

How Organizations Evolve When Community Development Embraces Arts and Culture

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The combination of community development with the social practice of art can lead to serious dissonance with respect to styles and boundaries. The nonprofit sector builds affordable housing with government support or provides health care for low-income residents according to a massive and arcane set of rules and financial constraints that have conditioned its practitioners to be very careful and attentive to detail, to always know what they will be getting from every contractor for each dollar, and to commit only to things on which they are authorized to spend. The creativity, such as it is, comes in maneuvering that system to get the best results. In contrast, artists who care deeply about being engaged with society and with local communities are experts at freeing and stoking not only their own imagination, but also that of the people with whom they work. They are experts at helping folks not only express themselves, but also become unbound from conventions and envision a radically different future.

What happens when these two very different approaches to transforming communities are brought together, with the time, resources, and support to create something new? The core concept underlying the Community Development Investments (CDI) initiative was to strengthen the capacity of community development groups to fulfill their mission through arts and cultural strategies. There was no intent for them to become cultural entities themselves. They undertook an array of discrete projects that brightened the landscape, improved the facilities, enlivened the discourse, and nourished the soul of each community. When the CDI projects and activities partnered with artists, designed buildings and spaces, or used cultural activities as a technique for community engagement, these were intended to be tools for accomplishing a larger goal. The organizations were invited to use arts and culture to think big, aim high, and find new ways to follow through on those aspirations.

This integration of arts into community development has taken root and changed the ways these organizations operate on two broad levels. The first level involves the overall culture, leadership, and future direction of the organization. The arts and cultural strategies led to fundamental rethinking by these groups of where they were headed and how they would get there. For these community development groups, a common thread was recognizing the value of changing how they operate, a reassessment they undertook even though they were successful with their current expertise and familiar activities. Agencies like these can face a gap between their practices and the voices, needs, and aspirations of the residents

in the communities they serve, especially when those are lower-income communities of color that have been marginalized or disinvested. Or, the community itself can change as populations shift, and the new population will not have strong connections to the more established groups. These gaps between organization and community will remain if they are not directly addressed. For the CDI organizations, arts and cultural strategies became the means to recognize these gaps, trigger a reassessment, and build the necessary bridges to incorporate community-oriented listening and collaboration into their long-term plans. They were acting in response not only to their immediate surroundings, but also to the social, economic, and political forces that shape their fields.

The second level of organizational change involves restructuring to deeply incorporate arts and culture into the daily fabric of the organization. For an organization to move beyond compelling visions and good intentions, the agency's core functions have to be reorganized to put time, talent, energy, and leadership into ensuring that new work lasts beyond a one-time grant.

The various dimensions of these levels of organizational growth and change are listed below. They are addressed in more depth, and with reference to the other CDI sites, in other articles in this volume and in other publications of the PolicyLink CDI research and documentation endeavor.¹

Key Themes of Organizational Growth and Change

Changes in the overall culture, leadership, and future direction of the organization came about as a result of the arts and cultural strategies. These included

- Building greater capacity and more openness to risk and experimentation
- Finding new ways to express an organization's core values and tell its own story
- Specifying different definitions and measurements of success based on those values
- Crafting more effective interactions with community members, partners, and stakeholders

Internal restructuring of the organization was required to deeply incorporate arts and cultural strategies. This includes such factors as

- Empowering key staff members to lead the new work
- Bringing the overall staff around to accepting, if not embracing, the new approach
- Incorporating arts and culture into the organizational strategic planning
- Changing internal systems to facilitate the new strategies

¹ The publications are available at www.communitydevelopment.art.

The Culture Change Underway in Housing and Neighborhood Development

Ever since the formation of community development corporations in the 1960s, countervailing incentives and requirements have pulled nonprofit developers in two directions: (1) to become proficient and effective at financing and getting affordable housing and community facilities built and operating efficiently or (2) to take on the much more open-ended, social, cultural, and economic challenges that underlie persistent poverty and health inequities in their neighborhoods. This pendulum swings between narrowly scoped projects and ambitious community revitalization, and lately, arts and cultural strategies are providing the reasons and tools to take up that broader mandate.



Residents of Milan, MN respond to prompts about their community developed by artists. Photo credit: Chris Johnson

Three of the six CDI lead organizations were affordable housing developers and managers, each of them very accomplished in that practice but with a strong determination to find new ways to have a broader and deeper impact on their communities. For the Little Tokyo Service Center, this meant drawing upon arts and culture to build solidarity and partnerships with other Japanese American groups to preserve the ethnic and historic identity of the neighborhood in the face of intense market pressure.

For the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, it meant integrating newcomers from around the world, including Micronesia, Latin America, and East Africa, into the civic life of towns with previously largely white, homogeneous populations. What became apparent in the course of generating and applying arts and cultural strategies toward those ends was that the process caused each organization to change and grow in fundamental and important ways. That was also the case for the third nonprofit housing developer in the cohort, whose story we relate here.

Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) is a tribal housing authority that works with the general Anchorage-area population and with Alaska Natives in particular. CIHA produces and manages affordable housing on a substantial scale. It is nationally recognized as a leader in this field and an important institution in Anchorage, but despite this growth and efficacy, the leaders sensed that something important was missing.

For CEO Carol Gore, the attention to culture was personal as well as organizational. As an Alaska Native woman nurtured by village values in her youth but at risk of losing touch with them while working in the urban setting, she sought to reintegrate a sense of shared

communal responsibility and the linkage of individuals' health with the health of the group. She describes this in the roundtable of CDI leaders by talking about the feeling that something was missing in their developments—they stuck strictly to the rules but failed to honor the long history of the place or the living culture of the people in the community.

For the CIHA managers tasked with considering what roles arts and cultural strategies might play in the diverse Spenard neighborhood, a change in values would need to translate into a change in what drives the organization. The regulation-driven, cost-focused, time-is-money calculus of developing and managing nonprofit housing would have to loosen up to allow for the risk and uncertainty associated with creativity, innovation, new voices, and broader goals for community-level change. The project leaders for the arts and cultural work—Tyler Robinson (Community Development, Real Estate, and Planning) and Sezy Gerow-Hanson (Public and Resident Relations)—met frequently with their fellow division leaders from the onset of each new arts-based project to find the ways in which the innovations might be of value:

- How it could help their colleagues meet their own responsibilities, such as managing the intake of new residents or connecting residents to new services
- How it could achieve better outcomes for the residents, such as providing for more community amenities beyond a simple housing unit
- How it would not endanger project finances or timelines but could actually strengthen the community buy-in for new development
- How it would advance the CEO's goal for the broader culture change
- And as a bonus, how it would be colorful, entertaining, energizing, and aesthetically rewarding

In holding space for these conversations, colleagues were able to provide input, get their questions addressed, and be given the chance to join in the process of change. Over three years, including some unsuccessful early attempts, the effort gradually resulted in a significant integration and acceptance of the core ideas underlying the arts and cultural work and a well-thought-through process for assessing new arts projects.

CIHA's resulting portfolio of arts and cultural projects and strategies represented a reexamination of what it means to succeed as an urban tribal housing authority. Leaders now define its impact as an organization not only by the quality of its housing, but also by how it worked with artists in numerous, experimental ways, took a larger role in community-scale change, and established an anchor for social interaction in the Spenard neighborhood. The CIHA staff came to realize that well-executed cultural strategies were not only good for the community and their residents, but that facilitating in this new, more open-ended, unobtrusive way enhanced CIHA's own reputation. As Robinson said, "We're leaders, [but as part of the CDI experience we've] learned how to not always lead."

CIHA enabled more than a dozen arts-related projects, ranging from eye-catching and

whimsical placemaking (e.g., scores of mimes humanizing a commercial street construction site) to support for the crafts-based enterprises of Native artisans and the creation of an arts-based community center in a once-vacant church building. That center was not only a large capital commitment but a symbol of the organization’s evolution from housing developer to community developer; it also included the creation of a new Community Development department within the organizational structure. These activities were specific to the Spenard neighborhood, but by the end of the CDI grant period, CIHA had established a process to generate new arts, cultural, and design activities in housing developments in other parts of the region.

Health Care Providers: Going Upstream Requires a Different Relationship with Community

The U.S. health care system is organized largely around the financing and delivery of medical services and frequently fails to emphasize not only public health outreach, prevention, and education, but also attention to the root causes of poor health and the health inequities in poverty and structural racism. The consistent empirical finding that medical care accounts for only about 20 percent of population health has not tilted the scale toward addressing the “upstream” social and environmental determinants of health in a proportionally large way. However, awareness of the need to do this has been growing for at least



*Staff and members of the quilting class at Jackson Medical Mall in Jackson, MS show off their wares.
Photo credit: Jackson Medical Mall Foundation.*

a decade.² The CDI organizations in Jackson, MS and Zuni, NM drew on arts and cultural strategies to focus on these upstream determinants and strengthen health-supportive dimensions of community life outside the doctor's office. These new components of their agencies' work—building things, energizing cultural expressions, and facilitating greater resident engagement—were accompanied by determination on the part of the leaders to make these priorities central to their organizations because of the heightened potential to reach new health outcomes.

The Jackson Medical Mall Foundation (JMMF) is a former shopping center that was turned into a medical resource center, with a large and varied range of health operations, that several thousand people visited each day. Its leaders were confident that they had built a unique and essential community asset; they also had a sense that they were mainly treating consequences but could—and should—be doing more to address the causes of health inequities in the surrounding city. To point in that direction, JMMF broadened its mission statement in recent years from addressing the needs of the medically underserved to encompassing technology, innovation, and creativity toward the goal of better community health.

The openness to new approaches and awareness of the economic and environmental conditions in the lower-income, predominantly African American communities near the Medical Mall dovetailed with JMMF's recognition that it should relate to its neighbors more holistically. It wanted to become an influential anchor for community revitalization and to address the physical and social issues that lead to so many health inequities—from diabetes, hypertension, and obesity to the trauma, injuries, and death due to violence. Arts and cultural strategies offered a promising path for redefining the pathway to health.

We view health care totally differently now than we did in the past. Health care to us was nurses and doctors and clinics. Now, we're providing a lot of wraparound services. For example, during our first year as a CDI participant, we did a blues concert during National Diabetes Month. Everybody who came to the concert received information about diabetes, and we incentivized them to get screening tests. We know there were folks who wouldn't have gotten screened, gone to one of the clinics, or may not have even known what was going on at the Medical Mall.

– JMMF Executive Director Primus Wheeler³

2 See various chapters in Thomas A. LaVeist, editor, *Race, Ethnicity, and Health: A Public Health Reader* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002); Judith Bell and Mary Lee, *Why Place and Race Matter: Impacting Health Through a Focus on Race and Place* (Oakland and Los Angeles, CA: PolicyLink and The California Endowment, 2011); Meredith Minkler, editor, *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Welfare, Third Edition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

3 Primus Wheeler, in dialogue with the author in a session at CDI Research and Documentation convening, Los Angeles, February 21, 2019.

The first strategy, then, was to use the arts as a draw, to activate the Medical Mall as a center for local culture, a vibrant ongoing site for musical performances, festivals, and exhibitions of folk arts that have been numerous and broad-based enough to draw in thousands of Jacksonians. In addition to establishing this more welcoming and colorful venue and providing work and revenue for local artists, the events offer preventive and educational services to large numbers of children, families, and individuals.

Once they have been connected to JMMF through the cultural offerings, residents have been engaged to express their opinions and desires, not only about the JMMF space but about the surrounding community. Informal and formal conversations, roundtable discussions, community meetings, and surveys were employed to draw out the residents' perspectives. A concurrent innovative process was conducted to solicit ideas for improvement from JMMF staff members, many of whom also lived in the surrounding community. That was organized by local cultural strategist Daniel Johnson, who encouraged all staff members to see themselves as artists in some fashion, and the result was much more colorful, insightful, and inclusive than traditional workplace surveys. His essay in this volume describes that process.

Hearing from the neighbors, clients, and staff in this way led to a culture change for the JMMF leadership. These more intense and extensive engagements were both humbling and energizing. The leaders realized that they should interact with their visitors not as passive medical consumers but as active stakeholders in a shared, continually changing community. Executive Director Primus Wheeler concluded that he and other leaders should not feel secure that they had figured out their role but that they needed to be open to significant changes. As JMMF's arts and cultural coordinator, Mahalia Wright, put it, "The great thing about our community is that they share their likes and dislikes, so we really have learned to embrace that. We want to hear the pros and the cons and make those cons into our strengths."⁴ JMMF is now expanding its footprint and attention to health factors beyond its walls through new projects that leverage cultural strengths and partners, such as community gardens that supply healthy food to community members and renovations of abandoned properties for cultural use, all of which have been informed and driven by the heightened engagement. JMMF's commitment to becoming a community anchor goes hand in hand with the new centrality of creativity to its mission.

Every kind of community—large or small, urban or rural—can benefit from creative attention to the social determinants of health. The Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP) has always had a set of core activities for young people, including sports programs, summer camps, and community gardens. In that respect, ZYEP was already addressing the "upstream factors" that affect health, seeking to foster fitness, positive social environments, and a diet that is not only healthier but also in touch with Zuni agricultural tradition. Zuni youth and their families face daunting challenges of historical trauma and enduring poverty, leaving

4 Mahalia Wright, in dialogue with the author in a session at CDI Research and Documentation convening, Los Angeles, February 21, 2019.

them at risk for mental health problems, including, at their most extreme, suicide. Dr. Tom Faber, founder and co-director of ZYEP, deemed arts and culture critical to creating a “safe, stable, nurturing environment.” This meant more than physical safety in the immediate sense: it reflected ZYEP’s shift to becoming more trauma-informed and resilience-based over the course of three years.

ZYEP designed and led the creation of this new park to expand the reach of its initiatives and provide a new center for community gathering. It was deeply imbued with Zuni art and expression of traditional beliefs in every phase of its design and construction. Art is essential and integral to life at the Zuni Pueblo—to both the economy and the spiritual resilience of the culture. ZYEP saw the power of drawing in Zuni artists to the park planning process, through the creation of a six-member advisory committee, to give input on the design of a park that would address a broad set of psychological and social needs beyond physical activity.⁵ ZYEP Co-director Joseph Claunch’s own Native background—as a member of the Puyallup Tribe—had given him a first-hand understanding of comparable trauma and the conditions for resilience. However, it wasn’t until he was immersed in the process of designing the park that he fully realized and embraced the power of the arts in transmitting cultural tradition and what it could mean for young people. For a self-described football jock and coach, albeit one with a doctorate in psychology, the process was revelatory and changed the way he approaches youth development. He reflected on it in February 2019:

The CDI process helped deepen my understanding of youth development in a tribal community. The artists we were working with helped me understand how we could do youth development on a much deeper level and more contextually, in a way that was really culturally responsive. I don’t think I could’ve learned those things in the university. I couldn’t have learned them by reading a book. This project helped me create space to just sit and listen to community, what they have to say, what they want for their youth, and how they want to go about it. That has been an invaluable process for three years to make space for that.⁶

The learning that Claunch describes has become the basis for ongoing organizational practices within ZYEP. Creating the park and community center through collaborating with the artists, incorporating Zuni tradition, and generating community input based in a deep appreciation of trauma and resilience will guide their ongoing programs with young people and their relationships with other groups. ZYEP leaders and artists also suspect that the experience has raised expectations and changed the rules of the game for how other spaces in Zuni will be developed.

⁵ See, for example, the essay by Zuni artists’ committee member Daryl Shack in this volume

⁶ Joseph Claunch, in dialogue with the author in a session at CDI Research and Documentation convening, Los Angeles, February 21, 2019.

Conclusion

The anticipated role for arts-based strategy and expression in shaping future development in the Zuni Pueblo would be compelling testament to the power of art to change not only lives but also places. CIHA and JMMF each found, through arts and culture, their own versions of how to bring their organizational values outside their own properties and into their communities. This extension of these organizations' priorities beyond their own capital projects and into the broader social fabric and development trajectory of the towns and neighborhoods where they work was common to all six CDI sites. It represented the full realization of what it meant to incorporate arts into their vision and their way of working.

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