Intro
Five years ago in Cincinnati, Ohio, we set out to create something bold, a thoughtful response to big questions about the future of our city.
Specifically, we were wondering who was investing in the next generation of leadership in our community—those people who would care for our city and carry it into the future—and the role for philanthropy in that.

At the same time, we were seeing think tanks, makerspaces, civic spaces, urban labs, and community spaces opening in cities around the world and wondering what it might look like if philanthropy were at the center of those spaces.

1. People’s Liberty was powered by the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation and was designed to embody the playful, irreverent spirits of the Foundation’s beloved benefactors.
In 2014, a team came together and set out to explore those questions: Two family foundation leaders. One architect. One designer. One entrepreneur.²

² In the beginning, People’s Liberty was built and shaped by Eric Arner, Vice President and Senior Program Manager of Community Development at the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation; Amy Goodwin, CEO of the Johnson Foundation; Megan Trischler and Kate Creason, co-founders of the design practice Tomorrow Today; and Jake Hodesh, who had recently returned to Cincinnati after building and launching an accelerator for creatives in Savannah, Georgia. Aurore Fournier joined the team in 2015, first as a consultant to project manage the Globe Grant, then soon after as full-time staff. Hannah Gregory joined the team in 2017 as a Resident, then stayed on to serve as our Community Manager.
We began meeting in a small square room around a small yellow table on the 11th floor of a Downtown Cincinnati office building.

3. The table pictured below belonged to Carol and Ralph—it was their kitchen table.
It wasn’t long before big ideas began to unfold—sketches, blueprints, timelines, logos, letters, spreadsheets.
Our process in the beginning was marked with dreaming and doing in equal measure.
We toured inspiring spaces across the country for inspiration.¹

¹ To download our report featuring in-depth case studies of civic hubs around the U.S., visit: https://issuu.com/tomorrowtoday/docs/searching_book_issuu
We searched high and low for other models to borrow from, intentionally looking outside the philanthropic sector to draw insight.
We leaned on our vast individual networks for consultation and critique.
We were making something new together and the energy surrounding this collective work was palpable.
The core of People’s Liberty was rooted in a concept we’d seen work on a micro-scale in other cities (and in our own)—giving grants to people for creative ideas.

But we were on a path to see if we could explore something even bolder by upping the ante of investment and providing support beyond just a check.
The Haile Fellowship

Fascinated by the MacArthur Foundation’s Genius Grants, we wondered what a local version of such a large scale individual-focused investment could look like. We were familiar with a host of fellowship programs and had a hunch that building a “civic sabbatical” for seasoned urban innovators might be worth exploring.

Those inklings turned into the Haile Fellowship, a $100,000 grant awarded to two individuals annually.
The Globe Grant

A number of “pop-up storefront” programs were gaining traction in other cities and we were excited about offering short-term, sidewalk facing space to Cincinnatians with creative ideas for public engagement experiences.

The Globe Grant extended three $15,000 awards annually to a person or team who would also receive the keys to an 800 sq. ft. storefront for three months.
The Project Grant

It was important for us to create a way for community residents to prototype and test their ideas on a neighborhood scale.

The Project Grant, sixteen $10,000 awards offered annually to a person or team, commissioned a growing network of civic doers to do just that in neighborhoods across the region.
The Residency

From the beginning, we recognized the value of good design and storytelling and were noticing the increasing number of young creatives interested in using their graphic design, writing, or social media sensibilities to “do good.”

We built our Residency Program (later deemed The Society of Mad Philanthropists) to offer full-time, paid jobs to emerging creatives.
As these programmatic pieces were taking shape, we were simultaneously creating a brand, shaping language, working with the IRS to formalize and legalize the process of granting to people, building out custom software for a grantee application/juror review process, and rehabbing a historic building that would eventually become our office and hub for all of this work.
**PRIMARY COLOUR PALETTE**

The primary colour palette provides plenty of impact and contrast.

- PMS 109
- PMS Black 7c
- White

**SECONDARY COLOUR PALETTE**

The secondary colour palette provides complimentary accents to the primary colour palatte. These can be deployed on campaigns and business initiatives.

- Pantone 281
- Pantone 534
- Pantone 673
- Pantone 832
- Pantone 7427
- Pantone 7340

**TYPOGRAPHY**

**HELVETICA NEUE - BOLD**

The primary use of the Helvetica Neue Bold typeface is for titles and headlines.

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ABCDEFHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefgijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
1234567890@!%&*
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**HELVETICA NEUE - REGULAR**

The primary use of the Helvetica Neue Regular typeface is for body copy.

```
ABCDEFHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefgijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
1234567890@!%&*
```

**RATIONALE**

The People’s Liberty identity was built from the Archer typeface family. Helvetica Neue provides great contrast to our identity.
For most of the journey we were “creating the path” while walking.
Early on, we learned when and how to leverage the individual skills of the team in service to the overall strength of the project.
In August of 2014, after nine months of behind the scenes building, we launched. On the hottest day\(^5\) of the summer, we welcomed the public to an open house on the ground floor level of 1805 Elm Street, much of which was still a major construction zone.

\(^5\) This event went down in PI history as "the sweaty party."
We did something else that felt bold too: we announced the application for our very first opportunity—two $100,000 Haile Fellowships. Nearly 400 people showed up that day to discover what this People’s Liberty thing was really about. And so it began.
There are many individual stories to share from this five year period.

We’ll do some of that in the pages ahead, and we’d like to encourage readers to visit our website⁶ for a more in depth look at the people and projects that played a role in bringing new life to our city.

What we hope to do here is to share some lessons: the joys and trials of giving grants to people; the privilege and responsibility of holding a seat of power; the positive and negative impact of occupying an anchor building in a rapidly changing part of town; the efficacy of digital and analog systems; the value and risk of disruptive change.

With some projects, it is fairly straightforward to analyze data and articulate impact. However, People’s Liberty was unconventional. Our experiences weren’t black and white, our learnings evolved over time, and the full impact of this place won’t be known for several years to come—our grantees, residents, and partners are all still shaping those futures. Instead, we are proud to share some takeaways that we’ve gathered along the way, and some stories of the people whose work we had the pleasure of watching unfold over these past five years.

Lastly, we’d like to offer a final note of gratitude to each and every person who dared to dream a little bigger with us. To the team at the Haile Foundation, Tim, Leslie, Chris, and Chad: thank you. To every grantee, resident, and past staff member: thank you. To every volunteer, designer, videographer, mentor, juror, and applicant: thank you. To everyone who wandered into an event, supported a project in your neighborhood, or tweeted a note of encouragement: thank you. Cincinnati is better because of you.

Signing off,

The People’s Liberty Team
(Eric, Jake, and Megan)
November, 2019

⁶. www.peoplesliberty.org
Space Matters
Space Doesn’t Matter
People’s Liberty couldn’t just be a website; it had to have a physical location for people to gather, to meet, to work, to see each other and build authentic relationships. Physical space has the profound ability to impact our human experience—for better or worse. Furniture choice, lighting decisions, ceiling height, private vs. public zones, music—it all matters. In designing the People’s Liberty space, we knew it needed to be open, bright, and clean—a space that by its very nature would be welcoming and spark imagination.

People’s Liberty made its home at 1805 Elm Street in the heart of Over-the-Rhine, adjacent to Findlay Market, one of Cincinnati’s most vibrant and diverse public spaces. The decision to locate in a flagship building in a regenerating neighborhood was not accidental. Placing an intentional, visible flag in the soil sent a message: “We’re here to be a part of this community.” Physical space gave us an identity, something that would become increasingly important as we set off to engage a growing cadre of civic doers.

We learned early that creating a sense of “welcome” doesn’t just happen. A sidewalk facing storefront and a yellow open sign isn’t always adequate invitation. People need to see a face, and for us, that meant creating a job role to staff the front door welcome desk to ensure a visitor’s first point of contact was hopeful and helpful. And because most people’s first question upon entering was, “What is this place?” that position needed to be held by someone who embodied our mission and could communicate it with openness, warmth, and clarity. (Thank you, Hannah.)

Ultimately, the People’s Liberty space became a vibrant hub of civic activity that allowed us to explore the role philanthropy can play as both convener and connector. Grantees, community partners, and visiting groups utilized the building day in and day out, using it as a homebase for their creative work and for hosting meetings and events of all sizes.

In five years, our grantees and staff hosted more than 600 events, welcoming nearly 48,000 people to the building. We are confident that the connections and relationships that formed within this special space will continue to strengthen and grow as our city moves forward.
Melis Aydogan & Rüya

Melis Aydogan’s project Ruya lived in the Globefront in the Fall of 2018. Her Turkish coffeehouse, taking its name from the Turkish word meaning dream, promised a common ground, a sense of welcoming, and a hint of nostalgia. Melis is a first-generation Turkish-American, and her space used coffee to introduce Turkish culture and identity to curious visitors.

In her three months in the Globefront, Melis garnered quite a following, so much so that her project continues today with multiple pop-ups emerging throughout the city. Physical, ground floor space made Melis’ project successful—it wouldn’t have worked without such an inviting atmosphere. Space mattered.
Meet Melis
Operating an 8,000 sq.ft. space in a rapidly changing neighborhood has its fair share of complications and questions: Who gets to use the space? How often? When? Who’s cell phone gets called when the alarms are going off? Can we serve alcohol? Can groups rent the space? Why do the light bulbs keep flickering? What’s that smell? There were a number of days when our small, stretched staff wondered if the building was more of a liability than an asset. Could our team’s time and talent be more impactful if Jake didn’t have to keep changing light bulbs, Aurore didn’t have to rearrange the furniture for the fiftieth time, Hannah didn’t have to figure out how to staff an evening event, and Megan didn’t have to hunt down all those disappearing forks? Shiny hardwood floors, pristine white walls, mid-century modern furniture, tidy rows of books and succulents are lovely things, but the time and care required to keep such a space functional is not for the faint of heart.

But more than grappling with unexpected maintenance issues or ongoing operations challenges, sometimes we wondered if having our own space might have centralized activity in a way that was counter to our mission of “community development.” After all, community doesn’t always happen inside a building.

It requires “going out” and “being in” our city’s diverse neighborhoods. By having a big, beautiful space we were compelled to use it and, likewise, we encouraged our grantees to make full use of it too. In doing that, we may have unintentionally prevented some of the neighborhood “scatter” that’s necessary when shaping community.

Partners from across our community and peers from other cities opened their spaces to us and to our grantees on a regular basis. Without exception, the passion behind the work mattered more than the type of kitchen stools or the color of walls or the Instagram-worthy signage hanging outside the door. Great ideas can flourish anywhere. We created a space to host as much of the work as possible, but we’re convinced that even when our building finally closes down, it won’t matter: the passion will continue on.
Money Doesn’t Matter
People’s Liberty was a significant part of the Haile Foundation’s Community Development portfolio and was centered on the assumption that we could invest in this place—Greater Cincinnati—by investing in our people. There are countless ways to invest in people, numerous methods to bridge community, and limitless tactics to make physical, city-wide improvements, but we set out to explore a new and different approach. As a foundation, we are regularly granting funds to organizations; as People’s Liberty we decided to grant funds directly to individuals.

More specifically, we provided funds to residents who had a bold vision and an implementable idea to create positive change in their community. The money we granted, while not the only important thing, was a very important thing. It was the motivator to get people’s attention, to get prospective grantees in the door, and to spark citizens’ collective and individual imagination. When we think back to that sweaty launch party in August 2014, it’s hard to imagine attracting 400 curious and brave souls if it wasn’t catalyzed by the unveiling of an unprecedented $100K Fellowship.

As we look back over the past five years, it’s clear to see that the money fueled people, helping grant recipients bring their bold ideas to life with energy and excellence. The funds covered project costs that were previously thought out-of-reach. It allowed new ideas to be tested without burdening grantees with the responsibility to raise additional support. The money also connected people, uniting community across networks and neighborhoods and enabling grantees to create new partnerships and relationships that didn’t start with “I have an idea; will you help fund it?” Money remains one of philanthropy’s most powerful tools, and putting it directly in the hands of motivated residents was a central component of People’s Liberty.
A NEW BEGINNING
Kathy Wade & Loads of Love

Kathy Wade’s project Loads of Love was a hit with residents who frequented the Super Laundry in Bond Hill. Each week, a small group gathered for a series of workshops conducted between washing and drying cycles. Through guest speakers, hands-on activities and lessons, the project engaged and taught simple and accessible life skills.

Kathy is well-known in the community as a doer and an artist, never lacking in big ideas for what’s next. The $10,000 Project Grant moved this idea—Loads of Love—up her long list of ideas. With her experience, it wasn’t a surprise that her timeline, budgets, and team members were primed and ready to go. But the funding enabled Kathy to take the risk and launch something new. For Kathy and her team, the money mattered.
Meet Kathy & Erica
What comes to mind when you hear the word “philanthropy”? Perhaps you’re imagining a stoic portrait of John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie. Or maybe you see the glowing face of Oprah or Melinda Gates. When most of us think about philanthropy we often envision wealthy people who allocate major dollars to causes that matter. Merriam-Webster defines philanthropy more broadly, tracing its root to literally mean “love of mankind.” “Goodwill to the human race,” the definition reads. Money is simply one vehicle—along with time, space, dialogue, volunteerism, and the offering of other skills and gifts—that a philanthropist might use to promote human flourishing.

People’s Liberty was designed to expand our city’s imagination for the role philanthropy can play in changing our community. From the very beginning we knew we had to offer more than just checks. We had a hunch that offering connections, mentoring, design help, and the personal time of our staff to each and every grantee would be just as valuable as the cash. Yet we weren’t sure whether these additional non-monetary supports would be perceived as important as the funding. It turns out that in the vast majority of cases, the funding wasn’t cited as the primary benefit of participation in People’s Liberty. Grantees may have been initially motivated by the funding, but ultimately, grantees placed far greater value on the legitimacy, the permission, the connectivity, and the camaraderie that came with being a member of the People’s Liberty family.

Through the years we watched simple one-on-one conversations enable bold action. We saw quick email introductions resolve hoop-jumping fiascos. We observed consistent peer-to-peer encouragement spur major growth, transforming people’s projects and lives. The returns on these investments aren’t always easy to measure, but still their value remains.

Money Doesn’t Matter
LESSON #3

Change Matters
LESSON #3

Stability Matters
“The only constant in life is change.” Whether those words are credited to the Buddah or rocker, Patti Smith (maybe both?), it seems all the great philosophers have penned similar truisms about change—its inevitability and its necessity. In the spirit of “changing the world,” People’s Liberty intentionally questioned convention and challenged traditional philanthropic practices. If successful, we hoped our experience would encourage other foundation leaders to think differently about their approaches to community impact.

For People’s Liberty to be a true “learning lab,” it was critical to embrace an experimental ethos in virtually every area of our work. Since we limited ourselves to a five-year lifespan, we re-evaluated every aspect of People’s Liberty every six months. Some elements continued but most were changed, either because they weren’t working or because we felt we could do better. Some changes were major and some were minor. We added new components and we dropped some others. And we learned from it all.

The Haile Fellowship, our marquee program, was changed three times in five years. We paused and redesigned and restarted the application process midstream in its second year, realizing we were evaluating applicants in less-than-productive ways. In the fifth year, we completely revamped the program, shifting it from two independent full-year full-time civic sabbaticals to three six-month part-time opportunities to address a predetermined issue. Our Project Grants shifted from ten months to six months in length.

We changed the ways we supported our grantees—from the way we launched them to the frequency we convened them. We hosted 18 completely different Globe Grant installations in our Elm Street “Globefront” over five years, and we also tested the impact of programming a storefront in another neighborhood for a year with three more installations. Virtually every grantee’s project changed from the way it was submitted to the way it was implemented. Sometimes more than once. We encouraged and supported that change.

We evolved our outreach strategies. We changed the formats, dates, times, and locations of our events. We altered the language of our grant application guides. We changed up the application questions and the community panelists for every grant round. We tried different combinations of media partners, and we tested analog techniques as much as digital ones. We revamped our website annually to explore how to create the best user experience. We traveled to other cities (Detroit, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Lexington, Louisville, Dayton, Columbus, Cleveland, Minneapolis, London, Copenhagen, and Aarhus) to find inspiration and additional ideas we could try.

This work would not have been possible without a team who were comfortable operating from a posture of possibility rather than a posture of status quo. While the core team had stability, our minds were kept fresh by new voices and ideas cycling into and out of the work every three months via The Society of Mad Philanthropy. We hope that this culture of actively seeking out and embracing change is one of the long-term legacies People’s Liberty will leave behind in our community. Change, we learned, is good.
Eban Taylor & Freshman

Eban Taylor’s project, Freshmen, aimed to eliminate the barriers of gathering food by delivering groceries to residents in Cincinnati’s Avondale neighborhood—specifically those residents who rely on food stamps. In her original proposal, Eban explained how she aimed to enlist food delivery drivers to purchase food at local grocers on behalf of the neighborhood residents.

Hiccups arose in the project quickly when Eban discovered that Ohio law prohibits the purchase of groceries with food stamps by anyone other than the card holder. Oops. Eban was forced to reevaluate her project and pivot to design a new way to approach the deliveries. After exploring her options, Eban decided the best way to demonstrate the limitations of the law were to pay for the groceries herself, taking the funds out of her grant, to deliver $100 worth of groceries to 14 different residents herself.

Her project changed and shifted, but Eban’s mission remained the same: get groceries to those in need.
For a team like ours—a group of problem-solvers and changemakers—knowing when to build and when to stay the course became an important distinction to navigate. In community-oriented initiatives, stable rhythms and regularity helps establish familiarity and trust. We quickly learned that breaking things just for the sake of breaking them increased the risk of muddying our mission, confusing our message, and losing our audience. Stability is very different than complacency.

Although we eschewed status quo at every turn, People’s Liberty intentionally set up structures and processes that would still give a sense of stability and familiarity to those joining us at any step along the way. Our office at 1805 Elm Street was the most visible manifestation of this. For the entire run of People’s Liberty, our physical front door was open. Our space was consistently home-base for events and trainings. Our work hours each week never changed, nor did our phone number. We used a system of consistent email addresses that enabled potential, current, or past grantees to contact us—regardless of who was answering messages that day.

We constantly made tweaks along the way, but our core offerings (Project Grants, Globe Grants, Haile Fellowships, Residencies) stayed consistent for all five years. Our cadence of application dates (Spring and Fall for Project Grants, Summer for Globe Grants, Winter for Haile Fellowships) also remained the same through the years. We built and then used the same application software for all five years making it easier for initially unsuccessful applicants to reapply. Our headlines were always bold, simple, typeset in Helvetica, and left-aligned. Our logos were trademarked. Literally.

Most importantly, we were careful when it came to putting together our core team. It was important for us to have a tight-knit, small crew that would remain the engine of People’s Liberty through its entire timeline. In the beginning, in addition to Eric, that team was Megan, Kate, Jake, and Amy. That morphed into Megan, Jake, Aurore, and Hannah. We adapted to the dynamic of adding a new cadre of Residents to the mix every three months, but underneath it all, the core team owned the values and energy of the place, maintaining a continuity of design ethos, relationships with national peers, and providing consistent points of contact for our grantees and local partners. This was one of the quieter successes of People’s Liberty: we wholeheartedly encouraged and embraced change, but the faces and places supporting it were constant, simultaneously enabling us to maintain a sense of stability for the community.
LESSON #4

You Have the Power
LESSON #4

We Have the Power
People’s Liberty was a philanthropic lab that spent five years uncovering and investing in great people. We always knew that the organization would end so we hoped that our long-term legacy would be empowering a new civic culture, shaped by community residents emboldened to lead change. In order to do that, we had to delegate, or more accurately, give up our power to that next cadre of 150 civic doers who boldly strode through our doors over five years.

We designed our process to trust the community in using that power and we were overwhelmed with the results. Unlike traditional grantmaking, we didn’t dictate what applicants could propose for funding. We didn’t dictate themes or focus areas. We also didn’t decide what ultimately got funded; we fully embraced a participatory grantmaking structure using community panels to review applications and to choose who received the grants. Even access to 8,000 sq.ft. of space at 1805 Elm Street was open for grantees to use as their own at any time over the five years.

The reputation of People’s Liberty was completely reliant on the people who came through our doors and the power of their ideas. If no one had applied for grants, if no one had attended events, if no one had challenged us to be better, People’s Liberty wouldn’t have been anything. Fortunately the community took up the challenge, embraced the opportunities, and seized the power; our city will be better as a result.

We understand that the long term impact of People’s Liberty is also out of our hands. The Foundation committed a significant amount of time and financial resources to the project. But the power to determine whether this was a brilliant experiment or an expensive folly lies entirely in the hands of those who participated as a grantee, resident, or partner. We’ll be watching over the coming years to see if members of the People’s Liberty’s family run for public office, start businesses, run nonprofits, serve on boards, or lead their neighborhood organizations. Now that would be powerful.
Philanthropy has a long-standing and stubborn power dynamic at play between grantors and grantees. Some have compared it to a parent/child relationship. Foundations are seen as the possessors of power, and we exert it through our giving of funding to nonprofits, often times with onerous conditions. One of the ambitions of People’s Liberty was to disrupt that power dynamic, to democratize funding for civic engagement, to delegate decisions to the community itself. While we did much in that direction and attempted to flatten the hierarchies, we were naive in thinking we could completely eliminate it.

Even though our Foundation is remarkably unbeholden and didn’t need to ask for permission to create People’s Liberty, we still had to put guardrails in place for use of the funding. The IRS insisted funds couldn’t be used for religious or lobbying purposes. Grantees committed to monthly check-ins so we could ensure progress, and they were all required to submit final reports that detailed what was accomplished and how the grant was spent. We also had to put restrictions on how our building was used, to decide what hours keyfobs would give access, and to explicitly state that no one could actually “live” under their desk.

Recognizing that we still hold a lot of power, we endeavored to use that power for good. We leveraged the Foundation’s prominence in the community to increase opportunities for People’s Liberty’s grantees in ways beyond the funding. We introduced our grantees to other organizations, other funders, and other leaders to expand their networks. We shared results of high-potential projects with other local and national funders with the hope that it could lead to follow-on funding (which often happened). We regularly made calls on behalf of our grantees when they were struggling through bureaucracies with the hope that our reputation could get them a meeting with the right person to expedite their progress (which didn’t happen as often as we’d like). We’d save seats for People’s Liberty grantees when the Foundation was invited to major events. We’d leverage our national networks to provide case studies and context for projects our people were pursuing. Everytime national peers were in town for our convenings or for other reasons, we were quick to introduce them to our PL family.

We hoped People’s Liberty could reverse—or at least minimize—the power dynamics of philanthropy. We made a lot of progress, but realized this spunky five-year experiment wasn’t able to do it alone. Nevertheless, we strove to use our power for good in every way we could imagine. Both People’s Liberty and the Haile Foundation carry clout in our community, and it was our duty to wield that power responsibly and for the benefit of our grantees. What’s the point of having access and power if you’re not going to use it for the betterment of the community?
Share some love:
a celebration for the people who make Cincinnati great: you.
Kick Lee & Cincinnati Music Accelerator

Kick Lee and his Cincinnati Music Accelerator (CMA) project demonstrates how the reputation of People’s Liberty was reliant on the power of the people who walked through our doors. Kick has been working to elevate musicians in the city for as long as he can remember. A tireless, passionate, and well-connected individual, Kick always had the power and the drive to move his ideas forward. However, until he received his People’s Liberty grant, Kick struggled to find anyone willing to invest in his ideas in a way that would move him from the wings onto the mainstage.

Today, you can find CMA all over the city. His musicians are busking on corners as part of the Street Stage Project, and his jeep Roadie is a fixture at community events. More importantly, Kick is now participating in, shaping, or leading conversations about the future of his city. Kick translated his People’s Liberty funding, opportunities, connections, and publicity into real power. This power changed Kick’s personal and professional trajectory and, unsurprisingly, Kick paid this forward by extending opportunities to musicians across the community. This was the true power of People’s Liberty.

Case Study: You/We Have the Power
Meet Kick
LESSON #5

Set the Bar High
LESSON #5

Don’t Bar the Door
Cincinnati has a history of excellence, driven by bold ideas from bold people. Whether it’s the city’s architectural legacy, its park system, or its iconic blue chip companies, Cincinnati has always been a place that insists on high quality for the betterment of the community. In recent years, that may have waned a bit. Ideas aren’t quite as bold, plans aren’t quite as audacious, and designs aren’t quite as groundbreaking. We wanted People’s Liberty to jolt the collective ennui and reinstill a culture of optimism and excellence.

To that end, we intentionally set our bar high striving for excellence in everything we approached. The architectural design of our space at 1805 Elm Street was intentionally elegant and bold, setting a new standard for how to reimagine an industrial furniture warehouse for 21st century use, appreciating its architectural history while embracing the modern of today. The space was both aspirational and welcoming, in no small part because it was furnished with 46 pieces of custom furniture commissioned from an emerging local furniture maker.

Our programs were also recognized for their creativity and excellence. Four times over five years we curated, organized, and hosted national convenings in our space. Each time, we invited national experts and peers doing excellent work in their respective communities to Cincinnati and into our space to share work and to inspire more greatness. The national recognition and reputation created by designing memorable agendas, meals, conversations, and collateral at People’s Liberty persists in other rooms around the country.

We also expected excellence from our grantees. For five years, we constantly dared our grantees to dream bigger, to push themselves further. This might have created some initial angst, but the results never ceased to amaze us. The vast majority of grantees produced impact in this community far beyond their initial dreams. Of course some projects fell short, and some people gave up too quickly, took advantage of our trust, or didn’t deliver on promises. People are people afterall. However, those disappointments were few and far between, and were the exception.

People’s Liberty had the opportunity to demonstrate what happens when you intentionally aim for excellence, not merely “good enough.” Our community responded. Loudly and proudly. We hope this is just the beginning of a renewed community expectation for excellence in everything we approach.
Don’t Bar the Door

We always had high ambitions for People’s Liberty. Some might say they were too high. We wanted to create a world-class outpost for a place-based family foundation that would trailblaze a model of #newphilanthropy. We’d use this philanthropic lab to reframe what “community development” means into the future. We wanted to change the community by uncovering and investing in great people and their great ideas. We set a high bar for the best of design, for the best of outreach, for the best in culture change, for the best in snacks. We set a high bar. But in the process we realized we needed to be careful not to bar the door.

The core team has been privileged to spend time surrounded by professional civic designers, social innovators, and creative placemakers, so it’s easy to forget how hard it can be to get that first community project started. On your own. With limited resources. In a neighborhood oftentimes overlooked for civic investment. It can be overwhelming. Add our unrealistic calls for perfection, and it could be paralyzing. We quickly recognized that our definitions of success or excellence weren’t always the same as our grantees’ expectations. We adjusted our thinking. We learned it was more important for us to help our grantees start (and finish) their project than it was for us to impose some unattainable aspiration of excellence.

People’s Liberty strove to change the community by uncovering and investing in great people. We did that. And we found the most success when we met people where they were, supported them with whatever assistance and connections and encouragement they needed, and let their learning journeys be theirs. Regardless of one’s education or experience, it’s ridiculously ambitious for anyone to go through a process of proposing an idea, setting up budgets and timelines, designing it, launching it, and finally completing it. We watched 120 people bravely go through that process with us, and regardless of the perceived “excellence” of the individual project outcomes, everyone learned something and benefited from the experience. That collective experience will pay dividends to our community over the long term. By keeping our door unbarred, by accepting differing ideas of success, by embracing the first-timer as much as the experienced activist, People’s Liberty was truly representative of and aligned with the ambitions of our people. And that was excellent.
Outro
Five years ago in Cincinnati, Ohio, we set out to create something bold, a thoughtful response to big questions about the future of our city.
Did we?
Is Cincinnati better? Bolder?
More welcoming? More connected?
More vibrant?
Did we demonstrate that you can change a community by uncovering and investing in great people?

We think so.

Thank you, Cincinnati.