

# How Creativity and Culture Can Contribute to Community Planning

BY LAURA ZABEL

**ART AND CULTURE ARE UNDERUTILIZED** assets in community planning and development. Working with artists can help improve stakeholder engagement in planning in a number of ways and contribute to plans and developments that represent and serve the people who live in a community.

## **ARTISTS BRING PEOPLE TO THE CONVERSATION**

In community planning and development there is a well-understood need and desire to get input from the people who live and work in the community itself. Community plans have a better chance of being useful, equitable, and healthy if the people who actually live in the community are represented in the planning process. Artists can help organizers and planners transform community-input sessions from lightly attended meetings in musty basement rooms to vibrant, engaging celebrations that invite more diverse participation and input. For example, the Friendly Streets Initiative, a community-led planning and organizing group in St. Paul, Minnesota, successfully worked with a group of artists to design creative and fun block parties where neighbors were invited to give feedback about traffic calming and bike and pedestrian issues in their neighborhood.

## **ARTISTS IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES**

Sometimes it can be hard to imagine a different future for a place. Residents and stakeholders can get stuck seeing the challenges facing a neighborhood rather than the assets and opportunities that exist. Artists can help people visualize possible futures for a place, designing community planning processes to translate their hopes and dreams into policy and action. For example, in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, artists have been working for more than two years to design creative projects that connect to the



historic preservation and reuse of the Kirkbride, a former state mental hospital. The issue of what to do with this historic and enormous property had become contentious and emotional for the community. By partnering with community development and historic preservation leaders, local artists have been able to establish themselves as key partners and allies, using their creative skills to engage their neighbors in imagining possible futures for the building and community. Now, after years of community division, there are many more residents at the table and together the community has changed the narrative of the building's future. The Kirkbride is now on the verge of a renaissance. Plans are in the works to convert it into a hotel, apartments, and restaurants. Art and artists have been a core part of the redevelopment.

#### **ARTISTS HIGHLIGHT AND SUPPORT EXISTING ASSETS**

In the past, community planning has not always fully recognized the existing assets of a place. Sometimes large development projects were implemented without regard to the potential displacement of people and businesses from the surrounding



**Community members participate in creative community planning activities.**

PHOTO BY  
JONATHAN PAVLICA

community. For the most part, cities and planners recognize that this has been an inequitable approach and now look for ways to implement planning that encourages development without displacement. Many places are implementing new Community Benefit Agreements<sup>1</sup> and other policy interventions to support this goal.

Artists can help planners develop projects that support and celebrate the unique and important strengths of a community that are already in place. For example, during the construction of a new light rail, the Irrigate project in St. Paul engaged artists to create hundreds of small projects in partnership with local businesses and community groups. These projects helped local small businesses and cultural assets to not only survive the construction but also build their capacity to thrive post-construction as the train attracted new development to their neighborhoods.

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#### **ARTISTS CAN PROTOTYPE AND EXPERIMENT**

Beyond helping people see that things can be different or better in their community, artists are good at “getting to the doing”—trying small experiments that help test new ideas. Often community organizers and other stakeholders are understandably focused on trying to stop bad things from happening to a neighborhood that can lead to an atmosphere of distrust between city planners and residents. In addition to supporting this work to stop the implementation of inequitable or ill-conceived development, artists can also help organizers and neighborhood groups mark their place, express their voice, and make change in productive, creative (and fun) ways. Often these can be small, low-risk projects that can happen quickly, without the need for long planning processes. For example, the St. Paul Frogtown Neighborhood Association has worked with neighborhood artists to develop “Lot Squats”—performances, installations, and gatherings that allow residents to try different creative uses for the vacant spaces in their neighborhood, “engaging neighbors in discussions about what these lots can be—and how we can reclaim our space.”

<sup>1</sup>A Community Benefits Agreement is a legally binding contract (or set of related contracts), setting forth a range of community benefits regarding a development project, and resulting from substantial community involvement.

Julian Gross, *CBAs: Definitions, Values, and Legal Enforceability* (The Partnership for Working Families, January 2008)

## ARTISTS HELP BUILD MOMENTUM

The distance between a community plan and actual changes for a neighborhood can be long, particularly with affordable housing development. Often a new development is announced and then (because timelines for big capital projects are lengthy) there is a long period of time where the site is fallow and it appears as if activity has stalled. Artists can help community leaders and developers fill this gap and build energy and momentum. For example, Minnesota-based Project for Pride in Living (PPL) worked with artists to design projects that invited neighbors onto the future site of PPL's new development, which includes 108 new units of housing, retail, and public plaza space. It invited people to engage in creative activities and conversations that asked them to express their definition of "home." These projects provided ongoing activity and physical changes to the site, giving the site a sense of momentum and vibrancy even before any real construction started. They also provided opportunities for neighbors to express their own ideas of home and build a sense of community ownership of the site while being a positive reminder that this new development is not only a physical structure but also people's homes.

## YOUR ARTISTS IN YOUR PLACE

Artists are in every neighborhood, on every block. Artists are people who know place, love place, and will use their creativity to tap into its potential and opportunities. An invitation to artists to use their creative skills to support their own neighborhood can help develop and implement plans that are authentic, vibrant, and just, reflecting the community's shared vision for its own future. The Housing and Urban Development office of Community Planning and Development lists as one of its guiding principles, "Planning and execution of community development initiatives must be bottom up and community driven." To enact this principle effectively, planners and developers need creative and culturally relevant strategies that engage diverse and representative stakeholders.

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