



INNOVATION FUND PROJECT REPORT

December 2017





Photo via Barram's Gardens

How might programming that attracts a diverse audience be tweaked to **foster connections and trust** across class lines?



Photo via Go Mt. Airy



Photo via The Oval

How can communities let their **identity shine through**?



Photo via Knight Foundation



Photo via Albert Lee, Fairmount Park Conservancy

How might we use the Civic Commons to activate people's **passions** and increase **civic pride/ownership** among **diverse** constituents?

How might the Civic Commons be **radically welcoming** through staffing, programming, and communication?



Photo via The Uni Project

How might we **replicate the diversity** evident daily at Reading Terminal Market in a neighborhood park or library outside of Center City?

ABOUT REIMAGINING THE CIVIC COMMONS

Reimagining the Civic Commons is a national initiative supported by The JPB Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation. The Philadelphia pilot, funded by the Knight and William Penn Foundations, was managed by the Fairmount Park Conservancy. PennPraxis served as the local facilitator of the Innovation Fund, which brought partners in the program together to activate the sites prior to the completion of capital improvements, to share skills and assets between site managers, field leaders, and community organizations, and strengthen relationships with surrounding communities.

ABOUT THE INNOVATION FUND

To garner community excitement and support, funders set aside the **Innovation Fund** to develop **early-action projects** that could be realized quickly and evaluated in the near-term. Projects were meant to be **low-cost prototypes**, exploring innovative ideas while cultivating new organizational leadership and community connections. RCC engaged partners and civic organizations to achieve large-scale, **long-term community benefit**. PennPraxis, FPC, Knight, and WPF worked with partners along the way to share ideas, refine and evaluate designs, define implementation and benchmarking paths, and learn from testing new ideas and approaches through each step.

Innovation Fund projects aimed to achieve:

INTEGRATION: Help integrate diverse users and communities, and encourage greater interaction across socio-economic and cultural spectrums;

COLLABORATION: Promote collaboration across civic assets throughout the city, attract new visitors to sites and neighborhoods, and promote collaboration across field leaders; and

LEARNING: Foster innovation in ideas generation, projects, concepts, gauging impacts, and partnerships, and learning together through the process of prototyping and experimentation.

SELECTED PROJECTS

On June 21, 2016, PennPraxis conducted the **Innovation Fund Workshop**. Partners from each of the five sites included in the Commons participated to identify projects that would activate sites prior to the completion of their scheduled redesigns and improvements.

Through two working sessions, participants identified several ideas as potential projects to further develop. These include:

1. **Neighborhood Exchange Boxes:** small exhibits or skill-sharing packages that will be exchanged between sites to convey the skills and identity of each site/neighborhood
2. **Viola Alley:** an installation and event in Viola Alley that will share the history and character of Parkside and include programming similar to the future Centennial Commons
3. **Story Centers:** mini library kiosks at each of the sites to serve as locations for reading and storytelling, designed by neighborhood youth
4. **Discovery Gateway:** a temporary art installation to highlight the future project in conjunction with nature-based educational materials and activities akin to the future site

The first projects to launch were **Neighborhood Exchange Boxes** and **Viola Alley**, in the summer of 2016. **Discovery Gateway** occurred in the Spring of 2017 and **Story Centers** in the Fall of 2017. The Viola Alley project spurred an additional project, **Parkside Fresh Food Fest**, a pilot CSA program with additional arts, music and community programming.



How might the Civic Commons **change the reputation** of these sites and neighborhoods?



If a Philadelphia neighborhood could send a gift box to another neighborhood, filled with all of the things that make its community unique, what would go in the box?



NEIGHBORHOOD EXCHANGE BOXES

Lovett Library to Bartram's Garden

EVENT INFORMATION:

September 28, 2016 at Supper Sessions, Mt. Airy
October 16, 2016 at Harvest Fest, Bartram's Garden

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Bartram's Garden
Mt. Airy USA
Free Library of Philadelphia
MGA Architects
Fairmount Park Conservancy
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

The project began as a modern-day interpretation of the legendary Bartram's Boxes, which were sent by Philadelphian John Bartram (1699-1777), American's first botanist, to clients far and wide. The simple wooden boxes were filled with seeds, dried plants, and other natural specimens, designed to incite a sense of discovery in its recipients. The boxes brought new varieties of flowers and trees to Europe, which were reflected in its gardens then and today. Bartram's estate is now Bartram's Garden, located in Southwest Philadelphia.

Bartram's Garden is the terminus of Bartram's Mile, the mile-long bike and pedestrian trail that will connect Southwest Philadelphia with Center City, and ultimately the Schuylkill River Trail.

The Lovett Library and Park project brings together the Free Library of Philadelphia and Mt. Airy USA, the local community nonprofit in the Northwest Philadelphia neighborhood, to solidify the library and its adjacent park as a community hub and gathering space, and provide fertile testing ground for the concept of a library without walls.

The sites represent diverse communities across the city, many of whom know little about each other, and rarely visit. The Neighborhood Exchange Box project sought to change that, by collecting stories and treasures about each neighborhood, and sharing them with another site.

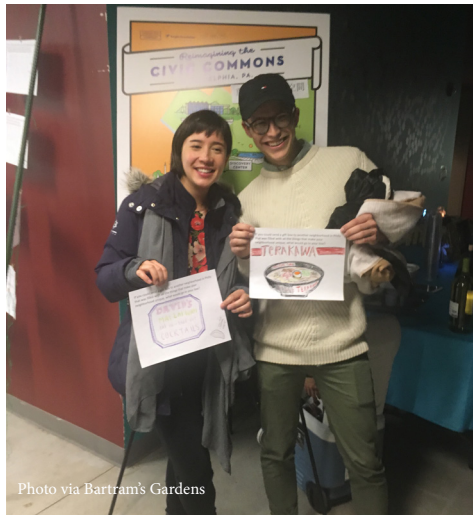
Mt. Airy USA kicked off the engagement, asking residents to share thoughts about what made the neighborhood unique. The team posted up at the outdoor dining nights "Supper Sessions" in the neighborhood, and repurposed a parklet (designed by MGA Architects for the AIA Convention this spring) as the venue for collection. The installation was meant both to draw attention and to invite visitors to share and linger. The outfit also featured a videographer who recorded residents' stories, as others wrote their thoughts on notecards which were then on display. After a few weeks, much input was collected, the box was filled, and was readied to send to the next site.

Several Southwest residents were invited to Mt. Airy for the last of their Supper Sessions and then served as ambassadors for the box at its new location. A number of these residents noted that they had never been to Mt. Airy and greatly enjoyed their visit and learning about its culture and history.

Filled with the contents of Mt. Airy, the box traveled to Bartram's Garden, where it was unpacked at the site's annual Harvest Fest. At this event, the box both shared the stories of Mt. Airy, as the gifts and notecards were displayed for all to view, and shifted to collecting stories from the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood.

Many Mt. Airy residents made the trip to Bartram's Garden for the festival, bringing diverse Philadelphians together to interact and learn and gain greater appreciation for the city's wealth of cultural assets.

As the project progresses, the Free Library of Philadelphia, another local partner in the Civic Commons, will work to archive and store the material for future sharing.



How can communities let their **identity shine through?**



If a Philadelphia neighborhood could send a gift box to another neighborhood, filled with all of the things that make its community unique, what would go in the box?



NEIGHBORHOOD EXCHANGE BOXES

Bartram's Garden to Viaduct Rail Park

EVENT INFORMATION:

February 28, 2017 at Asian Arts Initiative
March 3, 2017
April 5, 2017

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Friends of the Rail Park
Bartram's Garden
Asian Arts Initiative
Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation
Fairmount Park Conservancy
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

The third destination for the Neighborhood Exchange Box was the Viaduct Rail Park, located in a diverse cross-section of Philadelphia where increased development abuts historically Chinese neighborhoods.

The Rail Park is a long-anticipated project to convert abandoned segments of the Reading Railroad into open space. The "Viaduct" portion of the Rail Park, located in the Callowhill neighborhood immediately north of Chinatown and Center City, is almost fully funded and under construction. The surrounding area is characterized by residential lofts, many converted from historic warehouses, art galleries, ongoing light industrial use, and many still-vacant parcels. Though currently in flux, the residential makeup is among the most diverse in the city.

As the Viaduct Rail Park moves forward, neighborhood community partners are simultaneously leading engagement efforts to ensure that Chinatown's character is maintained and residents' needs are continually met as the neighborhood undergoes change. The Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) kicked off an update to the Chinatown Neighborhood Plan in December of 2016, working with Interface Studio. The neighborhood plan will address needs for housing, connectivity, and open space, and collect citizen input through a series of public forums. Down the street, the Asian Arts Initiative (AAI), just began a cultural planning process entitled: People:Power:Place, which will create a shared cultural vision for Chinatown North.

Designed to build bridges through the appreciation of shared experience and community pride, the Neighborhood Exchange Box provided the perfect accompaniment for these neighborhood conversations. Led by Friends of the Rail Park's Melissa Kim, the box popped up at the Chinatown Neighborhood Plan forum and again at the cultural plan community event. Kim was joined by representatives of Bartram's Garden in Southwest Philadelphia, the site that previously hosted the traveling collection of stories, in addition to PCDC and AAI staff, and PennPraxis.

Participants were eager to fill the box with messages celebrating the sights, sounds, smells, and experiences of the neighborhood. Food, people, culture, history, family, shared experiences, Reading Terminal, and specific food and drink like dim sum and bubble tea were mentioned several times.

The united themes of these responses indicate that there is a great deal that the community shares and values, despite differences in background or lifestyle. These common bonds will hopefully inspire community members to forge new and more meaningful relationships with one another as the neighborhood grows and develops with the new Rail Park as a shared asset.



Photo via Bartram's Gardens

How might we use the Civic Commons to activate people's **passions** and increase **civic pride/ownership** among **diverse** constituents?



Photo via Go Mt. Airy



Photo via The Oval



Photo via Knight Foundation



Photo via Albert Lee, Fairmount Park Conservancy

An alley in Philadelphia's East Parkside neighborhood became much more than a narrow passageway; it was transformed into a lively gathering space for learning, celebrating, and meeting new neighbors



Photo via The Uni Project

VIOLA ALLEY CONNECTOR

Centennial Commons

EVENT INFORMATION:

September 24, 2016

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Viola Streets Residents Association (VSRA)
Centennial Parkside CDC
Bartram's Garden
Free Library of Philadelphia, Culinary Literacy Center
Fairmount Park Conservancy
Philadelphia Horticultural Society
Metal Incorporated
Reading Terminal Market
Street Food Philly food truck
Philly Teepee
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

The Viola Alley Connector began as a vision of the Viola Street Residents Association (VSRA), and was refined by working with other Reimagining the Civic Commons (RCC) partners during the June 2016 workshop. VSRA and the Centennial Parkside CDC are involved in RCC due to the future development of the Centennial Commons, the plan to build new amenities along the Parkside edge of West Fairmount Park, which is adjacent to their community.

What emerged from the workshop was a plan to make physical and community connection between Viola Street and West Fairmount Park by locating several creative placemaking gestures within the underutilized alley. The project tested the idea of programming an alley and an adjacent empty lot as a venue to tell the story of the historic neighborhood, its residents, architectural history, and provide space for music, food, and community festivities.

The project was led by the Centennial Parkside CDC together with VSRA. Civic Commons partners involved included Bartram's Garden, whose staff brought a farm stand to the alley and demonstrated farming techniques in the Viola Street Community Garden; the Free Library of Philadelphia, whose representatives shared information and led a demonstration of African cooking techniques through its Culinary Literacy Center; the Fairmount Park Conservancy, who brought information about the Centennial Commons, and contributed tables and chairs and other resources to the event. In addition, the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS) created beautiful flower pot displays, in custom metal planters made by Metal Incorporated, and Reading Terminal Market gauged resident interest for a potential subsidized CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) for East Parkside residents. Parkside resident artists and videographers set up activity booths along the alley, which celebrated the history and character of the neighborhood.

The event was topped off by performances by a local drill team, gospel singers, and an African dance ensemble. The Street Food Philly food truck was present to provide free food to all visitors, and encouraged guests to linger and greet one another and stay for the entertainment. Even the Philly Teepee was pitched, providing a welcoming space for neighbors to relax and engage with one another. PennPraxis provided planning, logistical, and physical design support.

Most in attendance were Viola Street and Parkside residents, with about a third of visitors came from other Philadelphia neighborhoods. Those interviewed were very positive about the experience and enjoyed meeting new neighbors and learning about the neighborhood.



Photo via Bartram's Gardens

How might programming that attracts a diverse audience be tweaked to **foster connections and trust** across class lines?



Photo via Go Mt. Airy



Photo via The Oval



Photo via Knight Foundation



Photo via Albert Lee, Fairmount Park Conservancy

How might we **replicate the diversity** evident daily at Reading Terminal Market in a neighborhood park or library outside of Center City?



Photo via The Uni Project

PARKSIDE FRESH FOOD FEST

Centennial Commons

EVENT INFORMATION:

July 6, 2017
July 20, 2017
August 10, 2017
August 24, 2017
September 7, 2017
September 21, 2017

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Centennial Parkside CDC
All About Events
Viola Street Residents Association
Irvine Brothers Urban Produce Market
Fair Food Farmstand
Fairmount Park Conservancy
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

The Parkside Fresh Food Fest was a 6 (six) event series that sought to build community, utilize common public space, and provide fresh food access in the East Parkside neighborhood of Philadelphia. Events were free and open to the public and included chef-led cooking demonstrations with free samples as well as a variety of entertainment, education, and civic engagement opportunities located on Viola Alley.

Each food share included fresh fruit, vegetables, locally-sourced eggs and/or dairy products, and a selection of other grocery items from two well-known partners at The Reading Terminal Market: Iovine Bros Produce and Fair Food Farmstand. Information on each item was included along with a recipe card. Participants were able to purchase a 6-event, 4-event or single event share.

The seed of this food share program emerged from the Centennial Parkside CDC and the Viola Street Residents Association (VSRA) involvement in the local Reimagining the Civic Commons Initiative, specifically resident feedback at the Viola Alley Connector even on September 24, 2016.

The event realized a vision to make physical and community connection between Viola Street and West Fairmount Park by locating several activities and entertainment elements within the narrow alley. The project tested the idea of programming an alley and an alley-adjacent empty lot as a venue to tell the story of the historic neighborhood, its residents and architectural history, and provide space for music, food and community festivities.

The Viola Alley Connector was a great success, with residents wishing for more events to bring people together, and continue to activate the alley and other communal spaces. Using food as the foundation for community sharing, the idea of the “food share” emerged, which together with active programming, could provide a regularly-occurring event in the alley that would bring residents together to enjoy new foods and recipes, mingle with one another, and strengthen connections to their neighborhood, each other, and other partners.

Some of the original Viola Alley Connector partners are returning, like the Free Library and new organizations, like Indego Bike Share, came to facilitate new programs to keep things varied.



Photo via Bartram's Gardens



Photo via Go Mt. Airy



Photo via The Oval

How might the Civic Commons **change the reputation** of these sites and neighborhoods?



Photo via Knight Foundation



Photo via Albert Lee, Fairmount Park Conservancy

How might the Civic Commons be **radically welcoming** through staffing, programming, and communication?



Photo via The Uni Project

MIGRATE TO ADVENTURE AND DISCOVERY

Discovery Center

EVENT INFORMATION:

April 1, 2017

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Audubon Pennsylvania
Philadelphia Outward Bound
Strawberry Mansion CDC
Free Library of Philadelphia
Amber Arts
Fairmount Park Conservancy
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

Audubon Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Outward Bound have been working together, along with other local agencies and non-profits, to transform an abandoned and generally unknown water reservoir in East Fairmount Park, adjacent to the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, into a new community resource and reclaimed neighborhood asset. The daytime event was intended to raise awareness about the project, give a sample of future programming, and engage meaningfully with nearby neighborhood residents as well as Philadelphians from near and far.

Partners brainstormed an event which would serve as a “gateway” to the neighborhood, to East Fairmount Park, and to the Discovery Center, which is anticipated to be completed in 2018.

Using tried and true elements to harness community energy, the event featured offerings from local food trucks, giant games for all ages, welcoming and warming elements like fire pits and hot chocolate (it was still chilly in March!), seating areas, and energetic music. In addition, local arts partner Amber Arts, funded by the Fairmount Park Conservancy’s ArtPlace America Community Development Investments (CDI) grant, created posters placed across the event site, featuring neighborhood histories as told by local residents, sharing their memories of the reservoir and of growing up in Strawberry Mansion.

This added an element to remind attendees that the park was not only a city-wide recreational resource, but very much a part of neighborhood identity and pride. As community engagement and empowerment is a core principle of the Civic Commons, this was an important role to acknowledge.

Finally, the event included the unveiling of the Free Library of Nature program, featuring the “birding backpacks.” The backpack is part of a new initiative created by the Free Library of Philadelphia and Philadelphia Parks and Recreation to provide birding tools and programming to residents through their neighborhood library. The backpacks are available on loan at select library branches around Philadelphia to be used as part of an organized bird walk or on a solo adventure. The backpacks include maps, a bird guide, and binoculars. Those that attended the event were the first to test the backpacks, and participated in birding tours led by Parks and Rec and Audubon guides.

Migrate to Adventure and Discovery demonstrated the power of nature and outdoor education to bring people together. Philadelphians came from across the city, perhaps because they lived nearby, were bird enthusiasts, urban historians, or just wanted an excuse to be outside despite chillier temperatures. Though not yet complete, the Discovery Center proved to be a true “civic commons,” bringing a multitude of groups together to appreciate and share a community benefit.



Photo via Bartram's Gardens

How can communities let their **identity shine through?**



Photo via Go Mt. Airy



Photo via The Oval



Photo via Knight Foundation



Photo via Albert Lee, Fairmount Park Conservancy

Sometimes things do not turn out as you planned. Sometimes they turn out even better



Photo via The Uni Project

How might the Civic Commons be **radically welcoming** through staffing, programming, and communication?

STORY CENTERS

Lovett Library

EVENT INFORMATION:

October 26, 2017

PROJECT PARTNERS:

Mt. Airy USA
Free Library of Philadelphia
Trades for a Difference
Fairmount Park Conservancy
PennPraxis

EVENT SUMMARY:

Story Centers are mini library kiosks also/better known as Little Free Libraries. These kiosks serve as mini community hubs, inspiring diverse and intergenerational interactions through a collaborative design and building process as well as through their subsequent curation and programming.

While this was not an entirely new idea (the Little Free Library organization is an international nonprofit devoted to building and registering them, and Mt. Airy already had several), the closing of the neighborhood library, Lovett Memorial, presented the ideal opportunity to take inventory of those existing in the neighborhood and areas in need of more connection to literacy and community. Three additional libraries were planned to fill these existing gaps.

Bringing the concept of Story Centers into fruition took over a year. The idea emerged from a charrette attended by all the partner organizations of the Philadelphia Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative in the summer of 2016 and, since its inception, has taken many forms and iterations. From deciding which partners to work with to confirming the event date to recruiting participants, the process was a practice in patience, adaptability, and ingenuity.

Most of these unforeseen pivots led to positive outcomes. One of the most fortuitous of these was choosing to work with Trades for a Difference (TFAD), an up-and-coming Mt. Airy-based nonprofit dedicated to the mentoring and workforce development of local youth. Other changes resulted in less-than-ideal unforeseen consequences, like rain on the build day. The end result was a good compromise between the spirit of the original idea and the nuanced constraints of circumstance.

In the Trolley Car Diner Pocket Park, the Free Library, TFAD, and Mt. Airy USA partnered to build three story centers to be installed in various locations in East Mt. Airy. The build day coincided with Autumn on the Avenue, a seasonal sidewalk festival, also taking place on the busy thoroughfare of Germantown Avenue. Despite initial low turnout due to unexpectedly cold and rainy weather, the event otherwise commenced as planned.

As the afternoon progressed, more participants came, and the sidewalks became full of families with costumed children once the rain completely stopped. Folks of all ages came together using power tools, painting shingles, enjoying refreshments, and singing and dancing to oldies. While it was not what was originally conceived, Story Centers and the build day were still a success.

There is no coincidence that Story Centers were funded by the Knight Foundation's Innovation Fund. The essence of innovation is the evolution of an idea. Plans change. Obstacles appear. Problems must be solved. Sometimes in order for things to fall into place, relinquishing control and submitting to some uncertainty are necessary. Story Centers was the ideal project to illustrate and understand these lessons.

