



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **Creative Placemaking: The Next Phase for ArtPlace**

*Address to the ArtPlace Summit in Los Angeles.*

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### **I. Introduction: The Birth of ArtPlace**

What a pleasure it is to be here with all of you who have given definition to creative placemaking. Over the course of these couple of days, we'll all have the opportunity to understand the various ways in which this multidimensional, vibrant and powerful movement is shaping communities throughout America.

You all have been doing the work we call creative placemaking for a very long time. But it received an indispensable lift almost five years ago when Rocco Landesman took the reins at the National Endowment for the Arts. I wanted to share with you just a bit of that creation story.

I had the pleasure of getting to know Rocco when I was running the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis and he was running the Jujamcyn theater group with the patriarch of the McKnight family, Jim Binger. A couple of things were clear when Rocco's appointment was announced. First, he'd make sure the White House dress code included cowboy boots. Second, he would bring the same combination of intellectual brilliance and political savvy to Washington that he had displayed in New York. And third, he would not rest until he had re-infused the endowment with the kind of urgent energy and uncompromising vision that the arts and cultural community deserved – and desperately needed.

So when he asked me to come and visit his new offices right arrived he arrived in D.C., I pretty much knew he was cooking up something. When I saw Joan Shikagawa sitting on the sofa in his office, it sealed the deal. Serious people with serious ideas.

Rocco explained that he wanted to commit the NEA to the proposition that arts and culture could help restore and animate American communities. Just as his experiences with historic theaters had suggested. But far more. He asked if I would join with Luis Ubinas and Darren Walker at Ford to help birth that effort. That was a tough choice – the chance to work with two of the most brilliant people in philanthropy, together with one of the great impresarios of our time. Not.

I suggested that we get started by corralling Ann Markusen at the University of Minnesota to help us frame the argument – just as she had done for the McKnight Arts program in Minnesota. Rocco and Joan agreed.

The Markusen paper confirmed what Rocco already knew: creative placemaking was thriving across the national landscape, engaging artists in the re-imagination and renewal of their communities, elevating community identity and voice in the process of community development.

Rocco's next move was to ask Luis and Darren to host a meeting at Ford of a dozen foundations that support the arts to see what role philanthropy and the NEA might play together.

When we gathered at the Ford Foundation – the presidents of Mellon, McKnight, Bloomberg, Surdna, Rockefeller, Irvine, Cargill, William Penn, Rasmussen, Kresge and Ford, together with Deutsche Bank and the NEA staff – the decision to do something mutually supportive took all of 22 minutes. Darren, in his inimitable get-to-the-point style, suggested that we formalize the relationship. Each of our institutions agreed in principle to contribute to an entity that would invest in creative placemaking projects and forge new working relationships with the NEA and its federal partners.

The institution-formation phase was put into hyperdrive, and we had our organization, ArtPlace, within a matter of months. Too slow for Rocco, but a pace out of Star Trek for the rest of us.

A number of things were remarkable about all of this. Getting risk-averse institutions to move so quickly to create a new entity to be sure. But also drawing philanthropy and financial institutions into an unprecedented and complex relationship with the agencies of the federal government. Rocco was clear that his motivation was as much elevating arts and culture on the agenda of every department of the Obama administration as it was directing philanthropic dollars into projects on the ground.

And that's exactly what happened during his tenure. Federal departments began integrating arts and culture into their programming and talking to one another about how to do it better. Rocco arranged, for example, a

two-hour meeting at the White House for a number of the ArtPlace members to meet with President Obama's Cabinet. It was striking how each of the department secretaries and presidential advisers had thought hard about the integration of arts and culture into the workings of their agencies. What Rocco began, and the Obama administration has continued, is revolutionary.

But it is also ultimately sensible and compelling.

ArtPlace staked out the ground that when you're dealing with the host of seemingly intractable, wickedly difficult problems of our time, arts and culture simply has to be at the center of that conversation. It proposed that you can't smash those problems without the kind of creativity, the kind of energy, the kind of identity perspective that the arts provide.

When you do infuse the arts, conversations are richer, they're more balanced, they have much more to do with the creative potential of inviting people to examine not only their potential for human development, but also the potential that arts and culture have to drive economic development, to drive sensitive placemaking and attachment to community and to drive the kind of long-term visioning that a community needs in order to remain vital and healthy.

The evidence of that sits in this room. In just a little under three years, ArtPlace has made over \$42 million in grants, contributed to a network of more than 100 creative placemaking projects across the country and, thanks your creativity, passion and tenacity, has brought a national spotlight to the idea of creative placemaking.

## **II. Tenets of Creative Placemaking**

So what defines this work, exactly? What is it that tethers all of us here together? Let me suggest very briefly three characteristics that help explain our joint work.

### *1. Place*

First, at the risk of stating the obvious, creative placemaking is grounded in the particulars of place. In the community development field, the idea of placemaking has been around for a long time. It pivots on the idea that places are important. Places define us. We attach to a place with an emotional energy and a sense of long-term commitment that is often definitional to how a community works, to how individual identity is formed, to how group identity is formed.

The particulars of place can be reflected in the rich architectural or historic structures in a community. But a sense of place can also trace to less tangible qualities – deeply rooted cultural traditions, significant historical legacies or shared lineages of dance, music, language and other forms of expression.

Rocco is fond of likening art to the French concept of *terroir*, which holds that the best wine reflects the unique geography, geology and microclimate of the area in which the grapes were grown. In the same way, the best art reflects its unique local influences.

Creative placemaking accordingly has the potential to do more than embellish a location. It holds the promise of creating an essence – identifying, elevating or assembling a collection of visual, cultural, social and environmental qualities that imbue a location with meaning and significance.<sup>1</sup> When we're able to connect to a city or a neighborhood through an individual or shared cultural experience, there's a magnetic pull. You want to stay committed. You want to invest. You want to build a future. These are the conditions for civic transformation.

## 2. *Community engagement*

The second quality of creative placemaking is authentic and ongoing community engagement.

Creative placemaking, to be truly successful, is created with and by a community – not to or in spite of it. Community engagement is important not only because it ensures a voice for residents in shaping the future of their community, but also because it generates social capital – those informal networks of support that bond people one to another and that bridge across difference.

The centrality of arts and culture to social cohesion is one of the arts and culture community's secret sauces. Underappreciated and insufficiently understood, this phenomenon has been meticulously documented by the 20-year Social Impact of the Arts research project conducted at the University of Pennsylvania by Mark Stern and Susan Seifert. Stern writes:

“It turned out that the arts were associated with preserving ethnic and racial diversity in urban neighborhoods, lower rates of social distress and reduced rates of ethnic and racial harassment. Perhaps most surprisingly, we found that the presence of cultural assets in urban neighborhoods was associated with economic improvements, including declines in poverty. [We] documented that it was the social and civic

engagement associated with the arts that seemed to drive these economic benefits and revitalization.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s not simply that the arts promote social well-being; they are indispensable elements of social well-being. Just as you can’t strip out health or housing or transportation from social well-being, neither can you remove the arts.

### *3. Outward orientation – an engagement with community development*

The third quality of creative placemaking is the willingness and capacity of the arts and cultural sector to assume an outward orientation.

For all sorts of understandable and justifiable reasons, the arts and culture community can often be inwardly focused. Part of that is necessary – there is no substitute for continual cultivation of artistic mission and efficient systems of finance and administration. But increasingly, that is only part of the puzzle. The fate of cultural institutions and the sector is inextricably intertwined with the fate of their host communities.

Arts and culture, even if rooted in place and tied to community engagement, will contribute to community revitalization only to the extent that they engage private, public and nonprofit policies, practices and investments. The arts have to take into account other disciplines such as health, the environment, housing, transportation, education and human services. They have to interact with the financial, governmental and nonprofit sectors.

That will require that the arts and culture sector occasionally leave the safe and secure moorings that our organizations and institutions have come to know. Sometimes, we will pivot just a bit and get it right. At other times, however, we’ll have to expand our range of motion to embrace a level of risk and uncertainty commensurate with the magnitude of the challenges we face.

But ultimately, a sector that has long stood outside the fence line of major public discussions and decisions, looking in, will have to get inside and mix it up.

Indeed, creative placemaking is a clarion call for a different form of creative engagement. Elevating the particulars of place. Drawing on community wisdom and energy. Embracing the challenges of recommitting and reinvesting in America’s poorest communities. Looking beyond one’s own institutional walls.

Cultural creativity may well be the driving force of community revitalization in the 21st century. It promises more adaptive ways of seeing, understanding, experiencing and transforming where we live, how we work, what we dream.

You occupy an important part of that creative geography. I know you are committed to making it matter. And keep in mind Martha Graham's admonition: "No artist is ahead of her time. She is her time. It is just that the others are behind the time."

### **III. Introduction of ArtPlace 2.0**

We are now entering a new phase for ArtPlace.

I want to thank Carol Coletta for her leadership. She did an amazing job at crafting a program and creating a national buzz at lightning speed.

I also want to thank Jeremy Nowak, who did a stellar job at steering ArtPlace through its transition phase. His critical thinking and superb management skills allowed us to take ArtPlace to the next level.

And finally, I want to thank each ArtPlace grantee for your important work and your contribution to advancing this movement.

But our work is not done. We have much to do to take this to the next level, and I am so pleased to be working with ArtPlace's new executive director, Jamie Bennett. Jamie has been director of public affairs at the NEA since 2009, and was promoted to additionally serve as chief of staff in June 2011. Prior to the NEA, he was chief of staff at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and chief of staff in the office of the president of Columbia University. [See more on Jamie Bennett's appointment and [background](#).]

His vision for the next phase of ArtPlace as a platform to advance a broad and inclusive conversation about creative placemaking is just right. Please welcome Jamie to the stage.

Thank you.

<sup>1</sup>McMahon, E., “The Place Making Dividend.” *Planning Commissioners Journal*, No. 80, p. 16 (Fall 2010). See more at: <http://kresge.org/about-us/presidents-corner/connecting-detroit%E2%80%99>....

<sup>2</sup>The Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania (1994-present). See Stern, M., “Rethinking Social Impact: We Can’t Talk About Social Well-Being Without the Arts and Culture,” *ARTSblog*, May 1, 2012. <http://blog.artsusa.org/2012/05/01/rethinking-social-impact-we-cant-talk....> See also Stern, M.J., & Seifert, S.C. “Documenting Civic Engagement: A Plan for the Tucson Pima Arts Council,” University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project, June 2009.