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TRANSLATING OUTCOMES
Laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking

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Introduction

When I became ArtPlace America’s Director of Research Strategies in 2014, the tension around how to measure creative placemaking success was palpable. Practitioners and communities doing arts-based community development work had been defining their own success for decades, but the then-recent formalization of the field – through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Our Town grant program, the creation of ArtPlace, significant investments from national philanthropic entities, and numerous other policy and funding shifts – had happened seemingly overnight, without a corresponding or unified theory of change about the actual impacts of creative placemaking. The possibilities – and the risks – were both abstract and endless.

The NEA was in the midst of its multiyear Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study, which tested a suite of proposed metrics that could demonstrate the positive effects of creative placemaking on various dimensions of community ‘livability’ – the north star and conceptual through-line across many federal agencies’ place-based investments during the Obama Administration. The NEA’s candidate indicators relied on national, publicly accessible data and fell into four categories: residents’ attachment to communities; quality of life; local economic conditions; and arts and cultural activity (specifically the infrastructure supporting artists and arts organizations). ArtPlace itself had recently released a hotly contested set of indicators that positioned creative placemaking as contributing to the ‘vibrancy’ of a place (Taylor, 2012). With measures that focused on variables like property values, population density, and creative industry jobs, many critics felt the Vibrancy Indicators privileged traditional economic development strategies over more nuanced approaches to building wealth, wellness, and equity in communities through the arts. Respected researchers and scholars who had spent their careers studying the social or economic impact of the arts were increasingly vocal, calling out the shaky foundation upon which funders and policymakers were attempting to build a field (Moss, 2012). Renowned economist Ann Markusen (2013), for example, noted that ‘Evaluation by external generic indicators fails to acknowledge the experimental and ground-breaking nature of these creative placemaking initiatives and misses an opportunity to bolster understanding of how arts and cultural missions create public value.’ In a 2014 speech, Mark Stern of the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at the University of Pennsylvania stated:
Creative placemaking needs to work on clarifying its conceptual foundation but at the same time be open to experimentation in developing methods for understanding its outcomes. With a clear set of concepts, one can continue to improve one’s methods over time.

To further complicate matters, individual approaches to creative placemaking were rapidly evolving and adapting, necessarily, both to community context and to changing social and political dynamics across the country. Artists in the Midwest were collaborating with residents to address stormwater management in low-income neighborhoods, while longtime affordable-housing developers in Harlem were integrating children’s museums into their financial model for supportive housing. An esteemed dance organization was working with local transportation officials to redesign a suburban commuter corridor for pedestrian residents, while community organizers in rural California were turning to local artists to help build community cohesion and public space in an unincorporated migrant farming community. The sheer diversity of practices that fell under the ‘creative placemaking’ umbrella was both inspiring and dizzying, and the tent was only going to get bigger.

It was against this backdrop that, in 2015, we launched ArtPlace’s *Translating Outcomes* initiative – a five-year, multi-disciplinary research strategy designed to establish connections between arts and cultural activities and the countless community development goals that were surfacing in the ArtPlace grant portfolio and across the field. At its simplest, *Translating Outcomes* can be understood as a series of 10 ‘deep dives’ intended to expand our understanding of creative placemaking impacts by adopting and adapting existing research and evaluation methods from other sectors. Taken as a whole, however, the initiative served as an incremental, segmented approach to building creative placemaking knowledge for and with a diverse range of community development practitioners – one that has highlighted the critical importance of interdisciplinarity, and laid the groundwork for the creative placemaking field to embrace a multidimensional array of success measures that are as nuanced and complex as the practice itself. This chapter lays out the methods and values driving ArtPlace’s *Translating Outcomes* work, followed by emerging reflections on what this explicitly interdisciplinary approach has revealed about creative placemaking research and evaluation.

**Value-driven methods**

**Segmentation, not siloes**

Recognizing that the comprehensive community development field is made up of many professional disciplines, ArtPlace developed a diagram (Figure 36.1) to illustrate 10 segments of the field that are commonly understood as discrete sectors. These sectors are often separated out *vis à vis* distinct municipal agencies, university departments, or funding streams. They are Agriculture and Food, Economic Development, Environment and Energy, Health, Housing, Immigration, Public Safety, Transportation, Workforce Development, and Youth and Education. While ArtPlace used this matrix in multiple ways over the course of its grant-making and other work, the *Translating Outcomes* effort took this matrix as its road map and set out to analyze, make legible, and give language to how arts and cultural practitioners have long been partners in helping to achieve each of these sectors’ goals.

Each sector has its own terminology, conceptual frameworks, success measures, and disciplinary cultures to navigate, and as we dove into the first three sectors in 2015 – housing, community safety, and health – the challenge of rigorous segmentation became increasingly clear.
Defining clear boundaries for any given sector was exceedingly difficult given the increasing interconnectedness of housing, health, environment, and more, yet it was crucial to breaking down the complexity of the systems in which creative placemaking operates.

One critique of the initiative is that this segmentation was ‘re-siloing’ the work in a way that undermines the lived experience and reality of both communities and community development work that attempts to be comprehensive. The segmentation, however, simply served as a methodological tool that allowed us – in the tradition of interdisciplinary research – to build understanding, capacity, and nuance in each of the sectors.

Vocabulary differences are at the heart of translation activities, but research conventions and cultures must also be learned and navigated. Valid interdisciplinary research is necessarily based on a deep understanding of how concepts, methods, and results fit in the body of discourses and practice in which they were developed. Only then can judgments be made about how ideas can legitimately be applied in a new area.

(Palmer, 2010)

Taking a page from strategic communications research as well, the segmentation also allowed us to treat each sector as a distinct audience or stakeholder – building discipline- or industry-specific frameworks and resources in language that resonated for each. And ultimately, when viewed as a series, the material can be applied or combined in any number of ways that make sense for a given project, organization, or community context.

**Practitioner-led**

Our methods in each sector included three distinct phases of work, throughout which we maintained a commitment to highlighting and centering the voices of artists and practitioners – particularly those of color – who have long been pioneers in the field. Our research scope intentionally included people and places who had long been doing arts-integrated community development work, regardless of whether they referred to it as ‘creative placemaking’ and regardless of whether they had received ArtPlace, National Endowment for the Arts, or other creative placemaking-specific funding.
A traditional philanthropic approach might have been to hire expert researchers to conduct impact evaluations of grant projects within the ArtPlace portfolio, or to revise the set of Vibrancy Indicators as a resource for grantees to use in their own assessments. But how could researchers (or funders) possibly know more about the emerging practice and outcomes of creative placemaking than those who were leading the work in communities? It seemed critical, at this point in the evolution of the field, to begin with practitioners’ wisdom and engage them directly in shaping any future frameworks or resources.

In all three phases of work, we also explicitly engaged with the histories of systemic racism, exclusion, and injustice that have shaped each sector – from redlining and displacement in the housing sector, for example, to longstanding discrimination against black farmers in the agriculture and food sector; from the measurable public health impacts of racism, to a growing consensus among environmental advocates that the effects of climate change impact low-income communities of color first and worst. It is often precisely these inequities that community development practitioners are seeking new solutions to, and that artists, designers, and culture-bearers are drawn to solving in their own communities. As ArtPlace sought ‘to position arts and culture as a core sector of community planning and development,’ it was also critical to acknowledge both the positive and negative legacies within community development practice in order to situate creative placemaking in a values-driven, equitable way (a phrase taken directly from ArtPlace America’s organizational mission statement).

Iterative research design

The first phase of work in each sector centered around a field scan – a written report that described and assessed the arts and cultural activity that was already happening in the field. Conducted in partnership with individual researchers or teams uniquely positioned to investigate the intersection of arts and culture and a specific sector, each field scan represented an exploratory first step intended to surface: key goals or needs in that community development sector that arts and culture might address; a typology or framework for understanding the ways that arts and culture might partner with that community development sector; and barriers to integrating arts and culture within that community development sector. Research methods for each field scan included interviews with artists, practitioners, community members, researchers, and thought leaders – some deeply immersed in the intersection, others considering it for the first time; reviews of reports, media, peer-reviewed literature, and other publications on trends and policies in a given sector; a survey and meta-analysis of arts-integrated community development projects; development of a typology about ‘what the arts can do’ in language resonant to that sector; and creation of qualitative case studies highlighting each approach within the typology.

Prior to being published, each field scan served as a framing document for the second phase of work in each sector: an exploratory working group charged with taking the analysis and findings a step further. Each working group reinforced our commitment to highlighting the perspectives of artists, practitioners, community members, and thought leaders who are closest to the work, positioning them as the experts on whom we were relying to review and critique our findings.

Working groups participants were highly curated to achieve an explicitly interdisciplinary and diverse constellation of voices. Community-based artists shared ideas and inspiration alongside municipal policymakers, community development intermediaries, researchers and evaluators, funders, and organizers. We intentionally balanced local and national perspectives, ‘members of the choir’ with people who were ‘agnostic’ or new to the idea of creative placemaking, and those who hold power and privilege with those who seek to shift power. Everyone was asked...
to serve as peer reviewers for the field scan research, ambassadors for this cross-sector way of working, and advisors on next steps in that sector. While translation and identification of common outcomes were a primary goal of this initiative, an equally important objective was to build communities of practice that could learn from each other, and continue to advance approaches to creative placemaking practice and assessment long after ArtPlace’s sunset in 2020. We also engaged each working group in explicit discussion about barriers to collaboration with the arts and culture sector, many of which centered around questions of measurement and evaluation: are there specific policy restrictions or industry metrics that simply cannot accommodate arts and cultural work? What does it take to convince a housing developer, for example, that a slight increase to her financial bottom line will produce an exponential return on investment, albeit one that we don’t yet know how to measure?

**Co-creation**

The third phase of work in each sector, determined primarily by each working group, was the creation of a tailored program, resource, or initiative that would help overcome those barriers and catalyze more collaboration in that sector. The field scans were shared publicly but were never intended as the primary deliverable (ArtPlace America). Instead, ArtPlace funded delegations of artists to attend non-arts conferences, convened cohorts of community-based practitioners for peer learning visits across the country, piloted the first-ever artists-in-residence in state government, developed continuing education courses for affordable housing developers, and more. Seldom were these ‘phase three’ efforts focused explicitly on evaluation practice; most working groups, regardless of sector, recommended that more intentional learning, collaboration, and experimentation happen as a necessary precursor to defining common measures of success than could be taken up by researchers and evaluators. Practitioners were both the authors and the audience for this collaborative knowledge-building effort – and by focusing on discrete sectors, we were able to create learning resources that were more likely to be both useful and used.

It is important to note that strategic non-arts partners were vital to the success of the *Translating Outcomes* work. ArtPlace built relationships with peer organizations in each sector – some of whom co-convened the working groups and others who co-created learning resources – for a number of reasons that over time became core to ArtPlace’s overarching theory of change: to build credibility within the sectors we were seeking to influence, to develop distributed leadership within the evolving field of creative placemaking, and to ensure sustainability after ArtPlace’s sunset by embedding the work within other institutions. At the time of this writing, work in all 10 sectors is underway. In 8 of the 10 sectors, we have published clear frameworks for practitioners and engaged strategic partners who will carry the knowledge forward within the specific sphere of community development that they serve. Partners to date include NeighborWorks America and Enterprise Community Partners (affordable housing); Local Initiatives Support Corporation (community safety); Transportation for America (transportation); US Water Alliance and Grist (environment); Welcoming America (immigration); Rural Coalition, Farm Credit Council, and DAISA Enterprises (agriculture and food systems); the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine (public health); Jobs for the Future and NORC at the University of Chicago (workforce development); Creative Generation (youth development); and Common Future (economic development).

**What interdisciplinarity has revealed: we keep measuring the wrong things**

The *Translating Outcomes* series will culminate in a meta-analysis that brings the sector-specific learnings into a comprehensive whole; however, several insights have already emerged that have
implications for the next chapter of creative placemaking research and evaluation. Most significantly, it has become clear that we keep measuring the wrong things. After being immersed in the cross-sector work for six years, I offer the following reflections and observations in support of this idea.

The arts can help define more authentic, human-centered outcomes

Established metrics for success in other sectors do not capture the most meaningful impacts of creative placemaking work, or even of community development work. We interrogated each sector to better understand its existing systems of measurement and evaluation, and to draw connections between arts and cultural strategies and those established measures or outcomes. What we encountered, however, was far more complicated. Time and time again we heard in interviews and in working groups that the majority of people doing community change work—even those in fields strongly grounded in evidence-based practice, such as public health and community safety—felt that the measures they relied on were insufficient. Many were not meeting their own goals, or if they were, some deeper, more authentic measure of success was still lacking. In our affordable housing working group, for example, participants acknowledged the housing sector’s reliance on quantitative metrics and tendency to measure quantity of housing units, but over two days the group came to a consensus that creative placemaking approaches had the potential to shift the sector’s focus to quality of housing—a metric that more holistically incorporated dimensions of resident attachment, tenant turnover, and the long-term wellbeing of a housing community. Nearly everyone we have engaged in this research has requested help from the arts and culture sector: how can we more authentically connect with the people we are trying to serve, and how can we incorporate the social and emotional dimensions of the human condition into our measures of success? Concepts like trust, wellbeing, belonging, and collective efficacy are increasingly valued by those working in communities and are understood intuitively to be the domain of artists and culture-bearers. New (largely social science–based) methods for measuring such concepts will be central to understanding the true impacts of creative placemaking.

Practitioners create new, contextual measures all the time; funders and policymakers need to listen

There is a decades-long history of promoting ‘evidence-based practice’ in community development, in philanthropy, and in many of the sectors we explored through the Translating Outcomes initiative, where ‘rigorous tests to assess the efficacy of a given intervention’ are required before an investment can be made or an approach is deemed worthy of replication (Brooks, 2016). But as we convened more and more working groups, a pattern became clear: there is a profound disconnect between the work happening on the ground, and the evidence-based decision-making structures that have been embraced by policy and funding institutions for accountability and assessment. Our working groups became opportunities not just to translate across sectors, but within each one.

In our workforce development working group, participants experienced a site visit to the Sweetwater Foundation on Chicago’s south side and heard presentations from leadership at Coalfield Development Corporation (based in Wayne, West Virginia), Grace in Action Collectives (based in Detroit, Michigan), and Rolling Rez Arts (based on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota), among others. These arts-integrated, place-based efforts to advance quality employment opportunities were human-centered, sustainable, and successful in
ways that nearly everyone in the room celebrated, yet the more traditional workforce stakeholders were quick to point out that their institutions could never support — or even see — this work outside the context of our convening. Either it wasn’t happening at a large-enough scale, or they were using measures that didn’t align with commonly accepted standards in workforce development. These local organizations were, however, inventing new approaches and developing new indicators that resonated deeply with where the policymakers and funders knew their own field needed to go. At one point, a participant even said, ‘We’ve got experts in the room and no one thinks that workforce development is working’ (quote taken from January 31, 2020, meeting notes (unpublished)). DAISA Enterprises, one of ArtPlace’s partners in the agriculture and food systems sector, framed this same disconnect as a unique opportunity for systems change, acknowledging that

many people within philanthropic and community development fields recognize the constraints of siloed and prescriptive funding strategies, as well as the structures that keep those strategies in place. A key desired outcome of this (research) process is to amplify the realities and needs of practitioners as lessons which inform future availability of resources. Acknowledgment of the authentic, integrated, and multi-faceted ways in which community practitioners work and need to have agency and flexible support is an important step towards holistic systems change.

(Drew et al., 2019)

The Translating Outcomes process, in hindsight, created liminal spaces not only for artists and community development practitioners to interact and learn across disciplines, but for grassroots practitioners and community members to engage on equal footing alongside policymakers, funders, and others in positions of power or privilege. The more opportunities there are for funders and national entities to listen to and learn from practitioners at the leading edge of creative placemaking work — moving from evidence-based practice to ‘practice-based evidence,’ as it were — the sooner we will align on definitions of success that truly meet community needs.

**Summative evaluation is (still) premature**

When we launched Translating Outcomes in 2015, the kind of work that ArtPlace was supporting — and the majority of creative placemaking initiatives overall — simply did not lend itself to summative evaluation. Community change is slow; it can take years if not decades to achieve the kinds of outcomes that many creative placemaking efforts are aiming for (and the arbitrary period of time defined by grant funding doesn’t magically accelerate those outcomes; starting in 2016, applicants to ArtPlace’s National Creative Placemaking Fund were able to identify a grant period of up to four years that best met the needs of their community, organization, or project). Social impact measurement, too, is notoriously challenging, no matter whether you are working on childhood education, poverty, housing security, civic engagement, or racial justice:

As you widen your scope to deal with a major social problem, the harder it becomes to measure your impact because it is tougher to isolate cause and effect. It’s no longer a simple linear relationship, but a complex set of relationships.

(Hanna, 2010)

Given the sheer number of geographic and political contexts, demographics, artistic disciplines, community goals, and overall approaches to creative placemaking noted at the beginning of this
essay, we acknowledged the limited utility of summative evaluation and instead invested in a broader cross-sector learning agenda for the field.

Now, six years later, one might argue that the creative placemaking field can begin to pursue summative evaluation. Through not only the Translating Outcomes initiative but ongoing research efforts at the National Endowment through the Arts and elsewhere, we have identified a much broader array of measures than previously put forward, and are moving closer to consensus on the kinds of outcomes noted above – equity, belonging, wellbeing, and the like. And indeed, organizations who have been working this way for decades, such as Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky or Community Musicworks in Providence Rhode Island, have boldly undertaken the complex work of impact evaluation for some initiatives (see, All Access AKY, Kline and Wolf and Community Musicworks for example). But what I have learned from the artists and community leaders we engaged in our field scan research, working groups, and resource creation is that creative placemaking work often doesn’t ‘end,’ and qualitative, story-based, and participatory methods of assessment remain a better fit for both understanding and communicating the impact of their efforts.

Conclusion

Frans Johansson’s 2007 book, The Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation, has been an important reference for this notion of intersections, and the powerful opportunity that lies in an unlikely convergence or association across disciplines: ‘When you step into an intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures, you can combine existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary ideas. … Once there, [you] have the opportunity to innovate as never before, creating the Medici Effect. ’There is so much more work to do within each of the intersections we have initiated in the Translating Outcomes research. As the creative placemaking field continues to evolve and grow, critical and longitudinal evaluation of projects – done in collaboration with community members and residents – will be crucial to understanding the full range of outcomes, as well as the risks and limitations, of arts-based strategies. But creating and holding interstitial space for dialogue and connection has been a vital research method in and of itself, core to the work of bridging multiple disciplinary knowledge bases and honoring the complexity that creative placemaking represents. The artists and practitioners who are leading this work in communities are working at the edges, in non-traditional spaces, and in ways that don’t always align with funders’ program boundaries or the metrics that have been established in any given field.

A central characteristic of creative placemaking practice is that it is deeply collaborative. And, as anyone who has ever been in a partnership knows, whether it’s professional, organizational, civic, or as personal as a marriage, collaboration can be messy. Establishing and aligning values, learning and accepting each other’s strengths and weaknesses, sharing responsibilities and accountability, and communicating constantly about all of the above are baseline requirements for any successful partnership. When it comes to research and evaluation of creative placemaking work, the same and more holds true. Within the Translating Outcomes work, there has been a multidirectional learning curve for everyone involved – regardless of which sector we were investigating, and regardless of whether we were working with an individual researcher or a larger team with varied skill sets. At its simplest, creative placemaking research requires a strategic and deliberate merging of existing evidence bases and methods, bringing anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, planners, participatory action researchers, artists, and more into dialogue with public health scholars, criminologists, economists, infrastructure engineers, and other such specialists, as well as with community members directly affected by the work. More often than
not, however, it also requires a unique combination of rigor and flexibility – with methods that honor both the linear and the nonlinear, the established and the experimental, the known and the unknown, the logic model and the lived experience. Future creative placemaking research and evaluation efforts will require unexpected configurations of expertise; we must proactively structure and support such collaborations with the time and resources it takes to learn from each other and to align different ways of knowing.

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This chapter is an adaptation of the essay ‘Multiple ways of knowing: translating outcomes between the arts and community development,’ which originally appeared in Volume 14, Issue 2 of the San Francisco Federal Reserve’s Community Development Innovation Review (November 2019) (Hand, 2019).

References


Further reading in this volume

Preface: Placemaking in the age of COVID-19 and protest
Jason Schupbach
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Jen Hughes
Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita
Chapter 6: Listen, connect, act
Kim Cook
Chapter 10: From moon village to mural village: the consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul
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Theodore S. Jojola and Michaela P. Shirley
Chapter 32: The Hollywood Forest Story: Placemaking for the Symbiocene
Cathy Fitzgerald
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