

THE IMPACT OF VISIBLE COMMUNITY ART  
FOR A THRIVING, HEALTHY COMMUNITY

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## THE IMPACT OF VISIBLE COMMUNITY ART FOR A THRIVING COMMUNITY

In 2001, the city of Rochester, New York displayed a community arts project titled, Horses on Parade. As a former resident of Rochester, New York, I witnessed firsthand the excitement this project generated in the city at the display of many artistically painted large horse sculptures. At the time, I was a happy observer and did not know or look into the back story of how these horses came to be. I only knew, saw and felt how the city rallied around these creative horses on display around the city. Growing up near and around Rochester and living outside Denver, Colorado, I have always known communities that welcomed and encouraged art and culture through theater, music, dance, festivals, and visual arts. It was not until I began running for election to Westland City Council that I learned more about what a community known for arts and culture can do for the residents and business community and the impacts on the local economy, compared to one that does not have arts as a visible part of its fabric. Michigan Municipal League, a state association providing education and advocacy for more than 500 cities, villages, and urban townships, is working with their member communities around Michigan and has determined there are six pillars to community wealth building and placemaking (mml.org, 2023), of which arts and culture is one. It is clear that when communities have an active arts and culture plan, they realize positive impacts in the overall economic and physical health of their city and residents.

According to research by Michigan Municipal League, there are six pillars that contribute to a healthy community: lifelong learning, public health, arts and culture, financial security, sustainability, and infrastructure. When referring to a healthy community, they define it as employing strategies that build community and individual assets and create resilient and

adaptable systems to address social and economic needs of the residents and businesses in that community (mml.org, 2023).

In his article, ‘8 ways the arts can boost your local economy’, published on National League of Cities website, Jay Dick points out that the arts and culture of a community is one of the 9<sup>th</sup> most talked about topic. Plus, 25 percent of U.S. mayors discuss the importance of arts and culture when talking about economic development. He adds that the ‘arts can be an important part of a city’s economic development and growth strategy, without huge price tags or tax concessions.’

As cities continue to work to re-bound from 2020 and work to increase their populations and economic viability, it has been increasingly evident that cities must engage in a vibrant arts and culture community. The arts in a community include theater, dance, visual, sculpture, education, and art in the public square. Art plays a key role in placemaking. In the Project for Public Spaces article, ‘What is Placemaking.’ Placemaking is described as a collaborative process to shape our public space, strengthening the connection between people and the places we share and maximizing value (PPS, 2007). In addition to making a city desirable both for residents and business, a vibrant arts program is part of the collaborative process and has huge positive impacts on the physical and mental health of the community.

Harvey Perloff’s efforts to leverage arts and culture in the City of Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as conversations about livability in cities began the inclusion of an arts and culture plan by US municipalities in their economic development plans. Having an arts and culture master plan guided investment and focused on cultivating the local creative economies. (Loh, 2023). From here, professional planners became more involved in the planning and implementation of arts and culture. Since then, arts and cultural scholars have begun to

investigate these plans and how they have provided a way for arts and culture organizations to make a difference in their respective communities. These investigations have also shown that there is still a lot to learn about the impact. Loh discovered that integrating the arts and culture plan in city planning brings the various municipal departments together and looking at it as a type of multilevel connection to other arts and cultural initiatives. In determining the impact arts and culture has on a community, Loh looked at how to measure plan implementation as she found that while many of the municipalities that have a plan, many plans remain unimplemented and ultimately waste time and resources resulting in policy outcomes not wanted. She researched via a survey to 132 survey respondents from 64 US cities with an arts and cultural plan, as found in a Google search. They received a total of 61 valid responses, representing 41 of the 64 cities. The results varied by whether a city had a separate arts and culture planning department. Those with a separate department were more likely to speak favorably of their plan and had begun to implement it, albeit many suggested slowly was better. Looking at the various effects of these plans and the benefit or positive impacts to their cities, 62% of respondents indicated there was an increase in community pride, followed by support for arts and culture activities, placemaking and downtown revitalization. Revitalized neighborhoods, increase in tourism and attracting new residents were not far behind. Loh and her fellow researchers concluded that greater cooperation and alignment with arts and culture planning with other municipal departments could increase the public benefit.

After the need for planning, in looking at the public benefit, one of the first areas I wanted to look at was the health benefit to a community and how engaging in the arts may be influenced by socio-economic status or other demographic data. In their article, 'Who engages in the arts in the United States?', Bone, Bu, Fluharty, Paul and Fancourt, used the General Social

Survey (GSS) in the US to look at which of the demographic, socioeconomic, residential and health factors were associated with attendance and participation in the arts. Their conclusion was that they did find evidence for the social influence in the attendance to arts events, which was not as evident in participation. Bone et al, found that education, both traditional and parental had an influence on the level and types of engagement in the arts, one may have. They also found that overall, those who engage in the arts did receive many benefits including education, health and wider welfare. Interestingly, as they showed an increase in benefits, they established the importance of also identifying factors that reduce barriers to engagement and participation across all groups. The authors found that the same factors that are associated with barriers to arts engagement seem to be connected with health care and health outcomes, showing a possible correlation with the health benefits from arts engagement. Consistent with that is evidence that those who self-reported poorer health also identified lower attendance to arts events. The correlation was not the same as those who had interest in attending, even if they did not attend, bringing their conclusion that arts engagement could also represent a health behavior that leads to improved health outcomes (Bone et al, 2021). In exploring barriers, they suggest more research as some previous efforts to increase access by offering free tickets in Brazil have not been as successful as the organizers hoped. Other suggestions to reducing barriers are providing arts, avoiding high prices and reducing time constraints may increase levels of engagement. Developing interventions to promote arts could then lead to improvement in health outcomes (Bone, et al 2021).

Public art, which is literally for the public, as imbued in the name, must be openly accessible to everyone in the public realm. How to make public art accessible to a broad

audience needs to be explored as it has the ability to bring together people of diverse backgrounds. The power of the impact of art justifies the integral role of public art in society.

Ming Cheung, Natasha Smith, and Owen Craven from Australia, reviewed and analyzed journal articles in 2020 and wrote about their findings in the *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*. The authors retrieved and reviewed 839 articles, spanning 60 years, between 1961 and 2020. 139 were read in full, with 50 selected for deeper analysis. They identified eight categories for analyzing the benefits of accessible public art: placemaking, society, culture, economy, sustainability, wellbeing, wisdom and innovation. Cheung et al, expanded on the definition of placemaking, as the designing and redesigning of public spaces with input from the communities, making them more useful, communal and safe. The article speaks to the wide range of benefits from encouraging creativity to beautifying a city. With community engagement being at the heart of placemaking, public art, which also engages its audience, is a key component to communal spaces. Their conclusion was that indeed public art is a fundamental part of life-enriching experiences. It can transform spaces and achieve diverse impacts for the community and other stakeholders. In coming to that conclusion, they identified how art can humanize cities and places, promoting happiness and improving both physical and mental health. This wellbeing, the 'condition of being contented, healthy or successful' (Cheung, 2022) is achieved through building community and connecting societies. One example cited was a public mural in Philadelphia, which engaged more than 1,200 community members in the creative process. This particular mural, focused on reducing the stigma associated with suicide and the public aftermath enabled suicide survivors and other community members to share experiences of pain and suffering as well as a collective healing, resilience and hope.

One of the other categories Cheung explored is the economic impacts of public art, or the wealth that a city gets from business and industry. Public art can boost creative industries, drive cultural tourism and contribute to the branding and marketing of a city. In supporting this claim, Cheung referenced a town in the United Kingdom, Folkestone which had seen a decline in its economy between the 1960s and early 2000s. In 2008, international artists were commissioned to produce artwork, naming the project Folkestone Triennial. This public art project attracted tourists and local businesses saw an increase in their sales, resulting in the improvement in the local economy.

Some cities, such as Lakewood, Colorado, intentionally use the arts as a mechanism and stimulant for economic growth, resulting in more foot traffic to local business, increased housing options, more jobs and higher tax revenues (Dick, 2023). Lakewood's mayor, Adam Paul worked with the neighbors and businesses to create an arts district tied to the history and culture of the now, 40 West Arts District, which was the recipient of the largest Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Mayor Carl Gerlach in Overland, Kansas said, 'the young professional looking for a place to live wants a city with a host of entertainment and activities,' and development activity that provides increased job opportunities and competitive pay. He also indicated a well-placed arts district or arts venue can serve as an anchor and magnet for economic growth. Both public safety and infrastructure depend on the economic health of a community. Communities with arts and culture organizations, streets that are well-lit are seen as safer for and by their residents, showing that the arts are a bridge between the community and police. Additionally, communities with the public art attract pedestrians, bicyclists and auto traffic, leads to both safer and more vibrant communities (Dick, 2023). The article on National League of Cities references another public art mural, which engaged the community in West

Oakland, California, showing that art projects instill a sense of pride and positive thinking, and in doing so, create opportunities for generating tax revenue beyond any government investment, helping city budgets. This same article states the arts constitute bigger share of America's GDP than even construction or agriculture.

When a community is engaged in the arts, cities are more vibrant, but can that be quantifiably measured? I believe the answer to that is yes. Many of the benefits to a community of any program are the results of the economic benefits-so the same with arts. In speaking with Schwabl, she shared with me testimonies of businesses that saw increased revenue from Horses on Parade. One specific testimony was a limousine company who was hired by groups just to drive around and tour the horses. The owner thanked Schwabl for helping his business grow. Measuring other benefits may not be as defined as revenue, but measuring increases in traffic, or using engagement surveys can measure reception and mood from the intentional installation of art.

A thriving, healthy community is based on a community sense of pride, wellness, safety, economic stability and growth, housing and education. Arts and culture and especially public, visible art have been shown to benefit all of the above. Embracing arts and culture as a part of community wealth building and placemaking requires investment of both social and community capital and financial resources (mml.org 2023). Local governments can create line items in their budgets and assist in accessing state and federal grants for improving public arts and culture. When communities invest in an active arts and culture plan, they realize positive impacts in the overall economic and physical health of their city and residents. The return on investment is a thriving community that also celebrates arts and unique cultural impacts of that community and a thriving city that is known for its arts and culture.



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