Lessons on Collaborative Practice between Artists and Community Developers

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During the Community Development Investments program, when the six participating community development organizations embarked on a journey of co-creation with artists, their experiences had a steep learning curve. As participants leveraged their early experiments into more ambitious projects, they were compelled to address unforeseen friction with new arts partners, accept critique from many sides, and learn from periodic failures. They were rewarded for taking on these challenges by eventually putting in place a wide, colorful, and effective array of arts-based projects that advanced their mission and expanded organizational knowledge and relationships

This essay examines how these community-based organizations designed collaborative practices between their organizations and artists, and how these efforts have significantly changed the ways by which community preservation and revitalization can take place. The artists took on a broad range of roles: not only bringing creative expressions of local history to new audiences, energizing and activating public spaces, and organizing innovative performances and exhibits, but also facilitating internal strategic planning and ways of working.

This article describes cross-cutting themes across all six sites as context for detailed perspectives in the articles that follow in this issue of *CDIR*, including essays by six of the participating artists and dialogues among the CDI leaders.[1] Specifically, it provides insights on:

- how the CDI leaders matched their priorities with the expertise and artistic practice of collaborators;

- how they identified arts partners and built relationships;

- the process of creating guidelines, structuring relationships, and establishing roles and responsibilities; and

- how, through these experiences, the organizations became more transparent, nimble, and reflective.

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1   The themes of this essay are expanded upon, with many examples drawn from the CDI communities, in the May 2019 PolicyLink brief, *Working with Artists to Deepen Impact*, May 2019. Accessible at www. communitydevelopment.art

Lesson 1: Expanding Knowledge about Artistic Practice

An important first step for most of the CDI organizations was to expand their understanding and imagination around how artistic practice might be deployed in service of specific community challenges. As the organizations got more comfortable with how artists work, the artists often became not only hired talent but also thought partners in the design and execution of the projects, a deeper relationship which worked to the community's benefit. Moreover, learning more about common relationship structures with artists – elements as basic but important as pay scales for different artistic forms – enhanced the capacity of community development organizations to deploy experimental projects.

These organizations varied in their prior experience working with artists when the program was launched in fall 2015, but they nonetheless considered themselves novices and frequently expressed trepidation about the perceived 'black box' of how artists work. Over the course of three years, all six organizations embarked on learning more about the wide typology of artistic practice and increasing their understanding about how different methods and approaches might match each organization's community development goals.

The Center for Performance and Civic Practice coached, trained, and guided processes at the six sites throughout the course of the program. Their role as a key technical assistance provider was to help the organizations consider their own partnership practices, identify opportunities where an artist might be of service, and engage in productive co-design processes with artists interested in pursuing community development goals. Through this partnership, and as a result of the opportunity to learn more about the arts, many of the projects that the organizations undertook were with social or civic practice artists (Box 1). That is, artists whose artistic practice functioned in service of an aspiration, challenge, or vision defined by the organizations and their community partners.

Box 1

Types of Artistic Practice

Studio practice: Artists create their own work and engage with neighbors/residents as audience.

Social practice: Artists work with neighbors/residents on an artist-led vision that involves some level of community participation and an intention of social impact outside traditional audience experience.

Civic practice: Artists co-design a project with neighbors and residents; the spoken intention is to serve a community's/public partner's self-defined needs.[2]

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2   All three definitions are from Center for Performance and Civic Practice, Effective Partnering: Starting with Values, Goals and Vision, May 17, 2017, https://www.artplaceamerica.org/view/pdf?f=/sites/default/files/public/pictures/cpcp_low.pdf.

As the organizations worked with more artists, they also began to see that different kinds of practices could be applied in creative ways to their priorities – theater practice might help facilitate a community meeting and explore scenarios; photography might help illuminate what a community loves and hates; storytelling might help provide a new insight that data alone could not. With each relationship, the organizations had to adapt to different pay scales, requirements around material resources, and the languages artists use. One consequence of this adaptation was to learn to approach artists with more humility. Instead of approaching them with fully-conceived ideas about how an artist might develop a project, they began to treat artists as thought partners at the outset or design phase of projects.

Lesson 2: Seeking Out Arts Partners

There are many proven avenues to seeking out local art, artists, and arts organizations. When the groups began, many felt as though they were not sure where to find artists. Cultural asset mapping, issuing calls, and forming rosters, directories, and committees were all ways they looked to form new relationships The groups became facile with these techniques and chose or adapted them to their circumstances.

Cultural Asset Mapping

Cultural asset mapping is an exploratory process of identifying the cultural and artistic skills, talents, networks, and histories of an area—including people, spaces, and businesses—to acknowledge and integrate them into planning and development efforts. It provides documentation for visioning and planning that focuses on community-identified strengths, rather than their deficiencies, and provides a new lens through which to understand those communities.[3]

Many of the organizations conducted asset mapping at the beginning of the CDI program in order to uncover local artists, cultural centers, and art forms. Some chose to conduct asset mapping later in the program to fit a specific community development or relationship-building goal. For example, Fairmount Park Conservancy completed their cultural asset mapping project in the final year of the program. Their collaborators, Amber Art & Design and Ethnologica, encouraged them to focus on the *process of listening* over predetermining what the ultimate *product of asset mapping* would be. The partners conducted life history interviews in people's homes, on street corners, and via public events, including a barbershop on the porch of a historic house in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood.[4] They then compiled residents' stories and memories of the neighborhood into a deck of playing cards featuring current and historic figures and landmarks. The cards have been distributed to residents as a fun, educational, and culturally evocative way to continue a dialogue about

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3   Kofi Boone, "Disembodied Voices, Embodied Places: Mobile Technology, Enabling Discourse, and Interpreting Place," Landscape and Urban Planning 142 (2015): 217-226, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282487456_Disembodied_voices_embodied_places_Mobile_technology_enabling_discourse_and_interpreting_place.

4   Amber Art & Design, *Strawberry Mansion Community Engagement: Cultural Asset Mapping and Gateway Conceptual Planning 2017-2018*, October 15, 2018.

Residents participating in programs at the Hatfield House in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia, PA. Photo credit: Albert Yee

how these people, places, and memories might fit into future planning and development projects for the neighborhood. Ellen Ryan and Adela Park from the Fairmount Park Conservancy discuss their collaborative process with Amber Art and Design in the site dialogue that follows while Keir Johnston, Ernel Martinez and Martha O'Connell give their perspective in the adjoining mini-essay.

Issuing a Call for Artists, and Forming Rosters, Directories, and Advisory Committees

Issuing a call for artists, similar to a request for proposals, is a common way to find an artist collaborator. The organizations experimented with different methods of issuing calls and learned that defining the parameters of the call wasn't as simple as they expected, and that they had to be thoughtful about how open or defined the opportunity was.[5]

In 2017, Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) issued a call for artists to "advance the design of a small plaza as a permanent enhancement" in front of one of their mixed-use development projects in the Spenard neighborhood. Their call included: guidelines for working with artists; the project's details, including the building architect's plans; and very detailed guidance with respect to how artists were to approach the purpose, functionality, and design of the plaza. It was a learning experience for the organization—one artist responded that they were invited too late in the process, after the planning and permitting were already underway.

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5   Americans for the Arts, *Abridged Call for Artists Guidelines*, 2009, https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/
     default/files/pdf/2013/by_program/networks_and_councils/public_art_network/CallforArtistsGuide_
     Abridged.pdf.

Performer Brian Hutton as a part of the #MIMESPENARD project in the Spenard neighborhood of Anchorage, AK. Photo credit: Brandon McElroy

If the artist had been engaged at an earlier stage, they would have suggested reorienting the plaza in relationship to the surrounding landscape, because the architect had oriented it toward being able to look at the building rather than the surrounding mountains. Sezy Gerow-Hanson and Candace Blas of CIHA also discuss how their approach to working with artists changed over time in the following site dialogue, while artist Enzina Marrari reflects on working with the organization in her mini-essay.

All of the organizations used the call for artists mechanism to invite artists for specific projects and to cultivate their arts advisory committees and rosters. While individual artists and arts groups were being identified as potential collaborators via cultural asset mapping, calls for artists, or through direct contact by interested artists, the organizations also created new structures for communicating with them, sharing opportunities, and consulting with them as a group. Establishing artist rosters, artist directories, and arts advisory committee all became ways that the organizations moved from engaging with artists on a project basis to building long-term relationships that covered multiple opportunities.

An artist directory can be as simple as a record of information about artists and arts groups. An artist roster is more formal; it includes people who are engaged regularly in these formal engagements, are likely to be compensated for their collaboration.[6] Artist Carlton Turner advised the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation that these are artists who "you don't just call when you need them, *they show up* when you need them." An arts advisory committee is a group that is convened early and often for their input on the range of arts and culture

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6   Compensating artists and arts groups was a key value of the CDI program and an important best practice that affirms the importance of their contributions.

work of an organization. Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, Little Tokyo Service Center, and the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project all formed arts advisory committees and paid members from $30 per session to between $40 and $60 an hour for their participation.

Whatever the method by which the artists are brought into the work, what matters is the depth of the relationships that are formed and the utility of the guidance provided. Many of the groups discovered that it wasn't enough to get singular input from artists along the way, but that they could actually learn more when through a sustained body of artists invested in their mission and the work being done. Of the three sites with artist committees, the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project's seven-member advisory committee had the most profound impact on their project and on the sponsoring organization. That committee helped to culturally ground and foster community ownership over the design, construction, and placement of public art within H'on A:wan ("of the people") Park. Initially, artists were skeptical about the park because of historical experiences where development projects proposed by outsiders equipped with significant financial resources failed to deliver on their promised outcomes. The organization successfully countered skepticism from artists and built trust through frequent communication with the committee, especially when the construction progress was periodically stalled. Members of the committee have reflected that this is the first project where they have felt "heard" and that their input was acted upon.[7]

Consulting with Intermediaries

Some of the groups enlisted experts from the arts sector to support them in identifying artists and incubating relationships. Those professionals were available for brainstorming, confidence-building, and connecting the groups to other regional and national creative placemaking leaders. Consulting with arts intermediaries saved these groups time and outreach effort, both valuable during the defined three-year period. The Center for Performance and Civic Practice played this role for many of the groups, with ArtPlace America providing supplementary technical assistance and matchmaking.

Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership sought out Intermedia Arts, a Minneapolis-based multidisciplinary, multicultural arts organization, to hold their first Creative Community Leadership Institute in rural Minnesota in early 2017. The institute engaged cross-sector leadership (community developers and artists) to address community issues with arts-based strategies. This series assembled groups in each of the three target communities (Milan, St. James, and Worthington). They also added a fourth group to focus on their organization itself as they worked for three weekends on a series of trainings to ideate, research, and develop a logic model for a project addressing community issues. This process generated the initial projects for the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, creating momentum for at least 15 projects by the end of 2018.

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7   Susan Carter, memorandum to PolicyLink, December 2018.

Lesson 3: Defining Relationships

Leading with shared values can amplify the mutual benefits for both sides of an artist-community development collaboration. Some of the sites developed internal guidelines for their arts work that detailed their values and criteria and engaged artists as thought partners in developing new project ideas, not just responding to existing project ideas. These were both a revelation and a release, providing an opportunity for new ways of expression, resident engagement, and problem solving that were much different from their usual rule-driven playbook.

With their project frameworks in mind, the groups had to make decisions about when and where to deploy artists, and had to create the structural openings for any processes that engaged artists. Hiring an artist may sound like a good idea, but these groups learned that to engage with artists on a long-term basis meant developing specific internal structures and adopting common procedures within the arts world.

The different types of projects and initiatives deployed by the six organizations required distinct relationship structures:

- shorter-term collaborations, often categorized as commissions;

- open/responsive collaborations, often considered partnerships as formalized through memorandums of understanding; and

- major design and planning undertakings, carried out through artist residencies and designs for capital projects with contracts which address in greater detail the expectations for each partner's contributions.

To collaborate successfully, the organizations had to demonstrate their respect for the artists' and arts groups' skills and expertise, educate themselves about integrating these structures into their programming, institute fair-wage pay scales, and assign—and more critically, have a dialogue with artists about—shared language and expectations. Above all, they had to lead with their values, vision for the work, and open minds.

Artist Residencies

Through artist-in-residence programs, host organizations can provide artists with time, space, and other supports to engage in community-based work.[8] Five of the six organizations ended up considering, and then, pursuing formal residency programs, in order to anchor and situate their artist collaborators within their place-based community development work. Different models of artist residencies were engaged, but primarily these programs had artists playing a curatorial role in public programming and community engagement.

Residencies can bring new perspectives to either external or internal opportunities in this kind of initiative. Some of the artists, such as those working with Little Tokyo Service

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8   Maria Rosario Jackson, "Brief Reflections on Artist Residencies in Community Contexts," *CONSUMPTION* (project), Asian Arts Initiative, accessed March 19, 2019, http://asianartsinitiative.org/consumption/essay-by-maria-rosario-jackson-ph-d.

Center and its partners described below, created new pieces or performances that extended the reach, impact and insights of their hosts' political and cultural strategy. But other artists turned their attention to the host organizations. Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership hired Ashley Hanson as an in-house artist-in-residence to integrate arts and culture into the DNA of the organization, promoting collaborative practice across teams and departments.

Partnerships with Arts Institutions

Beyond relationships with individual artists, the sites also formed, or strengthened, more informal but critical partnerships with major arts institutions and cultural organizations.

Aligning with local museums and cultural centers can lend community developers credibility and expertise, boost their visibility, connect them to new artists, and generate new audiences for creative placemaking endeavors. Little Tokyo Service Center had prior experience working with local institutions dating back to the late 1990s when they renovated a former church building, transforming it into the Union Center for the Arts. In 2018, they ran a residency program in Little Tokyo on the theme of "community control and self-determination" with four of their longstanding partners—Japanese American National Museum, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, Visual Communications (a media arts company), and Sustainable Little Tokyo. Each partner group served as a primary host for one of the selected artists. Leaning into their role as a convener, Little Tokyo Service Center helped to increase cohesiveness among these arts institutions by circumventing competitive barriers, deepening present and future collaborations, and normalizing the practice of sharing expertise, contacts, and resources.

Lesson 4: Overcoming Challenges

At the outset, the community developers did not necessarily know what they wanted out of the partnership with artists or how to seek it, and the artists did not know how to work in this environment. **Failing early made the collaborative work more powerful later on.** This openness and experimental mindset may be familiar advice for social change agents and entrepreneurial nonprofit leaders, but it only becomes real through new, shared experiences.

The multiyear interventions pursued by the selected community development organizations were not without friction and periodic roadblocks. Participants in the arts and community development sectors brought their own styles of working, priorities with respect to project outcomes, and approaches to conflict resolution. Throughout the program, all six organizations had to accept feedback, learn from missteps and blind spots, and establish best practices for working with artists moving forward. Early failures were often stepping stones toward meeting more ambitious objectives.

CDI participants often reflected on how important it was to:

- Identify a common language and shared goals with artists
- Work to increase transparency and consistency in communication

- Demonstrate more patience during the initial pilot phase of the program (a precursor to deeper and longer-term partnerships)

- Test internal boundaries and flexibility with respect to deadlines and deliverables

- View partnership as mutually beneficial with both sides sharing their creativity and resources

Friction should be expected. Being transparent, flexible, and patient helps to mitigate conflict; mediation from an outside arts intermediary can also bridge perceived gaps.

Lesson 5: Sustaining the Work

Sustaining arts and culture work over the long term is a different challenge from embarking upon it, but the learned ability through experimentation to translate the outcomes of their work and maintain a wide net of partners has helped.

All participants report that the challenges of sustaining this work are different from the ones they faced as implementers. The CDI award was a one-time opportunity, so the maintenance of a strong arts and culture presence will require consistent commitment and creativity as well as new fundraising. The groups have been able to transfer their recently honed best practices and their expanded networks in the arts sector to support the development of new arts partners, projects, and communities, in many instances raising new resources and keeping a wide range of their staff members engaged. The fundraising was successful when they were able to demonstrate that they were equipped and committed to use cultural strategies to become more effective anchor institutions for their communities. They have come away with a more sophisticated and reflective understanding of the potential of arts and culture to amplify their mission-driven community development work.

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