

Our Town: Supporting the Arts in Communities Across America

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Why are a farm, a church, a museum, an arboretum, and a festival working together to create a new environmental arts center in rural Freeman, South Dakota? Why are a community loan fund and an office of economic and workforce development working with a local arts agency in San Francisco to secure permanent space for arts organizations? Why are a bank, an energy company, and a music organization collaborating on a series of pop-up performances in suburban Maize, Kansas? The answer: They are all working on projects funded by Our Town grants.

A vast diversity of places and projects have been funded through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Our Town grants. Since Our Town's inception in 2011, the NEA has awarded 256 grants totaling more than \$21 million in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Why Our Town?

The social, educational, economic, and aesthetic benefits of the arts for communities are well documented. Artists and designers provide a powerful aesthetic imprint on communities with their craft, sparking vitality and creating an environment conducive to ideas, creativity, and social engagement. Artists and designers provide amenities for consumers and rejuvenate downtowns and neighborhoods and strongly connect people to one another. Artists and designers help form the core of community development practice, along with public safety, land use, transportation, education, and housing, among others.

The NEA created Our Town as a catalytic investment tool. It has served as the Obama administration's signature place-based arts program, supporting a network of practitioners and neighbors who are positioning the arts as a driving force for creating opportunity and building strong communities. As part of President Obama's "Ladders of Opportunity" agenda, and in strategic partnership with sister federal agencies, the NEA makes Our Town grants as anchor investments. Motivated by these grants, communities form coalitions between their elected leadership and other key civic leaders. These grants create an opportunity for artists and arts organizations to connect with various development areas including public health, housing, economic development, and even agriculture, thereby bringing these stakeholders together for their community's benefit.

How Did It All Get Started?

Arts-based community development is nothing new. For example, Italian sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and engineer Michelangelo was a creative “placemaker” in his own right. Many artists, arts organizations, and their supporting networks have been engaged in this work for years in the United States. The foundation for the NEA’s efforts began in 2007 when Jeremy Nowak, with key support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania’s Social Impact of the Arts Project, published the groundbreaking paper “Creativity and Neighborhood Development—Strategies for Community Investment,”¹ based on research in Philadelphia for The Reinvestment Fund, a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). This research placed arts-based work in the language and context of community investment, outlining the role of the arts in building social capital, documenting the arts as economic assets, and showing how they affect market relations.

After reading Nowak’s paper and related research—and observing the success of the arts-driven community development communities in Philadelphia, his native St. Louis, and his home turf of New York City—former NEA chairman Rocco Landesman decided that the federal government could be a more effective partner for community-based arts efforts. “When I came to the NEA,” Landesman said, “I wanted to focus on...how the arts can be a force for social cohesion and economic development in neighborhoods, communities, [and] cities.”²

Landesman launched a three-part strategy that continues to unfold. First, he created a new NEA fund to support arts-based community development that ultimately became Our Town. Second, understanding that any NEA place-based funding alone would be insufficient on its own, he pursued strategic partnerships with other federal agencies that were also implementing place-based programs. His team identified where other agencies were investing and sought to develop alliances among federal officials, and arts and community development stakeholders.

These efforts have yielded a more comprehensive federal commitment to the arts, expressed in both funding and policy. For example, NEA’s work on the White House Council on the Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2)³ initiative has yielded new projects focused on chronically economically distressed cities. NEA provides staff support to the SC2 Council, providing technical assistance to SC2 cities—leveraging their arts sectors in support of their revitalization strategies and long-term economic planning. NEA staff is also participating in the White House’s Promise Zones⁴ initiative, strategically linking Our Town investments and grantees to Promise Zone communities. Staff also provides technical assistance and policy guidance to the selected neighborhoods, working with arts policy makers, organi-

1 Jeremy Nowak, “Creativity and Neighborhood Development—Strategies for Community Investment.” (Philadelphia, PA: The Reinvestment Fund, 2007).

2 Email correspondence. Rocco Landesman, Jane Chu, and Jason Schupbach. September 4, 2014.

3 For more on the SC2 Initiative, see <http://www.huduser.org/portal/sc2/home.html>.

4 For more on Promise Zones, see <https://www.hudexchange.info/promise-zones>.

zations and artists to drive positive community transformation. Further, NEA is supporting the place-based policy efforts of the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative and the White House Rural Council, and its partnership with the US Department of Agriculture on the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design.

As the final part of the strategy, Landesman encouraged new philanthropic investment in arts-based community development. The most visible example is ArtPlace America, a consortium that includes the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and Bloomberg Philanthropies, as well as banks with a strong presence in community development such as Deutsche Bank and Bank of America. Landesman understood the federal government works best partnering with philanthropic organizations and the private sector to experiment and build capacity of local organizations and individuals.

Our Town and the Mayor's Institute on City Design 25th Anniversary Awards

In 2010, on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Mayor's Institute on City Design, the NEA commissioned *Creative Placemaking*, a white paper by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa.⁵ The paper placed Nowak's research in a new framework and coined the term creative placemaking. It also laid out the many challenges and opportunities for the field and helped shape the guidelines for an NEA creative placemaking program—the Mayors' Institute on City Design 25th Anniversary Awards (MICD25)—which was created to test if there was interest from communities in NEA funding for creative placemaking activities.⁶

MICD25 were one-time grants for cities that had participated in the Mayor's Institute on City Design. Grantee projects ranged from public art invigorating a new greenway beneath a railroad track overpass in Greensboro, North Carolina, to plans for a cultural district in downtown Shreveport, Louisiana. The 21 awards confirmed a demand for a federal program supporting art-based development in US communities.

NEA based guidelines for the Our Town grants program on a few key elements that reflected the best research on creative placemaking: Broad partnerships are necessary to achieve good project outcomes; political support is essential; all communities have unique “arts assets” and projects should be tied to local assets and knowledge; and arts-based activities must work in concert with other community development efforts, plans, and goals. Hoping that Our Town's partnership structure would foster new collaborations, the guidelines were broad enough to allow a range of organizations and geographies to apply.

The NEA wanted to validate and support the many cultures found in the United States with Our Town. The program was designed to support high-capacity communities, with

5 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking.” (Washington, DC: The Mayors' Institute on City Design, 2010).

6 Since 1986, the NEA and the US Conference of Mayors, with the American Architectural Foundation, have run the Mayors' Institute on City Design. The institute has trained more than 1,000 mayors in the basics of city design and frequently addresses art-based community development issues. These mayors were the perfect first-time audience for the new research on creative placemaking.

many investment opportunities and long-standing relationships between arts and community stakeholders, as well as communities lacking those attributes but possessing a clear vision and committed leadership. The NEA decided to take a risk and see if requiring a partnership between arts organizations and local governments as a condition of each Our Town grant would produce successful collaborations.

What's Happened?

After a coordinated release of the Our Town grant application guidelines with the help of federal and field partners, the response has been enormous. Every year, the Our Town budget is only sufficient to fund approximately one-fifth of the applications received. Applicants can apply for up to \$200,000, and the average grant size is \$75,000. All grants from the NEA must be matched one-to-one by the grantee, and Our Town grantees typically match grants up to three or four times. And the diversity of places and projects where the grantees are working is astounding: the Native Village of Mary's Igloo on the Bering Strait in Alaska; Last Chance, Colorado, a town of 23 people; the urban neighborhood of Willowbrook in Los Angeles County; Bloomington, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis and home to the Mall of America; the jazz district of Kansas City, Missouri; Miami Beach; the Acadian villages on the border of Maine and Canada; and New York City.

Many communities have used their Our Town grant to catalyze multi-stakeholder partnerships. As of 2014, 246 partners are involved in 66 projects funded by Our Town grants, averaging 15 partners per project. Community development sponsored by the NEA creates incentives for artists and designers to participate in conversations from which they might have been traditionally excluded. Approximately one-third of the partners in Our Town projects are arts organizations from all fields the NEA supports: filmmaking, theater, folk arts, dance, literature, arts education, museums, symphonies and opera companies, and others. The range of other institutions that have stepped up to partner on Our Town projects is vast and exciting: aging services agencies, botanic gardens, religious institutions, scientific organizations, local businesses, banks, farms, business improvement districts, education institutions, and land trusts. Government is represented at the local, state, and federal levels.

Trends We Have Seen

Our Town projects generally fall into two categories: engagement activities, and planning and design activities. In engagement projects, the focus is on artistic programs that foster interaction among community members, arts organizations, and artists, often by leveraging existing community assets through public art, festivals and performances, artists working in storefronts, or pop-up artist studios. Planning and design projects develop the infrastructure necessary for community development to succeed, such as creative asset mapping; master planning for a cultural district; support efforts benefiting creative businesses; and designs for artist space, cultural facilities, and public spaces.

At the beginning of the Our Town program, more of the applications and the grants were focused on design and planning activities. Projects such as the Opa-Locka (Florida) Community Development Corporation's project focused on removing metal barricades placed around the predominately minority Magnolia North neighborhood in the 1980s. The barricades were erected by the local leadership to, as they saw it, isolate and mitigate high levels of crime and violence at that time. With Our Town support, a community-wide collaborative design process addressed removing the barricades and transforming intersections into inviting neighborhood entryways with new public open spaces and public art.

More recently, applications have moved toward arts engagement activities. For example, the Music City Opera Project by Nashville Opera is challenging dominant conceptions of what constitutes opera. In an open competition, amateur and professional composers, librettists, and arrangers will create new operatic works. Finalists will perform in unexpected places, such as honky-tonks and country music venues in downtown Nashville. Several other projects are focused on preserving Appalachian musical heritage. For example, Hindman, Kentucky (population, 777), will celebrate its local dulcimer-making tradition, and in Pickens, South Carolina (population, 3,012), a senior citizen group is creating the Center for Southern Appalachian Music.

In addition, some of the most interesting projects are happening on tribal lands. Southwestern Native American nations in Arizona and New Mexico are working to better design their communities. In addition, famed architect Maya Lin is working with northwestern tribes on the Confluence Project, a large-scale multisite public art project on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Other Creative Placemaking Efforts at the NEA

Our Town is only one of the NEA's projects to support arts-based community development. In addition to our expanding interagency work through SC2 and Promise Zones, the agency is funding convenings, research, and expansion of field building efforts for communities that engage artists as generators of social and economic capital. Three of agency's efforts merit mention:

Performing Arts and Transforming Place Convening

Performances have multifaceted ways in which they transform places, people's relationships with their communities, and community development processes. On November 3, 2014, the Arts Endowment hosted the "Beyond the Building: Performing Arts and Transforming Place" convening to develop a better understanding of how performance-based organizations, and the artists they engage, transform places through their artistic practices. The convening archive is available online.⁷

⁷ Convening archive for "Beyond the Building: Performing Arts and Transforming Place," <http://arts.gov/partnerships/beyond-the-building-performing-arts-and-transforming-place>.

Sharing Lessons Learned

In late September 2014, the agency launched “Exploring Our Town” on the NEA website.⁸ It is an electronic storybook chronicling more than 70 case studies on, and insights from, Our Town investments. This resource was created in response to calls from the field for lessons learned throughout the country.

Developing Results Indicators

NEA researchers have constructed arts and livability indicators from publicly accessible national data sets. In 2013, the NEA worked with the Urban Institute to validate the indicators for a representative sample of towns and cities that participated in the Our Town or MICD25 initiatives. The resulting report, “The Validating Arts and Indicators Study (VALI): Results and Recommendations,” is available on the NEA website as a tool for tracking contextual data deemed to be important for a variety of creative placemaking projects (see the article by Morley and Winkler in this issue for more on the VALI project).⁹

Artists’ and designers’ work with partners as diverse as farms, churches, and energy companies signals an exciting future for communities. Together, arts and community development practitioners are building communities with enhanced quality of life, increased creative activity, a distinct sense of place, and opportunity-rich local economies. Collectively, this work has demonstrated—for the first time at a national scale—that arts stakeholders are fundamental players in a community’s transformation. They are working authentically and equitably, and they are building on existing community assets. The NEA strives to support these efforts to make the arts available to everyone.

Jane Chu, PhD, was confirmed by the US Senate in June 2014 as the 11th chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Since 2006, Chu served as the president and CEO of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts in Kansas City, Missouri, overseeing a \$413-million campaign to build the center. As the performance home of the Kansas City Ballet, Kansas City Symphony, and Lyric Opera of Kansas City, the Kauffman Center has hosted more than one million people from all 50 states and countries throughout the world since its grand opening in September 2011. She was a fund executive at the Kauffman Fund for Kansas City from 2004 to 2006, and vice president of external relations for Union Station Kansas City from 2002 to 2004. Previously, she was vice president of community investment for the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation from 1997 to 2002. Chu also served as a trustee at William Jewell College and on the board of directors of the Ewing Marion Kauffman School and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. Chu was born in Shawnee, Oklahoma, but was raised in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She studied music growing up, eventually receiving bachelor’s degrees in piano performance and music education from Ouachita Baptist

8 National Endowment for the Arts, “Exploring Our Town,” <http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town/>.

9 National Endowment for the Arts, “Validating Arts and Indicators Study (VALI): Results and Recommendations” by Elaine Morley and Mary K. Winkler, <http://arts.gov/publications/validating-arts-livability-indicators-vari-study-results-and-recommendations>.

University and master's degrees in music and piano pedagogy from Southern Methodist University. Additionally, Chu holds a master's degree in business administration from Rockhurst University and a PhD in philanthropic studies from Indiana University, as well as an honorary doctorate in music from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance.

Jason Schupbach is the director of design programs for the National Endowment for the Arts, where he oversees all design and creative placemaking grantmaking and partnerships, including Our Town and Design Art Works grants, the Mayor's Institute on City Design, the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design, and the NEA's involvement in the HUD Sandy Recovery Taskforce Rebuild by Design Competition. Previous to his current position, Jason served Governor Patrick of Massachusetts as the creative economy director, tasked with growing creative businesses in the state. He formerly was the director of ArtistLink, a Ford Foundation funded initiative to stabilize and revitalize communities through the creation of affordable space and innovative environments for creatives. He has also worked for the mayor of Chicago and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs.