

Beyond Programs

How Third Spaces
Strengthen Community
Connection and Prevention

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Meet the Presenters



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INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC STRATEGIES

Mission: We work alongside communities to build power, challenge systems of inequity, protect health, and improve quality of life.

Vision: Safe, secure, vibrant, and healthy communities where everyone can thrive.



Today We'll Explore:

- ✔ What third spaces are
- ✔ Why they matter for prevention
- ✔ How they function as an environmental strategy
- ✔ How to design, activate, and sustain them
- ✔ A real-world case study from West Hollywood



What is a Third Space?

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term to describe the informal gathering places that anchor community life — distinct from home and work, and essential to social health.

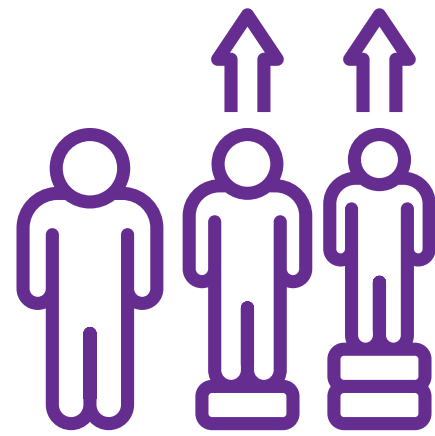
First Space - Home

Second Space - Work or School

Third Space - Voluntary gathering
(open, informal, and community-rooted)



Core Principles of Third Spaces



Equity & Accessibility

Free or low-cost, physically accessible, and actively inclusive of populations most underserved by existing gathering spaces.



Cultural Relevance

Programming reflects the identities, traditions, and values of the community being served – not a generic model imposed from outside.



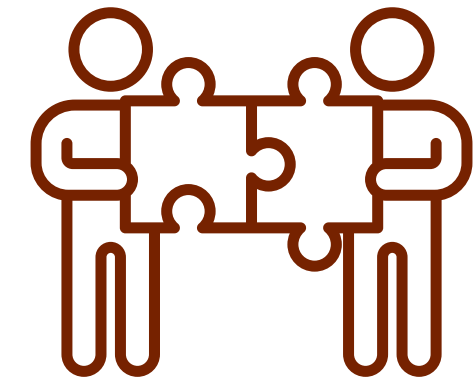
Community Ownership

Residents and community members shape the space, from design to programming, ensuring long-term buy-in and sustainability.



Substance-Free

The norm is established through environment and expectation, not enforcement – making sober spaces the natural, celebrated baseline.



Designed for Connection

Physical layout, programming, and activities are explicitly structured to encourage genuine human connection.

Third Spaces vs. Traditional Prevention

Both approaches have value — but third spaces offer something traditional curriculum-based prevention cannot: a shift in the environment itself. Rather than delivering a message to an audience, third spaces reshape the social conditions that make substance use more or less likely.



Traditional Prevention

- Curriculum-based programs with defined content
- Time-limited (e.g. a workshop, series)
- Delivered to participants by facilitators
- Targets individual knowledge and attitudes

Third Spaces

- Environmental Strategy embedded in community life
- Ongoing or recurring - part of the social fabric
- Community-led and co-created
- Targets social norms and collective behavior



The Environment Shapes Norms

Where people gather, and what those spaces normalize, powerfully shapes behavior. Communities with few visible substance-free alternatives face an uphill battle, because the built environment itself is telling a story about how people are supposed to socialize. Overall, social norms and environmental cues are stronger predictors of use than individual knowledge



Bars & Venues Dominate

High density of alcohol-serving spaces reinforces the norm that fun = substances



Lack of Hobbies & Third Spaces

Substance-free options are absent or hidden, leaving no visible counter-narrative



Drug and Alcohol Related Harms are Prevalent

Environments where drugs and alcohol are a focus, especially due to the lack of third spaces, tend to see an uptick in drug and alcohol related harms, making them part of the norms in these spaces

Change the Space, Change the Norm

Third spaces directly intervene in the social environment — making substance-free belonging visible and celebrated. They also help to relieve some of those drug and alcohol related harms that we see in these substance-focused environments.

When the environment changes, behavior changes.

The Social Context: Why This Matters Now

The social fabric that once supported organic community connection has frayed — with measurable public health consequences.

Rising Isolation & Loneliness

The U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness a public health epidemic.

Fewer Free Gathering Spaces

Public spaces for gathering are underfunded and disappearing from many neighborhoods.

Commercialized & Substance Centered Social Life

Social life has largely shifted to venues where spending money and alcohol consumption are central.

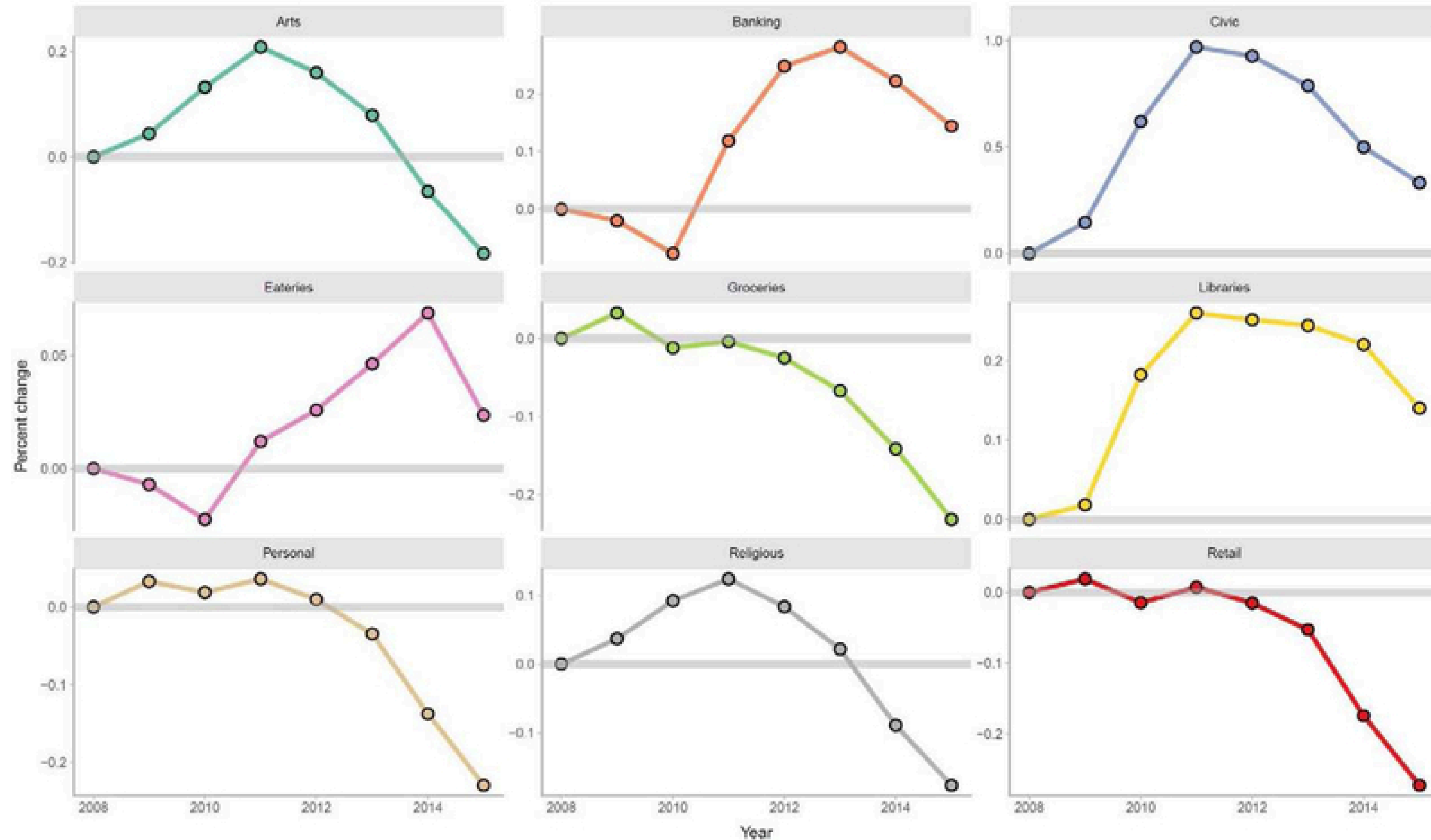
Shifting Social Dynamics

Digital connections have not replaced the protective depth of in-person community.

Key Elements: Accessibility, Economic Factors, Temptation, and Technology.

Diminishing of Third Spaces Data Report

American main streets are shrinking, everyday community spaces like laundromats, barbershops, and rec centers are disappearing, leaving fewer places for people to connect.



Understanding Why People Consume Alcohol

The perceived short-term social benefits of alcohol consumption versus the impact of long-term health risks.



Alcohol as a "Social Lubricant"

Curiosity, peer influence, and the desire to connect with others can make alcohol feel like an easy way to socialize and feel more comfortable in group settings.



Immediate High Value Reward

Relieves boredom, boosts mood, and can temporarily enhance confidence or performance.



Mental Health Conditions

Used to cope with stress, anxiety, or other mental health challenges, alcohol can temporarily numb difficult emotions or provide relief.



Substance Use Disorders

Repeated alcohol use can lead to dependency, loss of control, and the development of a substance use disorder.

Key Elements: Fun, Connection, Coping, or Habit.

Connection Is Protective

The research is clear and consistent: social belonging is one of the most powerful protective factors against substance use. Third spaces don't just feel good — they work.



Substance Use Risk

Belonging and social integration are associated with lower rates of alcohol and drug use across age groups.



Resilience

Prosocial engagement builds individual and community resilience — a core protective factor in every major prevention framework.



Protective Factors

Third spaces directly strengthen the bonding, belonging, and social support that SPF and coalition models identify as essential.

Social support predicts lower alcohol and cannabis use — and third spaces are purpose-built to create that support at scale.





INTRODUCING THE PLAYBOOK

Why We Developed the Third Spaces Playbook

As third space activations began producing real results in the field, it became clear that communities needed a way to turn promising ideas into consistent action. The Third Spaces Playbook was developed to help translate these efforts into a practical guide for implementation.



Community Demand for Structure

Coalitions and prevention practitioners needed a shared framework — not just examples, but a clear structure they could adapt to their own communities.



Sustainability Planning Gap

Many activations were one-time events. The playbook was designed to help communities build recurring, lasting spaces.



Built from Practice + Science

The playbook integrates lessons from real-world activations with prevention science, SPF principles, and community organizing best practices.

What the Playbook Covers

The Third Spaces Playbook is a comprehensive, practitioner-ready resource. Each section is designed to be actionable — giving coalitions and community organizations exactly what they need to move from idea to impact.



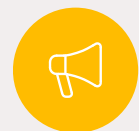
Core Principles

Equity, cultural relevance, and community ownership as non-negotiables



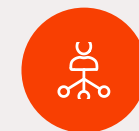
Sustainability Resources

Funding, partnership, and planning strategies for long-term viability



Community-Centered Framework

Strategies for authentic co-creation and sustained participation



Outreach Channels

Tested approaches for reaching underserved and priority populations



Planning & Design

Practical considerations for space, programming, and accessibility



Integrated Prevention Messaging

Embedding prevention naturally — without disrupting the community feel

A Community-Centered Framework

The playbook organizes the work into five interconnected elements — a community-centered framework for designing welcoming third spaces. This is more than a linear checklist; it's a living process.



Listen

Listening sessions, community input, asset mapping, and gap identification



Design for Joy

Themes, interactive elements, and cultural resonance that make people want to show up



Make It Visible

Strategic partnerships, community outreach, and a strong public presence



Integrate Prevention Lightly

Resource tables, QR codes, and soft messaging — prevention as texture, not lecture



Gather Feedback & Repeat

Continuous learning, iteration, and deepening community ownership over time

Planning & Design: Access in Third Spaces

Access isn't just about hosting an event— it's about understanding the realities that shape who can show up.



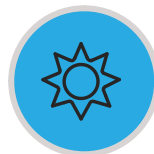
Understanding Time & Capacity

Design spaces that reflect how people actually live. Understanding when people are free and how they spend that time allows third spaces to meet them where they are.



Recognize Structural Barriers

Substance use doesn't occur in isolation — factors like income, transportation, secure housing, food access, and social environments influence choices.



Bring Resources into the Space

Partnerships with local organizations bring tangible resources directly into community spaces, build trust, and address immediate needs.



Start Small, Think Long-Term

Pilot events can create immediate opportunities for connection while contributing to broader community change.

Putting the Framework into Practice

Move from inspiration to action! These next steps help organizations and coalitions apply the community-centered framework — from understanding local needs to piloting and growing recurring gatherings.



Identify Underserved Populations

Find who is not being reached by current prevention or community infrastructure



Map Your Local Environment

Audit gathering spaces, nightlife density, and existing substance-free options



Partner with Trusted Organizations

Work with groups already connected to the community to help host, promote, and co-create the experience.



Consider Coalition & Funding Priorities

Ensure third space efforts support current prevention goals and available funding structures.



Launch a Pilot Event

Start with one visible event that invites people to show up and connect.



Gather Your Feedback

Use conversations, surveys, and observations to learn what what worked. Learn from participants to refine the next event.



Build a Recurring Model

Design for repetition — monthly, seasonal, or anchored to community calendars

Common Challenges

Anticipating obstacles is part of good planning. These are the most common barriers communities face when launching third space activations — and naming them early helps you prepare.



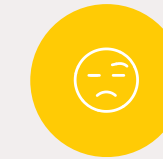
Low Early Turnout

Attendance and engagement concerns are common in the early stages — plan for a slow build and celebrate small wins.



Funding Gaps

Sustaining funding beyond pilot events requires proactive grant alignment and coalition support.



Stakeholder Skepticism

Competing priorities and doubt from partners can stall momentum — bring data and stories early.



Capacity Limits

Organizational bandwidth is real. Start lean and build systems as you grow.

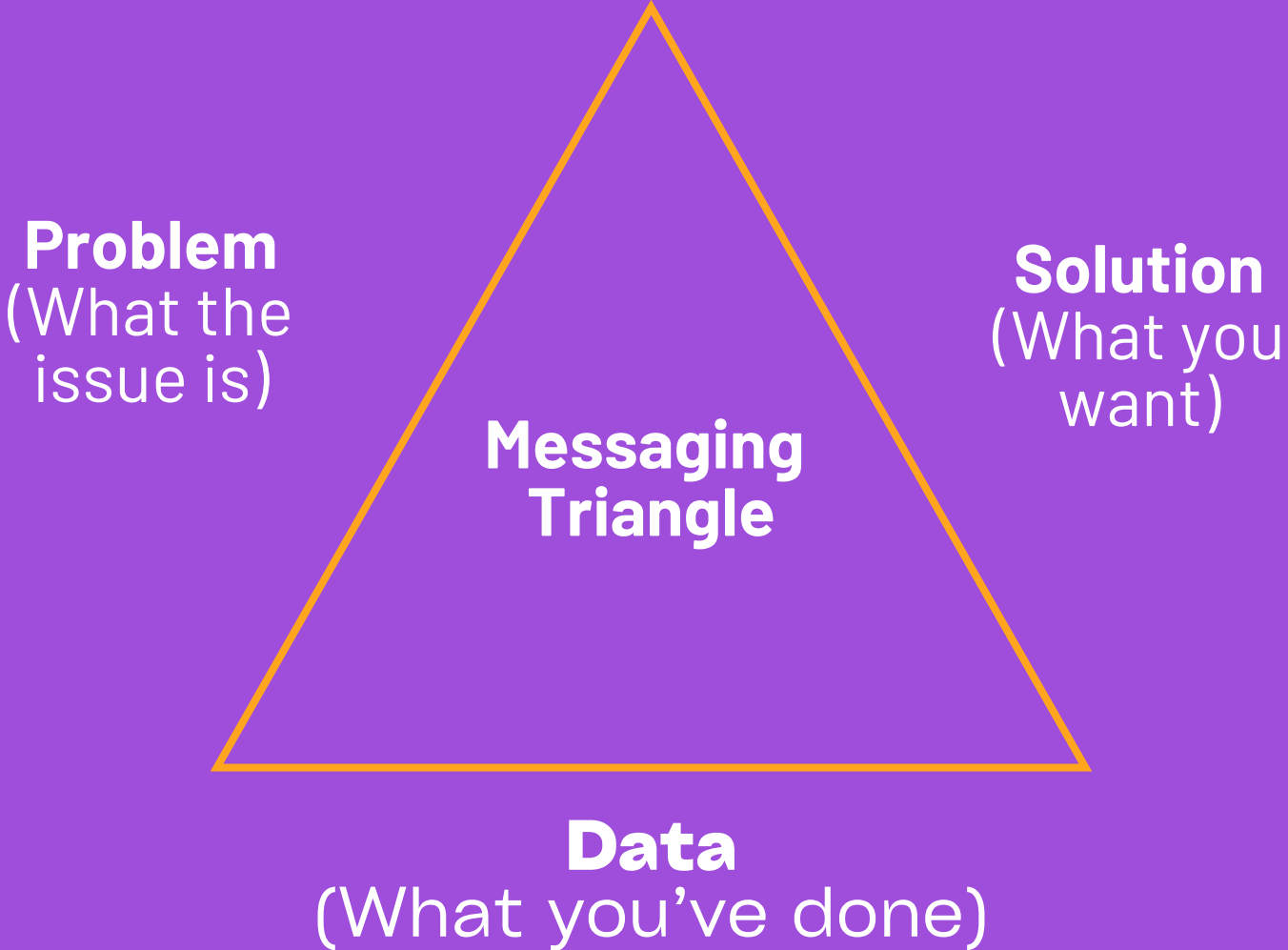


Cultural Disruption Fear

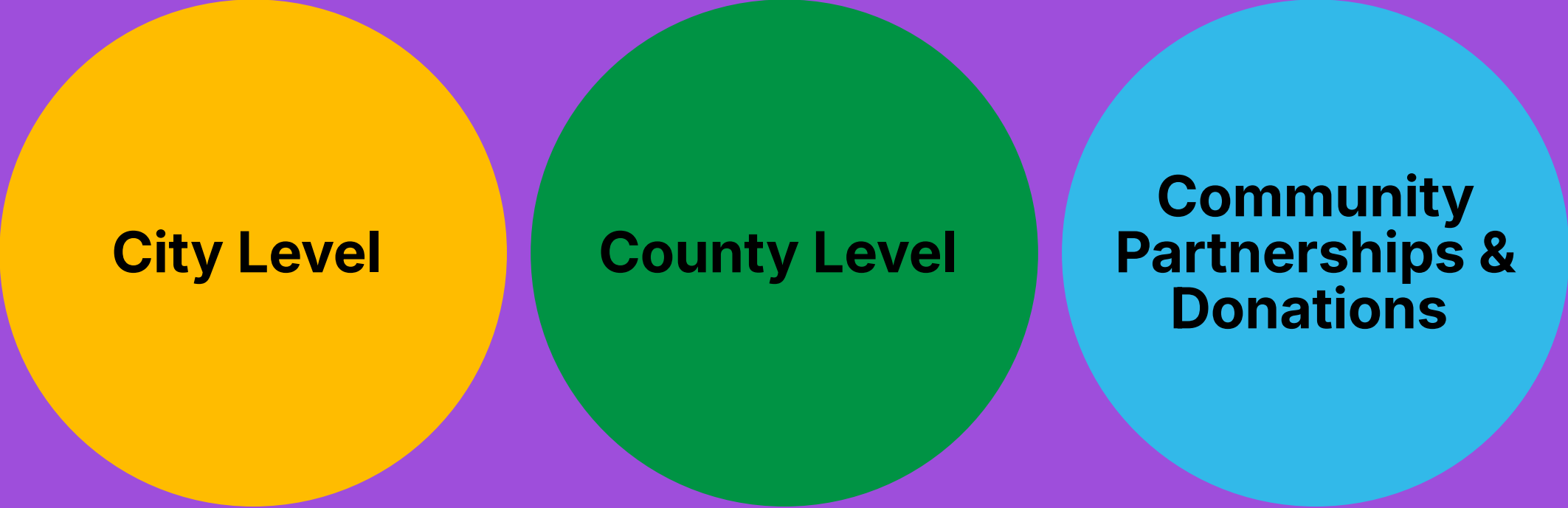
Fear of upsetting existing culture or partnerships can be managed through co-design and transparency.

Sustainability Resources

Sustaining third spaces requires both strategic messaging and diversified funding.



Messaging Triangle



Budgeting Buckets

Spreading the Word + Offering Perks

Ready to launch your event? Explore each of these resources to share ideas, engage your community, and make an impact.

Outreach Channels

Social Media

Posting flyers online with event details, such as the date, time, and location, can be beneficial for viewers to share with others in real-time.

Email

Email can be used to send information, such as newsletters and event reminders.

In-person Outreach

In-person events help build trust through face-to-face connections. A simple spreadsheet can show which spots bring in the most people.

Word of Mouth

Makes it easy for people to share the event information with their family and friends.

Incentives

Gift Cards

Connecting with local businesses can increase outreach and help form partnerships.

Giveaways

Offering prizes limited to the first set of guests who attend.

Community Service Hours

Attendees can earn school credit or community service hours in exchange for their time.

Recognition

Rewarding regular attendees with certificates of recognition can help motivate them to keep attending events.

West Hollywood: Community Context

West Hollywood offered a compelling — and complex — environment to test the third space model. It's a community with extraordinary cultural identity, deep LGBTQ+ roots, and a nightlife scene that has historically centered substance use as part of celebration and belonging.

High-Density Nightlife

Bars and clubs dominate the social landscape, creating strong norms around alcohol-centered gathering

Strong LGBTQ+ Identity

A community with fierce pride in its culture and deep investment in spaces that feel authentic and affirming

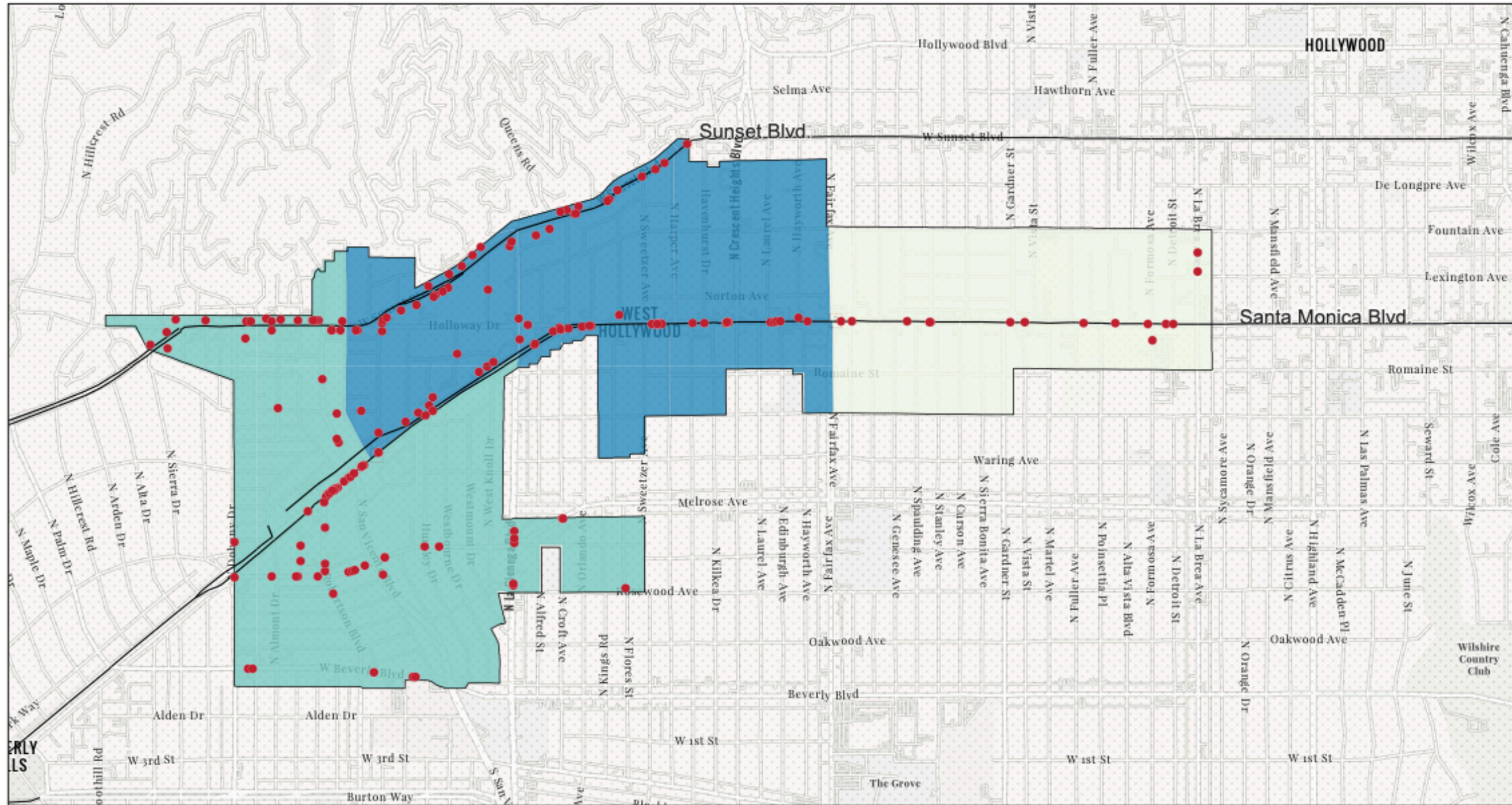
Community Feedback

Residents and organizations expressed a desire for more diverse, substance-free alternatives — especially for sober and sober-curious community members

Strategic Opportunity

A city committed to innovation in public health and a coalition infrastructure ready to support activation

West Hollywood Binge Drinking Rates and On-Sale Alcohol Retailers



6/28/2023

● On-Sale Alcohol Retailers

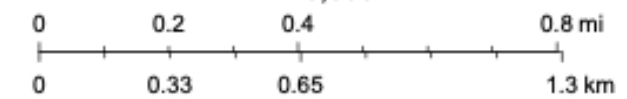
Binge Drinking Rates

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> 21 - 22

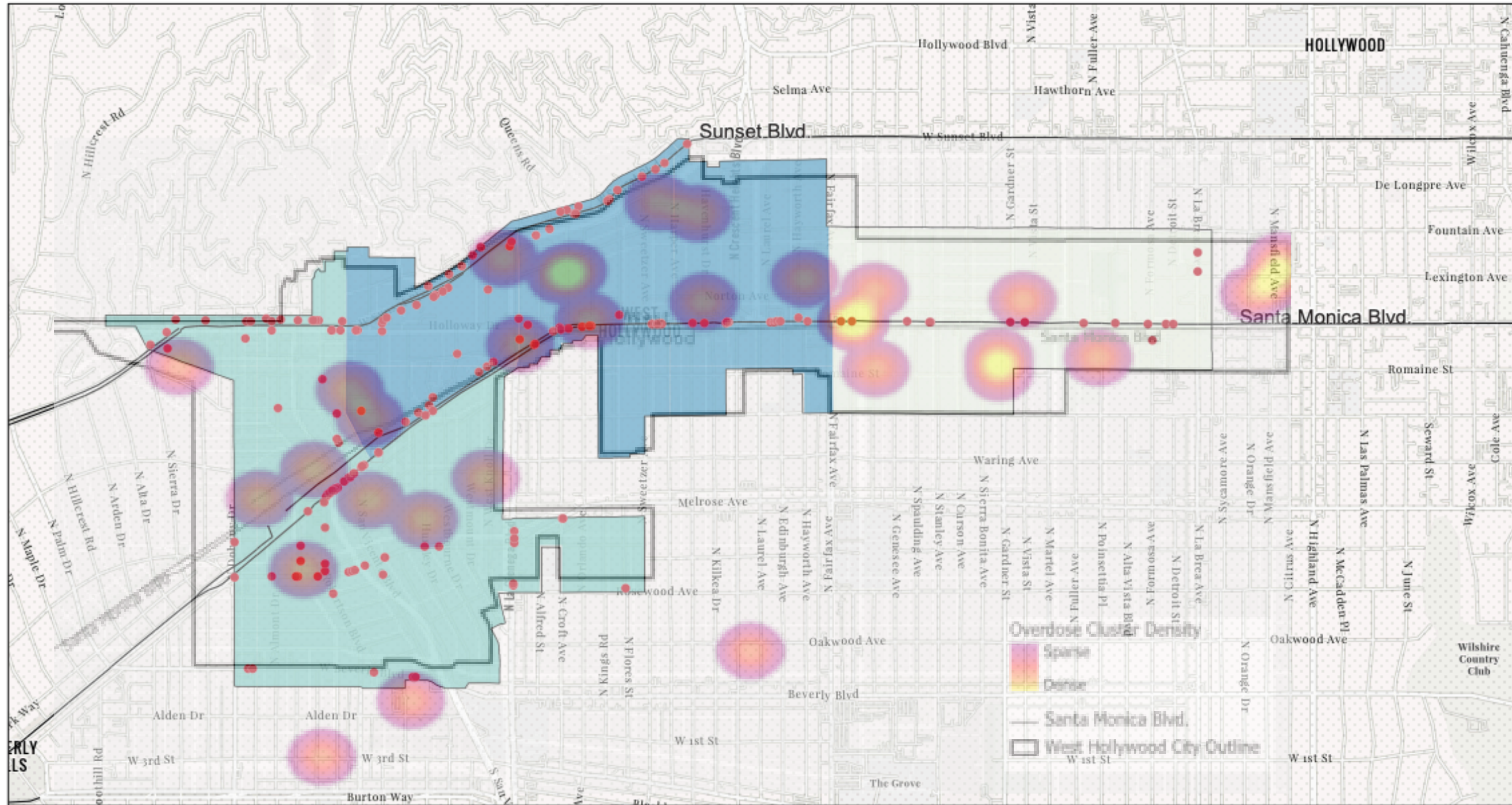
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County of Los Angeles, California State Parks, Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, US Census Bureau, USDA

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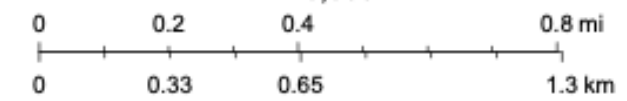
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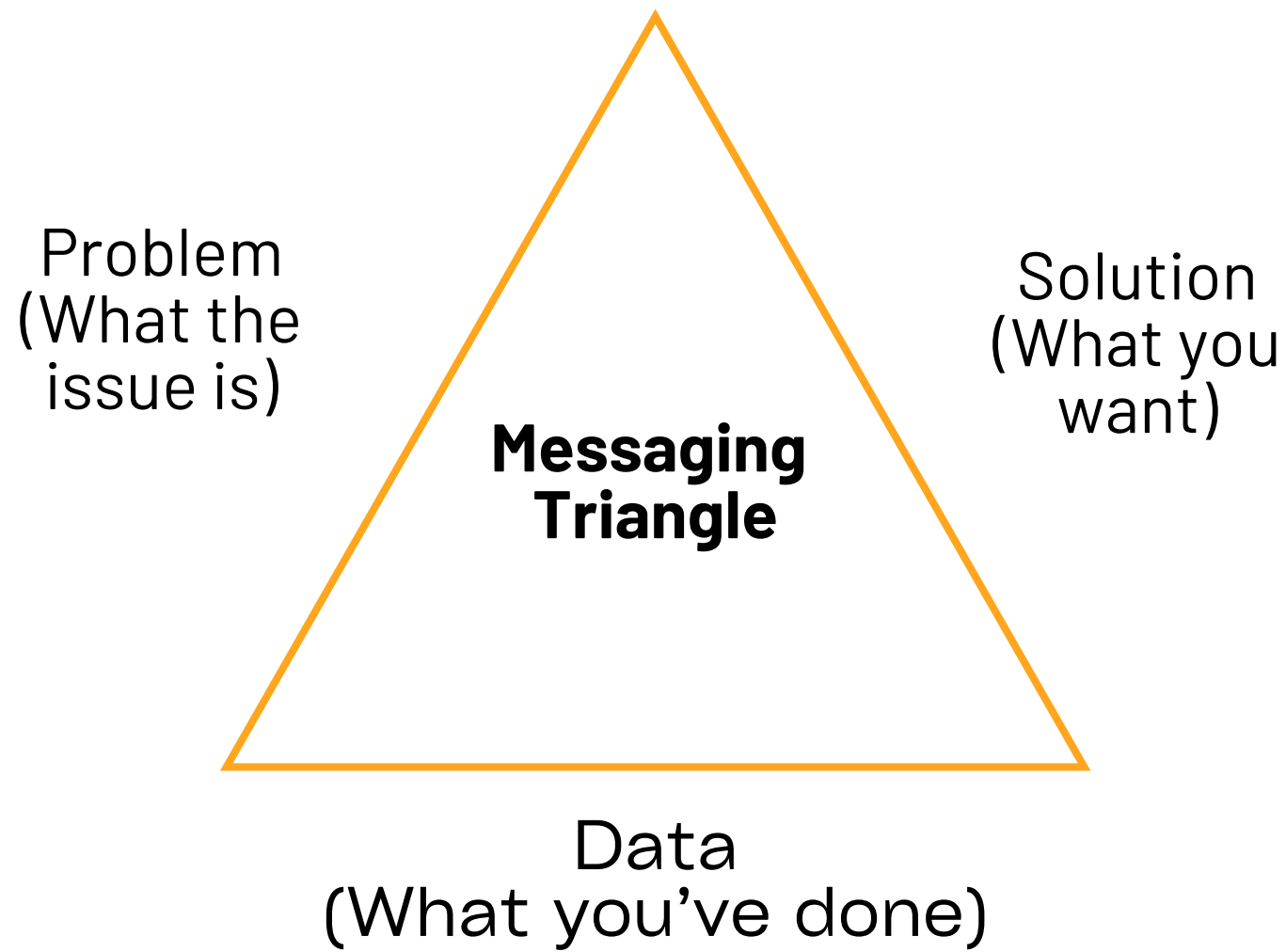
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“My name is **[Your name here]**
 I am a Safer WeHo coalition member, **a group dedicated to making WeHo healthier and safer.**
 We are working **to reduce the harms of drugs and alcohol** in our community, such as **increased DUI incidents**, by **creating sober third spaces for folks to have fun and make safer choices.** We are currently planning to do a pop-up for outreach at **[LOCATION]** on **[TIME]**. Are you interested in hearing more?”

Problem

- West Hollywood was prone to experiencing high levels of alcohol related harms, specifically:
 - #3 in LA County for Alcohol-Related Auto Crashes
 - #5 in LA County for Alcohol-Related ER Visits

Data

- West Hollywood’s relationship with alcohol is a close one:
 - High Outlet Density
 - Onsale #1 in LA County
 - Offsale #10 in LA County
 - Population Density
 - West Hollywood is densely populated
 - The population can double/triple on weekends/holidays

Solution

- Permanent & One-Time Third Spaces
 - Have the City/local governance incentivize businesses to hold these third spaces.

What We Activated in West Hollywood

Working with community partners, the coalition launched a series of third space activations rooted in joy, culture, and authentic community identity. Each event was designed to be visible, celebratory, and clearly substance-free — without feeling clinical or exclusionary.



BOOM!

An annual drug-and-alcohol free New Year's Eve Celebration in West Hollywood. Started by IPS in 2013 in partnership with the City of West Hollywood.



Novemberfest

Novemberfest - A Sober Oktoberfest Drag Bingo is an annual, community-based sober social event that is held in the period between Halloween and the winter holidays.



Pop-Ups

Our coalition hosts quarterly resource pop-ups in the heart of West Hollywood's Rainbow District as a way to destigmatize resource access and shift the norms of West Hollywood bar and club scene.



Pride AF: Alcohol Free

A vibrant, alcohol-free rooftop Pride concert that is designed as a sober-space celebration that brings together LGBTQ+ artists and community members in a supportive, stigma-free environment.

What Made These Activations Successful

Success wasn't accidental. Each activation in West Hollywood reflected a deliberate set of design choices — grounded in community, culture, and a strategic approach to prevention that never felt like prevention.

Arts & Culture at the Center

Events were designed around creative expression and cultural identity — not around the absence of substances. Joy was the headline.

Community Leadership

Local LGBTQ+ organizations, artists, and community members drove the programming — ensuring authenticity and deep participation.

Strategic Partnerships

City partnerships, cultural organizations, and local businesses co-invested in visibility and reach — expanding the coalition's capacity.

Visible + Celebratory

Events were public, vibrant, and proud. Substance-free gathering was made visible as a desirable, cool, community-affirming choice.

Prevention as Texture

Messaging was integrated lightly — resource tables, QR codes, ambient presence — woven in without disrupting the community experience.

Lessons from West Hollywood: What Stood Out

The West Hollywood third space activations generated real results — and real insight. These lessons should inform every community that picks up this model.

1

Community Interest Must Lead

External organizations can support, resource, and convene — but spaces only thrive when the community that uses them shapes and owns them. Top-down activation doesn't hold.

2

Visibility Shifts Norms

The act of showing up publicly — with joy, pride, and celebration — sends a powerful social signal. What is seen becomes what is normal.

3

Prevention That Feels Like Culture Works

When prevention is woven into authentic community experience rather than delivered as a message, it lands. People don't resist what they enjoy.

4

Start Sustainability Planning Early

Funding, partnerships, and infrastructure planning cannot wait. Communities that build sustainability into the design from the start are the ones that continue.

Scalability, Sustainability & Closing Reflection

Third spaces are not a niche tactic. They are a scalable, adaptable model for building the social infrastructure that makes communities healthier, for every population, in every context.

Adaptable Everywhere

Youth, LGBTQ+, rural, BIPOC, and faith communities, the principles apply across every context when grounded in cultural relevance and community ownership

Fits SPF & Coalition Work

Third spaces integrate naturally into Strategic Prevention Framework planning and strengthen coalition-level outcomes and policy alignment

Social Infrastructure = Public Health

This is the core reframe: investing in belonging isn't soft work, it's one of the highest-leverage public health strategies available to us

What would change if connection was our primary prevention strategy? That question isn't rhetorical. It's an invitation to redesign how we think about community, health, and what it means to truly prevent harm.



Q&A





**Thank
You!**

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