

New Formula: Arts Philanthropy Goes Grassroots

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Long ago, “friend” was a noun and “city” was a location: Santa Fe, at the weary end of the Santa Fe Trail, from which dusty travelers launched the ambitious start of cultural tourism some 75 years ago.

Then, last decade, new monikers began cropping up concerning cities. *Who’s Your City?*, a book written by socio-urbanist Richard Florida (of Toronto), unpacked his thesis of a “creative class” dominating global cities—workers in so-called creative professions, from art to film to physics, localizing effects of tolerance and self-expression to seed new-society economies.

The thinking that places characterized by creativity and tolerance also have futurist economies isn’t new. Even a decade ago, this proposition felt palpable compared, say, to the plight of Rust Belt factory workers selling backyard “pets or meat” in Michael Moore movies.

Then the recession came. Today, to pessimists, it may seem that “creative city,” “creative class” and “cultural entrepreneur” are just slogans. (In a controversial Oct. 1 essay for *Salon*, Scott Timberg goes a step further, arguing that the creative class is, in fact, “a lie.”) However, in the arena of federal arts policy, these terms embody platforms that marry new action to newspeak.

“Creative placemaking,” the latest coinage to emerge, is described as animating and rejuvenating existing neighborhoods, celebrating diversity and cultivating inspiration. It’s a new concept of civics, which puts arts at the nexus of social and economic development in cities—a civics that relies increasingly on grassroots creativity, mobilization and funding.

... On Oct. 10, a Huffington Post headline, “Arts Funding Is Supporting a Wealthy, White Audience,” scooped a report by the Washington, DC-based watchdog group National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. The report says foundations are serving a “shrinking” but mostly “white, wealthy” audience while overlooking poorer, ethnically diverse communities.

The NCRP in essence takes umbrage with the word “institutions” when it says, per Huffington’s article, “Current arts funding patterns have roots that date back to the 19th century...Early cultural philanthropists focused on building institutions to preserve the Western European high arts to validate America’s position as a world power and serve an elite audience.” In other words, what’s wrong with old models is that the concept of “audience” has changed dramatically.

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