



Artists as Revitalization Agents

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Concentrations of artists in a community often translate into more public art projects, civic beautification efforts, and cultural events.

Providence recently embarked on a rebranding campaign. Once called “The Renaissance City,” today it is “The Creative Capital.” The change reflects the presence of a large number of local artists, extensive cultural networks developed out of entities such as the Rhode Island School of Design and arts incubator AS220, and several mayors’ initiatives employing the arts for economic and social development.

Recognizing Revival

The common wisdom about the role of artists in community revitalization is that they move into communities where space is affordable, they create thriving creative spaces, and then they—and any other residents who were part of the community previously—get priced out as the real-estate market seeks to take advantage of newly hot neighborhoods.

Although that scenario has some basis in reality, the role of arts in community development is really more complex. Artists can be involved in many facets of community revitalization, and these days they are often likely to be a part of a larger civic strategy. *The Wall Street Journal* took notice of that phenomenon in a 2009 article describing struggling cities in which artists may take advantage of cheap space with the help of local officials: “What began as a grass-roots movement, with artists gravitating to cheaper neighborhoods and making improvements, is now being embraced by city officials as a tool to revive neighborhoods reeling from vacancies and home foreclosures.”¹

The role of arts in community development is no longer solely the purview of artists acting on their own. A growing number of practitioners, researchers, funders, elected officials, and traditional community development and financing organizations are taking a close look at culture-driven community revitalization. We at the national organization Partners for Livable Communities often find ourselves mediating between civic practitioners, unfamiliar with the language of arts but recognizing the value, and arts practitioners seeking to enhance their relevance and connection to surrounding communities.

The new efforts are widespread, encompassing nonprofit arts organizations, commercial arts presenters, and a complex ecosystem of creative workers enhancing natural cultural districts and developing new cultural districts. The New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) has been one of the most aggressive groups to map and quantify the cultural sector as a whole. Their web site, www.CultureCount.org,

serves as a database of arts activity for the entire region. They have regularly put together studies quantifying the economic effects of the cultural sector in the region, such as:

- the total expense for all cultural nonprofits in New England, approximately \$3.6 billion;
- the total revenue for all cultural nonprofits in New England, approximately \$4.5 billion; and
- the total number of cultural nonprofits in New England, 19,183 (performing and visual arts groups, museums, libraries, and the like).²

Within this ecosystem, artists have a unique role to fill. According to research by NEFA based on the 2000 U.S. Census, there are 225,750 people in the cultural workforce in New England, equating to 3.11 percent.³ In 2009, NEFA received approximately \$330,000 from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to distribute in support of preserving these important arts jobs.

New England artists live in large cities, small towns, and rural areas. Their effect is felt not just by communities in need of revitalization but in all communities in which they live.⁴ Artists contribute to quality of life by animating public spaces and creating cultural connections. They work in partnership with community organizations to enhance specific economic, social, and physical development strategies. And they contribute to the economy through their business enterprises.

That economic output is sometimes termed the *artistic dividend* and can be quantified through occupational characteristics and products produced and exported. Richard Florida’s 2002 work *The Rise of the Creative Class* made cities and towns aware of the economic value of artistic insight and creative thinking and launched intense competition to lure all sorts of creative workers. Researcher Ann Markusen, who has quantified and qualified many of these effects, describes both primary and secondary benefits:

Many artists are self-employed. Some contribute to their economies by

porting their work directly out of the region and spending the resulting income locally. Others enable productivity and marketing gains by unrelated area businesses, through contracting their skills in writing, performing, and visual art. Yet others, through their demands for inputs, evoke innovation on the part of their suppliers that broadens their business.⁵

In just one example of impressive cooperation, an initiative called “From Rustbelt to Artist Belt” brought together multiple sectors to harness the power of artists in the Midwest.⁶

In addition to serving as economic generators and community cultural connectors, artists frequently bring about changes in the physical fabric of communities. For example, they may locate live-work space in unused or underutilized buildings. Organizations such as Massachusetts-based ArtistLink have helped old industrial towns to renovate a significant amount of warehouse space into galleries and live-work space. ArtistLink has helped develop more than 65 projects in 30 communities.⁷

Artist spaces, sometimes located within a cultural district, can have important benefits for all concerned. In a recent study of 23 artist-space developments, almost half were positioned as community economic-development and social-improvement strategies. The others were positioned as viable business strategies or services for artist





needs. Because there is little capacity in the arts world to develop such spaces without help, they are often created by community development corporations or coalitions of civic and arts partners. These types of projects increase career opportunities and infrastructure for artists while building their relationships with the broader community. They decrease blight and animate neglected spaces, increase arts-participation opportunities for residents, contribute to local pride, and catalyze other economic gains in their communities.⁸

Furthermore, when there are concentrations of artists in a community, more public art projects, civic beautification initiatives, and cultural events may result. NEFA helped Lowell, Massachusetts, to leverage the value of its growing arts community to install public art works along 1.7 miles of trail next to the Concord River Greenway. And in Danville, Vermont, the Vermont Arts Council, the Vermont Council on Rural Development, and the Vermont Agency of Transportation partnered to help artists create aesthetic strategies for improving local traffic safety.

Challenges and Opportunities

Major challenges for artist-based development revolve around the support systems for the artists and the areas in which they locate. Many civic actors and communities are experimenting with cultural districts and artist subsidization, but not all projects are completely successful. Whether artists develop the space on their own or someone else develops it with artists in mind, artists who do not become owners can soon

find themselves being priced out. Longtime residents of the surrounding community can be priced out, too—unless they have a real estate ownership stake. Revitalizing without too much gentrifying is a balancing act. Moreover, artist-space management is often supported by nonprofit entities that developers create, and many developers fail to plan adequately for how a nonprofit will be supported once they have moved on.

Communities interested in exploring artist-based revitalization can help ensure greater success by researching the presence of artists locally and regionally to determine market demand prior to starting a project, talking with experienced artist-space developers such as ArtistLink to avoid common pitfalls, and encouraging ongoing, substantial connections between artists and community members to create a sense of shared investment in the future.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Alexandra Alter, "Artists vs. Blight," *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123992318352327147.html>.
- ² New England Foundation for the Arts, *New England's Creative Economy: The Nonprofit Sector*, http://www.nefa.org/sites/default/files/NEFANonprofitStudy_3-2010.pdf.
- ³ Douglas DeNatale and Gregory Wassall, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition*, www.nefa.org/sites/default/files/ResearchCreativeEconReport2007.pdf.

⁴ See for example, these *Communities & Banking* articles: www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2010/fall/Burke_Vermont_arts.pdf and www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2006/spring/revitalization.pdf.

⁵ Ann Markusen, Greg Schrock, and Martina Cameron, "The Artistic Dividend Revisited" (paper no. 314, Project on Regional and Industrial Economics, the Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota, March 2004), www.hhh.umn.edu/img/assets/6158/artistic_dividend_revisited.pdf.

⁶ "On Sept. 17th and 18th, 2009, [The Community Partnership for Arts and Culture] brought together a group of community developers, artists, arts administrators and policy makers to explore how formally industrial cities are using artist-based community development to change the stories being told about their communities," <http://www.cpacbiz.org/business/CreativeCompass.shtml>. See also http://www.cpacbiz.org/ftp_file/09-10/RBAB2WhitePaper2010.pdf.

⁷ *14 Stories: Building Stronger Communities by Supporting American Artists*, http://www.linconet.net/files/10_0825_LINC_LORF_10.pdf.

⁸ Maria Rosario Jackson and Florence Kabwasa-Green, *Artist Space Development: Making the Case* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2007), http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1001176_asd_case.pdf.

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