

BEYOND THE BUILDING: PERFORMING ARTS AND TRANSFORMING PLACE

Question 6: Addressing Equity: How can performing arts organizations address issues of social and cultural inequalities and equitable access within their communities using placemaking strategies?

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While it was acknowledged that art making and creative programming can be a platform for addressing address issues of social and cultural inequalities and equitable access, it was recognized that performing arts organizations need to be careful and committed to this work in a holistic way.

MARIO GARCIA DURHAM: Arts organizations are typically not apart from the social and cultural problems that communities face. ... The art fields themselves have these same challenging issues of privilege, inequity, diversity, patriarchal organizational models, and assumptions about what constitutes art and culture.

Organizations that are committed to their core to community transformation must be prepared and not take this work on lightly or based on the enthusiasm of just a few. The commitment must be sincere, well thought out, built on deep knowledge about the community and knowledge of best practices from the field.

SARAH WILKE: Arts organizations have to walk their talk and not just operate from the belief that we are all well intentioned and that art is inherently progressive and relevant. That means raising our competency on issues of social and cultural inequality and the language that goes along with it.

MK WEGMAN: It is essential that placemaking activities not gentrify a community out of its own neighborhood; rather that placemaking serves to build on existing community assets, not replace them, respecting and understanding the community context and being responsive to community desires, and that community/neighborhood residents, including artists, have an equal voice in decision making.

CARLTON TURNER: First we must recognize that if this work is to be truly transformational, we have to acknowledge the historic under-resourcing of grassroots organizations. Change is made from the bottom up, not the top down and in order to create meaningful and lasting change there has to be an investment made in these organizations that have the knowledge to uplift authentic voice, but lack the financial resources and organizational capacity to take the work to scale. Additionally, we need to look above economic indicators as the driving force of these projects. What are the health, education, and happiness indicators?

COLLEEN JENNINGS-ROGGENSACK: Performing arts organizations like ASU Gammage have consistently held focus groups and invited community advisors and consultants from the communities it serves. Performing arts organizations can through regular meetings, town hall discussions and designated gatherings raise these issues with an action-oriented agenda.

Some made the point that the creative work is what performing arts organizations bring to the table and it is how they work with the community to make that asset relevant that counts.

MARK SCORCA: The creative product must be the primary vehicle for addressing issues of social and cultural inequalities and equitable access. Deciding what is produced, how it is produced, where it is produced and the partnerships through which it is produced is of paramount importance.

SANDIE ARNOLD: We see the role of the arts center (including performing arts organizations) as that of a convener, partnering across sectors and grounding placemaking efforts in the arts as a way to foster dialogue, interaction, inspiration and connection around pressing questions for our city, in accessible and inclusive ways.

SANDRA BERNHARD: HGO's core values are excellence, relevance, and accessibility. HGO starts with the fact that every culture has a storytelling with words and music tradition. HGO has storytelling with words and music as their craft. We work on engaging through our craft along with the legends and legacies that make Houston strong in their diversity as well as storytelling.

Several respondents noted the practices and values they have incorporated into their work.

MICHAEL ROHD: Before we even get to the output, the art making, the placemaking at the heart of whatever the project is, we think of the creation and development of partnership, and the practice of partnership, as the most important bridge between intention and outcome in regard to equity and social justice. Who sets the table? Where is the table? Who is empowered to bring what to the table, by whom, and how do we monitor/stay aware of power and privilege at the beginning of planning?

ASHLEY SPARKS: Be at the table and bring/invite diverse people to the table; be rigorous in our ethics of whom we make visible and when, and transparent in our intentions/actions

Tactics cited for increasing accessibility, such as locating programs in neighborhood settings, offering free and reduced costs program, and providing transportation, are increasingly being devised in the context of community collaborations and partnerships and through community research.

NOAH SPIEGEL: This is a huge topic at Nashville Opera right now. We are currently working on multiple initiatives to investigate and invest in research, training and outreach/engagement for diverse communities within our city and region.

HOWARD HERRING: New World Symphony's WALLCAST™ Concerts "deliver excellent musical performances at the highest level of sight and sound for free. Access to excellence is no longer an issue. However, attracting people in the community who might traditionally feel unwelcome is a larger challenge.

CLAUDIA ALICK: Free programming. Programming that is in accessible spaces; presenting work from different cultures and aesthetics; connecting to other organizations doing the work that the art is promoting; identifying the issues important to your community and do work in resonance with those issues.