



Platforms for Place-Based Development

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Experts now widely acknowledge that historically underresourced communities need more than an upgraded built environment—as important as that is. Underresourced communities also require various strategies to directly support residents. Because concentrated disadvantage is rooted in the exclusion of people from opportunities, especially based on race and ethnicity, improving communities requires an inclusive approach. Increasingly, place-based redevelopment initiatives are doing this work from a starting point of one or more institutional platforms.

This brief identifies seven platforms commonly used in place-based revitalization efforts—sometimes also called neighborhood or community development. The brief categorizes and articulates these platforms to further the theory of change for place-based initiatives. Considering a platform's local context and the range of actors involved, the platform can be more or less compelling to stakeholders in an initiative's design. Some platforms are more conducive to meeting certain desired outcomes than others. A platform's suitability depends on the most important intended outcomes.

The seven platforms for community revitalization are

1. [public and assisted housing](#);
2. [public schools](#);
3. [educational and medical anchor institutions](#);
4. [real estate for residential, commercial, and community facilities](#);
5. [small-business development, contracting, and access to financing](#);

6. [resident services](#); and
7. [community engagement and mobilization](#).¹

Platforms for community revitalization are distinct from specific approaches or strategies. For example, an initiative may use a public school as a platform but use the school to provide diverse supports, such as community health trainings or job training services for parents, in addition to upgrading education quality.

An initiative may adopt strategies or approaches that involve more than one platform, though an initiative rarely incorporates several given coordination and costs.

Platform 1: Public and Assisted Housing

More than 4 million people live in project-based public or assisted housing. That housing is often concentrated in underresourced communities. And the federal government provides funding for upgrading distressed public or assisted housing buildings. For these reasons, public and assisted housing has frequently been a platform for place-based community revitalization. This revitalization work can sometimes be accomplished through mixed-income housing development (Chaskin and Joseph 2015; Joseph and Chaskin 2010; Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber 2007), though this is not always the case.

Two federal place-based programs have used public and assisted housing as their main asset. The first started in the early 1990s. The HOPE VI program focused on revitalizing some of the country's most disadvantaged communities. With oversight from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, HOPE VI targeted the nation's most underresourced public housing (Popkin et al. 2000; Popkin, Levy, and Buron 2009).

The second federal program, the Obama administration's Choice Neighborhoods initiative, succeeded the HOPE VI program, providing funds for housing and economic development in communities with concentrations of public and assisted housing. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has identified three primary transformation goals under Choice Neighborhoods: housing, people, and neighborhoods. Compared with HOPE VI, Choice Neighborhoods places more emphasis on providing services and coordinating social service agencies and community development planning (Pendall et al. 2015).

Platform 2: Public Schools

Public schools have also captured policymakers' attention as a platform for place-based development, building on the momentum of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone.² In many ways, public schools have a similar appeal to using public housing as a platform—they are stable local institutions with a set client base and regular funding. The success of the local model has led to replication through a federal model.

The US Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods initiative was one of the Obama administration's signature programs.³ The Promise Neighborhoods initiative is intended to help communities turn neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity by creating a continuum of school readiness and academic services for children from early childhood through college.

Previously, schools had been underused as a community asset, but new local efforts seek to better link schools to their communities (Khadduri, Schwartz, and Turnham 2007; Khadduri et al. 2003; McKoy, Vincent, and Bierbaum 2011; Proscio 2004; Tatian et al. 2012). This includes aligning local education and planning departments. It also means opening school buildings and grounds to communities for events such as conferences, concerts, exercise activities, and festivals. High-quality schools may also be supported to attract families to move to communities; schools are consistently among the most important factors in families' choices of where to live (Tatian et al. 2012). Higher-performing schools have been shown to increase property values (Bayer, Ferreira, and McMillan 2004; Black 1999; Dhar and Ross 2012; Kane et al. 2003), which in turn can promote neighborhood development.

Platform 3: Educational and Medical Anchor Institutions

Increasingly, neighborhood redevelopment initiatives are leveraging the investments of other public and private efforts or assets. The foremost example of this is coordinating neighborhood redevelopment around “eds and meds” anchor institutions, such as a successful university or hospital (Bartik and Erickcek 2008; Perry and Wiewel 2005; Poethig et al. 2016). Tying neighborhood investment to a large institution has appeal for cash-strapped cities, as hospitals and universities are large local employers. Furthermore, unlike other businesses, these institutions are highly unlikely to leave the city for another locale and therefore have the self-interest to contribute to redeveloping surrounding neighborhoods over a long time horizon.

Platform 4: Real Estate for Residential, Commercial, and Community Facilities

Real estate development is a common platform for place-based initiatives (Ferris and Hopkins 2015). This may be because federal subsidies such as New Markets Tax Credits⁴ and Opportunity Zones⁵ are broadly available and can be incorporated into a local development strategy. Or it may be because those designing revitalization efforts understand that, in particular, the housing stock is an important environmental and contextual determinant influencing the extent to which a neighborhood will ascend or decline (Pendall, Theodos, and Hildner 2015; Rosenthal 2008).

Initiatives may also produce commercial and retail spaces, motivated by the growing body of research that identifies some communities as lacking opportunities to buy basic household goods nearby. This includes research identifying the locations of food deserts (LeClair and Aksan 2014) and

research on the effect that adding grocery stores has on local residents (Dubowitz et al. 2015; Richardson et al. 2017). Along those lines, the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative seeks to increase the availability of healthy food options in communities with low incomes. Beyond grocery stores, similar analyses have been conducted more broadly on “retail deserts” or to identify “retail leakage” (Social Compact 2008).

Some initiatives seek to promote investment in amenities to stimulate growth and attract new businesses and increased investment. These amenities can include arts and culture and access to parks and outdoor recreation—sometimes referred to as creative placemaking (Eldridge, Burrowes, and Spauster 2019; Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, and Herranz 2006; Walker, Nicodemus, and Engh 2017). Researchers have found that providing such amenities helps promote positive outcomes for the development of high-poverty communities (Ding and Knapp 2003).

Several public and privately funded initiatives have focused on beautification as a strategy to promote economic vitality of those communities. The theory is that the beautification process may have a positive multiplier effect on community well-being overall (Listokin, Listokin, and Lahr 1998; Thomson 2008). The literature supports the idea that physical appearance affects homeowners’ perceptions of neighborhood conditions (Galster 1987).

Platform 5: Small-Business Development, Contracting, and Access to Financing

A fifth platform for place-based development is through local small-business development, often catalyzed by some network or institution. This platform typically facilitates or provides business development services; creates contracting targets or requirements for small local businesses owned by women or people of color; or otherwise provides access to financing for local small-business owners and entrepreneurs. Specific strategies can vary but are unified around the idea that residents will benefit from upgrading the economic conditions of a neighborhood. Investment-based initiatives may be linked to a local plan or development strategy but can also be developed without public input.

Small businesses are widely considered economic drivers in communities—as a means of wealth creation for the proprietor and employment for local residents. Small businesses have high local visibility and are an important constituency for politicians. Most businesses in the US are small: 87 percent of all US firms have fewer than 20 employees. (Of course, these businesses’ share of US employment is much smaller, at 17 percent.)⁶

Local efforts can be motivated by an understanding of both deficits and strengths. For example, although Latino people are 16 percent of the US adult population, they constitute only 6 percent of business owners, and those firms have only 1 percent of receipts.⁷ Even more stark, although Black people are 12 percent of the US adult population, only 2 percent of business owners are Black, and those firms have less than 1 percent of receipts.

Local initiatives have taken various approaches to encouraging the establishment and growth of small businesses. Examples include facilitating or providing access to equity and debt capital; providing workspace through business incubators; providing training, coaching, and mentoring; generating visibility; and advocating for changes to business regulations and permitting processes (Pettit and Pitingolo 2016; Theodos and González 2019).

Local initiatives can rely on numerous federal regulations and programs. For example, the Community Reinvestment Act, passed in 1977, stands as evidence that economic development can be accomplished through regulation, not only programmatic investments; the effect of this regulation was that large banks were required to expand investments in poor communities (Barr 2005). Likewise, the US Small Business Administration runs several loan and investment programs that provide access to capital for small businesses and entrepreneurs who otherwise could not access financing in the private market because they are too risky (Temkin and Theodos 2008). The Community Development Block Grant, created in 1974, has been used to create revolving loan funds for small businesses (Walker et al. 2002). And the New Markets Tax Credit has been used to promote business financing (among other financing) (Abravanel et al. 2013), as has the Economic Development Administration's programs. Additionally, the Enterprise Zones/Enterprise Communities program, created in the 1990s, used tax benefits to stimulate local business growth (GAO 2006a). Also, state and local governments provide even more community and economic development financing than the federal government (Bartik 2017). This may take the form of a dedicated local program, such as Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (Theodos and González 2019) or Detroit's Motor City Match. It may be structured as a business incubator (Stokan, Thompson, and Mahu 2015).

Platform 6: Resident Services

Most US place-based efforts to address community disadvantage focus on physical revitalization or boosting local economies. A few federal service delivery programs have been incorporated into place-based approaches, notably in the areas of health services, employment assistance, and links to other workforce-related supports. Examples include federally qualified health clinics that provide services for people with low incomes (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2011) and workforce "one-stop" centers that offer a range of job development and placement services (GAO 2006b).

Local examples exist as well. The Chicago Housing Authority piloted a wraparound service model from 2007 to 2010 to serve vulnerable residents from two public housing communities. The Chicago Demonstration provided case management, clinical services, substance abuse counseling, and a transitional jobs program for participants (Popkin et al. 2010). This model has since been refined and expanded as part of the Urban Institute's ongoing multisite Housing Opportunities and Services Together demonstration (Popkin and McDaniel 2013). This and other approaches are increasingly gravitating to dual-generation approaches to engaging residents (Aspen Institute 2016). These programs are designed to serve adults, children, and young people in the same families.

Platform 7: Community Engagement and Mobilization

A final platform that place-based development strategies have used to facilitate change is investment in community engagement, cohesion, and agency. Most such initiatives are funded by the philanthropic sector; the public sector has not commonly used these approaches. Numerous major US foundations, including the Annie E. Casey, Ford, MacArthur, Robert Wood Johnson, and Rockefeller foundations, have created place-based strengthening initiatives that include engagement and mobilization efforts. One example is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, which provided \$50 to \$60 million annually in support to 10 communities across the US over 10 years. The initiative sought to build local resident capacity, focusing both on outcomes for young people and adults (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013).

Community engagement efforts often involve strengthening local leadership and building organizational capacity. Many such efforts have been based on the idea of local self-determination, allowing the structuring of programs to be dictated by local needs (Kubisch 1996).

Conclusion

A current generation of community developers seeks to build local power, overcome racial and ethnic disparities, and support vulnerable families. Less well developed than our thinking around end goals are the platforms best suited to deliver results. This brief summarizes seven platforms for place-based revitalization: public and assisted housing; public schools; educational and medical anchor institutions; real estate for residential, commercial, and community facilities; small-business development, contracting, and access to financing; resident services; and community engagement and mobilization.

Notes

- ¹ This essay builds on my earlier thinking in Theodos and Popkin (2012).
- ² More information about the Harlem Children's Zone is available at <https://hcz.org/>.
- ³ More information about Promise Neighborhoods is available at <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/promise-neighborhoods>.
- ⁴ More information about New Market Tax Credits is available at <https://urban.org/nmtc>.
- ⁵ More information about Opportunity Zones is available at <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/opportunity-zones>.
- ⁶ Author's calculation of 2018 Business Employment Dynamics data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics: "National Business Employment Dynamics Data by Firm Size Class," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 27, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/bdm/bdmfirmsize.htm>.
- ⁷ Author's calculation of "Statistics for US Employer Firms by Sector, Gender, Ethnicity, Race, and Veteran Status for the US, States, and Top 50 MSAs: 2016," 2016 Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs, Table SE1600CSA01, Census Bureau, August 10, 2018, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ASE_2016_00CSA01&prodType=table.

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