

My Block is Beautiful

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Subjects: Fine Arts (Photography, Art as Social Practice, Graphic Design, Screenprinting)

Grade Level: 6-8, 9-12

Estimated Time: Developed as a 20-week project. Can be shortened or extended.

About This Lesson Plan:

My Block is Beautiful, a project of YMCA of Greater Pittsburgh, is an interdisciplinary S.T.E.A.M. project that integrates art, media, technology and civic pride. High School students from the Westinghouse High School feeder pattern participate in a 4 month-long series of workshops that include drone training, aerial photography, photo manipulation, screen printing and gallery installation. During these workshops participants learn about the science and practical application of drones and use them to take aerial photos of blocks in their community. They then transform these digital images into works of art — resulting in a digital/artistic beautification of their neighborhood. At each phase of the process, youth work alongside experienced mentors including drone experts, photographers, graphic designers and screen printers. This project is ideal for high school students, and it can be adapted for middle school.

About YMCA Lighthouse at Homewood-Brushton YMCA :

The YMCA Lighthouse mission is to develop young people that are creative, connected and ready for college and career. Based inside the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, the Lighthouse Project is a safe and exciting place for young people to explore their interests in music, film, photography, art and fashion. In each of our arts programs, experienced teaching artists empower young people to find their voice while building technical and transferable skills that position them for success after high school. Each arts program combines project-based learning, critical analysis and creative expression in ways that stimulate curiosity, build community, and transform youth in confident, creative leaders.

Pro Tips:

If you have access to a drone, perfect! If not, consider how you might use other technology tools to photograph or otherwise document your location from a new perspective. Use the tools you have to create artwork that reshapes perspectives and helps start dialogue about a place your students know well. Use these tools to think critically about how stories are told—and how your students might tell their own stories.

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Materials & Technology

- Quadcopter (Recommended models: DJI Phantom Standard or DJI Mavic)
- Ipad, iPhone or iPad Mini (download DJI app as per instructions)
- Extra DJI battery (optional - for extended flight time during sessions with youth)
- Computers with Photoshop CC installed (at least 1 CPU for everyone 2 students)
- Micro SD USB Card reader (to transfer drone images onto a computer)
- Color Printer or access to a printer
- 16"x20" Wooden Screen frames (3)
- Screen printing ink (various colors)
- 10" Squeegee
- Latex Gloves
- Framed Canvases (Wood or Metal)
- Projector (recommended)
- Internet access (recommended)

Supply Budget Estimate: \$1,600 - \$2,000

Lesson Plan

Before program begins

Spend time with quadcopter reading instructions and getting familiar with its operation. Consult a local drone specialist. Train any other key staff on the basic safety and drone operations.

Session 1: community mapping

- Schedule an urban planner, community historian or long time resident to lead a conversation with the group. Have students prepare interview questions. Have a large map out on a table or projected from a computer while the conversation is taking place.
- Questions:
 - What are some things the group may not know about their community?
 - Where are the assets in the community?
 - What should we know about the history of the neighborhood?
 - What are some current initiatives taking place that impact our community?

Session 2: Drone Safety and flight tests

- Review the [DJI Resources for safe flying](#)
- Rules, regulations and guidelines for your region/city
- Learn the parts of the drone and the controls on the remote.
- Practice taking off and landing
- Practice basic maneuvers and photography at low altitudes
- Take an aerial shot of your project group!

Session 3: Location selection and Photography Basics

- Students work in small groups and use local maps to identify compelling or interesting areas of their neighborhood that they want to photograph. What parts of the community are visually interesting? What parts of the community are important to capture and discuss?
- Photography basics:
 - Learn the rule of thirds
 - Consider how a close-up or wide shoot of the same thing tell very different stories
 - ISO -- Keep in Low

- Resource: [10 Surefire Drone Photography Tips](#)

Session 4: Drone shoot Day 1

- Arrive or meet at first locations. Have students take turns flying the drone and taking pictures. Encourage students to take pictures at different angles and altitudes.

Session 5: Drone shoot Day 2

- Students take turns taking aerial pictures at second location.

Session 6: Drone shoot Day 3

- Students take turns taking aerial pictures at third location.

Session 7: Review images and reflect, local artist or historian workshop

- Have images printed or compiled on a computer connected to a projector.
- Invite each student to say something about each image they took. Have the group respond with feedback, ideas or questions. Encourage the group to start thinking about creative applications for the images.
- Discussion Questions:
 - What do you see? Is there deeper meaning in this image?
 - What else can we say about this image?
 - What images stand out to you? Why?
- Optional: Invite a local photographer, photojournalist or visual artist to participate in the review. Invite them to offer ideas and ask questions.

Session 8: Example artwork and idea board

- Examples of Aerial Art: For added inspiration have students look at the work of Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu and other similar artists. What do you like (or not like) about their work? What inspiration might you draw from this?
- Have students create an idea board by pinning their actual images to a cork board or white board. Students can then add words and phrases and also make additional sketches. Encourage students to draw themes from the words and images.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - What are all the images and words telling us about our community?
 - Can we cluster together some words and images to create themes?

- How can we manipulate the images and use our creativity to further communicate the themes and ideas?

Session 9: Intro to Photoshop

- Use this [Photoshop Tutorial for Beginners](#)
- Import images into Photoshop and have students explore the basic functions such as applying effects, inserting text, using the lasso tool to create layers, using the paint bucket to fill colors.
- *[GIMP](#) is a free image editing software that can be used in place of Photoshop.

Sessions 10 & 11: Photoshop continued

- Students continue to work with images in Photoshop. Encourage students to experiment with images by turning them black & white or adding color saturation.

Session 12: Photoshop completion

- Students should finalize their digital images and export them in preparation for screen printing or digital printing.

Session 13: Screen printing planning session

- Students should finish exporting Photoshop files in preparation for screen-printing (or digital printing. Digital prints can be further transformed by having students cut out objects, use paint and markers and turn cut-outs into a collage. This is a recommended option if you do not have screen printing capability.)

Session 14: Field trip to art museum or art-making space

- If time and budget allow, organize a field trip to a local art museum, gallery or art-making space. Promote conversation about the actual meaning of the art as well they way it is presented.
- *This break in the art-making is so that staff can have the images “burned” on the frames. Identify a local screen print shop in your area who can do this for you or create your own screens by following this [DIY Quick guide to making screens](#) and ordering a screen printing starter kit like this one.

Sessions 15 - 17: Screenprinting

- Students screen print images onto designated materials -- Canvas, metal or wood all work well. Here's a [DIY Quick Guide to screen printing](#).

Session 18: Finalize Screenprints

Sessions 19 & 20: Exhibition Prep & Event Planning

- Students work collaboratively to design the installation of the gallery. Gallery exhibit can be a stand alone event or a component of a larger culminating showcase or community gathering.
- *Make sure students are ready to speak about their work and engage audience members.

Gallery Exhibition & Presentation

- Consider ways to engage audience in authentic ways:
- Students can stand near their works to ask and answer questions from attendees
- Place white paper or post-its near individual works and invite attendees to write statement or questions
- Hold a Q&A toward the end of the event
- [Example gallery art by 12th grader Destinee McCallister of the YMCA Lighthouse Project](#)

Re-Group and Reflect

- Students re-group to discuss the experience and complete a self-reflection survey.
- **Reflection Questions:**
 - What did you like most about this project/process?
 - What did you find challenging?
 - What did you learn?
 - What would you do differently next time?
 - Did this project/process challenge your thinking about art or community? If so, how?
 - How would you describe social practice art?

Knowledge, Skills, and Understandings

Understandings

- Youth will have an understanding of the relationship between art, technology and community
- Youth will understand the benefits and challenges of social practice art ([About social practice art](#))

Essential Questions

- What is the relationship between art and technology?
- What is the relationship between art and community? What is the role of art in building community?
- Can art have a role to play in urban planning issues such as gentrification, environmental justice, urban blight and community development?
- What do you/we want to say about our community (positive or negative)?
- Who is the target audience of our work? What do we hope the audience will get from our work?

Knowledge

- Students will know drone safety, various uses of drones,
- basic urban planning concepts, examples of map-based artwork
- Students will review maps of their community and know the various assets and challenges in their community

Skills

Students will be able to...

- articulate drone safety; identify parts of a drone; fly and land a drone;
- basic Photoshop skills such as photo manipulation; inserting text; applying effects ([Photoshop Tutorial for Beginners](#))
- Create screen printed artwork (optional)
- Present their works and explain the social practices and creative processes involved in creating their work