



Reimagining  
the Civic Commons

Investing with Intention: Our Four Outcomes

# Socioeconomic Mixing

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**Reimagining the Civic Commons** believes in the power of the civic commons to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits for more equitable and resilient communities. The four outcomes of **Civic Engagement**, **Socioeconomic Mixing**, **Environmental Sustainability** and **Value Creation** guide our approach to public space.

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# **Socioeconomic Mixing**

## **The Benefits of Public Places Where Everyone Belongs**





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# Our Growing Divides

**Research shows that Americans are increasingly polarized, segregated and isolated from one another and that economic inequality is increasing. These trends are negatively impacting our health and well-being and the prosperity of our communities.**

In 2016, the median wealth of white households in the United States was \$171,000—ten times that of black households and eight times that of Hispanic households. As these disparities grow, a mounting body of research points to the increasing segregation of neighborhoods by income. A Stanford study showed that since 1970, the number of people living in neighborhoods of either concentrated poverty or concentrated wealth has more than doubled.

This economic segregation has powerful implications for people's economic mobility. In neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, research shows lower economic mobility for children than in neighborhoods with more economic diversity, seriously impacting life outcomes for low-income children. A Chicago study exploring the links between segregation, job access and income revealed that this phenomenon can hold back an entire region's economy, impeding business growth and increasing the incidence of violence.



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Another division harming our health and well-being is the one in four Americans who struggle with social isolation, what the U.S. Surgeon General has identified as a “loneliness epidemic.” Research indicates that as people become more socially isolated, they experience negative impacts to mental and physical health and a decreased life span. A lack of meaningful social interaction has also been shown to weaken the immune system, making people more prone to diseases and infections.

And yet for decades, we have disinvested in the public spaces where we can connect with others—our parks, trails, libraries, community centers—while people with the economic means have opted for privatized spaces instead of public spaces. This means the benefits of the civic infrastructure with the greatest potential to provide opportunities for common ground for everyone, where we can foster empathy and trust across diversity, are unrealized.

Today, too many people live in communities where they rarely encounter others from different economic, social and racial backgrounds, precisely the activity we need to grow social capital, improve health, provide economic opportunities and generate trust.

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# What Is Socioeconomic Mixing?

**Socioeconomic mixing—the act of generating interactions among people with diverse economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds—creates valuable social connections between people who might otherwise never meet. Research finds that “time spent face-to-face with people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds engenders more trust, generosity, and cooperation than any other sort of interaction.”**

Socioeconomic mixing can be as simple as sharing space with people of different backgrounds or the small casual interactions that happen when we encounter others in public.

To put it simply, the more we inhabit space with and interact with others who have different lived experiences, the greater capacity we have to develop the connections that create greater access to opportunity—and build a future in which everyone benefits.



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# Why Socioeconomic Mixing Matters

**Cities thrive when people from diverse backgrounds come together to form shared experiences. And a large body of research points to the range of benefits of mixed income and diverse neighborhoods. For example, a study that tracked millions of young Americans over three decades found that young children from low-income families who grew up in mixed-income neighborhoods with lower rates of racial and economic segregation had higher levels of economic mobility later.**

Furthermore, public spaces and the diverse relationships they afford can create bridging social capital, explained as “connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society (such as race, or class, or religion).” Studies show that increased bridging social capital leads to greater innovation, education, upward mobility and increased opportunities for people in underserved communities.

A study finds that opportunities to encounter others in the built environment is also correlated with people's overall well-being. In cities, suburbs and small towns, Americans who live near public spaces like parks and libraries are happier with their neighborhoods and more trusting of others. Research also shows that the web of casual interactions we have with others in public are as important to our well-being as family and close friends.

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With low barriers to entry, public spaces are uniquely positioned to provide the opportunity for 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. But this only happens if those public spaces are high quality and intentionally designed, staffed and programmed to deliver socioeconomic mixing.



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# Why Now?

**A growing number of civic and community leaders are beginning to understand the fundamental connection between dynamic, welcoming public places and thriving, vibrant, more equitable cities. These leaders from the public, private and nonprofit sectors seek to address the widening chasms among Americans, and public space offers an opportunity to achieve important community and public policy goals.**

**Reducing distrust and polarization.** Public spaces are one of the few places left that bring together people of diverse backgrounds—and with no price of admission.

**Improving public health.** Numerous studies prove that access to parks and green spaces boosts physical and mental health.

**Supporting the local economy.** Vibrant public spaces are an integral part of supporting public life in neighborhoods, which allows small businesses to flourish.

**Improving opportunity and futures.** High-quality parks and open spaces across a city can promote diverse neighborhoods, improving opportunities and life outcomes for children in low-income families.





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# Encouraging Socioeconomic Mixing

**Nurturing public places that act as a common ground across diversity requires intentionality. Below are six insights emerging from a growing community of practice focused on fostering socioeconomic mixing for more diverse, connected and opportunity rich communities.**

## **Hold a high standard for civic assets with a focus on quality**

Pursuing high-quality design, programming and maintenance is necessary to regularly attract people of all backgrounds to share space together. These public assets must aim to be best in class in order to compete with alternatives for recreation, relaxation and free time that are available in the private market. Public spaces that are unimaginatively designed or programmed are unlikely to meet this threshold, as are those that are not well maintained. By holding a high standard for public places in all neighborhoods, community assets have a greater potential to attract a mix of visitors from different backgrounds.

## **Create connections across neighborhoods**

Civic assets usually focus solely on attracting people from one neighborhood, but current levels of economic and social segregation make it difficult to achieve true socioeconomic mixing with this operating model. Often, for civic assets to draw diverse users, they must attract residents from multiple neighborhoods.







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Along with a focus on quality, a shift in the operating mind-set may be necessary in order to consider the opportunity for civic assets to connect people across geographies. Cookie-cutter parks, libraries and community centers that lack distinguishing features are less likely to entice visitors from beyond the immediate neighborhood. A more effective option is to co-create distinctive assets in partnership with residents that bolster community pride along with a broader sense of welcome. Extend invitations often, and not only to nearby residents but also to the larger community. When building new assets, consider locations that are convenient to more than one neighborhood to encourage cross-neighborhood connections.

### **Design for a variety of experiences in one place**

When civic assets appeal to many different patrons for different reasons, there is greater long-term potential for connection across diversity. The variety of interesting experiences works to attract visitors of all ages and backgrounds and encourages repeat visits and repeated interaction. This doesn't mean that each public space should try to be everything to everyone but rather the design of public space should be thoughtfully approached to promote multiple, complementary uses. Design for concurrent uses by clustering different elements in close proximity to one another to encourage interactions among visitors who may otherwise not have an opportunity to meet.

### **Host programming that goes beyond events**

Public spaces should offer visitors the opportunity to connect with one another in both passive and intentional ways. Programming helps facilitate interactions between people of all ages and backgrounds through shared experiences. While large events can offer instances of socioeconomic mixing, more lasting impact comes from programs that offer everyday moments for people of different backgrounds to encounter one another. Relationships and trust are built over time—and programs that occur daily or weekly offer an opportunity to encourage deeper connections among regular participants. Something as simple as a daily walking club, a weekly yoga class, a semimonthly market day or even watching the sunset as a community can

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help create these much-needed connections. Layering multiple programs in a space on a specific day of the week creates additional chances for cross-pollination across groups with different interests. When civic assets act as platforms for residents and community organizations to co-create regular programs, even a small programming budget can deliver more diversity.

### **Staff to intentionally welcome**

Public spaces that provide opportunities for socioeconomic mixing are both accessible and welcoming to a wide range of ages, abilities and backgrounds. Along with design and programming, staffing plays a critical role in creating an inclusive atmosphere, where everyone belongs.

Hiring that reflects the diversity of the community can be an indicator of welcome to visitors of different backgrounds. And while managers of civic assets may not consider themselves in the hospitality business, public space plays host to people each and every day. How visitors are treated in a space impacts their experience and desire to return, as well as the opportunity to foster mixing across divides. Reconsider how staff are deployed in and across public spaces, while reconceiving staff roles and responsibilities to include acting as ambassadors and greeting every visitor and engaging with them in the space. This intentional and welcoming staffing approach can facilitate encounters between visitors, help those visitors understand and tolerate differences between people and, if necessary, resolve conflicts in ways that do not require law enforcement.

Responsibilities for creating a welcoming atmosphere can often be layered into positions along with other key duties like daily maintenance, thereby elevating the importance and value of frontline staff. Staffing in ways that prioritize a great experience for every guest contributes to mixing across social, economic and neighborhood divides.

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## Adopt the outcome and measure

Adopting socioeconomic mixing as a key goal of any investment in civic assets, and measuring performance through this lens, is critical for ensuring diversity is central to the design, operations and management of public space. Embedding socioeconomic mixing as an outcome encourages the creation of new strategies and approaches to public space that consider how design, programming and staffing prioritize welcoming a diverse mix of people, and it also allows for continuously gathering data on whether an asset is achieving socioeconomic mixing.

How do you know if you are succeeding on this intention? *Measuring the Civic Commons*, a metrics framework for public spaces, provides a variety of metrics and sources for capturing and understanding socioeconomic mixing including the income, racial and ethnic diversity of site visitors; opportunities in the site for meeting new people and impromptu interactions; perceptions of the public space and its neighborhood; and the diversity of the neighborhood. To help you get started, *Measure What Matters* is a customizable DIY toolkit that provides measurement tools including an observation map, a local news analysis and an intercept survey and neighborhood survey that can be used to collect and analyze data to understand public space performance in terms of socioeconomic mixing.



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# Socioeconomic Mixing in Action

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**Our civic commons is composed of the shared public spaces that nurture connection and tolerance of the people around us. When designed, managed and staffed with intention, this civic infrastructure can bridge the growing divides between Americans so prevalent today.**

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# **Memphis exemplifies putting socioeconomic mixing into practice**

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**Memphis is a city starkly divided by race and income with a poverty rate that has stayed stubbornly high. Compounding these divisions, there are too few places where Memphians of different backgrounds come together and share space as equals. Especially in cities with deep segregation, public space must be designed, managed and operated to intentionally welcome people of all races and backgrounds, a lesson Memphis has learned through the thoughtful reimagining of a library, a trail and two parks on its riverfront.**

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**Beginning in 2016, a collaboration of public and nonprofit partners transformed a six-city-block area adjacent to downtown Memphis and the Mississippi River, now called the Fourth Bluff, into a series of connected, vibrant and dynamic civic spaces.**

One of these civic spaces is River Garden.

What started as an uninspired, underused park right on the Mississippi River, named after Jefferson Davis (president of the Confederacy), was completely reimaged.

Renamed, redesigned and reopened in late 2018 as River Garden, this park has become a go-to place in downtown Memphis. With a dining and events pavilion, all-ages play and adventure structure, natural meadow plantings, fire pits, a snack shack, swings, hammocks, tables and differently scaled conversation spaces, it is successfully attracting more people than ever before with average visitor numbers up more than 300 percent.

Results of intercept surveys among visitors show that the parks users hail from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and from a diverse geography of more than forty different zip codes.

**To get these results, design matters.** Memphis's River Garden was redesigned in a way that clusters a variety of activity into one portion of the park. This encourages more interaction among visitors and increases the opportunity for people of different backgrounds to connect, as they climb on the tree house, swing on hammocks or grab a cup of coffee from the 4th Cup coffee stand. While many public spaces seek to separate users and activities, Memphis successfully works to bring people together. Even during this time of necessary physical distancing, the design of the park encourages friendly exchanges while staying six feet apart.





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### **Staffing is another opportunity to advance socioeconomic mixing.**

In River Garden, former park maintenance staff have been retrained as park rangers—an experience-focused team who are charged with greeting every visitor and making the parks welcoming for everyone, in addition to their daily maintenance tasks. Rangers proactively ask if they can improve visitors' experiences and are knowledgeable about programs, events and surrounding downtown businesses. These team members are now being paid higher wages for this value-added work and new positions were created for advancement to supervisory roles, with the goal of creating a team that reflects the diversity of Memphis.

With these new organizational responsibilities, employees have embraced their roles to create an elevated experience in public space—one where people mix across social, economic and neighborhood divides and where all Memphians feel more welcomed and valued.

### **Free programming is another way to bring together diverse neighbors.**

For the Memphis team, every program or communications decision that is made is examined as to whether it appeals across race, income and age. By focusing on regularly occurring programs (daily, weekly or monthly) with low or nonexistent barriers to participation (yoga classes, salsa dancing, roller-skating, basketball and concerts), they have drawn a racially and economically diverse audience to their sites. With kayak rentals and lessons available on the riverfront every day, often for free during special events, many Memphians without access to boats can get onto the mighty Mississippi River for the first time.

### **The team is also working to connect adjacent neighborhoods to increase opportunity across districts.**

While adjacent to downtown, the zip codes surrounding the Fourth Bluff and the adjoining riverfront are home to 39 percent of children living in poverty in Memphis. The Memphis team is leading efforts to define pedestrian and cycling corridors between the riverfront and surrounding neighborhoods, as well as bringing attention to the long-overlooked MLK Park south of downtown in order to use it as an anchor for new investment in the adjacent neighborhood.



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As more and more people cross paths at the Fourth Bluff, the civic commons is bolstering a sense of shared identity, creating connections among people of diverse backgrounds and advancing a more equitable Memphis. downtown, in order to use it as an anchor for new investment in the adjacent neighborhood.

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# **A cross-neighborhood approach to socioeconomic mixing from Akron**

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**With investments in three neighborhoods and the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail that connects them, Akron Civic Commons is knitting together isolated communities through collaborative reimagining of public places. Temporary and permanent design features and regular programming are reestablishing the 100-acre Summit Lake as a place of civic pride and play, bridging diverse neighborhoods, including Ohio & Erie Canal Park, and fostering economic development and public life in Akron's downtown.**

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**In building and highlighting the geographic and physical connections between places, the civic commons in Akron is promoting relationships that span these neighborhoods and a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This public space effort is intentionally focused on connecting people to each other across geographic, economic, political and racial divides.**

**By taking a portfolio approach to civic assets in multiple neighborhoods, Akron is creating a platform for diverse connections.**

Traditionally, cities approach public space work through the lens of individual sites or departments and rarely have strategies that consider how these assets connect to form a seamless public realm. The focus of Akron Civic Commons on civic assets—a set of parks and plazas and a lake that all sit along a trail—as a network that spans multiple neighborhoods flies in the face of this paradigm and is central to achieving socioeconomic mixing. This is because similar to many US cities, Akron has a high level of diversity citywide, but its neighborhoods are segregated by income and race. Therefore, civic assets that solely draw from the adjacent neighborhood are unlikely to support socioeconomic mixing.

Akron Civic Commons actively considers the unique role each civic asset can play in the immediate community and across all three neighborhoods—and how the design and programming can be complementary to encourage residents of all three neighborhoods to visit and interact.

In spring 2019, the Akron Civic Commons team partnered with the Akron Art Museum to bring world-renowned artist and dancer Nick Cave to the city. The collaboration worked to present *HEARD*, Cave's dance performance that is also part art installation, at both the museum's garden downtown and the Summit Lake Community Center, a public recreation center located in a Black-majority neighborhood. The effort was about representation and connection: one of the nation's preeminent Black artists performed first at the local community center and then at the city's most established museum, drawing hundreds of Akron residents to the performances at each site, many entering those public spaces in another neighborhood for the first time.



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Prior to the performance, residents of the Summit Lake and Ohio & Erie Canal Park neighborhoods visited with Cave throughout the planning process. The performance was introduced to the neighborhood, the Summit Lake Community Council and Summit Lake Community Association meetings, with community members given the opportunity to ask questions and learn about the project. Residents were given priority access to the performance, and Summit Lake and Ohio & Erie Canal Park residents were invited to a preview of a featured exhibit at the Akron Art Museum earlier in the year. Finally, all *HEARD • AKRON* rehearsals were held at the Summit Lake Community Center, with residents encouraged to watch.

**True collaboration at the heart of the work.** By having a single initiative working on reimagining public spaces in three adjacent neighborhoods, Akron Civic Commons is intentionally bringing together organizations, city departments and residents that may not otherwise interact. Dozens of NGOs, local governments and philanthropy and community groups and, most importantly, hundreds of residents across three neighborhoods are actively involved in Akron Civic Commons. The cross-silo collaboration brings everyone to the decision-making table where power is shared, regardless of title or organizational stature. At a regular Akron Civic Commons monthly meeting, neighborhood resident Grace Hudson may sit right next to the City of Akron's deputy mayor, with all voices carrying equal weight. When both civic leaders and residents begin to feel more connected to one another—even across neighborhood boundaries—they are more likely to trust one another. This flat organizational structure is creating opportunities for diverse people to work on building a better city.

The work has also inspired change at the City of Akron, whose newly created Office of Integrated Development works within government and with community partners to advance equitable economic development through the prioritization of public spaces as critical infrastructure.

**Building trust after decades of disinvestment.** A primary focus of the Akron Civic Commons work has been the Summit Lake neighborhood, named for the body of water nearby. Once an elite “million-dollar playground,” Summit Lake became a dumping ground for the city's

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rubber industry in the early 1900s. By the 1960s the neighborhood was geographically—and socially—cut off from the city by highway construction. Neglect and isolation led to concentrated poverty and growing distrust in this Black-majority community, located only two miles south of downtown.

The result was a neighborhood where people believed the nearby lake was dangerous and who distrusted government and community leaders from outside their community.

The Akron Civic Commons team has reimagined Summit Lake and built trust across the neighborhood through design and programming that enriches the lives of local residents and attracts visitors from throughout the region. The work started with “s’mores and canoes”—small gatherings on the shore of Summit Lake that gave neighbors ways to explore a natural wonder right at their doorstep. These small, early gestures created trust, allowing the team to do more and bigger work—and to influence others to help.

Co-creating with residents, the Akron team then piloted temporary improvements along Summit Lake’s shore: a new beachhead, barbecue grills, seating, tables and a nature play space. These early efforts were followed by more permanent investments: a seasonal shade canopy tested before installing a permanent picnic shelter, a pop-up nature center that informed the soon-to-be opened \$2 million nature center. These physical improvements have been complemented by evolving programming: a weekly farmers market, kayak and canoe tours, fishing lessons for local kids and fitness classes.

### **Investing this way changes perceptions about the neighborhood.**

By working shoulder-to-shoulder with Summit Lake neighbors, Akron Civic Commons has improved the perception of Summit Lake among residents and across the region. In 2019, the Akron Marathon route ran along Summit Lake for the first time. A recent survey found that 94 percent of visitors to Summit Lake believe that the nearby neighborhood has a bright future. Said one local resident of the project, “It brings in people from different parts of the city, even just for a temporary conversation.”

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