



Reimagining
the Civic Commons

Place Driving Equity

**An evidence-based action guide on the
role of public space for shared prosperity**



Contributors

In 2020, a multi city working group of practitioners and thought leaders convened virtually for a series of eight meetings to discuss the role of the public realm in delivering equity and prosperity in communities. The contents of this publication are a synthesis of these evidence-based discussions.

Authors

Donald Taylor-Patterson

U3 Advisors

George Abbott

Memphis River Parks Partnership

Paul Bauknight

Minneapolis Parks Foundation

Alexa Bush

City of Detroit

Kyle Kutuchief

Knight Foundation

Bridget Marquis

Reimagining the Civic Commons | U3 Advisors

Working Group Members

Lisa Adkins

Blue Grass Community Foundation

Christina Crutchfield

The Heights Community Development Corporation

Valerie Friedmann

City of Lexington

Suzie Graham

Downtown Akron Partnership

Tonnetta Graham

Strawberry Mansion Community Development Corporation

Kathryn Ott Lovell

City of Philadelphia

Tanja Mitchell

The Works, Inc.

Patrick Morgan

City of Philadelphia

Jared Myers

The Heights Community Development Corporation

Brandi Peacher

Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government

Van Meter Pettit

Town Branch Trail, Inc.

Chris Spahr

Centennial Parkside Community Development Corporation

Bronlynn Thurman

GAR Foundation

Jenifer Wuorenmaa

Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government

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Preface: The Urgency of Now

Place—the unique space where the physical environment meets the social, emotional and spiritual aspects unique to human life—is one of the most important drivers of equity and prosperity in communities.

The places where people come together to live, work, learn and socialize shape everything from mental and physical health to economic opportunity and success.

However, inequity in place fosters a world where some enjoy the opportunity offered by strong and vibrant public spaces, while others suffer from long-standing disinvestment. The PolicyLink Equity Manifesto defines equity as the “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential” (PolicyLink Equity Manifesto). While there has always been inequity in the quality and quantity of public spaces across American communities, the compounding crises in 2020 brought on by COVID-19 and civil unrest in response to persistent police brutality and racism have only further magnified it.

As spaces for gathering and community shut down due to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and people became confined to their homes, the role of public space and its intersection with public health became increasingly apparent.

Simultaneously in 2020, public spaces became sites of demonstration and protest, leading to growing conversations about access and privilege in public space. Today, as communities turn increasing attention to infrastructure and recovery, there is an urgent and unprecedented opportunity to encourage practitioners, policymakers and funders to consider the importance of public spaces in driving outcomes to improve equity and shared prosperity as these critical investments are made.

How We Got Here

Inequity, segregation and the built environment

Neighborhood decline, concentrated poverty and racism are central challenges to advancing more equitable communities and cities.

While some neighborhoods in decline face threats of displacement due to an improving market, those that don't rebound economically also tend to lose stability and population. Also, they remain overwhelmingly high-poverty neighborhoods. These pockets of concentrated poverty are persistent and growing across the country. Three-quarters of urban neighborhoods in the US that were considered high poverty in 1970 are still poor today. Meanwhile, the number of neighborhoods facing poverty rates exceeding 30 percent has tripled and the number of poor people living in these neighborhoods has doubled (Cortright, City Observatory). Persistent and deep segregation resulting from long-standing racist policies, racial bias and stigma have meant that many of these communities are majority Black (Williams and Emamdjomeh, *Washington Post*).

Chronic disinvestment and devaluation contribute to growing neighborhood decline and poverty. A 2020 Brookings study revealed that homes and businesses located in majority-Black communities are consistently undervalued relative to their quality. Holding variables like size of the home, quality of schools and other amenities in the neighborhood constant, homes in Black neighborhoods are undervalued by 23 percent,

resulting in over \$150 billion in cumulative losses (Perry et al, Brookings). Devaluation leads to further disinvestment, stigma and economic inequity.

Racism and neighborhood stigma have material effects on Black-majority communities, impacting investment and the long-term trajectory of both neighborhoods and the people living within them (Sampson and Raudenbush, Institute for Research on Poverty). While Black residents feel the brunt of these effects, these issues aren't confined to Black-majority communities. Higher levels of racial segregation are associated with lower incomes for Blacks, lower educational attainment for whites and Blacks, and lower levels of safety for all area residents. Economic and racial segregation can hold back an entire region's economy, impeding business growth and increasing the incidence of violence (Acs et al, Urban Institute).

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Investing in the public realm can be a catalyst for long-term change in communities that have suffered from systemic racism, disinvestment, devaluation and stigma. One step toward undoing these harms is to eliminate racism and build trust in communities. In order to do this, however, we must first acknowledge past and present racism in the public realm. As Carolyn Finney notes in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow and racial violence in the US have played a major role in determining who can and should have access to high-quality public spaces (Finney). While slavery and Jim Crow laws specifically targeted African Americans, these issues extend to other minority groups as well. A 2015 study by the Hispanic Federation noted that many Latino communities also lack access to safe places to walk, bike and play outside. While almost half of all whites in the US live within walking distance of a park, only one-third of Latinos share that same privilege (Hispanic Federation).

It is important to understand that in many cases, disinvestment in the public realm has been targeted and intentional. For example, in an effort to combat rising crime rates in Philadelphia in the early 1970s, former mayor Frank Rizzo absorbed Philadelphia's Fairmount Park Guard—unarmed employees who worked on foot, horseback and bicycle to provide safety, cleanliness and information to visitors throughout the parks—into

the Philadelphia Police Department and shifted funds from the parks to the police. However, when this plan did not reduce crime rates, Rizzo cut the park budget even further, reducing the Fairmount Park System budget to just 1.1 percent of the city total—the smallest budget in the system's history and half the size it was under the previous administration. Like many parks systems in America, almost 50 years later Philadelphia Parks & Recreation remains underfunded (Peters, Green Philly).

While many of the issues contributing to inequity in American communities are deep and systemic, investments in the public realm and neighborhoods can have ripple effects, improving not only the built environment but the overall physical, mental and economic health of communities. There is an urgent need for increased and smarter investments in the public realm to yield equity and shared prosperity, especially for disenfranchised communities.

A Call to Action

Equity, shared prosperity and investment in the public realm

Investment in the public realm and neighborhoods has positive health, economic opportunity and wealth-building effects and is critical to advancing equity in communities across America.

Disinvestment and devaluation amplify negative outcomes for residents in disenfranchised communities. Adversely, studies have shown that access to high-quality greenspaces can have significant mental and physical health benefits. A 2014 study in the *Journal of Mental Health Policy and Economics* found that mental health in urban areas is strongly tied to residential proximity to parks, with residents who live farther from parks experiencing higher levels of psychological distress (Sturm and Cohen, *Journal of Mental Health Policy and Economics*). Another study found that American citizens report living happier lives when their state spends more on providing public goods, like parks and libraries (Flavin, *Social Science Research*). The benefits of access to high-quality public spaces aren't solely psychological, however. Nature-rich neighborhoods can help deliver physical health equity as well. For example, the addition of street trees can help to cool neighborhoods by several degrees during a heat wave and even filter air pollution when planted near roads (McDonald et al, The Nature Conservancy). These investments in the public realm can have noteworthy impacts. A study in England found that lower-income communities with high levels of green space have mortality rates similar to those of higher-income

communities (Mitchell and Popham, *The Lancet*). It is, therefore, concerning that 38 percent of Americans say their community lacks convenient outdoor spaces to run, walk or exercise (ULI).

In addition to affecting health outcomes, the level of investment in the public realm and neighborhoods can significantly impact the opportunity and overall outcomes of residents in a given community. A Belgian study examining associations between green space in residential areas and intelligence and behavior found that children raised in greener urban environments have stronger cognitive functions, such as memory skills and attention, and higher IQ (Bijnens et al, *PLOS Medicine*). A separate study on race and economic opportunity in the US found that neighborhoods have causal childhood exposure effects: in 99 percent of US neighborhoods, Black boys grow up to earn less than white boys from

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families with similar incomes. However, Black boys who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods with low levels of racial bias among whites at a younger age had better outcomes including higher earnings in adulthood (Chetty et al).

Further studies show that inequity in investment in the public realm and neighborhoods affects wealth-building and economic mobility in communities. Racial wealth disparities are considerable in the US. As of 2016, the median wealth of white households was 10 times the wealth of Black households and eight times that of Hispanic households (Kochhar and Cilluffo, Pew). Additionally, the Great Recession disproportionately impacted the wealth of Black, Asian and Latino households: Asian and Black households lost over half of their net worth (54 percent and 53 percent, respectively) and Latino households lost nearly two-thirds of their net worth (65 percent) while white households lost just 16 percent (Tippett et al, Center for Global Policy Solutions). Multiple studies have shown that investments in public space can increase value, offering wealth building opportunities, if done with intention. When a property is adjacent to a park or open space, research shows that its value is significantly increased by up to 40 percent. Meanwhile, poorly maintained parks can detract from the vibrancy and value of nearby properties (ULI). The data is clear; intentional investments in public space and neighborhoods can support more equitable communities.



Eliminating Racism and Building Trust

Focusing on civic engagement and socioeconomic mixing in the public realm

Systemic injustices throughout American history, often perpetuated by institutions tasked to serve communities, have created situations in which many communities, especially low income communities and communities of color, have a righteous distrust of those with the power to shape the public realm.

In order to progress, many public-space practitioners find themselves needing to both address inequities perpetuated by their predecessors and build new trusting relationships with communities. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to building trust. The Trust/Distrust Matrix from Jens Emborg (et al) provides a useful framework. For example, in some cases a need for “trust building” may actually be a need for “distrust reduction” due to harms from the past (Jens Emborg et al). Understanding this nuance can be the difference between a successful project and one that fails due to a lack of community backing.

The Trust/Distrust Matrix breaks the broader concept of “trust” into three key distinctions: trust versus distrust judgments, calculus versus identity bases for those judgments and between-trust judgments assigned at the individual versus more institutional scales. In short, calculus-based judgements are founded on evidence, reason, predictability, etc. while identity-based judgements

are predicated on relationships, values, shared identities, morals/ethics, etc. A situation in which an individual or community is distrustful of an institution due to calculus-based judgements (e.g., a community that has seen disinvestment in their parks and playgrounds being distrustful of a parks department) is very different from a situation in which that community is distrustful of an individual based on identity-based judgement (e.g., a community that is distrustful of a planner who is not from their community). Understanding the nuance of each situation is key to determining the best path toward building trust.

Investment in public spaces can build trust in and of itself, both amongst different groups within a community and between community members and institutions. Research from the Center for Active Design revealed that disinvestment in public amenities catering to children was associated with lower civic trust. Conversely, investment in those amenities contributed higher civic trust, even amongst people without children. The research found that those who used well-lit parks were more likely to participate in elections, be better stewards of their neighborhoods and contribute to public life, while public spaces with broken lights were associated with a 20 percent lower perception of public safety (Budds, Curbed). Public space is also one

of the primary opportunities for creating connections across social divisions. With low barriers to entry, public spaces are uniquely positioned to facilitate new shared connections and social interactions with groups from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as different beliefs, nurturing greater tolerance and an appreciation for diversity (Madanipour).

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Acknowledging legacies of racism and inequity in the public realm is critical—and then must be followed by action. One step is to dismantle and rebuild the public realm, where necessary, to address legacies of racism and create new, welcoming environments.

This work can begin in the following ways:

- Storytelling, history and memorials that center the experiences of residents in disenfranchised communities can help address psychological barriers.
- Ensuring staff are welcoming (everything from staff demeanor to uniforms) and creating flexible rules that focus on comfort and experience can make spaces more inviting to community members who may have not felt welcomed in the past.
- Staffing that reflects the diversity of visitors and paid internships and fellowships that lead to jobs for community members can shift perceptions of public spaces and institutions.
- Prioritizing multimodal access to public spaces by making them accessible by foot, bike, transit, etc. can ensure all who want to access the space are able.
- Marketing, communications and programming that reflect the diversity of the community can help people see themselves in the space.

CASE STUDY

Confederate Statue Removal in Public Spaces

In Memphis, a group of nonprofit partners and public agencies has used design and programming to transform a previously underused six-block area beside the Mississippi River into a series of reimagined, vibrant community spaces called the Fourth Bluff. In an effort to remedy past and present harm felt by many residents in the majority Black city, the Fourth Bluff transformation started with the renaming of two formerly Confederate parks and the subsequent removal of a statue of Jefferson Davis from Fourth Bluff Park.

With the names and monuments removed, the nonprofit partner charged with daily management of the riverfront then worked to ensure the new spaces were inviting and welcoming to people of all backgrounds. This work included capital investments in trees, native meadow plantings and park amenities as well as a new approach to staffing and programming.

Today, the park design encourages visitors to connect with nature in a way the former parks did not, and comfortable, flexible gathering spaces are designed to encourage lingering and to allow for conversation among strangers. Art pieces from Black artists replace the former Confederate monuments. New park rangers, who reflect the diversity of Memphis, are tasked with not only maintaining the spaces but also welcoming all visitors to the park and facilitating a great experience. Intentionally designed spaces and programming offer a variety of experiences for people from all walks of life, helping bring people from different backgrounds—who might otherwise never meet—together.

It's important to note, however, that reimagining these spaces required creative, collaborative action. The City of Memphis had been working on removing the Confederate monuments from the parks for years prior to no avail, due to a state law that prevented communities from



removing historic monuments. In order to get around this, the city sold the two parks to a nonprofit, Memphis Greenspace, that worked swiftly to remove the Confederate monument from Fourth Bluff Park on the evening the sale was approved (Next City).

CASE STUDY

Centering Black Culture and Black Space

In Chicago, local partners like the Rebuild Foundation are working to transform perceived deficits by investing in people, programming and facilities that center Black culture and Black space in some of Chicago's most disinvested communities.

The Rebuild Foundation has worked to renovate and reinvest in sites like the Stony Island Arts Bank, a former community savings and loan bank that now offers 17,000 square feet of arts-related space to the South Side community in Chicago, the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, a rehabilitated public housing project that provides housing for artists and community members, and the St. Laurence School, a former elementary school turned creative entrepreneurship incubator to support artists and entrepreneurs of color. All of these projects share a common goal: to revitalize assets already present in the community and to foster “landscapes of belonging” in communities where decades of disinvestment and racist policies have created places where many people have not had access to cultural amenities and spaces that center their identities and experiences. In addition to space, Rebuild Foundation offers programmatic and research opportunities for local creatives who wish to explore, discover and reflect on the Johnson Publishing Company Collection, the University of Chicago's glass lantern slides, the Ed J. Williams Collection of “negrobilia,” Frankie Knuckles' personal vinyl collection and the Tamir Rice Gazebo Memorial on the Stony Island Arts Bank lawn.

The Rebuild Foundation found that by taking a platform approach to host mission-aligned individuals and organizations rather than acting solely as a programmer, they were able to amplify their impact, activate sites more frequently and offer a stronger sense of ownership to local community members. Organizations like the Illinois Humanities Education Division, which now has a satellite office at Stony Island Arts Bank, have been able to create new programming around the Arts Bank collections.



Local artists utilize the spaces to host weekly classes and programming. The platform approach not only allows the Rebuild Foundation to work around limited staff and capacity but also offers new space for individuals and organizations to create the spaces and programs they want in their communities (Bokhari, A Platform for Community; Lessons from Chicago Civic Commons).

Prototyping and Co-creation

Another approach to building trust and relationships within communities is to focus on prototyping and co-creation as a means to encourage community members to be involved in the process early and deliver quick but impactful projects that show a commitment to the community. Many times,

well-intentioned projects can backfire because community members were not involved enough in the creation of the project. Residents who are involved in the creation of their own spaces feel a deeper sense of connection to spaces and are more likely to both use them and take care of them.

CASE STUDY

Relationship-building through Co-creation

In Akron, Summit Metro Parks has worked closely with the community to turn the former Summit Lake pump house into the new Summit Lake Nature Center, which opened in 2021.

The center is complete with exhibits that honor both the natural and cultural history of the lake on the first floor and a second floor devoted entirely to community programming. The Nature Center did not start with a permanent building, however. In 2017, Summit Metro Parks responded to a desire in the community to engage with nature by transforming an empty room at the nearby community center into a welcoming, nature-infused space for curious residents of all ages to discover the natural wonder in their own neighborhood. Programming at the pop-up nature center included birding classes, fishing derbies, discussions with naturalists, astronomy and more. This pop-up space helped not only quickly bring life to a bland meeting room but offered residents a new perspective of the natural beauty of Summit Lake and helped build relationships and trust between community members and the Summit Metro Parks.



Resident-led and Neighborhood-focused Staffing and Programming

In addition to prototyping and co-creation, implementing resident-led, neighborhood-focused programming and staffing can both help to build trust and give residents a

sense of ownership over programs and initiatives, helping to ensure long-term success.

CASE STUDY

Programming and Staffing to Build Trust

In Southwest Philadelphia, Bartram's Garden, a 50-acre, public park and National Historic Landmark on the Schuylkill River is taking a layered approach to prioritizing nearby neighbors, building trust while at the same time continuing to serve as a regional destination.

In 2012, leadership at Bartram's Garden shifted its mission to become the "backyard" for Southwest Philadelphia with a focus on engaging nearby residents and creating a space where people from all walks of life feel as welcome as they would in a friend's backyard. In order to achieve this, Bartram's Garden has made a concerted effort to connect with nearby residents and create programming and experiences that draw in a variety of users. Community leaders also advise Bartram's Garden and institutional partners on programming, neighborhood investments and local priorities through the Southwest Community Leadership Circle. Programming at the garden includes everything from free community boating to gardening events to outdoor movies and concerts. Residents of Southwest Philadelphia and those with Pennsylvania's ACCESS card (which provides card holder's with Cash Assistance, SNAP and Medical Assistance benefits) receive tickets to tours, events and other programming at a cost of only \$2.

Bartram's Garden is also home to the Sankofa Community Farm, an African diaspora-focused community farm,



orchard and community garden. Sankofa employs roughly 20 paid local high school interns through its youth program, produces and distributes over 15,000 pounds of food each year, works with over 50 local families in its community garden and more. Building off the success of the farm's award-winning youth leadership program, the garden has also established a parallel river-focused internship.

By emphasizing the importance of making sure residents of Southwest Philadelphia in particular have access to the garden and are deeply involved in programming and staffing, Bartram's has created a community where over 80 percent of nearby residents, who were polled via a door-to-door survey in 2017, indicated that they'd visited the garden within the past year. Over 95 percent indicated that they felt welcome (Bartram's Garden; My backyard is Bartram's Garden).

Delivering Health Equity

Advancing environmental sustainability through the public realm

Investment in the public realm can also be a pathway toward advancing health equity in communities.

A 2019 report from the Outdoor Industry Association found that outdoor participation rates are lower among Black and Hispanic Americans than Caucasian and Asian Americans. Center for Disease Control (CDC) data has shown that low-income communities and communities of color often don't have the same access to facilities, resources and environments for physical activity as white communities. Furthermore, these communities often have poor street and sidewalk infrastructure and face disproportionately high exposure to violence (CDC). With data from Smart Growth America, author Angie Schmitt highlights the considerable health crisis of Black and Latino pedestrians being at higher risk than white pedestrians of getting hit by a car, partly due to neighborhood disinvestment and street design (Angie Schmitt, Smart Growth America's *Dangerous by Design 2021*). Minority communities are more likely to have fewer and more dangerous public spaces.

In addition to the physical health factors, studies have shown that many psychological issues can be exacerbated by disinvestment in the public realm. Negative neighborhood environments can add to and amplify other stressors, contributing to increased rates of depression (Carolyn E. Cutrona et al). Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) considers "community" (neighborhood trust and safety, community-based

participation, violence/crime, attributes of the natural and built environment, neighborhood deprivation) one of five core areas in its framework for understanding social determinants of mental disorders and mental well-being, and presents opportunities for intervening to reduce risk (WHO).

One way to promote health equity in communities is to invest in a dignified and well-connected public realm for all people. Here are a few examples of actions:

- Investing in walking and biking infrastructure, Vision Zero initiatives and complete streets programs, especially in low-income and minority communities, can help to create safer environments for outdoor activity.
- Viewing civic assets as a portfolio and encouraging cross-silo collaboration amongst civic agencies (parks departments, transportation departments, etc.) can ensure investments are effective and well connected.

Investing in Maintenance

In addition to creating well-connected spaces, ensuring spaces (both new and existing) are well-maintained can ensure that they remain accessible and desirable. On one end of the spectrum, this might look like ensuring playground equipment is safe and functional. On the other end, it might look like a program to restore vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods. In fact, a 2018 study found that restoration of vacant lots not only increased

perceptions of safety but also reduced crimes overall, including gun violence, burglary and nuisances, and increased the use of outside spaces for relaxing and socializing. Remediating vacant land via small and inexpensive interventions such as greening, mowing and trash cleanup, significantly reduced gun violence (Charles C. Branas et al; Ruth Moyer et al).

CASE STUDY

Investing in Public Parks for Health Equity

In Richmond, California, a cross-sector collaboration is helping to advance equity throughout the city. Pogo Park, a local community development corporation, has been working since 2007 to transform disinvested parks into well-utilized, green, safe places for children.

Pogo Park is currently the steward of two public parks in the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond: Elm Playlot and Harbor-8 Park. Since the start, local residents have been involved in the design, build and evaluation of the parks. By ensuring all “pogo parks” have certain basics, including staff, an office and rich play opportunities along with intentionally hiring and training community members to plan, design and build parks, Pogo Park ensures spaces remain well-maintained, safe and accessible for all members of the community.

Pogo Park has been intentional about ensuring the vision and mission are iterative and community based, making changes to the vision as the community changes and implementing new ideas from community members where possible. Following the revitalization of Elm Playlot and the Harbor-8 Park, a group of local teens developed an idea to make the neighborhood safer for children and



families through the creation of the Yellow Brick Road, a walking and biking path that connects the two “pogo parks,” along with other community amenities across the neighborhood.

Pogo Park is not just about creating beautiful spaces for children and families to play, however. It is part of a larger vision in the city to invest in the long-term health and wellness of city residents. Richmond was one of the first cities in California to add a health and wellness category to its general plan. By making this a priority for the city overall, Pogo Park has been able to receive support from various city agencies, including funding from the city health department, foundations and other partners invested in improving health and wellness outcomes for local residents (Stories of Intentional Inclusion: Pogo Park).

Nature-rich Public Spaces

Another method to advance health equity through the public realm is to invest in nature-rich public spaces. Programs and initiatives that increase the tree canopy in neighborhoods, plant street trees and reduce the space devoted to cars, while increasing space devoted to parks and other natural spaces, can improve the physical character of neighborhoods and the overall health of

residents. Designs and programming that invite people into nature can help to improve access and utilization of nature-rich spaces. Health providers, hospitals, public health organizations, etc. can be key partners in both the physical and programmatic elements of creating a more nature-rich public realm.

CASE STUDY

Health-oriented Programming

Hosted by Fairmount Park Conservancy, We Walk PHL, a free walking group in 15 parks throughout Philadelphia, increases the use of Philadelphia's parks, encourages outdoor activity and helps residents throughout the city meet their neighbors.

We Walk PHL was launched as a pilot program in 2017 and has since become a long-term initiative, with groups meeting several times per week at various public parks. In addition to the regular walks, the conservancy is also partnering with a local birdwatcher whose mission is to connect people of color to the natural world right outside

their doors. There will also be a team leading visitors on educational walks in We Walk PHL sites that are watershed parks.

We Walk PHL receives programmatic support from Philadelphia Parks & Recreation and programmatic and funding support from the City of Philadelphia's Department of Public Health. Leaders are recruited from the local neighborhood, are provided stipends and are trained on pedestrian advocacy, walkability as a racial justice issue and how to be inclusive and welcoming to people with all abilities. The long-term goal is to empower We Walkers to be park ambassadors and advocates, both formally and informally (We Walk PHL).



CASE STUDY

Greening Neighborhoods through Tree Planting

Since 2012, the City of Philadelphia, in partnership with public and private partners, has been working toward a goal to reach 30 percent tree canopy coverage in every Philadelphia neighborhood through a program called TreePhilly.

With the goal of advancing environmental justice and increasing equitable access to trees, TreePhilly works to connect local residents with the resources needed to both plant and care for street and yard trees in their neighborhoods. Since the inception of the program, TreePhilly has planted over 21,000 trees and engaged over 9,000 residents.

As part of its effort to advance environmental justice, TreePhilly has paid close attention to the most vulnerable neighborhoods in Philadelphia. TreePhilly staff have directly reached out to residents in neighborhoods of highest vulnerability to extreme heat during the summer to remind them to water their trees during dry spells.



They have also been utilizing data to compare tree canopy rates with crime, poverty and health demographics to determine where new trees should be prioritized. These focused initiatives not only help ensure best practices for taking care of young trees but also work to ensure equity in tree access, further the positive health impacts of green communities and build trust between residents and the city's tree institutions (TreePhilly).

CASE STUDY

Health-care Prioritizing Public Space

Supported by Baptist Health South Florida in Miami, the Meditation Garden at South Miami Hospital provides a peaceful area for people to relax, rest and reflect.

Opened in 2018, the garden was spurred by alignment with the recent investment in The Underline, a 10-mile linear park, urban trail and public art destination below the Miami-Dade County's Metrorail. Baptist Health South Florida and the Friends of The Underline share a common mission to promote health equity and well-being through the creation of inviting public spaces. Conveniently located along The Underline and adjacent to the South Miami Hospital, the Meditation Garden provides a healthy outdoor space for hospital staff, visitors, patients and local residents (Meditation Garden Dedication).



Image courtesy of Baptist Health South Florida

Advancing Equitable Wealth Creation

Creating value and opportunities for diverse connections through the public realm

Investment in the public realm can provide a pathway to advancing more equitable wealth creation and wealth building in communities, especially in disenfranchised and disinvested communities.

Data has shown that most communities that were redlined in the 1930s remain low-to-moderate income (74 percent) and minority (64 percent) neighborhoods today, a key contributor to the growing Black-white wealth gap (Mitchell and Franco, NCRC). For instance, Detroit neighborhoods redlined in the 1930 continue to see the highest rates of vacant and publicly owned property.

One of the most effective ways to advance more equitable wealth creation and wealth building is to invest directly in neighborhoods and residents. As Patrick Sharkey (et al) note in their 2020 *New York Times* article “The Gaps Between White and Black America, in Charts” America has rarely directed resources to the neighborhoods and residents most harmed by racist policy as a means to atone for decades of disinvestment and disenfranchisement. One of the most direct ways to shift this is to invest directly in people through local hiring and procurement initiatives.

Here are a few potential examples:

- Focus on local hiring initiatives that hire directly from target neighborhoods, and help to both increase job opportunities for residents and create a stronger connection between community members and local nonprofit organizations, institutions, government agencies, etc.
- Commit to local procurement initiatives that contract with local businesses for goods and services and keep dollars in the community that might otherwise flow elsewhere. Both of these initiatives put money directly into the pockets of community members and local business owners, helping to improve the economic health of the community overall.

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CASE STUDY

Hyperlocal Workforce Development

The City of Detroit has been developing targeted and intentional workforce opportunities for neighborhood residents with significant barriers to employment to participate in public-space construction and development.

Working with nonprofit partners, the city recruited directly from the neighborhood of its civic commons efforts and employed a crew of eight people to clear and prepare vacant land for construction, clear residential alleys and vacant lots, and perform ongoing maintenance. They are now scaling that work as a transitional workforce program that

will expand the reach of who they can employ—up to 100 participants—with a goal of placing people in full-time jobs of their choosing after gaining experience and skills working in the neighborhood. This work in the community, which is construction-based and more temporary, is considered the springboard for employment, rather than the end goal. It has the added benefit of deeply engaging residents in the work (who might not otherwise participate due to the financial burdens they are facing) and creating stewards for public spaces in the neighborhood. It has allowed the team to leverage a number of capital and place-based improvements into investments in human capital, combining both the physical and economic stabilization of the community.

A hyperlocal workforce program has the added benefit of deeply engaging residents in the work (who might not otherwise participate due to the financial burdens they are facing) and creating stewards for public spaces in the neighborhood.



CASE STUDY

Local, Equity-building Procurement Practices

Located in the East Parkside neighborhood of Philadelphia, Centennial Parkside Community Development Corporation (CPCDC) has been developing multiple programs aimed at meeting a need in the community to address high energy costs, increase access to renewable energy for local residents and create a sustainable stream of revenue for the community.

The Solar Savings Grant Program was developed following a robust community engagement process that revealed low-income families in the neighborhood were spending a disproportionate amount of their income on energy costs. While programs existed to provide renewable energy access to Philadelphia residents, particularly through the Philadelphia Energy Authority (PEA), these programs fell short of creating equitable access for

low-income communities. Following donations from Spark Therapeutics and the William Penn Foundation, CPCDC was able to partner with PEA to provide the first solar arrays to low-income residents through the Solar Savings Grant Program. Through this program, 50 low-income households received solar panels for their homes, allowing them to save 20 percent on their monthly electricity bills.

In addition to the Solar Savings Grant program, CPCDC has been working to create opportunities for investment in the community through the creation of an energy investment district in the East Parkside neighborhood. The energy investment district will generate solar energy for local cultural institutions like the Philadelphia Zoo and Please Touch Museum while creating a sustainable revenue stream for the community. The project will not only bring in revenue to support community economic development goals but also support the sustainability goals of local institutions, while creating jobs and wealth building opportunities for the local community (Energy Investment District, CPCDC).



Facilitating Authentic Cross-community Interaction

In addition to investing directly into communities and people, facilitating cross-neighborhood and cross-race interaction through public space and investing in initiatives to reduce the Black-white gap can help combat some of the ills caused by racist policy and segregation. Data has shown that the Black-white gap is entirely driven by differences in outcomes between white and Black men. Investing in cross-neighborhood, cross-class and cross-race initiatives, specifically those that increase upward mobility for Black men, are key to narrowing the Black-white gap. Efforts such as mentoring programs for Black boys, initiatives to reduce discrimination in the criminal justice system, reducing

racial bias amongst whites, and increasing interactions across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups can all be effective (Chetty). However, socioeconomic mixing won't happen without intention. The US remains deeply segregated. Different racial and ethnic groups often spend the majority of their time within segregated communities and have very few daily interactions with those outside of their own bubbles (Williams, *Washington Post*). Intentional investment in public spaces and programming that brings people from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds can help shift perceptions and combat negative stereotypes and biases.

CASE STUDY

Public Markets Supporting Economic Equity

Opened in November 2020, the Julietta Market is an example of an attempt to uplift neighborhoods through investment in small, diverse businesses.

Named after Lexington civil rights leader Julia Etta Lewis, Julietta Market is a public market, a small business incubator and an instigator of equitable economic development, all in one. Julietta Market has instituted

several innovative policies and practices aimed at centering equity, including a tiered rent system for those from marginalized groups, weekly small-business support meetings, access to a community-supported agriculture organization (CSA) with tiered pricing based on ability to pay and access to a shared kitchen for small food and beverage vendors. By purposely supporting diverse small businesses, the Julietta Market is supporting the local neighborhood by not only boosting economic activity but also providing affordable, fresh food and other goods, multicultural programming, and a creative and artistic outlet for all neighbors (Equity as Intention).



CASE STUDY

Reimagining the Public Library

In Memphis, leaders at Memphis Public Libraries (MPL) are working to bridge gaps and create common ground through the reimagination of the public library. Cossitt Library is a public library in the heart of downtown Memphis on the riverfront.

As one of 18 branches in the city, Cossitt is being renovated and reimagined to serve not only as the downtown core branch but also as a destination for all. MPL is intentionally working through an equity lens to ensure the library redevelopment is inclusive and reflective of the diverse Memphis community from construction to programming. The redevelopment was designed to encourage competitive bidding from Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) and Women's Business Enterprise (WBE) firms and ultimately was awarded to a first-generation MBE firm. Community members were also deeply involved in not only design of the space but also programming and even book curation. The library will include a specially curated section on African American history, programming from national

partners like Citizen University focused on convening conversations around community challenges and workshops on everything from photo and video editing to robotics. Physically, Cossitt will be a reimagined take on a public library with a ground floor cafe, podcasting studios, and a performance space, all hosted at the library (Fox 13 Memphis). Through community-informed and carefully designed spaces and programming, Cossitt is seeking to be a space that brings together people from across the Memphis community ("Bridging Divides," RCC Medium).



Opportunities for Youth

Finally, public spaces like recreation centers, libraries and other opportunities to connect youth to “identity projects” (hobbies or other extracurricular activities) can help young people in disenfranchised communities excel and have better overall outcomes. In a 2010 study, researchers at Johns Hopkins University interviewed 150 Black young men and women who’d grown up in public housing in Baltimore in the 1980s and 1990s. The study found that, of those who were not still in high school during the

interview periods (116), 90 percent who had participated in an “identity project” like music or arts graduated high school. This was compared to a graduation rate of only 58 percent for those who had not engaged in one. While many environmental factors, beyond high school and “identity projects,” affected these students, it was clear that access to these projects made it more likely that kids in these communities would succeed (Semuels, *The Atlantic*).

CASE STUDY

Reimagined Recreation Centers

The parks and recreation departments in Minneapolis and Philadelphia have been working to reimagine the traditional recreation center and create new spaces that cater to the specific interests and needs of youth.

The Minneapolis Parks & Recreation Board is working to transform four of the city’s 47 recreation centers into Creation Spaces. The Creation Spaces concept was born out of a desire to create spaces and places for youth in the city to experience different things beyond the typical sports-oriented activities offered at recreation centers. Creation Spaces seeks to reimagine recreation centers into spaces where kids can experience creativity in ways that feel good to them. These spaces go well beyond computer labs or makerspaces. Created and managed in partnership with industry experts, the four Creation Spaces will offer high-quality space for music production, culinary art, design (including graphic, architectural and apparel design) and video production. Through these new spaces, kids in the city are offered opportunities to build and grow new skills and interests. The board started with the four centers in different parts of the city to encourage participation and

connection across neighborhoods, with the long-term goal of offering Creation Spaces throughout the city.

Philadelphia Parks & Recreation is exploring a similar program to transform its existing recreation centers by incorporating local entrepreneurs into the spaces. Underutilized space in recreation centers can become recording studios, digital design labs or barbershop schools serving as a model and learning opportunity for repurposing public spaces for skills building, relevancy, revenue generation and community collaboration. Other recreation centers are hosting e-sports gaming spaces and programming to make e-sports and state-of-the-art technology more accessible for underserved youth. By offering the space to neighborhood entrepreneurs and e-sports, the city is increasing kids’ exposure to and knowledge of the entrepreneurial and gaming communities and industry.

Through these new spaces, kids in the city are offered opportunities to build and grow new skills and interests.

Conclusion

Investment in the public realm is about more than creating beautiful spaces. Investment in the public realm can help create communities that are more equitable, economically prosperous, civically engaged, environmentally sustainable and welcoming to people of all identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Deep and persistent racism, segregation, disinvestment and devaluation have created chasms in health equity, economic mobility and overall outcomes for communities across America, especially low-income communities and communities of color. **However, there is growing evidence that working with communities to address these harms, build trust and create spaces that are built by and for residents can help create new opportunities in communities that have for too long received less than they deserve.**





Reimagining the Civic Commons is a national initiative to foster engagement, equity, environmental sustainability and economic development in our cities. By revitalizing and connecting public places such as parks, plazas, trails and libraries, we aim to demonstrate how strategic investments in our civic assets can connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust and counter the trends of social and economic fragmentation in cities and neighborhoods.

Learn more at www.civiccommons.us.