

Arts and Culture from the Inside, Not Just on the Outside

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Significant Developments

Mrs. Louise Woodruff was born on Wood Street 80 years ago, less than a mile from the current location of the Jackson Medical Mall, a community-based medical and retail facility. She attended school, married, and bought a home in the area along what was then a gravel road. Mrs. Woodruff and her husband, Clarence, always worked nearby, including at the old furniture factory.

During segregation, black people had to work so hard there; they had all the hard jobs... All the businesses were owned by whites. For the most part, blacks in the area worked at the furniture plant, at the ice-house west of the mall, or at the industrial laundry just across the street. I worked sanding...I sanded right on out of there, though! They would work you like a slave.

When the Medical Mall was a retail mall, between 1970 and 1996, Mrs. Woodruff operated a snack shop inside. Now she and her friends take their morning walks in the Mall—an anchor for the community and historical memory.

This short narrative was gathered during a breakfast hosted by Significant Developments for mall walkers who daily lap the interior of the Mall. The effort was part of a creative process to deepen relationships between the Medical Mall and the surrounding community. It included the installation of thought bubbles over the walking route along the main corridor with such prompts as, “What brought you here?” and “What friendships have you made here?” These hung for just a few days while we invited mall walkers to a breakfast the following week where we facilitated conversations reflecting on memories of the mall and the neighborhood. The Mall believes that these types of intimate points of contact build trust and awareness between community members and the institution and lead to greater use of available services. Additionally, the Mall can reflect these community-based stories in its physical and brand identity.

Significant Developments is an artist-centered company that assists clients across sectors in centering their work and identity in community narratives. One important function of our work is to help individuals recognize that they are culture bearers; that the way they approach and interact with the world is a creative act that communicates their identity and the identity of a place. This activity that all humans share—expressing our culture through the ways we move in the world and the objects with which we surround ourselves—is what

we highlight with client communities. This recognition becomes an invitation to more intentionally consider culture and identity in their everyday activity.

From its inception, the Medical Mall articulated a strategic commitment to holistic, community-based approaches to wellness, including capacity-building and the arts. After 20 years of operation, the Mall serves thousands of patients daily through a sustainable set of long-term institutional partnerships, and yet it has struggled to define best practices for the capacity-building and arts-based aspects of its operations. Our work was to help shake up traditional notions of “art” as something outside of everyday activity and refocus “art” as something that emerges from the everyday interplay of culture. The addition of art to the Mall’s work shifted from imagining art as something new to be brought in to imagining art as a culture we already inhabit.

The Medical Mall staff was a key population we worked with, especially those working in public spaces. The creative process we employed was to inhabit the roles of maintenance, environmental services, and security; we shadowed and worked alongside staff in order to build relationships and discuss the cultural considerations they employ in their work. A striking discovery in these staff conversations was the existence of a broad working culture defined by patient support. Staff at all levels recognized that the public it served was not only navigating a building, but also dealing with difficult and personal health issues. Environmental Service Manager Barbara Thompson related a specific experience: “[A woman] came in the bathroom while I was cleaning and began to cry. She had just received a difficult diagnosis and just needed a hug and someone to talk to. It’s our job to be there when people need us.” Maintenance Supervisor Derell Tillman framed the work of all staff as “patient care.” “When we do our work well, we help the doctor concentrate on the patient and ease the patient’s discomfort in the ways we can,” he said.

This “patient care” culture was evident in an interaction we witnessed at the TB clinic. While repairing a thermostat, maintenance workers used elements of performance to ease their intrusion in the space and reassure nurses as to their progress. Following the interaction, we reflected our observations back to maintenance staff using the language of theater, highlighting how they used these techniques to navigate a sensitive space and make everyone feel comfortable—not just physically but emotionally. Despite the fact that recalibrating the thermostat was an inexact science requiring trial and error over time, the staff recognized that projecting/performing confidence about each adjustment psychologically comforted clinic staff and increased the length of time staff could tolerate fluctuating temperatures. This allowed enough time for maintenance staff to return and make adjustments without prompting from the clinic. Describing their roles through the language of theater offered another lens to guide their intention in the work.

As the Community Development Investments process unfolded, staff became active collaborators and participants. Some joined the quilting class, stopping by to work on projects at lunch and forming relationships with community participants. One staff member

shifted from in-house PR to opening her own firm; she contracted with the Mall while taking on local creative clients. Staff also began to show up in larger numbers to help shape developing cultural programs, offering community-based expertise. Our process invited staff members to bring more aspects of themselves to bear on their work and make a lasting mark on the new programs being developed.

Realizing and embracing the transformative impacts that arts and culture bring to the everyday work of society begin with realizing that the everyday work of society is performed by groups of people with their own creative culture. Every human is culturally expressive; we have simply developed a view of the arts that sets it outside of everyday life. Successfully incorporating the new methodologies that center arts and culture in our work begin by recognizing the culture that already exists and building with the community on that foundation.

daniel johnson is an artist working in the medium of social circumstance. Focused on agency, equity, and the formation of agreements, johnson roots the artistic process in framing everyday life as unfolding, intersecting stories. Through deep listening, reflections on belonging, and facilitated community storytelling, johnson works with groups of people to harness their unique cultural expressions in a co-design process to disrupt power dynamics and realize shared intentions. As the CEO of Significant Developments, johnson brings together teams of artists working across sectors to perform problem-solving, capacity-building, and full-scale strategic planning through creative play. Collaborators in his work have included the communities unfolding from the Jackson Medical Mall, Hinds County School District, Millsaps College, Hinds County Economic Development Authority, City of Jackson Mayor's Office, City of Jackson Planning Department, Mississippi Museum of Art, Mississippi Department of Transportation, and Midtown Partners CDC.