

# Art-Powered Places: “The Power of We”

BY LISA JO EPSTEIN

In the summer of 2016, I got a call from the folks at PACDC about an opportunity to vision a project involving the work we explore at JustAct as a pathway toward helping community organizers and engagement entities find new allies and more resources to do their important work at the grassroots level using creative placemaking. Armed with a small grant from the National Endowment for the Arts via the National Alliance of Community and Economic Development Associations, and a small cohort of diverse but dedicated community groups, the Art-Powered Places pilot was born.

Over the course of 2017 and into 2018, JustAct worked with five Neighborhood Advisory Committees (NACs) through a hands-on, arts-based curriculum exploring critical issues facing the neighborhoods they serve and possible creative paths to addressing those issues.

NACs serve as a key community engagement strategy for the City of Philadelphia, connecting residents living in lower-income neighborhoods with city and federal resources such as food access, energy assistance, foreclosure mitigation, and more. Participating in our pilot were NAC programs from organizations of all sizes and experiences: Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Brewerytown/Sharswood CDC, HACE, Mt. Vernon Manor CDC, and Southwest CDC.

Despite their diversity, they share one common theme: the neighborhoods they served are not where we typically see placemaking occurring—there are few coffee shops and no dog parks. People who live and work in these communities face difficult struggles, but also possess a deep wealth of creative resources that they may or may not share with the community at large.

Mark Harrell leading a session at Southwest CDC.



The question we kept asking ourselves is what can we do to help uncover what we know is happening and how can we nurture that to be a powerful force to help NACs better serve the community?

JustAct had a successful track record of implementing this kind of work in other communities—Chester, PA and the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia to name two—but this approach was new for most CDCs in Philadelphia and we had limited time to undertake our work. Helping us in the process was Mary Beth Semerod, an evaluation specialist, who helped us think about the theory of our work and how to capture that for a wider audience. Here is what we did:

- Compiled Census data to better understand the complexities of each NAC target neighborhood;
- Conducted four workshops at each NAC site that included: 1) identifying neighborhood assets (cultural, physical, and faith-based) and needs; 2) identifying barriers to addressing need; 3) brainstorming for creative pathways to using assets to break down barriers and 4) merging earlier sessions into a portable means for action;
- Nurtured meaningful networks between NAC staff and a range of volunteers to carry out this work

This work allowed each community action group to develop their own, unique understanding of their neighborhood’s needs, and then begin to plan possible future projects of their own imagination to transform where they live into places of equity and wholeness. This was paramount in order to ensure equity in development and community improvement. As one participant from the Brewerytown/Sharswood CDC astutely summarized, “Knowledge lies within the community. It starts here as we start developing ourselves.”

While the NAC Coordinators and volunteers extended invitations to local artists—mostly new to civic planning—everyone was considered a creator fully capable of mobilizing their imagination on behalf of the neighborhood. Mark Harrell, NAC Coordinator for Southwest CDC, remarked on the valuable organizing element when he explained that the methods led them to, “Listen to each other both with your ears and your heart.” Upon completion of the final session at HACE, Charito Morales asserted that, “People need to feel empowered to make changes and feel like they have a voice. In the past, people had courage, but not the tools to make change. Now I feel this group has both.”

Countering patterns of systematic social isolation and quick material fixes to “show” growth, residents found individual and collective power in opening up to one another thereby strengthening communication, knowledge and understanding. In particular, the process revealed to participants how and why their imagination mattered to neighborhood change. Stasia

**“Imagination is a critical element in addressing inequity.”**

— JEREMY LIU



Art Powered Places community meeting at HACE.

Monteiro, NAC Program Director for HACE, said Art-Powered Places, “Allowed softness in a world where it’s hard to be vulnerable. The space we created in this process allowed people to reveal their earnest observations of the neighborhood and its people, and has given us more deeply relevant knowledge of the challenges we face as we work to grow wellness in our communities.”

Meetings transformed into self-revealing, visioning opportunities for residents to see what Joyce Satterthwaite of Brewerytown/Sharswood CDC identified as “the power of we.”

This theme consistently resurfaced at other Art-Powered Places sites and reflected a shift in thinking about residents’ roles in the neighborhood

in relationship to the NAC’s goals. Aisha Glen, from Southwest CDC, noted how valuable, “Changing the approach to community organizing and planning contributed to changing their group’s mindset.” They were transformed from individuals attending community meetings. They became a dynamic collective working in relation to each other with renewed purpose, energy and ownership as Mark Harrell of Southwest CDC put it, “We started to think about who and what we could become. It was emotional.”

*Lisa Jo Epstein, Ph.D. is the founding Artistic Director of JustAct.*