

Breathing Lights

Summary of Findings

Bloomberg
Philanthropies

PUBLIC ART
CHALLENGE

Breathing Lights was a temporary art project in the cities of Albany, Schenectady and Troy, NY from September 30 - November 30, 2016. The project animated hundreds of abandoned buildings by illuminating windows with pulsating lights that mimicked the rhythm of human breathing. Artist Adam Frelin, Associate Professor at SUNY Albany and architect Barbara Nelson designed *Breathing Lights* to stimulate dialogue, engage communities and spark action on issues of urban blight in Capital Region cities.



Key Statistics



1.9 million views

of *Breathing Lights* buildings across Albany, Schenectady and Troy, NY over 61 days

\$5.4 million

catalyzed for the local economy, including:

- \$1 million Bloomberg Philanthropies' Public Art Challenge grant
- \$226,500 local project funding
- \$240,000 in-kind contributions
- \$4 million investments for new initiatives created as a result of the projects, including:
 - \$100,000 for arts initiatives
 - \$3.9 million for future work related to vacancy and blight

93 partners

across three cities helped implement *Breathing Lights*, encompassing:

- 20 city agencies
- 11 public-private collaborations activated on behalf of the projects

74 people

employed to help create and support *Breathing Lights*

101 programs and activities

were held in connection to the project, including:

- 12 Building Reclamation Clinics offering advice and renovation training for prospective homebuyers

120 articles

appeared in local and national print and online press, including *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*

52,000 people
accessed information about *Breathing Lights*
through the project website and social media

14 local artists
received grants to produce new works

14 community projects
in the Capital Region benefited from
recycled project materials

442,500 light bulbs
used to create 200 installations

1,500 windows
lit across 12 neighborhoods in three cities

15,000 free newspapers
distributed providing information about the project

18% of buildings
consistently lit during the *Breathing Lights* exhibit
sold to date

8 cities
across the nation and world have contacted
the *Breathing Lights* team about replicating
the project in their own communities



Local Arts and Culture

Breathing Lights supported the local arts community and created opportunities for future art projects.

***Breathing Lights* strengthened relationships between local arts leaders, promoting regional collaboration on arts initiatives.**

- 11 arts leaders across the three cities consistently worked together during the development and implementation of *Breathing Lights*, assembling an informal group of arts advocates committed to advancing the role of the arts throughout the Capital Region.

Local artists and creative youth were supported through new grant opportunities, which developed as a result of *Breathing Lights*.

- 11 local artists received funding through the Breathing Lights Arts Awards Competition, an initiative that commissioned a series of projects thematically related to *Breathing Lights*.

- 3 media artists helped young residents create short films through the *Breathing Lights*-supported Youth Media program developed in partnership with Youth FX in Albany, Told By Us Productions in Schenectady and Youth Media Sanctuary in Troy.

The project promoted interest in hosting more public art projects in the future.

- The City of Troy applied for and was awarded a grant from the New York Council on the Arts to create a citywide public art plan as a result of *Breathing Lights*.

*“Being a part of a project of this scale was awesome and encouraging to me... *Breathing Lights* allowed me to become an artist again.”*

Art Awardee



Civic Issues and Awareness

Breathing Lights advanced progress on critical civic issues.

Breathing Lights helped leverage or secure new grants and resources to combat blight and vacancy.

- \$3.9 million in contributions and in-kind support was raised for blight prevention and mitigation efforts, including a grant from the City of Albany to hire a new vacant building coordinator and a \$3.4 million grant from the New York State Attorney General for Land Bank efforts in Albany, Troy and Schenectady.

“This has been transformational, not only because it has brought our three cities together to work hand-in-hand, but because it has sparked conversations in neighborhoods, offices and classrooms.”

Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan

The project bolstered the efforts of Land Banks across Albany, Schenectady and Troy, NY.

- 18% of the 166 *Breathing Lights* buildings that were consistently lit during the installation have been sold since the start of the project on September 30, 2016¹.
- All three Land Banks said that *Breathing Lights* increased awareness of homeownership resources and elevated the critical role of the Land Bank.
- All three Land Banks saw an increase in interest in buying or renovating buildings because of *Breathing Lights*, and officials believe that the project helped set a positive image for the properties.

“Breathing Lights increased awareness of the issue but I think it also increased awareness of the scale and geographic concentration of the issue... There is real potential and Breathing Lights has opened the door to [that] potential.”

Land Bank Official

***Breathing Lights* brought policy makers together to identify and advance effective solutions.**

- 60 regional decision makers attended a policy roundtable conversation, which presented an assessment of existing policies related to blight and identified potential solutions.
- 68% of roundtable attendees surveyed agreed that *Breathing Lights* elevated the issue of urban blight throughout the Capital Region.
- 50% of survey respondents said that *Breathing Lights* advanced their work to address blight.



Community and Identity



Breathing Lights promoted a sense of community, civic leadership and pride.

"Breathing Lights felt like an opportunity to just be heard and hear others and that's really the only way to break down barriers... It was a great vehicle to get people from outside our neighborhood in [and] get people from different neighborhoods to discover each other"

Resident

***Breathing Lights* contributed to the emergence of new community leaders.**

- 3 nonprofit organizations in Albany, Schenectady and Troy became focal points of activity through the project, strengthening their influence in the community.
- 12 neighborhood ambassadors were deeply involved in the planning and development of the project, emerging as leaders within their communities.

***Breathing Lights* stimulated feelings of hope, pride and empowerment in the Capital Region.**

- 67% of survey respondents said that they feel a greater sense of pride because of the attention their neighborhood received.
- 78% said that it felt good to showcase community assets in such a positive way.

The project promoted a sense of engagement and agency among residents.

- 64% of residents surveyed said that *Breathing Lights* stimulated greater community engagement.

"For me what this project did was not only show that the problem was there, but that we can do something about it... It is not that we grew awareness, we grew awareness of hope."

Nonprofit Leader



Collaboration and Partnerships

Breathing Lights encouraged collaboration and the development of new relationships.

Breathing Lights cultivated collaboration across the region.

- *Breathing Lights* was the first art project that brought together officials from all three cities to work collaboratively. Representatives from all three mayor's offices were in consistent communication and discussed ways to share and streamline resources to combat issues of abandonment across the region.
- *Breathing Lights* deepened relationships between the public and private sectors, as evidenced by the 11 public-private collaborations activated on behalf of the project.
- Nonprofit leaders across the three cities developed new partnerships and strengthened existing relationships with the City and other organizations in the area.

"From an organizational stand point, one of the biggest benefits [of being] in this program [is] just giving our group a chance to engage with our partners in the area, strengthening existing partnerships and identifying new ones that would be beneficial to tackle what we are doing. This is a huge step toward that."

Nonprofit Leader