

LISC

Twin Cities

*Helping people
and places prosper*

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

The Promise of Arts-based Community Development



The Twin Cities is recognized across the country as a hotbed for the arts, which not only enhances our cultural life but strengthens the region in other ways. Dozens of art galleries, theater companies, music venues, design firms, and other arts organizations attract talented workers, high-paying firms, and growth industries to this area. This natural relationship between cultural abundance and economic prosperity is a cornerstone of the influential “creative class” theory that explains why some cities thrive and others wither.

Yet creativity is not limited to privileged, upper-middle class circles. The arts make a substantial impact in low-income and minority communities by knitting community bonds, inspiring young people, animating a new sense of possibility, bolstering economic development, and forging a positive identity for challenged neighborhoods. Here are a few examples:

Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis The room buzzes with excitement as onlookers gasp, laugh, or silently scrutinize the brash pop art at an All My Relations Gallery opening in Minneapolis’ Phillips community. Introducing contemporary Native American artists from across the country, the show includes a painting that depicts a vacant-looking fashion model with an ankle-length headdress and a scene of Native American life captured in an anime cartoon. Discussions sparked by the work continue over cheese and crackers at the adjoining PowWow Grounds coffee shop and spill out onto Franklin Avenue, which has been recently designated as the American Indian Cultural Corridor.

North Minneapolis Students from ages 11 to 17 sit at easels to compose still-life sketches of grapes, pots, and bottles—one of many art and design classes each week in a series of renovated storefronts at Broadway and Emerson Avenues. This is the home of Juxtaposition Arts, which offers neighborhood youth both coursework and apprenticeships in contemporary art, graphic design, environmental design, and textiles, as well as offering studios to working artists and a public gallery space.

University Avenue, St. Paul A fitness instructor choreographs a Zumba salute to the new Green Line light rail, which is performed publicly at several of the stops. A stained-glass artist and a poet beautify a chain-link fence around a parking lot. A flamenco performer brings a troupe into restaurants and shops, singing Christmas carols during the holiday season. These are just a few of the more than 100 art projects

conceived by people in six inner city St. Paul neighborhoods to boost community engagement and economic development. It's all part of Springboard for the Arts' Irrigate project, focused on creating a unique sense of place along the Central Corridor.

All over the Twin Cities Each year a diverse delegation of two dozen specially chosen participants—with artists and community leaders equally represented—come together at Intermedia Arts' Creative Cities Leadership Institute (CCLI) over five months for an intensive course exploring how arts and culture can improve communities for everyone. They learn from each other's experience as well as from CCLI faculty, speakers, field trips and hands-on projects.

"The arts can help people love a place. The arts can help people make a place more welcoming to others—and these are both qualities you find in places that thrive," notes Erik Takeshita, deputy director at Twin Cities LISC. That's why LISC supports all four of these cultural initiatives. Helping community residents transform their neighborhoods into good places to live, work, and raise a family is the mission of LISC's Building Sustainable Communities program. The program focuses on five Twin Cities communities facing economic and social challenges, three of which are directly served by the projects described: North Minneapolis, South Minneapolis, and the Central Corridor.

Economic and cultural benefits

"These are all great examples of arts-based development, which is bigger than just restaurant revenues rising after you build a new theater," Takeshita explains. "Arts and culture can help heal a community." Marc Morial, former New Orleans mayor and National Urban League president, agrees, noting that "youth participating in our arts programs are less likely to visit our legal system and more likely to achieve academic success and become contributing members of their community."

"The creative economy of the Twin Cities does not extend to North Minneapolis," observes DeAnna Cummings, executive director of Juxtaposition Arts. "So we want to bring creative energy to this part of town but also show the creative energy already here."

Juxtaposition offers free art classes to kids age 9-21, which can lead to paid apprenticeships and connections with local arts institutions like the Walker Art Center. Artistic Director Roger Cummings notes the instruction is rigorous, not simply exercises to boost self-esteem, with three-hour classes three times a week focused on learning technique and participating in student critiques of each other's work.

"Art is used as a medium to give young people a voice, along with critical thinking and discipline," says Juxtaposition Instructor Caroline Kent.

Culture makes the biggest impact on a community when everyone feels welcome and empowered to participate, explains Jun Li-Wang, who worked in the community development field before joining Springboard for the Arts in the innovative role as Artist Community Organizer. "Some artists can potentially highlight what neighbors want to see in their neighborhoods," she says. "Art is a way to encourage people to get together and do things they wouldn't otherwise do."



An Irrigate arts project along St. Paul's Central Corridor

The All My Relations gallery is just one project of the Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI), which sponsors artist entrepreneur trainings. It's also established East Franklin Avenue as the American Indian Cultural Corridor, with murals painted by neighborhood youth, public art celebrating the Indian community's history in the neighborhood, and a planned pedestrian plaza and public market next to the light rail station. "This is about transforming expectations," says NACDI Community Development Specialist Andy Hestness. "We want to create more of a sense of opportunity and possibility in this community."

Creative citymaking

Intermedia Arts, a fixture on the Minneapolis art scene for 40 years, plays a pivotal role in promoting arts-based community development across the Twin Cities. Since 2001 it has brought artists together with organizers, educators, activists, and other community leaders at the Creative Community Leadership Institute (CCLI) to test out new ideas for strengthening communities and to exploring issues of rank, power and privilege in American life. In 2012, CCLI expanded to Fargo-Moorhead, and is now looking at other communities in Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Last year they launched Creative Citymaking, another trailblazing project that teams artists and Minneapolis planners to think in new ways about the future of communities and engaging the people who live there.

Artists are often seen as the vanguard for gentrification, says Intermedia Arts Artistic Director Theresa Sweetland, so it's crucial that arts-based community development probe the questions of "Economic development and community vitality for whom? For the people living there now or for new people who will move in?" 

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