

An Arts Funding

What people are saying about

BY MICHAEL FALLON

The evolutionary progression of a trend from insightful idea to mature realization is not always easy to retrace. Our current national movement toward supporting “creative placemaking”—or a multifaceted, art-heavy design and planning process for creating pleasurable, attractive, and interesting city spaces—may have had any number of launching pads: the imagined garden-cities of Ebenezer Howard ca. 1890; the City Beautiful movement of Charles Mulford Robinson in the early 1900s; the community-based urban planning approach of Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch in the early 1960s; the development of the public art concept of placemaking in the 1970s. In order to understand creative placemaking today, however, it may be best to look at two key events of the past decade.

The first direct step toward the development of our current understanding of creative placemaking came with the publication, in 2002, of Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In this book, Florida, then a professor of regional economic development at Carnegie Mellon University, connected the nation’s most economically vibrant places to, essentially, the size and diversity of its pool of “creative workers.” In a time of dot-com billionaires and charismatic e-entrepreneurs, the idea struck a nerve among civic officials around the country. A *New York Times* review published a few months after the book’s publication mentioned that Florida had already been hired to consult with a number of cities—Providence, Rhode Island; Memphis; Indianapolis; Phoenix; and Bellevue, Washington—to attract creatives and entrepreneurs who could transform these places.

revolution

the creative placemaking boom

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—Tim Halbur | ArtPlace



It is tempting to suggest that the next stage of the evolution of creative placemaking came with the spring 2010 publication, by the Mayors' Institute on City Design, of Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa's white paper, "Creative Placemaking," and follow-up developmental work spearheaded by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) director Rocco Landesman. But, according to Jason Schupbach, the NEA's Director of Design, that would be an oversimplification.

"In reality," says Schupbach, this work built on a "pattern in what was happening organically in communities all across this country." Markusen, Gadwa, and Landesman's efforts brought national attention to the fact that places all across America were increasingly using the arts to help shape their social, physical, and economic characters and that funders like The Reinvestment Fund and Knight Foundation were researching and fund-

ing projects that used creative activities to drive civic vibrancy and community attachment. In other words, the seeds planted by Richard Florida had spread like weeds to all cultural corners of the country.

Launch of a Grantmaking Revolution

By 2011, two major new initiatives began throwing significant dollars at creative placemaking projects. The NEA's Our Town (www.nea.gov) announced in July it was distributing \$6.5 million in grant money to 51 projects in 34 states that involved partnerships between arts and design organizations and local governments. These projects were chosen based on their proposed ability to contribute toward the "livability of communities" by transforming them into "lively, beautiful, and sustainable places with the arts at their core."



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Innovation Studio

Following close on the heels of the first Our Town grants, in September 2011 another initiative announced its investment of \$11.5 million to support 34 creative placemaking projects. Called ArtPlace (www.artplaceamerica.org), the project was sparked by the NEA in tandem with Ford Foundation president Luis Ubiñas and a number of other funding partners—including the Bloomberg Philanthropies and the James Irvine, Knight, Kresge, McKnight, Andrew W. Mellon, Rasmuson, Robina, and Rockefeller Foundations—and an array of federal agencies that would act as policy advisors. The projects supported by ArtPlace were selected for their ability to help towns and cities thrive by “strategically integrating artists and arts organizations into key local developments in transportation, housing, community development, job creation and more.”

Today, after two annual rounds of grantmaking, Our Town and ArtPlace have distributed a total \$38.4 million in support of 212 individual projects around the country. While this amount is a drop in the bucket compared to the tens of billions of cumulative dollars that flow through the nation’s arts economy, the buzz around these programs has been widely influential, leading a number of other agencies—such as the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development and several charitable foundations—to investigate establishing their own creative placemaking initiatives. The organizations and artists involved in these projects have been deeply appreciative of the support.

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ning but doing, and of building connections between artists and the community that last,” says Laura Zabel, director of Springboard for the Arts, who helped develop an ArtPlace-funded project called Irrigate, which has created dozens of public art projects along a corridor of St. Paul, Minnesota, during the construction of a new light-rail line. Similar sentiments have been expressed by arts organizations and civic leaders all over the country.

Questions and Concerns from Two Sides

Despite the buzz around creative placemaking, two groups have raised questions and concerns about these programs.

First, many policy makers and researchers are concerned that they lack a feedback loop. “The problem with the grant programs so far,” says Ian David Moss, a researcher at Fractured Atlas, a nonprofit organization that supports artists and arts organizations, “is that there is currently no way to accurately judge their effectiveness. While both Our Town and ArtPlace are in the process of setting up broad indicator systems to track progress, this approach provides few tools for analyzing whether projects work or don’t and glosses over the complexity of how artists fit into economic ecosystems. Because of this, we won’t know when a grant really made a difference in a community or when it just got to ride on the coattails of other changes already taking place.”

Furthermore, the programs have riled some of the key people they were meant to benefit—the creative workers themselves. With its focus on large-scale community outcomes, rather than on creative expression, artists often feel intimidated or diminished by the creative placemaking process. Artists also often find problematic the community interaction necessary in these projects.

“[Artistic] practice within the public sphere comes with inherent risks,” said Sanjit Sethi, co-director of the California College of the Arts’ Center for Art and Public Life, at a recent public panel on placemaking and the role of artists in the community. “Community is a very loaded term, and so are issues like placemaking and collaboration and all of these

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other concepts that seem kind of convenient and fitting but are also incredibly problematic.”

Randy Rollison, program director of Intersection for the Arts’ Innovation Studio, concurred while speaking on the same panel. “The risk is enormous,” said Rollison of a major ArtPlace-funded placemaking project in San Francisco called 5M. “There’s risk in perception. There’s risk in mission drift. The ideas keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and the possibilities seem more and more endless. But the risk is we burn ourselves out on the possibilities.”

Even considering the new possibilities created by these grants, a number of artists worry that a focus on creative placemaking will actually limit their opportunities to do what they do. “There’s a strong undercurrent of skepticism,” says Ian David Moss. “I think the disconnect comes from the fact that whereas funders think that they are going to bring more money into the arts by convincing all sorts of people working in business, community development, and government of the power of art to transform communities, some artists view this as a zero-sum game, with creative placemaking taking away from the already modest amount of money that goes directly to working artists and art for art’s sake.”

Creative Placemaking Moves Forward

Despite the range of concerns, interest in creative placemaking is growing quickly. ArtPlace reports that it received almost

2,200 applications for its second round of creative placemaking grants in 2012 (in the end they offered just 47 grant awards, or just 2 percent of those submitted). “There is a palpable interest today by arts organizations and artists in finding new ways to connect with their communities, and imagine new futures for the neighborhoods in which they live and work,” says Tim Halbur, director of communications for ArtPlace.

The artists who have most embraced creative placemaking are those most interested in leading conversations about how we integrate place, art, and the community. “We as artists, and arts organizations, are the most creative people in the world,” says John Michael Schert, executive director of the Trey McIntyre Project, an ArtPlace-supported dance company. “So why look to business or government or education to champion innovative ideas?”

With so much at stake, and an increasing amount of resources and attention being utilized to transform communities toward creative placemaking, this may be the only answer for artists: Lead the transformation of your community, or get out of the way.

MICHAEL FALLON is a writer, editor, and nonprofit administrator based in St. Paul, Minnesota. His work has appeared in *Art in America*, *American Craft*, *Art Papers*, *Fiberarts*, *Utne.com*, *Public Art Review*, and many other publications.



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—Ian David Moss | Fractured Atlas