

Building Capacity for Creative Community Development

Paul Singh
NeighborWorks America

Every community in America can be a place of opportunity. NeighborWorks America is a congressionally chartered nonprofit that has worked for more than 40 years to make this vision a reality. We provide a range of capacity-building resources, including grants, technical assistance, and training, to a national network of nearly 250 community development organizations, in addition to strengthening the broader community development field.¹ NeighborWorks supports comprehensive community development: holistic strategies—driven by partnerships between residents and other stakeholders—that work across sectors to address the multiple factors that shape the lives of families and individuals. These comprehensive approaches often incorporate arts- and culture-based strategies to engage residents, build community, create awareness, forge partnerships, beautify public spaces, honor history and culture, revitalize neighborhoods, promote economic growth, and elevate marginalized voices. The NeighborWorks network has been undertaking these strategies for years, but as the creative placemaking field has grown and matured over the past decade, there has been new interest among network members in examining, deepening, and expanding this work.

NeighborWorks is building organizational capacity by expanding our training, outcome evaluation, and peer learning offerings to more fully support work at the intersection of arts and community development. We recognize the organizational evolution that this work necessitates, so we are adapting our own approaches and resources to help accelerate this change. We also acknowledge that there is a robust and growing ecosystem of intermediaries and other national, regional, and local organizations focused on building capacity for creative placemaking. In sharing our own evolution and lessons learned, we hope to contribute to a field-wide effort that supports organizations in using the arts to achieve positive community outcomes.

An Evolving Approach

In 2017, NeighborWorks surveyed our network regarding their creative placemaking experience and activities. With nearly a third of the network responding, a strong majority (75 percent) reported that they already strategically incorporate arts and culture into their work

¹ Two of the Community Development Investments (CDI) participants featured in this journal are also NeighborWorks network organizations (Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership and Little Tokyo Service Center).

and expressed interest in doing even more. Mirroring the evolution in the broader field, the organizations also reported that they use arts and culture to advance several comprehensive community development goals beyond economic revitalization. In-depth case studies also revealed that incorporating the arts leads community development organizations to adapt both internal practices and the ways they engage with residents, partners, and the communities they serve.

An example of this evolution comes from Pathfinder Services, a NeighborWorks network member that provides housing and supportive services in Huntington, IN, a rural town of 17,000 people. Pathfinder's first foray into arts and culture began in 2012 when it introduced painting into a course for developmentally disabled adults. After witnessing how the arts helped to foster independence and inclusion, Pathfinder soon expanded the program into the Creative Abilities Studio, which teaches clients a wide range of studio arts. Creative Abilities Studio enables the participants to learn new skills, socialize with one another, and, in some cases, earn revenue from the art they produce.

As Pathfinder CEO John Niederman witnessed the transformative role that art played in helping its clients, he wondered if Pathfinder also could use arts and culture to help the wider community of Huntington. If the studio could unleash creativity in its clients, what untapped talent might be identified in other residents? If clients could make an income from their artwork, could other Huntington residents as well? Like many rural communities, Huntington has experienced population decline; if people discovered the city's assets, would they move there?

This questioning led Pathfinder to pursue new partnerships and a broader creative placemaking strategy. It began by collaborating with the LaFontaine Arts Council on plans for an Arts and Entrepreneurial Center, which is slated to open in 2020. Pathfinder and the Council developed the design and programming for the center based on input from artists from across the region who articulated the supports needed to establish and grow their businesses. Pathfinder has worked with the city and a private developer to incorporate the center into an \$8 million mixed-use rehabilitation project. Using Success Measures tools, Pathfinder is also conducting a resident survey to identify individuals with artistic talents who may benefit from and contribute to the center's planned entrepreneurship training.

At the same time, Pathfinder helped lead an inclusive process to create a citywide arts plan for Huntington. Released in 2018, the plan calls for a range of strategies to advance livability, opportunity, vitality, and education, or LOVE, through the arts. As a result, Huntington artists have undertaken a number of projects, including activating an "Arts Alley," to highlight the city's recreational amenities and advance ongoing revitalization efforts.

Identifying Capacity-Building Challenges and Opportunities

Although NeighborWorks has supported creative placemaking efforts in our network with financial and other resources, this support lacked an intentional focus prior to 2017.

That year, we launched a planning process to better understand the role of arts, culture, and creativity in our work, and to identify ways to leverage our existing capacity-building resources to support the implementation of creative practices across our network and the broader field. Through our exploration, we observed numerous ways that community development and arts enhance one another. As a result, we affirmed and embraced “creative community development” as a key strategy for ensuring that every community in America is a place of opportunity.² In describing this work as “creative community development,” we sought a term that encompasses both creative placemaking and placekeeping. Creative community development occurs when residents, community development organizations, artists, culture bearers, and other partners harness the power of culture, art, and creativity to collectively catalyze social, physical, and economic transformation in their neighborhoods, towns, tribal lands, cities, or regions.

Our planning process also revealed that community development organizations face several key challenges in pursuing creative community development. These include:

- **Insufficient understanding** of the potential value of creativity, cultural expression, and artistic practice to community development
- **Difficulty demonstrating and articulating the impact** of creative community development
- **Struggle with identifying arts partners** and developing shared expectations and frameworks
- Need to avoid gentrification-led displacement and **promote inclusion**
- Difficulty in **securing financial resources**

Although each challenge is important to address, the issue of insufficient understanding merits added focus from a capacity-building perspective. Many network organizations that we spoke to shared that their early efforts were limited by preconceived notions of what constitutes “art” or “creative placemaking.” They initially tended to prioritize artistic products (e.g., the archetypal mural project) over partnerships with artists that could yield creative ways of addressing a range of problems. Community developers can also be risk-averse, which can limit receptivity to creative processes that delve into ambiguity or the unexpected. External models and examples that can expand the vision are often required, along with an internal champion who pushes boundaries, to introduce and keep creative community development at the forefront of an organization’s strategy.

² For more on the results from this planning process, see our “Creative Community Development Final Report” at http://neighborworks.org/Documents/Community_Docs/Revitalization_Docs/CreativeCommunityDevelopment_FinalReport2018.aspx.

Building Capacity for Creative Community Development

Addressing these challenges requires broadening exposure, cultivating imagination, supporting demonstrations, facilitating peer learning, and helping internal champions demonstrate the value of creative community development to internal decision-makers, as well as external partners and funders. In response to these needs, NeighborWorks has identified the following priorities to guide future capacity-building activities:

- Build network organizations' capacity to implement creative community development with a focus on advancing more equitable outcomes
- Raise visibility of arts- and culture-based strategies and creative expression to increase understanding of their value
- Provide the network and broader field with tools for and training in creative community development and outcome measurement
- Embed creative practices and collaboration within capacity-building efforts

We are particularly focused on embedding creative community development into our training, outcome evaluation, and peer learning offerings. By integrating this focus into our existing programs and resources, we hope to reach a broad cross section of the community development field—including those who may have minimal exposure to creative community development.

Training: Broadening Horizons and Building Core Capacities

Last year, we partnered with ArtPlace America to design a new training course as part of the NeighborWorks Training Institute, one of the premier and most comprehensive professional development opportunities for community developers. The new course, *Leveraging Arts and Culture for Affordable Housing and Equitable Community Development*, is based on findings from a series of six peer-led site visits sponsored by NeighborWorks and ArtPlace America in summer 2018. These visits explored promising models that integrate arts and affordable housing and engaged the hosts and visitors in learning from one another. The resulting course equips participants to partner with artists, conceptualize creative projects, and incorporate culturally relevant design into their projects. A simple four-point process outlined in the course provides practitioners with an accessible tool for planning effective creative community development projects. The steps in this process include:

1. Understand the community
2. Identify community development issues
3. Work with artists and culture bearers
4. Assess the impact

Going forward, NeighborWorks will continue to partner with ArtPlace America and others to infuse our training curriculum with creative community development examples and tailored content.

Implications for Capacity Builders: Robust participation in our initial training offering demonstrates demand for frameworks and tools that equip community developers to move beyond preconceived notions of creative placemaking, design new projects or initiatives, and partner with artists to advance community development goals. By embedding creative community development into existing training platforms and integrating it among diverse subject areas, capacity builders can extend their reach and build a broader constituency for creative community development.

Outcome Evaluation: Linking Arts and Culture to Community Development Goals

Success Measures, a participatory outcome evaluation group within NeighborWorks, offers consulting, technical assistance, data collection tools, and technology to help organizations plan and conduct evaluations. Based on our key finding that assessing and communicating impact is a challenge for practitioners, Success Measures is working to adapt and test a suite of data collection tools that will measure aspects of creative community development. This work includes engaging with other evaluators, researchers, and experts in creative community development to inform the tool-revision, development, and field-testing process. Some of the outcomes that Success Measures has identified as priorities for tool refinement and development include resident engagement; physical changes; social outcomes, such as health and well-being; cultural preservation; and the social practice of art. In addition, Success Measures will be developing a pair of new tools that capture impacts using creative methods, potentially including photography, video, storytelling, performance, and other audio/visual methods.

Implications for Capacity Builders: When we asked our network organizations how NeighborWorks can help address the most frequently cited challenge of securing financial resources, we heard that assisting organizations to demonstrate, quantify, and communicate the impact of creative community development is essential. This speaks to the need for continued work by capacity builders to create rigorous evaluation tools that can use multiple methods to demonstrate how arts-based strategies contribute to community development outcomes.

Peer Learning: Elevating Models of Equity and Inclusion

By facilitating peer-to-peer learning, NeighborWorks supports the dissemination of creative community development models across our network. In response to the expressed need for models that advance equity and counteract gentrification and displacement, NeighborWorks is launching a “learning community” that will engage five network organizations and their arts-based partners in designing and implementing strategies to raise awareness, engage stakeholders, and respond to these challenges in their communities. Working with

Springboard for the Arts, NeighborWorks will document and share the lessons and tools that emerge from the learning community and disseminate the findings broadly.

Implications for Capacity Builders: The expansion of the creative placemaking field over the past decade has led to a lot of innovation at the local level. Increasingly, community developers are interested in models that not only result in economic or neighborhood revitalization but ensure benefits for existing low-income residents and people of color. Capacity builders can help to elevate and spread these promising models—especially those that are focused on promoting the essential community development goals of inclusion and equity.

Layering Resources to Achieve Results

Foundation Communities owns and operates 24 residential developments across central and north Texas and provides a range of education, financial stability, and health services to its residents. Although some staff members had interest in creative placemaking, they did not formally incorporate it into their programming until after engaging in the NeighborWorks planning process in 2017. As part of that process, Foundation Communities participated in some of our initial training and peer learning, and consequently began to envision arts and culture as part of its holistic strategy.

Foundation Communities is currently undertaking three creative placemaking pilots to engage residents in the design of healthy residential communities. The organization is partnering with artists and using creative methods to better articulate resident needs, improve new building design, and inform ongoing programming to advance equity and health outcomes. In launching the pilots, Foundation Communities developed new partnerships and secured new funding sources. It was also recently awarded an arts fellow as part of Enterprise’s Rose Fellowship program. Beginning in late 2019, the fellow will further incorporate creative placemaking into Foundation Communities’ way of working. Although advancing this initiative has required patience and learning at every step—and sustaining bandwidth remains an ongoing challenge—Asset Project Manager Paula Suchland and Director of Institution Giving Julie Candoli report that staff across the organization are enthused and seeing the benefits from this inclusive approach.

Suchland and Candoli said they struggled at first to build the case internally within Foundation Communities—largely due to a lack of understanding of what creative placemaking entailed. By framing it as part of a comprehensive approach to community development, NeighborWorks helped bring legitimacy and credibility to their education effort. The expansive view of arts and culture embodied by NeighborWorks’ definition of “creative community development” also helped them to articulate its value to leadership. Case studies produced by NeighborWorks equipped them with examples of how arts and culture can help achieve community development goals. Last year, a team from Foundation Communities also participated in a peer-learning site visit hosted by ArtPlace America and NeighborWorks, where they received constructive feedback on their initial plans and referrals to additional resources.

Cross-Cutting Lessons for Building Capacity

Creative community development is still an emerging focus area for NeighborWorks America, but even over the past two years, we have learned several lessons that will inform our own efforts and may contribute to other capacity-building initiatives in the creative placemaking field.

Expanding imagination requires demonstrating the value of creative placemaking to community development goals.

NeighborWorks America's commitment to creative community development is grounded in our core values of equity, inclusion, resident engagement, and supporting strategies that best fit local conditions. We also recognize it as one of several components of comprehensive community development. By elevating and supporting models that align with these strategic priorities, capacity builders can help organizations move beyond preconceived notions by demonstrating how creative placemaking can advance a wide range of community development objectives. Further work across the field to equip internal champions with frameworks and tools to measure, assess, and communicate impact will also help to build support for efforts that are seen as innovative or risky.

Support is required for small-scale projects that can serve as learning opportunities and catalysts for future activities.

Creative placemaking success stories that feature large-scale, transformative efforts often gloss over the growing pains, setbacks, and incremental, small victories that characterize this work. In describing their experience growing a small, resident-led effort to activate community voices through photography into a full range of arts-related activities designed to build social cohesion, network member NeighborWorks of Western Vermont (NWWVT) admitted it "bit off more than it could chew." Despite widespread enthusiasm and support from leadership, challenges sustaining funding, volunteers, and partner engagement forced NWWVT to recalibrate plans and focus on smaller-scale projects that could build momentum over time. This experience is common—assembling adequate funding and ensuring long-term sustainability were the most commonly cited challenges reported by the NeighborWorks network organization in response to our 2017 survey. There is further need for flexible funding, training, peer learning, case studies, and other resources to help organizations navigate this nonlinear process and sustain/grow the effort through the startup or retrenchment phases.

Partnering with artists can improve the design and delivery of capacity-building resources.

As we support creative community development efforts in our network and beyond, NeighborWorks is learning how the creative process can benefit our own programs and services. We have taken initial steps to partner with artists in the planning and implementation of peer learning and training opportunities. This has revealed new ways of surfacing issues, elevating voices, and bringing new perspectives and alternative approaches to solving

problems. Like NeighborWorks, many organizations may find it challenging to embrace new ways of doing things, but partnering with socially minded artists can expand and enhance the impact of our capacity-building resources.

Conclusion

The growth of the creative placemaking field has already been accelerated by intermediaries and other capacity-building organizations that have realized the potential of arts and culture to advance community development goals. Still, there is additional opportunity to learn from what has worked, highlight emerging models, push boundaries, build core competencies, advance partnerships, and demonstrate the value of creative placemaking. In sharing lessons from NeighborWorks' efforts to develop a suite of tools and resources to support creative community development, we hope to contribute to a collective, field-wide capacity-building effort that can support the continued evolution of the practice.

Paul Singh, Vice President of Community Initiatives, leads NeighborWorks America's support for comprehensive community development efforts to build vibrant local communities that provide equitable opportunities for people to thrive. Singh oversees the Stable Communities, Community Building and Engagement, Rural and Healthy Homes and Communities Initiatives and the work of these teams to elevate and strengthen local practice through grantmaking, technical assistance, capacity building, peer-to-peer learning, demonstration projects, stakeholder convenings, and research. Prior to joining NeighborWorks in 2012, Singh was a Program Officer at LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), where he managed multiple programs that deliver technical assistance and training to nonprofits. Singh got his start in community development at Historic Saint Paul, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the historic character of his hometown of St. Paul, MN. He has a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Minnesota and an undergraduate degree from Macalester College.