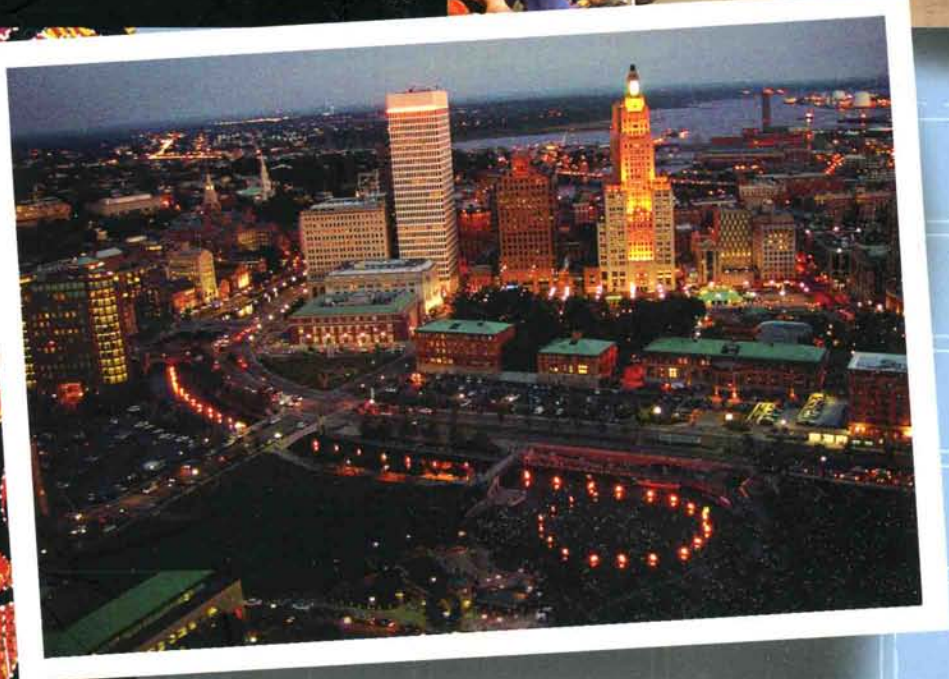
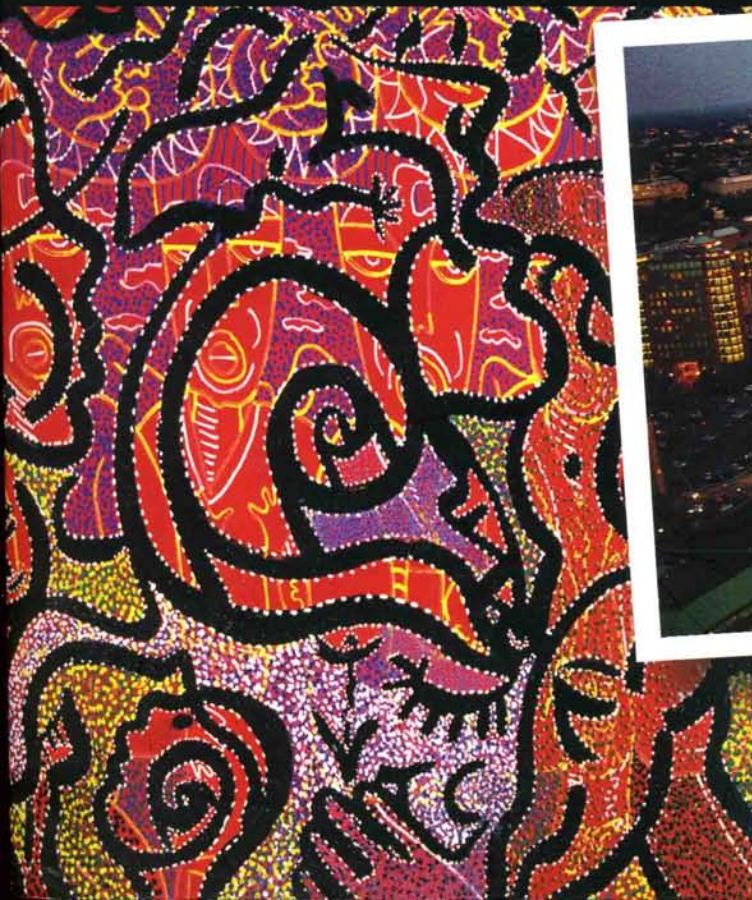


# The **CREATIVE COMMUNITY BUILDER'S** Handbook



How to Transform  
Communities Using Local  
Assets, Arts, and Culture



**Tom Borrup**

with Partners for Livable Communities

Foreword by Robert McNulty



Contemporary Artists Revitalize a Historic Downtown

***Artist Loft Program and Arts District,  
Department of Planning and Development,  
City of Peekskill, New York***

[www.ci.peekskill.ny.us](http://www.ci.peekskill.ny.us)

[www.peekskillartscouncil.org](http://www.peekskillartscouncil.org)

**The Setting**

A historic Hudson River city of 20,000, Peekskill, New York, dates from the 1600s. It sits just forty-five miles north of New York City. Like so many older small cities, Peekskill suffered the multiple impact of out-migration and proliferation of suburban shopping malls, beginning in the 1950s. In 1977, the closing of a major manufacturing plant sent the city's economy into a tailspin. By the early 1990s, the downtown was nearly abandoned.

By 2004, however, Mayor John G. Testa was upbeat in his state of the city address. He cited the community's newfound successes, describing its "beautiful location on a prime Hudson River site, both old and new homes, historic downtown, excellent train service [to New York City and Albany], advanced education opportunities, burgeoning artists district, quality cultural center, and the opportunity to 'belong' by engaging in many community activities."

**Organization Type/Description**

As a municipal agency, Peekskill's Department of Planning and Development is charged with policy and administrative responsibility for land use, economic development, and historic preservation. It encourages the development of new businesses and the expansion and relocation of existing businesses, all of which lead to the creation or retention of jobs for Peekskill residents. The department administers a mix of programs and federal, state, and local funds. It also manages the city's Artist Loft Program. It focuses historic preservation work on the Downtown Historic District and the overlapping, city-designated Artist District. The latter was created to revitalize a failing central business district by developing live/work spaces on the upper floors of historic commercial buildings and by promoting arts-related retail business on the street level.

**Mission or Statement of Purpose**

The Department of Planning and Development is responsible for advising the city manager, mayor, and common council on current and long-term land use, development, and historic preservation issues. Professional staff from the department act as liaisons between the public and various boards and commissions and provide technical information on land-use matters.

**STRATEGY 3**

**Attract Investment by  
Creating Live/Work  
Zones for Artists**



**FABRICATIONS:** An Outdoor Installation. Local artists Curt Belshe and Lise Prown created eight large banners that are hung on Peekskill city lampposts. The brightly colored banners depict iron stoves, once manufactured in Peekskill, and the faces of local ironworkers from that period.

*Snapshot***Artist Loft Program and Arts District, Peekskill  
Department of Planning and Development***City of Peekskill, New York***Setting**

- Hudson River Valley town, forty-five miles from New York City
- Population 20,000
- Economic decline since 1970s
- Underused downtown

**Community Assets**

- Vacant mixed-use properties
- Existing theater and artist population
- Scenic riverfront and historic architecture

**Strategies**

- Create a downtown artist and historic district with live/work space
- Establish partnerships between government agencies and community groups
- Provide incentives for property improvement and business and educational program relocation
- Attract new business and tourism by promoting cultural events

**Outcomes**

- Concentration of new residents in live/work units
- Re-activation of retail space and construction of significant new space
- Increased tourism
- New public and private investment in the downtown area

**Goals and Strategies**

The city's goals are to revitalize its downtown economy and historic building stock and to uplift community spirit. Its collaborative efforts center on attracting artists to live and work in vacant historic downtown commercial buildings and supporting light retail, galleries, and other amenities. These developments, in turn, attract shoppers and tourists, which restores pedestrian street life, and protect and restore historic architecture. As part of these efforts, Peekskill also attracts, develops, and supports nonprofit arts centers, educational programs, and creative industries. Strategies include the following:

- Create a welcoming and supportive environment for artists and support the Peekskill Artists Council
- Build partnerships with the Peekskill Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement District, arts groups, and education groups
- Designate and maintain both historic and artists districts
- Leverage public funds for renovation and new construction
- Provide building owners with tax incentives, grants, and loans to renovate buildings that can be used as live/work spaces by artists
- Provide space and incentives to relocate strategic educational programs and related creative-sector businesses
- Coordinate monthly gallery tours and other annual events and festivals to include and highlight the city's new creative image
- Connect cultural and historical assets with the scenic riverfront to promote tourism

**General Description of Activities**

During the 1990s, the city hired Ralph DiBart, son of a former mayor, as a downtown consultant. DiBart understood that artists could attract visitors and businesses and be a catalyst to revitalize the downtown. At first, many observers were skeptical. Building on the existence of the Paramount Center of the Arts, the city created the Artists District.

The vintage 1930s Paramount, a one-thousand-seat movie palace, is now a county landmark. It was acquired by the city in 1977 in tax default, opened briefly in 1979 as a performing arts venue for local groups, and mounted its first performance season in 1982. A subsequent grassroots campaign in 1996 to save the building leveraged the formation of an arts center. The Paramount Center of the Arts now houses live performances, arts-in-education programs, films, and visual arts and serves more than 50,000 people annually.

Using a variety of available funding, Peekskill created an affordable cooperative loft project that opened in 2002, providing twenty-eight live/work spaces. The New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal chose the loft cooperative as a demonstration project to show how housing can be rethought to include workspace. The Artist Certification

Committee reviews prospective residents. It defines an artist as “an individual who practices one of the fine design, graphic, musical, literary, computer, or performing arts; or an individual whose profession relies on the application of the above-mentioned skills to produce creative product; i.e., architect, craftsman, photographer, etc.”

By 2004, the Peekskill Business Improvement District boasted more than one hundred artists maintaining studio or live/work spaces in the storefronts, lofts, and studio buildings that are scattered throughout Peekskill’s downtown. The district lists twelve galleries and related businesses such as graphics, framing, music, photography, and piano rebuilding. On the third Saturday of each month, the district sponsors tours of artists’ studios.

Each August since 1997, a multifaceted festival called the Peekskill Celebration brings the community together with tourists to the Riverfront Green and now revitalized historic downtown. The Hudson River’s rich heritage and the new cultural vitality are showcased by more than forty events, including concerts, arts and crafts sales, environmental and educational exhibits, kayaking, a farmers market, Underground Railroad tours, river excursions, a road race, a sailing regatta, and more.

Westchester Community College located a branch campus in the Artists District and now offers full academic programs in addition to high-tech digital photography, graphics, music, and video courses. Other new businesses opened in 2003—a grocery co-op, coffeehouse, beauty supply store, deli, gallery and espresso bar, West Indian restaurant, clothing store, day spa, and full-service restaurant.

Retail stores have returned to downtown Peekskill. Restaurants stay open evenings. The local weekly and daily newspapers have expanded in size and circulation. Summer 2004 saw the opening of the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in a 12,500-square-foot former home-improvement store on Main Street. It houses its founders’ private collection and is the launch point for arts education, programs fostering emerging artists, an artist-in-residence program, and a lecture series.

### Assets Employed

- Vacant, historic, mixed-use downtown building stock
- An existing nucleus of downtown resident artists
- Scenic placement on the Hudson River and proximity to New York City and Catskill Mountain resorts
- Visionary leadership
- Historic downtown theater
- Long-standing community support for a performing arts center
- Cooperative relationships among city agencies, artists, businesses, and nonprofits

**O**ur hard work will continue to improve Peekskill’s reputation and image in the eyes of others but it’s equally important to enhance community pride and identity.

—Mayor John G. Testa<sup>49</sup>

### **Direct Outcomes**

- Revitalization of historic, largely vacant downtown
- Investment of \$8 million in housing, retail, and cultural facilities since 2000 with additional investment slated
- Relocation and expansion of education programs focusing on creative industries and skill development
- Increased tourist traffic
- Recognition that artists are contributors to economic vitality
- Construction of 23,000 square feet of new retail space and twenty-eight new live/work units
- Formation by the city of the "Grow Peekskill Fund" to provide loans, finance job creation, eliminate blight, and leverage local investment
- Opening of a new pharmacy and 65,000-square-foot supermarket

### **Indirect and Potential Impacts**

- Revitalization of civic life through pedestrian activity, social events, and re-invigorated civic organizations
- Increase in tax assessments for the first time in a decade