

DESIGNING POLICY FOR ARTS DEVELOPMENT
THE 1969 SURVEY: SUMMARY

Maryo Gard Ewell
October, 2007

I had been in college during the years of “The Arts in the Small Community,” and in the summer of 1968 I was the assistant to Ralph Kohlhoff, who was project manager in Spring Green. “Assistant” is a glorified title, really; in fact, I was his all-purpose errand girl, typist, driver, detail manager. Still, I was hooked on what I saw happening in Spring Green. The enthusiastic audiences in sold-out houses seeing the Rep’s “Streetcar Named Desire” or the Wisconsin Idea Theater productions. The eagerness with which students clamored for their first exposure to classical ballet with Tibor Zana.

I returned to school, where I had to design a small “real-world” statistics project, gathering data about something that interested me. With the assistance of my pal Margaret Berger we knocked on doors over spring break, determined to interview 40 people in Spring Green about their attitudes to the arts, now that six months had past since the summer of dizzying arts activity in 1968. The questionnaire was short; we asked if they knew of the project, if they attended events, participated in classes, helped with publicity, and, if the program were repeated, whether they would do so again. With only the most rudimentary knowledge of statistics, I nonetheless knew that we needed a random sample of people, so we went to addresses chosen at what we believed to be random from the phone book. I was interested in knowing how people’s attitudes to the arts in Spring Green compared to attitudes in a town that was nearby of roughly similar size and economic base, which had not participated in the grand arts experiment. I selected Mazomanie, and we interviewed about 40 people there, too, asking questions as similar as possible to those in Spring Green – had they heard about the project, did they participate (after all, they were less than 20 miles away), and then “if there were a similar project in Mazomanie, would you imagine that you would participate” in attending, taking classes, helping with publicity.

Forty people in each town could be nothing more than suggestive, of course. We knew that.

Still, what we found even with our small numbers was fascinating. People in Mazomanie were put in the “yes” or “indifferent” column at about the same rate when asked whether they thought the project had been a good thing. However, few people in Spring Green were indifferent – they had strong opinions:

Was the program a good thing?	Yes	No	Indifferent	Total
Mazomanie	56%	7%	37%	37
Spring Green	80%	12%	8%	40

This could suggest that people aren’t automatically opposed to the arts – they start at “neutral” or positive, and exposure to an arts program helps them develop opinions. In subsequent questions, such as “If the program were repeated in your community, would you attend plays [again],” people in Mazomanie and Spring Green said “yes” at about the same rate (65% and 60%, respectively). Interestingly, no one in Mazomanie said “no” - but 22% of the people in Spring Green said “no.”

So we asked, “who was it that, after exposure to the program (people in Spring Green), seemed disinclined to *participate*” – even though 80% of the respondents in Spring Green *said* that the program had been a good thing?

When we looked at the small bit of demographic data we collected, it appeared that in Mazomanie people of varying education levels were about equally interested in participating in the arts, where in Spring Green, the willingness to participate shifted to the better-educated:

Would you attend plays [again]?

	Yes	No
Mazomanie		
no college	61%	0%
college	77%	0%
Spring Green		
no college	47%	26%
college	93%	7%

So – remembering that we made the assumption that for purposes of this study the only difference between the towns was that people in one had seen the arts firsthand – this little study caused us to think that exposure to the arts might shift people's receptiveness to participation along educational lines. Where 0% of people in Mazomanie – regardless of education level – refused to consider participation, 26% of the respondents in Spring Green who had not gone to college refused to consider participation [again], where only a couple of college-educated people refused to consider participation [again].

Now, this was interesting. ***Classically, studies have shown that gender and education levels are predictors of people's participation in the arts. But these little numbers suggested that maybe, exposure to the arts project triggered a disinclination to participate, along education lines.***

Gulp.

That would be exactly the opposite of what the project's visionaries had hoped to achieve.

But, remembering that only the first year of the project had happened – the year of the Milwaukee Repertory, Lee Strasberg – in other words, a year of professional, out-of-town-based arts exposure, we asked about people's interest in seeing a local drama program develop. ***In Spring Green, 16% of the respondents with a high school education said that the program had not been a good thing – but 58% of Spring Green's respondents with a high school education said that they would like to see local drama. Which could suggest that locally-produced arts was somehow important in achieving the democratic ideal of the project.***

Well, that was a student paper. Tiny numbers and suggestive at best. It was time to graduate and enter the real world. I forgot about Spring Green.