

Creative Placemaking: How to Do It Well

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In four years, Our Town, an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), has invested more than \$21 million in creative placemaking in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. ArtPlace America—an unprecedented consortium of foundations with national bank partners and government agencies serving as strategic advisors—has invested \$56.8 million in projects where art-making improves community or place. The Kresge Foundation has adopted this framework for all of their arts funding. And both the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the US Department of Education have revised funding guidelines to encourage arts strategies as part of the Choice and Promise neighborhood programs.

We played a role in this story. In fall 2009, the new NEA chairman, Rocco Landesman, and deputy chair Joan Shigekawa commissioned us to write a white paper to frame a new Our Town funding initiative.¹ With their help, we chose a framework of creative placemaking. We spent six months surveying successful forerunners, identifying ingredients of success as well as common challenges. Our case studies cover many types of communities from older, industrial, inner cities to younger, lower-density cities to rural towns to Native American reservations. Through this process we honed a definition of creative placemaking that we hoped would fit them all:

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local businesses viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.

The definition emphasizes three features: strategic action by cross-sector partners, a place-based orientation, and a core of arts and cultural activities. The definition speaks to both instrumental and intrinsic outcomes—economic benefits, physical and social impacts,

¹ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking” (Washington, DC: Mayors’ Institute on City Design and the National Endowment for the Arts, October 2010), <http://www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.

and the arts' ability to inspire. This broad framing has helped creative placemaking win unprecedented policy action,² with practitioners and funders adopting multiple definitions to suit their particular circumstances.³

The framing and resources may be new, but the work has been unfolding organically in American towns and cities for decades, as we document in our *Creative Placemaking* case studies. In this article, we focus on how to do creative placemaking well, including challenges in partnering, project design, securing finance, and evaluating progress. We go beyond the limits of our initial definition and case studies, adding insights from subsequent research, consulting, public speaking, and community engagement.

Partnerships: Essential and Challenging

Cross-sector partnerships are fundamental to creative placemaking. Our Town funding requires that at least one public-sector agency and one nonprofit organization partner on a project, one of whom must be focused on arts and culture. In an example from *Creative Placemaking*, three Cleveland nonprofit theater companies partnered with a community development corporation to create the Gordon Square Arts District.⁴

What are the features of good partnering? First, partnerships are made, not born. We found that a single person, often an artist, initiated a surprising number of successful cases. His or her vision and persistent search for the right partners paid off. And second, successful initiators choose partners—and not too many—who bring complementary skills to the project. For Cleveland's Gordon Square Arts District, a musician who wanted to restore a defunct community movie theater sought out two local live theater companies who needed performance space and a community development corporation (CDC) that had successfully built low-income housing for 30 years. The three theater companies formed a cultural district in the city's underserved working-class west side.⁵ The CDC contributed development, fund-raising, and conventional finance experience. Together, the four organizations proposed and raised funds for an artist-designed streetscape to herald the theater capacity to come. They then won funding to restore two historic theaters and to build a third for the youth theater company.

Partnership challenges include coalition building, courting public will (winning mayoral, city council, city staff, and community support), and navigating imbalances in power, skills, and resources. To make partnerships work, each party must understand and take seriously the priorities of its partners. Each must acknowledge what it does not possess in terms of skills and

2 Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, "Fuzzy Vibrancy: Creative Placemaking as Ascendant U.S. Cultural Policy," *Cultural Trends*, 22 (3–4) (2013): 213–22.

3 Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, "Creative Placemaking 2.0," *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Summer 2012), <http://www.giarts.org/article/creative-placemaking-20>.

4 Markusen and Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking," pp. 34–35; W. Dennis Keating, "The Gordon Square Arts District in Cleveland's Detroit Shoreway Neighborhood," *Urban Publications* (Cleveland State University, March 18, 2014), http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/urban_facpub/1162.

5 Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, "Cultural Clusters: The Implications of Cultural Assets Agglomeration for Neighborhood Revitalization," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 29, no. 3 (2010): 262–79.

resources and patiently teach and share what it can bring to the table. Personal rough edges must be tolerated or addressed diplomatically. The partnership also must incorporate input from diverse community constituencies affected by the initiative.

Organizational time and resources also pose daunting challenges. Each Gordon Square partner reported that for as long as five years, lead staff devoted one-third of their time to the district effort, a considerable tax on their own agendas. To raise money for the streetscape and theater renovations and construction, each partner had to restrain its own funding-raising efforts lest it compete for the same funding pots.

Designing around Distinctiveness and Local Patronage

Building on uniqueness of place and community practices is a strong predictor of success. San José, California, for instance, has prioritized the marriage of art with technology. Its Zero1 Biennial builds on Silicon Valley's distinctive technology leadership while attracting and retaining artists.⁶ In another example, the Fond du Lac reservation in Minnesota purchases and incorporates artworks by contemporary Ojibwe artists in all five of its social services and health care buildings, where they quicken healing and encourage staff while generating income for regional artists.⁷ In many cases, projects that place local and regional community participation center stage tend to fare better than those that are preoccupied with attracting tourists from elsewhere. If community members actively engage in expanded and unique arts and cultural capacity, others will be attracted in time.

Roles for Community Development Bankers

Creative Placemaking identifies attracting private sector buy-in and assembling adequate financing as key challenges. Community development banks play a key role in this process. Artspace, for instance, has relied on bank finance, philanthropic grants, and low-income and historic tax credits to create and maintain dozens of affordable art spaces in both large and small US cities since the early 1990s. To create artist loft housing in an empty auto plant in Buffalo, NY, Artspace assembled \$17.6 million from 19 different lenders and grantmakers.⁸ This nonprofit has consistently been able to secure bank mortgages based on demonstrated long-run rental returns and evidence of prospective artist occupancy. Bank finance, along with nonprofit foundation grants, enables Artspace to create and manage arts-dedicated residential, presentation and commercial space with positive benefits and minimal displacement.⁹

6 Ann Markusen, "City Creative Industry Strategies: the State of the Art," Companion Report to the Otis Report on the Creative Economy (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design: December, 2012), pp. A1-14, http://www.otis.edu/creative_economy_report/download/2012-Otis-Report-on-the-Creative-Economy.pdf.

7 Markusen and Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking," pp. 43-44.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

9 Anne Gadwa, "How Artist Space Matters: Impacts and Insights from Three Case Studies Drawn from Artspace Project's Earliest Developments" (Minneapolis: Metris Arts Consulting, March 2010), <http://www.metrisarts.com/>; Anne Gadwa and Anna Muessig, "How Art Spaces Matter II: The Riverside, Tashiro Kaplan and Insights from Five Artspace Case Studies and Four Cities" (Minneapolis: Artspace and Metris Arts Consulting, July 2011), <http://metrisarts.com/evaluations/>.

Community development banks can also finance artist homeownership. In Paducah, Kentucky, a local bank extended loans to artists to convert buildings into artist-owned, live-work space. Paducah's city planning director Tom Barnett picked up the idea from an artist who had renovated an old Lowertown building into studio space and housing. Barnett spearheaded the budgeting, land acquisition and transfer, and regulatory, marketing, and public meetings required for the project. Advertising nationally for tenants, the city extended \$2,500 per artist to subsidize the cost of professional fees and architectural services, turning over property titles for as little as one dollar. Paducah Bank provided the renovation financing for artist owners: low-interest loans for up to 300 percent of appraised value to cover artists' purchase and renovation costs. Starting with a \$370,000 demonstration project loan that renovated three storefront buildings, Paducah Bank increased its lending to \$2 million within the program's first year. Ten years later, in 2010, the city had achieved a 10-to-1 return on public investment, thanks to Paducah Bank's willingness to invest in artists.¹⁰

Banks with community development experience can help ensure the success of creative placemaking loans by counseling clients about regulations they must navigate. In Paducah, the city's planning department liberalized its zoning ordinances to permit both residential and commercial uses, designating the city's Lowertown as a historic district, requiring that renovations follow design guidelines, and adopting and enforcing strong health and safety codes. Banks can also coach loan applicants on future maintenance and programming costs so that projects will remain viable beyond their initial construction.

Evaluating Creative Placemaking Outcomes

Public-sector and nonprofit funders find it challenging to define and monitor desired outcomes for creative placemaking. Within local initiatives, partners often struggle to define success and measure it. In *Creative Placemaking*, we call for evaluation and performance metrics charting impacts on artists, the area arts community, local businesses, residents, quality of life, civic engagement, return on the dollar, and opportunity cost.

Three pioneering empirical studies serve as role models in demonstrating whether outcomes match aspirations: economist Stephen Sheppard's documentation of the impact of MASS MoCA and other visual arts spaces on neighborhood property values and social networks¹¹ and two studies by urban planners Anne Gadwa and Anna Muessig of five Artspace live-work buildings that measured the impact of those spaces on artists, arts

10 Markusen and Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking," pp. 46–47.

11 Stephen Sheppard, "Museums in the Neighborhood: The Economic Impact of Museums," in *Handbook of Economic Geography and Industry Studies*, ed. Phil McCann, Geoff Hewings, and Frank Giarrattani (London: Edward Elgar, 2013), 191–204. MASS MoCA is a contemporary art center in North Adams, Massachusetts, that exhibits and supports the development of visual art, music, dance, film, and video. Situated on the former Sprague Elective Company's 13-acre campus, it occupies one-third of the downtown business district and is the result of a \$31.4 million adaptive re-use of nineteenth century factory buildings. Its facilities include exhibition space, office and retail space for commercial tenants in creative industries (both at 200,000+ square feet), a natural amphitheater, workshop and art fabrication facilities, and more.

communities, neighborhoods, and businesses.¹²

Early on, the NEA and ArtPlace both launched efforts to create indicators from secondary data sources such as the American Community Survey. The NEA initially laid out four general goals for creative placemaking projects: 1) strengthen and improve the local community of artists and arts organizations; 2) increase community attachment; 3) improve quality of life; and 4) invigorate local economies. They planned to generate indicators for each goal from existing data and to “build out this system and publish it through a website so that anyone who wants to track a project’s progress in these areas will be able to do so, whether it is NEA-funded or not. They can simply enter the time and geography parameters relevant to their project and see for themselves.”¹³

As its work evolved, the NEA developed indicators for the four goals as a way to help creative placemaking project planners be more intentional about generating local outcomes. They also hoped the indicators would help them to better understand the broader context (and geographical area) of their project’s impact, and support the design of program evaluations for specific projects. The NEA took care to ensure that all of the resulting 23 indicators were available from publicly accessible data sources. In general, the promotion of open data tools—both for decision-making and for the NEA’s better understanding of its own work—conforms to guidance from the Office of Management and Budget ensuring greater transparency and accountability.

To test the viability and usefulness of their indicators, the NEA commissioned a study from the Urban Institute to canvass creative placemaking grantees.¹⁴ Respondents generally considered indicators such as violent crime rate, median commute time, and proportion of housing units occupied as good measures of quality of life and attachment to community. But they were skeptical of the utility of indicators for assessing creative placemaking results, especially indicators seeking to capture changes in homeownership rates, election turnout, and median commute time. Respondents from both urban and rural areas also “expressed strong concerns about the relevance of data at large geographies—county or ZIP code—as indicators for smaller areas.”¹⁵

In a parallel effort, the ArtPlace consortium wanted to explore whether its funded projects had a transformative impact on community vibrancy (and within this, “people, activity

12 Gadwa, “How Artist Space Matters”; Gadwa and Muessig, “How Art Spaces Matter II.”

13 Jason Schupbach, “Creative Placemaking—Two Years and Counting!” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, May 31, 2012), <http://artworks.arts.gov/?p=13382>, accessed October 1, 2012.

14 National Endowment for the Arts, “Validating Arts and Livability Indicators in Selected Communities and Developing a User’s Guide with Case Examples and Local Data Sources” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, August 23, 2012), http://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=39f0ca2bec49a35d83076660a0b76992&tab=core&_cvview=1.

15 Elaine Morley and Mary Winkler, “The Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study: Results and Recommendations” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, April 2014), p. 3, <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/VALI-Report.pdf>.

and value”).¹⁶ But concepts like “vibrancy” are fuzzy.¹⁷ One group’s passions (e.g., loud evening concerts) may be another group’s nightmare. Even if groups can agree, how can concepts such as vibrancy be operationalized? ArtPlace proposed tallying smartphone location requests on Saturday night as a measure of vibrancy, but smartphone ownership is heavily biased toward younger people and those with higher incomes, and many people turn off their phones while dining or at a performance. A rise in homeownership? That discriminates against young adults, seniors, and lower-income households who are more likely to rent.

Even when measures are well-designed, data that focus on the small target area are often unavailable. Other data sets, like the American Community Survey, are simply not robust enough to capture features such as artist density in a neighborhood or community area. Above all, changes in any of these indicators could be caused by other unrelated forces or community changes independent of a creative placemaking project. And if ill-fitting indicators are used to gauge success, funders will be tempted to favor those proposals where indicators will turn out well rather than projects with the greatest potential impact.

Both the ArtSpace and the NEA indicator initiatives raised many questions. What would these indicators mean, how would they be constructed, and would their projects be compared across places and across time? These concerns led to a healthy and broad-based debate.¹⁸ Recently, ArtPlace leadership has been turning away from words like “outcomes,” “evaluation,” and “metrics.” Instead, it asks grantseekers to articulate their goals, in their own terms, for art projects that will intentionally move a place closer to what the community aspires to be. ArtPlace hopes that evaluation in this fashion will be less intimidating and more useful to grantees, as well as helping to inform current and future projects. They are still contracting for vibrancy measure updates and making them available, but they are no longer using them for evaluation.

The NEA creative placemaking team is currently working to help applicants and grantees understand the evaluation challenge and to articulate goals, be they artistic excellence, social change, cultural bridging, or quality of life. NEA is encouraging groups to work with professional evaluators and planning to actively work with creative placemakers to show them good examples of evaluations. They have commissioned *Exploring Our Town*, an online resource that includes case studies of more than 60 Our Town grants and an insight section of lessons learned. The NEA is also broadening partnerships with organizations and universities whose staff can help with local evaluations.

16 ArtPlace, Vibrancy Indicators, 2012, <http://www.artplaceamerica.org/articles/vibrancy-indicators/>; ArtPlace, Vibrancy Definitions, 2012, <http://www.artplaceamerica.org/loi/>.

17 Ann Markusen, “Fuzzy Concepts, Scanty Evidence, Policy Distance: The Case for Rigour and Policy Relevance in Critical Regional Studies,” *Regional Studies*, 37 (6-7) (October 2003): 701–17; Gadwa Nicodemus, “Fuzzy Vibrancy.”

18 Ann Markusen, “Why Creative Placemaking Indicators won’t Track Creative Placemaking Success,” Createquity Blog, November 9, 2012. Reprinted in *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*, 2013: Vol. 24, No. 1, Winter, 2013: 22-29, 50, <http://createquity.com/2012/11/fuzzy-concepts-proxy-data-why-indicators-wont-track-creative-success.html>; and in *International Journal of Urban Sciences*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2013: 291-303.

Improving the Model

Four years have passed since we wrote *Creative Placemaking*. Would we tweak our characterizations? Yes, thanks to the burgeoning experiments nurtured by NEA, ArtPlace, foundations, arts organizations, city and state governments as well as an outpouring of research and comments.

For one, we would stress the intrinsic contributions of arts and culture as co-equal with instrumental contributions. Many creative placemakers and their patrons strive for more than job creation, reuse of abandoned buildings, commercial retail sales—traditional economic development results. They aim for a more expansive notion of livability. They also deliver what arts and culture do best: beauty, heritage, innovation, bonding within cultures and bridging across them, social critique, entertainment, and expression, or as former NEA chairman Bill Ivey put it, a “right to an expressive life.”¹⁹

For another, we’d emphasize more fully the importance of equity. Creative placemaking initiatives should be designed to expand opportunities for low-income communities, people of color, and artists. They should also take care not to displace (either directly or via property value and rent escalation) existing residents, their practices and cultural gathering places. Forceful voices from within the creative placemaking community have articulated these concerns and pointed to alternatives, as we have on gentrification and equity research agendas.²⁰

Given current initiatives and proposed improvements, creative placemaking will likely be deepened and sustained. Appropriate financing will play a key role in that future. Many communities are embarking on efforts tailored to unique cultures, environments, and capacities. Applications to the NEA’s Our Town and ArtPlace are robust. Many communities not yet funded are proceeding anyway. In this decade, arts and culture are coming into their own, having won interest from mayors and city councils and community development orga-

19 Ann Markusen, “Creative Cities: A Ten-Year Research Agenda,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, (s22) (August 2014): 567–89; Kevin McCarthy, Elizabeth Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG218>; and Bill Ivey, *Arts, Inc: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

20 For examples of forceful voices, see Roberto Bedoya, “Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-Belonging,” *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Winter 2013); Carolina Sarmiento, “Strategies of Fire and ICE: Immigration, Cultural Planning and Resistance.” Doctoral dissertation. (University of California Irvine, 2014); Maria Rosario Jackson, “Developing Artist-Driven Spaces in Marginalized Communities: Reflections and Implications for the Field” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, *Leveraging Investments in Creativity*, October 2012), <http://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Developing-Artist-Driven-Spaces-Marginalized-Communities.pdf>. Our work on gentrification includes Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, “Artists and Gentrification: Sticky Myths, Slippery Realities,” *Createquity Blog* (April 5, 2013), <http://createquity.com/2013/04/artists-and-gentrification-sticky-myths-slippery-realities.html>. Our work on equity research includes Markusen, “Creative Cities: A Ten-Year Research Agenda.”

nizations as well as commitments of time and energy from artists and arts enterprises.²¹ As more partners become engaged in this work, we expect to see more innovation, tailoring to meet specific community circumstances, and learning from shared experiences among many participants.

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Anne Gadwa Nicodemus is a choreographer and arts administrator turned urban planner. She has advanced the discourse on arts-based community development through reports and journal articles including, Creative Placemaking (Mayors' Institute on City Design), which helped to define the field; "Arts and Culture in Urban and Regional Planning: A Review and Research Agenda" (Journal of Planning and Education Research); "How Art Spaces Matter" (Artspace); and "Fuzzy Vibrancy: Creative Placemaking as Ascendant U.S. Cultural Policy" (Journal of Cultural Trends). Nicodemus is principal of Metris Arts Consulting, which supports creative placemaking through research, planning, and evaluation. She gives frequent talks nationally and internationally and, since 2012, has made WESTAF's annual peer-nominated list of the nation's 50 most influential people in the nonprofit arts.

21 Ann Markusen, "Creative Cities: A Ten-Year Research Agenda," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, (s22) (August 2014): 567–89; Kevin McCarthy, Elizabeth Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG218>; and Bill Ivey, *Arts, Inc: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).