

PlayWalk in Downtown

Rochester, NY

SETTING



Urban

COST



\$290,000

SIZE



0.4 mi walk

OPEN SINCE

July
2021

GRANTEE

Local
non-profit

PHOTO: COMMON GROUND HEALTH

A networked play space in the heart of downtown

Project Overview

Over the years, the Healthi Kids Coalition, an initiative of Common Ground Health (CGH), a local health research and planning organization, has played an active role in exploring how play in schools and neighborhoods can influence health outcomes in Rochester, NY. CGH found in its research that kids weren't playing in parks and playgrounds as much as they were playing in everyday spaces like neighborhood streets, empty lots, and community centers.

The PlayWalk, a trail of sidewalk play features connecting destinations in Downtown Rochester, elevates play by making it a more visible part of the city's identity and values. The project has been a successful advocacy effort with lasting impact, perhaps best evidenced by Rochester's newly adopted "Playful Sidewalk Policy" which allows "anyone to create a playful sidewalk in their area and the city will provide the paint."



PHOTO: COMMON GROUND HEALTH



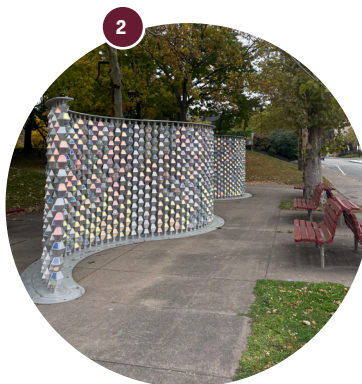
The PlayWalk enhanced visibility of this type of infrastructure but it also was a leverage point for us as we looked to influence the Rochester Comprehensive Plan.

JENN BEIDEMAN
Director of Whole Child Health
Advocacy & Project Lead



↑
The **public library**, a terminus of the PlayWalk, also hosts a Play Everywhere project inside.

PHOTO: COMMON GROUND HEALTH



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Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park is the other terminus of the PlayWalk; the Ripple sculpture, part of the PlayWalk, is also located here.



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Play elements **sited by a bus stop** allow transit riders to play while they wait. The PlayWalk cubes provide extra seating along Court Street.

Origin story

THE SPARK – ELEVATING THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMAL PLAY SPACES

In response to the finding that kids were playing in everyday spaces rather than formal play spaces—and wanting to elevate play as a tool for supporting healthy kids and communities—CGH submitted a concept to Built to Play’s Play Everywhere Challenge to build play into the streets in the heart of Downtown Rochester.



DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION – TESTING UNCONVENTIONAL PLAY SPACE DESIGNS

The PlayWalk project faced barriers big and small as it implemented an unconventional play space design. The team adapted to changing circumstances: political challenges constrained some siting decisions; signage was cut due to budget limitations; and the Little Free Libraries were unsuccessful as they filled with water. Today, maintenance is challenging due to harsh winters and siloed city agency management of the site.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION – TEEN-DRIVEN DESIGN

Local teens worked with the project team to develop the master plan, participating in design charrettes at a local public library branch (which were also open to the wider community), and a visioning process with local artists and landscape architects. They shared their hopes for mural art, music, and big games, and were compensated for their contributions.



ALL IMAGES: COMMON GROUND HEALTH



PHOTO COMMON GROUND HEALTH

Lessons learned



OUTCOME

PLAYWALK CULTIVATED USEFUL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS.



Common Ground Health, the Strong Museum of Play, the Rochester Public Library, local businesses, and many others came together to bring the PlayWalk to life.

LESSON

Use the play space development process as an opportunity to make and strengthen cross-sector ties.

Play is a unifying priority; the process of creating a new community play space can be an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones.



OUTCOME

PLAYWALK CONNECTS DISTINCT DESTINATIONS INTO A NETWORK OF PLAY.



“How do we connect what’s going on at the Strong [National Museum of Play] with the riverway, and **make it so that there is this interactive corridor to connect back to what youth are saying they want in our city? That’s really how it came about.**”

– Jenn Beideman

LESSON

Think of play as a network.

Consider foot traffic patterns and look for tactical ways that existing assets can be connected. Make the connection between play spaces safe, comfortable, and legible – and maybe even a play space in its own right!



OUTCOME

PLAY IS NOW EMBEDDED IN PLANNING POLICY.



“We got the city to create a “Playful Sidewalk” policy that **allows any resident to create a playful sidewalk and the city will provide the paint and everything.**”

– Jenn Beideman

LESSON

Pinpoint ways to elevate play within existing policies or planning initiatives.

Tying a play project to existing initiatives that already have momentum can help the process along. A new play space can also be a launching pad to influence policy by demonstrating the benefits of play, and bringing play investment to the forefront of the agenda.