

A Report to The Ford Foundation

Asset Building and Community Development Program
*Active Public Space: The Role of Arts and Culture in
Community Development Initiative*
Miguel Garcia, Program Officer

Emerging Paradigms in Organizational Approaches to Community Building

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Introduction

For the past decade, activists, thinkers, and philanthropists in America's community development and cultural fields have struggled to find ways to achieve broader social and civic objectives through their work. They have sought ways to make institutions and their processes more inclusive and more accountable. Simultaneously, researchers have been trying to find ways to assess heretofore invisible or uncharted impacts that the organizations in these respective fields have on their communities.

Innovative practitioners are demonstrating that there's more than one way to approach the job of building communities. A new generation of organizations that defy previously defined organizational categories has made significant contributions to this work and to their respective communities. They operate "under the radar" or on the fringes of the fields from which they've sprouted

"Downside Up," an April, 2003 report commissioned by the Ford Foundation, looked at organizations with one foot each in the arts and in community development. It helped launch the Foundation Initiative, known as the Role of Arts and Culture in Community Development. Authors of Downside Up recommended that a body of information be gathered and disseminated on "the history of the work at this convergence of art, culture, public space, and community development." Through a closer look at four organizations that cross these fields, this paper will examine the impulses from which they emerged and contribute to the growing body of information and understanding of this work.

Just as healthy ecosystems benefit from diversity, the coexistence of a variety of organizational approaches can be advantageous in building healthy communities. Profiles

of selected organizations and their leadership, below, illustrate how these entrepreneurs bring beneficial diversity to civic and cultural enterprises and challenge the way community building work is evaluated and supported.

Differences That People Make

Leaders of all civic and cultural enterprises, and especially those of entrepreneurial and grassroots groups, bring their unique qualities and worldviews to the job. Some have an inclination to burrow deeply into a specialty and amass a deep well of knowledge or skills in a particular field. Others seemingly drift or crisscross between professions or disciplines and sometimes play an important role as innovators or connectors of ideas and resources. Still others build empires – collections of various related functions under one umbrella.

Patterns of thinking, behavior, and strengths vary greatly among individuals as they get imprinted on organizations and institutions. These patterns are neither right nor wrong as long as they are an appropriate fit for their community's strengths, visions, and challenges. When organizations become unique and successful as a result of entrepreneurial leadership, they inevitably encounter issues around “founder syndrome” and present tough challenges to boards, civic leaders and philanthropists, especially during times of leadership transition. This becomes even more complex as leaders increasingly emerge from diverse cultural backgrounds and bring with them culturally-grounded constructs for how organizations function.

To “fix” this, should we strive to make civic institutions behave uniformly with just the right balance of depth and breadth and ‘vanilla’ personalities that anyone could lead them? It's a more complex dilemma.

Some in the policy-setting and philanthropic sectors have tried to coerce organizations to conform to structures or patterns that they best comprehend or that best meet their specific purposes. Some leaders are trained by schools that teach models rather than creative invention. They teach the structures and systems that exist, not ways to think about possibilities. Existing models don't necessarily serve communities well as communities themselves are unique. Some communities evolve so rapidly they appear to be built on shifting sand.

Policy-setters and philanthropists do need to hold these organizations and each other accountable and use consistent standards to track and define success. Accommodating a wide range of styles, cultures, and strategies will indeed require new ways of approaching evaluation more attuned to an interdisciplinary mix of outcomes.

Using the Creative Process to Realize a Vision

Uniformity doesn't help individuals, enterprises, and communities to build on their unique assets. The practice of recognizing and accessing unique assets possessed by

individuals and communities may hold the key to make more effective the work of community-based organizations.

Unfortunately, the civic and cultural organizations themselves, especially those that are smaller and community-based, are rarely clear on the strengths and assets they or their leaders possess. They typically operate on instinct and falter when they try to conform to someone else's notion of how they should behave and organize.

Institutions too often seem to think and act in narrowly-defined specialties with no peripheral vision or ability to see how their work impacts those around them. Universities, museums, and other large institutions located in urban centers have notoriously ignored neighborhoods deteriorating around them, and have come under criticism in recent decades. A few notable ones have undergone deep soul searching and charted new courses in their relationships with their neighbors, while most find fundamental change too threatening. This intransigence is not limited to large institutions, but can afflict organizations of all sizes.

Meanwhile some innovative, visionary organizations simply do what it takes to create the kind of reality they foresee. They focus more attention on their involvement in the dynamics of the world they're hoping to change. They approach their goals with no preconceived notion of how their work should be organized. They invent ways of working that fit their goals, their cultural experience, their community's needs, and their unique assets. In spite of pressure to the contrary, they often refuse to limit their sights and actions to one "discipline" or set of conventional practices.

Organizations Exploring the Outside of the Box

The non-traditional or under-the-radar organizations examined below vary widely in nature and activity, and they've combined their visions of community and of social change with the unique qualities of their communities and their leaders.

These four multi-faceted organizations routinely battle funders, consultants, partnering organizations, and the media who either under-estimate their tenacity or want them to decide "what they want to be when they grow up."

They are all outside the mainstream, and not alone. There are many more "like" them. They use nonprofit and for-profit structures, or a combination. They are not part of the dominant culture and defy the boxes one might try to envision them fitting into. They do this not deliberately, but because they simply do what makes sense in their place and time, and do what it takes to get the job done.

Because they have been considered anomalies, they have not been looked at in the aggregate and their work is rarely evaluated. They are organic, asset-based, people-driven organizations that are making a real difference. They have created success stories and ways of building communities we can learn from.

Snapshots:

- Some energetic members of the Hip Hop generation in California's East Bay think nothing of the synthesis of social justice, business, education, and art. An entrepreneurial graffiti artist set up a graphic design, photocopy, and mural painting enterprise, employed a virtual rainbow coalition of youth, taught art and financial responsibility, and helped establish a program of Individual Development Accounts for the kids. It evolved in rhythm to the Hip Hop practice of re-mixing.
- A community development corporation based in Boston's Asian American community embraced artists, food producers, youth, elderly gardeners, and housing development all in one small community organization. They've built and managed multi-family housing, small business development programs, a legendary community garden, and an innovative cluster of youth and arts programs. It all made sense in the context of advancing a culturally-identified community.
- A Black history archive in south Florida has leveraged culture, history, community planning, real estate development, and performing arts programs in its efforts to re-build a vital community. While establishing a widely regarded collection that chronicles regional African American history, the group developed a community master plan, acquired and restored historic properties, implemented a performing arts series, and staked out a central position in the re-development of an increasingly valuable part of Miami. It's all part of bringing a vision of community to life.
- Under one umbrella, a multi-cultural community gardening enterprise in the Upper Midwest fights for environmental responsibility, youth empowerment, eradication of racism and poverty, and advancement of cultural expression. Building on the variety of traditions in working the land, growing and preparing food, these "gardeners" built cross-cultural and intergenerational relationships, developed youth leadership, engaged in micro-enterprise development, and organized neighbors to envision, realize and activate neighborhood public space. It's an organic process of nurturing individuals' roots and sprouting new relationships.

Evidence of Their Impact Mounts

A flurry of recent studies has arrived at similar conclusions: that small, community-based cultural organizations have far greater impact than their size would suggest. And, that this impact is felt in areas not typically associated with the arts.

Dr. Mark J. Stern has studied community-based arts groups for 10 years at the University of Pennsylvania. A Professor of Social Welfare and History, his Social Impact of the Arts Project is one of the most exhaustive and talked about such examinations.

Stern contends that church basement theater groups are as important as major institutions. He wrote, in “Performing Miracles,” for the Center for an Urban Future, “A small organization using an old church or a rowhouse can have a larger impact than one that spends its energy building a shiny new theater or exhibition space.”

“We learned that culture does have a powerful effect on neighborhood revitalization – but it is one that has little to do with tourists, jobs or even revenue,” he continued.

Stern found the presence of small arts groups in neighborhoods increased levels of cultural participation. And further, that in areas with higher levels of participation – in both poor and middle class neighborhoods – there was positive impact on school truancy, youth delinquency, civic engagement, teen pregnancy, and a host of other factors associated with community well being.

He also found positive relationships between arts participation, population stability and real estate values. He concluded, “a low-income neighborhood’s chance of experiencing population growth more than doubled if it had a higher-than-average cultural participation rate.” And, further that “Neighborhoods with high levels of cultural engagement were much more likely to remain diverse over time.”

“Whatever the direct contribution these groups were making to their local economies was quite small,” he wrote. “Nonetheless, these same community cultural programs seemed to have a substantial impact on the economic fortunes of their respective neighborhoods.”

“Culture stimulates revitalization not through direct economic impact, but by building the social connections between people...it increases the inclination and ability of residents to make positive changes in their community, and it increases the connections between neighborhoods of different ethnic and economic compositions,” he concluded.

Stern cited evidence that 80 percent of participants in community cultural activities travel outside their own neighborhoods to attend events – a fact that, he says, separates culture from other forms of civic engagement. It reduces social isolation and builds connections across divides of ethnicity and social class.

“Community arts organizations are successes when they stimulate broader civic engagement, expand residents’ sense of collective efficacy, and strengthen the bridges between neighborhoods,” Stern concludes.

A March 2003 study, by Chicago researchers Diane Grams and Michael Warr, also looked beyond the art ‘product’ and examined the social and economic activity that goes on around the art activity. Commissioned by the Richard H. Driehaus and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations, their study focused on small budget arts organizations in ten Chicago neighborhoods.

Grams and Warr found that small community-based arts organizations leveraged a variety of relationships, capacities, and activities in unusually effective ways. They found that the

groups have three overarching results: they build social relationships, they enable problem solving, and they provide access to resources.

The study concluded that the presence and work of these groups promote neighborhood stability, enable a sense of belonging, create new productive uses of underutilized spaces, create new links to non-local resources, provide space for cross-cultural dialogue, and provide a safe haven and opportunities to learn new skills. They also found that these arts programs engage neighbors in creative problem solving, engage youth as citizens, develop leadership and decision-making skills, build cultural identities and positive relationships among neighborhood groups, build knowledge across cultural boundaries, and build knowledge, understanding and engagement in democratic processes.

Harvard researcher and author of the well-known Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam, arrived at similar conclusions in his September 2003 book, Better Together. He and co-author Lewis Feldstein, take traditional arts institutions and practice to task. "Traditionally, arts institutions have done far more bonding than bridging ... the system of financing and presenting the arts traditionally has reinforced entrenched patterns of exclusion," they wrote.

At the same time they countered, "we believe that the arts represent perhaps the most significant underutilized forum for rebuilding community in America." They illustrated several outstanding examples of community-based arts programs that they say do just that.

"We recommend that America's cultural institutions and the people who work within them create opportunities for political expression, community dialogue, shared cultural experiences and civic work – all with an eye toward making citizen participation fun," they wrote.

From their research and observations, Putnam and Feldstein recommend increasing activities that honor the community's own experiences and that offer more opportunities for participation in the creation and practice of artistic and cultural work. They cite the importance of bridging or linking audiences across economic and racial lines and of taking people beyond their comfort zones.

They believe that the arts can create "safe" space around potentially hot issues, and provide "practice" in the experience of participatory citizenship.

Consistent with the work of some of the organizations described above, Putnam and Feldstein urge the inclusion of artists in community planning and development work to bring imaginative ways of thinking and participatory group practices.

The Ford Foundation's Asset Building and Community Development Program, together with a team of leaders and thinkers in the culture and community development fields, took a look at innovative community development strategies between March 2002 and May 2003.

Known as The Listening Tour Project, they arrived at similar conclusions. In their report, “Downside Up,” the project team, observed that art and culture organizations support community involvement and participation, increase the potential for people to understand themselves and change how they see the world, and bolster community pride and identity. They also saw that the arts serve to improve derelict buildings, preserve cultural heritage, transmit cultural values and history, bridge cultural, ethnic, and racial boundaries, and stimulate economic development.

The Listening Tour also found that practitioners “in distressed communities have successfully used arts and culture as community development approaches but that community development and arts organizations were most often disparate and isolated from one another. They found that an important “synergistic relationship” exists between what are often regarded as different worlds.

A November 2002 report, issued by New York’s Center for an Urban Future, “The Creative Engine,” by Neil Scott Kleiman, saw similar potential for synergy and called for integrating cultural and business development. They found that the two have worked best side by side but that there’s rarely coordination. “In our survey of over 150 economic and community development organizations, only six were involved in efforts that directly linked the arts with business,” Kleiman wrote.

The Kleiman study found that arts and culture has been a primary component of growth in New York City and concluded that “nurturing the cultural sector means focusing on the thousands of small organizations that feed cultural economic development at the neighborhood level, as well as on major institutions.”

Profiles of Four Emerging Paradigm Organizations

A Closer Look:

Miami's Black Archives History and Research Foundation

By all accounts Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields' verbal skills and deep well of historic information paint a memorable picture of the history of the Miami area once known as Colored town. As Founder and Director of the Black Archives History and Research Foundation, Dr. Fields also has an even more compelling vision for the future of the area now called Overtown. And, she is on her way to bringing that vision to life.

A native of Overtown with many relations who still reside there, she has emerged as a major player in the re-development of what may soon become one of Miami's most desirable locations. It's located immediately north and west of downtown and directly between Miami International Airport and the American Airlines Arena and the Port of Miami where cruise ships load and unload passengers. Commuters and travelers sometimes think the name Overtown is derived from that fact that two major elevated interstate highways, as well as Miami's elevated MetroRail commuter railroad, pass over – and divide – this devastated urban area.

One of Miami's oldest neighborhoods, it was assigned in 1896 to the burgeoning city's Black workers. African Americans from other Southern states were joined by immigrants from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Haiti, the West Indies, and Cuba who all came to build railroads, dredge the harbors, and create and maintain this vibrant hub of tourism and international trade.

By 1904, Colored town had emerged as a significant community with commerce and culture that was a focal point for Black residents. In its heyday, its downtown corridor, 2nd Avenue, was dubbed "Little Broadway" and "The Great Black Way." Popular theaters, restaurants, hotels, jazz and R&B clubs thrived until the 1960s when desegregation, freeway construction, and urban 'removal' programs tore the heart out of the community. As a result, an all too familiar list of urban ills came to plague Overtown.

The population rapidly declined from a high of 56,000 to about 8,000 today. Unemployment is high, public schools are failing, and remaining residents have the lowest per capita income in Miami. The population of poor Blacks together with the area's reputation for crime and violence, has frightened investors and potential residents. Yet its proximity to downtown and transportation infrastructure, added to development pressures, have civic leaders and real estate predators eagerly eyeballing the area.

South Florida's buildable real estate is finite, sandwiched between the Atlantic and the Everglades. The area is considered built out, while the population and economy continue to grow. Since construction of the Interstate Highway system in the 1960s, frantic development has been low density sprawl that is now choking the region in traffic, thinly-spread infrastructure, and environmental fallout. Planners and policy makers are thus feeling the urgency to in-fill areas near the center and look to higher density strategies.

Still smarting from riots, unrest, and repeated failures of past urban renewal strategies, Miami-Dade's leaders are looking for ways to make Overtown viable for residential and commercial development. City leaders are attracted to Dr. Fields vision because it respects the community's history and existing residents. It also opens the way for aggressive in-fill development and potentially attracts 'creative class' urban dwellers with higher incomes, interests in culture, and preference for racial diversity.

However, the City has not put all their eggs in Dr. Field's basket. While there are many players in Overtown, the designation of a Historic District, essentially under her control, puts the Black Archive in a pivotal position.

Dr. Fields' concept for the Overtown Folklife Village first emerged in 1982, and she slowly began a series of historic preservation and restoration projects that have gained momentum in the past few years. Comprised of four square blocks near the southeastern corner of Overtown, the historically-designated Village includes the 394-seat Lyric Theater, two large, established churches, the home of Miami's first Black millionaire, several multi family housing structures with historic significance, numerous vacant lots, and the headquarters and social hall of the International Longshoreman's Union.

One of Fields' key team members is Kris Smith, a committed social justice advocate with training in public administration and political science. He was recruited by Dr. Fields, from the National Conference on Community & Justice where he worked on reform of corporate hiring practices.

When the Black Archives joined the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Streets program, Smith was appointed to head the effort. He said the Trust's development strategy, networking, and technical assistance have proven to be invaluable tools.

The Black Archives has secured control of much of the historic and vacant real estate in the Village, putting Dr. Fields' cultural re-development strategy front and center. The focal point is the Lyric Theater, a building that was restored in 1999 with music, film and other cultural programming beginning to attract attention and audience to this corner of Overtown – the corner nearest downtown Miami and just three blocks to the only MetroRail station to serve the neighborhood.

During my visit in July, 2003, the Lyric was closed while a \$5.3 million expansion was underway. The project adds a lobby, dressing rooms, bathrooms, an elevator, and connects the building to what's known as the 9th Street Pedestrian Mall, a partially-built

park-like walkway that will connect the historic district with the MetroRail station and American Airlines Arena about five blocks to the east.

Smith explained that the Lyric expansion was funded with a \$4.3 million add-on to a \$250 million bonding bill for an enormous Miami Performing Arts Center complex just outside the eastern edge of Overtown. It will serve some of Miami's major performing arts organizations and upscale audiences driving in from near and far. The balance to pay for the Lyric's expansion was supplied by the State of Florida and the City of Miami. Thus, for about two per cent of the cost of the big-box "mainstream" performing arts center, Overtown will have a vital focal point for cultural and community celebration. In addition to an expanded schedule of performing arts, the Lyric will coordinate outdoor activities on the Pedestrian Mall that Smith says will help "animate" the Folklife Village.

Smith speaks in the language of asset based community development and is familiar with the Kretzmann/McKnight methods. However, he claims to be a pragmatist and acknowledges that the community's assets alone, cannot do the whole job. "Outside" resources and people are necessary to rebuild Overtown, asserted. And, at the same time he recognizes that the pace of development and intensity of the politics is such that tactics need to rapidly adjust to forces outside their control.

The City and developers, he said, forecast a tripling of the current population in the next decade, a change he feels he can best address through staying fast to the cultural plan and to the Main Street Program's four strategies: design, economic restructuring, organization, and promotion.

Design standards related to both buildings and streets are key factors over which they can have some control. Smith wants to see the historic character of the area represented in restoration and reconstruction throughout. Creating a more welcoming feel and safe bicycle and pedestrian passage, especially for kids, is a high priority. Linking schools, youth programs, and other community facilities to residential areas with bike trails is one specific plan.

His plans include nurturing existing businesses, as well as building on assets that can grow new business that will attract outside capital and provide jobs for residents. I heard no one talking about big box solutions for Overtown. No one said the words, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, or a new manufacturing plant to bring jobs, although I didn't talk to all the players in Overtown.

Smith is working from a 1998 master plan for the Folklife Village created by a leading national architecture and urban planning firm based in Miami, a firm known for its leadership in advancing New Urbanist strategies. As part of its process, Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) conducted a charrette in one of the neighborhoods' churches, and consolidated ideas from a variety of other City, private, and community plans created during the preceding decade.

The plan remains culturally centered and to a significant degree builds on the human and physical assets of the community using design characteristics for new construction derived from the local vernacular. It incorporates artist housing along with commercial space, mixed income residential, and historic structures. It addresses a tourism plan that caters too much to the tourists for my taste, but foresees a strategy and facilities to attract and host family reunions, a wonderful device to bring former residents back to see how the community has both changed and built on its past.

The Black Archives and History Research Foundation, rooted in preserving the history of what a community once was, has tapped its unique strengths and put itself into a pivotal role to leverage what this community can become.

“It’s a culturally important icon,” Smith says about the Lyric Theater, “and by bringing it back to life, it says that the community’s assets will be taken care of.” As director of the Main Streets program for the Black Archive, Smith lives in Overtown with his family, and says he feels accountable to his daughter. He wants her to experience a safe and welcoming community and imagines answering to her one day, saying, “I did the best I could.”

A Closer Look:

Minneapolis/St. Paul's Youth Farm and Market Project

Community gardens come in many shapes and sizes. As a phenomenon, they have sprouted in nearly every urban area in America. They are not merely places for individuals and families to grow vegetables and flowers, nor are they just places to connect with the earth. More often they are where people connect with each other, and where small enterprises and big ideas grow.

The Youth Farm and Market Project, with seven garden sites in three neighborhoods in both Minneapolis and St. Paul, is one of the country's more exceptional.

Established in 1995, the organization's mission is "to nurture relationships between urban youth and their families, their communities, and the earth around them by growing, cooking, eating and selling healthy food."

A recent grant proposal expounds, saying their programs "generate understanding of cultural meanings of food, traditions of production and land ethos, and the complex issues of sustainability. This multicultural, multigenerational project will produce vegetables, herbs, fruits, and grains both unique to, and shared between cultures, as well as provide opportunities to cook in different cultural traditions."

However, the Youth Farm and Market Project exceeds even that ambitious prescription, and all on a modest half-million dollar a year budget.

Executive Director, for the past two years, Jeff Bauer, a young man in his late 20s, brings an equally eclectic background to the group. Jeff's young career, in addition to organic farming in both Minnesota and Latin America, has included considerable political and public policy work, human rights work both domestically and internationally, citizenship training, art project leadership, urban planning, community development, grant writing, and bartending.

His recently completed masters degree, through the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, included coordinating and chronicling the "Homeland Project," through which a group of five young Hmong women made a journey back to their birthplaces in Laos and Thailand, a journey Bauer made with them.

Bauer's own mentors included the late Senator Paul Wellstone, for whom he worked in 1995-96. He then worked for Minnesota Attorney General, Skip (Hubert, Jr.) Humphrey, and left state employment to work on Humphrey's failed bid to become Minnesota governor. Bauer cited his greatest accomplishment while working for the Attorney General was to re-vamp citizenship testing requirements, making them more accessible and fair.

Before joining Youth Farm in 2002, he worked on the south side of Minneapolis for two years with Hope Community, a community development corporation in a culturally diverse neighborhood that builds both housing and community, grounded in asset-based community organizing principles. One of Bauer's projects there was to work with kids and artists on urban planning and mural projects.

I met with Bauer on a quiet Sunday morning at their St. Paul garden site, not far from where he lives. We also toured a second St. Paul garden, on public school property, where funding has been secured to build a greenhouse to expand year-round activities. And, we visited a public plaza in the heart of the West Side business district, an area known for nearly a century as a Latino community. Known as La Placita, it is the site of one of Youth Farm's weekly markets and the center of a larger community building project they have recently launched.

The Latino population of both Minneapolis and St. Paul has grown dramatically in the past ten years, including in St. Paul's West Side where a Latin business community and a massive Cinco de Mayo festival thrive. However, the area has become far more complex as a home for numerous immigrant groups. New public housing developments include Somali and other East Africans, as well as Asian immigrants, mostly Hmong. The area, as well, continues to be home for long standing Irish and German working class families, and middle class Irish and Jews who live further up the hill, on what's known as the Bluff. Yuppies have also been rehabbing some of the larger old homes that overlook the Mississippi River and downtown St. Paul on the other side.

One of the difficulties Youth Farm cites is the dominant culture view of new immigrant groups in terms of their needs and deficits that fosters a sense of inferiority and powerlessness. Reinforced by the social service delivery system, this framework denies contributions immigrants can and do bring, and makes efforts to organize for power seem futile.

"Yet, we have seen that when people take on leadership roles in the community, around significant public work like farming and participating in the creation of public art, the nature of interaction among groups changes, and the public contribution itself gives otherwise marginalized people new standing," states a Youth Farm proposal.

As with most youth-centered programs, a variety of issues have to be addressed. Teaching gardening skills is only the beginning – drug use, pregnancy, dropping out of school, and family violence, are a few of the other concerns. By accessing culturally-based traditions around the earth and food, Youth Farm has created gateways into the lives of youth and their families that are open to few social workers. This has resulted in partnerships with other community agencies, new funding streams, and new dimensions being added to the Youth Farm program.

Bauer tells of one 78-unit housing project occupied entirely by Hmong families, where the kids attend a dozen different schools. "Schools aren't the place they feel connected to,

but the garden is,” he says, “and, they see the food they grew sold at the weekly farm market at La Placita.”

Bauer points out that the new immigrants here all come from agrarian-based cultures. “Re-connecting with a piece of land is a way for kids to get some sense of commonality. You don’t see Hmong, Mexican, and Ethiopian kids hanging out together, except here, where they work together,” he said.

“There’s conflict here too,” he admits, “sometimes between kids from the Bluff and kids not from the Bluff. But, there’s something about creating a place together that feels important.” Bauer relates how some kids who are now 14 and 15, and have been in the program since they were eight, “run the program and speak about it and the community like it’s theirs.”

Since Bauer’s arrival, Youth Farm has built upon its relationships and launched a partnership with West Side cultural, community, and business groups to further the development of La Placita. The project was recently given a major boost through a three-year Rockefeller Foundation grant.

La Placita is an area set aside by the local business development association, a project partner, to occupy a troubled vacant lot in the midst of the core business district. The vision is to create an active civic space where more frequent markets and cultural activities take place. While the business district is clearly identified by its concentration of Mexican shops, groceries, and restaurants, the vision is more inclusive.

Food and kids are probably two of the most effective ways to bring communities together and build capacity for collective action, followed closely by music, theater, dance, and art. Youth Farm is taking the lead in engaging them all, and its work has come a long way from growing vegetables with kids.

According to Bauer, the goal of the *La Placita Marketplace* project is to create a space people go to and interact with other people, where they see people buying food from the kids who grew it. “It’s not about culture as commodity, but a place to explore conflict as well as commonality,” he added.

According to a proposal for the project, it intends “to craft a creative, challenging outdoor public space in which people of all ages can both experience and struggle with the conflicts and commonalties inherent in such a diverse and changing community. Together, they will create an environment that catalyzes public discourse, mixes cultures, and explores traditions through dance, theater, farming, and the co-creation of physical pieces of public art. Through these vehicles, community members will also directly confront the issues of structural and positional power that both serve to pit immigrant groups against one another, and to perpetuate majority stereotypes.”

As a coordinating group, *La Placita Collective*, was created to further develop the public space and includes, FORECAST Public Artworks, Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc, Teatro

del Pueblo, Riverview Economic Development Association, the Hmong American Institute for Learning, and Somali storyteller Guled Ali Abdi.

During our Sunday morning meeting and tour the Danza group was performing in the plaza, their drumbeat audible blocks away. A small but spontaneous crowd had gathered around. Another of the project partners, Teatro del Pueblo, a Latino theatre group is working with people to tell their stories of how they came to be there, and to incorporate stories of the land in theatrical presentations. All the groups are engaging residents to contribute some form of performance or public art, both temporary and permanent.

Borrowing again from their proposal: “*La Placita Marketplace* will endure as a dynamic, challenging space where we lift our voices up in honest public discourse, pushing toward a democracy not yet realized, but somewhere within our collective reach, if only we have the courage to create it for ourselves. This is the true transformation we seek for the West Side – a shift to the power that already exists in our community, based on the histories of its residents, catalyzed by generations working together as mentors and teachers, rooted in the common belief that we are done waiting for the change that only we can bring.”

This kind of vision and idealism, along with the deep roots and tenacity of Youth Farm promise to make a difference in this community.

Bauer likes walking through St. Paul’s West Side, running in to people on the street, stopping by the auto repair shop that works on his car to catch up on neighborhood news. He likes the sense of community, the families, homes, and kids. “It’s the kind of neighborhood where people are open and friendly – if you’re open and friendly,” he said.

With 16-hour workdays common, Bauer enjoys the work – so much, he said, he’s amazed that he gets paid to do it.

A Closer Look:

Boston's Asian Community Development Corporation

Jeremy Liu, Director of Community Planning and Advocacy for the Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC) doesn't feel constrained by definitions of what a CDC should or shouldn't do. "CDCs are potentially organizations to do cool things," he said during my visit in April, 2003. He's not naïve about how CDCs exist and generate revenue, but says, "in general funders and intermediaries such as LISC discourage innovation. They're focused on securing revenue streams and using uniform standards to structure projects so as to minimize risk."

While ACDC is considered a community development corporation in the traditional sense, it is by no means conventional. For a relatively small organization, its thinking is broader than development organizations ten times its size, and its strengths are its versatility and its focus on the assets its community possesses and the challenges it faces. A large part of the rationale for engaging ACDC in the arts, Liu explained, is to develop a stronger sense of identity and voice for the community.

ACDC is relatively small and young. Founded in 1987 by people Liu described as, "savvy people involved in the community," ACDC's first project was a \$14 million 88-unit low-income rental building with community space and office space for the CDC. In its earlier days ACDC was primarily seen by the City as a partner in dismantling the city's infamous "Combat Zone," or sex-oriented business district that had over-run Chinatown. However, ACDC has taken the initiative to be more than that and, at times, has actively opposed City development plans.

Real estate in Chinatown, the focus of ACDC's work, is scarce but community identity is abundant. It's a small area with a long history squeezed between the downtown business district and the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Chinatown has about 6,000 residents with 5% owner-occupancy. Because it includes such a high level of immigrants, renters, and youth it has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the city. Liu points out, however, that an aggressive voter education program led to a 180% increase in turnout in 2002. Chinatown is overshadowed politically because the area is represented by a City Councilor who also represents downtown businesses. "There's little prospect currently of having an authentically representative or Asian voice in the city council," Liu complains.

Liu is a true entrepreneur committed to the well being of the Asian community and he has brought a mix of art and science to the task. His training in biology and environmental planning at Boston's Tufts University was supplemented by an art program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Before coming to ACDC he worked in planning for hazardous waste while he dabbled in photography, graphic design, outdoor art and

installations. By mixing interests in environment and art he says he “began to see land and layers differently.”

“Some people can talk about ideas well and some people can talk about concrete stuff. Art training helps bridge that,” he said. It gave him capacity to translate ideas into realities.

When he began at ACDC in 1997, there was a staff of three and he said, “It was like three independent contractors developing their own projects.” The still small CDC now counts among its many projects development an \$85 million 23-story mixed income residential tower.

He is bursting with ideas for public art projects that involve people in urban design, story telling, community history, building community identity, and other civic issues. “We figure out the (organization’s) structure from what we do, not what we do through the structure,” Liu added. He has built a number of ongoing programs and a highly innovative web-based urban planning project called the Chinatown Banquet.

In 2000, ACDC raised the money and led a process to supplement the new master plan for Chinatown that Liu hoped would be “real and compelling.” In addition to the usual planning process and community meetings, a key component involved young people learning and using video to collect stories of the community, its history and personalities.

The end product contains 30 video segments and is available on a CD and on the web at <http://www.chinatownbanquet.com>. It’s an interactive site set up for people to access the narrative plan and explore visual imagery and video interviews with elders and others in the community, illustrating the plan.

ACDC offers an array of services common to CDCs, including programs to support job training, small business development, anti-crime efforts, day care and home ownership. They’ve also actively opposed highway expansion and gentrification.

Liu told a story of when a developer, working closely with the City, was seeking permits to build a luxury hi-rise just outside Chinatown. It was designed with a huge parking garage at its base with residences above. Activists were protesting the design, the lack of affordable units, and the impact of car traffic on the neighborhood. A community referendum voted 2-1 against the project. Liu brought more attention to the fight, when he organized a “car jam” with 300 cars driving slow circles around the construction site, not breaking the law but wreaking havoc. Efforts resulted in design concessions and a commitment to additional affordable housing in Chinatown.

“We’re about more than murals,” Liu likes to remind people. He sees culture and art expansively, from working the land to making videos. He’s proud of ACDCs early support for “bubble teas” an Asian tapioca drink that’s become a phenomenon across the U.S. He calls these and other businesspeople “cultural producers.” When Chinatown was

at it's lowest point economically and spiritually, Liu says, the businesses that hung in were culturally based foods and products being made by and for the Asian community.

Supporting a daycare center that provides a Chinese language environment, is more than about retaining cultural roots, Liu explains. By building a community that is bi-lingual, it becomes more economically competitive in world markets, as trade and cultural exchange with the world's most populous country will only be an increasingly important enterprise.

“We're a culturally-based CDC and do projects and technical assistance to support culturally-based – Asian – businesses and nonprofits,” Liu says. ACDC is one of the few CDC's in the U.S. that considers individual artists and emerging nonprofits as entrepreneurs and small businesses that it has a responsibility to support. They recognize that to nurture them is in the best interest of the entire community.

In spite of their real or perceived lack of clout, the community and ACDC have some impressive victories and ambitious plans.

The most emblematic and very real victory was the fight that established the Berkeley Street Community Garden. During the 1950s, Liu explained, highway planners plotted to funnel cars into downtown Boston by building an inner beltway which included expansion of the Berkeley Street corridor. Several blocks of stately brick row houses were demolished in preparation, and as the land sat idle, nearby elderly residents, mostly Chinese and including some Syrian and Lebanese, planted gardens.

Political pressures eventually halted the highway plans and some of the cleared land throughout the city was re-appropriated. On the Berkeley Street site, the presence and devotion of the “squatters” was enough to protect the land from other users. After 20 years of struggle for legitimacy, the gardeners won permanent rights to the land. It was ceded to the South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust, with ACDC in the role of manager.

Liu spoke enthusiastically about both the symbolic and real significance of the gardens. “From our perspective, it's a valuable community health resource, both physically and mentally,” he said. For the elderly, it provides motivation and opportunity for physical exercise and social activity. The 140 garden plots are mostly claimed by “non-English speakers who have been here for 50 years,” Liu added, “growing food alongside yuppies who just moved into the neighborhood.”

“We work directly at the garden with elderly Asian gardeners, garden leadership, young people, designers, and an artist to ensure a really important resource is protected,” Liu said. “There's something that feels important when you can shape the public realm.”

According to Liu, the garden is more authentically Chinese than anything else you see in Chinatown. “If you go to any major city in China and see how gardening is done, and you

look at the way they plant and grow food here, you see the same thing – an agricultural tradition that goes back 50 centuries,” he said.

Liu also oversees an arts in education program with local youth to “build community development skills through arts and gardening.” In 2002 the Berkeley Street Youth Gardeners took second prize in the Mayor’s Garden Contest, and presented their First Annual Harvest Celebration less than a block away, at the Boston Center for the Arts.

“The Berkeley Street Community Garden is the most visible and vibrant ongoing expression of authentic Asian culture anywhere in the City of Boston,” announces ACDC newsletters and flyers. With 140 individual plots the garden is a landmark, prodigiously producing vegetables, community relationships, and carrying on cultural traditions year after year.

A Closer Look:

East Oakland's Tumi's and Eastside Arts Alliance

I first met Estria (he goes by one name) at the annual conference of the National Community Builders Network in Chicago in May 2003. His graffiti style T-shirt and ever-present sketch pad set him apart at this gathering of nonprofit managers and community organizers. As we began to converse, he revealed his enthusiasm for Hip Hop art and his entrepreneurial drive. He gave me his brightly-colored business card and promotional post cards for various projects and upcoming events, and he invited me to visit his neighborhood in East Oakland, California.

The next day I found myself on the same tour bus with Estria and marveled at watching him move from person to person on the bus during the afternoon-long tour, repeating his story and handing out cards.

Two months later I exited the East Bay BART line at the Fruitvale stop. The lively and colorful business district, a couple blocks from the station, is primarily Mexican. "Tumi's," Estria's business, was easy to find in the corner of a prominent, ornate six-story 1940s commercial building. The corner of the building was adorned with large-scale painted images exactly like those on his business card.

On the surface, Tumi's is a for-profit business specializing in design, printing, web site design, and photocopying. It also includes retail sales of Hip Hop accessories including t-shirts, posters, and one of the widest assortments of spray paints, tips, and other tools for aerosol painting I've seen in public. These same products are illegal in the City of Chicago, among other places.

At even closer inspection, Tumi's is about social change and community building. Their brochure proclaims, "Tumi's strengthens our community by participating in and supporting social justice movements. We employ local youth, and offer union printing using soy-based inks on recycled papers."

Four workers were busy that morning in the small shop, working at computer terminals, taking calls, and attending the counter. Tumi's customers are primarily the health clinics, public schools, and wide assortment of nonprofit organizations based in the area. "Oakland is the nonprofit capital of the world," Estria joked. "People do business with Tumi's because we're committed to the community."

Their brochure goes on, "Our multicultural designers have worked with non-profits for over 10 years. We understand non-profit culture, calendars and budgets."

Several years ago, Estria was a freelance graphic designer working for some of these nonprofit groups. There was no place in the community where he could do small printing

jobs and photocopying, he said. “I was spending a lot of money at Kinkos, and had to go way across town.” Thus the idea to start Tumi’s, which boasts itself “East Oakland’s only full service design, copy and print shop.”

Estria is also part of a core group of eight artists that make up the Eastside Arts Alliance (ESAA), a group he described, “Like a family. Blacks, Asians, and Brown folks – arts activists of color.”

ESAA was founded in 1999. A recent grant application stated, “our programs are dedicated to community empowerment and building bridges among the racially and ethnically diverse communities...uniting arts with community activism.”

“Our struggle is here,” Estria said. “If we’re going to be a force for change, we have to be in the community.” He went on to explain that each of the group’s members develops semi-autonomous programs in performing arts, video, dance, and visual arts. Some of them mix styles from the 1950s with Hip Hop, he said, as a way to connect with history and bigger social movements and with the culture and artists of earlier times.

“We believe that every community deserves a good library, great public schools, a park and recreation center, and a community cultural center where the arts can be nurtured and shared,” the ESAA proposal stated. Among its programs, the organization has included voter registration drives and arts presentations with discussions that addressed issues such as gentrification, the role of women in Third World movements, and the “war on terrorism.”

Estria’s contribution to ESAA is a program, called Visual Elements that he boasted received among the highest rankings in competition for arts grants from the City of Oakland. Through the program, he conducts arts workshops with youth and negotiates with community spaces to produce murals around the East Side, one of the most mural-rich neighborhoods in the East Bay.

Part of the proliferation of community murals, Estria explained, was due to leadership of several of the community-based organizations and clinics that see murals – and the participation of people in creating them – as important to a healthy community.

Youth in the Visual Elements program also learn skills in silk screening and computer-based design, skills that make them employable at Tumi’s, among other places.

The interaction between his for-profit business and his work through the community arts enterprise would raise eyebrows for some. Estria sees the positive side. “We can use each others’ resources,” he said. He maximizes the experience and the opportunities available to the young people he works with, and he taps the strengths of each enterprise, seeing both, like himself, dedicated to social and cultural change in the community.

Through ESAA, some of the kids in Estria’s program have been assisted in starting Individual Development Accounts, helping them learn about financial management skills

and opening and maintaining bank accounts. Each dollar they put into the account is matched by two dollars of philanthropic dollars through the sponsoring agency. The youth build assets, up to \$1,500 that they can use for educational expenses and other approved costs. Estria would like to see other entrepreneurs emerge from the community.

The Eastside Arts Alliance operates somewhat like a collective. Each core artist brings their program or programs to the table and contributes to administrative expenses and the overhead costs for the small space (about 1,500 square feet). They currently occupy a storefront in the San Antonio district, on the same street but just a mile west of Tumi's. Their board of directors lists some well-known names among Oakland-based writers, artists, and academics of the past 40 years. Few of them are active on a regular basis in ESAA, Estria explained, but they believe in what the younger artists are doing.

ESAA has an aggressive vision of its role in the social, political, economic, and cultural transformation of East Oakland and is committed to owning a permanent space for their community cultural center. They moved only recently from an unused one-story warehouse space into the smaller, nearby storefront on the first floor of a large low-income housing development on International Blvd., the community's main thoroughfare.

Together with partner organizations, according to its grant application, ESAA hopes to "build a sustainable and replicable model for community cultural development, definitively demonstrating that the arts are a vital element in transforming and reclaiming a neighborhood, reaching out to our endangered youth, and creating a space where diverse residents can come together to hammer out a common vision for social change."

Estria's work with youth and with creating art in the community have earned high ranks from local arts reviewers and local notoriety. As he took me on a tour of murals and major community institutions, such as the dynamic and multi-faceted community health center, La Clinica, he was repeatedly greeted and asked about community projects or friends in common.

Estria lives in the Fruitvale neighborhood, an easy walk from Tumi's in the lower half of a duplex owned by his girl friend's parents. He got the idea to name the business "Tumi's" several years ago on a trip with her family to Peru, their native country. He said he kept seeing images of this legendary armor-clad Incan warrior-god named Tumi. "People there just seemed to love this guy," he said.

A native of Hawaii – part Japanese, part Hawaiian – he came to California at 18 to attend college. His degree is in illustration, but, like many graffiti artists, his real education was gained from his work and interactions with other artists on the street.

He was arrested once for unauthorized graffiti and did one year of community service work. After college he taught art for four years at Precita Eyes, a community arts center in the Mission District of San Francisco, well known for its mural work. There he teamed up with other artists to create an innovative public art project and received a grant from

the Creative Work Fund, a highly competitive foundation-funded program that supports new at work by Bay Area artists.

On our bus tour two months earlier in Chicago one of the nonprofit enterprises we visited was a low-cost mini Home Depot, selling surplus home remodeling items donated by major retailers. One related enterprise under the same warehouse roof included school supplies available at low cost to Chicago teachers. Estria was quite taken by this idea and said he hoped to leverage his relationships with schools and his entrepreneurial ambition to provide youth and teachers in Oakland with a similar resource.

He's in the start-up phase of launching a silk-screen business in a warehouse away from the business district. He told me of his vision to open a youth-run healthy food café, noting the unhealthy foods that he sees kids eating. He also wants to explore starting a used furniture store where kids can learn carpentry skills and sales.

Reflecting on the mix of activities he's engaged with, and the impact he feels he's having on youth and the community, Estria said, "I'm having the time of my life."