Foundation for Social Connection

HEALTHY PLACES BY DESIGN

IMPACT REPORT

SOCIAL CONNECTION CONFERENCE

SEEDS OF CONNECTION

OCT 28-30 | ATLANTA, GA

Dear Friends,

It was our joy to cohost another Social Connection Conference together — and a special joy to convene in Atlanta for this year's theme, Seeds of Connection. We chose Atlanta because it is a place where ideas and movements take root — a city with a deep history of resilience, courage, and change. When we spent time here in 2023 co-hosting a community listening session to inform the creation of our Action Guide, we saw firsthand how deeply Atlanta is grounded in movement-building, creativity, and community power. The city has consistently shown tremendous support for our collective mission, and returning for this year's conference affirmed how right this location was.

Our theme reminded us that change doesn't happen all at once. It starts small, like a seed — nurtured by community and collaboration until it grows into something capable of transforming lives. Throughout the convening, we saw that belief in action. Across inspiring keynotes, dynamic panels, meaningful moments of connection, and immersive community experiences, participants planted new ideas, nurtured relationships, and laid the foundation for partnerships that will grow well beyond our time together.

We were honored to be joined by more than 300 changemakers from across sectors who all showed that people deeply desire connection. Throughout our three days together, the insights they shared demonstrated how intentional relationship-building can transform communities and systems at every level.

In a moment when advancing social connection is more essential than ever, we are also profoundly grateful to our sponsors for making this gathering possible. Thank you to Einhorn Collaborative, AARP, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Workday, HKS Inc., The Kresge Foundation, Art Pharmacy, The John A. Hartford Foundation, Levitt Foundation, and the YMCA of the USA for believing in our mission and fueling the momentum this conference generated.

We hope you enjoy reading about the collective impact made in Atlanta and feel inspired to carry this work forward. The seeds planted here will continue to take root in communities across the country for years to come.

We look forward to gathering again in 2027.

With gratitude,



Jillian Racoosin Kornmeier
Foundation for Social Connection
Executive Director



Risa Wilkerson
Healthy Places by Design
Executive Director



By the Numbers

300+
changemakers

24
sessions

6
community site visits

Where Everyone Came From

37
states & territories

5
countries

Representation Across Attendees

Note: Many attendees self-reported multiple affiliations

- 180 Nonprofit Organizations
- 45 Academia/Educational Institutions
- 35 Business/Private Sector
- 30 Healthcare (systems, providers, public health)
- 25 Philanthropy
- 20 Government
- 18 Community Groups/Neighborhood Associations
- 15 Technology
- 15 Unaffiliated/Independent
- 12 Students
- 10 Media
- 8 Faith-based Organizations

Covve Data

Learn about Covve on page 6

2137
connections made via Covve badges

9
average connections made per attendee

This Conference Helped...



of attendees understand practical ways to embed evidence and measurement into ongoing or future projects for impact



of attendees build a connection that will further their work in social connection, isolation, and loneliness



of attendees identify a key action they can implement to advance connection

Our Five Focus Areas

In curating this year's program, we identified five core areas that represent both the conversations essential to this movement and the timely issues shaping the future of the field. Together, they offered a comprehensive foundation for where connection work must go next.

The Art of Civic Connection



john a. powell and Suzanne McCormick in conversation

"We don't become human unless we are in relationship." This truth — returned to again and again by john a. powell — captured the essence of the Art of Civic Connection theme: our civic life depends on how well we see and connect with one another. Sessions brought this to life by exploring what it looks like when communities intentionally reimagine public spaces as places for trust and bridge-building.

Over the three days, attendees experienced this in both expected and surprising ways. Panelists versed on the history of civic organizing in Atlanta offered familiar insights, while social infrastructure installed throughout the venue created unexpected opportunities for support, allowing strangers to become collaborators and friends.



Attendees enjoy chatting at Connection Benches and relaxing on Zero Gravity Loungers

Together, we covered a wide range of topics — from transformative volunteerism and parks as democratic infrastructure to the power of music — but panels all kept coming back to the same conclusion: connection is the essential infrastructure for addressing our most pressing challenges. As Aaron Hurst emphasized, "We need to realize that connection is the only thing that can bring our country back together. It's the only thing in which everyone – rich or poor, whatever color – needs."

john a. powell also reminded us, "Bridging is about connecting, not persuading," a reframing that opened up new ways for attendees to imagine their work. It emphasized that lasting change extends beyond policies and programs — it requires culture change: the slower, harder art of rebuilding how we relate to one another.

We All Belong

Connection is a fundamental human need, yet for many people, policies, systems, and environments create barriers that make it difficult for all to access and experience. True progress in building a socially connected society requires centering those most at risk of disconnection and designing inclusive approaches that honor their nuanced lived experiences.

Sessions explored how meaningful connection becomes a pathway to liberation and collective power. As speakers Chris Joseph and Laila Kabongi emphasized, "Without community, there is no liberation." Conversations highlighted spaces where identity-affirming connection already thrives — particularly for communities often pushed to the margins. Panelists spotlighted barbershops and



Laila Kabongi and Chris Joseph pose after their session, *Flamboyant Futures: Slow Salon Gatherings Through Art, Identity, and Kinship*

beauty salons as organic hubs where culture, identity, and belonging are nurtured daily.

We also sought to model these principles throughout the conference itself. We intentionally brought together a wide range of cultures, abilities, and generations, and designed spaces that honored different ways of connecting. For example, our sensory room offered attendees a calm, quiet space to recharge and engage in activities at their own pace.

Intergenerational strategies were also among the conference's most resonant insights, with speakers like Arielle Galinsky underscoring how "bridging generational divides can also bridge other forms of societal divides." This emphasis on connection across difference was echoed by Suzanne McCormick of the YMCA of the USA, who described her organization's commitment to create spaces that elevate shared humanity over the labels that divide us, so "when you walk into the Y, you are not an R, you are not a D. You are a Y."

Taken together, these learnings affirm that by centering those most at risk and intentionally cultivating inclusive spaces, we can build a foundation of belonging where everyone can thrive.

Evidence to Action

Evidence-based approaches to social connection are essential to achieving lasting societal change. Throughout the conference, attendees explored how research and data can inform initiatives and drive tangible impact. Sessions showcased how communities are leveraging data while centering community voices, featuring insights from the Urban Institute, Leading on Opportunity, and local leaders from the Foundation and Healthy Places by Design's legacy Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities cohort. Corporate leaders also joined the discussion to share how they are measuring loneliness within their workforce and adapting business models to foster deeper connection – both at the organizational and community levels.

We were also proud to unveil and showcase new tools, frameworks, and approaches to translate research into practice and advance the social connection field. Alongside a panel of multidisciplinary experts from the project's working group, the Foundation launched The Roadmap: Reimagining Infrastructure to Improve Social Capital – designed to help local governments make strategic investments in local infrastructure to strengthen social capital and advance economic mobility. Members of the Foundation's Scientific Leadership Council (SLC) and other expert researchers and practitioners also contributed to discussions on evidence-based strategies that are receiving increased national attention, including early childhood relational health and social prescribing as pathways to foster connection, resilience, and well-being.



A New Roadmap: Structural Investment in Relationships to Build Social Capital and Economic Mobility panelists share insights from the project with attendees

Additionally, the theme of measurement threaded throughout the week. As AARP's Lona Choi emphasized, "if we want to sustain [the energy around social connection], we really need to build reliable long-term measurement tools." In *Measuring What Matters*, SLC members presented newly validated instruments for assessing social connection and its drivers. And during the Wednesday opening plenary, SLC Chair Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad announced a landmark 25-year research initiative supported by the Barnes Family Foundation that will track key indicators of social connection and their influence on health and well-being across the United States.

These conversations reinforced that when we pair solid evidence with committed action across sectors, we can measurably accelerate evidence-based change that spans across sectors.



Attendees tour StationSoccer fields with Sanjay Patel



Attendees connect during a nature hike facilitated by the Refugee Women's Network

Social Communities by Design

Recognizing that belonging cannot exist without addressing the physical and social environments that shape daily life, the conference explored how intentional design at every level – from public spaces and housing to transportation and zoning policies – can foster social connection and strengthen community.

Atlanta itself served as a laboratory for these ideas, as our community site visits brought these principles to life. Participants toured the Atlanta Beltline, a transformative loop of trails and parks navigating challenges of gentrification and equitable access; visited StationSoccer fields co-located at MARTA transit stations, where community leaders overcame initial skepticism from transit authorities to create vibrant neighborhood recreation spaces; and explored The Supermarket, witnessing how The Bakery Atlanta transformed arts spaces into anchors for creativity and community gathering.

Sessions further emphasized how intentional design shapes human interaction. Parks and public spaces were highlighted as "the great unifiers" — places where democracy happens and where even small, repeated interactions, like painting or building together, can deepen trust and strengthen bonds. Panelists emphasized that creating these spaces requires more than technical expertise; it demands understanding and feeling the lived experiences of the communities being served. Sheba Ross of HKS Inc. captured this point, noting, "Design leadership needs to make its journey; it's an 18-inch journey from the head to the heart. We can't just see with design expertise — we have to feel with the stories that are being lived around us." Echoing this sentiment, Asiaha Butler advised, "Be ok planning for things that are social. Joy is a common denominator for humans. Plan joy!"

These insights underscored that human-centered design — when approached with intention, empathy, and community engagement — is a powerful tool for building trust, fostering meaningful connections, and strengthening the social fabric of communities.

Connection in the Digital Age

As technology plays an ever-larger role in shaping human interaction, this conference created a rare and necessary space to explore both its promise and its perils. Rather than defaulting to polarized narratives about tech as either savior or threat, this program track invited attendees into a shared learning environment — one where innovation is examined through the lens of how it can augment human connection rather than erode it.

Youth voices, technologists, researchers, and policymakers came together to ask a central question: What would it take to build a digital landscape that truly supports social connection? In a powerful panel on bridging generations in the age of AI, young people challenged adults to move beyond siloed approaches and co-create solutions with them. Julia Freeland Fisher reminded us that "you can be pro-innovation and pro-social" by approaching technology with curiosity rather than judgment. Youth speaker, Atiksh Bhan, added, "For human connection to survive AI we need to rebuild a culture of face-to-face interaction... if we can build lives that are so engaging that the thought of sitting down and scrolling for hours or talking to an AI friend doesn't seem that appealing, that's the biggest cultural shift we need."



Atiksh Bhan and Julia Freeland Fisher in conversation with moderator Chloe Autio

The conference itself modeled this balance between digital and in-person connection through the Covve badge system, which facilitated 2,137 connections by making information exchange seamless and helping conversations flow naturally. As one attendee shared, "I loved the Covve nametags — they took the awkwardness out of asking someone to stay connected. It's so much easier to keep the conversation going while scanning a code instead of rummaging for a business card and losing the moment."



Covve QR codes made it easy for attendees to exchange details during the event — and receive a full report of all their new connections afterward

These conversations affirmed that technology is not the opposite of connection — it is a tool. And when intentionally designed and thoughtfully used, it can help clear the path for the relationships that matter most.

Explore more moments from the conference, including session recordings and photos, below!

Watch Recordings | View Photo Gallery

What Blossomed: Reflections from Attendees

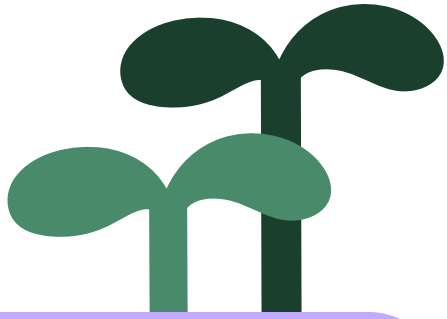
"This conference re-ignited my passion for this work. It exposed me to the breadth of work being done to promote social connection, and helped me connect with others to explore how I might best use my skills and passions to support the effort moving forward."



"There are times where this work can, ironically, feel lonely. This conference was a powerful reminder that there are people who are looking to make real and good change."

"The two days of sessions flew by in a blur of learning, laughter, and insight. But the most meaningful takeaway wasn't in a slide deck, framework, or quote—it was in the people. The spontaneous hallway conversations. [...] The joy of seeing faces I'd only known through Zoom. The ease of striking up conversations with people I didn't know, in contrast to a world where earbuds are regularly blocking connection. Being among others who care so deeply about belonging and connection was a form of nourishment."

"This conference gave me hope in humanity. It was promising to sit in rooms with people who value the importance of empathy and compassion. My hope is that the seeds that were planted at the conference cultivate a plentiful harvest of more diversity and connection moving forward."



"It was encouraging to learn from designers and changemakers who have encountered and surmounted barriers. Seeing examples of what is possible with a bit of grit and creativity reminded me that just because the path isn't always clear, it doesn't mean it's impossible!"



"It was, no exaggeration, the best conference I've ever been to. From a thoughtfully curated guest list of like-minded professional peers to useful, insightful sessions, to curated prompts to engage and connect over meals, to delicious outstanding catering. Bravo bravo bravo to you and your lovely peers for all your hard work. Balancing all that with your unflagging warmth and hospitality toward the participants was an incredible feat of connection in action, and a meta-triumph showing us how meaningful this work of re-connection is."

Take Action

A key takeaway was that even in challenging times, there is hope — and lasting change comes from sustained, collective action. To help you carry this work forward, we've highlighted a few transformative tools and resources to advance social connection across sectors and throughout the lifespan.

- **Action Guide for Building Socially Connected Communities**
- **The Roadmap: Reimagining Infrastructure to Improve Social Capital**
- **Navigating Generative AI and Youth Social Connection Through Intergenerational Conversation**
- **The Systems Of Cross-sector Integration and Action across the Lifespan (SOCIAL) Framework**
- ***The Weekly Connect: Evidence and Insights for Impact* Newsletter**
- **Socially Connected Communities: Solutions for Social Isolation**
- **Essential Resources for Socially Connected Communities**
- **Inclusivv Hosting Guide and Conversation Card**

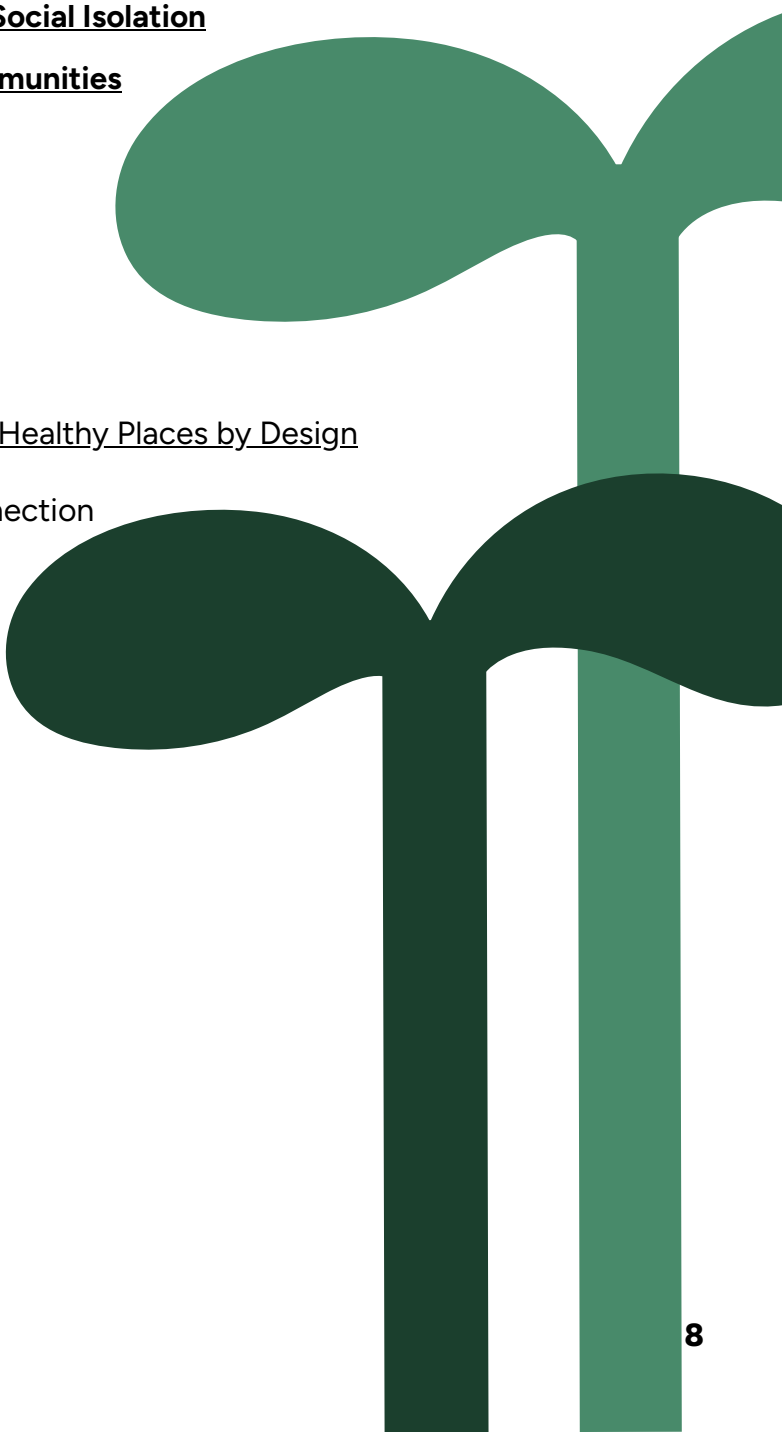
Stay Connected

We encourage you to stay connected with us and continue to share your Social Connection Conference highlights with us on social media!

LinkedIn: @Foundation for Social Connection and @Healthy Places by Design
Instagram: @fdn4socialconnection
Tags: #SocialConnectionConference #SeedsOfConnection

Let's Keep the Momentum Going!

The relationships we nurtured, and the ideas shared over these three days are only the beginning. We invite you to explore these resources, share them widely, and take concrete steps to strengthen social connection in your own community. We can't wait to hear all the progress made during our 2027 Social Connection Conference.




SOCIAL
CONNECTION
CONFERENCE
SEE YOU IN 2027
Build Relationships. Build Community.
blueprint 58
Foundation for Social Connection
HEALTHY PLACES BY DESIGN

Acknowledgements

This year's Social Connection Conference was made possible through the dedication, shared vision, and generosity of many team members, partners, and collaborators who believe in the power of intentional relationship-building.

Foundation for Social Connection Team

Jillian Racoosin Kornmeier – Executive Director
Frances Kraft – Director of Research and Practice
Morgan Marler – Associate Director of Network and Partnerships
Shannon Vyvijal – Associate Communications Manager
Prachir Pasricha – Associate Program Manager
Finley Blair – Storytelling and Communications Fellow
Emma Seegmiller – Social Connection Fellow

Healthy Places by Design Team

Risa Wilkerson – Executive Director
Teresita Maz – Deputy Director
Phil Bors – Senior Project Director
Joanne Lee– Senior Project and Communications Director
Jamie Elliot – Project Director
Casey Allred – Operations Lead
Becky Sniderman – Project and Events Manager

Special Thanks

- Loudermilk Conference Center
- John Davis and Carol Rose, colurwrk Photography
- Rachel Hardy, Framed In Creative Media
- Indaglow Productions
- TrueKin Booth Co., LLC
- Resilient Georgia
- Inclusivv
- Hannah Klein, Jordan Bowman, Draven Pointer, Nnennia Mazagwu
- Site Visit Hosts
  - The Atlanta Beltline - Kevin Bacon
  - Blueprint 58 - Becca Stanley
  - Civil Bikes - Nedra Deadwyler
  - Refugee Women's Network - Temple Moore and Sushma Barakoti
  - StationSoccer - Sanjay Patel
  - The Supermarket - Amanda Norris and Willow Goldstein