Project goals: Our goal was to create a unifying community space that would help foster educational, artistic and cultural exchange. Through the creation of this space, we hoped to strengthen community participation, develop educational art workshops for youth, and systematize restorative actions through sustainable community-engagement projects.

Additional funding: The grant funds were supplemented by two crowdfunding campaigns; one we created and another was administered by University of Iowa Professor James Dreier, who had previously visited the Los Pocitos community with a group of UI students and wanted to support the community through the project’s efforts.

Project background: During our study abroad in Havana, Mitra began working with University of Havana Professor Michael Sánchez Torres and his project, Akokán: a local initiative to improve the quality of life in Los Pocitos, a marginalized neighborhood in Marianao, Havana. Through collaboration with Michael, other community leaders, and funding from the Colorado College Keller Venture Grant, Mitra offered the Akokán initiative’s first weekly art workshops to youth and organized community development projects through which Evyn, and other students, became involved in Los Pocitos. Within the greater Havana region, Los Pocitos faces high stigmatization based on religious and socioeconomic prejudices. Through our project, we wished to address issues of marginalization and economic disadvantage in Los Pocitos, hoping to create spaces and opportunities for cultural exchange to overcome locally-projected and internalized stigmas.

Project challenges and implementation: Trying to carry out construction work on a short deadline in Cuba, during the hottest months on the island, proved to be impossible--so we ended up extending the project an extra five weeks. One major challenge in doing just about anything in Cuba is being given the official permission by whomever deems him/herself official enough to grant his/her permission. Although we thought we had the adequate permission for construction on our intended site, we learned upon arrival that that was not the case and after a month of trying to attain it, realized that we weren’t going to be able to. In addition, diving into a community development project on an island that has very limited access to resources proved very difficult. Post-hurricane relief measures and other recent political factors had resulted in an even higher scarcity of construction materials such as cement, wood, iron, and paint, greatly prolonging the construction process. We were adamant about sourcing work and materials from within the community to provide opportunities for locals to directly contribute to and benefit from the project. While the lack of materials and permission caused a major setback, we worked with community members to reassess and reconfigure the intended outdoor center; distributing the designed components between various communal spaces throughout the neighborhood, all of which we were able to attain permission for.

The reformed spaces include: the local family clinic, which we painted and supplied with a new desk, shelf, ceiling fan, and donated medical supplies; an outdoor classroom off the back of the clinic, with a locally made ceramic table and benches, metal overhang and cement base; an indoor classroom and meeting space renovated from an abandoned room of the local sports stadium; and development of La Escalera, one of the more vulnerable areas of the neighborhood. In La Escalera, community members helped to clean the trash contamination surrounding the river, the State helped to restore broken foot bridges and various artists painted murals on house walls. Although this deviated from our original vision of the development of one centralized community center, the spaces we were able to help transform are all centrally located and important spaces that most community members have contact with on a frequent basis. Furthermore, this reform benefited the ownership, accountability and sustainability of the
development measures, incorporating more community leaders as the responsible overseers and caretakers of the various components of a greater whole.

By focusing on multiple spaces, we were able to expand our network within the community and work with people of many different professions. Our collaboration with the wonderful leaders of the Akokán initiative and other community members who contributed to the project was the foundation that guided our entire experience. We also collaborated with Cuba’s first private design shop, Clandestina, to make a mold of our project’s design and teach a printmaking workshop, allowing each participating child to make a poster and print the design onto a t-shirt, which they artistically individualized with fabric paint. Through our initiative for Cuban artists to paint murals within the community, we worked with one painter native to Los Pocitos, two well-known Cuban artists that were from the neighborhood but had not been back since their childhoods, and five other local artists that had little to no prior contact with that part of their city.

Day to day, the most invigorating and rewarding aspect of our project was leading the youth workshops. We organized three workshops a week (many of which incorporated guest artists, both local and international) with a wide variety of artistic, educational focuses, including: photography, visual storytelling, modelling and working the catwalk, environmental awareness and appreciation, recycled instruments and music making, theater, contemporary dance and kids’ yoga. Our time with and relationship to the youth of the community was illuminating and gratifying, and in many ways kept us inspired and motivated to push forward with all elements of our project.

We planned our final event with the intention of inaugurating the community spaces and celebrating the end of the summer workshops and development projects. In addition, it was an opportunity to invite people from the greater region to Los Pocitos to take part in the cultural festivities. The day included workshops from local artists, a community gallery showcasing the art produced by youth in the summer workshops, a documentary screening featuring community leader Rayza San Lazar and her local recycling initiative, a storytelling performance, a carnival parade, and much more.

Overall, one of the biggest lessons we took away from the project was to be proactive and take initiative, trusting in our leadership capabilities, while still valuing and respecting the voices and perspectives of the community members. In the wake of all of the complications and frustrations, the patience, respect and trust that grew between us and various people that offered us their time, input, knowledge and beauty carried the project through. Struggling through the challenges of the construction process with community members made our relationships that much stronger and the fruits of our collective labor that much sweeter.

**The impact of peace:** Peace is a quality of existence. It is a state of personal consciousness, of interpersonal harmony, of balanced energy—grounding and liberating. Peace is the foundation upon which love and creativity can thrive, the roots which nourish relationships, the understanding and empowerment of self, others and all that surrounds us. We believe that peace will continue to be cultivated through the use of these creative community spaces, and through the sustained workshops that are focused on educating and empowering the next generation of change-makers.

“For me, peace is present in our project through the beauty and unity of the collective. It can be felt in the cooperative spaces that have been created and the cumulative understanding and growth that this shared journey has fostered.” —Mitra Ghaffari

“Despite the initial challenges we faced, we were able to think of alternative creative ways to reach our desired impact. Cuba forever invites me to challenge my values and viewpoints, and I am grateful for every lesson in creativity and humility that I learned through this project. Cultivating a network of community relationships was one of the most valuable aspects of the experience, and I cherished working with both older and younger generations in Los Pocitos.” —Evyn Papworth
(above) Before and after sample photos of the renovated classroom, after installing a new door and windows, repairing infrastructure, painting, installing electricity and equipping the space with furniture, supplies and the children’s artwork.

(below) A group photo with some of the students and leaders of the printmaking workshop, showing off our freshly-pressed project t-shirts. We designed the project logo to include the heart of Akokán (its meaning in Yoruba), the locally symbolic Ceiba tree of growth and unity, with its roots forming a peace sign.