



Reimagining the Civic Commons

Reimagining the Civic Commons is a national initiative to advance ambitious social, economic and environmental goals through revitalized and connected public spaces. By transforming public places—such as parks, libraries, trails and community centers—we aim to demonstrate how strategic investments in our civic assets can connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust and create more resilient communities.

Learn more at civiccommons.us.

Affirming the Power of the Commons

Reimagining the Civic Commons means reimagining not just the places themselves, but also how communities design, manage and operate these shared assets. Central to our approach is the belief that by managing public spaces as a portfolio of assets, we can create positive social outcomes.

A collaboration of national foundations and local partners, cross-sector teams in ten cities are working together with communities to achieve four main goals:



Civic Engagement

Building a sense of community that brings people of all backgrounds back into public life as stewards and advocates, shaping their city's future.



Environmental Sustainability

Increasing access to nature and creating environmentally friendly places, easily reached by walking, biking or transit.



Socioeconomic Mixing

Creating places where everyone belongs, and that generate opportunities for shared experience among people of all incomes and backgrounds.



Value Creation

Encouraging additional investments in neighborhoods so that they are better places to thrive.

Why Now?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. was experiencing increasing economic segregation, social isolation and distrust. The proportion of American families living in predominantly low-income or predominantly affluent neighborhoods has more than doubled over the past 50 years. A full third of people never interact with neighbors, while health researchers are growing increasingly concerned about the link between social isolation and physical and mental illness. Trust in institutions is in decline.

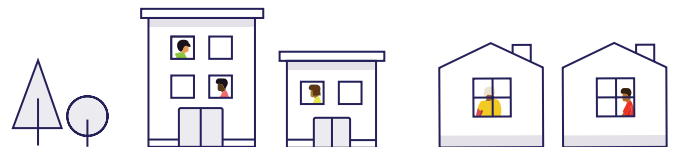
Yet every year, parks and recreation departments, trail maintenance and library operations fall to the bottom of nearly every municipal budget. They are seen as “nice to have” but not essential. And while a robust, nature-rich public realm has provided desperately needed relief for people in cities across the country during the pandemic, public spaces are not located in every neighborhood nor at the quality that we need.

Now is the time to prioritize our civic commons as it is essential infrastructure for equitable and resilient communities.



The percentage of people living in predominantly low income or predominantly affluent neighborhoods has risen from 15% in 1970 to 37% in 2014.

US Data Project, Brown University.



In the 1970s, 30% of people spent time with their neighbors. Today, only 20% do.

Less in Common, City Observatory, 2015.



Only 31% of people believe others can be trusted. While 64% of people believe trust among fellow Americans is declining.

General Social Survey, 2018. Pew Research Center, 2019.

The Demonstration Cities

Akron

With investments in three neighborhoods and the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail that connects them, Akron is knitting together isolated communities through collaborative reimagining of public places. Active co-creation is bringing diverse residents together and building civic pride.

Chicago

Through arts and cultural production, Chicago is transforming a closed elementary school and 13 vacant lots and connecting them to the radically restored Stony Island Arts Bank, creating a network of assets on the city's South Side that fosters opportunity for all.

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 have been turned into a park and a greenway, the commercial corridors are being reactivated, and systems are being developed to support stewardship, programming and advocacy for the commons.

Memphis

Memphis is transforming public and civic spaces with a focus on breaking down barriers, connecting to nature and creating new value for Memphians. What started at the Fourth Bluff is becoming a citywide movement of diverse neighborhoods and organizations working together.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is amplifying the role of public space as a vehicle for growth, change and connection. Through a new staffing model for civic spaces, it is deepening civic engagement to influence and inform neighborhood revitalization efforts and public investment in three neighborhoods.

The Expansion Cities

Lexington

Lexington's work centers on Town Branch Commons, a two-mile-long ribbon of trails and greenspace that will connect neighborhoods downtown through the central business district, and complete the final segment of an uninterrupted 22-mile trail system.

Macon

Macon's Ocmulgee Heritage Trail—already one of the city's most popular and diverse places—is being expanded into a network of trails and median parks, connecting diverse neighborhoods, reducing barriers to wealth creation and helping support a thriving downtown.

Miami

To address years of neglect and underfunding, a network of Miami leaders is focusing on advocacy to promote high-quality, equitable public spaces. By engaging residents in advocacy and developing shared policy priorities, the team is working to increase local investment in parks and recreation to meet the needs of diverse communities.

Minneapolis

The efforts in Minneapolis are connecting the residents of North Minneapolis to the river, physically, culturally and economically. By focusing on building prosperity for all, RiverFirst will be a catalyst for reversing long-standing racial and economic disparities in North Minneapolis.

San José

During a period of unprecedented growth, the San José team is transforming Guadalupe River Park, downtown's north-south greenway, and Santa Clara Street, downtown's east-west gateway in order to position the city to realize the full potential of its downtown urban public spaces—with public life as the lead redevelopment strategy.

“As civic leaders, we are challenged with balancing competing interests, all vying for position within our budgets and policy agendas. Reimagining the Civic Commons has allowed Akron to prioritize our public spaces in new ways, making them central to our social, economic and environmental policy goals.”

- Mayor Dan Horrigan
CITY OF AKRON



Shared Learning

A national Civic Commons Learning Network housed at U3 Advisors provides a growing community of practice with access to research and impact assessment, elevation through storytelling and cross-city learning opportunities. It is a go-to resource for civic asset and city leaders nationwide. We aspire to measure the impact of investments in the civic commons, support the innovation and collaboration required to achieve those impacts and increase broad-based support for these investments in cities across the country.

Measuring Impact

We have developed an open source, universal measurement system to better understand the impacts of our work on people in public spaces and surrounding communities. See how cities are using our tools and download them at civiccommons.us/resources

About the Project

Launched in 2016 in five demonstration cities, the initiative expanded in 2020 to five additional U.S. cities.

The Funders

The JPB Foundation, Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, William Penn Foundation

The fiscal sponsor of Reimagining the Civic Commons is The Miami Foundation.



The Cities

