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This is our final blog in a series written by speakers at [#RiseLocal](#). This week's story is by [Fay Darmawi](#), Founder of the SF Urban Film Festival.

Local innovation creates more resilient communities. In an era of rapid change, the resiliency of our communities to battle climate change, income inequality, and threats to democracy is contingent on creative problem solving.

I founded the **[SF Urban Film Fest](#)** (SFUFF) 4 years ago to serve as a catalyst for local innovation and creative problem solving in urban planning. What makes SFUFF a unique civic engagement platform is our focus on using film, a medium that is easy to comprehend and circulate. Film combines visuals, story structure, and music to make urban planning issues and methods

relatable and memorable. Often urban planning discussions rely on abstract communication tools such as maps, charts and graphs. But the most effective urban planners have always encouraged collaboration between city dwellers and government as well as the use of engagement strategies and tools that speak to all.

Making urban planning more accessible to the general population is important as we enter an uncertain future and need to reach audiences far and wide to gather the best and most creative ideas to stay resilient. A recent example of SFUFF's catalytic role was the screening of a short film by the StreetAir team composed of three teen-aged citizen scientists turned filmmakers.

SFUFF was not the first to screen the StreetAir grainy **short film**. Even with uneven audio and images jiggling from a hand-held camera, it's thesis was compelling: why is Columbus Avenue a thoroughfare for trucks and buses when clearly it's a one of San Francisco's most popular gathering places for people? The short film entitled "Columbus Discovers Air Pollution" had already won an award at a small environmental themed film festival. The award was well deserved as the film showed the tenacity and creativity of the young citizen scientists as they set off to prove the health risks of pitting cherished human scale public spaces against the pollution of constant vehicular traffic in their beloved North Beach neighborhood. The StreetAir team knew they had developed a way to understand and mitigate human health risks in their neighborhood, complete with data and a video to tell their story. The question was how were they going to get access to city staff who could help them realize the changes they wanted to make?

What made the SFUFF screening of the StreetAir film unique was the opportunity for the young people who created StreetAir to develop an action plan offering potential solutions to the problem identified in the film. Following the screening of their short film, the StreetAir team sat on a panel with a professional planner from the City of San Francisco Planning Department, Robin Abad. The StreetAir team - Zelda Zivny, Charlie Millenbah and Milo Wetherall - confronted Robin with a question of why the city could allow the pollution to harm their friends and family. Robin explained that the 4-lane Columbus Avenue serves as an important diagonal route for commuters from Marin County and the northwest parts

of the city heading to the Financial District. The StreetAir team countered that Columbus Avenue is lined with historic sidewalk cafes teeming with tourists and residents alike, and the StreetAir air pollution devices detecting unhealthy particulate levels from the constant stream of traffic. Furthermore, they added that the city could mitigate these effects if they regulated the placement of motorcycles away from parklets, synchronized traffic lights so cars would not idle, and reduced or eliminated truck traffic on Columbus Avenue. Robin gave them the bad news, “in the past, these concepts haven’t found strong support from local businesses and tourist operators.” But then he added, “the best way to make change is for locals to agree to make those changes – so sharing your work and ideas with local neighborhood organizations and institutions is one of the best ways to start shifting opinions.” That advice was what the StreetAir team needed – a plan going forward using film as a community organizing tool to distribute their data findings and implement change from the ground up.

The StreetAir team was recently awarded the State of California American Planning Association (APA) Award of Merit and plans to produce a few more 3-5 minute videos on ideas for improving Columbus Avenue to educate the neighborhood and push for change. SFUFF’s dream is to become an incubator for innovative approaches to problem solving in urban planning where projects that include film like StreetAir are born, developed, distributed, and ultimately implemented to make cities better for everyone.

It is this combination - visual storytelling with panel discussions with experts – that creates SFUFF’s secret sauce. While most film festivals focus on the process of filmmaking, SFUFF leverages film as a tool to solve the most pressing issues facing cities today. It is our hope that filmmaking can be a catalyst for civic change. We invite you to join us at the 4th annual SF Urban Film Fest, November 13-19, 2017 and get inspired to create the change you’ve been waiting for in your own community.

<https://www.newamerica.org/ca/blogs/film-catalyst-innovation-urban-planning/>