



Reimagining  
the Civic Commons

# Civic Assets

FOR MORE

# Equitable Cities

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To produce this report, Urban interviewed key stakeholders involved in the Reimagining the Civic Commons (RCC) initiative, reviewed documents and scanned relevant literature, and consulted with representatives from participating communities. These consultations included the conveners or institutional hosts, program staff, and local partners from the original five demonstration cities (Akron, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, and Philadelphia), along with the expansion cities (Lexington, Macon, Miami, Minneapolis, and San José). We are grateful to them for their time, expertise, and thoughtful contributions to this report.

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# A PROMISING SOLUTION FOR A FRAGMENTED SOCIETY

The United States is at a pivotal moment. Americans are increasingly polarized, socially isolated,<sup>1</sup> and segregated. Trust between people and the institutions that serve them is plummeting. Meanwhile, financial instability among families grows and long-standing racial inequities persist.<sup>2</sup> And now, the dual pandemics of coronavirus and racism threaten to deepen these realities. Reshaping our socially and economically fragmented environment requires bold, imaginative interventions. One promising solution taking place across the country focuses on restoring how we connect to one another in the public spaces we share—our parks, libraries, plazas, recreational centers, and more.

These civic assets exist in all communities but have rarely been considered strategic investments for cities. They are often a low priority in municipal budgets and have faced decades of disinvestment. However, over the past four years a collaboration of philanthropic organizations in partnership with civic and community leaders has been reinvesting in and reimagining these civic assets in ways that show their multifaceted value to communities. Such investments are a critical step toward reversing today's divisions and inequities: revitalizing these assets can catalyze neighborhood renaissance, improve local economies, and create an opportunity to rebuild trust, advance equity, and cultivate more vibrant and connected communities.<sup>3</sup>

By making our public spaces more attractive and inviting—and focusing on how residents and surrounding neighborhoods benefit socially and economically—cities are realizing the potential of these shared assets.

[Reimagining the Civic Commons](#) (RCC) is a national initiative unfolding in cities across the country that aims to address our growing social and economic fragmentation. Through the initiative, local teams are using thoughtful design and intentional programming to transform public assets in [Akron](#), [Chicago](#), [Detroit](#), [Memphis](#), and [Philadelphia](#) into gathering spots that nurture greater connection between residents from different backgrounds, attract new investments to adjacent neighborhoods, increase access to nature, and give people a sense of shared ownership over the public spaces in their cities.

RCC launched nationally in 2016 with \$20 million in support from The JPB Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the William Penn Foundation, as well as more than \$20 million in local matching funds. The three-year effort in the initiative's original demonstration cities is now entering its second phase. In 2020, a new cohort—Lexington, Macon, Miami, Minneapolis, and San José—will join the Civic Commons [Learning Network](#).

RCC's pursuit of a broad and systematically selected set of **social, economic, and environmental outcomes** and its adoption of a portfolio approach—that is, a focus on a **connected collection of diverse assets**—makes the effort particularly innovative. It is these two drivers that advance the reimagining taking place in each demonstration city. They are what shift the trajectory of how the civic asset investment unfolds. They also reframe the purpose of the investment to one that strives to ultimately create more equitable and resilient communities.

## REIMAGINING THE CIVIC COMMONS DRIVERS

### OUTCOMES

These four goals fundamentally guide how demonstration cities approach their work:

- **Civic engagement:** To build a sense of community that brings people of all backgrounds back into public life as stewards and advocates shaping their city's future.
- **Socioeconomic mixing:** To create places where everyone belongs and that generate opportunities for shared experience among people of all incomes and backgrounds.
- **Environmental sustainability:** To increase people's access to nature and create environmentally friendly places easily reached by walking, biking, or transit.
- **Value creation:** To encourage additional investments in neighborhoods so they are better places to thrive.

### PORTFOLIO APPROACH

Instead of concentrating on a single public place, demonstration cities are reanimating a collection, or portfolio, of connected civic assets. This is done in multifaceted, imaginative ways that challenge the status quo, dismantle silos among city entities, and engage a diversity of sectors.

This approach, driven by its focus on outcomes and a connected set of assets, is now **inspiring an emerging field of practice** that offers a potential solution to the growing economic segregation, social isolation, and decline in trust affecting cities and the nation. It is also **sparkling systems change** in several communities: government agencies, local residents, nonprofits, community advocates, and foundations are together creating, revising, or even overhauling practices and policies in their city. In doing so, they aim to better prioritize, manage, fund, and sustain efforts that breathe life into their community through public spaces. For today's entrepreneurial civic leaders, these efforts in RCC demonstration cities provide compelling insights into how strategic investment in public assets can catalyze equitable social change that is responsive, meaningful, and sustainable.

Through interviews, consultations, and discussion during a two-day convening, the Urban Institute explored the RCC experience for lessons on how to carry out this new way of working. We also sought to understand the challenges that might arise and how to best navigate

them, as well as to identify what it would take to evolve, expand, and scale this emerging field of practice.

Our report focuses on the policy and practice dimensions of the RCC approach. We identify elements of the approach that influence the policies and procedures of local governments, such as land use, parks and recreation, municipal finance, and infrastructure. Given the public nature of civic commons, RCC's policy ecosystem involves the interaction of local government officials, nonprofit partners, civic institutions, and residents in moving innovative ideas and practices from design and development through formal adoption, implementation, and assessment. Within the RCC context, practices are the strategies and tactics of how local cross-sector teams in each city work on their projects, develop programs, and engage with their partners and community.

With this publication, Urban aims to provide civic leaders, policymakers, nonprofit leaders, practitioners, and local and regional philanthropists with insights to inform and inspire action as they reimagine public spaces in their own communities.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF REIMAGINING THE CIVIC COMMONS

Where we live greatly influences our life trajectory. Academic research has shown just how important neighborhoods and place are in people's lives and well-being, in everything from short-term resilience in the face of a disaster<sup>4</sup> to longer-term impacts on child development and eventual life chances.<sup>5</sup> The challenges some neighborhoods face—specifically related to public safety,<sup>6</sup> environmental issues,<sup>7</sup> limited economic opportunity,<sup>8</sup> limited organizational and nonprofit-sector support,<sup>9</sup> and lack of access to public space

or other civic assets—can impact a person's opportunity to thrive.

Given the range of these challenges, if the goal is to promote equity and resilience within and across communities—as it is in the RCC effort—the approach needs to be multifaceted, too. A key step is to identify the assets in a given place, understand their current role and future potential, and figure out how to link them into mutually reinforcing structures that support the communities within which they exist. This means

that there needs to be an outcomes orientation that is relevant to communities, along with metrics that track progress on outcomes and help people understand the ramifications for equity.

While the use of metrics to evaluate performance is not new, it tends to be limited in utility or scope.

This approach to public space revitalization is not common practice; most civic asset leaders tend to think about operations, rather than community outcomes. RCC's focus on outcomes, however, encouraged demonstration cities to develop ambitions that extended beyond the boundaries of the public assets. Leaders fostered a shared language across departmental

and sectoral silos as well as across the types of assets they focused on. They also developed a measurement framework to understand progress toward the four outcomes.

Most important, having a set of goals to strive for has given RCC a greater purpose: Public spaces are being revived to build trust and public life, connect people of all backgrounds and bridge social capital, develop more environmentally resilient neighborhoods, and create real economic value for communities. This intentional pursuit toward shared outcomes significantly changed how RCC leaders and community members approached their reimagining of civic assets.

## TRACKING AND MEASURING PROGRESS

RCC has [developed a universal measurement system](#) for civic assets that local stakeholders are using to track a range of metrics. These go beyond traditional performance management and measurement outputs, such as visitor counts to a site. RCC also measures how a reimagined collection of civic assets helps nurture community equity, engagement, sustainability, economic resilience, and more. This breadth represents another aspect of the initiative that sets it apart from traditional investment approaches: it incorporates insights from multiple sectors and draws upon expertise from several fields that often do not speak to one another.

Broadening the range of metrics and outcomes across sectors leads to a more expansive sense of what an asset can accomplish and helps build bridges across differently placed interests. With this goal in mind, Reimagining the Civic Commons has sought to shift how public spaces are thought of and to clarify how they contribute to the social life of our communities. At the core of this work is an effort to [build a relevant evidence base](#) for the benefits civic assets could provide.

## INFLUENCING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PUBLIC SPACES

Core to the RCC vision is the belief that when public spaces are revived and connected, they can influence positive change—and help counter the social isolation, economic inequities, segregation, and mistrust of others that many communities are experiencing today. The demonstration cities' pursuit of four main outcomes reflects this central idea that public spaces catalyze social and economic change. Below we provide more discussion on these “north stars” of the RCC effort and why a revitalized collection of public spaces can deliver on them.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**Goal:** To build a sense of community that brings people of all backgrounds back into public life as stewards and advocates shaping their city's future.

The ability of public spaces to promote citizenship, civility, and community has long been one of their key perceived benefits. Frederick Law Olmsted, through his promotion and development of grand public parks—including Central Park—and park systems, is a touchstone for understanding how civic spaces can benefit all city residents.<sup>10</sup> On a smaller scale, Jane Jacobs's view of the importance of everyday sidewalk interactions is a touchstone for understanding how shared public spaces can build civic-mindedness: “The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts. Most of it is ostensibly trivial, but the sum is not trivial at all.”<sup>11</sup>

Public spaces are associated with increased social cohesion within groups and increased “bonding” social capital, and spaces designed for interactions have the strongest positive effects. The investment structure

matters, too: if an initiative is implemented without an equity frame, then the outcomes may end up reflecting and reinforcing inequities across different communities (such as when wealthier communities can fully fund parks “friends” groups to respond to budget cuts while poorer ones cannot).<sup>12</sup>

*“I think the degree to which we’ve been able to encourage socioeconomic mixing [through] the design of these spaces and ... the cultivation of stewards and champions and such has really created this space where there’s just a really nice mix of people that are showing up and interacting with each other, and I think that’s a huge accomplishment being in the South.”*

—SHAMICHAEL HALLMAN

Branch Manager at Memphis Public Library and civic engagement manager at [The Fourth Bluff](#)

### SOCIOECONOMIC MIXING

**Goal:** To create places where everyone belongs and that generate opportunities for shared experience among people of all incomes and backgrounds.

How people use and understand public spaces and interact with one another across social boundaries is critical for the well-being of communities. Extensive research has shown how neighborhoods, and particularly diverse neighborhoods, can promote access to opportunity and mobility.<sup>13</sup> By designing and activating public assets that encourage racially and economically diverse families to mingle cities can make progress toward reducing social isolation, fostering trust, and improving the reputation of long-overlooked neighborhoods.

Reputation of a site or neighborhood, whether from residents or visitors, can be a vicious or virtuous cycle leading to decline and disuse or growth and shared benefits.<sup>14</sup> There are many examples of supposedly successful projects, from parks to museums to libraries to other cultural sites, that do not actually foster productive interactions across different groups; and, where there is research evidence for positive connections, they have tended to lead to more limited and context-specific relationships.<sup>15</sup> However, there is evidence that amenities and programming designed to encourage interactions between strangers have fostered bridging social capital.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

**Goal:** To increase people's access to nature and create environmentally friendly places easily reached by walking, biking, or transit.

A host of positive environmental effects accrues to green space and ecologically informed infrastructure: parks and trees in particular can limit urban heat islands and produce what is known as a “park cool island,” green spaces promote biodiversity within cities, and permeable surfaces and other design elements can limit stormwater runoff and control flooding and promote resilience. Access is also key, both so people can directly benefit from the mental and physical health benefits public spaces and parks have been shown to provide and because spaces well-knit into the urban environment and conducive to walking, biking, or transit opportunities are more open to lower-income residents and younger people who may not have cars.<sup>16</sup>

*“When we first started this project, there weren’t a lot of kids that we would see on a daily basis, and now kids are pouring out of the adjacent homes and into the park. We’ve even heard comments like, ‘Oh, all these kids moved into the neighborhood.’ We had a realization that, no, kids have always been in the neighborhood. They just haven’t had a place to go or to feel safe to play outside. The impact that this is having on the health, well-being, civic life of people in the neighborhood is really undeniable.”*

—CAITLIN MURPHY

RCC coordinator at [Live6 Alliance](#), Detroit

## VALUE CREATION

**Goal:** To encourage additional investments in neighborhoods so they are better places to thrive.

Revitalized and connected public assets can help improve housing value and affordability, retail activity, and safety in communities. In some ways, this set of potential outcomes requires the most refined balancing act; there are clear positive associations between well-maintained public spaces and property values and business activity, but there is also extensive evidence that public space investments increase social tensions and exclusion, do not always benefit current local residents, and even lead to gentrification and displacement.<sup>17</sup> While this issue is well known, and policymakers, practitioners, and advocates are working to balance the benefits and costs of local investments on their surrounding communities, there is less research on what types of investments most successfully promote equitable and inclusive development.<sup>18</sup>

## SNAPSHOT: INITIAL MODELS AT WORK

### AKRON

With investments in three neighborhoods and the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail that connects them, Akron Civic Commons knits 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.

**Convener:** Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition

**Collaborators:** Akron Civic Theatre, Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Alpha Phi Alpha Homes, City of Akron, Downtown Akron Partnership, GAR Foundation, Students with a Goal (SWAG), Summit County Government, Summit Metro Parks, Trust for Public Land.

### CHICAGO

Chicago Arts + Industry, a collection of underused assets on the South Side of Chicago, are becoming vibrant civic places. Through arts and cultural production, Chicago is transforming a shuttered elementary school into a hub for creative entrepreneurship, and 13 vacant industrial lots into a public garden with artist studios and space for outdoor wellness programming. These sites will be connected to the radically restored Stony Island Arts Bank and nearby affordable housing, creating a network of assets that fosters opportunity for all.

**Convener:** Theaster Gates, Jr.

**Collaborators:** Rebuild Foundation, Theaster Gates Studio.

### DETROIT

In Detroit, investment in the Fitzgerald neighborhood is turning vacancy into an asset as a new model for neighborhoods across the city. Vacant lots are being converted into a park and a greenway, along with a series of neighborhood hubs for community gardens and smaller recreation spaces. The commercial corridors are being reactivated with retail uses and a storefront center for neighborhood design and planning, which houses staff from collaborating partners and public programming.

**Convener:** City of Detroit Planning and Development Department

**Collaborators:** City of Detroit (Department of Neighborhoods; General Services Department; Housing and Revitalization; Mayor's Office; Parks and Recreation; Police Department; Public Works), Detroit Collaborative Design Center, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, Detroit Land Bank Authority, The Greening of Detroit, Invest Detroit, Live6 Alliance, Marygrove College, University of Detroit Mercy.

### MEMPHIS

Along the Mississippi River, the Fourth Bluff project is transforming the historic Cossitt Library, River Line Trail, Memphis Park, and Mississippi River Park into places where Memphians from all backgrounds can connect with nature and one another. The Memphis project's networked approach to design, programming, and staffing is yielding libraries, neighborhood parks, and a connected trail for the 21st century.

**Convener:** City of Memphis Mayor's Office and Memphis River Parks Partnership

**Collaborators:** Downtown Memphis Commission, Hyde Family Foundation, Innovate Memphis, The Memphis Grizzlies, Memphis Public Libraries.

## PHILADELPHIA

Launched in 2015 with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia has collaborated with nonprofit and community organizations to create five new civic assets, each in evolving neighborhoods. Projects included a riverfront trail, a renovated public library and park, a new park, an outdoor education and nature center, and a new vision for West Fairmount Park. Since the launch of RCC, Philadelphia has built communitywide support for \$500 million of new funding for its commons through the Rebuild initiative.

**Convener:** Fairmount Park Conservancy

**Collaborators:** Audubon Pennsylvania, Bartram's Garden, Centennial Parkside CDC, Center City District, Discovery Center, Free Library of Philadelphia, Friends of the Rail Park, Mt. Airy USA, Outward Bound, Philadelphia Chinatown CDC, Philadelphia Parks Alliance, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, Reading Terminal Market, Schuylkill River Development Corporation, Smith Memorial Playground, Strawberry Mansion CDC.

## CONNECTING ASSETS FOR GREATER IMPACT

Every city has varied civic assets—parks, libraries, trails, community centers, and more—but they are rarely considered a network. Municipal resources tend to be siloed: parks departments are responsible for parks, library systems run libraries, and transportation departments are responsible for streets and sidewalks. This makes institutional sense, of course,<sup>19</sup> but it also means that agencies tend not to speak to one another and pursue redundant or even counterproductive activities and planning processes.<sup>20</sup> To get the most out of these public assets and deliver ambitious outcomes for communities, it is beneficial to consider all assets in a given neighborhood as a diverse portfolio of assets.

Building bridges across institutional divides could not only avoid some of the most egregious failures of institutional siloing and use resources more effectively, but, by bringing diverse stakeholders together, support a more expansive sense of how civic assets can mutually reinforce one another. Networks that include bridging links to a diversity of actors and resources have been found more adaptable and resilient and better able to enact future-oriented decisions.<sup>21</sup> By taking a portfolio

approach to civic assets, cities can better promote working across silos for improved decisionmaking and resilience.

When developing plans, designs, and programming, the RCC demonstration cities focused on connecting their public investments to the surrounding neighborhood, both physically and socially. Managing a portfolio of assets and the adjacent dynamics requires intentionally bringing together organizations, city departments, and communities that may not otherwise interact. Ultimately, this new way of working demands a holistic view and a coordinated plan of action that leverages stakeholders' strengths to maximum effect.

By nature of its outcomes orientation and its portfolio-driven approach, RCC is a concerted effort to build a more expansive sense of what civic assets can accomplish to strengthen communities and counter social fragmentation and inequality.

*"The Civic Commons also they gave us a framework where we could take these projects that we were doing excessively or tandemly or incrementally and gang them together in order to do larger-scale development over time."*

**—THEASTER GATES, JR.**

Artist and founder and executive director of [Rebuild Foundation](#), Chicago

# A FRESH APPROACH TO CIVIC ASSET INVESTMENT

RCC's ambition to achieve specific goals and measurable outcomes by focusing on revitalizing and connecting a collection of diverse public places is fundamentally changing how demonstration cities and their partner organizations operate. Based on our interviews and facilitated discussions, desk research, and analysis, Urban determined that the initiative's emphasis on outcomes and a portfolio approach yield a shift in how stakeholders lead, govern, manage, and think about civic assets. This is what ultimately paves the way for more

meaningful, potentially lasting community and systems change. Specifically, demonstration cities are moving away from

- siloed leadership practices to more **collaborative leadership**,
- traditional structures and practices to more **strategic operations**, and
- accepting the status quo to adopting an **innovation mindset**.

## REIMAGINING THE CIVIC COMMONS

A collection of **assets** works together to deliver more to the community

**A portfolio approach**

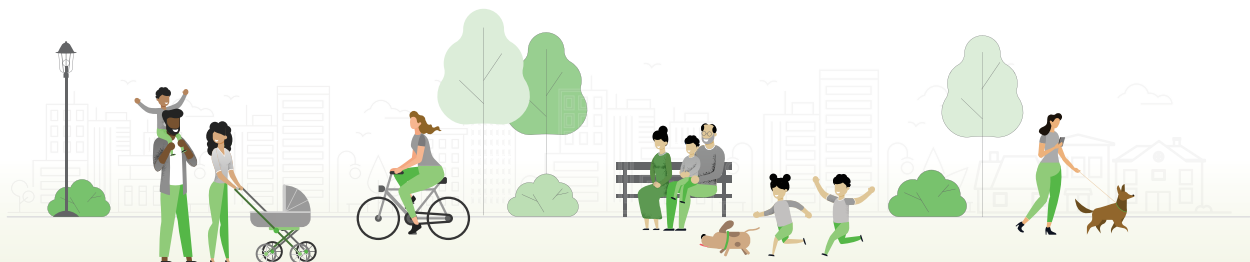
**Investments in Civic Assets**

**A focus on outcomes**

**Investments** focus on civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability, and value creation

**More Equitable & Resilient Communities**

- ✓ Collaborative **leadership**
- ✓ Strategic **operations**
- ✓ Innovation **mindset**



*“Too many of our civic assets are in tatters—underimagined and underinvested. Yet, we’ve seen what the best of these assets do for communities. They instantly improve quality of life for long-time residents as well as provide new curb appeal for overlooked neighborhoods. Reimagining the civic commons is a value-creation strategy we can no longer afford to ignore.”*

**—CAROL COLETTA**

President and CEO, [Memphis River Parks Partnership](#)

The demonstration cities’ experience provides actionable policy and practice lessons that other locales can consider as they reconsider their own civic assets. In the section that follows, we define these new ways of working, explain how RCC’s focus on achieving specific outcomes through a collection of assets drives changes in leadership, operations, and mindset, and spotlight key principles that characterize these shifts in practice. These practices and principles—which stretch across sectors, within departments, and into neighborhoods—can be guideposts for other cities seeking to nurture more public good from their public assets.

## COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Collaborative leadership requires experts from various sectors, departments, and disciplines—as well as local residents—to integrate their knowledge and lived experience to carry out a shared vision for public spaces. Traditional leadership practices in cities tend to be fragmented, resulting at times in duplicative, costly efforts. However, a collaborative leadership approach incorporates new voices and more diverse sources of knowledge. That, in turn, can ensure more informed decisionmaking and more thoughtfully designed, cost-efficient programs and projects. Although other initiatives have applied collaborative leadership principles and practices,<sup>22</sup> RCC’s versions of adaptive leadership come from different sectors, thus infiltrating

change agents across a broader spectrum of agencies, departments, and organizations and creating the right climate for more long-lasting systems change. The RCC approach is especially flexible and agnostic on where the change agents come from.

The RCC initiative’s outcomes orientation fuels this shift from siloed, unilateral leadership to a more collaborative one because reaching for the four goals provides a shared, strategic objective. Plus, achieving the ambitious set of goals would likely prove difficult if undertaken by a single organization or site. Collaborative leadership requires people from a range of fields and backgrounds to consider outcomes more systematically and broadly, builds an understanding of how they can reinforce one another, and provides an opportunity for engagement with community residents.<sup>23</sup>

*“Mayors love silo-busting; they love the idea that they can get different groups to work together.”*

**—MAURICE COX**

Commissioner of the department of planning and development for the City of Chicago and former director of planning and development for the City of Detroit, where he served as Detroit’s RCC convener

The collaborative leadership taking place in demonstration cities is also driven by the portfolio approach that the initiative adopts; people accustomed to thinking and working in silos are forced to engage with experts with other perspectives and assumptions in order to get things done. Leaders are encouraged to collaborate more in this fashion when a collection of assets is at play, as is the case in the RCC demonstration cities. The portfolio approach not only forces stakeholders to work across different types of public spaces—a trail, park, and library, for instance—in a single geography; it requires them to be more thoughtful about the unique role assets play in a community and how the programs they offer can best complement each other.

## PRIMARY PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

### Reframe roles across sectors and organizations.

Collaborative leadership requires a shared commitment to actively dismantle silos both within government departments and across sectors. It demands leaders adapt how they traditionally partner with others as well as how they communicate the value of their projects and their investment in public places. While collaborative work can be slower, especially at the outset, over the long term projects can have more impact by aligning organizations and departments around shared outcomes. Demonstration cities found that piloting is an especially useful tool for advancing collaborative leadership. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Identify a convener who sees value in the collaborative approach to advance their own work.
  - Use pilots in targeted geographies that require collaborative execution to demonstrate for all partners the value of working together before attempting to scale citywide.
  - Execute something together early on—a program, pop-up, or seasonal installation—to ensure the cross-silo team does not get stuck in planning mode. For example, Akron’s team prototyped a temporary log cabin in Cascade Plaza, while Detroit’s hosted a community storytelling program and painted pop-up bike lanes. The “what” is less important than the collective action that builds organizational trust.
  - Celebrate small wins throughout in ways that intentionally reinforce the collaborative effort and help keep momentum.
- Consider a structure that includes a core team with working groups executing specific aspects of the effort. Encourage philanthropic partners to actively participate in the collaboration, not just financially support the efforts.

*“It’s a very different approach. It’s much more time consuming and intensive, but I would argue that it’s much more sustainable because now you have genuine community partners who you’re doing things [with]... It’s being co-designed, co-created, and co-stewarded.”*

#### — DAN RICE

President and chief executive officer of [Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition](#) in Akron, referring to that city’s “residents first” engagement approach

### Identify, cultivate, and create with emerging leaders.

One benefit of collaborative leadership is that it can flatten institutional hierarchies and create opportunities to bring emerging leaders to light. Demonstration cities found that while these new voices may move on to leadership roles in other organizations, they bring with them the outcomes orientation and collaborative attitude toward public space work. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Encourage collaborative work across organizations and departments beyond the c-suite.
- Be open to spotting, engaging with, and mentoring people within local government, other stakeholder groups, and community members.
- Recognize the strengths of individuals within your collaboration and offer opportunities for members to take on more responsibility over time.

### Elevate resident leadership.

Local residents are at the heart of much of RCC's work. Some demonstration cities have residents on their core leadership team, and others have supported residents to manage specific projects or programs or have developed ambassador programs for resident volunteers to take a more active role in the efforts. While engagement will look different in different contexts, when done effectively it can take advantage of residents' deep local knowledge,<sup>24</sup> engender trust that can be used to build community and political momentum, and address false narratives, nay-sayers, and opponents. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Consider how your collaborative work can highlight current efforts by community members.
- Use nontraditional community engagement tactics like pop-ups, pilots, and activations to identify local champions who may not attend traditional community meetings.

- Launch pilots and prototypes that directly engage residents, offer an opportunity for co-creation that advances civic engagement, and build trust in communities.
- Provide mini-grants or other financial support for residents to step into meaningful roles and increase their capacity.

*"The incentivized collaboration and the learning network, both national and locally, gave us an opportunity to really find, inspire, and provide a platform for... formerly unrecognized community and organizational leaders."*

#### — JENNIFER MAHAR

Senior director of civic initiatives at [Fairmount Park Conservancy](#), Philadelphia

## COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

### DISMANTLING SILOS

The 2015 restructuring of the Detroit Planning and Development Department and the initiation of RCC occurred in tandem, mutually informing each other's development. Detroit's initiative started with limited government resources and assets, necessitating an innovative neighborhood economic development framework—one that drew resources and expertise from the public, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. Detroit's approach to [silo-breaking](#) differed from the municipal barriers other demonstration cities encountered, and stakeholders worked on spaces capable of bringing people from different departments, sectors, and organizations together. For instance, [Detroit's Neighborhood HomeBase](#) in Livernois-McNichols is a multipurpose community meeting and co-working space that connects residents with representatives of the City of Detroit, nonprofits, and neighborhood organizations. HomeBase is anchored by the Live6 Alliance, an economic development organization, and the University of Detroit Mercy's Detroit Collaborative Design Center. HomeBase is a physical marker of the collaborative planning ethic adopted by Detroit RCC and makes visible the expertise and needs of longtime residents.

### IDENTIFYING EMERGING LEADERS

Residents in Akron's Summit Lake community played a significant role in planning the reimagining of their neighborhood assets. Through intentional and consistent engagement with residents, RCC conveners identified neighborhood leaders who were clear "do-ers," had the trust of their neighbors, and were committed to their community's future. These resident leaders ultimately co-created and co-designed the revitalization effort in Summit Lake, an empowering process that allowed

them to see themselves as civic actors who could change their neighborhood. Early skeptics became passionate spokespeople for the effort. Perceptions of the neighborhood have shifted: 18 months into the Akron Civic Commons effort, the share of intercept survey respondents saying the neighborhood has changed for the better was 92 percent; 94 percent of respondents felt the neighborhood will change for the better over the next few years (63 percent indicated it will "improve a lot").<sup>25</sup> As the project evolved, residents also developed a sense of ownership and responsibility for Summit Lake—sentiments that will likely make them effective stewards of this public asset for years to come.

### CELEBRATING SMALL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In Akron, the RCC team focused on community engagement, program design, and implementation. They also recognized the value of looping in the city and the mayor for visibility and gave municipal figures the opportunity to claim small wins throughout the project. By allowing the city to wade in rather than jump in with both feet, the local government could vet the viability of the RCC process before committing significant resources. After seeing the RCC model's success, the already-engaged city put forward the financial and bureaucratic resources to expand Akron RCC's impact.

*"They actually invited us to be a participant. They were showing us who they were... They were letting us know our voice mattered. That was a deal breaker for me."*

— SANDY SAULSBERRY

Summit Lake resident referring to the Akron RCC team

## STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

Public space operations matter. How local governments, nonprofit partners, community-based organizations, and residents interact with each other as they manage, maintain, and assess public spaces can influence and improve how place reshapes a community. For far too long communities have undervalued the power of public places and the pivotal role they can play. By rethinking and prototyping different models of public space operations, RCC and its demonstration cities are shifting this narrative and elevating the importance of civic assets.

Cities traditionally approach their public space work through the lens of individual sites and projects that are often managed by different municipal departments. Separate divisions or offices within each department or agency may be responsible for different functions of the public space, from programming and maintenance to developing or expanding new spaces and facilities. Many cities do not have plans or strategies for connecting public spaces across neighborhoods; those that do have difficulty implementing them, leaving public assets disconnected and isolated.

RCC offers a more strategic, cohesive, and coordinated approach to the “nuts and bolts” operations of civic asset projects and programming. Local leaders and public space managers work across sectors and sites with their partners and community to launch and advance their reimagining process. By co-creating the design, programming, and revitalization of public spaces, everyone from frontline staff to neighborhood residents becomes invested in the current projects, their interrelationship, and the sustainability of civic assets from a portfolio perspective. How these leaders and their cities implement their work evolves and adapts to changes in their community, project, and leadership.

*“We’ve been baking Civic Commons principles and practices into our strategic plan, which is informing and sharpening our new community service areas. We’re revising the job [specifications] ... community engagement is now built into that. We’re for the first time designing curriculum for our staff as part of the service areas. So there’s a number of things that have been happening that can trace their origins to Civic Commons.”*

— PATRICK MORGAN

First deputy commissioner of strategy and engagement  
for Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

In the RCC experience, two critical components of strategic operations are an emphasis on connecting a portfolio of civic assets and programming with a dedicated attention to outcomes and impacts. RCC’s quest to achieve its four goals and its mandate to regularly measure a diverse set of metrics require stakeholders to track socially relevant successes and challenges, identify what is and is not working, course-correct as needed, and build accountability. This helps drive more strategic operations. Likewise, the initiative’s portfolio approach encourages management procedures, tools, and techniques that can more effectively address the complexities inherent in how communities can reinvigorate civic assets.

Our research discovered a range of different pathways to strategic operations across the demonstration cities. Despite these differences, we found that the initiative’s outcomes orientation and portfolio approach inspire a shift from traditional to more strategic operations. Below we highlight five core principles of strategic operations that emerged across the five demonstration cities.

## PRIMARY PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

### Develop responsive organizational structures, cultures, and cross-sector networks.

In a strategic operational environment, diverse entities are more responsive in how they manage and maintain public spaces. Given the complexities and breadth of issues that arise, each RCC city shaped its organizational culture by customizing RCC's overarching approach to local dynamics and community priorities. Building on their respective internal capacities and expertise, the RCC cities actively recruited strategic partners that provide complementary support and can help address critical gaps. In Philadelphia the funders and convener formed a local learning network of civic commons, public spaces agencies, and organizations. Sometimes, that support and insight arose across RCC's cities through its learning network activities (e.g., [study visits](#), joint reports, conferences). Suggested actions for this principle:

- Incorporate RCC-inspired practices (collaborative leadership, strategic operations, and innovation mindset, discussed later) into nonprofit, city government, and private-sector entities that work together to revitalize assets for community impact.
- Leverage the relative strengths of nonprofit and entrepreneurial entities to expand civic asset work beyond the usual suspects found in communities.
- Create more permanent vehicles (e.g., department, agencies, programs) to expand, manage, and help coordinate civic asset revitalization and related programming.
- Consider staffing that focuses on networks of civic assets in a neighborhood, rather than a single site, to more efficiently deliver outcomes in communities.

- Reclassify long-standing local government civil service jobs so they elevate community voices and engagement over mere asset management and maintenance.

### Blend different design approaches to create engaging, accessible assets.

The RCC projects are the primary pathway and physical manifestation of the initiative's revitalization approach, from how a site is built and what it looks like to how sustainable, environmentally friendly practices are incorporated into the process. The built environment is more than just a place; it is a vehicle for leadership, community collaboration, and social impact. Therefore, how a site is designed—its accessibility, how it offers a space for solitude as well as togetherness, and more—is critical to its ability to deliver on social, environmental, and economic outcomes in communities. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Consider closely layering a site's physical elements that welcome a diversity of people to share space.
- Make every asset work double time by incorporating green infrastructure solutions like rain gardens, bioswales, and green roofs.
- Prioritize spaces for bicyclists, pedestrians, and those arriving by transit, to support sustainable transportation to and from the assets.
- Embed natural elements, including native trees and plants, in ways that draw people to connect with nature daily for community health and well-being.
- Acknowledge local histories and legacies of disinvestment and injustice (which often were part of previous "revitalization" efforts or plans)<sup>26</sup> while confronting contested dynamics to help design spaces where all people feel welcomed. Residents can be suspicious of new investments in their

neighborhoods; leaders should directly confront this mistrust and seek to understand the origins of residents' concerns and their experiences of living in the area.

*"You can't outrun history; you can't escape what's already there on ground ... You have to go and reckon with that."*

— ALEXA BUSH

Design director, City of Detroit

### **Use creative approaches to engage the community.**

With an ambition to cultivate lasting civic engagement and stewardship, RCC leaders have been intentional in how they engage residents, local government, and institutions in public space work. Building trust among these groups has been essential to progress: "We learned from our neighborhood residents that relationships and projects move at the speed of trust," commented Akron's Dan Rice. It was strategic for conveners and staff to meet residents where they are in their lives and connect with them in engaging, productive ways. That has meant, for example, hosting community meetings outdoors, providing translators and child care, sharing meals, and collaborating with community members to build sites and programs. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Use pop-ups and pilots to engage residents in the development process, understand their needs, and provide them the opportunity to recreate public assets with you.
- Move from viewing public engagement as transactional to viewing it as a way to prioritize relationships. Approach the design and building process as an opportunity to involve people in executing the project rather than simply providing feedback.

- Generate excitement for the project through creative activities that are developed by and for neighborhood residents.
- Prepare for and address concerned community voices, perspectives, and attitudes—such as a fear that renewed public space will catalyze displacement of current residents. Acknowledge such concerns and communicate with residents honestly and transparently. The Detroit team recruited, trained, and hired local Fitzgerald neighborhood residents to be the principal data collectors for their metrics work. Having residents involved in this way has [increased transparency, built trust, and changed the local conversation about investment in the neighborhood](#).

*"Trust-building is hard. Trust-keeping is harder."*

— JAMAL BODDIE

Hyde fellow for community engagement at Memphis River Parks Partnership

### **Elevate programming that reflects diversity and fosters connections.**

Public space programming can animate spaces in ways that bring people from all backgrounds together for shared experiences and strengthen their connection to nature, the neighborhood, and broader community. Suggested actions for this principle:

- Partner with residents and local organizations to pilot new programs and develop funding models for sustaining them. These partnerships can be a source for creative activations and increase the capacity of local leaders and organizations. Detroit provided stipends to neighborhood residents interested in developing activities for Ella Fitzgerald Park. One popular program was hula hoops and bubbles, which fostered a hula hoop troupe that now uses the park regularly.

- Consult with residents to determine what programs would most resonate with them, and schedule these programs to encourage interactions among diverse groups of people.
  - Reinvent old civic assets through new programming that reflects changing neighborhoods and fosters connection. For example, programming at Philadelphia's centuries-old [Bartram's Garden](#) had primarily been aimed at history buffs and horticultural enthusiasts. Nearby residents did not see the waterfront botanical garden as their neighborhood park, nor did they have easy access. Reimagined programming developed in partnership with neighbors is now bringing people to Bartram's trails and gatherings, creating a new connection with the nature in their neighborhood.
- Ensure accountability for maintenance, stewardship, and sustainability.**
- Cities and neighborhoods ensure that once a new asset is built or an existing one revived, it is cared for—structurally and programmatically—to sustain its relevance to the community it serves. Suggested actions for this principle:
- Leverage civic asset revitalization to encourage new investment in neighborhoods that benefit residents and support the ongoing operations and maintenance of the public space.
  - Engage residents as active stewards of the civic assets through volunteer and/or job opportunities.
  - Embed the vision of revitalized civic assets and their community benefits into long-range local government asset management and comprehensive land use plans.
  - Institutionalize the civic commons within local government annual budgets, program requirements, regulations, and ordinances.
  - Cultivate the next generation of leaders committed to reviving the civic commons by convening managers and staff across different sectors and types of public spaces and civic assets.
  - Emphasize place-keeping by exploring how a renewed civic asset can provide local workforce development and wealth-building opportunities for local partners and residents.

## STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE IN ACTION

### DESIGNING FOR DIVERSE USERS

In Memphis, decisionmaking focused on how to effectively use design and programming to draw in and engage users from around the city and region. This included testing pilots to inform more permanent design features (see Riverplay, discussed below), building park elements that facilitate social mixing and account for diverse users and uses, and using signage to stitch together a network of assets (including Fourth Bluff Park, Cossitt Library, River Garden and the River Line Trail). This work also involved dealing with the divisive history of the area. Today's Fourth Bluff Park (renamed from Memphis Park, which was previously known as Confederate Park) had been the location of a statue of Jefferson Davis and other Confederate monuments; the statue was removed in 2017, and a 2018 diner-en-blanc event at the park of reclaimed it as an inclusive space. Since then, the renamed park has been redesigned and refocused to welcome diverse users from across the broader community. Interim findings point to the success of these efforts in increasing

visitorship and chances for interaction. Mississippi River Park, now known as River Garden, has seen average attendance increase from 7 to 22 an hour and the share of visitors within conversational distance from one another has increased from 21 percent to 50 percent.

*"We really needed to do something which was going to [attract a diversity of users](#), which meant that we needed to reach people who didn't see downtown as a recreational asset and needed to be very intentional about ensuring that our programming was responsive to the context ... we had to make sure that our programming was compelling enough to draw people back to these assets, which really hadn't been activated in a long time and weren't really on the mental map, besides some for negative reasons like the Jefferson Davis statue."*

— **GEORGE ABBOTT**

Director of external affairs, [Memphis River Parks Partnership](#)

## INNOVATION MINDSET

Reimagining the civic commons is not solely about restoring forgotten structures and energizing those spaces with activities. It is part of a greater vision for, and purpose in, a community. In pursuit of that vision, civic leaders are more willing to collaborate with others to seek ideas outside their usual circles and take shared risks that may buck the status quo. It is a practice that can offer a path for more innovation across departments and organizations that may be risk averse. And it represents a new way of working and thinking that leaves room to iterate an idea, stumble—or even fail—in a project's implementation, and to reassess and adjust. This innovation mindset also embraces continuous learning among diverse leaders through collaborative reflection; formally measuring and analyzing the impact of investments on people's lives, their neighborhoods, and the broader city; and tracking progress toward achieving the project's vision.

Part of this mindset is, naturally, encouraged by RCC's collaborative leadership and strategic operations practices: in the demonstration cities, civic-minded entrepreneurs have come from inside and outside government, a feature that has created a more stable and richer space for developing, testing, and iterating innovations.<sup>27</sup> Here again, the outcomes orientation and portfolio approach help shift how leaders identify, implement, and test innovations. A focus on socially relevant outcomes helps stakeholders identify and track key neighborhood characteristics, monitoring progress and responding to meet changing contexts and emerging issues. Even in the shorter term, working with a portfolio of assets helps those involved see opportunities for novel cross-sectoral collaboration.

## PRIMARY PRINCIPLES OF INNOVATION MINDSET

### **Build new approaches from the ground up.**

Bureaucracies have their merits, but flexibility tends not to be one of them. Program development and implementation are often standardized and centralized, making response to, or even acknowledgment of, local conditions difficult.<sup>28</sup> One distinctive element of the RCC approach is how it understands, values, and responds to concrete places: their type, scale, and social and physical context.

This focus has led to authentic resident engagement and leadership cultivation—and to some less centralized approaches. A common theme among RCC cities was that their revitalization approach proceeded from a certain place or neighborhood rather than being defined by an existing, top-down strategy. This has allowed the work on the ground to be more responsive to the needs and desires of the community and the potential of specific collections of assets. Suggested action for this principle:

- Look for latent possibilities in existing assets. Where others saw vacant lots and abandoned houses, Detroit's Fitzgerald neighborhood team recognized value in these spaces and in the area's residents. This shift in mindset among city representatives, local nonprofits, block club leaders, and residents helped reveal opportunities and assets that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

*“Can we take away the psychic trauma of having abandonment in a place? By restoring a building, do we give new energy to the idea that others may want to advance development around that?”*

— **THEASTER GATES, JR.**

Artist and founder and executive director of [Rebuild Foundation](#), Chicago

### **Embrace shared learning.**

This new way of working as a pathway to equitable social change demands continuous learning across sectors and organizations. The demonstration cities routinely [collect data](#) on their work to help understand who civic assets serve and how attitudes are changing about the sites and neighborhoods, and they adjust strategies based on their findings. Having such evidence can also support advocacy for policy change and additional civic asset investment. Suggested action for this principle:

- Adopt RCC’s framework for measuring and use the [Measure What Matters DIY Toolkit](#) to customize a set of metrics that track social impacts of public space investments in your community.
- Collect data regularly to understand change over time and inform operations and future strategies, as well as to craft stronger evidence-based stories on the benefits of investments in the public realm.
- Involve frontline staff members and community members in data collection efforts to increase transparency, develop greater trust, and grow the capacity of residents and team members.

### **Take chances, absorb risks, and keep the city engaged.**

Conveners often described RCC as a process of “building the plane while flying it,” where risk-taking is encouraged and even facilitated. Another way to support an innovation mindset is to give people the room to see what works and what does not. Piloting through proofs of concept or temporary placemaking using a “lighter, quicker, cheaper” model<sup>29</sup> can also help build broader support for future efforts.<sup>30</sup> Suggested actions for this principle:

- Use pilot projects to observe and understand what works and then move to permanent investments and scaling models.
- Consider the co-creation process, along with the end product, as a way to deliver the desired outcomes, and allocate adequate resources to it. As such, do not limit public-sector investment in public spaces to capital budgets alone.
- Philanthropy should consider flexible funding that accommodates an agile and future-oriented approach to public space. Public funding is often not nimble enough to adapt at speed to different uses.

*“By offering flexible funding for experimentation on public space work, philanthropy can encourage innovation and risk-taking that is much harder to achieve through public dollars alone. Serving as an active partner in the civic commons creates shared risk and a new way of working that is serving as a catalyst for lasting change in Akron.”*

— **KYLE KUTUCHIEF**

Program director, Knight Foundation, Akron

## INNOVATION MINDSET IN ACTION

### SUPPORTING ENTREPRENEURIAL EFFORTS

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On Chicago's South Side, the cluster of civic investments that aim to serve a community long neglected by the private sector is born from an entrepreneurial leader and neighborhood resident, Theaster Gates, and his collaborators. The community spaces and arts programming reflect Gates's belief that all people deserve access to high-quality cultural assets. His team is also creating a labor force to support the projects through workforce training and apprenticeships. Local government was minimally involved in the initial RCC Chicago work; as this work has developed, the city is now more directly involved in ensuring its sustainability: "[We looked at] how we can provide a certain amount of financial assistance and other resources and support to make those projects work, understanding their community value, and their objectives," said David Reifman, former commissioner of planning and development for the City of Chicago, who was involved in the RCC effort there.

### CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO CAPTURE DATA

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Memphis designed RiverPlay, a free pop-up park that offered various activities—basketball, soccer, skating, and more—to create shared experiences for people along the

downtown riverfront. The liability waivers required to use the space also captured people's zip codes, allowing the project team to document who was taking advantage of the temporary park. The information helped the team refine programming and outreach strategies to better support socioeconomic mixing, one of the RCC outcomes.

### ELEVATING INFORMAL EXPERTISE

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In Philadelphia, leaders decided against overly prescriptive, top-down processes. Instead, the conveners found that providing partners on the ground with the space and resources to co-create both at the site and neighborhood level and to share ideas and resources across sites drove rich engagement and programmatic success. Formal expertise is usually privileged above lived experience, especially in projects that involve government collaboration. By intentionally elevating the robust, necessary informal expertise and engaged leadership of residents, the Philadelphia team embedded resident-led processes into their work model.

# LEVERAGING COMMUNITY CHANGE TO RESHAPE LOCAL SYSTEMS

The initial RCC investment in the five demonstration cities has become a catalyst for community change, shifting people's perceptions of, and relationship with, public places. This new way of working has also helped formalize many of the initiative's practices, leading to shifts in programs and policy. Now, many of the five demonstration cities are transitioning to another phase in their journey, in which they are increasingly focused on how the RCC approach can influence and reshape local systems.

Over the past three years, RCC's support of new investments in revitalizing public assets has redefined places, whether a residential neighborhood, a downtown corridor, or a park and trail. There are signs that this approach has started to bear fruit, with early interim reports showing more users, improved reputations, and increased senses of safety in some sites and neighborhoods.<sup>31</sup>

*"Four years ago, we set out to see if designing and operating civic assets differently could improve people's lives. Today, we understand that this vision has made a measurable impact and the cities pursuing this work are experiencing systems-level change. The local teams enabled through this work are collaborating hand-in-hand with community members and have cultivated tremendous support for more strategic investments in public spaces in their cities."*

— **DANA BOURLAND**

Vice president of environment at The JPB Foundation

A critical bridge to sustaining revitalization efforts and expanding their impact is to change systems by institutionalizing the strategies, programs, engagement

processes, and investments in the civic commons. The work to change systems is just getting under way in many of the demonstration cities. Leaders are grappling with balancing the day-to-day community engagement and collaborations necessary to keep their restoration efforts progressing with tracking and documenting how their work influences different systems. As they explore how best to sustain and expand their impacts, demonstration cities have focused much of their system change efforts on two interrelated components: (1) strengthening and formalizing the internal operations, roles, and responsibilities of the local RCC convener; and (2) creating relevant local government programs, policies, and resources that reinforce the civic commons. Below we situate RCC's approach and the work from the demonstration cities in systems change literature and then highlight how the demonstration cities are working to transform systems.

## RESHAPING SYSTEMS TO SUSTAIN AND EXPAND IMPACT

Effective systems change requires dedicated resources, structural relationships, power arrangements, and values that address the root causes of an issue or societal problem by changing policies and practices.<sup>32</sup>

It is essential to understand the system's interdependent components, functions, and relationships along with how individual systems interact with other intersecting systems. Collaboratives are one mechanism for systems change through their ability to engage, mobilize, and coordinate multiple constituents and sectors around policies and practices that advance social change. RCC's approach exemplifies the three general stages of the collaborative model: formation, maintenance, and

institutionalization. Moreover, RCC demonstration cities illustrate the process of collaborative development: exchanging information, defining joint projects, changing the rules, and changing the systems. What follows are examples from the five demonstration cities that support RCC's collaborative efforts to institutionalize their projects and programs while laying the groundwork for systems change.

- **Akron's [Office of Integrated Development](#)** was heavily informed by the impact and visibility of Akron's RCC effort. By formalizing the RCC approach within local government policy and procedures, Akron infuses the civic commons ethos of public life and public space as a central component of an overarching community development strategy. With representation from engineering, planning, recreation and economic development, the Office of Integrated Development offers a more holistic approach to planning and development. Its strategic framework provides a blueprint for working smarter together to build and sustain an Akron that is healthy, equitable, beautiful, and resilient. The office is a powerful example of how city officials can be brought into the fold of community-based work. The trajectory of Akron Civic Commons affirms the clear role for nonprofits and community organizations to carry out demonstration projects, test new ways of local work, lower the risk of initiatives for city governments, and chart a path forward for local governments to sustain a robust civic commons portfolio.
- **Detroit's Strategic Neighborhood Initiative** is pushing collaboration both across silos within city government (planning, public works, etc.) and across sectors with governmental, nonprofit, and

philanthropic collaborators. Four years into this initiative, the RCC team is translating the approach to the Strategic Neighborhood Fund, an investment in nine other Detroit neighborhood districts. Public space was not originally a component of this program, but the early signals of RCC success in the Fitzgerald neighborhood elevated civic assets to a key component of the city's real estate and development strategy. While systems change is occurring at the city level, this dynamism was made possible by transformative actions at the neighborhood level. This neighborhood-scale approach could be an onramp to action for local government or neighborhood-oriented nonprofits, such as community development corporations.

- **Chicago's Master Plan for a Cultural District** embodies Chicago's entrepreneurial approach to civic commons work, which pushes the system to reform and reimagine itself. The RCC team leverages its advocacy on other key partners, such as local government and philanthropy, to reform funding norms in order to scale up the RCC work and collectively build a new development pedagogy. Chicago's Rebuild Foundation is developing a new site master plan to consolidate their RCC work and sites into a central cultural district on the city's South Side.
- **Philadelphia's [Rebuild Initiative](#)** is the city's largest-ever investment in civic infrastructure. Through a data-driven selection process that prioritizes community development and stabilization, Rebuild signals a city-scale shift toward equitable civic investment that builds upon the early RCC work. This \$500 million move toward collective funding and implementation is made possible by the RCC team's work to transform Philadelphia's "system

of parks” to a “parks system.” Relatedly, the Parks and Recreation Department is overhauling its staffing structure so its workers are centered on serving neighborhoods through various civic assets rather than having workers heavily concentrated in large recreational centers. Philadelphia is also meaningfully and systemically redefining expertise, shifting power from the nonprofit and government spheres to community leaders.

- **Memphis’s Comprehensive Plan** is an opportunity for city partners to demonstrate long-term systems change by integrating RCC principles and bolstering

reinvestment aligned with those principles. The RCC team is using seed funding and community engagement to influence how the plan is executed, namely to encourage sequenced investment around community-identified neighborhood anchors. Moving beyond its initial waterfront project, Memphis River Parks Partnership extended the RCC outcomes orientation and measurement framework to cover more than five miles of parkland. The city parks and recreation department is now adopting and adapting RCC’s four outcomes throughout the department.

## STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Communities have several considerations for how they can infuse elements of the RCC approach to civic asset investment into local systems so it becomes a norm and its impact on communities is long-lasting. What follows are several core strategies for cultivating systems change that emerged from Urban’s discussions with RCC conveners. Other cities should also keep these ideas top of mind as they invest in public assets for social, environmental, and economic change.

- Expand from [placemaking to “place-keeping”](#)—that is, the long-term management of public spaces—to include neighborhood job opportunities, workforce development, and wealth-building support that will sustain investments in the civic commons.<sup>33</sup>
- Revamp community and economic development funding to include financing the revitalization and programming of civic assets. Changes will likely be stymied unless decisionmakers rethink how this new way of working could be funded by existing resource streams, according to an RCC participant.

- Advocate for policy change to support investment in public spaces. Policy advocacy in collaboration with community organizers can help elevate policymakers’ and citizens’ understanding of the social and economic benefits of a reimagined civic commons. It can also encourage more resources to help sustain projects and programs.
- Collect and share data and stories with policymakers, so they have evidence of the returns on investment in civic assets. Such evidence can contribute to systems change and reinforce the short- and long-term benefits of civic assets to the community, the local government, and residents.
- Institutionalize the reimagining of civic commons through annual budgets, program requirements, regulations, and ordinances so the approach extends beyond one or two mayoral administrations. Doing so can also help transform long-entrenched practices within organizations.

# LOOKING AHEAD

RCC's reimagining of the design, management, and programming of public spaces presents local government, civic, and nonprofit communities with a new way of thinking about public assets as a pathway toward more prosperous, equitable, healthy and resilient communities. A testament to RCC's success is how each of the five demonstration cities has shaped RCC's outcomes-driven, portfolio approach to thoughtfully address community needs, assets, and priorities.

Moving forward, the RCC approach offers a promising solution to change agents across the country who are eager to create more vibrant, connected communities—places where all residents, no matter their income or zip code, feel a sense of belonging, where they have access to amenities everyone deserves, and where they have a voice in the future well-being of their neighborhoods.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, “One in Five Americans Report Always or Often Feeling Lonely or Socially Isolated, Frequently with Physical, Mental, and Financial Consequences,” press release, August 31, 2018, [kff.org/other/press-release/survey-one-in-five-americans-report-loneliness-social-isolation/](https://kff.org/other/press-release/survey-one-in-five-americans-report-loneliness-social-isolation/).

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<sup>4</sup> See Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kathleen Cagney, David Sterrett, Jennifer Benz, and Trevor Thompson, “Social Resources and Community Resilience in the Wake of Superstorm Sandy,” *PLoS One* (2016); Daniel Aldrich and Michelle Meyer, “Social Capital and Community Resilience,” *American Behavioral Scientist* (2014); and Sonny Patel, M. Brooke Rogers, and Richard Amlot, “What Do We Mean by ‘Community Resilience’? A Systematic Literature Review of How It Is Defined in the Literature,” *PLoS Currents* (2017).

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Isabelle Anguelovski, *Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environmental Justice in the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Raj Chetty, “Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2014); also see work from the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, such as Margery Turner and Ruth Gourevitch, “How Neighborhoods Affect the Social and Economic Mobility of Their Residents” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Mario Luis Small, “Neighborhood Institutions as Resource Brokers: Childcare Centers, Interorganizational Ties, and Resource Access among the Poor,” *Social Problems* 53, no. 2 (2006): 274–92; Patrick Sharkey, “Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crime,” *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 6 (2017): 1214–40.

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<sup>17</sup> The High Line in New York is in many ways the poster child for this phenomenon, sometimes referred to as environmental gentrification. See Alessandro Rigolon and Jeremy Németh, "We're Not in the Business of Housing': Environmental Gentrification and the Nonprofitization of Green Infrastructure Projects," *Cities* 81 (2018): 71–80. This dynamic has influenced practice to focus more on equity, with groups like the [High Line Network](#) sharing information and best practices across the country; see Diane Davis and Stephen Gray, "Beyond Appearances: Community Activism and New York City's High Line," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 3 (2019): 74–81.

<sup>18</sup> Again, see Pearsall et al., "The Benefits and Costs of Urban Public Spaces."

<sup>19</sup> Pendall et al., "Can Federal Efforts Advance Federal and Local De-Siloing? Lessons from the HUD-EPA-DOT Partnership for Sustainable Communities" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2013); and Alan Mallach, "State Government and Urban Revitalization: How States Can Foster Stronger, More Inclusive Cities," (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> "How Breaking Down Government Silos Empowers Placemaking," Project for Public Spaces, February 1, 2016, <https://www.pps.org/article/how-breaking-down-government-silos-empowers-placemaking>; and Katrina Smith Korfmacher, *Bridging Silos: Collaborating for Environmental Health and Justice in Urban Communities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Lenore Newman and Ann Dale, "Network Structure,

Diversity, and Proactive Resilience Building: A Response to Tompkins and Adger,” *Ecology and Society* 10, no. 1 (2005); Carl Folke, Thomas Hahn, Per Olsson, and Jon Norberg, “Adaptive Governance of Social-Ecological Systems,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 30 (2005): 441–73; and Michele-Lee Moore and Frances Westley, “Surmountable Chasms: Networks and Social Innovation for Resilient Systems,” *Ecology and Society* 16, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>22</sup> The 100 Resilient Cities Initiative was another project seeking to “bust silos” that attempted to foster an innovation mindset through the development of a central figure tasked with the work (a chief resilience officer). See Carlos Martín and Sara McTarnaghan, *Institutionalizing Urban Resilience: A Midterm Monitoring and Evaluation Report of 100 Resilient Cities* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Alexa Bush, “Measurement Tools: Early Lessons from Detroit,” Reimagining the Civic Commons Medium post, January 9, 2017, <https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/measurement-tools-early-lessons-from-detroit-f12f6b62d4d3>.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Judith Innes and David Booher, “Reframing Public Participation; Strategies for the 21st Century,” *Planning Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (2004); and Toni Griffin, Dan Cramer, and Megan Powers, “Detroit Works Long-Term Planning Project: Engagement Strategies for Blending Community and Technical Expertise,” *Buildings* 4, no. 4 (2014): 711–36.

<sup>25</sup> See Bridget Marquis, “We’re Measuring the Impact of Investments in Public Places. Here’s What We’ve Learned,” Reimagining the Civic Commons Medium post, April 22, 2019, <https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/were-measuring-the-impact-of-investments-in-public-places-here-s-what-we-ve-learned-2a4ecb3b6a60>.

<sup>26</sup> The [Just City Lab](http://justcitylab.org) has a range of resources and background on this. Also see José Meléndez and Brenda Parker, “Learning

in Participatory Planning Processes: Taking Advantage of Concepts and Theories across Disciplines,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 20, no. 1 (2019): 137–44. On the role of place in planning more broadly, see Patsy Healey, “Creating Public Value through Caring for Place,” *Policy and Politics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 65–79.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Mintrom, “Policy Entrepreneurs and the Diffusion of Innovation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (1997): 738–70.

<sup>28</sup> Probably the best known illustration of this dynamic is Robert Moses’s plans and projects versus citizen activism from the likes of Jane Jacobs. See Nolan Gray, “Why Urban Design Should Come from the Bottom Up (Part 1),” Strong Towns, January 15, 2019, <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/1/14/how-cities-design-themselves>.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.pps.org/article/lighter-quicker-cheaper>.

<sup>30</sup> Ryan D. Cagle, “How Design Research Applies to Public Space,” Medium post, January 24, 2019, <https://medium.com/@ryandcagle/how-design-research-applies-to-public-space-b5f2bc30e15c>.

<sup>31</sup> Again, see Marquis, “We’re Measuring the Impact of Investments in Public Places.” Also see the interim metrics reports available here: <http://civiccommons.us/2019/04/interim-metrics-reports/>.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Kreger, Claire D. Brindis, Diane M. Manuel, and Lauren Sassoubre, “Lessons Learned in Systems Change Initiatives: Benchmarks and Indicators,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 39 (2007): 301–20.

<sup>33</sup> Nicola Dempsey and Mel Burton, “Defining Place-Keeping: The Long-Term Management of Public Spaces,” *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 11, no. 1 (2012): 11–20.





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