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ARTISTS, CREATIVITY, AND THE HEART OF CITY PLANNING

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Strategy making in the planning field requires complex imaginative, intellectual and technical work, involving a wide range of sources of understanding and imaginative power.

(Patsy Healey, 2010, p. 188)

Introduction

Artists are celebrated for their imaginative powers – creative inclinations and skills they act on and foster throughout their lives. To provide the power British planning scholar Patsy Healey calls for above, some artists have applied themselves to city planning. In my work as a planning consultant in the United States, I’ve had opportunity to bring artists into many planning processes. Their skills are applicable in virtually all stages of planning, but my focus, and that of this chapter, is with artists in the public participation process. Projects I’ve been involved with span 25 different US states and have included artists from theater, design, visual, and fabric arts, writers, choreographers, vocalist/songwriters, amongst others. While some artists take their work into other arenas of public service, the focus in this chapter is based on my experience in neighborhood, district, creative economy development, and cultural planning. In these settings, artists have worked as co-designers, facilitators, and collaborators in data collection and interpretation. Projects are carried out directly with municipal agencies as well as independent actors such as community foundations, chambers of commerce, or other service organizations. Sometimes we work on stand-alone plans, sometimes on integrated plans side-by-side with city planners or other consultants with expertise in areas such as transportation, parks, and economic development. Cities have included Worcester, Massachusetts, South Salt Lake City, Utah, Lawrence, Kansas, Des Moines, Iowa, Marquette, Michigan, Oklahoma City, San José, California, Dublin, Ohio, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Bloomington, Minnesota, as well as many smaller towns. In this chapter I explore, from a first-person and practitioner perspective, theory, history, and experiences related to the roles of artists in advancing these practices. While this work is not unique — and I’ll reflect on a few of its earlier practitioners — it remains nascent and is slowly finding acceptance within the formal city planning profession.
The field and practice of city or urban planning is increasingly critical to the future of humanity as cities try to find solutions to a growing list of challenges, ranging from basic infrastructure maintenance, to climate emergency adaptions, tensions related to global population movements, to place-based health and housing disparities, and transportation, to name a few. With public sector resources being squeezed while cities confront increasingly complex challenges, it is important to find ways to do more than one thing at a time in civic work. Expanding the imaginative capacities of the public sector and promoting engagement in local democracy present enormous challenges, especially in a neoliberal environment bent on dismantling people-centered institutions and policies. Creative engagement practices are among the contributions artists can make to city planning, community development, and civic institutions generally. In normative public process, planners try to inform participants and engage them in sometimes-heated discussions in response to professionally developed proposals. Artist-led, culturally attuned creative practices when applied to the public participation process can result in multiple outcomes. These include expanding the diversity of people involved, eliciting higher-quality local knowledge, and making participation more meaningful, enjoyable, productive, and less contentious. Well-planned and facilitated public process can build social connections, gather more and different data, approach challenges with fresh eyes, activate group imaginations, find common ground, lead productive co-design activities, reframe complex problems, strengthen participatory democracy, among other things. These are tall orders and not every artist is inclined or prepared to jump into situations calling for such outcomes. Although still far from mainstream, artist-led creative engagement represents a growing practice among cities in the United States.

Over the past decade cities such as Los Angeles, New York City, Boston, Minneapolis, and St. Paul have been among two-dozen cities (at the time of writing) employing artists in various roles and departments including planning. These range from regional and comprehensive city plans to neighborhood and district planning to special topical plans including parks, culture, and transportation, for example. Artist Jackie Brookner, with the city planner in Fargo, North Dakota, launched the Fargo Project (2017), a multi-year process in 2010 to address recurring flooding. Brookner engaged residents in creative and social activities that led to the development of an 18-acre site as a storm-water detention system that doubles as a multipurpose neighborhood commons. Multiple artists began working in the City of Minneapolis planning department in 2013. Through a program known as Creative CityMaking (2019), launched by the nonprofit Intermedia Arts, artists and planners devised and deployed a variety of techniques to increase public involvement in local planning. A mobile engagement theater pulled behind a bicycle entertained people while soliciting comments; a mobile tracing unit involved passersby at street fairs and other community events to observe and trace the urban landscape as a way to see it differently. Another engaged young people through making zines and comic books that told stories of their neighborhood. Through an artist-in-residence program in New York City launched in 2015, artists engage across many city agencies (Alliance of Artist Communities, 2019). Tania Bruguera was the first selected to help build trust between immigrants and public service agencies. A similar program in Boston began in 2016 engaging seven artists to address racial equity across multiple city platforms (City of Boston, 2019). A year later, the Boston-based Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a regional planning agency, brought on a playwright and performance artist to help staff improve strategies for involving the public across the 101 towns and cities the agency covers (MAPC, 2019).

Artmaking involves repurposing raw materials to create value, beauty, and new meaning as well as to identify unique and different purposes for those materials. Moreover, artists needn’t
limit themselves to conventional materials. They might work with sound, movement, color, objects, buildings, spaces, neighborhoods, relationships, sense of identity, or social systems, just to name a few. Applying artmaking practices to such tangible and intangible assets of a neighborhood or city can change the game and open new possibilities. Creative engagement can take stakeholders on symbolic or metaphorical journeys engaging in learning, change-making, and community-building together. This enables and empowers community members and public officials to learn more about each other and themselves. It can move them to a new level where they make things together, find new connections, form new narratives and new relationships, and experience collaborative action.

Planning and public process

Public participation in city and community planning has its own complex history. After half a century as an institutionalized part of municipal planning processes in the United States, it is still gestating and still seeking ways to be more engaging and effective. Working alongside city planners it is evident that, to some, required public processes are perfunctory, annoying requirements, and for others an opportunity to ‘sell’ their ideas to a skeptical or uninformed public. Some planners find public responses challenging, while others discover useful information to help iterate and improve plans. Creative processes led by someone outside the formal municipal structure can take public participation to another level. Veteran Canadian cultural planner Greg Baeker attests: ‘The tools of the artist are an essential part of how we imagine cities: through stories, images, metaphors, exploring possibilities as well as critiques’ (2002, p. 24). Tools range from techniques to find shared vision, exercise voice, articulate ideas through song and movement, share stories, and celebrate the collective making of something new. Notable urban theorists of the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, including Patrick Geddes (1915/1949) and Lewis Mumford (1961), advocated citizen participation in planning before it was generally accepted in the practice, promoting ‘civic exhibitions on urban and regional issues, surveys, and through input to the creation of planning alternatives or scenarios. Mumford saw plans as “instruments of communal education”’ (Baeker, 2002, p. 23). Early city planning required engineering and organizational skills to coordinate resources and materials to implement expert-designed schemes. In contemporary planning, it is now recognized that planners need social and political skills more than, or in addition to, technical skills. In the 2006 *Just Planning*, British scholar Heather Campbell wrote: ‘The recent history of planning thought has seen the replacement of the planner as instrumental rationalist by the planner as facilitator’ (p. 103).

Some urban planning literature touches on creative techniques but largely ignores partnerships with creative practitioners (aka artists). American planning scholar John Forester, a longtime proponent of public participation and of planning as a learning and deliberative process, references theatrical terms so often in his writing, it’s surprising he doesn’t advocate recruiting theater professionals. In *The Deliberative Practitioner* (1999), Forester described ‘the staging of deliberation in planning’ (p. 236). Forester called for ‘creativity and finesse’ as well the importance of improvisation. Like Campbell, Forester calls on planners to reframe part of their work as ‘process managers,’ to engage people in idea generation and problem-solving. Forester also wrote about, ‘the power of the sketch, the power of visual inquiry’ (1999, p. 109) as potent tools in public engagement. In more recent writing, Forester (2018) described planning as, ‘real drama – drama no less powerful, no less moving, no less instructive, and no less illuminating for being set on the stages of our cities and neighborhoods’ (p. 15). He continues to call on planners to create environments conducive to productive idea generation, discussion, and deliberation of solutions to planning challenges – precisely the things artists do well. Creative environments artists
facilitate change not only the expectations of participants but how they relate to planners and to one another. In her advocacy of ‘unlearning the colonial cultures of planning’, British planning scholar Libby Porter (2016) asserted one step is to ‘place people in a different relation with each other: one of service, not of winning the argument’ (p. 158). Planners, in their important role of ‘process managers’ (Forester, 1999), ‘exert real influence … by shaping processes of inclusion and exclusion, of participation and negotiation’ (p. 90). In Forester’s experience, some of the most productive community deliberations took place in meetings that ‘brought them all together, not abstractly by appealing to “community building” or to some unitary public interest, but performatively – practically, interactively – over cards, drinks, music, camaraderie and dance’ (2018, p. 21; emphasis in original text). For Forester, these cultural practices served only to form social connections. Relationships are an important dimension of the work. However, the creative activities Forester describes did not fully integrate creative thinking and cultural difference into the process of gathering information, devising solutions, and deliberation. Forester simply observed that sociability greased the wheels for planners to get on with their work.

Planning as storytelling

Among the most articulate advocates of the importance of story and storytelling in planning is Australian planning scholar Leonie Sandercock, now based in Canada. Sandercock cited growing diversity in what she calls ‘mongrel cities’ and sees stories, as well as other creative narrative practices, particularly filmmaking, as ways to open planning processes to the increasingly diverse people and cultures inhabiting cities of all sizes. This brings threefold benefit: the expansion of practical tools, the sharpening of critical judgment, and the widening of democratic discourse. Supporting such a need for a multivariate input and criticality in the planning process, Porter further called for planning to be ‘self-aware as well as world-aware’ and working in the service of intellectual and emotional connection (2016, p. 158). Building connections between people may, in fact, be the root purpose of planning. Borrowed from ethnography, the practice of collecting stories and bringing ‘local knowledge’ into the planning process has emerged as a critical part of good planning. Local knowledge is best derived through storytelling and focused listening. Australian planning scholar Paul Maginn (2007) described how techniques of applied ethnography offer planners a way forward in achieving more effective community participation. Steven Dang, a Canadian scholar-practitioner, characterized artists as the storytellers of their communities: ‘They can provide a planner not only deep insight into a community, but ready-made and powerful means of communicating them’ (2005, p. 124). Dang advocates that planning education should include mining the rich meanings in stories and cultural artifacts. Planners need to take advantage of their communities’ story-collectors and storytellers.

Studies related to creativity and innovation consistently cite play, experimentation, and risk-taking as critical elements for new discovery. Those elements are rarely described in municipal procedure manuals. Creative city theorist, consultant, and writer Charles Landry focuses his more recent work on opening municipal agencies and processes to creativity (see: The Creative Bureaucracy and its Radical Common Sense, with Margie Caust, 2017). Conducting public engagement and planning work using routine settings and formats along with cut-and-paste solutions is sure to fulfill the colloquial definition of insanity. City bureaucracies are notoriously risk-averse, necessitating new ways of thinking in order to just open themselves to creative process. New thinking doesn’t come from the center or mainstream of any profession. Computer science scholar Gerhard Fischer reminded that the edges ‘are where the unexpected can be expected, where innovative and unorthodox solutions are found, where serendipity is likely, and where old ideas find new life’ (2005, p. 5). This is another way artists can be helpful. They tend to be
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comfortable on the edges, outside the mainstream, outside the box. Innovation, play, experimentation, and risk-taking are core to their approaches.

Art as data

Artists’ training and practice emphasize observation, listening, questioning, and intuiting the shape, meanings, stories, and symbols in their surroundings and in human actions, as well as the possibilities in materials. Planners are not trained to approach their work this way, or to understand, or even value such data. This is where extended dialogue between artists and planners is necessary. Rich and multi-layered data revealed through creative process is not always readable by planners. British-born design scholar living in Australia Paul Carter (2015) characterized planners and designers as dramaturgs. Dramaturgy is the practice of contextualizing, interpreting, and adapting story for the stage, giving structure and representation of the key dramatic elements appropriate for the audience and the time. Carter also constructed the term ‘choreotopography’ to blend movement and spatial thinking. There is much work for artist-generated data to have meaning for planners and these conversations are increasingly taking place. Creative methods employed by artists can offer needed dimensions in planning, listening to and appreciating the nuances in diverse cultural traditions of the residents who make up contemporary cities. Such methods also help engage people of more diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds in public process and draw people more deeply into contributing to the analytical and visioning work of planning. Artists who are culturally attuned to – better yet, part of – intersectional traditions, cultures, and ways of thinking can involve diverse communities sharing geographic places in neighborhoods and cities in the co-creation of solutions to community challenges, engaging people in devising more viable alternatives.

Perhaps because urban planning as a profession grew from technical roots in engineering and architecture as well as data-driven policy development, it has resisted the creative disciplines or working with artists as partners. California planner/artist James Rojas is among those who are making the case that data are not limited to things that can be counted. Among urban planning students at MIT, where he graduated in 1990, Rojas described how his creative inclinations made him the ‘odd duck.’ Rojas made models and analyzed space not through quantitative methods but as a creative visual practice. To Rojas, the city ‘is a spatial, visual, and material culture that ignites memories, emotions, and aspirations’ (personal communication, January 9, 2019). This, Rojas said, has to be understood through storytelling. In Los Angeles in the early 2000s, while involved with the arts, Rojas developed his practice of putting model-making to work to help people tell their stories. Rojas wrote in a 2018 Planetizen blog, ‘Stories increase public involvement in city planning, increasing awareness of how the built environment shapes people’s lives and how they can shape it in return.’ Rojas estimated he has conducted 500 workshops in cities across the United States and Mexico, yet his practice is far from embraced by mainstream planning: ‘I ask participants to collaborate in building their ideal community using familiar objects such as hair rollers, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, and other material’ (ibid.). Rojas considers this immersive storytelling that ‘allows participants the physical activity of reflecting, touching, moving, and playing with objects on imaginary maps’ (ibid.). Rojas explained that participants are able to, ‘quickly inquire, discover, prototype, and experiment with solutions. They learn their city is occupied by thousands of stories, seen or unseen, and all these stories collectively have power to promote physical change’ (Rojas, 2018). People gain a greater sense of agency, common purpose, and shared vocabulary when they make something together than when they simply try to talk about it.

Similarly, in his work on deliberative process and through his research with planners, Forester observed cases in which planners who draw rendered informal sketches or concepts for community
members to respond to. This encourages curiosity and play, what he called ‘interactions of inquiry before argument’ in service to stimulating participants’ imaginations of possible futures. Sketches, collages, sculptures, photographs, and other creations of participants in planning processes provide valuable data. Planners, however, are not trained to interpret or analyze them, and as such are often inclined to dismiss them. Stories, sounds, and movements elicited in response to prompts or to community challenges can also serve as valuable data as is standard in sociological research. How to best harvest and analyze such data in planning is an emerging practice – one rich in possibilities. Artists and planners can borrow a page from qualitative research, especially ethnographic and phenomenological studies, to systematically collect and code data – stories, interpretations of drawings, photographic images, movement scores – to find hidden meanings and patterns that can lead to meaningful findings and conclusions. Planners spend considerable time in universities learning to read data expressed through numbers. Artists and art historians learn to work with different symbols. Ethnographers and dramaturgs find meaning in nuances of stories. There are many interpreters who can read more than one language. More are needed.

Diversity and cultural competency

One challenge facing most city planners in the United States is growing ethnic and racial diversity that brings different culturally based ways of working, different relationships to local government, and different uses of public spaces, among others. Diversity both complicates and enriches planning work as Sandercock (2003, 2004) has written about extensively. Planners need more ways to foster dialogue and creative problem-solving while the environments they work in become more complex. Canadian planning scholar Neil Bradford (2004) described the planning field as largely unprepared for many challenges including diversity, creative thinking, economic inequity, and issues around environmental sustainability. As current social and natural environments elevate the importance as well as potential value of greater participation, new skills are called for to manage and maximize the meaning and value of the involvement of more and different people. Such skills are absent from the technical and analytical training most planners are equipped with (Kunzmann, 2004). Planners and policymakers often set up planning processes and local partnerships with insufficient knowledge of local cultures (Maginn, 2007). These increasingly include the presence of ‘global’ cultures in ‘mongrel cities’ (Sandercock, 2003, 2004). American urban planner Leo Vazquez (2009, 2012) asserted that most planners lack ‘cultural competence.’ He argued that most planners lack reflective understanding of even their own cultural practices and biases, let alone appreciation and understanding of the cultures and practices of others.

The goal in public process is for community members, planners, and other public officials to come together in a deliberative environment to, ‘learn together and craft strategies to act collaboratively’ (Forester, 1999, p. 4). Before this can happen, these parties have to achieve basic trust and confidence in the process. This is complicated, Forester asserted, ‘when they distrust or even detest one another, when they inherit painful histories of eviction or terror, racial hatred or sexual violence’ (ibid., p. 4). Cultural competency – also known as intercultural competency – in planning education is one building block to work through racism and troubled histories. American planning scholar Julian Agyeman and planner Jennifer Sien Erickson argued that, ‘recognizing, understanding, and engaging difference, diversity, and cultural heterogeneity in creative productive ways requires cultural competency’ (2012, p. 358). They built on Vazquez’s definition describing it as ‘the range of awareness, beliefs, knowledge, skills, behaviors, and professional practice that will assist in planning for, in, and with “multiple publics”’ (2012, p. 361). This enables people to appreciate difference, to work in cross-cultural situations, and to proactively engage with diversity and promote intercultural dialogue.
For a planner to develop an awareness of their own cultural vantage point and biases is at least as critical as learning about others, asserted Agyeman and Erickson. This impacts ‘how their own conscious and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, and desires affect their ability to listen well and understand other cultures’ (2012, p. 359). However, planners, need to understand more than just the people in the neighborhood or in the room. They need to understand the cultural specificity of existing structures and processes they employ and how their attitudes towards nonprofessionals in communities impact on the experiences of different groups (Maginn, 2007). Meanwhile, planning practitioners find themselves bound by established practices that sometimes include prescribed ways of conducting meetings. Like everyone, they are captive of their own biases and experiences and often pull from a limited vocabulary of aesthetic choices, land use patterns, and ways of involving people in civic dialogue. Motivating engagement of those who feel, and actually have been, excluded requires more than impressing on them the importance of choices over street widths and zoning variances. ‘Deliberative practice and participatory processes will fail,’ wrote Forester, ‘if planning analysts pay so much attention to technique or “substance” that they ignore and dismiss the history and culture, the self-perceptions and deeply defining experiences, or the citizens involved’ (1999, p. 245). When co-designing and leading these processes, artists have demonstrated remarkable abilities to surface unique experience, honor histories, bridge differences, and move people to constructing something together, even if symbolically.

Creative engagement: setting the stage

This is not the first published writing to argue the merits of artist-led engagement practices in the planning arena or to reflect on such experiences. While by no means a history of this work, a few notable forerunners and trends in the practice are reviewed here. Among early documented practitioners who integrated creative disciplines with formal spatial planning were American avant-garde dancer Anna Halprin and her landscape architect husband, Lawrence Halprin. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, their 1960s and 1970s experiments brought together their respective practices. British geographer Peter Merriman described how the Halprins attempted ‘to rethink landscape architecture and dance through the understanding of the spaces of choreography and performance, and the performativities and choreographies of spaces’ (Merriman, 2010, p. 431). The Halprins not only tried new ways to conceptualize spatial planning but new ways to involve a wider mix of people in articulating spatial thinking. They combined their practices and progressive politics to democratize choreography and dance performance, to include people of color and other marginalized people in collective creativity to democratize landscape and urban design. According to Merriman, they developed and practiced community processes ‘grounded in principles of group therapy and an emphasis on participation, direct personal experience and play’ (ibid., p. 439).

Australian planner Wendy Sarkissian began her creative practice in the 1970s, publishing in 2010 a reflective book, Creative Community Planning: Transformative Engagement Methods for Working at the Edge, with artist-planner Dianna Hurford. In summing up their experiences as creative planning consultants, they described their efforts, ‘to meet at a place of creation that calls new, informed and meaningful ideas into existence through rationality, integration, community knowledge and experience’ (2010, p. 7). Their book traces a wide-ranging body of work in communities of all types and sizes across Australia. They experimented with performance, music, visual arts, and stories, worked with local artists and activists in planning, ‘Listening to stories, identifying common goals and forming partnerships in action: this is creative community engagement – engagement that is as much about learning as doing’ (ibid., p. 154). Since
the late 1990s Steven Dang, a scholar-practitioner also worked with communities in Canada in creative community engagement. Dang uses the artistic process to ‘tap the creative collective potential of participants,’ (2005, p. 123), continuing, ‘While the planning profession may be reluctant to engage in community cultural development work, community-based artists are hard at work in community planning’ (ibid.) Dang’s own work focuses on activating local artists and imaginations. Dang described gathering stories as well as images from local artists (artists defined loosely) – images that tell profound stories into community values and categorizes three ways to employ art in planning: ‘Art as Window,’ ‘Art as Dialogue,’ and ‘Art as Doorway’ (pp. 123–25). In this construct, creative processes help participants see, discuss, and move to new places together.

Artists of many disciplines working in community settings, since at least the 1960s, have developed an extensive array of techniques and practices to foster community building and promote engagement in social issues and civic affairs. American cultural activists and writers Bill Cleveland (2000) and Arlene Goldbard (2006) both chronicled community-based arts and ‘community cultural development’ through which artists across disciplines developed approaches to activate engagement in community through culturally based creative work. Their writing surveyed many of the ways artists impact communities from spatial change and policy-making, to social network building and organizing around social justice issues. This work prepared the ground for much of the artist activism, and artist involvement in planning and civic work of the current era. Dang observed how ‘community-based arts practice often demonstrates community planning at its best: strengths-based, capacity-building, participatory, inclusive, communicative, reflective, innovative and adaptive’ (2005, p. 124). This work is also part of a wider ‘turn to community in the arts’ described by Australian sociologists Danielle Wyatt, Lachlan MacDowall, and Martin Mulligan. They described a trend beginning in the late twentieth century, ‘a surge of new or renewed interest in the idea of community across all art forms’ (2013, p. 82). Multiple forces, they assert, have contributed to this turn to community, one they observe stems from ‘artists’ attempts to bridge relationships between aesthetic and activist practices; a dissolution in the boundaries between cultural, social, political and economic domains; and the increasing instrumentalization of the arts’ (ibid., p. 81).

Process as product in planning: four case studies

Four brief stories follow based on some of my recent work involving artists in community planning contexts. The investment needed to include artists varied widely from one-time facilitation activities to extensive 12–18-month involvements in conceptualizing, implementing public engagement, and harvesting relevant planning outcomes. Most of these artists had extensive backgrounds in community-based work and/or teaching and were eager and adept at welcoming and mentoring less experienced artists. Most of the planners involved readily admit they learned much from the artists. One planner vowed he would never conduct community planning again without involving artists.

Community building as patchwork: a North Dakota case

In the Spring of 2015, the planning team I was part of was commissioned jointly by the City of Grand Forks, North Dakota and a local foundation, and invited local quilting artist Sarah Heitkamp to lead an eclectic group of over 80 community members through the steps of cutting and arranging fabric into small squares. Invited to a community planning meeting, some participants were caught unaware, but all engaged constructively and ultimately appeared to enjoy the experience. This was 18 years after a massive flood and fire devastated this fiercely
independent community. Residents had worked hard to put their city back together, yet early in our planning process we sensed a piece still missing. Residents had done the long and sometimes painful work of physical and economic reconstruction, yet they seemed to have lost the joy in building a community together. Along with quilt-making, a local music and dance group performed while residents assembled their squares into a large, collective patchwork on the floor. As the work came together, a shift was evident. Young and old passed around the microphone to explain the meaning of their contribution to the quilt and how their piece contributed to the community. Without judging the artistic merit of any square, they applauded each other celebrating their creative achievement. Making artwork together under the guidance of a locally known, accomplished artist, while they discussed their vision for the community’s future, brought a critical element of joy in collective achievement back to community work.

Learning from diversity in an urban center: a Minneapolis case

A year-long downtown Minneapolis district planning project I led in 2011–12 was designed to engage a diverse mix of stakeholders in a variety of ways in accordance with the complex nature of the linear district. The project was funded by grants and supported by the Hennepin Theatre Trust, operator of several large downtown theaters, and the City of Minneapolis. While the process leaned largely on local knowledge, it included outside expertise to push the boundaries of thinking and to inform the process. Visitors included New Orleans-based artist Candy Chang, British creative city visionary Charles Landry, American urban geographer Don Mitchell, and Los Angeles community development leader Chanchanit Martorell. Set a month apart, their presentations were complemented by a parallel set of artist-led public-participation workshops each month. Participation activities also addressed long-term capacity-building by creating and/or strengthening relationships among stakeholders in the practice of problem-solving. The project drew wide attention and discussion to both assets and challenges of the district and built understanding of how resources and creative energies of various institutions and businesses could be collectively employed to take on challenges from homelessness to street crime to unwelcoming urban design to the demonization of teenagers. A challenge facing the district was one of connectivity – connectivity between institutions, businesses, and a wide range of stakeholders. With a wealth of cultural assets and historic meaning, Hennepin is considered the city’s ‘main drag,’ the heart of its nightlife.

Moving beyond physical assets to the collection of stories was an important step. For part of this work the project engaged several youth organizations working with artists. Youth interviewed, videotaped, photographed, wrote poetry and music, and created radio spots highlighting stories of people in the district. Products were presented in numerous venues on the Avenue including the central library, art museum, office building atrium, and public school as well as through social media. Among the challenges with the project was devising participatory activities to involve the diverse mix of people who make the avenue their space. Stakeholders ranged from white suburban families attending the Disney Lion King, LGBTQ club-goers, basketball fans from the adjacent arena, and black teenagers hanging out. The district represents a kind of urban space and experience unfamiliar to many Midwesterners.

To design and assess the activities we conducted multiple meetings with four locally based lead artists, urban designers, and architects, with regular input from three institutional project partners and a representative of the City. Artists included theater director, Harry Waters Jr, visual artist, Ta-coumba Aiken, choreographer, Leah Nelson, and vocal artist/songwriter, Mankwe Ndosi. All the artists were African American. They used facilitation techniques attuned to diverse cultural sensibilities appropriate to this urban place. The core team also included
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urban designer Peter Musty and a team of architects led by landscape architect and planner Bob Close. The challenge for the team, similar to that described by Sarkissian et al., was to create ‘spaces of trust for different kinds of stories to emerge and for people to express themselves in their own vocabularies’ (2010, p. 13). Activities exercised every voice singularly and in unison, practiced listening to others, moved in relation to others, and drew visions of the future to activate and bring forth a tapestry of ideas that were incorporated into the plan. As importantly, the Hennepin Theatre Trust continues a robust program of placemaking and public art engaging stakeholders on an ongoing basis.

Testing the limits: a suburban case

In a 2014–15 project in a growing Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington, I was joined by a team of four artists and two planners, including artists from the Hennepin Avenue project, Aiken, Nelson, and Waters, and urban designer Musty, along with graphic artist Witt Siasoco and landscape architect Carrie Christensen. The team conducted multiple projects across 18 months. These included a 7-day charrette under tents in a central park location. It was more of a festival of artist-led discovery and planning that included walking and bike tours, an idea competition, dialogues with historians, planners, and developers, in addition to food, music, dance, ice cream socials, and more. One small project I’ll describe responded to the municipality’s articulated desire to incorporate creative placemaking and public art in new development and existing neighborhoods. This mini-project tested the local government’s permit review procedures through what they call the Design Review Committee (DRC). This group included city planners, fire marshal, police department, economic development officials, risk manager, and others. We selected several projects proposed by community artists for a mock review by the DRC on the stage of a small auditorium with an audience. The most revealing and simplistic artist proposal was to place a soapbox – a small raised platform – in a public space to be used at will by members of the public with something to say. Multiple members of the DRC found significant problems with the proposed soapbox. Citing existing regulations and public safety concerns, the DRC declined the proposal. This did not bode well for the potentials of a public art program! This semi-staged theatrical exercise shed light on the gap between desired ends and existing policies. That said, the City established an ongoing creative placemaking commission and program and the community has since become rife with public art.

Finding stories of place: a rural Midwest case

The story circle is a vehicle long employed by community-based theater practitioners and served as a useful tool for a 2012 project. An 8,000-square-mile rural watershed area spanning parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota, known as the St Croix River Valley, was identified by leaders in the region for possible formation of a US Park Service National Heritage Area – a locally managed network of cultural, educational, and touristic resources organized around a meaningful historic or cultural theme. A foundational task was to identify whether people across the region shared a substantive connection – a shared story – that was broadly meaningful, well-supported by existing historical assets and relevant to the region’s future. With oversight of a stakeholder-based steering committee representing the vast geography, our team was invited to assemble artists and planners to help identify that critical story. The heritage project was more than a simple listening tour and required core artists and teams of volunteers to conduct each of 11 gatherings in a consistent fashion. Considerable care went into devising a methodology and preparing teams of
planners, artists, and volunteers. This enabled the process to engage people more deeply through participation in story circles and careful listening with systematic documentation of every story.

In each of the 11 counties in the region, community members attended workshops that resulted in 438 discrete stories grounded in an accumulated 10,000 years of experiences. One of the warm-up activities employed at each gathering was to ask every one of the round tables populated by six to eight participants to add up their total years living in the region. This allowed some to claim many years of wisdom and others to claim the freshest perspectives— all valued equally. The next stage involved distilling data from 438 stories to identify four most prominent themes for further consideration. We then chose a process that represented some risk and had at least one vocal skeptic. A youth theater troupe based in one of the small towns in the region was engaged to work with an area playwright to turn the four themes back into stories through three-minute scenes. The youth troupe acted out each of the prospective themes at four strategically located subregional gatherings. Rather than a presentation by a historian or economic development specialist, teenagers illustrated the themes through theater. As a clear majority of participants in all the workshops and summits sported gray hair, this brought fresh thinking as well as participation of a new generation. The response was phenomenal. Theatre brought the ideas to life in wonderful ways simple words or PowerPoint images could not. The cross-generational relationship-building added a critical dimension not only to the planning but to the meaning of the prospective Heritage Area.

Finding joy in civic engagement

In his 100-year survey of urban planning, American planning scholar William Rohe examined the evolution of local and neighborhood-based approaches citing important lessons. One of those is ‘that local social relations and networks matter greatly to people and should be given great weight in revitalization planning’ (2009, p. 216). Building, rebuilding, and maintaining social networks that are open, equitable, functional, and leave community members a sense of fulfillment and even joy are essential for every community. I learned during the 1980s and 1990s, through my involvement in community-based arts that artists can be highly effective organizers, problem-solvers, and literal, as well as metaphorical, builders of alternative social, organizational, and physical community networks. For over 20 years I led an arts organization that served as ground for convening, conducting dialog, forming partnerships, and staging action. I learned more and more about the capacities of creative processes and of individual artists to effectively assess group dynamics, identify solutions, and build bridges.

Through my more recent two decades as a community planner, I’ve come to see how creatively activating people in planning can help stakeholders better tap their thinking and use multiple expressive forms, feel part of a group, and create a more constructive or positive ‘vibe’ around public process. I’ve come to appreciate that how planning is conducted significantly influences the outcomes. And, I learned that every community activity must include food and beverage for participants to share. At the same time, it’s worth noting that artists’ efforts, participatory processes, and even food for community members can be a smoke screen. For those involved, it can become something that New York planning critic Samuel Stein described as cover, ‘designed to make them feel good about losing’ (p. 190). He described how major real-estate interests have inordinate control of city governments and how planners find themselves boxed in with few options but to serve the interests of capital over residents. It’s imperative, therefore, that planners and their creative partners work towards building community capacity— helping diverse people in their communities find common ground, build their imaginative and
collaborative muscles, learn how the wheels of government work, and find joy in the work so they’re more likely to do it again!

Conditions conducive to fostering positive interactions, activating imaginations, and facilitating deliberative practices critical in urban planning are precisely the conditions I have experienced through artist-led practices. Orchestrating or staging new and meaningful ways for people to be together and to share fulfilling experiences is exactly what theater directors, choreographers, poets, or musical conductors do brilliantly. Dang asserted that ‘as a means of conversation, the arts are often more accessible and inclusive than the standard town hall meeting or open house’ (2005, p. 124). Creative environments are less intimidating, less judgmental, and often provoke a good degree of simple social enjoyment and sense of satisfaction. Artists can bring skills to help people find and amplify their voice especially for individuals less skilled at verbal debate or reluctant to stand up in a community meeting. ‘Art can be that important initial point of entry, transcending language and providing opportunities for residents to learn to work together on shared projects,’ wrote Dang (p. 125). Unlike planners, artists are not expert in the technical details of planning, nor do they often have direct access to the levers of decision-making in municipal government. As such, they provide an ideal complement to planners as they focus on the human interactions, deeper meanings, and problem-solving processes. As Baeker observed, ‘the tools of the artist become key to the participation of all’ (2002, p. 24). Artists draw on local knowledge and how it can be relevant to the questions at hand. They are inquisitive and deconstruct things to reframe issues and bring participants on a journey together to new ways of understanding the challenges their communities face. Artists can’t provide answers to all the challenges planners and communities face. They can be potent collaborators and facilitators to help communities work together to devise solutions.

References


Artists, creativity, and city planning


Further reading in this volume

Chapter 1: Introduction: what really matters – moving placemaking into a new epoch

Cara Courage

Preface: Placemaking in the age of COVID-19 and protest

Jason Schupbach

Chapter 3: An annotated history of creative placemaking at the federal level

Jen Hughes

Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking

Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita

Chapter 5: Making places for survival: looking to a creative placemaking past for a guide to the future

Jeremy Liu

Preface: ‘Disastrous forces, accidental actions, and grassroots responses’

Tom Borrup
Chapter 11: *Free State Boulevard* and the story of the East 9th Street Placekeepers

*Dave Lowenstein*

Chapter 15: Un/safety as placemaking: disabled people’s socio-spatial negotiation of fear of violent crime

*Claire Edwards*

Chapter 19: Placemaking in the ecology of the human habitat

*Graham Marshall*

Chapter 28: Integral placemaking: A poiesis of sophrosynes?

*Ian Wight*

Preface: The only thing constant is change

*Kylie Legge*

Chapter 34: Reconnecting *cité* and *ville*

*Philip Graus*

Chapter 36: Facilitator skills for effective collaborative placemaking

*Husam AlWaer and Ian Cooper*

Chapter 37: *The Neighbourhood Project*: a case study on community-led placemaking by CoDesign Studio

*Lucinda Hartley, Eliza Charley, Sama Choudhury, and Harriet McKindlay*

Chapter 38: Public seating: a small but important place in the city

*Kylie Legge*

Chapter 42: Creative Placemaking and Placekeeping evaluation challenges from the practitioner perspective: an interview with Roy Chan

*Maria Rosario Jackson*

Chapter 45: How the city speaks to us and how we speak back: rewriting the relationship between people and place

*Rosanna Vitiello and Marcus Wilkocks*