4
A FUTURE OF CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

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Introduction

Employing arts and cultural strategies to address social challenges is not a new idea, particularly during times of crisis. Crises such as the massive influx of new arrivals to cities in the early twentieth century, the Great Depression, the economic challenges of the 1970s, or the Great Recession of 2008 disrupt the status quo. During these times, some believe that the thinking and approaches that created the problem will not solve it and there is an openness to new ideas and ways of thinking. These are ideal times to harness the power of arts and culture.

In the early twentieth century, settlement houses integrated arts and culture to help welcome new arrivals to cities across the United States. Thousands of artists were employed during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) and later through the Comprehensive Employment and Training (CETA) Act of 1973 (Burnham and Durland, 2016). As noted in the chapter by Jen Hughes in this volume, in response to the Great Recession of 2008, the National Endowment for the Arts created the Our Town program and helped spearhead the creation of the public–private partnership, ArtPlace America. ArtPlace America was developed as a place-based community and economic development response to the loss of mobility as housing markets crashed and jobs were lost. Over the last 10 years, ArtPlace has strengthened the creative placemaking field — supporting and embedding arts and culture strategies that are working across community planning and development sectors to create equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities. Similar to previous crises, the COVID-19 crisis creates an opportunity to advance creative placemaking as a critical tool, particularly as community wellbeing becomes an ever more urgent need and focus. During the pandemic, the world turned to artists, designers, and culture bearers for solace and comfort. While many are all too aware of the inequities in our society, for others the multiple current crises put the stark realities of inequity into the spotlight, reinforcing the need to envision a different future and the importance of our relationships and the realities of our interconnectedness.

The future of creative placemaking is intrinsically linked to the uncertain future of our world, country, and community at-large. The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a public health crisis that impacted people’s physical and mental health. It has an impact on our economy and will impact everything from education to incarceration and from immigration to food security. There are fewer dollars available and more demands. There will need to be new ideas and
A future of creative placemaking

ways of working. In addition, there will be other crises and disruptions again in the future. The cornerstones of creative placemaking must be further strengthened creating a field that can be nimble, collaborative, collective, participatory, and responsive for our futures.

The future

Creative placemaking is, at its core, about unleashing the unlimited power of arts and culture to advance community wellbeing. Over the past 10 years it has been demonstrated that arts and culture can contribute to positive outcomes in other community development sectors ranging from public health to economic development, and from immigration to food and agriculture. In the future, artists and culture bearers can be leaders and allies in the problem-solving, envisioning, and advancing of the collaborative practices necessary to create more equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities. Creative placemaking can and should flourish in the future by supporting communities to: (1) imagine the future and remember the past; (2) advance equity; (3) help people build stronger relationships; and (4) support cross-sector collaboration and impact. More on the promise of each of these aspects of creative placemaking and a few current examples are provided below.

Imagining and remembering

Society will continue to struggle with a multitude of ‘wicked’ problems – a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize. Everything from climate change, to ending disparities and poverty, to terrorism. These wicked problems are abstract and systemic issues that have profound impacts on people’s everyday lives. Critical issues like these need future-imagining – allowing folks to ‘remove the cognitive, emotional, and temporal distance between us and the future’ and ‘enact and interact with potential crises as if that future is happening now’ (Zaidi, 2018). Future imagining helps open up individuals’ abilities to creatively problem-solve, think critically, evoke empathy, and provide their immediate attention to an issue. Interventions that allow communities to future imagine might allow them to innovate proactively instead of reactively. Arts and cultural strategies employed in community development structures can help us do just this – imagine our future. In the future, creative placemaking will help connect people to these large-scale issues and provide them with tools to help them imagine things that do not currently exist.

The Harrison Center for the Arts’ PreEnactment Theater in Indianapolis, Indiana is a good example. To help people get a glimpse into a future, artists, and community organizers stage ‘PreEnactments’ that include everything from set designers building temporary facades on vacant lots and sprucing up abandoned buildings to actors modeling inclusive and equitable ways of living. It is a way for the artists and the community to both envision and experience the neighborhood they want for their future. A neighborhood that ought to be – one that is more just, equitable, and economically vibrant.

As important as envisioning the future may be, it is essential to also remember the past. When it comes to issues of climate change or food security, there are ancient ways of being, including Native American traditions, that can inform contemporary solutions. There is wisdom in their traditions for all of us on how our actions may impact the planet – the land, water, plants, and animals – and how decisions made today will impact future generations. In the future there may be more efforts like the work being done to reclaim Indigenous Maskoke land and the establishment of an ecovillage in rural Weogufka, Alabama. This work is a great example of how old ways of being can help develop contemporary solutions. The collective is committed to embracing
the role of protecting and reviving traditional relationships to the earth while revitalizing language and culture. In 2018, Ekvnv Yefolecvlke became official land owner of 577 acres of Alabama woods. Colonization and capitalism are antithetical to their culture and are therefore not seen in their ecovillage – where only the resources that the language describes are found. In addition, initiatives that introduce regenerative agriculture, aquaponics, and livestock farming also aim to improve the holistic health of the community while their communal, shared wealth structure, creates a self-sufficiency leading to a more sustainable community (Thomas, 2010).

**Advancing equity**

Perhaps one of the most wicked problems facing the United States now and in the future is addressing issues of equity. This country was built on 400 years of inequality. Historic inequities, racism, and trauma have led to disparities for black people, indigenous people, and people of color in nearly every category imaginable from income to incarceration, from health to wealth, and from morbidity to mortality (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017). While creative placemaking can help advance equity in a number of ways, it will not magically address inequity in the United States. While not an exhaustive list, a few ways creative placemaking can help address equity in the future include helping communities heal from racism and trauma, helping people in the community better understand other people’s experiences, and being a driver for jobs, sustainability, and community wealth-building. As a backdrop for this work, the arts and culture fields must continue to move beyond the Western canon and recognize artistic and cultural contributions of artists and culture bearers that are black, indigenous, and people of color. Simultaneously, arts and cultural organizations must examine whom they are benefitting and how, moving beyond audience development and toward becoming more inclusive civic and cultural spaces that serve as anchor institutions whose mission includes building equitable, sustainable, and healthy local communities.

An example of how creative placemaking can advance equity by helping people who have experienced historic racism and trauma heal while also, simultaneously, helping others see inequities, is Clemmons Family Farm. Clemmons Family Farm is a beautiful, rare African American-owned farm that serves as a platform to push for racial equity and empower a growing network of Vermont artists of African descent by celebrating the arts and cultural heritage of the African diaspora in Vermont, a state that is only 1.2 per cent black. They also ‘create opportunities for healthy dialogue around the identity and cultures of all people (people of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, etc.) for a stronger and more supportive multicultural community’ (Clemmons Family Farm, n.d.). To advance equity in the future, communities must have a sustainable workforce pipeline and be able to build community wealth. The work of the Sweetwater Foundation in Chicago demonstrates how this can be done using creative placemaking. They are building a regenerative community by lifting up the local assets and creativity of community members and helping them connect to the uniqueness of their place. The arts, education, aquaponics, carpentry, and farming that Sweetwater engages in within their community values an essential economy – one that liberates the community from a single bottom line and looks to a triple bottom line that recognizes people, planet, and profit and is both emergent and flexible for the future.

**Building relationships**

Human beings are social creatures. Relationships are critical to our physical and psychosocial wellbeing. Arts and culture are a valuable tool in helping us build stronger relationships, both
with people who are like us and with people who are different from us. These relationships are
critical to building healthier, more equitable, and sustainable communities in the future.

Before folks can build relationships with people who are different from themselves, they
must be comfortable with themselves and with others who are like them. Many black people,
indigenous people, and people of color have been traumatized by racism and marginalization.
As we move forward, it is critical that people are provided the time and space to grieve and
heal. People then need to feel safe and to have a sense of belonging with other people who
have similar experiences. An example of this is the work artists and culture bearers in Natchez,
Mississippi, did to host a series of events to help the community own and reframe their cultural
history. This was part of a broader HEAL Community Natchez effort to use community arts
and culture to build toward equitable community development through a lens of health and
wellbeing. To achieve this longer-term vision for the overall community, it was vital for there
to be time and space for members of the African American community to take ownership over
the reframing of their own cultural history as a way for them to start to address the past before
they could imagine a shared future with and for the broader community. To build more cohesive
communities in the future, arts and culture can be employed to build relationships with people
across differences. ‘Dear Tamaqua,’ organized via the Tamaqua Community Art Center, is a good
example of how this can be done. ‘Dear Tamaqua’ (Tamaqua Area.com, 2015) invited people
to write letters, sing songs, or submit drawings about their community. They got input from
playgrounds and libraries but also from bars by offering opportunities for patrons to participate
by writing or drawing on coasters. Making it easy and fun meant more people got involved,
especially those who might otherwise not, and helped these folks ‘see themselves’ in the end
product, building a greater sense of ownership and pride in the outcomes.

As these examples show, arts and culture are critical assets to a community in terms of helping to
build the relationships needed as human beings. A community’s culture, relationships, and organiza-
tions help determine that community’s ability to recognize, respond, and recover from challenges.
Our future as a country will need this. Arts and cultural organizations are critical anchors in our
neighborhoods and communities. They often serve as gathering places for artists, culture bearers,
and other community leaders. They are community lifelines. They are places for people to learn,
practice, and hone their creative expression, through social events, food, health, technology, and
housing activities and they are also places for connections for students to each other.

Fostering cross-sector collaboration

The future, particularly one that may have fewer resources, demands holistic cross-sector solu-
tions to the challenges facing people and communities. Human beings do not live in silos; an
event that impacts public health inevitably affects the economy, food security, education, and
public safety, and more. Creative placemaking is, by its very nature, cross-disciplinary and cross-
sector work. The creativity of artists and culture bearers is a renewable resource that exists in
every community; it is like wind or solar energy – while it is there, mechanisms are needed to
harness this power (Springboard for the Arts, n.d.). Artists and culture bearers working in crea-
tive placemaking can contribute by both helping other sectors achieve their desired outcomes
and fostering innovation across sectors.

As outlined by Jamie Hand elsewhere in this volume, ArtPlace America has worked col-
laboratively over the past seven years with a range of partners from different sectors to develop
knowledge and resources about the ways that arts and culture can contribute to community
outcomes in the areas of agriculture and food, environment and energy, workforce development,
economic development, public safety, housing, transportation, immigration, youth, and public
health. This work has highlighted examples of arts and culture strategies that have successfully been employed toward community outcomes across sectors or community development silos. A great example is the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project in New Mexico (see also Jojola and Shirley, and Rubin, volume). H'on A:Wan Park is a 2.5-acre complex ‘designed to cultivate a sense of belonging among youth that is rooted in awareness of and pride in Zuni traditional culture [to counter] the effects of intergenerational trauma, including poverty, obesity, diabetes, substance abuse and youth suicide’ (Sonke et al., 2019). H’on A:Wan is more than just a park project or a youth development effort; it is a community hub made to build a healthier, more equitable and sustainable community with arts and culture at its core. In the future, artists and culture bearers can help ask cross-sector questions, thread the needles between silos, and help envision a new reality. The Fargo Project serves as a good example of how an artist can help foster cooperation across municipal departments, deepen engagement with the community, and achieve several outcomes within the same project. Artist Jackie Brookner worked with a variety of departments within the City of Fargo and engaged hundreds of community members to help reimagine and transform a barren stormwater basin into a vibrant social, cultural, and ecological hub. The result was an amenity that many residents feel a sense of attachment to that still achieves the required stormwater management objectives. In addition to the new park and stormwater management system, the Fargo project helped foster new relationships across departments and new ways of involving residents’ voices (Westlake, 2018.)

Conclusion

Society is changing, and as the future becomes increasingly uncertain, communities need a multitude of tools and multiple supporting structures to realize the full potential of creative placemaking to help develop healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities. There are promising signs. The field has a growing cadre of practitioners using the moniker of creative placemaking, and shared values and standards of practice are emerging (Waller, 2019). There is a growing body of knowledge that is being co-created alongside movement leaders, engaging in culturally appropriate research methods, and helping to codify and validate practice-based evidence. Practitioners, funders, and policymakers have been identified, supported, connected, and engaged. Public agencies and private philanthropy have used creative placemaking as a frame for their investments and grantmaking. Leaders in the field are rising from the grassroots as well as from the grass-tops. There are leaders at the local, regional, and national levels, not only from the arts, culture, and design sectors, but also from other sectors of community planning and development.

Yet, there is more to be done. For example, for creative placemaking to realize its full potential in the future, it must include support for more leaders from black communities, indigenous communities, and communities of color and other historically underrepresented communities. If one compares the creative placemaking field to the ages and stages of humans, it may be a ‘tween’—somewhere between a child and a teenager. The creative placemaking field is moderately strong (The Bridgespan Group, 2018) – able to do some things on its own, with still more room for growth, pushing boundaries but still in need of support, not able to be left alone at home just yet, and capable of building on current strengths.

As described earlier, there are four specific reasons why it is important to have a robust creative placemaking field in the future. It starts with being able to imagine a future that is better than the past while also remembering ancient wisdom and ways that have worked, and still do today. The future demands advancing equity in the United States. As social cohesion becomes a key outcome of community development across all sectors, relationships must be built both within communities...
A future of creative placemaking

and across difference. Finally, as the silos of community development erode and scarce resources force collaboration, cross-sector work will rise. This is hard work made even more difficult when you are attempting to strengthen a field that is at its core an intersection of two previously established or ‘original’ fields – arts and culture and community planning and development. Change must occur in each of the ‘original’ fields at the same time as we are evolving a new, distinct, yet related, field – creative placemaking. Creative placemaking was officially established as a federal policy in response to a societal crisis. The rise of the field post-disruption has demonstrated that arts and cultural strategies can allow community development to be responsive and nimble, and are crucial. The future needs an even stronger creative placemaking field with substantial networks that operate and collaborate effectively; creative placemaking work that allows for place-based contexts and different approaches; and decision-making power and significant resources that flow directly into the hands of the folks who live, work, and play in a place.

References


Further reading in this volume

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

Chapter 5: Making places for survival: looking to a creative placemaking past for a guide to the future
Jeremy Liu
Chapter 9: From the dust of bad stars: disaster, resilience, and placemaking in Little Tokyo
Jonathan Jae-an Crisman

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

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Paul Graham Raven

Chapter 26: Sculpturing sound in space: on The Circle and the Square (2016) by Suzanne Lacy
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Chapter 28: Integral placemaking: A poiesis of sophrosynes?
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Chapter 30: Ecological selves as citizens and governance as ethical placemaking
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Chapter 3: Seven generations: a role for artists in Zuni PlaceKnowing
Theodore S. Jojola and Michaela P. Shirley

Chapter 39: Translating Outcomes: laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking
Jamie Hand

Chapter 40: Transforming community development through arts and culture: a developmental approach to documentation and research
Victor Rubin

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

Chapter 43: A theory of change for creative placemaking: the experience of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town program: an interview with Patricia Moore Shaffer, PhD
Maria Rosario Jackson

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

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