INSPIRED LEADERS
SHAPING CITIES

DOWNTOWN AUSTIN SPACE ACTIVATION PROGRAM

SUMMARY

Downtown Austin Alliance Foundation

CITY:	Austin
STATE/PROVINCE:	Texas
COUNTRY:	U.S.
ORGANIZATION BUDGET:	$1,000,001 - $2,500,000
PROJECT COST:	$70,000
START DATE:	5/1/24
END DATE:	N/A

DESCRIPTION

The DASA program revitalizes vacant and underutilized spaces by offering accessible opportunities for small businesses, entrepreneurs and artists to activate downtown storefronts. Its purpose is to establish downtown as a platform that fosters economic growth for all, functioning as a hub for cultural vibrancy and community engagement. The program's goals include: Revitalizing vacant spaces to create a more dynamic downtown; providing affordable space for small businesses, artists and creatives to launch, test and expand their reach; cultivating community engagement opportunities through cultural events, markets and public programming; advancing accessibility and inclusion in downtown, ensuring participation for historically underrepresented entrepreneurs and artists; and improving perceptions of downtown through diverse, active and well-utilized spaces, thereby increasing feelings of safety and vibrancy. DASA serves small businesses, artists, creatives, entrepreneurs and community and civic organizations, with a particular focus on those lacking access to affordable downtown space. Key components of the program include: providing access to downtown space through a short-term, low-cost, flexible and publicly available process; offering support services such as marketing, mentorship, operational assistance and connections to service providers for program participants; facilitating community events, including pop-up shops, panel discussions, art galleries, performances, markets and cultural programming; and fostering collaborations with property partners, financial institutions, local government entities and others to further support and amplify program participants. The program's theory of change posits that through a collaborative activation program like DASA, the divide between downtown and underrepresented communities will be bridged.

INNOVATION

While the concept of rethinking the use of vacant spaces is not novel, with several peer cities implementing programs that activate such spaces with art and cultural activities, DASA distinguishes itself through its unique agreement structure with property owners. The program secures deeply discounted or even free lease terms and other flexible arrangements with landlords, terms that would typically be unavailable to a standard tenant and then transfers these savings to the activator. Unlike traditional economic development approaches, DASA uniquely blends entrepreneurship, the arts and public placemaking to cultivate a dynamic and inclusive ecosystem. Its investment lies in securing spaces and offering them on an a-la-carte basis to address community needs in real time. The public application process empowers participants to propose their own visions, making the program scalable and replicable across the city. As a pioneer of an innovative, people-centered approach to redevelopment, DASA prioritizes accessibility, inclusion and long-term impact. Renewed for another year, DASA intends to incorporate business incubators and co-location models as more spaces are secured. Regionally, DASA is being considered as a model for construction mitigation, testing property owner incentives for economic development, business recruitment and anti-displacement strategies. Ultimately, DASA strives to ensure that everyone can access the cultural, social and economic benefits of downtown.

OUTCOME

In less than a year, DASA has hosted more than 500 hours of free fun activities across three vacant spaces, engaging more than 6,700 people of all ages downtown. 56 percent of groups helped were non-profits, 50 percent of businesses supported were BIPOC-owned, 33 percent were small businesses, 28 percent were women-owned and 17 percent were LGBTQIA+-owned. DASA has launched complementary programs, including an Artist-in-Residency (AIR) program and Photography Fellowship, supporting live music, theater, fashion, art exhibits and cultural productions. Participants report increased sales and customer reach, with many indicating this was their first activation in downtown, highlighting the program's affordability and ease of participation. An increasing number of property owners have also shown interest in joining. Since 2019, DASA has provided over $1M in funds for artists, including art installations, murals and performance fees, ensuring equitable pay. The program has hosted 75-100 downtown activations per year, offering "pop-up" opportunities for local participation. DASA's outreach has reached over 1,000 subscribers, with over 225 applicants for artist calls. The organization has improved public spaces, such as 301 Congress Avenue Porch Project and Old Bakery Parklet, with murals, lighting and furnishings, increasing the attractiveness and usability of downtown. Research shows DASA has reduced vacancy rates and enhanced property values, benefiting both owners and the community. The activations contribute to increased foot traffic and local economic growth.

EXECUTION

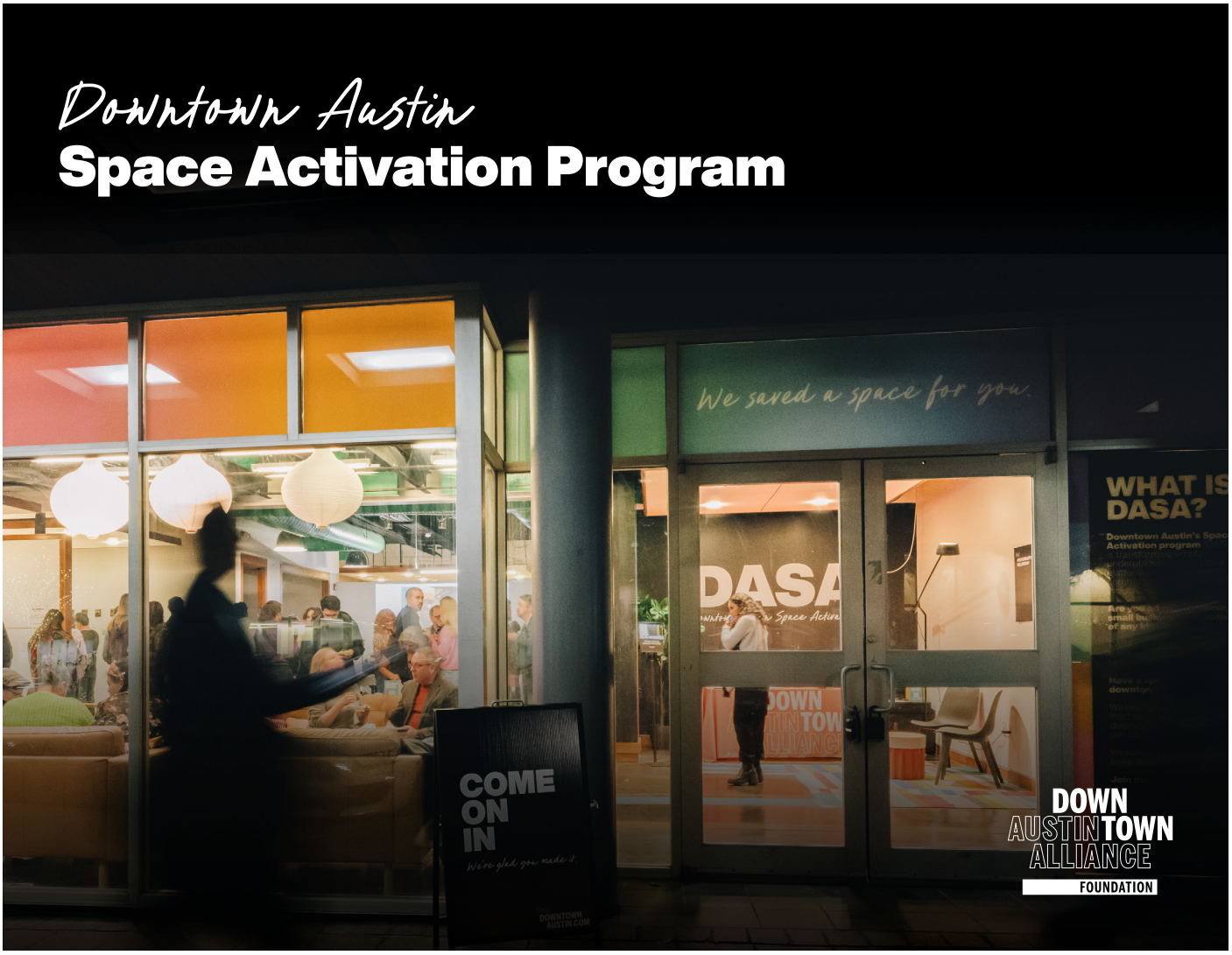
The DASA program's development followed thorough research to ensure it addressed downtown Austin's specific and current needs. Phase 1, the Analysis phase, involved formulating problem statements and identifying potential solutions. This included evaluating similar programs across the nation and reviewing internal data on storefront inventory, economic trends and community perceptions. In Phase 2, the Funding Plan, early adopters and funding sources were identified to secure initial space, and potential risks were mapped out, clarifying the program's role between property owners and activators. Phase 3, the Program Pitch, concentrated on developing key messaging and theories of change for presentations to investors, property owners and Board Members, and also included launching a marketing campaign to personify downtown, using the program as a demonstration of trust, investment and community commitment. Phase 4, Program Nuts & Bolts, involved creating an "AirBnB"-style application process, leveraging Austin's event success and tech-savviness to engage participants. Phase 5, Program Stabilization, focused on securing operating staff and budget, as well as establishing a comprehensive impact reporting framework to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which is used to attract further financial support and partnerships. DASA successfully achieved its activation goals, hosting over 60 activations and securing three underutilized spaces downtown. While budget variances occurred due to varying space improvement needs, cost efficiencies were realized through in-kind contributions and partnerships, such as IKEA Round Rock furnishing a storefront. Challenges like delayed property approvals were mitigated by maintaining a flexible activation calendar and securing multiple sites.

REPRESENTATION

Thanks to core partners, DivInc, Diverse Ethnic Chamber Alliance (DECA) and Future Front, DASA centers the needs of individuals with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, differing abilities, ages and cultural backgrounds. Every DASA initiative is informed by diverse communities and includes representatives that hold intersectional identities, ensuring all perspectives and needs are considered. Several partners are successful small businesses, whose experience informs DASA's programs support entrepreneurship. An Active Urbanism Committee provides input, ensuring the initiatives align with the creative community's needs across racial, ethnic, generational, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. DASA staff members, artists, curators and architects, bring expertise in design and placemaking to ensure creatives' needs guide decisions. Board and committee members with real estate and urban development backgrounds bridge the gap between property owners and DASA, fostering beneficial partnerships. Research through feedback surveys, foot traffic analysis and tourism data ensure programs engage visitors and enhance cultural richness. Our program leaders and key decision-makers reflect the demographics of our constituencies, ensuring decisions are informed by a broad range of perspectives and are culturally sensitive. DASA prioritizes continuous learning and adaptation, seeking regular input from the community and incorporating feedback to keep DASA relevant and impactful.

REPLICATION

The DASA program offers a scalable model for other downtowns facing vacancies, economic stagnation or barriers to small business entry. Its success lies in flexibility, partnerships and a community-centered approach, providing a practical roadmap for revitalization. The flexible space model allows for short-term, low-cost activations that allow downtown managers and property owners to experiment with temporary tenants without long-term commitments. This can be a very attractive proposition when districts are struggling to retain employee populations. A regular rotation in offerings provides something new and exciting to downtown. This model can be adapted to different markets by adjusting duration, pricing and programming based on local needs. Additionally, a simple intake process and space management procedures can be shared and modified from district to district, depending on unique space needs and offerings. Instituting a place-love marketing campaign adds an exceptional touch that enable place managers to better articulate downtown's commitment to centering the needs of all – with specificity and intention. Expanding research includes the economic, social and cultural benefits and outcomes of a downtown for everyone is a critical step for building long term impact and connection with community, ultimately building and celebrating a downtown that belongs to everyone.



Purpose

To position downtown as a platform that fosters economic growth for everyone, serving as a hub for cultural vibrancy and community engagement.



Unique Agreement Structure With Property Owners

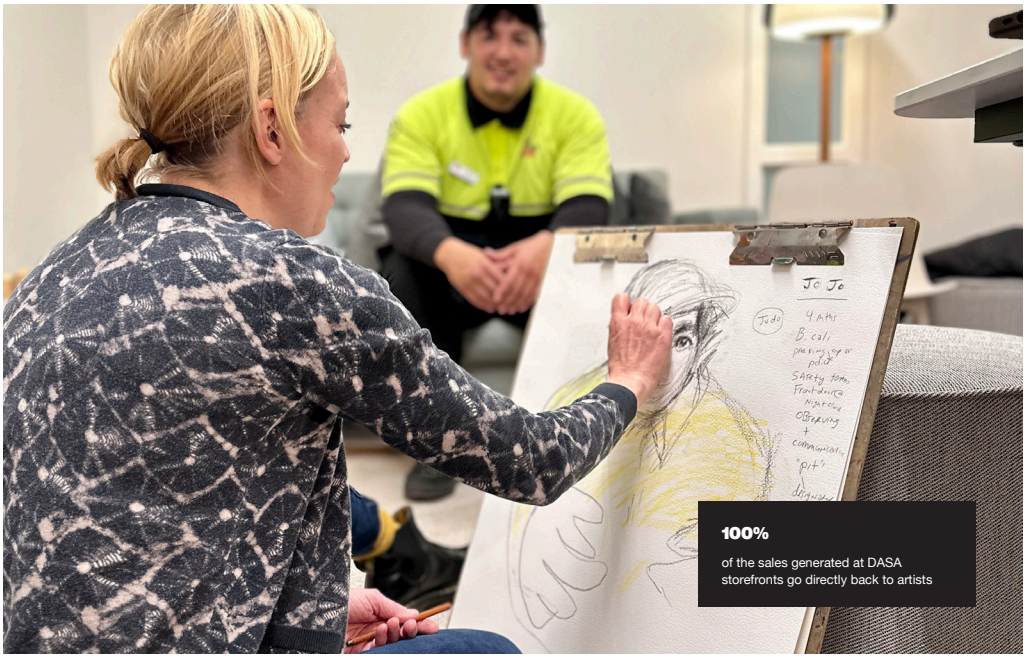
We secure deeply discounted and/or free lease terms and other flexible agreements with landlords which would otherwise not be available to a typical tenant. We then transfer those savings to the activator. To date, the DASA Program has provided more than $450K worth of space discounts for activators.





4+ Artists in Residence

Local Imprints: Stories of Place and People showcased works by DASA Artists in Residence Malti B. Lee and Megan Hildebrandt. Their Artist Talks shared insights into their experiences exploring Austin's stories through downtown locations and individuals.



100%

of the sales generated at DASA storefronts go directly back to artists

25+ Emerging Artist Exhibits

Moments in Motion: Downtown's Changing Canvas celebrated the first DASA Artist Residency and XOXO Photography Fellowship. Guests experienced artwork, heard from eight artists, and explored downtown through their creative perspectives.



48+ Live Performances

DASA transforms storefronts into intimate performance spaces, showcasing local talent through live music, theater, spoken word, and more.
“The affordability of the space allowed us to elevate our Cabaret series with a fun, showy spot downtown that was doable on our small budget.”



Community Impact

In less than a year, DASA has hosted 500+ hours of free fun activities across three vacant spaces, engaging more than 6,700 people of all ages in downtown.



Equity and Inclusion

56% of groups helped were non-profits, 50% of businesses supported were BIPOC-owned, 33% were small businesses, 28% were women-owned, and 17% were LGBTQIA+-owned.



Innovation

Unlike traditional economic development, DASA blends entrepreneurship, arts, and public placemaking to create a dynamic and inclusive downtown ecosystem. Our biggest investment is in securing spaces and hosting them in an al-a-carte style model that meets the demand of the community in real-time.

