



| CASE STUDY |

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES

Creating a unique sense of place in small towns

Cover Photo: Mystic Mama Rock & Jewelry Boutique

| CASE STUDY |

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES

Creating a unique sense of place in small towns

Downtown Bellefontaine wasn't always a place people went to linger. Just over a decade ago, it was a mix of underused storefronts and fading signage. The charm was buried beneath years of disinvestment. Today, it's a place where visitors walk slowly, take pictures under colorful umbrellas, pop in and out of locally owned shops, and grab coffee before browsing antiques or heading to a paint-your-own-pottery studio.

A WALKABLE DOWNTOWN FULL OF PURPOSE

That transformation didn't happen by accident, it's the result of intentional placemaking, a strategy that turns everyday public and commercial spaces into engaging, memorable, and community-driven destinations.

In Bellefontaine, placemaking is not just about beautification. It's about layering experiences—pairing businesses, activating alleys, designing for families, honoring history, and giving people a reason to come downtown in every season.

THE POWER OF PAIRING

One of Bellefontaine's most effective placemaking strategies is something most people wouldn't notice right away: the careful curation and pairing of businesses.

Imagine a family spending a Saturday afternoon in town. They grab lunch at Six Hundred Downtown, then walk next door to Robbins Nest to browse a unique selection of home goods. Mom pops into Four Acre Clothing Co. for Bellefontaine-themed apparel while the kids have frozen custard from Whit's. The experience feels seamless, and that's exactly the point.

Small Nation has been strategic in grouping businesses that complement one another, often referring to it as

a "Cracker Barrel model." Just like how guests at Cracker Barrel walk through the gift shop to get to the dining room, Bellefontaine encourages cross-shopping by design. The result? Visitors stay longer, spend more, and discover new businesses with each visit.

This intentional design extends beyond retail. Dash & Joey's smoothie shop is located inside the same building as Anytime Fitness and LoCo Depot. Make Time, a creative retail shop, now houses both a candle bar and a paint-your-own-pottery experience, helping make creativity and wellness part of the shopping experience.

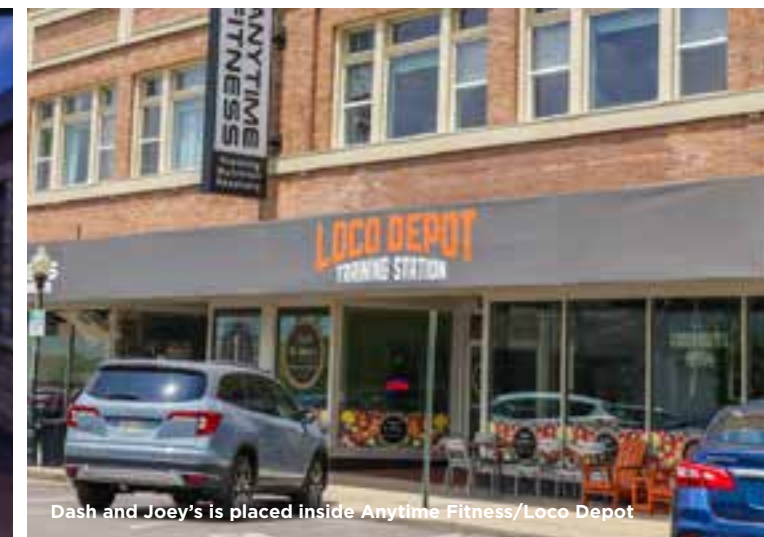
INTERACTIVE ALLEYS

One of Bellefontaine's most recognizable placemaking installations is Umbrella Avenue, a formerly overlooked alley next to Bellefontaine's Rainbow Row. Transformed by a canopy of floating umbrellas, it has become one of the most photographed spots in town.

Originally inspired by similar concepts in larger cities, Bellefontaine's Umbrella Avenue quickly evolved into more than just a photo backdrop. It became a gateway experience - drawing people toward a side of downtown they may have otherwise passed by. Local shops near the alley saw increased foot traffic, and events began spilling into the space.



The Morning Riot



Dash and Joey's is placed inside Anytime Fitness/LoCo Depot



Whit's Frozen Custard



Make Time



Umbrella Avenue

| SMALL BUSINESS. BIG IMPACT. |

Bellefontaine's success lies in its intentional approach to placemaking, turning everyday spaces into engaging, community-driven destinations.

Through thoughtful design, creative experiences, and a focus on storytelling, the town created a place where people linger, connect, and create memories.





The Big Orange Chair - Our Instagrammable Spot



Historic Walking Tour Plaque

In the winter, the umbrellas come down and are replaced with twinkling lights, evergreen garland, and a mistletoe booth. The transformation into Mistletoe Avenue reflects Bellefontaine's adaptive approach to placemaking, one that keeps spaces relevant and fresh throughout the year.

STORYTELLING ON EVERY BLOCK

Placemaking in Bellefontaine isn't just about color and commerce, it's also about storytelling. Bronze plaques affixed to downtown buildings share the history of each structure, offering a self-guided Historic Walking Tour that helps visitors understand the city's evolution.

From 19th-century architecture to mid-century renovations and modern-day reinventions, each plaque gives insight into Bellefontaine's rich past. For locals, this history sparks pride and connection. For visitors, it adds a layer of cultural depth that elevates the entire experience. Around the corner, visitors often discover McKinley Street - what's believed to be the world's shortest street - made even more memorable by a colorful mural celebrating its quirky charm.

Rather than relying solely on museums or interpretive centers, the Historic Walking Tour democratizes history, making it accessible to anyone, at any time, in the flow of their day.

SEASONAL EXPERIENCES THAT DRAW CROWDS

Fall in Bellefontaine means one thing: pumpkins. But not just any pumpkins, Jack-o-lantern barrels scattered throughout downtown, each with a name, personality, and a riddle. The Pumpkin Barrel Scavenger Hunt has become a seasonal favorite, especially for families.

Participants explore the downtown on foot, trying to match the clues with the corresponding barrels. In the process, they're visiting stores, talking to merchants, and creating memories.

It's a low-cost, high-impact placemaking activity that drives foot traffic and encourages discovery. And like many of Bellefontaine's best ideas, it's designed to feel playful, not promotional.

WHERE EXPERIENCE MEETS EXPRESSION

At Make Time, placemaking takes the form of experience-based retail. In addition to offering gifts and home goods, the shop now features a candle bar and pottery painting studio in partnership with Cracked Pot Studio.

Visitors can walk in, choose a scent or ceramic, and create something meaningful to take home.



Make Time



Pumpkin Barrel Scavenger Hunt



Pumpkin Barrel Scavenger Hunt



Make Time



America's Shortest Street Mural



The Syndicate



Downtown Promotion by COMSTOR



The experiences aren't just unique - they also encourage visitors to stay downtown longer. For example, candles take two hours to cure, giving guests ample time to shop, dine, or catch a show at the Holland Theatre while they wait.

Other experiential touches around downtown invite visitors to engage in playful ways. A large yeti statue outside Mystic Mama Rock + Jewelry and a group of aliens near The Morning Riot offer fun, unexpected photo ops. These characters have become local legends and are even featured on billboards in nearby communities, drawing travelers into town with the promise of aliens, a yeti, and great craft beer.

This kind of layered activity adds value to every square foot of the downtown and shows how even traditional retail can evolve into experiential placemaking.

MEASURABLE IMPACT AND LASTING CHANGE

The results of these creative placemaking efforts are clear. Vacant buildings are now full. Foot traffic has increased. Social media is filled with photos of visitors under umbrellas or sipping hot chocolate in Mistletoe Avenue. Businesses report longer visits and higher than average spending rates.

More importantly, the culture of the community has shifted. Residents now feel proud to show off their downtown. Tourists come looking for the alley they saw on Instagram. And entrepreneurs see Bellefontaine as a viable place to launch their dream.

These are the ripple effects of good placemaking, not just economic growth, but emotional connection and community identity. The belief is simple: if you create places that people love, they'll come back - and they'll bring others.

In a time when many small towns are struggling to differentiate themselves, placemaking offers a path forward. Bellefontaine proves that with thoughtful design, creative risk-taking, and community partnerships, any space - alley, storefront, or sidewalk—can become a reason to visit, a moment to remember, or a story worth sharing.

As more communities look to revitalize their downtowns, Bellefontaine's model is clear: don't just fix the buildings, bring them to life.

SMALL NATION develops places, spaces and dreams for small towns and small town entrepreneurs across the country.

**SMALL
NATION**

We're here to show the world that small town and small business success is not only possible, but profitable. For everyone.