The Community Listening House

a tool for transformation

milanlisteninghouse.org
A community art project designed to help communities explore hard questions.
In summer and fall of 2017, a team of four artists in western Minnesota created the Milan Listening House—a community-generated art installation centered around the question, “What does home mean to you?” The project was designed to address a lack of housing resources and differing housing values among diverse communities in the small village of Milan, MN. The project was implemented inside a dilapidated home. Community members were invited into the space for “listening sessions” with the artists. The stories and values shared in these conversations—housing-related and otherwise—were then displayed creatively in empty picture frames covering the walls of the house. After months of listening sessions and public exhibit hours, the artists presented a guiding document of concrete suggestions for housing & community planning to the City of Milan.

Though our project took place in Milan, the basic framework of the Listening House can be recreated in any community. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide an outline of our process for those interested in implementing a Listening House—or something like it—in their own community. Our project centered around housing, but this need not be the case for every Listening House. At its core, a Listening House is a deep visioning process which uses art-based strategies to answer hard questions relevant to communities and their constituents. The Listening House is intended to function as the first step in a transformative process initiated by activity, energy and excitement surrounding an underused space. It results in a concrete plan that governing bodies and other agencies can follow to implement real sustainable change in communities.
"What Does Home Mean To You?"

Step 1: Craft a question

A Listening House starts with a question, not an answer. Though a Listening House may be implemented to address a specific issue— in our case, housing— it is important for the artists to enter the community unattached from any specific “diagnosis.” Beginning with an open-ended listening process ensures changes are not driven by any individual or group’s specific agenda. The goal is for community members to work together towards understanding and identifying truly constructive solutions to community challenges.
Step 2: Identify a Space

Unused or underused properties are best suited for Listening Houses. Our space was an old dilapidated house located next to the community center. It was owned by a neighbor, Mike, who hadn’t had renters in several years. He was happy for our interest in the space, and rented it to us for $25 a month. We also facilitated a housing inspection for Mike to ensure the space would be safe for visitors and to help Mike plan for the future of the space.

Hosting a Listening House in a space in need of rehabilitation re-establishes a connection between community members and the space. The natural curiosity of the community to explore an “abandoned” space encourages participation and invites co-discovery between participants. Revisioning a space to function as a community art installation also encourages responses to questions that are playful, non-linear or associative. The concept “no wrong answers here” is reinforced by material reality of utilizing a neglected space as an art gallery.
Before the exhibit opened, we interviewed Mike and other residents about the history of the house. One of our artists wrote a brief history of the home, along with an introduction to our project. This document was passed out to all visitors when they entered the space. The intention was to root the Listening House in its particular history while inviting transformation for the future of the space and community.

“Hannah & Ole sold the house in the 1960’s. In the years since, over 30 people have lived here: two young women who threw big dance parties in the 70s; a family of eight recent immigrants from Mexico; a group of young men who drank too much and got in trouble with the law; a single mother and her daughters, who painted the walls pink and green.” ~ Exhibit Introduction
Step 3: Web Presence

We created a Squarespace website for our project, as well as Facebook and Instagram pages. These accounts were our main way of making our presence known, and informing the community of our open hours.

For those who could not come to the house for a listening session, a digital interview form was available on the website. Community members could also submit photographs and other creative contributions through our website form. These submissions were printed and exhibited in the house. Through our Instagram feed, we created a digital record of the installation.
Aside from our listening sessions, our main way of encouraging public dialogue around shared meanings of home was through the creative use of postcards. We printed our own postcards featuring a stylized image of our house on the front. On the back, we printed our central question “What does home mean to you?” and left space for a response. We distributed hundreds of these postcards in the community and to visitors at the house. Completed postcards were placed inside empty picture frames on the walls of the house, and also on Instagram.
Step 5: Showing Up

As individuals, we established a welcoming presence in Milan by showing up to important community events, frequenting high-traffic spaces (the cafe, the grocery store, the church, the library), and establishing rapport with residents. This helped us secure the trust necessary to begin scheduling extended listening sessions, or “one on ones.”

Unlike the postcards, these sessions are intended to go deep and address meaning, purpose and connection in community. Minimal notes are taken. The intention of the “one-on-one” is to build trust between the artists and the community so things typically left “unsaid” have the space to be revealed in confidential conversation.

The one-on-one meetings are not meant to uncover specific information related to the central question, but rather for the artist to grasp the depth and scope of the issue being addressed by holding space for deep conversations with individuals or groups of individuals. Some sessions happened through appointment, others occurred spontaneously as a result of the artist’s continued presence.
Step 6: Community Event

We organized and hosted a free meal at the community center in the middle of our project. This was a way for us to meet residents, get the word out about our project, and facilitate group discussion around the meaning of home. Also at this event, we had a large group discussion about what it means to be a good neighbor. Selected quotes from this discussion were typed up, printed out, and posted within old picture frames on the “Good Neighbor Wall” in the Listening House.

A community event is also a good opportunity for outside organizations to present resources for the community relevant to the central question of your Listening House. It is also a good time to collect relevant information for local governing structures.
Step 7: Gallery Hours

After we collected enough creative submissions and postcards to fill approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the space, we opened the Listening House for public viewing at regular intervals. We published these open hours in the local newspaper and on social media. During open hours, visitors were invited to tour the space, fill out their own postcard and add it to the wall, co-create poems with an artist, and take a polaroid portrait to accompany their contribution.
Step 8: Video Documentation

One of our team members used an iPhone to create a 2-minute promo video of the project which was used as a social media promotion tool.
Step 9: Archiving Information

After the public installation closed, we collected all postcards, photos, and other creative submissions as a record of the installation.
Step 10: Synthesizing Information

We then created a summary document of all the information we collected—drawing from our conversation notes, postcards, community meetings, and creative contributions. We identified local housing values and concerns that are widely held and important to diverse community members. We also included several recommendations for concrete action. We presented this as a resource for local governing bodies.

"The Milan Listening House successfully identified three strong common values, and two (runner-up) values.

These are 1) safety, 2) spending time with family, and 3) relaxing or leisure time. The values that were also named frequently were cooking and creating together."

~from our public report
How Does A Listening House Work?

1. The community crafts a question.
2. The artist and community identify a space. The artist and community work together to clean up the under-utilized space.
3. Artist holds hours in space and is present to converse with community members about the important question.
4. Postcards are distributed to the community, inviting responses to the question.
5. Artist displays community responses in the listening space and online.
6. Artist holds public exhibition hours, and a community event to inspire further contributions.
7. Responses are catalogued and presented to community leadership and partnering organizations.
8. Shared values and opportunities for community engagement are identified.
9. Transformation sprouts organically from community members, using community-generated solutions with existing resources to begin sustainable change.