

Contested Landscapes of “Reimagined” Civic Commons

A Senior Thesis by
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Abstract

In September of 2016, The J.P.B, John S. and James L. Knight, Kresge and Rockefeller Foundations announced a combined \$20 million investment in civic infrastructure (re)development across Detroit, Chicago, Memphis and Akron— after first piloting the collaboration and investment model in Philadelphia. This funding initiative, named “Reimagining the Civic Commons” (R.C.C.), assumes recent trends of social and physical “fragmentation and isolation” in American urban space. R.C.C. then posits social and physical reparation through “(re)activating and connecting” civic assets to yield increased, more equitably shared prosperity. Yet, a myriad of relationships to and imaginations of place undulate within each target community and among those with Civic Commons decision-making power. This heterogeneity is also sedimented in the already-existing “assets” that R.C.C. seeks to repurpose, materially troubling the initiative’s assumption of universal and “authentic” relationships to the physical and social landscape. This thesis illustrates how Reimagining the Civic Commons’ landscape-reshapings activate frictions between territorily-preserved legacies of ontological struggle and neoliberal visions of “civic” futures. Such frictions are necessarily localized, emerging from particular contexts and becoming both remade and subject to erasure as those contexts become abstracted.

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Chapter One

Stratigraphic Succession: Tracing the layers of “Reimagining the Civic Commons”

The principle of stratigraphic succession states that any given unit of archaeological stratification exists within the stratigraphic sequence from its position between the undermost of all higher units and the uppermost of all lower units and with which it has a physical contact (Harris 1989).

On March 16, 2015, the Office of the Mayor for the City of Philadelphia held a press conference opened by then-President of the Fairmount Park Conservancy, Kathryn Ott Lovell. “We are here today to make an extraordinary announcement that will change the civic landscape of our city, and that will shift the conversation about the role of urban public spaces on a national level,” Ott Lovell said. “The William Penn and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation have made an \$11 million investment in an initiative called *Reimagining the Civic Commons*” (PhilaGov 2015). Through five major projects — “some shovel-ready, some in the planning phases” — located around the edges of Philadelphia’s Center City district, Ott Lovell asserted that this initiative will

test the idea that a revitalized and connected set of civic assets can foster engagement, retain productive citizens and ensure the long-term prosperity of our city; and in so doing, we will confirm our belief that the social and economic value of a neighborhood and of a city is intrinsically raised by the vitality of our public spaces. Just a few years from now, with our *reimagined* civic commons, all eyes will be on Philadelphia. We will be number one in the New York Times for places to visit and an epicenter for our country’s thought leaders and learners of civic space (PhilaGov 2015).

By the time of this announcement, an additional \$20 million had already been committed from partners such as the Center City District, the National Audubon Society, Outward Bound, the Free Library of Philadelphia, Friends of the Rail Park, Mt. Airy USA, the Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation, Schuylkill Banks, and the Reading Terminal Market. A promotional video for Philadelphia’s Civic Commons projects, released shortly after this press

conference, describes Philadelphia as “the birthplace of liberty, it is the birthplace of William Penn’s Vision: the ‘green country towne,’ a place where all people have access to rivers and lakes, parks and trails.” An anonymous narrator tells viewers, “We are the testing ground for a new idea: the idea that collaboration can improve communities, create opportunity, and strive to achieve Penn’s beautiful vision” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2016c).

I encountered Reimagining the Civic Commons on a September Sunday night in 2016, roughly two weeks after R.C.C. had announced their expansion to Detroit, Chicago, Akron, and Memphis. Headlining a weekly urbanist newsletter was a story about this announcement, which I quickly discovered came with a two-minute promotional video, asking:

When’s the last time you visited your local library, met friends at the public pool, or attended a neighborhood gathering at a public park? There used to be more of that in America. We spent time in public places, interacting with friends and new people alike, learning about the differences and commonalities in our communities. Places like recreation centers, parks, libraries and schoolyards brought us together in ways we didn’t understand, enriching our lives and our communities. Now, we spend more time alone with our screens than outside with our friends. We often live in neighborhoods with people similar to us, replacing old divisions with new ones. The result? People don’t have a common stake in making their community better and are less likely to come together to solve problems, big and small--or even agree on what those problems are. What if we could change that? What would happen to our communities? Our country? Reimagining the Civic Commons explores just how to do that, restoring public life and public support to the places, the civic assets, that made these connections possible. It’s based on the idea that establishing a connected civic commons, where we can cross paths with our neighbors, encounter new ideas, develop empathy with the people who share our communities will improve our lives, improve our communities and improve our country. Cities across the country have the potential to harness the civic commons to make America better. Will your city be one of them? (Dougherty-Johnson 2016)

A combined \$20 million dollars from the Rockefeller, Kresge, Knight, and J.P.B Foundations, I learned, would be distributed among and matched locally within the four new cities over the course of three years. As Reimagining the Civic Commons had already announced the four new

cities by this video's publication, its concluding question suggests future iterations of the initiative through some selective, potentially-competitive process. This concluding question also articulates R.C.C.'s conception of itself as an inspirational, replicable, and scalable model.

Reimagining the Civic Commons used a number of attention-grabbing graphics and animations to articulate the value of their initiative in their early promotional materials, but it was the specifically political stakes of their questions that piqued my interest. I had become familiar with New Urbanist philosophies— which promote mixed-use, participatory, density-oriented, and “human scale” types of development— through my undergraduate coursework and summer internship with the Congress for the New Urbanism and I saw Reimagining the Civic Commons as an opportunity to directly trace the political implications of oft-touted suggestions that “making better places” can engender urban progress and prosperity. I wondered who the initiative's primary agents were, how Reimagining the Civic Commons was considering and making sense of American urban policies past and present, which genealogies of social philosophy the initiative was building on, and how they understood the possibility of “civic assets” to strengthen urban publics across the country. These questions stemmed from my personal belief in the power of strong and thriving urban publics to make possible counter-hegemonic urban futures. In many ways, I have imagined myself pursuing professional paths similar to those of some of R.C.C.'s practitioners— specifically, in spheres of place-based community building and public space-enhancement work. Reimagining the Civic Commons has made evident their desire to inspire and being recognized by other places and people, and I see this research as a critical opportunity to attend to the precise logics of an initiative that has already left traces in local neighborhood landscapes and in a larger professional landscape of public space imagination.

Strata

Reimagining the Civic Commons originated as a “national inquiry” in 2014, managed by the Municipal Arts Society of New York and funded by the Knight Foundation. This inquiry identified some elements and uses of, supposed threats to, stakes within, and innovative opportunities for the American “civic commons.” MASNYC describes itself as a “civil society advocacy organization focused on effective policy and leadership initiatives that foster urban livability and resilience,” and the initial goal of R.C.C. was to “build a national provocation and make the case for a reimagined civic commons, which will be so compelling that city leaders will embrace it, and commit to new ways to create, manage and invest in it” (Rowe 2014). This “case” was first made in June of 2015 at an international conference titled “Building a Sustainable Civic Commons” in Manhattan’s Civic Hall, which aligned with the initial publication of the Knight Foundation-funded “Reimagining the Civic Commons: Cities—Where Opportunity Meets Place” report. This report was introduced at the conference to an “audience of urban leaders” from Montreal, Toronto, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York hoping to “explor[e] the role that civic commons play in urban livability and economic competitiveness, and discus[s] investment and programming strategies to strengthen them” (MASNYC 2015). “Building a Sustainable Civic Commons” was hosted by MASNYC, Evergreen CityWorks, Cities for People, the Community Design Resource Center, the Boston Society of Architects, the Chicago Architecture Foundation, and the Fairmount Park Conservancy. All of this groundwork gave way to the initial \$11 million pilot investment from Knight and William Penn in Philadelphia, the 2016 expansion of this “testing ground” into four new cities, and the ambiguous question of which cities are *still to be next*.

R.C.C. offers no specific explanation of how each of the nineteen projects across the five cities were selected for Reimagination, aside from their potential to be “reactivated” and “reconnected.” They do, however, offer more precise frameworks for what constitutes a “civic asset” to begin with. One of the earliest reports that Reimagining the Civic Commons released on their website was published by Studio Gang Architects, a well-known firm founded by architect and MacArthur Fellow Jeanne Gang. This report, titled “Civic Commons: Reimagining Our Cities’ Public Assets,” lists “civic assets” as including libraries, recreational centers, parks, police stations, schools, streets, cultural centers, plazas, fire stations, churches, post offices, homeless shelters, and water bodies. This report highlights Studio Gang’s well-known idea of the “Polis Station,” a design of urban police stations that aims to “foster connections” between urban police officers and neighborhood residents in non-enforcement settings, as an example of a Reimagined Civic Common. Studio Gang states in this report that “When civic assets push their programming and resources beyond their usual boundaries while simultaneously pulling in the offerings of other institutions, they generate new opportunities and energize their neighborhoods” (Studio Gang 2016, 13). This framework for civic asset reinvestment is entangled with trends of “creative placemaking,” which the Kresge Foundation sees as “referring simply to the deliberate integration of arts and culture in revitalization work.” For Kresge, this process involves bringing together

artists, arts organizations and artistic activity into the suite of placemaking strategies pioneered by Jane Jacobs and her colleagues (...) In practice, this means having arts and culture represented alongside sectors like housing and transportation– with each sector recognized as part of any healthy community; as requiring planning and investment from its community (Spire and Base 2016).

In February of 2018, Reimagining the Civic Commons as a two-year-old standalone entity announced a system for “measuring the Civic Commons” and a commitment to reporting annually on “investment impacts.” This announcement states that the tools for measuring the Civic Commons would include surveys conducted at each project site, surveys conducted with a sample of community members in a specific neighborhood, visual assessments of how people engage with civic assets, visual assessments of the physical conditions of civic assets and surrounding neighborhoods, and assessments of data collected by outside organizations, such as the U.S. Census and American Community Survey (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2018a). The first measure of progress, “civic engagement,” would be evaluated based on frequency of Civic Commons visitorship, voter turnout among younger residents, and (a lack of) private fences around surrounding parcels. “Socioeconomic mixing,” the second measure, is signaled by “mixing across economic backgrounds in the civic commons sites, change in the perception and reputation of civic commons sites and neighborhoods, bridging social capital, and increased levels of neighborhood diversity.” The criteria for evaluating this measure include the probability that any two individuals selected at random at a Civic Commons site will be from the same income group, feelings among residents that the neighborhood has “changed for the better,” and quantities of “new acquaintances” made in the sites (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2018a). That many of these measures assume the possibility of universalized relationships to and affective experiences of place reflects the literature that R.C.C. uses to support their goals. Moreover, this language seems to collapse a multiplicity of people occupying these landscapes into interchangeable and nonspecific subjects in ways that line up with standard neoliberal frameworks of citizenship.

Reimagining the Civic Commons' third measure of progress, "environmental sustainability," is "signaled by increased access to nature, ecological indicators such as changes in the tree canopy, and increased walkability and bikeability of neighborhoods." The criteria for environmental sustainability includes the percentage of residential parcels in the study area that were within a half mile walk of a park or public open space; total public spending on parks and recreation per resident; tons of carbon dioxide sequestered annually in trees located in the Reimagined neighborhoods; square footage of stormwater features on neighborhood streets and in sites including basins, native plantings, and impervious surfaces; and percent of neighborhood intersections that include controlled pedestrian crossings. The fourth and final measure, "value creation," is signaled by changes in the "perception of safety" in neighborhoods, increased retail activity, and changes—presumably, *rises*—in real estate value "while maintaining affordability." This measure would be evaluated based on criteria such as percent of respondents who say they feel safe in the neighborhood, share of neighborhood restaurants that are not part of one of the nation's 300 largest restaurant chains, and percent of renter households spending more than 30 percent of income on rent (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2018a). When contextualized by the fact that Reimagining the Civic Commons does not itself fund affordable housing, this latter measure appears contradictory to the initiative's own goal of value creation and begins to hint at some of the internal tensions within the larger project. Some of the R.C.C. leaders with whom I spoke expressed frustration over questions about why the initiative does not develop affordable housing directly. These leaders doubled down on the park-centricity of their work in such moments, positioning affordable housing as an inherent by-product of "proper neighborhood stewardship and civic engagement."

Ultimately, Reimagining the Civic Commons intends to produce “new knowledge,” or even an entirely new “field of practice” for all American cities, based on the progress measured in the five “demonstration” cities. Some of these measurements are strikingly quantitative relative to R.C.C.’s qualitative goals of social reparation, a compensation or response, perhaps, to an uncertainty I heard from team members in Philadelphia about how to evaluate the success of its pilot projects. As Donald McNeil, Robyn Dowling and Bob Fagan explore in “Sydney/Global/City: An Exploration,” these types of orientations toward quantifying the city often become entangled with tendencies to compete globally with one another and can “attain a rather vague epistemological status” (McNeil, Dowling and Fagan 2005, 937). Through the initiative’s progression over the past two years, its leaders have appeared to negotiate a tension between delivering quantitative data and “empirical” evidence of success to the initiative’s stakeholders—perhaps most importantly, the funding foundations— and letting the more qualitative “vitality” of these spaces “speak for itself.” This tension remains fundamentally structured by the initiative’s movement between private and public sectors, as well as between goals of local(ized) progress and national scalability. Private and public sectors each carry distinct norms and guidelines for operational transparency, similarly to the ways that practices of accountability to local stakeholders may be adjusted in the process of nationally exporting this revitalization model. Principally, we can see R.C.C.’s leaders’ increasing concerns with quantitative data as entangled with their desire to compete for (inter)national recognition and legitimization.

Statement of solidarity and purpose

I see this paper as a project of solidarity with people and movements working toward transformative forms of urban justice. As such, I attempt to reconcile the philosophies of Reimagining the Civic Commons and the visions of its leaders with the devastating reality of systemic oppression in the United States. This attempt at reconciliation allows me to highlight some of the ways in which Reimagining the Civic Commons at times generates possibilities for, and at times directly undermines, radical urban futures. I take up this complex task in a spirit of compassionate critique that holds R.C.C.'s leaders' desires for social change and their inattention to the root causes of those social problems to equitable degrees of significance. A number of questions remain unresolved in both Reimagining the Civic Commons' and my own work, including but not limited to: How can we cultivate stronger and more cohesive public sectors that shift critical resources to the most marginalized urban residents? Does increasing the role, power and geography of the private sector push against such process? What might reimaginings of urban landscapes that trouble deeply entrenched power structures look like— and at multiple scales? To what extent can institutionalized narratives about urban places attend to the multiplicities of ontological experiences in urban space?

Months into my intensive research process, I was still coming back to foundational questions of *What and 'who' is Reimagining the Civic Commons?*, and it was in these re-evaluative moments that I felt simultaneously in awe of and frustratingly disempowered by the initiative's large scale and operational nebulosity. From the U3 Advisors company directing the overall project, to the four national foundations, to each demonstration city's convener and smaller nonprofit partners, hundreds of voices have moved through and merged in this one initiative. Many people and organizations actually joined the Civic Commons network months

after its pilot and expansion-announcement. I attempt to particularize authorship and agency as much as possible throughout this paper, a practice informed by my understanding that the specific positionings and placements of the people whom I reference shape their perspectives. In moments where authorship and agency appear cloudy or obscure, though, I will use the plural pronoun "they" to refer to those people and organizations generally envisioning and driving the work of Reimagining the Civic Commons at various operational levels across the five cities. I see the non-specificity of this pronoun as reflective of both the wide range of funders, planners, municipal officers, community activists, designers, etc. engaged in the initiative, as well as of my own consistent difficulty identifying this initiative's primary agents. Such difficulty has raised critical questions for me about Reimagining the Civic Commons' claims about transparent community engagement and structural openness. My access to these players also remained differentiated through my research process, as representatives of U3 Advisors did not respond to my request to schedule an interview after initially agreeing to speak with me.

Reimagining the Civic Commons presents itself as a “national learning network” and revitalization demonstration, which has contracted the project-management of U3 Advisors— an economic development and real estate consulting firm that specializes in “anchor” institutions such as university campuses and hospitals— and is funded primarily by four national foundations. Each demonstration city has one local nonprofit convener and dozens more nonprofit partners steering the projects' designs and programming. R.C.C.'s emphasis on public-private partnerships takes root in an idea that nonprofit foundations have higher capacities to experiment with certain hypotheses or operational systems because of lower “political risk”— often handing the results over to state or municipal offices to fully implement only after a

primary trial. In the event that “the public” expresses dissatisfaction over or disapproval of these experimented projects, the logic follows that public officials will remain protected from scrutiny and will not have future elections or appointments threatened (Zukin 1989, 42). Such a framework shelters public officials from constituent accountability in ways that trouble the initiative’s own insistence on the importance of transparency and openness. Reimagining the Civic Commons hopes that the William Penn, Rockefeller, Knight, Kresge, and J.P.B. Foundations will pass their demonstrated success onto the Cities of Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Memphis; but they also hope that model for public-private partnerships demonstrated by all of these players will similarly be “handed over” to other nonprofits and other cities after the “risks” of these partnerships have themselves been “first tested.”

Generally speaking, R.C.C. problematizes what they present as recent patterns of fragmentation and isolation in urban spaces, claims based on research largely funded by the four foundations that are also funding Reimagining the Civic Commons. This assumption of fragmentation is entangled with R.C.C.’s suggestion that existing social and organizational networks are insufficiently “civic” as a function of their perceived insularity. The initiative then suggests possibilities for positive social transformation through “(re)activating” and connecting urban “civic assets.” There are two main layers of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ connectivity methods across all cities: they aim to connect individual people from different parts of a site-host area to and through each site, as well as to connect groups and organizations currently working in “silos” to and through each project process. R.C.C. believes in utilizing existing neighborhood resources and practicing comprehensive community engagement to ensure sustainable processes and products, defining their approach to revitalizations as non-

prescriptively “grounded.” They attempt to reimagine contemporary patterns of urban social relations in ways they describe as “equitable,” “inclusive,” and fundamentally “civic.” That Reimagining the Civic Commons offers varied and sometimes contradictory narratives of urban history evades meaningful attention to the distinctive layers of the landscapes that have “accumulated at different phases in the hurly burly of chaotic urban growth engendered by industrialization, colonial conquest, neocolonial domination, wave after wave of migration, as well as of real-estate speculation and modernization” (Harvey 1996, 417). As I move through this paper, I will attempt to *bring to the surface* many assumptions, contingencies and indirectly-articulated or unarticulated values underlying Reimagining the Civic Commons so as to analyze how they work within and against the initiative’s own claims. There are hundreds of possible interviews, blog posts, tweets, and conference presentations missing from this paper, but it is my hope that the data and theories woven together through this text themselves speak volumes.

The fact that decision-making power within the initiative appears to be so dispersed and fluid has contributed to a number of inconsistencies in how various players and stakeholders envision and articulate the goals of R.C.C. Over the course of my fieldwork, I have identified four major discursive themes and theoretical orientations underlying Reimagining the Civic Commons that are somewhat in tension with one another. First, there is a consistent, indirect reference to structures of urban and territorial inequity that sits uneasily with an assumption that all individuals and organizations are—and should be—free to choose how and where they occupy space. Additionally, I have noticed a thematic belief in the radically transformational possibilities of connected and shared resources that sits uneasily with their positioning of “civicness” as controlled, orderly, and value-boosting. I believe that these logics—of inequality

and equality, transformation, and structure—ultimately conflict at the point of encounter between a facilitation of justice-through-place and an idea of landscape-as-archive. In fact, I hope to suggest that it is exclusively at this confrontational point that the tension between (neo)liberal visions of utopic “civicness” and memory-preserved legacies of violence and struggle achieves coherence. Such points are necessarily localized, emerging from particular contexts and becoming remade and subject to erasure as those contexts become abstracted.

Reflected in my struggles with these questions and guiding my analytical resolution is a particular kind of *friction*, in Anna Tsing’s sense, manifesting at the intersection of the perceived value and success of each individual asset-revitalization project, on the one hand, and the perceived value and success of Reimagining the Civic Commons as a learning network and revitalization model on the other. Many of R.C.C.’s funders and visionaries operate at high levels of influence in American public life, and built into the foundation of Reimagining the Civic Commons is a suggestion that this initiative is experimental and potentially *ground-breaking* for cities around the world. R.C.C.’s success, for some people in the network, begins as a function of the “progress measured” in each individual project site; but its value and significance are seen as extending far beyond those geographies. Some people with whom I spoke articulated cardinal loyalties to individual projects, while others—largely by virtue of their professions—appeared more invested in the possible, eerily place-indifferent legacies of the Civic Commons (net)work. Such variety is reasonable, perhaps even productive within a network spanning five cities and dozens of disciplinary backgrounds. However, these dialogic points between neoliberal visions of utopic “civicness” and memory-preserved legacies of violence and struggle are time- and place-variant; they are themselves perhaps indifferent to or independent of the larger agendas of

Reimagining the Civic Commons. In the end, attending to dialogues and frictions between that which has been preserved on/in the ground and an attempt to *build common ground* may prove the ultimate measure of accountability to urban residents historically denied the most power.

Methodological considerations and theoretical framings

As I have moved through this research process, I have attempted to situate myself thoughtfully and intentionally within the vast webs of scholars, practitioners, funders, and community residents alongside whom I write. This attempt has largely been one of productive struggle, yielding important reflections on the stakes and implications of my own work. More inhibiting has been my process of navigating a set of nebulous and shifting discursive landscapes, which has made it difficult to locate and occupy a stable position from which to critically engage with the work of Reimagining the Civic Commons. Both the subjects and objects of R.C.C. remained fluid over the course of my research, unsettling my ability to make claims about how the initiative, as a whole, has physically and ideologically operated. In this section, I aim to trace the lineages of scholarship on which R.C.C. and my study of R.C.C. both build. These lineages overlap and diverge, enhance and obscure, and work on and against each other in ways that may generate more clarity on things implicit within Reimagining the Civic Commons. Put simply, I attempt to write my own process of making sense of Reimagining the Civic Commons in parallel with the initiative's apparent attempt to make sense of particular contemporary urban problems and solutions.

Donna Haraway's well-known essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" warns against the "god trick" of performing "infinite vision" in scientific writing, suggesting instead "the particularity and embodiment of all

vision” (Haraway 1988, 582). I follow her framework of feminist subjectivity grounded in “limited location and situated knowledge,” rather than “various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway 1988, 583). This idea of subjectivity reverberates in the discussion by Eve Tuck, Allison Guess, and Hannah Sultan of writing collaboratively “from somewhere” in their essay “Not Nowhere: Collaborating on Selfsame Land.” For Tuck, Guess, and Sultan, their different implications, codings, and investments in structures of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness form the precise contingencies of their scholarly collaboration and political solidarities. I merge this understanding of collaboration with Haraway’s idea of individual nodes accumulating in webs of connections “called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (Haraway 1988, 584). My collaborative placement remains informed by my academic background in studies of urban spatial construction, as well as by my interests in and connections to professional urban planning spheres. This node also gains structure through my Whiteness, womanhood, U.S. citizenship, educational privilege, attachment to colonized Wampanoag land, and other orientations toward power. In many ways, my epistemological concerns and junctions of power increase my proximity to the agents of this kind of urban reshaping. In other ways, those same concerns and axes position me as a potential target of such work. Ultimately, I recognize this research project has only been able to materialize because of specific people shaping specific physical and discursive landscapes at specific moments in time. With an understanding that many of these people have been placed under and through systems of subjugation, I aim to use the intellectual territory granted to me as relatively legible and legitimate to pose questions about the very structure of this epistemological cartography.

The analytical framework I bring to this project amalgamates my encounters with an ecology of writings on urban and territorial imaginations. I read several of William Cronon's writings as I became acquainted with cultural anthropology as a discipline concerned with constructs of urbanity and nature. Engaging with William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) and "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (1995) pulled me into analyses of "place" as a dominantly-narrated cultural location of and for "civilized" humanity, often dichotomized with the nonhuman and natural. Reading the works of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin and Jane Jacobs expanded my thinking of urbanity as a "way of life" informed by and characteristic of particular spatial structurings. (The Rockefeller Foundation points to their funding of Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* as the origin story of their current investment in "resilient cities as places of ingenuity and innovation.") Writings about place by Tim Cresswell, Dolores Hayden, and David Harvey have similarly encouraged my close attention to the ways that the term "place" can connote ownership, privacy, belonging, hierarchical positioning, and general socio-geographical orderings. Cresswell has articulated an idea that "place" suggests a distinct shift away from the perceived genericness, naturalness, and abstractness of "space," weaving meanings and relationships into geographic territories to create "material settings for social relations" (Cresswell 2004, 7). All of these scholars argue for the fluidity yet embeddedness of social relations in "places;" in particular, they understand interventions against the perceived genericness, naturalness, and abstractness of open space to be rooted in traditions of hegemonic land theft and use.

Similarly, William Turkel's *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* (2007) and W. J. T. Mitchell's *Landscape and Power* (1994) suggest that physical landscapes and their iconographic depictions shape and hold legacies of human social relations. Both of these authors attend to landscape alteration and authorship specific to processes of settler colonialism, presenting landscapes as themselves a form of text from which to read expressions of power. Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1995) and Timothy Ingold's *The Temporality of the Landscape* (1993) expand on ideas of "archival landscapes" to argue that physical places ask dwellers to confront legacies of the past in their contemporary uses of that land. All of these scholars have informed my understanding of how landscapes physically index those who have, over time, cultivated ecological and material relationships with and left something of themselves in the land. These writings edge toward questions of territorial belonging, which sociologist Sharon Zukin explores in her book *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2009). In this text, Zukin traces the lineage of claims about authenticity in urban space to illustrate its role as a tool of spatial narration representing anxieties about social and territorial changes, rather than innate characteristics of a particular geography (Zukin 2009, xxi). I use these writings to understand how physical landscapes, social orderings, and operations of place-creation inform one another.

My exploration of place, memory, landscape, and territory remains structured by an understanding of their racialized contexts. Patrick Wolfe's well-known definition of settler colonialism as the "structure of elimination of the Native" (Wolfe 2006, 387) reverberates throughout my thinking on territory, as does a recognition that questions of land ownership in the US remain structured by traditions of anti-Blackness and histories of chattel slavery. Theories of

hauntology also inhabit this ecology of critical race and land frameworks. The term “hauntology” originates from French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s spin on the term “ontology,” referring to figures that are neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive but remain in contemporary spaces as “spectres” (Derrida 1994). Elisabeth Roberts’ *Geography and the visual image: A hauntological approach* introduced me to the “in-between” status of visual images in human geography and the ways in which their temporal ambiguities allow for particular ghostly presences of Indigenous, marginalized, and subaltern peoples. Eve Tuck and C. Ree similarly explore the power of ghosts in their essay “A Glossary of Haunting” (Tuck and Ree, 2013), calling for a reckoning with ghosts as a decolonial analytical practice and taking seriously the idea of pasts as unfinished and dynamic, embedded in and emanating from particular places and conjunctions. In *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, cultural geographer David Harvey illustrates how cities “incrementally add things on rather than totally shedding their skins and beginning all over again” (Harvey 2013, 417). These theorists push me to understand the urban sites selected for Reimagination as particularly densely layered with such legacies, energies, and apparitions.

The texts above guide me in weaving critical questions about nature, culture, space, place, race, memory, ontology, and locality into Reimagining the Civic Commons’ hypothesis that expanding the user bases of public resources increases urbanites’ civicness, mutual trust, and overall prosperity. This hypothesis, now being tested through landscape-altering methods, builds on lineages of scholarship about social capital and integration amidst shifting social landscapes. At the very base of this lineage lies French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who first theorized about the need to maintain social ties and solidarity amidst the new social structurings assumed

to be brought on by modernity, industrialism, and— crucially— urbanization. His well-known book *The Division of Labour in Society* specifically explores how divisions of labor allow for social coherence among people with differing values and beliefs (Durkheim 1893). Political scientist Robert Putnam takes up many of Durkheim’s concerns in his hugely influential 2001 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, where he suggests a decline in social capital beginning in the 1950s. Putnam positions a perceived decrease in interpersonal interactions across lines of difference as a catalyst for the putative deterioration of American civic institutions and life. Reimagining the Civic Commons directly draws on key tenets of Putnam’s thinking, particularly when discussing their place-indifferent understanding that “we,” *in all American cities*, do not feel connected to one another. Entangled with these questions of social capital are Richard Florida’s writings on how urban segregation supposedly decreases the ability of cities to incubate innovation, creativity, and economic progress specifically through its hindrance of social interaction (2002). Much of Florida’s thinking on the “creative economy” and “creative class” has significantly informed contemporary excitement around creative placemaking— as explicitly noted in the William Penn Foundation’s handbook on “civic asset reinvestment” (Greenspan and Mason 2017).

Sociologist Elijah Anderson has explored how interactions across lines of difference in American public spaces remain structured by White supremacy’s pathologization and criminalization of Blackness. In his book *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (2011), Anderson argues that urban settings offer “respite from the lingering tensions of urban life” and “an opportunity for diverse peoples to engage one another in a spirit of civility,” yet disproportionately subject marginalized people to higher behavioral standards

(Anderson 2011, 154). Anderson demands the consideration of the “racial fault lines” underlying the surface-level social interactions in any ascription of value to these apparently-utopic spaces. Geographer Ash Amin also brings together writings on space, place, land, and social interaction in his essay “Collective Culture and Urban Public Space” in which he argues that “even the most imaginative attempts to engineer social interaction in public space (...) are normatively ambivalent” (2008, 7). As urban “commons” are embedded with multiplicities, for Amin there is no singular or universal way of experiencing social “throwntogetherness” in public spaces. Solidarity with fellow urbanites and with the city itself depends on one’s social positioning and on the material dynamics and historical legacies of the public space in question, rather than being “a measure of some ideal (...) achieved regardless of the fine-grain of time and place” (Amin 2008, 22). Amin pushes me to imagine how R.C.C.’s civic asset-revitalizations may produce a particular “emergent force, facilitating new spatial combinations and new rhythms of usage and regulation that will jostle against old combinations and rhythms” (Amin 2008, 22).

These references to certain motions produced through remakings of space also call forth anthropologist Anna Tsing’s writings on “friction.” I read excerpts of Tsing’s book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* as I was becoming familiar with classic theories of urbanity, feeling struck by her illustrations of new arrangements of culture and power emerging through heterogeneous encounters between globally circulating ideas of progress and particular geographic landscapes (Tsing 2011, 5). Tsing fundamentally challenges dominant ideas of globalization as a triumphant force that “clashes” with cultures on the ground, unsettling dichotomizations of “global” and “local.” Crucially, Tsing turns instead to the syntheses that occur between the “global” and “local,” and the movements, actions, and effects produced by

that synthesis as important sites of power. As “global projects” continue to narrate remakings of local landscapes, Tsing pushes for a recognition of how specific people, institutions, and geographies actively shape those projects and stipulate the precise contingencies of their circulation.

The 2005 essay “Sydney/Global/City” by Donald McNeill, Robyn Dowling, and Bob Fagan engages with similar questions about how the language of globalization has increasingly structured how cities understand, govern, and promote themselves. Their analysis grapples with the ideology of neoliberalism, generally understood to move away from classic theories of liberalism in its emphasis on privatization, limited government, and deregulation. Neoliberal frameworks for “trickle-down” fiscal policies emerged in the United States and elsewhere in the 1980s and 90s, largely out of conservative anxieties around what was perceived as the “welfare state.” In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007), David Harvey defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 2). In many American cities, neoliberal frameworks have pushed to increase the role of the private sector in urban economic and social structurings. For example, the Reagan administration significantly reduced spending on public housing and income supplements through this logic of individualized upward mobility in the 1980s. As Jason Hackworth writes in *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism*, “Neoliberalism has become naturalized as the ‘only’ choice available to cities in the United States and elsewhere” (Hackworth 2007, 11). Hackworth understands neoliberalism to be a “process

occurring alongside and in combination with many other processes that affect urbanization” and contingent on time and space (2007, 11). Given the centrality of public-private partnerships and the perceived “risk capital” of private foundations in Reimagining the Civic Commons, weaving critiques of neoliberalism into my analysis will help me pose questions about this project’s vision for future urban governance.

As alluded to before, my participant-observation work for this project took place on a somewhat hazy, shifting set of discursive and physical landscapes. Listed in the Appendix are the names of the eleven project team leaders, non-profit foundation representatives, local community organizers, landscape architects, and consultants whom I interviewed. A portion of these interviews were conducted in person during my week in Philadelphia in the summer of 2017, and the rest of the interviews were conducted over the phone, including eight with people working in Memphis, Detroit and Akron. No one connected to Chicago’s Reimagining the Civic Commons operations responded to my interview request. All of my interviewees consented to being recorded and quoted. After each interview was completed, I transcribed these conversations and coded them with attention to specific discursive practices and thematic patterns. My categories of analysis emerged as my own structured curiosity intersected with the ethe of my informants. I asked about people’s understandings of “place,” stories of belonging, visions for the future of their cities, and how they might situate Reimagining the Civic Commons within their own personal or professional developments. With many of my informants, I asked more specific questions about the particular mechanisms of their work with Reimagining the Civic Commons. These conversations gifted me with incredible stories of the places that give people joy, the values that launch them out of bed every morning, the struggles they have encountered in this

work with Reimagining the Civic Commons, and the senses of community they have built through it all. I remain deeply grateful for their energy, candidness, vulnerability, and generosity.

I spent one week in Philadelphia in June of 2017 to visit the five project sites— many of which were under construction— and conduct preliminary in-person interviews with people publicly and professionally connected to those projects. During this initial period of fieldwork I was able to walk the Bartram’s Mile riverside path, observe the interaction between the Viaduct Rail Park construction and the surrounding social and physical infrastructure, get lost in East Fairmount Park on my way to the planned site of the Discovery Center, lounge on the grounds of Centennial Commons park, and better understand the renovations happening at the Lovett Library and Garden. During this time I also stumbled upon murals telling stories of different Philadelphia neighborhoods and read municipal plaques honoring significant historical moments from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to a block-wide gay rights protest. I used various forms of public transportation around and into and out of the city during my time there, particularly as I travelled to the five project sites. I stayed with a friend in Elkins Park, a nearby suburban township that has its own SEPTA train stop where I began my commutes into the city. That my time in Philadelphia was significantly shorter than typical periods of ethnographic fieldwork reflects a persistent assertion from R.C.C. leaders’ that the revitalized assets are not, themselves, cardinal products of Reimagining the Civic Commons. Instead, as many leaders suggest, these revitalized assets serve as mechanisms for demonstrating the success of their model for public-private partnerships in urban public space reimagination.

A considerable portion of my fieldwork was spent combing through the promotional materials for Reimagining the Civic Commons. From the front-page video announcing R.C.C.’s

expansion into Detroit, Chicago, Memphis, and Akron down to each individual project's Twitter account, I analyzed many of the linguistic and visual tools used by the initiative leaders to articulate their visions. Reimagining the Civic Commons builds on a number of earlier, privately-funded studies positing a correlation between well-designed public spaces and social equity; examining those studies myself allowed me to better understand the explanatory systems underlying these new civic asset designs. Similarly, many of the nonprofit organizations funding projects across and within the cities have funded research about various social concerns that have served as precursors to these "revitalizations." Because many of the initiative's community engagement processes involved a number of public data-gathering and discussion-based forums, I was able to digitally explore materials such as neighborhood surveys and online platforms designed specifically for these purposes. Although I was not able to attend any design-based planning meetings related to Reimagining the Civic Commons, identifying some of the ways those community engagement processes were digitally made public did give me some insight into this important component of the project. Many of my interviewees recounted their experiences with these community engagement processes, some praising the "open-mindedness" of design teams while others expressed frustration with certain feedback structures.

In the chapter that follows, I will unpack some of the specific logics and discourses under which Reimagining the Civic Commons operates to further contextualize their vision for the future of urban spaces and social relations. There, I will examine a few key texts and scholarly lineages that have laid the foundation for R.C.C.'s work, and I will discuss the landscape of practitioners and funders driving the national initiative. Attending to the precise language that R.C.C. uses to describe their work will deepen my ability to make sense of these genealogies of

social critique, professional landscapes, and visions of the future. My third chapter will take readers through an exploration of Reimagining the Civic Commons' work in Philadelphia, with deeper attention to two of the city's five Civic Commons Reimaginings, Bartram's Mile and the Viaduct Rail Park. As Philadelphia was chosen to pilot the entire initiative, the city's twelve-month head start relative to Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and Akron generated unique questions for me about the Civic Commons processes and progress. The fourth and final chapter of this thesis presents a vignette of R.C.C.'s revitalization of Memphis Park, before moving into larger conclusions about the initiative's conditions and contingencies. Memphis Park is one of four assets in Memphis selected for Reimagining the Civic Commons, and I explore R.C.C.'s engagement with the park's statue of Jefferson Davis to further highlight some negotiations about "civicness" and "publicness" embedded in the landscape of R.C.C. Through this paper, I seek to raise critical questions about how Reimagining the Civic Commons both conceptualizes of and leaves imprints in in the landscapes they attempt to reimagine.

Chapter Two

Fault Lines: Exploring the foundations of Reimagining the Civic Commons

Fault Line: *noun*. 1. A line on a rock surface or the ground that traces a planar fracture.
2. A divisive issue or difference of opinion that is likely to have serious consequences (Oxford English Dictionary).

Energy release associated with rapid movement on active faults is the cause of most earthquakes
(Seismological Society of America).

Given that Reimagining the Civic Commons articulates itself as a response to particular problems in contemporary American society, analyzing the knowledge presented as evidence of such problems can illuminate the stakes they identify in their own work. A “Learn” tab on the general R.C.C. website, in fact, explicitly encourages visitors to engage in this kind of exploration. This webpage highlights a 2015 report published in City Observatory, which describes itself as a “website and think tank devoted to data-driven analysis of cities and the policies that shape them,” and funded by the Knight Foundation, called “Less in Common.” Economist Joe Cortright, author of this essay, tells readers that

There is compelling evidence that the connective tissue that binds us together is coming apart. In particular, it appears that the level of social capital—the connections and norms of reciprocity that smooth interpersonal actions and support community—has declined in the United States over several decades. (...) While we have more leisure time, we spend more of it alone or isolated by technologies as diverse as the private automobile and personal headphones (2).

Cortright employs an anthropomorphic metaphor here, suggesting that there is something intrinsic and natural about human interaction— perhaps especially in urban space. Building on many of Durkheim’s concerns and directly referencing Putnam’s well-known ideas about social capital in an era of “bowling alone,” Cortright goes on to explain how the decline in social capital “is both a cause and an effect of the decline of the public realm: people exhibit less trust

because they have fewer interactions” (4). Using headphones and consuming electronic media privately exemplify such pitfalls of “bowling alone” for Cortright, as he states that

With our separate, personal audioscapes and an increasingly fragmented media world, it may be more difficult today to have shared, collective experiences that provide a common meaning (or narrative) and strengthen our sense of attachment to “place” and each other. (20)

Such an idea that consuming the same information leads to apparently “civic” collective meaning-making practices idealizes consumption of centralized media. This idea also carries a nostalgia for a supposedly simpler media landscape, aligning seamlessly with nostalgia for a perceived simpler and “less fraught” social landscape. Scholars such as Michael Parenti (1987), Peter White (2000) and Noam Chomsky (2010) have elucidated the political implications of centralized media sources, pointing to ways that frameworks of media objectivity subtly reinforce faulty stereotypes about marginalized groups of people— particularly, along lines of race, class, and gender— that people with privileged identities learn not to perceive.

Anthropologist David Harvey (1996) has similarly argued for the impossibility of common narratives about place given systems of power that *place people differently* at many intersections of identity. The ability to facilitate shared, “civic” attachments to place through collective media consumption remains undercut by the differential allocation of agency and autonomy to bodies occupying the same landscape.

In what appears to contradict his earlier statement about an essentially natural “connective tissue” that binds us all together, Cortright proceeds to mention the power of legal structures in the spatialization of urban communities. After critiquing the fact that higher-income people increasingly live in separate, wealthy neighborhoods, he states that “Our policy decisions

have shaped our built environment and land use patterns, and resulted in voluntary and involuntary segregation, sorting the public realm so that we spend proportionately more time with people like us” (2). This language of policy-driven segregation and sorting suggests a critique of larger systems that limit individual agency. “Economic and income-based segregation gives way to increased racial segregation and growing political polarization,” Cortright continues, which results in a consequential reduction in empathy for one another (4). As presented in an “easy-to-share” infographic, the report can ultimately be boiled down to a few key findings: “recreation is privatized, we spend less time with our neighbors, we mistrust each other, and we have less in common but need to come together more.” Despite the power-attentive mention of structurally-induced segregation above, an ultimate point of contradiction becomes apparent in this claim that people are disconnected from one another in life-altering ways, yet live through and understand the conditions of that separation in the same way. Further, it is clear in Cortright’s language that he believes a thriving “civic sphere” to depend on interactions *between* people in different socioeconomic groups. Cortright obscures the value of the well-documented “connections and norms of reciprocity” (4) among lower-income people— often, key mechanisms of survival amidst structures of economic disenfranchisement and isolation— and explicitly positions these social landscapes against what he believes to be “the civic realm” (10). Members of the Reimagining the Civic Commons team have publicly cited this text in dozens of blog posts, social media messages, and secondary interviews since the initiative’s conception.

“Where opportunity meets place”

Another text presented as central to the creation of R.C.C. is a June 2015 Knight Foundation-funded report called “Re-Imagining the Civic Commons— Cities: Where Opportunity Meets Place.” In this report, the Municipal Art Society of New York City names what they call a “downward spiral away from the Commons” when wealthy Americans began prioritizing private amenities and services over public ones in the 1960s. This point is repeated through many Reimagining the Civic Commons’ articulations of concern about American society, and it is an observation that seems to challenge hegemonic systems of economic stratification: if “public” comes to mean only for those who cannot afford private, we have a “precarious inversion of the original purpose of the civic commons” (MASNYC 2015, 3). MASNYC then points to organizational isolation as the root cause of inequitable access to quality resources, suggesting that “Municipal bureaucracies, operating within their silos, are constrained in their capacity to share programming among parks, libraries and community centers” (MASNYC 2015, 5). This kind of language lays the foundation for what will become a central emphasis on public-private partnerships in Reimagining the Civic Commons, hinting at an idea that private organizations may have more capacity to develop and program public resources than do public agencies and bodies. The authors of this report make a concluding suggestion that cities would benefit from the creation of a “connected, aligned, strategic network of assets delivering new value in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (MASNYC 2015, 7).

Most effectively managed and programmed by staff drawn from the public, commercial, institutional, private and community sectors, according to MASNYC,

A healthy civic commons will enable economic opportunity through which entrepreneurs can build supply chains and cultivate markets. A vibrant civic commons will entice newcomers to invest, and bring their ingenuity and their purchasing power. An active civic commons will make physical activities easily accessible, reducing health care costs and encouraging the development of ties that foster trust. A well-used civic commons has the potential to increase public safety by providing activities that bring more eyes to the street. A well-designed civic commons can build in flexible, adaptive public spaces. (...) A connected commons will enhance the value of each of its components, realign their uses and functions, and maximize their collective value for urban residents to the benefit of the city as a whole. (MASNYC 2015, 9)

These explanations of a healthy, vibrant, active, well-used, well-designed, and connected commons offer an implicit definition of a good or productive commons-user: entrepreneurial, innovative, possessing investing and purchasing power, medically inexpensive, and behaving appropriately "on the street"— an often racially-coded symbol that has been shown to contribute to the disproportionate surveillance of Black and Brown people (Fyfe 2004). MASNYC explicitly roots the need for a “reimagined” civic commons in the rise of co-working spaces, a perceived success of the “sharing economy,” increased attention to the promises of mixed-use, hyper-connected neighborhoods, and the apparently positive implications of a “doubled number of coffee shops in the U.S. in the past decade” (MASNYC 2015, 7). MASNYC makes explicit the centrality of market forces in this description, as the aforementioned productive and good commons-users are likely to be the same select group of people expressing excitement around these co-working spaces, coffee shops, and products of the sharing economy. In many of his writings, Richard Florida traces contemporary trends of designing urban space around “young professionals” working in STEM, media, and other fields dubbed “innovative.” He positions this “creative class” as a key driver of the urban economic growth that exacerbates economic inequality and threatens to displace lower- and middle-class dwellers (Florida 2017). Insofar as

the original idea of the urban commons suggested a reframing of urban resources based on their collective management and use, rather than the market-driven value (Harvey 2012, 67), one may identify a “precarious inversion of the original purpose of the civic commons” in MASNYC’s precise vision of “reimagined” civic commons.

Since the creation of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ Facebook page just days before the September 2016 expansion announcement, R.C.C. has published dozens of studies and articles that further “substantiate” the philosophies of their work. Some of these studies and articles include a December 2016 piece in the *New York Times*’ “Upshot” section titled “How Social Isolation Is Killing Us;” a 2016 column by high-profile conservative writer David Brooks arguing that “social isolation” is the “central challenge facing our era;” a *Wall Street Journal* article about how “Fewer people engage in idle chitchat anymore, but research suggests that making small talk has surprising benefits;” and a handful of Robert Putnam’s podcasts discussing increased divisions between the American rich and poor. Reimagining the Civic Commons has also used their Facebook page to publish evidence of other cities and nonprofits implementing their own projects similar to— sometimes, explicitly inspired by— R.C.C. These include a *Travel and Leisure* article first published in August 2016 about how “Across the globe, cities have discovered that unlovely infrastructure and scarred old industrial land can be transformed into lush, strollable oases;” a 2017 article about the City of Meriden, Connecticut’s “new public green, built on the site of a former shopping mall as an anchor for mixed-use development and the 'start of a new downtown;” and news about a \$25 million renovation of vacant Akron City Center Hotel into an apartment building described by R.C.C. as “another win for Akron's civic commons.”

Motivational mixings and mixed motivations

Reflecting the fact that the leaders of Reimagining the Civic Commons have branded the initiative a “learning network,” a handful of gatherings since the end of 2016 have given team members across all five cities a chance to exchange knowledge with one another. Senior Director of Civic Initiatives at the Fairmount Park Conservancy Jennifer Mahar explained the structure to me, describing the “learning exchanges and journeys” as visits where they “learn from each other,” and “learning labs where [they] bring in experts from around the world.” These studio sessions encourage team leaders to reflect on their Civic Commons work and, in the spirit of collaboration and silo-reduction, share “best practices” for success—another term drawn from calculative approaches to solving social problems (Miller 2006). “Civic Commons Studio #1” was hosted in Philadelphia in December of 2016, “Civic Commons Studio #2: The First Moves” was in Chicago in May 2017, and Akron hosted “Civic Commons Studio #3” in October of 2017. In a digitally-published report of Civic Commons Studio #1, readers learn that the weekend began with demonstration teams presenting their visions, strategies and first year plans. The network heard from

national thought leaders, including John A. Powell, on inclusion and belonging; Mike Diberardinis on Philadelphia’s Rebuild initiative and its focus on civic engagement; (...) Theaster Gates on small scale redevelopment; and Bryan Boyer’s provocation on “how the city would feel if the civic commons won” (Marquis 2017).

This latter phrase invokes language reflecting the way that contemporary cities compete fiercely for attention, investment, and kudos through symbolic as well as material strategies. Consultant Lynn Ross reiterated this question of “what the city would feel like if the civic commons won” in her presentation about Reimagining the Civic Commons at the American Planning Association’s 2017 Policy and Advocacy Conference, where Richard Florida also spoke— another example of

the initiative's already close-knit network of knowledge producers and consumers (American Planning Association 2017). Civic Commons Studio #2 featured a presentation from Harvard political scientist Ryan Enos, author of *The Space Between Us: Social Geography and Politics* and well-known applier of Putnam's theories to urban placemaking, who discussed how "Segregation prevents shared identities and integration enables shared identities" (Rice 2017c). Also at Studio #2 scholar of architecture and urban design Nicholas de Monchaux reminded the teams that cities are places of "organized complexity," ordered webs of physical infrastructure and social relationships (Rice 2017c). According to the larger R.C.C. blog, Civic Commons Studio #3 was kicked off by "visionary" New York City Parks Commissioner Mitch Silver, who runs what he calls the "Department of Fun, Health and Happiness" and played a large role in "revitalizing" 67 "neglected" public spaces in 2014 (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2017b).

These workshops and collective learning sessions prove crucial moments for Reimagining the Civic Commons to reaffirm itself as a civic asset revitalization model rooted in ideology and agenda; more specifically, in a belief that public inter-group mingling directly leads to social equality and progress. These learning sessions have also illuminated some of the tensions and disagreements around the agenda of Reimagining the Civic Commons among the team leaders themselves. In one deeply candid conversation I had with Co-Director of Live6 Alliance Lauren Hood, she told me a story of becoming agitated by Detroit's planning director at the last R.C.C. convening in Chicago. "I threw my hands on the table, and I shared what my motivation was, and I was like 'What are everyone else's motivations?!'" Hood was frustrated with the way the planning director was praising the Detroit team for conducting "forty community meetings" in Detroit's Fitzgerald neighborhood. "You'll hear these 'forty meetings'

come up in conversation, a lot of our residents are really pissed about it (...) People are like it wasn't forty and you came to us with a park design, it wasn't designed collaboratively." When Hood returned home from the convening, she found an email from the planning director in her inbox that included photos of her at one of these community meetings. The planning director had sent these photographs to the entire Detroit team, presumably attempting to prove that these meetings had happened in the way he had explained— despite the fact, as Hood reiterated on the phone, that she was challenging the planning director's narrative about what happened *in* those meetings. She described receiving backlash from colleagues who questioned the professionalism of her agitation, saying they made her feel "terrible about it." She elaborated, "For at least a couple weeks, I was waking up super anxious. (...) I seriously was like traumatized by the fallout temporarily." She concluded, "I think that's our biggest hurdle, is mixed motivations."

Networks and net-worths

Reimagining the Civic Commons insists that organizations engaging in theoretically complementary work amidst shared or similar landscapes tend to work in "silos." The idea of these professional disconnects seemed evidenced to me in the fact that nearly everyone connected to the work of Reimagining the Civic Commons understands that work differently and uniquely— often, conflictingly. However, both R.C.C.'s emphasis on this operational division and my own observations of conceptual detachments remain complicated by the reality that many of R.C.C.'s leaders have previously-established relationships with other organizations leading the initiative. Many of the smaller organizations within the Civic Commons network had previously operated within larger Civic Commons organizations; for example, the Live6 Alliance was born out of the University of Detroit Mercy. Moreover, Philadelphia, Detroit, Memphis,

Akron, and Chicago once housed the corporations that made profits now growing in these foundations' endowments. Following the career trajectories of some key R.C.C. players illuminates many of these wide and deep connections.

Carol Coletta, Senior Fellow at the Kresge Foundation's American Cities Practice, is perhaps the most prominent example of the cross-silo connectedness underlying this initiative, as she served as the former Vice President for Community and National Initiatives at the Knight Foundation until 2016. When Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson announced Coletta's new role with Kresge in 2016, he cited her work with mayors, city managers, council members, and civic leaders and her history of "galvaniz[ing] philanthropy to work in different forms of partnership with the public, private and academic sectors in pursuit of urban reimagination" (Kresge Foundation 2016). In Philadelphia, Patrick Morgan of the Knight Foundation used to work for the City of Philadelphia itself, serving in the Mayor's office with whom he now partners. Justin Diberardinis, Program Director at Philadelphia's Bartram Garden is in fact the brother of Michael Diberardinis, Managing Director of the City of Philadelphia. When I asked my interviewees how they came to their current work, many of them described having been notified about a job opening or recommended for a job by someone in this larger professional placemaking or public space development network.

R.C.C.'s idea of revitalizing local "civic commons" comes coupled with a "revitalization" of professional spheres to include more "civic" collaboration. When I specifically asked about how the Reimagining the Civic Commons learning network allowed for unique practices of networking and collaboration, I received a consistent response that the shared, cross-organizational access to funding felt unprecedented to many of R.C.C.'s local organizational

partners. Beyond this unique experience of multiple organizations collaboratively implementing grant-funded projects, many of my interviewees mentioned uniquely high levels of access to their partners at the four major foundations. Reimagining the Civic Commons' overarching desire to increase cross-organizational collaboration juxtaposed with its undercurrent of previously-established networks may in fact mirror the complex landscapes of the project site host communities themselves. Working social and organizational networks already exist within the communities deemed "disconnected," but Reimagining the Civic Commons considers these networks insufficiently "civic" as a function of a perceived lack of streamlining and centralization.

We can see the same close networking in the choice of U3 Advisors as overall project manager and director for the Civic Commons practitioner network. U3 Advisors is a for-profit national firm that provides real estate and economic development consulting to colleges and universities, medical centers, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and developers and businesses pursuing public-private partnerships— institutions that U3 Advisors understands to "anchor our communities" and which "can be leveraged to regenerate and strengthen their surrounding neighborhoods" (U3 Advisors 2018). This "anchor institutions" framework follows an understanding that large "civic" organizations like universities and hospitals can and perhaps ought to invest in smaller civic improvement projects in their host neighborhoods. Many of U3's consultants and developers come out of the same kinds of institutions that they promote as anchors for redevelopment. U3 Advisors was founded in Philadelphia in 2006 by Omar Blaik, who had previously served as Senior Vice President of Facilities and Real Estate at the University of Pennsylvania, and it remains centrally plugged into national networks of planning

and design based on New Urbanist and creative placemaking approaches. According to Blaik's biography on the U3 website, "Under his management, Penn embarked on more than \$2.0 billion of construction and real estate developments that transformed both the campus and the surrounding community," largely increasing the value of the surrounding housing stock. Since 2006, strategies advised by U3A have contributed to what they call the "resurgence of Midtown Detroit, College Park, Maryland, and University City in Philadelphia" (U3 Advisors 2018).

Consultant Bridget Marquis of U3 Advisors acts as Director of the national Civic Commons Learning Network. Marquis formerly worked as an independent consultant for the Knight Foundation's Community and National Initiatives and consulted on the development and launch of the Knight Cities Challenge grant program. It was precisely through her work with Knight that Marquis served as program director for ArtPlace America and developed programming for CEOs for Cities. ArtPlace America is a "ten-year collaboration among a number of foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions that works to position arts and culture as a core sector of comprehensive community planning and development" (ArtPlace America 2018). CEOs for Cities is a nonprofit "learning network" of "cross-sector leaders" who are dubbed "CEOs" on account of their desires to catalyze change in their urban communities (CEOs for Cities 2018). Both ArtPlace America and CEOs for Cities operated, for several years, under the direct leadership of Carol Coletta, who was with Knight and is now with Kresge. U3 and all four national nonprofits have helped shape and left marks in the landscapes of these five cities and in contemporary urbanist discourses.

Foundations of Reimagining the Civic Commons

The effects of these tight networks of professional and personal connections can be traced in the work of the foundations funding Reimagining the Civic Commons. In 2013, the William Penn Foundation launched its Great Public Spaces initiative, the mission of which reads almost identically to that of Reimagining the Civic Commons. It was through this initiative that funding was allocated to Reimagining the Civic Commons, as well as to further research about “repurposing” civic infrastructure. One of these 2017 reports is titled “Civic Infrastructure: A Model for Civic Asset Reinvestment” and defines “civic infrastructure” as encompassing

the physical spaces, buildings, and assets themselves, as well as the habits, traditions, management, and other social, political, and cultural processes that bring them to life—two realms that, together, constitute a whole. (...) These investments should result in quality natural environments, providing educational and recreational opportunities, advancing economic inclusion, and supporting citizens’ senses of spatial, historical, and social identity. (Greenspan and Mason 2017)

This report cautions against investing in high-profile parks like the High Line in New York City, which “have fueled center-city redevelopments and promoted rediscovered waterfront,” but “contributed to growing inequality, gentrification, and unequal access to public spaces” (Greenspan and Mason 2017). In what appears to contradict this critique of the High Line, one Reimagining the Civic Commons’ Philadelphia projects, the Viaduct Rail Park, is a member of the “High Line Network— a website that serves as a digital hub of information about “infrastructure reuse” projects across the United States (High Line Network 2017). In line with William Penn’s interest in funding this research, Executive Director of the William Penn Foundation Shawn McCaney has articulated excitement about funding Reimagining the Civic Commons because

The common theme among these projects is that they sit on the “seams” between neighborhoods, and as a result they have the potential to become “shared” civic spaces. By transforming them into high quality and high performing public assets, they can serve local recreation needs while at the same time potentially attracting visitors from other parts of the city, thereby promoting greater social interaction across the city.

“For the William Penn Foundation,” he makes explicit, “that is the ultimate reason why we are investing in trying to reimagine the civic commons” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2016c). That William Penn’s interest in Reimagining the Civic Commons stems directly from R.C.C.’s desire to expand the user bases of these civic assets across “neighborhood seams,” perhaps a coded reference to differently racialized and classed geographies, reifies William Penn’s goal of uniformly making Philadelphia one of the most democratic, innovative, and civically-engaged cities in the world (PhilaGov 2015).

A closer examination of these foundations’ workings may highlight some of the fault lines in the very foundation of Reimagining the Civic Commons. In May of 2014, Lisa Ranghelli of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy described of the William Penn Foundation as an “outsize private family foundation with community-oriented aims,” and the “800-pound gorilla” in Philadelphia philanthropy. In 2015, the William Penn Foundation reported \$2.2 billion in net assets and over \$32 million in grant payments for their “Creative Communities” branch alone (William Penn Foundation 2015). After conducting in-depth interviews and surveys with various stakeholders and grantees, Ranghelli reported that the William Penn Foundation, as an “effective collaborator” in the city, has an “imprint in Philadelphia that can literally be seen everywhere— in the parks and on the waterfront, at performance venues and in early education classrooms” (Ranghelli 2014, 3). The William Penn Foundation grew its financial base from the Rohm and Haas Company, a Fortune 500 company

making specialty chemicals; Rohm and Hass was sold to Dow Chemical Company for \$15.3 billion in 2009 (Ranghelli 2014). Despite having a mission, values statement and new strategic plan that indicate a “commitment to making long-term systemic change that will improve educational outcomes for low-income children, protect the region’s watershed for future generations and ensure that the arts thrive in ways that promote the economic health of the city,” William Penn has been the subject of critique from local residents for a “perceived abandonment of a broader anti-poverty agenda” in its push for urban growth” (Ranghelli 2014, 21). In 2012, William Penn contributed more than \$1 million toward a study by the Boston Consulting Group that recommended closing dozens of low-performing public schools and advocated higher quality charter school growth in Philadelphia (Ranghelli 2014). I heard reverberations of this de-prioritizing of public education in my conversation with Justin Diberardinis, who told me that many community members had asked him why Reimagining the Civic Commons was putting money toward “re-activating” parks instead of public schools. Although William Penn’s staff is comprised of a team reflecting the diversity of the state of Pennsylvania, at least 10 of 11 board members are White, seven of eleven are male, and another seven are members of the Haas family itself (Ranghelli 2014, 37).

Many of the same patterns and tensions can be seen in the work of the Kresge Foundation. Well known for its role in the Great Bailout of Detroit in 2014, the Kresge Foundation currently holds about \$3.7 billion in assets, with \$149.2 million in total giving for Fiscal Year 2016 (Kresge Foundation 2017). A tale of founder Sebastian Sprering Kresge “launching a profitable honey business from the gift of a single bee” underscores the foundation’s deep-rooted belief that “hard work and ingenuity yield exponential impact” (Myrick 2015, 10). For many years, the

Kresge Foundation was known for focusing on “self-help charitable efforts that encouraged the poor to lift themselves out of poverty” (Myrick 2015, 11), a framework that explicitly erases structures shaping impoverishment in the U.S. More recently, Kresge has shifted focus to promote “arts and culture as a core strategy to strengthen communities” (Myrick 2015, 16). The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy also conducted a report about the Kresge Foundation, highlighting Kresge’s unique commitment to questions of meaningful and impactful community engagement that facilitates a sense of belonging amid periods of neighborhood change. This report also discussed concerns about Kresge’s size and scope, and expressed skepticism based around their wide range of investments in education, arts and culture, environment, health, and human services. A critique of Kresge’s heavy-handedness has also surfaced within the R.C.C. project, as one grantee commented, “They are deciding which neighborhoods are ‘worthy’ of saving and which ones have the problems they want to solve. (...) I would say [that] Kresge’s intrusiveness or invasiveness fits with those kinds of power dynamics” (Myrick 2015, 32).

Kresge sees the idea of a “place” as a “space with meaning” that people are “attracted to” and “have memories of. It’s somewhere they’re likely to want to travel to” (Spire and Base 2016). This language implies that “space” lacks meaning and attraction in and of itself, positioning an ability to serve as a “destination” for mobile visitors as a central measure of spatial meaningfulness. These judgements appear to reproduce narratives of “emptiness” that have historically been deployed to justify practices of land grabbing, displacement, and colonization. Yet, Kresge claims to center creative placemaking around an idea that “great things already exist in a community, and with a little extra effort, we can advance things even further. In

fact, creative placemaking doesn't work very well unless community building is already happening" (Spire and Base 2016). Kresge's language becomes especially complex in this articulation; they believe in attending to assets and networks of people that already exist, while simultaneously assuming those networks of people assign incomplete value to and draw limited amounts of meaning from such assets. While they say placemaking does not work unless community building is already happening, Kresge clearly sees a whole or entire sense of community as unattainable without such a creative placemaking process. In many ways, these logics reframe the term "creative" from "something material, messy, unpredictable and expansive, into a comfortable and tidy – perhaps quirky – bohemian flavor, used to rebrand something or somewhere and make it more consumable" (Starowitz and Cole 2015).

When I spoke with Carol Coletta, she described the idea of a Civic Commons as places that are "welcoming to all," "available without hassle, without any [financial] barriers," and sites where "generosity," rather than money, could be exchanged. Coletta shared with me her personal belief that

When public space is really working, people start to think about themselves as all part of the same tribe. You know, we are very tribal people, right? And we tend to— in some ways, more so than ever because technology enables us to— enables our tribalism. What I think is exciting in public space, when done well and done right, I think public space sort of creates... a bigger tribe. A tribe that overcomes some of the differences and sort of— it's a tribe that you have to do very little to choose. And anybody, as long as they're— I mean, as long as they follow a few basic rules of civility, I think can be part of that tribe, if that makes sense.

This comment both elucidates Coletta's belief in the "civic," democratic possibility of public space and codifies the hegemonic social order on which that transformation depends. Coletta's language of tribalism and civility erases the particular conditions of violence to which Native

American tribes have been subjected under structures of colonization— not the least of which include a biologization of “tribal” differences that were somewhat colonially imposed— and it suggests a desire to minimize identity-based differences in ways that may fall into problematic frameworks of colorblindness. Under this framework, such a space may not “welcome” those trying to name and reclaim power in parts of their identities that have experienced systemic marginalization. A key boundary between “civic engagement” and “incivility” emerges here, as practices of openly criticizing the social relations on which the entire revitalization gains structural coherence may cross a critical line of behavioral appropriateness. Such practices are at odds with the kinds of proper demonstrations of democratic behaviors that are supposedly encouraged through these new parks. Language of incivility in reference to Native tribes, and Black and Brown people more generally, carries its own genealogy of violence.

With an endowment of approximately \$2.4 billion and nearly \$128 million paid out in grants in 2016, the Knight Foundation primarily funds projects in the 26 cities where the Knight brothers once owned newspapers. Akron, Detroit, and Philadelphia are three of these “resident communities” in which the Knight Foundation has an on-site program director to oversee local grant-making. Three “core beliefs” motivate the Knight Foundation's work: a belief in freedom of expression, a belief that an informed citizenry is essential for individuals and communities to make their own best choices, and a belief in equitable, inclusive and participatory communities (Knight Foundation 2018). In particular, Knight identifies three “key drivers of city success: attracting talented people, expanding economic opportunity by breaking down divides and making new connections, and creating a culture of civic engagement” (Knight Foundation 2018). Knight’s current CEO, former president and publisher of *The Miami Herald* Alberto Ibarguen,

has been a central driver of the foundation’s emphasis on digital media innovation in recent years. Knight’s excitement around digital media innovation, abundant in their website and social media platforms, sits uneasily with R.C.C.’s general problematizing of supposedly alienating personal mediascapes as articulated by Cortright. In another NCRP report, Lisa Ranghelli named “attracting and retaining college educated 25–34-year-old ‘talent’ into its cities” as central tenet of Knight’s approach to community work. A review of the foundation’s largest grants issued from 2013–2015 demonstrates Knight’s willingness to invest significantly in urban revitalization and support technological innovation in journalism and information access (Ranghelli 2015). Ranghelli discusses how Knight “risks leaving poor communities on the outside looking in as urban cores are revitalized” under the guise of this “talent, opportunity, and engagement” tagline (Ranghelli 2015, 4). Through Reimagining the Civic Commons, it is worth mentioning, Knight has shifted their focus those neighborhoods on the margins of such cores with a stated desire to improve civic assets for those who have experienced historical disinvestment. However, one of Ranghelli’s interviewees believed the Knight Foundation views community engagement and civic participation “as ends in themselves, not necessarily as empowerment tools to then push for change in local governments and systems.” Ranghelli concluded that

For every comment praising Knight Foundation’s partnership with stakeholders, one or more respondents expressed a contrary opinion. (...) The variation in experience documented in this assessment was pronounced relative to other foundations reviewed by Philamplify. (Ranghelli 2015, 38).

At the time of this report, most of Knight’s “Engaged Communities” leadership and all of the resident city program directors were White.

I met with Patrick Morgan, Philadelphia Program Director under the Knight Foundation’s Community and National Initiatives branch, in a coffee shop right outside of Philadelphia City

Hall. Patrick spent a decade in Philadelphia’s municipal government, a sector he explicitly described to me as lacking the “risk capital” to test ideas for public space revitalization, before joining Knight at the beginning of 2016. Patrick personally shares Knight’s belief that well-designed public spaces play a critical role in in cultivating engaged and informed communities, but that such a cultivation “only happens if people feel authentically connected to those spaces.” He spoke candidly about a problematic trend of outside organizations “parachuting in with all the answers,” a practice that he is pushing Knight to avoid, as well as a trend of private organizations promoting these revitalizations in a superficially flashy, even “sexy” way. He and I joked about conventional uses of aerial footage to promote revitalized urban spaces, as he exclaimed, “[Local residents] don't use them from, like, 20,000 feet in the air! They use them at the street level, at the ground level, at the community level,” an assumption on which he stressed Reimagining the Civic Commons operates. Patrick’s belief that civic asset activation should “start with those who have been disconnected from the space, and inclusion means everyone else can come too” struck me as one of the more specifically counter-hegemonic articulations I had come across in my research so far. That specificity remained fluid in our conversation, however; Patrick told me that before the R.C.C.-funded Bartram’s Mile project, residents of Southwest Philadelphia were disconnected from the Lower Schuylkill River for “historic reasons, and more reasons than we can probably get into now.”

Neither 20,000 feet in the air nor 20,000 feet below the surface

It is precisely from this conversation with Patrick Morgan that I began to think about the parallel of rejecting the “20,000 feet in the air” model of promoting public space redesign while remaining indifferent about the “deep” historical relationship between Southwest Philadelphians

and the Lower Schuylkill. Most of my conversations with leaders of Reimagining the Civic Commons left me with a level of confidence about their “groundedness,” in their degree of commitment to regular community feedback relative to the larger professional placemaking sphere. But for an initiative articulating concern, in many ways, over the *fault lines* of urban society, Reimagining the Civic Commons engages ambivalently with the tectonic plates— that deep, *dirty* history— informing the ground on which they work. Moreover, I went back through the promotional videos for each individual Philadelphia Civic Commons project after my conversation with Patrick, feeling surprised to rediscover that all five of them do, in fact, utilize drone footage to identify “problem areas” and illustrate their visions for the futures of those sites.

A guiding question that remained central to my fieldwork this year asked how those connected to the work of R.C.C. understand the idea of a civic commons, and additionally, what meaning they may draw from a “reimagination” of that idea. What I struggled to identify at the time of this fieldwork was an implicit and complementary question beneath the surface of the former— a question asking, what kinds of *value* do those people assign to the work and products of Reimagining the Civic Commons? Language of value can be seen woven throughout nearly every aspect of R.C.C.’s messaging, more subtly in some instances than in others. References to social and risk capital, civic assets, public-private partnerships, innovation and ingenuity, high performance and advancement, prototypes, studio sessions, best practices, and even competition (see: Theaster Gates asking what would happen if the civic commons “won”) appear inextricable from market logics and hint toward economically-based measures of success. In fact, the first three “measures of success” laid out on the national Civic Commons website—civic engagement, economic integration, and environmental sustainability— dance around this

language of monetary value. The “value creation” measure is considerably more direct and belies R.C.C.’s repeated claim that economic growth is marginal to its goals, a mere by-product of an otherwise people- and community-centric initiative.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller has explored questions about how value as a concept “create[s] a bridge between value as price and values as inalienable,” locating this bridge “at the core of what could be called the everyday cosmologies by which people, and indeed companies and governments live” (Miller 2006, 1123). Miller draws on his fieldwork with municipal governments to discuss the use of design or planning jargon, saying, “Unlike academic jargon which tends to perform cleverness through the use of obfuscation, this jargon is a kind of performance of the language of transparency” (Miller 2006, 1125-1126). Such a performance for Miller represents what he identifies as dialectic process of translating monetary value into the values of transparency, representation, and participation held by government constituents, and vice versa. Miller’s comparison of planning jargon to academic jargon here speaks to a few striking moments of my correspondence with national R.C.C. leaders. In my email exchanges with Bridget Marquis of U3 Consulting, I was asked to “use minimal jargon” in my project description so as to make my framework more accessible to those with whom I sought interviews. These moments unsettled me relative to my own struggles combing through some of R.C.C.’s blog post bylines, organization logos, and studio session keynote speakers— encounters with jargon that occasionally seemed to cloud the initiative’s actual driving forces. These email exchanges pushed me to question the initiative’s quasi-populist rhetoric of community engagement, horizontal leadership, and democratic participation, particularly given its tight professional networks of knowledge-production. I imagined a concern over my own “values” in

some of these correspondences, an anxiety over questions or uses of data that might somehow fall out of line with both the *value* and *values* of Reimagining the Civic Commons.

A word that directly references *something of value*, “asset” is positioned as one of the most complex arenas where negotiations of temporality and ontology take place in Reimagining the Civic Commons. R.C.C. names these assets as spaces with some previously-established degree of value, yet they clearly and consistently declare their unfulfilled value-potential and “underdevelopment.” Part of this unfulfillment for Reimagining the Civic Commons stems from a declaration that these assets are “not for everyone,” that their value remains “not maximized” as a direct function of the incompleteness of their user bases. This is where particular assumptions about community and social capital— and indeed, the capitalist underpinnings of this term itself— become consequentially reified, as Reimagining the Civic Commons makes concrete their belief that the “full value” of these assets can only be achieved by facilitating a user base that is diverse and integrated. Such a belief edges toward a radical shift in the very organization of urban space, asserting that “assets” benefiting a small handful of dwellers are by definition un-civic, under-democratized, and not actually ideal assets. This belief also sharply undercuts the legitimacy of value that residents of the sites’ host communities may already assign to such sites to justify interventions by those with higher levels of financial, cultural, and educational capital. Claiming ultimate authority over measures of value here becomes a contested site of seeming to attend to historically-disenfranchised communities’ desires for improved resources while deploying language of deficit. These frameworks of deficit are often disproportionately used to pathologize lower-income communities of color, dangerously asserting that such communities cannot be trusted to care for their neighborhoods properly.

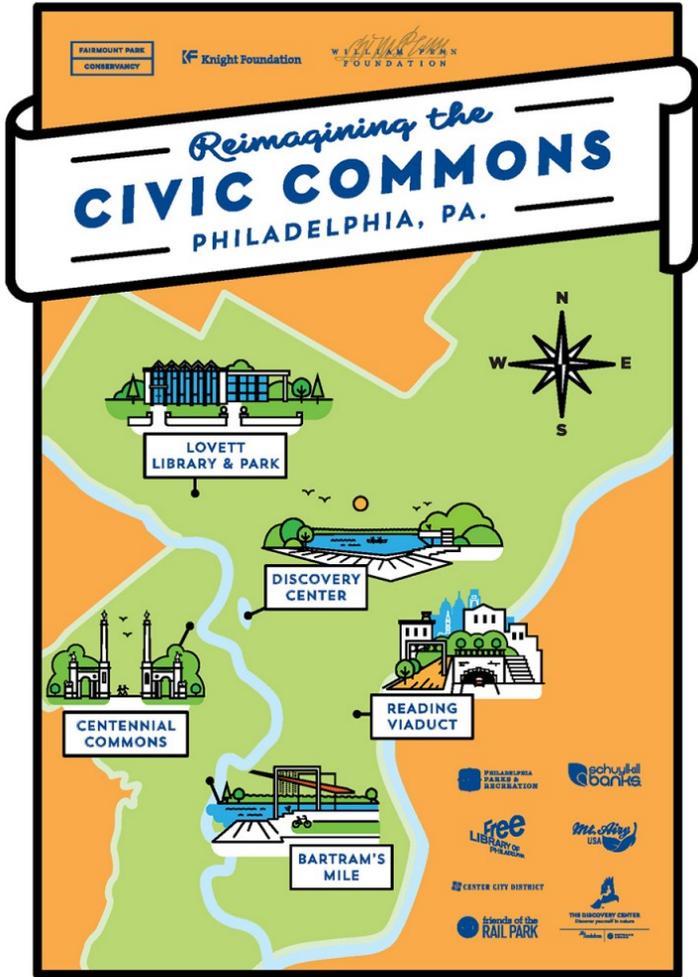
Similarly, it is critical to recognize how coded descriptions of existing communities' practices and general qualities as "colorful," "authentic," and "place-attached" often reify reductive categories as they attract resources and spur different kinds of replacements themselves. Miller's bridge between "value as price and value as inalienable" can thus be located at the core of Reimagining the Civic Commons' "everyday cosmologies," a complex negotiation that lingers beneath the surface, on and above the ground of R.C.C.'s work.

Chapter Three

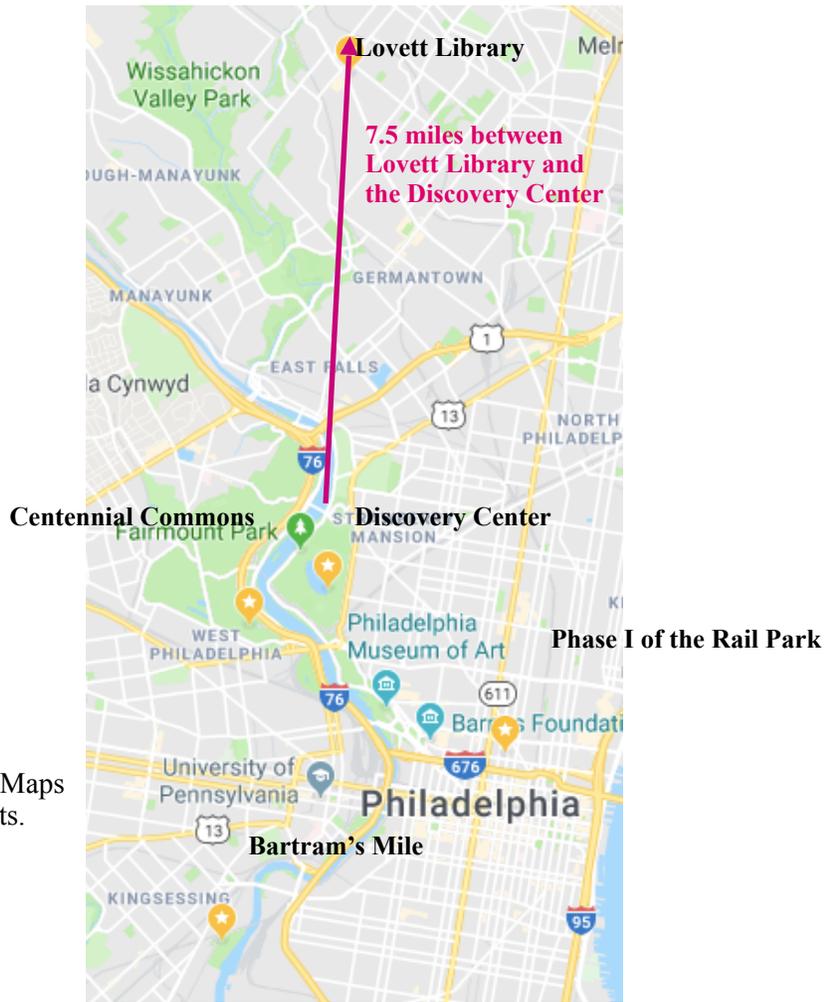
Reimagining the “Greene Country Towne”

Two kittens scampered across Sarah McEaney’s living room table as we sat down to talk on a sticky afternoon in June, purring, unmistakably, into my digital audio recorder. Her street-level apartment sits directly behind Phase One of Philadelphia’s Viaduct Rail Park, blending seamlessly into the industrial infrastructure that surrounds it. She joked to me that the flower pots on her patio were the only green things in this neighborhood. Her house was full of green, in fact; dozens of hanging plants with deep chartreuse hues contrasted with the beige weeds and weathered steel rail tracks directly in front of her brick-covered entrance. Sarah has lived and worked as a studio artist and muralist in this neighborhood, just north of Chinatown, for 38 years. When the City of Philadelphia proposed tearing down the large factory buildings around her home to construct a baseball stadium back in 2000, Sarah joined a group of residents opposing such a large invasion. The momentum from this group quickly gave way to the formation of the Callowhill Neighborhood Association. In 2003, a subgroup began thinking about transforming the abandoned railway into a pedestrian park. After years of developing ideas for the park and relationships with other organizations, Sarah and one other founding member of CNA eventually became connected with the William Penn and Knight Foundations. She couldn’t recall when exactly the name “Reimagining the Civic Commons” came into the picture, gesturing her hand in a brushing motion and saying, “You know, that's all on them,” when I asked. The Rail Park officially broke ground in October of 2016, and it will run three miles long through ten Philadelphia neighborhoods— “twice the length and width” of the New York City High Line (Friends of the Rail Park 2017)— upon completion.

The Viaduct Rail Park exemplifies the intersections of history, power, agency, and ontology that haunt and shape Philadelphia's pilot of Reimagining the Civic Commons. A celebration of the city's industrial traditions is articulated in tandem with a lamentation over the emotional and physical isolation structured by contemporary urban life. The excitement of many of the leaders over the range of socioeconomic statuses quite literally bridged by the elevated park is qualified by their sometimes-regretful resignation to the fact that the initiative cannot guarantee affordable housing to alleviate the resulting economic pressures. R.C.C.'s insistence on the importance of local community engagement and connectivity exists in parallel with the Rail Park's national visibility and membership in the High Line Network. These operational multiplicities undulate within and reassemble Philadelphia's social and physical landscape. I move, here, into an exploration of the larger Reimaginings of Philadelphia's Civic Commons, both to identify significant iterations of these undulations and (re)assemblages, and also as a cue from the initiative's own insistence that the asset-reimaginings gain meaning through their aggregation. This exploration reflects more breadth than depth in my research, a decision guided by R.C.C. leaders' emphasis that the initiative is primarily interested in demonstrating the success of public-private partnerships in urban public space reimagination, and less interested in the actual revitalized products themselves. In total, five asset in Philadelphia are being reimagined: the Viaduct Rail Park, spanning ten neighborhoods and passing through Center City; Centennial Commons park, known for hosting the 1876 Centennial Exhibition; the Lovett branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia system; the Discovery Center on the banks of the recently-reopened East Park Reservoir; and the Bartram's Mile walking trail alongside Southwest Philadelphia's Lower Schuylkill River.



Left: Map of the Philadelphia Civic Commons projects, labeled by their unique graphics, designed by the initiative itself. Sourced from <http://civiccommonsphl.myphillypark.org/>.



Right: Annotated Google Maps screenshot of all five assets.

The website for Philadelphia’s pilot of Reimagining the Civic Commons positions these “revitalizations” in relation to particular motions with/in the urban landscape. On the

Philadelphia Civic Commons website, Katherine Ott Lovell states that the five Philadelphia projects were selected because of their positions “in neighborhoods on the periphery of Center City that are fluid right now, or will be changing in the next five years” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2016c). In more specific terms, four out of the five assets sit in majority-Black neighborhoods and four are in neighborhoods with poverty rates higher than that of the city as a whole. Ott Lovell’s use of “change” and “fluidity” seems to assume and sanction an inexorable process of gentrification, a shift in demographics that can be inferred to mean fewer people of Color and poor people. Shawn McCaney’s aforementioned commentary about “neighborhood seams” also speaks to this celebration of porousness. Borders and boundaries gain a new currency, as Ott Lovell and McCaney position these sites as new frontiers worthy of pioneering. All Philadelphians are encouraged to move through and between sites previously obscured to or under-utilized by them, producing affective circulations lateral to the city’s inevitable spatial plasticity. Central to the Reimagination of these sites is an idea that anyone can develop relationships with and perhaps lay claim to them. Also on this website, Managing Director of Philadelphia Michael Diberardinis asserts that “When you foster development, there’s always a risk of the long-time residents being priced out. It’s just an urban reality. I think here in Philly we’re going to be very careful that the long-time residents will benefit from the projects” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2016c). These spectral acknowledgments of power alongside naturalizations of hegemonic value systems are contextualized by Knight Foundation’s belief that

Philadelphia’s momentum is palpable. Because of its beautiful public spaces and civic assets, the city is increasingly recognized as a world-class destination for visitors and tourists. This initiative is designed to bring high-quality amenities, like the ones placing

Philadelphia on a world stage, to all of our residents, especially those in our most underserved communities. (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation 2015)

Jennifer Mahar also identifies palpable momentum in Philadelphia. Since joining the Conservancy in 2012, Mahar has personally pushed to expand funding and networking opportunities for and between local community development corporations (C.D.C.s)— nonprofit organizations that promote and support community development, often through offering economic development, educational, community organizing, and real estate services for lower-income residents. The Conservancy itself helped found the Strawberry Mansion Community Development Corporation, and Mahar currently serves as an advisor to the Board. Mahar told me that she “challenged” the foundations to bring C.D.C.s and other neighborhood organizations into the Civic Commons network at the beginning of their partnership. She seemed critical of the ways that particular networks of organizations have functioned tightly in the city over the past few decades. “The head of Bartram's is like— I used to work with her at Philadelphia Horticultural Society. And now the person at Reading Viaduct works for the Local Initiatives Support Coalition. (...) You know, we trade staff.” Later in the conversation, she reluctantly used the word “inbred” to describe the network over the past few years. Most of the value she identified in Reimagining the Civic Commons was precisely in the expansion of this network, which she said reflected the foundations’ interest in breaking down the supposed “silos” in which Philadelphia nonprofits currently operate more than physically improving the sites themselves. Jennifer highlighted the fact that two C.D.C.s in the Civic Commons network had toured each other’s neighborhoods the week prior, her face lighting up when she added that these

organizations can now “get coffee in Chicago with one of the biggest national funders of open space.”

Less than one year after the expansion of Reimagining the Civic Commons into four new cities, Philadelphia’s mayor announced the Rebuilding Community Infrastructure (Rebuild) initiative to invest \$500 million of public and private money into public spaces over seven years. The goals of Rebuild mirror those of Reimagining the Civic Commons, and some of the private money for Rebuild will come from the same foundations. In fact, Rebuild cites Reimagining the Civic Commons as the “proof of concept” for investing in civic infrastructure. This citation reflects R.C.C.’s articulation of itself as a “testing ground” and a “producer of new knowledge,” and as having the kind of “risk capital” for experimentation for which public offices are supposedly not rewarded. In a blog post titled “A New Path for Urban Philanthropy,” Shawn McCaney states that R.C.C. represents “city-coordinated philanthropy” (McCaney 2017). McCaney establishes R.C.C. and the Rebuild initiative as setting the stage for “strategic, data-driven investment initiatives that advance equity, engagement, and neighborhood quality of life” (McCaney 2017). It remains crucial, here, to note not just how Philadelphia Civic Commons has laid a foundation for projects in the subsequent four “demonstration cities,” but how its perceived success has sparked larger investments within Philadelphia itself.

A significant portion of the public dollars funding both Philadelphia Civic Commons and Rebuild come from Mayor Kenney’s 2016 beverage tax; a penny and a half per ounce of sugary drinks sold in Philadelphia at the point of distribution, to be exact (Philadelphia City Council 2016). I spoke with Mahar about what it means for Reimagining the Civic Commons to receive funding through this “soda tax.” Philadelphia’s sugary-beverage tax differs from those in cities

like New York and Seattle precisely through its lack of explicit concern over public health, she told me. For Mayor Kenney, the primary purpose of this tax has always been to generate funding for universal preschool and greenspace. This tax has been subject to criticism, nonetheless, because Philadelphia distributors have passed the cost burden onto their majority-low-income consumers. Senator Bernie Sanders publicly opposed Mayor Kenney's tax, suggesting, in a *Philly Mag* opinion piece that went viral, that the mayor increase taxes on the city's wealthiest residents instead (Sanders 2016). Though this tax escapes a pervasive and problematic pathologization of lower-income peoples' food choices, Reimagining the Civic Commons' use of the money implicitly endorses the disproportionate burdening of poorer residents to subsidize public resources—resources that were established, in part, to relieve the poorest residents of this financial burden. That this private beverage consumption has been leveraged to fund public institutions reflects the negotiations about publicness and privateness embedded in the landscape of Reimagining the Civic Commons

“Civic-scale” swings

The Viaduct Rail Park, Phase One of which costs around \$10 million and is scheduled to open in the spring of 2018, is one of five “civic assets” in Philadelphia that were selected for Reimagination. From the 1890s through the end of the twentieth-century, these train tracks carried passengers into and out of Center City and supplied manufacturers, like Baldwin Locomotives, with raw materials. At its peak, the Reading Railroad was one of the largest corporations in the world and carried unparalleled quantities of freight across the northeastern United States. Since the Reading Railroad decommissioned the Viaduct tracks in 1984, this three-mile section has largely remained fenced off to the public. The Rail Park celebrates the

railroad's centrality to the city's nineteenth-century industrial boom, partially manifesting in the Park's restoration of the tracks' original steel. Its proposed "spaces for lounging and gathering, civic-scale swings, lush vegetation, amazing views of Philadelphia, and arts, culture, health and wellness programs," serving "families, students, runners, walkers, bikers, artists, commuters, and tourists" (Friends of the Rail Park 2017), on the other hand, prove to be unprecedented uses and understandings of this infrastructure (Brash 2017). Once a part of the city's infrastructure for transporting manufactured goods, these tracks will now carry pedestrians and people on various kinds of self-propelled wheels through the city, ostensibly catalyzing shifts in surrounding social and physical networks.

Sarah McEneaney has remained at the forefront of the Rail Park's community-engagement initiatives since its conception. She has worked with the local design firm Studio Bryan Hanes to facilitate a series of community meetings over the past several years. These meetings, mostly advertised through physical flyers and emails and typically attended by 15 to 25 people, have allowed local residents to express desires for and concerns about the Rail Park. Bryan Hanes "came with a totally open mind" about the design, Sarah told me. The firm shared examples of other parks around the world that had repurposed industrial infrastructure but without starting from any prescription for Philadelphia's. As our conversation about the Rail Park grew deeper, Sarah seemed to express some fatigue with the bureaucratic and procedural obstacles she has faced in bringing this project to life. She has remained much more excited about connecting with community leaders about the possibilities of the Rail Park than about many of the logistical components. "[Reaching out to community leaders] is the kind of job I still want to be involved in, even when I step back a little from the day to day stuff," she reaffirmed.

Recounting how one group of Chinatown residents initially opposed the Rail Park and preferred that the city tear down the elevated tracks, Sarah identified a lack of “mutual understanding” and trust as some of the largest obstacles she has faced through this community engagement process.

Many people in the city’s Chinatown neighborhood, roughly 80 percent of which remains populated by Asian-American residents, have expressed anxieties about housing affordability over the past several years. Philadelphia’s Chinatown was established in the late nineteenth century largely as a result of increased job opportunities at railroad companies such as Baldwin Locomotives, and some of today’s residents fear a particularly ironic displacement caused by a park that repurposes this infrastructure. *Curbed Philadelphia* has tracked the growth of the Callowhill neighborhood, just north of Chinatown, over the past few years. In 2016, the number of construction permits pulled for the Callowhill neighborhood doubled from the previous year. A disproportionately high number of “young working professionals,” often predominantly-White and wealthy, moved into Callowhill between 2010 and 2015, tripling the number of property sales in that area (Romero 2017). Echoing R.C.C. rhetoric about the centrality of economic development to civic commons projects, the Rail Park’s page on the website for the “High Line Network” celebrates the fact that the Rail Park “is already fostering new investment and major renovation in the Callowhill neighborhood, and will prompt the redevelopment of several major vacant parcels around the area” (High Line Network 2017). Recent economic research has clearly predicted increased property values in Callowhill and Chinatown as a direct result of the Rail Park (Romero 2017).

In a 2016 interview with *Philly Mag*, Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation Development Director Sarah Yeung expressed agitation over the Rail Park plans. “[The Rail

Park] is not just a park,” Yeung said. “It’s an economic development project, and it’s seen as a regional benefit. It has not been discussed in terms of its local impact or its local benefit and value, and I think that’s a really dangerous situation that is rife with potential for inequity” (Brey 2016). Sarah McEneaney said she does not want the Park to “change the neighborhood to the extent that the High Line changed New York,” but she reiterated the fact that those driving the park’s imagination, design, and implementation come from the realms of arts, landscape design, and culture-based planning instead of the housing sector. I sensed in Sarah’s voice a sense of remorse as she reiterated this fact, as well as a particular defensiveness about the value and importance of the Rail Park in Reimagining Callowhill’s Civic Commons. Sarah remains eager to work with neighborhood groups developing affordable housing, saying “[Affordable housing groups] have to show us, because we don't know how to build housing. You know, we're park advocates.” Although the Knight Foundation has granted money to the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation to develop affordable housing in the past, there is no direct investment in housing through Reimagining the Civic Commons. This serves as an expression of distinction between the “public” as opposed to the “civic” realm within R.C.C., given that investing in affordable housing assists a particular socio-economic segment of a city rather than all members of a city directly. R.C.C.’s positioning of the “ideal” Civic Commons user as universally interchangeable— and in many explicit ways, educated, urbane and cosmopolitan— may preclude the initiative from shifting institutional resources to those with the highest economic need.

A patriotic park

In addition to convening Philadelphia Civic Commons, Jennifer Mahar has overseen the revitalization of Centennial Commons. Philadelphia's Centennial Commons Park, known for the celebration of the nation's 100th anniversary in 1876, will receive new traffic calming measures, lighting, and interactive play spaces to enhance the existing open green space. Centennial Commons Park sits on the southwestern edge of the 2,052-acre Fairmount Park, adjacent to the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia's Parkside neighborhood. Fairmount Park is the largest municipal park in Philadelphia and it exists within a network of city parks that were gradually incorporated into the Fairmount Park system through the twentieth century. The grandiose Smith Memorial Arch, honoring Pennsylvanians who took part in the Civil War, currently sits at one end of Centennial Commons and opens into a network of busy roads that remain difficult for pedestrians to cross. The Parkside neighborhood was developed for the six-month-long 1876 Centennial Exhibition itself, centered entirely around a handful of "civic assets" that were subsequently deconstructed and never replaced. That Philadelphia competed with other cities to host this international fair places the Centennial Exhibition within a long legacy of inter-city competition that has included world's fairs and industrial expositions, sports events, and many types of competitive image-making and brand-promotion. Anthropologist Thomas Carter has discussed these kinds of tournaments of value as "the sport of cities," which in many ways have served as a precursor to Reimagining the Civic Commons' own suggestion of competition (Carter 2006). A particular sense of pride in having hosted this Exhibition remains in what Jennifer Mahar described to me as the "stories and photos and relics that have been passed down among generations in that neighborhood," which mirrors the ways that physical remnants of the

Exhibition have been found in dozens of archaeological digs of the park over the last thirty years (Cotter 1992; Seyfert 2006; Milroy 2016). The park's patriotic and colonial legacy has reverberated in the deprioritization of Parkside's majority-Black and poor residents over time. A lack of investment in public education, the implementation of barriers to homeownership, and a proliferation of drugs in the 1980s both reflected and exacerbated residents' structural disenfranchisement.

Twenty-six plans to redevelop Centennial Commons alone have “come and go[ne] over the years without any action” (Vuocolo 2015), according to Parkside's Viola Street Residents' Association founder Michael Burch, a partner in the Civic Commons network. When the Please Touch Museum restored and moved into the Centennial Exhibition's Memorial Hall in 2008, it demolished an adjacent recreation center that Jennifer told me had “fallen into disrepair” and had to close. This tax-exempt museum, aimed at educating children through mechanisms of physical play for a \$19 entrance fee, received \$1.3 million from the William Penn Foundation and \$550,000 from the city to move from its previous North 21st Street location (Brubaker 2016). Many Parkside residents viewed this decision as a “community asset [being] replaced by an institution with a regional appeal,” in Jennifer Mahar's words; it was seen as a disinvestment in one of Parkside's civic assets for a larger investment in Philadelphia. Mahar has encountered and empathized with Parkside residents' distrust of city park officials, and she told me their communication and collaboration have improved since they began meeting every other month for pizza and beer. She echoed Sarah McEneaney's Reimagination of Philadelphia's Civic Commons as park-centric. Mahar told me that Parkside residents often say, ““Oh, they're spending money on this new bike lane, but there's no public school left in Parkside, they're all

charter now.' And they're not wrong, but I'm a park girl!" Later in the conversation, she expanded,

We're park people, we do park projects, we want to bring families to the park and make the parks nice! Now, we have to think about what the park means to the neighborhood, and how can that be a catalyst for neighborhood change— but that the neighbors kind of control and are a part of.

Jennifer described the park as containing “a broken bench, a field of grass, and that's kind of it.” When I visited Centennial Commons Park the next day, I noticed about two dozen people, the majority of whom appeared to be non-White, playing in the public pool and eating lunch on the adjacent picnic benches. This reflected Burch’s comment in an interview with Curbed Philadelphia that residents “use [Centennial Commons] for picnics and family parties, but not for events or programming” (Romero 2017). It seems clear that larger investments in community resources must complement the Centennial Commons revitalization in order for the residents to effectively “steward” the park and expand its uses. In their messaging, Reimagining the Civic Commons consistently posits that these resources and mechanisms of empowerment will result secondarily from these park revitalizations, yet the initiative does not directly fund or prioritize such resources. Insofar as R.C.C. devalues and obscures the myriad of already-existing uses of the park, such as the lively picnics and poolside games I observed, they trouble their own goals of promoting park reclamation that “begins with those people closest to the asset.” Suggesting that this park’s community of lower-income users is somehow “inauthentic” or “unmaximized” as a result of these park users’ assumed insularity directly employs the neoliberal frameworks of interchangeable citizenship that often enable structures and processes of gentrification.

A twenty-first century library

Lovett Library and Park in Philadelphia's Mt. Airy neighborhood is receiving a \$1.25 million grant from Reimagining the Civic Commons to expand the overall size of the library, add a technology center into the mezzanine, ensure the library's compliance with American Disability Act requirements, and increase access to the adjacent park. This library was built in 1887 before joining the Free Library of Philadelphia in 1924; it is now one of 54 branches of the city's library system. As reflected in 1990 census data finding Mt. Airy to be one of the most integrated neighborhoods in the country, this area has maintained an "ethnically, racially, and economically diverse population for much of its history" (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2017b). Mt. Airy contains a Quaker home that served as a refuge for people escaping enslavement through the Underground Railroad. It is one of the few that remain open to the public, and it sits less than a mile from the Lovett Branch down Germantown Avenue. A specific sense of pride rooted in this tradition of co-residence shapes the library's redesign; visitors to the Lovett Library and Park Civic Commons web page hear Susan Zipin, a former public school teacher and activist in the Mt. Airy neighborhood, explain how the Lovett branch was selected for Reimagining the Civic Commons in part because of the "vibrant and diverse" community it serves. As Mt. Airy property values have increased over the past several years, particular concerns about maintaining this history of diversity and investing in services that benefit all community members have come to the surface.

Lovett Library's redevelopment plans were originally envisioned through the Free Library of Philadelphia's "Building Inspiration: 21st Century Libraries" Initiative, which itself was made possible by a \$25 million grant from William Penn—the largest gift the foundation has

ever made. The Reimagination of Lovett Library represents Philadelphia’s participation in contemporary discourses about how to situate libraries within shifting landscapes of media consumption. Many national foundations, including Knight, have invested resources into rethinking traditional library models over the past several years (Palfrey 2015). While matters of printed versus digitized books remain central to these questions about libraries, their physicality also becomes entangled with questions of spatial belonging and ownership. The increase in visitation and new circulations of people being proposed by Lovett’s reimagining has raised particular questions about how to continue offering services that those with the highest need can access. Memphis similarly seeks to Reimagine its long-standing Cossitt Library through the Civic Commons network. When the team at Cossitt faced these questions about how to meet a variety of community needs, they actively incorporated feedback from the homeless people who frequent the space in the new designs. Lovett’s complement to the other four civic assets remains structured by its unique setting as a predominantly-indoor public space with offerings that address issues of subsistence, employment, and general poverty-alleviation and survival. A particular friction has appeared to emerge from the intersection of the team’s desire to make Lovett Library a technologically-advanced “maker’s space” and a space for critical social services, simultaneously. In what may be an ironic and revelatory mistake, the Free Library of Philadelphia’s tab for Lovett Memorial Library currently states that three computer lounges featuring “state-of-the-art technology and equipment” will allow “customers” to produce audio content including audiobooks, original music, and podcasts (Free Library of Philadelphia 2018). As the Philadelphia projects continue to develop, we owe attention to how the publicness

embedded in Lovett Library may conflict with the “civicness” being Reimagined into this Commons.

A center for (self) discovery

Designed collaboratively by the Philadelphia Outward Bound School and the Pennsylvania chapter of the National Audubon Society, the nature-education based Discovery Center along the currently closed East Park Reservoir broke ground in September of 2017. This 14,000-square-foot center will include a rock-climbing wall, a tree-top “observation deck,” and a sloped waterfront deck at a total cost of \$18 million. The Discovery Center has received \$1 million through Reimagining Civic Commons, in part because, according to the Discovery Center’s page on the R.C.C. website, the East Park Reservoir was itself an engineering feat at the time and a “civic marvel when it opened over 120 years ago” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2017a). This historical vignette of the reservoir reflects the fact that the reservoir served as Philadelphia’s primary source of drinking water from the 1890s through the end of the twentieth century. The Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, bordering the reservoir’s eastern boundary, has experienced significant demographic shifts since it held some of the city’s wealthiest families in the 19th century. The neighborhood became a working-class Jewish community in the 20th century, and has held lower-income, predominantly-Black residents since World War II. In a blog post for the Discovery Center, lifelong neighborhood resident and Executive Director of the Strawberry Mansion Community Development Corporation Tonetta Graham describes how, as a child, she remembers “just escaping into the park. It was a safe place” (Vuocolo 2015). Divergently, the Philadelphia Water Department built a fence around the reservoir as an explicit “safety precaution” in the early 1970s. Reimagining the Civic Commons explains that the

reservoir closed around the same time that Strawberry Mansion saw increases in drug use, “crime,” “blight,” “home vacancy,” and general “suspicious activity” around the reservoir area—which had itself become “dense with vegetation” (Vuocolo 2015). Graham names the area “a forgotten section of the city” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2017a), further suggesting a historical disconnect between the residents’ and city officials’ valuations of the neighborhood.

In contrast to this language implying a lack of strong community networks in the neighborhood, many Strawberry Mansion residents have collectively engaged with the Discovery Center planning processes. When residents asked for the Center to prioritize public accessibility as much as it prioritizes educational programs run by Philadelphia Outward Bound School and Audubon, the design shifted to reflect those needs. “This is an experiment in community-based conservation,” says Phil Wallace, executive director of Audubon Pennsylvania. “Yes, it’s about the birds. Yes, it’s about learning and programming, educating kids and families and people of all ages about stewardship.” But it’s also an opportunity, he says, to “potentially galvanize further investment in the community.” This potential for continued investment edges toward the possibility of displacement for current neighborhood residents—despite the community engagement processes and a central project narrative that “this place holds a very special meaning to a lot of the residents in Strawberry Mansion” (East Park Leadership and Conservation Center 2018). Through a series of community events focused on recounting memories about the once-open reservoir, the Discovery Center team has “heard amazing stories from members of the community that talk about how their grandparents or their parents brought them up here to watch the sunset over the lake” (Vuocolo 2015). Graham makes clear that she believes opening the reservoir after 40 years of closure will “give residents access

to this beautiful, secluded paradise. The Discovery Center will reconnect us to a piece of our shared neighborhood history and inspire a whole new generation to learn, observe, explore, and discover” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2017a).

The Discovery Center suggests that you “Discover yourself in nature” (East Park Leadership and Conservation Center 2018), consistently promulgating a separation between the reservoir’s wildlife and the rest of Philadelphia’s urban landscape. However, the project’s website identifies precise historical moments when engineering and administrative decisions actively shaped the body of water and people’s relationships to it. This acknowledgement of how humans have built and structured the reservoir troubles a problematic distancing of human settlements and organic ecologies in the city. Yet an assumption that a reinvestment in this “natural” landmark will uncover a liberatory truth otherwise obscured by urban life reproduces that faulty dichotomy and universalizes people’s relationships to both concepts. Fundamentally, this project employs an interventionist framework, identifying itself as a

chance to ensure that this natural lake is not drained, to save and sustain the site as an important wildlife sanctuary, to reopen this miracle of nature in the heart of East Fairmount Park, and to establish a world-class educational center for environmental conservation and leadership development. (East Park Leadership and Conservation Center 2018)

As scholars such as William Cronon have explored, the use of singular and interventionist narratives in landscape-alteration processes often serves to erase Indigenous histories and pathologize non-dominant uses of open space. This project language implies a need to impose order the levels of wilderness and wildness in the area, both in the sense of the bird population that has used the Reservoir as a sanctuary for forty years, and in the sense of the “social decline” the Discovery Center team narrates and suggests is linked to the presence of Black and Brown

bodies. These dual frameworks of intervention— the natural and the social— further highlight how R.C.C.’s ideas of civicness depend on particular logic of correcting and controlling the “natural” and “unruly.”

Unbrownings through Bartram's Mile

Costing an estimated \$6.7 million— split fairly evenly between public and private funds — the Bartram’s Mile project is a paved riverside walkway explicitly aimed at “reconnecting people to the outdoors and celebrating the history and horticulture of Philadelphia's 45 acre Bartram’s Garden” (Vuocolo 2015). Bartram’s Mile sits in an area of Southwest Philadelphia with a median household income of \$20,469 and a population that is 95 percent Black (Morgan 2016). This mile-long path takes pedestrians from the grounds of Bartram's Garden to the Schuylkill River Swing Bridge, which connects to Grays Ferry Crescent Trail into Center City. The Garden itself sits right along the river’s edge, with a whimsical boathouse, visitor’s center, vegetable garden, animal barn, and acres of flora contrasting both the the formerly industrial neighborhoods behind it and the Center City skyline just ahead. The Mile is aesthetically minimal and user-friendly, with an iron structure bearing its name at the Garden’s end of the path. Though parts of the walkway remained incomplete at the time of my fieldwork in Philadelphia, I observed several people whom I read as non-White strolling with one another on the path, even fishing off its edge. They waved to folks brushing the Garden’s horses, admired the reflection of the sun off the water, and stopped, on multiple occasions, to literally smell the roses.

I spent an hour walking through the grounds with Program Director Justin Diberardinis, a long-time South Philadelphian who has helped develop community-based agricultural and

recreational programming. Justin told me that his programming philosophy is “high relevance, high outreach, high integration, high involvement in the development in the program for the people who live closest to the Garden.” He maintained that given histories of marginalizing Southwest Philadelphian voices, success for the Garden meant developing programming that is accessible to and owned and loved by the people closest to it, yet so attractive that people from all over the city want to participate as well. Bartram’s Garden prioritizes job applicants from the adjacent public housing development, Bartram’s Village, and a diverse range of people stopped us along our walk to wave an enthusiastic “hello” to Justin. The design and programming processes for Bartram's Mile have remained accountable to community leadership and rooted in networks of local relationships, and their aims to improve quality of life for the predominantly lower-income residents of Color in the immediately surrounding neighborhoods proved evident. For example, when the Garden was designing its kayak rental program, Justin and his programming team suggested they avoid online sign-ups so as to not offer an advantage to visitors with higher access to the Internet.

The oldest botanical garden in the United States, Bartram’s Garden exemplifies the strategic positioning of greenspace in American nation-building projects. John Bartram, America’s first botanist at a time when that work carried immense political power, purchased the then-plantation land in 1728 from Swedish settlers who themselves had colonized Lenni-Lenape land in the year 1648. In a number of writings throughout his career John Bartram made explicit his belief that Indigenous people could not be trusted to cultivate the land, and his family believed the garden to be a sign of divinity, a representation of virtue in an otherwise disordered social landscape (Wulf 2017). John Bartram circulated through elite spheres with comrades like

Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, and from the colonial era until today, this green space has been centered around asserting stewardship of local scenery and promoting patriotic ideas of economic progress. John Bartram was an original upholder of William Penn’s vision for a “greene country towne, which will never be burnt and always wholesome” (Milroy 2016, 4), a narrative that has historically been deployed to justify practices of land grabbing, alteration and “domestication”— and a narrative that remains at the forefront of the William Penn Foundation’s financial contribution to the Bartram’s Mile project.

In contrast to this (neo)colonial vision of the city, many of the R.C.C. leaders with whom I spoke branded Philly as not only a quintessentially patriotic and democratic city, but an industrial and gritty one. As that newer aspect of the brand has adapted to the city’s fluid political landscape over time, so too have green spaces like Bartram’s Garden undergone consistent redefinition to align with context-specific, politically-dominant notions of community.

This alignment has always been spatializing and racializing, perhaps ambivalently so. The section of Southwest Philadelphia adjacent to the Garden became gradually lower income and less prestigious through the 1800s, as steam technology brought factory and mill jobs to the Lower Schuylkill River. Many of those petroleum companies began dumping toxic waste into the river shortly after moving in, increasing health and safety concerns for those living and working in the area (Milroy 2016, 210-214). One of these companies was Standard Oil Company, whose money lies at the base of one of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ four national funders, the Rockefeller Foundation—information that I discovered coincidentally, outside of any R.C.C.-related messaging. By the turn of the century, as the neighborhoods alongside the river became over 80 percent Black (Herr-Cardillo 2017, 43), air pollution was rampant, and according to local

newspapers, a “thick sediment of oil and sewage destroyed the natural vegetation along the waterway” (Nolan 1876). Homes alongside the Lower Schuylkill were collapsing into natural sinkholes due to an accumulation of untreated sewage and stormwater from the 1930s into the 40s (Herr-Cardillo 2017, 37). By 1937, a Homeowner’s Loan Corporation redlining map gave that section of West Philadelphia the lowest grade for living. The surveyor noted a “concentration of undesirables,” problematically “uncivil” people in the eyes of the state (Nelson et al. 2017). The Philadelphia Real Property Survey of 1934, a contributing factor to discriminatory insurance and lending practices, similarly cited the condition of neighborhood buildings and the demographic information of its residents to give Southwest Philadelphia alongside the River the lowest possible rating (Herr-Cardillo 2017, 42). In 1945, Pennsylvania enacted the Urban Redevelopment Law to enable federally funded “elimination of blighted areas and promotion of neighborhood sanitation” (Spirn 2005, 399), and many homes in Southwest Philadelphia were subject to demolition. As the West Philadelphia Landscape Project grassroots advocacy organization has stated, today’s landscape of Southwest Philadelphia “bears the imprint of national policy and individual enterprise, of global forces and local impetus, of greed and generosity, prejudice and liberality, neglect and care, fears and dreams” (Spirn 1991).

In Reimagining the Civic Commons’ promotional video for Bartram’s Mile, President of the Bartram Village Resident Council Vanessa Pitts narrates footage that pans over acres of “underdeveloped” land, down streets with run-down houses, across “blighted” areas. “The word ‘Schuylkill’ means ‘the hidden river,’” Pitts tells us. “Once an industrial brownscape, it is now becoming green again. Bartram’s Mile will provide residents of Southwest Philly a beautiful place to gather and the ability to travel to Center City by bike or on foot” (Fairmount Park

Conservancy 2016a). Structuring this narrative of the river as *hidden-at-best* and *desolate-at-worst* are ideas of danger that have become associated with the river over time. “When I first moved out here, the community had a frightful relationship with the river,” says Pitts, referring to a handful of tragedies that occurred at the river’s edge. “Once they create [Bartram’s Mile], all the fencing and everything will be there. The coastline is secure. There will be more police activity back there” (Fairmount Park Conservancy 2016a). The Bartram’s Mile website draws direct connections between the “contaminated brownfields and abandoned industrial buildings” alongside the waterfront and community concerns about crime, particularly vandalism, in the past ten years. It is at these moments of articulating a “rediscovery” and even securing of the Garden and Mile area that legacies of urban and territorial inequities are actively brought to the “community engagement”-glazed surface. This discovery narrative erases centuries of human relationships to that land and reproduces exclusionary ideas about belonging— exclusions that trace a direct line of descent from documents written by John Bartram and his descendants. Untamed by Bartram’s Mile, the Lower Schuylkill would, under this narrative, be at risk of remaining *browner* than acceptable, the water itself a space of inherent danger, Southwest Philadelphia too fundamentally deficient to achieve the John Bartram Association’s and Reimagining the Civic Commons’ desires to make Philadelphia one of the “greenest, most civically-engaged, innovative cities in the world” (PhilaGov 2015). R.C.C.’s goal of “bringing high-quality amenities, like the ones placing Philadelphia on a world stage, to underserved communities,” (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation 2015) appears to carry guidelines for “worldly” or “classy” behavior in those spaces, establishing a particular framework of place-

based “authenticity” that ultimately upholds normative orderings of power (McNeil, Dowling and Fagan 2005).

Central to the Bartram’s Mile project are complex questions about how to situate imaginations of history within a reimagination of the Lower Schuylkill’s riverbanks. Archaeological surveys of Bartram’s Garden published through the Garden’s website have found pre-historic tools, evidence of seasonal Lenni-Lenape occupation, and mechanisms of Swedish subsistence in the strata (Bartram’s Garden 2018). Yet, the Mile’s celebration and marketing of Bartram’s heroic stewardship edges toward hegemonic narratives of the land amidst ongoing anxieties about long-term neighborhood affordability and sustainability. Stating that “We take great joy in thinking about the generations of people who have followed these patterns to seek beauty and sustenance along our riverfront, and we are delighted to count ourselves— and you! — among them” (Bartram’s Garden 2018), the Garden’s programmers negotiate a balance between recognizing historical multiplicity and encouraging anyone, regardless of residency in the neighborhood, to claim belonging in that space. Anne Whiston Spirn, Founder of the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, believes that to read landscape is “to anticipate the possible, to envision, choose and shape the future: to see, for example, the connections between buried, sewerred stream, vacant land and polluted river, and to imagine rebuilding a community through purifying its water” (Spirn 2005, 400). Echos of this critical practice, framed by a slippery distinction and romanticization of “the past,” emerge in the Garden’s statement that

History at Bartram’s Garden isn’t musty or mounted in a display case. It’s found in living collections that continue to grow, bloom, and reproduce; in buildings, gardens, and trails that are part of everyday education and discovery. Learners of all ages and history buffs are welcome to step back in time, explore the present, think about the future—it’s all here for you! (Bartram’s Garden 2018).

An April 2018 blog post highlighting the progress of Bartram’s Mile tells readers that, at the Mile’s opening in 2017, “Not only did the community celebrate a new (and impressive) patch of recreational space, but they turned the page to a new era of partnership between southwest Philadelphia’s residents and the civic assets that surround them” (Maier 2018). This and dozens of other R.C.C. blog posts were written by Chris Maier, the Founder and Creative Director of Made by Little, which is a “creative agency focused on crafting stories and curating experiences that bring brands, communities, and campaigns to life” (Made By Little 2016). Maier goes on in this post to write that, over the next year, “visitors should keep an eye out” for the repurposing of the abandoned Schuylkill Crossing swing bridge at the end of the Mile into a pedestrian bridge. For Maier, “This means that residents in Bartram Village, who’ve long been hemmed into their community by swaths of industrial refuse, fencing and unkempt urban wilderness, will suddenly have easy access to the east bank community of Grays Ferry—and beyond” (Maier 2018). Maier concludes this post by reiterating how Bartram’s Mile will “forge a deeper sense of trust with its surrounding neighbors by ‘planning *with*, not *for*,’” them. Nearly one year after the Mile had opened and two years after the announcement of Philadelphia’s R.C.C. pilot projects, residents of the Southwest Philadelphia, and especially residents of Bartram’s Village, appeared to have new and expanded levels of access to this green space and to the river. At the same time, the Philadelphia Civic Commons team appeared to continue obscuring those residents’ agency, “civicness” and senses of connection to the rest of the urban fabric— alongside another insistence that these plans and processes have been spearheaded by the local community. Ultimately, the new circulations of people facilitated by Bartram’s Mile will leave their own

imprints in the soil, the housing market, and the landscape of racial politics. As they “step back in time,” “explore the present” and “think about the future” alongside the Lower Schuylkill, these residents and visitors will participate in reshapings of the landscape that themselves “activate” critical and generative ontological contestations.

Aggregations

Those curious about the Philadelphia Civic Commons projects need not imagine their conceptual connectivity; Philadelphia’s page on the national Civic Commons website opens with



Philadelphia’s page on the national Civic Commons website. The animation begins as soon as one visits the website, and it becomes an interactive feature once the animation is complete. Retrieved from civiccommons.us/philadelphia.

As the five project squares move toward one another, the Discovery Center appears, an overgrown abandoned railway gains a manicured walking path, Lovett Library and Centennial Commons become populated with smiling children, and the shades of green become more vibrant as kayakers take to the Schuylkill River. Each project square has several clickable nodes, where visitors can learn how Bartram’s Mile is “improving perceptions of safety by making the area feel looked after,” the Rail Park is “the green heart of the diverse, local community, bringing

neighbors together as a part of daily life while attracting visitors citywide with its quality design and city vistas,” and business owners near Lovett Library— perhaps even Lovett Library itself— “see upticks in customers, and vacant storefronts on Germantown Avenue are filling as pedestrian life thrives” (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2018a).

On a fundamental level, the physical connectivity of these assets largely depends on vehicular transportation. While walking along Bartram’s Mile and across the Gray’s Ferry Bridge can bring pedestrians close to the Rail Park, Lovett Library remains a twenty-minute drive from the second-most-northern civic asset, the Discovery Center. Underlying Reimagining the Civic Commons’ promotion of asset-connectivity, then, is a foundational idea that these assets can *do* or *mean* something together that they cannot apart— often, serving the paramount interests of the city “as a whole” (Coletta 2017). While this assumption follows a particular model of sustainability rooted in the flexible and maximized use of existing resources, it reflects a problematization of each asset’s incompleteness. This language of partiality also emerges in the aforementioned clickable nodes, as the website suggests that the Southwest Philadelphians have not “looked after” the Bartram’s Mile area, that Callowhill and Chinatown currently lack a neighborhood “heart” or hub, and that the success of the free-to-use Lovett Library becomes a function of the commercial activity around it. Insofar as R.C.C.’s excitement around futures of connectivity continues to erase structural mechanisms of separation in the city and the vitality of the communities formed through those mechanisms, their alterations to Philadelphia’s physical and social landscape still threaten to displace or marginalize those historically denied the most power. Philadelphia Civic Commons’ landscape reshapings have, in many ways, (re)activated

sedimented ontological negotiations and spatial contestations that threaten to haunt R.C.C.'s desire to obtain (inter)national recognition.

Chapter Four

Salient: Protrusions from the surface of Civic Commons' landscapes

Salient: *adjective.* 1. most noticeable or important.
2. Projecting or jutting beyond a line or surface; protruding.
noun. 1. a piece of land or section of fortification that juts out to form an angle (Oxford English Dictionary 2018).

To me, Reimagining the Civic Commons is not about these five projects. Reimagining the Civic Commons is about an idea— you know, the lessons that we learn in scaling this work to the rest of the cities. So you know in five years, if we got great places in these five cities, great assets, that's no harm done. That's good. But will that be a success to me? No, not in any way. I think that if people are not saying “I want that,” it has not been a success. So it needs scaling or spreading in a way- and by the way, that doesn't mean we stay in business as Reimagining the Civic Commons and these funders. That's not the point. The point is cities and city governments.
—Carol Coletta, interview

Throughout Reimagining the Civic Commons' two years of formal existence and the two years of preparation that preceded it, this initiative has, at various points, claimed to be primarily or entirely about a wide range of things. This often-contradictory list includes: a public space revitalization model, a learning network for nonprofit organizations, an economic development tool, an experiment in social engineering, a park-centric restorer of nature in the city, a horizontal and multi-sector collaboration, a divergence from mainstream urban redevelopment practices, a proof of concept for its host municipalities, a maker of places that people want to spend time in and steward rather than pass through, a catalyst for new and open circulations of people, a people-not-profit driven project, a “new way of doing business,” something rooted in the particularities of the selected neighborhoods, and a producer of new knowledge for all American cities. Some of these goals appear to have materialized more than others, often enhancing, undermining or shifting the bounds of others along the way. One particular claim has remained

consistent and salient from the beginning, however: R.C.C. fundamentally aims to *change the landscape* of civic asset imagination in the United States.

Nearly everyone with whom I spoke articulated discrete connections to and understandings of this physical and metaphorical landscape alteration; many of them even indicated having observed this perspectival multiplicity themselves. As I have previously stated, I believe this variance has given way to two principal tensions structuring the initiative: a tension between an attempted recognition of historical structures of urban and territorial inequity, and a reorganization of space based on a universalization of people's relationships to one another and to each city. Similarly, this heterogeneity has engendered a tension between a thematic belief in the radically transformational possibilities of connected and shared resources and an idealization of "civicness" as controlled, orderly, and value-boosting. These tensions and negotiations emerge out of the specific local landscapes experiencing alteration, and they merit attention as

Reimagining the Civic Commons begins to circulate its (self-)perceived success in Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Memphis, and Akron in the form of "new knowledge" for other nonprofits, cities, and governments. All of this begs a question about how the archival characteristics of the physical R.C.C. landscapes may be erased through an emphasis on the metaphoric landscape of civic asset imagination. In this chapter, I will explore a salient site of friction that has emerged from one of R.C.C.'s projects in Memphis. I will tie this vignette into smaller vignettes from Akron and Detroit to ultimately draw conclusions about R.C.C.'s potential impacts on the landscapes of these five cities and on the landscape of "civic-asset imagination." I refrain from sharing stories about Chicago in this paper on account of the fact that no one connected to

R.C.C.'s work in Chicago allowed me to interview them, and I did not feel comfortable analyzing digitally-published data and materials exclusively.

A Reimagination of Memphis in the Wake of Slavery

Public discourse about the presence of Civil War monuments in civic spaces gained a particular electricity in the summer of 2017, when a rally against the planned removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee drew hundreds of violent White supremacists to Charlottesville, Virginia. People in hundreds of American statehouses, city parks, courthouses, university campuses, and “civic” sites publicly grappled with questions of how to appropriately reference and remember the Civil War and the many monuments that memorialize the defeated Confederacy. As had been made brutally evident by the election of a White supremacist-sympathizer as President of the United States, active conflict over the presence of these statues reflected atmospheric anxieties, fears, aggravations, and indignations about the contemporary landscape of American racial politics. In Memphis, a city that both seceded from and became reincorporated into the Union, a Reimagination of the Civic Commons quickly became contingent on meaningfully confronting racialized legacies of the past; the promotions of “civic engagement” articulated by R.C.C. leaders were put to the test by activists honoring a Black radical tradition. The Kresge Foundation’s suggestion that placemaking ought to be “link[ed] at every possible opportunity to your community’s heritage, while creating wide berth for exploring a community’s changing form and function” (University of Detroit Mercy 2017) reverberates through this vignette in its political ambivalence— particularly, when positioned within the context of local histories of violence and oppression.

Conspicuously named “Confederate Park” before the Memphis City Council voted to rename the land in 2012, Memphis Park was selected as part of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ network of projects in Memphis. Memphis Park sits on the “Fourth Bluff” of the Mississippi River alongside Health Sciences Park, which was similarly named after Confederate army general Nathan Bedford Forrest until another City Council-voted change in 2013. The leaders of Reimagining the Civic Commons in Memphis refer to themselves as the “Memphis Civic Commons team” and the “Fourth Bluff team” interchangeably, but the initiative is only reimagining and “activating” the Memphis Park portion of the city’s Fourth Bluff area. Until a nonprofit organization purchased the parks from the City of Memphis in December of 2017 for \$1,000 each, statues commemorating Confederate authority figures stood in both locations. A statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis stood in Memphis Park, specifically, and both were protected by a Tennessee state law that prohibits the city from legally removing Civil War monuments in public spaces. The City of Memphis was eager to sell these parks to get rid of the statues, on the other hand, which required changing the designation of the properties from “parks” to “open spaces” and determining that “it [was] in the public’s interest that a private entity should be allowed to repurpose Health Sciences Park and Memphis Park using private resources free from the unreasonable restrictions imposed by the Tennessee general Assembly” (Office of the Shelby County Register of Deeds 2017). The privately-funded nonprofit proprietor of these parks, Memphis Greenspace, Inc., was established in October of 2017 with the primary and promptly-achieved goal of legally removing Confederate statues in the city. Memphis Greenspace, Inc. was not an original member of the Memphis Civic Commons

network, but it has since become a partner in the initiative as a direct result of this change in Memphis Park's administrative landscape.

Memphis Greenspace, Inc. had the statue of Jefferson Davis removed on December 20, 2017, roughly one hour after Nathan Bedford Forrest was removed at 9:01 p.m. as a nod to the city's area code. Standing atop an inscribed pedestal reading "Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, 1861—1865," the statue of Davis had been erected in Memphis Park in 1964 in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. I spoke on the phone with the Fourth Bluff Programming Curator and long-time Memphis resident Andria Lisle, who told me that the statue was specifically intended to intimidate and undermine Black power in the city. The statue was surrounded by a number of descriptive plaques that remain in the park and offer narratives of the park's history. One of these plaques states that, "Opened in 1906 as part of the Memphis Park and Parkway System, Confederate Park commemorates the Battle of Memphis. (...) In May 1901, the United Confederate Veterans held a reunion here in an 18,000-seat structure named Confederate Hall." The United Confederate Veterans organization convened annually between 1911 and 1951, offering host cities an opportunity to compete with one another and to prepare more elaborately than each previous year. This vignette is comparable to Philadelphia's hosting of the Centennial Exhibition in 1876, another large-scale "civic exposition" that laid a foundation for contemporary forms of inter-city competitions— such as Reimagining the Civic Commons itself. Another plaque honors Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, an "enthusiastic Confederate supporter and suffragist," and Virginia Bethel Moon, "a Confederate spy who escaped from Union forces here and continued her espionage in Washington, D.C. and New Orleans." With the

Jefferson Davis statue removed, the inscribed pedestal atop which Davis stood remains in the park, alongside war-era cannons and these kinds of other descriptive plaques.

As Reimagining the Civic Commons had selected Memphis Park for revitalization prior to and with no expectation of the statue's removal, the implementation of the park's redesign immediately confronted community resistance. Andria Lisle is a White journalist and artistic curator, and she was hired by Maria Furhmann to "program" the Fourth Bluff in April of 2017, roughly seven months after the announcement of Memphis as an R.C.C. city. Maria Furhmann serves as the City of Memphis Grants Coordinator and a leader of Memphis Civic Commons. Andria told me that in the summer of 2017, the Memphis Civic Commons team attempted to host weekly "pop-up" events in Memphis Park to begin their "activation" process. These events included yoga session, beer gardens, concerts, food trucks, and interactive play spaces. The local Black Lives Matter chapter swiftly mobilized a boycott of the park, leading to a handful of meetings between the BLM chapter, Maria Furhmann, and members of the Downtown Memphis Commission. Tami Sawyer, a long-time Memphis activist and candidate for County Commission, founded the #TakeEmDown901 hashtag in 2017 to mobilize support for the removal of Confederate statues in the city with a 901 area code. The "Take 'Em Down" slogan came from New Orleans' Take 'Em Down NOLA Coalition, which was founded in 2015 to "build a city free of White supremacy" (Take 'Em Down NOLA 2018). Sawyer organized a number of direct protests in Memphis Park throughout the summer, drawing attention to the fact that Memphis "is a city where over 70% of the residents identify as the descendants of slaves" (Sawyer 2017). The Memphis Civic Commons leaders decided to move all remaining pop-up events to the Mississippi River Park under the reasoning that

We acknowledge the [statue removal] initiative and want to make clear that we love our parks not the confederate statues. 2. Our yoga attendance is growing and we need more space! (Yay!) Also, this is a great way for more people to experience Downtown's new pop-up park, RiverPlay! (Downtown Memphis Commission 2017).

The Downtown Memphis Commission, a long-time member of the Memphis Civic Commons team, later stated that “The core of the Civic Commons work is to create great places that belong to all of us. The Memphis Civic Commons team is committed to doing all within our power to be truly inclusive” (Downtown Memphis Commission 2017). These initial negotiations illuminate revelatory frictions between protest tactics used by these statue removal organizers and R.C.C.s understanding of what constitutes proper “civicness.”

While the statue stood in the park, the Memphis Civic Commons team publicly understood it to be an “opportunity of civic discourse where we discuss the totality of our past and determine as a community our direction and story today” (Groundswell Design Group 2016). I spoke with Andria Lisle before the city had sold the land to Memphis Greenspace Inc., and she expressed disapproval of the statue’s presence in tandem with strong disappointment over her inability to “program” the park. “I look at that park longingly, because you know it’s a beautiful public space, except for the Jefferson Davis statue. I can’t wait to get back in there,” she stated. While most of the Fourth Bluff team ultimately supported the statue’s removal, many members did not believe that Jefferson Davis should be an “obstacle” to programming an “underutilized” park even if the statue remained. Principally concerned with cultivating “authentic relationships” to the park via landscape improvements, new Wi-Fi hot spots, wayfinding signage, performance space, flexible seating arrangements, and a programmable light display, many members of the Memphis Civic Commons team advocated for ignoring the depiction of a Confederate president

with his hand in the air. After the statue was removed, Carol Coletta stated that more “potential” for the park had been “unlocked” (Poe 2018) in what appeared to contradict R.C.C.’s earlier narration of the statue as an opportunity for civic discourse.



“Site Activation” rendering of Memphis Park by Groundswell Design Group contracted by Memphis Civic Commons.

SITE ACTIVATION

The pedestal on which Jefferson Davis stood remains in Memphis Park. Image courtesy of Bob Henderson via Google Maps.



It is specifically through a recognition of how the institution of slavery shaped Memphis' landscape that the #TakeEmDown901 and other statue-removal organizing groups have drawn connections between the violence of Confederate statues and the need for local criminal justice reform in the city (Sawyer 2017). Memphis Park's contemporary landscape is embedded with other markings that call for a critical reading of the state of racialized power disparities in Memphis, even in the absence of representations of Jefferson Davis and other iconic figures of the Confederacy. Situated directly in the middle of the park and contrasting the greenspace and Civil War memorabilia that surrounds it is a bulky, aluminum SkyCop® box that surveils the park 24 hours per day.



The SkyCop® technology in Memphis Park, surrounded by greenspace and war memorabilia. Screenshot from Google Maps.

This panoptic audio and video surveillance technology “detects criminal activity as it is unfolding;” the company claiming that, “In many cases, SkyCop’s presence alone is enough to deter criminals” (SkyCop, Inc. 2018). When I spoke with Carol Coletta, she identified discussions of safety as “front and center in some of the cities, particularly in Memphis.” She told me that many (presumably-White) community members felt concerned that improving the

basketball court on the Fourth Bluff would “be a security threat” and “precipitate the need for police and more policing.” This racially-coded rhetoric and explicit “broken windows” framework for policing are embedded in the landscape and shaped by the afterlives of slavery (Sharpe 2016). Such an idea has been shown to disproportionately target urban residents of Color, especially Black people, while not significantly reducing crime rates (Alexander 2010). Furthermore, the physical signs of “disorder” that broken windows policing targets are often caused by the public conduct of homeless people who do not have the privilege of accessing private settings where those same behaviors are not criminalized. Far from Studio Gang’s arguably neoliberal idea of the “Polis Station,” the SkyCop® box was never intended to facilitate “positive, civic interactions” between local officers and neighborhood residents. That visitors to Memphis Park were long subjected to many types of surveillance, from the technological scrutiny the SkyCop® box to the gaze of Jefferson Davis, animates Sawyer’s belief that a project intended to foster inclusivity should never have started with these parks “unless the park organizers sought to directly address this racist legacy” (Kinney 2017).

Repurposing the Sediment

The idea of repurposing and “activating” civic assets that already exist remains foundational to Reimagining the Civic Commons’ work across all five cities; deeply embedded in their philosophies is a rejection of traditional planning practices that deny the potential of existing infrastructure, networks, and activism. Yet, in seeking to “uncover” and “maximize” the value of things-already-built, the initiative has consistently struggled to acknowledge historical negotiations about and heterogeneous relationships to these sites. The identified “underutilization” of Memphis Park is inextricable from the 53 year-long presence of an

authoritative Confederate figure and the much longer history of racial injustice in the city, and the Reimagination of the park within the Civic Commons initiative can never detach from the legacy of slavery as a landscape-altering system. Philadelphia's Viaduct Rail Park similarly remains entangled with the specific and largely-violent placement of Chinese immigrants within twentieth-century American labor structures— as well as the environmental exploitations on which the city's industrial economy depended. Bartram's Mile quite literally builds upon sedimented legacies of environmental racism. These sites do not *just exist*; they emerged from and have remained shaped by particular political contexts. People's diverse engagements with these sites over time have been guided by the cultural and physical landscapes contextualizing them, just as these sites have played a role in shaping narratives about their host landscapes and neighborhoods.

Henri Lefebvre's foundational statement that "Authentic knowledge of space must address the question of its production" and "must account for both representational spaces and representation of space, but above all for their interrelationships and their links with social practice" (Lefebvre 1991, 116) demands attention to how places hold the histories that have allowed for their formation. Many theorists of place since Lefebvre, such as Dolores Hayden, Timothy Ingold and David Harvey, have taken up similar questions about how memory and identity cohere in urban places. Dolores Hayden speaks of urban landscapes as "storehouses for social memories," pointing to how natural features "frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes" (Hayden 1995, 9). She theorizes about the layers of history that accumulate in physical landscapes over time, identifying power in the fact that all "Indigenous residents as well as colonizers, ditch diggers as well as architects, migrant workers as well as

mayors, housewives as well as housing inspectors, are all active shaping the urban landscape” (15). Central to my own argument is a recognition of how, beyond the traces of urban life that have remained in the “chemical composition of rock, the orientation of magnetic particles, the layers of sediment or strata” (Turkel 2007, 66) in the nineteen landscapes undergoing reimagination in the Civic Commons network, these sites fundamentally operate as “textual systems that facilitate processes by which social and subjective identities are formed” (Mitchell 1994, 1). Reimagining the Civic Commons has, over the past two years, offered a variety of narrative frameworks for understanding how the social and physical landscapes in which they intervene came to be. As reflected in two vignettes from Akron and Detroit that follow, it is precisely because of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ desire to reshape physical and professional landscapes that we owe attention to how embedded hegemonic legacies and structures are similarly being (re)activated.

Ruination and progress in Akron, Ohio

The geologic structuring of landscapes remain inseparable from the socioeconomic.

Anthropologists Arlen Chase and Diane Chase have noted how

Not only are soils and stone excavated, moved, and redeposited for a variety of construction-related purposes, but industry and mining also result in by-products (such as slag) that create other landscapes or are incorporated into landscape fills. Extensive deposits of sediments may be either purposeful or incidental and result from any manner of human-caused disturbance to the landscape. (Chase and Chase 2016, 363)

Ohio’s Summit Lake, the site of Reimagining the Civic Commons’ work in Akron, contains an estimated 29 million cubic feet of “contaminated sludge” produced as waste by the rubber industry, according to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (Downing 2016). Similar to the Lower Schuylkill River in Southwest Philadelphia, sediments of silty clay have been

observed in Summit Lake “along with oils and greases, high levels of phosphorus and bacteria from sewer runoff” for over four decades. This industrial pollution has disproportionately affected the predominantly-Black and lower-income residents of the Lower Summit Lake region, dating back to the 1910s when many Black and Appalachian residents were employed by those polluting rubber factories during the early years of the automobile industry (Ohio History Central 2018). Through a number of planned and tactical mechanisms, the landscape surrounding Summit Lake has been shaped by logics of exploitation and negligence.

In a handful of blog posts written for Akron Civic Commons, Demetrius Falconer, Outreach Manager at Summit Metro Parks, names the fact that “residents have experienced years of disenfranchisement from educational programs, disconnection from the city itself because of highways, and even dismissal from participating in the development of their communities” (Falconer 2017). When the Knight Foundation’s Akron Program Associate Bronlynn Thurman blogged for the Akron team about the Second Civic Commons Studio, which took place in Chicago in the spring of 2017, she called for more “well-supported black spaces” in Akron given that the city is approximately 30% African-American (Thurman 2017). At the same time, the official proposal for Akron to participate in the Civic Commons network describes the park adjacent to Summit Lake as “marked by disinvestment, remembered only as a dumping ground for factories and for long-held negative perceptions of safety” (Akron Civic Commons 2016). Though vaguely referencing a history of narratives that devalue Summit Lake’s surrounding landscape, this language largely reproduces the precise reduction of Black and poor neighborhoods to “dangerous” and “dirty” communities that R.C.C. claims to counter. They universalize acts of negative remembering and perception-holding that were likely enacted by

White and wealthy people outside of the neighborhood, naturalizing landscape-marking practices that obscure the livelihoods of the lower-income communities who continue to inhabit and steward the land. Dan Rice, President and CEO of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, similarly describes the industrial era’s “tremendous cost to the environment” and the ways in which “effects of redlining and suburban sprawl shifted people and economic drivers away from the city” (Rice 2017a) in an early Akron Civic Commons blog post. Though perhaps attempting to link Akron’s environmental history with the city’s fluid socioeconomic structurings, Rice employing language of “cost” to the environment and “disappearance of economic power” that does little to denaturalize larger systems of racial capitalism in urban space. As Anna Tsing writes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, “We are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival” (Tsing 2015, 19).

Vacancies and vanishings in Detroit

The four national foundations investing in Reimagining the Civic Commons have identified what they understand to be “promising potential” in the five demonstration cities. Community activists in Detroit have critiqued recent trends of private nonprofits— many of which house wealth generated in part from Detroit-based industries— intervening under a particular logic of “rescuing” the city from decline (Sugrue 2014). Kresge and Knight participated in Detroit’s 2014 Grand Bargain, in which several private foundations donated \$816 million to the city to reduce the burden of underfunded municipal pensions and allow world-renowned art to remain in the city-owned Detroit Institute of Art, whose collections had been mooted as possible sources of revenue during the fiscal crisis. For Kresge in particular, this

participation set a precedent for their position as a catalyst of redevelopment and engineer of “civic life” in the city (Rapson 2016). In a speech in August of 2016 to “civic and philanthropic leaders” in Memphis, Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson proclaimed that

Foundations working in Detroit are acknowledging that we can no longer sit at the margins, hoping that our good intentions and charitable impulses will help the community claw through tough times. (...) We are aggressively helping contribute to the rebirth and reimagination of our city. (Rapson 2016)

Reimagining the Civic Commons’ investments in Detroit involve the “conversion of vacant lots into productive landscapes” (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2017c) that lie directly between the University of Detroit Mercy and Marygrove College in the north of the city. A few dozen lots are being converted through the initiative itself, and some of R.C.C.’s partners are working to rehabilitate 115 vacant homes and nearly 200 lots (Reimagining the Civic Commons 2017a). This area is part of Mayor Mike Duggan's \$125 million plan to demolish vacant homes and “clean up” two dozen commercial corridors throughout the city, which Duggan developed in collaboration with community partners (Pinho 2017). When Reimagining the Civic Commons and the City of Detroit broke ground on the HomeBase Community Center in October of 2017, the Kresge Foundation announced an expanded commitment of over \$20 million in the Livernois-McNichols area in northwest Detroit alone over the next several years. Mayor Duggan responded, "By working closely with the community and partners like Kresge, we are turning the vacant land, once seen as a liability, into an asset” (Kresge Foundation 2017).

At this ground-breaking ceremony, Rapson also offered some history of the Live6 Alliance, which Kresge helped found. He explains that the Live6 Alliance,

was initially conceived as a way of migrating a neighborhood stewardship model (...) and transfer that model to the neighborhoods of Detroit. Well, it turns out that you can’t really migrate a model of community organizing and development from midtown to a

neighborhood. You can be inspired by it, you can take your bearings from it, you can even steal an idea or two from it, but you can't expect a carbon copy. Probably not even a facsimile. And you don't want to, because the act of neighborhood revitalization and stewardship must be rooted in the specifics of place, in the fiber of culture and traditions of service that have been layered over time and that define how a community works, that determine how individual identity is formed, that shape how informal networks of support and mutual assistance are forged. (University of Detroit Mercy 2017)

This understanding of place-based revitalization attends remarkably to an idea of multi-layered landscapes and to the significance of social ties among particular groups of people. That statement clearly troubles previous suggestions of valuelessness and destitution in these sites, perhaps as well as an idea of replicable or scalable placemaking.

In March of 2018, four R.C.C. leaders— Carol Coletta, Kathryn Ott Lovell, Theaster Gates of Chicago's PlaceLab, and Gia Biagi of Studio Gang— made a presentation about R.C.C.'s Detroit initiative at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. This annual conference and festival brings together thousands of artists, musicians, filmmakers, entrepreneurs, technology thought-leaders, media moguls, and “global professionals” to “discover new creative frontiers” (South by Southwest 2018), a clear reflection and an important early epicenter of “creative class” enterprises and thought. The description for the Reimagining the Civic Commons session reiterates the initiative's belief that “as communities became segmented by income” and “technology advanced," Americans have come to “spend less time together in social settings, trust each other less and interact less with people whose life experiences are different.” The following section of their description perhaps reflects assumptions about the attendees and cultures of South by Southwest, as they state that

As we invest in connected sets of public places around the country, we are demonstrating —with data—the outcomes of a reimagined civic commons. This data-driven approach offers a new method for determining the multifaceted value of reinvesting in civic assets.

Hear from designers, artists, and policy makers how democratizing new civic commons for the 21st century will create more creative, inclusive cities for all. (South by Southwest 2018)

Leaving no room for uncertainty about the overlap between a South by Southwest attendee and an appropriate Civic Commons user, Kathryn Ott Lovell explicitly asked the “millennials” in the audience to move to Philadelphia during this presentation (South by Southwest 2018).

Entangled in this discursive nexus of nonprofit intervention and community interests, local significance and national circulation were Lauren Hood’s comments to me about Detroit’s vacant lots. Soon after Hood recounted her frustration with the lack of substantive local input into the community engagement processes in our conversation, she spoke about the specific ways that the 2008 housing foreclosure crisis has haunted the social fabric of the Livernois-McNichols area. Many residents of the neighborhood where Reimagining the Civic Commons is “transforming vacant lots into a park and greenway” and “reactivating the commercial corridors” continue to mourn the displacement of their neighbors who lost homes through predatory loaning practices, she told me. Facilitating new forms of integration or inter-mingling in Fitzgerald, Hood believes, will remain limited in its ability to recreate those neighborly experiences of the past specifically because of the ruptures in Detroit’s social fabric that have already taken place. She evidently struggled to reconcile her own feelings of nostalgia for parts of the past with a recognition of marked shifts in the landscape; a desire for more “vibrant and active” public spaces with an anxiety about the ability of her remaining neighbors to feel ownership of those spaces; an excitement about new organizational and financial collaborations with an uncertainty about who has been gaining what from such encounters.

An enduring testimony

In praising William Penn as a pioneering urban visionary and the Mississippi River—the original point of settlement from which Europeans colonized Chickasaw land—as Memphis’ “first great place” (Cannon 2016), *Reimagining the Civic Commons* offers quasi-biographical narratives of its cities that replicate older hegemonic histories in celebrating wealthy White-Anglo men who are remembered for imposing order onto a “wild” landscape. Dolores Hayden discusses how these “urban founding father” narratives often also praise those who “made fortunes building downtowns” (Hayden 1995, 39-40), further promoting colonial, patriarchal, and speculative land uses. All five of the Civic Commons “demonstration teams” indeed highlight how industrial booms, in different ways and at different times, brought economic prosperity and notoriety to each of the cities. These historical celebrations collaborate eerily with R.C.C.’s articulated nostalgia for an apparently “more civic” past in which urban neighbors “spent time with one another in public” and sustained “social harmony.” At the same time, the initiative points to the uneven distribution of that industrial wealth and, occasionally, to structural mechanisms of inequity that have marginalized lower-income communities and communities of Color. Overall, they seem to lament the ways in which many of those same histories that they celebrate can be tied to R.C.C.’s understanding of contemporary urban dwellers as “segmented” from one another.

Amidst the aforementioned landscape layers that Harvey argues have accumulated in the “hurly burly of chaotic urban growth” are cracks, crevices, ambiguities and things-uncanny through which particular legacies of power seep through. Some of these legacies may carry ghostly presences— voices of the marginalized, subaltern and Indigenous, as Jacques Derrida

(1994), Avery Gordon (2008) and Elizabeth Roberts (2013) have stated— that haunt R.C.C.’s operations and modes of thought. For Roberts in particular, haunting is “experienced as disorientating, unsettling, confrontational, chilling, spooky, or even mundane. It can surprise us, implicating us bodily, affectively and ethically” (Roberts 2013, 393). Activist Tami Sawyer appeared to experience this chilling and affective encounter during the removal of the Jefferson Davis statue in December 2017. She went live on Facebook as the industrial hooks and ropes lifted Jefferson Davis off his pedestal, explicitly invoking the spirits of her great-great-grandparents who were once enslaved in Tennessee (Sawyer 2017).



Jefferson Davis statue being removed from Memphis— formerly “Confederate— Park. Copyright 2018 Nextstar Broadcasting, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.arklatexhomepage.com/news/local-news/confederate-statues-removed-from-memphis-park/885424199>.

Many scholars have drawn connections between mantras about “activat[ing] under-utilized space” and logics of Manifest Destiny that position Indigenous peoples as incapable of stewarding the land. In an April 2017 blog post titled “Placemaking When Black Lives Matter,” urban theorist Annette Koh turns to how, in the 1969 People’s Park struggle over open space in Berkeley, California, the University of California deployed a narrative that “The park is

underutilized, only a small group of people use the park and they are not representative of the community” to delegitimize the presence of protestors and homeless campers. Later in the post, Koh asserts that “In particular, viewing place as ‘common denominator’ runs the risk of erasing major differences in the ways people experience place and public spaces. In the United States, these major differences cleave along racial and class lines” (Koh 2017). Reimagining the Civic Commons articulates a vague celebration of difference and heterogeneity in urban space, but they avoid critiquing the structures behind and implications of those difference. Rather than investing directly in mechanisms of addressing these structural concerns, they insist that services such as public education and affordable housing remain outside of their Reimagination. They take such structures and implications “for natural” (Potteiger and Purinton 1998) in many ways, refusing to do the “dirty,” contentious work of strengthening the public sphere and focusing on cultivating surface-level “civicness” instead. As Kansas City artist Julia Cole noted in a speech published by *Lumpen Magazine*, goals of combating urban isolation and political disempowerment through creative placemaking “are not trivial or even undesirable, they are just incomplete – and often deliberately avoid tackling the root causes of the systemic problems they address” (Starowitz and Cole 2015).

In this paper, I have argued for a recognition of how Reimagining the Civic Commons brings to the surface some of the most haunted and contested facets of various landscapes through their “activation” and reshaping processes. Specifically, these haunted facets include capitalist market logics under the guise of nonprofit community work, tensions between ideas of “civicness” and “publicness,” ambivalence over spatialized structures of oppression, and a multiplicity of relationships to particular places, among others. Crucially, Timothy Ingold’s

conceptualization of landscapes as “enduring records of and testimonies to the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within them and have left something of themselves” (Ingold 1993, 152) disrupts precarious narratives of vacancy and destitution while allowing for imaginations of future layerings. In this sense, Ingold offers critical tools with which to make connections between these archived records and testimonies and future patterns of spatial negotiation at the local level. R.C.C.’s attempt to build common ground beneath and among differently placed people risks requiring those who are the most traditionally “out of place”—itself a shifting category— to negotiate and make compromises about their belonging. Thus, the initiative’s engagement with these dialogues and tensions will prove ultimate measures of accountability to urban residents historically denied the most power. Some of these dialogic encounters and emergences may be captured and rendered visible by R.C.C.’s measures of success, and used to make claims of new knowledge for any and all American cities; but some of them will remain localized in ghostly form, haunting the spatial practices articulated in these nineteen sites and risking reassemblance or erasure through national circulation.

Appendix

Bennett, Chris. Telephone interview by author. August 9, 2017.

Coletta, Carol. Telephone interview by author. July 13, 2017.

Diberardinis, Justin. Interview by author. June 27, 2017.

Diberardinis, Michael. Telephone interview by author. July 26, 2017.

Ferrentino, Cara. Telephone interview by author. July 28, 2017.

Hood, Lauren. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2017.

Lisle, Andria. Telephone interview by author. November 6, 2017.

Mahar, Jennifer. Interview by author. June 26, 2017.

McEneaney, Sarah. Interview by author. June 26, 2017.

Morgan, Patrick. Interview by author. June 28, 2017.

Rice, Daniel. Telephone interview by author. August 4, 2017.

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