

## Chicago Loop Alliance

### INNOVATION

ACTIVATE, a series of pop-up arts events in alleys and other unconventional urban spaces, seeks to assert that the Loop is a neighborhood too. Four times every summer, ACTIVATE reclaims space for people through art, music, and urban design. Since its inception, ACTIVATE has engendered its nearly 10,000 yearly attendees with a sense of community and a feeling of agency over what public spaces look like in the Loop.

What started the day as an alley with a few dumpsters and delivery vehicles is transformed into a place full of color, art, and performance. The alley buzzes with a crowd eager to participate in the creation of the night ahead. Each event transforms an alley through a specific theme. ACTIVATE comes alive with the art of the city – experimental theater performances, bands on competing stages, muralists painting 40 feet in the air – there is rarely something “too much” for ACTIVATE.

Our community has grown, with one third of attendees reporting they have been to 5+ ACTIVATEs. This year we will empower these attendees further by seeking their creativity and input on our Elevate State Corridor Plan. Attendees will take part in on-site visioning activities to provide input on the future of State Street, the Loop’s historic main street. Unlike most urban planning processes that struggle to engage diverse crowds, Elevate State will leverage eight years of intentional community building to give people a say in what the Loop will be in the future.

### OUTCOME

ACTIVATE brings attendees from 74 different Chicagoland zip codes. To us, this statistic is a testament to the importance of working with artists who embody Chicago’s diversity across race, gender, sexuality, age, and background. Without engaging artists who represent this diversity and celebrate it in their work, it would not be explicit to guests from all over Chicago that ACTIVATE is a space for them. Creating a space that is explicitly welcoming to people of all backgrounds, builds excitement among groups of people who feel excluded at other events. The word-of-mouth buzz then becomes one of the largest factors to bring new attendees; with so many guests attending their 5+ ACTIVATE we also have one third reporting it is their first ACTIVATE.

People coming into the Loop to experience ACTIVATE are shown the Loop anew. 85% of attendees surveyed reported a positive change in their view of the Loop. This change contributes to stakeholders’ interests in different ways. Property owners may have an easier time finding tenants as people see the Loop as a more exciting place. Residents may feel more pride in living in the Loop after seeing the energy ACTIVATE brings. Retailers and restaurants see huge benefit, as Chicago Loop Alliance estimated ACTIVATE created \$3.1 million in economic impact since 2013. This ripples out to the other areas of Chicago where artists can then create work in their neighborhood with the money they were paid for their work at ACTIVATE.

### EXECUTION

Starting in December of the year prior and finishing at the end of October, we plan all four ACTIVATEs and raise almost two-thirds of the project’s budget.

February of each year, we create a call for curators that outlines our theme for the season, as well as the specifics of how an ACTIVATE works: transforming space, empowering artists, and inviting collaboration. From the proposals we receive, we select a set of curators who represent a diverse cross-section of Chicago both in artists they seek to showcase and in neighborhood geography. We are explicit about the level of attention to detail and quality of the art created in the call for curators as well as the contract we sign with each curator. This helps us coach the curators in creating a unique and engaging ACTIVATE.

When ACTIVATE started, CLA negotiated a custom permit with city officials to allow us to run ACTIVATE, a program previously unheard of. It’s this innovative approach that has been the driving force behind ACTIVATE. We simultaneously work with abutting property owners to coordinate around deliveries and alley usage and the city to obtain permits.

## **REPRESENTATION**

Inclusivity is at the forefront of all planning for ACTIVATE. We intentionally select curators who come from different areas of Chicago and are diverse in culture, race, sexuality and gender. We also specifically ask for their proposals to include artists of diverse backgrounds. ACTIVATE is free, eliminating the barrier to entry for people of any socioeconomic status. This year, we will be implementing accommodations for people with different disabilities.

Not only is inclusivity embedded in our planning, we see it as integral to the success of ACTIVATE. Walking by an ACTIVATE, a Loop worker is more likely to explore what is happening in the alley if they hear music they would hear in their neighborhood; if they see a muralist who looks like them painting on a wall; or if they see specific kinds of art that relates to their identity. After our event celebrating Chicago's Drag scene, a participant said, "the Queer Community doesn't always feel welcome in the Loop, but this event changed that for me today." When people see themselves represented by the art and artists at ACTIVATE, it becomes clear this is their space just as much as anyone else's.

## **REPLICATION**

We are approached by many people throughout Chicago and the country with questions about ACTIVATE and how it works many times throughout the year. We happily share our learnings in terms of planning for the series as well as aspects of each ACTIVATE that make it unique and successful. We treat ACTIVATE both as something we cherish in its uniqueness and as something we want to share.

We've seen many of the artists who grew their profile at ACTIVATE start to exhibit work or create murals in neighborhoods across the city. We've also seen other cities across North America replicating ACTIVATE through their own alley events. However, ACTIVATE will always be uniquely Chicago both due to our sizeable alleys but also the uniquely giving community of artists who bring ACTIVATE to life. It would feel like the ultimate success of the program for every neighborhood and city to celebrate art and artists, bringing them into the conversation of what public space is and how it should be treated.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

Each ACTIVATE has numerous moving parts: permitting and property approval to dumpster placement or specific hardware needs for an installation. To manage each piece, we break the event into tasks and responsibilities.

Chicago Loop Alliance manages all aspects of the event aside from the artists and performers. We hire curators to work with artists and performers and fulfill their creative vision. We work directly with the curators to trouble-shoot and ensure the safety of each installation as well. In September, a curator planned an overhead lighting element and we worked with them and the building owners to ensure the piece would be safely secured and wouldn't tear the conduit out of their walls.

To keep the planning on schedule and ensure the event runs as planned we create a site plan and installation schedule. These break up all parts of ACTIVATE into smaller tasks that can be parceled out to curators and hired installers. Due to our meticulous pre-planning, we are able to start our day at 7am, with the event beginning at 5pm, ending at 10pm, and entirely broken down by 1am. We leave each space we work in cleaner than we find it.