



Equitable Business Improvement Districts as a Creative Placemaking Model

Background

PolicyLink believes that arts and culture are core components of an equitable society, and that they also provide key strategies for achieving equity. Arts and culture can activate, amplify, and extend the power and reach of the voices of the one-in-three Americans living in or near poverty, to accelerate equity for themselves and the nation. PolicyLink lifts up and magnifies arts and culture as both a core component and approach to equitable development and movement building.¹

Our efforts span the breadth and depth of the fields in which PolicyLink works, touching health, infrastructure, equitable economy, workforce development, and every issue in our portfolio. PolicyLink also works closely with the creative placemaking field, which leverages arts and culture by diverse partners to strategically shape the physical and social character of a place in order to spur economic development, promote enduring social change, and improve the physical environment.² Read our [framing paper](#) to learn more about how equitable development policy can be advanced across multiple sectors when aided by arts and culture practices. Also see www.communitydevelopment.art for other PolicyLink research about creative placemaking, and arts and culture.

This is the third component in a series exploring avenues of new research regarding arts, culture, and equitable development. The goal of the series is to encourage the examination of these issues and see that the importance of arts and culture strategies is recognized by potential researchers and those who can use that research.

This document, the third in the series, invites researchers to develop a research plan to inform and support policy change at the nexus of arts and culture, creative placemaking, and equitable development. The proposed research is based on themes that have emerged from the exemplary Downtown Grand Rapids business improvement district (BID) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is becoming a model for incorporating arts and culture in support of equitable revitalization and greater social cohesion in a diverse population (see sidebar on next page for more details).

PolicyLink hopes this research will provide data and findings to make a strong case for policy change, which could then be supported and advocated for by leaders in both the arts and placemaking fields. The nature of these issues and a commitment to equity both call for approaches to research that are participatory and inclusive with the residents of the communities.

Specific Research Aim

The overall aim of this envisioned research is to learn from the experience of the [Rail Park](#) in Philadelphia (a three-mile revitalized public greenway project with pathways and gathering spaces for pedestrians, bicyclists, neighbors, and visitors), Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc., and other similar placemaking projects to guide and inform the establishment of policies and practices to make urban economic development more effective and equitable. Infrastructure reuse projects like the Philly Rail Park have become increasingly used to stimulating urban economic development through turning obsolete structures into valuable public space.

More specifically, we want to gauge different ways that business improvement districts (BIDs) could be structured in order to make creative placemaking projects more equitable. For example, permanent creative placemaking projects, like the Philly Rail Park, have utilized BIDs as a part of their revenue generation and guidance for ongoing maintenance and operations.

We anticipate this research will inform and inspire jurisdictions to think differently about the role that BIDs could play in advancing equitable development. The ultimate outcome would be policy change in the ways that jurisdictions incorporate community outreach and engagement into the BID approval process, and a shift in the ways that jurisdictions codify how BIDs are governed. This would open up the possibility of utilizing BIDs in connection with creative placemaking projects to counteract the gentrification pressures they may inadvertently cause.

Key Questions and Information Needs

Our foremost objective is to encourage and solicit research concepts and plans about the practitioners and agencies engaged in creative placemaking and arts and culture efforts that have the potential to advance equitable policy change for the 100 million Americans living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. While PolicyLink does not have the funding to support new research projects at this time, we are committed to working with potential partners to raise the necessary support as well as to encourage and guide low-cost pilot projects, such as those done by groups of students in connection with their curriculum.



Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc.

Created in 2013, [Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc.](#) (DGRI) is the entity responsible for neighborhood revitalization and place-based management in the urban core of the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan. DGRI absorbs and streamlines the combined operations of the Downtown Development Authority, the Downtown Improvement District, and the Monroe North Tax Increment Finance Authority. In 2015, DGRI began spearheading a 10-year community plan and investment strategy for accommodating growth in its reemerging Downtown, called "[GR Forward](#)," which explicitly embraces an **"equity-based growth model"** on the grounds that reducing racial inequality would be fundamental to its future health and success.

As part of their equity-driven growth model, GR Forward plans to achieve the following [six goals](#):

- Establish a regional equity framework and plan of action
- Cultivate an equity perspective in civic governance
- Foster racially and ethnically diverse business ownership
- Achieve a more diverse Downtown workforce
- Create a more welcoming and inclusive Downtown
- Attract a diverse population to the Downtown neighborhood

[Click here](#) to read more about what has been accomplished so far.

Outlined below is a preliminary set of information needs we believe can help make the case for policy change in favor of supporting creative placemaking through the tax revenue collected by BIDs. We respect the researcher(s)' decision to pursue any combination of these if what is outlined below is overly prescriptive.

Research objectives, initial questions, and information needs:

- Explore the role that a more inclusive business improvement district, in terms of board composition and governance structure, can play in advancing both placemaking (including formal programming and informal activities) and equitable development.
 - In what ways do placemaking efforts undertaken by BIDs differ from those led by the public sector or nonprofit organizations?
 - Is there significant difference in the demographic composition of BID leadership for those localities that have incorporated arts and culture into their placemaking efforts?
 - Would a more inclusive BID board governance structure that includes commercial and residential renters impact the rate of displacement of people-of-color owned businesses?
- Determine how residents and/or patrons of the BID assess and rate the quality of their experience over time.
- Develop an evaluation rubric for measuring the potential inequitable or equitable outcomes of a proposed business improvement district.
 - The rubric could identify gaps and opportunities for equitable impacts in a neighborhood.
 - The rubric could inform a digital primer with tips and promising examples of how to launch an equitable BID.

Target Audience

The target audience for this research includes, but is not limited to:

- Public-private partnerships supporting equitable development
- Local government agencies seeking to undertake creative placemaking
- Local arts and culture organizations
- Developers
- Communities considering adaptive reuse projects
- Community development practitioners
- Creative placemaking organizations and collaboratives such as the High Line Network

Research Methods

Research methods could consist of one or more of the following:

- A scan of research on the impact BIDs have on advancing creative placemaking in jurisdictions around the country
- In-depth interviews with board members from a range of BIDs to identify a benchmark for inclusivity
- Interviews with artists who led artistic or cultural engagement with property owners
- One or two case studies of neighborhoods that have implemented BIDs
- A mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods
- A synthesis study or development of a core outcome set around arts, culture, and creative placemaking with equity as the central pillar

The research would entail a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and should, as noted above, follow principles and practices of community-based participatory research (CBPR) wherever possible.

Deliverables and Schedule

We hope that this invitation to explore an important topic encourages researchers to take up these questions, whether as part of their ongoing activities or as the start of a new initiative. For those who would like to explore a partnership with PolicyLink, we envision a process by which prospective researchers work with PolicyLink to sharpen plans for a study and raise the resources for it:

- A concept paper or letter of interest in which the research team conveys their ideas and approach, which would serve as the basis for discussion and planning with PolicyLink about the scope of both the project and the resources necessary to carry it out.
- For a team or teams identified to proceed with us, a thorough research proposal that outlines in more detail the research needs and objectives mentioned above, along with a development strategy jointly created with PolicyLink.

Notes

- 1 To advance equity, PolicyLink advocates for groundbreaking policy changes that enable everyone, especially people of color, to be economically secure, live in healthy communities of opportunity, and benefit from a just society. PolicyLink is guided by the belief that the solutions to the nation's challenges lie with those closest to these challenges: when the wisdom, voice, and experience of those traditionally absent from policymaking drive the process, profound policy transformations emerge.
- 2 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa. *Creative Placemaking*. National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, DC, 2010.

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Photo on page 2: "[File:Downtown Grand Rapids from River House.jpg](#)" by Rachel Kramer is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

Contact Details

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