What is the Re:Center Project?

Re:Center is a creative placemaking initiative anchored by a citizen-powered collective process. This cultural organizing work combines strategies in community arts engagement, artistic excellence, asset mapping, and program development to more fully activate key areas of need in throughout Chicago Park District’s fifteen Cultural Centers. Together, community members, artists, and park staff work to re-imagine Chicagoans as cultural stewards of our public parks.

Participants undergo a process of mutual listening and co-creation as they reflect on and respond to the role of parks in local citizens’ lives through four phases of gathering: The Listening Party, The MeetUPs, The Feature, and Circulations. Through Re:Center, we aspire to build intentional partnerships and long term relationships between parks, artists, and communities that enhance quality of life for all.

We endeavor to...

+ Cultivate relevant programming that considers the interests of the community
+ Develop community members as stewards of cultural center/park space and place
+ Increase communication between park staff and community
+ Create platforms for community-driven forms of artistic expression

This guide is a publication of the Chicago Park District’s Arts & Culture Unit in the Culture Arts & Nature Department. The Arts & Culture Unit envisions parks and cultural centers as vital spaces that encourage all Chicagoans to explore the arts and their power to enhance quality of life, neighborhood development, and community dialogue. The Arts & Culture Unit connects Chicagoans to arts experiences in their local parks through events and programs that help develop understanding, knowledge and appreciation of a wide variety of art forms and processes, and their diverse and unique cultural expressions. By integrating arts and culture into all Chicago neighborhoods we strive to encourage a life-long commitment to arts learning, neighborhood expression, and cultural advocacy.
Recognize. Recognize who you are in this work. What preconceptions, identities, and experiences do you bring to the table when doing this work? Don’t decide the outcome before the process begins. Process is critical, but not rigid. Continue moving forward knowing the process will evolve and adapt. It takes time to build relationships.

Research. Make a map of what already exists—places, programs, relationships, etc. Respect the work that has been done already. Connect to existing partners in the community.

Invite. We are always grappling with ethics of representation, and power—who has it, who gives it, who is in the position to make decisions about the kinds of community activity a community will have access to? Consider how you craft the invitation for others to enter and join the conversation. Who needs to be at the table? Who isn’t here? And why? How do make space for others to enter and to participate?

Listening Party
Who doesn’t use your park?
Who uses your park?

MeetUP
What format can these meetings take?
Who is already meeting at your park?
Who doesn’t use your park?
Who uses your park?

Feature
What do you want the community to know about your park?
What does this look like? Participation? New classes? New groups?
What Cultural Center Priorities would you like to expand on?

Plan
Don’t just talk. Make ample space for people to learn how to plan and implement community planning processes themselves…with confidence! Get specific about what you want to see—set goals and expectations, both short term and long term. Plan a budget for your project.

Make
Create a work plan and make the thing(s) you have imagined: performances, workshops, exhibitions, showcases, workshops, conversations, resource fairs, etc. Activate people power from the park and the community. This is an opportunity to issue another invitation. Along the process you’ll discover new points of access that people can comfortably enter.

Share
Invite the public to view the process you’ve been a part of. This could be a performance, exhibition, open house, etc. Bear witness to the importance of this everyday work and honor the cultivating experience the group has planned and shared together. Recognize that through planning and action, you can reach some of your goals (and perhaps long) term goals.

Evaluate
Circle back on your short and long term goals, to see what you’ve met, what obstacles you faced, and where you can go from here. What were some of the major successes and challenges? What ideas do you have for the future after going through a process together?

Document
Take photos. Take videos. Collect audio. Make sure that someone who is not familiar with your project can comfortably enter. That could be who is not familiar with your process captures the pulse of it from looking at this documentation. Share input and data as the work happens to keep people engaged and to keep the momentum of the process going.