

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Creative Placemaking and Expansion of Opportunity

*Observations
and Reflections*

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JULY 2018

Introduction

Creative Placemaking, the integration of arts, culture and community engaged-design into comprehensive community development and urban planning, has gained momentum in the last several years.

At its best, Creative Placemaking builds on a community's cultural assets and leads to healthier places where all people, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, can thrive. It helps to elevate, shape and sometimes transform the physical, social, cultural and economic qualities of neighborhoods. It is fueled by the imagination of community residents and stakeholders, artists, designers and culture bearers often working along with community developers, urban planners and people from other fields. To accelerate the momentum of Creative Placemaking, ensure equitable outcomes and move closer to the day when a robust emphasis on arts, culture and community-engaged design is inherent in planning and development, it is incumbent for all involved to pause, take stock and consider what progress requires.

The observations and reflections presented here are intended for practitioners, community leaders and people in philanthropy, among others who are interested in building healthy, equitable communities and in the systemic integration of arts, culture and community-engaged design critical to that end. This material draws from my work as a senior advisor to The Kresge Foundation's Arts & Culture Program since 2012, working closely with grantees and national partners involved in Creative Placemaking. It also draws from more than 20 years of applied research and practice at the intersection of urban planning, community development and arts and culture from national and local perches. The considerations introduced here provide a point of departure for further examination, discussion and action as the field continues to develop.

Building on Legacy Work, Taking New Risks

The Kresge Foundation's Arts & Culture Program is dedicated to Creative Placemaking with a focus on equitable outcomes.¹

This focus aligns with the foundation's mission of expanding opportunity for people with low incomes and historically marginalized groups in America's cities, and its commitment to cross-sector and cross-disciplinary approaches. The Kresge Foundation entered the Creative Placemaking space boldly, with its president, Rip Rapson, publicly and passionately acknowledging the importance of arts and culture in society and in the foundation's work. He did so without succumbing to the dichotomous thinking prevalent in some dimensions of the arts field about the intrinsic vs. instrumental value of art and cultural activity or buying into narrow interpretations of arts and culture that limit full understanding of the myriad ways in which artists, aesthetics and creativity are manifest and matter in communities. Rapson aspires to having art, culture and community-engaged design be "knitted into the patchwork of land use, housing, transportation, health, environmental, and other systems necessary for stronger, more equitable, and vibrant places."²

Kresge also entered the Creative Placemaking arena with humility, recognizing relevant work already underway. The foundation sought to support and learn from decades of exemplary practices at the neighborhood level where artists, designers, heritage bearers and community residents have helped disinvested communities become more vibrant, relevant, meaningful places. Examples of such initiatives include *Project Row Houses* in Houston; *East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation* in Northern California; *Philadelphia Mural Arts*; *AS220* in Providence, Rhode Island; *Broadway Housing Communities* in New York and the *Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative* in Boston, all Kresge grantees. The foundation also recognized a small, emerging body of research that, over the last 20 years, has focused on (1) building grounded theory about the presence and roles of arts and culture in communities, with a particular focus on low-income and historically marginalized communities, (2) attempts at empirical approaches to test and document impacts of arts and culture and (3) the integration of arts, culture and design into community development and related realms of practice and policy.³ While building on these important precedents, much of what Kresge has set out to do and support is uncharted territory—specifically, seeding the systemic changes that make Creative Placemaking and equitable community development a sustained, effective and common way of working.

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¹ The origins and evolution of The Kresge Foundation's Creative Placemaking strategy is documented in [Kresge Arts & Culture Program: The First Decade](#).

² See presentation by Rip Rapson, [Creative Placemaking: The Role of Arts in Community Development](#), Wilson Center, Washington DC, December 2016.

³ Examples include the [Social Impact of the Arts Project: the Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project](#) at the Urban Institute (see also [Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators](#)); the [Shifting Sands](#) program from the Ford Foundation; and the [Arts & Civic Engagement Impacts Initiative](#) from Animating Democracy, among others.

TAKING ROOT

Several years into the advancement of Creative Placemaking, the language and general premise are taking root. This evolution was encouraged by Kresge, with *ArtPlace America* and the *National Endowment for the Arts* as key collaborators. The term is now widespread in the arts and culture field, and increasingly in community development and urban planning. Related concepts are also becoming more prevalent in the field of public health as interest in environmental determinants of health outcomes deepens. Examples of this are evident in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Building a Culture of Health initiative* and in the California Endowment's *Building Healthy Communities initiative*. Creative Placemaking is appearing in trade journals and in conference titles, as well as in scholarly realms and even popular press. Some universities and colleges have recently initiated programs devoted to it. The term is not without controversy or critics. It has been associated with gentrification, displacement of residents with low-incomes (often including artists), and loss of affordable real estate and lifestyle options in some markets as creative people cultivate places that become hip and attractive to those with disposable income seeking interesting places to live.

As Creative Placemaking gains traction and audiences have more opportunities for exposure to and engagement with the concept and actual work, there is evidence that definitions of art and the roles of artists are expanding. There has been progress with efforts to describe what Creative Placemaking looks like, how it operates and why it matters, although more are needed.⁴ There is also a surge in knowledge-building activity—research on impacts of Creative Placemaking and analyses of Creative Placemaking processes through developmental evaluation, supported, in large part, by ArtPlace, the National Endowment for the Arts and Kresge.

As Creative Placemaking becomes more prevalent, societal issues and social justice concerns such as gentrification, economic and cultural displacement, and cultural appropriation begin to intersect with the term. That leads to the emergence of, quite appropriately, questions about values and ethical practices.⁵ Creative Placemaking is simultaneously being praised and criticized, and the question must be posed: If Creative Placemaking is to be understood as an instrument for greater equity and expansion of opportunity for vulnerable populations, what field developments are most essential?

⁴ See case illustrations captured by ArtPlace America <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/funded-projects> <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/our-work/community-development-investments/introduction> and the National Endowment for the Arts <https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town/> as well as various efforts to document and evaluate place-based initiatives through the Local Initiatives Support Corporation <http://www.lisc.org/our-initiatives/economic-development/creative-placemaking/resources/>.

⁵ In the course of questioning possible negative impacts of Creative Placemaking for vulnerable populations, “Creative Placekeeping” was coined as an alternative. See Bedoya, Roberto. 2013. “Creative Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-Belonging.” *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*. Also, in recent meetings focused on Creative Placemaking, there has been interest in developing a field-wide code of ethics, statement of values and related mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable populations benefit from Creative Placemaking initiatives and are not harmed.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING AND EXPANSION OF OPPORTUNITY

A review of research on the roles of arts and culture in low-income communities and the examination of early experiences of Kresge Creative Placemaking grantees indicate that the strategic development and sustainability of Creative Placemaking practices contributing to the expansion of opportunity for low-income communities requires attention in at least six inter-related areas. While not an exhaustive list, these six areas can be understood as critical field needs or opportunities. They are essential to improving current practices. They are also critical to the training of future urban planners, community developers, community organizers, social workers, public health administrators, artists, arts administrators, designers, funders, policymakers and others involved in creating healthy, just communities. Each is introduced and discussed briefly here. All six warrant further investigation and deliberation.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING AND EXPANSION OF OPPORTUNITY: CRITICAL FIELD NEEDS

- Clear understanding and articulation of the sources and consequences of urban inequality and the process of change at various levels
- Reckoning with limiting practices that impede strategic field convergence
- Reframing the presence and roles of arts, culture and design in vulnerable communities
- Meeting the challenge of cross-sectoral work inclusive of arts, culture and community-engaged design with the patience, nimbleness and new structures required
- Making visible and legible the new ways that artists, community developers, urban planners and others work through Creative Placemaking
- Meeting the challenge of research and evaluation with creativity, rigor and scrutiny of existing orthodoxies.

Understanding Urban Inequality and Change

For anyone involved in Creative Placemaking or any aspect of comprehensive community planning and development, a solid grounding in historic and contemporary root causes as well as the consequences of inequality, including cultural inequity is essential.⁶

Current public and scholarly discourse on poverty and inequality, while growing, is not as robust or nuanced as was the case 25–30 years ago when there was more attention paid to differences in programmatic and policy approaches addressing different kinds of poverty and exclusion. Moreover, while there is a growing body of research on arts and culture in low-income neighborhoods, connections to both root causes of inequality and plausible solutions remain under-theorized and insufficiently considered.

On a related note, in both research and practice, more attention is needed to understand how change relevant to expansion of opportunity actually happens at various levels—on the ground in neighborhoods as well as across local, regional and national systems. In this realm, Kresge’s Creative Placemaking work has led to important insights and breakthroughs. For example, interactions with grantees and extant research on the role of arts and culture in communities provide confidence that many Creative Placemaking efforts, particularly those involving active art practices and community-engaged design, lead to numerous benefits at the neighborhood level. Among them are greater social cohesion and sense of agency among residents, increased pride and stewardship of place, physical transformation and greater control over community narrative. These are important contributions in and of themselves, and, based on grantees’ experiences and previous research, they should also be understood as preconditions for other types of longer-term change. The identification of preconditions necessary, or optimal, for many socio-economic improvements typically tracked by the planning and community-development fields suggests the critical need to reconsider how these fields think of change processes and how progress should be monitored. What facilitates these necessary preconditions? What impedes them? How should they be considered in strategy formulation and assessment?

⁶ “Cultural equity” refers to people’s rights and access to the resources necessary to create and control their own narrative and to develop intellectual and aesthetic conventions and traditions on their own terms.

RECKONING WITH LIMITING PRACTICES THAT IMPEDE STRATEGIC FIELD CONVERGENCE

Creative Placemaking requires the convergence of arts, culture and design with community development, planning and related fields. But prevalent, longstanding professional practices often militate against convergence. For example, in “comprehensive” community development and planning, arts, culture and design often have not been much more than an afterthought, if considered at all. Kresge believes that community-development and planning strategies lacking arts, culture and community-engaged design are inherently flawed and not comprehensive.⁷ To address this, the foundation has incentivized arts-and-culture-based strategies among community developers, planners and others in related fields to target a range of urban issues including bolstering civic engagement, addressing blight and land use, and diversifying economic development strategies to include creative businesses and culture-affirming enterprises such as those that lift up cultural assets (e.g., culinary, design and other traditions specific to historically marginalized communities) that are often overlooked or under-valued.

Kresge also has helped some facets of the arts-and-culture field to be more responsive to community development needs and opportunities by incentivizing cultural organizations to deepen existing involvement in local, comprehensive community-development initiatives. Examples include *Juxtaposition Arts* in Minneapolis, the *Wing Luke Museum* in Seattle and the *Ashé Cultural Arts Center* in New Orleans.

These early investments and insights gleaned from their experiences suggest that what is needed now are field-wide systematic and critical analyses of orthodoxies that militate against conversion and strategic ways of working in support of expansion of opportunity. Thus, in addition to understanding the evolution of Creative Placemaking as a new, interstitial field, there is also merit in better understanding how new orthodoxies that encourage intersection and synergy might evolve in well-established fields implicated in the work. Moreover, we must recognize how interstitial work can have the effect of “raising the bar” across fields—creating higher and different standards for excellence and effective practice.

REFRAMING ARTS, CULTURE AND DESIGN

Momentum toward a more expansive notion of arts and culture in recent years is evident in the proliferation of Creative Placemaking projects; *Creativity Connects*, the National Endowment for the Arts’s 50th Anniversary initiative focused on artists working at the intersection of arts and other fields; and the *California Survey of Arts & Cultural Participation*, the James Irvine Foundation’s survey on arts participation, which exposed the artistic proclivities of Californians without regard for traditional arts genres or modes of participation. That said, so as not to default to narrow and limiting interpretations of art and roles of artists in communities, Creative

“Kresge believes that community-development and planning strategies lacking arts, culture and community-engaged design are inherently flawed and not comprehensive.”

⁷ Jackson, Maria Rosario, “Building Community: Making Space for Art,” Creative Cities Essay Series, Leveraging Investments in Creativity and the Urban Institute. New York and Washington, D.C. 2011.

Placemaking practitioners and advocates must continue their persistence in helping others see, imagine and support the diverse ways that arts, culture and design can be truly integrated and contribute to comprehensive community development.

For many years, the following guiding premises have been useful to me as I have bridged from community development and urban planning to the arts-and-cultural sector and vice versa. Embracing these premises widens the lens for identifying and imagining how arts, culture and design can intersect with community development and planning.⁸

- Creativity, aesthetic expression and the impulse to create meaning are evidence of our humanity and serve as community assets from which to build.
- Participation in arts and culture takes many forms and occurs in a wide range of venues—parks, community centers, churches and public spaces. People attend art events and buy art. But they also make, teach, learn and support arts and culture in myriad ways, from the amateur to professional realms.
- Our societal tendency is to focus on art products, but it is also imperative to recognize and appreciate the creative process. Process can be as important as, or in some cases, more important than art product.
- Artists have many kinds of relationships with communities, often helping people find their voice and expression, or lending a different perspective when framing or devising solutions to community issues.
- Arts-and-culture activity is intrinsically important and contributes to a wide range of community dynamics, conditions and issues.
- Arts-and-culture activity in communities relies on supports inside and outside of the cultural sector.

These premises and their further development are critical to equitable Creative Placemaking practice as well as necessary theoretical and empirical research.

⁸ Jackson, Maria Rosario, *Cultural Vitality in Communities*, TEDX Washington, DC 2012; Jackson, Maria Rosario, *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement*, The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. 2002

Meeting the Challenge of Cross-sectoral Work

Working across policy silos—an inherent element of Creative Placemaking—requires patience and flexibility.

Impediments to cross-sector work include an aversion to disruption of standard procedures and the lack of time to contend with the additional demands of collaboration, including negotiation of possibly competing or seemingly incompatible standards or goals. Other impediments include lack of staff to follow through on work that does not fit into anyone's job description, meager funding for hybrid work, and the inability to frame the work in ways that illuminate stakeholder interests.

Internal, cross-programmatic experience at The Kresge Foundation, the work of Kresge's national partners and grantees, and research on comprehensive strategies indicate that cross-sector work often requires people who can serve as translators and bridges. This involves agility with code-switching from one professional dialect and perspective to another and identifying overlapping areas of interest that may or may not be obvious.⁹ Cross-sector work often requires partnerships and consistent, recurrent opportunities for people from different sectors to build trust and accommodate differences in style, language and ways of framing issues. A shared willingness to take risks and access to materials explaining key tenets in intersecting fields is important, as is the space and tolerance for failing and trying again. Integrating arts and culture into community development often requires an appetite for an open-ended process and comfort with or tolerance for the creative process and the unknown. Some of what is required is disruptive and not always easy, rewarded or even permitted. A better understanding of how best to create a hospitable environment for useful disruption and systemic change is part of the critical work ahead.

MAKING VISIBLE AND LEGIBLE NEW WAYS OF WORKING

In recent years, progress is apparent among artists involved in socially engaged practices as they begin to distinguish different approaches to Creative Placemaking and related activities.

Inherent values in practices, criteria for excellence, and techniques and methods employed are becoming more legible. Efforts to distinguish and codify Creative Placemaking and related practices are imperative to meet the immediate need to share expertise. They are also crucial because they make legible important and sometimes new ways of working that otherwise might be invisible, under-valued or ignored.

⁹ *ArtPlace America's field scans of policy areas intersecting with Creative Placemaking are an important step toward facilitating cross-sectoral work.*

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Examples include the work of Bert Crenca through *Practice//Practice*, a professional development program and various tools and products developed through *Springboard for the Arts* in Minneapolis and *Place Lab* in Chicago. More are needed.

Research, Evaluation and Measurement

The research and evaluation infrastructure for Creative Placemaking is still emerging, and several needs must be addressed, including thick description, developmental or process evaluation and assessment of on-the-ground impacts, as well as research on sustained systems change.

It is essential to build an accessible body of good documentation and developmental analysis that describes various strands of Creative Placemaking, how it works, why it matters, who is involved, and what tensions they navigate and manage. These thick descriptions and analyses of process become the basis for creating new and different ways of working—for imagining new jobs and positions within the arts sector and community-development, planning and related fields and, by extension, new paradigms for training of future practitioners.

The field is also hungry for stronger evidence of Creative Placemaking's impact in expanding opportunity for low-income communities. This is a question that community-development and arts practitioners, funders, policymakers, community leaders and others wish they could answer definitively. We are making progress in understanding the contributions of Creative Placemaking, as noted previously. But we are stymied by the fact that methods for empirically capturing initial impacts such as narrative of place, agency, social cohesion and others are scarce and largely underdeveloped. Moreover, there has been no industry demand for capturing these kinds of impacts, since these conditions and systemic factors impacting them, for the most part, have not been sufficiently accounted for in how we understand the changes aspired to. This is an area ripe for interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral, community-involved and community-led exploration.¹⁰

¹⁰ An example of initiatives to address this field need include the Creative Measurement Lab at Arizona State University—a pilot effort that brought together researchers and practitioners from various fields including art, theater, design, architecture, community development, planning, folklore, sociology and others along with community organizers and leaders to interrogate methods for assessing community agency, social cohesion, stewardship, narrative of place and systemic forces impacting these. Another example is an emerging collaborative effort of The Kresge Foundation, Bush Foundation, Knight Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts and ArtPlace America focused on art, place and social cohesion. The continued work of the Social Impacts of the Arts Project is yet another example. Also, a growing body of work in the evaluation field known as “equitable evaluation” holds the promise of relevant contributions.

Conclusion

While important progress has been made in the Creative Placemaking field, there are formidable challenges that require us to look to the past to learn what we have done well, what we should forgo, and what we must modify or invent.

Additionally, we must ensure that the artists, culture bearers, community leaders, planners, community developers, policymakers, researchers, evaluators and funders who have committed to this work are supported, connected and encouraged in their pursuit of ethical excellence and impact. While there is a proliferation of Creative Placemaking activity, the work can still be lonely and feel like swimming upstream. Moreover, the pool of people poised to do this work effectively, while growing, is still small and only beginning to organize. Lastly, we must look to the future, ensuring that the next generations of people committed to creating vibrant, artful and equitable communities have the benefit of our examined experience and the inspiration, passion, imagination and confidence to continue to take risks and exceed our aspirations.