

Outcomes in Communities of Arts and Cultural Strategies: The Role of Organizing and Engagement

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The ArtPlace Community Development Investments (CDI) initiative was designed to support the integration of arts and cultural strategies into community development in its “natural” setting. The goal was to integrate arts and cultural strategies into projects and efforts as they are typically planned and implemented through the work of six organizations. This approach to integrating arts and cultural strategies was intended to provide useful information about adopting this practice for other community development organizations and the community development field well after ArtPlace’s significant funding was completed.

The initiative presented the opportunity to learn from the experiences of these organizations over three years as they incorporated arts and cultural strategies in new or different ways to achieve their community development goals. The outcomes of this work are the subject of this section of the journal. The CDI initiative brought rigor to understanding the relationship between action and outcome in a field where outcomes measurement and evaluation is often fraught with the tension of organizations trying to balance funder interests and priorities against the thoughtful exploration of new practices and approaches. We employed a participatory and iterative approach to documenting the community development outcomes that each organization achieved.

This essay also provides an overarching description of two aspects of the community development process that changed through the integration of arts and culture and, as a result, transformed the scope of community development outcomes of all the organizations participating in CDI:

- **Moving from engaging to organizing:** Using arts and cultural strategies that gave authority and responsibility to artists and community members, these organizations turned the process of community engagement into a form of community organizing.
- **Achieving mission-aligned outcomes and strengthening the social fabric:** These organizations were able to take concrete steps toward accomplishing mission-aligned goals while also deepening the impact of their work overall through new kinds of activities that have ultimately strengthened the community’s social fabric.

What Are Community Development Outcomes?

The organizations highlighted in this section reflect a substantial breadth of the community development field and respective outcomes—from affordable housing to social services, from elders to youth development, from site-specific to narrative change. At PolicyLink, we consider community development to have both a social- or human-focused aspect and a physical or place-based dimension, with community development outcomes sitting at the intersection of these two. The highest aspirations of community development, where places and people’s lives improve in a sustained and self-directed manner, require that the people of a place are leaders in its improvement.

Arts and Culture Enhancing Community Development

The CDI initiative did not ask organizations to suggest specific activities in their proposal. Instead, they were asked to describe their organization, their work, their goals and vision for the community, and how they believed incorporating arts and cultural strategies might improve that work. In this way, each organization’s existing work was used as a “baseline” condition to anchor the “experimental” application of arts and culture. The outcomes described in this issue hold real promise for adoption and adaptation by other community development organizations, who should be able to see the relevance of these six cases to their own “normal” processes.

The community development field, already at the confluence of human and real estate development, is grounded in balancing how one achieves a goal and the goal itself. Frameworks such as equitable development, comprehensive community development, asset-based community development, and the social determinants of health have helped the field understand the complex interaction of people in places and how to measure outcomes for both humans and real estate.

Community development organizations of all kinds need to interact constructively and purposefully with their constituents, neighbors, clients, tenants, business partners, fellow nonprofit leaders, and people with whom they have a range of other working relationships. The ways in which community developers build and manage these relationships depends on their goals. Sometimes it is as seemingly simple and limited in scope as inviting comments on a proposed new project. At the other end of the spectrum, community developers can become organizers, in that they actively inform, train, and mobilize local residents and other groups to build power and influence to affect critical planning and policy decisions and bring about significant change.

Arts, cultural, and creative placemaking strategies have helped these six organizations to find a suitable balance between the differing levels of authority and responsibility that they and their community stakeholders experience. We identified two ways that arts and cultural strategies served community development outcomes by increasing community members’ sense of agency:

1. Artists and arts collaborations created more meaningful forms of community engagement that influenced the trajectory of these organizations and their projects and disrupted unequal power dynamics in significant ways. The CDI organizations, like all community development organizations, constantly have to adapt to changing demographics, market forces, and other factors in order to remain relevant and responsible; indeed, an increased adaptivity of the organizations and their partners to evolving roles in the community development ecosystem is one of the most tangible outcomes of these six cases.
2. The creative process of arts and culture has served as a road map for using engagement activities to build community agency and strengthen the social fabric while advancing transactional housing, real estate, project development, and property management goals—otherwise known as “output.” In essence, arts and cultural strategies created a human-development through line from activity to output to community development outcomes of these organizations that merge people- and place-based goals.

Improving Community Engagement and Organizing Through Arts and Culture

The CDI organizations experimented with some completely new approaches to engagement and organizing, with the results sometimes surprising even themselves. Their approaches were greatly enhanced and fundamentally changed by virtue of employing various arts and cultural strategies.

If these groups had limited themselves to holding hearings in the conventional way or running planning sessions with familiar facilitation exercises—such as “dot voting” to solicit priorities or visualizations of scenarios—or had even conducted one-on-one conversations to build relationships in the style of grass-roots, base-building organizers, they would have made some progress but would not have broken new ground. Instead, the creativity and imagination unleashed through the arts and cultural strategies pushed the organizations in new ways and helped them achieve a stronger connection with those they sought to engage or organize.

For instance, in Anchorage, the Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) partnered with a theater set designer to create an interactive space for exploring microunit design and quality of life with local residents, policymakers, and partners, which substantially improved the input, engagement, and buy-in of their stakeholders to support the move to smaller living. The CIHA program represented a tactical approach that began with attempting to engage stakeholders to obtain input.

Over time, many of the organizations have found that arts-based engagement tactics are also helping to substantially advance community control and self-determination. For example:

- The Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) is a community development corporation that started as a response by activists for linguistically and culturally competent social services for the Japanese American communities of Little Tokyo and Southern California. It



Zuni youth celebrate the groundbreaking of the Ho'n A:wani Community Park in Zuni, NM.

Photo Credit: Zuni Youth Enrichment Project

sought both a site-specific outcome—the right to control the redevelopment of a publicly owned site in the neighborhood—and a narrative-change outcome in popularizing the story of the site's and neighborhood's history as a means of justifying this right. Working with artists to increase the community's sense of power and agency and enhancing the social fabric of the neighborhood were strategies for achieving both of these outcomes. And just as the outcomes were intertwined, these strategies were interrelated; arts and culture helped LTSC work with and through this complexity. LTSC and one of its arts and cultural partners discuss their work together later in this section.

- The Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP), a youth development organization that was founded to provide recreational activities and programs for youth on the Zuni Pueblo, sought to create a permanent space for its rapidly growing programs as an approach to addressing persistent health issues among the Zuni community. Along the way, it realized that empowering artists as leaders in the planning and design of the Ho'n A:wani Community Park was not only an effective and efficient way of developing, but it was also the way ZYEP itself would become more deeply rooted than it already was in the future of the Pueblo. The arts and cultural engagement helped ZYEP turn a park project into a health and wellness resource by creating persistent cultural resonance with the facilities for programs, but it also turned it into a beacon for making the process of physical development on the Pueblo more responsive to the community. ZYEP staff and one of its Artist Committee leaders discuss their work later in this section.

Community Engagement and Community Organizing

Development of affordable housing, parks, and other types of facilities requires community development organizations to adhere to public processes pertaining to building and zoning approvals and allocation of public subsidies. Engagement processes can be used to shape the project, as well as inform the public and fulfill public notice requirements; they can also be used to enlist support or address and defuse opposition. But not all participation is intended to value the community's voice authentically—especially when participation, outreach, and public involvement processes are also used by government agencies, for-profit real estate developers, and even other businesses to conduct or dress up community engagement without any intentions to adapt or change projects in response to the feedback. Engagement can sometimes lead to partnership, delegated power, and community control, but it is insufficient by itself.

To attain more, an organizing framework is also needed. Community organizing usually arises from contested terrain. Issue-based organizing in the United States was born in the 1940s out of a turbulent and potent mix of working-class frustration, labor movement activism, and discontent over racial inequity. Early targets were corrupt city governments, predatory banking practices, environmental pollution, and institutionalized forms of discrimination, such as redlining.

This type of organizing centers the leadership of community members so that they can define their self-interest, map the local power and influence, and translate that into political goals and strategies for collective action. Community organizing is most often based in the residents of a town, neighborhood, church parish, or cultural or racial enclave, but it can also enable those who receive services or benefits to develop their power—such as clients of financial literacy training or residents of affordable housing—or those who are most disenfranchised or lack voice and agency—such as youth or limited-English-speaking immigrants. The point of such voice, agency, and power is for residents to gain a measure of control over their lives, their neighborhoods, the fate of their community, and sometimes over the community development organizations themselves.

Arts and Cultural Strategies in Engagement and Organizing Lead to Improved Community Development Outcomes

Artists, and arts and cultural strategies, can be valuable assets and leaders of community engagement in ways that fulfill the promise of authentic participation. In addition to making the process of community development more responsive and building more power within communities, the documentation and research of the ArtPlace CDI initiative indicates that integrating arts and cultural strategies enables community-based organizations to more effectively advance their mission goals. This is evident by the early indicators of long-term outcomes in these community development areas, such as:

Health equity

The Jackson Medical Mall Foundation (JMMF), Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC), and ZYEP were all able to create culturally resonant spaces that help community members to feel connected to health-enhancing resources, such as parks and open spaces, recreation and cultural opportunities, and health services. In Zuni, community members are experiencing a reduction in crime and an increased sense of safety. The Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP) addressed housing determinants of health through assessment and rehabilitation service in an underserved Latinx community.

Housing

The SWMHP Healthy Housing program, led by artist-organizers, resulted in housing rehabilitation funds and resources to the Latinx community. LTSC grew the base of community members who were mobilized to advocate for affordable housing on a key parcel of publicly owned land. CIHA enlisted likely and unlikely allies in support of microunits as a new affordable-housing typology for Anchorage.

Economic development

JMMF supported arts, culture, and creative-economy small businesses by providing retail and business space as a way to attract more and diverse clientele to the Mall. ZYEP directly contracted with Zuni artist-entrepreneurs for arts, cultural, and design services in developing the Ho'n A:wán Community Park; the opportunity and completed park are now a showcase, as well as a business incubator space for these Zuni artists. SWMHP created an artist roster that enables local artists to provide arts, cultural, and creative placemaking services across the region.

By leveraging the talents of artists and arts partners, organizations were able to more effectively achieve outcomes by adapting their processes and approaches to be more connected, relevant, and responsive to—and shared with—communities.

In the process, organizations are also simultaneously strengthening communities' social fabric and setting up conditions that allow them to, as sociologist Robert Sampson describes it, be more "collectively effective" in advocating for the long-term change they wish to see. These conditions for long-term change have been described as nearer-term outcomes, such as increased

Social cohesion

In the Spenard corridor of Anchorage, CIHA was able to bring together previously unconnected community members and social groups to create a vision for transforming the area with new affordable housing, a community center, and streetscape improvements. Through the process of exploring the redevelopment of the Church of Love property, and ultimately changing development plans, CIHA, artists, and other community members feel more connected to one another and the future of Spenard.

Social agency

On the Zuni Pueblo, the success of the artist-led process for engaging with the community to guide the development of the Ho'n A:wán Community Park has established a precedent for the Zuni Tribal Council to apply to all other real estate development. Artists and community members, who feel a sense of agency and community ownership over the park now that it is completed, are approaching ZYEP with programming ideas.



Little Tokyo Service Center staff activate the vacant VIDA building to prepare the community for changes in Los Angeles, CA. Photo credit: Rudy Espinoza

Civic and political leadership

Beyond providing practical resources for healthy housing renovations, the SWMHP initiative resulted in the first person of color, a Latina, being identified and supported to serve on a partner city's housing committee. LTSC staff note in the Dialogue that follows in this issue of CDIR that their longtime arts and cultural partner organizations have taken on heightened leadership roles in community development as the First Street North campaign evolved over three years.

Narrative control

LTSC and the First Street North campaign used arts and cultural activation and awareness strategies to reframe the value of a parcel of publicly owned land from simply an economic "highest and best use" to one having a keystone cultural and historic value for multiple communities of color. JMMF leveraged arts and culture to flip its own narrative as an organization from focusing on the medical needs of the underserved to the cultural assets of the community.

Civic knowledge and know-how

Working with its arts and cultural partner, FPC developed an approach to building relationships with communities near their parks based on a reciprocity of authority and responsibility; community leadership was supported to influence the design of a planned public recreation center, and FPC reciprocated by issuing an RFP for an African American landscape architect for the project. This reciprocity was based on an earlier prototype of this relationship-building strategy, where FPC delegated the authority for the programming of a historic house to the community as a means of developing FPC's comfort with a sense of responsibility for the community.

There is a risk, borne out by hard experience, that policies, planning, and programming officially intended to improve conditions can damage a community's social fabric. This is evident from past planning practices, such as urban renewal, which sought to wipe out "blight" and revitalize places anew, often uprooting their history and relocating their residents. This applies for all settings—from urban to rural. Developing public spaces, businesses, and housing without regard for cultural relevance can displace vulnerable residents or perpetuate feelings of not belonging.

In contrast, these six community organizations' journeys have shown that arts and cultural strategies can strengthen the expressions and physical presence of a community's social ties and cultural roots. Emerging results indicate that organizations that consciously and carefully embed their work in a community's social system can help shape more culturally relevant, responsive, and fully utilized spaces and programming. In the process, residents are activated to exercise their own power to shape their future, thus increasing the likelihood for more cycles of effective development and improved economic and social outcomes.

Connecting into these systems, particularly those of marginalized communities, can be difficult for outside investors, planners, or policymakers, given the historical threats that such interventions have often brought. Also, the seams that bind communities may be invisible, uncommon in dominant narratives, and largely unknown to those outside of it. This is why arts and cultural strategies—which often help "make the invisible, visible"—may be uniquely suited to uncover, strengthen, and weave a community's social fabric into future development.

The organizations were able to use a variety of arts and cultural strategies to improve communities' position despite the varying economic, demographic, and social challenges. Therefore, no matter what pressures and challenges cities and towns are facing, community-based organizations across the country can benefit from turning to the arts and cultural sector for a more effective, resilient-based way to achieve their community development goals.

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