



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

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As interest in measuring and understanding the impact of arts investments in community development continues to grow, a new study examines how “creative placemaking” interventions build social capital in communities, using Levitt music venues as case studies. This research offers insights into arts-based strategies to promote social connectivity, a central goal of many creative placemaking efforts, and is a working illustration of what can and can’t be learned from different impact-measurement approaches.

BACKGROUND

Through its support of creative placemaking, the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation empowers communities across the country to revitalize underused public spaces through free live music, including the development of permanent outdoor Levitt music venues, each providing 50 free, professional concerts to the community every year. Levitt venues—each managed, programmed and supported by a Friends of Levitt nonprofit organization—share a common mission to strengthen the social fabric of their communities by invigorating community life and bringing people together of all ages and backgrounds.

Commissioned by the Levitt Foundation and led by Slover Linett Audience Research, this multi-year (2013–2016), mixed-method study was designed to explore whether and how Levitt music venues are bringing about change in communities and the mechanisms by which they affect individual concertgoers and the broader community. The new study sought to examine the social impact of these venues and to further the dialogue on how to measure the outcomes and impact of creative placemaking interventions.

Indirect Outcomes Assessment, by Joanna Woronkowitz, Ph.D.

Largely modeled after the National Endowment for the Arts’ “Arts & Livability Indicators” system, this component of the study discusses the limitations of indicators in creative placemaking outcomes measurement and impact evaluation.

Audience & Community Outcomes Exploration, by Slover Linett

Using primary qualitative and quantitative data collection, this component of the study examines how Levitt venues provide opportunities for social interactions that increase both “bonding” and “bridging” social capital, and explores the community-level impact of Levitt venues.

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KEY FINDINGS

- The free Levitt concert series, and the venue’s welcoming environment, offer a **hybrid experience of both the arts and community connection**, facilitating **social interaction** not only within attendees’ **existing social groups**, but also facilitating meaningful social interactions **across demographic boundaries**.
- Levitt venues, while playing a **catalytic and contributory role in broader community revitalization**, were **not solely responsible** for these developments and were one among several strategies for community vitality. Fully **understanding a neighborhood’s context** is key to understanding both the potential and actual impacts of a creative placemaking initiative.
- Reinvigoration of the public space creates an **improvement** in community members’ **perceptions of the safety** of the Levitt venue location and surrounding neighborhood. More broadly, this **reinvigoration combined with activation** of the Levitt venues contributes to community residents’ **“pride of place.”**
- The **caliber and variety of musicians** performing at Levitt venues plays an **important role in appealing to a diverse cross-section of their communities**. While attendees may not be familiar with the particular artists performing, they have come to **trust Levitt to expose them to new music and high-quality talent** they will enjoy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The Levitt Foundation hopes the implications from this study will provide valuable guidance to a wide range of creative placemaking efforts, from music-based projects to those involving other arts disciplines and diverse community contexts, and including both temporary and long-term investments.

- In creative placemaking, programming is as important as place in providing a compelling and communal experience.
- For music providers in particular, a venue’s programming can communicate subtle but important messages regarding who might feel welcome.
- The physical and logistical attributes of a creative placemaking project will guide how people participate in, and how they benefit from, the experience.
- Communicating explicitly about a project’s community-building goals with participants and residents can help to engage them as informal ambassadors.
- 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.
- Partnership, coordination, and collaboration are essential creative placemaking skills and key to ensuring that the placemaking project remains community-driven.
- There isn’t a “one size fits all” method of assessing the success of creative placemaking projects. Project-specific assessment reveals insights that would not be reached through an indicators approach alone.