



SUPPORTING PUBLIC LIFE IN AMERICAN CITIES

**How Recent Knight Grants are Helping Local
Leaders Envision Better Communities**



**KNIGHT
FOUNDATION**

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One of the ways Knight Foundation has supported more informed and engaged communities is through a set of investments focused on public life: the spaces and places where people come together to participate in community. The goal is to connect and engage residents in their communities through more parks and public open spaces, bike and pedestrian lanes to enable people to connect, and programming that draws people together to share a common experience. Through this work, Knight has found that quality public spaces strengthen community bonds, increase civic engagement and create more opportunities for diverse communities to gather together and learn from each other.

GRANTEES AT A GLANCE

8 80 Cities, which creates public spaces great for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old to transform cities. It provides leadership development and funding for young civic innovators with unique solutions to improve public spaces, transportation and civic engagement in their cities. 8 80's activities include study tours to Copenhagen and direct work in cities. Twenty community leaders also are chosen each year to participate as Emerging City Champions.

Better Block, which shows community members they have the power to change their neighborhoods and shows city leaders how changes would work through temporary installations. It seeks to create opportunities for communities and their existing and emerging leaders to gain exposure to and training from urban planning experts, civic innovators and architects from around the world through global symposiums as well as study tours to show successful examples of initiatives around the world.

Gehl Institute, which conducted research to expand advocacy for public life. Gehl offered trainings and public programs as well as developing tools for the study of public space and public life. As of April 1, 2019, Gehl Institute focuses exclusively on the Public Life Data Protocol, an open data standard.

League of Creative Interventionists, a network of community leaders using art and culture to reimagine cities through time-limited projects in public spaces. Its fellowship program identifies and catalyzes passionate neighborhood residents to discover their leadership and co-create what they want to see in their communities. The program provides each fellow with an artist stipend, guides, resources and tools to reimagine their neighborhood with powerful acts of culture and also access to a valuable national network of peers and mentors.

To support and spark public life efforts, Knight Foundation made a series of grants seeking to inspire and prepare city leaders to promote public life more effectively in their communities. To build local leadership, programs exposed participants to new possibilities and provided access to national experts. The goal was to catalyze leadership and commitment to public life that would prove durable.

Activities included study tours to leading example cities, such as Copenhagen; a series of public life events and competitions that provided temporary and “pop-up” installations; fellowships for dozens of emerging leaders; a set of research tools that participants could draw on; and a variety of convenings around public art, design and city planning.

There were nine different grants across four grantees: 8 80 Cities, which seeks to create public spaces great for an 8 year old and an 80-year-old and transform cities; Better Block, which shows community members they have the power to change their neighborhoods and shows city leaders how changes would work through temporary installations; Gehl Institute, which conducted research to expand advocacy for public life; and the League of Creative Interventionists, a network of community leaders using art and culture to reimagine cities through time-limited projects in public spaces.

These grants were oriented around supporting the cultivation of public spaces and public life in communities to support several goals, including that:

- A more robust public life would attract and retain talented residents, who value well-designed public amenities.
- Public life would enhance interaction in public space and would help people push their communities to better address the needs and wishes of residents. This would be realized through inspirational interventions, including study tours and temporary demonstration projects.
- Public space activities and outcomes would reach a diversity of people from different economic and racial backgrounds. There was an aspiration that a diversity of residents interacting more with one another would support interaction and the promotion of social capital in ways that would help promote opportunity for everyone.

To assess the work done by the grantees, Knight Foundation asked Street Level Advisors and Pathline Consulting to review the programs and their impact. Based on a series of interviews, a survey, and research into grantee reporting, this report outlines their findings.

KEY FINDINGS



INSPIRING NEW ACTIVITY AND LEADERSHIP

There is clear evidence that the programs succeeded in inspiring community leaders to strengthen public life, and in some cases influenced participants' career trajectories. Multiple public life programs were expanded or replicated by local leaders, and several new organizations were created.



ATTRACTING INVESTMENT

Grantee activities led to increased public and private investment in public space and life. Public investments included protected bike lanes and other bicycle infrastructure, as well as funding for parks and green space. One city created a new Office of Public Life. In almost all examples of increased government investment in public space, interviewees cited the study tours as a critical contributing factor. In two cases, grantees worked to ensure that bond funds, each totaling more than \$40 million, incorporated public life considerations.



INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY

Programs led city officials to improve public life decision-making processes. In several examples, temporary interventions inspired local officials to incorporate new processes to reach a broader cross-section of residents, and to reconstitute public committees that had long been dormant. Almost a quarter of surveyed Copenhagen trip participants established a bicycle plan for their cities, 12 percent created a bicycling/pedestrian committee, Macon reconstituted a dormant bike committee and is working on a bike plan and 5 percent now have bicycle safety courses planned.

In addition to these impacts, some critical strategic questions also emerged:



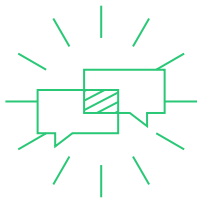
INSPIRATION VS. ESCALATION

The programs have clearly served to inspire individuals and many said the programs raised their visibility and supported their leadership. However, some participants hoped for more support on logistics, financing and policy processes to help them transform inspiration into concrete outcomes.



THE RIGHT MODEL AND APPROACH

A few interviewees questioned whether the foreign cities visited were the best model for all U.S. communities given differences around issues like comparative racial diversity and economic inequality.



INCLUSIVE AND AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Several people interviewed wanted to ensure that the projects had diverse participation at all levels, from grantees to those leading community interventions to the public being served. Greater diversity among leadership teams contributed to more inclusive community participation in local programs and events, and lessened concerns that activities might contribute to displacement of current residents.



HOLISTIC APPROACH

Findings suggested that further coordination across strategies and grantees could be beneficial. Participants sometimes worked with more than one grantee and grantees sometimes partnered on events. But such partnerships were more accidental than intentional. There was a sense that increasing these connections in more intentional ways would benefit participants and the public.



DRIVING CHANGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Participants often described ways that their work with the grantees made them feel more knowledgeable about how to create change and inspired in a way that made them more likely to create change. They described how the programs gave them increased confidence to take risks, and the skills to understand how they can build on best practices from other areas. Some interviewees highlighted learning about the importance of engaging a diverse mix of community members and ensuring that change agendas are driven by community priorities.

Creativity was an additional key ingredient. In interviews with participants across all four grantees, participants used the words “joy” or “fun” in describing grantee events. This was particularly common among interviews with League of Creative Interventionist fellows and Better Block participants.

Many participants described how their engagement with these programs led them to become more involved in public life activities and to be seen as — and see themselves as — leaders. This was also consistently true for the 880 Emerging City Champion participants, who frequently described the program as dramatically changing the trajectory of their professional lives, and some Creative Interventionist interviewees as well. Better Block and Gehl Institute tended to partner with more experienced professionals, so there were fewer dramatic shifts in career trajectories.

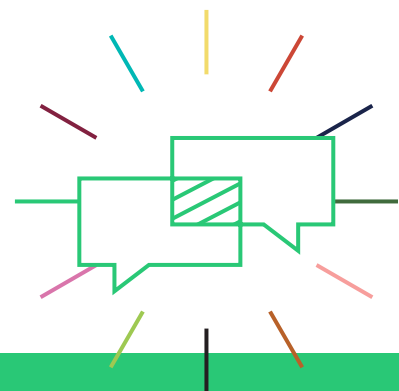
Interviewees said that the public life leadership grantees gave them confidence, allowed them to develop their voices as artists and change agents, and helped them be perceived as community leaders. Several said the public life leadership program they participated in was a key moment in their personal and professional lives, and some described specific examples of ways that the program led to current public life leadership roles after the end of the program. This included a “dream job” with a local developer who wants to incorporate public space philosophies into a redevelopment project, a newly created artist-in-residence job focused on public life, and an executive director role with a neighborhood-based organization.

In some sense, these grants represented a test of the power of inspiration. The portfolio focused on inspiring both government leaders and community residents. Tours to other cities, exposure to eye-opening perspectives at meetings and through fellowships, and time-limited pop-up interventions, such as temporary bike lanes, would help participants gain new perspectives on what could be possible for their communities. Grantees hoped this inspiration would lead to positive long-term changes in local communities across the country.

There is no doubt that participants in the grantees' programs were inspired. Whether they participated in a study tour, conference, fellowship program or neighborhood pop-up event, words related to "inspiration" were commonly used by participant interviewees to describe their experience.

Participants described how the programs led to the broader engagement of other neighborhood stakeholders, during but also beyond the intervention itself. Engagement moved beyond the "usual suspects" of "hyper-involved" residents to include a broader group of residents. These participants later became involved in a local neighborhood association, started a new business, and made other changes. One interviewee noted that because of ongoing volunteer engagement, they could easily enlist these volunteers in future efforts to change community in the future.

In a couple of cases, city leaders returned from study tours around the same time that local groups were hosting pop-up demonstration events, which were connected to things the leaders saw during the study tours. Interviewees felt that this amplified messages about public life in ways that made local leaders more willing to dedicate time and resources toward creating change.





CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Interviewees shared examples of ways that they had changed their organizational practices as a result of what they learned through Public Life Leadership programs:

- **San Jose, California:** An Emerging Cities Champion said a downtown revitalization organization has become more invested in tactical urbanism and placemaking as a result of this work.
- **Macon, Georgia:** The director of an organization focused on revitalizing downtown says their work with Better Block has changed their approach. In one example of this shift, six months after a Better Block event highlighted the potential for an intersection to become a park, the organization closed off local streets to create a park for a weekend event.
- **Multiple communities:** Wikiblock, an open-source toolkit of designs for plywood benches, chairs, planters, stages, kiosks and other items, has been downloaded by hundreds of people since its launch in 2016.

Some interviewees expanded or replicated programs developed through the grants:

- **Multiple communities:** A program to get young people interested in voting by touring historical landmarks, started by an 880 Cities fellow in Philadelphia, has expanded to Detroit and Washington, D.C., as well as areas in Alabama and Mississippi.
- **Multiple communities:** The developer of an Akron small business incubator, which was inspired by a Better Block event, has been approached by four different cities across the country and some additional local developers, asking for assistance in replicating the model.

- **Akron and San Jose:** An Akron-based program designed by grantee Hunter Franks, which brings hundreds of city residents together for a community meal, has now been replicated in a different neighborhood in Akron and in San Jose. The events provide residents with opportunities to come together to socialize and talk about public space priorities for the future.
- **Charlotte, North Carolina:** An interviewee speculated that a local Better Block event inspired additional pop-up urbanism events, such as a recent Park(ing) Day event in the city.
- **Detroit:** An Emerging Cities Champion won a Knight Cities Challenge to create a local version of the 8 80 Cities fellowship.

Temporary investments sometimes even inspired local leaders to launch new organizations:

- **Akron:** Attempts by local leaders to replicate a successful Better Block event, combined with interest in local partnerships by the city and county, led to the creation of a new community development corporation. The husband of the local Better Block event organizer has become the director of the organization.
- **Macon:** An Emerging City Champion was inspired to create a cycling and walking organization in Macon that now employs several people. Another interviewee shared that this leader has worked effectively with the mayor on cycling issues in the Georgia city.
- **Lexington, Kentucky:** The local Emerging City Champion created a new nonprofit organization focused on making public policy information more readily accessible to local residents, building on his experiences in his 8 80 Cities fellowship.
- **Charlotte:** A local Emerging City Champion's work helped inspire the development of a new nonprofit working to address local food deserts.





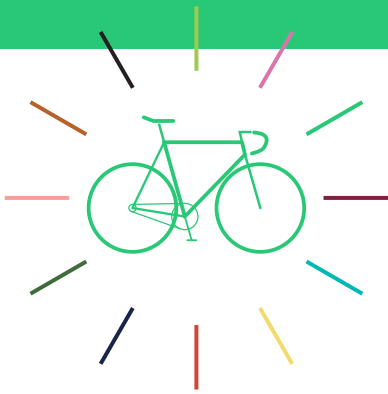
INFLUENCING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Interventions for local government leaders were designed to demonstrate inspirational possibilities for public space and public life. Study tour trips would expose leaders to alternative possibilities and allow them to network with other city leaders, and temporary interventions would provide opportunities to test new ideas and engage with local residents.

In many of the most dramatic successes, interviewees cited in particular a trip to Copenhagen as a critical contributing factor. The trip was described as “capacity building for (city) leadership,” where leaders were both be inspired and could learn from other public officials about “principles of excellent city building.” There were many strong examples of study tours and temporary interventions leading to public investment.

Often the public investment inspired by the portfolio took the form of bike lanes and other bike infrastructure:

- **Multiple cities:** A survey by Forum Research Inc. of Copenhagen study tour participants found that as a result of the trip:
 - More than four in 10 (43 percent) of participants said there have been improvements to public spaces, such as parks, as a result of the study tour.
 - Two in 10 (20 percent) participants said the Copenhagen study resulted in public space changes to their city that cost \$1 million or more, and almost one in 10 (8 percent) said it resulted in changes that cost \$10 million or more.
 - Almost one-quarter said they built/installed bicycle lanes (22 percent).
 - Over one quarter (27 percent) said there are plans/proposals for future bicycle lanes.



- **Detroit:** Presentations by 8 80 Cities, the study tour to Copenhagen, and the work of an Emerging City Champion led the city to shift a nine-lane state highway to become a five-lane road with bike lanes. The city now has protected bike lanes on at least four major roadways and is continuing to expand on these efforts. The city also launched a bike share program, with a subsidy to make the bikes accessible to people who receive state benefits.
- **Macon:** Inspired by a local Better Blocks event and a trip to Copenhagen, private financing has been secured to develop a mile of bike lanes.
- **Charlotte:** The city council also recently approved new permanently protected bike lanes. Participants in local Better Block and League of Creative Interventionist activities believe their work to highlight the issue and pilot temporary bike lanes may have contributed to the change.

In some places, grantee support led to local investment in open street events:

- **Detroit:** Inspired by presentations by 8 80 Cities, the trip to Copenhagen, and additional consulting support from 8 80 Cities, Detroit has hosted open streets events the past two years. The Knight Foundation provides funding for the event because others decided to support it.
- **San Jose:** 8 80 Cities inspired open streets events in San Jose. Attendance was around 30,000 the first year, year two was around 100,000 people, and attendance is expected to be even higher in year three.

Activities also resulted in parks investments and improvements:

- **Macon:** A local participant said that a presentation to city leaders by 8 80 Cities led additional funds to be allocated for the local public parks budget.
- **Detroit:** An 8 80 Cities survey respondent said a prototype they developed during their fellowship is being used in the development of an 8,000 square foot park that will open in summer of 2018.
- **Macon:** An Emerging City Champion said that a presentation of community feedback inspired city leaders to better address residents' needs. A city trail committee decided to broaden their outreach to local residents and to search for grant funds to make requested improvements.

Despite many successes, the emphasis on Copenhagen in particular had drawbacks. A few interviewees worried that the Knight Foundation or the grantees were driving energy and resources to bikes at the expense of other community needs. There also were concerns that Copenhagen's lack of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, relative to American cities, made it an imperfect choice as a primary model for public life improvement.



BUILDING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to focusing on local government, efforts strove to shift business practices to create expanded local economic opportunities. There seemed to be an assumption that if residents help design local interventions, these efforts would be more likely to benefit them and less likely to cause harmful results like resident displacement.

Grantee efforts inspired local entrepreneurs to create new small businesses in downtown areas:

- **Ottumwa, Iowa:** Small businesses sparked by pop-up Better Block events — a bagel store and a boutique — are looking for a permanent home downtown. A burger restaurant located outside downtown decided to move downtown as a result of the event as well, with renovations under way and the restaurant opening within the year.
- **Memphis:** After a local Better Block event, businesses are now opening on the block where the event was held.
- **Akron:** The Summit Hill Better Block in Akron catalyzed the development of several stores that were vacant, and a Knight Cities Challenge grant to the founder of Better Block led to the creation of an Airbnb in Akron that highlights Nepali culture. An incubator for small businesses, called the Northside Marketplace, was inspired by a Better Block event in neighboring Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. A local real estate developer participated in the event and decided to create a 6,000-square-foot site that now hosts 40 local businesses — many of which are the same businesses that were operating on a pop-up basis at the Better Block event.

Both participants and local Knight directors expressed concern that grantee activities might be perceived as contributing to gentrification. Several subjects expressed confidence that it was possible to invest in bike lanes in communities of color in ways that helped support and stabilize the existing community rather than being a force for displacement.



DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

There were challenges to ensuring that the portfolio's engagement efforts reached a broad, inclusive cross-section of residents. All four grantees were critiqued in some interviews for a lack of racial diversity among those implementing the programs. Two local Knight program directors described frustration with the relative lack of racial diversity among grantees, as well, with one saying they felt that "it did limit our ability to be credible in these communities."

Some of the grantees are taking steps to increase diversity within their organizations. For example, as one grantee organization added staff, they shifted from an entirely white staff to a current staff that is one-third people of color.

The individuals or planning committees organizing local demonstration projects sometimes appeared to roughly match the diversity of the surrounding neighborhoods. This includes, for example, an African American 880 Cities fellow working in a predominantly African American community in Philadelphia, or Creative Interventionist fellows in Charlotte, whose team included a higher proportion of people of color than the city overall. However, many of interviewees acknowledged that the local organizers and, in some cases, participants in neighborhood events, were disproportionately white. Among interviewees, only a little over a quarter participated in neighborhood interventions that had high levels of racial and ethnic leadership diversity. There were also critiques about limited racial/ethnic diversity of participants and presenters at some public life leadership programs, which grantees worked to address.



INSPIRATION VS. IMPLEMENTATION

A sizable minority of participants described a need for more support for implementation in terms that suggested that the emphasis on inspiration was sometimes limiting success in implementation. For example, an 880 Cities participant said they would like to see less time spent on inspiration and more time on successful strategy and tactics. A Gehl participant felt that too much of grant resources went to advising and consulting and not enough for implementation. One interviewee shared that they found it stressful to have to figure out detailed logistical considerations and address liability issues without much support from their grantee partner.

Similarly, Better Block's approach of inspiring change by pushing boundaries created challenges for some participants. Local partners sometimes ran into stressful implementation challenges, such as obstacles with the fire department or other city agencies and said they wished they had more direct support in implementing their neighborhood intervention. This was particularly challenging for participants who were city government staff, since this put them in direct conflict with their coworkers, though it ultimately helped government staff collaborate more effectively with one another.

While there were missteps along the way, grantees quickly adjusted based on community feedback. One interviewee described a situation where local League of Creative Interventionist members built temporary structures in the community and noted that "they certainly worked with people in the community, but it wasn't necessarily a community driven thing." The intervention failed and within "not even 24 hours, most of it was vandalized or thrown into the lake." In another example, a Gehl community partner pushed back on the timeline for design work in one community and urged them to give community residents greater control over the process.

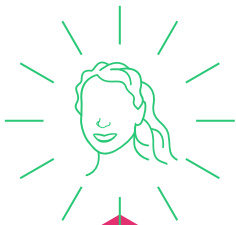
In both cases, grantees responded to community concerns and participants described how the process allowed them to better connect with one another in positive ways, but the stories suggest the importance of ensuring that projects are responsive to and driven by resident priorities.

CONCLUSION

Knight's investment in these public life efforts achieved the project goals of catalyzing local leaders and inspiring participants to create durable change in their communities, provide knowledge of best practices around the country and around the globe, and to give them the skills and confidence needed to take risks on behalf of their communities. As a result of these programs, participants increasingly saw themselves as leaders and in many cases changed their career trajectories.

Participants frequently reported that the grantee activities were authentically rooted in the local places where they were based — and when they were rooted, the projects were generally successful. When projects were not aligned with community needs and demographics, they often fell short of expectations.

All four grantees placed a high degree of emphasis on listening to local stakeholders and, to a significant degree, this seems to have extended to the point where local stakeholders themselves felt invested in lifting up the voices of other community members. The great majority of interview subjects reported feeling like the Knight grantees were committed to lifting up local leadership, engaging a diversity of residents, and building local capacity through these interventions.



John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

200 South Biscayne Boulevard

Suite 3300

Miami, FL 33131-2349

(305) 908-2600

KF.org



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FOUNDATION**