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The deadline for feedback is the end of day on March 15, 2021.

UNO's Strategic Investment: Social Justice, Inequality, Race and Class Proposal

Creating Playful, Inclusive Equitable Communities for Everyone (PIECE):

Omaha Urban Thinkscapes

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Vision: To create playful public spaces that improve the health, well-being, and development of young children and their families in Omaha

Throughout the world, city leaders are recognizing the need for development of community spaces to improve the lives of young children and their families. Organizations such as Playful Planet <https://www.playfulplanet.org.uk/> and Child in the City <https://www.childinthecity.org/> are organizing and supporting efforts of city planning that includes children's rights and well-being.

Drawing from the Urban Thinkscape project originating in Philadelphia, PA, this project "brings the benefits of playful learning, which combines the enjoyable nature of play with a learning goal, to a community setting. Examples include puzzles at bus stops that stimulate spatial skills; movable parts on park benches that become opportunities for exploring language, color, and numbers while on-site signage and resources connect families to additional information and resources about the links between play and learning" (see <http://urbanthinkscape.com/>). The Omaha Urban Thinkscapes Project would help design, build, research, and plan cultural/educational events on new public spaces for playful engagement and learning.

Beginning in early 2020, a small group of Omaha leaders have begun to meet and plan to begin a project that will help create playful public spaces for children and its residents. The leaders include Kate Knudsen representing the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC) and the Omaha Metro Area Raise Me to Read campaign, Stephen Osberg, Director of Transportation Development of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and Dr. Debora Wisneski of UNO. Other community partners who have committed to collaborate on the project are the Union of Contemporary Art, Amplify Arts, and Omaha By Design. Each partner or collaborator of the project will contribute their own expertise and funding for different aspects of the project. UNO can offer researchers to help design the participatory action research and overall evaluation of the project to document the results of the community playful public space projects. Furthermore, the project will provide unique opportunities for service learning for UNO students.

Immediate Goals for PIECE: Omaha Urban Thinkscapes Project

- Create a playful sense of place in Omaha public spaces that showcases the art and culture of Omaha neighborhoods
- Engage children and families with playful learning experiences while using public spaces
- Increase the mental, physical, language and cognitive development of Omaha children and residents

Ultimately, the Omaha Urban Thinkscapes Project can be a catalyst for UNO to become a leader in engaged scholarship in interdisciplinary research and service learning around child rights, play, community planning, and equity. As discovered in similar projects, the collaboration and development of small public spaces for children led to further research in issues of children and families, budgets that increased invest in public spaces, and new ideas for childcare and digital platforms for families through cities.

[https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfulsocieties/files/Tel%20Aviv\\_Urban95\\_Final.pdf](https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfulsocieties/files/Tel%20Aviv_Urban95_Final.pdf)

Project Phases: (Highlighted sections are potential UNO contributions and funding request is limited to support these activities)

**PHASE 1: Design and Planning (2021)**

- A. Identify Partners: Funders, Designers, Community and Education Leaders, Researchers, Artists
- B. Invite Consultants from prior Urban Thinkscape Project
- C. Develop Budget and Confirm Funding Sources
- D. Identify Initial Sites
- E. Hold Community, Artists, and Education Focus Groups to guide design of Thinkspaces

**PHASE 2: Site and Study Preparation (2022)**

- A. Design and Construct Sites
- B. Develop Research Study Plan
- C. Marketing and informational Plan

**PHASE 3: Implementation and Data Gathering (2022-2023)**

- A. Opening of sites
- B. Community informational and feedback sessions
- C. Community cultural and education events
- D. Research team gathers data

**PHASE 4: Community Reporting (2023)**

- A. Research Report Analysis and Publication and Repeat Process

**How Social Justice, Inequality, Race and Class is Addressed through the PIECE Project:**

Historically, the lives of children and families in urban areas have been negatively impacted by racist and inequitable policies, specifically in the systems of education and urban design. Through both systems children and their families, particularly those in underserved Black and Brown neighborhoods have been excluded from planning their own public spaces and have had playful opportunities reduced. For example, young children of color and low-income children in early education are often forced into more teacher-directed skill-based learning and programs with extensive assessments in order to “close the achievement gap.” These education practices limit their access to free complex play, despite research supporting the power of play in learning for the young. Furthermore, playful public spaces become accessible only to the privileged and children’s access to play becomes another form of structural racism. Equitable urban design practices have been identified as having real opportunities for marginalized groups to have decision making power in the process. What makes the process of the Thinkscapes project more aligned with social justice is that it includes community artists and

low-income children and families of color in the design of the public spaces and the research process, as well as, provides access to playful learning to their neighborhoods.

#### Measurable Outcomes for the Community

1. Increase in community use of playful spaces for playful learning and cultural events
2. Observational Assessments of child and family playful learning onsite focusing on language, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development

#### Measurable Outcomes for UNO

1. Increased interdisciplinary engaged scholarship
2. Increased student outcomes aligned with service learning projects based on social justice principles

**UNO Campus Stakeholders:** Service Learning Academy, Community Engagement Center programs and partners, UNO faculty and students interested in playful learning, equitable urban design, community development, participatory action research, public art projects, etc.

**Potential Partners:** El Museo Latino, Why Arts, The Rose Theater, MAPA, SPARK, Metro Transit, Canopy South, 75 North- Highlander, Neighborhood Associations, Educare of Omaha, Omaha Early Learning Centers

**Potential Funders:** Robert Daugherty Foundation, Kiewit Foundation, Weitz Foundation