

Commentary MPR News

Need community development? Put your money on the arts

by Anne Gadwa

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When you think of arts and culture, maybe you envision an abstract painting or your kid's school musical. But do you imagine an engine of recovery? "Creative placemaking," an effort to provide just that, is a high-stakes gamble now underway.

Earlier this month, a powerful consortium of foundations, corporations and federal agencies announced investments of \$11.5 million in grants and \$12 million in loans across the country. Our own St. Paul-based [Springboard for the Arts](#) won \$750,000 to train a cadre of artists as community organizers. That training is part of a program called [Irrigate](#), which will support more than 100 juried art projects along the Central Corridor to attract a flow of people to the area during construction disruption and sow the seeds for the corridor's transformation into a vibrant urban artery.

Creative placemaking is the new rubric that the National Endowment for the Arts uses to fuse arts with community vitality. Using arts and culture, cross-sector partners strategically shape a community's character and generate livability and economic development. The long-time artist haven of Lowertown, the Central Corridor's terminal neighborhood in St. Paul, offers compelling proof of the concept.

In Lowertown, a range of public and private leaders made affordable artist space a priority as a component of the neighborhood's future. First, [Lowertown Lofts Artists Cooperative](#) opened in 1985 as a limited equity ownership coop. Then in the early 1990s, nonprofit developer Artspace innovatively used low-income housing and historic tax credits to transform underused buildings into more than 100 units of affordable living and working space for artists -- the [Northern Warehouse](#) and [Tilsner Artists' Cooperatives](#).

What have the payoffs been? My firm, [Metris Arts](#), has prepared reports showing that artists have benefitted from these appropriate, affordable spaces. They enjoyed an increased ability to collaborate, network and share skills and equipment. They also experienced boosts to their professional reputations, careers and productivity.

The buildings and their denizens provide high-quality cultural experiences. They attract visitors to the area and bolster area businesses. These investments have put properties back on the tax rolls and spurred area redevelopment. For instance, the Tilsner investment raised neighboring home and condo values by nearly \$14,000 on average.

Community development initiatives and art spaces reinforce one another to produce significant and lasting change. Lowertown benefited from a three-decade, \$10 million revitalization initiative, in which public, philanthropic and private actors gave priority to affordable housing and support for artists. In Reno, new parks and civic buildings and a hugely popular Artown festival complement Artspace's Riverside Artist Lofts--swelling downtown Reno's population and transforming the Truckee River district into an amenity.

Fortunately, the new [ArtPlace](#) consortium is paying attention. With leadership participation from major federal agencies, 11 foundations and a loan fund capitalized by six major financial institutions, ArtPlace embodies cross-sector partnership.

In this era of tight money, skeptics are on solid ground in seeking evidence of returns on investment for creative placemaking and other approaches to community and economic development. For my money, creative placemaking is worth the risk.

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