Introduction

Over the past several years, there have been important developments relevant to the conception and assessment of equitable Creative Placemaking initiatives and, more generally, the assessment of comprehensive community-development strategies. The observations and insights presented in this chapter draw from an examination of selected grantees of The Kresge Foundation Arts and Culture team’s Creative Placemaking initiative who are working primarily in low-income and historically marginalized neighborhoods around the United States. This examination included review of grantee reports and other documents, interviews, and focus group discussions in the first several years of Kresge’s Creative Placemaking strategy implementation, starting in 2012. These observations and insights also stem from a still small, but growing, body of research on the roles of arts and culture in communities, some of which precedes the adoption of the term Creative Placemaking, as well as from well-established literature on urban poverty and inequality. As the practice of equitable creative placemaking increasingly aligns with aspirations toward more just communities, we are beginning to recognize that, at its best, the work requires a more nuanced understanding of urban inequality; how arts, culture, and community-engaged design intersect with strategies to expand opportunity and how residents in low-income communities may benefit. The integration of arts, culture, and community-engaged design into community development and planning also challenges us to rethink how we conceive of and track change at the neighborhood level as well as change in the systems that are often part of the root causes of community conditions.

The challenge of describing creative placemaking

The term Creative Placemaking and the related concept of Creative Placekeeping have gained traction in the fields of arts and culture, design, community development, urban planning, public health, and others, and Creative Placemaking is emerging as a nascent field of its own. Creative Placekeeping emerged in response to Creative Placemaking as a way of calling attention to
the need for vulnerable, most-often communities of color, to guard against social, cultural, and economic displacement. Displacement of low- and moderate-income communities in some real estate markets has been perceived to be hastened by cultural enhancements to communities, especially when such enhancements are not coupled with strategies to preserve affordability (see Bedoya, 2013). A persistent and critical challenge is that the practice has been difficult to describe. This is true for several reasons. First, the term still has multiple definitions and interpretations, and each sector involved in the work requires a translation of the concept suitable for its audience(s) – often a translation that allows for the bridging of arts, culture, and design to concepts and practices already familiar within a field. Second, the concept continues to be difficult to convey quickly, given that Creative Placemaking activity is often contextual and can manifest in different ways – building on cultural assets specific to communities and in various dimensions of comprehensive community-development processes. Third, for many people, including people in the arts-and-culture sector, definitions of art and the roles of artists in society are frequently narrow and not inclusive of cultural assets in low-income communities, arts-based processes, or the diverse roles of artists, designers, and culture-bearers in planning and community development. All of this often precludes full understanding of Creative Placemaking practices.

A review of grantees of The Kresge Foundation’s Creative Placemaking initiative who operate in neighborhoods showed that investments took many forms. What they have in common is the focus on attempting to strengthen comprehensive approaches with arts, culture, and community-engaged design elements. This involves activity such as the inclusion of artists, designers, and culture-bearers in the crafting and implementation of community organizing, empowerment, and visioning efforts; the creation of physical structures and changes in the built environment that are meaningful and beautiful; the delivery of social services that are culturally relevant and appropriate; and the creation of businesses and other enterprises that tap into community imagination, talents, and heritage. As a result, approaches to community development build on the creativity and wisdom of residents, lift up cultural assets, and are, in fact, even more comprehensive.

Consider the following diverse examples of Kresge grantees working at the local level. Surrounded by San Francisco real estate market pressures, the Chinatown Community Development Center strives to preserve and protect its place in the city while recognizing the shifting needs of its community. Inspired and fortified by their cultural heritage, the center has maintained a continuous practice of recognizing and celebrating cultural assets through activities that include: walks in the neighborhood; annual community traditions; art exhibits, films, and events that elevate community history, aesthetics, and style. Residents, artists, culture-bearers, merchants, and community organizers are actively involved in shaping the social character and built environment in the neighborhood. This includes cultural programming intended to increase community pride, connection, and stewardship. Moreover, through culturally relevant community organizing practices, residents stay abreast of critical community issues and contribute to the design of open spaces and transit-oriented developments, helping to maintain and improve a viable, vibrant, and affordable place for longtime Chinatown residents and newcomers alike.

In New Orleans, New Corp, Inc. seeks to revive the historic buildings and craft traditions prevalent in the 7th Ward, while simultaneously addressing employment training and placement needs, blight, and vacancy. New Corp, Inc., along with the New Orleans Master Crafts Guild and other organizations, offers neighborhood residents master-craft apprenticeship training and case management support that result in construction certifications and paths to employment. Additionally, the organization hires graduates of the program to assist with rehabilitation of
vacant residential buildings, with a focus on historical design. New Corp, Inc. plans to provide the renovated housing to residents at subsidized prices, buoying a significant, but waning, craft tradition that contributes meaningfully to New Orleans’s distinctive architectural character and heritage. That craft tradition has been handed down through generations of Creole craftspeople for more than 200 years.

In Minneapolis, residents in neighborhoods served by Pillsbury United Communities are writing and performing original theater works examining their environment, personal journeys, and the broader human condition. Pillsbury United Communities, a human-services organization made up of four networked neighborhood centers, devises strategies to address intersecting needs and issues. Its creative approaches foster individual and collective resilience and self-sufficiency for participants. With a core value of integrating arts and culture throughout its work, Pillsbury offers a range of programs that tap into the creativity, imagination, experience, and wisdom of the people they serve. Its work impacts program participants and their families and neighbors. Its arts-infused method of working and offering services also contributes an important model and precedent in the human-services field.

In addition to specific, neighborhood-focused initiatives in several cities, sometimes artists are embedded in a range of municipal agencies including planning, transportation, and law enforcement. They help reimagine how such entities, through policies and practices, can better contribute to the creation of healthy, opportunity-rich environments where all people can reach their full potential. Within these systems, artists, designers, and culture-bearers often catalyze different ways of framing issues and new ways of working within bureaucracies, beyond individual policy silos and/or with residents in communities. At their best, these systemic interventions address significant barriers to opportunity and often have the capacity to bolster necessary neighborhood-level work.

One way to get a handle on the range of ways in which arts, culture, and community-engaged design intersect with comprehensive community development and planning is to recognize that essentially activity that falls under the umbrella of equitable creative placemaking and placekeeping serves to help reframe, retool, and repair. Reframing has to do with the role that artists, art practices, and art products can play in helping us to see an issue in a different way – by calling a different question, forcing us to shift our gaze away from the consequence of a problem to its root cause. Reframing an issue can help us get unstuck and can lead to fundamentally different approaches to complex and sometimes seemingly intractable circumstances and conditions. Retooling, often connected to the concept of reframing, has to do with reimagining the methods by which we seek to address fundamental actions. For example, artists and culture-bearers have made tremendous contributions in providing new ways of encouraging civic engagement through active creative practices – music, theater, film, and other art forms that allow for the interrogation of public concerns and even policy issues. The work of repairing through arts and culture, particularly in historically marginalized communities of color, can be deeply profound, meaningful, and necessary. This often requires reckoning with the harm and violence done to root cultures in processes of assimilation and subjugation. The work of repair is often about fighting against cultural erasure and degradation through cultural reclamation and validation. This also often involves helping individuals and communities reclaim agency over their own narrative, history, and physical environment as well as attending to material needs. Recognizing the various roles that arts, culture, and design can play in comprehensive community development has everything to do with our ability to appropriately and usefully assess the specific contributions of creative placemaking as well as our understanding of change in general.
Understanding urban inequality, neighborhood, and systems change and the contributions of creative placemaking

Alignment of Creative Placemaking practices with initiatives to expand opportunity in low-income communities relies on a more nuanced understanding of the root causes and consequences of urban inequality, new ways of thinking about how change happens, and corresponding improved ways of tracking and assessing change.

Urban inequality

To date, most efforts to address urban inequality through Creative Placemaking have embraced the need to be comprehensive or cross-sectoral. To be sure, issues of housing, employment, education, and health, among others, are most often interrelated, and approaches to these issues must account for that. I argue that we must go further to truly uncover the most strategic ways in which the integration of arts, culture, and design in planning and community development can have impact. Drawing from longstanding and extensive research on urban inequality in the United States from sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and scholars in urban planning and public policy, I have posited that poverty and inequality are the result of multiple interrelated factors. These stem from deep flaws in the socioeconomic opportunity structure (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) shortcomings in the institutions that exist to connect people to opportunity, and people’s responses to long-term exclusion and disconnection from opportunity. Beyond acknowledging the interrelated nature of socioeconomic conditions and often poorly coordinated diverse areas of public policy, this articulation allows for a more multidimensional way of thinking about comprehensiveness. It affirms the necessity of tackling pressing issues at individual, family, and neighborhood levels, but it also elevates the need to ensure that issues are addressed holistically, inclusive of necessary sustained structural, systemic, and institutional changes.

Mapping the ways in which arts, culture, and design can have plausible impacts at different points of intervention is helpful in both strategy-building and impact assessment. Here, again, the concept of reframing, retooling and repairing apply. Reframing: what role can artists or designers working with residents play in reimagining systems that are exclusionary? Retooling: how might culture-bearers help design programs that are more effective, relevant, and culturally appropriate for residents in historically marginalized communities? Repairing: how can the residents’ practice of heritage-based arts-and-culture traditions as part of a comprehensive strategy be impactful? How might changes in the built environment or the creation of businesses that celebrate the cultures of historically denigrated or maligned groups make a difference?

Neighborhood change and barriers to capturing contributions of creative placemaking

As the field struggles to evaluate the impacts of Creative Placemaking, it has become clear that the pace of change is often different from the pace of funding cycles. Foundations and other funders, at their best, know that neighborhood investments may not yield the ultimately desired results during a grant period. Those results may not manifest for years to come. However, research on the role of arts and culture in communities (Jackson et al., 2002; Wali et al., 2002; Walker et al., 2017) and interactions with grantees strongly suggest that many Creative Placemaking efforts can lead to some nearer-term outcomes, including greater social cohesion and sense of agency among residents, increased pride and stewardship of place, physical transformation, and greater
control over community narrative. This is particularly true of activities at the neighborhood level that involve celebration of community cultural assets, individual and collective artmaking, interrogation of social issues through artistic media, and physical transformation of previously blighted areas. These are all important contributions in and of themselves. They are also often understood by practitioners on the ground as preconditions for other types of longer-term change. Consistent with previous research, many grantees interpreted these contributions as important steps toward outcomes such as more-equitable economic development, homegrown creative entrepreneurship, and important policy changes including those supporting creativity, innovation, and the preservation, protection, and advancement of community assets.

Recognizing that these preconditions for longer-term change are imperative has implications for how the community-development field initiates strategy development and gauges progress. We are just beginning to realize how this conceptual breakthrough might be embraced and how it might manifest in different field practices and policies. Community development–related theories of change that do not account for the roles of arts and culture, their contributions, and the concept of preconditions for some types of change, are inadequate. They do not represent our best thinking about how change happens and what is required. These need to be updated—modified to reflect our experience and best thinking. Changes in evaluation orthodoxies used by community developers, urban planners, and people from other intersecting fields also will be required. In addition to the need to reassess theories of change and strategies to assess progress inclusive of contributions of arts, culture, and design, other shortcomings must be considered. The following is not an exhaustive discussion of all limitations in these fields. These are selected observations that signal critical areas that warrant attention if Creative Placemaking and better ways of addressing inequality are to be successful.

Recalibrating concepts of neighborhood reinvestment and change in community development and planning fields

In many markets, the traditional focus on attracting reinvestment to the urban core is outdated. The urban core is once again desirable to developers and people who crave more density and related amenities. In those neighborhoods, the challenge is not simply ‘more development,’ but how to equitably integrate new development while preserving affordability, culture, and community and also creating pathways for existing vulnerable communities to build wealth and benefit from infusions of new resources. For decades, when addressing issues in low-income communities, students of urban planning and community development were trained around the concept of community revitalization and the need to attract investment to neighborhoods hollowed out by urban renewal and white flight. Urban renewal refers to a period in the development of many American cities, during the 1950s and 1960s, in which investments in new highways and the removal of ‘urban blight’ resulted in the decimation of largely low-income African American and Latino communities and hastened the migration of white people from increasingly racially mixed city centers to more homogenous white communities in the suburbs. No one was sufficiently trained to manage the unbridled reinvestment or return to the urban core and related racialized dynamics that we see in many cities today. The community-development and urban-planning fields have been caught unprepared and must catch up. Similarly, in other related fields, the contemporary experience of practitioners is exposing shortcomings in long-held and outdated assumptions about how things actually work. The observation about the community-development field and dominant thinking about economic revitalization is related to a challenge we encounter with Creative Placemaking: the too-frequent and often overly simplified association of the presence of artists and growing cultural vitality with ‘gentrifica-
ition’ or, more specifically, the loss of affordability and the psychological, cultural, and physical displacement of vulnerable populations. In real estate markets where displacement concerns are warranted, it is incumbent upon planners, developers, and community leaders to ensure that Creative Placemaking strategies are integrated with a suite of related interventions that, at minimum, mitigate displacement and, at best, truly expand opportunity.

Recalibrating dominant concepts of impact and excellence in arts and culture

Not unlike the community-development and planning fields, the arts-and-culture field also has shortcomings related to limited ways of understanding impacts, industry standards of excellence, and education and training for artists and designers. In part as a result of the rise of Creative Placemaking, there is growing interest in better understanding and documenting the social impacts of the arts as well as impacts related to health and wellbeing. However, for decades, and even now, the lion’s share of research and advocacy focused on arts impacts has concentrated on economic impacts. As such, the body of research available to examine or support Creative Placemaking fully is still emerging. Advocates do not yet have all of the skills and tools required to make the case for the value of the arts in ways that resonate with what we are learning about the various roles of arts and culture in communities.

Another challenge in the arts-and-culture field has to do with existing standards of excellence and corresponding well-developed validation systems that are poor fits for Creative Placemaking. Standards of excellence in the arts field, for the most part, tend to align best with artforms that result in art products for presentation, sale, and consumption in the conventional arts market. Arts-and-culture work that is integrated into community life and is process-heavy does not result in products for conventional presentation or sale, may not even include professional artists, and typically does not aspire to critical acclaim by tastemakers in the art world. The creation of appropriate standards of excellence and validation systems is a crucial piece of work for the ethical advancement of Creative Placemaking and, ultimately, to ensure benefits for already-vulnerable populations. On a related note, the creation of education, training, and professional-development opportunities that can help artists and designers ethically work in communities and collaborate with entities outside of the arts toward equitable outcomes and public good is essential. In recent years, there has been evidence of more academic programs focused specifically on Creative Placemaking as well as growth of programs in public practice, social practice, and similar genres, which are relevant, although not the same. Still, many artists involved in Creative Placemaking acquire their skills on the job, often through baptism-by-fire, working through trial-and-error in and with communities.

Promising developments and trends in creative placemaking evaluation and research

Consistent with earlier observations about standards of excellence and validation systems, there is important work to be done in developing research and evaluation practices aligned with Creative Placemaking, and there are promising signs of progress. Early in the practice of Creative Placemaking, there was premature interest in summative evaluations — a rush to account for causal impact of Creative Placemaking practices in ways that were not appropriate for the work or consistent with the stage of development of the field. Fortunately, there is now recognition that rushing to summative evaluations without better understanding the practices themselves, the contexts in which they are carried out, and the pace of change would be a mistake. Another development is that the national focus on Creative Placemaking has led to a revival
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of interest in creative ways to enhance and increase resident engagement in civic and community issues, including a revival in community-led and community-engaged research. It has also led to revisiting asset-based community development approaches, evolution in cultural asset mapping tools, and a renewed appreciation for underappreciated features of a community (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). To this end, public folklorists and applied ethnographers have surfaced as important collaborators. They bring nuance, rigor, and energy to cultural asset mapping processes, often advancing strategies that include citizen ethnographers and reveal community values, history, and aspirations that otherwise could go unrecognized (see, Alliance for California Traditional Arts and Southwestern Folk Alliance for example.) Artists also have surfaced as resources in this area, bringing arts-based strategies for identifying community cultural assets and assessing neighborhood changes that complement more-conventional research and evaluation, including social science–based methods reliant on secondary and administrative data (for an example of art-based cultural asset mapping see LA County Arts).

Indicators vs. indications

The absence or scarcity of conventional quantitative data serving as clear indicators of progress – recurrent, reliable quantitative data about community characteristics and trends or program performance measures – does not mean that there is no way to measure Creative Placemaking impacts. There are studies of social cohesion, agency, and similar concepts that are important precedents. I have also found that practitioners understand on-the-ground clues that refute, confirm, or expand their hypotheses about the change they expected to see as a result of art-, culture-, and design-based interventions. These observations can be thoughtful and disciplined without leading immediately to rigorous, serial, quantitative data. I call these disciplined observations and discernments ‘indications.’ In the absence of more quantitative data, indications provide important signals and insights that can inform policy and program development. I am not arguing against the importance of traditional quantitative indicators but offer the concept of indications as an alternative that is useful, particularly when the data infrastructure for a field of practice is in early stages or the subject matter is a poor fit for conventional quantitative methods.

Innovation and measurement

There is increasing evidence of openness to experimenting with new and innovative ways of understanding community conditions and change processes. Examples of this include the Local Initiatives Support Corporation’s experimental work with arts-based inquiry into Creative Placemaking initiatives through a collaboration between its research division and artists, as well as the work of PolicyLink with ArtPlace America as they set out to document and assess the process and impacts of the ArtPlace’s Community Development Investments program. Also, in the spirit of experimentation, with support from The Kresge Foundation, the Creative Measurement Lab at Arizona State University is a pilot effort involving practitioners, community organizers, and researchers from around the country involved in comprehensive community development and neighborhood change along with graduate students and faculty from fields including the arts, design, architecture, theater, social sciences, sustainability, urban planning, and public policy. They collaborate on questioning existing evaluation orthodoxies, developing new ways of framing community issues, and measuring difficult-to-document community attributes while lifting up the expertise of people who live in the communities in question. Community characteristics explored in the first round of Creative Measurement Lab included agency, social cohesion, stew-
ardship, narrative of place and the systemic, and other factors contributing to the state of those characteristics. Consistent with principles of Equitable Evaluation, ongoing work in Creative Measurement Lab includes modifying existing evaluation methods and tools to account for Creative Placemaking practices in community development, planning and related fields as well as the development of new evaluation approaches (Equitable Evaluation Initiative). Equitable Evaluation is an emerging practice that calls into question well-established approaches to program assessment and research that may carry inherent biases that preclude a useful and nuanced understanding of conditions, dynamics, and changes in low-income communities. Creative Measurement Lab is also involved in the creation of corresponding pedagogical resources to equip aspiring and existing practitioners in new ways of approaching assessment and research.

Conclusion

To me, the examined experience of Creative Placemaking to date reveals that developing viable, new ways of framing and capturing community and systems change involves taking risks – calling into question our usual ways of working and notions of expertise, creating intentional spaces where people who don’t typically come together to work on evaluation do, and where conventional power arrangements are up-ended in an effort to seek truth and proximity to the conditions we wish to see impacted. It also requires calibrating expectations about timelines and management methods inherent in blending different perspectives; attempting to build the structures and validation systems that support new, smarter, and more-holistic, ethical, impactful ways of working. Most importantly, it requires leadership, stewardship, and the resolve to try something different and accept the process of failing, learning, adapting, and trying again.

Acknowledgments

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References

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Further reading in this volume

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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
Chapter 6: Listen, connect, act
Kim Cook
Chapter 10: From moon village to mural village: the consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul
Jason F. Kovacs and Hayun Park
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