40
TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE

A developmental approach to documentation and research

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Introduction

The ways in which arts and culture can engage, energize, and motivate residents to work toward ambitious goals to improve their communities are as diverse and colorful as the communities themselves. It recently took the form of a neighborhood-wide treasure hunt for cultural touchstones through Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, following the Japanese tradition of Takachizu – touchstones which will prove valuable in the community’s battle for control of key development sites. It was found in a homegrown musical theater production in a tiny Minnesota town, bringing together, through surprisingly common myths and traditions, the newcomers from Micronesia and the long-term residents of Scandinavian descent. And, it can be seen in the faces of Zuni children and youth as they explore, and make their own, a new park and community center designed in every respect to embody their tribal history, culture, and artistic heritage. Arts and cultural strategies are proving to be effective and innovative components of the practice of community development. Artists and culture-bearers are now working with community-based organizations in ways that enhance economic, physical, and social outcomes for places and deepen and reinvigorate the voice and agency of residents. In the course of integrating arts and culture into their operations, these community development organizations have, themselves, been fundamentally changed. This activity, and the changes in how community developers and artists work together, represent the latest wave of creative placemaking in the US, one grounded in the principles and practices of equitable development. Previous versions of creative placemaking had emphasized generating pedestrian-friendly environments and ‘vibrancy’ in underutilized or underappreciated spaces and had sometimes become associated with attracting newcomers rather than enhancing the lives of current residents. As the more equity-centered practices diversify and proliferate, it will be important to document them thoroughly and to understand them within a framework that outlines the process by which arts and culture strategies can make an impact and a difference.

This chapter describes a five-year effort, now in its final stage, to provide this kind of documentation and analysis for one of the most significant philanthropic investments intended to
transform community development through arts and culture. While the chapter will provide the context, structure, and evidence of some outcomes of the initiative, the emphasis will be on the goals, terms, parameters, and experience of conducting this research. The initiative was intended to generate learnings that can be more generally applied beyond its grant-supported activities, and the experiences of the grantees and their partners provide guidance for system-level innovation in several fields. The author has been the director of this research and documentation effort as part of a team at PolicyLink, working closely with the staff of the funding consortium ArtPlace America and the leaders of the six grantee organizations. PolicyLink is a national non-profit research, advocacy, and policy change organization and eight staff members participated in the project, as did six local correspondents, one in each of the Community Development Investments (CDI) communities. PolicyLink was chosen in part because of experience in diverse fields including community development, health equity, arts and culture strategies, participatory research methods, and evaluation of philanthropic initiatives. Data collection included site visits, convenings of the grantee organization teams for reflection and dialogue, review of documents, and hundreds of interviews and video recordings of artists, residents, and other stakeholders as well as the lead agency staff.

This approach to researching innovative practices instigated through a one-time grant program implicitly draws from the framework of Developmental Evaluation (DE), which has been ‘designed to meet the need for a more expanded view of evidence’ than that provided by conventional program evaluations. DE is best suited to inquiry about situations that are continuously evolving. The approach was first conveyed by Michael Quinn Patton (2010) and is enjoying a new wave of attention in recent years. As the research and strategy firm FSG puts it, ‘DE can provide stakeholders with a deep understanding of context and real-time insights about how a new initiative, program, or innovation should be adapted in response to changing circumstances and what is being learned along the way’ (Parkhurst et al., 2016). PolicyLink did not literally conduct an evaluation, and eschewed the term, for there was neither assessment of a program or its grantees nor expectation that the program would be repeated. Rather, these complex, dynamic experiences offered important lessons for field-building, and the spirit and intention of DE was consistent with our purpose and analytical style in getting at those lessons.

Six well-established organizations, based in diverse urban, rural, and tribal communities, moved deeply into arts and culture practices as part of the CDI Initiative of ArtPlace America. Their plans, struggles, and pathways from ideas to outcomes in housing, local economic development, health, youth development, and parks and recreation were documented and analyzed from their selection in 2015 through early 2020, when they were moving into post-grant sustainability mode. The participating organizations and their partners have taken on and struggled with some of the most pressing and complex issues of our time, including gentrification and displacement, racial health inequities, the isolation of immigrant newcomers, and the historical trauma resulting from racism and oppression (see Figure 40.1). They have combined their expertise and standing with the tools and ways of thinking, imagining, and working of artists. As a result, they have helped residents to own and express the identity of their communities, built cultural resilience, and changed the terms of engagement and the methods of neighborhood planning and placemaking.

The purpose and approach of the CDI initiative

CDI represents a customized approach to linking arts, culture, and community development. Building upon, but significantly altering and expanding what is sometimes known as creative placemaking, ArtPlace, a consortium of foundations and financial institutions, chose for these
Participating organizations and summary of their activities

Cook Inlet Housing Authority, Anchorage, Alaska Guided by Native Alaskan village values, this regional tribally designated housing authority creates housing opportunities to empower people and build community.

Focus: Solving problems in new ways and elevating resident voices.

Key projects: ‘Living Big, Living Small,’ exploring small space living with set designer Sheila Wynn; "MIMESPENARD," mitigating business disruption during a road construction project with performance artists Enzina Marrari and Becky Kendall; the Church of Love, transforming a former church slated for demolition into a community center/art space/performance venue; and embedding story gathering and listening as an organizational practice with Ping Chong + Company.

Fairmount Park Conservancy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Urban parks conservancy that leads and supports efforts to improve Fairmount Park’s 2,000 acres and 200 other neighborhood parks citywide.

Focus: Working with artists to make city parks relevant for a more diverse population of Philadelphians, and to celebrate the history, culture, and identity of its neighborhoods.

Key projects: A community catalyst residency with the Amber Art & Design collective at the Hatfield House in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, including cultural asset mapping, social engagement, and community building; leading a master plan process for the Mander Recreation Center; co-hosting the West Park Arts Fest in East Parkside; and expanding the scope and reach of The Oval, a seasonal pop-up park in downtown Philadelphia.

Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, Jackson, Mississippi Manages a 900,000-square-foot medical and retail facility in central Mississippi with a mission to holistically eliminate health-care disparities through the promotion of creativity and innovation.

Focus: Enhancing their role as a neighborhood anchor by fusing arts and culture with health and economic development goals.

Key projects: Intergenerational programming and festivals linking artistic production and economic development with the delivery of health services; ‘Reimagining the Jackson Medical Mall’ with Carlton Turner, a leading innovator in Mississippi African American cultural empowerment, to introduce history and storytelling into the design of the space; a new community garden and kitchen; and internal and external creative engagement practices with Significant Developments, LLC.

Little Tokyo Service Center, Los Angeles, California Provides family services, affordable housing and tenant services, and community organizing and planning for the nation’s largest Japantown, in downtown Los Angeles.

Focus: Facing increasing pressures of displacement, homelessness, and high costs of living, they launched the +LAB (‘Plus Lab’) Arts Integration project to test new ways to promote the equitable development of ethnic communities.

Key projects: ‘Takachiizu’ with Rosten Woo and Sustainable Little Tokyo, inviting residents to share treasures from the neighborhood; #MyF5N, which seeks to assert ‘moral site control’ over the future of the contested First Street North site; 341 FSN, an experimental storefront space designed to explore community control and self-determination; and the +LAB artist residency program.

Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, Southwest Region of Minnesota Provides housing development, preservation, rehabilitation, and supportive housing and community development services for a rural 30-county region.

Focus: Partnership Art, which uses arts and cultural strategies to incorporate new voices, including Minnesota’s growing immigrant communities, into local planning processes.

Key projects: Milan Listening House, exploring immigration stories and the concept of home to inform the revitalization of public spaces; Healthy Housing Initiative, an outreach and education toolkit reaching new Latino communities; ‘Creative Community Design Build,’ where artists engage communities to reimagine underutilized downtown buildings; and hiring Ashley Hanson as an internal artist-in-residence to help sustain their arts and cultural approaches.

Zuni Youth Enrichment Project, Zuni, New Mexico This effort is devoted to enhancing the health and resiliency of youth on the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico.

Focus: Integrating Zuni arts and culture into planning, design, and construction of a new youth center and park.

Key project: Supporting an ongoing artists’ committee and other local artists to co-design and contribute to long-term stewardship, activation, and programming of H’n A:wan (‘of the people’) Community Park.

Figure 40.1 Participating organizations and summary of their activities (Rubin, 2020).
Transforming community development

investments well-established community development organizations which had little or no previous arts and culture experience. The common central priority was to employ arts and culture strategies to advance and strengthen – not to change – the organizations’ missions. The criteria and priorities included: selecting organizations rooted in serving low-income communities, with large and medium-sized cities, small towns, and tribal lands among the six, each in a different part of the US; employing an inclusive and broad definition of community development, not only nonprofit housing and neighborhood development organizations, but also community-based health services organizations, and those centrally concerned with youth development and the stewardship of urban parks; encouraging a very broad array of possible arts and cultural contributions, resulting in not only the most commonly expected mode of creative placemaking – public art – but theater, sculpture, printmaking, photography, music, experimental film, storytelling, quilting, beading, interior design, and many other disciplines and crafts, produced and experienced by a very wide range of people. Outcomes as unusual as scores of mimes in the streets and playing cards with pictures and biographies of neighborhood notables were produced, as were some sizable and significant capital projects, from parks to community art centers; seeing the possibilities in certain artists as facilitators, guides, and advisors to the community development organizations who will bring different sensibilities and approaches compared to typical consultants to the nonprofit sector; and cultivating an environment of learning and experimentation, without projects specified in proposals or in the first year of activity, providing plenty of room up front to explore possibilities, map the community’s cultural assets, fail at early ideas, adapt, and build the trust and perspective necessary for long-term success. Throughout the initiative, the groups were provided customized technical assistance and peer sharing opportunities, and access to sources of additional capital should they need it.

Defining features of the research and documentation

The CDI research and documentation effort grew up alongside the program itself, and the analytical approach reflects a balance between conveying the unique features of six distinct, experiences and producing lessons of broader relevance to their various fields of practice. Description alone, as useful as it may be, would not be enough; the goal has been to dig deeper into what can be called the ‘but for’ questions: What difference has the integration of arts and culture strategies made for the practice of community development? What has changed from the agencies’ previous way of doing things, and what has been the impact of that shift? With a small sample of six sites and a largely qualitative approach to tracking the planning and implementation that was unfolding throughout the full study period, this did not yield standardized comparative measurements of the relative influence of specific factors. But it has yielded complex accounts of the context, processes, partnerships, strategies, and activities at each site as well as parallel information points about each of them that have fed into addressing three cross-cutting areas of interest and conceptual themes. Those themes, which will be discussed later, became the basis for sets of questions developed through exchanges with the grantees to generate a comparable but distinct ‘learning agenda’ for each site. The common questions and the site-specific agenda topics were the foundation for the queries used in individual interviews of people in many roles, not only in the CDI grantee agencies but in their numerous partner groups, the artists who worked with them, and the residents and other stakeholders. The common questions were also used to solicit self-generated responses by site leaders via an online interactive audio, video, and text system, VoiceThread, structured in-person dialogues among participants from the six agencies, multi-faceted site visits, and analysis of many types of written materials and budgetary records by and about the sites. Artistic activities and capital projects were documented with still photography.
and video as well as text, and the myriad creative activities, some of which produced research findings in their own right, became an important part of the documentary record.

**Guiding principles for data collection and analysis**

This highly interactive and flexible approach to researching an evolving initiative was guided by several priorities which guided who was interviewed or observed in action, when, and for what purposes.

*Gather the perspectives of participants at several points in time*

Since the program was new, and the grantees began their work period without project plans or specific commitments, virtually every interesting question involved learning about how things were evolving given this open-ended start. That included the work plans and how they were carried out, the relationships with partners, the personal understanding of the role and impact of arts and culture of the organizational leaders, the organizational practices and policies, and much more. It was vital to interview, observe, and otherwise learn from the key players at several points over four years to see how their thinking, and the activities themselves, evolved. It was similarly necessary and rewarding to share drafts of emerging themes and lessons and receive their input on these at every stage.

*Encourage and document interaction among site leaders*

CDI created a lively community of practice of roughly 20 individuals, including several people from each site, who met roughly monthly in video conference calls and six times in person over four years. They were very insightful about commonalities and differences across their organizations and learned a lot from each other. The monthly online interactions generated by ArtPlace created a regular flow of shared information, and the annual ArtPlace conferences and two additional in-person gatherings organized by PolicyLink produced facilitated dialogues among site team leaders that were recorded and edited for publication and mined extensively for quotes and insights.

*Ask about the personal meaning of the work, not only facts, plans, and policies*

People who undertake innovative, if not risky, arts and culture activities are motivated by what they hope to achieve, and they draw meaning from the endeavor in personal as well as professional ways. By their nature, creative ventures cannot be reduced to just formal plans, so we added a ‘creative documentation’ component in the form of extensive video interviewing by photographer and professor of art Chris Johnson. He visited each site twice, almost two years apart, and asked a cross section of 10 participants in each community about the personal meaning and motivation they drew from this work and how it may have changed over time. The video recordings have been edited into a finished production for public use.

*Acquire multiple perspectives on the same issue and activity*

The staff members of the CDI organizations built new partnerships with artists and/or with community-based groups and fashioned new relationships with residents of their community. It was essential, when documenting these engagements, to learn how this experience looked and
felt from the partners’ point of view as well as the grantees. These engagements featured false starts and rebooting and faced the need to reconcile different views of how to proceed. The challenging interactions were at least as important to learn from as the ones that went smoothly.

**Encourage and record eclectic forms of expression and reflection**

Documentation of this kind of initiative calls not only for well-ordered evidence in the conventional social science sense but also for stories, poetry, personal testimonies, photography and videos, including recordings of performances, that are evocative of the spirit of the work and which provide living examples of what can be accomplished. The collective efforts of artists, agency staff members, and community folks in all six places resulted in a plethora of projects and reflections about them which have been captured for future use.

**Recognize that social changes will precede, and be the preconditions for, most long-term community outcomes, and that those long-term outcomes will mostly not take place before the study period ends**

The activities undertaken through the CDI initiative were creating the conditions for concrete changes to the quality of life: better population health, positive youth development, improved housing, more welcoming public spaces, and so forth. The groups could specify their intended results for the populations they served. However, those ultimate outcomes take years after the initiation of a project to be realized, and with a few exceptions, during the grant period the main impacts were to create changes in the way that people interacted. These preconditions included such phenomena as organizing to build voice, agency, power and collective efficacy, strengthening the social fabric, heightening the sense of community identity, and building bridges across cultures. The research was therefore geared primarily toward documenting and analyzing the role of arts and culture strategies in bringing about these social changes.

**Transforming community development through arts and culture: themes, questions, and findings**

During the first year of the program, PolicyLink coordinated a series of dialogues among the project coordinators from each CDI site team and the ArtPlace staff to identify common concepts and a framework for the research. The framework that emerged after several rounds of refinement was relevant to all six sites and promised to provide useful comparisons and lessons. It eventually encompassed three categories – Organizational Evolution, Collaborative Practice, and Community Development Outcomes – under which were nested a total of 9 major questions and 25 sub-questions (ArtPlace America, n.d). Organizational Evolution was significant because the chief executives and project directors realized that it would be essential to take advantage of this opportunity to make larger changes in the culture, direction, and internal structure of their agencies in order to better live up to their values and achieve their mission. Collaborative Practice became the category for documenting and comparing the multitude of ways in which community developers and artists or arts organizations became mutually acquainted and more sophisticated about codesigning complex projects. Community Development Outcomes began as an effort to document the tangible changes expected in the health and prosperity of people and their communities, but, as described above in the section on principles of the research, became more focused on the cultural and social changes and new strategies for organizing that were the necessary precursors to better outcomes. For example, a major question from the
research framework was: how can community development organizations establish productive relationships with artists and arts organizations, with the follow up questions of: how does a community development organization learn about and build connections within the arts community; what are the approaches to selecting and incorporating artists and arts and cultural organizations as strategic partners in community development work; and to what extent does a community development organization's support of artists or arts and cultural organizations outside of the collaboration (i.e., capacity building, training) strengthen the collaboration?

The most basic task in service of this framework was to track and describe what happened – documentation of the baseline circumstances and then the ideas, plans, deliberative processes, decisions, and actions – as the site teams moved through cultural asset mapping into setting priorities, doing detailed project planning, and then creating numerous partnerships and activities. Beyond the description, however, it was important to discern from the participants why and how the arts and culture strategies may have made a difference to their organizations and communities. The common analytical questions for all the sites were followed by more detailed site-specific questions referred to as learning agendas.

Collaborative practice

The community development organizations needed to figure out how to recruit and partner with artists, and the artists similarly needed to determine how they could make a useful contribution in this different environment. The interviews with all parties in the first two years and reflective dialogues in the third year, firsthand observation of events, and compilation of the materials used to solicit and contract with artists provided a comprehensive picture of how these arrangements were made, complete with the missteps and revisions. When www.communitydevelopment.art, the PolicyLink–managed website on which the CDI research and documentation is being presented, debuted in May 2019, the first brief on the site was ‘Working with Artists to Deepen Impact’ (Stephens, 2019), ‘exploring the theme of collaborative practice, or how these community-based organizations cultivated working relationships with artists, and how they have significantly changed the approaches through which community preservation and revitalization can take place.’ Specifically, the brief provides insights on: how the community development organizations matched community development priorities with the expertise and artistic practice of potential collaborators; identifying arts partners and building relationships through cultural asset mapping, calls for artists, collaboration with intermediaries, the compilation of artist rosters and directories, and the formation of arts advisory committees; lessons learned from the process of creating guidelines for this new work, structuring relationships, and establishing roles and responsibilities; overcoming challenges – specifically, how these experiences improved their community development work – and learning to be more transparent, nimble, and reflective; and continuing the work after the program ended (Stephens, 2019). Subsequent conference presentations and publications, including several chapters in the special issue of Community Development Innovation Review (Crane et al., 2019), have provided additional stories and reflections from the participants about these techniques, lessons, and challenges.

Organizational evolution

Soon after the initiative was underway it was evident that the ways in which the CDI organizations were changing would be very interesting and important, and that these changes would be ready for documentation and analysis over time well before the community outcomes would be. The CEOs, project managers, and other staff members of the grantee organizations were out-
Incorporating arts and cultural strategies into core work resulted in changes in the overall culture, leadership, and future direction of the organization.

These included:

- Finding new ways to express their core values, leading to greater organizational cohesion and more effective communications
- Identifying different definitions of success based on those values
- Building greater capacity and openness to risk and experimentation
- Crafting more effective interactions with community members and partners

Incorporating arts and cultural strategies deeply in the organization meant actively aligning internal processes and structures.

This included factors such as:

- Assigning and sharing responsibilities throughout the staff for implementing arts and culture
- Diversifying the race and ethnicity of staff and leadership
- Integrating arts into strategic planning processes
- Bringing in artists as advisers and colleagues

Each site has roughly comparable stories of foundations for change being laid through arts-focused ventures. In Little Tokyo, the projects and activities which promoted the neighborhood’s cultural identity reinforced the community’s campaign to control future development, an effort which will take years. In Southwest Minnesota, social ties among populations from vastly different cultural backgrounds were established through community theater and other endeavors.
but would need continual renewal if those ties are to be strengthened and sustained. The trends that could be discerned from the scores of activities and strategies led us to aggregate them into two categories, each of which is the subject of a brief and other articles and presentations. One category includes the ways in which arts and culture strategies led to new forms of community engagement and organizing, for which the Little Tokyo example above is a prime example. This embodied not simply new material to add to the same type of organizing campaign, but also a new way of perceiving the issues, motivating people, and building grassroots voice, agency, and power. The other category includes the strengthening of the community’s social fabric, of which the Zuni and Southwest Minnesota examples are emblematic. That stronger social fabric can provide support for both personal growth and collective efficacy.

**Audience mapping and its implications for research and writing**

The choices of intended readers and listeners for this kind of analysis affect how it is carried out and presented. Researchers were not the principal audience, and few articles or reports were produced directly for fellow analysts, though the products will be hopefully nonetheless useful to them. ArtPlace placed a high priority on reaching people in positions to improve their own practice or alter the prevailing norms and practices of a professional field, and the PolicyLink team worked with ArtPlace in 2017 to identify nine distinct audience segments in order to prepare presentations of findings and stories that would reach each of them effectively. These segments represent sectors in which the CDI grantees work, such as affordable housing, neighborhood planning, community health care, and parks, and media serving demographic groups such as indigenous people (since two of the six sites are Alaska Native or Native American tribal entities). Throughout 2020 there were articles for leaders in nonprofit management and social investment, and a publication or two for practitioners and teachers of the social practice of art. Audiences with intersectoral roles and interests were sought as especially valuable targets for presentations. For example, the findings were brought to a real estate development member organization that was training leaders on health equity, and a national coalition of community development intermediaries that brought together African American, Latino, and Asian American organizations. The most ambitious presentation was the November 2019 issue of *Community Development Innovation Review*, the journal of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (Crane et al., 2019). The special issue, *Transforming Community Development through Arts and Culture*, includes 27 pieces which not only present this research but provide perspectives on the future direction of the field from leaders in banking, social investment, and philanthropy as well as community development. The intent was for the material to inform and motivate investors as well as practitioners.

**Conclusion**

The developmental approach taken to documenting and analyzing the ArtPlace Community Development Investments generated a detailed, continually growing body of information about the initiative. The participants co-created the questions that guided the study and their frequent opportunities to revisit and reframe those questions in light of their evolving experience was at the core of the research. The research shows that from a baseline of high accomplishment in their respective fields but little or no familiarity with arts and cultural strategies, the organizations’ leaders became, after four years, sophisticated in how to design collaborative ventures with artists that served their communities well. The documentation drew upon not only conventional interviews and reviews of source materials but also explored and illustrated the great
breadth and depth of the creative activities undertaken in each place. The research was intended to provide useful feedback to the participants in real time and to generate lessons for practitioners and thought leaders in all the relevant fields. The diversity of audiences and modes of published, online, and in-person presentation of the research have helped to meet that latter goal. Presenting spoken word artists, mimes, and audience dancing at events sponsored by federal reserve banks may have been unconventional, but it proved to be informative, colorful, and engaging, and entirely in the spirit of the initiative and the research. The personal stories and systematic findings have added to the body of evidence about the value of arts and culture for community development, and the leaders in the field will hopefully bring forth many new accounts in the coming years.

References


Further reading in this volume

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

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

Chapter 6: Listen, connect, act
Kim Cook

Chapter 9: From the dust of bad stars: disaster, resilience, and placemaking in Little Tokyo
Jonathan Jae-an Crisman

Chapter 10: From moon village to mural village: the consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul
Jason F. Kovacs and Hayun Park

Chapter 11: Free State Boulevard and the story of the East 9th Street Placekeepers
Dave Lowenstein

Chapter 12: Public transformation: affect and mobility in rural America
Lyndsey Ogle

Chapter 13: Sensing our streets: involving children in making people-centred smart cities
Sean Peacock, Aare Puussaar and Clara Crivellaro

Chapter 14: Experts in their own tomorrows: placemaking for participatory climate futures
Paul Graham Raven

Chapter 16: More than a mural: participatory placemaking on Gija Country
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Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek
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Preface: The radical potential of placemaking
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Chapter 22: Embedded Artist Project: Epistemic Disobedience + Place
Frances Whitehead
Chapter 23: Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival
Gail Skelly and Tim Edensor
Chapter 24: Artists, creativity, and the heart of city planning
Tom Borrup
Chapter 25: ‘If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere…’: cultural placemaking at the heart of cities
Sherry Dobbin
Chapter 26: Sculpturing sound in space: on The Circle and the Square (2016) by Suzanne Lacy
Trude Schjelderup Iversen
Chapter 31: Seven generations: a role for artists in Zuni PlaceKnowing
Theodore S. Jojola and Michaela P. Shirley
Chapter 32: The Hollywood Forest Story: Placemaking for the Symbiocene
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