

Multiple Ways of Knowing: Translating Outcomes Between the Arts and Community Development

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When I became ArtPlace America’s Director of Research Strategies in 2014, the tension around how to measure creative placemaking success was palpable. Practitioners and communities doing arts-based community development work had been defining their own success for decades, but the then-recent formalization of the field—through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Our Town grant program, the creation of ArtPlace, significant investments from national philanthropic entities, and numerous other policy and funding shifts—had happened seemingly overnight, without a corresponding or unified theory of change about the *actual* impacts of creative placemaking. The possibilities—and the risks—were both abstract and endless.

The NEA was in the midst of its multiyear *Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) Study*, and ArtPlace itself had released a hotly contested set of indicators that positioned creative placemaking as contributing to the “vibrancy” of a place.¹ Respected researchers and scholars who had spent their careers studying the social or economic impact of the arts were increasingly vocal, calling out the shaky foundation upon which we were attempting to build a field.²

To further complicate matters, individual approaches to creative placemaking were rapidly evolving—adapting, necessarily, both to community context and to changing social and political dynamics across the country. Artists in the Midwest were collaborating with residents to address stormwater management in low-income neighborhoods, while longtime affordable-housing developers in Harlem were integrating permanent museums into their financial model for supportive housing. An esteemed dance organization was working with local transportation officials to redesign a suburban commuter corridor for pedestrians, while community organizers in southern California were turning to local artists to help build community cohesion and public space in an unincorporated migrant farming community. The sheer diversity of initiatives that fell under the “creative placemaking” umbrella was both inspiring and dizzying, and the tent was only going to get bigger.

It was against this backdrop that ArtPlace launched two new research programs to complement its project-based grantmaking to date. The Community Development Investments (CDI) initiative—the learnings of which comprise most of this volume—was created to generate

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- 1 Many critics felt the Vibrancy Indicators privileged property values and talent attraction over such factors as wellness and household income. For the full list of the indicators, see Andrew Taylor, “Vibrancy by Proxy,” *The Artful Manager*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.artsjournal.com/artfulmanager/main/vibrancy-by-proxy.php>.
 - 2 Ian David Moss, “Creative Placemaking Has an Outcomes Problem,” *Fractured Atlas*, May 9, 2012, <https://blog.fracturedatlas.org/creative-placemaking-has-an-outcomes-problem-97686ba491cb>.

lessons and insights about how community development organizations in diverse circumstances could integrate arts and cultural strategies into their structures and core activities.

The second program, which we refer to as our “Translating Outcomes” work, was a series of 10 research initiatives designed to establish causal pathways between arts and cultural activities and the countless community development goals that we were seeing in the ArtPlace grant portfolio and across the field. Another equally important function of the Translating Outcomes work was to build frameworks that could serve as a bridge for those new to creative placemaking to step into this approach—language that articulated what, exactly, the arts were doing in a given community development project or context.

Recognizing that the comprehensive community development field is made up of many professional disciplines, we developed a matrix to illustrate 10 segments of the field that are commonly understood as discrete sectors: Agriculture & Food, Economic Development, Environment & Energy, Health, Housing, Immigration, Public Safety, Transportation, Workforce Development, and Youth & Education. Our Translating Outcomes project took this matrix as its road map and set out to analyze, make legible, and give language to how arts and cultural practitioners have long been partners in helping to achieve each of these sectors’ goals. It was an incremental, segmented approach to influencing comprehensive community development practice—one that would take time but would hopefully lay the groundwork for the creative placemaking field to embrace a multidimensional array of success measures that are simultaneously more nuanced and more complex than the field has yet been able to capture.

Each sector has its own terminology, conceptual frameworks, priorities, and disciplinary cultures to navigate, and as we dove into the complexity of the first three, the value of rigorous segmentation became increasingly clear.³ Our methods in each sector included interviews with artists, practitioners, and thought leaders—some deeply immersed in the intersection, others considering it for the first time; a meta-analysis of creative placemaking projects both inside and outside of the ArtPlace and NEA portfolios⁴; reviews of peer-reviewed and gray literature on trends and policies in a given sector; and the creation of a taxonomy or typology laying out a hypothesis about “what the arts can do” in language resonant to that sector. Throughout the process, we maintained a commitment to highlighting equitable practices and approaches to creative placemaking, and to centering the voices of artists and practitioners—particularly those of color—who have long been pioneers in the field.

We then, once again, invited artists, practitioners, and thought leaders to review and critique our findings in a working group, where we also engaged them in explicit discus-

3 A critique we often heard about the Translating Outcomes initiative is that it was “re-siloing” the work in a way that undermines the lived experience and reality of both communities and community development work. The segmentation, however, simply served as a methodological tool that allowed us to build understanding, capacity, and nuance in each of the sectors. When viewed as a series, the material can then be applied or combined in contextual ways that make sense for a given project, organization, or community.

4 Our research scope intentionally included people and places who had long been doing arts-integrated community development work, regardless of whether they referred to it as “creative placemaking.”

sion about barriers to collaboration in a given sector: Are there specific policy restrictions or industry metrics that simply cannot accommodate arts and cultural work? How do we inspire community development practitioners—already stretched thin with their day-to-day responsibilities—to take on work that requires a wholly new set of competencies? What does it take to convince a housing developer, for example, that a slight increase to her financial bottom line will produce an exponential return on investment, albeit one that we don’t yet know how to measure?

At the time of this writing, work in all 10 sectors is underway. In seven of the 10 sectors, we have published clear frameworks for practitioners and engaged strategic partners who will carry the knowledge forward within the specific sphere of community development that they serve.⁵ The plan has always been to conclude the Translating Outcomes series with a cross-cutting meta-analysis that brings the sector-specific learnings into a comprehensive whole; however, several key insights have already emerged. Two, in particular, shed light on priorities for the next chapter of creative placemaking research.

- **We keep measuring the wrong things.** Established metrics for success in other sectors do not capture the most meaningful impacts of community development work. We interrogated each sector to better understand its existing systems of measurement and evaluation, and to draw connections between arts and cultural strategies and those established measures or outcomes. What we encountered, however, was far more complicated. Time and time again, we heard in interviews and in working groups that the majority of people doing community change work—even those in fields strongly grounded in evidence-based decision-making, such as public health and community safety—felt that the measures they relied on were insufficient. Many were not meeting their own goals, or if they were, something was still missing. Nearly everyone we have engaged in this research has requested help from the arts and culture sector: How can we more authentically connect with the people we are trying to serve, and how can we incorporate the social and emotional dimensions of the human condition into our measures of success? Concepts like trust, wellbeing, belonging, and collective efficacy are increasingly valued by those working in communities and are understood intuitively to be the domain of artists and culture bearers. New (largely social science based) methods for measuring such concepts will be central to understanding the true impacts of creative placemaking.
- **Creative placemaking research is as messy as the work itself.** A central characteristic of creative placemaking practice is that it is deeply collaborative. And, as discussed in the articles and dialogues about collaboration in this journal (and as anyone who has ever been in a partnership knows, whether it’s professional, organizational, civic,

5 Partners to date include NeighborWorks America and Enterprise Community Partners (affordable housing), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (community safety), Transportation for America (transportation), US Water Alliance and Grist (environment), Welcoming America (immigration), Rural Coalition and Farm Credit Council (agriculture and food systems), and the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine (public health). Research papers in each of the sectors can be downloaded at <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/areas-of-work/research/translating-outcomes>.

or as personal as a marriage), collaboration can be messy. Establishing and aligning values, learning and accepting each other's strengths and weaknesses, sharing responsibilities and accountability, and communicating constantly about all of the above are baseline requirements for any successful partnership. When it comes to research and evaluation of creative placemaking work, the same and more holds true. For both the Translating Outcomes and the CDI Research and Documentation efforts, there has been a multidirectional learning curve for everyone involved—regardless of which sector we were investigating, and regardless of whether we were working with an individual researcher or a larger team with varied skill sets. At its simplest, creative placemaking research requires a strategic and deliberate merging of existing evidence bases and methods, bringing anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, planners, participatory action researchers, artists, and more into dialogue with public health scholars, criminologists, economists, infrastructure engineers, and other such specialists, as well as with community members directly affected by the work. More often than not, however, it also requires a unique combination of rigor and flexibility—with methods that honor both the linear and the nonlinear, the established and the experimental, the known and the unknown, the logic model and the lived experience. Future creative placemaking research and evaluation efforts will require unexpected configurations of expertise; we must proactively structure and support such collaborations with the time and resources it takes to learn from each other and to align different ways of knowing.

Frans Johansson's book *The Medici Effect: What Elephants & Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation*⁶ has been an important reference for this notion of intersections, and the powerful opportunity that lies in an unlikely convergence or association across disciplines. The participants in this volume's Researchers' Roundtable conversation, too, cite the value of the "edges" in this work; as Jennifer Scott notes, "Something really powerful happens when it's very cross-sector and interdisciplinary; people don't even realize they have that need to connect in that way until that encounter."

There is so much more work to do within each of the intersections we have initiated in the Translating Outcomes research. As the creative placemaking field continues to evolve and grow, critical and longitudinal evaluation of projects—done in collaboration with community members and residents—will be crucial to understanding the full range of outcomes, as well as the risks and limitations, of arts-based strategies. It is our hope, however, that the cross-sector frameworks and resources generated through ArtPlace's two bodies of research serve as a foundation for all sorts of disciplines to see themselves in this work, to step into new collaborations with artists, and to bring their own critical inquiry into the mix.

6 Frans Johansson, *The Medici Effect: What Elephants & Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

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