

Community History, Identity, and Social Change: Reflections from Researchers on the Potential of Arts and Culture

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Tina Takemoto, California College of the Arts

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Jennifer Scott, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and University of Illinois, Chicago

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Facilitated by Victor Rubin and Jeremy Liu, PolicyLink

In April 2019, PolicyLink convened five researchers and faculty members¹ from diverse disciplinary backgrounds—psychiatry, landscape architecture, anthropology, photography, and visual arts—to take stock of how we could advance the systematic understanding of the role of arts and culture in community development and social movements through research. The participants have been “engaged scholars” in the best sense of that term: knowledgeable and respectful of the process of community change and sophisticated about how universities need to change to better support this type of research.

The participants were, in order of their first remarks:

Chris Johnson, Professor of Photography at the California College of the Arts and co-creator of the “Question Bridge: Black Males” project. Chris serves as the video documenter of the CDI initiative.

Tina Takemoto, Professor and Dean of Humanities and Sciences at the California College of the Arts. Tina, a visual studies scholar and artist, was a resident artist with the Little Tokyo Service Center.

Mindy Fullilove, Professor of Urban Policy and Health, The New School. Mindy, a psychiatrist and author of several books, including *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It*, is leading the “400 Years of Inequality” project.

Jennifer Scott, Director and Chief Curator, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and core faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Jennifer is an anthropologist and ethnographer with a wide range of experience in community history and arts.

¹ Two of the participants have been directly involved with the ArtPlace America Community Development Investments (CDI) initiative, and the other three were familiar with it and had extensive experience with other relevant efforts. Some of their research has directly supported the local community groups with which they were in partnership, and in other instances, they have documented or analyzed those local experiences to inform broader audiences and strengthen fields of practice.

Michael Rios, Professor of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design in the Department of Human Ecology and Vice Provost of Public Scholarship at the University of California, Davis.

The discussion brought out important points about how research on race, culture, neighborhood change, and the preservation of community identity can be shared and deployed to support social movements and grass-roots strategies for equitable development. A strong sense of the value of history as a tool for social change—particularly the often-overlooked histories of people of color and working-class communities—permeated the session. The panelists reinforced the practical uses of unearthing, transmitting, and learning from the record of communities and cultures. As Jennifer Scott put it, “Contemporary artists connect art and artifact, bridge past and present; [they] catalyze conversations and creative openings for people, help imagine what’s happening forward.” The conversation identified at least two ways that research can advance place-based arts and cultural strategies:

- *Research that provides a resource for projects and organizations.* The CDI endeavors were grounded in or informed by what historians, anthropologists, urban policy analysts, or other researchers learned from residents or about their communities.
- *Documentation and comparative analysis.* The field as a whole can benefit from rigorous and culturally sensitive research about innovative projects and strategies, presented in forms that a range of practitioners can use and appreciate.

Victor Rubin, along with Jeremy Liu, of PolicyLink moderated the following discussion, which has been edited for length and clarity.²

Victor:

Let’s start with reflections on your recent activities at the intersection of arts, culture, and community development. Chris, as the video documenter of the CDI initiative, can you share your observations from spending time at the sites? What kinds of inquiries did you think might substantively contribute to our understanding of this work that were not present in our research framework?

Chris:

I’ve been working on a project for a number of years, in collaboration with other artists, named “Question Bridge: Black Males.” That experience helped me see that one thing that I could add [to the CDI story] would be the human element of it. All of these activities [to integrate the arts] are driven by the motivations and aspirations of people. I didn’t see that there was any clear effort being made to talk to those people [carrying out the CDI projects] about why all of these complex collaborations and activities were meaningful to

² The full transcript is available at www.communitydevelopment.art

them on a personal level, because obviously, their personal involvement is what would make these activities sustainable. Their intuition would guide these activities, and they would have insights from their direct connections with the communities that they're engaged with. I spent two to three days at each of the six CDI sites, and I asked all of the stakeholders a range of questions to better understand their values and motivations.

They all shared in different ways that they saw the value of integrating the arts and found themselves doing their work differently because of the involvement of the artists. They also felt that the earlier they could bring artists into the planning processes, the better the outcomes would be. Everyone found the work to be personally fulfilling in different ways, and it opened them to intuitive and cultural opportunities that they hadn't seen before.

Victor:

[Tina, can you describe your work with the Little Tokyo Service Center \(LTSC\) in Los Angeles and your research into the multicultural history of this neighborhood, notably in the 1940s and 1950s? How is this largely unknown history relevant for today's efforts to build multicultural coalitions and preserve the identity of the community?](#)

Tina:

I spent last summer in Little Tokyo as part of the +Lab residency, organized with LTSC. There is an area in the neighborhood called First Street North, which is home to 13 historically designated buildings. A sidewalk monument runs along the street that designates the businesses from 1900 to 1940, organized by visual bands. Each one represents a decade and has the names of historical businesses inscribed in front of each storefront. The band that represents the 1940s is blacked out and mostly devoid of names to denote the time when Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from Little Tokyo and incarcerated by the U.S. government. During the war, this part of Little Tokyo became known as Bronzeville, where African Americans and other folks of color were able to move because the neighborhood didn't have race-restrictive covenants, which had enabled Japanese Americans to live there in the first place. For my project, I was interested in expanding the timeline to include the businesses that operated during the '40s up to the present. I often heard that Bronzeville ended abruptly right after the war when Japanese Americans returned to the neighborhood. But the reverse street directories showed that African Americans and Japanese Americans had lived on the same floors of the same hotels for a considerable period into the early 1960s. This research opens up questions about how these cross-racial negotiations and cohabitations took place and expands our understanding of the complex multicultural history of First Street North that continues to this day.

Victor:

Mindy, your work explores neighborhood change, dislocation, and disruption, as well as the efforts to maintain and build cultural continuity, particularly in African American communities. Why is an understanding of history so critical for people who seek to make change?

Mindy:

I'm working on a project called "400 Years of Inequality"; 2019 is the 400th anniversary of the first arrival of Africans in Jamestown, and our project is a call for a national observance. One of the things that I've referred to a lot is Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove's *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, which is just full of stories of people's struggles. One part was the struggle to win industrial unions in the '30s. They're sort of a testimonial of what that was like. How did people come to feel it in their bodies that they could take over a factory? How'd they actually sit down to have a sit-down strike? One of the comments that Genora Dollinger makes in *Voices of a People's History* is that after the strike, the women were different; it changed who they were.

These larger movements have strong cultural components, but it's not just the arts and culture—it's also the context in which we're using these strategies and the many steps in the process. There's a role for arts and culture at each step. If we think about these common themes that emerged from CDI—gentrification and displacement, racial health inequities, the isolation of immigrant newcomers, and the historical trauma resulting from racism and oppression—that's quite a list of profound conflicts. I'm sure you could add climate change and a few other things and begin a pretty complete list of what we're up against. How do we [create a sense of urgency and] not act like we have a hundred years to figure this out?

Victor:

Jennifer, how does your approach to uncovering community history enable residents and agents of change to craft the identity of the places where they live?

Jennifer:

I'm an anthropologist by training, and my attention to place and space began with doing ethnographic work and being in the field. I work a lot with marginalized histories or histories that have been erased. Recently, I've been working a lot with historic house museums, but not in the traditional sense of what people usually think about, like George Washington slept here and celebrating very elite histories. At Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, we are uncovering this history of the social settlement, which wasn't the first social settlement, certainly, but the most impactful in that it catalyzed a movement. And it's interesting to look at their process because I think it mirrors what CDI is doing in some ways. They created a settlement landscape with 13 buildings eventually and were trying to follow an immersive

model. You had social reformers, mostly middle-class and upper-class, moving into an area that they identified as a slum and trying to be as close as possible, in order to figure out what was happening in those neighborhoods and to problem-solve. One of the first buildings they built was an art gallery, which became the first public art gallery in Chicago. So, they were offering social services, health care, language classes, skill building for the immigrant community, but they were also offering an extensive slate of art classes and at the same time advocating for policy changes and legislation change, fighting for the eight-hour workday.

We connect these histories to present-day social justice issues, which sounds great and simple, but it's also very challenging to do when people have been left out of the story. One of the good things about the social settlement history is that it lends [itself] to a kind of experimentation and trial and error that they were putting in place. They were originally thinking of arts and culture as a relief from factory work—the long, monotonous, brutal labor exploitation that a lot of the immigrants were experiencing. And, from the beginning, they were thinking about arts and culture as an embedded part of democratic practice and exchange and that everyone should have access to the arts. But I think they also were struggling with this question that we continue to struggle with, about different levels of need and how people need to care for each other or the role of the state in that care, and what that looks like.

Victor:

Michael, you've conducted community design projects of many kinds, seeing how such endeavors get underway, how they're structured, what's motivating them, and how they relate to social and political goals, and you've contributed significantly to a body of research on these topics. What makes for a valuable connection to arts and culture in those kinds of projects?

Michael:

The essential theme of my work, both as a practitioner as well as a researcher, has really been looking at place and placemaking as a way to reimagine a different world. What is the role of art, design, and culture in that reimagining of a different world?

In response to both Jennifer and Mindy, the struggle to survive and to basically just put up with the conditions that we are faced with every day is not enough. We really have to reimagine fundamentally a different world. Art and design can get to more of that presence of being, of belonging and trust building. Trust is really required to ultimately form the collective action that needs to happen in places where people can then form alliances at different scales of action. Obviously, the challenge to do that is a tall order. But I think that all of this work is ultimately about creating a different sense of politics and a vehicle to collectively act.

That's where it's important to bring in the conversation about the community building and community development components, beyond what CDCs [community development corporations] do in terms of professional services. We have to step back and think, where's the political action in all this work to create these sorts of transformative experiences? This perspective has come from my own work in the 1990s, working in the Bay Area, embedding myself as an urban designer in the Spanish Speaking Unity Council, a CDC, and organizing around parks equity and looking at the structural conditions that led to a community of over 50,000 individuals with the highest concentration of youth in the city, but having the least amount of parks and open space. How do we understand that structural injustice and what has led to that and be forward-thinking about what we can do to reimagine that place?

More recently, I've been thinking about creative placemaking as one of a number of methodologies for the types of transformations we want to see. And not just in place-based communities, but also beginning to infuse this thinking, this logic, into institutions, because it's our institutions that are failing us. Are there openings to apply these methods? There's a lot of critique of community development corporations for professionalization and getting away from their historical origins of building and local policy change. This might be one way to come back to the roots of community development corporations as community-based organizations.

Mindy:

I was really resonating with what Jennifer and Tina were saying. History has a lot to teach us about how we got to where we are, but it also holds perspectives on what the tasks are and then what we might do, all the things that we might do. I think that the role of the arts is in helping people see the history and connect to it, because people are very alienated from history. They don't read anything, and we're fed lies.

Chris:

The other thing that I heard from a lot of you, and that resonates a lot with my experience on the road, are the issues of building natural and effective coalitions. When Michael's talking about alliances at different scales of action, that really sums up the experience that I had [visiting the CDI sites]...that people who thought that they were in different spheres [of practice] understood that they had a lot in common: it simply hadn't occurred to them that they were within a paradigm that had something to share with community activists. They saw that that their work is more fulfilling and more effective, frankly, by virtue of the alliances that were being built.

In the Zuni case, they built alliances among artists who had been there in the community all along. Something like 80 percent of the residents of the Zuni Pueblo are creative activists of one kind or another, but they'd never been brought together toward a common issue until

the CDI initiative gave them an incentive to do that. What we see is a natural, organic coalition-building process that's being instigated by the [arts and cultural efforts]. The challenge is to keep it going and to make the logic of these alliances—and the new paradigms that are emerging—clear to everybody so that it can spread throughout the industries, because there are artists who are looking for more ways to get involved with creative placemaking. There are businesses that are trying to figure out how to relate more effectively to their communities.

Jennifer:

I wanted to react to some of what you all are saying about coalition building and what Mindy was adding about history. One of the things that we found really helpful in our West Side project with history is that just in bringing people together, especially in a highly segregated city, history would reveal and uncover the systems of oppression that people were facing in their different neighborhoods. They could compare notes about the systematic nature of racism, you know, the practices of redlining. It took very specific form in the West Side of Chicago that was different from the South Side, but then overlapping as well. In that way, people could come together as you all were just saying.

Jeremy:

How can research be useful and help guide decisions in arts-based community development efforts? What would your respective disciplines and universities need to support this work to happen more often and more effectively?

Jennifer:

We're [Hull-House Museum] at a university, but we have over a hundred community partners, so the most powerful discussions and exhibitions are when they're interdisciplinary and when the researchers are in dialogue with community members. We've had historians who are grateful to be in conversation with practitioners. We always have artists and activists involved in our programs and initiatives. 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. I think that it is really helpful to elevate the interdisciplinary part of this work and research.

Mindy:

The most important role researchers can play is in looking at the edges; it's easy to see what's working, but it's hard to do the critical work, and it's very hard to get that funded. Anything that lifts up that ability of people to really take a deep look at what they did [and ask the really critical question]—did it move the field? Did it actually solve the problems? This is the more critical stance; very hard to get it funded; pretty hard to get published. But if we don't know that, we don't know anything.

Tina:

Within the context of an art and design school, it is exciting to think about all of the different ways we can interact with historical material as a mode of inquiry and community engagement. Some students might think that archival records, maps, and photographs are just things that we use to illustrate history, rather than seeing the ways these materials can enable us to have an active and, as Mindy says, critical conversation with the past in the present. Having the opportunity to physically touch and revisit historical artifacts can spark memories, initiate dialogue, and forge meaningful, intergenerational connections. When a small detail in a photograph or print leads you to wonder how it came into being or to question everything you thought you knew about this image, this is when history becomes alive and the inquiry process begins.

Michael:

Scholarship and research on social movements is often used as a way to legitimize a particular set of practices. I think more about the critical evaluation of creative placemaking, not as a way to undermine the work but actually as a way to elevate it further, to make it more substantive. A lot of the research is really promoting this work, legitimizing this work, and I believe in it. But I think we really have to step back and understand some of its limits and find ways to get that research back to [those who] practice so that those issues get addressed over time.

I would say that in addition to funding being key, there are little to no incentives outside of the creative disciplines to do this work. At least that's the perception. We have to understand how we, within the academy, can articulate the value and impact of this type of scholarly production with publicly facing impact, and how we then organize ourselves to change the norms and policies in the academy to do more of this work.

Victor:

[Terrific! A very good note to end on.](#)