

Art and Community Development - New Orleans Style

by Erik Takeshita



There is no other place in the world like New Orleans. Surrounded by the bayou, New Orleans is an incredibly remote piece of land. It has served as a port city for centuries, constantly evolving, embracing newcomers, and overcoming challenges. Art and culture in New Orleans are part of the fabric of the community; it is virtually impossible to talk about New Orleans without talking about the role of art and culture in the community.



Michaela Harrison honors the elders and spirits in Congo Square, epicenter of New Orleans cultural traditions. Photo: Michael Premo

It is only appropriate, then, that [Network of Ensemble Theaters \(NET\)](#) decided to host one of its four [MicroFests](#) in New Orleans in January 2013. For MicroFest: New Orleans, NET and its partners curated an incredible 52-hour event with an amazing array of arts experiences that showed the power of art to impact community. NET held similar MicroFests in Detroit and Appalachia in August and October 2012, and in Honolulu in June 2013.

Honolulu or Appalachia, art requires four characteristics to have a positive, sustainable impact on community:

Regardless of whether it is in New Orleans or Detroit,

- **Residents and communities are the *agents* of change, not the *target* of change.** The work that has the most impact on a community is work that is created by the community and is of the community. Arts and culture can be a powerful tool to help empower and activate people to effectuate change in their lives and communities.
- **Art is at the center.** Art can help people identify and unlock their own power. Art is something everyone and every culture has at its disposal regardless of age, income, language, race, religion, or class. Trained and dedicated artists can play a critical role in supporting residents and communities to be the agents of change in their own lives.

- **Place matters.** Embedded in the work are the places it is from. Not merely the physical locale, but also the spiritual, emotional, and psychological sense of a place. The history, the present reality, and the future aspirations of a place are reflected in the work.
- **Art works across sectors and is collaborative.** An ensemble working across sectors over a period of time creates the work. This ensemble practice of collaboration, while messy at times, parallels the need in our society for hard conversations and innovative solutions to the most intractable challenges we face.

MicroFest: New Orleans revealed different examples of how art and culture are transforming communities. It also created a valuable forum for deeper exploration into the impact of art on community, on both the positive results and the unintended consequences that may occur. The art itself was a valuable tool in helping to frame and mediate some very difficult conversations by participants.

THE MUSIC PLAYS ON: WORKING FOR LASTING EFFECT



The Music Box. Photo: [New Orleans Airlift website](#)

Salvaged materials were recycled into “sound houses” that made sounds unlike anything ever heard before. When played by skillful musicians led by a talented conductor (who traded in his baton for a fan with a smiley face), they created incredibly beautiful music of the highest artistic quality. Concerts drew people from near and far, with people lining up around the block to get a seat on the ground, to stand, or to merely stand outside of the fence and listen. A micro-economy emerged with folks selling water and food to those waiting in line. At other times, neighbors and children were welcome to come in and play the instruments. The faces of children from the neighborhood glowed with delight and wonder. The work was inspirational and is a testament to how beautiful things emerge from unexpected materials and places.

The music created by many local and international artists at the [Music Box](#) was truly amazing. The creativity to use recycled materials and compose beautiful music with these one-of-a-kind instruments is inspirational. The value in providing delight and joy to people in the neighborhood is extraordinary. The impact of having people visit a neighborhood they may not otherwise have given a second look, to have a wonderful experience, and to leave some money in a newly sprouted micro-economy cannot be underestimated.

The Music Box, a project of [New Orleans Airlift](#), a multi-disciplinary arts organization that creates innovative artistic opportunities for New Orleans-based artists locally and around the globe, clearly presented a fabulous opportunity for community residents to explore, learn, create music, and make money. But, it was also temporal. The Music Box has been dismantled and with it the opportunity for children to find delight and inspiration and for new visitors to come to the neighborhood. The artists of New Orleans Airlift are, however, building on their experience and success with the Music Box to establish a new, permanent, interactive musical house called [Dithyrambalina](#) in the Lower 9th Ward.

With their new, permanent home, they are seeking to recreate the positive effect on a more long-term basis. They are thinking differently about their relationship to and role in the community. Rather than just being a group of artists executing a temporary installation in a neighborhood, they are exploring how they can become a part of the community. They recently went to the local neighborhood association, shared their plans with residents, and engaged in a wonderful conversation about people's positive experiences with music. Dithyrambalina, as a permanent structure in the neighborhood, has an opportunity to create meaningful, long-term impact in the community that the Music Box, as a temporary installation, never could.

WHOSE NEIGHBORHOOD IS IT? YOURS, MINE, OR OURS?



Despite the playful banter and polite laughing, the tension was palpable. In this culturally and historically-rich, but racially-stratified city, a MicroFest panel of three white men, two African-American women, and a white woman moderator were introduced by another white man to talk about art and community development. The discussion started off with the moderator, a relatively new arrival who teaches at the University of New Orleans, telling the audience we are in the Bywater, sometimes also known as St. Claude.

MicroFest participants enter the Antenna Gallery in the St. Claude neighborhood, location for the Art and Community Development panel. Photo: Michael Premo

The first male panelist, a transplant from Brooklyn, talked about St. Claude being a “pretty rough area.” The second, a returnee to New Orleans but new to the neighborhood, noted that before the storm he never traveled to this neighborhood; it was a scary place. The third, a developer, spoke of how he owned a building in the neighborhood but had chosen to leave it vacant for 18 years waiting for the neighborhood to “ripen,” all the while doing a “pitiful” job with security.

The first woman on the panel was a native New Orleanian who helped create the St. Claude Main Street program and who currently runs a local community development corporation. The other is a native Mississippian who has worked in the 7th Ward for years and is currently the executive director of one of the nation’s pre-eminent African-American community-based theater companies. Both women were unequivocal: This is the 9th Ward. This is where families have lived for generations. Babies were born here, children educated, couples married, lives celebrated. The 9th Ward is neither a “blank slate” nor an “empty canvas.” It is a thriving neighborhood with a rich culture and history.

It is like a tale of two cities, but in this case, it is two tales of one neighborhood. For some the story starts after the catastrophe known as Katrina; for others, the story spans centuries and generations. Both are true. Both have joys; both have challenges.

For their part, the work being done by the people on the panel is admirable and clearly demonstrates the power of art and culture in community. The former Brooklynite has a studio and art gallery that bring in new visitors and vitality to an otherwise low-trafficked area. The returnee has opened a café, is striving to pay living wages to people from the neighborhood, and engages artists (such as having them redecorate the bathrooms on a regular basis) as a draw for business. The developer renovated what was once one of the largest rice mills in the South into high-end housing. He turned the graffiti in the once poorly secured building into a selling point to help the “creative class,” clearly an example of how arts can be used to spur on community development.

One of the women on the panel recalls how the community identified arts and culture as one of the assets they had and could build on to help bring investment back to their community. She shared how artists have been coming to the 9th Ward for decades, and post-Katrina the rate of influx has increased significantly. She wasn’t apologizing for the strategy of encouraging artists to come to the neighborhood, for having arts and culture as a draw for people to visit, or for the renewed interest or investment in the 9th Ward. Yet a sense of fear of the unintended consequences of this influx of new arrivals to the 9th Ward could be heard in her voice, seen on her face.

Neighborhoods are constantly changing; they are never static. The real question isn’t whether a neighborhood will change or not but rather *when* will it change, *how* will it change, *who* will influence the changes in a neighborhood, *who* benefits, and *who* is impacted negatively. In New Orleans and across the United States it is difficult to answer these questions without taking into consideration the social construct of race. While

unfortunate, it is still true that people have different experiences based on the color of their skin. At some point in the community development panel a white person talked about squatting on a property abandoned after the storm; one of the African-American women noted that as a black woman, she couldn't do that; she is very careful to "stay within the lines." The issues of race and how they play out in the revitalization of communities are real and deep.

The community development panel at MicroFest: New Orleans provided an entry point for these conversations—about the role of race in community development, the unintended consequences of reinvestment in neighborhoods, the tension between wanting reinvestment, yet also not wanting to change a place beyond recognition, and the edge that exists between differing narratives of a community. Art can not only help bring new people, new energy, and new investment to communities, but it can also be powerful tool in helping to frame and mediate some of these hard conversations about the role of art in community development.

RECOGNIZE AND STRENGTHEN WHAT YOU'VE GOT



Fourth Arts Block-NYC's Load-Out, a semi-annual event that makes theater and other artist members' unwanted sets, costumes, props, and office equipment available for free to other artists. Photo: Whitney Browne

For 50 years the [Fourth Arts Block](#) in New York City has been working to establish itself as a multicultural, multidisciplinary cultural district. Once slated to be torn down as part of urban renewal, arts and community folks organized, mobilized, and said "No!" They worked with residents and small businesses, with arts organizations and politicians. Over time, what evolved is something called a "naturally occurring cultural district."

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, there are naturally occurring cultural districts elsewhere in New York, New Orleans, and throughout the country. In New York, Caron Atlas, Tamara Greenfield, and others have

organized a peer group to build trust, learn from each other, build a common agenda, and influence policies of the city.

There has been a lot of buzz about creative placemaking lately. While the increased attention on the role art and culture in building stronger communities is great, one of the challenges with these conversations is that they seem to suggest that *places* need to be *made* and that they didn't exist before. This, of course, is false. There are vibrant places

everywhere. Some may need additional support or investment, but they are places with rich histories, cultures, and people who call it *home*.

ArtPlace, a collaboration of foundations, banks, and several Federal agencies, convened a Creative PlaceMaking Summit a week or so after MicroFest: New Orleans. One of the participants noted, “We should never apologize for progress.” This is clearly true. Disenfranchised neighborhoods certainly need and want new people and investment (otherwise they wouldn’t be distressed). The real challenge is how *progress* gets defined and by whom. Equitable and sustainable progress, such as that in naturally occurring cultural districts, would both attract new investment and ensure that people there now could afford to remain and recognize it as their own.

To achieve this, both existing residents and businesses and new arrivals and investors must do their part. Existing residents and business need to ensure they “own the dirt.” One of the best ways to ensure not being priced out of a market is by owning the property (either residential or commercial). If businesses and individuals don’t have the means to do so outright, there are a number of models that can help ensure permanent affordability of both housing and commercial real estate such as co-ops, land trusts, and other community ownership models.

In addition to ownership, it is also important to prepare businesses for changes that may occur. For example, if there is new investment in a community, property values may go up, raising other costs such as property taxes. It is important to prepare businesses for these changes by making them as strong as possible and positioning them to take advantage of changes in the market. Having more people and more money in neighborhoods is a good thing, but only if a business can capitalize on it.

As for new arrivals and investors, they need to recognize and appreciate that they are entering an existing community with a long history, not a place of empty slates or blank canvasses. They should take the time and make the effort to understand the history, people, and place where they are now from. Every place has its own unique qualities, distinctive personality, and values—that is, culture. According to Carol Bebel from Ashé Cultural Arts Center, “In New Orleans, art may be the favorite daughter, but culture is the big momma.”

In New Orleans there seems to be a standing invitation to new arrivals and visitors to understand the city—what it is to be a New Orleanian. Native New Orleanians and transplants alike exude a sense of southern hospitality that helps make New Orleans permeable. If people allow themselves to let New Orleans “get under their skin,” they become a part of the place. This process of indoctrinating new arrivals into what it means to be New Orleanian is a centuries-old practice. New Orleans has been an important port city for more than 300 years. Just as the land it sits upon was built up over thousands of years by sediment deposited by the Mississippi River, the culture of New Orleans has developed through the contributions of Native Americans and new arrivals from Spain, Africa, France, England, and yes, even Brooklyn.

Key to the on-going success and vibrancy of New Orleans, these new arrivals did not try to recreate Spain, Africa, France, England, or Brooklyn in southern Louisiana, but rather recognized and honored the indigenous assets of New Orleans. They made the effort and took the time to understand the people, the language, the history, the food, the customs, and the cultures and to find ways to add to it, not supplant it. It is like seasoning a giant pot of gumbo or jambalaya—each new arrival adds his or her own unique flavor but doesn't overwhelm or compromise the overall dish.

CULTURAL TRADITION: SOURCE OF STRENGTH, PRIDE, & DISCOVERY

Her former-schoolteacher voice grows more powerful as she weaves her tale and dons a bangle, an apron, a blouse, a headdress. Each of the intricate, hand-beaded green, white, yellow, and black items is beautiful in its own right, but as an entire ensemble it is simply breathtaking. Just as the beaded imagery in the suit tells a story, she tells us a tale of her father, her son, her grandchildren, herself, her community. In doing so she pulls the curtain back on some of the centuries-old traditions and rituals of the Mardi Gras Indians. Then, seemingly suddenly, the transformation is complete; just as a butterfly emerges from the caterpillar's cocoon, Queen Cherice of the [Guardians of the Flame Maroon Society](#) appears before our eyes.

Attendees at MicroFest: New Orleans bear witness as she tells her story and transforms from mere mortal to Queen. It is a clear example of agency and putting art at the center. As she donned her costume, her voice rose and her already formidable presence grew; it was as if the costume itself were giving her power.

Until recently, Mardi Gras Indians kept their traditions shrouded in secrecy—to the point that hand-beaded costumes that had taken a family an entire year to create would be burned at the end of the season. Fortunately, this veil of secrecy has been lifted. Significantly, members of the Mardi Gras Indian community are *choosing* to share their rituals, customs, and traditions, which are not being *taken*. Power and a sense of agency is derived, in part, from the ability to control what is shared and what is kept sacred within the community.

All one has to do is go to the [Golden Feather Mardi Gras Indian Restaurant and Gallery](#) and see some of the amazing suits on display to recognize that artistic practice and excellence are at the center of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. The intricate, hand-beaded suits can



Queen Cherice. Photo: Pam Korza

weigh hundreds of pounds and take a full year to make. The creation of these suits is ensemble work, with many members of a family and community involved.

The masterful artworks produced reflect not only the place where people live, but where people are *from*—a spiritual, emotional, and psychological sense of community. Queen Cherice, Chief Shaka Zulu, and Na'imah Zulu, the proprietors of Golden Feather Mardi Gras Indian Restaurant and Gallery, and other Mardi Gras Indians have realized their suits, rituals, and traditions are critical to their identity, their history, and their future.

Sharing their culture and traditions has a twofold impact. First, it becomes a source of pride and strength for their community. It also, however, becomes a valuable entry point of discovery for new arrivals and others not in New Orleans.

DOING IT RIGHT: ASHÉ CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

Remnants of a once vital commercial district can still be seen in mosaic tiles that once welcomed people to businesses along what is now called OC Halley Boulevard. People gathered on a Sunday evening the day before we honored the memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the day before the second swearing in of the 44th president of the United States, Barak Hussein Obama, the first African-American president in the 227-year history of the United States. People gathered at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center for a community sing-along of the songs of "The Movement." It is 50 years after the historic events of 1963, and four generations of people—from those who participated in The Movement to great-grandchildren who are benefiting from their sacrifices and hardships—all came together on this night to sing and dance.



Ashé Cultural Center. Photo: Ashé [website](#)

and others to transform Central City back into the vibrant commercial hub for the African-American community it once was. According to Ashé's Executive Director Carol Bebel, "The community has put arts and aims together in terms of intending a Central City of wonderfulness."

Somehow it seems appropriate that MicroFest: New Orleans would wrap-up at [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#), and later that evening Ashé would be transformed into a concert hall for a community sing-along. Located just blocks from the internationally recognized Garden District of New Orleans and adjacent to the Central Business District of NOLA, Ashé works tirelessly with artists, residents, community-based organizations,

Ashé’s mission embodies the best in arts-based community development. They enlist, organize, and empower residents to be the agents of change, not just the target. Ashé puts art at the center of its work. Ashé is grounded in Central City. Ashé works across sectors and is collaborative—working with youth and elders, working on housing and jobs, working with residents and government officials.

Because residents of the community are the agents of change, Ashé’s programming reflects people’s hopes, dreams, and desires. They have programs to help elders pass along traditional knowledge. They have programs for both men and women. They have extensive programming with youth and young people.

Because their mission is focused on using arts and culture to support community development, much of their work is beyond the walls of the center itself. In response to the need for financial services in the community, Ashé worked to attract a credit union to the neighborhood. Recognizing the need and opportunity for housing, Ashé helped develop new housing for artists along OC Halley Blvd.

Ashé doesn’t do all of this alone. Carol Bebelle is masterful at developing partnerships across sectors, and Ashé participates in the Central City Partnership, Central City Renaissance Alliance, and OC Halley Blvd Merchants and Business Association, to name a few. A great example of how Ashé works across sectors and in partnership is their work with Roger Williams College to create the Ashé College Unbound program to offer bachelor’s degrees in community and cultural development.

For all of their partnerships and cross-sector work, the art and culture of African-Americans in Central City is at the center of Ashé’s work. And art is why some 135 people gathered at Ashé Cultural Center one January evening—to keep the dream alive 50 years later and to revel in the joy and memory of how song helped change the world.

THE POWER OF ARTISTS

Asante Salaam from the [Mayor’s Office of Cultural Economy in New Orleans](#) noted that artists often underestimate their power and influence. Art is a powerful tool. Kathie deNobriga, Mayor of Pine Lake, GA, reminded artists doing community-based work that “It’s not about *your* art; it’s about *our* lives.” Artists work in community development, as NET Executive Director Mark Valdez has said, as essential mediators helping residents and communities become agents of change in their own lives. This is the superpower artists possess—the ability to help create critical bridges.

In the case of Ashé, it is about connecting folks to the history of the neighborhood and the future they are seeking to create, creating intergenerational opportunities for learning and growth, and creating cross-sector partnerships to comprehensively revitalize Central City. For Queen Chericé, it is about connecting the past to the future, her community to itself,



Sage Crump and Kathie De Nobriga at Ashé Cultural Arts Center. Photo: Michael Premo

MicroFest: New Orleans illustrated vividly and viscerally the power of the arts to transform communities. It reinforced that the best work:

- is done *by* a community not *to* a community;
- puts art and artists at the center;
- is of a particular place; and
- happens across sectors and is collaborative.

These are not unmediated interactions; highly trained and dedicated artists make this work happen. This does not happen accidentally; these are intentional actions. This is not second-rate art; it has the high artistic quality and represents, to borrow from Alison De La Cruz, the “highest stakes in life.” Such is the power of art, New Orleans style.



and her community to new arrivals and others interested in learning more about the history and culture that is New Orleans.

I bought a shirt at the MicroFest. It is a red, hand-screened T-shirt that has quickly become one of my favorites. It asks simply: “What impact does ART have in your COMMUNITY?”



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