

Integrating Arts and Culture into Community Development to Improve Outcomes

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Working in historically marginalized communities requires commitment over the long term, forging partnerships with a range of organizations, digging into the root causes of poverty, and empowering residents and stakeholders to plan their own futures. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is one of the country’s largest organizations supporting efforts to revitalize communities and bring greater economic opportunity to residents. Together with residents and partners, LISC forges resilient and inclusive communities of opportunity across America—great places to live, work, visit, do business, and raise families. Over the past 40 years as a community development intermediary, LISC has deployed \$20 billion in community development resources, leveraging \$60.4 billion in investment. At our core, we are dedicated to a holistic approach to working with communities to improve quality of life, evaluate and address social determinants of health, and ensure economic opportunity for all.

Five years ago, LISC began to think more deeply about how artists and community developers might come together to solve problems and build new pathways for community growth. Although LISC has a long history of investing capital in the development of arts and cultural facilities, we were unfamiliar with the practice of creative placemaking. We were interested in exploring opportunities in this space, but we were unsure where the path would lead. Yet our hunch was that partnering artists with community developers might spark a new way of working that would inspire collaboration, improve economic and physical conditions in neighborhoods, create social cohesion, and eventually build deeper trust between people and organizations—the very outcomes that are central to achieving our mission.

Currently, LISC defines creative placemaking as “activities that connect art, culture, and community in order to create resident-driven solutions to neighborhood challenges.” This work includes an asset-based approach that invests in cultural resources, supports process-driven planning, and drives economic inclusion. This article describes the core values that drive our creative placemaking efforts, the outcomes we have seen as a result of them, and the lessons we have learned along the way.

Core Values of Creative Placemaking at LISC

We anchor our approach to creative placemaking with a set of clearly defined values¹:

- First, we regard *artists as community developers*. Artists play a variety of roles that are central to community development. For example, they can serve as building developers, core design-team members, or community design facilitators.
- Second, we employ a *racial equity* lens when evaluating and administering creative placemaking funds. We work to ensure that our creative placemaking investments promote outcomes in which all people can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.²
- Third, we invest in projects that will *develop communities without displacing* the current residents of those places. We encourage residents to co-create solutions to problems and actively participate in their implementation. Our creative placemaking investments are *community driven and comprehensive, and they emphasize the importance of collaborative change*.
- Finally, our creative placemaking investments *cultivate inherent community assets, build capacity, and cultivate agency*. Indeed, our hope is to support work that has been rooted in community for decades but will benefit from investment and technical assistance.

The Transformative Power of Arts and Culture to Drive New Outcomes

We have discovered that creative placemaking works best when embedded in a broader program of community development that addresses affordable housing, education, health, and safety. Accordingly, creative placemaking is a key pillar of our new economic development approach, which is called Catalyzing Opportunity. Our work in underinvested communities is based on the premise that opportunity is accessed based on the local environment one lives in, the education and skills one has, and the access to capital and economic choices one enjoys. Our Catalyzing Opportunity strategy empowers people so that more of us can contribute to and take advantage of economic growth, transforms places that are experiencing distress and underinvestment, supports enterprises in building robust economies and communities, and drives systems innovation by working to address institutional challenges.

The practice of creative placemaking helps us to catalyze opportunity because we have seen how it has disrupted standard operating procedure for community development organizations and created possibilities for new outcomes in communities.

1 LISC, “Creative Placemaking: Catalyzing Opportunity.” Interim report to the Kresge Foundation (New York: LISC, September 30, 2018).

2 https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/The%20Competitive%20Advantage%20of%20Racial%20Equity-final_0.pdf

Outcome 1: Art Unleashes Community Power and Innovative Solutions That Drive Economic Prosperity

We often think of arts outcomes in creative placemaking: a beautiful mural depicting historic events, a piece of public art on a transit corridor, or a branding project in a commercial center. But we have found that the *process* of creative placemaking, and the level of inquiry artists bring to the work, also uncovers hidden opportunities. It is the process of including artists, early on, in the work of neighborhood building that produces innovative solutions, particularly in our most underinvested places.

In Philadelphia, our LISC office has a long partnership with the Village of Arts and Humanities (VOAH). The organization serves as both an arts and cultural provider, as well as a community developer, and has been our partner in neighborhood convening and planning. VOAH is embedded in the eastern North Philadelphia neighborhood, which includes Germantown Avenue, a mile-long strip saw-toothed with vacant and abandoned buildings and lots. For VOAH, forgotten urban spaces, such as Germantown Avenue, can become sites of community cultural renewal, ultimately laying the foundation for an economic agenda that enfranchises community residents in new ways. Indeed, this enfranchisement is the necessary condition for equitable economic growth. As Aviva Kapust, executive director of VOAH, says, “We needed to anchor the corridor in equity, and the only way to do that is to bring in art. Why art? Because art is the ability to ‘conjure’ something wholly new and to do so in service to, and with, others: with people you know, using the words they use.”

So, VOAH artists from North Philadelphia began the process of envisioning how to transform Germantown Avenue, and created art parks, murals, and urban gardens—projects that became highly visible expressions of community power. Add to this the Village’s arts residency program (devoted to social change), its youth arts program, and its nationally recognized and arts-centered citizen reentry program for women, and the result is a layering of new relationships across multiple communities within the community.

Outcome 2: Creative Placemaking Builds Community Identity, Ownership, and Agency

We believe that building and maintaining quality housing is the key to improving the quality of life for families and individuals in underinvested communities. We have also discovered that improving housing conditions does not necessarily lead to civic ownership of neighborhood assets. In the past five years, we have seen creative placemaking as a game changer for improving social connection that leads to deeper ownership of community assets.

Trinity Square is the gateway to South Providence, which, as Southside Cultural Center (SSCC)’s Richardson Ogidon often points out, is the most diverse neighborhood in Rhode Island. Although decades of disinvestment left behind a decayed housing stock and pockets of severe blight, community development organizations plowed some \$200 million into affordable housing, holding off—and, in some places, reversing—decline. However, this investment did not build a community identity that includes the various people who live there.

As a community cultural center, SSCC “connects, cultivates, and engages community through the arts.” Ogidon sees SSCC “as the anchor to a natural evolution of the community’s identity.” SSCC’s creative placemaking efforts in the Trinity Square neighborhood are tied to the Center’s location within the historic Trinity United Methodist Church. In 2015, SSCC, the City of Providence, and LISC Rhode Island were awarded an ArtPlace grant to produce a project that would serve as a gateway to the South Providence neighborhoods. A broad coalition was convened, and Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) partnered with the city and SSCC to design and build the work.

Over a series of months, LISC assisted SSCC in convening a broad-based coalition of community organizers, business owners, social service staff, homeless community members, and longtime residents who had often been left out of traditional community planning. This work was not straightforward or easy. Power dynamics between institutions and residents were initially fraught. The original RISD concepts were met with skepticism, and it became clear that the community needed to be the agents of self-determined identity formation. The process of creative placemaking, of involving artists in the collaborative process, helped illuminate the community’s priorities and desired identity. As we learned, it isn’t importing art into a community that catalyzes a neighborhood’s cohesion—it’s the far more unpredictable process of making art *as* a community.³ An outcome of this consideration was that a representative team of residents was paid as consultants to provide expertise in the needs of the neighborhood. Community members decided that they needed a flexible performance space that could be used in multiple ways. They determined that a decaying parking lot could be the site of such a space. In response, SSCC and its partners—LISC, the city, and RISD—working with the community created SouthLight, a beautifully designed and illuminated community performance space, lawn, and garden that offers programming throughout the warmer months.

Over the past four years, South Providence and the area around Trinity Square have become demonstrably more cohesive. Participation at SouthLight performances has been strong. The SSCC member organizations, such as the Rhode Island Black Storytellers, Rhode Island Latino Arts, and the Laotian Community Center, are active participants, while the building itself has become recognized as a community hub. Two newly energized neighborhood and business associations have mobilized community and business volunteers for block parties, events, and neighborhood cleanups. As community cohesion and activity continue to rise, new investment has begun to flow. For example, the Southside Community Land Trust acquired a building and large lot across from Trinity Church. Through the work of SSCC and its partners, community leaders expect to solidify and highlight the community’s cultural identity, stimulate foot traffic, animate community spaces, and create a node for new business formation and expansion in the district surrounding a newly illuminated Trinity Square.

3 Katharine Greider, “Shedding Light on a Community’s Creativity” (New York: LISC, August 25, 2017), <http://www.lisc.org/our-stories/story/shedding-light-community-creativity>.

Outcome 3: Creative Placemaking Drives Social Cohesion and Cultural Understanding into the Process of Community Development

We have found that this work helps build cultural bridges in neighborhoods and breaks down assumptions. As communities evolve, new and distinct communities often emerge within them. This often leads to one culture dominating or attempting to maintain its control. But what if these communities could begin to understand each other and work together on place-based initiatives for their neighborhoods?

Cincinnati's Price Hill neighborhood tells a story that is familiar to many American communities. The traditionally white German inhabitants of this community have been aging or migrating out for many years and have been slowly replaced by African American and Latinx families.

Leaders of the local community development corporation, Price Hill Will (PHW), had long pursued a fairly traditional program of housing rehabilitation, but they recognized they needed to do more to respond to the dynamics and stress of neighborhood change. Community members voiced strong support for more arts and cultural programming and for arts and cultural practices to be integrated into community development programs at PHW. In response, PHW sponsored an Arts Council to organize local artists and arts organizations and develop community events.

Yet the game-changing event that set PHW and all of Price Hill on a new course was the creation, in 2011, of a program called MYCincinnati as an operating entity within the organization. MYCincinnati is a "franchise" of the international music education program known as El Sistema, which uses music to transform children and families by emphasizing themes of dignity, inclusion, and social justice.

Over the course of eight years, and from a beginning class of 11 students to 60 today, MYCincinnati has become a fulcrum of community change, reaching hundreds of families directly and leading them to regard both each other, and Price Hill, as a true community. As former Director Laura Jekel said: "When the program is over, the relationships remain."

The old firehouse that's home to MYCincinnati has become a community center for the program itself and for other arts and community events. With support from LISC, PHW launched the Summer Creative Community Festival to showcase community talent in multiple community venues, including MYCincinnati students, as well as artists of color and LGBTQ artists. As current MYCincinnati Director Eddie Kwon noted, "Inclusivity is at the core of the festival."

Former director Jekel pointed out the next step in the sequence: "MYCincinnati led to creative placemaking, and now creative placemaking is leading to equitable economic development. In fact, the entire Price Hill Will real estate development portfolio is related to the arts. Working with LISC and PHW, we have been able to create a pathway for the arts to support community development outcomes—and not just social cohesion—but the work is now manifested into community gathering spaces and will continue to drive civic life."

And now under the leadership of PHW’s executive director, Rachel Hastings, renovation of a beautiful but abandoned Masonic Temple, built in 1912, will soon begin. The temple is expected to open in 2020. MYCincinnati will be among the new tenants, expanding its footprint in the city. This move will enable MYCincinnati to serve more families and to begin a Creative Action Residency, which will provide artists with an opportunity to investigate community challenges and work with residents on specific responses, culminating in a performance. The firehouse will anchor a new Creative Campus, consisting of eight buildings and two vacant lots. The Campus will house a variety of arts organizations committed to principles of inclusion, which, as Kwon puts it, will create a “density of opportunity” that will become an entry point to the community, generate foot traffic, solidify the neighborhood’s identity, and set the tone for further development.

Conclusion

LISC has dramatically expanded its arts and cultural work over time and has contributed significant funds and resources to communities around the country. Last year, we committed \$23.2 million in loans to 12 projects, with over \$32 million in the pipeline for 27 projects in 14 cities. We have also established a national creative placemaking infrastructure, supported hundreds of projects, and deepened the professional skills and capacities of our staff and our partners. In addition, since 2015, LISC—in partnership with PolicyLink—has leveraged support from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Kresge Foundation to provide grants and technical assistance to creative placemaking projects across the country.

And perhaps most important, we have worked to ensure that our creative placemaking efforts are integrated with the rest of the work we do at LISC, because we are seeing that the model works in helping us achieve our central goals for community revitalization. We understand that when arts and cultural partners are at the table, we are able to be more responsive to communities, build more effective coalitions, and, as a result, address critical needs in an even more comprehensive way. Our arts-related investments have transformed our practice and that of our community partners. These new practices and partnerships, all of them rooted in the arts, have helped us achieve our broader organizational outcomes: helping to catalyze opportunity in communities across America.

Maurice Jones is President and CEO of LISC. Prior to joining LISC, Maurice was the Secretary of Commerce for the Commonwealth of Virginia, where he managed 13 state agencies focused on the economic needs in his native state. Before that, he was second in command at the U.S. Department of HUD, serving as deputy secretary in charge of operations. He has also been commissioner of Virginia’s Department of Social Services and deputy chief of staff to then-Governor Mark Warner. At the U.S. Treasury Department during the Clinton administration, he managed the CDFI fund. His private-sector experience includes top positions at the Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, a Richmond law firm, and a private philanthropy investing in community-based efforts to benefit children in Washington, DC.