



# HOST A PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY MEAL



PHOTO BY SHANE WYNN

**“The shared meal  
elevates eating  
from a mechanical  
process of fueling  
the body to a ritual  
of family and  
community, from  
the mere animal  
biology to an act  
of culture.”**

**-Michael Pollan**

# ABOUT THE PROJECT

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Like many post-industrial cities, Akron, Ohio faces social, economic, and racial divisions that have existed for many years. With support from the Knight Foundation, I set out to explore ways to use public space to connect the people living in Akron's different neighborhoods. The one place where I continually witnessed great social and economic diversity was local breakfast restaurants. I knew I wanted to experiment with a shared meal to bring people together. 500 Plates was born.

To assemble a meal where the participants were representative of the city, my team and I partnered with local organizations and put out a call for Neighborhood Ambassadors from each neighborhood. We met with each Ambassador, recorded their story and shared it online, and then asked them to sign up 10 of their neighbors to attend the meal, creating an event that was truly representative of Akron's entire population.

In addition, we collected favorite household recipes from each Ambassador which were printed onto custom plates by a local ceramic artist and used at the community meal, creating a unique way to connect Akronites from different neighborhoods. Each guest at 500 Plates took home one of the plates as an extension of the meal.

The meal took place on a stretch of the Innerbelt Freeway in downtown Akron that tore apart that neighborhood when it was built in 1970. The freeway was closed to vehicle traffic that day and is being closed and reconfigured as developable land in 2016. The meal served as a way for residents to reimagine what that open stretch of concrete can potentially be used for in the future. Sixty-three tables connected atop the concrete, creating one continuous 500-foot-long table. Attendees were guided by volunteer table hosts to discuss their personal stories as well as the challenges and opportunities of their neighborhoods, public space, and the future of their city.

This toolkit is a simple guide to how we made this project happen, in hopes that it inspires similar projects that reimagine public space and ignite conversation in cities around the world.

-Hunter Franks

# OVERVIEW

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## Identify challenge

Dialogue between a socioeconomically diverse group of participants is at the forefront of the project. Is there a certain challenge you have in your city that you think is ripe for discussion? What are the difficult topics that people are not talking about? How can you approach these challenges with positivity and excitement?



## Find participants

Leverage citywide and neighborhood organizations to put out a call to find Neighborhood Ambassadors. Work with them to record their story, collect a favorite recipe of theirs, and ask them to recruit ten other people from their neighborhood to come to the meal. Get out the word about the meal through social media and word of mouth and set up a way for people to register to attend. Recruit volunteers to help with the project.



## Identify location

Is there a certain space you want to host the meal? Work with your city government to close down a street for a day and reclaim it for people. Or find an underused park or public space in your neighborhood that you want to activate for one day.



## Create meal

Decide the date and time of the meal, what the menu will be, who will make the food, how it will be served, how many chairs and tables you will need, seating assignments, speaking program, etc.



## Document and sustain

It is important to record the ideas that arise from discussions. Find volunteers who want to serve as table hosts to help guide the discussions at each table and create a way for participants to continue to engage with the project once the meal has ended, both online and offline.

# PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

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**Neighborhood Ambassadors** // Work with local organizations to identify one Neighborhood Ambassador for each neighborhood in your city. Reach out to that person and ask to interview them, record their story, ask them to recruit ten people from their neighborhood to come to the meal, and collect a favorite household recipe of theirs to be printed onto a neighborhood custom plate for the meal.

**Attendees** // Create a website or other way for interested people to register for the meal. We used Eventbrite, a free online service, to allow people to register for free tickets to the meal. We also printed up fliers with information about the project and took them out to neighborhood events and meetings.

**Table hosts** // Volunteers are key to making the event successful. At each table, we had one table host who guided participants through discussion questions. The table host also made all the participants at their table feel welcome and included in conversation. We held a table host orientation where we presented simple steps to facilitation and discussion and gave each host a 500 Plates t-shirt. In addition, it is helpful to have volunteers to help greet people, take tickets, and set up and tear down.



# THE MEAL

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**Location //** We worked directly with the Mayor's Office to close the freeway for a day. We chose Sunday for the meal so traffic was light and we made sure we had the proper event insurance and other logistics in order to eliminate any risk for the City. In addition, we presented the meal as a unique opportunity to gather ideas from residents. The City was an amazing and integral partner to the meal happening on the freeway.

**Menu //** We used three dishes from those we had collected from Neighborhood Ambassadors. We picked dishes that were mostly vegetarian, gluten, dairy, and nut-free, so we could be as inclusive as possible of those with dietary restrictions. The meal was catered locally and served buffet style, as participants were invited to serve themselves from banquet tables. We provided one gallon of water per table.



**Seating //** When participants registered for the event online, we asked them to include their address and neighborhood. We mailed physical tickets with event information and seating assignments to each participant. Seats were assigned so that we could make sure people from different neighborhoods sat next to each other. Assigned seats also ensured that each table had a table host.

**Table //** We rented 63 eight foot long tables and lined them together to form a 500 foot long table. We added a 500 foot long table runner made of butcher paper for people to draw or write their ideas for what they wanted to see on the future of the freeway. Place settings included a small golf pencil for them to draw or write on the table runner, a menu and sponsor list, and opening and closing poems which were recited in unison at the beginning and end of the meal. In addition, we had silverware, drinking glass, small bowl, and custom made plates with neighborhood recipes.

**Plates //** We made 500 custom plates for the project, each one containing one unique recipe from one of the 22 neighborhoods. These recipes were printed onto stoneware plates by a local ceramic artist and each participant was invited to take their plate home with them in a custom tote bag we hung from their chair.

**Program //** The meal was on a Sunday from 1pm-4pm. A local band played until the speaking program began at 2:00pm. The opening poem was performed at 2:30pm and then the catering staff released participants by table to take their plate and bowl up to the buffet tables to get food. The closing poem was performed at 3:30pm, followed by music until 4pm as participants exited.



PHOTO BY SHANE WYNN



# DOCUMENT AND SUSTAIN

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It is important to record the ideas that arise from discussions. We put out small golf pencils and butcher paper that lined all 500 feet of the table for participants to draw or write their ideas for the future of the freeway. In addition, the table host helped guide the discussion.

We used an online platform, Neighborland.com, to document all ideas that were collected on the table runner. Neighborland allows participants to share, support, and discuss ideas for what they want to see on the freeway. These ideas will be shared with the City and future developer of the space.

We also created 22 steel and wood tables which we put out in public spaces in the 22 neighborhoods to serve as a future gathering point for smaller neighborhoods meals.



# CONNECT

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[www.500plates.com](http://www.500plates.com)



[facebook.com/500plates](https://facebook.com/500plates)



[#500Plates](https://twitter.com/500Plates)



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### TEAM

**Hunter Franks** is the artist behind the project

**David Swirsky**, a native Akronite, helped in making all facets of the project come to life

**Eva Kwong**, a local ceramic artist, made all 500 plates with unique handwritten recipes

**Dominic Falcione**, a local fabricator, is making 22 wood and steel tables for the neighborhoods

**Adam Grenley**, a local filmmaker, put together the film documenting the project

### SPECIAL THANKS

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