



CREATIVE STRATEGIST PROGRAM EVALUATION

DECEMBER 2021

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE PROGRAM

Part 4 of 4



Los Angeles
County
Arts &
Culture



Artist Deborah Aschheim sketched voters as part of a #365DaysOfVoters social media campaign for the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk.

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Sandra de la Loza's Walk
for Wellness at Earvin
"Magic" Johnson Park.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE PROGRAM

As cycle two of the pilot phase was coming to an end, Arts and Culture staff developed a theory of change for the Creative Strategist program. The goal was to build a theory of change that would reflect the original aspirations of the Creative Strategist program, informed by what had been learned from implementation of the first six residencies and changes that had been made to the program throughout the pilot phase. It was also informed by literature that had been reviewed, including work written about other types of artist residency programs run by local government agencies. This was a point where having an evaluator embedded in program implementation proved particularly useful.

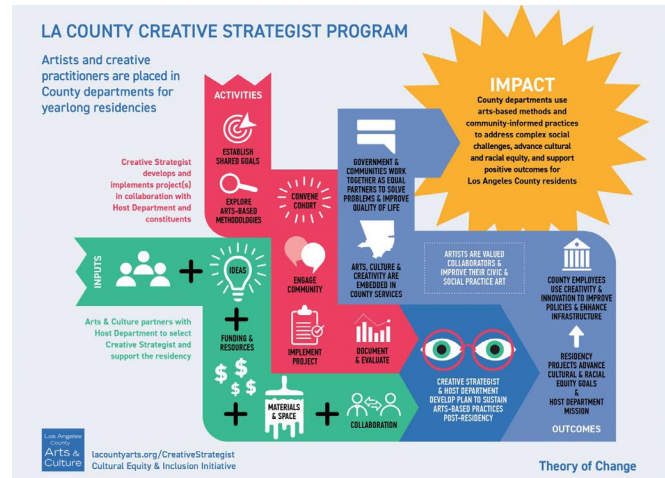
Through this process, the team:

- Refined and clarified the inputs required from both Arts and Culture and the host department
- Identified six key activities that would be consistent across all residencies
- Established outcome goals for the first 3-5 years and for the first 6-8 years

The full theory of change can be seen in Appendix 1.

The theory of change is being used as future phases of the Creative Strategist program rolls out, both for program planning and communications. It will also be used to evaluate the program. For this pilot phase, the evaluation centers on two main questions:

- Were the goals of the residencies achieved?
- Was progress made toward the original vision for the residencies?



A theory of change for the Creative Strategist program was created during cycle 2. See the Appendix for a larger, detailed version.

Were the goals of the residencies achieved?

Each residency and each host department was different from the rest, with its own focus and purpose. Operational structures of each department were different, and creative strategists were placed at different points in the organizational structure. Each artist selected brought a unique set of skills, knowledge, disciplinary practice, and worldview to their work.

One important consistency across all the residencies is that none of them achieved the goals set out in the host department's original proposal within a year. In each residency, there came a point at which both the creative strategist and department connector realized it would take much more time to achieve their goals than a one-year, part-time residency would allow. For the most part, the artists brought into the residencies had limited subject matter expertise in the area they would be working

in. The artists required much more time to learn about the work of the departments and the communities they served than had been planned for. The departments required much more time to understand that “art” is both a process and a product, and to understand what a creative strategist could and could not do for them. Operational checks and balances that are familiar to government staff became roadblocks to action, especially when approvals were needed for creative activities outside of everyday bureaucratic functions. When executive level support and advocacy were requested to

help remove obstacles, either within the host department or from Arts and Culture, that support tended to move at such a gradual pace that implementation was slowed even further. Nevertheless, in spite of the challenges faced along the way, each residency had tangible results, as Table 1 shows. In nearly all cases, the creative strategists are continuing work begun in the residencies, though sometimes in other spaces. As of this writing, all but one residency had been extended or the artists re-hired (directly or indirectly) by their host departments to continue work that was begun during the residency.

Table 1: Tangible results of pilot residencies

Host Department	Tangible Outcome	Continuation beyond one-year residency
County Library	Five kamishibai workshops; training videos for librarians	Nakagawa was hired back to conduct additional workshops in the Second Supervisorial District; due to the pandemic, he instead created training videos
Vision Zero (Public Health)	Traffic safety signage installed; bike racks forthcoming	Residency is extended through March 2022
VSAP (Registrar-Recorder)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 20 get-out-the-vote workshops held on 10 campuses #365DaysOfVoters campaign on Instagram launched 	Aschheim continued the #365DaysOfVoters campaign in partnership with other cities in LA County
Office of Violence Prevention (Public Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community retreat held to gather community input into OVP’s strategic plan Storytelling Project gathers nearly 100 stories from community members about experiences and impact of violence; turned into a book 	Residency extended by OVP in order to complete the Storytelling Project; residency extended through 2021
Parks and Recreation	Arts and Culture framework and toolkit for parks created and disseminated	Three-month extension to complete framework and toolkit; de la Loza hired to prototype the framework at Earvin “Magic” Johnson Park
Mental Health	<i>Healing Through Story</i> toolkit created and disseminated	Yadav brought back by the department for subsequent community engagement work

Each host department said they would keep the creative strategist on in their residency if they had funding to do so. Conversations took place between Arts and Culture and every host department about possible extensions, but in most cases additional support to formally extend the residency did not materialize. The residencies at Vision Zero and OVP were the only ones extended with host department funds. By the time cycle two residencies were coming to a close, the COVID-19 pandemic had been declared and County budgets were being cut.

As of this writing, the funding for the Creative Strategist program has been reduced in response to pandemic-related Countywide budget cuts to a single annual residency. However, in acknowledgement of lessons learned through the pilot phase, the per-residency budget amount has been increased by half, to \$75,000. In 2021, two residencies are planned. In addition, several other County departments have expressed interest in hosting a residency that would be covered by other funding sources. This suggests there is growing interest among County leadership in the value of the innovative thinking and creative problem solving this program brings.

Was progress made toward the vision for the residencies?

From its inception, this program attempted to explore how art could be used as a tool to make government more equitable. The original recommendation laid out in the County's Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative (CEII) stated ambitious goals. Ensuring that people and communities who have historically had less access to the arts and the benefits

they offer, is central to the program. As the recommendation was written, creative strategists would "formulate strategies that foster transformational changes" that would "increas[e] access to artistic and creative experiences in every community." Working in their host departments, creative strategists would achieve this by

- increasing community engagement and participation,
- identifying cultural and community assets,
- supporting public programs and events, and
- creating new public artworks and beautification projects.

All of the residencies focused on **community engagement and participation**. Nearly all of them included **public programs or events**. Many identified **cultural and community assets** during their research phase which paved the way for their final projects. There has been some limited creation of **new public artworks or beautification projects**, including books and guides to using storytelling. Each project launched by the creative strategist had some continuation post-residency, and these new iterations were as varied as the residencies themselves.

A significant amount of **art-as-process** occurred across the residencies, with many of the creative strategists doing work engaging communities, especially those historically underserved by local government. Some creative strategists completed staff trainings and left toolkits that department staff can continue to use, if they choose to. At the same time, some of the **art products** that were created could have been achieved through a creative services contract. This is notable in light of the fact

that most of the creative strategists spent a significant amount of time early in the residency expanding the view of their host departments from thinking about art products to thinking about art as a process that could help them achieve their mission. This may also reflect what can now be seen as a too-short time frame for the residencies that shortchanged the implementation phase. If more time were available for implementation of the proposed projects, the final art products might very well have been just as strong as the process phase. The lesson here may be that an art product is not necessary for every residency or host department.

Did the residencies increase equity and inclusion in the arts? Did they help to make progress toward transformational change in their host departments? It became clear early on that there was not a shared understanding of “equity” or “transformational change” among all parties involved. In spite of that, and because of the emergent and process-oriented nature of the program, these residencies did bring to the surface gaps in the operational culture of the host departments and old habits of thinking about relationships with community. They opened opportunity, but what host departments do with that in the long term remains to be seen over a longer time period. When governments seek to address civic challenges or support aspects of civic life that are long-term, structural, or deeply entrenched, realistic expectations are needed for of how much one artist residency can achieve.

One friction that was clearly visible in each residency comes from the fact that artists and government employees have very different ways of working in the world. They speak different languages, even when they are talking

about the same things. This led on occasion to frustration, misunderstandings, and even moments of distrust. Looking back, it is possible to see places where the creative strategists and their department connectors were actually working toward the same goal but their style of work and communication prevented them from understanding each other. The Cross Sector Manager can and should help to mediate when these frictions arise, to build understanding and mutual respect.

While these may play out as interpersonal conflicts, they may in fact reflect systemic differences. As Lithgow and Wall have said, artist residencies in municipal governments can challenge everyday practices and change institutional operations and policies but they are not inherently transformative nor necessarily focused on equity or social justice.⁴⁷ What tied these residencies together was the idea that art-based strategies can *support* change. Because of varying and loose understandings of equity and the role of the residencies in moving toward it, the program was ultimately shaped by the specific individuals involved. When program staff at Arts and Culture changed, when connectors at the host departments changed, and in the single case when the artist changed, the residencies also changed.

Each artist brought to their residency expertise in certain discipline(s) and creative practices as well as a predisposition to specific artistic approaches. The artist’s subjective identity is a strength that can be built on, but it also limited what the final project ultimately would be. For example, a theater artist was not likely to propose to use sculpture or painting for their final project. However, all of them drew on community engagement knowledge they

had acquired either as part of or outside their artist practice. The Creative Strategist program can continue to welcome artists from all arts backgrounds but should consider prioritizing those with experience with social practice and civic practice art.

If the ambitious goals laid out in its original vision are to be met, much more work is necessary at the beginning of each residency to create a shared vision and understanding of the needs of the host department, and to bridge gaps in knowledge and practice between each creative strategist and their host department. Arts and Culture staff need to work intensively with host departments to develop clear goals for the residency that are aligned with goals laid out in the County's Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative. The Cross Sector Manager should help the creative strategist and the department work together to define the creative strategist's role clearly so their work can successfully support the communities the department serves.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE CREATIVE STRATEGIST PROGRAM

As the residencies launch, a program is needed to educate creative strategists quickly but deeply about both subject matter and operations of their host department. The program should consider searching more intentionally for artists who already have at least some expertise in the work of the departments where they will be placed. Also, as the residencies launch, a program is needed to educate department connectors about the wide universe of what art is and can be, and the idea of art as process. Substantive, ongoing, and intense support

is needed for the creative strategists and the department connectors throughout the residency. If the Creative Strategist program is to succeed, it needs to be prioritized and supported at the executive level both in the host departments and at Arts and Culture.

The findings in this evaluation also raise fundamental questions about the purpose of the Creative Strategist program and how its goals can be met. Answers to these questions can help to improve its structure and administration in the future.



Questions about the program's purpose

1. What is meant by “transformational change” and what is the appropriate role of Arts and Culture in driving those changes in other County departments?
2. Whose equity goals are paramount in an artist residency, those of Arts and Culture or those of the host department?
3. How can Arts and Culture use the Creative Strategist program to build relationships with other County departments in order to achieve equity goals?
4. What unique skills and benefits do artists bring to these residencies that subject matter experts, consultants, or community organizers do not?



Recommendations to improve program structure and administration

Program management

1. Broad goals for the residencies should be determined before the Call for Artists is issued, led by the host department and facilitated by Arts and Culture. Once goals are set, each residency should leave a significant amount of room for iteration and evolution of the project as the creative strategists and their host departments get to know each other better.
2. Each residency should begin with the creative strategist spending significant time getting to know a) the department and services they provide, b) background information about the field they will be working in, c) the communities served by the host department and how, d) the department staff they will be working with, and e) how County government works. This is a tremendous amount to learn in a short amount of time.
3. Residencies should be longer than a year in order to meet goals of both the residencies and the Creative Strategist program and to achieve meaningful long-term impact.
4. A formal program to guide and train both sides through the residency should be established and a professional development curriculum created. Topics could include orientations to social practice and civic practice art, organizational change, learning to listen across difference, how County government works, using arts-based strategies to work in communities, and cross sector collaborations toward equity.
5. There should always be several residencies operating at the same time to build a cohort of creative strategists and department connectors to share skills, develop cross departmental collaboration, and build mutual support.
6. Explore the possibility of selecting a team of artists instead of a single artist to work on some residencies. The potential impact for residencies could be greater and their reach wider across departments.
7. Make a greater investment in the program in terms of staffing, communications, professional development, and funds to extend successful residencies as needed.

Staffing

8. The Cross Sector Manager's job does not begin and end with individual residencies. Administration of a residency starts far in advance of its start date and facilitation continues when a host department extends the residency, with or without financial support from Arts and Culture. Program staffing at Arts and Culture should reflect this longer time horizon.
9. The structure of the program requires that Arts and Culture staff administering it have a wide array of skills including program administration (i.e., budgeting, contracting, communications, and professional development) as well as arts practices including community engagement methods and civic or social practice art, as well as knowledge of County government functions and practices. They also need knowledge and

experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion as practiced in the arts, as well as knowledge of how LA County's diverse communities have been impacted by systemic racism. Ideally, program staff will reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of LA County. Therefore multiple staff are recommended to staff this program for it to achieve its full vision.

10. Roles of staff in host departments and Arts and Culture should be clearly delineated. Consistent staffing is strongly recommended. In the event of a staffing shift, a transition plan should be established.

Host department placements

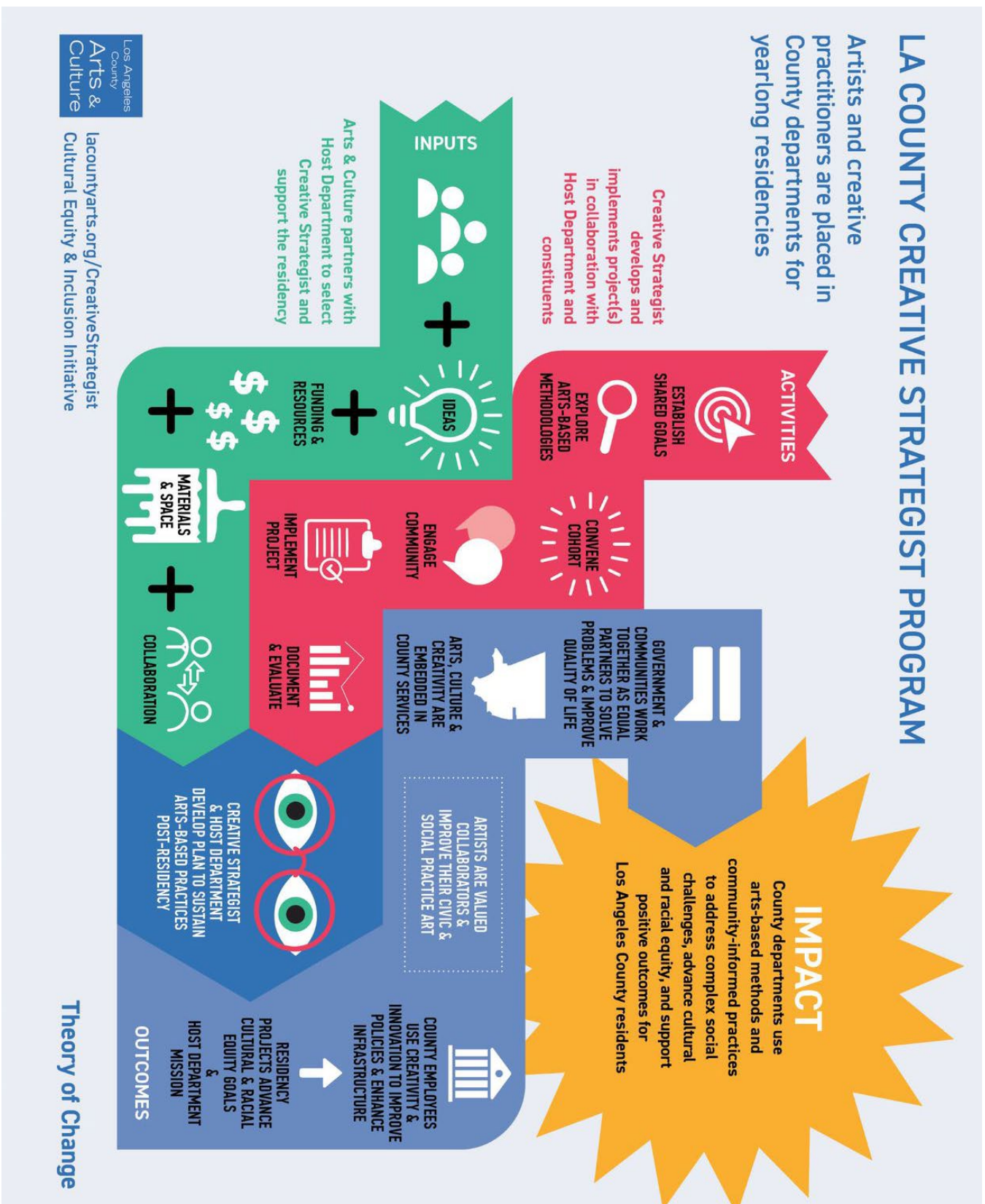
11. Creative strategists should be placed with access to executive level managers in departments. If this is not possible, the department executive should provide clear, visible support for the residency.

12. Consider having a team facilitate the residency within the host department, if the department is large, rather than designating a single staff person as connector. Representatives from the different divisions that the residency intersects with could be part of this team. This can help build an accountability system into the structure and allow creative strategists greater access across department divisions.
13. Work with the creative strategist to create a maintenance plan so that when the residency ends, changes in the department's approach to community and operations can continue.

In Conclusion

These residencies opened up space for new ideas and practices in six divisions of LA County government. The creative strategists modeled innovative approaches to working with community, but were restricted by time, by gaps in knowledge between the creative strategists and their host departments, and by varying and loose definitions of equity. Structural changes to staffing, budgets, and administration created other challenges. It is too soon, though, to determine whether the "productive frictions" they produced will have a lasting impact. While knowledge and new ways of seeing and understanding were gained by both the creative strategists and their department connectors, these changes and opportunities could potentially be lost if they are not built into the infrastructure of the department. In many ways, these residences were the beginning of conversations that did not have time to come to fruition. Time will tell whether what was learned and what changed will continue to have a transformational impact on the operations and mission of each host department.

APPENDIX



ENDNOTES

[47](#) Lithgow and Wall, 2017.



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This evaluation was completed with generous support from the Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program of the American Council of Learned Societies.

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