

2018 International Downtown Association Awards

Submitted by Downtown Cincinnati Inc.

Project: Things Are Looking Up: BLINK Backstage in Downtown Cincinnati

In October 2017, downtown Cincinnati saw itself with new eyes during the inaugural BLINK light and art festival. The four-day, free event was one of the largest light and art events in the nation, featuring 57 large-scale light installations projected onto iconic buildings and landmarks throughout 20 city blocks, mostly along the just-opened streetcar route. Over one million visitors came to see BLINK, an event that showcased the city's revitalized urban core, celebrated its historic architecture, and drove record setting traffic to bars and restaurants. To leverage this transformative opportunity, Downtown Cincinnati Inc. (DCI), in collaboration with key partners, produced a BLINK-connected event to drive traffic to an underdeveloped area in the Central Business District called Backstage.

Backstage, a nexus of two alleys (Gano and Ruth Lyons), was conceived in 1995 as an extension to the nearby performing arts complex, is an underutilized alley behind five bars, restaurants, and a boutique hotel, the 21c Museum Hotel. It proved to be an ideal location to extend BLINK. Located near one of the recently opened streetcar stations, Backstage is in the heart of the CBD near other larger scale BLINK light installations, and most importantly, the owners of the nearby bars and restaurants were eager to work with DCI.

DCI collaborated with Artworks, one of the organizers of BLINK, and a team of residents and business in the Backstage area, to choose a light installation that would work best in a functioning alley. The artists needed to adhere to specific guidelines that would allow for vehicle traffic, loading dock access, and residential parking. The installation was a series of large illuminated "archilace" halos suspended along the alleyway by Loop.pH, a London-based artist cooperative. The wire halos were illuminated by lighting rigs mounted on the rooftops and fire escapes in the alley, drawing the viewer's gaze upward.

On the ground, DCI partnered with 21c Museum Hotel and Nicholson's Tavern and Pub for an evening event to bring BLINK attendees into Backstage and support the nearby establishments. A DJ as well as "Cirque du Soleil"-inspired performances by Circus Mojo, a local circus arts organization, created a family-friendly event that transitioned into an adult crowd later in the evening with craft cocktails. Thousands of people walked through the alley and stopped to look up at the beautiful and intricate light installation above their heads.

The idea to activate an alley space with both light-based art and a community event was inspired by visits DCI made to Ottawa and Detroit for International Downtown Association conferences. In each city, an underutilized alley was transformed via creative use of light and artwork. These projects encouraged foot traffic and activity, while also increasing customers for nearby businesses. Such projects also transformed the alley spaces into improved pedestrian corridors and destinations in their own right, while also revealing an opportunity for future development on the site.

During the initial planning stages for BLINK in summer 2016, DCI joined the project as a sponsor at the \$15,000 level (which covered all expenses for the Backstage installation and event) and a supporter to provide additional outreach and promotion. DCI organized a Backstage working group made up of Artworks, as well as nearby arts institutions, restaurants, bars, residents, and office managers – to plan an event in the alley during BLINK.

By seizing on the recognized approach of using art and events to rethink the potential of alleyways, BLINK Backstage created a first step in changing the district into a more interactive space. The Backstage working group has continued these efforts, organizing an event for the Cincinnati Reds Opening Day festivities in March 2018.

In a post-event survey conducted by DCI, the respondents indicated sales increases from 20% to 75% over the same dates in 2016. Nicholson's, one of the organizers partners of BLINK Backstage saw a 20% increase for the weekend and offered, "We were blown away by the impact of this amazing event." 21c Museum Hotel, another partner, was sold out for the entire weekend and had a 33% increase at its restaurant, Metropole, and a 90% increase at the bar, adding, "We absolutely loved this event. The Backstage installation and alley party were amazing to witness. We had several locals staying downtown at the hotel which is something we love seeing." Lucy Blue Pizza, located around the corner from the alley had a 150% increase in sales, sharing, "BLINK was incredible for everyone and showcased our downtown wonderfully."

Red Bike, Cincinnati's bike share system, saw a 38% increase, noting "With all of the pedestrian traffic, Red Bike really was the best way to try to see all of BLINK." The Cincinnati Bell Connector streetcar with a station next to Backstage, had a 40% increase in ridership over the same period last year.

BLINK was produced by Agar, a special events company, Artworks, an award-winning non-profit that employs and trains local youth to create murals on downtown buildings and drive community impact, Brave Berlin, a local lighting production company, the Carol Ann and Ralph V Haile Jr. / U.S. Bank Foundation and the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. Funding for BLINK's \$3,000,000 budget was provided by local corporations and foundations.

Overall, BLINK had a significant impact on all of the businesses throughout downtown, particularly the restaurants and bars. An estimated one million people visited downtown during BLINK – an unprecedented number for a first-time, four-day event. By comparison, the 40-year Taste of Cincinnati, held over Memorial Day weekend each year, draws half a million visitors. The crowd for BLINK was enthusiastic, upbeat, and delighted, and included many suburban and regional visitors who had not been downtown in recent years. This offered DCI the opportunity to showcase downtown as an exciting and welcoming destination to all. News stories and social media reflected that feeling with more than 1,500 tweets, 7,000 Instagram posts, and 70 million traditional media impressions about BLINK in its first year.

While a festival of the size of BLINK may not be a realistic undertaking for every downtown, it is possible to develop "hyper local" programs within large-scale events by employing existing relationships with business partners and arts organizations. This project transformed the alleys in Backstage into a vibrant downtown connector, linking businesses in the area in an innovative new way. Through dynamic light-based artwork and an event produced by strong partnerships, BLINK Backstage created a space that drew people in, improving the vibrancy of the area, encouraging more foot traffic, and boosting customers to the restaurants and bars in the area.