Creative Placemaking: Beyond the Bandwagon
A workshop for the 2012 Midwest Arts Conference

Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, Principal
612.709.0232
gadwa@metrisarts.com
www.metrisarts.com

FRAMEWORK: MOVING FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY

What’s your idea?
• CP strategies employed
• Where?
• Desired outcomes

Why you/your organization?
• Does it advance mission (org) or employ your passions, skills, talents, interests (artists)

Coalition Building
• Initiator w/ vision & drive? Need to augment skills?
• Partners? Who might champion?
  ○ Why them? Does it advance core interests/mission of institution/constituents?
  ○ If not, how would the project need to shift to do so?

Partner logistics
• Trust? Experience?
• Roles and responsibilities?

Equity issues
• Race, income, mobility, age, gender—will you work w/ pluralistic communities? How? Might project exacerbate disparities?

Local assets/distinctiveness employed?

Role of art/artists

Funding
• Scaling project to available resources

Communication
• How will you tell your story?

Ideas for measuring outcomes/success
CREATIVE PLACEMAKING RESOURCES

National Funders:
The National Endowment for the Arts (Our Town): http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/OurTown
ArtPlace: http://www.artplaceamerica.org

Influential Reports

How To Resources

Critical Commentary:
Funders, arts administrators, and other people trying their hand at creative placemaking (artists and more unlikely suspects) find their way to me. Because I coauthored *Creative Placemaking*, the 2010 white paper for the NEA’s Mayors’ Institute on City Design, I’m an authority, yet folks get through to me with a cold call or e-mail, instead of waiting for an announced webinar from the National Endowment for the Arts or ArtPlace or trying to read between the lines of application guidelines.

Many of their questions are the same. I get asked, “What is creative placemaking, really?” Grantmakers want to know how they can best support it and the most effective creative placemaking strategies. Prospective creative placemakers want to know who across the country has tried or is attempting work similar to theirs and the lessons they’ve learned. Across the board, people want to know how to substantiate and quantify impact. And then there are the wary — longtime arts advocates who wonder if this is just the *nom du jour* for the creative class/economy frame, or if we’re dangerously putting too many eggs in one basket.

Nowhere is this debate more heated than in Connecticut, where six existing, publically funded arts programs will be consolidated and/or eliminated to explicitly support creative placemaking. So far, Connecticut appears unique among states, although many have long supported recognizable placemaking objectives through community arts development or creative economy grant programs. In Connecticut, total available funding will nearly double to $3.1 million, with the hope that the 2013 state legislature will again increase funding by several multiples on the grounds that it isn’t just funding art but greater economic stimulation. The pie is increasing, but artists and arts and cultural organizations used to getting a slice are being weaned off sources of general operating support and encouraged to retool into a more competitively awarded creative placemaking frame.

**So, How Did We Get Here?**

The story begins in 2009 with the arrival of Rocco Landesman as the NEA’s new chairman. A leading Broadway producer, Landesman immediately started doing what producers do so well — cobbling together resources. He met with the heads of other, better-funded federal agencies to pound the table about how the arts can catalyze strategic, cross-sector partnerships and advance missions in education, health and human services, housing, rural development, and transportation. He and his savvy senior deputy, Joan Shigekawa, envisioned a new initiative. They drew inspiration from the Social Impact of the Arts Project (University of Pennsylvania), the Arts and Cultural Indicators Project (Urban Institute), and the Reinvestment Fund’s “creativity and neighborhood development” community investment strategies. Working through the Mayors’ Institute on City Design (an NEA leadership initiative in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors and the American Architectural Foundation), they tapped Ann Markusen — economist, urban planning professor, and my mentor and frequent collaborator — to research a white paper to underpin their new initiative. The result, *Creative Placemaking*, not only provided the foundation for the new NEA grant program, Our Town, it also helped spark the creation of the ArtPlace funding consortium.
ArtPlace is remarkable both for the sizable amount of the dollars invested and for who is at the table. Between 2011 and 2012, ArtPlace will invest $26.9 million in creative placemaking initiatives across the country. Eleven top national foundations, including Ford, Knight, and Rockefeller, comprise the consortium. Six major financial institutions have capitalized a $12 million loan fund. Federal agencies participate as strategic (nonfinancial) partners, not just the NEA but also such unlikely suspects as the Departments of Agriculture and Transportation. With the leadership of Carol Coletta, former CEO of CEOs for Cities, ArtPlace pursues a creative placemaking strategy centered on the still somewhat fuzzy concept of vibrancy and sees mayors and other civic leaders as a key audience for its work.

Functioning as parallel efforts, in communication but on separate tracks, ArtPlace and the NEA’s Our Town have risen to the top as the main funders and policy shapers of the burgeoning creative placemaking field. However, smaller or regional private foundations are paying keen attention. The Educational Foundation for America and Connecticut’s Fairfield County Community Foundation have used or are exploring how to use their grantmaking to support creative placemaking. The William Penn Foundation, which recently joined the ArtPlace consortium, expects that creative placemaking will be a significant area of emphasis under its new ten-year strategic plan, to be launched this summer.

**But What Is Creative Placemaking, Really?**

As Ann Markusen and I point out in our white paper, creative placemaking has been happening in neighborhoods, towns, and cities for decades. Scholars and practitioners can correctly link it to the cultural development movement and find overlap with creative economy concepts. The work may not be new, but the frame, interest, and available resources are and are rapidly evolving.

Here is the initial creative placemaking definition that Ann Markusen and I developed and that the NEA still uses:

> In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.

Our definition describes the “what” and “how” of creative placemaking: place, strategic action by cross-sector partners, a core of arts and cultural activities. It also speaks to outcomes, especially physical impacts. We include benefits to businesses and highlight intrinsic benefits of arts and culture, but our framing transcends both traditional economic impact arguments based on dollars spent and multiplier effects and a narrow art-for-art’s-sake purview.

On its website, ArtPlace uses different language to talk about creative placemaking:

> ArtPlace believes that art, culture and creativity expressed powerfully through place can create vibrant communities, thus increasing the desire and the economic opportunity for people to thrive in place. It is all about the local.
Explicitly trying to resist too narrow a definition, Carol Coletta strategically focuses on ArtPlace’s desired outcome of creative placemaking — vibrancy — as opposed to dictating the “how.” She strongly believes that artists are in the best position to propose innovative ideas, tailored to their locality. ArtPlace defines vibrancy as characterizing “places with an unusual scale and intensity of specific kinds of human interaction.” Although what constitutes vibrancy is not yet clear, this June ArtPlace plans to roll out specific metrics it will use to quantify vibrancy. It views vibrancy as a proxy for quality of place, which helps develop, attract, and retain talent.

Kip Bergstrom of the newly created Connecticut Office of the Arts agrees. His personal creative placemaking soapbox is that “great art makes great places. Great places attract great talent. Great talent creates great jobs.” The state’s unwieldy official definition may stem from efforts to placate the arts old guard:

Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public and private space(s) and the people who use them, that leverages the assets of the creative sector — artists, arts and cultural organizations, arts-related business — along with residents, schools, businesses and local governments, to improve the community’s economic conditions and quality of life. It creates artistic communities with a rich variety of participants and events involving large cultural institutions, small emerging organizations with fresh ideas, community and educational organizations, and artists who flourish in a supportive environment.

Longtime nonprofit developers of art spaces, Artspace and Artscape (based in Minneapolis and Toronto, respectively) offer their own definitions, from Artspace’s short and sweet “the leveraging of cultural assets to strengthen the social fabric of a community,” to Artscape’s

Creative placemaking is an evolving field of practice that intentionally leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community’s interest while driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that also builds character and quality of place.

Kudos to Artscape for hitting the nail on the head with “evolving field of practice”! The answer to the question “What is creative placemaking, really?” is that funders and practitioners are making it up in real time. We’ve entered an exciting period of experimentation, which makes sharing information absolutely critical. Some of the questions I hear are these: Is funding intended to support only new initiatives, or will there be long-term investments or continued support? Is this work really intended for low-income/minority urban neighborhoods or could it also be effective in the suburbs, a city’s central business district, or a rural community? Ann Markusen and I tried to paint an expansive frame for creative placemaking — our case study examples aren’t just using arts activities or artists to animate vacant buildings. We also include workforce development and art in health and transportation. We illustrate a diversity of options by highlighting locales ranging from tiny Arnaudville, Louisiana, to Buffalo, New York, and San José, California. But the funders that bring the real resources to bear emphasize different aspects and strategies.

The Pitfalls and Potential of “Prove It”
Hand in glove with the new resources and opportunities for creative placemaking is demand to substantiate return on investment. Over the next few months both the NEA and ArtPlace will share
current thinking on how to measure and track change from creative placemaking. (An archive of the NEA's April 12 webinar on this topic, “Our Town Indicators,” is available at www.arts.gov/podweb/webinars.html.) ArtPlace has announced a June rollout for its vibrancy indicators system. Although I helped catalyze the growing momentum and impact evaluations are part of my consulting firm’s bread and butter, I see both dangers and opportunities in the amount of import placed on outcomes.

First, I worry about managing expectations. It’s probably unreasonable to expect that a modest, one-year Our Town grant will move the needle, at least quickly. In my work evaluating the impacts of five art spaces in Reno, Seattle, Minneapolis, and St. Paul, the neighborhood transformations and benefits to in-house artists occurred over time horizons of ten to twenty years.

Then there’s the challenge of figuring out what “the needle” is. Because the geographic scale, time horizons, and desired outcomes vary across creative placemaking efforts, one-size-fits-all indicator systems may prove inappropriate. Additionally, quantitative indicators track change on a few key metrics, but they don’t prove causality, establish context, or probe lessons learned. That analysis requires triangulation with qualitative data, but it’s resource intensive to interview an array of community members.

The tensions between self-interest, advocacy, and field building also strain objectivity. If grantees are forthcoming about challenges and botched efforts, they fear future funding will be on the line. As champions of a new policy initiative, the NEA and ArtPlace also face pressures to “spin” impacts in the most positive light. To its credit, in terms of risk tolerance ArtPlace appears to be more in the venture capital camp than most philanthropic funders. Carol Coletta recognizes that some failure is inevitable and feels that the field is best served when we “fail fast and learn fast.” Venture capital funding is patient, however; investors wait for returns on the order of seven years, while playing an active role advising management. How can we strike the right balance between embracing a culture of critical learning, risk tolerance, and patience with the needs of advocacy and judicious investment?

The pressure to demonstrate outcomes could also drive shortsighted or inequitable investment choices. Grantmakers and civic leaders justifiably want to allocate limited resources wisely — the most bang for their buck. But will the need for “quick wins” mean that areas with the most severe challenges (those with great potential but longer-term payoffs) are passed over?

Lastly, what about art? Just because creative placemaking’s outcomes are not limited to intrinsic art impacts does not mean that standards for participation or artistic quality should be abandoned wholesale. Artists and arts and cultural organizations need not be confined to an “input” in a grand theory of change. Creative placemaking evaluations can probe benefits (or even costs) to these stakeholders. As with non-arts outcomes, the desired goals will vary from project to project, but failing to consider arts impacts is like a doctor taking a patient’s temperature but not her pulse.

However, if indicator systems and other evaluative approaches successfully navigate these thorny issues, they could yield tremendous value. First and foremost, they would help advance creative placemaking and its benefits: practitioners and funders could attempt and support future projects empowered by lessons learned; increased visibility would spark even greater interest; and creative placemaking proponents could counter skepticism with (hopefully) objective data on outcomes and impacts, in other communities or their own.
On Winners and Losers
Because of creative placemaking, arts stakeholders are now eligible for new resources, and that momentum appears to be growing. In just two years, the ArtPlace consortium has opened up $26.9 million for creative placemaking. Since the NEA spearheaded a change in thinking, diverse federal agencies are advocating policy shifts for more flexible and holistic approaches to meeting locally identified priorities. In some cases, this means that arts stakeholders are now explicitly eligible to apply for community development dollars, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Sustainable Communities grant program. Local governments are also thinking about arts and cultural activities in new ways. Our Town’s grant application deserves partial credit because it requires a public sector and nonprofit partner (one of which must be arts related); mayors have been besieged with partnership queries from arts constituents. Pushing arts and cultural players to climb out of their silos represents one of creative placemaking’s most important potential benefits, but it remains to be seen to what extent art and cultural leaders will be on equal footing vis-à-vis their collaborating partners. Lastly, even as funding increases, arts and cultural nonprofits that have not historically focused on creative placemaking or have no interest or skills in that area will not be competitive for the expanded pie. If, as in Connecticut, creative placemaking resources are shifted away from traditional arts funding, there will be losers.

My personal view is that creative placemaking is particularly good use of public arts funding (and I say this as an ex-choreographer and dancer). Creative placemaking emphasizes public benefit over private enrichment. Economic arguments couched in terms of vibrant communities resonate more with people than dollar impacts and jobs created. Creative placemaking often “brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired,” but physical and economic revitalization outcomes also appeal to those who don’t agree that the arts’ and culture’s intrinsic value makes them deserving of broad-based support.

Where We Go from Here
The creative placemaking trains have left the station and are barreling down the tracks. Through ArtPlace, funders and partner federal agencies have an unprecedented opportunity to share thinking and advance relatively coordinated policy. As shapers of major policy, the NEA and ArtPlace face an expectation of transparency and field-building opportunities for would-be creative placemakers and other funders. It behooves everyone interested in practicing and supporting creative placemaking to stay closely tuned in to this rapidly evolving discipline. I’m avidly watching developments unfold and will continue to weigh in and shape thinking and priorities, as best I am able.

Anne Gadwa Nicodemus is principal of Metris Arts Consulting, which provides research and analysis to help arts and cultural activities strengthen communities — and vice versa. A choreographer/arts administrator turned urban planner, Nicodemus is a leading voice in arts and community development. With her frequent collaborator, Dr. Ann Markusen, she has authored a number of major reports and journal articles.

Creative Placemaking and the How Art Spaces Matter reports are available for download at metrisarts.com.