

*An investigation of  
arts and culture  
strategies within*  
**MacArthur's Vital  
Communities  
Portfolio**

This paper summarizes interviews with representatives from community development organizations funded through the MacArthur Foundation's Vital Communities (VC) program, as well as representatives from organizations funded to provide infrastructure support to community development work, and representatives from philanthropic organizations doing relevant work.<sup>1</sup>

Those interviews were rooted in the question of how MacArthur might better support ways that arts and culture strategies can be enlisted to add to the momentum of the industrial and commercial corridor development work it currently supports. The interviews also briefly explored ways that MacArthur might expand this grantmaking to also support culturally identified communities who are dispersed across neighborhoods around the city.<sup>2</sup>

While MacArthur generally talks about its place-based, VC investments largely as real estate development, it was clear that the development of the built environment is inextricably linked to economic development, the creation of community safety and wellness, and to the affirmation of the shared identities of the people and cultures who animate these spaces.

Because MacArthur's current investments are place-based, the interviews began by creating an understanding of the Chicago neighborhoods in which MacArthur invests, which were overwhelmingly created when the white political and financial establishment used redlining, employment discrimination, denial of capital, and other forms of systemic and structural racism to force Black, Indigenous, and other People Of Color (BIPOC) people into culturally cohesive communities outside of Chicago's business center and the residential neighborhoods in which those with the highest incomes lived.<sup>3</sup>

In opposition to the oppression that created these neighborhoods, the communities living in them used these neighborhoods as sites to create resilience (places to heal and strengthen), resistance (places to build power and dismantle systemic and structural oppressions), and renaissances (places where cultural heritage is celebrated, and new art is created).

All four of these forces – oppression, resilience, resistance, and renaissance – remain simultaneously present in the neighborhoods today.

There was a consensus among the interviewee that all four forces need to be acknowledged when having any conversation about community development: as there is still major work to be done in repairing and dismantling systems of oppression; and also community residents largely love and celebrate their neighborhoods as places where great people live, where there is wonderful food to eat,

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<sup>1</sup> A list of individual interviewees is included at the end of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The scope of these interviews was shared with interviewees in advance; that memo is also included at the end of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that throughout this paper, "neighborhood" refers to a physical place and its built environment; and "community" refers to the people living in a specific neighborhood. (Elsewhere in the Vital Communities portfolio, "community" is generally used to mean both.)

and that are alive with art, fashion, music, stories, and other community traditions. Both things are simultaneously true.

Arts and culture play a central role in all four of those forces:<sup>4</sup>

## Oppression

The cultural traditions of the European diasporan communities were the ones that were given permanent pieces of real estate in prime locations near Chicago's business centers and transportation hubs. They were the ones taught in schools and universities. And it was at these openings and galas that business deals were made, political alliances were forged, and those who held power and resources bonded with one another.

## Resilience

Arts and culture play a vital role in keeping and sharing history, in healing and wellness both for the physical body and for mental health, and they are vitally important in helping imagine and design new ways to navigate what remains for too many a treacherous world.

## Resistance

The Design Studio for Social Intervention uses a five "s" methodology for designing successful social interventions.<sup>5</sup> They include both "symbol" and "sensation," as arts and culture are central to power building and social change: social movements live in popular culture through their soundtracks, images, language, and narratives.

## Renaissance

Arts and culture take the form of the birth and rebirth of the culinary, dance, literary, media, music, performance, story, and visual lives of these communities. As such, they are also vital components of

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<sup>4</sup> This paper uses the National Endowment for the Arts' definition of arts and culture: "an act of creative expression done within the confines of a set of known or emerging practices and precedence that is intended to communicate richly to others (e.g., a symphony performance, a teenager's final art project, and a grandmother's crochet practice)." *How Art Works*. Page 12.

<sup>5</sup> *The Five "S" Methodology for Designing Effective Social Interventions: Structure, System, Scale, Symbol, and Sensation*.

the economic, physical, and social development of the neighborhoods. The ways in which people are bonded with each other informs all the other systems at work in their neighborhoods.

The interviews affirmed two things:

One. The community development organizations in which MacArthur is investing are doing thoughtful and important work – some of the most comprehensive and effective work in the City (and likely, the country).

Two. All of them also (not coincidentally) have arts and culture woven throughout their work. What does differ from organization to organization is the explicitness and intentionality with which arts and culture are included, as well as which words are commonly used to name what are referred to as “arts and culture” in this paper.

Given what MacArthur staff have observed both in the VC portfolio, as well as in the world at large, the Foundation believed that organizations that intentionally work with artists, creative workers, culture keepers, and tradition bearers can deploy their knowledge, skills, and abilities to help community development organizations achieve their missions more effectively, more efficiently, and for more of the community.

The interviews explored the following list of tactics that involve arts and culture:

- arts-based/creative economies
- expanding the kinds of activation strategies that are used
- dreaming and rehearsing a future none of us has yet experienced
- foot traffic (organic, as well as that driven through tourism and destination marketing strategies)
- narrative change
- places of gathering and belonging
- remembering traditional knowledge
- self-determination
- social cohesion

The interviews suggested a different framing and arrangement of tactics into the following four broad areas:

### ***1. Economic development***

The community development organizations in the VC portfolio are all thinking about economic development, as they are all working with lower-income communities within Chicago. Because Chicago largely exists within a capitalist system, individual wealth is inevitably twinned with self-determination.

Generally, if community members want the full spectrum of choices to be available to them, they will need to accumulate financial capital.

Each organization reported examples of arts and culture businesses in their neighborhood. Often, the first examples were restaurants. Each neighborhood has restaurants about which they brag and are proud. These restaurants both reinforce the cultural identities of the communities in the neighborhood, while also providing jobs and economic opportunity for them.

Several organizations talked about other arts and culture businesses in their neighborhoods that functioned in similar ways (inspiring pride, affirming identity, and providing economic opportunity for residents of the neighborhoods) these tended to be art galleries, as well as performance venues, dance studios, community arts centers, and at least one significant block party.

Tiffany Mikell shared that the Arts and Culture Capital Lab she ran through the South East Chicago Commission understood that you needed to invest in three strata to have arts and culture as part of a neighborhood economic development strategy:

- creative professionals (who generate income for themselves through their practice);
- creative producers (who create workflows that generate income for themselves and creative professionals); and
- creative innovators (who generate revenue for an entire community by creating and nurturing an ecosystem).<sup>6</sup>

The creative professional category is an especially important one to note, as these sole-proprietor (largely maker) businesses do not generally require large amounts of capital to start.

An important note that came up primarily for majority immigrant communities was that not everyone believes that arts and culture can be part of economic development. In these communities, arts and culture was more often synonymous with “leisure” or “hobby” than “career” or “profession.” To develop arts and culture economic development strategies for people in these communities, there will likely be an initial bias to overcome. Although it is interesting to further note that in these same communities, there was a broadly accepted understanding that the culinary arts were an important part of the local economy.

## **2. Foot traffic**

Foot traffic is a natural byproduct of arts and culture, as much art is still consumed in person, in real time, by groups of people.

Foot traffic is also a component of economic development (as many economic development strategies depend on people from outside a neighborhood spending money within that neighborhood). It is also

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<sup>6</sup> ACCL: Arts and Culture Capital Lab

both a driver of community safety (as an increase of people on the street decreases the incidence of many crimes), as well as an outcome of community safety (neighborhoods that are understood to be safe are also understood to be places for lingering and leisure time).

Multiple examples were given of corridors that had a full day's worth of possible activities: a single stretch along which you could get your nails done, go to brunch, go shopping, see a movie or performance, and have dinner or drinks afterward.

These are all largely positive.

Foot traffic, however, is also paired in many people's minds with the development and displacement patterns commonly referred to as "gentrification." As outsiders "discover" a neighborhood for themselves, economic forces often begin driving change to accommodate the needs and expectations of the visitors, rather than those of the residents.

As part of any efforts to change the patterns of foot traffic, it is essential that there is a shared understanding of who is meant to be a "host" and who is meant to be a "guest" in any given neighborhood.

If communities and business owners are equipped and empowered to be the hosts for their own neighborhoods, they will be able to set the terms of engagement, as well as the cultural expectations for how hospitality is extended. As previously discussed, in a capitalist system, self-determination (in this case, being the "host") is tied to individual wealth. This means that as a necessary component of economic development strategies that rely on foot traffic, there needs to be an investment in the financial and political power of the neighborhood residents. Otherwise, the very strategies that intended to build wealth in these communities will instead risk building wealth for the neighborhood once it is inhabited by different residents.

Further, an increase in foot traffic from outsiders to the neighborhood might also bring with it additional attention and additional policing (both literal and metaphorical). Some of the existing economies in some of the neighborhoods are dependent on gray market activities, some of which take place in places that are not always up to code, and some of which involve residents without documented immigration statuses. This additional enforcement is likely to help certain pieces of the economy thrive, while completely disrupting, if not dismantling, other swaths of the economy. Again, an investment that is dependent on outside foot traffic must also look at what additional and adjacent investments need to be made to survive these increased inspections.

### **3. Narratives**

There was a broad (and largely shared) understanding among the interviewees that all of us are working within and often against a set of narratives – both ones we have about ourselves, our communities, and our neighborhoods; as well as ones projected onto us by others. These narratives have been formed,

refined, and reinforced over generations, through countless experiences, stories, and interactions – particularly as reported and enshrined in journalism, media, and pop culture.<sup>7</sup>

While everyone was committed to resetting false and unhelpful narratives, everyone was also clear-eyed about the overwhelming nature of combatting these, especially while working on a hyperlocal level. Everyone saw their work as helping to contribute new narratives, and simultaneously understood that it would take (at least) a generation of focused and aligned work at the city (and in some cases national) level to fully reset them.

Closely entwined with the narratives conversations was a conversation about the importance of arts and culture in excavating, un-erasing, and celebrating the history of places. Collective memory and traditional knowledge are important elements as part of any community development work.

It is also the erasure of history that can contribute to the creation of wrong narratives. Several interviewees specifically mentioned the fact that the Chicago Black Renaissance is generally far less known than the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the under-reporting of the role that Black Chicago played in financing the Civil Rights movement. Reclaiming and proclaiming these histories will, no doubt, be an important element in rewriting the narratives about the south and west sides of Chicago.

#### 4. Self-determination

Whether the actual phrase “self-determination” was used, this concept was the north star for the organizations working at the neighborhood level. The organizations were committed to providing their residents with the economic, educational, and employment opportunities within stable systems of health, housing, and safety, so that residents are fully in charge of their own destinies and able to participate, prosper, and reach their full potentials.

In these conversations, arts and culture often was talked about as being important articulation/embodiment of the aspirational and a reminder of the possible.

The interviews tested the language of “rehearsing the future we would like to see” to describe one of the roles that arts and culture plays with self-determination, collective efficacy, and world-making. While the concept resonated, that language did mostly feel imposed.

It is worth noting that this language was more natural to the arts-identified interviewees. Playing with this language might be helpful in translating the ways community development organizations describe their work with the ways that artists and arts and culture organizations may contribute to it.

It is also worth noting that the entire concept of dreaming of a possible future was seen by some to be a luxury not available to many community residents. Far too many community members are still

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<sup>7</sup> The PopCulture Collaborative has an especially useful discussion of narrative archetypes, systems, and networks in their [\*Pop Culture for Social Change Terms and Definitions\*](#) and other learning resources.

struggling fulltime to survive (and hopefully thrive), so the notion of reimagining their neighborhood, their city, their world was not an endeavor for which there would be time or space available.

This means that there is also the danger that twinning arts and culture with planning work could reinforce the notion that arts and culture is a luxury, not a fundamental part of the work. (Many would, of course, counterargue that part of the equity struggle is to ensure that many of the luxuries that are only currently available to the privileged are also available to us all.



*An additional note:*

Almost all the tactics laid out for exploration in the interview protocol fit into one of the above four categories. However, that is not true for the role of arts and culture in creating places of gathering and belonging. While questions around this were asked, there was little interviewee engagement with this topic.

This was initially somewhat surprising, as “gathering and belonging” is a topic that is arising more and more frequently in conversations with city leaders and planners around the country when discussing the roles of arts and culture organizations as community anchors.

However, given that the neighborhoods in which MacArthur is investing are largely demographically stable, it is perfectly plausible that these entire neighborhoods are a place of gathering and belonging for their community residents.

As MacArthur thinks about other neighborhoods in which to invest, as well as thinks about investing in communities that are dispersed across several neighborhoods, “gathering and belonging” is likely to become more relevant. Three publications might be helpful as context:

- PolicyLink has published a brief on the role of arts and culture in driving social cohesion, which talks about the ways that arts and culture bond neighbors with one another, while simultaneously rooting them in their neighborhood.<sup>8</sup>
- PolicyLink’s findings are completely in line with the Knight Foundation’s work with Gallup.<sup>9</sup>
- Finally, Alaka Wali studied drumming circles in Chicago parks and found that making art together (in this case, music) created a shared, master identity for the participants – an identity that transcends cultures and demographics and is durable beyond the arts experience. She posits that arts and culture are a pathway to integration that does not involve assimilation.<sup>10</sup>

There was a not unrelated subcurrent of conversation in the interviews that could be summarized as: much of community development is involved with creating places for community to do things. It is also important to create places for community members to do nothing. Sites of leisure is a distinct but related element that could roll up to the “gathering and belonging” umbrella. Specifically, Black reunions and block parties were held up as important examples of the legacies of “how we gathered when we had no other choices” that have been reclaimed and renamed.

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<sup>8</sup> *WE-Making: How Arts and Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being.*

<sup>9</sup> *Soul of the Community.*

<sup>10</sup> *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places.*

## **Implications for MacArthur's grantmaking**

There are three foundational truths that the interviews affirmed:

- Large amounts of flexible grant dollars are essential to the success of comprehensive community development work. MacArthur was given great credit for not adhering too strictly to its own programmatic requirements and working with grantees to ensure that good work was being supported even when it did not fit perfectly within existing funding guidelines.
- The imprimatur of a grant coming directly from the MacArthur Foundation was cited by many as helpful to legitimizing the work as worthy of attention and investment from others.
- The community development organizations in which MacArthur is currently investing are already working with arts and culture strategies.

MacArthur could easily decide to keep investing in projects in the ways that it does so currently through VC.

Specifically, given the importance of flexible funding in community development projects, more dollars in fewer categories would be even more helpful on the ground. MacArthur might wish to consider collapsing what are currently called "place-based initiatives" and "creative placemaking and keeping" into a single stream of funding that would simply invest in something like "neighborhood- and community-based initiatives," with an explicit understanding that arts and culture are part of what makes a community. In this frame, MacArthur could frame its investments as being in projects that develop the built environment in a neighborhood, that help build the wealth and health of the people who inhabit it, and that also consider the cultures that animate and connect them to each other.

It is interesting to know that MacArthur is naturally evolving in this way, as it considers "catalytic" projects like the Humboldt and Englewood trails. These projects more explicitly address that complete constellation of built environment, health, wealth, and culture.

In addition, MacArthur might want to consider using the money currently budgeted for "creative placemaking and keeping" investments in the following ways:

## **Creative Professionals and Producers**

Much of the work happening in arts and culture generally (and specifically in the neighborhoods in which MacArthur is investing) happens through individuals and small businesses (and not through nonprofit organizations). These are not easy for a foundation to support directly.

MacArthur might want to consider creating a regranteeing program that would invest in creative professionals and producers.

It could consider doing this within an entity that could serve individuals working in any of the neighborhoods represented in the VC portfolio or beyond.

## **Communities of identity (not geography)**

There are some communities in which MacArthur would like to invest more that are not based primarily in a single neighborhood. Asian-American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) communities were both cited as examples. MacArthur could establish a “community steward” fund to invest in organizations that serve as anchors for cultural communities that are not place-based.

## **Learning**

There is not yet a broad and shared understanding of how and why arts and culture strategies fit within in place-based community development projects. There are opportunities for MacArthur to help make visible and share the work already happening:

- MacArthur could build upon its current partnership with the Trust for Public Land to create one or more awards that celebrate the work of specific artists and/or arts and culture projects (in addition to the one current award celebrating an overall community development project).
- MacArthur could commission and create a dissemination strategy around a set of case studies that examine how arts and culture strategies are helping community development organizations achieve their missions more efficiently, more effectively, and in service to even more of the population. This would serve to both stand up Chicago organizations as national leaders, as well as serve as playbooks for organizations interested in working in these ways.
- The philanthropic interviewees were also interested in learning from the work that MacArthur is doing (as well as sharing their own work). MacArthur could consider creating a loose consortium of place-based, community development funders, who could share the work of their grantees, including best and leading practices around the integration of arts and culture.
- VC currently utilizes a system of advisors to help source potential new grantees. As the pool of advisors is recruited, some number of spots could be held for people who would look at projects explicitly through the lens of how arts and culture strategies are being deployed on the ground. These advisors already serve as “invitation extenders,” who help connect MacArthur with potential new grantees, so having explicit arts and culture spots would also encourage MacArthur to connect with more organizations who may not think their work is a fit for the VC portfolio.
- Additionally, when asked about benefits of working through intermediaries (rather than with the foundation directly), interviewees cited some of them as having more trust with and proximity to communities than is possible for a large, centrally located organization. Utilizing advisors in this way combines some of the best parts of intermediaries and direct grantmaking.

A final note on language: there was a general sense that “creative placemaking and keeping” was somewhere along the not-great to perfectly fine continuum. There was no shared sense of what language might replace that, except that philanthropy is always encouraged to say plainly what they are doing. MacArthur should, therefore, first decide on any programmatic refinements it would like to

make to the VC portfolio, and only after that, should it work to plainly articulate the changes without attempting to “jargonize” the work.

# Appendices:

## List of interviewees

Ellen	Alderman	<a href="#"><u>Rebuild Foundation</u></a>
Caitlin	Caspersen	<a href="#"><u>Builders Initiative</u></a>
Allyson	Esposito	<a href="#"><u>Builders Initiative</u></a>
Nedra Sims	Fears	<a href="#"><u>Greater Chatham Initiative</u></a>
Mae	Hong	<a href="#"><u>Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors</u></a>
Ayesha	Jaco	<a href="#"><u>West Side United</u></a>
Aviva	Kapust	<a href="#"><u>The Culture and Community Power Fund</u></a>
Bo	Kemp	<a href="#"><u>Southland Development Authority</u></a>
O. Victoria	Lakes-Battle	<a href="#"><u>IFF</u></a>
Grace Chan	McKibben	<a href="#"><u>Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community</u></a>
Tiffany	Mikkel	<a href="#"><u>South East Chicago Commission / Arts and Culture Capital Lab (former)</u></a>
Caroline	O'Boyle	<a href="#"><u>Trust for Public Land</u></a>
Marcela	Rodriguez	<a href="#"><u>Enlace Chicago</u></a>
James	Rudyk	<a href="#"><u>Northwest Center</u></a>
Kashif	Shaikh	<a href="#"><u>Pillars Fund</u></a>
Erik	Takeshita	<a href="#"><u>The Culture and Community Power Fund</u></a>
Eric	Williams	<a href="#"><u>The Silverroom</u></a>

## **Memo shared with interviewees**

As you know, the MacArthur Foundation has a set of enduring commitments, including its commitment to its hometown of Chicago.

Within this Chicago commitment, MacArthur has funded through four programmatic areas:

- Advancing Leadership
- Civic Partnerships
- Culture, Equity & Arts
- Vital Communities

MacArthur's Vital Communities portfolio builds on a long history of support for neighborhoods and focuses on three types of projects:

- Place-based initiatives, which address the unique characteristics and needs of people within a specific location. We will concentrate resources primarily on pre-development of industrial and commercial corridors and industrial clusters outside of Chicago's downtown areas. These initiatives may include comprehensive planning; land use planning and management; community outreach; or urban design that attracts commercial and industrial real estate investment.
- Creative placemaking and placekeeping projects, which use art and cultural activities to engage community members in initiating physical, cultural, and economic changes in their environments.
- Infrastructure support organizations, which conduct planning, management and technical assistance, policy research, evaluation, data analysis, or other assistance offered to groups working at the community, citywide, or regional level.

The Vital Communities portfolio is currently going through a strategy review, which is expected to largely affirm this approach, while potentially re-aligning its geographic priorities to more closely align with other work in which the Foundation is investing.

Concurrent with this review, the Vital Communities portfolio is also interested in re-thinking what has been labeled "creative placemaking."

The neighborhoods in which Vital Communities currently invests are variously described as disinvested, historically marginalized/isolated from power and resources, and segregated.

These same neighborhoods also all have an abundance of cultural and social wealth (along with various degrees of the other [8 types of community wealth](#)).

Therefore, MacArthur is interested in investigating how it could better support ways that arts and cultural strategies can be enlisted intentionally to add to the momentum of the [industrial and] commercial corridor developments it supports in its place-based initiatives.

MacArthur believes that organizations that intentionally work with artists, creative workers, culture keepers, & tradition bearers can access their knowledge, skills, and abilities and deploy them to help community development organizations achieve their missions more effectively, more efficiently, and for more of the community. The Foundation is especially eager to investigate tactics that include:

- arts-based/creative economies
- expanding the kinds of activation strategies that are used
- dreaming and rehearsing a future none of us has yet experienced
- foot traffic (organic, as well as that driven through tourism and destination marketing strategies)
- narrative change
- places of gathering and belonging
- remembering traditional knowledge
- self-determination
- social cohesion

Given that many of the Vital Communities grantees already use the above tactics organically in their work, MacArthur is exploring how they can better support these artistic, creative, and cultural strategies through expanded grantmaking in what has been called the [creative placemaking and placekeeping](#) piece of their [Vital Communities](#) portfolio.

This could mean additional grants to projects that explicitly address and leverage both place-based and cultural considerations and tactics by using culturally rooted strategies to engage community members in imagining, initiating and stewarding physical, cultural, and economic changes in their environments.

In addition to the above, MacArthur is also potentially interested in a modest exploration of projects that are rooted in specific cultural communities that are dispersed across many neighborhoods. Asian-American/Pacific Islander and Middle Eastern/North African communities, for example, are not currently well represented in the Vital Communities portfolio.

For its currently Vital Communities grantees, MacArthur is interested in better understanding:

- 1) The ways that these projects are already deploying intentional cultural strategies,
- 2) If they would deploy additional or deepened cultural strategies if additional funding were available
- 3) If they already have partnerships with arts and cultural organizations

- 4) If there is specific knowledge or expertise they would be interested in leveraging for their work
- 5) If there is interest in creating an occasional or ongoing community of interest, learning, or support.

For cultural communities not currently well represented in the Vital Communities portfolio, MacArthur is interested in identifying some of the anchor organizations for these communities and understanding the range of projects in which they engage that contribute toward the economic and equitable development of these communities. It will begin its exploration through arts and cultural organizations currently serving these communities.

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