

# VACANT LOT ACTIVATION TOOLKIT

Free Lots Angeles  
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## Free Lots Angeles

Free Lots Angeles is a collaborative made up of six Los Angeles based non-profit organizations centered on transforming vacant lots into vibrant, resourceful public spaces through community-driven, participatory planning processes. We help guide communities into thinking broadly about their community needs and assets through multiple, interactive workshops that help us map and design their ideas. Then, we take all of the collected data and use it to design physical manifestations on vacant lots that highlight not only the needs of a community, but also everything that makes that community great.

Through support from The California Endowment, Free Lots Angeles has worked with residents and community partners throughout South Los Angeles to activate vacant lots since our first in January 2014. Free Lots Angeles has temporarily transformed vacant lots in Watts, South Los Angeles on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Central Avenue, and in partnership with the Citizens Architect Apprenticeship Program at Augustus Hawkins High School. Free Lots Angeles continues to collaborate with communities to temporarily and permanently transform vacant lots to improve quality of life throughout Los Angeles.

# Toolkit

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide individuals/organizations/entities a blueprint for temporarily transforming vacant or underutilized pieces of land into vibrant spaces that represent the long-term needs of the communities in which they are located.

Our toolkit consists of the following components:

- **Mapping & Access:** In this section, we provide recommendations for identifying vacant spaces in need of activation and offer advice on how to gain access to these spaces. We also introduce LA Open Acres, a tool that can be used to identify vacant lots in LA.
- **Community Engagement Workshops:** Residents are the most important part of the work. The public spaces that we create need to respond to community priorities. To do so, we enable a workshop series with residents to design and program each vacant lot. The following topics are covered in the community engagement workshops:
  - Needs and Assets Assessment
  - Prioritizing Solutions
  - Site Planning
- **Design:** Design is everything. In this section of the toolkit we provide recommendations on how to develop designs based on community engagement data.
- **Programming:** Programming is essential. Here, we provide ideas for making sure that the activities and entertainment during an activation meets the community's expressed needs.

# Process

Site Identification

Community  
Engagement  
Workshops

Design and  
Programming

Activation Event



## Lot Mapping & Access

There are more than 20,000 vacant lots in the city of Los Angeles. Many are owned by the city, others are privately owned. Free Lots Angeles is working with residents and government agencies to create new policies that improve how community members can more easily access publicly owned vacant lots for transformation. Currently, LA Open Acres (<https://laopenacres.org>) is a great tool to help you find more information on a vacant lot in your neighborhood. On the site, you can also find information on how other Angelenos are working to transform vacant lots in their neighborhoods. Your Council member's office is a great resource in helping gain access to a vacant lot.

## Community Workshops

Free Lots Angeles believes that residents of a community already have a great sense of what is needed to improve their community. So, we collaborate with residents to design each transformed vacant lot. To do so, we enable a participatory design process. At minimum this process should include the following three steps - but the design process can go much deeper. You can ask community members to provide programming, help with construction, select materials and color palettes, and/or design each of the structures! The following workshops are meant to provide a starting point for a process that works best for your community.

# Workshop 1

## Needs Assessment + Asset Mapping

**Activity 1:** The first activity should be used to engage resident-participants to identify the broad needs of their community, whether that means health, transportation, income generation, traffic, congestion, trash, public space, safe place for kids, place to exercise for adults, etc. Various activities can be used to gather this information on community needs; following are a few examples:

- Photo Activity: participants go on a walking tour to take photos in the community of areas or items that represent a broad need of the community
- Group Question and Answer: a general question is asked to the group, and participants present the group with their ideas
- Three Circles: 3 circles are used to represent 1. how you see your community, 2. how others see your community and 3. how you would like to see the future of your community. Participants fill in the 3 circles and share back to the larger group.
- Surveys and Questionnaires: a survey or set of questions is used to gather information from community members on broad needs
- A Day in the Life: Participants are invited to interview another participant to understand their 'Day in the Life', or what a typical day looks like for them. Needs are assessed through storytelling.
- Collage: Participants use cut-out pictures from newspapers or magazines to make a collage that responds to a question or theme posed by activity moderators. Ex: 'What is it like to live in this community?'

**Activity 2:** It is important to take note of the cultural richness and positive aspects of the community. These items can be used as important resources for the activation. Moderators should engage residents to map the existing assets and resources in their community, that could mean cultural places, relaxing and fun places, etc. This activity can be done using a physical map, or online using a digital map ex: google maps. Prompts for asset mapping activity can be:

- Where do you go to socialize in your community?
- Where do you go for culture and arts in your community?
- Where do you go to play or exercise in your community?
- Where are the fun places to go to?
- Where are some great places in your neighborhood?

\* NOTE: When planning any sort of community engagement workshop, consider implementing the following measures to ensure workshops are accessible to all residents:

1. Language interpretation
2. Childcare
3. Time of day

## Workshop 2

### Needs Prioritization + Solutions Selection

**Activity 1:** Not all community needs can be addressed in the activation of the lot, so it is important for participants to narrow down to the most important needs, or the needs that are most feasible to address on the site. In this first activity of Workshop 2, residents are engaged in an activity to prioritize the broad needs they had identified in the last workshop. A few examples of activities that can be used to do this are:

- Group Prioritization activity: split into smaller groups, participants decide together what the priority needs are, then each small group presents their narrowed down list with an explanation to the larger group
- Matrix: through using a matrix, needs are categorized according to 'want' vs. 'need' and 'easy' to implement vs. 'difficult' to implement, or 'high cost' vs. 'low cost' along the 2 axes. Participants place each need in one of the quadrants.

**Activity 2:** Now that the prioritized needs are established, it is time for participants to identify the preferred solutions that address those needs on the site so that we can begin to look at what goes on the site. In this activity, residents are taken through a process to collectively identify the most preferred solutions, which are the components on the site that address the prioritized needs. This can be done using the following activities:

- Vote by stickers: for each prioritized need, various solution options are presented, preferably in printed out images, and participants vote on their favorite solution using stickers.
- Split into groups, each group collectively decides on solutions then each sub-group presents their solution set to the larger group

# Workshop 3

## Site Plan Design

**Activity 1:** In this last workshop with residents, activity moderators should engage participants to begin thinking about the design and physical layout of the site plan, including the location of the different components in relation to one another on the site, while also considering the cost restraints of the individual components. This can be done through mapping out the site plan of the lot activation on a large print out with the site dimensions clearly outlined.

In addition to the map of the site dimensions printed out, prepare cut-out pieces of paper of the different components, scaled to their appropriate dimension, to be placed on the map by participants. Participants should take into account:

1. prioritizing what physically fits on the site (not all components will be able to be placed),
2. where each component should be placed in relation to the other components, and
3. cost restraints, some components may not be financially feasible for a temporary activation.

For cost restraints, you can mark each component with \$ dollar signs to represent its relative cost, ex: expensive components like a built seating area would be labeled '\$\$\$\$', whereas cheap components like an art area would be labeled '\$' to represent their relative costs.



# Design

The design of the temporarily transformed vacant lot should reflect the needs and priorities of the community as determined in the participatory design workshops. Incorporating the existing culture into the design can also be an important design element. The transformation of vacant lots does not have to be expensive and you do not need to be an architect to design lot components. Some of the most important elements of transforming lots in Los Angeles are: safe and clean spaces, shade, seating, and recreation areas.

Here are some of our favorite materials and easy ways you can create a fun and engaging design with a small budget:

Hay Bales: can be used for comfortable seating, stacked, or singular, can also be used to hold up light shade structures

Wrapping paper and fabric: can be used to bring color to a site, and are a good lightweight material for shade!

Palettes: can be used to create tables, seating, can be stacked on each other to create rooms, you can secure them with screws or zip ties!

Astroturf: can be laid on concrete to provide a more comfortable surface for sports play, dancing, yoga, and other forms of recreation

2x4 wood: can be used to create simple and sturdy stages, secured to chain-link fence posts to support and lift light weight shade structures, made into frames that create rooms of activity



# Programming

Key to the design's success is the successful programming of the transformed lot. Programming should be culturally and linguistically relevant to the community participating in the activation. In the communities where we work, we often hear that access to economic opportunities, health programs, culture venues, etc. are priorities. Design and programming should go hand in hand. While the programs you bring to a transformed lot will be determined through your community process, here are some examples of programming that we have found successful:

**Live Music:** to create an active space and attract visitors there is almost nothing better than live music

**Kids Activities:** safe, fun, and interactive kids activities are even better than live music for creating an active and transformed lot

**Art:** kids and adults alike love making art! providing a table, paper, watercolors, and a clothesline for exhibiting the work created is a great simple way to make an artful day

**Exercise classes:** yoga and zumba for all ages is a fun healthy activity that can be done on any flat surface

**Library:** take some used books and magazines and place in a quiet seating area and you have an instant library!

**Gardening:** with plant donations from your local garden store you can create small gardens to teach residents best gardening practices and then give them plants to take home to start their own!



# Thank You!

We would like to thank our funders, The California Endowment, for supporting Free Lots Angeles' work and for funding the development of this toolkit. This toolkit is a working document and we hope to update it as we are continually learning how to improve the process of accessing and transforming vacant lots in Los Angeles.

We are building a community base to support policy change that enables access to publicly-owned vacant lots for community benefits. To be part of this discussion contact Malcolm Harris at 323-233-4118 or malcolm@trustsouthla.org. If you are interested in transforming a vacant lot near you, please contact Luis Gutierrez at luis@lurnnetwork.org.

You can find more about our work at our Facebook page.

Best,

The Free Lots Team

Community Health Councils, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, Kounkuey Design Initiative, Leadership for Urban Renewal Network, Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, and T.R.U.S.T. South LA





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