

# RPIC FINAL REPORT CENTER FOR HABITAT RECONSTRUCTION

June 30, 2024

First RPIC Video for social networks:

[https://www.facebook.com/crhpr/videos/624764552501064/?\\_tn\\_=%2CO](https://www.facebook.com/crhpr/videos/624764552501064/?_tn_=%2CO)

Second:

[https://www.facebook.com/crhpr/videos/2029394214096935/?\\_tn\\_=%2CO-R](https://www.facebook.com/crhpr/videos/2029394214096935/?_tn_=%2CO-R)

Placemaking Plan for La Playa, Barceloneta:

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=16t8j1\\_qGDC6hzzbIKOvX7yRI5KSGqjgu&usp=drive\\_fs](https://drive.google.com/open?id=16t8j1_qGDC6hzzbIKOvX7yRI5KSGqjgu&usp=drive_fs)

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Project

The “From blight to placemaking in Barceloneta Puerto Rico” project, funded by the USDA and its Rural Placemaking Challenge Initiative (RPIC), was designed to revitalize the coastal communities of La Playa through a combination of sustainable development, community engagement, and environmental restoration. The project emerged in response to the ecological sensitivity of the area and the significant damage inflicted by hurricanes Irma and María. Its primary goal was to enhance the quality of life for residents while promoting sustainable practices and community cohesion.

From the outset, the project focused on inclusive community engagement, recognizing the importance of involving residents in the planning and development of their own spaces. Through a series of community meetings and workshops held across Punta Palmas, Palmas Altas, and La Boca – the three largest communities of the La Playa area - we gathered valuable insights and fostered a collaborative spirit. These efforts were crucial in overcoming historical conflicts between community leaders and the city government, paving the way for more effective and harmonious development.

The project had six objectives:

- **Objective #1** - Assist rural communities to identify and map their assets, challenges, and opportunities, with emphasis on currently vacant and abandoned spaces.
- **Objective #2** - Execute participatory planning activities for the creation of Placemaking Plans, outlining community-wide goals, strategies and tasks.
- **Objective #3** - Assist communities conceptualize, assess the viability, and prioritize pilot placemaking projects from within their Plans.
- **Objective #4** - Assist communities to strengthen and expand partnerships to create and implement their Plans.
- **Objective #5** - Improve communities’ economy, social, and cultural vitality through Innovation Seed Grants.
- **Objective #6** – Increase rural access to broadband.

## Key Achievements

Per the original logic chart submitted with the CRH's proposal:

Projected Outputs	Projected Outcomes	Final Results
<p>1. Four community maps created by community residents in the Barceloneta coastline, 12 months and 24 months into the project period.</p> <p>2. 65 residents active in community planning activities</p>	<p>Increased # of residents aware of their community surrounding, assets, and geographic distribution of impediments to community vitality.</p> <p>Increase # of community stakeholders committed to new Placemaking activities.</p>	<p>Tests were administered to residents, demonstrating that 96% of those polled are now more aware of their surroundings and the presence of abandoned properties in their communities.</p> <p>In addition, 52% of residents expressed interest in taking part in transforming abandoned spaces for the benefit of the community.</p>
<p>3. One published final Comprehensive Plan.</p> <p>4. Placemaking Plan drafted and reviewed by multiple stakeholder-authors.</p>	<p>Increased # of residents participating and meaningfully engaged in community planning efforts.</p>	<p>The Placemaking Plan was successfully published and involved a lengthy process of community consultation and consensus building. In addition, it was vetted by community leaders prior to completion.</p>
<p>5. Residents in target communities identify at least 30 potential projects in the Placemaking Plan.</p>	<p>Increased # of Placemaking opportunities with the potential to increase community quality of life and vitality.</p>	<p>A total of 29 potential projects have been identified in the Placemaking Plan. Nevertheless, an additional 36 properties have been identified for future potential projects, pending the Municipality's declaration of said properties as public nuisances.</p>
<p>6. At least 30 hours of meetings between stakeholders and potential partners.</p>	<p>Increased # of Placemaking partners for Plan implementation.</p>	<p>Placemaking partners have increased, and not only include those mentioned in the original proposal chart, but have expanded to include: a new neighborhood association that</p>

		was created with the help of this project; local businesses that chipped in to make pop-up activities possible; a formal MOU with the Municipality to leverage the latter’s nuisance program; collaborations with the Puerto Rico Department of Housing to the reuse of vacant lots; and collaborations with the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DRNA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to leverage efforts for coastal restoration.
7. At least five Placemaking Plan finding projects enacted.	<p>Increased # of Placemaking projects that increase access to modern utilities (including access to broadband), affordable housing, efficient transportation, reliable employment, medical services, public safety, education, and community resiliency.</p> <p>Decrease in # of environmental and health risks in the community.</p>	Three projects have been advanced through pop-up activities promoted by the CRH, two blighted coastal properties have been demolished by state and federal agencies after being referred said cases, and two properties are currently being rehabilitated by the state Housing Department, also after referral by the CRH.
8. At least two of the five Placemaking Plan projects funded by Seed Grants increase access to broadband.	Increased # of community members with access to broadband.	Unfortunately, in the final trimester of the CRH’s RPIC program, we were notified that the seed grants portion of the grant was erroneously awarded. Considering this, the CRH had to halt its seed grant activities.

**Summary of Findings**

As part of the final Placemaking Plan, the initiative yielded several important findings that underscore the unique needs and opportunities within the La Playa community. Through comprehensive data collection, community engagement, and environmental assessments, we

identified key areas that require attention and development to enhance the overall quality of life for residents.

1. **Demographic Insights:** Community members carried out a door-to-door census, demonstrating the significant presence of older adults in the community. This demographic characteristic emphasizes the need for age-friendly infrastructure and services. Additionally, the majority of the residents face medical conditions such as cancer, Alzheimer's, asthma, diabetes, hypertension, and mental health issues like depression and anxiety. These health challenges necessitate accessible healthcare facilities and support services within the community.
2. **Community Participation:** Community participation varied across different areas, with an average of 42.3% of residents expressing interest in engaging in community activities. However, a significant challenge identified was the lack of recognition of community leaders, with 51% of respondents unable to identify them. This gap highlights the need for stronger leadership and better communication to foster a more engaged and cohesive community.
3. **Recreational and Educational Needs:** A recurring theme across all communities was the desire for more recreational and educational spaces. The establishment of pop-up community gardens and open recreational spaces, accompanied by interactive workshops and community events, addressed some of these needs, but there remains a significant demand for more such facilities to promote physical and mental well-being.
4. **Connectivity and Access:** One of the predominant issues identified was the lack of physical access to services outside the neighborhood. Despite having a municipal trolley service with relatively high ridership, residents proposed new routes and the use of abandoned lots for strategically placed trolley stops. This indicates a need for improved transportation infrastructure to enhance connectivity and access to essential services.
5. **Environmental Concerns:** The environmental assessment, in collaboration with NOAA and DRNA, highlighted the ecological sensitivity of the La Playa area and the extensive damage caused by hurricanes Irma and María. The NOAA's Marine Debris Removal Program was a crucial step in restoring the shoreline and natural habitats, engaging the community in conservation efforts. This initiative also underscored the importance of continued environmental stewardship to protect and preserve the local ecosystem.
6. **Internet Connectivity:** A notable disparity in internet connectivity was observed across different communities. This finding aligns with the USDA's goals of increasing broadband access in rural areas. Improving internet connectivity is essential for enhancing access to information, education, and healthcare services, particularly for the older population.

In conclusion, the findings from the Placemaking Plan highlight the need for targeted interventions in healthcare, recreational facilities, transportation, environmental conservation, and internet connectivity. These insights will inform future development projects, ensuring they are tailored to meet the specific needs of the La Playa community and contribute to its sustainable growth and development.

## Plan Summary

The Placemaking Plan (which is included for reference) outlines a series of targeted projects based on an extensive community census that identified needs at a micro, street-level scale. This detailed assessment led to the identification of 29 properties declared as public nuisances. For each of these properties, we developed proposals focusing on open space, housing, community development, and recreational facilities.

1. **Open Space Projects:** To address the need for more communal and green areas, the plan includes transforming vacant lots into vibrant community gardens and parks. These green spaces will provide areas for recreation, social interaction, and environmental education. The projects involve cleaning up and landscaping abandoned lots, creating spaces where residents can gather, grow fresh produce, and engage in outdoor activities. These initiatives not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood but also promote environmental stewardship and community cohesion.
2. **Housing Projects:** The plan emphasizes the rehabilitation of abandoned properties to provide safe and affordable housing options. These efforts include structural repairs and modernization to provide safe alternatives to deteriorated housing, ensuring that the restored homes are safe and habitable. Additionally, the Plan proposes the development of new affordable housing units to address the significant demand in the community. These projects aim to reduce blight, provide decent living conditions for low-income families, and support the aging population by leveraging accessibility.
3. **Community Development:** To foster a sense of community and provide necessary facilities, the Plan proposes several community development initiatives. These include community centers and meeting spaces for local residential boards. These centers will serve as hubs for community meetings, activities, and local governance, providing a venue for residents to organize, collaborate, and engage in civic activities.
4. **Recreational Facilities:** The Plan addresses the need for recreational spaces by proposing the development of passive parks and playgrounds. These facilities will provide safe and accessible areas for exercise, play, and relaxation. The inclusion of fitness equipment, walking trails, and children's play areas is intended to promote physical activity and well-being. Additionally, the plan includes supporting existing sports facilities by reutilizing neighboring lots, and thus providing opportunities for community members of all ages to engage in physical activities.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

### Methodology of Community Involvement

The methodology of community involvement in the Placemaking Plan was rooted in inclusivity, transparency, and active participation. Our approach aimed to ensure that all voices within the community were heard and considered in the planning and development processes. This methodology encompassed several key components

1. **Community Meetings and Workshops:** We organized a series of community meetings and workshops across different neighborhoods, including Punta Palmas, Palmas Altas, and La Boca. These sessions were designed to gather input from residents, identify their needs and priorities, and foster a collaborative environment. The meetings were structured to encourage open dialogue, with facilitators guiding discussions and ensuring that all participants had an opportunity to speak.
2. **Surveys and Questionnaires:** To capture a broad spectrum of community opinions, we designed questionnaires and community members assisted with carrying out door-to-door outreach. These tools were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data on various aspects of community life, such as health, connectivity, recreational needs, and environmental concerns. The surveys were designed to be accessible, with clear and simple questions to ensure high response rates.
3. **Focus Groups:** In addition to general meetings, we conducted focus groups with specific demographic segments of the community, such as older adults. These smaller, targeted discussions allowed for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different groups within the community. Focus groups provided a platform for more detailed feedback and helped to identify nuanced issues that might not surface in larger meetings.
4. **Participatory Mapping:** We employed participatory mapping techniques to involve residents in the spatial planning of their community. During workshops, participants were invited to mark maps with areas of concern, potential sites for development, and existing assets. This visual and interactive approach helped to clarify community priorities and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial dynamics within La Playa.
5. **Collaboration with Local Organizations:** We partnered with local organizations, such as community groups, environmental NGOs, and public agencies, to broaden the reach and impact of our engagement efforts. These partnerships provided additional resources and expertise, enhancing the overall quality of the involvement process. In the case of one neighborhood, CRH and RPIC support permits for the creation of a resident's association.
6. **Knowledge Exchange:** Residents were actively engaged in knowledge exchange through various initiatives. The CRH facilitated visits from other placemaking groups, allowing for an exchange of ideas and experiences between different communities. Additionally, our community participated in the Placemaking Summit in Atlanta in March 2024. This event provided a valuable first-hand opportunity for residents to learn about diverse placemaking initiatives across the United States, further enriching their understanding and approach to community development.
7. **Transparent Communication:** Maintaining transparency throughout the project was essential for building trust. We provided regular updates on the project's progress through public meetings, social media, and flyers. This ongoing communication ensured that residents were informed and could see how their input was being incorporated into the planning process.

By implementing this comprehensive and inclusive methodology, we were able to foster a sense of ownership and commitment among residents, laying the groundwork for successful and sustainable community development in La Playa.

## **Specific Activities and Events**

The Placemaking Plan process included a variety of specific activities and events designed to engage the community, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance the ability of residents to imagine new uses for surrounding empty spaces. These activities were crucial in building momentum, fostering community spirit, and demonstrating the tangible benefits of active participation in local development.

1. **Pop-up Community Gardens:** One of the most impactful activities was the establishment of a pop-up community garden. These efforts provided green spaces where residents could gather, grow fresh produce, and engage in environmental education. The gardens were set up in an underutilized lot, transforming them into a hub for workshops and events. These initiatives not only beautified the area but also promoted healthy lifestyles and food security.
2. **Community Clean-up Campaigns:** We organized several clean-up campaigns to address the issue of blight and vacant spaces. These events brought together volunteers from different parts of La Playa to clean streets, lots, and re-occupy once productive spaces. The clean-up campaigns not only improved the physical environment but also fostered a sense of pride and responsibility among participants.
3. **Public Art Projects:** To celebrate local culture and enhance public spaces, we initiated several mural projects. Local artists, in collaboration with community members, created vibrant murals on community walls. These murals reflected the history, heritage, and aspirations of La Playa, adding color and character to the neighborhood while fostering a sense of community pride.
4. **Planning and Visioning Sessions:** Throughout the project, we conducted planning and visioning sessions where residents could share their ideas for the future of La Playa. These sessions included participatory mapping, brainstorming activities, and discussions on potential development projects. When proposals were brought to the table, the CRH would seek data and viable models and would report back to the community for further vetting. The input gathered from these sessions was crucial in shaping the final placemaking plan.

By implementing these specific activities and events, the Placemaking Plan process not only addressed immediate community needs but also built a strong foundation for ongoing engagement and development. These efforts demonstrated the power of collective action and highlighted the community's capacity to create positive change.

## **THE PUBLIC NUISANCE PROGRAM**

### **From Community Mapping to Municipal Action**

This project worked side-by-side with the Municipality to ensure that the Barceloneta Public Nuisance Program in La Playa identified and addressed properties that posed health, safety, or environmental risks to the community. The detailed process of property identification and declaration involved several systematic steps to ensure thoroughness, transparency, and community involvement.

1. **Initial Survey and Data Collection:** The process began with an extensive survey and data collection effort to identify properties that were abandoned, derelict, or otherwise problematic. Community members played a crucial role in this phase, providing local knowledge and insights. We utilized a combination of feedback loops, aerial imagery, and public records to compile a comprehensive list of all abandoned properties within La Playa.
2. **Visual Inspections and Documentation:** Once potential properties were identified, CRH and municipal staff conducted visual inspections to assess the condition of each property. These inspections included detailed photographic documentation, notes on structural integrity, presence of hazardous materials, and any signs of illegal activity. The findings were recorded in a centralized database for further analysis during the community planning phase.
3. **Community Input and Verification:** Follow-up community meetings were held to present the findings from the initial survey and inspections. Residents were invited to provide additional information, verify the status of properties, and express any concerns or preferences regarding specific sites. This participatory approach ensured that the community's voice was central to the decision-making process and that the Municipality's Nuisance Program remained transparent and participatory.
4. **Notification to Property Owners:** Formal notifications were sent to the owners of identified properties by the Municipality, informing them of the intent to declare their properties as public nuisances. Owners were given a specified period to respond, during which they could dispute the findings, propose remediation plans, or take corrective action to address the issues.
5. **Administrative Hearings:** For properties where owners did not respond or where disputes arose, administrative hearings were conducted. These hearings provided a platform for property owners to present their cases and for municipal officials to outline the evidence supporting the declaration. Decisions were made based on the merits of each case, with a focus on protecting community health and safety.
6. **Declaration and Remediation Orders:** Regarding properties that were formerly declared as public nuisances by the Municipality, remediation mediation orders were issued, outlining the specific actions required to address the issues. These orders included timelines for compliance and potential penalties for non-compliance.
7. **Follow-up and Enforcement:** Municipal teams conducted follow-up inspections to ensure compliance with remediation orders. Properties that were not brought into compliance faced further enforcement actions, including fines, liens, or, in extreme cases, municipal takeover for remediation.
8. **Collaboration with External Agencies:** In cases involving significant environmental hazards or complex legal issues, the CRH facilitated discussion with the Puerto Rico DRNA and the NOAA. These collaborations provided additional expertise and resources to address challenging situations.



By implementing this detailed and structured process, the Municipality's Public Nuisance Program effectively identified and addressed problematic properties, contributing to a safer, healthier, and more aesthetically pleasing community environment; as well as providing the community planning process with the needed data and validity needed.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

### **What have been the most challenging or unexpected aspects of this project?**

The Placemaking Plan process, while ultimately successful, faced several significant challenges and unexpected obstacles. These include:

1. **Lack of Trust from the Community:** One of the most challenging aspects was overcoming the deep-seated mistrust that many community members had towards the authorities involved. This distrust stemmed from a history of conflicts between residents and previous administrations. Many community members were skeptical about the Municipality's involvement, and it was common for the CRH to invest significant resources to mediate conflict. To address this, we employed a transparent and inclusive approach from the outset. Regular communication, open meetings, and participatory planning sessions were crucial in building trust. We ensured that community members were actively involved in decision-making processes and that their feedback was genuinely considered. Over time, these efforts helped to alleviate some of the skepticism, although it remained an ongoing challenge to maintain and build upon this trust.
2. **Municipal Micro-management and Protagonism:** Another significant challenge was dealing with the municipality's inclination to micro-manage the project and assert control over various processes. This tendency often created friction and slowed down progress, as municipal officials sometimes prioritized the administration's agendas or sought to take credit for successes. This behavior not only complicated the project's implementation but also risked undermining the community's sense of ownership and autonomy. To navigate this, we focused on fostering a collaborative relationship with municipal officials while clearly delineating roles and responsibilities through a formal MOU. It was essential to diplomatically assert the project's commitment to community-led development and ensure that the municipality supported rather than dominated the initiatives.
3. **Turnover with Program Officers:** One significant challenge we encountered was the high turnover rate among Program Officers. It often seemed that within just a few months, we would cycle through several different Officers. While each Officer was helpful and responsive, this constant change meant that we frequently had to re-brief about our organization and project. This repetitive process could be time-consuming and sometimes frustrating. Additionally, during periods when we were between Officers, important matters such as budget amendments and other consultations could experience some delays.
4. **The Cancellation of Seed Grants:** During the final stretch of the RPIC process, the CRH received unexpected news from the USDA that the seed grant line item, which had

been included as part of the grant award, was not available due to an administrative error. This funding was crucial as the CRH had already been preparing a Request for Proposals (RFP) process for local non-profits to compete for these funds, which were intended to support community-driven projects enhancing local infrastructure and public spaces. The CRH had to quickly adapt to this new financial reality by re-evaluating the budget. Despite the setback, the CRH maintained transparency with stakeholders and focused on maximizing existing resources to continue community engagement activities such as low-cost, high-impact pop-up events, murals, and community gardens with the aim to mobilize and inspire residents.

### **What advice would you give to other organizations planning a similar project?**

When planning a community revitalization project similar to the CRH's there are several key pieces of advice and insights that can help ensure success. Drawing from our experiences, we highlight recommended a few recommended approaches:

1. **Plan for the Worst:** One crucial piece of advice is to always plan for the worst, especially when working with government partners. Bureaucratic processes can be slow and sometimes unpredictable. Contemplate the possibility of having both allies and obstacles within any given administration. It is essential to develop contingency plans and to be flexible and adaptable in your approach. This will help you navigate unexpected challenges and maintain progress even when faced with bureaucratic delays.
2. **Relationships with Program Officer:** When executing your RPIC project, it is crucial to maintain good communication with your Program Officer. Do not hesitate to consult them on any questions or to present new ideas. Even if they do not immediately know the answer, they are there to support you and will work to find alternatives. Program Officers are invested in the success of the project and want it to be impactful.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Program**

In evaluating the RPIC program, it is essential to consider both its strengths and limitations to fully understand its impact and areas for improvement:

#### **Strengths**

- **Adequate Funding:** The RPIC budget cap allows for significant positive changes within a given community. The financial resources are sufficient to support various initiatives, ensuring that the projects can have a substantial and lasting impact. Additionally, the program offers flexibility in how the funds can be used, allowing for a wide range of activities and interventions tailored to the specific needs of the community. This adaptability is crucial for addressing diverse challenges and seizing unique opportunities as they arise.
- **Program Staff:** Compared to other federal agencies, USDA-RD and contractor staff are responsive and efficient. They consistently provided timely feedback and support,

demonstrating a strong commitment to the success of the project. Their proactive approach and dedication to finding solutions greatly facilitated the implementation process, making it smoother and more effective.

### **Limitations**

- **Cost Share Requirement:** While 15% is relatively low compared to other USDA grants from the same period, it still poses a constraint on the extent of support we can provide. This requirement can be particularly burdensome for smaller or less financially robust organizations, limiting their ability to fully participate and benefit from the program.
- **Cost Share Requirement for Seed Grants.** For low-income rural communities like La Playa, a requirement of 50% match for a Seed Grant is especially prohibitive. Most local groups in these areas do not have the financial capacity to meet this requirement, necessitating the involvement of external organizations. This reliance on outside groups can create tensions and complicate collaboration, as it may lead to conflicting priorities.
- **Lack of Continuity:** RPIC does not appear to have dedicated funding, and it has been two years since the RFP. We would have loved to complete this current grant and then apply for funding for another handful of communities. With the experience gained, we feel we could execute future projects quicker and more effectively.

### **If you had the opportunity, what would you have done differently?**

If we had the opportunity to do things differently, we would have advocated for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Municipality from the very beginning of writing the grant. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities upfront would have streamlined our processes and avoided unnecessary delays. This proactive approach would have ensured that we did not waste time waiting for city responses to issues that could have been managed more efficiently with predefined guidelines and expectations.