

MicroFest: USA | A synthesis of learning about art, culture, & place

By Pam Korza for the Network of Ensemble Theaters, in partnership with Animating Democracy, a program of [Americans for the Arts](#), June 2013



The complete synthesis and eight essays about the MicroFest experience may be found on the [NET](#) and [Animating Democracy](#) web sites.

[MicroFest USA: Revitalize, Reconnect, Renew](#) was a journey—part festival, part learning exchange—orchestrated in 2012–2013 by the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) to take a fresh look at the roles of art, culture, and artists in creating healthy vibrant communities. NET’s intent was twofold: to acknowledge and advance the pioneering and current work of ensemble theaters committed to community-based practice and positive community change, and to foster mutual learning with a wider spectrum of artists, cultural workers, and community partners also contributing to community well-being and social change.

The MicroFest journey included Detroit, Appalachia (Harlan County, KY and Knoxville, TN), and New Orleans (and Honolulu after the time of this writing), places challenged in the extreme by economic, social, and environmental issues. These are also places where rich and distinctive cultural forms and artistic communities have thrived and where art and artists are innovating strategies for renewal and revitalization as part of a vibrant ecosystem of interdisciplinary, cross-sector, collaborative work.

In the particular context of the kinds of challenges these communities and regions face, MicroFest focused on core questions in order to illuminate the role that arts and culture might play in other communities:

- What does the work look like?
- What makes the work *work*?
- What are we learning about working across sectors?
- What difference are we making, and how do we know?

MicroFest highlighted a spectrum of cultural production that is artist-driven, grounded in community-based and social practice, and that is traditionally under the radar in official or conventional creative placemaking strategies, which tend to focus on physical enhancement,

amenities, art spaces, and tourism and economic engines. By putting this range of socially and civically engaged creative work on the radar, NET aims to contribute to enhance understanding of this work within its own ensemble theater community and be a factor in local and national dialogues.

What Does the Work Look Like?

In the work of community revitalization, renewal, and reaffirmation, arts and cultural work at its most effective is highly influenced by and responsive to the particulars of place. MicroFest shone a light on ensemble theater and other performance-based work, indigenous and local cultures, public art, media arts, hip-hop, and cultural organizing efforts as critical parts of the cultural ecosystem working for positive change.

Devised theater and community-based theater practices are prevalent and potent. Such work is carried out by mission-driven ensemble theaters (Junebug Productions, The Carpetbag Theatre) that embrace local aesthetics and a commitment to social change through community-based art practice. One-time and long-term theater projects (*Higher Ground*) create open forums for discussing important issues, while also building relationships and capacity to work together for change. There is experimentation within ensemble work (The Hinterlands) and across artistic disciplines, as well as a potent focus on site-specific work (*Cry You One*, *Mondo Bizarro*). Youth-centered theater companies (Mosaic and Matrix Theaters) have engaged generations of young people in high-level artistic production and in the history, issues, and affirmation and reimagining of their city. Within communities, theaters exert individual and cumulative focus on issues from access to healthy food to the erosion of the bayou, to the healing and reintegration of formerly incarcerated women into the community (ArtSpot Productions).

Along the continuum of cultural production, there are potent roles for innovative hybrid forms as well as for traditional arts. The socially engaged arts in Detroit, Appalachia, and New Orleans represent “incubators of possibility.” The result of boundary crossing between theater and other artists (Invincible’s *Complex Movements*), nonprofit and commercial entities (Detroit Lives!), different design fields (rogueHAA), urban planning, and direct work with artists is hybrid work that reveals and explicates issues in new ways and seeks to contribute to actual change. Just as radical, folk and traditional arts (Mardi Gras Indians, Mt. Sinai Spirituals) are forms of community empowerment, expressions of deep cultural knowledge and durability, creativity, and community values.

Artists and culturally specific organizations play a catalytic role in revitalizing public spaces and neighborhoods and providing civic as well as cultural gathering spaces. Artists boldly deploy imaginative strategies to reclaim blighted, abandoned public spaces (The Music Box), mobilizing community members to transform alleys (The Alley Project), repurpose closed schools to serve community needs (Higher Ground), and improve neighborhood safety. Longstanding cultural organizations (Ashé Cultural Arts Center, The Carpetbag Theatre) step up as civic organizations, anchoring downtown neighborhoods. They play a critical role in preserving a neighborhood’s

historic and cultural roots, advocating for cultural and economic equity, while supporting new creative, business, and civic ventures.

What Makes the Work Work?

MicroFest looked at how place impacts art, ways ensemble theaters are contributing to healthy vibrant communities, and how ensemble values are embodied in place-based creative activity. The values of self-determination and agency, equity, and social justice were a central focus.

Art is at the center. *MicroFest affirmed the tools of theater—story, dialogue, metaphor, conflict, and human drama—as elements of effective socially engaged art.* Story, in particular, showed its power to identify common ground; define the truths of a place and dispel misperceptions; “give people hope” and, especially when shared and witnessed in the public sphere, provide validation, evoke empathy, and mobilize people.



Matrix Theatre Company performs *Detroit Dreaming* in The Alley Project.

Values that underpin effective ensemble theater—inclusion, transparency, excellence, and respect—are also values at the foundation of effective social justice work, underscoring ensemble theater as an excellent partner in this work. Other values at the heart of the most transformative creative work were offered by Gerard Stropnicki: *agency, authenticity, artistry, audacity, and accuracy.* Whether they are theater ensembles or other configurations of artists and community partners, ensembles work by fostering a sense of the whole, and they can bring fragmented communities together into a collective space to create and to solve problems.

Socially engaged art is intentional, and it is most effective when it stems from clarity and specificity in its social intention. Artistic choices and engagement strategies support that intention. In addition, rigor on both artistic and civic terms supports the most compelling and successful work.

Place and time matter. *Continuity of culture strengthens the power of arts and culture to revitalize and renew distressed communities.* Consciously and subconsciously artists “construct to deconstruct to recreate” a continuity of culture, building and drawing upon place-based aesthetics from the past and present in ways that deepen the meaning and power of creative work. Creative strategies gain potency when they contain the stories and themes, sounds, and rhythms that signify a place.

Understanding the context and dynamics of place is critical to doing the most potent art and the most responsible community work. “The stakes are high because the work is consequential,” Gerard Stropnicki wrote. MicroFest participants acknowledged the potential for negative consequences if context of place is not carefully considered.

Commitment to sustained and varied arts and cultural efforts around critical needs and issues in a community is paramount to effecting change. Achieving positive change around large-scale and long-standing issues is a lengthy proposition. Projects that have evolved over multiple years deserve attention to understand how they serve as a sustaining forum and force to build civic capacity and strength and to address issues in the real time of people's lives. Similarly, the ongoing work of organizations in prisons, schools, social justice organizations, and over time in neighborhood is critical to achieving incremental and cumulative change.

People are agents, not targets, of change. *When the work has its greatest social impact, it is because the people of a place are invested and involved from the outset in defining and framing issues from their experience; project outcomes are based on what matters to them.* Who drives the work of community change is a critical question in the context of disenfranchised communities. The ethos of community *agency* was prominent throughout MicroFest, looking at how arts and culture can be a powerful tool to activate people to effectuate change in their lives and communities. Skilled and dedicated artists play a critical role as leaders, as partners, and in supporting residents and communities to be agents of change in their own lives.

Community-based institutions provide bridge building and sustained leadership with a deep understanding of art and context and a commitment to community engagement. The many stories and examples in Detroit, New Orleans, and Appalachia illustrate how various organizations have enabled sustained work over time by providing support and infrastructure for community members to engage in arts and culture toward self-determined outcomes. Reliable youth-centered organizations support young people to develop individually and collectively in their communities through the arts. Community colleges and colleges of arts and design provide leadership, partnership, and infrastructure.

Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCD) assert a place-based, community-determined approach to community development. "A lot of creative place making is an interventionist model," Caron Atlas said. "[The NOCD] model is people intervening on their own behalf. Place making as a long-term process rather than a short-term intervention." NOCDs are self-determined by the artists, cultural groups, businesses, sympathetic officials, and community members in neighborhoods where distinct and naturally occurring layers of culture provide a vital and desirable mix for local people, and may be a destination for others.

What Are We Learning about Working across Sectors?

The most successful and creative strategies for making a vibrant place and addressing complex social and civic issues include cross-sector collaborations. MicroFest looked at artists and cultural organizations working inside systems, collaborating with issue-specific organizations and activists, and working across sectors.

In equitable, responsible, and creative cross-sector work, the transformational change that artists, cultural workers, and art can effect needs to be uplifted. Rather than being viewed as

merely a product, the arts need to be better understood by other sectors as a transformational means that can contribute to their targeted outcomes, such as health and wellness. MicroFest demonstrated how arts and culture—deployed *within* the planning process rather than being only the outcome—can enliven public meetings, enhance dialogue and decision-making, and attract diverse participants. What makes the most provocative work *work* is collaboration that doesn't just use art as a tool for some other end, but collaboration that embraces the holistic integration of creativity as a core part of any civic or social endeavor.

Artists need to check their attitudes and keep an open mind in working with other sectors. Carol Bebelle asks, “Can we put aside any disagreement or difference in values we might have with an institution or system—whether city government, the justice system, or the organized church—to acknowledge that ours is not necessarily the bigger truth? Can we be good partners even when we believe we know better than ‘they’ do? Having a different opinion is not necessarily a trump card; it can be viewed as a distinguishing value of diversity.”



Cry You One, Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions, MicroFest: New Orleans performance, 2013. Photos: Michael Premo

What else does it take to effectively work across sectors and within systems?

It takes cultivating open-minded partners and identifying pivotal bridge builders who are effective translators and boundary crossers; and it takes time. Key local advocates are necessities—people who can negotiate between arts, government, and business in order to successfully incorporate community-based arts into community development and other civic processes.

It takes navigating difficult conversations. Many of the challenges of working across sectors relate to issues of language and communications; lack of understanding of professional norms, expertise, and cultures; and underlying misperceptions. It takes a commitment of energy and time to learn and to be present in the other's sphere of work, an ability to be vulnerable to missteps and to correct them, and a willingness to challenge and be open to challenge and discomfort.

It takes confronting power as a key determinate. MicroFest raised myriad concerns about how power plays out in cross-sector work. Confronting issues of power and privilege is key if the goal is transformational community development that is grounded in and determined with community. In much community development, there is a gulf between grassroots efforts and resource bearers both within and outside the community. “Structuring partnerships to equitably incorporate volunteer leadership over the long-term is particularly important in economically distressed communities where many or all of the local partners rely on volunteer staff,” wrote Mark Kidd. Artists, too, bear privileges and power. They must be aware of the how their power affects the dynamics of community and cross-sector efforts.

It takes complicating notions of gentrification. In Detroit and New Orleans, which are both experiencing an influx of artists and newcomers, MicroFest conversations revealed the limits of the term *gentrification*. While participants heard of classic actions that typify gentrification playing out, the typical scenario—artists enter a less favorable area, stimulate development, and are then priced out—is not always the case. Transitions are often symptoms of larger shifting economic and social cycles, or it is local residents who make improvements that ultimately force artists out. Caron Atlas pointed out that gentrification is not an inevitable force out of everyone’s control. It is linked to policy, and people can influence and change policy.

Erik Takeshita reflected on MicroFest as an entry point for these conversations about gentrification “and inherent issues of power and agency, about the role of race in community development, the unintended consequences of reinvestment in neighborhoods, the tension between wanting reinvestment yet also not wanting to change a place beyond recognition, and the edge that exists between differing narratives of a community. Art can not only help bring new people, new energy and new investment to communities, but it can also be powerful tool in helping to frame and mediate some of these hard conversations about the role of art in community development.”

It takes alternative and more expansive notions of economy that are values-based rather than strictly market-based. MicroFest brought forward activist–scholars’ concepts of *moral economy* and *human economies* of value in pursuing equitable community development and the renewal and sustainability of healthy communities. Both suggest a powerful role for arts and culture as agents of change.

It takes effective models of institutional and philanthropic support that honor and uphold the values of responsible arts-and-culture-based revitalization. Some exemplary approaches were cited within MicroFest that offer models for responsible place-based funding, all of which respect and honor the people of place and support their agency to define the use of resources. They include: Detroit’s Skillman Foundation, which embedded support for community-based art in a major neighborhood and youth development initiative; the East Tennessee Foundation’s small investments to support and grow local cultural assets and their economic potential; and philanthropist John Paul Dejoria’s hands-off and sustained commitment to Grow Appalachia.

What Difference Are We Making, and How Do We Know?



The Hungry Heart, FISH Hospitality Pantries and The Carpetbag Theatre.
Photo: Michael Premo

Transformative social change requires focus on the civic and social impact of cultural work, in addition to economic development with a goal of equity. Participants acknowledged the value of evaluation to improve the work and to be more effective in achieving social goals, but these coupled questions proved somewhat elusive on the MicroFest journey. Nonetheless, many participants and community members offered stories that illuminate how broad notions of

“intentional *transformation*” can be demonstrated in terms of more specific changes in:

- *awareness, knowledge, or understanding of issues* (e.g., *Angola 3*, a play by Parnell Hebert about the horrors of solitary confinement and injustices in the prison system);
- *public dialogue and deliberation* (e.g., FISH Hospitality Pantries use of theater to spark community conversations about new ways to address hunger and poverty in Knoxville’s food deserts);
- *attitudes* (arts helped communities clarify values, envision new possibilities, and break out of conventional patterns such as “not in my backyard” (Building Home) and negative misperceptions of place (Matrix Theater’s *Detroit Dreaming*);
- *civic engagement and creative capacity* (e.g., Higher Ground participants form relationships through developing and performing theater, relationships that foster an increased sense of self- and collective agency, building social capital that can motivate and empower action);
- *action* (e.g., Latina women involved in Congreso de Jornaleros empowered by theater to mobilize and meet with the Sheriff); and
- *policies, conditions, and solutions* (e.g., through arts-based projects, Kids Rethink New Orleans replaced a policy of zero tolerance in charter schools with the practice of restorative justice).

“Most of the MicroFest artists aspire to a more holistic view of impact, placing strong emphasis on relationships and process,” wrote Michael Premo. Animating Democracy’s research similarly finds that arts and culture make their most significant contribution in building capacity for civic engagement and the creation of human, social, and community capital, areas deserving further exploration.

As MicroFest participants tried to understand how social change occurs, they wondered, “Is change revolution or evolution?” The notion that change is *incremental* resonated; incremental change may be framed as intermediate outcomes, points along the way that mark progress or that can influence other change. Also, change happens through *networks* (this concept introduced via science-based emergence theory by Detroit hip-hop artist Invincible in her *Complex Movements* performance). Networks lead to communities of practice, out of which, suddenly and surprisingly, emerge systems of influence.

Implications of MicroFest: USA

While there have been many initiatives and studies that have examined and provided support in arenas of arts and civic engagement, social justice, and creative placemaking, MicroFest is unique in focusing through a multifocal, progressive, social justice lens. MicroFest provided a view of the work from the vantage point of ensemble theaters and from the point of view of other artists, community agents of change, and community members affected by issues of place. By virtue of these converging interests, the exchange and learning that took place at MicroFest informs current discourse in creative placemaking, arts and community development, and arts and social justice. This section presents opportunities, challenges, and lingering questions opened up by MicroFest regarding:

A) Supporting ensemble theaters within a broader community of practice. Place-based, in-person opportunities for learning and exchange are crucial for examining the work in context and situating ensemble theaters in a broader community of practice. Looking ahead to the future, dissemination and co-learning strategies include:

1. Continue MicroFest, build upon its strengths, and address the gaps.
2. Promote and reinforce specific uses of MicroFest documentation.

B) Advancing ensemble theater and cultural production in cross-sector work. As interest and demand increase among arts and other sectors, the need has grown for education and exchange opportunities that bring different stakeholders together for joint learning.

Approaches might include:

1. Deepen MicroFest’s examination of cross-sector work.
2. Expand participation by professionals from other sectors to extend the reach of cross-sector learning; nurture ambassadors in other fields and sectors as potential partners in their own communities.
3. Ensure artist training in working across sectors.
4. Explore strategic opportunities within specific sectors or fields where collaboration with arts and culture can advance positive community, civic, or social change.

C) Understanding impact. Artists and cultural organization leaders who are committed to social change work want to know what difference they are making, how they can do their work more effectively, and how to better tell the story of their impact. NET can play a role in building a culture of evidence:

1. Invite researchers and evaluators to engage in MicroFest planning, case studies, and sessions to infuse their thinking and identify opportunities for skill building and field learning.
2. Offer models or ideas for cross-sector evaluation that look at what it would take to negotiate, plan for, and evaluate multiple stakeholders' desired outcomes.
3. In the earliest planning for MicroFest, identify projects that are or that can be focusing efforts around assessing social impact in the time leading up to MicroFest and whose results can be shared at MicroFest.

D) Supporting and sustaining arts and culture in community revitalization. Questions of how to ensure and sustain healthy communities and the role of arts and culture in making and maintaining vital and just places loom large. They are outside the scope of MicroFest or NET alone to tackle, and they remain for the field at large to address. Further, recognition and resources will come to the arts and culture sector as funders and other sector leaders see evidence accrue over time regarding their contributions and impact. This said, certain questions suggested by MicroFest are worth noting, unanswered here but posed for future discussion.

- What more can be done to sustain the work of severely under-resourced individual artists and the often small- to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations that are driving and partnering in this work?
- What are the models and how can we maximize learning from cultural work and cross-sector partnerships that have been longstanding, strategic, and impactful?
- How can colleges and universities become even stronger partners in this work?
- Does youth-focused work in this arena represent a critical focus for further development and investment?
- What are models of institutional and philanthropic support and coordination that honor the values of ensemble practice and that have potential for advancing sustainable healthy communities?



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MicroFest Essays

Detroit

[Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference](#)

by Eddie B. Allen, Jr.

[Re-imagining Revitalization: Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit](#)

by Michael Premo

Appalachia

[Creative Engagement and a Moral Economy in Appalachia](#)

by Caron Atlas

[Microfest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia's Coal Country](#)

by Mark W. Kidd

[A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place](#)

by Gerard Stropnick

New Orleans

[MicroFest/Artists Spotighting the World As It Is and the World As It Should/Could Be](#)

by Carol Bebel

[Three Lenses on MicroFest: USA, Intentions, Values, and Prepositions](#)

by Gerard Stropnick

[Art and Community Development – New Orleans Style](#)

by Erik Takeshita