

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

What's Next
Revitalizing Community Connection
By Corey Binns

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↓ A series of community meetings led to inexpensive improvements that helped revitalize Akron, Ohio's, Summit Lake. Akron is one of five cities involved in the Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative.

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register in the top 15, says Kate Folb, who directs Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center that provides entertainment industry professionals with information for storylines on health, safety, and national security. "It was just completely off people's radar," Folb says.

N Square approached Folb about providing funding and contacts to include the issue of nuclear security in her program's portfolio of activities. The program has since developed storylines about nuclear weapons in popular shows such as the political drama *Madam Secretary*.

"This is an issue we all have a stake in and all can have agency over," says Erika Gregory, N Square's managing director. The collaboration was founded in 2014 by program officers from five foundations invested in peace and security issues—MacArthur, William and Flora Hewlett, Carnegie, Skoll, and the Ploughshares Fund—which were concerned by the lack of new ideas, energy, and resources being devoted to the disarmament field. Public fears regarding the threat of nuclear annihilation, which faded with the Cold War, are now largely enshrined in dated cultural artifacts. Until recently, the threat of an accidental or deliberate nuclear strike seemed obsolete in the face of more tangible crises like school shootings.

Today, the organization is building a network of experts and donors from a variety of fields, all committed to nuclear-threat reduction. Gregory helped launch the N Square Innovators Network in 2017, bringing

together a group including engineers, brand strategists, designers, media wonks, futurists, and nuclear-threat experts, for retreats, meet-ups, and other gatherings. N Square puts up everyone together in houses, and activities have included everything from nighttime beach walks to discuss arms control to games such as figuring out how to escape a room called the "Putin Bunker" as a way to think about the role of kinesthetic experience in building public awareness. Two more cohorts will follow this fall and next spring.

Gregory wants to make sure that those working on disarmament have the resources and allies they need, she says.

So why work with Hollywood instead of the Pentagon? Gregory cites *The Medici Effect*, in which author Frans Johansson argues that innovation happens when different disciplines and ideas intersect. Having people from very different backgrounds working together is critical, she says. Each person brings his or her own unique expertise to bear on a common problem. "People working on policy agendas don't necessarily have any idea what is going on with new technology."

Complacency comes at a cost, says Morgan Matthews, N Square's program manager and design strategist. "We don't have frameworks for managing [a nuclear event], yet it has the highest consequence of anything humans can do to our planet and ourselves," she says. Such threats, as well as newer technologies like synthetic biology and autonomous weaponry, "will continue to come at us." ■



CITIES

Revitalizing Community Connection

BY COREY BINNS

A 100-acre glacial lake known in the 1900s as Akron's million-dollar playground sits just a two-mile jog south of the city's downtown. Thousands of Ohioans once spent summer days riding the park's roller coaster and swimming in the lake. But after the area's booming rubber industry contaminated Summit Lake, the nearby neighborhood fell into decades of decay and isolation.

In 2016, a series of meetings with community members led to inexpensive improvements around the lake. Today, families from all over the city sit next to each other on new benches under shade umbrellas, grill hot dogs, and paddle canoes. For Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan, the process revealed the critical role that public spaces play as a platform for equity: "It's allowed us to reevaluate how we view city

parks and view our citizens as cocreators of public land."

Akron is one of five US cities involved in a three-year, \$40 million initiative launched in 2016 that has developed a measurement system for parks, trails, and community centers to model how cities can restore their civic commons. The goal is to create, or re-create, public spaces that matter. "Libraries and parks and recreation centers have historically served the purpose of amplifying citizenship," says Carol Coletta, a fellow at The Kresge Foundation, one of the four funders of Reimagining the Civic Commons in addition to the JPB, Knight, and Rockefeller foundations. "We're trying to reclaim their legacy as institutions."

Communities, especially disinvested ones, need a boost, says Coletta. We no longer know our neighbors, and our belief in institutions has dwindled. She and her colleagues set out to pinpoint hiking trails and civic spaces they might repurpose to rebuild capital and trust in disenfranchised neighborhoods.

The team claims it has built the first comprehensive set of metrics that connect the impact

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of revitalization to things such as trust between people; perceptions of safety; and a community's ability to draw together people of different incomes, races, and backgrounds.

Treating plazas and hiking trails as a linked portfolio tied to social outcomes marks a simple yet significant shift, says Bridget Marquis, director of the Civic Commons Learning Network. She urges city officials to recognize the value of existing parks and libraries that communities invested in a century ago, rather than building anew: "Every city, and almost every neighborhood, has civic assets that if reimaged could connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust, and

counter the trends of social and economic fragmentation."

Marquis and her colleagues developed a set of indicators, collected from a combination of focus groups, surveys, and police and real estate records. Trust, for example, is measured in part by asking if people trust their local government to do what is right. Public life is gauged by the number and duration of times people visit a public space.

The initiative also studies socio-economic mixing by measuring the diversity of race and income levels among visitors to each site, the time people spend with their neighbors, and the opportunities people have to meet someone new. Despite

mounting research espousing the benefits of diverse, mixed-income communities, socio-economic mixing doesn't appear on many city agendas. People working with the initiative can bridge divides, starting with the civic commons as places that make it convenient and pleasant to be in the company of strangers.

In Philadelphia, the Swim Philly program lured more swimmers to its public pools with bright lounge chairs and umbrellas, free water aerobics, and poolside yoga. The pools' popularity inspired Mitchell Silver, commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, to launch five

freshly painted "Cool Pools" in each borough. Silver believes the civic commons program can revitalize communities—if leaders manage expectations and build public trust. The Learning Network will continue to share resources with other cities.

"If all cities were making strategic investments in our civic assets to connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust, and counter these trends of social and economic fragmentation, I believe we would see stronger, more equitable cities," Marquis says. "Places that finally live up to the American ideal that we are all created equally and that we all can share equally in public life." ■



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