

Assessing a Set of Indicators for Creative Placemaking: Reflections From the Field

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Along with the interest and growth in creative placemaking is a concomitant interest in measuring and communicating accomplishments of those efforts and sharing good practices among creative placemaking practitioners. Toward this end, funders, researchers, and other interested parties are developing methods of measuring impact and identifying what information (e.g., indicators) to collect to measure progress toward a goal. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), for example, developed a set of creative placemaking indicators to enable practitioners and other stakeholders to better identify and understand potential outcomes of their efforts and how they might be communicated.² Similarly, ArtPlace America identified an initial set of 10 Vibrancy Indicators intended to help assess its investment in creative placemaking and learn more about the contributions of arts activities to creative placemaking.³ Indicators have also been developed for some local creative placemaking projects.⁴

Identifying these indicators is not without challenges because creative placemaking efforts often have multiple and varying goals, such as increasing employment, reducing crime, and attracting or retaining residents. Community context also affects the appropriateness of particular indicators. For example, crime rates may not be considered particularly useful as indicators for communities that generally have little crime. Thus, multiple indicators are needed. In addition, considerable debate exists among arts researchers and practitioners about which indicators are best aligned with and able to measure benefits of creative placemaking efforts.⁵ Despite these challenges, managers and funders of creative placemaking initiatives are interested in identifying and using indicators to help determine whether outcomes of interest are moving in the desired direction.

1 The described study received support from the NEA. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, its funders, or the NEA.

2 The NEA does not expect all grantees to use all of its indicators. Rather, they are intended as resources to be used where applicable. For more information, see Sunil Iyengar, “Taking Note: Learning Is the New Word for Evaluation,” *Art Works Blog*, May 8, 2014, <http://arts.gov/art-works/2014/taking-note-learning-new-word-evaluation>.

3 For more information on the ArtPlace America indicators and their use, see “Vibrancy Indicators” at <http://www.artplaceamerica.org/vibrancy-indicators/>; and “ArtPlace America Metrics FAQ” at <http://www.artplaceamerica.org/artplace-metrics-faq/>.

4 See, for example, indicators developed for Minneapolis’ creative placemaking effort focused on Hennepin Avenue: Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, “Track-It Hennepin 2012: Baseline Indicators and Data Roadmap” December 2012; and pp 10-24 of Appendices to “Plan-It Hennepin: Creative Placemaking for Downtown Minneapolis,” http://hennepintheatretrust.org/sites/default/files/user/email/plan-it_appendices.pdf.

5 Ann Markusen, “Creative Cities: A 10-Year Research Agenda,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36 (S2) (2014): 567–589.

The Validating Arts and Livability Indicators Study

The NEA sponsored the Urban Institute's Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study from fall 2012 to spring 2014 to validate a set of 23 potential indicators.⁶ The NEA selected indicators to reflect four key dimensions of livability: resident attachment to community, quality of life, arts and cultural activity, and economic conditions. The NEA identified multiple indicators for each dimension (Table 1). It chose indicators by reviewing goals of applicants for NEA funding and by reviewing relevant research. The NEA chose only indicators for which data are available from national, publicly available sources, such as the US Census Bureau's County Business Patterns data to avoid the need for practitioners to rely exclusively on local sources, which may not always exist, or to collect their own data, which can be expensive and time-consuming. Publicly reported data establishes reasonably reliable indicators of changes in a community's livability. Although creative placemaking efforts are not the only cause of changes in publicly reported data values, such changes could be examined in combination with local or project-specific data to better understand a creative placemaking project's effects. In addition, changes in indicator values could be a starting point for more rigorous project evaluation.⁷

The VALI study sought feedback about the suitability of the indicators for two purposes: to reflect livability conditions and, separately, as outcome indicators specific to local creative placemaking efforts. Researchers conducted site visits and held a convening to obtain feedback from approximately 80 participants involved in creative placemaking from 10 Our Town grantee communities.⁸ (For more on the NEA's Our Town grants, see Chu and Schupbach in this issue.) Urban and rural sites were equally represented in the study. Participants provided feedback by reviewing community-specific maps and bar charts based on indicator data and also discussed indicators conceptually (independent of numeric values). Participants represented approximately 50 organizations, including arts and cultural organizations, community or neighborhood organizations, and businesses and local government agencies. The study also included a focus group with five practitioners or researchers with expertise in community development and indicators who were not directly involved in creative placemaking.

6 E. Morley, M. K. Winkler, S. Zhang, R. Brash, J. Collazos, "The Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study: Results and Recommendations," (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2014), <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/413142-The-Validating-Arts-and-Livability-Indicators-Study-Results-and-Recommendations.pdf>.

7 J. Schupbach and S. Iyengar, "Our View of Creative Placemaking, Two Years In," November 27, 2012, <http://createequity.com/2012/11/our-view-of-creative-placemaking-two-years-in.html>; and J. Schupbach, "Creative Placemaking—two years and counting!" May 31, 2012, <http://arts.gov/art-works/2012/creative-placemaking-two-years-and-counting>.

8 Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, who served as an advisor to this study, facilitated portions of this day-long convening.

Table 1. NEA Candidate Indicators for the Arts and Livability

Indicator	Geographical Area
Resident Attachment to Community	
Capacity for homeownership (proportion of single-unit structures)	Census Tract
Length of residence (median length)	Census Tract
Proportion of housing units owner occupied	Census Tract
Proportion of housing units occupied	Census Tract
Election turnout rate	County
Household outflow (tax returns leaving)	County
Civic engagement establishments per 1,000 population	ZIP Code
Quality of Life	
Median commute time	County
Retail and service establishments per 1,000 population	ZIP Code
Violent crime rate	County
Property crime rate	County
Percentage of residential addresses not collecting mail	County
Net migration	County
Arts and Cultural Activity	
Median earnings of residents employed in arts- and entertainment-related establishments	Census Tract
Proportion of employees working in arts- and entertainment-related establishments	County
Relative payroll of arts- and entertainment-related establishments	County
Arts, culture, and humanities nonprofits per 1,000 population	Census Tract
Arts and entertainment-related establishments per 1,000 population	ZIP Code
Economic Conditions	
Median home purchase loan amounts	Census Tract
Median household income	Census Tract
Active business addresses	Census Tract
Unemployment rate	Census Tract
Income diversity	Census Tract

Note: Based on outcome area and the lowest geographical level at which national data are available.

Reactions to the Indicators

Participants approached this study with more interest than expected. They were very engaged with the indicators and local data validation activities throughout the process. Many asked thoughtful questions, challenged assumptions, and offered alternative proposals. Their responses suggested an appetite for measuring the impact of creative placemaking efforts. This was particularly evident at the convening of four Our Town grantees—two rural and two urban communities. Each community had two representatives—one from an arts-related partner agency, the other from a government partner agency. The mixture of perspectives, evident in both full-group and small-group discussions, provided a particularly rich exchange of ideas. Often, such “buy in” is absent and measurement activities are primarily viewed in the context of grant compliance and less often in the context of program improvement.

Key findings from the VALI Study (the report is available on the NEA and Urban Institute websites) include the following:⁹

Participants viewed most of the indicators as representative of their respective livability dimensions. Some exceptions included single-unit housing structures (representing capacity for homeownership) and election turnout rates as signals of community attachment; and home purchase loan amounts and a measure of income distribution (Gini coefficient) as indicators of economic conditions.

Less consensus existed on the validity of indicators as measures of creative placemaking project contributions. Participants had mixed or less favorable reactions to a greater number of indicators when they considered using them to reflect their own project’s intended outcomes. Less favorable were single-unit housing structures and election turnout rates (resident attachment to community), and median commute time (quality of life). Several indicators, including crime rates, household income, and unemployment rates received mixed ratings. Given the relatively small size and scope of many creative placemaking efforts in the context of the larger community, many participants believed these projects could not have much effect on these indicators.

Community context matters. The communities selected to participate in this study were diverse in many ways, including age of community; geographic region; population (age, size, density); project type (e.g., arts infrastructure, cultural district development, festivals and engagement); and project objectives. These and other characteristics appeared to affect perceptions of indicators, particularly their appropriateness as creative placemaking indicators. For example, individuals representing an urban or rural area often expressed different views about the same indicator (e.g., crime rates). However, when the responses were aggregated among all communities, these differences tended to be more muted.

9 Elaine Morley et al, “The Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study: Results and Recommendations,” <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/VALI-Report.pdf>.

Geographic scope of indicators is a principal concern. Study participants often raised concerns about using indicator data reported in large geographic areas (e.g., county crime rates) to reflect changes in smaller areas where creative placemaking projects typically focus efforts (e.g., neighborhoods). However, participants considered data reported for these larger areas useful in providing context for other indicators.

Looking Ahead

The VALI study showed that most respondents viewed the indicators as relevant within their respective livability dimensions. However, participants viewed some indicators as less strongly relevant for measuring the contribution of individual creative placemaking efforts. Most participants viewed the set of indicators as a reasonable place to start, but many also thought that additional indicators and tools were needed to effectively communicate individual program or collective community effects. These findings suggest a two-part agenda. The first part should address identifying the most appropriate measures. The second should focus on how best to develop the capacity of creative placemaking organizations to capture and report on their contributions to individuals and communities. We offer the following suggestions:

Taxonomy of Outcomes

Build on the efforts of NEA, ArtPlace America, and others in the field by assembling a working group to develop and gradually refine a taxonomy of outcomes to capture the individual and collective contributions of creative placemaking efforts. Efforts such as the Cultural Data Project—or the more recent effort by Grantmakers in the Arts to establish a National Standard Taxonomy on Support for Individual Artists¹⁰—could guide development of such a classification structure. The taxonomy of cultural vitality indicators, developed by Maria Rosario Jackson and colleagues, could also offer guidance.¹¹ A distinguishing factor of this suggestion is emphasis on outcomes for individuals and community rather than a set of indicators that largely captures inputs and resources supporting arts activities. The four livability dimensions are a start, but other dimensions, such as education, health, and diversity (sometimes noted as gaps by study participants) could be readily added. Initially, this taxonomy could be an inventory of indicators currently available and in use, but it could quickly evolve to build a menu or wish list of desirable indicators currently unavailable or untested.

Creative Placemaking Monitoring and Evaluation Peer Network

The VALI Study revealed considerable interest in indicators, data sources, and data collection techniques. Creating a forum for various stakeholders to continue to engage in

10 Alan Brown et al, “A Proposed National Standard Taxonomy for Reporting Data on Support for Individual Artists,” (Seattle, WA: Grantmakers in the Arts, 2014), <http://www.giarts.org/article/support-for-individual-artists-research-initiative>.

11 Maria Rosario Jackson et al, “Cultural Vitality In Communities: Interpretation and Indicators,” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2006), <http://www.urban.org/publications/311392.html>.

these and other topics could support creative placemaking activities and better measurement opportunities. The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, as an example of a network, sponsors a listserv enabling participants to share resources, post research inquiries, or share ideas about current or best practices. Depending on the size, scope, and interest of a potential creative placemaking community of interest, participants could work together to solve problems with gaps in research, data collection strategies, and methods. Such a network could be established with relatively low overhead, but choosing a sponsor or moderator for the network may require more consideration.

Repository of Tools and Approaches for Evaluating Creative Placemaking

Although the size and scale of creative placemaking activities vary considerably, many projects have limited capacity and resources to undertake measurement or evaluation activities. Finding a place to post sample community surveys, local strategies for obtaining less commonly available data elements, or case studies would shorten the learning curve for many communities. The repository could include links to publicly available resources, with new links added as they become available. Materials could include case studies, such as the NEA's recently released e-storybook of case studies and lessons learned from Our Town grantees;¹² studies or guidance documents on indicators; and data sets or descriptions of data sets, such as those available from local indicator projects in some communities.¹³ VALI Study researchers identified several projects that may have indicators relevant to creative placemaking. The NEA expects to provide this information in 2015.

Research Partnerships

Data collection and evaluation capacity concerns of local creative placemaking projects may also be addressed by encouraging partnerships with local universities or community-based groups. The advantages of such partnerships, in many cases, is to offer low-cost support beyond what may be possible with limited funding for most local creative placemaking efforts. Depending on the type of data collection activity, it may be possible for partners to help engage residents (e.g., recent retirees) in conducting in-person community surveys or participating in focus groups to obtain data on a variety of community outcomes unlikely to be available to national, regional, or local administrative data sources.

We believe advancement on any of these fronts would lead to a broader menu of indicators, data collection strategies, and, ultimately, better data in support of creative placemaking efforts.

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12 The National Endowment for the Arts, "Exploring Our Town," <http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town/>

13 The Boston Indicators Project is a well-known example. It includes a section of indicators on cultural life and the arts. See <http://www.bostonindicators.org/>.

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