

## Creative Placemaking

By Jason Schupbach

### PUTTING THE ARTS TO WORK FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The arts have a role to play in economic development as much as any other field. However, all too often the arts are viewed as non-essential. Creative placemaking is when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work, making sure the arts find a permanent home at the "table." It takes time, ingenuity, and patience to ensure the integration of arts into community planning efforts. This article outlines the basics of having an arts-based economic development strategy.

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Photo by Ryan Hilvat, ArtsQuest.

A crowd attending an event on the SteelStacks campus, which has become a huge destination and tourist draw for the city of Bethlehem, PA.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamentals of contemporary economic development is that you have to build a community where people want to live – not just work, but live – their life in a convenient and experience-filled way. This fact is reflected in almost every recent study of trend lines for where companies are placing headquarters<sup>1</sup> and where Millennials are choosing to move.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the Knight Soul of the Community study investigated just why people move somewhere – it asked “Great schools, good transit, affordable health care and safe streets all help create strong communities. But is there something deeper that draws people to a

city – that makes them want to put down roots and build a life?” After interviewing more than 40,000 residents over three years, the top three answers for why someone loves living in a place shocked almost everyone. They are “social offerings, openness, and aesthetics.” To those of us working in the arts, this fact said something huge – that if you are trying to build a great community, you need the arts at the economic development table.

Any economic development practitioner will tell you there is no such thing as a silver bullet when building a great community. You need to pursue many different strategies at once – a jobs strategy, safety strategy, land use strategy, transportation strategy, education strategy, housing strategy, etc. – to be successful. This article will outline the basics

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## PUTTING THE ARTS TO WORK FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The arts have a role to play in economic development as much as any other field. However, all too often the arts are viewed as non-essential. Creative placemaking is when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work, making sure the arts find a permanent home at the “table.” It takes time, ingenuity, and patience to ensure the integration of arts into community planning efforts. This article outlines the basics of having an arts-based economic development strategy.

## OUR TOWN GRANT PROGRAM

(<https://www.arts.gov/national/our-town>)

The Our Town grant program supports creative placemaking projects that help to transform communities into lively, beautiful, and resilient places with the arts at their core. Creative placemaking is when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work - placing arts at the table with land-use, transportation, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure, and public safety strategies. This funding supports local efforts to enhance quality of life and opportunity for existing residents, increase creative activity, and create a distinct sense of place.

of having an arts-based economic development strategy as part of that mix – or what we at the National Endowment for the Arts call “creative placemaking.”

## THE ARTS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The simplest way to define creative placemaking is as a way to strategically engage the arts in economic development priorities. You should ask yourself: what are you trying to achieve, and how can the arts contribute to that goal? For the past five years, the NEA has been building support for creative placemaking in America. We have invested over \$21 M in communities in all 50 states and Puerto Rico through the Our Town grant program; helped to create a funders collaborative called ArtPlace America; and established partnerships with other federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Throughout this process, we have learned a lot about what works and what does not – and we are happy to share some of that knowledge with you.

To start, you need to recognize that almost every community has artists and arts organizations. They are one of the best naturally occurring resources in the world. The arts bring diverse people together and give a sense of belonging to community members – and really, who wants to live life without the arts?

Next, arts jobs are real jobs and an important part of economy. The Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis recently completed an in-depth analysis of the arts and cultural sector’s contributions to current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP). In 2012, arts and cultural production contributed over \$698 billion to the U.S. economy, or 4.32 percent to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product – more than construction (\$586.7B) or transportation and warehousing (\$464.1B). Furthermore, arts and cultural spending has a ripple effect on the overall economy, boosting both commodities and jobs. Looking once again to the 2012 data, 4.7 million workers were employed in the production of arts and cultural goods,

## ARTPLACE AMERICA

(<http://www.artplaceamerica.org/>)

ArtPlace America (ArtPlace) is a ten-year collaboration among a number of foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions that works to position arts and culture as a core sector of comprehensive community planning and development in order to help strengthen the social, physical, and economic fabric of communities. They do this through grantmaking, research and cross-sector partnerships.

receiving \$334.9 billion in compensation. Despite this evidence, knowledge of how to incorporate the arts into economic development is not well understood by the economic development field and is not taught very often in public policy schools.

When beginning an economic development project, you should start by asking yourself: what are you trying to achieve, and how can the arts contribute to that goal? Digging into this idea, Jamie Bennett, executive director of ArtPlace America,<sup>3</sup> outlined four basic strategies for creative placemaking activities – anchoring, activating, fixing, and planning – in his recent article for the San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank Community Development Investment Review Journal. Let us look at each quickly with an example project.

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## ANCHORING

*Anchoring refers to when an arts organization acts as the key institution in a neighborhood, providing community identity and/or generating area foot traffic and business.*

This strategy is probably the most commonly understood creative placemaking technique. If you build



Photo by Julian Rankin.

Mississippi Museum of Art's Art Garden has anchored the downtown, providing a place for downtown workers to eat lunch and tourists to meet before seeing a show.



*Ground Control: an Opera in Space (2012) by Nelly Ben Hayoun, 2012 ZERO1 Biennial, Seeking Silicon Valley, S. 1st Street Parking Lot.*

the museum, restore the theater, or open the digital studio/maker space, residents and tourists will come and spend money in the surrounding restaurants and shops.

A favorite example of an anchoring project is in Bethlehem, PA. The SteelStacks [<http://www.steelstacks.org/>] project has transformed the abandoned Bethlehem Steel plant into a center for arts and culture. At one time, Bethlehem Steel manufactured steel for structures including the Golden Gate Bridge and the Empire State Building. When the plant closed in 1995, it became one of the largest brownfield sites in the United States and left the region with many economic challenges.

The site was eventually purchased and partially developed as a casino. The remaining land was reimagined by a local arts group, ArtsQuest. The SteelStacks campus now includes the outdoor Levitt Pavilion, a jazz café, music hall, and film center. Additionally, the local PBS affiliate moved its new headquarter building to the site. Today, the SteelStacks outdoor and indoor performing arts facilities draw two million people a year to this community of 80,000 people, generating revenues and jobs for the city of Bethlehem.

## ACTIVATING

*Activating is when communities bring the arts (visual and performing) to public spaces, making public spaces more attractive, exciting, and safe. So many wonderful examples of this type of work exist, with festivals and events happening all over the world.*

Some of the most innovative work in this area is being done by the Quartier de Spectacle, [<http://www.quartierdesspectacles.com/en/>] an entertainment district located in the eastern section of Downtown Montreal. Montreal has a large number of annual festivals, including its world famous Jazz Fest. Local artists and cultural organizations wanted to ensure these festivals would be held downtown in perpetuity. So, they did something special. Working with the city, they closed off a city street and completely redesigned it as a permanent space for

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festivals. Infrastructure – including a permanent stage and lighting, and movable, flexible pieces that can serve as lighting, tables, and spaces for vendors – was installed. Making this infrastructure available to festival producers can save festivals \$60,000-\$100,000 a year in production costs and keeps many festivals from moving outside the city.

In addition to infrastructure, Montreal has installed permanent digital projectors on 30 buildings, hiring media artists to design projections which are then played on the buildings throughout the year. This amazing outdoor display of digital art is a relatively inexpensive way to activate the buildings and streets in the district.

## FIXING

*Fixing is defined as re-imagining the use of vacant and blighted spaces through arts and design, and how communities use these spaces to connect people to opportunities.*

For years now, one well-known fixing strategy has been to fill empty storefronts with new businesses run by artists or designers on a temporary basis. Using public funds, communities typically cover insurance and start-up costs. In many cases, these temporary rentals are continued beyond the subsidized program timeline, creating new permanent businesses in the districts. The Revolve project [<http://www.degc.org/businesses/revolve-detroit-1>] in

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Photo credit: Design Museum Boston.

*A bench designed as part of Design Museum Boston's Innovation District project.*



An artist storefront participating in Project Storefronts New Haven.

Detroit, MI, and Project Storefronts [<http://www.projectstorefrontsnewhaven.com/>] in New Haven, CT, are great recent success stories of this strategy.

Lately, however, many people are using 'tactical urbanism' – or 'pop-ups' – as a strategy to rethink spaces. These kinds of activities include temporary public art and parklets. In San Francisco, CA, the Market Street Prototyping Festival [<http://marketstreetprototyping.org/>] takes this work to the next level. It invites artists, designers, and the public to submit ideas that might improve and/or activate Market Street, the city's main artery. The festival is a testing ground for design and public art prototypes. The hope is that, through feedback, the 'pop-ups' will inform longer-term projects for temporary or permanent installation under the city's major infrastructure project, Better Market Street, which looks to completely redesign the street by 2018.

## PLANNING

Planning strategies include engaging community stakeholders through the arts and soliciting community input and suggestions in community design.

Planning activities are essential for the economic development of all communities. The NEA has found that incorporating artists and designers early in the community planning process strengthens outreach and awareness of economic development issues. In 2012, when the city of Flint, MI, started its first city plan in 50 years [<http://www.imagineflint.com/>], it came to the Agency with a unique project proposal to fund artist residencies in neighborhoods. Looking to avoid boring public meetings, it wanted to involve theater, dance, and visual artists in planning, data collection, and conducting community meetings. Essentially, Flint wanted to use artists to bring the public into the equation, giving them seats at the planning table.

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## COMBINING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Many communities use a combination of these four strategies at different stages and places in their economic development process. It is quite common to see temporary public art used in tandem with a festival to prepare a site for a permanent cultural facility that will anchor the neighborhood.

Take what is happening in Wilson, NC, with their new Whirligig Park. Over the course of his lifetime, world-renowned local folk artist Vollis Simpson created more than 200 giant whirligig sculptures out of found metal parts. Until recently, the majority of these joyful pieces sat rusting in his front yard just outside Wilson. Once a flourishing tobacco producing town, downtown Wilson is now a shell of its former self, full of empty warehouses and storefronts.

With the intent to revive downtown, the town struck a deal with Simpson to restore and move his pieces to a specially designed park. The park will *anchor* the community, *fix* a public space, and *activate* the downtown with temporary festivals as the pieces get restored. Additionally, the project will not only restore the old whirligigs but also train unemployed local residents in folk art restoration. As a result of this work, developers have purchased every building around the new park site, new residences are being built nearby, and two new restaurants have opened with more in the works.

## GETTING STARTED

Many people ask the NEA, how do I start a creative placemaking project? It always starts with two main things: understanding your community and establishing key partnerships. To put that in laymen's terms, you need to figure out who is out there and then begin to work together to fill your community's needs.

First, ask yourself: who are the cultural players in my community? Who are the government workers and the artists? What are the major cultural institutions and creative businesses? If you do not know, contact your local arts council. The local arts council could be a branch of your local government or a local non-profit. Either way,



Photo by Mark Vancleave.

Planning session for the Hennepin Avenue Cultural Corridor in Minneapolis, MN.

it should have its finger on the cultural pulse of your community and be able to put you in contact with key cultural players.

If your community does not have a local arts council, you should put together a ‘cultural assets map,’ or a map of the arts and cultural institutions, individuals and businesses in your community. This may take some additional funding but it is worth it. The best asset maps use culturally resonant folklore-based techniques to map a neighborhood. This helps to reach sections of the community that would not normally participate, giving voice to the previously unheard. (You can find more on how to do these kinds of maps here: <http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town/project-type/asset-mapping>.)

Once you know who the cultural resources are in your community, it is important to get to know the community itself. Often, economic development project managers are already involved with their target communities. However, when that is not the case, it is important to make the effort to fully understand the residents – their stories and concerns – so that they can be reflected in the goals and vision of the larger project.

You cannot unilaterally apply a project from one community to another and expect success. Every community is unique. As Roberto Bedoya from the Tucson Pima Arts Council writes, “Success looks very different from one community to the next, depending on local values and systems, which are influenced by the history, social capital, culture, politics, and economic conditions of a region.” Therefore, it is important to enter into many conversations with different stakeholder groups in order to learn about each of their unique perspectives, histories, and modes of creative expression.

Note that it can be challenging to uncover unique cultural elements in historically disadvantaged communities but that is when it is most important. So, as you develop a project, you should always ask, how can my project boost the area’s current assets and benefit the community as a whole, not just a section of it? (For more resources on understanding community, check out: <http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town/project-process/understanding-community>.)

**As an economic development organization, one of the first things you will need to do is establish a common language with your local cultural organizations and artists. Frequently, you will find that the economic development and arts worlds don’t speak the same language. So, be patient and ask lots of questions of each other when you first start to meet. Once you have established a common language, you can begin to establish a partnership and develop the project together. Know that projects often don’t emerge in the first meeting, but take time to work out together.**



Photo by Jerome DePefilli.

*The first few whirligigs, created by artist Vollis Simpson, installed in the new Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in Wilson, NC.*

[gov/exploring-our-town/project-process/understanding-community](http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town/project-process/understanding-community).)

Finally, all creative placemaking projects require partnerships to succeed, partnerships between not only economic development and cultural actors but also all of the local actors necessary to help a project succeed. As an economic development organization, one of the first things you will need to do is establish a common language with your local cultural organizations and artists. Frequently, you will find that the economic development and arts worlds don’t speak the same language. So, be patient and ask lots of questions of each other when you first start to meet. Once you have established a common language, you can begin to establish a partnership and develop the project together. Know that projects often don’t emerge in the first meeting, but take time to work out together.

The more partners you have the better, as it shows community support and commitment, increasing the project’s likelihood of success. The most successful Our Town projects have at least 15 local partners on the ground, ranging from all kinds of sectors. On projects related to public health, we’ve seen hospitals, universities, and even farms step up; on projects related to transit access, we’ve seen malls, business improvement districts, and even churches collaborate; and so on. You should imagine all of the pieces of your project’s puzzle, and get to know the local people who can help you to make it happen.

## FUNDING PROJECTS

Another question people ask us is – how can I raise the money to do this work? Funding creative placemaking projects takes determination, creative thinking, and diverse financing. At the national level, as previously mentioned, the NEA has a specific grant to fund creative placemaking called Our Town, and ArtPlace America gives yearly competitive grants. Beyond this, every state has a State Arts Agency, which receives NEA funding, that you can apply to for funding, and if you have a Local

Having the arts at the economic development table can lead to enormous benefits for your efforts. Remember social offerings and aesthetics – the arts – draw people to a community.

Arts Council you might be able to find funding options there.

You should also look to your local and regional foundations, and corporate and individual donors. Depending on the type of project, you might be able to pursue other financing mechanisms, including tax increment financing, tax credits, loans, and bonds. The Our Town grantees have found success using a combination of all of these sources and methods.

## CONCLUSION

Having the arts at the economic development table can lead to enormous benefits for your efforts. Remember social offerings and aesthetics – the arts – draw people to a community. The arts are authentic local assets that can be used to augment what is unique about a place. They can lead to the creation of new jobs and opportunities for all residents of a community. Therefore, if you are patient

and willing to try new ideas, please open the door to the creative talents of your community and add the arts to your economic development strategy – amazing things await!

These examples just scratch the surface of the incredible diversity of creative placemaking projects that are occurring across the world. For more detailed examples, check out the Exploring Our Town [<https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town/>] online database available on [www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov), which is home to over 70 examples of creative placemaking projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. ☺

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/core-values>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2014/05/what-millennials-want-and-why-cities-are-right-pay-them-so-much-attention/9032/>

<sup>3</sup> ArtPlace America (ArtPlace) is a ten-year collaboration among a number of foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions that works to position arts and culture as a core sector of comprehensive community planning and development in order to help strengthen the social, physical, and economic fabric of communities. [www.artplaceamerica.org](http://www.artplaceamerica.org)



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