

# REIMAGINING CIVIC SPACES FOR EQUITY AND UNITY

How Innovate Memphis collaborated with community stakeholders to revitalize parks and public spaces in Memphis, promoting unity, civic engagement, sustainability, and investment.

## CAN REVITALIZING PUBLIC SPACES BRING TOGETHER DIVERSE COMMUNITIES AND FOSTER ECONOMIC GROWTH?

### CORE OBJECTIVES

- **Foster civic engagement** through public activities, community trust-building, and building public awareness of Memphis Civic Commons investments.
- **Promote socioeconomic mixing** by facilitating interactions between community members, enhancing neighborhood reputation, and bridging social capital.
- **Enhance environmental sustainability** by improving access to nature and outdoor activities, and increasing awareness of nature stewardship.
- **Create value** through financially supporting Civic Commons and attracting new investments.

### DEVELOPMENT

The Memphis Civic Commons and [Innovate Memphis](#) organized temporary demonstrations and pop-up programs to enrich public spaces, fostering community engagement and well-being through strategic investments in parks, libraries, and community centers.

As a facilitator, Innovate Memphis managed finances, coordinated grants, and served as the primary data collector and evaluator, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the community's needs through inclusive workshops and surveys involving over 4,000 Memphians.



In 2016, the [Reimagining the Civic Commons](#) initiative sought to transform public spaces to achieve social, economic, and environmental objectives. “[Civic commons](#)” refers to public resources promoting community engagement, social interaction, and residents' well-being.

Like many American cities, Memphis has grappled with decades of neglect in upkeep with public assets, segregation, social isolation, and economic inequality. As one of the first five cities to join the Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative, Memphis focused its early efforts on transforming the underused assets along the Downtown Memphis riverfront into a lively space.

The collaborative effort began in 2017 with the establishment of a riverfront task force by the City of Memphis, leading to the development of the [Memphis Riverfront Concept Plan](#) by Studio Gang. This plan guided the transformation of disjointed Memphis parks into a unified network of engaging public spaces and sparked the evolution of the Riverfront Development Corporation into [Memphis River Parks Partnership](#), which aimed for a more ambitious and community-centric future for the riverfront.



## IMPLEMENTATION

The Civic Commons began with small-scale testing in Fourth Bluff Park, including RiverPlay, a pop-up park which featured two installments: an ice rink and, later, shaded seating, a skating rink, basketball courts, and food trucks.

RiverPlay is an extension of the successful winter ice rink at Fourth Bluff, attracting 8,000 visitors in a brief span. This showed city leaders the potential for increased use through programming and activities at Fourth Bluff.

### RIVER GARDEN AND FOURTH BLUFF PARK (NOVEMBER 2018)

River Garden and Fourth Bluff Park, formerly known as Confederate Park and Jefferson Davis Park, was transformed based on community feedback and the Riverfront Concept Plan. In 2013, the park names changed, while the removal of Confederate markers in 2017 required legal battles and a creative resolution.

Reopened in 2018, the parks have encouraged socioeconomic mixing and feature multi-use elements, such as a playground, a pavilion, riverfront views, and open lawns. The layout was planned so that more than 50% of the park's users at any time are within conversational distance. The introduction of diverse foliage, performances, and art installations by local Black artists replaced Confederate monuments, fostering a welcoming atmosphere.

An emphasis on effective park management led to new park ranger positions, promoting community engagement and supporting park maintenance. With an increased feeling of safety and security, these parks have experienced a surge in visitor numbers and income diversity, setting a new standard for the riverfront district and elevating park standards citywide.

Fourth Bluff Park's programs now attract diverse individuals, facilitating interactions that might not have occurred otherwise.

#### Examples of regular programs:

- Full Moon Kayaking – Evening kayak rentals with a DJ on a pontoon boat.
- Sunset Skate Night – A DJ spins tunes while all ages skate for free on the River Play courts.
- Tropical Thursday – Latin dance instruction and practice with new partners.

The success of investment into Fourth Bluff Park compelled Memphis to transform the riverfront and center its efforts on a \$75 million project aimed at rejuvenating five miles of riverfront parks.

**From 2016-2019, visitor-ship of River Garden increased by more than 180%.**



**The percentage of visitors who feel safe at night has almost doubled from 37% to 68%.**

Survey Agreement Over Time	Baseline 2017	Final - 2021
Neighborhood has improved (some or a lot)	55%	74%
This place is important to me, my family, or my friends.	81%	92%
This place is important to neighborhood	90%	95%
This place is important to the city	91%	95%

## THE RIVER LINE/GREENBELT PARK (NOVEMBER 2018)

**Big River Crossing's users surged by about 20% after the River Line's completion.**

Greenbelt Park seamlessly connects all five miles of riverfront park districts, providing car-free access to the Mississippi River for Memphians. The Greenbelt project added new trails, improved existing connections, and unified signage throughout.

Combined with new transportation options, like rentable bikes and scooters, the River Line brought new life to public and private spaces all along the riverfront.

## THE MEMPHIS HARBOR

The Fourth Bluff has opened up entry to a valuable natural asset, the Memphis harbor. With ongoing initiatives such as daily kayak rentals and diverse events, this space has seen a resurgence, attracting thousands of Memphians who've embraced its recreational offerings. During the summer of 2019, over 2,000 individuals enjoyed paddling harbor, highlighting continued and enthusiastic participation.

## COSSIT LIBRARY (APRIL 2023)

The Cossitt Library is a cornerstone of the Civic Commons and has been reimagined as an interactive creative community hub, and a model for modernizing Memphis Public Libraries. The design improvements include flexible furnishings, co-working spaces, a cafe and courtyard, a gallery to host rotating art installations, a performing arts space to host creative programs, and technology equipment to support and cultivate artists, including technology for audio recording, photography, videography, 3D printing, VR, and more.

“  
In a city with a very high poverty rate, their libraries are oases of care, civility, activity and opportunity.  
— Crosby Kemper”

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The Fourth Bluff was a catalyst for riverfront reinvestment, supported a downtown renaissance, and ultimately influenced the transformation of Tom Lee Park. The influx of over \$13 billion in downtown investments from 2014 to 2018, coupled with the ongoing \$4 billion worth of development projects, underscores the enduring impact of Memphis Civic Commons on the city's economic landscape.

Notably, the expansion of the learning network beyond the downtown area highlights Innovate Memphis's continued commitment to engaging and supporting communities throughout the city, solidifying its position as a key driver of positive change and development in Memphis.

