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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.



Sharon Yazowski Executive Director



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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.

In this pre/post research, Slover Linett focused on Ruby Hill Park's unique "situ-

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

atedness" 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." 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 "placetending" 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

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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 "belonging" (along 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,

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

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(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 bullet points 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, socioeconomics, 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.

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