Creative Placemaking: An Interview With the Ford Foundation

__Laura Callanan__, visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, interviewed the Ford Foundation's president, __Darren Walker__, and the foundation's vice president for economic opportunity and assets, __Xavier de Souza Briggs__, to understand the foundation's commitment to creative placemaking.

Laura Callanan: ***The Ford Foundation funds in areas like "economic fairness" and "metropolitan opportunity." How does creative placemaking fit Ford's priorities?***

Darren Walker: The Ford Foundation has, for over five decades, invested in the arts and invested in community and economic development. The research that generated this idea of creative placemaking has its roots in both community development and in arts and culture. In some ways, creative placemaking is about a new paradigm at the intersection of both.

The use of arts projects, cultural facilities, and the creative process in communities to enliven and enrich the community experience, while at the same time contributing to economic development, is a really appealing idea to us. Creative placemaking was a way to bring together two long-standing areas of work of the foundation.

Xavier (Xav) de Souza Briggs: The Ford Foundation has always looked for the innovative edge. When it comes to the vitality of places, that innovative edge might be social programs. Certainly that was true historically. It might be catalytic uses of capital, what's now called impact investment. Or it might be the arts. Creative placemaking is at Ford because it is consistent with the foundation's culture of taking a risk and innovating.

There is also a second reason: There has been a clear shift over the last 10 to 20 years in the leading thinking about places and what makes them vital and attractive. It has gone from a near obsession with the hardware of place–the physical systems–to a much deeper appreciation for the role of human capital, knowledge, and creativity. Our support of creative placemaking reflects this shift.

Laura: ***A lot of attention has been paid to the "creative economy." What's the connection between a creative economy and a creative place?***

Xav: The creative economy is centered on livelihoods. Creative placemaking is about revitalizing a small town, or a neighborhood in a bigger city.

One of the ways in which the creative economy and creative placemaking come together is through talent and production: These are both rooted in

place. Exchanges happen in place. It's through a percolating of talent–through ideas riffing off each other–that places behave in creative ways and produce creatively.

There is a culture of place that evolves through tradition, a sense of memory, and a narrative of a place–all things artists address in their work. And this culture is deeply connected to the economic activity of a place.

Laura: ***Art needs an audience—a community if you like. Does that mean all art is creative placemaking?***

Darren: No. I think it's very important for those of us who are supporters of the creative placemaking movement to be rigorous and to be analytical about what actually constitutes creative placemaking. If everything that an artist does is creative placemaking, then nothing is. The challenge for us all is to bring some sense of rigor to our understanding.

Being a painter and just living in a place doesn't necessarily equate to creative placemaking. But, if you have an artist housing complex that houses 50 artists, and that housing complex includes a community center, and there is a creative output from the artists living there that is impacting the community–through the creation of livelihoods or by transforming the physical space–and, if that artist housing is part of a broader strategy for revitalization of the community, then that's creative placemaking.

You've got to be clear about what the community development elements are. Is it jobs? Do physical design and redesign play a role? I think that we have to get more rigorous. The early work of economists and researchers like Ann Markusen[1] or Mark Stern[2] helped to do just that. It was formative, and even they would argue that it needs to be further refined. There continues to be a very robust research agenda around this idea of creative placemaking. We at Ford, as supporters of this movement, are investing in that research agenda. Ultimately you've got to have data to back up this idea.

Xav: Placemaking, for a variety reasons, is necessarily defined by the boundaries of place; community does not have to be. Audience for a theater company or visitors to a museum may come from a wide geographic area. And there are large numbers of people–including some of the most disadvantaged–who have a place that serves as a base camp for them, though they don't actually reside there. It's where their important relationships are–the ones they treasure, the ones that define their routines–the place that anchors their church community, where they are from, where their extended kin still live.

1 Ann Markusen and David King, "The Artistic Dividend: The Arts' Hidden Contributions to Regional Development" (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota's Project on Regional and Industrial Economics, July 2013), http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/prie/pdf/artistic_dividend.pdf; "Evolution and Impact on Careers, Neighborhoods and Economies Artists' Centers" (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota's Project on Regional and Industrial Economics, February 2006), http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/prie/pdf/artists_centers.pdf.

2 Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, "Culture Builds Community Evaluation: Summary Report" (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania's Social Impact of the Arts Project, January 2002), http://impact.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/docs/culture_builds_community/summary_report.pdf.

But, I don't think that fact about communities being unfettered by physical location changes the possibilities for placemaking. Place is defined by boundaries plus a distinctive character. An important place can be quite micro. You think of the Mission District in San Francisco, and the famous mural alley there,[3] which was a center for Latin American political art. That place was tiny, but it was incredibly meaningful.

Laura: ***"Creative placemaking" is a newly coined term. What has been the historical relationship between community development and the arts?***

Xav: In the past, community development and the arts were in parallel play. There has not been a lot of interaction, even when both were happening in the same places. Until recently, community development has not included a deliberate effort to create new kinds of economic opportunity through the arts. This is despite the fact that some of the places that have received the most community development investment have also been the cradle of important artistic movements, like the Bronx and hip-hop.

This lack of interaction is in part because, in this country, community development since the 1960s has had a problem-solving frame: delineating problems and fixing them. It has been very heavy on financial investment and social programs. Community development has also had elements of a social movement, with community members making claims on government and the wider society.

Artists and cultural institutions can take on an anchor quality in a community, particularly when they decide to be community serving and to be productive in place. But there is, understandably, a concern about compromising artistic standards for the sake of some community cause. That can be an important conversation, something to be talked through between artists and community constituents.

Laura: ***What do artists and arts organizations add to the work of traditional community development actors (like Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), vocational training programs, small business incubators)? And do artists need traditional community development partners for their creative placemaking activities to be successful?***

Xav: Artists often draw on the place where they are—give voice to that place. They learn about the neighborhood's history and patterns in a way that goes beyond day-to-day experience. Artists help access the historical context of the community.

Community development has not consistently focused on the community narrating itself. I think that artists can help community developers to connect, engage, listen—all things that are very central to successful community development. The artists I've met who are deeply engaged in their communities, like the artists at Project Row Houses, have these kinds of community conversations.

This is good for the artists as well as the community. It gives the artists allies. It

3 Balmy Alley is located in the San Francisco Mission District between 24th Street and Garfield Square. Beginning in 1972, it was the location of murals commenting on the experience of Mexicans and Chicanos of the United States.

helps the artists to generate audiences and to imagine the larger social significance of what they do. Artists can be part of the dialectic about where the community is headed–about what are the critical issues.

And artists can also gain a lot from teaming up with traditional community developers. There is a wide array of hard skills–like project management, budget management, taking financial risk–where community developers have a lot of experience working with projects at scale and ensuring projects run on time.

Darren: Artists and artist-led projects in communities often become platforms for community resilience. They help create social capital. There are many, many examples: from the Ashe Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, to Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, to Theaster Gates's work in Chicago, to Mark Bradford's redevelopment work in Los Angeles. There are many. When we look at those kinds of projects, artists' contribution to community resilience and building social capital, it is both tangible and intangible. It's hugely important.

Laura: ***Creative placemaking seems to assume every community has embedded creativity. What about under-resourced communities where much of the population has moved away, poverty is high, crime is high? Is creative placemaking possible in poor and vulnerable communities?***

Darren: There's cultural production and culture in every community. I reject the idea that a community that is poor can't be a place of creative placemaking. It may take an intervention. The creative process may need to be organized, leveraged, and oxygenated, but you often find that creativity is there. Whether it is in song or dance or in some other art form, it's there.

People may not identify it as culture, in the kind of high art elitist way in which many people think of culture, but it is often there. The discovery of that inherent creativity is what is so exciting. It doesn't mean that, in a poor neighborhood, in order to have creative placemaking, you have to have artists move in. I reject that idea categorically.

However, we'd be ignoring history if we didn't take into account that the more cultural production becomes commodified, the more it becomes attractive to a mainstream audience and the more a community will become attractive as a place to live and work. It is then that the issues of gentrification, and some of the tensions inherent in transformation, become salient.

Xav: Communities of place have always shown a certain amount of turnover. They're not static sandboxes. That turnover is a source of vitality. There are times when it can come with pain and conflict, it's true. But the question is how the newcomer–including the newcomer artist–finds home, finds a place, relates to neighbors, becomes productive in a whole new direction in that place, and is inspired by that place.

Laura: ***Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but when it comes to community development, it's all about outcome data. What are some of the factors you consider to measure whether a creative place is a strong and healthy community?***

Xav: This idea of what makes a healthy community has evolved a lot in recent decades

and recent years. Happily, it is a more multidisciplinary conversation now. Sometimes, it's literally about health–things like health indicators. Sometimes, it's about norms, behaviors, and the membership metrics that Bob Putnam[4] and others have done so much to illuminate. Sometimes it is rightly about the community as a place of investment: flows of capital, buying power.

I think that it's a good thing that measurement is more multidimensional now. But, we still have a lot to learn about how to capture the impact of creative placemaking on communities. I don't think that creative placemaking has necessarily made a big impact on how success is measured in communities, though it has much to offer and the potential is there.

Laura: ***You travel around the United States and the world visiting Ford programs. Do you have any favorite examples of "creative places"—communities that have been shaped by creativity?***

Xav: Yes, many. These are communities suffused with cultural energy and creative production that is central to the sense of place. New Orleans, of course, and Salvador da Bahia in Brazil. Havana, Cuba, has that same, intensely creative energy, many neighborhoods in New York City, Berlin, Amsterdam. What's so amazing, though, is that a place does not have to be big and cosmopolitan–like those "world" cities–to be a very creative place.

Darren: Two projects are standouts: The GoDown in Nairobi founded by the remarkable Joy Mboya. The GoDown is a repurposed industrial park on the outskirts of the city that houses artists housing and studios, creative design SMEs, NGOs, and an artist gallery collective. The other is the Townhouse in Cairo situated close to the central business district and somewhat derelict. It's a series of former auto repair and manufacturing buildings that were refashioned as a community arts center including a large theater, gallery, and local vendors. During the Arab Spring, the Townhouse was a place for public discussion and debate, and it served as a refuge during confrontations on the streets of Cairo. It's a model of ingenuity and innovation in a very challenging context.

Darren Walker is president of the Ford Foundation, the second largest philanthropy in the United States with over $11 billion in assets and $500 million in annual giving. The foundation is based in the United States and operates worldwide, with ten offices in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America. Prior to joining the Ford Foundation in 2010, Darren was vice president for foundation initiatives at the Rockefeller Foundation, where he led both domestic and global programs. Beginning in 2002, he helped guide the foundation's programs in education, civil rights, workforce development and program related investments. He also supervised Rockefeller's foreign offices, initiated new programming in urban development and arts and culture, and led its post-Katrina New Orleans Recovery Program. He is a 1982 graduate of The University of Texas at Austin and its School of Law in 1986. He is a member of the boards of the Arcus Foundation, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors,

4 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Friends of the High Line, the New York City Ballet, and the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Xavier ("Xav") de Souza Briggs, PhD, is vice president of the Ford Foundation's Economic Opportunity and Assets program. He leads the foundation's work promoting economic fairness, advancing sustainable development, and building just and inclusive cities in the United States, Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. He also oversees the foundation's regional programming in China, Indonesia, and India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Before joining the foundation in 2014, Xav was associate professor of sociology and urban planning and associate head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Xav's books include The Geography of Opportunity *(Brookings, 2005) and* Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe *(MIT Press, 2008). His latest book,* Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty *(Oxford, 2010), won the best book of the year from the National Academy of Public Administration. From January 2009 to August 2011, while on public service leave from the MIT faculty, Xav served as associate director of the Office of Management and Budget in the White House. There he oversaw a wide array of policy, budget and management issues for roughly half of the cabinet agencies of the federal government. Xav holds an engineering degree from Stanford University, an MPA from Harvard and PhD in sociology and education from Columbia University.*

Laura Callanan was a visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco in February 2014 and guest edited this volume. She became the senior deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts in November 2014. From 2008-2013, Callanan was a consultant with McKinsey & Company, where she led work on social innovation and authored Learning for Social Impact: What Foundations Can Do, From Potential to Action: Bringing Social Impact Bonds to the US, *and* Leaders Who Scale What Works. *Prior to joining McKinsey, she had been a senior adviser at the United Nations Development Programme, executive director of the Prospect Hill Foundation, and associate director at the Rockefeller Foundation. Most recently, Callanan was a senior fellow with the Foundation Center and scholar-in-residence at UC-Berkeley/Haas School of Business' Center for Nonprofit and Public Leadership where she authored case studies on James Houghton, founding artistic director of Signature Theatre in New York; Theaster Gates and his community development activities on the South Side of Chicago; and Deborah Cullinan, executive director of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Callanan recently completed a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Fellowship and a visiting fellowship at the American Academy in Rome to research and write* The Surprise Social Entrepreneur, *a book about artists as social innovators.*