

BUILDING COMMUNITY: MAKING SPACE FOR ART



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INTRODUCTION



Active Arts, Music Center, Los Angeles, CA

Photograph by Mario de Lopez

Good places to live have more to offer than adequate housing, transportation, jobs, schools, and commercial amenities. They have spaces in which residents can express themselves creatively, connect with one another, and engage in experiences that expand their intellect, imagination, creativity, critical thinking, and even their capacity for compassion and empathy—spaces in which art happens. These spaces can help transform residents into neighbors, mundane experiences into extraordinary and inspiring occurrences, and bland and monotonous places into communities with organic identities that grow out of the history, aspirations, passion, and imaginations of the people who live there. Art spaces and the activity they make possible are crucial elements of a viable community, contributing to its cultural vitality and, by extension, its health, social fabric, and economic development.

Urban planners, community developers, and policymakers in various fields, including the arts, do their best to improve existing communities and design new places in which to live and work. However, when thinking about art and culture, they

often revert to conventional notions of art spaces: large venues for the presentation of professional art, cultural districts concerned primarily with the consumption of art products, and live/work spaces for artists. But how might art spaces be incorporated into comprehensive community planning and revitalization strategies if we better understood (a) the full range of artistic activity that people value, (b) the importance of arts and creative outlets for all people, (c) the roles that artists play in society, and (d) the kinds of art spaces that robust cultural vitality requires? We address this theme by drawing from 16 years of urban planning research on the presence and roles of arts and culture in communities; a focus on artists in society—especially those working outside the traditional cultural sector at the intersection of arts and other fields such as community development, education, health, and environment—and an exploration of a wide range of contemporary art spaces.¹

¹ This essay builds on research conducted through several research projects including the Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project (ACIP), launched in January 1996—an effort to better understand the role of arts and culture at the neighborhood level and to develop arts and culture neighborhood indicators; *Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for US Artists* (2000–03); research on artists' spaces and the public arguments used to make a case for them (2007); and a subsequent study focusing specifically on the support structure for artists working at the intersection of arts and community development, education, health, and the environment (2008–11).

Ashé Cultural Arts Center

At Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, LA, residents and artists gather to celebrate, mourn, address community concerns, carry on and create new cultural traditions, and tap into the creative, entrepreneurial, and artistic energy that has made New Orleans a cultural force. Through a wide range of programs and events, artists from all artistic disciplines—seasoned to emerging—come to Ashé to make their art, share it with the community, and help everyday people unleash their imaginations, engage in critical discussions about their environment and their lives, and explore their creative powers. Ashé Cultural Arts Center is a thriving hub in the midst of a neighborhood marred by disinvestment and related crises. Located in Central City on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard (formerly Dryades Street), Ashé is a beacon for creative people who care about the community and the city. It is the pulse point of a neighborhood seeking revival.²

AS220

AS220, in the heart of downtown Providence, RI, is a hub for creative people of all kinds. The organization animates the area with arts workshops, shows, and exhibits. It provides residential and work studios, galleries, and performance and educational spaces. Focused on attracting a wide range of participants, creative styles, and artistic skill levels, all programs and exhibitions are unjuried, uncensored, and open to the public. Founded in 1985, AS220 seeks to “stimulate the cultural mulch in Rhode Island” and has been an important catalyst in the revitalization of downtown Providence.³

Side Street Projects

In Pasadena, CA, professional and nonprofessional artists of all ages pursue their work in a formerly vacant lot that is now occupied by vintage travel trailers housing a remarkable array of arts programs and services. In addition, kids’ arts programs are held aboard renovated transit buses. Established in 1992, Side Street Projects is an artist-run, mobile nonprofit organization that provides the opportunity and means to pursue a wide range of creative efforts. Working with children and adults, the organization promotes self-reliance and creative problem solving through contemporary art. Artists working at Side Street Projects—often taking on important social and community issues—see the organization and their efforts as “social enterprise” and “meta-public art.” In partnership with the City of Pasadena, the organization intends to remain mobile and seeks to transform “blighted, transitional spaces throughout Northwest Pasadena into something that blurs the line between public art and public service.”⁴

² <http://www.Ashecac.org>.

³ <http://www.as220.org/about/about-as220.html>.

⁴ <http://sidestreet.org/about/>.

HOW CULTURAL VITALITY CONTRIBUTES TO COMMUNITIES



Girls on Tarima, Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center, San Pablo, CA
Photograph by Mike Melnyk

In addition to considering conventional venues and activities related to the presentation of professional art for consumption, it is necessary to think about a broader range of activities and places implicated in the concept of *cultural vitality*.⁵ A place with cultural vitality has a character and identity based on the creative and artistic contributions and aspirations of its citizenry. Research has linked dimensions of cultural vitality to economic development, attachment to place, positive health outcomes, and civic engagement, among other desirable effects. Based on our years of study and that of others, we recommend that planners and policymakers heed the following premises in planning for cultural vitality and making the most of community revitalization strategies.⁶

First, cultural participation ranges from amateur to professional activities; often includes the cultural expressions of ethnic, racial, age, and special interest groups that may not be validated or adequately represented in large mainstream cultural institutions; and occurs in diverse places. In some communities, in addition to (and sometimes instead of) art presented in mainstream cultural institutions, residents may value less-validated forms of music, theater, and dance such as sacred music, landscaping in private and public gardens, graffiti, altars, storytelling, local culinary traditions, and various activities related to community festivals—activities that often have not had a place in conventional venues. Correspondingly, the notion of places in which art happens includes such venues as theaters, auditoriums, or museums of various sizes and persuasions as well as community-based organizations, community centers, church halls, parks, schools, libraries, business establishments, and even temporary spaces in which art and cultural activities can take place and in some cases are most accessible to community residents. These forms

⁵ As defined in the Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators Project, cultural vitality is evidence of the creation, dissemination, validation, and support of the arts and cultural activity as a dimension of everyday life in communities. Jackson, Maria Rosario, Florence Kabwasa-Green, and Joaquin Herranz, *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2006).

⁶ The following premises build on work in Maria Rosario Jackson's, "Arts and Cultural Participation through a Neighborhood Lens," in *The Arts in a New Millennium: Research and the Arts Sector*, edited by Valerie B. Morris and David B. Pankratz (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

“Research has linked dimensions of cultural vitality to economic development, attachment to place, positive health outcomes, and civic engagement, among other desirable impacts.”

of artistic expression and places in which they are created are an important dimension of both the physical environment and the community’s dynamics.

Second, while cultural participation has been understood primarily as audience participation, people often participate in cultural activities in various other ways. People also want to participate actively in creative processes.⁷ They want to go to concerts and plays and to see visual art, but they also yearn to make music, dance, tell their stories, and create meaningful objects and experiences that express their thoughts, feelings, and aesthetics. Arts and cultural participation can be amateur or professional, active or passive, individual or collective, continuous or episodic, public or private. While urban planners and policymakers tend to think of art primarily as products to own or consume—paintings, sculptures, plays, dance performances, concerts, books, recorded music—creating such things and even just the process of creation without commitment to a final product must also be understood as art worthy of attention and investment.

Third, people engage in arts and cultural activity for reasons inherent to art itself—for the aesthetic and technical attributes—but frequently also because they want other benefits for themselves, their families, and their communities. While more scarce in the past, a growing body of research is now interrogating and documenting the health and social impacts of a range of individual and collective art experiences;

there is also greater and more sophisticated research about how the arts contribute to education outcomes and economic development, the two most developed areas of research on arts impacts. Research on the social impact of the arts indicates that cultural participation (defined broadly) is important for fostering civic engagement; creation of social capital and social cohesion; stewardship of place; diversity; intergenerational and cross-cultural relations; the preservation, transmission, and adaptation of heritage from one generation to another; and a wide range of benefits associated with individual development, such as strengthened problem-solving and leadership skills.⁸

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⁷ Alan Brown, Jennifer Novak, and Amy Kitchener, *Cultural Engagement in California’s Inland Regions* (San Francisco: James Irvine Foundation, 2008); Maria Rosario Jackson and Joaquin Herranz, *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002); Christopher Walker and Stephanie Scott-Melnyk, *From Reggae to Rachmaninoff: How and Why People Participate in Arts and Culture* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002); Ann Markusen, Sam Gilmore, Amanda Johnson, Titus Levi, and Andrea Martinez, *Crossover: How Artists Build Careers across Commercial, Nonprofit, and Community Work* (San Francisco: James Irvine Foundation, 2006).

⁸ Knight Foundation and Gallup, *Soul of the Community: Why People Love Where They Live and Why It Matters: A National Perspective*, 2010; J. Nobel Stuckey, “The Connection between Art, Healing and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 2010; John Holden, “How We Value Culture and Arts,” presentation at Future of the City Symposium, University of Chicago, June 2011. Also see various publications from Mark Stern and Susan Seifert on the Social Impacts of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania, <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAP/>; Jackson and Herranz (2002); and Alaka Wali, Rebecca Severson, and Mario Longoni, *The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity, and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* (Chicago: Chicago Center for Arts Policy, 2002).

ARTISTS' VARIED ROLES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO PUBLICS⁹



AS220 Mercantile Printshop, Providence, RI

Photograph by Heidi Gumula, DBVW Architects

In the same way that urban planners, community developers, and policymakers often have been hampered by conventional definitions of art, they have been hampered by conventional notions of artists. The stereotype is that artists are creative geniuses working in isolation, or stars visible exclusively in grand theaters, museums, or on the big screen. The default concept is the artist-audience or artist-patron paradigm in which people primarily connect to artists by consuming art products. But this only captures a slice of artists' experiences and our experience as a society. Around the country, many artists—people who are trained in and perform an artistic discipline(s) as a vocation or profession—conduct and share their work in settings ranging from the Metropolitan Opera and the National Gallery to local theaters and community arts centers. In these cases, for part of or all of their artistic careers, artists also are active in places not typically associated with the mainstream cultural

sector—parks, churches, community-based organizations, retail establishments, schools, health agencies, and a range of municipal departments—and they are critical players in various aspects of our community and cultural life.

Through recent research concerned specifically with artists involved in “hybrid” work—often outside the conventional cultural sector and at the intersection of art and other fields—we found that such artists are driven by one or some combination of the following desires: (a) to be of service to communities or to pursue social justice–related issues; (b) to connect to multiple and nontraditional publics and markets in different ways—audiences, collectors/consumers, students, amateur artists; and (c) to deal with problems outside the arts and be at the cutting edge of problem solving and invention, often in research contexts.¹⁰

⁹ This section builds on material presented in Maria Rosario Jackson's, *A Study of the Support Structure for Artists at the Intersection of Arts and Other Fields* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Ibid.



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We witnessed artists pursuing their craft as teaching artists or artist educators in public and private K–12 schools all around the country. Here, the work is about creating art-based curricula through which students engage in all subjects. For the artist, the work is in the creation of the curricula, the experience of the students, and, sometimes, other physical and non-tangible products created in the process of learning. The key setting, for the most part, is the school and the classroom.

In the Boston, MA area, Troubadour, an organization of songwriters, composers, musicians, and poets, has been educating elementary school children for more than three decades. Using poetry, songs, and other literary genres, students develop their critical writing and expressive skills and explore their environment. Troubadour seeks to “give children and adults the power to think deeply and the wings to communicate.” The organization operates in public and private schools, libraries, camps, and arts and non-arts community

organizations. Over the years, thousands of children have benefited from this work.¹¹ Victor Cockburn, the principal artist and executive director of the organization, says that he is now sought out by former students who have gone on to become educators and seek to provide their students with powerful art and literacy experiences.

In Chicago, IL, Urban Gateways has trained hundreds of artist-educators who are integrating their considerable creative talents into K–12 curricula, developing new pedagogical tools, and enhancing learning opportunities for students in Chicago and throughout the country. The organization seeks to “ignite the creative potential of all young people through the arts.”¹²

We also explored the efforts of artists working to educate people about important issues in hospitals, clinics, prisons, and social clubs—creating plays and other performance

¹¹ <http://www.troubadour.org/index.htm>

¹² <http://www.urbangateways.org/>

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pieces to get participants (non-professional actors and audiences) both to understand an issue intellectually and connect to it emotionally.

In Southern California, Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest medical institutions in the region (and the nation), has made tremendous strides through its Educational Theatre (ET) program, which employs actors, writers, directors, and others in producing high-quality theater performances that deal with health issues ranging from nutrition and obesity to mental health and HIV-AIDS. Artists involved in these programs are employees of Kaiser Permanente. They have rigorous artistic conservatory training and training in health issues through their employer and other respected national health agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control. Theater programs are often offered through schools and other community venues. In ET's 25 years of operation, thousands of people have been touched by the programs' work, and it has been able to demonstrate its impact using a range of metrics respected in the public health field.¹³

There are many examples around the country of artists making art, sometimes with neighborhood residents, in efforts to explore and address pressing social problems such as environmental issues and human rights abuses. This work often happens in unexpected places. In New Orleans, artist Mel Chin has taken on lead contamination in the soil of some of the city's most distressed areas. Chin's work involves collaborating with scientists and

residents to find a creative solution to the problem and, through community-based art activity and a large public art installation, helping mobilize residents locally and nationally to call for government responses to it. Perhaps one of the most visually striking aspects of his work has been the creation of a Safe House in a New Orleans neighborhood severely affected by lead contamination. The Safe House contains thousands of fake hundred dollar bills created by children. A performance featured fake money from the New Orleans Safe House, and from children around the United States, delivered to the US Capitol in Washington, where real money was demanded to solve the contamination problem.¹⁴

The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a grassroots theater group founded by John Malpede, involves residents of Skid Row, a neighborhood characterized by high poverty, homelessness, mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and recovery, and high levels of creativity among its residents. In collaboration with many social service and social justice advocacy organizations in the area, LAPD writes, produces, and performs theater pieces about gentrification, incarceration, the drug epidemic, and corruption in local and national politics. Performances occur in Skid Row as well as in other communities and venues in the city. LAPD has also toured nationally and internationally, performing in such venues as formal theaters, public streets, and community centers.¹⁵

Artists also thoughtfully take on issues, make statements, and work in spaces like water treatment facilities, in natural settings such as rivers and beaches, and in historically

¹³ <http://xnet.kp.org/etp/scal/index.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.fundred.org/>

¹⁵ <http://lapovertydept.org/>

significant and sometimes politically charged spaces. In Houston, TX, Project Row Houses, founded by artist Rick Lowe, is an effort to revitalize and animate the historically African-American Third Ward by preserving its signature row houses and programming with other artists to meet the community's socioeconomic needs and tap into residents' creativity, passion, and curiosity.¹⁶ In Chicago, IL, Theaster Gates, an artist also trained in urban planning and religion, is taking on a section of the economically distressed Dorchester Avenue in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. With an aesthetic based in reclamation and redemption, Gates created Dorchester Project and is rehabilitating buildings to make them beautiful, meaningful, useful, and environmentally sustainable. His intention has been to create art spaces that bring value to the neighborhood, the people in the neighborhood, and the often previously discarded materials that he uses in both the buildings and the objects he creates in his studio practice.¹⁷ In Los Angeles, CA, at the Watts House Project, Edgar Arceneaux and other artists work with local residents to animate and transform their homes and neighborhood with creativity and imagination.¹⁸ In Washington State, environmental artist Lorna Jordan has transformed what was a conventional, unattractive water treatment facility into a magnificent earthworks sculpture that connects the participant to water systems and subtly educates the public about ecosystems, environmental issues, and sustainability. In her work, Jordan seeks to engage people as participants rather than spectators.¹⁹

Additionally, we witnessed many artists dedicated to the preservation and advancement of art and cultural heritage in communities. In these cases, we also saw the integration of arts practice in a range of spaces. In San Pablo, CA, Los

Cenzontles has been teaching traditional Mexican music to area youth out of a former liquor store in a strip mall. The organization provides a family-friendly environment for programs and events. The Cenzontles musical group is so accomplished that it has toured nationally and internationally and has worked with world music producers and musicians on transnational collaborations.²⁰ For the youth involved in the program, the space is a second home.

In Honolulu, HI, the PA'I Foundation, established by *kumu hula* (master hula teacher), Vicky Holt Takamine, has helped keep native Hawaiian culture and the traditional art of hula alive through instruction, practice, and performance. Until recently, the dance school was housed in a local school. The PA'I Arts and Culture Center, a new facility, is located in a local shopping center, easily accessible to members of the community with whom the foundation is primarily concerned.²¹

A key point to keep in mind is that artists have many different relationships to the public—as makers of art that people consume, but also as co-creators, organizers, advocates, social critics or provocateurs, community leaders, educators, and contributors to various kinds of experimentation and innovation, among other roles.²² Most important, artists are key forces in helping people individually and collectively take responsibility for their own creativity and human development and, often, for their connectivity to the rest of the world. With this in mind, urban planners and policymakers may begin to see the promise of enlisting artists as allies and collaborators in efforts to improve communities.

¹⁶ <http://projectrowhouses.org/>

¹⁷ http://theastergates.com/section/117693_The_Dorchester_Project.html; <http://dorchesterprojects.tumblr.com/>

¹⁸ <http://wattshouseproject.org/>

¹⁹ <http://lornajordan.com/Artist.asp?ArtistID=20609&Akey=2C782FMS>

²⁰ <http://www.loscenzontles.com/>

²¹ <http://www.paifoundation.org/>

²² Related to the idea of artists having various roles and relationships with their publics is the long-standing concept of and literature about artists as “animateurs.” Animateur refers to the community worker who encourages and promotes cultural participation—the making of art and culture—among the masses. See also personal accounts of artists in Burnham and Durland (1998); Becker (1994); Felshin (1994); more recent Animating Democracy literature; and “bridge conversations.”

COMPREHENSIVE NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES & THE ARTS



Francis St. Rice University Collaboration, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX

Photograph by Eric Hester

Considering arts, cultural participation, and artists more expansively opens up new ways of thinking about the kinds of spaces crucial to communities with cultural vitality. The large presentation venues, cultural districts, and artists' live/work spaces to which urban planners and policymakers default are important, but they are only part of a larger, more sophisticated, and integrated way of thinking about cultural vitality as a crucial element of communities. In thinking about what kinds of organizations and spaces are required to make cultural vitality robust and, by extension, relevant to community revitalization, it is useful to first have a vision—however idealized—of what that might look like. The examples previously discussed in this essay provide some insight into aspects of cultural vitality and how it matters in communities. The following section offers a bird's-eye view.

In places with robust cultural vitality and the possibility of positive neighborhood transformation, people are generative. Professional artists are pushing their creativity

and innovation to the next level. They are connecting to the public and contributing to society in myriad ways, and they are able to make a living, or at least a portion of their living, doing so. People who are not professional artists also want to exercise and advance their creativity and innovation. They want to solve problems, make things, and create and share experiences. People participate actively as well as passively in cultural activities because it is essential to their well-being and it enhances their individual and collective human experience. Artists and non-artists alike recognize that their cultural participation has other benefits as well.

Places with cultural vitality show evidence of both the preservation of cultural heritage as well as the invention of new traditions and cultural expressions. Diversity is desirable, and mechanisms in place allow for the conservation and progression of discrete cultural heritages as well as the sharing of heritage and the opportunity for new cultural synergies. The places in which people make culture might be thought of as cultural kitchens, where people sort out tough issues



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and create the identities and forms of representation that they share with each other and offer to the rest of the world. The places in which one can share culture are also crucial. One might think of these as cultural communal tables, places where people can come to celebrate, compare, contrast, and experience diversity.²³

So what kind of arts ecology is necessary to support cultural vitality as discussed here? What kinds of organizations and spaces are crucial? One might surmise that many different kinds of players are implicated. Surely, public and private arts funders that support the nonprofit sector are critical, as are entities that make commercial and for-profit arts enterprises possible. Large presenting venues, cultural districts, and artist live/work spaces are part of the puzzle

also. But in light of our specific interpretation of cultural vitality and our particular concern for the revitalization of American communities and neighborhoods, certain kinds of players, organizations, and spaces that typically get less attention come into sharp relief. Four types of arts organizations that are crucial to cultural vitality and community improvement, especially at the neighborhood level, have emerged: (a) artist-focused organizations, (b) community-based arts organizations, (c) ethnically-specific and traditional arts organizations, and (d) intermediary arts entities.

Artist-focused organizations are place-based entities that provide artists with validation, peer networks, opportunities for training and professional

²³ A discussion about the roles of ethnically-specific organizations and spaces that serve cultural commons appears in Maria Rosario Jackson, “Toward Diversity That Works: Building Communities through Arts and Culture,” in *21st Century Color Lines: Exploring the Frontiers of Americas Multicultural Present and Future*, edited by Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).

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development, and material supports—financial and in-kind resources, materials for making their art, connections to publics, and opportunities for compensation in the form of jobs, commissions, awards, and grants. They sometimes provide space for working and living. In our years of field research, hundreds of artists attested to the centrality of these organizations for their work. Examples of artist-focused organizations include the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, CA; the Curley School in Ajo, AZ; Open Book 2.0 in Minneapolis, MN, serving those interested in literary and book arts; and La Mama and 651 ARTS in New York City. While these organizations have public programming, they are artist-centric and often help fortify artists to participate more effectively in community-based work. For example, theater artist John Malpede of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, which focuses on the Skid Row area of the city, has a relationship with the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica. Similarly, some artists affiliated with the other organizations mentioned are involved in community-based activity.

Community-based arts organizations and *ethnic-specific* and *traditional arts organizations* are place-based entities that frequently encourage and make possible active arts engagement for all people. Often, they connect artists to publics in the various roles discussed previously. They frequently provide training in a craft, opportunities for validation of a wide range of artistic endeavors, and

some material supports such as raw materials, equipment, and space. These organizations also regularly help connect artists and publics to community issues. They are hubs for community cultural activity—inclusive places, typically with low barriers to entry—frequently offering programs and services at a low cost or for free. They often play a general leadership role in communities, particularly on cultural issues.

Ethnically-specific and traditional arts organizations have many of the same functions as community-based arts organizations, but they have a special concern for the advancement of a particular cultural group and as such are often involved with social justice issues pertaining to that group. As stated previously, they also are crucial to sustaining and promoting diversity. Examples of community-based and/or ethnically-specific arts organizations include those mentioned at the beginning of this essay—Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, LA; the Side Street Projects in Pasadena, CA; and AS220 in Providence, RI. Other examples include the Steel Yard, also in Providence, RI; the Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia, PA; the Clemente Soto Véllez Center in New York City; Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education in the Bronx, NY; Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose, CA; Sitar Arts Center in Silver Spring, MD; and the South Dallas Cultural Center in Dallas, TX.

Intermediary arts entities Intermediary arts entities play a crucial role by supporting cultural vitality and community



Waterworks Gardens: The Release, Lorna Jordan, Renton, WA

Photograph by Lorna Jordan

revitalization. These organizations and/or individuals help connect artists to a wide range of opportunities inside and outside the cultural sector. Their effectiveness depends on their bird's-eye view of the cultural resources and possibilities within the geographic area (community, city, region, or larger area) with which they are concerned, their connections, their access to resources, and their ability to communicate and advocate for artists in a wide range of contexts. Though crucial to helping artists make contributions to society, such entities are often scarce. Unlike the organizations discussed previously, their effectiveness is less tied to being place-based or serving as a home base for people seeking to participate in art. Examples of intermediaries are LA Commons in Los Angeles and Artists in Context in Boston. LA Commons seeks to “engage communities in artistic and cultural expression that tells their unique stories and serves as a basis for

dialogue, interaction and a better understanding of Los Angeles.”²⁴ Artists in Context is “a flexible organizational framework designed to assemble artists and other creative thinkers across disciplines to conceptualize new ways of representing and acting upon the critical issues of our time.”²⁵

While we know from our research that these types of functions and organizations are essential to neighborhood cultural vitality, there is no clear formula for how they should manifest themselves. This will vary in different cities, towns, and communities and will depend on several factors: geography, density, demand for particular kinds of cultural activity, and real estate and other available resources.

²⁴ <http://www.lacommons.org/>

²⁵ <http://artistsincontext.org/>

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS TO CONSIDER



Camp Metalhead 2011, The Steel Yard, Providence, RI
Photograph courtesy of The Steel Yard

At this particular moment, the integration of arts and culture into community revitalization efforts is perhaps more likely than it has been in previous years, even despite the austere economic context. There are several reasons for optimism. Paramount among them is the revival of national and local interest in comprehensive revitalization strategies and working on integrated solutions to the problems of American cities and communities.²⁶ At the federal level, the National Endowment for the Arts has been involved recently in cross-sector discussions and planning with the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Transportation, and Agriculture. Whether these inter-agency overtures will translate into actual federal and local plans that include provisions for advancing cultural vitality as part of comprehensive strategies in the long term is still unknown. But the fact that these diverse agencies are communicating and willing to do something together is extremely encouraging. There are also other contextual factors that people who are interested in integrating arts and culture into comprehensive strategies might find helpful.

There are also other contextual factors that people who are interested in integrating arts and culture into comprehensive strategies might find helpful.

In the United States and other countries, there is heightened consciousness about creativity as a major economic engine. Interest in the “creative economy,” “creative cities,” and similar ideas have led to an increased awareness of the presence of artists and their possible impacts on communities. At the same time, there have been some important strides in research to develop a more nuanced understanding of the economic and social impacts of the arts (and artists), although more of this work is needed.

There is also a national revival of interest in place and all things local: locally-made products, local and slow food movements, and so on. This has led some artists to give

²⁶ Previous waves of interest in comprehensive approaches have occurred in 20- to 30-year intervals and include the 1960s War on Poverty and the community-building movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

greater priority to identifying with and addressing issues in their local communities (beyond their local arts communities) and has often resulted in collaborations of artists making art with people outside the arts. Related to the previous point, there is increased interest in urban planning and related fields in “placemaking” as opposed to “place branding.” Placemaking deals with infusing meaning into a place organically, in large part through expressive creativity that influences the built environment. Recently, the National Endowment for the Arts launched initiatives anchored in the notion of “creative placemaking.”²⁷ Artists certainly can and do play a role in this process.

Finally, the sobering reality of our current bleak economy has encouraged, and in some cases perhaps forced, artists to think more expansively about opportunities for work and new or alternative markets they might tap into. The Urban Institute reports between 2006 and 2010, the number of artists (per thousand members of the population) increased in 69 of the top 100 metropolitan areas in the United States. In fact, the number of artists grew in even the most financially distressed communities, such as “double trouble” metropolitan areas—places affected by declines in both employment and housing values. The artist population grew in 23 of the 30 “double trouble” metropolitan areas between 2006 and 2010; in 12 of those areas, it increased by 10 percent or more.²⁸

This is a time of both great challenges and opportunities. The growing presence of artists in communities and so many pieces of evidence that people are becoming more actively interested in creativity and artistic innovation is a promising sign. Urban planners, community developers, and policymakers have before them an immense asset they have not yet fully recognized or used.

“There are several reasons for optimism. Paramount among them is the revival of national and local interest in comprehensive revitalization strategies and working on integrated solutions to the problems of American cities and communities.”

²⁷ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010).

²⁸ Those 12 areas are Akron, OH (13.7%); Baltimore-Towson, MD (13.2%); Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor, OH (19.8%); Honolulu, HI (17.2%); Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL (18.6%); Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA (19.9%); Modesto, CA (42.9%); Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura, CA (24.0%); Poughkeepsie-Newburgh-Middletown, NY (15.2%); Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA (17.5%); Santa Rosa-Petaluma, CA (10.5%); and Springfield, MA (12.3%). Analysis from Arts and Culture Indicators Project data at the Urban Institute.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE THINK ABOUT ART SPACES AND COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES



Band Setting Up, Dorchester Projects, Chicago, IL

When planning for robust cultural vitality, urban planners and policymakers should consider art space options beyond those with which they often are most familiar. To be fair, even with the limited categories that are most typical—large presenting venues, cultural districts, and artist live/work spaces—some recent developments related to these concepts are worth noting. For example, as stated earlier, several large presenting venues are considering how they might work more proactively and effectively with community-based arts organizations and how they might address demand for other kinds of cultural participation beyond audience participation. Some performing arts presenters recognize that traditional presentation venues are insufficient to address both the demand for audiences' increasing interest in more active cultural engagement

and, in some instances, artists' desires to connect to publics in different ways. To this end, arts presenters are (a) beginning to rethink how future performing arts centers might be designed, (b) thinking about how to make the most of the traditional facilities that they have, and (c) considering their roles as presenters outside the confines of traditional presenting venues—in non-arts places where people already gather or prefer to gather, or in nontraditional places where performing artists want to do/share their work.²⁹

Among some large presenting venues, there is evidence of impressive efforts to remove barriers to participation by supporting active arts participation and the use of facilities for civically oriented activity. The Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County's Active Arts program, which provides

²⁹ Topic of discussion during plenary and group exercises at 2011 conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters.



Photograph by Charlie Vinz, Rebuild Foundation

opportunities for all to dance, play music, sing, tell stories, and exhibit photographs on the Performing Arts Center campus, is a national model.³⁰ The efforts of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center are also notable.

The idea of cultural districts is being revised and expanded, in large part, as a result of Mark Stern and Susan Seifert's work on naturally occurring cultural districts, which take the concept of a cultural district well beyond the notion of a commercial strip populated with arts consumer options. Stern and Seifert's work calls attention to geographically defined networks made possible by the presence of a density of cultural assets in particular neighborhoods. They argue that because natural cultural districts evolve through the self-organized efforts

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³⁰ <http://www.musiccenter.org/events/activearts.html>.

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of local players, the challenge for policymakers is how to nurture sensitive social investment that maximizes community benefits.³¹

Also, in some instances, the idea of artist live/work spaces is beginning to be associated with more than just efforts to achieve economic impacts. The Curley School in Ajo, AZ, is an example of how artist live/work spaces serve artists and can anchor economic development and more comprehensive community transformation.

These developments all bode well in creating communities with cultural vitality and advancing neighborhood and community improvement initiatives. Here we offer some other ideas for urban planners, community developers, and policymakers to consider.

First, the provision of permanent or long-term space for community-based arts organizations, ethnic-specific and traditional arts organizations, and artist-focused organizations—which are place-based and rely on their ability to be a hub or “home base” to be effective—is crucial for cultural vitality. Earlier, we provided examples of the various forms that these spaces might take: stand-alone prominent buildings with strong physical identities, less obvious spaces integrated into strip malls and other commercial areas, houses that are integrated into residential neighborhoods, and even mobile options such as Side Street Projects.

Second, some artists doing hybrid work and concerned with their role in a local community often find it beneficial to live and work where they are more integrated into the fabric of the locality rather than living and working where they are solely or primarily surrounded by other artists—as is the design of most “artist space” developments. So, in addition to artist live/work spaces and artist communities, scattered-site spaces for artists are an option.

Third, much work by artist space developers and arts advocates has focused on artist ownership of spaces and/or long-term arrangements for occupation of spaces. However, another area of concentration is artists’ access to spaces where the people with whom they wish to connect already gather: shopping centers, health clinics, schools, bus stops and other transportation hubs, and community centers, among other places. While artists have been able to work in this way and have made important contributions in doing so, securing access to such spaces is not always easy or straightforward. Facilitating this kind of access for artists is an important area of work with which few people have been systematically involved. Work in this area has often been the domain of artists themselves and/or intermediary arts entities such as LA Commons and Artists in Context. Efforts from planning departments, redevelopment authorities, business associations, and similar gatekeepers in the form of new or relaxed regulations for art uses of spaces, or even incentives to encourage private parties to support the integration of art experiences in their spaces, would be an important contribution.

³¹ Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, *Cultivating “Natural” Cultural Districts. Social Impacts of the Arts Project* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania and the Reinvestment Fund, 2007).



Asian Arts Initiative Gallery Exhibition, Philadelphia, PA

Photograph by Annie Seng

Fourth, another priority dealing with access pertains to the practice of ethnically-specific and traditional cultural arts, a crucial element of diversity. Among traditional artists or tradition bearers (who are often Native Americans or members of immigrant groups), access to sacred spaces—places significant for spiritual, religious, and/or historical reasons—is particularly important. In Hawaii, access to sacred spaces where hula has been traditionally practiced as well as places where natural materials are available for the creation of traditional costumes and instruments is key. The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance also has faced challenges accessing sources for traditional materials, especially given environmental challenges that have made some natural materials scarce.

Fifth, among many artists making art in communities, often at the intersection of arts and other fields, collaboration with non-arts organizations for occasional and/or sustained use of space can be absolutely essential. Examples of smooth collaborations as well as thorny relationships related to borrowed use of space abound. Developing successful working relationships can take time, compromise, and trust. Urban planners, policymakers, community developers, and others concerned with improving communities can

assist with these collaborations. Often, this happens by developing stronger working relationships with intermediary arts entities and sharing information with them about available spaces, how best to comply with or get exemptions from regulations, and similar issues that will facilitate their work.

Last and most important, urban planners, community developers, and policymakers concerned with comprehensively improving communities absolutely must integrate provisions for advancing the cultural vitality of communities into their plans and strategies. On a related note, the training of these professionals also must include arts and culture as an important dimension of life in communities and cities. This must be a priority, not an afterthought. Without consideration of how the contributions of artists and the cultivation of a creative, generative citizenry can help advance education, the built environment, civic engagement, social capital, and even the economy, the most well-intentioned efforts to improve communities and cities will be inadequate and incomplete. Moreover, communities will be hollow and bland, devoid of the very qualities that make places meaningful and enjoyable, and living in them worthwhile.

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Images, from left to right:

Camp Metalhead 2011, The Steel Yard, Providence, RI
Photograph courtesy of The Steel Yard

Make It Count B-boy Jam, Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia, PA
Photograph by Annie Seng

Active Arts, Music Center, Los Angeles, CA
Photograph by Mario de Lopez

Cover images, from left to right:

Girls on Tarima, Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center, San Pablo, CA
Photograph by Mike Melnyk

Francis St. Rice University Collaboration, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
Photograph by Eric Hester

Camp Metalhead 2011, The Steel Yard, Providence, RI
Photograph courtesy of The Steel Yard