LEARNING SERIES

ARTS AS A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

for Planning of The Village at Market Creek
When the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation (JCNI) began working with the neighborhoods of southeastern San Diego in 1997, our staff began knocking on doors to build relationships and connections with residents to deepen our understanding of how to learn and work within the community. Together, we explored how to build upon the community’s many existing assets and address needs around jobs creation, safety, and chronic underinvestment.

Early in our work, we began hosting quarterly open house events and “Ethnic Night” celebrations organized by residents. These activities featured cultural learning and sharing, and they brought light to groups that were previously “invisible” to each other within their neighborhood – sometimes even on their own block. While our initial outreach and organizing strategy wasn’t developed with an arts and culture component in mind, it soon became clear that we were most successful at engaging community members and building stronger, more diverse, and more cohesive resident teams when we led with learning opportunities and dialogue around the community’s many cultures. These experiences thus shaped how arts and culture became a key component of our civic engagement strategy for connecting with residents and other community stakeholders as we identify, develop, and move JCNI’s work forward.
GOALS

During those early years, key arts and culture-related goals for The Village began to emerge as we reflected on what we learned in our many conversations with residents:

◆ **Build upon and strengthen connections in the community to elevate its unique mix of arts and culture traditions within the region.** Southeastern San Diego is home to a wealth of established arts traditions and new forms, educators and students, practitioners and appreciators. We look for opportunities to deepen existing relationships with and between the residents, organizations, and networks we work with, and to build connections with others who wish to share their own arts and culture traditions with the community and beyond.

◆ **Support the development of arts and culture as an everyday experience in the community.** Resident teams envisioned the community as a place where people could regularly interact with the arts, which would encourage wonder and exploration, enhance beauty and neighborhood pride, and help cultivate fresh perceptions that could counter pervasive negative views of the area. We seek a variety of partners and funding sources to support the implementation of an arts district plan – infused with the cultures and values of the community – that residents, urban planners, designers, and JCNI developed for The Village.

◆ **Foster the arts as an economic engine in the community.** The Village has tremendous potential to bloom into a vibrant public art, design, and performance destination for residents and tourists, bringing both foot traffic and dollars to the area. We aim to identify natural intersections where we can best support the birth of a flourishing local economy for businesses, artists, and performers alike.

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS

With these goals in mind, our civic engagement efforts came to incorporate a strong arts and culture-based strategic component that has taken many related and overlapping paths over the years.

Each of the pathways includes excerpts from residents who were interviewed by writer Joanne Edgar.

1. We intentionally bring diverse groups of people together to learn from each other.

2. We work through existing cultural norms and hierarchy to reach out to the community’s cultural groups.

3. We promote traditional cultures.

4. We recognize that cultures are not static, so we promote their contemporary iterations as well as other, non-ethnic cultures.

5. We develop and support art and culture activities that serve as focal points of ideas, exchange, and learning.

6. We do much of the work ourselves and we fund other organizations that lead such efforts in The Village.
We intentionally bring DIVERSE GROUPS of people together to learn from each other

As we began engaging with residents in the community, we were introduced to the breadth and depth of the cultural histories and traditions of the neighborhoods surrounding what would become The Village at Market Creek. Rather than immediately engaging residents around a specific issue, we started by taking the time to build relationships and get to know each other. Once a spirit of sharing, learning, and trust was established, we believed we could then successfully begin to delve into a project together.

ACHIEVEMENT

A built environment for The Village that is informed by the community’s diverse arts and cultures

Early on, community members expressed the desire to make arts and culture central to the everyday experience of residents and visitors to the neighborhood. One of the first ways we sought to implement this idea was by bringing together residents and the Market Creek Plaza architects to consider the design of the plaza. Their work resulted in an award-winning design whose bright palette and distinct, culturally-influenced forms have become a hallmark for The Village and the surrounding neighborhoods.

In 2012, residents and other community stakeholders came together for a nearly year-long charrette process to compose design guidelines for future Village development. These guidelines— which address color, shape, materials and texture, nature and the environment, culture, and public art—extend the values and considerations expressed in our earlier art and design teams, while incorporating many new voices and perspectives, for architects and designers to refer to as development continues.

Macedonio Arteaga

JCNI purposefully brought together leaders from nearly a dozen different cultural groups to help design the shopping center and develop plans for a wider sustainable community that will include an affordable housing complex. Macedonio points out that he had never been in meetings with so many diverse groups working on the same tasks, an experience shared by the other leaders as well. Each group brought artifacts representing their own heritage and presented them to the group. “We were being asked, ‘How do you want to see your neighborhood?’” explains Macedonio. “And you right away start thinking culture and art.”

Macedonio has been part of JCNI’s community planning network for a decade or more, meeting regularly with other ethnic groups on development issues, some as specific as the width of the sidewalks on the grounds of the planned housing complex. The entry point, the opportunity to build trust and friendship, was always art.
Early in our community engagement efforts, we learned the importance of understanding and respecting the social organization and leadership structures, both formal and informal, of The Village’s many cultures. Once we began meeting with residents who helped us gain a better understanding of how their respective communities were organized, we were in a better position to more successfully connect with individuals and the larger community as a whole.

LEFAUA LEILUA

JCNI’s philosophy of community engagement is based on respectful communication by reaching out to the diverse cultures in southeastern San Diego through the leaders of each ethnic group. JCNI recognizes the importance of beginning with those who already have status in their own community and then building their organizing skills as they learn to reach out to others. Lefaua’s husband is a talking chief, a position of high status and respect in the Samoan community. Lefaua thus had the recognition and credibility in her own community to engage them in neighborhood issues.

Lefaua joined the Neighborhood Unity Foundation board and got to know community leaders from other cultures. She joined a JCNI team of community coordinators, helping to organize around issues such as street safety and education. “Jacobs really taught the residents how to stand up and fight for what each community deserves,” she explains, talking about JCNI’s organizing methodology that includes each culture identifying the issues they care about the most.
The neighborhoods in and around The Village at Market Creek are home to nearly 87,000 residents whose cultural and ethnic origins span the globe. Whether through cultural festivals, workshops, or other activities, we have sought to highlight the sharing of cultural histories, languages, and visual and performing arts traditions with the community and beyond.

JANICE WALLER BOUFFIOU

The Chamorro community began its cultural festivals with JCNI in 2009. Now sponsored by the nonprofit group CHE’LU Inc., these festivals draw more than 5,000 people. CHE’LU’s mission is to revive and preserve the Chamorro culture through education. There are stories, music, and special Chamorro food, which is now on the catering menu at Celebration Hall in the Joe & Vi Jacobs Center.

The Chamorro community is also reviving the sakman canoe, a long-distance outrigger that was once the fastest sailing boat in the world. In the seventeenth century, hundreds of these flying boats sailed between the Mariana Islands. They were all destroyed by Spanish colonists, along with the knowledge of how to build them. A detailed drawing from 1742 survived, however, and this became the blueprint for a new sakman under construction today, using redwood logs from Mendocino County in California. Janice and other Chamorro leaders have a vision of the sakman sailing the seas once again, this time from California to Guam in a grand celebration of their culture and history. As Janice explains, the sakman is an educational tool for the next generation as well as the elders. “It will inspire our youth to learn to build and tell the story of the sakman.” She adds, “It’s really up to us to educate the next generation to keep it going. Otherwise, it will just be lost.”
We promote their CONTEMPORARY iterations as well as other non-ethnic cultures

Cultures are neither static, nor are they based solely on ethnicity. We seek to encourage and support opportunities to draw attention to the work of local groups and organizations that are building upon and exploring, through art, performance, and dialogue, the shifts taking place within their cultures and the contemporary issues they are facing. We also look to support other emerging cultures and their arts in the neighborhood.

SERGIO GONZALEZ
The goal of Writerz Blok is to change the perception of graffiti art: to show that with education and understanding of different techniques, graffiti will be understood as a new wave of art. As Sergio points out, graffiti art is the hallmark of the hip hop culture, which he believes is a multi-ethnic culture of its own. Hip hop events at Writerz Blok – with a DJ, a master of ceremonies, breakdance, and, of course, graffiti art – are hugely popular among San Diego youth, attended by hundreds.

“The graffiti is the visual that embraces and brings out what people are doing at hip hop events,” says Sergio. “Every time we do a mural, we like to show different elements of culture and lifestyles and communities. It’s always positive, showcasing who we are, how we grew up, and how we were inspired by the generations that started graffiti and breakdancing and the hip hop movement.” Graffiti art holds the hip hop culture together.
We develop and support activities that serve as focal points of IDEAS, EXCHANGE, and LEARNING

While much of the arts and culture-based engagement we have led or supported over the years has had a specific project in mind – a festival series, for instance, or an after school language program for youth and adults – we have also sought to provide space and facilitation for unique learning networks of residents and other stakeholders who care about the community.

ANAMARIA L. CABATO

Anamaria served on the Center for Community and Cultural Arts (CCCA) guide team that developed the Rites of Passage exhibition, a powerful learning experience for her. She remembers some difficult conversations between community members, JCNI staff, and museum personnel early on in the planning period. But when people started to share their own rites of passage, she says, “the walls started coming down. In sharing our cultural differences, we saw a lot of commonality. Light bulbs went on. We are not only different; we are the same. We want the same things for our families, our communities, and for the world, really. We want to connect.”

Developing the exhibition took two years and a lot of patience. A museum-quality exhibition was the goal and making choices about what to include was not always easy; ten wedding dresses were submitted, for example. A professional curator joined the team to guide the process. Originally, they thought each culture would have its own separate corner in the exhibition, but when the discussions yielded more commonality than differences, they decided to organize the exhibition around key stages of life from birth to death, with multiple cultures contributing pieces to each stage.

ACHIEVEMENT

The birth of a unique arts and culture learning partnership

JCNI is a founding member and early facilitator of the Center for Community & Cultural Arts (CCCA), a partnership of residents, artists, and cultural groups in southeastern San Diego and several Balboa Park arts and culture institutions.

The partnership sought to create space for dialogue between communities and institutions that often didn’t communicate or relate well to each other. Together, its participants have explored what the relationships and opportunities between underserved and underrepresented communities, museums, and the arts could be. Their efforts have been heralded by the traditional museum and arts funder communities as an emerging model for engagement and understanding.
Since 1999, we have administered a series of small-grant funds that has supported a number of organizations and community groups that organizing arts and culture-focused community engagement efforts in The Village. We also continue to directly lead other resident engagement opportunities such as our public art program and design guidelines planning, which are tied very closely to our physical development efforts in The Village.

RAHMO ABDI & ABDISALAM FARAH

The Somali community built connections to JCNI when they applied for a Spirit of the Diamond grant to help celebrate Somali Independence Day. This was the beginning of an ongoing collaboration and an annual Somali cultural festival that continues to this day. The early events were held in small halls and attracted several hundred people, mainly Somalis. Once Market Creek Plaza was completed with its outdoor amphitheater and open space for large-scale events, attendance blossomed. Now thousands of Somalis come to celebrate, and families and children from other cultures join them.

The Somali community shows up with pride at their annual festival. “You feel it when you see so many people from your community sitting in one place,” says Abdisalam. “You cannot shortchange that. And the kids feel it too when they hold that flag and run around with it and start singing the national anthem.” Rahmo adds: “No matter what tribe you are back home, here you are Somali on that day and you have come to celebrate your culture.”

The Village public art program was launched

In addition to looking at the forms of the buildings in The Village, residents on our early Art and Design Team were interested in how public art could transform the community by increasing economic activity for local businesses and countering negative perceptions of the area. In 2003, we installed the first public art project at Market Creek Plaza, which honored local residents for their efforts to strengthen the community. Seven additional public art commissions – including murals, tile walkways, and sculptures – have since been completed.

We have also developed relationships with local, regional, and national artists, partnered with the city’s arts commission (jointly securing a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant in 2011), and received support from a variety of funders for our initial public art projects. In 2012, community residents and stakeholders developed a public art plan for The Village that identified and prioritized potential project themes, forms, and locations. We are now seeking funders and partners to help the community realize this plan.
ARTS AS A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

OUR LEARNINGS

It is a slow process
This strategy is all about relationship building. It takes time to make connections, develop understanding, and identify mutual goals and values. Our experience has been that patience and a willingness to look for the less-obvious opportunities to connect and build trust through arts and culture can make the difference in a resident wishing to learn more and choosing to stay involved in the work.

It has provided easy entry points for community members to connect with the work
The arts and culture focus of our civic engagement efforts has provided a number of low-key ways that community members can begin getting involved in The Village, whether it is stopping by a cultural festival at Market Creek Plaza or bringing their child to an arts workshop offered by one of our museum partners. We recognize that not everyone who does so has or will become more deeply involved in our work. Yet it continues to open doors of opportunity to meet and get to know each other, which can lead to any number of possibilities for residents and JCNI alike.

It has broadened our outreach in the community
Event attendees and participants in meetings which have led with an arts and culture engagement component continue to share what they did and learned throughout the community, becoming informal ambassadors for the work in the process. While it does not necessarily deepen our outreach into specific parts of the community – such efforts require additional, sustained, specific work – it has supported our ability to reach more widely to new audiences in the community and further afield.

It is critical to connect with both the formal and informal leadership in the community
Leadership can take multiple forms in a community, and it is just as important to connect with a community's less visible, less formal, or perhaps even less obvious leaders as it is to do so with its more formal structures. Doing so ensures that we are building relationships with a wide range of voices within a particular neighborhood or culture who can provide additional, valuable perspectives to the work.

It has helped forge new and interesting partnerships and led to unexpected opportunities
Arts and culture offer natural intersections with many community needs, such as housing, safe spaces for youth, deterrence programs, physical and mental health support systems, or cross-generational relationship strengthening. By keeping our eyes and ears open, we are better able to identify these unique opportunities as they arise and help connect people, organizations, and networks across their mutual interests.

It is a starting point, not the end
Connecting and starting relationships with residents is just the beginning. Nurturing these relationships and helping interested community members identify the points where they are a great fit for more long-term or deeper participation in The Village and shaping the community's future is what we aim for.
NEXT STEPS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Our art and civic engagement strategy has led to several key successes over the last fifteen years that have brought us closer to successfully building upon local networks, supporting arts as an everyday experience, and nurturing the arts as an economic engine for the community. Yet there is still much work to be done, including the critical components of:

- Completing our development plans for additional retail, mixed-income housing, and light industrial space, which are necessary for supporting existing and potential arts and culture venues and activities in the community.
- Thoughtfully integrating business and arts venues and activities to promote mutual patronage and success.
- Working closely with our networks to continually identify places of natural intersection to support arts and culture in The Village.
- Identifying and connecting with additional partners – including community groups, developers, businesses, nonprofits, and funders – to support, pilot, and/or establish visual and performing arts events, public works, and opportunities for diverse audiences in the community.

As civic engagement resides at the core of our work, arts and culture engagement has come to inform, in both large and small ways, the strategies we have employed in our physical development and ownership work throughout The Village. We believe that it will continue to shape and enliven the built environment as The Village's development and arts district plans progress, and it will ultimately contribute to the growth of the strong arts and culture-based economic engine that residents have envisioned for the community.