

SETTING THE STAGE FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE: REFLECTING ON CREATIVE PLACEMAKING OUTCOMES



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TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF OUR WORK

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How do we know if the Levitt Foundation’s long-term creative placemaking investments are creating the desired impacts—how do we measure and define success?

When the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation embarked on this study four years ago, we began with one all encompassing question: How do we know if the Foundation’s long-term creative placemaking investments in outdoor, permanent music

venues and the nonprofits that manage them are creating the desired impacts—adding vitality to once-neglected public spaces; bringing people together of diverse ages, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds; ensuring access to high caliber concerts through consistent free programming; and, ultimately, strengthening the social fabric of communities? In other words, how do we measure and define “success?”

We recognized that the Levitt Foundation’s theory of change regarding the outcomes and impact of these permanent music venues presenting free concerts contained many underlying assumptions, which we were keen to test. Among these assumptions were how Levitt venues and the free programming presented improve overall city livability, raise the quality of life, increase attachment to community and community engagement, improve perceptions of the public space and surrounding area, and create a stronger sense of neighborliness and social connectivity. While we had learned a fair amount about the program’s impact through regular visits to the Levitt venues, conversations with a variety of stakeholders, and annual reports and audience surveys provided by our Friends of Levitt partners, we sought a more rigorous, objective approach that would provide us with new information and insights to guide our work.

The 2012 recommendation by entities like ArtPlace America and the National Endowment for the Arts to use a set of indicators with nationally available data to measure the impact of creative placemaking projects further sparked our desire to undertake an independent study. We wondered whether these indicators, primarily economic and demographic in nature, could shed additional light on the impact of permanent Levitt venues across the country—especially since these venues, while locally driven and realized, share a common mission, framework and program goals to strengthen communities through free, live music. Would the data collected through the uniform indicators approach present a clear picture of

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outcomes and social impact and illuminate trends or similarities across the Levitt network of music venues?

With these questions in mind, we commissioned a third-party study with Slover Linett Audience Research and Dr. Joanna Woronkowitz to test the assumptions outlined in our theory of change and provide us with a new, data-driven understanding of the social impact of permanent Levitt venues. We hoped the study—a mix of primary research conducted by Slover Linett using qualitative and quantitative methods, and secondary research conducted by Dr. Woronkowitz using a quantitative indicators approach—might inspire refinements or challenge the assumptions underlying our venture philanthropy model and the program itself, with the goal of creating greater impact. We also sought to uncover any unintended effects of these long-term creative placemaking interventions.

We hope this new body of research contributes to the creative placemaking field and the funding community at large, sparking further dialogue on how to measure outcomes and impact and on the role of creative placemaking projects in strengthening communities and promoting social connectivity. We would like to thank the Slover Linett team, in particular Sarah Lee and Peter Linett, as well as Dr. Woronkowitz for their rigorous and thoughtful analysis throughout this multi-year, multi-layered process. The new knowledge gleaned from this study has already begun informing the work of the Levitt Foundation and will continue to do so moving forward. We also thank the staff of the five permanent Levitt venues for their participation and openness during this study. Last but not least, we are grateful to the Bruner Foundation for its generous support of this work.

We believe the recommendations and implications discussed in this white paper will provide valuable guidance to a wide range of creative placemaking efforts, from music-based projects like ours to those involving other arts disciplines, and both temporary and long-term investments. Please [share your thoughts and comments](#), and we 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
Senior Director of
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Peter Linett | Slover Linett Audience Research

The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation empowers communities across the nation to revitalize underused public spaces through the power of free, live music. The Foundation focuses on two key program areas: permanent Levitt music venues and the Levitt AMP [Your City] Grant Awards. Currently, there are six permanent Levitt performance venues across the country, with four more in development, in communities from Pasadena, California to Arlington, Texas to Memphis, and in sites ranging from previously decrepit WPA-era band shells in challenged parks to previously vacant lots in once-dormant downtown areas. This kind of arts-based effort to revitalize a neighborhood, community, or city has, over the last decade, come to be known as “creative placemaking,” a movement that now includes a wide spectrum of projects, from efforts to invest in cultural amenities in order to make a place more attractive for economic development and a vibrant workforce, to artist-driven social and community projects that use creativity to improve the physical and social fabric of neighborhoods.¹

As the creative placemaking field has flourished, with national funders directing tens of millions of dollars to creative placemaking projects in all 50 states and U.S. territories, there has been a growing interest in measuring and understanding the impact of these projects, particularly with respect to their contribution to the economic vitality, livability, vibrancy, social capital, and civic engagement of the communities in which they take place. At first, creative placemaking assessment efforts were focused on developing “indicators” of change and success: new

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frameworks for bringing together a variety of data points that are related to intended creative placemaking outcomes, which can be tracked over time to gauge the impact of the investment in creative placemaking initiatives.² But it has since become clear that the indicators approach has real limitations, especially with respect to connecting

changes in the indicators with specific features or activities of any given creative placemaking project.³ So more recently, a body of project-specific studies has been growing, many of which use multiple methods to directly measure the effects that creative placemaking projects have had on the people and places involved, and to shed light on the mechanisms by which they bring about change. Such locally tailored studies also offer ways to avoid a problem that some observers have noted in indicators-based approaches: that the use of economic data can

overlook the displacement of some residents and unintentionally endorse gentrification in the name of economic vibrancy.

In that vein, the Levitt Foundation commissioned a multi-mode study in 2013 to better understand and document the impact of the six permanent music venues, which receive major grants from the Foundation—on the individuals who attend them, on the neighborhoods and communities in which they are located, and on the cities as a whole. The study was designed to test the Foundation’s hypotheses about the outcomes assumed to result from the existence of, and the programming provided by, each venue and to explore *how* the venues are bringing about any observed changes and *whether* they are creating social impact in their communities. More broadly, it was also

A multi-modal study to explore *how* the venues are bringing about observed changes and *whether* they are creating social impact.

conceived as an opportunity to learn more about the challenges of measuring the social impact of creative placemaking projects using multiple research and analysis methods.

The study consists of three components: an **Indirect Outcomes Assessment**, which is largely modeled after the National Endowment for the Arts’ “Arts & Livability Indicators” system and uses existing national data to measure change on various dimensions in the communities around five permanent Levitt venues; an **Audience & Community Outcomes Exploration**, which uses primary qualitative and quantitative data collection among concertgoers and neighborhood residents in two Levitt communities (Memphis and Pasadena, California) to explore the effects “on the ground” in those communities; and a **Pre/Post Community Outcomes Study**, which also uses primary qualitative and quantitative data collection, this time with a “pre-post design” to document changes from before a new Levitt Pavilion opens in Denver in 2017 to after it has been in operation for a full season. The present document includes a reflection on the first research component and the full paper based on the second component; a paper based on the third component will be released in early 2019.

INDIRECT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

In this paper, Dr. Joanna Woronkowicz of Indiana University shares reflections on her recent indicators-based analysis of neighborhood change in five Levitt com

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munities, “Levitt Music Venues and Neighborhood Change: Reflections on a Creative Placemaking Indicators Analysis.” That analysis resulted in an internal report to the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation and a peer-reviewed article in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* titled “Art-Making or Place-Making? The Relationship between Open-Air Performance Venues and Neighborhood Change” (2015); the [journal article](#) is available as a companion to this white paper.

Using data from the U.S. Decennial Census and the American Community Survey, Dr. Woronkowitz analyzed change in five of the communities with a permanent Levitt venue between 1990 and 2011 on three broad dimensions: residents’ attachment to the community; quality of life; and economic conditions. Her analysis largely follows the National Endowment for the Arts’ 2014 Validating Arts & Livability Indicators (VALI) study in constructing each of these dimensions. By analyzing national data sets on a highly local level to assess the changes in those VALI categories that have taken place in neighborhoods during the period in which the Levitt venues were founded and the years following, Dr. Woronkowitz sought to shed additional light on the value of an indicators-based approach to creative placemaking impact research.

The news about that value is mixed at best. Dr. Woronkowitz’s analysis shows that indicator trends varied widely across the five Levitt neighborhoods in the study. Some neighborhoods saw improvements related to residents’ attachment to community, while others did not. The same was true for quality of life and economic conditions. Even within these broad categories, some indicators pointed toward improvements, and others pointed in the opposite direction. From this, Dr. Woronkowitz draws three conclusions: First, that the indirect impacts of Levitt pavilions are probably largely dependent on the unique neighborhood context and other conditions that exist prior to the introduction of the Levitt venue. Second, that that context and those conditions can’t be understood through an analysis of existing data sets, at least not the nationally available (and therefore comparable) data sets used in her analysis. And third, that for those reasons, the indicators method is probably not the most effective way of understanding the effects of creative placemaking initiatives. To authentically evaluate the impact of an initiative, both its unique goals and the unique conditions of the community must be taken into account. In the case of the Levitt Foundation and its nonprofit and civic partners in each city, those goals include concepts like neighborhood cohesion and providing a safe, vibrant place for neighbors to interact—concepts which are

inherently difficult to measure through the standardized data sources that can be aggregated in an indicators framework.

AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY OUTCOMES EXPLORATION

In the second paper, “Levitt Venues in Memphis and Pasadena: An Audience and Community Outcomes Study,” Sarah Lee, president of the cultural research firm Slover Linett, and her colleague, Nicole Baltazar, summarize the findings of the Audience and Community Outcomes Exploration they conducted at the Levitt Pavilion in Pasadena and the Levitt Shell in Memphis. 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 half a dozen concerts; a quantitative survey of attendees at a sample of concerts throughout each venue’s summer season; interviews with elected officials, a variety of local business owners, neighborhood social- and 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 a mix of residents in each city.

This hybrid experience of the arts and community connection helps to foster a deeply communal spirit at Levitt concerts.

Assimilating these multiple perspectives across the two research sites, the team finds that Levitt venues offer a *hybrid experience* of the arts and community connection: attending a concert at a Levitt venue is not solely and exclusively about the music, but neither is the music incidental to the quality and value of the experience. Rather, the experience is a complex interweaving of musical, social, and community elements. This hybridity helps to foster a deeply communal spirit at Levitt concerts. The musical performance offers an experience that is shared among those in attendance, while still allowing social interaction and connection among audience members to take place. Being able to interact with people *within* one’s existing social network (including those who attend together and those who encounter each other serendipitously at the concert) is an especially important part of the experience for many concertgoers. This makes Levitt venues a successful platform for what sociologists call “bonding social capital,”⁴ or the ties that connect members of a group to each other and form a social safety net. The researchers also found that Levitt venues foster interactions across social networks. This helps build “bridging social capital,”⁵ or

points of connection, understanding, and exchange between and across diverse social groups. Levitt concerts do this by providing a forum for residents to come together in a defined space in a way that enables them to have friendly interactions with people unlike themselves. Levitt concertgoers feel a sense of “all are welcome,” which is heightened by the fact that there are literally no doors or walls to keep some in the venue and others outside of it. The demographics of the audiences Lee and her colleagues surveyed in Pasadena and Memphis suggest a level of diversity along multiple dimensions that is rarely found in arts settings (particularly the formal performing arts, but also many other niche cultural experiences that appeal to only one demographic or psychographic “type” or community). The open lawn setting at all Levitt venues and free admission for the concert series engender a “leveling” effect: concertgoers feel a sense of equality with their fellow audience members, a sense that socioeconomic differences fade away while enjoying a Levitt concert. Again, the music is not incidental to these social effects. Levitt concerts are almost universally expected to include high quality music, and audiences believe that the performers booked by Levitt venues will meet high

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standards whether they are local musicians or artists of national stature. While the music is a central reason that people attend, many choose to attend irrespective of the *particular* artists performing; they have come to view Levitt as a trusted curator that will expose them to new music genres and artists they will enjoy. So the success of Levitt venues

as placemaking enterprises may hinge not just on their creating welcoming, appealing public environments but also on their being astute musical programmers who know what will appeal to their communities.

The research team also observed that the presence of Levitt venues in these two cities played, and continues to play, an important role in broader physical and economic revitalization efforts in the immediate areas and surrounding communities. In both Pasadena and Memphis, the Levitt Foundation worked with the city government and a local Friends of Levitt nonprofit to restore an existing but run-down WPA-era band shell. The restoration of both band shells contributed to reinvestment in and reactivation of the parks where they are located. Stakeholders described both parks as being unsafe and in disuse before the restoration; now they are used actively both during and outside of Levitt concerts, and concertgoers almost unanimously report feeling safe at each. The Levitt venues also

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support revitalization of the area by spurring economic activity in the neighborhoods around the venue. Concertgoers patronize local businesses such as bars, restaurants, and retail outlets before and after the show. Some of those concertgoers live in the immediate vicinity of the Levitt venue, so their spending helps keep economic activity in the neighborhood; others come to the neighborhood from other areas, bringing incremental revenue to the area. In both Memphis and Pasadena, the Levitt venues are perceived to have had an important catalytic and contributory role in the broader revitalization of the neighborhoods beyond the parks, but in neither case was the venue solely responsible for those developments. This is probably true of most creative placemaking efforts, and it is consistent with the way the Levitt Foundation selects communities for a possible Levitt venue: considering both the community's *need* (whether it has substantial neglected or underutilized public space, and whether it lacks accessible arts and cultural offerings) and its *readiness* (whether there is commitment and support from local leadership and residents to improve a public space and the surrounding area). In both of the cities studied in this evaluation, that dual picture of need and readiness appears to have been well supported: the Levitt venue was one among several strategies for community vitality, and the readiness and commitment shown by local stakeholders was reflected in their support not just for the Levitt project but also for parallel undertakings with similar goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Since every creative placemaking project is unique, its success depends on the goals it is trying to achieve and the specific context in which it operates. Yet the two completed components of the Levitt Foundation study, taken together, point to some broad implications for the creative placemaking field, and particularly for projects that have free live music programming at their core. We list them briefly here and discuss them in more detail in the final section of this document.

In creative placemaking, programming is as important as place in providing a compelling and communal experience for participants. Creative placemaking projects must pay equal attention to the creative and artistic programming they offer, as well as the physical attributes that support community-building and social capital-building—it may be helpful to think in terms of *hybrid experiences*, in which the art itself is closely interwoven with social connection and participation.

For music providers in particular, a venue’s programming can communicate subtle but important messages regarding who might feel welcome. To bring together a truly diverse community, music-centered projects may need to include programming that authentically reflects the diverse backgrounds and varied tastes of that community. Offering a diverse and eclectic roster of genres and performers, all of high quality, is critical to making sure the venue speaks to multiple segments of the population.

The physical and logistical attributes of a creative placemaking project will guide how people participate in, and how they benefit from, the experience. When developing a project, creative placemakers and their colleagues should carefully consider how their space or location establishes or reinforces the kind of participation they hope to see, as well as how potential barriers to entry (like location, price, proximity to public transportation, etc.) inform who participates and how frequently they participate.

Communicating explicitly about a project’s community-building goals with participants and residents can help to engage them as informal ambassadors. Local audiences can be strong advocates for creative placemaking projects, encouraging their friends, family, and community members to attend and support these initiatives. Communicating a clear, specific message about community-building goals gives audiences the language to cement their own feelings about the creative placemaking project and communicate those feelings to others.

The history and sociology of the community in which the creative placemaking project takes place, and the specific site that is chosen, will profoundly inform the way the project unfolds. By recognizing when a community is poised for revitalization or when there are other investments being made in a community’s social capital, placemakers can leverage their work for maximum impact and can help tip a community toward new levels of engagement. But a community’s existing characteristics and history can also limit a project’s potential. An in-depth awareness of a community’s latent potential *and* persistent challenges can help initiatives set appropriate goals and develop targeted strategies for high-impact creative placemaking.

Partnership, coordination, and collaboration are essential creative placemaking skills and key to ensuring that the placemaking project remains

community-driven. Given that the aims of most creative placemaking projects are ambitious and systemic—it may simply not be realistic for any single project alone to substantially move the needle on a community’s overall livability or economic vitality or social connectedness—connecting it with other social efforts and stakeholders is critical for effectively unlocking the full potential of a project.

There isn’t a “one size fits all” method of assessing the success of creative placemaking projects. The creative placemaking field has been embracing the notion that primary data collection efforts should be combined with the existing indicators frameworks in order to assess the social impact of individual placemaking projects. We believe that this study illustrates this, showing how project-specific assessment reveals new insights about both the efficacy of creative placemaking projects and the mechanisms by which they operate—insights that would not be reached through an indicators approach alone.

We invite you to explore each section of this white paper in depth and look forward to sharing the third component of this study in early 2019. In the meantime, we invite your [comments and feedback](#).

1. Markusen, Ann, and Anne Gadwa. *Creative Placemaking*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010. Accessed January 29, 2016. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.
2. See, for example, Morley, Elaine, Mary K. Winkler, and The Urban Institute. “The Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study: Results and Recommendations.” April 2014. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/VALI-Report.pdf>.
3. See, for example, Markusen, Ann. “Fuzzy Concepts, Proxy Data.” *Createquity*. November 9, 2012 or Moss, Ian David. “Creative Placemaking Has an Outcomes Problem.” *Createquity*. May 9, 2012.
4. Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
5. *Ibid.*

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