

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PAST TO HELP INFORM THE FUTURE?
Best Practices in Arts Development
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Note: A version of this paper was printed as a Monograph in December, 2009: "Effective Community Arts Development: 50 Tips for 50 Years" and is available as a free download at <http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/americans-for-the-arts-publications/monographs>

Wisconsin was the setting for a seminal community arts development experiment in five very small towns in 1967-69, none with any organized arts activity at the time. Interviews conducted with elderly artists who have lived in those towns for decades, the collection of written materials, and a survey done in 1973 and replicated in 2005, all form the basis for this reflection by one of the original project directors, the interviewer, and six arts administrators. We asked: what can we learn from this project that can be useful to forward-looking arts developers today?¹

The Wisconsin project embodies one of two quite different approaches to arts development. Both fervently agree that the "arts are for everyone." The ends of the spectrum are:

- Outreach/exposure/access. The arts administrator seeks ways for all people to be in the audiences for arts events of high quality. The words of John D. Rockefeller III exemplify this perspective: "The arts are not for a privileged few but for the many ... their place is not on the periphery of society but at its center." Still, describing the work of the 1965 Rockefeller Panel on the Performing Arts, Michael Straight concluded that "the Rockefeller Panel held that the arts were for the many but could not be entrusted to the many."²
- Community development. Robert Gard, who spearheaded the Wisconsin project, wrote: "In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone....As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves."³

The Wisconsin project embodied the second approach – one of "local control" in which people envisioned an arts menu that included experiences brought from elsewhere, as well as activity that was locally-designed. A local arts council was created reflecting local public needs (not just "arts needs.") One meshed arts with a broad agenda of local environmental concern; another, with local economic development. We may not think of these things as revolutionary today, but they were, in 1967. Indeed, they were so revolutionary that the First Lady, Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, visited one of the communities to experience some of its showcased events, and the handbook that resulted from the project – *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan* - went on to become the bible for emerging community arts councils throughout America at the time.

It seems that the project made a lasting difference. Reading through all of the study material, we elicited fifty things that we feel form the basis of community development and the arts.

START WITH A BIG IDEA

1. There must be a grounding philosophy about the way that people can live together well, for the goal

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² Straight, Michael, *Nancy Hanks: An Intimate Portrait*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988, p. 81.

³ Gard, Robert, Michael Warlum, Ralph Kohlhoff et al, *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan* Madison, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 1969, online at www.gardfoundation.org, p. 4

is a human community, not only an arts community.

2. The philosophy must simultaneously imagine an evolution of the arts *and* an evolution of the community and its many systems. Just having more arts available will not necessarily make the community a better place to live. In the 1960's a community arts council – then a 20-year-old idea – often took this leadership. (The right term for such a group is still evolving; for this paper, I'll use the term "community/arts development council.") In 1969 Robert Gard said, "One of the first principles of community arts councils should be the assumption that they are and should be an instrument of social change affecting change in both the arts and community life in general...they should be experimental...in order to develop a community of creative abundance."⁴

3. Democracy is perhaps the biggest idea in America. Why not ground arts development work in furthering democracy? Democracy is, after all, what all people living in America have in common. This can mean three distinct things, and all are important:

- Creating more access to the arts. This is the "more arts *for* more people" idea.
- Enabling all people to make art based in their personal story, world-view, and culture.
- Using the arts to raise important questions, and engaging people in dialogue about them.

4. Community development includes the evolution local economy, agriculture, natural resource base, transportation, housing, health, social justice, and more. The effective arts developer will partner with some or all of these efforts, for goals will overlap.

5. Community development is a process based on an assumption of local wisdom and an assumption that most of the resources needed to get something done are right there in the community.

EXERCISE LEADERSHIP

6. Effective community arts developers share a commitment to all of the people in their community.

7. They share a belief in the inherent creativity of the people in their community.

8. They're aware that this creativity may lead to something other than art as they know it.

9. They know that they aren't leading people to art, but bearing witness to their creativity.

10. They are trying to change the prepositions: from arts *for* people to arts *of, with and by* people.

11. They are in it for the long run, walking with the visionaries who have come before them.

12. They are in it for the long run, walking with the visionaries who will come after them.

13. At the same time, they need to be effective in the short run or there won't be a long run! They cultivate an understanding of the unique psychology of their place and a curiosity about the best way to work successfully within and with their local community process.

14. Effective arts developers share a slogan: *Inquiry and experimentation!*

15. They joyously claim the full range of community endeavor, caring little or not at all whether activities are done by for-profit groups, non-profits, individuals, or informal gatherings.

16. They instinctively see that snowboarding can be choreography, advertising can be poetry, parades can be theater. If it's creative, if it aspires to excellence – then it's part of the world that they claim.

17. They're always asking themselves, "How can I use this situation? How can this person fit in?"

18. They recognize the many instances of "them" and "us." Artists and non-artists. English-speakers and non-English-speakers. Oldtimers and newcomers. Young and old. People with divergent world-views. They ask, "How can these groups be brought together?" "The articulate, neighborly sharing of excellence in art"⁵ is what a community/arts development council is about.

⁴ Gard et al, first draft of *Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan*, University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives.

⁵ Gard et al p. 9.

19. Community/arts leaders understand that the creative resources that are needed are probably right at home. Thus they know that while some of their work involves coaching, the bulk of their work involves uncovering latent creativity and encouraging it to flourish.

20. Arts developers nurture others:

- by sharing power, knowing that the arts and the arts institutions they know may be changed.
- by working with the leaders among the young, ethnic and cultural groups, elderly, newcomers, residents of housing developments, business groups, religious groups, and others.

21. Arts developers challenge others:

- by providing settings in which *all* people can express their creativity.
- by insisting that their neighbors live up to their creative potential.

22. Effective leaders may be simultaneously insiders and outsiders. They accept this even if it makes them uncomfortable. These terms are not about longevity so much as perspective. Leaders know that it is important to cultivate both roles. And they know that it is important to put aside any longing to play just one role, because they're at their most effective when they can play both.

23. As insiders, they know how things work, and they are reputable and broadly trusted.

24. As outsiders, they compare their community to others. They are alert to what is happening elsewhere. They are thinking about how to bring new ideas home. Sometimes it's in the outsider role that leaders find adrenaline and the courage to carry on. Or where they see more clearly unrealized possibilities in the community and can identify new ways to get things done. They can sometimes pose questions that insiders cannot. They may be more likely to notice the stories that a community tells about itself – are they about successfully overcoming odds? Or about being worn down by outside forces? And thinking of ways that these stories can be harnessed to help move forward.

25. Community/arts development leaders are not only “arts people.” In fact, sometimes the longest-lasting creative leadership comes from someone who thinks of herself as an economic development specialist or thinks of himself as an environmental activist.

26. Leaders lead by listening, by encouraging others, by speaheading a risky idea.

27. They know and participate in many community groups, and are personally comfortable with people from many walks of life. This teaches them the multi-faceted realities of how their community works.

28. They are not defensive about their broad perspective on the arts in the community.

29. Effective community/arts developers are passionate about the place where they live.

MERGE CREATIVITY, EXCELLENCE, AND COMMUNITY

30. A community/arts development approach sees no conflict between process and product, between quality and broad participation. In the synthesis of good community process, some technical coaching, and each person's creative outlook on the world lies the potential for exciting art.

31. “There is a vast and noticeable difference between letting a thousand flowers bloom and permitting everything to come up in weeds.”⁶ There must be standards of excellence, but the community may be inventing an excellence that is its own, marrying the flavor of the place with the freshness of local people's ideas and visions.

32. Articulating quality begins with a profound respect for the people.

33. The professional artist who is also a community/arts developer is more “coach” than “teacher.”

34. Participating in art-making enables a person to be a more judicious and open audience member.

35. The words *art*, *ideas*, and *creative activity* may someday become synonyms. Why not now?

36. Someone in a small Wisconsin town said: “We don't think of our Sand County Players as art. It's

⁶ Gard et al p. 96.

just what we do.” Isn’t that what we most aspire to? Do we need to label it “art?”

37. There is no single arts scene. Many can co-exist. Each should support the others.

38. We may need to find ways for people can talk about arts, moving beyond description into conversation that includes opinions about both the art and the ideas that the art is leading us to.

39. Locally-made art can grow from local history or from the stories of people who live in a place or from metaphors about the meaning of living in that place.

40. The community/arts development council considers local resources when presenting original art. No choreographers in town? But perhaps there *are* retired professional ice-dancers. No composers? Probably there *are* teen rock bands who write their own songs. No set designers? But maybe there *is* a graphic designer at the ad agency. Thinking this way may lead to art that’s fresh and exciting.

41. Labeling activity as “fine,” “folk” or “community” arts is irrelevant. What matters is that it be joyous and sincere, grounded in a commitment to excellence and challenge.

CONSIDER STRUCTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

42. The old style arts council includes artists, art lovers, representatives of arts organizations, and perhaps representatives of the business community or the media. A community/arts action group may also includes an environmental activist or someone from the military base, who may not necessarily know about the arts, but who care about building a strong community.

43. The mission may be a broad one. One man said: Land is bigger than the arts. It’s love for the land that we have in common, so the arts “stick” because we connect them with something bigger.

44. The group can be non-profit or for-profit, tax-exempt or not, part of another agency, completely informal, or even intentionally temporary, depending on what makes local sense. In one small Wisconsin town, the theater group does not have nonprofit status, does not aspire to a facility of its own, does not seek grants, is not in the data base of the state arts council, and gives its income to other community endeavors. Yet in a survey, 83.3% of the people knew about the theater’s performances, an almost unprecedented awareness of local arts activity.

45. The structure should be flexible enough to maximize creativity and avoid institutionalization – not creating a structure whose maintenance could ultimately take priority over the original stated purpose.

46. The service area can be a planning region, a local telephone calling area, a watershed.

47. The council knows its local demographics, so is aware of who is and is not participating.

48. The council instinctively knows that there are different strategies for attracting more people like current participants, creating new meanings for its oldest friends, and engaging new participants.⁷

49. In one of the small Wisconsin communities, a participant said, “Our arts council used the Tupperware Party as the model for getting people engaged – neighbor by neighbor, block by block.”

50. It is important to be clear what success means. It isn’t always numbers. If a goal is the building of community relationships, evaluation will include assessing the health of the ecosystem – the relationships – not the budget growth of arts institutions or the number of arts events.

TO CONCLUDE...

In 1969, Robert Gard said: “If you try, you can indeed/Alter the face and the heart/Of America.⁸ Also in 1969, Ralph Burgard said: Arts councils “must...be concerned with the confrontation of art and people, not art institutions and people...We must live in the future to better understand the present.”⁹

⁷ McCarthy, Kevin, and Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2001.

⁸ Gard et al p. 98.

⁹ Burgard, Ralph, *Arts in the City: Organizing and Programming Community Arts Councils*, New York, Associated Councils of the Arts, 1969.

In our community/arts development work, the ordinary and the extraordinary mesh. Insider and outsider find common ground. Beauty merges with daily living. The singer and the engineer find common ground. The past, future and present meet. They meet in *our* creative community.

The “Tips” articulated here don’t seem to time-bound – they are still relevant in 2010. But will they be relevant in 2050? How will they morph as the world morphs? Which will remain constant and true?

What do you think?