

A Retrospective Impact Evaluation

Staying Power



Lessons from a Decade of Art and
Making in Montgomery, Alabama

2025



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Acknowledging



01

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We extend our deepest thanks to the artists, makers, griots, civic leaders, and Montgomerians who shared their experiences and wisdom through interviews and focus groups. Their voices and perspectives ground this report in the realities of Montgomery’s creative ecosystem. Each conversation added dimension and clarity to the impacts and lessons outlined here, and we are grateful for their generosity and honesty.

The Third Plateau team was honored to lead the retrospective impact evaluation of the Buller Family Foundation’s creative placemaking work in Montgomery. This report was authored by Lance Bitner-Laird, with contributions from Elena Chernock, Chanel Marin, and Cait Fitzwater, whose expertise in evaluation, strategy, and communications strengthened the process.

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Photographs courtesy of Michelle Consuegra, Nico Giquel, and Katy Beth Barber.

Artists, makers, and griots

- Alana Enfinity
- Alisa Beck
- Chintia Kirana
- Kalonji Gilchrist
- Michelle Browder
- Milton Madison
- RC Hagans
- Steven Lambert
- Wade Preston
- William “Bill” Ford, Jr.
- Valda Harris Montgomery

Civic, business, and institutional leaders

- Bill DeMarco
- Collier Neeley
- Jacqueline Viskup
- Jim Holiber
- Laurie Jean Weil
- Suzanne La Rosa
- Todd Schmidt
- Todd Strange
- Tom Blount



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Letter from the Foundation's Principals

In 2011, our family's building materials company, MarJam, expanded into Montgomery, Alabama. During that time, the then-mayor, Todd Strange, invited us on a tour of the historic downtown. Within a few blocks, we were struck by both the beauty and gravity of the place — its architecture, history, and potential.

After that visit, we entered into agreements with the City to purchase several properties in the downtown, recognizing both the opportunity and the responsibility of stewarding space in a place with such deep historical significance. From the beginning, we knew we were stepping into something larger than ourselves. We found it humbling. We didn't arrive with a blueprint, only a belief that revitalization begins with the things that make a community feel whole: safe and beautiful public spaces, opportunities for children to explore and create, and places where people can gather and experience joy and wonder together — and what sustains revitalization is a community's connection to itself — its stories, history, and culture.

Our approach has never been traditional development. It has been a practice of listening, learning, and building relationships with the artists, educators, organizers, and cultural leaders already shaping Montgomery's future. MAP360 was created for them. The path has not been linear, nor has every effort succeeded. Some partnerships have flourished; others have shifted or come to a natural close. Restoring the historic Kress building required more than the market could return in the short term, but its role as an anchor on Dexter Avenue warranted

care. Incubated businesses like Wade Preston's *Prevail Union Coffee* and Michelle Browder's *More Than Tours* grew their own momentum over time, while others evolved or concluded. These turns reflect the reality of long-term revitalization. It requires patience, adaptation, and the willingness to stay in relationship through change.

More than a decade later, we continue to be inspired by Montgomery's artists, entrepreneurs, and young leaders who are shaping the city's next chapter. It is our firm belief that artists are the essential "first mover" entrepreneurs of successful community-led revitalization. Arts is the infrastructure that creates culture, spurs economic growth, and restores social cohesion. This evaluation reflects what has been learned along the way: that progress rooted in dignity, trust, and belonging is slow, imperfect, and deeply worthwhile

With gratitude,



Sarah Beatty Buller & Mark Buller
Principals, Buller Family Foundation
Founders, MAP360.org

Summarizing



02

Summarizing

Executive Summary



Context

Montgomery, Alabama compresses the nation's defining histories into a few city blocks. There, the streets have witnessed the rise of the Confederacy, the fall of Reconstruction, the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, and the continuing struggles and progress that define the American story.

Few streets embody that story more vividly than Dexter Avenue. The avenue begins at Court Square Fountain, where men, women, and children were once sold into bondage, and the telegram that launched the Civil War was sent. It terminates at the Alabama State Capitol, where Jefferson Davis was installed as the president of the Confederacy, and where, after the war, lawmakers imposed some of the nation's first Black Codes.

In the half-mile stretch between, Martin Luther King Jr. organized a movement for justice, and Rosa Parks's defiance set history in motion. The same avenue carried thousands of marchers from Selma to the steps of the Capitol, calling for an end to the laws and barriers that denied them full and equal participation in democracy.

In the decades that followed, Montgomery's downtown, like many across the South, was hollowed out by disinvestment, urban renewal, and suburban migration, leaving once-vibrant streets underutilized. Still, a deep reservoir of local imagination, cultural memory, and creative hustle endured — sustained by local artists, educators, entrepreneurs, organizers, and networks. The opportunity downtown was to create space and support for cultural life to gather and grow.

In 2011, the Buller family, based in New York, stepped into that landscape when Mark Buller's building materials company, MarJam, expanded into the Montgomery area. At the time, downtown had seen little outside investment, and few developers were willing to take on its vacant or historic properties. The Bullers were among the first external investors Montgomery had seen in decades, distinguished by their commitment to preservation, entrepreneurship, and the arts. Rather than demolish and rebuild, they restored historic structures and reinvested in the cultural and creative life waiting to bloom in the city. This approach made room for more voices in Montgomery's revitalization.

Impacts

According to those interviewed, the Buller family began their work by listening to Montgomerians and finding collaborators with whom they could walk alongside. From there, they got to work bringing local imagination to life by reviving dormant spaces, resourcing culture bearers, and seeding community-driven programs. In 2018, Ms. Beatty Buller officially created MAP360.org to expand cultivation of Montgomery's arts, storytelling, and cultural ecosystem.



Over the more than decade since, the following impacts took form:

Momentum builds

as early risk-taking and steady presence turn hesitance into shared action and draw new collaborators into the work.

01

Gates open

as direct invitations, incubated spaces, and patient support lower barriers — especially at the margins — and turn ideas into realities.

03

Souls grow

as proximity and creating together deepen trust and belonging, allowing a community to name and claim its own worth.

05

2011

02

Apertures widen

as Montgomery artists step onto national and international stages, expanding what the city believes is possible for itself.

04

Spaces awaken

as vacant blocks become sites of memory and imagination, where history is held and new stories take root.

Today

Over the same period, their efforts generated the following outputs:¹

\$39.75M

invested² by the
Bullers in grants,
cultural programming,
and capital projects

**An estimated
\$10M+ in**

additional catalytic
investment into the
downtown core by
developers inspired by
the Bullers to join
the effort



**An estimated
1.5 million**

people engaged through
public art projects and
cultural programming led
by MAP360³ or delivered
during the launch of
Kress on Dexter

175+

programs, events,
murals, and initiatives
produced

**55
historic**

and/or underused
spaces restored,
reopened, or made
available for community
use and cultural activity



**300+ artists,
arts organizations, and
cultural practitioners**

supported through
grants, commissions,
residencies, partnerships,
and access to space

**An estimated
189 partners⁴**

have hosted
programming in the
revived spaces

**More than
1000 students**

across Montgomery
public and private
schools have participated
in arts programming
supported through
MAP360

¹ These outputs were collected and calculated by the teams at the Buller Family Foundation and MAP360.

² The \$39.75M cumulative investment comprises approximately \$31.5M in capital expenditures, \$6.725M in real estate purchases, \$400,325 in foundation giving, and \$1.12M in MAP360 investments.

³ MAP360 is the nonprofit founded by Sarah Beatty Buller in 2018 to serve the local artist community.

⁴ Partners have included nonprofit organizations like the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, and 21 Dreams Arts & Culture.

Lessons

Interviewees and collaborators emphasized that the work in Montgomery has not only transformed spaces and lives but also yielded insights on how to do this work well, in and beyond Montgomery. What follows are the lessons they highlighted, offered as guidance for other philanthropists and changemakers:

- **Signal early** by communicating vision and intentions; good communication deepens trust.
- **Nurture life** by keeping spaces in motion by any means; consistency builds confidence.
- **Press forward** through friction; patience and persistence turn resistance into momentum.
- **Get proximate** by entering with humility, listening first, and moving at the speed of trust.
- **Resource fairly** by investing abundantly and transparently; equity remedies scarcity.



Next

The story unfolding in Montgomery makes clear what is possible when patient capital, creative leadership, and community trust converge. Since the evaluation, the Bullers' commitment to Montgomery has only deepened — through the purchase of additional downtown properties, the incubation of a new children's museum, and the opening of Alabama's first veterans resource center. In October 2025, MAP360 co-produced American Revival Montgomery, a free-to-the-public concert at Troy Theatre featuring world-class artists Yo-Yo Ma, Alfre Woodard, and Valerie June alongside local Montgomery talents. The gathering was documented as a 90-minute special for Alabama Public Television — further amplifying the voices and creative legacy of Montgomery's people.

The next chapter codifies the key philosophy, learnings, and programs the Bullers developed at MAP360 into a comprehensive methodological resource for other communities to access. The methodology will address:

- **Assessing arts infrastructure:** Establishing the framework of organizational and on-the-ground conditions for sustainable, community-centered revitalization.
- **Cultural programming:** Co-creating or investing in programming with aligned partners that reflects community identity, shared memory, and creativity — rooted in place and shaped by the people who call it home.
- **Space activation:** Preserving and restoring spaces for cultural gathering, making them accessible resources for communities to use, share, and shape — seeding, scaling, and sustaining the work of creative change agents.
- **Narrative amplification:** Supporting communities in documenting, sharing, and connecting their own stories — locally and globally — while strengthening the advocacy infrastructure needed to increase local investment in the arts.
- **Impact metrics:** Tracking and evaluating the data sets that measure the short and long-term results of community-centered revitalization.

By building collaboratively with mission-aligned organizations, MAP360 can come alongside communities ready to ignite lasting cultural growth. Together, they can ensure the next great American renaissance blooms from the inside out.



Introducing



03

Introducing

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Buller Family Foundation's decade-long creative placemaking investment in Montgomery, Alabama. Since 2011, the Buller family, through its Foundation, nonprofit [MAP360](#), and local real estate holding company, has revived historic buildings, expanded cultural infrastructure, and supported local change agents. The evaluation looks at how that work affected Montgomery. It shows changes in the city's culture and civic life. It also shares lessons to guide a wider philanthropic strategy for the South.

The evaluation was guided by a [retrospective theory of change](#), co-developed by Third Plateau and the Foundation team. This framework outlines the inputs, strategies, and intended outcomes of the work, shaping both inquiry and analysis.

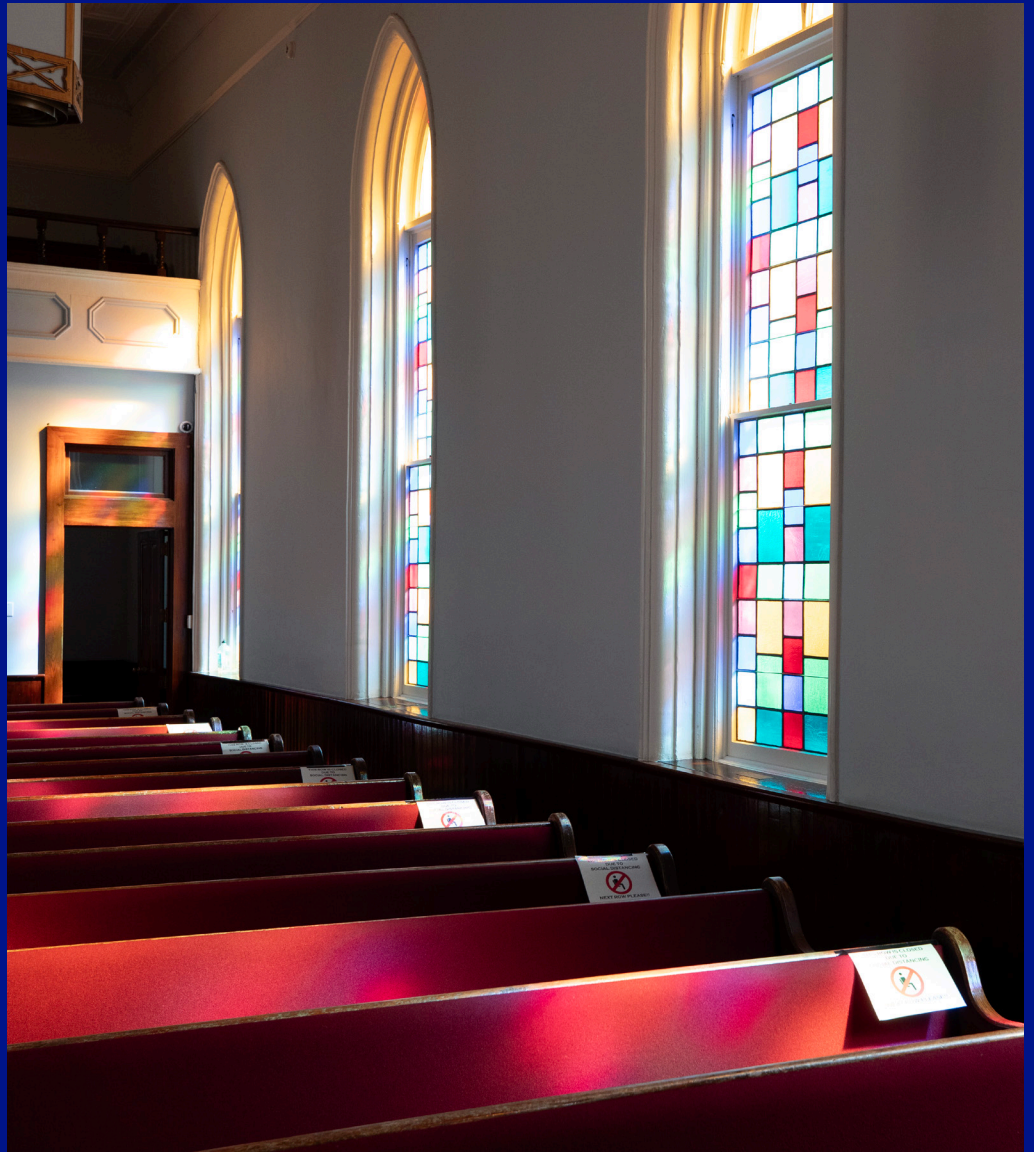
This evaluation relied on qualitative, story-based methods. It included interviews with artists, cultural leaders, small business owners, MAP360 collaborators, and civic and philanthropic partners; group conversations to capture collective insights; and a review of documents, artifacts, and photographic

evidence. These methods were chosen to capture outcomes while preserving the nuance of community voices and creative practices. A fuller discussion of methods and limitations is provided in the [Supplementing](#) section.

The chapters that follow synthesize shared stories and observations. They describe how Montgomery's history and context shaped this work, the role of the Buller family and their collaborators in opening new possibilities, and the outcomes and ripple effects that followed. Together, these findings offer a portrait of cultural change in Montgomery and lessons to guide future place-based arts philanthropy across the South.



Grounding



04

Grounding

In Place, With Roots



Montgomery, Alabama — It is a place that contains multitudes. In its memory, it holds every duality that has defined the United States of America. Many will know it as both the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. There, bondage and freedom, oppression and resistance, and memory and progress have always walked the same streets.

Dexter Avenue — where more history is concentrated in a few city blocks than almost anywhere else in America — begins at the Court Square Fountain, where stolen men, women, and children were once sold into chattel slavery; it terminates at the Alabama State Capitol, where Jefferson Davis was installed as the president of the Confederacy, and, in the aftermath of defeat, lawmakers enacted some of the nation's earliest Black Codes to keep free people unfree.

Along that same stretch, a young minister, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., stepped into the pulpit of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and called a congregation and a nation to the long work of justice. On it, Rosa Parks boarded a bus and, with intention, refused to give up her seat, igniting the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A decade later, that same avenue carried thousands of marchers from Selma, who pressed forward to the steps of the Capitol and forced the nation to confront its own soul.

This is the Montgomery many know. In conversations with local artists, griots, and community leaders, these themes were accompanied by more complete, nuanced stories of the community and its creative ecosystem. These stories provide the context in which the work of the Buller family and their collaborators has taken shape, and the conditions that continue to influence it today.

Past Lives, Standing on the Nation's Fault Line

Montgomery concentrates the contradictions of the United States in a small, intensely symbolic landscape. In conversation after conversation, participants shared that most tend to locate Montgomery's meaning in its past. To them, the city is a national mirror, reflecting and clarifying the tensions and truths innate to the wider project of America.

At the same time, they emphasized that this past cannot be reduced to trauma alone. Alongside the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and dispossession live memories of solidarity, kinship, and creativity. This village of neighbors, culture, and shared resources helped people endure. Many spoke of Montgomery as a place that can slow the country down, amplify shared humanity, and remind people of the unfinished work of promoting justice and dignity.

"Dexter Avenue is the rug that America swept a lot of stuff under."

— **Wade Preston**, founder of Prevail Coffee, incubated at Kress on Dexter

Participants highlighted that the [*Equal Justice Initiative*](#) (EJI), has been a force in shifting how the city, the nation, and the world view its past. By confronting history, EJI has helped restructure the narrative of the past, sparked new investments, and created spaces for reckoning.

Still, a caution emerged: Montgomery risks being frozen in time, branded as a museum to the past rather than an incubator of the future. Residents and culture-bearers alike pressed for memory to be translated into momentum, insisting that the same landscape that reveals America's deepest contradictions can also point toward a more human and plural horizon.



Cautious Optimism, Growing at the Speed of Trust

While Montgomery has a low baseline of social trust, people emphasized that trust is buildable. Interviewees described a culture of wait-and-see, particularly toward outsiders. This response is rooted in historic racial trauma and repeated disappointments. New efforts are often met with skepticism, naysaying, or indifference until they prove they can succeed.

People emphasized that trust can be accrued through consistency, proximity, and sharing in the work. When leaders embed themselves, get proximate, return phone calls, and collaborate across silos, suspicion softens and gives way to participation.

“A lot of people do not support things until they know it will stay around. We don’t trust you until we do. Once we trust you, you’re in the circle.”

— Alana Enfinity, MAP360 exhibiting artist,
2025 Paris Urban Art Fair

This relational terrain shaped how residents received the Buller family. Their collaborators saw generosity and energy. However, interviewees shared that others in the community had unrealistic expectations. They assumed the Bullers’ resources could fix more, faster. In many interviewees’ minds, these expectations blurred into opportunism.

Despite the guardedness, Montgomery is fundamentally community-centric when the conditions are right. Artists and leaders agree: Montgomery is home to good people. They want to work together, but often lack the right tools to do so well.



When leaders embed themselves, get proximate, return phone calls, and collaborate across silos, suspicion softens and gives way to participation.



Quiet Downtown, Hollowing Out a Once Vibrant Core

Once the heart of commerce and daily life, Downtown Montgomery has been hollowed out. Like many American cities, it faced challenges from:

- Shopping Malls
- Urban Renewal
- White Flight
- Highway Development
- Systematic Divestment

When the Buller family first toured Montgomery, they found, as many interviewees put it, a ghost town.

This disassociation from the downtown runs deep. Residents of Montgomery's bedroom communities often dismiss it as unsafe or irrelevant. After the decline of Monroe Street, the historic Black business district, many Black Montgomerians came to see the downtown as "not for us." Younger generations, raised after its decline, never developed the habit

of going downtown. They are generally unaware of what was — "streets so thick with life you had to hop off your bike and walk it to pass through," as one interviewee recalled.

"Downtown was the hub. Everything was right there on Dexter or nearby on streets like Monroe, Commerce, and Bibb. You had theaters, shops, and the bus exchange."

— Valda Harris Montgomery, PhD, author, activist, educator, and steward of the Dr. Richard Harris House Museum

For some, downtown still carries the stigma of emptiness, a place long abandoned and difficult to reimagine. For many, especially those in the Buller family's orbit, it has become an incubator of possibility, waiting for critical mass.



Cultural Void, Excluding the Margins

For decades, Montgomery's arts landscape offered few rungs for artists to climb. Outside of a handful of established institutions — the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (est. 1930) and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival (est. 1985) — dedicated spaces, networks, and nonprofits were few and far between. Existing opportunities mostly targeted well-resourced, majority-white audiences and artists. As a result, many, especially Black artists and women, had little chance to be seen, supported, or sustain their craft.

Emerging artists recalled that there were virtually no entry points to show work, connect with peers, or grow a career locally. Those who pursued the arts often had to leave Montgomery to gain serious recognition, while others gave up altogether. Talented Black artists, in particular, were boxed out of mainstream venues, and women of color faced an even steeper climb. Without a wider, inclusive arts ecosystem, many felt isolated. And their art became a personal hobby instead of a way to earn a living.

Generations of Montgomery artists lived within those constraints. Many remembered how talented friends or family, even themselves, had to take steady jobs like teaching because there were no other options. Creativity always found a way to express itself in Montgomery, like the rare flower that blooms through a crack in the pavement; but without scaffolding or support, it almost never developed into a sustainable or abundant career.

“Coming to Montgomery in ‘95, there was no place for an unknown starting artist to display work. There’ve been a lot of artists that have come through this city, that were as good or better than me, who just never really got the opportunity.”

— **Milton Madison**, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025
Paris Urban Art Fair



Creativity always found a way to express itself in Montgomery, like the rare flower that blooms through a crack in the pavement; but without scaffolding or support, it almost never developed into a sustainable or abundant career.



Power Struggles, Obstructing the Way Forward

Montgomery's soil is rich, but its roots can get tangled. Interviewees said that the city's size posed both promise and risk. At its size, emergent leaders are always one handshake away from power-brokers but also one roadblock away from being stalled. What can feel like obstruction up close often reflects long-built systems, constrained capacity, and competing mandates⁵ rather than ill will or indifference alone.

Over and over, community members described the "powers that be" as more brake than accelerator. Some with authority resist change and default to familiar patterns, keeping the city on its back foot. This has calcified progress, slowed adaptation, and held back innovation. Some interviewed felt that these powers prioritized their self-interests over community needs. As a result, there is a lack of shared vision. Many talented individuals go undernurtured, and promising initiatives struggle to gain traction and maintain momentum.

Interviewees also pointed to entrenched class and racial inequities that shape who gets heard and who is sidelined. These dynamics have formed over decades and centuries. In Montgomery, resources shape which ideas succeed. Well-funded institutions get attention, but grassroots organizers and smaller efforts often struggle on the margin. Decades of suburban migration have drawn much of the city's wealth and influence away from the downtown core, leaving fewer resources to seed new ideas where they're most needed. And a significant racial wealth gap still persists.

"The city can be a great obstacle."

— Multiple Interviewees

Montgomery's civic landscape revolves around a few major institutions that hold significant influence and resources:

- City Government
- Colleges and Universities
- Maxwell Air Force Base
- Chamber of Commerce

They shape civic life, but they often work in isolation. They rarely coordinate or align on a creative and artful vision for the future. Many agree that progress occurs, but it often happens despite the system, not because of it.



⁵ City leaders often face pressing demands relating to education, public safety, and core municipal services that limit their capacity to focus on the arts and creative placemaking.

Crosswinds Blow, Opening and Closing Civic Space

Montgomery today is pulled in many directions. Civic space in America is closing, but artists are leading the effort to keep it open. From 2018 into early 2020, the momentum of the Buller family and their collaborators was palpable. The Buller family's signature property, Kress on Dexter, had opened in 2018. Collaborations and MAP360 activations were multiplying. More felt possible for downtown than at any point in recent memory.

Those winds shifted, and COVID-19 pumped the brakes *hard*. The pandemic pushed people back into their homes and out of the city center. This was a closing — a pause in the energy and expression that had been building downtown. Amid the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered. The racial reckoning it set off reached hearts everywhere, including in Montgomery. Artists like Michelle Browder and Milton Madison jumped into the fray. They created murals, sparked conversations, and turned downtown — further quieted by the pandemic — into a stage for expression again. At the same time, philanthropic dollars were pouring into Montgomery, much of it through EJI, as funders sought to respond to the racial reckoning. For a moment, energy and investment converged. Artists who had long struggled to be heard suddenly found their work urgent, visible, and in demand.

Momentum in this period was unevenly felt by makers and small businesses. While funding flowed into the city in response to the racial reckoning, many small and minority-owned businesses — especially those that had anchored downtown's fragile revival — were left without equivalent relief. The pandemic hit these entrepreneurs hard, closing doors and drying up foot traffic. Even as new investments signaled hope, the basic economic scaffolding remained deeply strained.

The surge of national solidarity proved difficult to sustain. As the pandemic stretched on, projects lost momentum, coordination frayed, and narratives were in flux. Federal recovery dollars arrived, and Montgomery's history made it a natural stage for national reflection. But, siloed leadership and political indifference caused much of that moment to slip away. What could have been a season of acceleration ossified.

Polarization in national politics seeped into local life. Some people began to feel closure around certain forms of cultural expression. At the same time, Montgomery's growing immigrant and refugee communities, primarily Asian and Hispanic, continued to shape the city in ways rarely acknowledged in official narratives. While they remain on the margins of the city's story, their presence speaks to a more plural future.

“Art is all about beauty, empathy, and sensitivity... and somehow that’s being dismissed as ‘too woke.’ It’s negatively affecting the soul of America.”

— William “Bill” Ford, Jr., visual artist, arts advocate, and president of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts board of trustees

More people feel crime and disorder are rising. This echoes a national conversation that has grown out of the pandemic. Many suburban residents see downtown as dangerous, even if it's often safe. They point to visible homelessness and the city's uneven capacity to manage public space. These perceptions, regardless of their accuracy, impose a burden on efforts to revive the core.

Montgomery is a place of contradictions, heavy with memory yet restless for what's next. Its downtown had weathered decades of disinvestment and reinvention, each wave leaving traces of what came before. Artistic and entrepreneurial expression existed at the edges, waiting for space, resources, and an opening. The Bullers and their local collaborators found a narrow opening and widened it into possibility. At the intersection of art, enterprise, and historical preservation, they helped accelerate a creative revival.



Transforming



05

Transforming

Over Time, Impact Happens

Over the past decade, the Buller family's work in Montgomery has moved from planting seeds to cultivating growth that can now be seen and felt across the city's arts and culture ecosystem. Impact is rarely immediate. It unfolds slowly, through steady acts of care, persistence, and risk-taking that accumulate into visible change.

Their approach has been steady and relational. Instead of imposing a vision, they listened first, invested patient capital, and took on risks that made space for others to lead. By activating buildings, seeding cultural programming, and widening access to resources, they created conditions where creativity and trust could grow together.

Local artists, makers, and storytellers shared how this work has catalyzed momentum, widened horizons, opened access, awakened spaces, and nurtured trust. These themes form the throughline of the impact that follows. They are a portrait of culture change as it takes shape over time.



Momentum Builds, Catalyzing Collaborative Change

MAP360's work has accelerated Montgomery's arts and culture ecosystem beyond its natural pace. Artists and entrepreneurs alike described the Bullers as nurturers who opened doors, grew talent, and expanded reach at a scale the city hadn't seen before. Interviewees shared that the Bullers have been catalysts, acting as bold outsiders willing to take on the initial big risks that other developers would not. By installing murals, staging exhibitions, and activating dormant spaces, they gave permission for others to follow suit, shifting others' hesitation or ambivalence into action.

"Sarah will push out and plant the next marker; we push to it — the gathering point to go the next mile."

— **Kalonji Gilchrist**, filmmaker, curator, cultural organizer, and founder of 21 Dreams Arts & Culture

The Bullers didn't come in imposing their own vision; they listened first. Many described how Sarah, in particular, sat with artists, asked what they needed, and then helped turn those ideas into reality. That pattern of "hear, then do" made people feel not just included but accompanied, as if they had a true partner walking alongside them.

The Buller family's investments in public arts served as beacons, inviting creatives to jump in. Their rhythm of action and response to community needs brought many others into the work. What began as a handful of initiatives became a widening circle of collaborators. Local artists began to work together, often for the first time. They also connected with gallerists, administrators, and curators who could help advance their careers. This process broke down

walls between artists, administrators, and institutions. Silos gave way to collaboration and mutual support.

The Bullers' investments unlocked additional private funding that the government could not. Their willingness to put patient capital and vision on the line inspired other developers to follow. This led to the opening of new restaurants and businesses, and to the restoration of buildings and spaces. Long-inactive players found themselves "back in the sandpile" again, eager to build alongside them.



"I used to be very active in Montgomery, and owned some property I didn't know what to do with. When the Bullers went all in on Kress on Dexter, I said what the heck. Now, I'm on my eighth building."

—**Thomas Blount**, architect, LGBT activist, philanthropist, and re-developer of historical architecture

The Buller family's persistence, and their refusal to give up on Montgomery despite challenges, built deep trust with collaborators. Interviewees appreciated that the Bullers continue to till the soil, again and again, until life emerges, as one interviewee put it. That consistency has kept the energy alive, even when faced with challenges. For example, when the citation of an unknown ordinance threatened to derail a major art activation, the Bullers adapted quickly, moving the MAP360-sponsored mural and community engagement to a new site so the work could continue. Their willingness to stick with it, through the hard stuff, has made them true partners to the arts and culture community they've helped build. Their steady presence has done more than nurture; it has sped up change. They are pushing Montgomery's creative ecosystem forward much faster than it could alone.

"That has been the biggest thing [for Montgomery], that someone wants to till the soil, even though they may have not seen the harvest...[the Bullers] keep trying."

— **Alana Enfinity**, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair

Apertures Widen, Expanding What's Possible

MAP360's work has expanded what Montgomery artists believe is possible — for themselves, for their city, and for their place in the wider world. Many artists have now gained international visibility. Those who once had no local platform are now showcasing their work abroad. They collaborate with peers from different countries and connect Montgomery

to the global arts scene in ways they never thought possible. MAP360 has taken multiple cohorts of local artists to Paris. On the most recent trip, eight Montgomery artists exhibited their work at the 2025 Urban Art Fair. MAP360 also invited international artists — like MonkeyBird, JonOne, and Hopare — to Montgomery to create public works and collaborate with local artists. Uniquely, the work has connected Montgomery to the world and the world to Montgomery through *art*.

"Around here, we've had this bad habit of forcing ourselves into whatever opportunity came along — an exhibition, an open call — even if it didn't fit, didn't pay, or wasn't worth it. Often it was the only opportunity here, so we'd wedge ourselves in just to be part of something. This experience [with the Bullers] shifted that. Now we're working harder on our own art — who we are, what we want to say — so that when the right opportunity comes, like the Paris trip, we're ready for a platform that truly fits us."

— **Alisa Beck**, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair

**Uniquely, the work has
connected Montgomery
to the world and the
world to Montgomery
through art.**



This work has ushered in newfound visibility and shifted what's possible for the Montgomery arts community. Local artists, makers, and griots are finding new pathways — from NPR features to sustainable careers rooted in their creative practice — that were not available to them before. Exposure has turned what once felt unimaginable into viable futures, including living and working in Paris, a city layered with meaning and history for Black artists. Montgomery's cultural voice is now heard differently, both by the world and by the people who call it home.

“Their work has put Montgomery on the playing field with the major arts capitals of the world, raising the profile of [Montgomery] artists.”

— **Todd Schmidt**, Executive Director of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival



This widening aperture has sparked experimentation and growth. Artists described feeling encouraged to try new forms, blend genres, and imagine more expansive versions of themselves. Projects that once would have stayed as ideas have been nurtured into realities. Younger people, the interviewees said, are also imagining new possibilities. They see Montgomery not just as a site of history, but as a place to stay, create, and be seen. The Bullers have helped ensure that both artists and the city itself can be seen in their most expansive form.

“Sarah is a demanding person, but she doesn’t demand you to be someone different. She just demands you to be more of who you are, right here, right now.”

— **RC Hagans**, visual artist and Alabama Artist in Residence at MAP360 Gallery

The Bullers have listened to locals’ wildest dreams and helped bring them to life. What was once a closed loop of limited possibility has opened. The Bullers’ approach, rooted in listening and walking alongside, was key to long-term success. Opportunities were not imposed from above. They grew out of conversations, solidarity, and friendship. For example, local creative Steven Lambert wanted to activate space with a maker pop-up. The Buller family joined him to make it happen in their building at One Court Square. They listened to the community’s needs and took action. This turned ideas into real experiences, like first exhibitions and new businesses downtown.

“I’m fortunate they have worked with me. I believe in experimenting and finding the small wins. I love that they let me do that pop-up, to be the point person finding others who have an idea. There was a big momentum shift after that pop-up.”

— **Steven Lambert**, Creative Director and Partner at Handshake Union



Gates Open, Unlocking Accessible Opportunity

This work has lowered the barriers to entry to a historically gatekept arts ecosystem. Artists and entrepreneurs interviewed described how they received direct invitations, were given space, and were trusted to experiment, instead of navigating long grant processes or closed networks. Pop-ups, markets, and maker activations served as ways to test ideas. They helped build audiences and turn vision into action.

“We have too many gatekeepers. And it was nice that I met somebody who had a key and was willing to share it with me.”

— **Alana Enfinity**, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair

Incubation turned into a sustainable practice for many. Short-term storefronts and reduced-rent spaces helped launch tours, galleries, nonprofits, and small businesses. Early experiments, like a coffee counter, a barber’s chair, and a cluster of makers, helped prove concepts that would mature into durable ventures.

“When I was just starting my tour company, Sarah offered me space downtown as an incubator. The space afforded me the opportunity to not only be on display but also created an environment that welcomed people to rest. After some time at Kress, I created a space of my own [down the street].”

— **Michelle Browder**, artist, activist, founder of Mothers of Gynecology and More Than Tours, incubated at Kress on Dexter





Access and opportunity showed up at pivotal moments. When life or logistics threatened to stall progress, the Buller family stepped in with timely support that kept people moving forward. Interviewees noted that the Buller family and, in particular, Sarah's uncommon solidarity was often the difference between stopping and sustaining momentum.

Crucially, opportunity widened for those too often left out. Interviewees, particularly those with long histories in Montgomery, knew that this work created new pathways for young Black and women artists that had never existed before. What once felt like a world of locked doors has become one where keys are shared, circles widened, and new futures unlocked.

“I was in one of those seasons where everything bad hit at once — loss, heartbreak, even losing my work space within the span of three days. I’m bad at asking for help, but by chance I ran into Sarah downtown. She didn’t hesitate. She just asked, ‘What can I do?’ and then she did everything she could do to help me out.”

— RC Hagans, visual artist and Alabama Artist in Residence at MAP360 Gallery

“What they’ve done here in Montgomery has had tremendous impact. I see it everyday. The opportunities they’ve provided for artists of color are invaluable and deeply important to me, particularly those opportunities they’ve given to young Black women artists. When I was in school, the expectations on women severely curtailed how much time they could spend perfecting their craft. Today, artists like Toni Toney and Michelle Browder get to pursue their passions as arduously and often more seriously than their male peers. I am really heartened by and grateful for the opportunities the Bullers have helped make possible.”

— William “Bill” Ford, Jr., visual artist, arts advocate, and president of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts board of trustees

Opening the gates widened what art itself could say in Montgomery. Murals like “Are You Listening?” and other installations coinciding with the racial reckoning of 2020 claimed walls and streets as spaces for voice, making visible the conversations the city often avoided. MAP360's collaborators expanded which kinds of expression, imagination, and dissent could belong. Interviewees also reflected that this work helped stretch the boundaries of what counted as art in the civic square and who was allowed to say it.





The Buller family incubated an ecosystem of leaders who could drive forward and sustain the work of creating and placemaking. With newfound resources, spaces to take risks, and a growing support system, artists and entrepreneurs described how opportunity multiplied outward. Walking alongside leaders like Michelle Browder, Kalonji Gilchrist, Chintia Kirana, and Kevin King, the Bullers helped seed and grow a movement. This movement of cultural stewards keeps the lights on and the gates open.

Spaces Awaken, Transforming the Downtown

A place that was once described as a ghost town is now more alive with arts, stories, and gatherings. Interviewees traced the transformation of empty facades and erasure into spaces that invite color, texture, and vibrancy. They highlighted programs like the annual Arts in Motion festival. This free event, hosted by MAP360, unites artists and the community. Together, they transform Montgomery's core into a lively celebration.

Kress on Dexter is a beautiful microcosm of community in Downtown Montgomery. The award-winning⁶ rehabilitation revived the former S.H. Kress & Co. department store, which closed in the mid-1990s and sat vacant for many years until the Bullers purchased it. Today, Kress on Dexter stands as a thriving hub. It is home to beloved local businesses like [Prevail Coffee](#)⁷ — a globally recognized roastery and coffee shop — as well as an innovation incubator created by the [Air University Innovation Accelerator](#). MAP360's Kress Community Room, a 2,000-square-foot multipurpose space, has hosted more than 89 events since opening in 2018, including:

- Exhibitions
- Community Meetings
- Symposiums
- Performances
- Celebrations

It has also welcomed local and national nonprofit groups such as:

- Alabama Shakespeare Festival
- Center for American Progress
- Center for Democracy
- Equal Justice Initiative
- Institute for Climate and Peace
- Partnership on AI
- Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
- We The Action

As of 2025, all 26 residential units in Kress are rented, bringing new life and new neighbors to the center of Downtown Montgomery.



⁶ The Kress Building was awarded the 2018 Associated Builders and Contractors Excellence in Construction Award for Best Historical Restoration Under \$25 Million and was recognized with a 2019 Honorable Mention from the Alabama Council of the American Institute of Architects.

⁷ Prevail Coffee is ranked the #2 coffee shop in the United States and #17 globally by [The World's 100 Best Coffee Shops](#).

These spaces have also become platforms for both memory and imagination. Inside Kress on Dexter, rooms that once enforced segregation now facilitate inclusion. Preserving the “Colored” and “White” water-fountain stones, along with storytelling about Monroe Street’s Black business district, shows that space can be more than four walls. It can hold community memories and help people envision a better future together. Interviewees appreciated that the Bullers acted to remember what was, embedding the truth into the built environment. This helps the space serve the past and the future. They also appreciated that dialogues platformed community elders. With platforms, these keepers of memory were able to share their wisdom with younger generations and inspire them to action.



“They consulted me, and, at first, I wasn’t sure if we should put the ‘Colored’ and ‘White’ water fountain stones on display. But when I saw the young Black kids and white kids and the adults much younger than me encountering them, I took a different view. Those words were etched in stone, in marble, because they were meant to be permanent. We were never supposed to share. Now, they’re a learning tool.”

— Valda Harris Montgomery, PhD, author, activist, educator, and steward of the Dr. Richard Harris House Museum



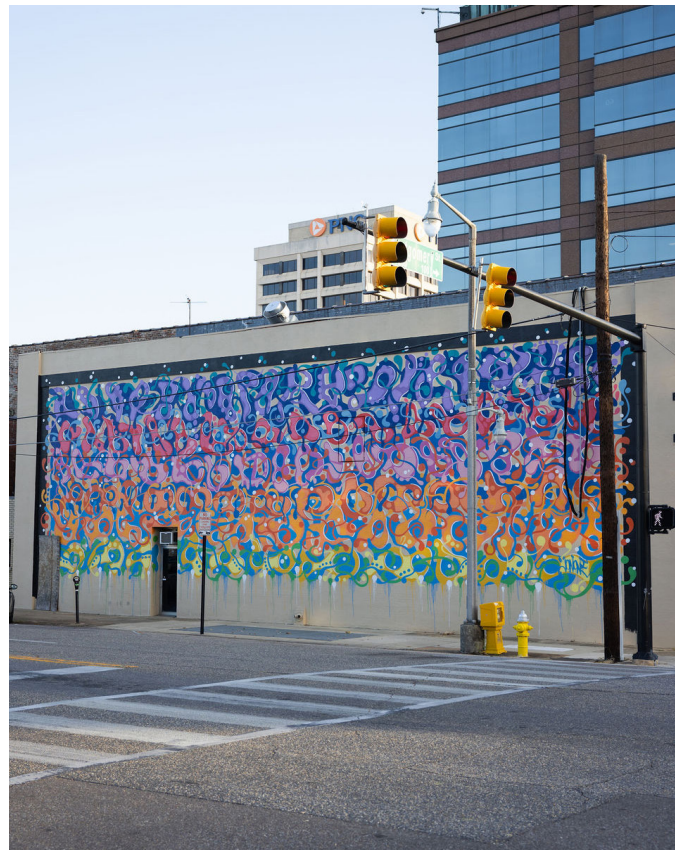
“Downtown has a lot of white buildings, which lend themselves to a culture of ‘no’ and maintaining law and order. The work the Bullers have done with creative placemaking has added color, texture, and vibrancy to the landscape. That has ripple effects, getting people to think about innovation and imagination, and it inspires the creatives here to do more and invites them to the table.”

— **Kalonji Gilchrist**, filmmaker, curator, cultural organizer, and founder of 21Dreams Arts & Culture

Space activation created new hubs. Prevail Coffee, incubated and housed in Kress, now functions as a civic commons. MAP360’s gallery space across from Court Square Fountain brings artistry and creativity to the city’s center. Murals across downtown transform the streetscape⁸ into a vibrant, living gallery:

- **Court Square:** Hopare’s “Citizen”
- **Lee Street:** MonkeyBird’s “Conference of the Birds”
- **Montgomery Street:** Milton Madison’s “Are You Listening?”; JonOne’s “DNA”
- **Dexter Avenue:** Hopare’s “Valda”

Created by local and international artists, they invite life to linger at these nodes.



⁸ Lee and Montgomery Streets are named for enslavers: Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Revolutionary War General Richard Montgomery.



Public spaces became places to engage with neighbors and for everyone to become part of the canvas. In 2019, the “Inside Out: We Are The Dream” project plastered the faces of more than 3,400 Montgomerians and visitors across downtown, transforming facades into galleries of belonging. People wandered the streets searching for their own portraits and, in the process, stumbled upon neighbors they might have never noticed before. In 2022, famed French artist Hopare created a soaring mural of Valda Harris Montgomery. This work honors her family’s civil rights legacy. It also pays tribute to Monroe Street, the once-thriving Black business district where her father, Dr. Richard Harris, owned and operated Dean Drug Store. Together, these MAP360 activations blurred the lines between community and space, turning downtown into both a canvas and mirror.

“For the first time, I felt like a public arts project in Montgomery really hit the bullseye [referring to *Inside Out*]...This piece was up for almost a year, and everyday, I’d see people trying to find themselves, and in that discovery find others. They started laughing, telling stories. It was a really beautiful participatory moment.”

— **Chintia Kirana**, multidisciplinary artist, co-founder of Expose Art

In revitalizing spaces, these MAP360 projects have helped revive Montgomery’s civic and cultural commons. A lively downtown shows care, welcomes the community, and brings daily energy that supports growth. Interviewees noted that when culture animates space, everything around it gains value.



Souls Grow, Deepening Trust and Belonging

In Montgomery, the cultural work nurtured through these projects has helped build a deep level of trust. At its best, art does more than fill walls or town squares. It heals, bridges, and makes room for people to find one another again. Through consistency, listening, and creating space for others to lead, the Buller family created an environment where trust could grow.

The act of making and experiencing art together became a quiet but powerful healer. In a city marked by silos and histories of separation, neighbors shared meals and built projects together. They engaged in dialogues and took part in international exchanges. This created opportunities for groups that rarely intersect to discover common ground. In that process, artists and community members alike began to feel like partners and neighbors shaping Montgomery's cultural future.

These spaces of connection provided validation. Local artists spoke of how their identities were deeply affirmed by recognition on an international stage at the Urban Art Fair in Paris. These creatives, accustomed to toiling in isolation, found themselves exhibiting in rooms they could not have seen themselves in before. These special moments, for many, marked a shift from doubt to belonging, from questioning their talents to claiming them.



“I’m still trying to process what Paris meant to me. It is really hard to put into words. I’m getting a little emotional, because when you receive something you were never expecting, it feels profound. I’m 51 years old. Showcasing my art in Paris wasn’t even in my sights for this lifetime... [tearfully] It was profound to be hanging on the walls with some of the greatest artists. It felt like being in a museum — like you’ve died, you’re Van Gogh, and then you come back to life to see people celebrating you. That was pretty incredible.”

— Alisa Beck, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair

The impact has rippled outward beyond any one individual's personal pride and into community pride. This work has ushered in a *Gumpaissance*, as one artist called it, where the community at large can feel artistry and creative energy coalescing around them. The French duo *MonkeyBird*, collaborating with local artists like RC Hagans, created “The Conference of the Birds” mural. This mural, as interviewees shared, gave permission to Montgomery to imagine itself differently and to believe the city is worthy of investment and attention.

“Montgomerians have lost the internal view of themselves [that they should be recognized internationally]. With MonkeyBird, it helped Montgomerians see that we’re still important, that people want to be here, and that we have something to contribute. That mural and others gave Montgomery permission to change their own perception about themselves and realize that they are a community worth investing in.”

— Collier Neeley, former Executive Director of the Landmarks Foundation of Montgomery

The work of the Buller family and their collaborators has been about tending to the spirit of a place. Beyond renovating buildings, creating murals, or hosting festivities, the work has helped to build a sense of community and pride. A coffee shop on Dexter Avenue brings together strangers of every stripe. A mural lets a child see her own face on her city’s wall. In the gallery, an artist whispers under their breath, “I belong here.” Each of these moments signals the deeper work underway: a community learning to trust itself, to believe in its worth, and to carry pride not only in what it creates but in who it is becoming. The structures built and opportunities opened are meaningful, but the greatest achievement is less visible: the ways souls in Montgomery are growing and how, through art, trust and belonging are sprouting, too.





This is what culture change looks like in practice. You find the right people, help expand what they believe to be possible, connect them with resources and social capital, and build something alongside them. From there, you watch as the work takes root, grows, and begins to multiply on its own. By all accounts, that has been the Buller family's recipe — a way of working that has not only accelerated Montgomery's cultural revival, but also seeded a model of change that could, with collaborators, ripple across the South.



Learning



06

Learning

Going Forward, Lessons in Hand

We asked everyone the same question: *if a funder wanted to support this kind of work elsewhere in the South, what should they know?* What came back were lessons, warnings, and bits of practical advice grounded in what they'd learned from this work in Montgomery. The guidance below — signal early, nurture life, press forward, get proximate, find conspirators, and resource fairly — should serve as maxims for how to do this work well going forward, in Montgomery and in any Southern city trying to grow something new.



Signal Early, Telegraphing Vision and Strategy

Telegraph plans early, widely, and often. That was the top lesson shared by interviewees. To many, the key is making the vision and brand legible:

- Who you are
- What your intentions are
- Why this project matters now
- How it fits into the longer arc
- How others can play a role

Keep revisiting those things as they evolve. Communication influences how quickly the needle can move and how much resistance may surface.

A steady cadence of updates builds trust, keeps the circle open, and turns curiosity into participation. At every touchpoint, name the role you're playing. Publish a website that signposts where you've been and where you're headed. Pair each new installation or event with the next invitation. Lean on trusted community leaders to boost the signal of your messages. And always close the loop with what happened and what comes next. Communication is what determines how deep the roots of trust can grow.

“Montgomery is still so behind in communication. If you aren't on the right Instagram or Facebook, you may actually miss something — so many people feel like they're not in the loop.”

— Milton Madison, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair



Nurture Life, Keeping Space in Motion

Activation is a start, not an end; the lesson is continuity. What people remember are the places that stayed alive, highlighting the work that remained visible, programs that brought folks back, and layers of activity that turned rare excursions into daily habits. Empty storefronts and long construction timelines invite questions. Quiet stretches weaken confidence. Keep the lights on, keep a door open, keep something — almost anything — happening. Even an unfinished site can carry a story and signal progress when it is tended to with care.

Make momentum manageable, and keep spaces active by any means necessary. Appoint clear roles for stewardship. Pair each opening with a schedule of follow-on engagements. Fill any lulls with pop-ups, makers' marts, food trucks, student showcases, and other reasons to linger. Invite nearby anchors to co-program so foot traffic compounds. Use windows as galleries, sidewalks as stages, and vacant lots as storytellers. Consistency turns one amazing day into a place people return to, and it is return visits that build trust.

“The one-off projects introduce Montgomery to new people and reintroduce Montgomery to people who live here, but the momentum doesn’t accrue unless continued.”

— **Suzanne La Rosa**, co-owner of The NewSouth Bookstore on Court Street

Press Forward, Weathering Inevitable Challenges

Progress means friction, but patient capital and a steady presence will turn the ‘no’ and ‘not yet’ into ‘alright then’ and ‘yes.’ Many old rules linger in the South; offices will change hands, and some folks will test whether you will stick around. Plan for a long walk and stick with it, like the Bullers have. Create a map of the powers that be (e.g., city government, church, sports) that can create headwinds or can be leveraged to your advantage. Build the path to ‘yes’ with those who wield power, and work around them, through grassroots community, when they remain stuck on ‘no.’

Land use is often a hotly contested local issue. Developing space too will bring its own tension. People will ask if this is revitalization or speculation, equitable development or gentrification. To attend to this, make your model clear to the public. Be ready to answer these questions consistently and responsively.



“The Bullers are always on the path to yes, when others are not.”

— **Kalonji Gilchrist**, filmmaker, curator, cultural organizer, and founder of 21 Dreams Arts & Culture

And because history in the South carries legacies of harm, trust-building also requires sensitivity to hurts that may not be visible but are still very present.



Get Proximate, Entering with Care

What opens hearts is consistency, transparency, and the willingness to listen and then activate. The first moves into a community matter. People notice whether you arrive with assumptions or with humility, willing to listen and ask questions first. In our conversations, interviewees returned to the same advice:

- Get Proximate, Fast
- Listen to the Community, First
- Be Patient, Always

The Buller family did this, and it is a model worth expanding on.

Enter with care and move with the community at the speed of trust. Interviewees suggested that funders should take time to learn what can and cannot change. They should understand the histories that shape the present and recognize which relationships will carry the day. They suggest walking alongside those already in motion and offering support before introducing your own idea.

Doing the homework matters. Due diligence about the place — its politics, its markets, its immovables — prevents missteps that erode trust. And because history in the South carries legacies of harm, trust-building also requires sensitivity to hurts that may not be visible but are still very present. Racial tension, mistrust of outsiders due to decades of extraction, and disappointment from broken promises all compound and attach to this work.

“We’re in Montgomery, Alabama. From now until the national championship, every weekend is all about football. The other big things are church and family. You have to understand what you can’t change and what you have to work with.”

— **Laurie Jean Weil**, Montgomery philanthropist and former president of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts board of trustees

Venture philanthropy and development carry a responsibility to build for sustainability. Kress on Dexter was an ambitious, necessary, and forward-looking project, but it took years for the local market to catch up. Even catalytic investments need time, partners, and realistic expectations to take root. Doing the homework on market conditions matters, and when those conditions don’t yet exist, funders must be ready for the patient, hands-on work of helping to create them. They must also remain nimble and ready to adjust strategies as market conditions shift, especially in fragile environments where small disruptions can have outsized consequences. Flexibility is as essential as persistence when building for long-term sustainability.

Find Conspirators, Backing Local Leadership

Seek out those who are already in motion. The Buller family built deep relationships early with leaders, working in their corners, who have since coalesced and now help sustain progress on the ground. In each community, there will be those who have been shouldering this work. Starting with them not only builds credibility; it also signals respect for the work that came before. Funders elsewhere should ask: who are the organizers, artists, and entrepreneurs already hustling to make something happen?

Backing those in motion with capital, visibility, and connections creates early wins that ripple outward. When local leaders feel supported, they in turn lend their support to new ideas, opening doors that outsiders alone cannot. Find this group early. Provide them with resources. Invest in bringing them together. This could be through shared experiences like the Paris trips or other chances that unite leaders into a strong team.

“The Bullers have been proximate to artists including myself, and have seen what we can do with a crumb. If you’re proximate with the people, providing the resources, and making the introductions; it’s that simple.”

— Michelle Browder, artist, activist, founder of Mothers of Gynecology and More Than Tours, incubated at Kress on Dexter

Resource Fairly, Sowing Abundance

Real investment, given with care and an abundant spirit, creates room for collaboration, dignity, and momentum. The distribution of funds shapes relationships, power, and the long-term health of a place. Interviewees underscored that philanthropy works best when it listens first, magnifies existing energy, and walks alongside rather than dictates.

Too many artists described a norm in the South of hustling on scraps: \$10,000 budgets run guerrilla-style, \$1,000 grants they had to beg for, favors stretched thin, and opportunities missed because resources weren’t shared fairly. While many artists have managed to stretch limited resources into beauty, scarcity breeds mistrust and competition. These dynamics must be interrupted.

Fairness matters, and clear guidelines for giving keep expectations balanced and stop dependence from forming around any single funder. Funders who support the South can change scarcity dynamics. They can do this by promoting shared work, building stronger networks, and ensuring fair resource distribution.



“A \$10,000 budget means guerrilla style with favors, hustling, and stretching every dollar. A \$100,000 budget runs differently, with more risk, insurance, and accountability. When people haven't worked at both levels, there's conflict, because there's no [shared] understanding of what each requires. Opportunities can feel far away when you don't have the means, and that creates gaps, misunderstandings, and rifts.”

— **Alana Enfinity**, MAP360 exhibiting artist, 2025 Paris Urban Art Fair



In the end, the lessons from Montgomery emphasize that it's not just about individual projects. It's about how funders engage. They should show up consistently and communicate clearly. They need to keep spaces alive and move with communities at the speed of trust. Backing local leaders who are already in motion is key, and resources should be shared fairly so that abundance can take root. Done this way, philanthropy shifts from charity to partnership, and what begins as support from the outside becomes momentum owned and sustained from within.



Concluding



07

Concluding

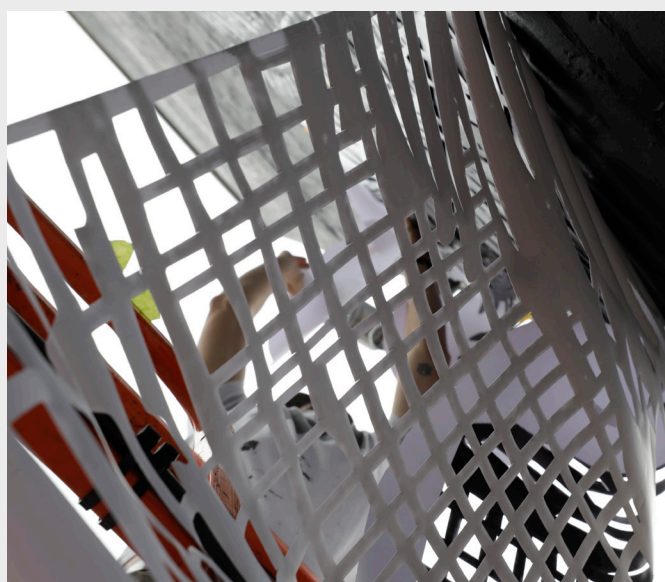
Montgomery's artists work in many forms. One form, referenced in several conversations, is cut paper and stencil — an art that begins with wounding, with a knife or small blade that cuts to take something away. To those passing by the gallery window in Court Square, catching a brief glimpse of the resident artist bent over the paper while carving, it may seem like ruin. But, in the artist's hands, what's cut open becomes the very shape of beauty. The empty space created is loss but also part of a pattern.

Montgomery carries deep cuts. Its streets still bear the marks of slavery and segregation, disinvestment, and distrust. Those cuts cannot be undone. But they can be worked with, given form, layered with care, and made to speak again.

That is what the Buller family, through MAP360 and with their collaborators, has tried to do in Montgomery. They worked patiently to build trust, opened doors and gates, made space for others to step in and create, and left the light on. They helped the city see that its fragments could be a starting point for the outlines of a new design.

What has come from that work is fragile but unmistakable: artists who now believe their voices can carry across the world, a downtown beginning to stir with life, neighbors who look around and start to believe again in the worth of their place and of themselves.

Cut paper is the closing image for this report. It is a reminder that beauty can come from what has been torn. And maybe that is Montgomery's way, too. It will never be seamless. But in the hands of those who care enough to keep tending it, this city can become the most expansive version of itself. When entrusted to those engaged in the radical act of creation, the next great American renaissance blooms from Montgomery.



Concluding

Epilogue

Since the completion of this evaluation, the Buller family's work in Montgomery has shifted into an even higher gear. Downtown has seen major new tenants take root, including Alabama's first Veterans Resource Center, Valiant Cross Academy's fourth campus, and the forthcoming Children's Museum of Montgomery, which the Bullers are helping to incubate. The family has also purchased and begun restoring additional properties along Dexter Avenue, improving the streetscape and expanding opportunities for retail and cultural use. In 2026, they will open *The Camellia*, a new apartment building that will bring new housing options to the city's core.

In the cultural sphere, MAP360 — the public charity founded by Sarah Beatty Buller — earned an award from Main Street Alabama for its *Conference of the Birds* mural and expanded the project's reach by producing a documentary, *Searching for Simorgh*, which was screened at this year's Tryon

International Film Festival, Montgomery Film Festival, Monadnock International Film Festival, and France–U.S. International Film Festival. MAP360 also launched a new Collaboration Grants Program supporting Montgomery artists working on innovative, community-focused projects across disciplines.

Building on this momentum, the Buller Family Foundation has begun sharing what has been learned in Montgomery with partners across the U.S. In September, the foundation convened two gatherings in New York, in partnership with Deutsche Bank and JPMorgan Private Bank, to promote the importance of longer-term arts and culture investment in the American South. A national learning journey followed, bringing more than twenty philanthropists, artists, and cultural leaders to Montgomery during *American Revival Montgomery* to experience the city's transformation firsthand. In the fall, the foundation hosted a panel at the annual Grantmakers in the Arts conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, alongside philanthropic leaders from Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi to spotlight the persistent underinvestment in Southern culture.

Together, these efforts mark a new chapter — turning Montgomery's lessons into a roadmap for communities ready to grow through arts infrastructure.

Supplementing



08

Supplementing Appendix

This section provides the scaffolding behind the findings. While the body of the report focuses on story, synthesis, and implications, the appendix gathers materials that ground the evaluation in rigor. Here you will find:

- **Retrospective Theory of Change:** The framework, developed collaboratively by the Third Plateau and Foundation team, maps how inputs and strategies were expected to yield outcomes in Montgomery, and the assumptions and factors that influenced them. You will find a visual representation of the theory of change along with associated definitions.
- **Glossary:** A reference guide to key terms and concepts used throughout the report, providing a shared language for understanding the findings.
- **Methodology and Limitations:** A fuller account of how data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, including the constraints and considerations that shaped our work.

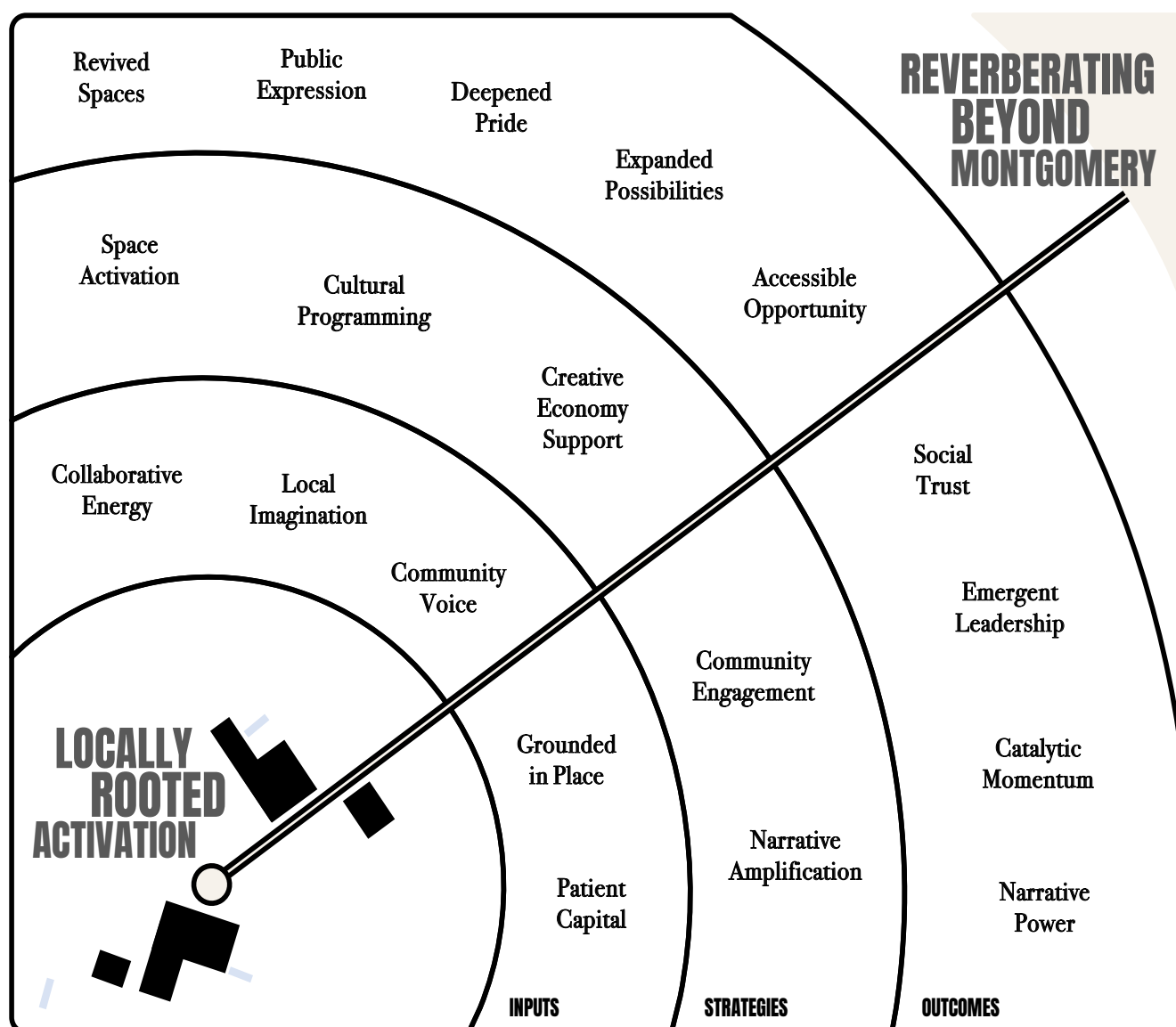
Together, these supplemental materials are meant to provide transparency, nuance, and practical grounding. They allow readers to see not only what was learned, but also how it was learned, and to understand the conditions under which the lessons from Montgomery may or may not transfer to other Southern contexts.



Retrospective Theory of Change

Because this evaluation was conducted after more than a decade of investment, the theory of change was developed retrospectively, rather than designed at the outset of the work. In partnership with the Foundation team, Third Plateau mapped the key inputs, strategies, and outcomes that would clearly articulate the Foundation's desired effect on Montgomery.

This framework served as both a lens for analysis and a tool for sensemaking. It allowed individual stories to connect to broader patterns of impact, while also naming the contextual factors that shaped what was or was not possible. The following visual illustrates the retrospective theory of change: beginning with locally rooted activation, building through strategies of engagement and amplification, and culminating in outcomes that reverberate beyond Montgomery.



To ensure clarity, below are brief definitions of the core elements in the retrospective theory of change. These definitions describe how the Foundation and researchers understood each term within the Montgomery context, and how they function together — from inputs that seeded the work, to strategies that carried it forward, to the outcomes that emerged over time.

Inputs:

- **Collaborative Energy:** Activating and connecting artists, institutions, and partners across sectors to amplify local efforts.
- **Local Imagination:** The homegrown vision, hustle, and artistry already alive in Montgomery, that needs space, affirmation, and resources.
- **Community Voice:** Lived experience, leadership, and creative agency from the people, especially those long overlooked.
- **Grounded in Place:** Being in deep relationship with Montgomery's people, histories, land, and spirit.
- **Patient Capital:** Flexible, relational support that moves at the speed of trust and stays long enough to build momentum that sticks.

Strategies:

- **Space Activation:** Revitalizing buildings and public spaces to create platforms for culture, commerce, gathering, and public imagination.
- **Cultural Programming:** Supporting artists and cultural workers through fellowships, exchanges, residencies, installations, and expressive projects.
- **Creative Economy Support:** Providing artists, makers, and small business owners with access to space, flexible capital, testing grounds, and visibility.

- **Community Engagement:** Creating events, gatherings, and moments that strengthen connection, build trust, and invite collective ownership.

- **Narrative Amplification:** Investing in storytelling, visibility, and cultural leadership to shift how Montgomery is seen and who gets to be seen.

Outcomes:

- **Revived Space:** Historically and culturally significant spaces are brought back to life to serve the creative, communal, and economic needs of today.
- **Public Expression:** People have platforms to share what matters to them artistically, culturally, and personally.
- **Deepened Pride:** Residents express growing pride and a deepened sense of value in their city and themselves.
- **Expanded Possibilities:** People begin to imagine and act beyond familiar limits across local, regional, and global contexts.
- **Accessible Opportunity:** Resources and support are directed toward people and ideas that have been historically excluded.
- **Emergent Leadership:** New leaders step forward from within the community and are trusted to shape what comes next.
- **Social Trust:** Stronger relationships form through shared work, shared space, and mutual respect.
- **Catalytic Momentum:** Local action sparks new investment, collaboration, and momentum across the city.
- **Narrative Power:** Montgomery's story is reclaimed by those living and leading in the present.

Glossary

- **Belonging:** The recognition of one's voice and power to shape society. It goes beyond participation, encompassing the capacity to co-create institutions and structures that define community life.
- **Black Codes:** Sets of laws enacted by Southern states after the Civil War to restrict the rights and freedoms of newly emancipated Black Americans. These laws sought to preserve prewar racial hierarchies by controlling Black people's movements, labor, and civil participation, effectively forcing many into exploitative labor arrangements and limiting their access to justice, property ownership, and political representation.
- **Chattel Slavery:** A system in which human beings were kidnapped, enslaved, and transported, treated legally as property to be bought, sold, and inherited. In Montgomery, Court Square was once the site of that trade.
- **Civic Commons:** Welcoming and inclusive third spaces, including coffee shops, plazas, community rooms, and libraries, where neighbors of many stripes mix, linger, and build social trust outside of the context of work or home.
- **Civic Life:** The everyday ways people gather, participate, and solve problems together, including, but not limited to, public meetings, festivals, and neighborly conversations that knit members of a community together.
- **Creative Placemaking:** An approach to community development that intentionally integrates arts, culture, and creativity into the shaping of public spaces and civic life. In practice, creative placemaking often means artists and community members working together to transform spaces in ways that celebrate local identity, foster belonging, and spark economic and social vitality.
- **Cultural Infrastructure:** The people, places, and supports that make creative life possible and visible, including, but not limited to, galleries, studios, venues, organizers, and festivals.
- **Gatekeep:** To implement formal or informal barriers that control who gets access to resources, relationships, platforms, or opportunities, and who is excluded.
- **Griot:** Traditionally a West African oral historian, storyteller, and keeper of collective memory. In the American South, artists in Montgomery used this term to honor community elders, artists, and culture bearers who preserve and pass on the city's histories.
- **Gumpaissance:** A locally coined term blending "Gump," a nickname for Montgomery, and "Renaissance" that describes the city's recent cultural revival driven by arts ecosystem incubation, emerging collaboration, and public art.
- **Incubation:** Short-term space and support that allow creatives to test ideas, build audiences, and grow into sustainable ventures.
- **Maker:** Artists, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs who design, build, and sell tangible goods, often through pop-ups, markets, or storefronts downtown.
- **Place-Based:** To be rooted in the specifics of a community, knowing its people, histories, and geography. Involves walking alongside and listening deeply, rejecting a top-down one-size-fits-all approach to development.

- **Pluralism:** A promise and a practice of engaging diversity with dignity, belonging, and shared purpose. It means moving beyond zero-sum thinking to co-create solutions across differences, turning diversity into a source of strength rather than division.

- **Proximate:** The state of being close to the people and issues at hand; leading and investing from a place of deep relationship, listening first, and moving at the speed of trust.

- **Urban Renewal:** A government-led process of redeveloping areas within a city that are deemed “blighted” or underused, often through demolition and new construction. Urban renewal in many American cities displaced Black, minority, and low-income communities, erasing neighborhoods rich in culture and social connection. In Montgomery, as elsewhere, its legacy continues to shape patterns of trust, development, and belonging.

- **White Flight:** The large-scale migration of white residents from urban centers to suburban and rural areas, particularly during the mid-20th century, often in response to desegregation, civil rights advancements, and increasing racial diversity in cities. In Montgomery and other Southern cities, white flight contributed to disinvestment in downtown areas, shrinking tax bases, and the erosion of civic life.

Methodology

This evaluation was designed to understand the impact of the Buller family’s decade-long creative placemaking efforts in Montgomery, Alabama. The approach was qualitative and narrative-driven, rooted in stories and perspectives from those closest to the work. The goal was not only to document outcomes but also to surface the conditions, contexts, and lessons that shaped them.

Multiple forms of evidence were drawn upon to provide depth:

- **Stakeholder perspectives** were gathered through interviews and a focus group.

- **Documents and artifacts**, including grant records, photographic evidence, and other documentation.

- **Documentaries and media** produced during and about the various projects and initiatives on the ground in Montgomery.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to capture a range of voices connected to the work. This included artists, cultural leaders, small business owners, MAP360 collaborators, and civic and philanthropic partners. Data were collected through:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** 17 one-on-one interviews were facilitated, each lasting 45-75 minutes, guided by an interview protocol aligned around context, impacts, and lessons.

- **Semi-structured focus group:** one 90-minute group conversation with three participants was hosted to surface collective insights and reflections from civic leaders.

Data collection occurred in August and September 2025. Analysis took place in September 2025 and was conducted using MAXQDA software. The analysis process combined:

- **Deductive coding**, which aligned with the retrospective theory of change, included inputs, strategies, and outcomes.

- **Inductive coding** captured emergent themes around context, impacts, and lessons.

- **Thematic synthesis** traced connections between individual codes and broader patterns.

Findings were shared in a sensemaking session with the Foundation team and principals in September 2025. This session allowed for validation of major themes, the testing of interpretations against prior knowledge, and the surfacing of additional insights before finalizing the report.

Limitations

As with any qualitative inquiry, there are limitations that shape how findings should be interpreted:

- **Sampling size and scope:** The evaluation relied on 17 interviews and one focus group with three participants. While purposive sampling captured a range of perspectives, the findings are not meant to represent all voices in Montgomery.
- **Self-report bias:** Data were based on participants' reflections and experiences, which may be influenced by memory, personal perspective, or social desirability. Triangulation with documents, artifacts, and media helped mitigate but did not eliminate this limitation.
- **Temporal focus:** Data collection occurred in August-September 2025 and reflects perspectives during that window. Conditions in Montgomery and the trajectory of the Buller family's work may continue to evolve beyond the scope of this evaluation.
- **Researcher positionality:** As external evaluators, interpretations were informed by both inductive and deductive analysis and the retrospective theory of change developed with the Foundation team. This co-constructed framework provided structure but may also have guided attention toward certain outcomes over others.

- **Generalizability:** Findings are context-specific. While lessons may inform broader place-based philanthropy across the South, they should not be assumed to apply wholesale to other communities without consideration of local dynamics.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation offers a credible and well-rounded picture of the impact of the Buller family's investments in Montgomery. The combination of multiple data sources, systematic coding, and validation through sensemaking supports the trustworthiness of the insights presented here.

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