ART
& SOCIAL CHANGE

RUST BELT to artist belt IV
St. Louis
AT THE CROSSROADS

date	location	report by
APRIL 12-14, 2012	**ST LOUIS, MISSOURI**	**KO SIEW HUEY** **NGIAM SU-LIN**

RUST BELT TO ARTIST BELT
art and social change

By Ko Siew Huey and Ngiam Su-Lin

The Rustbelt to Artist Belt: At the Crossroads Convening held from April 12 – 14 2012 in St. Louis, USA aimed to open up a discussion on the artist's role in effecting positive social change. Its participants ranged from artists, community organisers, architects, policy makers, and educators. The format of the convening consisted of lectures by guest speakers, breakout sessions for participants to choose from, group teaching and learning, culminating in a street party in a residential area that has benefitted from the arts.

Art as Integral to Community Revitalisation and Development

The focus of the convening was on a specific subset of community arts – that which has social change as an objective and artists taking on the role of leaders in this change. The conversation was situated squarely in the space that was concerned with helping communities thrive by weaving the arts into the fabric of society.

The guest speaker for the opening of the convening, Arlene Goldbard articulated this clearly, "Arts is the loom upon which our social fabric is woven"; she reminded, and challenged us to dare to imagine a world we would like to live in, and to believe that we could realise it if only we believed in ourselves and others enough - if only we desired it strongly enough, for "nothing can be changed that isn't first imagined and desired"; pushing past the negative voices in our heads, overcoming the fear of unrealised hope, we were called to "Dream. Desire. Represent."

She put forth the question, "what if every development initiative starts with culture?"

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A significant number of the presentations and discussions during the breakout sessions articulated how artists were working together with communities to effect change and development through various artforms, engagement platforms, methodologies and work models.

Apart from the street party on the last night where we saw some artist-in-community initiatives, we would have liked to see more community arts programmes in action, visited organisations, homes, community arts centres etc. to gain a fuller picture of what was happening on the ground.

(Left) Parade along Cherokee Street (Right) Arlene Goldbard delivering the opening address

Photo by Ko Siew Huey

KEY LEARNINGS

Mapping the Landscape of Arts for Change

A helpful beginning to this work of arts-based community development starts by having a framework to map the entire ecosystem. This was introduced during one of the breakout sessions co-facilitated by the director of the Center for the Study of Art and Community, Bill Cleveland, and a co-director of Animating Democracy, Barbara Shaeffer Bacon.

An Ecology of Arts-Based Community Development

The framework is beneficial for understanding and articulating various components found in arts-based community development and social change work – "nurture and heal", "build and improve", "educate and inform" and "inspire and mobilise"; how the components and how one positions oneself on this framework differs although there may be overlap. Each component requires different knowledge, experience, skills sets, dispositions etc. that reflects different intended outcomes (which also have areas of overlap).

Self-reflexivity about one's intention when doing the work is important as it has a great impact on the outcomes achieved. This alignment is crucial for preventing the creation of unintentional consequences. This point will be further developed in the later section on ethics of engagement.

Takeaways

1. The framework, by giving a clearer idea of what "success" means for different accountability groups, together with clarity in our intentions, enables us to better recognise the evidence when we have achieved what we set out to do. This understanding then informs training and evaluation, the development of significant practice and meaningful collaboration.

2. The framework reflects and demonstrates how a robust ecosystem is necessary for arts-based community development to be effective and sustainable, as well as how the various components interact with one another to create impactful change.

Continuum of Impact

To help practitioners measure the impact of arts-based community development and to articulate the difference arts and culture make in societies, another framework, developed by the non-profit group, Animating Democracy, was introduced.

This is a well researched, thought-out and sophisticated framework that is much needed for arts-based community development and social change work. It contains important languaging for the field, and how to communicate arts outcomes to other non-arts fields. The framework also contains research methodology, and how to go about evaluating one's programmes.

Takeaways

1. Advocacy in arts-based community development = data and evidence + stories and artwork

2. Be honest about the intention of evaluation. Is it to a) improve a programme or b) make a case to a specific audience? The right intention shapes the way the evaluation is designed, interpreted and presented.

3. Be smart about data and evidence collection (data being more rigorous), as well as the use of primary vs. secondary data. Always think about what is good enough to use given the constraints of time and resources.
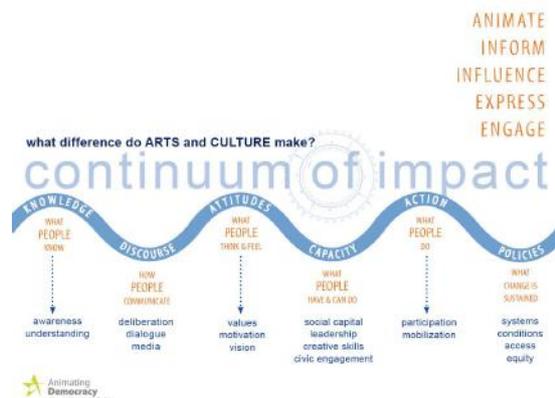
Photo by Ko Siew Huey

The physical and social spaces reinforce each other to create an environment for communication and connection to happen.

(Left and below) Public artworks on display in City Garden, a community space at Downtown St. Louis

Photo by Ko Siew Huey

Creative Placemaking

Case studies were helpful in adding vibrant splashes of colour to the blank canvas of theoretical frameworks.

The architects behind programmes like "Old North St Louis Restoration Group" and Cleveland's "North Short Collinwood" shared success stories of how artists have played a crucial role in revitalising the physical and social dimensions of communities in a manner that respects the inherent historic, cultural and urban character.

Creative placemaking is a term that reflects a specific area of arts-based community development where the arts is used to revitalise housing areas or public spaces, bringing transformation to physical and social spaces. The physical and social spaces reinforce each other to create an environment for communication and connection to happen.

Takeaways

1. Importance of socially engaged art programming that goes beyond mere "gesture" (eg. exhibition at the end of a workshop), but which is integrated into the life of the community. This process takes a long time and involves observation by the artist and meaningful co-generation and action with community members. Community support is key and they have to be involved in the decision making process.

2. Asset building for the artist: beyond traditional grant making, what can go into creating a new support system for the arts? Asset building and financial literacy are vital components. The Collinwood model created a financial incentive scheme that enabled artists to own their own homes and studios. By including them as residents with a stake in the neighbourhood, the art programmes became embedded within the community and were more relevant in addressing concerns of the neighbourhood. It also attracted new businesses into the area.

3. It is key to frame these programmes as a sustainable investment in people and infrastructure, and not mere beautification of buildings. Of course, it is prudent for investments to be done incrementally as iteration is part of the process when experimenting with new models.

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Ethics of Engagement

Given the significant role of artist as leader and change agent when engaged in arts-based community development work, it is important to reflect on the common ethical challenges, usually revolving around the following issues:

- freedom of expression
- personal boundaries
- identity
- role of the community artist

How does one deal with conflict when it happens, and more importantly, how does one pre-empt the eruption of full-scale conflict?

Takeaways

1. The most crucial element in the ethics of engagement involves knowing oneself. Self-knowledge and reflexivity is paramount in ensuring an ethical process and outcomes. As Thomas Merton put it succinctly, "He (and she) who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without this deepening of his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas."

2. Specific things to bear in mind when engaging communities:

- revisit one's own assumptions, values, commitments, etc. before leading a process for others
- examine the key purposes in doing the work and give people the benefit of knowing them
- remember that communities are always becoming, are dynamic and not objectify them
- establish connection between self and other, developing authenticity

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(Below) Roseann Weiss, Director of the Community Arts Training Institute in St Louis, sharing a light moment with the participants

Photo by Ko Siew Huey

APPLICATION

Ecosystem and Multisectoral Partnerships

In order for arts-based community development and social change to be meaningful, impactful, and sustainable, a whole ecosystem of multisectoral partnerships is required, ranging from artists, community organisers, healthcare workers, policy makers, urban planners, law makers, funders, educators etc.

Each component of the ecosystem has a crucial role to play, and using a framework like 'Mapping the Landscape of Arts for Change' is useful for understanding the state, development and gaps of arts-based community development in Singapore, in order to articulate current practice and methodologies, address gaps and challenges, encourage development in parts of the system that are underdeveloped; contributing overall to the further development of this field.

Recognising the ecosystem involved in arts-based community development also reinforces the importance of networking, peer support and education, having an infrastructure and system to dialogue, share, exchange practice etc. amongst various components in the ecosystem. Only then will the system continue to thrive, be creative and develop, even as it contributes to community development.

Education and Evaluation

Understanding what we do in arts-based community development, being able to do it well, and to know whether we have achieved the intentions of our work, and how, are important fundamentals to the work.

The continual education of various stakeholders in the ecosystem, and ongoing evaluation of initiatives and programmes are no less than ethical concerns and contribute to the quality of outcomes, as well as the resources that will be made available for the sustainability of the work.

Providing training opportunities for artists, community workers, educators, healthcare workers, policy makers etc. is therefore important, as well as creating opportunities for peer support and education. Eventually, a school or institute such as the Community Arts Training Institute in St. Louis would be relevant in educating those new to the field, as well as providing ongoing education.

As well, it is important to locate or develop evaluation tools and methodologies for the various programmes and initiatives. This would involve research, including participatory action research. The importance of evaluating one's work and being able to articulate with more specificity the outcomes of the arts would also need to be instilled in artists, and would need to be intentionally incorporated into arts-based community development work.

(Above) Ngiam Su-Lin, co-writer of this report, fully immersing herself in the experience of the convening

Non-Traditional Models of Funding

At the convening, the lack of resources to do arts-based community development work was a common refrain, and there is recognition of the limitation of traditional grant methods to sustain work in particular communities and spaces.

It is relevant and necessary to explore alternative business models for sustainable arts-based community development work, even in Singapore.

As such, it would be wise to tap into resources in the ecosystem (public private people sector) to find innovative ways to structure long term funding. Some examples would be:

- networked fundraising (crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter)
- approaching marketing departments of companies rather than foundations and government funding
- asset building for artists
- artists as entrepreneurs

In particular, the idea of entrepreneurship is an interesting proposition. If entrepreneurship is defined as the act of shifting resources into areas of higher yield, the challenge is in creating a fit between investor values and community needs.

Seen in this way, whether or not an entity is for profit or non-profit becomes secondary.

The focus shifts towards the pursuit of alignment of interests which then unlocks the flow of resources to create maximum social value.

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