

THE ARTS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Czech president Vaclav Havel, a renowned playwright whose artistic voice became a resounding voice for democracy and civil society, has observed that the arts offer a unique means of connecting us to our common humanity.¹ Whether visual, musical, dramatic, or literary, the arts allow us to “create together” and to discover shared understandings. The creation and presentation of art often inspires a raft of civically valuable dispositions – trust, openness, honesty, cooperativeness, tolerance, and respect. From museums to open-air amphitheaters to dance studios, arts spaces are, at root, civic spaces. The arts are a superb means of building social capital.

It is tempting to see the arts as peripheral to rebuilding community. After all, art exists for its own sake – valuable for what it *is* as much as for what it might do. In part because artistic expression abides by such a lofty ideal, leading cultural organizations sometimes have held themselves aloof from the communities in which they are located. As a recent National Endowment for the Arts report observed,

“In enshrining art within the temples of culture – the museum, the concert hall, the proscenium stage – we may have lost touch with the *spirit* of art: its direct relevance to our lives, [and] we may have stressed the specialized, professional aspects of the arts at the expense of their more pervasive, participatory nature. In the process, art became something that we watch other people do, usually highly skilled professionals, rather than something we do ourselves.”²

But a growing body of research suggests that the arts can be a valuable engine of civic renewal. Indeed, more and more arts institutions are directing substantial resources to that cause. The arts can nurture social capital by strengthening friendships, helping communities to understand and celebrate their heritage, and providing a safe way to discuss and solve difficult social problems.

Whether we are spectators, performers, or producers, the arts provide a uniquely enjoyable way to build our stock of informal social capital. Two people who attend a Monet exhibit and later discuss the works over coffee have built social capital through a shared artistic experience. Doctors and laborers and students and retirees who sing together in the community chorus or perform in a local theater production have built social capital through a shared artistic experience. The conductor who leads the town band and the choreographer who stages a dance performance have built social capital through a shared artistic experience. Social capital can be built among spectators, performers, and producers – as well as across those groups.

Beyond the individual effects, the arts allow for public celebration and exploration of the meaning of community. Public art inspires civic pride, thereby uniting us in our appreciation of what we have collectively produced. For example, Somerville, Massachusetts, is dotted with huge murals depicting, among other things, the diverse ethnic groups that constitute the city’s population; the array of civil servants who make the city work; the aspirations and dreams of local schoolchildren; and the site where George Washington first raised the colonial flag on the eve of the American Revolution. Artistic projects and rituals are often instrumental in allowing

immigrants to honor their native heritage and in helping them navigate the uncertainties of life in a new country.

For native-born Americans and recent arrivals alike, the arts provide a safe means of bridging differences and resolving community conflict. For example, after the accidental death of an African-American youth and the retaliatory slaying of a Hasidic Jew put Brooklyn on the edge of racial warfare, a museum, historical society, and preservation group led neighborhood residents in creating the successful Crown Heights History Project, a community healing and learning process that fostered a new kind of communication and expanded tolerance through increased understanding. In our Saguaro meeting on the arts, we heard how the Washington, D.C.-based Freestyle Union assembled a highly diverse group of participants (professional and blue collar, young and old, varied classes and races) to practice rap in “cipher” sessions. We learned how Roadside Theater restored local storytelling and song performing, attracting non-religious and religious participants, wealthy and poor, southerners and northerners, whites and Native Americans.

In addition, the arts can serve as a powerful spur to civic dialogue. An especially moving, shocking, insightful, or original work might compel us to discuss social, spiritual, or political issues with friends and family members. For example, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., is a graceful piece of art that captures Americans’ powerful and complex emotional memories of the war and serves as a space for contemplation, connection, and dialogue. In inner-city Houston, an Episcopal priest, working in partnership with the city’s Museum of Fine Arts, helped poor kids paint a joyful mural next to a mass of gang graffiti – evoking commentary on the poignant mix of hope and hopelessness among neighborhood youths.³

Participation in the arts also strengthens democratic institutions. A major study of Italian regional government found a startlingly strong relationship between the number of local choral societies and the effectiveness of government institutions.⁴ The implication is not that singing *per se* improves mail delivery, but rather that “communities that sing together” (literally and metaphorically) better achieve the government they desire. In recent years, mounting evidence shows that arts programs improve the challenging work facing government agencies, whether it is keeping kids healthy and safe, preventing crime, or beautifying dilapidated neighborhoods.⁵

Finally, and especially appropriate in these uncivil times, the arts “hath charms to soothe the savage breast” (to borrow from the English dramatist William Congreve). Scholars who study the emotions have found that dancing, playing music, and engaging in other artistic activities bring more joy than do many other leisure activities.⁶ That joy in turn enhances our willingness to reach out and connect with others. At least one study has suggested that involvement in the arts, including as a spectator, can prolong your life.⁷

In sum, cultural endeavors offer social capital effects both direct and indirect, immediate and long lasting. The arts provide a powerful way to transcend the cultural and demographic boundaries that divide us and to find deeper spiritual connections with those like us. To use our phrasing, the arts create both “bridging” and “bonding” social capital.

Traditionally, however, arts institutions have done far more bonding than bridging, and it is rare for the same artistic production to do both simultaneously. Like neighborhoods and churches, many arts and cultural institutions are unofficially but unmistakably segregated by race, by socioeconomic class, and sometimes even by gender. This is in part because people naturally seek out those who are like them, and in part because the system of financing and presenting the arts traditionally has reinforced entrenched patterns of exclusion.

Fortunately, in recent years, the cultural world and its philanthropic supporters have begun to change. Many long-established arts institutions are taking steps to create more meaningful community connections and to broaden their reach. In St. Louis, for example, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra transformed itself from an elite institution into one that offers music classes in impoverished areas and performs with inner-city church choirs. These “bridging” activities have strengthened both the Symphony and the surrounding community alike.⁸ A 1996 study found that more than half of all major-city arts agencies were involved in projects relating to AIDS; about the same fraction were involved in environmental protection; nearly two-thirds were involved in crime prevention; roughly nine out of ten were involved in helping at-risk youths; and about the same percentage tried to raise cross-cultural awareness.⁹ With help from philanthropic foundations, arts organizations are increasingly being founded with an explicit aim to bridge inter-group chasms. The arts have the potential to promote such bridging social capital precisely because they can provide a safe space to shelve political and ideological differences, or at least manage those differences without conflict. We need not be of the same race, generation, gender, political party, religion, or income group to sing, act, or create together.

Trends in Arts Participation

The arts contribute greatly to our stock of social capital, and America boasts more cultural organizations today than ever before. Americans participate in the arts in countless ways, formal and informal, public and private, collective and solitary.

On the formal side, the United States is home to some 21,750 non-profit arts, culture, and humanities organizations, according to federal government estimates. These officially recognized organizations hold an astonishing \$37-billion in assets and spend \$13.3-billion annually to enrich our understanding of truth, to enlarge our appreciation of beauty, and to give us insights into the human condition.¹⁰ These organizations include small-town volunteer-led preservation societies, big-city art museums, and everything in between. And their numbers are growing faster than our population. From 1965 to 1992, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, the number of professional orchestras doubled, the number of opera companies nearly quintupled, the number of non-profit theater companies increased more than 12-fold, and the number of dance companies also increased 12-fold. The nation boasts 1,200 art museums, half of them established in the past generation. Today, all 50 states have arts agencies, as do 3,800 localities.¹¹

Alongside these formally established organizations are tens of thousands of groups known collectively as the “unincorporated arts.” Under this umbrella are non-professional and loosely organized church choirs, poetry slams, recital series, chamber music ensembles, quilting guilds, reading groups, hip-hop sessions, and other largely volunteer-run groups.¹² These forms of artistic

expression often take place among friends in private homes and operate with neither budget nor bylaws. They represent an important, less visible form of social capital.

In many ways, the arts are flourishing in America, despite diminishing government support both at the federal and, sometimes, the state level. But, as with other forms of communal activity, there are troubling trends afoot. For one, we have come to *observe art together* far more often than we *do art together*. According to a 1997 national survey, 35% of Americans had visited an art museum in the past year, 25% had attended a musical, and 16% had gone to a classical music performance.¹³ By contrast, fewer than 3% of Americans had acted in a publicly performed play, only 10% had performed in a choir or chorus, and just 11% had played music (and this is a generous estimate of musical social capital, as it includes those who played alone).¹⁴ Spectator activities can be done singly or in a group; and to the extent that we “spectate together,” these activities may help to build or reinforce social capital. We support arts spectatorship because it is intrinsically rewarding and can create social capital among spectators. And, obviously, without spectators, few of us would be as enthusiastic about performing together.

That said, spectatorship is a poor substitute for participation, which requires ongoing interactions, coordination, and trust. And this richer form of social capital is on the wane. Scattered evidence suggests that the gap between observation and participation has been growing over the past generation. For example, museum attendance has increased a modest 10% over the past dozen years, and attendance at rock/pop concerts is up by about a third. But examples of citizens producing culture together – town bands or jazz jamming or simply gathering around the piano, for example – are becoming scarcer. On average, we play musical instruments only half as often today as in the mid-1970s,¹⁵ and the fraction of households where someone plays an instrument has fallen precipitously (from 51% to 38%) in that same time period.¹⁶ What is more, analysis of survey data reveals a pattern now familiar: Middle-aged adults (the Baby Boomers) are far less likely than their same-aged counterparts in generations past to create art.

All available evidence suggests, in short, that we are becoming a nation of arts spectators more than arts participants, and this trend is likely to accelerate because of the generational patterns. This is a troubling omen for anyone who believes, as we do, in the vast promise of the arts to bring diverse people together and to enlarge our sense of common connections and linked fate.

Even amid these warning signs, we believe that the arts represent perhaps the most significant underutilized forum for rebuilding community in America. We call on artists, arts administrators, government officials, and everyday citizens with a modicum of unexpressed creativity to imagine new and innovative ways to use art to build social capital.

Principles of Building Arts-Based Social Capital

If the arts are to strengthen social capital, three principles should guide that work. These principles call our attention to the delicate balance between the different roles that arts and cultural institutions play in a democratic society. We hope to shift that balance toward a larger community role without undermining the important role of arts institutions as forums for the creation and display of intrinsically valuable works.

Principle 1: Look for Opportunities to Bridge. Given how well the arts may enable us to form trusting ties across race, income, gender, religious faith, and generations, we should seek out such opportunities regardless of our station: whether we are artists thinking about a new project, singers joining a chorus, single people trying to figure out what to do on Friday night, or grant makers wondering what arts projects to fund. We should always ask whether we are using the arts to connect with people unlike ourselves.

Principle 2: Revive Arts Organizations as Community Institutions. A hundred years ago, the arts were far more volunteer-based. Most towns had an opera house, a playhouse, a music hall, and a caroling society. Today, many arts institutions have become high-priced entertainment venues, where people go to consume culturally rather than to connect socially. We need to return to an era in which arts institutions were more akin to public libraries and town squares than to sports arenas and mall multiplexes. Doing so may require a difficult set of measures, including new funds, a reconfiguration of arts spaces, and changes in the way that institutions conceive of their mission. Using arts spaces as public spaces is an example of “recycling” social capital in that participation in entertainment may well create new networks that will increase individuals’ participation in public affairs, volunteer activity, or religious life.

Principle 3: Include Artists and Cultural Institutions in Community Planning. Artistic endeavors and the institutions that sponsor them can achieve a host of important policy goals. Arts institutions can anchor neighborhood revitalization efforts, and cultural activities can help heal community divisions and make social programs more effective. However, while policy makers and political leaders have begun to understand the economic benefits of a strong cultural sector, they have not fully understood the civic benefits. To remedy that, leaders of the local arts community need to be incorporated fully into planning efforts, commissions, and programs at the neighborhood, city, state, and national levels.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital Through the Arts

The arts have a singular advantage in rebuilding social capital: cultural activities are enjoyable and fun. Unlike attending meetings or voting – what we call “civic broccoli” because they’re good for all but unpleasant to many – artistic performance is akin to civic fruit. We have fun and enjoy the arts, even as they do us good. The enjoyable nature of the arts makes them perhaps the most promising, if neglected, means of building social capital.

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.

Recommendation 1: Increase Funding for “Community Arts.” We recommend that private philanthropy and government arts agencies devote a greater share of their budgets to financing art projects and productions that are broadly participatory and civically oriented. Public murals, community theater groups, local chorales and the like promise to accomplish a wide array of worthwhile goals – from honoring community experiences, to providing civically valuable opportunities for cultural participation, to offering citizens an entertaining alternative to television. We would like to see more productions like Seattle’s “Dance This,” which brings

together youth dance troupes from a variety of cultures – Chinese, Mexican, African, among others – to immerse residents in diverse styles of expression. Community arts projects and public arts participation also promise a way out of the destructive debate over whether public money should support the arts, and, if so, what kind of art is appropriate, and who decides? Because of the role of arts in rebuilding social capital and communities, we foresee broader consensus on the principle that community arts projects are worthy of public support.

Recommendation 2: Create Opportunities for Collaboration Between Arts Organizations. Leaders of arts institutions are also community leaders. They can bridge constituencies in emotionally powerful ways, and thereby bridge cultures. People naturally seek out others like themselves, and often fear venturing into unknown territories – sometimes, but not always, with good reason. Young inner-city residents and comfortable middle-aged citizens alike often do not feel comfortable or welcome outside their respective environs, nor do they see any point in finding out if they are missing something. Similarly, people of all stripes who have never meaningfully experienced the arts often do not feel comfortable or welcome in *cultural* environs, nor do *they* want to learn if they are missing something. Witness, for example, the paucity of people under 30 at the symphony.

Good leaders challenge people to move beyond their comfort zone, and good leaders make these people glad they did. In Boston, for example, the Museum of the National Center for African-American Artists had a “Fish Fry” in which diverse groups of black Americans (Haitians, Jamaicans, Cape Verdeans, Brazilians, and African Americans) built 20-foot-long fish and then paraded them or launched them by boat in elaborate processions to the New England Aquarium. We wholeheartedly embrace efforts by arts institutions to reach out to one another, to discover their common goals of enlarging cultural understanding, and to establish pathways for their constituencies to follow.

We embrace programs that link institutions with very different audiences, bringing, for example, the well-heeled together with the truly disadvantaged, Hispanics with Hmong, Buddhists with B’Hai and Baptists. We embrace programs that link professional theatrical troupes with communities that have never staged a play. We challenge leaders, in the arts and in other civic institutions, to reach out to leaders unlike themselves to use art as a mode of spanning community divides, and in the process to find ways to make the arts accessible financially and culturally. Fostering greater collaboration across arts organizations also furthers our “C2C” principle, in which citizens help citizens without expert intermediaries.

Recommendation 3: Make Civic Dialogue Integral to Artistic Productions. We join others, including the advocacy group Americans for the Arts, in calling for a revival of the old practice of using artistic productions to critique and improve community and democracy. We believe that the arts provide a safe space for discussion of difficult issues, and that the act of creating and performing together breaks down the walls that block democratic discourse from occurring. We endorse efforts such as Swamp Gravy, a Georgia- and Chicago-based theater company whose works explore racial and cultural divisions in the South, and the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, which, among other subjects, has explored the impact of economic dislocations in the Northeast. We also support the continued proliferation of poetry slams, which are part cultural critique and part performance art and are especially popular with young people from diverse cultural

backgrounds. These efforts, and scores more like them, allow for diverse groups of people to gather together and explore what it means to be a citizen.

Recommendation 4: Incorporate the Arts Into Social Problem Solving. The arts are intrinsically worthwhile, but they also have instrumental uses. We call on government and non-profit leaders to find creative ways to tap artists as partners in educational, social, and faith-based programs. We believe that programs to lift people up must raise their spirits and spark their imagination. The power of the arts to do so has been evident for decades. Witness the runaway success of the Jesse White Tumblers, a Chicago acrobatics group that recruits youths from the city's roughest housing projects and provides them with a positive alternative to gangs.¹⁷ Or witness the Arts-in-Corrections program, which uses writing and music among inmates to lessen the social isolation within jails, and also reduces recidivism when the inmates get out.¹⁸ Recently, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities profiled more than 200 extracurricular cultural programs – from a Cambodian dance troupe in Massachusetts to a poetry league in Washington, D.C. – that are improving the lives and skills of at-risk kids in neighborhoods all over the country (see www.cominguptaller.org).

We recognize that artists need never leave the studio or stage to contribute to society, and we do not want to force artists to be social workers, teachers, community organizers, or public servants. However, we know that artists possess an invaluable repertoire of skills and sensibilities that can breathe life into tired programs. Artists' touches could increase both the fun and the effectiveness of everything from English-as-a-second-language classes, to health-and-healing programs for hospital patients, to economic development projects in depressed areas.

Recommendation 5: Connect Arts to Community Service. We call on cultural institutions and unincorporated groups of artists to find innovative ways to support the community-building work of other organizations. For example, members of quilting bees often stitch for local charities and organizations. In San Francisco, a quilting bee that meets for free at a police station repaid the hospitality by stitching quilts to be carried in squad cars and used to comfort traumatized children.¹⁹ Such efforts connect quilters to their communities, imbue their product with deeper meaning, and allow art to better the human condition.

Concluding Thoughts

In an exploration of how arts projects can animate democracy, Americans for the Arts observed that art is a “powerful force for illuminating civic experience” through its ability “to create indelible images, to express difficult ideas through metaphor, and to communicate beyond the limits of language.”²⁰ We agree. Sadly, in an age of 500-channel television and individualized entertainment, America has begun to forget the civic value of community arts. Our forebears knew well how watching together and performing together strengthened social bonds. America needs to commit itself to creating new and exciting opportunities for shared cultural experiences – opportunities compelling enough to lure us away from “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” We need to find the modern-day equivalent of the opera house or the dance hall: an entertainment venue that doubles as a community space. Cultural institutions are eagerly reinventing themselves, and all of us need to join them in finding new and innovative roles for the arts to play in building social capital.

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- ¹ See among other writings, “Post Modernism: The Search for Universal Laws” by Vaclav Havel, a speech delivered on the occasion of the Liberty Medal Ceremony in Philadelphia, 4 July 1994.
- ² Gary O. Larson, *American Canvas* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1997), p. 59.
- ³ This example was spotlighted in the NEA’s *American Canvas* report, p. 64.
- ⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- ⁵ Jenny C. Seham, “The effects on at-risk children of an in-school dance program” (Ph.D. Diss., Adelphi University, 1998); Steven Durland, “Maintaining Humanity: Interview with Grady Hillman About Arts-In-Corrections” in *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena*, ed. Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (New York: Critical Press, 1997), pp. 251-256; and Larson, *American Canvas* (1997).
- ⁶ Michael Argyle, “Subjective Well-Being,” in *In Pursuit of the Quality of Life*, ed. Avner Offer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 30-33.
- ⁷ Lars Olov Bygren, Boinkum Benson Konlaan, and Sven-Erik Johansson, “Attendance at cultural events, reading books or periodicals, and making music or singing in a choir as determinants for survival: Swedish interview survey of living conditions,” *British Medical Journal*, 3 (13), 1577-1580, 21 December 1996.
- ⁸ Bruce Coppock (Executive Director, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra), “Speech to Grantmakers in the Arts.” Unpublished ms., October 10, 1995.
- ⁹ “United States Urban Arts Federation: A Report on the Arts Councils in the 50 Largest U.S. Cities,” June 1996, p. 7, cited in *American Canvas*, p. 84.
- ¹⁰ Data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. Based on charity registration data supplied by the Internal Revenue Service. See http://nccs.urban.org/fin_grp.pdf
- ¹¹ Data from Jason Edward Kaufman, “Introduction to the arts and social capital in America” (Cambridge, Mass.: The Saguaro Seminar, 1999), p. 3.
- ¹² Monnie Peters and Joni Maya Cherbo, “The missing sector: The unincorporated arts.” *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 28 (2), Summer 1998, 115-128.
- ¹³ National Endowment for the Arts, “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Summary Report” (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1997), Table 1, “Attendance at Arts Events: 1997,” p. 15.
- ¹⁴ National Endowment for the Arts, “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Summary Report” (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1997), Table B, “Arts Participation,” p. 34.
- ¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Author’s analysis of DDB Needham Life Style surveys. According to National Endowment for the Arts surveys of arts participation, lifetime exposure to music lessons declined from 47 percent in 1982 to 40 percent in 1992.
- ¹⁶ *Music USA 1997* (Carlsbad, Calif.: National Association of Music Merchants, 1997), 37-38.
- ¹⁷ Steve Neal, “Jesse White has launched achievers for 40 years,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 July 1999, p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Durland (1997), 251-256.
- ¹⁹ Leah Fletcher, *The Social Fabric: How Quilting Groups Are Rebuilding Community in Contemporary America* (Honors Thesis, Harvard College, March 2000).

²⁰ Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*. Report to the Ford Foundation. (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 1999).