

# Building Collaborative Partnerships: Enhancing City and Indigenous Relations in La Crescent, MN

Jules Marzec  
Resilient Communities Project

## Abstract

This project explores strategies to foster respectful, collaborative partnerships between the City of La Crescent and Indigenous communities. The city aims to incorporate more indigenous history, culture, and art in their public spaces, starting with Overlook Plaza, a small piece of land overlooking the Mississippi River. This qualitative study identifies key principles essential for effective engagement. These insights offer a framework for sustainable, culturally respectful collaborations that advance shared goals and foster enduring partnerships.

## Place It! Activity

**Place It!** Activity held in La Crescent was aimed at engaging community members and stakeholders in visualizing the future design and use of public spaces, particularly **Overlook Plaza**. The Place It! Method is a hands-on, interactive approach that encourages participants to create physical models of spaces using everyday objects. This method allows individuals to express their visions for public spaces in a creative, inclusive, and accessible manner.

The activity focused on exploring how the space could reflect **Indigenous history and culture**, fostering a deeper sense of community connection and respect. By encouraging participants to reflect on their personal experiences and cultural perspectives, the activity revealed a variety of priorities, such as **cultural recognition, accessibility, environmental sustainability** and **community gathering**. The outcomes of the activity helped inform the findings and recommendations of this study



Figures 1 & 2 PlaceIt! Activity, La Crescent, MN Aug 2024

## Methods and Materials

This research employed a **qualitative approach**. The primary method of data collection was **semi-structured interviews**, complemented by a review of relevant literature on Indigenous engagement practices. **Seven total interviews** were conducted with government officials, Indigenous leaders, and key stakeholders involved in community engagement. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Patterns and recurring themes were identified through both inductive and deductive coding. Researchers also participated in a Hock youth field trip in La Crescent, focusing on incorporating indigenous culture and art into city spaces.

## Key Findings

### A. Personal and Continuous Engagement

- Trust requires ongoing, in-person communication.
- Start with small, low-cost events to build relationships over time.

### B. Cultural Sensitivity and Flexibility

- Adapt to different concepts of time and communication.
- Respectful language and acknowledgment of cultural practices are vital.

### C. Inclusivity and Shared Leadership

- Involve Indigenous communities at all stages of planning and execution.
- Shared leadership empowers Indigenous communities and promotes culturally appropriate outcomes.

### D. Trust and Accountability

- Building trust is an ongoing effort; transparency and feedback are key.
- Permanent staff help maintain consistency in relationships.

### E. Fair Compensation for Indigenous Experts

- Indigenous knowledge must be acknowledged and fairly compensated.
- Compensation can be monetary or in the form of resources, based on the contributor's needs.

## Recommendations

### 1. Build Lasting Personal Relationships

- Ensure diverse participation from city and Indigenous communities.

### 2. Respect Cultural Timelines

- Flexibility allows for comprehensive input and feedback.

### 3. Employ Inclusive and Collaborative Planning

- Co-stewardship: Indigenous leaders should be part of all decision-making. This ensures cultural alignment and effective project outcomes.

### 4. Compensate Indigenous Experts

- Provide monetary and non-monetary compensation to recognize their deep cultural expertise.

### 5. Foster Trust and Accountability

- Transparency and feedback are critical for building and maintaining trust.
- Permanent staff members should be responsible for ongoing engagement.

### 6. Engage the Entire Community

- Alternate event locations to foster mutual respect and inclusivity.
- Involve a broad range of voices from both communities to maintain strong relationships.

## Conclusions

The research project highlights a crucial intersection of historical memory and contemporary community engagement. Our findings underscore the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into public spaces, like Overlook Plaza. Researchers provided several recommendations for the city moving forward. By reflecting on the land's historical and cultural context, including the transformation of natural landscapes and the legacy of forced migration, we can create spaces that honor and recognize the deep-rooted connections between the local Indigenous communities and their ancestral lands.

## Contact

Jules Marzec  
Resilient Communities Project  
Humphrey School for Public Affairs  
University of Minnesota  
marze010@umn.edu



Resilient Communities Project

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



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