

## Progress in Arts and Culture Research: A Perspective

Several years ago, in Pittsburgh, on the heels of a big conference on arts and culture in the United States, I was asked by a news reporter to comment on the impacts of the arts on communities. Having spent the previous 10 years or so researching the topic—investigating the myriad ways in which arts and cultural activity are often present in communities, the roles that various manifestations of arts and culture can play, and the ways in which cultural vitality can be measured and monitored over time—I relished the opportunity to share what I was learning. “What specifically would you like me to comment on? The presence of artists in neighborhoods? The incidence of amateur arts practice in communities? Audience participation at downtown venues and events? Arts education?” The reporter, rather than being pleased with a menu of items from which to choose and diverse ways of thinking about arts impacts, was slightly perplexed, annoyed, and taken off course by my question. He told me that he needed a brief statement about arts impacts and that if I would talk about activity downtown and its economic impacts that would be just fine. I told him that I could comment on downtown arts activity, but that if he was truly interested in the original question he had asked me, limiting the answer to downtown activity and economic impacts would not do the topic justice. The reporter, not wanting to be perceived as taking short cuts, indulged me. I was pleased to push the envelope.

In the few minutes we had, I called his attention to a range of other ways in which arts and culture are present in cities and also ways in which people actively participate—through recurrent festivals and community celebrations, informal but recurrent gatherings in parks and community centers where group traditions are maintained and/or invented, church-based artistic activity, and also through the convergence of professional working artists in neighborhoods, among other manifestations. These are often important aspects of communities that go overlooked and are missed only when they are gone. I talked about how the most developed areas of study on impacts had to do with arts education in schools and the economic impacts of arts-presenting organizations, such as museums, theaters, and concert halls. I had to tell him that there was research that provided suggestive evidence that other manifestations of arts and culture mattered in important ways—for building social capital and collective efficacy within groups and across diverse groups, for workforce development through the acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, for mitigating crime and improving public safety, and for the advancement of creativity in and of itself. However, there was still quite a bit of research to do to integrate the presence and value of these activities into discussions and assessments of community conditions and dynamics.

At that time, even just attention to expanding the notion of arts and culture beyond downtown venues and audience participation felt like a coup. Several years later, I can now report that good progress has been made on several fronts. First, while downtown notions of arts and culture are still dominant among policymakers, urban planners, and arts administrators, other manifestations of cultural vitality that go beyond presenting

venues and audience attendance are also prevalent.<sup>1</sup> In fact, people are becoming increasingly concerned with active arts participation<sup>2</sup> and cultivating a creative citizenry, in part because they understand that creativity is the engine for the global economy, but also because there is increasing recognition that advancing creativity is essential on many fronts.<sup>3</sup> Second, people in such fields as health and community development are recognizing the contributions that arts and culture can and do make in these realms. An example of this is the work of the King County in the state of Washington, which has integrated questions about arts and cultural activity into its Community Health Survey. Another example is the Metropolitan Chicago Information Center's analysis of amateur arts practice in Chicago neighborhoods and implications for community development. Also, through the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania, there is research under way about how different kinds of cultural districts can impact community development.<sup>4</sup> Other research from the Urban Institute is beginning to explain and document the role arts and cultural activity plays in racial and ethnic relations.<sup>5</sup> Third, on a very practical front, there is recent research to better understand the kinds of arts and culture data that planners and policymakers need to do their best work, and efforts are under way to make such information more available.<sup>6</sup>

Without a better grasp of how arts and cultural activity can and do shape communities, planners and policymakers cannot do their best work. With better data and analysis, we are making strides in integrating arts and culture as a core topic alongside and within other areas of concern like education, community development, and health. We have come a long way and there is much more to be done, but the assumptions that arts and culture are limited to downtowns, that the only impacts that matter are economic impacts,

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson, Maria Rosario, Florence Kabwasa-Green, and Joaquin Herranz. 2006. *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>2</sup> See Brown, Alan S., Jennifer L. Novak with Amy Kitchener. 2008. *Cultural Engagement in California's Inland Regions*. San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation; Wali, Alaka. 2006. *The Informal Arts Finding Cohesion, Capacity, and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*. Chicago: The Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College.

<sup>3</sup> Coletta, Carol. Forthcoming. "Fostering the Creative City." New York: The Wallace Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Stern, Mark J. and Susan Seifert. 2008. "Cultivating Natural Cultural Districts." The Social Impact of the Arts Project, The Reinvestment Fund and The Rockefeller Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, Maria Rosario. 2008. "Towards Diversity that Works: Building Communities through Arts and Culture," in *Twenty-First Century Color Lines: Multiracial Change in Contemporary America*, edited by Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield. Temple University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Dwyer, Christine M. 2008. "Communicating Value: Reframing Arts and Culture Data." Portsmouth, New Hampshire. RMC Research Corporation. See DataPlace (<http://www.dataplace.org>) and Policymap (<http://www.policymap.com>), two online data resources for people interested in community economic development and housing. Both sites now include measures of cultural vitality as recommended by the Arts and Culture Indicators Project (ACIP) at the Urban Institute, a project supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and Leveraging Investments in Creativity.

and that arts and cultural activity are at the periphery of community life rather than at the core are fading as our grasp of how communities actually work and change comes into sharper relief.