

Tearing Down the Fence

Little Village Interview Synthesis

Nick Scheele • Dylan Shefman • Enzo Mignano





PAUL VERDELL

Organization

Library Street Collective Sponsor

Title

Contemporary Artist

Bio

Paul Verdell, originally from Long Beach, California, studied at Bowling Green State University and completed a residency in Senegal. He recently moved from Toledo to Detroit, where he now lives and works in Little Village. Sponsored by Library Street Collective, his art reflects his Black American heritage through expressive color and mark-making.



TARA AKITT

Organization

Library Street Collective

Title

Senior Director

Bio

Tara Akitt hails from Canada, where she grew up in Toronto and studied at Queen's University in Kingston. She now serves as the Senior Director of the Library Street Collective, organizing shows across Detroit. She lives in Little Village, a block away from the Shepherd, with her husband and daughter.



NATHAN RICH

Organization

Peterson Rich Office

Title

Founding Partner, Architect

Bio

Peterson Rich Office is a Brooklyn-based architecture and design practice recognized for its cultural, publicly engaged, and social impact projects at multiple scales. Nathan and his team lead the renovation design efforts for The Shepherd and the proposed mix-use development across the street.

What's going on there?

We found a few consistent themes during our user interviews. The following pages outline the theme's description and impact on the surrounding area

Density Through Art

Building physical, social, and experiential density through art to foster dynamic, connected communities.

"Density Through Art" is all about how art can shape and grow a neighborhood in different ways - physically, socially, and experientially. It is the idea that art does not just live in galleries but can spill out into the streets, influencing everything from new buildings to how people interact. When a space becomes known for its art, it starts attracting other developments.

"I think more density should be an ambition because they've created kind of the destination out of it. Now they have to create housing."

- Nathan Rich

As art draws in new developments, physical density naturally follows, transforming the area into an arts district. This growth extends beyond a single gallery like The Shepherd, bringing in new restaurants, cafes, and other gathering spaces. These new spaces encourage people to explore, meet, and connect with each other. Whether it's bumping into neighbors at a local café or chatting after a gallery visit, these developments create opportunities for social interaction that did not exist before.

"[The Shepherd] is a grassroots concept for how you can rebuild the neighborhood."

- Nathan Rich

With physical and social density in place, the experiential aspect falls into place, turning the neighborhood into more than just a place to visit and now a place to experience.

The combination of the Shepherd, new businesses, and a connected community means that people are not just coming to see an exhibition; they are staying for dinner, wandering through shops, or grabbing coffee the next morning. This layered experience turns the area into a destination, where art is just the starting point for a day spent exploring, dining, and connecting

"Having some kind of density here will attract people... who want to do everything all at once, but also those who might want to see a show and grab dinner"

- Tara Akitt

"I think art grabs people to come and stay, and then maybe you'll have other people doing something else, other than fine art."

- Paul Verdell



The senior Urban Tech cohort engaging in conversation on whether or not the fruit in the ceiling is real.

Photo: Ting Fong Chen

The next step towards physical density is housing.

Enzo: What does Little Village need next? How can this vacant land be redeveloped? What's needed?

Nathan Rich: Housing seems like a natural next step for the area. Anthony and his team have already been restoring some of the existing houses, like two-family homes, and that's made a big change. Some of the artists you've spoken to live in those buildings, as do some of their team members. Other people are coming in and renting or buying those homes, but there needs to be more density. The area is still pretty sparse.

The development we built across the street aims to create a community where there wasn't one before. Typically, houses in the neighborhood have their own driveway, garage, and front door. Because we were working with a full block, we inverted that design—turning the front doors toward the center of the block and keeping the parking on the perimeter. This creates a walking path in the middle where people can see each other as they enter their homes, apartments, or studios.

This design intentionally creates a space for community. Otherwise, there aren't many spaces for people to gather in the neighborhood. Cars, which often separate people in typical suburban areas, are parked in clustered lots, creating a short walk from the parking areas to the front doors. This means neighbors might see each other as they come and go, encouraging a sense of connection. The layout and planning were designed to create opportunities for people to see each other, get to know each other, and look out for one another.



A collection of videos of Little Village showing the area full of life.

Video: Peterson Rich Office

Proactive Engagement

Engaging local stakeholders to build *for* the neighborhood, not just *in* it.

Proactive engagement has been key to the growth of Little Village, starting with building strong connections with local stakeholders. Anthony and the Library Street Collective have focused on forming relationships before any projects break ground, ensuring that they understand the community's needs. This groundwork is critical for aligning new developments with the neighborhood's values and priorities. By creating a "web of connections," Anthony has laid a foundation of trust, bringing together local organizations and residents in a shared vision for the area.

"Anthony's done a lot of groundwork to connect with different community stakeholders."

"The success comes from making those relationships before you build."

- Tara Akitt

"They've built active partnerships with local non-profits, creating permanent space for these groups to become generators of community."

- Nathan Rich

Once these relationships are in place, setting clear goals that reflect the community's needs becomes the next step. Nathan approaches the design process with a focus on these goals, treating them as guiding principles that ensure the neighborhood's character is respected throughout the development process. This approach keeps the project aligned with the broader vision that was shaped through community input. This goal-setting ensures that spaces like The Shepherd maintain their grassroots feel while introducing new possibilities for the area.

"At the beginning of a design process... we set out a series of goals for the project... that tend to be like our North Star."

- Nathan Rich

Through this deep community engagement, Little Village has become more than a place for new buildings - it is a neighborhood where residents have a strong sense of place and belonging. The process of including community voices creates spaces that feel accessible, fostering a sense of shared ownership. By making sure that public spaces are truly for everyone, developers have helped the area evolve without losing its identity.

"Once you get the communities involved, making public things and not gatekeeping... helps the area survive and thrive."

- Paul Verdell



Books curated by the Library Street Collective to promote the education and expression of art.

Photo: Dylan Shefman



The Charles McGehee Legacy Park hosting the Detroit Windsor Dance Team in celebration of Black History and the future of Detroit and its people.

Photo: Detroit Windsor Dance

Art as a First Language

Art is a primal instinct in all of us, so it makes for a very natural foundation for neighborhood-making in Little Village.

Little Village is a neighborhood in perpetual transition, from a thriving Eastern European community to empty lots and sparse development, now to new beginnings. The Shepherd itself has transformed from a religious community anchor to an art-focused one.

Library Street Collective has chosen such an integral element of the human experience as art to represent the neighborhood. As a result it's bringing together people from all walks of life to bond and build relationships over a common medium.

Not only has the neighborhood changed, but so too has the Shepherd. Initially the neighborhood's center point, the church served as a meeting place for decades. By transitioning the building's purpose to art, Library Street Collective was able to maintain its history as a place of connection, since art is innate to all of us. Keeping the gallery free and open to the public has been crucial to enabling its connective nature.

"So rather than it being an anchor for the community around religion, it was now an anchor for the community around the arts."

- Nathan Rich

"He's like, Okay, that's all I need to know. If they're building a free museum and gallery, it's kind of hard to be like, f* that."**

- Paul Verdell

Detroit is not New York or Los Angeles or Chicago. It is not the arts mecca of the United States, or even the Midwest. But it does not need to be - art exists everywhere. You do not need a prestigious (pretentious) arts scene to enjoy art; in fact, without it, you may find a more natural selection of art with a greater ability to draw appreciation from even the most "un-artistic" people.

"Everybody grows up drawing, whether you're good at it or not."

- Paul Verdell

With such a strong emphasis on art, we were curious who the neighborhood is actually *for*. Is it for the tourists who come from Macomb County on the weekends to see a show? Is it for the artists who are moving for better opportunities? It *for* any particular group of people, or will it become just another neighborhood with cafes and shops?

All three interviewees seemed to share a common perspective: art will always be integral to the neighborhood's identity, but eventually the rest will come. People need amenities, and amenities need employees. What started as an arts enclave may end up becoming a (quirky) standard neighborhood, and they're okay with that. So long as the spirit of Little Village is alive, the neighborhood will be anything but standard.

"I think art is the kind of thing that grabs people to come and stay, and then maybe you'll have other people who begin to do something else, other than fine art."

- Paul Verdell



Paul's self portrait of himself in 10 years in Little Village, a little older, a more grey hairs, and wearing a Hermes shirt.



Even in the absence of art, Paul's studio walls tell a story of their own.

Photo: Dylan Shefman

Everyone starts with a crayon in hand.

Enzo: Do you think art is a good playbook in terms of focusing new development?

Paul Verdell: Do I think it is a good playbook? I think so. I think anything that involves art is a great playbook. I'm very biased on that, but I do think that anything that involves some type of creativity is a good way to, you know, do any type of community involvement. Somebody told me this the other day, and I always think about it. It's like, everybody grows up drawing, whether you're good at it or not. Everybody grows up drawing like, what's the first thing your parents give you, or your teacher gives you? A crayon and you're making something on paper. It could be great, could be terrible, but everybody grows up drawing, so I think anything that deals with any type of creativity is always a good it's good in my book.



Paul's current artistic phase is returning back to his roots of self portraits.

Photo: Dylan Shefman

Porous Edges

Turning Little Village from barriers into bridges

Little Village is beginning to breathe once again through the integration of open urban spaces that promote inclusivity and seamless edges between areas. This approach seeks to remove physical barriers, like fences, and foster environments where everyone feels welcome. In cities like Detroit, where racial and socioeconomic divisions have historically been reinforced by physical walls - such as the Grosse Pointe Wall, which once separated residents - porous design represents a reversal of these exclusionary practices. By breaking down both literal and figurative barriers, porous edges aim to unify communities by expanding where a resident can interact with in the neighborhood. The result is a more connected and integrated urban landscape where residents feel a sense of shared ownership and accessibility.

"...keeping the development very porous to the surrounding neighborhood...the opposite of a gated community"

- Nathan Rich

In recent developments, landscape design is being used as a transition space, connecting projects like the Shepherd to the nearby restaurants and businesses in a seamless way. Landscape is "filling in the white space" of the mostly vacant lots which is fostering a more cohesive neighborhood atmosphere, and promoting walkability and interaction between spaces. This creates opportunities for both the resident and visitor to engage with local amenities, public art, dine, and socialize in spaces that feel connected and inclusive. The landscape itself becomes the bridge that brings people together, emphasizing openness and accessibility over separation. Water access is also improving, with the removal of the facades and some of the boat storage opening up more direct access to the lake.

"...I was very conscious that [Rosie] would have a lot of space to play and like...she goes on a walk twice a day, at least, minimum..."

- Tara Akitt

This shift towards porous and permeable urban design marks a significant departure from Detroit's past. By removing barriers and creating multifunctional, open spaces, the city is working to heal historical divisions and foster stronger community ties. Developments like the Shepherd show how thoughtful landscape design can preserve the city's historical character while also guiding it towards a more inclusive and integrated future. Slowly but progressing, Detroit is reshaping its urban environment to be more reflective of the diverse communities it serves, building a foundation for greater equity and connection.

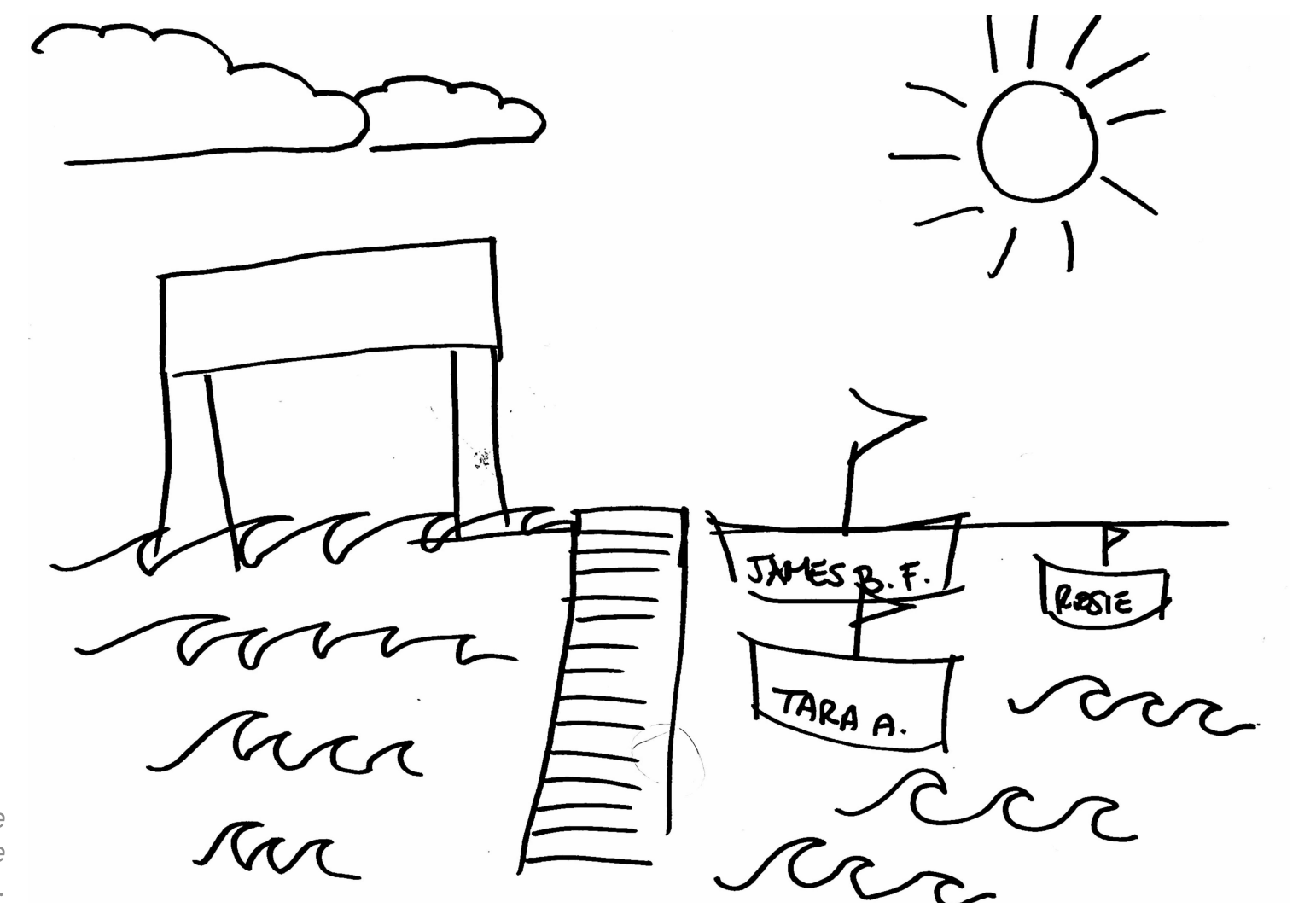
"There are no fences around here, and we wanted to make sure that nothing felt closed off or inaccessible. The two public parks are always open and available for family members. And I've actually had people come to me and say, 'I actually come here at night and I don't even go inside the Shepherd. I just want to walk the grounds.'"

- Tara Akitt



Along the edge of Detroit and Grosse Pointe lies a fence that separates the two districts.

Photo: The Other America



Tara's vision of Little Village in 10 years where the hard edges between the water and the neighborhood softened.

Thrives on familiar faces and community spirit, but for it to truly flourish, it needs the lifeblood of density

Enzo: Where do you see Little Village in 10 years? If you were plopped down there, what's the first thing you'd see? What would you smell or hear?

Nathan Rich: I think it would be the neighbors. The name "Little Village" really resonates with what they're trying to create—it's about building a real community. When you visit now, you see the same people each time, walking down the street—some of the artists, makers, and people who work at the Shepherd.

When I go to Detroit, I stay in the area, and you start to see familiar faces as you walk around. I think for that sense of familiarity, friendliness, and community to grow over time as the neighborhood expands would be spectacular.

Enzo: What do you think would have the greatest benefit in this community?

Nathan Rich: Once you have more density, you need certain types of programming to support it, like grocery stores, sources of food. And then I guess the last piece is maybe transit. There is a bus that stops there on Jefferson, but if the idea is to bring people from downtown Detroit, it would be great if there was transit that maybe stops in the neighborhood itself, in a Little Village neighborhood itself, seems like it would be, just be a nice way to connect it to some of the other neighborhoods.



A concert being held at The Shepherd, showing the mix use and blending of the space.

Photo: Peterson Rich Office

Productive Tension

Layered history with innovation in every corner

The tension between preserving its rich history and embracing new development is palpable. With the abundance of vacant lots and scattered services, it can be easy to just start new, but the development in Little Village is oriented in a different way by being caught in a balancing act between innovation and preservation. The Shepherd is a great example of this harmonic relationship. The former church, now repurposed as an art gallery, lecture hall, and performance space, was designed to balance its historical legacy with modern functionality. The building's exterior remains intact, preserving its role as a neighborhood anchor, while its interior has been transformed into a versatile cultural hub for both local and global audiences. This strategic adaptive reuse of The Shepherd echoes Little Village, and Detroit's, broader efforts to layer history with innovation, creating a space where the past and future can coexist.

"...there's this kind of layering of new, old, new, old, new, old."

- Nathan Rich

The transformation of The Shepherd is part of a larger revitalization effort in the surrounding area, where new developments are emerging alongside long-standing structures. This mix of old and new is seen in the adaptive reuse of industrial buildings, public art installations, and the creation of new businesses, all carefully integrated into the existing neighborhood fabric. The balance between maintaining the historical character of the area while introducing contemporary spaces is key to fostering a sense of continuity. There is also a conversation of the balance in cost and affordability. Sometimes design sacrifices have to be made to either keep the cultural character or cost of living low.

As the neighborhood grows, this layering of history and innovation not only draws in visitors, but also supports the local community by preserving its cultural identity and encourages economic development and new social opportunities through identity branding.

"I mean, Detroit has such an amazing history, it has an amazing history as amazing black history, you know? And that's one of the things that I very much think about while I'm here, especially as a black artist..."

- Paul Verdell

This productive tension between honoring the past and embracing new possibilities is central to the neighborhood identity. The interplay between the historic framework and the contemporary additions at The Shepherd and its surrounding area is a metaphor for Detroit's broader transformation. The area surrounding has already seen the addition of a beer garden, two new restaurants, and the creation of art maker spaces and studios - most of these developments are located in existing and repurposed spaces. As the neighborhood moves forward, this delicate balance ensures that development honors its past while building a vibrant, inclusive future.

"...finding buildings that have a very strong existing character and then reframing, celebrating that character through contemporary interventions...brings a lot of value to just the experience of these spaces."

- Nathan Rich



An art exhibition in an old ship storage facility

Photo: Ting Fong Chen



A modern white box art gallery with the original stained glass and alter in the background.

Photo: Peterson Rich Office

Blending the church's historic character with contemporary interventions, creating a space where past and present coexist in every step and frame.

Enzo: I love the term you used here "productive tension" to describe The Shepard. How is that embodied in the project?

Nathan Rich: You know, finding buildings that have a very strong existing character and then reframing, celebrating that character through contemporary interventions is something that we like doing, we're getting better at doing, and that we find, as you know, brings a lot of value to just the experience of these spaces. And also, you know, it brings value, so just kind of like the history of a place. So like, an example of that is when you walk into The Shepard, you see through layers of space and time. In a sense, you walk into the original church entry, but we've reframed that entry with the sort of new glowing Halo structure.

Then you are in the historic and original lobby of the church, but you look through that opening that looks down the original apps of the Catholic Church, through a contemporary gallery space that's lit with much cooler light than the rest of the church, that has obviously different types of construction, different types of walls, has artwork in it, and then through that there's another opening. And all these openings align that then frame the original church altar. So there's this kind of layering of new old, new old, new old. And just as a pure sort of architectural strategy we find, you know, it's, it's something that, again, celebrates history, but brings something that's contemporary, that also, you know, like the historic church, is not an environment that could support the display of contemporary art. The lighting doesn't exist for it, the sort of HVAC and environmental sort of controls don't exist for it. And there's not even really walls for for, you know, hanging paintings. So we had to create a new environment, but we didn't want to completely cover up that historically.



The beginning stage of remodeling The Shepard started with a meeting underneath the cathedral ceilings.

Photo: Peterson Rich Office

Polycentrism

Detroit's spread-out nature presents both challenges and advantages to its citizens, and Little Village seeks to flip that trend on its head.

Polycentrism is the state of having many centers, and that's certainly true of Detroit in a variety of ways. Everyday resources, like grocery stores, are spread sparsely across the city, providing access to far-flung corners but also leaving dead spots like Little Village. Tara has to drive downtown or to Grosse Pointe for groceries as no accommodations exist nearby.

Because of its sparse development, Detroit is also extremely car-dependent. Tara's grocery trip downtown or to Grosse Pointe takes only 10 minutes in a car but could take up to an hour by bus.

"Yeah, if you want to leave the neighborhood, you probably need a car. At the moment, it feels pretty disconnected from the rest of Detroit."

- Paul Verdell

Paul compared Detroit to Los Angeles, his previous hometown, for its spread-out nature and several hubs of commerce. At the moment Detroit is spread out, but it struggles with regional commercial centers like Los Angeles is known for.

Tara expressed interest in the Strategic Neighborhood Fund's focus on providing amenities to outer neighborhoods by creating corridors all throughout the city. She's particularly excited for the Islandview/Villages corridor to be built, as it'll play nicely with development in Little Village.

"All the galleries are so far away. I love art, and it's hard for me to get to everything, because I know I'm going to be driving an hour this way, 30 minutes that way, 30 minutes this way to hit up three art shows in a day. But having some kind of density here will attract folks that might want to see a show and go grab dinner. I think the density of what we're doing over here will be an attractive force."

- Tara Akitt

Little Village is trying to turn the tide of traditional development, and even recent institutional efforts to build up the neighborhoods. Whereas Detroit typically developed outward and consumed as much space as it could, Little Village seeks to build inward, packing as much value into each square foot as possible. Plans like the Strategic Neighborhood Fund look to develop along corridors, while Little Village builds in spite of them (read: Jefferson).

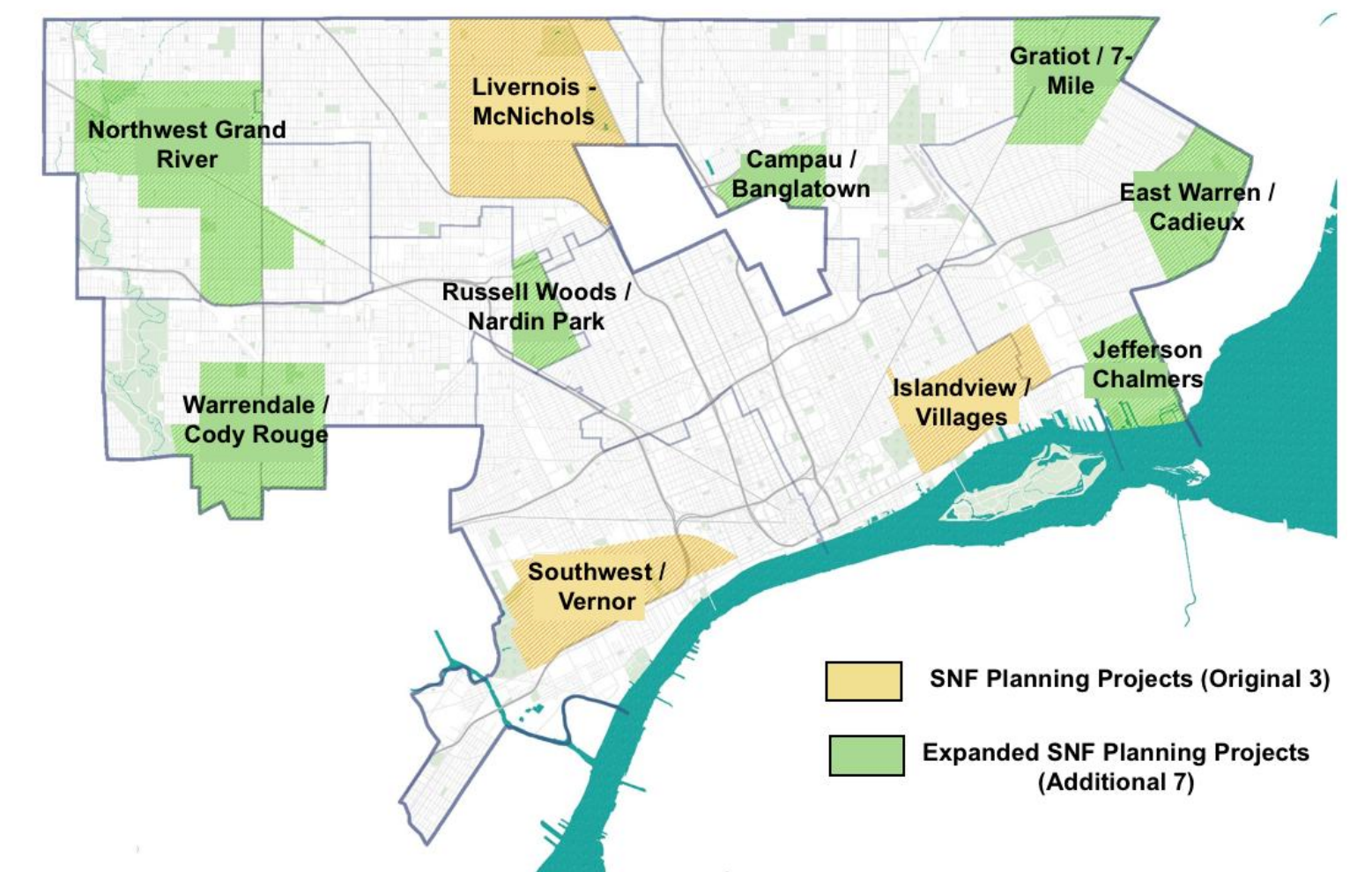
Crucially, Little Village aims to centralize the arts scene in Detroit before it becomes too big and sprawled to handle.

"It's really quite amazing. I think that they're finding the value in what's what's there, and trying to reuse it, adapt it, in order to serve new audiences and populations and communities."

- Nathan Rich

Nearby urban prairies exemplify the shortcomings of the development patterns of old and offer endless new opportunities to a neighborhood that finds value in the small things.

Photo: Elizabeth Borneman



Final Reflection

Can art really reshape a neighborhood?

A neighborhood transformation centered around art can seem risky, particularly when the focus is so niche. At first glance, it raises questions about whether such a development could resonate with the broader public, especially those not deeply engaged in the arts. Could a community really thrive with art as its anchor, or would it remain too exclusive, failing to draw in those who are not already part of the arts scene?

However, conversations with Paul, Tara, and Nathan revealed a different story, suggesting that the potential of such a transformation extends far beyond just art. While art serves as the foundation, the true strength of this approach lies in the engagement it fosters with the community. Paul's view that art acts as a "good unifier" challenges initial doubts, illustrating how spaces like The Shepherd can become not just venues for artistic expression but also hubs for everyday interactions. This speaks to the idea of "Porous Edges," where the space remains open and welcoming to everyone, offering a more inclusive experience than might be expected.

Proactive engagement with local stakeholders further underscores the success of this approach. Nathan's method of building relationships and setting a "North Star" for projects before breaking ground highlights the importance of aligning with the community's needs from the start. This "web of connections" with local nonprofits and residents ensures that new developments aren't just imposed but rather evolve alongside the neighborhood. By incorporating local voices, trust is built alongside shared ownership that sustain Little Village's long-term growth.

Ultimately, a neighborhood transformation centered on art is less about the art itself and more about the experiences and connections it creates. Art may serve as the initial draw, but it's the layers of community interaction—new restaurants, social spaces, and reimagined historic buildings—that keep people coming back. This blend of old and new, with art as a catalyst, is proving that a neighborhood can embrace change while still retaining its core identity, turning what seemed like a risk into a dynamic and inclusive community model.

We all were once artists as kids, and Little Village is embracing it.



Stained glass color gem that is used in the gravel pathways outside of The Shepherd, connecting the area through color.

Photo: Enzo Mignano

