

# PROGRESSIVE PLANNING

The Magazine of Planners Network

## Arts, Culture and Community

Issue Editor: Ayse Yonder



Photo by Antonio Roselli, Community Design Group

Flower bearers from Heart of the Beast Puppet Theater in Minneapolis

## Artists as Community Developers

By Ann Markusen

Artists have been under-appreciated as participants in community and neighborhood development in cities around the world. On the one hand, they have been lumped into a "creative class" whose hedonistic preferences for residing in lively, diverse cities are credited with generating economic growth. On the other hand, artists are sometimes accused of playing a gentrifying role, displacing lower-income residents from urban neighborhoods.

Both of these are misconceptions and partial truths, obscuring the unique, grounded and generally positive role that artists play in urban and ethnic neighborhoods. Artists' actual contributions depend on how the built environment and community development are managed by planners, so an understanding of how the arts ecology works is important for making good planning practice. I use the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul as a laboratory for illustrating artists' contributions and note how planners have facilitated these contributions and how they could do better.

[Cont. on page 7]

### INSIDE:

MARCUSE ON  
KATRINA

PUBLIC ART  
AND WILD RICE

CULTURE AS  
COMMUNITY  
CONNECTOR

THE NEXT LA

MANY OTHERS...

## Markusen [Cont. from page 1]

### Artists and the Creative Class

From a progressive planning point of view, what is wrong with the notion of a creative class drawn to diverse cities and the implied causal connection between diversity and high-tech success as popularized by Richard Florida in his recent book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*? To begin with, creative class status is reduced to higher educational attainment, a definition that automatically excludes working-class people. But human creativity, conceptually, cannot be conflated with years of schooling. People at all levels of education exercise considerable inventiveness: home care workers figure out ingenious ways of dealing with testy and disabled clients; people schooled on the streets orchestrate brilliant petty crimes; repair people and technicians find remarkable ways of fixing machines and improving their design. Secondly, Florida's sole measure of diversity is the presence of gay male households. When one uses race or ethnicity as a measure, the correlation between diversity and high-tech growth disappears. Third, the location and community activities of artists (writers, musicians and visual and performing artists) differ markedly from those of other members of Florida's so-called creative class—accountants, lawyers, scientists, engineers, managers.

It makes sense to focus on artists as urban actors distinct from other highly educated groups. As a group, artists exhibit high levels of schooling but relatively low earnings. Artists do tend to live in diverse urban neighborhoods, whereas engineers and managers favor homogeneous suburbs. Artists are drawn to inner-city neighborhoods because they are affordable and offer access to quality workspace and to each other. Performing artists—dancers, choreographers, actors, directors and musicians—because they rely on collective performing arts spaces and quirkier audiences, are even more apt to live in inner cities than visual artists and writers, but all artists are more centrally inclined than the rest of the workforce.

Despite their solitary work habits, many artists participate actively in politics, voting in high numbers and using their visual and performance skills in political campaigns. It is believed that artists vote predominantly "left." Artists are often supported by elites, through direct patronage or foundation-channeled grants, but are nevertheless frequently opposed to the latter's values—aesthetic and political. Artists remain a powerful source of articulated opposition to the societal status quo and a major force for innovation.

In the built environment of the city, artists play multiple roles in stabilizing and upgrading neighborhoods, both through their presence and occupation of space and through their active community engagement. Three kinds of artistic space help to stabilize urban neighborhoods and facilitate artists' roles in community development: artists' clubhouses; live/work and studio buildings; and small-scale performing arts spaces. Many of these are rehabbed former industrial buildings that offer spacious work and performance space at an affordable price.

### The Flourishing of Arts in the Twin Cities

In the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, many artists work in and regularly visit "clubhouses"—dedicated spaces that serve amateur as well as accomplished artists on a community or genre basis. These include the Loft Literary Center,

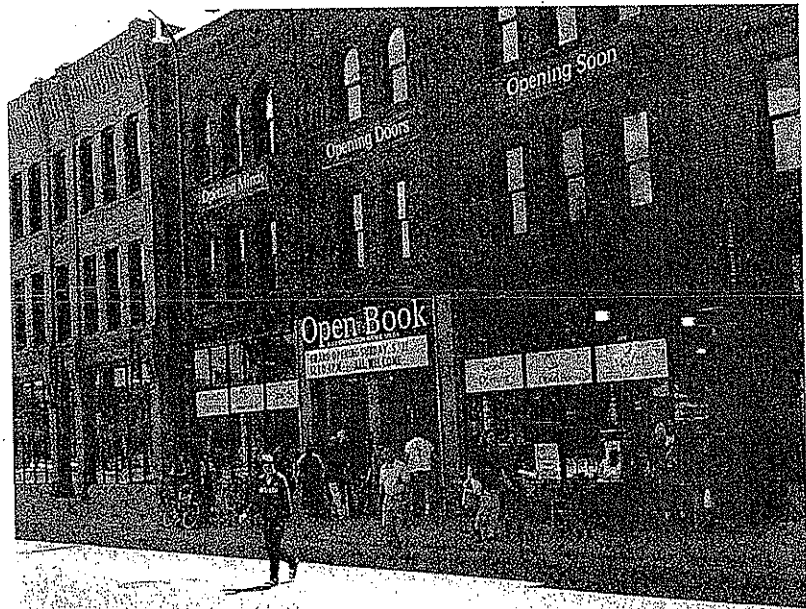


Photo by Bob Williams

Open Book, home to the Loft Literary Center, on opening day

Playwrights' Center, Textile Center, Northern Clay Center, Composers' Forum, Minnesota Center for Photography and Independent Film Project. These also include Homewood Studios, which serves a northside working-class, African American neighborhood, and Intermedia Arts, which serves a southside ethnically mixed and increasingly immigrant neighborhood. In these dedicated spaces, artists and their audiences come together to learn about each others' work, receive feedback and mentoring, share equipment and space, build networks and learn about funding and presentation opportunities.

The Twin Cities also hosts a large number of artist live/work buildings, among them Lowertown Lofts, Northern Warehouse, Tilsner Artists →

Cooperative and Frogtown Family Lofts, all in St. Paul, and studio buildings, including Grain Belt, California Building and Traffic Zone, all in Minneapolis. These offer artists an affordable space to live and work in the presence of other artists struggling with many of the same artistic and economic issues. They function as venues for art crawls and other community events and ensure that artists are on the street at all hours of the day and night, keeping crime rates down and stimulating re-use of nearby facilities, such as that now used by the old Farmers Market in St. Paul.

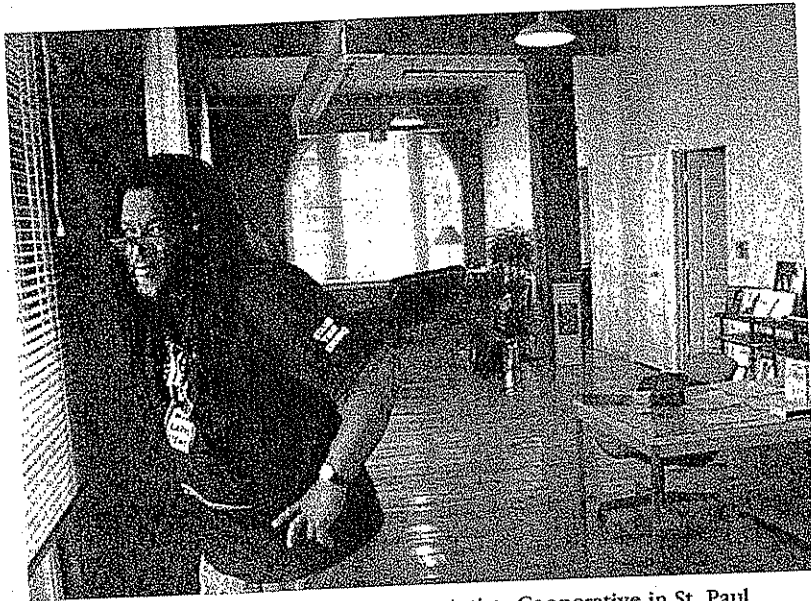
Small-scale performing arts spaces, such as theaters or dance venues embedded in neighborhoods, stabilize and invigorate commercial areas and often relate to the unique character of the community. The Twin Cities hosts fifty-five theaters and a number of dedicated dance spaces, plus many music venues that serve these purposes. While the largest of these are entertainment destinations surrounded by parking ramps, and while they receive disproportionate shares of public arts and economic development funding, many others have forged close ties to neighborhood residents.

interest-free loan of \$325,000 to do the renovations, and HOB also won a \$150,000 loan from the Neighborhood Revitalization Program, to be repaid through service to the neighborhood. The neighborhood, increasingly Latino, rallied to help clean up the building—it needed a new roof, standing water pumped out and every surface washed. Across the street, Latino merchants had, all with private money, redeveloped vacant space into a *mercado* and new restaurants, with rental housing upstairs. Through a carefully built partnership of mutual respect, HOB and the Latino Business Association are now taking over the huge, vacant Minnesota Antiques building to use as an incubator for Latino businesses and as a Latino community network space. The building will also house the theater, giving it a place to rehearse, build puppets (now done in the theater aisles) and run the office (now in the old balcony).

### Artists and Gentrification

The mushrooming of artistic activity in some inner-city neighborhoods has in some cases prompted concerns about gentrification and community displacement. Planners and communities are also concerned that artists' space may reap subsidies—for low-income housing, for instance—that may crowd out other worthy and poorer recipients. In some cities, like New York City, tensions between long-time working-class and minority residents of a neighborhood and incoming young artists moving into apartments and industrial spaces have been high for decades, as described in Sharon Zukin's pioneering 1982 book, *Loft Living*. Real estate developers often use artists—and sometimes even their sweat labor—as a vanguard for wholesale neighborhood turnover, sometimes subsidizing galleries and performance spaces as a way of making the neighborhood more hip. Zukin argues that artists' conversions of lofts for live/work space contributed to deindustrialization, but the causal link is difficult to prove. In Manhattan's Soho and Tribeca, the departure of small manufacturers may have been accelerated, but the larger phenomenon, fed by the pull of cheaper and more functional suburban sites and cheap imports, happened in many cities across the country with no artistic incursion. In some cities, pioneer low-income artists have been displaced by wealthier galleries and more prosperous residents. This process is less problematic in deindustrializing and depopulating neighborhoods in cities like Paducah, Kentucky, Cleveland and St. Paul's Lowertown, which have benefited from artists moving into vacant industrial space and increasing personal security and economic activity. Also, many artists occupying such space are of the neighborhood to begin with, so the artistic use of such space constitutes a community retention success.

Photo by Roy Close, Artspace



Jusenius Hall in his studio at the Tilsner Artists Cooperative in St. Paul

An outstanding example of how artistic space has helped to revitalize and stabilize a low-income neighborhood is Heart of the Beast (HOB) Puppet Theater. Begun in the 1970s by counter-culture young people, HOB works with larger-than-life puppets worn by the players and relies on original scripts and live music, much of it now international ethnic folk material. After working out of a series of churches and lofts, HOB worked with the City of Minneapolis to lease and then buy a former porn theater (once a family theater) in the poorest neighborhood of town. After some dragging of its feet, the City gave the theater troupe a ten-year,



Many artists, along with other lower-income residents, are displaced when property taxes and rents begin to rise along with the incursion of higher-income residents attracted to the buzz that artists create in neighborhoods they have helped to renovate. One way of preventing this dynamic, so powerful because of private land ownership rights in our society, is to build and hold artistic space in common as cooperatives, non-profit organizations or land banks. Artspace, Inc, a Twin Cities-based national pioneer in the reuse of older buildings for artistic space, has for almost twenty years gone this route rather than turn over ownership to private parties.

Beyond matters of space, artists make many contributions to community viability and life. Artists produce commissioned and informal public art that enlivens the community visually, and they often participate in planning parks and cultural facilities. Artists are often actively engaged in community events, such as parades, festivals and fairs, and neighborhood politics. Heart of the Beast, for example, unfurls its puppets every year for a themed May Day parade down the south side, ending up in Powderhorn Park, where admirers from all over the city come to view them. It also partnered with a vibrant ethnic business community to revitalize a commercial strip. Artists help to create the vision that Jane Jacobs celebrated in *Death and Life of the Great American Cities*—a series of distinctive, stable neighborhoods with porous borders that invite visits from other city residents.

Cultural planning is an exciting contemporary frontier for planners, especially because it increasingly demands collaboration among land use, economic development and cultural policy agencies and the public. Planners make momentous decisions, through zoning, infrastructure provision and urban redevelopment schemes that shape the cultural map of a city. In the past decade in the Twin Cities, too many city and state public sector resources have gone into subsidizing large, "fine art" destination theaters and museums while small-

er-scale, neighborhood-embedded artistic spaces have had to scrap for funding. Better intelligence on and articulation of the dividends that artists and



Photo by Roy Close, Artspace

An artist with her son in her residential live/work unit at Frogtown Family Lofts (St. Paul)

art spaces make to communities can alter this pattern and nurture artistic activity as a key ingredient in community development.

*Ann Markusen is a professor and Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs, and director of the Project on Regional and Industrial Economics at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. For her recent work on artists and urban development, visit [www.bhh.umn.edu/projects/prie](http://www.bhh.umn.edu/projects/prie) for publications such as: "The Artistic Dividend: The Hidden Contributions of the Arts to Regional Development" (2003); "From Clubhouse to Hothouse: The Evolution and Impact of Artists' Centers" (2005); "Urban Development and the Politics of a Creative Class" (Environment and Planning, forthcoming); and "The Artistic Dividend: Urban Artistic Specialization and Economic Development Implications" (Urban Studies, forthcoming).*

## SAVE THE DATE

### Planners Network Conference 2006

Tending the Garden: From Grassroots to Green Roofs

Thursday, June 8 - Sunday, June 11

Chicago, IL