

The Art of Building Community:
The Role of the Arts in Community Development

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Introduction

The arts are often considered a luxury and have been viewed as a periphery element in the process of community development. However, a growing body of research is demonstrating that the arts play a vital role in community development. Increased attention is now being paid to the role arts play in economic development and in the development of social capital within a community. Additionally, there is a focus on the way in which the arts can aid in cultural awareness, and the importance of this awareness to community development.

This essay will offer insight into the value of art and the significant impact the arts can have on community development. Ways in which the arts, addressed in this essay in a broad sense, impact economic capital and social capital will be explored. Further discussion will be offered on the importance of cultural awareness and cultural preservation in community development. Brief discussions of communities and organizations, which highlight the way in which the arts have been used as a tool in community development, will be shared. Finally, concerns, such as measurement of the impact of arts programs, will be raised.

The Value of Art

The arts are considered by many to be an indulgence, not necessarily an essential element in our communities. Art activities are generally enjoyable social events that are not considered to be of great importance to development within a community. However, it is for this very reason that we must recognize the importance such activities may play in community development. The enjoyable nature of art and art events, such as concerts or plays, give

opportunity for the development of economic capital, social capital and cultural awareness within a forum that is pleasurable.

Moreover, involvement in arts based community development can occur both on a formal or informal level. One may chose to join a theatre company, thereby participating in community development through a formal network, or one may chose to attend a play and informally participate in community development. The range of activities the arts allow for, such as performer, volunteer, sponsor, or attendee, offer individuals a realm of possibilities for involvement in their community.

Further, art is a not a fixed concept and may be altered to fit each communities, cultures or countries needs. Art can be created by anyone in nearly any location and with limited resources. Art is both individuals gathering to write poetry, with the only requirements being a meeting location and writing tools, as well as an orchestra performing in a large concert hall, requiring significant financial resources, time and a venue. The range of possibility in the creation of art is unlimited, permitting nearly any community to create art.

Art allows for the involvement of individuals from various backgrounds and gives those individuals the opportunity to interact with one another. Art strengthen already formed bonds as well as assists in fostering new networks and relationships. Art also allows for the sharing of ideas and beliefs in a way that is less threatening than other approaches. Art has been used as a tool to address issues of racism, violence, the spread of AIDS, and similar issue that are controversial in nature. Art allows for individuals from various backgrounds to gather and

participate in an event that can initiate discussion on shared concerns in a way that is entertaining.

The Arts and Economic Capital

Currently, the majority of research regarding art and community development is focused on the role the arts play in economic development. This is, in part, because economic capital is the aspect of community development that is most easily measured. There are multiple levels in which the arts support the development of economic capital within a community. Through art events economic activity is generated and capital is brought into a community. The arts may also be products produced for sale by artisans generating a source of income for the individual and drawing funds into the community. Further, the arts impact economic capital through the creation of jobs.

Art events such as concerts, gallery openings, museum shows, and plays generate economic activity for a community. These art events bring money into the community through attendance and through tourism. Art events attract visitors and bring customers into local restaurants, hotels, and shops. In 2000 Americans for the Arts, a non-profit organization which works to support the arts, published *The Arts and Economic Prosperity Study*, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. This comprehensive study of 91 communities across 34 states within the United States indicated that non-profit arts organizations generate over 130 billion dollars annually. This economic activity includes both the spending of the non-profit arts organizations and event related spending (Americans for the Arts, 2002). The arts create a draw for community members and visitors alike. These events generate a

significant level of economic activity within the community, this is true for both large urban cities as well as smaller communities.

An example of the economic impact the arts have had on a community is the 1999 *Cows on Parade* public art display in Chicago, Illinois. This temporary exhibit generated over \$500 million dollars for the city of Chicago during the three-month exhibition. The exhibit brought in an estimated additional two million visitors and generated income for hotels, restaurants and shops. “One store in Chicago reported a \$40,000 profit over its weekly projections due to thousands of additional customers generated by the exhibit” (Project for Public Spaces, 2002). *The Cows on Parade* event was a strong tourist draw for the city of Chicago and other cities within the U.S. have staged similar art events.

The arts also generate economic capital within a community through the production and sale of the work of artisans. Artists create products for sale, which both benefits the individual artist and stimulates the local economy. Very often women in developing countries are the artisans involved in this small business approach. Women create small handicrafts, such as jewelry or woven fabrics, to sell and support themselves with the proceeds. There are numerous non-profit and “fair trade” agencies which support this type of economic endeavor.

Peacecraft, which defines itself as “a business with a conscience”, is a fair trade agency which purchases hand made arts and crafts items from community cooperatives within developing countries and then markets those products. One community cooperative that Peacecraft works with is the Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE) in Thailand.

WEAVE aims to support and empower indigenous women through the creation of work that is not dangerous, does not remove women from their local community and pays a fair wage. The women of WEAVE produce hand-spun cloth from silk worm cocoons and sell this product to Peacecraft. In turn, Peacecraft pays the women a fair wage and then markets this product (Peacecraft). This arts and crafts business benefits the individual women and generates income for the local community.

Further, the arts impact economic capital through the creation of jobs. Art is an occupation, and artists are aided in their work by a multitude of supporting personnel. A staged performance not only requires actors but carpenters, painters, composers, and service staff. As Sociologist Howard Becker has noted in his research in *Art Worlds* “Every art, then, rests on an extensive division of labor” (Becker, 13, 1982). Art is a collective action, numerous individuals are necessary in the creation, staging, and distribution of art. With an increase in performances, gallery spaces, or businesses selling art there is an increase in employment. This collective action of creating art results in the creation of jobs within the community.

Through art events, the sale of art work, and the interdependence in the creation of art, not only is economic capital created but these activities also serve to build social capital within a community. “Producing art works requires elaborate modes of cooperation among specialized personnel” (Becker 1974). Through the creation, production and distribution of art community members are involved in a cooperative undertaking. The arts call for citizen involvement through volunteerism and attendance, which helps to build trust, a key element in the creation of social capital.

The Arts and Social Capital

As indicated above, art is a collective action and this collective action facilitates civic engagement and trust within a community. Research in community development has indicated that trust is a key component in the development of social capital (Green and Haines, 101, 2002). Research on the role of art in building social capital indicates that community gatherings, volunteerism and public art all aid in creating community networks. Civic engagement helps to create networks of individuals, building trust among community members and enabling community members to collectively participate in activities.

Art events create places for members of the community to gather. These events, although pleasurable, also serve an important role in building networks within a community. “The enjoyable nature of the arts makes them perhaps the most promising, if neglected, means of building social capital” (Bettersogether, n.d.). These events give community members the opportunity to interact with one another, to share common experiences and to engage in dialogue. Moreover, art events are often staffed and supported by volunteers. Volunteerism builds community networks and displays commitment to community programs. These events are enjoyable and social in nature, yet they assist in developing the foundation in creating community networks.

Civic engagement and interpersonal trust are key elements in building social capital. There is a reciprocal relationship between these two elements, however Brehm and Rahn indicated in their research that civic engagement prompts trust; that engaging in activities with other members of the community facilitates trust within the community. Trust can create

involvement, but it is easier to build community involvement first, followed by trust rather than the reverse (Brehm and Rahn, 1997). Therefore, it may be considered that the community gatherings, volunteerism and involvement from the community created by the arts is an important first step in the development of social capital.

Through shared activities and experiences such as art events, community members come to build trust. Of further importance is that these art events promote both bridging and bonding forms of social capital. Arts events certainly bring individuals with shared interests and formed relationships together however, because the nature of the activity is pleasurable, individuals from outside this social network also take part in the event. “The arts have the potential to promote such bridging social capital precisely because they can provide a safe place to shelve political and ideological differences, or at least manage those differences without conflict” (Bettertogether, n.d.). The arts can provide a forum for individuals of different races, classes, generations and backgrounds to share in a common experience.

In addition, there has been research that indicates that the arts benefit public health, furthering the development of social capital. In urban areas elements such as neglected physical environments, crime, and limited public space can lead to isolation, which in turn affects public health. Public art can be used to define a space and offer residents an area to gather. In 2001 the Sunnyside neighborhood in Portland, OR, a white, moderate to low income urban community, came together in an attempt to address the physical deterioration in the community. The Sunnyside neighborhood decided to create a public gathering space and used public art to define this space. The community designed a mural at a neighborhood

intersection along with a sculpture wall bordering each corner to serve as a resting-place. In a public health study, conducted by the Community Health School at Portland State University two years after the completion of the public art project, research indicated that residents of the Sunnyside neighborhood spent 25% more time gathering in public than did residents of a comparable neighborhood. In survey data, Sunnyside residents rated their neighborhood significantly higher than residents of a comparable neighborhood as a good place to live and a good place to raise children. In addition, Sunnyside residents rated their health higher than those residents of the comparison neighborhood (Semenza, 2003). This creation of a public space through the use of art worked to decrease isolation and to increase the (real or perceived) health of residents.

Community involvement in art events or in the creation of public art brings with it a sense of esteem and fulfillment for the community. “Public art inspires civic pride, thereby uniting us in our appreciation of what we have collectively produced” (Bettersogether, n.d.). This sense of pride and accomplishment can have a significant impact on the development of a community.

The Arts and Cultural Awareness

It may be argued that a community’s sense of itself and pride in it’s culture is an essential element in development, and the arts play an integral role in allowing a community to understand and preserve it’s own unique cultural elements. The area of community development in which the arts may have the greatest impact is that of cultural awareness. Art, in an age of globalization, allows a community to preserve its culture and share that culture

with others. The arts are an element of a community's identity and may help to preserve the heritage and history of the community.

All communities have traditions and history individual to them and this heritage adds a level of richness to the lives of the individuals within the community. The arts can be reflective of a community's heritage and serve to preserve that heritage. This process not only reinforces the community's sense of its own heritage but also creates an awareness of cultural differences for those outside the community. In effect, the arts allow for insight into the history, experience and lives of others.

The World Bank has recognized the value the arts play in community development. In 1997 the World Bank established an arts program, which includes an extensive collection of art works from the bank's 184 nation members. "The Art Program's activities reflect an implicit understanding of art and culture as integral forces of human development in the broadest sense" (World Bank, 2003). The World Bank's arts collection, which initially began in the 1970's for decorative purpose, has been transformed into an large collection of contemporary art from all over the world. The World Bank hosts numerous exhibits each year and actively solicits the work of new artists. Further involvement includes the 1999 *Culture Counts Conference* sponsored by the World Bank, which addressed the value in creating and preserving culture as an integral element in community development (Asian Development Bank, 2003). Cultural preservation has a definite influence on the development of a community. Further, cultural awareness and preservation offer a sense of pride to a community.

In addition to creating cultural awareness for outsiders, the arts also create awareness of differences within a community. Art is an effective tool in education and in initiating dialog on issues that present potential for conflict. Arts based civic dialog is an approach which uses the arts as a tool in engaging the community in the discussion of issues. This approach is not a new approach, in fact in ancient Greece art was often used as a method for civic engagement (Community Arts Network, 2003).

An arts based approach to the discussion and decision on the restoration of a statue of King Kamehameha I by the residents of the rural region of Kohala in Hawaii is an example of the way in which this approach allows for effective community involvement. In this situation, the Hawaii Alliance for Arts Education, community members and the art conservator took part in various community gatherings, including a dance puppetry performance, a story telling session, consultation with village elders and a high school debate. “Through these activities, larger issues of history, identity, ownership, development, tourism and preservation were raised, and consensus was eventually reached to continue the community’s practice of painting the statue” (Community Arts Network, 2003). This approach gave all members of the community, from high school students to elderly residents, the opportunity to take part in civic dialog. The arts based approach stimulated dialog and participation within the community while also providing education on the communities culture and history to outsiders, as well as to those within the community not familiar with these elements. Further, this approach was non-threatening; individuals who may not have chosen to attend public forums were involved in the dialog initiated by these arts events.

There is limited research on the importance art plays in preserving cultural heritage and generating cultural awareness. This lack of research poses a concern for this field as sponsoring agencies look to research finding when making funding decisions.

Areas of Concern

There are a number of concerns that may be raised when discussing the role arts play in community development. A predominate concern is the ability to measure the impact the arts are having on community development.

“It would appear then that arts projects located in communities have a valuable role to play in social and economic development. Evidence indicates they can contribute to the overall regeneration of an area using predominately people-centered strategies within community development framework. The problem, however, is in measuring and valuing that contribution” (Kay, 2000).

Evidence indicates that the arts are a valuable tool in creating economic capital, social capital and creating cultural awareness, however defining this impact in quantifiable terms has proven difficult. As was noted in an earlier section of this paper, the economic impact the arts have on community development has received the most attention, as it is the most easily measured component. The creation of social capital and cultural awareness, as well as the impact the arts have on a community’s sense of itself are more difficult to measure.

Evaluating the role of the arts in community development presents many methodological challenges. Research is primarily based on self-reports made by individuals; elements measured are intangible and offer no definitive standard of measure. In addition to the methodological difficulties, artist themselves often resist the quantification of their work.

“Artists may resist, even revile, classification and quantification, perceiving such approaches

as hostile to the creative process” (Newman et. al., 2003). The arts and artists do not easily lend themselves to evaluation. Developing research tools to measure and quantify the arts, the work of artists and the impact the arts have on communities is a difficult undertaking.

The difficulty in measuring outcomes has a negative influence on funding for arts programs. As most funding organizations require evidence of the achievements of a program, arts organizations find themselves in a difficult position. With limited research in this field, objection by many to the very notion of measurement or outcome goals and the intangible qualities influenced by the arts many programs find themselves in jeopardy of losing funding.

Further concerns include the correlation the arts have with affluence. Art, particularly within western culture, has been associated with affluence. This concept of art may serve to limit individual’s involvement in art programs. “The collective manifestation of social capital must be sustainable at the level of individual civic engagement and in individual attitudes towards others “ (Brehm and Rahn, 1997). In order for the arts to be most effective in community development, individuals must perceive arts activity to be open to participants from various backgrounds. This elitist concept, which is particularly strong with the high arts, may have a negative impact on the role of art as a tool in community development.

Conclusion

As sociologist Howard Becker has noted “...art is social in character...” (Becker, 1974). The arts are by nature a collective activity. The creation and continuation of art is dependent on a multitude of actors, including the artists, patrons, volunteers, and laborers. Further, art intends

to draw people together and to encourage dialog. The collaboration required of art and the exchange generated by art make it an effective tool for use in community development. However, the arts have been overlooked and under utilized as a tool in this field. The pleasurable nature of art events combined with lack of quantifiable results may have an influence on the limited use of art in community development.

The arts provide an enjoyable social activity to a community while also bolstering economic gains, fostering social capital and preserving the cultural heritage of a community. Currently, a body of research exists indicting the significant economic impact the arts have. Additional research on the importance the arts play in creating social capital and in raising cultural awareness is underway. Understanding the importance of the arts is essential if one is to take a holistic approach to community development.

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