

SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ARTS



INNOVATION STORY
No 6

Small Moves, Big Impact

STORY BY
Emily Sortor

Springboard for the Arts is an economic and community development organization focused on helping artists thrive. Springboard's diverse set of programs offers direct services and resources for artists and builds partnerships with communities to help them harness the power of art.



**“Everything we do is
built from assessing what
artists and the community
need in tandem.”**

Laura Zabel
Springboard for the Arts

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1991

GEOGRAPHY
Minnesota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$1M – \$4,999,999

LEADER
Laura Zabel

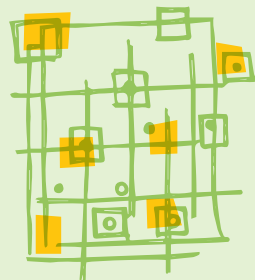
INNOVATION

SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ARTS

Springboard has built placemaking partnerships in both urban and rural communities, transforming overlooked and undervalued public spaces into points of local pride.

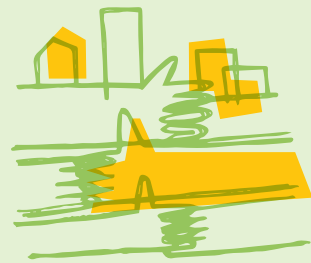
Breakthrough

Springboard's artist-led projects bring people to the table who are usually excluded from most economic development planning efforts. This high level of authentic engagement gives neighborhoods a voice in development projects and creates new and unique opportunities for artists to express themselves in their communities.



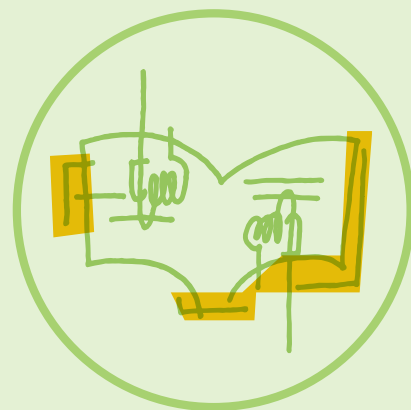
Start With Lots of Little

Springboard tests community development projects on a small scale, as a way to determine how they might fare when scaled up. This approach helps Springboard manage risk, maximize positives and engage more people with good ideas.

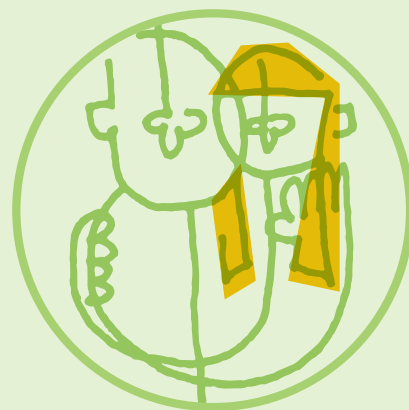


An Infrastructure of Relationships

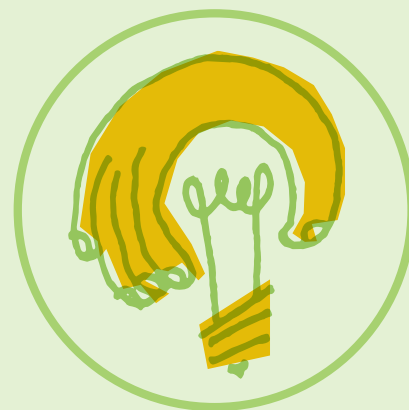
Springboard relies on strong partnerships with staff, frequent collaborators or partner organizations to identify community issues, then makes it easy for artists and community members to engage in identifying solutions. It's a practice that works in urban and rural communities alike.



EMPHASIZE
LEARNING



BUILDING
RELATIONSHIPS



WELCOMING
IDEAS

Dominic Facio was walking around downtown Fergus Falls, feeling elated after a particularly successful community event — a drag show he had hosted at a favorite local restaurant.

A car pulled up next to him. His longtime family friend stuck her head out of the car window and yelled, “Dominic! I have lived in Fergus Falls for 20 years, and I’ve never had more fun than I had last night.”

Ms. Lexi D’s Catwalk Party was Fergus Falls’ first drag show, and Dominic was thrilled. Even for an experienced event organizer like him, the show had been a risk. But the event turned out to be a smash hit.

In 2017, Fergus Falls, Minnesota, began the long and ambitious process of creating a downtown and riverfront master plan. The project’s goals were to strengthen downtown businesses and attract new investments; create a vibrant gathering place with multiple uses; and attract visitors to the community.

Eventually, the master plan would lead to the design of several infrastructure changes, including expanding public spaces along the riverfront that forms the centerpiece of the small town and identifying opportunities for new development.

Unfortunately, for the average citizen, any positive impact felt far off while the planning process was underway. Around the same time the master plan was completed, several big-box stores announced their closure. Social media conversations about the town’s future were “unproductive,” says Michele Anderson, rural program director at Springboard for the Arts.

There were plenty of ideas about how to make the community better — but the solutions felt too expensive or would take years to implement. To bring back a spirit of fun and to combat the doom-and-gloom narratives weighing down Fergus Falls, Springboard invited individuals to propose ideas for art projects that would bring people together around making the community better. They called the endeavor the Year of Play.

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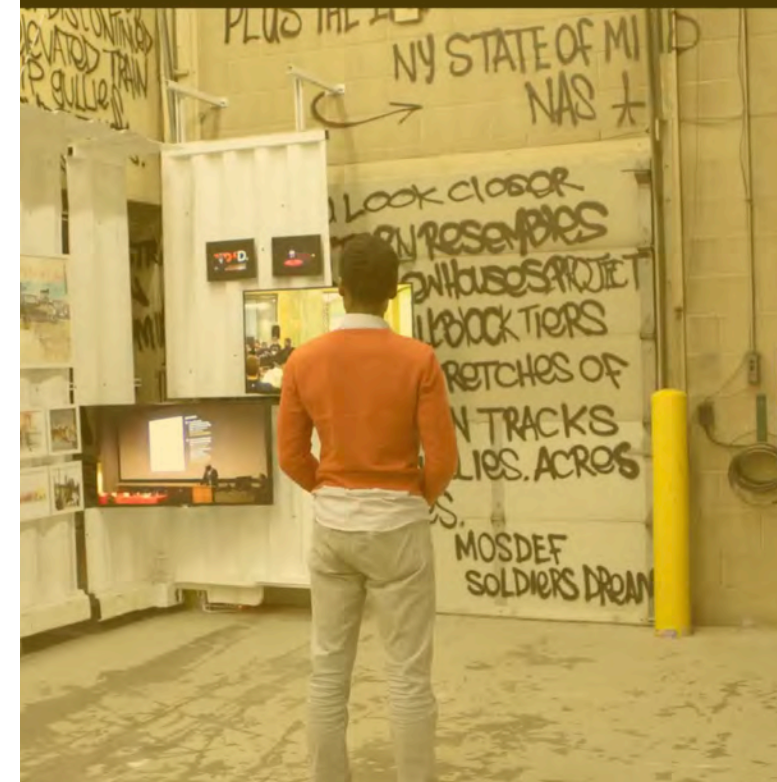
Staff members at Springboard for the Arts' Fergus Falls location, Dominic included, are all artists and community members in the small city. Their lived experience there told them Fergus Falls needed connection, not just construction, to thrive.

The Year of Play projects were funded with \$500 microgrants; Michele notes the idea of applying for a large grant can be intimidating to those who don't consider themselves a "Capital 'A' Artist." An award of \$500, on the other hand, is approachable.

Artists, artisans, urban planners and others came forward in droves with inspired proposals.

Accepted projects brought the community together for events that included a movie night on a frozen lake, a pop-up vintage arcade and even a temporary splash pad.

Dominic, Springboard's rural program coordinator, pitched the Catwalk Party, and the show made ripples in a town previously lacking in queer culture. The overwhelmingly positive response to the first party inspired him to continue the event outside of the Year of Play; he applied for and received a grant to put on three more Catwalk Parties in the Fergus Falls area. The shows are still drawing large crowds, giving community members and performers space to have fun.

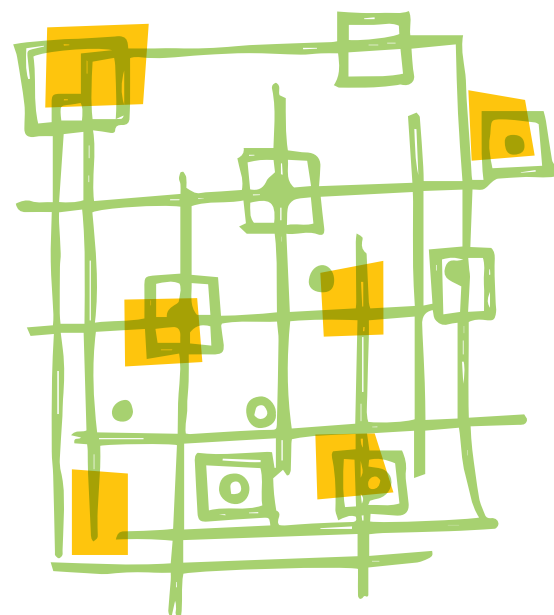


Hip-Hop Architecture Exhibit

START WITH LOTS OF LITTLE

Like much of Springboard's work, the effects of the Year of Play lived on after Springboard's involvement and continue to enrich the community thanks to the effort and enthusiasm of community members.

Springboard for the Arts self-describes as a "platform organization" and an "economic and community development organization for artists and by artists."



Springboard for the Arts Toolkit

CHARACTERISTIC
No
1



EMPHASIZE LEARNING

HOW DOES THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING DRIVE YOUR APPROACH TO TESTING AND PILOTING PROGRAMS?

"By starting small and then growing the project based on what has worked, we never completely fail. We build on success and lean into what is working. In a way, everything we do is a rehearsal, and everything we do is a pilot. We are constantly working, changing course and learning. We never say one project is a complete success or a total failure because programs are always evolving. Though this process is a vulnerable one, we learn a lot from being vulnerable and sharing our work with others. I really prefer constant learning and adapting to a more linear process of producing a program and then evaluating. We've even approached the development of our new space this way: by just inviting our community to use the space, we've been able to learn what people really need and want from the space and incorporate that into the design process."

Laura Zabel

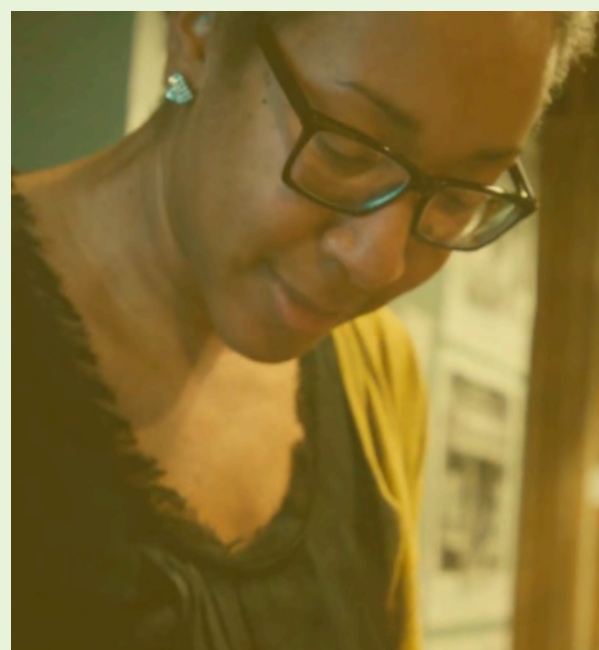
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Laura Zabel



Reciprocal Relationships Between Community and Artists



Collaborative Approach

“I am invested
in the quality of
relationships and
the quality
of relevance.”

Laura Zabel
Springboard for the Arts



Springboard for the Arts Office



Springboard for the Arts Office

The way Springboard engages with the public reflects the creative practices of the artists on staff.

It is based in St. Paul but helps arts communities around the country grow by sharing tools and knowledge.

This means the projects it takes on are all geared toward helping others make a successful life in the arts. The organization serves as a springboard for the careers of artists and others hoping to enrich the community, as its name suggests. Originating in 1978 as a United Arts program offering counseling and resources for artists, Springboard became an independent entity in 1991 and has since grown into a full-fledged organization.

Springboard has grown its constellation of offerings little by little. It still offers business skills classes, as well as grant resources, professional development help and avenues for community members to engage with artists, among other services.

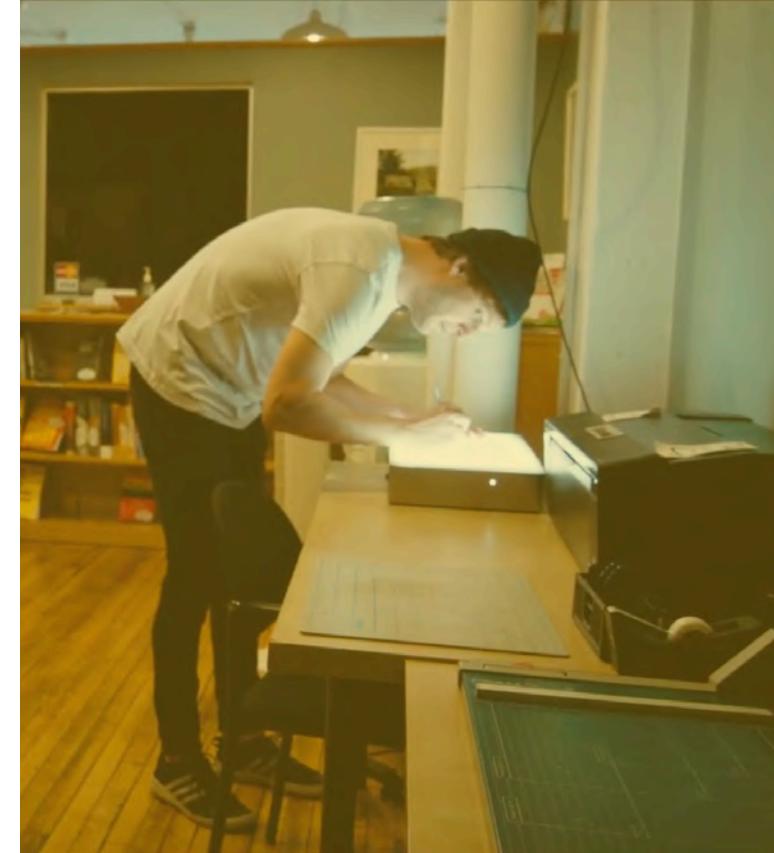
Executive director Laura Zabel stresses that Springboard is not deficit oriented — instead of jumping to fix a problem, Laura says the organization’s job should be to think critically about how people participate in big challenges and to help them participate. In Laura’s words, “Everything we do is built from assessing what artists and the community need in tandem. Over time, we have gotten clearer

about what artists need, and we help the community connect with artists.”

In the context of Springboard’s initiatives and projects, this plays out in the following way: if a challenge arises in a community, Springboard’s practice is to “ask how artists can address that challenge, find the creative people who are most impacted by the challenge and support them in creating projects that address the issue,” says Laura.

The way Springboard engages with the public reflects the creative practices of the artists on staff. Laura’s theater background, for example, inspires her approach to testing and scaling work. “In theater, there is a constant back and forth between the audience and between production and critique,” she says. At Springboard, production and feedback likewise happen simultaneously.

Springboard works by making lots of small moves, testing community development projects on a small level. Laura says that how a project fares on a small scale often indicates how it will fare on a large one. When appropriate, the staff can grow the project themselves or pass it off to another organization, as they often do.



Business Skills Training



Rural/Urban Solidarity

CHARACTERISTIC

No

2



BUILDING
RELATIONSHIPS

HOW DOES BEING
AN ORGANIZATION
“FOR ARTISTS AND
BY ARTISTS” INFORM
HOW YOU BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS IN
YOUR COMMUNITY?

“When I think about our aspirations for how we work, I am inspired by the Quaker idea of being in ‘right relationship’ with your community. For me this means not focusing on a specific transactional partnership but emphasizing interdependence, trust and shared success. For us, that has to start with the ways in which we support our staff of practicing artists and how we try to build long-term relationships of reciprocity and trust with partners and collaborators. When I think about being in right relationship with a community in the context of our work, I think this means letting the community decide what they need, recognizing that the people most affected by an issue are the experts. Having a staff made up of artists gives us insight into what the arts community needs.”

Laura Zabel

Springboard for the Arts

“Rather than starting from the outcome of a project, we think about how we can bring more people into a project.”

Laura Zabel
Springboard for the Arts

Laura succinctly calls this approach “starting with lots of little.” It’s a way to both manage the risks of implementing a new initiative and maximize the positive effects it can have. In Laura’s words, “lots of little” comes from a people-centered approach, and it changes how the organization measures success.

The “lots of little” model enables Springboard to engage with more people than would be possible if the organization poured more resources into just a few projects, and to Springboard, engagement means success. Laura says, “Rather than starting from the outcome of a project, we think about how we can bring more people into a project.”

She stresses that when measuring success, Springboard intentionally pivots from traditional models of what success means. She says Springboard has never been invested in exclusivity, stressing that “exclusivity is not quality” even though, too often, the two may be conflated.

She says, “That’s not the kind of quality that I am invested in. I am invested in the quality of relationships and the quality of relevance. You can’t do those things by keeping people out. You do those things by creating porousness in relationships, and you can’t do that if you only do it for a certain number of people.”

Springboard believes that progress and community development should come from leveraging a community’s assets to “create conditions that support [the health of a community] rather than ‘fixing’ perceived deficiencies or problems.” In other words, that change happens little by little from the people in a community itself, not by singular large efforts enacted from the top down.

AN INFRASTRUCTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Springboard’s success in having a positive impact on the community through “lots of little” relies on having a network of strong relationships.

Laura observes that community development work often emphasizes enhancing or improving a community’s physical infrastructure. But she challenges this idea, saying that a community needs a “parallel infrastructure of relationships” to thrive. “Yes, we need to invest in technical fixes,” she says, “but we need to invest in why people feel at home here. Why people feel a sense of belonging.”

Laura says that Springboard prioritizes being “in right relationship” with a community — an idea based in the Quaker tradition. Springboard relies on trusted partners who tell them the truth. In a way, the strength of Springboard’s relationships is the best measure of its success.

Springboard is an organization rooted in strong bonds, and it encourages others to bond through collaboration. Its staff use relationships to identify where to put their energy and where to start a project. Often, the artists of Springboard’s staff, a partnering organization or a trusted collaborator will identify an issue in the community.



Springboard makes it as easy as possible for people to engage and make use of resources.

The task for Springboard then becomes figuring out how to let artists respond to that issue.

Though Springboard largely works with partnering organizations to identify the needs of a community, Laura recognizes that some community members may fall through the cracks with this model. To make sure Springboard's resources are available to everyone, not just those with an organizational connection, it has a "porous" model, which maximizes the opportunity for community members to engage with the organization.

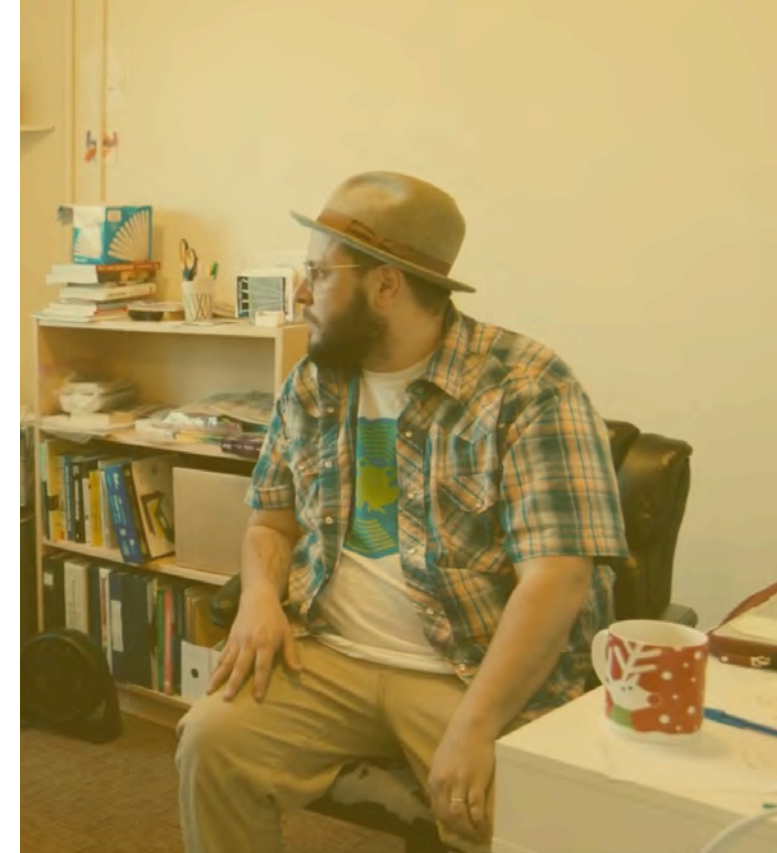
Springboard stays porous by maintaining a "drop-in" mentality. Community members are invited to attend classes on building a business, ask questions on how to obtain health insurance, visit the online job board or share an idea for a project. Springboard makes it as easy as possible for people to engage and make use of resources.

The organization's success in helping arts communities thrive through relationship building plays out in the idea of "rural/urban solidarity," a central tenet of Springboard's work that turns the common idea of the "urban/rural divide" on its head. According to Laura, describing the relationship between urban and

rural areas as a divide is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In her eyes, examining how these areas face some of the same issues can be key to enriching both.

One of the ways in which Springboard works to enrich both urban and rural communities is by creating "Toolkits for Change" for community organizers around the country. These toolkits provide advice for organizers who wish to strengthen their communities in the areas of health care, professional development, community engagement and others. Like much of Springboard's work, the toolkits are adaptable so that they can be implemented in a wide variety of communities that face different challenges. Springboard as an organization believes deeply in trusting a community to know best what it needs, and keeping work adaptable and passing projects to others are a natural extension of this belief.

Springboard also uses the idea of rural/urban solidarity as an agent for positive change in its Homecoming residency. One of two residencies Springboard offers, the Homecoming program focuses on bringing artists who previously had ties to Fergus Falls back to the area to pursue a creative project.



Springboard for the Arts Office



Springboard for the Arts Office

CHARACTERISTIC
No
3



WELCOME IDEAS

IF YOU WORK THROUGH DOING "LOTS OF LITTLE," DO YOU HAVE TO NARROW SCOPE AND ELIMINATE SOME INITIATIVES AT A CERTAIN POINT?

"A lot of times, we don't have to eliminate projects, and we don't have to choose what to pursue. With lots of little, we don't have to make big choices up front. In fact, Springboard doesn't choose what is successful — a lot of times our community tells us. If a project receives traction and a positive response, we grow it or continue it. Our goal really isn't to narrow scope at all. I think the idea of 'lots of little' also brings new people to the work because it lowers the barrier to participation. By giving artists and other community members the opportunity to try something small, a lot of different voices and perspectives can be represented. This helps ensure that the narrative doesn't belong to just one person. However, when we do have to narrow projects down or make choices, we prioritize initiatives by people who are in a community we work with and prioritize working with those most impacted by the work."

Laura Zabel

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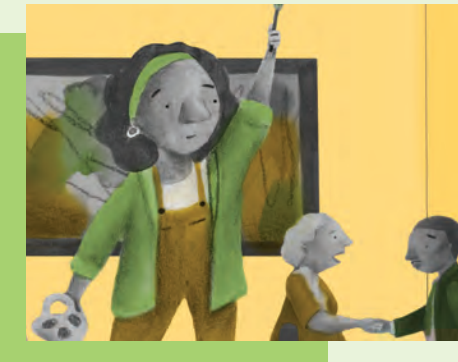
Placemaking



Artists Access for Health Care



Team Leadership



Springboard for the Arts Building

Just as Springboard itself examines what makes a place feel like home, so does the work of Wesley Fawcett Creigh, one of Springboard’s 2018 Homecoming resident artists. During her residency, Wesley worked with two communities in and around Fergus Falls, conducting interviews with immigrant communities in the area and members of A Place to Belong, a social club for those with severe mental illnesses. Wesley asked questions about how individuals create a sense of place and what community means to them.

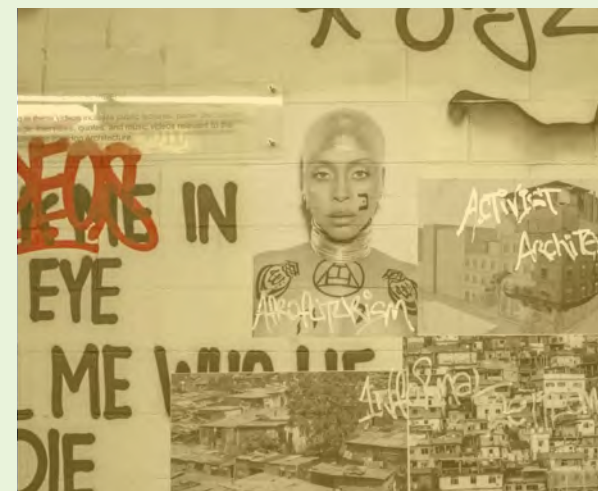
Echoing Springboard’s philosophy, Wesley believes that home and community occur when people “feel comfortable, feel like they belong and feel as if they are understood.”

Inspired in part by the success of the organization’s Fergus Falls location, Springboard has expanded its presence in St. Paul, opening a new location on University Avenue.

The new location is still a raw space; Springboard’s St. Paul staff is in the process of determining how best to use the building, letting the public guide the way.

For the time being, Springboard has offered the space free of charge to whoever wants to use it. Artists propose projects, and Springboard gives them the platform to make those projects happen. Sometimes it’s a group of students from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; sometimes it’s a person creating an exhibition on hip-hop architecture. How artists choose to use the space in the coming months will inform what renovations the organization will make to it.

Springboard’s staff is committed to trusting members of the community to tell it what they need. Put simply, relationships inform the resources that Springboard provides. In Michele’s words, “It makes all the difference to have a physical presence that the community sees” — a presence that is a true reflection of the community itself.



Hip-Hop Architecture Exhibit



Hip-Hop Architecture Exhibit