

October 2014: Vol. 18, No 4. – Community Development in the Context of Art: North Park and the Citizen Artist – Lynn Susholtz and Leslie Ryan



CultureWork

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Current Issue

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By CultureWork, on October 29th, 2014

The Fall 2014 issue of *CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts & Culture Workers* focuses on the active engagement of citizen artists committed to a specific neighborhood in San Diego, California. How does one grow an arts organization while also growing and expanding an engaged local neighborhood through events, exhibits, and aesthetically pleasing experiences and surroundings as well as public cultural policy? How does one do this in a way that does not gentrify but that builds over years of commitment to a sense of place and people, embracing those who live and work there and who seek expression through dancing, gardening, policy making, and educational engagement? Learn more about the corner called Art Produce in the North Park, San Diego neighborhood in which authors Lynn Susholtz and Leslie Ryan have lived and worked for the past 20 years.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris

Robert Voelker-Morris

Editors

CultureWork Pages

Community Development in the Context of Art: North Park and the Citizen Artist

Lynn Susholtz and Leslie Ryan

The *New York Times* has declared that North Park is one of San Diego's "most vibrant and diverse districts" with what the *Los Angeles Times* calls a "hipster vibe." *Forbes* has ranked it one of America's hippest neighborhoods, home to local, artisan food, art events sponsored by local businesses and art galleries, historic architecture, and quirky storefronts.

North Park is a redevelopment success. Thirty years ago inexpensive Craftsman houses were disappearing to make room for "Huffman six-packs," a label that accurately described the shape of the apartments and their developer. There were more bars on the windows than not, and cars parked on dry front lawns. In 1978, California's Proposition 13 had eviscerated public budgets for parks and community services. City employees managing the local recreation center considered the assignment to be a punishment rather than a coveted position, and a small but persistent gang problem reinforced issues of safety and security for the community. Today the Craftsman houses are being lovingly restored, bars describe the dozens of craft breweries and restaurants rather than lock-down façades, and front yards are carefully landscaped with vegetables or boldly-textured succulents. Pawn shops have given way to skate shops, and delicious waffles are served in a former driveway. North Park is a "bastion of creativity" and a success story for the [City of San Diego](#).

This transformation, or revolution, was led by a handful of North Park artists, historians, journalists, businesses and home owners who had each decided that they wanted to make North Park into a place worth living in, and by encouraging arts and public culture it would become a place worth loving (again). We, Lynn Susholtz, community artist, and Leslie Ryan, landscape architect, began our design collaboration in 1995 with a city contract to update the [General Development Plan](#) for the North Park Community Park, awarded to Lynn's art and education business, Stone Paper Scissors. We jointly worked on the design and planning for the park overall; the first phase of construction was Lynn's design for a tot-lot and playground. It was the first time an artist-led team was selected as the prime consultant on a Capital Improvement Project. This was a huge leap for the City, but not for a community where the artists were seen as more responsible and responsive to local needs than the City's engineers.

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As a North Park business and home owner, Lynn has been deeply embedded in the community. In 1999 she renovated the boarded-up North Park Produce market building and transformed it into [Art Produce](#), an art studio, pedestrian gallery, learning lab, garden, and café where the community is invited to contribute to an on-going conversation about public culture. It since has been recognized by and received awards from an array of local and national arts, urban design, educational organizations and public agencies. In 2001, Leslie established Hybrid, one of the first galleries participating in [Ray at Night](#), a neighborhood art walk that is still going, attracting hundreds of visitors each month. Her engagement with the arts and culture of North Park has continued with the co-presentation of exhibits and public conversations at Art Produce.



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Art Produce is a collaboratory of experiments in public culture. One example is [Voices: Mapping the Hood](#) (2009), an extensive project involving [Eveoke Dance Theatre](#), [TranscenDANCE Youth Art Project](#), and [North Park Main Street](#). College students and school kids interviewed new immigrants to the neighborhood, business owners, long-time residents and visitors, and made collages that collectively told the story of the place. Lynn created [OurSpace](#), a potlatch or gift exchange, where community members could share objects, words, and images with each other. Another exhibit, [The Future Imperfect of Cities, Landscapes, and Dreams](#) (2010) opened as North Park initiated the process of updating its Community Plan. The exhibit integrated a public discussion and workshop about community development in the context of art, rather than sidelining art as a separate element of a larger plan. The community we have now is the outcome of decisions and actions made before our time – it is important to ask about how what we make now will shape the future of this place. A cross-institutional group of faculty and students contributed imaginary visions of North Park as a community of very local food production in [Eat Here Now](#) (2012). This exhibit was linked to the [garden](#) Lynn constructed behind Art Produce, transforming an asphalt and concrete parking lot into an urban patch of guavas, figs, eggplant, basil, and tomatillos. Rainwater is captured and stored under new permeable paving, providing water for much of the year, and the local farmer’s market spills over into the garden each week.



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The changes in North Park emerged through the efforts of many people. We were part of an informal group with members who formed and re-formed in various configurations as

opportunities and issues arose in the community. The shared goals were not entirely altruistic (as discussed in an [earlier essay](#)). We each wanted a culturally rich place to live and work, with safe streets and schools, and coffee shops, restaurants, and grocery stores within walking distance of where we lived. Believing that communities need physical places to meet and gather, we started a “First Friday” open house at Lynn’s house and invited neighbors and local politicians to hash out ideas and concerns and discuss what we wanted for the future of our community. As urban theorist [Michael Sorkin](#) (2001) has written, “there is simply no substitute for the physical spaces of public assembly...The internet is great, but it ain’t the Piazza Navona: free association and chance encounter still demand the meeting of bodies in space. Embodiment is the condition of accident and accident is a motor of democracy” (p. 186).

Collectively and individually, we made impassioned and repeated suggestions and arguments for designating and identifying North Park as an Arts and Culture District. In 1998, the title became official, and now is one of the primary elements in the current draft of the City-mandated [North Park Community Plan Update](#). We advocated for inclusion of artists on design teams, especially on public improvement projects such as bus stops, sidewalks, [bridges](#), bike racks, and neighborhood entry markers. We lobbied our council representatives to increase the funding available for small business owners in the City’s [Façade Rebate Program](#) if an artist was involved in the design process. Art Produce became a pilot project for including public art in façade improvements, and subsequently, dozens of storefronts were transformed with paint, new windows, tile, awnings, and street trees. A neighbor and local historian taught us about the value of the front porch as a place to meet and gather, an insight Lynn applied to the [gallery](#) at Art Produce, a long storefront with art, art-goers, and art-makers interacting with the street. The gallery became a porch to the living room of the street, a “pedestrian gallery” that is accessible to the urban *flâneur*, and also pedestrian in the sense of participating in everyday life of the community. The transparency of the façade allowed for art to be experienced close to home, close to schools, and on the way to the bus stop.

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We took advantage of the police chief’s new interest in neighborhoods and supported a police storefront in the North Park Community Park, which over the years had become virtually abandoned except by gangs and illegal activities. With new sources of public funding available and in partnership with the local community association, Lynn and Stone Paper Scissors enacted an arts-based curriculum at the park’s Recreation Center that engaged underserved children and their families in art, dance,



theatre, and environmental design classes, and turned the center into a vibrant after-school arts place in the process. The classes contributed to the planning of a new elementary school and playground for the park, becoming unofficial design charrettes led by children and families from socio-economic groups and communities of color, and those who were new immigrants to the region, whose interests tend to be underrepresented in neighborhood planning. Although the public funding stopped after four years, Lynn continued to offer free art classes, and has “graduates” of her classes now matriculating with art and design degrees from major universities. Lastly, we joined and attended City Council meetings, the North Park Planning Committee, the North Park Recreation Council, the North Park Community Association, the Business Improvement District, the Redevelopment Project Area Committee, and the Sustainable North Park Main Street Committee. The success of North Park is a story of personal investment in a place. Being citizen artists meant we adopted not only our poetic licenses but citizenship in a place.

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Video Player

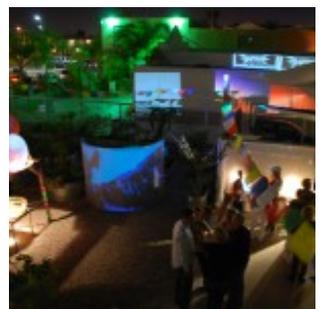
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There are side effects, however, to success. While funding for arts and culture has tightened in general over the past decade, we have seen the available public money being directed to other communities as North Park is left to be nurtured by dispassionate market forces. Specialty bookstores and used furniture shops have given way to numerous brew pubs, upscale restaurants, and market-rate artist lofts that many artists cannot afford. Rents overall have increased drastically, and artists are leaving the community they built for other neighborhoods elsewhere. A thriving business district is essential for the health and well-being of our community, but *resilient* communities are diverse, which means laundromats, pawn shops, thrift stores, dentist offices, and affordable housing are important too. Brew pubs cannot single-handedly make a community. Artists grow social capital, and while social capital generates economic success, the reverse is less often true. In a recent [interview](#), MacArthur Genius recipient, Rick Lowe, of Houston’s Project Row Houses spoke of how the era of community arts, when artists were in a community because they wanted to be part of



a neighborhood, has been replaced with art as a “social practice” that is often more concerned with establishing credentials than lasting change. “Is social practice,” he asked, “gentrifying community arts out?”

At this juncture in North Park’s renaissance from run-down to written-up, it is a good time to refocus attention on artists and the cultural workers who make communities more livable and lovable today; to ask what it looks like for artists to invest in a place. What is next? In the spirit of [Claus Oldenburg’s](#) 1961 “I Am For...” non-manifesto for the arts, and [Tom Tresser’s](#) call for artists to participate in public life, we offer our own non-manifesto for community development in the context of art, and suggest that it is time for YOU, fellow artist, to:

1. Show up at every community meeting you possibly can attend – especially meetings concerning neighborhood planning, policy and funding – and stay until the very end. There is typically a dearth of creative ideas and solutions, and it is usually the last person in the room making the decisions that could mean \$\$ to your neighborhood.
2. Utilize and activate public facilities and public spaces (they are public, after all!) including streets, schools, sidewalks, recreation centers, and parks. Linger. Find a porch and sit on it. Get to know your neighbors.
3. Open your door to children – every child. There are very few free or low-cost cultural activities available to neighborhood kids, especially teens, who are often open to a community mentor/artist/caring adult, particularly if there is a cool place for them to hang out with each other. If they learn to direct their energy towards recreating and bettering their own community, they will also care for and protect it.
4. Enlist fellow artists (this may be harder than you think), designers, architects, and other creative thinkers to begin to re-envision and re-consider the neighborhood. Use your studio/house/yard/garage/local public facilities, churches, and empty storefronts to showcase local artists, performances, sustainable environmental practices, and pop-up exhibits.
5. Plant a tree, or two trees, or a tomato so the streets are cooler and more beautiful and promising, and so others want to be there as much as you do. Put chairs and benches and planter boxes on the sidewalk for public use.
6. Stay flexible and do most things incrementally when possible. Remember that whatever has improved (or gotten worse) will continue to change. Learn from past mistakes, missed opportunities, and successes.
7. Fight for and design opportunities for diversity and equity – social, economic, environmental and cultural – because laundromats, art galleries, schools, churches, yoga studios, barber shops, thrift shops, and, yes, brew pubs, all contribute to a resilient and multi-dimensional community. Remember that someone who makes your community (or your dinner) what it is, may need what you don’t, and deserves to have it available in their own neighborhood too.
8. Listen to poet Gary Snyder who wrote “find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there.”



9. Apply the skills you have as an artist and improvise, invent, and take risks. Become a community resource. Teach what you know; learn what you can; share knowledge. No one's going to do it for you, or represent your interests except you....and if you don't do it, who will?

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Authors Note

Lynn Susholtz has lived in the San Diego region since 1980 and is the owner of Art Produce and Stone Paper Scissors. Art Produce is an activist business enterprise and community cultural center that connects artists, cultural organizations, schools, urban farmers and local businesses. [Stone Paper Scissors](#) integrates community voice and vision into the cultural and physical landscape through public art and education. Lynn's studio art practice ranges from mixed-media drawings to sculptural installations.

Leslie Ryan is a second-year Ph.D student in Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University. She received a research degree (Master of Environmental Design) from Yale University's School of Architecture (2006) and a B.S. in Landscape Architecture from Cal Poly University, San Luis Obispo (1988). Her thesis at Yale received the Porter Prize, the top University-wide award for original scholarship on a subject of general interest. Leslie is the recipient of the Rome Prize in Landscape Architecture (1995), and has received a Graham Foundation Grant for book research on the ecological artists Helen and Newton Harrison. Her writings on relationships between art and land use practices have been published in *Places Journal* and the *Journal of Environmental Philosophy*.

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References

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