

Creating Active Public Spaces

BY TOM BORRUP AND MIGUEL GARCIA

Using their own brand of discipline, creativity and tenacity, a new generation of American arts and cultural organizations are doing more than creating, teaching and exhibiting art. A growing body of research has begun to confirm that these community-based groups are also remaking towns and neighborhoods, revitalizing their economies and building community pride and participation.

“The Creative Engine,” a report by the Center for an Urban Future, found that arts and culture are primary components of New York City’s growth. The report specifically cited the city’s thousands of small organizations as well as major institutions.

In Chicago, Diane Grams and Michael Warr, in a report to two local foundations, concluded that small arts organizations contribute significantly to neighborhood stability by improving social relations and access to outside resources.

Among the arts groups we have found to be especially effective in strengthening communities economically and socially are Houston’s Project Row Houses, Asheville’s Handmade in America, North Adams’s Mass MOCA, Chicago’s Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum and Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis. In each one artists and local leaders have joined forces to build connections across economic and ethnic lines, melding community development with arts and culture.

“A small organization using an old church or a row house can have a larger impact than one that spends its energy building a shiny new theater or exhibition space,” says Mark J. Stern, Professor of Social Work and History at the University of Pennsylvania. Stern and Susan Seifert, a city planner, lead The Social Impact of the Arts Project. It has studied the effects of cultural organizations in four U.S. cities and is now conducting a longitudinal study of some 50 commu-

nity-based cultural groups in Philadelphia. “We learned that culture does have a powerful effect on neighborhood revitalization,” Stern says.

Rebuilding Communities on History and Creativity

Founded and led by Rick Lowe, a visual artist, Project Row Houses is rebuilding a devastated African-American neighborhood in Houston’s Third Ward. Lowe’s raw material has been the history, culture and resilience of the people, and a block of narrow, run-down houses similar to ones that once housed slaves.

Since 1995 Project Row Houses has restored 22 houses on two blocks and has begun renovations on two adjacent blocks. Seven of the houses are now used as residences for single mothers who are completing their education. Eight are used for art exhibits, while others are meeting places for local residents to discuss such issues as gentrification, ethnicity and identity. The project is now restoring the El Dorado Ballroom, once a lively nightclub for jazz and blues, including homegrown talents like Lightnin’ Hopkins. The project is also working with local residents in a surrounding 35-block area to craft a master revitalization plan that will shape new investment to benefit low-income residents. Lowe believes that the degree to which a neighborhood arts organization can integrate itself into the community and become a part of the community-building process will determine its success.

In western North Carolina, HandMade in America, based in Asheville, is enhancing the area’s quality of life while broadening economic opportunities. Realizing the futility of recruiting yet another large

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Arts Centers Help Transform Communities.

manufacturer to be their economic salvation, HandMade’s leaders decided to turn to the enormous but usually invisible talents of craftspeople from the area’s small towns and back roads. Becky Anderson, HandMade’s director, is tapping the region’s long tradition of crafts, and is aiming to make western North Carolina a major center for handmade objects.

In the similarly picturesque mountains of northwestern Massachusetts, the vast mills of North Adams have long been abandoned, as owners moved to the South in search of cheaper labor. A year after the last mill closed in 1986, Joe Thompson, a lecturer at nearby Williams College and exhibit designer at the college’s Museum of Art, set out to develop a bold arts-based enterprise in the bountiful space of the abandoned mills. Thompson’s idea was to capitalize on the area’s proximity to both New York and Boston, the region’s reputation for seasonal music and dance festivals, and the expertise of Williams College.

The result, after a long struggle, is the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA), which opened in 1999. It is not only the nation’s largest contemporary art museum, it has also restored North Adams’s self-esteem, encouraged tourism and revived the local economy. The downtown business district, 70 percent vacant when the museum opened, now boasts 70 percent occupancy.

Practicing Civic Engagement

According to Prof. Stern, arts and cultural groups “increase the inclination and



Efforts to mix the arts and economic development—as exemplified by Project Row Houses in Houston, left, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, center, and HandMade in America in Asheville, North Carolina—are proving to be a surprisingly effective way to rebuild communities and restore civic pride.

ability of residents to make positive changes in their community, and increase the connections between neighborhoods of different ethnic and economic compositions.”

During the past decade, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum on Chicago’s West Side vaulted from infancy to a substantial institution by galvanizing the traditions and aspirations of its largely immigrant neighborhood.

Carlos Tortolero, a former school-teacher and founding director of the museum, drew on the West Side community’s many talents, its good relations with the Chicago Park District, and its schools, artists and youth to build an institution his community is proud of. In 2003, more than 220,000 people visited the museum, half from surrounding neighborhoods. The museum’s main meeting room, one of the few public gathering places in the area, is used daily by a wide variety of community groups.

A youth-run radio station, Radio Arte, added in 1997, solidified connections with young people and gives them and the organization a voice in surrounding neighborhoods.

The museum has helped solidify the Mexican-American community but it is also building bridges across ethnic and geographic lines, bringing new economic and intellectual resources into the community. As the international and local mix of artists began attracting audiences from far and wide, the museum led the drive to launch the Pilsen/Little Village Information Center, a tourism and local business

council. Little Village is now the city’s second largest generator of sales tax, surpassed only by the upscale Magnificent Mile shopping district.

When Intermedia Arts transformed a south Minneapolis auto repair shop into an arts center in 1994, no one expected it to become one of the area’s most dynamic and important civic spaces. Its eclectic programming and multiple community uses have created a remarkable meeting place where corporate executives, politicians and area business owners routinely occupy the same space as graffiti artists, homeless teenagers and environmentalists.

The organization took an assertive role in neighborhood redevelopment beginning in the late 1990’s, engaging artists, the public and community leaders in planning for the neighborhood’s future. Working with the city’s fast-growing Latino, Asian and African immigrant

communities, Sandra Agustin, the center’s artistic director, makes sure all these voices are heard in discussions of such issues as gentrification and racism.

With support from Animating Democracy, a project of Americans for the Arts, based in Washington, D.C., the center commissioned artist-activists to engage neighborhood residents in the creation of sculptures, performances and murals. Through both the artwork and the process of making it, the people expressed their worries about gentrification and displacement. At the same time, they were building connections with neighbors and devising ways to stabilize and improve their neighborhoods.

The operating principle at Intermedia Arts, like that of the other groups, is that a museum can and should be a living laboratory for the collaborative talents of ordinary people, putting culture to work building community and revitalizing neighborhoods. ■

You’ve Got To Have Art

In 2002 and 2003 the Ford Foundation supported the Downside Up Listening Tour Project, an effort to understand the convergence of art, culture, public space and community development. Coordinated by filmmaker Nancy Kelly and the Center for Independent Documentary, the project used Kelly’s documentary film “Downside Up,” about the inception and evolution of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, to explore these issues.

One outcome of the listening tour has been an initiative known as Shifting Sands Communities—Art, Culture and Neighborhood Change, which has brought together a dozen neighborhood-based arts and cultural institutions in mixed-income, mixed-race communities throughout the United States. They have begun to formulate strategies to deal with changing demographics and market forces that affect long-standing residents and new arrivals alike. Changes often result in tensions between different racial, ethnic and income groups, but they also offer opportunities for social integration and upward mobility for low-to moderate-income residents. Among the assertions being tested is that art and culture have a unique role to play in spurring neighborhood-based social and economic development. The Ford Foundation has granted funds to Partners for Livable Communities, a national research and training organization based in Washington, D.C., to manage the initiative.