

Empowering Voices: The Community Development initiatives of the Irving Art Center and its Community of Artists

Basil Schaban-Maurer*

ARTICLE INFO

Received: October 18, 2016. Received in revised form: November 01, 2016. Accepted: November 11, 2016. Published online: November 12, 2016.

ABSTRACT

In the context of representational democracy, what often remains opaque and at times convoluted, is the nature of the relationship between private citizens and the public officials who represent them, and its subsequent impact on the local communities in which they live and work. This paper situates and clarifies the nature of direct engagement between individual artists and their representatives at the Irving Arts Center, in Irving, Texas, in the United States. The paper offers a glimpse at the processes that govern the role of the artist as an individual “citizen practitioner” whose life experiences and practical knowledge shape the artist-community level of engagement in a community-development program targeted to their needs. This notion of the “citizen practitioner” reverses the conventional hierarchy that dominates municipal planning and policy-making bodies, where decision making authority resides with elected officials and technocrats with little input, in the form of direct citizen engagement, from individuals in that community. An interview with the program coordinator and curator of the Irving Arts Center surmises that such a citizen is better equipped to the role of a community’s upkeep and stewardship than a community-development professional applying standard models of development.

Key Words: Citizen Participation; Irving Arts Center; community-development.

To cite this article: Schaban-Maurer, B. (2016). Empowering voices: The community development initiatives of the Irving Art Center and its community of artists. *Urbana*, 17, 49-56. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanuapp.org/>

*  basil@earthnomad.com

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between individual artists and their representatives or advocates within their community that may bear on the nature of their participation and interaction in such a community. Shared goals, interests and aspirations as well as challenges and issues which confront individual artists in turn define them as a community of artists. The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of the artist as an individual “citizen practitioner” whose life experiences and practical knowledge shape the artist-community level of participation and development strategies and outcomes. Such a community of grassroots’ “citizen practitioners” (Schaban-Maurer 2013) can have a positive impact in forming meaningful and relevant planning strategies leading to a more enlightened community-development outcome. The key assumption to be examined here, which in turn, forms the research question of this paper, is the extent to which practical knowledge or praxis delineates the level of participation of individual artists, in a community of artists, in a community-development program targeted to their needs. The principle methodology will be to provide a summary of an interview conducted with a community-development expert (Marcie J. Inman, program coordinator and curator of the Irving Arts Center) discussing the strategies and issues that shape the programs (Kids Arts and Art Connection) and level of interaction between the community development organization (The Irving Arts Center) and members of the artist community which it serves. After adequately introducing the history and services of the organization, a summary of the interview and the various issues discussed in the interview and their implications will follow. Finally, this paper will surmise with relevant observations and recommendations for further research into the role of the “Citizen Practitioner” (Schaban-Maurer 2013) in practice-based community development initiatives and participatory research approaches

Overview of Citizen Participation

The challenges and issues facing Citizen Participation are an emerging area of concern for community development planning, public officials, and community development organizations as well as for community-based participatory researchers. Citizens participating in issues and decisions that have an impact on their lives have mandated special attention and deliberation from their societies both in contemporary times and in ancient antiquity.

Nancy Roberts, in her conference paper *Direct Citizen Participation: Building a Theory*, delineates the nuances of the two positions most often adopted by advocates of citizen participation as she states “the subject of citizen participation has a long lineage dating back to the Greek city-states. Two questions have been central to its history: Who is a citizen and how should the citizen participate in governance? Responses to these questions have varied depending on the political and administrative theory one champions. Those who value indirect citizenship participation, or representative democracy, cite the dangers, costs, and logistical difficulties of involving all members of a society. Those who value direct citizenship participation cite increased state legitimacy and the benefits of social learning when all citizens are involved.” (Roberts 2004, Abstract)

Regardless of the path one takes towards more effective participation, the problems confronting participation require comprehensive answers. Such problems can be assessed by asking the following questions: Does citizen participation in community development

decision-making promote measurable change? Is there a unique and comprehensive approach to gathering input from citizens in order to value, synthesize and transform the input into satisfactory parameters? Is there an effective approach to applying citizen participation to policy and design parameters that lead to positive change? In fact the answers to these questions highlight deeper issues of political empowerment and their agents of change in the lives of citizens.

Roberts describes the political process that governed citizens' intensity and level of participation in her work *Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation* "For the first half of the 20th century, citizens relied on public officials and administrators to make decisions about public policy and its implementation. The latter part of the 20th century saw a shift toward greater direct citizen involvement. This trend is expected to grow as democratic societies become more decentralized, interdependent, networked, linked by new information technologies, and challenged by 'wicked problems'." (Roberts 2004, 315)

This era of direct citizen participation, in issues impacting the daily lives of citizens, was a time of great passions and political activism. This form of direct citizen participation took its impetus from a point of convergence by public sentiment, environmental and social hiatus and media sensationalism that brought the issues of equity, civil rights and institutional and corporate accountability into the limelight. It was also a time of reflection on societal norms and values and resulted in a re-evaluation of the increasingly controversial roles those bureaucrats, elected officials, professionals and scientific experts had played in the shaping of urban America.

Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff in their 2003 work *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment* expound on the activism of that era as they state "the 1960s were a decade of citizen activism combined with a spreading awareness of the disruption associated with urban mega-projects. This activism found many outlets but three are of particular significance in the present context: the movement for civil rights, citizen participation and (toward the end of the decade), environmental protection." (Altshuler and Luberoff 2003, 22) The authors describe citizen participation efforts as having arisen out of a growing sense of individual frustration compounded by disfranchisement and a desire for personal and political empowerment by ordinary citizens at a grassroots level of society. Such issues are at the heart of the phronetic discourse which addresses them at both the individual level and at the level of society at large. This individual sense of frustration culminated in a nation-wide movement that the authors describe "the movement for citizen participation was organized, above all, around the premise that citizens had a right to be consulted in timely fashion and with access to all pertinent evidence, about government deliberations that might profoundly affect them." (Ibid)

The other two factors, namely, the civil rights movement and the environmental movement are expounded upon by Dennis Chong in the 1991 book *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement*. The author uncovers the underlying social factors shaping the indirect form of citizen participation that culminated in the latter two movements. The author stipulates "Successful past collective action proves that a considerable number of people are willing to participate in collective action. Social pressure presumes that people are linked by membership in the same community and therefore share common bases of information." (Chong 1991, 121)

The brief history of the two forms of citizen participation described above highlights a key observation for this chapter, in that citizen participation as a social phenomenon has undergone what can only be described as an evolutionary process of development. In the first half of last century, citizen participation emerged in its indirect form that was more attuned to, and as a consequence, more malleable to the influence of conservative and institutional forces that reigned at the time. While the latter half of the century, saw the emergence of a direct form of participation as a result of greater awareness of its benefits highlighted by accumulating research in the behavioral science and psychology fields as well as disillusion and growing dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the previous half century of citizen activism.

Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff describe this shift in societal norms for the period leading to our present era as they state “by the end of the 1970s mega-program reversals were occurring universally. A satisfactory explanation of these program reversals must, we judge, be organized around two themes: the general and to date unique surge in citizen activism that occurred during the 1960s, and social learning.” (Altshuler and Luberoff 2003, 252) The authors go on to remark on the dynamics of that period, which brought about mega-program reversals representing an end to an era of strong command-control policies. The authors go on to say “the Fainsteins highlight the former, concluding that the protest of this period brought a wide-spread shift from directive to concessionary regimes- which increased redistributive expenditures, adopted affirmative action programs, developed programs of citizen participation and shifted the emphasis of urban renewal from CBD redevelopment to neighborhood rehabilitation. This was, they judge, merely a tactical shift, but the highest priority of business now was insulation from popular attacks.” (Ibid)

What is at heart for the debate over citizen participation is the realization that our present tools and research methods have proven to be inadequate to the task at hand. The debate has changed direction as well, from one where socio-political issues determined outcomes that were legislated into laws, to one where economic and political considerations sit at the forefront of the debate acting as strangleholds and are increasingly mired in dogma.

This paper advances concepts that are central to citizen participation in both its forms. Value-rationality is paramount among them, in that the values codified by any society are the sum of the individual values of each of its members rather than the reverse. Values emerge from the expressed actions of individual citizens as they conduct their daily lives. Society in turn codifies these values in a process of social coercion and cohesion forming social groups in the process. Individuals, however, suffer a loss of personal values when they ascribe to the values of a group.

Group activism by its very nature, tends to further erode individual initiative and personal modes of expression by limiting them to group parameters and then channeling group efforts through established avenues and methodologies, rather than, through creative or newly initiated paths. The process by which social groups consolidate and achieve group power and group identity is by applying social coercion to its group members in order to achieve the appearance of social cohesion. A macrocosm of this process is paralleled by institutions and their mechanisms of bureaucratic hierarchy and control.

In summation, group activism compromises and subordinates individual praxis and value-rationality to that of the group's homogeneous attributes and group consensus. Citizen participation could then be viewed as having been institutionally compromised, where value rationality, a main component of "Phronesis," (Aristotle, Thomson, & Tredennick 1976) is substituted with a generic value-substitute measure (such as instrumental-rationality) that belongs to the group as a whole. However, when considering outcomes that require collective decision-making as is common to policy decisions in general, the value of "Phronesis" (Aristotle, Thomson, & Tredennick 1976) is in its ability to enrich the debate by increasing the awareness of the participants to the issues of context, value-rationality and ethics while investing the participants with meaningful knowledge distilled from their own individual praxis (Flyvbjerg 2002).

History of the Irving Arts Center

In 1980 the City of Irving commissioned the building of a multi-million dollar city-owned Irving Arts Center, an art venue and cultural center, at the request of its artist community and their respective organizations on MacArthur Boulevard. The Center is strategically located in between DFW Airport and Love Field Airport to be easily accessible from the Central cities. The Center's website provides a short glimpse of the political process that culminated in establishing the Center:

In August 1980, the Irving City Council established the City of Irving Arts Board, which was charged with the responsibility of encouraging and supporting community arts activities and oversight of the Irving Arts Center. The work of the eleven-person board is funded through a portion of the local hotel room occupancy tax. The Arts Board meets monthly and agendas are posted as required by law. (Irving Arts Center 2007)

It took ten years to complete the facility which was opened to the public in 1990. The Center's website provides additional information on the physical facilities of the Irving Arts Center, "It has more than 91,500 square feet of performing and visual arts space, including a 707-seat concert hall (Carpenter Performance Hall), and a 253-seat theater (Dupree Theater). The Center houses four gallery spaces that offer rotating exhibitions. The Main Gallery is a 3,800-square-foot art gallery space with 200 linear feet of wall space." (Irving Arts Center 2007) Marcie Inman, in her interview, reiterated the importance of the Center in providing financial as well as spatial and social support for the Irving art community, as well as its representative non-profit art organizations:

Since 1980, the Irving Arts Center has provided millions of dollars of grant funding to local organizations. Funded general operational support grants have included support for traditional arts organizations producing symphony, ballet, theater, band and choral concerts and on-going support for the Irving Black Arts Council and the Academy of Bangla Arts and Culture. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

Marcie also lists the granting recipients of the Projects run by the Center, as she states "grants include outreach performances in schools, cultural programs celebrating Black, Hispanic and East Indian traditions, exhibitions, literary conferences, workshops, support for the creation of youth music and theater programs." (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

In addition to the above, the Irving Arts Board provides the following organizations with a offices, grant writing services, meeting rooms and management advice: Academy of

Bangla Arts and Culture, Entertainment Series of Irving, Irving Art Association, Irving Ballet Company, Irving Black Arts Council, Irving Chorale, Irving Symphonic Band, ICT MainStage, Irving Heritage Society, Irving Symphony Orchestra, Las Colinas Symphony Orchestra, the LCSO Lone Star Youth Orchestra, the LCSO Lone Star Wind Ensemble, Lyric Stage and the New Philharmonic Orchestra of Irving.

Programs

The first program that is the focus of this paper and is administered and coordinated by Marcie Inman is KidsArts, which provides youth-oriented performances, Saturday School, Family Art workshops and summer camps. The program's audience is children ranging in age from 6 to 14 in which they participate and are exposed to a variety of professional visual and performance arts. A grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts partially supports the program. The second program that is coordinated by Marcie Inman is The Arts Center which provides a public forum and meeting facilities to local cultural organizations. Marcie explains:

These organizations are 501(C) (3), non-profits governed by elected boards of directors. They operate independently and set their own programs and policies. They produce a wide range of art activities, and as resident organizations, are provided access to a variety of services and benefits through the Irving Arts Board. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

Additional services offered by the program through the Center, according to Marcie Inman, are low facility rental rates, receiving priority facility booking, having access to the IAC Financial Assistance Program, receiving marketing assistance, and a free-of-charge shared workspace in the Arts Center.

Interview Summary

For the interview, a set of ten questions were prepared to address a variety of relevant issues to the main focus of the paper, namely, the role of Marcie Inman as a community art expert and how her beliefs and values, as well as her preferred work and research methodology, informs her coordination activities for the programs. The questions also addressed Marcie Inman's goals for the programs and how they relate to her constituents, the Irving artist community, as well as, her principle work methodology, skills utilized and theories informing her practice. The final set of questions concerned Marcie Inman's communication style and the nature of her interaction with the artist-members of the programs as well as her views on the level of artist participation in the programs and in their community.

The following epitomizes her responses to the issues and challenges facing the artist community, which her programs are seeking to address and mitigate. In response to being asked about the goals of the programs and their relationship to important issues facing the Irving artist community, Marcie stated:

In late 2000, the Art connection program was introduced to meet a voiced need from the artists both individually to me as well as through collective meetings at the Irving Art Center. The main issues were, the artist needs for exhibit spaces, networking, local to national, academic support for their youth. They also expressed a need for political representation of their needs to the city council in which the Center acts as their advocate. We formed the program and our

relationship based on these expressed needs. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

When questioned on whom she represents through the programs, Marcie indicated that her constituents are the artists residing in Irving, in particular, and the visiting public, in general, since the Center is a city department. On the question of methods most utilized to accomplish her immediate and strategic goals for the programs, she responded:

Personal skills acquired through my art education as well as life experiences which inform my judgments. I use particular tools, like the news letter, organization skills when it touches on exhibit scheduling, budget information supplied by the city as well as feed back from our member artist in our meetings. The most important skill that I depend on is interpersonal communication with the varied cultural backgrounds of the members that requires a level of finesse and sensitivity that can not be supplied by any training manual. I rely on my own personal experience instead. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

When questioned on the role of theories informing her work and measures of success of the programs, Marcie stated:

I don't rely on any formal method or on standard measures of economic impact as other departments of the city do. Instead I view the numbers of membership increases as well as feed back from the meetings and forums and newsletter as a quality indicator of how well we are doing. The Art Connection membership increased from the original 200 to over 300 this year, which means it has remained very steady. The kids Arts program membership, however, has increased immensely, to the point that the program is now made permanent by the city, which mandated its funding. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

On the question of member participation in the programs and the factors that have encouraged participation, Marcie pointed out:

Our artist community has been active from the start of the programs both in person and through community participation in writing the goals and objectives for the program. They also participated in the design and implementation of the programs. The main attraction to continued interest in the programs is our flexibility and openness to ideas introduced by the artists as well as our hands-on approach to letting them take responsibility for all the important details of running the exhibit spaces and editing and publishing the newsletters. (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

Marcie also commented on the physical facilities role in providing a flexible and exciting space for the members to get involved, she states "The facilities are also beautiful and have aged well through the years. Their design allowed enough flexibility to allow for our increased needs and expansion requirements." (Marcie Inman, Irving Arts Center 2007)

Observations and recommendations

As we revisit the key assumption of this paper as to what extent practical knowledge or praxis delineates the level of participation of individual artists, living in a community of artists, in a community-development program targeted to their needs, we can safely say

that such a role is positive and that it can reach beyond the individual members of the community to include their professional advocates as well. The main observation of this paper is that when a “Citizen Practitioner,” (Schaban-Maurer 2013) possessing intimate practical knowledge of his community in the form of “Citizen Praxis,” (Schaban-Maurer, 2013) applies value-judgment in daily interactions with it, such a citizen is better equipped to the role of its upkeep and stewardship than a community-development professional or city official that applies standard generalizations out of context and without direct feed back from the individuals comprising that community. The exception here, as in the case of Marcie Inman, is when a professional utilizes direct feed back from community members and utilizes personal life experiences in reaching value-laden judgments in responding to community issues and needs. This notion of the “Citizen Practitioner,” (Schaban-Maurer 2013) reverses the conventional hierarchy that dominates municipal planning and policy-making bodies, where decision making authority resides with elected officials and technocrats with little input from the community.

References

- Altshuler, A. A., & Luberoff, D. (2003). *Mega-projects: The changing politics of urban public investment*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Aristotle, Thomson, J. A., & Tredennick, H. (1976). *The ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean etics*. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom: Penguin.
- Chong, D. (1991). *Collective action and the civil rights movement*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2002). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Irving Art Center. (2007). www.irvingartscenter.com/history. Retrieved February 24, 2007, from <http://www.irvingartscenter.com/history>
- Roberts, N. (2004a). Direct citizen participation: Building a theory. In *7th National Public Management Research Conference* (p. Abstract). Washington DC: Georgetown University.
- Roberts, N. (2004b). Public deliberation in an age of direct citizen participation. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 34(4), 315.
- Schaban-Maurer, B. (2007). *Comments from an Interview with Marcie J. Inman at the Irving Arts Center*. Irving, Texas, USA.
- Schaban-Maurer, B. (2013). *Rise of the citizen practitioner: A phronesis-based approach to citizen engagement and social policy*. Seattle, WA: Amazon Publishing, Saarbrücken: Scholars' Press.