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September 8, 2016

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National Initiative To “Reimagine the Civic Commons” Selects Chicago for \$5 Million Grant

Initiative supports Chicago’s plans to invest in revitalizing and connecting public spaces through the Chicago Arts + Industry Commons

SEPTEMBER 8, 2016— A new national effort to counter the growing economic and social fragmentation in our cities has awarded Chicago and the Chicago Arts + Industry Commons (CAIC) a \$5 million grant to shift from isolated activation of single properties and to a strategy of neighborhood development that promotes connectivity, harmonized investment, synchronized programming and coordinated training, education, and sustainability. *Reimagining the Civic Commons* is a partnership of four national foundations that seeks to foster civic engagement, economic opportunity, and environmental sustainability through revitalizing and connecting parks, libraries, community centers, and other public spaces.

Chicago was one of four cities selected for the grant; Chicago, Akron, Detroit, and Memphis join Philadelphia, which began a *Reimagining the Civic Commons* pilot project in 2015. The \$5 million grant for Chicago will be matched by an additional \$5.25 million in support from local sources.

Reimagining the Civic Commons seeks to counter the trends of economic and social fragmentation in cities, where people are segregated by income and less likely to interact with people whose experiences are different from their own. By revitalizing and connecting public spaces, the initiative intends to be the first comprehensive demonstration of how a connected set of civic assets – a civic commons – can yield increased and more equitably shared prosperity for cities and neighborhoods.

The CAIC includes three significant sites on the South Side of Chicago. The flagship of the network, a former bank turned arts and cultural center, has already been radically renovated through private investment. Two nearby assets, a closed Catholic elementary school and 13 vacant city lots, will be reactivated and transformed into vibrant civic spaces for public use. A fourth site on the West Side of Chicago includes two unused properties owned by the Chicago Park District: a former horse stable built in 1888 and an adjacent powerhouse built in 1896. These structures will be redeveloped into a center for industrial arts production, skills training, and artisan studios.

The assets that the CAIC will ultimately transform are representative of difficulties facing many cities: aging infrastructure, forgotten or underused tracts of land, and buildings that no longer meet shifting community needs. The strategized implementation plans of the CAIC will create spaces for public use while also re-energizing the residential and commercial interests in the South Side’s Greater Grand Crossing, South Shore, Woodlawn, and Garfield Park areas.

The collection of civic assets for the Chicago Arts + Industry Commons will not come online at once, but will be phased in as properties are developed and programmed. The Stony Island Arts Bank, which opened in October 2015, is the first activated asset in the CAIC network. As the flagship asset, the space will operate as

testing ground for future asset activation, serving as the pilot site for programming, pedagogy, and culture. In addition, the Bank will be a nexus for network-wide planning and implementation of residential and commercial development intended to demonstrate and test the CAIC's proposed Cultural Reinvestment Model.

Year One of the three year CAIC plan will be dedicated to four categories of work: Infrastructure development; Asset site prep and construction; Piloting + Programming and prototyping of the Cultural Reinvestment Model; Pedagogy workforce training and convenings.

"CAIC is truly about the ebb and flow of knowledge between people, between generations and lived experiences," said Lori Berko, COO of Place Lab and spokesperson for the Chicago project. "It creates spaces for moments of teaching and learning, leveraging the talent in our South and West Side communities to bring a second life to all of these properties. The transformation of these civic assets will provide fresh opportunities for youth and new chances for adults to envision their future."

Reimagining the Civic Commons is a partnership among four national foundations—The JPB Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation —and Chicago civic leaders including Theaster Gates, the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago.

"Space Fund, Rebuild Foundation, and the University of Chicago are excited to be partners with the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, any many other organizations in the development of the Chicago Arts + Industry Commons," said Gates, acknowledging how critical collaboration is to the idea of the commons. "We have spent the last 10 years developing a network of platforms, skilled people and facilities that would allow us to turn the city's perceived deficits into assets. With support from *Reimagining the Civic Commons*, the CAIC will employ local residents, renovate multiple buildings into new cultural hubs and create new revenue and job opportunities in some of Chicago's most disinvested communities."

As cities have become more fragmented socially and economically in recent years and the use of personal technology has advanced, broad-based support for public spaces has eroded.

At the same time, economic segregation, where residents live in either primarily low-income neighborhoods or primarily high-income neighborhoods, is on the rise. In fact, the number of high poverty neighborhoods in the core of metropolitan areas has tripled and their population [has doubled between 1970 and 2010](#).

Americans are also less socially connected to their neighbors than they once were: a recent report from [City Observatory](#) shows that Americans are spending less time together in social settings, trusting each other less, and interacting less regularly with people whose experiences are different from their own.

In addition, most cities are poorly prepared to deal with the harmful impacts of climate change, which fall disproportionately upon people who live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

In each of the participating cities, *Reimagining the Civic Commons* will serve as a learning laboratory to test strategies designed to address social fragmentation, economic segregation and environmental sustainability across the country. As part of this grant, Chicago/Chicago Arts + Industry Commons will participate in the national Civic Commons Learning Network, which will host cross-city learning opportunities, provide tools and grow the resources needed to reknit communities across the country through investments in public spaces.

Find out more about each city's plan online at: www.CivicCommons.us

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