

Arts and Culture in Detroit: Central to Our Past and Our Future

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No community in America, except perhaps for those in the paths of natural disasters, has faced the prospect of losing so much of its arts and cultural heritage as Detroit has in the last 18 months. The threatened sell-off of the collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) to satisfy creditors in the city's municipal bankruptcy has served as a symbol of the painful path of restructuring.

The Kresge Foundation and other philanthropies responded to the dual prospect of lost art and draconian reductions in benefits to pensioners. Partnering with the State of Michigan and the DIA itself, the philanthropies contributed to an \$816 million fund to transfer the DIA collection to a nonprofit entity outside city control and dramatically reduce the cuts pensioners would have to suffer. Without this "grand bargain," the bankruptcy process very likely would have embroiled the city for a decade, as pensioners invoked Michigan's constitution's protection of pensions and creditors and the DIA litigated whose rights to the art would be primary.

The imperative to deal honorably with pensioners was clear. Equally clear, however, was the need to protect and preserve an integral part of the city's cultural patrimony, an institution that has served as a beacon for residents and visitors alike—an institution that has anchored Detroiters' sense of identity and connection to their community. Compromising such a civic treasure would have diminished the city in unfathomable ways.

That the philanthropic, public, and cultural communities stepped forward to prevent this misfortune speaks volumes about the value Detroit places on arts and culture. Their actions also are an invitation to explore the burgeoning vibrancy of other dimensions of the city's cultural ecology.

Detroit is among the countless cities across America continuing to reap the benefits of Rocco Landesman's extraordinary 2009–2012 tenure at the helm of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Landesman committed the NEA to the proposition that arts and culture can restore and animate our communities. Further, he sought to institutionalize this commitment by bringing together the Kresge and Ford foundations to spearhead the creation of ArtPlace America, a philanthropic consortium committed to creative placemaking.

The idea of placemaking has long been a staple of urban planning—the act of creating the map of civic life by developing distinctive, livable places. Landesman proposed that by connecting arts and culture to placemaking, their roles in contributing to the social, physical, cultural, and economic identities of a community can be recognized. He suggested that arts and culture have to step inside the fence-line of community development and claim their

places in the diverse terrain of land use, housing, transportation, environment, health and other systems necessary to create stronger, more vibrant places.

Detroit is increasingly enlivened by such thinking. Philanthropies, nonprofit organizations, private entities, and government are all pursuing mutually reinforcing strategies. The lineup of partners may vary from project to project, but the principles remain the same.

Consider the more than 160 arts organizations located in the city. The major institutions—the DIA, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, College for Creative Studies, Michigan Opera Theatre, Charles Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit Historical Museum, and others. There is no shortage of small-, medium-, and large-sized organizations, projects, and activities touching the lives and daily routines of thousands of city residents. Just a handful of examples are illustrative:

Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit recently moved into the same building as University Prep Math and Science Elementary School. The youth theater can now integrate arts and culture into the school’s curriculum and provide new cultural activities for the surrounding neighborhood.

Festivals and celebrations—among them the Detroit Design Festival (the design arts), DLECTRICITY (light and contemporary art installations), and Art X Detroit (showcasing the work of Kresge Artist Fellows and Eminent Artists)—regularly attract thousands of people to Midtown Detroit to participate in installations, workshops, shows, studio tours, lectures, and block parties.

The community+public arts: DETROIT program draws on community engagement, large-scale public art, urban planning, and green infrastructure to transform vacant and underused spaces in multiple Detroit neighborhoods.

The REVOLVE Livernois initiative created 30 temporary and permanent art installations and pop-up activities along a stretch of Livernois Avenue, historically known as Detroit’s “Avenue of Fashion.” It has been expanded with grants from Kresge and the NEA’s Our Town program to five additional corridors (for more on the NEA’s Our Town program, see Chu and Schupbach in this issue).

Intersections, an arts-infused pocket park project, has engaged the North Corktown business and residential community in redeveloping contiguous vacant lots at one of the neighborhood’s key intersections.

Power House Productions reclaims vacant land and houses purchased for as little as \$100 in Banglatown (named for the multiple generations of Bangladeshi immigrants) and gives the properties new lives as power generators (wind and solar), cultural spaces, artistic installations, and community centers.

Through the *Alley Project*, Young Nation has transformed an alley in Southwest Detroit into a permanent outdoor exhibition space dedicated to aerosol paint street art by local artists and youth. The project is shaped by a design process that continuously engages neighborhood residents.

Artists are standing at the heart of this ecosystem. Those who have resided in the city for many years have been joined by new arrivals. Together they are helping the city creatively reimagine the arc of its aspirations. The newcomers are attracted to the city by what some have termed “Rust Belt chic:” the possibility of buying a house for \$1,000 or renting for a pittance; working unconstrained by bureaucracy to carve out unexpected uses in unexpected places; converting the public ruins of factories and warehouses into studio and exhibition spaces; and the opportunity to experience community vibrancy, street life, and cultural identity.

All these efforts entail some degree of risk and a willingness to see potential where others have not. Rebuilding a city requires not just the spirit to try something new; it also requires a common sense of purpose. Detroit is fortunate to possess both of these qualities. In fact, city residents spent more than two years coming together to establish parameters for the city’s transformation and to identify pathways to better opportunity for all Detroiters, captured in a framework for action called “Detroit Future City.”¹

Since its completion, Detroit Future City has become the guide for all of Kresge’s investments in the city and has entered the fabric of municipal and regional planning. It draws from the input of thousands of Detroiters to define quality of life and affirm that safety, health, prosperity, housing, and public services are among the essential building blocks of an economically viable, socially cohesive city.

Detroit should approach its challenges with unprecedented ambition. It will have to be smart—challenging preconceptions about what a city is supposed to look like and how it works. It will have to be bold—pursuing ideas that will strike some as outlandish and others as foolish. It will also have to be unflinching in its courage—bracing against forces that will not welcome such sweeping change. Anything less won’t be enough.

Artists in Detroit are uniquely suited to help meet these challenges. They are instrumental in helping us see connections among the past, the present, and the future. They embody, embrace, and express the soul of the place. And they are fully engaged in creative placemaking—contributing tangibly and powerfully to energizing and animating our neighborhoods.

Rip Rapson is president and CEO of the Kresge Foundation, a \$3 billion national, private foundation based in metropolitan Detroit. Rapson came to Kresge in 2006 and led the philanthropy in a multiyear transition to expand and recalibrate its grantmaking. Strategically focused programs emerged: arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development in Detroit, Kresge’s hometown. Each seeks to expand opportunities in America’s cities so that vulnerable people can lead self-determined lives and join the economic mainstream. Rapson serves as chairman of the ArtPlace Presidents Council and sits on the boards of Living Cities, the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, the Downtown Detroit Partnership, M-1 Rail, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of New York. He earned a law degree from Columbia University.

1 For more on the Detroit Future City framework, see <http://detroitfuturecity.com/>.