Creating Process for Change

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Center for Performance and Civic Practice

Act I: Who We Are

imagine each line as one of five voices

Center for Performance and Civic Practice (CPCP) is a team of five artists.

We believe

that with the right approach,

the same tools and capacities artists use to make art

can be utilized to transform systems

and improve the impacts of government and community-driven efforts and programs.

We commit to racial justice and to hosting and supporting practices of inclusion.

We commit to using the word "artist" expansively to include those who think of themselves as designers, culture makers, and heritage holders.

We commit to the collaborative act of field-building, cross-sector, arts-based, community-led transformation.

We commit to supporting the growth of local capacities to:

Grow circles of stakeholders through equitable engagement strategies;

Partner effectively across fields of experience and knowledge;

Tackle local challenges and imagine creative opportunities for change.

We co-design, facilitate, coach, and support

Process.

Our core principle:

If you are working for change,
the people you hope will benefit
from that change
must be the authors of the vision for change.
They must be co-designers and co-leaders of any strategies to accomplish that change.

Act II: Cultivating the Conditions for Discovery

Between 2016 and 2019, CPCP worked with the ArtPlace America Community Development Investments (CDI) sites virtually, at conferences, and on regular site visits. Our formal role was to provide technical assistance. Informally, we were privileged to play the role of partners, confidants, and supporters. At the different sites, we spent time facilitating staff and board meetings; designing and leading public engagement sessions with diverse local stakeholders; and helping local artists think about their partnership and creative practices with these community development partners. We co-wrote artist calls, helped refine new values and vision statements, and supported messaging strategies for internal and external communication. In addition, we spent lots of time coaching the process of building the necessary will among staff to shift organizational practices—the shifts that are necessary to make creative placemaking possible and sustainable.

We found that organizations new to working with artists often learn that their daily structures for doing business do not necessarily make for smooth collaborations when it comes to creative strategies. Many community development corporations and municipal agencies function in an environment where they need to specify their intended results from the outset. Collaborating with artists does not have to be, as one CDI site member said, "all loosey goosey," but it does need to leave space for discovery. We often work with organizations to learn whether their practices support "discovery potential"—that is, whether they have the capacity and patience to sometimes start a process with the intention of addressing an aspiration or challenge, rather than starting with a designated singular output. Discovery potential can leave space for goals and strategies to evolve. Part of CPCP's work in non-arts contexts is to explore what system or organizational culture issues might need to shift to allow maximum benefit from the collaborative work at the heart of creative placemaking.

For instance,

Some organizations find-

their current purchase-order system is not able to accommodate shifting project needs that develop over the course of a creative process;

Some find-

having been founded and operating within a dominant culture of whiteness, they normalize institutional habits and strategic approaches that collide with efforts to authentically engage and collaborate with historically oppressed and excluded communities;

Some find-

their various departments (marketing, facilities, program management, development) rarely discuss projects with each other, leaving staff members out of the loop and frustrated when last-minute requests come in for public engagement events.

What practices help develop discovery potential?

- Openness to re-imagining how set business systems could operate.
- Asking questions like, "How can organizational mechanisms align with values and purpose?"
- Committing to staff and board anti-racism training, so that when you engage with communities and talk about justice and change, you are doing that work internally.
- Setting aside time for share-outs and check-ins, so people across the organization know what's going on, why and how it impacts their work.

How do we collaborate to find creative strategies that address community-defined aspirations and needs? Like anything that requires vast amounts of time, resources, and public will, it takes intention, and consistency—it takes a process.

Act II: The Power of Questions

In Anchorage?

Artists and Cook Inlet Housing Authority staff had to think through what outcomes they were aiming to accomplish, and what responsibility the artist's creative output should have for legible impact on those outcomes.

In Philadelphia?

Artists and Fairmount Park Conservancy staff had to examine what leadership, decision-making, and ownership on a shared project look like amid the complex power dynamics of compensation and credit, as well as their co-location in a city (like many others) with a deep legacy of structural racism.

In rural Minnesota?

Artists and Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership staff had to co-imagine what strategies could bring geographically disparate employees into a shared understanding of and commitment to cultural organizing as a worthwhile investment of their limited time.

There are questions that are useful to ask at the start of any partnership. Often, collaborators think they've had the conversations without asking the questions out loud.

Ask the questions.

The benefits of making time and space to sit with the conversations they surface are varied and deep.

What values do we each bring to this collaboration?

What expectations do we bring?

What goals do we start with, individually, and what goals do we agree to pursue together?

What will success in our work together look like?

What does collaboration mean to us?

How do we want to communicate in moments of disagreement or tension?

Are we sharing leadership on project design?

Who is leading the actual conversation/meeting/session when we are in the room with other stakeholders?

How will we make decisions about the content of what we create, produce, communicate, and make public?

How will we build, reflect on, evolve, and evaluate process together?

In Zuni Pueblo, artists and Zuni Youth Enrichment Project staff had to determine what timeline and engagement activities could support a community's vision for a new park and community space.

In Los Angeles, artists and Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) staff had to help theLTSC Board see creative practice as an effective strategy that accomplishes visible, community-centered outcomes aligned with existing organizational goals.

In Jackson, artists and Jackson Medical Mall Foundation staff wanted to explore how a place with a significant history and immense physical scale could be activated to communicate new meanings and serve as a dynamic community resource.

Does your partnership serve a particular group of stakeholders or constituents?

If so, does your partnership not only represent but also include members of those groups?

How can you make certain that when you meet to design goals and processes,

those stakeholders or constituents are with you in the room?

How can you ensure that you have made a space in which everyone can participate equitably?

Act IV: Artists Make Meaning

We have been in spaces where artists successfully aim public imagination and collaborative expression at equitable participation in the shaping of place.

If place is geography bound by shared meanings,
if place plus time equals change,
what does change do to meaning?
How is meaning shaped? By whom? For whom?

Artists keep, make, and transform meaning. It is what they do. Their relationship to place, in addition to inhabiting it, is to see it and listen to it. Whether intentionally or not, every creative act, every moment of imagination and expression in a place, contributes to that place's shape.

Which returns to the question-- by whom and for whom?

For artists, engaging in creative placemaking involves imagining their own artistic practices in service of collaborative community settings and moments.

In a traditional studio practice (making work solely from a core creative impulse of one's own), the artist creates meaning and shares it. In a civic practice (making work collaboratively in service to a community-defined outcome), the artist listens and co-creates meaning with an intentionality established by residents and community partners.

When artists new to civic practice, new to collaborative practice in and with community, engage in creative placemaking, they sometimes say:

Does being responsive to community mean I give up my own voice and expertise?

The answer is—no.

Your voice is your point of view and life experience, and you need these to be a strong collaborator.

Your expertise is your particular set of creative assets and aesthetic sensibility, and you need these to be a strong collaborator.

You also need curiosity, humility, the capacity to listen, and respect for the voice and expertise of your community collaborators, whether you are of that community or not.

The intelligence, lived experience, cultural practices, and local knowledge of your place-based community collaborators are assets as valuable as any you bring, no matter your discipline or training.

Creative placemaking centered in a civic-practice approach values discovery. It values co-design, and it demonstrates that the achieved outcomes and outputs would not have occurred if this group had not built a partnership and worked together.

We've seen print-makers build collaborative tools that residents use to imagine a vision for growth in their community; we've seen theatre directors aim their skills toward the facilitation of conversation between residents with different beliefs and opinions about public good; we've seen musicians deploy practices of ensemble in spaces where dialogue was tense and difficult; we've seen heritage holders use story to bring community together for problem-solving a local challenge; and we've seen writers collaborating with designers help local leaders make complex issues legible to local stakeholders.

These examples all have something in common—they each demanded the creation of a process where experience was centered on listening as a value, an action, and an outcome. Each demonstrated an understanding that if relationship is central to building community, then listening is the currency of making change.

Act V: Listening for Change

At an early meeting, we heard a staff member at one of the six CDI sites say something like:

> *The thing that makes me most uncomfortable about setting up moments to listen to community members about projects and plans is: What if they tell me what they want and I can't deliver? Isn't that a betrayal? Doesn't that prove I wasn't listening? I mean, we make the decisions. Sure, we base them on feedback, on research, on our own expertise in areas like construction and zoning and budgeting. But if we open the conversation up and people have an unrealistic wish list, or a batch of complaints, I know we can't address all those things within the parameters we have to make a project happen. Why set up false expectations? Why disappoint people? Why piss them off?*

So.

The first time CPCP heard this, we felt lucky to be trusted with the candor it demonstrated. When we heard something like it at more than one site, we knew it represented an opportunity in the form of a challenge: How do we transform this wariness, based on legitimate experience and understandable risk aversion, into a strategy for redefining how exchange with residents and local stakeholders could occur? How do we help the sites leverage their growing relationships with artists into opportunities for that transformation?

We said something like:

> *What might listening, in an ideal world, provide you with? What are your goals?*

And they said something like:

> *The opportunity to actually do what people want instead of what we think they need. The chance for people to invest energy in an idea because they feel some ownership. More ideas. Ideas we wouldn't come up with on our own.*

We said:

> *You are grappling with two very real questions:*
> *What do you need to do to earn the right to listen?*
> *And what promises do you make when you listen?*

They said:

> *See, this is our challenge. We thought we just wanted feedback, but that doesn't feel right, given our values and how we talk about community development.*

We:

> *It doesn't sound like you just want feedback. Feedback suggests you did something, you want someone's opinion, and you'll decide whether that opinion warrants action on your part or not. Your goals imply a commitment to exchange.*

They:

> *That's right.*

We:

Exchange implies listening implies dialogue. In the case of your work with residents, you have to devise the right invitations to dialogue; you have to measure authentic listening by the duration of relationships you build, the quality of the process you shape, and the transparency you demonstrate around how you make decisions and how you hold your-selves accountable.

They:

That sounds good, but…that takes time and staff capacity. We barely get done what we need to do as it is.

We:

Process aimed at more transparent exchange doesn't have to overwhelm your capacity. You have already begun to engage local artists whose assets can be tremendously produc-tive in service to outcomes you already prioritize.

They:

But what does that look like? What's an example you can imagine that would help me communicate the possibilities to the different stakeholders who are not in this conversation we're having right now?

Act VI: An Example

(Imagine a staff member at a mid-sized, place-based community development corporation speaking at a staff gathering.)

I went to a community meeting Saturday morning about the new housing development going up in the neighborhood.

There were residents, city employees, community organizers, even some of the developers.

It was led by a local artist. When we started, she taped a 20-foot piece of butcher paper across one wall in the room. Then she put out markers and invited us to draw a timeline of the neighborhood's history, starting as far back as we wanted, right up until today. She played music and gave us 15 minutes. When time was up, we stepped back and looked. What wasn't written was as interesting as what was. We spent another 30 minutes talking about history and place and change; about systemic inequity, institutional racism, gentrification, and displacement.

Then she told us about a project she had recently completed.

Four high school students and four elders, all living within a one-mile radius of the proposed development site, did the same exercise we just did. Following that, they partici-pated in a two-hour arts workshop once a week for the next three months. Every week, they told stories to each other about people and places on or not on the timeline they had made; every week they interviewed one local resident the artist brought in as a guest; and every week, at the end of each session, they spent another 30 minutes refining their

collaborative timeline. Adding images, replacing or shifting text, stapling objects and maps. This involved some hard, deep conversations. By the end of two months, they had built—together—a multidisciplinary representation of meaning with commentary and first-person accounts knitted across centuries and locations.

They spent their third and final month of weekly sessions making a video that takes a viewer through not just the art but the process they went through to create it. One month after their last session, they hosted a community meeting. The eight original participants, the youth and elders, showed their video, and then they led the meeting participants in a dialogue that began with responses to the video and the timeline art, but moved on to a pretty energetic dialogue about what residents want this neighborhood to be 5, 10, 100 years from now.

After telling us this whole story, our artist/facilitator showed us the seven-minute video—it's amazing—and we had that same dialogue about the future, in the room, with her.

I have gone to a lot of meetings since I started work here.

At Saturday's meeting, after we made our own timeline, watched the video, and had that dialogue, I felt a level of connection and care that I've never felt before in a space like that. I learned about what matters to a group of strangers. The artist who led it, she had a clear commitment to process. And people, they really opened up.

I think we should be collaborating with artists not just on what they produce, but on processes they can help us design and lead. They could be working with us and the transit authority on issues of equity; they could be working with our housing coalition on community design; we could use support facilitating staff meetings and board meetings. Between their artistic skills and their knowledge and love for this neighborhood, I see a lot of possibility.

I don't know that our organization is 100 percent prepared for the kind of collaborations I believe we could imagine.

But I know we could be.

Epilogue: Moving Forward

(Imagine each line as one of five voices.)

What is the discovery potential at your organization/agency?

Is there opportunity to identify and explore what you intend to address before defining an outcome by which success will be measured?

Is there an appetite for outputs that can't be imagined at a project's start but rather will iterate across a process?

As you do the work of making public good, do you have a process for engaging in difficult conversations about:

Power and privilege?

Structural racism and economic inequities?

Whiteness and patriarchy?

Collaboration and conflict?

Who do you and your colleagues serve?

Who are your stakeholders?

In what ways do you listen?

Where? When? How?

In what ways is that listening visible and legible?

CPCP's core principle:

If you are working for change,
the people you hope will benefit
from that change

must be the authors of the vision for change.

They must be co-designers and co-leaders of any strategies to accomplish that change.

Artists, designers, culture makers, and heritage holders are a local resource in every place.

Listen. Collaborate. Build process together.

Create.

Soneela Nankani is executive director of CPCP. Prior to this, she served as managing director for six years. She leads CPCP's efforts toward impact-driven programming and sustainable organizational practices, as well as guides the organization's endeavors to articulate more clearly than ever before its commitment to racial equity and justice in its mission, values, and work. Soneela has over 25 years of experience as a community dialogue facilitator, co-creator, thought partner, and performer in capacity-building and place-based projects around the nation. She has done much of this work in collaboration with Sojourn Theatre, with which she has worked since its founding in 1999. She has also done this work in partnership with education departments at theaters. Additionally, Soneela works as a theater performer, writer, and producer. She is an award-winning audiobook narrator. Soneela has a BA in economics from the University of Pennsylvania and an MFA in acting from Columbia University.

Michael Rohd is a cofounder of CPCP, where he holds the position of Lead Artist for Civic Imagination. He is also the founding artistic director of the 19-year-old national ensemble-based Sojourn Theatre. In 2015, he received an Otto Rene Castillo Award for Political Theater and the Robert E. Gard Foundation Award for Excellence. He is an Institute Professor at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts and is author of the widely translated book Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue. He was the 2013-2016 Doris Duke Artist-in-Residence at Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago. Recent and current projects include collaborations and productions with Goodman Theatre, Bush Foundation, Lincoln Center, Singapore Drama Educators Association, Americans for the Arts, Nashville's MetroArts, Cleveland Public Theatre, Catholic Charities USA, Cook Inlet Housing Authority Alaska, ASU/Gammage, and Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Shannon Scrofano is a Los Angeles-based designer whose work includes interdisciplinary performance, public space, exhibition, curation, and dial projects internationally and throughout the United States. She was a part of the founding team of artists who hatched CPCP, where she currently serves as Director of Design. She is a company member of Sojourn Theatre and is on the design faculty at California Institute of the Arts, where she works on new models for design education.

Rebecca Martínez is a Brooklyn-based artist with CPCP and the program director of Catalyst Initiative and Learning Lab, two core initiatives. As a member of Sojourn Theatre, she has worked as a director, choreographer, and facilitator for multiple national projects, including Don't Go, How to End Poverty in 90 Minutes, Finding Penelope, Islands of Milwaukee, On the Table, and the two-year Artist-in-Residence collaboration with Catholic Charities. At both CPCP and Sojourn Theatre, her work focuses on cross-disciplinary social and civic practice through co-designed, arts-based engagement and invitation strategies. She is a member of Sol Project Collective, New Georges Jam, Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab, INTAR's Unit52, SDCF Observership Class, Latinx Theatre Commons Steering Committee, and 2018-2020 Women's Project Lab. She was a 2017 Drama League Directing Fellow, a 2019 Audrey Resident, and an associate member of SDC.

Sara Sawicki is a Chicago-based theater artist. She is an ensemble member of Sojourn Theatre, where she also works as the project coordinator for the touring engagements of Sojourn's How to End Poverty in 90 Minutes. Sara joined CPCP in 2015. As CPCP's Partnership/Communications Manager, she supports CPCP partner relationship development, acts as project manager for the expanding Civic Body programming, and coordinates internal and external organization communications. Outside of CPCP and Sojourn Theatre, Sara works as an artist touring internationally as a performer/puppeteer with Manual Cinema; a company member of For Youth Inquiry; a recurring youth circus co-director and writer at Actors Gymnasium; a cinematic performance capture at NetherRealm Studios; and a freelance director and performer.