

Widening the Lens: Arts, Culture, and an Equitable Future for All Communities

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In this conversation, held in April 2019, Michael McAfee, president and CEO of PolicyLink, and Rip Rapson, president and CEO of the Kresge Foundation and chair of the Funders Council of ArtPlace America, explore why arts and culture strategies are central to equitable development. They provide insight into how leaders can build on lessons learned from the Community Development Investments (CDI) program to create healthy, opportunity-rich communities for all. Communications consultant Fran Smith moderated the conversation.

Why is fusing arts and culture as an integral component of community development important for achieving equitable outcomes?

Rip Rapson (RR): One of the things that has always perplexed me is why we ever thought that arts were anything *but* an integral part of community development. As we look at the way communities have evolved in America, issues of community identity, history, economics, politics, and otherwise have always been expressed through the vocabulary of arts and culture. So, I would phrase the question differently: Why *have* arts always been an integral component of community development, and how can we support that work? So much of what we've tried to do with PolicyLink and others is to ensure the role of the arts is understood, valorized, and strengthened over time.

Michael McAfee (MM): I agree with everything you said. And I think of James Baldwin's statement that art is a way to correct delusion. I see arts and culture as essential for correcting delusion in our society, in our perception, and in our consciousness. In community development and in our organizations, we run to data, data, data. But data often miss the things that are right in front of us. If we're going to get to equitable outcomes, we must see clearly the ways in which we've designed the society to not be equitable, and we must see the ways in which humanity causes harm. If you don't correct that delusion, you don't get there. That's why I think arts and culture are integral.

RR: That reinforces a couple of things for me. One is that arts and culture have always had a powerful role in social capital, in reinforcing or even creating informal bonds of trust and support that lie at the heart of community and certainly at the heart of equitable communities. To that end, arts and culture are as much a process as a product. I mean, they can be a product, and often they're a glorious one. But they are also a process of bringing people

together to find shared identity, find difference, find shared purpose, or find divergent purpose. That active, creative iteration makes the arts and cultural process so different from our normal problem-solving process.

How does incorporating arts into community development create new avenues for problem-solving and elevate resident voice and power in that process?

RR: If the problem is defined through a lens of creativity and artistic heritage, often the problem we *think* we're trying to solve changes. If we think we're trying to solve a housing problem or a transportation problem or even a human services problem, the conversation gets narrow pretty fast. It gets technocratic and isolated pretty fast. Arts and culture tend to broaden the aperture of problem analysis. Once you do that, all sorts of different solutions flow in. Opening the aperture permits many more aspects of the economic, social, and political dimensions to inform how you take something apart and put it back together. When we're talking about issues of urban America, I think we have to focus at least in part on deconstructing barriers to full equity and justice. Arts and culture play a really powerful role in that active deconstruction and reconstruction. It's not enough oftentimes, but I think we've failed to appreciate fully the extent to which it is absolutely necessary to pry things open in a way that our traditional disciplinary approaches to community work don't permit us to do.

MM: Arts and culture awaken us to what is already there in a community—the artistic expressions, the cultural connectivity, and other things we miss because of the limited aperture that we bring to the work. Art-centered development amplifies and accelerates resident voice and power. This is the work for us to be doing at this moment in our nation because, one, our institutions that are central to a strong democracy have a very limited aperture, and two, we are grossly disconnected from that resident voice and power. We can't seem to find the right set of strategies to alleviate so many of the problems that frustrate us because we are unmoored from the soul of community, which to me is arts and culture.

RR: I think one of the complexities of urban America is figuring out how you honor, acknowledge, and value community heritage while creating a sufficiently wide berth for exploring a community's changing form and function. We see this struggle in Detroit and many other communities. It's quite complicated to look back, look current, look forward, and understand the relationship of those things as you begin to define where your community wants to move next. It's an act of synthesis that often lies outside the competence of our traditional systems. They don't work that way; it's just too hard. Arts and culture do a particularly good job of trying to hold those concepts simultaneously. Not every piece of art, not every artistic process, but in the aggregate. It's almost the job description of the arts to weave past, present, and future.

How can arts and cultural strategies help communities deal openly and constructively with the often-unspoken dynamics of race?

MM: This really gets to the power of arts and culture. It reveals who we are. It reveals the beloved community to ourselves. Race is not a thing that has to be dealt with and that we have to fear—it's just an embrace of us and our humanity. We need to be able to see that race is no different from any other thing we struggle with, and we can overcome our racial divides if we develop the muscle to do that. But we have to care about it. We have to want to acknowledge and atone for the things we've not done well in our nation's history. If you don't get race, you don't get arts and culture, because you're denying folks their experience, the soul of who they are.

RR: In the past few years, I've participated in different institutions' attempts to come to terms with issues of race, equity, and justice. Some have come at this purely as an intellectual proposition, through history or pedagogy. That's sort of a dead end. You need a wide set of tools that draw on something much deeper and more profound, at a personal level and a community level and a societal level. The efforts that have been enormously powerful blend storytelling, musical expression, and visual creation—different ways of seeing a community and the talents in that community. It's the ability to bridge heart and soul and intellect.

How can arts and culture serve as a bulwark against displacement and reinforce the cultural richness that makes cities so vital and attractive?

RR: Conversations around displacement tend to conflate a few different things. There's physical displacement—you know, when you build a sports stadium or you run a freeway through the middle of a traditional African American neighborhood. There's financial displacement that occurs when property values go up and your grandmother can't afford her taxes. There's also cultural displacement, a sense of identity that's being torn up by the roots and not valued. Often you get the economic development people saying, "Yeah, yeah, we've gotta do this because we have to grow our tax base; we've got to be competitive." And you get the social justice folks saying, "Well, yeah, but you know, you're doing all of this on our backs." When I've seen the most effective conversations around issues of displacement, those worlds are somehow bridged. One important way to bridge them is to think about the cultural dynamism of a place. What does it mean for a community—whether it's as a block or a neighborhood or even a city—to honor its traditions, patterns of settlement, and patterns of culture, and not have those obliterated into something that no longer bears resemblance to what that city used to be?

MM: If you care about the arts and cultural fabric of a community, you will fight for it as hard as you fight for that plot of land to build that new stadium. It's that simple. If, say, I care about community that deeply, will I fight for it as hard as I'm going to fight for the new stadium that's going to displace folks who have built a vibrant community? I'm seeing this happen in Oakland right now. And this is why I'm challenging even my own thinking here,

not just looking externally. The soul of Oakland is being torn out. Why? Because folks don't own land. Institutional leaders will bring them to our lunches and have them perform for us all day long. But they won't be there in another year. As an institutional leader now, I have to ask, will I help buy up the land so that it can be owned by community? If all the leaders who play a role in the design of cities—developers, government, foundations, civic leaders—really care about this beautiful body of work that CDI and ArtPlace have created and nurtured, we would show up differently, holding a different set of interests, fighting for a different set of things. It doesn't mean people can't make a profit. But leaders would no longer be driven by the delusion that if we just create all these nice, shiny buildings, the community will be whole.

RR: We're having this conversation in a really big way in Detroit. This is fundamentally a city whose energy, resilience, and grit stem very much from the African American experience. It would be a huge lost opportunity to *not* figure out ways to capture that experience, how it has changed, and what that sort of dynamism means going into the future. And what is a better vehicle to interrogate these kinds of questions than arts and culture? I mean, we ask our artists and culture workers to go deep, to get us really uncomfortable, to figure out what the real questions are underneath the questions we're talking about. In Detroit, art has been a huge assist. It helps break down some of the rigidity, the preconceptions, and the defensiveness that come with this conversation. It becomes a way of trying to figure out what the channels of communication can be so people don't retreat to their own corners.

This volume features a number of community development organizations, intermediaries, and financial institutions that have embraced this work. What is the broader impact of programs like CDI and other ArtPlace investments?

MM: One of the most exciting things about these investments is they have lent validity to what a community would naturally express. This is an important way that intermediaries or organizations that aren't necessarily sitting on the ground have amplified community voice and experience, by recreating the space for it and recentering community back into our practice. What you hear me describing is my desire to take it further, build on the rich legacy of ArtPlace and CDI and say to folks, one, understand the power of arts and culture. And two, consider what would happen if we didn't simply become seduced by the performance, but if arts and culture actually corrected the distortions in the way we might see community. I think that's one of the important and beautiful competencies for leaders doing this work. Can you see the humanity of folks? Can you recognize the gift—that art allows us to see a different possibility in a community that we may not have considered?

RR: I've actually come out of our experience more optimistic about the community development system. Not only have we made progress in creative placemaking, but this is going to become more commonplace. What we've seen is the unlocking of a whole different way of thinking in some cases, some more successful than others and some perhaps more enduring than others. But things that clearly are going to last beyond a grant or an expressed interest by a bunch of foundations.

What do you see as a key challenge to fully incorporating arts and culture into all community development work?

MM: When I'm on the ground, I very much see how arts and culture are woven into the work, rooted in the community, and connected to me. It is a relationship-building strategy that is naturally born out of community. Intermediaries are more removed. We're often participants in the performance without having connection to that soul, that relationship. We embrace it without having to correct our delusion. Without having to own the ways in which we may be harming humanity, the very things that the artists are saying, are singing, are dancing about. And so I wonder sometimes, do we actually see what is happening right in front of our eyes as intermediary organizations, because if we saw it would we continue down the road with the strategies that we've implemented?

RR: When ArtPlace was created almost a decade ago, there was a sense that arts stood at the margin of the mission of community development organizations, finance institutions, transportation institutions, all the major public systems that we associate with community development. The creators of ArtPlace explicitly intended to try to spur an almost viral uptake of arts and culture into the core of that. We've had success, but it's really tempting to think about public systems in the community development sphere as largely technocratic exercises.

MM: Some of this is not technocratic. I think that's the journey for our field to be on, to embrace this much deeper work. It's for us as institutional leaders who may not have an artistic bone in our body, like Lord knows I don't, to hold this consciousness and this care, to say, I value this, and to struggle with how we apply it in a real way to our community-building work. That's how you get to a new set of results, a greater level of impact in places. For me it starts with leaders showing up with a different consciousness, leaders centering a different theme, actually meaning community for all, and leaders fundamentally questioning what and whom are they building for, and why.

RR: As you were talking, Michael, I clicked back into the pragmatic challenge that arts and culture continue to have. We just broke ground for a new community center in the northwest part of Detroit which will bring together the community, one of the universities, community organizers, all sorts of folks. We had the mayor and all the council members there. And it was really clear to me that all of the ways in which arts and culture helped form that space were invisible to them. Here was a physical space located on a commercial corridor within a broader commercial revitalization effort that involved open space, housing, small business development, and the like. And yet there was nothing about that space that didn't owe its existence to arts and culture. Its design was curated with an eye toward how space works and how community uses space. The walls were full of photo documentation of how the community is evolving, what it used to look like, what it looks like now, and some artistic expression of what the community hoped it would be. A spoken-word poet set the tone. The engagement of young people in the space is going to be through different forms of contemporary

artistic expression. There are going to be DJs, electronic musicians, drummers, and all sorts of stuff. It was both right there in our face, yet completely invisible. We still have an enormous challenge to remind people that arts and culture are not just a symphony or the corner mural project. It's a process of creation and inclusion and identity elevation and problem-solving. That seems soft, but it's another tool to make sure you're doing the work that's most creative, enduring, and effective.

Michael, how does the CDI experience inform and inspire your own leadership?

MM: It has me thinking about how often my desire is to just go to the solution or the policy. It has me thinking about my blind spots and what I'm not seeing when I go into a community. I find it quite liberating to stop and think about the experiences of the people I'm dealing with. To ask myself, how do I sit with them, break bread with them, and think about what possibility we might create if we join in a relationship in a different way? If I slow down and do that, I find I often end up in a better place. One thing that has come out of it for me is that I can do a lot to create a place at PolicyLink that is far more liberating in terms of how that soul is woven throughout our organization. I see so many possibilities if we bring this as a real competency. I've always been intrigued by Bayard Rustin's notion of an angelic troublemaker. How can I use arts and culture to be that angelic troublemaker? So, you all have set me on my own exciting journey. It's the result of leaders at PolicyLink bringing this into our organization and making sure this work is more than just a grant that we have. It's a way of us being in the world.

Rip, what lessons can philanthropy draw from CDI?

RR: In many ways, philanthropy has the same blind spots that the public and private sectors have. We want to compartmentalize. We want to keep our systems separate. We want to assume that pouring money into tangible products is the way we measure our success. My main takeaway is that the one-dimensionality of philanthropy as an approach to community development simply doesn't work. The approach has to be integrative in terms of systems and in terms of the tools it brings. I strongly believe that arts and culture help us break out of the traditional way of thinking about community development, community finance, and public policy, and move us into a more complicated, messy, given-and-take kind of world that ultimately is the future.

Michael McAfee is president and CEO of PolicyLink, a national research and action institute focused on advancing racial and economic equity to achieve just and fair inclusion for all. He brings over 20 years of experience partnering with organizations across the public, philanthropic, and private sectors. Michael joined PolicyLink in 2011 as the inaugural director of the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink. Under his leadership, PolicyLink emerged as a national leader in building cradle-to-career systems that ensure children and youth in our nation's most distressed communities have a pathway into the middle class. Before PolicyLink, Michael was director of community leadership for The Greater Kansas City Foundation and Affiliated Trusts and at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, he managed a \$450 million housing, community, and economic development portfolio.

Rip Rapson is president and CEO of The Kresge Foundation, a private, national foundation dedicated to expanding opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing and chairs the Funders Council of ArtPlace America. Since 2006, Rapson has led the 95-year-old foundation to adopt an array of grantmaking and investing tools to improve the economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions of urban life through six defined programs: arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development in Kresge's hometown of Detroit. Using a full array of grant, loan and other investment tools, Kresge invests more than \$160 million annually to foster economic and social change. An active member of the national philanthropic and southeast Michigan civic communities, Rapson is board chair of Living Cities, and a board member of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago's Detroit Branch, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Detroit RiverFront Conservancy, Downtown Detroit Partnership and M-1 Rail.