

Engaging Your Community in the Creative District Planning Process: The World Cafe

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Colorado Creative Districts Standards include “community buy-in.” In fact, it is one third of the reviewers’ score when they review a community’s application for certification. It is CCI’s conviction that those Creative Districts that are supported by the the people of the community are more likely to be sustainable over time, for many reasons.

“The people of the community” are more than artists or the business or government people that already support the Creative District activity. It’s important to engage people who may not be the “usual suspects.” Consider the person who lives in an apartment above a store and doesn’t think of herself as an arts-lover, the new immigrant, the owner of a barbershop, the legacy resident whose family has lived there for several generations: can the Creative District engage them?

“Engage” is a word that means much more than hoping that community members attend events or translating your brochure into Spanish. It means actually offering to people a say in the planning of the District. It may mean a chance for them to serve on an Advisory Committee or the District board. It means that they feel comfortable walking in to the office of the Creative District coordinator and proposing to co-sponsor an event that celebrates a certain culture or a significant historical event. There’s an adage that says, “If you want support, ask for advice.” How can a Creative turn this adage into a strong reality?

A facilitation tool that puts the community at the center of the Creative District planning process is The World Café. The World Café process is an engagement tool that prompts discussion that is community-based and encourages discussion with people of diverse viewpoints and cultural histories. By understanding the key facilitation steps of The World Café process, District leadership can have access to a discussion tool that’s been used to solve social and cultural problems around the world.

The World Café has been used by Creative Districts for vision and project planning, to solve issues of connectivity, and for design charrettes. This paper will draw on examples used successfully by Creative Districts; it can be used by any Creative District in communities large and small. Since Creative District issues are not typically contentious, the World Café sessions are generally easy to facilitate and can be done without using an outside consultant. The organizers will spend most of their time preparing the context questions and inviting a diverse mix of participants to ensure a true voice of the community.

World Café is a community facilitation tool, sometimes referred to as a “community conversation,” that was developed in 1995 by community activists in Palo Alto, California and refined in settings around the world. The World Café is now a non-profit organization that provides access to facilitation tools through their website, www.theworldcafe.org, and their services can be contracted for large community projects. More details about the World Café can be found at the website and should be used in conjunction with the examples in this paper

that are tailored towards the issues and concerns commonly expressed by a Creative District. The World Café asks the following from users, "You are welcome to use the term "World Café" to describe an event you are convening (e.g., "A Main Street USA World Café"). If you do this, you must acknowledge the World Café Community Foundation as the source of the name and method by including a link to our website: <http://www.theworldcafe.com>."

Very simplified, a World Café session begins with the invitation of a diverse group of community members to participate in a planning session that lasts no longer than an hour and a half. Three questions have been devised. There are tables in the room, each with a recorder. At a given table, one of these questions is discussed by a small group for a short period of time. At the end of the time, participants move to another table where they discuss the second question. The rotation is repeated one final time. There are different possible ways of ending the session, described below.

This method permits deeper discussion of important topics; it invites depth of thinking, where other techniques, such as Nominal Group techniques, invite breadth of thinking. Both are appropriate – but at different times in the life cycle of a Creative District.

A full explanation and details of the World Café process can be found at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>. Below is a summary list of some key elements with details important to the Creative Districts:

- The setting of the session is very important. A comfortable facility must be selected that accommodates participants sitting at round tables holding 6-8 people. Placed on the tables are large sheets of paper and colored markers. Additionally, for Creative District activities, it is useful to include fun objects that can be manipulated with the hands, played with, and perhaps turned into art. This hand-to-brain connection gets participants in a creative frame of mind, but is not distracting and typically does not need to be explained to the group.
- There is no need for a visual presentation at the session and the time dedicated to the facilitator speaking should be very limited. This session is about what the community has to say, not what the facilitator wants them to hear! A microphone can be useful for the facilitator.
- The facilitator opens the session with a brief introduction that explains why people are present and describes the process (this should take 5-10 minutes). The participants are presented with one question at a time by the facilitator and each is discussed for twenty minutes. After each twenty minute discussion, the table participants move to a new table location and mix with folks they have not previously participated with. Three questions are prepared and presented.
- During each of the three discussion periods there is a recorder who writes the group's ideas on the table papers. This person is the only one to remain at the same table through each session. These recorders can volunteer on the spot and do not need to be selected in advance.
- When the session is over, the facilitator, who is listening in on the conversations, makes some observations to the group and informs people that there will be online summary and

follow up...which happens as quickly as possible after the recorders have dovetailed their notes.



This is an example of a successful facility arrangement. Notice the paper tablecloths for writing, colored pens, plus pipe-cleaners and play dough for a finger activity.

The World Café includes a description of seven design principles that make the community discussion a success, these can be found at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/principles.html>. For the purposes of Creative District development and use, the following insights into the design principles gives more detail and specifics to be successful.

- 1) The World Café process is started by identifying the need or problem to be solved. The World Café is a community based “conversation” which produces results that are reflective of your community’s needs. The Creative Districts have used this process for vision planning, creating boundaries for a district, identifying needs and support, creating an artist work/live project, and identifying ways to connect arts to the community. It may be helpful to refer to some of the resources that CCI has provided, like *Creative Community Builders*, and the *Soul of Pueblo*, to understand the possibilities available for community discussion and for community solutions.
- 2) Choose a space for the public discussion that is comfortable, provides enough room, and has good accoustics. In “art audience” terms, you want a space that “reduces barriers to participation” so that the diverse invited participants feel comfortable and welcome. It’s important to consider how your space is perceived by youth, disabled, people of color, immigrants and other under-served populations. These are the participants that are most valuable in your community conversation because they are rarely asked to contribute their opinions. Initial attention to location and the diversity of invited participants will allow you the

most success in having your outcomes reflect the needs of the entire community, and will contribute to more diverse and interesting engagement in the Creative District.

- 3) The facilitator will prepare three questions for one World Café session. The table groups will spend about 20 minutes discussing and creating ideas for each question. Fortunately, organizers don't have to have the answers to begin a World Café; they simply set the "stage" with questions that are meaningful and make progress towards an outcome that they can use to develop action steps as your solution.

In the first World Café that was used for the overall vision planning and strategy of the Pueblo Creative Corridor, the questions that were used were:

- What does an Art District in Pueblo need to have?
- When you imagine yourself in an Art District, what are the sensory elements that make you know you have "arrived?" Think in terms of your five senses: What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel?
- Using the large map in front of you, draw a line, create a border, that you feel represents an arts district in Pueblo with a density of creative businesses and events. This vision, created by the community, is used for subsequent planning of programs, incentives, and infrastructure in the Corridor.



Large maps of downtown Pueblo were printed for each table discussion so that everyone could be involved in the Creative District boundary-making process. The process of sharing and listening created a cohesive community vision.

The facilitators in Pueblo were looking for direction and vision for the Arts District—and especially engaging the community in the process of creating the boundary around the Creative District that the state application requires. It was important to the facilitators that the community create this line rather than the Creative District administrators. The result was that the community chose the established footprint of the First Friday Art Walk. This

boundary made sense to everyone and even though there was heavy lobbying from theaters, restaurants, and studios that lay just a block outside of the line, they were satisfied with the process and accepting of the outcome.

When the World Café was used in Greeley Creative District (GCD) to tackle issues of connectivity, leaders developed a broad definition of connectivity, using it to refer to physical space, cultural diversity, technology, and communication. The questions presented at the Greeley planning session were,

- What types of things need to be connected? Community, History, Cultural, Food Connections? Create a list to identify these factors, these are current connections and connections that you wish to make
 - What does the Greeley Creative District “look, smell, sound, feel, taste” like when it’s connected? Create your dream picture of your community’s connection to GCD, and connection’s throughout the GCD
 - What steps could the community take to create the connectivity you hope for? What do you need to have, or do to be connected?
- 4) During the table conversations, it’s important for the facilitators, table recorders, and participants to make sure that everyone is getting a chance to express their opinions. There may be some very passionate participants who tend to dominate a conversation, as well as those who are new to the process and may feel intimidated. The facilitator should convey the need to self-monitor in the opening statements, but also monitor the room and tables to help with the flow of conversation from all participants. The World Café process minimizes this potential problem because every 20 minutes table participants change and the dynamics of a conversation change.
 - 5) The exciting element of the World Café is that the facilitators can orchestrate the invitations to include many viewpoints and voices to create the most diverse perspectives and solutions. Once present at the World Café, the process of moving from table to table allows for the evolution of ideas from the abstract to the practical. For the purposes of the Creative Districts, the participants are generally motivated by the same positive viewpoint and the diversity of viewpoints culminates in a rich tapestry of exciting solutions.
 - 6) As the participants move from one table to another it’s helpful for the recorder to share some of the ideas that were expressed previously and to listen to ideas that are developing, can be connected, or that can expand the conversation. This is where participants discover “Aha!” moments and solutions you hadn’t anticipated. One exciting moment at the Pueblo World Café was a conversation that developed about Sunday activities. It was the first time that community members and small business owners had the opportunity to explore the difficulties that surround Sunday activities and, most importantly, this provided the opportunity to listen to another viewpoint.
 - 7) Ending the World Café with a wrap-up of essential ideas is confirming to the participants. The World Café site uses graphic recording of some key solutions or observations from the session. This can be useful, but can take more time than has been allotted. Instead, facilitators can find more use in allowing the participants to vote individually, or rank in groups the most important discussion items. This can be done at the tables in the last groups, without moving. Or the final lists can be taped to a wall and participants can use

colored dots to place beside the elements that they consider to be the most important. This allows facilitators to take away a great selection of ideas but prioritize those that are the most important to the community. Additionally, the Creative District administrators can use resources like technical support and money more strategically.



Participants using the final minutes of a design charrette to vote, with colored dots, for their favorite ideas of an art-centric work/live development. These results were used by architects to create a design schematic that includes the community vision.

When these World Café sessions are complete the participants express a dedication to your project and are genuine supporters of your efforts. Many participants have never been included in a community planning process, feel very fulfilled, and have a deep sense of gratitude towards the organizers. It then becomes the responsibility of the Creative District administrators or organizers of the World Café to continue communications, stay faithful to the community vision, and show progress with the project. Of course, through the World Café process, what you've created is a diverse grassroots group of advocates and volunteers to propel your Creative District to achieve meaningful community development.

Susan Fries, MBA, Pueblo Arts Alliance Executive Director, has worked tirelessly to promote and develop the arts in Pueblo. As the Executive Director of the Pueblo Arts Alliance and the Pueblo Creative Corridor, Fries has guided, informed and worked intimately with a variety of local non-profits, for profit business, and local and state government to advance the creative industries as an economic development model. She has been on the forefront of connecting the dots between local arts programs and positive economic impact.