

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Creative Placemaking

*Rethinking Neighborhood
Change and Tracking Progress*

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JANUARY 2019

Introduction

This paper discusses developments in the conception and assessment of Creative Placemaking initiatives and, more generally, the assessment of comprehensive community-development strategies.

The observations and insights presented here draw from an examination of selected grantees of The Kresge Foundation Arts & Culture team's Creative Placemaking initiative who are operating primarily in low-income neighborhoods around the United States.¹ 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. These observations and insights also stem from a small, but growing, body of research on the roles of arts and culture in communities, as well as from well-established literature on urban poverty and inequality.

Previous papers in this series have discussed the evolution of The Kresge Foundation's Arts & Culture Program strategy and its embrace of Creative Placemaking², as well as introduced observations about the development of the field and work required to ensure that Creative Placemaking contributes to the expansion of opportunity for historically marginalized communities.³ This paper begins to delve more deeply into some of the field needs introduced in previous writings, specifically the need for a more nuanced understanding of urban inequality; how arts, culture and community-engaged design intersect with strategies to expand opportunity; how residents in low-income communities may benefit; as well as the need to re-think how we conceive of and track neighborhood change.

¹ Kresge's grantees working at the neighborhood level serve populations with disproportionately high rates of unemployment, incidence of poverty and related conditions, per an internal Foundation analysis conducted by Sam Coons and Seth Beattie using American Community Survey data.

² The origins and evolution of The Kresge Foundation's Creative Placemaking strategy is documented in Kresge Arts & Culture Program: The First Decade <https://kresge.org/library/kresge-arts-culture-program-first-decade>.

³ A discussion of developments and requirements in the Creative Placemaking field appears in https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cp_white_paper_2_for_posting.pdf.

What does Creative Placemaking Look Like?

While the term “Creative Placemaking” has 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, a persistent and basic 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). 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 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. This often precludes full understanding of Creative Placemaking practices.

A review of The Kresge Foundation’s Creative Placemaking grantees that operate in neighborhoods showed these activities 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 such as [Chinatown Pretty](#). 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 long-time Chinatown residents and newcomers alike.

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In New Orleans, [NewCorp, 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 craftsmen 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, artists, with support from Kresge among others, 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.

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Understanding Urban Inequality, Neighborhood 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 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 flaws in the socioeconomic opportunity structure, 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. At the same time, importantly, it also elevates the need to ensure that issues are addressed holistically, inclusive of necessary sustained structural, systemic and institutional changes critical to eradicating inequity.

Mapping the ways in which arts, culture and design can have plausible impacts at different points of intervention is helpful in strategy-building and impact assessment. What role can artists or designers working with residents play in reimagining systems that are exclusionary? How might culture-bearers help design programs that are more effective, relevant and culturally appropriate for residents in historically marginalized communities? How can 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 CONTRIBUTIONS OF CRATIVE 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 customary one-to-three year grant cycles. Kresge knows that neighborhood investments may not yield the ultimately desired results during a grant period. Those results may not manifest for years to come. However, interactions with grantees and research on the role of arts and culture in communities⁴ 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, examination 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. Changes in evaluation orthodoxies used by community developers and urban planners will be required. Current ways of working and assessing progress do not adequately account for how community change happens and the range of ways in which art, culture and community-engaged design can have impact.

⁴ Jackson, Maria Rosario, Joaquin Herranz and Florence Kabwasa-Green. 2002. *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement*. The Urban Institute. Washington, D.C.; Wali, Alaka, Rebecca Severson and Marion Longoni. 2002. *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*. Chicago Center for Arts Policy, Columbia College. Chicago. Walker, Chris, Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh. 2017. *More Than Storefronts: Insights into Creative Placemaking and Community Economic Development*. Local Initiatives Support Corporation. New York.

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 inequity are to be successful.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN PLANNING

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 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.⁵ 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.

This 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 “gentrification” or, more specifically, the loss of affordability and the psychological, cultural and physical displacement of historically marginalized populations. In real estate markets where displacement concerns are warranted, it is incumbent upon planners, developers, funders 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.

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 well-being. 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. Practitioners and researchers 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.

⁵ 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.

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-cultural activity 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-obstructed 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.

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Developments and Trends in 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.

The national focus on Creative Placemaking has led to a revival 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 hidden features of a community.⁶ To this end, 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.

⁶ Kretzmann, John and John McKnight. 1993. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community's Assets*. ACTA Publications. Chicago, Illinois.

⁷ For more information on mapping cultural treasures, see the Alliance for California Traditional Arts website at <http://www.actaonline.org/content/building-healthy-communities-cultural-treasures> as well as the work of the Southwestern Folk Alliance at, <https://www.southwestfolklife.org/la-doce-research-findings/>.

⁸ For an example of art-based cultural asset mapping see <https://www.lacountyarts.org/willowbrook/>.

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.

In the emerging learning and evaluation culture at The Kresge Foundation, there is a willingness to take risks and try new approaches, knowing that existing evaluation methods frequently fall short of the foundation's aspirations. To this end, Kresge has encouraged collaboration among consulting teams with different methods, experiences and areas of expertise. The foundation has also invested in "equitable evaluation," an emerging practice that calls into question well-established approaches to program assessments that may carry inherent biases.⁹ These biases may perpetuate inequity and preclude a useful and nuanced understanding of conditions, dynamics and changes in low-income communities.

⁹ For more information, see the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) website at <https://www.equitableeval.org> for more information.

Conclusion

The Kresge Foundation's experience with Creative Placemaking, teaches us that developing viable, new ways of framing and capturing community change involves taking risks.

It also requires calibrating expectations about timelines and management methods inherent in blending different perspectives; trying new approaches; and 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, a willingness to reconsider commonly accepted practices; the resolve to try something different, and to accept the process of failing, learning, adapting and trying again.

