Setting The Stage

Planning for a Cultural Plan in Montgomery County, MD

by Todd W. Bressi

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1. Introduction: Setting the Stage for a Cultural Plan

It has been more than 20 years since Montgomery County completed a countywide cultural plan. The Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC) is now preparing to undertake a new one, following recommendations in the *Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan* adopted by the County Council and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) Planning Board.

Much has changed in the last twenty years:

— The **County's demographics** have changed: though its population has grown about one percent per year, its non-white population has grown by approximately 80 percent, to the point where 60 percent of the County's population is non-white.[1]

— The **philosophy of cultural planning** has changed: There is less focus on arts and culture organizations and on the economic impact of the arts and culture sector, and more focus on a community's overall creative and cultural life.[2]

— There has been an awakening to the **intersectionality** between the arts and culture sector and a broad range of public services, from civic engagement and voting to environmental, placemaking and transportation projects.

— **AHCMC's vision, values and priorities** have evolved as it completed two strategic planning processes, adopted racial equity principles and navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. AHCMC has shifted its grantmaking emphasis towards empowering smaller and non-traditional organizations, emphasizing general operating support and reorienting its evaluative criteria more heavily towards community impact. This evolution towards equity, community impact, and emergency response and preparedness position's AHCMC to lead conversations concerning power and representation in arts and culture policy.

Recognizing these changes, AHCMC concluded it should conduct preliminary research that would provide a fresh context for its upcoming cultural planning process. This context would help AHCMC position the plan externally, moving arts and culture stakeholders, County leadership, and the public at-large beyond inherited notions about what a cultural plan might mean. Additionally, this context would help AHCMC with the internal management of the planning process by informing the goals of the plan, the selection of a consultant and the research and engagement approaches.

AHCMC began by reviewing recently published literature that focuses on the cultural planning process, analyzing several recently completed cultural plans and interviewing cultural agency leaders in several comparable cities and regions. That review helped AHCMC focus on specific research questions that would provide a broader understanding of arts, culture, and creativity in Montgomery County, from the point of view of arts stakeholders and from an understanding of the broader community's lived experiences and practices.

In 2022 AHCMC launched three research projects that were focused on:

1. Eliciting residents' perceptions of what "arts and culture" means.

2. Identifying and mapping arts and culture assets and resources in the county.

3. Demonstrating the evolution of the county's arts and culture network through an analysis of AHCMC's grantmaking

AHCMC expected the research to provide a fresh foundation for a new cultural plan grounded in both the needs of arts and humanities organizations and practitioners, and an understanding of how arts, culture and creativity enters the lived experience of county residents. This understanding would help ensure the planning effort would be relevant to the County's newest and most diverse communities, provide a context for evaluating the directions and priorities that have been embraced in AHCMC's strategic plans and grantmaking over the past decade, and offer a platform for understanding how a wider variety of County resources could be joined to support the community's creative life. It was also hoped that the process of developing this research would continue AHCMC's long-term community relationship building, a critical undertaking for the upcoming planning process.

This introduction summarizes those research projects and puts their findings into context to set the stage for organizing Montgomery County's next cultural plan.

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[1] This information is compiled from the Thrive Demographic Summary and population data published by the St. Louis Federal Reserve (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MDMONT0POP)

[2] Tom Borrup, "40 Years Young: The Evolving Practice of Cultural Planning," *Artsblog*, Posted November 8, 2018

2. Evolving Conditions

Montgomery County's Demographic Context

The *Thrive 2050* General Plan update outlined significant changes in the County's demographics in the past half century, as well as clear patterns of communities that remain geographically, economically, and socially isolated as a result of past patterns of discrimination.[3]

Montgomery County is home to some of the most culturally diverse places in the United States, including Silver Spring, Rockville, Gaithersburg, and Germantown. The county's population has grown more diverse over the last sixty years because of a steady influx of foreign-born immigrants. Since the last cultural plan was undertaken, the most dramatic shift has been a decrease in the percentage of the white population from 60 percent to 40 percent (with a relatively even breakdown of Black, Hispanic and Asian-American / Pacific Islander populations). At the same time, the County's overall population grew from 840,000 to 1.05 million.[4]

Thrive also noted that past patterns of discrimination have left many communities geographically, economically, and socially isolated. Black communities, in particular, historically suffered from a lack of public investment in infrastructure such as new roads, sewer and water, schools, health clinics, and other public amenities and services. Some communities were hurt by the urban renewal policies of the 1960s. Others faced pressure to sell their houses or farms to developers for new subdivisions.

Thrive noted that these disparities lag to this day:

> *Today communities with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities also show lagging median household incomes, not because of their race or ethnicity but because of financial precarity due to low-wage jobs, high rates of being uninsured, declining business starts and lack of housing are experienced to a greater degree because of past and institutionalized discriminatory practices. Not surprising is the resulting gaps in quality-of-life indicators seen among many Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents.[5]*

Changing Context for Cultural Planning

The philosophy of arts and culture planning has changed significantly over the past twenty years. The most important change has been a shift in emphasis towards exploring community interests rather than primarily focusing on the needs of traditional arts and cultural sector actors, or instrumentalized goals such as economic development or "placemaking."

In a 1994 field scan of cultural plans, scholar-practitioner Craig Dreezen noted,

> *With some notable exceptions, most cultural planning centers upon the interests of arts organizations, arts audiences, and artists. Some plans focus on the arts and assert no pretensions to transform communities. Others purport to plan for the entire community, but are concerned with that community mostly for its potential support of the arts.[6]*

Not long after that, a groundbreaking study led by Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson (the current chair of the National Endowment for the Arts) argued for a change in how communities approached the question of, "How are arts, culture, and creativity defined, presented, and valued at the neighborhood level?" The study proposed four guiding principles that could guide cultural planning work:

— Definitions of art, culture, and creativity depend on the cultural values, preferences, and realities of residents and other stakeholders in each community.

— Arts, culture, and creative expression are infused with multiple meanings and purposes simultaneously.

— The concept of participation includes a wide array of ways in which people engage in arts, culture, and creative expression.

— Opportunities for participation in arts, culture, and creative endeavor often rely on both arts-specific and non-arts- specific resources.

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[3] Thrive's data shows that the demographic shifts identified in the AHCMC 2016 cultural plan have continued, even as the rate of population increase has slowed.

[4] The changes from 1960 to 2020 are even more dramatic; in 1960 the County's population was 96 percent white, with most of the other residents being Black, and only 340,000 people, compared to 40 percent white and 1.05 million people in 2020.

[5] The preceding three paragraphs are cited from Thrive 2050, pp. 11-13, with minor clarifications.

[6] As quoted in Tom Borrup, "40 Years Young: The Evolving Practice of Cultural Planning," in Artsblog (Washhington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, November 8, 2018).

By 2017, the landscape of cultural planning had shifted dramatically. Scholar-practitioner Tom Borrup conducted an analysis of fifty recent cultural plans and found that:

> *The data reveal that expectations of cultural plan-*
> *ning have increased significantly over these 20-plus*
> *years, and that the greatest change is in the em-*
> *phasis on serving community interests rather than a*
> *focus on the arts and cultural sector's own needs.[7]*

Yet cultural planning still lagged in important ways. Despite the findings of the Urban Land Institute's 2003 report on cultural planning research methodologies, Borrup found:

> *Definitions of "culture" as expressed by the range*
> *of community resources included in plans also*
> *expanded, but not as inclusively as the public has*
> *come to understand culture, according to outside*
> *marketing research.*

This finding indicates, perhaps, that while cultural planners understood that they had to think more broadly about the meaning of arts and culture, they had not yet embraced processes that would authentically connect with communities about their "cultural values, preferences, and realities" or identify ways of cultivating "both arts-specific and non-arts-specific resources." Not surprisingly, Borrup also found:

> *Where cultural plans also set their sights, but where*
> *outcomes fell short, is in the area of cultural equity—*
> *expanding resources for under-represented groups*
> *including immigrant populations, removing barriers*
> *to participation, and bolstering education and youth*
> *development. Fewer than half of cultural plans*
> *included specific actions to address diversity, equity,*
> *and inclusion—a surprising finding in 2017.*

AHCMC's informal scan of city and county arts and culture plans, in preparation of this research, found that while most plans now specifically discuss diversity, equity and inclusion, they stubbornly remain wedded to a focus primarily on the needs of traditional arts and culture organizations and goals such as economic development. One notable exception is the City of Oakland's cultural plan, which offers this message to the city:

> *Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development*
> *Plan … illustrates the vibrant and diverse ways our*
> *city understands itself as a community of creativity*
> *and care—and how we envision the path forward*
> *to maintain our unique identity. It gives voice to the*
> *idea that we all belong to each other as Oaklanders*
> *and affirms that our civic well-being is deeply*
> *rooted in Oakland's long- term artistic and cultural*
> *health. … Its goal is to ensure that the people of*
> *Oakland not only feel a sense of belonging in*
> *the city and to each other, but know that the city*
> *belongs to them.[8]*

Oakland's plan offers the following premises:[9]

— A recognition that Oakland's cultural vibrancy exists in all sectors, in all neighborhoods, and in all communities;

— An understanding that the health of cultural life is inextricably tied to the existence and quality of *cultural spaces* (spaces intended for production, enactment, and/or sharing of culture, whether non-profit, for-profit, or something in between), *neighborhood places* (places people find to exercise their cultural expression and build identity), and the *civic cultural commons* (public areas and structures where people gather, connect, celebrate, learn, and build community); and

— The necessity to work across government and collaborate with City colleagues to effectively promote cultural equity.

Belonging in Oakland is perhaps the most advanced example of this new perspective on cultural planning—and the role of government support of a community's cultural life:

> *Cultural Affairs must redefine the domain of its work*
> *—moving from a myopic focus on the non-profit arts*
> *sector to a purview that more accurately reflects the*
> *reality of where cultural life takes place.*

Oakland's plan is reflective of an idea that has recently emerged in the context of cultural policy, "belonging." As described by Evan Bissell in Notes on *Cultural Strategy for Belonging*:

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Mayor Libby Schaaf, "A Message from the Mayor," in Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan (City of Oakland, 2018).

[9] *Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan* (City of Oakland, 2018).

In a foundational article called "The Problem of Othering," the Hass Institute's john a. powell and Stephen Menendian describe belonging as " An unwavering commitment to not simply tolerating and respecting difference, but to ensuring that all people are welcome and feel that they belong in the society." They continue that this "must be more than expressive; it must be institutionalized as well." A culture of belonging must inhabit stories, symbols and how we see ourselves and each other. It also must inhabit the systems, policies and practices of society that make up the substance of culture." [10]

The arts, culture and humanities are essential to this process because, powell argues, "People largely organize themselves and operate around stories and beliefs, not around facts. Culture can move people in ways that policies cannot." For that reason, cultural policy and cultural planning can be acts of civic engagement, connection and ultimately empowerment—essential to "organiz(ing) our space, our structures and our policies to do the work we need to build the world we want to live in." [11]

Intersectionality

In 2010, the Mayors Institute on City Design (MICD) published a seminal white paper, *Creative Placemaking*—coining an eponymous term that has resonated through the arts, culture and community development worlds (and inspired countless iterations, such as "creative placekeeping"). The paper introduces the concept in the following way:

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. [12]

Linking the arts to broader public needs and processes was by no means a new idea; decades earlier the Ford Foundation had seeded initiatives to situate arts activities within community

development corporations with economic development and social service missions. Mainstream organizations such as MICD and the Urban Land Institute, and advocacy groups such as Project for Public Spaces, had for many years created roles for artists in community planning processes.

But this paper crystallized that thinking, attached a theory of change and impelled funders to support initiatives proposed at the community level.[13] Not long after the paper was published, the National Endowment for the Arts launched the "Our Town" grant program (which specifically requires collaborations with local government), and several major national philanthropies joined to create ArtPlace America, a ten-year initiative to catalyze, document and rigorously evaluate these efforts.

Some early manifestations of creative placemaking were critiqued for being insensitive to the communities where projects were located. It was argued that some placemaking projects were ignoring the inherent value of communities already in place, overlooking their needs and potentially promoting their displacement. Another critique has been that creative placemaking can instrumentalize arts and culture. In this critique, artists and arts organizations are viewed as a means to achieve an end, but not as a resource for questioning the ends themselves. Dialogue about these issues has led to strategies for leadership and empowerment that allow for creative placemaking to be driven by people in under-resourced communities and to promote economic and social change.

Fifteen years after the white paper was published, it can be said that one of the greatest accomplishments of the "creative placemaking" movement is that it has garnered broad acceptance for the idea of intersectionality—that artists, arts and culture organizations, and the ideas of the arts and culture world can play a catalytic role in how public agencies go about their work.[14] Similarly, the movement has shined fresh light on the imbalances in cultural, economic and political power that have shaped (and continue to shape) our communities. It validated artists and arts organizations as expected voices in the public sphere, and along with that the ability to imagine futures beyond those offered by the status quo.

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[10] Evan Bissell, *Notes on Cultural Strategy for Belonging* (Berkeley: Haas Institute, 2019), 8-9
[11] Ibid., *7*
[12] Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking*, (Washington, D.C., Mayors Institute on City Design, 2010), 3
[13] For the Theory of Change, see Markusen and Gadwa, 3. A diagram is attached to the end of this report.

AHCMC's Evolving Vision, Values and Goals

Finally, over the past fifteen years, AHCMC has set a trajectory for responding to the County's increasing economic and social complexity and for rethinking its approach to the County's cultural needs. This trajectory is reflected in the strategic plans it completed in 2008 and 2017, the set of racial equity principles that it adopted in 2018 to guide its work, and the continued re-alignment of its grant programs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of funding, AHCMCs first major step was to partner with the County Council to eliminate "earmarks," for large arts organizations (which are often the most politically connected). Increasingly, AHCMC has focused its grant programs on general operating awards (based on field learnings that general operating grants play a strong role in helping organizations build long-term capacity by providing comprehensive support) and on the need to help organizations weather the COVID-19 crisis. It has focused on building a ladder of grant opportunities that provides support to groups of all sizes and allows small organizations without formal non-profit designations to apply for project grants. These changes allowed AHCMC to distribute funding more widely, and with fewer conditions, providing more resources to organizations serving the County's newest communities and those who had not been recognized in the past.

In 2018, AHCMC adopted a set of racial equity principles to guide its work:

> *Brave conversations: The path to racial equity is fraught with deep-seated emotion and conflicting perspectives. As leaders, we will create cultures where learning is valued above being right and where individuals are invited to bring their whole, vulnerable selves to the conversation.*

> *With Us, Not for Us: The path to racial equity is a continuous effort that must actively facilitate self-representation, meaningful input, leadership, and shared decision-making with those who have lived the experience of being in the groups we seek to know and serve through partnership*

> *Power Sharing: Reaching racial equity cannot be possible unless we recognize and challenge power imbalances within our communities and professional structures. … We will question socio-historical contexts and structural factors that will hopefully lead to community-driven, shared leadership with a balance of power amongst all partners.*

These principles provide a significant platform for AHCMC to lead conversations about what racial equity means in the context of arts and culture funding and policy. These principles open the door for addressing the gap that Borrup noticed in his research: that the arts and culture field's leadership understood the importance of embracing diversity and equity in its work, but planning processes had not yet embraced processes that would authentically connect with communities about their "cultural values, preferences, and realities."

As AHCMC's equity principles note, that process will require brave and honest conversations, self-representation of the groups who are being served, and a recognition of structural imbalances in power that result in structural challenges in access to resources.

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[14] For example, the Los Angeles County Cultural Affairs "Creative Strategist" program embeds artists in a variety of County agencies, not only to help them interface with the public in order to deliver their programs and services, but also to rethink their priorities and plans.

3. Setting the Stage: Putting Arts and Culture in Perspective

To prepare for the County's upcoming cultural plan, AHCMC launched three research projects that were focused on the following questions:

— How do people in Montgomery County define what "arts and culture" means to them?

— What are the arts and culture assets that are important to people in their lives, and where are they located geographically in the County?

— What does AHCMC's record of grantmaking indicate about the nature and needs of the County's arts, humanities and cultural organizations?

What do "Arts" and "Culture" Mean?

AHCMC retained Margie Johnson Reese Partners (MJR), a Dallas-based cultural planning consultancy that was part of the team that worked on the County's first cultural plan, to undertake research on and develop a working definition of "arts and culture" as understood by people in Montgomery County. MJR took its task as considering "institutional definitions and meanings of art" as well as "the historical, conventional, and appreciative ways that people make art as a form of cultural sustainability."

MJR's research process involved several approaches: reviewing relevant background reports and studies to refresh the team's knowledge about the County; individual and group conversations; an online survey; and community conversations led by local artist facilitators specially trained for the task.[15]

Early in its work, MJR simplified the central research question to "How do you define art?" MJR's report makes an important distinction between "art" and "culture" that has also been broadly articulated in arts and culture planning research:

Though the line between the two may be a fine one, there are differences. "Art" is broadly viewed as the creative expression of ideas, emotions, experiences and other human states and qualities. "Culture" is a tapestry of beliefs, customs, heritage and social forms. The arts are an expression of culture, so understanding how people define and make art helps us understand why sustaining culture is important.

MJR's engagement process revealed several themes:

— **Art is (or should be) inclusive and reinforce a sense of belonging and connection.** Art is "expressions of thoughts and feelings in multiple media accessing our senses that hopefully evoke more empathy, understanding, connection, conversation, thoughts, perspective and joy."

— **Art is a form of self-expression rooted in humanity and communication.** Art is "creative expression, beauty, new perspectives, inspiration, shared humanity"

— **Art is a way to celebrate and sustain culture or heritage.** Art is "a reflection of contemporary feeling, storytelling of the community."

— **Art is an avenue for exploration, creation and innovation.** "Art is the result of getting to the edge of the cliff but not falling over—knowing how to get to that scary place over and over so you can hold the hand of the audience and help them see further than they could have."

Further synthesizing the findings, MJR offered the following summary definition. Montgomery County residents define art as:

"A process of creating or making something of personal or cultural relevance that celebrates or sustains heritage, reflects or challenges ideas/values, investigates innovation, and occurs in or reflects spaces that feel familiar and reinforces a feeling of belonging or its absence."

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[15] It should be noted that face-to-face engagement occurred at a time when meeting approaches and protocols were still responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

MJR's report also shared other cross-cutting observations about the County's arts and culture sector from input gathered during the engagement process:

— **Accessibility.** Participants discussed access challenges to arts programs as they relate to physical barriers for seniors and both people with physical disabilities, as well as access challenges related to financial limitations, availability, and socio-economic status.

— **Inclusion.** Arts leaders described inclusion as a goal related to developing diverse audiences; non-arts participants described inclusion as a desire to be viewed as a valued contributor to the cultural landscape of the County.

— **Equity.** Leaders of the County's largest arts and culture institutions sought a finite definition of equity; many raised concerns that their funding from the County would be reduced if it were dependent on meeting an "unstated" equity goal. Art makers and culture keepers in communities of color consider equity an often-unattainable moving target.

— **Cultural Heritage.** Participants articulated the concept of *cultural heritage* as the unique, intangible expression of inherited traditions and the quest to teach and share those traditions for the sake of future generations.

— **Affinity and Allyship.** Leaders of culturally-specific organizations and community-based groups discussed the importance of *affinity* and *allyship*. *Affinity* means belonging, sharing common interests and goals, and, in some cases, cultural heritage. *Allyship* means a process by which those in power use their voices to advocate for under-represented groups.

Individual leaders of culturally-specific organizations and community-based groups expressed clear concerns about the investment and support necessary for programs that focus on cultural sustainability. They expressed two parallel goals: First, education in culturally-diverse art forms (particularly the performing arts) is a way to sustain and advance a community's cultural heritage for future generations. Second, amplifying and investing in the organizations that promote these cultural traditions, not only in small venues and at neighborhood festivals, is integral to the broader cultural ecosystem of the County. Additionally, they noted, efforts to strengthen the infrastructure of culturally-specific organizations and groups could broaden the public's experience and understanding of these cultural traditions, beyond what they might encounter in a one-month celebration or occasional projects.

MJR's research illuminated parallel conversations that should be recognized in the forthcoming cultural planning process—one reflecting individual artistic spirit (which occurs within a broader cultural context), and the other reflecting inherited cultural practices.

One is a conversation that considers arts and culture as relatively similar terms, referencing the expression of ideas:

Something that is aesthetically pleasing or done to create an emotional response, or to comment on the human condition, politics, society, or our relationship to the natural environment.

A visual expression of an idea ... that is filled with emotion, is powerfully and enticingly expressed, and has universal meaning

The other is a conversation in which artistic and cultural practices are embedded in the broader traditions of a community, must be practiced to sustain the cultural life of that community, and lose their meaning when extracted from the community. This idea of arts and culture is critical to a sense of welcome, belonging, connection and cultural survival.

Mapping the County's Cultural Life

AHCMC retained Civic Arts, an Austin-based cultural planning consultancy, to explore how the county's art, culture and humanities assets might be identified, mapped and understood as a network that supports the creative life of county residents. The question Civic Arts set out to understand was, "Where do Montgomery County residents go to experience and express creativity and culture?"

This research question is related to a growing field called "cultural asset mapping." While asset mapping is a conventional technique in many types of planning processes, in cultural planning there has been an emphasis on using mapping as a visual tool to elicit deeper information about communities' own cultural practices, networks and geographies. In this way, asset mapping can offer a counterpoint to "official" data, such as Census business classification data or even lists of grant applications.

Also, cultural asset mapping falls at a unique intersection between quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, cultural asset mapping is an inventory of *specific points* of a community's cultural facilities and creative resources. Qualitatively, the community conversations that support the mapping process require a discussion of what "artistic, cultural and creative value" actually *means* to a particular community, at that particular time. Issues of meaning and interpretation must be balanced with the work to name specific and quantifiable points in order to get the fullest understanding of what the data is saying.

Civic Arts' research process involved several approaches:

— **Evaluation of existing data sets about art and culture resources (described below).**

— **Community convenings.**[16] A local partner and twelve Community Conveners (people who were artists, arts educators or in arts-supportive professions) were trained by and worked with Civic Arts to develop research and engagement approaches, which included on-line mapping meetings; pop-ups at places like farmers markets, community gatherings

and shopping areas; and individual, one-on-one meetings. [17]

— **Online portal.** Civic Arts developed an on-line platform, Maptionnaire, that gave on-line participants the capacity to not only answer a specific series of questions, but also to name a specific site that came to mind or indicate a broader area of the County that they associated with some form of personal creative and cultural expression.

This research highlighted two separate cultural geographies in Montgomery County: a geography of traditional arts-sector resources and an emergent geography of community-based creative and cultural life.

— One geography is **"Traditional Venues."** The specific points for these traditional venues were collected from existing datasets, including County GIS sources, AHCMC grantee information and readily available data from Google Maps using key cultural sector search terms such as "gallery" and "theater." These sources yielded 332 data points for places where people experience art and creativity—ranging from familiar and widely-known venues such as Strathmore and movie theaters to art supply stores, galleries, museum and dance studios. These fall primarily along major arterials and within primary population centers within the county.

— The other geography is specific points of interest identified by the Community Conveners' engagement activities (**"Community Identified Points of Culture and Creativity"**). This process yielded 205 data points reflecting places where people say they experience art and creativity in their everyday lives. These are places where people gather to share, create and enjoy the way creativity and culture come into being within their own lives, the lives of their families and the lives of their communities. These places are distributed widely throughout the County with clustering around areas with major population concentrations.

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[16] When direct community work started in late spring of 2022 it was quickly realized that many of the same civic engagement techniques that were used in the cultural planning work before the COVID-19 pandemic were not going to work as they previously had. People's comfort levels around gathering, their desire to engage in civic issues, and their day-to-day priorities around when to gather had all radically shifted.

[17] Examples of the types of meetings held by Community Conveners included: Social media outreach with specific graphics and videos; on-line research into different area communities; promotion of on-line portal through Facebook Live presentations; distribution of information at different sites of arts training and education, at arts performances, at local area grocery stores, and Spanish-speaking areas; visits to local businesses (as identified by various creative communities) for flyer distribution and insight; presentations at houses of worship; pop-up events at parks and public spaces; in-person attendance at craft and making gatherings; on-line one-on-one interviews and focus groups; community gatherings organized specifically for this project.

Recognizing that there is a qualitative dimension to the learnings about community-identified assets, Civic Arts further refined them into four categories:

— **Creative Expression:** Spaces where people gather to share out (formally or informally) the type of creative expression that they enjoy making or that connects them. Examples include the Bombay Bistro in Rockville and comedy night at the Silver Branch Brewing Company.

— **Collective Creative Making:** Spaces where people gather to both learn from each other and enjoy the experience of community around a favorite form of culture or creativity. This includes spaces such as community quilting and fiber arts circles (Friendship Start Quilters Workshops, Potomac Fiber Arts Guild), informal acoustic music jams, and camera clubs.

— **Community Events and Gatherings:** Compared to cultural activities that are more formally organized, these spaces tend to be either smaller and/or places where people engage in modes of creative expression not typically recognized within the traditional arts-community. These include role playing, ice skating (Veterans Plaza), skateboarding (K-Town Skate Spotz) and the NeedleChasers biennial quilt show.

— **Connecting with "Other," together:** This final categorization is harder to define. Many people identified places of creative and cultural expression that touched broadly on experiences of religion, spirituality or connection with nature; sometimes individual experiences, but often in groups. These include the choir at St. Rose of Lima parish in Gaithersburg, practicing yoga at sunset, mindfulness meditation gatherings, walking in Brookside Gardens. The researchers labeled these resources as places where people feel connected to the "Other"—someone or something that is both greater than and outside of one's self.

The data yielded three specific insights:

— **Distributed Geography of Creativity and Culture:** Traditional cultural assets and community-identified cultural assets do not share the same geography. Traditional cultural assets tend to fall along major corridors and within major population areas. Community-identified cultural assets are spread more broadly throughout the county, reflecting day-to-day relationships between residents and their own forms of cultural production. These different sets of points seem to work in a complementary fashion, and together provide a very broad picture of cultural access within the county.

— **An Expansive Geography of Arts and Culture:** The two data sets barely overlapped. Of the 332 traditional cultural assets and the 205 community-identified assets, six percent of the points overlapped. In other words, while residents do associate traditional arts venues with creative and cultural production, they do not associate such venues with their own creative expression. This suggests that by considering how arts and culture activities are manifested in the lives of residents as well as how the arts manifest within traditional cultural organizations, the geography of arts and culture expands dramatically.

— **Shift from Different Types of Media to Different Types of Relationships:** While traditional cultural assets could be divided into traditional classical understandings of creative media (dance, visual arts, literary, theater, literary, etc.), the community-identified assets grouped more into categories that could be better understood in terms of **relationships** (relationships between producers and producers, productions and receivers, producers and "other"). In other words, the focus of meaning shifted from the type of thing being expressed, to the relationship in which something was produced.

From both the mapped data and the reflections and observations of Community Conveners, the team concluded that local creative gatherings are experientially distinct from the traditional artistic venues, organizations and programs that are more commonly supported by public funding. The three specific insights that emerged from the mapping of community data point to a lived experience of creativity and culture within the county that is culturally based, closer to home and focused on the development of connections with local neighbors.

4. AHCMC: Economic Impact of the Arts, and AHCMC Grantmaking

AHCMC retained Imani Drayton, an economist based in Takoma Park, to explore three questions related to the economic impact of the investment that Montgomery County has made into the arts and economic sector—particularly the impact on local business development, tourism and community revitalization. As the research plan developed, AHCMC and Drayton posited several specific questions to explore:

— Does the presence of arts organizations in a high physical density area with high employment levels lead to a multiplier effect for economic development?

— Does the presence of arts activities in low-income areas reduce crime, graffiti, and vandalism?

— Does arts education in low socioeconomic schools increase graduation rates, improve STEAM scores and close achievement gaps?

— Does the presence of arts activity/organizations attract attendance from outside the county?

— Do arts organizations contribute to the development/attraction/retention of a skilled workforce?

— Have residential property values near arts activity increased at the same or greater rates than other areas of the county, of Maryland?

— Have arts investment attracted creative businesses?

However, several months into the research process, it became clear that it would be near-impossible to generate quantitative findings on these questions. This is largely because existing data sources are simply not robust enough to look at these questions historically. Also, there are questions about whether the methodologies in existing research that has been completed elsewhere are accurate. To understand these dynamics in Montgomery County specifically, these questions would be best studied through new research projects and new data sets developed to support these questions.

Consequently, the research project shifted to analyzing one of the most easily accessible databases, AHCMC's record of grantmaking. Drayton was able to organize and then analyze data from eighteen years (2002 through 2020) by importing the data into Tableau, a visualization tool. It is important to note that grantmaking approaches evolved during this time in response to many internal and external factors—two AHCMC strategic plans, AHCMC's adoption of a racial equity statement and practices, a recession, the COVID pandemic and protests related to race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Key Observations

— Arts and cultural organizations, as well as artists, often operate within a regional context. Some of AHCMC's grantees reflect this regional reality; presenting work and collaborating with individuals and organizations outside Montgomery County to both bring new work into the County and showcase local work from Montgomery County to greater regional audiences.

— Since 2003, AHCMC has expanded its service footprint, providing grants to organizations in an increasing number of County areas.[18] For example, organizations in north central county only began applying for and receiving grant support in 2015.

— During the same time period, the amount of grant funding for arts organizations in core areas has increased. For example, arts organizations in Rockville received $155,000 in 2003. Since then, arts organizations in this zip code have received more than $23.5 million in grants.

— Most organizations funded by the Arts Council over the past 20 years fall within a budget range of $50,000 to $250,000; with grant awards averaged between $10,000 and $50,000 and a typical the median grant award of was approximately $12,000. Historically, organization grants have ranged from around $1000 to over $700,000. Such a low median compared to the maximum grant size and average budget range highlights some of the challenges presented to maintain equity between larger and smaller organizations. In FY21, AHCMC's Board approved a grants policy change, enacting a maximum grant award of $600,000 regardless of an organization's budget size, to center equitable grantmaking. AHCMC no longer provides awards over $600,000 to ensure funding for smaller, less capitalized organizations.

[18] These observations were made by analyzing the number and amount of grants awarded by Zip Code.

— Funding is divided between general operating support, project/program grants and special initiatives. In recent years, the Arts Council has steadily increased its levels of general operating support to support increased trust and allow greater flexibility in spending and investment for grantees.

5. Implications for Montgomery County's Cultural Plan

These research studies indicate that understanding how arts, culture and creativity enters into the lived experience of County residents — grounded in the perspective of the community itself — can provide a strong foundation for a future County arts and culture plan. This would complement the focus that cultural plans typically have on established arts organizations, venues and practicing artists and their operating, capital and creative needs.[19] These are some of the key considerations for a future plan:

— Explore new paradigms for expressing the purpose and understanding the impact of public arts and culture support as related to cultural and community resiliency and personal growth. This should serve as one of the foundational pillars of the County's arts and culture strategies, just as concepts of "economic development" and "vibrancy" have in the past.[20]

— Consider the diverse ways that people engage with arts and culture in their everyday lives, in addition to their interaction with more formal and traditional arts organizations and venues. In one sense, this mirrors the distinction between "arts" and "culture" that MJR's report flagged. These interactions were characterized most clearly in Civic Arts research as **"Creative Expression," "Collective Creative Making," "Community Events and Gatherings,"** and **"Connecting with 'Other,' Together."**

— Consider community actors as critical partners in the creation and implementation of studies and data collection efforts on the ground.

— Consider how a wide range of County resources and policies — beyond AHCMC grantmaking — create a network of support for the cultural life of its residents. This includes not only direct funding, access to public facilities and service delivery, but also the way that private and shared spaces could be used to further cultural life and the County policies that impact that use.

— Recognize the challenges to effective, broad-based community engagement. Planning fatigue, changed attitudes towards gathering because of the pandemic, desire not to be seen by public agencies, lack of understanding of how participation can lead to change, and distrust in planning processes are among the barriers that AHCMC's consultants experienced in these research projects. For a cultural plan, there is also the potential that for many communities in Montgomery County a "cultural plan" is a culturally-specific endeavor that has little relevance to them.

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[19] According to Civic Arts, few cultural agencies ask, "What are we missing when we only identify cultural assets by standard categories?" For the most part, this question has been explored through academic work, albeit on a smaller scale, and usually with an eye toward providing a basis for re-evaluating policy objectives and priorities. (Email correspondence with Civic Arts' Lynn Osgood, September 8, 2023).

[20] MJR Partners' report observes, anecdotally, that community cultural organizations supported the resiliency of their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Likewise, community-based cultural organizations mounted responses to address basic needs such as food and clothing, as well as outlets that supported the mental trauma of isolation."

[22] As noted by Mario Rosario Jackson et. al., "The production, dissemination, and validation of arts and culture at the neighborhood level are made possible through the contributions of many different kinds of stakeholders — both arts and non- arts entities. The networks of relationships among these entities constitute a system of support that is critical to a community's cultural vitality." Maria-Rosario Jackson, Ph.D. Joaquín Herranz, Jr. Florence Kabwasa-Green, *Art and Culture in Communities | A Framework for Measurement* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2003)

Appendix 1: Arts and Culture Funding Snapshot | View and Download HERE

Arts and Economic Prosperity 6: The Economic and Social Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture Organizations and Their Audiences in Montgomery County, Md. (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts: 2023)

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Appendix 2: Bibliography | View and Download HERE

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Appendix 3: Creative Placemaking Theory of Change

THE PROBLEM
AMERICAN CITIES, SUBURBS, AND SMALL TOWNS CONFRONT STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND RESIDENTIAL UPROOTING

THE SOLUTION
REVITALIZATION BY CREATIVE INITIATIVES THAT ANIMATE PLACES AND SPARK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE PAYOFFS
GAINS IN LIVABILITY, DIVERSITY, JOBS AND INCOMES

INNOVATIVE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010).