

Rhode Island Changes the CREATIVE Economy

by Drake Patten
The Steel Yard



We hear it a lot: art improves our lives, makes us better people, changes our futures. But how, exactly, do we know that? What does an arts-driven metamorphosis really look like? In which sectors of our community do we see it? And where does it matter the most?

Until recently, the arts were identified with privilege, education, and a secret handshake involving a certain sophistication. Even though that has changed over the last 20 years, the newer “economy positive” profile is sometimes still accused of being a walled community. That may be the result of how we’ve come to argue for the arts’ validity, a direction largely fueled by funders and their ideas about what success looks like.

In short, we’re mired in metrics such as dollars spent, numbers of people served, peripheral impact (restaurants and parking garages), and the like.¹ Some of this also comes directly from how the arts have been studied and argued for—the price of seeking mainstream legitimacy. Consider Richard Florida’s often referenced *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which equates vibrant cities with creative activities.² The idea is that if you mix up art and capitalism in urban cen-

ters, everyone will be better off. Would that it were that easy.

Inclusion Wanted

In *From Creative Economy to Creative Society*, Mark Stern and Susan C. Seifert make the point that such activity does not always offer the trickle-down benefits it promises.³ Many people get included in the creative economy’s new wins, but many don’t. Displacement resulting from the influx of an out-of-state workforce and the loss of potential jobs to outsiders are among the oft-cited negative outcomes. Instead of trying to find the sunny side, Stern and Seifert focus intelligently and sensitively on *cluster economics*, identifying the impact of neighborhood-based creative economies.

Nevertheless, mainstream economics continues to exert a hold on arts advocacy and on the agencies and membership groups charged to do this work. Witness Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa’s white paper “Creative Placemaking,” which provides copious metrics to support their claim that artists are a highly educated and innovation-producing segment of the American workforce.⁴ Indeed, a review of this workforce reveals an extraordinary breadth of jobs and industries currently included in what makes up our creative class. But again, what happens if you aren’t a member of the group? Can the arts make a difference in your life? Can the arts engender social justice and community equity?

It can, via a different kind of arts, one that may or may not ever be fully counted by mainstream arts metrics, but one that exemplifies cluster economics with precision. This art and its practitioners are engaged in seriously committed applied work at the grassroots level within communities. It builds its success with the simple tool of a creativity that is deeply collective

(the boundary between expert and novice is blurry), responsive (this kind of art listens), and bold (this art is unafraid to move in where it may not initially be wanted or understood). It also is determined and idealistic, sometimes appearing more like social service than art.

It is also intelligent, agile, and hard-working. Its practitioners see art as a means for change, a mutually defined language, an act of mutually constructed social responsibility. Outcomes may or may not include a newly minted workforce for the creative sector or converts to museum going, performance attendance, or art buying. However, it often does result in a job, become the doorway to something new, or engender a desire to change a personal or community status quo. This art may simply be a means to an end. And that’s OK.

Taking Art to the Streets

In Rhode Island, all forms of art exist in relative harmony—the highbrow, the creative capitalism, and the type that takes art to the streets. It may be the mix itself that makes the whole work so well. Statewide, the arts are change makers, although not always in the traditional feel-good ways that the public associates with arts experiences.

Rhode Island is particularly adept at taking art to the streets. Three programs offer a window into how this less-recognized kind of art-making is modeling major, sustainable social change. In all three cases, how big the efforts are or hope to be, where they do the work, and how well they integrate arts professionals with constituents are all critical aspects of their success.

Community MusicWorks

With a conviction that musicians can play an important role in public service—and with start-up funding from Brown Univer-

sity's Swearer Center for Public Service—Sebastian Ruth launched Community MusicWorks in 1997. Through the permanent residency of the Providence String Quartet, CMW provides free after-school education and performance programs that build long-term relationships among professional musicians, children, and families in Providence neighborhoods.⁵

A 2009 evaluation by arts consulting firm WolfBrown reports, “playing music becomes an experience of developing personal agency and of recognizing both the power and the responsibility of having a voice in larger civic and cultural conversations.” CMW works with families, takes music into communities, and gives students the responsibility of co-owning every performance. What a way to model social responsibility!

RiverzEdge

RiverzEdge Arts Project is a youth-development program giving paid employment and a voice in their community to educationally and economically disenfranchised youth aged 12 to 24.⁶ Based in Woonsocket, RiverzEdge engages teens in creative expression, disciplined effort, and economic self-reliance. Youth serve as designers and producers of output from T-shirts to letterhead. They are able to compete with mainstream printing companies and are fast becoming the local choice for graphic work and production. In addition to having a safe space in a challenging urban environment, they are learning about small business from the ground up.

The Steel Yard

Located where five of Providence's poorest neighborhoods meet, the Steel Yard focuses on opportunities to engage people in processes related to industrial arts.⁷ The nonprofit works with a wide range of students, but its niche is increasingly that of underserved individuals, aged 18 to 24, who take part in workforce training in metalworking. Trainees work side by side with the Steel Yard's own public-projects senior fabricators to place one-of-a-kind street amenities (trash cans, bike racks, tree guards, fence panels) into neighborhoods across the city. Thus arts can train people for high-paying (non-arts) jobs. In the process, the programs develop communication skills, build expectations about showing up, and require participants to recommit each day to collaboration and learning.

Lessons Learned

These examples offer sound community-building lessons. First, both the production and placement of programs' products—whether concerts, posters, or trash cans—happen in areas these organizations serve. Second, no matter how lofty the goal (a CMW graduate playing at Carnegie Hall, a sculptor showing internationally, or a graphic designer taking over at a major magazine), organization leaders believe that what's important is for the process to alter people's outlook, their future, their sense of social responsibility, and their opportunity. Arts converts are not expected, but participating, fully franchised citizens are.

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Nationwide there are many programs where social justice is happening at the intersection of art-making and the human experience. Some arts-driven metamorphoses may end up looking different from what people normally think of as arts, and that's OK. But will arts metrics capture that? Given the outcomes described here, it seems more likely that the successes will get swallowed up in statistics that measure poverty resolution (home ownership rates, education, access to health care, and rates of employment). And for artists trying to have their sector recognized for the important work they do in communities across the nation, that's not OK.⁸

Economic arguments are common and popular in arts advocacy, and they have a critical place in moving the sector toward adequate support and better public understanding. But they tell only a fraction of the story. The rest of this story, the part that might count most, is found at the physical intersection of arts and community. There, uncounted, are the powerful stories of how art really does change lives.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Secondary-impact statistics that include factors such as hotels, restaurants, and parking fees sometimes seem desperate. Corporations don't count such things when estimating their impact on home communities; why should the arts?
 - ² In 2005, Florida acknowledged that his “city on a hill” concept was proving false—too late for cities that had acted on it.
 - ³ Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, *From Creative Economy to Creative Society*, <http://www.trfund.com/resource/downloads/creativity/Economy.pdf>.
 - ⁴ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking” (white paper, Mayors' Institute on City Design, U.S. Conference of Mayors and the American Architectural Foundation, 2010), <http://www.nea.gov/pub/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.
 - ⁵ See <http://www.communitymusicworks.org>.
 - ⁶ See <http://riverzedgearts.org>.
 - ⁷ See www.thesteelyard.org.
 - ⁸ Similarly uncounted are many small businesses owned by artists. Not macro enough to get seen in larger studies, they too exist on the fringe, uncounted where their numbers might make a more salient arts argument than restaurant and parking revenues.
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