

Asking Tough Questions About Creative Placemaking:
Expanding Opportunities
By Judi Jennings, to be posted on ArtPlace America Website

At this moment in time, creative placemaking is more important than ever as our nation experiences conflicting worldviews, inequitable economic development, deepening social divisions, and cultural antipathies. In these rapidly changing contexts, it is important to respond quickly and even more important to give careful thought to new directions. To help think through these challenges, I spoke with three people whose work I greatly respect: Sean Starowitz, Assistant Director of the Arts for the City of Bloomington, Indiana, Erik Takeshita, Community Creativity Portfolio Director of the Bush Foundation. and Carly Hare, National Director/Coalition Catalyst, CHANGE Philanthropy. All three offer courageous assessments of current creative placemaking and exciting new possibilities.

Challenging dominant rural/urban narratives

When asked about creative placemaking now, Starowitz quickly points out this is a crucial time for the field to ask tough questions about what spaces are being designed and for whom. He is looking to artists to imagine new possibilities. Erik Takeshita agrees. “Artists and culture workers imagine what doesn’t exist and then materialize and manifest it,” he says, “so how do we do that on many fronts because the current systems are not working so well for some places.”

Starowitz calls for “more healthy exchanges between rural and urban places, especially in the arts, to change the dominant narratives. He urges questioning narratives that “create otherness and fracture people and places into islands of blue among the seas of red.” Instead, “we need to look for commonalities not just differences,” he explains. Starowitz believes arts can be an equalizer. For example, he looks to intergenerational mentor/apprentice relationships often found in rural cultures and imagines mentorships in racial equity and cross cultural exchanges.

From his multi-state perspective, Takeshita makes the case for thinking beyond rural and urban to include suburbs and small towns. He believes the real point of creative placemaking is to help people come together to solve their own problems. “If we focus resources on those doing least well,” he argues, “that will make everyone better.” Takeshita envisions new roles for creative philanthropy itself in movement building that recognizes how race, gender, sexual identities, ethnicity, economic and immigration status intersect with placemaking . Starowitz adds that focusing on varied communities would mean creating new metrics for success that would be defined by each community.

Changing Philanthropy

Working with a wide range of communities on self-defined aspirations using new metrics means changing traditional arts and culture philanthropy, as the ArtPlace

America experience demonstrates. Now, there is much to be learned from new forms of philanthropy focusing on local initiatives, inclusive intersectionality, and creative connections. CHANGE philanthropy is using these kinds of emerging strategies for social change funding that expands opportunities for people and places.

As the national coalition director for CHANGE Philanthropy, Carly Hare, who is Pawnee/Yankton, is enacting many of the new directions envisioned by Starowitz and Takeshika for the arts and culture field. As she explains, as a coalition CHANGE Philanthropy is not organized into specific issue areas or constructs. Instead their staff focuses on strategies to bring community members and funders together to have deeper conversations about new focus areas and strategies for philanthropy. A recent example is CHANGE Philanthropy's work with Grantmakers for Southern Progress in Charleston, South Carolina, where they helped to bring together local, regional, and national funders interested in funding in the US South.

Hare describes how CHANGE Philanthropy evolved over 20 years, beginning as a mostly volunteer-led national coalition of identity based affinity groups. She played a role in the coalition then as the Executive of Native American Philanthropy, one of the member groups, which also include Hispanics in Philanthropy, and the Women's Funding Network. Over the last few years, the coalition considered how collectively they could become a thought partner to lead and leverage power in philanthropy.

Hare says that now is really an important time to strategically amplify the work of the member partners to leverage power nationally. She says at this moment in time they want to honor the legacy of the relationships that brought them together and think creatively about how to be strategic in current contexts. Their goal is to encourage strategic grantmaking with an equity lens. All coalition member partners are national in scope and also have deep understandings of the local context of their work. They are creating a new frame for community-based and constituency led social change work, while also working with national funders to acknowledge the importance of community solutions.

Hare says CHANGE Philanthropy is rooting their work in network weaving practices and focused on making connections. So now, for example, they are looking at how intersectionality plays out in rural settings. She says there is a real need for this kind of understanding on the part of funders and sees this as one of the biggest lessons to be learned from post-Katrina New Orleans. This is crucial for creative placemaking to understand the displacement that is happening in both rural and urban areas.