



LISTENING TO THE MUSIC OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

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

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

A new study examines to what degree a creative placemaking project, such as a new cultural space like an outdoor music venue, can be positioned and programmed to become a community asset and inspire community attachment over time, using Levitt Pavilion Denver as a case study. Following a pandemic-fueled wave of interest in public spaces, the study offers timely insights for civic leaders, practitioners and funders seeking to build more equitable and thriving public spaces.

Commissioned by the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation and conducted by Slover Linett Audience Research, the study focuses on Denver's Ruby Hill neighborhood—a largely residential, predominantly low-income Hispanic/Latinx community. Reflecting on fieldwork conducted during the “pre” phase of the research in 2013 (before design and construction of Levitt Pavilion Denver began) and the “post” phase in 2019 (during the pavilion's third concert season), the white paper **explores shifting perceptions** of Ruby Hill Park, the local area, and the pavilion through the lens of lived experiences of local residents and park users before and after the venue came into being; **the role of collective memory** in shaping attitudes towards the arts investment; and how **equitable practices and processes** can further a **sense of belonging** while fostering long-term investment in the community.

BACKGROUND

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 community engagement, neighborhood vibrancy, and perceived safety and livability. The first two parts of the study were published in the 2016 white paper, *Setting the Stage for Community Change: Reflecting on Creative Placemaking Outcomes*. Among other findings, the report examined how the experience of free Levitt concerts fosters social interactions within groups and across demographic boundaries, which, in turn, builds social capital.

The 2021 white paper presents the third part of the research, a *Pre/Post Community Research Study at Levitt Pavilion Denver*, which explores the precursor to social capital—a **sense of belonging**. Slover Linett focused on the unique “situatedness” of Ruby Hill Park, including its location and history of use, in order to understand the preconditions for Levitt Pavilion Denver's creation and how it has begun to contribute to a sense of place and overall community vitality.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Slover Linett used largely **qualitative research methods**—ethnographic observation, naturalistic in-context interviews, standardized intercept interviews and one-on-one stakeholder interviews—to understand the role and impact of Levitt Pavilion Denver over time and across multiple definitions of “community,” inviting a range of perspectives on the pavilion and its concerts, the park, surrounding neighborhoods, and Denver as a whole. The researchers aimed to be attuned to **systemic drivers of equity and inequity** in the local community context and to listen for perceptions among area residents, Denver community stakeholders, and concert attendees of how Levitt Pavilion Denver has (or could) play a role in shifting those dynamics.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Levitt Pavilion Denver has helped create a **stronger, more equitable community of music lovers** in Denver, filling a longstanding gap in the area's arts landscape through free, high-caliber and wide-ranging music programming that is proximate to neighborhoods previously lacking consistent arts access, brings disparate music-loving audiences together, and enhances a sense of belonging through the pavilion's laid-back, casual vibe.

2. To **foster long-term investment in the local community** that supports a sense of belonging, Levitt Pavilion Denver could emphasize the community-led process at the core of its creation to better retain collective memory and navigate tensions around demographic change in the area, as well as potential barriers to participation. To support belonging, Levitt Pavilion Denver may consider more frequently bringing recognizable elements of the neighborhood into the project space, while increasing its presence within the community outside of the venue.

3. Having taken a nuanced view of the complexities of Denver's live music ecosystem, Levitt Pavilion Denver has played an important role in creating a **nurturing environment for musicians** in the city through opportunities both on and off the stage, in terms of competitive pay, helping artists reach broader audiences, and connecting artists to each other and to educational partnerships with schools and nonprofits.

4. The concentrated collaboration at the heart of Levitt Pavilion Denver's public/private partnership with the City involves the **sharing of resources in a complex landscape** among multiple stakeholders, which may make it difficult to attribute beneficial outcomes, or responsibility for challenges, to a single entity. A continued commitment to balancing established policies with project intention can lay the groundwork for shared, ecosystem-level progress to drive equitable public spaces.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FIELD

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Building on community assets

- When planning creative placemaking projects, find multiple opportunities to identify, honor, and collaborate with a community's existing cultural assets.
- Recognize that the collective memory of a project's origins may fade and be replaced by new perceptions or suppositions.

Working with complex community systems

- Set shared, realistic expectations of change and impact—and link with other efforts to amplify positive outcomes.
- 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.

Developing community-centered outcomes

- Involve communities of focus in the placemaking work in equitable and culturally responsive ways, particularly in defining desired outcomes at the start.
- 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.

Supporting a sense of belonging

- 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 connectivity.
- Acknowledge that creative placemaking work is not neutral, particularly when it involves arts and cultural components that are closely tied to differing community identities.
- Work to tie belonging within the creative placemaking space to forms of belonging outside that space, in the surrounding community.

