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Community Arts Councils: Historical Perspective Part Two

Maryo Ewell

MY purpose is to tell you about community arts councils, from the ideas that generated them to the present. I believe that story-telling enables people to evaluate how far they have come, to attribute significance to what has happened, and to enable people to then define a course for the future. In Part I. I concentrated on the gestation and birth of community arts councils. My emphasis was on such councils as a hybrid of community movements with an arts emphasis and arts movements with a community emphasis. My discussion included giving credit to persons associated with this gestation and birth as well as on specific early arts councils that helped shape our present day understanding and appreciation of what arts councils can accomplish. Keeping this in mind, the second part of my story will concentrate on the Community Arts Council in its youth. This prolonged and turbulent period in the movement is characterized by the notion of locally driven groups forming arts councils in response to gaps in the arts scene. This formation is accomplished in the midst of social and fiscal revolutions that first promote growth and later encourage maturity in the face of numerous and conflicting societal trends.

Youth (1956-1990)

By 1956, there were some 55 community arts councils in the country (Yuen, 1990). By 1967 there were an estimated 450 community arts councils, of which 70 employed some paid staff (Burgard, 1968). Of these, 273 were private non-profits, while 42 were public. Twenty-four of the 29 cities of populations of 500,000+ had an arts council (13) or commission (9). Fourteen years later that number had more than doubled to an estimated 1000 arts councils (Gibans, 1982). This phenomenal growth in the numbers of community arts councils suggests that a "movement" was taking place within the United States around the importance of linking community development to citizens' ability to access and participate in the arts. However, this evolutionary movement must be understood as being more than just an increase in numbers of local organizations.

Name changes reflect evolution as well. Within its youth the generic name for "community arts council" would to a great extent become "local arts agency." This label reflects the belief that what really matters is what an entity does, not what it calls itself. For example, are not public arts commissions functionally the same as "community arts councils?" What of the recreation district or arts-and-business council that also serves as the de facto "community arts council" for its area?

Dramatic social change within American society would have a profound impact on local arts agencies beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s. For the local arts scene, two moments and two movements changed society's orientation to art and the nature of art in the community.

Moments

The first moment was the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." This was important to local arts agencies because the federal government had taken a new and firm stand about the importance of a publicly-supported arts infrastructure that could be echoed at the local level. Additionally, the NEA had to make 20% of its program funds available to the states via state arts agencies (SAAs). By 1967, all states and territories had created SAAs. So it was a logical next step that this federal-state linkage should become a federal-state-local linkage. Many local arts agencies sprang up as a result. Because of NEA encouragement, many SAAs added community arts council program directors. The NEA contributed, in part, to this arts environment by acting like a Johnny Appleseed for the arts by sowing community arts councils across the nation. Concurrently the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) (1974-83) enabled many local arts agencies to hire their first staff. In short, community arts became a part of the tax-supported public service and political scene.

The second moment was the Bicentennial celebration in 1976. The decade before the Bicentennial was a time of local rediscovery. Historical societies, local Bicentennial commissions, and groups of citizens began serious discussion of the meaning of their community: Who are we? How can we express our "sense of place" and "sense of our people?" This coast to coast discussion inspired many events and festivals across the nation. The infrastructure and discussions that began then still remain and continue today in many places. This Bicentennial focus affected not only the number of descendent local arts agencies, but also encouraged communities to discover their local uniqueness, values and character of place. This same purpose of discovery continues to inform the missions and programs of local arts agencies.

Movements

The importance of the Civil Rights Movement to the evolution of arts in the community is inestimable. This movement, growing through the 1950s and continuing full force through the 1960s, brought Americans' attention to the struggle to acknowledge personal rights and brought them to confront racial oppression. This put the need to respect diversity on the community arts agenda. *"Artists are frequently on the front lines of social change movements. Through the work of many artists, community arts organizations have been increasingly sensitized to issues of social equity"* (Dreeszen & Korza, 1994). [emphasis mine]

President Ronald Reagan and the social policy his administration encouraged constitute the second social movement of importance. Federal funding for many social programs - not just arts programs - was drastically reduced. Though public money for the arts had never been easy to secure, it seemed abundant, in comparison to the Reagan and post-Reagan years. Suddenly, local arts agencies had to think differently about sources of funding. They had to be far more resourceful in the way they behaved. They no longer had the resources to act in isolation. All of this, coupled with the dawning realization that acting in isolation was not furthering their cause anyway, prompted better management, better fiduciary practices, more canny resource-mobilization, and a stance of entrepreneurialism and collaboration.

Changing Programs

Finally, this period of youthfulness in the evolution of community arts councils, or local arts agencies, is characterized by changes in arts programs in response to larger societal changes. American society of the late 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s responded to far different conditions than the conditions influencing the prototypical arts councils of 1949.

Patterns of giving on the part of individuals and corporations changed in response to a changing economy and shifting patterns of wealth and wealth-transfer. There was increasing concern about violent crime. There was also a growing awareness that "Generation X" could, for the first time, not expect the promises of the "American Dream." Education costs grew simultaneously with apparently decreasing abilities of American students. Corporate growth spawned franchised goods and services throughout America, so that even the smallest most remote communities began to look like all others regardless of region or cultural character. Changing farm patterns and the growth of the Interstate highway led to the demise of many towns. Changing patterns of transportation, communications, life expectancy and the stock market, all worked together to create situations in which significant numbers of people no longer needed to live where they worked. People began to move frequently and live in two or more places. A global economy affected how goods were manufactured and how Americans worked and how companies were organized. Economic patterns required two-worker families even among the middle class, with implications for leisure time and volunteerism. Numbers of biological, two-parent nuclear families diminished. Homelessness proliferated. Living with AIDS and HIV became a fact of life for many. The "Anglo" majority became the minority. Instant communications became possible via The World Wide Web (WWW). The Cold War, which had served the function of uniting some Americans against some external "enemy" ended. Medical breakthroughs helped people to live longer meaning more groups requesting, and requiring, help

in articulating meaning in their lives. Environmental issues required attention, as environmental degradation became too great to be ignored. Changing ideas of the correct use of taxes resulted in ballot initiatives resulting in cuts to government services. There was general questioning of affirmative action, the role of government, religion, and the place of the United States in the World community.

All of these issues began to be reflected in the programs of local arts agencies as early as the mid-1960's. Many community arts councils had added the cultural or inter-cultural festival to their activities. They began to look more broadly at their communities: *The Arts In The Small Community: A National Plan* (Gard, Warlum, & Kohlhoff, 1968/1993) proposed that local groups consider the environment (natural resources, health, local history) as well as certain groups of people (ethnic groups, youth, retired people) and collaborations with other local organizations (businesses, schools, colleges, religious institutions, service clubs, libraries) in forming community (Gard, Warlum, & Kohlhoff, 1968). *Arts in the City*, published in the same year, was echoing these ideas in an urban setting (Burgard, 1968).

As but one example of the evolution from a simple arts program to comprehensive reform, consider the local arts agency's changing role in education. Initially, arts councils took arts programs to schools for lecture-demonstrations and assembly programs. By the 1970s councils began emphasizing artists-in-school residencies. They next began working on curriculum reform that emphasized the use of arts to achieve other learning objectives (improving reading ability, for instance) and social objectives (student retention).

During this period, local arts agencies tried to influence whole systems such as public education or social welfare. Numbers of program options became staggering in response to identified community needs. Continuing to the present it is common to discover local arts agencies doing everything that their prototypes did in 1949 with the addition of the new programs that the social and historical awareness of the 1960s inspired. Council activities consisted of programmatic layers associated with arts education activity and social change initiatives. Local arts agencies began and continue to facilitate artist residency programs in settings as diverse as factories, corporate offices, homeless shelters, and hospices. Local arts agencies are often the facility-developer-manager in their community. Local arts agencies added programs for seniors, youth-at-risk, and other under-served community groups. They appeared at the table for the development and aesthetics of new housing, transportation, and community "redevelopment." They are also at the table in comprehensive community economic development, planning and tourism. They began promoting their communities' artistic resources internationally on the Web. They pioneered entrepreneurial approaches to expand their financial and social capital. Through these comprehensive services, local arts agencies evolved into vitally important forces in their community. It is important to once

again note that was accomplished in an era that began with widespread public support for local arts agencies and ends with shrinking resources and a sometimes-hostile governmental climate. This historical period concludes with art councils stretched to the limit, seeing more to be accomplished, and with beleaguered staffs overwhelmed by it all.

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Thinking Ahead: Disaster Preparedness Planning for Museums

Yvonne Lever

The Pacific Northwest has entered a period of increasing danger from natural disasters, making this an appropriate time to think about disaster planning for museums. Museums are often unprepared for emergencies, frequently making no plans for disasters of any kind (Lever, 1999). Every museum, large or small, needs an emergency plan and a program for mitigating - preparing in advance- for

disasters.

Obstacles to museum emergency preparedness include the lack of information, manpower, or funding. Financial considerations may present the greatest barrier. Not every mitigation measure is costly, but many critical measures cost more than some museums' annual budgets. So, making the commitment to invest in disaster preparedness can be difficult. Museum managers may be well aware of the shortcomings of their own disaster preparedness.

When budgets are tight, the extra time, space and expense for something that may never happen is difficult to justify. In my experience, having a disaster plan is much like having private health insurance. One is usually convinced of its need after the event (Gardiner, p. 40, 1996).

How does a museum staff begin to prepare for disasters? Two possible courses of action -- joining in community-wide programs or developing an institutional emergency plan -- are complimentary and often developed simultaneously.

Museum managers need to remember that their organizations do not exist in isolation, but are interdependent with the larger "universe". An excellent approach, then, would be to participate in a community-wide disaster plan which includes emergency services, utilities, schools, and neighbors -- rather than prepare alone.

Community collaboration is not a new concept among museum managers -- it is becoming a standard in museum education and services. "Over the years, the museum field has carved out a definitive role in the areas of community outreach and service....a museum is as important to its neighborhood as the local public library" (Said, 1999).

The first step toward building a "disaster-resistant community" is to realize the need. The FEMA guidebook, Project Impact, describes many cases in which communities only realized the need for preparation after disaster struck their towns -- floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and so on. Project Impact is an efficient, holistic approach to protecting entire communities by collaborative effort: building community partnerships, identifying hazards and community vulnerability, prioritizing hazard risk reduction actions, and communicating success (FEMA, no date).



Inspecting damage after Northridge, California earthquake, 1994. (FEMA)

Federal, state, and county agencies sponsor programs to improve our safety and awareness of natural disasters. Agencies such as FEMA, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and others provide assistance to cultural heritage institutions, but the impetus for these projects must come from the communities at risk. Mitigation with community partners such as utilities providers, emergency services, business leaders, and educators could result in a more comprehensive solution as the museum acknowledges its dependence on community services. The experience might also help museums build relationships with colleagues and constituents. Further, collaboration in the community provides an opportunity to attract and educate constituents. If, for example, a museum's mitigation needs included anchoring a building to its foundation, why not make that operation a public event? Invite the neighbors to see the procedure, ask the local fire department to make presentations, invite the Red Cross to sponsor children's activities, and so on. For a public event, it might be possible to find community funding for supplies or volunteers to teach these measures to visitors. The project

could easily be linked to other community events which bring visitors to the area, and would enhance the museum's reputation.

Building local partnerships requires time and energy, but the rewards may extend beyond disaster planning. Benefits could be far-reaching -- resulting in comprehensive mitigation for the museum, improving community visibility, establishing good relations in the business community, and finally, helping everyone to be safer from disasters.

Although the benefits of collaborative planning could be excellent, it is acknowledged that in most cases it probably will not be done. For most museums, disaster planning will be the independent project of one or two staff members. Even when this is so, it is possible to create and execute a disaster plan that is holistic -- that operates successfully for the museum *body*, including personnel and collections. If preparing alone is necessary, then a thorough emergency plan must be created -- one which includes and supports museum personnel no matter what emergency must be faced.

The following course of action is recommended.

1. Include the museum stakeholders; all staff, administrators, volunteers, and board members. Staff and volunteers must bear the brunt of any emergency needs at an institution, and must be committed to emergency plans. The board is a critical group to include as a source of funds, volunteer labor, and long-term support.

2. Seek outside professional advice. Emergency service agencies can provide information, technical assistance and training, and avenues to other resources. The museum community is another excellent resource. Conservators and museum professionals are often generous with advice. Professional journals include articles advising about measures that work specifically in collections. It is advisable to read extensively and talk to experienced people to understand the range of possible actions.

3. Make a frank assessment of the museum's status and needs. The condition of the museum building is the primary consideration for disaster preparedness. An architect or experienced contractor should be consulted about the building's structural status, but if that is not possible (financially) then other resources exist for assistance. It might be possible, for example, to approach a university's School of Architecture or Historic Preservation to develop an upgrading project.

Preservation organizations may have funds for retrofitting or other projects -- resources are available for those willing to find and negotiate them.

Assessments of the museum's interior must also be made. Storage and exhibit spaces can be examined for stability of furnishings, object support needs, and danger from hazards such as water and fire. Museum records should be considered, as well. Documentation should be as complete as possible, with duplicate records stored off-site. Finally, and most importantly, museum staff must be prepared and well versed in emergency procedures. In an emergency, it is important that staff clearly understand their roles and obligations -- and that those roles do not create a conflict between museum and home responsibilities.

4. Follow the assessment by creating and proceeding with a comprehensive, long-term emergency plan. It may not be possible, or desirable, to attempt everything at once. Make the plan long-term and coordinate it with ongoing museum functions. Sort the projects by complexity of task and expense. The first step might be to make long range plans to fund high-cost, contracted activities such as retrofitting, rewiring, or plumbing. A capital campaign and volunteer recruitment project could be extended over several years. Meanwhile, smaller and more manageable projects could be started using available or easily attained resources. Prioritize the projects and link them to museum activities. For example, an annual inventory could be an opportunity to anchor shelves or box fragile objects. A volunteer group could provide short term labor on projects such as stabilizing furnishings, bringing catalogues up to date, or repairing vulnerable facilities. Including the mitigation projects in ongoing museum functions will reduce the stress and expense of accomplishing them, and may help staff and volunteers to accept hazards as real. Participating in projects and practicing an emergency plan gives staff members a sense of ownership of both the plan and the danger (see Palm and Hodgson, 1992 for discussion of ownership or internalizing danger). In *Institutional Trauma: Major Change in Museums and its Effects on Staff*, Brumgardt discusses his museum's emergency plan and how it prepared the Charleston Museum staff for Hurricane Hugo....this process involved the active participation of all principal staff and review/approval by the board of trustees. The result was therefore a product of consensus. Since the plan was developed in the absence of direct practical experience, we knew that it could not anticipate all contingencies. Still, it was carefully and deliberately devised, and everyone had stock in its

effective implementation (1995, p. 60).

It is important, then, to incorporate emergency preparedness into the organizational culture, to build confidence and skill in staff, and to work visibly and steadily toward an ultimate state of disaster preparedness.

Disaster preparedness could be effectively addressed collaboratively among a group of museums. Sharing ideas, difficulties, and perhaps even labor and costs, will contribute to success in the individual museums. A serious hazard from earthquakes, floods, and fires exists in the Pacific Northwest and preparing for any one emergency does much to prepare for all emergencies. In *Protecting the Past From Natural Disasters*, Nelson reminds us that "Preparedness requires commitment: of individual and staff time; of government policy at the federal, state and local levels; of professional experts, national and local organizations, property owners, volunteers; and of money" (1991, p. 162). Let museums face hazards from natural disasters together, and embrace the people and agencies who share our interests to create safer, enduring communities.

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CultureWork seeks submissions of concise (500-1500 words) critiques and advisories on community arts and the preparation of community arts workers. Graphics that express the spirit of community arts are welcome, to be published with attribution. Manuscripts should be sent in plain text format (i.e., **not** MS Word .doc format), via email, on Macintosh or Intel high-density 3.5 inch floppies or zip disks. Use American Psychological Association guidelines for style and citations. Send submissions to Maria Finison at [<mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu>](mailto:mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu) or via snailmail: care of Arts & Administration Program, School of Architecture and Allied Arts, University of Oregon, Eugene Oregon 97403. If accepted for publication, authors may be asked to make revisions.

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