

# Howell Summit Gardens

Howell, MI

SETTING



Suburban

COST



\$150,000

SIZE



0.4 acres

OPEN SINCE

October  
2020

GRANTEE

Local  
non-profit



# A whimsical downtown gathering spot.

## Project Overview

Howell Summit Gardens is the center of gravity in downtown Howell, MI – and the brainchild of Kate Litwin, COO of Howell Main Street Inc. (HMS). HMS spearheads projects like Howell Summit Gardens Playground to create unique, inviting experiences that set downtown Howell apart from other communities.

The Built to Play grant helped transform the space from a vacant and derelict bank drive-thru lot to a whimsical and colorful public space for all ages to enjoy. Howell Summit Gardens is more than a playground that encourages free and imaginative play – it is a vibrant community commons that brings people together and advances local economic development goals.



It's been a launching point. It's definitely the gem of our downtown, and we're going to have more. Without this project, I don't think the federal government would be looking at giving us [more] money.

KATE LITWIN  
Howell Main Street Inc. COO, Downtown  
Development Authority Director & Project Lead



↑  
**The gnome hats** are a focal point and interpretive play feature. A testament to their popularity, kids have adopted many nicknames including the "spaceships" and "the three little pigs' houses."



Sited between a surface parking lot and main street businesses

↑  
**Local businesses** color life in the play space and have also been influenced by the play space's popularity – one resident remarked that there was a "trail of milkshake droppings" leading from the bakery to the play space, while an adjacent gas station gave its facade a face lift in response to the play space opening next door.



↑  
**Non-traditional play equipment** like table tennis, corn hole, and chess invite free play across a mix of generations – with some enterprising kids using gravel from the ground as the ping ball or chess piece.



# Origin story

## THE SPARK – FOOT TRAFFIC FOR A SLOW PART OF MAIN STREET

Before the project, the only other outdoor public spaces in Howell were lawns in front of institutional buildings like the courthouse and library. Initially, Litwin’s idea was to create a trail that would connect the library and the park to activate certain parts of town. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the project vision evolved into an outdoor room for Howell.



## DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION – A WHIMSICAL DOWNTOWN

A landscape architect pitched the “gnome” concept in response to Kate’s vision. Cost effective design leverages the site topography for slides and amphitheater seating. The gravel was donated and turned out to be an adaptable play element, too. Local volunteers helped build certain play elements. For example, a local brewery sent its staff to help build a maze feature while local artists designed painting patterns for other elements.



Creating a life-size fairy garden that would be like “stepping into a new world in the downtown” was Kate Litwin’s idea.

## COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION – PLAY IS NOT JUST FOR KIDS

In its pre-project state, the site was abandoned, overgrown, and littered. HMS held a series of charrettes and focus groups to start shaping the project. An engagement process coined the “future of downtown” emerged with placemaking as its focus. HMS heard that the community wanted a safe place for kids to play and a multi-purpose event space, but also, more fundamentally, a place where anyone could dwell without having to buy anything.

ALL PHOTOS: HOWELL MAIN STREET INC.



# Lessons learned



OUTCOME

**THE SPACE ENCOURAGES IMAGINATIVE PLAY**



“They really like the stage seating for **jumping up and down the seats.**”

– Parent of kids playing

LESSON

**Don’t over design – leave room for interpretation.**

Features – from gravel to mazes to gnome hats – that can be reinterpreted according to a child’s imagination encourage greater freedom to play and make the play space stand out against more common prescriptive play spaces.



OUTCOME

**THE PLAYGROUND INSPIRES MULTI-GENERATIONAL PLAY**



**50%**

of adults in Howell Summit Gardens were observed playing, versus only 7% of adults overall in the sites visited by the Gehl team.

LESSON

**Create spaces that are shared between kids and adults.**

Whether through small opportunities for play that appeal to adults and seniors such as introducing corn-hole features, or larger, strategic efforts like siting the site within the town’s “social district” where adults can stay with a drink while they watch their child play, encouraging people of all ages to stay and play adds to the vibrant public life of a play space.



OUTCOME

**THE PROJECT CATALYZED MAIN STREET DEVELOPMENT**



“This playground is inventive and creative and really cool. Otherwise, you go somewhere with a normal playground like at my middle school. **It’s cool that it is downtown.**”

– Kid playing

LESSON

**Connect play spaces to small businesses.**

This can create a win-win scenario where local businesses benefit from uptick in commercial activity and playgrounds are invigorated by goods and services available to visitors close by. The adjacency to shopping amenities can also make it easy to “stumble” on to the space when spending time nearby.