

The Connection between Public Space and Cultural Resources: Reflections on Our Work in Strawberry Mansion

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As public artists with a focus on engaging the communities we are working in and with, we highly value *process* in community development, with the belief that neighbor-informed community development comes from building relationships, sharing stories, and investing financial resources over time. Single arts-based projects do little to transform relationships between community organizations and residents and rarely impact community development efforts over the long term. Instead, a process-based approach requires substantial commitment from partnering organizations because it prioritizes neighbors' interests, rather than predetermining which investment or project should take place. It can be a challenge for community development organizations to have the flexibility of funding, staffing, and decision-making to respond in authentic ways to community priorities. We believe an approach rooted in the arts can help address some of these challenges.

Our community development partner, Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC), began to envision an arts-based approach to public park improvements through an ArtPlace grant in 2015. We were thrilled to join FPC at Place Lab in Chicago with artist Theaster Gates. The sessions focused on Ethical Redevelopment Principles, a formalized approach for using artistic processes to drive investment in neighborhood needs. Creating the space for community members to truly lead a decision-making process when resources are at stake *can be possible* through arts-based approaches; ethical redevelopment principles are grounded in the notion that *"resource inequity can be reduced with imagination."*¹

From 2017 to 2018, we partnered with FPC on a cultural asset mapping project and public programs residency in Strawberry Mansion, one of the most segregated black neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Strawberry Mansion has a long history of artists, civic leaders, and local influencers whose legacies live on. At the same time, the neighborhood has historically been cut off from access to resources for public education, infrastructure, and healthy foods and has endured strategic local disinvestment for decades. However, rapid growth and encroaching real estate developments are creeping into Strawberry Mansion, as is happening all over the city. Although FPC has always had a relationship with Strawberry Mansion, it

1 Place Lab, "Ethical Redevelopment Manual" (Chicago, IL: Place Lab, University of Chicago, 2016), <https://placelab.uchicago.edu/ethical-redevelopment>.

serves many neighborhoods, and the staff has often not had the ability to get to know or work with those residents.

Within this context, we partnered with FPC to open the Hatfield House, a historic mansion on the edge of Fairmount Park in Strawberry Mansion. This effort repurposed an existing but previously inaccessible space in the park into a place for interviewing neighbors, hosting free arts-based events, and hosting public discussions about development, the arts, and neighborhood history. We aimed to capture neighbors' input on new investments in the park, as well as inform the relationship-building between the neighborhood and FPC. We also aimed to create programming alongside residents at the House in order to provide the opportunity for further relationship-building between FPC and neighbors in fun, organic ways.

Reflections on Organizational Evolution and Community Development

Throughout our year-long process of gathering data and curating events, we shifted our approach to collaboration with FPC and neighborhood leadership to conceptualize ourselves not as *makers* in the neighborhood but as *facilitators*. We wanted to focus on an arts- and culture-based *process*, rather than working toward a predetermined goal of art production, to unearth neighbors' personal histories, expertise, and interests for the park and the neighborhood. As part of this process, we met people for conversations in local spaces such as homes, barbershops, and the recreation center. We engaged neighbors at celebratory, free, public arts events at the Hatfield House and built relationships with local artists and makers through the community-based organizations working within Strawberry Mansion.

Over the course of five months, we worked with Beth Uzwiak, a community-based ethnographer at Ethnologica, to conduct 25 life-history interviews and 50 informal interviews. We met over 20 neighborhood-based painters, dancers, musicians, herbalists, and makers. We hosted eight public events, during which three painters and a photographer exhibited and sold art; five neighborhood-based caterers provided food; and eight neighborhood-based musicians, singers, a dancer, and three barbers showcased their work at the House.

The data we collected with Ethnologica through interviews in Strawberry Mansion pointed to very specific priorities for park improvements, such as better lighting, better access to picnic permits, hiring locals to run programming, and more bathrooms in the park. We also collected data on the main concerns of neighbors, which focused on such themes as retaining home ownership, healthy food, lack of employment opportunities, addressing trauma, high incarceration rates, and decreased funding for public schools. Through this process, we discovered the ways in which one community development “focus”—in this case, park improvements—intersects with all aspects of civic life.

Because of its specific mission, in many ways FPC was restricted to address park-based needs only, which limited our ability to respond to neighbors' requests or to provide a timeline on their requests moving forward. However, this experience made clear to us that community organizations, ourselves included, need to develop and foster new partnerships

to be able to deliver more holistic outcomes. Additionally, we hope that funders can break down silos across priorities or programs to allow greater flexibility in targeting funds where they are needed most and on creating more immediate timelines. (For instance, ensuring that neighbors have access to picnic permits as regulations shift in the park was a simple, early request we received.) More flexible funding could support community development organizations to foster new partnerships, allowing for more integration across arts and community development efforts. As artist-partners, we know that arts processes often make space for myriad needs to arise and be addressed in the short term. Through our cultural asset mapping, we met individuals and organizations that spanned a range of services, such as healthy food, youth recreation, herbalism, and foraging. This kind of cross-service partnering can begin to address neighbor needs in creative collaborations.

Defining ourselves as facilitators, translators, and bridge-builders, *rather than as public artists*, revealed that such an approach can:

- Expand the capacity and reach of external community development organizations to engage neighborhood members in new relationships and services;
- Strengthen the capacity of neighborhood-based community development organizations to build on existing relationships with residents by engaging in ongoing follow-up;
- Create a process of discovery and self-determination alongside neighbors;
- Place neighborhood-based artists, who may otherwise have been unknown by the outside community development partner, at the forefront of community cultural celebration.

When community-engaged artists and community development organizations commit to raising up local designers, performers, cooks, and caterers, they create new opportunities for valuable activities that benefit the community, such as festivals, youth programming, and more. This kind of bridge-building can create a long-lasting, more equitable distribution of community resources.

Amber Art & Design is an art collective of six Philadelphia- and New York based artists: Ernel Martinez, Keir Johnston, Charles Barbin, Linda Fernandez, Siddhartha Joag, and Martha O'Connell. We have a collective 20 years of experience partnering with local communities, NGOs, museums, and academic and cultural institutions to realize transformative projects. We have a longstanding portfolio of public mural projects and regularly advise on art-driven processes between institutions and communities. Our work engages with concepts of restricted movement, public space accessibility, and deep, hyper-local, community-based engagement with a commitment to prioritizing a community's existing expertise and intergenerational knowledge. Through our collaborations with social researchers, community organizers, and community institutions, we work to bring institutional resources into neighborhoods that have seen decades of resource depletion. We currently have projects in development in Philadelphia; New York City; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Newfoundland; and São Paulo, Brazil.