

AWAKENING THE CREATIVE VOICE:
BUILDING CREATIVE CAPITAL IN CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Remarks by Alan Brown
Prepared for the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago
October 18, 2011

Session Description

A sea change in arts policy is underway, as evidenced by the NEA's new focus on "creative place-making" and the shift in cultural planning to a more broad based effort to situate the arts with the "creative industries." This change in focus has spawned numerous efforts to develop better logic models and measurement systems for assessing the impact of investments in culture, including a number of "creative vitality indexes" under development now. As arts funders and advocates struggle to make connections between arts programs, businesses and the civic agenda, we still suffer for lack of a clearer vision of what a creative community looks like. In his remarks, Alan Brown will offer a potential model for building "creative capital" in cities and communities across the US. Participants will be asked to consider what conditions are optimal for creativity to flourish in a community like Chicago.

Remarks

Good afternoon, and thank you so much for the kind invitation to meeting with you as part of this distinguished series.

I'd like to speak with you this afternoon about building creative capital in cities and town across the United States. You all know very well that this is a difficult and transformation time in the cultural sector. Budgets are shrinking, risk taking is on hold, and artists are finding less work. Several months ago, Rocco Landesman, the chairman on the National Endowment for the Arts, ignited a firestorm of debate by remarking that there are too many theatres in the U.S., and we ought to start thinking about shrinking the supply. The blogosphere pretty much came unglued, and there's been a vigorous debate about whether there can ever be too much art, what defines an over-supply of art, and what approaches funders might use to reduce supply and accelerate the level of dying and regeneration in the cultural ecology. If you believe that culture is an ecosystem, which it is, then you must believe that in a healthy ecosystem there is birth, growth and competition for resources, and regular dying and regeneration. For the past 30 years, we've been very good at birth and growth, and really lousy at death and regeneration.

In a funny way, supply and demand are really the same thing: when communities are provided with excellent cultural programming, people respond. Why, for example, is theatre participation in Seattle much higher than in other cities? Why is classical music participation in Boston much higher than it is in other places?

Of course, demographics play a role. But you'll find that communities with particularly high levels of cultural participation in a specific category tend to have a long history of offering an excellent supply of programs in that category. In other words, the public responds to creativity and excellence in programming.

What's most interesting about the supply and demand debate is how all pathways seem to lead to two conditions for survival: artistic vibrancy and community relevance. These are two terms I'd like you to remember: artistic vibrancy and community relevance. If arts and cultural organizations can remain artistically vibrant and relevant in their communities, then supply will align with demand and the system will remain in balance.

I imagine you all think a lot about what a balanced cultural system looks like in Chicago. This is perhaps the greatest challenge and the single most important role you can play in your community, which is to be a good diagnostician of cultural health, and to keep the ecological view in mind when you advocate for programs and make difficult budgetary decisions. Our system of culture in the U.S. is dominated by institutional thinking. The locus of power lies with the large institutions and their wealthy and influential board members and donors, and their very natural interest in self-preservation. Over the years, foundation funders and municipal arts agencies have grown hyper-responsive to the needs of nonprofit arts organizations, and, I would argue, have lost the ecological view of creativity and public value.

Whose job is it to look across the community – transcending the institutional view – and find new ways of getting thousands of people dancing, or getting a musical instrument in the hands of every child who wants one, or getting thousands – or tens of thousands – of residents reading the same book or writing a poem. To move the big needle of cultural participation, it must be someone's job to look across the system at the larger realm of creative possibilities. It is a lonely job, and I congratulate those of you who work hard to diagnose need and awaken the creative voice of every citizen, young and old, rich or poor, regardless of limitation or disadvantage.

You are stewards of your community's creative capital. And thank heavens, because in the U.S., most of our communities have no steward of creative capital, only fractious mobs of arts administrators competing for resources.

What is Creative Capital?

Maybe you've heard the terms social capital and cultural capital, and certainly you're all familiar with capital in a financial sense. But I would like to offer for your consideration a new form of capital – creative capital.

Creative capital is the capacity to express, imagine and invent. It is an ecology of new ideas. It is an asset – a measurable asset, I would argue, a sort of wealth in an economy of possibility.

The term creative capital can be applied to individuals, to families, and to communities. After all, at the core of a community's creative capital are its creative inhabitants. In Dallas, my colleague Dennie Palmer Wolf and I collaborated on a study to measure the creative capital of Dallas area school children as defined by:

- Their level of involvement in creative activities
- Evidence that they value creative activities (by electing courses, or joining a community group, etc.)
- Their continuity of engagement (or sustained involvement)
- Their access to creative tools and resources in the home
- Their level of social support, validation and a sense of accomplishment

The time has come to translate this framework to the larger arena of community life. Our sector desperately needs a more compelling outcome rubric. What is the outcome of a vibrant cultural sector? What does a creative city look like? How will we know when we've succeeded? What are we shooting at? Until we can define and embrace "the thing that makes us successful" we will never fulfill our potential.

We need an outcome framework that values both the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of art, culture and creativity. That framework cannot be solely economic, as in the "creative economy," because humans create economic value. Without creative humans, there is no economy. So, let us focus on nurturing creative humans, and the economic benefits will follow.

Therefore, creative capital is human phenomenon and a lived experience. It is a value system that encourages, rewards and integrates imaginative thinking into community life. It is an asset that increases the effectiveness of individuals, brings families closer together, and enables communities to imagine and realize a better future. The community with the most creative capital wins! Why? Because it is safe, clean, colorful, because its residents have a strong sense of connectedness and shared purpose, and because it is the place where everyone wants to live.

Now, I'd like to briefly talk through the six domains for creative capital at the community level.

The first domain is **creatively engaged youth and families**. Of course a strong system of creative learning in the schools is a critical part of this domain, but there are many other opportunities for creative engagement after-school, in the community, at places of worship, and especially in the home. Research suggests that the home is the cradle of creativity. But, who is rocking the cradle? I don't know a single arts group that concerns itself with designing arts activities for children and

their caregivers to do together at home, in place of, say, one hour of video games per day. This is, perhaps, one of the greatest shortcomings of the arts ecosystem. There is absolutely no reason why every caregiver in Chicago shouldn't have access to high quality DVDs and other tools for dancing together, singing together, telling stories and drawing and making things and building a creative portfolio on the Internet for every child. Where is the arts community in this necessary work?

What do creatively engaged youth look like? They look like the high school students in Dallas who decided that their school parking lot was not just an unattractive parking lot, but a blank palette for art. Each student was assigned a parking space, and painted it, turning the lot into a wildly vibrant mosaic of art, that loudly pronounced to the community, "We are creative!"

While youth programs are especially important to ensuring a creative future, we must not allow older adults to lapse into a void of creativity simply because they are no longer in the workforce, or because they lack mobility or social support. Studies of arts participation have shown a steep drop off in creative engagement amongst older adults, and this trend must be reversed if we are to realize the creative potential of our communities. I wish every community in Chicagoland had a choral music program for seniors and, yes, even a dance program.

The second domain of creative capital is **a creative workforce and work opportunities for creative professionals** such as writers, musicians, designers, computer programmers, animators, architects and craftsmen. I'm sure you're all familiar with the creative economy literature, so I won't repeat that here, but I would like to be clear why it is good policy to situate arts and culture within the larger ecology of creativity.

Of course, creativity fuels science, mathematics, physics, computer programming, retailing and just about every domain of human endeavor. But we must be clear that artistic expression is not just peripheral to this larger system of creativity, but at its core.

In a report on employment of professional artists published last year by Australia Council for the Arts, David Throsby accords the creative arts a core role as a generator of ideas and as a source of creative talent. His model depicts the creative industries as a series of concentric circles:

1. The inner ring is the core arts that produce original work in text, sound, image and performance.
2. The next layer is the wider cultural industries such as media and publishing
3. And the outer ring includes creative industries such as design, advertising, fashion and architecture.

Again, that's three concentric circles: Arts, Culture and Creativity.

People and ideas flow between these rings: novelists who also work as editors or journalists; actors who run corporate training workshops; craftsmen who fashion new building materials; visual artists who design websites for commercial businesses; dancers, musicians and composers who work in advertising and entertainment; and many more.

As you all know, there is a great deal of energy in the business sector now around creativity in the workforce. A recent report by the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce said “The nation’s leadership in technology and innovation depends on a ‘deep vein of creativity’ and people who can write books, build furniture, make movies, and imagine new kinds of software that will capture people’s imagination...”

Business leaders argue that without a greater capacity to think creatively, they’ll lose their competitive edge in the global marketplace. Meanwhile, arts and cultural organizations stand in front of business leaders with their hands outstretched, asking for money, and missing entirely the whole conversation about creativity. What would happen if the arts community banded together and collectively approached the business community with a simple question: “How can we help to make your workforce more creative?”

There is much work to be done in building a shared understanding of creativity: creativity in problem solving, creativity in decision-making, creativity in child rearing, creativity in local governance. We must find new and better ways of illustrating how creativity permeates every aspect of business, governance and human life, and that it starts, at its core, with artistic expression.

Whose job is it to nurture the next generation of creative professionals? Ours – all of ours. If it doesn’t start with the arts community, it will never happen.

The third domain of creative capital is **positive social norms around creativity**. Without positive social norms, creativity will be squelched by the vocal few who try to enforce dangerous, conformist, and intolerant views of culture. Like pilots who refuse to fly with Muslims on board. Or parents who freeze up when their young son announces he wants to take a dance class.

Parents and caregivers need to be educated about the importance of their child’s creative development. Forget about arts advocacy. Instead, devote those resources to educational programs and creative activities for parents of young children, and we won’t need to advocate for the arts in 20 years, because it will already be a core value.

It all starts with uncovering the unique and idiosyncratic landscape of creativity in your Chicago. Too often, cultural policy is based on a void of information about what forms of creative and cultural expression are actually meaningful to people. When is the last time you asked your community what creativity means to them? Imagine if

you started a website where everyone in the community could upload examples of their creative output. What would that look like? Think about what that sort of public input process might uncover, and how else you can build positive social norms around creativity.

Until and unless a community can see its own creativity reflected back to it, it will not see itself as a creative place, and cannot fulfill its potential. Positive social norms around creativity might result from education and advocacy efforts, but are much, much more likely to grow from an over-abundance of self-generated evidence that “we are creative, in ways that we never imagined.”

The fourth domain of creative capital is **local support for artists and arts organizations**. This includes support for artists at all levels of skill, encompassing professional artists, aspiring professionals, amateurs who work at a high level, as well as beginners who are just exploring.

Research conducted by the Field Museum found that engaging artists from amateurs to professional, and providing them with opportunities for cross-fertilization can be powerful tools for community development.

What programs and activities are available to artists and aspiring artists in Chicago? What are their creative outlets? You can map them, by discipline. What are the creative outlets for musicians? For dancers? For writers? For storytellers? For quilters? Make that map, and put it up on the wall in your office, and use it to figure out where opportunities are missing, and refer to it every time you have a decision to make.

If you don't already, start tracking enrollment figures at community music schools, university arts programs, private dance studios, crafts workshops, community centers, book clubs and even church choirs. We must get much better at keeping our fingers on the pulse of creativity at the ground level.

Where do local artists meet to exchange ideas? Coffee shops? Art fairs? Poetry slams? Gallery crawls? Film festivals? Every community needs places, both physical and virtual, for the exchange of art and ideas, and this is a key element of the system of support for artists.

Of course the amount of local financial support for nonprofit arts groups is another indicator of the health of the creative ecology, and one which is relatively simple to measure. Not just the dollar amount of support, but the breadth of support. If all the private support for the arts comes from a few wealthy families, I would not call that a healthy system. There's a lot of really successful work going on with online fundraising events in Detroit, Pittsburgh and Minneapolis, and I encourage you to consider what roles you can play in catalyzing broader support for the arts in Chicago.

The fifth domain of creative capital is **public policies that foster creativity and civic engagement**, and that attract creative people and businesses.

Cultural engagement is civic engagement. A recent study of 3,000 Philadelphia residents proved beyond a doubt that people who engage with arts, culture and creativity are the same people who vote, who volunteer, who attend religious services, and who socialize with their neighbors. Investments in creativity are investments in civic engagement.

Creative capital can be seeded and nurtured through smart public policy. These include:

- Public art set-asides
- Zoning ordinances that favor good design and deter visual clutter like unsightly billboards (Scottsdale, Arizona)
- Arts districts and streetscape improvements
- Artist support programs like The Creative Entrepreneur Project in San Jose, California
- Tax credits for artist housing like the Buffalo Artist Lofts in Buffalo, New York, or the Paducah, Kentucky artist relocation program through which, over ten years, 70 artists rehabilitated 80 vacant and dilapidated properties and constructed 20 new buildings
- Taxing authorities that support creativity, like the voter-approved Denver Scientific and Cultural Facilities tax district, which generates millions of dollars a year for Denver's cultural organizations
- Economic incentives for creative businesses
- And, of course, the integration of creativity into other city planning efforts including transportation, parks and recreation, public health and safety policies.

This is not my area of expertise. But I ask each of you to consider what can be done to advance this realm of public policy, whether through cultural planning or some other means.

The sixth and final domain of creative capital is **visible signs of creativity in the community**. Ann Markusen calls this “creative placemaking.” She says, “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.”

A community cannot regard itself as a creative place without a visible landscape of creativity. I'm not just talking here about public art, but rather the aesthetic landscape of the entire community, including the quality of architecture, landscape design, outdoor lighting, bus shelters, fire hydrants and utility poles – you name it. Our cities and towns are all blank palettes for creative expression. My favorite

example is yarn bombing... wonderfully subversive acts of civic disobedience such as knitting unauthorized parking meter cozys.

And then there are the people who impossibly over-decorate their homes for the holidays. Maybe you can commission a study on that some day. That's what happens when people don't have enough creative outlets. It comes gushing out one way or another!

Arts leaders in Syracuse, New York looked at their downtown landscape and, instead of seeing crumbling concrete walls, saw a blank palette for art. Giant video screens were installed on three buildings in downtown Syracuse, which light up every night of the year from nightfall to 11:00 p.m. with artwork and videos made by community members. Out of nothing, they created the largest urban video project in the nation.

I'm especially fascinated with the possibilities of participatory public art – community art projects that might involve hundreds, if not thousands of residents – in a collective act of creative expression. A sculpture made out of old shoes. A Christmas caroling program that touches every home in the community. The possibilities are limited only by your ability to think creatively about engaging the public. This is a perfect storm waiting to happen, in the age of flash mobs and random acts of culture.

When creativity is visible around every street corner, seen in every window, heard in every home, tasted in every kitchen – when you cannot avoid it – then, your community will understand itself as a creative place.

Let me summarize again the six domains of creative capital:

- 1. creatively engaged youth and families**
- 2. creative workforce and work opportunities for creative professionals**
- 3. positive social norms around creativity**
- 4. local support for artists and arts organizations**
- 5. public policies that foster creativity and civic engagement, and**
- 6. visible signs of creativity in the community**

All of these can be measured. It will take some work. We need to agree on indicators and design affordable measurement systems. But if we don't create our own scorekeeping system, we can never win the game, because we'll always be playing on someone else's field. The time has come for us to define success on our own terms – with our own vocabulary and our own indicators.

Closing

In closing, I'd like to challenge you once again to take the ecological view of creativity in your community. While some communities might not have much of a

formal arts infrastructure, and budgets may be small and getting smaller, you must realize that creativity is a currency in a different economy. In this economy of meaning, wealth is attainable for everyone, because every human being is intrinsically creative, although they might not know it yet.

Everyone has a stake in the creative capital of their community, especially businesses, elected officials, parents, and the education system. The arts, of course, are a major stakeholder in the creative capital of their communities, but sometimes I wonder why we don't act like it. Too many arts groups have grown complacent and comfortable producing professionally curated arts experiences by professional artists for professional audiences - and lost touch with the vast sea of creativity all around them.

In his address to the League of Resident Theatres earlier this year, consumer anthropologist Robbie Blinkoff observed that "Our most basic human need is to create and be playful."

Every human being has a creative voice of intrinsic worth. And it is every community's obligation to awaken that voice.

Thank you.