Patricia Moore Shaffer, Deputy Director of Research & Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, speaks with Maria Rosario Jackson about the Arts Endowment’s Our Town grant program. The Our Town program was launched in 2011.

Maria Rosario Jackson

Why did the National Endowment for the Arts need to establish a theory of change for the Our Town program? Why was that necessary?

Patricia Moore Shaffer

We began work on the Our Town theory of change in 2016, but our discussions began when the Our Town grants program was launched. At that point in time, creative placemaking as a field was just emerging. At the agency, we were reading the White Paper on creative placemaking that Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa had written and talking about how to measure the impact of Our Town grants and document the work of our grantees. When I look back at what we knew then versus what we know now, having gone through the theory of change exercise, we have a far more nuanced understanding of the implementation strategies and outcomes associated with Our Town grants. It’s due in large part to the Our Town theory of change and logic modeling work that we have done, which took us through a deep exploration of our funded projects.

In reflection, developing a theory of change forced the agency to assess its assumptions about the program. We articulated program outcomes as part of that process, and we identified implementation strategies that support those outcomes. When we first started the Our Town theory of change work, we had seen it as a critical step toward planning an evaluation study to document outcomes associated with the program. Before I returned to the agency in 2015, I was sitting on the technical advisory group that was planning a summative evaluation of Our Town. I was one of the voices at the table that called for a logic model to be in place before we began any evaluation work. When we developed the statement of work for the evaluation contract, we developed it as a two-phase contract. The first phase was to generate the program theory of change and logic model, followed by the actual evaluation study in the second phase.
As sometimes happens during this process of developing a theory of change, the agency
developed a much richer understanding of the program and how it worked and, as a result,
made changes to the program goal and grant guidelines. What we learned through the process
resulted in a revised program model for Our Town. While this is a great outcome, it signaled to
me that this was not an appropriate time to conduct a summative evaluation. We stopped further
planning for a summative evaluation but did additional work to learn more about the program.

Maria Rosario Jackson
The institutional reason for this work, in part, has to do with the fact that this is public money
and there has to be accountability. Part of that accountability involves having an evaluation plan,
but you recognized that the work was not yet ready for the kind of summative evaluation that
would typically be expected. How was this work different from evaluations that the agency has
done for other programs?

Patricia Moore Shaffer
At the time of its launch over 10 years ago, Our Town was unique among the agency’s grant
programs for linking the arts with community development and revitalization outcomes. While
many Our Town grant projects shared a similar intent for attaining these outcomes, they vary
considerably in their design. These variations are due in part to differences in local context and
needs. While there are some common strategies used across projects and some common out-
comes being sought, there are so many unique factors around each project that, from a meas-
urement perspective, it’s very difficult to come up with an evaluation design that would yield
summative outcomes common across a large body of grants.

By contrast, I’ll offer you an example of an evaluation study that was comparatively simple to
design. The subject of study was the agency’s Poetry Out Loud national initiative. It has a strong
set of guidelines issued to all states. The project is implemented with a small amount of varia-
tion at the school level that is easily documented. We had a strong understanding of anticipated
outcomes because there had been some formative evaluation work already completed on this
program. Given the combination of a fairly standardized approach to program implementation
and previous evaluation work done, the evaluation plan was relatively simple to prepare.

Our Town projects, by contrast, are rich in their differences; we also did not have the benefit
of past evaluations to draw upon. We had done some very light portfolio analyses, but we had
never looked in depth at any of the narrative data that was part of our grantees’ final reports.
When we started the work, we knew we needed a working model that allowed us to take into
account the very wide variance that we’re seeing across projects. That’s what started us on this
journey and why it differed from other evaluation work that we’ve done.

Maria Rosario Jackson
What did the work of creating a theory of change entail?

Patricia Moore Shaffer
We decided to use an evidence-based approach to developing the theory of change and the
logic model, drawing on evidence associated with grantees’ applications, final reports, and other
documentation. We also completed a program scan that looked broadly at other creative place-
making and place-based programs to learn about their program models. We consulted with
grantees, as well as with subject matter experts through a technical working group.

In terms of grant documentation, we analyzed data and information from grant applications
and grantee final reports. We also reviewed existing case studies that are presented in the online
During this stage of analysis, we were asking questions about how projects were implemented by grantees. What inputs and strategies were associated with these projects? What outcomes were associated with those projects?

The grant applications and reports offered rich narrative data that helped to explain how Our Town projects worked. Looking across hundreds of grant projects, we were able to discern patterns in the essential ingredients of Our Town projects. The Our Town program leadership at the agency was actively engaged in this analytical process. Sitting in a meeting room for several multi-hour sessions, for example, we worked together identifying themes in a sample of grantee final reports, looking for the strategies and outcomes that were being reported by grantees. I can share that there were a lot of ‘Aha!’ moments that happened during that process as the patterns of findings began to emerge.

One of those ‘Aha!’ moments was the realization that several Our Town project reports were describing sustained policy or strategy change in local government. There was one project we discussed that involved an artist who, as part of the project, had been hired by municipal government to facilitate community engagement projects related to a planning exercise the city was doing. In the final report, the grantee reported that the city had actually created a permanent job for the artist. This outcome didn’t fit neatly in the categories of economic, physical, or social change that we had previously identified. We began to use the term ‘systems change’ at that point because this was a policy-level change, or even a procedural change, that seemed to reflect a new way of doing business that was sustained after the grant period was over.

In terms of consultation, we engaged with a range of subject matter experts and grantees. We asked very similar questions – How were the Our Town projects being implemented? What inputs, strategies, and outcomes were associated with the projects? – but we also inquired about how similar art- and place-based programs were implemented, trying to discern their program theory. We wanted to understand Our Town but also situate it in this larger context of creative placemaking and other place-based work. We interviewed key stakeholders and experts recommended to us by the technical working group; we also interviewed other individuals recommended by interviewees using an approach called snowball sampling.

A program scan was another key strategy for our work. We looked at other creative placemaking programs as well as other place-based initiatives and specifically any relevant published studies or program evaluations that had been done. We were especially interested in the underlying program theory as well as evidence of outcomes associated with those programs. We were very interested in understanding the types of measures and measurement approaches other programs used to assess outcomes.

As you might imagine, this process unearthed a lot of information, and we conducted qualitative analysis to identify common project inputs, strategies, tactics, outputs, and outcomes. Following this analysis, our contractor produced a preliminary findings document and facilitated a theory of change workshop with the Our Town program staff. This workshop yielded the first theory of change, which we took to the technical working group for constructive feedback. Working with the technical working group and the program staff, we iterated several versions of the theory of change before agreeing upon the version that became the foundation for the revised program guidelines. We also began building a logic model and measurement framework at that point.

The final theory of change highlights the local-level inputs necessary for Our Town projects, including local leadership, financial resources, community buy-in, and cross-sector partnerships. The creative placemaking strategies describe broadly the approaches cross-sector partners adopt to address local challenges: imagine/envision new possibilities for a community or place; connect communities, people, places, and economic opportunity via physical spaces or new relationships; inject new or additional energy, resources, activity, people, or enthusiasm into a place,
A theory of change

community issue, or local economy; and illuminate or elevate key community assets and issues, voices of residents, local history, or cultural infrastructure. Implementation of these strategies leads to local community changes, including economic, physical, and social change. Both the process of undertaking Our Town projects and the positive local changes they engender build community capacity, and ultimately can advance systems change at the local level to sustain the increased utilization of art, culture, and design activities in community development. The theory of change also articulates the vision for Our Town: sustained support and recognition of arts, design, and cultural strategies as integral to every phase of community planning and development across the United States. The theory of change also recognizes the importance of external leadership. National leaders in creative placemaking, such as ArtPlace and the Kresge Foundation, definitely influence Our Town projects while also contributing toward the vision.

The first phase of the project stopped at this point, and I mentioned before that the original plan had been to move into a summative evaluation. What happened at the end of this first phase was a program goal change that reflected this larger vision for the program. The agency staff also made modifications to the guidelines that embedded the theory of change in the language shared with potential grant applicants. I already mentioned that we made the decision not to pursue a summative evaluation, but we wanted to understand more about longer-term outcomes, particularly systems change. To that end, we designed a small study that employed a grantee survey and a small selection of grant case studies.

The grantee survey was structured to test out every part of the Our Town theory of change, asking questions about local inputs, strategies, and outcomes. The value of the survey was that it also allowed us to collect self-reported information about longer-term outcomes, particularly systems change. The agency’s final reports must be received 90 days after the close of a grant period, so at best we are collecting information about short-term outcomes. The grantee survey allowed us to ask project directors about outcomes years after their grants had closed. The case studies also focused on longer-term outcomes, examining the mechanisms and indications associated with systems change work.

Using what we learned from the grantee survey and the case studies, we created the final version of the theory of change. In this version, systems change is prominent, weighted equally with local community change. We also developed a logic model based on the theory of change and a measurement model to guide our future performance monitoring and evaluation of Our Town.

We’re still unpacking a lot of what we learned in Phase Two. In one of our very early conversations, you and I had talked about the importance of looking for those early indications of systems change given the challenge of measuring the longer-term outcomes associated with creative placemaking. The grantee survey and case studies helped us identify a set of indications that are correlated with systems change and measurable within or immediately after the grant period. For example, we found that sustained partnerships that continue beyond the immediate grant period is an early indication of systems change. Another early indication is artists trained in creative placemaking, since they can sustain and replicate program activities and perpetuate the successes of projects. Projects that were very active in communicating their project successes also seemed to have a much stronger chance of reporting systems change at a later time. This was particularly true in rural projects, not as much in urban projects, but for rural projects, it seemed to be a very significant factor. We also saw having local leadership, particularly government leadership, that was receptive very early on to arts and creative placemaking, seemed to indicate an early buy-in to creative placemaking that would later result in systems change.

So that’s where we are at this point. While we opted not to do a summative evaluation because of the modifications to the program, we feel we’re in a much better place now in three to five years to potentially look at an evaluation of this work.
That’s super interesting. I’m happy to see that the indications and indicators distinction has been useful and has had some traction. Quantitative data to measure or document many of the things you are observing as contributions of creative placemaking work are often not readily available. The notion of ‘indications,’ which relies on rigorous observation but is not quantitative still allows one to capture the contribution. This distinction between indications (rigorous qualitative observation) vs. indicators (quantitative data) was something I had to come up with as part of my work with the Kresge Foundation. We were at a loss for how to describe what we understood to be movement when the quantitative data that the community development field relies on to track change was a poor fit.

I can’t tell you how happy the researcher was when he shared his report with us. He said, ‘We found them! The indications!’ And the good news is that they’re all measurable. These are indications we can collect at the final report stage and be able to use to tell the story of the grants and that was ultimately what we wanted out of this phase of the work.

What other conceptual or practical challenges or discoveries did you encounter?

We learned a lot about which methods are most effective in identifying theories of changes. During the first phase of this project, the work relied heavily on analysis of grant documentation. During the second phase, we reached out to our grantees through a survey and case studies. Learning from the field is critical. While we did engage the field during Phase One through interviews and obviously read their words in grant applications and final reports, we would have benefited earlier on by engaging with grantees in a much deeper, more engaged way.

This experience influenced how we worked later with similar projects, prioritizing engagement with grantees and stakeholders.

How has this experience impacted how you commission research going forward?

It has changed the way we do this work. An example I can offer is the Creative Forces program and the work we did establishing a logic model for their community arts engagement portfolio involving military-connected individuals. We made an early decision to hold a series of discussions with a technical working group that included practitioners – from arts organizations, state agencies – who were planning and implementing this type of arts programming. We also facilitated a consultation session with practitioners at a convening to learn more about the range of program models used in the field. We shared with them a very early version of the logic model and used what we learned during the convening to revise the model. We developed a very strong logic model in a much shorter period of time due to the input of practitioners.

Having done this theory of change work, what would you say are the greatest research and evaluation priorities for the creative placemaking field?
There is a strong interest in the creative placemaking field to collect data to demonstrate outcomes. Documenting how creative placemaking investments change communities is critical for moving the work forward. For me, it’s important to support the people working on the ground level to document the outcomes of this important work. The arts sector does not have a strong history of investing in evaluation, but it is so critical to support the evolution of this work.

Another area of research interest for me is in understanding the mechanisms and outcomes associated with systems change at the community level. The arts are not unique in this interest; there are a lot of other sectors, such as education, that are examining systems change and the role of cross-sectoral partnerships. Better documentation of field-level work would improve our understanding of systems change in creative placemaking and, more importantly, improve our ability to facilitate it because we’re all interested in seeing this work sustain itself and contribute to change by bringing the arts and culture more deeply into the work of community development.

That makes a lot of sense. One of the things that rings true as I hear you talk about the theory of change process is the necessity to have some descriptive material that can help anchor the questions. So, a lot of this work was about the ‘what is it and how does it work’ which had to precede any attempt at summative evaluation. Then there’s the question of, what is the timeframe to actually be able to see the impacts? There’s a time-related question that perhaps still remains open with some impacts being able to be detected earlier than others. I think that is another priority area.

I agree. The Our Town grantee survey confirmed our theories and gave us some self-reported evidence of outcomes. But we need to be doing research that examines longer-term impacts of the work. One tantalizing finding from the survey: our analysis showed that there is some correlation between certain placemaking strategies implemented by Our Town grantees and outcomes that they report. This was very exciting to discover. The evidence is not strong enough at this point to say, ‘well, if you do this and that, it will lead to X outcomes,’ but it does suggest to me a pathway for more research in this area.

If we are able to start generating that type of evidence, it could bolster the type of guidance that we can provide to communities who may be dealing with very specific issues and want to attain certain outcomes.

That does seem valuable. Thank you so much, Patricia, for sharing your work and insights and for making time to talk.

Acknowledgment

Special thanks to Christina Park and Emma Galligan from the Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities at Arizona State University, for editorial and technical contributions.

Bibliography


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*Cara Courage*

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

Chapter 2: Placemaking as an economic engine for all  
*James F. Lima and Andrew J. Jones*

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

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*Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita*

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*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*