

Creative Placemaking in the United States: Arts and Cultural Strategies for Community Revitalization

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1. Introduction

In the United States, issues of audience development and engagement in the arts are intersecting issues of community revitalization. Arts organizations are realizing that they must understand and engage with those they seek to serve. Studies are showing that the engagement with others through attending or participating in an arts event is as important to people as experiencing the art. In fact, between 2006 and 2012 the Wallace Foundation in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, funded 54 organizations arts organizations

to develop and test approaches for expanding audiences. The summary report for this important study showed two over-arching themes: 1) successful initiatives created meaningful connections with people, and 2) successful initiatives received sustained attention from both leadership and staff. Understanding these motivations of current and potential audiences is important to creating audience development strategies of organizations (Harlow, 2014).

In 2012 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) conducted the most current national survey of how American adults engage in the arts. The findings show that roughly half of all adults in the U.S. attended or participated in an arts event or activity during the one-year study period. Events and activities measured include visual and performing arts, photography and film-making, electronic media, movie-going, and reading/literature. Especially good news (since the U.S. has a growing non-white population) is that the study noted that non-white and Hispanic Americans saw no declines in arts attendance rates, and actually saw some increases. It is also important to note that this study, along with an increasing number of arts managers and planners, are recognizing the informal ways that people participate in the arts - social dancing, singing in church choirs, belonging to a book club, etc. - as significant forms of arts participation (NEA, 2013). Many arts and cultural advocates are finding that the terms *art* and *culture* often send an unintended message of exclusivity instead of the desired message of inclusivity. The term *creative expression* is now appearing much more as organizations and communities seek to engage more people with the arts. (Arts Midwest, 2016).

Lately, one major engagement effort in developing arts projects has been referred to as *creative placemaking*. The concept of creative placemaking refers to a variety of community-based practices that draw on local arts and cultural assets to building a stronger community. Creative placemaking has become a popular idea in the arts and cultural sectors, but it is still a concept with various meanings and uses, based on the experiences and goals of the users. Rooted in the scholarly tradition focused on *placemaking* (Mayar 2014; Schneekloth and Shibley 1995), creative placemaking brings together several fields of knowledge and practice such as urban planning, public art, community development, and social and cultural policy. In this chapter, we would like to articulate the current debate about the ways of improving life in the communities through the idea of creative placemaking.

We are a cultural policy scholar and a community cultural development consultant aiming to stimulate deeper understanding and dialogue around creative placemaking in the US. Eleonora studies creative placemaking from a cultural policy perspective highlighting the actions developed by the major arts federal agency, the NEA, around this term; Bill reflects on the ways creative placemaking has been and is currently used within community development practice and discourse. We combined our perspectives because we believe that in order to better understand the cultural sector it is important to bring together multiple sets of knowledge and make sense of a fascinating, but very complex reality (Paquette and Redaelli 2015; Föhl, Wolfram, Robert 2016).

2. Creative placemaking and the NEA

In the United States, the major governmental institutions involved in the arts and cultural sector are the NEA at the federal level, state arts agencies, and local organizations at the

county and city levels. The NEA was founded in 1965 as an independent agency that offers funding to projects exhibiting artistic excellence through competitive grants. Creative placemaking is a framework introduced to change the usual paradigm of intervention of the NEA, which was focused on providing funding to specific art forms, and instead promotes the cooperation between the arts, urban planning, and community development. This new strategy emerges from one of the federal agency's goals consisting of fostering engagement with diverse and excellent art to improve livability of places. But what exactly has the NEA done in promoting creative placemaking? Three main actions can be identified: (1) the NEA has spread the use of this term among cultural practitioners with the publication of a white paper titled "Creative placemaking;" (2) it offered funding for projects based on the creative placemaking ideas included in the white paper creating the grant "OutTown;" (3) it leveraged funding and spurred collaborations among different sectors to involve multiple actors in the implementation of creative placemaking projects and ideas initiating the partnership "Artplace" (Redaelli, 2016).

With the release of the white paper "Creative Placemaking" by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, the NEA brought the term creative placemaking to the forefront of how communities can become more livable places by means of arts and culture in 2010. This white paper was commissioned by the Mayor's Institute of City Design, a leadership initiative of the NEA, with the purpose to assess the role of the arts in the community and provide the framework for a future policy platform. The argument was developed merging scholarly literature on urban revitalization and the role of arts and cultural investment, with empirical studies that scan hundreds of cases and offer in-depth analyses about the local efforts developed through the nation (Landesman 2013). Markusen and Gadwa (2010) state that "in creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities" (p. 3). Creative placemaking operates at all geographic scales and mobilizes public will, private support, and secures arts community engagement.

This conceptual framework and definition of creative placemaking was the base for the creation of the grant program "Our Town" and the partnership "ArtPlace." In 2011 through the grant "Our Town" the NEA tried to encourage the development of creative placemaking projects. Between 2011 and 2015, the NEA awarded more than 300 grants totaling almost \$26 million. "Our Town" projects focus on arts engagement and cultural planning and grant awards are made to partnerships that consist of at least one private nonprofit arts organization and a local government entity. Moreover, "Our Town" projects also demonstrate how arts and culture can impact a wide range of community priorities, including economic development, environmental resiliency, at-risk youth and entrepreneurship programs, and use of public spaces. For example, in 2012 the Portland arts nonprofit "My story" received a grant to partner with the city and five neighborhood organizations to develop a youth arts and community program. They developed "We are Portland" a mobile portrait studio that gave local youth an opportunity to photograph their families, friends and neighbors. They provided youth photography workshops, festive Family Portrait Days, and citywide art exhibits.

Beside creating this new grant category, the NEA initiated a partnership called

“ArtPlace” involving six federal agencies along with two White House offices, fifteen leading national and regional foundations, and six of America’s largest banks. ArtPlace was established in 2011 as a ten-year project to strengthen the field and position arts and culture as a core sector of community planning and development. This initiative leveraged a large amount of funding from both the public and private sectors and supported creative placemaking projects with grants throughout the nation, awarding more than 226 projects a total of almost \$70 million. One prominent example is the project Time Based Art (TBA) festival funded in 2011 in Portland. This festival is organized by the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA) and builds on years of itinerant programming throughout the city offering contemporary arts in repurposed buildings. PICA’s festival sparked revitalization in a series of neighborhoods thanks to the support of architecture, developers and contractors partners, while bringing attention to cutting edge contemporary arts projects.

Finally, a closer look at these three initiatives of the federal agency - the white paper, the grant “Our Town,” and the partnership “ArtPlace” - highlight how the NEA spurred collaborations among different actors of the public sphere to gain greater support for the idea of creative placemaking. The white paper was commissioned to two renowned scholars, Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa. This shows an interest from the federal agency to collaborate with academics to develop knowledge in the field. The grant “Our Town” encouraged collaborations requiring arts organizations applying for the grants to cooperate with local governments. Finally, the creation of the partnership “ArtPlace” brought together different federal agencies, banks, and foundations engaging an impressive variety of actors in paying attention to the value of the arts and their contribution to the community.

This brief analysis helps to understand how the NEA promoted the idea of creative placemaking in the United States as an investment in projects that contribute to the livability of communities through multiple partnerships that have the arts at their core. Its actions included shaping the conversation, providing a conceptual framework, as well as supporting actions based on these ideas through the provision of funding through a new grant program and the creation of a partnership involving multiple actors from both the private and public sectors. Our next steps will be to better understand how the idea of creative placemaking has been perceived among practitioners active in community development.

3. Creative placemaking and community development

Interest in involving people from many different backgrounds in community cultural projects has been a central concern not only for the NEA but also for the practice of community development. Over the years community development practitioners developed a range of approaches for working with local communities and in particular disadvantaged people and the need to mobilize people power to affect social change. In the 1990s, arts practices started to be contextualized in these types of projects that had a larger socioeconomic and political purpose (Hager, 2008). Community development practitioners engaged community members in art making often focused on issues concerned with diversity, democracy, and social justice. How do practitioners in the field

perceive the increased popularity of the term creative placemaking? Creative placemaking has received a fragmented and contradictory response among community development practitioners, who mainly struggle with the idea that making a place might mean to disregard its people and its history. In fact, the reception of the term continues to be characterized on the one hand by a series of critiques and struggle on its meaning and on the other hand, by its use highlighting a collaborative practice across professional disciplines and recognition of the local culture.

Sean Starowitz and Julie Cole (Starowitz and Cole, 2015) in *Lumpen Magazine* highlight a few aspects that make the use of the term problematic. They claim that the use of the term creative placemaking conceals an assertion that the areas involved in the projects are not already places with physical value or specific cultural roots. Therefore, they are in need of being transformed through creative actions. Underneath this umbrella term is the practice of using public art and other tools of public design to create nicer, cleaner, friendlier public places, generally defined by standards of mainstream culture, instead of engaging those most affected by change in the process of development resulting in processes of *placemaking*. Starowitz and Cole emphasize the danger of these projects that end up serving the tastes of those who profit from the system and perpetuating inequality. The use of creativity is considered a “magic glue” that brings together places and lives, but in reality it hides the perpetuation of a broken economic system. They presented this argument looking at the latest development of Kansas City, MO that lost historic homes and displaced numerous people.

Following these critiques of the term, Jenny Lee and Roberto Bedoya suggest the alternative concept of *placekeeping* (Bedoya, 2014). Placekeeping is a concept that allows for a greater emphasis on strong connection with, and respect for, the cultural memory of local people. Creative placekeeping is definitely gaining traction with arts organizations engaged in community development. Evidence of this is the webinar “USDAC Citizen Artist Salon: Creative Placemaking, Placekeeping, and Cultural Strategies to Resist Displacement” (U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, 2016) organized by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, a grassroots organization engaged in developing an action network of artists and cultural workers mobilizing creativity in the service of social justice. The main idea is the importance of *keeping* a place through remembering, listening, collaborating, as well as stewardship and collective action, rather than *making* a place through primarily the tools of urban planners. Bedoya explain this concept claiming that projects should understand how people feel that they belong in a place, before any physical changes are made, in order to keep the agency of people alive.

Other practitioners of community development are suggesting directions for creative placemaking emphasizing its multidisciplinary and social justice aspects. Consultant and author Tom Borrup uses the concept to describe “arts and culture as a partner in community revitalization” (Borrup, 2016). Borrup also focuses specifically on betterment of the lives of community members as a primary outcome of creative placemaking. An example of this collaboration between arts and culture and the revitalization is the work of the organization Know Your City (Know Your City, 2016) in Portland, Oregon. This innovative organization engages the public through art and social justice creative

placemaking projects. Programs and publications aim to educate people to better know their communities and to empower them to take action toward more just communities. Core programs include walking tours, such as A People's Tour of Portland which explains history from the "bottom up"; Portland books and publications which make history and contemporary issues publicly accessible and utilize local artists, writers, graphic designers, and illustrators; youth programs that get students out of classrooms to interact with civic leaders, inquire how the city of Portland works, and encourage them to conduct interviews and produce media including video or artwork that communicate what they have learned.

This quick overview of the reception of the term creative placemaking in the community development discourse illustrates how this term does not have a clear connotation or reception. On one hand, it is sometimes perceived as a fancy idea that ends up perpetuating social inequality. At the same time, there are practitioners and organizations enhancing the role of social justice through creative placemaking projects.

4. Conclusions

In this chapter we exposed the current debate in the United States about the ways of revitalizing communities through the idea of creative placemaking. We approached creative placemaking from different perspectives: one highlighting the role of the NEA in framing and supporting the term and another reporting how community development practice is reacting, using, or critiquing the term. This joint investigation made us realize how, besides different opinions on the use of the term, creative placemaking is a concept that is generating a lively conversation between the arts, urban development, arts funding, equity, and social justice: all important ingredients for more livable places. This overview showed also that the debate around the concept of creative placemaking parallels in many respects our introductory comments on audience development and arts participation where emerges the importance of engagement "with" the community. Finally, approaching the term from our different perspectives and professional practices – one of a scholar and one of a consultant - allowed us to realize how a conversation between scholars and practitioners brings different sets of knowledge to the table and is fundamental to articulating the nuances and developing a better understanding of concepts shaping the arts and cultural sectors.

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