



The Power of the Commons

Impact and Opportunity in
America's Public Spaces

Reimagining
the Civic Commons



Reimagining the Civic Commons is transforming civic assets from places of untapped potential to places that bridge differences, create increased and more equitably shared prosperity, and contribute solutions to some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

What started as a grant program has evolved to become a new model for cities to design, manage and program their public spaces.

The initiative launched nationally in 2016, when a diverse network of city governments, nonprofits, community groups and national foundations committed to an ambitious goal: to demonstrate that public spaces have the power to connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust, and create more economically and environmentally resilient communities.

After piloting the initiative in Philadelphia in 2015, four additional demonstration cities — Akron, Chicago, Detroit and Memphis — each received an initial grant of \$4 million, matched by local funding. Each city took its own approach to reimagining local parks, trails, libraries, recreation centers and other public assets — with a few common threads as guided by Reimagining the Civic Commons.

- **A portfolio approach:** Rather than manage public assets individually, each city began to manage them as a portfolio. This means working across agencies and organizations, and side by side with community members, to consider new futures for each community's civic infrastructure.
- **An outcomes orientation:** The four outcomes of Reimagining the Civic Commons — civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability and value creation — serve as each city's North Star. These outcomes spur local practitioners to see their civic assets as capable of creating positive social outcomes. And, through associated metrics, the outcomes enable cities to demonstrate the multifaceted value of reinvesting in civic assets.

- **A deep commitment to collaboration:**

Practitioners in all five cities participate in the Civic Commons Learning Network, a national collaboration that brings together practitioners, policymakers, advocates and residents to share knowledge and support one another as they transform how they design, manage and operate public spaces.

Since Reimagining the Civic Commons launched, community leaders, residents and government officials in the five demonstration cities have joined together to transform and connect their civic assets. This report shares each city's unique approach to revitalizing local public spaces while breaking down silos and building trust among residents. It includes insights from people leading and participating in their community's efforts, shared in interviews about their experiences with this work. And it looks back on six years of innovation, collaboration and capital investment to reveal powerful impacts that are changing how people understand the potential for urban public space.

The results are different in each city, and inspirational everywhere.



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Pride Polina





Reimagining the Civic Commons launched in Philadelphia as a pilot initiative in 2015 with support from John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and William Penn Foundation.

The pilot invested in five civic assets: a riverfront trail, a renovated public library and park, an elevated park, an outdoor education and nature center, and a new vision for West Fairmount Park. Through these capital projects, the city also worked to create a collaborative, innovative and impact-driven approach to public space.

The pilot projects generated momentum to think more broadly and ambitiously about the powerful role public spaces can play in amplifying the vibrancy of a city and in supporting equitable neighborhood redevelopment. Since the launch of Philadelphia Civic Commons, the city has built community-wide support for \$500 million in new funding for parks, recreation centers and libraries through the Rebuilding Community Infrastructure (Rebuild) initiative. Learnings from the Philadelphia pilot also informed the national expansion of Reimagining the Civic Commons in key ways.

Since the pilot initiative, Philadelphia Civic Commons has focused on three neighborhoods: Parkside, Strawberry Mansion and Southwest Philadelphia. These neighborhoods border multiple Rebuild sites and are home to three of the original sites from the pilot. In collaboration with hyperlocal partners in each neighborhood, Philadelphia Civic Commons is deepening civic engagement and influencing neighborhood revitalization efforts while identifying opportunities for civic spaces to become a shared, common ground.



Inspiration from Philadelphia: How the pilot shaped the national initiative

As the first Reimagining the Civic Commons city, Philadelphia shaped and inspired the national initiative that kicked off in 2016. Here are some of the lessons learned in Philadelphia and how they influenced the initiative as it expanded to other cities.

- **Provide flexible funding to support cross-silo teams.** By sharing funding instead of competing for funds, civic asset managers can see one another as collaborators rather than competitors, and cities are better positioned to manage their civic assets as a portfolio.
- **Encourage cities to select civic assets that are or could be physically connected.** Selecting assets that are close together spurs collaboration among neighbors, local governments and neighborhood-based organizations.
- **Go beyond capital projects.** In addition to physical changes, investments in innovative design, programming, staffing, communications and process all matter in driving outcomes.
- **Commit to a new way of working.** Reimagining the Civic Commons requires a paradigm shift toward seeing public space as a way to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits.
- **Nurture leadership beyond the C-suite.** Rather than teams composed solely of CEOs, collaborations that identify and support leaders throughout partner organizations and from communities are more resilient. This is not only equitable, but it also deepens relationships and institutionalizes this new way of working.
- **Create a national learning network.** To change public space practice, it's important to learn from what others are doing, and focus on creating impact. The Civic Commons Learning Network provides opportunities for research and impact assessment, elevation through storytelling, and opportunities to learn from others pursuing this important work.

Systems change

Bartram's Garden is the oldest botanic garden in North America, located along the Schuylkill River in Southwest Philadelphia, a predominantly Black neighborhood. Before 2012, the garden welcomed many visitors but few were from within the neighborhood.

Then the team made an intentional commitment: to build and heal relationships with neighbors and to become the “backyard” for Southwest Philadelphia. In 2015, Reimagining the Civic Commons added momentum to deepen this work.

The team at Bartram's Garden now works to support equity in a variety of ways, including through programs that prioritize nearby neighbors. Garden staff listen to residents and create programming based on their ideas, saying “yes” whenever they can. They also changed the way they told their history — in particular, the area's rich Black history — and invited neighbors to help tell the story.

Another example of a systemic change that's leading to engagement and equity can be found in the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation department. The department is replacing an archaic staffing model that led to inequitable distribution of programming with a new, dynamic model that reduces historic racial disparities in staffing while also better meeting community needs.

Known as the community-service-area model, the new staffing model shifts away from assigning staff to specific recreation centers and instead assigns them to neighborhoods. Through the new model, staff are supported to program a variety of parks, recreation centers and playgrounds in a certain area in partnership with community members and local organizations. The staffing model uses data to understand where the staffing needs and programming opportunities are greatest and emphasizes diversity in hiring. This model was developed with inspiration from the Civic Commons approach of managing civic assets as a portfolio and engaging neighbors in decisions about their local public spaces. It results in more relevant and community-informed programming, and better outcomes for communities.



“For over 100 years, we saw ourselves as the keeper of a house and garden museum. Today, we think of ourselves as caregivers of a public space with a responsibility to our community.”

Maitreyi Roy,
Bartram's Garden



Increased collaboration

Reimagining the Civic Commons helped catalyze collaboration among a variety of organizations in Philadelphia, leading to new partnerships, new programming and larger audiences for groups doing important community work.

In 2017, Centennial Parkside Community Development Corporation partnered with Reading Terminal Market to provide a subsidized farm share program through the Parkside Fresh Food Fest, a six-event series that offered fresh, local food at affordable costs. A major success, this was also the first time the market ventured outside its walls to operate in the community. This partnership continued through 2019 and because of it, in 2020, the Centennial Parkside CDC was able to quickly pivot to distribute 400,000 pounds of produce during the early days of the pandemic.

At Bartram's Garden, a partnership with the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia led to a free bike education program that provided free bike rentals, tours and riding classes on the Bartram's Mile Trail. Also at the garden, a collaboration with Mural Arts Philadelphia led to the creation of FloatLab, a one-of-a-kind floating classroom and art space on the tidal Schuylkill River.

Inspired by Philadelphia Civic Commons and a cross-silo approach, Fairmount Park Conservancy now convenes a biennial Public Space Summit that brings together the staff and volunteers connected to Philadelphia's parks, recreation centers and libraries for a day of inspirational, practical and educational workshops and sessions. The Public Space Summits have also inspired new endeavors, including the Conservancy's Neighborhood Collaboration Grants. These grants of up to \$2,500 encourage teams from parks, recreation centers and libraries to collaborate, breaking down silos to co-create public events and other efforts that bring people together, connect amenities and encourage new partnerships.

“Philadelphia falls into the trap of thinking we should create a new organization and do everything ourselves, but we are only three full-time staff at the Centennial Parkside CDC. So it's been really valuable to have partners with expertise in particular areas. We can go to them for advice and resources and sometimes bring their programming into our community. It extends the range of all these groups to do the work we're trying to do.”

Alexandra McFadden,
Centennial Parkside CDC
former board president

New neighborhood capacity

In the neighborhoods where Civic Commons pilot projects occurred, local organizations built their capacity and expanded their stewardship of civic assets.

Since its creation in 2015, Centennial Parkside CDC has grown in size and impact. The group hired its first full-time director in 2017 and launched its Clean and Green team the same year. In 2020, it created a new position, director of sanitation and environmental programming, to grow the Clean and Green team. It also launched a social enterprise, Centennial Solar.

Strawberry Mansion CDC has also increased its organizational and neighborhood capacity. The organization developed the Clean Pathways Initiative to keep corridors clean, both by hiring local cleaning crews and engaging residents in cleanup. Crews consist of people aged 18 to 34 interested in training programs or gainful employment. Through Strawberry Mansion CDC's "day pay" model, crew members earn \$100 per day and receive assistance with resumés and financial assistance in obtaining necessary identification to qualify for work. The Strawberry Mansion CDC plans to hire more people to maintain neighborhood spaces, including the three

entryways to Fairmount Park and key local corridors, and they've received federal funding to hire two part-time staff to serve as community connectors.

At Bartram's Garden, the Southwest Community Leadership Council has evolved to address a number of community issues and priorities. Initially convened by the garden to help with the site's master planning, Bartram's now provides support to help the group convene. Ideas from this group led to the launch of the first-ever tree planting program in Southwest Philadelphia, and the Leadership Council is working with Local Initiatives Support Corporation Philadelphia to build neighborhood capacity and a unified voice to ensure new development in the neighborhood is equitable.

"In 2017, the Centennial Parkside CDC had an operating budget of something like \$60,000. But by 2021, the operating budget was \$1 million. They're moving into their own home, buying property, staffing up. It's so amazing, their growth and their mission and everything that they've accomplished so far. I can't wait to see what happens next."

Jennifer Mahar, Fairmount Park Conservancy





Diverse public life

The work of Philadelphia Civic Commons is nurturing a diverse and lively public life for local neighbors.

In the East Parkside community, Parkside Edge opened in 2018 after a \$5.4 million renovation in which Fairmount Park Conservancy collaborated with Philadelphia's Parks & Recreation, Water, Commerce and Streets departments to bring rain gardens, new lighting, seating, trees and walking paths to the park. Then, new programs and management strategies made the park a go-to place in the neighborhood. The park hosts popular events like the Fresh Food Fest and the West Park Arts Fest. To keep the park clean and support community stewardship, the Centennial Parkside CDC created a Clean and Green team that provides living-wage employment for local residents. The Clean and Green team now holds contracts with four organizations: the Fairmount Park Conservancy, the Philadelphia Water Department, the Philadelphia Zoo and the City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce.

At Bartram's Garden, the focus on programming for the local community increased use of the garden, particularly during the pandemic, and also helped promote production of local food and support food sovereignty. The garden is located on the banks of the Schuylkill River, but only recently could visitors use the garden as a gateway to interact with the water. Today, the garden is home to a dock and community boathouse where visitors can rent a boat or go fishing for free. People can borrow fishing rods and buy bait from a vending machine right on-site.

Through its home gardening program, the garden supports home-based food programs for local residents while fostering new community connections. In 2021, the Bartram's team installed raised beds at 60 homes in Southwest Philadelphia. Sometimes, while the team is installing a new raised bed, a neighbor notices, stops by to find out what happens and signs up for a raised bed at their house. In this way, residents who did not know about the program gain access to it while also building connections with Bartram's Garden and their neighbors.

"They started to see that the Centennial Parkside CDC was beginning to activate the park in a very real, very authentic way. When we brought out the Fresh Food Fest, the idea for that was huge. And what it did was allow the neighboring community to come out and see us and people who looked like us, and different cultures and the diversity of not just the community, but the aesthetic of the place."

Tashia Rayon,
Centennial Parkside CDC



“When it comes to food sovereignty, you want to be able to connect with neighbors and look out for each other, sharing different crops and different vegetables, and just creating relationships and connections that last forever.”

Hajjah Clover, Clover Gardens and Bartram’s Garden



“The benefit of pulling these different constituencies together is you get to have those conversations that you may not have normally had.”

Tonneta Graham,
Strawberry Mansion CDC



Innovative programs

In addition to programming within its parks and public spaces, Philadelphia Civic Commons spurred innovative programs, including one that addresses an unintended outcome of civic improvements.

The Strawberry Mansion Historic Home Repair Program is a response to concerns that the improvements to Fairmount Park, such as The Discovery Center supported through Philadelphia Civic Commons, would lead to displacement of nearby neighbors due to increased real estate pressure. The new program provides resources for local residents to invest in their existing homes, encouraging them to stay and thrive in the neighborhood. It was developed through partnerships forged during the Civic Commons pilot, and there are plans to expand it to other neighborhoods.

Another example is Making Space: Reimagining Recreation, created by Philadelphia Parks & Recreation in partnership with the City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce. Making Space opens unused space in recreation centers to local entrepreneurs and business owners. In exchange, the entrepreneurs and business owners participate in mentorship programs for local youth. Innovative programs like these provide strong evidence of the potential of reimagining civic assets. Recreation centers don't have to be just about basketball — they can also create economic value and new connections in communities.

“The Civic Commons studios and learning journeys allow us to look up and out, learning and connecting with other cities. They helped inspire our new social enterprise initiative, Making Space, to reimagine Philadelphia recreation centers as community hubs where innovation and creativity happen.”

Kathryn Ott Lovell,
Philadelphia Parks & Recreation





Akron

Aidless
60

The Lippincott
School

When a coalition of community leaders in Akron, Ohio, began reimagining their civic commons in 2016, they were ready to do things differently.

From the initiative's early days, Akron Civic Commons focused on breaking down silos, reconnecting neighborhoods and building trust with people who, for decades, had been left out of conversations about the future of their communities. In these ways and more, the story of Akron provides insight and inspiration on how to foster a more hopeful, equitable future.

Akron's investments in three neighborhoods (Summit Lake, Ohio & Erie Canal Park and downtown) and the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail that connects them are examples of how a city can knit together disinvested and isolated communities through collaborative reimagining of public places. Through temporary and permanent design features and regular programming, Akron Civic Commons is working toward multiple goals: reestablishing the historic Summit Lake, the namesake of the surrounding neighborhood, as a place of civic pride and play; breaking down barriers to create shared spaces in Ohio & Erie Canal Park; and fostering economic development and public life in Akron's downtown.

In Akron, the scars of history run deep. In the 1930s and '40s, lenders and government officials redlined Akron's historically Black communities, lowering property values and instituting decades of deep and divisive racial segregation. In the 1960s, the construction of state Route 59 displaced or disconnected many Black residents from the rest of the city. Ongoing neglect and isolation led to concentrated poverty and a growing distrust of civic leaders. In the ensuing decades, Akron lost more than 25% of its population. And while part of Route 59 was eventually decommissioned, there was no effort to reconnect people in neighborhoods cut off by its construction or to reestablish trust.

Through Akron Civic Commons, Akron has invested not only in improving civic assets but in new ways of working that emphasize collaboration and trust. These impacts have filtered beyond the initial Civic Commons neighborhoods and outside the early team of collaborators. Through Akron Civic Commons, Akron is learning to move at the speed of trust — and, in the process, transforming its public spaces, local institutions, relationships and outlook for the future.

Moving at the speed of trust

Summit Lake is both a beautiful glacial lake and a neighborhood 2 miles from downtown. But, after years of industrial dumping and disinvestment, the lakefront and the lake were so neglected that, in early Akron Civic Commons meetings, neighbors expressed that the lake was dangerous and requested a fence around it.

Neighbors also expressed doubt that anything would change. “My first thought was, ‘Here we go. A bunch of professionals coming in to tell us what they are going to do,’” said Starleen Saulsberry, a Summit Lake neighbor.

Rather than avoid these difficult histories, the Akron Civic Commons team worked through them. By deeply listening, the team learned that residents feared the lake because it was unclear where its edge was. They feared that children might fall in and drown. In response, the Civic Commons team piloted a beachhead with large rocks that step to the water’s edge, wooden porch swings, grills, picnic tables and umbrellas. The pilot was so successful, the beachhead was made permanent. Today, Summit Lake Park offers canoeing and kayaking, fishing, community gardens, cultural programming, a farmers’ market and a nature center — all conceived in collaboration with local residents.

Trust also took root in the Ohio & Erie Canal Park neighborhood, which lies between Summit Lake and downtown. Once called Canal Park, the name was changed when a baseball stadium opened in downtown Akron. The city named the stadium Canal Park and renamed the neighborhood Park East, without consulting residents in the decision. When Akron Civic Commons started, the team worked with residents to reclaim their identity, including engaging them to give the neighborhood a name that meant something to them.

Prior to Akron Civic Commons, residents of this mixed-income neighborhood tended not to interact outside of their buildings or condos.

But improvements to the neighborhood park, and the opportunity to build relationships through the neighborhood steering committee, created moments for connection and bridged long-standing divides. The park was reimagined in partnership with residents. There’s a new mural and a new playground, and there are improvements to the park’s pavilion. The park now hosts fun, inviting programming, such as a summer concert series presented by local developer Alpha Phi Alpha Homes.

According to Akron Civic Commons convener Dan Rice, decades of disinvestment had created an expectation of “things being done to and not with, and promises made and not delivered.” Now, rather than being beholden to externally driven project timelines and election cycles, the process is built on developing authentic relationships and building trust in the community. “The trust is more important than the product,” says Rice.





“After getting involved, I found that they actually are taking into consideration what the neighborhoods — the communities — want and need.”

Crystal Ann Williams Costa,
Akron Civic Commons Steering Committee



“I see the future of the neighborhood. I see more people looking at their neighborhood more positive, instead of looking at it as if it would never get better.”

Marcus Saulsberry, Summit Lake resident

“What I saw was a beautiful landscape — the plants, the trails, the buildings, just everything about it, how well kept everything was. It felt comfortable and safe and inviting. I made an intentional effort as I was walking through the lock today to enjoy the fall colors.”

Lori Pesci, downtown Akron resident



Elevated perceptions and value

Akron Civic Commons is changing perceptions of neighborhoods and creating lasting value for the local community — and downtown and Summit Lake provide striking examples.

In the 1970s, investment and visitorship in downtown Akron began to decline. This decline continued for decades. But now, spurred by Akron Civic Commons, the intentional focus on public space and public life has become a catalyst for new development.

At Lock 3 Park along the canal, a \$10 million transformation driven by Akron Civic Commons is converting a concert and event space into a year-round park with shaded seating, landscaped gardens, artwork, ice skating and a performance pavilion.

At the same time, the Downtown Akron Partnership (DAP), the local special improvement district, has intentionally sought to welcome diverse audiences and nurture value. Their work includes new public art installations, performances, health and wellness classes, and support for small, minority-owned businesses. The award of two federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants in 2016 and 2018 helped convert downtown's Main Street from a fast-moving, four-lane artery into a complete street with ample sidewalks, protected bike lanes, a more robust tree canopy and reduced speeds.

Together, these investments have catalyzed residential and business growth downtown. Since 2019, downtown Akron has gained 223 new residential units, and another 468 have been renovated. With a 90% occupancy rate, the momentum for attracting more residents to live downtown is just beginning. Growing the diversity of storefront retail has also been a key focus. With support from DAP's Start Downtown program, there are six times more Black-owned businesses downtown compared with 2018, and 22% of downtown retail stores are owned by people of color.

In Summit Lake, along with physical and programming investments, partners across northeast Ohio joined together to conduct an environmental assessment of the lake. Completed in 2018, the assessment found that the lake's health had dramatically improved since the days of industrial dumping, with an abundance of wildlife and the capacity for many types of programming, including kayaking, canoeing and fishing. This finding has helped perceptions of the lake change for the better, while also increasing interest in programs and stewardship to support a continued healthy ecosystem.

Today, Summit Lake hosts all sorts of city-wide celebrations. In spring 2019, internationally recognized artist Nick Cave worked with neighborhood residents and local artists to create a performance that premiered at the Summit Lake Community Center, before it was presented at the downtown Akron Art Museum. Also in 2019, the Akron Marathon included Summit Lake as part of its route for the first time in the race's history.





“Akron Civic Commons is the perfect example of showing people that you have power, you have a voice, you have a say in what your neighborhood looks like.”

Margo Sommerville,
Akron City Council

Public sector commitment

As a Reimagining the Civic Commons city, Akron Civic Commons received an initial investment of \$4 million to reimagine its public spaces. But the new ways of working supported by this funding have helped spur broader commitments by local public agencies.

Today, Akron is investing significantly more resources in high-quality, equitable public spaces, while also successfully pursuing funding from a diverse array of external sources.

For instance, Summit Metro Parks, the park district for Summit County, of which Akron is a part, committed to transforming a former pump house on the banks of Summit Lake into the Summit Lake Nature Center. Beyond the capital investment, Metro Parks now staffs the nature center to keep it open for regular hours and provide consistent programming.

At the same time, the City of Akron has allocated a number of new resources into public spaces in the city. Of the federal COVID-19 recovery funds the city received, \$10 million are being invested into the transformation of Lock 3 and Summit Lake parks. With these funds, the city more than doubled its capital budget for parks and recreation projects in 2021, from \$9.5 million to \$25 million. The city has also seen success in securing funding from federal sources. Through the advocacy of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, the Akron Civic Commons team received federal resources via a \$1 million earmark for Lock 3 Park.

Civic purpose and pride

As the Akron Civic Commons team moved away from seeing their work as a series of transactions and toward seeing it as a network of relationships, they also focused on including residents as stakeholders in their communities.

In this way, the team used the process of transforming public space to nurture a sense of civic purpose and pride. Residents became members of the Akron Civic Commons team, sat on steering committees and, when positions became available, whether as park ambassadors, nature center greeters, storytellers or data collectors, were hired to fill these roles.

With a renewed sense of agency, residents are now more engaged in their communities. After seeing the success at Summit Lake, residents proposed and led the creation of the Growing Mindz Memorial Garden in the neighborhood on a previously vacant lot. Neighborhood resident SeKoria Finney brought this space to life and has built a team of local stewards to tend to it regularly.

Organizational shifts are occurring as well. The Akron Civic Theatre now views itself as a community development organization with arts and entertainment as its vehicle. It changed its core mission and has invested in improvements that demonstrate community connection, such as murals on the outside walls overlooking Lock 3 and Lock 4 parks. And the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition has made a long-term commitment to co-creating and co-stewarding public spaces along the Towpath Trail in Akron Civic Commons neighborhoods.



“It gives them hope, and that’s what they needed. A lot of those people lived in that area that was taken out, and now it’s back and now they own it. They own it. And they had a voice where before they didn’t have a voice.”

AnnMarie Ford,
Akron Civic Commons Steering Committee



A new way of working

In Akron, the values and ways of working central to Reimagining the Civic Commons have filtered beyond the Akron Civic Commons team. They are now woven into the fabric of city government and civic life.

Inspired by Akron Civic Commons, the City of Akron created the Office of Integrated Development (OID) in 2018. This new city department merged previously siloed divisions — Planning and Urban Development, Economic Development, Downtown Operations and Recreation, as well as elements of the Engineering Bureau — into one seamless agency with equity and public life at its core. OID's strategic framework commits to co-creation with residents and local businesses, and prioritizes high-quality public spaces as a core community and economic-development strategy.

Akron's approach to outreach and engagement is undergoing a Civic Commons-inspired makeover as well. In 2020, the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA) was one of only 11 nationwide applicants awarded a HUD (U.S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development) Choice Neighborhoods planning grant. The local housing authority's proposal centered on Summit Lake, a collaborative, resident-led approach and a neighborhood strategy that extends well beyond its housing properties. As they invest the \$450,000 grant, the AMHA is partnering with residents to develop a shared vision that encompasses not only existing housing but also the public realm of the broader neighborhood and the programs and services needed to support wellness and quality of life.

In these ways and more, the four outcomes of Reimagining the Civic Commons — civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability and value creation — are informing a new way of doing business across a multitude of organizations in Akron.



“What Akron Civic Commons has done is allowed us and challenged us to go deeper, to be more intentional, in not only listening to our residents, but bringing their ideas to life.”

Christina Hodgkinson, Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority



“Now we really stop and we make an honest effort to get a variety of thoughts and opinions, particularly from the residents, before making decisions. And yeah, it holds up a process sometimes. But we have decided that it is worth it to slow down and wait, because the value of what we create is much greater than what we anticipate.”

Demetrius Lambert-Falconer, Summit Metro Parks

Chicas





Chicago Arts + Industry Commons is advancing an innovative approach to cultural development in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood.

The Civic Commons approach on Chicago's South Side is bolstering opportunities for people who have been excluded from the city's economic growth while also creating spaces of creative exploration. This is being done through clustered and coordinated activity at a network of significant sites, enhanced public access to the arts and increased support for a growing community of artists.

Chicago is a world-class city with a rich history of arts and culture and beautiful public spaces that commemorate and expand on that history. On Chicago's South Side, the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood is a strong, vibrant community, but generations of divestment and discriminatory public policies have intentionally excluded Greater Grand Crossing and other South Side communities from many economic opportunities. This systematic exclusion spurred high rates of unemployment and poverty, weakened public education, increased blight and vacancy, and created a narrative of negativity and fear.

Today, an existing network of civic assets in Greater Grand Crossing has been reactivated and redeveloped: the Stony Island Arts Bank campus, Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, Kenwood Gardens, Retreat at Currency Exchange Café and a number of affordable housing units for artists and partners along South Dorchester Avenue. One more site, the former St. Laurence school building in Greater Grand Crossing, is being transformed into an arts and entrepreneurship incubator and will create another node in the existing constellation of sites. These anchor sites are the product of artist Theaster Gates' visionary placemaking work, spearheaded by his nonprofit organization Rebuild Foundation, an artist-led, community-based platform for art, cultural development and neighborhood transformation in Chicago.



“I see Rebuild as a physical place like Arts Bank, but also an intangible, invisible space that invites people to dream and to play, to look at themselves differently, and to engage.”

Brandon Breaux,
fine artist/designer

Belonging and community pride

The Stony Island Arts Bank is a neighborhood anchor in a community that was once a mainstay of Chicago's Black middle class.

Once a savings and loan bank, the building had been abandoned for years before Theaster Gates purchased it from the City of Chicago for \$1 in 2015. Today the Stony Island Arts Bank is a 17,000-square-foot cultural hub dedicated to innovation, creative production and artistic scholarship, with a focus on Black images, objects and art — and an intention to foster diverse public life and community pride.

The Arts Bank welcomes local artists, curators and innovators to lead free classes and programs for friends, neighbors and visitors, establishing Chicago's South Side as a world-class destination for arts and culture. For instance, in 2022, Rebuild Foundation partnered with Black-owned Anthony Gallery to exhibit the work of emerging and established contemporary artists as part of a yearlong gallery residency at the Arts Bank.

Through programs like these — and the partnerships that lead to them — the Arts Bank is creating unique opportunities for engagement and celebration, while also elevating the rich histories, resiliency, talent and potential of the local community and artists of color.

“The magic of seeing Black folks congregate together. The magic of seeing our community come together as a collective. The magic of seeing how, though we had many disparities in this neighborhood, and we had George Floyd and the riots right after, we saw joy. We saw hope. We saw something that we weren't seeing on TV.”

Aamina Vela,
community member





Joy and well-being in nature

Where there once were 13 vacant lots, there now is Kenwood Gardens. A blossoming oasis along the Metra Electric train tracks, Kenwood Gardens feels like a prairie in the middle of Greater Grand Crossing. It's a space where people can experience nature in an intimate setting while connecting with one another.

"As we installed the plants and planted seeds and bulbs and trees, we observed sets of invertebrates entering the garden. First there were wasps, then mud wasps, then the parasitic mud wasps that steal the mud wasps' nests. Then bees, then honey bees, then we had worms, finally. Then we had slugs, and once we had slugs, we had small birds. And once we had small birds, we had larger birds. You put in the right things and then life happens. It was humbling."

Chris Abraham,
garden designer

The gardens were designed to provide a biophilic haven and a space for reflection for people throughout the South Side and beyond. Filled with native and regionally appropriate plants and home to meandering trails and a community garden, Kenwood Gardens welcomes people for meditation, performance, educational programming and opportunities to experience this beautiful public space.

Kenwood Gardens was brought to life with the help of local neighbors, horticulturists and landscape architects. Rebuild Foundation hosted its first-ever free concert series in the gardens, welcoming guests to enjoy outdoor performances by local ensembles monthly. The gardens also hosted a suite of wellness programs including yoga, meditation and sound bathing. The first year of programs in the garden revealed a glimpse of future possibilities and programs — and shared the joy a dose of nature can provide.

A new narrative

After decades of redlining, disinvestment and exclusion from Chicago's booming economic growth, the narrative of Greater Grand Crossing — like many historically Black communities across the country — had become dominated by fear-mongering media stories and statistics that highlighted crime and unemployment rather than positive stories about community, strength, creativity or the multigenerational historical significance of Greater Grand Crossing. This created the perception that Greater Grand Crossing was a place to avoid.

Rebuild Foundation's district of cultural amenities and public spaces provide a new and alternative lens — arts and culture — through which to approach long-standing inequities and spur deeper understandings of Black culture and Black history. Today, world-class public spaces and cultural programs attract people from a wide range of neighborhoods and cities to experience Greater Grand Crossing.

The groundbreaking innovation evident in Rebuild Foundation's spaces and cultural programming has attracted media attention locally and around the nation. Local media outlets like the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Magazine*, WTTW public radio and *Chicago Reader* have highlighted initiatives at the Arts Bank and Kenwood Gardens. National and international publications like *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Wall Street Journal* have also spurred visitorship to Greater Grand Crossing's reimagined civic assets, pushing back on harmful preconceived notions and heralding narratives that honor the beauty of the neighborhood.

“At this event at the Arts Bank, you saw people from the surrounding community certainly come in. But you also saw people from the North Side and from Pilsen. And then I know, because of our sign-in list, there were people from the south suburbs. So it was like this mix of Chicagoans.”

Shannon Bonner,
educator and creative entrepreneur





Follow-on investment

Building on work supported by Reimagining the Civic Commons, Rebuild Foundation has secured new funding to reimagine more locations in and around Greater Grand Crossing.

Rebuild is transforming the St. Laurence school, a shuttered Catholic school just steps away from Kenwood Gardens, into an arts and creative entrepreneurship incubator. In 2022, Rebuild received its first significant investment of public funds — a \$1.6 million grant from the City of Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund — to develop St. Laurence. A \$950,000 grant from the State of Illinois and a \$3.5 million inaugural Humanities in Place grant from the Mellon Foundation followed soon after. Follow-on grants and fundraising efforts have also helped Rebuild develop operational models for St. Laurence and other sites.

In May 2022, Rebuild Foundation formally broke ground on the emerging incubator in a ceremony where public officials, including Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker and City of Chicago First Lady Amy Eshleman, expressed support for the project. And in 2021, the Obama Presidential Center broke ground just a few blocks away from the Stony Island Arts Bank, indicating momentum for continued local investment.



"We'll have artists in residence, creative entrepreneurs — the whole building is dedicated to how do Black and brown folk on the South Side develop and hone their talent, so that they can do more for themselves and out in the world."

Theaster Gates, Rebuild Foundation

Lasting, local value

As reimagined civic assets in Greater Grand Crossing open their doors, they're spurring lasting, local economic and social value by providing space and support for artists and entrepreneurs from within the community.

St. Laurence will become an arts and creative entrepreneurship incubator for local makers and creators.

The Stony Island Arts Bank hosts exhibitions and public programs, and it serves as a place of discovery for Rebuild's artists in residence. The Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative — a former public housing project — is home to affordable housing as well as flexible space for artists and community members. And Kenwood Gardens serves as a summer sanctuary for Rebuild's wellness and music programming, where artists and neighbors can enjoy experiences on Black land in Black space.

This intentional focus on artists and entrepreneurs from the South Side empowers creatives and organizations in the local neighborhood to grow their enterprises, refine their practices and share their talent on a wider scale. This was true even during the height of the pandemic, when Rebuild supported artists by strategically leveraging shared community spaces.

Rebuild has also shifted from producing a full calendar of programs to serving as a platform for artists and cultural workers in residence to conduct research, produce new work and facilitate programs that engage the Greater Grand Crossing community, Chicago's artistic and scholarly community, and visitors from across the world. For the artists and entrepreneurs contributing to programs, Rebuild's platform model helps them build relationships with the South Side community while expanding their audiences and impact. This model also allows the Rebuild team to stay small and nimble while they support larger initiatives and a sustained community practice. By acting as a purposeful convener, Rebuild has become a larger catalyst for the neighborhood.

"It means I can shop in my community, from artists who look like me, who have some shared experience, who are producing artwork that I want to bring back to my home. Having that in your neighborhood, that has value."

Laura Lane, Sunshine Enterprises



"A sense of abundance is really, really important. You can't have experimentation if you don't have comfort and safety. You can't create change in a scarcity mindset. So we've created places of safety and beauty and hospitality. There's food and there's drinks and there's music, and all of these things create a place where you can talk to your neighbors. You can talk to your community. You can come up with ideas for the neighborhood that don't have a chance to grow elsewhere."

**Ellen Hartwell Alderman,
Rebuild Foundation**



Detroit





In Detroit, the work of Reimagining the Civic Commons primarily took place in Fitzgerald, a formerly disinvested, majority Black neighborhood on the city’s northwest side.

Detroit Civic Commons focused on transforming vacant spaces into community assets, including a recreational greenway, a park, a commercial corridor, meadows and community spaces.

Prior to Detroit Civic Commons, the commercial vacancy rate along Fitzgerald’s primary commercial corridor, McNichols Road (also known as 6 Mile), was at about 70%. Residential vacancy was prevalent, too, with over 100 vacant houses in the neighborhood. Through Detroit Civic Commons, more than 25 acres of vacant parcels scattered across the neighborhood were transformed into a new set of public amenities. Obsolete structures on McNichols and vacant lots on Livernois Avenue were revitalized, becoming new stores and community spaces.

The neighborhood has transformed in other ways, too. An auto-oriented street has become an inviting “complete street” where it is safe for pedestrians and cyclists to linger. And community members participated throughout, doing everything from helping to design a new mural to opening new businesses. The result is an increasingly resilient community, and a public-space-first approach to equitable neighborhood revitalization that provides a model for other neighborhoods.

Joy and connection, outdoors

The green spaces and commercial places created through Detroit Civic Commons are inviting people to come out and enjoy their neighborhood in a way that, for decades, was difficult.



Redlining and disinvestment led to vacancy and related problems in Detroit's historically Black communities, a trend compounded by the 2008 recession, when many residents lost their homes to foreclosure and properties were abandoned. At the same time, public spaces received little investment in this city built for cars, making the public realm uninviting.

The community assets created through Detroit Civic Commons are drawing people back outside, together. Ella Fitzgerald Park is becoming the heart of the neighborhood, providing residents a place to gather and play. Before it was a park, the space was a collection of 26 vacant lots and, based on observation mapping in 2017, before the park was built, almost no one went to the site. In 2018, after the park opened, 77% of intercept survey respondents said they visited Ella Fitzgerald Park at least weekly, and more than one-third said they visited daily, drawn by a custom play space, basketball courts and fun times with friends and neighbors.

A similar transformation is happening on McNichols, where a new streetscape and new businesses and retailers invite people to linger and socialize. Where there once was vacancy, there is now an active main street with mixed-use retail anchored by local entrepreneurial talent, a community storefront that brings together myriad collaborators and gathering places for the community.



"We are three generations that have come back to this community because of this change. It boosted morale, it brought back some reassurance, because the businesses are coming back and the abandoned houses are getting rehabbed or torn down."

Stephanie Harbin, San Juan Block Club



“I grew up in the Detroit where we had neighborhoods, where kids played together outside, at the park and in this neighborhood. We kind of lost that, but I’m starting to see some of that come back. People are in the park, people have their birthdays in the park, they are celebrating the fact that they have this space.”

Kim Tandy, City of Detroit Department of Neighborhoods



“What it did was formalize an investment template for all the neighborhoods across the city that are part of the Strategic Neighborhood Fund. Now everywhere we go, it’s four pillars of investment — commercial corridor, parks, streetscape and housing stabilization — all framed by a year-long planning study ahead of time. That template was teased out of the Civic Commons work here.”

Michael R. Smith,
Invest Detroit



A template for equitable neighborhood redevelopment

Since Reimagining the Civic Commons launched, Detroit has created robust, multisector partnerships and braided together philanthropic, private and public dollars to create a model of community revitalization so powerful it is now being used in neighborhoods throughout the city.

Detroit has done this, in part, through the Strategic Neighborhood Fund (SNF). SNF is a partnership of a diverse collection of organizations, including the City of Detroit, local community development finance institution Invest Detroit and philanthropic and corporate donors. It funds community-driven projects in four specific areas: park improvements, streetscape improvements, commercial corridor development and affordable single-family home stabilization.

It started in the Fitzgerald neighborhood — and Detroit Civic Commons informed how it grew and which types of initiatives it prioritized. Based on early signs of success in Fitzgerald, SNF formally added parks and public spaces as the fourth pillar of its investment strategy. The Civic Commons emphasis on collaboration across silos also filtered into SNF in a big way. To facilitate collaboration, the local Civic Commons team hired a coordinator who split her time among the City of Detroit's Planning and Development Department, Fitzgerald-based community development organization Live6 and Invest Detroit. On McNichols, Neighborhood HomeBase — a public community-gathering space and shared office space created through Detroit Civic Commons — is a physical manifestation of this collaboration, with offices for Live6 and the University of Detroit Mercy's Detroit Collaborative Design Center and space for City of Detroit staff.

SNF shows the power of partnerships and collaboration, and also the power of investing with a portfolio approach, as opposed to funding small, disconnected projects one at a time. The effort has now expanded to 10 areas across the city and, as of 2021, raised more than \$50 million. Residents of the first three investment areas, including Fitzgerald, are significantly more likely to report greater satisfaction with their neighborhoods, greater satisfaction with local housing conditions and better perceptions of safety than other Detroiters. They have also seen more people move in, more businesses opening and increasing property values.



Local and Black wealth

Transforming vacant lots and buildings into inviting spaces is creating economic value in the Fitzgerald neighborhood. To ensure this value benefits local residents, Detroit Civic Commons has been prioritizing Black-owned businesses and developers through investments and technical assistance programs. And as a result of the Civic Commons work, long-time homeowners are seeing their home values increase.

On the McNichols corridor, formerly vacant buildings became home to Black-owned businesses like Detroit Sip and Detroit Pizza Bar. Detroit Pizza Bar co-owners Marcus Jones and Akunna Olumba received funding from SNF to help open their business, including instituting a six-to-eight-week training program for employees. When the restaurant opened in spring 2022, more than 95% of employees lived within 2 miles. Nearby, the Sawyer Art Apartments, an affordable apartment building near the University of Detroit Mercy campus, are being developed by a Black-led development team. Supporting Black-owned businesses and Black developers is part of an intentional effort to provide grants and technical support to Black business owners, and to rethink the city's request-for-proposal process. "If the majority of businesses aren't Black owned or the

developers aren't Black, we're not meeting the goal of people who are here and really supporting this community," said Alexa Bush of The Kresge Foundation, previously with the City of Detroit's Planning and Development Department.

For long-time Fitzgerald homeowners, the Civic Commons work is leading to increased home values. In 2017, median home values were \$36,700. Based on Zillow data, of the 32 homes sold from January to August 2022, 84% sold for more than that, with 28% selling for more than \$100,000. This is a contrast to previous years, when many homeowners suffered significant decreases in home equity after the 2008 foreclosure crisis. The new community amenities are also attracting new residents to the neighborhood, including through the city's home rehabilitation programs.



"We're in a majority Black neighborhood in a majority Black city, so for whom and how had to be really important. We were explicitly trying to rebuild people's home equity that they lost in the Great Recession. Because if you look at the racial wealth gap in the U.S., Black wealth is 15 times less than white wealth, and so much of that is tied up in single-family housing. We weren't shy about trying to rebuild that equity in this neighborhood."

Alexa Bush, The Kresge Foundation



More community resilience

By fostering connections among people, supporting residents to become stewards of their local civic assets and building green infrastructure, Detroit Civic Commons is nurturing resilient communities.

The initiative has created meaningful new connections among people as residents, leaders, government and nonprofits collaborate to reimagine community spaces. Mini-grants support residents to create public programming. And by attracting people from nearby neighborhoods, Ella Fitzgerald Park is boosting socioeconomic mixing and reducing isolation.

To boost environmental resilience, the initiative is building a public realm that supports biking, walking and rolling, while also investing in green infrastructure to support climate resilience. One example of this is to turn vacant lots into meadows, which absorb stormwater, provide habitat, beautify neighborhoods and reduce maintenance tasks like mowing. Detroit Civic Commons has also increased the tree canopy in Fitzgerald, planting trees on the commercial corridor, on the greenway and in Ella Fitzgerald Park. Trees reduce the heat island effect and are a piece of the puzzle to foster resilient neighborhoods in the face of climate change.



“Civic Commons has done a wonderful job, and I want it to trickle down. I want our children, my grandchildren, to be a recipient of the good, the change. The community, we’re making a comeback and that is with the help of this particular collaboration.”

**Darnetta Morris-Banks,
Prairie Street Block Club**

Stewardship and co-creation



“When I first moved here, I feel like everyone just really didn’t care about their neighborhood. They would throw trash out their windows or they didn’t really care to walk two feet to the garbage can. And then over the course of a year or so, people are picking up their trash and they’re taking pride in their houses and fixing up their houses. That was a really positive change for me.”

**I’sha Schultz-Spradlin,
College Core Block Club**

To create civic assets that would become places of community connection and civic pride, Detroit Civic Commons listened to and learned from residents, co-creating the new spaces with them. The process to design and build Ella Fitzgerald Park provides one such example.

The Civic Commons team engaged with residents in creative ways, such as hosting cookouts in vacant lots, offering pop-up bike repair clinics and hosting a resident-led series called Activity Day to inspire programming in the future park.

The ideas and feedback shared at these gatherings allowed the community’s identity to be integrated into the park. Residents suggested the park’s name and, in collaboration with artist Hubert Massey, designed and installed two mosaic murals in the park. Residents maintain and clean the park, with support from workforce development programs that provide training in green-collar construction and maintenance and enable residents to participate directly in the revitalization of their communities. Mini-grants support resident-led programming, and the Friends of Ella Fitzgerald Park stewardship organization will partner with local block clubs on the park’s long-term care.

Residents were also involved in research efforts, serving as primary data collectors to understand changes in everything from public life to perceptions of safety. This created transparency about the research while also spurring changes of mind in some of the data collectors as they learned about the solutions being proposed and gained a better understanding of their neighbors’ opinions. For instance, after observing McNichols for a number of days as a data collector, Stephanie Harbin, a neighborhood resident and president of the San Juan Block Club, realized that many of her neighbors rode bikes and that McNichols was an unsafe corridor for them. This completely shifted her opinion, and she became an ardent supporter of protected bike lanes in the neighborhood.



Belief in a better future

The changes in Fitzgerald — new parks, new greenways, new spaces to gather and share experiences — are spurring a new, hopeful outlook for residents. In interviews and survey responses, people say the neighborhood has improved, and they expect even more improvement to come.

“It’s bringing a new environment and it’s bringing a new atmosphere, and a lot of people want to come to McNichols,” said Chanale Greer, a member of Turner Street Block Club. “They want to walk down the corridor. They want to see these new buildings being built.”

In 2017, only 34% of Fitzgerald residents said they felt the neighborhood had improved over the past few years. Just 18 months into Detroit Civic Commons, 89% of people visiting Ella Fitzgerald Park or the McNichols commercial corridor said they felt the neighborhood had improved recently, and 96% said they felt the neighborhood would improve some or a lot over the next few years.

“They asked for our ideas, and we recommended a park down there, green areas, and roads to be better and shops open, all this good stuff. A lot of people never thought it would come, but that change, it came.”

Andrew White, San Juan Block Club



Reimagining the Civic Commons

Impact Interview Report

Memphis





Memphis, Tennessee, is transforming public spaces across this majority-Black city with a focus on breaking down barriers, connecting to nature and creating new value for Memphians.

What started at the Mississippi River has become a citywide movement of diverse neighborhoods and organizations, all operating in different geographies and on different scales, yet working together to achieve shared goals.

In 2016, when Reimagining the Civic Commons kicked off in Memphis, the area now known as the Fourth Bluff — a four-block area along the Mississippi that is home to two parks, a historic library and other civic assets — was not on the mental map of most Memphians. The area lacked a name, and many early focus group participants did not realize that the vacant space then called Mississippi River Park (now River Garden) was even a park. Since then, the Fourth Bluff has become a series of connected, vibrant and dynamic civic spaces adjacent to downtown and the river. After demonstration projects were completed, a citywide collaborative began advocating for robust civic infrastructure throughout Memphis.

Prior to Reimagining the Civic Commons, there were few places where Memphians of different backgrounds could come together and share space as equals. Memphis is a low-density city, making residential segregation even more likely to hinder socioeconomic mixing. Public spaces were home to divisive Confederate monuments. And although downtown Memphis is a relatively mixed-income neighborhood, it is adjacent to some of the poorest neighborhoods in Tennessee.

Memphis grew from the river and exists today because of the river. Now the city is building a riverfront to spur new connections and new value.



“We didn’t care about the rain. We cared that part of history was gone. We didn’t have to look at it anymore. You know, we would walk around the park, but it was still there. It was still a reminder of the [Confederate] past. But now when you go there, you see blue and yellow tables and chairs and artwork. It’s just a beautiful thing.”

Tanja Mitchell, The Works Inc.

Divisive places to welcoming spaces

Until recently, Fourth Bluff Park (formerly Confederate Park) was home to Confederate monuments, including cannons and a statue of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis. The statue — a tribute to white supremacy — stood until 2017, when cranes finally removed it as a crowd of people watched and cheered.

Two years of legal challenges halted the removal of the other Confederate monuments. But in 2018, the day after the last cannons were removed, the park hosted Le Dîner en Blanc, a pop-up dinner party welcoming people from across the city to celebrate together. Construction to redesign the park began soon after, and in 2020 the park welcomed the Peace Project, an installed soundscape that served as a healing space and signaled Fourth Bluff Park's transformation into a place of welcoming. Inviting programming continued through a partnership with the Memphis Grizzlies NBA team. In 2021 and again in 2022, the park was chosen to host the official playoff game watch parties and welcomed large, diverse and joyful crowds.

Today, there are new pathways, trees, lighting and seating areas where the monuments once stood, reclaiming this place for all Memphians to enjoy and belong.

“If we focus on being inclusive but also being equitable, then the tides turn.”

Victoria Young, Le Dîner en Blanc Memphis



“It’s theirs, wherever they live. People see the downtown parks as their parks, and they feel that agency and they feel that ownership, and it’s pretty special.”

Penelope Huston, Downtown Memphis Commission





Diversity thrives

River Garden was designed to bring people from diverse backgrounds downtown to share space and experiences. Since reopening in 2018 after a \$1.6 million renovation, the 1-acre park on the banks of the river has become a go-to place.

“There’s a definite difference in the diversity down here than what I saw maybe 15 years ago. I love coming here and seeing a variety of types of families, a variety of age groups walking around, enjoying the parks, enjoying the riverside, getting their exercise in as a family. It just warms my heart.”

Mark Akin, Envision Fitness and downtown resident

The garden features amenities designed for hanging out and enjoying the beautiful space and the company of others, including an all-ages treehouse and play structure, human-size nests constructed from Mississippi River driftwood, a firepit, a dining pavilion, swinging benches, a coffee shop and fabulous harbor-side views. Programming, like weekly Firepit Fridays during cooler months, brings downtown workers, residents, families and tourists together to kick off the weekend and roast marshmallows at sunset. Visitors can also rent kayaks and enjoy paddling in the adjacent slack-water harbor.

By October 2021, average weekend visitor numbers at River Garden were almost three times those of 2017. Intercept surveys among visitors showed that the park’s users hailed from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and from a diverse geography of more than 40 different zip codes, a contrast to the residential segregation still common in Memphis. This success was the product of an intensive focus on achieving defined outcomes and by focusing on designs and programs that would appeal across age, race and income.

Responsive community assets

Located on the riverfront, the historic Cossitt Library is transforming to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the community, while continuing to provide critical library services. The changes span from the selection of books to the design of the space to programming and partnerships.

The redesign enables the library to serve as both a neighborhood branch for the downtown core and a destination for all to enjoy. New features accommodate the needs of today's community, including co-working spaces, a 2,500-square-foot performance space, a cafe and inviting outdoor spaces. To celebrate the local Black community and honor Black history, the library is expanding its book collection to include a specially curated selection of books on African American history and stories of everyday Memphians from historic Black neighborhoods.

A suite of robust programming with national partners such as Citizen University and Citizen Film seeks to position the library as a convener and facilitator of conversations to address community challenges. Locally, Cossitt Library partners with Memphis-based organizations to pair budding creative entrepreneurs with library resources, helping them develop their ideas into viable, sustainable businesses that will strengthen the local community.



“Civic Commons has played a huge role in how we are reimagining this library. Everything from the partnerships we have gone after to the types of equipment we have purchased, all have been affected in some way by Civic Commons. The studios we’ve been a part of, the conversations we’ve had, the learning journeys to other cities — they’ve all had a profound impact on us.”

Shamichael Hallman, Memphis Public Libraries





Countered stigma

By creating a series of high-quality, connected assets along the Mississippi River, Memphis is improving perceptions of the riverfront and downtown — and overcoming geographic and historical challenges.

Memphis' downtown marks the very western point of city limits in a metro area that has, for the most part, expanded eastward. And as one of the most sprawling and geographically segregated cities in the nation, Memphis had to draw new people from across the city to downtown — a place that was unfamiliar to many and negatively perceived by some.

High-quality, free and family-friendly experiences not available elsewhere contributed to a shift in perception. One example is the Full Moon Kayak series. In warm months, when the full moon rises, a DJ spins tunes from a boat in the middle of the Memphis Harbor and 30-minute kayak and paddleboard rentals are free for all. Kids are welcome, as are dogs. The event has been a huge success, attracting hundreds of people, with many bringing their own boats.

Efforts like these contributed to a dramatic change in feelings of safety. In focus groups in 2017, participants shared that downtown was perceived as unsafe. "I think people just have an assumption that downtown is dangerous," said a downtown worker. Intercept surveys conducted around that time validated this perception: Only 37% of respondents said they thought downtown was safe at night. However, just a few months after the launch of new evening programming and the installation of new lighting at Civic Commons sites, intercept surveys showed a dramatic change: 68% of respondents said they felt safe in downtown at night.

"I think people understand the uniqueness of Memphis and the potential that Memphis has. And sometimes we might just need a little push to get that going."

Courtney McNeal,
Innovate Memphis

Connection to nature and one another

Memphis' riverfront civic commons sites are now all connected by the River Line, a 5-mile walking and biking trail that also connects to riverfront parks beyond the Fourth Bluff. The single, connected trail and its new entry points and wayfinding in adjacent neighborhoods have spurred a significant increase in activity up and down the riverfront.

The number of people crossing the Big River Crossing (a mile-long pedestrian and bike bridge over the Mississippi) increased by about 20% following completion of the trail.

In addition to building the trail, and because the trail provided a safe outdoor space to exercise and socialize, Memphis found unique and safe ways to encourage the use of public spaces at a time when people needed connection to nature and one another more than ever. And as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in 2020, the city closed Riverside Drive — a downtown street next to Fourth Bluff public spaces. River Garden became the site of self-guided nature walks with facts about the meadows and biodiversity added strategically throughout the park.

The riverfront also became Memphis' biggest outdoor gym. On Riverside Drive, Memphis River Parks Partnership adapted its popular skate nights from concentrated events into free skate rentals across every summer weekend. With safer and better access to the riverfront, and more space for social distancing, visitor numbers increased even as groups became smaller and more spread out.

Looking ahead, Memphis is improving safety for pedestrians accessing the trail. Pedestrian safety interventions on nearby streets have been identified and are being planned and built to welcome even more people to explore the reimagined Fourth Bluff.

“One thing the pandemic underlined is how important public green space is to our health, physical and mental. Parks and green spaces were the only places we could go safely during the early days of the pandemic and feel like we could breathe, almost literally. There should be a national as well as a local cry for more investment to keep those spaces beautiful and open to everybody.”

Justin Entzminger, Innovate Memphis





“Being part of the Civic Commons Learning Network has given us the opportunity to see great public spaces in other cities and to work with world-class design talent. This has helped raise our aspirations and standards for how parks, libraries and other city assets look and operate in Memphis.”

Maria Fuhrmann,
Office of Memphis Mayor
Jim Strickland



Elevated expectations

A principle of Reimagining the Civic Commons is that public spaces should provide the best quality for all — in both experience and design — so they can support equity while competing with alternatives in the private market. Through innovative approaches to programming, staffing and design, Memphis is creating places that raise the bar for what a public space can be.

At River Garden, the maintenance staff are now the River Garden Rangers, committed to both maintaining the space and providing an excellent experience for all visitors. All rangers collaborated to build a set of norms — a playbook for what they need to do and know, and how they can support visitors at the park. Today, rangers not only pick up litter and perform maintenance tasks but also welcome everyone to the parks, proactively ask if they can improve visitors' experiences, and share knowledge about programs, events and nearby businesses.

Memphis is also providing free, crowd-pleasing programming like the beloved Soulin' on the River concert series. Launched in 2019, the program brings high-quality concerts to public spaces on the riverfront and in 2021 expanded to neighborhoods throughout the city.

And, informed by the work in the Fourth Bluff, Memphis is investing in the riverfront's most visible and accessible park, Tom Lee Park, in a big way. A \$61 million transformation is taking place, led by an internationally renowned design team including Studio Gang and SCAPE.

Artwork by Theaster Gates will honor the park's namesake, Tom Lee, a Black man who, in spite of not knowing how to swim, saved 32 people from a capsized steamboat in the icy current of the Mississippi River in 1925. The park and the artwork will emphasize conversation, reflection and a path to community reconciliation.

Memphis Civic Commons has also inspired a broader shift in the city's approach to parks and public space. Civic Commons principles were integrated into the Memphis 3.0 comprehensive plan, informing the City's goals to create vibrant civic spaces and support sustainable, resilient communities. And Memphis Civic Commons has itself expanded, transforming into a peer network of public space managers across the city who share resources, test and scale approaches to public space, and support engagement and advocacy across neighborhoods. By reinforcing an appreciation for parks and public space — and demonstrating their potential to create positive social outcomes — Memphis Civic Commons paved the way for elevated expectations and local systems change.

“Reimagining the Civic Commons prompted us to think differently about the public realm and gave us the flexibility to try new approaches. It created a platform to connect and learn with our peers, nationally and locally. All this has helped us reimagine the processes and models that are essential to implementing change.”

Susan Dalton, Innovate Memphis



Much has changed since Reimagining the Civic Commons began working to address pressing social issues through the lens of public space. The U.S. faces challenges to its democracy, rising social isolation, decreasing trust and the accelerating consequences of climate change. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and a reinvigorated racial justice movement have drawn attention to longstanding health disparities, systemic racism and inequities affecting, in particular, communities of color and people living in poverty.

And yet, after six years of collaboration and innovation, it's clear that the hypothesis that spurred Reimagining the Civic Commons holds true: **Our shared public spaces can indeed provide solutions to some of these pressing issues.**

In the five Civic Commons demonstration cities, collaborative teams on the ground have countered harmful trends and helped reverse historic inequities. They have created high-quality public spaces and beneficial outcomes for communities. And they have accomplished all of this using the portfolio approach, outcomes orientation and commitment to collaboration emphasized by Reimagining the Civic Commons.

Since its launch, the initiative has expanded to include seven additional cities in the Civic Commons Learning Network. These 12 communities across the U.S. are undergoing a paradigm shift to design, manage and operate civic assets in ways that spur civic engagement, bring diverse people together, create value and promote environmental sustainability.

Looking ahead, there is great potential to spread the lessons of Reimagining the Civic Commons beyond these 12 cities. Because in addition to sharing the impacts of the first six years, this report serves as a call to action.

Policymakers and public space practitioners across the U.S. have more opportunities than ever to transform their public spaces in ways that support positive social outcomes. From the American Rescue Plan Act of

2021 to the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Discretionary Grant program to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, considerable federal funds are available that could be used by communities to create high-quality, accessible civic infrastructure. Philanthropic funders are investing in bringing together networks of people and organizations working in public space, recognizing the social, environmental and economic advantages of breaking down silos. And public space practitioners are understanding more and more how to design and operate public spaces as a portfolio in order to achieve greater beneficial impacts for people and neighborhoods.

As these new ways of thinking and working spread to more people and communities, the power of the commons will only grow. Faced with immense challenges, now is the time for American communities to not only invest in public spaces but also to reimagine our expectations for them.

Parks, libraries, trails and other shared public spaces can be transformative. The power is ours to make them so.



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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.

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