

TOWARDS SYNERGY AND TRANSFORMATION: REFLECTIONS ON ARTS AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS AS ALLIES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

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For more than 25 years, from the diverse perches of philanthropy, government, academia, and research institutions, as well as from the perspective of on-the-ground arts and community development organizations, my work has been focused on integrating arts and culture into our concept of healthy places where all people can thrive, and on creating comprehensive strategies to address inequity particularly in historically marginalized communities. These are often communities of color, characterized by media and governmental systems primarily in terms of socio-economic deficits without sufficient consideration for their cultural assets, creativity, and evidence of their resilience. As community development, planning, and allied fields essential to equitable, just communities begin to more seriously and strategically consider artists and arts and cultural organizations as allies in their work, what do they need to know? What do arts and cultural organizations need to know? How might this promising synergy be bolstered?

From 2013-2015, I had the unique privilege to collaborate with Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) as an observer of one of its artist residencies; an effort that resulted in *CONSUMPTION*, a project conceived by artist Rick Lowe

and adapted and executed by artists Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin and Emily Chow Bluck. *CONSUMPTION* was an effort to re-define the physical presence and role of Pearl Street, an alley-like street immediately behind AAI and its various neighboring organizations that serve drastically different constituencies co-existing in the same space.¹ From my perspective as someone with roots in urban planning and community development fields, artist residencies can be important mechanisms for artists and arts organizations to contribute to community improvement strategies in ways that can stretch and challenge conventional practices in community development, planning, and arts alike.

My observation of the conception and evolution of *CONSUMPTION*, resulted in key insights about what artists and host organizations require or could benefit from in order to maximize a community-focused residency experience. One requirement is that both artists and hosts interrogate their practices in order to distill core values and corresponding ways of working with each other and in communities as well as related logistical and material requirements. Another requirement, particularly for long-term residencies, in my opinion, is the idea of establishing a “courting” or

“trial” period to “get on the same page,” and test what appear to be commonly held values and practices and assess the fit between artists and hosts. This also includes assessing what the artist might inherit in terms of the host’s relationships with residents and institutions in the community and gaining clarity about what this means for the work imagined. Another idea that emerged from the observation was the possible utility of a third-party thought partner/mediator who could offer a safe space for all parties involved and help navigate difficult elements of collaboration. Last, the notion of “funder fit” emerged as a call to consider the qualities of supporters of residencies wisely and, to the extent possible, cultivate a culture of flexibility and tolerance for adjustments essential to the work.

In addition to providing a window into residencies, the observation of AAI from 2013 to 2015 also offered a window to more deeply understand the roles that community-based arts organizations, particularly those like Asian Arts Initiative that are committed to lifting, interrogating and celebrating complex racial ethnic identities, can contribute to neighborhood change and community development. Raising the visibility and full understanding of



arts and cultural organizations as community development partners, particularly community rooted small to midsize organizations, is often not easy. Concepts of art and culture are often narrow and do not account for expansive ways of thinking about process-based practices nor the roles of artists beyond makers of physical objects or as performers. Moreover, there is still important work to be done in mapping different types of community-based arts practices to elements of comprehensive community development. This mapping needs to happen not only as the concept of community development exists currently with a focus on cross disciplinary connection (e.g., housing, health, education, environment, etc.) but also inclusive functions, some of which get little or no attention in concepts of comprehensive community development such as community organizing, visioning systemic and community change, community engaged design, reclamation of cultural identity and narrative, and meaningful physical transformation of community spaces.

Arts and Culture in Assessment of Our Societal Condition

A key challenge in fully understanding the plausible roles

of arts and culture in our human condition and in community change has been an overemphasis on blunt economic impacts by arts advocates, policy makers, and the community development field. In recent years, this emphasis has been fueled by concepts that could be useful if considered critically and not taken to extreme such as “Creative Class” coined by Richard Florida and popular in the early 2000s and “Creative Economy,” still prevalent today.² This overemphasis is not surprising. As a society we measure our condition largely in terms of how our economy is doing. Economic considerations are the dominant currency of policy debates and in the community development and planning fields, economic impacts are the gold standard for neighborhood change. I am not arguing that we should abandon any focus on economic impacts. It is important and that would be foolish. But I am arguing that we direly need to expand our prism for how we measure our human condition, the criteria we use to make policy choices and the ways in which we think about what constitutes community improvement.

For decades there have been several strands of research and practice, that while still at the edges,

do attempt to expand our lens into assessing our condition, making prudent policy choices, and better catalyzing and assessing change at the neighborhood level. These include research on social indicators as well as policy and investment analysis strategies that look at more than singular economic bottom lines and advocate for triple and quadruple bottom lines. These often are aligned with interests in environment and sustainability as well as shared prosperity. Even within these, and despite a growing and persistent interest in the inclusion of arts and culture as critical input and desired outcome, this has been, for the most part, marginal or non-existent.³

Re-framing the Roles of Arts and Culture in Community Development and Planning

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in how arts, culture, and community engaged design can be part of planning, community development, and related fields. This is evident in increasing artists’ involvement in social practice, public practice, tactical urbanism, and creative placemaking. In the last seven years, building on my previous work and that of others, I have been specifically involved in examining and advancing activity under the “creative placemaking” umbrella, with a particular focus on arts-based community development and planning strategies that acknowledge systemic root causes of inequity, build on community cultural assets, and involve resident engagement in service of equitable community outcomes. In my opinion, perhaps one of the most important contributions of the rise of equitable creative placemaking has been the invitation to community development, planning, arts, and other fields to reckon with how arts and culture often contribute to community change in neighborhoods beyond

only economic impacts. Efforts to assess the impacts of creative placemaking increasingly lift up contributions of arts-based activity having to do with impacting individual and collective agency, social cohesion, sense of stewardship, narrative of place, and physical transformation of neighborhoods among other community qualities that have not typically been part of how neighborhood change processes are understood or formally assessed.⁴ All of these impacts are consistent with the aspiration of the AAI residency I observed and what ultimately became the *CONSUMPTION* project. While not intentionally positioned as such at the time, I argue that such activity can be instructive to community development and planning fields as they begin to embrace the invitation to evolve. Moreover, as community-based arts organizations are better understood as possible community development partners, a better grasp of how they function, their past and future roles, and insights into their support needs, are imperative.

In efforts to better understand the range of arts and culture organizations in a given place, a common frame for distinguishing among organizations is budget size. To be sure, understanding the contours of the cultural sector in terms of budget size has value. But I think that in addition to understanding distinctions by budget size, it is crucial to understand distinctions among organizations by virtue of what they do. With this in mind, several years ago, I started a strand of research on what I call “cultural kitchens.”⁵ The term refers to those places where people, especially people from historically marginalized communities that have experienced violence done to cultural roots, gather to reclaim, mend, and/or build new cultural roots and take control of their narrative. Cultural kitchens encourage

both tradition and innovation. They take many forms including identity-explicit art and cultural centers, mutual aid societies, and even sometimes churches and commercial entities. In their roles as hubs and pillars in geographic communities and in communities of interest, they are places that have impact far beyond what happens inside of them and are critical to a more equitable and just society. The term “cultural kitchens” comes from my observation that often, among public officials, in efforts to tout diversity as a virtue of a place, point to places and events that serve as cultural commons: communal tables where people gather to share their culture with one another. It occurred to me that while we lift up these cultural communal tables as virtuous, we do not give sufficient attention to where it is that people actually make the culture that they then share. Where are the cultural kitchens that make that possible? How do they work? What do they require to function? How robust or fragile are these key entities that make so much possible?

Asian Arts Initiative, in my opinion, is a unique cultural kitchen serving a geographic community as well as a more extended community of interest. I posit that its experience and lessons learned over the years are valuable not only to the arts and culture field but also to the fields of community development and planning as they embrace the invitation to integrate arts, culture, and design into how they address communities, how they conceive of comprehensive approaches and change, and also how they recognize and track progress. Distilling those lessons and framing them into more broadly accessible material for audiences beyond the arts and culture field is part of important work ahead.

1. <http://asianartsinitiative.org/consumption>
2. Florida, Richard. 2002. *Rise of the Creative Class*. Basic Books. New York.
3. For examples of research on social indicators see *Social Indicators Research: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality of Life Measurement* <https://link.springer.com/journal/11205>, and *International Society for Quality of Life Research* <http://www.isoqol.org>
4. Jackson, Maria Rosario. 2018. “Creative Placemaking and Expansion of Opportunity.” *The Kresge Foundation*. Troy, Michigan. https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cp_white_paper_2_for_posting.pdf
5. Jackson, Maria Rosario. 2011. *Cultural Kitchens: Nurturing Organic, Creative Expression*. Grantmakers in the Arts blog. <http://blogs.giarts.org/equity-forum/2011/12/07/cultural-kitchens-nurturing-organic-creative-expression/>

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