

MicroFest: USA

A synthesis of learning

about art, culture & place



By Pam Korza

For the Network of Ensemble Theaters
In partnership with Animating Democracy,
A program of Americans for the Arts

June 2013

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MicroFest: USA | A synthesis of learning about art, culture, & place

By Pam Korza for the Network of Ensemble Theaters, in partnership with Animating Democracy, a program of [Americans for the Arts](#), June 2013



The complete synthesis and eight essays about the MicroFest experience may be found on the [NET](#) and [Animating Democracy](#) web sites.

[MicroFest USA: Revitalize, Reconnect, Renew](#) was a journey—part festival, part learning exchange—orchestrated in 2012–2013 by the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) to take a fresh look at the roles of art, culture, and artists in creating healthy vibrant communities. NET’s intent was twofold: to acknowledge and advance the pioneering and current work of ensemble theaters committed to community-based practice and positive community change, and to foster mutual learning with a wider spectrum of artists, cultural workers, and community partners also contributing to community well-being and social change.

The MicroFest journey included Detroit, Appalachia (Harlan County, KY and Knoxville, TN), and New Orleans (and Honolulu after the time of this writing), places challenged in the extreme by economic, social, and environmental issues. These are also places where rich and distinctive cultural forms and artistic communities have thrived and where art and artists are innovating strategies for renewal and revitalization as part of a vibrant ecosystem of interdisciplinary, cross-sector, collaborative work.

In the particular context of the kinds of challenges these communities and regions face, MicroFest focused on core questions in order to illuminate the role that arts and culture might play in other communities:

- What does the work look like?
- What makes the work *work*?
- What are we learning about working across sectors?
- What difference are we making, and how do we know?

MicroFest highlighted a spectrum of cultural production that is artist-driven, grounded in community-based and social practice, and that is traditionally under the radar in official or conventional creative placemaking strategies, which tend to focus on physical enhancement, amenities, art spaces, and tourism and economic engines. By putting this range of socially and civically engaged creative work on the radar, NET aims to contribute to enhance understanding of this work within its own ensemble theater community and be a factor in local and national dialogues.

What Does the Work Look Like?

In the work of community revitalization, renewal, and reaffirmation, arts and cultural work at its most effective is highly influenced by and responsive to the particulars of place. MicroFest shone a light on ensemble theater and other performance-based work, indigenous and local cultures, public art, media arts, hip-hop, and cultural organizing efforts as critical parts of the cultural ecosystem working for positive change.

Devised theater and community-based theater practices are prevalent and potent. Such work is carried out by mission-driven ensemble theaters (Junebug Productions, The Carpetbag Theatre) that embrace local aesthetics and a commitment to social change through community-based art practice. One-time and long-term theater projects (*Higher Ground*) create open forums for discussing important issues, while also building relationships and capacity to work together for change. There is experimentation within ensemble work (The Hinterlands) and across artistic disciplines, as well as a potent focus on site-specific work (*Cry You One*, *Mondo Bizarro*). Youth-centered theater companies (Mosaic and Matrix Theaters) have engaged generations of young people in high-level artistic production and in the history, issues, and affirmation and reimagining of their city. Within communities, theaters exert individual and cumulative focus on issues from access to healthy food to the erosion of the bayou, to the healing and reintegration of formerly incarcerated women into the community (ArtSpot Productions).

Along the continuum of cultural production, there are potent roles for innovative hybrid forms as well as for traditional arts. The socially engaged arts in Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans represent “incubators of possibility.” The result of boundary crossing between theater and other artists (Invincible’s *Complex Movements*), nonprofit and commercial entities (Detroit Lives!), different design fields (rogueHAA), urban planning, and direct work with artists is hybrid work that reveals and explicates issues in new ways and seeks to contribute to actual change. Just as radical, folk and traditional arts (Mardi Gras Indians, Mt. Sinai Spirituals) are forms of community empowerment, expressions of deep cultural knowledge and durability, creativity, and community values.

Artists and culturally specific organizations play a catalytic role in revitalizing public spaces and neighborhoods and providing civic as well as cultural gathering spaces. Artists boldly deploy imaginative strategies to reclaim blighted, abandoned public spaces (The Music Box), mobilizing community members to transform alleys (The Alley Project), repurpose closed schools to serve community needs (Higher Ground), and improve neighborhood safety. Longstanding cultural

organizations (Ashé Cultural Arts Center, The Carpetbag Theatre) step up as civic organizations, anchoring downtown neighborhoods. They play a critical role in preserving a neighborhood’s historic and cultural roots, advocating for cultural and economic equity, while supporting new creative, business, and civic ventures.

What Makes the Work Work?

MicroFest looked at how place impacts art, ways ensemble theaters are contributing to healthy vibrant communities, and how ensemble values are embodied in place-based creative activity. The values of self-determination and agency, equity, and social justice were a central focus.

Art is at the center. *MicroFest affirmed the tools of theater—story, dialogue, metaphor, conflict, and human drama—as elements of effective socially engaged art.* Story, in particular, showed its power to identify common ground; define the truths of a place and dispel misperceptions; “give people hope” and, especially when shared and witnessed in the public sphere, provide validation, evoke empathy, and mobilize people.



Matrix Theatre Company performs *Detroit Dreaming* in The Alley Project.

Values that underpin effective ensemble theater—inclusion, transparency, excellence, and respect—are also values at the foundation of effective social justice work, underscoring ensemble theater as an excellent partner in this work. Other values at the heart of the most transformative creative work were offered by Gerard Stropnicki: *agency, authenticity, artistry, audacity, and accuracy.* Whether they are theater ensembles or other configurations of artists and community partners, ensembles work by fostering a sense of the whole, and they can bring fragmented communities together into a collective space to create and to solve problems.

Socially engaged art is intentional, and it is most effective when it stems from clarity and specificity in its social intention. Artistic choices and engagement strategies support that intention. In addition, rigor on both artistic and civic terms supports the most compelling and successful work.

Place and time matter. *Continuity of culture strengthens the power of arts and culture to revitalize and renew distressed communities.* Consciously and subconsciously artists “construct to deconstruct to recreate” a continuity of culture, building and drawing upon place-based aesthetics from the past and present in ways that deepen the meaning and power of creative work. Creative strategies gain potency when they contain the stories and themes, sounds, and rhythms that signify a place.

Understanding the context and dynamics of place is critical to doing the most potent art and the most responsible community work. “The stakes are high because the work is consequential,”

Gerard Stropnick wrote. MicroFest participants acknowledged the potential for negative consequences if context of place is not carefully considered.

Commitment to sustained and varied arts and cultural efforts around critical needs and issues in a community is paramount to effecting change. Achieving positive change around large-scale and long-standing issues is a lengthy proposition. Projects that have evolved over multiple years deserve attention to understand how they serve as a sustaining forum and force to build civic capacity and strength and to address issues in the real time of people's lives. Similarly, the ongoing work of organizations in prisons, schools, social justice organizations, and over time in neighborhood is critical to achieving incremental and cumulative change.

People are agents, not targets, of change. *When the work has its greatest social impact, it is because the people of a place are invested and involved from the outset in defining and framing issues from their experience; project outcomes are based on what matters to them.* Who drives the work of community change is a critical question in the context of disenfranchised communities. The ethos of community agency was prominent throughout MicroFest, looking at how arts and culture can be a powerful tool to activate people to effectuate change in their lives and communities. Skilled and dedicated artists play a critical role as leaders, as partners, and in supporting residents and communities to be agents of change in their own lives.

Community-based institutions provide bridge building and sustained leadership with a deep understanding of art and context and a commitment to community engagement. The many stories and examples in Detroit, New Orleans, and Appalachia illustrate how various organizations have enabled sustained work over time by providing support and infrastructure for community members to engage in arts and culture toward self-determined outcomes. Reliable youth-centered organizations support young people to develop individually and collectively in their communities through the arts. Community colleges and colleges of arts and design provide leadership, partnership, and infrastructure.

Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCD) assert a place-based, community-determined approach to community development. "A lot of creative place making is an interventionist model," Caron Atlas said. "[The NOCD] model is people intervening on their own behalf. Place making as a long-term process rather than a short-term intervention." NOCDs are self-determined by the artists, cultural groups, businesses, sympathetic officials, and community members in neighborhoods where distinct and naturally occurring layers of culture provide a vital and desirable mix for local people, and may be a destination for others.

What Are We Learning about Working across Sectors?

The most successful and creative strategies for making a vibrant place and addressing complex social and civic issues include cross-sector collaborations. MicroFest looked at artists and cultural organizations working inside systems, collaborating with issue-specific organizations and activists, and working across sectors.

In equitable, responsible, and creative cross-sector work, the transformational change that artists, cultural workers, and art can effect needs to be uplifted. Rather than being viewed as merely a product, the arts need to be better understood by other sectors as a transformational means that can contribute to their targeted outcomes, such as health and wellness. MicroFest demonstrated how arts and culture—deployed *within* the planning process rather than being only the outcome—can enliven public meetings, enhance dialogue and decision-making, and attract diverse participants. What makes the most provocative work *work* is collaboration that doesn't just use art as a tool for some other end, but collaboration that embraces the holistic integration of creativity as a core part of any civic or social endeavor.

Artists need to check their attitudes and keep an open mind in working with other sectors. Carol Bebel asks, “Can we put aside any disagreement or difference in values we might have with an institution or system—whether city government, the justice system, or the organized church—to acknowledge that ours is not necessarily the bigger truth? Can we be good partners even when we believe we know better than ‘they’ do? Having a different opinion is not necessarily a trump card; it can be viewed as a distinguishing value of diversity.”



Cry You One, Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions, MicroFest: New Orleans performance, 2013. Photos: Michael Premo

What else does it take to effectively work across sectors and within systems?

It takes cultivating open-minded partners and identifying pivotal bridge builders who are effective translators and boundary crossers; and it takes time. Key local advocates are necessities—people who can negotiate between arts, government, and business in order to successfully incorporate community-based arts into community development and other civic processes.

It takes navigating difficult conversations. Many of the challenges of working across sectors relate to issues of language and communications; lack of understanding of professional norms,

expertise, and cultures; and underlying misperceptions. It takes a commitment of energy and time to learn and to be present in the other's sphere of work, an ability to be vulnerable to missteps and to correct them, and a willingness to challenge and be open to challenge and discomfort.

It takes confronting power as a key determinate. MicroFest raised myriad concerns about how power plays out in cross-sector work. Confronting issues of power and privilege is key if the goal is transformational community development that is grounded in and determined with community. In much community development, there is a gulf between grassroots efforts and resource bearers both within and outside the community. "Structuring partnerships to equitably incorporate volunteer leadership over the long-term is particularly important in economically distressed communities where many or all of the local partners rely on volunteer staff," wrote Mark Kidd. Artists, too, bear privileges and power. They must be aware of the how their power affects the dynamics of community and cross-sector efforts.

It takes complicating notions of gentrification. In Detroit and New Orleans, which are both experiencing an influx of artists and newcomers, MicroFest conversations revealed the limits of the term *gentrification*. While participants heard of classic actions that typify gentrification playing out, the typical scenario—artists enter a less favorable area, stimulate development, and are then priced out—is not always the case. Transitions are often symptoms of larger shifting economic and social cycles, or it is local residents who make improvements that ultimately force artists out. Caron Atlas pointed out that gentrification is not an inevitable force out of everyone's control. It is linked to policy, and people can influence and change policy.

Erik Takeshita reflected on MicroFest as an entry point for these conversations about gentrification "and inherent issues of power and agency, about the role of race in community development, the unintended consequences of reinvestment in neighborhoods, the tension between wanting reinvestment yet also not wanting to change a place beyond recognition, and the edge that exists between differing narratives of a community. Art can not only help bring new people, new energy and new investment to communities, but it can also be powerful tool in helping to frame and mediate some of these hard conversations about the role of art in community development."

It takes alternative and more expansive notions of economy that are values-based rather than strictly market-based. MicroFest brought forward activist-scholars' concepts of *moral economy* and *human economies* of value in pursuing equitable community development and the renewal and sustainability of healthy communities. Both suggest a powerful role for arts and culture as agents of change.

It takes effective models of institutional and philanthropic support that honor and uphold the values of responsible arts-and-culture-based revitalization. Some exemplary approaches were cited within MicroFest that offer models for responsible place-based funding, all of which respect and honor the people of place and support their agency to define the use of resources. They include: Detroit's Skillman Foundation, which embedded support for community-based art

in a major neighborhood and youth development initiative; the East Tennessee Foundation's small investments to support and grow local cultural assets and their economic potential; and philanthropist John Paul Dejoria's hands-off and sustained commitment to Grow Appalachia.

What Difference Are We Making, and How Do We Know?



The Hungry Heart, FISH Hospitality Pantries and The Carpetbag Theatre.
Photo: Michael Premo

Transformative social change requires focus on the civic and social impact of cultural work, in addition to economic development with a goal of equity. Participants acknowledged the value of evaluation to improve the work and to be more effective in achieving social goals, but these coupled questions proved somewhat elusive on the MicroFest journey. Nonetheless, many participants and community members offered stories that illuminate how broad notions

of “intentional *transformation*” can be demonstrated in terms of more specific changes in:

- *awareness, knowledge, or understanding of issues* (e.g., *Angola 3*, a play by Parnell Hebert about the horrors of solitary confinement and injustices in the prison system);
- *public dialogue and deliberation* (e.g., FISH Hospitality Pantries use of theater to spark community conversations about new ways to address hunger and poverty in Knoxville's food deserts);
- *attitudes* (arts helped communities clarify values, envision new possibilities, and break out of conventional patterns such as “not in my backyard” (*Building Home*) and negative misperceptions of place (*Matrix Theater's Detroit Dreaming*));
- *civic engagement and creative capacity* (e.g., Higher Ground participants form relationships through developing and performing theater, relationships that foster an increased sense of self- and collective agency, building social capital that can motivate and empower action);
- *action* (e.g., Latina women involved in Congreso de Jornaleros empowered by theater to mobilize and meet with the Sheriff); and
- *policies, conditions, and solutions* (e.g., through arts-based projects, Kids Rethink New Orleans replaced a policy of zero tolerance in charter schools with the practice of restorative justice).

“Most of the MicroFest artists aspire to a more holistic view of impact, placing strong emphasis on relationships and process,” wrote Michael Premo. Animating Democracy's research similarly

finds that arts and culture make their most significant contribution in building capacity for civic engagement and the creation of human, social, and community capital, areas deserving further exploration.

As MicroFest participants tried to understand how social change occurs, they wondered, “Is change revolution or evolution?” The notion that change is *incremental* resonated; incremental change may be framed as intermediate outcomes, points along the way that mark progress or that can influence other change. Also, change happens through *networks* (this concept introduced via science-based emergence theory by Detroit hip-hop artist Invincible in her *Complex Movements* performance). Networks lead to communities of practice, out of which, suddenly and surprisingly, emerge systems of influence.

Implications of MicroFest: USA

While there have been many initiatives and studies that have examined and provided support in arenas of arts and civic engagement, social justice, and creative placemaking, MicroFest is unique in focusing through a multifocal, progressive, social justice lens. MicroFest provided a view of the work from the vantage point of ensemble theaters and from the point of view of other artists, community agents of change, and community members affected by issues of place. By virtue of these converging interests, the exchange and learning that took place at MicroFest informs current discourse in creative placemaking, arts and community development, and arts and social justice. This section presents opportunities, challenges, and lingering questions opened up by MicroFest regarding:

A) Supporting ensemble theaters within a broader community of practice. Place-based, in-person opportunities for learning and exchange are crucial for examining the work in context and situating ensemble theaters in a broader community of practice. Looking ahead to the future, dissemination and co-learning strategies include:

1. Continue MicroFest, build upon its strengths, and address the gaps.
2. Promote and reinforce specific uses of MicroFest documentation.

B) Advancing ensemble theater and cultural production in cross-sector work. As interest and demand increase among arts and other sectors, the need has grown for education and exchange opportunities that bring different stakeholders together for joint learning.

Approaches might include:

1. Deepen MicroFest’s examination of cross-sector work.
2. Expand participation by professionals from other sectors to extend the reach of cross-sector learning; nurture ambassadors in other fields and sectors as potential partners in their own communities.
3. Ensure artist training in working across sectors.
4. Explore strategic opportunities within specific sectors or fields where collaboration with arts and culture can advance positive community, civic, or social change.

C) Understanding impact. Artists and cultural organization leaders who are committed to social change work want to know what difference they are making, how they can do their work more effectively, and how to better tell the story of their impact. NET can play a role in building a culture of evidence:

1. Invite researchers and evaluators to engage in MicroFest planning, case studies, and sessions to infuse their thinking and identify opportunities for skill building and field learning.
2. Offer models or ideas for cross-sector evaluation that look at what it would take to negotiate, plan for, and evaluate multiple stakeholders' desired outcomes.
3. In the earliest planning for MicroFest, identify projects that are or that can be focusing efforts around assessing social impact in the time leading up to MicroFest and whose results can be shared at MicroFest.

D) Supporting and sustaining arts and culture in community revitalization. Questions of how to ensure and sustain healthy communities and the role of arts and culture in making and maintaining vital and just places loom large. They are outside the scope of MicroFest or NET alone to tackle, and they remain for the field at large to address. Further, recognition and resources will come to the arts and culture sector as funders and other sector leaders see evidence accrue over time regarding their contributions and impact. This said, certain questions suggested by MicroFest are worth noting, unanswered here but posed for future discussion.

- What more can be done to sustain the work of severely under-resourced individual artists and the often small- to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations that are driving and partnering in this work?
- What are the models and how can we maximize learning from cultural work and cross-sector partnerships that have been longstanding, strategic, and impactful?
- How can colleges and universities become even stronger partners in this work?
- Does youth-focused work in this arena represent a critical focus for further development and investment?
- What are models of institutional and philanthropic support and coordination that honor the values of ensemble practice and that have potential for advancing sustainable healthy communities?

INTRODUCTION

[MicroFest: USA / Revitalize, Reconnect, Renew](#) was a journey—part festival, part learning exchange—orchestrated in 2012–2013 by the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) to take a fresh look at the roles of art, culture, and artists in creating healthy vibrant communities. The impulse to delve into place-based work was intended to acknowledge and advance the pioneering and current work of ensemble theaters committed to community-based practice and positive community change. It was also intended to foster mutual learning, with a wider spectrum of artists, cultural workers, and community partners also contributing to community well-being and social change. Across all MicroFests there was interest in looking at how place impacts art and how art impacts place.



MicroFest's Core Questions

What does the work look like?
 What makes the work *work*?
 What are we learning about working across sectors?
 What difference are we making, and how do we know?

As NET was preparing for MicroFest, Executive Director Mark Valdez reflected, “Whether urban or rural, or in neighborhoods, wards, or ‘hollers,’ the most successful and creative strategies we have identified for making a vibrant place include cross-sector, cross disciplinary collaborations that involve community participation alongside arts and non-arts professionals. The merging of multiple perspectives and expertise enable fresh and holistic solutions to some of the community’s most pressing needs and challenges.¹ The curation of MicroFests—immersive events that engaged artists, partners, community members, and scholars in neighborhood alleys and lots, coal mines, bayou, food pantries, and alternative stages of America—elevated such efforts to explore the core questions.

“The United States has a long tradition of democratic popular arts founded on inclusion and diversity and practiced with aesthetics rooted in local culture and the voices of lived experience.” -**Mark Kidd**

NET saw an abundance of transformative creative work happening across the country. It was drawn to Detroit, Appalachia (Harlan County, KY and Knoxville, TN), New Orleans, and Honolulu. These are places challenged in the extreme by the economic, social, and environmental issues that are affecting other communities. And they are places where rich and distinctive cultural forms and artistic communities have thrived and

where art and artists are innovating strategies for renewal and revitalization as part of a vibrant ecosystem of interdisciplinary, cross-sector, collaborative work. Are these communities prophetic in their creative reckonings, rebuilding, and renewal?² What can other communities learn from them?

Ensemble theaters have not been widely viewed within the context of a larger ecosystem of artists, cultural workers, and other sector partners who are making innovative contributions to address the issues their communities face. *MicroFest: USA* situates theater ensembles (place-based entities themselves) within this ecosystem and looks at ways ensemble theaters are working with intention to contribute to healthy vibrant communities, in addition to how ensemble values (defined by NET as collaboration, flexibility, transparency, mutual respect, and inclusion) are embodied in place-based creative activity and in collaborations between arts and other sectors that are aiming to transform place.

MicroFest happened at a time when nationally, a growing number of arts funders, researchers, and practitioners are adopting the term *creative placemaking* to bring attention to the ways that arts, culture, physical infrastructure, and economic development can be coordinated to change the demographic and economic composition of economically distressed neighborhoods and communities.³ How does NET's inquiry fit within this context and how is it distinguished?

The most widely promulgated approach to creative placemaking is characterized by partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shaping the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.⁴ While encompassing social outcomes such as bringing diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired, the emphasis is on livability and economic development outcomes. These creative placemaking initiatives are supporting an array of good projects and organizations. They are fostering creative entrepreneurs and cultural industries that support job growth, new products and services, economic development, physical improvements, and so forth (a few of them were also presented at *MicroFest*).

Yet, many find the term *creative placemaking* somewhat problematic. As described by Erik Takeshita, a community development professional with Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC):

What is hard about some of these conversations is that they seem to suggest that “places” need to be made and that they didn’t exist before. This, of course, is false. There are vibrant places throughout the country. Some areas may need additional support or investment, but they are places with a rich history and people who call it “home.” One challenge is that much ...seems to be focused on short-term interventions rather than long-term, sustainable change. This is particularly difficult when dealing with historically disenfranchised communities. It is simply unreasonable to assume decades of disinvestment can be turned around with short-term investments of a year or two.⁵

A long and wide view is needed in which an expanded range of arts and cultural strategies are embraced and in which the communities who live and breathe the issues of place are engaged to achieve long-term sustainable change. Mark Kidd, Communications Director for [Roadside Theater](#), an ensemble theater company based at [Appalshop](#) in rural eastern Kentucky, wrote.

The civic priorities of community-based arts instead emphasize establishing a civic and creative infrastructure that is capable of taking on a variety of projects, including economic development, by involving a broad cross-section of the community, then identifying new ways to leverage local and external resources and expertise. The social justice and civic capacity building outcomes of the collaborations MicroFest is visiting offer an important lens to understand the responsibility of the “creative” in placemaking.⁶

In the particular context of the kinds of distressed communities and regions that MicroFest chose to visit and learn about, its lenses give focus to:

Creative activity that expands beyond physical enhancement, amenities, art spaces, and tourism and economic engines. This spectrum includes: community-based and socially engaged art, artist-driven work, indigenous and local cultures, ensemble theater and other performance-based work, and cultural organizing efforts.

Cross-sector work in which artists and cultural organizations are working inside systems, collaborating with issue-specific organizations and activists, and across sectors. Complex problems require the combined and integrated expertise of different fields and sectors to maximize complementary knowledge, resources, and skills in order to think outside the box and “incubate possibilities.”

Equity and social justice as moral imperatives underpinning healthy communities in which leaders and residents care about all of the residents, including those who have been disenfranchised due to economic, racial, and social inequities and injustices and where artists and cultural organizations can play a role in helping make transformative positive change.

Civic and social impact as a significant benefit of activating the arts in community; this is in addition to economic development with the goal of equity.

MicroFest’s primary purpose was *not* to offer a counterpoint to the current realm of creative placemaking, but to shine a light on a spectrum of cultural production that is traditionally under the radar in official or conventional creative placemaking strategies. Its aim was to heighten visibility of these critical parts of the cultural ecosystem, parts that aren’t always recognized or engaged by civic and sector leaders in community revitalization and renewal efforts.

This paper synthesizes key insights from MicroFest’s many rich experiences through these lenses. It draws from the experiences and dialogues of Microfests in Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans and shares substantially the illuminating ideas and examples offered in a set of essays that NET commissioned. These essays provide perspectives from locally and nationally situated artists, activists, cultural leaders, community developers, and others who were at MicroFest with the task of exploring NET’s four core questions. ([See page 10](#)).

By putting this range of socially and civically engaged creative work on the radar, NET hopes to contribute to local and national dialogues. It hopes to enhance understanding of this work within its own ensemble theater community, the broader arts community, and among sectors such as community development, the environmental movement, or social justice that may integrate arts and culture in meaningful ways in their work toward healthy communities. Finally, the paper surfaces implications for NET and ensemble theaters; for those in the field working at the intersection of art/culture and placemaking, social change, and civic engagement; and for funders to advance the full spectrum of arts and culture in creative placemaking and healthy, vibrant communities.

MicroFest Essays

Detroit

[Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference](#)

by Eddie B. Allen, Jr.

[Re-imagining Revitalization: Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit](#)

by Michael Premo

Appalachia

[Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia](#)

by Caron Atlas

[Microfest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia's Coal Country](#)

by Mark W. Kidd

[A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place](#)

by Gerard Stropnick

New Orleans

[MicroFest/Artists Spotighting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be](#)

by Carol Bebel

[Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA, Intentions, Values, and Prepositions](#)

by Gerard Stropnick

[Art and Community Development – New Orleans Style](#)

by Erik Takeshita

WHAT DOES THE WORK LOOK LIKE?

MicroFest: Detroit / Earth & Sky Repose

MicroFest participants listen as two local artists describe [Earth & Sky Repose](#), a public artwork situated on a once vacant lot in the North End of Detroit. This public art not only provides a place to sit and contemplate beauty, but functions as a passive water collection system for a community garden, greenhouse, and landscaping on this once vacant lot owned by the adjacent church. Local stonemason Tom Davis created the cross-shaped stone pathway, the water collection system, and other stone features in collaboration with local glass artist Karen Sepanski, whose handsome sculpture punctuates this small oasis.



Earth & Sky Repose, North End neighborhood, Detroit.

Sepanski and Davis contrast the experience of this public art project with others typically decided by committee, often with only superficial community interaction. Here, cultural production is grounded in community. The actual site was chosen and the artwork came to fruition through substantial church and neighborhood participation. When asked what was needed from this public art opportunity, community members answered: “Food, jobs, and a safe place for our kids.” So the church (represented by church member Jerry Hebron, also a member of the Christian Community Development Organization) partnered with Vanguard CDC, a youth service organization; the Greater Woodward CDC, a service organization for the homeless which buys food from the garden with a grant from Whole Foods; the Central Detroit Christian organization; and Home Depot, which donates supplies. Gardening labor is supplied by individuals working off community service hours as well as by young people who have taken “real ownership” of the garden. Seven people were being trained at the time of MicroFest to install solar panels at the garden. Pointing to a nearby location, Hebron said, “See that next block over there. My goal is to take that block entirely off the grid in a few years.”

The public artwork was resourced and the process deftly facilitated by the [Community + Public Art: Detroit \(CPAD\)](#) program of the [College for Creative Studies](#), led by Mikel Bresee, and where Carducci is Dean of Undergraduate Studies. CPAD itself was developed and is executed with a grassroots ethos and process. The visionary Detroit-focused [Skillman Foundation](#) saw the importance of a cultural dimension to its [Good Neighborhoods](#) program, which is investing \$100 million over ten years in six of Detroit’s most distressed neighborhoods. In the Good Neighborhoods program, neighborhood groups are empowered to define the challenges and direct the use of resources toward neighborhood and youth development goals. CPAD, although seeded as an idea by Skillman staff, was shaped with substantial community input, and since its launch in 2008 has realized 19 other public art projects, all generated by neighborhood residents and leaders and engaging local artists. The positive effects of these projects have attracted other local foundation support (JPMorgan Chase and Kresge Foundations); this in a city that has neither a public art program nor a local arts commission and that in 2013 went into official receivership.

So, what does it look like when arts and culture contribute effectively to revitalization and renewal guided by an ethos of equity and social justice?

- Art directly supports community needs such as jobs, food, and beauty.
- Art taps the identity and soul of place to bring community together to create positive public spaces and experiences and to enhance the meaning of sustainability of place.
- Art integrates into cycles and systems of community support, revitalization, and life.
- Art is resourced by forward thinking foundations that let the community lead, support needed infrastructure, and sustain commitment to allow change over time.

These are qualities of creative placemaking observed in the three sites of MicroFest: Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans.

A Continuum of Cultural Production / Incubators of Possibility

“We need to see cultural production as a continuum,” asserts Vince Carducci, Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. In Detroit alone, MicroFest participants experienced a varied and vast array of creative contributors: ensemble theater; youth theater and youth arts/development organization; single artist projects and artist collaborations; artist–activist groups; DIY (Do It Yourself) arts entrepreneurs; informal unincorporated creative ventures; collaborations between artists and with allied professionals (architects, designers, crafts, and tradespeople); and artists engaging with other fields, like science; and with community members to make a meal, work the soil, create art.

MicroFest revealed a continuum of cultural production that is highly influenced by and responsive to the particulars of place.

Artists are transforming public spaces and neighborhoods. In both Detroit and New Orleans artists boldly deploy imaginative strategies to reclaim blighted, abandoned public spaces. They mobilize community members through visual arts to transform alleys and garage doors into outdoor graffiti galleries (The [Alley Project, Detroit](#)), and to repurpose closed schools to serve community needs in Appalachia, through theater ([Higher Ground](#)). Artists engage as fellow residents on committees to improve neighborhood safety ([The Hinterlands](#)).

Culturally specific organizations play a catalytic role in revitalizing downtowns and providing civic, as well as cultural gathering spaces. They step up to the challenge, sometimes when other civic entities don’t; they anchor and help develop cultural spaces (such as Carpetbag Theatre’s role in the Gay Street section in Knoxville). For decades, [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) in New Orleans has been leading and working alongside civic leaders and countless partner organizations in preserving its own Central City neighborhood’s historic African-American roots, and supporting new creative ventures, as well as business and housing development for all its residents. Citywide, Ashé has kept arts and culture central in post-Katrina renewal efforts. These organizations build trusting relationships and advocate for cultural and economic equity across their endeavors.

“Once an ugly reminder of a city’s ills, this little park [The Alley Project] is reborn as an incubator of possibility. Surging creativity is being pulled to the front by boldly innovative youth rather than forced out of view by fearful criminalization and misunderstanding.”

-Michael Premo

Devised theater and community-based theater practices are prevalent and potent. In Knoxville, Carpetbag Theater continues a long-term commitment to a mission that embraces local aesthetics and a charge “to give artistic voice to the issues and dreams of people who have been silenced by racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.” In Harlan County, the multi-year Higher Ground cycle of plays has created an open forum for discussing important issues facing Harlan County residents, while also building relationships and capacity to work together for change. In Detroit, [Mosaic Youth Theatre](#) and



Higher Ground, Harlan County, KY. Photo: Michael Premo

[Matrix Theatre](#) have engaged generations of young people in high-level artistic production and in the history, issues, and affirmation and reimagining of their city. And in New Orleans, [Junebug Productions](#), [Mondo Bizarro](#), and [ArtSpot Productions](#) exert individual and cumulative focus on issues from access to healthy food to the erosion of the bayou, to the healing and reintegration of formerly incarcerated women into the community.

Along the continuum of cultural production, there are potent roles for traditional arts, as well as for innovative hybrid forms. Philip Lauri, founder of [Detroit Lives!](#) observes, “Detroit will be an innovator just because we happen to be one of the first behemoths to fall. We are forced to create the model, and what a grand opportunity indeed that is.”⁷ He and other young professionals and artists are experimenting and inventing, guided by a commitment to transform Detroit with social responsibility and unconventional organizational structures.

[RogueHAA](#), for example, describes itself as a “design, architecture, and urban advocacy collaborative” and a “complementary personality to the architectural firm, [Hamilton Anderson Associates](#).” While HAA focuses on the design and construction of buildings and landscapes, rogueHAA operates outside the boundaries of traditional professional design practice. The studio’s primary directive is to serve as both a forum and catalyst for thoughtful design discourse through a series of initiatives including publications, competitions, installations, a lecture series, and a [blog](#). The result of boundary crossing between nonprofit and commercial, different design fields, urban planning, and direct work with artists is hybrid work that reveals and explicates issues in new ways and seeks to contribute to actual change.⁸ One example is a community led pop-up coffee shop and event space located in a vacant storefront in a strip mall, a collaboration with economic, business, and community members accomplished in under four weeks for \$4,000.

Seeing this spirit and such innovative approaches in many places, artist and activist Michael Premo describes Detroit an “incubator of possibility.”

Just as radical, folk and traditional arts are forms of community empowerment, expressions of deep cultural knowledge and durability, creativity, and community values. Traditional forms such as the Gospel songs of the [Mt. Sinai Spirituals](#) and the storytelling of [Pam Holcomb](#) in Harlan County, KY, provide a critical connection to the past, fostering intergenerational connection and understanding and linking history to contemporary issues toward deeper understanding. They name and interpret their experience, and affirm cultural continuity in the

face of social concerns. Cultural workers, activists, and others intentionally draw upon folk and traditional arts and culture to unite people in celebration of place, as well as mobilize people on political or social issues. Preservation in the form of cultural engagement and participation among the [Mardi Gras Indians](#) of New Orleans is a form of place-based advocacy as well as an act of naming, resistance, and critical affirmation for a community whose cultural values, languages, and art forms have not always found support or recognition by mainstream systems.⁹



Cherice Harrison-Nelson, aka Big Queen Reesie of the Guardians of the Flame. Photo: Michael Premo

Other work readily experimented artistically across disciplines to create compelling art, such as [Invincible's Complex Movements](#), developed with fellow visual designer and hip-hop producer and [The Music Box](#), an interactive musical village created by the [New Orleans Airlift](#) to activate an abandoned lot in New Orleans' Bywater district. More than 23 artists—sound engineers, architects, musicians, and visual artists—converted the remains of collapsed houses into musical instruments that thousands of community members enjoyed.¹⁰

At MicroFest: New Orleans, Roberto Bedoya, director of the [Tucson Pima Arts Council](#), characterized the range of cultural activity that is revitalizing his own community:

The range of projects has been from celebratory mural projects to dealing with contested issues like immigration and environmental poisoning. Some projects are also conceptually driven. We have a new streetcar line developed in the city, so let's think about this streetcar being developed around bikers' routes or [the] working poor's lives. You're just trying to prompt the social imaginary. It's about agency and imaging the places in which they live.

Bedoya could have been describing Detroit, Appalachia, or New Orleans. Each place has been influenced by the unique constellation of artists that inhabit that place, who in turn reflect the place in their work. The beauty of the social imagination became evident throughout MicroFest.

WHAT MAKES THE WORK WORK?

MicroFest: New Orleans / Agency, Authenticity, & Action through Theater

Excerpt from [Art and Community Development – New Orleans Style](#) by Erik Takeshita



Photo: Michael Premo

"Who told you that?" The answer from both sides is "Mr. Moneybags," the foreman. Together they attack Mr. Moneybags.

The actors are set. Scene 1: An African-American father is told by his wife that he needs to go out and find work so their baby can eat. Scene 2: Same man walks into a foreman's office at a construction site, asks for work, is told he has to fill out an application, is given one and exits, application in hand. Scene 3: Three Latino day laborers are picked up on a corner and driven to the job site. Scene 4: African-American man returns with his application, but is told the jobs have been filled. He and other African-Americans looking for work huddle up, as do the Latinos. The two camps start yelling myths, stereotypes, and insults at one another. Someone finally asks

Mr. Moneybags, presented by the African-American members of [Stand with Dignity](#) and the Latino members of [El Congreso de Jornaleros](#) (Congress of Day Laborers), was humorous and poignant. It conveyed the coming together of these two groups, through story sharing and theater making, to improve conditions and policies for laborers who are working to restore and rebuild New Orleans.

The [New Orleans Worker's Center for Racial Justice](#), which helps organize both Stand with Dignity and El Congreso, has integrated theater practice into its services as a social justice organization. Through story circles and creation of productions such as *Mr. Moneybags*, members of El Congreso and Stand with Dignity have gotten to know one another and become friends. They educate fellow immigrants about their rights, performing at worker gatherings and at soccer games in which day laborer teams compete. The plays inform immigrants about their rights and what to do if they are stopped by the police or immigration. They hand out little cards immigrants can keep in their wallets or purses with key phone numbers and phrases in English and Spanish such as "I want to speak to my attorney." They now work *together* and show up at one another's actions, such as testifying at Housing Authority of New Orleans meetings for equal employment opportunities.

The work of El Congreso and Stand with Dignity works; it has impact because:

- The authenticity of the work—the truth and accuracy of the stories, the direct source and genuineness of their delivery—gives the plays poignancy, authority, and a power to motivate and activate primary audiences of fellow Latino immigrant and African-American workers and their communities.
- The workers themselves have agency, determining how and when they activate and how and when they employ cultural strategies.
- A skilled social justice organization equipped in immigration issues links to local artists to learn and incorporate creative strategies, helps build the bridge between different communities of color, and helps immigrants determine personal and collective ways they can protect their rights and influence policy.

As artists, activists, community organizations, civic leaders, and, of course, ensemble theater members convened at MicroFest, top of mind was the question: *What makes the work work?* From each case study immersion, they sought to draw out the principles and values, the quality practices, and to understand the dynamics that must be considered as guideposts for responsible and effective work.

This section riffs on three of four broad touchstones that Erik Takeshita offers regarding what makes the work *work*, i.e., how arts and culture can have their most positive and sustainable impact on community: (1) place matters; (2) art is at the center; and (3) residents and communities are the *agents* of change, not the *targets* of change. The fourth—the work happens across sectors and is collaborative—is explored in the next section.¹¹

Place Matters, Time Matters

Just as the land it sits upon was built up over thousands of years of sediment being deposited by the Mississippi River, the culture of New Orleans has been developed through the contributions of Native Americans and new arrivals from Spain, Africa, France, England and yes, even Brooklyn. The key to New Orleans' ongoing success and vibrancy is that these new arrivals did not try to recreate Spain, Africa, France, England or Brooklyn in southern Louisiana, but rather recognized and honored the indigenous assets of New Orleans. They made the effort and took the time to understand the people, the language, the history, the food, the customs, the cultures, and to find ways to add to it, not supplant it.

Erik Takeshita

Place matters. Place defines culture and culture defines place. While this might be said about any place, it is especially true in Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans. It is beyond this paper to delve into the subject of regional aesthetics, but as Mark Valdez has noted, “You won’t mistake Mosaic Youth Theatre or Invincible in Detroit for Higher Ground or Pam Holcomb in Harlan County.” That an art form such as individual storytelling became prominent in a place like Appalachia likely has something to do with people living so remotely from one another.

Consciously and subconsciously artists “construct to deconstruct to recreate” (in the words of Carol Bebel, director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans) a continuity of culture, building and drawing upon place-based aesthetics from the past and present in ways that deepen the meaning and power of creative work.

Motown make its way into the techno music track beneath Jessica Care Moore’s poem about Detroit. Homegrown Detroit writer Eddie Allen remarked, “It’s almost like a code language among Detroiters, reminiscent of the spirituals sung aloud during slavery, which doubled as instructions for mobilizing toward freedom.”¹²

Continuity of culture strengthens the power of arts and culture to revitalize and renew distressed communities. Creative strategies gain potency when they contain the stories and themes, sounds and rhythms that signify a place; whether it is a Cajun *cri de coeur* about the vanishing Louisiana wetlands by [Mondo Bizarro](#) and [ArtSpot Productions](#) in theater and music set on an actual bayou,¹³ or the song and storytelling traditions historically used as powerful vehicles for civil rights and labor union activists in Appalachia that continue today in the work of [Appalshop](#), [Roadside Theater](#), and the [Higher Ground](#) project.¹⁴

In New Orleans, Appalachia, and Detroit, continuity of culture is partly the result of veteran and pioneering artists and bridge builders who “offer the shoulders of giants”¹⁵ on which stand a new generation of artists and cultural workers committed to place. These iconic place-based art makers and cultural activists have evolved time-tested and leading edge practices in community-based theater and other disciplines: John O’Neal and Junebug Productions in New Orleans, Roadside Theater and Appalshop in Kentucky, The Carpetbag Theater in Knoxville, and others. In Detroit, the philosophy and organizing influence of lifelong activist and bridge builder [Grace Lee Boggs](#) continues to inspire generations of artist-activists. Their work has been defined by place as their work has come to define place. These artists and activists also perpetuate the values and skills of exemplary place-based work through training, mentoring, and collaborating with other artists.

Understanding the context and dynamics of place is critical to doing the most potent art and the most responsible community work. “The stakes are high because the work is consequential,” Gerard Stropnick wrote. “When we work in and with communities in crisis, we are talking about people’s lives. It’s incumbent upon us to get it right.”¹⁶ To get it right, the work has to be sensitive to political, social, and cultural context and to be accurate. In his own work



Speed Killed My Cousin, The Carpetbag Theatre. Photo: James Geiger

on the Higher Ground theater cycle in Harlan County, KY, he describes how crucial it was to understand the context of “‘Bloody Harlan,’ a place where until recently exploitive corporate self-interest intentionally divided already geographically isolated constituencies into coal camps and company towns, an anti-union and profit-protecting set of policies brutally enforced in living memory with guard towers, barbed wire, and automatic weapons. The resulting scar tissue of suspicion continues to stymie cooperative action.”¹⁷ The principle that “Context is everything” reverberated throughout MicroFest as participants acknowledged the potential for negative consequences if context of place is not carefully considered.

Artists and other agents of change are able to see and seize the transformative moment. Shea Howell, activist and co-founder of [Detroit Summer](#), amplified this idea in a *HowlRound* interview with Mark Valdez:

There is a kind of freedom that has come because of the disappearance of industrial society. It has created a space for people to raise questions that other people have not even had to begin to contemplate. So there is this feeling in Detroit that you're part of a new future, that you're part of what's emerging that is completely undefined. ... So we have artists who are building windmills with the idea of creating energy so that their homes can be heated with and lit by local wind power. And they're not just creating a functional windmill, but they're creating a beautiful windmill. And they're not just creating a functional, beautiful windmill, they're trying to do it with things they have been able to find within a one-mile area. This idea that you can create something that is useful, that is beautiful, that is ecologically sound, and that is essential for community is—well, you can feel it on the streets, you can feel it from people you talk with.¹⁸

Commitment to sustained and varied arts and cultural efforts around critical needs and issues in a community is paramount to effecting change. Achieving positive change around large scale and long-standing issues is a long-haul proposition. That is why projects such as Higher Ground that evolve over multiple years deserve attention as a sustaining forum and force to build civic capacity and strength and to address issues in the real time of people's lives. Similarly, the ongoing work of organizations such as the [Prison Creative Arts Project](#), inside a system, or [Matrix Theater](#)'s work inside a Detroit neighborhood (and many others featured at MicroFest) is critical to achieving incremental and cumulative change.

Art at the Center / The Potency of Theater and Ensemble

The most potent work positions art, artists, and culture bearers as integral to community change efforts. MicroFest embraced the fullest range of art, culture, and artists to learn from other disciplines' practices and work across sectors. It sought to understand how theater, and ensemble theater in particular, can help to advance community revitalization and renewal goals.

MicroFest affirms the tools of theater—story, dialogue, metaphor, conflict, and human drama—as elements of effective socially engaged art. Story, in particular, is a foundational element in the work of theater and of personal and community transformation. Story collecting is a research method and a source of data and inspiration. First-voice stories tell the lived experience that defines the truths of a place, its assets as well as issues, and that dispels misperceptions. Stories “can give people hope and a sense of a way out,” “identify common ground,” and, especially when shared and witnessed in the public sphere, provide validation by conveying to people that their stories are worth listening to and transmitting. Stories evoke empathy and a deeper understanding of the human implications of issues that may be abstracted by the media. Stories galvanize and mobilize people to action.

Ensembles foster a sense of the whole and bring community people together into a collective space to create and to solve problems. Ensemble members see themselves as part of a greater whole and are able to foster this same sense of wholeness in communities that are fragmented or divided. Caron Atlas reflected on the *Higher Ground* plays:

[They] enacted the community response to floods, real and metaphoric, in that place. *Higher Ground* is not only a play *about* neighbors coming together to support and change their community, it *is* neighbors coming together to support and change their community. As the play's subtitle says, 'It takes many hands to battle a flood.' Robert Gipe describes how 'in the process of making plays about drug abuse, mine disasters, outmigration, and land use, we have developed a strong community organization, one that finds hope in addressing problems together in a way that celebrates strength rather than enabling hand-wringing.'¹⁹

Values that underpin effective ensemble theater—inclusion, transparency, excellence, and respect—are also values at the foundation of effective social justice work, underscoring ensemble theater as an excellent partner in this work. The value of inclusion is fundamental, not only to ensemble theater, but to community-based theater. The use of Image Theatre and other Boal techniques, for example, in the [Building Home](#) project (a collaboration between the New River Valley Planning District Commission and Virginia Tech Department of Theater and Cinema), served to attract and engage voices of poor citizens struggling to find and maintain low-income housing in a regional planning process, where previously meetings had focused almost exclusively on the experience of landlords.²⁰

Theater director and NET founding member Gerard Stropnický expands upon the core values of ensemble work by proposing five others—*agency, authenticity, artistry, audacity, and accuracy*—that underpin transformative creative work.²¹ The work of [El Congreso de Jornaleros](#) and [Stand with Dignity](#), whose story opened this section, embodies all of these values (see sidebar). Alison De La Cruz, Los Angeles-based artist, arts educator, and cultural organizer, reflected on their play, *Mr. Moneybags*, compelled by its artistry, authenticity, and the courage of its makers in the context of their circumstances. She wrote:

Their work...epitomized the principles of ensemble theater making that I value: respect, inclusion, and a clear ensemble built over time with a set of practices and a distinct body of work. I noticed the clear pictures their bodies made in moments of frozen images and their use of spatial relationships. I reflected back their use of humor as a bridge to build common understanding. Most importantly, I was struck by this thought: while some colleagues train for many years and spend thousands of dollars to discover ways to evoke truth and discover the high stakes within their work, these worker-organizer-actors created plays from the high stakes of life. ... When some of these worker-organizer-actors tell their truth, ...the truth can mean violence, detention, deportation and, in those extreme instances, death.²²

Socially engaged art is most effective when it stems from clarity in its social intention, and it reflects artistic choices and engagement strategies that support that intention. Stropnický's essay (excerpted liberally here) looks at creative practice through the lenses of values, intention, and engagement and their interrelationship.

He describes two plays about incarceration from MicroFest: New Orleans to highlight distinctly different intentions. In his play [Angola 3](#), Parnell Herbert's intents are to raise consciousness

about the horrors of solitary confinement and the endemic injustice of a system that makes this sentence happen, and to provoke public pressure so the system might change. To support these intentions, creative and engagement elements are chosen—a clear outside villain, select evidence to build an argument for a particular position, and a call to action.

The other play, [Did You See Me?](#), was created by The Graduates, a group of women once inmates of the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, co-directed by Ausetua Amor Amenkum of [Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective](#), and Kathy Randels of [ArtSpot Productions](#). The play poetically weaves together stories of these women’s own lives, focusing on how they were shaped by their experiences with the criminal justice system. The intended outcomes are healing, restorative justice, and peace building. To support these outcomes, the artists use several techniques: a first-person narrative to give voice and authenticity to the experience; a story presented as complex with many, even contradictory, viewpoints; acknowledgment of personal responsibility by the women that establishes credibility; and no clear hero or clear villain, which opens up the performance space as one where personal and community healing can occur.²³

This analysis shows how clarity of intent as held by artists (as well as by community partners and the balance between them) is critical to making aesthetic choices and engagement strategies.

Rigor on both artistic and civic terms supports the most effective work. The most compelling and successful work is based in rigorous process and is supported by a body of experience and tested practices, as well as experimentation. At MicroFest, in addition to the previous examples, compelling, rigorous work is coming out of youth-centered organizations. Detroit Summer has developed sophisticated techniques integrating art, activism, media literacy, and interviewing, among other skills, to guide community members through identifying and exploring an issue, then producing media. They draw inspiration from many different practices, fields, and sectors.²⁴

Mosaic Youth Theatre’s “theory of change” focuses on the core elements of creating high expectations, a supportive environment, and a sense of artistic empowerment for youth. Artistically, the bar of excellence for Mosaic’s high school-aged singers and actors is set “very, very high...Sometimes ridiculously high,” says artistic director Rick Sperling. “When you put the bar just above what’s possible, that’s when you experience the most growth.”²⁵

Agents, Not Targets, of Change

If you don’t tell your story, somebody else will, and you may not like how it comes out.
Coal miner in Appalachia²⁶

When the work has its greatest social impact, it is because the people of a place are invested and involved from the outset in defining and framing issues from their lived experience and project outcomes are based on what matters to them. Who drives the work of community change is a critical question in the context of disenfranchised communities that have been

“studied,” “done to,” and “deliberately disempowered” by political, corporate, or other forces over time. The ethos of community *agency* was prominent throughout MicroFest, looking at how arts and culture can be a powerful tool to empower and activate people to effectuate change in their lives and communities.

When the stakes are particularly high, those most affected by the issues are actually driving work, as is so poignantly demonstrated with the theater-based organizing of Congreso de Jornaleros and Stand With Dignity. The many stories and examples in Detroit, New Orleans, and Appalachia also illustrate how various organizations have enabled sustained work over time by providing support and infrastructure for community members to engage in arts and culture toward self-determined outcomes. Skilled and dedicated artists play a critical role as leaders, partners, and in supporting residents and communities to be the agents of change in their own lives.

Community-based institutions provide bridge building and sustained leadership with a deep understanding of art and context and a commitment to community engagement. Sometimes they are theater companies or arts organizations like [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) in New Orleans, which sees its civic role as core to its being, enlisting, organizing, and empowering residents to actively participate in transforming Central City back into the vibrant commercial and cultural hub for the African American community it once was. Activist organizations continue to play a crucial role in mobilizing and sustaining efforts of, by, and for the people; groups such as the 80-year-old [Highlander Research and Education Center](#) in Tennessee and the [Louisiana Bucket Brigade](#) provide leadership, facilitation, and training in cultural organizing.

Reliable youth-centered organizations support young people, especially those in isolated or challenged communities, to develop individually and collectively in their communities through the arts. Youth are respected, supported, and engaged as active stakeholders, stepping up in



Detroit Summer youth and their graphics

significant ways as they look to make change and improve conditions that directly affect them. Through [Kids Rethink New Orleans](#), staff and guest artist-organizers train young people in [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) and other creative organizing methods so that their voices can be central to key school reform issues such as replacing a zero tolerance policy with a more equitable, restorative justice approach. The organizational base of Kids Rethink enables the changing cast of youth over time to keep sights on their even higher goal—to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.²⁷ The youth-led [STAY Project](#) (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) is “a diverse regional network of young people throughout Central Appalachia who are working together to advocate for and actively participate in their home mountain communities.” Not having found a place for themselves in adult-led social justice efforts, they are designing their own projects, building diverse coalitions, and

contributing solutions to community needs with support from the [Appalachian Media Institute](#), Highlander Center, and the [High Rocks](#) leadership program for young women in Hillsboro, WV. STAY Projects' programs and convenings are grounded in Appalachian culture and incorporate music, dance, and media.²⁸

Key to the success of these and other organizations and programs experienced at MicroFest—[Tribe One](#) in Knoxville, [Detroit Summer](#), [Mosaic Youth Theatre](#), and [The Matrix Theatre Company](#) in Detroit—is intergenerational learning and leadership.

Community colleges and colleges of arts and design provide leadership, partnership, and infrastructure. In Detroit, there is no local arts agency to provide leadership or infrastructure for an ongoing program like Community + Public Art: Detroit. The College for Creative Studies has supplied the community-based expertise of faculty to help design as well as administer the program. *Higher Ground* was initiated and is led by the Appalachian Program at [Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College](#) in Harlan County. In New Orleans, Xavier and Tulane Universities have been instrumental in their own initiatives linking student engagement in arts, humanities, and design to the restoration of the city post-Katrina. In all these ways, colleges and universities are developing leadership and creating a pipeline of socially engaged artists and citizens.

Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts assert a place-based, community-determined approach to community development. Caron Atlas and Tamara Greenfield of [NOCD-NY, the Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group](#) in New York City, spoke of the concept of NOCD as a way to recognize and build around the cultural assets already in the community. “A lot of creative place making is an interventionist model.” Atlas said. “Our model is people intervening on their own behalf. Place making as a long-term process rather than a short-term intervention.”²⁹ The movement toward Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCD) is an important counterpoint to districts typically centered around major cultural institutions like symphonies and museums, typically the official projects of civic entities. NOCDs are self-determined by the artists, cultural groups, businesses, sympathetic officials, and community members in neighborhoods where distinct and naturally occurring layers of culture provide a vital and desirable mix for local people and may also be a destination for others.

WORKING ACROSS SECTORS: WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

MicroFest: Detroit/Art in the Justice System

Excerpt from [Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference](#), by Eddie B. Allen, Jr.



Inside the Urban Network bookstore and cyber café, all eyes remain on Imani. She's an actress, of course, but her dramatized testimony is of sexual victimization at age 10, being captive to a drug habit, and then locked up because of it. With [4TheatrSake's](#) performances, including two other segments, as a backdrop, MicroFest participants soon delved into a discussion of what produced Imani's condition, and what, if any, artistic solutions exist for provoking wider and broader dialogue about her plight.

"Art is the healing and the coping mechanism," says panelist [Hasan Davis](#), an artist, writer, and the juvenile justice commissioner for the State of Kentucky. As a proponent of creative expression, Davis

makes clear his support for access by prisoners to outlets that will help nurture their humanity in what are often the less humane circumstances of confinement.

But, in his unique position as both an arts advocate and The Man, representing a justice system that places little value on art, Davis says creative agencies must think in dollars when proposing programs and talking about outcomes. Presenting arts resources and arts-driven skills with an eye toward capitalizing on prisons' fundamental concerns, such as re-entry programming and transferable skills development, is what will be heard, not art's power to enable emotional expression or retreat. Speaking the language of elected officials and facility administrators, says Davis, creates commonality. Even though "data is clear about the transformative value of the art, they don't want to hear it unless it affects budgets."

MicroFest: Appalachia/Art in Regional Development

Excerpt from [Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy](#) in Appalachia by Caron Atlas

The Building Home collaboration between [Virginia Tech's theater department](#) and the [New River Valley Planning District Commission's Livability Initiative](#) is using theater and the "BUILT" participatory board game developed by [Sojourn Theatre](#) to analyze what is needed and to envision alternatives for a regional plan. Theater has encouraged participation by a larger and more diverse group of people than usually engage in planning. The game has offered an experience of decision-making that moves players along a continuum of grappling with and understanding individual, neighborhood, and regional interests.



Photo: Michael Premo

Playing two rounds of the BUILT game at MicroFest left me with an experience of the creative tension between working within the system and using our imagination to stretch or transcend it. We were asked to make land use decisions regarding where various organizations should be sited in the community. Should a particular location be a school, a job incubator, or a community center? But, inspired by the vision behind the former Evarts, KY, high school where we were playing the game, I thought, what if we wanted to combine them into a multi-use community space? We learned that, in the third round of the game, these creative leaps can take place. However, paralleling many community processes, we didn't have time to play this round.

The capacity to work effectively across sectors is critical in revitalizing distressed communities. Outside-the-box approaches are needed where others have become stalled, stale, or simply failed. The magnitude, complexity, and interrelatedness of issues demands that we leave silos behind in favor of integrative, holistic approaches.

The two stories that opened this section, stories of arts working across sectors and within systems of community development, justice, and education, are among many other stories experienced during MicroFest focusing on food justice, the environment, immigration, and youth development. The stories suggest important learnings, challenges, and possibilities related to cross-sector work.

Moving Forward with Transformational Intention

In the work of equitable, responsible, and creative community revitalization, particularly in distressed communities, what needs to be uplifted is the transformational change that artists, cultural workers, and art can effect. A recurring theme at all MicroFest's stops was the notion of *transformational* change. In Knoxville, Carlton Turner, director of [Alternate ROOTS](#), talked about cultural transformation. "[It's] not just about creating another job or bringing in a few more dollars, but transforming the culture. Arts and culture can validate, and help build an analysis that allows evolution and the cultural transformation to happen."³⁰ Turner points out a challenge: within institutions and systems, art is often seen only as a product instead of a resource. The arts are not viewed as a transformational means that can contribute to the targeted outcomes of other systems and sectors such as health and wellness.

Transformational change was often contrasted with *transactional* change. Tension is illustrated in the Arts & Justice conversation in Detroit (see sidebar), between the prison system's bottom line—dollars for outcomes—and artists' and social workers' target of human transformation. Hasan Davis, himself an artist and a strong believer in arts' transformative power, doesn't see these desired outcomes as mutually exclusive. But the power wielded by large systems ultimately prioritizes the system's outcomes when resources are being allocated or policies set. The question is: How can these divergent types of outcomes be reconciled in the potentially transformational work of community development?

*Arts and culture deployed within a planning process, rather than being viewed as strictly the outcome of planning, bring transformative capacities to enliven public process, enhance public dialogue and decision-making, attract diverse participants, and elicit meaningful public participation.*³¹ In the Building Home collaboration between a regional planning commission and university theater department, and in Higher Ground's next cycle of plays, art and theater practices innovate conventional regional planning and envisioning processes. Higher Ground will be staged in unoccupied buildings throughout the county as part of a process to design new community spaces, bringing residents together to imagine a new future for real estate that has been inaccessible for public uses.

Systemic or sector impact implies the importance of scale and sustainability. The arts should be integral partners and members of coalitions working at large-scale as well as microcommunity levels. When we think about sectors and systems we need to think about scale and sustainability. Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools is operationalized in six schools across New Orleans. One of its projects, [The Great Cafeteria Takeover](#), succeeded in renegotiating New Orleans schools' food contract to ensure healthier choices and has become a national influence. The story of this victory is told in an Emmy-nominated film, on HBO, amplifying its message and being used by other schools across the country.³²

At MicroFest: New Orleans, Michael Rohd shared [Sojourn Theatre](#)'s current cross-sector collaboration with Catholic Charities USA; teams of Sojourn artists will conduct residencies as part of ten poverty-reduction regional gatherings across the country. In addition, Sojourn artists will help design the Catholic Charities' 2013 and 2014 national conferences, acting as "dramaturgical consultants" for the structure of these events and creating performance, public forums, and capacity-building workshops. "We have planning committees to partner with, locations to learn about and hopefully, theater activity we have yet to conceive that will help us bring our assets to bear on challenges our partners face in their work to end poverty."³³ Sojourn is breaking new ground in system-wide integration of theater strategies in the way a national social justice organization works to achieve its social justice goals around issues of poverty.

With every cross-sector story at MicroFest, invariably, the challenges of boundary crossing work came up, along with the rewards when the work *works*. This section surfaces some of the challenges that need to be addressed, as well what was learned in advancing successful cross-sector work.

What Does It Take to Effectively Work Across Sectors and Within Systems?

Working *inside*

For Carol Bebelle, "Being *inside* means artists/culture bearers are valued by other sectors and civic leaders for their capacity to see things differently." But she adds, "We are still on the outside of America's homes, school boards, and civic and commercial offices with our noses pressed against the window, wishing we were inside."³⁴

What does it take for artists and cultural workers to hold a meaningful place inside systems and to work hand in hand with other sectors? And, as Caron Atlas asks, "Are there times when it is better to work within the system and others when it is better to be independent from it?"

It takes cultivating open-minded partners and identifying pivotal bridge builders who are effective translators and boundary crossers. Key local advocates are necessities—people who can negotiate between arts, government, and business in order to successfully incorporate community-based arts into community development and other civic processes.³⁵ There are people who are at the "cusp of understanding," who are beginning to connect the dots, who are looking for innovative ways to make a difference in their own spheres. Virginia Tech theater director Bob Leonard pointed to the open-mindedness of New River Valley Planning

Commission staff members, who recognized that something different had to be done to involve more than the usual suspects in a major regional planning effort. There is need to cultivate people like the planning commission staff in other sectors.

Changing the system and influencing a sector takes time. Recognizing that it takes time to develop such relationships among those who have influence within systems, Terry Holly of the [East Tennessee Foundation](#) in a Knoxville panel on cross-sector partnerships said, “All people take offense, back up, put up walls, but if you can find people who believe in what you are doing, even if it means playing the rules by the book for a time until they become independent enough to push the program forward.”

Even when inroads are made, there are no guarantees. A key ally within the system moves on “and it is back to the beginning, because the system didn’t change.” After decades of working within the Michigan Correctional system, [Prison Creative Arts Program](#) director Buzz Alexander admitted that there are still struggles to retain the program. MicroFest participants were eager to learn from others like Alexander, who has stayed at the table over time.

Navigating difficult conversations

We need all of these folks in the same conversations and we need to be intentional about a common good. Wealthy folks, poor folks, creative folks, black, brown, white, and green people...that’s the part I haven’t figured out yet, how to get everyone in the same conversation.

Greta Gladney, Executive Director, [Renaissance Project](#)

Many of the challenges of working across sectors relate to issues of language and communications; lack of understanding of professional vocabulary, norms, expertise, and cultures; and underlying misperceptions. These are not unfamiliar to those who work in fields of public art, community-based art, or even across artistic disciplines. Bill Cleveland of the [Center for the Study of Art and Community](#) has been equipping artists and partners in social service, justice, education, and other sectors for decades to work through these barriers.³⁶ While it is not rocket science, it does take a commitment of energy and time to learn and to be present in the other’s sphere of work, the ability to be vulnerable to missteps and to correct them, and a willingness to challenge and be open to challenge and discomfort.

Arts and nonarts partners alike need to check self-perceptions and

misperceptions of the other in order to build trusting productive relationships that draw on shared goals and complementary strengths. Art and artists still contend with an image problem that makes prospective partners in other sectors skeptical, or even fearful. In one MicroFest panel, a public works director said, “You have to have likable artists” to assuage reservations. A community developer at the same panel admitted not knowing why she had been asked to

“We all have different disciplines, so we all have different languages. So we need to be clear, then listen carefully. It isn’t easy. While we do cross-sector collaboration, we always need to work at finding the language.”

-Mickeeya Harrison, Tribe One, Knoxville

comment at community development discussion focused on arts. The dialogue that preceded opened her thinking beyond the perception of arts as a luxury to a role for the arts in “creating pride of place and helping people define their own community better....Hearing about place-based arts, re-use, and things that community values; there is a role.”

In her MicroFest essay, Carol Bebelles cautions artists to check their attitudes and also keep an open mind in working with other sectors and segments of the community. She asks, “Can we honor the values of community—whatever they are? For example, can we put aside any disagreement or difference in values we might have with an institution or system—whether city government, the justice system, or the organized church—to acknowledge that ours is not necessarily the bigger truth? Can we be good partners even when we believe we know better than “they” do? Having a different opinion is not necessarily a trump card; it can be viewed as a distinguishing value of diversity.”³⁷

Confronting power as a key determinate

Confronting issues of power and privilege is crucial if we seek transformational community development that is grounded in and determined with community. MicroFest raised myriad



Louisiana Bucket Brigade’s Art-to-Action cultural organizing strategies exemplify artists, activists, and community working together to change the policies and actions of those in power.

democracy. Too often experts speak for us when we are already fluent in the matters that impact us most deeply.”³⁸

Power dynamics are evident from the earliest point of many cross-sector and inside-the-system projects. Where does an initiative arise from, and who initiates it? Whose outcomes and measures of success matter? Who sets the terms; what is influencing the agenda, and who allocates resources? Issues of power demand more discussion. These broad questions were

questions about how power plays out in cross-sector work and how to level the playing field. In the context of post-industrial Detroit, where arts and culture workers are working in sophisticated grassroots ways to transform the city, MicroFest: Detroit revealed the obsolescence of industrialized logic; that is, in the words of Michael Premo, “the assembly line thinking of capitalism that demands we be consumers rather than dynamic co-creator-participants in our social and civic lives.” He goes on: “Our predicament is further complicated by the paternalism and transactional nature of much of the way we interact with the civic structures of our representative

raised at MicroFests and led to others; conversations only scratched the surface in trying to respond to them. Here are a few noteworthy threads.

How can community development efforts bridge the gulf between grassroots efforts and resource bearers both within and outside the community? Mark Kidd observes, “In many small towns in Central Appalachia, the irrepressible strands of community democracy are manifested in Rotary and motorcycle clubs, churches, school gymnasiums, and volunteer fire departments. ...Structuring partnerships to equitably incorporate volunteer leadership over the long-term is important in any community coalition-building, but it is particularly important in economically distressed communities where many or all of the local partners rely on volunteer staff.” Staging partnerships in which community knowledge is respected and local volunteer leadership’s power is equal to that of outside government or private sector funders remains a huge challenge.³⁹

What privilege and power do artists bear and how might these upset the dynamics of community and community and cross-sector efforts? There can be tension when artists see opportunity and transform abandoned homes into art, mount involved events and installations in the midst of a neighborhood, or “get away with” creative acts in apparently unregulated spaces. The same privilege is not felt by people of color, as one MicroFest participant emphasized, “I have real fear of retribution if I color outside of the lines.” Michael Premo wrote:

If arts and cultural practice is to move forward with transformational intention, then we as artists and cultural workers must also confront the role power plays in privilege, race, class, gender, sexuality, and how that manifests in our work and our relationships as artists, citizens, and human beings. For example, even the most well meaning artists should consider the manifestations of power and privilege that even allows them the access to negotiate with a municipality or particular community and should seek to uncover the implications of power and privilege in every facet of our endeavors.⁴⁰

Complicating Gentrification

Historically, the role of art within the development of revitalization of cities can be seen cynically as one of unwitting accomplice to gentrification and complicit partner to the exploitation of creative capacity. . . But what if art and other creative forces in Detroit could overcome this seemingly predetermined path?

Dan Kinkead, rogueHAA, from his [introduction](#) to the Detroit panel: Art, the Avant Garde, and the Realities of Resurrecting an American City

The issue of gentrification was an inevitable focus during MicroFest, particularly as Detroit and New Orleans both are experiencing an influx of artists and newcomers. We heard of classic actions that typify gentrification playing out in Detroit. Detroit hip-hop artist Invincible referenced a marquee example in her collaborative work-in-process performance, [Complex Movements](#). In the show she confronts the current attempt to rename the Cass Corridor and to push out its residents to make it desirable for hipster youth.⁴¹ We heard the unanswered

question: Can developers be convinced that economic, racial, and cultural diversity are a type of capital?

In [Eastern Market](#), where the opening panel took place, the corporation that manages this historic market area is trying to retain its food processing and distribution purpose while responsibly supporting art ventures to “add value to a business objective.” Michael Premo assesses, “The consequences of this outlook can be positive depending on where you sit. For example, due to the futility of trying to dissuade graffiti artists from ‘getting up’ around the neighborhood, they’ve embraced it and hire artists to create murals that add color and contribute to the marketable character of the district.”⁴²

In New Orleans, discussions over decades about development in the St. Claude neighborhood and the Lower 9th Ward revealed a common ambivalence regarding influxes of artists. They are valued as residents, provide a draw for people to visit, and attract renewed interest and investment, yet there is also a sense of fear about the unintended consequences of these new arrivals.⁴³ Detroit has experienced a similar influx of artists attracted to vast amounts of empty industrial spaces, affordable houses and lots, and a general sense of opportunity to contribute to the transformation of a city. While long-time residents of neighborhoods in New Orleans, Appalachia, or Detroit want and welcome new residents and investment, they also want new arrivals to recognize and appreciate that they are entering an existing community with a long history, not a place of “empty slates” or “blank canvasses.”⁴⁴

Conversations in both Detroit and New Orleans revealed the limits of the term *gentrification*. The typical scenario of artists entering a less favorable area, stimulating development, and then being priced out is not always the case. Sometimes, as Caron Atlas pointed out, it is local residents who want to make their neighborhood a better place and make improvements that ultimately force them out. Michael Premo further describes that:

The demise of other areas similar to [Detroit’s] Eastern Market in cities across the country is not always strictly a result of gentrification. These transitions are often symptoms of larger shifting economic and social cycles. New York City’s “gentrified” Meatpacking District, for example, declined in part because of the innovations of containerized shipping and supermarkets which replaced local supply chains with global networks. Certainly gentrification is itself a discrete economic and social cycle, but it is only one gear in a multifaceted system, the complexity and nuances of which are too often obscured in emotional conversations charged with the weighty realities of class, race, and the depression of loss.⁴⁵

One alternative is supporting the evolution of Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCD) that sustain holistic development and are guided by values of equity and self-determination. The discussion by Caron Atlas and Tamara Greenfield of the [Fourth Arts Block](#) in New York City pointed out that gentrification is not an inevitable force out of everyone’s control. Atlas reinforced that gentrification is linked to policy, and people can influence and change policy. NOCD coalitions can slow things down and serve to hold officials accountable.

Erik Takeshita reflected on MicroFest as an entry point for these conversations about gentrification “and inherent issues of power and agency, about the role of race in community development, the unintended consequences reinvestment in neighborhoods, the tension between wanting reinvestment yet also not wanting to change a place beyond recognition, and the edge that exists between differing narratives of a community. Art can not only help bring new people, new energy and new investment to communities, but it can also be powerful tool in helping to frame and mediate some of these hard conversations about the role of art in community development.”⁴⁶

Reframing Assumptions about Economy

How do imaginative ideas and creative methodologies extend conventional modes of civic participation and reframe assumptions about leadership and economy? Are there trade offs between making creative leaps and making systemic change? How can the two be integrated so that each stretches the other towards positive change?

Caron Atlas⁴⁷

*There is need for new paradigms to guide work at the intersection of arts and other sectors and systems. Of particular interest and merit are alternative and more expansive notions of economy that are values-based; that, as Caron Atlas wrote, “go beyond producers, consumers, and profit margins toward, equity, sustainability, and meaning; that support place rather than destroy it.”⁴⁸ MicroFest brought forward activist–scholars’ concepts of *moral economy* and *human economies* of value in pursuing equitable community development and the renewal and sustainability of healthy communities. Both suggest a powerful role for arts and culture as agents of change.*

Atlas’ MicroFest essay centers on the work of Helen Lewis, whose own essay, “Rebuilding Communities: A Twelve-Step Recovery Program,” outlines the values (most fundamentally an economy that supports all the people) and assumptions that must underlie a responsible *moral economy*. Lewis’ notion of rebuilding communities begins by examining the connection between power, politics, culture, and economy. Her concept of a moral economy requires a cultural shift and the dismantling of a system of arrangements that support extraction in Appalachia and the power status quo. MicroFest offered ample evidence of Helen Lewis’ 12 steps to rebuilding community as manifested through arts and culture-based initiatives.⁴⁹

During a visit to [Beardsley Community Farm](#) in Knoxville, where arts and culture are connected to issues of food justice, Matthew Glassman, of [Double Edge Theatre](#) in rural Ashfield, Massachusetts, described how his theater company is learning from localization advocate Helena Norberg-Hodge’s concept of *human economies*. Communities are coming together to rebuild more human-scale, ecological economies based on a new paradigm—an economics of localization.⁵⁰ Double Edge Theatre moved from Boston to purchase a disused 105-acre dairy farm in a rural part of their state as a retreat and rehearsal space. Glassman said, “Once we made Ashfield our home, we realized that the rural location was instead a new prism for seeing how interconnected our work is with the place where we live.” Over the last 15 years, Double Edge has begun to renew the agricultural potential of its land, while the increasing curiosity of



MicroFest participants at Beardsley Community Farm.
Photo: Michael Premo



neighbors has prompted the creation of a public performance space and performance season at the farm.⁵¹ An economics of localization is playing out combining culture and agriculture in ways that can potentially sustain Double Edge and contribute to community economic vitality.

Effective models of institutional and philanthropic support that honor and uphold the values of responsible arts-and-culture-based revitalization need to be made visible. There were some exemplary approaches cited within MicroFest that offer models for other responsible place-based funding, all of which respect and honor the people of place and support their agency to define the use of resources.

The Skillman Foundation in Detroit has embedded support for community-based art in its major neighborhood and youth development initiative which is grounded in neighborhood level decision-making.

Terry Holley of the [East Tennessee Foundation](#) described how the wealth created by the extractive industries of the region (first timber, then coal, now water) does not stay in the region. She contrasted that with how small investments made by the East Tennessee Foundation have supported and grown local cultural assets and their economic potential. A \$1,500 grant supported the town of Coker's Creek (620 families, 80 percent living below the poverty line) to do a door-to-door asset survey that revealed a wealth of people with traditional arts and artisan skills but no clear way to bring them to a higher level. The next investment, \$2,500, engaged those local artists who were nationally recognized for their skill to teach others, with the objective of getting to marketable quality creative work. Demand for the workshops grew beyond local artists and artisans; demand for the objects secured a \$5,000 grant to repurpose a closed Post Office as a gift shop space for local artists to sell their work on the hiking trails, a collaboration with the Park Service. These small incremental investments

provided impetus and enabled a natural evolution of the project to help poor families develop an income stream.

The story of philanthropist, John Paul DeJoria, co-founder and CEO of John Paul Mitchell Systems, Inc. (Paul Mitchell hair products) and his hands-off and sustained commitment to [Grow Appalachia](#) was yet another story.

Taking a Holistic Approach

Cross-sector work is most effective when collaboration is ingrained in the practice and organizational DNA. What seems to make the most provocative work *work* is collaboration that doesn't just use art as a tool for some other end, but embraces the holistic integration of creativity as a core part of any civic or social endeavor. Detroit's Invincible provides in her Complex Movements performance examples of science that reveal cycles and processes that are anything but linear. "This holism seems to ground the city's most insurgent artistic, civic, and social efforts."⁵²

A core principle of both the moral economy and of ensemble theater, Caron Atlas notes, is being part of a greater whole. She concludes her essay:

During disasters, be they floods in New York or Appalachia, or collapsed coalmines, people step up to help one another in extraordinary ways. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit writes about this civic capacity that gives us a "glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become." The question is how do we build this capacity and incorporate it further into our everyday lives? Is our policy making built on fear and competition? Or does it support the compassion and solidarity that is being part of a greater whole?

We can't be limited to either/or paradigms. If our economies and our communities are complex and adaptive ecologies, our job in both urban and rural areas is to work across sectors, strengthen our interdependence, and stretch our vision and practice. MicroFest asks how we know if the work works. I think that it is unrealistic to make claims for arts and culture in isolation. But, if they are part of an interwoven moral economy, creative civic action, and sustained activism, then the work works. With strength and joy we step up, stand together, and create a greater whole.⁵³

WHAT DIFFERENCE ARE WE MAKING?

MicroFest: Detroit / Mosaic Youth: Theater Making Its Case

Adapted from [Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference](#) by Eddie B. Allen



“We didn’t start with a model,” founder Rick Sperling told the MicroFest audience gathered at Mosaic’s rehearsal space. “We just did stuff. We saw that there was a need. Arts programs were being eliminated.” Even now, he says, site-based theater programs exist in only about five percent of the schools in Michigan’s largest educational district.

Years after Mosaic’s founding, Sperling recognized that the program was not only filling an extracurricular need, but developing a blueprint for teen success. “Over the years I began to see that the Youth Ensemble program was having an impact on its young artists that went far beyond artistic pursuits.”

Eventually, a [study](#) was conducted by the University of Michigan with support from The Wallace Foundation, which enabled in-depth research on Mosaic’s methods and its outcomes in the lives of primarily lower-income, urban-reared youth. During a three-year period, Mosaic participants were given pre- and post-program assessments, including questions about their personal life influences and challenges, ranging from the sources of stress in their lives to their parents’ marital status. Mid-year assessments were individually conducted among youth whose parents consented to their participation in the study. Meanwhile, Mosaic alumni feedback was solicited via e-mail surveys, with iTunes or Amazon.com gift cards provided as their incentive for responding, which generated nearly 200 additional data sources.

U-M’s study, “Excellence on Stage and in Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development Through the Arts,” was specifically commissioned, said Sperling, to help him and the staff assess what helped and what didn’t help in producing both artistically talented and personally well-developed students.

“We also decided to create this document because we wanted to share our model with educators, youth workers, arts organizations, and policymakers,” writes Sperling. “While we could tell people— anecdotally—about the incredible success stories we were witnessing, it was hard to sway many people who were set in their belief that the arts were an “extra” and could not significantly impact youth development.”

What did Mosaic get out of its evaluation?

- It got a theory of change that clarified how Mosaic’s work *works*! It was able to codify the core elements of its approach—creating high expectations, a supportive environment, and a sense of artistic empowerment for youth—and share its model with others.
- It got a longer view of its impact on youth by looking over three years.
- It got meaningful, credible numbers to substantiate the value of theater-based youth development, such as: 92% cited their Mosaic involvement as the source of their confidence in believing they could achieve other goals; and 97% of Mosaic youth surveyed said Mosaic helped them make a valuable contribution to a group or the community.

What Types of Change?

Even to the true believers, we wonder if we're fooling ourselves; art and performance can seem to be pretty weak tea in the face of overwhelming social and economic challenges. Yet, as these experiences accumulate, we can't help but confirm artists as necessary contributors to the complex and interwoven processes of revitalization, renewal, and reconnection. As Jo Carson suggested, a play (or any work of art) will not in itself "solve [the] problem," but art can provide a view through the fog....She embraced its healing power, but completely understood its limits.

Gerard Stropnick, director, writer, actor, founding member of Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble⁵⁴

What difference *are* we making, and how do we know? These coupled questions proved somewhat elusive on the MicroFest journey. In retrospect, given the limits of time, it was more than enough of an agenda just to learn about the nature of the work and what makes it work.

Although Mosaic Youth Theatre's was the only explicit evaluation story at MicroFest, many others discussed observable outcomes and shared testimonies about the changes they experienced from participants and community members involved in projects. Their stories illuminate how broad notions of "intentional *transformation*" can be demonstrated in terms of more specific outcomes. These outcomes can be clustered in the six categories of Animating Democracy's [Continuum of Impact](#) that was distributed as a reference point at each MicroFest.⁵⁵

MicroFest shone a light on how the range of projects and programmatic and organizational work are contributing to observable change in:

Awareness, knowledge, or understanding of issues. Through the creative process, from the content of the creative work, and through related engagement activities, creative work

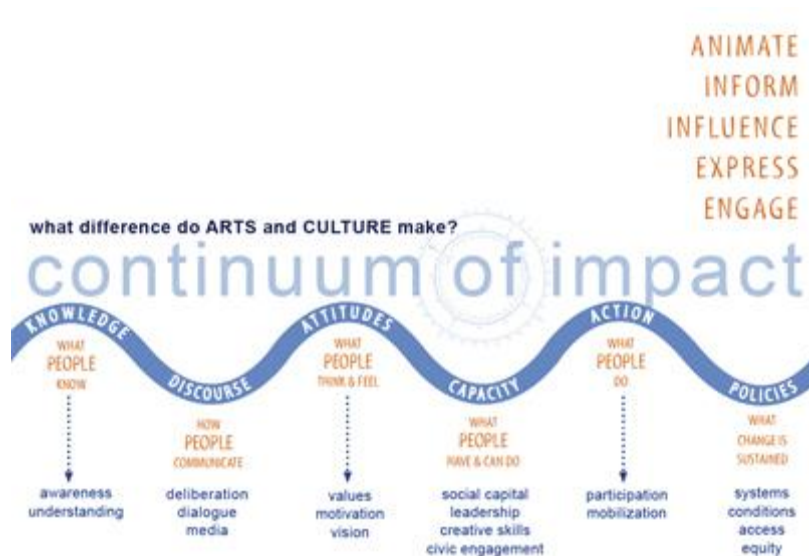
"The theater started after Katrina. Police were coming to bother us. We thought of using theater to educate our members about their rights. It has really worked. Sometimes you can't remember your rights but then you watch the play. The light bulb goes off for any injustice that comes your way."

-Santos, a member of Congreso de Jornaleros

reveals the complexities and dimensions of issues, dispels false dichotomies, and deepens understanding of various and often conflicting perspectives. Plays such as Carpetbag Theatre's *Speed Killed My Cousin*, about the effects of military service borne by returning warriors and families; *Cry You One*, about Louisiana's vanishing wetlands; and *Angola 3*, about the horrors of solitary confinement and injustices in the prison system, all contribute to raising awareness, keeping issues present in the public consciousness, and educating various publics about the issue.

Public dialogue and deliberation and the media. Art changed the quality of dialogue in the public planning process in the Building Home project through creative devices such as the BUILT

game and techniques such as Image Theater, as well as expanded who participated and who was heard. The game offers an experience of decision-making that moves players along a continuum of grappling with and understanding individual, neighborhood, and regional interests.⁵⁶ FISH Hospitality Pantries used theater to open hearts as well as minds to spark community conversations that can lead to new ideas and action to address hunger and poverty in Knoxville's food deserts. Art strategies helped call media attention to the Louisiana Bucket



Animating Democracy's [Continuum of Impact](#) includes definitions, sample indicators, and data collection strategies for six families of

misperceptions of place (Matrix Theater's *Detroit Dreaming*); and attitudes about those who are incarcerated (Prison Creative Arts Project, 4TheatrSake, The Graduates). Traditions and ritual provide ways for communities to reconnect to, take pride in, and find strength in cultural identity (Mardi Gras Indians).

Civic engagement and creative capacity. Arts and culture projects and organizations have built foundational relationships. New partnerships, such as those formed by The Carpetbag Theater with local veterans' organizations, extended Carpetbag's capacity to reach targeted veterans' interest audiences and expanded the creative strategies in veteran partner organizations' toolboxes. The Higher Ground project has had effects along the continuum of impact, all of which have built civic engagement capacity in Harlan County. Its plays create an open forum for discussing the important issues facing Harlan County residents, while also creating opportunities for project participants to form ties that extend beyond the work of developing and performing theater. These relationships fostered an increased sense of self and collective agency, building social capital that can motivate and empower action. For example, a group of women involved in Higher Ground who care deeply about their community helped write a funding proposal to develop the play. These women continue to be leaders in the project and hold the community college that leads Higher Ground accountable for its outcomes.⁵⁷

Individual and collective youth leadership development results from participatory artmaking models such as those developed by Matrix Theatre Company, Detroit Summer, and The Alley

Brigade's efforts in the community of Diamond, LA. The 61 media stories in one 12-month period, including stories in the Houston Chronicle, Shell Oil Company's hometown newspaper, contributed to convincing Shell to hear Diamond's demands.

Attitudes. MicroFest featured projects that helped communities clarify values, envision new possibilities, and break out of conventional patterns, patterns such as "not in my backyard" attitudes (Building Home); negative

Project, and cultural organizing models such as the Zilphia Horton Cultural Organizing Institute and the STAY Project by providing skill building training that equips and empowers youth and young adults.

Michael Premo offered that “Most of the MicroFest artists aspire to a more holistic view of impact, placing strong emphasis on relationships and process,” as these examples illustrate. Animating Democracy’s research similarly finds that arts and culture make perhaps their most significant contribution in building capacity for civic engagement and the creation of human, social, and community capital.⁵⁸ This area of outcomes may deserve further research and resources.

Action. MicroFest participants showed how arts and culture can galvanize, motivate, and mobilize people to take action in their communities. Latina women concerned about the local Sheriff’s potential abuse of holding immigrants in jail were empowered by their theater work with Congreso de Jornaleros. With the help of a coalition of women’s organizations, they mobilized to sing outside the Sheriff’s office window until they eventually got a meeting, a first step toward dialogue on the issue and influencing policy. Organizations working in advocacy or organizing modes, such as Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Moving Forward Gulf Coast, and some mentioned by Caron Atlas in her essay, such as [Kentuckians for the Commonwealth](#) and the [Center for Rural Strategies](#), point to impact by the number and diversity of people taking action in their efforts toward positive changes in legislation or policy.

Policies, Conditions, Solutions. Actual changes in conditions, systems, and policies attributable to arts-based projects and programs were reported by Kids Rethink New Orleans, which succeeded in replacing a pervasive policy of zero tolerance around discipline in charter schools with a more equitable practice of restorative justice. Ashé Cultural Arts Center, through its ongoing presence in Central City New Orleans and partnership work, plays an active civic role, influencing and participating in decisions that affect the social, civic, economic, and cultural well-being of its own neighborhood, as well as the city at large. For example, in response to the need for financial services in the community, Ashé worked to attract a credit union to the neighborhood. And, recognizing the need and opportunity for housing, Ashé helped develop new housing for artists along OC Halley Blvd.

How Do We Know?

“The stories, while drops in the bucket, add up.”
-Bobby Martin

MicroFest began a process of drawing out the kinds of outcomes that are meaningful from the perspectives of those doing the work—a useful and important step in taking agency as a field to define and determine outcomes that matter. Mosaic Youth Theatre’s formal evaluation, made possible with funding support from the Wallace Foundation, was an anomaly at MicroFest. Most of the evidence of change as described above is not the result of formal evaluation efforts but rather of informal observation, testimonials, and a collection of stories and anecdotes. This is the best that most groups can do, given limited capacity and resources.

MicroFest raised more questions than answers about understanding the impact of this work. People wondered how to gauge hard-to-measure outcomes such as shifts in attitude or understanding and whether they can attribute civic outcomes to their arts efforts, knowing that many factors are in play. Recognizing that some outcomes might not be felt until well after a project concludes, participants asked if it's realistic to track evidence of change over a longer term. Other questions included:

- Who and what is driving evaluation?
- How do we more clearly and specifically define civic or social intentions that are realistic and able to be tracked?
- What evidence do we look for that place is transformed, revitalized, or renewed?
- How do we connect the dots between creative activities and actual outcomes?
- How do we weigh the effects of creative process and engagement as well as artistic product?
- How much traction is the work and its message getting beyond those who are directly involved in creating it?

Acknowledging nascent efforts in addressing such questions, Mickeeya Harrison, executive director of [Tribe One](#) suggested that, "To be most generative, you have to start by looking retroactively at what we found, then look forward, informed by what we've learned through research....to use evaluation in a generative way ... it needs to be iterative."

Making the Case

With all of these questions and most groups struggling simply to implement the labor intensive work of community-based arts, some might ask, why bother?

Urban planner Maria Rosario Jackson wrote, "Ideally, evaluation is driven by the genuine desire to learn about better ways to achieve stated goals, rather than by the urgent need to justify an investment." She says, "It is also true that the need to make the case in support of community-based arts activity is a fact of life."⁵⁹

Jackson lays out several barriers that stand in the way of the fullest valuing of community-based arts: community-based arts still sit at the margins of the arts sector, overshadowed by attention to major and more mainstream cultural institutions; cultural participation is narrowly understood largely still in terms of arts attendance; the full roles of artists in communities are un- or under-acknowledged; the arts are viewed as separate from or irrelevant to other policy areas; and there is an over-emphasis on proving the economic impacts of the arts at the expense of documenting and highlighting other possible arts impacts. These barriers have "important implications for how one thinks about situating an argument in support of community-based arts activity. Addressing and overcoming these barriers is essential to the field and also important for anybody interested in a more useful and adequate way of thinking about the role of arts and culture at the community level. It is essential to contemplate this as

one contemplates evaluation and its potential uses in helping to make the case for community arts with social and civic intents.”⁶⁰

The ability to substantiate the value of arts and culture, what they add to the strategies of creating healthy, equitable communities, became clear in MicroFest conversations related to collaborating with other fields and sectors and to increasing resources outside of arts funding.

Evolution and Epiphanies

Sustainable positive change in any place requires time. In places like Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans that have experienced a history of disinvestment, the effects of catastrophic economic collapse, or natural disaster, recovery and renewal may feel like a never-ending process. As MicroFest participants tried to understand how social change occurs, someone asked, “Is change revolution or evolution?” Certain theories of social change fueled the conversations.



MicroFest: New Orleans at Ashé Cultural Arts Center.
Photo: Michael Premo

Change is incremental. The notion that change is incremental was offered up by Matthew Glassman, of Double Edge Theater, who has found value in the concept of *human economies*, as put forth by Helena Norberg-Hodge. Norberg-Hodge is a leading critic of conventional notions of growth and development; she advocates for human-scale economies based on the economics of localization. It makes sense to consider increments or building blocks of change. Robert Gipe of the Higher Ground project described a small mural project at Evarts (KY) High School that was made possible by one student who

used college work-study money. Gipe observed, “Even if we can’t generate a new economy around the arts, you can change the way people engage.”

In the evaluation world, incremental change may be framed as intermediate outcomes, points along the way that mark progress or that can influence other change. Charting incremental changes may be a more realistic and practicable approach that unburdens arts practitioners and their partners from unrealistic expectations.

Change happens through networks. Invincible’s Complex Movements performance and discussion introduced Margaret Wheatley’s and Deborah Frieze’s science-based emergence theory:

In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions

spring up simultaneously in many different areas. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond each locale. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more global or comprehensive level.⁶¹

Invincible, and others in Detroit, observe this kind of emergent change happening there. Networks lead to communities of practice, out of which, suddenly and surprisingly, emerge systems of influence. MK Wegmann of the National Performance Network challenged participants to think, “What is the networking support that is connecting individual and disparate efforts to recognize and build upon them?” The many organizations that have evolved to support change efforts in Appalachia, such as those supporting the STAY program for youth, provide examples of networks and coalitions working together.⁶²

During MicroFest, participants noted small epiphanies among leaders of other sectors, such as the Knoxville civic leader who, until being part of the MicroFest conversation, had never made a connection between art and its capacity to contribute to social change. She was acknowledged as “someone on the cusp,” a leader who can be cultivated, and even these small shifts in attitude represent opportunity to build allies and partnerships—a capacity building change.

Carol Bebelle wrote, “[New Orleans] is a city that is fluent in the art of improvisation. It is in our music, our problem solving, and our cooking. ... This creative impulse, mostly taken for granted, was never more necessary than in fueling our recovery from the near destruction of our dear city and its subsequent resurrection after the ‘Katrina-related federal flood.’”

Culture is a life force in these places in distress. The tea is not weak.

IMPLICATIONS OF MICROFEST: USA

MicroFest: USA was an illuminating and generative opportunity for ensemble theaters to look outside their own network and see themselves within a larger ecosystem of cultural and community stakeholders working with intention to make positive change.



Each MicroFest proved to be a rich immersive experience through which to learn how the arts and cultural assets

of place can help revitalize and renew communities facing extreme economic and social issues. From Detroit to Appalachia to New Orleans, participants both demonstrated and examined the alignment of values—collaboration, inclusion, transparency, excellence, and respect—that exists in ensemble theater work and cross-field and cross-sector work. Ensemble practices were apparent as participants witnessed theater and other artists working across disciplines as well as collaborating with organizers, prisons, community colleges, schools, planning commissions, and other community-based entities. In this context, the concept of *ensemble* gained a productive complexity, reinforcing the values that guide ensemble theater work and expanding to embrace new configurations of artists and greater intentionality toward community change.

MicroFest brought fresh focus to what this work looks like; how it works, especially across fields and sectors; what factors make it effective; and observable outcomes. MicroFest: Honolulu (not yet held at the time of this writing) will add to the learning and may suggest additional considerations.

While there have been many initiatives and studies that have examined and provided support in this arena, MicroFest is unique in focusing through a multifocal, progressive, social justice lens: at once viewing the work from the vantage point of ensemble theaters and from the point of view of other artists, community agents of change, and community members affected by issues of place.

By virtue of these converging interests, the exchange and learning that took place at MicroFest informs current discourse in creative placemaking, arts and community development, and arts and social justice. This section presents opportunities, challenges, and lingering questions opened up by MicroFest regarding:

- Supporting ensemble theaters within a broader community of practice
- Advancing ensemble theater and cultural production in cross-sector work
- Understanding impact
- Supporting and sustaining arts and culture in community revitalization

Supporting Ensemble Theaters within a Broader Community of Practice

Place-based, in-person opportunities for learning and exchange are crucial for examining the work in context and situating ensemble theaters in a broader community of practice. Artists and arts organizations with common values, interests, and intents are often unaware of others working on the same issues in different creative disciplines and genres, and even within their own. Because the community of practice around this work is far-flung, coming from multiple artistic disciplines, universities, social justice organizations, community development sectors, and beyond, practitioners often work with little knowledge or sense of affinity with other change agents whose work and intentions align with their own. They are not frequently connecting their work, sharing information, or learning from others' experience.

Even in a virtual world, where online forums and journals offer substantive exchange, in-person and in-place learning around this work of place cannot be replaced. Convening a community of practice coalesces different sources and influences. It enables demonstration of quality practices as well as real-time dialogue about the ethical and practical challenges and aesthetic possibilities of this work. In a format such as MicroFest, it connects the local to the national and the national to the local.

MicroFest can inform the national discourse on the role of arts and culture and ensemble theaters in community development and revitalization through dissemination and co-learning strategies. Looking ahead, some specific opportunities coming out of MicroFest: USA (2012–13) include:

1. Continuing MicroFest, building upon the strengths, and addressing gaps. MicroFest succeeded in examining the nature of arts and cultural production with goals of revitalization and renewal of place as well as factors that contribute to effective work. It only scratched the surface of learning related to working across sectors and understanding social impact. (Cross-sector and social impact areas are discussed in the next two sections). There was, perhaps, unfulfilled interest in a deeper exploration of aesthetics in terms of how place affects art and the effects of social or civic intent on aesthetic choices and artistic product; these may deserve more explicit focus. MicroFest explored with a sense of openness and discovery, and as the work evolves such openness will continue to uncover trends and innovations. Involving key field leaders in a next iteration will serve to define and sharpen questions that can add to field research and knowledge building.

2. Promoting and reinforcing specific uses of MicroFest documentation. The documentation of MicroFest—nine commissioned essays, posts on HowlRound, and videostreaming—contribute to a body of knowledge with valuable field reflections. Strategies to ensure that these materials are known, accessible, and used by NET, within artist training institutes, and in

academia, will ensure their value as educational resources and keep NET and ensemble theaters visible as important contributors to discourse in this arena of work.

Advancing Ensemble Theater and Cultural Production in Cross-sector Work

There is increased attention being paid to comprehensive strategies to solve society's intractable problems. Leaders charged with making inroads on issues in all sectors, whether community development, government, immigration, health, the economy, the environment, or philanthropy, recognize that issues are interrelated. In addition, civic leaders, people working in social justice organizations, and federal government agencies are looking for innovative strategies to address issues and opportunities of place. The context is ripe to reassert the arts in this "moment of comprehensiveness."⁶³



As interest and demand increase among arts and other sectors, the need has grown for education and exchange opportunities that bring the concerns of different stakeholders together for joint learning. Opportunities for deep exchange in which the complexities of local context and cross-sector work can be examined are key to maximizing the powerful role of arts and culture in sustaining healthy and just communities. Possibilities to address these needs include:

1. Deepening MicroFest's examination of cross-sector work.

a) Explore specific challenge points raised at MicroFest: Areas of cross-sector work where deeper and common understanding would advance effective work include:

- differing vocabularies, professional norms, and ways of working;
- dynamics of power in cross-sector collaborations and self-determination in communities;
- goals that may not be aligned;
- misperceptions and/or a general lack of knowledge of how arts and culture can support community, civic, and social goals.

b) Focus on a particular sector, field, or issue in order to enable depth of inquiry and learning. Some possibilities suggested by MicroFest:

- Community development field: an opportunity in which the social justice lens and community-based arts practice could influence a field already working toward models of arts and culture support and integration.

- Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts: an opportunity to illuminate asset-based and self-determined models for community development and better understand where and how ensemble theaters are contributing to the health and vibrancy of those districts.
- Select issue(s): an opportunity to delve into effective cross-sector models related to issues such as immigration, the environment, or returning military personnel, which are commanding public attention nationally and locally.

c) Continue a case-based learning approach focused on exemplary cross-sector work. One emphasis might be on programs, initiatives, or projects in which artists have had a sustained and/or deep, integrated opportunity to influence a system and effect change. The example of Marty Pottenger's influence in municipal government in Portland, ME was given.

2. Expanding participation by professionals from other sectors to extend the reach of cross-sector learning; nurturing ambassadors in other fields and sectors as potential partners in their own communities. Strategies are needed to ensure more balanced perspectives than the MicroFest pilot was able to achieve. Two ways to approach this might include:

a) Seek one or more partners to jointly conceive and promote MicroFest. Inroads have been made with LISC, but there may be other national entities (such as Welcoming America for immigration issues) or regional associations of planners, etc.

b) Consider if and how MicroFest or NET ambassadors can participate in the convenings or blogs, of other sectors and disseminate MicroFest resources to them.

c) Explore opportunities for MicroFest learning to be shared in the creative placemaking arena through joint gatherings, sharing documentation, or simply informal meeting of leadership to share observations and ideas.

3. Ensuring artist training in working across sectors. There are several artist-led training institutes that provide skill building in community-based practices for theater and other artists. Some may be interested in developing further their cross-sector partnership curriculum; or new offerings altogether may be worth considering. Ensuring affordable access to these is important so that artists can take advantage.

4. Exploring strategic opportunities within specific sectors or fields where collaboration with arts and culture can advance positive community, civic, or social change. This may begin by identifying bridge builders in arts and other arenas for a strategy session to explore reciprocal opportunities.

Understanding Impact

Artists and cultural organization leaders who are committed to social change work want to know what difference they are making, how they can do their work more effectively, and how to tell the story of their impact better. It has been a challenge to elevate evaluation as a means

to satisfy these interests. Barriers include limited skills, capacity, and resources, as well as skepticism that evaluation is worth the effort. Cross-sector work brings added challenge with multiple stakeholders' interests and intentions at play.

In addition, the emphasis on the economic impact of the arts predominates in current creative placemaking and community development approaches; even within the arts sector it has obscured the social impact of arts and culture work. Social impact has only recently been given focus and without more attention here, it is difficult for others to understand the full contributions to community change that artists and arts organizations are making.⁶⁴

Look at what role NET can play in building a culture of evidence. More focused attention and entry-point learning on the social impact of arts and cultural activity can help arts practitioners improve practice and better tell the story of the full impact of this work. Possible directions within MicroFest include:

1. Inviting researchers and evaluators to engage in MicroFest planning, case studies, and sessions to infuse their thinking and identify opportunities for skill building and field learning in areas such as:

- examining *intentionality* in planning for projects, which ensures meaningful and realistic outcomes relative to the artistic intervention;
- identifying indicators of change, especially those in the areas of relationship building, social capital, and other “capacity” outcomes for which the arts have proven especially potent, as well as practicable ways to collect and analyze data;
- understanding the value of arts and culture strategies to achieving social or civic outcomes; and
- having opportunities to consider within particular communities networks and cumulative effects of this segment of cultural producers.

2. Offering models or ideas for cross-sector analysis that look at what it would take to negotiate, plan for, and evaluate the desired outcomes of multiple stakeholders.

3. In the earliest planning for MicroFest, identifying projects that are or can be focusing efforts around assessing social impact in the time leading up to MicroFest, and whose results can be shared at MicroFest. This might take the form of a mini-Field Lab in which evaluators are paired with ensemble theaters or other select participants for coaching and assistance.⁶⁵

Supporting and Sustaining Arts and Culture in Community Revitalization

Questions of how to ensure and sustain healthy communities and the role of arts and culture in making and maintaining vital and just places loom large. They are outside the scope of MicroFest or NET alone to tackle, and they remain for the field at large to address. Further, recognition and resources will come to the arts and culture sector as funders and other sector leaders see evidence accrue over time regarding their contributions and impact. This said,

certain questions suggested by MicroFest are worth noting, unanswered here but posed for future discussion. Some may influence choices NET makes; others have implications for arts, funding, and other sector stakeholders and leaders.

What more can be done to sustain the work of severely under-resourced individual artists and the often small- to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations that are driving and partnering in this work? While many of the types of theater ensembles and cultural groups featured in MicroFest are doing the most progressive work at the intersection of art and civic/social change, they themselves are working and living at the edge of economic survival. Not the likely recipients of funding from large national initiatives, they scrape together personal and limited local resources to carry out creative initiatives. These artists must be able to have secure lives and survive financially as they contribute to the transformation of communities.

What are the models and how can we maximize learning from cultural work and cross-sector partnerships that have been longstanding, strategic, and impactful? In the place-based inquiry that MicroFest was, the strongest work was sustained over time and engaged strategically, as well as organically, in response to place. Artistic leadership as well as community and sector partners were able to sustain commitment. How can strong work that is already happening be supported at the same time that the emergence of new and innovative cultural strategies are encouraged and also supported?

How can colleges and universities become even stronger partners in this work? In all three MicroFest places, a college of art and design, a community college, and public and private universities play key leadership and partnership roles in advancing compelling and sustained work. Current directions in higher education to advance public scholarship in the arts, humanities, and design (for example, through [Imagining America](#)), are propelled by a goal to foster lifelong civic engagement, and to train in community-based arts. This trend makes colleges and universities a potential base providing infrastructure, research, and evaluation capacity, as well as a pipeline of next generation artists. What models of campus–community partnerships can further illuminate the possibilities?



Does youth-focused work in this arena represent a critical focus for further development and investment? Youth-centered organizations and youth-led efforts proved to be some of the most exciting, longstanding, and effective work exposed by MicroFest. Youth are a source of hope and potential, and they are the next generation of citizens and contributors to their communities. There are many sophisticated models within the fields of theater for young audiences and youth theater, youth arts, youth development, and youth civic engagement with

which NET might further explore. There is opportunity to support youth-based programs at the intersection of youth development, civic engagement/social justice, and arts.

What are models of institutional and philanthropic support and coordination that honor the values of ensemble practice and that have potential for advancing sustainable healthy communities? Alternative approaches to funding need to be developed to support evolving notions of ensemble theater and social innovation, and which allow for alternative structures outside the nonprofit model. Place-based work requires smart and coordinated local sources working together. How can local resources such as community foundations and individual donors be educated and engaged? What are models of support in which small investments over time effectively build sustainability and create local impact? What insights do national funders have from their experience funding in comparable arenas? A first step might be a mapping and analysis of where funding support for this work is coming from, i.e., public and private sources; local, state, national level; presenters, commissioning, creation funds; as well as feeders to a pipeline of artists equipped to do the work effectively (e.g., artist-led training programs, professional networks and associations, the academy).



Pam Korza co-directs Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts that inspires, informs, promotes, and connects arts and culture as potent contributors to community, civic, and social change. She co-wrote *Civic Dialogue, Arts & Culture*, and the *Arts & Civic Engagement Tool Kit*. She co-edited *Critical Perspectives: Writings on Art & Civic Dialogue*, as well as the five-book *Case Studies from Animating Democracy*. She has consulted and offered workshops and presentations on arts and civic engagement for artists, cultural organizations, funders, and at cross-sector gatherings across the country and in China and South Korea. Pam serves on the National Advisory Board for Imagining America, a consortium of colleges and universities that advances public scholarship in the humanities, arts, and design. Pam previously worked with the Arts Extension Service (AES)/UMass where she coordinated the National Public Art Policy Project and co-wrote and edited *Going Public: A field guide to developments in art in public places*. She also directed the New England Film & Video Festival.

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Endnotes

¹ Valdez, Mark, “The Network of Ensemble Theaters’ MicroFest: USA: Part 1 Detroit,” [HowlRound](#), Aug. 12, 2012.

² Carol Bebelles raises the question, “Is New Orleans a prophetic city?” in her MicroFest essay, “[MicroFest/Artists Spotting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be.](#)” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

³ Mark Kidd, “[MicroFest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia’s Coal Country](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁴ The 2010 National Endowment for the Arts’ [Creative Placemaking](#) report by Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting defines creative placemaking as follows: In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. In turn, these creative locales foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers. Together, creative placemakings livability and economic development outcomes have the potential to radically change the future of American towns and cities.

⁵ Erik Takeshita, “[Art and Community Development, New Orleans Style](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁶ Mark Kidd, “[MicroFest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia’s Coal Country](#).” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁷ Valdez, Mark, “The Network of Ensemble Theaters’ MicroFest: USA: Part 1 Detroit,” [HowlRound](#), Aug. 12, 2012.

⁸ Detroit Lives! applies multimedia and social branding skills to public art, documentary film, a clothing line, and other products that carry messages aimed to shift negative perceptions of the city.

⁹ For more on this topic, read, Betsy Peterson’s “[Folk and Traditional Arts and Social Change](#),” Americans for the Arts/Animating Democracy, 2011.

¹⁰ Mark Valdez, “The Network of Ensemble Theaters’ MicroFest: USA: Part 1, Detroit.” [HowlRound](#), Aug. 12, 2012

¹¹ Erik Takeshita, “Art and Community Development – New Orleans Style,” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

¹² Eddie B. Allen Jr., “[Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2012.

¹³ Gerard Stropnicky writes in his piece “[Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA: Intentions, Values, and Propositions](#).” Cajun artist Nick Slie is creating *Cry You One*, a site-specific theater work that mourns and

celebrates both the vanishing wetlands that once helped to protect New Orleans from Gulf storms, and Cajun culture itself.

¹⁴ Caron Atlas, "[Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia](#)," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

¹⁵ Carol Bebel, "MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

¹⁶ Gerard Stropnick, "Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

¹⁷ Gerard Stropnick, "[A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place](#)," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

¹⁸ Mark Valdez, "The Creation of a New Way of Living: Interview with Shea Howell" HowlRound, August 15, 2012.

¹⁹ Caron Atlas, "Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy."

²⁰ Jon Catherwood-Ginn and Robert Leonard, "[Playing for Good: The Arts in Planning and Government, Americans for the Arts/Animating Democracy](#). 2012.

²¹ Gerard Stropnick, "Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michael Premo, "[Reimagining Revitalization: Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit](#)," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2012.

²⁵ Eddie B. Allen, "Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference."

²⁶ Gerard Stropnick, "Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA."

²⁷ Carol Bebel, "MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World."

²⁸ Caron Atlas, "Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy."

²⁹ Gerard Stropnick, "Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA."

³⁰ Mark Kidd, "[MicroFest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia's Coal Country](#)," Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

³¹ Jon Catherwood-Ginn and Bob Leonard, "[Playing for Good: The Arts in Planning and Government, Americans for the Arts/Animating Democracy](#), 2012.

³² Carol Bebel, “MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be,” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

³³ Michael Rohd, “[LEAN IN: Sojourn Theatre, Civic Practice & Catholic Charities USA](#),” *HowlRound*, Jan. 12, 2013.

³⁴ Carol Bebel, “MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World.”

³⁵ Mark Kidd, “MicroFest: Democratic Arts.”

³⁶ Art in Other Places

³⁷ Carol Bebel, “MicroFest/Artists Spotlighting the World.”

³⁸ Michael Premo, “[Reimagining Revitalization: Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2012.

³⁹ Mark Kidd, “MicroFest: Democratic Arts.”

⁴⁰ Michael Premo, “Reimagining Revitalization.”

⁴¹ Gerard Stropnick, “Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA: Intentions, Values, and Prepositions,” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁴² Michael Premo, “Reimagining Revitalization.”

⁴³ Erik Takeshita, “Art and Community Development, New Orleans Style,” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Michael Premo, “Reimagining Revitalization.”

⁴⁶ Erik Takeshita, “Art and Community Development.”

⁴⁷ Caron Atlas, “Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia,” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Atlas’s essay draws on some of Lewis’ steps including: 1. Mobilize/organize/revive community. 2. Regain community history through oral histories, music, and theater. 3. Develop leadership and organizational capacity. 4. Analyze and envision alternatives. 5. Collaborate and build coalitions.

⁵⁰ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena_Norberg-Hodge

⁵¹ Mark Kidd, “MicroFest: Democratic Arts.”

⁵² Michael Premo, “Reimagining Revitalization.”

⁵³ Caron Atlas, “Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy.”

⁵⁴ Gerard Stropnick, “[A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁵⁵ Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, created the [Continuum of Impact](#) from research that coalesced the most common social outcomes that artists and cultural workers aspire to through their creative work and that they may achieve.

⁵⁶ Caron Atlas, “[Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013.

⁵⁷ Caron Atlas, “Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy.”

⁵⁸ Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, “[Evaluating Impact/Appreciating Evaluation](#),” Americans for the Arts/Animating Democracy, 2012.

⁵⁹ Maria Rosario Jackson, “[Shifting Expectations: An Urban Planner’s Reflections on Evaluation of Community-based Arts](#),” Americans for the Arts/Animating Democracy, 2009.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Michael Premo, “[Reimagining Revitalization: Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit](#),” Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2012.

⁶² Caron Atlas, “Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy.”

⁶³ Maria Rosario Jackson observed these things at the Funder Exchange on Evaluating Arts & Social Change, May 22, 2013, held at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, in which funders, arts practitioners and intermediaries, and evaluators were convened by Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts.

⁶⁴ The social impact of the arts has been a core focus of the [Arts & Civic Engagement IMPACT Initiative](#) of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, as well as the [Social Impact for the Arts Project](#) at the University of Pennsylvania.

⁶⁵ Animating Democracy piloted an arts and civic engagement impact Field Lab which may serve as a model.