Context matters

In New Orleans there is an expression, ‘I know this dirt.’ It speaks to time, and passage of time, and fertility, and soil, and longevity, and labor, and love of home. I know this dirt. It summons the idea of connecting in community and looking deeply at the soul of a place. It tells us to listen and learn the stories of the people. When we develop the tools of listening to the storytelling and language and history that is derived from among the people in the places where we undertake our work, we root that work deeply and generate possibilities that can be timeless. We cannot franchise creative placemaking – context matters. It is not formulaic in its realization. We can commit to clear qualities of listening and engagement and truly foster cross-sector collaborations that lead to lasting partnerships and coalitions that deepen and positively change both the cultural and economic future of a place. Creative placemaking, when done well, is inherently idiosyncratic; it responds to and reflects the cultural assets centered in a location and those who reside there. It is with this perspective that true creative placemaking can occur.

Humans

In the end, when we ‘make’ places we are talking about the places where humans live, work, play, learn, and come together (or not) as a community. In its best form, creative placemaking will add to the vitality of a community, through engagement, collaboration, participation, and collective decision-making. Then the economic and other benefits follow from these processes. Very often, creative placemaking has garnered attention as a method for advancing economic development goals – in some ways serving as a response to the elimination of the value attributed to the arts and culture as a core element of civic life. Creative placemaking added utility to the conversation about the value of the arts – when the intrinsic-value conversation could not sway policy or move capital, economic benefit could serve to do so. Yet, the very heart of creative placemaking sits in the efforts of humans who see possibility in unlikely places, who forge partnerships with unusual suspects, and who move mountains to find the capital needed to realize their aspirations for community. Sometimes those mountains are moved one shovel of dirt or can of paint at a time. The work, and the beauty, of creative placemaking is best realized through human interaction, through conscious listening, and by valuing the contributions of residents in cities and rural...
settings who have deep wisdom of their places, filled with memory, culture, and opportunity to advance civic goals.

**Exemplars of the work**

Remarkable examples of this approach are everywhere. Here are a few to consider: Carol Bebelle, Founder of Ashe Cultural Center in New Orleans; Artist Yazmany Arboleda; the Network of Ensemble Theaters’ ‘Microfest’; Ghana Think Tank; Maud Le Floch’s Polau des Artes in France; Dr Mindy Fullilove; Joy Mboya, Founder of GoDown Center in Kenya; and Karin Lekberg’s work at Subtopia in Sweden.

What these people and projects share is a profound ability to be present, to demonstrate respect for the people who inhabit the places they live and work in, and a practice of responsive listening. Carol Bebelle is known to say: ‘First show up, in a while people will come to know you, keep showing up, and in a while, you will have a community’ (Bebelle, 2015). Her work over more than 20 years – at first the Efforts of Grace, and then translated into the Ashe Cultural Center in Central City New Orleans – served as the catalyst for a revitalization of the O.C. Haley corridor. Carol Bebelle’s work led to the creation of a multi-disciplinary exhibition and learning space, 29 residential units, a theater and community black box space, a credit union, and a legacy of emphasizing culture, community, and economic development (Asante and Lopez, 2017; Worthy, 2019). Artist Yazmany Arboleda is deeply engaged in working directly with people and expressing their stories. While Yazmany’s work is often ephemeral he is committed to the role of listening and stimulating people to collaborate within the spaces and places where they live. This is transformative work both for participants and for witnesses of his public art projects and place activation (Brice. 2019; TEDx, 2014). Network of Ensemble Theaters’ *Microfest USA* project took a deep look at the communities of New Orleans, Detroit, and Appalachia, culminating in a summit in Honolulu. With each of their explorations they made tangible efforts to include the voices of the people who lived in those locations while also examining the role that local theater plays in advancing community and economic development strategies. In her paper, ‘*Microfest USA*: A synthesis of learning about art, place, and culture,’ Pam Korza states: ‘Artists and culturally specific organizations play a catalytic role in revitalizing public spaces and neighborhoods and providing civic as well as cultural gathering spaces’ (Korza, 2013). The *Microfest USA* project points to engaging with and documenting work that is locally grounded and vitally important. Ghana Think Tank’s innovative work proposes that we subvert the notion that the answers reside in the Western nations (Ghana Think Tank, n.d.); Maud Le Floch’s work at Polau des Artes Urbaines asks developers to embed artists in the building process as site-specific contributors to community engagement that influence the build decisions (Le POLAU, n.d.); Dr Mindy Fullilove points to reconnecting cities to their past while planning for their future and carefully listening to those who reside there (Fullilove, 2013); Joy Mboya’s work in Nairobi took raw space and generated a community center that serves thousands of artists, entrepreneurs, and community members at the GoDown Arts Center (Engage Talk, 2018; SmartMonkey, 2013); while Karin Lekberg’s work at Subtopia, located in the Botkyrka municipality outside of Stockholm has generated a creative cluster that positions the migrant community as core contributors to the future of Sweden (Subtopia, n.d.).

**Examples of process**

As someone who has been doing this work for 25 years, I often get asked ‘how’ to do the work, and what I have learned. To examine some specific process choices, I will reference work from
my own direct experience in New Orleans, Louisiana and more recently in Washoe County, Nevada and Mountain View, California.

Arts Council New Orleans

When I moved to New Orleans to take the role of President/CEO of the Arts Council in early 2013, the city was rapidly advancing a narrative of itself as a new tech hub, a place for entrepreneurs, a destination in the midst of a post-Katrina renaissance. This narrative, while it had merit, was also in contrast to the other stories I was learning as I listened to people who lived there. I heard about New Orleans as the center of mass incarceration for the world; as the place where 30,000 blighted properties remained and community development organizations were struggling with the challenges of funding based in affordable housing legislation that did not allow for renovation or blight remediation as strategies for helping neighborhoods; a city where thousands of youth between 15 and 24 years were out of school and out of work; and the influx of new and enthusiastic transplants was seen as much as an intrusion as an infusion of talent. Initially the strategy for me was to listen, ask who else people thought I should talk to, and listen some more. I believed that a small agency, like the Arts Council, might be able to partner with larger entities and leverage resources that would aid the larger population. This resulted in two initiatives as well as some changes to our grant-making processes.

The first initiative was a launch of an art and technology festival, LUNA Fête, centered on project mapping. The hoped for outcomes were many, including that we might: raise awareness with regard to urban lighting strategies as a mechanism for increased safety with lighting as art as well as a safety solution; build a rapport between long-term residents and younger newcomers through the creation of a large-scale, family-friendly spectacle, in the streets – that was free. This paradigm would be familiar to New Orleans while also introducing technology that the younger entrepreneurs would identify with, and thus could allow for connectivity across these two factions within New Orleans; generate enthusiasm for these technologies and foster new learning and tools capabilities for New Orleans artists; and create partners across the New Orleans tourism, arts, and technology sectors. Launched in 2014, LUNA Fête is the longest-running and largest project-mapping festival in the United States and has advanced the technical skills and opportunities for 200 artists and 60 youth since its inception. In 2019 LUNA Fête was attended by more than 100,000 people and has established a firm place in the crowded New Orleans festival calendar. It continues to be a cross-sector collaboration among several partners.

The second initiative, Youth Solutions, began with a working group of 12 people who sat together and met for a year. Comprised of architects, public health professionals and researchers, a social worker, an artist, graphic designers, a community activist, along with myself and one other staff member of the Arts Council, we came together once a month, broke bread, checked in on each other’s worlds and wellbeing, before our conversation about how to address youth trauma alongside the trauma to the physical place of New Orleans would commence. We talked amongst ourselves, and we also reached out to have conversations with partners city-wide. Consequently, Youth Solutions was created as a living laboratory to: examine the linkages between what social science social/emotional/wellness indicators show is effective and what artists naturally do; build a handbook for artists such that they might be better able to articulate their work in the vocabulary of social science; test out the impact that design education could have for local youth who might be empowered to propose and enact changes in their community; use the built environment and work with architects and artists to create a sense of agency for the youth through changing the world around them; and create toolkits and documentation that could be shared broadly for the field. After a year of developing the project, Youth Solutions was funded by both the National
Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant and ArtPlace America. The program took hold in the summer of 2015 and resulted in many young people participating in the creation of public art interventions throughout Central City in New Orleans. Perhaps more importantly, Youth Solutions created an environment that evolved the practice of youth empowerment and public art for the Arts Council that continues to this day – work that is grounded in a clear understanding of how to articulate and communicate impact when artists work with youth. In terms of our grant-making, we made substantial revisions to the funding categories so that we could support and celebrate the street parading and traditional cultural communities of New Orleans.

**Partners and Burning Man Project**

When I joined Burning Man Project as the Director, Art and Civic Engagement, I was invited to collaborate with officials at the County offices in Washoe County, Nevada. We secured funding through the NEA Our Town grant, for a 200-mile ArTrail which we developed with specific sensitivity to the role storytelling, memory, and placekeeping could take as a part of a placemaking effort. The county hosted over five community story circles, learning about the history of miners, ranchers, indigenous people, and residents over chili dinners, pancake breakfasts, and coffee. In fact, recording and archiving these stories became an outcome from the process that has ignited and inspired Washoe County leaders. The Burning Man team and the Washoe County staff worked together to make sure that all of our encounters reflected the intent of our project. Thus, when we held a large stakeholder meeting with county, state, and local organizations represented around the table, we took more than a full hour at the top of the meeting asking each person to bring something with them that they connected to their relationship to Washoe County. This time of storytelling in the circle was established with transparency about our intent to create an ‘us’ before we presented our plans to the group. We did not want to stand up in front of a room with chairs in a row and state our case and then defend it. We wanted to explicitly foster a sense of unity through story and a common feeling for the place that was home. This gentle opening then set the stage for the presentation of the plan for the trail and we avoided steering into the pitfalls of public hearings that are so often fraught with challenging discourse. Once we became an ‘us’ we were able to use that unity to nurture a feeling of common cause while also providing legitimate methods for stakeholders to participate and influence the overall project.

Another project emerged in 2018 as the Burning Man Project team began to explore creative placemaking with Google. In this partnership we endeavored to ensure that even with a large corporate partner we could find ways to influence art selection and community input processes that would be authentic and participatory. Burning Man is at heart a culture of engagement and not one of production. While we were eager to see the art of Burning Man translate into more permanent public settings, we were equally interested in an approach that was values-aligned with the Burning Man ethos. Understanding that ultimately the decision-making would lay within the Google leadership, we also knew that our partners at Google were invested in creating avenues for local residents to influence that outcome. Plus, in our meetings with City staff members we heard a common desire between Mountain View and Google to create a public space that was inviting, where people would gather, and linger, and feel welcome. There was a sense of urgency that this not become a ‘workplace amenity’ but rather a central plaza that drew residents in and reflected their interests.

To undertake the engagement process, we developed several input systems, the first, a storytelling evening at a local café centered on stories of ‘where you went when you were a kid and what you loved about it.’ Again, as with the Washoe County stakeholder group, transparent communication was key; we shared that we didn’t want to create a situation where they told
us what they really wanted was a neon banana and then we end up picking a ceramic frog and they wonder why we asked in the first place. We shared that while literal desires might not be met, design principles and aesthetic preferences could be garnered through this evening of sharing. We started the evening off and soon people in the room were eagerly talking about where they played, how they hid and discovered and engaged in adventures as children. The room had people from early twenties to early seventies and the experience quickly turned into an evening of laughter and good feelings (it turns out that asking people to remember where they played as children is a good mood machine). We were able to glean such factors as verticality for wayfinding (represented in their youth by water towers and street lights), ways to be in public while also having privacy (hiding in juniper bushes, hanging out at the wall at the basketball court), and finding portals to new spaces (tunnels and following creek beds). These were drawn onto small poster boards by my team and brought into the room for the selection committee. Similarly, we hosted two Human Centered Design workshops for community residents, asking them to consider how we might create places to gather, places to feel ownership, places to linger, and through a series of drawing exercises and maquette-building with found objects we were able to get at impulses for play, free spiritedness, and interactivity. Additionally, we hosted online commenting opportunities which both boosted the visibility of artists who submitted and gave us a broader input reach (comments were not broadcast). We also created and taught a seminar on archetype and identity for Google employees to get at underlying symbols that would be meaningful for those who worked there. In the course of the last two years we’ve been able to facilitate the commissioning of 15 artists for Google with $2.588 million in artist fees, all grounded in the principles and design influences of the community at large.

Black Rock City

_Burning Man_, which takes place each year in the Nevada desert, is, itself, a creative placemaking engine. Known as Black Rock City, with over 32 years of innovation, improvisation, play, and co-creation it has evolved into a laboratory where learning by doing, collective effort, and year-over-year iteration has led to a deep body of practice and knowledge that translates well into creative placemaking. In her 2019 article for the _New York Times_, titled ‘A Nobel-winning economist goes to Burning Man,’ Emily Badger quotes Paul Romer as saying about _Burning Man_ and Black Rock City:

> I picture an economist showing up… and saying: ‘Oh, look! This is the miracle of the invisible hand. All of this stuff happens by self-interest, and it just magically appears.’ And there’s this huge amount of planning that actually is what’s required beneath it to make the order emerge.
>
> *(Badger, 2019)*

In fact, it does take planning, but it also takes innovation and practice. The results of this integrated approach are what _Burning Man_ has to offer the field of creative placemaking. Most certainly the practice of building a temporary city in the desert results in a huge body of knowledge, but I would argue it is the approach to year over year, learning by doing, and then iterating that is an even more crucial element in what _Burning Man_ can offer others. Creating a prototyping mindset and then improving on that initial effort, engaging with community members in a whole-hearted collective build effort, and generating practices that improve year over year
have essential qualities and approaches to offer those who work in more permanent environments. Too often the world of city planning and building becomes hampered by risk avoidance, long-term and slow-moving capital flows, and competing interests. Burning Man offers cities and placemakers a potential toolkit for subverting those overly defined methodologies and testing out new practices. One example of a city where community members can directly impact the built environment is in Bologna, Italy, where the local government has created a micro-contract system for citizens to make improvements to their neighborhoods. This sort of risk-taking and participatory action within a permanent city is at the heart of the temporary metropolis known as Black Rock City where Burning Man takes place.

Thinking about culture and creative placemaking in a post–COVID-19 environment

When we are fortunate enough to all arrive at a post–COVID-19 environment we will find ourselves at risk of cultural destitution that is profoundly deeper than what we witnessed in the 2008–2009 recession. As I consider this, I am reminded of the paper, ‘Cultivating ‘natural’ cultural districts,’ co-authored by Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, created in partnership with The Reinvestment Fund. Their work comes to mind because they reference the idea of clusters of cultural assets, both formal and informal arts production, and while not called out specifically within their paper, I would suggest that a cultural cluster must also include migrants, restaurants, food trucks, and the social spaces that anchor our communities. These cultural generators will play a critical role in revitalizing our cities after the pandemic. As stated by Stern and Seifert:

While the arts are commerce, they revitalize cities not through their bottom-line but through their social role. The arts build ties that bind – neighbor-to-neighbor and community-to-community. It is these social networks that translate cultural vitality into economic dynamism.

(Stern and Seifert, 2007)

After an extended period of social isolation – where even our most casual social encounters with the small-business owners who built the dry cleaners, the shoe repair, the beauty salon, and others who make up our communities, were denied us, we will want those relationships to survive and those businesses to thrive. Success will require substantial capital flows to the street level. These small-business owners are the backbone of our economic health, our service providers, and our connective tissue. Along with artists, they have the capacity to bring back a vibrant society, if we invest wisely. Bringing both cultural sector activists and small-business owners together and insisting that the investment in our cities be aimed at restoring our ‘third places’ will be essential. This will be the essence of creative placemaking when we re-emerge to rebuild our economies and our communities. We need, fundamentally, to connect. One positive result of the global pandemic is that we are reminded of our shared humanity and vulnerability; to translate that into action for our future will mean thoughtful and responsive investments at the neighborhood level. Creative placemakers will be well poised to support hyper-local efforts that can generate a global revitalization through banding together and insisting on responsible capital deployment at the grassroots level. Otherwise we will suffer the tearing apart of the rich and vibrant fabric that makes each place unique and allows us to enjoy the many incredible benefits of living in diverse and dynamic communities.
Kim Cook

References


Further reading in this volume

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 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
Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek

Chapter 17: ‘I am not a satnav’: Affective placemaking and conflict in ‘the ginnel that roared’
Morag Rose

Martin Zebracki

Chapter 22: Embedded Artist Project: Epistemic Disobedience + Place
Listen, connect, act

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

Toni Borrup
Chapter 25: ‘If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere…’: cultural placemaking at the heart of cities

Sherry Dobbin
Chapter 31: Seven generations: a role for artists in Zuni PlaceKnowing

Theodore S. Jajola and Michaela P Shirley
Chapter 37: The Neighbourhood Project: a case study on community-led placemaking by CoDesign Studio

Lucinda Hartley, Eliza Charley, Sama Choudhury, and Harriet McKindlay
Chapter 41: Rituals of regard: on festivals, folks, and findings of social impact

Maribel Alvarez
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