COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CREATIVE DISTRICTS

Maryo Gard Ewell

In thinking about writing a short paper on the topic of community engagement and the arts, I googled community + engagement + arts and got 47,700,000 hits on March 26, 2016. It is *the* topic *du jour*, it would seem, and it's a fascinating one. Any artist or arts organization may wish to learn as much as possible on the topic, for it could be a key to the future of the arts in America.

This very short paper cannot be a review of the community engagement literature! But it can suggest why understanding and practicing community engagement can be important to Colorado's Creative Districts.

Let's turn first to the language of HB11-1031, the legislation that birthed the Colorado Creative Districts program. Here are some phrases and sentences from the Act:

- "The arts and culture transcend boundaries of race, age, gender, language, and social status"
- Creative Districts "enhance the economic and civic capital of the community…"
- They "are a highly adaptable economic development tool that is able to take a community's unique conditions, assets, needs, and opportunities into account…"
- They "establish marketable tourism assets that highlight the distinct identity of communities"
- They "provide a focal point for celebrating and strengthening a community's unique cultural identity, providing communities with opportunities to highlight existing cultural amenities as well as mechanisms to recruit and establish new artists, creative industries, and organizations."
- They contribute "to the development of healthy communities across the state…"

In short, the overall idea of a Creative District is bigger than the well-being of an arts organization or even a collection of arts organizations, or the securing of a market for an artist's work. It's about the collective health of a place – a health that incorporates the transcending of boundaries, the building of civic as well as economic capital, the attracting of visitors in search of authentic experiences, the communication and celebration of unique identity.

This idea has been gaining traction over the past decades, and now, perhaps, its time has come.

Clayton Lord, citing a historian of community development, suggests that it was the War on Poverty of the 1960's that "was a watershed moment in how governments at all levels interacted with the communities they were trying to help, shifting from a dictatorial approach to a collaborative one, and thereby opening the door for the transition of community-based art to arts—based community activation."[1]

In 1969, Robert E. Gard's Office of Community Arts Development at the University of Wisconsin published *The Arts in the Small Community,* suggesting that community arts councils could

[1] Clayton Lord, "Arts and America 1780-2015," in Clayton Lord, editor, *Arts and America: Arts, Culture and the Future of America's Communities,"* Americans for the Arts, 2015, p. 21-22.

meet broad community needs such as environmental preservation or economic development – while they helped to grow the arts. The concluding words of that book, "If you try, you can indeed alter the face and the heart of America," made it clear that, in his mind, community arts development was also about community growth and change.[2]

In 1999, Bill Moskin and Jill Jackson conducted a study for the Packard Foundation and identified a group of arts organizations that were stable and successful in a new way: "The 'alternative model' organizations work to provide a forum for community expression, and balance excellence with meaningful community participation. They address issues of cultural, regional and community identity and work to develop strategic collaborations with diverse organizations."[3]

In 2006, Tom Borrup, in his *Creative Community Builder's Handbook,* said that creative community building – "building and rebuilding the social, civic, physical, economic and spiritual fabrics of communities….engages the cultural and creative energies inherent in every person and every place."[4] He distilled the research behind this statement – which was considerable (and which has grown exponentially since then).

In 2010, Richard Evans of EMC Arts gave a speech in Denver, pointing out the evolving role of arts organizations in communities. Where before, arts organizations may have been founded in the vision of one or two leaders, now creative organizations are often the synthesis of visions of many. Where before, art was offered *to* people, now everywhere art-making is also *with and of* people, and the line between artist and audience is blurring, and it's appropriate to explore whether the community is engaged in the process of art-making - planning, curating, evaluating – as it also is engaged with the product.[5]

In 2015 the National Endowment for the Arts published *Beyond the Building: Performing Arts and Transforming Place.* One key finding of the gathering from which this paper was drawn was: "An organization must interact with and understand its community in order to know at which community development table it should sit. The authenticity of relationships between the organization and its community, and between the organization doing the work and the funders, are both very important. The conversation on authenticity frequently revolved around the work of Roberto Bedoya, emphasizing his push for the work to have an authentic relationship with the history and people of a place—what he calls 'placekeeping.'"[6]

Another key finding was: "Creative placemaking is about helping people learn about social and political issues, health and nutrition, environmental concerns and more; helping people take ownership of the special place in which they live, in order to make it more vital and ever more livable; and helping people understand their collective responsibility for fighting injustice in their place, as well as what it means to exercise their citizenship".[7]

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[2] Robert E. Gard, Ralph Kohlhoff, Michael Warlum, Kenneth Friou and Pauline Temkin, *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan,* University of Wisconsin Extension, 1969, p 98.
[3] Bill Moskin and Jill Jackson, "From Stability to Flexibility: Relevance, Excellence and Cultural Participation," Americans for the Arts Monograph, June 1999, p. 3.
[4] Tom Borrup, *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook: How To Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Arts & Culture,* Fieldstone Alliance, 2006, p. xv.
[5] The author was in the audience for this talk; these points are from her notes.
[6] Jenna Moran, Jason Schupbach, Courtney Spearman, and Jennifer Reut, "Beyond the Building: Performing Arts and Transforming Place," National Endowment for the Arts, May 2015, p. 6.
[7] Moran et al, p. 8.

In short, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy's famous statement, more and more artists and creative organizations have been saying, "Ask not what my community can do for me; ask rather, what can I do for my community?" Given the dramatic demographic shifts happening in the United States, thought-leaders like Laura Zabel of Springboard for the Arts in the Twin Cities say this:

> "Art gives us a place to start.
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> "Art gives us something in common.
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> "Art helps us tell a new story.
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> "The sharing of stories about ourselves, our differences, and our similarities is perhaps the most important challenge and opportunity of the next ten years. Artists have a vital role to play in helping to shape these narratives. Art can be the missing ingredient to build elusive, evermore necessary connections between disparate people.
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> "With this powerful possibility comes responsibility. We must look outside the boundaries of our own work, sector, and comfort zone. The future will require arts organizations and artists to be one part of a whole set of community needs, working together to create healthy, safe and vibrant environments; this is not work that can be done alone, on a pedestal, or in a silo.
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> "The arts sector must listen to the community around it, partner deeply and intentionally across sectors and movements, and align its interest boldly with values of equity, justice and prosperity for all. It is time to fulfill our promise and responsibility as artists and as change agents: to help people see and understand each other in new ways, connect their common humanity, and to tell the story of a bright and prosperous future available to all." [8]

The point is: a Creative District could be a vital – maybe even essential – force in building a society in which the promise of democracy becomes increasingly real.

How? By inviting its broad community to participate. It makes sense for so many reasons.

Perhaps it's because the Creative District leaders share a conviction that the community is not just the audience, but that each individual who lives in a place, works in that place, owns property in that place, should have an opportunity to shape that place. That's the community development imperative.

There's a social imperative. As the demographics of American communities are changing dramatically, people need to understand the perspectives of groups different from their own. Social cohesion in neighborhoods and towns will depend upon this, more and more, and what better way to come to know and understand "the other" than within a creative framework?

And there's the economic imperative. Research suggests (googling tourism + cultural + authenticity brings 129,000 hits) that visitors are hungry for authentic experiences. This refers not only to being able to purchase craft beers or handmade items made in a place, but also to

[8] Laura Zabel,"Arts and Inter-Community Connection" in *Arts & America*, p. 48.

experience the stories and histories that have built that place as the unique entity that it is, with its own architecture, mix of peoples, and way of getting things done.

And there's a practical imperative, too: organizations must evolve, or die. So, too must Creative Districts. If the broad community is truly let in to shaping the District, it's more likely to have a life beyond its visionary founders and to change as needed as new individuals, maybe even new populations, come to the area, and as its economic and social needs evolve.

A slogan for this kind of thinking might be "With, not for." "With" is a word that's about "us," about collaboration. "For" connotes the old idea of "outreach."

How to get to "with?" It starts with an attitude, not with a set of techniques. Does the core group of a Creative District truly believe that everyone – resident, property owner, worker – should have a voice? Without this attitude, subsequent community-building activities will be shallow.

It requires learning who is in the community now: the different cultural groups. Age groups. Economic groups. Long-time residents and brand-new residents. Full-time residents and part-time residents. Business owners and employees. Property owners and renters. Transients like students. Visitors.

How to do that? People tend to understand a community in terms of what and who they already know. It's essential to also learn what they don't know. An African-American community development student residing in a small town in Maine, wanting to know her community better, deliberately took a different route home from work each night for two weeks. Only two streets away from where she lived – in a block of bars and businesses that she assumed did not want people "like her" – she discovered a small but thriving African-American music scene and a poetry open mic night that attracted people of many cultures and age groups. "I've lived there five years, and I didn't know."

There are so many ways to learn. Look at the census of course, and consult the planning department of the municipality. But also, talk to school administrators and the English-as-second-language teachers about who's in their classrooms. Look at as many maps as possible to learn where people live, where open space is, what transportation patterns are. Walk routes – including alleys! – that you don't typically walk, looking at bulletin boards or at posters in store windows you don't typically notice. Browse shops you don't shop at, and talk to the employees and other customers there. Attend a church you don't typically attend and talk to people at the coffee hour afterwards. Attend public meetings you wouldn't ordinarily attend, and see if you can be a guest at private meetings. Look, listen, learn.

Simply putting out a poster saying "Public meeting! Everyone welcome!" is not community engagement. How often have we all done this, failing to attract "them," and concluding that "they" aren't interested! With some idea of who is in the Creative District, the literally endless process of getting acquainted and trust-building begins. What are the aspirations and concerns of the different groups of people? In central Illinois, the McLean County Arts Council hired a community organizer whose first language was Spanish. His job description was to spend as much time as possible with the increasingly large population of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the community, visiting their homes, helping tend children, joining the church that most attended. As people came to know and trust him, they became increasingly aware of the arts council, too, especially when he began bringing a colleague or two with him. For groups who may not now participate, the invitation to participate, to collaborate, must come from a trusted

person. In this case, it might be the staff member of that Arts Council. In other cases, the Arts Council might work collaboratively from the start with a known entity in a community – with a church, for instance, or with a cultural business that is frequented by a group that typically does not participate – and the invitation to participate might, then, be from the pastor or the business owner – not from the Arts Council.

A Creative District group must ever and always check in on its attitudes. At a conference many years ago, Ruby Lerner, now President/Executive Director of Creative Capital, said that "cultural diversity" is often used as a code for "finding people who don't look like me, but who do think like me and share my values. And if we truly value cultural diversity, we must also be prepared to realize that the participation of new people who are not like me may change the very nature of the organization, and we must welcome that."[9]

The author remembers being on an arts board years ago, whose by-laws made provision for a high school board member. During one year, a remarkable young woman was on the board, co-chairing committees, donating part of her allowance, and putting up posters for the arts events at her high school. Reflecting back to that time, we realize we had done exactly what Ruby Lerner had described – we wanted her to be "like us," just younger – and we tacitly believed that her presence on the board would draw high school participants. Which, of course, did not happen. We lost a great opportunity. Imagine what might have happened had she not been the token student on the board … had she been given some budget and authority to develop the arts among her peers in new and relevant ways under the rubric of the arts organization.

So who is trusted? Who extends the invitation to participate? What's the location of gatherings? Who leads the gatherings? In what language? Who has the power – or is power truly shared?

And does the District group recognize that this is not a one-shot meeting, one-shot event, but rather the start of a process that must last forever, a lifetime commitment?

It may well be that a vital early step in building community trust is one in which the District founding organizers, are evidently meeting a visible, broadly shared community need. In Denver's Art District on Santa Fe, many alleys were dark, forbidding places, full of broken glass and overflowing dumpsters. A broad campaign to light the alleys, literally clean them up, beautify them with paint-a-thons of the dumpsters and start holding mini-arts-events in the alleys enabled the Creative District's organizers to be seen as meeting a safety need. Similarly, the District is working with the City traffic administration to install additional traffic lights, making it safer for children to cross a busy artery on their way to school.

Cultural celebrations are, of course, one good way for groups to showcase their histories and traditions. But tasting someone's food, seeing someone's dance, is but an icebreaker. What comes next? A storysharing circle could be another excellent first step, in which culture-bearers, historians or elders from different groups share their history of, and knowledge of, a place – again realizing this to be a first step. In Ridgway's Creative District, a storytelling day, facilitated by a folklorist, led to a community event in which a descendant of Chief Ouray, who lived in the area, led a bicycle history ride through the county, showing places important to the history of the Ute people in the area. Or – now that apps can be so easily designed for mobile phone users – what about the creation of a mobile phone-based walking tour of the District, in

[9] In the author's notes from Ruby Lerner's presentation at an Americans for the Arts conference, probably in the late 1970's.

which the visitor can click on images, videos and audio stories of a given address, learning about its many layers of history through time?

Or perhaps a step along the way is a shared experience where truly everyone participates and "no one is more equal than others." Here's a story from the Greeley Creative District:

"In 2015 Greeley attempted to break a Guinness World Record for the longest chalk pavement art. The 16-member organizing committee of the Great Greeley Chalk-A-Lot solicited sponsors to pay for chalk and related materials, did months of promotion and organized the logistics, and engaged 125 volunteers who managed event elements the day of. Over 3,600 community residents showed up to take pART in this ambitious community art goal and drew amazing pictures as individuals, couples, families, girl scout troops, grandparents, office teams.....you name it. Per the Guinness rules the picture had to have a common theme, which we selected as "Celebrating Nature". To be considered for the world record the drawing had to be 6'6" wide and at least 3.48 miles long. I had our City engineers lay out a winding route that we could contain within the largest parking lots around on the University of Northern Colorado campus. We consumed the equivalent of 76,000 sticks of chalk over a 10-hour period with a steady stream of every type of community resident in attendance. We took pictures and videos, surveyed our final finished drawing, and submitted all the documentation to Guinness. And, we did it! Greeley now holds the title as the world record holder for longest chalk pavement!" http://greeleygov.com/government/ceo/chalk-a-lot[10]

Exciting as this was, Greeley also knows that this one shared experience is but a single step in engaging the broad community in its Creative District. The great philosopher of the 1940's, Baker Brownell (who, by the way, introduced collaborative drama-making into the community development process), distinguished between two types of community solidarity. "Organic" solidarity is the long-term goal, a "society right with nuclear groups where the human being in his community will be of prior concern. Instead of the usual…smearing over with color and perfume the disorder within human life, there will be true reorientation. Educational, religious, artistic and technological interests will be redirected in behalf of the human community."[11] He contrasts this with "agglutinative solidarity" – "the kind of coherence found among members of an anonymous public."[12] This is the emotional, often dramatic, but temporary, bonding of fans at a football game or even the creative – but momentary – shared "high" on the night of an art walk. This is easy to achieve. Organic solidarity is not. It begins with an attitude and a vision, and has no ending.

As people build trust and respect for "people not like me" – whether this refers to culture, age, economic situation – the "social capital" of the community or neighborhood is strengthened. In the 19th century, Proust said, in translation, "Only through art can we get outside of ourselves and know another's view of the universe."[13] More recently, demographer Manuel Pastor is quoted as saying that culture is a unique tool for "making the 'other' human."[14] "Communities that know how to bridge their differences are not only healthier, individually and collectively, but they are also able to affect policy change as advocates on their own behalf…particularly when

[10] Becky Safarik, Greeley Assistant City Manager, e mail to the author, March 24, 2016.
[11] Baker Brownell, *The Human Community: Its Philosophy and Practice for a Time of Crisis,* Harper & Brothers, 1950, p. 110-111.
[12] Brownell, p. 107.
[13] Marcel Proust, *Le Temps Retrouve´,* [The Past Recaptured], *1927.*
[14] Manual Pastor, quoted in Zabel, p. 40.

the community's network includes socioeconomic and demographic diversity."[15] So the practical side – the community will be able to attract more resources to develop further.

As people share their stories and their histories, and as the Creative District collectively values these histories, more visitors are attracted to experience that unique place; long-time residents are likely to remain, for it is still their place; and new people are likely to be attracted to live there, for Richard Florida recognizes tolerance and diversity as hallmarks of places where the "creative class" wants to live.[16] The mix is alive, vibrant; it is not "merely cool."

And as all people are broadly welcomed in the leadership of the Creative District, it is more likely to outlast its founding visionaries, and to remain evolutionary, and relevant, for the times as they change.

Whether, then, for reasons of a moral need to create social capital, or a commitment to meaningful economic development, or a practical desire to attract resources and create the likelihood that the Creative District will evolve and last over time, community engagement is a vital key to Creative District health.

For the stakes are high. "The arts help transform American communities and the result can be a better child, a better town, a better nation, and perhaps a better world."[17]

[15] Melanie Ferris, quoted in Zabel, p. 40.
[16] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life,* Basic Books, 2002.
[17] Robert Lynch, in Lord, p. xiv.