

# BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH THE ARTS

The North Adams Story



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In North Adams, the walls of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) form a dividing line between the high-minded art within and the struggling postindustrial city without.

But outside the 13-acre complex, the erstwhile mill town boasts its own arts community, comprising artists who arrived after MoCA and institutions and residents who predate it. Creative placemaking (shaping the character of a geographic area around the arts and cul-

ture) provides a useful paradigm for exploring the synergy between the two creative spheres.<sup>1</sup> By framing North Adams as a prototypical “creative place,” we can consider the ways in which major arts-development projects intersect with preexisting community assets. This approach replaces the superhero fallacy of arts-oriented development with models that respect community institutions and affect the lives of low-income residents in a more meaningful way.

The symbolic value of Mass MoCA has been huge. The Sprague electric plant, which houses the museum, was once the largest employer in North Adams. After it closed, its empty hulk weighed on the city's spirit. Opened in 1999, Mass MoCA created 77 jobs by 2002 and influenced the creation of 150 jobs by other businesses. So says Center for Creative Communities (C3), a collaboration of Williams College and Mass MoCA, which also documented a net growth of over \$9.4 million annually in the county economy. Counting tourists, the economic impact is closer to \$14 million. All good. However, creative placemaking emphasizes the value of locales being able to retain a higher share of income that is generated by residents (as opposed to tourists). Keeping the money in circulation at home results in greater community benefits.

Another consideration is that, according to data from the Berkshire regional planning commission, the average weekly wage in the sector most improved by Mass MoCA—that of “arts, entertainment, food services, and accommodation”—actually has the lowest average weekly wage of any employment sector in North Adams by far. At only \$253 per week, wages in this sector are about half of the next lowest, retail.

Meanwhile, home affordability has declined with the increase in home values. New artist-oriented loft developments, the North

Adams dot-com boomlet, and the draw of Mass MoCA's year-round art, cinema, music, and performance offerings (which help local companies retain employees) have all contributed to the increase in property values.

## New Investment

Today as MoCA enters its teens, several long-term development projects are beginning to take root.

The Partnership for North Adams, a joint effort of the city, Mass MoCA, and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) is spurring community development projects through public-private partnerships. For example, it has intervened in the threatened destruction of one of the city's iconic churches and has collaborated on an RFP (request for proposal) to redevelop Heritage State Park. The successful proposal, approved by the City in June 2012, removes the park's maintenance from the city's budget and rebrands the site as a retail center integrated with the state's new gateway to Mount Greylock. Investment on such a scale would not happen if not for Mass MoCA.

Also capitalizing on the presence of Mass MoCA, MCLA's Downstreet Art (DSA), a public art project designed to revitalize downtown, was launched five years ago, in 2007. Downstreet

Art fills underused public and private spaces with pop-up galleries, performances, public art projects, and the like throughout the summer and fall.

Since the Mass MoCA campus is physically separated from downtown North Adams, Downstreet Art is important in defining the city as a cultural haven, rather than simply an empty vessel where Mass MoCA is located. Downstreet Art brings people downtown, into the restaurants and shops and the (largely noncommercial) art venues. And although new commercial tenants might not hold Downstreet Art directly responsible for their decision to open up shop, it does deserve credit for creating a sense that “something's happening,” a sense of potential that makes investment appear reasonable. Suzy Helme, co-owner of Shima, an upscale natural parenting and baby goods store on Main Street, concurs and adds: “DSA has been a vital part of our summers! We almost always do enough sales to make it worthwhile, and you can't beat the sense of community that happens on those monthly openings.”

## New Networks

Stephen Hannock is a painter with an international reputation. He also maintains a studio in Beaver Mill (developed in North Adams by artist Eric Rudd).

For the past two years, Hannock has organized a show of artwork from the local schools in Mass MoCA galleries between installations. A reception and prizes are part of the excitement. The experience teaches students to prepare their work for sharing with the public, and it lets them see their work in a greater context. The combination of a significant art institution, the commitment of a renowned artist, and support from school administrators and art teachers makes it possible.

Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (NBCC), a community-organizing nonprofit, also uses the arts to work with youth. A writing workshop helps teens discover the power of the written word through their own investigations, outside of school. The workshop might have existed without Mass MoCA, but some opportunities would probably have been missed.

Kate Merrigan, director of the program, describes an example of the connections that form when larger institutions are engaged in the community. An internationally recognized artist, Pepon Osorio, was brought to the area by the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) and set up an art installation in a vacated car dealership under the auspices of Downstreet Art. Since the subject of the installation was a provocative interpretation of the divergent character of North Adams and Williamstown, it became that semester's subject matter for the teen writing workshop's project. They also made valuable connections with adult mentors.

The Williams staff member who coordinated with the NBCC later became an admissions officer at MCLA. When MCLA denied admission to one of the teens, Merrigan reminded the admissions officer about how hard-working and energetic the teen was. Her application was reconsidered, and she was accepted.

NBCC youth are also engaged in a long-term effort to bring a skate park to North Adams. Teens rapidly age out of programs, so youth leadership programs are generally not conducive to development projects. However, several "generations" of North Adams youth have identified a skate park and gathering place as a top priority, and even teens who don't skateboard are enthusiastic. One generation identified Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a likely funding source and made a proposal to the mayor. Another carried the work forward with engineers and design professionals.

Ultimately, a Mass MoCA curator was drawn into the project and is connecting the youth with yet another conceptual installation artist, this one specializing in urban design projects including public skate parks. The involvement of a major artist not only raises the level of discourse among the teens, but also elevates the project from a perfunctory concrete structure to a destination of wider interest.

Community theater has also been important in the arts scene.

When Main Street Stage lost the lease on its location, it reinvented itself as a traveling theater company. Summer 2012's family-friendly production incorporated puppetry and performance, and many of the free shows were held adjacent to low-income and public housing, drawing the attention of neighborhood families who would likely not otherwise attend live theater.

In one case, community members and NBCC organized a bike parade from a housing development to the show as a part of the state's "Mass in Motion" initiative.<sup>2</sup> Main Street Stage's creative company and board are made up of both long-term residents and recent transplants. The imprimatur of MoCA and North Adams as a creative center has been a benefit to the troupe.

Creative placemaking is the right model for contemporary initiatives using the arts to make a positive impact on low-income communities. Efforts to measure outcomes are elusive, but several organizations are productively engaged in the attempt. Notably, the ArtPlace Foundation is developing indicators of "vibrancy and diversity" that should assist communities in the future. In the meantime, ArtPlace has developed 10 questions to help identify whether or not a locale is moving in the right direction.

Questions such as "Is there a new indoor/outdoor gathering place?" and "Are there more people on the streets?" can help people think about whether the creative networks are developing in such a way as to improve the quality of community life. Efforts to define precisely how creative placemaking can contribute to community development are expected to continue and to serve as an intelligent guide to planning.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See A. Markusen, "Creative Placemaking" (report, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, 2010), [www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf](http://www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf). "In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities."

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/consumer/wellness/healthy-living/mass-in-motion-english.html>.