



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **Why the Arts Must be at the Table**

*Creative Placemaking: The Role of Arts in  
Community Development*

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conference on Creative Placemaking that was part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
celebration of the National Endowment for the Arts.*

### **The New Reality**

Since the time this event was conceived so many months ago, one thing has remained remarkably constant, while another has become a bit topsy-turvy.

The remarkable constant has been Jane Chu. Her grace, her thoughtfulness, her unwavering advocacy for the centrality of arts and culture in our nation's daily life. In her peripatetically miraculous visits to hundreds and thousands of communities from Alaska to Alabama, from New Hampshire to Nevada, she has reminded us continually and powerfully that it is through arts and culture that our nation uplifts the routine and tests the profound, that it interrogates the meanings of its past while probing the possibilities of its future. We are deeply in your debt Jane. It has been a deep honor and privilege to be an observer of your journey.

The slightly topsy-turvy thing is, of course, the political environment. It's a little like waking up after a medical procedure and realizing that you no longer possess a part of you that you thought was pretty important. The levels and intensity of uncertainty, angst, polarization, and fear that have been manifest in the post-election discourse make clear that something to which we have grown accustomed and on which we have come to rely is, in fact, missing.

Actually a great many things are. The inviolability of the nation's social compact that valorizes every individual's worth and dignity; a commitment to civil, balanced discourse; a celebration of shared destiny; each of us could embellish on the list pretty much indefinitely.

## **The Role of Arts and Culture**

But the question for today is what, if anything, this has to do with the arts and cultural universe – or, alternatively, what path the arts and culture universe proposes to follow in this new reality.

It depends a little bit on what end of the telescope you're looking through.

If we look through the narrow end, we can discern questions about the viability, relevance, and vitality of our national arts and culture infrastructure. Will the NEA survive in any recognizable form? The NEH? Will federal arts funding be preserved? Will Shaun Donovan and Jane Chu's pathbreaking efforts to integrate arts and culture into other federal activities endure? These are vitally important questions, and I hope today's conversations suggest a framework and set of strategies for thinking about them.

But if we look through the broader end of the telescope, a more granular set of images emerge – a pointillistic reflection of thousands of communities engaged in acts of artistic expression, cultural affirmation, and creative exploration. Those images, I would suggest, create a more immediate portrait of how our arts and cultural energies will be intertwined with our country's future.

In a word, arts and culture – in its full complexity and splendor of organizations, genres, and forms of participation – are central to defining community life. Have been, are now, and will be.

Fused as an integral component of community development, the arts reflect and help shape the social, physical, cultural and economic identity of a place – tapping deep reservoirs of heritage, bridging across difference, erecting new platforms for civic participation, and forging paths of revitalization for disinvested and otherwise marginalized communities.<sup>1</sup>

## **Three Aspects of Arts and Culture's Importance to the New Reality**

So as we immerse ourselves in the volatility, uncertainty, chaos, and ambiguity of the next years, arts and culture may be far more important than conventional thinking might have it. Let me suggest three broad reasons that may be so.

First, they will assume elevated importance because of their power to avow and fortify bedrock values of community tolerance, cohesion, and inclusion.

To be sure, Kresge's values are not everyone's values, but on the morning after the election I tried to identify for the Kresge staff the principles for which the Foundation stands as it seeks to advance opportunity in American cities. I said:

- We stand for the elevation of our shared destiny, not for an invidiously corrosive social, economic, and political ethic that enshrines individualism and self-advancement as the ultimate public virtue.
- We stand for deep, abiding, authentic respect for one another's worth and decency, not for a denigration and marginalization – indeed demonization – of those whose skin pigment, physical conditions, sexual orientation, gender, or faith differs from our own.
- We stand for the benefits of working in true partnership with individuals and organizations allied in common purpose for the advancement of the public good and the promotion of structures of mutual assistance, not for a hunkering down into silos of fear that attempt to deny the forces of equity and social change and wall off compassion for the less fortunate.
- We stand for the imperative of a creative problem-solving that calls on community wisdom, intergenerational exchange, and principled disagreement, not for the false comfort of facile judgments about complex, interconnected problems or the bombastic certitude of rhetorical hyperbole.
- And we stand for opportunity structures that dismantle, and substitute for, the persistent and pervasive racial, economic, and political barriers that so shamefully impede pathways to equality and justice for low-income people and people of color, not for the enshrinement of those barriers in public policy and the perpetuation of racial and ethnic division.

The arts impel us toward an affirmation of these values. In the words of the inimitable Rocco Landesman: “Art is not so much the predication of, as the elaboration of, our humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, the arts will play an elevated role because they propel us inexorably toward constructively disruptive civic reflection.

We're not entering an era of stasis and comfort. Forgive my optimism, but I'd like to think that that is an invitation to creative redirection, not panic and despair. A time to draw on the power of arts and culture:

- The power to interrupt our certitude by seeking to explain but declining to resolve;
- to detect order within disorder and to animate the dormant;
- to dislodge our inertias by drawing us outside of ourselves to question the ways we see the world;
- to substitute the unexpected and fresh for the conventional, insular, and stale;
- to offer beauty and confront us with the reality of the repellent;
- to present a vision of connection rather than an apologetic for isolation;
- to leave us no option but to wrestle with what is good and what is bad, what is false and what is true.<sup>3</sup>

Stated differently, the creative powers resident in every community of America can help reset the civic table. Let me quote Rocco once again:

There are laws in civil society and physics. There are rules in games and in the classroom. In art, the rush comes when we overturn the laws and break the rules and create something new. Yet, because it comes from a long and accretive tradition, we feel we know it – like we have always known it. Surprise and recognition at once. <sup>4</sup>

The third reason the arts will have an elevated role in our future is the reason we gather here: their ability to drive creative placemaking.

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 collective norms are constructed.

As our discussions throughout the day will cast in bright relief, creative placemaking 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>5</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. They were before the election. They will be after the election.

Just a single example: the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. Wing Luke is an historic immersion in the experience of Asian Pacific immigrants, tethering the museum to the community and vice-versa. One is struck, however, by the absence of a kitchen, cafeteria, or snack bar inside the museum.

It's an unequivocal statement. By sending visitors out into the museum's largest exhibit – the community itself – Wing Luke drives home the point of the inseparability of the institution and its home. It's an act of outward-looking leadership, a leadership that is concerned not only with the well-being of the institution itself, but also with the well-being of the greater community it seeks to serve and represent.

We'll hear countless other examples today. Arts and culture helping define the routines of daily life. Arts and culture contemplating community building as a creative act by becoming knitted into the patchwork of land use, housing, transportation, health, environmental, and other systems necessary for stronger, more equitable, and vibrant places.

As we absorb the politics, intrigue, and tweetosphere of next generation Washington, let's not confuse that with the real work being done in real time in real places. And let's keep in mind that because the crucibles of change are increasingly local, cultural creativity may well become the driving force of community revitalization. It promises more adaptive ways of seeing, understanding, experiencing, and transforming where we live, how we work, what we dream.

## **Implications for Philanthropy**

So what does all of this mean for an institution like Kresge?

First, Kresge, like so many of our peers, will continue doing what we have been doing, tempered by an understanding that new challenges will place adaptability at a premium.

We'll stay focused on creating opportunity in America's cities. This country is so sprawling, so endowed with human richness, and so chaotically decentralized that there is room among the interstices of broad policies and programs to find your place – a place to lift up and make your mark, a place to forge common bonds of understanding and purpose, a place to serve in the shadows to ignite the spark that will make light. A block, a neighborhood, a workplace, a city.<sup>6</sup>

That is core to the alchemy of arts and culture.

Second, we need to have the back of our grantees and partners, equipping them with what they need to navigate in more turbulent water.

A resilient and vibrant arts community isn't something that philanthropy can fund into existence. It has to thrive organically – as it has throughout history. But can it be nurtured? Should it be nurtured? Of course. It's just a question of how.

Artists and arts organizations are in it for the long-term. So must we be. I believe this is one of the highest values of ArtPlace. Jamie and his extraordinary staff are exploring the kinds of capacities that need to be built by the time ArtPlace sunsets in order for front-line arts and culture workers to take their rightful place in community problem-solving. Kresge, like the other dozen foundations in the ArtPlace consortium, needs to go to school on Jamie's work.

Third, we need to widen the aperture of community leadership.

It is painful to observe the face of America changing at a rate that outpaces our political absorptive capacity. Arts and culture can provide a partial antidote, lifting up new lenses to interrogate inclusive, distributive, and racially-aware leadership patterns at the local level.

Indeed, artists themselves can emerge as compelling leaders in a community's revitalization, working hand-in-glove with leadership from traditional sources of power and influence.<sup>7</sup> There is probably no more compelling example than Theaster Gates' mobilization of artists, architects, developers, educators, and community activists and residents to integrate the arts into the process of neighborhood transformation.

In a related vein, working across disciplines, across sectors, and across geographies has to become habit. The election underscored the necessity of reaching beyond our normal envelopes of comfort in forging connections with a more expansive set of actors – particularly with an eye toward genuine inquiry into alternative points of view. Lyz Crane will moderate a fascinating discussion

this afternoon on this aspect of creative placemaking.

And fourth, we have to communicate, communicate, and communicate some more.

We need to convey unambiguously what we stand for, how we work, what we've accomplished, what we have yet to learn. But we also need to turn those capacities inside-out and listen with an extreme care and empathy to those whose perspective may be foreign to ours. Again, there is no better vehicle than arts and culture.

## **Final Thoughts**

We are about to experience a recalibration of every conceivable dimension of civic life. Nothing is as it has been. We are different now, and we move differently together.

But we cannot lose sight of the unique power of arts and culture to draw people of different backgrounds and beliefs into the common, safe space of creative problem-solving. We cannot forget that arts and cultural workers can turn things inside-out and upside-down to help communities work at the sharp edge of the transformationally unexpected and unconventional

And we cannot sacrifice our belief in the power of arts and culture to help residents of neighborhoods and communities harness the energies of shared purpose in service of their patrimony, their values, their aspirations.

So my thanks to all of you who are prepared to step forward. It's your time to challenge, to create and to lead.

Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> See generally, Jackson, M.R., "Developing Artist-Driven Spaces in Marginalized Communities: Reflections and Implications from the Field," *Leveraging Investments in Creativity* (Urban Institute: 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Landesman, Rocco. "The Play's The Thing," address to The American Academy of Arts and Letters' Blashfield Foundation Address. May 18, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The recitation is inspired by John Tusa's remarkable book *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*, page 22 (Methuen Publishing Ltd., London: 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Landesman, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> McMahon, Edward, "The Place Making Dividend." *Planning Commissioners Journal*, No. 80, page 16 (Fall 2010). See more at [http://kresge.org/about-us/presidents-corner/connecting-detroit%E2%80%99s-assets-through-strategic-placemaking#\\_ftn2](http://kresge.org/about-us/presidents-corner/connecting-detroit%E2%80%99s-assets-through-strategic-placemaking#_ftn2).

<sup>6</sup> Stolen from my dear friend Alan Stone.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. "Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change: High Impact

Strategies for Philanthropy.” A Philanthropy at its Best Report, October 2011.