PolicyLink

CDI Research and Documentation:
An Account of the Approach, Framework, and Methods

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The effort to document and research the Community Development Investments initiative grew up alongside the program itself, and the analytical approach reflects a balance between conveying the unique features of six distinct experiences and producing lessons of broader relevance to various fields of practice. This essay describes the ways in which the PolicyLink team, in close consultation with ArtPlace America, the grantees of the program, and a number of advisors, created and carried out an approach that was suited to the unique features and dimensions of the initiative. [1, 2]

Readers of the www.communitydevelopment.art website or other accounts of the Community Development Investments initiative of ArtPlace America (CDI) will be familiar with the basic outline of the program, but a brief summary may be useful here: six well-established organizations, based in diverse urban, rural, and tribal communities, were selected as CDI grantees and moved deeply into arts and culture practices as part of the program. Their plans, struggles, and pathways from ideas to outcomes in housing, local economic development, health, youth development, and parks and recreation were documented and analyzed from the time of their selection in 2015 through late 2020, when they had moved into post-grant sustainability mode and when this account was written. The participating organizations[3] and their partners have taken on and struggled with some of the most pressing and complex issues of our time, including gentrification and displacement, racial health inequities, the isolation of immigrant newcomers, and the historical trauma resulting from racism and oppression. They have combined their expertise and standing with the tools and ways of thinking, imagining, and working of artists. As a result, they have helped residents to own and express the identity of their communities, built cultural resilience, and changed the terms of engagement and the methods of neighborhood planning and placemaking.

Defining features of the research and documentation

The CDI initiative did not solicit project proposals from applicants, nor were the selected organizations expected to have plans ready to implement when the grants started. Rather, they were encouraged and supported with various forms of technical assistance to conduct a customized process of cultural asset mapping and to otherwise generate an agenda for arts and culture activities which recognized existing cultural resources and drew upon their relationship to the communities they served and of which they were a part. The asset mapping was then used to develop strategies and then ideas for projects and activities, all of which were subject to extensive iteration, negotiation, and revision. It was, in short, a learning process for everyone involved. The process entailed a great deal of exploration, trial and error, and trying on a range of approaches for their "fit" with the community and the community development (CD) organization. This open-ended approach was a relatively rare and well-supported opportunity for both community development entities, who were used to much more constrained processes for defining projects and their tangible outcomes, raising funds, and establishing contractual relationships. It was also new territory for most of the artists, who had not been in these kinds of partnerships with community developers before. It also meant that the documentation and research methods had to account for—and fit well—with this extended time frame for design, the differences across six diverse communities, the customized eclectic array of projects in each site, and the new kinds of partnerships with artists.

Our approach to researching the innovative practices instigated through this one-time grant program implicitly drew from the framework of Developmental Evaluation, which has been "designed to meet the need for a more expanded view of evidence"[4] than that provided by conventional program evaluations. "DE" is best suited to inquiry about situations that are continuously evolving. The approach was first conveyed by Michael Quinn Patton[5] and is enjoying a new wave of attention in recent years. As the research and strategy firm FSG puts it, "DE can provide stakeholders with a deep understanding of context and real-time insights about how a new initiative, program, or innovation should be adapted in response to changing circumstances and what is being learned along the way."[6] PolicyLink did not literally conduct an evaluation, and eschewed the term, for there was neither assessment of a program or its grantees nor expectation that the program would be repeated. Rather, these complex, dynamic experiences offered important lessons for field building, and the spirit and intention of DE was consistent with our purpose and analytical style in getting at those lessons.

Description alone would not be enough—the goal of the research being to dig deeper into what can be called the "but for" questions:

- What difference has the integration of arts and culture strategies made for the practice of community development?

- What has changed from the agencies' previous way of doing things, and what has been the impact of that shift?

With a small sample of six sites and a largely qualitative approach to tracking the planning and implementation that was unfolding throughout the full study period, this did not yield standardized comparative measurements of the relative influence of specific factors. But it has yielded complex accounts of the context, processes, partnerships, strategies, and activities at each site as well as

parallel information points about each of them that have fed into addressing three cross-cutting areas of interest and conceptual themes. Those themes, discussed in the section on Themes, Questions, and Findings below, became the basis for sets of questions developed through exchanges with the grantees to generate a comparable but distinct "learning agenda" for each site. The common questions and the site-specific agenda topics were the foundation for the queries used in individual interviews of people in many roles, not only in the CDI grantee agencies but in their numerous partner groups, the artists who worked with them, and the residents and other stakeholders. The data collection activities took various forms.

- Structured in-person moderated dialogues among participants from the six agencies for participants to respond to questions in their learning agendas and reflect on experiences. These were conducted and recorded at six in-person gatherings of the site teams, including two two-day sessions devoted entirely to research issues, generating dialogues.

- Approximately 50 interviews conducted by PolicyLink team members.

- Site visits to each CDI community by PolicyLink team members. There were one, two or three visits to each site.

- An online interactive audio, video, and text system (VoiceThread)[7] with several dozen entries in response to questions posed by PolicyLink.

- Analysis of many types of written materials and budgetary records by and about the sites. PolicyLink reviewed detailed budgetary and progress reports from each site submitted to ArtPlace as well as media coverage and contextual information about each community.

- Roughly 120 video interviews with staff, artists, and community leaders conducted at the sites by contributing artist Chris Johnson.

Artistic activities and capital projects were documented with still photography and video as well as text, and the myriad creative activities, some of which produced research findings in their own right, became an important part of the documentary record.

Guiding principles for data collection and analysis

This highly interactive and flexible approach to researching an evolving initiative was guided by several priorities, informing who was interviewed or observed in action, when, and for what purposes.

- **Gather the perspectives of participants at several points in time.** Since the program was new, and the grantees began their work period without project plans or specific commitments, virtually every interesting question involved learning about how things were evolving given this open-ended start. That included the work plans and how they were carried out, the relationships with partners, the personal understanding of the role and impact of arts and culture of the organizational leaders, the organizational practices and policies, and much more. It was vital to interview, observe, and otherwise learn from the key players at several points over four years to see how their thinking, and the activities themselves, evolved. It was similarly necessary and rewarding to share drafts of emerging themes and lessons and receive their input on these at every stage.

- **Encourage and document interaction among site leaders.** CDI created a lively community of practice of roughly 20 individuals, including several people from each site, who met roughly monthly in videoconference calls and six times in person over four years. They were very insightful about commonalities and differences across their organizations and learned a lot from each other. The monthly online interactions generated by ArtPlace created a regular flow of shared information, and the annual ArtPlace conferences and two additional in-person gatherings organized by PolicyLink produced facilitated dialogues among site team leaders that were recorded and edited for publication and mined extensively for quotes and insights.

- **Ask about the personal meaning of the work, not only facts, plans, and policies.** People who undertake innovative, if not risky, arts and culture activities are motivated by what they hope to achieve, and they draw meaning from the endeavor in personal as well as professional ways. By their nature, creative ventures cannot be reduced to just formal plans, so we added a "creative documentation" component in the form of extensive video interviewing by photographer and professor of art Chris Johnson. He visited each site twice, almost two years apart, and asked a cross-section of 10 participants in each community about the personal meaning and motivation they drew from this work and how it may have changed over time. The video recordings have been edited into a finished production for public use.[8]

- **Acquire multiple perspectives on the same issue and activity.** The staff members of the CDI organizations built new partnerships with artists and/or with community-based groups and fashioned new relationships with residents of their community. It was essential, when documenting these engagements, to learn how this experience looked and felt from the partners' point of view as well as the grantees. These engagements featured false starts and rebooting and faced the need to reconcile different views of how to proceed. The challenging interactions were at least as important to learn from as the ones that went smoothly.

- **Encourage and record eclectic forms of expression and reflection.** Documentation of this kind of initiative calls not only for well-ordered evidence in the conventional social science sense but also for stories, poetry, personal testimonies, photography, and videos, including recordings of

performances, that are evocative of the spirit of the work and which provide living examples of what can be accomplished. The collective efforts of artists, agency staff members, and community folks in all six places resulted in a plethora of projects and reflections about them which have been captured for future use.

- **Recognize that social changes will precede, and be the preconditions for, most long-term community outcomes, and that those long-term outcomes will mostly not take place before the study period ends.** The activities undertaken through the CDI initiative were creating the conditions for concrete changes to the quality of life: better population health, positive youth development, improved housing, more welcoming public spaces, and so forth. The groups could specify their intended results for the populations they served. However, those ultimate outcomes take years after the initiation of a project to be realized, and with a few exceptions, during the grant period the main impacts were to create changes in the way that people interacted. These preconditions included such phenomena as organizing to build voice, agency, power and collective efficacy, strengthening the social fabric, heightening the sense of community identity, and building bridges across cultures. The research was therefore geared primarily toward documenting and analyzing the role of arts and culture strategies in bringing about these social changes.

Themes, Questions, and Findings

During 2016-2017, roughly the first year of the program, PolicyLink coordinated a series of dialogues among the project coordinators from each CDI site team and the ArtPlace staff to identify common concepts and a framework for the research. The framework that emerged after several rounds of refinement was relevant to all six sites and promised to provide useful comparisons and lessons. It eventually encompassed three categories (Organizational Evolution, Collaborative Practice, and Community Development Outcomes) under which were nested nine major questions and 25 sub-questions.[9]

- **Organizational Evolution** was significant because the chief executives and project directors realized that it would be essential to take advantage of this opportunity to make larger changes in the culture, direction, and internal structure of their agencies in order to better live up to their values and achieve their mission.

- **Collaborative Practice** became the category for documenting and comparing the multitude of ways in which community developers and artists or arts organizations became mutually acquainted and more sophisticated about codesigning complex projects.

- **Community Development Outcomes** began as an effort to document the tangible changes expected in the health and prosperity of people and their communities, but, as described above in the section on principles of the research, became more focused on the cultural and social changes and new strategies for organizing that were the necessary precursors to better outcomes.

Here is one example from the research framework of a major question and its follow-ups, from the category of Collaborative Practice:

How can community development organizations establish productive relationships with artists and arts organizations?

- How does a community development organization learn about and build connections within the arts community?

- What are the approaches to selecting and incorporating artists and arts and cultural organizations as strategic partners in community development work?

- To what extent does a community development organization's support of artists or arts and cultural organizations outside of the collaboration (i.e., capacity building, training) strengthen the collaboration?

The most basic task in service of this framework was to track and describe what happened—documentation of the baseline circumstances and then the ideas, plans, deliberative processes, decisions, and actions—as the site teams moved through cultural asset mapping into setting priorities, doing detailed project planning, and then creating numerous partnerships and activities. Beyond the description, however, it was important to discern from the participants and from our observations and analysis of documents why and how the arts and culture strategies may have made a difference to their organizations and communities. The common analytical questions for all the sites were followed by more detailed site-specific questions in their learning agendas.

Collaborative Practice: Lessons Learned

The community development organizations needed to figure out how to recruit and partner with artists, and the artists similarly needed to determine how they could make a useful contribution in this different environment. The interviews with all parties in the first two years and reflective dialogues in the third year, first-hand observation of events, and compilation of the materials used to solicit and contract with artists provided a comprehensive picture of how these arrangements were made, complete with the missteps and revisions. When www.communitydevelopment.art, the PolicyLink-managed website on which the CDI research and documentation is presented, debuted in April 2019, the first brief on the site was *Working with Artists to Deepen Impact*, "exploring the theme of collaborative practice, or how these community-based organizations cultivated working relationships with artists, and how they have significantly changed the approaches through which community preservation and revitalization can take place."

The brief provides insights on:

- how the community development organizations matched community development priorities with the expertise and artistic practice of potential collaborators;

- identifying arts partners and building relationships through cultural asset mapping, calls for artists, collaboration with intermediaries, the compilation of artist rosters and directories, and the formation of arts advisory committees;

- lessons learned from the process of creating guidelines for this new work, structuring relationships, and establishing roles and responsibilities;

- overcoming challenges—specifically, how these experiences improved their community development work—and learning to be more transparent, nimble, and reflective; and

- continuing the work after the program ended.[10]

Subsequent conference presentations and publications, including several chapters in the special issue of *Community Development Innovation Review,* further discussed in the Audience Mapping section, have provided additional stories and reflections from the participants about these techniques, lessons, and challenges.

Organizational Evolution: Lessons Learned

Soon after the initiative was underway it was evident that the ways in which the CD organizations were changing would be very interesting and important, and that these changes would be ready for documentation and analysis over time well before the community outcomes would be. The CEOs, project managers, and other staff members of the grantee organizations were outgoing, candid, and reflective as their efforts unfolded over three years, and their partners shared valuable perspectives about how the community development organizations had changed as a result of the arts and culture strategies. The lessons were pulled together in a brief entitled *How Organizations Evolve When They Embrace Arts and Culture*.[11] Eight categories of change were examined, four in overall culture, leadership, and future direction and another four covering the active alignment of internal processes and structures. They are illustrated in the brief by the stories and self-assessments of the leaders and other testimony and images that portray the new ways of thinking and working.

Community Development Outcomes: Lessons Learned

Improvements to the communities and to the health, economic security, and quality of life of the residents are, of course, the ultimate reason for undertaking this initiative. While outlining them was relatively straightforward, it was likely that, in most instances, outcomes of this nature would not be visible or measurable until several years had passed. Most of the projects were, in one way or another, establishing the preconditions for longer term changes. For example, H'on A:wan park, built in the village of the Zuni nation in New Mexico, and the largest capital project undertaken with CDI resources, was immediately upon opening a significant cultural and physical asset but also the foundation for promoting healthy youth development. While the building and grounds were completed in three years, the changes to the resilience, health, cultural awareness, and future prospects of Zuni children and youth will take longer to become established, let alone measured.

Each site has roughly comparable stories laying the groundwork for change through arts-focused ventures. In Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, the projects and activities which promoted the neighborhood's cultural identity reinforced the community's campaign to control future development, an effort which will take years. In Southwest Minnesota, social ties among populations from vastly different cultural backgrounds were established through community theater and other endeavors but would need continual renewal if those ties are to be strengthened and sustained. The trends that could be discerned from the scores of activities and strategies led us to aggregate them into two categories, each of which is the subject of a brief and other articles and presentations. One category includes the ways in which arts and culture strategies led to new forms of community engagement and organizing, for which the Little Tokyo example above is a prime example. This embodied not simply new material to add to the same type of organizing campaign, but also a new way of perceiving the issues, motivating people, and building grassroots voice, agency, and power. The other category includes the strengthening of the community's social fabric, of which the Zuni and Southwest Minnesota examples are emblematic. That stronger social fabric can provide support for both personal growth and collective efficacy.[12]

Audience Mapping and its Implications for Research and Presentation

The choices of intended readers and listeners for this kind of analysis affected how it has been carried out and presented. Researchers were not the principal audience, and few articles or reports were produced directly for fellow analysts, though the products will be hopefully nonetheless useful to them. ArtPlace placed a high priority on reaching people in positions to improve their own practice or alter the prevailing norms and practices of a professional field, and the PolicyLink team worked with ArtPlace in 2017 to identify nine distinct audience segments in order to prepare presentations of findings and stories that would reach each of them effectively. These segments represent sectors in which the CDI grantees work, such as affordable housing, neighborhood planning, community health, and parks, and media serving demographic groups such as Indigenous people (since two of the six sites are Alaska Native or Native American tribal entities.) At the end of 2020 there were articles in press for leaders in nonprofit management and for practitioners and teachers of the social practice of art. Audiences with intersectoral roles and interests were sought as especially valuable targets for presentations. For example, the findings were brought to the Urban Land Institute, a real estate development member organization that was training leaders on health equity, and the 2019 People and Places Conference, the biannual gathering of a national coalition of community development intermediaries that brings together African American, Latino, and Asian American organizations. The largest and most ambitious presentation was the November 2019 issue of *Community Development Innovation Review,* the journal of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.[13] The special issue, "Transforming Community Development through Arts and Culture" includes 27 pieces which not only present this research in a structure based on the framework, but also provide perspectives on the future direction of the field from leaders in banking, social investment, and philanthropy as well as community development. The intent was for the material to inform and motivate investors as well as practitioners, and the dissemination was designed to reach those varied audiences.

Conclusion

The developmental approach taken to documenting and analyzing the ArtPlace Community Development Investments generated a detailed body of information about the initiative that grew and became more focused over four years. The participants cocreated the questions that guided the study and their frequent opportunities to revisit and reframe those questions in light of their evolving experience was at the core of the research. The research shows that from a baseline of high accomplishment in their respective fields but little or no familiarity with arts and cultural strategies, the organizations' leaders became, after four years, sophisticated in how to design collaborative ventures with artists that served their communities well.

The documentation drew upon not only conventional interviews and reviews of source materials but also explored and illustrated the great breadth and depth of the creative activities undertaken in each place. The research was intended to provide useful feedback to the participants in real time and to generate lessons for practitioners and thought leaders in all the relevant fields. The diversity of audiences and modes of published, online, and in-person presentation of the research have helped to meet that latter goal. Presenting spoken word artists, mimes, and audience dancing at events sponsored by Federal Reserve banks may have been unconventional, but it proved to be informative, colorful, and engaging, and entirely in the spirit of the initiative and the research. The personal stories and systematic findings have added to the body of evidence about the value of arts and culture for community development, and the leaders in the field will hopefully bring forth many new accounts in the coming years.

Notes

1 A related essay will be published next year as a chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking,* Cara Courage, editor (forthcoming in 2021).

2 The PolicyLink CDI project team included, over nearly five years, Jeremy Liu, Lorrie Chang, Alexis Stephens, Milly Hawk Daniel, Adam Dyer, Nisha Balaram, and Kasandra Kachakji as well as the author. The ArtPlace team included Deputy Director Lyz Crane and Director of Research Strategies Jamie Hand. The six local research correspondents were Michele Lee Anderson (Minnesota), Karen Black (Philadelphia), Jilly Canizares (Los Angeles), Susan Carter (Zuni), Meghan Holtan (Anchorage), and Charles Husband (Jackson). Two or three project codirectors from each of the six CDI sites actively participated in the development of the research framework and learning agendas. An advisory committee of leaders in creative placemaking, arts and culture strategies, community development, and research about neighborhood change contributed to developing the framework and reviewing draft products. The Creative Documentation video project was conceived and directed by Chris Johnson with production assistance from Corduroy Media.

3 Cook Inlet Housing Authority, Anchorage, Alaska; Fairmount Park Conservancy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, Jackson, Mississippi; Little Tokyo Service Center, Los Angeles, California; Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, Slayton, Minnesota; and Zuni Youth Enrichment Project, Zuni, New Mexico.

4 Marcie Parkhurst, Hallie Preskill, Jewlya Lynn, and Marah Moore, "The Case for Developmental Evaluation," FSG, March 1, 2016, https://www.fsg.org/blog/case-developmental-evaluation.

5 Michael Quinn Patton, Developmental Evaluation: *Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use,* Guilford Press, 2010.

6 M. Parkhurst, et. al., "The Case for Developmental Evaluation," FSG, March 1, 2016, https://www.fsg.org/blog/case-developmental-evaluation.

7 The system is known as VoiceThread, and project leaders contributed text, short videos, and audio recordings in response to a question posed each month for one and a half years. These recordings were shared with the grantees and ArtPlace and used by PolicyLink in the formulation of summaries of grantees' activities and reflections but are not finished products available for public use.

8 The seven videos—one about each CDI site plus an overview of Chris Johnson's purpose and methods for creative documentation—are accessible at https://communitydevelopment.art/resources/creative-documentation-videos. A brief describing the creative documentation process is at www.communitydevelopment.art/strategies.

9 The research framework with these questions can be accessed on the ArtPlace America website, https://www.artplaceamerica.org/areas-of-work/research/cdi-research

10 Alexis Stephens, *Working with Artists to Deepen Impact,* PolicyLink, 2019. It can be accessed at https://communitydevelopment.art/strategies/working-with-artists.

11 Victor Rubin, *How Organizations Evolve When They Embrace Arts and Culture.* PolicyLink, 2020. This and the other briefs can be accessed at https://communitydevelopment.art/strategies.

12 These issues are explored in depth in two PolicyLink briefs about the CDI initiative, posted on www.communitydevelopment.art/strategies: Jeremy Liu, *Moving from Engaging to Organizing with Arts and Culture Strategies,* PolicyLink, 2020, and Lorrie Chang and Victor Rubin, *Strengthening and Connecting to the Social Fabric of Communities,* PolicyLink, 2020.

13 Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, *Community Development Innovation Review.* Special issue: *Transforming Community Development through Arts and Culture,* Lyz Crane, Jeremy Liu, and Victor Rubin, Guest Issue Editors, Issue 14, Number 2, November 2019. The issue is accessible at https://www.frbsf.org/community-development/publications/community-development-investment-review/2019/november/transforming-community-development-through-arts-and-culture/

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