

# THE SAVING POWER OF COMMUNITY CREATIVITY



Highlights of  
Arts, Culture, and  
Creative Placemaking  
Responses to COVID-19



CREDIT: Bridge of Grace CMC

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Metris Arts Consulting's mission is to improve and measure cultural vitality. We believe in the power of culture to enrich people's lives, help communities thrive, empower communities, and cultivate belonging. Our clients span the country and globe. They include government agencies, community and arts nonprofits, philanthropic foundations, and developers. We help them equitably advance cultural vitality (planning), fill knowledge gaps so that they can effectively incorporate arts and culture into their work (program development), and understand what difference their efforts make, why, and how (evaluation). We use a range of research and communication skills to advance understanding (research for field building). Our work in the realm of creative placemaking launched our practice. Over our ten years in operation, we've grown and diversified our services. Our team brings a combined 61 years of experience, spanning government, municipal arts, nonprofit arts administration, research, evaluation, and planning.

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# INTRODUCTION



CREDIT: Elena Stanton

The contributions of arts and cultural organizations to community strength and sustainability too often go unrecognized outside their local context (and even sometimes within that local context). However, their leadership in response to the pandemic and the most recent movement for racial justice has not only helped build community resiliency, but potentially saved lives and livelihoods. It's never been clearer how much we stand to lose if we fail to give these organizations the attention they deserve.

**2020** was a year that brought immeasurable pain and left us in uncharted territory. As of this writing in April 2021, more than 570,000 Americans have lost their lives to COVID-19, there are approximately 30 million documented cases of the virus, and many of those infected actively struggle with still-mysterious “long haul” symptoms. The pandemic has also fueled a staggering economic downturn. Job losses left a record number of Americans in need of assistance to help put food on the table and pay rent. Local businesses operated in fear of—and sometimes succumbed to—permanent closure. Widespread social isolation took its toll with family and friends unable to gather safely. Due to the wide-ranging effects of structural racism, communities of color not only contracted and died from the virus at disproportionately high rates, but also endured outsized economic hardship.

The year 2020 cast a sharp spotlight on another deadly racial justice issue, as well: the unjustified killings of Black people at the hands of law enforcement. In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others, people in communities across the country and world organized, strategized, and led Black Lives Matter and other protests that marked some of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history.<sup>1</sup>

Communities that have endured the most devastation and trauma as a result of the pandemic and racial inequities in policing are often those that have been plagued by decades of disinvestment and discrimination in housing, urban planning, and public services. Facing limited external support and historic oppression, dedicated residents in these places have, over the course of decades, developed an infrastructure of community-based organizations to improve their neighbors' lives. Community-based organizations help provide shelter,

<sup>1</sup> Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History; The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

# WHAT IS CREATIVE PLACEMAKING?

As defined by ArtPlace, “[c]reative placemaking happens when artists and arts organizations join their neighbors in shaping their community’s future, working together on place-based community outcomes. It’s not necessarily focused on making places more creative; it’s about creatively addressing challenges and opportunities. . . We believe creative placemaking at its best is locally defined and informed and about the people who live, work, and play in a place.”<sup>2</sup>

The term “creative placemaking” has been used to describe both the community-centered planning and visioning **process** and a wide variety of **projects** implemented by community leaders.

This practice can take varying forms including, but not limited to, temporary, visual art installations, performance events, and developing permanent, brick-and-mortar spaces.

employment, youth programming, and safety improvements. They also support close social bonds and community visioning for revitalization.

Within this ecosystem of grassroots supports, arts and culture organizations play a key role. They hold and lift up the cultural heritage and artistic talent that the mainstream arts world has historically marginalized. They do so in a place-based fashion, growing deep roots in particular cities and individual neighborhoods. As trusted local institutions that approach community-building through creativity, these organizations have sometimes been tapped to engage residents in developing and implementing local revitalization goals.

In 2020, community-based organizations, including those typically focused on arts and culture and creative placemaking, once again found themselves called upon to address surging community needs. Given their deep local roots and extensive relationships with residents, many of these organizations found themselves at the forefront of the response to the pandemic



CREDIT: Barrio Alegria

and mobilization for racial justice. They recognized that the scale of the current crises required them to temporarily shift their priorities to react to immediate demands while keeping their core goals in sight. They are stepping outside their comfort zones, tapping into a more fundamental understanding of their missions, forging new partnerships, and at times literally rolling up their sleeves to meet community needs.

These interconnected crises have interrupted short-term creative placemaking work, but they have also highlighted the deeper meaning behind that work. More than ever, residents of communities that have been disproportionately harmed need an approach to recovery that acknowledges those historic harms and ensures that crisis responses meet real community needs, not just outsiders’ assumptions about community needs. In places that have endured more than their fair share of trauma, it is also critical that the crisis response prioritizes mental and physical health and community stability.

Arts and culture organizations are positioned to implement this type of approach at a hyper-local level in a way few other organizations can. While their primary engagement tool is arts and culture, these organizations ground their work in hard-earned trust and deep relationships with people who live in the neighborhoods they serve. As illustrated in “WE-Making,”

<sup>2</sup> “About ArtPlace,” ArtPlace America, June 27, 2019, <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/about/introduction>.

a report from Metris Arts Consulting on the use of arts and culture strategies to unite community members for collective action, these organizations use creative approaches to nurture strong community ties. Their work to strengthen relationships, foster a sense of belonging, encourage participation, and focus community energy on common goals all serves to build social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

*This is a long-term process that cannot be quickly replicated. It is an investment in community well-being, a resource communities can lean on in times of great pain and great need.*



## Purpose of this Resource

For several years, the Center for Community Progress (Community Progress) and Metris Arts Consulting have explored how arts and culture organizations are revitalizing communities that have been hit hard with vacancy and abandonment. In mid-2020, as we began to understand the pandemic's devastating health, economic, and social impacts on communities and the policy demands surrounding the calls for racial justice, we also began hearing how community-based organizations using arts and culture had shifted their work to provide critical community support.

Community-based arts and culture organizations are often known for their work to uplift and protect human dignity, rooted in trust- and relationship-building. They also have a finger on the pulse of existing challenges—including both immediate needs and long-simmering distrust of government or other institutional entities. This positions arts and culture organizations, as critical builders of social cohesion, to reach and help people as few other organizations can. By creating space for meaningful engagement and developing new partnerships to increase resources and impacts, in 2020, these leaders leveraged their strengths in new ways and got to work with urgency. This resource highlights the efforts of creative leaders during the pandemic and also seeks to inspire others trying to address acute needs.



<sup>3</sup> Engh, Rachel, Ben Martin, Susannah Laramée Kidd, and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus. "WE-making: How arts & culture unite people to work toward community well-being," Easton, PA: Metris Arts Consulting, 2021.

# CREATIVE RESPONSES TO CRISIS

Throughout 2020, Community Progress and Metris Arts examined how several community-based organizations were using arts and culture to respond to the challenges of the pandemic and the greater societal awakening around racial justice. We spoke one-on-one with practitioners, most of whom work in communities that have high rates of property vacancy and abandonment.



CREDIT: The King's Canvas

Many of the organizations we interviewed for this resource were those that we have interviewed over the last several years about their efforts to use creative placemaking to revitalize vacant properties. During this new analysis, we sought to understand how the social cohesion previously cultivated through creative placemaking enabled them to step up to address the current crises.

Historic and present-day land use, lending, and investment policies and practices have actively and intentionally discriminated against people of color, businesses, and entire communities (to learn more, visit **Appendix B**). This legacy of injustice not only exacerbates the health and financial impacts of the pandemic, but also drives the need for a community-based response.

The social cohesion and trust that community organizations created and nurtured through arts and culture was, in many cases, developed out of necessity in response to the challenges brought on by disinvestment. The work of building truly equitable social cohesion requires acknowledging the underlying structural conditions and barriers that stand in the way of community well-being. Arts and cultural organizations, in particular, often explicitly aim to disrupt these same conditions and barriers. Marginalized communities of color have long used arts and culture to collectively advocate for resources, improve quality of life, and reclaim the narratives of their neighborhoods. Community-based arts organizations have adapted this longstanding sense of purpose in new ways to respond to the crises of 2020. Our conversations brought to light common challenges and innovative responses, detailed in this section.

# Maintaining Engagement and Relationships

One of the most important aims of creative placemaking is bringing people together and reinforcing strong community relationships and a sense of belonging. Pandemic-induced shutdowns threatened community bonds and made it harder for organizations to convey important information to their neighbors and engage them in activities toward a common purpose. Despite the challenges, creative community leaders have meaningfully engaged residents and strengthened partnerships to support a collective crisis response.

## NEIGHBORS AND BUSINESSES STAY CONNECTED IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

The **East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC)** is a nonprofit community development organization with over 45 years of experience in building healthy, vibrant, and safe neighborhoods in Oakland and East Bay, addressing the specific needs of individual neighborhoods by connecting the essential elements of health and well-being through its Healthy Neighborhoods Approach. EBALDC, along with a number of partners, had plans in the works for an early 2020 summer block party and placekeeping festival in the Havenscourt neighborhood in East Oakland. When the pandemic hit, EBALDC's staff knew that its neighbors in the community were hurting and needed to connect with one another. EBALDC partnered with Destiny Arts Center, a youth dance nonprofit, on a creative way for neighbors to engage with each other despite stay-at-home orders: a virtual block party. Taking place just four days after the murder of George Floyd, the virtual party included serious panel discussions as well as recorded performances by Destiny Arts Center's dance students. This gave the students and teachers a chance to showcase their hard work, even though live performances were canceled. It also connected families from across the city who might not interact outside the dance studio. The event



*Youth dance during virtual block party in Oakland, CA CREDIT: EBALDC*

culminated with a virtual dance party hosted by a local DJ. People joined from their living rooms and spent hours dancing to the music and interacting virtually.

Part of EBALDC's mission is to improve the health and well-being of residents in the neighborhoods it serves. The organization began sharing critical information with neighbors through community outreach boards. Posted on fences throughout the neighborhood, these message boards include information on testing sites, eviction prevention, what businesses are open, and other pandemic response information. EBALDC's staff hope the boards will provide a framework for keeping the community informed and engaged in the future, beyond the pandemic.

Like its people, Oakland's local businesses have struggled with the effects of the pandemic and lockdowns. EBALDC launched creative efforts to save its communities' businesses and protect small entrepreneurs. Each project benefited a local business and simultaneously engaged community members through creative activities. They included:

- A tote bag design contest to support a store's first anniversary. Each participating artist received a \$250 gift card to the store; the related shopping activity helped the store stay in business.

- Support for a health and wellness business to do a “wellness day” at a community farmer’s market. The event included healthy food giveaways and free outdoor Tai Chi classes with participants in socially distanced chalk circles.
- Funding for a Black cultural organization to install a mural on a new neighborhood restaurant. Along with many other businesses in the urban core, it sported boarded-up windows during the summer’s protests. With a music-themed mural decorating the boards, the restaurant had an attractive backdrop for its grand opening featuring outdoor concerts and brunch. Despite opening during the pandemic, the restaurant has been able attract enough business to remain open.

### Staying connected – while separate – through collaborative artwork

In Toledo, Ohio, The **Arts Commission** hired a diverse group of artists to design interactive art projects that they delivered to every unit in a low-income housing complex. Residents all worked on their own versions of the same project and the artists put the final results together to make a larger composite piece. This approach offered paying work for artists at a time when many arts programs and experiences were halted. It also provided residents with a communal experience to combat the isolation induced by stay-at-home orders.

## Pivoting Activities to Meet Immediate Demands

Community-based arts organizations had a full slate of activities planned for 2020 before COVID-19 hit. However, the scale of the pandemic and the need to help their communities process or respond to the protests for racial justice required something more. Community members were struggling with health, food, housing, and employment challenges. Many leaders quickly recognized they had no choice but to temporarily adjust their priorities. The following snapshots illustrate one reason why community-based arts organizations become trusted neighborhood entities: many of them nimbly shifted gears to provide what their communities needed, instead of what the organizations had planned to deliver.

### ENTREPRENEURSHIP STAYS AFLOAT IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

**ArtUp** is a Memphis, Tenn. initiative working to build a more inclusive creative economy. ArtUp runs a regularly occurring artist accelerator program designed to help creative entrepreneurs grow and scale their businesses and planned to start a new cohort in early 2020. The organization chose instead to retool the accelerator program in response to pandemic-induced threats to creatives’ lives and livelihoods and worked to help accelerator graduates pivot their businesses to virtual or hybrid models.

It granted funds and provided technical assistance to six creative entrepreneurs. One recipient, Chef Eli Townsend, had to close his restaurant a few months after the pandemic began. With ArtUp’s help, he started virtual cooking demonstrations, private online classes, and meal preparation for families. What began as a small online following blossomed into a new business model for his culinary art. This success





*Inside Out installation in Lynn, Mass.*  
*CREDIT: Spenser Hasak, courtesy of Beyond Walls*

caught the attention of Memphis' Downtown Commission, which was looking for ways to support businesses during the crisis; it sponsored a regular program of virtual cooking demonstrations called "Monday Meals" with Chef Eli. Other sponsors supported outdoor demonstrations and cooking events, creating great success, new customers, and increased product sales.

In addition to the artist accelerator program, ArtUp developed and implemented a new virtual entrepreneurship venture with financial support from the Memphis Mayor's Office. The Dream Up program teaches homeless and housing insecure youth how to "dream up" their own businesses. The pilot cohort started with 40 Black youth who learned entrepreneurial skills and pitched business ideas focused on mental health, prescription access for seniors, anti-bullying, and fashion and beauty. The program was led by interns in their early years of college, who were close in age to the participants and were able to relate to their experiences far better than older adults. The participants learned to engage in design thinking and create slide decks to pitch their businesses. In turn, they helped ArtUp design the new Dream Up program, advising on what worked and what didn't in their experiences of virtual learning. The organization found it richly rewarding to work with housing insecure youth, recognizing that the ability to earn income is critically important to the youth and that number of housing insecure families is likely to grow due to the pandemic.

## Tackling a new issue to help neighbors in need

**Barrio Alegría** (Barrio) in Reading, Penn., conducts arts-focused community leadership development in a primarily Latinx neighborhood. While conducting focus groups of neighbors during the pandemic, Barrio's leaders learned that some residents were having trouble paying rent. Because of their historic distrust of institutions, residents were not seeking or receiving assistance to stay in their homes. Even though they did not have experience in rental assistance, Barrio found a way to respond to the community's need. The organization created a community navigator position, hiring a young Latina woman to distribute information about the state rental assistance program and conduct an outreach campaign. She helped neighbors submit 130 applications for relief.



## Protecting Health & Well-being

The pandemic has exposed the results of generations of racial and economic disparities in access to healthy housing, economic opportunity, safe public spaces, and amenities. The virus hit lower-income communities and communities of color much harder than wealthier and whiter communities. Pandemic impacts and police killings created both physical and emotional trauma in communities of color. Community-based arts organizations were tasked with helping their residents stay safe from the virus while navigating the stress and trauma of ongoing racial injustice and inequitable negative impacts.

## CREATIVITY SUPPORTS MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IN LYNN, MASSACHUSETTS

Lynn, Mass. faces significant vacancy and disinvestment resulting from loss of industry. It also had the highest rate of COVID-19 infections in the state by the fall of 2020. **Beyond Walls**, a public art and placemaking organization in Lynn, turned its attention toward engaging Lynn's youth, who were deeply distressed by their inability to attend school or socialize. Beyond Walls invited young people to express their feelings

about how the pandemic and national protests were affecting them in writing, images, or spoken word. The organization then worked with professional artists to turn these into collective public art works. For example, Shepherd Fairey's design studio, Amplifier, transformed drawing submissions into posters that were displayed around the city. This program helped youth feel heard and respected, while creating an opportunity to process the traumas of 2020. At the same time, it created meaningful art across the city that reflects this moment in time and visions for the future. Beyond Walls also worked with a number of community partners to host the renowned artistic organization Inside Out, founded by the artist JR. Inside Out designed a wall at the Lynn Community Health Center that highlights the youth of Lynn in 127 portraits.

Beyond Walls found other ways to meet the moment. Its executive director served on the city's COVID-response task force, focusing specifically vulnerable populations such as people experiencing homelessness. The organization turned its artistic talents to help stop the spread of the virus. Almost immediately after the pandemic began, Beyond Walls hired three seamstresses to make masks with its distinctive murals on them and gave the masks away to community members. With public restrooms closed, unsheltered people were unable to wash their hands while research showed COVID-19 was spreading rapidly in homeless housing spaces. Beyond Walls tackled this problem in a way that aligned with its mission to address community needs through a creative lens, by designing and developing prototypes for remote handwashing stations. Placed in areas where unsheltered people congregate, the handwashing stations

served to activate space and engage community members in collective action for the benefit of the community. The first handwashing station, installed outside Lynn Community Health Center, recorded 550 hand washes in a 24-hour period. Beyond Walls improved on the prototype and created five more units that it installed in locations around the city.

## Helping artists create and cope

**The King's Canvas**, an art gallery and studio in Montgomery, Ala., provides under-resourced artists with studio space and training to develop their artistic and entrepreneurial skills. It also serves as a community hub for artists and is working to create neighborhood gathering spaces. The King's Canvas' executive director heard from and about individuals in the neighborhood who were struggling with mental health issues and other stressors during the pandemic. He collected art supplies and delivered them to their homes, knowing that the ability to keep creating would bring social, emotional, and mental health benefits during a traumatic time. He also worked with a local pastor to connect those who needed additional resources with mental health counseling and social services.

*Truth Be Told installation in Lynn, Mass.  
CREDIT: Beyond Walls*



# BEYOND THE PANDEMIC:

## Recognizing the Critical Role of Arts and Culture in Revitalization



● CREDIT: Barrio Alegria

Community-based arts and culture organizations are committed to their ongoing work to strengthen relationships, engage people in neighborhood activities and processes, and create a sense of common purpose. They were doing this work before the pandemic, building social cohesion, and engendering trust in their organizations as neighborhood institutions.

They leveraged this trust and connection during the pandemic to identify and respond to community needs and they will continue doing this work after the pandemic ends. We have witnessed creative placemaking practitioners' ingenuity and ability to shift priorities and respond in real time to unprecedented community needs.

Now is the time to recognize the true value of that social cohesion as local governments and other stakeholders plan for recovery and begin to shift their capacity back toward revitalization work that they were forced to put on hold or slow during the pandemic. In Toledo, Ohio, one organization is doing just that, leveraging the value of arts and culture for long-term

equitable revitalization strategies. The Lucas County Land Bank's primary focus is on converting vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties to provide assets for neighbors and benefit their communities. Due to the historically racist policies and practices of disinvestment, the majority of the vacant properties the land bank works to address are in communities of color. While arts, culture, and creative placemaking are not within the expertise of the land bank, its leadership sees this work as a critical tool to develop the social cohesion of neighborhoods the land bank serves. As such, it complements the land bank's mission. Lucas County Land Bank supports arts-based strategies through partnerships as a means to strengthen its work and reactivate vacant lots that continue to cause harm to communities.

Community-based arts and culture organizations are, at the core, strengthening their communities in profound ways that extend far beyond any one project or program and they can serve as critical partners for others engaged in revitalization work. These organizations use creative tools to knit together a stronger social fabric that improves overall resiliency. They understand and acknowledge the structural barriers. As community members themselves, they often experience these barriers. For years, they have engaged in outreach activities focused on residents who are often missed by traditional institutions. During the pandemic, the value of that work became even more clear. To ensure that recovery is equitable and responsive to community needs in the short and long term, these organizations should be at the table as key community engagement planning partners.

**This section will highlight three opportunities to utilize arts and culture organizations during recovery and beyond.**

# OPPORTUNITY 1

## Connect Neighbors to Needed Resources

Communities are working on strategies to connect renters, homeowners, and small business owners to resources and support networks. Preventing the displacement of people, businesses, and investment in neighborhoods needs to remain a top priority for local governments, philanthropy, and community development practitioners. This should include prioritizing resources that help families meet basic needs, so they do not have to choose between meeting housing costs and putting food on the table, keeping the lights on, or accessing health care.

As the local examples highlighted in the previous section, community-based arts organizations that have built strong relationships of trust not only understand *what* the needs are in their communities, but *who* needs support. They can work as liaisons between local governments, financial institutions, other community groups, and philanthropic institutions to help identify needs and conduct community outreach.

In the first year of the pandemic, creative placemaking practitioners forged new partnerships, developed new programs to address critical needs, and engaged residents who are not reached through traditional government programs. In addition to serving as direct liaisons, their expertise should be leveraged—and compensated—to advise local governments and social service agencies on what resources are needed and how to improve the accessibility of services.



Community arts organizers in Reading, PA distribute resources on rental assistance. CREDIT: Barrio Alegria

“The key needs in our divested neighborhoods include investments in art and placemaking and vacant land repurposing initiatives that help improve quality of life, health, and the general appearance of the neighborhood. These types of investments create a visible voice for the community by helping document the history of the neighborhood, building trust and social cohesion, and increasing engagement.”

**Shantaé Brownlee, Lucas County Land Bank**  
Read more from Shantaé on page 21

**Pillsbury House + Theatre (PHT)** serves as a trusted hub for community gathering, arts experiences, and needed human service resources in Minneapolis. Throughout the pandemic and racial justice protests occurring on its doorstep, PHT has listened and responded to evolving needs in the community, providing everything from basic human services to opportunities to process emotional trauma. With three decades of sustained work to foster attachment, access, and agency for neighborhood residents, PHT is well positioned to connect neighborhood residents to the resources they need during the pandemic and beyond.

## OPPORTUNITY 2

# Assist with Proactive Information Gathering

It is highly likely the pandemic will lead to increased property vacancy and abandonment. Residents and small business owners alike face hurdles to affording rental and mortgage payments. Widespread evictions are anticipated. Diminished resources for owners to address property maintenance issues and the everchanging dynamics of where and how American workers will conduct business in the future will contribute to those increases in vacancy. Cities, towns, and neighborhoods need to take proactive measures to identify where vacancy is most likely to increase and develop interventions before it becomes unmanageable. Arts and culture leaders have already organized neighbors in their communities. Those connections can be used to identify individual vacant properties and streets with widespread nuisances, like dumping, trash, and illegal activities. Arts organizations can recommend priority areas for direct investment (including creative placemaking projects) based on their knowledge of neighborhood challenges as well as the existing assets that can be a catalyst for improvements. They can lead data gathering initiatives, such as parcel surveys to identify long-term or newly vacant properties, or distribute questionnaires to property owners and business to determine their future plans to occupy spaces in the community.

Arts and culture organizations have the ability to develop creative, out-of-the-box approaches that engage residents in new ways or engage residents who would otherwise be missed. Many information gathering activities can serve a dual purpose. Residents' input can inform not just policy decisions, but also artistic projects that document the pandemic's impact or support neighborhood revitalization. These activities create opportunities for collective healing and processing alongside necessary information gathering.



Entrepreneurial training led by community-based arts organization CREDIT: The King's Canvas

“There are as many stories as there are people in our neighborhoods, and it is very difficult to separate them into good people and bad people, because we all hold parts that are good and parts that are bad simultaneously. . . Art has allowed us to humanize those parts that typical community development assessments have disavowed. When we look at building community, we do not look to build community for those that are deemed “good”, because we recognize that we are all complex. ”

**Daniel Egusquiza, Barrio Alegria**

Read more from Daniel on page 18

**NewVue Communities** in North Central Massachusetts employs a collaborative organizing model that relies on developing cohorts of “stewards” who work with local government on issues such as health, public education, and art. These leaders identify issues in the community that need attention. NewVue builds their skills to communicate these issues effectively to decision makers and work collaboratively to plan and implement solutions. Almost 50 local artists serve as arts stewards, focusing on projects such as developing affordable studio space for local artists in formerly vacant spaces and advising on creative design of a multi-use trail.

## OPPORTUNITY 3

# Lead Community Visioning and Planning Efforts

The calls for racial justice have brought to light what so many people living in disinvested communities have long known: racial disparity in access to resources creates massive wealth, health, and development gaps. Political leaders, companies, philanthropy, and individuals have pledged to do better when it comes to advancing justice and building equitable communities. To meaningfully advance racial justice, however, community residents that have been affected by these injustices need to lead in developing plans for their communities. As one step in that direction, arts and culture leaders are equipped to think outside traditional engagement strategies and have the expertise to lead community visioning processes.

Local arts and cultural organizations can be champions of preserving, honoring, and amplifying the historic and cultural legacy of communities. They are able to bring people together in ways that government officials often cannot. Local governments should involve creative placemaking organizations in leading visioning and planning workshops that connect the wants and needs of community members with investment plans and strategies.



Children play in pocket park, part of Tired-a-Lot Studios CREDIT: Bridge of Grace CMC

“Creative Placemaking is a realistic strategy for economic development in our underinvested and historically marginalized communities, and we are already seeing this plan work. . . Let’s empower the people on the ground who are already doing the work, provide resources that are often difficult for us to secure, and provide some seed money for carrying out projects that are going towards revitalization efforts in our community. When this happens, we will witness neighborhoods that were once staples in the community begin to thrive again.”

Kevin King, *The King’s Canvas*  
Read more from Kevin on page 19

Faith-based community organization **Bridge of Grace Compassionate Ministry Center** worked with teens in its “Tired-a-Lot” studio to envision and execute a plan to improve vacant lots in its Fort Wayne, Ind. neighborhood. The teens used low-cost and upcycled materials like pallets and tires to transform vacant lots into pocket parks. The city’s Parks and Recreation Department took notice of this community-led effort as it began to consider how to transform a neighborhood park. The city wanted to get input from neighborhood residents, but did not have a strategy for doing so effectively. Parks and Recreation Department staff approached Bridge of Grace for help. The organization guided the city through a community-engaged master planning process for the park. That effort was so successful, the city formalized the engagement process to replicate it in other neighborhoods.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

We do not yet know when the pandemic will end and what the scope and scale of the recovery effort will be.

However, we have already seen the communities that have faced centuries of economic neglect, racist violence, and resource deprivation are more deeply impacted. These same communities will, in all likelihood, be the most challenged in the recovery ahead.

While they may be under-resourced, these communities also have assets to build upon. Their residents often are dedicated to their community and to its success. They may have deep cultural roots and a tradition of working collectively and supporting one another with the resources they have. The work of arts and culture organizations lifts up and strengthens those traditions, inspires the development of creative solutions, and bonds people more tightly together.

We can realistically anticipate increases in vacancy and abandonment, housing insecurity, and neighborhood decline, as well as the loss of small businesses, investment, and

other scarce resources in marginalized communities of color. Addressing these challenges equitably—in ways that directly respond to residents' needs and don't replicate past injustices—requires creativity, trust, and community collaboration on solutions. In short, the kind of social cohesion that the arts and culture organizations profiled in this paper are working to build.

Community-based organizations that use arts and culture have unique skills and relationships, and an intimate understanding of local needs, that have together proven invaluable during the pandemic and racial justice reckoning. We see this in the efforts by Barrio Alegría and The King's Canvas to dig deeper, recognizing needs that were not immediately apparent and finding resources within the community to respond to them. We see it in EBALDC and The Arts Commission finding creative ways to foster relationships with and among community members during a time of social isolation. And we see it in Beyond Walls' public art works that acknowledged young people's grief and trauma from the past year's events. All of these efforts helped reinforce connections and belonging among residents, engender trust that institutional actors see their struggles and care for them, and shepherd community well-being. Building social cohesion is difficult in a time of isolation and trauma. But as these creative placemaking leaders have shown us, it is not impossible. Community development practitioners, local government officials, and philanthropic partners should leverage arts and culture leaders' expertise and dedicate funding to engaging these organizations, if they truly want to support equitable recovery and progress toward racial justice.

# LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES:

## Views on Arts, Culture, and Revitalization from the Field

Arts and culture leaders are deeply concerned for the fates of their organizations and the people they serve. The individuals we spoke to, however, rose to the moment by doing what they do best: being creative.

Our conversations with arts, culture, and creative placemaking leaders were so rich and revealed so much about the critical role these organizations play in times of crisis that we wanted to create space for those leaders to share directly with you. We are thankful to our partners and friends for sharing their experiences and lessons learned in the case studies included in this section.





## LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES:

Viewing Arts, Culture, and  
Revitalization from the Field

# BARRIO ALEGRÍA

Daniel Egusquiza, Founder  
and CEO

Barrio Alegría (Barrio) changes lives by reweaving the community fabric through focused creative expression, exploratory interaction, and fostering the seeds of hope. Barrio activates this vision by embedding innovative leadership and community development initiatives into its art-based programming. Our projects deal with social justice issues, utilizing art as a vehicle to instigate personal transformation and community building.

Life in Reading, Pennsylvania, is a constant dance between blight and creativity. When blight has the upper hand, we internalize the negativity, lose our sense of possibility, and settle for the way things are. Deep inside, we know that we each possess an inner brilliance to be change agents, but sometimes the blight seems insurmountable. Collective action is the process of joining our individual creativity in efforts bigger than ourselves to make magic happen.

Art is our platform for engagement. It has allowed us to build trust, break down feelings of isolation and dream a different future. Because it is a universal language, we have used art to meet people where they naturally convene, at bodegas, laundromats, and parks. Typically, we have run surveys and questionnaires after art events to learn more about participants' experiences in their community. Everyday leisure spaces have been transformed into places for democratic participation. In South Reading, art opened neighbors to the idea of change, and after three years of resilient work, they began to trust that we would advocate for their best interest.

In art, there is no good or bad. There is the interaction of elements. Community cultural patterns similarly exist inside a deep patchwork; some elements are oppressive, other elements instill pride and a sense of community. The lens of art and culture is appropriate when tackling the complex arena of community economic development. Mechanical approaches to change and problem "eradication" will always fail because complex systems involve interrelated elements and are not easily replicated. It is one of our basic truths that in our community, everything is connected.

There are as many stories as there are people in our neighborhoods, and it is very difficult to separate them into good people and bad people, because we all hold parts that are good and parts that are bad simultaneously. For example, a local drug dealer, who makes sure nobody bothers us during our art programs, is the nephew of one of our biggest volunteers. A returning citizen spends time choreographing dances for young people, helped by a Mexican immigrant who used to be a teacher in her native Michoacan. Art has allowed us to humanize those parts that typical community development assessments have disavowed. When we look at building community, we do not look to build community for those that are deemed "good", because we recognize that we are all complex.



CREDIT: Barrio Alegría

## LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES:

Viewing Arts, Culture, and  
Revitalization from the Field

Because one of Barrio's values is that "we share what we have," it is always hard to witness a tendency among agencies to lock away resources from neighbors because "they are not able to take care of this on their own." So, we have been working hard to rewrite the rules. We hold a photography project, for example, that includes lending out ten Digital Single Lens Reflex cameras to neighbors to document their lives. In four years of programs, only one has been damaged due to a coffee spill. None has been lost.

I understand the need to want to see change happen almost instantaneously. But developing a sense of community and changing self-limiting beliefs takes commitment and time. In the early years of programming, we worked with neighbors to create art programs, and many times, only one person attended the event. But we remained committed, we understood that our role is to hold the space. And organically, neighbors showed up to support efforts.

We have been lucky to find partners who are willing to support us no matter where we are in our development. The local Wyomissing Foundation understood the importance of investment, believed in us when we were still a young organization, and spent time training us and making sure that we were achieving milestones. And after a shift in leadership, our local government opened up lines of communication, which has made it easier for us to deliver programs.

*Of course, there is still work to be done. We have grand dreams of accessing abandoned lots and repurposing blighted properties in our neighborhoods, but first we must address capacity issues, money issues, and train our neighbors so that the dreams can be built on foundations of knowledge and power. Our ongoing success hinges on our reputation to help individuals to solve community-level problems. We know that our efforts are only planting the seeds and we have lovingly accepted that we might not be alive to enjoy the fruits of our labor.*

# THE KING'S CANVAS

Kevin King, Founder  
and CEO



The King's Canvas works to eliminate barriers that prevent people from being creative. We focus on providing creative support for underexposed and underdeveloped artists in Montgomery, Alabama. We have a space in the neighborhood where artists can create, as well as art supplies for those who need them. We offer entrepreneur classes, and we partner with other organizations to create events in order for artists to sell their art, and to establish relational capital through network building.

Our mission is much broader than art and business classes, however. We are seeking to build community and provide opportunities and access for our neighbors in West Montgomery, even as we support marginalized artists throughout the city. We are bringing new life to vacant spaces in our commercial corridor by converting vacant lots into green spaces and community gathering spots with public art and landscaping. Our current approach is producing successes that can be replicated in other underserved neighborhoods throughout Montgomery.

Vacant commercial properties, overgrown lots and demolished homes create blight in our neighborhood. Much of our focus is mitigating blight and providing life to these spaces. We seek to make the area an even more beautiful place to live and to visit. We seek to bring social and cultural value to vacant spaces within the community by activating them with public art that adds life and color. We've partnered with various organizations to create



*We want our local government leaders and philanthropists to know that we have an effective revitalization plan that will actually work if we are fully funded and had the resources to execute it.*

outdoor events that have given our artists the opportunity to sell their artwork and earn extra income during this uncertain time.

We have built a strong community in West Montgomery based on our relationships with neighbors and the business community. These connections help us identify what our community members need and find ways to meet those needs. For example, during the COVID pandemic, I became aware that people in our The King's Canvas community needed access to mental health resources. I partnered with a local pastor who has access to a support system with a wide variety of mental health workers, therapists, and counselors and we were able to connect individual people to the resources they needed. We also created an art supply drive in order to continue to foster creativity in artists as they were in isolation due to the shelter in place order.

That same sense of community has helped us to develop a revitalization strategy using the principles of creative placemaking that we are currently implementing. I can't tell you how many meetings I have sat in where politicians and community leaders ask, "What do you want?" and people respond "We need you to invest in The West Side and we want more businesses on the West Side." But people are usually unaware of how to implement what they're asking for. They just know they want to see more vibrancy in their neighborhood. I believe it's up to those of us who have access to information to equitably distribute that information to others. We also need to take it a step further by eliminating the "giver/recipient" concept and ask the question: Where are the local assets within the community residents that could be used to strengthen the community? When mutual contribution takes place, mutual transformation happens. For this reason,

we use creative placemaking strategies through our work at King's Canvas to demonstrate the vibrancy the community is asking for as we all become participants of transformation.

We want our local government leaders and philanthropists to know that we have an effective revitalization plan that will actually work if we are fully funded and had the resources to execute it. We are focused on a commercial corridor with thriving businesses, while eliminating the vacant spaces that are eyesores for the neighborhood. My goal is to get local leaders, government leaders, and philanthropists to understand that we can not only activate spaces in West Montgomery, but this is a strategy that we can implement all over the city. We can apply creative placemaking principles in our neighborhood, then move to other neighborhoods based on their own revitalization needs.

Creative placemaking is a realistic strategy for economic development in our underinvested and historically marginalized communities, and we are already seeing this plan work. A Black-owned coffee shop and bookstore will soon open next to The King's Canvas as well as other potential businesses who are now asking about the third storefront unit. We have outgrown our art studio and will soon convert it into a small gallery and our studio will relocate to a larger space in the rear of the property. The presence of The King's Canvas has also increased patronage of other businesses in the vicinity of our studio.



● CREDIT: The King's Canvas

## LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES:

Viewing Arts, Culture, and  
Revitalization from the Field

# LUCAS COUNTY LAND BANK

Shantaé Brownlee, Senior Vice  
President for Operations and  
Chief Financial Officer

While nothing could have prepared any of us for these unprecedented times, Lucas County Land Bank's tools are uniquely designed to address neighborhood challenges. Many of the neighborhoods we serve in Lucas County have experienced sustained disinvestment and population loss. They have yet to recover from the 2007-2009 Great Recession or the impact of the national foreclosure crisis. Most are majority-minority or low-to-moderate income neighborhoods that suffer from both an abundance of abandoned, tax-delinquent, and deteriorating properties and a lack of homeownership.

To address these challenges, the Land Bank recently released a strategic plan for the next five years to build neighborhoods by putting a direct emphasis on three key features of any neighborhood: **land, buildings, and people**. We understand a community's resilience depends on the capacity of individuals and households to endure and recover from the impacts of a disaster, such as our current crisis. Now more than ever, our community needs our Land Bank to take an equitable and aggressive approach to neighborhood revitalization. To assist our Black and Brown communities to survive and recover from the pandemic's challenges, we have established a five-year, \$1.5 million Neighborhood Justice Fund. This fund will support Land Bank investments in the built environment that will grow wealth and foster health in Black and Brown communities.

The Fund builds upon the work of the Land Bank's RISE (Rebuild Invest Stabilize Engage) Neighborhoods program, implemented in 2016. RISE is an effort to target investments in key neighborhoods in Lucas County and goes above and beyond the work we do in every neighborhood throughout Lucas County. RISE works to revitalize the real estate market for homeowners, which stabilizes and increases values. We do this by providing home repair assistance to existing homeowners, providing financing and other incentives for new and existing neighborhood businesses, investing in art and placemaking initiatives in partnership with residents and neighborhood-based organizations, and working with the City of Toledo on strategic nuisance abatement and code enforcement.

The key needs in our divested neighborhoods include investments in art and placemaking and vacant land repurposing initiatives that help improve quality of life, health, and the general appearance of the neighborhood. These types of investments create a visible voice for the community by helping document the history of the neighborhood, building trust and social cohesion and increasing engagement. Our work in the Clinton Park neighborhood shows how RISE partnerships with neighborhood-based organizations and grassroots community relationships created a momentum for lasting change.



CREDIT: Lucas County Land Bank



CREDIT: Lucas County Land Bank

Clinton Park is a 96-percent minority, low-to-moderate income neighborhood in the City of Toledo. Clinton Park suffers from a disproportionate number of blighted commercial and industrial sites, a legacy of Toledo's history as an industrial powerhouse and a time when people lived and worked close to these intensive uses. The large inventory of vacant land contributes to blight and declining property values and perpetuates the cycle of disinvestment. The Land Bank is providing land, funding opportunities, and case management support for neighborhood efforts to activate vacant spaces and create a stronger sense of place.

*The Land Bank is working to acquire an abandoned, tax delinquent industrial site that is under emergency demolition orders as well as the adjacent vacant lots. Our work will include remediating any environmental issues found on the site and demolishing the nuisance structure. With the input of the residents, we intend to green and beautify the site with fencing and tree planting and welcome individuals to the Clinton Park neighborhood through signage or other related placemaking activities.*

The Land Bank will maintain the site, over time, as a community asset. Due both to high-profile parcels of vacant land in the neighborhood and an already very challenged commercial inventory, our RISE programming will focus mainly on art and placemaking efforts along the business corridors and within the neighborhood. We will also work in the city to invest directly in Clinton Park, the park for which the neighborhood is named. By removing blighted sites and making greening investments, we will improve the quality of life, safety, health, and well-being of the individuals who live in the nearby residential neighborhood.



Arts and culture organizations are positioned as critical builders of social cohesion, to reach and help people as few other organizations can.



# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

Community Progress and Metris Arts Consulting would like to offer our deep thanks and appreciation to the neighborhood and thought leaders who shared their stories, insights, wisdom, excellence, and advice with our team including:

**RÉNA BRADLEY**, Community Development Director, Bridge of Grace Compassionate Ministries Center

**SHANTAÉ BROWNLEE**, Senior Vice President for Operations and Chief Financial Officer, Lucas County Land Bank

**ALEXA BOSSE**, Founder and Principal, The Hinge Collective

**KATHERINE BRAY-SIMONS**, Our Town Specialist Visual Arts Division, National Endowment for the Arts

**DANIEL EGUSQUIZA**, Founder and CEO, Barrio Alegria

**MARC FOLK**, President and CEO, The Arts Commission

**MEREDITH GERAGHTY**, Program Officer, NewVue Communities

**JEN HUGHES**, Director of Design and Creative Placemaking, National Endowment for the Arts

**KEVIN KING**, Founder and CEO, The King's Canvas

**ANNIE LEDBURY**, Creative Community Development Manager, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation

**LYNNE MCCORMACK**, Senior Creative Placemaking Officer, LISC

**FRANCISCO RAMOS**, Community Organizer, NewVue Communities

**NOËL RAYMOND**, Co-Artistic Managing Director, Pillsbury House + Theatre

**LINDA P. STEELE**, Founder and CEO, ArtUp

**LEILA TAMARI**, Senior Program Officer, ArtPlace

**JUN-LI WANG**, Associate Director, Programs, St. Paul, SpringBoard for the Arts

**AL WILSON**, Founder and CEO, Beyond Walls

# Appendix B

## A LEGACY OF DISINVESTMENT

Historically and continuing into the present day, discriminatory land use, lending, and investment policies have actively and intentionally harmed Black and other people of color, businesses, and entire communities. These practices range from sanctioned policies such as redlining and exclusionary zoning, to racial steering and block busting (see Table 1).

These discriminatory policies and practices drive up the number of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD) properties. VAD properties are connected to public health concerns like increased crime and environmental contaminants. They can

decrease surrounding properties' values, affecting individuals' wealth and equity in their homes and perpetuating a cycle of disinvestment. VAD properties also strain local government resources, decreasing tax revenue while increasing demand for public services such as police, fire, demolition, and maintenance. These properties have even been connected to decreased social capital in neighborhoods, meaning neighbors are less likely to know and look out for each other. Economic crises, inequitable government decision making, and natural disasters exacerbate these issues and complicate the strategies to address them.

**Table 1: Historic (and Continuing) Discriminatory Housing Policies and Practices**

<b>Redlining</b>	Denying specific communities access to financial services such as banking, credit, and lending due to the community's racial makeup. Redlining was developed by the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation and was legal from the 1930s until passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Investigations and lawsuits against lenders for redlining practices continue today. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Racial Exclusion from Federal Home Loan Programs</b>	These post-WWII lending programs, such as those enabled under the G.I. Bill, made living in new suburban developments possible for working class white Americans. Black families seeking similar mortgages were explicitly denied and ultimately relegated to disinvested urban communities.
<b>Exclusionary Zoning</b>	Using public zoning and building code requirements to ensure that the homes built in suburban (or sometimes neighborhoods within urban) communities are less affordable to working class, disproportionately Black home seekers. For example: prohibiting multifamily housing or mandating large lot sizes to drive up housing costs. This is still a common tactic today.
<b>Blockbusting</b>	A tactic used by real estate agents to convince white homeowners to sell their properties below market value, out of fear that the presence of Black households was about to cause their property values to plummet. The homes would then be sold at inflated prices to Black families who had been shut out from purchasing elsewhere as a result of the tactics described above.
<b>Racial Steering</b>	A tactic in which real estate agents steer their clients toward particular communities and away from others based on the client's race. Evidence suggests that this practice persists today. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Urban Renewal</b>	Urban renewal was a large federal investment effort in the 1950s and 1960s that demolished and displaced communities of color deemed "blighted" in favor of building new housing and commercial properties <sup>6</sup>
<b>Racially Restrictive Covenants</b>	Developers used racial covenants attached to property deeds to prevent the sale of property to people on the basis of race. The use of covenants was common and legal from the early 1900s until the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an example of present-day redlining, see the 2021 New York State Department of Financial Services investigation into Hunt Mortgage Corp. at [https://buffalonews.com/news/local/state-accuses-lenders-of-redlining-in-buffalo-settles-with-hunt-mortgage/article\\_075d4e3e-671a-11eb-9864-b72cf4e5c086.html](https://buffalonews.com/news/local/state-accuses-lenders-of-redlining-in-buffalo-settles-with-hunt-mortgage/article_075d4e3e-671a-11eb-9864-b72cf4e5c086.html)

<sup>5</sup> For an example of modern racial steering, see the 2019 Newsday investigation into the Long Island real estate market at <https://projects.newsday.com/long-island/real-estate-agents-investigation/>

<sup>6</sup> To better understand the displacement caused by urban renewal projects in the 1950s and 1960s, see the University of Richmond's "Renewing Inequality" project at: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/#view=0/0/1&viz=cartogram>

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth look at racial covenants in one city, see the University of Minnesota's "Mapping Prejudice" project at <https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu>



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