

Recommendations for ArtPlace America Blogging

Introduction

The nature of creative placemaking is dynamic and often, lessons are learned in real time. As a condition of their grant, ArtPlace America (ArtPlace) grantees submit monthly blog posts reflecting on the progress of their project. ArtPlace, in turn, uses the information to help practitioners, artists, community members, and other stakeholders begin to discern what distinguishes creative placemaking activity from community cultural development; planning and design-based activity concerned with improving the quality of life in a place, or theories and practices focused on the connection between economic factors and the arts. A majority of grantees comply and submit monthly blogs, but the depth of reflection, quality of content, and level of transparency in their process varies widely.

ArtPlace has produced a number of summary documents capturing the essence of lessons grantees have learned over the course of their funding cycle; however, these documents have remained internal as the organization itself grapples with the best way to give shape to conversations around creative placemaking. The challenge of translating the self-reported, anecdotal evidence gathered from grantees is how to convey the value of those insights to the broader arts and civic communities as unique and relevant to creative placemaking. This report is intended to assist ArtPlace with setting priorities and policies around the grantee blog that will help the organization gain a better understanding of the variety, scope, and character of creative placemaking activity across the country.

Observations

ArtPlace America compiled summaries of major topics that emerged from blogs submitted by grantees during 2011 and 2012 as follows:

- Artists
- Capacity
- Community
- Diversity
- Funding
- Government
- Leadership
- Marketing
- Partnership
- Placemaking
- Private Sector
- Process
- Space
- Sustainability

- Volunteers
- (Miscellaneous)
- (Quotables – especially perceptive quotes from grantees)

Although ArtPlace projects are concerned with a variety of social, political, economic, and artistic concerns and employ various methods for sparking positive change in communities, most grantees will grapple with issues at some point during their project's duration. These 15 topics and two sub-categories can be consolidated into four broad thematic areas:

Building Consensus and Buy-In

Adapting to change in dynamic circumstances, finding out what community members and stakeholders want, and learning to leverage a variety of knowledge and strategies is critical to success; no two locales are exactly the same.

- All grantees must learn how to “map” the community with which they will be involved (e.g. discovering its assets, learning who its influencers are, etc.).
- All grantees must learn how to talk about their project with the community, how to build trust and nurture relationships. Additionally, grantees must be willing to consider outside input so that the project is an accurate reflection of the community's wants/needs/desires.

Measurement and Evaluation

Creative Placemaking is a framework that is evolving. ArtPlace has created a similarly fluid set of measures to help practioners evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of their work, but questions around quantifying and qualifying impact remain.

- All grantees must find meaningful and relevant ways to measure the impact of their project on a place.
- All grantees must consider what *unique contribution* the arts have made to raise the quality of life in the locale where the project occurs.

Managing Change

Creative placemaking is concerned with sustainability and the “long view.” Although ArtPlace grantees receive funding for one year (with possible financial extensions), most of the projects will not be completed in that time. (e.g. many projects were initiated prior to receiving the grant)

- All grantees must have strategies for adapting to extraordinary and unexpected circumstances (e.g. environmental conditions, changes in laws, etc.).
- All grantees must create project plans that are resilient and flexible (e.g. building/construction delays, personnel changes, social and/or community processes, leadership transition).

People

One goal of creative placemaking is to enact a fundamental transformation to the character of a place, which often begins with getting the “right mix” of people involved.

- All grantees must have strategies that allow for knowledge and relationships to transfer as a project sustains and becomes an integral part of community life (e.g. how to keep the project going if the project creator or other “key influencer” moves on).
- All grantees must have strategies for managing relationships that are long- and short-term (e.g. training and orienting a rotating roster of artists, learning about and working with community neighbors and local business owners).

Recommendations

After serving as the primary ArtPlace liaison to blog contacts for grantees and reviewing blogs submitted from September to December 2013, the following areas emerged as opportunities for improvement to the blogging process:

Frequency

A monthly blogging requirement is a logical way to ensure grantees are held accountable for their project. To date, grantees receive all funding at the beginning of their project period, rather than allocated at intervals that may or may not coincide with other accountability methods, such as reaching certain milestones or meeting with staff. If creative placemaking is a process that emphasizes the value of the “long view” and sustainability, the blogging process should reflect that similarly.

- A less intense blog schedule (e.g. quarterly, bi-monthly) would raise the quality of the blogs. A longer time period between submissions gives grantees an opportunity to reflect more deeply on how their projects impact communities rather than simply to “report back” on progress.
- More time allows grantees to better determine what strategies have worked best and which ones need adjustment.
- More time between blog submissions will give grantees the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects more accurately.

Transparency

Currently, blogs are the only dynamic content on the ArtPlace website, which places tremendous pressure on grantees to produce reflections that support the validity, efficiency, and effectiveness of the projects. To garner support for this work and build advocacy for the field, grantees might feel an inevitable tension between being completely honest in their blogs—sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly—and only focusing on the big, splashy wins or using language that indicates that everything transpired smoothly throughout the process. As a funding body, ArtPlace employs a grantmaking model akin to a venture capitalist approach, meaning there is a heightened tolerance of risk. Encouraging grantees to share challenges as well as wins will help them reflect on their placemaking activity in a deeper way that will add valuable knowledge to the field.

- Blogs should include a section that specifically addresses challenges and how grantees went about solving them. Some grantees have noted that they they’ve missed submitting a monthly blog because they “did not have anything sexy to say” or had

an especially challenging or frustrating month in the project cycle. Others have asked questions about the number and type of people who read the posts, implying that they may be questioning the value of writing the blog each month.

- Asking grantees explicitly to share challenges supports the idea that ArtPlace is already confident in their work and ability and only seeks to learn more about creative placemaking in real-time along with them.

Content

If grantee blog submissions continue to be the most dynamic content on the ArtPlace website, the quality of the content must improve.

- Communications staff should take a larger editorial role in the blogging process (e.g. copyediting, proofreading, line editing, asking follow up questions to clarify information and gather more detail about projects, etc.).
- ArtPlace should consider alternative ways to share updates and information from grantees by producing periodic reflections on trends seen across blogs submitted over a specific amount of time (e.g. summary posts reflecting on what the organization is learning from grantees; reflections on issues and trends important to the field like working with artists or mapping communities; more Q&A/conversations, etc.)

Style

Blogs need a uniform format and voice that is reflective of ArtPlace while also reflecting the unique voice and character of the grantee.

- ArtPlace should create more specific guidelines about how to format the blog. Not every staff member who is tasked with producing the ArtPlace blog is familiar with general guidelines for creating web-based content.
- ArtPlace should update/create/revise a style sheet to ensure that texts and images that appear on the website or in grantee-produced materials referencing their ArtPlace project are consistent with its brand message.

Conclusion

Learning from and with grantees as they go about the work of stimulating positive change in communities is critical as ArtPlace moves forward in shaping its grantmaking and policy activities. Helping ArtPlace grantees think more critically about creative placemaking through the use of a more refined blogging plan will assist the organization in achieving its larger goals.

Appendix I: Sample Grantee Blog Guidelines

Grantee Blog Guidelines

The nature of creative placemaking is dynamic, and often lessons are learned in real time. The information you share about your experience helps future grantees and others who are interested in learning more about creative placemaking. Reflecting on your work critically, sharing lessons, challenges, successes, and insights provides valuable information that strengthens the field.

Each blog should include:

- **Brief Updates** (1-2 paragraphs) on the progress of your ArtPlace-funded project (e.g. activities, events, your planning/strategy meetings, partnerships, etc.)
- Brief summary of **Challenges** (1 paragraph) that occurred over the last 3 months and how you went about addressing them (e.g. how do we manage expectations for quick returns with the realities of ongoing operations or partnership development? How do we learn and grow from the trial and error necessary for successful creative placemaking?).
- Describe a few **Recent Wins** (e.g. a new development in your partnership efforts, positive press about the project or the community, acquiring new space, etc.)
- One new **Insight/Provocation** (e.g. a lesson learned that may be relevant for others working in the field, or a question raised about the unique nature of creative placemaking, etc.)

Examples from previous grantees:

Insight:

“When our organization started developing models for artist housing several years ago, we were operating from two basic premises: that artists without an ownership stake are all too often financially pushed out of communities by the positive change they help make; and that vacant properties, when left unchecked, have a huge, detrimental effect on community psychology. If we could help artists purchase extraordinarily affordable, structurally sound but currently vacant houses and storefronts, we realized, we could address both issues in a meaningful way . . .”

“The ongoing and open-ended question of what intentional community and self-determination may mean in the 21st century is the central focus of our research and outreach effort, and directly informs the current round of discussions between community leaders, artists, and curators who are moving forward with the project . . .”

Question/Provocation:

“ . . . how do we measure people’s perceptions of a place? Since we have yet to build anything (sculpture, signage) or open our pop-up shop, how can we be sure that we are making a difference . . . ?”

“Some places already enjoy the benefits of being a mature market where the masses support creative production. But at some point, they had to create that demand. How was that demand created? How did they move the value of creative thinking into the mass market . . . ?”

Blog posts are due on or before the 15th for an assigned month.

- Submit them to blogs@artplaceamerica.org
- Name the file as follows: YRMoDAY_NAMEOFPROJECT (140215_ArtWeek.docx)
- Blog text must be submitted in MS Word format OR included in the body of the email.
- Use a standard typeface (Times, Arial, Garamond, etc.)

Photo Guidelines:

- For the purposes of creative placemaking, think of “places” as collections of people. Toward that end, we encourage you to share photos that show people interacting with each other, with art, and with their place.
- Attach “web ready” (min. 300dpi resolution) photos separately in JPEG format
- Images should be sized no smaller than 500 pixels in width
- Provide photo captions and proper credits with each photo submitted. Please do not watermark your photos.

Grantee Blog Schedule:

Following is an alphabetical listing of current grantees divided into 3 blogging “cohorts” with due dates for each.

Appendix II: Sample Post – Issues From the Field

Collaborating Across the Aisle: What Makes a Partnership Good?*

Creative placemaking is a diverse practice and draws on the strengths in a range of fields from urban planning and economics to education and social services—much to our benefit. Negotiating a partnership is a process that requires time, patience, and vision, but learning how to nurture a partnership into a more healthy relationship will garner great rewards.

Share a Common Goal

You've put in the internal work to understand your need for partners, done the research and identified your current and potential allies, strengths and areas for growth. Now it's time for you and your partners to determine ways to match your programs to projects and activities that will help each organization reach a larger goal.

Ask Yourself:

- What is the ultimate goal or outcome of our relationship, or what can we do together that we cannot do on our own?
- What kind of infrastructure do we need to support the work involved in our collaborative efforts and address questions about capacity and resources?
- Do my ideas support the goal we set together?

Sharing a common goal is the basis of partnership, even when you have different ways of achieving it. Your shared goal becomes the neutral ground you can always go back to when challenges come your way—and they will.

Celebrate Each Other's Strengths

Even in a collaboration where everyone is equal in knowledge, talent, and resource, there must be a division of labor. Sometimes, someone has to take the lead. Have clear and explicit roles and responsibilities as well as ways to be accountable for them.

Ask yourself:

- What's the nature of our relationship: to create joint programs; to share human capital; to co-own and create ideas?
- Am I able to maintain an appropriate level of self-interest and promote the best parts of my organization and myself?

Learning to delegate and allowing your partner's strengths to shine is a wonderful benefit to partnership.

* Each "Issue" post should employ current/relevant quotes previously compiled ArtPlace documents and new information from current grantees.

Know When to Hold and When to Fold

Naturally, strong personalities will generate strong partnerships—and conversely, strong disagreements. While people participating in the partnership need to be firm and savvy negotiators, they need to be good strategists as the relationship deepens. The more we learn about our partners, the more we need to adjust, which isn't always easy. When the sparks begin to fly around new and unexpected challenges, remember to take the “long view” and remember your shared goal, or why you chose to collaborate in the first place.

Ask yourself:

- What's at stake if I back down in a compromise?
- Will conceding my position jeopardize reaching the shared goal—our big win?

While you can't always tell when someone is bluffing, you will know if you've got an unbeatable hand.

Don't be Afraid to Renegotiate

The best partnerships are the ones that are fluid. Establishing trust that leads to open dialogue is critical for keeping the collaboration going as circumstances change. If everyone believes in the shared goal, making adjustments or even ending the relationship becomes that much easier.

Ask yourself:

- Have we done what we set out to do together?
- Is our goal the same now as it was when we began?

No one ever said collaboration would be easy, but when partners recognize and acknowledge each other's gifts, the idea and strategies they share will only lead to a more brilliant partnership.

Appendix III: Sample Post - What We're Learning

What We're Learning: December 2013 – Flexible Plans and the Value of Working with Others

In creative placemaking, practitioners are often concerned with sustainability, meaning projects don't just end when the building gets built, or when the program commences. Placemakers must consider what might happen in far-flung futures—environments filled with uncertainty. Navigating dynamic environments requires not only humility and adaptability, but also quick thinking and a level head. But how does one balance pragmatic thinking with idealism? Circumstances change, but how much should we change with them?

In December, grantees grappled with the question of flexibility as project timelines accelerated, slowed, or faced some significant alterations as well as learning lessons about the unexpected power of alliances.

[Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District](#) (LPCCD) struggled through plan alterations as they continued their [restoration project](#). “We felt we had the experience of developing construction budgets so that a project as massive as restoring a 150-year-old burned-out church façade would be do-able with our team. Nevertheless, the uptick in construction pricing before construction was unnerving,” they reported. Although LPCCD knew that construction budgets change and sometimes the sub-contracting process can get out of hand if careful attention isn't paid to negotiating the bid process and contract metrics, the sudden changes still caught the team by surprise.

[Artist Build Collaborative](#) experienced a bit of serendipity as they worked to complete the [Silent Lights](#) installation. After the team dug a trench for a gate, they decided to extend the footprint of the installation, allowing Silent Lights to nearly double in size. Fortunately, they did not assume the plan was final before seeing the installation realized and were able to seize an opportunity to deepen the project's impact.

The [Shreveport Regional Arts Council](#) (SRAC) has struggled with connecting to new artists, but through their monthly [UNSCENE!](#) events, new-to-SRAC artists have started to come around. “Artists working with UNSCENE! are so excited about their participation that they have unofficially become a part of our marketing team . . . They are reaching audiences that we hadn't yet reached and bringing them into the fold.”

Artists in residence at the [McColl Center for Visual Art](#)'s [Art and Ecology Community Campus](#) demonstrated the power of interdependence as each artist's residency focus began to blend and meld into one.

Understanding that it takes a range of skills and competencies to get a successful project up and running is important, but knowing when to accept help from unusual sources and make room for the unexpected allows the change we seek to become a bit easier to find.