



Creativity is Ageless:

Projects and Recommendations from the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture's Creative Strategist Program Residency with Los Angeles County Aging and Disabilities Department



Introduction

Elders line-dancing to Jennifer Lopez. Youth learning how to care for plants from their elders. Teens connecting with elders over their shared love of mariachi. These were some of the many magical moments that we witnessed during our two-year Creative Strategist residency at the Los Angeles County Aging and Disabilities Department.

As a Creative Strategist in residence, I was tasked with working with four service centers in the County's 1st Supervisorial District —East L.A. Service Center, Potrero Heights Park Community and Senior Center, San Gabriel Valley Service Center, and Centro Maravilla Service Center—to develop creative programming that would also meet their community building goals. With my collaborator Leo Alas, we spent four months with each center designing and implementing a pilot project around one of four themes—care, community, culture, and connection—with the intention that this pilot project could serve as an example of what is possible in a collaboration between an artist and a service center.

This final report documents our work with the four community and senior centers over the course of two years, what we learned, and what we recommend for scaling creative programming to all 14 community and senior centers operated by the Aging and Disabilities Department. The report is divided into three sections:

- ◆ **Cultivating a Creative Ecosystem** recommends a program architecture for supporting creative programming and engagement at the service centers.
- ◆ **Emergent Themes** describes key topics and themes that are vital for creatives and staff to consider when working with the service centers.
- ◆ **Pilot Projects** describes our work with the four service centers in greater detail

We are grateful for this opportunity to witness the vital services that these community and senior centers provide as well as the vibrant array of community members who gather at these centers, and we hope that our creative work will continue.

Carol Zou

Creative Strategist in Residence
Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture
in partnership with Los Angeles County Aging and Disabilities Department
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Credits

Lead Artists: Carol Zou, Leo Alas

Documentation Support: Monica Almeida, Boone Nguyen, Forever Dominguez, Em Butler

Staff Support: Kim Glann, Liza Zavala

Printing: Alternative Source L.A.

San Gabriel Valley Service Center

Staff Support: Rosendo Garcia, Connie Ho, Giovanna Douglas

Collaborating Artist: jen hofer

Interpretation Support: Rocio Payan, Monica Lim

Cooking Exchange Leads: Aura, Mr. Wong, Margaret, Joann, Tina, Angela

East L.A. Service Center

Staff Support: Sandra Gonzalez, Janina Murrieta, Abner Martinez

Collaborating Artists: MoonJar Design, Joel Garcia, Marlene Aguilar, Yerberia Mayahuel

Potrero Heights Park Community and Senior Center

Staff Support: Maria Cerdas

Collaborating Artist: Chris Ramirez/Freedom Drum Circle

Centro Maravilla Service Center

Staff Support: Andrea Michel, Nancy Almaraz, Wing Chan

Collaborating Artist: Genelle Brooks-Petty

Youth Artists: Leonardo Garcia, Dwayne Gonzalez

Elder Mentors: Concepcion Villareal, Salvador Ochoa

Cultivating a Creative Ecosystem: Program Design for Successful Creative Community Engagement

Cultivating creativity in municipal spaces doesn't just take the work of one person—it takes the work of many. Throughout the residency, we encountered and nurtured an ecosystem consisting of center directors, program staff, community members, and of course, artist collaborators. Each node is vital to sustained creative programming.

Center directors

We have had the great pleasure to work with center directors who were collaborative, open to trusting the artistic process, and supportive of their staff. We continue to recommend maintaining a consistent point of contact between artists/service providers and center directors who can articulate the needs of their community and connect artists to staff and local resources in order to realize certain creative goals.

Program staff

Program staff are the first line of connection with community members and are vital to creative programming at Aging and Disabilities community locations. They are integral to community outreach, and can help identify community assets and needs. Additionally, program staff themselves are incredibly creative and often lead classes and have ideas for additional creative programming. At the same time, program staff are tasked with a plethora of responsibilities—helping with utility payments, food security, a toy loan program, front desk staffing, translation, and more. We recommend having a staff position at each center that can focus on day-to-day programming and volunteer management.

Community members

Retired center participants are a valuable asset to Aging and Disabilities centers. Retired center participants have skills to share and want to spend their time giving back to the community. Community members have led art classes, cooking classes, line dance classes, and helped with general center duties and events. We recommend incorporating center participants into Aging and Disabilities centers as workshop leaders, volunteers, and steering committee members. We also recommend intentional stewardship of community volunteers through events such as volunteer appreciation events.

Artist collaborators

Artist collaborators can bring skills and a different perspective to day-to-day programming at Aging and Disabilities centers. Artists have a conceptual way of working that helps ensure programming is intentional and serves multilayered objectives. For example, the cooking classes hosted at San Gabriel Valley Service Center were not just cooking classes, but creative strategies to address isolation and promote intercultural connection. Artist collaboration benefits from long term engagement (minimum 1 year) with centers so that they can build meaningful relationships with community and staff. We recommend continued partnership with local arts nonprofits and Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture to source and resource artist collaborators.

Evaluation

We recommend annual evaluation processes of creative programming at Aging and Disabilities centers to assess the effectiveness of the programs in meeting the department's and the County's goals, and to develop new goals and creative strategies.



Emergent Themes

While I began with the themes of **Care, Community, Culture, and Connection** to frame the approach with the four pilot sites, additional themes emerged throughout the two-year residency. These themes can be used to focus center priorities and to identify artists and projects that would be a good fit for collaboration.

ACCESS

For many, Aging and Disabilities Department service centers are a home away from home. They are sites to get out, meet new people, and learn new things. In order for a center to serve this function in its community, it needs to be thoughtful of the visual cues that show welcome and culture. These indications are part of what it means to build access.

Building audience

Many centers shared similar stories of hosting events with plentiful participants prior to the closure of facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. Since then, centers have struggled to bring constituents back. We recommend building relationships and partnering with local community groups to build awareness and engagement. We also recommend consistent and predictable programming as a way to build sustained participation. Consistent programming helps people plan ahead in order to attend programs they are excited for. A great tool is a community calendar that center users can access.

Creating welcome

Front desk personnel are the face of the centers and provide a friendly welcome, orientation, and service information to participants. It is important to invest in the well-being of front desk personnel. Another way to create a welcoming environment is through clear and accessible signage and architecture that helps participants orient themselves. Some considerations include use of color, signage in multiple languages relevant to the site's cultural demographics, large and legible fonts, and ADA accommodations beyond what is minimally required.

Signs of community

To make their spaces more lively, some centers have featured artworks from center participants around the walls. Our favorite display was a wall of photos from past events featured at Potrero Heights. Photo displays like this give newcomers an idea of what types of programming the center provides, adds warmth, and celebrates the space and the participants. These kinds of displays are a way for participants and center staff to honor how invaluable this free community resource is.

INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMMING

Creating spaces for coming together

Aging and Disabilities centers are a vibrant mix of cultures, reflective of the ethnic and cultural diversity of Los Angeles County. Creative programming is an opportunity to bring cultures together over shared interests. We have observed that the quality and caliber of creative programming will attract participants regardless of culture—such as with the classes at Potrero Heights Park Community and Senior Center—and center users will continue to recruit additional participants from their own ethnic groups. In addition to language barriers, we observed how a lack of shared space created a cultural barrier to community members coming together. We recommend culturally sensitive and diverse programming that encourages community members to share their own cultures with each other and with others through cooking, karaoke, celebration of cultural holidays, arts and crafts, gardening, etc.

Building translation/Interpretation capacity

We observed that center staff's language capacities influence the people who access the center. When center staff are reassigned to different centers, the community around that center also shifts because that staff

member served as the point of contact for primarily monolingual speakers of a language other than English. We recommend explicitly investing in translation and interpretation as a service component, through certified bilingual staff or providing professional development opportunities. Additionally, we recommend training and implementation of language justice frameworks at centers that serve diverse cultural communities. Instead of informally assigning the task to bilingual staff members, consider establishing a protocol for translation and interpretation. Consider training multilingual community volunteers to support translation and interpretation needs at Aging and Disabilities centers.



INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Intergenerational programming can be extremely beneficial to center participants and the greater community. This can be a way to include family members, including children and grandchildren. This type of programming lowers a participation barrier that may come up as a result of needing childcare. It also creates an opportunity to engage local community schools with volunteer activities– a mutually beneficial exchange for centers that need extra hands for larger events.

Teen engagement

The centers already publicly advertise their programs for all ages. A few also already utilize teen volunteers. The coordination involved with intentional youth engagement– either through childcare, child-centered activities, or teen volunteer engagement– requires a specific skill set and experience working with youth.

Program concepts that emerged during the Centro Maravilla residency include intergenerational walking clubs and teen-led center improvement projects. To best understand the interests of any individual center, we encourage hosting focus groups.

DISABILITY

We are curious about how disability will be integrated into centers' services. While our work did not explicitly engage with the theme of disability at the four centers, we engaged with disabled community members. We want to uplift the knowledge that center staff have developed to accommodate disabled community members. Consider additional competencies and knowledge that could be explored through focusing on disability as a theme.

PURPOSEFUL AGING L.A.

In addition to the themes we identified, creative community engagement supports the following priorities outlined by the Purposeful Aging L.A. initiative.

- ◆ **Communication and Information:** Artists can help increase the visibility of resources available at Aging and Disabilities centers.
- ◆ **Outdoor Spaces and Buildings:** Artists can help activate outdoor spaces and create design projects to make Aging and Disabilities sites more welcoming.
- ◆ **Social Participation and Respect and Social Inclusion:** Artists can facilitate programming and projects that create an environment of community, inclusion, and belonging.

East LA Service Center (2022)

How can art be used to build community participation and interest in a community garden?

The goal at East LA Service Center was to make meaning within the center's empty green space to build a community garden. Building community confidence and investment in the garden was important to creating a sustained gardening practice. We developed programming to inspire a relationship between the community members and the land, with specific emphasis highlighting existing knowledge within the group that would be valuable in the garden creation. The program began with a community town hall, a series of four garden-related workshops, and ended with a community build day.

Community town hall

The Community Town Hall was a large community event. We asked participants to contribute to a community tapestry to help us understand their wishes and priorities for a community garden.

Garden-related workshops

- ◆ **Our Garden, Our Community** with MoonJar Design
- ◆ **Coming Together Over Food** with Marlene Aguilar
- ◆ **Storytelling Through Land** with Joel Garcia
- ◆ **Ancient Medicine, New Beginnings** with Yerberia Mayahuel

Design meeting

Following the workshop series, we held a Design Meeting with community leaders who would spearhead the project moving forward. We collected requests for tools and plants and facilitated an organization structure between center users and staff to continue the garden and determine responsibility moving forward.

Build day

Center families, teen volunteers, and staff gathered together on August 27, 2022 to build their community garden. The garden consisted of five planters and an array of seasonal plants. Master Gardener Joseph Juarez demonstrated how to divide the planters effectively with a square foot gardening method. Marlene Aguilar catered seasonal dishes and juices. There was a craft area for children and seniors to make art for the space. Participants submitted art works, poetry, and photos for a garden zine that we gave away during the Build Day.



Potrero Heights Park Community and Senior Center (2022)

How do we make visible and support the abundant creativity that already exists in our communities?

Our intention with Potrero Heights was to amplify and celebrate how they were engaging creative assets in the community. Potrero Heights exemplifies engaging the creativity of staff members and center participants to create vibrant programming.

Celebrating community assets

We worked with Boone Nguyen to photograph volunteers and community members, who were instrumental in leading workshops and assisting with programming at Potrero Heights. We used the photographs to create a vinyl wall mural that celebrates the people who add life to the space.

Resourcing existing programming

We used our budget to cover materials, food, and guest



artist stipends for center events such as Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon, Cancer Awareness Tea Party, Holiday Party, and Arts Showcase. Many Aging and Disabilities sites operate with a limited budget, and we wanted to show what was possible when centers are resourced to realize their creative visions.

Introducing guest artists

We brought in guest artist Chris Ramirez and Freedom Drum Circle to activate the outdoor amphitheatre space and show what a mix of arts workshops led by professional artists and community members could look like.

Centro Maravilla Service Center (2023)

How can centers create a welcoming space for teens?

The goal at Centro Maravilla was to foster an intergenerational relationship with local teens. The second goal was to beautify the space with a community engaged project. By fostering this relationship, we aimed to develop a deeper community investment in the center.

Summer program

We started by reaching out to local high schools and middle schools. We advertised the program on a nomination basis and offered community service hour credits to incentivize teens.

The program began with a series of workshops where the teen volunteers learned about public art, social engagement, and interior design, with the mentorship of Genelle Brooks-Petty. Students were paired with elder mentors to draw inspiration for a project for the center.

Design projects

Our two teen participants developed project proposals based on what they learned in the workshops and in consideration of their mentor elder's interests.

The first teen, Dwayne Gonzales, developed a two-part project. First, he noted the center was difficult to navigate and wanted to use an artistic solution to make key rooms easier to find. He created colorful door banners to differentiate the doors to the toy room, the art room, and the computer room from the others. His second project was to build planter beds for the outside patio. He was inspired by his elder mentor, Concha, who expressed her deep love for plants.

The second teen, Leo Garcia, was inspired by his mentor, Salvador, who shared his love for puzzles. Leo wanted to create a project that was interactive

and that community members could contribute to. He proposed creating a mural that could be taken apart and reassembled with puzzle pieces. The mural design was a silhouette of a mariachi performing at Mariachi Plaza. The mural's design provided ample room for community members to add their own artistic contributions. He also asked that the final mural be made into a miniaturized puzzle he could give as a gift to his elder mentor.

Puzzlepalooza

The program culminated in a gathering called Puzzlepalooza. The teens' projects were opened to the public and community members were invited to contribute and participate. The students were awarded a certificate of completion for their work on the project.



San Gabriel Valley Service Center (2023)

How can arts and culture bridge cultural gaps?

The focus at San Gabriel Valley Service Center was to bridge a cross-cultural gap between Spanish speaking and Mandarin speaking populations. Staff reported difficulty in creating programs that would attract both populations. We started by brainstorming potential programs with center regulars who gave input on what they would like to see.

Cooking demonstrations

The group decided on a cooking demo series. The central guiding components of the series was that they were led by center volunteers, they were fully trilingual, and recipes were shared from two different language groups.

Participants would volunteer at the end of each demo to host the next one. The demos were spaced two weeks apart to give enough time to translate and compile recipes in a trilingual printed zine for attendants to follow along and make notes. We also had a word of the day for each demo where participants had the chance to learn the word for common ingredients in different languages. Demo leaders requested ingredients and tools in advance and demonstrated their recipe to a group of 15. Every cooking demo, of course, ended with everyone sharing a meal together.



Trilingual cookbook and community potluck

The demos culminated in a trilingual cookbook and community potluck, complete with trilingual karaoke and line dancing. The cookbook was a compilation of all the recipes that center participants had demonstrated, as well as a handful of new ones submitted just for the cookbook. One feature of the cookbook is the Community Pantry page with images and translated names of culturally specific ingredients that may not be familiar to those outside of the cultural group.

Language justice training

The cooking demonstrations were fruitful in bridging cultural gaps, but there seemed to be a greater structural need for staff support around language inclusion practices. For this reason, we hired jen hofer to facilitate language justice training for community volunteers and staff. These training sessions included best practices for translation, tips on building a multilingual vocabulary tree for the center, active listening practice, and philosophical discussion of what language justice looks like. Afterwards we compiled a resource binder for the center to use for future internal training sessions.

