

LISTENING TO THE MUSIC OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

Findings from a pre/post research study
at Levitt Pavilion Denver



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sloverlinett
AUDIENCE RESEARCH



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Foreword

Sharon Yazowski and Vanessa Silberman | Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation

What is, and what should be, the role of creative placemaking in communities undergoing change?

This was the central question that inspired us to commission on-the-ground research in the Ruby Hill neighborhood of Denver in 2013, an area that was beginning to experience demographic change and was home to Ruby Hill Park. The expansive park was in the midst of implementing a comprehensive Master Plan that included a future cultural investment—Levitt Pavilion Denver, an outdoor performance venue that would present 50+ free concerts each summer.

Now, in spring 2021, as we reflect upon a year of tremendous challenges, loss and hardship, the power of public spaces to offer comfort, healing, and a sense of togetherness has become increasingly evident, even while needing to be apart. A renewed interest in public spaces has sparked dialogue and an openness to new approaches for reimagining these crucial civic assets that, at their best, play an essential role in people’s well-being and strengthen the social fabric of communities.

Within the field of creative placemaking, the conversation around public space has evolved over the past decade to be reflective of the community and to build upon a community’s existing assets. Before the pandemic, before the calls for racial justice and addressing systemic inequities became a mainstream rallying call, a growing number of creative placemaking practitioners and funders were prioritizing equity and inclusion in public spaces, investing in authentic community engagement and practicing intentional arts programming and design to create positive social impact.

At the beginning of our research in 2013, our efforts were focused on learning more about the social impact and community outcomes of Levitt programs to inform our practice of partnering with communities to create inclusive public spaces. We commissioned Slover Linett Audience Research, a nationally recognized social research firm for the cultural sector, to conduct a multi-year, mixed method research study that would examine the social impact of two outdoor Levitt venues in Memphis and Pasadena, Calif., each a cultural anchor for shared

community experiences through high-caliber free concerts in open lawn settings. As a program designed to add vitality to once neglected public spaces and foster social connections among people of all ages and backgrounds, the community outcomes we wanted to explore included whether outdoor Levitt venues increased attachment to community, improved overall livability, raised quality of life, improved perceptions of the public space and the surrounding area, and created a stronger sense of neighborliness and social connectivity.

While shaping this first phase of research, we simultaneously embarked on an additional phase of research in a third community, the Ruby Hill neighborhood of Southwest Denver—a predominantly low-income, Hispanic/Latinx community where in 2013 a new outdoor Levitt venue was in the early stages of development. As the venue was in its initial planning stages, we recognized a timely opportunity to gather primary data on community outcomes through a pre/post lens: before design and construction of the Levitt Pavilion (2013) and then six years later, during the venue's third full summer season of free outdoor concerts (2019).

Among the questions considered for the pre/post Levitt Pavilion Denver research: How might a creative placemaking project be designed and realized to support a sense of belonging and inspire community attachment? To what degree would the development of a creative placemaking project and new cultural asset like an outdoor music venue play a role in perceptions of the neighborhood and the park itself over time? And given that this new cultural asset was being developed in a neighborhood beginning to undergo demographics shifts, reflective of the entire city's accelerating pace of change, we asked the larger question: what is, and what should be, the role of creative placemaking in communities undergoing change?

The 2016 white paper, *Setting the Stage for Community Change: Reflecting on Creative Placemaking Outcomes*, reflected on key findings and suggestions for the field based on the first phase of research in Memphis and Pasadena, including how the free outdoor concerts create a hybrid experience for audience members, one that centers both the art itself and the opportunity for people to have social interactions that foster social bonding and social bridging, which in turn builds social capital. Another key finding pertained to the improved perceptions of the public spaces where the concerts took place due to ongoing activation, as well as how each venue was part of a larger ecosystem creating positive change. *Setting the Stage for Community Change* informed our approach to grantmaking, including incorporating more focused practices to support a sense of belonging into our programs.

Building upon our learnings from the 2016 white paper, the findings from the Denver research again informed our approach to grantmaking, integrating more equitable processes and practices into our programs. We hope these findings serve as a valuable resource and case study for the creative placemaking field at large including practitioners, planners and funders, especially those working with communities undergoing change. As we've further learned from this

research, both processes and practices determine whether a creative placemaking project will evolve equitably, which in turn can help foster a greater sense of belonging for multiple communities, address issues of collective memory, and unpack shifting perceptions regarding the public space and placemaking project prior to and during its realization. The insights from the pre/post study have already informed the work of Levitt Pavilion Denver in broadening their inclusionary practices and our work in supporting creative placemaking in communities undergoing change, with equity at the forefront.

We are tremendously grateful to our research partner Slover Linett, in particular Tanya Treptow and Peter Linett, for their rigorous approach to the research, thoughtful framing of the study and nuanced reflections on the findings. We also thank the staff at Levitt Pavilion Denver, as well as neighborhood residents and Denver community stakeholders, for their openness and participation in the study. We invite you to share your comments with us and look forward to continuing the conversation.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon Yazowski".

Sharon Yazowski
Executive Director



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vanessa Silberman".

Vanessa Silberman
Deputy Director

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation partners with communities across the United States to support the activation of underused public spaces through the power of free, live music. The Foundation has long been a part of the creative placemaking field's dialogue and evolution, and it has engaged in ongoing self-reflection in order to deepen its principles and practices. That process has included research with Slover Linett, a Chicago-based social research practice serving the cultural sector. In 2013, the Levitt Foundation commissioned Slover Linett to conduct a three-part study to better understand and document the impact of permanent Levitt music venues, focusing on community-level outcomes such as awareness and accessibility of the arts, social capital and connection, community engagement, neighborhood vibrancy, and perceived safety and livability. The first two parts of the 2013 study, an **Audience and Community Outcomes Exploration** and an **Indirect Outcomes Assessment** (the latter led by Joanna Woronkowicz), were conducted in connection with Levitt venues in Memphis and Pasadena, Calif., published as a white paper in 2016, *Setting the Stage for Community Change: Reflecting on Creative Placemaking Outcomes*.

This report presents the third part of the project, a **Pre/Post Community Outcomes Study** of Levitt Pavilion Denver. This Levitt venue was developed in historic Ruby Hill Park, located in the Southwest Denver neighborhood of Ruby Hill, a largely residential, predominantly low-income, Hispanic/Latinx community. Ruby Hill Park had been beloved by some residents but was also underused and regularly the site of disruptive, sometimes illicit, activities. The City of Denver decided in 2003 to undertake a master planning process for Ruby Hill Park, and local residents were closely engaged in that multi-year process. Through community listening sessions and workshops, residents helped to shape the vision for the park as an amenity-rich neighborhood destination which would add value to their immediate community. They called for numerous new park features, including playgrounds, community gardens, public art, extended walking trails, a picnic pavilion, and an outdoor performance space in the park's natural bowl—which would become Levitt Pavilion Denver. The venue

opened over a decade later in the summer of 2017, managed and programmed by the local Friends of Levitt Pavilion Denver nonprofit.

Both periods of research examined Levitt Pavilion Denver as one model of arts-based community development—how creative placemaking projects both tap into and contribute to community vitality and identity

In this pre/post research, Slover Linett focused on Ruby Hill Park’s unique “situatedness” in order to understand the preconditions for Levitt Pavilion Denver’s creation and use and how it has begun to contribute to the sense of place and community both in Ruby Hill and more widely in the city of Denver. This study spanned the better part of a decade, from the “pre” phase of the study conducted in 2013, well before the venue was built, to the “post” phase in 2019, during its third summer concert season. Both periods of research examined Levitt Pavilion Denver as one model of arts-based community development—a case study of how creative placemaking projects both tap into and contribute to community vitality and identity, and about how the arts (in this case, free outdoor music in an informal setting) both shape and are shaped by the dynamism of a rapidly growing and changing metropolitan area.

We’ve taken an open-ended, anthropological approach to understanding the role and impact of Levitt Pavilion Denver across multiple levels of “community,” using the pre/post structure to explore how the subjective perceptions of community members changed and how those changes relate to the presence of the pavilion. We used largely qualitative research methods—ethnographic observation, naturalistic in-context interviews, standardized intercept interviews, and one-on-one stakeholder interviews—to invite multiple perspectives on Levitt Pavilion Denver itself, Ruby Hill Park, the Ruby Hill neighborhood, other nearby Southwest Denver neighborhoods, and Denver as a whole. We also aimed to be attuned to systemic drivers of equity and inequity in the local context—and to listen for perceptions among residents, community stakeholders, and concert attendees of how Levitt Pavilion Denver has helped shift those dynamics (or could help to a greater extent over time).

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

As creative placemaking has evolved as a practice, there’s a growing consensus that the term “placemaking” does not fully encompass the work being done or the progressive ethos of that work. While “making” does a good job of encapsulating the positivity of new energy and change, the word can also convey a tendency to, as researcher Anne Gadwa Nicodemus put it, “ignore, discount, or undervalue the culture of people in a place and its history.”¹ The field has continued to use “placemaking” as one of several descriptions under the broader (and less pithy) rubric of arts-in-community-development, while striving to more explicitly acknowledge and work with pre-existing conditions and social

¹ See <https://metrisarts.com/2018/11/23/journeys-in-creative-placemaking-keeping-taking/>

contexts—the assets as well as the needs or challenges. Some practitioners have advocated for alternative terms such as “placekeeping” and “place-tending” to more accurately credit existing community assets and valuable interactions with place, and more recently “placeknowing” to acknowledge the need to respect and work with the history and creative energies of a community when undertaking any efforts to strengthen it through the arts. Of the three

We frame a more expansive view of “placemaking” in this study, while emphasizing “placeknowing” as a through-line

terms, “placeknowing,” with its emphasis on historical and present-day context, is perhaps most integral to the broader concept of placemaking. The emphasis on “making” does not necessarily erase what’s already there; rather, it builds on identified existing assets, historical traditions, and cultural practices to create a more holistically informed and dynamic system.

Therefore, as we frame a more expansive view of “placemaking” in this study, we do so while emphasizing “placeknowing” as a through-line, especially in our Suggestions for the Field section.

We hope to contribute to the field’s methodological knowledge and provide a model for reflection and discussion that is useful in other contexts or with other challenges.

KEY FINDINGS

The Levitt Foundation’s mission centers on “building community through music.” This is a broad and ambitious principle, and it operates at various levels and definitions of community. Levitt venues aim to reflect and be inclusive of the city from which they draw their audiences, but also to engage deeply with a specific local geography—a neighborhood or neighborhoods which may have both commercial and residential sections and other forms of difference and diversity. As such, each local Friends of Levitt nonprofit prioritizes different kinds of local “communities” and engages them in different ways. For this pre/post study, as we interviewed residents and other stakeholders about Levitt Pavilion Denver’s role in building community, we distinguished among several senses of that word. We learned that the pavilion and its programming are actually engaging various kinds of communities in different ways and to different ends. Three key communities emerged, and these became important analytical lenses for us in the research:

Denver’s music lovers: This community consists of people who enjoy live music and related leisure-time experiences, whom we largely encountered at Levitt concerts during the 2019 phase of research. This community is dispersed throughout Denver and shares similar affinities and values. This is a community in the affinity sense rather than the geographic sense.

Denver’s music professionals and educators: This community is a complex ecosystem based on live music and music education, and it includes people with many different professional and vocational roles: musicians, venue managers, other industry professionals, and music educators at various levels (from grade-school teachers to university faculty, part-time teaching artists to hobbyists).

The “local” community: This community includes residents of Ruby Hill and adjacent neighborhoods (Athmar Park, Westwood, Mar Lee, Harvey Park, College View, etc.) as well as residents of Southwest Denver generally. Members of this community sometimes expressed a shared “Southwest Denver” identity; they tend to live in neighborhoods that share key demographic characteristics, such as being lower-income and rich in racial and cultural diversity. So this community is both geographic and identity-based.

The observations we made at Levitt Pavilion Denver itself revealed that those three communities often intersect at the venue, tied together via a deeper form of community having to do with a *sense of belonging*. The idea of “belonging” (along with its opposite, “dis-belonging”) has emerged as an important variable in equity-oriented arts discourse. Whereas social capital has traditionally been

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viewed as value generated by, and distributed during, a cultural experience like a music concert, belonging may be thought of as a precursor to being able to express one’s identity and connect meaningfully with others in a particular place or experience. In other words, belonging is a precondition for both social bonding (i.e., connecting with others from one’s own or similar networks or groups) and social bridging (connecting with others from networks or groups that may be different from one’s own), since both of those involve inhabiting and expressing one’s identity in the first place.

When Denver residents and stakeholders shared their thoughts about Levitt Pavilion Denver and how they felt it affected the communities that they belong to, their insights fell into four broad outcome areas:

1. **Creating a stronger, more equitable community of music lovers**
2. **Fostering long-term investment in the local community**
3. **Supporting Denver’s live music artists and music educators**
4. **Sharing resources in a complex landscape**

In the core sections of this report, we explore the mechanisms by which Levitt Pavilion Denver has contributed on these four dimensions and how the Levitt Denver team has evolved and focused its work to enhance those outcomes. We’ve summarized each section here.

In talking with Denver residents and stakeholders, it was clear that Levitt Pavilion Denver has already begun to strengthen the city's **community of music lovers**, and that it is uniquely positioned to continue building connections among—and contributing to the sense of belonging and identity within—this distributed community. We found that the creation of the venue and its ongoing programming are considered an important, much-needed addition to the city's live music ecosystem. Interviewees told us that the pavilion plays an important role in providing high-quality, accessible and relevant live music experiences to Denver-area residents, and that it fills a longstanding gap in Southwest Denver's organization-based arts landscape. We noted a few opportunities for the pavilion and the Friends of Levitt Denver nonprofit that operates it to better connect to Denver's live music attendees, starting with working to increase awareness of the Levitt venue by reaching out to other places around the city where music lovers already feel a strong sense of belonging. At the time of our research, the pavilion's marketing strategies were largely online and on social media, so some music lovers in Denver we spoke with in 2019 hadn't yet heard about it—or, if they had, weren't aware of the scope and musical quality of its free summer programming. The digital-only communication approach may also be unlikely to reach potential music-loving Denver residents who less regularly access the Internet and may not use social media, but who may be highly interested in free concerts.

We heard strong signs that Levitt Pavilion Denver is valued by many members of **the local Ruby Hill neighborhood and surrounding areas** as a place that brings the community together. Residents we spoke with who had attended Levitt concerts generally perceived it as offering a wide variety of musical styles, including Latin-based genres in keeping with the neighborhood's predominantly Latinx/o/a population. Most also knew that the pavilion sometimes featured musicians from nearby neighborhoods or elsewhere in Denver. To them, these were clear indications that Levitt valued the local community, not just music lovers coming to the venue from elsewhere in the Denver area. At the same time, we heard about ways in which the pavilion could navigate the tensions of perceived demographic change and gentrification in surrounding neighborhoods. In order to counteract assumptions of complicity in these trends, Levitt Pavilion Denver needs to project strong signals of connection and commitment to a deeply-rooted Ruby Hill community and emphasize the community-led process at the core of its creation. Our interviews revealed a few tangible, if entirely unintentional, aspects of the pavilion environment that may run counter to the message of connectedness and belonging that the Levitt Denver team is trying to send. Some of these are the result of local governmental regulations, which require creative thinking to mitigate. For example, while entrance to concerts at the venue is almost always free, there are check-ins at the pavilion gate to prevent outside alcohol being brought in and limitations on capped bottles, and at the time of our research, there were also requirements for patrons to use clear plastic bags when carrying their belongings. While frequent concertgoers may be familiar with similar procedures at other venues, local residents coming to a Levitt concert for the first time may not expect this,

and to some the entry experience felt more like an inspection by authorities or a “stop sign” than a gesture of welcome and belonging. We also heard a need for the Levitt Denver team to continue working to increase awareness of the venue and its offerings among residents of Ruby Hill and other nearby communities, including those who may not consider themselves music fans. Some residents we interviewed reported that they regularly drove past Ruby Hill Park but had little sense of what kinds of performances occurred there. The Levitt Denver team is already thinking creatively about ways to counteract the implicit symbolism of physical or procedural barriers (e.g., fencing, carry-in restrictions). It may also be beneficial to find additional ways of bringing distinctive, recognizable elements of the surrounding local community into the venue itself, to give people the sense that the community extends into and throughout the concert space.

Friends of Levitt Denver, which manages the pavilion and programs its concert schedule, has also made a commitment to **support Denver’s musicians and, to a lesser degree, music educators**. When we interviewed members of Denver’s professional music community, they told us that Levitt has played an important role in creating a more equitable environment for musicians in the city, especially in terms of pay levels and in helping artists develop a broader audience. Several praised the pavilion team for nurturing the careers of Denver musicians to a greater degree than local for-profit venues—particularly Levitt’s policy of paying competitive wages to local performers and encouraging other venues to match this. Local musicians also appreciated how the pavilion helps them develop visibility at a national level, by virtue of the fact that many Levitt Denver concerts involve an invited local band or performer to open for a national act. Those concerts sometimes involve musical collaborations between the Denver-based performers and the touring headliners, which creates opportunities for mentorship and modeling from musicians who are further along in their careers. Additionally, Levitt Denver has forged partnerships with several schools in nearby neighborhoods in Southwest Denver and is currently implementing programs to bring professional musicians into local schools for performances and mentorship. While these programs are still in their early phases, education stakeholders we spoke with appreciated that the Levitt team was making these efforts to reach out into the community in addition to inviting the community to the venue for concerts. It was clear that they would welcome additional programs or relationship-building at this level.

In Denver, the Levitt Pavilion has been a collaboration between the national Levitt Foundation, the local nonprofit Friends of Levitt Denver, and the City of Denver (particularly Denver Parks and Recreation, a City department), with ongoing input from local community groups. So creative placemaking naturally fits into the trend in philanthropy to support (and evaluate at the level of) collective impact. Several stakeholders we interviewed in this study viewed the ongoing activities of the pavilion through that lens, as an important opportunity for Levitt Denver to participate in a broader dialogue and contribute to shared, ecosystem-level progress. Some indicated that this kind of collaborative,

This kind of collaborative, intentional work reveals lessons about the practical and cultural challenges of coordinating among organizations with different communication models, priorities, and ways of working

intentional work reveals lessons about the practical and cultural challenges of coordinating among organizations with different communication models, priorities, and ways of working. They also noted that, since both the process and any credit for impact are shared, it's hard to ascribe credit for success (or responsibility for challenges). For example, we found positive changes from 2013 to 2019 in residents' perceptions of safety in the park; would those improvements have occurred in the absence of Levitt Pavilion Denver, perhaps as a result of the other investments in park amenities? It seems likely that the pavilion has played a major role, but how any one decision or strategy—for instance, the variety and quality of the music performed, or the free admission policy—affects the whole is impossible to know. Yet we did hear indications that Levitt concerts provide unique qualities that enhance safety in specific ways, due to the frequency of concerts, their evening hours, and the density of people in the park during concert times. Many local concert attendees we spoke with in 2019 felt relatively safe spending time walking through the park after a Levitt concert, whereas previously they would not have entered the park after dark.

The residents and stakeholders we spoke with in 2019 were open about both the positives and negatives of change in their neighborhoods. A number remarked that gentrification comes hand-in-hand with new expectations for leisure, recreation, safety, and general quality of life. Many also took a nuanced view of the pavilion's specific role in gentrification: Some felt that gentrification was a citywide issue and didn't see Levitt Pavilion Denver and the other investments in Ruby Hill Park as root causes of the phenomenon. To help strengthen the economic vitality of the Ruby Hill community, Levitt Pavilion Denver has an opportunity to collaborate in deeper ways with arts entities and businesses in the neighborhood. This may require thoughtful planning and consideration, especially because some local businesses are themselves perceived as serving new demographic groups coming into the community. At the time of our research, the restaurant and retail scene in Ruby Hill was gradually expanding, including Vietnamese and Mexican restaurants reflecting the diverse populations of Southwest Denver. These businesses offer opportunities for the Levitt Denver team to think creatively and intentionally about how collaborations could help strengthen the local economy and support vitality outside the boundaries of the venue and the park.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FIELD (abridged*)

Co-authored with Sharon Yazowski & Vanessa Silberman, Levitt Foundation

Based on our findings in this study, we offer the following broad suggestions and reflections for creative placemaking practitioners and funders, grouped under four themes: Building on community assets, Working with complex community systems, Developing community-centered outcomes, and Supporting a sense of belonging.

*The suggestions are distilled into bulletpoints below; see page 63 in the full report for a detailed discussion of each.

BUILDING ON COMMUNITY ASSETS:

1. **When planning creative placemaking projects, find multiple opportunities to identify, honor, and collaborate with a community's existing cultural assets.** Consider how new configurations of public space, new amenities, or new program offerings may impact current uses and users—and recognize that those impacts may be considered positive or negative by community members. Also, using a broad definition of arts and culture that includes informal, non-institutional activities and expressions of personal creativity or identity is paramount to fostering inclusivity as creative placemaking projects develop and unfold.
2. **Recognize that the collective memory of a project's origins may fade and be replaced by new perceptions or suppositions.** Because creative placemaking processes often occur over a period of years, they can encounter issues of community memory. This makes ongoing communication important, to keep the founding aspirations and values of the project visible and relevant to all residents and stakeholders over the course of time.

WORKING WITH COMPLEX COMMUNITY SYSTEMS:

3. **Set shared, realistic expectations of change and impact—and link with other efforts to amplify positive outcomes.** Recognize that, on its own, no single project or investment in a community is likely to meet its full range of goals or reverse systemic, historical inequities. Consider broadening definitions of success for the placemaking project beyond measures of direct or immediate impact, instead considering how it functions within a *chain of change*—for example, spurring additional investment or attention or leading to new alliances

or initiatives that build toward the same goals and reinforce shared priorities.

4. **Make time to consider potential challenges and opportunities in projects where ownership is shared among organizations and partners with varied styles, communication modes, priorities, and ways of working.** Create communication streams that are responsive to the culture and infrastructure of each organization in the partnership. Think creatively about how to provide an inclusive, welcoming working environment that's adaptable to different professional settings, cultural practices, and grassroots collaborations.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY-CENTERED OUTCOMES:

5. **Involve communities of focus in the placemaking work in equitable and culturally responsive ways, particularly in defining desired outcomes at the start.** Allow ample time and conceptual “space” for open-ended conversations with community members, and involve them from the outset of the work rather than bringing pre-existing plans for them to respond to. Acknowledge that the creative placemaking process should center on community-driven solutions derived from the historical and local context—that is, on lived experience with the community space. And it is important to include discussions of equity from the outset in order to avoid assumptions that might prevent a truly equitable impact.
6. **Acknowledge that communities are not monolithic, and engage in dialogue with local stakeholders and residents to identify which groups the placemaking project will actively engage and serve.** Formal front-end research or informal (but intentional) time spent in communities can be vital to understanding “the community” in more nuanced, authentic, and equitable terms. Be sure to consider community as a broad term, in some contexts geographically based, but also based on affinity and shared self-identification, such as BIPOC business owners and artists.

SUPPORTING A SENSE OF BELONGING:

7. **Design the creative placemaking project explicitly to bring people together, both with those they may know already or are already connected with in some way (social bonding) and those they don't know and may be different from (social bridging).** Genuine belonging requires candor about the complexities of the place, its history, structural inequities, and current realities—including realities of race, socio-economics, opportunity and access—that have a negative impact on people's lives. Creative placemaking projects can foster belonging by acknowledging the authentic narrative of the space, since that narrative will resonate across community divisions or inequities.
8. **Acknowledge that creative placemaking work is not neutral, particularly when it involves arts and cultural components that are closely tied to differing community identities.** It's important to practice awareness and open communication about any tensions that may arise. Make room for moments of candid, ongoing conversation amongst different groups of residents and stakeholders so they can hear, and hopefully gain an understanding of, each other's perspectives regarding differing needs and desired outcomes for the space. Remain cognizant of the root causes and mechanisms behind any tensions or resentments, even if those are not directly related to the placemaking endeavor. Try to empathize with all perspectives in order to find common ground, align shared goals, and emphasize collective pride of place.
9. **Work to tie belonging within the creative placemaking space to forms of belonging outside that space, in the surrounding community.** In keeping with the idea that creative placemaking projects are embedded in broader ecosystems of community change, practitioners should make the projects porous to the outside—in both directions. Invite in community and neighborhood groups to use the creative placemaking space for their own purposes, and engage with other community sites by participating in neighborhood activities or supporting local causes.

Both the researchers and the Levitt Foundation welcome comments, questions, and conversation about this report. Please email the authors at hello@sloverlinett.com and the Foundation at info@levitt.org.

About the Levitt Foundation

The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation is a private family foundation that exists to strengthen the social fabric of America. Through its commitment to creative placemaking, the Levitt Foundation supports the activation of underused public spaces—neglected parks, vacant downtown lots, former brownfields—into welcoming, inclusive destinations where the power of free, live music brings people together to create more equitable, thriving and sustainable communities.

The Foundation's primary funding areas include permanent Levitt venues and the Levitt AMP [Your City] Grant Awards. Both of these programs include free, family-friendly concerts in outdoor, open lawn settings; acclaimed, emerging talent to seasoned, award-winning performers in a broad array of music genres and cultural performances; a musician-friendly ethos in that all artists are paid for their performance and supported by professional sound and lighting; and concert sites that are accessible to a wide range of socioeconomic groups. Levitt venues and AMP grantees partner with local nonprofits and community groups to inform and guide programming, outreach and engagement. As such, these programs embody the Foundation's funding philosophy and core values to support projects that are inclusive, catalytic and dynamic and create connectedness and joy.

The Levitt Foundation invests in community-driven efforts that harness the power of partnerships and leverage community support. Permanent Levitt venues and Levitt AMP concert sites reflect the character of their town or city, while benefitting from the framework and best practices of the Levitt program. In addition to providing Levitt venues and AMP grantees with funding, the Levitt Foundation also provides support resources, toolkits, information sharing platforms and peer-to-peer convenings to help maximize impact in their communities.

With the permanent Levitt venue program, the Foundation provides seed funding to renovate or build a state-of-the-art outdoor performance venue, known as a Levitt Pavilion or Levitt Shell, as well as annual operating support to an independent Friends of Levitt nonprofit organization, which manages, programs and supports an annual series of 50+ free concerts every year at the



venue. While representing significant investments for the Levitt Foundation, each Friends of Levitt receives the majority of its annual funding from the local community. There are currently eight permanent Levitt venues across the country, located in Arlington, Texas; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Dayton, Ohio; Denver; Los Angeles; Memphis; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and Westport, Connecticut. In partnership with civic and community leaders, additional permanent Levitt venues are in development in a handful of cities.

With the Levitt AMP [Your City] Grant Awards, the Foundation provides \$25K annual matching grants to nonprofits operating in small to mid-sized towns and cities to enliven underused public spaces through the Levitt AMP Music Series—10 free outdoor concerts presented over 10 to 12 weeks during the summer or fall. Reflecting the Foundation’s ethos that all Levitt projects are community-driven, each year finalists are selected through an online public voting process to help gauge the community’s enthusiasm and need for the program.

The original Levitt Pavilion opened nearly five decades ago in the town of Westport, Connecticut, when local residents came together to create a community gathering space for free concerts. When the town donated its problematic landfill along the banks of the Saugatuck River, a capital campaign for the project ensued. As summer residents of Westport, New York-based philanthropists Mortimer (who had amassed a fortune through his clothing company, The Custom Shop) and Mimi Levitt were approached to support the campaign and ultimately became its largest private contributors, prompting the town to name the pavilion after them. Mortimer and Mimi were active members of the Westport Friends of Levitt board and over the years, the Levitt Pavilion’s programming evolved to include more than 50 free professional concerts every summer. Carrying memories of his impoverished childhood, Mortimer was proud that the high-caliber concerts at the Levitt Pavilion were always free.

During the late 1990s, Levitt Pavilion Westport’s continuing success as a community destination inspired Mortimer to develop a venture philanthropy model to bring free concerts to additional cities through new Levitt venues. He then passed the baton to his daughter, Liz Levitt Hirsch, to oversee the growth of Levitt venues across the country. The first and second Levitt venues to open under the new venture philanthropy model were in Southern California where Liz calls home, opening in Pasadena in 2003 and Los Angeles in 2007.

Over the past two decades, Levitt's venture philanthropy model has expanded to become a national network of permanent Levitt venues and Levitt AMP concert sites, each creating positive social impact and vibrancy in their communities. The work of the Levitt Foundation also includes research, sharing Levitt's impact and learnings with the field on the conference stage and at cross-sector convenings, and ongoing conversations with civic leaders and communities nationwide on the role of creative placemaking and arts investments to create a more equitable, thriving and sustainable future.

For more information, please visit <http://levitt.org/>.



About this Study

LEVITT FOUNDATION IN CONTEXT

The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation first laid the groundwork for a national network of Levitt venues across the U.S. in 1999, and over the following two decades thousands of free Levitt concerts have been presented in nearly 50 towns and cities across America. In the course of this work, and in supporting a wide variety of public music programming, the Foundation participates in and contributes to a national and international dialogue about how arts and artistic activities can play a role in strengthening communities.

This ongoing conversation involves a broad range of planners, policymakers, elected officials, funders, nonprofits, artists and practitioners, many of whom understand their work under the rubric of creative placemaking. Creative placemaking is a complex ecosystem of practices and projects, and the meaning of the phrase has evolved in important ways as the field has grown over the last decade. Its practitioners may have varying understandings of the aspirations,

Creative placemaking is a complex ecosystem of practices and projects, and the meaning of the phrase has evolved as the field has grown

priorities, and ethos of creative placemaking, even as they understand themselves to be part of a transnational community of practice.¹ The term was coined in an influential 2010 report from the National Endowment for the Arts by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus (the latter an advisor to this study), to describe the role arts organizations and artists can play in urban and rural development projects, working in collaboration with commercial, governmental, nonprofit, and other partners.² In the 1940s and '50s, urban development was dominated by large-scale, top-down “urban renewal” projects that often displaced people and demolished existing structures to make way for new housing, parks,

highways, concert halls, or other amenities. Activists like Jane Jacobs began to challenge that mindset in the 1960s, advocating instead for an approach to urban planning that emphasized mixed-use development, walkability, an active street life, and a general responsiveness to the lives, needs, and desires of the

¹ See Andrew Zitcer's article “Making up Creative Placemaking” in the Journal of Planning Education and Research, May 2018, 1-11: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324988433_Making_Up_Creative_Placemaking

² See <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>

people who live, work, and play in a neighborhood.³ Creative placemaking, with its focus on community-driven engagement and emphasis on existing assets, is a close cousin to the “new urbanism” movement founded by Jacobs and other progressive planners and placemakers.

As institutions across a variety of contexts (e.g., community development, urban planning, arts and culture, philanthropy, etc.) have integrated creative placemaking into their missions and mindsets, they have continued to more explicitly define this work. When the National Endowment for the Arts initiated its Our Town grant program in 2011 to support creative placemaking projects around the U.S., it described creative placemaking as what occurs “when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work—placing arts at the table with land-use, transportation, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure, and public safety strategies.”⁴

The work of creative placemaking is not without its complexities, including a self-reflective debate around the means and measurement of increasing equity

Similarly, when ArtPlace America was created in 2011 as an unprecedented collaboration among foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions to support and strengthen the emerging field of creative placemaking, it defined that field in a similar vein as “the intentional integration of arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies into the process of equitable community planning and development.”⁵ Several of the ArtPlace consortium members, such as The Kresge Foundation and Surdna Foundation, have adopted creative placemaking as a core priority in their arts funding programs, with the aim of situating arts and cultural practices within broader community vitality strategies to create more equitable places and opportunities. The president of The Kresge Foundation, Rip Rapson, reflects on the value of incorporating the arts with community-engaged design initiatives that are “knitted into the patchwork of land use, housing, transportation, health, environmental, and other systems necessary for stronger, more equitable, and vibrant places.”⁶

The work of creative placemaking is not without its complexities, including a self-reflective debate around the means and measurement of increasing equity. Many collaborations between arts organizations and public services support existing communities and help deepen their roots in their own neighborhoods, although some creative placemaking initiatives are just beginning to undertake the type of intentional work that ties into system-level change, such as in slowing a process of community displacement. Many see benefit in intentionally identifying communities that may be directly impacted by creative placemaking projects, and working to incorporate those communities into the process of devising and implementing those initiatives so that the value accrues

³ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1962. doi:10.1002/ncr.4100510614.

⁴ National Endowment for the Arts, <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/creative-placemaking>

⁵ ArtPlace America, <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/about/introduction>

⁶ Presentation by Rip Rapson, *Creative Placemaking: The Role of Arts in Community Development*, Wilson Center, Washington DC, December 2016

broadly. Opportunities for community input—not just as early-stage feedback but throughout planning and implementation, to shape and drive the project—help generate outcomes like (in the words of one Kresge white paper) “social cohesion and sense of agency among residents, increased pride and stewardship of place, physical transformation and greater control over community narrative.”⁷ Such benefits underscore the community-wide, community-first vision of creative placemaking as an engine of positive systems change.

Practitioners have also debated the merits of the term “placemaking” as a core descriptor of the work, as it can seem to imply starting with a blank slate. While “making” does a good job of encapsulating the energy focused on the process of creating something new, the word can also, in the words of researcher Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, unintentionally “ignore, discount, or undervalue the culture of people in a place and its history.”⁸ Some practitioners have

In general, the field has continued to use “placemaking” as the primary term, while striving to more explicitly acknowledge and work with pre-existing conditions and connections

advocated for alternative terms such as “placekeeping” and “placetending” to credit existing community assets and interactions with place, as well as “placeknowing” to acknowledge the history and cultural practices of a place. Yet these terms, too, may pose limitations or obscure important power dynamics. Since communities are not monolithic, which constituents get to decide which aspects of place to “keep,” “tend,” or prioritize for “knowing”? And how might these decisions influence the natural evolution of a place over time? In general, the field has continued to use “placemaking” as the primary term, while striving to more explicitly acknowledge and work with pre-existing conditions and connections.

ONGOING COMMITMENT TO RESEARCH

The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation has long been a part of the creative placemaking field’s dialogue and evolution, and has engaged in critical self-reflection in order to glean new insights that have informed its practices. That process has included research with Slover Linett, a Chicago-based social research practice serving the cultural sector. In 2013, the Levitt Foundation commissioned Slover Linett to conduct a three-part community impact study to better understand and document the impact of permanent Levitt music venues across the county, focusing on community-level outcomes such as:

- **awareness and accessibility of the arts**
- **social capital and connectivity**
- **community engagement**
- **neighborhood vibrancy**
- **perceived safety and livability**

⁷ https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/kresge-white_paper_neighborhood_change_fnl.pdf

⁸ See <https://metrisarts.com/2018/11/23/journeys-in-creative-placemaking-keeping-taking/>

Two parts of the study were published as a white paper in 2016, *Setting the Stage for Community Change: Reflecting on Creative Placemaking Outcomes*, authored by Sarah Lee and other members of the Slover Linett team, with an independent contribution by Joanna Woronkovicz, Ph.D. The white paper is available for download at <https://levitt.org/research>.



The first two parts of the 2013 study (an ‘Audience and Community Outcomes Exploration’ and an ‘Indirect Outcomes Assessment’) explored the impact of Levitt venues located in Memphis and Pasadena, Calif., on concert attendees and their surrounding communities to understand the underlying mechanisms that may influence individual and community-wide effects. In both locations, the team used a mix of primary quantitative and qualitative social research methods, including participant observation and in-context interviewing with audiences at select concerts; a quantitative survey of attendees at a sample of concerts throughout each venue’s summer season; interviews with elected officials, local business owners, neighborhood human-service providers, funders and philanthropists, other community and cultural leaders, and Levitt venue staff and board members in each community; and community discussion groups with varying degrees of familiarity with Levitt representing a mix of residents in each city.

Building on that earlier work, this third part of the project aims to build a more intimate picture of one Levitt site over time, by conducting a ‘Pre/Post Community Outcomes Study’ of Levitt Pavilion Denver. This document is a report of the findings from that study, which spanned the better part of a decade, from the “pre” phase of the research in 2013 to the “post” phase in 2019. Both periods of data collection focused on the five outcome areas mentioned above, with the overall goal of understanding Levitt Pavilion Denver as one model for both tapping into, and contributing to, the sense of community in a neighborhood within a metropolitan area experiencing ongoing demographic change. To accomplish this goal, we took an open-ended, anthropological approach to understanding the role and impact of Levitt Pavilion Denver. We aimed to be attuned to systemic drivers of equity and inequity in the local community context and listened closely for perceptions among resi-

dents, community stakeholders, and concert attendees of how Levitt Pavilion Denver affects those perceptions and other community dynamics.

Levitt Pavilion Denver as one model for both tapping into, and contributing to, the sense of community in a neighborhood within a metropolitan area experiencing ongoing demographic change

While Levitt Pavilion Denver is just one instance of the many and varied creative placemaking endeavors undertaken in recent years around the U.S. and elsewhere, we hope that by providing a detailed look at the particular mechanisms and issues at work in this case, we can contribute useful insights to other creative placemaking practitioners working in other contexts, with other challenges, and thereby help practitioners, funders and researchers deepen this vital work. In our analysis and discussion below, we've kept in view not only the outcomes specified in the Levitt Foundation's logic model, but also the broader and evolving dialogue about impact in the fields of creative placemaking, arts activism, and equitable community development.

SPECIAL PROJECT ADVISORS

We have benefitted enormously in this analysis from the contributions of three thought leaders in creative placemaking and community engagement, who provided insights to the Slover Linett team at key junctures to help ensure that our Levitt Pavilion Denver pre/post findings would be relevant to a broad range of readers. They are Kiley Arroyo, executive director at Cultural Strategy Council; Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, founder of Metris Arts Consulting; and Andréa Girón Mathern, then director of community research & engagement at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and now principal at Centrality Research.

During the research and analysis phases of the project, these advisors helped our team reflect more deeply on the goals of the research and the intended audiences for the report. They also offered feedback on the research design and protocols, particularly to ensure equitable practices, and reviewed drafts of this report to help ensure that it reflects and engages with the broader discourse of creative placemaking nationally and internationally. We deeply appreciate the work of these advisors and thank them for their thoughtful, generous insights and concrete guidance on how to make this a clear, focused, and useful case study for the field.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

Our primary audience for this report is people working in creative placemaking, community development, and public engagement, many of whom share the Levitt Foundation's goals of using the arts to help empower and strengthen communities and create more equitable, vibrant, and sustainable places. Our secondary audience is the broader Denver community, including those respon-

sible for or professionally connected to the Ruby Hill neighborhood, Ruby Hill Park, Levitt Pavilion Denver, and the city’s broader music and arts ecosystem. We hope this report will give those readers a glimpse of how they and their colleagues contributed to our findings, and that they will see the evolution of their city’s arts and music sector thoughtfully reflected through the lens of Levitt Pavilion Denver.

For anyone reading this report, we hope it provides a useful discussion of how access to the arts in public spaces, including free live concerts, can help build social capital, create a sense of belonging, and increase the well-being of individuals and communities.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

In this ‘Pre/Post Community Outcomes Study’ of Levitt Pavilion Denver, we used largely qualitative research methods during our 2013 and 2019 fielding periods, including ethnographic observation, naturalistic in-context interviews, standardized intercept interviews, and one-on-one stakeholder interviews.

This kind of qualitative research focuses on understanding people as complex and holistic beings with perceptions, opinions, and values that both reflect and shape their experiences

Each data collection method purposefully differed in type, sample, and focus to provide multiple perspectives on Levitt Pavilion Denver, Ruby Hill Park, surrounding neighborhoods, and Denver as a whole. Together, these data sources helped us identify trends in collective perceptions of Levitt Pavilion Denver and its impact. It is important to note that this kind of qualitative research approach focuses on depth as opposed to breadth; it views people as complex and holistic beings with perceptions, opinions, and values that both reflect and shape their experiences and their communities. We strove to understand and contextualize people’s subjective perceptions of Levitt Pavilion Denver in relation to their own sense of, and participation in, their community—

in the multiple ways they might define that term. This organic approach gave us insight into how Levitt Pavilion Denver (and, by extension, similarly framed arts-in-community-development initiatives) could more deeply tap into and contribute to these communities.

During the 2013 “pre” study fielding period, the research team spent six days conducting research across the city of Denver, using the following methods:

- **Ethnographic observation and naturalistic in-context interviews primarily within Denver city limits at public locations such as restaurants, cafes, bars, stores, city streets, and public parks.** The team visited the Ruby Hill neighborhood and Ruby Hill Park daily and drove around Denver and surrounding areas extensively to better understand the similarities and differences between neighborhoods and their relationships to one another. Over the course of the observation, the

research team spoke to approximately 40 individuals using in-context interviews—also called “in-situ” interviews—to speak to people within the context of their normal day or routine in a relaxed and informal manner about the study topics. The fielding protocol topics included the physical, social, and civic experience of being within the community; safety; and the availability of arts activities and events within the community. Conversations ranged from a few minutes to up to 45 minutes.

- **Standardized intercept interviews at four different public parks in Denver, including Ruby Hill Park, Washington Park, Confluence Park, and City Park—all representing popular “third places” where Denver residents spend time.** We conducted 52 interviews using this standardized qualitative research protocol, which featured a number of closed-ended rating questions and demographic questions, including: understanding what community means to those interviewed, their perceptions of the community within which they were interviewed, their connection to that community, what they would want to change or have remain the same within that community, their level of involvement in civic activities, demographic information, and a few questions about whether they had been to Ruby Hill Park and what they thought about the park. These interviews were at minimum around 20 minutes.
- **Local stakeholder interviews with 13 local community leaders, social and human service providers, business owners and managers, as well as residents of Southwest Denver.** Included were three current members of the Friends of Levitt Denver Board of Directors and two ex-officio & honorary board members. Some of these pre-scheduled interviews were conducted in person and some by phone; they each lasted between 30–45 minutes. (See Acknowledgments section for a list of these interviewees.) We used a semi-structured interview guide to learn how these stakeholders perceive the city of Denver, the Ruby Hill neighborhood, Ruby Hill Park, and Levitt Pavilion Denver.

Throughout the 2019 fielding, we kept in mind the 2013 baseline, pre-pavilion views that we had heard of those same concentric levels or definitions of “community,” particularly what people thought of the Ruby Hill neighborhood and its namesake park before the development of the Levitt Pavilion. (It’s worth noting that our 2013 fieldwork took place after the construction of other park amenities that were part of the first phase of the park’s Master Plan, such as a new playground, a picnic pavilion, a community garden, upgraded walkways, a new upper roadway, and additional parking.⁹)

⁹ See https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/747/documents/planning/master_plans/RubyHill-MasterPlan-2008.pdf

Given the six years that had elapsed, we modified our data collection methods for this “post” study in two important ways. First, we wanted to maximize our time speaking with people who’d had at least some contact with the Levitt Pavilion since its opening (e.g., concert attendees, local neighborhood residents). Second, we wanted to incorporate additional equity-based research practices, reflecting ongoing shifts in the field of social research since the “pre” wave of the study. This included offering modest but ethically important monetary incentives to respondents who participated in our standardized intercept interviews (see below) and providing access to the eventual report of findings for those who shared their email addresses with us. During a five-day period of on-the-ground fieldwork, we used the following methods:

- **Ethnographic observation and naturalistic in-context interviews to understand behaviors, perceptions, and social interactions around the Ruby Hill neighborhood and at Ruby Hill Park.** The research team visited Ruby Hill neighborhood and Ruby Hill Park daily, speaking both with individuals who had familiarity with Levitt Pavilion Denver and those who did not. The team attended three concerts at the Levitt Pavilion representing a variety of artists and genres, to observe the venue environment, attendee behaviors, and group dynamics. We also spoke with individuals and small groups in a variety of public “third places” around Denver, approaching people who had at least some familiarity with Ruby Hill Park. In total, we spoke with approximately 35 individuals. The length of the conversations varied widely, from 5–30 minutes or more, and each was focused on a pre-determined subset of our research themes adapted from 2013: awareness and impressions of Levitt Pavilion Denver and its concert series; general perceptions of Ruby Hill Park, the Ruby Hill neighborhood, and Southwest Denver; safety in Ruby Hill Park; and Denver’s music scene.
- **Standardized intercept interviews mostly before, during, and after the concerts or in the surrounding neighborhoods of Southwest Denver.** We conducted 42 interviews using this standardized qualitative research protocol, which featured a number of closed-ended rating questions and demographic questions adapted from our 2013 protocol to focus on a narrower set of standardized topics: awareness and impressions of Levitt Pavilion Denver and its concert series; general perceptions of Ruby Hill Park, the Ruby Hill neighborhood, and Southwest Denver; safety in Ruby Hill Park; and Denver’s music scene. These interviews were at minimum around 20 minutes, and some continued up to 45 minutes. A number were conducted in Spanish by a native Spanish-speaking member of the research team, based on interviewees’ preference.

- **Local stakeholder interviews with 13 local community and nonprofit leaders, Denver government officials, and local arts and music organizations, as well as residents of Southwest Denver.** Three of those interviewees had been part of our 2013 “pre” study and ten had not. Some of these pre-scheduled interviews were conducted in person and some by phone; they each lasted between 30–45 minutes. (See Acknowledgments section for a list of these interviewees.) We used a semi-structured interview guide to learn how these stakeholders perceive the city of Denver, the Ruby Hill neighborhood, Ruby Hill Park, and Levitt Pavilion Denver, at three levels:
 - **The Ruby Hill neighborhood:** connections to and perceptions of the local neighborhood and Denver more broadly, and how both have been changing.
 - **Levitt Pavilion Denver:** awareness of the venue, the local Friends of Levitt nonprofit and its work, current and potential partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits, and ways to form future partnerships.
 - **Denver’s arts and music community:** Levitt Pavilion Denver’s influence and contribution to the city’s cultural and arts landscape, including comparisons to other indoor and outdoor concert venues.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

As readers know, the gender-neutral term “Latinx” is sometimes used as a more-inclusive alternative to “Latino” or “Latina.” While Latinx underscores inclusion, some feel that the word undermines the gender agreement of the Spanish language or that it doesn’t authentically reflect the ways people in Spanish-speaking or -descended communities refer to themselves. In this report, we use the term “Latino/a/x” to describe people of Latin American descent or identity as a way to both honor the Spanish language and include those who identify as gender-nonconforming. In instances where we quote research respondents directly, we use their term of choice when describing their own ethnic or racial identity.

Findings & Reflections



Overview

“WHAT” GROWS OUT OF “WHERE”

The Levitt Foundation’s mission is to strengthen the social fabric of towns and cities across the country through free outdoor concerts, bringing people together of all ages and backgrounds for a shared experience. By providing grants and resources to nonprofits in communities of all sizes, the Foundation supports the activation of underused public spaces through live music and, in the case of its permanent Levitt venue program, the creation or revitalization of outdoor performance bandshells designed to become community anchors. One vivid example is Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks in Bethlehem, Penn., which was built in 2011 at the base of a large, defunct steel mill, thereby activating a parcel of the city that had been one of the nation’s largest private brownfield sites. Levitt Pavilion Denver, by contrast, was created in an existing neighborhood park that

We focus on Ruby Hill Park’s unique “situatedness” to understand the preconditions for the pavilion’s creation and how it has begun to contribute to a sense of place and community

was important to and even beloved by some residents but also underused and sometimes the site of disruptive or illicit activities. So in this pre/post study, we focus on Ruby Hill Park’s unique “situatedness” in order to understand both the preconditions for the pavilion’s creation and how it has begun to contribute to a sense of place and sense of community in Ruby Hill and more widely within the city of Denver.

The Ruby Hill neighborhood in Southwest Denver is a residential, predominantly low-income, Hispanic/Latinx community. As of 2017, the population of Ruby Hill was 11,402, with 3,618 households.¹ According to our conversations with local residents, the neighborhood was originally developed in the 1950s for a population of largely white, blue-collar families with jobs in adjacent industrial areas. Although many white residents have now left Ruby Hill, a number of older white residents have stayed in the community and still live there today.

¹ Explore data from the American Community Survey 2013-17 at: <http://denvermetrodata.org/neighborhood/ruby-hill>

Recently, as Denver’s population has boomed and housing costs have increased across the city, white, middle-class families and single millennials have begun purchasing homes in Ruby Hill, where median housing prices are lower than the Denver average.

A PARK EVOLVES

One major draw for those new homebuyers, and a reason others enjoy living in the neighborhood, is Ruby Hill Park, an 83-acre municipal park that enjoys the city’s highest elevation, with beautiful views of Southwest Denver and the downtown skyline. However, the site had not always been treasured. In fact, well before it was officially designated as a park in the 1950s, the elevated spot was used for a variety of purposes, some positive and some negative: as high ground to escape rising flood waters, as a staging ground for Ku Klux Klan rallies, even as a garbage dump. In recent decades the park had become an occasional target of vandalism and crime, save for the winter months when its steep hills became popular for sledding. (A local nonprofit even provided ski lessons for underserved youth.) The park’s location at the east edge of the Ruby Hill neighborhood, backed against the South Platte River, may have contributed to its underutilization: it is “off to the side” rather than nestled among homes or retail areas like many other parks in Southwest Denver. Despite easy accessibility from the residential streets and neighborhoods to its west and northwest, Ruby Hill Park was never ideally positioned to be a multi-neighborhood resource. It is bordered on the northeast, east, and south by a large industrial area and a golf course, both of which have tended to make the area sparsely trafficked after dark. Driving to the park is relatively easy and parking is available, but public transportation does not link to it. For bikers, getting to the park from the north or south is relatively easy using the S. Platte River Trail, a popular bike path running through Denver, but arriving there from the east can be challenging due to the river and Highways 85 and I-25, which are difficult, though not impossible, to cross via bike.

Factors other than geography had also contributed to the park’s long underuse, according to some local observers. In a 2019 interview, one community stakeholder suggested that as a result of being located in a community of color, Ruby Hill Park may have been under-resourced by the City and therefore not appealing to neighborhood residents: “The park was underused, and the community was a community of color. There are equity issues. There’s been a lack of equity across our [park] system.”

As part of an official action plan to recognize and confront the inequity of public space investment in Denver, the City decided in 2003 to undertake a master planning process for Ruby Hill Park. Local residents were engaged in the process through community discussion sessions and workshops, helping to shape the vision for the park as an amenity-rich neighborhood destination which would add value to their immediate surroundings. The plan called

for new amenities and attractions that would also make Ruby Hill Park a year-round, citywide destination: playgrounds, community gardens, public art, extended walking trails, a picnic pavilion, and an amphitheater in the park's natural bowl. The implementation of the Master Plan would give the park a new visibility throughout the city, transforming it, as another community stakeholder in our research put it, into a "crown jewel" of the Denver parks system.

Having heard about the success of public space transformations supported by the Levitt Foundation in other cities, Denver officials reached out to Levitt to discuss the potential performance venue. A public-private partnership was structured, and an independent local nonprofit called Friends of Levitt Denver was formed in 2012. A Denver-based firm, studiotrope Design Collective, was chosen in 2015 to design the state-of-the-art pavilion, which would accommodate up to 7,500 people in an open lawn setting. The Levitt Pavilion opened in July 2017 with a free concert featuring three Colorado-based, celebrated bands, followed by a series of free concerts through early fall.

NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCE OR CITYWIDE DESTINATION?

How one understands the role of the park, and indeed the role of Levitt Pavilion Denver and the local nonprofit that manages it, depends in part on which of

We've tried to understand these multiple perspectives and bridge them where possible, some switching between those neighborhood-level and citywide senses of community

those two perspectives one takes. We heard different ways of framing and assessing the park from stakeholders and concertgoers, some of whom discussed it primarily as a resource for the immediate local community and others who discussed it as an amenity for Denver more generally. (In some cases, interviewees noted both perspectives). From the former perspective, Ruby Hill Park is considered in standalone rather than comparative terms, as a place for the local neighborhood, whereas from the latter it's viewed as a hub within the city's wider network of urban, connected green spaces. This difference illuminates the various nested levels or definitions of the idea of "community," a word that can be applied to the people who live together in a neighborhood like Ruby Hill or, more broadly, to the people who live together in a large, rapidly growing metro area like Denver—or, more abstractly, to people who share affinities of identity, taste, interest, behavior, profession, etc. In this study, we've tried to understand these multiple perspectives and bridge them where possible, which necessitated some switching between

those neighborhood-level and citywide senses of community—both of which we knew to be important to Levitt and its mission.

AN ORGANIC VIEW OF OUTCOMES

In the course of this study we asked various Denver stakeholders about the roles that Levitt Pavilion Denver plays in their community and in the Denver ecosystem. Their thoughts and perspectives fell into four broad outcome areas, and these became our framework for analysis in this report. The four areas are:

1. **Creating a stronger, more equitable community of music lovers**
2. **Fostering long-term investment in the local community**
3. **Supporting Denver’s live music artists and music educators**
4. **Sharing resources in a complex landscape**

In the sections that follow, we explore the mechanisms by which Levitt Pavilion Denver has contributed on these four dimensions and how the Levitt Denver team has evolved and focused its work to enhance those outcomes.

Before diving into those areas, however, we’d like to share a few overall insights from this study, derived from the consensus perceptions of Levitt Pavilion Denver that we heard across the interviews as well as our own reflections on how this study builds on and extends the Levitt Foundation’s ongoing commitment to research.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

Ruby Hill Park is one of only a few public spaces in the Ruby Hill neighborhood where people can congregate and relax—one reason the park is loved by many of those who use it regularly. Most community residents we interviewed in both 2013 and 2019 had strong positive perceptions of Ruby Hill Park, describing it as a large, beautiful park with scenic views of the city, valuable for its tranquility and for the fact that it lets people relax in nature while still within the city.

While Levitt Pavilion Denver did not open until mid-2017, by the time of our “pre” research in 2013 a number of other park renovations were already in place from Phase 1 of the Master Plan, along with pre-existing features such as baseball fields and a public pool. Phase 1 improvements included new playground amenities, a picnic pavilion, a community garden, upgraded walkways, a new upper roadway, and some additional parking.² During that phase of the study, we saw myriad ways in which Ruby Hill Park offered a place for local community members to play and relax. Pre-existing baseball fields also drew people from all over Denver and were a well-used feature of the park. Local youth sporting teams and adult amateur club teams used the hills for exercising and conditioning. People swam in the public pool and tended the

² See https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/747/documents/planning/master_plans/RubyHill-MasterPlan-2008.pdf

community garden. The playground area was used by families with children. After dark, the park had a somewhat different feel; locals told us that it was seen as attracting people who engage in unsafe or illegal activities such as car racing, drinking, and drug use.

Returning in 2019, after additional significant investments to the park had been completed (including the Levitt Pavilion and a mountain biking course), we saw that the tranquility of the park had not been lost. People continued to describe the park to us in the ways we had heard six years earlier, highlighting its views and bucolic quiet. Without prompting, many people remarked on the infrastructure upgrades with enthusiasm, describing these as contributing to Ruby Hill Park as an accessible, valuable public green space. A number still saw the park as a “hidden gem” of Southwest Denver, suggesting that the new investments were visible to and used by locals, but perhaps less so by the broader city. Park users we spoke with in 2013 and 2019 mentioned a broader range of activities that they associate with the park, beyond being in nature and sledding; these included baseball, grilling, and family parties. In 2019 many park users also mentioned free Levitt concerts. And we heard a clear perception that the improvements had made the park a safer and more welcoming place.

All this illustrated and reinforced several points that both we and the Levitt Foundation team were already aware of, and which have become central to the evolving arts-in-community discourse over the last decade. First, creative placemaking rarely if ever occurs on a blank canvas; it can also be a form of “placekeeping,” of building on existing creative and community assets—for example, working with local artists to extend a program already underway or repurpose an existing structure, as Levitt and its partners did so vividly with Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks in Bethlehem, Penn. In the case of Levitt Pavilion Denver, the assets included a naturally well-sited and expansive city park with a complex history and a relatively small yet loyal group of users in the neighborhood. In creative placemaking, there are qualities to be protected and preserved and local assets to leverage or build upon, in addition to challenges to address and improvements to make. At that broader level of “community,” as we will discuss below, the assets here included a dynamic music scene around the city; an active, ambitious commitment by the City to its parks in general, and to Ruby Hill Park in particular; a Master Plan shaped by neighborhood voices; and a willingness by Denver leaders to look outward at similar projects and precedents around the country, including the work of the Levitt Foundation and its nonprofit venue partners in other cities.

Second, in many creative placemaking efforts, arts investments are only part of the equation—a key part, to be sure, but very much intertwined with other kinds of investments. In Ruby Hill Park, it’s impossible to know how the Levitt Pavilion

Creative placemaking rarely if ever occurs on a blank canvas; it can also be a form of “placekeeping,” of building on existing creative and community assets

In many creative placemaking efforts, arts investments are only part of the equation—a key part, to be sure, but very much intertwined with other kinds of investments

might have impacted the park in the absence of those other community-inspired infrastructure enhancements like the mountain bike course, community garden, etc. As it was, the coordinated effort was transformative, and the role of free outdoor music attracting thousands of people each summer was and remains central to that transformation of the park, though not uniquely responsible for it.

Third, and related, the arts entities in creative placemaking projects aren't always the catalysts for the project, and they don't need to be in order to contribute in unique and powerful ways. In the case of Ruby Hill Park, it was the community that "asked" for an outdoor amphitheater, among other new amenities and programs during the master planning process in the early to mid-2000s. The Levitt Foundation was then asked to help realize that vision in partnership with the community, which led to more authentic, "bottom up" ownership of the project—an ethos that has become increasingly important in the creative placemaking movement, especially to practitioners and funders who see the movement as a way to advance equity and inclusion in under-resourced or historically marginalized communities.

FROM SOCIAL CAPITAL TO COMMUNITY BELONGING

In an earlier phase of this research project, we conducted an 'Audience and Community Outcomes Exploration' in 2014 that explored the mechanisms of engagement at Levitt venues in Memphis and Pasadena, Calif. Through observations, interviews, and visitor surveys at those venues, we studied the development of social capital among concertgoers and the community at large.³ Social capital can be described as the value people derive from existing within and being connected to a social network, which contributes to a host of positive economic, health, educational, and civic outcomes.⁴ We saw many examples of that value being generated or deepened at and around the free Levitt concerts, through both planned and unplanned social interactions that led to moments of (re)connection or strengthening relationships. Sometimes these moments resulted in "social bonding," i.e., deepening the ties between individuals who are similar to one another on some key dimension or already part of a group. Other times, they facilitated "social bridging," i.e., points of connection, understanding, and exchange across diverse social or demographic groups.

In the "post" study at Levitt Pavilion Denver, we documented similar positive mechanisms at work during concerts. For example, in summer 2019, we saw numerous moments of serendipitous encounters and hellos between acquaintances or friends who had independently chosen to attend the concert (i.e., strengthening ties within social networks, including what sociologists call "weak

³ https://levitt.org/ckeditor/userfiles/images/1478133733_Levitt_white-paper_setting-the-stage-for-community-change_creative-placemaking-outcomes-study_2016.pdf

⁴ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

ties”⁵). As we had seen in Memphis and Pasadena, the open space of Levitt Pavilion Denver’s lawn setting meant that children could explore freely, bridging spaces between unconnected groups in their play and opening the door for their parents or caretakers to begin conversations that might not have occurred otherwise.

Belonging is a necessary precondition for social bonding and social bridging, since both of those involve inhabiting and in some sense expressing one’s identity

While bonding and bridging continue to be important outcomes to consider in creative placemaking, the observations we made at the Denver venue also revealed a deeper form of community building having to do with a sense of belonging. The idea of “belonging” (along with its opposite, “dis-belonging”) has emerged as an important variable in progressive arts discourse. Whereas social capital is viewed as value generated by, and distributed during, a cultural experience like a music concert, belonging may be thought of as a precursor to being able to express one’s identity within a particular place or experience. In other words, belonging is a necessary precondition for social bonding and social bridging, since both of those involve inhabiting and in some sense expressing one’s identity in the first place. Roberto Bedoya, a leader in the national conversation about the arts in public life and an advisor to our 2016 Levitt white paper, describes this phenomenon further:

What I’ve witnessed in the discussions and practices associated with Creative Placemaking is that they are tethered to a meaning of “place” manifest in the built environment, for example, artists’ live-work spaces, cultural districts, spatial landscapes. And this meaning, which operates inside the policy frame of urban planning and economic development, is okay, but it is not the complete picture. Its insufficiency lies in a lack of understanding that before you have places of belonging, you must feel you belong. Before there is the vibrant street one needs an understanding of the social dynamics on that street—the politics of belonging and dis-belonging at work in placemaking in civil society.⁶

Taking this view, belonging is deeply connected to historical realities of race, class, poverty, and discrimination and how those shape people’s sense of self, connection to others, and connection to place. Belonging may also be about personal agency, being able to see how your own actions influence change and growth in your community. As researcher and consultant Anne Gadwa Nicodemus (one of our advisors on this study) puts it, “When you can shape a place, you can claim it.” She sees arts and culture as critical, underutilized tools that can be used to give people voice and as a result, reflect a more authentic—and equitable—narrative of community.⁷

⁵ The importance of weak ties has been emphasized in the literature in recent years (<https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2017/09/18/the-importance-of-weak-ties/>)

⁶ Roberto Bedoya, 2013. “Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-belonging.” Grantmakers in the Arts. <https://www.giarts.org/article/placemaking-and-politics-belonging-and-dis-belonging>

⁷ <https://metrisarts.com/2018/11/23/journeys-in-creative-placemaking-keeping-taking/#more-2420>

Both recreational areas and arts and cultural activities can play a role in belonging and feelings of attachment to a community. A recent survey of community ties from the Urban Institute/Knight Foundation notes that people who enjoy easy access to recreational areas and safe places express stronger sentiments of attachment to their community, and that those with access to quality arts and cultural activities not only have stronger feelings but also invest more of their time and resources in their communities (although people from low-income households are less likely to report that their neighborhood has easy access to arts and cultural activities than those in high-income households).⁸ Later in this report, we'll explore some of the perceptions of belonging (and dis-belonging) related to Levitt Pavilion Denver as those we interviewed described them to us.

LAYERS OF “COMMUNITY”

The Levitt Foundation’s mission centers on “building community through music,” a principle that balances between broad and narrow definitions of community. Levitt venues aim to reflect and be inclusive of the city from which they draw

The pavilion and its programming are actually engaging various kinds of “communities” in different ways and to different ends

an audience, but also have to engage with a specific geographic situatedness: a set of characteristics and histories unique to the particular neighborhood. As such, each Levitt site prioritizes different kinds of local communities and engages them in different ways. For this pre/post study, as we interviewed residents and other stakeholders about Levitt Pavilion Denver’s role in building community, we distinguished among several senses of that word. We learned that the pavilion and its programming are actually engaging various kinds of “communities” in different ways and to different ends. Three key communities emerged, and these became important analytical lenses for us in the research:

Denver’s music lovers: This community consists of people who enjoy live music and related leisure-time experiences, whom we largely encountered at Levitt concerts during the 2019 phase of research. This community is dispersed throughout Denver and shares similar affinities and values. (So it’s a “community” in the affinity sense rather than the geographic sense of that word.) Members of this community tend to be highly aware of the variety of options for live music in Denver, although some may still not be aware of Levitt Pavilion Denver, given that it’s relatively new (operational for only three summer concert seasons when we conducted the “post” study). They may be avid concertgoers or sporadic, “special occasion” attendees, but they share a passion for high-quality live music from both local and touring groups.

⁸ See <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Community-Ties-Final-pg.pdf>, pgs. 24-25, 30

Denver’s music professionals and educators: This community is a complex ecosystem based on live music, and includes people with many different professional and vocational roles, including musicians, venue managers, other industry professionals, and music educators at various levels (from grade-school music teachers to university faculty, part-time teaching artists to hobbyists). Those in this community most likely to interact directly with Levitt Pavilion Denver are musicians who may perform at the venue; but Friends of Levitt Pavilion Denver, the nonprofit organization that manages and programs the venue, also works extensively with local educators in Southwest Denver, to serve and engage the community beyond Ruby Hill Park (primarily with youth who have limited access to a range of organization-based arts opportunities).

The “local” community: This community includes residents of Ruby Hill and the neighborhoods immediately adjacent (e.g., Athmar Park, Westwood, Mar Lee, Harvey Park, College View, etc.), as well as a broader definition of residents of Southwest Denver generally. Members of this community sometimes expressed this shared “Southwest Denver” identity; they tend to live in neighborhoods that share key demographic characteristics (such as being lower-income neighborhoods rich in racial and cultural diversity). They often find that Levitt Pavilion Denver is the closest option for free, live outdoor music. Some in this community have been to Levitt concerts; others have heard of the Levitt Pavilion but not yet attended. Although we didn’t conduct a quantitative survey to measure awareness, based on our interviews it seems that some proportion of the local community may not yet be aware of Levitt Pavilion Denver.

It’s worth asking whether fostering a sense of belonging in one community could push away or exclude another community, perceived exclusion or otherwise

As we’ll explore in the specific findings sections below, each of these communities has different needs and different ways to engage with the Levitt Pavilion, and the Levitt Denver nonprofit has developed different resources and experiences for each as it has become more embedded in the neighborhood and the citywide landscape. Of course, as the city grows and evolves, Levitt Pavilion Denver is engaging more communities than the three defined above. We focus on these three in this report not only because they emerged naturally from the interviews, but also because they have been integral to the shaping of Levitt Pavilion Denver’s priorities and mission and because all three are highly invested in the pavilion and its work.

In our analysis here, we examine the ways in which the three communities find value in mutually beneficial interactions with the Levitt Pavilion, and where opportunities may exist to deepen those connections. We also consider that notion of belonging, discussed above, with and across distinct communities. Given the historical inequities in every U.S. city, it’s worth asking whether fostering a sense of belonging in one community could push away or exclude another community, perceived exclusion or otherwise.

How can creative placemaking endeavors create space for multiple kinds of belonging, and what does that look like in practice?

Asking those questions and taking a nuanced, segmented view of “community” and belonging has already been helpful to the Levitt Foundation and the Friends of Levitt Denver team in determining engagement goals and strategies, and we hope they are useful to other creative placemaking practitioners and funders in other contexts, as well.



1 Creating a stronger, more equitable community of music lovers

FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

In talking with Denver residents and stakeholders who were familiar with the Levitt Pavilion Denver in Ruby Hill Park, we found that the creation of the venue and its ongoing programming are considered an important, much-needed addition to the city's live music ecosystem. Many interviewees told us that the pavilion plays an important role in providing high-quality, accessible and relevant live music experiences to Denver-area residents, and that it fills a longstanding gap in Southwest Denver's arts landscape. It is clear that Levitt Pavilion Denver has already begun to strengthen the city's community of music lovers, and that it is uniquely positioned to continue building connections among—and contributing to the sense of belonging and identity within—this distributed community.

OFFERING A UNIQUE MUSIC EXPERIENCE

As frequent attendees of live performances, Denver's music lovers are well aware of their options amid Denver's robust music scene, and they greatly appreciate what the Levitt Pavilion offers. Based on our conversations with concert attendees in 2019, Levitt Pavilion Denver is perceived as bringing together people from all over Denver and reinforcing a sense of community during concerts based on shared enjoyment and, to some extent, shared taste. One community leader we interviewed summed up the idea:

I think of music as uniting communities. Music is a language that speaks to all of us. Some of it we don't understand, but there's a fair amount of overlap.

As many music programmers and venue managers have observed elsewhere, Levitt Pavilion Denver attracts music-based communities that vary demographically based on the headlining artist and genre of music—something noted by several of the concertgoers we interviewed. Yet, crucially, demographic self-selection into certain musical styles isn't always determinative, as music



preferences are highly individual, and taste communities can often overlap, particularly with musical experiences that cross genres or at performances of more than one artist or genre. Several interviewees told us that the free concerts at Levitt Pavilion Denver are an opportunity for people to explore their musical tastes, and that this can bridge disparate communities. As one stakeholder said:

[Levitt Pavilion Denver] is unique in a positive way, being focused on music and art. They are unique in trying to be very diverse in what they do, bringing in different kinds of performers, targeting different populations.

The free concerts at Levitt Pavilion Denver are an opportunity for people to explore their musical tastes, and this can bridge disparate communities

We learned that Denver’s music lovers value free Levitt concerts for two distinct reasons: because they present high-quality local and touring artists who perform their own, original music; and because the pavilion environment provides a causal, laid-back vibe that enhances a sense of belonging and intimacy. They consider this a unique and valuable combination, one that isn’t found at the city’s other music venues. As one music lover who lives in Southwest Denver told us, “Levitt offers a really great venue for the location it’s in. It is the only place where you don’t have to fight for a spot. At [other venues] you need a ticket and you still don’t have a [good] spot.” Other free outdoor music sites in Denver may offer a comfortable, family-friendly vibe, however interviewees told us that those venues tend to showcase cover bands rather than great original performers, and they typically don’t have as high-quality of a sound system. These factors are more important to music lovers, who often connect with and “follow” particular artists and music genres, than to general residents just looking for a fun, relaxing leisure-time experience.

The spatial design and structure of Levitt Pavilion Denver also feels familiar and welcoming to this community, with its large stage, prominent screens for close-ups of the artists, dance platform, and state-of-the-art, colorful stage lighting—all conventions shared with commercial music venues in Denver and elsewhere (along with food trucks and a beer sales area). Individuals who regularly attend live music quickly notice these parallels, which serve as cues to relax, enjoy, and participate, a message that “this is a place for me.”

We did notice that many of the Denver music lovers we spoke with were highly familiar with a variety of commercial Denver music venues, and regularly purchased tickets to performances—suggesting that many individuals may be in a higher income bracket. This mirrors findings from other arts contexts, and



is not surprising: members of the music-attending community have the time and resources to travel to venues across Denver and they have more disposable income to spend on entrance fees, drinks, and other costs associated with many musical experiences. Ticket costs aren't usually an issue at Levitt venues, which offer mostly free programming and allow attendees to bring their own food and beverages on-site. At Levitt Pavilion Denver, attendees can also purchase food on-site from local food trucks, although outside alcoholic beverages are prohibited and must be purchased from the venue.

CREATING A NEW ACCESS POINT FOR LIVE MUSIC

In this research we spoke with music lovers who lived in Southwest Denver as well as those who lived in a variety of neighborhoods throughout the city. Music-loving residents of Southwest Denver were particularly appreciative of the close proximity of Levitt Pavilion Denver to their neighborhoods, as it allowed them to more regularly express their passion for live music without having to make the trip to other parts of the city, which could be a barrier to participation due to cost, time, and lack of transit options.

In our 2013 “pre” study, we heard about a general lack of formal arts support or infrastructure in Southwest Denver. Indeed, the problem was broader than

Over past decades, Southwest Denver neighborhoods had received less attention and investment from both the public and private sectors, leading to deleterious effects

the arts: community stakeholders spoke of how, over past decades, Southwest Denver neighborhoods had received less attention and investment from both the public and private sectors than other parts of the city, leading to deleterious effects on the social, economic, cultural, and political fabric of those communities and depriving residents of multiple kinds of capital. These effects were considered particularly apparent in the Ruby Hill neighborhood. Apart from Ruby Hill Park, the neighborhood community had few “third places” for gathering and connection; these were limited to the Athmar Recreation Center (a City-run YMCA-like facility), a bowling alley, a few churches, discount mini-malls, and a handful of restaurants and bars. We did not observe

opportunities to engage in public-based informal or formal arts experiences during our 2013 visit to the area, and we frequently heard from interviewees, including Ruby Hill residents, that “there’s nothing to do” in the neighborhood.



Yet the lack of visible arts activities didn't mean that the arts were non-existent, as we discovered in our stakeholder interviews with community and nonprofit leaders, Denver government officials, and local arts and music organizations. There were and are deep, active cultural practices in the area, including participation in the traditional arts, personal creative practice, and other non-institutional forms of engagement. These may have been less visible to some residents as well as to outsiders (such as our research team) and may have therefore received less recognition and investment than formal, public arts institutions.

By 2019, we observed more public-based arts activities, although these were still largely informal. We spoke with some residents who expressed their creativity through urban gardening, and others who used the neighborhood's public library and recreation center for various kinds of art activities and making. We also saw abundant visual creativity in the interiors of businesses in Ruby Hill, for example in the décor and detailing of restaurant environments and retail shops. And we learned that many Denver musicians live in Southwest Denver, though they mostly travel to other neighborhoods with live music venues to perform.

Levitt Pavilion is a crucial piece of the arts ecosystem in Southwest Denver, making performances accessible to residents who may not have had consistent, local opportunities to engage

As of 2019, even with the Levitt Pavilion in full swing and Ruby Hill Park's other amenities serving both neighborhood and Denver-area residents, we still found that broader infrastructure and "supply" problems in the arts persisted. Several of the stakeholders we interviewed in 2019 noted that they considered music and the other performing arts to be less integrated into Southwest Denver than they are in other parts of Denver. One said that, other than the Levitt Pavilion itself, "there's hardly anything in Southwest Denver, aside from the Gothic Theater, that is a real [music] venue." So the existence of Levitt Pavilion Denver and its ongoing slate of 50 free concerts each summer is a crucial piece of the arts ecosystem in Southwest Denver, making musical performances accessible to residents who, in many cases, already value the arts in their own lives but may not have had consistent, local opportunities to engage.

At the same time, the visibility of the arts in neighborhoods in and around Ruby Hill is gradually improving. Compared to our 2013 research, in 2019 we found more pop-up events and festivals in the area that incorporate the arts, such as the Little Saigon Night Market and the Mid-Autumn Festival on nearby Federal Boulevard, both launched in 2019. Other neighborhoods of Southwest Denver



have intentionally developed arts destinations, such as the Westwood Creative District (a few neighborhoods north of Ruby Hill, but still situated in Southwest Denver), which was certified in 2017 and celebrates the area’s Hispanic-centric culture with colorful murals, galleries and arts happenings.¹

Indeed, the creation of Levitt Pavilion Denver is understood by many local stakeholders and residents as part of a broader shift toward recognizing and investing in artistic and cultural vitality—which itself is tied to the broader movement in the city that led to reinvestment in Ruby Hill Park starting in the early to mid-2000s (described above). So the arts, recreation, and community intersect in important ways in this project; Levitt Pavilion Denver extends the reach of Ruby Hill Park by connecting outdoor recreation and nature with

Successful reinvestment tends to spark additional investments, creating a virtuous cycle of support, engagement, and vitality in a shared ecosystem

new opportunities for engaging with music, all in a community-centered, highly accessible way. This powerful combination may account for some of the value and uniqueness our 2019 interviewees ascribed to the park and pavilion. And Levitt Pavilion Denver provides mostly free concerts, opening up the experience to residents regardless of their income level.

It’s also important to note that successful reinvestment tends to spark additional investments, creating a virtuous cycle of support, engagement, and vitality in a shared ecosystem. And in addition to incorporating creative practices

horizontally across organizations and sectors, practitioners are also considering ways to translate efforts into systems-level policy change.² During the past decade, Denver developed a citywide cultural plan, IMAGINE 2020, which aims to provide a strategic vision for arts, culture and creativity across neighborhoods—and a “call to action to city agencies, cultural institutions, businesses, civic leaders, neighborhood- and community-based organizations, and residents to make this collective vision a reality.”³ Levitt Pavilion Denver is uniquely positioned to anchor additional collaboration and investment in and beyond the arts in Southwest Denver, and to help the area respond creatively to the city’s cultural vision.

¹ <https://www.colorado.com/certified-creative-districts/westwood-creative-district>

² See Kiley K. Arroyo, “Creative Policymaking: Taking the lessons of creative placemaking to scale in Artivate: A Journal of Entrepreneurship in the Arts, Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 46-72. See <https://artsconnectionnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/artivate.pdf>

³ <http://www.artsandvenuesdenver.com/assets/doc/AV-1401-brochure-FINAL-PROOF-5dc5d33d95.pdf>



FUTURE STEPS ▶▶▶

How can Levitt Pavilion Denver further strengthen Denver’s community of music lovers, and contribute to a sense of belonging and identity in that community? We noted a few opportunities for the pavilion and the Friends of Levitt Denver nonprofit to better connect to Denver’s live music attendees, starting with working to increase awareness of the Levitt venue by reaching out to other places around the city where this community already feels a strong sense of belonging.

Levitt Pavilion Denver is still a relatively new venue, so naturally it is less recognized than other long-established music providers in the city. At the time of our research, the pavilion’s marketing strategies were largely online and on social media, so some music lovers in Denver we spoke with in 2019 hadn’t yet heard about it—or, if they had, didn’t realize the scope and musical quality of its free summer programming. Many of these music lovers noted that they often saw posters of other live music concerts (both free and ticketed) at coffee shops, restaurants, and music stores—so they may have expectations that any significant music venue would do the same. As one arts stakeholder reflected, with “such a vibrant arts and culture community in Denver, it’s more about breaking through.” The digital-only approach may also exclude potential music-loving audiences in Denver who access the internet and social media less regularly, but who may be highly interested in free music concerts. In one case, a Ruby Hill resident we spoke with regularly checked the Levitt concert schedule through Facebook, but did not feel like that was typical for her neighbors: “People in these neighborhoods aren’t active [on Facebook]. They aren’t necessarily being reached.” To engage a wider range of Denver music lovers, Levitt Pavilion Denver may need to create more active collaborations with venues and neighborhood third places around the city that already act as hubs for information (e.g., coffee shops, libraries, music stores, etc.), whether through partnerships, sponsorships, advertising, or in-person interactions and invitations, and other direct engagement efforts.

Much prior arts research suggests that this latter approach of emphasizing in-person interactions and issuing active invitations to attend a show at the Levitt venue will be especially important if Friends of Levitt Denver hopes to contribute to increasing not just its audience size but also the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity of its music-loving community.



2 Fostering long-term investment in the local community

FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

Through this research, we see clear signs that Levitt Pavilion Denver is valued by many members of the local Ruby Hill neighborhood (and surrounding neighborhoods) as a place that brings community together. At the same time, the pavilion must navigate within the larger tensions of perceived demographic change and gentrification in surrounding neighborhoods. In order to counteract assumptions of complicity in these trends, Levitt Pavilion Denver needs to project strong signals of connection to a deeply-rooted Ruby Hill community and emphasize the community-led process at the core of its creation.

If they had attended at least one concert at Levitt Pavilion Denver, the residents of Ruby Hill and other Southwest Denver communities we spoke with shared many positive responses, often emphasizing the sense of belonging they had experienced. Even residents who hadn't yet attended appreciated the potential of having easy access to live music in their area, and those who were aware that the concerts are free considered this access to be an important signal of inclusivity. Although it's not possible to measure in a qualitative study to what extent Levitt concerts contribute to community stability in Ruby Hill (and ultimately free music concerts are unlikely to counter citywide trends of rising housing costs), some residents did feel that Levitt Pavilion was being sensitive to the lower-income status of many Ruby Hill residents by offering free concerts, thereby acknowledging and valuing the pre-existing neighborhood community. As one Ruby Hill resident told us:

Once they put in the pavilion, it opened up opportunities for the neighborhood that there wouldn't have been otherwise. Gentrification is getting excessive, but Levitt does free concerts, so that makes it different. If anything, I think the Levitt Pavilion has helped to stabilize the community, because even if costs go up, the concerts are free.

Given the limited options for public gatherings in the area, we weren't surprised to find that some residents used Levitt concerts as a "third place," with the music as a backdrop or occasion for the experience of connecting and



cementing social ties.¹ For example, the local neighborhood association has begun to hold gatherings at Levitt concerts, and local residents who walk over often recognize and greet other neighbors. One community stakeholder told us:

There's just not a lot of businesses here, not a lot of places for people to gather. There aren't coffee shops. The Levitt Pavilion has really created a spot in Ruby Hill Park which is such a great place for people to gather. I see some neighbors at the community gardens, but I have seen more of my neighbors in the last couple of years at the Levitt Pavilion because there is finally a place for us to gather. I think the pavilion has helped us build community.

VALUING LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Residents we spoke with who had been to Levitt concerts generally perceived it as offering a wide variety of musical styles, including Latin-based genres in keeping with the neighborhood's predominantly Latinx/o/a population. Many also knew that the pavilion sometimes featured musicians from nearby neighborhoods or elsewhere in Denver. To them, these facts in combination were clear indications that Levitt valued the local community, not just music lovers coming to the venue from greater Denver. One resident we talked with in Ruby Hill had a sibling who had been invited to perform at Levitt Pavilion Denver,

The [Levitt Denver] team took time to earn the trust of residents and develop positive relationships with neighborhood associations

which indicated to him that the venue was doing a good job of showcasing artists who reflect the community. The community stakeholders we interviewed were also aware that the pavilion programmed a variety of music and included local musicians, both of which they felt helped the venue appeal to a wider audience. One community leader observed that there is a great deal of untapped creative interest among Ruby Hill residents, so “having something like [the Levitt Pavilion] to build a sense of community is pretty cool.”

More broadly, the community stakeholders we interviewed felt that Levitt Pavilion Denver had been highly responsive to the local community, particularly during early stages of its development, reaching out to both the immediate Ruby Hill community and other Southwest Denver neighborhoods with similar demographic backgrounds. Those who had observed the Levitt Denver staff's interactions with constituents in those neighborhoods remarked that the team took time to earn the trust of residents and develop positive relationships with neighborhood associations.

¹See also the discussion of “hybrid” arts-and-social experiences at Levitt venues in our 2016 whitepaper, “Setting the Stage for Community Change,” pages 11 and 34–36.



One nonprofit leader noted:

When it was a question of Levitt Pavilion being built, they wanted to get into the communities and talk with people, and really listened to what concerns people have. I really appreciate that people had that voice, with thoughts and feedback. Just like with anything, everyone might not be happy, but they tried to address concerns as much as possible.

Although the impetus for the development of Levitt Pavilion Denver was community-driven, there was still hesitation among some residents, as the concerts would likely drive significant changes to the immediate area in regards to traffic patterns and the sound environment during concerts. Some community nonprofit stakeholders who participated in the process recalled that the Levitt team was attentive and responsive in identifying what they could bring to the community to alleviate those concerns and were patient with question after question. One stakeholder felt that intensive community interaction was especially critical in the early stages, when residents struggled to understand how exactly an outdoor music venue would function and what impact it would have on their day-to-day lives: “People were frustrated, and it was a big change.

Intensive community interaction was especially critical in the early stages, when residents struggled to understand how exactly an outdoor music venue would function

There was a lot to talk about. Now there is just not a lot to talk about. Levitt is becoming part of the community slowly but surely.”

Several community stakeholders we talked with praised the Levitt Denver team’s process before and after the pavilion was built. Some pointed to Levitt’s participation as a member of the Southwest Denver Coalition, which involved attending meetings regularly and maintaining a visible presence and accessibility. Others mentioned the team’s efforts to reach out to specific ethnic and cultural communities in Southwest Denver, such as the Vietnamese and Latino/a/x communities, to develop relevant music programs. And several cited Levitt’s efforts to bring music education oppor-

tunities to local schools. As one educational stakeholder put it, “Levitt Pavilion has been proactive with establishing relationships with schools and local organizations.”



WIDENING A SENSE OF BELONGING

While Levitt Pavilion Denver has taken critical steps to engage the immediate Ruby Hill community, it may need to work to project even stronger signals of belonging and welcome to the wider Southwest Denver community. In our conversations with those residents, we learned that, broadly speaking, constituents outside of the immediate Ruby Hill neighborhood are less likely to know or trust that the Levitt Pavilion experience will be an authentic, welcoming place to express their own distinctive sense of identity or belonging. This is partly because the venue and its programming are not yet familiar to some area residents, and partly because of the ongoing social dynamics of gentrification occurring in many Southwest Denver neighborhoods and the city as a whole, which carries the potential to further marginalize lower-income, ethnically and

Our interviews revealed a few tangible, if entirely unintentional, aspects of the pavilion environment that may run counter to the message of belonging the Levitt Denver team is trying to send

racially diverse communities. In contrast to the community of music lovers discussed above, who may immediately recognize and feel comfortable in the kind of environment Levitt Pavilion Denver offers, the community of Southwest Denver residents may experience Levitt's concert environments as something different from the norm. So they may pay close attention to whom that environment seems to be for—and whether it is a place for them. To win the trust of more of these residents and signal relevance, the Levitt Denver team should consider highlighting and celebrating local belonging even more clearly and frequently.

Our interviews revealed a few tangible, if entirely unintentional, aspects of the pavilion environment that may run counter to the message of belonging the Levitt Denver team is trying to send. Some of these are the result of local governmental regulations, which require creative thinking to mitigate. For example, in order to legally sell alcohol in Denver, areas for alcohol consumption must be fenced in. Alcohol sales are an important revenue stream for Levitt Pavilion Denver and, for many concertgoers, a signal of informality and social enjoyment. So, to meet the City's requirement, the venue team has constructed a semi-permanent fence around the venue's lawn perimeter of the large open area on the hillside. Entrance to the concerts is still free, but there are check-ins at the gate to prevent outside alcohol being brought in, monitor limitations on capped bottles, and require patrons to use clear plastic bags if they're carrying belongings.² Communication about multiple entry requirements can be challenging, and we heard a number of concert attendees with confusion about the venue's policy. While frequent live concertgoers may be familiar with similar require-

² Note: Levitt Pavilion Denver's policy requiring concertgoers to use clear bags has since been discontinued.



Southwest Denver residents are more likely to be encountering [entrance requirements] for the first time—and may be more likely to view them as signs of exclusion

ments at other venues, and adequately prepare for the situation, local residents coming to a Levitt concert for the first time may not expect this—leading to a first interaction with venue staff that feels more like a stop sign than a welcoming gesture forward. In our interviews, some residents “read” these physical and procedural barriers symbolically and had strong reactions to them, comparing Levitt Pavilion Denver to other outdoor music venues in Denver that they view as more welcoming. For example, one commented that, at live music events at

City Park, “you don’t feel criminalized going in. They don’t have check-ins and you can [enter through] any side of the park.” Some local community stakeholders also noted that, for some lower-income residents, having to use a clear bag to carry belongings³ or buy higher-cost alcohol on-site may be a financial or practical barrier. As one Latinx/o/a interviewee told us: “I love these concerts, but they can get expensive [if one wants to purchase alcoholic beverages on-site].”

Some of the community stakeholders we spoke with reflected on these barriers at a deeper level—on what they saw as a tension between Friends of Levitt Denver’s mission and these multiple potential barriers around attending a concert. As a local governmental stakeholder put it, “[they] want to decrease the barriers to attendance, but there is a fence surrounding the pavilion and I think that goes against the mission of the Foundation.” An arts leader wondered whether there were ways to think more creatively about this challenge, since “it feels like a barrier to entry literally, and I can’t help but think, although it’s good for security, maybe there are different ways to deal with it.” Again, Denver’s music lovers may be familiar with music venues that have stricter entrance requirements than Levitt Pavilion Denver, but local Southwest Denver residents are more likely to be encountering these elements for the first time—and may be more likely to view them as signs of exclusion.

As explored above in connection with the community of music lovers, we saw a need for the Levitt Denver team to continue working to increase awareness of the venue and its offerings among general residents of Ruby Hill and other nearby communities. Some residents we interviewed reported that they regularly drove past Ruby Hill Park but had little sense of what kinds of performances occurred there. This is in contrast to concert attendees, who have multiple opportunities to hear references to or see signage about the Levitt Pavilion’s multi-concert season once through the venue entrance. Levitt

³ Note: Levitt Pavilion Denver’s policy requiring concertgoers to use clear bags has since been discontinued.



Denver's primary model of advertising the free concerts online and on social media may be less likely to reach nearby community members who have not yet tried a concert. As one stakeholder told us, "Not all people use Facebook or email. Up and down Federal Boulevard [a commercial corridor street adjacent to the Ruby Hill neighborhood] you do not see any advertisements. You hear about [Levitt] online, but that's it." Similarly, a resident of Ruby Hill who did use Facebook to learn about concerts said that many of her neighbors weren't active on the platform, adding that "they aren't necessarily being reached, as many speak Spanish, and all of [Levitt's online communications] are in English."

By way of a suggestion to enhance Levitt Denver's position in Southwest Denver, some of the residents we interviewed mentioned other businesses in the area (restaurants, breweries, etc.) that did a good job sharing about the efforts they made to "give back" to the neighborhood, for instance by sponsoring local causes, providing services for local events, or contributing to some positive change in the neighborhood outside of their own properties—and they felt that Levitt Pavilion Denver could do the same. The Levitt Denver team may be able to more directly connect with these kinds of businesses outside the arts sector to learn of their effective community communication efforts.

FUTURE STEPS ▶▶▶

It may also be helpful to acknowledge the mixed messages that barriers present and help attendees understand why they are necessary

The Levitt Denver team is already thinking creatively about ways to counteract the implicit symbolism of physical or procedural barriers (e.g., fencing, carry-in restriction). For example, it may be possible to post messages of welcome on the perimeter fence reinforced by visual examples (e.g., photos) and with equal use of Spanish and English. It may also be helpful to acknowledge the mixed messages that barriers present and help attendees understand why they are necessary.

The Levitt Denver team may also need to find additional ways of bringing distinctive, recognizable elements of the surrounding local community inside the venue, to give people the sense that community belonging extends into and within the concert space. As noted, the pavilion's programming of local musicians already signals this to some extent, and there may be additional opportunities, such as showcasing other kinds of local artists on the pavilion grounds during concerts, or bringing in popular local businesses as visible part-



ners on the grounds (e.g., local food vendors, rather than food trucks based outside of the immediate neighborhoods). The Levitt Denver team may want to explore ways of integrating distinctive local organizations, businesses or community groups more closely into the concert experience or more permanently into the venue environment. Levitt Denver already creates opportunities for some local organizations—e.g., library branches, social service providers—to set up booths along a main entrance walkway, but there could be additional, deeper partnerships between Levitt and such organizations that would create an authentic, distinctively local sense of belonging.

Finally, if resources permit, the pavilion team could foster a greater sense of belonging among local residents when they do attend Levitt concerts by increasing Levitt's presence and support of the community outside of the venue. In other words, the message and work of Levitt Denver around the community helps determine how comfortable and welcome community residents feel at the pavilion. Like many arts nonprofits, Levitt Pavilion Denver has had to focus its limited budget and staff capacity on online marketing rather than

The message and work of Levitt Denver around the community helps determine how comfortable and welcome community residents feel at the pavilion

other forms of advertising and communications. But our interviews suggest that Levitt Pavilion Denver may be able to develop a deeper and wider sense of belonging in the local community by devoting even more energy to being “out there” in visible ways around Southwest Denver—and to getting creative with signage, cross-promotion, and physical invitations to residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. That presence could include incorporating the community in ongoing goal setting and planning, which would be in keeping with the evolving practices of creative placemaking described above. For example, goal setting meetings would ideally allow ample time and conceptual “space” for

open-ended conversations with community members, creating desired outcomes together before focusing on specific solutions.



3 Supporting Denver's live music artists and music educators

FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

Friends of Levitt Denver, in addition to managing the pavilion and programming its concert schedule, has also made a commitment to support Denver's musicians, and in a more limited way, music educators. That community of artists and educators is distinct from and complementary to the community of concertgoers—or rather, communities of concertgoers, since people who come to Levitt Pavilion Denver include music lovers from the immediate neighborhoods as well as from elsewhere in the city. When we interviewed members of Denver's professional music community, they told us that Levitt has played an important role in creating a more equitable environment for musicians in the city, both in terms of pay and in helping artists develop a broader audience.

STRENGTHENING A MUSIC ECOSYSTEM

There is already a strong sense of community among Denver's musicians, and other individuals whose work supports music performance and education in Denver. The music sector stakeholders we interviewed for this study in 2019

Levitt has played an important role in creating a more equitable environment for musicians in the city, both in terms of pay and in helping artists develop a broader audience

observed that Denver has a closely connected music community, due in part to its distance from other major cities, which makes it difficult for local bands to build a regional audience or go on tour. As one put it, "If you're in New York, you can play in other nearby cities, but in Denver, you can't tour as easily, so you have to very carefully plot out how you play around town." Several local musicians said that Levitt Pavilion Denver had helped them connect to a wider audience, including multi-generational groups (including families with young kids) who may be less likely to attend shows at Denver's indoor music venues.

They also praised the pavilion team for nurturing the careers of Denver musicians to a greater degree than for-prof-



it venues—particularly Levitt’s policy of paying competitive wages to local performers and encouraging other venues to match this. One music sector stakeholder told us:

There’s an education gap among artists about pay. Venues typically pay a percentage of ticket sales, so if no one shows up to your show, you’re not going to get as much. Levitt is a little different because their free shows are flat-fee structures. They’ll pay at or above market value. It shows to local artists that Levitt’s primary concern isn’t to try to be a money machine. They just want to put on great shows. It’s just a lot more artist friendly. Bands are really excited to do Levitt.

Perhaps most importantly, local musicians appreciated how the pavilion helps them feel a stronger sense of connection to and visibility in the national music community, through the structure of most Levitt Denver concerts: the pavilion often invites a local band or performer to open for a national act. Those concerts, which sometimes involve musical collaborations between the Denver-based performers and the touring headliners, are opportunities for mentorship and modeling from musicians who are further along in their careers.

The Levitt Denver team has had to play those roles with real sensitivity to the rest of the music ecosystem in Denver, since managers of for-profit venues may feel they are in competition with the nonprofit Levitt Pavilion in attracting music talent and building audiences. In contrast to the visual arts sector, where commercial art galleries are usually seen as serving a different purpose and a different audience than nonprofit art museums, Levitt Pavilion Denver plays a role that does overlap and compete with commercial music venues, at least from the point of view of musicians and some audience members. When Levitt books a touring band, it may mean that other venues no longer have the opportunity to book that band, and therefore can’t make money from those ticket sales. However, this competition is mitigated somewhat by the fact that the Levitt Pavilion was built in a location in Denver where there aren’t many live music options. Bands with a sufficiently large following can perform across the large metropolitan area multiple times without exhausting their audience. Moreover, one music sector stakeholder we spoke with explained that musicians appreciate that Levitt Pavilion lets them connect with a unique audience, slightly older and more family-based than when they perform at indoor venues at later hours of the evening, where the fans are likely to skew younger.



SUPPORTING MUSIC EDUCATION

In addition to working with performing artists, the Levitt Denver team supports youth engagement in music. The City of Denver has historically lagged in making music education a priority in the public schools, as one education community stakeholder noted, many districts have had little or no music programming available for students. This is beginning to change, with the State of Colorado and City of Denver commissioning new reports to guide music education strategies. But these efforts take time, and community stakeholders who we spoke with emphasized that nonprofit interventions to strengthen young people's connection to music are still much needed.

The Levitt Pavilion has several partnerships with schools in nearby neighborhoods in Southwest Denver and is currently implementing new programs to bring professional musicians into local schools for performances and mentorship. While these programs are still in development, education stakeholders we spoke with appreciated that the Levitt team was making these efforts beyond its concert offerings at the venue. As one education-focused stakeholder noted, "Levitt had been proactive with trying to establish relationships with local schools and organizations." Another focused on the direct relationships that Levitt was able to facilitate between students and local musicians, as Levitt brings some of their performers into schools and also has provided opportunities for local students to perform on the Levitt Pavilion stage.

FUTURE STEPS ▶▶▶

It's important to note that our conversations with musical artists and music educators were a small sub-focus of our overall work. We hesitate to suggest future steps as we do not want to over-generalize these trends. But some broad, positive guidance did emerge. The stakeholders we spoke with who had insight on the landscape of music performance in Denver generally felt that the Levitt Pavilion Denver team had a nuanced view of its complexities and worked to provide more equitable opportunities for local musicians. They hoped that Levitt Denver could continue this work. Local music educators credited Levitt Denver with building a framework for impactful engagement with youth. It was clear that they would welcome additional programs or relationship building at this level.



We did hear some contrast between community stakeholders based in music versus those with a broader perspective. Non-music-focused community stakeholders were more likely to wonder whether Levitt Denver could also use its resources, and more specifically its well-designed venue, to connect with the local community beyond music. They encouraged the pavilion team to explore partnerships with community groups in more open-ended ways. One suggested using the stage “for a cultural show, or fashion show, or dance performance,” which might build broader awareness of the Levitt Pavilion in the communi-

Building community and fostering a sense of belonging may be furthered by a “both/and” approach—by offering multiple communities multiple ways of connecting with the venue, with each other, and with place

ty or bring in new audiences—for instance, older residents who may be less drawn to the kinds of music Levitt currently presents. Another community stakeholder noted that some community organizations are planning to hold signature arts & culture events (e.g., Lunar New Year, Cinco de Mayo) in less-than-ideal locations such as parking lots near dangerous, busy streets. They felt that the Levitt Pavilion would be a far better location, and hosting such events could widen the community’s sense of the pavilion as authentically relevant and locally engaged, “adding value to what is already going on by what [Levitt] has to offer.”

Engaging with local communities in such ways could be seen as distracting from Levitt Denver’s mission of “building community through music.” Yet our interviews in this study suggest that building community and fostering a sense of belonging may be furthered by a “both/and” approach—by offering multiple communities multiple ways of connecting with the venue, with each other, and with place. Those ways could continue to center on music, but could also include other experiences of arts and culture that help nurture belonging and develop empathy across differences.



4 Sharing resources in a complex landscape

FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

Authentic partnerships require a high level of communication and trust in order to surface and discuss different perspectives and priorities in productive ways, and authority and decision-making should be intentionally shared

As noted earlier, creative placemaking efforts are usually undertaken not by individual organizations but by multiple entities, public and private, working in partnership with each other and with the community itself. Authentic

partnerships require a high level of communication and trust in order to surface and discuss different perspectives and priorities in productive ways, and authority and decision-making should be intentionally shared through co-created collaborative processes. In Denver, the Levitt Pavilion has been a collaboration between the national Levitt Foundation, the local nonprofit Friends of Levitt Denver, and the City of Denver (particularly Denver Parks and Recreation, a city agency), with ongoing input from local community groups, neighborhood residents, and concertgoers from across the city. So creative placemaking naturally fits into the trend in philanthropy to support—and evaluate—collective impact. Several stakeholders we interviewed in this study viewed the ongoing activities of Levitt Pavilion Denver through that lens, as an important opportunity to participate in a broader dialogue—which could potentially

foster shared, ecosystem-level progress. Some indicated that this kind of collaborative, intentional work reveals lessons about the practical challenges of coordinating among organizations with different communication models, priorities, and ways of working.

PARTNERSHIP ADVANTAGES

The Levitt Foundation provided major support to, and worked in close collaboration with, Friends of Levitt Pavilion Denver throughout the venue design and development process, in partnership with the City of Denver. But the idea for an outdoor venue in the park originated with community members, as described



earlier in this report: Denver officials initiated a conversation with the Levitt Foundation as a result of a community-engaged master planning process for Ruby Hill Park. The pavilion was structured as a public-private partnership with a long-term lease on public park land, for which the City of Denver continues to own and oversee, with the venue managed and programmed by Friends of Levitt Denver. These kinds of partnerships are all hallmarks of successful creative placemaking, as noted in a recent report by the Urban Land Institute, which considers it best practice to include “artists, community members, local government, foundations, and community organizations in project planning and development.”¹

However, this complex model meant that the Levitt Denver team needed to closely observe local regulations and coordinate its policies with City of Denver officials throughout the project, in ways that wouldn’t have been necessary had the venue been located on privately held property. It was sometimes challenging to anticipate the division of roles and responsibilities; trust-building and fluid, responsive collaboration were crucial, as were nuanced, consistent communication and empathy.

In the early stages of the project, the Levitt Pavilion team and Denver officials needed to find a balance between established policies (and in some cases, laws) and the Levitt team’s vision of providing an inclusive, welcoming environment.

That kind of concentrated collaboration, with its overlaps and redundancies, means that it’s difficult to attribute any beneficial outcomes to a single entity, or a specific decision

For example, signage was important for creating public awareness and conveying a spirit of welcomeness, but there are limitations on signage and endorsements in the City’s policies for public parks. As one governmental stakeholder recalled in our 2019 interviews, there was “pushback from park advocates that we were commercializing the park.” Issues also arose around serving alcoholic beverages in public areas, traffic flow and parking, and even which agency was responsible for installing Wi-Fi within the pavilion’s offices.

That kind of concentrated collaboration, with its overlaps and redundancies, means that it’s difficult to attribute any beneficial outcomes to a single entity, or a specific decision. Both the process and any credit for impact are shared. For example, we found positive changes in residents’ perceptions

of safety in the park, compared to our 2013 conversations. Would those improvements have occurred in the absence of Levitt Pavilion Denver, perhaps as a result of the other investments in park amenities? It seems likely that the pavilion has played a major role, but how any one decision or strategy—for instance, the kinds of music performed, or the free admission policy—affects

¹ See <https://knowledge.uli.org/-/media/files/research-reports/2020/creative-placemaking-v2.pdf>



the whole is impossible to know. But we did hear indications that Levitt concerts do provide unique qualities that enhance safety in specific ways, due to the frequency of concerts, their evening hours, and the density of people in the park during concert times. Many local concert attendees we spoke with in 2019 felt relatively safe spending time walking through the park after a Levitt concert, whereas previously they would not have entered the park after dark.

The specifics of the research are worth noting. During our 2013 “pre” research, we asked a sample of people who had recently been to Ruby Hill Park to quantify their sense of safety there on a seven-point scale, with “1” being completely unsafe to “7” being completely safe. The average rating was 5.2 (with a small sample-size of 23), and many told us that the overall safety of the park, especially during the day, had already improved over recent years. In our 2019 “post” interviews, we asked a similar question and found that the level of perceived

The overlapping efforts of these multiple stakeholders are one sign of the project’s successful community embeddedness and an example of creative placemaking’s ethos

safety of Ruby Hill Park had increased by nearly 1.5 points—to an average of 6.6 out of 7 (sample-size of 38). Those 2019 interviewees were grateful for the change. As one said, “Before, Ruby Hill Park didn’t feel as safe. You had to be more alert and aware. Now, you can let your guard down.”

Clearly, the consistent arts activation of the Levitt Pavilion contributes by markedly increasing foot traffic and “spillover” use of the park during the summer concert months. But at 83 acres, the park is large; attending a concert at the pavilion is only one of many common uses of the park, and only for part of the year. So the positive shift in perceived safety should be attributed to the efforts of multiple stakeholders working together to revitalize and then maintain the “new” Ruby Hill Park, including various City departments, community volunteers, residents themselves, and of course Friends of Levitt

Denver and its staff. The overlapping efforts of these multiple stakeholders are one sign of the project’s successful community embeddedness and collective impact, and an example of creative placemaking’s ethos of intentionality and collaboration.

“IMPACT” AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF GENTRIFICATION

During our 2013 fieldwork for this study, gentrification was already much on people’s minds, as Denver had entered a period of economic and population growth that has only accelerated in the subsequent years. At times, the city has



been the fastest-growing metro area in the U.S., with people moving from out-of-state to fill the demand for skilled professionals in the science, technology, and healthcare sectors. Denver's median income was already relatively high, though the cost of living had remained modest; the recent population booms have shifted both upward. Displacement of low-income residents has been one consequence. For example, Highland, a neighborhood in Northwest Denver, had been home to many lower-income Hispanic/Latinx families. But in the 2010s, the sections of Highland closest to downtown were filled with new construction of modern homes, restaurants, and shops, becoming a trendy, hip area. More white, higher-income residents moved to the neighborhood as home prices rose, displacing previous residents and gradually changing both demographics and economics.

In 2013, the Ruby Hill neighborhood was experiencing relatively less gentrification than other areas of Denver. A few neighborhood residents we spoke with, who identified as white, had recently purchased homes in or near Ruby Hill because of the relative affordability of the area and its easy access to central Denver. But that seemed to be the exception rather than the norm. Still, some of the 2013 interviewees predicted that neighborhoods like Ruby Hill could become more popular—even too popular—with homebuyers who are priced out of other neighborhoods.

By the time we returned for the 2019 research, those predictions had been borne out to some extent in Ruby Hill and to a great degree in Denver overall. One resident noted that Ruby Hill is one of three or four neighborhoods in Southwest Denver that had seen only modest gentrification so far, but that this was changing as median incomes and housing prices continue to rise across the city. Similarly, a community leader described this moment as a time of transition for Ruby Hill:

Like in many neighborhoods there is the process of gentrification [in Ruby Hill]. White and middle-class people are moving in. It is seen as a desirable location where the price range is still reasonable for a starter home. You see a lot of young couples buying their first place and developers [coming in]. A lot of people don't live in the homes they own, and people of color, immigrant families, and low-income families rent those properties. And it is becoming more lucrative for people to sell their properties instead of renting...

The residents and stakeholders we spoke with in 2019 were open about both the positives and negatives of change in their neighborhoods. A number remarked that gentrification comes hand-in-hand with new expectations for leisure, recreation, safety, and general quality of life. One Ruby Hill resident, for



example, felt that changes in the racial/ethnic make-up of the neighborhood in particular were important to acknowledge, as it led to changing behavior from within the community (expectations of residents), as well as to change from outside (investment by government), but that the need for change was caused in the first place, at least in part, by historic civic disinvestment in communities of color. “The demographics have changed, it’s getting whiter. [The City government says] it’s getting nicer, and so we’ll give you more stuff. But you should have been doing that before.”

While new investments enhance the quality of life in the community and can catalyze additional investment, they can also exacerbate perceptions that change is geared to newly incoming demographic groups

Many also understood the pavilion’s specific role in gentrification to be nuanced. Those who we spoke with felt gentrification was a citywide issue; they didn’t see Levitt Pavilion Denver and other investments in Ruby Hill Park as root causes of the phenomenon. One Ruby Hill resident told us that “gentrification was going to happen with or without Levitt, because of the neighborhood’s proximity to downtown.” Some identified the housing market as the primary cause, like the community leader who noted, “They’ve been putting in new houses that are more expensive...It changes things, when they update things.” But repeatedly, we heard that there are two sides to new investments like those occurring in Ruby Hill Park. While new investments enhance the quality of life in the community and can catalyze additional investment, they can also exacerbate perceptions

that change is geared to newly incoming demographic groups. Some residents felt that Levitt Pavilion Denver was strongly intertwined with economic change in the area, even though they and their friends appreciated and benefited from the concerts it offered. Others reflected that the new people coming into the area have different expectations for leisure and recreation than long-term residents. One community stakeholder who has lived in Ruby Hill for many years reported wryly:

I get a lot of updates on the houses for sale in Ruby Hill. Almost every single real estate description says that it’s within walking distance of the concerts. More stuff will come because of Levitt. At some point, someone will look at our neighborhood and maybe say we should put in a coffee shop or a brewery.

Residents’ perceptions of cause and effect in gentrification were similarly complex. Some wondered why the new park investments had occurred only in recent years, at the same time as a higher income white population was moving into the neighborhood. Many viewed the public sector investments in Ruby Hill



Park—including Levitt Pavilion Denver—as a response to, rather than a cause of, the gentrification in the area. However, demographic change may make it more difficult for the local community to retain a collective memory of Levitt Pavilion as a community-envisioned initiative (along with changes to Ruby Hill Park generally). In fact, investments in the park had been guided by a community-engaged Master Plan in the early to mid-2000s, which was strongly focused

Demographic change may make it more difficult for the local community to retain a collective memory of Levitt Pavilion as a community-envisioned initiative

on meeting the needs of long-term neighborhood residents; the improvements were largely built prior to some of the demographic change and gentrification across Denver in the subsequent decade.

While Ruby Hill residents noted ways that Levitt Pavilion Denver valued their local community, such as by showcasing artists from the area, including Latin music, we also heard some ambivalence about the venue’s musical programming. Some felt that the musical choices were geared toward the tastes of the new, incoming neighborhood population rather than long-term residents; when these neighborhood residents attended concerts, they believed that their fellow audience members didn’t always match the demographic mix of the surrounding neighborhoods. One Latino resident associated this with perceived income disparities: “Ruby Hill...is a lower-income area, but people with middle and higher incomes are coming to the concerts.” Another resident felt that the disconnect was largely one of age, because they typically saw a younger crowd at Levitt concerts than in the neighborhood generally.

FUTURE STEPS ▶▶▶

To help strengthen the economic vitality of the Ruby Hill community, Levitt Pavilion Denver has an opportunity to collaborate in deeper ways with arts entities and businesses in the neighborhood. One challenge has been that Ruby Hill and other neighborhoods around the park have relatively few opportunities for leisure spending, meaning that concertgoers haven’t been able to integrate attending a Levitt concert into a broader experience in the neighborhood—for example, by visiting local bars, restaurants, or shops. There simply aren’t many within walking distance. As one stakeholder we interviewed put it: “The Levitt Pavilion is uniquely positioned because it’s out of downtown. It’s not surrounded by feeder bars and restaurants. It’s a destination. You have to want to go there. You don’t stumble about it.” Accordingly, in our conversations with



concert attendees, almost everyone we spoke with said they would be going home directly after the concert, noting that “there’s not too much to do in the area” or that “it doesn’t seem like there is much around” (echoing things we heard in our 2013 interviews, before the pavilion had been built).

This research study is not broad enough in scope to be able to suggest specific mechanisms for how Levitt Pavilion Denver might work towards collective positive impact with local businesses. This kind of collaboration may need nuanced consideration, especially in cases where local businesses are also themselves perceived as serving new demographic groups coming into a community. But

Tightening the venue’s economic integration with the community would be another step toward equity in Levitt Denver’s work

the restaurant and retail scene in Ruby Hill is gradually diversifying, and there are opportunities for the Levitt Denver team to think creatively and intentionally about how collaborations could help strengthen the local economy. In addition to several isolated food, drink, and shopping options in residential sections of Ruby Hill, nearby Federal Boulevard is a burgeoning foodie destination—particularly for cuisines that reflect the diverse populations of Southwest Denver, such as Vietnamese and Mexican restaurants. Businesses along South Federal Boulevard have begun efforts to pool their resources as an official Business Improvement District and attract new activity in the area by creating a positive sense of place (e.g., with banners, public art, and other enhancements).²

While Federal Boulevard is not within easy walking distance of Ruby Hill Park, there may nonetheless be opportunities for these two placemaking initiatives to work in tandem. For instance, the Levitt Pavilion team could work with those local businesses and restaurants to sell merchandise or food at concerts, instead of the current food trucks that hail from outside of the neighborhood.

Tightening the venue’s economic integration with the community in those ways would be another step toward equity in Levitt Denver’s work—as working with resident-owned local businesses may counter gentrification effects by helping keep money in the neighborhood. But it may require additional resources and time (for instance, to help local restaurants obtain the certifications or licenses necessary to operate outdoors at the pavilion) as well as a commitment to supporting inclusion in ways that go beyond presenting high-quality free music for the community. As a summer-only venue, the pavilion is unlikely on its own to stimulate year-round consumer activity or business growth in Ruby Hill. Yet it could contribute significantly to those goals if it spurs excitement and creates demand for new kinds of local offerings.

² <https://denverite.com/2019/06/24/little-saigon-night-market-attracts-hundreds-to-federal-laying-the-ground-work-for-a-new-westside-bid/>

Suggestions for the Field

Co-authored with Sharon Yazowski & Vanessa Silberman | Levitt Foundation

The previous pages of this report present Slover Linett's findings as an independent research and evaluation consultancy commissioned by the Levitt Foundation, based on the felt experiences and perspectives of the local residents and stakeholders with whom we spoke, and interpreted through the lens of our experience studying cultural engagement in a variety of forms and contexts. Now, in this final section of the report, we shift to a co-authored mode: these suggestions for the field were jointly written by the researchers and the two Levitt Foundation leaders who have been closest to this research, executive director Sharon Yazowski and deputy director Vanessa Silberman. Because this section is meant to extrapolate from empirical research to strategic practice, the practitioners' perspective was essential. We hope the resulting insights are illuminating to those working—or funding—in other arts-in-community settings.

*Our suggestions are grouped under four themes: **Building on community assets, Working with complex community systems, Developing community-centered outcomes, and Supporting a sense of belonging.***

Building on community assets

- 1. When planning creative placemaking projects, find multiple opportunities to identify, honor, and collaborate with a community's existing cultural assets.** At this stage in the evolution of creative placemaking, most stakeholders have moved past the “deficit model” of arts and culture provision, at least in their language. But in a valid attempt to prioritize meeting needs in the community, it's easy to emphasize what's missing or not working, and to overlook existing creative and cultural assets, “bright spots,” and other neighborhood resources. So at the outset of a project, take time to become familiar with existing community and place connections and work to understand how different people view the tangible and intangible assets in their communities. Consider how new configurations of public space, new amenities, or new program offerings may impact current uses and users—and recognize that those impacts may be considered positive or negative by community members. Such considerations are especially important when the creative placemaking work takes place in liminal (i.e., edge, transitional, or shared) spaces. Use a broad definition of arts and culture that includes informal, non-institutional activities and expressions of personal creativity or identity, because those can be critical to fostering inclusivity as the project develops and evolves.





- 2. Recognize that the collective memory of a project's origins may fade and be replaced by new perceptions or suppositions.** Because creative placemaking processes often occur over a period of years, they can encounter issues of community memory. As described earlier, we found that some current residents of the Ruby Hill neighborhood had forgotten—or perhaps never knew because they weren't yet living in the area—that plans for the pavilion had emerged in response to the suggestions and needs of residents at the time. Far from being an “outside in” venture meant to benefit people living elsewhere or attract new, wealthier residents to the community, the Levitt Pavilion and the park's other infrastructure enhancements were organic, local, and “bottom up.” This makes ongoing communication important, to keep the founding aspirations and values of the project visible and relevant to all constituents over the course of time.

As referenced early on in this white paper, creative placemaking practitioners have debated the merits of the term “placemaking” as a core descriptor of the work, with some practitioners advocating for alternative terms such as “place-keeping,” “placetending” and “placeknowing.” Yet these terms, too, potentially pose limitations by hindering the progression and evolution of a place. Ideally placemaking can help reinforce, celebrate, and build on a community's existing creative and cultural assets, recognizing and honoring history as a place to move forward from, rather than remaining within a perceived time and place. The evolution of Levitt Pavilion Denver illustrates this kind of embeddedness.

Arts-infused community development can be a tool for supporting the evolution of places as an ongoing, fluid process rather than a fixed moment of placemaking or remaking

It would be true but too simple to view this project as having created a new, arts-activated space in an underutilized location; it also emerged from a broader movement for revitalization and public investment in the Ruby Hill neighborhood and Southwest Denver. It built on—and reciprocally reinforced—other park infrastructure investments that were being made during the same time period. Moreover, the Levitt Pavilion both benefited and benefited from an existing user-community to forge new connections among arts, music, recreation, and nature, thereby expanding the ways that people connect to Ruby Hill Park and deepening their relationships with both music and public space. This is not always the case with Levitt

venues; some Levitt pavilions have been created on neglected or vacant sites (although there is always some kind of community-led process shaping the creation of the venue). But it's an important principle to keep in mind, because arts-infused community development can be a tool for supporting the evolution of places as an ongoing, fluid process rather than a fixed moment of placemaking or remaking.

Through this lens, the term “placemaking” takes on a more expansive meaning, one that values existing assets as critical ingredients to a project’s development and fruition. The emphasis on “making” does not necessarily erase what’s already there; rather, it builds on identified existing assets, historical traditions, and cultural practices to create a more holistically informed and dynamic system. We believe that this is why, despite those alternative terms, creative placemaking is still a meaningful rubric for the movement. Any act of creation occurs with and amid existing materials and contexts; making or building something new doesn’t mean disregarding what came before—indeed, it requires and emerges from those preexisting conditions and assets, even as it attempts to enhance them.

Relatedly, that second point above—about collective memory and the “origin story” of the placemaking initiative—may be important in many development projects, and it doesn’t appear to have been discussed in the literature. Terms like “placekeeping,” “placetending,” and “placeknowing” imply that there’s a

It’s important to put mechanisms into place that keep the actual backstory visible to the community, serving as an ongoing reminder [how] the project was undertaken

single past or “backstory” to the initiative, and that that narrative remains stable in the minds of stakeholders over time. To the contrary, we found that the community’s perceptions of the project’s origins, purposes, and beneficiaries evolve over time in ways that can wander from the facts, so that eventually there are multiple “pasts” in circulation. Some of those stories may run counter to the actual impetus and ethos that animated the project. So it’s important to put mechanisms into place that keep the actual backstory visible to the community, serving as an ongoing reminder that the project was undertaken by and for people with longstanding and embedded ties to the

community, to enhance their lives and their neighborhood. With that kind of stewardship, the story of the project becomes part of the set of assets that the placemaking work both leverages and enhances.

Keeping that story alive and accurate requires thinking strategically about who influences and “tells” that story over time, and who or what might gradually erode or redirect it. Those influencers will differ by context; in Levitt’s case, it’s clear that the local nonprofit organization that operates the venue plays a crucial role, not as the only storyteller but as a key voice among many. The story should be told clearly and concisely at the beginning of the initiative, then retold and affirmed year after year—and not just externally, to existing and newly arriving community residents and business owners, but also internally within the organization(s) involved, as turnover brings new staff, volunteers, and board members into the work. Yet it may also be important to allow that story to evolve in certain ways, consistent with the facts but with different emphases, language, or framings that respond to the changing needs and situations of the community. The story shouldn’t constrain the project or fix it in amber; it should be a foundation rather than a ceiling for meaning-making and progress.

Working with complex community systems

- 3. Set shared, realistic expectations of change and impact—and link with other efforts to amplify positive outcomes.** Recognize that, on its own, no single project or investment in a community is likely to meet its full range of goals or reverse systemic, historical inequities. Consider broadening definitions of success for the placemaking project beyond measures of direct or immediate impact, instead examining how it functions within a *chain of change*—for example, spurring additional investment or attention or leading to new alliances or initiatives that build toward the same goals and reinforce shared priorities. Consider ways to connect the creative placemaking project to community-serving nonprofits within and outside of the arts and culture sector, local government agencies, as well as the local business community (including restaurants and retail). In tandem, these joint endeavors could lead to additive or “macro” effects that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts—or help prevent unintended outcomes such as displacement, gentrification, or perceptions of exclusion.
- 4. Make time to consider potential challenges and opportunities in projects where ownership is shared among organizations and partners with a range of priorities, as well as varied styles, communication modes, and ways of working.** Create communication streams that are responsive to the culture and infrastructure of each organization in the partnership. Think creatively about how to provide an inclusive, welcoming working environment that’s adaptable to different professional settings, including bureaucratic ones, cultural practices and grassroots collaborations.





All placemaking projects take place within complex evolving systems; the project is rarely if ever the only change occurring in the community. So it's important to take a systems-level view that spans both the project at hand and the other kinds of investments, processes, and organic shifts that are affecting, or will affect, the community.

There is general agreement in the field of equitable community development that confronting and reversing systemic, historical inequities requires a coordinated, multi-pronged approach. Creative placemaking practitioners, community planners, and developers must think and work intentionally and

Creative placemaking practitioners, community planners, and developers must think and work intentionally and systemically to shape equitable change

systemically to shape equitable change. By linking discrete projects or investments, collaborators can contribute to a virtuous cycle that gathers strength over time. This kind of collaboration requires introspection, inquiry, and humility—particularly when working in close cooperation while respecting the goals of each partner, which might be different due to the historical context and cultural perspective of each partner. This in turn puts a premium on clarity of roles and openness to multiple communication and working styles. And partnering with other entities in distributed, genuinely collaborative ways is

necessary to accommodate multiple priorities and allow for emergent, unexpected directions or outcomes that enhance the project. Full, *a priori* control of the placemaking initiative is neither possible nor desirable. In other words, the process is just as important as the resulting “product.”

In Denver, the Levitt Pavilion project team tapped into other local efforts and conversations from the outset. But there may now be opportunities for additional or more targeted partnerships to make equitable outcomes an even more tangible rallying point for the organization and its multiple audiences and communities.

Developing community-centered outcomes

- 5. Involve communities of focus in the placemaking work in equitable and culturally responsive ways, particularly in defining desired outcomes at the start.** Allow ample time and conceptual “space” for open-ended conversations with community members, and involve them from the outset of the work rather than bringing pre-existing plans for them to respond to. Acknowledge that the creative placemaking process should center on community-driven solutions derived from the historical and local context—that is, on lived experience with the community space. Provide ways for community representatives to debate and define what the desired outcomes might look like in concrete terms, in both the short and long term. And it is important to include discussions of equity from the outset in order to avoid assumptions that might prevent a truly equitable impact. To support this dialogue, also actively collaborate with community entities already committed to these priorities.
- 6. Acknowledge that communities are not monolithic, and engage in dialogue with local stakeholders and residents to identify which groups the placemaking project will actively engage and serve.** Formal front-end research or informal (but intentional) time spent in communities can be vital to understanding “the community” in more nuanced, authentic, and equitable terms. Consider multiple kinds of categorizations—racial or ethnic identity, geographic location, life stage or other demographics, affinity or behavior, etc. Be sure to consider community as a broad term, in some contexts geographically based, but also based on affinity and shared self-identification, such as BIPOC business owners and artists.





Over the last decade, many practitioners have been shifting the timing of community input to earlier in a creative placemaking process, so that residents and other stakeholders can inform initial visioning and goal setting. Emphasis has been placed on listening deeply to community opportunities at the outset, as well as during design, implementation, and ongoing iteration. These shifts roughly parallel the movement from a deficit-based view of placemaking to

The movement from a deficit-based view of placemaking to an asset-based view recognizes the multiple narratives, creativity and cultural vitality that already exist

an asset-based view, which recognizes and attempts to incorporate and build on the multiple narratives, creativity and cultural vitality that already exist in the community. In the words of Project for Public Spaces, placemaking can support a shift from top-down, privatized decision-making toward “empowering communities to create public spaces that support their own needs, interests, and values.” This entails involving communities actively, and creatively, as full partners in the project.

That collaborative development of goals and intended outcomes, including discussions on how a project might address existing inequities, can also be tied to how creative placemaking practitioners measure impact. If the desired outcomes are determined by and with communi-

ty members, then it would be natural to involve them in the eventual evaluation of the project. After all, it is the community residents themselves who are best qualified to reflect on what has changed, who has benefited from those changes, how it all feels on an everyday level, and what else might be needed to fully achieve the aspirations and values of the project.

Such an approach is well aligned with the principles of equitable evaluation or culturally responsive evaluation, a relatively recent research framework that aims to identify and evaluate changes related to the systemic drivers of inequity, and that also involves affected communities in defining the focus of the evaluation and in meaning-making. This approach differs sharply from the indicators-based assessments used in the early years of the creative placemaking movement, as outlined in the introduction of this white paper. It also differs from our approach in the present study, in which we’ve taken an open-ended, anthropological approach to understanding the role and impact of Levitt Pavilion Denver at multiple levels of “community” using a pre/post structure to explore changing community perceptions. While we aimed to be attuned throughout the study to systemic drivers of inequity in the local community context (and examining how Levitt Pavilion Denver could help shift those dynamics), we did not directly involve community members in the research design. One could imagine instead an outcomes-based evaluation in which the outcomes were co-defined at the outset of the project with community members, and in which community members co-designed and co-conducted the study alongside professional researchers. A decision to work in that way would have needed to be made in conjunction with the community planning process that preceded over a decade prior and informed the multiple reinvestments in Ruby Hill Park, including planning for the Levitt Pavilion.

Supporting a sense of belonging

- 7. Design the creative placemaking project explicitly to acknowledge the narrative of the space, past and present, to foster an individual sense of belonging to create an environment conducive to bringing people together for social bonding and social bridging.** Research shows that social bonding, connections with those people may know already or are already connected with in some way, and social bridging, connections with those they don't know and may be different from, are both crucial to people's attachment to place,¹ and both contribute to a sense of belonging. Yet genuine belonging requires candor about the complexities of the place, its history, structural inequities, and current realities—including realities of race, socioeconomic, opportunity and access—that have a negative impact on people's lives. Creative placemaking projects can foster belonging by acknowledging the authentic narrative of the space, since that narrative will resonate across community divisions or inequities, though fostering a sense of belonging for some communities may inadvertently alienate others. Practitioners should have candid conversations during the planning process about how belonging and dis-belonging operate for various constituents in that place. Consider designing the project to give voice or visual form to one or more communities of focus, so they can hear and see themselves in it from the outset, to actively signal belonging.



- 8. Acknowledge that creative placemaking work is not neutral, particularly when it involves arts and cultural components that are closely tied to differing community identities.** The more inclusive and collaborative the creative placemaking process is, the more likely it will be that different constituents or communities will express different goals, visions, and resource needs for the same space or program—even when they share a desire to make the places where they live, work, or play better. Those differences may be fraught if they map onto historical or cultural inequities or perceived power imbalances. So it's important to practice awareness and open communication about any tensions that may arise. Make room for moments of candid, ongoing conversation amongst different groups of residents and stakeholders so they can hear, and hopefully gain an understanding of, each other's perspectives regarding differing needs and desired outcomes for the space. Remain cognizant of the root causes and mechanisms behind any tensions or resentments, even if those are not directly related to the placemaking endeavor. Try to empathize with all perspectives in order to find common ground, align shared goals, and emphasize collective pride of place.
- 9. Work to tie belonging within the creative placemaking space to forms of belonging outside that space, in the surrounding community.** In keeping with the idea that creative placemaking projects are embedded in broader ecosystems of community change, practitioners should make the projects porous to the outside—in both directions. Invite in community and neighborhood groups to use the creative placemaking space for their own purposes, and engage with other community sites by participating in neighborhood activities or supporting local causes. Forging and maintaining these reciprocal kinds of relationships may nurture a holistic sense of belonging within the community and help ensure that the project doesn't become siloed and remains a dynamic, visible presence in the eyes of community residents.

¹ (from previous page) See discussion in our earlier white paper for the Levitt Foundation, https://sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/1478133733_Levitt_white-paper_setting-the-stage-for-community-change_creative-placemaking-outcomes-study_2016.pdf, especially pages 25–32.



To foster belonging, all partners in a creative placemaking initiative need to understand the mechanisms of both attachment to place and alienation from place

Practitioners of creative placemaking increasingly acknowledge its non-neutrality, particularly when it involves historically marginalized communities. Roberto Bedoya, in the post on “dis-belonging” cited earlier, argues that, until recently, “a troubling tenor of Creative Placemaking discourse [has been] the

avoidance of addressing social and racial injustices at work in society and how they intersect with Creative Placemaking projects.”² The field has gradually acknowledged, however, that such projects can either “empower communities and help cultivate belonging [or] be used as a wedge to alienate individuals and groups of people,” as Anne Gadwa Nicodemus puts it.³ The stated goals of creative placemaking have been to contribute to the economic vitality, livability, vibrancy, social capital, and civic engagement of the communities in which they are undertaken. But “communities” are never monolithic, and in some instances creative placemaking has led to perceptions of winners and

losers. The distinction between the two often hinges on gentrification, displacement, and the resulting resentments. Placemaking practitioners and funders have come to recognize that, without deep reflection and inclusive processes, their work may unintentionally exacerbate those problems.

In order to foster belonging and prevent its opposite, all the partners in a creative placemaking initiative need to understand the mechanisms of both attachment to place and alienation from place. Measuring effects like gentrification has proven to be tricky enough, if not outright misleading in some instances—and not just because community residents tend to see both its positive and negative effects, as noted in this study. Measuring resentment, alienation, and cultural displacement—while also measuring attachment and pride—will be a challenging task. Learning how to do so will be an important next step for the creative placemaking field. A macro-level, interdisciplinary approach will be necessary, since those dynamics are inextricably tied to historical conditions and structural inequalities in America’s social and economic systems. Perhaps paradoxically, a local, grassroots approach will also be needed, since only local observers or participants will understand dynamics and identities that shape belonging in that place.

² <https://www.giarts.org/article/placemaking-and-politics-belonging-and-dis-belonging>

³ <https://metrisarts.com/2018/11/23/journeys-in-creative-placemaking-keeping-taking/>

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Our 2019 fieldwork in Denver was conducted by a team that included Adelina Parrell Tummons, a multilingual researcher then affiliated with the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and Meredith Wong, then a researcher at Slover Linett. Meredith also played a central role in the analysis and preliminary meaning-making of our findings and reflections. Other former colleagues at the firm who played key roles in the earlier phases of the project include Sarah Lee; Dreolin Fleisher, PhD; Eric LaPlant; and Nnenna Okeke, PhD. Emily Bray, PhD, a researcher at Slover Linett, contributed to data analysis, and Sarah Liberman Weisz provided editorial review. We also thank Nicole McGaffey and Julia Berghammer at the Levitt Foundation for the graphic design of this white paper.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

2013 “pre” study

Alexis Boian	Young Philanthropists Foundation
Jolon Clark	The Greenway Foundation
Amy Drayer	LGBT Community Center of Colorado
Cole Finnegan	Hogan Lovells
Ryan Goral	Collegiate Peaks Bank
Deborah Jordy	Colorado Business Committee for the Arts
Lindy Eichenbaum Lent	Civic Center Conservancy
Brandy Moe	Resident of Southwest Denver
Chris Nevitt	Denver City Council, District 7
Cindy Parsons	Comcast Corporation
Rebecca Pfinster	Resident of Southwest Denver
Gordon Robertson	City & County of Denver
Trinidad Rodriquez	George K. Baum & Associates

2019 “post” study

Jolon Clark	Denver City Council, District 7
Bart Dahl	DIME Denver
Father Joseph Dang	Denver Health
Christin Crampton Day	Colorado Business Committee for the Arts
Lisa Gedgaudas	City & County of Denver
Scott Gilmore	City & County of Denver
Paul Lhevine	Swallow Hill Music
Brandy Moe	Denver Urban Gardens
Chris Nevitt	City & County of Denver
Kasandra Ornelas	Southwest Denver Coalition
Kaitlin Peterson	Denver Public Library
Lucille Rivera	Chicano Humanities and Arts Council
Jesse Tang	Schmitt Elementary School

About Slover Linett

Slover Linett is a social research practice for the cultural and community sector, broadly defined to include museums, libraries, the arts, parks and public spaces, public media, science engagement, placemaking, and philanthropy. Founded in Chicago in 1999, the firm uses a range of equitable research and evaluation methods—from community ethnography and asset-mapping to quantitative survey research, advanced statistical modeling, and generative, co-creative workshops—to illuminate public perceptions, values, behaviors, outcomes, and new possibilities for relevance. Slover Linett’s mission is to help practitioners and policymakers increase equity and access, deepen engagement, and meet deep human and community needs. Our emphasis on empowering diverse populations and using culturally sensitive research practices places inclusion, responsiveness, and social change at the center of our work—and has made us trusted thought partners to leading organizations and foundations around the U.S. Our Chicago-based staff of twelve includes social scientists from disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and public policy, many with advanced degrees.

Slover Linett’s projects have ranged from a national study of millennials’ attitudes toward science for the National Academy of Sciences and a campus-wide arts strategy for Cornell University to multi-city research for the Human Origins Program of the Smithsonian Institution and an international program evaluation for the MacArthur Foundation. In addition to working with some of America’s most beloved civic and cultural destinations, such as Central Park, The High Line, the Library of Congress, Kennedy Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we’ve helped national and regional funders like the Knight Foundation, Wallace Foundation, and Irvine Foundation. We also work with progressive projects like Nina Simon’s Of/By/For All movement, the Baltimore Museum of Art’s community “branch” strategy in places like food markets, and Signature Theatre Company’s low-cost ticket access initiative.

During the pandemic, Slover Linett helped lead Culture & Community in a Time of Transformation: A Special Edition of Culture Track, a large-scale audience and population study in partnership with LaPlaca Cohen, Yancey Consulting, and NORC at the University of Chicago, with generous support from the Wallace Foundation, Barr Foundation, William Penn Foundation, Terra Foundation for American Art, and Art Bridges (a Walton family initiative) and crucial in-kind contributions from Microsoft and FocusVision. The first wave of the online national survey became one of the largest quantitative studies of cultural engagement in U.S. history; the findings have been viewed and downloaded more than 13,000 times and presented at numerous online conferences, and led to a BIPOC-focused analysis and report released in December 2020,

“Centering the Picture: The Role of Race & Ethnicity in Cultural Engagement in the U.S.” The 2021 phases of the project will amplify the voices of Americans of color and focus more deeply on the participants served by community-embedded organizations, from public libraries to independent music venues.

More information about Slover Linett can be found at our website, <https://sloverlinett.com/>, including recent news and commentary and team bios, and on our Twitter feed @SloverLinett.