

Mimes and Road Construction: An Unlikely Partnership for Community Investment

*Enzina Marrari
Kendall|Marrari*

In summer 2017, a frequently traveled area in Anchorage was undergoing major road reconstruction to improve traffic patterns and safety. Spenard, one of Anchorage's oldest neighborhoods and a bohemian part of town, is home to artists, musicians, and colorful establishments. However, the seven-block reconstruction project along Spenard Road would last the full length of the summer—Alaska's most profitable tourist season—and would significantly disrupt multiple restaurants, local businesses, cultural amenities, and residences.

Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA), a catalyst for affordable housing development and neighborhood revitalization throughout Anchorage, is based in Spenard and decided to focus its community development investment (CDI) work through ArtPlace America in this neighborhood. At the start, many local artists approached CIHA with ideas for community projects. Kendall|Marrari, an art team focused on social impact that I co-lead with Becky Kendall, proposed the concept of “Spenard Art Fest,” which involved cross-sector partnerships, professional development for artists, and community-wide events. But CIHA didn't buy in. Through an iterative process, we presented multiple versions of a concept and became increasingly discouraged.

We expressed frustration to Asia Freeman, an artist and executive director of the Bunnell Street Arts Center, with whom CIHA had contracted to provide guidance on developing successful relationships with artists. She encouraged us to stay the course, and we decided to have one more meeting. However, this time we would not present a concept—just a blank page. When CIHA leaders asked, “What do you have for us?” we instead asked what challenge they were facing and what they were trying to achieve through art. In this moment, our art practice shifted. We moved from a *Social Practice* approach—artists identifying a social problem and designing work around it—to a *Civic Practice* approach—artists responding to problems identified by the community and designing work to address them.

Through this shift, we began a robust conversation about the Spenard Road reconstruction and CIHA's concern about the potential negative impact to business owners and constituents, as well as the risk of an unfavorable outcome that could tarnish future road projects. Together we outlined the problem and discussed how other cities have used art to address similar issues. One example was a city that placed red balloons to indicate new crosswalk patterns. The vision of this red balloon triggered a thought, and I wrote it down. We left that meeting more informed about CIHA's needs but without clear direction on how

to move forward. I thought about what I wrote down: *mimes*. I turned to Becky and said, “I have an idea. Let’s fill Spenard with 100 mimes!” She looked wide-eyed, and her frustration turned to joy. After some laughter, Becky said, “But let’s start with one mime and end with 100, a slow build.” And so, we began to design MimeSpenard.

As artists, we find inspiration everywhere. A question I’ve heard since the inception of this project is, “But why mimes?!” Becky and I are both performance artists, but neither of us had experience with pantomime. I remembered seeing a local mime performer and how much joy and laughter he brought to the observers, how he invited participation and sparked curiosity. I knew that same wonder could be felt by a broader audience. How can I describe the cognitive process that went from the image of a red balloon to a group of mimes? It is the creative process, the act of artistic problem-solving. This example demonstrates the challenge of partnership across a non-arts organization with creatives. Sometimes the path from A to B has no clear route. It is a mixture of feeling and memory, object and reference, vision and experiment. It is a process that can be difficult to trust, but when given the chance, it can execute astounding results.

MimeSpenard used consistent and exponential growth of visual stimuli on Spenard Road to retain commerce and build enthusiasm and curiosity during the road project. MimeSpenard had three main goals: (1) pique the interest of residents and draw attention to Spenard; (2) support local businesses impacted by the road reconstruction; and (3) create positive experiences and opportunities for community engagement. Collaterally, we reinvested in our community by hiring artists, made purchases from local businesses, and collaborated with entrepreneurs.

MimeSpenard had four major components:

1. *Performance-based*—Mimes staged on the road, inside local businesses, in performances and skits, and in public interaction;
2. *Key anchor events*—A pop-up mime mural, a mime bike ride, a pop-up mime parade and concert, pop-up mime makeup booths, a community wishes-and-woes well, and Mime Day;
3. *Community and business involvement*—Developing a relationship with the construction company and partnering with over 20 local businesses in the corridor, local artists, and local media via engagement events;
4. *Maintaining the identity and integrity of place*—Celebrating the uniqueness of Spenard: bohemian roots, sometimes-seedy atmosphere, grassroots mom-and-pop feel, quirkiness.

MimeSpenard mirrored our relationship with CIHA in that it was a slow progress spread over three summer months—or construction season, as it’s called in Alaska. We started with one mime at a community event announcing the road reconstruction and ended with 131 mimes on Mime Day—a community celebration that involved 13 businesses, local artists,

art activities, music, and over 100 community members. This event marked the culmination of MimeSpensard and the coming end of the construction season. MimeSpensard was itself a mixture of feeling and memory, object and reference, vision and experiment. When we proposed this concept to CIHA, we had no idea if it would accept it—or if the concept would succeed. We had to be ready to fail, and CIHA had to be ready with us. This is the challenge of working across sectors: we may be uncomfortable with how new partners approach a problem. We may not see the direct route from A to B, but if we trust in each person’s strengths and allow room for failure, experimentation, and joy, the results just might be astounding.

Enzina Marrari is a visual and performance artist, educator, and community organizer. She believes that art is a tool for communication and connection and strives to create intimate and shared experiences through her work. Enzina is deeply impassioned by her community and is part of the artist team Kendall Marrari, which addresses social or civic issues with the intention of effecting positive community change. Enzina is currently living and working in Anchorage, AK, where she finds inspiration in her surrounding environment, in the confrontation of the hard stuff, and in the stories of her peers. She lives by the belief that each person has the power to positively impact the world. She received a BA in Sculpture and Figure Drawing from the University of Alaska, Anchorage and an MA in Installation and Environmental Art from New York University. She is a 2017 Rasmuson Foundation Artist Fellow and a 2018 recipient of the Alaska Journal of Commerce’s 40 under 40 award.