

Creative communities: the arts, social responsibility and sustainable planning and development

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Abstract

This paper is about the arts, social responsibility and sustainable development and presents how the arts and culture can play a significant role in regenerating communities. These issues provide the background for how viable and creative communities can be achieved through the fusion of cultural development within regions, cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods. Of course it is vital to understand the fundamental necessity of sustainable development in regard to strong economies, employment opportunities, and good access to services, attractive and safe surroundings and environmental protection. Success in achieving the principles advocated by Agenda 21 is increasingly becoming the vanguard of the artists and members of creative communities. Work addressing problems of poverty and social exclusion in refugee communities; reducing crime and the fear of crime and increasing community initiatives through arts based projects will enlighten and give hope to areas often filled with despair. The development of the arts and culture in community regeneration has been a global phenomenon for decades. Cultural authorities, local, regional and national governments and funding agencies have understood the impact of the arts in assisting communities to cope with societal pressures and the proliferation of issues that contemporary life brings. Arts programmes provide meaningful and effective ways to awaken cultural values, heightening a sense of being and place and providing a social service that opens doors to the construction of sustainable communities.

Keywords: arts, culture, sustainable, communities, regeneration, responsibility.



1 Introduction

Throughout the developing world the concept of sustainable communities grew out of the community action movement of the 1960's and the 1970's which was responding to the top-down delivery of welfare services which emphasised the individual's problems rather than seeing the social machine as malfunctioning. This approach reinforced the dependency of the disadvantaged on welfare and state bureaucracies. The community action movement campaigned for the development of partnerships between local authorities and local communities based on the principle of sharing power, resources and information. This would enable communities to define and realise their own aspirations and help individuals and groups to develop skills and abilities to organise their own community needs. During this same period, the community arts movement was coming to the fore and enjoyed a considerably free wheeling ride of social activism, although mainly confined to the more privileged members of the community. In the 1980's community arts practices were proposing the use of art to effect social change and affect social policies and encompass the expression of political action.

Artists working in the field of Community arts became known as "cultural workers", emphasising the socially conscious nature of the work, countering the tendency to see art-making as a frivolous occupation, a pastime as opposed to important labour.

Disillusionment with the economic policies of the 1990's, mainly in the field of property-led approaches that were overriding cultural policies, gave rise to a new wave of emphasis on arts and cultural activities in urban regeneration. Comedia, the far-reaching report in 1996 picked up on the new mood and pointed out the arts and culture were increasingly important aspects of urban regeneration. However, a greater amount of financial support had been directed to capital investment, thus failing to exploit participatory arts activities to support community-led renewal.

The Comedia report claimed:

"Compared to high-profile capital projects, community based and participatory cultural activity is seen to have several key strengths: -

- *Cultural activity is relatively cheap and very cost effective*
- *It can be developed quickly in response to local needs and ideas*
- *It is flexible and can change as required*
- *It offers a potentially high return for very low risk*
- *It can have an impact out of all proportion to its cost" [1]*

This paper focuses on notions of creative endeavour relating to issues of social responsibility and sustainable development. A number of approaches are presented with particular reference to work in the Creative Communities movement. Landry and Bianchini state that planners find it easier to think in terms of expenditure on highways, car parks and physical redevelopment



schemes rather than on soft infrastructures such as training initiatives for skills enhancement, the encouragement of a lively night-time economy, grants to voluntary organizations to develop social networks or social innovations and the decentralisation of powers to build up local capacity for creativity and encourage people to have a stake in the running of neighbourhoods [2].

2 Creative projects and the construction of sustainable communities

The development of the arts and culture in community regeneration has been a global phenomenon for decades. Cultural authorities, local, regional and national governments and funding agencies have understood the impact of the arts in assisting communities to cope with societal pressures and the proliferation of issues that contemporary life brings. Arts programmes provide meaningful and effective ways to awaken cultural values, heightening a sense of being and place and providing a social service that opens doors to the disadvantaged in most effective ways.

The regeneration of neighbourhoods and communities have undergone a radical series of changes over the last two decades and the collaboration with arts based projects has been closely implicated in these processes of transformation. Indeed it is widely acknowledged that a subtle and complex interplay between regeneration strategies, cultural projects and cultural policies have been a driving force in these improved sustainable communities. Economic progress and the quest for greater wealth now move hand in hand with a preoccupation for social regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. The reorienting of urban policy affects the way culture and the arts have been viewed at the community and urban level. The Renaissance City Report from Singapore's Ministry of Information and the Arts introduces strategies for cultural development working with the state, the arts community and the economic community working together for Singapore's cultural and economic benefits [3].

Communities can be of many different types: the urban or rural community, but also, as Mitchell claims, even an architectural design studio can provide a small-scale model of a creative community. He has constructed the *Sustaining Creative Communities* studio which has become a place where people work intensively together, interact in formal and non-formal ways, and produce creative output. At larger scales, he claims, we think of a university, or a city or an entire nation as potential creative communities. His studio aims to discuss the role of architecture and urban design in establishing and sustaining creative communities, and the emerging role of information technology in intensifying and geographically extending creative communities [4].

The Aga Khan has also established a collaborative project, ArchNet, which is the world's largest on-line resource on architecture, urbanism, landscape design and related issues with a particular focus on the Muslim world. The creative global community that ArchNet represents, with over 6000 members from 110 countries, joins the academic and professional resources of two prominent universities and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture [5].



My recent work at UNESCO involved a role in creating a global studio, the *Digi-Arts* project for creative works via the internet, working with a team of people and reaching out to children worldwide. The web-site/portal is expected to engage children in schools and out of schools around the world, thus creating a sustainable environment of distance education. Via this major new development, it is UNESCO's aim to bring the knowledge era and all it has to offer to secondary schools in all countries. Apart from schools with easy access to computer technology, the following schools are classified as priorities based on the UNESCO "Education for All" and the 1992 Rio Declaration (Agenda 21) targeted criteria:

- to schools whose pupils are poor, disadvantaged and disabled
- to children who have difficulty of access to education
- to improve the level and quality of learning in relation to computer technology and digital arts
- expanding skills with effective programmes geared to future employment and productivity
- equal opportunity to boys and girls
- increasing access via these mass media and communication channels to affect social action in terms of behavioural change [6].

Efforts to improve social needs and local surroundings through the revitalization of town centres, tackling degraded urban environments and ensuring harmonious interaction with neighbourhoods are happening worldwide. Creative mechanisms are increasingly being used in areas of healthcare, refugees, poverty eradication, housing, servicing disabled groups, homelessness and community enterprise.

"*L'Art pour l'Espoir*" was an arts programme at CASP the largest refugee agency in Paris. This programme brought the arts to refugees as a means of improving their lives, not only as a source of enjoyable activities, but as a proven catalyst to learn new skills and vocational training. These refugee communities can be given the opportunity to improve their lives through the proven strategies of arts-based programmes. These programmes also have the capacity to assist refugees and the homeless to contribute to the cultural life of the city or country in which they find themselves. The project activates the artistic and cultural life and abilities of refugees as a means of improving their social, psychological and physical well-being. Developing cultural programmes incorporating all the art forms will enable refugees to feel less depressed, motivated to improve their situation, develop a sense of self-worth and display a variety of skills according to their cultural background. Such projects contribute to the long-term sustainability and social development of cities and communities [7].

Within the Arts and Healthcare communities, a number of practitioners are realising that collaboration with the arts is capable of bringing about more beneficial results in regard to lessening medication and time spent recovering in hospital. New developments in the medical field need to be implemented at the early stages of education. For example, doctors need increased understanding in the broad spectrum of the arts and their role in healing. These issues have been neglected in traditional medical training and at the earlier stages of upper



secondary education. Artists working in healthcare environments are providers of sustainable environments using creativity—a recognized source for improving one’s sense of well-being, one’s sense of self and self-worth, and the positive effects of these measures in the healing process. Doctors and healthcare workers have developed new skills in communication and bedside manner as a result of working with artists. There is a growing movement where hospitals are turning to the arts as an additional aid to healing that provides a creative tool to support health care [8].

In the design of healthcare facilities, hospital architects are working collaboratively with landscape architects, artists and designers to build sustainable harmonious healing environments. Architects are designing hospitals with a new ambience resulting in positive outcomes in regard to the healing process and time spent in hospital. The influx of revolutionary hospital designs include greatly increased garden space and areas dedicated to meditation. Common sense tells us that a hospital with rooms opening on to gardens and balconies with a view of foliage and positioned to receive natural light will impact on the level of improvement of emotional, and consequently, physical health [9].

3 Research for sustainable communities

The creation of art as an expression of a sustainable community with community stories to tell and struggles to overcome is not a new phenomenon. However, it is only recently that this work, under the title of community arts or community cultural development, has been defined as an artistic discipline in its own right. Research programmes need to investigate the underlying principals of this work, identifying programmes that are universal and those that are culturally specific. Projects are continually in the process of being established and Zukin claims many social critics have begun to write about new public spaces being formed by the “transactional space” of telecommunications and computer technology [10].

Research programs at Harvard’s Project Zero encompass a wide variety of ages, academic disciplines and sites. The common goal is to develop new approaches using multi-disciplinarity, feeding in to the notion of sustainable, creative communities. While focusing on school and museum communities, Project Zero is beginning to explore how its research ideas are being used as vocational tools in the commercial world. Current investigations study the conditions under which professionals can accomplish good work—often using creative pathways to produce work that is both excellent in quality and socially responsible [11].

Extensive research has been undertaken through the Social Impact for the Arts Project (SIAP) tracking the quantitative effects of cultural participation on other social outcomes. A subject for this research was the evaluation of Culture Builds Communities (CBC), a three year initiative of the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia. CBC supported over 30 non profit, community based arts and non-arts organizations in the region that provide high quality arts experiences in disadvantaged, low income communities. CBC linked artistic



goals with community goals while supporting the development of a strong administrative infrastructure to support these efforts. Grants were made to enhance artistic quality, support artists teaching in community settings and build programmatic links between arts and non-arts organizations in a neighbourhood. CBC also advocated for the inclusion of the arts in broader efforts in youth development, community development and city policy.

SIAP tracked the degree of cultural participation in these communities and, using statistical models and census data correlated this participation with other community outcomes. Among other outcomes, the SIAP data found that low-income neighborhoods with high degrees of cultural participation:

- were five times more likely to have very low levels of delinquency and three times more likely to have very low levels of truancy
- changed the social environment by fostering a sense of “collective efficacy” in which individuals are much more likely to rate the quality of life in their neighborhood as “excellent”
- were more likely to remain ethnically and economically diverse than other diverse areas, providing a means of moving a neighborhood from “accidental” to “intentional” diversity
- combined with high diversity rates were strong predictors of the likelihood that a Philadelphia block group would increase its population during the 1990’s
- stimulated a regional audience for community arts, meaning that community arts and cultural programs create “non-geographical” communities that serve as a counter balance to the barriers that separate rich and poor neighborhoods

While this research is particular to the structure and culture of US cities, it points to quantitative ways that widespread arts and cultural participation effect positive community change [12].

4 Creative community projects for social responsibility and sustainable development in Africa

Recent work at UNESCO investigating creative communities in Africa, effectively demonstrated how arts projects can affect a wider, holistic view when dealing with various groups. These programmes are capable of producing more well-balanced, fully developed human beings able to make worthwhile contributions to society; able to understand more clearly social mores; or simply to help people manage their lives in a more satisfying manner.

This however, needs to be viewed in the context that although Africa has great talent and rich cultures, some countries within the continent, such as South Africa are sadly lacking in institutions to train and support their culture. There are few cultural industries and in the rare case where they exist, the local people are excluded from the benefits. Africa has the arts but lacks the arts institutes; it has the traditions and talents but insufficient teachers skilled in guiding and nurturing this talent, based on their traditions.



There is a great threat facing Africa – without infrastructure, without institutions and access to training and education in the arts, the artistic traditions are in danger of being lost. Africa stands at risk of becoming consumers of other people’s creative industries rather than the producers of their own unique creativity.

Access to and participation in the arts, cultural expression, and the preservation of heritage are basic human rights; they are not luxuries, nor are they privileges as many have been led to believe. Freedom of expression is a fundamental prerequisite for democracy. The arts, culture and heritage have a vital role to play in development, nation building and sustaining democracy. The arts need to be empowered to fulfil these tasks. The following case studies present the wider significance of how the arts have the capacity to fulfil a vision of establishing a sustainable nation for future development.

Key policy makers are realising the potential of the arts and the establishment of creative communities. These small communities establish a sense of identity and become a source of income and pride. The complex interaction of creativity and discipline, of social organisation and individual expression are part of the story why creative communities are so important and how they contribute to economic growth and Africa’s long term sustainability and cultural development [13].

5 Brief description of African case studies using the arts as means for education regarding social responsibility and sustainable development

- *Centre for Intercultural Learning and Talent Development* in Ghana harnesses the local youth and secondary students to equip them with artistic skills, social skills and information about pertinent life issues. Cultural issues have been removed from the school curricula, so this NGO delivers an education through theatre, music and various art forms. Their teaching of the arts is focused on socially pertinent issues such as drugs, gender and health etc. Moral songs are taught incorporated into theatrical performances in their own language. This provides a forum for beneficial communication sessions, research and results in getting the students involved and retaining their interest. Major health issues such as hygiene, reproductive health and AIDS are presented in creative and often humorous ways. Environmental issues such as the encroachment on the rain forest and social issues such as street children are also part of the learning process. By establishing a formal unit, the *Cultural Learning Certificate*, courses in rhythm, drum, music etc., help solve many social problems and teach life skills in a positive and effective manner.
- *Moving Into Dance (MID)* is a community based organisation from South Africa which supports the integration of people from different cultural backgrounds and different abilities through dance and teacher training. *MID* works through a fusion of Western and African dance



elements aiming to break down the barriers that apartheid had built up between people of different colours. *MID* has been involved in the rehabilitation of youth, building of social bridges and the reconstruction of society in South Africa. They conducted successful classes for school children at the primary and secondary level which have developed into a programme using dance as a teaching tool for subjects like maths and science. *MID* builds a creative community of people and nurturing their overall development is one of the prime aims.

- *The Market Theatre Photoworkshop (MPW)* is the only community-based photographic training institution in Johannesburg. The workshop offers bursaries and provides affordable photographic education amongst groups that historically have had limited access to the media. *MPW* runs life skills and business skills as well as photographic courses which prove to be a viable source of education, equipping aspiring photographers, many of them secondary school students, with the necessary skills to generate an income and secure employment.
- *Art Teachers Initiative* is a creative community education initiative and is located in the Port Elizabeth area now known as the Nelson Mandela Metropole. This NGO run by Michael Barrie has the enormous task of training art teachers for South African schools. The responsibility is immense due to the impact of Apartheid and the consequences of that regime. The present government values an arts education for schools and its associated benefits, but in this Rainbow Nation where the first world sits alongside the third world, co-existing but not touching, the Art Teachers Initiative is in the state where two worlds are slowly merging. The Art Teachers Initiative has to deal with more than teaching art to prospective teachers. Their role is delivering a model demonstrating education regarding social issues and the development of life skills from which best practices could be drawn.
- *Sibikwa Community Theatre Project's* mission states its aim is to promote theatre and performance arts education with the aim of integrating the growth of life skills, vocational training and cultural awareness in a multi-lingual approach using the full spectrum of performance disciplines.

6 Conclusion

Many of the effects of incorporating creative projects within communities (e.g. improved self-esteem, and personal and social development), are highly pertinent to the task of tackling disaffection and social exclusion. Although a great deal is known about how poverty, inequality and education relate in different parts of the world, very little is known how to achieve greater equality of opportunity for a sustainable, socially responsible society. Creative projects are easily accessible and usually deeply entrenched in the cultures of all nations. Hundreds of research studies, program evaluations and research analyses provide recent compelling evidence that involvement in community cultural/creative activities



will prepare people for the challenges of life and work. This has a universal application and needs to be adopted by policy makers and planners if people, particularly in developing countries are to have every opportunity for enhancing their chances.

Our lives need to be directed according to sustainable objectives. The arts and culture can play a significant role in facilitating the whole cross-section of society to investigate, explore and enjoy the principles of sustainable living, at the same time supporting those whose opportunities are inaccessible. The arts are working with young people, local governments, social services, disadvantaged and marginalized groups, educational institutions, businesses, NGOs and a range of other community groups. The arts do have the capacity to sustain communities to enable people to enjoy a rich and satisfying quality of life based on consumption of an equal share of the world's resources, without destroying the birthright of future generations.

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- [4] William Mitchell is Dean, School of Architecture and Planning, Harvard University. The programme Sustaining Creative Communities was established with the Singapore-MIT Alliance and the MIT Industrial Liaison Programme. http://web.mit.edu/sma/events/special_events/mitchell.html
- [5] ArchNet [www.ArchNet.org] was launched in September, 2002 by His Highness the Aga Khan, Imam [spiritual leader] of the Ismaili Muslims; Charles M. Vest, President of MIT; and Lawrence H. Summers, President of Harvard University as a global electronic resource designed to bridge cultural, civilisational and digital divides. For further information contact the Information Department, 60270 Gouvieux, France. Email: amyn.ahamed@aiglemont.org or Shiraz Alibhai, Managing Director, ArchNet, Cambridge, MI, USA.
- [6] Agenda 21 is the report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992.
- [7] Joubert established the project at Centre d'Action Sociale Protestant CASP, the largest refugee agency in Paris and at that time housed two thousand, four hundred refugees each night. 40% of the refugees come from Eastern Europe, 30% come from Africa and 30% from other places. The programme was aimed at bringing arts projects to refugees as a means of improving their lives, not only as a source of enjoyable activities, but as a proven catalyst to learn new skills, vocational training and psycho-social development.



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