

KIP'S REMARKS AT ACP SESSIONS - MARCH 2014

WHAT IS PLACEMAKING?

The term “placemaking” has been used in urban design and town planning circles for decades, but it is a fairly new, somewhat unfamiliar term in the arts world. What does it really mean?

Here's how I think about it: It is the active attempt by a community of people to define and express themselves and the place “where their souls inhabit the soil” as Linda Ronstadt would put it. Did you see that story in the Travel Section of the New York Times a couple of months ago, where a reporter traveled with Linda through the borderlands of southern Arizona and northern Mexico where she grew up? Everywhere she went, visiting friends and relatives, there was music and song. Her family and friends have made and are making that place, and in turn, they are being made by it.

That is the key thing to understand about placemaking: the making works in two directions: we make places, and places make us. Think of it as a conversation with ourselves, our predecessors and our descendants, which takes place in space and across time—past, present and future. The stories of our predecessors are etched into our buildings and onto our landscapes, and these stories, in turn, inspire us to leave our mark. How, we ask ourselves, will our lives look to the future based on what we leave behind?

What place made you? Where and when was your making of a place and the making of yourself so intertwined that it's hard for you to tell the two apart?

Where does your soul inhabit the soil? Are you lucky enough to live or work in such a place now?

PLACEMAKING IS NOT PRIMARILY ABOUT REAL ESTATE

The second point I want to make about placemaking is that it's mostly not about the physical stuff. It's about people and creative activity. The key element of place is the play, not the stage, both today's plays and the plays that have taken place over time. Our challenge is not to create permanent effects from temporary creative activity, but rather to make a larger and richer flow of creative activity. Robust creative activity is not an instrument to some greater end; it is the end...the live and perishable experience of place.

PLACEMAKING IS ABOUT ATTRACTING YOUNG TALENT

I was at a New England Foundation for the Arts workshop last week where one of the participants said he was put off by why he called "\$1,000 words." You know what he means...fancy words, the jargon used by a group of people as a kind of short-hand communication. I fear that a term I am going to use—"existential threat"—may be one of those fancy phrases, so I want to define it. It means something that is a threat to your very existence, or to the kind of future you would like to live. I believe that placemaking is the intersection of an existential threat to Connecticut, as a state economy, and an existential threat to arts organizations.

Much of the current thinking about the economic impact of the arts is focused on measuring the impact of arts organizations as job creators, counting up the

direct jobs created by arts organizations and the indirect jobs created by the spending of arts organizations and their patrons. There is nothing wrong with that, and in fact, DECD participates in that kind of economic impact study with Americans for the Arts. But, these direct and indirect job effects are actually much less than the impact that the arts can have on the larger economy by the way that the arts contribute to distinctiveness of place, making localities magnets for young, mobile talent. Put it this way: great art creates great places; great places attract great talent; great talent creates great jobs. If we prove this chain of connection through our work, there is a much higher level of public funding that the arts could get by making places into talent magnets, than we can get based on simply the direct and indirect job creation potential of the arts. We should be investing in art not so much to produce a marginal return on investment in terms of direct and indirect jobs, but rather to address Connecticut's most fundamental existential threat: the need to attract young, mobile talent, without whom we cannot build the next economy. ***Not investing in art is the riskiest possible economic development strategy that Connecticut could pursue.***

MEASURING PLACEMAKING AT THE LEVEL OF THE LOCALITY.

The above suggests a simple way to measure the success of placemaking *at the level of the locality*. We should measure success based on demonstrated market demand—on the increase in the number of college-educated 25-34-year-olds who are choosing our places. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to measure too many things. It is much more powerful to use just one compelling measure of success than to use several. The “purchasing” of our places by the

population of young innovators we most need to attract is the acid test of success.

MEASURING PLACEMAKING AT THE PROJECT LEVEL

But at the same time, it is fruitless to try to assess the impact on the talent magnetism of a place resulting from a specific art organization or art project. The concept of place is too dynamic, subject to too many influences, most happening over too long period of time, to determine the casual effect of a specific organization or project on the overall distinctiveness or vibrancy of a place. Organizations and projects should be measured on their own terms. What community are they intending to serve, with what impact, as measured in what way? In choosing among organizations and projects to fund, what is important is to insist they be intentional, and that they be rigorous in pursuing their intent and evaluating whether they achieve it.

FOSTERING INTENTIONALITY

We have explicitly taken this non-prescriptive, but intentional approach in our *Arts Catalyze Placemaking* program. We do not define placemaking for our grantees, trusting that collectively they have greater genius than we do. We believe that an increase in the absolute number of intentional art projects succeeding at their self-defined intent will ***collectively*** increase the magnetism of places for young talent. The idea is to nurture intentionality, then get out of the way, and trust in the collective wisdom. ***The biggest problem is that in most cases we are not funding a critical mass of projects at the same time in the same place. This is not so much a question of focus, as it is of***

overall funding levels, especially funding for competitive arts projects.

We should be distributing \$6 million a year through ACP, not \$2 million. And we need you to help us persuade the State's leadership to support that kind of increase in funding as the economy recovers and we get out of the current structural deficit. I look forward to working with you on that in the years ahead.

YOUR EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE

I talked about the need to help us meet the State's existential threat: the need to attract the young talent who can help us build the next economy. Let me end by suggesting that by fostering a greater degree of intentionality among arts organizations, we are also helping you to focus on your own existential threat—maintaining the relevance of the live experience of art in a digital age. An actual painting, not a digitized image of it. The whole, rich sound of a live music performance, not a digital recording of it. A live play, not a YouTube video. A whole poem or novel, not a Tweet. You need to get people off their computers, out of their houses, looking up from their smart phones. That requires taking risks to create new content that is provocative and inspiring—that brings a larger local and regional community of people back to the live experience of art and the live experience of place, which are in many ways the same thing.

Thank you.