

Dialogue on Working with Artists

Alexis Stephens of PolicyLink spoke in February 2019 with four leaders of the Community Development Investments (CDI) activities at their agencies. Ellen Ryan is Senior Director of Strategy and Planning for the Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC) in Philadelphia, and Adela Park is Special Projects Coordinator for FPC. Sezy Gerow-Hanson is Director of Public and Resident Relations at the Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) of Anchorage, AK, and Candace Blas was Manager of the Church of Love at CIHA. They spoke about their organizations' collaborations with artists throughout the three years of the CDI initiative. This discussion refers to activities that participating artists Enzina Marrari of Anchorage and the members of the Amber Art and Design collective of Philadelphia describe in their essays in this section of the volume.

Alexis:

This conversation will be about collaborative practice, the nuts and bolts of the work that you have done over the past three years—the structures that you've built, the daily emails and conversations, and the relationships that you've cultivated.

I want to start at the beginning with Ellen and Sezy, who have been thinking about how to originate work with artists to meet the goals of their respective organizations. What was your institution's prior knowledge about different forms of artistic practice? And are there any particular projects you pursued that helped you to better understand how they might match with your community development priorities?

Sezy (CIHA):

We had zero knowledge that there were different forms of artistic practice. We were familiar with public art as community developers, so this was quite a journey.

Ellen (FPC):

As a parks organization, we have a lot of familiarity with visual artists, particularly mural artists. But the Conservancy's partnership with artists had really been restricted to art as decoration and art as entertainment. For our annual friend-raiser, Glow in the Park, we would find fire dancers or somebody who could scale a monument with hula hoops of different colors, something like that to entertain at a benefit. But what we hadn't done was ask an artist to partner with us and be a thought partner. And we certainly hadn't worked with any kind of social or civic practice artists, so that was completely new territory. The way, the duration, the extent, and the depth were all completely different. The first way was contractual; the second way was a partnership.

Sezy (CIHA):

We had to quickly learn through our early technical assistance visits what this could translate to and then take a big leap of faith. For example, we worked with a set designer to design a model of a micro-apartment unit so we could play with configurations in that space in a three-dimensional way because there were concerns from developers, policymakers, and residents about whether they could actually be livable. This was brand-new territory for us that we thought was going to be a discussion about design layout for the apartments. It ended up being a discussion about community and the things that you need in your community, particularly if you're going to live in a small apartment. It was a much broader dialogue with some really big takeaways and "aha" moments for the private developers who came through that set and played with us. Even the architects, who had been supporting the move to micro-units, seemed surprised at how well it could work.

We had our board president walk through a micro-unit with us. He's a big man who lives in a big house in Texas. For him to stand in one of these units and remark, "People could live in this," changes the discussion that you have later when you go to the board and tell them we're going to develop micro-units. They have a different buy-in now; they have a different understanding. That would have never happened on paper, two-dimensionally. Collaborating with the set designer to make this temporary set we could play with changed our organization. Having a set designer apply her practice in this way was something that we had never thought about.

Alexis:

[Ellen, how did you learn to deploy different artistic forms and match them with the different community development priorities you had set?](#)

Ellen (FPC):

I think we're still learning. Amber Art and Design, the collective that we ended up partnering with, helped us to start to shift the way we work in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood. It was through a conversation with them that we recalibrated and figured out a new way of working together.

Generally, we are still figuring out who is the right person for the right job. Sometimes we do a call-to-artists, and that's been successful; sometimes we rely on referrals of artists. We want to do an artist roster. We have talked about doing mixers, where we invite artists in and have a conversation so that we can tell them who we are and they can tell us who they are. This pool and ability to have these conversations will be especially important for our new program, which is a staff "Yes Lab." The idea is that we're saying "yes" to giving small project resources to our staff for trying new approaches to support their work in partnership with artists. We want to make sure that we have a great selection of artists for staff to work with.

Alexis:

Sezy's description of the set-design project reminded me of something that you've said, Candace, which is that artists have unique ways of seeing the world and solving problems. Candace and Adela, as the folks doing a lot of the project management directly with artists, how have you also seen that play out?

Candace (CIHA):

I'll use an example of one of the projects that we've done, which was called MIMESPENARD. It was a collaboration with two artists who had originally approached us with an idea they had when they first heard that we had received this grant. They were approaching us with ideas for how we could use the money, and we countered with our goals of community development. We explained there was this corridor in Spenard where part of the road was going to be under construction for the entire summer. And we knew that that road construction would negatively affect small businesses in the area. We posed this concern to the artists to see if they had a unique solution to that problem.

The artists thought about it, and we scheduled a follow-up meeting with them. When we were gathering to meet with them, we noticed that there was a mime outside in front of the Church of Love [the community arts center run by CIHA] and we said, "Whoa, that's so cool. There's a mime outside!" We asked the artists, "Did you guys see that there's a mime outside? How cool would it be to do something with mimes?"

And lo and behold, they had planted that mime there for us to notice the effect of how energized and engaged we felt by spotting and interacting with the mime. I had gone up to him and asked, "Why are you here?" and of course, mimes don't talk; he did a good job of not saying anything.

So, before they'd even pitched the idea to us, we were sold. Then over the course of the summer, these two artists trained an army of mimes who would pop up throughout the area that was under construction. And it engaged the community; community members then became mimes; kids and their parents became mimes, and they would take shifts and wander and just hang out along the corridor. It culminated with a big huge community event where there were musicians and community members all in mime regalia marching around this stretch of Spenard. MIMESPENARD not only succeeded in bringing people into this area and its businesses, but it had a lasting community impact and was certainly a unique way of addressing the challenge we were concerned about.

Adela (FPC):

In the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, a big part of our work and partnership with Amber Art and Design was about first accepting and embracing their perspective as artists. Doing so expanded our idea of what art even was. It sounds simple, but within our organization

you think of an art piece or a product or a visual work. And throughout their residency, they really drilled down and focused on the social practice aspects of art and pushed us to think outside of those traditional forms and focus on the goals of our work together, which were to help change our relationship with the community to get more input into what we were doing in the park. I remember when we were still in the negotiation phase of the contract, we had a disagreement about what we wanted to call the residency. We really wanted to call it an artist residency, and they really pushed back on that.

They wanted it to be more focused on community. We eventually settled on calling it a “community catalyst residency.” That term reflects the approach that they were bringing. One of the things that they did at the Hatfield House was build and create a team of artists and collaborators from the immediate neighborhood—photographers, graphic designers, painters, event planners—who all contributed to each event that was held. The creation of that network was a really powerful way of not just breaking down the perceived barriers between artists and community, but really deepening relationships in the neighborhood, creating energy around the Hatfield House, and providing real opportunities for people to be engaged with it and to be a part of it. They were able to unlock the creative potential that is in every community.

Alexis:

Both organizations had many different types of relationships with artists—whether it was a one-time collaboration for specific events, or longer-term partnerships or residencies. How do you approach these types of relationships differently? How do you navigate them?

Ellen (FPC):

I was joking with Adela before I got here that I should just show a graphic of me complaining about the challenges between Fairmount Park Conservancy and Amber Art and Design. We were constantly butting heads; I just want to be frank about that. It was for the right reasons, and even though we had agreed on the goals together, I don’t think we always put our values to the fore.

Values become important, because as social practice artists, they had their own questions and their own line of inquiry. As an organization, we have our own mission and way of working. Finding that happy balance in a year’s work is really tricky, and we had all-out arguments sometimes. But one example of a great outcome was the deck of cards that we did together, which is actually the cultural asset map of Strawberry Mansion—and which I’m super proud of. It was a tough project, but it’s made us smarter about how to enter those kinds of partnerships. I’d like to think that Amber Art and Design learned, too. We’re still talking about a second phase with them. I think that says something; we were able to find our way.

I'm trained as a planner, so I see things a certain way, but you have to allow yourself to open up; so that was my challenge. Other projects have been much easier, but the work we did in Strawberry Mansion is still unfolding—it's still resonating.

Sezy (CIHA):

We worked really diligently, and the secret sauce is to be transparent. Those are the words that would run through my mind as we would go into meetings. I've been known to be inflexible, so I would just have to remind myself, "Be flexible and transparent." Creating a framework of guiding principles that describe our goals and way of working in Spenard to help us with our transparency was a key to managing relationships long- and short-term. We have a certain capacity and skill set, and we learned to try to meet the artists where they were at with their capacity.

Having had a lot of success as a developer, we've had to acknowledge the challenging moments. We had ArtPlace tell our CEO that failure was part of the journey; that gave us the opportunity to make bold statements and go forth and stumble. The idea that something "was a failure, but not a failure" was new for the organization. We did a call-to-artists that failed. They presented, nobody liked any of the proposals, so we had to go back and kind of eat a little humble pie and say, "Obviously our call was flawed, not your ideas, in that we didn't put forth what we needed." I think learning all of those things helps to manage the long-term relationships that we have with our whole arts community.

Alexis:

[Sezy, could you tell us about Cook Inlet Housing Authority's guiding principles for arts-engaged work? How has your approach to the principles changed over time?](#)

Sezy (CIHA):

I think many of us in community development organizations in the CDI program had those moments where we met with a room full of artists and stakeholders and they just didn't understand us and we didn't understand them. We learned along the way. We started working with a local artist, Asia Freeman. She became our arts midwife. She taught us the right terms. She translated for us. We developed a framework of principles and goals out of that work and the project in Spenard, and it became a filter for decision-making about what projects to work on. As we look forward, we want to take the framework and broaden it, so that it applies

across the region that we work in and has loftier and bigger goals.¹

The framework worked in two ways. It was how we communicated externally about what we were looking to do, but it also became really important to how we were communicating internally. It helped our organization understand beyond just what those of us directly involved were doing. It served a lot of purposes, and I think it's a great base foundation for us to continue to tweak.

Alexis:

Did Fairmount Park Conservancy have an “arts midwife”? What was the learning curve like as far as details like pay scales, structuring payments, or putting out RFPs, for example?

Ellen (FPC):

Some artists brought their own contracts. They gave us a draft, and we ran it by our lawyers if need be. We had other artists, like Amber Art and Design, who asked us to do the contract. We ended up working with a few curators, midwives of a different stripe, who brought some of that expertise to us. And we began to adapt that expertise to the situation. I'd say we are 75 percent there in getting that process down, but it took time.

We're just about to do a children's activity book for LOVE Park, which is a beloved park in Center City. It's right next to a family court building. We wanted to make an activity book that welcomed the children of those families waiting for their appointments. We intend to give it for free to the nonprofits that serve the family court families. But this experience has put us into a new level of learning; we have to get permission to have an image of Robert Indiana's LOVE sculpture and think about copyrights.

So, with each project there's new learning, but we have a comfort level now that we've got our basics down. And, we've finally gotten to a point with our attorneys where they're ready for these projects. It's the accumulation of the different helpers that we've had along the way, but I only wish we had reached out for more support sooner. I think there was a certain hubris on our part initially: “Oh, we can do this, we can do that,” but we finally have a good base now.

1 The framework reads, in part: “Any artist we work with must demonstrate their capacity for listening to community residents/stakeholders and the Cook Inlet Housing Authority. They must be committed to outcomes which address the needs, values, and priorities expressed by other stakeholders and a process that is mutually iterative, amidst whatever artistic process and output they devise and execute.” For a longer discussion of this and other sets of principles for working with artists in the CDI initiative, see the PolicyLink brief by Alexis Stephens, *Working with Artists to Deepen Impact* (May 2019), available at <https://communitydevelopment.art/resources-tools/working-with-artists>.

Alexis:

Candace and Adela, you have had to take on a lot of boring, but necessary, project management tasks. How did you approach your work, from within the organization?

Candace (CIHA):

I will just start by saying it's not boring. It's really fun work. Maybe not the logistics and the repetition, but the projects are so fascinating and so are the people that you're getting to work with. I have found it very energizing, and every experience was new, even though I use a similar framework or forms to fill out. Some of it can be repetitive, but I think that means that it's a success if you have a system that you've created to interact with artists to achieve these projects and to create these events. To me that's successful project management. That's how I approach it: seeking that formula and hoping not to recreate a wheel that's already been created.

I have some practical pointers and advice for the project managers who are working at the intersection of artists and community development organizations. I would say budget for time for the contract phase with an artist. Say you've identified an artist you want to work with; the artist does not begin for two weeks after that because, at least with Cook Inlet Housing, our organization is quite large and there needs to be some bureaucratic process in order for a large organization like that to function. There has to be some system. When you introduce a new element into that system, like an artist wanting to have an art camp, for example, it can throw a wrench into the machine. I would say, practically speaking, budget for four to six weeks to even complete a contract, which would include deliverables and a timeline.

And it's important to communicate to the artists throughout that contracting process why it's taking so long, so that they don't get frustrated. There might be moments where the community development organization might feel frustrated with the artist because they are having trouble understanding why we require insurance. And the artists might feel alienated and want to walk away from a project because there are too many hurdles for them to overcome. It is so important to communicate, especially if your organization is new to using artistic strategies in your work, so that both you and the artists can have some patience and humor.

Adela (FPC):

I've learned that it's important to have a clear set of goals from the outset. Not just because it's helpful from a planning perspective, but it's so important in making sure that there's a clarity in terms of what you're trying to achieve together and what one party's values are versus another party's. It's also important to balance that with a certain amount of flexibility. You never really know what's going to happen in a project, and we're not doing any of these projects in a vacuum, so you have to be able to let the project evolve and to be able to incorporate and respond to the feedback that you're getting from your partners and your

stakeholders. It's really important to set out what you need at the beginning and listen to what your partners need, not just what you hope to hear.

Alexis:

My final questions are about moving forward and continuing with arts and culture work and making it sustainable. What is working and what has been tougher with respect to collaborative practice? How are you starting to move forward with some of these relationships and partnerships?

Sezy (CIHA):

We've committed to creating a community and cultural hub at the Church of Love that gives a physical place for this work to live. Also, we created a new community development department outside of our standard housing pipeline, so this practice has a home on the organizational chart. Our storytelling that we worked on with Ping Chong + Company really signified to the entire organization that we were making a serious commitment to the Dena'ina oral tradition of storytelling and the importance of that in the culture of Anchorage and Alaska. CIHA is taking responsibility as an organization that can help perpetuate Dena'ina storytelling in a different way. All those things together are what continue us to move forward with the practice that we've worked really hard to understand and get our arms around in the past three-and-a-half years.

Ellen (FPC):

The Conservancy did a strategic plan this past year, and it really helped our organization—which has been very opportunistic and growing very fast—to understand how we might reach maturity. How do we begin to say no to some projects? We're often pulled into things that might not be our core mission. Rebranding our mission statement and describing our values in plain language has also given us the opportunity to ensure that arts and culture are a bedrock—just as community engagement is—to our mission and the way we work.

With the staff “Yes Lab” described earlier, we're really trying our best to infiltrate and make sure the staff is really incentivized to do this work and to learn from the projects that Adela and I have been engaged in over the past two years. The strategic plan is really going to help us straddle a change of leadership now that our former executive director, Jamie Gauthier, has stepped down to serve on city council. I have faith that we will get there and that with a strong strategic plan, and one with arts and culture at the core, this work will be sustainable and continue to be important to the organization.