

AZ CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

Written by Kimi Eisele,
Southwest Folklife Alliance

EASTLAKE REDISCOVERING THE SOUL OF THE CITY THROUGH THE ARTS

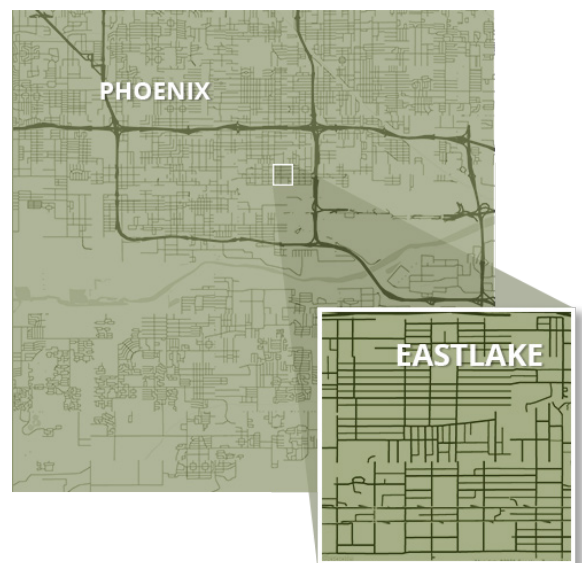
For years, a young autistic man who attended Richard Yarbough's church in the African American neighborhood of Eastlake in downtown Phoenix would play air drums in the pews when the church's band played. When the man showed up at one of the monthly Jazz in the Park concerts in Eastlake Park, he asked the drummer at the end of the show if he could play for a bit. The drummer obliged and the band stuck around to accompany the young man as he took the stage, this time with real drumsticks.

"To our astonishment, he really could play," said Yarbough, president of Pilgrim Rest Church, and one of the Jazz in the Park organizers. "We all sat there with our jaws dropped down to our feet like, wow. I had known this young man for maybe eight or nine years, and we never knew he could play like that."

The story seems a good metaphor for how a team of creative thinkers is leveraging arts and culture with support from Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) to rebrand Eastlake as the "Soul of the City," creating new opportunities for participation and making sure hidden gems no longer go uncelebrated.

"We are interested in creating a dynamic Harlem-like environment in the City of Phoenix. It's missing. And we think it's squarely placed in Eastlake, as it should be," said Talonya Adams, the CCI team leader.

Her team leveraged CCI funding to further a process that was already in motion to draw new development to Eastlake, but to do it on the neighborhood's own terms. "It has really increased the probability and the possibility that Eastlake, its history, its cultural relevance and meaningful contribution to the City is less subject to erasure," Adams said.



Members of Team Eastlake post with longtime Eastlake resident and former city councilman, Calvin Goode..



Talony Adams and Jackie Berry

GETTING ON THE MAP

Gentrification and displacement came to Eastlake in the early 2000s with the planned third runway of the Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport. Property owners were given incentives to sell their homes and many residents left, Yarbough explains. But as Phoenix grew, the neighborhood found itself part of the downtown core with an excess of vacant land.

“Fortunately for us, a lot of it was owned by African American churches or other African Americans who maintained land ownership,” Yarbough says. “We now have an opportunity for people to come back to the Eastlake neighborhood and to revitalize it and to bring back some of that energy that had been here for so many years, while maintaining the cultural roots that African-Americans had planted.”

One of the first things that had to happen to bolster the neighborhood’s visibility was to get Eastlake on the map. Literally. An official tourist map of the Downtown Phoenix Partnership highlights downtown neighborhoods and is circulated to the Chamber of Commerce, convention center, and elsewhere. In an earlier version of the map, Eastlake appeared as a yellow dot on the page, said Jackie Berry, realtor and CCI team member. So Berry met with the Partnership and asked them to consider a revision.

The map artist, Jennifer Urso, visited Eastlake, and the

CCI team gave her the neighborhood parameters and highlighted particular historic landmarks and cultural sites. “She went and did her thing and came back with a map that was really deficient,” Adams said. “So it was interesting for our team to understand how Eastlake is viewed from people outside, and how we could better tell that story about these assets that are historical, architectural and culturally significant.”

The next version was much improved and now the team is using the map to develop a walking tour and to expand awareness of Eastlake, Adams said.

In addition to the map, the project has yielded several other tangible products, including a new web site, additional grant funds to support public art at Eastlake’s entrance, a video highlighting the legacy of civil rights and cultural contributions from African Americans in the neighborhood, and the Jazz in the Park concert series, which takes place the last Saturday of the month during fall and winter.

These successes have yielded a new sense of neighborhood pride. Adams says sharing the map with business owners and churches has helped strengthen relationships and morale about Eastlake. “People are very excited to see their barber shop on the map. The churches were very excited to see themselves represented on the map in that way. So that’s kind of a gift to the community,” she said.

DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CITY OF PHOENIX

The project has also created and an improved relationship with the City, which has been essential in terms of shaping future development for the neighborhood.

Through quarterly meetings with the City Manager, the team has been able to communicate their ideas and be in conversation with various city departments about streets, housing, zoning, parks, and more. “They’ve all been at the table, and we’ve been able to share our vision and align some of the work that’s being done,” Adams said.

After successfully getting the neighborhood place type changed to allow multistory development and urban infill, the team worked with the City on an action plan that included basic guidelines such as sewer capacity, water capacity, how many units could Eastlake afford to build, but also incorporating cultural aesthetics and history. “We want to make sure our area develops the correct way. It can look like every corner in Tucson or Phoenix and it would have CVS and Walgreens and a Wendy’s. But we want to develop so that we’re a place that when you come from Tucson, you say ‘Oh I’m gonna stop in Eastlake and get some chicken from Mrs. White’s,’ or, ‘I’m gonna go to the Black Theater Troupe and see a play,’ or ‘I want to come hear a diversity studies seminar at Pilgrim Rest.’ That’s what ... we want to accomplish,” said Berry.

The team was able to give input to a new housing development, one that replaced a housing project that was torn down. According to Berry it will reflect “the 40s, 50s vibe from when Eastlake was at its peak.”

Berry says what surprised him the most working on the project has been the amount of neighborhood history in Eastlake—from the apartments that housed the city’s first African American doctor, to the Tanner Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church where Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke to the Swindell House where artists like Cab Calloway and Dizzy Gillespie stayed because they weren’t allowed to stay at the Adams Hotel where they performed.

“Having those things in your neighborhood and being able to share those and let people understand that you

have a three or four percent African-American population in the city of Phoenix, but you have that kind of history—that’s one of the things that really inspired me,” he said. “It’s a shame that so much of it has been torn down. But we can’t cry over spilled milk. The thing is to preserve what you have and then find a way to recognize what was here.”

But preserving what exists given the reality of city development that has long overlooked African American contributions isn’t always easy. The Eastlake team faced several challenges throughout.

Some neighbors were resistant to their plans to make Eastlake a destination, for instance.

Finding African American artists to work consistently on the project, involving youth, and maintaining consistent attendance from local audiences were also challenges.

But the team is hopeful moving forward. The team agreed that arts and culture allowed them to reframe the conversation and draw more people into their work. “The work we have been able to do through the arts, through placemaking, through storytelling, it’s given us a different frame to talk about Eastlake in a meaningful way,” Adams said.

One of the key lessons for Adams came from her colleague, Yarbough, shortly after he joined the team. In a meeting he posed the question, “How do we want people to feel when they’re in Eastlake?”

“That’s when we started coming up with this idea of an experience. That’s been just such a great lesson, in even just how we approach things. Not just, what is it that you’re trying to achieve, but how do you want a person to receive the work? How do you want a person to feel about what you’re communicating? It’s very empathetic. It’s a really smart way to think about what it feels [like] to be in a place ... like Eastlake,” Adams said.

And while there’s still more work to do, Berry says more people now know and speak of Eastlake. “We were recognized in [Phoenix] New Times as one of the emerging neighborhoods to come up,” he says. “The sun is on the horizon.”