Fuzzy vibrancy: Creative placemaking as ascendant U.S. cultural policy

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Fuzzy Vibrancy introduces international audiences to a major new U.S. cultural policy and funding trend—creative placemaking, wherein cross-sector partners strategically shape the social and physical character of a place (ranging from a neighbourhood to region) around arts and cultural assets. The article critically examines creative placemaking's similarities to and deviations from pre-existing cultural policy and its fit with other arts-based economic and community development trends in the U.S. Through an analysis of policy rhetoric and a sample of initiatives, it explores the interplay between policy and practice. It focuses on the challenges of a tendency towards "fuzzy concepts" within policy development.

Keywords: creative placemaking, culture-led regeneration, creative economy, cultural planning, cultural policy, arts economic development

Introduction

In the past two years, a major new U.S. cultural policy has emerged—creative placemaking. Interpretations vary, but all emphasize arts-centred initiatives with place-based physical, economic, and/or social outcomes. The top funders, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and ArtPlace (a collaboration between thirteen foundations and six banks) have made a combined 232 grants in all 50 states, for an investment total of $41.6 million. Other private foundations (Kresge, William Penn) have placed a new emphasis on creative placemaking in their grantmaking. The State of Connecticut has shifted the focus of all of its arts funding to creative placemaking, and nearly doubled funding award levels (Gallant, 2012; Kane, 2012).

The funding resources committed to this policy initiative have been significant, but even more striking is the unprecedented collaboration and coordination between public and private agencies around creative placemaking. For example, eight federal agencies serve as advisors to ArtPlace, offering lessons from their own place-based funding efforts; these include the departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Transportation, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012). At the local level, because both ArtPlace and Our Town (the NEA's creative placemaking grant program) emphasize partnerships, elected officials, urban planners, business leaders, other civic stakeholders, artists, and arts organizations have been challenged to get out of their traditional silos to investigate the links between cultural activity and community development.

In this paper, I examine creative placemaking using two research questions: How does creative placemaking relate to previous U.S. cultural policy initiatives? And, where does creative placemaking fit in terms of earlier approaches to arts-based economic and community development?

I argue that despite the U.S.'s fragmented arts and cultural policy system, the architects of creative placemaking have managed to advance this cultural policy with unprecedented speed and cross-sector coordination. Further, creative placemaking seems to have expanded the concept of cultural policy and diversified stakeholders. By emphasizing cross-sector partnerships and instrumental value to non-arts stakeholders, creative placemaking broadens the scope of cultural policy from its conventional focus on funding for non-profit arts and cultural organizations.

An analysis of policy rhetoric and a sample of creative placemaking grantees suggests that funders and practitioners pick and choose from the spectrum of past arts-based community and economic development trends. However, a more extensive network of public-private actors and backing by national political commitments differentiates this policy initiative from past local and regional efforts.

I explore the interplay between policy and practice; noting a tendency towards the adoption of "fuzzy concepts," or ideas which mean different things to different people, but flourish precisely because of their imprecision (Markusen, 2003, 2012). "Creative placemaking," and its "livability," and "vibrancy" outcomes are malleable concepts, open to interpretation. Although this has increased creative placemaking's appeal to varied stakeholders, it has also left it susceptible to criticism—that it is vague and supports development and gentrification over social equity. As funders and policymakers develop indicators and metrics for measuring the success of creative placemaking projects, these fuzzy concepts are becoming less opaque and therefore even more open to challenge and contestation.

The following section of the paper maps out constraints within the U.S.'s cultural policy and funding system. It illustrates how creative placemaking differs from previous cultural policy approaches. Next, I place creative placemaking in the broader context of arts-based economic and community development. The third section makes the argument that creative placemaking, as a "fuzzy concept," has unintended limitations. The article concludes with a discussion of near-term opportunities for strengthening the field and outlines multiple avenues for further research.

Creative placemaking as a new stage in U.S. cultural policy

In contrast to dominant European models, a decentralized funding system with higher shares of support from the private sector heavily shapes the U.S. cultural sphere. Decentralization and private funding can seriously constrain efforts to coordinate major cultural policy initiatives. As the NEA asserts in *How the United States Funds the Arts,* "No single agency or individual can set an artistic agenda for the nation" (2012, p. 25). How then did the NEA recently adopt a major arts policy platform, and earn support from other federal agencies, the philanthropic sector, private banks, and other local cross-sector actors?

A decentralized system shapes and funds the U.S.'s arts and cultural ecology. The NEA is more akin to a private philanthropic foundation than a ministry of culture. The U.S. divides authority over heritage, trade, media regulation, and arts education among many federal agencies and congressional offices (Ivey, 2008; Wyszomirski, 2008). The arts funding landscape includes direct public funding (NEA, state, regional, and local arts agencies), other direct and indirect public funding (various federal departments and agencies, and tax incentives), and private sector contributions (individuals, foundations, and corporations). Private sector contributions to performing arts organizations and museums are more than five times that of government, which underscores the significance of private philanthropy (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012).

This fragmented system reinforces silos across the arts and has historically favoured "canon" institutions. Because the NEA and private philanthropy support non-profit arts organizations, the system reinforces the divides between the commercial, the unincorporated/community, the non-profit, and the public arts sectors. Actors across these sectors rarely find common cause or think expansively about cultural policy (Ivey, 1999; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010a). Furthermore, funding patterns have traditionally focused on preserving and presenting visual art and music based in the classical Western European canon, with organizations with budgets over $5 million (2% of the universe) receiving half of arts funding. These institutions primarily focus on Western classical art forms and serve predominately white and upper income audiences (Sidford, 2011, p. 1).

Creative placemaking departs from previous cultural policy initiatives in two ways. First, although cultural policy shifts tend to be incremental, the NEA achieved unprecedented coordination around policy adoption. Generally, foundations shift practices gradually, with organizations such as Grantmakers in the Arts aiding the dissemination of ideas and research through its magazine, website, and convenings. Even though there is variation in the ways that the NEA, ArtPlace, other foundations, and practitioners interpret and advance creative placemaking (Gadwa Nicodemus, 2012), this cultural policy concept has received widespread attention and legitimacy in record time.

Secondly, creative placemaking has expanded the conceptual frame of what is meant by cultural policy and attracted a broader array of stakeholders. Typically, non-profit arts constituents and advocacy groups conceive of cultural policy primarily in terms of lobbying for funding. As outgoing NEA Chairman, Rocco Landesman, said:

> …for most people in this country, "cultural policy" is a synonym for "give us more money and get out of our way." Far too often, the conversation stops there. But there are big issues that need addressing (Landesman, 2012).

Historically, the NEA echoed this limited view. It primarily provided matching grants to non-profit arts organizations and disseminated funds to state and regional arts agencies for re-distribution. Tactics pursued under prior NEA leadership, for example, focused on trying to increase congressional funding by repairing frayed congressional relations through an initiative that expanded the agency's reach into new political districts (Ivey, 2008).

A desire to expand arts funding also motivates creative placemaking's proponents; they, however, emphasize identifying shared value to non-arts stakeholders. Facing a limited budget for the NEA, Landesman met with the heads of better-funded federal agencies to make the case that the arts are uniquely positioned to catalyze successful cross-sector partnerships and advance missions in education, health and human services, housing, rural development, and transportation (Gadwa Nicodemus, 2012). These conversations laid the groundwork for the creative placemaking platform. Similarly, ArtPlace seeks to catalyze non-traditional arts funders to invest in creative placemaking. It envisions its role as providing the venture capital to seed experimentation and disseminate findings from specific cases about what works and why. It views local civic leaders, including mayors, developers, business improvement districts, and community foundations as key audiences for its work (C. Coletta, personal communication, September 17, 2012).

Consequently, creative placemaking involves a broader array of stakeholders than those from within the more conventional cultural policy arena. In a sample of creative placemaking grantees, arts groups ranged from the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and Indianapolis Museum of Art, to Media Alliance (based in a community art centre), and to the Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College. Both ArtPlace and the NEA encourage partnerships; the NEA requires two primary partners on its Our Town applications, a non-profit organization and a local government entity, one of which must be a cultural organization. In the NEA's most recent round of grants, non-arts partners included botanic gardens; religious and scientific organizations; banks; farms; business improvement districts; land trusts; educational institutions; and state, local, and federal government agencies, including the Army.

In sum, creative placemaking departs from more traditional patterns of U.S. cultural policy in two ways—the unprecedented speed and coordination with which the policy was adopted, and by expanding the scope of cultural policy and diversifying stakeholders. Given the U.S.'s fragmented arts policy and funding system, how did policymakers achieve these inroads? Tactics included effective use of the bully pulpit and direct approaches to non-arts stakeholders. HUD director Shelly Poticha credits

Landesman with elevating the discussion of the role of art “far beyond funding of symphonies and museums to a much broader topic of community revitalization” (O’Neal Parker, 2012). To develop and substantiate the policy concept of creative placemaking, proponents also tapped recent research findings. Creative placemaking’s links to past arts-based economic and community development also helped prime the pump for acceptance.

The historic continuum of arts-based economic and community development

Where does creative placemaking fit in terms of earlier approaches to arts-based economic and community development? The degree of recent federal leadership and private-philanthropic investment mark a turning point. Its emphasis on cross-sector partnerships is also a new distinction. However, creative placemaking capitalizes on a long history of local and regional efforts to use arts and culture to advance community revitalization. In her historical analysis, Johnson (2009) identified five distinct trends of “arts economic development,” four of which continue to this day: the formation of arts tourism; the attraction of knowledge workers; the stimulation of creative production; and the prioritization of micro-development.

The formation of arts tourism coalesced in the 1960s, as cities included the development of large-scale performing arts centres as part of their tourism strategy to cope with the decline of manufacturing industries and population losses. Yet, tourist-centric brick and mortar projects have also faced scrutiny. Critics question whether cities recoup investments, given capital expenses and ongoing operational and maintenance costs (Eisinger, 2000), and their economic merit vis-à-vis other projects that serve the local population (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010a). Recent research lends credence to these concerns. Woronkowicz et al. (2012) found evidence of overinvestment and subsequent financial challenges related to a building boom in cultural facilities from 1994-2001.

Johnson also identified the attraction of knowledge workers trend, which culminated in the early 2000s. Urban policymakers focused on drawing middle class individuals back to urban centres by cultivating bohemian neighbourhoods with fine-grained arts experiences or by building downtown, large-scale entertainment centres. This trend first emerged in the 1980s with watershed zoning for artist live/work space in New York City's SoHo neighbourhood, which catalyzed private sector investment and the marketing of the bohemian lifestyle by the real estate industry (Zukin, 1982). With Florida's best-selling *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), political leaders looked increasingly to artists and arts industries as a way to attract highly educated workers. Such tactics have been criticized as a justification for gentrification and for exacerbating social inequity with policies that are top-down, exploit disenfranchised groups, and commodify arts and cultural resources (Chapple & Jackson, 2010; Grodach, 2011; Peck, 2005).

Beginning in the 1990s, city officials and state legislators targeted cultural production as a high-growth industry. In what Johnson dubs the "stimulation of creative production" trend, policymakers attempt to recruit and retain artists and arts enterprises to harness creativity, spur innovative behaviour, and support new agglomerations of creative workers and firms. Strategies include: offering film incentives, creating design and arts-production districts, establishing arts incubators, and sponsoring new research on the contributions of the creative economy (Johnson, 2010). Cultural economy frames (DeNatale, Wassall, & New England Foundation for the Arts, 2007; Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale, & Cohen, 2008) influenced these initiatives, as did Pratt's theory (1997) that cultural industries diversify cities and regions' economic base, thereby helping to mitigate deindustrialization.

More recently, public sector and foundations leaders have increased support for efforts to bridge grassroots arts-based community building with economic development. Johnson's "micro-development" trend spans neighbourhood art centres that provide opportunities for arts participation (Markusen et al., 2006), mural programs that foster community engagement and neighbourhood beautification (Nowak, 2007), informal venues that boost cultural participation and creative expression (Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, & Herranz, 2006), and grassroots arts space strategies that spur neighbourhood revitalization (Jackson, 2012). Scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers have explored how smaller arts venues and cultural activities can catalyze gradual change in low-income neighbourhoods that benefits the existing community (Borrup, 2006; Chapple & Jackson, 2010; Jackson & Herranz, 2002; Nowak, 2007; Stern & Seifert, 2010). Stern and Seifert's research on Philadelphia, PA, for example, has found that cultural clusters (concentrations of non-profit arts organizations, commercial cultural firms, resident artists, and cultural participants) are associated with positive neighbourhood features, with little evidence of ethnic displacement. These positive features include higher levels of local and regional civic engagement, increased population and housing values, and decreased poverty rates (2010).

Which of these trends is creative placemaking most akin to? An analysis of project descriptions and policy rhetoric suggests rationales and strategies cut across the spectrum of earlier arts-based community and economic development. Policy shapers and practitioners appear to pick and choose from various strategies and rationales tailored to their particular audiences and needs. For instance, ArtPlace has stated a logic line that "vibrancy is a proxy for quality of place, which helps develop, attract, and retain talent," which aligns it with the attraction of knowledge workers trend. And, although NEA funding cannot be used for capital costs, grant funds have supported design costs for cultural facilities with stated tourism goals, consistent with the arts tourism trend. Markusen and Gadwa also presented statistics on the American arts and cultural enterprise as an economic sector and argued that it is large, diverse, entrepreneurial, competitive, and export-generating—rhetoric that fits within the stimulation of creative production trend (2010b). Despite these catchall tendencies, creative placemaking does stand out. Federal leadership and the degree of investment and policy coordination differentiate it from the past local and regional efforts. Its emphasis on cross-sector partnerships is also a new distinction.

Fuzzy rhetoric, varied practice

> New concepts, as they emerge, may be fuzzy simply because they are in the state of development… They may help to stimulate debate and sharpen a body of work as a whole. Such concepts may mature and gain substance in the course of such a debate or shrivel up under the heat of scrutiny… They may be addressed to different audiences, meaning something distinctly different in each forum… Political organizers often look for umbrella concepts that can pull strange bedfellows together (Markusen, 2003, p. 704).

For better and worse, creative placemaking is currently a fuzzy concept. Despite the high degree of policy coordination, different funders and practitioners have used at least seven creative placemaking definitions (Gadwa Nicodemus, 2012). The imprecision of creative placemaking and its related concepts of livability and vibrancy has helped turn strange bedfellows into allies, yet also makes creative placemaking susceptible to criticism. Vibrancy has been dismissed on the grounds that it's clichéd, vague, hard to measure, and elitist (Frank, 2012). Others critics, concerned with issues of social equity, suggest that the creative placemaking policy rhetoric is culpable in exacerbating disparities (Bedoya, 2012; Mehta, 2012). Issues of measurement and evaluation have also sparked controversy and debate. The discourse around methods and the validity of proposed data sources raise questions of competing values, as different evaluation systems move creative placemaking from the flexibility of an initial fuzzy concept into the more concrete territory of measuring outcomes (Coletta, 2012; Gadwa Nicodemus, 2012; Markusen, 2012; Moss, 2012; Schupbach & Iyengar, 2012). This section explores the interplay between creative placemaking policy and practice and the tendency towards fuzzy concepts.

The two leading policy shapers behind the initiative—the NEA and ArtPlace—rely on different definitions. ArtPlace offers "art and culture at the heart of a portfolio of integrated strategies that can drive vibrancy and diversity so powerful that it transforms communities." In contrast, the NEA advances the initial definition that Markusen and Gadwa developed in their white paper:

> In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b).

The NEA's definition is more measured and specific. It emphasizes strategic action by cross-sector partners, a place-based orientation, and a core of arts and cultural activities. ArtPlace's definition contains more inspiring and subjective language, which increases its appeal to different stakeholders. It epitomizes the characteristics of a fuzzy concept: a focus on process at the expense of agency and actors, multiple interpretations by different people, and lack of clarity (Markusen 2003, 2012).

Both the NEA and ArtPlace also rely on fuzzy concepts in other creative placemaking rhetoric. For instance, ArtPlace's definition of diversity extends to race, ethnicity, and income "through an inclusive and connected place." Vibrancy is defined as "the synergy among people, activity, and value in a place that increases community vitality and spurs economic opportunity" (ArtPlace, 2012). The NEA has named increased community "livability," as its desired outcome for creative placemaking. Within this concept it includes improved quality of life (a particularly subjective concept), greater creative activity, stronger community identity and sense of place, and economic development (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.).

Although the concept of creative placemaking has been expansive and fluid, the indicator systems that are currently being developed as creative placemaking's metrics are much less so. For instance, the NEA offers the following examples of possible long-term livability measures: growth in overall levels of social and civic engagement; arts- or design-focused changes in policies, laws, and/or regulations; job and/or revenue growth for the community; or changes in migration patterns (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.). ArtPlace's recently announced "vibrancy indicators" include the following as metrics of vibrant places: dense populations; high concentrations of employed residents; concentrations of creative workers and firms; concentrations of consumption/socializing-oriented businesses such as restaurants and bars, as well as independent businesses; abundant local job opportunities; walkability; a mix of jobs and residences; and high levels of activity on nights and weekends. Indicators related to property-value increases are still in the process of being developed (ArtPlace, n.d.-b). Despite the vibrancy indicators' instrumental orientation, within its grant guidelines, ArtPlace continues to list "placing artists and art at the centre of planning, execution and activity" as its first principle of successful creative placemaking. Similarly, language around social inclusion, connectivity, and economic integration suggests these values will also inform its grantmaking decisions (ArtPlace, 2012).

Although proposed indicators move creative placemaking into more concrete territory, they also open the door to contestations over value. In a recent interview, Markusen speaks to practitioners' confusion around the mixed messages surrounding creative placemaking outcomes—should initiatives try to raise property values and attract tourists? Can the field re-affirm a commitment to the intrinsic value of arts amidst these instrumental outcomes? (Schupbach, 2012a). A key challenge in the next phase of this policy's life will be balancing the ideals in the policy rhetoric to the more concrete realities measured as outcomes.

How has fuzzy policy rhetoric translated to into grantmaking and on-the-ground implementation? A sample of funded initiatives reveals that, to date, creative placemaking has encompassed a wide range of programs and initiatives under its policy umbrella, and that grantees sought to advance numerous interpretations of livability and vibrancy, beyond trying to spur economic development.

A random sample included 30 of the 232 projects funded by the NEA or ArtPlace since 2010 under the creative placemaking mantle. ArtPlace-funded projects were slightly underrepresented in the sample, 7:23 (23.3%) vs. 80:152 (34.5%) in the full universe. I analyzed short project descriptions and (for ArtPlace grantees) blog posts for stated goals, strategies, and rationales. A future project will involve augmenting this research with project stakeholder interviews and reviewing full grant applications and final reports. Though preliminary, the first stage of this analysis revealed some interesting results.

First, the sample reflected a wide range of types of projects. Design and public art installations for public space or infrastructure (8) and arts engagement efforts (7) were the most highly represented. These were followed by support for design and pre-development costs for artist spaces and cultural facilities (6), and cultural planning efforts (5) that ranged from public art plans to cultural asset mapping. Lastly, two projects focused on creative entrepreneurship support through training and incubator space. Many projects included a blend of the aforementioned strategies, and two—the Higher Ground Project in a rural Appalachia coalfield county, and the Arts Center of Mississippi—defied categorization because their approaches were so multi-faceted.

Second, the sampled projects also revealed that grantees seek numerous outcomes. This sheds interesting light on how practitioners interpret the concepts of vibrancy and livability, and put them into operation. The cultural planning initiatives seemed most oriented towards economic development, with two projects (City of Santa Rosa, and Serenbe Institute for Art, Culture & the Environment, Inc.) invoking tourism as a desired outcome, and several other projects referencing growing the creative economy or creative industries. The artist space and cultural facilities projects stated a variety of rationales: to revitalize neighbourhoods, secure affordable space for artists, animate vacant space, expand arts access, develop the adaptive re-use of historic structures, retain artists and arts groups, and promote tourism. These varied rationales are consistent with prior research, which documents that art space developments frequently seek to satisfy the distinct interests of multiple and diverse stakeholders (Gadwa 2010, 2011).

The public art and design-engagement projects in the sample focused on the use of art to increase awareness of or animate infrastructure or public space. For instance, Fargo, ND commissioned ecological artist Jackie Brookner to design and transform an existing storm water detention basin into a neighbourhood commons; and the Indianapolis Museum of Art's grant supported a series of public art installations to increase community awareness of its river and water supply. Some projects (e.g. Ballroom Cultural Arts Foundation's extensive improvements to a county park in Marfa, TX and the *Swarm Street* parking garage light installation that connects portions of Indianapolis' cultural bike/walk path) emphasized the prestige of the artist or architect involved. Both project descriptions mentioned their local Latino populations, but lacked details on how the projects might involve these community members.

Goals for arts engagement projects included community-bridging and expanding arts access. Arts organizations were listed as the NEA's "lead partners" more frequently than within other categories, although many of the project descriptions emphasized the involvement of diverse partners. These projects were, on the whole, more grassroots-based and focused on social equity. For instance, the Wing Luke Museum used its ArtPlace grant funds to pursue programming in the service of "sustainable" revitalization for the benefit of residents and businesses within Seattle's Chinatown-International District. Such programs ranged from an exhibition on a local Chinese noodle manufacturer that led to improved relations with city officials, to hosting Asian-American Santa in their gift shop as a way to entice holiday shoppers to patronize the neighbourhood.

Conclusion

Despite creative placemaking's rapid ascent as cultural policy, it is now at a crossroad—"mature and gain substance" or "shrivel up under the heat of scrutiny." The emphasis on partnership across sectors ensures that projects must assemble political will. One promising indication that such cross-sector partnerships can be sustained comes from grantees who were initially unsuccessful in their applications for support. Several reported efforts to work together to pursue their goals with alternate funding sources (J. Schupbach, personal communication, September 17, 2012). However, to avoid a meteoric ascent and fall of this new policy initiative, funders, policy advocates, and practitioners must acknowledge the limitations of its fuzzy concepts even while still seeking to promote its shared value to non-arts stakeholders. A key question is whether the new kinds of cross-sector ties that have been forged under the creative placemaking umbrella are resilient enough to withstand the challenges that will inevitably surface as more concrete goals—institutionalized in the indicators, metrics, and evaluation tools that are being developed around this initiative—emerge. Similarly, will the tension in policy and practice between gentrification and social-equity agendas reach resolution or continue to dog the concept?

In the meantime, researchers have several opportunities to strengthen and learn from creative placemaking, as a practice and as cultural policy. By investigating the specific arguments used with different stakeholders (other federal agencies, private foundations, local civic leaders, artists, arts and cultural organizations, etc.), the policy initiative of creative placemaking can be analyzed for its usefulness as a template for crafting more coordinated cultural policy in the U.S. Through close analysis of the case studies of creative placemaking projects, researchers can help practitioners and policymakers better understand the successes and challenges that accompany arts-based community development initiatives. Of particular relevance to *Cultural Trends* readership is an opportunity to investigate the ways in which creative placemaking parallels and is distinct from related international practices, such as the creative city model (Landry, Bianchini, Ebert, Gnad, & Kunzman, 1996; Landry, 2003) and cultural regeneration projects (Evans, 2005). Creative placemaking, as a new set of initiatives in the U.S. cultural policy toolkit, can both inform and be informed by a broader comparative perspective and a more robust international dialogue.

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