Valuing the Intersection Between Arts, Culture, and Community:
An Exchange of Research and Practice

by Lynn Stern
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INTRODUCTION

*Fort Greene is a truly mixed neighborhood and stronghold of black culture.
In Bedford-Stuyvesant, individual artists are doing a lot in the neighborhood.*

*Ditmas Park is a place where you really run into a little bit of everything...
Within one block, there's a mosque, church, and a synagogue.*

*I live in Sunset Park. I love that I can trade vegetables over the fence with
my Chinese neighbor and hot sauce with my Guyanese neighbor.*

What I love about Staten Island is its relationship to the water.

I love that Corona is full of hustlers and that you don't hear much English.

These are some responses from practitioners and researchers to the question of what they value most about their neighborhoods. It was a fitting opening to "Valuing the Intersection Between Arts, Culture, and Community: An Exchange of Research and Practice," a half-day gathering of thirty-five practitioners and researchers that took place on September 12, 2013, at Downtown Art's East Village studio. Downtown Art is a member of Fourth Arts Block, a nonprofit coalition of cultural and community groups that lead the development of the East 4th Street Cultural District, the only official cultural district in Manhattan.

This gathering was convened by Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts–New York (NOCD-NY), a citywide alliance of artists, activists, creative manufacturers, and policy makers committed to revitalizing New York City "from the neighborhood up." Through presentations, questions, and dialogue, participants learned about the structural inequities that exist in cities and philanthropy and gained deeper insight into the power of neighborhood cultural clusters as sources of community health and resilience.

The exchange grew out of NOCD-NY's initial explorations around a collaborative research agenda that responds to the shared needs of members. NOCD-NY recognized that coordinated efforts could broaden and deepen the impact of members' research (e.g., door-to-door surveys, oral histories, community asset mapping) already under way in their respective neighborhoods with the multiple goals of strengthening practice, understanding neighborhood and artist needs, case making, and field learning. At the same time, NOCD-NY members continue to grapple with one of the key challenges in this work—identifying and communicating appropriate measures for the social, community, environmental, and economic impacts of these districts. While most people readily acknowledge that there is some degree of relationship between culture, community, and economy, the concrete connections are complex, subtle, and still largely undocumented. As a coalition of community-based cultural leaders, NOCD-NY was eager to tell a compelling story without falling back on data sets that diminish or dilute these complex connections. This gathering offered an entry point from which to explore research approaches and tools that can make visible the value of this work.

Recognizing the wealth of related research already under way in the field, NOCD-NY determined that a convening of NOCD-NY members and allies and a select group of leading researchers was the logical next step in collaborative research. Since research specific to the arts, community development, and other fields did not necessarily relate to NOCD-NY's holistic approach, NOCD-NY intentionally chose researchers who are highly respected for their rigorous work and cross-disciplinary approach.

RESEARCH

Six researchers representing a range of fields—psychiatry, urban planning, social work, and anthropology, among others—joined NOCD-NY members and allies to share their work. The following summaries outline their affiliations and research interests:

Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove is a professor of clinical psychiatry and public health at New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University. Fullilove has conducted research on AIDS and other epidemics affecting poor communities and is interested in the links between the environment and mental health. Her research examines the mental health effects of environmental processes such as violence, segregation, and urban renewal. She is the author of _Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It_.

Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson is senior advisor to the Arts and Culture Program at the

Kresge Foundation and adjunct professor in the Arts Management Program at Claremont Graduate University. In 2013 she was appointed by President Barack Obama to the National Council on the Arts. Jackson's work has focused on comprehensive community revitalization, urban inequality and the politics of race and ethnicity, and the role of arts and culture in society.

Susan C. Seifert is director of the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), a research group at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice. SIAP explores the relationship of arts and culture to community change, with a focus on neighborhood revitalization, social inclusion, and community well-being. A recent SIAP report, *"Natural" Cultural Districts: A Three-City Study**, looks at "natural" cultural districts in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Seattle.

Mark J. Stern is Kenneth L. M. Pray Professor of Social Policy and History and co-director of the Urban Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Since 1994, as principal investigator of the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), Stern has led studies of how cultural engagement influences urban neighborhoods. In addition to his work on culture and community, Stern's research interests include U.S. social history, history of social welfare, and social welfare policy.

* a link to the studies mentioned in this report can be found in the bibliography.

Holly Sidford is president of Helicon Collaborative, a consulting group that works with artists, cultural organizations, foundations, and other creative enterprises to strengthen the role of art and culture in communities. Sidford's recent publications include *Fusing Art, Culture, and Social Change; Bright Spots Leadership in the Pacific Northwest*; and, with Rodney Christopher and Rebecca Thomas, *Case for Change Capital in the Arts*.*

Alaka Wali is curator of North American anthropology and applied cultural research director at the Field Museum of Natural History. Wali's research in the urban United States examines the obstacles to resource acquisition for economically disadvantaged groups and the ways in which local social organization and cultural strategies can be incorporated into grassroots empowerment programs.

NOCD-NY designed the three-hour exchange of presentations, questions, and dialogue with the following objectives in mind:

- *Build dialogue and understanding between researchers and practitioners in different fields and learn what others are thinking about and doing.*

- *Join together to describe the essence and demonstrate the arts and culture in communities*

and the value of arts and culture for those communities and for the city in such areas as social networks, neighborhood economies, civic engagement, creative incubation and in the intersections between them.

- *Strengthen a network of allies that can be resources for one another.*

- *Identify opportunities and strategies for becoming part of broader conversations about rebuilding, community revitalization, health, and the city's political leadership transition.*

NOCD MEMBERS' STORIES: MEMBERS' WORK AND ITS VALUE IN COMMUNITIES

Background materials about NOCD-NY members and three presentations by representatives of four coalition members—Melanie Cohn, representing Staten Island Arts; Anusha Venkataraman, El Puente; Gonzalo Casals, El Museo del Barrio (now with Friends of the High Line); and Prerana Reddy, Queens Museum of Art—grounded the day's conversation in stories that illuminated these members' work and its value for their communities. Presenters represented the spectrum of organizational members that constitute NOCD-NY—a local arts agency, a community-based group, and cultural institutions—and the diverse New York City neighborhoods in which they work.

The presentations highlighted the distinctive character of these neighborhoods and their richly varied histories and contemporary contexts. As shown in the following examples, they also revealed shared dynamics that are common to neighborhoods in transition, such as an influx of new immigrant groups, the forces of gentrification, and the residual effects of urban policy:

> Melanie Cohn profiled **St. George, Staten Island**, a low-income, largely Black and Hispanic neighborhood that is "perpetually on the radar to be gentrified." Cohn noted that

Staten Island is home to many new immigrant groups—from Sri Lanka, Mexico, and countries in Africa, among other locations—that are fueling the borough's thriving heritage arts community.

> El Puente's community of **Southside Williamsburg, Brooklyn**, has experienced shrinkage, disinvestment, and dislocation over the past three decades resulting from the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. More recently, as Anusha Venkataraman noted, this tight-knit, largely Dominican and Puerto Rican neighborhood has become the new cultural mecca for artists from other U.S. communities and abroad. While Southside Williamsburg's Latino population remains larger than the population of any other group in that area, over the past decade the former has shrunk by 25 percent. Said Venkataraman, "Many community members feel that the neighborhood is not their own."

> From the multiethnic borough of Queens, Prerana Reddy profiled the Queens Museum of Art's immediate neighborhood of **Corona, Queens**, a low-income yet bustling hub dominated by Ecuadorian, Dominican, Mexican, Chinese, South Asian, and Korean immigrants. Gonzalo Casals, a resident of Jackson Heights–Woodside, noted that his neighborhood is home to the second-largest concentration of gay men in the city.

NOCD members' stories brought to light the range of the members' work to reinforce the cultural character and fabric of their neighborhoods; build and deepen community ties among residents, including artists and cultural workers; and make "visible" the deep reservoir of local arts and cultural assets that make each of these neighborhoods distinct. The following examples highlight the work described in the presentations:

Reinforcing neighborhood character and culture. To strengthen indigenous cultural heritage in Staten Island neighborhoods as both a cultural and economic asset, Staten Island Arts works closely with small businesses and heritage fairs to make them stronger on their own. The ¡WEPA! Festival, an initiative of El Puente's Green Light District, addresses the expressed need of local artists to have a venue for their work in the community.

¡WEPA! Festival, 2012.

Building community and access to resources. Gonzalo Casals shared a story about how the creation of a monthly film series offered gay men in his Jackson Heights–Woodside neighborhood an opportunity to meet one another outside the bar scene—using art as a tool for bringing this community together. The film series was brought to the Queens Museum of Art (QMA), which lends its infrastructure to support it. Casals noted that QMA's support of the film series informed his approach to community engagement at El Museo del Barrio. Prerana Reddy provided other examples of how QMA extends its work and resources to cultural producers and residents in the community, such as through its sup-

Mujeres en Movimiento, an Immigrant Movement International collaboration with WeBike to increase women's ridership, bike riding and maintenance skills. photo: Neshi Galindo

port of Immigrant Movement International, an artist-led storefront community center, and the revitalization of Corona Plaza.

Making "visible" local arts and cultural assets. Both Staten Island Arts (SIA) and El Puente are engaged in cultural mapping projects to document and share cultural assets, strengths, and practices in their communities. SIA's Count Yourself In project surveys Staten Island artists to gather baseline data that can be shared with public officials and policy makers to better advocate for local artists' needs. Data collected by El Puente's ¡WEPA! Project will inform a Cultural Assets Action Plan to further support the cultural community, amplify the visibility of Latino artists and artists of color, and develop new spaces for cultural expression.


Staten Island Arts launched the *Count Yourself In* survey campaign in 2014.

KEY THEMES FROM RESEARCHERS' PRESENTATIONS

Taken as a whole, NOCD-NY members' stories of neighborhoods in flux and the impacts of members' cultural work in these communities represented a bellwether of key trends that were highlighted in researchers' presentations. Perhaps the most sobering trend that was brought into stark relief by researchers' presentations is the persistent and profound structural inequities in cities and philanthropy.

Structural inequities.

Drawing from a recent research project with Susan Seifert, culminating in the publication of *"Natural" Cultural Districts: A Three-City Study*, Mark Stern shared findings on the processes through which cultural assets came to cluster in seven neighborhoods in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Seattle. In terms of the "social geography" within which clusters develop, Stern and Seifert observed an "explosion of economic inequality" alongside increased economic, ethnic, and household diversity. They differentiated cultural clusters into those that succeed in the context of economic and location advantage (high market and market districts) from those that overcome legacies of exclusion and isolation (civic clusters). In Philadelphia, Stern and Seifert discovered that civic clusters in low-income neighborhoods tended to decline in significance between 1997 and 2011, a possible result of neglect by funders and internal developments within the cultural community.
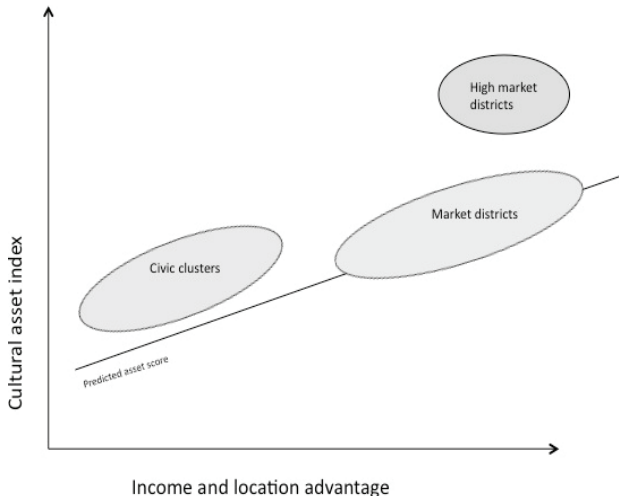
Susan Seifert and Mark Stern chart the presence of cultural assets relative to income and location advantages for different types of "natural" cultural districts.

In current work with the Reinvestment Fund, Stern has developed a policy tool that incorporates culture as a dimension of social well-being and assesses a dozen dimensions of well-being for each Philadelphia census tract. The study showed concentrations of advantage, concentrations of disadvantage, and neighborhoods with both strengths and weaknesses. The dominant pattern

is that economic well-being (measured by income, educational attainment, and labor force participation) dictates other dimensions of well-being (e.g., housing, health, education, security, environment). Cultural assets tend to reinforce patterns of economic inequity, but social connections—including cultural resources and engagement—can function as mediating influences. For example, cultural assets were associated with lower rates of chronic illness and poor health (morbidity) in low-income neighborhoods.

In her presentation, "Urban Restructuring and Inequity," Mindy Fullilove summarized her research, which is informed by her professional training as a psychiatrist, around the mental health effects of "serial displacement"—the repeated dispersal of low-income communities of color by environmental processes such as violence, segregation, redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkages, gentrification, and the foreclosure crisis. Fullilove observed that serial displacement creates structural inequities: it destroys social networks and capital by forcing these communities to involuntarily move out and start over, thereby placing them at a disadvantage. Fullilove suggested that culture,

> *Serial displacement creates structural inequities: it destroys social networks and capital by forcing these communities to involuntarily move out and start over.*

which she defined as "an explicit depiction of what people and artists see," is often a manifestation of "things breaking apart" in these neighborhoods. For example, the emergence of hip-hop in the 1970s coincided with planned shrinkage in the South Bronx. She observed that structural inequities have profound mental health impacts—they are "a source of deep torment for people."

The theme of structural inequities surfaced by the presentations of Stern and Fullilove was echoed in Holly Sidford's findings on arts funding patterns in her report *Fusing Arts, Culture, and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy*.

Sidford shared compelling data in support of the report's central finding: the distribution of cultural funding is out of balance with the changing demographics, aesthetics, and economics of today's evolving cultural sector. The report documents an expanding cultural sector with significant growth in the number of groups that are community based, ethnically specific, or both; the majority of the sector's nonprofit arts and culture groups are small (74 percent have budgets of less than $250,000 a year). With regard to arts funding

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patterns, arts and culture groups with budgets of over $5 million represent less than 2 percent of all groups, yet they receive more than 55 percent of all contributions. Ten percent of culture grants are classified as benefiting disadvantaged populations; 4 percent are classified as advancing social justice.

The power of arts and culture.

While shining a light on structural inequities in cities and philanthropy, researchers' presentations also provided a deeper, nuanced understanding of the value of arts and culture as sources of neighborhood health and resilience and as an integral part of addressing or responding to these structural issues. In her presentation, "Culture, Creativity, and Design," Alaka Wali discussed her anthropological investigations into culture and creativity as key ingredients in the resilient design of "social processes" that respond to adversity. Her research on the "informal arts" demonstrated that the arts are an area in which social differences and barriers are crossed, particularly in informal, active arts (e.g., drumming circles). Wali's social network research in Chicago revealed that neighborhoods that provide outlets for aesthetic expression make their communities more successful in their capacity to respond to adversity. Wali also

observed that the kinds of aesthetic expression promoted in these neighborhood outlets, such as folk and traditional arts, are often dismissed but they are essential to well-being and the construction of identity.

Recycled art mural by Juan Diego, Chicago. photo: opyright of The Field Museum

Maria Rosario Jackson discussed her research on arts and culture in comprehensive community revitalization, which is informed by her training as an urban planner. Recognizing that challenges in housing, health, employment, and other community issues are interrelated in urban and rural areas, Jackson's research looks at arts and cultural activity as part of a community's connective tissue and as an integral element of strategies to help address sometimes seemingly intractable issues. Reflecting on why arts and cultural activity must be considered in community improvement strategies, Jackson asked, "If, historically, strategies to disempower communities take away creative expression, then why isn't arts and cultural activity a part of strategies to help empower communities? What are the conditions necessary to integrate arts and culture into strategies to help

If, historically, strategies to disempower communities take away creative expression, then why isn't arts and cultural activity a part of strategies to help empower communities?

strengthen historically disenfranchised communities?" One of those conditions, suggested Jackson, is building understanding in other sectors that arts and culture are valuable and inextricable from other community priorities and concerns: "You can measure progress on the 'get it' meter when other fields, like health and community development, 'get it'—that is, they understand the range of fundamental ways in which arts and culture are crucial to community advancement."

RESPONSE

Key themes and points of learning raised in researchers' presentations sparked a robust discussion among participants about research opportunities and challenges. Stern and Seifert's focus on how the arts are intrinsic to, and contribute to, social well-being spurred further thinking by the full group about how to reset the equation of what well-being is and how to define it. As Holly Sidford asked, "Can new measures of well-being be drawn from psychiatry, the happiness index, and theology?"

Jackson noted that this is a moment when there is renewed interest in comprehensive strategies for community revitalization, opening the door to new opportunities to integrate arts into these strategies and the policies that support them. Jackson cited the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative in partnership with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts as an example of arts organizations and individual artists actively working with housing organizations, human services agencies, schools, and other

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entities to address a wide range of issues that ultimately affect health outcomes. If this is a moment for comprehensive approaches, suggested Jackson, we need to provide more examples of how arts and cultural activity connects with other sectors in neighborhoods, demonstrating both its intrinsic and instrumental value.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

The exchange generated a wide range of questions for further discussion around terminology, definitions, and data, as well as strategies for addressing gentrification, incorporating new cultural practices, and shifting narratives to reconstruct policy. These questions included the following:

- What is the relationship between the rich opportunities of culture and arts and the structural issues that bump up against them? Who has the power to create narratives in neighborhoods? How can we reconstruct positive policies to replace negative ones (e.g., redlining)?

- What effective strategies can we employ to integrate arts and culture into comprehensive community strategies—how can we move the needle on the "get it" meter?

- What can we learn from social service organizations about data collection for case making?

- What tools do we need to help us more effectively tell the stories of what we do?

- How has artistic practice changed? Are we capturing these changes in data collection and research?

- How do we as practitioners navigate in a neighborhood that has already gone through gentrification but still has a long-standing cultural community? How can we connect and support long-term community members and more recent residents?

- How can we increase the utility of data for small cultural and community organizations?

- With regard to terminology and definitions: are there terms we can use that better convey NOCD-NY values? Placed based versus place making? How do we define what is a "natural" district and what is not?

NEXT STEPS

"Valuing the Intersection Between Arts, Culture, and Community" generated a number of next steps to further field learning and NOCD-NY's explorations around a collaborative research agenda. The session's rich and wide-ranging discussions affirmed the importance of continuing this kind of sharing and dialogue among practitioners and researchers. It also underscored the importance of bringing together a coalition of voices and experiences of people across the city as a way to make change. Participants recommended follow-up exchanges, including those that bring artists in conversation with researchers, to continue to promote learning and collaboration among practitioners and researchers, as well as to explore the questions raised at this event.

The exchange also galvanized NOCD-NY members and allies around amplifying members' stories of their work in order to shift narratives in neighborhoods toward reconstructing policy. To advance policy making in support of this work, NOCD-NY will integrate researchers' feedback into its working list of policy recommendations for new city leadership. In addition, NOCD-NY will explore specific recommendations from researchers to build on the coalition's strength and momentum. These recommendations include the following:

- In collaboration with a local research institute, develop NOCD-NY as a practice field within related sectors, such as community planning, social work/community organizing, and social practice art. NOCD-NY members could function as field placement sites for students to begin to do fieldwork and produce documentation to advance NOCD-NY's collaborative research agenda.

- Form a Creative Neighborhoods Fund as a mechanism to "encourage the flexible allocation of private, public, and philanthropic resources" to support and stimulate neighborhood cultural activity. The proposal is modeled on the Reinvestment Fund's Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (see Jeremy Nowak's Creativity and Neighborhood Development, 16–18).

- Based on recommendations presented in NOCD-NY's Innovative Cultural Uses of Urban Space profile series (*http://nocdny .org/2013/09/18/update-innovative-cultural -uses-of-urban-space/*), advocate for and support building a network of flexible and accessible spaces for cultural use throughout New York City neighborhoods that is illustrative of naturally occurring cultural districts as a concept and approach to community building.

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