

# Montpelier

## A Single Creative Idea Can Transform a Community



### The Challenge

The State House lawn is a rare patch of grass and trees in downtown Montpelier. The city has a compact center bustling with people, restaurants, stores and offices. Unfortunately, with all that density it is missing public spaces where pedestrians can pause, and enjoy one another. In most of Vermont's downtown areas, more land is allocated to parking than buildings, parks, or public spaces. However, in car-dependent Vermont, any talk of reducing the existing parking supply meets strong resistance from drivers and businesses. A local economic development group launched an experiment to prove that fewer parking spaces can help local business thrive while creating opportunities to celebrate the arts and bring the community together.

The downtown organization, [Montpelier Alive](#), local Architect [Ward Joyce](#), and dozens of community members and artists are working to create vibrant public spaces downtown; balancing public art and placemaking projects with the needs of drivers and business owners. The goal is a downtown that is safer and easier to walk, focusing on spaces for people to gather, rest, and enjoy.

### The Solution

The Design Committee of Montpelier Alive became energized by Park(ing) Day demonstrations in San Francisco. The annual event has inspired citizens across the globe to claim a metered parking spot, and turn it into a park for a day. This simple action helps demonstrate how much of our public space is devoted to cars, and plants a seed to think about creative ways to use public space to better serve and engage the community.

Inspired, Montpelier Alive held their first Park(ing) Day. Two parking spots on State Street were transformed into parks for the day; featuring tables, chairs, trees and benches. What started as Montpelier Alive's request to use a few parking spots to foster community, has transformed into a multi-phase public project that enriches downtown Montpelier. The parklet on the Rialto bridge, pocket park on Main Street and summer project "Langdon Street Alive" have each activated public spaces, and created economic and social benefits.



For more information, please contact:

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Website: <http://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/downtowns>





### Rialto Bridge Parklet (Year 1)

Montpelier Alive approached the city with the idea for a 2-year pilot project, to use 6 parking spaces downtown for alternative purposes during the summer. The goal was to use the public space to foster community and encourage interaction among strangers. The design committee put out a call for proposals and chose 3 projects to support. Initially only one project, a parklet by local Architect Ward Joyce, came to fruition. The parklet on the Rialto Bridge featured built-in benches, planters, hanging flower baskets, and a view of the river, creating an inviting atmosphere for gathering or a short respite with nature from the bustling streets.

As part of an architecture design course through Vermont Technical College (VTC), Joyce lead a group of students through the 10-week process of designing and building of the parklet. The project was financed through fundraising campaigns and support from VTC, with materials costing \$10,000, and all labor donated by students and community members.

There were mixed reactions to this project. While many enjoyed the space, using it to eat lunch outside or take a break to look at the river, some business owners were concerned that it took away two valuable parking spots downtown. Conversely, Alla Vita, a shop close to the parklet that serves take-out lunches, found their business increased due to the amenity. People appreciated having a comfortable place to eat just outside the shop.

“I tell my sons that beautiful, meaningful communities happen because we make them happen. It takes a team of hardworking people that care to create great places to live.”

-Sarah Jarvis, Montpelier Alive

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## Montpelier Pocket Park (Years 2-3)

Building on the success of the first project, Joyce and Montpelier Alive chose to expand the experiment for year two. They moved the parklet to a vacant lot just off Main Street, transforming the empty space into a vibrant park. A single parking space in front of the park was converted into bicycle parking. The park reused the main structure from the parklet, and incorporated a green wall, rainwater catchment system, overhead lighting, a life size chess board, tables, seating and planters.

The project was quite a large undertaking, and a labor of love. Joyce donated his time and skills, a local property owner leased the land at no cost for two years, and 20 community members helped install the park. Even still, the project cost \$20,000 to cover material costs, insurance, and water. General upkeep and watering the plants was taken on by Joyce and volunteers. The project was funded through crowd sourcing, Montpelier Alive, a grant from National Life, donations from a local lumber yard, and direct outreach to the community.



The pocket park had overwhelming support from the community. Some people were skeptical that the parking space was used for bicycle parking, but came to embrace the idea after seeing it heavily used all summer. The park created much needed green space and outdoor seating downtown; with users averaging 100 people per day during the summer.



Additionally, during the second year of the experimenting, a seasonal parklet was installed on State Street in front of Positive Pie. The wooden parklet designed and built by Montpelier firm Anomal, expanded the restaurant's outdoor seating.



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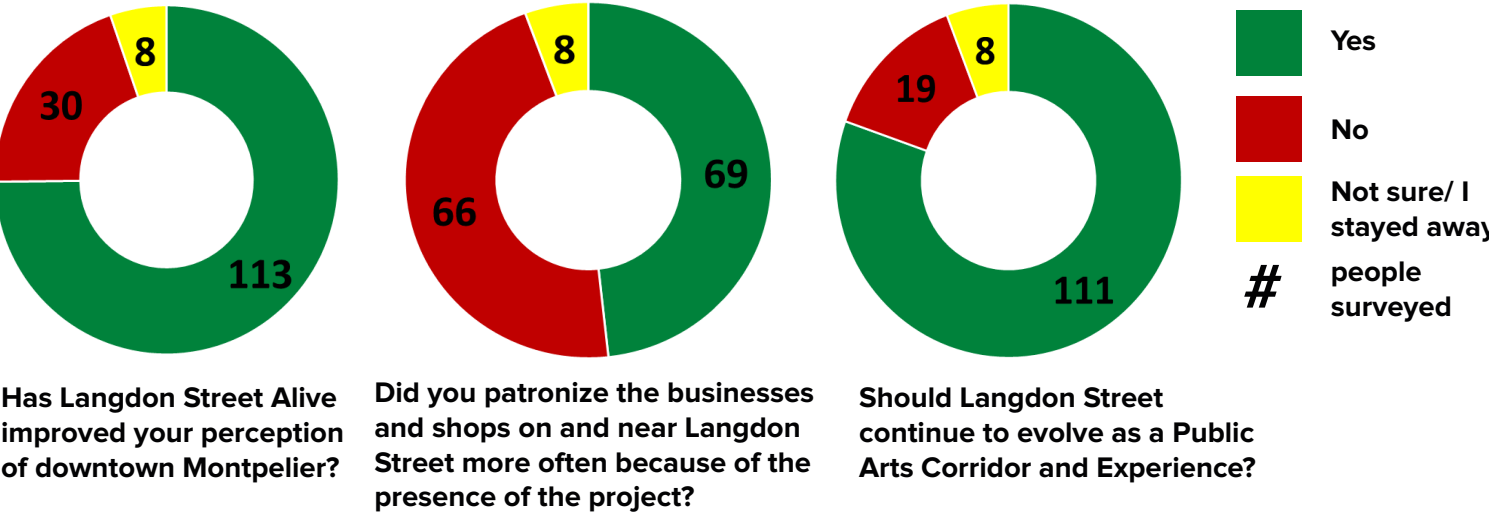
Langdon Street Alive (Year 4)

Based on the success of the parklet and pocket park, Joyce realized that people in Montpelier were craving better uses of public space. He hatched the idea of turning Langdon street, a one block street in the heart of downtown, into an outdoor art gallery. The concept was to take over the street with art and create a conversation piece; a community activity where everyone could be involved from children to grandparents. First, Joyce contacted the city and got their support, then formed a steering committee, and began fundraising. The committee of 11 included members of Montpelier Alive, local artists, architects and residents. The combination of people from different backgrounds helped legitimize the project, and ensured a wide range of community engagement. The Langdon Street Alive board solicited donations and applied for 25 grants, raising \$42,000 for the project. It is indicative of community-driven projects such as these to rely on a variety of funding streams and creative solicitations to finance the vision.



Many local business owners helped the project take shape. Andrew Brewer, owner of Onion River Sports on Langdon Street, made a financial contribution as well as a land contribution. Brewer donated a piece of his parking lot to create a pocket park next to his building. The park featured seating, tables, shade umbrellas and bike parking. Casella Waste paid \$1,500 to have three of their dumpsters painted by local artists. During the process of planning the event the steering committee had over 100 conversations with people in the city. The goal was to build support, gain community input, get different local groups involved in the event and strengthen connections between organizations.

The planning and input paid off, and the result was a street brimming with art and color. Visitors enjoyed parklets, a bridge of flowers, sculptures, large paintings, even participatory art - where people were encouraged to take a blank canvas from a wall and return it with a finished painting. There were community events in the street, and the celebration of the 1-year anniversary of a popular new restaurant. A survey conducted by Langdon Street Alive showed overwhelming support for the project. The graphics below indicate that residents and visitors embraced the public art aspect of the project and would like to see it continue to thrive.



## Next Steps

Supporters say Montpelier's placemaking efforts have encouraged people to stay downtown longer and spend more money than they would have otherwise. With these three projects, the group has shown that interesting and innovative uses of parking and underused land are a great way to support local businesses and bring community together. Montpelier Alive is continuing to champion places for people downtown. Winter 2017 unveiled the first public skating rink on the state house lawn, a community-led project many years in the making. Ward Joyce and Montpelier Alive have set their sights on creating a permanent park in the vacant lot where the pocket park is currently located. They are in the planning phase for the second summer of Langdon Street Alive. Montpelier Alive wants the city to continue to be a place that experiments with interesting and innovative ideas, that thinks outside of the box and draws people in because of unique experiences and amenities. These three projects help support that vision of Montpelier- a unique place where everyone can be involved in creating the spaces that bring community together. Their efforts and enthusiasm are working to influence local policy and investments to continue to create public gathering spaces and vibrant events downtown.



## Ward Joyce's advice for communities interested in placemaking events

- 1 Get one energized person or organization to lead the effort.  
They must be able to sell the idea, and have the vision and capacity to bring it to life.
- 2 Have a good idea that benefits the whole community.
- 3 Tell the story well; create models and a visual presentation, have conversations.
- 4 Make sure your project is doable.
- 5 Foster local partnerships.

### Resources

information on Placemaking  
[Creative placemaking overview](#)

### For More Information

Ward Joyce Designs

Montpelier Alive

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