Artists as City Builders: Ideas for Inclusion

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Sense of Belonging

Psychologists teach us that our sense of belonging, our social ties, is a vital part of our mental health. Inclusion, relationship, or even just feeling invited into a community at any scale can help us feel like we belong. Places of inclusion, perhaps most notably our parks and public spaces, are the places we can generally dress as we want, say what we want, sing what we want to, even dance. Planners teach us that vibrant, thriving downtowns with their customer relationships are vital for community health. Artists teach us that creatively responding to urban challenges enlivens the human spirit, creates third places for inclusion and through them, the generation of new ideas. While measuring mental health and community health is complicated, what is offered here are an artist's observations, not calculations. Perhaps in this modest untangling of belonging, inclusion and the shared desire to thrive, are some ideas that will assist us as we urgently identify and mitigate the perennial practices of exclusion.[1]

Zoning

Being excluded from housing that is safe and affordable has inspired artists' creative responses in cities around the world. Some artists have created non-profit organizations that develop live/work spaces within the constructs of the Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) program. Layering capital sources from local and national foundations and the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), and with private donors and capital campaigns, these projects solve problems of affordability and legal workspace. Where these entrepreneurial solutions don't exist, artists have squatted, lied to landlords, and lived in abandoned or transitioning warehouses where their work is legal, but living is not. These are places where they've been able to work as they want, or live as they want, but they can't do both. Exclusionary zoning framed and on a pedestal.

Many cities have witnessed the ways declining areas in or adjacent to downtowns, such as has happened in Minneapolis, Houston and Salt Lake City, have become, inviting places for new live/work places. The inclusion of live/work space as a permitted use in historic, downtown areas has become relatively common with zoning revision processes. Whether slipped in as mixed-use ordinances or more robustly as part of an integrated cultural plan, these achievements are increasingly regarded as part of a "healthy zoning policy." As the Covid-19 crisis has proven, live/work space even as a temporary remedy, might best be included in more building and zoning ordinances. As part of resiliency planning and managing uncertainty, artists' spaces may offer more robust meaning to inclusionary zoning. [2]

Mixed-use zoning in the planning world is not unlike mixed-media in the artists' orbit. In the end both represent a desire for diversity, a desire for inclusion. Primary uses and diversity, as Jane Jacobs observed, are keys to the health and vibrancy of downtowns. Artists who have created vibrant third places, places where housing, commerce and culture interconnect, transform places adjacent to downtowns and incorporate primary uses, transform new downtowns, and create new places of inclusion. Houston's "Project Row Houses" serves as a model landscape of this elegant complexity.

Third Places

Founded in 1994 by Rick Lowe and several other African-American artists, Project Row Houses (PRH) was inspired by German artist Joseph Beuys's idea of "social sculpture." Along with Houston based artist and educator Dr. John Biggers, Lowe and his collaborators worked to create a place that served as "the central nerve of the neighborhood." Because the project engages the primary uses needed to generate and preserve diversity, it exemplifies a mixed-use neighborhood that serves as a "downtown" in a neighborhood that contained the kind of old buildings Jacobs said were needed for new ideas. PRH's founders knew that, "[w]hile they were artists, they were also advocates." [3]

As advocates for inclusion and for historic preservation and adaptive-reuse of architecture rooted in West African vernacular, and advocates for a place to help residents of Houston's Third Ward find community, PRH created a resource that would be, "an engine of social transformation." As a gathering place for artists, housing for young mothers, small businesses, or just a place to get a cup of coffee and a bite to eat, PRH became a de facto downtown for, "creative thinkers and the neighbors around them." The sense of belonging needed for community and personal health is deeply rooted in PRH. The radicle (sic), the first root of this community success is the inclusionary vision growing from spaces developed by artists.

In 1979, recognizing the need for affordable living and workspace and the strength that artists' spaces have for anchoring a sense of belonging, the Minneapolis City Council and Minneapolis Arts Commissioned created the organization named Artspace. In its early days, Artspace assisted artists in finding safe, legal places to work in the city's Warehouse District. Less than a decade later, the organization became an advocacy organization to, "create, foster, and preserve affordable space for artists and arts organizations." With the nuanced inclusion of arts organizations rather than just artists, a new diversity of use emerged. Today, as a national developer of affordable housing and workspace, Artspace creates spaces that meet the needs of artists, and also meet the needs of places like Houston's Third Ward where community health is strengthened.

Another such place is in Trinidad, Colorado. As part of the "Space to Create Colorado" initiative sponsored by the state's Colorado Creative Industries division (similar to state-run arts councils and commissions), this pilot project spawned the revitalization of a town with the highest concentration of historic buildings of any downtown area in Colorado. With a 68% vacancy rate

in those buildings, Trinidad was fertile ground for Artspace to transform an entire block of the downtown's Main Street into a mixed-use neighborhood. With street-level amenities, co-working spaces, cultural facilities and with proximity to a park and a historic train depot, the inclusion of artists and creative industries into the urban ecosystem of Trinidad has resulted in a decline of vacancy rates to just 13%.

Colorado Creative Industries (CCI), as a division of the state's Office of Economic Development and International Trade, has engaged the importance of inclusion and diversity as part of its mission. By strategically aligning Artspace's development expertise with CCI's mission to use "creative industries" as an organizing element for community development, weaving together ideas to embrace the culinary arts, the design arts, historic preservation, film and media, the performing arts, visual arts and crafts into a restorative urbanism, an entrepreneurial spirit has emerged even in rural areas. Bridging the urban/rural divide by celebrating the diversity of the creative impulse is noteworthy. Equally noteworthy is the erasure of the pecking order commonly found in traditional, top-down, arts-focused revitalization programs; painters, sculptors, printmakers, dancers and musicians and literary artists are joined with the craftspeople, culinary arts and other forms of creative process that engage the hand or mind. As an expression of inclusion, this big-tent approach builds community resilience and a sense of belonging. Less segregation and more integration.

Primary Uses

A year after Artspace was established in Minneapolis, a parallel but unrelated organization named Artspace was formed in Salt Lake City. Now known as Artspace Utah, (AU), the organization has focused its work in an area known by a number of names, including West Downtown. Other names include The Depot District, The Warehouse District, The Granary District as well as other names that have become epithets. The idea of a "West Downtown" holds a number of interpretations, one of which defines the struggle for inclusion by citizens. Since 1980, AU has created mixed-use residential space and incubator space for small businesses and non-profit organizations, transformed public spaces into places of inclusion, initiated changes to building and zoning ordinances, and participated in developing urban design strategies to mitigate the challenges of walkability around 10-acre superblocks. [4]

As city builders, AU's artists and the organizations embraced by the organization's mission offer ideas for inclusion that are emblematic of healthy, resilient and diverse communities. Since several of AU's projects are located in spaces that have historically been considered part of West Downtown, their relationship with the other "Downtown" has been influential. Most notably, decades after city leaders proclaimed Downtown as "a place for culture and commerce" and not appropriate for mixed-use residential development, the "cataclysmic money" from a partnership between Taubman Properties and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints created what Taubman Properties today calls "the retail centerpiece of one of the nation's largest mixed-use downtown redevelopment projects." Where residential development was once excluded, in 2006, the partnership between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Taubman Properties was enough to convince the Salt Lake City

Planning Commission pay attention and allow a mixed-use zone to be overlaid. Downtown now houses thousands of new residents in thousands of new, high-end housing units. While economic inclusion remains elusive, residential developments are now a primary use.

It is important to note that the tools of exclusion are still apparent in Taubman's project. The blurring of public and private spaces at entry points to the 20+ acre City Creek Center (CCC) are marked with discreet signage to remind people that once they're off the city sidewalks they are in private property. No longer bound by the democracy of the public way, other signage warns visitors that "Visiting the center without shirt or shoes, or failing to be fully clothed. Wearing clothing that is, or in a manner that is, obscene, offensive to others, that may provoke a disturbance, or is otherwise inconsistent with a first-class, family oriented shopping center." The idea of a "first class, family" community and the exclusive retail options (Tiffany & Co., Nordstrom, Porsche Design, Apple, Boss, Coach, L'Occitane, Louis Vuitton, Sephora, and Tumi, to name a handful) is in striking contrast to the offerings in AU's projects.

AU's affordable housing units were funded largely through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit and New Markets Tax Credit Programs as well as vital layers of foundation, CRA, Redevelopment Agency and CDBG funds. No cataclysmic money was involved. The street level offerings in AU's projects have included artists' studios, offices of diverse social, environmental and economic non-profit organizations, tailors, consignment stores, a Buddhist Temple and martial arts studio, childcare for children of people facing homelessness, coffee roasters, cultural organizations, youth education programs, a writing center run by a community college, performance spaces, tattoo studios, specialty food stores, hair salons and barber shops, a grocery market, and even The Salt Lake City Police Department's Community Connection Center. As a "downtown," west though it may be, this artist-founded community development organization is exclusive only by its inclusiveness, the ultimate diverse and integrated community.

Downtown Vibrancy

The importance of these observations of the experiences of artists-as-city-builders in Houston, Minneapolis, Trinidad, and Salt Lake City is in their replicability. Not any specific ways per se, as there are no cookie-cutter formulas. The evidence of success is in creating a sense of belonging. This is the way that self-organizing communities create *vibrancy through diversity*. Unlike programs where downtown "experts" are hired and paid to create a place, or downtown alliances of businesses hire a director—often not even from their own cities—to love a place, those who are deeply attached to their places creatively respond to personal and community challenges. Perhaps as important now, particularly in light of the isolation we experience and witness from sheltering in place from the 2020 Covid-19 epidemic, are the questions about who downtowns are for, and to whom do they belong, and are they necessary.[5]

Building on the importance of attachment and the sense of belonging that creates social capital, engaging artists as consultants with downtown planning and management organizations is a proven strategy for success. In the same ways these community development

entities engage transportation consultants, economic development strategists or a host of other "experts", drawing more deeply on artists' creative responses to complex challenges is an underused opportunity. One artist, also trained as a planner, is Candy Chang. Her work to get citizens engaged in visioning the futures of places, including specific buildings, is meaningful, fun, and successful. Below is just one example of her community engagement. Other exemplary projects of hers address the safe, legal inclusion of street vendors and street musicians as part of municipal policy development. As a city builder, Ms. Chang is an alchemist.





Images courtesy of Candy Chang: www.candychang.com

Inclusionary Zoning

The third places that assemble as de facto downtowns, walkable places with primary uses, are hyper-local responses to a lack of access to the experiences that historic downtowns used to provide. Many cities now contain multiple places that serve the same function as the downtowns

created by segregated zoning. If we are learning anything in U.S. cities today, it is in regard to the failings of segregation in all of its forms, and the vital importance of diversity and inclusion, in all of their forms, too.[6]

ENDNOTES

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3. Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community . AbeBooks, August 1999.
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