

SHARED SPACES

Learning from the Place Leadership Network



ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

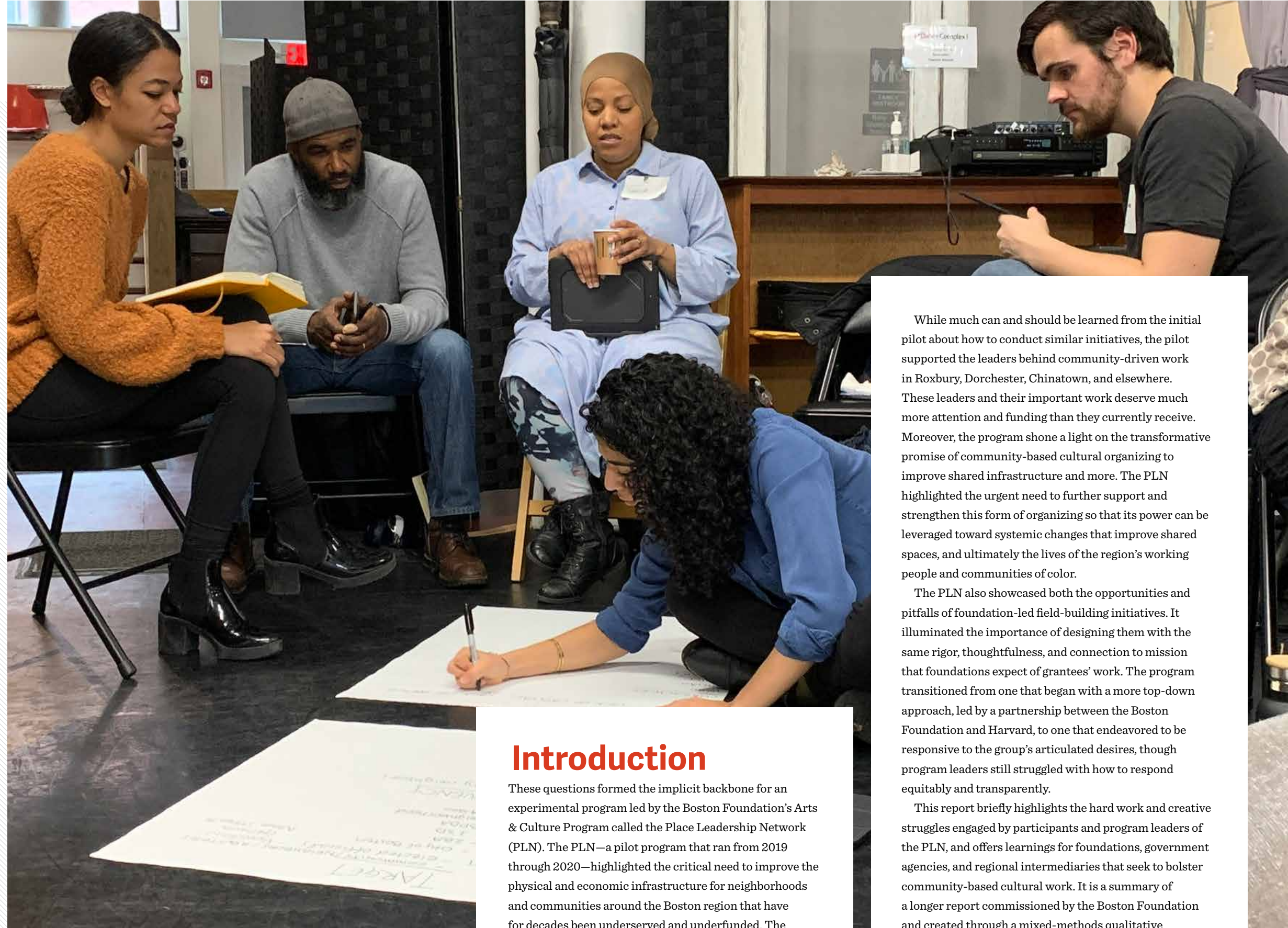
Prepared for the Boston Foundation
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With contributions from Place Leadership Network participants and CoDesign at Harvard

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**HOW CAN SHARED SPACES
IN NEIGHBORHOODS
NEGLECTED BY POLICY AND
FUNDING BE IMPROVED
AND ACTIVATED, FROM THE
GROUND UP?**

**WHAT STRUCTURAL
CHANGES CAN PLACE-
BASED LEADERS
ACCOMPLISH MORE
QUICKLY AND EFFECTIVELY
IN COALITION THAN
WORKING SEPARATELY?**

**WHAT CAN FUNDERS AND
GOVERNMENT AGENCIES DO
BETTER IN THEIR EFFORTS
TO SUPPORT PLACE-BASED
COMMUNITIES OF
COLOR?**



Introduction

These questions formed the implicit backbone for an experimental program led by the Boston Foundation's Arts & Culture Program called the Place Leadership Network (PLN). The PLN—a pilot program that ran from 2019 through 2020—highlighted the critical need to improve the physical and economic infrastructure for neighborhoods and communities around the Boston region that have for decades been underserved and underfunded. The program took a cohort-based and emergent approach to exploring these ideas, providing funding for eight groups to participate as well as to implement some of the ideas discussed throughout the course of the program.

While much can and should be learned from the initial pilot about how to conduct similar initiatives, the pilot supported the leaders behind community-driven work in Roxbury, Dorchester, Chinatown, and elsewhere. These leaders and their important work deserve much more attention and funding than they currently receive. Moreover, the program shone a light on the transformative promise of community-based cultural organizing to improve shared infrastructure and more. The PLN highlighted the urgent need to further support and strengthen this form of organizing so that its power can be leveraged toward systemic changes that improve shared spaces, and ultimately the lives of the region's working people and communities of color.

The PLN also showcased both the opportunities and pitfalls of foundation-led field-building initiatives. It illuminated the importance of designing them with the same rigor, thoughtfulness, and connection to mission that foundations expect of grantees' work. The program transitioned from one that began with a more top-down approach, led by a partnership between the Boston Foundation and Harvard, to one that endeavored to be responsive to the group's articulated desires, though program leaders still struggled with how to respond equitably and transparently.

This report briefly highlights the hard work and creative struggles engaged by participants and program leaders of the PLN, and offers learnings for foundations, government agencies, and regional intermediaries that seek to bolster community-based cultural work. It is a summary of a longer report commissioned by the Boston Foundation and created through a mixed-methods qualitative assessment of the program conducted by Sherman Cultural Strategies with contribution from PLN teams and CoDesign at Harvard. The full report is available upon request to the Boston Foundation.

About the Place Leadership Network

The PLN was conceptualized and led by Boston Foundation Arts & Culture Program Fellow F. Philip Barash, as part of an effort to develop the Foundation's point of view around placemaking. A history of Foundation-led placemaking initiatives, including work in the Fairmount Cultural Corridor and Avenue for the Arts, were the background, and Barash sought to build on these efforts to increase the visibility of and amount of funding for place-based stewardship of shared spaces and cultural organizing, public space improvements and arts programming, particularly outside of downtown Boston and in Black and Brown communities of Boston.

Barash used the Foundation's platform and resources to bring attention to what he saw as long-neglected public spaces in Boston and to support the local leaders who steward them, whether they be housed within Main Streets organizations, community development corporations, nonprofits, or volunteer groups.¹ Designed and developed in consultation with a variety of national and local leaders, the program took shape as a learning cohort that aimed to provide both professional development and support for new initiatives in a salon-like environment. PLN also approached the newly-created CoDesign at Harvard, a lab at the Graduate School of Design led by Dr. Lily Song, and Song and Barash developed a partnership to provide aligned faculty and student resources for the PLN participants alongside Harvard student learning.

During CoDesign's spring 2020 course, Dr. Song worked alongside Sherman Cultural Strategies and graduate students to develop a theory of change that could be used by the program as a basis for evaluation. While that theory of change (included in the full report) was never adopted, Song, CoDesign students, and Sherman went on to develop a field resource entitled Transformative Place Leadership Framework, comprising five values and five elements critical to transformative place-based change.

The Boston Foundation selected eight teams from 37 applications through an open application process during the spring and summer of 2019 that included four information sessions. The teams represent a diverse cross-section of nonprofit organizations, community development corporations, Main Streets organizations, business improvement districts, and other community-based organizations across the Boston region. Below is a snapshot of the eight teams, organized alphabetically. Descriptions are based on the teams' own proposals and reports submitted throughout the PLN process.

¹ Barash, Philip F. Public Spaces Define Our Identity. *CommonWealth* magazine, January 16, 2019. <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/arts-and-culture/public-spaces-define-our-identity/>



THE PLACE LEADERSHIP NETWORK HIGHLIGHTED THE URGENT NEED FOR THE BOSTON REGION TO TAKE A COORDINATED AND EQUITABLE APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIVE AND HOLISTIC COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

Asian Community Development Corporation, with the Chinese Historical Society of New England and Chinatown residents

PLACE/CHALLENGE: Chinatowns across America are shrinking due to intense pressure from gentrification and rising housing costs. Not only are residents and small business owners being displaced, but cities are losing their historic and cultural identity.

GOAL: Extend Chinatown's cultural footprint, using art and play to transform the unused Phillips Square into a new gateway reflecting its origins and culture shaped by working-class, immigrant families.

FUTURE PLANS: Publish an updated vision for Phillips Square that a coalition of small businesses, civic associations, and working-class residents can sponsor, identify goodwill projects that can build trust with stakeholders, and promote belonging and safety in public spaces to combat the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and engage families who have had limited access to open space and limited social connection due to technology during the pandemic.

Bowdoin Geneva Main Streets, with Meetinghouse Hill Civic Association and the Farmers Collaborative

PLACE/CHALLENGE: The Bowdoin Geneva Main Street district is a commercial and regional destination in Dorchester, home to a mix of Cape Verdean, Caribbean, and Latino communities. Like most predominantly Black communities, Dorchester's Bowdoin Geneva is at the mercy of market forces threatening to displace longtime residents who have been redlined to this ethnic enclave because of the City's racist history.

GOAL: Work with the City of Boston's Department of Neighborhood Development to activate 20 vacant community lots to grow local and sustainable produce or create maker spaces through land trusts. Create an Afro-centric district that will draw tourism dollars, capture retail sales leakages, and grow the market base in the community.

FUTURE PLANS: Forge stronger relationships between public and private agencies to accomplish the above. Establish more urban farm lots, festivals, theatrical productions, and other art installations using available lots, buildings, and neighborhood talent. Redouble efforts toward political relevance.

Central Square Business Improvement District, with The Dance Complex and Community Art Center

PLACE/CHALLENGE: Central Square, the traditional downtown for the City of Cambridge, is a dense, vibrant, mixed-use district, but gentrification is driving out long-standing residents and changing business ownership. Arts organizations, many as renters in the district, are also affected. The rapid changes are driving economic inequality.

GOAL: Build a strong and diverse coalition, network of leaders, and thoughtfully programmed neighborhood spaces that unite a divided community. Collaborate more deeply in partnerships that bridge arts organizations, business, and citizens/neighbors in civic and creative practice together and lay a foundation for the Central Square Cultural District.

FUTURE PLANS: Continue to take action and lead participatory design and other collaborative creative processes that ensure that the development of Central Square is not led by businesses or government alone, and produce Central to Each Other, an interactive exhibit and community participatory curation process, focused on projecting photography, video, illustrations, text, and graphic design onto the facade of the historic Dance Complex.

Charles River Conservancy and the Esplanade Association

PLACE/CHALLENGE: The “urban” Charles River, 10 miles of land on both sides of the river, spanning Boston, Cambridge, Allston/Brighton, and Watertown, including the 64-acre Charles River Esplanade on the Boston side, still needs care despite years of advocacy to clean up the effects of industrial pollution having made it one of the cleanest urban rivers in the U.S. Challenges include underfunded public partners, climate change, a need to increase representation of diverse park users, and a history of fragmentation.

GOAL: Strengthen the nonprofit sector’s collaboration, collective voice, inclusivity, effectiveness, resources, and role in order to enhance the health, resilience, and use of the valued but underfunded Charles River Basin parks.

FUTURE PLANS: Develop statewide public art and volunteer guidelines that can adapt to the communities they serve, evaluate and improve internal practices for community input and voice in our projects and programs.

Hyde Square Task Force and Boston’s Latin Quarter

PLACE/CHALLENGE: Boston’s Latin Quarter has a rich heritage of Afro-Latin arts and culture and has been designated a cultural district. Recent changes have led to gentrification that has forced many low-income, Latinx families to move away. This displacement threatens to erase the neighborhood’s historical identity as a safe haven for Latinx immigrants and culture.

GOAL: Utilize Afro-Latin arts to build bridges and bonds between neighbors while welcoming visitors and tourists and creating a cultural home for the region’s Latinx population. Support the 65% of businesses that are immigrant-owned in order to decrease wealth disparity and increase economic stability.

FUTURE PLANS: Implement a recently completed cultural district plan, and work with the Latin Quarter Advisory Committee to guide this work with spatial equity and justice in mind. Build and strengthen relationships within and outside of the Latin Quarter with those who have shared goals, including deepening relationships with the Tenant Task Force leadership at the Mildred Hailey Apartments. Host a series of virtual Latinx arts performances May-July 2021.

North Shore Community Development Coalition

PLACE/CHALLENGE: The Point neighborhood (or “El Punto”) is a dense, urban neighborhood adjacent to downtown Salem that has been home to immigrant communities for over a century. North Shore CDC, a community development nonprofit, runs the Punto Urban Art Museum (PUAM), which now has 90+ murals in the neighborhood and hosts regular school tours and activities that aim to create a beautiful, uplifting environment for Point residents, and to break down the invisible divide between the Point and the rest of Salem.

GOAL: Define the organizational structure and financial sustainability for this growing arts destination. Deepen the programs surrounding PUAM, specifically the visitor experience and educational programming.

FUTURE PLANS: Revisit messaging, wayfinding, and signage, including the branding and storytelling that accompanies the Punto Urban Art Museum. Re-focus commitment to residents through the design of a resident-led tour program to be implemented when the COVID-19 crisis has abated. A curriculum will empower residents to lead educational tours and train them to discuss issues that have faced this community and that continue today.

Roxbury Cultural District

PLACE/CHALLENGE: Roxbury, the geographic center of Boston, has seen both strategic disinvestment and intentional investment over time. It has deep historical roots and a legacy of arts and cultural leadership. As a transit hub, Nubian Square welcomes around 50,000 commuters in a typical workday. With an accelerated rate of growth and development over the last five years, gentrification and shifts caused by increasing community and economic development have created a collective feeling of uncontrollable change.

GOAL: Capture opportunities during this current phase of change. Explore alternative approaches in partnering with developers in the area to create relationships that are guided by community needs and can be of mutual benefit to the district and developers.

FUTURE PLANS: With expanded knowledge of Business Investment Districts explore the idea of a district-increment financing model. Continue to deepen existing relationships with the Dream Collaborative and New Atlantic Development, selected to develop 2147 Washington Street, which intends to house community workshop space, and permanent and temporary art exhibitions.

The Trustees of Reservations

PLACE/CHALLENGE: The 56 Trustees-owned community gardens across eight neighborhoods in Boston reflect the social, ethnic, and horticultural diversity of the nearly 150,000 people living within a quarter mile of the gardens while sharing common elements: healthy soil, reliable water systems, fencing to ensure safety, and accessible pathways. The grassroots origins of the gardens live on today through self-governance, and volunteer led management for these neighborhood gathering spaces.

GOAL: Better understand gardens’ neighborhoods and their needs. Make the process of joining a garden or getting involved in other ways more transparent and break down any barriers—real or perceived—to doing so.

FUTURE PLANS: Sharpen outreach skills to connect with local communities and their lived experiences and racial histories to strengthen representation and cultural exchanges, to in turn enrich the gardening community and create shared experiences. Better train, recruit, and support volunteers and program partners through new training sessions, outreach strategies, and programs.

Program Details & Structure

The Place Leadership Network is one of several recent experiments around the country in cohort-based or peer learning in the placemaking, community development, and community-based arts sectors. The PLN was developed in the context of and consultation with several of these programs.

The PLN program employed a curriculum of modules focused on different themes about urban development and decision-making. One- or two-day-long sessions were held throughout the ten-month period at various PLN team locations around the Boston region. Session topics, guest speakers, and agendas were pre-determined for the first few sessions by Barash at the start of the program, and became more collaboratively designed as the program progressed.

Barash also supported several of the PLN groups as they evolved their efforts independently by acting as matchmaker between PLN groups and promotional opportunities, City agencies, and external advisors or consultants.

Through a partnership with Harvard's Graduate School of Design's CoDesign, each team was paired with a group of students from the Fall 2019 Action Research course, who completed a project based on the PLN's initial goals; additional elements of the partnership included three events held at Harvard, a student-led exhibition at the GSD, a Spring 2020 course named Program Evaluation for Change Leadership, attendance and facilitation of sessions, and guidance and feedback throughout the process.

Funding

Each PLN team received \$15,000 of funding from the Boston Foundation's Arts & Culture impact area to support participation in the cohort at the program's start. Throughout the program, the Foundation approached peer funders to help raise the profile of place-based work and to solicit investment. In total, \$130,000 was raised from the Wagner Foundation, Rappaport Foundation, and an anonymous donor. At the end of the program, a second round of funding totaling \$200,000 was distributed to each organization in amounts ranging from \$20,000 to \$30,000.

In March 2020, as an emergency relief response to the pandemic-driven economic and social crisis, the Boston Foundation established the COVID-19 Response Fund to support organizations meeting basic needs for vulnerable populations. From March through July, the Fund awarded 251 general operating support grants, the vast majority at \$25,000 each. Among those receiving grants were PLN members ACDC, Hyde Square Task Force, and Bowdoin Geneva Main Streets.

In the context of the pandemic, Arts & Culture staff "unrestricted" a \$20,000 grant to the Esplanade Association previously earmarked from a field of interest fund designated to supporting performances on the Esplanade. Additional funds from other sources within the Foundation were distributed to several organizations. A new grant of \$22,000 was provided to the Roxbury Cultural District out of the Economic Inclusion impact area. In all, the Foundation distributed \$437,000 in direct support to PLN participants.

Analysis: Learning from the Place Leadership Network

As a result of the Place Leadership Network's experimental nature, the pilot yielded many important lessons for future programmatic efforts designed to support place-based leadership work. Below are both promising features and considerations for future efforts. Reflections are drawn from participant feedback, observations, and the precedent analysis, and focus more on the role of the Boston Foundation and the groups than the partnership with CoDesign at Harvard. More information about methods to collect data are described in the Appendix of the full report, available upon request to the Boston Foundation. Quotes included were collected from the mid-program survey of participants, and are shared here anonymously.

The data provided feedback about the following themes:

Equitable process, design, and funding

The program participants regularly reflected on the benefits of a racially, culturally, and geographically diverse cohort. Groups and communities in predominantly Black and Brown communities have historically been and are still often overlooked in the placemaking field, by philanthropy, and by municipal governments. The PLN included several teams led by people of color, and others with either White or POC leadership serving predominantly Black and Brown communities.

"I HAVE REALLY ENJOYED BEING ABLE TO MEET OTHER PEOPLE IN BOSTON AND MASSACHUSETTS WHO ARE DOING THIS WORK AND LEARNING FROM THEIR EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES."



Given this focus on racial and geographic diversity in the team selection process, participants also shared frustration that the program design—in terms of selection of speakers, facilitation of dialogue, amount of funding, and provision of technical assistance—did not always reflect a clear focus on racial and geographic justice. Future programs seeking to best support communities of color, working class communities, and others that have been marginalized and under-resourced should take a clear perspective and follow through on that in every aspect of the design of the program, funding, and facilitation.

One way to do this would be to provide a skilled facilitator who is not a member of Foundation staff and to make space for moving where the group wants to go, rather than pre-determining the agenda based on what Foundation leaders believe the groups need. The systemic issues that created the context for the PLN go beyond the eight teams funded to be part of the pilot initiative—they impact all of the region’s communities. In order to help change dynamics long-term, a program like the PLN could provide critical space and funding for groups to self-organize and then use the Foundation’s voice, influence, communication channels, and more to advocate for the changes the groups want to make.

“WHILE THE PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS/ COHORTS HAVE BEEN CHOSEN FOR THEIR DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, THE ‘TEACHING’ SEEMS TO HAVE COME WITH A ONE-SIZE FITS ALL, OR A SUPPOSED BEST PRACTICE THAT WE SHOULD BE LED TO DISCOVER.”

“WE’RE THRILLED TO BE A PART OF THE PROGRAM AND VERY MUCH SEE THE VALUE IN THE FOUNDATION TAKING A LEADING ROLE IN SUPPORTING THOSE WHO CARE FOR PUBLIC PLACES AROUND GREATER BOSTON.”

Fundraising strategy

The program supported participants for their time and participation—something that all programs asking community-based leaders to devote time and energy should do. Participants appreciated and noted this difference. Additionally, it was shared several times how much the teams appreciated the funded time for peer learning specifically, something they do not often have time or energy to do.

Several of the Boston Foundation leaders interviewed noted that they learned from the PLN the importance of making clear from the beginning when a program is a pilot. While the PLN was emergent and experimental, they shared the importance of clarifying the absence of a long-term funding commitment, and the need to create a responsible “exit strategy” from the very beginning if a longer-term commitment is not possible. In terms of time commitment, many noted that the program might have had more impact if spread over the course of two or three years, given the time it takes for relationships to grow and systemic changes to take root. Despite these time limitations, the Boston Foundation, PLN, and other partners are exploring ways to build on their connections, including presenting at conferences, continuing to work with the City, and more.

Bridge-building and power sharing

The PLN uniquely brought together community-based leaders from around the region and provided a platform, bolstered by the name and power of the Boston Foundation, to elevate their work and provide access to government leadership. Barash and other staff worked to leverage their positions, networks, and influence where possible to increase funding, publicize the role of these groups, and help connect them to resources within and outside of the region.

Participants shared that while they appreciated this innovative structure, they did not always feel that the bridge-building was done in a way that aligned with their best interests. Government leaders and invited speakers were often brought in to present to the groups, rather than vice-versa. Many noted that participants did not need additional information as much as space to provide feedback and education to those in power about how to tailor policy and programs to suit their neighborhoods’ needs. Another way to flip the power dynamic could be to have grantees or program participants paid to design or co-design the program, so that it could be more responsive to their needs and interests from the beginning.

The program also struggled, as many foundation-led initiatives do, with power sharing and transparency. Partially as a result of their own internal accountability systems, it is difficult for foundations to truly co-design efforts with grantees, and grantees—who may be reliant on foundation support for crucial funding and relationships—are not structurally in a position to provide honest or clear feedback. Foundation leaders may choose to design cohort programs with this in mind in various ways, such as supporting and hiring a third party to run the program, providing honest reflection time when they are not present or in the room, and other tactics addressing the power imbalance head-on.

“THERE ISN’T A LACK OF EXPERIENCE, TECHNICAL SKILLS, OR IDEAS. IT’S THE POWER, CAPITAL, AND CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT.”

“WHILE THE SPEAKERS HAVE BEEN VERY IMPRESSIVE AND INTERESTING, I THINK EXPERT PANELS WOULD BE MORE USEFUL IF THEY DIRECTLY RESPONDED TO A NEED VOICED BY THE COHORT.”

Power sharing also requires open and even communication. When there is an imbalance of information, participants cannot leverage their roles. Program leaders of all kinds should endeavor to develop, articulate, and confirm understanding of a clear theory of change that uses the language of participants before the program begins. Participants also noted that it was difficult to provide feedback and co-design the experience when basic aspects (funding, scheduling, and more) of the program kept changing, as is noted throughout this section. Just as leaders expect applicants and grantees to detail and be accountable for their plans, program leaders should clearly communicate from the start how much funding is available, the time commitment and scheduling for sessions, and how decisions are made.

Other issues related to structural power imbalances may be mitigated by foundations de-centering themselves as much as possible, both structurally and in the way personnel engage interpersonally with program participants. Foundations may wish to build stronger and more comprehensive long-term institutional partnerships with city government, local community leaders, and external technical experts and other entities to ensure that multiple aspects of a place’s context are being considered. This is especially true when decisions about a neighborhood’s future planning efforts may be made within the program, but without community involvement beyond program participants.

Conclusion

The PLN provided much-needed space and support for eight teams of nonprofit and community-based leaders to explore topics and shared struggles. Much can and should be learned about how to make similar initiatives even more effective, and community-based leaders and those who seek to support them throughout Greater Boston could build on this work in myriad ways. To start, funders and policymakers could increase funding specifically for community-based cultural organizing and stewards of shared spaces, with a targeted focus on communities of color and working-class communities that have too long been under-resourced compared to their neighbors. Intermediaries could leverage

the power of coalition-building among community-based leaders to elevate important policy changes and shift entrenched power dynamics.

While not all place-based work is equitable, local organizing and cultural events in a neighborhood or community are always the building blocks of healthy, empowered, and connected communities. The authors hope that future efforts can build on the PLN's work to elevate the role of this important and under-supported sector of the region's social, cultural, and political infrastructure, and the potential for philanthropy to play a pivotal role in convening and providing resources.



ABOUT THE BOSTON FOUNDATION

The Boston Foundation, Greater Boston's community foundation, seeks to bring the collective power of our region's people and resources together to drive real change. Established in 1915, it is one of the largest community foundations in the nation—with net assets of \$1.3 billion. In 2020, the Foundation received \$169 million in contributions and the Foundation and its donors paid \$215 million in grants to nonprofit organizations. The Foundation has many partners, including its donors, who have established more than 1,000 separate charitable funds for the general benefit of the community or for special purposes. With support from the Annual Campaign for Civic Leadership, the Foundation also facilitates public discourse and action, commissions research into the most critical issues of our time and advocates for public policy that advances opportunity for everyone. The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), a consulting unit of the Foundation, designs and implements customized philanthropic strategies for families, foundations and corporations around the globe. To learn more about the Foundation and its work, visit [TBF.org](https://www.tbf.org).

Arts & Culture at the Boston Foundation

The Boston Foundation Arts & Culture program was, at the time of writing, reviewing its framework in the context of an ongoing strategic planning process and leadership transition at the Foundation. The framework currently has three main components: building an equitable cultural ecology for Greater Boston; supporting and developing inclusive public spaces; and attracting new resources for areas of need in the arts. The program is currently led by Interim Director Eva Rosenberg.

ABOUT CODESIGN AT HARVARD

CoDesign, led by Faculty Coordinator Dr. Lily Song, was the PLN's academic partner. In 2018, the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) established the Community Design and Learning Initiative (CoDesign). CoDesign seeks to build upon the GSD's design studio and research tradition to initiate learning-by-doing partnerships involving faculty, fellows, students, and alumni across different programs with nonprofits, community groups, civic organizations, and government agencies in Greater Boston and beyond. More information can be found at <https://research.gsd.harvard.edu/codesign/>

ABOUT SHERMAN CULTURAL STRATEGIES

Sherman Cultural Strategies is a Boston-based consulting firm that works locally and nationally at the intersection of community development, the arts, and social justice. We bring teams of consultants together to support the evolution of values-driven partners in the philanthropic, nonprofit, and government sectors through strategy, research, writing, and facilitation. Motivated by a lifelong interest in developing collective power, sustaining relationships, and fighting injustice, we support leaders and organizations through generative collaboration and creative expression. More information can be found at <https://www.danyasherma.com/>

