

Ten Policies to Increase the Impact of the Arts on Placemaking

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Policy #1: Foster partnerships between creatives and visionary mayors. All placemaking is local. County, state and federal governments are funders, capacity builders, conveners and regulators, but all placemaking happens at the local level. Federal, state, county and foundation arts funding should foster/require local partnerships between the arts community and the visionary mayors who are their natural allies.

Creative placemakers need the strong voices of mayors as champions to overcome the inertia of the constituencies for the existing arts funding policies of government agencies and foundations. Visionary mayors are also the primary source of initiative in regional economies, the weavers who bring together the threads of the arts, historic preservation, economic development, housing, transportation and education to create the fabric of placemaking. Without the weaver, the arts are simply a single thread.

Likewise, visionary mayors need to move beyond the large arts institutions to directly engage their community of local arts entrepreneurs in order to maximize vibrancy and creative energy of their cities. This engagement requires a light touch, as successful entrepreneurial communities, arts or otherwise, need to be allowed to self-organize from the bottom up, rather than be organized by government from the top down. Not all visionary mayors can do this, and not all mayors are visionary. So a partnership between creatives and municipalities will not always be successful. An intriguing opportunity is to connect the innovative mayors who have self-selected through the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge with the creative placemakers who have self-selected through ArtPlace. These might be further linked to the technology startup communities that are self-organizing around the country, with and without government support. It is breathtaking to imagine the explosive synergy that could come from merging these three initiatives into one movement.

Policy #2: Balance funding between institutional and entrepreneurial/market approaches.

There is too much emphasis in arts policy on institutionalized approaches, such as arts districts and artist live/work spaces, and not enough on storefront and pop up type approaches that are more quickly transformative and more of a fit with the transient nature of much of the arts community. There is also too much focus on providing direct financial support to arts organizations and not enough focus on creating a stronger market for artists and their work through promotion, mentoring and networking.

Artists are generally more nimble and entrepreneurial than established arts organizations. One of our key challenges is to overcome the inertia of arts organizations in order to engage and unleash the energy of the creatives in a local place. Funders should allow individual artists to apply for funding, alone for smaller grants and in partnership with an organization for larger grants. All organizations should be required to engage artists in planning and execution of their projects as a condition of all funding.

A special funding focus should be the development of the kind of local leadership that is capable of identifying and directly engaging local creatives.

Policy #3: Focus the measurement of arts outcomes on the role of the arts in creating distinctive places that are magnets for talent. Much of the current thinking in state arts policy circles (e.g., NGA, NASAA, AFTA) is about measuring the impact of the arts as a job creator, focusing on the direct jobs created by arts organizations and the indirect jobs created by the spending of arts organizations and their patrons. These direct and indirect job effects are actually much less than the potential job impact that the arts can have on the larger economy by the way that the arts contribute to distinctiveness of place, making localities magnets for the young, mobile talent, who crave distinctive places and who are the primary fuel for the growth of the innovation economy. Put it this way: great art creates great places; great places attract great talent; great talent creates great jobs. If we prove this chain of connection through our work, there is a much higher level of public funding that the arts could get by making places into talent magnets, than it can get based on simply its own job creation potential or intrinsic value.

Policy #4: Tailor placemaking strategies to the neighborhood context. There are three very different kinds of placemaking challenges at the neighborhood level that require a different leadership approach and policy tool kit:

Low-income neighborhoods which have static or declining vibrancy, due to persistent rates of poverty and declining population and job growth. These neighborhoods have the challenge of economic integration and upward mobility, of changing the bedrock conditions for their residents such that current residents get a larger share of economic growth and chose to stay in the neighborhood as it is redeveloped. There are often deep creative capabilities among existing residents that can be unleashed and developed. But, to be effective, arts initiatives need to be coordinated with housing redevelopment, workforce development and school reform (see Policy #10 below). Working in low-income neighborhoods requires different policies and skill sets than those required in more prosperous neighborhoods. But as soon as a low-income neighborhood becomes prosperous, it faces the next set of challenges described below.

Distinctive, mixed-income neighborhoods with rising vibrancy. These neighborhoods have the challenge of maintaining diversity and distinctiveness in the face of "commodification" as rising rents crowd out diversity of people and use. The result is more high-income people, more chains and large companies, and less socio-economic diversity and less one-of-a-kind shops and startups. This is extremely problematic as diversity is a fundamental precondition for innovation. In these neighborhoods, there needs to be a deliberate effort to preserve lower rent uses, through housing policy and historic preservation policy, described in Policy #5 below, and through zoning policy that is permissive of funky uses. For example, some cities allow commodification on main avenues, but maintain diversity through a free-for-all of permissive zoning on side streets, which typically command lower rents than the main avenues anyway.

Generic chic neighborhoods with declining vibrancy. These neighborhoods have the challenge of using some of their prosperity to buy back some of the soul they sold to get it. If they do not, they will lose the competition for talent to diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods, the next economy will pass them by, and they will become increasingly less vibrant, high-income enclaves. I think this context is actually the most difficult placemaking challenge. Better to avoid it by maintaining the diversity of distinctive, mixed-income neighborhoods.

Implied in all this is a fourth context: *the un-place*, the vast expanse of undifferentiated strip malls, subdivisions and office parks in seas of industrialized agriculture that characterizes much of the American landscape. Most of what we have done for the past 70 years is to make un-places. It is actually hard to make a place from a greenfield. Creative placemaking does not presume that a place does not already exist; it is in fact most successful when there is already a real place to build upon, made distinctive by past layers of development, of local character accreted over time.

Our cities, large and small, served as the primary ports of entry for waves of immigrants and were the engines of upward mobility that created the middle class in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Their decline has been both a consequence and a cause of rising income inequality, and their revitalization represents our best chance to rebuild the middle class. Income inequality and income segregation stifle economic growth and innovation. To the extent that creative placemaking helps to restart our cities as engines of upward mobility and innovation, it contributes to the solution of the most critical problem facing the nation.

Policy #5: Use housing and historic preservation policy to promote and maintain diversity. Hope 6 and now Choice Neighborhoods are promoting economic integration in low-income neighborhoods, but housing policy is not playing the role in preserving diversity in distinctive, mixed-income neighborhoods that would help those neighborhoods avoid commodification. Outside of the Choice Neighborhoods program, state and federal housing policy has been focused on fair housing, opening up the suburbs and their better schools to people of color. Very recently, there is growing federal and state interest in building mixed-income housing at transit nodes, mostly for environmental and workforce access reasons, versus as a deliberate strategy to maintain diversity in distinctive, mixed income neighborhoods. Scattered site housing programs go in the direction of deliberately fostering fine-grained diversity, especially when pursued as aggressively as London does with its Council Flats, which integrate affordable housing into every neighborhood of that city, contributing greatly to London's dynamism.

When the great American urbanist Jane Jacobs noted that new ideas come from old buildings, she was not talking about heritage architecture. She meant that a large supply of cheap space is essential to creating the diversity of people and uses that spawns innovation. Historic preservation is too focused on adaptive reuse, which makes historic space the equivalent of new space from a rent perspective. If one of the most important functions of old buildings is providing cheap space that enables diversity, then a key element of historic preservation policy should be to keep a good portion of old buildings in an un-renovated state. Just as we have open space preservation policies in rural areas, we need cheap space preservation policies in distinctive, mixed-income neighborhoods.

Policy #6: Promote the reintegration of art and science. Some arts folks seem to feel they have a monopoly on creativity. In fact, the essence of the creative process is exactly the same for art and science. There is a narrow definition of a "creative economy" in the arts world that includes only arts and closely related industries, such as fashion, design, publishing, and advertising. This definition excludes scientific researchers and technology entrepreneurs, two of the essential types of creatives in an innovation economy. Part of the next economy will be a fusion of art and science. We should use arts policy to deliberately foment it by funding art/science reintegration.

Policy #7: Encourage churn among arts organizations and foster the rapid recycling of failed arts entrepreneurs. The network is the emergent structure of the larger innovation economy of which the arts are a part. The work of Lee Fleming at Harvard shows that the most productive networks connect a diverse and dynamic group of individual innovators across institutional and sector boundaries. These networks are formed by a subset of innovators who move from one firm or organization to another, taking with them the relationships at the previous place. This happens both by individual choice and by firm failure, in which case the talent of the failed firm is recycled into other existing firms and startups. This is why places like Silicon Valley, with higher rates of churn in both workers and firms, have denser and more productive innovation networks than more stable places like Boston. This is partly a consequence of state policy: Massachusetts enforces non-compete agreements and California does not. And it is partly a difference in culture: Silicon Valley does not stigmatize failure; in fact the saying in the Silicon Valley is that *failure = experience*. This full embrace of the failure that accompanies all risk-taking is less common elsewhere. The arts need to act more like the Silicon Valley and California and less like the rest of the country. We need to encourage risk-taking among both arts institutions and arts entrepreneurs, knowing that much of it will result in failure, and find ways to facilitate the absorption of the workers of the failed institutions into other institutions and the recycling of the failed entrepreneurs into new ventures, borrowing some of the recycling mechanisms of the best startup communities, such as the position of “entrepreneurs in residence”—a failed entrepreneur who works at a venture capital firm, advising their portfolio of funded companies until the next startup opportunity emerges. Perhaps ArtPlace and other funders could create “arts entrepreneurs in residence” to advise its grantees while they look for the next project to lead.

Policy #8: Link creative placemaking initiatives to form regional learning communities. Fleming notes the importance of frequent face-to-face interaction to exchange tacit knowledge, the principal currency of innovation. Tacit knowledge is not conscious and hence cannot be conveyed via the Internet. As Michael Polyani put it, *we know more than we can tell*. Fleming calls these networks for tacit knowledge exchange *small world innovation networks*.

But, the geography of *small world innovation networks* is not limited to a single dense node, such as Kendall Square in Cambridge. Their geography is metropolitan, such as the multi-county Silicon Valley or the tri-state Boston Metro. They are enabled by the transportation infrastructure that creates regional labor markets: interstate highways and commuter rail. Over time, higher speed commuter rail will greatly extend these already geographically vast networks to a super regional scale. When we think about the creative places we are making, we need to conceive of them in a metropolitan or super regional network, and strengthen the connection among places (nodes) in the network to amplify the market for talent, ideas and products (including art) of each node in the network, and the opportunity to learn from each other’s success and failures. This is particularly critical in states with many small cities without a dominant large city, as these states only reach a competitive critical mass of innovation capability as a whole regional network versus as a single node.

Policy #9: Use art to help make urban schools the best places to develop pattern recognition skills. Richard Murnane and Frank Levy in their seminal book, *The New Division of Labor*, ask two questions: What do computers do better than people? What do people do better than computers? The answer to the first: computers are faster, better and cheaper than people at any task that is rules-based. People are better than computers at tasks that involve the pattern recognition skills of critical thinking and complex communication.

Yet, our schools from kindergarten through college are still focused on producing human robots with strong rules-based thinking skills. Tests of the “achievement gap” between suburban whites and urban blacks and Hispanics are tests of rules-based thinking. The truth is that we don’t know what the relevant achievement gap really is because we don’t know how to measure it. And most schools, even the best suburban schools and Ivy League colleges, do not know how to develop pattern recognition skills. These skills are primarily based in tacit knowledge that is acquired by experience rather than by reading or listening to lectures.

The arts draw upon and develop a capacity for pattern recognition that can be applied outside of art. It’s why the best medical schools have their students take art classes to improve their diagnostic capabilities. It’s why as Ken Robinson showed in the UK, the schools with the best art programs have the best math and science results. We should aggressively exploit this connection, using art along with other project-based learning to make schools in low-income neighborhoods the best schools at developing pattern recognition skills, leap-frogging the suburban schools to produce an innovation-capable workforce and serving as the primary mechanism for promoting upward mobility and reducing income inequality.

Policy #10: Use public art to radically enhance the public realm and create conditions for serendipity. The Polish journalist and Solidarity activist Adam Michnik noted that democracy is not a noun; it’s a verb. It’s a never-ending process. It’s not something you have; it’s something you make every day. Likewise, a creative place is not a noun. It is not a program or project. It resists intentionality. Innovation is not predictable. A great place is not where you go to do something; it is somewhere you go to enjoy doing nothing. Civic engagement should be fun, a form of collective cleverness.

And without good public space, there is no civic engagement; in fact there is no city. The space between buildings—streets, sidewalks, plazas, and parks—is the most important space in the city, and a chief policy challenge is to rebalance this precious space from cars to pedestrians and bicycles.

Art has a key role to play in enlivening the public realm, but our various “percent for art” programs are not up to this challenge; they are simply too small scale to have impact, and the works that are funded are often barely visible to the public. As it has since the very first cave painting 40,000 years ago, art has the ability to transform a place that is dark and scary into a place that is safe, inviting and vibrant—more quickly and cheaply than any other tool we have. We need to unleash it to do so.