

Common Goals, Different Approaches

How Five Cities Reimagined Their Public Spaces

BY AARON WIENER | APRIL 2019

CHICAGO



AKRON



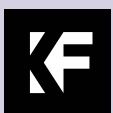
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In his 2018 book “The Divided City,”

the urban scholar Alan Mallach wrote, “America’s once industrial and now postindustrial cities appear to be on a trajectory to a future in which they become more and more polarized places where bustling, glittering enclaves of prosperity are ringed by declining or largely abandoned areas, and where millions are relegated to lives of poverty and hopelessness.” The American city—which seemed bound for devastation in the 1960s and 1970s and revival in the 2000s—is now on a path toward greater socioeconomic division. And for all the talk of wildly rising costs and metastasizing luxury condos in cities like New York and San Francisco, there are far more places, such as Detroit’s Fitzgerald, Akron’s Summit Lake and Philadelphia’s Strawberry Mansion, that were once stable middle-class neighborhoods but have long been sliding toward disinvestment, neglect and isolation.

The public sector has struggled to halt this slide and connect residents of underresourced neighborhoods to opportunities in thriving areas nearby. It’s an incredibly challenging task, given all the factors at play: economic forces, a history of racial discrimination, poor transit connections, housing inequality, educational shortcomings and a lack of quality public gathering spaces, to name a few. But four foundations have come together to launch an important experiment in breaking down some of these barriers. What would happen, they asked, if a small group of cities received funding to transform a few public spaces each into places where different groups of people could mingle, where investment inequities were rectified, where environmental stewardship and sustainable transit

connections were a priority, and where local residents could claim a degree of ownership? If each city were left to its own devices, how would it structure its projects, in terms of leadership, site selection, community engagement, redevelopment strategies and goals? And how would those decisions affect the outcomes?

Reimagining the Civic Commons is an attempt to answer those questions. This three-year national initiative was launched in 2016 with the announcement of a \$40 million investment in public spaces in four cities: Detroit; Memphis, Tennessee; Akron, Ohio; and Chicago. The four foundations—the JPB Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation—invested half of the total, with matching funds from local sources. (In a fifth city, Philadelphia, a pilot program that started in 2015 was supported by Knight and the William Penn Foundation.)

Most of the cities are now more than two-thirds of the way through their Civic Commons grant periods, and while much of the work remains to be done, their projects have taken shape in concrete and meaningful ways. The disparate approaches chosen by the five cities, and the mix of successes and challenges they've encountered, show clearly that there's no simple right or wrong answer to the question of how to create a better civic commons. Instead, they offer different lessons for further efforts, by cities and the partners that support them, to create a richer, fairer, more sustainable and more integrated urban landscape in the future.



PHILADELPHIA

The Pilot

Confronting challenges of geography
and community engagement



COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES



Ask the leaders of Philadelphia's Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative what the project's unifying goal is, and you'll get as many different answers, from "create these legendary public spaces" (Jamie Gauthier, former executive director for the Fairmount Park Conservancy) to "exploring what public spaces do, not just that they exist" (Patrick J. Morgan, former Philadelphia program director for Knight Foundation) to "it's less about the projects and more of an idea" (city Commissioner of Parks & Recreation Kathryn Ott Lovell).

Of the five Civic Commons cities, Philadelphia is the outlier. It was the pilot city, and it's the only one whose grant period is over. Its sites are spread across the city: You would have to travel more than 20 miles to visit them all. And where Memphis is focused on its riverfront and Detroit on one neighborhood, Philly tackled a library, a recreation trail, a park, an old rail line and a new lakeside office building. It's all over the place, both geographically and conceptually.

Mixed into that complicated assemblage is some great success. Bartram's Garden is widely hailed across the Civic Commons network as the initiative's model site; it broke down the perceived barriers between a natural landmark and a neglected neighborhood and made residents feel welcome for the first time. Centennial Commons is bringing investment and programming to a park that lacked both—the park's inaugural public movie screening, of "Black Panther," turned out a small but delighted crowd of neighbors—and the Discovery Center is likely to do the same for East Fairmount Park. The Rail Park could be a transformative project that re-establishes forgotten connections across the city.

Now that Philadelphia's Civic Commons grant has expired, the team is applying the lessons of the initiative to other projects in the city—most notably Rebuilding Community Infrastructure (Rebuild), a \$500 million citywide neighborhood

PHILA

Philadelphia

revitalization program funded largely through a soda tax—and to share them with the Civic Commons cities whose work is ongoing. All of that requires a deep examination of what Philly got right and what it got wrong.

‘WE WERE JUST MAKING THIS UP AS WE WENT’

Philadelphia's Civic Commons initiative was born when the William Penn Foundation's Shawn McCaney saw an opportunity to connect several existing projects in the city to the nascent Civic Commons effort. In Ott Lovell's telling, it was largely a way to get funding to finish those projects. “Nobody really knew what the Civic Commons was going to be beyond money for capital projects,” she said.

There ensued a confusing period when Knight was trying to help Philadelphia make sense of the initiative and define its objectives. “For the first six months, we were just thrown two consultants a week, doing things we didn’t totally understand,” Ott Lovell recalled. “And as the consultants came in, we were just making this up as we went.”

“We had no idea what we were doing,” said Jennifer Mahar, senior director of civic initiatives at the Fairmount Park Conservancy, which is leading the city's Civic Commons team. The four other cities had to apply for their grants with a statement of purpose, so they were already tied to the mission of the project. But Philly was flailing. The biggest problem, Mahar said, was that “there was no structure for community participation.”

Nowhere was this clearer than the Rail Park. The planned transformation of a historic train line had the potential to connect disparate neighborhoods, from a tunnel under the grand museums of Fairmount to a viaduct above the old factories of Callowhill.

Yet early on, there were perceptions that community engagement was lacking. “The community wasn’t invited in,” said Ott Lovell. The result was distrust among neighbors of the Rail Park’s first phase, through Callowhill and North Chinatown, who were already witnessing the start of rising prices and displacement as old industrial buildings and shabby apartments were converted into high-end residences. There was widespread concern that the Rail Park would accelerate the process without providing any real amenities for the neighbors. After all, the project is frequently compared to the High Line in New York, where nearby condo prices more than doubled in the seven years after the park’s 2009 opening.

Of course, the Rail Park could be a real treasure for the neighborhood, which lacks parks and public gathering spaces. It could connect residents, by foot or bike, to the museums, businesses and neighborhoods to the west. But that’s only if residents feel welcome—if they believe the Rail Park is for them

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**– KATHRYN OTT LOVELL,
PHILADELPHIA COMMISSIONER
OF PARKS & RECREATION**



and not just for tourists and newcomers. And that requires a retroactive civic engagement process that Philadelphia is seeking to tackle across its five Civic Commons projects.

‘THERE’S A TRUST ISSUE’

In 1952, a 7-year-old white boy named Paul Waxman was playing by the Schuylkill River when he fell in. Joseph Mander, a 41-year-old black man, jumped in to try to rescue him, but the current was too strong, and they both drowned.

The Strawberry Mansion neighborhood was divided then—the Jewish majority was giving way to an African-American one (in 1952, John Coltrane bought a house there, where he composed “Giant Steps”)—just as the broader community is racially divided today. But in a macabre way, Mander’s heroics are a metaphor for the diverse and inclusive community that Civic Commons is trying to build at a new site between Strawberry Mansion and the river—and a reminder that it won’t be easy.

A playground at the edge of Fairmount Park is named for Mander, and the Fairmount Park Conservancy sought to connect it to the Schuylkill through a project called Mander to the River. But Mahar said the conservancy fumbled it by starting with traffic-calming measures by the river, rather than on the neighborhood side, drawing frustration from neighbors who felt like an afterthought. The challenge with the Discovery Center, as construction there nears completion, is not to repeat that mistake.

Just as with the Rail Park, Mahar said, there was initially “such a focus on the capital piece and now the real focus is on engagement.”

It remains a complicated ambition, because providing a resource for neighbors is one of several competing goals for the Discovery Center. The building, a stunning modern wood-clad space perched at the edge of a pristine reservoir, will serve as the headquarters of Audubon Pennsylvania and Outward Bound Philadelphia. It’s designed to be part of a sanctuary for migratory waterfowl. “I don’t think there’s another building in Philly that was designed to be bird-friendly,” boasted Audubon program manager Keith Russell.

Philadelphia

Stripes on the windows prevent birds from flying into them, and nooks in the outer walls are intended for nesting. The question facing the project is whether it can appeal to neighborhood kids as much as canvasback ducks.

Questions about community engagement have long plagued Fairmount Park. “There’s a trust issue,” said Tonnetta Graham, president of the Strawberry Mansion Community Development Corp. “It’s still there.”

When Graham was growing up in Strawberry Mansion, the streets posed dangers, but Fairmount Park “was like a safe haven.” Kids would flock to the park to play, particularly around the reservoir. Some collected insects; older ones called it lovers’ lane. Then fences went up around the reservoir area, and they’ve stayed up for decades. Neighbors complained, but according to Graham, no action was taken until the “little old white ladies” of the Audubon Society started asking what was going on behind the fences. “And now,” Graham said with a smirk, “we have the Discovery Center.”

That’s why Graham insists that it’s so important to engage the community if the Discovery Center is to be home to more than just birders and climbers. No one consulted the neighbors before putting the fences up. If there’s no engagement as they come down—and if there are too many rules and regulations, unlike in the old days when kids could roam free—the Discovery Center, like the Rail Park, will risk seeming to neighbors like it’s for someone else, not for them.

‘I HOPE OUR BEING HONEST ABOUT OUR CHALLENGES HELPS THE OTHER CITIES’

The feeling around Bartram’s Garden is different. As with the Discovery Center, the adjacent neighborhood is impoverished—in this case, the sprawling Bartram Village public housing complex. Bartram Village residents long saw the aquatic garden on the west bank of the Schuylkill River as a playground for visiting boaters and birders, not a place for them, even though it was right in their backyard.

“When I first moved out here, I didn’t know too much about Bartram’s Garden,” said Tanya Robinson, who has lived at Bartram Village for more than 20 years. “I felt like I couldn’t really go there.”

Engaging the community was central to the Bartram’s Garden overhaul, which began before Civic Commons. (Technically, it’s the Bartram’s Mile trail, not Bartram’s Garden, that’s one of Philadelphia’s five Civic Commons projects, but the lines are so blurred that Civic Commons partners more often refer to Bartram’s Garden as the heart of the city’s initiative.) When Bartram’s Garden Executive Director Maitreyi Roy was building her team six years ago, “she hired somebody who did not have a background in gardens or public space or even public programming,” said Justin DiBerardinis, the garden’s community engagement director. “She hired me. My background is in community building.”

Philadelphia

DiBerardinis said there were extensive conversations with neighbors about what they wanted to see in the space. Knight Foundation has helped by providing microgrants to neighbors to develop their own programming for Bartram's Garden. "There's a certain humility," he said, in admitting "that the people who work here today are not necessarily the best people to provide the programming in this space."

If neighbors didn't know what was going on at Bartram's Garden before, "they know now," said Robinson. "A lot of people go now. It's a peaceful place." Strangers bond over boating and fishing, she said, and maintain those friendships outside the garden. To her, the project is an unmitigated success. "It couldn't be any better," she said, "because for me, it's already perfect."

Not everyone in the community feels that way. On a recent balmy Saturday, the weekly free community boating—a signature part of the Civic Commons era at Bartram's—was canceled because of high water and strong currents. "Those boaters ain't here today," said a middle-aged man walking by the river. I asked if he was there for the boating. "Hell, no!" he responded. "I go fishing. And these boaters, they have no idea what they're doing. They get lost and stuck and got to be rescued. And they have all this water to use, but they just go right where I'm fishing." He set up his rod next to a friend, who quickly reeled in a small fish from a section of the river they had all to themselves.

Bringing together diverse communities is difficult and sometimes messy. "We segregate because integration is hard for everybody," said DiBerardinis. "If you're doing a good job at integration, it just means that we're all uncomfortable, and we're all willing to be part of that discomfort in the service of something greater."

Bartram's Garden highlights a fundamental truth about Philadelphia, one that underscores the importance of creating inclusive public spaces through programs like Civic Commons. The city has a 26 percent poverty rate, so for many families, for whom vacations aren't an option, public spaces are critical for recreation and relaxation. "We are a city of parks and libraries," said Morgan. "They are interwoven into every single neighborhood in the city."

If Bartram's Garden offers positive lessons for the rest of the Civic Commons network, then the challenges elsewhere in Philadelphia's initiative should serve as equally instructive cautionary tales. "I hope our being honest about our challenges helps the other cities," said Mahar.

Morgan thinks that's already the case. Other cities' projects are now "more focused in terms of their scope, their scale and their partnerships," he said. Leaders of the other cities' projects have paid regular visits to Philadelphia, particularly Akron's Dan Rice and his team. "They're here like every other day," said Mahar. "Dan is probably at Bartram's right now." (Rice said Akron sees Philadelphia as its "sister city" in Civic Commons.)

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**– JUSTIN DIBERARDINIS,
BARTRAM'S GARDEN COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT DIRECTOR**

Philadelphia

But the lessons from Civic Commons also got city leaders thinking about how to build on the initiative within Philadelphia. “What if we made a massive investment across the city and scaled the Commons model? That is in part how Rebuild came about,” said David Gould, the deputy director of Rebuild in charge of community engagement.

Then-Philadelphia Managing Director Michael DiBerardinis, who previously chaired the Rebuild oversight board (and is Justin DiBerardinis’ father), said: “What we learned from the Civic Commons is that the real value comes from the continuation of the relationship to the space; that a genuine connection, and a serious involvement from the community, does in fact improve the product; and that the long-term stewardship and programming is predicated on a sincere and legitimate community engagement process. We’re going to apply those learnings to Rebuild.”

Morgan called Civic Commons “a ripple that led to a bigger wave.” Beyond Rebuild, Civic Commons is having another kind of ripple effect in Philadelphia: It’s helping community members who are active in Civic Commons projects become leaders on a citywide scale. “There are people that are now emboldened to become leaders in our city,” said Ott Lovell. She pointed to Justin DiBerardinis and Tonnetta Graham, who has traveled to other Civic Commons cities to learn from and share with the network. “Think about Tonnetta before we started and now that we’ve come through this process. Here’s a lady that sees a future in this world and would never have been exposed to this. And that’s a huge benefit to our city, because Tonnetta’s not going anywhere.”



Philadelphia

There's no bigger evangelist of the Civic Commons mission in Philadelphia than Anuj Gupta. He was executive director of Mt. Airy CDC when the nonprofit, which serves the city's Mount Airy neighborhood, received a Civic Commons grant to transform Lovett Library and an adjacent park. In 2015, he became general manager of Reading Terminal Market, the city's 125-year-old market and food hall, where he's applying the lessons of Civic Commons. Two Knight Foundation grants have helped: One brought locals from different cultural backgrounds together over dinner to share their cuisines and experiences and to foster new relationships; another will transform adjacent Filbert Street, currently dark and down at the heels, into a multiuse public plaza with merchants, seating and musical performances.

Gupta said he has taken it as his mandate to expand the market's diversity. "If I'm out here saying this is Philadelphia's market, then it needs to reflect Philadelphia," he said. It's getting closer: The first Latino-owned business in the market opened last year.

It is this kind of diffusion of Civic Commons values that Ott Lovell sees as the initiative's success in Philadelphia, despite the stumbles and shortcomings. New leaders are stepping up to take the baton from those who proved an awkward fit. At the Rail Park, for example, the Center City District is still in charge of the capital projects, but the Friends of the Rail Park—which recently brought on its first paid staff members, including a community engagement director—oversees programming, and the Chinatown Community Development Center is increasingly active in shaping the park's future.

When the Civic Commons project started, Ott Lovell recalled, a lot of time was spent discussing lofty ideas like socioeconomic integration and value creation. "And I think that's wonderful for Civic Commons nationally, but what's the value for us as Philadelphians?" she said. "What are we getting out of this? And one big thing is that through exposure to this network and these ideas, we upped our game here."

DELPHIA

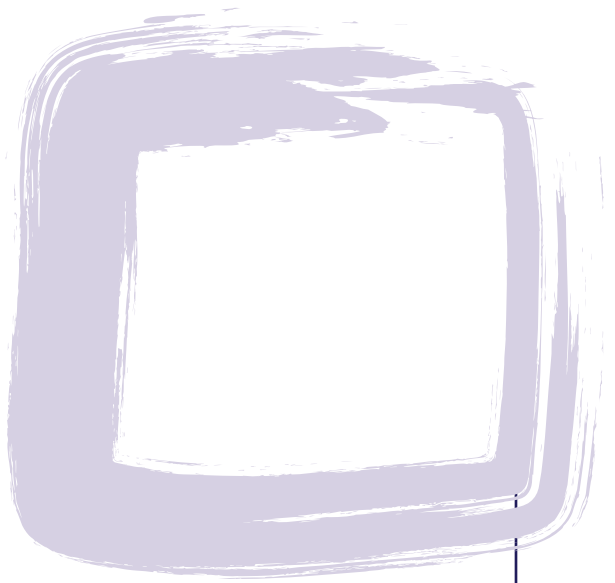
Redefining Assets

A city on the rebound turns mass vacancy to its advantage

DETROIT



COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES



On the wall of his office, Maurice Cox has pinned a map of Detroit that's colored like Christmas. Each property in the city is marked red or green—red for occupied, green for vacant, although you could be forgiven for guessing the inverse, since there are at least as many overwhelmingly green patches as red ones.

Downtown Detroit is a block of near-solid red. You don't need the map to tell you that: Cox's window looks out onto a dazzling array of skyscrapers connected by a network of footbridges. Radiating from downtown on the map, however, are streaks of green. And 9 miles northwest of downtown is a perfect square dominated by green.

This square is the heart of the Fitzgerald neighborhood. And it's where Cox, Detroit's planning director, is focusing a lot of his energy.

Vacancy and blight have plagued Detroit since its steady decades-long decline—precipitated by suburbanization, white flight, riots and the erosion of auto industry jobs—brought the city to its nadir, culminating in its 2013 bankruptcy. Between 2004 and 2014 alone, Detroit lost 244,000 people, enough to form Michigan's second-largest city. What makes the Fitzgerald project particularly important for Detroit—and different from the other initiatives in the Civic Commons network—is that it's redefining vacancy as an asset. Other Civic Commons cities have focused on building new assets or restoring old ones. But Cox and his team are taking something that has always been seen as a negative and trying to turn it into a positive.

The view out Cox's window frames the city's most obvious asset: the revitalization of downtown Detroit. It began with investments in Detroit's riverfront and Campus Martius Park in the early 2000s and rapidly accelerated when Dan Gilbert moved his mortgage company, Quicken Loans, into downtown in 2010, purchased a slew of office buildings nearby and lured other businesses to the downtown core. Now, on a warm summer evening, you can find groups of business travelers in work attire hopping between downtown's high-end restaurants and bars, and large numbers of locals strolling

DET

Detroit



along the pristine RiverWalk, with sweeping views of Canada across the Detroit River. To the north, in Midtown, hipsters and young professionals patronize breweries, boutiques and museums.

The success of Detroit's downtown differentiates it from other Civic Commons cities, such as Memphis, which is focusing its efforts on downtown to restore the city's center and sense of place, and Akron, which is putting resources into downtown and seeking to connect it with areas that have more population and off-hours foot traffic.

The recovery of downtown Detroit is well underway. It serves as a visible reminder of what Detroit writ large could be, and of what it used to be, before the city of 1.85 million was reduced to a 670,000-person shell. The goal now is to help the recovery spread throughout the city. The Civic Commons project in Fitzgerald is, more than anything, an effort to revive a sagging neighborhood and give it attractive public amenities it has long lacked. But it's also a proof of concept for the rest of the city. If vacancy can become an asset in this quarter square mile, can it also be used to revive Detroit?

'THE MAN IS COMING INTO YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD'

The idea for Detroit's Civic Commons project began 4,000 miles away, during a 2015 bike ride in Copenhagen. Knight Foundation had arranged a tour for leaders of Knight-supported cities, and a group of about 25 was biking through the Danish capital at a good clip when Cox and Knight Vice President Carol Coletta (now with The Kresge Foundation and Memphis' Civic Commons project) got stuck at a red light. As the rest of the group pedaled out of sight, they split off and got to talking about an idea Cox had for Detroit's abundant vacant land: turning it into parks and greenways. Coletta told him that would be a perfect fit for a new initiative called Reimagining the Civic Commons and encouraged him to apply.

Detroit

What made Cox's idea attractive was how different it was—how it turned the concept of an asset on its head. The initiative was also appealing to Cox, since independent funding would allow Detroit to experiment with a new development model that might be tough to pursue with taxpayer dollars. And it gave Cox a way to fulfill a directive from Detroit's mayor, Mike Duggan. Downtown Detroit was well into its comeback, and Duggan had told Cox, "I want you to get as far away from downtown as possible and show that we can revitalize neighborhoods that are not adjacent to downtown."

Fitzgerald was a good candidate for several reasons. Like many Detroit neighborhoods, it was plagued by vacancy. But it also had advantages that led Cox and his team to believe a renaissance was possible. It was sandwiched between two schools—the University of Detroit Mercy and Marygrove College—that could serve as anchor institutions and nodes for the connections Cox wanted to make. And it was near neighborhoods and commercial corridors with a lot more economic strength from which Fitzgerald and its struggling retail strips could potentially benefit. Just over a mile away is Palmer Woods, whose median household income is 10 times that of Fitzgerald, according to Alexa Bush, a senior planner for the city.

On the surface, Fitzgerald might not seem to have a lot to work with. Other Civic Commons cities chose to improve historic libraries and parks that once boasted big, well-heeled crowds before falling into disrepair. The Fitzgerald project area has 20 acres of vacant land and two commercial corridors whose storefronts are mostly boarded up, save for a few liquor stores and takeout joints. But Detroit does have two major advantages over the other cities in tackling this project. First, there's a base of philanthropic support that's the envy of some of the other cities' leaders, support that pulled the city through its most difficult period and is helping sustain the Civic Commons project. Now, through Civic Commons, four foundations are working together to create new investments—an unusual arrangement that pools resources and know-how as never before. The city still has limited funds to work with, but according to Cox, it has been able to leverage \$4 million in Civic Commons funding for neighborhood projects into about \$40 million in public, private and philanthropic investment.

And second, the city government itself is leading the effort, with a rapidly expanding planning bureaucracy that has grown from six city planners in 2015 to 36 today. Previously, maybe one planner would come to a neighborhood planning meeting; now, those meetings draw around six apiece. And the city government can work with its various constituent agencies to smooth the process.

"We have the ability to coordinate departments and services and resources in a way that the other entities—a conservancy or nonprofit—can't," said Cox. "We can say, 'This street needs to be paved because we're doing

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**– MAURICE COX, DETROIT
PLANNING DIRECTOR**

Detroit

something on it.' We can call [the Department of Public Works] and get them on it. It's not like an outsider trying to get government's attention." That's a huge benefit in a project as complex as this, which involves the city agencies that handle housing, finance, parks and recreation, public works, planning, real estate and neighborhood engagement, among others.

But having the city government lead a project like this comes with a major drawback as well. "We're still the city," said Cox. "We're like the Man. And the Man is coming into your neighborhood."

"The trust piece is huge for us," Bush added.

"It's enormous," Cox agreed. "And not only are you the Man, but you don't have a great track record for delivering on the promises you've made in the past. All that baggage can weigh you down." In a baseline survey conducted at the start of the initiative, zero Fitzgerald residents said they could almost always trust the city government to do the right thing, while 39 percent said they almost never could.

The project also has inherent challenges that no leader could easily overcome. For starters, the city had to acquire 400 vacant properties through foreclosure and process them all. "Something as simple as running a title search on each of those properties, doing 400 of them consecutively, that takes months and months of time," said Bush. Then the city had to turn over all the vacant houses to a developer to rehab them, in what Cox said was one of the largest land transfers to a single developer in Detroit's history. Additionally, the team is trying to use the project as a local workforce development opportunity, partly by training residents in sustainable agriculture so they can maintain gardens on some of the vacant lots.

"We're trying to do it all in the timetable laid out by Civic Commons, which is three years," said Cox. Unsurprisingly, parts of the project fell behind schedule early in the process. The key is "to work quickly but not work beyond the speed of the trust that you've built up," Bush said, adding that now, "pretty much everything's got good momentum." That's not quite visible yet on the commercial corridors or the greenway, which has yet to break ground. But it's on prominent display at Ella Fitzgerald Park.

'IT'S GOOD TO SEE THE LIFE COME BACK'

The north-south blocks in Fitzgerald are the longest city blocks I've ever seen. Some of them stretch half a mile, uninterrupted. For some residents to visit their neighbors on a street 200 feet away without crossing through private property, they have to walk a quarter-mile up to the main road and a quarter-mile back. And until July 2018, there were no public spaces for them to gather in the neighborhood.



Now there's Ella Fitzgerald Park. That's where the city turned 26 vacant lots and houses into the neighborhood's central park. On a Friday afternoon a few weeks after the park's ribbon-cutting last July, three kids played basketball on the new court. In the playground, one middle-aged woman pushed another on a swing, and six children, four of them black and two white, clambered on the wooden beams and slides, in a rare instance of socioeconomic mixing in Detroit. (The city has among the least racially and economically diverse neighborhoods of any in America, and the least mixing of any Civic Commons city, according to research by the urban economist Joe Cortright.)

"If we were out here two years ago, there would be no one here but us," said Bush. The baseline survey of the future Ella Fitzgerald Park showed no visitors on weekdays.

Near the playground stretched a 140-foot mural designed by Detroit artist Hubert Massey and installed with the help of neighbors, who chiseled the ceramic tile and inserted it into the colorful mural wall. "These are embedded memories," said Cox. "People's handprints are literally all over this."

Getting neighbors involved helped resolve the trust issue that loomed over the project. Bush estimated that the Civic Commons team had held 100 community meetings over the past couple of years. The conception of the park came out of a dialogue with Fitzgerald residents. They were the ones, Cox said, who suggested turning the vacant parcels in the center of the neighborhood into a park. Residents also came up with the name Ella Fitzgerald Park, adopting it from the neighborhood school formerly called Ella Fitzgerald School. Once the park had that name, a neighbor pointed out that the design ought to have a musical element. So the city created a blue painted pattern on San Juan Drive, which bisects the park, that's an abstract representation of the chord pattern in the Ella Fitzgerald song "Dream a Little Dream of Me." Not only does it tie together the park's concepts, but it also causes passing drivers to slow down. (Neighbors also requested signs displaying the park's rules, to provide a sense of security and order.)

Detroit

Still, the community outreach, while critical to the planning, wasn't as fundamental to the design as in, say, Akron, where residents of the Summit Lake neighborhood essentially dictated the concept and details of the Civic Commons project. Instead, the design was more about keeping with the spirit of neighbors' demands. Ella Fitzgerald Park was a response to the desire for high-quality public spaces, "even if people didn't say, 'We want you to make these 20 lots a park,'" said Bush. "We're going to meet your end goals, but we may not use the same means to get there."

Stephanie Harbin was one of the neighbors who didn't trust the city when the Civic Commons project began, after all the broken promises of the past. "My first thought was: Here we go again," she said.

Harbin has lived in the neighborhood for nearly 50 years, and she remembers a healthy community of families and businesses. As children, she and her friends would walk over to the University of Detroit Mercy to have lunch in the cafeteria. (Now, the school's main gate facing Fitzgerald is closed.)

"It was a happy time for the community," she recalled. "We didn't have all the blight and vacant housing." Things began to change in the 1990s, when crime and gun violence entered the neighborhood and vacancy started to increase. "It's like you wake up one morning and say, 'What happened to the neighborhood?'"



**“It’s like you wake up
one morning and say,
‘What happened to
the neighborhood?’ ”**

**– STEPHANIE HARBIN, PRESIDENT
OF THE SAN JUAN BLOCK CLUB**

Detroit

Despite her doubts, Harbin attended the community meetings organized by Civic Commons, and all of the time Cox’s team was investing in the process persuaded her that the effort was sincere. It was refreshing, after feeling for so long that no one in the city government cared about the neighborhood. She’s the president of the San Juan Block Club, and she’s among a number of local leaders to receive small grants from Civic Commons for neighborhood projects—in her case to organize a storytime for kids and a Halloween “trunk or treat,” a safe parking-lot version of trick-or-treating. (The program is similar to the Knight-supported microgrants in Philadelphia for Bartram’s Garden activities.)

“It’s good to see the life come back,” she said.

Harbin was sitting in the Detroit Sip cafe on McNichols Road, where there’s less evidence of a comeback. This stretch of McNichols has lots of boarded-up storefronts and no trees. The one obvious sign of progress is a mural across the street from the Sip, of people playing in front of a setting sun, which replaced the plywood on that vacant property. The Sip is a hub of activity, but it’s the only real hub.

More progress ought to be on the way. The city, the community investment financial institution Invest Detroit, and cooperative landlords control most of the three blocks around the Sip, and they’re looking for developers to turn the derelict shells into functioning retail spaces to rent out to businesses. To build trust, the team focused its developer search on neighborhood residents, and it got several promising responses from developers in and around Fitzgerald. McNichols is a long way from its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, when every storefront was full, but there is a sense that the worst is behind. The aim is to move things far enough along to attract private investment that can sustain the corridor in the long run.

“The short-term goal is less vacancy,” said Cecily King, executive director of the Live6 Alliance, a nonprofit planning and development group focused on the Livernois and McNichols (also known as 6 Mile Road) corridors and a Civic Commons partner. “The challenge is, what is the right tenant?”

A lot is wrapped up in that question. Partly, it’s a matter of what residents need. (High on that list is a grocery store, since many residents have to travel a mile to shop.) But partly, it’s about convincing neighbors that these new investments are designed with them in mind. These are residents who are accustomed to journeying 6 miles to downtown’s RiverWalk to enjoy a pristine,

Detroit

safe, attractive public space. Years of neglect have given them reason to be skeptical of promises to create these kinds of spaces in their neighborhoods—and to persuade them that the goal is to serve them rather than wealthier future neighbors. As Live6 program manager Ajara Alghali put it: “How do I balance bringing newcomers in without displacing residents?”

The fact is, there *will* be newcomers to Fitzgerald: Civic Commons is working to rehab 100 houses in the neighborhood, so if all goes as planned, 100 new households will arrive. But fears of gentrification seem premature, and Bush said they come more often from people outside the neighborhood worrying about Fitzgerald's future than from Fitzgerald residents themselves. After all, longtime residents are nostalgic for the days when every lot had a house and every house had a family.

Restoring that version of Fitzgerald, and of Detroit, can't be done by tackling housing or parks or streetscapes or retail alone. It requires an integrated approach, and that's what Civic Commons has allowed and what makes Detroit's Civic Commons project such an experiment. Detroit has borrowed ideas from the other Civic Commons cities, such as the \$130 million Strategic Neighborhood Fund modeled after Philadelphia's soda-tax-financed Rebuild initiative, but Cox noted that activation of vacant spaces in places like Philadelphia is on the scale of 1 acre, not 20. Each piece of Detroit's project may be unexceptional, but the combined effort to transform every aspect of a vacancy-plagued neighborhood is definitively new.

“Has it been done before?” Cox said. “Everything you're seeing here has been done before. Is there a city that took 26 vacant lots and turned it into a 2 1/2-acre park across alleys and streets? Probably not.”

**“Has it been done before? Everything
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– MAURICE COX, DETROIT PLANNING DIRECTOR

ROIT

Rewriting the Narrative

Addressing a complicated history
through a riverfront revitalization

MEMPHIS



COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES





The kayak race was, by any normal standard, a modest one. The dozen or so participants paddled at a leisurely pace. One had the advantage of a coxswain aboard—a dog in a bright green life vest, perched on the prow—but still trailed the pack. A drone captured footage of the contest for all of 30 seconds before crashing into a pedestrian bridge, breaking in two and plummeting into the river.

But for Carol Coletta, president of the Memphis River Parks Partnership, the mere presence of all these kayaks in the Wolf River Harbor, an offshoot of the Mississippi, was cause for celebration. “Look at these people!” she exclaimed. “This is great!”

The Memphis riverfront’s journey to this moment proceeded about as quickly as the Wolf River Harbor’s languid current. There was a time when the river put Memphis on the map; when the commerce it brought made the city the world’s top market for cotton, hardwood and mules; when the adjacent downtown flourished and grew. Then steamboats and mules were supplanted by railroads and cars. The city’s center of gravity pulled eastward, toward the highways and the suburbs.

Downtown declined slowly, then suddenly, with a gunshot fired at the balcony outside Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in 1968. “After Dr. King’s assassination, downtown Memphis died,” said Robert Montgomery, a member of the Downtown Memphis Commission’s Blue Suede Brigade, which provides security and assists visitors. The exodus of people from downtown was followed by an exodus of business, and blight and crime took their place.

Now, residents tell a consistent story: Sometime in the past 10 to 15 years, something started to change. Downtown began its comeback. But like the decline, it started slowly, almost imperceptibly. That’s why a small milestone like a kayak race seemed so significant.

MEM

Memphis

“Our part of downtown is pretty sleepy in general. There’s nodes of activity to the north and south, but this is the missing middle.”

– MARIA FUHRMANN, MEMPHIS GRANTS COORDINATOR

Still, in the context of the surrounding areas, the downtown Memphis riverfront remains the laggard. “Our part of downtown is pretty sleepy in general,” said Maria Fuhrmann, the city’s grants coordinator and Civic Commons lead. “There’s nodes of activity to the north and south, but this is the missing middle.” As with Detroit’s Civic Commons project, which seeks to build an enlivened connection between two universities, the aim is to bridge those nodes and make the underserved center feel vibrant and valuable. It’s no coincidence that Detroit and Memphis are the two most segregated Civic Commons cities, where well-resourced areas can sandwich such underinvested ones.

Other recipients of Civic Commons grants focused on neighborhoods, buildings and parks that had been largely forgotten in the public consciousness. Memphis set its sights on its most obvious landmark: the riverfront. And Aug. 4, 2018, was its coming-out day.

‘NARRATIVE FREAKING MATTERS’

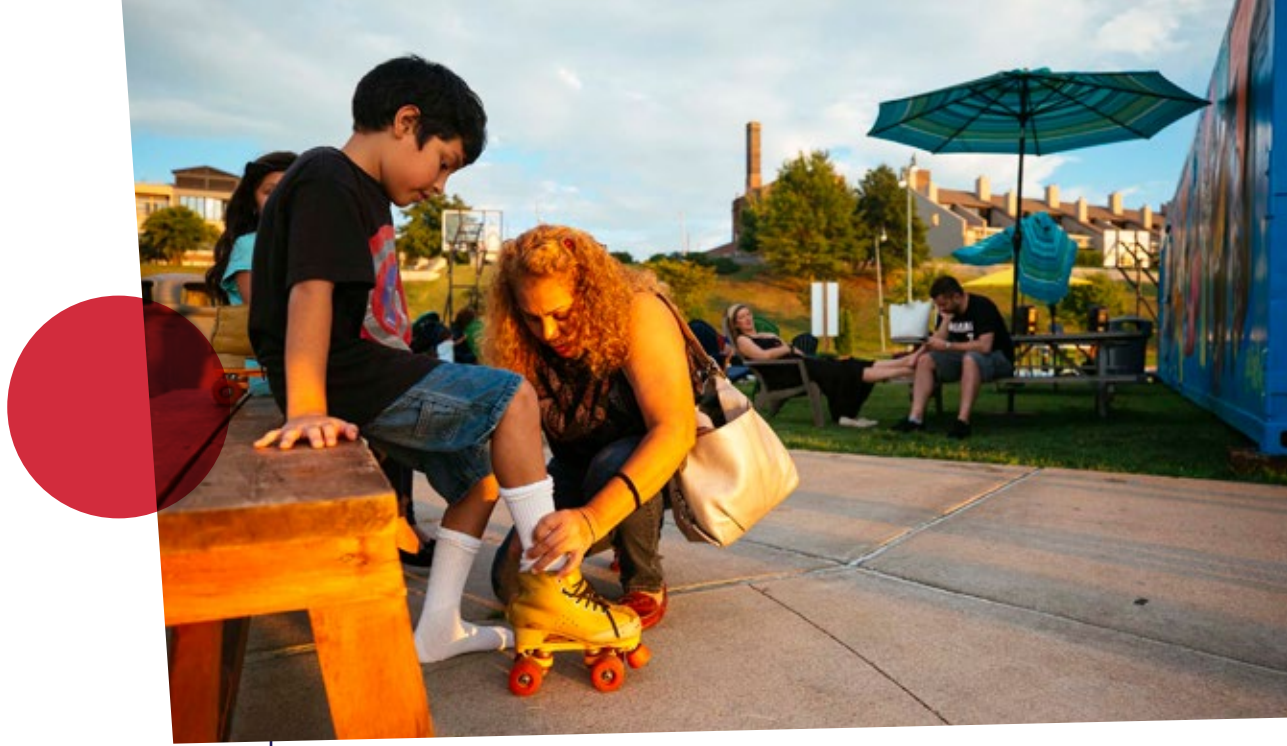
“Two months ago, you would never have seen this,” said Fuhrmann as she watched the kayakers launch into the Wolf River Harbor.

That’s only partly because many residents have wrongly assumed that the harbor waters were dangerous. (It didn’t help that the singer Jeff Buckley drowned there in 1997.) It also has to do with a bureaucratic change. Last year, the Riverfront Development Corporation, the organization that formerly ran the five miles of public space along the riverfront, became the Memphis River Parks Partnership. The organization re-launched with a refreshed and re-energized board, a new leader in Carol Coletta, new staff and a revised mission: “to work with and for the people of Memphis to unlock the transformative power of the Mississippi River.”

That *with and for* is key. The new organization, under Coletta’s leadership, made a conscious effort to reach out to local citizens and involve them in the riverfront. The Partnership made a habit of saying “yes.” It gave permission to a local entrepreneur to rent kayaks on the river, and it’s not charging them rent for launching on the riverfront. That sunny Saturday morning marked their official launch.

The retooling of the RDC into the Partnership “really spoke to the citizens,” Fuhrmann said. “And honestly I think people were really excited about Carol coming and leading it.”

Coletta, a native Memphian, wears two hats as a Civic Commons leader: She heads the Partnership, which contracts with the city to run the public spaces along the river, and she’s a senior fellow at The Kresge Foundation, which helped fund the Civic Commons program. As a former Knight Foundation vice president, she also brings a breadth of perspective that allows the city to draw from the successes and challenges of other Knight and Civic



Commons projects. Foremost among the messages she has delivered to the Memphis project has been the need for trust and community engagement. When Coletta is biking around town—and she always seems to be—she greets every passer-by, whether on a populated downtown street or on the long bridge across the Mississippi to Arkansas.

“Narrative freaking matters,” Coletta said. It might as well be her mantra. Until recently, Memphis’ Civic Commons assets didn’t have a narrative. There were two underused parks with names that alienated the city’s majority-black population (Jefferson Davis Park and Confederate Park) and statues to match, and a crumbling library that got hardly any use except as a shelter and resource for the downtown homeless population. Coletta, Fuhrmann and the Civic Commons team set out to build a narrative in small ways. They branded the area with a new name, or rather a very old one—the Fourth Bluff—and used it to give the once-disparate assets a sense of cohesion. “Especially if you’re a slow-growth/no-growth city, you damn well better be joining everything up,” Coletta said.

Recognizing that creating nice new spaces was only a fraction of the battle, they set out to engage the community so that people would use these spaces. Again, the individual activities were modest. A skate night to bring people to the park. A hackathon to brainstorm ideas. And, yes, boating to get people onto the river.

But that modesty is, in some ways, the whole idea. The city tried the opposite approach before. Towering above the kayakers on the river, and hogging the spotlight in Memphis’ humble skyline, is the glistening 321-foot-high Memphis Pyramid, opened in 1991 and designed as a literal silver bullet to give the struggling city a boost. Its designer promised it would be “a monument like the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower, a signature for the city,” but it never lived up to the hype or the \$68 million price tag. The Memphis Grizzlies played there for three years, and then it sat vacant for a decade. In its latest incarnation, it’s a giant Bass Pro Shop, a gaudy monument to consumerism

Memphis

that's next to downtown but designed to be accessed only by car. The Civic Commons model eschews such silver bullets. Rather than building shiny new structures, it's about breathing life into old spaces that have lost their luster. And it's about connecting them to the surrounding urban geography and the people who inhabit it.

The challenge facing the Civic Commons team is that for all the talk of downtown's renaissance, the broader perception is that downtown is not a safe or welcoming place. One downtown worker surveyed in advance of the project summed up the prevailing attitude: "I feel like everybody who lives outside of the [Interstate 40/240] loop thinks that downtown is a very dangerous place to be and you shouldn't go there. I hear that from everybody."

For all its progress, Memphis is still a city where many people keep to their corners. And breaking down those barriers requires confronting the city's thorniest issue: race.

'RACE IS MORE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THIS INITIATIVE'

"There was a huge library near the riverfront," the novelist Richard Wright, who lived in Memphis as a teenager in the 1920s, wrote in "Black Boy," "but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves." From the time it opened as Memphis' first library in 1893, Cossitt Library was available only to white residents. So when Wright wanted to read the writings of H.L. Mencken, he had to persuade a white man to lend him his library card and forge a note asking the librarians to give him the books on the man's behalf.



Memphis

“Can we inhabit this park in spite of the statue? And it turns out we couldn’t. It was just too much of a barrier. It made too many people feel uncomfortable.”

**– MARIA FUHRMANN, MEMPHIS
GRANTS COORDINATOR**

A student-led sit-in at Cossitt in 1960 paved the way for the desegregation of Memphis' public institutions. Now the renovation of the library, as part of the city's Civic Commons initiative, will include an installation on the first floor to honor the sit-in organizers. But the full racial integration of the library, and of the other Civic Commons sites along the riverfront, will require a lot more work.

According to Cortright's research, Memphis is among the most racially and economically segregated cities in America, behind just Detroit among the Civic Commons cities. The revitalization of downtown Memphis has brought new investment that has sought to lure residents, but those who have moved there have been those who could afford to; they skew wealthier and whiter than Memphis' overall population. (Downtown's demographics, at about two-thirds white and one-fifth black, are a near-exact mirror image of the city's.) Meanwhile, according to Coletta, about three-quarters of visitors to the underinvested riverfront parks, before the Civic Commons effort, were black. In a divided city like Memphis, she and Fuhrmann say, once a space is defined as a “white” or a “black” one, the other group tends to avoid it. The challenge for the Civic Commons team is to make the parks and the library feel welcoming to everyone.

Compared with the other cities, Coletta said, “I think race is more at the forefront of this initiative.”

The desire to make the spaces reflect the city's demographic mix puts the Civic Commons team in the awkward position of explicitly trying to lure whiter and wealthier people to places that risk being seen as exclusively black or low-income. “Our challenge of socioeconomic mixing in these particular spaces is to attract people with financial options about where they want to be,” Coletta said. “In other words, it's not the opposite. And that is even more interesting, because it's sort of politically incorrect.”

Still, at Confederate Park (renamed Memphis Park), the greatest obstacle to a broad and diverse visitorship was the statue of Jefferson Davis. The city tested whether features to make the park more attractive—lighting, seating, music, food, beer—could draw a crowd. The question was: “Can we inhabit this park in spite of the statue?” Fuhrmann recalled. “And it turns out we couldn't. It was just too much of a barrier. It made too many people feel uncomfortable.”

So the mayor made a gutsy and creative move: He sold Memphis Park to a nonprofit, Memphis Greenspace, which promptly took the statue down. The maneuver, technically outside the Civic Commons process, paved the way for the park's Civic Commons makeover—and drew widespread admiration from the leaders of the other Civic Commons cities. It was made possible by an advantage that Memphis has over some of the other cities: Its efforts are partly overseen by the city government itself, together with the River Parks Partnership, which works very closely with the city, and they're taking place on city-owned land. Only Detroit has greater city involvement.

Memphis



Still, challenges like the statue conundrum made it hard for Memphis to keep pace with some of its Civic Commons peers, and more than two years into the grant period, much of the work is still just beginning. “Memphis has been a very slow starter, in part because we had to wrestle some of these issues to the ground,” said Coletta. “You know, how do we get a statue out?” But by the time the project is done this August, she said, “I think you’re going to see a newly robust heart of this downtown that is serving as a place for all Memphians, where all Memphians feel welcome and comfortable.” She predicted that the Memphis team will be “fast finishers,” in part because Fuhrmann is leading the project. Rather than begging a slew of government agencies to do their part to facilitate the work, the Memphis team can count on coordinated leadership from the city.

For now, there’s one clear showpiece of the initiative, and the evening of Aug. 4 was its time to shine. Memphis Park had been rehabbed in a hurry. The pedestal upon which the statue had stood was spirited away, and artificial turf was laid in its place, a makeshift bandage to cover the wounds of the past. As the sun began to set, the crowd poured in: all dressed in white, bearing white tablecloths and table settings. It was Memphis’ inaugural *Dîner en Blanc*, a semiformal, monochromatic meal in which attendees, somewhat perversely, paid money to bring their own food, drink, furniture and dishware to a public space. Six thousand people had tried to buy the 2,000 available tickets.

It seemed an impossibly large number to fit into the small park, and yet as the event took shape, so did the park, for perhaps the first time. And it looked resplendent. Notably for a space that had long been unwelcoming to African-Americans, the crowd was overwhelmingly black. (Socioeconomic mixing, clearly, is still a work in progress; the crowd on the river that morning had been overwhelmingly white.)

Out came the champagne, the excessive quantities of food, the ornate candelabra and the bug spray. Almost immediately, the sky darkened and rain began to fall. The guests, undaunted, placed their white cloth napkins on their heads and didn’t let the weather dampen the festivities. The band couldn’t perform, but a DJ did. Soon hundreds of people, arrayed in neat lines in the center of the park, were doing the wobble. This wasn’t just a dinner or a ribbon-cutting; it was a full-on celebration. Memphis Park is just one small piece of a riverfront and a downtown that have a long way to go. But on that stormy night, a space in the heart of the city that had for so long been unpleasant, unloved and unwelcoming finally seemed to belong to Memphians.

PHIS

Think Small

Aiming for bunts, not home runs,
in community-driven planning



AKRON

COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES





It seemed like such an everyday scene: Two women and their children walked down a small slope, sat on a pair of bench swings and looked out at Summit Lake. But captured in that tableau was the success of Akron's Civic Commons strategy.

In a network with grand ambitions to transform the way urban communities interact with public spaces, Akron's Civic Commons initiative could be summed up with a different sort of motto: Think small.

Not only is Akron the smallest Civic Commons city by far—at 197,000, its population is one-eighth of Philadelphia's and one-fourteenth of Chicago's—but it has intentionally shied away from grandiose projects. Where Memphis is seeking to reshape its riverfront, Detroit is transforming acres of vacant land into a major community asset and Chicago is aiming to change the way cities approach the arts, Akron asked Summit Lake residents what they wanted, and they said seating, tables and shade. So that's what they got. And by restoring access to the lake and fulfilling those simple requests, the city did more to build trust than any monumental construction could have.

"I don't think we ever went about this saying we were going to change the landscape of Akron," said Dan Rice, president of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, which is leading Akron's Civic Commons project.

Memphis, by contrast, has been tackling "a really giant project," said Kyle Kutuchief, the Knight Foundation program officer in Akron. "And ours is really a sum of small parts." There are improvements to a recreation trail. There are new activities in once-deserted downtown squares. And there are some very well-used picnic tables. Akron has tried for too long to hit grand slams, like huge development projects and efforts to fix the economy by luring big companies. Now, Kutuchief said, the city is going for "bunts and singles."

'THIS IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ON STEROIDS'

Akron's glory days are well behind it. "We're the former rubber capital of the world," said Kutuchief. "We're a place that *used* to be something." In the heady days of the rubber boom in the 1960s, Akron's population peaked above 290,000. Since then, the city has lost nearly a third of its residents.

AK

Akron



It's not the only Civic Commons city experiencing population decline. Detroit and Memphis have shed residents for decades as well. But both of those cities are undergoing revitalizations of their downtowns that have lured new residents and businesses and allowed them to build on this success in nearby neighborhoods. Akron doesn't have that advantage. Commuters come during the day, but "at 5 o'clock, you could basically roll a bowling ball down Main Street," said Rice.

What Akron does have is the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail, which, when completed, will run 101 miles, from Cleveland in the north to New Philadelphia in the south. It draws recreational users from the Akron area and nearby Cuyahoga Valley National Park. But it hasn't been the asset to Akron that it could be. Many cyclists coming from the north stop as soon as they get to downtown Akron, where the landscape ahead looks unwelcoming and the reputation is no better. Farther south in Akron, where the trail wends through lower-income residential neighborhoods, it can feel uncomfortable to users and residents alike. When the Civic Commons team asked users and residents about that part of the trail, they gave the same answer. "The hikers and bicyclists said, 'I feel like I'm going through someone's backyard,'" said Rice. "And the residents said, 'We feel like 2.5 million people are going through our backyard.' "

The Civic Commons initiative stretches along 3 miles of the trail. Part of the plan is to improve the experience of the trail itself. Through Civic Commons, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition added lighting, planters, murals and newly painted bike lanes. Just as Memphis' Civic Commons project is trying to fill in the "missing middle" between areas of greater activity to the north and south, Akron's is doing the same on a recreational basis, on a part of the trail that has been less attractive to runners and cyclists than sections to the north and south.

Akron

But the focus is less on connecting areas outside the city than on linking neighborhoods within it. Downtown Akron has cultural resources like museums, a library and a theater, but to residents in lower-income parts of the city such as Summit Lake, these spaces “might as well be on Mars, because they don’t feel they have access to them,” said Rice.

The history of Summit Lake traces that of the city, through its ups and downs. When Akron was thriving, the lake area was, too: It was home to an amusement park frequented by wealthy residents and known as the “million-dollar playground.” Then industrial runoff polluted the lake and a new freeway severed the neighborhood from downtown. Together with the Park East neighborhood to the north, the area is now the poorest in Akron (most households make less than \$20,000 annually) and is majority-black in a mostly white, but segregated, city.

Decades of broken promises have formed a “gulf of mistrust” between residents and the city government, said Rice. Until 2015, Akron had the same mayor for 28 years, and he was known for pushing big projects like a baseball stadium and numerous playing fields but not for collaborating with the community. (He was, in the terminology of the sport he promoted, all home runs and no bunts.) Civic Commons began just as a new mayor was taking office, one who was more open to different strategies for city planning.

Initially, there was talk of a \$350,000 master plan for Summit Lake. Rice quashed it, imagining how he would tell residents he was spending that sum on a plan when they wanted basic amenities like benches. The team also considered installing a Ferris wheel to hark back to the old amusement park. But that wasn’t what the neighbors were asking for—and the cost of a Ferris wheel could have supplied a whole lot of benches.

One of the first things the Civic Commons team did was clear out a patch of brush so that the lake was actually visible—and beautiful. (On a recent afternoon, a group of cormorants stood proudly on old wooden posts that jutted out of the center of the lake, and an osprey whistled overhead.) More critically, the team asked residents what they wanted, which included seating, shade and grills. First, the team put up temporary prototypes, including a tent and fabric umbrellas; when people reacted favorably, it installed a permanent pavilion and metal umbrellas. Some residents also asked for art, and now a giant Adirondack chair marks the start of the new public space.

“This is community engagement on steroids,” Rice said.

Many residents had seen the lake as a hazard—both a drowning risk and an environmental one. Knight grants funded swimming lessons for local kids at city pools and an environmental study that showed the lake to be safe for

Akron

“When we did the environmental report, we made sure the residents saw it first. Because in the past, they would have seen it last.”

**– DAN RICE, PRESIDENT
OF THE OHIO & ERIE
CANALWAY COALITION**

recreation. (Rice said having a permanent Knight program officer in Akron has been a “huge advantage” for the city.) “When we did the environmental report, we made sure the residents saw it first,” he said. “Because in the past, they would have seen it last.”

Still, there were tremendous hurdles to establishing trust. “Summit Lake had a history of having things done to it and not with it,” said Eric Nelson, a former Summit Lake resident and the executive director of Students With a Goal, an after-school program in the neighborhood. “Everything that happens in Summit Lake, people have a great deal of skepticism.” The Civic Commons team held a series of meetings in the neighborhood. When Rice started showing up, Nelson said, he was viewed as an outsider. Small groups of neighbors attended his presentations but remained wary, waiting to see if his actions matched his words. As trust began to grow, attendance at these meetings did, too.

Part of the challenge was persuading people that the new spaces were truly intended for their use. A gleaming educational center had been built near the lake, but it was done without community input, and at first neighbors mostly ignored it while continuing to frequent the drab old community center next door. “They didn’t believe that this brand-new building was for them,” Nelson said. He gestured to the brightly patterned picnic tables, which had been painted by local kids hired by a neighborhood artist brought in by the city. “Same with this activation here. People would pass by, but they thought it wasn’t for them. Now they’re having birthday parties here.” On weekends, the grills and tables are often all occupied.

“You had to change the perception before people would come,” said Audley McGill, who runs the community center and grew up in Summit Lake. (Long ago, at the same center, McGill served as a basketball coach to a boy who would become Akron’s best-known philanthropist, LeBron James.) McGill said one of the community’s priorities for Civic Commons was to create things other than more underused ballfields.

Even now, trust is not fully established. “It’s a work in progress,” said Nelson.

As I talked with a group of residents at the picnic tables, Veronica Sims, an at-large City Council member who grew up in the neighborhood, happened to walk by. When she had first heard about Civic Commons, she said, her reaction was: “Them gentrifiers, those colonizers are at it again!” But Rice’s openness and commitment to working with the community helped persuade her that the intention was real. She urged him and his team to go door to door and talk to residents about the project. Now she believes Civic Commons is showing residents that they can demand that the city government work for them.

Akron

“When you’re not asked about your needs for so long, you forget to know what your needs are,” she said. “Civic Commons is teaching them, yes, you can have that, and yes, you should be asking for that.”

‘WE DON’T HAVE A CHOICE’

Upon receiving a Civic Commons grant, the Akron team made a more concerted effort than any of the other cities to learn from Philadelphia’s Civic Commons pilot initiative. The first thing Rice did was contact Jennifer Mahar in Philadelphia to pick her brain. He has visited Bartram’s Garden half a dozen times and calls it “Summit Lake East”—they’re both waterside, trailside park areas next to public housing. He also drew lessons from Philadelphia’s struggle to unite five geographically disparate projects, and for Akron he made a point of undertaking projects that were all linked by the trail.

Initially, the city government was barely involved in Civic Commons. James Hardy, chief of staff to Mayor Dan Horrigan, first heard about Civic Commons as Horrigan was preparing to take office in January 2016, but at the start, the city’s role was pretty much limited to granting permission when Rice or Kutuchief asked for it.

That changed in February 2018, when Horrigan, Hardy and other Akronites traveled to Philadelphia for a meeting that Rice said “turned our project around.”

“That’s when it clicked for everyone, including myself, that this was not just about a nice thing to do, but it was a whole different lens through which to view public spaces,” said Hardy. “They’re not just pocket parks; they’re platforms for building equity.”



Akron

This episode also highlights an advantage of giving grants to smaller cities. Once the city government got involved, it got fully involved. “When I look at who’s around the table at our monthly Civic Commons meeting, it’s not deputy directors; it’s the heads of departments,” said Kutuchief. “It’s really becoming a way of doing business in Akron. It’s setting an expectation of how we do public work.”

A \$5 million grant can be transformative in a midsize city in a way that it can’t in a larger one, at least not on a citywide scale. For one thing, the initiative connects downtown to two peripheral residential neighborhoods, which would be impossible in any of the larger cities. Plus, as Akron’s team points out, the United States has a lot more midsize cities than large ones. If Akron’s experiment is successful, it can be applied in many other places. And within Akron, the model is already being replicated: In April 2018, the city (with Knight support) launched a contest for neighborhood leaders and groups to pitch local park improvement projects. The winners received \$100,000 to complete the work, in what Hardy called “a rapid-fire version of Civic Commons.”

But being a second-tier city poses challenges as well. Revitalizations of downtowns in midsize cities are about five years behind those in larger cities, according to Suzie Graham, president of the Downtown Akron Partnership. In big cities, it’s easier to convert old office buildings to new residential uses. In Ohio, Columbus and Cincinnati have received state funding to do so. But Akron is the state’s fifth-largest city, and it doesn’t get those kinds of resources. “The bigger cities have more collective pull, and political pull, to get that funding,” said Graham.

Even if Akron’s Civic Commons projects are modest, the team’s hopes for what they can do for the city’s future are grander. In the past, Kutuchief said, public officials haven’t bothered trying to get people to want to live in Akron, which they’ve seen as a lost cause, and instead have aimed to facilitate the commute from the suburbs so that people will at least want to work in Akron. In the process, the city has kept losing population and tax dollars. Now 81 percent of the people who work in Akron and earn more than \$40,000 annually do not live in the city, according to planning director Jason Segedy.

On a recent sunny Thursday morning, no one was on Cascade Plaza, one of the downtown spaces Civic Commons is working to improve. At another downtown site, Lock 4, there was just a janitor taking a break. And Lock 3, which Rice called “our Central Park,” was empty until a man showed up with a fishing rod to catch what he could from the canal.

“These people drive in from the suburbs, park in the garage, take the elevator up to their offices, order lunch, take the elevator down at the end of the day and drive home,” Rice said. But he thinks that will start to change as the spaces become more welcoming, with seating, lighting and events. “If you give people a reason to come to these spaces, they’ll come. And it’ll change their perception.”

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a reason to come to
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**– DAN RICE, PRESIDENT
OF THE OHIO & ERIE
CANALWAY COALITION**



The goal is to make the city a more attractive place to live and work. If that happens, more Akron workers will eventually decide to be Akron residents, and more companies will see fit to locate in an increasingly livable city. “Five million dollars is not going to convert a city into something different,” said Graham. “But if it starts to shift the narrative, that’s the ideal.” She noted that Akron has a “ridiculously low” downtown residential population compared with other cities of its size, but it’s poised to nearly double in the next few years, with several developments underway.

Still, it’s impossible to plan around hypothetical future residents, and the team is focused on improving the quality of life for people who already live and work in Akron. Sitting at a basement conference table with other project leaders in the 1836 house that was once home to the Ohio & Erie Canal’s engineer and now serves as the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition’s offices, Rice insisted that even though the Civic Commons grant ends later this year, the work at Summit Lake and elsewhere will continue. If the team treats this like a normal project with an end date, he said, “we will kill this project. We will have failed civic engagement.” He added, “There’s going to be other funding. We will find the money.”

“We have to try,” said Bronlynn Thurman, who works for both Knight and the GAR Foundation in Akron.

“Or we could just continue to decline,” Graham chimed in.

“We have to do this,” Rice said adamantly. “We don’t have a choice.”

RON

An Artist's Vision

Theaster Gates' art-fueled empire transforms a slice of the South Side

CHICAGO



COMMON GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES



The musicians at the front of the room raised their instruments, paused and then launched into a rambunctious string quartet by the African-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.



The sound rang through the hall, an old bank lobby not designed for acoustics but very well-suited to the purpose. An ornate ceiling arched overhead, affording a peek at a soaring two-story library housing the personal collection of the legendary African-American publisher John H. Johnson, the late founder of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. An array of children sat on a rainbow of colorful pillows up front, while the grown-ups filled benches behind them, rapt and silent until they broke into applause.

The musicians, all black, announced their next piece. Like the others in the D-Composed series, it was by a black composer and under five minutes long. They invited the kids to clap and the adults to stomp to the beat as the violins soared and the cello plunked a rhythmic line.

Elsewhere across the Civic Commons network, cities are creating parks, libraries and trails. Chicago is different, in a few obvious and less obvious ways. Most apparent is the focus on the arts. String quartets have yet to feature in the other Civic Commons initiatives; here, they're center stage—literally at the Stony Island Arts Bank, and figuratively at Chicago's other sites, which all seek to foster artistic creation. Then there's the person at the heart of it all, renowned South Side artist Theaster Gates. In the other cities, the projects are the product of extensive partnerships and collaboration, but Chicago's projects are largely Gates' brainchild. And where the project sites elsewhere are mostly owned by municipal governments or nonprofits working closely with the city, Gates himself controls most of the properties his team is working on.

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– THEASTER GATES, ARTIST

Does that allow Gates to move the projects swiftly without waiting for government cooperation? “Absolutely not,” he said with a laugh. He still relies on the city and development partners, and he wishes he had sat down with the mayor at the beginning of the process to get buy-in and participation from these partners at the onset of the Civic Commons initiative.

But his ownership of the projects does allow him to do something different, and something he considers more valuable. “One of the things that neighborhoods need more of is autonomous local voices to determine an agenda that is not necessarily set by a municipal public,” he said. If the city controls a development project, it’s answerable to the will of voters, who are likely to want basic services like grocery stores. If a private developer does, it tries to maximize income, maybe by luring a national chain retailer. “My thinking is, there are other players who should try to determine the fabric,” he said. “And those players have different expertise than national interests.”

In this case, he’s the player. That comes with pitfalls, but also promise: Gates has a vision for the South Side of Chicago, one that Civic Commons is helping him realize more comprehensively than ever, and it’s beginning to transform a once-neglected neighborhood—or at least a small corner of it.

‘IT FELT LIKE A SMALL TOWN’

In its overview of Chicago’s Civic Commons initiative, the team laid out lofty ambitions for the Arts Bank, a columned 1923 neoclassical building that stands out on an otherwise drab stretch of eight-lane Stony Island Avenue. The site, the team promised, would “become one of the country’s most important venues for the exhibition and study of art, architecture and black culture” and “position Chicago and the nation at the forefront of the growing movement of site-specific, concept-driven alternative art institutions.”

That’s heady stuff, but when it comes down to it, the successes of the city’s initiative are taking place at a significantly more micro level. Chicago may be the biggest city taking part in Civic Commons, but the approach has focused so intently on one part of one neighborhood that it actually feels like the project’s smallest town.

That phenomenon was on display two blocks from the Arts Bank, at a block party on Dorchester Avenue. At first glance, it might have looked like any city neighborhood block party, with parked cars barricading off the street and kids dancing and a DJ spinning hip-hop remixes. But look closer: That house at the corner, the handsome one with the artfully corniced second-story bay window, is Gates’ home. The funky, deconstructed-looking wood-paneled house across the street is Archive House, a gallery, library and archive owned by Gates’ Rebuild Foundation. The squat brick building next door is Listening House, also owned by Rebuild. A few houses to the left lives Devin Mays, an artist and former graduate school student of Gates who now



works for him. Gaylord Minett, another employee of Gates at Rebuild, also lives on the block. To be clear: It's not a long block, and some of the houses are vacant. Oh, and the block party was partially funded by Rebuild.


This is a small-town enterprise. And Gates is its undisputed mayor.

Quietly, Gates has built a South Side empire. He owns 25 properties, totaling more than 185,000 square feet of built space and 33,500 square feet of vacant space, and outside of a portion of the Arts Bank, none of it is financed by debt. He employs 240 people. When I drive around the neighborhood with Mallory McClaire, Gates' chief of staff, we couldn't go a block without running into someone else who works for Gates. His name—always just his first name—is uttered reverently in nearly every sentence.

Chicago's Civic Commons initiative is Gates' initiative through and through, and in this it's markedly different from the other cities' projects. Detroit's is run directly by the city government; Memphis' and Philadelphia's are led by "conveners" who work for the city; and Akron's is operated in close coordination with the city government and, like the others, focuses largely on public land. But Gates owns most of Chicago's Civic Commons properties. He runs the nonprofits that are spearheading the effort. His artwork hangs inside the Arts Bank. When another of the projects, at the former St. Laurence Elementary School, is complete, the aim is for the anchor tenant to be Dorchester Industries—which is part of Gates' Rebuild.

The Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood—home to the Arts Bank, two of the three other Civic Commons sites and Gates himself—has half the median income and twice the unemployment and vacancy rates of the city overall. Distrust of public officials runs high there: A baseline survey found that just 7 percent of neighborhood residents trust the city government to do the right thing all or most of the time, versus 53 percent who almost never trust it. In this context, it can be advantageous to have a private citizen leading the initiative—even one whose time is stretched very thin between a University of Chicago professorship and an extensive travel schedule.

Chicago



As with most of the Civic Commons projects, it can be hard to delineate exactly what, among Gates' many enterprises, is and isn't part of the initiative. The Arts Bank completed its first phase of construction before Civic Commons began, and programming there isn't supported by the Civic Commons grant, although funds provided by Gates and Rebuild do count toward the required local funding match. Construction on the three other projects—St. Laurence and Kenwood Gardens in Greater Grand Crossing, and Garfield Park Industrial Arts on the West Side—is supported by Civic Commons, but it's also far from done. When I visited in late August, St. Laurence was undergoing environmental remediation, Garfield Park was still early in its transformation from a dilapidated former power plant, and Kenwood remained an overgrown field surrounded by a chain-link fence, with an excavator sitting in the corner. (The Garfield Park site, nearly 15 miles from Greater Grand Crossing in Gates' childhood neighborhood, is so removed from the others that it's reminiscent of the far-flung Philadelphia projects, with all the challenges their disparate geography brings.)

Those sites will offer a wider range of resources and amenities for neighbors than the arts programming at the Bank. St. Laurence, a 40,000 square foot shuttered school, is envisioned as the first proper coworking space around Greater Grand Crossing, with a focus on artists and “makers.” The anchor tenant will be Dorchester Industries. This project, also founded by Gates, has a mission to not only create beautiful things from locally-sourced reclaimed materials, but to also train employees to pursue careers in the building trades and creative industries. With Dorchester Industries occupying the first floor, Gates and his team hope to attract similar users and partners to the space.

The Garfield Park project will transform an old powerhouse into an industrial artisan space and will become the new home to Dorchester Industries existing wood milling facility. Kenwood Gardens will have artist studios and a public garden. The latter site requires the most imagination at this stage, sandwiched as it is between a back alley and train tracks. McClaire said the tucked-away location, with limited foot traffic, would allow it to better serve as a “meditative reflective space.” (Ten seconds later, a freight train roared deafeningly by.) She does expect, though, that the active presence of the artists and ongoing programming along the adjacent Dorchester Avenue will bring people out.

Before Civic Commons, Gates was working on a variety of individual projects in Chicago. The Civic Commons grant allowed him to create what he called a “master plan”—a series of interrelated projects that would cross-pollinate to provide benefits that no single enterprise could.

“Should we focus on housing? Should we focus on industrial or cultural space?” he wondered at the start of the project. “It became clear that if we could aggregate a collection of buildings that were somewhat adjacent, we could help build cultural infrastructure faster than any developer would consider, particularly in Grand Crossing. And if we announced that we got \$5 million from Civic Commons, we could attract other funding.” In this way, his thinking is similar to that of the Detroit project’s leaders, who realized that a park couldn’t transform a neighborhood but that a park combined with rehabbed housing, improved retail, better connectivity and private investment could.

“We ended up with a school, a bank, some land and a public space,” Gates said. “And it felt like a small town.”

For now, though, the Arts Bank is the only operational Civic Commons-related site, making it effectively a proof of concept for the broader initiative, and for perhaps its greatest challenge: showing neighbors that these projects are really for them.



‘PEOPLE SAY ART CAN’T CHANGE THE WORLD’

Christine Bowen has lived in the neighborhood for 30 years. One day, while visiting her laundromat on Stony Island Avenue, she was pleasantly surprised to see that the long-vacant bank building across the street was under construction. “My first impression was that it’s going to be good, whatever it is,” she recalled. She learned more about the plans for an arts space, free and open to the public. “My second impression was, ‘I don’t have to go to the North Side for something!’ ”

That’s the reaction Gates’ team is hoping for. An underserved neighborhood is finally being served, and with arts and programming at a level hard to come by even in the wealthiest parts of town. But as the project has gained national and international attention, that perception risks being clouded.

Bowen, who now works as a docent at the Arts Bank, said visitorship has been diverse. On Thursdays, it tends to be people from the neighborhood. On weekends, there are people from all over the world, who come to Chicago for other purposes and stop by to see the Arts Bank they’ve heard about. (The building is open from Thursday to Sunday.) According to the baseline survey, just 18 percent of Arts Bank visitors had annual household incomes under \$40,000, compared with 65 percent of neighborhood residents.

McClaire said a steady stream of tour groups visit the Arts Bank, with a lot of people from the policy and art worlds. They’re welcome, of course, but she worries that if there are too many of them, neighbors will start to feel that the site is a tourist attraction and not for them. They have since secured parking which can accommodate tour buses and vans around back, where they’ll be less visible. The main entrance of the building has also been reworked to create a more inviting welcome for residents and tourists alike. Rather than entering through the solid black door along Stony Island, guests enter the side through large glass doors just off of the soon to be re-landscaped North Lawn of the Bank.

“When people come in from the neighborhood, they’re surprised that it’s available to them, that they’re not intruders,” said Bowen. It’s a struggle that’s common to several of the Civic Commons projects in underserved areas—persuading people in Akron’s Summit Lake neighborhood that the new lakeside picnic tables and grills are really for their use, or in Philadelphia’s Chinatown that the Rail Park isn’t just for wealthy out-of-towners. When lower-income communities have been denied amenities on par with those of their richer counterparts—particularly when promises have been repeatedly left unfulfilled—it can take real work to convince them that these multimillion-dollar investments are for them.

Chicago

Mays, the artist who lives on Dorchester, believes he has to work to dispel this tension in his everyday interactions in his neighborhood. Greater Grand Crossing is gang-heavy territory, he said, and it can take years of incremental trust-building to get through to the “guys who gang-bang and sell dope in front of the Bank.” These are people who always have their guard up and don’t easily allow themselves to be taken in by new people and experiences.

These gang members walked by Mays a good 25 times on his street and around the Arts Bank two blocks away before they let their guard down a little and asked if he worked in the Arts Bank. Later, they opened up a tiny bit further by complimenting his shoes. “It might take them doing that with me 100 times before they say, ‘Hey, man, can I come inside?’ It might take another five years. You have to be patient.”

But art, he said, has the power to help break down those barriers and allow people to be vulnerable. Even if it’s just getting people who don’t think of art as a part of their lives to help paint a big, floral “Dorchester” mural at the corner.

Can the Civic Commons projects really “position Chicago and the nation at the forefront” of a new arts movement? That’ll be a tough bar to clear. But it is helping improve lives and raise hopes at a much, much smaller scale.

“People say art can’t change the world,” Mays said, taking in his block on Dorchester. “But what if this is my world now? What if my world is between that corner and this corner? Then art can totally change my world.”

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– DEVIN MAYS, ARTIST

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