and foundations. (more advice on funding is provided at the end of this toolkit)
- With creative programming and clever community involvement often times funding can be achieved for the entire length of the project. This will cost you only running supplies to make it happen. This also can come with expectations from the space owner so get all the details and expectations in this case.

Art Shop windows

Some projects in empty shops never open their doors; they either wrap the windows in vinyl, create something that is viewed through the window, or hang an exhibition in a way that it is seen without entering the shop. This kind of work does not usually involve paying business rates. Check what your local authority will allow.

You may be able to:

- do anything as long as the door is shut and the public don't enter
- use a certain depth within the shop rate-free, for example, up to two feet from the window
- display anything that doesn't touch the floor; that is, it must be suspended from the ceiling or hung on the walls
- only attach materials directly to the shop windows

Saving the landlord from “Blighted Property.”

- Multiple units in simultaneous occupation
- Arts organization as managing agent
- Saving landlords from business rates

Forming a Network to explore new ways of using space particularly around the idea of a ‘third place’ between work and home can be a great source for achieving free use of spaces.

It takes only a small group of associates to form a company like Space-Making Group or something similar in name. This group can effectively become the managing agent for vacant properties around the County with special access to produce art related use while marketing these spaces to potential renters.

Owners can employ the group, initially for a fee, to manage empty units and bring a range of arts, creative industries, retail and other users to these units in an annual project. These are being offered rent-free for the first 3 to 6 months, with occupiers taking responsibility for any necessary refurbishment, as well as paying rates and utilities.

It is hoped that this will bring additional foot traffic, and help establish new businesses alongside the existing ones, who are mostly serving distinct ethnic groups with food, fashion or household retail. In addition, it relieves the landlord of the possible burden of being sighted for blighted properties by the Neighborhood Services Division and ensures the units will be partly refurbished, decorated and maintained in the short term.

7. Finding funding

Not all funds will match the project you're planning, so make sure to apply for funds that are suitable and work closely with funders whenever possible. When you're working with funders you'll have to work to a set time, provide a planned activity and usually monitor certain outcomes.

Funding for empty shop projects is new, so there aren't many dedicated funds available yet. You'll need to look carefully at what you're doing and how it can be funded from established sources.

Caution should always be taken in that the search, draw down and management of funds for a project does not outweigh the need for funds – and that the needs of funders don't change the nature of the project itself. Don't make funds the most important thing, and don't waste time chasing funds when finance may not be the barrier to getting the project going.

Public Funding

Funds from public organizations stem ultimately from central or local government. These funds will tend to be used to create economic outcomes such as new jobs created, land redeveloped or new businesses started. Those from artistic or cultural sources will wish to see audiences developed or new artworks created.

These are never simple funds to draw down and will generally require quite rigorous administration and accounting. For this reason it is always advised that smaller projects consider looking for funding only as a last resort, especially whilst public investment is reduced.

Public funds for local actions are many and varied, but generally fall into one of three categories:

- Enterprise development and entrepreneurial activities
- Community engagement to include job creation, job trials or intermediate labor
- Cultural activities, events and engagement

Largely, the first two categories are seeking economic impacts and are measured as such, although some community initiatives are far softer and require fewer or softer outcomes to be identified.

The final category often does not seek economic impacts but does still seek additionality – that is, to add something to what's already there.

National Resources

NEA (<https://www.arts.gov/>), Americans for the Arts (<https://www.americansforthearts.org/>), as well as Virginia Commission for the Art (<http://www.arts.virginia.gov/>) can provide funds for arts-based initiatives through the 'Grants for the arts' scheme. Note that no funding stream is dedicated to empty shops projects, however. Contact your local office for more information.

Meanwhile other supportive arts organizations can be a resource for funding as well as in-kind support to such efforts.

Creative thinking, planning and research are key. Don't limit your possibilities by thinking small.

Act locally, but think globally!!!

Enterprise development and entrepreneurial activities

Although you might not think of your idea as a business yet, some sources of finance may see it this way or see it as having potential.

Nationally and locally, the US Small Business Administration operates as the public sector service for business support and for programs aimed at helping people start a business or a social enterprise. The website offers loads of ideas, advice and experience. The service offers free start-up training, coaching and advice and can help you find local providers of specific support.

Link: <https://www.sba.gov/>

For those considered 'disadvantaged' in the labor market (normally meaning, people of color, young people aged 16-25, older people aged over 50, those with a disability or those longer term unemployed), there's more assistance with starting a business, offering small grants to assist the starting of the business.

8. Getting In

It's not hard to get into an empty shop, especially if you lay good foundations. But start early as it can take a long time – and don't get hung up on one unit, keep your options open and talk to as many people as possible.

There are two people you need to work with to get access; the building's owner or landlord, and the manager or agent. But don't worry; if you have one on your side they can usually persuade the other. And relationship building is the answer to getting them on your side. You'll need to do this more than once; you'll need to do it regularly; in fact, you'll need to make it a normal part of your working week, at least until you're established.

You'll find estate agents, rental agents and building managers at business networking meetings. Use search engines to find business networking groups in your area, and your local Chamber of Commerce. Contact them, explain your plan and tell them about the benefits to local business. Because you've planned, you know what size shop you want, where it should be, and for how long. So be clear in what you ask for.

If you can't find networking meetings, contact your city/county manager, or economic development, business support or regeneration officers and ask for their advice – they should be able to point you in the direction of local business groups that are below your radar, or direct you to landlords and letting agents.

If you find a business group, ask for either five minutes to speak at a forthcoming meeting, or just to be able to attend a meeting as a guest. Come looking smart and professional. Make sure you have business cards ready with your name, phone number and email address.

If you have the chance to make a presentation, keep it short, sharp and focused on the problem, and your businesslike solution. Don't talk about the project itself, but about the benefits to the group you're making a presentation to. In short, answer the audience's only real question which is 'what's in it for me?'

You should also have a short introduction for when you talk to people one-to-one; you need to say in less than a minute what the problem is, how your project addresses it, and why that's a benefit to other businesses. Don't forget to talk to everyone, not just landlords and letting agents, as these meetings are full of useful, active people who can help your project come to life.

After attending networking meetings keep business cards and make a note of any personal information on them – hobbies, interests and so on. You never know when you might need to call on that contact, so try to keep in touch with them by phone, email or by meeting occasionally for a coffee.

If you can't get into business meetings, it's time for another approach: find the shops you like. Don't think that every shop that's empty is for rent; many empty shops are still rented to a company that's not trading or has gone into administration, so won't be available. When you find ones that are, note down the name on the rent/lease boards and visit their office.

Either give them your one-minute pitch, asking for an appointment later that week. Or just set up the meeting, and don't mention that you want a temporary lease and no rent until you've met them face to face! Again, be clear about the size of shop, area it should be in and the duration of the project.

9. Planning the space

Curating & Merchandising

You've got the space! You've got to look good. Quality retailers spend a lot of time, money and effort making their shops look good – you can achieve similar standards on a budget by being creative and thinking sideways.

Think carefully about how your space will work. A big, open space with large windows might make a great gallery space, but could be intimidating for visitors if you're running workshops and they feel they're being watched. Can you create multiple spaces in your shop – a quiet corner for meetings and workshops, a wider space for displaying art or artifacts, and an office area out the back?

In art terms, the process of putting the displays together in a space is called 'curating' – in retail, it's 'merchandising'. The basic rule is, choose a style and stick to it. Find furniture and objects that match, and treat the space as one big display. Or if you're going to 'zone' the interior – maybe a cafe area, a shop corner, a display space – use furniture and colors to make each area distinct. Shops like Ikea are great sources of affordable, funky furniture.

Even better than buying new furniture is recycling; embrace the temporary nature of the project and find furniture for free, using your local online groups. Give it all a lick of paint – everything white looks stylish and professional, or if you like more fun try miss-matched primary colors. Then sell it or give it away when the project's finished.

And don't forget to utilize furniture, fixtures and fittings you find in the space as well. Use that creative mind of yours or your other members to make use of everything you can get for free. Often times if the works are really creative people will want to purchase them.

It's always possible to borrow equipment as well. Larger local stores may also be able to help with the loan of shop-fittings, shelving and so on. And local community centers, charities and organizations might be able to loan you other things that you need. Museums might have display stands and libraries may loan desktop display cases. If you have a clear plan and you know exactly what you need, it's easy to ask. Remember to think about security. If you're displaying art or local history artifacts, can they be secured and can the staff in the space monitor them easily?

Signs & Legibility

Signs are important. Look at the shops around yours – they have invested in clear signs, corporate identities and clever displays to make it comfortable for customers to come in and spend money.

You may choose to spend money on custom-made shop signs or vinyl transfers for your shop windows. While a few lines of text are very affordable, larger full-color and photographic designs can cost hundreds of dollars.

So for short-term projects this might not always be economical. So be creative, and remember that a huge, homemade sign outside the venue may be more effective than a poster in a window. Alternatively, many copy shops can enlarge a black and white page to poster size for just a few dollars.

Like some retail shops wrapping windows in brown parcel paper, to create a sense of excitement before opening to the public. It could turn out to be a fab idea! Also give opportunity to be creative on the paper with pictures, words, and art work leading up to the opening.

Think as well about how art galleries use signage; when you walk into a room at most galleries, it tells you what the room's about in big, clear letters.

Design clear signs explaining what the project is about. Again, enlarge it at a copy shop for legibility. If you use your signs to explain the temporary nature of the project, it can attract people to get involved in this or future projects; and it can calm nervous visitors who don't understand your project.

Professional displays & exciting windows

- Created excitement with window displays
- Used professionally-designed displays
- Developed a clear visual identity

Using a shop that was in an area left behind by redevelopment and changing patterns of foot traffic, the project can start with its windows wrapped in brown paper to hide what was happening inside. When the brown paper is torn down, it reveals a temporary arts space, with professional displays created by the local artists and design staff. A strong visual identity can be applied throughout, following the brown paper theme and including an iconic sign representing the area.

Throughout six weeks, the venue should host a range of events, initially exploring life in the town historically, and present finishing with an exploration of the area's future regeneration. At every stage, the windows should be used to maximum effect and a TV running in the window showing short films will add movement and interest even outside opening hours.

Events could include talks, presentations and drop in sessions with arts experts. The projects could also tie in with current world events to help get publicity and free media coverage.

Always a good and successful project is one to capture locals and their memory, with people's personal photos scanned and copied on site and 'I remember...' slips completed by visitors. These memories and images can be produced as a booklet, and a YouTube channel of activity. They will form a valuable legacy and an archive of local history.

10. Marketing

Marketing On A Budget

As with everything, although you're working fast and in a temporary space it's best to plan your marketing in advance. Again, time spent planning early will save lots of time and trouble later on. Get a big sheet of paper, draw up a calendar starting at least a month in advance of your project, and plot in your marketing activity week-by-week. Start your marketing as early as possible, particularly if you're working in an off the beat location where it will be harder to attract visitors. In these locations, good marketing really counts.

There should be three strands to your marketing; print, media and online. Use a different color pen for each, or use columns on your plan. Cross each item off when it's been completed – it's satisfying to do!

Checklist

- Flyers
- Posters (adapted from flyers)
- Press Release
- Press email list
- Facebook group
- Instagram account
- Twitter account

Making Print & Distributing Flyers

If you're lucky and work in an organization, there's probably somebody who's responsible for your design and printing. Meet them early on in the project, and give them a clear brief. They'll need to know when and where the project is happening, in Plain English what it's about, who your audience will be and a clear deadline for everything to be delivered.

If you're working on a smaller project, it's not hard to design and print your own flyer. It can be a simple, black and white flyer photocopied at a local shop – or a full color design, professionally printed. 5000 postcard-sized flyers, printed both sides, should cost you around \$170 and should be printed in about one week. If you don't have design skills or can't afford a graphic designer to do the job for you, use your creative skills and draw, collage or paint something. Photocopied collage always looks good, and has a urgency that will match the nature of many empty space projects.

Flyers should be distributed through local shops and cafes. Don't forget your local Tourist Information Centre and your local museum, galleries or libraries. Ask them if they can distribute your information to other branches or venues

If you have volunteers, get them dropping info in neighborhood shops. And if you're lucky, local schools may help out and send flyers home with their students. Stop and talk to people when delivering flyers and they'll spread the word for you. Don't forget hairdressers and barbers, as they'll happily chat to a captive audience about what you're doing.

Make sure you distribute flyers about two weeks in advance, and visit them again in the days before you open.

Don't forget to tell your neighboring shops what's going on: drop a leaflet in to them, and ask them to display a poster or have flyers on their counter.

Press Releases

Write and distribute a press release; it's a great investment as it will return real results. If you have a local agency, you may be able to persuade them to come onboard with your project and work at a lower rate than they would for a commercial client, to help you write a great press release.

If you don't have somebody to do this it's easy to build a good list of email contacts in the local and regional media; buy newspapers, pick up free magazines, and scour websites for email addresses. Use resources like Twitter and Facebook to find direct routes to journalists as well, and start talking to them early about what you're planning.

Send your press release to local, community websites (who love to receive great content for their sites, arts & culture websites, and groups, clubs and societies in your area – they'll use it in their newsletters. Don't forget that most councils have their own magazine or newspaper, although these might need information some months in advance, and that some will list community events on their websites as well.

Here's how to write a press release in seven simple steps:

1. At the top of your press release, include the name of your group or project, the date and the words 'Press Release' – journalists are busy so make it easy for them!
2. Then add an attention-grabbing headline – a maximum of half a dozen words is ideal. Think like a tabloid.
3. The first paragraph should be a short one (just one line is good) outlining the story in an interesting way. Use bold to make this stand out from the page and grab interest. If you don't get attention now, your press release will end up in the bin – or turned into a NIB, a 'News In Brief' piece at the side of the page.
4. Follow up with some background ...and then lead in to the story. Explain what's happening and why it's of interest to readers. Aim to write a press release that is between 300 - 400 words. Too short and it won't get good coverage: too long and it won't get read.
5. The press often like to have a quote – so restate the most important facts, as a quote from someone involved in your project. You want your contact details to be part of the story – so make sure to include them in a way that they're relevant to what's written before and don't get left out.
6. Make it clear where the story ends and that any following information is additional and for the press only. Using '/ends' is standard and easy to understand. Add your contact details and any 'Notes for Editors', like the background to a project, or a brief history of a venue.
7. Offer a good photo to match the story. It's best to both provide one yourself and also to offer press the chance to take their own. A good picture really makes your story stand out on the page. Offer interviews or live broadcast ideas for radio and TV.

Social Networking

For the first time in the history of humankind, we have the tools available to make networks of friends and colleagues – to bring together those who share common ideas, interests and aspirations – in real time, around the world and at low cost. These tools are really good for empty shops projects, where you need to be fast and flexible.

Social networking websites include names you're sure to be familiar with – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the countless other networks.

Pick the sites that best match the audience you want to reach, and the aims of your project. For example, if creating a photo resource is an aim, Flickr is a site you should be using. If you're about engaging with young people, use Tic Tok. If your audience is a little older, in their 20s-40s, you'll probably find them on Facebook.

Each site has very different tools, display options and ways of working so you'll need to take some real time in learning how to use them, and the only way to do this is to get stuck in. Most sites have friendly users who are happy to help a 'newbie' so don't be scared and remember - you won't break anything, and can always take down content you're not happy with at a later date.

As you get more involved, you should also check the etiquette of different sites – for example, Twitter users prefer informal, friendly conversation so don't just blast them with a sales message.

11. When You're Open

Once you're in, you should check what you have available. While your plan should cover most problems, you may need to make some adjustments if your shop doesn't have everything you need. Don't worry – there's usually a quick and easy way to get around problems. For example, if you don't have running water can you ask another shop nearby, and carry water in camping containers (these should cost less than \$5 each).

Here's a checklist for once you're through the door.

- Doors lock, keys
- Windows safe
- Toilet accessible and working
- Running water, sink or kitchen area
- Lights working and visually appear safe
- Telephone and broadband
- Heating working, controls explained

To make the most of opening your empty shop, you'll want to:

- Engage with people when they visit
- Capture information from them for future contact
- Get feedback on your work

Choosing set opening times, and displaying them clearly in the window, is vital. It's better to advertise you are open for less hours, and get the highest number of visitors in the shortest time. Make sure you find out about local events – like a farmers' market or an arts festival – when visitor numbers to the area may be higher, and open to match. Use the social media you've signed up with to let people know when you're open. Make this a regular reminder, as you'll catch different people online on different days.

On the days you're open, use signs on street corners to direct people your way. Find out if there are any sites nearby where you can legally hang a temporary banner or signpost. And if you can display an A-board, put one out in a prominent location.

Make your venue stand out from others on the street: bunting, flags, or balloons tell people exactly where you are and are like urban shorthand that says something exciting is happening. You'll notice that many potential visitors are worried about entering your space, especially if it's not immediately clear what you're doing: make them feel comfortable by putting up a sign to say you are open, and if possible leaving the front door open wide.

Once visitors are in, try to make them feel welcome without being too pushy. It's a fine balance, but a polite 'hello, look around and I'm here if you have any questions' always works. And it should be obvious – but remember to smile! It's all about engaging with visitors. Don't ignore people when they come in; don't huddle with friends in deep conversation; don't bury your head in a book; don't eat food at your shop counter.

Keeping a rough count of visitors is a good idea, and provides some valuable information for your evaluation. Keep a day to day count, or for more detail monitor mornings and afternoons separately. If you have huge numbers of visitors or you're open for weeks on end, it may not be possible to count everyone in and out. Count visitors for an hour a day, multiply by the number of hours you're open and use this to estimate footfall.

Even better than just counting is starting a real relationship with your visitors. Try to collect details from them to build your own mailing list with a simple 'sign up for our list' form.

Use a visitor's book as well, near the door, to capture comments from visitors as they're leaving. Or be inspired – a big board, sticky notes and a pen are an equally good, and far more visually exciting, way to encourage feedback.

While collecting information is vital, particularly if you're working for, with or funded by an organization that wants certain data collected, don't let this compromise the friendly and informal nature of your empty shops project.

And make sure that visitors can take away your details too, by giving them postcards, business cards or a simple leaflet. Include all the ways they can contact you – with your Facebook address, Twitter name, Instagram, email and phone number shown clearly. If there are future events they might like, make sure they are given details of those before they leave.

Finally, try to get good-quality photos of your visitors at busy times, that you can upload to Facebook and Flickr. And put a sign up asking them to upload their images to your Facebook and other social media as well.

12. Useful equipment

Based on five years of running projects in empty shops, here are some top tips for essential empty shops equipment:

Tables: Folding pasting tables are ideal, as unlike larger commercial trestle tables they will fold in half and fit into the boot of a normal car. Don't buy cheap wooden ones – they'll fall apart far too quickly. Professional painters and decorators use high-quality, metal framed pasting tables and the most stylish ones look really good as well as being firm and sturdy to work on. They should cost around \$35-\$50 each.

Seats: There are plenty of folding or stacking seats available as well, and it's worth having enough to accommodate guests.

Heaters: Empty shops seem to be universally cold. Electric fan heaters that cost \$15-\$35 are fast and effective, but they do add to the electricity bill. You know how shops always have a heater over the door? It creates a warm air curtain to stop cold air coming in – and it works. So put one heater near the door.

Wifi: There's a gadget called a 'mi-fi' which is about the size of a mobile phone. It connects to mobile broadband, and then acts as a wifi router for up to five laptops or other devices. It's ideal for creating temporary wifi hotspots in empty shops and provides a reliable, robust connection. It will cost about \$60, and it's pay-as-you-go so you'll need to top it up.

Tablecloths: Using fabric softens a space, gets rid of nasty echoes and hides clutter. Single bed sheets are about the right size for covering tables. Buy a load in one color so your space looks coordinated.

Toolkit: You'll need a few tools, and with this useful kit you should be able to pull off that Mary Poppins trick and look prepared for any emergency. You don't need anything specialist, just a claw hammer, pliers, scissors, a couple of screwdrivers and a staple gun. Add gaffer tape, masking tape, nylon fishing wire, small tacks or nails, drawing pins and staples and you're ready. Blue tack, bulldog clips and dressmaking pins are also useful for displaying things. The whole kit will cost less than \$50.

13. Packing up

When you've finished, you need to make sure you'll be invited back by the landlord or renting agent and that means filling a few garbage bags, getting the polyfilla out, and having a good scrub up.

First clear everything you've brought into the shop, and make sure you have garbage bags to clear any rubbish. Of course – separate your recycling. If there's anything that you don't need that useful to someone else and pass it on.

Spend some time with a tube of fast-drying filler, and fill any holes you've made in the walls. Repaint or touch up the paintwork.

Any shop-fittings should be left neat and tidy for the next user. Leave furniture neatly to one side, and leave shelf-brackets and other fittings neatly stacked.

If you got anything you got free online, consider putting it back online for someone else to use. Borrow or bring a vacuum cleaner from home, and make sure you clean under shop counters as well as the obvious spaces. Wipe down surfaces, and if necessary clean windows. If there are kitchen areas, make sure they are clean and if there's a toilet, clean it and leave enough toilet paper for the next person.

Make sure you show the landlord or renting agent the space before you return the keys, so there's no future dispute about the condition when you left. If you've made improvements, make sure they know. And make sure they get a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers – it ensures they will remember you, and leaves some goodwill for the next project.

14. Evaluation & Documentation

Just because you've packed up and locked the door, it doesn't mean your project is over. You need to evaluate and document your project; for your own satisfaction, to show people when you're planning your next project, and to add to the idea of a nationwide empty shops map. If you're working within an organization, there will be set evaluation you have to complete and if you have worked with project partners or received funding, you may need to provide them with certain evidence and evaluation as well.

As with everything else to do with empty spaces, don't make your personal evaluation complicated, and keep a light-touch. Enjoy the process of recording the good work you've done.

On one side of your report write down how many people were involved in your project; as exhibitors or contributors, as volunteers, and how many people visited while you were open. Note down any organizations or businesses who were involved, funded or supported the project.

Record your actual project budget: what everything cost, and what money came in. match this against the estimates in your plan. They won't be exactly the same, but unless there were major changes or big unexpected problems should be close.

List any key media coverage, with a note of date and the author, including local newspapers, national press, TV and radio, and of course any blogs or websites which wrote about your project. It's always worth keeping copies, but remember you can't photocopy press cuttings or scan them to put online without a license, but you can use links in most cases without issue.

Keep as many photographs as possible, ideally starting with an empty shop, through the setting up, to a full and busy space with people in it, and then an empty shop again.

Write down any comments, from exhibitors, contributors, visitors, neighboring shops, that stand out – record the negatives as well as the favorable ones, as these may well be more useful and help you learn lessons for next time.

And write your own thoughts and feelings down; what worked, and what didn't? Why did some things swing while others were stuck in a rut? Was the project too long, or too short? When was the highpoint, and what was the low?

Keep all of this in a portfolio or folder, to refer to when planning future projects.

Don't forget to ask a local library or museum if they are able to keep an archive about your project, with flyers and posters, photos, press cutting and your evaluation. If you have any creative responses to your project, such as a podcast or film, include copies on thumb drives.

15. Support

There are a range of organizations which can give practical advice, support and help the development of individual projects. Some of these specialize in projects in real estate, while some are experienced at using such spaces as part of their work.

Empty Shops

Organizations and groups that promotes best practice in museums, libraries and archives, to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all are great resources to contact

The organizations working with the museums, archives and libraries sector, that taps into the potential for collaboration between them and run pilot projects include:

America Alliance of Museums - (<https://www.aam-us.org/>)

Museum Association – (<https://www.museumsassociation.org/>)

The Open Space Project

Is designed to help look after our County and assist as a creative guide to the Department of Communities and Local Government. It will look to find and support 'Open Spaces' use of empty commercial buildings during a time when certainty in industry seems challenged.

This can be started in an 'explore, develop and test' phase, with some flexible funds to get some imaginative community uses into empty shops as beacons. With County assistance and tax breaks this could produce a range of Open Space leases, suitable for empty shops, buildings and even unutilized land throughout Prince William County.

Prince William County Arts Council

Arts Council as an agency for the arts in PWC, distributes public funding from the Government. Contact your local office for more information.

Link: www.pwcartscouncil.org