

Rural Cultural Roundtable Report

Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 28, 2011

Introduction

On June 28, 2011, cultural leaders, policymakers, funders, and researchers interested and active in rural contexts met to discuss the power of place-based arts and culture as an integral part of equitable, democratic, and culturally vital communities. Cosponsored by the Arts & Democracy Project, the Center for Rural Strategies, and InCommons, the group was hosted by the Bush Foundation in its Saint Paul, Minnesota, offices. Following the model of previous roundtable discussions held in the urban centers of New York and Los Angeles, this meeting examined the integral role of arts and culture in building democratic and inclusive relationships and narratives in rural communities.

Roundtable Framing

The roundtable organizers used the conceptual tool of “naturally occurring cultural districts” to engage participants in a discussion of how cultural organizations that spring up organically can strengthen communities by nurturing cultural assets and stimulating social, civic, and economic benefits in communities and across them. Starting with the caveat that the concept was generated out of urban settings, participants were encouraged to extend the relevance of this lens to their experience of cultural work and community building in rural places.

The context for the roundtables is the growing interest in placemaking, culturally based community revitalization, cultural districts, and integrated strategies for sustainable development. Mark Stern and Susan Seifert’s Social Impact of the Arts Project, including their report, *Cultivating “Natural” Cultural Districts*; Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa’s white paper, *Creative Placemaking*; and Maria Rosario Jackson’s work on cultural vitality at the Urban Institute and the field information gathered by Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC) inform this conversation.

Recognizing that the concept of naturally occurring cultural districts would need to be adapted to a rural context, roundtable partner the Center for Rural Strategies raised the following questions for consideration prior to the roundtable responding to briefing materials describing characteristics of naturally occurring cultural districts:

- The term *district* in *naturally occurring cultural district* implies geography. Rural geography is different from urban geography. How does that affect the concept of naturally occurring cultural districts in rural places?
- Another characteristic of such cultural districts is that they have dense clusters of connection among cultural groups, artists, and small businesses and community groups. Rural communities are less densely populated. Is there another type of “density” at play in rural areas? Or is lower population and organizational density antithetical to the existence of such districts?

- Another characteristic is dynamism: In rural areas, change generally occurs more slowly than in urban areas. Does the pace of rural change affect naturally occurring cultural districts? Or does rural change have a different set of indicators?
- Yet another characteristic is *networking*, the interconnection of people and institutions within a district. Do rural networks behave differently from urban ones because of distance, less access to communications technology, and fewer organizations? Each of these aspects of a network might, in turn affect how such networks help create social capital and community capacity.

The connection between place and culture is strong. The Rural Cultural Roundtable was an opportunity to explore these concepts and perhaps shape some new ways for talking about the relationship between arts and culture and building stronger communities. In addition to raising questions about the differences and similarities between rural and urban places in relation to naturally occurring cultural districts, the moderators—Caron Atlas, director of the Arts & Democracy Project, and amalia deloney, grassroots policy director at the Center for Media Justice—framed the conversation from the outset to ensure that it was grounded in the values of equity and inclusion and in a recognition of the integral role of art in communities. Many efforts to support sustainable communities or comprehensive community development overlook the deep reserve of arts, culture, and creativity that is essential to the vibrancy and resilience of a community. And many articulations of the arts and creative economy lack an explicit analysis of who has access to cultural resources and opportunities, what forms of arts and culture are validated, and who benefits from the creative economy. Participants considered these questions throughout the roundtable:

- How can opportunities and benefits be distributed fairly and equitably across communities?
- What is the nature of the benefits?
- In what ways can community members have a voice in these decisions?
- How can arts and culture be supported as an ecology, rather than as a hierarchy?

Policy Overview of Rural America

To further provide a framework for beginning the conversation about the role of art and culture in community building, Dee Davis, founder and president of the Center for Rural Strategies, sketched an overview of the social conditions in rural America.

Summarizing the 1998 Brookings Institution brief, *MetroPolicy for a MetroNation*, Davis described how the think tank’s focus was on rethinking how social policy can encourage investment in cities. The brief characterizes rural investment as unnecessary and less productive. It set up a rural-urban dichotomy that has shaped unproductive rural policy and service provision from the government, as well as unflattering portrayals of rural places by the media. This dynamic is starkly reflected in three key issues: health, education/youth, and broadband access.

Health

Although rural regions in the United States have high rates of health problems, diabetes, obesity, and heart disease among them, only 10 percent of Americans live in rural regions. A recent

report found that rural women’s life expectancy has declined. In many rural communities addiction to alcohol, methamphetamines, and prescription pain medicine has increased dramatically.

Education/Youth

The No Child Left Behind Act has been particularly hard on rural schools. Required to teach to the test, educators in these schools have little room in their teaching for the place-based curriculum that helps rural children connect to their communities. The rural-urban dichotomy noted above shows up in funding priorities, with less money per child allotted to rural kids, given the different funding formulas for rural and urban districts. To add to this pressure, rural youth are affected in the arena of housing because the Community Reinvestment Act, which enabled local banks to provide low-interest loans to families, has been under assault.

Broadband Access

This is the overarching rural issue that connects these problems (health, education, investment), and rural communities are lagging behind. The digital divide is a real and significant problem. Without pervasive broadband access, rural communities are at a deficit in the current economy and find it challenging to meet their most basic needs.

In response to a question from David O’Fallon about what he means by the term “stronger communities,” Davis replied:

We use to think a lot of things worked, especially infrastructure—factories and highways. What actually works is an investment in quality of life infrastructure such as broadband, bike paths, sidewalks, et cetera. Especially important are things linked to the global economy. With the improvement of cultural resources for a community there is spillover for other areas.

Examples of Arts and Community Change in Rural Communities

In this segment of the roundtable a diverse range of arts groups, including networks, hub organizations, historic sites, and cultural districts, practicing in rural communities across the United States, shared their process, challenges, and successes. They addressed themes such as keeping tradition alive, creating opportunities for young people to stay in and contribute to their communities, cultivating cultural economies, and engaging in cross-sector partnerships. Moderator Caron Atlas encouraged the group to think about these grounded examples with a mind to weaving together practice and policy.

Part I: Empowering Youth through Place-Centered Programs

Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, Edcouch, Texas

Presentation

Delia Pérez

Associate director, Llano Grande Center for Research and Development

In the border community of Edcouch, Texas, the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development strives to create access to higher education for area youth and engage them in

community development, with an emphasis on building leadership that respects local history and culture. Working in a context where a historical dynamic between laboring classes of Mexicans and a ruling class of Anglos has resulted in poor educational attainment and a poor local economy, the nonprofit has developed a unique college preparation program that encourages Edcouch-Elsa High School students to see that college is not only possible for them but necessary and that many of them are talented enough to compete for admission at the most prestigious universities. Scores of the center's students have graduated from elite schools, returned home, and become civically engaged members of the community. Using media to share stories that add to the collective sense of history, empathy, and activism, the youth and adults at the center work to lead public dialogues that are open, vigilant, and mindful of the continuing need for change.

Delia Pérez highlighted the organization's goal to encourage students to return home postgraduation to enter the local workforce as professionals who contribute to civic life and community development efforts. In spite of the fact that a large part of the community's identity and pride is associated with the center and its activities, Pérez cited challenges to the work. These include community members' *intentionally* placing trust in themselves and their rural roots as well as keeping in sight the principle that everyone matters. She noted the importance of creating community collaborations, such as a partnership with a local housing organization and a pilot program for a community youth center. In describing the spirit of the work, Pérez stated:

Bringing people face to face has been very important to the work that the Llano Grande has done. People have a lot of pride and love for the community and when we bring them together in a space where they can build relationships and really think through the issues that really matter to our community important things happen.

Response

Julie Ristau

Codirector, On the Commons

Framing her response within her current work with On the Commons, a national commons movement center that connects leaders and organizations in civic engagement practice, Julie Ristau described her interest in outlining a narrative and worldview of the commons. A driving question of this work is how people are working together to own their own culture and expand their sense of humanity. Starting with the notion of the commons as based on equity and agency, along with making decisions guided by a set of governing principles and managing resources together, Ristau argued that it is important to reconnect to the commons:

The idea of the commons is an old idea. It is an historic idea. Some of us have started resurrecting that in the last decade in response to Bush's ownership society. I think at the heart of the commons is the antithesis of commodification. I believe a lot of what has happened in rural communities is a dire sense of commodification—a sense that our communities no longer matter. We need to repopulate our communities and reclaim our sense of identity. It is heartening to hear about Llano Grande's work. Your focus on education, on having a stake in place, on young people coming back and wanting to contribute is important.

Discussion

Isabel Broyld, a project manager for the Neighborhood Development Center, was struck by Pérez's emphasis on intentionality. Given this purposeful approach, she posed a question about lessons learned.

Pérez's response underscored the fact that institutions can stifle these connections between people tied to place. She cited an example of how parents in the community often feel that they are being "talked at" by school officials rather than being engaged in genuine dialogue. Pérez continued, "Our law enforcement officers and teachers look like us. When we talk together, fine. But making these connections within their structures is hard."

To change oppressive institutional structures and cultivate democratic dialogue in its underresourced community, the Neighborhood Development Center uses a variety of techniques for encouraging cross-generational communication. Among these techniques is the use of social media to convene people who are local and people who are away from the area but want to stay involved. The center is also intentional about having formal community conversations, or *platicas*, that include both collaborating organizations and the diverse members of the community.

Erik Takeshita, senior program officer in the Twin Cities office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), was curious about the process of encouraging the students to come back to the community once they have left to go to school.

Pérez emphasized that the center is successful in attracting youth back to the community because it continues to communicate with them while they are gone and it positions the young people as role models for other youth. The center also works to find employment for the youth in the Rio Grande Valley. While it is not always possible for people to come back, it places a strong value on continuing communication through the use of online connections such as the organization's website.

Appalachian Media Institute/STAY Project, Whitesburg, Kentucky

Presentation

Ada Smith

Program coordinator, Appalachian Media Institute; founding member, the STAY Project

The STAY Project (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) is a diverse regional network of young people from Central Appalachia working together to advocate for and actively participate in their home communities. A consortium supported by organizations that foster youth civic engagement, including Appalshop's Appalachian Media Institute (Kentucky), the High Rocks leadership program for girls and young women (West Virginia), and the Highlander Research and Education Center (Tennessee), the STAY Project works with young people as decision makers who design their own projects, build diverse coalitions, and contribute solutions to community needs. The focus is on the need for communities now and in the future to have the basic human rights that all people deserve, no matter where they live, or their economic status, race, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or cultural background. The project

emerged from a youth forum where participants expressed that they did not know how to participate in social movement efforts in the region.

The STAY Project is guided by three core action principles:

1. Having youth ask each other what they want and need in order to stay and work in their home communities.
2. Connecting them with the resources and skills they need to make their visions for Central Appalachia come true.
3. Recognizing that there are young leaders in the region who are already creating change.

Beginning with a history of Appalshop as a youth media training program of the War on Poverty, Smith detailed the significance of Appalshop's role in creating an innovative cultural hub in a rural region that lacked those creative and integrative resources. The organization planted itself at a crucial moment in the history of the country and of eastern Kentucky and sustained itself by positioning itself as an amplifier of the voices of the region.

The Appalachian Media Institute (AMI) was launched in 1988 to replicate this place-based youth engagement model and establish a vehicle for formally bringing new youth participants into the life of the organization. Through programs such as the AMI Summer Documentary Institute, youth learn media literacy skills, examine representations of the region and themselves, interrogate the pressing social issues in their communities, and explore what it means to be a media activist. Smith explained:

What we started seeing is that young people are really powerful and imaginative. They are critical thinkers about what is happening in their communities and how to push conversations forward. We have young people who are not only creating media but really pushing themselves and their community members to ask for the things that they want and need.

As a founding member of the STAY Project, Smith built on the powerful work of Appalshop and AMI with mountain communities in eastern Kentucky. But she and her colleagues also pondered the possibility of a larger activist network led by youth in the broader Appalachian region. A central question that motivated her and her regional collaborators, High Rocks and Highlander, were how to empower and resource young people's activism in their home communities, with special attention to understanding who the diverse young people in the region are, including African American, Latino, and LGBTQ youth.

Response

Peter Pennekamp

Executive director, Humboldt Area Foundation, Eureka, California

Both the examples of Llano Grande and the STAY Project happened in these communities for a particular reason. Native American communities also face similar debilitating issues of poverty, drugs, et cetera. Rejuvenation happens through attentive cultural responses that intentionally create equity and create cultural centers in the face of challenging social relations. These projects

pay attention to building coping strategies for youth and their underresourced communities through strategic and inclusive cultural practice.

Discussion

Gülgün Kayim, the director of arts, culture, and creative economy for the city of Minneapolis, agreed that these cultural hubs help establish the narrative and support the relationships around community storytelling, especially in communities that have been pulled apart. She cited the powwow in native communities as an important structure for rebuilding narrative connections. She was curious, however, whether the STAY Project was conscious about telling the story back to the community.

Smith responded affirmatively, agreeing with the characterization that many rural communities have been “pulled apart.” Having lost something, she and the members of the STAY Project see this as their opportunity to reimagine what has been lost.

One element of being conscious of telling the story back to the community is sharing how marginalized communities have been represented by others. This includes AMI’s looking at other communities as well as its own. As Smith noted:

To me some of the most powerful work that has come out of AMI has been when we partnered with other organizations like Llano Grande . . . where you have two communities that look really different racially coming together and recognizing that we have both been through the exact same things . . . that we have been treated the exact same way and we’re both trying to figure out what to do next.

Addressing the question of how Appalshop has been so successful in getting people to come back to their homeplace, Smith emphasized the commitment of individuals rooted in a place. She also underscored the significance of Appalshop’s intentionality in bringing new people into the organization as well as building genuine partnerships with funders.

In response, Vicki Benson, of the McKnight Foundation, raised a challenging question about the role of artistry and artists in this youth engagement work that opened up dialogue among participants around a reconceptualization of what art means socially. The cultural sector can be portrayed as a viable economic avenue and Appalshop and the STAY Project are conscious about conveying that youth don’t have to leave their rural communities to make a living as photographers or as filmmakers. Tim Dorsey, a program officer with the Open Society Foundations’ Strategic Opportunities Fund, added that it is about the intersection of culture, social justice, and media arts. He underscored the important role that organizations such as Llano Grande and Appalshop play in maintaining national conversations and providing a sense of continuity by pushing the practice. They integrate the arts with a way of living and place artistry at the center of life.

Dee Davis, founder and president of the Center for Rural Strategies, affirmed this point:

If there is a naturally occurring phenomenon it is that young people want to step forward and tell their stories . . . across diverse spaces. And with dreams comes responsibility.

You tell stories and take them back to the community. But you must tell the story unswervingly. It must be a story that represents the community. So you create an aesthetic from people who live the story. You create a local appreciation for excellence. Authenticity becomes a standard. This leads to artistry.

Part II: Preserving and Enlivening Cultural Heritage

Penn Center, Saint Helena Island, South Carolina

Presentation

Emory Shaw Campbell
Executive director, Penn Center

Founded in 1862, Penn Center is the site of one of the country's first schools for freed slaves. It carries on this spirit as a significant African American historical and cultural institution. Located on Saint Helena Island in the heart of the South Carolina Sea Islands, Penn Center is situated within the Gullah culture. Its Penn School campus was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1974 and is a part of the Penn School Historic District, which comprises nineteen buildings related to and used by Penn School.

Penn School was reorganized as Penn Center in 1950 and the organization shifted its focus to community development issues embedded in the civil rights movement. The campus was one of the few sites in the South that was allowed to accommodate multiracial groups. Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow civil rights activists regularly retreated at the center and the music and dance cultivated there were often incorporated into organizing strategies.

The preservation of Gullah culture is central to the center's activities, which include monthly community sings and the presentation of the arts and history of Gullah communities by the center's York W. Bailey Museum. In 1981 a group of alumni and friends of the center recognized a need to revive once vibrant community programs which became the Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration. Their goal was to preserve the Gullah cultural heritage in demonstrations of Gullah art forms and cuisine. The annual celebration has grown in popularity, from a local audience of two hundred to an international one of more than twenty-five thousand participants.

Through its rich history and current community programs, Penn Center is seen by many as the main purveyor and preserver of the Gullah cultural heritage today. As Emory Shaw Campbell, the center's executive director, shared, however, rapid development in the region in recent years posed a threat to the center's preservation efforts. In response, the center worked with planners and political leaders to develop policies to protect the island's cultural resources. The county adopted a cultural conservation district that protects Saint Helena Island from outside investment and the center continues its cultural preservation efforts by nurturing programs in net making, basketry, music, and dance. Along this cultural corridor other celebrations are popping up, other artists are emerging, and new restaurants honoring the food traditions of the island are opening. This has all emerged out of celebrating and protecting the tangible and intangible resources of the culture itself.

Response

Erik Takeshita

Senior program officer, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Twin Cities offices

This raises important questions about the relationships between art, culture, and community that resonated throughout the roundtable discussion. While this work is about artists and artistry, it is centrally about people coming together. It happens in the way modeled by Penn Center when people move from being passive victims to being proactive and taking matters into their own hands. It happens by creating a future that you envision and by asking the question, How can we affect what is going on in our communities? These projects are deliberate about celebrating home. They raise questions such as, How do we celebrate the assets that we have in any community? How do we advertise that to the rest of the world? How do we build on the strengths that we have? What prevents us from doing this work of celebration and being more active? How do we extend the reach of rural communities?

It also raises other questions about the specific needs and historical realities of diverse rural communities—whether they experienced mining, slavery, or displacement. But commonly, how do we deal with those realities and move forward by not becoming victims of them? How can we be more active players in our own destinies?

Discussion

Isabel Broyld identified the theme of the significance of artistry to becoming citizens. In contrast to popular education that focuses on race, power, and democracy, our schools are taking the arts away from our children. But the arts are what make us human. So it is crucial to take back our schools. It is important to acknowledge what has been taken from you and assert the power to take it back.

David O’Fallon, president and CEO of the Minnesota Humanities Council, added that the education system leaves out the unmediated voice of community people. We need to own that we have powerful and deep belief sets and recognize that for people to become agents in their own narratives will require a deep structural change. Changing those beliefs in a sustainable way requires people being committed to the process over time. This means hearing and sharing deep generational stories that are not just flashy ideas but stories of deep change.

What is the role of the artist in this process? Several participants raised the issue of the separation between the artist and the community. Matthew Glassman, core actor and core director of Double Edge Theatre, contributed that artistry and the citizenry should be coalesced and not separate. Ann Markusen, director of the Arts Economy Initiative and the Project on Regional and Industrial Economics at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, remarked that the schools are failing us because they have portrayed artists as being separate from everyone else. This idea of holding artists apart eclipses the idea of everyone being an artist and the value of working at art collectively.

Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, Bangor, Maine

Presentation

Theresa Secord

Executive director, Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance

The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) is an intertribal arts service organization in Maine, serving two hundred tribal basket makers in the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes. The mission is to preserve the ancient art of ash and sweetgrass basketry, Maine's oldest art form. In 1993, when tribal basket makers founded the organization, there were only five dozen elders still practicing the art, once a mainstay of cultural artistic practice and economic development among the tribes. Through a series of annual programs, intertribal basketry workshops, a traditional-arts apprenticeship program, and four annual markets, MIBA has successfully lowered the average age of basket makers from sixty-three to forty and increased the numbers of artisans from fifty-five to two hundred. MIBA is committed to improving quality of life through traditional art for these tribal artisans, many of whom live at or near the poverty level.

With the recent recession the market for baskets in Maine has virtually disappeared and MIBA was forced to close its retail gallery in Old Town, Maine. Since the gallery closed in 2009, MIBA has established new collaborations and partnerships to keep artists employed. This includes working with the Maine Crafts Association to develop marketing strategies such as selling baskets from a kiosk in a local mall.

MIBA's executive director, Theresa Secord, began working as a basket maker while engaged as a geologist for the Penobscot tribe. While basket making had come to be associated with poverty and not a career (her mother and grandmother did not cultivate the tradition), Secord reevaluated the implications of the loss of this art form. Looking back to her roots and her great-grandmother's work with baskets, she began to feel a deep sense of cultural responsibility to revive the art—both as a way to strengthen community identity and connection to place and history and as an economic strategy. Secord emphasized that “we have always linked marketing with saving our culture.”

The story of a young artist, Jeremy Frey, a Passamaquoddy basket maker, exemplifies the power of community cultural production. In 2010, Frey was awarded the prestigious United States Artists Fellowship. Acknowledging the rise of a successful artist from poverty and drug addiction as a youth on his rural reservation, this award was celebrated by the entire basket making and arts community in Maine. It was a direct result of MIBA programs and its community of artisans practicing in this ancient, naturally occurring cultural district.

Response

Isabel Broyld

Project manager, Neighborhood Development Center

Secord's presentation reminded Isabel Broyld of the importance of people taking ownership of their stories. Often, because culture and art have become privatized in the larger American landscape, people in marginalized communities are wary of outside notions of how to market their culture. They hold it very close and are very careful about sharing it openly. Through her experience as a program officer with the Northwest Area Foundation, Broyld learned how crucial it is to recognize that communities know what they need. She cautioned that we should be wary

of bringing a Western entrepreneurial notion to the work. She outlined what she learned from this experience:

My job was to come into communities and help them look at entrepreneurship—tourism and cultural tourism. The biggest thing I learned was that you can't parachute into a community and create that . . . just because you see the promise of that. How do you, as a partner, support that mining and that extraction of the culture by the people who should own it? So even our good intentions . . . me as a Latina . . . I got excited by the idea; the vision, the promise, the future. But I was bringing a very Western mindset to something that had no place for it. I came to realize that they are doing it on their own and it is beautiful. The support they need from us is money. No conversation. No dialogue. No learning. I think philanthropy has a lot to learn from this process.

Discussion

Coming back to the split between art and culture, Lori Pourier, president of the First Peoples Fund, argued that this distinction is a very Western one. This dualistic thinking is repeated in tribal communities where it is often thought that we live in two worlds when, in fact, we all live in one world. Having just come from a four-day ceremony in which over four hundred dancers returned home from all over the country to gather together, she argued that democracy for her is a celebration of cultural life and an effort of people to determine their own destiny. She suggested we take the *art* out and refer to these processes as *culture*.

Reflection on the Roundtable

To summarize the roundtable discussion up to this point, amalia deloney noted these emergent themes:

- The importance of naming the healing properties of art, culture, and creativity—naming home, celebration, rootedness, and the alchemy between these
- The core values of the work—localism, self-reliance, honor, responsibility
- New elements—democracy, citizenry
- New economy—what is it? Economies of scale, confusion of producers and consumers
- Communities as sites of distribution—both of goods and services and of lifeways, values, ways of being in the world that change how we live together

What hasn't been named:

- Where is colonization in all this, especially in relation to labeling and essentializing categorization?

To these broad themes from the conversation Caron Atlas added:

- The need for attention to a broad definition of *economy* and *economic relationships*
- The importance of insightfully grounding policy decisions in different values from those we are accustomed to
- The necessity of recognizing and transcending artificial silos that inhibit cross-sector collaboration
- The significance of giving space to and representing multiple narratives in communities

Part III: Building Cross-Sector Dialogue and Partnerships

St. Croix Festival Theatre, Saint Croix Falls, Wisconsin

Presentation

Danette Olsen

Executive Director, Saint Croix Festival Theatre, St Croix Falls, Wisconsin

Amy Frischman

Manager, Wild Mountain Taylors Falls Recreation, Taylors Falls, Minnesota

The Festival Theatre is a nonprofit arts organization in Saint Croix Falls, Wisconsin, with a mission to “make the arts welcoming to all people as an essential part of their well-being and for the vitality of the community.” To this end, the organization has a long history of both traditional arts partnerships and nontraditional cross-sector partnerships. Since 2005, the group has grown its cross-sector connections by participating in and supporting programs through such collaborations as three consecutive National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grants in partnership with libraries in the region, a strategic marketing alliance with a focus on destination cooperative advertising, participation in the development and implementation of Earth Day celebrations with the National Park Service, and strategic support of ArtReach St. Croix.

For Danette Olsen and Amy Frischman, paying attention to both natural and cultural assets by blending arts and recreation activities makes sense, given the physical geography of their place and local reliance on the experience economy in the Saint Croix rivershed. By harmonizing across the recreation sector and the cultural sector they are continuing the stewardship of a place that has a long history. These efforts go back to the 1890s, when the communities of Saint Croix Falls, Wisconsin, and Taylors Falls, Minnesota, worked together to advance legislation in each of their states to create Interstate Park, establishing state parks on both sides of the river, and setting the tone for a strong conservationist ethic in local arts and recreation practice.

Frischman and her brother are in the infancy of a collaboration to continue their family’s recreation business, Wild Mountain Taylors Falls Recreation. To advance their business they have engaged in several cross-sector partnerships, including with the National Park Service and the Festival Theatre, as well as with businesses in the private sector. By sustaining a vibrant arts presence in rural Saint Croix and reaching across sectors to build community through partnerships such as these, Festival Theatre has become a significant member of a sustainable cultural heritage ecosystem that is vital for the experience economy that is so important to communities in the region.

Response

Tom Borrup

Creative Community Builders, Minneapolis, Minnesota

In community-building efforts it is important to see the natural environment as a shared resource and asset that brings people together. This exemplifies the idea of the commons. In difficult economic and political times it is often a challenge to help people understand that quality of life issues and environmental concerns are interconnected. Navigating across divides and sectors is

also challenging. People have deep histories in these rural places—relationships with each other and with the land. The two governments on either side of the river have unique structures and environments. While artists can often easily cross these boundaries, for community people the boundaries have meaning. So it is important to understand those local perceptions and to build in a process of working together more effectively around these shared assets. Borrup has found success working with extension agents in this process of bridging divides.

Discussion

Frischman reiterated this point of perception and historical realities. As a visitor to the area she wanted tourism. After she served on the local council, however, the divisions came into focus as she saw older community members hold on to animosities that date back to the time when her great-grandfather started their family business.

David O’Fallon argued that we often work with very narrow definitions of *economy*—an interpretation that often translates into only issues of profit. How do we broaden that to include households, sustainability, and environment? How do we get policies that value things like this river valley? These cross-sector collaborations strengthen the position of communities if they create possibilities for democratic dialogue.

The NUNU-Arnaudville Experiment, Arnaudville, Louisiana

Presentation

Gaye Hamilton

Cultural district program manager, Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

The NUNU-Arnaudville Experiment is a vortex of volunteers: a law professor, a gourd craft artist, a retired marketing specialist, a musician, a filmmaker, a homemaker, a French activist, a retired banker, and a contemporary fine artist. Capitalizing on local resources and talents, the consortium’s programs attract an equally diverse audience and a growing rank of volunteers. NUNU events provide multiple platforms for artists to earn a living wage and gain access to professional and administrative services. The Experiment focuses on four main areas—education, visual arts, music, culinary arts—and has developed key organizations representative of each. These include the Frederick l’Ecole des Arts, the Deux Bayous Gallery Collective, the Louisiana Musicians Collective, and the Jacques Arnaud French Studies Collective.

Gaye Hamilton related how powerful this cross-sector approach has been for a rural community that has been in decline and feels forgotten. The Experiment has helped the community recognize and embrace its cultural assets as resources to build upon. While the energy of the Experiment owes much to its many volunteers, visual artist George Marks brought a powerful and inspirational vision to the project when he returned to his home community.

At the heart of the NUNU-Arnaudville Experiment is attention to regionalism, inclusion, and diversity. The collaborations facilitated by the Experiment have created a diverse and artistic mix of people and genres. It has also stimulated a poetic sensibility to creative living that addresses the arts culture, community, education, and the environment while leveraging the role of the artist in society.

Response

Anne Gadwa

Principal, Metris Arts Consulting, Minneapolis, Minnesota

One of the innovative aspects of the project is that its organizers asked how they could use the town's deficiencies and turn them into assets. They were interested in bringing things that were under the radar out into the spotlight. They also worked diligently to create networks that included local businesses, to show people how the economy would benefit, including through profit sharing. Only after buy-in from those networks was established and the activities took hold did they try to go to governmental partners such as the French consulate in New Orleans. They also lobbied the state government and successfully gained statewide, legislated cultural districts as well as tax credits and sales tax breaks.

It is important to draw out the lessons from these naturally occurring contexts. There is the challenge in rural communities where you don't have the necessary density of population. The question of how to scale these efforts becomes significant and the regional frame becomes more salient.

Discussion

Given that this is another example of the exploration of a broader definition of *economy*, Caron Atlas raised the question of how we ground policy decisions in different values from those that are normally used. How can we create conversations beyond these artificial silos and bring strengths to the table from a variety of sectors? How do we bring to light the multiple narratives that are part of our communities?

Increasing Impact

After hearing about and discussing six examples from diverse approaches to cultivating democracy through arts and cultural work in rural communities, representatives from three arenas—research, communication and documentation, and funding and policy—discussed how to increase the impact of this challenging work.

Expanding Research

Ann Markusen shared insights she has gained through conducting research on a wide range of community cultural development strategies. Her first caution centered on the concept of naturally occurring cultural districts. Her key concerns are that the idea of competition between districts can become a distracting and divisive frame and can eventually lay the foundation for competition between groups; that some practices are seen as constituting cultural districts, whereas others don't (this goes against seeing the artist in everyone); and that *natural* falsely connotes something that doesn't require social relationships to institute this work. Markusen also related some general insights she has gained from her work over the years, several of which echo points made by the organizations that presented at the roundtable. These include the following:

- The idea of exporting a formulated project plan or the idea of building something that can be transplanted to another community is problematic. The focus on the local is important. Rather than push for homogeneity, groups must ask, "What is distinctive about our community?"

- Local institutions such as community radio stations, schools, and churches can be valuable resources. Citing her experience with conservative work with youth by churches in Minnesota, however, she cautioned that churches can also be incredibly powerful vehicles for counterdemocratic messages.
- Encouraging young people and midcareer artists who are new to the community can bring vitality and innovative approaches to the work.
- Concerted attention to inclusiveness along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality is crucial to supporting equity.

Markusen concluded with a call for new research on arts practices, arguing that the field needs to build a body of case studies that is comparative so we can learn from them.

Using Communications and Documentation

Creating community narratives was a consistent theme throughout the examples section of the roundtable. In her presentation on increasing impact through communication and documentation, Mimi Pickering, a documentary filmmaker and media activist from Appalshop, pointed out that the media tools for documenting and distributing community storytelling are increasingly accessible. She argued that every community should see media as a part of its community-building strategy. Engaging in media offers a win-win situation for communities.

Jesikah Maria Ross, a media educator and founding director of the University of California–Davis’s Art of Regional Change, echoed Pickering by pointing out that we can use media to amplify or lift up our strategies by telling stories grounded in real people’s experiences. Thinking about how media is commonly perceived as out of reach, she stated:

Too often we think of media as necessarily slick. But all of us have stories and can talk about our issues and assets through media. We don’t have to be artists or documentary media makers to do that. We need to be versatile with media because it can be applied in so many ways. If we are committed to the notion that we are going to make deep shifts, we must reveal an alternative, compelling vision that reflects our own voices, our own histories, our own place.

Pickering followed up by saying that funders frequently pose the question of what the art of media or of documentary film is. She responded by pointing out the contrast between commercially produced media that saturates our world versus media that documents the lived realities of people in communities. “Part of our role,” Pickering argued, “is to offer concrete alternatives to commodified images, stories, and messages.”

Finally, Ross offered that a good place to start a pragmatic relationship with media and documentation is to build partnerships. She encouraged participants to seek out the community media center in their communities.

Funding Cultural Work

Patrice Walker Powell, of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), opened the discussion of intensifying the impact of the work from a funder’s perspective by noting the impressive diversity at the table—both in terms of racial-ethnic diversity and in terms of the presence of new

leadership and the honoring of the legacy of elder practitioners. Highlighting the NEA's long-standing interest in supporting rural arts activities, Walker Powell offered words of advice for how to develop a strong grant application for cultural work. First, she suggested that groups speak from the assets of their place and acknowledged that many were already doing this. Second, she indicated that shorter grant periods are likely and she projected that the field may see some downsizing in available funds. Therefore, networking is important in this climate. Third, Walker Powell pointed out that it is crucial both to recognize the range of workers in cultural work (artists, as well as administrators and technicians, for example) and to invest in the psychic health of those workers and leaders by giving them a break every once in a while. She suggested sending them to conferences and to reflection centers in order to recharge and be free from the demands of this intensive work.

In response to Walker Powell's framing of the relationship between funders and cultural organizations, Tim Dorsey described his experience on a retreat at Penn Center with the Art and Social Justice Working Group. Finding a place for undisturbed reflection was important for the group, and Penn Center's connection to place and to history provided the opportunity to connect with both other people involved in advancing cultural work and the deep spiritual essence of the place. Citing a tour guide's comment that her African ancestors were never enslaved but instead had moved into and operated in the spiritual realm, Dorsey underscored the importance and challenge of communicating such profoundly existential aspects of a community and its history to a foundation:

The Penn Center for me is one of the places in the world where the veil between this world and the other world is actually quite thin. . . . From the perspective of a funder, my challenge is to make that case in a grant recommendation that is going to make sense of and capture the essence or the spirit of the work.

Other comments by participants around funding included a remark by Matt Fluharty, coordinator of *The Art of the Rural* blog that media can play an important role in expanding membership in rural communities both to those who have a hard time going back to their communities for various reasons and to those who aren't native to a rural community but want to be a part of the membership. Jesikah Maria Ross added that practitioners should cultivate collaborations with both funders and local community partners. She cited her own success in working with both land grant universities and county extension agents who are actively looking for creative ways to do community development, given their mandate to support local communities.

Reflecting on the Roundtable

To synthesize the conversation at the meeting before participants broke into small groups to brainstorm next steps in various aspects of the work, Amalia Deloney offered the following summation. She commented that she saw themes emerging from the discussion that were similar to what guides her own organization, the Center for Media Justice. Namely, cultural change precedes political change. Several questions then emerged from this point:

- How do we shift the policymaking process to make it people centered and community based?
- How do we set an equity agenda around cultural rights?

- How does that take into account access and affordability . . . and then accessibility and skills?

With this set of questions in mind, small groups of participants reflected on the roundtable and their practice in relation to specific themes, including policy, cross-sector partnerships and alliance building, heritage and culture, youth engagement, and the role of artists in this work. An animated discussion process generated the following ideas, among others:

- **Policy.** Cultural organizations need to listen deeply to our communities, build relationships by seeking common ground, and use stories to change the narrative about rural places.
- **Cross-sector partnerships and alliance building.** Regularly meeting and inviting a range of people to participate in respectful conversations is crucial, even when some parties may seem to be hostile to our ideas and practices.
- **Heritage and culture.** We need to recognize the environment as part of our place and our culture so that we equitably take care of our culture, economy, and environment.
- **Youth.** We need to insist on youth representation on our boards and political bodies; place-based curricula in our schools; and media literacy training for our young people, especially during middle school.
- **Involvement of artists.** Attention should be paid to the language we use so that we don't set artists apart as a special group in relation to our communities. Rather, we should work to cultivate awareness that everyone can be creative and that a diversity of people can take pride in and eloquently tell the stories of the place.

Next Steps

At the urging of Katharine Pearson Criss, vice president of the Center for Rural Strategies, the group discussed the possibility of becoming a working group and using the Rural Assembly as a vehicle for continuing the conversation about the challenges and successes of rural cultural work.

The Center for Rural Strategies, Double Edge Theatre, and the Art of the Rural cosponsored a gathering at Double Edge in Ashfield, Massachusetts, in August 2012 to begin to develop this working group.

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Roundtable Participants

Caron Atlas, Arts & Democracy Project
Vicki Benson, McKnight Foundation
Tom Borrup, Creative Community Builders
Isabel Broyld, Neighborhood Development Center
Helen Brunner, Media Democracy Fund
Emory Shaw Campbell, Penn Center
Whitney Kimball Coe, Center for Rural Strategies
Katharine Pearson Criss, Center for Rural Strategies
Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies
amalia deloney, Center for Media Justice
Tim Dorsey, Open Society Foundations
Matthew Fluharty, *The Art of the Rural*
Amy Frischman, Wild Mountain Taylors Falls Recreation
Anne Gadwa, Metris Art Consulting
Matthew Glassman, Double Edge Theatre
Gaye Hamilton, Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism
Catherine Jordan, Bush Foundation
Gülgün Kayim, Arts, Culture and Creative Economy, City of Minneapolis
Ellen Kimball, Athens Area Council for the Arts
Ann Markusen, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota
Maureen Mullinax, Xavier University
David O'Fallon, Minnesota Humanities Council
Danette Olsen, Festival Theatre
Peter Pennekamp, Humboldt Area Foundation
Delia Pérez, Llano Grande Center for Research and Development
Mimi Pickering, Appalshop
Lori Pourier, First Peoples Fund
Julie Ristau, On the Commons
jesikah maria ross, University of California–Davis, Art of Regional Change
Theresa Secord, Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance
Ada Smith, Appalachian Media Institute and STAY Project
Erik Takeshita, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Patrice Walker Powell, National Endowment for the Arts

RURAL CULTURAL ROUNDTABLE

Archibald Bush Foundation, 332 Minnesota Street, Suite E-900, St Paul
June 28, 2011 9:00 am – 1:00 pm

AGENDA

Framing the Day 9:00 – 9:35

Introductions

Welcome

Catherine Jordan, director, Bush Foundation's InCommons

Roundtable history, format, and focus

Caron Atlas, director, Arts & Democracy Project and amalia deloney, grassroots policy director, Center for Media Justice

Rural public policy framing

Dee Davis, president, Center for Rural Strategies

Examples 9:35 – 11:15

We will ground our conversation in a diverse range of six examples including networks, hub organizations, historic sites, and cultural districts. They address themes including keeping tradition alive, creating opportunities for young people to stay in and contribute to their communities, cultural economies, working across state lines, and cross sector partnerships. (Each presentation is 5-minutes with 5 minutes response and 5 minutes clarifying questions.)

There will be a 10-minute break in the middle of the examples.

Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, Edcouch, TX

Presenter: Delia Pérez, associate director, Llano Grande Center for Research and Development

Response: Julie Ristau, codirector, On The Commons

Appalshop / STAY Project, Whitesburg, KY

Presenter: Ada Smith, program coordinator, Appalachian Media Institute, Appalshop and founding member, STAY Project (Stay Together Appalachian Youth)

Response: Peter Pennekamp, executive director, Humboldt Area Foundation

Penn Center, St. Helena Island, SC

Presenter: Emory Shaw Campbell, executive director emeritus, Penn Center and Founder, Gullah Heritage Consulting Services

Response: Erik Takeshita, senior program officer, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)

Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, Old Town ME

Presenter: Theresa Secord, executive director, Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA)
Response: Isabel Broyld, U7 project manager, Neighborhood Development Center

Festival Theatre, St Croix, WI

Presenters: Danette Olsen, executive director, Festival Theatre and Amy Frischmon, vice president, Wild Mountain Taylors Falls Recreation

Response: Tom Borrup, principal, Creative Community Builders

Arnaudville Experiment and LA Department of Cultural Recreation and Tourism, LA

Presenter: Gaye Hamilton, cultural district program manager, LA Department of Cultural Recreation and Tourism

Response: Anne Gadwa, principal, Metris Arts Consulting

Increasing Impact 11:15 – 11:45

Research

Ann Markusen, director, Arts Economy Initiative and Project on Regional and Industrial Economics, University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and principal, Markusen Economic Research Services

Communication and documentation

Discussion initiated by Mimi Pickering, director, Community Media Initiative, Appalshop and jesikah maria ross, founding director, UC Davis Art of Regional Change

Funding/policy

Discussion initiated by participating funders

Open Roundtable Discussion 11:45 – 12:15

Recommendations in Small Groups 12:15 – 12:45

Identify and prioritize

- Recommendations
- What's needed to implement them
- Next steps

Report Back and Closing 12:45 – 1:00

Lunch and informal discussion