Pearl Street Project Brief

The four blocks of Pearl Street run from Broad to 10th Streets just north of Vine Street in Philadelphia’s Chinatown North and Callowhill neighborhood. Now, as an emerging “arts district” grows, luxury loft housing is developed, and a Reading Viaduct park similar to the Highline is planned, Asian Arts Initiative is leading a multi-year effort to transform the neglected alley into a community asset that connects the diverse constituents in our neighborhood and beyond, including the homeless shelter at one end of our block to the luxury loft apartments and condos on the other end, and the wealth of artists, immigrants, and community members interspersed throughout.

In our initial phase of envisioning Pearl Street as a culturally vibrant space, Asian Arts Initiative partnered with Oakland-based landscape architect and artist Walter Hood and a range of local stakeholders. The resulting design articulates the need for a “base level” of improvements to be made—installing lighting and re-paving to address standard safety issues—as well as five types of interventions to further illuminate and activate the alleyway: emergents, greening strategies such as green walls and rooftops, or his playful dumpster gardens; thresholds, which demarcate and invite audiences to enter Pearl Street with banners, signage, or other structures; animation, or lighting that is both functional and adds an aesthetic element; curatorial, which identifies opportunities for visual arts installations and events; and active agents, entities such as Asian Arts Initiative and each of our neighbors who can host activities and foster productive energy in the alleyway.

Our initial planning phase culminated with the first-ever Pearl Street Block Party in September 2013 that incorporated over three dozen cultural groups and hundreds of community members in a daylong line-up of performances, creative activity booths, an interactive furniture build, and a Community Feast that was served outdoors upon the tables and chairs that had been assembled earlier in the afternoon—literally engaging individuals from all backgrounds to sit at the same table to talk about their hopes and vision for this neighborhood and Pearl Street.

Currently, Asian Arts Initiative is in the next phase of realizing the Pearl Street Project. With a national award from ArtPlace America, we have partnered with a range of artists and commissioned a series of temporary installations and projects that have animated the street and facilitated interaction among neighbors. We are working with the local Groundswell Design Group (responsible for the wildly popular Spruce Street Harbor Park along the Delaware River) to implement physical improvements like lighting and greening elements, which will be installed following the Pearl Street Passage pop-up exhibition during the city-wide DesignPhiladelphia festival in October 2015, which will highlight the intersection of Pearl Street and the Reading Viaduct and draw thousands of visitors to the neighborhood.

In order to realize the vision, we are seeking public sector support for the “base level” improvements to be made as well as other physical amenities—making Pearl Street a more inviting environment for installing artwork and hosting programmatic activities, and building the visibility and sense of community in Chinatown North and Callowhill and for our City as a whole.
Pearl Street Current Condition
Community Feast
Block Party
Future of Pearl Street